

KALEIDOSCOPE KAL'S

When's the last time you had a good laugh? Not a nervous titter, mind you, but a real rip-snorter? Now granted, here along the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Katrina's lacerating visit, finding something to laugh about can be as rare as hen's teeth. And rarer still is the laughter brought on by a Southern winter. For those of us who have grown up along the Gulf Coast, we know that for every shimmering day, there are also seemingly endless days of rain - that rain the consistency of dripping molasses. Don't forget the rain's bone-chilling dampness either! Have I deflated your spirits with talk about a miserable winter forecast? If so, please allow me to inflate those spirits with a story.

Here's a question for those of us who grew up south of the Mason-Dixon line: can you name the place where, as a child, your Mama warned you in low suggestive tones, "Get giggly in here and I'll tan your hide."? If you hollered out, "the church house," march to the front of the class, and put a gold star by your name. Alas, I seldom heeded my Mama's warnings, and consequently my hide was tanned more times than I care to remember. But remember I must, hence the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey would say.

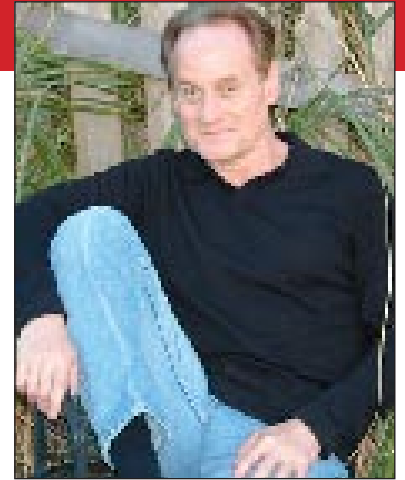
As a child, I was fidgety, so runs the tale. Lying dormant for an entire church service was torture. The longer the sermon, the more intense the torture became. The pews, seemingly carved from soft, cuddly concrete, only added to my agony. But one morning during Divine Services, Providence took pity on me and sent deliverance not in the form of a short sermon, but an overweight saint with the unusual, but apropos, last name of Collard. I say apropos because she, Miss Collard, was a true child of the South; one reared on fried chicken and collard greens, along with those other greens - turnip and mustard - which we Southerners adore and you non-Southerners deplore.

Miss Collard - Miss Reva Sue Collard - was a fascination to me. Every Sunday morning there she sat, molded into HER pew like putty. Each Sunday her head was crowned with some sort of outrageous hat, which Miss Collard assumed augmented her lavender-colored hair. One Sunday morning, my mouth overloaded my brain and I blurted out, "Look Mama, Miss Collard's hat

looks like its got a smushed seagull on it." My mother said nothing, looked at me sweetly, and then proceeded to pinch off a large chunk of my flesh. That sent my legs into spasms, but my upper torso knew to remain frozen. It was in that fridged state that I spied Miss Collard. She was moving in a most peculiar fashion. The pasty folds of skin on her bare arms quivered. She surreptitiously shifted the mountainous weight of her expansive derriere from one side to the other. She appeared to be swaying. Many folks that morning just figured she was "rockin' and rollin' for Jesus," as the old-timers say.

Now for those of you who did not grow up in a small country church, the rock- and- roll terminology might seem a misnomer. Be not deceived. It is a term of endearment. "Rockin' and rollin' for Jesus" only meant Miss Collard was getting into the spirit of the sermon. But it was not her spirit that was rocking and rolling. It was her stomach. Her previous night's supper of twangy collard greens, homemade cornbread, and crispy fried chicken had not sat well. Her collards had come back with a vengeance, causing a serious gastric disturbance. And what a disturbance that caused!

The Preacher's sermon on Rahab the Harlot was at a fever pitch. I had been gouged a second time after asking, "Mama, what's a harlot?" First came the pinch, then the admonition, "Ask your Dad." My father, the Marine, had long since slipped off to the Land Of Nod, and therefore could do little to elevate my torture or boredom. Seeing that



was engrossed in the sermon, I re-set my sights on the undulating Miss Collard. A look of discomfort had descended across her face. It was that same look which might accompany birthing a baby or passing a kidney stone. Those two functions are relatively painless for the baby or the stone, not so the individual. Miss Collard was no exception. By now, her gentle swaying had developed a distinctive lunge. She seemed to force all her weight onto the pew, hunkering down, as it were, into the very grains of the wood.

The Preacher then shouted out, "Rahab was a harlot and a liar, but the Good Lord had a plan for her life." What happened next was in nobody's plan. The Preacher's scathing indictment of Rahab squelched the loud shouts of "AMEN", and a pall of silence enshrouded the church as each member pondered what the Good Lord's plan for Rahab might be. By that time, Miss Collard's only plan was one of escape. But alas, she could encapsulate the gaseous offspring of the offending collards no longer. A sonic blast of escaping air ricocheted off the rock-hard pew. Its deafening sound echoed around the room. That eye-opener was followed by an invisible cloud of noxious fumes. Those fumes created a windstorm of another sort, the frantic fanning of many-a-funeral-home fan.

Knowing exactly what had happened, I felt a volcano of laughter bubbling up my throat. It was suppressed by my mother's gloved hand, which she plastered across my mouth.

The eruption of toxic perfume roused my Dad from peaceful slumber.

He came to with a start and whispered, "Hooee! What's that smell?" It did not take long for

Dad to figure out what had happened.

In the pew two rows back, the teenagers were sniggering and shaking the pew. Their parents started sniggering. My own parents got tickled. The choir snorted. Even the



Preacher had trouble maintaining decorum. His scorching sermon concerning a scarlet woman had been upstaged by one of his own scarlet women. For by now, Miss Collard was scarlet, due not to some bedroom liaison, but scarlet due to the color of her face, which was the same as a vine-ripened, home-grown tomato. I could not help but think, "A red face and lavender hair don't match."

As the snorts and sniggers escalated, the Preacher, due to his own suppressed snorts-of-laughter, dislodged his upper plate. Readjusting his teeth, he said in a low, preachified tone, "Brothers and Sisters, we'll have a short prayer and dismiss." And dismiss we did. My parents couldn't snatch me up fast enough. We tore down the church aisle, jumped into our 1959 Nash Rambler (Dad was always a Rambler man.) and bounded down the street, hollering all the way home. But poor Miss Collard was another story. After all the excitement at the Baptist church, she hurried down the street and

joined-up with the Methodists. She knew their pews were cushioned, and therefore a bit more soundproof.

Over forty years later, the story of that fateful

Sunday morning and poor Miss Collard's smelly demise was one of the last my family and I shared together, just before Dad was promoted to Glory. Even at that sorrowful moment, the retelling of Miss Collard's social faux pas helped displace

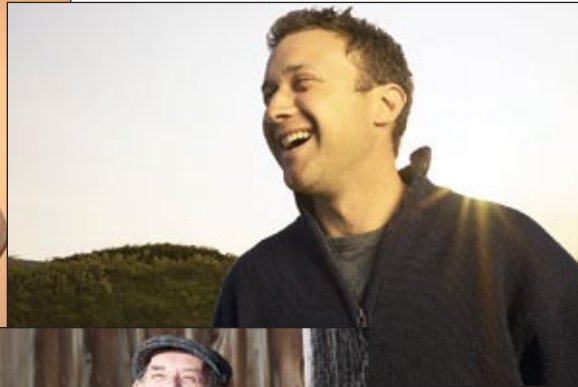
tears of sadness with laughter, which - as the Good Book states - is "the best medicine." Laughter brightens any dreary-cold day, relieves stress, makes you healthier, and can help retard the onslaught of aging. So as the dreary winter days approach, please remember the words of the French writer,

Nicolas Chamfort, "the most wasted of all days is that on which one has not laughed."

Please remember to pray for our troops.

May God bless, and keep a song in your heart.

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