

S A F A R I

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A B O U T M E

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IT HAS BEEN SAID, by myself as well as others, that I do not like mailing comments. While this is almost true, a more realistic approach is that I don't like stale mailing comments.

Also, I do not particularly enjoy reading any apazine that has an anonymous origin. That is the reason for the blatant name and address up above. Many is the time I have been enjoying some pleasant one-sided conversation coming to me from the pages of such an apazine. Then, when I began to wonder who was speaking, no matter how dilligently I searched, I could not unmask the culprit. Please, kind folk, do not make the task so hard—make yourself known.

As a point of further enlightenment I have also been accused, and this time very rightly so, of overworking the egotistical "I" so, if you wish, you could refrain from pointing out this additional obvious failure on my part.

And, above all, it has been decreed that I produce for this FAPA mailing or get thrown "the rascal" the hell out.

Ergo, this is some production for this FAPA mailing. If everything goes as scheduled, and this is produced in time, it will be due to the good graces and assistance of Buck and Juanita Coulson. Their help is acknowledged with much thanks.

Now, this little attack against all the evil and corruption that runs rampant throughout our fair land today, is called "About Me." Actually I am using

this space in the vain attempt to help you get to know me better.

So, I am 33. I acquire books, go to conventions, and read occasionally. I am married to a beautiful lifetime; her name is Nancy. Together we have accumulated four children who do their damndest to drive me out of my mind.

I never write letters. Except business letters. I know a great number of people. Some of them quite well. I believe in firm friendships and love much too quickly. I think the greatest thing in life is giving.

I am very selfish, one has to be in order to give. I make friends very slowly, knowing that that way they will last much longer. I like good food, jazz, Barbara Streisand, tall girls with big busts, and anything drinkable with vodka in it.

I like people; sane, rational people. I like sound all around and laughter and fan parties.

Empathy sends me the furthest, the quickest. I love to love.

I have an origin in the old south, I am ancient. I was born and raised there, in that totally unreal, foreign world. I think I shall try to capture a portion of it for you. The sights, the sounds, the smells, the feels.

This is not necessarily the way it was. Rather this is the way it might have been, clouded by a poor memory, colored by a drab imagination.

THERE IS A LINE in one of Tom Lehar's songs about a man who wants to "put that white sheet on again." I never hear it without dredging up a good bit of personal nostalgia, but surprisingly enough, it isn't for the things in the song; the black-eyed peas, the ham, and all.

Oh, certainly they exist as a part of a southern heritage, of a more border-line South, of the Ku Klux Klan, of inroads by the NAACP, of urban renewal in southern metropolitan areas. But these things are not the old South; not at all. Blank out the southern accent and appear suddenly walking down an Atlanta street, or Birmingham, or Memphis. But, where are you? Really? Couldn't this be Chicago, perhaps; or Detroit, Philadelphia, Seattle, Los Angeles. Remove every exclusively regional identification and I defy you to come up with the right answer.

The deep South, that is another thing entirely. It feels like a hairy grape vine sliding through your hand as you sail across a creek bottom shrieking "Aeoeoeo," in your very best Tarzan imitation. It is the feel of poke salad crunching under your fingers as you place it in your bag along with the wild onions you just gathered for dinner. It is the stain of lush, ripe blackberries on your hands (and more than a little on your face) that will be that heavenly three-layer cake with some left over for jam. It is fried chicken or squirrel (freshly killed that morning) mingling with the odor of freshly baked biscuits for breakfast that you use to sop up the thickin' gravy with. And, too, it is the gleam of a cornered opossum's eyes that reflect in the beam from the hissing, stinking carbide lamp as you clobber him and put him in your towsack to take home for baking. The sound of a lonely owl hooting far out in the swamp, muffled through a million strands of Spanish moss. The countless tears that fall from giant willows, crying all the while, to float out among the cypress knees and browning magnolia blossoms; the overpowering odor of gardenias. The rows and rows of cotton that stretch as far in any direction as the eye can see, or the fingers last; what outs the balls do make. The op-

pressive odor of cottonseeds squishing—shortening for the masses, but porkchops, never again.

The hiss of a water moccasin and his cousin, the cotton-mouth—waiting, mouth open, among the cotton bowls. The unmistakable clatter of a rattler, coiled to strike. The pssst-psst of a puff adder as he swells and bluffs as his cousin, the cobra, never had to do. The gentleness of a king snake, gliding through the grass to battle a coachwhip, fat with robbed eggs. The grace of a fawn, cutting a silent path through the underbrush, to pause once, cocking an ear in your direction. Then, the sharp stench of exposed gunpowder and a new bruise on your shoulder; but meat for awhile—if there is no game warden near at hand.

Highs on dried corn silk, rolled in last week's Grit; whoosh, up in one mighty eyebrow searing flame. The delectable taste of fresh home brew; thick, dark, malt-like. The stark realism of white lightning thundering its wicked way through your guts. And out there, behind the chicken house, in the little pine grove, the boys smoke shoplifted cigars and talk about Life, It, Sex. And then, then, up in the treehouse you finally find there is a good deal more to the game of "Ma and Pa"; enough to make it somehow much better than "Doctor."

But, inevitably, someone snitches and your dad beats hell out of you and your mother offers no sympathy and you rush off, through the woods, alone. Mamma will help!

IT IS ONLY in the big cities that voodoo queens look like voodoo queens. In southern suburbia they quite often look like the gentle old mammy who does the washing, and the ironing, when mother is feeling "porely." She has a lap that is wide and soft, and a dry shoulder for crying on. She has comforting words for any emergency and smells sweetly of herbs, hair freshly singed by a curling iron, and pomade. And her invariable prescription is a piece from her inexhaustible box of chocolate covered cherries.

Mammy, mamma, Queen Lula; her names are all interchangeable. Chances are

she will be sitting on her stoop when you arrive, fanning herself with a palmeto fan advertising Jones' Funeral Home. On the fence post marking the corner of her yard a rotting owl, long dead, hangs feet up; to ward off—what? To call what to her?

You came though, didn't you? Not that you believed in all that mumbo-jumbo stuff, not for a minute. But she would understand, and for long enough there would be someone who could help, however little.

You eat the candy, sniveling away in protest at your cruel treatment. She "now, now"s and, after awhile, sends you home with a better feeling toward your parents and never with a cruel word having been spoken against them. For some unknown reason, you remember when you had first seen mamma.

LATE, VERY late.

You and Charles Billy Ray, sometimes called "snot nose," had crawled through Preacher Joe's watermelon patch earlier. Sneaking quietly, snake style, between the rows and over the vines. You could hear the crickets chirping all around you and off to the left, near the water, a daddy bull was croaking and splashing into the water. You stand up then, with a choice melon snapped from the vine under each arm and whisper to Charles Billy Ray, "let's go," because you just thought you heard another sound by that far fence post.

And you run like hell to a chorus of "What yall doin' in mah melons?" and a shower of buckshot swooshing prudently well overhead. It was great, too, later as you drop the melons down and crack them open against the ground. Carefully scooping out the heart of each; that's all, just the heart. You leave the rest there, for whoever or whatever cares, and think up something else to do for the hell of it.

"I heard old man Anders' cane is sweetern hell this year," says Charles Billy Ray.

"Think we ought to see?"

Cautiously back around the melon patch toward the water, ever vigilant that Preacher Joe doesn't reappear, l2 gauge in hand. And there it is, right

where you last saw it; Joe's rowboat. No paddle, though, Joe knows better; just the long part of a broken off frog gig. But that's enough, hell, the swamp wasn't more than a foot and a half deep in most spots. Untie the boat and shove off. Charles Billy Ray sat at the head, and you in the rear, with the gig. There is very little motion of the water, an occasional slap against the side of the boat, but more frequently the sound is the bump of a cypress knee that Charles Billy Ray couldn't push you around quick enough.

"Goddamnit," he says, "another damn knee."

IT IS A LONG WAY across the swamp to old man Anders' field, more than half a mile. You never think, though, that you might be going in a circle, supremely confident as you are. You disturb some birds, perhaps, and encounter the occasional scuttering of some mating squirrels as they toss tupelo balls plop into the water. Finally you come out, right where you knew you would all the time, by old man Anders' pigsty.

God, it stinks!

"Lookit the way them damn pigs are rutting around..."

"Yeah, they must be in heat," says Charles Billy Ray, taking the gig end from you and poking it between the railing fence.

"Charles Billy! What the hell you doing?"

"Just seeing if they're in heat, like I think." And you watch the big sow back toward the stick.

"I never saw pigs do it." It was an all purpose word then.

"Same as dogs."

"Ah, they ain't going to do nothing now, let's go."

Just a short way from the sty the trees disappear; here the field starts. It is wide, you can't remember having been all across it. There isn't another tree in sight. There is nothing but the corn; tall, reaching way up, their sweet silk swaying in the wind, the leaves rubbing against each other like grasshopper legs. Quickly you are over the fence and whispering, "stay close to me, Charles Billy." For you know here you

can get lost.

A little way into the field you encounter an indian burial mound that, for some unknown reason, no corn will grow on. Overhead the moon is brilliant, like a diamond in a setting of a million sparkling jewels; it beats down on the mound like a klieg.

A sudden call of nature and too much watermelon. A contest is proposed, "Betcha I can spell my name."

"Betcha!" And you go at it with a wide sweeping Parker scrawl; aiming carefully, watching the dust flick up from the sandy earth.

"Ah, you cheated. Anybody can spell Ray..."

"Ah, you frign cajun, come on..."

Into the cane once more. Walking, rusty boy scout knife at ready to sample a choice stalk.

Then you hear it.

"Charles Billy," you hiss quietly. "I hear something..."

"Holy hell," he echoes, equally quiet, "them's drums..."

But you can't go away; you want to but who ever saw two thirteen-year-olds admit to cowardice when there's just the two of them? So you go on—ahead. Only you go very slowly, somehow you're almost touching each other for reassurance. Finally you get to a point where you drop down and single file, snake-like on the ground; dragging your jeans along just like you had done in the melon patch. The sound comes again, much louder—the beating of a skin drum; goat hide tightly stretched over—something; what?

Already you can smell the crackling fire and catch a few of the faint phrases drifting out toward you. And there she is, Mamma Lula, looking ten years younger than when you saw her last week at the general store. For the first time that you know of, she has her hair tied back in a red bandana and a blood red apron covers her dress.

She is barefoot, feet spread far apart in front of the fire. Her hands are high over her head, and in one, a knife blade gleams—both from the fire and the full moon overhead.

The snake is in her other hand.

Big and black.

And coiling all around.

A SHUDDER FLASHES through both of you and, unconsciously, you find your hand creeping out to clutch at Charles Billy's, which was creeping to meet you halfway.

The bond is formed anew and where confidence had not existed only seconds before for either of you, it now flows freely, minutely, slowly building up. Surging finally, through half a friend and seeping over to recharge the other half.

Clutching the snake near its head, Mamma Lula was careful to make very sure it couldn't possibly strike. Quickly, biting into her flesh, shooting venom as if under pressure. She whipped the snake about, through the air, making it snap like a whip then dropping it hastily into the leaping fire.

To writhe there, bruised and singed and dying. Flopping and jerking amid the flames. Until it could move no more.

"Now," the bandanaed and aproned Negress mumbles across the fire. "Bring me the offering of placation."

A bleating screech of protest filtrates through the clearing. And someone rushes out of the shadows into the firelight, clumsily carrying a goat in his arms. A young kid that squirms and thrashes around and bleats for an escape that no longer exists for it.

That same rusher out of shadows holds him down in front of the fire, before Mamma Lula and the gleaming knife blade.

The knife that cuts through the air as it swoops downward; that cuts through the bleating sound, that slices easily through the upturned abdomen of the goat. Ripping and shredding and splashing blood in multiple directions. Scissoring its bladed way through the muscles, the very flesh; severing the tough arteries, the less tough veins.

To bleat no more.

Raising the tiny, blood covered organ on high. Holding it aloft as the warm, red blood trickles slowly down Mamma Lula's chocolate arm. The heart gives one final, timid flutter before it stops.

To beat no more.

"Aieeee," she sings, tossing the offering to the fire, where it flops

against what once might have been a snake before it starts a sizzling crackle of its own.

"It has been done," Mamma Lula, shuddering, says, as revulsion and distaste surges up inside her guts. Hating herself for what she just did to placate those she believed in except on Sundays and Wednesday nights' prayer meetings.

After all, some Thing, some Being must control the other days and nights. Far better it was for her to play both sides against the middle, even at the cost of her own threatened internal re-orientation.

"Take it away," she says in resignation, handing the now dull, rusty colored knife to the man from the shadows who held the still goat cadaver.

Efficiently, practiced, he stripped away the skin of the goat and tossed it also to the fire. One swooshing puff of quickly burnt hair offended the air all around. Next the guts did go. All the undesirable viscera, plopping into the fire and snapping aloud.

Cleaned, thoroughly butchered at last, the now socially acceptable goat is lifted high by the shadow man. Someone else, holding a carefully cleaned pole, approaches. Then, harshly, from rear to gaping mouth, the stick is thrust and a wild cheer breaks from the people all around as the spit is placed over the waiting fire.

To be turned, over and over, revolving on the supports at either end.

Dripping constantly.

Juices so fragrant and delectable that their aroma wafts through the air, following the route of a phantom breeze, to reach your nose; Charles Billy Ray's nose. The mouth does water, the tongue search, the belly rumble, the hands unclench.

There is world enough, and confidence enough for all, now that a more pressing emotion is taking over. The gnawing hunger, insistent, demanding.

Dripping constantly over the fire. Odors of torture to saturate every gulping breath.

Over and over twirls the spit so slowly.

Over and over rolls the guts so commandingly.

The fire sparks and leaps higher, trying to lap at the almost cooked delicacy. The lush juices, falling to the flames, only serve as added incentive to make the fire strive to claim the whole. Each separate, falling drop catching fire, popping and sputtering in mid-air.

The spit twirls continuously, over and over; dripping, popping, sputtering.

The guts growling incessantly, over and over; rumbling, rolling, constricting.

"HOW NICE OF you boys," Mamma Lula says, standing right behind you both, so close she could lift a delicate brown barefoot toe and touch where your jeans are still blue.

The hands rush together again, groping through the darkness to touch so the you can become complete again. Defiant now, empathy-ridden; confident enough to face any demon. Slowly turning, gulping down your astonishment at having been discovered and your shame that it was done so quietly.

"...to join our barbecue," the benevolently smiling Negress finished her sentence, reaching down to where the hands do join. Separating, pulling you both gently to your feet.

Quick to pick up the cue, for once in your delinquent life, you follow the script exactly. "Thank you, ma'am," you say.

"Yeah," Charles Billy Ray follows hesitantly, "yeah. We were feeling mighty hungry."

"...and smelled your meat cooking all the way from the landing..."

"...so we ran and ran..."

"...hoping to get here before you finished eating it all," the sham dialogue is finished.

"Now, now," Mamma Lula exudes confidence. "Don't you fret. We haven't even started slicing yet. Just getting ready to start a little dance, we were."

"I thought I heard a drum from across the swamp," you say, furthering the false impression that you had just stumbled upon the scene.

"Might have," admitted Mamma Lula, not fooled for a single minute. "The noise does carry a far piece on nights like this, when the moon is full and the

breeze rushes through the tall corn patch."

"I didn't hear anything," Charles Billy Ray lies.

"Well, I could have been mistaken," you confess.

"Come on now, up to the fire," and Mamma Lula starts leading the way, still holding your hands in hers.

They are so soft to the touch.

Close your eyes for a minute; there, can't you bring the feel of them back from your memory? Warm and dry and firmly soothing. Smooth and rough and calmly commanding.

"Just find a seat anywhere," she says, releasing the caressing grip now. "Smell the fat falling in the fire? Man, does that ever smell good. Won't be long now til you can eat your fill."

"Thank you, ma'am," you speak empathically together and gaze deep into the fire, searching for what might be a skeleton snake.

Behind you next, the drum resumes with renewed vigor. A happy, carefree sound. Not at all like the surmons that had brought you, crawling flat on your belly, stealthily through the clattering cane rows.

The people dance. Laughter and swirling skirts and stamping feet careen all around you, throbbing in rhythm with the beating of the drum. Wilder and wilder; emotions unrestrained, inhibitions laxing. Laughter rampant amid the swirling, the stamping, and the throbbing.

Unceasingly dancing, flailing in the grip of frenzied ecstasy.

Then everything ceases. The drum, the dancers, the laughter, the swirling, and the stamping.

But the fire leaps on.

One log, burning its own supports from underneath it, rolls over to the center of the fire, releasing a cloud of glittering ashes and causing a furious crackling that slowly sputters back to only so many more pleasantly leaping flames.

"Reckon it's about ready," someone says, bending over the twirling meat, poking a long-handled fork carefully into the tender succulence. And a miniature river of fresh drippings falls

from the barbecue to the flames.

The flames gobble them up and then sparkle with an intensity that matches the fresh rumblings that echo both of your mouth-watering longings.

Large slabs of steaming hot meat are sliced, dribbling their abundant succulence across the paper plates, and shoved into your hands. There is a liquid, too. It sloshes in its own paper cup and is not very cold. It pours from a large crockery jug and smells strongly of homemade sassafras tea, and tastes exactly like Dad's root beer.

No forks, no knives, no nothing more.

You crouch then, cross-legged, feeling the warmth from the plate seep through your jeans and run scaldingly around your legs. A peculiar drawing sensation plucks at your face, tensing and stretching; you are much too close to the fire. A chilling breeze rushes across the clearing, suddenly from nowhere, marking the sharp difference between the feel of your back, away from the fire, and your uncomfortable face.

Frantically, both of you puff and blow over the meat, in a vain attempt to hasten the cooling, but that is almost hopeless. You down another sip of tea and almost immediately regret that you had, because it only serves to whip your insides into making further insistent demands. And put the cup to the ground at your side.

Very cautiously now, you reach out and grasp the chunk of meat with both hands. How it does burn through the fingers, flashing up the hands to the arms. For just a minute you feel like dropping it back to the plate, but instead you blow on it again. Finally, bending quickly down, you sample one scalding taste that trickles burningly down the gullet, illuminating each inch of the way with delightful sensations.

You look up then, at Charles Billy, four individual eyes pair rapidly into two sets and smile deeply into the other. "Damn, that's good."

The heat is forgotten then, and the fiery meat disappears, wolfed bite by bite. Washed down with the last swallow left in your paper cup, dregs and all.

The fire by now had dwindled sharply, being nothing more than a token blaze. From every side the darkness starts creeping inward, closer and ever closer to the diminishing fire. The moon overhead had moved far down and was threatening to rush over the cane-topped horizon at any moment.

Already the people had finished eating, packed up the usables, and started trinkling away in little groups of twos or threes.

"Don't you think you boys ought to be heading home now?" That was Mamma Lula, smiling at the two bloated boys, satiated from their gluttony.

THIS NIGHT, fortunately, Charles Billy Ray was staying over with you. Or was it you spending the night with him? It doesn't really matter, because neither of you were at the other's house. Instead you were at your house. Camping out for the night in the little lean-to there at the corner of your father's south forty.

That was your place; the plural you as both of you was the secret sharer of the other.

Where the baby pines grow so thick you can hardly fight your way through them, just about twenty feet inside the pine thicket. Carefully you brush each separate sapling aside so as not to harm it, allowing it to snap back in place behind you to seal off from every prying eye the blood-oath secrecy of the location.

Several little trees had been cut there, inside the clearing. Their tell-tale corpses snaked smoothly away, gliding across the ground on slick-needled treads.

The trees that had been left, forming the edge of the soon to be floor, were bent inward and tied at the top, making walls angling down all around. The intruding branches were snipped from the inside, with total disregard as to what damage might be occurring for the trees.

It did make a very comfortable little house though, just big enough for two friends with two sleeping bags and little else. Comfortable, snug, secure. High and dry unless the rain would fall,

forcing its way through the tightly pressed needles to drip, splashing on your floor.

Sprawled out atop the sleeping bags—it was much too warm to crawl inside them—you fumble with your pack long enough to dredge up a magnificent treasure. A single cigar, five cents then, just what this country needs.

King Edward.

Puffing furiously, it finally glows with a red-ended life of its own. Sending whirling billows of uninhaled smoke to the pointed ceiling. To start filling up there, slowly edging downward to saturate the entire tent with the aromatic essence of Virginia's finest. There to linger for days to come, through the clothes, through the sleeping bags, and on inside the pack that had just rejected its perpetrator in virgin form.

From hand to hand to mouth to mouth. Coughing, sputtering, spitting. Praising in the highest tones, the undeniable advantages of a good cigar following a sumptuously served gourmet repast. Recalling in detail the rare vintage sassafras wine that so effectively crowned the royal roast.

Their compliments to the chef.

Finally then, long after the cigar had been gummed and saturated at the one end and repeatedly had lost its glowing coal at the other, you drift asleep.

Already you had covered the past week's events, along with this night's. And bragged in exaggerated tones about your amorous escapades in conjunction with the astonishing thing you had heard from someone about Claudia's disgusting little exhibition behind the scoreboard at the Power and Light Athletic Field.

Damning her with all the violence at both your command. Damning her, not for what she was reported to have accomplished there with the entire junior basketball team, but because neither of you could make the squad. Neither of you had been there.

Perhaps, if you were to ask her to go with you to the matinee this Saturday?

Always a Western with banal dialogue and unreloadable guns and the next exciting episode of some raunchy cliff-hanger that never, somehow, started just where last Saturday's had ended. That,

a Betty Boop, a newsreel, something unmentionable by Pete Smith, and Previews Of Coming Attractions.

There, though, it was dark. That was the only important thing. That and the popcorn and the circus peanuts and exploration in the flickering shadows.

But you are both asleep now, dreaming of pounding drums, trying harder next year to make the team, and boop op e doop.

MAMMA LULA stops at her fence post and looks at the owl. Unconsciously she reaches up to the drawn, shriveling claws and twirls the fowl around, watching the downward face revolve around and around. She doesn't even notice the stench. She can't even remember how long it had been upended there.

Finally she stops the twirling by running her fingers across the spinning face, making it slow to a stop, its face away from her. She strokes the feathers at the back of the head idly, searching for something. Then pulls one feather out and walks, head down and dejectedly up to her little house.

Slowly she crossed her tiny porch and walked through the unlocked door. Mamma Lula didn't have anything worth stealing, except for a large box of chocolate covered cherries. Her door was never locked, and there were few who would dare to venture inside while she was away; something about the owl outside, keeping watch.

Closed in now, all the events of the night seemed to rush over her, flooding her with a montage of fleeting sensations. All tiring. So very exhausted, wanting desperately just to collapse across the bed to sleep straight through what little remained of the night.

How very hard it is for her to keep a constant watch over everything. It drains away her energies, threatening eventually to wash her straight into the grave. So hard keeping tabs, directing, making sure everything runs smoothly and everyone stays happy. Playing God, even on Sundays and Wednesday nights.

She shouldn't be alone like this, Mamma knew, in her declining years. Where were her own children? Five of them and two more dead. Those five

married, grandchildren she had never even seen, moved up north searching for a dream.

Lonesome and blue, aching from every muscle, Lula lit her frugal kerosene lamp and turned back the covers, getting ready for bed.

Course, she thought, it isn't all bad. Mamma did have the boys, those two who had crashed the feed tonight and all the others. They loved her. Rare times she even got to cuddle them close and rock them on her gnarled knees; the arthritis did pain bad at times. She could share with them part of their growing up, take care of them, feed them, teach them the proper meaning of sympathy.

Mamma Lula sang then, slipping her faded flannel nightgown down over her collapsing body. Gutturally and bluesy, hardly more than a mumble, "...I'll tell you, ain't these tears in my eyes...."

Leaning over the lamp, carefully holding her nightgown out of harm's way, Lula blew out the flame, plunging the cabin to darkness. Surefooted then, she crossed to her bed, climbing in.

"Oh, Lord," Lula said, pulling the tattered sheet blanket over her, more to keep away the mosquitoes than for warmth, "what a proudly lonely thing, a voodoo queen."

Sleeping, she cried.

THUSLY, with an accidental avoidance of the discussion of either fantasy or science fiction, we reach the close of SaFari V2-N1.

For me, it has been a very long struggle, waiting in line to get here. Rascal or not, I intend to stay for a while at least. In the future, I'll do my damndest to stick closer to the main subject. This little side trip through a nonexistent twilight world was just sitting there, at the top of the head, plaguing me to release it.

So I surrendered.

If I bored you, forgive me. But then, if I had, I trust you wouldn't have read this far.

Until next we meet then, may I wish you all the very best for the holiday season?

—Earl Kemp