

Noctor

by Vickie Cimprich

1. Lees Junior College

There was initial enthusiasm over, and concern about, my 1976 arrival in Jackson, pop. 3000. For example, I was single. Lexington was 81 miles northeast and “the line,” the Breathitt/Perry County line 30 miles south, was the closest place you could buy liquor. During my employment interview, the college president asked me if I had any marriage plans. “Why, Dr. Fusslinger, is this a proposal?” said the Scarlett O’Hara sitting in my chair. No. My Title III funding supervisor asked me how long my hair was. My division chair and I said a little about Thomas Merton.

But after a couple visits to the chairman’s home, a brusque acknowledgment from my church’s pastor at Sunday mass, I was lonely. Not particularly for a suitor. My first walk around town, I met Athens Carrell near the post office who bent my ear with some good stories. But I had no bunch, no crowd, certainly no intimates. I lived in a college housing basement that was thinly disguised as an apartment. A possum moved into a crawl space and peed regularly on my ceiling.

I was as in tune with the world as a Carthusian, but at that time wasn’t clear if they had a women’s branch (they don’t, but the Camaldolese do). The solitude I did practice accounts for my ’72 green Corolla barreling into the church parking lot one Sunday, just as the bank president Howard Thomas and the rest of the congregation was barreling out. Daylight savings time had changed out from under me. I turned off the ignition and sat, until my wits refooted in the wake of the bygone. Going home alone was too black bleak. Then I remembered Sally Paton’s invitation for the afternoon—to go out to her place where they were going to dig potatoes.

The Patons’ place was at Noctor, several miles out Highway 30 from Jackson, Kentucky. Sally Paton and Bernard, mother and son, were my students in English 101, the first class I taught at Lees in the fall of 1976. Sally and I, pretty much the same age, liked each other. She accepted my gawky fascination with “Appalachia” and shared the old timey and new events of her daily life with me. She also kept up with her classwork. I know in those days my teaching was disjointed and must have seemed bizarre to the 17 and 18 year olds from the county schools. Sally and Bernard had sharp minds and were sensitive. Bernard didn’t seem the sort to throw his lot in with the psychedelics transacted locally, or over at his weekend National Guard service in Winchester. His artwork, described below, suggested otherwise. Bernard

seemed like a sad, serious young person. Why he never brought any writing or indeed himself to class, I'm not for sure.

On the last day of class or during exam week, Sally gave me a drawing by Bernard. Tangled wisps of parallel curved lines filigreed through a face. Road signs—DETOUR and STOP—interrupted the tracteries in the cerebellum. None of the 101 writing I'd read all semester approached the insight or psychology of the message encrypted here. Today, 33 years later, I wish I could begin again with him. "Tell me about drawing this. When did you do this? Do you have any more? Can I give you an Incomplete for the course and we'll make some words for this?" Maybe the fine lines would be strong enough to go on.

On the way out to the Patons' I passed the Burns' place. It was across the swinging bridge their grandfather had built. What a swinging bridge does is walk back at you. This one made Noctor Branch look like a magnificent gorge to me. Wire and wood, patchwork Gothic. The next December's Audubon bird count, I was out there with a good birder about a decade my junior. The local chapter director's research on the return of bird species to strip mined sites was being funded by Falcon Coal. I took a picture of an abandoned tank dripping oil down on a moonscape. It was pure deliverance to come back down out of there to the swinging bridge and stand down in the branch. I took a picture of the Burns' dog, head stuck through the wires, looking down at me.

2. Digging potatoes

So I drove up around the bend and turned in the Patons' gravel drive. Everybody was glad to see me. All left off whatever they'd been up to to welcome me, Sally, Fuller and the two girls. Fuller was an architect in his seventies, with an office across Jefferson Street from the college. I sometimes wondered why Sally had such an old husband, but he would have been a lot younger when they married. Besides, Sally never bothered me with speculations about my private life. Fuller showed me around his place including the root cellar where some of last year's potatoes still were. The potatoes were not the smooth scrubbed spuds I'd buy in net bags at the store. These had dirt and grit and slices off some ends and it didn't matter. They provided the imagery I'd use in a poem thirty years later.

Fuller harnessed the quarter horse and got it hitched to the plow. Each of the girls delved a row down the length of the patch. Seeing the girls do well, I asked to try. I grabbed the ends of the plow, heard Fuller start up the horse, walked three steps and fell over. We all laughed at me. But I was inside disappointed. After all, I was strong. I changed my own car oil. Apparently the ability to turn a band wrench wasn't useful for steering a quarter horse. And from Noctor would come more to learn besides.

In the middle of the oral history unit, Sally came up to me and asked if she could do her interview with a Navajo Indian who was staying out at her place. "Sure," I said, "I'd like to meet him."

3. Winston Sellars

Winston was a skinny Indian. Broad forehead, dark eyes, a teacher's voice but certainly no credentials—except the kind sharp people got from a tour of duty in Vietnam. He was given to expressions like "more fun [or whatever] than you can shake a stick at," and "It beats pokin' a stick in your eye." Another time we'd had coffee or

lunch at the Lonesome Pine. Afterwards as we walked down College Avenue, I told him how I missed my dad, who'd died three years earlier. He told me that my father is always with me.

From Pat's taped interview, I learned that he'd been raised by a Mormon couple whose notions were pretty restrictive. He had sympathy for his birthmother.

In my case, my mother didn't want me, couldn't keep enough food in the house to keep me alive, so when she gave me away that's basically what it was. When I left mother I was 18 months old and when I went to see her again I was 15 Then it was like two strangers meeting on the street and one says I'm your mother. We tried, but Indians are not known for their show of emotion. We're not put together that way.

But I could see that to live like the Indians do on a reservation is not a life. . . . Because the people down there have no other contact with the 20th century than maybe planes flying over their heads or a ride into town on a pickup. On a reservation . . . when you reach five or six years of age, the bus comes around and the government says, along with the BIA, you have to go to school. Sometimes the bus driver comes down, picks the kid up and puts him on the bus.

Winston was an artist and spoke of his teacher and friends in Colorado. Some way there he had taken up with Fuller's brother, an aging hippy, and accepted his invitation to come to Kentucky. I asked about his work. "You want to see some pictures? I'll make you some pictures." Within a couple days I owned two Winston Sellers, green and black felt tip ink on gift box white cardboard, a pretty good cobra and a good soaring eagle.

He was like Sally, generous with strangers. There came a poem.

At times before
 it snows
 My heart is as cold
 as the wind
 A heart that
 Bounces, sings and
 dances
 If snowflakes chance
 To fall
 or as it tumbles
 From my feet . . .
 Beneath this heart
 of pounding heat
 If snowflakes
 Chance to fall
 Creatures pass and
 Leave a path
 On a soft quiet pad
 Eyes that shine sparkle
 and wink
 If snowflakes chance
 To fall.

—Winston Sellers

I walked in those days with a stiffened back. Although I invited him over for some eggplant Parmesan and more talk, I made me a rule of no male/female stuff between

the school marm and the injun. Somehow the day a single red rose lay on my office desk, I'll be darned if I could connect it to anybody. Thought maybe somebody was playing a joke on me.

One day on the high sidewalk in front of Gamble & Strong's Grocery, Jarrod Burns from out Noctor and I passed and spoke. Seems Winston and Fuller's brother had a falling out and Winston was no longer living with him. In fact, Winston was living in an old school bus. "I heard he was living with you," says Jarrod. I not only conveyed No Way to *him*, but the next time I saw Winston . . .

Christmas holidays I was in Covington with my mother. Winston phoned from the Holiday Inn on December 23. I had a date with the guy I did want to be seeing that evening. What was I to do with Winston? After supper I went down to the Inn and met Winston in the lounge. I unloaded on him for showing up, and for the shacking up rumor. This was mean spirited. The next day I picked him up at the public library and took him to my Mom's, where he bypassed our couch for a night on the dining room rug. The day of Christmas Eve, I schemed: "Winston, wouldn't you really rather be celebrating Christmas with your friends in Colorado?" Yeah, they'd be really glad to see him, but he didn't have the money. I left him at the house and went to the bank, where my passbook took a dent I could afford. A goodbye kiss on the cheek at the Departures curb at the airport left me feeling relieved and guilty. He assured me his teacher would be really glad.

In springtime down at Lees they let me have Helen Tyler's roomy second floor apartment, after she left for a job in Lexington. One day I was washing and waxing my kitchen floor when Winston arrived. He'd brought me a color photo book of Aspen and a pendant of one laminated leaf of a fall aspen tree. When he said goodbye, he left a Glenwood Springs address. That fall my car trunk was broken into while I camped off Tunnel Ridge Road in the Red River Gorge. I lost an oral history program tape recorder, a Jerusalem Bible, and the journal that had Winston's address.

Each fall now I wear the leaf whenever I get dressed up. Other times, well, your Navajo is always with you.

4. The Burnses

Jarrold Burns had that kind of sneering intellectuality some burned out druggies have. His blue eyes were glazed. He took a week or so of my class, my second year at Lees. His personal experience paper was on the time he and a friend set out from high school to be evangelists. They wound up broke in Florida. It was hilarious. It was a mistake giving it back to him to revise and edit. Never saw it, or him in class, again.

No teacher did. But he was turning up, in the dark, near Billy Felton's house, just across the field from the Burns' place. Billy taught Media at Lees. If you were in Billy's classes, you got to work at the campus radio station and maybe DJ your own show. Billy had the coolest new thing to offer and Jarrod had to look out his back yard day in day out at Billy's place. Billy got Dobermans to keep Jarrod away and the Dobermans died on poisoned meat. After some small explosives went off in his yard, Billy lawed him.

An inconclusive court date left everybody except the plaintiff in stitches. Some time after the progressive dinner, Jarrod asked me to meet him, and I said I would. In the college library of course. He told me he'd come to say goodbye. He was leaving Jackson and all the Devil's works at Lees. He gave me a brown paper package that he said was home-ground corn meal. To be on the safe side I dumped it in my garden out back.

5. The Progressive Dinner

December of my second year, the social development team at the college organized a progressive dinner. We'd start with hors d'oeuvres at the Feltons'. However, the first click of high heels made a retrograde percussive sound on the swinging bridge. Certainly hospitality and food were the best. But there seemed to be hardly anywhere to look while eating crudités out on the front porch except back across the bridge, where Jarrod Burns and his buddies were bunched up on the roadside looking back at us.

I left Lees after two years. This was as much my mood as any lack of real work to be done and any alternative ambition. I moved to a quiet place in the country fourteen miles away from Beattyville in Lee County. Some twenty years later I read in the Cincinnati newspaper that Lees Junior College was being censured by the American Association of University Professors. Within a year or two it was taken over by the University of Kentucky's community college system. It had long since become too much for the benevolent denomination to handle.

Noctor was only one of the places where I learned about benevolence, violence, distance and connection. I'd seen more kinds of times in Breathitt County than you can shake a stick at.