

THE DAY HANK WILLIAMS DIED

Hank Williams died on January 1, 1953. That would be enough to make the date memorable, but it was also the day I discovered that being a grown up is not as easy as it appeared from my third grade vantage point.

At the time, shortly after Ike had been elected president, my family was living in New Orleans. My dad was a sales manager for Sherwin Williams Paints and spent most weekdays on the road. But he took off a week at Christmas and we came home to Texas to visit relatives near Austin. We had a great time until New Year's Eve when my brother came down with chicken pox. The next day dad had to fly to Atlanta on business leaving my mother with two little boys, a 1950 Ford, and a long drive back to New Orleans over pre-interstate highways.

Armed with courage, a thermos of Maxwell House, tuna sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, Christmas toys placed in the back seat for distraction, and a giant bottle of calomine lotion, mother began the 600-mile drive home.

It's a good thing mom is an optimist by nature for she was to need all her optimism by the end of that day. Car trips, kids, and itching don't mix well. My brother was four and not what you'd call a silent sufferer. He loudly demanded and received the calomine treatment every twenty minutes. I can still smell the stink of that pink lotion

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as it was applied to his burgeoning pox. As you might imagine, this frequent doctoring slowed our progress considerably. So did two-lane highways full of trucks and homebound holiday travelers.

In the early afternoon near Lake Charles, while eating deviled eggs prepared by my grandmother, we heard the terrible news about Hank. The radio announcer said he'd been found in the back seat of his Cadillac, dead of a heart attack at twenty-nine.

While we weren't big country music fans, we lived in Louisiana where Hank Williams was second in popularity only to Jesus. And in some counties his favorable rating was slightly ahead of Christ.

I began to ask Mother questions about God and heaven and dying. Mostly I wanted to know if I would still be able to hear Hank sing "Jambalay Crawfish Pie Filet Gumbo" on the radio. She assured me I would and that eased my mind.

Soon after dealing with Hank's death, we came across a particularly straight stretch of road near DeRidder. For once there were no trucks in front of us. Mother gunned

our little Ford up to seventy miles an hour just as a gigantic sow stepped from behind a roadside sign and began to meander across the highway. We're talking about hundreds of pounds of solid unsliced bacon directly in our path. We were seconds from porcine destruction. Mother slammed on the brakes, throwing Chris and me to the floor and sending toys flying everywhere. We came to a dead stop one foot from Big Mama who eyed us with disdain and lazily waddled on her way.

My brother and I screamed in terror for several minutes. Then we discovered that several of our favorite Christmas treasures had been broken and cried even louder. Mother did the only thing she could: she promised us banana splits. The bribe worked and we quickly turned our attention to finding a Dairy Queen. Of course, this was New Year's Day in the fifties and nothing was open so we had to settle for Mounds and Baby Ruths from a service station.

After another 150 miles and eight more calomine-dabbings, we pulled into Baton Rouge around 9:30 p.m. There was still an 80-mile haul to New Orleans, but mother threw budgetary restraint to the winds and stopped at a restaurant for dinner.

Chris and I ordered burgers and fries. Mother ordered coffee. Lots of coffee. As I looked at her across the Formica tabletop in a halo of neon from the JAX beer sign, for the first time I saw not a parent but a person. A woman exhausted and alone and responsible for two little boys. A woman who had come twelve inches from greasy, pork-laden death. A woman who had two hours more to drive in the dark.

For a moment I realized it might be hard to be a parent. Of course, I didn't say anything about this revelation, but for a few seconds I understood. I wish I could tell you that as a result of my insight I became a better child, a kinder brother, and a more thoughtful eight-year-old. Unfortunately that was not the case. Instead I asked for a nickel to play the jukebox and chose Jambalaya Crawfish Pie in memory of old Hank.

Somehow we made it home that night. The next day—jealous of all the attention my brother was getting and eager to avoid going back to school—I happily came down with the chicken pox myself.

Recently I recalled this story to my mother, but she barely remembered our long day's journey. However, I will never forget her solo bravery that New Year's Day of 1953. Her courage will remain with me forever, just as children today observe their parents' unsung heroics even as moms and dads least expect it.

JIM COMER '66