

## **YOUR MOST SPECIAL DAY**

Michael Criley

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You are young again. The family dentist twists the valve. Peppermint flavored gas goes through a hose to your nose. Itching to move, you awake briefly somewhere else, on a pilgrimage to a shrine for Pleasant Dreams. Though children follow you, eating the cough drops you left to mark the road home, you won't get lost.

In your hands you hold a special daybook, a sort of full-color guide to County Clayton, where strangers are welcome because the stranger they are, the more at home they'll feel. Being the vacationland of nobody's business, feel free to wander until you can't stop.

Like in train stations or any crossroads to be navigated by the unenlightened, there are big signs here. Crucial information is spelled out and pasted overhead, but here in a childlike scrawl revised by a babysitter who hears voices.

Stray off the interstate and you'll see lost billboards, sitting ducks for generations of vagrant sign painters and nocturnal pranksters. Some were restored as a sixth-grade class project, only to be tagged and bombed by Brownies flying on snake oil.

Be sure to visit the county fair. See the pig with the sinister turntable? If you let him play your records, you're dancing backwards. And that's not the only thing odd at the fairgrounds. Cause and effect aren't always hooked up in an orderly fashion. Karma here is swift but the payback strange, because morality is administered by an intervening God who might be a quack.

From there, you digress into a wasteland of deceptive charms, where foulmouthed ravens will help anyone find a better place, for a price. No photos allowed. Since your memory is shot, the only reliable souvenir of your sojourn is this book by the local painter laureates, Christian and Rob Clayton. Acting as the visionary revisionists of all regional lore, the brothers piece together narratives from fragments of bedtime stories, hobo gossip, crackpot sermons, family secrets, suburban legends, and sea chanteys.

In their give and take, each time a brush is picked up the story shifts, names change, landmarks are obscured, and new motives assigned. They improvise and revise until their stories are true, testifying to the existence of a land where history can always be improved.

To get back home, find a tree stump, unfold your brain like a road map and smooth out all the wrinkles like the purest tourist in an unfurled world. Now place a bottle of Liberty Spike Pomade in the center, give it a spin and off you go.

By now you notice that every alley leads back to County Clayton, where all flat surfaces tell a story or two, or three. Where else does the writing on the sky describe what just happened and what might? Are they encouragements or stern warnings? If you really want to know, peek in the window. It looks like your aunt's parlor has been vandalized by the loopy handyman. They'll never make sense of what he's done to her diary, but everyone likes the wallpaper better now. Word came too late that he found Bliss under a perfect tree. Since it's nothing but a stump now, let's have a beer and take another look at that map.

Over there is Tim House, where we all found out we were home-schooled in the same playhouse. Now it's shrinking. It's just big enough to be a reliquary for a few self-portraits done by your imaginary friends. Some of the older girls say the dentist still makes house calls, but you can't find where he hides his chair. Maybe you should just sit down here and take a nap.

Your dream of County Clayton starts under the rummy eye of the headmaster, where books are embellished on the sly by honor students detained for defacing the hygiene charts. It's too bad they can't all grow up to be tattoo artists. For three hours after school each day, they toil like monks over their composition books, illuminating each page with a visual slang of flames, scales and webs. When the margins are full and borders all sing, the text is attacked, its logic obliterated. The books are then sold to itinerant preachers. The proceeds keep plenty of nuts in the pantry.

While you slept, the countryside was hit by a storm. Patterned bed sheets from the Storyville cribs, rust-stained clouds, attic wallpaper, polka dots, lipstick portraits, and lost homework all rode in on a slow greasy twister from the wrong side of the tracks. The eyes of portraits reorganized by the gyre now follow you around the room and right out the door.

You survey the storm's wide swath of invention. It looks as if all the wayward uncles have returned and St. Vitus taught them to dance. They all preach a New Word from the animated pages of black-speckled composition books. And the baritone birds are also back, dive-bombing the bible factory behind the courthouse. Lita can tell you what they really make in there; her mom is the nurse on the night shift when all of the accidents happen.

I'm now with you on the playground of our collective subconscious. The squirrels are bigger than ever. Misfits on hiatus from an Appalachian fairy tale dig for coal in the sandbox. What's in balance when Déjà vu and Amnesia are on the see-saw? False memories chase revised myths through the monkey bars while the teacher's pet sneaks a smoke with the coach. Is that keep-away or dodge ball Christian and Rob are playing with the Facts of Life?

Check the travel guide again. Can you find the missing pages from the book report on You Know Better, done by the quietest girl in the school? She picked up on a voice in that book that made her squirm, drawing attention to something no one else had heard before, but then couldn't deny. So the book was banned by the school district and all copies dropped down a dry well. Then came the year of the floods.

Today, something brighter than the sun overhead lurks beyond the horizon, up-lighting the trees and the patterned clouds. The persistent glow beyond the hills is the light of a new tomorrow, stalled in the wings until this peculiar day clears the stage. The scenery has been chewed to nubs, but Today won't go until it has left its mark. It works hard to be The Most Special Day, like every day in a county where a neighbor's medicine is yours for the taking. Might as well; it's not doing them any good.

When you wake up to find a billy goat carving crop mandalas in the milkweed around your memories, you know it's time to unpack your bags. The dentist is gone, your teeth feel new, and somewhere out there some bored kids with plastic legs must have had some funny ideas. You are now a character in the next local legend, a cautionary tale staged in a wild patch of night-blooming nostalgia...or is this the debris field of myths colliding with malarkey? Either way, it's where the circus camps every winter while the

town's witless librarian restores their banners. That might be Christian in the background bribing the monkeys, while Rob stirs the paint. Welcome back. Now let's get lost.