

THE RED EYED RABBIT

By Wade M. Smith

One brisk autumn morning in the long ago, my mother took me by the hand and we walked together to Central Elementary School in Albemarle. This was a journey of about a mile. Normally I would have devoted myself fully to the task of stepping on each crack in the sidewalk. But, on this day, I was in no mood to step on the cracks. This was my first day of school. I was filled with a strong sense of foreboding. My family lived in a mill village called New Town. It was hard times for almost everyone in those days of the war. There was no running water in our village. The houses were cold in winter and hot in summer. There were frequent blackouts designed to darken the villages to hide them from possible enemy planes. We hung blankets over the windows so that we could light a candle and huddle together as a family. Thankfully the enemy planes never came.

Everyone in the village of New Town worked at the Wiscassett Hosiery Mill. My Dad was a knitter of stockings for elegant and fashionable ladies and we imagined them wearing these beautiful stockings in the impossibly far away city of New York. The mill whistle blew at eight each morning to signal the time to begin work. The mill had long ago given the land for a tiny wooden Baptist Church which nestled at the edge of our village and we attended every service no matter the purpose of the meeting. Life was good in New Town. My brother, Roger, and I grew up in the warm embrace of a generation of people who left the farms and came to town to work in cottons and yarns.

As my mother and I walked hand in hand to the school my thoughts were not on stockings for elegant ladies. I was filled with dread. There were no kindergartens at this time. I had no school experience at all. I knew none of the other children who would fill the classroom. Later I would grow to love Edward Brunson and Luther Kimrey and Z.Z. Harris, all classmates who would occupy my days for many years. On this day I was a tense little boy on the first day of school. Miss Pauline Whitley was my teacher. She was a severe lady who did little to ease my fears.

After the school bell rang and the students made their way into the class room, Miss Whitley came to each table with large sheets of newsprint and placed a piece of paper in front of each child. In the middle of each table she placed a carton with red, yellow, white, green, orange and black tempera paints. We were invited to paint whatever we wished. World War II was in full cry. All the boys drew bombs falling from airplanes. The girls drew simple houses with stick figures sweeping around barren yards. For some reason which I cannot explain, I drew an enormous rabbit. It filled the entire sheet of paper. I painted the rabbit white, its eye red, the sky blue, the grass green and I made an orange sun which peeped out from the corner of the paper. And that was it. I was finished. The entire paper was filled. There were no blank spaces at all.

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The principal of the school was a strong woman named Miss B.C. Parker. She brooked no foolishness. Miss Parker walked into the room and paced silently up and down the aisles looking at the paintings. When she came to my rabbit she stopped and exclaimed: "My what a wonderful rabbit!" She asked me to stand with the rabbit and let the class see it. Then, she took me along with my painting out into the hallway and we taped the painting up for all to see. Within an hour of the opening of school I was in love with it. I loved the first grade and the teachers and all my classmates. And forever, I loved Miss B.C. Parker.

That is the way school began for me sixty five years ago. Painting was very important at Central Elementary School in Albemarle, North Carolina. Mill village kids came to school and fully embraced painting and singing. I loved school and couldn't wait to come back. I loved it because there would be painting there on most days. In the spring each year the North Carolina Symphony came to play. Mill village boys and girls got to see the symphony and Benjamin Swalin. In second grade my self portrait was chosen by a committee and sent with other paintings by American kids to France. After a while, all my teachers wanted my paintings for their personal collections. As I moved from grade to grade each teacher immediately asked me to do a painting. The boys in my class transported the easel and paints to a location on the school ground of the teacher's choice. While they read See Scotty Run, I painted the dogwood tree in bloom or the daffodils.

Then the earth turned and the sun rose and set and the stars glided by and the time came to choose a college. I was admitted to the School of Design at N.C. State University. I would paint great paintings and design skyscrapers. But, a funny thing happened on the way to Raleigh. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill offered a Morehead Scholarship and I traded painting for English and Blackstone.

As a lawyer, I continued to paint. My drawings and paintings hung in the homes of friends and on the walls in my children's houses. They laid around the house and leaned into corners in the basement. Sometimes I would work on one painting for a year. But, I was always painting. The paintings bloomed on the desert and were not viewed very much by people who were not desert dwellers, so to speak. Then one day the Mahler Gallery came calling. I had a visit from Rory Parnell and Megg Rader. Suddenly, my paintings have come to town. I have no expectation that the world will come calling and demand that I paint for a grateful throng of art lovers. If the people don't come, I will remind myself of a simple truth. I didn't paint these pictures for them. I painted them for Miss B.C. Parker. They owe their existence to her. And I know that somewhere she is happy about these paintings. Her only disappointment would be that among them there is no rabbit. Long may she run, along with my rabbit.