

Lemonade

By Jim Turner

A.J., a.k.a. Albert Jackson Ellis, was missing his left arm. A truck driver by trade in the early 1950s, he liked to rest his elbow on the rolled-down window. Sometimes he would hang the whole arm out and let his damp hand float up and down in the breeze. There was no air conditioning in those days, at least not in heavy work trucks, and the summer air could be stifling in those bare-bones cabs. One of those accidents that people like to call “freaks” found A.J.’s arm trapped between another truck and the door to his cab. As you might guess, the arm lost the confrontation and had to be amputated just above the elbow.

My earliest memory of him was with an empty left shirt sleeve, so I don’t know whether or not he ever experimented with a prosthetic. The early prosthetic arms were cumbersome wood and metal creations with multiple straps and a mechanical claw. They were okay for grasping and holding items, but nothing like the wonderful creations that are available today. Anyhow, I never saw him wear one. A.J. was a puzzle to my extended family since he and one of my father’s brothers were married to sisters. I guess there might be a Southern expression to explain how we were related, but I don’t know what it is. I just called him Uncle Albert.

Though he had been in the periphery for several years, I didn’t really get to know him until 1958 when we moved to a rural community near him and became his farming neighbor in Vance County. I don’t recall ever hearing anyone refer to him as handicapped. In pre-politically correct Henderson in those days, “one-armed man” was as nice as it got.

The fact is the man was a bull. He did more work and enjoyed being alive more than anyone I had ever met in all my 15 years. With only one arm he could drive heavy equipment, split wood with a maul and a wedge, swing an ax, fish, smoke, chew tobacco and plow fields with a mule and a wood-handled tool handed down from the Middle Ages. He could hitch up the mule before dawn, drag the plow to the field and be carving straight, smooth furrows before the sun rose over U.S. Highway 1. I learned lots of things about life and living from him—and about how to overcome adversity and how to say, “Yes I can” instead of “I can’t do that.” I began to understand that making lemonade from lemons is the real deal.

I learned how to hunt on outings with A.J. I watched in amazement as he breached his shotgun and loaded it, raised the barrel to rest on his left stub and hit his prey. I learned how to set a rabbit trap, how to gig a frog, how to skin a catfish, and how to spit tobacco juice and create an artistic masterpiece. I learned how to tap dance around cuss words by saying something that wasn’t the bad word but left little doubt about your intent. There were some things he couldn’t do, of course. He didn’t play a guitar or a fiddle or a banjo. He couldn’t sing, but having three arms would not have changed that. He could not use deodorant under his right arm. That seems like a crass thing to point out, but it made being close to him a bit uncomfortable at times.

My dad was a wonderful, kind man and he knew how to do all those things I just recognized in A.J. He was patient and forgiving of my ineptness. I loved and adored him and miss him still, but A.J. was a novelty, and he just made work seem like fun. He had two sons who were about the same ages of my brother and me, and we were usually in trouble together.

I woke about 3 a.m. a few days ago, and these thoughts were sloshing around in my brain. I have never spent much energy trying to interpret my dreams. I have always accepted that they might have some relation to real things I am spending extra awake hours trying to resolve. Or dreams could be like a newborn baby’s smile—just gas. But the truth is Jean and I have been focused in recent weeks on some personal stuff, and I wonder if my subconscious self was telling me to try to look through the fog and find some sunlight. We’ve all been to that place where we tell ourselves to buck it up. Knowing something will be helpful for you, and making it happen, are not always in the same time zone.

A lot of advertising dollars are being spent these days to focus attention on us geriatrics. One emphasis is on our maintenance medications, which seem to be

increasing in numbers monthly. We are encouraged to take all our meds every day and, if we have time left over, we can talk to our doctors about getting more pills for other stuff. “Ask your doctor if Heal-It-All XL extended release tablets are right for you.” So, I did.

It was just a routine checkup, but while I had three minutes of his attention, I decided to inquire about my recent strange dreams. “Doc,” I said, “I have been having interesting dreams lately. Some of them are vivid, and I clearly remember dialogue when I wake. Some of the dreams are just action with no talking, but with bad music playing behind scenes of transformers changing from cars to tall buildings to dump trucks and finally ending as a banana split. What does this mean? Do you think Heal-It-All XL might be right for me?” There was a long pause as my doctor processed my complaint. Then he began to type on his laptop.

In recent years, if you have an interest in learning what a doctor had to say about you in 1998 during a June office visit, you can actually access this information online. It almost always begins with the statement “Patient presents with . . .”

Anyhow, Dr. Doctor typed away silently for a while: “Patient presents with questions concerning dreams and . . .” I could read his work upside down but only got some of the words. “Who scheduled this dimwit? What is my tee time on Saturday? What’s the name of the new psycho drug hawked by that cute pharmacy rep?” Finally he returned his attention to me and asked, “Are you in any pain today?” “No,” I replied. “Okay,” he said, “I’ll give you something for that,” followed by, “Heal-It-All XL is an option for you. But first I would like you to try a non-narcotic treatment. Take eight ounces of pulp-free lemonade twice daily. See me again in 30 days, and we will look at a variety of hallucinogen options to treat your presented complaint. Remember to bring your insurance card, and we can talk about some samples you might try. These are items currently being promoted by Ms. Peaches, and she promises they work miracles for conditions like yours. Follow the arrows to the cashier on your way out. And sleep well.”

Current Sudoku

8	5							
		7	3					5
				2				1
	4	2						
			2		1		4	3
	3	8	5				9	
		9					6	
					4		7	
7						8		

See page 9 for solution.