

Dropping In

By Jim Turner

I found it at the bottom of our drive, crumpled and saturated from the previous night's blow. It had come to rest just a few feet from the edge of the lagoon and would have been floating, except the wind had shifted out of the north. I am not really a hat person like many guys are, but my "Jimmy Ray" straw Panama has a certain sentimental attachment for me, and losing it to a storm would have been sad. There is a story surrounding this particular hat, as you might guess, and I will tell it soon. First, though, I should admit that I do collect logo caps from places we visit but I seldom wear them. I just throw them in a cabinet or closet and keep them until the Salvation Army inherits them.

You would think that I would be very conscientious about protecting my nose and ears from the sun's anger after my second melanoma earned me some interesting scars and a partially new nose that grows whiskers. But I still have to be reminded and threatened by my golf buddies that they will report me to the boss if I don't cover up and paint myself with sunscreen. Friendly reminders from those guys guilt me into doing the smart thing. Except for the "Jimmy Ray" straw one, though, hats don't have much appeal for me. I'm not vain about my hair or anything as simple as that. They just feel funny on my head. They don't feel natural.

I had a cousin who is now deceased named Jimmy Ray. That kind of double name was and still is, I suppose, very popular here in the South. You might expect that he married someone named Betty Sue or Sally Ann, but he was always in too much of a hurry to have to say more than one name at a time when addressing his wife. He loved to talk, though, and—as we like to say down here below the Mason-Dixon Line—he never met a stranger. In the case of Jimmy Ray, the truth is nobody was a stranger for long after they met. If the newly engaged pair of ears

didn't drift away quickly, they were going to get filled up with nonsense in short order. He was an amazingly likeable fellow. Quick to laugh and even quicker to make you smile, he was just fun to be around. It was inevitable that he would be someone I would emulate in my youth. Andrew Earl, also deceased, was my other hero, but the double name issue didn't come into play with him because we all called him Peanut; I have never known why. I learned lots and lots of mischievous stuff from Peanut and Jimmy Ray.

A few years ago Jimmy Ray lost his wife to cancer and was himself a lost soul for a couple of years. One way he coped with the pain of the loss was by never staying still long enough to think. He traveled back to California where he had lived for several years, visited every family member he could locate and found many new friends along his way. After a couple of years of rambling, he met a nice single-name lady who enjoyed traveling as much as Jimmy Ray, so together they made the rounds of family members once again.

There is another custom here in the South that is not practiced so much now as it was many years ago, but old customs die hard for some people. I am referring to the practice of "dropping in" unexpectedly for a visit. In this age of cell phones and pocket computers, it is hard to imagine that someone might drive three hours, park in your drive, ring the doorbell and say, "How y'all doing? We were just in the neighborhood and wanted to see you." But guess what? That's what Jimmy Ray and his lady friend did. Jimmy had on a nice Panama hat, was driving a new red SUV and escorting his sweet and attractive friend. Jean was at home and I was playing golf. I did just mention cell phones, didn't I?

Try to imagine my hitting a 320-yard drive, then pulling out the pitching wedge for the approach to the green. I imagine that all the time, but I had more likely just rolled one down the fairway and was still swearing when my cell played a frantic tune. Somehow, Jean had managed to change my ringtone all the way from home to something that sounded like a panic-stricken goose. She needed my attention right away. "You need to come home," she said. "We have guests." Then she explained that J.R. and friend had done the drop-in thing.

Never believe that golf buddies are forgiving about anything when it comes to unsettling their competitors. The guys I hang out with are extremely alert for any opportunity to divert my focus from the really important nuances of the game, such as what I should eat when we make it back to the club house. So naturally I had to explain the urgency of Jean's call and my need to concede the dollar bet and head on home. I told them the whole Jimmy Ray story and for some reason they all found it rather humorous. They also decided that I should forevermore be known as Jimmy Ray. On the golf course I now have an alias, which has spread beyond that original foursome and caught on with others as well. I left the three of them laughing and went home to visit my cousin and his lady friend.

I hope you don't misunderstand my message here. I really was glad to see Jimmy Ray and his new friend and we had a nice visit. It was the kind of afternoon perfect for sitting on the screened porch with iced tea and sweet pastries. It was a time when everybody catches up with family stuff and remembers good times from years past. I am really glad that the cell phone screamed for me to come home because that was the last time I saw him. The guests left in the same manner they had arrived. They looked at their watches, looked at each other and Jimmy said, "We have to be going. It's getting late and we want to stop and see Bobby Joe and Ruth Ann before supper time." And then they left—without Jimmy's Panama hat. They got in the red SUV and backed down the drive, stopping just a few feet short of the lagoon near the spot where I found the straw hat resting just a few days ago.

Later in the afternoon, beside the chair where Jimmy Ray had sat enjoying his iced tea and conversation, we saw the hat lying on the floor. When we called to let him know, he said a phrase or two that can't be printed here. Then he said, "Keep it for me. I'll get it the next time I see you." I plan to do just that.

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