

The Summer Cottage
By Michael Groetsch

With curious anticipation, I turn from Highway 90 onto North Beach Boulevard. A fruit vendor sitting near his pickup truck waves like we are old friends. The vendor is surrounded by the fruits of early summer. A pile of light-green watermelons lay near the tailgate of his truck. Although we count our lives in years, we seem to measure them in seasons.

As a bright sun warms my heart, I park my car and begin a pilgrimage into my childhood. Walking barefoot on the sandy beach that my feet have not touched since the summer of 1958, I am suddenly saddened by its neglect. The humid air blowing across the murky water of Bay Saint Louis, a small coastal community in Southern Mississippi, seems thicker now. Weeds and underbrush cover broken gray concrete steps where we sat as children. Large stone barbecue pits that once announced the flavor of our family gatherings stand crooked and embedded within the sand like tombstones that proclaim an earlier life.

Searching for ancient artifacts to validate the past, I look for my tiny footprints erased by decades of rising tides. I listen for our boyish laughter carried away by distant winds. I seek the beach shower that once cleansed sand from our naked bodies. Gazing towards the shoreline of the bay, I yearn to see Mom and me collecting seashells near the water's edge.

Returning to my car to resume my journey, familiar surroundings begin to provide an emotional rush. The sight of a decaying beachfront mansion being restored to its former picturesque splendor renews my spirit. The century old Hancock Bank, gothic in appearance and resilient to time, stands proudly within the midst of the town's business

center. A fully restored bronze colored '51 Chevy sits in its parking lot. The old Star Theater, now a sweet shop, serves snowballs to tourists and children who are unaware of the classic films once shown within its walls. A young man and his family transform an old vacant building into a coffee shop that will welcome customers seeking refuge from the stress of a day.

I drive away from the beach into the majestic grounds of historic Saint Augustine Seminary. Birds, squirrels, and butterflies frolic under the protective arms of ancient oaks. Flowing gray moss hang from trees like artistically placed tinsel arranged by God. A young woman and child walk beneath the canopy of oaks and carefully examine the beauty of a pink flowering bush. The simultaneous sounds of church bells and the whistle of a distant train heighten the spirituality of the moment. As I search the spacious grounds of the seminary for the artesian stream in which I once swam and caught multicolored perch using paper clips and string, I come upon the old grotto from which the stream flowed. The grotto is now dry and absent of silent visitors who often knelt within the serenity of prayer. An elderly priest of Cajun descent approaches and introduces himself as Father Guidry. Together we reflect the magic of a time long past.

I continue my journey and arrive at the old cottage on Hancock Street where I spent the early summers of my life. The L-shaped house, with its tin roof and linear porch, appears as it did nearly a half century ago when my brothers, cousins, and I wandered aimlessly on its tree- shaded grounds. Aware that the house is vacant, I walk up the narrow concrete steps as if anticipating the soft whisper of my mother's young voice. Sitting on the front porch swing that cradled me as a child, the smell and beauty of the large Elm tree that I once climbed brings back a time almost forgotten. As I walk along

the long wooden porch, I find myself peering into the windows of the cottage hoping to see the spirits of family members now deceased. The fruit tree from which I picked pecans still stands to the left of the kitchen. The concrete basketball court on which I once played still awaits my presence. My reflective mood intensifies as weeping willows warn me of an approaching summer storm. As I embrace the moment, I begin to hear the words and laughter of my family echoing from the past.

“Mama, are we almost there yet?” I ask impatiently.

“Mike,” she sighs, “If you ask me that one more time, we’re going to turn this car around and go back home!”

Sitting in the back of our canary yellow ’54 Buick convertible, my brother Ewald and I try to entertain ourselves by counting out- of- state license plates. My brother Barry is only five- years- old and doesn’t know how to count very well.

“Mama, Ewald is touching me again,” I complain. “Tell him to sit on his side of the car,” I demand.

“Mike,” she responds, “I’m absolutely tired of your whining. I’m warning you. One more word and I’m going to ask your father to pull the car on the side of the road and take care of things. Now be quiet!”

“Ugh! Something stinks, Mom! I think someone passed the mustard,” Ewald yells while exhaling his words. “Everybody roll down the windows,” he begs.

Mom denies responsibility for the odor while Dad’s proud chuckle proclaims guilt.

“How many miles now, Mom? Are we almost there yet?” I ask again, as her patience seems to be wearing thin.

We finally pull into the white shell driveway of our summer home. My cousins Kenny and Chuck run toward our car like a welcoming committee. Kenny is 10- years-old. He is my best friend. Wearing nothing but bathing suits and bouncing up and down like Mexican jumping beans, they announce that they are going swimming.

“Hurry up and put your bathing suits on,” Chuck begs as if there are only four spots left available on the beach.

“Don’t go anywhere until both of you help unload the car!” Mom demands.

Pretending not to hear her request, we slip on our bathing suits and skip down the streets like jackrabbits as our aunts and uncles help Mom and Dad with the car. The summer of 1958 in Bay Saint Louis has officially begun.

After washing the sand from our sunburned bodies under the ice cold shower near the public pier, we head back for supper. Swimming always makes me hungry. My stomach begins to growl in anticipation of dinner.

“We’re having beans tonight. Beans and rice is my favorite, but it always makes me fart,” Kenny proclaims. “Maybe you better not sleep in the same bed with me tonight,” he warns.

Arriving at the house, we climb the front steps to the aroma of red beans and rice and the sounds of dinner plates and silverware being placed on the table.

“Dinner is ready,” Aunt Lillian and Uncle Buddy (Kenny’s parents) proudly announce.

I get a warm feeling inside and silently thank God for my family.

After dinner, the adults go to the front porch to drink coffee and to smoke their cigarettes. Some of my friends tell me that smoking is cool. I think that it looks stupid. It also stinks. Kenny and I tag along with the adults so that we can snoop on their conversations. They think because we don’t hear them tell us to cut the grass, clean up the house, or put out the garbage, that we don’t hear other things they say. But we do, especially when it comes to gossip. That’s how we know one of our uncles got arrested and that my aunt thinks she is pregnant.

I sit on the porch swing with Mom while Kenny sits on the steps with Aunt Lillian. After awhile though, the adult stuff gets boring and Kenny suggests that we go to the movies. He also knows that the adults would like to get rid of us and will give us money for the show and some candy.

“Hey, Mike, how about going to the Star Theater on the beach to see *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*? If we go for the 7:00 o’clock show, we can get in for 25 cents.”

Although I’m terrified of the scaly human size Creature in the movie, I’ve seen it seven or eight times. I agree to go as our parents give each of us a dollar and ask that we take Ewald and Chuck with us. They even insist that we see a double feature. I think Kenny is right; they are trying to get rid of us!

We enter the Star and go straight to the snack bar. After looking at all of the candy in the glass case, I buy a box of Milk Duds, Jujy Beads, and a Pepsi. I give the lady 40 cents and still have enough to get a Milky Way or some popcorn later.

“Hi Mike! Welcome back to Bay Saint Louis,” I hear someone say from behind.

It’s Roland, the colored boy that lives on Washington Street near our summer home. We sometimes ride bikes with him and his cousins.

“How about hanging out with us tomorrow?” he asks.

“Yea, sounds good to me,” I respond. “We’ll meet you at the corner of Washington and Hancock about 9:00 in the morning. Hey Roland, how about sitting with us and watching the movie?” I ask.

“ Mike, you know colored people aren’t allowed to sit on the ground floor with white folks. We have to sit on the balcony. Look, I’ll see you in the morning if the Creature doesn’t get us in the meantime.”

Roland opens the door to the narrow staircase that leads to the balcony as I walk to my seat to join Ewald, Chuck, and Kenny sitting on the ground floor.

I always chew my lip when I watch this movie. The Creature that lives in the Black Lagoon reminds me of a big lizard. Although I’m afraid of the dark and can’t sleep very well after seeing this movie, I pretend that it’s no big deal. I’m almost 10- years- old and don’t want the others to think that I’m a baby. I also have a crush on the lady in the picture that the Creature carries into the lagoon. It’s the same kind of crush that I have on Doris Day, the pretty lady with blonde hair who plays in movies with Rock Hudson. Like being afraid of the dark, I never tell anyone of the crushes. They might think that I’m stupid and weird.

“Hey, Ewald, did something wet just hit you from behind?” I ask.

“Yea, I think someone just threw a soft drink off the balcony.”

“It hit me too,” Kenny responds.

“They also hit me with sticky candy and some popcorn,” Chuck declares.

“It must be Roland and his cousins sitting above us,” I suggest. “Hey, Roland, I’m going to kick your butt tomorrow when I see you if you don’t stop!” I yell clear across the theater as the Creature retreats back into the Black Lagoon.

Chuckles can be heard coming from the balcony as the manager of the Star comes down the aisle with his flashlight. The manager is such a nerd.

The movie is over and we decide not to stay for the second feature. We don’t want to miss out on anything that may be going on at the summer cottage. We exit the door of the theater that faces the beach. I see Roland again, but he denies knowing who threw the stuff from the balcony and agrees to meet us in the morning to ride bikes. As we step outside the Star, I begin looking towards the beach for any signs of the scaly Creature coming out of the water.

“Why are you walking so fast?” Ewald asks, as Kenny and Chuck yell that they see a large shadowy silhouette near the shoreline.

We begin running back to the cottage, as I feel a tingling sensation within my stomach.

It’s bedtime. Mom and Aunt Lillian tell Kenny and me that we can sleep together in the bedroom towards the middle of the house. Dad and Uncle Buddy pass through the

room with long cans that have the letters DDT and pump handles, spraying for mosquitoes, so that we don't get eaten up while we're sleeping.

"Hey, Dad," I ask, "you don't think that stuff is bad to breathe?"

"Of course not, Mike," he responds. "You don't think that they would sell it at the grocery store if it could hurt you? Please go to sleep. You guys are keeping everybody else up!"

I tell Kenny that the pillows and sheets smell like mothballs. They're been in storage all winter long.

"Gee, I didn't know that moths had balls," Kenny says, as Ewald and Chuck laugh loudly from the next bedroom.

"Mike," Kenny yelps, it's the Creature from the Black Lagoon looking in the window."

We both pull the sheets over our heads to the smell of a terrible odor.

"Ugh, Kenny, did you cut the mustard?" I ask.

"I warned you not to sleep with me after I eat red beans and rice," he responds.

I quickly pull my head from beneath the sheets as I keep one eye on the window for any sign of the Creature.

"Mom, tell Mike and Kenny to shut up," Ewald yells from the other bedroom as Dad threatens to separate us if we don't quiet down.

The cushion of air and soft noise of the window fan helps us fall asleep in anticipation of another day.

It's Friday morning. Roland and his cousins stand us up so we ride our bikes back to the cottage. My cousin Cindy and her mom and dad pull into the driveway as we arrive. They're here to spend the summer with us. Cindy is my second best friend. She can't be my best friend because she's a girl. I have a crush on her, but I can't tell anyone because she's my cousin. You're not supposed to have a crush on your cousin. I kissed her once but we swore to each other that we would never tell anyone.

Cindy's best friend is a 10- year- old girl named Carmel. Carmel has dark black hair and dark eyes. I think that she's pretty. I also have a crush on Carmel but she doesn't know it yet. I think Carmel and her family will be here tomorrow to spend a couple of weeks. I hope so, but I have to watch out for Kenny. I think that he likes her too. I once saw him trying to kiss her behind the shed near the basketball court. I don't think Carmel likes him though because she ran into the house saying that her mom was calling her. I didn't hear anything at all.

"Hey Cindy, how about going fishing with Kenny and me?" I ask

"Nope! That's boy stuff," she responds. "I think that I'll just stay here and go make groceries with my mom at Jitney Jungle. I also need to help her unpack. I'll see you and Kenny later. Maybe we'll go swimming or something."

Kenny and I get on our bikes with our fishing poles and tackle boxes. Our moms' yell at us to put some shoes on but we don't hear them because it's not gossip.

"Hey, Mike, we need to see Mr. Al first. I don't have anymore hooks and sinkers. I also need some gray plastic worms that we use to catch those big croakers."

Mr. Al is the local barber. He also sells fishing stuff out of his barbershop. I once bought a squiggly brown plastic cockroach from him and caught a five- pound flounder.

Kenny and I like Mr. Al. He tells us funny stories and is always nice to us. He also cuts our hair for 25 cents. After getting our hooks and sinkers from Mr. Al, I tell him that I'm coming back in the morning to get a haircut. I'm going to get a flat top like I did last summer. When I put pink Butch Wax on it, it stands straight up. I think it looks cool. I think Carmel likes it too. Last summer when I got a flat top, she told me that I looked like the singer Ricky Nelson. She doesn't know it, but when I look in the mirror at my flat top, I kind of agree with her. When no one is around, I also sing his songs and think that I sound like him too.

Kenny and I arrive at the beach and chain our bikes to a small tree and walk with our fishing poles and tackle boxes to the end of the public pier.

"Mike, if you catch a catfish, please be careful that you don't stick yourself with its fin like you did last year."

"Kenny, do you think that I'm stupid or something. I learned my lesson last summer. I didn't know how quick catfish could pop up and stick you. I know better now. Ain't no way that it's going to happen again."

After putting my favorite brown plastic cockroach on the line, I cast it out into the water and brag about the big croaker that I'm going to catch. As soon as my line hits the water, I get a huge strike and begin reeling it in.

"God, Kenny, I think that it's a giant catch. Grab the fish net in case we need it!" I scream.

Kenny yells in excitement as I pull the fish closer. We both look surprised however, as I pull it out of the water and discover that it's a little catfish not much larger than the plastic lure.

“Oh well, at least it gave me a good fight,” I proclaim as the little fish pops up and stings my right palm and the pain makes me see stars.

Within 15 minutes, we’re back at the summer cottage. My right hand is throbbing and beginning to swell like a helium balloon while Kenny roams around the house telling everyone how stupid I am.

“I told him to be careful if he caught another catfish,” he righteously announces. “I reminded Mike about how he got stung last year. I can’t believe he did it again,” I hear Kenny repeating in the next room as I get the urge to bite him. I can’t help but wonder why I consider Kenny my best friend. Maybe I should think about swapping him for Cindy.

Mom tells me to come and sit in the kitchen while she fills up a big bucket with water and pours in a couple of boxes of Epsom salt. She always seems to know what to do when I am sick or when I hurt myself. Sometimes I wonder why she didn’t become a doctor. Mom pulls out the Epsom salt when I sprain something or when something is swollen, paregoric when I am nauseated, and a round bucket with a hose attached to it for an enema when I have stomach cramps. While I still tell her when something is swollen or when I’m nauseated, stomach cramps have to get real bad before I open my mouth.

It’s about 10:00 p.m. and time to go to sleep. I lie in bed with my right hand still soaking in the Epsom salt. Kenny tells me that he’s sorry for calling me stupid but still can’t believe that I did it again. My hand is throbbing as I hold it in the bucket and continue to watch the window for any sign of the Creature. The voice of my Aunt Gail arriving with her children for the weekend can be heard outside the cottage. The soft noise of the window fan and the sound of a passing train once again give me a warm

feeling inside. As Kenny falls to sleep, I slip out of the bed, get on my knees, and thank God for my family; and Carmel; even Kenny.

“Well, Mike, what do you think?” Mr. Al asks as he swings the barber’s chair around so that I face the mirror.

Although I think that I look just like Ricky Nelson, I can’t say anything. Everyone in the barbershop will think that I’m stupid.

“Thanks, Mr. Al. I think that it looks great. Here’s a dollar. I also need some pink Butch Wax so that I can spike it up later.”

“That will be 25 cents for the haircut and 20 cents for the Butch Wax,” he says as he gives me my change and puts the hair stuff in a little brown paper bag.

I ride my bike back to the summerhouse and begin touching my hair with my left hand. The swelling in my right hand has gone down quit a bit, but it still hurts a little. My hair feels cool. Kind of like a porcupine. It’s a little flatter than I want it to be but I’ll spike it up more as soon as I get back to the house.

I ride across the front lawn of the cottage and see Carmel’s family car parked in the driveway. Sneaking into the backdoor, I grab a hairbrush off the dresser and go directly into the bathroom before anyone sees me. Opening the jar of Butch Wax, I scoop out a big glob and rub it into my hair. It’s bright pink, so I have to rub it real hard so that the color doesn’t show. As I brush my hair straight back and than slightly to the side, I begin humming the tune “*Traveling Man*” by Ricky Nelson.

With a big smile on my face, I walk into the den and see Carmel and her mom sitting on the sofa. Kenny, Aunt Lillian, and Uncle Buddy are sitting on the other side of the room. Suddenly and without warning, Kenny begins laughing hysterically.

“Mike,” he asks, “how much did you pay for that haircut? I hope that Mr. Al gave you change. He must be mad at you or something. I was going to get a haircut myself, but after seeing you, I think that I’ll wait.”

Hoping that Carmel will rescue me from my embarrassment, she razzes, “Yea Mike, you sort of look like a dead porcupine.” She also hands me a paper towel while telling me that I have some pink stuff on my right ear.

Aunt Lillian and Uncle Buddy laugh quietly as they place their hands over their mouths. I never liked Ricky Nelson very much anyway. Cindy is now my best friend.

Later in the day, Carmel and I go to the beach alone, without Kenny. As we turn the corner from the summer cottage and walk down Washington Street, Carmel lets me hold her hand and I begin to feel butterflies again. It’s not the kind of butterflies that you get when you think that the Creature is after you. It’s the kind that you get when you like a girl and you think she likes you. We walk on the beach and collect small seashells along the shore. I pick up a stick and begin drawing a heart in the sand. Inside the heart I write, ‘Mike loves Carmel’. She draws a second heart next to mine and writes, ‘Carmel loves Mike’. The butterflies begin to tingle deep within my stomach as I kiss Carmel on the lips. We continue to walk along the beach, holding hands and feeling the sand beneath our feet. We watch the train pass along the trestle that crosses the bay. I like the way that the wind blows through Carmel's dark black hair. I kiss her once more and without

another word being spoken, we walk back to the summer cottage, hand in hand, both silently wishing that the summer would last forever.

My Uncle Buddy bought one of those black and white television sets, with the big hand dial, and put it in the family room. I don't know why, though. We're much too busy to ever watch television. Early in the morning we go into the woods, climb trees, and catch tadpoles in the shallow pond with soup cans. We gather pecans and cooking pears from some of the trees and bring them to our moms so that they can make dessert for lunch. After lunch we fish and swim in the salty water of the bay. We collect seashells and make sand castles that get flooded by the rising tide. Later in the day, we ride our bikes to the artesian well at the grotto and catch perch in its stream. We walk through the old graveyard near the beach and tell ghost stories that keep us up at night.

Even in the late evening we are still too busy to watch television. The adults take us to the skating rink and we race in anticipation of an unknown prize. We then share banana splits and floats at the Dairy Queen on Highway 90 while playing cards on the tables outside. Before going to bed, we walk barefoot to the corner bakery and get hot bread that melts in our mouths before we swallow. We all sit on the porch and listen to the sounds of the crickets late into the night and talk about our wonderful day. We share hugs and kisses. We then go into the house feeling warm inside, say our prayers, and go to sleep in anxious anticipation of the next morning. Television? Who has time for television when we have so many important things to do with our family!

I sometimes wonder if our summerhouse is also the home of the Pied Piper. There are so many people that visit our cottage. I often think that they find us by following the Piper here. There are grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends. While some spend the night, others spend the week. The lucky ones stay for the entire summer.

I also think sometimes that our cottage is the home of the Great Houdini. When the sound of the rain hitting the tin roof, the soft noise of the window fan, and the whistle of the train mix together, all our worries seem to magically disappear.

Last week, I even had a dream about the Piper and Houdini. In my dream, my mom and dad, grandfathers and grandmothers, aunts and uncles, cousins and friends all followed the Piper into the cottage and sat together in a giant magic bowl. Houdini came into the room, stirred up the bowl and we became one.

It is the summer of 2004 and I return to Bay Saint Louis with my wife Barbara, my son Justin, and his fiancée Jessica. As I turn from Highway 90 onto North Beach Boulevard, once again the fruit vendor gives a friendly wave and a warm smile. A crude sign advertises boxes of cannonball size cantaloupe and baskets of bright red apple. On both sides of his truck are sacks of orange and green citrus.

As I resume my journey into the past, I want to share the spiritual aura of this quaint community with those I love. I need to express my feelings about this wonderful place before it evades me like a fading dream.

We first travel the beach road and have lunch at ‘The Dock of the Bay’, a popular restaurant that overlooks the trestle from which Kenny and I fished as children. We buy snowballs from the window of the old ‘Star Theater’ from which my brothers, cousins, and I bought tickets to see the ‘Creature’. We walk the seashore on which Carmel and I spent the days of summer we hoped would never end and then stroll through a beachfront shop to the scent of strawberry incense. We visit the Saint Augustine grotto and listen to church bells as the sound of a train is heard in the distance. Next to the grotto, we sit and watch 2 young boys laughing and climbing the majestic oak that Kenny and I often conquered before returning to the cottage for supper.

Leaving the beach area, I again drive to the old summer cottage. It seems to await my return. As we leave the car, I walk up the front steps of the porch to the song, “*Best Day of My Life*,” playing on the radio in the background. My eyes begin to moisten. Barbara and Jessica instinctively allow me space as Justin follows. I sit on the porch swing while Justin cuddles next to me and softly whispers, “I love you, Dad.” Our souls touch as we gaze upon the beauty of the old Elm tree while inhaling its intoxicating scent.

As we sit quietly on the porch swing, my mind willingly fades to fantasy.

I suddenly see the faces and hear the voices of Pied Piper and the Great Houdini coming from the front door of the summer cottage.

“It’s been a very long time. We’ve been expecting you. We knew you would return. Please come in and visit. We will share the love that still remains within these walls,” the Piper says with a soft smile on an aged face.

Accepting his invitation, I follow them through each room of the cottage and begin to feel the presence of family members long passed. I can hear the affectionate whispers of Grandmother and Grandfather as I walk through the front room. I enter the middle bedroom and feel Kenny’s embrace as he takes my hand and leads me towards the kitchen. I smell the aroma of red beans and rice. I hear the clatter of plates and silverware being placed upon the table. The voices of Mom and Aunt Lillian announcing that it is dinner can be heard among the clamor. As I approach the kitchen, a light summer rain bounces off the tin roof and the soft flow of the window fan caresses my spirit.

“Welcome home, Mike. Remember the giant magic bowl. It’s always remained here. It’s just that you’ve been looking for it in the wrong places,” Houdini says with a gentle tone.

I climb and look into the magic bowl and see the smiling faces of Grandma and Grandpa, Kenny, Aunt Lillian and Mom, and cousins and friends whose spirits still live within me. As I step into the giant bowl, I melt into their arms as Houdini stirs it up and we become one.

“You have found the meaning of life. It’s up to you to share it with others,” whispers the Piper.

“Come back whenever you feel the need,” Houdini responds. “The door is always open.”

My brief drift into fantasy is suddenly broken by Justin's voice.

"It's getting late, Dad. I have a lot of homework to do when we get home. It's time to go," Justin suggests.

"Justin's right, Hon. Tomorrow is a workday and we both have to get up early," Barbara responds. "Hey, would you like to pick up some fruit on the highway?" she asks.

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea. The seasons are changing. It's nearly fall. Maybe the fruit vendor already has tangerines," I reply.

As we get into our car and pull out the shell driveway, I gaze towards the summer cottage and notice that the porch's swing is swaying on its own. Could it be the wind, I wonder? Or could it be Piper and Houdini sitting and waiting to open the door for the next family who seeks the meaning of life?

"I love you, Mike."

"I love you too, Barbara. I sure hope that the fruit vendor has tangerines."

"This very moment is a seed from which the flowers of tomorrow's happiness grows." – Margaret Lindsey