

# The Last Leaf

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## CLASS REUNION

THE EVENING of May 1, 2004 marked the gathering of my classmates to celebrate our graduation fifty-six years ago. Of course, the banquet was preceded and followed by hours of visiting with some of the people who shared a classroom with me for a number of years. I am quick to admit that having not seen a few of these friends since graduation, I cannot now recognize them from Adam's housecat. And one change I notice about them is that fate has not been kind to them where good looks are concerned. I probably expected to see again the cute and giggly girls who fascinated me at 16, but instead I meet sparse white hair, thin lips, wrinkles and dark-circled eyes—all on a bent frame of strange proportions. Truly, Fate is the great equalizer where age is concerned; none can survive the onslaught of the years. With few exceptions, we become basically ugly.

In truth, however, some of us do salve our self-esteem by trading looks for intelligence—or at least for a more amiable disposition and the ability to make small talk. I had buddies during my school years who seldom spoke—and who now, more than fifty years later, will gab non-stop for as long as a listener is in the area. It's a little embarrassing when you expect a "Yep" or "Nope" and instead you get an endless flow of meaningless pap.

Another change wrought by the aging process is the unfettered urge to embrace anyone, male or female who can remember you—or pretend to do so. Those pretty girls who could once give you a violent flush just by touching your hand and who kept themselves always out of your reach, now rush willingly into your arms without a shred of hesitation. It's as if they all know that there is no longer any danger in such affectionate behavior. Sad to say, they are right.

Among those who grace the reunion are our teachers. I relish being able to stand before my favorite teacher with no quake in my knees nor tremble in my voice and express my sincere appreciation for the effort put forth on my behalf, and in spite of my obvious dislike for studying. On reflection, I think these educators who work diligently to prepare us for life are perhaps the most under-rated and poorly rewarded soldiers in the fox holes that dot the battlefields of our education. For a few years, it has been my pleasure to let some of those rare creatures know what their influence has meant to me.

And until our gathering next year, I will perhaps write a letter or send an e-mail to some, but for most of my old classmates, it will be a year of continued passage down a narrowing road—with a stop now and then to relive the days of youth at another class reunion. #

## AN OLD HOUSE

DURING MY YEARS of growing up I lived in several different houses, some in the country; some in the small towns of central and southwestern Georgia. I have two favorites, both of which were built in the early nineteenth century, and one of which is now part of the historical village of Westville, near Lumpkin, GA. The other is largely destroyed with only a small portion still standing. I'll discuss my feeling about that one here.

I was not yet six years old when my parents and I moved onto the Burnett Place. The house was huge with twin gables on the front and a porch that extended across the entire front and halfway down the south side of the old building. There were four rooms on each side of a big central hallway which opened onto the front porch and also onto the back porch which was screened and ran along the length of the dining room and the kitchen. The rooms were fifteen feet square with ten foot ceilings with a fireplace in each room. My father, a skilled carpenter, moved two of the rooms from the north side and made a storage house of them. He also removed the porch from the south side and replaced the steps that lead onto the porch in the back of the house. A modern bathroom had been added earlier as well as running water to the kitchen sink. The house sat on brick pillars three feet high. The house and yards were shaded by huge oak, magnolia and mulberry trees. This had been a self-sufficient plantation during its younger years. The main compound included a blacksmith shop, a smokehouse, two large barns, a crib and shelter for the milk cows, a garage and storage house and a large garden with fruit trees and grape vines. Near the barns was a pile of rusting shafts and pulleys—all that remained of the cotton gin.

For four years, that plantation and the huge old house was my home; one that I cherished then and even more in the years after we moved away. There was a kind of magic about the place—from the shrieking of winter winds around the eves to the chirping of a multitude of birds during the summer. Unaffected by having few playmates, I happily chased make-believe Indians and outlaws around the place and climbed high in the trees to enjoy the elevated view, especially on windy days. The land extended almost two miles to the banks of the Chattahoochee River where my mother would sit for hours and catch channel catfish. There was a waterfall with three levels as well as two creeks on the place and I fished as much as any kid my age—and hunted squirrels and game birds with my father. My main transportation was the bicycle I got for Christmas, although I loved to ride an old gray mare named Queen. The people I knew and grew to love on that plantation added much to my young life, and I cherish memories of them. I have made a point of revisiting the homesite in recent years, and seeing in my mind's eye all the buildings and hearing the sounds of the mules, horses, cows, sheep, goats, dogs, geese and chickens that once made it a beehive of activity. A way of life truly gone with the wind. #