



The Wedding on
Big Bone Hill

A NOVEL

STEVEN KEY MEYERS



Jack hits the road in a classic RV on the quest for Paradise, USA. It seems he's found it in the RV community of a bucolic Kansas state park. But, this Eden turns out to be almost as tricky as the original when, one weekend, a little boy goes missing. The lonesome task of doing justice threatens tragedy in an otherwise ruefully funny celebration of the upside-down underpinnings of an American microcosm.

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1.

On her way to work the lunch shift at Long John Silver's, Donna stopped off at the ranger station to give her dad the news that she was going to marry his boss. She entered to a jangle of bells, flashed her ring (her dad thought it sparkled grudgingly) and told him all about it as he stood at the counter in front of the wall of caged reptiles.

Listening, Percy Bratcher treated his daughter to the sneer and the flipping back of his unlikely ginger thatch that he bestowed so freely on the public. In fact, she had to break off when one of the off-season trickle of campers stepped in to ask for a map to the park. With curled lip, Percy informed him they were out. The camper left, her dad flipped his hair and Donna resumed.

She lived with Mark, the wonder was that he would propose. After fleeing with her mother and brother to parts unknown the first time Percy got out of prison, she had returned alone after his second stretch, the embodiment of the court's mercy in granting custody to a reformed and remorseful father. Naturally the head ranger fell for her.

"Married, huh?" Percy grunted. "He's a dog, you OK with that?"

Mark's affairs—besides those with park visitors, townswomen and outlying farm wives—included the one with Donna's mother that led to the standoff that landed Percy in prison in the first place.

"He's changed," Donna informed him. "Turning forty. Wants to settle down, raise a family."

"Sure," said Percy. "And you're—?"

"Nineteen in July." Which would also be the anniversary of her moving in with Mark (Percy did not care to revisit that battle). She turned to leave, opened the door without jangling the bell. "Don't fuck it up, Daddy, it wasn't easy. Hey, it's *Kansas*. Been legal since I was twelve years old."

"Set a date?"

"Saturday of Labor Day weekend, on top of Big Bone Hill. Not too bad: the dress, cake, rent a shelter for the reception. But if you don't want to pay for it, we'll elope."

"Won't get off that easy," Percy growled at her departing yellow ruffles.

He watched her reach inside her ancient one-eyed Isuzu and open the door. Duct tape held the front bumper on and propped up its remaining headlight, brightened the smashed-up fenders and secured the back window's plastic sheeting. A bungee cord closed the hood.

One day Mark delivered to Donna a brand-new, turquoise Thunderbird convertible, with a broad golden ribbon across it to match her hair, and she laughed in his face. *That's my girl*, had been Percy's thought.

After she drove off he returned to arranging the morrow's annual springtime burn of Big Bone Hill.

At 4:59—he was nothing if not punctual—Percy wished the snakes and turtles goodnight, turned off the shortwave and the lights, locked the door and climbed, groaning, into his decommissioned park truck. It still had the siren and amber roof

– THE WEDDING ON BIG BONE HILL –

lights, but its insignia were painted out in a darker shade of brown than the rest. He drove down the lane opposite the ranger station toward the swimming beach, but short of it turned into the woods where his old Airstream nestled against a slope like an undiscovered plane crash.

Indoors he sat down heavily and with his inevitable groan. His pet squirrel, Rocky, glad to see him, ran over excitedly and jumped in his lap. Percy, in no mood, brushed him off. In the process Rocky nipped his finger. Two telltale droplets of blood welled up. There was nothing for it but, groaning, to get up again, wipe the wound with alcohol, bandage it, grab the .22 from behind the couch, and open the door. Rocky scurried onto the picnic table and Percy blew his head off, thus making him the first casualty of Donna's engagement.

He kicked the body into the trees, and stood listening to the echoes of the rifle's report. The sound was startling in a state park where shooting was illegal—doubly so when a two-time felon forbidden guns pulled the trigger. But the echoes died out without rousing ranger sirens, and that was that.

That was that, except that, unusually for a weeknight, Percy cracked a bottle of Kentucky Tavern. Reviewing the history of Mark's worming his way into his family he missed Rocky's sympathetic ear and chattering counsel, but by the time *Letterman* came on, Kentucky Tavern was running low and he could only nod and snore. The next morning he woke up still in his chair to a dire, if relentlessly cheerful, Kansas City traffic report.

2.

Any number of websites cater to the recreational vehicle community, gaudy advocates of the “RV lifestyle.” Many of them offer all manner of classified ads, running the gamut from *rigs for sale* to *employment opportunities*. Those vying for notice in the latter category generally seek workampers – in RV parlance, “volunteers” – to perform some certain task of local or state or national park maintenance, be it mowing, or cleaning restrooms, or greeting the public, in return for – in lieu of salary – an RV site with water and power.

At *Wheels-Ho.com* there appeared in the winter of 2002/03 an ad that did not particularly stand out from many similar ones:

Wanted: couples/singles to work
entrance booth, Fort Horace State Park,
Kansas, Fri or share Sat/Sun, April thru
Sept. Free site w/ water & elec. Email:
Dennis33@flashmail.net

It was only in March – with America poised to invade Iraq and give Saddam Hussein the licking it forgot to give him in

– THE WEDDING ON BIG BONE HILL –

1991 – that Jack saw the ad. He was perusing the Web from the public library in the little Texas town where he had parked his motorhome the previous November. He had lived in the rig for half a year and not before sought an RV-related job, but he thought it might be fun, and also reduce his expenses – not that money was an issue – as he continued his quest for Paradise, U.S.A. Also, he was finding the isolation of the RV lifestyle an engulfment it might be best to resist.

He Googled Fort Horace State Park and found endless accounts of fishing and camping – it had a huge lake, thanks to an Army Corps of Engineers dam – plus myriad photographs of campground and meadows, and especially of Big Bone Hill, that landmark of northeastern Kansas.

He wrote:

Hi Dennis,

Do you still need someone for your booth? I'm a single guy with a dog (she doesn't bite) in a 21-foot motorhome, headed north from the Texas hill country. A summer job's just what I'm looking for. Please let me know if I should come by Fort Horace State Park.

Sincerely,

Jack

He returned to the library the next day, and found a response to his message sent not half an hour later:

Hi Jack,

Sure! Still have the Friday slot to fill – noon to 11, hour off for dinner – though there's a couple on board now for Sat/Sun.

– STEVEN KEY MEYERS –

My first year as Vendor, appreciate your help! Season opens soon, so great to hear from you!

Thanks,

Dennis

PS Your dog will love it!

All that enthusiasm made Jack a little wary. Still, he replied:

Sounds good. If all goes well, I'll swing by a week from Wednesday. Let's meet before finalizing things?

He began seeing to his rig and taking Lady, his black Lab mix, on farewell walks along the Blanco River and through the town, so hospitable and pleasant over the mild winter. Already hints abounded that by summer Texas would be ablaze.

At his last library visit, the day before he was planning to start a leisurely drive northward, he found another email from Dennis, sent one night at 2:00 a.m.:

Googled you, great to meet one of the FAMILY! Love the glam! PS What RU wearing?

All right, Jack thought. OK. He knew just the photographs Dennis had come upon, taken years earlier, when he and his dead lover, Cameron, hosted a spectacular glam-rock Halloween party for the Hollywood LGBT drop-in center, he with others caught in satirical gold-lamé that rayed out from outrageous lumps between their legs, below big eyes, big pouts and big hair.

What struck him now was how *young* were the boys in the pictures. But it's irritating, too, to be forever cute on the Internet,

– *THE WEDDING ON BIG BONE HILL* –

when cuteness has faded past recall and the outrageousness of your crotch was anyway largely due to a sock.



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