



PROJECT MUSE®

Pavarotti in Pearl Creek

Judy Cooper

Appalachian Heritage, Volume 36, Number 1, Winter 2008, pp. 55-65
(Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.2008.0015>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/237265>

PAVAROTTI IN PEARL CREEK

Judy Cooper

As he drove over the bridge into Kentucky, Adam Crabtree drank from his sweating Diet Coke and wiped his hand down his designer jeans. Might as well start, he told himself, and slipped a CD into the player. Below him, a barge eased down the wide Ohio River. It would be going south too, eventually, although I-75 was a more direct route. Adam clicked the button until he found the third track and straightened his shoulders.

His mother had called him yesterday, not long after he arrived at the bank. "Grandpa died," she'd said, her voice quiet like his father might be nearby.

"How's Dad?"

"Itching to get down home," his mother had replied. "You remember what you're supposed to do?"

He did. When Adam's voice had changed, an ethereal tenor emerged from the croaks and wavers. He'd spent the rest of high school shuttling from musicals and choirs to private lessons. When Grandpa'd heard about Adam's singing, he'd first asked him if he knew "Wildwood Flower" and then declared he wanted his grandson to sing "Amazing Grace" at his funeral.

"I do," Adam had told his mother. "But I wish I remembered the words."

"After all those hours you spent in church?"

"The hymns all ran together," he'd said, but the fact was he'd never paid much attention and hadn't been in church at all since high school, six years now.

Last night Adam had dashed into the public library to get a copy of someone singing the old hymn, but the only CD the librarian had been able to find was by Pavarotti, a strange choice for a funeral in Pearl Creek, Kentucky. Although Luciano's enunciation sounded more like ravioli than soup beans, Adam sang along as he drove, remembering the words as they came. Back when he'd studied at the

Cincinnati Conservatory those two quarters, he'd sung along with the Italian's recordings every chance he got. Pavarotti had been his hero even if he had needed falsetto for the man's top notes.

On the second verse Adam stumbled on the lyrics, not aided by a swerving SUV, but kept singing, getting the melody in his head. With a tricky, clever modulation, Pavarotti upped the key by a whole step for the third verse, and Adam thought he might do the same at the funeral. It would add interest, especially since he would be singing *a capella*. Breathing as he'd been taught, Adam had no trouble with the high notes and decided he'd use the same key. It felt good. Traffic whizzed by, the sun bore down, and singing seemed like the right thing to do.

He'd never figured out whether his parents were pleased or dismayed by his decision to quit music, just like he'd never known whether they'd wanted him to do it in the first place. When he'd performed they'd been proud. They'd showed up at every concert, and his mom had coaxed him through auditions, but Dad had a habit of mumbling about steady incomes and retirement. Adam hadn't cared about such things while he was winning awards and scholarships, but his father's words made for an easy out when harsh competition and jury anxieties hit him like terminal influenza.

"I'm giving up music," he'd told them. "I want a family some day. I'll need something steadier." He'd majored in business and found his job at the bank three weeks after graduation, and since then he'd had two promotions. They'd have to find their pride in that.

As the scenery changed from city to farmland, Adam ran through the song twice more and listened to another couple of Pavarotti's tracks. He hadn't traveled this way since high school. College classes and part-time jobs had provided an excuse for avoiding many of the family pilgrimages to Pearl Creek. When he was a kid, he'd looked forward to spending a week or so with his grandparents every summer. They'd taken him fishing, and Grandpa had taught him how to shoot, even going so far as to buy him a child-sized rifle. "He's got your eye, Dwayne," Grandpa had told Dad.

The landscape changed to lush, rolling hills just north of Lexington, and changed again when he crossed the Kentucky River. Adam set Pavarotti aside; he had plenty of time to run through the song again, and dug an old Radiohead CD from his case. He'd brought

plenty of music since most of the radio stations south of Lexington played nothing but country. He hated country music. Ahead of him, I-75 stretched like a gray ribbon unwinding in the heat. After Berea, he watched for the spot, the one his dad always noted, where the mountains loomed ahead like giant beasts. "There they are," his dad always said when the hills appeared.

Eventually Adam left the interstate and drove right into those towering hills. His mother had clucked like a hen when he'd asked her for directions to Pearl Creek, but he'd always been in the backseat, busy with his Gameboy or Walkman. He'd never driven to Pearl Creek. He'd never wanted to.

The last summer he'd come down, he hadn't been able to ignore the accents and bad grammar, the shabby houses and rusting coal tipples. He was a city boy, raised up on malls and movies, and there was none of that in Pearl Creek. His grandparents didn't even have cable and spent interminable summer evenings out on the porch swatting mosquitoes and watching the sun set behind the hills.

The road slithered between jutting boulders and dizzy drop-offs where tenacious cedars and pines clung for their lives. When Adam finally reached Compton, he knew he was nearly there. The little burg might be Burcham County's seat, but it held little more than a Dairy Dip, a courthouse, and a stop sign or two. He passed dumpy little dwellings with perpetual yard sales and a half-dozen groceries, always with a name announcing the proprietor. And just about as often he passed churches: Pentecostal, Holiness, and several flavors of Baptist. Someone passing through would think that all the people down here did was eat and pray.

After Peggy's Rag Shop, which, just during Adam's short memory, had also been a used furniture store and, before that, a video shop, he eased his car up the steep gravel driveway of his grandparents' house. A few cars and several trucks were parked every which way on the grass beside it. The porch was full: Grandpa's siblings, most of whom were at least seventy, Dad's cousins, Granny's family, and a neighbor or two. They all seemed to know him.

"It's Dwayne's boy," someone said as Adam got out of the car.

"They giving out free samples at that bank of yours?" another asked. They knew everything about him.

Mom had seen him coming. When he hugged her, she smelled of vanilla and deviled eggs. As usual, she had performed her funeral rites in the kitchen. “You all right?”

He nodded and followed her into the house, setting down his backpack by the door. Glancing into what his grandmother called the front room, he said, “I’d best see Granny.” It seemed like he always reverted to country expressions, if not the accent, as soon as he crossed the Burcham County line. It killed him.

Granny was sitting in her recliner, swollen ankles puffing like muffins around her black oxfords. “Lord have mercy,” she whispered when Adam knelt by her chair to hug her. Her cheeks were still as powdery and soft as ever, but her hair had gone completely white. “Look at this boy,” she crooned, patting on Adam. “All grewed up and handsome.”

Dad’s sister, Aunt Teresa, sat on the sofa with her son Tater, two years younger than Adam. As he recalled, his cousin’s name was actually Benjamin but nobody had ever called him that. The two of them had played long and hard back when Adam used to visit. “Howdy,” Tater said with a grin. “Been a while.”

When Adam stood, Aunt Teresa looked him up and down. She’d left the county after her divorce and gone to Knoxville, where she’d finished beauty school. Adam figured that was where she got the idea to pluck her eyebrows down to nothing and pencil them in real high. She alternated between looking indignant and surprised. After a few years, she’d come back to do hair at Ronica’s Beauty Barn in Compton and moved in with Tater. The two of them lived in a double-wide he’d squeezed into a holler down by the abandoned mining camp where Grandpa’d been born. Dad said that Tater hadn’t worked a day in his life and got by on welfare and growing marijuana, Burcham County’s best cash crop. “Your daddy’s been wondering when you’d get here,” Aunt Teresa said.

“Had to work this morning.”

She sniffed. “Don’t know why you all have to live so far away. Mom could’ve used help while Daddy was in the nursing home.”

Adam didn’t know what to reply to this, but hoped she wouldn’t say it to his dad.

Waving her hands until her upper arms jiggled, Aunt Teresa went on. “What in the world do you all see in Cincinnati anyway?

It's nothing but chili parlors and taverns." She threw her head back, choosing indignant just then.

"They was a time when you would've liked that." Tater gave his mother a lazy grin.

"Teresa's been saved," Granny explained, touching Adam's wrist. "God's great love worked upon her heart." Nonetheless, Granny frowned at her daughter. "But don't you go blaming Dwayne for moving north. A man's got to find work."

Not Tater, Adam thought. He tried to joke. "Besides, even though his job's in Ohio, Dad won't live over there. You'd think the Ohio River was the Berlin Wall."

They gave him wan smiles; it wasn't a joking matter. Granny patted him again. "Go find your father. The last I heard, he'd gone up yonder to the home place."

There was a path of sorts leading away from the house and down to a little stream that fed into the actual Pearl Creek. A couple of rickety boards spanned the trickle of water, but Adam leaped across. He remembered how tickled he'd been with himself when his legs had finally grown enough to do that. Towering poplars made a gateway into a stand of dense trees, and the path disappeared in moss and leaf mold. Adam knew the way. The home place had burned when Dad was in high school, leaving only the rocks that once served as its foundation, but the family revered its ruins like a gravesite. At one time or another, all of them, including Aunt Teresa, had dragged him through the trees to the home place. Adam took a deep breath of pine resin. Up ahead he saw the clearing, rising above the creek. He scanned the rough site for his father. He wanted to comfort him, but catching him grieving would be nearly as bad as seeing him naked.

Adam spotted him, standing by scrubby bushes and vines that threatened to reclaim the place. Every so often, Grandpa had hired someone to come in and bush hog it, but Granny probably hadn't thought of that during the six months he'd been in the nursing home. Adam walked over to his father.

"You made it."

"Yep."

"Traffic bad?"

“No.”

A hot breeze billowed Dad’s shirt and ruffled his thin hair. Adam’s would probably get thin too; they sometimes joked that Mom hadn’t contributed much but her smile to his gene pool. She usually retorted that she’d given him his brains, but that wasn’t necessarily true either. There wasn’t much Dad didn’t notice.

His father pointed toward the old rocks nearly obscured by weeds. “There was a big front porch right there with a squeaky old swing. Seems like I lived on that porch. Fred and I used to sleep out there when it got too hot.” Fred was Dad’s older brother who’d died in Vietnam. Adam had seen pictures of him in his uniform.

“Bet you didn’t sleep much.”

Dad chuckled. “That’s a fact. We used to smoke cigarettes Fred stole from Daddy, saying we were chasing off the mosquitoes.” He smiled at the empty spot like he was seeing a living house. “I was always scared Mom would catch us. That woman gets ten feet tall when she’s confronting the devil.”

Adam grinned, but Dad turned serious. “Fred was gone by the time of the fire. I’m glad he never saw it like this.” He walked a few steps. “Mom had her garden over here, and back there,” he pointed, “was a little barn.” Scratching his neck, Dad looked at Adam. “It doesn’t mean anything to you, does it?”

He shrugged. “It’s important to you.”

Dad looked at his feet, nearly hidden by rough weeds. “Well, whether you like it or not, it’s part of you, just as much as my nose or your mother’s smile.”

Rubbing his absolutely Crabtree nose, Adam said, “I reckon.”

Dad smiled. “You reckon. I reckon we’d best get back to house and clean up for the funeral home.”

“You dread it, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

Adam did see his father cry that night, but his tears had flowed natural and quiet, not like Aunt Teresa’s loud sobbing, and Mom had held Dad’s hand so tight her knuckles were white. Dozens of people crowded into the funeral home, so many that, at one point, they lined up out the door. Just the kinfolk from Granny’s and Grandpa’s two families would’ve made a crowd, but church people and old friends

swelled the throng too. Everybody introduced him as Dwayne's boy, and he guessed that in Pearl Creek that was his primary identity.

Up in the evening an old codger, stooped and skinny, wearing shiny black pants hitched nearly up to his armpits, made his way up to the coffin and grabbed Adam's arm. "I knew Ike Crabtree back when we was mining," he said. His voice was rough. "Damn, if we didn't run the roads and chase the women back then."

The old man never said his name; he simply kept a death grip on Adam's arm and moved him toward the casket. Peering down his thin nose at Grandpa, the old man said, "Ike don't look one bit happy about this." Before Adam could even dream of a reply, the man released him and tottered out the door, not speaking to another soul.

Nearly as many came to the funeral the next day. Adam didn't see the old man again, but Aunt Teresa's two daughters had driven in from North Carolina, and Granny's sister arrived from Tennessee. Tater followed Adam around like a puppy and kept saying he should come down and spend some time, maybe in the fall. "We could go fishing," Tater said. "Like we used to with Grandpa. I got plenty of room up at the trailer, and it's mighty pretty when the leaves turn."

"That'd be nice," Adam replied, knowing he'd never do it.

"I mean it," Tater said.

"I know you do. Maybe. If I can get some time off."

The funeral home people seated Granny up by the casket with Dad and Aunt Teresa on either side of her. The preacher had pulled Adam aside and told him he'd be singing after the prayer, so he sat where he could get out. A knot of nervousness balled up inside his stomach, surprising him. He'd sung in front of tons of people, often with scholarships riding on those performances, and hadn't been as jittery as he was just then.

It seemed like the preacher would never quit praying, but then he did, and Adam walked to the front. Mom gave him that same encouraging smile she always did before he sang, but Dad was looking at his lap. That suited Adam. The first note wobbled, but then his voice righted itself, the simple tune washing away his fears. People in Pearl Creek would've done it like the Sunday morning gospel shows, but Adam sang as he'd been taught, not showy like Pavarotti, but with the clarity and precision of hours of practice. One verse, two.

Keeping his eyes on the painting of Jesus on the far wall, he changed keys for the third, as he'd planned, and finished. Only then could he look at his dad.

After the funeral home's dim lights and chilled air, the bright heat outside stunned people but also livened them up. Talking and milling around, they waited until the last minute to get into their hot cars. Mom found a ride back to the house; she wanted to get the food out. Adam and his dad stood by the car. A little purple flag waved from the antenna. Before the procession began, one of Dad's second cousins came up to them and shook hands. Adam vaguely remembered him from one of the reunions he'd attended when he was a kid.

"Quite a voice," the man said.

"Thanks."

"Do you sing opera?"

"Used to."

"I thought that was a trained voice," the man said, nodding as he moved away.

The funeral director herded people into their cars, and Dad started the motor and turned the air conditioner to high. As the procession snaked its way onto the road to the Pearl Creek Cemetery, cars going the opposite direction pulled over and turned on their lights. "What're they doing that for?" Adam asked.

"Respect."

"People couldn't do that in Cincinnati."

"People wouldn't do that in Cincinnati."

The sun beat down on the little cemetery, cooking bouquets of plastic flowers and miniature flags left over from Memorial Day. All the Crabtrees were buried here. Grandpa's grave sat behind his parents', and Uncle Fred's stone was to the side. Since Mom had gone back to the house, Adam wondered if he should hold Dad's hand like she had. But Crabtree men wouldn't do that, he decided and just stood close. The mountains, smokey and vague in the heat, hovered over the graveyard, and Adam saw his father raise his eyes to them while the preacher finished up.

"You okay, Dad?"

"I'll do."

"Want me to drive back to the house?"

“That’d be nice.”

Inside, people were filling plates and praising Mom for her cooking. She ducked her head and said folks had brought stuff, but Adam recognized her potato salad and cakes and knew she’d baked the ham that morning. Few of the men had worn ties, but those who did, took them off before eating. People complimented his singing, and Aunt Teresa sidled up to him holding a paper plate and plastic fork. Her face was pink and cried clean of make-up. She looked younger. “I hear you’re going back as soon as you eat.”

“That’s right.”

“I wish you’d come back and stay a while.” She fanned herself with the plate. “Do you still like that pineapple cake I used to make?”

“Sure. Mom got your recipe, remember?”

“Well, I’d make you one if you’d come. Tater’d love to have you, too.”

“He invited me.”

She nodded. “Well, think about it.”

People ate on the porch, on quilts in the yard, on the porch steps. As they ate they relaxed and started telling stories and jokes. Dad was telling a tale about Grandpa giving a young preacher a hard time, and even Granny was smiling. Adam had hours of driving ahead of him, but he wasn’t in a hurry to leave. One of Aunt Teresa’s daughters had brought her little boy, and Adam joined Tater in throwing a ball to the kid. “Do you remember them slingshots Grandpa carved us that one summer?” Tater asked, grinning at the little kid who’d taken the ball in the face but hadn’t cried.

“I do.” Adam scooped up the ball, but the kid lost interest and ran toward the porch. “We used bb’s for ammo and tried to hit a coffee can up in the dogwood tree.”

“You hit it more times than not. Grandpa called you ‘dead-eye.’”

Suddenly Adam could remember it like yesterday. “Remember how he said he’d take us to a turkey shoot when we got older?”

Tater’s dimples deepened. “Yeah.”

“Did he ever take you?”

“Yeah.”

“What was it like?”

The two of them strolled over to the side yard where men leaned against their sun-baked trucks, smoking and talking in low voices. "Nothing much. A bunch of men target shooting, chewing tobacco, and getting a snort out of the glove compartment now and then." Tater grinned and tilted his head toward some Crabtree relation who was doing just that. "Grandpa won a ham, which was no surprise the way he shot. I didn't win nothing, but I felt like a big old man."

Adam picked up a pinecone from the grass. "They still have turkey shoots around here?"

Tater nodded. "In the fall."

From the porch Adam heard his mother calling, saying Granny wanted him. He went into the house, dim and cool and smelling of food. It was getting late. Granny stood in the front room, waiting for him. "I found this," she said. "And you should have it." She thrust a Wal-Mart bag into his hand. "He loved you, boy."

Adam opened the bag and found the slingshot, the one he and Tater had just been discussing. It was simply carved with an industrial-sized rubber band attached to do the work. "I loved him too."

"They's more." She pointed at the bag.

He pulled out four CDs: Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash, and two others.

Granny's glasses caught the lowering sun as she looked toward the window, seeing something other than the folks on the porch. "While Ike was in the nursing home, he'd get agitated sometimes. They said it might ease him to hear music. So we bought him some of his favorites. It's old stuff, but you're the musician in the family so's I thought you might like them."

"That's real nice, Granny."

She straightened her back. "I reckon you'll be leaving before long."

He nodded.

"They's plenty of food if you want to pack a sandwich."

He didn't, but he did pack his clothes, stuffing the Wal-Mart bag into his backpack and closing the door of the tiny, paneled bedroom he'd always slept in. He hugged Granny and his parents, shook a dozen hands, and said he'd be careful, he'd drive safely. Coming around the

side of the house he saw Tater. "I don't reckon you've got e-mail, do you?" Adam asked.

Tater sighed. "We're not cavemen, Adam. Hell, yes, I got e-mail."

"Well, write down your address for me." Adam pulled two of his business cards from his wallet and a pen from his pack. "Keep one for my e-mail," he said. "And let me know when there's a turkey shoot. You'd take me to one, wouldn't you?"

Tater scribbled and grinned up at Adam. "Damn straight."

He dumped the backpack in the passenger seat and maneuvered his car down the driveway. After stopping in Compton to get a Diet Coke, he drove into the hills, trees strobing the sunlight on his car. He needed music and reached for Radiohead but changed his mind. Fumbling in his pack, he pulled out the Johnny Cash CD and stuck it in the player. Cash's rugged voice rumbled through the speakers. Adam didn't see how it was possible, but he recognized nearly all the words. Cash's range was a little low for him, but Adam sang along.

