Almost Heaven

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To the memory of
James William "Billy" Allman
and Barbara Kessel.

You are both missed.

In West Virginia, history often repeats itself. Perhaps the fact that our history is so painful explains why it is so poorly understood.

John Alexander Williams

Therefore, angels are only servants—spirits sent to care for people who will inherit salvation.

Hebrews 1:14

Prologue

Dogwood, West Virginia
2006

Becky Putnam stepped onto Billy Allman's front porch, a camera strung over one shoulder and a reporter's notebook in the other hand. She had graduated with a degree in journalism from Marshall University, a minor in English literature, and felt lucky to have a job in her chosen field. But after a few more assignments like this one, she was going to apply at the new Target. She'd heard they were hiring.

A friend of the owner had mentioned something about Billy Allman and his new venture in town. It was a human-interest story, but not one worth telling in detail. She hoped to get a couple of usable snapshots and then head back to work on the obituaries. If there was anything that kept circulation up, it was the obituaries.

A dog growled inside when she knocked, and she noticed his brown and white coat through the small window by the door. He put his paws up and peered at her, then scratched at the door. She turned and looked at the hillside and the interstate in the distance, car tires whining with the muted wetness of a West Virginia rain. There was nothing like West Virginia rain to bring out the smell of the earth. Of course, she hated the smell of the earth and the West Virginia rain. She wanted to be working in Cincinnati or Lexington. Somewhere that could yield a double

homicide or some gang slayings. Instead she was stuck with a promo/puff piece about a guy who had built a radio station in his own house. What could possibly come from this?

The door opened, and there stood Billy Allman. She had expected someone eccentric, maybe with thick glasses and an Albert Einstein look. Wild hair. Or a Stephen Hawking body in a wheelchair. But Billy looked surprisingly normal. He had a crooked grin and hair that barely covered a growing bald spot. He wasn't short or tall, just average with an average build and hairy arms that hung down from a tight T-shirt with sweat stains in the underarms. His jeans had that unwashed look that led her to believe they could stand in the corner by themselves. His skin was washed-out, and she thought of the poem by Edgar Allen Poe that included:

While the angels, all pallid and wan,
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy, "Man,"
And its hero, the Conqueror Worm.

She didn't know why she thought of that, other than the word *pallid*, which was how Billy looked. A tinge of ghost to his complexion. She guessed it was from being inside most of the day.

"You must be Becky," he said. "Come on in. Don't mind him; he'll just lick you to death."

He shook her hand and backed inside, looking about and straightening some newspapers on an old couch. Lined up against the wall was a collection of old radios. She asked about them, and Billy went into a dissertation about the year they were made and how long it took him to restore them. He turned one on and let her hear the sound quality and smiled as he tuned the dial.

More to keep the movement going forward than from a keen interest, she said, "Do you mind if I take your picture in front of them?"

His eyes danced and he held up a finger for her to wait. He disappeared into a cluttered room and returned with what looked like a bookshelf with several tubes and knobs mounted on top. "This is my 1924 Atwater Kent. My pride and joy."

"Great," Becky said.

He knelt in front of the other radios and rested the shelf on one leg as she snapped the photo. Then Billy led her into the control room, and she took a few more with him at the microphone with headphones on.

When she was done, they sat in the living room and she took some notes. He offered her a drink of water, but by the looks of the dishes in his sink, she didn't want to take the chance. The room was stuffy and close, and the odor of sweaty clothes and stale breath and old wood made her eyes water.

"Is there a Mrs. Allman?" she said.

"No, my mother is gone. . . . You mean a wife?" Billy blushed. "No. I've n-never married."

"You must be quite proud of this accomplishment," Becky said, changing the subject. "Not everyone can build their own radio station."

Billy nodded. "This is about the happiest day of my life."

She wondered what was on the opposite end of that spectrum. If this was the high point, what could possibly be the low point?

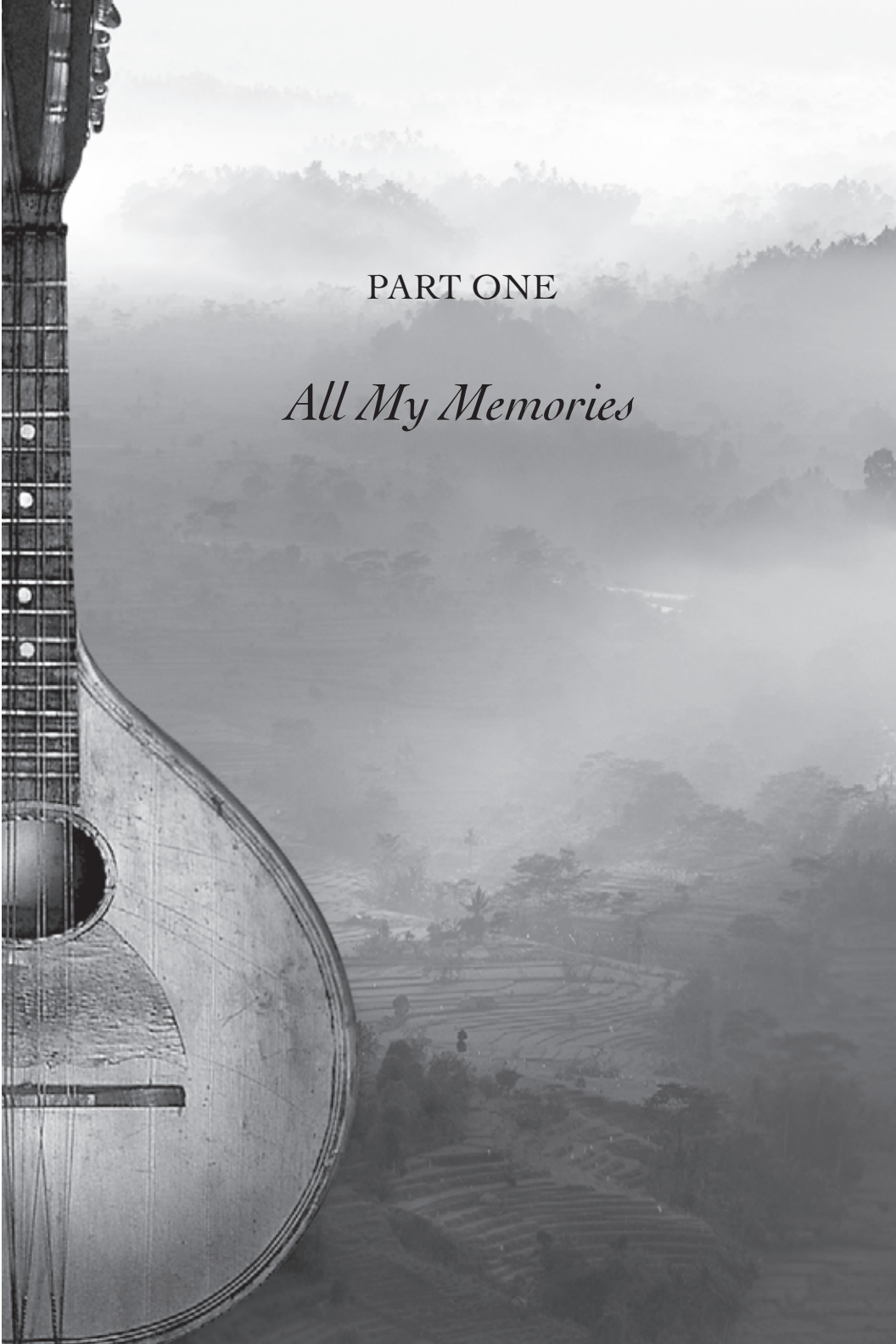
She asked a few more questions and took one of his business cards with the station's slogan on the front. "Is there anything you'd like to add that I haven't asked?" That was one of those questions they taught you in journalism school.

"You've pretty much covered it, I guess." He walked her out, and as she stood on the porch, he leaned against the door, the

dog sitting at his feet dutifully. "I know it's not much. I mean, I know most people probably will pass right over my picture and the news about the station. But I appreciate you taking the time to come all the way out here. I appreciate your interest."

His sincerity almost took her breath away. She smiled and shook his hand again. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Allman. I hope you like the story we run."

"I'm sure I will."



PART ONE

All My Memories

1

I suppose you can sum up a man's life with a few words. That's what the newspaper tries to do with an obituary. And it's what that reporter will try to do in her article. "Billy Allman . . . resident of Dogwood . . . lifelong dream to build a radio station . . ." She'll do a fine job, I'm sure. She seemed kindhearted and the type that will get her facts straight, but I know there will be a lot of my life that will fall through the cracks.

I believe every life has hidden songs that hang by twin threads of music and memory. I believe in the songs that have never been played for another soul. I believe they run between the rocks and along the creekbeds of our lives. These are songs that cannot be heard by anything but the soul. They sometimes run dry or spill over the banks until we find ourselves wading through them.

My life has been filled with my share of dirges and plainsongs. I would sing jaunty melodies of cotton candy and ice cream if I could, a top-40 three-minute-and-twenty-second tune, but the songs that have been given to me are played in A minor and are plagued with pauses and riffs that have no clear resolution. I ache for some major chord, a tonal shift that brings musical contentment. I do not know if I will find that.

Throughout my life I have dedicated myself to God. I told him

early on that I would go anywhere and do anything he wanted. No holding back. But as time slipped and the conversation has become more one-sided, that plan has appeared haphazard at best. God has seemed massively indifferent to my devotion, if he has even heard my cries.

I suppose I need to put this story down in an ordered fashion to make sense of the silence and to fill in the missing places of my own. Or perhaps I will be able to convince the people who know me as a hermit that there was some reason for the pain. Our lives are judged by a few snapshots taken at vulnerable moments, and I have decided to set my hand to recording the flashes I can recall, the ones revealing my motivations. The look on that reporter's face as I showed her the disparate parts of my life made me want to put this down in my own words. But this is not really for those outside looking in. This is for me.

One of the neighbors described the morning of February 26, 1972, as a cold stillness. I woke up at the first sign of the overcast light. It was my tenth birthday, and as children will do, I did not want sleep to steal any of the good apportioned to me that day. I had invited three boys from my class to the first and last party my parents would ever offer. After that day, Mama never wanted to celebrate a thing, I guess. She had baked a cake the night before and I wanted a piece so bad I could taste it. I can still smell the cherry icing if I close my eyes and think hard enough.

I flipped on the TV to watch the only channel we got in the hollow. Too early for *Johnny Quest* or *Scooby Doo*, my favorites. It was some preacher talking about a prophecy of sudden destruction and how it would come like a thief in the night, like a woman's labor pains. We should be prepared. We should cry out to God now before that destruction came.

At ten, I hadn't committed many mortal sins, so there wasn't much reason for me to think that his message had bearing on my life. But after the fact I wondered if what happened was because I was too prideful or had asked for too many presents. Children will do that—make everything about them, as if some decision they make will change the course of history. If I had prayed right then and there, would things have been different? If I had cried out to God for mercy, would he have changed the course of Buffalo Creek?

I turned off the TV and went to the front window, where the beads of water streaked the awkwardly cut glass and drifted down to the softening wood that tried to hold it all together. In the wintertime the wind whistled through those panes and ice formed on the inside so thick you could scrape your name. Now the water soaked the window through, and streams flowed down the dirt driveway to the road, washing the mud across it. The sight of that misty morning ran cold through me. It was as if the leaves had known better. They had escaped and left the trees looking like sticks on the silent hillside.

Daddy had left the house in the evening to check on the creek because it was up to the top of its banks. He came back to tell us a bunch of people had already gone to the high school because they thought the dam was going to break. The fellow from the coal company had assured everyone up and down the valley that nothing was wrong. We should just stay in our houses. Ride out the rain.

"You think we ought to get over to the school?" Mama had said.

Daddy rubbed his chin. "I think we ought to wait it out and see." Daddy had faith in the company, but not as much as he had in God.

I noticed a muddy spot on the front porch that wasn't there the night before, so I could tell Daddy had been back, but now

I figured he was checking the dam one more time. There wasn't much movement on the road, just a few cars spraying water as they passed. And then I saw him, moving faster than usual. My father had a gentleman's gait. He never seemed in a hurry, sort of like my idea of what Jesus must have been like walking along in dusty Israel. He always had time to reach down and give a dog a pat on the head or to pull me close to him with one of those big hands. Like other people who make their homes on the sides of mountains, he took things in stride. He believed that a person in haste usually missed out.

But my daddy walked straight inside the house that morning without taking his boots off. The mud was everywhere, and all I could do was stare at his feet and wonder what had happened because Mama would kill him when she saw it.

"Where's your mother?" he said.

"Still asleep," I said. "What's wrong?"

"Arlene!" he shouted. I heard the bedsprings creak, and he turned back to me before he walked down the hall. "Get dressed quick."

"Is it the dam?" I said.

"Yeah, it's the dam."

I threw on a pair of pants and a shirt over the T-shirt I'd slept in. Though they tried to speak softly, I could hear everything. I heard everything they said about me at the breakfast table each morning and everything they talked about in bed through the thin walls of that tiny house. At least everything I wanted to hear. Sometimes I didn't want to hear a word from them because of the pain it brought about my older brother Harless.

"I don't like the looks of it," he said. "Water is just about to the top. If that thing goes, it's going to wipe this whole valley out. And everybody with it."

Mama pulled on her robe and hurried down the hallway. "Is that what the company's saying?"

Daddy followed her in his muddy boots. Since the company had let us buy the house, he had taken such pride in keeping it clean and neat. He even planted trees and bushes in front.

"I don't trust Dasovich," Daddy said. "He went through again this morning telling us not to worry. That he was going to install another leak pipe. But the top of that dam is like a baby's soft spot. And if I'm right, there's enough water behind number three to stretch from there to the Guyandotte and back again and cover this whole valley."

Mama had the Folgers can out but she wasn't opening it. The cake she'd made sat on a white plate with wax paper over it.

Daddy looked at me. "Get your shoes on."

"Where are we going?" I said.

"Over to the school. Put some clothes in the basket yonder. Just in case. And take it to the car."

"What about the party?" As soon as I said it, I felt bad. The look on his face made me ashamed of being so selfish. But I couldn't help it. And the tears came.

"Your friends will probably be over there," he said. "It'll be one big party. Then when it's safe, we'll come back." He touched my shoulder and nodded toward my room. "Arlene, you get dressed and I'll grab a suitcase."

Mama put the cake in a hatbox, and I hurried to get the basket of clothes. I grabbed my Bible and Dad's mandolin and put them between the underwear and T-shirts and jeans, then walked out on the porch and down the cinder-block steps. Thunder was under there looking at me. He was our little beagle who slept outside. Daddy would take him rabbit hunting and he said he was the best, but I liked it when he curled up next to me while I watched TV. Mama would let me bring him in every so often as long as he wasn't wet and didn't come begging in the kitchen. I would scratch his back and watch his hind legs go to running. We called him Thunder because of that bellow of a bark.

I bent down and looked under the porch. "Come on, boy," I coaxed, but he kind of whined and his eyes darted left and right, like there was something beyond me that spelled trouble.

Daddy came out of the house with the old suitcase my papaw brought with him when he stayed with us before he died. My daddy was born in Omar, and Papaw was from Austria-Hungary, back before it was just Austria or Hungary. Papaw always said the West Virginia hills reminded him of his homeland. He took to mining like a duck to water, though I think he would have lived longer if he'd have just farmed.

Daddy brought out the suitcase in one hand, and in the other was a drawer from the desk with all of our pictures. On top of the drawer was a hatbox holding the cake Mama had made. "Open the door," he said, and when I didn't get to it fast enough, he grumbled and set the suitcase on the car and popped open the door and put everything inside. "Get in. Quick."

Mama came down the steps holding Harless's picture against her chest. She had a look on her face that was pure worry. Mama was an uncommonly beautiful woman of the hills, with long hair that she cared for every evening with a pearl-handled brush her mother had given her. After she brushed it out, she braided it, and I remember it swinging down her back as she made breakfast in the morning. Daddy always said she had the hair of a Tuckahoe Indian maiden, and Mama would smile, but it was true. Her great-grandmother on her daddy's side had been from the tribe during the days when white people were offered money for Tuckahoe scalps.

Just as Mama made it to the car, there was a sound that echoed through the hills I will never forget. It was like hearing a car crash behind you; you knew exactly what it was, but you didn't want to turn your head and look because you knew there was going to be somebody dead back there. I heard stories later of the people who were higher up the creek and

what they saw after the upper dam broke and overwhelmed the other two. Daddy had said the company didn't have engineers building the dam, just a drawing of what it should be, and they turned the guys with bulldozers loose. All the waste from the mines was piled up as high as they could get it, but not packed down like it should be. When all that rain mixed with the water used to clean the coal, it made a lake filled to overflowing—132 million gallons is what they said later on. That's what was coming toward us, but of course we didn't know that for sure right then.

Thunder barked and ran out from under the house. I jumped out and yelled for him, but Daddy grabbed my arm and slung me back. "Stay in there." He whistled for Thunder, the high-pitched whistle I could never do, and the dog turned and looked at him, then kept running toward the creek like he was after a rabbit.

Daddy hopped in the car and started it up.

"Don't leave him!" I shouted.

"He'll be okay, Billy. Calm down."

We made it to the blacktopped road and headed down the valley, but as soon as we did, Mama looked at Daddy and said, "Other, what about Dreama?"

Daddy gave her a stare that said she was asking too much.

"She brought those kids over last night," Mama said. "The car's right there by the house. She won't know."

Daddy turned our Chevy Impala onto a dirt road that was nothing but mud and slipped and slid up the embankment. Mama asked what he was doing and he wouldn't answer her until he reached the tree line and set the emergency brake. "I'll be right back."

For some reason I still don't understand, he reached back and squeezed my leg. "You be good," he said.

I didn't want him to go. But there was nothing I could do. I just watched him slip and slide down the hill, almost like he was

trying to make us laugh, his one hand over his head, his other hand around the cigarette he was trying to keep dry.

"Lord, protect him," my mother said as she watched. She was always praying out loud like that. Just a sentence here or a sentence there that led to a running conversation with the Almighty on everything from baking banana bread to saving somebody's marriage. I imagined my daddy was doing exactly the same thing because he had the same kind of relationship with his Father in heaven.

The rain was still coming, running down the window, so I rolled mine down to get a better look, and that's when I saw Thunder coming up the creek bank barking and sniffing along the edge of the water. I yelled at Dad to get him, but he couldn't hear me. He kept sliding toward the house until he got to the porch. That's when we lost sight of him, but I guessed he was knocking on the door and trying to wake Miss Dreama up.

About that time a car came along honking its horn and that car was just going lickety-split. As the car raced on, I heard something upstream, and through the trees it looked like a semi-trailer was moving fast along the road, except it was an actual house that was coming down the valley like a child will move a toy in the dirt. I stared at it, fix-eyed, my voice caught somewhere inside.

"Oh, Lordy, here it comes!" Mama opened the door as fast as she could and started hollering at the top of her lungs. "Other! The dam's busted! Get out of there!"

She took a step and fell flat on her behind in the mud and slid. I got out and tried to help her, and when I looked up, Miss Dreama's house was splintering from the wall of water that crashed down. It surged onto the other side of the hill carrying part of the town with it; then it switched back and that black sludge slammed into the side of Miss Dreama's place and lifted

it right off its foundation, turning it a little. It was then I could see my father with a little one in each arm, trying to keep his balance. Miss Dreama screamed and Mama screamed and then I couldn't hear a thing. It was like some switch just turned off. I turned away because I couldn't bear to look and caught sight of Thunder just before the black water engulfed him.

My father's face was determined and stoic as he tried to step off the porch while the house moved, but it was swirling fast, like the house in *The Wizard of Oz*. It was all he could do to stay upright. And I thought if he could ride it out, maybe everything would be all right. Maybe if I closed my eyes and prayed, things would be okay and the whole crew of them would step off onto dry ground. But there was nothing dry in that West Virginia valley.

Mama got up and slipped and slid back to the car. When I just stayed there, watching, she picked me up by the arm and almost tossed me into the front seat with her. She started the car and held her foot on the brake as we slid backward toward the raging water, and then I heard my own screams. The car slipped sideways and she turned the wheel sharply so we drifted straight. Miss Dreama's house was moving faster now. I glanced at my mother; she was doing all she could to stop us but we were being drawn like a magnet down. Daddy had been right to put us up near the tree line and if we had stayed there, we would have been okay, but I never blamed her for what she did. She was doing it out of instinct, out of desperate love.

The car slid down and the water met us. I call it water but it wasn't really. It was as thick as gob and just as nasty. A black mix of mud and coal sludge and trees that had been ripped from the bank moving in a torrent that only God himself could've stopped. Once it was loosed from the number three, there was nothing that was going to stop it until it reached the Guyandotte.

The black mess was all over the window and coming in the backseat. Mama opened her door and tried to grab me, but she fell out and I was pulled back by another wave that swept over the car, caught fully in the weight of the water that treated houses and trailers like my toys. The car door closed and my birthday cake had fallen and mixed with the brackish water. I screamed for my mother, who ran along the bank—though it had been someone's backyard only a few minutes earlier. My breath came in fits, just gasps, and for a moment I thought about the preacher and the sudden destruction he had predicted.

"Help me. Help me. Mama! Help me!" I cried to God and Jesus and my mother and yelled for my daddy, but I couldn't see anymore and the coal sludge was filling up the car behind me.

The back of the car slammed into something that I later learned was a telephone pole that hadn't been swept away yet, and through the windshield I saw another house coming toward me, moving with the water like a boat. Then the car rose up like it wanted to stand on its trunk and I fell into the backseat and saw the open window. I knew right then this was my chance, my only chance to escape what was coming.

From that day to this one, when anyone asked how I survived, I have told them one story. That it was my birthday. That I didn't want to die. That something rose up inside of me that was equal to or greater than that flood, and that was the human instinct to survive. And not only did I jump out of that car into the swirling water and get to solid ground, but I grabbed my daddy's mandolin on the way out. Most people who heard me play never knew what that instrument went through. It was probably the only mandolin that survived the Buffalo Creek disaster, but I don't know that for a fact.

I was sitting in the mud, too close to the water that looked like cement, when Mama got to me. She hauled me back up the bank to safety and then collapsed in a heap, bawling and

rocking back and forth and saying, "I thought I had lost you. I thought I had lost you. And I prayed that the Lord wouldn't take everything."

It wasn't long after I got out of the water that a trailer smashed into our car and took the telephone pole with it and all of it went rolling down the valley like dirt rolls off a car when it's washed. It was just gravity and force and pressure doing what God intended when he made this old world. I was an eyewitness to the whole thing.

The water went down in about three hours or so, and then everybody started looking for survivors and walking through the houses that weren't smashed. Mama and I moved back up to where our house was, thinking maybe Daddy had gone there and was waiting. We didn't find him or our house. It looked like somebody just took a hand and pushed everything away. There was nothing left.

The street was mud- and coal-covered, and people were walking here and there asking if we'd seen this person or that. Some of the bodies had been found, and men made stretchers to carry them to the temporary morgue. People said the National Guard had been called out but wouldn't arrive until the next day. But everybody pitched in and did what had to be done. Hill people are like that. We take care of our own.

People invited folks into their houses. Just flung open the doors wide without a care in the world how they would make it. Some brought others in for a meal or just to sit and tell their stories. I don't know that anything helped more than talking about what had happened. Where they were when the water hit. How their cousins looked the last time they saw them. And then there were the stories of people going by in houses, standing on

roofs, just trying to survive the surge. Those were the hardest for me because I remembered my daddy.

We worked our way to the school, hoping to find him there. We passed what looked like our car raised up on a twenty-foot pile of debris. I could only see the underside of it and the top was smashed in. I couldn't tell if it was ours or not, and anyway it didn't make much sense to guess.

The two of us wandered into the school, and when Mama saw her friends, they just fell into each other's arms and cried. I stood back, watching and wondering what we were going to do. We didn't have a house. Our car was gone. We only had the clothes on our backs and that mandolin.

It was late that afternoon when we finally had something to eat put in front of us, but neither of us was hungry. Every time somebody walked in the front door, Mama would jump. Whoever it was got an earful of questions. She'd say Daddy's name and then repeat it: "Other Alexander Allman." She'd tell them the mine he worked in and that he had a tattoo of an eagle on his right shoulder.

We slept on cots in the gymnasium that night. There was a lot of coffee and talking until late at night, and then the crying started. Mothers crying for their babies. Husbands crying for their wives. Children crying for their parents. Just a whole mass of humanity trying to get through. One man was interviewed by the TV news, and he said he was sorry God had allowed him to live to see what he did.

A lot of people were coming in and out, exhausted from all the searching. I fell asleep and my father came to me in his miner's hat, his face black with coal dust. He had marks on his face and neck where he'd been hit by tree limbs and rocks.

"Where were you, Daddy?" I cried. "What happened?"

Just like that, he was gone and I woke up with the most awful feeling, crying out for him. Mama was there to hush me,

saying it was okay. I looked around and others were staring. I just held on to her.

The next day the National Guard came, and they were pulling bodies out of the creek and out from under houses and even out of trees. It seems odd to say that, but the wall of water was that high. It lifted people right up into the trees and left them. There was a church that was moved off its foundation and plopped down a long way from where it used to be, and everybody said wasn't that like God to leave a house of worship alone. But what we didn't know was there was somebody underneath it they found a while later.

I knew my daddy was somewhere in that list of victims, just another body in a stack of people they brought in bags and on stretchers. I didn't want to see him that way. I wanted to keep thinking of him in the good way, him teaching me about the mandolin or holding my hand as we walked to the company store. But the picture that kept coming back was him on Miss Dreama's porch holding those kids and trying to get to safety.

We walked around like zombies all day, and then here came some trucks with clothes and blankets and big boxes filled with cans of Spam and other food and water. I lost all my appetite for Spam about then.

That night there was talk of when the funerals would start. Our pastor came and Mama hugged him and he was in just as bad a shape as we were.

"The Lord has a purpose in this," the pastor said. "For the life of me, I don't know what it is, but I know my Redeemer liveth. And heaven is a more beautiful place because of all these good people who are there."

"Is my daddy there?" I asked.

The man's face was as wrinkled as a paper sack after lunch. "Billy, if your daddy got caught in the flood and died, I know for sure where he is. He's praising Jesus in the presence of God and the angels. You don't have to worry about that."

"Is that what happens when you die?" I said in a shaky voice. I was thinking about the kids in my class who wouldn't be there next week. "You don't go floating off somewhere and stay around in the air; you just go on to heaven?"

"Absent from the body is present with the Lord," he said. I could tell it was something he had memorized because it came out stiff and cold. I knew he couldn't help it. He was suffering right along with us.

When he started talking about Daddy and what a good man he was, that sent Mama into a fit of bawling, and I followed her. He said he was sorry, but Mama said not to be. That we needed to remember. And that there was still a chance, as long as he hadn't been found.

"They found one little baby stuck in a hole up the holler," the pastor said. "It's a plain miracle is what it is. And God ain't done yet, son."

I wished that baby were my father, but I was still glad for the little guy. The pastor asked us if we wanted to come back to the parsonage, that it hadn't been touched by the water, and Mama said it would be better for us to wait at the school, in case any word came.

After the pastor left, she went off in the corner to talk with some women and they'd get to crying and I didn't want to bother her, but I was scared to be alone. All night the trucks and machines rolled in, so we didn't get much sleep, but who can sleep when you have lost everything?

A man in uniform showed up about daybreak and asked in a big voice if there was an Arlene Allman staying there. She hurried to the door and next thing I saw, she was on the floor, on her

knees, one hand raised up over her head like I've seen her do in church, just crying and saying, "Jesus, Jesus."

I had been praying to Jesus that Daddy would make it out somehow, but I knew in my heart right then that he was gone. A cold shiver shot down my soul that made me think of what it would be like living without him. I had it planned out that Mama would sleep in her room and I would stay in mine and we'd just go on like other people do when someone is killed in a mine explosion or a cave-in. Then I remembered that our house was gone and so was our car and we were wearing the only clothes we owned.

Mama stayed with the man a few minutes getting information on a sheet of paper, then collected herself and came over and knelt in front of my cot. The dam had burst on her and the tears just flowed and it didn't seem they were ever going to stop. Then I saw something in her face—a spark, I guess. Something that told me to hope.

"Billy, listen to me," she said. "Your daddy's alive. He's not dead; he's alive."

She kind of shook me because I guess my mouth was open and nothing came out. She said something about him being pulled out of the creek and taken to a hospital. Unconscious at first. Then he spoke up and gave them his wife's name and his son's name. She pointed at the paper that listed the name of the hospital. The Guard people were going to try and get us over there, but they were dealing with other injured people and all that came with the cleanup. And there was a lot of that to do.

"He's there waiting for us. They're going to get him all better, so you don't have to worry. Jesus was taking care of him all this time and we didn't even know it."

I managed to say something finally. "What happened?"

"We don't know. But somebody pulled him out of the mud and saved his life. Some good neighbor who was at the right place at the right time."

All I could do was hug her and hang on because even though it was good news, I didn't know whether to believe it or not. Until I could actually hold his big, calloused hand, there was part of me that couldn't believe.

"Your daddy is going to be so proud of you," Mama said.

I picked up the mandolin and held it tight to my chest, rubbing the front of it and hoping it was true and not some cruel joke. That news was like getting Lazarus back from the dead, and to this day I still remember the sight of him, wrapped up in bandages, his arm in a sling, gauze over the eye that got gouged out and scrapes all over his face, lying there in the hospital bed watching *I Love Lucy*, except he wasn't watching; it was the fellow next to him watching. I was still holding the mandolin when I hugged him, and the nurse had to pry me off there because she had to take blood or give him a shot or something.

"Thunder didn't make it, did he, Daddy?" I said.

"I reckon he didn't, Son. But he knew there was something coming, didn't he?"

I nodded.

"He was a faithful dog to the end, but that water was too much for him. But the Lord saw us through it."

"What happened to the people in Miss Dreama's house?" I said.

Mama looked kind of sad at me like I hadn't obeyed her, but I couldn't help it.

Daddy looked down at the covers and sort of smoothed out the sheet a little bit, and a big old tear formed in the one eye that wasn't covered. "It was just awful, Son. I don't expect I'll ever be able to take it all in. It's just tragical."

"Did they make it?" I choked. "Those two little girls?"

He shook his head and looked at Mama. "I don't see how they could have. When we got close to the bank, I jumped down

into the sludge and the mess but I couldn't hold on. The current was too strong. I never should have made it out myself, but God must have something more for me to do, I reckon."

Mama's mouth started giving way, her chin puckering. "They found them in the creek, down past the railroad trestle. All of them together except the littlest one. They haven't found her yet."

She put her head down on the bed, and Daddy put his bandaged arm around her and tried to pat her. There with the people on the TV laughing at something Lucy said, my mother and father had their most honest conversation I ever heard.

"I didn't mean for you to get hurt," Mama said. "I just wanted Dreama to know. The last thing in the world I wanted to happen was to see you get hurt."

"Arlene, you listen to me. There wasn't nothing going to stop that water once it made up its mind to come down that valley. You were looking out for your neighbors as you would yourself. I'm just glad you stayed on high ground."

Mama looked up at me, and I knew we were going to keep our secret from him. I knew he was not in a state to hear the truth. So I kept quiet. It was some time before he heard about the car and how I was stuck in there alone. It liked to kill him when he saw how damaged it was, and it wasn't long after that we moved out of the creek.

But all of that time, from my tenth birthday until the day he died, I never told him what really happened in the car. I told Mama and Daddy what I have written here before, and that is, I just got up enough nerve to jump. But that is not the truth.

My first reaction was not to believe what happened. I was scared that I had made it up. In a little boy's mind it's possible to get the truth mixed up with the make-believe. After I decided I couldn't make up something like that, I was scared that people would think I was uppity. That they would figure I thought I was something special.

But if you want to know the truth about how I got out of that car, I'll tell you.

After Mama slipped out and I was by myself, it was like the world went into slow motion, like one of those old movies of the Kennedy assassination. The black water poured through the back window as a wave came over the car.

I cried out to my mama and to Jesus and my daddy. I had to tell myself to breathe because it was the scariest thing I've ever seen. We hit the telephone pole, and the windshield cleared enough for me to see another house coming toward me. That's when the car rose up and I fell into the backseat.

And this is where my story changes, because I did not see an open window and know this was my chance to escape. I did not pull myself up by any kind of courage or will. There was nothing that rose up in me that was greater than the floodwaters. Like the 125 others who died that day, I would have drowned or been crushed in that backseat if I had been left to my own devices. I did not jump out of that car and I certainly didn't grab my daddy's mandolin.

With the swirling waters around me, thick as a coal milk shake, I was *lifted* out of that car. By some force of nature or the supernatural. Or maybe it was love that lifted me like a helpless little baby out of that window and placed me on the ground where my mama found me. And right beside me was my daddy's mandolin.

Now that may sound far-fetched to you, and if you think I am touched in the head, you can stop all the speculating because I'm as sane as anybody. But I'm telling you, as sure as I sit here and write this, I had no hope of living and I went from the backseat of that car to being on the ground just as fast as you can blink your eyes. I was another dead body in a car about to be smashed. But by some miracle I wound up alive alongside a river of death. Me and an old mandolin. How can you make people understand a thing like that?

About the Author

Chris Fabry is a 1982 graduate of the W. Page Pitt School of Journalism at Marshall University and a native of West Virginia. He is heard on Moody Radio's *Chris Fabry Live!*, *Love Worth Finding*, and *Building Relationships* with Dr. Gary Chapman. He and his wife, Andrea, are the parents of nine children. Chris has published seventy books for adults and children. His novel *Dogwood* won a Christy Award in 2009. You can visit his Web site at www.chrisfabry.com.