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Mud

When I was a child, we made many trips to visit my mother's brothers, Errett and Laurence Dunlap, in Ardmore and Wilson, Oklahoma. After a time, Uncle Laurence moved to Ardmore.

Uncle Errett was a large, hearty man who had made a fortune in the oil business. He and Aunt Vesta with their two children, Errett, Jr., and Elsie Ve, lived in a large, white, two-story frame house whose yard occupied all of a square block except for two smaller houses just west of them. I remember Errett, Jr., only as a teenager who had a minimal amount of time for his three cousins from Dallas. I was impressed when he went far away to school at the University of Pennsylvania, but I don't remember seeing him much after until we were all adults. Elsie Ve and I were about the same age, and we always had much fun playing. I found Aunt Vesta a forbidding figure who was big on hugging in an impersonal way and disapproving of any boisterous behavior. I can still hear her say, "Nice little 'gea-urls' don't act like that!" But Uncle Errett was different. I know now that he was a small but rotund man, but my childish memories have him a very large, happy man, generally with a cigar somewhere on his person, smelling good in his pocket or clutched unlit in his mouth. He always seemed interested in the young fry and had many suggestions for things we could do. He was devoted to his little sister, my mother, and they always had a great deal of catching up to do. My father was in the oil business too, so he and Uncle Errett had a lot to talk about. I actually remember none of the conversations, for Elsie Ve, Martha, Willett, and I always found plenty to do in other parts of the house - a comfortable sunroom or on the large wrap-around covered porch on the east and south sides of the house.

Obviously, I have many happy memories of our visits with Uncle Errett, as well as with Uncle Laurence and his family, but some of my most vivid memories have to do with parts of the trip to and from Dallas. For one thing, once we got past the small towns of Farmers Branch and Carrollton (now indistinguishable from greater Dallas), we would have to stop the car for Martha who, no matter which of many precautions were taken, always got carsick just as we reached a certain ninety-degree turn in the road. That detail settled, and I can't remember her ever being carsick anywhere else, Daddy nearly always quizzed us on the towns we were next to approach: Denton, Valley View, Sanger, and then Gainesville, where his sister lived and where we generally stopped for a short visit. After Gainesville came the Red River. I loved to cross the river and look down at the exciting red water as it flowed rapidly east. I don't remember the names of the towns in Oklahoma, for Daddy's teaching was singularly ineffective on that part of the trip. In the earliest days of my memory, the fascinating part of the trip started immediately upon our entering Oklahoma, when we left the bridge over the river.

The highway north had two lanes, but only one lane was paved. Going north to Ardmore, we had the right-of-way on the paved lane. Traffic was not heavy, the road was straight, and visibility was good for long distances. Consequently, all traffic going both ways used the paved lane until a south-bound car spotted a north-bound car and moved onto the

unpaved lane. I had no problem going north; in fact, I enjoyed watching oncoming traffic move out of our way. Our car could stay on the paved lane. It was the return trip in rainy weather that I found a nightmare. I'm sure there were more trips in fair weather than in foul, but it's only the wet times I recall. The action of a car slipping and sliding on a muddy surface, or worse, digging a hole into the thick mud with the rear wheels, was the most terrifying event I could imagine. I'm not even sure we were ever stuck in the mud on one of those trips, but I had no trouble imagining being stuck, for it had happened to us on occasional country roads we'd traveled nearer home. Oklahoma is basically flat terrain between Ardmore and the river, but I recall frightening impressions of what looked like steep embankments, especially close to the river. Then, I could picture us being forced to leave the safety of the paved road, sinking deep in the red mud, but not deep enough to keep us from slipping inexorably into the evil, roiling red water below us. Although it never happened, it didn't *have* to happen in order to activate my tortured imagination. I don't actually remember our ever having to surrender the paved lane as we approached the safety of the bridge, but I could *imagine* it happening, and imagination was enough to force me to bury my head in the corner of the back seat and nurse my terror until we had reached the safety of Texas soil.

That highway was completely paved before I was ten or eleven, but tense memories still remain. Not long ago, I was leaving an unpaved parking lot when I hit a stretch of mud, my wheels spun, and briefly I was back on that Oklahoma highway sure that I was facing the last moments in my life.