



One *Enchanted* Evening

NATURE'S NIGHTTIME SOUNDTRACK SETS THE STAGE

text by **Barbara Rodriguez** illustration by **Michael Witte**

IN TEXAS, NIGHT SOUNDS ARE AS DISTINCTIVE as the geography. The gusting West Texas wind and distant train whistles differ from the sounds of the Hill Country, which always chirps and whirs and buzzes. The deep dark hours of East Texas, especially in the vicinity of Caddo Lake, are filled with sounds muffled by thick pine needles, clouds of fog, and curtains of moss hanging from cypress.

I first thought about the stars at night and the sounds that accompany them a few years ago, when I rented a ranch outside Bandera for a week in July. The creaks and wheezes of the century-old ranch house became my lullaby. Tree frogs chirped and bull frogs harrumphed. A spring that gurgled an easy walking distance from the house seemed most musical just before I slept.

As the Fourth of July approached, my young son let me know that the night sounds he was looking forward to were more explosive than the ones I'd been enjoying. Having headquartered ourselves on thousands of acres outside the city limits, he argued, we could surely justify a stop at one of the firework stands that in July pop up along Texas roadsides like mushrooms. I promised the next day we'd see what we might find.

After a late-day plunge into a bracingly cold swimming hole, we returned to the house to find a notice on the kitchen

table, a simple request that we abstain from lighting any fireworks on ranch property. Despite recent rains, we were surrounded by miles of parched ranchlands. We dared not entertain thoughts involving random sparks and explosions. Elliott, of course, was crestfallen.

The evening of the Fourth I suggested we drive to the highest point on the property. I supposed from there we would see any sanctioned fireworks display, but also hoped the outing might allow a disappointed 12-year-old to forgive his mother.

There were no fireworks that night. In fact, it began to rain shortly after we reached the summit. But we threw a quilt on the hood, and climbed up to lean back against the windshield. We listened for a long time to the night sounds. When the misty rain stopped, the clouds suddenly opened to a sky full of stars. It was an unexpected display of beauty that seemed to hush even the frogs and crickets. I heard a little intake of

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breath from my son. "This is kinda better than fireworks, don't you think?" Just then, cicadas all around us ignited as if clamoring to agree. ★

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Gardens of Stone

HISTORIC CEMETERIES OFFER TIMELESS ADVENTURE

text by **Barbara Rodriguez** illustration by **Michael Witte**

RAMBLING THROUGH HISTORIC cemeteries was one of my mother's favorite diversions on any road trip. Even as a child, I understood that any cemetery was a direct connection to the history of a place, and inspiration for all sorts of poetic musing.

Fourteen miles southwest of Abilene, Buffalo Gap's cemetery makes a great case for the historical connection. The buffalo are gone, the 20-foot stacks of hides that had pioneers exclaiming in their diaries long since crumbled into history. But the Gap is still there, a red-dirt and oak-shaded valley squeezed between shrugging, square-shouldered mountains.

I began my tour just outside of town at the oldest public cemetery in Taylor County, visiting the timeworn monuments to Civil War vets and children lost in another century. Wending through elaborately carved marble sculptures of lambs, doves, and vines, I found the historical melody of a wondrously lacy name carved into stone: Mittie Cylvesta.

History also drapes graves outside of Graham, but I traveled there in search of two specific graves. I rented a house on the Hockaday Ranch, where guests can bump around the acreage, bird watch, and fish for bass and perch in a 50-year-old tank.

Over the course of a lazy weekend I left the ranch twice in a fruitless search for the graves of the Marlow brothers—recast as the sons of Katie Elder in the John Wayne classic. Whether the Marlows were truly outlaws or merely ne'er-do-wells remains a local topic of hot debate. It was a question I sought to ponder above the earthly remains of two of them. Frustrated, I decided to ask ranch owner Kent Pettus, a historian by hobby and disposition, for direction. Pettus knew where to find the brothers, as it turned out that three of the bad boys had landed in the Finis Cemetery established by his great grandfather.

The original Marlow marker, hidden beneath a laurel and washed almost smooth by time, was not nearly as poignant as I'd imagined. But nearby I found a Bible verse captured on a pre-Civil War marker that has stayed with me. I pushed back limbs to read the epitaph on a marker that had long since toppled over: "She Hath Done What She Could."

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Many years and cemeteries later, I think now and again on that spare sentiment. There are life lessons in those fields of stone. ★

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Little Turkey Day

TRADITIONS REIMAGINED ON THE ROAD

text by **Barbara Rodriguez** illustration by **Michael Witte**

THANKSGIVING IS ABOUT FOOD memories, certainly. But our memories seldom include complaints about wobbly tables, the scorch on a dinner roll (in my family, it's not Thanksgiving until something bursts into flame), or the number of crying babies. Something about the tradition, the blessing,

the raised glasses, the toggled seating, Papa's Jello salad, or Aunt Betty's ambrosia (dishes no one would ever travel to order in a restaurant) make us willing to hit the road, whether across town or state lines, to be together.

I count among my treasures the memories of my family's Thanksgiving gatherings. But as my older siblings left home, things changed. Some years my brothers journeyed to their wives' homes in other states. My sister's growing family made it difficult for her to travel.

Suddenly, Mom felt the need to reinvent our traditions. My younger brother and I were notified one year that we would be celebrating Thanksgiving on a camping trip. I'd enjoyed camping with the family for as long as I could remember, but as an opinionated pre-teen, I thought my parents had gone mad.

My mother was the most enterprising sort of cook. She

managed miracles in the kitchen every day, scarcely kicking off her workday heels before heading to the stove to scratch up elaborate family meals. But that year, on a ranch outside Brownwood, a Thanksgiving feast conjured up out of an ice chest, to be cooked in a 16-foot travel trailer, was her most magical feat—a campsite cornucopia of cornbread stuffing, candied yams, green beans, and the crisply-browned Cornish game hens we forever after called "little turkeys."

The roster of guests was reduced to my father, brother, and me. There was no memorable row over politics or life choices, no kitchen fire. Refusing to be glum over our reduced ranks, Mom reinvented our traditions and served a glorious meal beneath a bright blue sky. A "little turkey" tradition was born.

Years when thousands of miles separate my son and me from extended family, that campsite menu has become my go-to lineup. Elegant little Cornish game hens are deeply flavorful, and while half a hen will feed reasonable folks, serving one per guest allows me to feel lavish. Most of all, it remains a meal that is easily taken on the road. ★

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