

R. K. Mullins

The Drunken Savior

How a drunk bum turned my life around

As a young boy growing up in the hills of Virginia, there wasn't much to do or many people to look up to. Yes, there were the usual people like the police, firefighters, school teachers, parents, local sports heroes, but none of these was my hero.

These people would never do as a hero for a young boy deep into troubling things that no boy should ever know of. I can honestly say that my hero saved my life even though I did not understand or know the total impact he would have on my life.

Who could predict that a man who stayed drunk from one day to the next? My small town considered him a worthless bum. There were two men in my hometown that referred to this way.

All most every mother and father forbid their children from going near either of the two men. However, troubled boys like me found that we could give either man the money to buy us beer, wine, or liquor and a few bucks for them to get some cheap wine. They were all too happy to go into the store and buy us what we wanted.

One of these men would become my Hero. Wright Collins was his name, a once-great educator at a southern college. Who had become a broke man? His story was one of love. Love for a woman that broke his heart and left him a shattered man.

This man once taught math to young men and women with open endegger minds to the world of math. Young minds ready to absorb all that Wright had to offer. I could go on and tell you the reader of this man's life.

The love of a woman utterly destroyed Wright. Alone that would not make him a hero. No, this is the tale of how a drunken, broken man with what seemed to be nothing to offer would become the savior of one young boy.

I was this boy. I was a thirteen-year-old boy when I started my encounters with Wright Collins, and I was deep into things I should not have even known about. Drugs and alcohol were already a significant part of my life. The road I was traveling would have undoubtedly lead me to prison if it were not for what I learned from Wright Collins.

That's correct; a lowly town drunk would teach me more than any school could ever do. I use to skip school two or three times a week, and it was one of those days where I met Wright. I started to hang around him and enjoyed a good day of drinking and listening to him ramble. He would talk all day long, just stopping long enough to

take a swig of his wine. He spoke of when he taught students algebra, geometry, calculus.

Wright was so proud the best of his students went on to become great businessmen and women. Top-notch engineers, lawyers, and doctors. Wright never once tried to make me go to school or explain how much I needed a good education.

No, he just sat there reminiscing about past glories and how she cost him everything. When the one person he loved more than his life betrayed him. She made him the I knew.

As those days passed by me like wind through the trees, I would have never believed how much Wright was teaching me. It would be years later for me to understand the real impact Wright had on my life.

I was grown with kids of my own, and he had passed away before I would realize what Wright taught me. These things had stuck with me throughout my life. Wright always said that a person must have something to believe in or what was the point in living.

One hot summer day, he asked me what I believed in, and I responded I don't know, maybe GOD I finally replied.

GOD, he asked, why. I could not answer him then, and still today, I am not sure I could answer his question. He looked at me and said, “no, I don’t think you believe in anything, not even yourself.

That’s a damn shame, kid, and you need to believe in something. That statement would haunt me through the years. When he died, they haunted me no more.

So I asked him what he believed. He told me his-self and the philosophies he lived his life by or at least tried to. I asked him what those were, and he refused to say to me. He said I was too young to understand them. It would be a waste of time to explain them to you at that moment.

I dropped the subject for the moment, but I would later explain again. Until then, I would continue down the same path I was traveling. I needed Wright to tell me of his philosophies, philosophies that would later save me.

I went to Wright one day when I was about sixteen. I wanted him to buy me some whiskey, and I would, in turn, give him enough money to buy himself two bottles of his favorite wine. He took the money, and I waited in his one-room shack, which he had built from old pallets, bits of wood, and tin. It was far from the grand house he used to live in when he was teaching.

Most of us would not even allow a dog to sleep in this shack, but Wright was happy he had four walls and a roof to keep the water out when it rained. Old

newspapers, magazines, and pages were torn from a Sear and Roebuck catalog, insulated, and kept the wind and cold way.

Wright spent most of his days and nights there when he wasn't in town looking for someone to be kind enough to buy him a bottle. If he found someone that kind, he would drink every drop and stagger to the local jail. They would put him in a cell to sleep it off. The next morning gives him a meal and a few dollars they collected for the officers. Those few dollars would, of course, spent on more wine.

In his shack, he had a metal box with a piece of stovepipe he had found. He used to heat the room and heat a can of soup, beans, or some other little something he would live off. Live off of, yeah, if that is what you want to call it. If he eats something two or three times a week, he was doing good.

Day after day, the only thing he put into his body was that cheap wine. You know the wine I'm talking about the stuff that today might cost \$4.00 back then cost \$1 at best. Most of us would not dare drink something this bad. Wright survived drinking that and worse.

How many of you would bathe in a river or eat spoiled meat. I know I wouldn't, but Wright did this happily. Well enough of the backtracking. I was sixteen, and a girl broke my heart. I went to Wright crying and half stoned out of my mind. I was ready to do something stupid.

Wright asked if I had any money for liquor or beer. As usual, I had a few bucks on me, and I gave it to Wright. He asked me to walk with him down to the store. Then we would have a drink and get nicely drunk and talk. So I went with him to the store, and we came back to his shack.

There I proceeded to down a 5th of a jack. You might look down on someone buying alcohol for a minor, as I do today. That day Wright saw I needed something, and he needed something. So we filled each other's needs for a while.

As I sat there drinking my jack, Wright started telling me of his philosophies. He said if I were smart, I would find something to guide my life, or I would someday not have one at all. Wright went on to explain how his philosophies help him make it from day-to-day. I knew he was trying to get me to ask what they were. So I did, "What are these philosophies you keep talking about?"

Well, he said, they're mine, not yours. However, maybe mine can help you find yours.

Number one is, "Have fun with life; don't let life have fun with you." He said that meant life will always throw you a curveball and trying to get you off your game. Suppose you realize that you know that life is strange and should be fun. Find ways to live your life to get the most amount of fun and enjoyment from it.

Number two: You are the best you, you can be. There is only one me and only one you, so we have to be the best one there is. We have to be the prettiest, ugliest, smartest, dumbest because there is only one of us. We are all this every day of our lives, whether or not we want to be. So why not accept this fact and be the best us we can be.

Number Three: Do what feels right. As long as it doesn't hurt yourself or others, do what feels right. As long as you do that, you can never go wrong.

Well, I didn't take much stoke in his words that day.

I continued down the same path I had been going down. But that night I was supposed to go out with some friends. I stayed with Wright and got stinking drunk instead. The friends did go out without me, and they got into some real trouble and ended up going to jail for drug possession.

If I had not had went to Wright's that day, I too would have been sitting behind bars that night. However, this wasn't how he saved me. One night after I had grown up and had my first child (at 19), I read the tragic end to Wright's life.

It was a bitterly cold winter night, and Wright had been in town and scrapped up enough money to get good him and drunk. He did like he always had and went to the town jail so he could sleep it off. That night he was met by a young officer telling him that he had to go home.

It seems that there were no rooms at the jail, and Wright would have no choice but to leave. Well, Wright was too drunk to walk that distance, and he knew it. He walked around the building and found an open window leading down to the basement of the jail. He climbed in where he was sure he would be safe and warm and fell asleep.

It was two weeks before someone went down to that basement and found Wright lying there dead. The night Wright climbs into the basement, the temperature had dropped to below zero. My friend, my teacher, a man the town knew as a bum, but a man I knew to be my salvation had frozen to death.

There was but a small paragraph in the paper describing how Wright died. That's all the town seemed to think his death was worth. The county buried him in a poppers grave with no stone or marker that showed anyone who laid there beneath their feet. He died much like he lived, drunk, and only warmed by the alcohol he consumed.

It did nothing to help him live but did everything to cause his death. A few years later, I was unemployed and doing what I ever could to earn money to feed and house my wife and children. I had stolen food from people's gardens. I was getting very disparate. I started to think about getting back into something that I had not done

in a long time. I was thinking of asking a few people I knew from the old days to set me up with something. I had to find a way to feed my kids.

Almost ready to get back into something that could have been more divesting to my family than anything else ever could. I was out scrapping, looking for things I could sell to junkyards or today's recycling places. I found myself in what looked like a cemetery. I looked around for anything I could sell when I found a small metal plate on the ground. It read Wright Collins.

After all this time, I never knew where they had lain him to rest. And I would find him in what was looking like my moment of desperation. I knelt beside the grave and started pulling the weeds from around the metal plate. I asked Wright what should I do.

I'm not sure why I would ask a dead man that. It wasn't like he could answer me. Would he speak beyond the grave and give me some bit of wisdom that would help me. Well, to my surprise, that's what happened in a way. I sat there for a few minutes when I started to cry. I looked around to make sure no one was around and wiped my eyes with my jacket sleeve.

I asked myself what I was doing, crying over a man that had been dead for years and asking him for help. I must have lost my mind. Then it hit me, those words

he kept telling me over and over again. A man has to believe in something. A man needs something to live his life by, or why live it at all.

His philosophies started ringing in my ears. I shook my head as if to tell Wright I understood. I finally understood what he had desperately tried to teach me.

It only took his death and me finding his grave in my moment of need to get through to me. Through to me, it did.

Wright's words had gotten through to me. When I needed him the most, he was there for me. Even after death, he was there. I never did call the people I knew from the old days. I continued to struggle, trying to feed my family as best I could. However, I never went backward. I never went back to doing those things I did as a young boy.

Thanks to Wright Collins, I was able to move past that and find other ways to make ends meet. Well, I went on to become the man Wright knew I could be. Loving fathers are doing whatever they can to ensure their children are cared for.

I went back to school and had a great life. I am trying to live by the philosophies of a drunken bum. If not for Wright, I would have gone the wrong way. He saved me that day. I guess it's true the dead can talk if we listen to them. Wright Collins is my Superhero and always will be.

I hope you find someone in your life that can become your hero if you do not have one. Maybe one day, someone's words or actions will help you in ways you yet to know.

In loving memory of my Hero Wright Collins