

The Satyr



Quentin Dodd

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by [Quentin Dodd](#)

You can cross all of Hawkwood County on Interstate 64 and not see very much besides hills and woods. However, if you're looking in the right direction at the right time, and if you're not too hypnotized by the highway, you might notice a few things. You could see a massive stone monastery on the pinnacle of a distant hill. Or a lonely white farmhouse nestled at the base of a wooded slope might catch your eye. If you leave the highway and take the county roads that wind through the valleys, you'll make other discoveries, too. Like a lot of hilly places, Hawkwood County has stayed isolated, and the past is a closer companion here than elsewhere. For example, waves of German and Swiss immigrants settled here a hundred and fifty years ago, and as you drive you'll find little villages with gingerbread alpine buildings and names from the old country. If you stop for lunch at one of the roadside taverns, there's a chance you may hear a couple of old folks speaking something that isn't exactly German, but isn't quite English, either.

I was in Hawkwood County that day because of a photocopied flyer I'd seen on a library bulletin board the week before. It announced, in an enthusiastic calligraphic hand, that a Renaissance fair was being held on the grounds of Childress Hall, a bed and breakfast near the town of Einsiedeln. I'm enough of a romantic that the idea of rambling around outside a stately old house, watching people dressed in fanciful outfits and shopping for things in tents sounded like a good way to spend a Saturday, so I made plans to go.

Experience told me that wireless reception in such a sparsely populated area was going to be unreliable, so I double-checked the map and set out. It took about an

hour to get to Einsiedeln, which wasn't much more than a few houses and a half-block of storefronts. As I drove by--slowly, because I was trying to find my turn--I saw that one of them was a pizza place, another was an antique shop, and the third, separated by a vacant lot, was the kind of combination hardware store, general store, and gas station that you sometimes see in little places like this where it's half a day's work to drive someplace that has a fully-stocked grocery store.

I followed the turn for county road 37, which dipped low as it ran out of town and passed beside a cemetery on a high bluff. Within a few minutes I saw a printed sign that read "Renaissance Faire" with an arrow beneath, indicating that I was on the right track. Thankfully, there were a few more signs to follow as I got deeper into the backcountry, and I never ended up getting lost. At one point I drove down a gravel road past a fenced-in field where a pig stared at me from beneath a patch of sunflowers, then chased after my car as if he were a dog. Soon after that, I reached not Childress Hall itself, but a field that had been roped off and turned into a parking lot. A farmer with a mighty beer gut was directing traffic with one hand and sipping from a Coors Light with the other. He didn't strike me as the kind of person who would be particularly interested in this kind of nonsense, but he was clearly delighted by the stream of costumed revelers who were exiting their cars and lining up for the shuttle bus. I joined the line and climbed aboard when the rattling old school bus rounded the corner and chugged to a stop. At first, I had no idea why a shuttle bus was needed. Surely, I thought, this couldn't be a big enough affair to require satellite parking facilities, but as we got closer, driving past the fields, then up the hill and through a close tunnel of low-hanging trees, the answer came to me: There wasn't anywhere else to park.

Being a bed and breakfast, Childress Hall probably had only seven or eight parking spaces, enough for the guests and the staff, but mightily insufficient when there would be hundreds of people wandering the grounds. But that was fine with me. Riding the bus along the narrow, winding, tree-lined road, I felt like I was moving into a different kind of world, which was what I was looking for. As I said earlier, I'm a romantic, and I don't mind meeting romance halfway. The bus stopped and we all got out and walked the last fifty yards up the path, before the forest fell away on either side and I could see in the distance the old mansion on top of the hill, surrounded by a clearing.

The clearing was dotted with clusters of white canvas pavilions where the vendors had set up, and the charmingly hand-drawn map I had gotten at the entrance tent showed that there were several stages set up along the edges of the forest, where musicians would be playing and demonstrators demonstrating. I could smell wood smoke and something roasting, and all of a sudden I was very hungry.

I bought a roast beef sandwich and walked around, people-watching. Whenever I go to an event like this, I always have the nagging feeling that I'm going to be the only person to show up, that no one else in the world could possibly enjoy the same combination of medievalism, pageantry, and playacting that I do. Every single time, I'm surprised not to be alone. While I walked through an avenue of canvas-walled booths, I saw not only people in everyday modern clothes, but also a jester, several iridescent pixies, a handful of barbarians, a heavily spiked gothic knight, lords and ladies of every description, and several extravagantly dressed people who had used the opportunity not to dress as a character from medieval legends or fantasy fiction, but just to let their true selves come out for a little time in the sun.

The avenue ended at a small stage with a painted backdrop, set in one corner of the clearing, with the forest leaning in on three sides. A company of middle-eastern dancers had just begun their set. Since I am unable to resist anything bejeweled, draped in bright colors, and shapely, I sat on a hay bale to watch. There was a little tent off to the side, draped with patterned tapestries, which the dancers used for costume changes. I got the impression that some others were also moving around behind the thick screen of underbrush as well, but whenever I took my eyes off the dancers to glance into the greenery, I never saw anyone.



The dancers finished and I tossed a dollar into the basket they passed around, and went see what was for sale. In some of the booths they sold things you could easily find on the internet, probably for less money, but the attraction here was buying them in this atmosphere, from a guy in a tunic and a snood. Others, though, were

completely hand-crafted, and you got the sense that if you didn't pick up something you wanted, there was a better than average chance it would disappear into the mist, never to be seen again. That particular impression was very strong in one of the tents, where the proprietors had set up a series of tall wooden panels, and hung from them dozens of stiffened leather masks.

These masks fascinated me. There were the usual death's heads and long-snouted plague doctors, but many other designs as well. I saw suns, moons, wolves, mournful-looking hares, flowers, dragons, and even abstract designs formed from multicolored ribbons of leather. I kept returning to study a mask of the ancient green-man figure, a face made of flowing green leaves, with a hint of red along the edges to suggest the passage of the seasons. Naturally, I don't have much of an urgent need for a foliate mask, but I couldn't leave it alone. I kept picking it up and studying it, and once even went so far as to hold it up to my face and regard myself in the mirror that hung from the tent's central post. The proprietor noticed my indecision and shrewdly offered to take five dollars off the price. Moments later, cash had changed hands.

At first I thought I'd just carry it along with me, then hang it from the corner of a picture frame when I got home, but I couldn't resist the temptation to put it on. After all, I thought, where in the world would a green-man mask look more normal than right here? Not only that, but I would be contributing to the whimsical and otherworldly atmosphere that people want to experience when they come to festivals like these. I would, in fact, be performing a service. In that light, what other choice did I have? I put it on and adjusted the leather cord that kept it in place. It was very comfortable, and I strolled through the fair without so much as a raised eyebrow. In

fact, a young person dressed as a cavalier in black and silver asked me where I had gotten it, which made me unreasonably pleased.

Childress Hall itself, sitting alone at the peak of the hill, was a good-sized brick house with gray stonework around the windows and along the corners. It had a central block of two stories with a gabled attic, and wings sweeping backward on either side. The front of the house, facing the long gravel drive, was ornamented by a decorative garden within a low brick wall. The garden held two classical statues, a carelessly draped nymph and a javelin thrower. An assortment of decorative shrubs and flowers surrounded their vine-covered plinths.

A small sign on the garden wall announced that self-guided tours of the house were available, starting at the side door. At that that moment, I felt like staying out in the sun, but I made a mental note to come back and take the tour before I left. From the outside, the refurbished Childress Hall was still very beautiful, and I hoped the conversion to a bed and breakfast hadn't improved the interior to the point where it was all sheetrock and off-white inside.

Halfway down the hill and close to where a long rectangle had been roped off to accommodate the upcoming jousts, I saw that the owners had planted the beginnings of a hedge maze. The hedges were still young, and wouldn't fully lock themselves together for some time yet, but the bushes were already eight or nine feet tall. As I traversed the maze, I could hear voices and got the impression of other people moving behind the half-interlaced branches, but I never ran into anyone. This wasn't much of a surprise, since there were plenty of gaps where people could slip out, and there may have been alternate exits from the maze that I hadn't noticed at first.

I emerged from the labyrinth into a row of tents with canopies shaped like mushrooms, and stopped at a roped-off area to watch a local chapter from the Society

for Medieval Re-Creation give a demonstration of swordfighting. While I watched a Byzantine cataphract and a thirteenth-century crusader thrash each other with blunted swords, I got the impression of being stared at. My green-man mask was making me feel self-conscious, despite being less exotically dressed than half of the people in sight. I took it off, but then chided myself for acting foolish. I bought it, I liked it, I ought to wear it, right? So I pretended I had just wanted to wipe my face with a handkerchief and put the thing back on.

Once the fighting demonstration was over I drifted away while the next performers, a falconer and his assistant, were setting up their equipment. A couple of Elizabethan ladies-in-waiting passed me by, and when I turned to get a second look something else caught my eye. There was motion in the dark tangle of brush and young trees at the edge of the woods. For a moment I thought it was a startled bird shaking the branches, but then I saw the face. It was a wide-eyed face with a frozen grin, and as my eyes adjusted to the shadows, I saw that it was an actor's mask: a jolly, laughing satyr with wildly curling hair and a pair of pygmy ram's horns.

We looked at each other frankly for a moment. The normal thing for people to do in this situation would be to nod politely and move on. But at that moment, wearing what we were wearing, we weren't people. We were a satyr and a green-man, and we were both curious to see what would happen next.

The satyr cocked his head--I could tell by the build and by some subconscious understanding of the motions that the figure was a man--in a gesture that indicated curiosity. I made an exaggerated shrug. He straightened up and made a slight bow, from which I got the impression he was inviting me to follow him.

I hesitated. I wanted to know what was going on, but I wasn't inclined to join in some sort of audience-participation performance. The satyr took a few steps back into

the woods, turned again to look at me, and took a few more. Curiosity got the better of me. When I approached, I saw an opening in the bushes and stepped onto a little trail. Then I remembered that Childress Hall advertised having several miles of walking trails in the woods around the clearing, something they probably didn't want to publicize too much on a day when there were hundreds of people wandering around, for fear of patrons getting lost. The figure of the satyr, whom I now saw was wearing a toga, proceeded down the path a few dozen yards in front of me. The path itself was well taken care of and worn clear in most places. Here and there, short retaining walls of weathered brick had been built into the side of the slope that the path curved around.



Despite the oddness of the situation, I couldn't help enjoying my walk through the warm, sun-dappled forest. I smelled the rich scent of loam and leaves, and the sharp tang of sassafras. Behind me, I heard the distant sounds of someone playing a recorder, but it quickly faded and was overwhelmed by the lazy buzzing of fat, autumnal bees. The ground had become rougher as it descended, and the path now started to detour around rocks and large trees. While I was taking in the atmosphere, the satyr had disappeared somewhere ahead of me, but I continued to amble along. Clearly, this wasn't any part of the fair, but I couldn't deny that I really wanted to see what was around the bend. As I descended the hill in a slow semicircle, I began to hear the sounds of running water, and soon I was beside a small, fast-moving stream. On my left, opposite the stream, the brick retaining walls became more frequent, and soon they had formed a structure nearly as tall as I was, a wall with grey stone caps and streaky metal ornaments embedded in the mortar.

The wall pushed into the side of the hill and formed an open space alongside the stream. Across the water, the ground rose again slightly, and I saw a few vine-covered stone shapes that could have been rough-hewn benches, or could have been stray boulders. Either way, the effect was that I had stumbled into a tiny amphitheater.

The bees had flown off somewhere, and all I could hear were the sounds of the stream and the susurrations of the leaves. The track ended here, with the edge of the amphitheater wall curving down in front of me to meet the bank of the stream. The satyr, whoever he was, must have left the path earlier and scampered into the forest. I felt like the only person around for miles.

Here and there, the forest was slowly overtaking the wall. Creepers gripped the bricks, and tangles of young plants had established colonies along the base.

Something behind the tallest of these tangles caught my eye. I knelt down and used a piece of fallen bark to clear away the plants and get a better look. My investigations revealed a little niche, maybe a foot off of the ground and another foot in height. If those stone shapes across the stream were seats, then this niche would have been right in the center of the stage. It had been sealed with broken chunks of bricks and a few water-worn stones. I thought for a moment that I shouldn't be digging around in other people's property, but I pushed the objection out of my mind. I would, I told myself, just take a look at what was behind the wall of stones, then put everything back the way I had found it. Most likely, there was nothing there besides more stones. Someone had probably made an attempt at straightening up this area five years ago, and had piled all the loose bits in this convenient location, intending to come back later and do something with them, but never got around to it. If there was anything else in there, it was probably abandoned beer cans. A couple of vintage steel Sterling Brewery cans from 1977 would be interesting, but they were just as likely to be cans bought from the convenience store last month.

It turned out to be neither of those things. Removing the stones revealed a ceramic theatrical mask, painted blue with white highlights around the eyes, depicting a laughing satyr. I turned it back and forth in a patch of sunlight, studying it. The mask was filmed with grit, as if it had been hidden away for quite some time. The small holes on either side held remnants of rotten twine, which must have been used to tie the mask in place.

Once again, I felt like someone was watching me, and I suddenly got the idea that I may have blundered into some staging area for the performers at the fair. For all I knew, I was disarranging a carefully placed prop, which was going to be needed for an event later in the afternoon. I felt like an intruder, someone who had no

business poking around backstage and getting in the way. I knelt down and replaced the mask in the niche, covering it again with the stones as well as I could.

When I stood up again, I took a few steps backward to assess my repairs and happened to look up and over the wall. There, on the wooded slope above me, stood several figures. They were all robed, and all wearing theatrical masks in the ancient style. There was a angry old man, a laughing woman, a stern hero, a wily slave, and other archetypes I couldn't recognize. There seemed to be about six or seven of them, but they slipped in and out of the shadows and made it hard for me to get an accurate estimate.

In the front of this scattered party, the satyr himself stood at the lip of the wall. How had he gotten so close, walking through the leaves and underbrush without me hearing him? His mask, though cleaner and brighter, was similar to the one I had just put back in the wall, and I was doubly convinced that I had stumbled into some scene that was being prepared. The satyr spread his arms wide, palms open, in an expansive gesture. Blue eyes smiled through the eye-holes of the mask. It was clear he wasn't upset by my intrusion, but I still felt intensely out of place, so I shuffled out of the little amphitheater and retreated up the path. More than once, I wanted to turn around and see if the satyr and his troupe were still watching me from the hillside, but I couldn't bring myself to do it until I had reached the sunshine and bustle of the fair, and by that point all I could see behind me was a dark path into the trees.

I was a little bit unnerved by what I'd just seen, so I decided to take off my green-man mask and walk around like a regular person again. I bought a beer from a brewery tent staffed by a couple of guys dressed as friars. (Or, for all I knew, they could have been real friars. Saint Ulrich's archabbey was only a few towns away.) At one of the stages I watched three comedians perform all of "Midsummer Night's

Dream" in five minutes. When they were finished, I sat there for a few minutes studying the program I had picked up at the entrance tent. It listed who was performing, and where and when, and I tried to figure out which group contained the masked troupe I had stumbled across at the base of the hill. I didn't find an obvious answer, and I kept glancing up like a startled animal every time I thought I saw movement in the trees, so eventually I gave up and put the program back in my pocket.

I had seen nearly everything the fair had to offer, but didn't feel like leaving yet, so I lined up at the side door of Childress Hall to take the tour. It was self-guided, with yellow arrows affixed to the walls to move everyone in the right direction. I was pleasantly surprised to see that the current owners had done a good job of renovating the structure while still keeping it in a form that the Childress family might have recognized. Since the goal of the tour was to encourage people to think about booking a stay here, the yellow arrows led through the bedrooms, all of which had a bit of jazz age ambience, and through the amenities available to the guests, including the plant-filled sunroom and the library on the second floor.

To my eyes, the library was the most impressively restored room on the tour, though it's possible that I was simply more appreciative of a well-appointed library than I was of anything else. In addition to the shelves of books, there were a number of framed photographs on the walls, showing the house in its early days, and the people who had lived in it. One of the current owners was stationed here in the library, gamely dressed as a medieval herald. With the enthusiasm of someone showing off a favorite possession, he was describing some of the house's architectural features and answering questions from visitors. Behind him, a set of French windows

revealed a narrow balcony, which looked down on the statue garden, and the sprawling array of tents and booths and merry-makers.



By asking one or two questions myself, and listening to what the owner was telling the other visitors, I managed to put together a basic understanding of the house's history, of which the current owners seemed very proud. It had been built as a summer home by the Childress family, major stockholders of the Detroit-Memphis Railway Corporation, in the eighteen-nineties. Marion Childress, the last of the line, sold it in 1949 after she moved to California. At that point, the house had been abandoned for some time due to changing tastes within the family and the expense of

keeping it maintained, so Marion had let it go cheaply to a local farmer. The farmer had always intended to pull it down, but never quite got around to it.

The owner pointed out a framed photograph on the wall, showing three young men. They were probably about college age, though young people always look much older in old photos. It showed, he told us, Julian Childress and two of his cousins. They were the last generation who had spent much time at the Hall. Julian in particular loved living here, and came back every time he had a break from Dartmouth. He had been the poet of the family, and something about the surrounding hills and the wildness had appealed to him greatly. In fact, Julian had published at his own expense a book of the poetry he had composed here. It was in the library somewhere, the owner said, but he couldn't put his finger on it right away, since they had just re-organized all the books.

According to the stories that had come down through the years, Julian would bribe the servants and local farmers with kegs of beer to watch the performances he staged whenever he could convince a handful of friends to come down to the Hall with him. Apparently, they were quite impressive little spectacles. There's a passage from a well-known novel, written in 1945, that is supposed to incorporate the author's reminiscences of watching one of Julian Childress's plays when she was a little girl and her mother kept house at the Hall.

Among the other pictures on the wall, I discovered another photo of Julian. It was a full-length photo, about five inches tall, showing him in a jester's costume and posing in front of a stone-topped brick wall. When I leaned in close to get a better look, I was struck by the brightness of his eyes, and the simple joy he obviously took in dressing up and playing pretend. The owner, winding down his remarks, said that

the Childress family hadn't used the house as often after Julian had died at the age of twenty-two in the 1918 influenza epidemic.

My heart wasn't in the rest of the tour, so I made my way quickly through the remainder of Childress Hall. I took note of the second floor bedrooms and the ornate dining room, but Julian's laughing expression was still foremost in my mind. Outside, I descended the hill and sat down by the roped-off tilting field to watch some of the jousting. My attention kept wandering and I studied the shadows beyond the tree line, scanning for any movement. It was in that state, where I wasn't quite watching the action in front of me, and not quite sure what I was looking for in the forest, that I realized something about the second picture I had seen in the library. It hadn't stuck in my mind just because of the subject's joyful expression and his too-early death. In truth, it was because I had seen that face before. Part of it, at any rate.

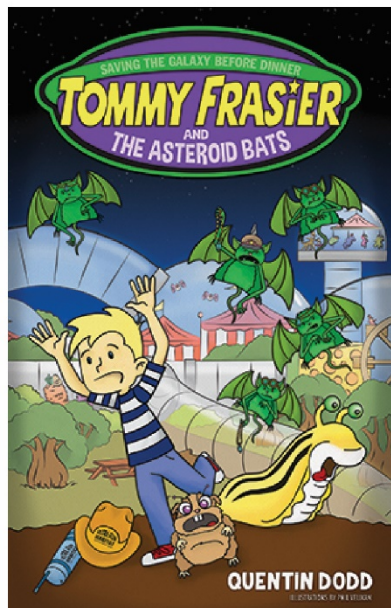
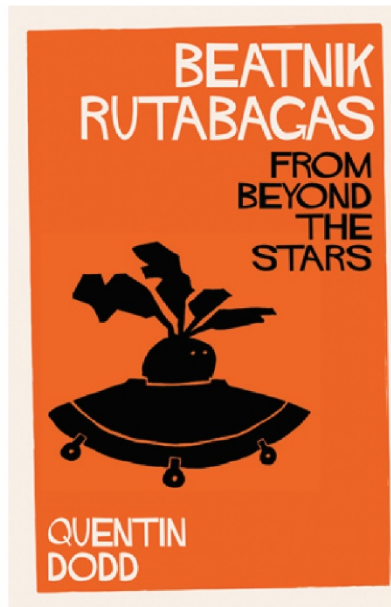
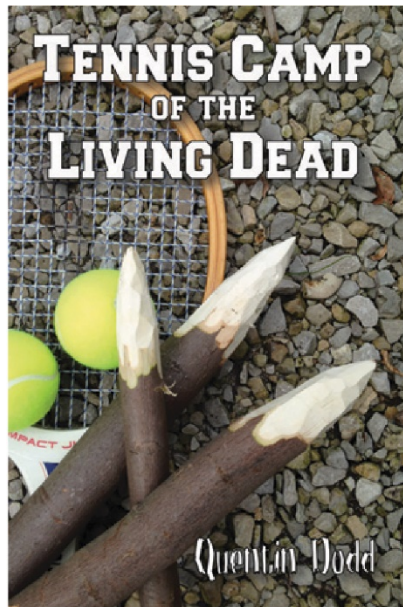
I stood up, detoured around a line of laughing children in butterfly wings, and followed the edge of the forest to the hidden corner where I had discovered the path. I was afraid it might have vanished, but it was visible and real. I hurried down to the stream and the little neglected amphitheater, and knelt by the niche in the wall to uncover the mask. I studied it again. It might have easily been a hundred years old, hidden away here and protected from the worst of the weather.

Who had put it here, I wondered. One of Julian's friends? A family member? Had someone left this mask as a memorial to sunny afternoons and indulgent applause, before the house was closed up and abandoned? As I carried it back up the path with me, I had the sense, one last time, of being watched. There may have been motion in the shadow of the oak trees, but I didn't stop. Let them look, I thought, if it made them happy.

Emerging again into the swirl of color and music and laughter and commerce, I rubbed a few spots of dirt off the satyr mask with my thumb. I had a momentary desire to fix the strings, tie it around my own face, and caper across the lawn, but I resisted. Instead, I walked up to Childress House and stepped over the low wall into the statue garden. I doubted I was supposed to be in there, but this would only take a moment. I placed Julian's mask amid the vines at the feet of the Greek youth, and angled it so that he could look out on the day's festivities. I backed away to examine the results and felt a sense of rightness. Eventually, once the tents were taken down and the visitors had gone, someone would discover Julian's mask, figure out what it was, and add it to the house's collection of Childress family relics.

As for myself, I was suddenly ravenous again. I put my green-man mask back on and descended the hill, looking for a booth I'd seen earlier, where some local Boy Scouts, dressed as Robin Hood's merry men, sold paper bags full of kettle corn.





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