

# cumberlands



**Fall--Winter  
1981**

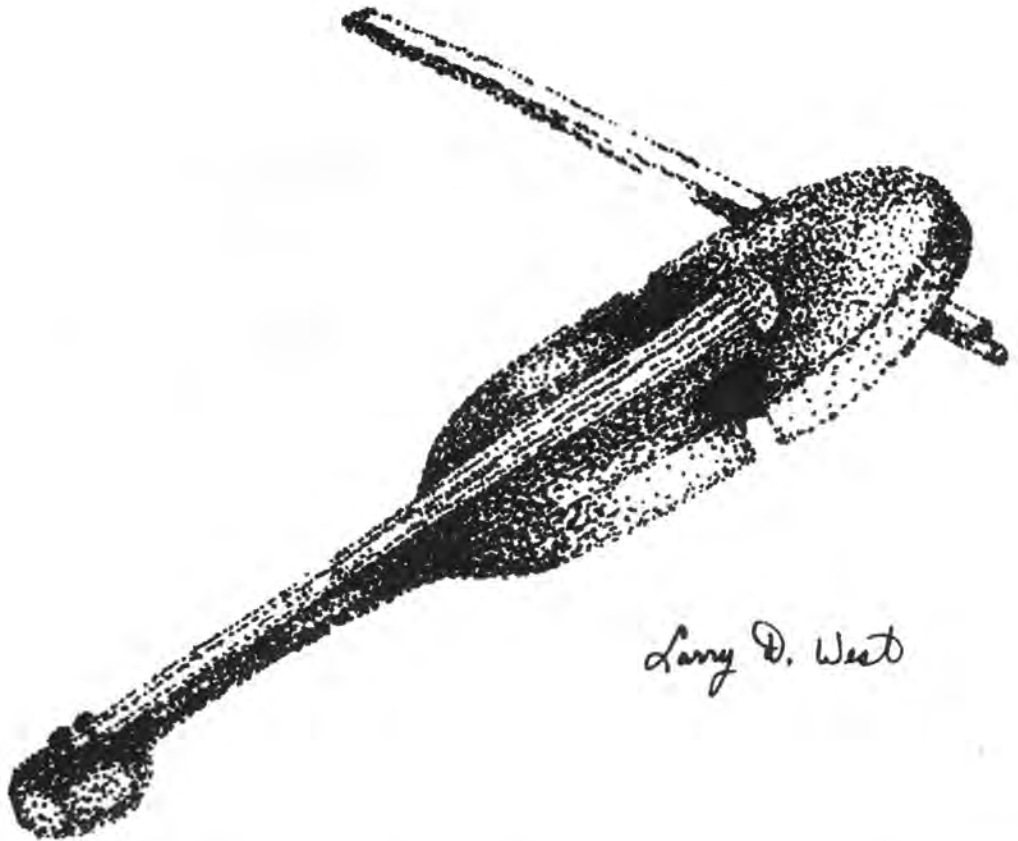
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*Larry D. West*

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# THE LIBERATION OF UNCLE EDDY

by  
Dallas Denny

**D**AVID FIRST SAW the mummy on the 6:00 news. After the strikes and slayings, the mistakes and misunderstandings had all been reported, there was some time to kill and the mummy story was aired as a filler. Someone at the station had thought it would be cute to send the most junior newsperson out to the salvage barn to do a feature, because there was a mummified body on display there. The mummy was of unknown lineage, although presumably Big George's biggest attraction. The most junior newsperson was commenting on this fact when David called his wife, Betty, to come and watch.

Big George's country manner and grooming made him look oafish and unsophisticated in contrast to the studied poise and carefully contrived casualness of the most junior newsperson. "Nobody rightly knows, Miss Hope, where *Uncle Eddy* came from. When I bought the salvage barn in '43 I found him back in a corner with a lot of other junk. Nobody seemed to know anything about him, so I just moved him out to the center of the floor, dressed him in this tuxedo and wig, and started telling everybody it was my Uncle Eddy."

David and Betty stood watching, transfixed, until the commercial came on. That night, in bed, they speculated about the mummy.

"Maybe Big George was short the down payment on the salvage barn, or something, and he did away with the original proprietor. It was wartime; things must've been in an uproar."

Betty raised herself up on one elbow. "I think Uncle Eddy was killed for love. George came home from work early one night. He caught Uncle Eddy with his wife. There was a struggle—shots!

He wondered what to do with the body. Ah! The perfect solution. The purloined person."

"Maybe—maybe it's not *Uncle Eddy* at all. Maybe it's *Aunt Eddy*. Make that Aunt Edie, George's wife."

"Could be. He dressed her in a tuxedo and a yellow wig to disguise her sex."

"And got rid of the bloody clothes. He ripped them to shreds and scattered the bits from a speeding car."

"A Hudson."

"From a speeding Hudson. Then came the process of embalming the body, the delicate explanations of his wife's absence."

"It didn't really look like a mummy to me. Just a skeleton."

"The rascal! Oh, the devious rascal! He's calling Eddy a mummy when he's—she's really a skeleton. Is it easier to make a skeleton than a mummy?"

"It must be," cried Betty. "Big George sure looked lazy to me."

"Now comes the inevitable visit from the inspector! The slow, measured pace, up and down the aisles of the salvage barn, past the porcelain figurines, past the plumbing fixtures, past the moldering books. He stops, leaning on Uncle Eddy's casket and points his pipe at Big George."

"Uncle Eddy didn't mind the smoke."

"Big George breaks out in a cold sweat."

"But the inspector tells him he is closing the case."

"Big George smiles in smug satisfaction."

"The inspector smiles in bewilderment."

"Uncle Eddy smiles—"

"Because skeletons always smile!"

"Right!"

"Good night to you, Big George. I hope you sleep comfortably tonight."

"Good night, Uncle Eddy. Good night, inspector."

IT WAS ABOUT A MONTH later that David and Betty passed Big George's salvage barn. The words *Big George's Colossal Salvage* spanned the entire length of the building. But, although the salvage barn was visible from the interstate, there was no exit near, so they simply discussed the mummy anew and decided to stop by the next time they were in the vicinity. However, it was over a year and their marriage was on shaky ground

when David and Betty drove up to Big George's salvage barn in their two-seater Fiat.

David parked the car in front of the extra "1" in *Collosal* and he and Betty wandered into the gloomy innards of Big George's. David remarked that he had already ranked Big George's right up there with Disneyland, the Jack Daniels distillery in Lynchburg, Tennessee, and the copper mine in Bisbee, Arizona, as a major monument to the American way of life. Betty did not answer; she was not in a good mood.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom inside the building, David saw Big George, feet propped higher than his head, lounging behind a mahogany-and-glass display case, holding a newspaper. He was looking at David, grinning. A world of meaning was implied by that grin. David took it to mean, at the very least, "Hi! I'm Big George, and you are a fine, nice, young married couple that is here to browse around and probably not buy anything. I can see you're not Negroes or Jews or Yankees, so go ahead and look around, and for heaven's sake make yourself at home. I won't be doing much talking, though, unless it's about Uncle Eddy. I'm always happy to talk about Uncle Eddy."

David and Betty walked past piles of tractor parts, lighting fixtures, and lumber, and approached Uncle Eddy's coffin. Inside, Uncle Eddy grinned at them through a plexiglass window Big George had put on the casket. Bits of powdery, brittle-looking yellow hair stuck out from the preposterous wig on his head. Brown, leathery skin was stretched across the bones like a ballon is stretched over the open end of a tin can. In places the bones plainly showed. The teeth were discolored, as if from smoking.

David and Betty grinned back at Uncle Eddy, but, when it became apparent that Uncle Eddy could hold his grin far longer than they could theirs, they wandered away to browse through the hodgepodge of household appliances, Harlequin romances, and World War II surplus that filled the salvage barn. And then they were in the Fiat, leaving. David yelled, "We know your secret!" to a startled-looking Big George, who was standing outside the salvage barn dickering with a man in coveralls about a lawnmower. And then the salvage barn was behind them, receding in the rear-view mirror. Betty sat in

stony silence.

**T**HAT WAS THE DAY of their biggest fight. David sat for some time after Betty had taken the Chevrolet to work at her evening job. Finally, he got up, walked to the refrigerator, opened it, and removed a can of beer.

By 7 p.m. David was roaring drunk, his judgement borne away by the brew. When the idea struck him, the mediating mechanism that would ordinarily have vetoed any actual tendency to action was not consulted. Thought became action; a whim was translated into muscular movement. David got an envelope full of almost-matured savings bonds from their hiding place, and got into the Fiat and drove it, top down, to Big George's salvage barn.

Big George smiled his usual smile when he saw David stumble into the salvage barn. David passed him, unseeing, and walked right up to Uncle Eddy. Big George walked up behind him. "I wonder who he is," mused David, aware that Big George was looking over his shoulder.

"A body can't rightly tell," speculated Big George.

"I guess not," said David, "But would a body be willing to sell Uncle Eddy?"

Big George was a man of quick thought. He named a price. It was not more than a piano would have cost. David named another, lower figure. Eventually they settled on a third, intermediate figure. David paid Big George with the savings bonds. Before he did, he asked, "Well, how about it, Uncle Eddy?" Uncle Eddy didn't object.

And then he and Big George were lugging the heavy coffin to the Fiat. The coffin was big and the car small, but eventually the two men managed to wedge it into the open space where the passenger usually sat. David leaped into the other side of the car, backed out, and drove drunkenly home.

Had David been sober he could never have lugged the coffin up the stairs and into the apartment. By 9 p.m. he had propped Uncle Eddy against the living room wall and opened up the cover.

David inspected Uncle Eddy closely. He was definitely a home-made mummy. Some of the joints were held together with cotter pins and baling twine. Uncle Eddy had more than a

faint odor of corruption, but then he hadn't bathed in years. David was too intoxicated to mind. He gently lifted Uncle Eddy from the reclining coffin and sat him in an armchair. The joints bent easily.

David removed the yellow wig from Uncle Eddy's head, and placed it on his own. On Uncle Eddy's head David placed his cowboy hat, and in his yellowing phalanges David placed a beer can. As David stepped back to admire his handiwork, he bumped into the coffin. Turning, he climbed into the reclining coffin and pulled the cover with the viewing window in it closed. David went to sleep, wearing Uncle Eddy's grin.

## KEYS

by  
Dallas Denny

Keys, keys  
A lifetime of keys  
Pitched into this bucket  
Yale, they say  
Master, they say  
Samsonite, they say  
Or Buick, or Fiat  
I save keys  
They unlock old memories

This is the key to my first car  
The one with the bad brakes  
This key fits my grandmother's house  
Although she never locks it  
This key fits an army footlocker  
In which I have stored  
Things too private to tell you about  
This tiny key fits a tiny lock  
Long since discarded  
This big brass key  
Fits the tightroom  
At a mental hospital  
Where I once worked  
Or lived  
I don't remember which  
This key fits the lab building  
At my old college  
Where I used to put together experiments  
While my marriage was falling apart  
And all the keys in this pile  
Are the ones that must fit something  
But I don't know what  
I'm going to keep them  
Because some day they might fit something again  
Don't laugh it's happened before  
With this key  
I opened the trunk  
Of a Chevrolet  
And it is a Mercury key

And now it's time  
To put all my keys  
Back into the bucket  
They've done their trick  
They've taken me back twenty years  
I save keys  
They unlock old memories

*DALLAS DENNY, Greeneville, TN, is "a full-time psychologist and a closet writer" who only recently began publishing his work; one of his short stories also appears in this issue.*