

“CATAHOULA CREEK”

Uncle Red wasn't necessarily accommodating the boys for a month out of the goodness of his heart. He was old-school and expected anyone enjoying his hospitality for a month to step up and lend a hand. Each day as they sat down for breakfast he'd present them with a list of chores to tend to before they could pursue the pleasures of life on a farm in 1946 Mississippi.

Matthew and Sonny were both 15 and Hatti's nephews.

Aunt Hattie was a great cook.

“Remember to breathe when y'all eat,” she'd chuckle, her blue eyes lighting up behind wire-framed spectacles. She always wore an apron, and loved to just stand there, hands tucked into apron pockets, watching her appreciative diners devour her country cooking. She was of average height but appeared short standing alongside her extra-large husband. She wore her grey hair pinned to the top of her head, giving her an extra inch or two, so she wouldn't feel so small standing next to her mountainous husband.

The boys finished their chores early afternoon, panting to get down to Catahoula Creek. Mississippi summers were hot, and the creek water was cool and beckoning like a sultry temptress for them to jump in and sample her pleasures.

Red, although outwardly phlegmatic about their visit, looked out for them. He pointed out that debris accumulated in the creek and clearing where they planned to swim and dive would be a prudent thing to do.. The debris was also a haven for water moccasins.

Moccasins would see the boys and warily retreat. Still, the boys had to be careful. A moccasin bite could be fatal. Uncle Red's solution was simply to kill everyone he saw.

Dressed in his usual attire of faded overalls and chambray shirt, he accompanied them to the creek with his 22-caliber rifle. As they neared the bridge, he directed that they lag behind. He crept to the railing and gazed silently over the river like a hawk looking for dinner. If there was a log sticking out of the water, there's where the moccasins would be, their bodies in the creek water and their triangle heads resting on the logs.

The rifle looked like a toy in Red's big arms.

He'd fire and a fat, four-foot water-moccasin would flop out of the water minus its head. He killed four moccasins the first day. He wouldn't let the boys swim in the creek until he was convinced there wasn't a moccasin alive within a mile of that section of the Catahoula.

After he'd put moccasins on the endangered species list, he stood guard on the bridge as they hauled out the debris. There was a small white-sand beach just off the bridge and a Spanish oak tree with a sturdy limb jutting out over the water. The sun was burning-hot, making the creek all the more inviting.

"I got a rope y'all can use for a swing if y'all crawl onto the limb and tie it on. Y'all can stand on the bluff then and swing out over the water," Red said, pointing to the remnants of a frayed rope. "Yonder's where some other kids done it years ago. Must've been Jake and Billy. They got kilt in the war."

"You in the war, Uncle Red?"

"Not this one, Matthew. The one before. You and Sonny be in the next."

"There's gonna be another?"

"Always is."

"That where you learned to shoot?" Sonny asked.

"I already knowed how."

"Kill anybody?"

"Ain't that what a war's for?"

Red's given name was Harry. Folks called him Red because he once had hair the color of an Irish Setter. It was gray now, almost the color of his eyes, which were narrow and squinting from years in the sun. He was big like a bear and had killed Germans. He was a hero to the boys.

When they first went down to the creek, the water was auburn from the decaying wood. By the time Red declared it safe, it was crystal clear, and some plump fish were swimming around almost begging to be caught.

Sonny's father was a judge and owned the nicest house in Picayune, about ten miles away. Hattie told Matthew he'd given Sonny a wad of money when he'd dropped Sonny off. There wasn't much to spend it on. Nearest store was in Picayune.

Sonny found something, though.

Someone had to shinny out the limb over the Catahoula and tie on the rope Red had donated. They flipped a coin. Sonny lost. They arm-wrestled. He lost. They raced to the bridge. He lost.

Sonny was small and pale-skinned and always wore a T-shirt to ward off the sun when they swam. He read a lot, so much in fact he *needed* glasses to read. His eyes were small but a bright blue. He looked like a nerd when he put his glasses on, which he probably was, although Matthew liked him a whole lot. Sonny reciprocated, and they considered themselves not only first-cousins, but best friends as well.

So, Sonny resolved the dispute of who would tie the rope on as a man of means might.

“Give you a dollar, Matthew, if you tie it on.”

Matthew agreed, but later, as he swayed precariously above the creek, he realized he needed to give greater heed to risk. Sonny laughed and needled him about how scared he looked.

The limb *was* high, though, and the swing over the water from the bluff was intimidating. Sonny offered Matthew another dollar to try it out first. To Sonny’s dismay, the price for future risk of Matthew’s body had skyrocketed.

“I’ll go first, but it’s gonna cost you three dollars.”

Sonny hesitated, but, after studying the lofty limb, agreed.

Matthew thought he was jumping from an airplane. The momentum of the swing took him as high as the limb. He let go at the apex of the swing, and his heart raced with excitement as he plummeted into the *water*.

Sonny made him do it three times.

“My brothers used to do that,” a sweet, southern voice called from the bridge.

They looked over to see who spoke and got their first look at Nell. She had curly blonde hair and large blue eyes and a smile that was as pleasant and inviting as the Catahoula. She was barefoot and had on a faded yellow dress that revealed a shapely young body. Matthew decided she was as pretty a girl as ever he’d seen and, if Sonny’s wide-open mouth was any indication, he agreed.

“What’s y’all’s names?” She inquired.

“I’m Matthew, and that’s my cousin, Sonny, in the water.”

“I’m Nell. My daddy owns the farm up the road.”

“Were Jake and Billy your brothers?”

“How’d you know ‘bout them?”

“Our Uncle who owns the farm up the hill told us.”

“Oh, Mr. Red. Yeah, they was my brothers. Germans kilt ‘em.”

“Sorry about that, Nell.”

“It’s okay. I got three more what was too young.”

“Matthew’s daddy was a pilot,” Sonny volunteered, as he waded out of the creek, towing the rope behind him. “Got killed by the Japs. Last month of the war.”

Nell understood irony. “That’s a shame, Matthew. If he coulda made it a little longer, he’d a got out of it. Bet your momma took it right hard.”

Sonny could be a contrarian sometimes, especially if he was after something Matthew was after, which probably meant he was also eyeing Nell up. “Yeah,” Sonny said, laughing. “She waited a whole month before she got a boyfriend.”

Matthew wished Sonny hadn’t said that, although in truth, Sonny was being generous. His momma waited hardly a week before she took up again with a man she’d been running around with when the news came his daddy had been killed. She’d been cheating on him the whole time he’d been fighting the Japanese. She even made Matthew call her by her first name, Joy, because she didn’t want anyone to know she had a son. She’d had a great time during the war and was sorry to see it end.

Nell came to Matthew’s defense. “That ain’t a very nice thing to say, Sonny. Cousins supposed to stick up for one another.”

“He’s just kidding, Nell. He’s my best friend.”

“He oughta act like it.”

Sonny didn’t want to lose her good graces so early on. “Sorry, Matthew.”

“It’s okay, Sonny.”

“Can I use y’all’s swing?”

“It’s kind of scary. Sure you’re up to it?” Sonny teased.

“I bin watchin’ y’all, Sonny, and I saw how Matthew had to practically kick you off the bluff, so I figure if you kin do it, I kin, too.”

“Well, get your suit and prove it.”

“Don’t need one. I’ll go in my panties and bra.”

She quickly shed her dress and was down to her undies. She looked like a goddess to her two gaping admirers. She ran to the bluff and called for Matthew to bring the rope to her.

“Give me a big shove, Matthew,” she said, as she climbed on the knotted end of the rope. “And I don’t care if you touch me ‘down there’.”

He put his hands on her thigh and the knot, close to ‘down there.’

She smiled and pulled his hand closer. “Now, give me a big shove.”

Matthew gave her a good launch. She squealed with excitement as she sailed over the creek. Then, as if she’d trained for weeks, she let herself go and athletically cannon-balled into the creek.

She popped out of the water in ecstasy. “That’s the way Jake and Billy done it. They didn’t have the creek cleaned as good as y’all, but they said doing a cannon-ball scared away all the moccasins.”

“They never got bit?”

“Never, Matthew. Almost wished they had. Leastways we could tend their graves. Lawd knows where they restin’ now. That’s what Momma says anyways.”

They took turns on the swing, and, when they grew tired, rested on the small patch of white sand. Nell lay down between them.

“Y’all come here every day?”

“Will now that we got the swing up,” Matthew answered.

“What time?”

“Bout three, soon as we get through with our chores.”

“Can I join y’all?”

“Long as I can shove you off in the swing.”

“Don’t you wanna share with your best friend?” She teased.

“Share what?” Sonny quickly asked.

“Matthew likes to touch my ‘down there’ when he shoves me off.”

That got Sonny’s attention. “Where’s your ‘down there’?”

“Here,” she replied, touching it.

Sonny’s small eyes had bulged when Red had plunked heads off moccasins from fifteen feet away. They were even larger now, fueled by high-octane testosterone. If there’s anything in the world hornier than a 15-year-old boy, science has yet to discover it.

“My turn to shove you off tomorrow.” Sonny spoke so quickly his sentence sounded as if it were a single word.

She gave them a big smile. She held the power, and her slaves just grinned back. They would have chewed the head of a moccasin if she asked.

Matthew, though, was not without initiative. “Maybe you can push me off tomorrow, Nell, and I won’t mind at all if you touch my ‘down there’.”

“I bet you wouldn’t.”

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Hattie and Red never had kids. She had dozens of nephews and nieces, but Matthew was her favorite. His mother, Joy, was her youngest sister and the beauty of the family, and Matthew had inherited her brown eyes, long eyelashes, and charming smile. Hattie had pictures of everyone in her extended family, but her favorite was of Matthew when he was six. His hair was bleached blonde from the sun and his brown eyes looked huge as he gazed back at the camera. He was even more handsome now as a slim, athletic young man.

She wanted kids because she enjoyed them. Red was pragmatic. He wanted kids around to help with the farm. They tried for years to have some, but one of them had bad plumbing. The Lord’s plan, they concluded.

She noticed a glow about the boys when they returned that day and, after only a few interrogatories, learned the reason. They didn’t tell her about Nell swimming in her undies, just that she was really a brave girl to swing off the bluff.

“Better play with her while you can.”

“Why?” Matthew asked. “She going somewhere?”

“Soon as she turns 15 and her daddy signs the papers, she’s getting’ married.”

“Married at 15?”

“That’s the minimum age in Mississippi.”

“Who to, Aunt Hattie?” He tried not to show disappointment.

“Elmer Pearson.”

“Used to work at the sawmill,” Harry injected. “But got a finger cut off and learnt how to drive log trucks. Him and Nell been together years now.”

“Wonder he ain’t in jail,” Hattie said disapprovingly.

“Why?” Matthew asked.

“He’s 19 years old. Bin chasing after Nell since she was 12. If her brothers had lived through the war, bet they’d a shot him.”

“Stories ‘bout him,” Red said in a dark way that got the boys’ attention.

“What kind of stories?” Matthew asked.

“Like how he got his finger cut off. Carson over at the sawmill said he thought Elmer stuck his finger in front of the saw on purpose.”

“He’s not the first man what lost a finger in a sawmill, Red.”

“Carson bin working there 20 years, Hattie, and he said Elmer the first what lost the baby finger on his left hand. It’s always thumbs and pointin’ fingers. Kind of convenient.”

“You sayin’ he deliberately stuck his finger in front of a saw blade? Why would he do that?” She asked, looking at Red as if he’s been kicked by a mule.

“To git out the draft. He was 18 and just been called up. Word come Jake and Billy been kilt by the Germans. Carson said he heard Elmer tellin’ folks the Germans ain’t done nothing to him. Why should he git kilt fightin’ them?”

Matthew and Sonny lay in the bed they shared and talked about Elmer.

“You think he stuck his finger in front of that saw on purpose, Matthew?”

“Don’t know.”

“I couldn’t have done it,” Sonny.

“Not unless you paid me to do it first.”

They both laughed. Sonny dropped off to sleep, but Matthew kept thinking about the story. He didn’t see how a man could hold his finger in front of a saw blade. That would require courage. If he had courage, why was he afraid to go to war?

He figured it out, though. Better to lose a little finger now than his life later on.

He knew his daddy would never have cut his finger off to avoid going to war. He hadn't even waited to be drafted. The day after Christmas, 1941, he joined the Army Air Corps.

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Nell was waiting for them the next day.

"My turn to push her off," Sonny reminded him.

"I got a feeling we're not going to be best friends much longer."

Sonny laughed, but he had other things on his mind. "Wonder if she'll jerk us off?"

"I'll ask her for five dollars," Matthew said, intending it as a joke.

The stakes were too high for Sonny to haggle. "Deal," he quickly agreed.

"What y'all whispering about? Bet y'all talking 'bout me."

"Why would we be talking about you?" Matthew smiled innocently.

"I'm not dumb. I see the way y'all been looking at me."

"Hard not to."

Girls 101. Her pleased smile told him he was learning.

"I brought an old quilt for us to lay on when we done swimming," she said, as she led them down from the bridge to the little patch of sand. She'd carefully spread the quilt. That's when they noticed she had a cut above her left eye. There was no swelling, but she had a black eye, too.

"What happened to your eye, Nell?" Matthew asked.

She shrugged. "Elmer come to dinner last night, and I was tellin' him how much fun we had swinging off the bluff. He got jealous and hit me. Daddy told him he wasn't allowed to hit me till we was married."

"Does it hurt?" Sonny asked.

"No," she answered bravely. "I kept a cold rag on it. Didn't think y'all would even notice. Come on, let's get to swimming. Get some cool creek water on it. Be gone by tomorrow."

Sonny looked around nervously. “Your boyfriend going to come checking up on you?”

“Don’t be such a fraidy-cat, Sonny. He’s at work. And besides, Matthew’s here, and he’ll protect us. Right, Matthew?”

Matthew had no way of knowing how big Elmer was and whether or not he could back up his words, but he meant it when he said, “I’ll sure try.”

One of his momma’s boyfriends had slapped her once, and he’d gone after him, only to be slapped by his mother. She insisted she’d done it to keep him from getting beaten up.. Kind of made sense. The man later gave him a dollar so he’d leave and go to the movies. Still, Matthew didn’t approve of men hitting women.

Matthew and Sonny were barefoot and already had their bathing suits on. Nell pulled off her dress, stripped to her undies, and draped her dress on a bush.

“Come on,” Nell commanded. “Let’s git in the water. Who’s gonna push me off?”

“I am,” Sonny quickly answered.

“Well, come on, then,” she yelled and raced up the bluff.

Sonny was on her heels. “Pull the rope out of the water, Matthew, and bring it up to us.”

“Yes, Master.”

He swam out to retrieve the rope. The knotted bottom was two feet above the water. He walked it to the bluff and handed it up. He’d counseled Sonny about the ‘down there.’

Nell stood on her tiptoes at the edge of the bluff, straddling the knotted rope between her legs and clamoring for Sonny to come over and give her a shove. He did everything Matthew had instructed him to, plus more. He put one hand over Nell’s thigh and the other on her bottom, then pulled her back and shoved. She squealed like a female Tarzan as she swung out to the creek and cannon-balled in. She bobbed up laughing, swam to the rope, and came running back with it.

She gave Sonny an exhilarating push-off, massaging his “down there” with her thumb, making him squirm with pleasure. He sailed across the creek and, despite the distractions at launch, successfully ejected himself into the creek. When he returned with the rope, he was self-consciously holding a hand over his erection. She giggled.

“Let’s see if I can do the same for you, Mathew,” she whispered.

“Might get your hands sticky.”

“Washes off.”

He straddled the rope and waited for Nell to push him off. Keeping her back to Sonny where he couldn't see what she was doing, she put her hand directly on his "down there" and began to massage it. She pulled him back several times, continuing to massage him. It was perfect timing and the instant she released him for the swing into the creek, he got sticky. He shuddered and for a moment felt like he was going to fall off the rope.

"Better hang on tight, Matthew," she called, laughing as he struggled to hold on.

Sonny got suspicious, so she shortened the prep time on Matthew's shove-offs. Sonny made hers longer and longer. She didn't complain, and Matthew began to notice a gleam in her eyes. They eventually grew tired and retreated to the quilt, where they all lay down. The oak tree gave them shade, and a soft wind had picked up and was blowing small ripples down the Catahoula.

"That was fun," Nell said. "Y'all have a good time?"

Sonny's appetite had been whetted. "Matthew's got something to ask you, Nell."

"What is it, Mathew?" She had an inkling.

He felt like strangling Sonny. The timing wasn't right yet.

"We were wondering if you'd jerk us off," he reluctantly said.

"Both y'all? Right here?"

"Not at the same time. There's a grassy spot over behind the big tree. No one can see from the road. We could lay on the quilt."

"Okay," she agreed. "But no touchin' my 'down there.' "

Ground rules suited Sonny. "I'm first," he decreed.

"Okay, git the quilt," Nell directed.

Sonny jerked the quilt out from under Matthew so hard it practically sent him flying. Sonny quickly grabbed Nell by the hand and led her to the grassy spot behind the big tree.

Sonny finally came walking back. He was ready for a long nap.

Matthew tried not to laugh.

"You 're going to love it, Matthew," he said dreamingly, his small blue eyes shining in delight. Soon as she touched me, I went. I wanted to go again. Took me awhile. Thought I was in Heaven."

Matthew was quickly on the move to the other side of the oak tree. When Nell saw him, she smiled with pleasure. She rushed to the side of the tree and yelled back at Sonny. “You better not peek, Sonny, or I’ll never do it again. Hear me?”

“I hear,” he said in a drowsy voice and collapsed on the sand.

To Matthew’s immense surprise and very pleasant surprise, Nell sat on the quilt and took off her bra and panties. She reached up and pulled down his swimsuit, then spread her legs and pulled him down on top of her. The next ten minutes were indeed Heaven.

“You can kiss my breasts.”

He happily did that for a while. Then she took his “down-there” and inserted it into her “down there”. “You tell me when you’re getting ready to go so I can yank it out,” she directed.

“But--”

“Don’t worry about it none, Matthew. Elmer and I do it that way all the time. He sometimes forgets, but I can tell when he’s about ready, so I yank it out.”

She was warm and welcoming.

“You takin’ a long time, Matthew. You sure you ain’t gone yet?”

“I’m sure, Nell. I’ll yank it out when I do.”

Elmer evidently didn’t take long, and, as Matthew lingered, she began to moan.

“Oh, Lord, it ain’t never felt this good before.”

Her moans and verbalizing excited him to the point where he was microseconds away. He yanked his “down there” out. She smothered him with more kisses.

They laid on the quilt breathing heavily. “Reckon you can go again?”

“Yes,” he answered.

She was hot as one of Aunt Hattie’s biscuits. He entered her, and her moans started again. Her hips eagerly moved up to him.

“That’s my spot, Matthew. Hold off going just a little longer. Suddenly she gasped and her strong, tanned legs clasped him like a vise. He felt himself having to go and tried to pull away, but she began to shudder and cry out and wouldn’t release him. He put his hand on her mouth so Sonny wouldn’t hear. Her shudders finally stopped, and she reached down and pulled his “down there” out. He had already gone. She knew it but didn’t say anything.

“Did you and Sonny---”

“No, he had fun, but he ain’t handsome like you. You the one I wanted to do it with.”

She pulled him back for a final kiss. “I love you, Matthew.”

“I love you, too,” he responded, having no idea what he meant.

They had three more weeks of swims and “down there’s” at the creek. Nell turned 15. Her father signed the papers, and she and Elmer married. Sonny never caught on he was missing the main event, assuming he was Nell’s favorite because she took behind the big oak first. Matthew said nothing to his aunt but did tell Red he was worried about Nell.

“Why”

“Elmer beats her.”

####

Nell was Matthew’s first love, and he never forgot her. Always laughing and ready to cannon ball. He’d break into a smile whenever he thought of her, especially years later when he went to Korea. Red had been right about another war coming, and thinking about Nell kept Matthew warm many a night as he and his fellow Marines fought their way down south from the frozen Chosin Reservoir.

Until...

...Until a sniper shot him, and he didn’t have to worry about staying warm anymore.

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Nell’s daddy, Harbin, died seven years after she married Elmer, and Hattie and Red drove over to the Picayune Baptist Church for the funeral. They were standing in line to pay their respects to the family, which had formed a receiving line in front of the church. Red still had his eagle eyes, and he pointed out Nell to Hattie.

Hattie detected his anger. “What you upset about?”

“Look at Nell’s face. Elmer beats on her just like Matthew said.”

As Hattie got closer she could see the remnants of a black eye.

“And look what’s holdin’ on to her.”

Hattie hadn’t noticed the little boy clutching Nell’s hand. She saw him now and almost fainted. He looked just like the boy in her favorite picture. He had a frightened look, though, and there were bruises on his slender arms and legs.

Nell saw them and tried to smile. She was taller and much thinner than when they had last seen her. She was still golden-haired and pretty but looked worn-down to Hattie.

“Matthew,” she said to the boy, “look who’s here. It’s Mr. Red and Miz Hattie. They lived just down the road when I was growin’ up. Say ‘Hello.’ ”

“Hello,” the boy said, almost in a whimper.

“Matthew?” Hattie repeated.

“My husband didn’t want no junior, so he said I could name him whatever I wanted. I always liked the name ‘Matthew.’ ” She tilted her chin defiantly.

Everyone brought a covered dish and there was a cornucopia of food back of the church for the mourners. After they all had eaten, the men passed moonshine around. The women gathered in groups to say nice things about Harbin and console his widow. Hattie waited for the right moment and then took Nell and little Matthew aside. She had discussed it with Red and they were of the same mind.

“Your little boy is my nephew’s son, ain’t he?”

“You know he is. I seen you and Mr. Red starin’ at him.”

“That why Elmer beats y’all?”

Nell glanced around to make sure no one was listening. “Elmer’s uglier than a scarecrow, and he knows Matthew’s too good lookin’ to be his. He’s says he gonna kill us both one of these days.” Her eyes were moistening, and she wiped away a tear.

“You know my nephew was killt?”

“I knew. I cried for a week. Read about it when they awarded him that medal. Had his picture in the paper. Said he was your nephew. Elmer seen it, and he knew I’d been swimmin’ with him ‘fore we got married. Little Matthew looked just like the man in the picture. Dumb as Elmer is, he can add two and two.”

“You gonna stick around till he kills y’all?”

“Ain’t got much choice, Miz Hattie.”

“Your folks won’t take you in?”

“They got eyes, too. They know Matthew’s not Elmer’s. They all on his side.”

“It’s settled then. You and little Matthew come live with us. My nephew made me his beneficiary, and the government sent me a \$10,000 check when he got kilt. I got no need for that kind of money, and it’s just settin’ in the bank. We can use it for his son.”

“Elmer’ ll just go to Judge Clark, and he’ll order us back.”

“Judge Clark’s my little brother. He’s always done what I tell him. ”

“Elmer wouldn’t stand for that. He’d just get his gun and come drag us back.”

Hattie shook her gray head. “Red was in the first war.”

“Matthew told me. Said he kilt some Germans.”

“He was a sniper. Kilt over 20 of ‘em. Elmer tries to take you and Matthew, Red’s gonna add to that total. He don’t cotton to a man what beats his wife and kids.”

Hattie got Nell’s address. Elmer was working the next day, and they drove over and collected her and Matthew. It wasn’t until Nell filed for divorce and sole custody of little Matthew that Elmer learned where she and Matthew were. As predicted, he showed up at the farm and demanded they return home. Nell refused. He cursed and raised his fist to strike her. Red was standing nearby and stepped between them. He took Elmer off to the side.

Elmer had heard the war stories about Red, and he was nervous. He stuck his jaw out and tried to look unafraid. His left hand was still scarred red from when he had mangled it in the saw years before. He had a habit of cupping it in his right hand to hide it. He was tall and thin, and although only 25, he had already lost some of his teeth. The rest were brown from smoking and chewing tobacco.

Red offered him the deal Hattie had cooked up.

“This is my wife talkin’, Elmer. If it was up to me, I’d just shoot you and hide your body in the swamp where nobody’d ever find you. You don’t deserve it, but Hattie says if you sign the papers Judge Clark sent you, she’ll give you \$1,000.”

Elmer scoffed. “Where she gonna git that kinda money?”

“Ain’t for you to know nothin’ but what she’s got it and it’d be yours.”

A \$1,000 was more than Elmer made in a year. He and Red talked some more, and then he got into his truck and drove away.

Hattie came over. “What’d he say, Red?”

Red smiled a rare smile. “Looks like the Lord finally give us a family, Hattie.”

THE END
