

“DOWN THERE”

Sonny was Matthew’s first cousin as well as his best friend. Matthew lived in Biloxi and Sonny in Picayune, 60 miles apart, a substantial distance in 1946. It was hard for the two boys to get together. Their Aunt Hatti was sympathetic to their plight and invited them to spend a month with her and her husband, Harry, on their farm near Kiln, which was south of Picayune and 30 miles from where Matthew lived.

Sonny’s daddy was a self-described traveling man, and he dropped Sonny off at Aunt Hattie’s, and she and her husband, Harry, and Sonny drove to Biloxi to collect Matthew. The two cousins excitedly hugged each other and jumped into the back of the truck and rode with Red, Uncle Harry’s Irish Setter, to their farm.

Uncle Harry was their relative by marriage and didn’t necessarily do this out of the goodness of his heart. He made it a working vacation for the boys. He’d dole out a list of chores to them each morning at breakfast. That never bothered them because they were always in a good mood when they sat down for one of Aunt Hattie’s southern breakfasts.

Matthew deemed her the best cook ever. She made to-die-for biscuits and grits. She had dozens of hens, and every morning she’d gather fresh eggs. She’d lay the smoking-hot biscuits out on plates, surround them with home-made butter and a mountain of grits, and top it all with sunny-side-up fried eggs. He and Sonny would cut up the eggs and biscuits and mix everything together. They’d wolf it down without taking a breath.

Spending a whole month with his cousin and best friend was Matthew’s main attraction for going to see her and Uncle Harry, but, if he had to pick a second reason, her cooking wouldn’t be far behind.

If they hustled, they could usually get through Uncle Harry’s to-do list by two or three in the afternoon. And hustle they did, because they wanted to get down to Catahoula Creek, where the water was deep

and they could jump off the bridge. Mississippi summers were hot, and the creek water was cool and inviting.

Uncle Harry, although he was somewhat phlegmatic about their visit, did look out for them. He pointed out that debris always accumulated in the creek, and they'd have to do a good bit of clearing out where they planned to swim and dive so they wouldn't crash into a log, not to mention the debris was a haven for snapping turtles and water moccasins.

The turtles were surprisingly aggressive, the moccasins less so. They'd generally see you first and almost immediately begin to retreat. Still, the boys had to be careful. A snapping turtle bite hurt like hell, but a moccasin bite could be fatal. Uncle Harry's solution was to take no chances and kill them all.

The first week of their visit he accompanied them to the creek with his 22 cal rifle. As they neared the bridge, he'd tell them to be quiet and stay behind him. He'd creep up to the railing and gaze silently over the river with his craggy, hawk-like eyes. If there as a log sticking out of the water, there's where snapping turtles or moccasins would be, their bodies in the cool creek water and their heads resting on the logs. He was so big and broad the 22 cal looked like a toy in his arms.

The first three or four times he shot they couldn't see a damned thing for him to be shooting at. He'd fire and then suddenly a fat, three-foot water-moccasin would leap out of the water minus his head. He killed four moccasins and three snapping turtles the first day. He wouldn't let the boys swim in the creek until he had it cleared out to his satisfaction, which meant there wasn't a snapping turtle or moccasin within a thousand yards of that section of the Catahoula. After he'd put snapping turtles and water moccasins on the endangered species list, he stood guard on the bridge and oversaw the boys as they hauled out the logs and debris that'd accumulated over the winter. There was a small white-sand beach just off the bridge and a nearby large tree with a sturdy limb hanging out over the water.

“I got a rope back at the barn y’all can make a swing out of if one of y’all is willin’ to climb that tree and crawl onto the limb and tie it on. That way you can stand on the bluff there and swing out over the water and drop off.” He pointed to a section of the limb where the remnants of a frayed rope remained. “You can see there where some other kids done it years ago. Must’ve been Jake and Billy. They dead now. Got kilt in the war.”

“Were you in the war, Uncle Harry?”

“Not that one, Matthew. The one before it. You and Sonny be in the next one probably.”

There gonna be a next one?”

“They always is.”

“That where you learned to shoot?”

“I knowed how already.”

“You kill anybody?”

He shrugged. “Didn’t hardly know nobody what didn’t.”

That was one of the longer conversations Matthew had with him.

When they first went down to the creek, the water had an auburn color from the decaying wood. By the time Uncle Harry declared it safe for them to swim in, it was almost crystal clear, and some decent sized fish could be seen swimming around in it. He even tasted the water and pronounced it fit for drinking.

“Tastes good as well water.”

Sonny’s daddy, the traveling man, had money. Matthew don’t know what he did, or if he traveled to sell stuff or not. He just knew Sonny and his parents lived in the nicest house in Picayune, and he and his wife both had a car. He’d given Sonny a handful of money before he headed off to do whatever it was he did, so Sonny was well-heeled with cash. Trouble was there wasn’t much to spend it on at Aunt Hattie’s.

Sonny did find something, though, to spend his money on.

When it came time for one of them to crawl out on the limb over Catahoula Creek and tie on the rope Uncle Harry had donated, Sonny didn't want any part of it. They flipped a coin to see who would do it. He lost. They arm-wrestled. He lost. They raced from Aunt Hattie's to the bridge. He lost again.

He decided to settle it the way any self-respecting capitalist would.

"I'll give you a dollar, Matthew, if you crawl out and tie the rope on."

Matthew could've gotten Sonny's whole bankroll if he'd negotiated, but he was too inexperienced in the world of finance at the time to hold out for more. He agreed to do it, but once he ventured out on the limb and hovered 25 feet above the water, he realized he needed to pay more attention to return on risk in the future.

It wasn't a pretty thing to see as Matthew carefully inched out on the limb to install the new rope. Funny how things didn't look very high when he was standing on the ground looking up at them, but, when he was up there looking down, it was a different story. Sonny laughed and needled him about how scared he looked clinging onto the limb.

He did credit Matthew for brains, though. After he'd tied the rope securely on the limb, he simply slid down it into the water rather than trying to negotiate his way back to the main part of the tree. Even a cat sometimes had trouble getting down from a tree he'd managed to climb up.

The swing immensely improved their swimming options. They knotted the bottom of the rope to sit on and then added a small cord to it to make it easier for them to haul it up to the bluff, where they could then launch themselves out over the creek and do a Geronimo into the water.

Sonny graciously suggested Matthew be the first to do it, his strategy being that if Matthew wasn't killed outright, he might then try it himself. Matthew had resigned himself to being the designated Guinea

pig, but he'd vowed that In future endeavors the reward would equal or exceed the risk.

"I'll do it for three dollars."

"Two," his cousin countered.

"Deal."

Sonny looked at him with new-found respect.

The first time Mathew made the swing for life, he thought he was jumping out of an airplane. The bluff was as high as the bridge and the momentum of the swing took him almost as high as the limb itself. Somehow he garnered up the courage to let go of the rope at the apex of the swing. His blood raced with excitement, as he hit the water with a substantial splash. Good thing, too, he'd let go of the rope when he did, as it guaranteed he would land in the deepest part of the creek. If he'd let go too late and missed the deep water, his body, or at least his lower extremities, could've been at risk in the shallows.

Sonny made him do it three times to prove the swing was operational and not just a working theory. Although Matthew was annoyed at being the test dummy, he still loyally cautioned his cousin it was imperative he let go of the rope when he was over the deeper part of the creek. Sonny was as good a listener as a negotiator, especially where his body was concerned, and he followed Matthew's instructions to the letter. His performance was flawless, and the exhilarated look he gave Matthew as he surfaced from the deep part of the creek after his first swing made it clear he was forever hooked.

"My brothers used to do that," a voice from the bridge called. "They wouldn't let me. Said I was too young."

They looked over to see who was speaking and that was when they got their first look at Nell. She was almost 15, and girls in Mississippi, with their parent's permission can be married at that age. Boys had to be 17. It wasn't uncommon for Mississippi girls to be grandmothers in their early 30's. Nor was it uncommon for people to have uncles and aunts younger than they were. Mississippi girls, or at least poor ones,

didn't have much to look forward to other than a new baby every Spring.

Like everything else in Nature, the female of a species always looks her best when she's ripe for mating. Nell was no exception. She had large blue eyes and a smile that was both pleasing and tempting. She, as they learned, never met boy nor man with whom she didn't flirt.

As if her hormones weren't enough to get her into trouble, she was also damned good-looking. She was barefoot and had on a hand-me-down dress that was too big for her, but despite that, Matthew could see she had beautiful legs and appealing breasts. He didn't know what Sonny's reaction was, but he was pretty sure it was favorable if his cousin's wide-open mouth was any gauge.

"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 Harry told us."

"Yeah, they was my brothers. Germans kilt both of 'em."

"Sorry to hear that, Nell."

"It's all right. I got three more what was too young to go."

"Matthew's daddy was a pilot," Sonny volunteered, as he waded out of the creek, towing the rope behind him. "He got killed by the Japanese. Last month of the war, right, Matthew?"

"Almost."

For a country girl, Nell understood irony. "That's really a shame, Matthew. If he coulda made it a little longer, he'd a bin 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. “She grieved so much it took her almost a year before she got married again.” He laughed at his joke.

Matthew wished Sonny hadn’t said that, although it was the truth. The worst part of it was she’d been cheating on his daddy for almost the whole three and a half years 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 rose 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 me, Nell. He’s my best friend, too.”

“He oughta act like it.”

Sonny didn’t want to lose her good graces 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?”

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

“Well, go get your suit on and come prove it.”

“Don’t need no suit. I’ll go in my panties and bra.”

She quickly shed her dress and was down to panties too big for her and a bra too small. No matter, 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, which he quickly did.

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

He wasn't sure exactly where "down there" was, but he was prepared to give it a liberal interpretation. He warned her first, though, to make sure she let go of the rope over the dark spot in the creek, as that was where it was deepest. He put his hand over her upper right thigh and onto the knot, which was very close to her "down there". She leaned her "down there" into his hand.

"Now, pull me back and give me a big shove."

He did as requested and sent her zooming out over the creek. She squealed with delight as she sailed through the air. Then, as if she'd trained for weeks, she let herself go at precisely the right spot. He watched with pleasure and admiration as she cannon-balled into the deepest part of the creek.

She popped out of the water in near ecstasy. "That's the way Jake and Billy done it. They didn't have the creek cleaned out near as good as y'all, but they said the cannon ball splash scared away all the turtles and moccasins."

"They never got bit?"

"Never, Sonny. Almost wished they had. Leastways we could tend their graves. Lawd knows where they restin' now. That's what my momma says anyways."

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

"Y'all come here every day?"

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

"What time y'all come?"

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

"Y'all care if I join you?"

"Long as I get to 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 definitely got Sonny’s interest. “Where’s your ‘down there’?”

“Right here,” she replied, touching it.

Sonny had a near-orgasm when she touched herself between her perfectly shaped tanned legs. He had kind of red hair and a few freckles, and his blue eyes were sparkling. If there’s anything hornier in the world than a 14-year-old boy, it’s yet to be discovered.

“My turn to shove you off tomorrow then,” he announced.

She gave them both a big smile. She held the power, and she knew it how to wield it. Her two slaves just grinned back at her.

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

“I bet you wouldn’t.”

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Hattie and Harry never had kids. She had dozens of nephews and nieces, but Matthew had always been her favorite. His mother, Joy, was her youngest sister. Joy was the beauty of the family, and Matthew had inherited her flashing brown eyes, long eyelashes, and beautiful smile. She had pictures of everyone in her extended family, but her favorite picture was one of him when he was six years old. His hair was bleached blonde from the Biloxi sun, and his brown eyes looked huge as he gazed back at the camera. Some people just took beautiful pictures, and he was one of them.

“This boy’s gonna break some hearts someday,” she’d tell her husband whenever she went through her box of pictures.

Harry was unimpressed. “Looks just like any other kid to me.”

She wanted kids because she loved being around them and enjoyed their company. Her husband was more pragmatic. He would've been glad to have some boys around to help him with the farm. They tried for years to have kids, but one of them had bad plumbing. They never knew which one it was and rationalized that their not having kids was just the Lord's plan.

She noticed an unusual glow about Matthew and Sonny when they returned back to the house and, after only a few interrogatories, learned the reason. They didn't tell her about Nell swimming in her panties and bra with them, just that she was really a brave girl to jump off the swing so high above the creek.

"Well, y'all better play with her while you can."

"Why?" Matthew asked. "She going somewhere?"

"Soon as she turns 15, she's getting' married."

"Who to?" Matthew tried hard not to show his disappointment.

"Woodrow Nelson. He drives a lumber truck."

"He used to work at the sawmill," Harry elaborated. "But after he got a finger cut off, decided to learn how to drive a log truck. Got his commercial license and got hired by a company in Kiln. Him and Nell been goin' together for a coupla years now."

"Wonder he ain't been sent to jail," Hattie said disapprovingly.

"What for?" Matthew inquired.

"He's 22 years old. He was chasin' after that girl when she was only 12. If her brothers had lived through the war, I bet they'd a shot him."

"Lot's a stories 'bout him."

"Like what, Uncle Harry?"

"Like how he got his finger cut off in the first place. Buster over at the sawmill said he always thought Woodrow stuck his finger in front of the saw blade on purpose."

“He ain’t the first man what lost a finger in a sawmill, Harry.”

“Buster bin workin’ there 20 years, Hattie, and he said Woodrow was the first what lost the baby finger on his left hand.”

“You saying he deliberately stuck his finger in front of a saw blade? Why on earth would he do that?” She sounded dubious.

“To git outta the draft. He was 18, and he’d just been called up. Word come down that Jake and Billy been kilt by the Germans, and he was ‘fraid to go. Buster said he heard ‘im tellin’ folks them Germans didn’t do nothin’ to him and why should he git kilt fightin’ ‘em?”

“Well, if it’s true, it’s sure a surprise?”

“Why you say that?” He asked his wife.

“Cause I always thought he was dumber than a fence post.”

Matthew and Sonny laid in the bed they shared later that night and discussed the conversation their uncle and aunt had about Woodrow Nelson.

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

“Don’t know.”

“I couldn’t have done it,” Sonny said in awe.

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

They both laughed. Sonny dropped off to sleep, but Matthew kept thinking about the story. It was confusing. He didn’t see how a coward could hold his finger in front of a saw blade. That would require real courage. And if he had real courage, why was he afraid to go to the war? Better a little finger now than his life later on? That had to be it, Matthew concluded, and that was why Aunt Hattie said he wasn’t dumb.

In a way He wished his daddy had been working in a sawmill when the war started and had cut off his finger so he wouldn't have had to go to war and get killed. He sure missed having his daddy around.

As he thought about it, though, he decided his daddy wouldn't have deliberately cut his finger off anyways. He hadn't even waited to be drafted. The day after Christmas, 1941, he joined the Army Air Corps. Did that mean his daddy was dumb as a fence post?

He fell asleep mulling it over.

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Nell was waiting on them the next day.

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

"Long as she pushes me off."

"Well, I want her to push me off, too."

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

Sonny laughed. "Wonder if we can get her to jerk us off?"

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

"That's too much. I'll give you three."

"Four."

"Deal."

"What y'all whisperin' 'bout? Bet y'all talkin' 'bout me."

"How'd you know?"

"I ain't dumb, Matthew. I see'd the way y'all was lookin' at me."

"Well, you so pretty, kind of hard not to."

Her smile told him that was a good answer.

“I brought an old quilt for us to lay on when we done swimmin’,” she said, as she led them down from the bridge to the little patch of sand. She’d carefully laid the quilt down on the sand.

Matthew and Sonny were barefoot and already had their bathing suits on. She pulled off her dress and stripped to her panties and bra. She laid her dress on a bush.

“Who’s gonna push me off?”

“I am,” Sonny quickly answered.

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

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

“Yes, Master.”

He waded out into the creek to retrieve the rope. The knotted bottom was about two feet above the water. He walked the rope to the bluff and handed it up to Sonny. He’d already explained to him how to get the most feel “down there”.

Nell stood on her tiptoes at the edge of the bluff and straddled the knotted rope between her legs and yelled for Sonny to come over and give her a shove. Sonny had again been a keen listener. He did everything Matthew had instructed him to, plus more. He put his right hand over Nell’s thigh and onto the knotted rope and his left hand on her bottom to where both of his hands were touching her “down there”. He pulled her back and gave her a shove. She squealed in excitement as she swung like a female Tarzan towards the creek. In addition to being pretty and desirable, she was athletic, and at the apex of her swing, she slipped agilely off the knot and cannonballed into the cool creek water. She bobbed up laughing, swam to the rope, and came running back to them with it.

“I’ll shove you off, Sonny,” Matthew volunteered.

“No way,” he protested. “I want Nell to do it.”

“Ain’t no problem, I’ll do you both.”

Sonny climbed on the rope and waited anxiously for Nell to come over.

“He wants me to touch his “down there”, she whispered to Matthew.

“Are you?”

“I’ll touch yours better.”

She gave Sonny a good send off, actually rubbing his “down there” with her thumb. Matthew couldn’t help but noticing him squirming with pleasure. She pulled him back and let him go. He sailed across the creek and, despite the distractions at his launching, released himself into the creek at just the right time. He, too, folded into a cannonball and splashed into the creek. When he returned with the rope, Benny couldn’t help but notice he had an erection. He was self-consciously holding his hand over it. Nell giggled.

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

“Might get your hands sticky.”

“It washes off.”

Sonny handed him the rope. He straddled it and waited for Nell to push him off. She did and keeping her back to Sonny where he couldn’t see all that she was doing, she placed her right hand directly on his “down there” and began to massage it. She put her hand underneath and pulled him back two or three times as if to maximize his propulsion into the creek, all the while 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 laughed.

Sonny got a little suspicious, so she had to shorten Matthew’s shove-offs. Sonny, though, made hers longer and longer. She didn’t complain, and Matthew began to notice an aroused gleam in her eyes. After

about ten swings apiece, they grew tired and retreated to the quilt, where they all laid down.

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

Sonny'd had a good time, but he was after a better one. "Matthew's got something to ask you, Nell."

She turned to Matthew, who was at her right. "What is it, Mathew?" Her eyes told him she had an inkling.

He felt like strangling his cousin and best friend. He didn't think the time was right. He was thinking maybe another week or two of playing around and she might volunteer to do it without being asked. Too soon, he thought. But, what the hell. All she could do was get mad and not come down to the creek with them anymore.

"We were wondering if you'd jerk us off."

"Both of y'all? Right here?"

"No, not here, and 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 I'll just play with your 'down there'. You can't touch my 'down there' or my breasts."

The ground rules suited Sonny. "I'm first," he declared.

"Okay, git the quilt and let's go."

Sonny practically jerked the quilt out from under Matthew and led Nell to the grassy spot behind the big tree.

"And don't you peek, Matthew, else I won't do it agin. You promise?"

"I promise." And he meant it. Watching his cousin, best friend or not, getting jerked off held no attraction for him.

They were gone longer than Matthew expected. Sonny finally came walking back looking like he was ready for a long nap.

“You all right?”

You gonna love it, Matthew. Soon as she touched me, I went. It was so quick I wanted to go again. I told her you wouldn’t mind waiting, so I asked her if she’d do me another. She said okay, but it took me a while the second time. It felt so good. Like I died and went to Heaven. Go on, she’s waiting on you.”

Matthew was quickly on the move. He got to the tree. When Nell saw him, she smiled. She walked to the side of the tree and yelled back at Sonny. “You better not peek, Sonny, or I’ll nevah do it agin. You hear me?”

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

The next 10 minutes were like a dream to Matthew. To his immense surprise, Nell sat on the quilt and took off her bra and panties. Then she reached up and eased down his swimsuit. She spread her legs and pulled him down on top of her.

“You can kiss my breasts.”

He gladly did that for a while. Then she took his ‘down there’ and inserted it into her ‘down there’. “You tell me when you gonna go so we can yank it out.”

“I—”

“Don’t worry about it, Matthew. Woodrow and I do it that way. He sometimes forgets, but I can tell when he rolls his eyes back he’s about ready, so I yank it out.”

This was his first time at bat. She sounded like a major leaguer.

“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.”

He guessed she wasn’t used to boys taking long, and, as he lingered on, she grew excited and began to moan.

Commented [GG1]:

“Oh, Lord, Gawd, it ain’t never felt this good before. Keep on, Matthew.”

That broke the spell. Her moans and verbalizing had excited him to the point where he was microseconds away. He yanked his “down there” out. She smothered him in kisses.

“You reckon you can go agin?”

“I think so.”

“Wipe yourself off on the quilt first.”

She was hot as one of Aunt Hattie’s biscuits and couldn’t wait for him to start again. Her moans and groans and heated commentary started again, only an octave or two higher. Her hips began to move up to him in a frenzied motion.

“That’s my spot, that’s my spot, Matthew. Hold off goin’ just a little longer. Suddenly she gasped and locked her legs around him and clamped him to her like he was in a vice. He felt himself having to go and tried to pull away, but she began to shudder and cry out. 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.

“I felt it comin’ out,” she said. “Pretty sure I got it in time. Oh, Matthew, I could keep you here all night. Oh, Jesus, that was so good.”

“Did you and Sonny---”

“No, she giggled. “He had fun, but he ain’t handsome like you. You the one I wanted to do it with. Come on, git back in your swimsuit ‘fore he comes nosin’ ‘round. We’ll go back in the creek and clean off.”

They needn’t have worried about Sonny. He was sound-asleep in the sand. Nell ran for the rope and pulled it up to the bluff. “Come on, Matthew, shove me off. And you kin touch me ‘down there’ all you want.”

He gave her a rousing shove-off. Her squealing and exuberant splashdown awakened even the testosterone-depleted Sonny.

They had two more weeks of swims at the creek. Nell turned 15, and her daddy signed the papers for her and Woodrow to get married. Sonny never caught on, and mistakenly assumed he was Nell's favorite because he was always the one she took behind the tree first.

Nell was Matthew's first love, and, in many respects, his best. He never forgot her. Always laughing and ready to do a cannonball. She was something. He'd always smile when he thought of her, especially when he went to Korea years later. She kept him warm on many a cold night.

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Aunt Hattie didn't have any conclusive evidence as to what happened at the daily swims, but she read young eyes well. She knew something transcendental had occurred to both her nephews, Matthew more so than Sonny. Sonny was still an innocent of sorts. He didn't even know what his daddy did for a living, she mused. Did he really think a salesman made the kind of money his daddy did by knocking on people's doors and thumping hairbrushes or bibles? His daddy had the finest house in Picayune and two cars and fistfuls of money. On a salesman's salary? Hell, no. His daddy, her brother Hubert, ran a whore house in New Orleans. Even paid off the draft board, so he didn't have to go off and fight in the war.

She rarely saw Matthew or Sonny after that summer. They were older and since Nell had moved to Kiln and was having a baby every Spring, there wasn't much attraction for them to visit their elderly aunt and uncle. They'd discovered other interests.

Seven years after Matthew and Sonny visited them, her husband, Harry, died of a stroke. He was 67. He was a well-liked man, and scores of folks showed up for his funeral. Hattie was surprised and pleased to see Nell there. It was nice of her to drive in from Kiln with Woodrow and her four kids to say good-bye to Harry. Nell introduced her to her kids, and Hattie fussed over them.

“This here’s my oldest,” Nell said. Woodrow hates his name and said he damned sure didn’t want no Junior. Said I could name ‘im whatever I wanted, so I named ‘im Matthew. It’s a name I always liked. Say hello to Mrs. Hattie, Matthew. Her and Mr. Harry lived just down the road from me when I was growin’ up.”

A little boy with sun-bleached hair and huge brown eyes smiled a not unfamiliar smile at her. “Hello, ma’am. I’m Matthew Nelson. I’m sure sorry to hear your husband died. Mamma said he was a nice man.”

Funerals were still a get-together occasion for southern families in those days, and people lingered for hours after Harry had been laid to rest. The last mourner left, and, although Hattie had a lot of cleaning up to do, she wanted first to look at some of her old photos. She found the one she especially wanted to see, one of another six-year old with sun-bleached hair and large brown eyes and a ready smile. His name was Matthew, too. He got killed in the war in Korea, in 1953, just before they signed the truce. His cousin Sonny got deferred somehow. Hattie suspected Hubert probably paid off the draft board again.

Her poor nephew, Matthew. Even though she didn’t see him that much, she missed him. He should’ve come and stayed with her and Harry and got himself a job in the sawmill. Maybe Woodrow could’ve shown him how to slice off a finger and avoid the draft.

Hattie made a mental note to go into Kiln more often and visit Nell. Be nice to watch Nell’s little Matthew growing up. Maybe when he got older he could even come and stay with her for a spell. She could use some help with the chores now that Harry was with the Lord. It comforted her to know Harry might be talking to her favorite nephew at that very moment.

THE END.

