

**WASHED
IN THE
WATER**

**TALES
FROM
THE
SOUTH**

By Nancy Hartney

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Washed in the Water



Lisa Dell thought about rivers a lot. People, too. She found it hard to say exactly where things began and where they ended.

Take the Suwannee River. Blackwater spilled out of the Okefenokee Swamp, flowed through scrub and palmetto-choked land, and ended up in the Gulf of Mexico. Moss-draped branches dabbled sweeper fingers in the current most of the way.

Likewise, a church community filled up with folks and flowed in swirls and eddies through shadows and sunshine. God's True Word Baptist Church near Ellaville seemed to do that. Most ever' September, the congregation put on a tent meeting to revive and re-awaken their Christian faith and draw in new members. Folks living out

in pine-lands came into town and camped under great oaks for an entire week, sometimes longer. Locals came early of a morning and stayed into evening. Preaching, singing, jawing and general neighboring went on all day and into late night hours.

Lisa Dell's mother, a pinched, nervous woman, insisted Lisa come to take care of other folks' children, sing in the choir, and help with cooking for revival week. In other words, to work.

After six children, her Daddy got worn out and run off. Mama sent the younger brothers and sisters to live with relatives. Two oldest boys drifted off and never looked back. Shed of everyone but Lisa Dell, Mama proceeded to push her into day cleaning with white town folks that didn't want coloreds. Lisa didn't mind the work, but she hated for Mama to take *all* her folding money and any hand-me-down clothes she brought home. And she hated enduring the perspiring clutches of an employer driving her back to their rent house after a day's drudgery. Lisa was Mama's only ticket and Lisa resented that.

Although heavy set, Lisa was still a striking girl-woman with her raven hair, olive complexion

The Day the Snake Got Killed



The tiny green body writhed, exposing a pale white-yellow belly. Twisting over and over, dark eyes unblinking, it flashed a forked tongue and thrashed, helpless. The three children gawked.

Elvoy, oldest at age fifteen, had located the snake under umbrella-shaped squash leaves, snapped it out by its tail, whacked it with a stick, and flung the small form toward Billman.

The child let loose with a single high screech, whirled around, stumped his toe on a stob, and sprawled face down. Still screaming, he scrambled out of the garden on all fours. At the edge of the yard, he realized the snake had landed among green beans. Standing up, he snuffed, rubbed his skint knee, and attempted to recover his seven-year-old

male dignity.

Dissolving in guffaws, Elvoy bent over and clutched his stomach. A slender, bony fellow, he sprang from a clan of white trash who survived near a palmetto hammock. His people hunted and trapped without regard to any law. They caught live rattlers and gators and sold them to gas stations and tourist courts as roadside attractions. Travelers on their way to Miami or Fort Lauderdale liked to stop, lean over snake pits or crocodile ponds, and throw empty Coke bottles, rocks, and other debris at the hapless reptiles in an attempt to incite some action.

“Chop his head off! Use this here grubber.” Elvoy taunted both younger children. He grabbed a hoe propped on the fence and shoved it on Sissy. “Do it. Chop his head off! It ain’t nuthin’ but a snake.”

“It’s harmless.” Sissy shook her head and backed away.

“No, it ain’t. Make you sicker than a dog if it bites.”

They watched the garden snake struggle. Billman, on the edge of the drama, wiped his nose and inched back cautious-like toward them.

The Cane Grinding



Late Saturday afternoon, Sarah watched as Mama, Pap and Martha Ann with Baby Blue piled into the decrepit Ford pickup. They rattled off down the road in a rooster tail of dust toward old man Chesterfield's cane sugar mill.

Mama's instructions rang in her ears: finish the ironing, do the milking, gather eggs, and then walk on down to the neighboring farm.

Deliberately, Sarah lingered over the ironing board humming to herself, dawdled around gathering eggs, and strolled down to fetch Belle from the pasture for evening milking. Milk sloshed out as Sarah carried the pail to the house, stopping on the way to pour some into a shallow pan for the colors, jostling against each other.

Chores finished, Sarah washed her face, pulled on a clean shirt, and glanced in the mirror. A narrow face and dark brown eyes stared back. Although Mama called the freckles splattered across her nose good-luck pennies, she knew they were simply brown spots. But truth be told, she realized she was fence post plain and that most folks simply looked around her, never *seeing* her.

As day reluctantly loosened its grip and night encroached, Sarah dared not piddle around any longer. Ambling down the dirt track, she scuffed her feet through warm, coarse sand. Fireflies sparkled in purple dusk beneath moss shawls of live oaks. Birds twittered and squabbled, settling for the night. An insect chorus rose and throbbed to a deafening hosanna.

Sarah loved syrup-making since it was one of the few non-church social gatherings in her rural community. She played king-of-the-hill with other youngsters on the cane-pummy pile, running, jumping, and shoving with abandon. But, since getting her period, Mama forbade any more tumbling around, especially with boys. Now, she hung around women with their home-spun, earthy wisdom and, occasionally, around men talking

The Fig Trees

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Mama's honey-slow voice floated from the kitchen accompanied by a tinkle of spoons and aroma of perked coffee.

"Child, stop your piddling around and hurry. The bus'll be here soon."

"I know Mama. I'm hurrying."

Lee rolled out of her sagging bed, her night-gown waddled around her stick figure. She yawned, stretched, and shuffled barefooted across the cool pine floors to the closet-sized bathroom.

She splashed water on her face, combed the sleep-tangles out of her hair, and padded back to the bedroom. Wiggling into a homemade dress, she pulled on bobby socks, and slipped into brown saddle-oxfords. She stared in the mirror. Stringy

dishwater colored hair. Fingernails chewed to the quick. Plain as an old corn cob. Never mind she thought. School's starting and summer tobacco season finished.

She plopped down at the kitchen table, grabbed an oven-warm buttermilk biscuit and smeared on fig preserves.

Mama bustled between the gas stove and a sink of soapy water. Drying her hands on a flour-sack apron, she leaned out the back door, and looked down the dirt road.

"I see it coming. It's already at the Watson's farm. You'll have to run."

"Yes, Mama." Lee scrambled up from the table and grabbed her notebook and pencils.

"Don't forget, ride home with Grace Harris after school. She's coming to pick figs."

"You already told me that. I'll remember." The screen door slapped closed as Lee sprinted out.

The yellow bus rocked to a stop in a dust maelstrom. She clambered aboard and the old vehicle lurched forward, grumbling on toward the county school.

Gangly and shy, Lee sat in the back alone. She thought about her new teacher and classes. Parched

# More Than Fruitcake



At first cold snap, Granny and Granddad, on their way from Atlanta to West Palm Beach for the winter, arrived at our farm. Time to make fruit-cakes, a staple and expected Christmas gift. *A Tradition.*

Everyone, including an aunt from down the road and several cousins, gathered around our kitchen table. The day started with hot coffee, or, in the case of me and younger cousins, cups of half milk and half coffee topped off with sugar.

Momma, Aunt Sylvia and Granny did the measuring and mixing. A sixteen-year-old going on thirty cousin started the chopping. Me and another restless eleven-year old began cracking nuts. Pecan, Brazil and walnut meats surrendered to our probing

nimble fingers.


Chartreuse citron, red candied cherries, dark and pale raisins, and sun-browned dates spilled kaleidoscope-like across floured cloths. Sticky fruit, dusted white, tumbled together, transformed into square marbles.

Sunshine streamed through a window, lighting escaped flour clouds. Cinnamon, dark star cloves, and ginger transformed that ordinary farm kitchen into an exotic aromatic country. Scissors clicked, large spoons chimed against bowls, and knives swished across wooden cutting boards creating an orchestral symphony of preparation.

Aunt Sylvia, who pulled her hair straight back into a hard little bun at the nape of her neck, usually started it – *‘it’* being the latest community news. Her round face glowed and her hands flew about when she talked. In fact, she spoke with more animation than all the other Jefferson women put together. Some folks called her dramatic.

“Well, Bethany and Charlie were at it again. Sheriff Moore had to drive all the way out to their farm Saturday night. By the time he got to the house, Bethany’s eye had swollen shut.” Aunt Sylvia wiped her hands across a damp dish towel.

## Last Love



Leroy Jackson moved his ponderous frame toward the table under moss-draped oaks. He had a pronounced limp in his right leg, wore greasy bib overalls, and led a hound on a frayed rope.

“Y’all men give me one of them there sign-up forms.” He pointed and drawled in a demanding tone. His left cheek bulged with chewing tobacco and brown drool seeped into the creases around his mouth. He didn’t wipe.

“Hello, Leroy.” One of the men behind the table glanced up. “That Queenie you got with you? Need one form do you?”

Leroy grunted. He took the registration paper with grimy, gnarled fingers and laboriously filled in blanks, stopping often to lick his pencil stub. He

did not bother to step away from the table, causing men behind to shuffle around his bulk for their forms.

The hound sat at his feet, yawned, then stretched out, head on her paws. Her russet coat, common to Redbones, mirrored autumn light. She sported two white toes on one foot and a small patch on her chest.

Sun dripped through tree branches in shades of umber and orange and pooled among leaves. Parked askew in the oak grove, cars and trucks marked spots where folks set up their camps. At dark, a bonfire would summon bluegrass fiddlers, hunters, and spectators to officially start the week-long competition.

Leroy, locally known as a bootlegger and ne'er-do-well, carried a stench of meanness about him. He had been married three times to straight-laced, good Christian women, each who left in turn, either by running off or dying. He never seemed to notice or be bothered by the manner of their leaving. One thing for certain though, he loved hunting and was unashamedly proud of his hounds.

At seventy-four, he aimed to win the Ozark Hills and Hollows Coon Dog Hunt Contest with

# The Stooper



No sound's as sweet as that ear-splitting, nerve-grating bell when horses break from the starting gate. Nothing compares to the surge of power, pounding roll of hooves, flashing colored silks, and jocks perched high on a horse's withers.

I played the ponies a little, sometimes won, sometimes didn't. No matter. I didn't go for betting. I hung at the track for the horses.

Watching those athletic animals made the hair on the back of my neck prickle and goose bumps cover my arms. Rain, shine, or cold, my days—as often as possible—uncoiled at the track with its great dirt oval, shed row backside, greasy canteen, and betting windows peopled by crippled souls living on myopic dreams.



Years back, as a young woman, I'd left home, looking for something besides life on a hard-scrabble tobacco farm. Not sure quite how, but I eventually ended up in Hot Springs. Time I arrived, town was decades past prohibition and its heyday as a gangster vacation spot. Then and now, Oaklawn Park housed the only parimutuel Thoroughbred betting in Arkansas. I fell hopelessly under the spell of track life.

Didn't make any money. Instead, I found freakish winters, sodden summers, seedy high rollers, and a nefarious backside empire. Everyone worked cheap and harbored a hidden demon.

Women, especially my kind, got hired after white farm boys and nut-colored immigrants. I took what I could get, usually green or rank horses, tedious grooming jobs, hot walking, and shed row work. The leftovers of the horse world. No classy gym for me. Mucking stalls, wrapping legs, soaping tack, and hauling feed gave me all the squat, bend and lift I needed to stay thin.

After a time, trainers got used to seeing me around, liked my work and the way I handled the ponies. When a regular exercise ride didn't show, I'd get the breeze unofficial and on the side,

course. And, less money of course.

My first time to sling a leg over a thousand pounds of raw adolescent power gave me an adrenaline rush like nothing I'd had before or since.

One leggy bay, Red Romero, stole my heart. I groomed and wrapped him a few seasons. Licensed riders breezed him. Apprentice jocks or broke-down old timers usually took the ride. He stayed in the money for a while, but gradually slipped back until he got left at the starting gate. Bowed tendons, popped splints, and close to seven years old, he raced on courage and bone for a spell.

I stayed with him long as I could, even when his trainer didn't pay. Last I saw of Red, he shipped to dirt-track claiming races in Oklahoma. Places where stewards turned a blind eye and owners didn't question how a horse got to the winner's circle.

I cried over that one.

Still, for a gal, I did pretty good. Got started on my license and worked up to breezing, although I never got beyond end-of-the-road trainers in class. Grooming and mucking backside helped me make ends meet.

When I turned forty-five, it all caught up with