
Cockfight

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IT WAS DAWN ON FRIDAY, July 22, 1973. It was 84 degrees in the shade at 7 a.m. The recent hot summer drought had brought the usually noisy Broad River to a quiet stream trickling down from the mountains into the foothills of Cherokee County, South Carolina. The dust was so thick on the dirt road leading down to Elsie Jenkins' house by the river, that the preacher told the whole church last Sunday that he needed to turn on his windshield wipers to see how to come callin' on his flock down there on Beagle Club Road where Miss Nora Lee lived.

She didn't take all that attention too good last Sunday, but she reckoned that the preacher went to see others there on the dirt road too. It's just that she lived a humble life there by the river, doing things the way they'd always done them there; raising chickens along with the prize Bantam roosters that her Daddy and Granddaddy were so known for before they died.

Others must have been proud of them too, because they sure did drive a long way to buy them. She had a man last week come all the way to Cherokee County from Missouri, and when he came pulling in the driveway in his shiny new pickup truck, Gordon thought it was the preacher. Because in this neck of the woods, only the preacher could afford to drive something that fancy, not her neighbors who worked in the weave room at the mill or over in Blacksburg at the dye house for Peeler Rug Company.

Nora Lee woke up when the Bantam roosters in the backyard pen began to crow. She had some age on her now, and she felt the arthritis in her left leg ache

when she pulled back the quilt from her bed, placed her feet on the dingy shag carpet of the trailer she lived in, and shuffled into her bedroom slippers. “Shit, another day a-burnin’ up in this trailer,” she mumbled. She rose slowly from the bed, glanced in the mirror at the sagging skin on her arms from the house coat she’d put on to sleep in the night before, and walked up the narrow hall in the trailer to the kitchen.

“G-o-r-d-y! G-o-r-d-y! You’d better be a-gettin’ up, cause I’m gonna have breakfast ready shortly,” Nora Lee told Gordon, her grandson she had raised since birth, when the State declared his Momma, Elsie, mentally unfit to raise her only boy.

“Granny, I ain’t ready to get outa bed”, said Gordy with all the power a little nine-year-old boy could muster from his own voice.

“Well, I said get up, and if you thank for one minute that you can’t mind me, I’ll have you go out thar to the back yard and pick ye own hickory switch.”

Gordon knew that Granny meant business about getting out of bed, so he pulled back the light blue Mickey Mouse sheets that Mary Sue, his favorite neighbor across the path through the woods had given him when her daughter, Geneva, had grown tired of them. “Yes mam,” was his next reply, trying to avoid the hell fire and damnation he knew that his Granny would inflict on him if he didn’t mind her.

“Granny, why ain’t the river loud no more?” Gordy asked in a curious nine-year-old kind of way.

“Because we ain’t had a drop of rain ever since the preacher had the Home-comin’ thar on the church grounds, and that was way back on Memorial Day Sunday,” said Nora Lee.

By now, Gordon was watching Nora Lee knead the dough for the biscuits from the same wooden biscuit bowl that her Momma used. “Granny, can you make me a hoe cake this mornin’ and lots of eggs with gravy?” Gordon asked.

“I reckon so, Gordy, but why do you eat so much?” she asked.

“Cause I’m a-growin’, Granny, and purty soon, I’ll be a man,” Gordon said.

That caught Nora Lee by surprise and it dawned on all of her 74 years that this little baby she’d taken to raise would one day be a man. “Gordy, just take it one day at a time,” she said. “Enjoy being a boy, playing with ye little playmates, swimmin’ in the river and agoing to church with me.”

He always liked the way Granny petted him. What she said always seemed to make perfect sense to him. “Okay, Granny, but like it or not, one day I’ll be all grown up,” he said. Nora Lee smiled, proud of the goodness she’d tried so hard to put into that boy.

Suddenly, it sounded like there was an explosion in the den. But it was no explosion at all. The front door of the trailer had been knocked completely down off the hinges and there stood Elsie Jenkins, Gordon’s Momma, Nora Lee’s daughter. She’d escaped from the Columbia mental hospital and only God knows how she’d made it back all the way to Beagle Club Road, some 100 miles away.

Elsie came in and lunged straight for Nora Lee just as she was pouring the coffee in the sausage grease to make the red-eye gravy. Gordy screamed. He didn’t really know his Momma but he knew she wasn’t supposed to be nowhere near these parts of the woods by the river. “Momma, what are you doin’ here?” he screamed.

“Get away from me, ye little piece of shit!” said Elsie. Gordon was so scared that he pissed in his underwear and then stood there trying to cover it up with one of Granny’s dish rags he’d rushed to pick up off the counter.

Elsie just got right up in front of Nora Lee and said, “I ain’t got no use for ye! You took my baby away from me and sent me off up thar to that hell hole in Columbee!” She was referring to the court order that named her mentally incompetent to function in society while pregnant with Gordon. She was sent to live out the rest of her days at the state mental hospital.

“Now Elsie, I didn’t have anythang to do with that! You made ye own bed when you was out thar wonderin’ the streets, hangin’ out in ever beer joint, drankin’ and takin’ them pills and a-takin’ on any ole man who would give you a dollar,” Nora Lee said.

That made what little sense Elsie had leave her and her eyes began to glare with a look that Gordy was sure to never forget. Elsie lunged at Nora Lee. “Momma, what are ye doin’?” Gordon screamed, tugging at Elsie’s hospital gown to get her away from his Grandmaw. “S-t-o-p it, s-t-o-p it!” Gordon pleaded. Elsie turned and gave Gordy the hardest backhand across his face that she’d ever attempted. He fell hard to the floor in a heavy thump, spitting blood out of his mouth along with one of his front teeth.

Then, Elsie reached down and grabbed the belt right off of Gordon's britches and wrapped the belt tight around Nora Lee's neck. Nora Lee tried to fight off Elsie but she was too weak from her blood sugar to do much about it. "I finally made it out of that hell hole last night, and it's time for ye to pay for takin' my boy from me!" said Elsie.

Nora Lee silently prayed to God to have mercy on her. Elsie grabbed both ends of the belt and pulled it tight. Elsie's lower denture fell out and cracked on the floor. One of Nora Lee's eyeballs popped out to the floor along with a big gush of blood, drenching Elsie's white cotton hospital gown. Nora Lee was spared no mercy, as she lay slumped on the floor. Elsie took a bobby pin from her hair and stabbed it into the other eye left on Nora Lee's face. "Thar!" she said. "You ain't a-layin' eyes on him no more!" she said. Elsie stood there thinking that she had finally finished what she had come to do. She rose to her feet, turned off the burners on the stove and ate a handful of raw biscuit dough. Then, she left out the front door and started walking down the dirt road toward the woods.

Gordon had managed to get to his feet and take off running as fast as he could run in his bare feet down the trail by the river to Harvey and Mary Sue Walker's house as soon as Elsie took the belt off his pants. He was crying and saw Harvey Walker plowing out in the field on his old Massey Ferguson tractor that cranked in the front with a big long handle. "Momma's out, Momma's out!" he cried.

At that moment, Harvey saw the terror in Gordon's eyes—a look that he'd never seen before. He stopped the tractor, got off and came over and placed his hand on Gordon's shoulder. "What the matter, son?" Harvey asked.

"I said, Momma's out. Help me, Mr. Walker, help me!" he cried. "I thank she's a-tryin' to kill Granny."

"Now, wait a minute, Gordy. What in the devil are you a-talkin' about?" said Harvey.

"I said that Momma busted into the house awhile ago and the first thang she did was go after Granny," Gordon replied. Harvey picked up Gordon and he carried him up the dirt path from the garden to the house he had shared with his wife, Mary Sue, since January 24, 1961.

They approached the Walker's house and Mary Sue and her little daughter Geneva were sitting on the front porch shucking corn from the garden. Geneva was in Gordon's fourth grade class at school. "Momma, that looks like Gordy

that Daddy is totin’,” Geneva said.

“Harvey, is that little Gordy? What in the dickens has happened with that child?” said Mary Sue. “Genever, go in the house right now and play with them baby dolls over thar in that old tater box!” Mary Sue told Geneva.

“But Momma! Gordy’s in my class at school!” Geneva told her Momma.

“Do what I said Genever! This is grown folk business!” Geneva got up from the front porch swing, put down the corn, and reluctantly went inside to her bedroom. Mary Sue opened the screen door and hollered to Geneva to stay in her room until she was told to come out.

“Harvey, what happened?” Mary Sue asked.

“We ain’t got time to go into this by speckalatin’ and gossipin’. We got to take care of this youngun!”

Harvey walked inside and placed Gordon on the bed in the guestroom. Mary Sue walked into the den, put a washrag into the sink, wrung it out and came back. She started wiping off Gordon’s head. “She shore put a beatin’ on him. It’s pitiful. Children are God’s gifts to the world. Little Gordy and Nora Lee ain’t never hurt nobody. Why in the world would Elsie want to come back to these parts and inflict such a devil-like thang on them? What we gonna do now?”

“I got to go get Preacher Jones to ride over thar with me and see if Nora Lee is all right,” he replied. He leaned over and kissed Mary Sue with the deep heartfelt love he had had for her since he met her at the county square dance in 1960. “I’d better skedaddle out of here and get the preacher,” Harvey said.

“Be careful, Harvey,” she pleaded.

Harvey walked outside while the screen door quickly slammed behind him. He started the engine on his pickup truck and started down Beagle Club Road, wiping the dust from his eyes as it came in the window he had rolled down to escape the 97-degree heat on that hot summer day in South Carolina. Harvey turned right onto Ridge Road. He knew the preacher would probably be at home. The preacher lived about a mile further down Ridge Road. Harvey’s truck pulled up into the drive and honked the horn.

Rev. Jones heard the horn and walked out onto the porch. “Well, Brother Harvey, what brings you over?” he asked. “You bringin’ another bushel of butterbeans and tomatoes today?”

“Nahh, preacher... I wish that was why I came a-callin’ today but that ain’t the reason,” Harvey told the preacher as he reached down into his overalls and pulled out a soiled handkerchief to wipe the sweat off his brow. “We got a bad thang happened over thar by the river,” Harvey told the preacher. “Miss Nora Lee Jenkins has been hurt,” he said.

“Miss Nora Lee? Why, she ain’t never done nothin’ but good to anybody she ever came around,” the preacher said.

“I know,” Harvey replied. “Preacher, will you ride over thar with me to see just what’s the matter? Little Gordy came a-runnin’ over to the house a while ago and he’s in pitiful shape. Pray for him, preacher,” Harvey said.

“Yes, I’ll pray for him,” the preacher quickly said. “Of course I’ll go, Harvey. Let’s get in the truck and get right over there.” The preacher reached over on the coffee table and put his bible in his right hand. Then they walked out the door.

Harvey and the preacher got in the truck and rode over to the Jenkins’ trailer on Beagle Club Road. Right away they saw the door was torn down from the front of the trailer. They got out of the truck. Slowly, Harvey walked up to the trailer and peered in the window. He stepped back and vomited on the grass.

“What is it Harvey?” the preacher asked.

“Come here, Preacher. It’s much worse than anythang I ever saw in Korea,” he said.

The preacher walked over. “We got to call the Law,” he told Harvey. The preacher knelt and prayed out loud that God had spared mercy on Nora Lee. Then he walked in the trailer and picked up the receiver of the rotary phone hanging on the wall. The heat and the odor of the dead body were unbearable.

He dialed the Sheriff’s Department quickly. He knew the number by heart because Sheriff McKinney was the chairman of the deacons at the church and he called that number at least once each week to arrange to have lunch with him at the Peach Orchard Café, and then go fishing for catfish at Broad River.

“Cherokee County Sheriff’s Department,” the woman on the other end of the line said.

“This is Preacher Frank Jones from Grassy Pond Baptist Church here in Cherokee County. We got a woman who has been killed in her trailer. Please send out a deputy.”

“Oh my God, Preacher. What happened?” the operator asked.

“We ain’t got time for that,” he told the dispatcher. “It’s so hot out here the body’s gonna have rigamortis settin’ in if we don’t get someone out here. Send out the funeral home and the deputy to make a report.... Is Sheriff McKinney working today?”

“No, Preacher, he’s gone fishing in Santee for the weekend,” she replied. “I’ll send somebody out thar right away.”

No sooner had the preacher hung up the telephone than Elsie appeared stumbling down the driveway. “Preacher! Thar’s Elsie,” Harvey said, and they both ran toward her. She began cursing them. They grabbed her and wrestled her to the ground.

Elsie struggled and spat on the preacher. The preacher and Harvey held her to the ground. She reeked of intimate female odor. The Preacher felt nauseated from the heat and her smell.

“We ain’t a-lettin’ loose,” Harvey screamed. Harvey pulled out a short piece of hay bale twine from his back overalls pocket and tied her hands tightly together. They heard the sirens of the Sheriff’s deputies as they sped down Beagle Club Road. They could see the dust from the patrol cars over the tops of the pine trees across the field.

Two deputies pulled into the drive. “You’d better get this gal and carry her back to Columbia as fast as you can,” Harvey said.

“Yes sahh,” they replied. The deputies got out the handcuffs and threw Elsie in the back seat of the deputy’s car. She was kicking the windows and screaming. They could tell she wasn’t wearing any underwear.

“What happened, Preacher?” one of the deputies asked.

“Her little boy, Gordon, came a-runnin’ down to the house tryin’ to tell that his Momma had got out of the crazy house in Columbia. She was hurtin’ his Grandmaw, Nora Lee. Well, take a look in the house. She killed her with that belt layin’ on the floor. Pulled it so tight that her eyeball popped out beside her head.”

Elsie was still spitting and screaming. “What should we do with all them roosters in the back?” Harvey asked the preacher.

“I’m sure that somebody having one of them secret cockfights down here by the river will be glad to take them,” the preacher said in a way that all people

in Cherokee County talked about the cock fights—in a hushed whisper. Illegal cockfights were a rite of passage for young boys there, just like hunting and fishing were. They always went to them with their Daddy, Granddaddy and Great-Granddaddy because it was a secret backwoods southern heritage passed down since the days of the Civil War.

The deputies got in the car and drove away with Elsie. She was placed in a maximum-security section of the mental hospital, committed to live there for the rest of her lifetime. Harvey and Mary Sue agreed to be foster parents to little nine-year-old Gordon until the State decided where he should live once again.

Things settled back down in Cherokee County to a slow pace. It rained the whole month of August 1973. Ike and Tina Turner were singing “Proud Mary” on the AM radio stations. And at last, one by one, they came riding in the back of pick-up trucks, on blistering Sunday afternoons, down the dusty trail by the river, with their inner tubes, to go for a ride on the swift currents just after Labor Day and all of the month of hot September 1973, as the Broad River once again returned to a noisy roar just beyond the pine trees of the Jenkins’ trailer.