

A Tale From Under De Pecan Tree

The following excerpt was written by, Miss Annabell Nylund. It is taken from the collection, "Skipping Stones at Whisper Creek".

Miss Nylund grew up in the Deep South during the years of segregation and oppression where early childhood experiences greatly influenced her life. Despite marriage offers from many suitors, she graciously declined. After facing much opposition from society, she continued with the adoption of two African American orphans during her tenure as a well-respected school teacher. Miss Nylund currently lives in Savannah under the care of her children Bennett & Annabella.

"There's something about the Deep South and its right of passage. The people, the hospitality, and of course the food. I fondly remember the aroma of delicious southern cooking as it drifted through the air. They were recipes having stood the test of time and proudly handed down from generation to generation. Whatever

essence permeates this southern life, I am thrilled to have been part of it. With words of generational wisdom children grew, and during those awkward adolescent years of existence, knowledge of ones self became instilled.

My Daddy always said, in a most thoughtful tone, *“Don’t ever take your roots for granted, because everything you are and will become depend on it.”* I sit here and wonder, if this piece of subtle advice have shaped my loyalties and success. I believe it has. As a young girl, life was everything it could be. But among the jubilant times there were the trying ones. Winters were cold and unbearable and slavery was nothing more than a business. It is a history full of lessons a common dread; segregation. I often took trips with my mother to Alabama. She claimed the women were softer there, more well mannered and tea times were organized correctly. At first I never truly understood why mother always referred to herself as “coming from good stock.” but after seeing my aunt Wilhelmina it all made sense.

Wilhelmina Wickersham was a stunningly beautiful woman. Even more beautiful than my own mother. Daddy said I resembled her and so it was affirmed. When my grandfather died, his estate awarded Mother and her two siblings enough money and property to to continue with “*good living*”. With her share, Mother combined with daddy to purchase our orchard. She eventually sold her share of the land, and the money was used to build our house. Uncle Joe stayed on the family property and Aunt Wilhelmina bought the Colten plantation from the Coler Estate. I remember her as a fierce lady who remained vigilant for equality. Mother ceased to indulge in Aunt Wilhelmina’s cause and instead distanced herself from it. I however was fascinated by this woman’s ability to think for herself. I vowing to be just like her one day, fighting for what’s right and embracing my own thoughts. Mother often scolded me on our way home in hopes of changing the ideals of Aunt Wilhelmina which lodged itself in my impressionable young mind. Our last trip was no different. “You must never get caught in that nonsense you hear me? Your aunt is a Vigilante, god knows she is my only sister but-” “do you hate her?” I

interrupted. “For heaven’s sake child! No!” “Then why are you angry?” “I’m not.” “I think you envy her.” “Little girl you must quit this. Right this moment.” The scolding were short lived since our trips to Alabama slowly became a thing of the past. It was Mostly on holidays we would hear from aunt Wilhelmina.

Life continued in the segregated south and though it was colorful and charming I felt a burdensome sadness of dissatisfaction. The advantages I had been given seemed minuscule in comparison to the joys of the very ones we were warned not to associate with. Such joy displayed itself daily as I looked on to see white folks who dutifully retired to fancy table settings with lace napkins, silver and quality food. I craved for the day to join the common or less than common folk as they ventured off to a nearby tree. Children and adults appreciated its shade, shades of beautiful and bountiful laughter and stories. It was then I decided, just like my aunt to break the barriers and share in their joy. Despite the unfortunate separation of our cultures and likeness it was us children who innocently broke the rules. We were determined to befriend the

colored children-I say "*Colored Children*"- because it was the term used in those times. But we saw them as people, human beings just like us. I often pray and hope they saw me just the same.

In the expectancy of being accepted a quiet love evolved. We hid our friendships in an attempt to avoid retribution to protect our colored friends. As I grew I became aware of my role. One person in particular changed me. His name was Benji. Benji was the most handsome boy I had ever laid eyes on. He had the brightest smile and the cutest walk. Oddly, he looked sad each time I saw him. Unlike my sadness which I carried in my heart. I presumed his unhappiness came from the fact of a less fortunate position than the rest of us. This in itself truly broke my heart.

He waved at me once in a while, almost a flick of the hand. As I said, if caught there would be certain retribution. It was never any of our faults just destiny I guess. Being friendly with someone less fortunate or colored would not be looked upon admirably. I slowly began to despise my position, especially having to dress all prim and proper while my new friends wore tattered hand-me-downs. It was

Mother's idea to groom me for the hosting of tea parties. I contemplated running away, but where would I go? I guess it was a foolish thought, but then at eight years of age anything is sensible. When I turned fourteen, Benji and I met in secret- many times. The bliss was beyond electric. Fortunately, Jolene Roker, Mother's closest friend who seemingly lived on our veranda to the tune of idle gossip never found out about us. I can see her now, stomping away pulling on her horse hair while she tried desperately to jiggle her non existent bosom and yeast roll behind going insane wondering whether she had sipped from the same cup as a negro. Oh the scandal! I was a young white girl with a colored boy four years my senior. It was a dangerous situation, but if it was meant to be, then so be it, at least in our minds it was right. We shared a kiss once, but that was the only time. Deep down I loved that boy. We held hands and told stories, and our feelings grew with each passing moment. Then one day he failed to show up at our secret meeting place. I felt as if my world had ended and it did in a way. While I waited still hoping he would show the shouts and screams of the neighbors echoed down hill.

Frantically, I ran up as fast as my young legs could carry me. Breathless, I reached our house and I saw my daddy's face. It was drained to its limits of emotion as he grabbed hold of me and shielded my eyes. "Don't look", he said in the most grievous way, "Don't look, everything will be alright, just shut your eyes tight." The moment still haunts me today, because through my daddy's fingers I saw Benji, and instead of leaping with joy, tears of agony encased me in a crust of helplessness. I felt my heart wither and die that day. He was my best friend, my confidante, and as forbidden as our involvement was, I would give my life for him. But it was too late. Benji's eyes were shut and his hands tied behind his back hanging from a Pecan tree in Mr. Vincent's front yard. I remember the days I spent loving the magnificent beauty of the tree, playing gleefully under it. Now it was nothing but a dark symbol of ignorance and hate.

A crowd had gathered for the gruesome spectacle, and that was the day I stopped loving. Through the years I wondered if daddy knew of the relationship Benji and I had ignited. His voice was

sympathetic and caring but my life was scarred and I hated love. I slowly escaped and withdrew into the loneliest part of my emotions spending most of my time in school and after school I did my homework on the banks of Whisper Creek. Late into the evening until dusk I would listen to the water trickle. Benji enjoyed wading in the shallow parts of the creek. He often tried to skip stones but gave up after a few tries. He was so good to me, picking fresh flowers and brushing my hair. Nothing extravagant, but that is how I preferred it. The creek became my refuge and in an unexpected way, a source of therapy if you can call it that.

One day while I took in the bouts of nature I heard a voice.

“There is more to see than just here you know.” I looked up. Standing, towering above me was Mr. Vincent. I refused to speak because until that very moment I still blamed him for the cruelty Benji had endured. Soon enough he got me talking and surprisingly listened to my fragile thoughts.

“Why are you here? No one knows about this spot.”

“Oh child,” he said shaking his head, “What else is there for a lonely man like me to do. I feel worse than you. Besides, I played in these parts as a boy. As a young’n I also thought every place was a secret spot.”

“I do not care to talk to you Mr. Vincent, you helped, helped to. . .”

“Helped? I had no say in the matter child.”

“You mean it was not your idea?”

“How could it?”

“It was your Pecan tree he was hanging from!” I replied with the innocence and anger of a child.

“Doesn’t mean a thing, it was just there.” He said. I turned to him curiously.

“Mr. Vincent, can I ask you a question?”

“Depends on what it is.” He said shrugging his shoulders and raising his eyebrows.

“It’s about what happened.”

“Ask away.” He said smiling.

“Would you have stopped it, I mean, if you had the chance?”

My question made him hesitate a little.

“Deep down in my heart I wanted too, but it was too late.” he said solemnly. His comment deepened my interest somewhat.

“You mean you had no idea what was happening?”

“None at all, I only found out after I stepped outside. The shame and contempt I felt was unforgiving, the boy was a good and kindhearted soul.”

“Why do you feel ashamed if it was not your fault?” I asked. He hung his head low.

“We all feel guilty at some critical moments in our lives this is one of mine. All of it was my fault.”

“Why do you say that?”

He raises his head and tears began to flow.

“I cannot tell you, it won’t make any difference now.”

“Don’t you trust me Mr. Vincent?” A little smile appeared across his tear stained face.

“So you liked Benji?”

I wanted a feasible answer,

“You are not going to tell me are you Mr. Vincent?”

Almost lost in another dimension and without the slightest response, he turned and walked away broken.

Months passed and we developed a friendship often meeting at the creek. Then, one day the rain came, it poured for a week flooding the creek beyond its banks. I became miserable having to stay indoors with no real place to slip away too. On the Friday before the rain cleared, we all stood in the muddy community cemetery for Mr. Vincent’s funeral. He had died from a battle with pneumonia. To my surprise, he left me something in his will, a small handmade box with bits and pieces of what I suppose had to do with his life. After searching through the box I found some old photos and a stack of paper containing writings which were held together with a piece of string. As it turns out, Mr. Vincent had written down a list of important events from his life. Bearing no significance to me I simply put away the contents and hid the box.

Year after year I tried desperately to leave my home town but to no avail. Several years after Mr. Vincent died Daddy took ill and of course, I had to help Mother. Life had treated me unfairly with so much, and to add insult to injury, my other three siblings went off to live their lives and I was stuck. They had children and spouses, homes to care for, and jobs to attend to. What did I have; a grueling life of Pecan harvesting. I got yelled at and berated for not doing things perfect. Mother gradually became a cruel and bitter woman as she grew older taking out her frustrations on me. Early one morning I had had enough of her behavior- it finally took its toll. Reluctantly, I took a page from her playbook giving her a taste of her own medicine. On that faithful morning, she started yelling then began hitting something. I jumped out of bed and ran down the hall just in time to see her beating daddy because he could hardly move his legs. Before she struck him again I pushed her as hard as I could. She stumbled across the room and onto the floor.

“You little bitch!” She screamed. I stood there in shock watching her, my own mother looked like a monster had devoured

her sanity. Daddy tried to calm the situation but to no avail. His eyes welled up with tears and I assume to this day it was because he realized how unpleasant life had become. The woman who he loved was now a hateful human being. After that, everything seemed to be alright, yet we slowly grew apart. The times of rigorous and meticulous grooming I dutifully submitted to my early years led to an avoidance of tea parties and social clubs. It was not long after, mother disappeared without even a note to say goodbye. Two years later in the fall of 1952, daddy passed in his sleep. I had waited a long time for mother to return but wherever she was it must have been better. The plantation had been doing well and I thought of selling it, but some things you can never compromise on, not even a feeling.

Thankfully, Aunt Wilhelmina and I reconnected and stayed in touch after daddy's funeral. We visited whenever possible and wrote each other at least weekly. Her letters were a thrill to read, they were filled with triumphs, trials and her fearlessness. Most noted were her actions to help a young man by the name of Mathias and above that,

she risked everything for the underground railroad movement. Sometimes I wish she had been my mother.

A day later, after Daddy's funeral as I strolled through the misty Pecan orchard to visit his grave, I remembered the box Mr. Vincent had willed to me. Everything has true meaning at some point, old pictures and writings or not. I often pondered over the contents of the box, wondering and hoping to know why he left it to me. So much death and tragedy had visited my life leaving me with unanswered questions. The riddle of the box added to a mystery which lingered for many years even after I had children of my own.

Mr. Vincent's prized possession had a purpose, and he wanted me to have it. If I recall clearly, the best moments I had throughout my life was the ones I had spent with Benji. Silly, I know, but again I loved that boy, I still do and deep down I wished he was right here with me. In a strange and soulful way he is.

You see, the box stood on my night table in a special spot, and as I was lying in bed one night my eyes seemed to have played a trick against me. Years had drifted into the past and for the first time I

saw scratched onto the side, possibly by a nail- Mr. Vincent's worn down handwriting-still quite visible. I had handled the box so many times before but failed to notice anything. I guess some things do come into perspective if you look close enough. On the box read:

"My Son Benjamin H. Vincent

Born March 20 1941, A Gift."

UPDATE:

Miss Annabell Nylund passed away on August 22, 1976. Her children still resides in Savannah, Ga.