

THE CISTERN
by
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In my haste to get to my Aunt Inez's house, I snatched and pulled at my sister's hair. I resented having to help her dress, and wondered why I'd ever wished for a sister in the first place. A brother could have pulled on a pair of shorts and run outside with a crewcut and no help from me.

At last I was ready, and stood in front of Grandma for her instructions.

"Now Diana May, I want you to take this quilt with you over to Inez's for the new baby." Grandma folded it into a square and handed it to me.

"Okay." I waited for further orders.

"What's the matter with you, girl?"

"Nothin' Grandma."

"Well then, don't just stand there -- get a move on. Inez had that baby last night and if you don't get over there and help with them other young'uns, she'll be up milking cows."

I headed for the door.

"Wait just a second, I'm not done."

"I thought you wanted me to get a move on."

"Don't get sassy now."

"I'm sorry, Grandma."

"That's my girl. Now, you know your Aint Faye's over there, but I need Faye to come home and help me and Grandpa in the field today. So I need you to hurry your hind end up, get on over to Inez's to take care of her and the kids. And send Faye home. Now go on."

I squeezed the soft warm cotton baby quilt to my still flat chest and hurried out the door. On the way to Inez's, I counted the tiny squares. Each one was fashioned from pastel flannelette fabric that I recognized as the host material for all us kids's pajamas and nightgowns. Miniature

flowers, ducks and cowboys sat side by side in 360 boxes the size of alphabet blocks, waiting to provide a new little human with the warmth and security that Grandma built.

In twenty minutes I was knocking at Inez's screen door. Inside it sounded like Ralph and Cliftie were trying to kill each other, as usual. Faydie was screaming in her crib. My mother's step-sister Faye unlatched the screen, pried the quilt loose from my fingers, and led me to the curtained-off corner of the front room that served as Inez and Slick's bedroom. There sat Inez at the sewing machine, pedaling the treadle as if her life depended on it.

"Inez, Diana May's here. I gotta go home."

"Show her how to feed Faydie before that child yells her lungs out. And how to change George too." She looked up from the machine just long enough to deliver the orders and glance at me.

Faye took me on a speedy trip through the two room house, showed me the milk, the bottles, the nipples and the diapers, then changed the new baby so fast I couldn't begin to see how she'd done it. As she went out the screen door I lifted a bottle from the pan of hot water on the woodstove, dripped some milk on my wrist, and hurried to the crib to feed Faydie. Ralph and Cliftie were still tussling in the floor, yelling and crying and getting in my way.

The home-made crib's sides were as high as my head. I couldn't lift Faydie out to feed her, but she stood at the bars and opened her mouth, so I popped the nipple in. Now that her screaming was stopped, Inez could hear the boys. In a minute, she called from behind the curtain.

"You boys get outside with that fighting!"

They didn't reply, but they did jump up and race each other out to the yard, slamming the screen door against the side of the house. It banged back shut, the spring vibrating its protest.

"Diana May? You feeding the baby?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Well, bring her in here and sit on the bed."

"I can't Aunt Inez. I can't get her out."

Inez stood at the curtain and laughed. "What a sight! You look like you're feeding a calf!"

Inez hauled the toddler over the side of that enormous crib and we all went and piled up on the bed with little George.

He opened his dark blue eyes, squinched up his red face and bald head and emitted a hoarse "ooh wah."

Inez barely looked at him as she opened her gown and pressed his face to her breast. Her eyes were on Faydie whose tousled blond hair and warm head were making my left arm sweat as I held her close to me and fed her. Faydie's dimpled legs lay across my lap. Inez reached over and picked up Faydie's bare foot and squeezed her toes. Faydie smiled, causing milk to leak from the corners of her mouth and run down her chin. Inez dabbed with a diaper and George came loose from his own milk source.

Inez frowned as she re-attached him. "I was hoping for another girl," she said almost to herself.

"He's awful cute, though, don't you think so, Aunt Inez?"

"He'll be just like them other boys in two years' time. Always rough-housing and screaming."

"I wish I had a brother."

"Well, I'd give you this one if your Mama'd care to have him."

I was shocked.

Inez laughed. To cover my embarrassment, I attempted another line of conversation.

"What are you making on the sewing machine Aunt Inez?"

"Oh, just some house slippers. My old ones is plumb wore out."

"Oh."

We sat in silence as the two babies completed their meals. Outside, the boys continued to

scrap like a couple of hound dogs. Ralph would tease, Cliftie would cry, Ralph would hit him to shut him up, then they would fight until they grew bored enough to start the cycle anew.

When George stopped nursing, Inez put him in the middle of the bed and pulled Faydie from my arms. "I'll take over here, Diana May. You go tell them boys to get in some fresh water and more wood."

"Your mama says to get some water and some wood," I yelled from the porch.

The boys seemed glad for an excuse to rest from their violent play. Ralph scraped back the lid to the cistern as Cliftie went behind the house to gather wood.

I straightened the front room as well as I could, then went in the kitchen. It was almost noon, so I thought I'd make dinner for all of us. Faye had put on a pot of navy beans that morning. I added water, stirred and tasted. I decided to make a batch of cornbread and busied myself with that chore. The boys were in and out of the kitchen, filling the woodbox, the bucket, the basin. Then they were pushing and shoving each other again, so I sent them to the chickenhouse to gather eggs.

When the hot pan of fresh cornbread was cooling on the rack, I tiptoed over to Inez's corner and pulled back the curtain, expecting to find three napping faces.

George still slept in the middle of the bed, Inez lay on her side, her arm hanging off the edge. But Faydie was nowhere to be seen. I whirled back and frantically searched the rest of the house. When I'd looked everywhere except under the bed, I tried there too. No Faydie.

I hurried outside. I ran to the chickenhouse. Ralph and Cliftie stood outside it, pelting each other with handfuls of manure.

"Boys! Have you seen Faydie?"

"Huh uh." They stopped their war and stared at me.

"Well, she's not in the house. Come help me find her."

"Faydie! Faydie!" We called together.

Inez came running from the house, barefooted, tangled hair flying, gown clinging to her leaking breasts.

"What's the matter? Where's Faydie?"

"I don't know, Aunt Inez, she's gone."

"Gone? How could she be gone? Weren't you watching her?"

"I thought she was asleep -- with you. I was in the kitchen making dinner."

"Oh God." She ran around the side of the house, and I heard her scream.

The boys and I ran to her. She was stretched flat out on the ground, her arms reaching into the open cistern, as she screamed for us to help.

I peered down into the dark hole, knowing what I'd see and praying it wasn't true. Below us, face down, floated the yellow-haired toddler. Inez got her out, but it looked as though it was already too late. I tried to become invisible as Inez's horrible wrenching sobs filled the air.

Suddenly, I remembered the newborn, and ran back inside to check on him. He lay undisturbed where I had last seen him. Why couldn't Faydie have done the same? I ran back outside where Inez was pumping Faydie's arms across her tiny chest.

Faydie choked, then vomited. Then cried almost as loud as Inez had a few moments before. Inez yanked her up, tossed her over her shoulder and carried her inside, dripping water across the floor. She collapsed with her into the rocker, forgetting about the rest of us.

I went in and sat on the bed next to George, watching him breathe and remembering how hard I had prayed for a baby sister. I remembered how happy I had been when she was born. And with shame, I remembered that the last time I'd seen her I had purposely pulled her hair.

What if something happened to her like what almost happened to Faydie? Our daddy had died, my sister could die too.

That night, after I was questioned by Grandma until I was hoarse from replies and held-back tears, I helped my sister get ready for bed.

In her pajamas covered with faded ducks, she sat on a stool while I fetched the hairbrush. When I raised my arm to brush her hair, she flinched.

"Don't worry, Howdie, I'm gonna be gentle. I'll try real hard not to pull your hair, okay?"

She nodded her assent.

"You help me by sittin' real still okay?"

"I will."

Tears clouded my vision as I placed my left hand on her head and gently brushed the tangles from her fine hair. Heaven had sent me a sister, and I still had her. Ralph, Cliftie and George had nearly lost theirs today. Maybe it was my fault. I hadn't watched her every minute. But I hadn't watched my sister every minute either and I still had her.

Life was a mystery I would never unravel. But I did understand that I had been given a second chance to appreciate my sister.

When we were both ready, I led her to our sleeping pallet on the floor in the front room, covered us with a summer quilt, and added a special thank you to my prayers.
