

Country Cousins

by James Lynn Smith

Feeling precocious for my young age, I approached the white indoor plumbing fixture. “This is the commode. It flushes stuff away so it don’t stay around.” I pushed the handle and my cousins gasped at the noisy vortex of swirling water in the bowl as it rushed with abandon through the siphon jet’s drain.

Glen’s eyes widened. “Dang, Chad,” he said to his brother. “I’d be scared to sit on that thang, it’s liable to suck you down.”

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It was during the late forties, and my favorite country cousins were Chad and Glen, both boys. We would play together when visiting my grandmother’s farm for family reunions. Chad was my age and Glen, a year younger. “Cops and Robbers” as well as “Cowboys and Indians” were our usual games, but occasionally we played “War with Japan.” I had no idea what or where Japan was.

My family moved from the country to the small suburb of Farnsworth, Mississippi, when I was five and remained until I turned seven. Because I was an only child, I was happy to learn one day that my cousins would visit. Their family consisted of eight siblings, two parents, two dogs, a milk cow, and numerous chickens. The latter were a part of the family until it was time for a fried chicken dinner. Knowing their rural estate was devoid of the niceties enjoyed by townspeople, I was anxious to show them around.

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I grinned with a secret feeling of superiority as I looked at the concern on Glen’s face. “You don’t have to worry ‘bout that. The commode just makes a lot of

racket.” I then demonstrated hot and cold running water, letting them feel the difference as it filled the porcelain basin.

“That sure is nice.” Chad said. “I wish we had that.”

Next was the refrigerator. Though my grandmother’s farmhouse eventually had one, as well as indoor plumbing, my country cousins’ family was not so prosperous and up-to-date. A man delivered their ice as a big block supported by a pair of tongs he grasped to cast the block over his back. He placed it in an insulated cabinet simply referred to as the “ice box,” a term still used for more modern equipment.

“Where’s the ice?” Chad said when I opened the refrigerator. Seeing the freezer compartment, he added, “How can them little pieces keep everything cold?”

“They don’t keep it cold,” I said. “The ‘frigerator makes them from water. It keeps cold by itself.” By this time I felt a little sad that I was the only one “in the know” and tried to curb my feeling of advanced urbanity. “If you want to, we can go outside and I’ll show you the sawmill and the train depot. Clyde’s barber shop is by the depot and has three chairs. Then we can stop by Pauline’s store and get some ice cream.”

After the dazzling tour of miniscule Farnsworth was complete, we began our usual play. I became so involved in our games that I no longer felt like a host. After a day or so it was time for them to leave and I was happy about an invitation to visit their home. Later, I tried to imagine what it would be like. Perhaps I would be treated a little like royalty because of my town-smart savvy.

My understanding was nowhere correct for a large rural family that worked hard on the land, bristled with sibling rivalry, and secretly viewed townspeople as indulgent softies.

The day came and my mom dropped me off at my cousins' house. After a brief visit with her sister, she drove off. The road was gravel, and pale, yellow dust covered almost everything in their front yard.

Now it was my cousins' turn to show me around. We toured the corn crib, the shed where their milk cow came each day, an old tractor, and the well from which water was cranked up by a rope connected to a long tin cylinder. They also showed me an outdoor shower, the chicken coop, and—If I had known the expression, “gross” would have been my word—the outhouse. It had two holes in a bench-like arrangement and an odor similar to a pigsty. Searching vainly for a roll of white tissue paper, I deduced the reason for corncobs and an old Sears and Roebuck catalog. My cousins were amused at my reaction.

Near day's end, I met others in the family, returning from errands or work in the fields. Three girls and three other boys, except one, were older than me and my two playmate cousins. I don't know what hormones exist in a youngster my age, but I fell in love with two of the girls. One pale and buxom, the other tan and slender. There was no hint of future monogamy in my attentions. My eyes followed them both whenever they were around. It's a wonder I didn't become cross-eyed, rather than nearsighted.

Their mother was a shorter, heavier version of my mom. The dad was medium height with sun-browned skin where uncovered by khaki work clothes. When sober, he was soft spoken but opinionated.

At the evening meal, he said, “Them idiots that run Marion County don't grade the roads enough. We got ditches that run half way across the road. Next time I see the grader, I'm gonna pull the operator out and kick his butt if he don't promise to come around sooner.”

Seeing my troubled brow after his comment, Chad later said, “That's just our daddy. That's the way he talks.”

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The next day I helped my cousins shuck ears of sweet, ripened corn for roasting and pick blueberries. In the afternoon they invited me to practice passing and shooting basketball in their side yard. I was neither athletic nor encouraged to be so, my own dad struggling to make a living and too busy for sports. My face caught the ball more often than my hands. A similar result occurred with gloves when Chad talked me into a “friendly” boxing match. I’m sure it wasn’t long before my cousins considered me insubstantial and wondered how they could have any fun during my visit. The usual games we played at my grandmother’s would quickly pall.

It didn’t take them long to figure something out. “Can you swim?” Glen asked me.

“Yes, some.” I had learned in a shallow creek, but once took the bus to nearby Columbia where the city pool was deep enough to go underwater.

“We have a creek near here, and one place is big enough for a swimin’ hole. We’ve got a rope to swing out over it and drop in. It’s real fun.”

Off we went to the swimming hole, doffed our clothing and approached it. They stopped, looked at each other knowingly, and then at me.

Chad said, “The water’s warm here and it’s fun to swing out and drop in from the rope. You’re visitin’ and you get to go first.”

He directed me to a big tree on the bank with a limb overhanging the water. An attached, thick rope had a knot tied in the end to facilitate grasping. Eying the water, I imagined it would feel like the city pool. Bravely, I grasped the rope, pulled back, and picked my feet up. Out I swung like Tarzan on a vine and let go. The stinging impact and water shooting up my nose were nothing compared to the ice-cold shock against my pale skin. Surfacing, I sputtered, shook my head, and squealed my distress.

They were laughing, thoroughly enjoying my reaction. Eventually they came in, but from the bank first, gradually acclimating to the coldness. After getting used to the temperature, they also used the rope. But each pinched his nose just before splashing down to avoid water shooting into his upper sinuses.

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The next afternoon, we were inside. An old encyclopedia sat on the shelf in the living room, undoubtedly a hand-me-down from kin to help the kids with schoolwork. I picked out a “B” volume and found the picture of a massive brontosaurus.

“We used to have those around here; came up from the back forty,” Chad said.

“I thought this was a dinosaur. They don’t live anymore,” I said.

“Yeah, we never eyed one but my grandpa did. He said they was the biggest, scariest thangs he ever saw. When they walked, the ground shook. Grandpa’s stack of firewood would fall down.”

At that point in my life, I wasn’t familiar with deception. After all, I had no siblings of my own and adults didn’t lie. Nevertheless, I experienced some vague disconnect. I must have put this “factoid” in a mental category of “don’t argue, but suspend disbelief.”

The next day, I was admonished to take off my shoes. My cousins went barefoot most of the time. “You got those long, white, narrow feet,” Glen said. “You ought to walk barefoot so they’ll get tough.”

“Yeah,” Chad said. “They look kinda sissy. Take off your shirt too. We don’t want our friends to laugh at you.”

So I started going barefoot and shirtless. I watched wherever I walked, both to avoid stepping on a hard object and to avoid droppings by escapees from the chicken coop. Always looking downward, I appeared to be searching for a lost

object.

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Later that afternoon, I asked how much land was theirs.

“Daddy says it’s about eighty acres,” Chad said.

I didn’t know what an acre was, but fathomed it extended farther back than the pasture and clumps of trees we could see from the house.

Glen looked at Chad with that peculiar near-smile and said, “Lots of things happened around here in the war.”

“What?” I asked.

“The ‘Mericans and Japs had a war down in the pasture.”

“Yeah,” Chad added. The Japs marched right by our house. Me and Daddy hid behind the shed while they went to fight the ‘Mericans.”

“What did the Japs look like?” I asked.

“Oh they was fearsome,” Chad said. “They had horns on their heads. The ‘Mericans killed all of ‘em in the fight, and their bones are still out there. Would you like to see one’s skull?”

“Yes, where?”

“We’ll take you there. We have to walk a ways.”

As we walked along, I expected to see monstrous remains hidden behind each rise in the rolling hills. My feet were sore by the time we reached the site of the terrible battle. Lying in tall pasture grass and bleached by the sun was an awesome, elongated skull. The horns rang true with what they said about the fearsome appearance. I shivered at the thought of our soldiers having to fight such a creature.

I had a strange urge to turn and look at my cousins. Their suppressed grins were the giveaway. The concept of deceit in order to toy with another’s mind suddenly coalesced in my reckoning. They had taken me to the site of a bovine

skull with a bogus tale about “Japs.” That day I learned the meaning of what we now call a “put-on.”

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The final day of my visit came. I helped with chores and in the afternoon there wasn't much to say. I figured they'd had their fun with me and now I was too wise to fall for tricks. Interaction was normal and a little boring.

“Mom gave us a list of things to get at the store,” Chad said. “It's only a mile from here. Want to come with us?”

“Yes,” I said, glad for anything to break the tedium of sitting.

But it was not so simple. They had to slow down as I picked my way, barefoot, along the rocky road, determined to develop manly feet. One place in the road had a rather sharp curve.

“This is a place Daddy says is dangerous,” Glen said.

“Yeah,” Chad added. “A wreck happened here and killed a man.”

Not much more was said until we reached the store and a few items were bought. Cigarettes for the dad, soap for the kitchen, a can of condensed milk and other items a garden does not produce. On the way back, the sun sank low because of my slow progress. By the time we approached the sharp curve, it was nearly dark.

“They call this place in the road ‘Dead Man's Curve,’” Chad said.

“Tell him what happened,” added Glen.

“The man's car ran under a truck and it cut his head off. They never found it.”

“You think what they say is true?” asked Glen.

Chad waited a few seconds. “It's hard to believe, but some people say his ghost comes back lookin' for his head at night.”

In the light of day, such a tale is pure fantasy. But at night, when little is

seen to establish a mood of normalcy, even tales take on powerful possibilities. As I moved along, I wondered which would be worse, seeing a ghost or acquiring a craziness that could kill me with fright.

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” Chad said with bravado. “That’s for scaredy-cats.”

As we moved farther into the curve, we were silent until Glen said, “I thought I heard a sound behind us.”

Chad said, “Probably just a possum or somethin’.” He stopped and cautiously turned to look behind him. “Dang-O-Mighty, it *is* the ghost,” he shouted.

Not waiting, my cousins streaked down the road ahead of me. Then I sprang into action as hair rose on the nape of my neck. My tender white feet pounded hard rocks on the road until they carried me into the lead.

Before long, I realized my cousins had stopped. Turning back, I saw two moonlit figures nearly doubled over, laughing. Once again, they had manipulated me into providing amusement.

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How does this story end? Of course my mom picked me up the next day and I went home with a sunburn and bruised feet. But it was also with a touch of ire and a newfound appreciation for how clever my “rube” cousins were in their own environment. And how one-upmanship can arise in a large family and subtly extend, as a game of sorts, to others they encounter.
