

My Grandmother's Secret

by Lee Jeffers Brami

"The past is never dead. It's not even past." — William Faulkner

When I was in my early twenties, my grandmother Annie told me a true story about her childhood that I never forgot. I had read her brief memoir about life as a child in the small Kentucky village where she was born, and I was charmed by it. So was the editor of her town's local paper, which published her story.

But the paper left out one part of that story, published in 1969. The incident they left out happened when she was seven—in 1897. That story has haunted me ever since, just as it haunted her.

My grandmother was a born storyteller. She could transfix me as a child with stories about Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox. She could recite "'Twas the Night Before Christmas" better than anyone. And when I was very young, she sang me lullabies in her rich alto voice, making me feel, as she used to say, quoting Robert Browning, that "God's in His Heaven, all's right with the World."

I can still hear the lilt of her Southern voice, although it's been fifty years since I last heard it, saw her smile, and smelled the delicate scent of her rosewater cologne. Her infectious laugh warmed me, wrapping the two of us together in a conspiracy of close family friendship.

She told me how, on summer evenings, she and her sister gathered fireflies and "watched the home-bound river of blackbirds as they streamed overhead in columns to the cemetery treetops on the horizon." The girls turned somersaults and played Blind Man's Bluff. Every day they waited for the lamplighter to come on horseback down the dirt road. The nearest lamp post was just past the school-room yard, next to their house. "The lamplighter would rein in his horse beneath the lamp," she remembered, "and then insert something into a long-handled hook, lift it with unerring accuracy, and there would

be an upsurge of brilliance as the little fan-shaped flame sprang into being. Bugs would fly in all directions and moths tumble out of sight while the dark sidewalk ... bloomed in a circle of warm light.”

One sunny Autumn afternoon, Annie was invited by the local sheriff's daughter, Theodora, to spend the afternoon at her house after school let out. Annie was not a close friend of Theodora's, nor did she want to be. Theodora's father, the local sheriff, scared her. He was a large man with a bushy black mustache who rode around town on his horse, his two pistols conspicuously hugging his hips, his ample belly sagging over his silver-buckled belt. He always glowered. Annie had never seen him smile.

Theodora had dark brown hair like his, but she wore her long hair in carefully curled ringlets. She was a thin, pale little girl who always seemed somewhat nervous around other children.

Annie would have politely told Theodora that she couldn't visit her, except for one thing: Inside the lovely, large white house with its wide front porch where Theodora lived was a grand piano. Annie could only play “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Her uncle had shown her how to play that one piece on his upright piano. She had loved the feel of the ivory and ebony keys, and the music she could make.

So she said yes to Theodora and they walked together from school to Theodora's house. Once inside, Theodora's mother, a slender blond woman with a soft voice, served them lemonade and homemade sugar cookies.

After they ate, Theodora first let Annie twirl around on the horsehair piano stool, and eventually told her she could play the piano. Annie gently stroked the keys. She played “Mary had a Little Lamb” several times. Theodora showed her how to practice the “C” scale, and she played that several times too, using the right fingering, as Theodora had taught her. Annie could have sat at that piano for hours, exploring the sounds of the different notes, alone and together.

When Theodora grew bored acting as a piano instructor, she whispered to Annie that she had a secret in her bedroom, adding that Annie was the only person she would show it to. Before Annie could see it, Theodora explained, “You first have to promise that

you won't ever tell anyone else about my secret, because I would get into lots of trouble if anyone knew."

Annie crossed her heart and promised. She was a little scared, because Theodora looked so solemn; but she was also curious. They walked up the gracefully curved, beautifully polished wooden stairs and into Theodora's bedroom. Annie recalled that the bed was covered by a lacy white bedspread and trimmed with pink dust ruffles. The window was framed by curtains that matched the bedspread.

Theodora took the chair at the child-sized desk facing the window and moved it over to the closet, then climbed the chair and reached to the top of the closet. She brought out a shoe box.

"Remember, you promised not to tell," Theodora repeated.

Annie promised again, and Theodora slowly opened the box. Before Annie could see what was inside, she smelled something that reminded her of rotten meat. When she looked inside, she saw something dark hidden under some tissue paper. When Theodora first pulled away the tissue paper, Annie couldn't understand what she was looking at. She saw that dried blood had pooled under the dark thing.

After several moments, she realized what it was: a severed hand.

She stepped back quickly, but not so quickly as to realize the color of the hand. It was the same dark coffee color of her friend, who she knew as Uncle Charlie, an elderly Black man with a white beard and a peg leg, who used to carry her on his shoulder when she was younger. He was a kind of handyman who also ran errands for the villagers, and he always smiled at Annie and told her interesting stories about his life as he carried her around, including one about how he lost his leg during the "War Between the States," as most Southerners called it. Annie's father had fought on the same side, and her mother told her how brave her father had been when he was captured by Yankee soldiers and held as a POW in a dank prison in Boston Harbor.

Annie knew it wasn't Uncle Charlie's hand, but it was the same color. It *could* have been his hand

"How ... how did you get this?" she whispered to Theodora, barely able to force the words out.

“I went with Mama and Papa to a lynching a couple of days ago,” said Theodora, “and I secretly picked it up after they cut off his hands and feet.” Annie recalled that Theodora said this with a certain amount of pride. “I hid it in my coat so Mama and Papa wouldn’t see it.” She had found a shoe box of her Mama’s to keep the hand and stuck the box in a corner of her closet where no one else would find it.

Annie could tell that Theodora thought of the hand as a prized trophy, that she was proud of having brought her secret possession back to her house. And she seemed to expect some sign of admiration for her daring. Instead, Annie felt like throwing up.

“I don’t feel well, Theodora. My tummy feels really bad. I’m sorry, but I need to go home now,” Annie said. She wanted to leave that bedroom and that house as quickly as possible.

Theodora looked disappointed. “Oh. I was hoping you could stay longer.”

“I’m sorry,” said Annie again. “Thank you for inviting me to your house and letting me play your piano.”

She thanked Theodora’s mother for the cookies and lemonade and almost tripped going down the front stairs of the house. Walking home, Annie felt dazed. She had been so excited about playing the piano. And she had loved every minute of stroking those keys. But now, all she could think of was Uncle Charlie and that cut-off hand.

She told no one about the incident until many years later. Not even her mother or sister. She never knew what happened to the hand, and she never asked.

Two years after that visit, Annie moved with her family from their small Kentucky village to Asheville, North Carolina, and she never saw Theodora again.

Long after they moved to Asheville, Annie’s mother—my great-grandmother—told her that as a teacher in the one-room school in their Kentucky village, she regularly received notes from parents requesting permission to excuse their children from school on certain days. Those were the days when they knew a lynching would take place, and they were in the habit of making a picnic day of it, if the weather was good.

The families would pack a lunch and a blanket, lay out their food, and watch “the entertainment” as they ate. My great-grandmother would refuse permission and would mark those children “absent without cause.” It was the one small token of resistance she allowed herself.

I was horrified by my grandmother's story, horrified and spellbound. Because she was such a good storyteller, I found myself drawn into her long-ago world, staring with her at that amputated Black hand.

I asked my grandmother how any human beings could be so cruel, so inhumane. She shook her head.

"Well, honey, that was the culture of the time in this country, at least in some places," she said.

I don't think she meant to scare me or leave me as haunted as she was. She simply wanted to share the story with someone who would understand. Perhaps she wanted to dilute its horror by sharing it with me.

In my own world, "Negroes" were now starting to be called Blacks, or Afro-Americans, and the slogan "Black is Beautiful" was becoming popular. The Black Panthers were often in the news, while a year earlier, Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated. It was a different world, certainly, filled with chaos and violence, but also filled with hope. I felt that my country was slowly becoming a better place.

Haunted as she was by her childhood experience, my grandmother still held firmly to the belief that human history was "an upward spiral," as she put it. "We might make the same mistakes over and over, and there will always be some human cruelty," she said, "but slowly, surely, we are evolving into better people." I agreed with her completely, and I thought she was very wise to imagine our past and future that way.

I would like to believe now, as I did then, in my grandmother's upward spiral. But the late nineteenth-century world she described, with its horrifying underside, doesn't seem so long ago anymore.



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