

Hattie's Story

Short Story

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The old woman sat propped against a large sycamore tree. Against its almost white trunk, several pillows had been placed and she leaned back against them. Around her shoulders was wrapped a colorful quilt, and her head was covered with a gingham bonnet. Her face was soft and only mildly wrinkled; not so her neck and hands which placed her age into the nineties. Her hair was drawn back into a bun and tucked under the bonnet, but the stray strands were snowy white and wispy. Her eyes that had once been a sparkling blue were now the color of old denim, washed too often. She sat with her head tilted to one side, one shoulder several inches lower than the other. A close observer would notice that her body twisted badly to one side. Hattie Gouge held a fine fly fishing rod in her gnarled and arthritic hands. While she no longer had the dexterity to tie on hooks, she could still bait them. Her grandson, the one who carried her to the creek and settled her into her nest, always made sure the hook was secure and unless she made a big mistake, it would still be there when he returned.

"You comfy, Gran?" Tom asked as he checked the rod once again.

"Fine, Tom. Don't you worry none. I'll be fine." He smiled and placed a brush of a kiss atop her head and headed off. She would be fine, she thought. As fine as ever you could be with a twisted back and a twisted foot since birth. Those two things, a choice made for her, had shaped her life. Pain and old age framed her life now. She had learned to mostly live with the pain, but she reckoned she wasn't sure she could live with old age. She giggled like a girl when she thought about that. No, she reckoned, she could not live with old age.

Hattie carefully threaded the hook with a nightcrawler from a mason jar still containing several of its relatives that her great-grandchildren had so gleefully collected for her the night before. She also had a supply of grasshoppers jumping in a jar close by in case the fish were picky today. Hattie carefully swung her rod back and forth so she could cast out into the stream. Severally limited by her seated position, the cast was short and not satisfactory, but it was the best she could manage. She recalled the days when she could still stand and fish. Her casts rivaled any thrown by the men in her family. She could plop her hook into a dark pool of water near rocks across the creek and not bat an eye. Now she aimed for the closer pools. She was still good enough to make the cast most of the time..

Hattie loved to fish. When Abner had introduced her to it all those long years ago, she was hesitant. She had accompanied him out of boredom one day in the early spring of the first year she had come to live with Abner and his wife Martha. She had planned to sit and read while Abner fished, but the day was too beautiful to be still. The water was cold, but she delighted in taking her stockings and shoes off and wading in the water while Abner fished ahead of her. When he concluded that the fish were sick of worms and grasshoppers, he had shown her how to turn over rocks and catch the small salamanders. When he offered to show her how to cast the rod, she turned him down at first. It was mostly from embarrassment. With the twist in her back, she was often awkward doing things. Abner never judged or gave up though. Soon, he had her whipping the rod and line in slow, arcing curves. After several tries she put the hook down where she wanted, and she was hooked like the fish they took home that day. Fishing became her passion and she was at the creek anytime Martha could spare her from chores.

One of the best things about fishing was that she could always justify the time she spent. It was a rare occasion that she didn't bring home fish for the table. In the lean times, and Hattie had seen her share of those, fish was the

main component of the family's diet. That it soothed her and made her happy was a bonus. It also gave her time to think. In the early years she planned her work or solved her problems while she watched the restless water rush by. There had been many times Hattie had wished she could just lie down in the water and let it carry her away. To let it take her somewhere where no one knew her or needed anything from her. She was glad now that she had stayed and dealt with what life had handed her. She knew now that those hard times had made the good times that much sweeter. She also thought that seldom had she actually made her own decisions about the path of her life. Even being here in this hollow that she had learned to love had been decided for her.

The sun was just peeping over the tall trees on the other side of the river, and she knew Tom would be back for her in an hour or so. She drew her line in and made a new cast, this time dropping it into a deep pool near a large rock that sat midstream. Almost immediately, she felt a tug on her line and pulled ever so gently. When she felt the fish grab on, she jerked the line to set the hook and began to reel it in. The trout jumped out with a mighty wave of its tail and she could tell it was a really nice one. Hattie played the fish well and soon landed it. She could not get up, but she pulled her line so she could reach the struggling fish. This was the hard part. With her limited movement, it would be easy to lose her catch. What she really didn't want to happen was to take the fish off the line to have it jump out of her hands and land somewhere she could not get to it and the fish could not get back to the water. That would be harsh and a waste all way around. Carefully, she wrapped her stiff fingers around the fish and held as tightly as she could and then slowly she worked the hook out of the fish's gaping mouth. Once freed, she placed the fish into the bucket Tom had brought and filled with creek water.

"There now. You just set there and be comfy until Tom comes for us. He'll give you a good home in his pond and you can jest keep on a growin'. Not that you ain't a good size now. I seen the day you'd make a meal for two. But not today, not today."

Life and death had been so much of her life that Hattie often mused on the fickleness of both. Hattie had grown to love her life here under the shelter of the tall trees that stood sentinel over the hollow that had been chosen by Abner for his home. She welcomed each season and the hardships that came with each. Hot in the summer and cold and snow in the winter. Spring was a freshening and fall brought sad and poignant feelings she never quite got a handle on. Now the fish, her fish, would start a new life in a new pond, just as she had begun a new life when Abner brought her to this place. Hattie cast her line out again and tried to get more comfortable against the tree but the pain was as much a part of her as the twist that caused it. That twist had shaped her life just as it had shaped her back.

Hattie remembered those days in her father's house when her father and older brother treated her more like a slave than part of the family. Her mother had died, or so her father said, not long after she was born. Since there was no other women in the house, as soon as Hattie could lift the heavy pots and pans, she became the cook, housekeeper, gardener, washer woman, overall chore-doer. If her father and brother worked enough to keep the rickety roof over their heads that was all that was required. She wondered what had happened to her pa. Did he die alone in that old house or had he found some woman desperate enough to marry him like he bragged? Her brother she didn't have to wonder about. She knew where he was buried on a stormy, cold night in a shallow grave unmarked with no words spoken over him and no remorse felt over his death. Abner had killed him when he tried to

rape her and the two of them had dragged him into the hog lot and buried him. They had no pigs left by then. The war took them just like it did the young men and the hope of those left behind. So Hattie and Abner scraped the churned up ground up and dug as deep a hole as they could. Abner was weak from a wound on his head caused by the butt of a rifle and a bullet put there by one of the deserters who, with her brother, had broken in.

The War Between the States had dragged on for four long years when Abner and Hattie had found themselves along in the big house. Martha had died a month earlier from a fever for which there was no doctor or medicine. Food was scarce but both Abner and Hattie had sacrificed trying to build up Martha's strength, but nothing helped. In the end they carried her to the family graveyard and dug as deep a hole as they could manage in the cold ground. No flowers grew to adorn the sad mound, but Hattie collected pine cones and tied them together into a wreath as best she could and placed them on the grave.

There had been rumors of marauding renegades raiding in the area for some time. Abner and Hattie had hidden all that had any value, most of that was sentimental, far into the woods. The lone surviving hog was penned so far away that carrying food to it daily sapped Hattie of her strength. Little food and cold weather didn't help. She and Abner had just finished a meal of boiled potatoes and cornbread when they heard a commotion in the yard that told them that there was something to worry about. They had not even risen from the table when the door burst open and three rough-looking men stormed in. There were three of them, dirty with unkempt beards and shaggy hair. Obviously, they had been living rough. Hattie stared as they surrounded the table and snatched up what food was left. One she learned he was called Jeb- seemed to be in charge; one was called Jess and had a mean, cruel look to him. The third seemed familiar, but Hattie did not know why.

"Well, well, well. What we got here? Looks like a family dinner. Ain't that nice, Jess?" The leader gave Hattie and Abner a smirk, but there was not cruelty in his voice. "We beg pardon but we are in need of supplies so if you will just stay in your seats, we'll have a look around and see what we can use." He doffed his hat.

Jess, who had an evil smile, said in a slow drawl. "You ain't mindin' if we'uns con-fis-cate a few items in the name of the Con-fed-er-acy, do you now?"

"You men are not soldiers in any army. I suspect you are deserters," Abner stood to his full height. For his trouble he was slapped hard across the face. "Don't take kindly to them words, old man. Boys take what you can find and I'm sure these nice folks won't care one little bit." He also doffed his hat at Hattie. When Abner again stood to stop them, Jess shot him in the lower leg. As blood flowed down his ankle and began to puddle in his shoe, Jess laughed. Jeb raised a hand and started to speak, but Jess said, "You still alive. Be dead if'n I wanted you dead, but you see, we ain't bad people. Just trying to get by. Now set down and let us git on with it." Hattie helped Abner into a chair and stood silently behind him trying not to look at any of the men.

"Jeb, you know who that girl there is?" The third man spoke for the first time. When Jeb shook his head, the man continued. "Member me tellin' you I had a sister who married some old man. Don't you know your brother Will?" Hattie did not speak but knew real fear touch her as never before. She knew why he had seemed familiar.

The men tore the house apart. There was little to find so they cussed and became abusive. One ripped the curtains from the windows saying at least he could make handkerchiefs from the material. Hattie's brother stayed near her and Abner throughout. When the leader was satisfied there was nothing more to find, he and Jess gathered

their bags and headed for the door. As he passed, Jess struck Abner again, cutting his lip against his teeth and leaving his mouth bloody. He smiled down at Abner. "I don't like being talked back to." He smiled at Hattie and doffed his hat once more. Will watched as his companions prepared to leave. He walked toward where Hattie stood comforting Abner. "You boys head on back to camp. I'll be there later," Will said. "Me and my sister gonna get reacquainted." He grabbed Hattie by the arm and jerked her up. "Don't see no young'uns runnin' round so not sure this old man done you any good. Bet ya ain't had no fun a tall. Shame, even with a twisted back."

"Will, leave her be," Jeb said. "No need for that kind'a bad. We take but not like that. 'Sides she's your sister and a cripple."

"Always wondered how that twist in her back might change things." Will spit on the floor and his companions looked at him. Jeb opened his mouth to speak but merely closed it again. Seeing the expression on Will's face, both men shook their heads and muttered curses as they went through the door. When Will heard their horses trod off, he jerked Hattie again. "Which uns your room, Sis?"

Abner rushed him, but before the arm he swung could connect, Will swung the butt of his rifle into the side of Abner's head. He landed hard on the floor near the hearth. All Hattie could do was resist as much as her body would let her. She scratched and even bit, but Will laughed and continued pulling. Both he and Hattie stopped abruptly when a shot rang out. They looked toward Abner who held a Colt revolver in both hands. Hattie gaped at him. "Had it hid under the hearth stone," he said simply. Will released Hattie and lifted his rifle and toppled over. That's when they dragged him to the pig lot and dug a grave. Dumped him in and carefully spread the ground they had scraped up back so it looked as if the hogs had just been there. No one came to ask about him, and Hattie and Abner had never spoken of it again. When they once again had hogs, Hattie wondered if her brother's ghost bothered them.

A soft tug on her line caught Hattie's attention. She must have been dozing because she jerked the line too quickly and knew immediately she had lost the fish. "Reckon you gonna still be alone for a while," she said to the fish in the bucket and reeled in her line. Once she had recast, she settled back into the comfort of the quilts. She recalled a windy day, a wedding day actually, when Abner had given her a similar quilt to sleep in.

Abner had come to buy some woodworking tools Hattie's father had acquired by some crooked means. Abner has soon summed up Hattie's situation and guessed what her future would be in that house and decided to rescue her. Of course, her father had demanded money for the loss of his servant and Abner paid. Then her father decided to act all nice and proper and demanded a wedding. Abner staged one. A fake minister was brought in and a ceremony held. It was not until they were safely away that Abner told her it was fake. He was already married and did not need a wife; besides, he said she was much too young to marry anyone, least of all an old man like him. Hattie had been unsure of what kind of man Abner was, but he soon proved himself a smart one as well as a kind one. When they were a few miles down the road, Abner hid his horse and wagon among some trees and together he and Hattie watched her father and brother ride by. From the little she heard, Hattie knew they had planned to rob Abner and take her back home to work for them. Abner outwitted them and after they passed, he and Hattie were soon on the road in the opposite direction. It took two days for Abner to get home and those nights she had slept in

the bed of the wagon, wrapped in the quilt Abner gave her. Hattie never saw her father again. Her brother had stumbled into her life because of a war that robbed Hattie of a chance at true happiness.

An extra large pileated woodpecker flew into the branch of a dead pine near Hattie's nest. She had always been awed by the creatures and watched as the bird attacked the tree with its rhythmic tapping. She only came back to herself when her rod slipped in her hand. The swift current threatened to rob her of her prized possession. Martha had always told her wool gathering could be costly.

Martha was as much of a mother to Hattie as she could be. Hattie had been fifteen when she came to live with the Phillips, nearly grown but woefully awkward and ignorant. Martha not only taught her to read and write but how to act around people. It was a year before Hattie put those lessons to the test. Martha urged her to go to a barn dance and helped her make her first real dress-up dress. At first, Hattie had refused to go, but finally, she relented. As she had suspected, she sat and watched pretty girls and the not-so-pretty girls move around the barn floor with partner after partner. She smiled when Abner and Martha looked at her because she did not want to disappoint them. On the verge of tears, Hattie made her way carefully to the punch bowl. She tried to walk straighter and hide her hunch, but the pain caused her to wince. "You okay?" The voice was soft and so was the young man when compared to those around him. While most of the farm boys looked tough and physically strong, this one looked young and willowy. Hattie had assured him she was alright, and they both got glasses of punch. He was as shy and awkward as she when he asked if she'd like to sit and talk. Like her, she learned, he felt left out because the other young men saw him as a weakling and an object of disdain. Carl Balleau was the fourth son of one of the largest land owners around. His brothers were his physical opposite and claimed he was his momma's boy, one who liked to read and work in the house garden. The field work was too difficult for him. He supposed it was, but often tried to prove he was their equal only to be quickly put down. To Hattie, he seemed to handle it with good humor. His quick smile made her feel warm and safe. When he had asked her to dance, she explained she really did not know how, but he insisted he would show her. They never finished to the song. It was soon obvious that the rowdy movements of a square dance caused Hattie pain. Carl said nothing, just suggested they get more punch and sit. At the end of the night, he asked if he could visit.

Six months. That was what they had. During those months, they went on picnics, fished the creeks, and talked of everything but the war everyone said was coming. It was obvious to Hattie that Carl was caught up in the excitement, but she refused to give it a place in her life. Foolish, she later realized. Something that big and ugly was going to crush you no matter how much you tried to avoid it. It came and Carl went. Hattie had assumed that since no one saw him as a fighter he would be spared, but when the young men of the area gathered to form the Harrison Brigade with Carl's oldest brother as their leader, there was Carl, outfitted and ready to go. When he had told a shocked and tearful Hattie, he had assured her he would return and they would marry. He didn't give a hang about her twisted back and if they didn't have children, so what. There was plenty like her that needed help. She placed a twist of her hair in a pocket watch Abner had helped pick out and presented it to him for luck, she had said. She never saw him or the watch again. The romantic part of her life ended the day Carl's father had ridden over to tell her the news. After that, life was just doing what was necessary to survive. Hattie never forgave.

Once they had chosen to sit on a large rock in the warm sun and dangle their feet in the creek. “You don’t need to go.” Hattie had said softly.

“Yes, I got to. It’s my fight too.”

“Seems to me it’s nobody’s fight around here. Ain’t none of you got slaves no how,” Hattie spit out her words.

“Hattie, you know it ain’t just about slaves. They’s tellin’ us how to live. The state should have the say, not some northern gov’ment.”

“If we don’t got slaves, what do we care if’n they set ‘em free. “Sides nobody should own another person. Do you think they should?”

“Don’t reckon I ever give it much thought. It was just the way it’s always been.”

“I was slave enough ‘fore Abner come and got me, so I reckon I know what it’s like to not have a say, so I say nobody ought’n own another person.”

Carl looked bewildered. He had never heard her speak so strongly. “Well, I’m going.”

“You gonna die for something you don’t even know if you believe in? Then you are just dumb and I don’t care.” Hattie had snatched up her shoes and hobbled off barefooted. When she had presented him with the watch, Hattie had only half way apologized.

Hattie’s second fish was an equal to her first but harder to land. “You shore put up a good fight,” she told the fish as she dropped it with the first. “Reckon you was pretty set on stayin’ in the creek. Not to worry, you got plenty company in Tom’s pond. Course there may come a day you will be somebody’s supper but not today. Not today.” The fish flopped in the bucket for a minute or so and then became still. It had no room to move around but would remain alive until it could be transferred into the fresh water pond that Tom kept. Hattie had often fished and released what she caught if it was not needed for the table. It was her delight when Tom decided he wanted a pond and raise the fish. He rarely allowed those to be caught but the younger children were allowed to fish and an adult would release the fish back.

Hattie threw her line back out into the water and settled back against the tree. The sun was warming the air around her and she relaxed. All in all, she thought, life hadn’t been so bad. She had had a family contrary to what her brother and father had said. Maybe not in the normal way but what did it matter. Like Martha and Abner, she found she could love a motherless child fiercely.

Hattie stared at the clouds and they morphed into a memory of a dusty road and a ragged group trudging along it. Hugh Gouge walked tiredly along carrying a bundle of rags and holding the hand of a small boy. Two little girls followed so closely in his wake that they were covered with the dust his boots kicked up.

Hattie remembered the day Abner had proposed marriage, not to him, of course, but to Hugh Gouge. She had been leaning against the corral fence feeding tender grasses she had pulled to the aged donkey that had wandered onto the property shortly after the war ended. They figured someone had felt he wasn’t worth the energy to keep and had turned him loose. Hattie had latched onto him immediately and made him a pet. Now she was feeding him grass and talking quietly to him about her sorrows. She heard Abner’s approach and dropped the grass for the donkey to finish.

“You spend more time with that donkey than you do people,” he had said as he propped up against the fence beside her. He reached down and pulled a long piece of grass and held it out for the animal. “He looks a mite better’n he did when he first come here.”

“He probable eats a lot better, I reckon,” Hattie said. She figured Abner had something on his mind and wondered how long it would take him to get around to it. Since they had buried Martha, Abner was mostly aimless. If Hugh Gouge hadn’t come into their lives when he did, Hattie wasn’t sure if she and Abner would have managed through this last long, lean year. Gouge was another stray who landed on their doorstep, except this one was accompanied by four young children, the youngest wrapped in a dirty blanket, with a wet diaper, sucking on a sugar teat. It was the children that forced Hugh to ask for their help. They had been thrown out by carpet baggers who bought his place for back taxes he couldn’t pay. Taxes that accrued while he was serving in the Confederate army. Now he was homeless and his children hungry. Abner took them in and they had stayed. Hugh did most of the work around the place and Hattie had taken care of the children. “Anything wrong with the young’uns?” Hattie asked to break the silence.

“No. Hugh took them to the creek to play. He finished hoeing the corn and needed a break.”

“They’ll like that. He don’t get to spend much time with ‘em.”

“Hattie...” Abner paused and sucked in a big breath. “Hattie, I want you to marry Hugh.” Hattie didn’t speak. Of all the things Abner could have said, that was the most surprising. Abner went on to explain his reasoning. He was getting old and wouldn’t be around much longer and he wanted Hattie secure. The marriage would guarantee both Hattie and Hugh’s family a place. He would leave his place to them. They worked it already and nobody else needed it. When Hattie began to protest, Abner held up his hand. “Hear me out,” he said. He had gone on to explain that the marriage would work cause Hugh had problems himself. A wound from the war, as Abner put it, had left Hugh ‘not quite a man’ and Hattie’s twisted back would be no problem. But in every other way Hugh would love her and take care of her. And the young’uns needed a ma and Hattie had proven to be a good one. So she had married him and for the most part it had been a good union. Not that Hattie hadn’t longed for what she didn’t have sometimes. Although she almost had it,

That day she and Carl had taken a picnic to the creek on the warmest day of those short six months and after eating had lain on a quilt and studied the clouds as they talked. Carl told her he had land; his pa had deeded each of his sons a large parcel to set up homestead. His included a small knoll that overlooked the creek. He knew it would make a fine place for a house. He shyly added it would be for him and Hattie if she wished. He had raised himself up on one elbow and stared down into her eyes. There was hope and shyness and fear of rejection in his own. Her smile said all he needed and he had kissed her fully for the first time. It was a shy kiss at first but as they grew accustomed to one another, it bloomed in full youthful passion. Soon, they were locked in a tight embrace; one Hattie had dreamed of and was thrilled with. As his hand brushed softly up her side she took in her own and guided it to her breast. At first, the hand just lay there but in a while the fingers began to explore as the kisses became more urgent. Just before the buttons were loosened and Hattie had sucked in a breath in anticipation, Carl pulled back and shook his head. “I’m sorry, Hattie. I sort of lost my head there. It’s still abuzzing.” He shook his head again and took a deep breath. “You know I wouldn’t hurt you for the world.”

“You wasn’t a hurting me none. I liked it.”

“I did too,” he grinned shyly. “A lot. Too much I be thinking. But I can wait till we build that house on knoll and I carry you across as my wife.”

The day she had married Hugh Gouge, Hattie regretted that day more than she ever had. Abner was right. Hugh loved her good in all ways but one. He gave her protection, children, a home, and as much of himself as he could. But a part of her always yearned for what Carl had waited too long to give her. There was no passion in her marriage. Hugh would kiss her quickly on the cheek or on top of her head but he never took her in his arms and kissed her proper. It hurt too much to know what he couldn’t do was all he ever said when she asked him about it.

She married Hugh; she raised and loved his children; she cooked and cleaned for him until his daughters got old enough to take over. Then she did little except fish and rest her aching back. When walking to the creek became too painful, she was carried. She had buried Hugh twenty years ago and now lived with the grandchildren his children had produced. They cared for her patiently and carefully. She was more their child than their grandmother. The near-by fish flopped in the bucket. “Funny ain’t it, Fish, a grandma that’s a virgin.” She giggled.

A tug on her line brought Hattie back. She had been so deep in that memory, she jerked her line too hard and lost the fish at the end of the line. She tut-tutted to herself and patiently reeled in and replaced the bait. She cast out once more, but the sun was getting high and heating up the air and the water. Fishing was mostly over for the day.

She had grown old. Her body told her so, but her mind rejected the idea. The only decision she had to make was whether to go fishing or not and really that was not up to her. It depended on whether Tom or one of the others would carry her to the creek.

She still loved the chill morning air, the smell of rain as it came over the mountains, the turning of the leaves in the fall, the thrill of finding the first daffodils in the early spring, and the beauty of the mountains around her. She loved fishing like now when quiet was all around, and she could choose which days she wanted to live over. She liked looking at the clouds and seeing stories they had to tell. Like the one above her. The wind moved the wisps around and as the sun shone through them, she could swear she could see Carl the day he left her for the war, all dressed up in his Confederate gray, a kepi with two crossed firearms on his head, and polished brogans. He was beautiful and her heart longed for him. The ache was as real today as it was all those years ago. But...wait... there’s something wrong, she thought. He hadn’t looked like that, had he? No, she was sure he had worn butternut and only a slouch hat. She was confused and it made her head hurt. Her fishing line jerked but she ignored it.

“Granny, you ready to come to the house. Mavis will be puttin’ dinner on the table soon.” Tom called out as he neared the tree where he had placed his grandmother earlier. He didn’t want to disturb her, and he sure didn’t want her to fuss that he scared away the biggest fish of the day. She didn’t answer so he approached carefully and found her leaning back against the tree asleep. He smiled and thought how nice it was that she could rest. The pain must not be too bad today. He nudged her gently and when she did not respond he drew in a breath. He looked closer and felt tears forming. As he brushed the wispy white hair from her forehead he said softly, “At least she had an easy life.”