

The Hole in the Ground

“I hope we don’t move here.” Nell Cotton skipped along the dirt road.

“This place ain’t so bad. Better than the small, old yard we have back home.” Pete Cotton kicked at some rocks.

“We didn’t have no big woods filled with big, scary things.”

“Momma said we may have to move in with grandma and grandpa until things work out better.”

“I know.”

The siblings continued down Merchet’s Road. Even though it had a name most people knew, the old road was rarely traveled anymore. It wiggled away from Edward Cotton’s farm toward another back road whose name was lost.

The woods thickened around the children. Pete paid no mind. Nell kept looking around while tugging at her short hair. A night of sleep after forgetting a piece of gum had led Nell to her current hair style.

The children were not alone of course. Debby Cotton, their mother, would never send them out into the world without proper protection, the family dog. John Henry, a shaggy brown mutt with white blotches that Nell called milk stains, rushed behind the children guarding their feet.

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“Look yonder.” Pete ran up the side of the road with John Henry following. “It’s a creek.”

A twist of running water neared the road. Shallow and thin, the creek wasn’t exactly a major waterway.

“Let’s see where it goes.” Pete and John Henry left the road and took up with the creek. John Henry lapped at the water once, but jerked away from it.

“Petey,” Nell yelled. “Petey, get back here.”

“Come on, Nell.”

“No. I ain’t going to go out in the woods.”

“Nell.” Pete kicked at another rock. “You’re already in the woods.”

Nell looked around. She huffed and put her hands on her waist.

“Come on, Nell. Just a little ways and then we can go back.”

She frowned, but finally joined Pete and John Henry.

“I don’t like it here,” Nell said. “The farm. I don’t like the chickens running around.”

“You’re just mad you can’t pet them. They ain’t cats.”

“I know they ain’t cats. I just don’t like the farm. I don’t want to be here. That’s all.”

Pete, scratching at his head, turned back and smiled. Listing pine trees had hid the road.

“I like it here,” he said. “We can have adventures just like we’re having now.”

“We’re not having an adventure.”

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“Sure we are. We’re adventuring ain’t we boy?” John Henry danced in front of them and then hurried to check out a shrub.

They moved on, and the creek grew fatter, slower, and greener. John Henry didn’t sprint forward as much. He mainly hugged Nell’s feet.

“I think it’s a swamp now,” she said. “And it stinks.”

“Reminds me of you.” Pete picked up a stick and stuck it in a lump of moss at the water’s edge. It bubbled and held the stick.

“Petey.” Nell sighed. Just off to the left, the ground slopped up into a high mound. Midway up dimpled a dark hole. “Look at that.”

“Wow.” Pete took off immediately for it. “It’s a cave.”

“Petey, don’t go.” Nell looked at John Henry who gave her only one glance before running to join Pete. Nell slowly followed, dragging her feet and stomping at tall weeds.

“Shoot,” Pete said. “It’s small.”

The hole in the ground wasn’t two feet wide but had an endless black eye.

“Come on, Petey. Let’s get out of here.” Nell didn’t get too close to the hole. “It’s not a cave. It’s a hole, and it’s scaring me.”

“Scaring you? It’s just a small cave. And we got John Henry to protect us.”

John Henry sniffed at the hole and tiptoed back.

“It’s not a cave. Let’s go.”

“It’s a cave.”

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“No, it’s not.”

Pete fell on his knees and peered inside. He strained his eyes. Nothing. He listened deep. Nothing. He even smelled. Instead of nothing, he got a whiff of something wet and sour, reminding him of the time John Henry spent the night out in a bad thunderstorm and came up the next day muddy.

“You remember momma talking to grandma about what Deacon Harvel did with all that money?” Pete asked. “You remember? She said he hid it in the woods.”

“He was caught.”

“But not with the money.” Pete peered into the hole.

* * *

Deacon Joel Harvel hummed “Go Tell it on the Mountain” as he gingerly strolled along with the creek. He spotted the cave and headed straight for it.

“Praise Jesus.” He’d been carrying three large money bags for miles and was nearing a time to rest. As always, he wore his best white suit which he hated to sweat in. And a rest would sure help chase those sweat demons away.

He pushed the money bags into the cave first. After a pause to wipe his brow and make sure his blazing white hair still held high, Deacon Harvel managed to squeeze into the cave without dirtying his cherished suit.

“Praise Jesus.” Quickly, he buried his money bags under loose rocks. Deacon Harvel then pulled his white bible from his jacket. He often pointed out to enquirers that they’d used

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real gold to engrave his name. He placed his bible atop the makeshift grave so he would know where he had hid his loot.

And just as he enjoyed a moment of rest, Deacon Harvel heard the hounds that had been tracking him.

“Deacon Harvel,” Sheriff Thomas James yelled. “This is the law. Come on out now.”

Deacon Joel Harvel did just that.

* * *

“I’m telling you he have hid his money in this cave.” Pete jumped up with moon eyes twinkling.

“It’s a hole,” Nell said. “And it’s not his money. It’s the church’s. And he didn’t come out here to grandpa’s farm to hide it in a hole.”

Pete stomped his feet and grunted. “Okay, what do you think is in the hole then?”

“I don’t care what’s in it. I want to go home. Let’s go.”

John Henry barked, and Nell twitched.

“John Henry,” she scowled.

“Well, I’ve got to see what’s in the cave.” Pete bent down and peered inside again.

“Might not be Deacon Harvel’s money. But might be some other folk’s money.”

“We don’t need to know what’s in there.” Nell leaned closer and looked inside.

* * *

Nell knew nothing good was about to happen when Pete sprinted into the hole. John

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Henry followed, completely ignoring her. And there she was with the hole, alone with the woods and swamp backing her up.

“Well, shoot.” She squeezed through the hole. She slid. She tumbled. She fell deep.

When Nell woke, there was only darkness for her.

“Maybe it is a cave,” she said. “Petey? John Henry? Petey?”

She tried to stand up but couldn’t. It was like the black, a hidden veil, held her down.

She ran her hands down her dress. They found something that felt like wool.

“A blanket?” Her fingers twisted into it, and they stuck.

“Petey?” she screamed. “Come here, Petey.”

Something touched her leg. At first, it was just like a little tap from a blade of grass.

Then another. The touch became a tickle and moved in waves up her legs and then her arms.

Nell imaged tiny hairs being draped across her and weaving together. Several landed on her face, touched her lips. Soon, she couldn’t move at all, and the hairs were pulling tighter, squeezing.

“Petey?” she cried. The tickling waves grew, ran up her neck, her face, made their way under her dress.

She felt them on her face, her lips, their weight and bounce as they wiggled inside. On her tongue, they tasted of dry, Autumn leaves.

* * *

Nell let out a squeak. This time John Henry jerked.

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“I ain’t going in there. And you aint’ either,” she told Pete.

“Stop being a dang baby.”

“I ain’t being a baby. I want to go home.”

“Well, I ain’t going home until I know what’s in the cave.”

“It’s a hole, and you ain’t going in.”

“Okay. We’ll send John Henry.” Pete reached over and scratched John Henry behind his ear. His leg went on auto and scratched at air.

“What?”

“John Henry can go look first. He’s an adventurer just like us. He’ll go.”

“Petey?”

“John Henry will see if it’s alright.”

Pete picked up a small stick. He wiggled it under John Henry’s nose. Then Pete flung it into the cave/hole.

“Go on boy. Go get it.”

Without hesitation, John Henry leapt forward into the cave/hole.

Nell and Peter leaned in and waited. Pete braced himself on his knees and grinned like he could see John Henry coming back with a money bag in his mouth. Nell pulled at her hair knowing John Henry would yelp and come fleeing from the hole covered in cobwebs and spider bites.

And then it happened. John Henry barked three times. A loud crunch echoed out of

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the hole. John Henry whined for a second, and then a louder, wet crunch came. Something splattered like that of a tomato thrown hard against a barn wall.

Nell and Pete Cotton screamed and ran. They ran as fast as they could, both stumbling and falling, bruising.

They ran through Edward Cotton's skimpy corn field kicking up sprouts.

When they made it to the front porch of the aged farm house, Debby Cotton and her mother Eudina were waiting.

"What on Earth is a matter with you?" Debby handed Eudina a dish towel, bent to a knee, and took up her children.

She got them to breathe slower and only occasionally sob. They told her about their adventure, even including the part about Deacon Harvel and his church money, and ending with the end of John Henry.

Debby let loose of children and stood back. She crossed her arms on her hefty bosom and fixed her aged face of lines and corners.

"I ought to wait for your grandpa to get home," she began. "Have him get his belt and give the both of you the whippin' of your lives."

"But mamma," Pete said. "We ain't telling no lie."

"What did you do? Did you just let him run off? Then make up a story why you don't have John Henry no more?"

"No mamma."

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“I should whip you for lying. You got one coming for that.” Debby looked at her mother.

“We ain’t lying,” Nell said, sobbing louder.

Debby slapped her, making her sobs turn back to crying.

“Here’s what you gonna do. Both of you are going to go back out and find John Henry. And if you don’t find him by the time grandpa gets home, you’re gonna get a whippin’.”

“But momma?” Pete began.

“You need a slap too?”

He shook his head.

“No? Then get on out there and find poor John Henry before something bad happens to him. Go on.”

They hesitated for a moment. Pete finally took Nell’s hand and led her off the porch.

“Go on,” Debby yelled.

Pete led them from the house and back into the meager corn field. He turned and saw his mother and grandmother still standing on the porch.

“I can’t,” Nell said. “We got to go back.”

“We can’t do that.” Pete tugged at Nell. She stood and cried, tears dripping from her chin. “We’ll just go far enough so they don’t see us no more. Come on.”

They walked to the edge of the woods.

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“This way.” Pete took Nell to a pine tree and leaned her against it. He couldn’t see the farm house, but could see the corn.

“Hush your crying now,” Pete told her. “Don’t do no good.”

“I can’t help it.” Nell leaned on Pete. “I ain’t no baby, Petey. But I can’t help it.”

“Need to get your mind on something else.” Pete looked up at the sky peaking through the tops of trees. They didn’t move much. “Remember that time we tried to climb that old oak in the backyard?”

“Back at momma’s?”

“Yeah. Remember what happened when we got up on that first limb?”

“It broke.” Nell laughed a little, slowing her crying. “It broke with us on it.”

“Mrs. Clades thought we was dead. We’re lucky she didn’t tell momma.”

“I bet we’d gotten a good whippin’ then.” Nell sat down at the base of the tree and hugged her knees.

“Yeah. I know we would have.” Pete sat down as well.

“You think grandpa’s gonna whip us?” Nell asked, voice soft and distant.

“I reckon so. Nothing we can do about it.”

“I want to go home.”

“Me too.”

The woods sat quietly with the children. The sky grayed briefly with a roll of thick clouds. But they left the children alone with sobs and broken sighs.

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“We could lie.” Nell sniffed and wiped her nose. “We could tell momma we lost John Henry.”

“I ain’t no liar.” Pete picked up a rock and threw it.

“But...”

“We can take a whippin’. I ain’t no liar. And you ain’t one either.”

“We’re getting a whippin’ for lying.” Nell sobbed and pulled at her knees. “We didn’t lie, and John Henry is dead, and something’s out there. And we’re gonna get a whippin’.”

“Hush now.” Pete put his arm around Nell. “Ain’t nothing out there. Something bad did happen to John Henry. But it was in that cave and not out in the woods.”

“But...”

“Hush. We’re gonna go back to momma and tell the truth again if she asks again. If she has grandpa whip us then we’re just gonna take a whippin’. They can believe us or don’t. That’s up to them. We ain’t liars. And we’re okay.”

Something faint cracked above their heads. Both looked up and waited. Another crack came but this time they saw a rock bounce off the tree.

“Petey?”

“Hush.”

A rock hit just above their heads.

“Let’s go.” Pete took Nell by her hand and pulled her up.

“What is it, Petey?”

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A rock few past them.

“I don’t know.”

Nell began to cry as they ran again.

They made it to the house and rushed into the kitchen.

Debby and Eudina were setting the table for Edward Cotton's arrival.

“Good Lord.” Debby threw her towel at the sink. “What is it now?”

Nell chewed at her lip and watched Pete.

“Something was throwing rocks at us.” He swallowed and nodded at Nell.

“I don't know what's gotten into you two,” Debby began as the door flung open.

Edward Cotton stomped in. He tossed his dusty cap onto a nail in the wall, placed his hands in his coveralls, and stared at the children with a limp, gray face.

“Why they crying?” he finally asked.

“They went off and lost the dog,” Debby answered. “Then they come rushin' back cryin' and lyin' about it. I didn't raise no liars so I really don't know who these two belong to.”

“You ought to tan their hides.” Edward wobbled past them and inspected the dinner table.

“I told them when you got home you were gonna take your belt to them for lyin' to me.”

Edward sighed and left the room. Debby's face laxed for a moment, and then drooped when her father came back with a worn, leather belt.

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“Outside,” he told the children, and then stepped out to the porch, letting the door slam hard behind him.

“Momma?” Nell asked.

“Go on. Get it over with.” Debby turned her back. “Get it over with so we can eat.”

Pete and Nell Cotton slumped out of the kitchen and to the porch.

“You first, boy. Drop your britches.” Edward looped the belt around his hand making it creak and crackle.

Pete did as told.

“Turn around.”

He did.

“Bend over.”

Again, he did. Pete stared at Nell and clutched his hand together as if in prayer.

“You don't lie to your mamma again, or I'll have to do this again, and it'll be much worse.”

He began to count and whip Pete, the straps slapping hard on Pete's backside, bruising quickly.

Pete tried to hold his breath, but he gasped for air with each blow.

At twenty, his whipping was over. Pete, with wet eyes, pulled his pants up and winced.

“Go on in inside now,” Edward said. “This ain't for you to see.”

Pete went inside, being careful of not letting the door hit him.

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“Ten for you,” Edward told Nell. “Turn around and pull up your dress.”

Nell cried as she did.

Pete stood in the kitchen listening to his grandpa count and whip Nell, who cried out each time the belt hit her. Pete stared at his mother who was quickly spooning pinto beans onto plates, Edward's first.

* * *

The Cotton Family sat around the table. The grownups ate hurriedly, filling their mouths with each fork or spoonful. The children sat staring at their plates as if they were empty, which was quite the opposite. Nell occasionally wiped at her eyes. Crying was not allowed at the table.

“Table's for eatin'.” Edward crumbed cornbread over his steaming beans. He looked at Debby, and she looked down.

“Nell and Pete,” she began. “You two go on to bed. It's getting' dark, and I think you need to think about what you did anyway. And you'd better pray in the morning John Henry comes back to us.”

The children slunked away from the table and left the adults to their silent dinner.

Debby had the same room that she grew up in. Nell and Pete had to share a small room next to Edward and Eudina's room. The children's room still had boxes of memories, aging artifacts of fragility, and jars of preserves all icky brown and yellow, forever spoiling.

In the middle of the room lay a drooping bed that belonged to Eudina's bother

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Charles Lattens. He even died in it after a night of drinking homemade spirits, but the children didn't know of his untimely passing. In front of it rested a small chest of drawers that had been the only thing cleaned out for the children to put their things in, which wasn't much.

"Turn around," Pete told Nell. "I don't want you lookin'." Nell turned away as Pete changed into the only pajamas he had. Eudina had sown them years ago. They were faded blue and worn in places. But they made due. Debby had informed them that there was a lot of "makin' due" to come.

Next, it was Pete's turn to stare out the window as Nell put her pajamas on, which were also made by Eudina. Hers were dull pink and just as worn.

Dark had come. The naked bulb on the distant front porch cast a shallow stretch of yellow light. It crossed the yard at an angle to light dogwood tree.

"It gets dark too quick here," Pete said.

"It gets dark too quick anywhere." Nell crawled up on the bed and wiggled under the tattered covers. She began to cry again.

"Don't cry. Ain't nothing gonna happen."

"I know. I just hate it here."

"I do too. But maybe we won't have to stay here long." Pete looked out the window, at the dead sky. "No stars tonight. Gonna be a dark night."

* * *

Pete Cotton watched Nell sleep, watched her twist and pull at the blankets. He sat

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atop a locked chest. Just two days ago, Pete had Nell convinced that inside sat gold China plates from Japan.

Outside, the night had stayed dark. The only sounds were that of Nell turning in her sleep. Pete's eyes closed occasionally, but always returned to window.

“Too quiet,” he mumbled. Nell stirred some more. “Hate sleepin' with her.”

The porch light went out. Pete perked up. Nothing. With the room's light and the porch's off, there was only blackness for his eyes. And that just made everything louder.

Nell's breathing sped up and slowed. Passed that, the creaks and snaps of distant walking sounded. Pete tuned to the walking, but it quickly faded.

He eased back on the chest and waited. It was only a short time before his eyes closed.

Nell sat up and screamed. Pete leapt from the chest and screamed with her.

Something near the window flashed and boomed, rattling the glass. The children found each other and held tight. The flash and boom came again. People stomped about in the house and yelled.

“Petey?” Nell cried.

“It's okay. It's okay.” It was all he could say for awhile.

“What's happening?” Nell sobbed.

“I don't know.” Pete remembered Mr. Neifit's Chevy truck backfiring. Debby Cotton thought somebody had been shooting at the house, had come out running for her children and

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cover. “Gunshots, Nell. It could have been gunshots.”

Somebody stomped on the other side of their door.

“Who would shoot a gun?” Nell tightened her grip on Pete.

“Got to be grandpa.” Pete pushed Nell back. “He might have got what got John Henry.”

“Or it got him.”

Pete went toward the door, and Nell grabbed him back.

“Don't you dare, Petey.”

“Nell, I got to see.”

“Just like you got to see in that hole.”

“Nell, it ain't like that.” Pete took her hand. “If something was bad happening don't you think momma would have come in scared and gotten us up?”

“Maybe.”

“And they'd be grandma and grandpa right behind her. Grandpa shot what got John Henry, and I want to see it.” He hesitated for a moment. “And then momma will know we ain't no liars.”

Pete touched the door and quickly opened it.

Eudina Cotton stood at the door to the kitchen. Her face shown pale and tired, and her hands fumbled with her nightgown. She did not notice the children.

Pete reached behind him and found Nell's hand. He slowly pulled her from the room

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and toward the kitchen.

They stopped in the living room, but had a view of the kitchen and back door. At the sink, Debby Cotton frantically washed her face and looked paler than her mother. Through the door, Edward Cotton held his shotgun up to his shoulder, waiting.

“Told you,” Pete said. “Grandpa got it. Got what got John Henry.”

Edward leaned his ten gauge against the door frame and strayed off the porch.

“Momma, what's wrong?” Nell asked, but nobody but Pete seemed to pay her any attention.

Debby slowly stepped outside.

“How many did you get?” she asked.

“Two I think.” Edward stepped back onto the porch. “Goddamn dogs. They got all my chickens. Every last shittin' one of them.”

“Dogs?” Nell asked.

Eudina heard her that time and motioned for the children to go back to their room. Before they could move, the back door slammed shut. That's when the screaming started, Debby then Edward.

The porch light exploded, something bumped the back door hard, and another gunshot thundered.

Eudina rushed to the door and tried to open it.

Debby screamed on the other side of it and a gunshot silenced her. Nell fell back

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dragging Pete to the floor.

At the door, Eudina clawed at the knob, tearing her fingernails to the quick.

Pete saw the knob come out and fall away. Nell pulled at him, forcing him backwards.

Outside, Edward Cotton screeched for a second before his voice gurgled away.

Eudina turned from the door and started to run for the children. Unfortunate for her, the door burst open, knocking her to the floor. The lights brightened and died. Pete and Nell screamed as their grandmother clawed at the floor for a hold.

Pete pushed at Nell, forcing her into their room. He closed the door so hard it bounced back into him. He leaned on it and something stopped it from closing. Something held it open.

“Momma?” Pete asked. “Grandma? Grandpa?”

He just felt something pushing hard on it. Not enough to fling it open, but enough to keep him from closing it.

“Nell?” he begged. “Nell. Help me with the door.”

She only cried and lay in the corner next to the window.

“Nell, come on and help me with the dang door.” Pete stomped his feet until she got up and ran to him, actually knocking the door shut.

Pete twisted the lock, the one that Edward Cotton himself had promised, “You both get two whippings if I ever find that door locked with one of you on the other side.”

“Petey. Petey.” Nell held to him. He held back.

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The door jerked slightly and then creaked like something pushed hard on it from the other side slowly causing the wood to crack.

“I wished I hadn't look in that cave,” Pete said. “I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. We didn't see nothing. We didn't. Please don't hurt us.”

“Please,” Nell added but barely could sound it out between sobs.

Everything stilled and silenced. And then, as if in the room with them at their ears, a small voice whispered one word, “Run.”

The window jettied up, cracking the glass.

Nell screamed, her voice harsh and broken. Pete didn't scream. He stared out the window and remembered the whispered voice.

Pete yanked Nell to the window and shoved her out of it. He followed, landing on her. Nell moaned, but Pete didn't stop. He stood and got her up. The two began to run.

As they passed the dogwood tree, something scraped Pete's face deep, but he didn't slow. He continued to drag Nell behind him.

The children ran. They ran away from the family farm house without a single glance back, not even when the screaming started again.

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