

* The publication, *The New Southern Fugitives*, that published this piece is now defunct. The story was published in Vol. 1, Issue 43 on September 5, 2018 and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Cuss Words

Alabama summers were a physical thing, heat and humidity so unrelenting that most folks would've cussed it if they'd had the energy. On the hottest days, it was best just to pull the curtains closed, stand in front of an air conditioning vent and sip on sweet tea. But the heat couldn't tame young children, and growing up, I was often driven outdoors, away from the supervision of the TV set, to go get some color in my cheeks. My grandmother's genteel Southern way of saying I was getting on her last nerve. On days like this, the only thing to do was find somewhere cool – a swimming hole, a creek, a barn. I would hide from a sweltering afternoon by seeking out these haunts, even if I wasn't supposed to. I didn't often have moments of unfiltered play away from the watchful eyes of adults, so these moments were snatched and hoarded like candy, their sticky sweetness to be savored, even if I had nothing to do other than complain.

I was eleven the day Aimee and I snuck into the barn on her family's back lot. The heat was sticking to the last of the baby fat that still clung to my legs and sweat dripped from the backs of my knees and down into my battered Keds. Afternoon light

filtered through the wood-slatted walls, narrow shafts of sun cutting across the barn floor, heavy with dust and motes of life that never fell to earth. Nothing moved. Even the goats had ceased their ever-present nagging and lay quiet in the scrub outside.

The warmed-over air smelled of old grass and oil, warm leather and aged wood. Inside we found nothing except a large pile of straw on the ground and grease stains like liver spots on the floor. Metal shelves lined the back wall, loaded with old paint cans and odds and ends I couldn't identify. Metal things, most of them rusted or coated with dirt and grime, unknowable.

Hanging from the rafters was a long rope as thick as my arm. At first, we simply held on, swinging as long as we could, living pendulums, until our hands gave out. Over and over again, until our palms were red and sore, we swung through the air, heads thrown back, eyes closed. We chattered like monkeys and leapt from the rope into the straw, taunting each other to jump from higher and higher up. But the hay pile was thick, and the chaff was dry, even at the bottom; it smelled clean and dusty and made me sneeze. We threw handfuls at each other, the straw sticking in our hair and sneaking into our clothes, and we laughed in the full-bellied way that children at play often do.

And when we had exhausted ourselves, we lay back in the hay and stared into the dark corners of the ceiling. Above us, the hayloft stretched out almost halfway across the upper reaches of the barn. It's strange to think that it wasn't the first thing we had been drawn to, but perhaps we'd had to work up to it, subconsciously waiting for a voice to question our intrusion into the barn, and in the absence of such a voice, perhaps we felt we'd been given permission. And now the hayloft called to us, whispering, welcoming,

daring us to come, though I would not be the first trespasser. Next to me, Aimee sighed heavily, her breath swirling dust motes up and away into the light.

So, we climbed. Aimee first. Me after.

The air up there was musty and smelled of dark, spidery places. A cobweb brushed against my face, dirty silk strands falling across my cheeks. A shiver raced up my back and shook my shoulders. We stood staring into the recesses of the hayloft, a secret and forbidden place which was now nothing more than an empty floor covered with a scattering of unwanted straw. The rafters were close, possibly close enough to climb, but even we were not daring enough to tempt fate that far. The hayloft door, the only thing of interest, was a small rectangle crossed with two wooden boards, like an X that marked the spot.

Aimee crossed the floor in a few quick steps.

“Damn it!” she said, the word strange in her childish mouth.

“What?” I asked. The cuss word was nothing new. It was one of several we had practiced in secret.

“The door is locked,” Aimee said, rattling a heavy padlock against the wood.

Disappointed, I turned around and headed to the open edge of the hayloft. I stood at the edge and looked, bird-like, at the ground below. The hay pile looked smaller from here, scattered and less substantial. The rope that had carried us like time ticking by was too far to try and reach. There was nothing left to do but...

“Let’s jump!” Aimee said.

I looked over the edge again. The ground was a lot farther away than it had been a moment ago. The hay pile more scattered.

“C’mon, I’ll go first.”

I shook my head and backed away.

“Scaredy-cat,” Aimee said.

“Am not,” I said, but there was no venom in it. As a kid, fear, in any form, was a contemptible offense. Better to jump and break my leg than be scared. Still, I hesitated.

“Are so.”

“Not.”

“So.”

“Not.”

We could have kept it up for an hour, but I was irritated by all of this: the empty hayloft, Aimee, the fear welling up in my throat with each denial. I was scared, but I would be damned if I admitted it.

“Jump then,” I said, stepping back to give her room. She wouldn’t jump. I knew it, but I’d forgotten that this was the girl who raced around in a go-cart, scuffing knees and elbows when it flipped over on a half-buried rock and didn’t cry. The girl who could shoot a rifle and watch her father skin a deer. She’d crawl under bushes and into crevices just because. I really should have known better.

“Fine,” she said, ending our argument.

And then she jumped. For half a second, she was suspended in air, her black hair flying out from her head as if it, too, couldn’t believe she had jumped, and then she

disappeared. I raced over to the edge and looked down, half-expecting to see her shattered on the concrete below. Instead, she lay in the bed of hay, unbroken, a smile curling across her face like a challenge.

I had to jump now. Otherwise I would have to live with being a scaredy-cat for as long as kids are cruel. Because Aimee wouldn't keep this to herself. She would tell everyone at school how I was too scared to jump even though it was no big deal. She had done it. So, I muttered my favorite cuss word, took two steps, and jumped off the edge of the loft in defeat of a dare. I landed hard in the hay, my elbow smashing into a rock, sending pain shooting up all the way to my eyes. I tried to roll to the side, but I was pushed instead.

“Get off me!”

Aimee lay half underneath me, her hand pressed against her head, eyes tearing up. I stood up, moving back quickly in little shuffling steps. I couldn't do anything except stare as Aimee's face blotted red and her eyes watered, tears spilling over her cheeks, pasting down loose strands of hair and straw.

“You...you...,” Aimee stuttered through her tears. “You Yankee!”

She glared at me and spat out that word like it tasted as foul as it sounded. Sticks and stones were bullshit. That word hit me like a boot to the stomach. I had no reference for being called a Yankee because it wasn't done. Not between us. Not between Southerners. I may not have known exactly what it was, but I knew it was one of the worst things you could be. It was a word grown-ups always muttered in angry, breathy

curses or snarled as a threat. A word said as they laughed in that joking way Southerners have that was never funny to others.

The silence that followed stole my breath and hollowed out my chest. Tears hotter than the summer sidewalk rolled down my cheeks, tracing paths through dust and dirt. I wiped them away with the backs of my hands, gumming the filth on my face. The hitch in my chest made me sound asthmatic, while Aimee fought her tears quietly. We waited there in the barn, all tears and pride and knobby knees, waiting for one of us to know what to say.

“Don’t be such a crybaby,” Aimee said, eventually, her words cotton soft, and she reached out her hand to me. I pulled her up though she was heavy and taller than me by half a head. Standing there, brushing away the straw, she punched me on the shoulder just hard enough to nudge me sideways. I punched her back. Quiet settled between us like the humid summer heat, uncomfortable and oppressive, but ignored. Red faced and filthy, we went back inside in search of cooler air and our own sweet tea.