

## Heaven

I thought it was the worst day of my life, the day Daddy blew up the beaver dam, the day Aunt Betty drowned in Catahoula Lake. I was wrong. It was the second to worst day. This business with the beaver dam happened on an old broken-down plantation in Central Louisiana. Daddy told us the place had been named Heaven way back in the old cotton-picking days. Rich planter families lived there for years. Back then, rich people named their places. He told Sis and I there were angels living way up in the big live oak trees, that we couldn't see them because they were hiding in the moss. The angels were there, watching over our little paradise. We better believe it.

Heaven had seen better days by the time we lived there in the sixties. The big house was rough around the edges, but everything worked most of the time. We were happy then— me, Sis, Momma and Daddy, Aunt Betty, and after her, Cousin Billy. We didn't do much farming, just kept a large vegetable garden and a couple of milk cows. All the crop land was rented out by then. Daddy worked at the lumber mill in town. Momma and Aunt Betty watched us two kids. Sis and I played under the big house, climbed trees, and swam in the big pond the beavers formed by damming the bayou. Heaven was as good a name as any other.

That day started rough. After breakfast, I grabbed my pellet gun and walked off into the pecan grove to shoot birds. When I pulled the gun up to take my first shot, I found that Sis had plugged my barrel with bubble gum. I was madder than a hornet and ran back to the big house with murder on my mind. I threw my gun down on my bed and ran into Sis' room to launch an

attack. No Sis. I started yelling her name as I ran down the front stairs. “Sis, dammit. Where are you girl? You ruined my gun! Come on out, you gotta’ pay. I know you’re hiding somewhere.”

Momma was at the base of the stairs with her apron wrapped around her waist and a slight smile on her face. “What on earth are you screeching about John Dale? Sis rode over to Bunkie with Daddy. Here, give me your gun and we’ll see about cleaning that barrel out.”

We both walked onto the front porch and sat on the swing. Momma used a pair of tweezers she kept in her apron. “Momma, when’s Aunt Betty coming back? I miss her.”

“I told you. Betty had a baby. Your new Cousin Billy. She’s living in Natchez now. I suspect we’ll see her soon. Billy has to get a little older before they can travel.”

“But it’s been a year,” I said. “Something like that. I ain’t seen her. Things were more fun with her living here. Sis and I are seeing so much of one another; we get into more fights now that Betty’s gone.”

“Now John Dale, you’re the oldest. I’m counting on you to set an example for Sis. You got to learn to control your temper.”

She pulled the gum out of the barrel, and I went to clean it with turpentine we kept in the barn out back. I shot me a couple of black birds roosting in a big pecan tree and put them in a game pouch in the lining of my hunting vest. I heard Daddy’s truck drive up. A couple of minutes later I heard Momma let out something between a scream and a moan. I ran around front and saw Momma and Daddy sitting on the front porch swing. Momma had her face buried in his chest and was crying to beat the dickens. Sis was standing a few feet away whimpering. She was just eight then. I ran up the steps and stopped.

Daddy turned his head toward me while still holding Momma. “Your Aunt Betty drowned in Catahoula Lake. Boating accident, we think. She’s dead.”

“What about Billy?” I asked.

“He’s safe. Betty was alone near as we can tell,” Dad said. “Take your sister and y’all play out back.”

I took Sis’ hand and led her through the house out into the grove. We went straight for the beaver pond, sat under a huge cypress, and just stared at the water. Neither one of us had ever lost someone to death. Some black birds were fussing at us and a bull frog chimed in every few minutes. A pair of wood ducks splashed in the cattails causing nearby turtles to plunge from their log perches back into the brown water.

The beaver lodge was on the opposite side of the bayou. I had never seen the beavers which built all this, but had seen pictures in our World Book Encyclopedias of what a beaver lodge looked like under the surface. I imagined a beaver family, one like ours, living underneath that big pile of sticks and mud. Could a beaver drown? What did beavers do when one of them died? Was there a beaver heaven? I knew there was one for cats and dogs.

Daddy walked up behind us. He threw a spool of wire at my feet. “Brother, you get up and help me lay out this wire.” He held a small wooden box under his arm. He was wearing his rubber wading boots and walked to the edge of the bank where the beaver dam began. “Stand here and hold the spool. I’ll pull the wire out as I walk over the dam.”

“What are we doing with this wire, Daddy?” I asked.

“We gotta get rid of this dam, son. Mr. Bordelon down the way says he can’t pump water from the bayou for his cotton. Beavers got the bayou stopped up with this dam.” He held up a stick of dynamite for the box. “We gonna blow it sky high. Y’all will love it. Like a big bunch of fireworks. You’ll see. Sis, you run go stand by the barn. Be sure to keep your fingers in your ears.”

“But Daddy, we can’t blow this up. There’s a beaver family living here. There’s turtles and wood ducks living here. Sis and I swim in the pond. Please, Daddy. We can’t.”

“I got no choice, boy. This water’s got to flow again. Besides, look at all the pine trees those critters chopped down. Son, you hold that spool. When I tell you, you go run to the barn and keep your fingers in your ears.”

I watched Daddy walk across the rickety wall of chewed-off trees and branches which stanching the flow of the dark bayou water. He fixed the wire to each stick and buried the charges deep in the pile every ten feet or so and. After he finished, we walked together back to the barn where Sis was standing. Daddy then wound the wire around two poles on the plunger. My heart was beating hard. All I could think of was that drawing in the World Book.

“Don’t Daddy,” I pleaded. “It’s wrong. There’s a family in that lodge. Please!”

“What you talking about boy?”

“A beaver family, Daddy. You can’t kill ‘em.”

“Sorry, boy. Got to. Besides, they’ll be fine. They’ll just move on down the bayou. Those beavers and turtles, they find a way. Now, fingers in ears!” In went the plunger, and the charges erupted with a flash and a blast that sent a shock wave through my body. The chewed-off tree trunks and branches flew high in the air and landed in a spread-out mess. The lodge collapsed on itself. The brown water surged downstream; the beaver pond was no more. Daddy and Sis walked back through the pecan grove to the house. I ran over to the water but saw no sign of the beaver family.

Momma stayed shut up in her bedroom the rest of the day. Sis and I tried to be quiet and keep away from both the grownups. I heard some fussing behind closed doors. I heard Momma

saying something about Cousin Billy. Later that night, Sis asked me about Aunt Betty and what would happen to the beavers. Having no answers, I lied to her.

A couple of days later, I went with Momma and Daddy to Aunt Betty's wake at a funeral home in Bunkie. It was a first for me. I walked into the parlor where her casket was bathed in a pale blue light. My grandmother, Aunt Betty's mother, was in the corner surrounded by a bunch of ladies with rosary beads. Two of them had their hands on her, and she was sobbing. Momma and Daddy dropped down on a padded kneeler, crossed themselves and bowed their heads. Aunt Betty's face looked puffy. I touched her crossed hands which held a rosary with little purple glass beads. Her hands were stone cold. I backed off, and one of my uncles escorted me out of the parlor and into the small coffee room. He brought me a Coca Cola and told me to sit there and drink. I did what he said.

There were a few grownups at a nearby table bent over and whispering to each other. I heard bits and pieces. Something about how Aunt Betty couldn't be buried at the church because she had drowned herself, that Father Laborde shouldn't say her funeral mass. It didn't make sense to me then, the part about the priest. But I sensed the gravity of my aunt taking her own life. It was something shameful, something said in whispers. I knew better than to ask any questions.

After the wake, we drove by my grandmother's home where one of my other aunts was looking after Billy. Momma came back to the car with Billy and a diaper bag. She climbed into the back seat with me.

“Are we bringing Billy home?” I asked.

“Yes,” Momma said. “Meet your new brother.”

“Why don't his daddy keep him?”

Daddy started the car, then leaned back over the seat toward me. “Billy don’t have a daddy. He ran away before Billy was born. That’s why Betty drowned herself. Grandma is too old to take care of him, so God asked us to take him into our family. You think you can be a big brother to Billy?”

“Sure can. I’ll teach him to shoot a pellet gun someday.” I leaned over against Momma and looked into Billy’s eyes.

Momma held Billy the whole way back to Heaven. She didn’t say a word. Neither did Daddy. Tears streamed down her face as she fed Billy a bottle. I kept quiet as well, even though I was still curious about our new family member.

After Daddy parked the car, Momma brought the baby around to him. “Here Roy, you better get used to taking care of this boy.” She plopped Billy in Daddy’s arms and handed the bottle to him. Then she marched up the front steps and up the stairs to their bedroom. I heard the door slam. Sis ran out, so excited to see Billy. Daddy dropped to a knee to let her cuddle her new brother. While Sis cooed and kissed on Billy, Daddy shot me a stare. Shut up about Betty it said.

By the time Billy became a toddler, a dark cloud descended on Heaven, and a chasm opened between my parents. Momma stayed shut up in her room a lot. I saw liquor bottles in the trash. Daddy made a bed on the back porch and slept there most nights. Sometimes he’d stay gone for three or four days. Momma told us he was away on business. Likewise, Momma would disappear for weeks at a time. Daddy said she was taking care of Grandma. We kids raised ourselves. Sis took Billy everywhere, like he was one of her dolls. She fed him, dressed him, and taught him stuff a grownup would teach a growing child. Daddy found an old-fashioned baby carriage at a junk store in town. Sis pushed Billy everywhere around Heaven in that beat up

contraption. For a little girl with a checked-out mother, she did a respectable job with her new baby brother.

Before long, Momma just stayed at Grandma's. After that, Sis and I would take turns going to see her. Billy always stayed with Daddy. The liquor bottles kept filling up the trash. Various ladies slept overnight with Daddy. One of them took a liking to Billy and us kids. Her name was Elsie, and I admit that she tried hard to be good to us. We started to love her. One night, she and Daddy had a big ruckus, and we saw no more of Elsie. It wasn't long after that, I looked up into the semi-circle of live oaks framing the driveway up to the front porch of Heaven and thought about those angels. By then I knew they weren't living in the trees watching over us. I just hoped that something was up there, something good, somewhere.

In the winter of 1983, I was working on a drilling rig in West Texas and got a call from a hospital in Alexandria about Momma. I drove thirteen hours straight through the night to get there. All I could think of on that drive was our life at Heaven before Betty died. Why did it end like it did? Why did Betty die? I meant to get some answers from Momma.

Thankfully, I made it back before it was too late. Momma was asleep when I arrived. No one had seen Billy in years, but he sent some flowers. Momma had finished chemo for her breast cancer. It hadn't worked. Sis was there by her bed.

"How is she?" I asked.

"It won't be long they say. That why I had them call you. She's been asking for you." Sis gently touched Momma's bruised arm to wake her. "Momma, John Dale is here. Wake up. He wants to talk."

Momma's eyes opened and she smiled. "Thanks for coming son. Sis said you're working in Texas. So good to have my two babies here together."

“I see Billy sent flowers. Have you spoken to him?”

“He sent a card. Couldn’t come. Working in Georgia somewhere. He’s married, got two little ones.”

I took her hand in mine. “Momma, tell us what happened when y’all brought Billy home? I need to know. Whatever happened to his real daddy? What happened to Heaven? Daddy won’t tell me nothing. Hell, half the time he’s so drunk he don’t even know it’s me. Tell me while you can.”

“John Dale,” said Sis, putting her hand on my arm, “Let her be. She’s too weak to talk about all that. Just be here and love her.”

“No girl,” said Momma, “I can talk.” Momma looked at me. “What I can tell you son is that you’ll have to get this from your Daddy. It’s his doing, not mine. You’ll have to get it from him. Maybe you’ll have to sober him up. Maybe that’ll do him good. But it needs to come from him, not me.”

“Ok, if you don’t want to talk about you and Daddy, then tell me about Aunt Betty. Why did she drown herself?”

“Shame.”

“Shame? What the hell, she just had a baby. Why would someone kill themselves over that? Was it because the father split the scene?”

“It was a different time, son. I’m too weak to talk about this mess.”

“Fine, but tell me about Billy’s father? Who is he? Why did he leave? Tell me something Momma, please.”

“Your Daddy knows more than I do, talk to him. I gotta’ sleep.”



Three years after we buried Momma, I blew out a knee on an offshore rig when a well kicked and a pair of tongs broke loose. Lucky I didn't lose my leg. They did the surgery at the big VA hospital in Pineville. Did rehab there too. I liked the people and the place and got a job cutting grass there at the hospital. Had me a nice, clean apartment in town and a girlfriend who had her head screwed on right. Things were good. Then Daddy called one morning before work.

"John Dale, you got to come down to Heaven this morning. This can't wait, son. I think I've seen my last sunrise. Please, boy, come on down." There wasn't a trace of liquor speaking. His voice was clear and urgent. I called into work and headed south down Highway 1 in my pickup.

I pulled into the semi-circle driveway under the huge oaks where the angels once lived. The old place had twenty-five years of wear-- peeling paint, a few broken windows, rotting and missing shutters. The azaleas were almost as high as the first story. There was a lazy bird dog napping in one of the old wicker chairs on the front porch. The porch swing was sitting busted up on the dusty board floor. The dog didn't bark; barely looked at me before resuming his nap. The front door was already cracked open. I went back toward the kitchen and saw Daddy sitting in the living room watching ESPN on his satellite TV. On the table beside him was a full bottle of vodka and a bunch of pill bottles.

"Hey boy, thanks for coming. Got some cold drinks in the frig. Couple of beers if you want one."

"Naw, I'm fine. What's this about seeing your last sunrise? I knew you weren't shitting me. Tell me what's going on with you? I knew you were down. Sis told me about some prostate cancer, but that's a slow one."

“I hadn’t said nothing to Sis. It spread. Now it’s brain cancer. Ain’t long. Maybe today. I’m more than ready.”

“So, why did you call, Daddy?”

“Sis told me about what you tried to get out of Momma ‘fore she died. I guess I figured you deserve to know the truth. You know, about Betty, Billy, and the whole mess. Here, help me up. I want us to go sit out on the porch.” I helped him to his walker, and we wobbled out the front door.

We plopped down on the dusty wicker chairs after chasing the bird dog off his bed. I was face to face with Daddy for the first time in many years. There wasn’t much light left in those eyes. But there was enough left for him to tell his story.

“You remember when we all lived here. Betty was here a couple of years. There was a lot of love in this old house. You and Sis loved her so much. You remember those days, don’t you? When we were all happy? When there were angels in the trees? You and Sis swimming in the beaver pond.”

“I do, and I don’t understand why it ended.”

“That’s what I need to tell you. Betty and I made a big mistake. Right under your Momma’s nose. She got pregnant and moved to Natchez where Billy was born. When I told her I couldn’t leave Momma, she drowned herself in Catahoula Lake. We had agreed to give the baby for adoption, but she changed her mind. She got crazy over the next few months. Drinking, taking some pills. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t break Momma’s heart. I was stuck in between, like a deer in the headlights. Then we got the news. It was like a bomb went off.”

“God damn you.”

“Son, that’s a given. God’s already done that. I’ve been living in hell ever since that day. Believe me son, I’ll be paying for this for eternity. But eternity includes now. Just look around. Look at my face. There’s hell to pay for sins like that.”

“What did you do with Billy? I was working in Texas. Next thing I know, he’s off living some place in Mississippi. What’d you do with him? Why don’t he ever talk to any of us?”

“I was a fuck-up as a father without your mother. You know that. Momma couldn’t bear to see him. I couldn’t just let him raise himself, like you and Sis had to do. I was too far gone by then. I found a place that helped orphan boys. A school. A place he could live and be safe. So, I took him there, came home, and crawled back into my bottles.”

“Why did you blow up the beaver dam that day Betty died? You remember that?”

“I remember doing it, didn’t realize it was that day.”

“I was begging you not to do it. You remember?”

“Son, after I heard Betty had killed herself, some type of fear grabbed me. In my gut. Took hold. Something I had never felt. I remember feeling like a trapped animal, like a rabbit with its leg in a trap. I would have chewed off my leg to get out of that trap, but there wasn’t a way. Truly, I can’t remember what the hell I did that day. Ain’t no telling. If I hurt your feelings or scared you and Sis, I’m sorry. I may have had a few snorts of whiskey. Ain;t no telling.”

I rose and walked through the darkened house, off the back porch and into the old pecan grove. Many of the old trees survived the storms and hurricanes of the last thirty years, though many were overrun by caterpillars and covered with webbing which gave them a ghostly appearance. I headed toward the bayou. When I arrived, I saw another beaver dam stanching the flow of the bayou. Behind it was a large pond surrounded by old cypress trees. I sat down and

stared across the pond at the beaver lodge. I cried and tried to remember when there were angels in the trees and a river of love flowing through Heaven.

Inspiration Credit – Down on Rigolette, song by Steve Conn writer and musician extraordinaire, playable on all major music platforms

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