

WASHED IN THE WATER

TALES FROM THE SOUTH

by Nancy Hartney

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Washed in the Water



Lisa Dell thought about rivers a lot. People, too. She found it hard to say exactly where things began and where they ended.

Take the Suwannee River. Blackwater spilled out of the Okefenokee Swamp, flowed through scrub and palmetto-choked land, and ended up in the Gulf of Mexico. Moss-draped branches dabbled sweeper fingers in the current most of the way.

Likewise, a church community filled up with folks and flowed in swirls and eddies through shadows and sunshine. God's True Word Baptist Church near Ellaville seemed to do that. Most ever' September, the congregation put on a tent meeting to revive and re-awaken their Christian faith and draw in new members. Folks living out

in pinelands came into town and camped under great oaks for an entire week, sometimes longer. Locals came early of a morning and stayed into evening. Preaching, singing, jawing and general neighboring went on all day and into late night hours.

Lisa Dell's mother, a pinched, nervous woman, insisted Lisa come to take care of other folks' children, sing in the choir, and help with cooking for revival week. In other words, to work.

After six children, her Daddy got worn out and run off. Mama sent the younger brothers and sisters to live with relatives. Two oldest boys drifted off and never looked back. Shed of everyone but Lisa Dell, Mama proceeded to push her into day cleaning with white town folks that didn't want coloreds. Lisa didn't mind the work, but she hated for Mama to take *all* her folding money and any hand-me-down clothes she brought home. And she hated enduring the perspiring clutches of an employer driving her back to their rent house after a day's drudgery. Lisa was Mama's only ticket and Lisa resented that.

Although heavy set, Lisa was still a striking girl-woman with her raven hair, olive complexion

and acorn-brown eyes. She lacked self-confidence though and often chewed her nails down to the quick, leaving raw, ragged hangnails outlining each finger.

Her mother berated her shy ways, admonishing her to throw herself into the spirit of love at the camp meetings, enjoy the touch of others, and, especially, to seek out the minister. Lisa chafed at her mother's manipulations. She made excuses by saying she had to finish breakfast or dinner, take care of the children, or practice choir.

On the last night of the autumn gathering, Lisa sat outside and watched kids while they slept on quilts under the trees. Mosquitoes buzzed incessantly and caused one or another of the children to stir and scratch at bites.

Sweat trickled between her breasts and hair kinked into wet, wispy ringlets around her face. She sat outside listening as gospel singing shook the church house panes and folks raised their voices in a great musical petition. Surely a better life awaited in the hereafter. Of all things religious, Lisa loved singing best. Usually she sang in choir or did solos. Folks said God smiled at her rich alto voice.

Oil-soaked rag torches lit the entrance to the

church grounds, throwing shadows across the lichen-covered stone wall. She watched men and boys drift out to stand under ancient oaks and visit over a jug. She noticed couples, some married, some not, slip away into the graveyard to lay behind a family marker. Maybe, like her, they felt safer among the departed.

For the last hour, she had sat against a tree and moved the hot air around with a hand fan advertising Moore Brothers Insurance. She got precious little relief from it.

Lisa Dell always thought Jesus Christ a radical who walked in the dust with the unloved, unvalued, and dispossessed. He talked against government and berated religions of the day. They got Him for it too. Tried, convicted, and sentenced to die – all quite legally.

In her heart she knew Preacher Westerly, an itinerant self-taught minister, railed against her ideas as blasphemous. She also knew him to tip the bottle. When he was into the devil's brew, his lecherous nature rose up and took over.

During the Friday evening call to salvation, her mother had shoved her forward in front of the entire congregation. She had knelt at the flimsy

wood rail and taken Christ as her personal savior in a thin whisper.

The Sabbath crowned revival week when Lisa Dell knew she and other born again petitioners would be baptized in the Suwannee.

Nagging questions played in her mind: *Am I getting washed in the water for me 'cause I gotta respect what Jesus did? Or am I doing it in answer to my sweet granny's dying wish? Mama pushed me into this in front of the whole church so maybe it's to save face for her? Could water really wash away sin? How much do I have to believe?*

On the other hand, seemed like everybody expected it after spending four days living with and among them. Especially Preacher. He had panted after her the entire time. Easiest thing to do, just be quiet and get baptized.

When final service ended, folks ambled out to catch an evening breath of air, gather up sleeping children, and saunter off to their camps. She helped the last of them, and then stood under ancient oaks, dreamily watching fireflies. Breezes, balanced somewhere between oven-hot and summer-sodden, slowly stirred.

Preacher sidled up right behind her. A sour

stink forewarned her even before she felt his dry, scruffy fingers.

“Get your gnarly old hands off me. You supposed to be a man of the cloth. You supposed to stay away from drink. You supposed to set an example.” She edged further around the tree.

“Sister Lisa Dell, you a woman that God made ample. He done that meaning for you to share yourself.” Stumping his toe on a protruding root, Preacher fell to one knee. Bracing himself against the sticky bark of a pine, he wobbled upright and, undeterred, inched around the tree licking his lips.

“Your mother is a good woman.” He staggered slightly, slurring his words, as he attempted to whisper in her ear. “You done accepted our Savior during the call. You gonna be gettin’ baptized on Sunday morning.”

“I know that. Mama made me go up to that altar.”

“Let’s go over yonder under them other trees. We can pray together and I can guide you.” Swaying, Preacher reached for her.

“No.” Lisa backed up a step, wringing her hands. “I think we can talk over by that torch near yonder gate.” She pointed toward the church yard entrance. “Over there. In the light.”

“No, Sister, no. You come with me over under them fur oaks.” He gestured to a dark pool of shadow. “My truck’s there. We can sit so’s I can guide you. Private like.” He snatched at her, stumbled, and fell face down into pine straw. Drooling, he rose to his knees and motioned toward her. “Come git me up. I cain’t make it on my own.”

Tentative, she extended her hand. Rabid dog-like, he grabbed her wrist and held it in a vise grip. She braced against him as he pulled himself upright.

“Your mother done told me to *be* with you.” He grunted, spewing a sour fog inches from her face.

Uncertain, she jerked her head away. Her hair whipped across his face as she turned.

“You smell. In fact, you stink. Mama does mean things to me, but I ain’t going with you.”

“Don’t rise up against your mother and against the Lord. He commanded children to honor they parents. You do as you been told.” Glaring, he yanked her step-by-step across the hard-pack yard toward the dark fringe of pines and his dented pickup.

“God meant you to share yourself. You a hand-maiden just like Biblical Hagar and are saved forever.” He fumbled a moment, breathing hard, and

then stumbled on. He pulled her with him.

At the truck, Preacher shoved Lisa Dell against a rusty wheel well. She flopped off-balance, hands flailed across the dented hood, grabbing for a hold. Uncertain whether she could slap or scratch a reverend, she twisted toward the front bumper.

Preacher clamped a liver-spotted hand across her mouth. Fumbling, he ripped her dress buttons, grabbed her tits, and yanked her skirt up, wadding it around her waist. He fumbled a moment with his pants, then snatched her head back by her hair, and bent her across the ancient front wheel well. Too flaccid from drink and unable to push into her, he slammed her to her knees and shoved her face into his crotch. He ground across her mouth, holding her head tight.

She struggled to stand, pushed against him as she felt his member swell and heard him panting. He flopped her onto her belly and fell onto generous buttocks, knocking her breathless. Moaning, he spent himself onto her bare bottom, then shoved her away, pulled his pants up, and staggered back, pointing at her.

“You a handmaiden. Remember that. A handmaiden.”

Opening the dust-covered cab, he sprawled face down onto a tattered seat, ragged snores rising immediately. Mosquitoes settled on his face and arms.

Lisa slid down the wheel well and knelt next to the truck, sobbing. She stared ruefully at the prone figure, legs dangling out the door.

“Mama, Mama, why do you shove men on me? Especially this preacher. This ain’t Christian guidance.” Snot and tears streamed down her face. Heartsick and frightened, she stood, wadded ripped panties into a tight ball, stuffed them in her pocket, and straightened her dress. The bodice was ripped and two buttons were missing.

Not the first time someone assumed that it was OK to mistreat me because I’m fat. Not the first time Mama promised me away and pushed me toward some man. Not the first time for that. First time for a preacher man.

Crying, she stumbled through the campground to the river’s edge, waded into a gentle eddy and plopped down. Breathing in deep heaves, she sat for a time with her face in her hands.

Gathering herself, she sloshed cold liquid on her butt, inner thighs, and hair-covered mound.

She sucked in a deep breath and ducked under the current.

If only I could stay cradled here forever.

She felt weightless. Her hair floated in a graceful pirouette. Her ears rang and throat tightened. She felt the heavy thump of her heart. No sense saying anything to anyone about this little set-to. She knew Preacher was an itinerant man that came for river baptisms and revival camp meetings. He offered the tiny community salvation and a break in their monotonous hardscrabble lives. Folks simply overlooked his shortcomings. Besides, her mother pushed her into the man's clutches, using her, once again, for some hidden purpose.

Unable to hold her breath longer, she sat up and gasped, humid air filled her straining lungs. Resting her elbows on her knees, she coughed in deep spasms.

Startled, an owl lifted off a dead limb and glided silently into the dark. Night creatures rustled in the weeds. The river whispered south. She sat a long time listening to the life around her. Her breathing steadied. The violent pumping of her heart slowed.

Next day, Preacher never even glanced at Lisa Dell. He knelt on the embankment bent over, praying real hard. He looked less like a preacher than a black crane feeding on some frog hidden in the cattails. Finally, he rose, arms uplifted, and eyed the knot of believers.

Hot as it was, Lisa shivered. Up the bank, families and community members croaked through “Take Me to the Water” slightly off key.

“You people, brothers and sisters in the Lord, come on down to the river with me.” Preacher’s nostrils flared as he spoke, making his hooked nose appear capable of sniffing out sinful thoughts. His eyes lent him the look of an angel-possessed avenger wielding a flaming sword against evil in men’s souls. A thin aura of tarnished glory settled across his bony shoulders. The reek of liquor lingered about him.

“Sing again, fellow Christians. Lift up your voices and tell these folks they will be saved.” He gestured toward the group of converts.

The gathering broke into “We Shall Gather at the River,” their voices earnestly grabbing at a rough harmony, struggling with just the right key.

“Ain’t you been baptized before?” Lisa Dell

whispered to a wrinkled, sun-darkened spinster standing next to her.

“Girl, I like for Preacher to put me in the river ever time he comes through. Only time I gets any attention.”

“Attention?” She thought a minute. “Don’t matter that you done been washed? Ain’t this for God?”

“No, girl. I ain’t doing it for Him. I do it for me. Preacher never seems to mind neither. He jes’ likes to baptize folks. ‘Specially womenfolk.” She spat a stream of tobacco juice onto the sand and carefully wiped her mouth. “Seem like Jesus takes us all any way we come, any time.”

A sandy-haired boy nearby snickered. “Know what? If I ’as big as you I’d be real worried. Preacher cain’t duck no cow.”

Angry at the boy’s mean-spirited taunt, her mother’s desperation, and the conniving self-gratification of the preacher, Lisa Dell spun around.

“For someone about to be baptized, saved from sin and full of heavenly love, you saying some dirt-mean things,” she hissed. “In fact, that’s ugly talk from Satan hisself.”

“Ain’t neither, ’cause it’s true. You ought to be scared about getting dropped and drowning.” The boy snorted.

“Preacher too skinny to be holding you up. He humped you pretty good other night though. I know ’cause I watched.”

“You egg sucking white trash. You don’t know nuthin. I ain’t standing near you and your evil, spiteful tongue.”

“You one needs to worry. Heck, Preacher know you don’t believe. He heard talk about you.”

“He might a’ heard. But he told me I’m saved and can serve as a handmaiden like Hagar. My mama prayed with Preacher. He told me I needed to give myself to him ’cause he’s Jesus Christ’s messenger on earth.”

The boy hooted. “That’s another way of saying he can poke you for free. You sin when you lay with a man not your husband. Jes’ ’cause he’s a preacher don’t make no difference.”

Tears welled up in Lisa’s eyes. She elbowed him aside and stomped defiantly to the end of the line. Sniffing, she gathered her white dress around her generous bosom. A sodden breeze wafted across her face.

Preacher stood a moment on the bank intoning. He prayed. He began another sermon.

“You are buried in water with Christ and your

sins washed away, white as garments you wear. You will emerge clean and filled with light.” His voice rose.

“I hold the key to your everlasting life here in my hands, in this river. Lord said that unless man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. He that believes is saved.”

He took off his black frock coat, waded waist deep into the swamp-fed river and waved people forward. Several deacons inched into the water and stood knee deep, helping lead supplicants toward a wider channel.

Preacher smiled, grasped each petitioner, drew them close and placed a hand-held cloth over their faces, pressing each beneath tea-colored water.

“In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, I baptize you. Your sins are washed away. Walk in life renewed.”

Lisa Dell hung back. She fidgeted, thinking.

If mother told me to lay with Preacher, and Preacher said I would serve as a handmaiden, was it really a sin of fornication? If he forced himself on me, what was that? My sin or his? What about honoring my mother and doing what she told me? How much can a river wash away?

Doubts fluttered through her mind. No sense turning back now. She'd spent days and nights here with these people, working and singing and caring for their children. Preacher had forced himself on her and that felt bad wrong. No matter. Still, baptizing always transformed a riotous revival week into a final sweet day of forgiveness and renewal.

Last in line, she stepped forward and waded out. For his part, Parson licked his lips at the sight of her full body moving through the warm river.

In one motion, he clamped a claw-like hand around her wrist, pulled her to his side, and rubbed his leg across her privates. He placed his free hand over her face and submersed her.

Water rushed over her body, causing her to gasp. Had it not been for the cloth, she would've fallen into a coughing fit.

"In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, I baptize you. You are a daughter of God, carry the word with you."

He lifted her up. His hand slid off her face, down her neck, and slyly pinched her breasts. Again, he placed the cloth on her face and pushed her beneath the water.

“Put your trust in God. You are washed free of sin,” he said loudly to the knot of believers. “Life starts new for you.”

Lifting her up for a second time, he smiled and whispered in her ear. “You a handmaiden of God with a rich body. Share it.”

Unnerved by his whispers, his callous feeling of her body, and her own conflicted, blasphemous thoughts, she struggled against his groping. Gasping, she misstepped, floundered in bottom mud, and fell backward. Her ritual dress billowed out and swamped them both.

Preacher grabbed at her. Struggling, the two sank into deeper water. A great whirlpool swirled about their bodies and gathered up past and future wickedness in one fluid motion.

Sputtering, they clawed to the surface, only to gag and drag each other down thrashing. Silt rose in dark clouds and obscured their struggles.

The gaggle along the bank stood transfixed and aghast. Finally, a deacon and several community members waded out. One grabbed at Lisa Dell’s flailing arms, intent on pulling her to firm footing. Another snatched at her sack dress, tried to wrap his hand in the hem, and haul her up the bank. Instead, everyone sank in a morass of snorts.

Another fella splashed in and tossed a rope to the struggling group. One man grabbed the hemp lifeline, and then another latched on, and, finally, Lisa Dell caught ahold.

Hauled to firm footing, she coughed violently, rotund body heaving, wet hair plastered her face and channeled rivulets into her eyes. Bent over, hands on her knees, she fought to catch her breath. Her breasts hung loose in magnificent pendulums. The cotton dress precisely outlined her full body. Confused and ashamed, she stumbled toward people on the bank as the deacons turned to help Preacher.

A thin farmer stepped forward, glared through bushy eyebrows, and pointed a grime-caked finger at her.

“Girl, you laid with Preacher and the river rejected you. That’s God’s way of punishing your sin. Jezebel. Harlot. Whore.”

Murmurs and whispers ghosted about. Some folks nodded agreement, others stepped back and shook their heads.

“Preacher’s a man of God and you tempted him. You are damned.”

“That ain’t for you to say. Jesus Christ forgave the harlot, forgave Mary Magdalene. He be the one going to judge,” intoned a withered crone.

“It weren’t like that,” Lisa Dell said. “Preacher told me I’m like a handmaiden. My mama pushed me forward same as Sarah did Hagar.”

“God judges. Leave that girl be,” said a young mother, toddler balanced on her hip. “That preacher man is lustful.” Red faced, she turned and scurried away. Several other women nodded agreement.

Lisa stared at the knot of people then turned and watched parson, frantic and alone, as he surfaced slightly downstream. Catching a dead tree limb, he pulled himself toward the main trunk.

Buttons gone, his shirt hung open exposing a fish-belly white chest. His suspenders, ripped off thin shoulders by the current, hung askew about his hips. He struggled, hand-by-hand, up the fallen tree until he could crawl up the bank.

Obligingly, the river washed away the smell of whiskey. A taint of sin lingered.

Lisa plopped down on coarse sand, trembling. Children stood with mouths open and gawked. A baby cried. Some folks turned away, grim faced, and whispered. Others, like moths drawn to a flame, edged closer. Finally, a knobby hand patted her head, wrapped a thin towel around her shoulders, and pulled her to standing.

“Girl, you need to go on now. No sense worrying over what cain’t be undone. Lord works in strange ways. Trust Him. You done been washed in the water.”

During the night, Preacher left out for his next calling. Mama went with him. A neighbor woman said she heard Mama say as a respectable white woman, she promised she’d help him gather new converts. Lisa thought that would be mostly young females. Her mama never even said good-bye.

Alone and on her own for the first time, Lisa Dell felt a lightness of being. Pure and simple, she thought, this baptism was a sign, an omen, a turning point. Washed clean in the water, she felt a new beginning take root.

Without a backward glance, she started off down the dusty road.