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Ebb and Flow

Nancy L. Hedrich

The invitation lay in her pocket like a hot poker, burning a hole through the calico in a direct line to her thumping heart. She had been asked to come to the big house! She had been there once before with her mother when Mrs. Biermiester had taken sick. Her ma had insisted on bringing some of her special soup. It was the biggest house Crystal Lee had ever seen up till then, painted white with green shutters and trim to match. They had the luxury of a yard with trimmed grass surrounded by beds of planted flowers. Crystal Lee had asked her Ma how come the porch was on top of the columns instead of on the ground. "So they can sit outside and catch a cool breeze without the mosquitos bothering them. Mosquitos can't fly that high," explained her Ma. They had knocked, lifting the brass knob three times. Their soup had been accepted by the black woman who opened the green door, and they had left. Now she was to go there alone, by invitation! Her heart thumped faster as her hand slid into her pocket, touching the heavy vellum. It was real, alright. She wondered if anyone else had been invited.

It was Crystal Lee's job to empty the pan of dishwater every morning and every evening. It was one of her earliest memories; flower water she had called it. Stamens covered with sticky yellow, wearing their best blue petticoats, waited patiently in the morning breeze for their beau to buzz them. The crystalline droplets settled on their blue perches, winking back at her like precious tears.

"Do they wonder if they will bloom next year?" she thought, gazing at the flowers but seeing something else. Someone else, with hanks of brown wavy hair her fingers itched to brush back from a handsome forehead and soft hazel eyes that smiled back at her. Would he be home during the "tea"?

Certain that she needed to stop thinking about him but knowing she couldn't, she went back inside the house where she had lived her whole life. Putting the dishpan back in the sink, she saw Ma had filled the jelly jar pan with water up to the marker and placed it on the stove to heat. Ma's eyes matched the worn chambray blouse she wore, a softly wrinkled blue faded with river washings. Those eyes saw all things and dispensed understanding like the generous spoon she used to stir the blackberry jelly, swirls of luscious fruit bubbling their aroma through the small house. Crystal Lee's nostrils breathed in the delicate scent mixed with the fresh baked bread cooling on the sideboard. She had just eaten, but her mouth was already beginning to water in anticipation of the treat ahead.

Pa rose from the scarred table he had made with his father before he left home with his bride. "Thankee for the best bowl of porridge I ever did have,"

said Pa while nuzzling Ma's neck. The telltale pink started rising from below her ears to cover her neck and face. He delighted in her reaction and never missed a morning. Neither did Crystal Lee. "Looks like it'll be a sunny day today, so's I'll take my pail with me. I want to get as much work done as I can," said Pa. With a last affectionate hug and pat, he was gone through the door, a two-legged creature advancing on acres and acres of wheat ripening in the sun.

"Ma, tell me again 'bout how Pa brought you the flower seeds," pleaded Crystal Lee. Smoothing the dishtowel across her hands, Ma sank down onto the nearby stool and traced the memory of that day. "One day your Pa came back from town. He walked in all hot and dusty with a kind of funny grin on his face, so I know somethin' was afoot. 'Flo,' your Pa said, not Florence like he usually calls me, 'I saw something today that I ached to buy.' Playing along, I put my hands on my hip and said, 'Eb, what in tarnation did you go and do that for? We don't need to be spending our money on everything that catches your eye's fancy.' He reached into his overall pocket and held his hand out to me. 'Here, it's for you,' he grinned. I took the white, folded envelope and looked inside. I saw a bunch of little bitty seeds. Your Pa said, 'I saw a picture of cornflowers in the seed catalog. Almost the prettiest blue I ever did see. Almost as pretty as your blue eyes. I'm sorry Flo, but I just had to have 'em.' Well, Crystal Lee, my eyes started watering up and your pa gathered me in his arms and held me for a real long, long time," sighed Ma, remembering. Crystal Lee smiled. She knew the story by heart but never grew tired of asking to hear it again.

"How do I look, Ma?" asked Crystal Lee as she smoothed back her freshly washed hair, soft from rainwater and chamomile, pinned up now that she was "of age."

"You'll do," replied Florence, eyeing her daughter. "You're fine enough for anyone - remember that."

Walking to the river, Crystal Lee used her paddle to shove off from the bank, letting the current easily pull the canoe and its passenger downstream. She hadn't felt like harnessing the horse to the buggy; besides, it was a nice day to float downstream. She had read about a gas-powered buggy - now that would be something to see! The pungent air vibrated with the buzz of cicadas and dragonfly wings dancing their iridescent lives away across the surface of the water. Green reflections of thick live oaks arching across the river drifted across Crystal's face, leaving it dappled with light and shadow. The Brazos river was like mother's milk to this parched land, wet nourishment flowing from generous channels of Texas clay and slate.

Moistening her lips, Crystal Lee clamped them together to dispel her nervousness. Underneath the deceptive calm lay a restless spirit. Thinking back, she hadn't seen *him* in years until - the dance last Sunday night.

"Priscilla, who is that?" she had asked, her breath catching on her teeth.

"Who do you mean?" teased Priscilla, knowing precisely who she meant.

"You know, Pris, over there, leaning against the dance post. Who is he?" asked Crystal Lee, yanking hard on her best friend's sleeve.

"That's young Clay Biermeister; he just graduated and is home now," laughed Priscilla in a knowledgeable way, passing on information she had overhead at the general store just yesterday.

Clay caught the girls' look and smiled back. Crystal ducked her head, thinking, "He's taller than me, but not too tall. And he has a nice smile, but not too wide. And his hair, wavy brown heaps of it." He had asked her to

dance, more than once! She had hummed the songs all the way home, mindless of Ma and Pa's amused glances.

Crystal Lee's hand trailed along the water. "This river never worries where it's going or why," she thought to herself. "It has direction and purpose even while it crisscrosses the countryside, flowing over and around obstacles. Why, people might never have survived here if not for the river. She had heard Ma tell the story so many times she felt that she'd lived through the great drought of '89 when it all but killed everything living. Even the great Brazos had felt it, running its lowest in a century, according to Old Man in town. But it never dried up, not the Brazos, unlike the wells and stockponds that so many others depended on. Times were hard that year. Crops failed, not only for lack of water, but burned to a crisp in the heat. The Texas sun had glared upon them like a woman scorned.

Animals had suffered. They still talked about the cows' incessant noise that summer, mooing day and night. Their plaintive cries could be heard across the county. Mr. Tillman had three cows that went stark crazy, stampeding towards their old waterhole, only to find it dried up. After running themselves into a frenzy, they just dropped dead. People still talked about it. A lot of livestock was lost that year. Some were slaughtered, driving the prices way down, so farmers lost money whether their cows lived or died.

People suffered too. Ebenezer had run up to the house - straight through the door to Florence.

"There's trouble o're the Tillman's. I'm going to hitch up the team, be ready to go," he gasped. Florence had quickly packed her carpet valise with linen strips, herbs and ointment, and a jar of fresh soup. Over the sound of the horses at a dead run and the jouncing of the buggy, Ebenezer

explained, "Ted Cooper was working in his field next to Tillman's. He heard screaming and saw Mrs. Tillman running out of the house, off across the fields. Cooper went looking for Asa Tillman and then fetched me for help. As soon as there's enough of us, we'll go lookin'."

Arriving in a whirl of dust, Ebenezer jumped down, turning to help Florence climb out over the buggy wheel. Seeing several men gathered, he headed to the barn to join them. Concern etched their faces. Florence gathered her skirts and entered the unpainted wooden cabin. Blinking quickly to adjust her eyes from the white hot glare, she set her valise on the table and unpacked.

Ebenezer and Asa teamed up, leaving Cooper and two others to fan out across the fields. The wind carried the name of Alice over the earth, but no reply came back. They followed the crumpled wheat path to the edge of the forest. With a shared look, the men pressed on, looking for broken twigs, pieces of torn cotton, or overturned rocks. On and on they searched, till Asa, stumbling through the thick brush, almost fell head first into the river. Grabbing handfuls of roots and limbs, he saved himself. The corner of his eye caught a flash of color in the distance.

Carefully picking his way, Asa waded over to his wife. Alice was sitting smack in the middle of the Brazos, letting its cool water flow around her and over her hands and legs.

"Alice, I'm taking you home now." Splashing out of the river, the men made their way home with an unprotesting Alice lying quietly in her husband's arms.

Placing her in Florence's capable hands, the men headed outside to scuff their toes in the dust and feel helpless once again. Florence spooned broth into Alice's mouth and changed the cool cloths on her head when they warmed. Everyday that week and several after, Ebenezer

and Asa hauled water from the river. Gallons and gallons they brought back to keep the animals watered and Alice cool. It was a hard year for the Tillman's.

Like everything else that year, the flowers suffered too. Ebenezer returned from his daily morning walk across acres of parched fields and found Florence in bed. Alarmed, Eb sat on the bed, the springs crunching under his weight. "Flo, honey" he asked, "are you feeling poorly?" Hearing only sobs, he gathered her into his arms. "What's troubling you? Tell me please," begged Ebenezer.

"Oh Eb, those, those flowers look like the first cake I ever baked for you, burned to a crisp," stuttered a grieving Florence. "They're gone and dead and they were so pretty," she cried, clutching shriveled stems between her fingers. "Why does everything have to die? Why do we have to live in a place that kills every living thing in sight? Why Eb, why?" she hiccupped and sobbed.

Holding his wife close, Eb had waited for the storm to end and the shaking to stop. Pulling out his bandana hankie, Eb wiped her face. Florence leaned into her husband's arms, letting his strength seep into her inner being. "Here, Eb, let me have that hankie," Florence instructed and proceeded to blow her nose. "Well, that's as much water as I've seen all month," she laughed weakly.

"Flo, life's like the Brazos. It comes and goes, sometimes it's full and sometimes not, but it always remains the river," Eb had whispered into her ear. "We'll see it through together," he said, giving her a squeeze.

The flowers had shriveled up, looking like pieces of brown leather strips someone had carelessly thrown away. The spring of '91 was a wet one and brought many surprises with it: one was the cornflowers that sprang up by the porch like always. Eb declared, "Cornflowers are

hereby a Texas native. Anything that can survive a drought out here deserves to wear the brand of Texas native, whether they be man, beast, or plant."

Laughing back at her husband, Florence declared, "Well, I guess that makes us Texas natives too." Rubbing her back, she had wondered if that was a good time to tell Eb what else the spring rains had brought. Crystal Lee arrived later that year with the golden maples and was named after the clear water that was so essential to their lives.

The canoe glided down the river, neither too fast nor too slow. The Biermeister boat dock was almost in sight. Instead of worrying about the future, her mind was flooded with memories from the past. The flowers, the river, Ma and Pa crowded around: "Remember," they seemed to whisper.

"Does knowing where you've been help tell you where you're going?" she wondered. Ma and Pa knew as newlyweds where they were going to start a family and homestead a piece of land. The flowers knew to bloom every spring, all the knowledge of life contained in their little bitty seed from the year before. Even this river knew where it had been and where it was going.

Crystal Lee dipped her oar into the water, guiding the canoe over to the boat dock. Slipping the knot over the end of the bois d'arc post, she clambered out. Standing tall to stretch her lithe frame, she stood still for a minute, listening—to see if she could hear it. Yes, there it was, there on the cool breeze stirring her skirts and in the gurgle of the water. Life. It was behind her and all around.

She patted her pocket and started walking up the path that would take her to the big house. She knew where she came from and with a clear mind went forward to meet whatever lay ahead.