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Cousins

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Belletete: Cousins

It was the blue jay that she had loved as a child. It was Jeffrey she had loved as an adult. Still, as she watched the blue jay romp about on the branches outside her window, the remarkable beauty that it displayed could not be forgotten, not even by her grandfather's words. For the first time in what seemed to be an eternity, she saw the beauty that marked this bird. Its brilliant blue that brought color to her life.

She jumped up almost instantaneously with her last thought and dashed into the kitchen. Her fingers fumbled nervously with the buttons on her phone.

"Jeff, I really do want to go to lunch with you."

Cousins

by Carolyn Belletete

Randy sat solemnly at the edge of the cow pond, his piercing blue eyes staring aimlessly into the glasslike water. The deep furrows of thought burrowed heavily into his forehead. As he blinked away, his glance and mind were carried to the farm. It was apparent that little had changed since he had left to go to college six years ago in 1962. Cows still chewed placidly on the sparsely growing blades of grass. A few ducks wandered about the edge of the pond quacking incessantly and nipping at a fly or beetle which carelessly landed within the reach of their beak. This was where Randy had grown up, his years of childhood bliss and learning were all around him.

The letter from his Aunt Mira, which he had been reading was laid carefully in his lap, the tender bits of reminiscing about the summers her son Jeffrey had spent on the farm popping out at him. It was impossible for Randy to keep his thoughts from going back to one summer, which would forever remain a part of the memory of Jeffrey's visits.

It was the summer before Randy would begin high school. Most of the boys in his class were working on the farms, which their families owned or rented. Once in a while, a few of the boys would get done with their chores early or else the weather was too miserable to work the land, and then they would come by and just mess around for a while. Generally, Randy spent most of the time by himself. His family lived on a small farm in isolated country.

The best part of that summer for Randy was when his cousin Jeffrey came to visit. Jeffrey was a city boy from Chicago, which fascinated him. There was a wealth of questions Randy wanted to ask Jeffrey about the city, hoping that someday Jeffrey would have him come to visit and experience the sights and sounds of city life for himself. When Jeffrey finally arrived, the boys were immediately friends as well as relatives. Jeffrey was only a year older than Randy, and even though he was from Chicago, he certainly wasn't a snob or pansy as Randy had imagined he might be. The rapport between them was genuine and Randy wanted to show Jeffrey all about the country life which surprisingly interested him. Day after day, the boys spent getting better acquainted and exploring everything about the area.

Although the entire summer was especially memorable, since the bond of friendship was tightly woven between the boys, it was the day before Jeffrey was to go back to the city that was now the focus of Randy's thoughts. The day was already hot and humid, but they wanted to kick around the farm one last time. After an enormous breakfast of pancakes and sausages, Jeffrey suggested that they take the rifles out and do some target practicing. Randy swelled with pride since he had patiently taught Jeffrey to be a better than average marksman and to always remember that a gun should be respected and not used as a toy. Learning to shoot and perfecting his skill was actually going to be tested when Jeffrey came back during the fall to go hunting with Randy and his father.

Shooting was fun but the burning sun grew hotter and hotter the higher it rose in the sky. There was little relief from the heat. No hint of breeze moved even the lightest leaf. The cow pond was only a mile from the house and Randy and his friends had often gone swimming there. Going back to the house for suits would be a waste of time as far as Randy was concerned. More than once he had gone skinny dipping; although, if his mother had found out, she would have really given him the devil for such indecency.

"Jeff, how 'bout we take a quick dip to cool off?"

"That' would be a great idea. But where's the pool? Your mother doesn't have time to take us into town, does she?"

"Aw no. We'd just go down to the cow pond for some skinny dipping."

The skeptical look on Jeffrey's face told Randy that a little more encouragement might be needed to get his cousin's enthusiasm geared up for this.

"The guys from school and I go lots of times when we get some free time. It's really great to see the ducks fly when we splash water at 'em. Only thing (GOD) has to be careful not to rile them too much or they'll come chasing after you. My buddy Mike got a terrific black and blue mark the size of a baseball when the old drake necked him."

After only the slightest pause, Randy saw Jeffrey's face light up. "I guess it would be a great way to cool off. Okay, let's go!" Jeffrey exclaimed.

The boys sped off toward the pond and began taking off their shirts in the process. By the time they reached the edge, both of them were nearly naked. The pond looked more than inviting; it was heaven to the boys. The water itself was no more than about fifty feet across and from experience Randy knew that at the deepest it was only eight feet. The worst part of swimming in the cow pond was getting to the water. For about three feet, all around the edge, it was ankle deep mud mixed here and there with manure. Once past the edge they would revel in the cool refreshing water.

Randy went flying by Jeffrey barely stepping on the edge and threw himself into the water. Coming up spewing water recklessly in the direction of the ducks dozing in the shade, he motioned for Jeffrey to jump in.

"Brother, is this great. I knew I was hot, but this sure does beat standing out in the sun. Hurry up and get in Jeff."

Jeffrey had carefully folded his clothes beside the heap that earlier had clothed Randy's body. His hesitation was only minimal and he prodded through the mire toward the water. Slowly the water rose up as he pulled his foot out of the mud, carefully replacing it again and stepped deeper into the water.

In only a matter of seconds, the water closed over Jeffrey's head and Randy wildly dove under the water and came up to join Jeffrey. Jeffrey's head was bobbing in and out of the water. Enjoying relief from the sweltering heat, Randy splashed, dove, and hollered with glee, oblivious to Jeffrey only a few feet away. Randy swung himself around in the water and looked around for his cousin. Nearby bubbles were gently breaking the surface and Randy assumed that Jeffrey must be submerged, and was probably going to swim under water and pull him under while he wasn't watching. Randy dunked his head under the water to turn the tables on his cousin. When Randy came up this time Jeffrey still was no where in sight.

He must be around Randy thought to himself. "Hey Jeff, come on up! Jeff! Where are you Jeff?"

Slowly an agonizing fear began to grip Randy. A fear which quickly grew until he was nauseated with the tightness in his stomach. Frantically thoughts whizzed through his mind about what he should do. Without thinking, Randy found himself diving into the murky water groping for his cousin. If only he could see in the water. If only he could hold his breath longer. He had to come up for air and return under the water several times before he finally felt his cousin's body not far from the edge of the water, with his legs practically buried in the mud.

Clawing at the sucking mud and pulling desperately at his cousin, Randy realized he must bring Jeffrey to the surface quickly. He had been under the water too long already.

The life-saving courses had been fine when the drowning person was conscious and at least was able to kick their feet to help. But with the dead weight of Jeffrey pulling against Randy it was seemingly hopeless for the lighter boy to bring his cousin out of the water. Struggling beyond his limits, straining every muscle until they felt as though they would literally tear from his body, Randy finally managed to pull Jeffrey to the bank.

Jeffrey's torso was lying lifeless on the bank. The eerie blue of a drowning person glowed through the caking of mud, which was already beginning to crust under the scorching sun. Randy was mesmerized by the frightful sight. His cousin's mouth hung open, muck oozing out and his tongue lolling placidly half in and half out. The eyes entranced Randy. Only the whites were visible.

Panic had squelched the fear in Randy. His first reaction was to run. Run faster and harder than he had ever run before. Run for help, run to hide, run, run, run. But his cousin was lying there dead or dying at his feet. The urgency of Jeffrey's horrifying look embraced Randy totally as he moved Jeffrey's arms so that his head was between his hands and made sure that his mouth was cleared as much as possible of the mud.

Randy searched his mind quickly for whatever remnants of the life-saving techniques he had learned years earlier while in the Scouts. Back pressure, arm lift, back pressure, arm lift. Over and over Randy repeated the words as he fiercely worked on his cousin's still body.

"Oh God, please save him!"

Randy had pulled Jeffrey from the water by his feet and his head was still facing down the bank partially in the quagmire surrounding the pond. Slowly Jeffrey's body slipped closer and closer to the water with each push Randy made on his back. Realizing the possibility of his cousin slipping back into the water, Randy scrambled back to pull him further up the bank. Back pressure, arm lift, over and over again.

"Jesus, he has to come to! Mom's going to really be pissed. Jesus, God help me! What more can I do?" The words tumbled one on top of another from Randy.

Time seemed to drag on forever to Randy. His arms ached agonizingly. His lungs were on fire from gasping for air, hoping that gulps of air would strengthen his physical being.

"Oh God! Oh God Damn! Please save him God." Prayer and profanity mingled incongruously with one another.

Exhaustion had nearly overwhelmed Randy. He was barely able to lift his own arms to apply even one more stroke of artificial respiration when bubbles began popping on Jeffrey's mud-caked lips. Slowly responses began to come from Jeffrey's body. A bizarre combination of quivering and belching shook Jeffrey's body. Barbaric guttural sounds emitted from the colorless gaping mouth. Randy was delighted, amazed, and appalled at the mannerless utterances attempting to form words on his cousin's lips.

The quivering movement caused Jeffrey to once again edge toward the water. Randy quickly grabbed for Jeffrey's ankles and pulled him up the bank. Further this time from the danger of the water.

Finally, Jeffrey opened his eyes and sputtered water and mud from his mouth. Coughing, sneezing, and belching to clear the clogged passages essential to his life. Jeffrey only gazed up at the sky, staring blankly as if hypnotized by the closeness of death.

"Randy? Randy?" he mewed softly as if the words themselves were an excruciating effort.

"I'm right here Jeff. Hang on guy, you're going to be okay. I've got to get help." Randy squealed both in delight and panic.

"I'm so tired Randy. I want to sleep. Let me sleep, okay?"

Randy's concept, that at this point sleep and death were synonymous, drove him as if he were obsessed. "Hey, Jeff, you can't sleep. Don't shut your eyes Jeff. Jeff!"

With every word, Randy vigorously shook Jeffrey, hoping to shake the sleep from him and the life back into him.

"Just let me sleep. Sleep." The words trailed off as Jeffrey began to doze.

The only way Randy could think to keep Jeffrey from sleeping was to keep him talking. But how could he keep him talking and go for help at the same time?

"Jeff, you've got to stay awake. Jeff, keep talking about something."

"Why? Leave me alone. Let me sleep."

"Talking will keep you awake. I got it, do you know the Preamble to the Constitution?" Randy quizzed.

"Sure, sure, but I want to sleep."

"Jeff you start reciting the Preamble, and I want to hear you keep on reciting. Got that Jeff? Keep reciting over and over until help comes. Jeff? Get with it Jeff. Start reciting now."

Randy shook Jeffrey violently to revive him from his stupor. Jeffrey slowly began the recitation.

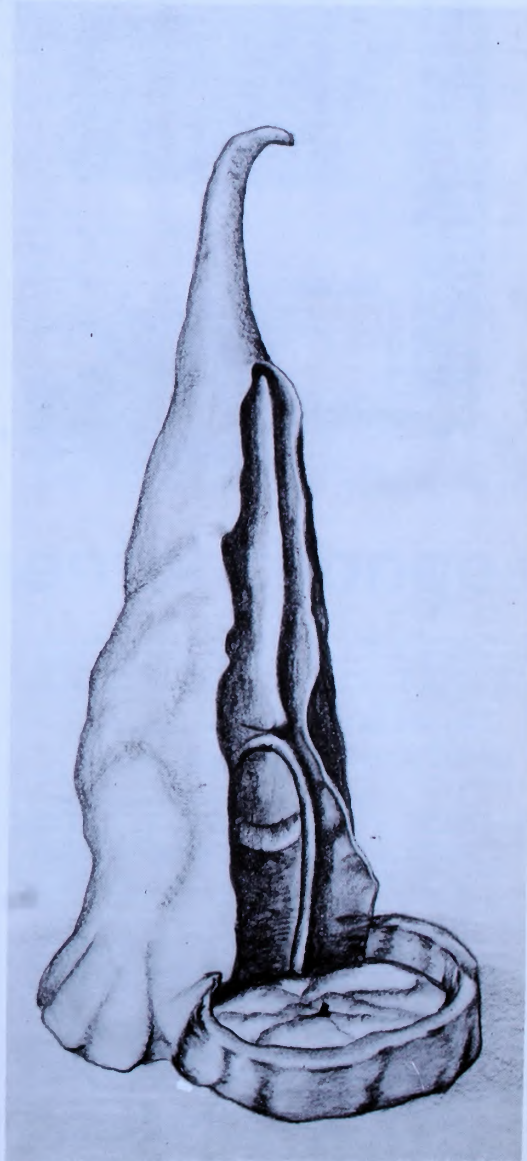
"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice . . ."

No sooner had Jeffrey gotten past the first few words than Randy was streaking toward the house. His lanky, bare legs not pausing or breaking stride once. As if he were a quarter horse, he swiftly galloped toward the house, toward help, toward protection.

The volunteer firemen were summoned and were met by Randy's mother and older brother at the cow pond. They had found Jeffrey lying at the edge of the pond, his body mummified in a casement of mud hardened and cracking under the sun's rays. Jeffrey was still reciting the Preamble just as Randy had instructed he do.

Safely away from the crucial events of the past hour, Randy half listened to the screaming sirens in the distance. He was totally oblivious to the magnitude of what he had done and unaware of the forthcoming praise to be given him for heroism which had been something he had to do.

How long ago that all seemed now. Randy sighed with relief of the memory's end and with the sadness of the present time. He forced himself to pick up the letter, re-reading it word for word. Then, as if he was overcome by some unknown power, he wildly shredded the letter over and over until minute pieces of words were all that remained, telling him of Jeffrey's death in Viet Nam. With a futile ferocity, he flung the scraps onto the cow pond and watched them float aimlessly, a duck occasionally pecking at a scrap here and there. It was a hot humid day as Randy galloped quickly back to the house, never breaking stride, never looking back, never wiping the tears from his cheeks.



Candle Holder

Sylvia Carnes