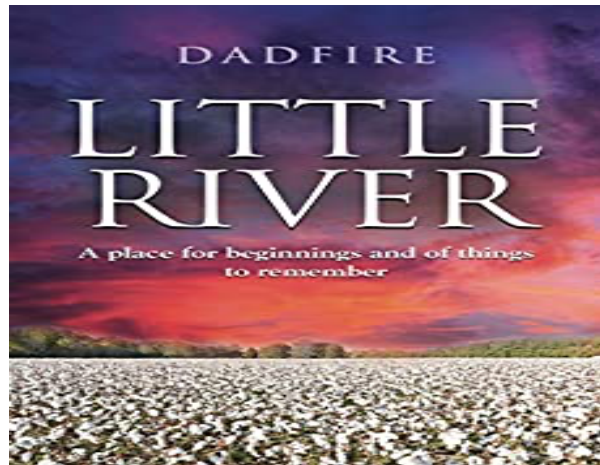




Little River

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CHAPTER TEN **Cousins Make A “Pit” Stop**

The only waterways we might get to see that were clear water, would be creeks like the Fourche River up in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains. It was close to the Missouri state line where some of our relatives lived. We didn't see them very often, perhaps only once every couple of years. We preferred to go see them and do the visiting. That way, we could leave and go home, when we were good and ready. Jack and I did enjoy fishing and playing in that crystal, clear water there, but honestly didn't really care much about having to see our relatives, especially our cousins!

We didn't have enough, comfortable space at our house, for an entire visiting family to spend much time with us. Jack and I didn't care to have any visitors around at all. It meant we had to give up our beds, usually sleep on the floor, and be out of our room.

My Aunt and Uncle on my daddy's side lived up around those foothills on the Fourche River. Jack and I always hated it when they would come around. They had two boys who were older than us. These cousins were very mean, and would always mess with our toys, fishing reels or any of our stuff they could get their hands on. They would break your things, just for the fun of it.

On this particular day, Jack and I were having our usual sword fight in the yard, with our sticks we used for swords, when we heard a truck churning up that loose gravel.

We could see the dust cloud rising high above the electric poles, coming our way down the dry, dusty road. To our surprise, the old truck pulled right up in our front yard as it came to a screeching halt. Their brakes were so bad, they barely stopped within a foot of running into our house, making that horrible noise that hurt our ears. It was the kind of noise that sent this sharp, cringing, pain through your head. A sound like someone running their fingernails down a

blackboard at school. It gave me and Jack, what we called the unpleasant willies, along with shivers up and down our spine.

Jack ran into the house announcing, "I think we are in for some company." That's when I realized, oh no, it was my worst nightmare conceivable. It was those menacing cousins from Fourche River. Trouble no doubt, has arrived!

Out jumped Aunt May and Uncle Remus, followed by those two least favorite cousins of ours. Aunt May was so happy to see us though. She wore these big, huge glasses that covered her whole face. The lenses were so thick, that when she looked at you, both eyes looked like the full moon was just winking back at you. It was adorable in a way and she was always very sweet with us boys.

Her hair was tied up in this tight bun on the top of her head, with this big looking needle thing stuck through it. I thought that hair needle resembled a weapon for sword fighting, more than it did for holding up hair. She had these strings of beads that were hanging way down from her neck. The beads would bang together, and make these noises that reminded me of a train going down a track, every time she moved her head...clack, clack, clackity, clack! She wore this perfume that was so strong, it would make me sneeze and my eyes water. Aunt May shouted out, "You kids have grown so much since I seen ya last... Y'all come here and give your Aunt May a big ol hug."

She was squeezing me so tight I thought my eyes were going to pop right out of my head that was buried in her chest, not to mention a little pain from those hard beads being pressed against the side of my face. I figured they were going to leave indentions in my face, after she got through hugging me.

Finally, after all the hugging and greeting, everybody began to make their way into the house. Aunt May plopped down on the couch, and told Uncle Remus to sit down. He took a seat by her side, and she was talking and going on, while nobody else was able to say anything. Uncle Remus would start to say something and Aunt May would quickly interject, "I'm still talking Remus, don't interrupt me."

Uncle Remus would let out a big exhale of frustration, look over at us boys, and with a long sigh, saying, "I can't ever get in a word edgewise with this woman."

Uncle Remus was a nice guy I suppose. He was never known to say a whole lot, but when he did, it was always to the point. Every time I had ever seen him, he had on what looked to be the same worn out overalls, and it prompted me to ask him if he ever just wore blue jeans or something different.

He said, "A real man only wears overalls or suspenders," and emphatically added, "Belts are for sissies!"

He always had quite the stomach, and I figured that's why he liked the overalls. Plus, he always liked hanging his thumbs around the straps at the top of his chest. I guess that was as good a place as any to put them. He had this long mustache that ran down both sides of his jaw and blended in with his long scruffy beard. I asked him if he ever shaved it. He said he couldn't remember the last time he didn't have a beard. His hair on top was almost all gone. All that was left was a couple of long strands of hair on top that he would pull over to one side. He treated those

last two strands of hair like prized possessions. Those two lonely strands of hair on that bare head reminded me of a couple of spaghetti noodles left all alone on a bare plate, ready to be washed.

Aunt May had been going on and on talking for quite some time, but Uncle Remus finally had enough and burst in with this animated, enthusiastic expression on his face. He excitedly said, "I got some big news to tell y'all."

He explained how they were actually on their way to West Memphis and they couldn't stay but about an hour. They needed to get on their way before dark to see Aunt May's brother there.

He started telling how her brother had gone up north, got a good job at the car plant in Michigan, and was coming back next week to move their whole family up there. He wanted to talk to him to find out more about it. Uncle Remus went on saying he wanted to do the same thing, hoping to get hired there, and later come back to get Aunt May and the boys after getting settled in and saving enough money.

Daddy said, "That's a great idea Remus. I hear they pay real good money up there at those plants, and have lots of benefits they give their employees!"

Uncle Remus, nodding his head, continued, "Oh, they say you can go to a doctor practically free. Not only that, I've been told they also put money in a bank to build up for your retirement. They got these unions there too and the workers get together to make sure you have all these rights you don't get everywhere else."

Even though daddy acted happy for Remus, I could tell when he looked away, rolling his eyes, that he was thinking to himself something like... Yeah, if he doesn't get fired after the first month.

Daddy had told me once that Uncle Remus had tried to be a farmer. He said he simply never had it in him, wasn't cut out for it, and would never stick to one thing very long. He would take a job here and there, doing mainly odd jobs. Nevertheless, if he could get hired at a plant up there and stay with it, dad knew it would be good for his family.

I figured that we would stay farming and never go up north like that. Dad had told me before that he didn't like the cold weather there, and the little bit of snow we got here once or twice in the winter was enough for him.

Now the ladies were just yapping away while daddy leaned back just listening in. Uncle Remus reached into his side pocket of his overalls, pulled out this dark brown, square chunk of chewing tobacco, held it out to daddy, and offered him a piece. Daddy politely said, "No thanks Remus, my smoke will do me fine," and dad lit up a cigarette. He and mama both smoked cigarettes that had that unmistakable picture of a big camel on the front of the pack. I wondered what a camel had to do with cigarettes, but they sure did like them.

Dad explained to Remus, "I've mostly quit the chewing stuff since Belle doesn't like me doing it in the house, so I gave it up."

Uncle Remus replied, "Well, suit yourself, but I never let a woman decide what I can or can't do," and proceeded to tear off a nice size piece of chewing tobacco. With his finger and thumb, he grabbed the side of his jaw, pulled it open really wide, and stuffed it in.

Aunt May, after being quiet for a while, in a demonstrative voice says, "Ed... Ned, one of you boys go to the truck and get me my tobacco can."

Ned goes out for a minute, comes back and hands her the red can with the little flip top. Inside is her smoking tobacco. She takes this little white rectangular paper sleeve out of her pocket. She then takes the tobacco can, and carefully shakes out a precise, little row of tobacco on the paper. She starts to roll it up into a nice, little, pencil shape, and then licks down one side of the paper right before finishing the roll. She then continues rolling it up into a long, cylindrical shape, licking the entire thing, from end to end.

Finally, she folds it over one last time, pinching the ends together, to complete her masterpiece, and then asks Remus for a light. Once she started smoking it, she would have a few loose grains of tobacco to gently spit out, to complete the process.

She always spilled some tobacco on her lap and would swipe it off to the floor or the furniture. The whole ordeal to me was like tobacco art in motion. It was a fascinating ritual to watch, that I am sure she had repeated a thousand times. I wondered to myself why she didn't just buy cigarettes from a store all ready to smoke like my parents did. That sure seemed like it would be a whole lot less trouble.

I liked the smell of that tobacco a lot more than the tobacco Uncle Remus chews. That stuff would often make my stomach sick when he would start spitting out the juice. You could see some drool running down the corner of his mouth along his mustache.

Mama said, "Bean... Go grab that spittoon we got in the back room by the porch for your Uncle Remus."

I put down the spittoon close by, and although he was pretty good at hitting it, he would still miss sometimes. He always had this little, brown line of tobacco that was in one corner of his mouth. It was always stuck there and I couldn't keep myself from staring at it. Every time I looked at him when he would talk to me, all I could look at was that brown line down his jaw. It's like when somebody has a piece of food on their lip showing while eating, that just hangs there, and I want to do or say something about it, but I don't.

By now, mama, daddy and Aunt May are smoking up a storm, filling up the ashtrays and the room with smoke. I felt like I could barely breathe. Large, white grayish clouds filled the room, and would float in thick layers, hanging in a fixed position below the ceiling. I could hardly see the ceiling, because of all the smoke in the room. I would wave the smoke away from my face, watching it swirling around and then the cloud would circle right back in place. I never could get used to the pesky smoke, and I told myself that I would never smoke one cigarette when I grew up.

Finally, mama said, "Why don't you boys go on and play and let us adults talk now."

Jack and I really hated to hear those words, as we knew that surely was going to mean some trouble.

Cousins Ed and Ned are not the kind of cousins you just go and play with. They were big, physical boys, and meaner than dirt. They would bully you, and loved pinching you as hard as they could. They would do anything to make you mad or cry. They were about thirteen and fourteen years old, and especially loved picking on anybody younger and smaller than they were. They

went running off to our rooms, and Jack and I know we are in for some trouble. When we got there, they were already messing with our toys, kicking and throwing ‘em across the room.

Then Ed starts bending our construction set pieces, so we couldn’t use them, and says, “Let’s see ya build something out a’ that!”

Now I’m getting mad and tell ‘em, “Y’all quit doing that or you’ll be sorry!”

Ed said, “Yeah, these things are for babies anyway.”

Ned eyed my BB gun in the corner of the closet and exclaimed, “What have we here? Now this is more like it... I wonder how good this thing shoots!”

Ned cocked the handle and started firing shots at some little train cars we had on a track in the corner. He was counting the cars as he knocked them off the track. Jack told him to leave our stuff alone.

Ned said, “You want to do something about it, little baby.” Jack finally had enough, grabbed a baseball, and hit Ned in the side of the head with it. Ned angrily said, “Now, you’ve done it boy,” and pointing the BB gun right at Jack, shouted, “Y’all better run.”

Jack replied, “We can outrun you fat boys any day. We’ll run down to the river so fast... You won’t be able to catch us.”

So Jack and I took off running to get outside, and we could hear mama say as we darted by, “Boys, y’all quit your runnin’ in the house.”

I was following Jack, but instead of heading toward the river, I followed him to the back of the house, out of sight. We kept hidden until we saw them come out and start running toward the river, the opposite direction. Jack said, “I can’t believe those big dummies believed me when I told ‘em we were heading for the river.”

I said, “Jack, that’s a good idea telling ‘em that. They will be looking for us down there for quite a while, thinking we’re hiding somewhere down by the river bank.”

We went on down to the barn, and Jack was by the stinky pit that we had helped daddy with earlier. Jack was kneeling there, staring at it, like he was deep in thought. I could see those wheels turning.

Jack said, “I got a great idea, if you want to have some real fun with those boys.”

I wondered exactly what Jack had in mind. With a little devilish look on his face without speaking, he was pointing at the boards we had just put down to cover that nasty hole. I looked back at Jack and we began nodding in agreement without saying anything. It was like we were reading each other’s mind, about what we were going to do.

I said, “Jack that is the best idea you have ever come up with.”

So we started removing the stakes, the flagging around the hole, and the board cover we had only put down a little earlier with dad. We were already beginning to giggle, just thinking about our most glorious plot.

It took both of us with all our strength, to drag the contraption of wood we helped daddy build, and set it out of the way. Now we were wishing daddy hadn’t used such big boards, because they made it very heavy to move. We were grunting and straining but managed to move the cover out

of the way. With the surging odor rising out of that hole though, we knew we had to finish our little trap quickly.

Now there were some heaping piles of leaves all around, from the big trees close by. We could easily grab a big bunch of leaves all at once, as well as lots of various size sticks. With the longest, skinniest sticks we could find, we began our task of covering the hole. By the time we added all the sticks, leaves, and grass, we had the hole totally disguised. It didn't look a whole lot different from the ground around it.

There was this big pile of old lumber by the side of the barn on one side, and an old fence line that ran down the other side with little space between. It created this corridor that would lead right to our trap. There wasn't any way those boys would miss that hole, if we could get them to run through here. If we only got one of them to fall in it, the sight of that happening would be worth all our hard effort.

We waited until the boys realized we didn't go down toward the river. We knew they would head back toward the house looking for us, trying to find where we were. We were watching for them and would run around the barn in an obvious, loud manner, hoping they could see us in the distance.

When they spotted us, they ran in our direction, arrived at the barn, and started looking for us. We had hidden behind one of the big trees behind our ingenious trap.

We yelled out loudly, "Hey, you big, dumb nitwits... We're over here," and started throwing dirt clods at 'em.

Not to be out done, Ned yelled back, "Well, all y'all got is dirt clods... I got this here BB gun and I'm fixin' to do me some real target practice."

He started firing off shots, and we could hear the bb's pinging off the bark of the big oak tree. One shot managed to hit Jack in the back. He acted like it didn't bother him that much, but I know it had to hurt. We were bombarding 'em with dirt clods as fast and hard as we could throw 'em. They were jumping around, dodging most of them, but we did manage to land a few on our targets. Then one big clod hit Ned right square in the forehead, and now, they were really getting mad.

They had enough and came running our way as fast as they could, right straight toward the pit we covered up. It went just like we had planned. One of 'em fell right in, Ed first, then Ned followed right after.

They were wallowing around in that slimy, stinking mess of outhouse holdings, up to their chest, moaning and groaning, throwing a fit, and sounding like trapped varmints, screaming and hollering. They were cussing with words that I wasn't sure I had ever heard before. They would try to climb out and slip right back in a few times. They knew by now what they had fallen into.

Jack and I were just rolling in laughter, the kind of laugh that is so hard, it hurts your stomach but oh so enjoyable. We didn't want to hang around long enough to be there when they managed to get out. We ran back to the house but could barely contain ourselves laughing so hard. We didn't care what trouble we might get into for pulling that prank. It would be worth any punishment, even if it meant getting a few licks.

We finally got home still bursting with laughter, and stopped at the front porch, ready to run into the house when we spotted 'em coming. Mama heard us and came out on the porch. She knew something had to be up. She didn't see Ed or Ned anywhere.

In a manner like she knew we had done something, mama asked,
“What have you boys been up to? Where is Ed and Ned?”

I almost couldn't contain myself to answer. I tried to get control, but I kept interrupting my words with fits of laughter,

“I don't know...hehehe. They were down at the barn...hehehehe... Got...themselves...hehehe...in a stinking mess of...hehehe... something,” as we continued laughing. Everybody else had come out on the porch to see what was going on.

Then Ed and Ned showed up looking like big, slimy snails. They were all covered in dirt, slime, old leaves, sticks and toilet holdings, stinking to high heaven and looking like a couple of zombies. Everybody stood there not believing their eyes. Mama exclaimed in disbelief, “What in the world has happened to you boys?”

Those boys were so mad, their nostrils were going in and out like mad old bulls about to charge. They were glaring back and forth between Jack and me, staring at us with such intent of revenge, I thought their eyes were going to pop out of their sockets. We didn't think they could stink any worse than when they first showed up, but with a little help from us we managed to pull that off too.

Daddy looked at Jack and me with crossed arms and lowered his head toward us with a squint in his eyes, knowing we had everything to do with this. We pretty much knew he had figured out by now, what we somehow had done to those boys, knowing we had recently helped him cover up that nasty hole.

Ned and Ed went on to explain what had happened to them in no short order. Here, Jack and I are in some of the most serious trouble ever for something we did, but every time we glanced over at them in that stinking, slimy condition, we would burst out laughing all over again. We just couldn't help it. We were laughing so hard, we had to hold our hands down on our knees to keep standing up.

After everything settled down for a minute, mama made us apologize for what we did to the boys. Flustered with what we had done, she said, “You boys should be ashamed of yourselves, treating your cousins like that. Y'all go to your room, shut the door and don't come out, until your daddy and me sit down to figure this thing out, and what to do about it.”

We happily went to our room just like mama told us to do but could still hear most of what was going on through our open window.

Ed and Ned got cleaned up the best they could at the water pump beside the house. Then mama went to get some of dad's old clothes that he didn't wear anymore, for the boys to have something clean to change into.

Finally, Aunt May said, “Time's a wastin', and we need to be getting on the road, to be sure to make it to West Memphis by dark.”

They started loading up their truck, and mama gave them some food to eat along the way. She also gave them an apple pie she had just baked, to try to make up for what we had done. We could hear her again apologizing again for what we did. They were saying departing words, and daddy was telling them that he hoped things would work out for Uncle Remus concerning the job up north.

After they were gone, we heard mama say to daddy, "So what are you going to do to those boys now for pulling that prank?"

We heard daddy answer, "Today, they ain't mine, they're yours."

Then we heard 'em both start laughing almost as hard as Jack and I had! Jack and I watched the dust cloud from our window, rising high in the distance from their truck, heading down that same dusty road they had arrived on, just a short time earlier.

That rising dust could not begin to match how high our spirits had been lifted from our accomplishments, on that most glorious and wonderful day.

Cousins Make A Pit Stop (A poem by the author)

I heard their old truck comin' down the gravel road
Saw the dust cloud risin' 'bove the 'lectric poles
As their truck pulled up in a screeching halt
Their brakes so bad, they could barely stop
It was my Aunt, my Uncle and my cousins too
They said they'd stop for just an 'our or two
On their way to town, they was drivin' through
Now me and little brother gotta handle this crew

Out jumped Aunty May, hair stiff as a broom
Could take her hair and sweep the room
Strings of beads hanging down her neck
That cling and clack like a train on a track
Her glasses so big, 'bout covered her face
Just add a handle and they'd make a rake
Her eyes so big through her glasses it seemed
Like seeing the moon winking back at me
With perfume bought at the five and dime
So strong it makes me dang near cry
She gives a big hug and squeezes so tight
I think my eyes might pop right out

She takes a seat, plops down on the couch
Then tells Uncle Remus to sit on down
He takes a seat right by her side
But can't get in a single word edgewise
Now ol Uncle Remus, he's a nice enough guy
Wears overalls purt near all the time
Cause his stomach don't fit in regular pants
Always scratching his butt like they's fire ants
His mustache goes way down his jaw
His beard so scruffy, feels sharp as a saw
His hair on top is 'bout all gone
'Cept a strand or two, 'bout a foot long
Then cousins Ed and Ned, they come on in
Bringin' their stuff like they movin' in
So me and little brother gotta make us a plan
How to deal with this rowdy unwelcome clan

Now Pa leans back, just listin' in
To the ladies yappin he's takin' in
Uncle Remus offers Pa a piece of his chew
Pa says no thanks, my pipe'll do
From his pocket Uncle Remus tears off a wad
Then sticks that chaw in the side o' his jaw
Soon a little drool comes runnin' down
And settles in a crack down the corner of his mouth
Sometimes he misses the spittoon when he spits
Gotta watch where you walk so's not to slip
Aunt May reaches for her tobacco can
Then rolls some smokes and licks 'em end to end
Now I can hardly breathe, clouds of smoke fill the room
Can't see the ceiling or across the room
I wave it away to keep it out of my face
But the smoke seems to stay right in place

Now cousins Ed and Ned are meaner than dirt
Ed pulled my hair, pinched little brother's butt
They'd do anything to make youngins cry
'Specially little folk 'bout half their size
They ran to our rooms fast as they could

Went to breakin' our toys like I knew they would
Then Ned shot brother with our BB gun
Took another aim and said, "Y'all better run"
So we went runnin' down the hill a bit
Past this place where Pa once dug a pit
Then we yelled out loud, "Y'all dumb nitwits"
Runnin' mad in a rage they fell down in the pit
It was the hole for the outhouse before Pa moved it
Now we ran back home laughin' all the way
Couldn't believe the fun we was havin' that day
Ma said, "Where's them boys at anyways"
I said, "Oh, they went on down the hill to play"
Ma said, "Well we're ready to eat"
Supper's on the stove, wash your hands, wipe your feet
Got beans and taters, cornbread too
Got sliced tomatoes and a little stew
Then 'bout that time, them boys showed up
Sinking worse than they did when they first showed up
All covered in slime and lookin' like zombies
We went to laughin' so hard 'bout busted our tummies

When Ma found out just what we done
Said, "That's no way to treat your cousins
Y'all go to your room now and don't come out
Got to sit on down now and straighten this out"
She told the boys to go wash by the pump
They came back after still smelling like skunks
Uncle Remus said, "It's time to be leavin" then
As me and my brother watched with a grin
From our window we yelled out, "Y'all come back again"
'Cause me and little brother,
Sure enjoyed our kin