

## **The Baptism**

**by James B. Goode**

There were several reasons why nearly everyone in Deckerd, Tennessee thought my Momma, Vicy Ratliff, was crazy. She ran away from home when she was fourteen and married my Daddy, Arlis Sexton, a building contractor seventeen years her senior. Besides, he had been married before, had three grown children, and an ex-wife who still lived in the same town. My daddy had two main loves in his life—clear, charcoal filtered Tennessee moonshine and any young woman who would listen to his line of bull. When he met Momma, he told Lymon Francis, his trusted colored helper, that he had “met the most voluptuous morsel of feminine pulchritude he’d ever seen and was determined to have her, even if it meant having to attended his own funeral.”

“I don’t know nothin’ ’bout no pulchritudes, but you knows that them womens can be trouble. Just recollect what happened with the first one,” Lymon said. “You might as well poke your eyes out right now and be done with it.”

They got married by the Justice of Peace in Deckerd and in the next six years had me and my two sisters. One time I overheard Daddy laughing and telling Lymon that Momma could just look at his whangdancer and get pregnant.

But when Momma declared that she was going to build a finish laundry next to our house, most everyone knew for sure that she wasn’t dipping with all her oars in the water.

“That is the hairbrainedest idea I ever heard tell of,” our next door neighbor Reva Stamper told her as they sat around the table drinking coffee one morning. “Southern women do all their own laundry with a washboard and tub. They can’t afford to pay someone else to do their chores. Their men won’t stand for it!” she declared.

“These ‘Southern women’ are damn tired of rubbing their knuckles to blood and bone,” Momma said. “You wait and see, they’ll come in droves. There ain’t no tellin’ now much money there is out there stuffed in bras and fruit jars.”

Daddy thought she ought to stay at home like a good wife and take care of us girls. Even though he wasn’t particularly religious, he loosely paraphrased the Bible. “The man is the head of the house and it is the job of the woman to honor him and help keep his house and young ’uns,” he said.

“A man ain’t the head of nothin’,” she said. “My daddy bossed me enough in my first fourteen years and I ain’t gonna let no man tell me what to do. I ran away from home because of a bossy man. My daddy wouldn’t even let his fingernails get dirty, cussed us from daylight to dark, and had seven of us and Momma pullin’ weeds all day in the hot sun. I got so damn tired of weedin’ that tobacco that I took to pullin’ it up,

stickin' in back in the ground, and prayin' that the whole damn field would die."

Daddy knew there was no talking her out of it and if he kept on standing in her way she would make his life miserable. There was always the threat of "cuttin' him off permanent," as Momma said. When Daddy told her "she couldn't do that, she didn't know where he was getting it," she grabbed him by the shirt collar and looked him dead in the eye and said, "If I ever hear tell of you foolin' with some other woman, being 'cut off' might take on a whole new meanin'." Daddy knew she meant it. When she took on that graveyard dead serious look about her, I guess Daddy had no doubt that the stress of trying to sleep with one eye open wasn't worth it. Living with Momma sometimes was like living with a box of hammers. He knew that when Momma got like this, he might as well be talking to a signpost.

By 1946, Momma had saved \$2,500 from selling eggs and milk. Lymon found out that the Army was selling some laundry equipment used in the prisoner of war camp up at Camp Forrest in Tullahoma and told her about it. "They has declared Camp Forrest and Northern Field surplus and they is sellin' off most everything, Miss Vicy. Don't you let Mr. Arlis know I told you nothin'," he said. "He'll throw a hissie-fit."

"I don't give a red rat's ass what kind of fit he throws. I am goin' to build a finish laundry and he might as well get on the train and ride with me," she said.

She got "gussied up," as Lymon said, and took her \$2,500 dollars to Tullahoma and bought all the laundry equipment Lymon could pile in five loads on his five-ton truck. She stored it in our tobacco barn and started working on Daddy and Lymon to construct a building next to our house.

Since she had no money left and needed some other laundry equipment to round out the shop, she went looking in the closest, large city. She found Jim Cox of the Marvel Laundry Company in Nashville who sold commercial equipment. She insisted that he come to Deckerd to see what she had planned. He was so impressed he personally arranged for a bank loan for \$20,000 from the National Bank of Rochester, New York. She paid off the loan in two years, an act that caused the president of the bank to come all the way to Deckerd to see how this Southern, country, woman had pulled off such a feat. After he found out she had signed contracts with all the hospitals for miles around and with the military training base at Camp Forrest that was being converted to an airbase, he went back to Rochester with quite a story to tell his bank board.

Momma hired lots of young, colored girls to work in the laundry. She was known all over for paying a fair, living wage so they came in droves, seeking work. Although we had lots of contact with colored folks in Momma's business, we didn't really know many of their people. The young girls came to work at the laundry and brought their babies. They left in the evenings, walked the long, dusty street to Alabama Row, and disappeared into the mysterious place where most all colored people lived in our town. We rarely went to Alabama Row, except to ride with Momma sometimes when she drove some of the colored girls home.

The most special one of these colored women was a tall, very black, regal girl named Geneva who Momma hired to stay at the house and be a wet nurse for the babies. Of course, she also cooked, made the beds, and performed other house chores. But the most important thing she did was teaching the three Vicy Ratliff girls (as we were known by everyone) manners and all the things associated with growing up to be ladies.

"Now you sit with those pretty knees together, Miss Gay," she would say. "And don't show your underdrawers to the world . . . Ladies sit with one hand in their lap and eat with the other when they is at the table—no elbows on the tabletop neither," she insisted. "Every one of you is goin' to takes a bath everyday and put on fresh clothes for as long as I draws a breath on this earth," she warned. She laid all our clothes out

on cane-bottomed chairs in front of the fireplace every night. When Lymon kindled the fires in the morning, she always scooted the chairs closer to the heat to make sure we had clothes as warm as toast.

Momma came in late one evening while I was sitting at the kitchen table doing my school homework. She made a cup of coffee and sat down across from me. She didn't say anything, so I peeked at her over the top of my math book. She was staring out the kitchen window with tears streaming down her cheeks. Momma almost never cried. She cried once when her last baby was stillborn, once when her Momma died, and once when our old dog Fetchit died. So I knew something was dead or dying.

"What's wrong Momma?" I asked. At first, she didn't answer. She continued to stare toward the window until the tears pooled up on her lips and dripped to spatters on the yellow Formica table.

"I can't lose her," she said. "She's like a sister to me. She's everything to me. All my life I been looking for someone with a soul like her's—a friend who would stick by me in the tempest that this life is . . . I know they say the Lord won't give you a burden you can't bear but this one is going to break me in half." She cradled her head on her arm and sobbed, shaking the table like a rocking wave.

I knew instantly she was talking about Geneva. I knew she hadn't been feeling good but we thought she might just be tired. Before I could say anything, Momma said, "Geneva's got bad cancer. I had her to Doc Fields today and he says they ain't much can be done."

This hit me like I'd fallen out of a tree. I couldn't get my arms around the idea that Geneva wouldn't be a part of our lives. Because Momma was so busy with the laundry, we depended on Geneva for everything. Almost all of the tenderness and love I knew came from her.

For the next few days, Momma lay in the bed and cried constantly. Finally one day she quit crying, like she just turned off a spigot. She got dressed in her best gingham dress, put on a blue straw Sunday hat, put me in the car with her, went down to Alabama Row, loaded Geneva in her big Buick, and took her over to the Winchester Hospital. When she got there, we marched into the lobby and she said loudly, "I've got a sick woman out here and I want a room for her in this hospital." Burris Campbell, the hospital administrator, came out of his office to see about the commotion.

"What's going on here, Miss Vicy?" He asked.

"Geneva is in the Buick outside, sick to death with cancer. I want her brought in here and put to bed. I aim for her to have the best care she can get and if she is to die, I'll have her die with dignity."

"Now, Vicy, you know we can't put colored people in the Winchester hospital," he said. "You'll have to take her home and let Doc Fields look after her at her house."

Momma looked him up and down, bit down on her right fist, then asked, "How many finish laundries is there anywhere close to here?"

"Why, only one I know of, Miss Vicy," he said.

"And who owns that laundry?" She asked.

"Why, you do, Miss Vicy," he answered.

"Well, Mr. Campbell, if you expect to have clean sheets, pillowcases, towels, or a clean rag of any kind you'll put Geneva in the hospital and not say another word!" Momma always bit her fist when she got mad. She stood there waiting for his answer, biting her fist and then slamming it down on the receptionist's desk.

Mr. Campbell glanced down to his feet, then slowly raised his head and looked over his reading glasses. "Bring her in the back door and we'll put her in a room at the rear of the ward. You know I'll pay a price for this," he said.

Geneva stayed in the Winchester Hospital for the next two weeks. Finally, she begged to go home.

"I wants to be in my own bed, in my own nightgown, instead of this dress with the back all split out," she pleaded. "The grits in here is awful. They taste like river sand mixed with ditch water."

Momma took her home, warning Mr. Campbell that when Geneva got worse, she'd be back and he better have a bed ready.

One hot, summer day about a week later, Momma called for me to come to the front of the laundry. I had been roller skating the laundry from the front counter to the back so Lymon could load the washers.

"Gay, you go on down to Alabama Row and take Geneva her supper and this stack of clean sheets and pillow cases," she said.

I walked the dusty road toward Alabama Row, carefully trying to balance the plate of food in one hand and the stack of brown paper-wrapped packages of bed linens in the other. I arrived in the Row with all of the fried chicken on the plate and three stray dogs following me. I was glad when I got inside the gate and picket fence at Geneva's where they couldn't get to me.

Geneva's house was a lilting, frame shack, held together with road dust and Tennessee rainwater. Each corner was blocked with stacks of rocks that had subsequently sunk into the soft ground to various depths at each corner. The result was a twisted rectangle that made the unpainted batten boards have a slight corkscrew look.

I came up the three rickety, wooden steps onto the rotting boards of the porch and tried to peer through the screen door to see if anyone was stirring. A mid-day quietness had settled into the fabric of the house. Cicadas rubbed their paper wings in the pines along the fencerow. A fly, caught in a web attached to the porch post spun and buzzed in a last desperate attempt to fly away from the spider's jaws. I knocked on the doorframe. At first, no one answered except an old mongrel, yellow dog that skirted the perimeter of the swept, dirt yard and growled behind its bared teeth. I went over to one of the open windows, placed my hands beside my eyes to shade the sun, and tried to see if anyone was inside, when I heard a faint voice.

"Who is you?" the voice said.

"Geneva, this is Gay. Momma sent me down here with your lunch and some clean bedclothes," I said through the window screen. Momma had "borrowed" Daddy's carpenter's crew and installed screens so the flies wouldn't bother Geneva as she lay in her bed.

"Why, come on in child," the faint voice of Geneva came from somewhere in the hot interior of the shotgun house. I opened the screen door slowly and let it ride against my behind as it closed. The rusting spring groaned in harmony with the Cicadas.

"I'm in the back room," Geneva said. I squinted my eyes until they adjusted to the subdued light. I could see the narrow doorway set in the center of the wall that divided the house in half. An oval picture of a baby in a casket was hung on the right side of the doorway and Jesus and the Disciples stared down at me from a color picture in a rectangular gold frame hung on the other side. I dragged my shoes in long scrapes as I walked through the opening.

"Where is you, honey-child?" Geneva said from the twin bed set against the rear wall. I could see a table by the bed with a glass of water that had her false teeth resting on the bottom. She was covered from head to toe with an old crazy quilt made from left over pieces of fabric taken from old dresses and men's suits. I put her food on the table next to her soaking glass.

"Hello sweet Geneva," I said as I leaned down and kissed her cheek. Her smooth

skin felt hot on my lips. “You’re runnin’ a little fever,” I said. She looked at me with half-closed eyes. Her skin glistened with sweat. She struggled to raise her hand to pat me on the head. I stared into the depths of her glazed, alabaster eyes. As I began to pull away, she pulled me back and swept her leathery hand across my cheek to wipe away the rivulets of tears that ran freely along my cheekbones.

“Child, I don’t think I’m long for this world,” she said. “I think sweet Jesus wants me to come up there and take care of all them babies who done and gone on—all them little angels who flew on in to the promise land to help bring all the peoples there heaps of nice baby smells and smiles.” Her voice was raspy.

“You’re goin’ to get better!” I said. “ ’cause we all need you. What about all those babies at the house? What are they goin’ to do?” I pleaded.

“Child, listen to me. I’ve got a secret nobody knows about. Lean down here where I can tell you what’s been pressin’ on my mind most my life,” she said as she pulled me closer.

“You know I been goin’ to church down at Mt. Sinai since I was a girl. But I ain’t never done what the Lord says it takes to get to heaven,” she said. “I ain’t never confessed my sins and been baptized.”

My heart nearly stopped. It was hard for me to figure everything she was saying.

“See that crystal candy dish your momma gave me over there on the shelf by the door? I wants you to go draw some well water and fill it up. I wants you to pour it on my head and baptize me.”

“I ain’t a preacher,” I said. “I don’t think it will take if I do it.”

“Is you one of God’s children?” She asked.

“You know I am Miss Geneva, mother had us all baptized in the Catholic Church.”

“I knows that,” she said. “You remember I held ever one of you until the priest was ready to douse the next one. And that’s why it’s okay. I reckon the Lord will understand that we done it with what was deepest in my heart.”

I did what she said. I was afraid not to. It was a frightening thing to a sixteen-year-old Catholic girl to perform an unsanctioned baptism. I drew the water in a galvanized bucket, brought it to the kitchen table, filled the crystal candy dish, and carried it to the back room, trying to walk like Geneva had showed me when she put a book on my head and made me practice walking in high heels. I propped Geneva up on some pillows and put a towel around her shoulders.

“I don’t know the right words,” I said.

“Just say what I says,” she spoke in an ever-weakening voice. I held the dish above her frizzled hair.

“I done baptize you,” she said.

“I done baptize you,” I repeated.

“In the name of the father.”

“In the name of the father.”

“The son,” she continued.

“The son,” I followed with a shaky voice.

“And the holy, Holy Spirit.”

“And the holy, Holy spirit . . .” I tilted the dish and let the water slide over the edge and onto her graying hair. She rose, as if to meet the water, then relaxed as if some huge burden had flown from her. Her face fell to one side and a long exhale disappeared into the thick Southern air.

Outside the Cicadas sawed a powerful lonesome sound into my heart and soul.