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Y E A R S

A RAINBOW OF FLOWERS

JANE HALL

Before my cousin, Priscilla DuBois Stanley, plighted her troth to Harold Collins, Ph.D., she stirred up what we in LaFayette, Georgia, refer to as “a heap of trouble.” Specifically, she collected an array of information about the familial histories of LaFayette’s most prominent Baptists, displayed it in scrapbooks at the dedication of the church sanctuary, and told people she was presenting the symbolic estates of these citizens.

Her action had two ill effects. The first and most obvious, of course, was the public disclosure of heretofore private and personal information. The second, more elusive, and perhaps more costly consequence of Priscilla DuBois’ behavior was the debasement, in LaFayette, of the concept of the symbolic estate. Since, as the name suggests, a symbolic estate has meaning only in a figurative sense, it cannot be “pieced together” with newspaper clippings. By attempting to do so, Priscilla DuBois perpetrated a gross violation of the entire notion.

It may have been that my all-too-frequent contact with my cousin saved me in this instance. For I am today one of the few persons in LaFayette, Georgia, who not only recognizes but also publicly professes a cherished symbolic estate. One of the most precious aspects of this heritage was handed down by my grandmother and refined (in different ways) by my parents. This endowment was a hearty

respect for the difference between stupidity and ignorance.

I was really young when Granny first spoke to me about it — so young, in fact, that I couldn’t begin to understand it. I later decided that her dealings with my brother Will had persuaded her that early and persistent intervention would be necessary for my survival. We would sit on her front porch in the late summer afternoons. Granny would crochet as I arranged oak-leaf plates and poured tea into walnut-shell cups.

“Katherine,” she’d say, “I want you to remember that there are all kinds of people in this world. When you take out what few geniuses there are, you’re left with the average kind of person, the one who is stupid, and the one who is ignorant. Average folks have a way of evening each other out, so you need not spend a lot of time worrying about them. But if you’re going to have a good life, you’ve got to be able to tell the difference between those who are stupid and those who are ignorant. And more than that, you’ve got to know how to deal with each kind.”

And though it has been twenty years, I remember precisely what I said, “What kind of a person is Will?”

To which she replied with a touch of irritation, “I’m not sure we’ll ever know. Probably he’s a hybrid of some sort, but you cannot afford to waste your time worrying about Will. This is

what I want you to remember: Stupid people have to be endured because stupidity lasts forever. Ignorant people must be taught because ignorance can be fixed.”

“Will’s a high what?” I asked.

“Lord, Katherine! Well, it’s my fault. I used a big word and you missed the boat altogether. A hybrid is a mixture — generally of things that haven’t been combined before. As far as I can figure, that’s what Will is. And I’m sure I can’t tell you how to deal with Will. Did you hear anything else I said?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered a bit apologetically. “What about Billy Taylor? Is he stupid or ignorant? Mama told me he wasn’t bright and Will said he was retarded.”

“Why, you *did* hear me!” Granny exclaimed. “I’m not certain about Billy and that proves my point beautifully. I’m inclined to think he’s ignorant.”

“What makes you think that?” I asked.

She pondered a moment and replied, “Well, Billy knows there are some things he doesn’t know. He’s not sure what they are or how to ask the right questions, but he’s always willing to let people try to teach him. I think if he were really stupid, he wouldn’t realize that there are things he doesn’t know.”

Although my parents shared an appreciation for the need to differentiate stupidity from ignorance, they differed in their means of dealing with the concept. Papa was much less reflective before designating a person to either particular category and much less gracious in enduring or patient in teaching. At least, so he seemed to be until he crossed paths with Arnold Adams.

Arnold was the son of Homer and Fanny Lou Adams, and he was my brother Will’s age. We probably would never have remembered that if Homer hadn’t come into the bank to speak to Papa about Arnold. When that happened, Papa was more than a little taken aback. He told Mama and me about his shock at dinner.

“Eva,” he announced as he served himself some chicken, “I’ve got a hell of a problem. Remember Homer Adams and that boy of his? One that’s not quite right? Damn if I know what to do.”

During his tenure at the Piggley-Wiggley, he stocked twelve cases of Campbell’s soup where the dried beans were supposed to go. When he worked at the church, he scrubbed all the toys in the baby nursery with Pinesol.

“Horace Henry, I certainly do wish I could come to understand why you cannot speak a sentence without a curse word. I asked Osgood about it just last week . . .”

“Hell if you did!” Papa interrupted. “Osgood Taylor’s got as much business minding my language as I do monitoring Ronald Reagan’s ‘hot line.’ ”

“What’s your problem?” Mama inquired in a futile effort to change the subject. The topic of salvation (extending to the church and its ministers) was the single matter upon which Mama and Papa had never reached even a momentary consensus. Indeed, since Mama saw the mission of the church from a mystical and avowedly incontrovertible viewpoint, and Papa adopted a hard-line factual

stance, she was eternally uneasy about his future in the life-to-come. It was probably fortunate for us all that the maintenance of Papa’s day-to-day peace-of-mind commanded the bulk of her resources.

“What the hell did Osgood say? That’s what I want to know!” Papa demanded. “He damn well better not have said a single thing; not after all the time I’ve invested in trying to save him.”

“Horace Henry! That is enough!” Mama declared in return. “You’ve never ‘saved’ Osgood.”

“I have so! Why, I’ve done it any number of times. The last one, I guess you’ll remember, was when Nadine Gilmore told the world who she’d bedded down with from Osgood’s own pulpit. If I didn’t save him, I’d like to know who did!”

“Whom. With whom she bedded down . . .”

“HELL!”

“Horace Henry, I’m sorry. For everything. I should never have said anything. Please tell us about your problem.”

“Not till you tell me exactly what Osgood said.”

“Dear Lord,” Mama murmured. “He said he guessed God had more important things on His mind than your language.”

“Aha!” Papa exclaimed. “Are you satisfied?”

“Horace Henry, please tell Katherine and me about your problem.”

“I’ll tell you after you’ve laid this salvation business down once and for all. When I think about it, Eva, I wonder that I’ve had the strength to put up with it day after day all these years.”

Mama bit her tongue, inhaled, and sighed. "I'm sorry and I promise. Now, what happened?"

"Homer Adams asked me to give his boy a job."

"That's it?" Mama asked with disappointment.

"What the hell did you want, Eva? Arabs trying to buy the bank?"

At the "hell," Mama swallowed a sigh. "I just cannot see what the problem is."

"Eva," Papa said a trifle patronizingly, "The boy's not right!"

"Well, I'm sure you can find something for him to do. You're always talking about people who don't want to work. I remember Arnold. He started school with Will."

"If you don't beat all, Eva! Will's got a master's degree even if it isn't worth a damn thing, and Homer's boy's just made it out of the twelfth grade!"

"Horace Henry! You ought to be ashamed! Will worked very hard . . ."

"Don't you go trying to change the subject, Eva," Papa warned. "There's about as much demand for people with masters in philosophy as there is for fifty-year-old tap dancers. And Will has never *worked* at anything but driving me crazy. I've got a serious problem here; the bank is no place for a dimwit!"

"You'd better watch yourself or you're going to say that out somewhere," Mama observed.

"Say what out somewhere?"

"Any of what you just said. The worst was 'dim wit,' of course. You'd feel terrible if that got back to Homer."

The topic of salvation (extending to the church and its ministers) was the single matter upon which Mama and Papa had never reached even a momentary consensus.

"Dammit all, Eva. I come to you for help and get a grammar lesson and a sermon. We got any dessert?"

"Fresh-baked peach pie," Mama patted Papa as she cleared his plate.

"Put ice cream on top. And don't be stingy with it, either. I've got a problem, and I think better when my stomach's full."

Ice cream or no ice cream, Papa mumbled and muttered about Arnold's aspirations into the night. At breakfast, he informed us that there was no way it could work. Never, not ever, could a dimwit be successful in the C&S Bank in LaFayette.

"Horace Henry, you just be sure you don't say that out somewhere. You may embarrass yourself."

"I'll be damned, Eva. I guess I can manage my own affairs by now. You just worry about the running of this house and Will, and I'll take care of the C&S Bank," he asserted as he rose from the table.

I was wondering which of them was responsible for worrying about me when he stuck his head into the breakfast room and announced, "I'll handle you till you start causing trouble."

"I'm afraid your father's going to cause today's trouble," Mama said. "I

suppose, in some ways, it's my fault. I should know better than to warn him about saying something. Now, he'll be bound and determined to do it. Oh, well, you go on to school, and don't worry. Maybe nothing will come of it."

Something did. At lunch, Papa went to the Lions Club. Albert Brassfield overheard him telling the Rev. Osgood Taylor that the Citizens and Southern National Bank could not be staffed by persons who were "not right." And Albert thought that was so funny that he attracted the attention of the entire group while he was trying to pass this statement onto Cecil Bradshaw. And Papa got so mad that his fellow Lions could be amused by the notion of a person who was "not right" working in the bank, that he went right back and hired Arnold Adams.

Then he came storming home and asked Mama if she were satisfied. Since he was genuinely upset this time, Mama avoided any recriminating responses.

"Horace Henry, what kinds of things does he know? I mean, he must be able to do something."

"Well, I figured that, too, so I asked Homer. Damn if I could make heads nor tails out of what he said. Only thing that came through at all was that Arnold is real good at taking care of plants. I guess you know how much time we devote to that every day at the bank. The only thing I can take any comfort in is the fact that I'm smarter than he is. If that's the case, surely I can come up with some sort of scheme. You know we've had many a discussion about that being the trouble with Will. He's smarter than the two of us put together but he acts like he hadn't got the sense of a doughnut hole."

"Granny told me once that Will was a hybrid," I said, without realizing how quickly this would take us back to

Arnold's single strength.

"Damnation! Katherine!" Papa began hotly. "I'm sorry," he continued under Mama's watchful gaze. "I know you didn't mean anything. I just cannot see what's to become of this entire state of affairs."

"Well, tomorrow you can try Arnold at different things," Mama offered. "I'm sure you'll find something he can do well."

But Papa didn't seem to be able to find anything that Arnold could do tolerably, much less adequately. He began by assigning Arnold the task of sorting slips according to teller numbers. This was a disaster from start to finish.

Mama claimed that Papa had started too high because if Arnold could have handled numbers better, he wouldn't have spent seven years in high school. So, after spending an evening in the vault undoing Arnold's work, Papa dropped back to sorting by colors the debit slips into pink, credit, white, installment loan, yellow, and so on. But Arnold never got the hang of that, and the sorting was finished by the three of us on yet another evening.

"What exactly did you tell him to do, Horace Henry?" Mama asked as she gazed upon an array of multi-colored aggregations.

"I told him to put them together," Papa almost shouted. "And I didn't tell him to make five hundred damn rainbows either!"

"Now, calm down, Horace Henry. We'll have this straight in no time. That gives me an idea. Maybe Arnold could straighten up."

Arnold turned out to be excellent at straightening up. He was so good, in fact, that he swooped down upon and disposed of Florence Abigail

Abernathy's balance sheet while she made a brief visit to the "little girls' room." When Florence Abigail discovered that her sheet was missing, she began to swoon. Papa and Arnold had to go through the contents of the dumpster behind the bank hunting for it; by the time they located it, Florence

When Florence Abigail discovered that her sheet was missing, she began to swoon.

Abigail was this side of hysteria. She took great pride in her balance record; in twenty-two years as a teller, Florence Abigail had never clocked out later than 4:03 P.M.

Thanks to Arnold's efforts, it was nearly five before Florence Abigail recovered her sheet and five-thirty before she regained sufficient composure to attempt achieving a balance.

We knew something was up because Papa called ahead from the bank and alerted Mama to have a double Jack Daniels waiting.

"Oh, dear," Mama fretted. "I do hope Horace Henry hasn't jumped all over that boy. This certainly is a mess."

"I just want to know one thing," Papa said after taking two long sips of his bourbon. "Why the hell can't Florence Abigail say 'bathroom?'"

Mama hadn't been expecting that. "What?"

"You heard me. Damn, I hate it when she says, 'little girls' room,' I half expect her to ask me if I need to potty."

"Horace Henry!"

"Well, things like that grate on you. Arnold made a mistake. But he was trying to do his job and he jumped right in the dumpster looking for it."

"*Inside* it?" Mama asked with distasteful astonishment.

"Yes, Eva, inside. That old biddy was wailing and sobbing. And we couldn't find a damn thing after Leon Watson dumped all those styrofoam peanuts in there. He's not a bad boy. Damn likeable actually. God knows he's not smart, but he tries so hard to do what you want him to do. Tries a hell of a lot harder than Will and that's a fact."

"Dinner's ready. Let's eat," Mama said, with the wisdom to leave the last statement alone.

I doubt that any of us would have predicted things to have evolved as they did. Which is not to say that the events which followed deviated from reasonable expectations. It is to suggest that too often we base our anticipations upon surface behaviors without taking the time or effort to examine the values which support them.

For all his rantings and ravings, Papa was a kind and decent human being who admired hard work and loyalty. And for all his intellectual limitations, Arnold Adams was a person who was steadfast in his commitments and consistent in his strivings. It was hardly remarkable, therefore, that by the time of the balance sheet fiasco, Papa and Arnold had established a relationship of mutual respect and affection. Nor was it astonishing that Papa set out to find Arnold a job at which he could succeed.

This was no small undertaking. As an employee of the LaFayette 5&10, Arnold wrought havoc upon Cecil Barnes' inventory. During his tenure at the Piggley-Wiggley, he stocked twelve cases of Campbell's soup where the

dried beans were supposed to go. When he worked at the church, he scrubbed all the toys in the baby nursery with Pinesol. And since they'd had so much trouble getting him out of the school system, they weren't about to let him back in for any purpose.

"He's not stupid," Papa declared one night at dinner. "I'm not suggesting that he's bright. But in every single situation, the trouble's come when he tried too damn hard to learn how to do something. I'm beginning to think that it's us instead of him. If we knew how to teach him correctly, I swear . . ."

Papa paused. I was too astonished to speak since Papa seldom (if ever) took the blame for anything. But Mama didn't seem to be at all amazed.

"Horace Henry, have you and Homer ever asked Arnold what he thinks he can do? I'm not sure he can tell you exactly what he knows or wants to do, but it might help some."

"I don't know," Papa mused. "Arnold's not too good with questions like that. I don't guess it'd hurt to try, though."

So, after dinner, Papa called Homer and asked him to bring Arnold over. When they got there and were seated on the sofa, Papa began, "Now, Arnold, you realize, don't you, that your jobs haven't gone very well? I'm not fussing, now. I'm just stating a fact. Mrs. McClellan thinks your daddy and I ought to ask you what you want to do or what you think you know how to do. You understand that, Arnold?"

Well, Arnold just sat there. He didn't say anything at all; he just sat there on the sofa. Finally, Mama said, "Arnold, you do know that Mr. McClellan loves you, don't you?"

I was amazed when she said it, but my astonishment increased as I looked at Papa. He rarely admitted loving me,

and I certainly didn't expect him to acknowledge such feeling for somebody like Arnold. But instead of ranting a denial, Papa gazed at the floor and grunted in an affirming manner.

"Yes'm," Arnold said after a while, "I do know that!"

"Well, then, tell us what you want to do," Mama urged. Arnold did not reply. "You do understand some things. Mr. McClellan has told me about it."

Arnold Adams did not speak. He sat on the couch and stared at my father. When Papa did look up at him, Arnold said, "I know where I ain't been yet."

By the time Arnold rendered this observation, I was too shell-shocked to take in any more. In the course of an hour, two exceedingly unusual events had come to pass. The first was my mother's public assertion of Papa's affection for Arnold. The second was Papa's uncharacteristic restraint in denying it or chastising Mama for it.

"Arnold," Papa said, "That's a real smart thing you just said. I imagine after I've thought about it awhile, I'll see it as one of the smartest things I've ever heard anybody say. But it doesn't tell us what you want to do. What would you enjoy doing, Arnold?"

"I like taking care of plants."

"But, Arnold," Homer broke in with desperation, "The reason Horace Henry took you on at the bank was because there wasn't anyone in town who would pay you to do that."

"Why not?" Mama asked. "Why shouldn't LaFayette support a gardener? Why can't we have flowers that belong to all of us?"

"Hell if I know," Papa replied. "Homer, let's go ask about it tomorrow."

They did and discovered that LaFayette had no flowers that belonged to all of us mainly because nobody had ever thought of it before. Papa led a campaign to collect Arnold's first salary and supplies for his gardens. He hit Arnold's previous employers first; most were more than willing to chip in as long as Arnold would promise never to try to work for them again.

Now, if you come to LaFayette, Georgia, you're not likely to get confused and imagine you're in Pasadena on New Year's Day. Most likely, you won't even think you'd wandered into Calloway Gardens. You will probably, however, experience a pleasant surprise. Every likely spot in LaFayette is adorned with Arnold Adams' flowers — fifty damn rainbows in all. Arnold has made his rounds carefully for a number of years, tending each and every spot in its turn, missing none, since he always knows where he ain't been yet.

And if you were to follow Arnold around, you'd notice, in time, that he tends folks equally well as he does flowers — in fact, with such a fine sense of discrimination and order of things that it borders on the genius. If you don't believe me, follow him into the C&S Bank. When you see the face of the pretty teller in the second window light up as Arnold places a fresh flower in the bud vase, or hear the pompous accountant explode, "Damnation Arnold! Why the hell do you insist on sticking these things in my coat when you know damn well they make me sneeze?!" you'll know what I mean.

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