



Memoir



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Ray Slater

The Path

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Between Granny's house and Walter Walker's house there was a path. It was a typical Central Florida footpath. A white ribbon of sand winding about a half mile through scrub pines and on a tenuous loan from vines and creepers and ferns that threatened to reclaim it. The summer I spent with Granny, Walter and I kept the path open, running back and forth from one house to the other.

The deep south was the next thing to heaven for two ten-year-old boys. There were lakes for swimming and fishing, endless woods to explore and warm sunshine requiring little or no clothing, especially shoes. There was sand and mud to roll around in and warm rains to wash it away.

Walter's father died when he was quite young. His mother worked all day as post-mistress and Granny seemed always busy. So, Walter and I were on our own most of the time and most of the time we were digging. We could dig three or four feet into the soft sand and strike water--an "instant beach". The wet sand made all manner of castles, forts, roads and cities.

In dryer areas we dug tunnels, sometimes as long as twenty feet or more. Fortunately, they never collapsed while we were in them but we did have one incident with a "fireplace" and smoking pine needles that taught us a painful lesson about chimneys and venting.

Usually, by early afternoon, a thunderstorm would build and Walter and I would hide from the lightning until it passed and then splash in the puddles.

Walter Walker and I had a special fondness for palmettos--a small cousin of the palm tree that grows throughout Central Florida. The frond terminates in a fan. On the base of the frond there is a small edible bit of tuber. The fronds and leaves made great bows, arrows, spears, headbands and feathers.

Walter liked to crawl through large patches of palmettos. I never did. There are lots of snakes in Florida and I was sure they loved to hide in palmetto bushes.

As the sun started to set and the day begin to cool Granny would call me home for a bath and supper. Baths were in an old cast iron bathtub standing on feet shaped like lion's paws.

After supper Granny and I sat on the screen porch and took in the cool evening breeze. The porch faced Walter's house and the path.

At first the woods and path seemed "enchanted" with "whip-o-will" calls and fireflies. But as it grew darker the trail and surrounding woods took on a sinister appearance with strange dark shapes and unidentifiable sounds.

Granny loved to tell me stories about camping in the woods when she was a young girl. How the horses had to be protected from prowling alligators. She spoke of hearing panthers scream in the night and how at times it was prudent to travel at night and sleep during the day.

Every so often when I would hear one of those "unidentifiable" noises, Granny would say, "That's a wampus cat." She never explained and I never really wanted to know.

One day Walter and I spent hours picking purple berries and boiling them over a pine needle fire to make "poison" for our darts and arrows. It was a terrible brew that stained everything it came near. I'm sure it would have worked but by the time it was ready it was too late to make any arrows or darts.

It took a long time to clean up and Mrs. Walker invited me to stay for supper. Now Mrs. Walker was a good cook and when you're working with fresh Florida vegetables and stone ground cornmeal it's hard to go wrong. But nobody could beat Granny's turnip greens and hoe cake. So it wasn't for the food that I stayed. It was for Walter Walker's two older sisters, Pat and Dawn.

Dawn Walker was in her early teens and filling out in all the right places--although at ten years old I'm not sure I even knew where all the right places were. Dawn was beautiful and everyone said so. They said she would marry into money. he did. They said she would marry well and be happy. he didn't.

Pat Walker was a bit older than Dawn and absolutely the most beautiful and wonderful thing I had ever seen. my opinion was confirmed the day Pat turned on the record player and tried to teach Walter and me to dance. When she put my hand on her hip and led me around the room going "one, two, three...one, two, three." Well, it sure beat crawling through tunnels with Walter.

When supper was finished and the dishes done we all sat down on the floor--Walter and me and Dawn and Pat--to do a jigsaw puzzle. It was a picture of Jesus tending a flock of sheep. "Christ the good shepherd." Jesus was holding a baby lamb.

I found a lot of pieces and, as I placed each one, I looked up for Pat Walker's smiling approval.

We finished the puzzle about nine o'clock. I said goodbye and headed home. Barely two steps out the door I realized it was dark! The sky was dark. The woods were dark. And, worst of all, the little path that was so warm and friendly during the day was now a fearful thing filled with ominous shadows. All the vines had changed to snakes just waiting to bite my bare ankles. All the tree limbs were long arms with grasping fingers. At first I skipped. I reasoned that the longer my feet were off the ground the less chance I would have to be bitten. Several times I almost tripped but caught myself just in time to prevent falling head first into a pit of vipers. Then, as I began running, I heard the sounds. Unfamiliar, unidentifiable sounds. A panther? Or worse yet, Oh my God! A WAMPUS CAT!

I ran faster and faster, sure that if I looked back some ghastly creature would overtake me.

Finally, the warm light of Granny's front door. I raced in and slammed the door behind me. Minutes later my heart was still pounding.

Walter Walker and I spent the rest of the summer making strange brews from berries and crawling through tunnels. We raced across that sandy little path dozens of times. But I vowed never again to set foot on it after dark.

Unless, of course, there was a chance to watch those angelic hands of Pat Walker pick up cloudy white puzzle pieces and turn them into little lambs gathered at the feet of Jesus.

This is Ray's first submission to the Wildwood Literary Review. We hope to hear more from him in the future! You can send encouragement to him via e-mail at:

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