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## Memory Undaunted

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## MEMORIES

— a vengeful reminiscence by a former  
member of a high-school girls'  
basketball team in Western Oklahoma —

# MEMORY UNDAUNTED

by Jean Newlin

ILLUSTRATION BY: Ben Test



Many years had passed, but as I read the article about Beatrice, my stomach tightened. All the old hurt ate at me. Dr. Beatrice Russell Longstreet has received the top Distinguished Alumni Award given each year by Jefferson State University. When I knew her in high school, she was also distinguished, but it was for being a terrible person who tried to cover up because her house had dirt floors, her mother was an obscene old gossip in greasy housedress, and her dad always stank because he took care of at least a hundred hogs on his farm and collected every piece of junk he could put his hands on.

Most of the teachers at the Concord Consolidated School in Western Oklahoma thought of Beatrice as a rose, but she was more like a goathead or jimson weed or sandburr. I hadn't attended that school all my life as Beatrice had, but it didn't take me long after I transferred there in my junior year to find out how Beatrice operated in the school and how

she had become a favorite. And all the other students tolerated her because it was easier than to fight against the system.

I remember being in Geometry class one day. I never did know why, but old Mr. Taylor, the teacher, always seemed to delight in embarrassing some of us. The way to crush me faster than any other was for someone to draw attention to my dad's farming practices. There it was in the late 1940's, and Dad was still farming with horses. Almost everyone else in the community was using tractors by then, everyone else except for my dad and old Lige Russell, Beatrice's father. But the Russells didn't live next to the highway as we did, so most people hadn't paid much attention to Old Man Russell as he held on to the past. But there was always Daddy with his team right next to the highway when I got off the schoolbus each day. And Mr. Taylor was a successful farmer in his own right as well as a Math teacher.

On the day I remember, we weren't even talking about farming, but Mr. Taylor seemed to have his mind on it and managed to work around to it.

"Folks, farming is a big part of my life as well as teaching Math. I have to have farming to make a living as well as to keep pace with the community."

"But farming is a big expense nowadays," remarked Todd Myers behind his book.

"Yes, Todd, it is. I have thousands of dollars invested in my machinery alone. We're through with those simple days when all we had to do was throw a little fodder and provide drinking water for our horses."

"Not if your Jean's old man," someone in the back of the room mumbled as I felt my face burning with embarrassment.

"Why, yes, I don't suppose anyone in our community still holds to the outdated method of farming with horses." I pushed lower into my desk seat as my soul screamed within me. — Here it comes. He's sure to mention it again.

"Oh yes, your father still uses horses, doesn't he, Jean?"

I muffled a "Yessir" as anger flooded me. I wanted to scream aloud, "Why don't you ask about people who live in houses that have dirt floors or about people whose fathers collect junk and let it rust in their yards or about dirty mothers who wear the same greasy clothes all the time? Or why don't you mention that Old Man Russell still farms with horses too as that little snip hides behind her Geometry book and smirks at me? Or better yet, you nosey old lecher, why don't you ask me why Royce and I were parked on the dirt road near your driveway when you passed us last night and stared as you passed by? Why don't you just go ahead and slobber away every humiliating detail of my life?"

**B**

eatrice was always a great one for giving "concerts" in the Gymnasium-Auditorium during the noon hour before basketball practice started. And so it was later on the day of the embarrassment during Geometry class. She sat at the piano and began to run her fingers over the keys. Not only couldn't she play the piano; she couldn't even play chords. So what came out was anything but musical, but that didn't stop her from singing to her own accompaniment. As she preened, she asked her audience, "Isn't that beautiful? Don't I have a wonderful voice?" I answered, "Not particularly."

As I walked into the girls' dressingroom one day to get ready for basketball practice, I was thinking about Beatrice. My mother, always a practical Christian, had been trying to reason with me about the



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terrible person, Beatrice, I was always talking about at home. She had suggested that Beatrice's snootiness toward her other classmates and me could be caused by her own feelings of displacement and inferiority. So I went in that day ready to try. Sure enough, there was Beatrice as usual. There were some eighth-grade girls there as I walked in, and Beatrice was putting on a show for them. I promised myself to try to be nice.

I struggled as I looked at Beatrice ogling in front of the mirror. She was stroking her naturally curly hair and rolling her eyes as she smiled into the mirror. With a kiss, she muttered, "Oh, Be, you are so beautiful! How is it possible for one girl in a small country school to have so much beauty and talent — as well as intelligence?"

The younger girls thought it was very funny to hear a high-school junior bragging on herself because they had never heard her before.

As I walked in, Beatrice turned to me and asked, "Jean, can you answer that question?"

"What question, Beatrice?"

"The question I just asked myself."

"Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans." I reeled off a few books of the New Testament, hoping to be able to control my base nature as I turned to spiritual things. "I don't know, Beatrice. I guess we're just lucky."

"Oh, I suppose so."

"By the way, I've been meaning to ask you to spend the night with me after one of our basketball games. Could you do it tonight?"

"Oh, Jean, I'm sorry. I may be needed at home tonight. Mother's bridge club is meeting at the house for lunch tomorrow, and poor Mooter is a bit sickly this week. But I'll check with her this afternoon."

If thoughts would kill! Oh, Beatrice, what a bold-faced lie that is! You can't be a nice person even if someone is nice to you.

I knew there wasn't a woman in the neighborhood who would go to that nasty woman's house for a meeting — even if anyone in that backward community could even play bridge. The only reason anyone knew about the inside of the house was that old Lige Russell had no pride. Anyone who went to the door got invited in — no matter how terrible everything looked: "Come into this house and take a load off your feet!"

The visitor came away with unbelievable tales of spilling-over slop buckets in the kitchen, dive-bombing flies, cockroaches crawling everywhere, furniture covered with layers of dust, doorways with no doors revealing unmade beds, dirty clothes strewn from one end of the house to the other. And this scene from *HOUSE BEAUTIFUL* was ruled over by a garrulous woman in a greasy house-dress. So it was the men of the community

That night when we got on the bus to go to play our third conference game, Beatrice was still playing her role. "Well, I'm not really sure that I should go, Jean."

"Didn't you come prepared?"

"Yes, I brought my nightie, a toothbrush, and some clothes for tomorrow."

"Why, then?"

"Well, Mooter is really concerned about the house for tomorrow. You know how important these big social events are to parents."

"No problem, Beatrice. I'll just borrow the family car after the game tonight unless we're too tired to drag; you and I can go down to your house to help your mother with her cleaning."

"What will your mother say?"

"Oh, she may go along with us. She's been wanting to meet your mother anyone who had gone away with tales about Mrs. Russell's showplace. Some of the nosier men had created excuses for going over there just to get in. In that country community, excitement of any kind was at a premium.

After school that afternoon, I told Mom what I had done. "Jean, I'm very proud of you!"

"Why, Mom?"

"Because at least you're trying."

"But what if it makes no difference?"

"It will."

"Well, it hasn't yet!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because she's still as snippy as ever."

"What did she do, Honey?"

"Oh, she made up some big lie about her mother needing her to help with the house."

"Maybe it wasn't a lie."

"After all we've heard?"

"Maybe it was gossip."

"But Mother, do you really think Beatrice's mother has a bridge club?"

"Is that what Beatrice said?"

"That's what she said!"

"Well, Honey, that's funny, but you must understand the girl's motivation."

"What, Mom?"

"Think about her anger. She's rare."

"How?"

"She was born into a family that has no great objectives."

"Do you think Beatrice is like that too?"

"Certainly not! She's just waiting for her chance."

"Chance?"

"Yes . . . her chance to get out."

"And then what?"

"She'll finish at the top of your class — right?"

"Right."

"And then she'll leave."

"What do you think she'll do then?"

"She'll go somewhere and excel, and we won't hear anything else about her until she has made a name for herself."

I had to "Yes, Mama" her, half believing her.

way."

"Really?"

"Yes. Maybe if they get along well, Mom could even get into your mother's club. You know, we haven't been here very long, and Mom hasn't met many people."

**T**hinking back over those old memories and feeling all the former anxieties, I felt that the whole day was lost and that I might as well go to bed. It was after 3:30 in the afternoon when Jonce came home from school and shook me awake. He was trembling because I was usually standing at the door waiting when he came home from school and like a dutiful mother even had a treat for him. "Mom, what's wrong? Why have you been crying?"

"Oh, Honey, this has been a bad day — a sad day."

"What's wrong? What happened?"

"Well, Jonce, it was something that happened a long time ago. I try not to think about it, but today I was forced to."

"Did it happen before I was born?"

"Yes, Son, it did."

"I'm sorry you're sad, Mommy."

**O**n that day so many years ago, I had entered the dressing room, and I felt that something was about to happen. I heard Beatrice giggle and say, "Oh well, Alberta, that's simple enough. If you really want to know, I can find out during practice today. MY way is better than any rabbit test!"

"Find out what, Beatrice?"

"Oh, nothing, Jean — just a little joke between Alberta and me."

I kept thinking about Old Man Taylor and his grapevine and the way he had caught Royce and me parking on the country road. I already knew that there were rumors all over school about Royce and me. I should have stayed off the basketball court because of the way I felt, but I didn't.

In fact, I didn't think anything more about what Beatrice had said until I began to guard her on the court and she charged at me, kicking me soundly in the stomach. It seemed deliberate.

The next thing I knew, Royce was bending over me in the superintendent's office where I had been carried after I fainted. Royce was crying in big heaving sobs and gasping, "It's OK, Jeanie. We'll get married as soon as we finish school this year. Everything's gonna be all right."

And it had been up 'til the time I had read that paper today.