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Short Story

## SPIILLED AT THE SMOKEHOUSE

By Georgie McIrvin

Most of the old geezers had finished their breakfast, drunk several pots of coffee, run out of gossip and left, when that new feller, Troy, came in. Merle didn't see him, or he probably never would have said what he did to Homer Lee.

"I felt like I was struck by lightning when a woman came up to me yesterday and out of nowhere asked me about that old '53 Pontiac out at the base of Sugarloaf. I acted like I didn't know what she was talking about. Not too many people around here do anymore-- Oh, hi Troy, I didn't see you sneaking in behind me."

"Not sneaking in, Merle, just stopping in for a cup of coffee before I head out to Little Rock. But since I did hear what you said, what's it all about and why so hush-hush?"

Willie Joe looked at Merle in a questioning way that he understood as asking permission to tell the secret that they alone had shared for fifth-five years. "Might as well," Merle said "Doubt there is anyone left that it can hurt, and we were the only two witnesses."

Willie Joe refilled his cup and took a big swig of coffee before he began. "Now you probably know that Cleburne County has been dry since Hector was a pup. That has never meant that folks here don't drink. They just have to get it elsewhere. Those that can afford it drive to Little Rock to the big

Wine and Spirits store. The rest depend on fellers like Homer Lee to make the whisky run about once a week and buy from him in the alley behind the Mercantile. Now Homer Lee was doing real well with this enterprise until he took a shine to the Baptist preacher's daughter. She was a cute little thing but never cut out to be a preacher's daughter."

"Homer Lee, are you going to tell me about the car, or are you planning to give me the history of Cleburne County? I got to get to Little Rock."

"Let me tell that part," Merle said. "I'll just collapse it real quick."

"OK, one of you get to it." Troy muttered while fingering the keys to his truck.

"Where Willie Joe made his big mistake was when he invited Cindy Sue, the preacher's daughter, to go with him on a run. Like most people who go to Little Rock for booze, they drank a big bunch of it on the way back. They say you could hear that preacher two blocks away when Cindy Sue sashayed in drunk as a skunk. Was he ever ready to settle things with Willie Joe!"

Homer Lee butted in, "What most people didn't have a clue about was that the preacher had a lot of friends who met in the woods in long white robes and tall pointy hats. And he was one of them. When he let his "friends" know about what had happened to Cindy Sue, they began their planning."

"Now at that time we were only eleven and twelve years old," Merle inserted. "But we knew where Willie Joe hid his truck 'cause we often went huntin' out by ole Sugarloaf. It was all just woods back then, weren't no houses or businesses, no nothing. But there were some old logging roads wandering through there where the mule teams went in to get the logs that came down the slide and took them to the rail yard when they were cutting up on the mountain. Willie Joe knew about these too so that's how he got his car in such a hidey hole. Beside the trees down there weren't so big cause all the big-ums down there had already been cut."

"That night we were out there hunting possums. If our dads had caught us we wouldn't have been able to sit down for a week or more." Homer Lee said. "So we were moving very quietly when we heard a roar coming through the woods. It was Willie Joe tearing through the scrub brush a fast as he could in that souped -up old '53 Pontiac. He wasn't slowing down for nothing. All of a sudden he slammed on the brakes and almost stood that car on its nose."

"We was well hid in the bushes where we could see out and nobody could see us," Merle picked up the story. "What I saw almost made my eyes pop out of my head. There was a whole line of spooks, or people dress in white with tall pointed caps blocking Willie Joe's way. These guys had this all planned out ahead of time cause we never heard them say a word. But several of them had big coils of rope hanging on their shoulders. I thought they were going to hang him but they didn't."

"I bet we are the only two people in the world who ever saw what we did that night," Merle was just itching to tell the good part. "Those guys went over the Willie Joe's car and began tying ropes to the tires, bumper, mirror, and anywhere else they could find on the passenger side of that car. I guess Willie Joe was hiding in the floor board. They had ropes tied everywhere and then several took a good hold on

each rope, and they all began to pull. At first the car raised up a little on that side then they let it settle back. The next time it came up a little farther. They kept rocking that car up and down for the longest time until it finally stood up on the driver's side. The others who weren't on the ropes got under the passenger side and shoved. That car rolled over with wheels up looking like a road-killed armadillo. We got out of there. No way did I want to stick around and see anymore. Once I heard Willie Joe scream-- but only once."

The three men were silent. Each took another swig of coffee and didn't dare look at one another. This was the first time that Homer Lee and Merle had ever told this story. It was hard to tell.

"Listen, guys," Troy said, "This has certainly been interesting, but do you really expect me to believe this fantastical tale? The drunk preacher's daughter, the preacher in the KKK, flipping a bootlegger's car with ropes out in the woods? Come on, guys!"

Homer Lee felt insulted. Here they had shared their deepest secret and this come-lately doesn't even believe it. "Tell you what," he said, "Go out behind ASU and start up the side of the mountain until you find that new trail they have built out there. Go to your left around to the East side. Look off through the trees and you will see that car. It is really beat-up after fifty-five years out there. The wheels have been taken off, the headlights are gone, but you can still see the turquoise paint. It's there all right. And we were there when it happened. Most of those big trees were just little saplings back in '59 and now they have mostly covered the old logging road. But it is there! You can go see for yourself."

Troy slowly nodded, "OK, the car is there but I have some doubts about some of that story. When I get back from Little Rock, I think I'll go out there and see for myself." Troy headed for the door after paying his check and leaving a generous tip. Pausing at the door, he slowly said, "You didn't say anything about what happened to Willie Joe. Do you know?"

Homer Lee rubbed his chin and said, "Some folk say he bounced out of the car and headed deeper into the woods and was never seen hide nor hair again."

"And what do you say?" quizzed Troy.

In unison they replied, "We don't say nothing."

After Troy backed up his truck and turned out onto 7<sup>th</sup> Street, Homer Lee and Merle looked at one another and sort of smiled. "Do you think we should have told him about going back out there a few weeks later and what we saw?"

"Nah, who cares what two little boys saw all those years ago. But did you ever wonder what was under that long mound of fresh dirt we found behind that biggest hickory tree?"

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