

Floral Point and Hoffler Creek Part II

When I spent the night at my grandmother's house, Floral Point, I slept in the yellow bedroom on the second floor overlooking the lane lined with pecan trees down to the river shore. I would lie in my unaccustomed big double bed until I heard the household help arriving in the driveway below. Cars would crunch in, doors would slam and then laughter and voices would ring out. I couldn't hear what was actually being said, but I always marveled at how enthusiastically they seemed to greet each other from being together just the afternoon before. Then I would jump into my shorts (for it was either always summer at Floral Point or Thanksgiving or Christmas. There were no other seasons. I'm pretty sure that Mam's birthday would have been a season, as well, but it was in summer anyway) and head on down the long and winding black walnut staircase to the first floor. About halfway down I would hit the wall of BREAKFAST SMELL. It was mainly coffee (I have said that coffee by itself was a whole food group at Mam's) with subtle undertones of bacon and hot butter and perhaps a soupcon of maple syrup if "cakes" were on the menu. Pancakes were always just "cakes" at Floral Point.

The tableau of that dining room scene will forever be in my mind's eye. Mam presiding at the head of the table with Juliet on the other end, and Joan and Otis on one side. I would sit opposite Otis which was fortuitous because of the pepper ritual. No matter how many times I saw it, I never tired of the phenomenon of Otis' eggs. No matter what else there was for breakfast, Otis always had two sunnyside up fried eggs. Each morning they would be planted on the table before him, jiggling in all their white and yellowness. Whereupon, Otis would seize up the silver pepper shaker and totally and completely cover them in pepper. They ended up looking just like two anthills there on his plate. Then without batting an eye or emitting a single sneeze or tear, he would blandly eat them as though it was the most natural thing in the world to do. It was a most satisfying spectacle to me.

There was one week of one summer when I was about thirteen or fourteen that I spent at Floral Point where I arose before the help arrived or even much of the sun. That summer I was in love with Mam's paperboy. His name was Butch Ballance. He lived in one of the houses along the River Shore lane, and he rode his bike to deliver newspapers to the customers of his route which, thank you, Lord, included Mam. For an entire week I made up some excuse about why I just happened to be up at dawn fooling around in front of my grandmother's house. "Oh, I was just hunting eggs for breakfast" (the chickens were firmly penned in a yard in back of the house). "Oh, I was just looking for wild asparagus along the hedgerow" (it was August). "Oh, I think I dropped my hanky" (folks, even way back then teenagers didn't carry hankies). "Oh, I just couldn't sleep" (did I mention I was a teenager???). Speaking of the Lord, I worry that when I die I will rot in hell for the lies I told for the love of Butch Ballance. Mr. Ballance, if you are out there somewhere, I want you to know that I blush thinking about it all to this day.

I have talked a lot about life and times in the rooms of the first and second floors of Floral Point. I have only just mentioned the third floor, “the attic”, which was the private domain of the Hawks family, Juliet, Otis and Joan. Visits to the attic were rare and brief and usually as a result of some message that needed to be delivered off hours to Juliet. If I happened to be around, this task would fall to me, possessing the youngest set of legs on premises, in light of the three long flights of stairs. I was thrilled to goosebumps to be dispatched to the attic. First there was the long anticipatory climb and then the creaking open of the door to reveal what seemed to me a sort of parallel world. Upstairs, downstairs, indeed. Closest to the door in the attic was Otis’ workbench. Otis, who had owned a hardware store in Churchland, was a stay at home inventor by the time I knew him. His workbench was covered with tools and cogs and flywheels and the like, and I have a mental picture of him standing before the thing, arms raised, eyes closed as though he was about to play a Bach fugue on the organ. Juliet was invariably at the sewing machine. People always talked about how Juliet made all of her own clothes, but, as far as I was concerned this was just hearsay until I could see for myself. My personal experience with respect to the acquisition of clothes was that, when fall was in the air, my mother would drive me all the way from Virginia Beach into Norfolk to shop at Smith and Welton Department Store. We bought scratchy wool skirts and sweaters as fast as we could, and then repaired thankfully to the mezzanine tearoom for a celebratory lunch of shrimp salad and rolls before undertaking the long ride back home. My mother firmly would not and did not sew, but, indeed, Juliet did. She would sit at the machine by one of the peaked attic windows, a foot pumping away at the pedal below and push a wad of fabric beneath the bobbing needle. Sure enough, a sleeve or a pant leg would come out of the other side. It was a miracle. Juliet was also well known for her hats which she trimmed to match her outfits. The hats themselves she did not miraculously extrude from the sewing machine. They were purchased in downtown Portsmouth from The Famous. I went along on a couple of those hat runs. Portsmouth was very citified and very, very far away from the little village of Churchland in those days.

Juliet’s sewing skills taught me a valuable lesson early in my youth. Juliet even made beautiful ball gowns for herself. I cannot now imagine where she wore these gowns, but when she had worn them out (once), she would give them to her nieces to play “dress up” in. As it happened, when one of these gowns came up for grabs, two nieces were in attendance at Floral Point. Juliet decided that she would toss a coin to decide which of us cousins would get the dress. I won the toss, and my cousin had a major fit, weeping and crying and carrying on to the extent that my mother made me hand the dress over to her. I was dumbfounded. I had won the dress fair and square, and yet it was not to be mine. The valuable lesson I learned is that life is not fair. Not only that, my cousin grew up to be the kindest, most generous person I know. Go figure.

Finally, I will, once again, take you outdoors at Floral Point which was to become Hoffer Creek. The creek ran behind the house, and there was a pasture next to the house which ran down to the creek on one side. That pasture had three important features to my mind. One was a barn, the second was a cemetery and the third was a cow. There was a problem with numbers two and three with respect to

my desire to explore number one. The cow was invariably between the fence on the house side and the barn. She had one horn, and, when she would see me climb onto the fence, she would waggle that horn, roll her eyes appraisingly and lick her chops with a tongue the size of a surfboard. I spent quite a good bit of time sitting on that fence trying to calculate if I could make it to the barn and through the big bolted doors before that horn got to me, and I could tell she was pondering that same question. Having the aforesaid young set of legs, I figured if she came after me I could probably outrun her on past the barn, but then there was nowhere to go but feature number two, the cemetery, and that was not an appealing outcome either. I have said how our outings to the town of Churchland always included a ceremonial lap around the Churchland Baptist Church cemetery. Those departed relatives clearly commanded a lot of love and respect. Nobody ever visited or even mentioned this burial ground, and I was only given to suppose that these were the less than presentable sort of ancestors. I did not in the least desire to disturb their rest, no matter how fitful it was. You will be happy to know, as was I, that my great grandparents, Luther and Bette Ballard were promoted to the ranks of the departed at the Churchland Baptist Church when Floral Point was sold and Lake Ballard came to be. I don't know what happened to the cow, but I hope she was buried at sea.

I did make it to the barn alive a time or two in my childhood, and despite the life threatening cow, or perhaps because of her, the reward was worth the risk. I loved the gloomy bigness of it. I loved the way the light slanted through missing boards and sparkled on dust particles in the air. I loved the sound of the pigeons and the smell of hay and musty old books and the jumble of broken furniture forever patiently waiting to be repaired. I knew that the books were law books that had belonged to Mam's brother, Howard, who ended up being sent as a U.S. Customs official to Hawaii. Hawaii was a whole lot more exotic and far away in those days. In fact, it was even pronounced differently as "Brother Howard went to Ha-WHY-ya". Despite the great distance, especially in those days, Brother Howard and his wife came back every summer to visit my grandmother. One of these summers was during prohibition. Now Brother Howard was known for his love of pineapple brandy which was perfectly legal in Hawaii but which had been declared to be demon stuff in the States. Howard worked his way around this problem by putting a supply of brandy bottles in a waist belt designed for some sort of similar smuggling activity which he had confiscated from somebody in the course of his Customs work. Worst part of it was, he made his wife wear the thing because he felt that it detracted from the perfect fit of his white linen suit.

Torrid love, howling cousins, contra banding great uncles, even mad cows, I guess I have embarrassed my family and myself enough. I will close with the observation that though life was, and is still, not fair, those were the days. Juliet said it best. In those days nothing changed. Now everything does. At least the domain of Floral Point, Hoffler Creek Wildlife Preserve, remains, and I hope that is forever.