

CALPURNIA TATE
GIRL VET

SKUNKED!
BY JACQUELINE KELLY



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JACQUELINE KELLY

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY JENNIFER L. MEYER



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For animal lovers everywhere

None of the terrible things that happened need have happened at all if the skunk hadn't drawn attention to itself by ripping up our garden and stealing a bunch of vegetables. And if Father hadn't told the hired man to set a trap and kill it. And if the skunk hadn't turned out to be a mother with a baby hidden in a den nearby. And if my younger brother Travis hadn't heard the hungry baby crying and stopped to investigate.

But this unfortunate chain of events did occur, with Travis winding up in disgrace and a hero at the exact same time.

You may wonder how one boy, age eleven and a half, could end up both heroic and disgraced on the same day. Well, I'm going to tell you about it, and it's all true. There may be some people in our town of Fentress, Texas, who suspect me of stretching the truth from time to time, but I swear this is not one of those times.

In 1901 we lived in a big white house near the San Marcos River: me, Mother, Father, Granddaddy, and a total of six brothers. How I got stuck in this big old mess of boys I'll never know. Life is just not fair sometimes. Rivers tend to attract wildlife, so living near a river is an excellent thing if you happen to be interested in such. Travis and I were both interested in wildlife but for different reasons. I was interested because Granddaddy was teaching me Science. Together we studied all kinds of life, wild and tame, big and small, flora and fauna (meaning both plants and animals). Travis, on the other hand, was crazy about animals as pets. He was always bringing home some wild creature or other, determined to make it his pet. He persisted in doing this even when the creature was just as determined to *not* be his pet.

One fine day in May, he went down to the river. On the way he heard a strange noise unlike anything he'd ever heard before. The noise was like a squeak and a hiss and a grumble all mixed up together.

"Hello?" he said. "Who's there?"

The noise stopped. Some other boy might have been scared, but Travis knew these woods and was not afraid. He stood very still. Then he heard the noise again. It was coming from a hollow tree. He peered inside and saw a tiny animal looking up at him.

"A kitten! How'd you get stuck in there? Don't worry. I'll get you out, and then I'll help you look for your mama."

Travis reached in. He gently pulled the kitten out. Except that the warm furry body curled in his palm wasn't a kitten. It was a kit. Also known as a baby skunk.

Travis nearly dropped the kit in shock. But he knew that skunks spray only when they are scared or upset, so he stood very still and made no sound. He and the kit stared at each other. The baby had shiny black eyes, two white stripes down its back, and a fluffy tail. It sniffed his hand and tried to nibble his thumb.

“Poor little guy, I guess you’re hungry. Where’s your mama? We better find her.” He explored the surrounding woods for a while, but there was no sign of her.

Finally he said, “I guess I have to take you home with me. Your mama’s not going to be happy, and my mama’s not going to be happy, either. She doesn’t like it when I bring wild animals home, although I don’t see anything wrong with it myself. I’ll have to hide you somewhere or she’ll pitch a fit.”

The kit began to squirm and grumble, so Travis tucked it into the bib of his overalls, where it settled right down. (It’s a cruel world for orphaned skunks unless they have the great good fortune of meeting my brother.)

“All right, let’s get you to your new home.”

The kit stayed quiet while Travis fretted about hiding it from Mother.

“I guess you’ll have to live in the chicken coop.” He thought about this for a minute. “I suspect the chickens won’t like that. They’re really fussy. You won’t believe the racket they make when someone goes in their pen, even to feed them. And I can’t put you in the root cellar. Our cook, Viola, goes in there all the time to fetch potatoes. So I guess it’s the barn for you, my friend.”

If the kit had any thoughts about this, he kept them to himself.

Travis sneaked into the barn. He hurried past the horses and the milk cow and the barn cats to the farthest corner, where he kept his tame rabbits. It was dark and gloomy back there, and a new addition to the family would be less likely to be noticed. He hoped.

He spoke to his prizewinning Angora rabbit. “Bunny, I want you to meet your new friend.”

He held the skunk up to Bunny’s cage. Bunny’s nose twitched once; the kit’s nose twitched once. And then they ignored each other. So much for new friends.

Viola rang the dinner bell on the back porch. Travis shoved the kit into the empty cage next to Bunny’s, saying, “Mother gets upset if we’re late to the table. After we eat, I’ll bring you your dinner, once I figure out what that is, of course.”

He hurried inside and took his place next to me at the long table crammed with hungry brothers. After the blessing, he whispered, “Say, Callie, what do skunks eat?”

I gave him a wary look. “Why do you ask?”

“Um, no reason. I’m just curious.” He went back to eating his ham and potatoes and pretended not to notice that I was now staring at him in alarm.

“Travis,” I hissed, “tell me you didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?”

“Tell me you didn’t bring a skunk home,” I said, trying to whisper, but I was so anxious it came out a sort of strangled whisper-scream.

Mother said, “Is there something wrong? Do you two have something you wish to share with the rest of us?”

“No, Mother,” we said, and stared at our plates.

Later when Mother was busy talking to someone else, I whispered to him, “There’s no skunk, right?”

He didn’t answer.

“*Right?*”

He didn’t speak. He didn’t need to. I could see the answer in his face.

After dinner Travis grabbed a paring knife and stole an apple from the pantry and ran to the barn. The kit stood on his hind legs when he saw Travis and tried to reach through the wire with his paws.

“Don’t worry. I haven’t forgotten about you. Look, I brought you an apple. I hope you like it.”



He was so busy slicing it that he didn’t hear me sneak up behind him.

“Idiot!” I cried, and he jumped about a foot in the air.

After landing back on earth, he said, “Gosh, Callie, you scared the life out of me. And it’s not very nice of you to call me an idiot.”

“I’m calling you an idiot for the simple reason that you are one. Nobody in their right mind brings a skunk home. Can you imagine what Mother and Father will say? You’ve got to let it go this instant before it sprays someone.”

The baby grumbled and reached for the apple.

“Look, Callie, he’s hungry. We have to at least feed him.”

Travis unlatched the cage and held out a slice of apple. The starving kit took it in its tiny paws and ate the whole thing in five seconds flat. Then, with twitching nose, it held out its paws for more.

It really was very cute. And it didn’t seem to smell. And normally no one visited this corner of the barn except Travis. And owls and coyotes hunted nearby at night. And that’s why I agreed, against my better judgment, to keep it overnight and let it go “first thing in the morning.” (This makes *me* such an idiot I can barely believe it.)

By the time morning came, Travis had named the kit Stinky, which wasn't strictly true.

Let me tell you something you might not know: The rule is that once you've made the mistake of yanking a wild animal out of its natural habitat, you have to look after it. You become responsible for its welfare. And once you've given it a name? It's all over. That animal becomes part of your family. So although Travis looked like the same brother on the outside, inside he had turned into a mama skunk.

The next day was Saturday. Travis and I zipped out to the barn before dawn to check on the baby. We fed it some carrot peelings, and it gobbled them down so fast I was afraid it would choke.

“All right,” I said, “that’s done. I’m going out now to make my Scientific Observations. You can come too but you have to be quiet. You know how you are.” Travis tended to chatter while I was working, and oftentimes I had to shush him to get my work done.

Travis scooped up the kit and stuffed him down his overalls.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“I’m bringing Stinky along for the walk.”

“Don’t be silly.”

Travis peeked down his bib. “Look, he’s asleep. He won’t be any trouble, I promise.”

I looked, and the kit had indeed fallen fast asleep against Travis’s chest. It looked a whole lot happier than me. I sighed. What could you do with a brother like this?

“Okay. But if I hear a single peep out of either one of you, you’re on your own. Got it?”

“Got it.” He smiled.

On the way to the river, he proceeded to tell me a long, complicated story about something that had happened at school between him and my best friend, Lula, and I had to shush him about twelve times. Each time he’d nod and promise to be quiet, and then a minute later he’d be gabbing again. Normally I enjoyed his company, but not when I was working. My observations were serious stuff.

We made it to the inlet and found a good place to sit on the riverbank just as the sun was coming up through the trees. The water at the inlet was quiet and shallow. It didn’t smell so good, but it was an excellent place to find turtles and tadpoles and such. Travis lay back on the warming grass and snoozed. I printed in my Scientific Notebook: *May 20. Clear and fine. Winds from the southwest.* Then I sat quietly and waited for Nature to show herself to me.



A few minutes later, a great blue heron glided silently down the river and, to my great surprise, landed in the shallows only twenty feet away. It had not noticed

us. I froze in place and prayed that Travis would stay still. I'd never seen the *Ardea herodias* up close before. The bird was huge, with a wingspan of six feet, its beak long and sharp as a dagger, its plumage a mixture of rich blue and gray. Suddenly, faster than my eye could follow, it snaked its head into the water and came up with a small perch. Was the fish for its own breakfast or was it intended for its hatchlings? Maybe there was a nest nearby. Herons built nests that looked like huge piles of sticks all jumbled up, so messy that you wondered how they held together.

Just then the kit stirred and woke Travis, who started to sit up. I hissed at him, "Shh, don't move," but it was too late. The heron launched itself into the air with a harsh cry of outrage, so at odds with its graceful appearance. It flew downriver with ponderous wingbeats, each flap so slow it made you wonder how it could possibly stay aloft.

"Wow," said Travis. He saw the look on my face and said, "Sorry, Callie, I didn't mean to scare it off."

But I was too busy looking at what the bird had left behind to chew him out properly. In the shallows floated a large blue feather, almost a foot long. I hurried to snag it with a stick before it floated away. I ended up getting my boots wet but it was worth it. Holding it to the sun, I noticed it looked blue when I turned it one way and gray when I turned it the other. Why? I'd have to ask Granddaddy about this.

I let Travis hold it for a minute to let him know I'd forgiven him.

"It's a real beauty," he said. "Are you going to make a pen out of it?"

I was tempted, but quill pens were hard to use without making a terrible mess everywhere. Pencils were much safer. I said, "No, I think I'll just add it to my shelf." I kept a collection of bones and fossils and other such treasures in my room. "And besides," I went on, "my penmanship is nothing to write home about."

I watched him to see if he got the joke. It took him a moment, but then he laughed. I always enjoyed making him laugh. It was like the sun bursting out from behind the clouds on a gloomy day.

We made our way toward the cotton gin. Halfway there, Stinky poked his head out and started making loud grumble-squeaks.

"What's wrong with him?" I said.

"I don't know. He looks okay to me. Maybe he's hungry again."

We entered a clearing, and the kit got louder and louder, its calls echoing from tree to tree. I listened closely.

"What is that?" I said. By now the skunk was squawking so loudly you could barely hear yourself think.

Travis looked puzzled. Then he broke into a big smile and trotted over to a hollow tree. He peered inside and said, "Look, Callie! It's the tree where I found Stinky."

I looked. To Travis's joy—and to my dismay—a pair of tiny black button eyes gleamed faintly in the dark.

Another kit.

“Oh boy, another one!” Travis cried, all excited. Stinky grew even more excited at being reunited with his brother (or sister, who could tell?). The three of them would have thrown a party if I’d let them. The only one not excited by the reunion was yours truly. No, not excited. Not at all.

Stinky wriggled and would have fallen to the ground but for Travis catching him just in time. “Here,” he said, shoving him at me.

“Uh, I don’t think—” But it was too late. I was left holding one kit while Travis practically dived into the hollow tree for the other. To my surprise, Stinky was soft and warm and furry, and he didn’t smell. He tickled as he sniffed my fingers. I hated to admit it, but he was really kind of ... cute.

Travis emerged with the other kit. It squirmed feebly in his hand. It was only half the size of Stinky, but it looked about two-thirds dead to me.

“Oh, Travis,” I said, knowing the heartbreak that lay ahead, “it’s the runt of the litter. It isn’t going to make it. You should put it back.”

He looked aghast. “We can’t just leave it here. We have to try. You have to help me.”

I thought for a moment. Did I dare go to the vet, Dr. Pritzker? It would be asking a lot. He didn’t look after wild animals, especially wild animals like skunks that were considered the lowest of the low. They were varmints and pests, real nuisances to the local farmers, tearing up gardens and stealing eggs from the henhouse. Nobody in town would ever dream of trying to save a skunk because they were all too busy trying to kill them. Dr. Pritzker might think I was crazy or—much worse—stupid. And I didn’t want him to think I was crazy or stupid, because he sometimes let me watch him doctor the cattle and horses, useful animals that were actually worth something. All that would come to a sudden halt if he thought I was crazy or stupid. I weighed all these things up. Then my soft hearted brother began to plead with me.

“Please, Callie, we have to try. Please.” He looked so upset that I knew I’d have to give in.

I sighed. He cracked a huge smile, knowing he’d won me over.

I shoved Stinky at him and said, “See if you can get some food into the little one. I’ll go to Dr. Pritzker’s and meet you at home.”

“Thanks! You won’t regret it.” He jogged off, clutching the kits to him.

“Of course I will,” I shouted at him. “I always do!” Then I took off in the other direction. I made the run downtown to Dr. Pritzker’s office in record time, and I was relieved to see his mare, Penny, hitched to his buggy out front. I’d caught him before he left on his first call of the day.

I didn't even stop to give Penny her usual pat on the nose but burst through the door, startling the doctor who was looking over some papers on his desk.

"What is it, Calpurnia? What's the trouble?"

I paused to catch my breath and think. I couldn't tell him we had a skunk. So I said, "Dr. Pritzker, I'm worried about one of our, uh, kittens. It's awfully small, it's the runt of the litter, and I told my brother we should just let it go, but he wants to try and save it."

"Do you think that's a good idea? Nature doesn't usually intend the runts to live."

"I know, but Travis has his heart set on trying. What should we do?"

"Well, the first thing you have to do is keep it warm somehow. Once they lose body heat, they start to fail quickly. And it needs to feed frequently. Is the mother cat around to feed it?"

"She's ... gone."

"Is it old enough to eat solid food? Some ground-up meat?"

"Uh, maybe not. It looks pretty weak to me."

"Then you'll have to feed it milk somehow, either with a sponge it can suck on or with a very small bottle. And you'll need to warm the milk first."

"Okay, I will. Is there anything else we can do?"

"You can hope for the best. And I do hope you and Travis won't feel too badly if it dies. Runts often do, even when you do everything to save them."

"Thank you."

I dashed back out. It wasn't until I'd got most of the way home and saw the sun high in the sky that I realized we'd missed breakfast. Uh-oh, a punishable offense in our house.

Travis had both skunks in the cage by the time I got back to the barn. The larger one was nosing and cuddling the smaller one, which looked frighteningly weak. I explained Dr. Pritzker's advice and then cast around for something I could use to warm the runt. I grabbed a brick from a stack and then ran with it to the back door of our house.

Our cook, Viola, sat at the kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee and taking a short break between cooking our family's huge breakfast and cooking our family's huge lunch. "You two done missed out. Your mama's not happy about that. She wants to see you."

Drat. Now I was in trouble, and I didn't have *time* to be in trouble.

"What you doing with that brick?"

Viola doted on Idabelle, our one Inside Cat, whose job it was to keep the mice at bay, so I decided to stick with the kitten story. "I need it to warm one of the barn kittens that's sick." I opened the stove and pushed the brick in, nearly burning my fingers.

"Okay, but your mama wants to see you."

I smoothed down my hair, straightened my pinafore, and marched into the parlor where Mother sat mending a big basket of my brothers' shirts. (It turns out that a passel of brothers aren't just hard on their sister; they're hard on their shirts as well.)

"Ah," said Mother, "the missing daughter has returned. Where were you at breakfast? And where is Travis?"

The sick kitten story seemed to be holding up well, so I went on with it and then explained about having to run to Dr. Pritzker's for emergency advice. Mother didn't much like me hanging around his office, saying it wasn't a suitable place for a young lady, but she, like everyone else, felt sorry for the so-called sick kitten. She finally let me go with a word of warning not to miss any more meals, then said, "Send Travis to see me."

"I think he's still busy with our, uh, patient."

"Well then, after that. You may go."

I went back to the kitchen, took a dish towel from a drawer, and scooped out the brick and wrapped it up, again nearly burning myself. This skunk doctoring business was dangerous in ways I hadn't expected.

I hurried out to the barn with my warm bundle.

Travis stood in the gloom next to the cage, looking anxious and biting his nails.

"Stop that," I said. "Mother will get all over you about it, and you're already in trouble for missing breakfast. Look here, I've got a way to warm the kit up."

"You didn't tell her we have skunks, did you?"

I marveled at the boy. Was he insane? “I told her we had a sick kitten. I told Viola that too. So that’s what we’ve got, right?”

“Right.”

We opened the cage and put the brick between the two. The bigger kit immediately nestled up beside it. The smaller one didn’t quite get it, so I picked it up and put it on top of the brick. It rooted around feebly, looking like it was trying to nurse in the fuzzy towel.

“All right,” I said. “Next, the warm milk. Go and find Flossie—we won’t need much.”

“She’s out in the pasture.”

“Doesn’t matter. We only need a couple of squirts. I’ve got to find a bottle that’s small enough. Or a sponge. Ugh, I guess I have to go back into the house again.”

Travis grabbed an empty jar and went out looking for our milk cow. I went back to the house, trying to think what I could use. We’d hand raised orphaned lambs and piglets with bottles in the past but they were far too big for the kit.

Viola was gone from the kitchen. I rustled around in the pantry but there was nothing we could use.

“Think, Calpurnia, think,” I muttered. Somewhere in my distant past, I’d seen a tiny little bottle in the house, but where? Then it came to me.

Mother was still sewing in the parlor, so I crept quietly up the stairs so as not to attract her attention. I went into the trunk room, stacked high with wicker traveling trunks, and then up the rickety stairs into the attic. The reek of mothballs grew stronger as I climbed higher. The hatchway into the attic creaked ominously as I pushed it open. Just like in a ghost story.

Oh stop, I told myself. You’re just being silly.

The attic was dark and piled high with winter quilts. My grandfather’s war uniform hung from one of the rafters like a dead Confederate soldier, complete with sword. I shuddered and wished I’d brought a candle with me. In the corner stood our old rocking horse, paint chipped off, scraggly real horsehair mane and tail mostly missing from hard use by many children, including me. All seven of us had outgrown it, but for some reason Mother had not been able to pitch it out.

Over there were my old dolls sitting in a row, dolls I hadn’t played with in years. They grinned at me in the gloom and spoke in a whispery chorus: “Calleeeee. Where have you been, Calleeeee? We used to be your dearest friends, but now you have abandoned us in the dark. What do you have to say for yourself, Calleeeee?”

I cleared my throat. “Be quiet. You’re not really talking. It’s just my imagination. My *overactive* imagination.”

“Are you sure, Calleeeee?”

I told myself, Calpurnia, get a grip. I said to the dolls, “Oh, shut up.”

And they did.

I opened a tin box full of doll clothes. Buried at the bottom was a tiny glass bottle with a rubber tip. Ha! I congratulated myself on being a clever girl and skedaddled out of there before the dolls could accuse me again. I'd outgrown them and felt a bit sad about it, but not too sad because now I had other, better things in my life. Now I had my Scientific Notebook and Granddaddy to do experiments with; now I had Dr. Pritzker to teach me about animals. Now I had tadpoles that turned into frogs, caterpillars that grew into butterflies.

I crept back through the house and ran into Viola peeling spuds in the kitchen.

"What you got there?" she said, squinting at me.

"Nothing," I said, and thrust the bottle into my pinafore pocket.

"Huh. Every time you got 'nothing,' it never turns out good."

"Ha ha, very funny." I kissed her cheek and ran out before she could swat me away.

Back at the barn I waited for Travis and worried about the runt, staring at it closely to make sure it was still breathing. It lay on the brick where I'd placed it, its rib cage barely moving in tiny shallow puffs.

Travis clattered in, carrying the jar with a couple of inches of milk. He looked like he'd been in a fistfight, with his hair standing on end and streaks of cow manure all over him.

I stared at him. "What happened to you?"

"It's Flossie," he panted. "She's not used to being milked at this time of day. She didn't like it one bit." He wiped his brow. "And all this time I thought we were friends. Did you find a bottle?"

I showed him the doll bottle, and we both agreed it was perfect. It had to be—it's all there was. I poured the warm milk into it while Travis took the runt and cuddled it in his arms.

"I think the brick is working," he said. "He feels nice and toasty."

I had my doubts. The poor thing looked pretty limp. I held the bottle to its mouth but it didn't move.

"What's wrong?" said Travis. "Why won't he drink?"

"I don't know. Maybe it won't drink cow's milk. Maybe it will only drink skunk's milk. Maybe we have to round up a skunk to milk."

But Travis was in no mood for joking. "We can't milk a skunk," he cried, sounding dangerously close to tears.

"All right then, we're going to have to force it." I squeezed the rubber tip of the bottle, and a little milk oozed out. "Wake it up."

"How?"

"Poke it, shake it, do something."

He poked it gently but it didn't move.

All right, Calpurnia, I told myself, drastic times call for drastic measures. I pinched the kit by the scruff and pulled its head all the way back so that its tiny pink mouth gaped open. I pushed the bottle deep inside. The kit gagged, and milk dribbled down its chest.

“It won’t swallow,” Travis said miserably.

What more could we do? By now I figured it was a goner, and we were going to have to make yet another trip to the sad little cemetery out back where my brother’s failed pets were laid to rest. Travis was just going to have to get used to it. Besides, one baby skunk should be enough for any boy, right? (Although one certain boy would never see it that way.)

And then something wonderful happened: The runt twitched its tiny nose. Then it licked its chops. Then it feebly tried to lick its fur where the milk had splattered. Signs of life!

I gave it some more milk, and it managed to swallow a couple of drops. Just a couple. But it was a start. Travis lit up like the sun, making it all worthwhile.

If Travis was an idiot to adopt two skunks, I, being one year older and so much wiser, was an even bigger idiot for going along with him, right? In my defense I have to say that I warned him and warned him, but of course he grew more and more attached to them.

So now we were stuck with (1) Stinky the Skunk, and (2) Winky the Runt. I thanked my lucky stars there weren't a dozen kits hidden in that tree.

Dr. Pritzker came over a few days later to look at one of our pigs with an eye infection, and I hung around to watch.

"Hello, Calpurnia, how is your kitten coming along?"

"My what?"

"The kitten you told me about, the poorly one."

"Oh ... yes, of course ... the kitten. It's doing very well, thank you. I think your advice made all the difference."

"Would you like me to examine it after I'm done here?"

"Uh, well, perhaps some other time. I'm pretty sure it's sleeping right now, and I hate to wake it up."

Dr. Pritzker gave me a funny look but that didn't bother me. I was used to it. Lots of people gave me funny looks.

By now Stinky was eating all sorts of fruits and vegetables and bugs, along with tidbits left over from our family meals. In fact, he'd eat anything we put in front of him. Granddaddy, the source of all knowledge, explained that skunks are "omnivores," which is a fancy way of saying they'll eat anything from popcorn to crickets to fried chicken. One day Travis presented Stinky with a whole pecan, which frustrated the kit to no end, as he was unable to crack the thick shell with his tiny teeth. Finally Travis cracked the nut open for him, and Stinky greedily inhaled the contents.

Winky was still using the bottle but slowly improving. The hardest thing was keeping his brick warm. We were constantly running in and out of the kitchen while trying not to draw too much attention to ourselves.

One day Travis and I walked into the barn and heard a terrible racket. We ran to the back, where Ajax, Father's prize bird dog, was barking and pawing at the skunk cage. Stinky and Winky growled back at him from the far corner, doing their best to look large and fierce.



“No, Ajax!” we screamed, but he was too excited by the presence of not just one captive varmint but *two* of them. He must have figured this was his lucky day.

I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him away, but he fought me like a wild thing and jerked loose.

Stinky stamped his feet.

“Nooo!” I cried.

Stinky turned his back.

“Nooooo!” I cried.

Stinky let fly.

Ajax took a direct hit in the face. He howled and pitched over backward, pawing at his muzzle and uttering horrible screeches. The poor dog screamed and thrashed as if he were being tortured (which, if you think about it, he was).

Travis and I could only stand there with our mouths open, staring at this terrible and ridiculous scene.

When Father got home from work, Ajax was lying in his favorite place on the front porch. Reeking. You could smell him from miles away.

Father glared at the dog. “You, sir! Get off the porch! You’re banished for a week. Don’t come back until you’ve improved.”

Ajax flattened himself and slunk away, looking very embarrassed. Unfortunately he went to his second-favorite place, which was *under* the porch, and although we could no longer see him, it turned out to be not a whole lot better, nose-wise.

Father turned on us. “You two. Do you know anything about this?”

Travis said, “Well, we—”

I elbowed him. “No, sir,” I said.

“No, sir,” Travis echoed. Father scowled at us. We stared at our boots.

“Pfaw!” he said, and strode into the house.

“What do we do now?” said Travis.

“I guess we better wash Ajax,” I said glumly.

“Ugh.”

“Exactly.”

I knew that plain old water would not fix the stench.

“Stay here,” I said. “I’m going to talk to Granddaddy.” I went inside and knocked on the door of the library, where he spent much of his time.

He called out, “Enter if you must.” He said that because he preferred to be left alone. He preferred to live what he called A Life of the Mind. This meant that he liked to sit quietly, and read lots of books, and think about things. So what kinds of things did he think about? Everything, as far as I could tell: birds, dinosaurs, fossils, volcanoes, tornadoes, the weather, the planets, the stars. I hadn’t yet come across anything he hadn’t thought about. I hoped he’d given some thought to skunks and dogs.

“Granddaddy, what’s the best way to get the smell of skunk off a dog?”

“Ah, I take it one of the dogs has had a mishap with the family Mephitidae?”

“Yep, a mishap right in the face. He’s pretty miserable. And to make it worse, Father has banished him, which makes him *really* miserable.”

“Then I suggest you mix up five parts hydrogen peroxide, five parts baking soda, and one part liquid soap. Leave it on the beast for several minutes before washing it off. Repeat this process several times. You will find what you need in the laboratory.”

“Thank you.” I turned to go.

“Be careful not to spill the hydrogen peroxide on your clothes.”

“Why?”

“It will bleach them. And avoid storing the mixture in a closed bottle.”

“Why?”

“It is likely to explode.”

“*Explode?* Really? Perhaps you could, uh, come and help me.”

“Calpurnia, did I not teach you your proper weights and measures?”

“Yessir, you did.”

“Well, then.” He went back to his reading.

I went to the laboratory out back, which was really just an old shed where Granddaddy did his experiments. Sometimes I’d sit with him and take notes.

There were many bottles of chemicals on the shelves, the more dangerous ones marked with a skull and crossbones. I finally found what I needed and measured out the three ingredients, careful to keep the mixture off my dress. I poured it all into a big jar and left the cap off. An explosion was the very last thing I needed (although it might be quite interesting). Then I stopped off in the house and swiped a bar of Mother’s fancy rose-scented soap that she kept for special occasions. I figured this occasion was special enough.

I met up with Travis, and we took Ajax to the river on a leash, me carrying the open jar and taking care not to spill it. Progress was slow.

Travis asked, "Why didn't you put a lid on it?"

"You don't want to know."

At the river we took off our boots and led Ajax into the water. We covered him with our recipe and made him stand there for several minutes. Then we splashed him with water and rinsed him off. Then we did it again. And again. He kept trying to climb up the bank, and we kept scolding him and pushing him back into the water. Nobody, neither child nor dog, enjoyed themselves.

Then we did a final scrub with Mother's fancy soap. Ajax still smelled like a skunk but not as much. And now he at least smelled like a skunk that had been rolling in rose petals.

"What do we do with Stinky and Winky?" Travis said.

"We'll let them go where you found them. They'll be happier in the wild, you know."

"That's not what I meant."

"Come on, Travis..."

"No, Callie, not yet. Maybe when they're bigger and can look after themselves. What about Ajax? I'm afraid he'll attack them again."

"After that? No dog could possibly be that dumb."

We looked over at Ajax, who had chosen that exact second to scratch himself with such a silly expression that we both had a moment of doubt. He squinted and grinned, his upper lip caught on an eyetooth. I'd be willing to bet that no dog in the history of the world had ever looked dumber.

"Hmm," I said, "I guess we should put the kits in the loft for now. They'll be safe there."

We took Ajax home and pushed him under the porch, giving him strict instructions to "Stay!" Then we went to the loft, which was sunny and warm and dry. It smelled of sweet hay, and when the sun shone in at just the right angle, you could see a million golden flecks of dust dancing in the air. It felt like a magical place. Up there you could see all the way to the cotton gin downtown and miles of cotton fields in the other direction. It was also a good place to do gymnastics in that you could do rolls and flips and cartwheels in the loose hay without hurting yourself too badly.

It was no easy task hauling the cage up the ladder but we finally managed. Travis took the kits up in his overalls. We let them snuffle and nose around for a while and then tucked them back in their cage. We dumped a bit of loose hay over the cage to disguise it, just in case any of the other brothers came by.

* * *

The kits seemed happy in the loft. Travis brushed their fur and gave them baths and brought them little toys that they tossed about just like regular kittens. He sneaked them out for walks in the woods at dawn and at dusk, and he carried them around

in the bottom of his satchel where they curled up happily enough in two black-and-white balls.

Stinky and Winky never sprayed him. They never even stamped their feet in warning. They became such beloved pets that I think Travis lost sight of the fact that his furry friends were, in fact, skunks.

I joined him in the loft every few days, still trying to convince him to let them go just as soon as they reached a certain size.

But then came the fateful morning when Winky would not play with his toys, and worse, he would not eat.

Travis looked worried at breakfast. When I asked him if there was anything wrong, he whispered, “No, I’m fine.”

But I knew him better than anyone, and I could tell he was not fine. If he’d told me his plan, there’s no doubt I would have talked—or maybe yelled—some sense into him. But I didn’t know about it until it was too late.

I set off to school with Travis and two of my other brothers, Sul Ross and Lamar. Travis had his book satchel over his shoulder but, strangely, he was carrying his books under his arm. I was about to ask him about this when I heard someone calling my name. Up ahead, my friend Lula Gates waited for me, waving and calling.

“Hi, Lula!” I waved. I ran ahead to meet her, and we chatted all the way to school. I didn’t give Travis another thought. At least, not right at that second.

We made it to school just in time to line up while Miss Harbottle rang the handbell. We trooped in, the girls in one line and the boys in the other. Our school had only one classroom, so the little ones sat up front and practiced their ABCs; the older children sat in the middle and recited their times tables; the oldest children sat in the back and studied world geography with the atlas and the globe.

Lula and I shared a desk right behind Travis, who, for some reason, looked extra fidgety. You’d have thought the boy had ants in his pants the way he kept squirming in his seat and fiddling around with the satchel at his feet.

At recess we all ran outside. Usually Travis hung around and bothered me and Lula while we played hopscotch, but this time he took his satchel to the far side of the playground. Now I knew for sure something was wrong with him, and I’d have to tell Mother. Which meant she’d either dose him with a teaspoon of cod-liver oil, the most awful substance in the entire world, or haul him off to see Dr. Walker, with his cold hands and even colder instruments. Both prospects were enough to make you shudder.

Miss Harbottle rang the bell to signal the end of recess, and we all went back to our desks.

“Boys and girls,” she said, “today we will all have a lesson in Texas history. You little ones, pay attention now. Did you know that before Texas became part of the United States, it was actually a part of Mexico? That’s right, part of another country. And the brave Texians, as they were called, your very own ancestors, fought a war against Mexico to gain their independence.”

Normally such a discussion would have deeply interested Travis, but now he was busy trying to slide a box of raisins out of his desk without making any noise.

Miss Harbottle said, “The Texians suffered terrible defeats at the Alamo and at Goliad.”

She pulled down the map of the United States and tapped it with her pointer to show us the sites of the famous battles. The Alamo was only fifty miles from our house. But because it was a full day's journey on the train, none of my brothers or I had seen it.

"But the tide turned at the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836. That's where our own General Sam Houston led his ragged army of volunteers against the much larger Mexican forces commanded by General Santa Anna."

Then something happened that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up: Travis's satchel moved. On its own. Which satchels aren't supposed to do.

The flap lifted an inch, then fell shut. Then it lifted a couple of inches and fell shut. It lifted a third time and, to my horror, out poked a pointy black muzzle with twitching whiskers.

Miss Harbottle grew louder as she got to the exciting parts of the battle.

Then to my double horror, another, smaller black muzzle poked out beside the first one. The mind reeled. I couldn't believe it.

"Travis," I hissed, "what have you done?"

"Huh?"

"You can't bring skunks to school."

He looked down just in time to stop them making their escape. He gently nudged them back with his foot. I glanced around. Nobody seemed to have noticed. All eyes were on Miss Harbottle.

I whispered, "Have you lost your mind?"

He turned halfway in his chair and murmured, "Winky stopped eating. I couldn't just leave him at home; he's way too skinny. I'm trying to tempt his appetite with raisins. Normally he's a real raisin hog, but for some reason he won't eat them."

"But both? You had to bring them *both*?"

A couple of students glared at us.

"I couldn't separate them. They get so upset."

"You get them out of here right now."

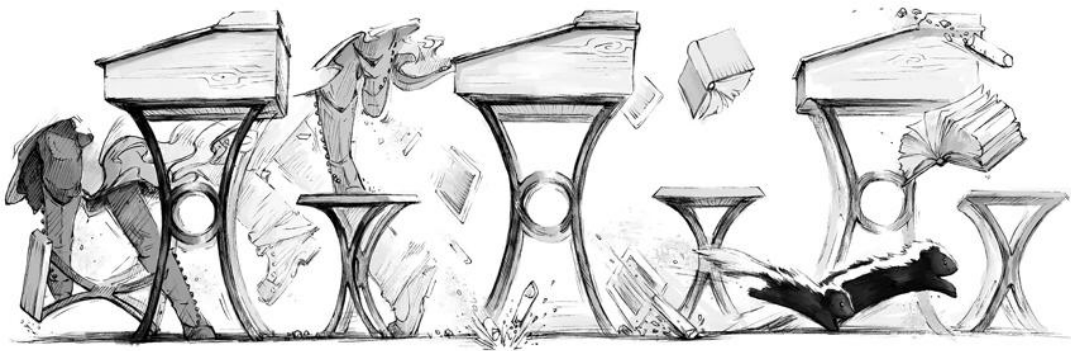
Lula elbowed me to be quiet.

I thought fast and hard. Maybe I could scoop up the satchel and run for the door. And keep running all the way back to the barn. But what would Miss Harbottle say about my behavior? I'd have to plead illness. And what would my parents do? It would mean the cod-liver oil or the doctor. Was it worth it? To save Travis from his overwhelming love of animals and his own incredibly stupid decision?

I weighed my choices.

Miss Harbottle said, "General Houston led his soldiers on their surprise attack, crossing the high grass fields around the Mexican camp. General Santa Anna was so confident of victory that he had not posted any sentries to keep watch during their

afternoon siesta. The Texians were only yards away when they opened fire, shouting, ‘Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!’”



She jumped and screamed at the top of her lungs: “Eeeeeeee!”

We all jumped along with her.

She ran to the corner for the broom and held it up before her like a rifle. Gosh! Her re-enactment was so vivid and thrilling. Why couldn’t all our lessons be like this? Instead of droning on about five times five—

“Skunks!” she yelled. “Skunks!”

I looked down. Stinky and Winky were scurrying between the desks and heading right for her.

She might as well have yelled “Bomb!” for the effect it had. Piercing screams filled the air. The students erupted in panic. They started rushing for the door and dropping books and knocking over chairs.

“Travis,” I yelled, “do something.”

“Do? What should I do?”

“Get them.”

Stinky had made it to Miss Harbottle’s desk, where he hunkered down underneath in safety. Winky, slower and confused by the noise, didn’t get there in time. Miss Harbottle jabbed him with the broom and moaned, “Go away, you. Oh, please go away.”

“No, don’t,” pleaded Travis, “please don’t upset them.”

I also could have told Miss Harbottle that upsetting a skunk was not the best course of action and that she should just stay calm and be still, but she was from the big city of Austin and had never had to face down multiple skunks before. She took a swipe at Winky and sent him skidding into the corner.

“Oh no,” said Travis, but a second later Winky got up and shook himself. He didn’t look hurt, but he didn’t look happy, either. He raised his tail.

Uh-oh.

He stamped his tiny feet.

Oh no.

Miss Harbottle backed away, but just then Stinky emerged from under the desk, trapping her between them.

I called out, “Try to stay calm, Miss Harbottle.”

Travis begged again, “Please don’t rile them.” He crept forward with his satchel. “If you’ll just stay calm, I think I can get them.”

She looked at him as if he were crazy. “Stay back! They’re wild.”

“Actually,” he said, “they’re—”

“Yes, Travis,” I shouted, “they’re wild. Can’t you see how wild they are?”

Travis crept closer. Stinky advanced on Miss Harbottle. She took a swing at him and missed. He stamped his feet. But Winky beat him to it, letting loose a poof of mist from his hind end that settled on the floor and the blackboard.

“Nooooo,” shrieked Miss Harbottle.

Stinky turned his back to her and raised his tail. He was only four feet away. It would be a direct hit. Except that at the very second he fired, Travis launched himself through the air like a flying human shield, saving our teacher from the spray.

Coughing and gagging, we stumbled to the door and pitched down the steps into the fresh air. Travis reeked to high heaven. His streaming eyes were bright red. The other children backed away from him as fast as they could, which was just as well, since he then did the only thing he could possibly do to make things worse. He bent over and put his hands on his knees and threw up his breakfast.

Stinky and Winky scampered away in the confusion and were never seen again.

* * *

Mother ended up burning Travis’s shirt. And for a while he had to eat his meal on the back porch with no company except for the dog Ajax.

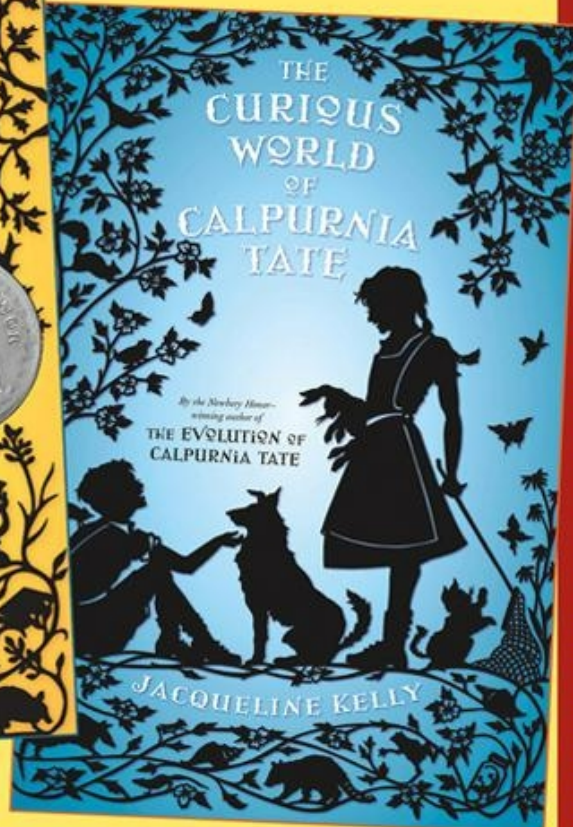
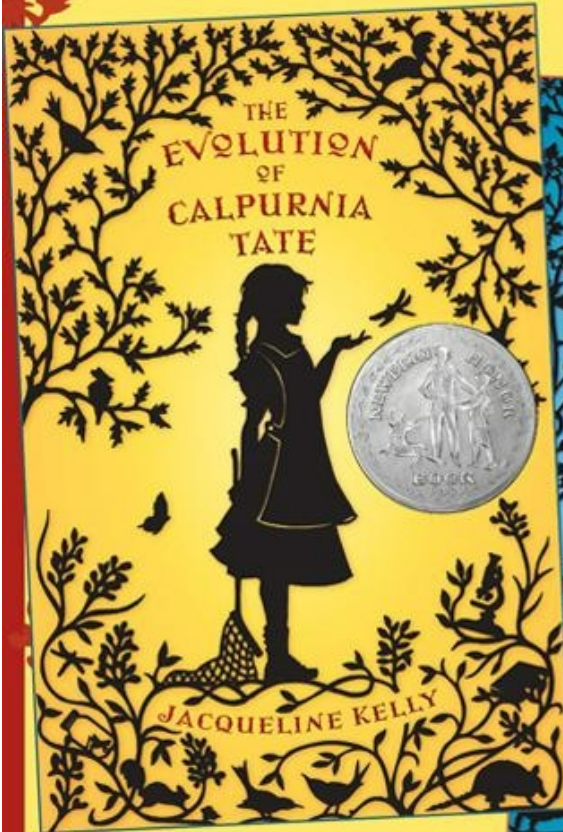
Thus ended the episode of the “wild” skunk invasion of the Fentress School. Travis, who was entirely at fault for the whole thing, ended up a total disgrace in my eyes but a hero to our teacher and all our classmates. You see, because the classroom smelled so horrible, the school had to be closed and we were let out early for summer vacation.

If anyone had asked me, I could have told them that swabbing down the floor and blackboard with a mixture of five parts hydrogen peroxide, five parts baking soda, and one part soap would have fixed things well enough so that we *could* have held classes for that last week.

But no one asked me.

And I didn’t bother to tell.

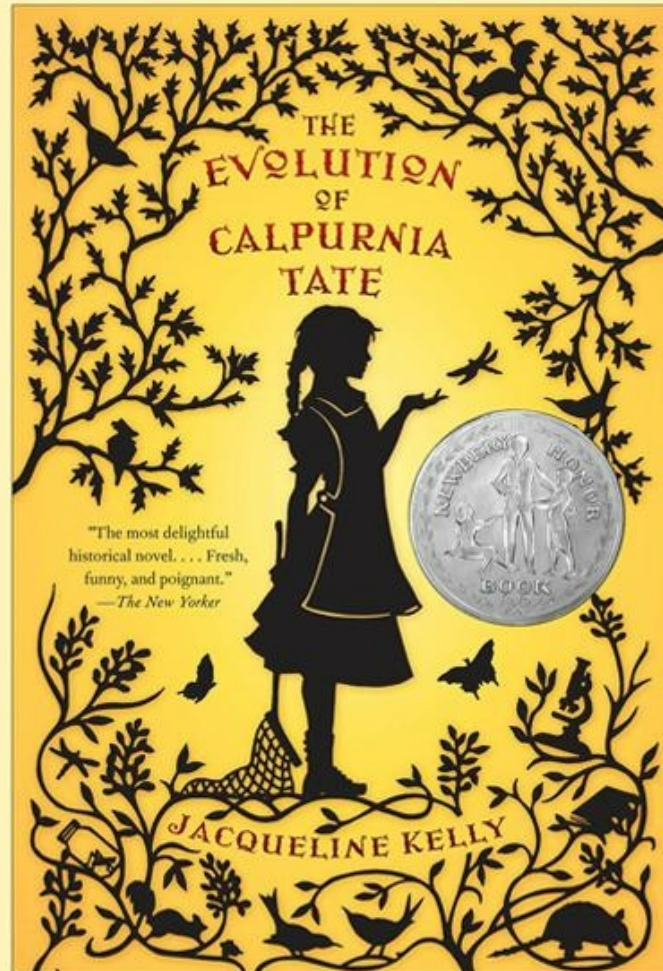
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Keep reading for a sneak peek
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The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate



CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES

When a young naturalist commences the study of a group of organisms quite unknown to him, he is at first much perplexed to determine what differences to consider ... for he knows nothing of the amount and kind of variation to which the group is subject....

BY 1899, WE HAD LEARNED to tame the darkness but not the Texas heat. We arose in the dark, hours before sunrise, when there was barely a smudge of indigo along the eastern sky and the rest of the horizon was still pure pitch. We lit our kerosene lamps and carried them before us in the dark like our own tiny wavering suns. There was a full day's work to be done before noon, when the deadly heat drove everyone back into our big shuttered house and we lay down in the dim high-ceilinged rooms like sweating victims. Mother's usual summer remedy of sprinkling the sheets with refreshing cologne lasted only a minute. At three o'clock in the afternoon, when it was time to get up again, the temperature was still killing.

The heat was a misery for all of us in Fentress, but it was the women who suffered the most in their corsets and petticoats. (I was still a few years too young for this uniquely feminine form of torture.) They loosened their stays and sighed the hours away and cursed the heat and their husbands, too, for dragging them to Caldwell County to plant cotton and acres of pecan trees. Mother temporarily gave up her hairpieces, a crimped false fringe and a rolled horsehair rat, platforms on which she daily constructed an elaborate mountain of her own hair. On those days when we had no company, she even took to sticking her head under the kitchen pump and letting Viola, our quadroon cook, pump away until she was soaked through. We were forbidden by sharp orders to laugh at this astounding entertainment. As Mother gradually surrendered her dignity to the heat, we discovered (as did Father) that it was best to keep out of her way.

My name is Calpurnia Virginia Tate, but back then everybody called me Callie Vee. That summer, I was eleven years old and the only girl out of seven children. Can you imagine a worse situation? I was spliced midway between three older brothers—Harry, Sam Houston, and Lamar—and three younger brothers—Travis, Sul Ross, and the baby, Jim Bowie, whom we called J.B. The little boys actually managed to sleep at midday, sometimes even piled atop one another like damp, steaming puppies.

The men who came in from the fields and my father, back from his office at the cotton gin, slept too, first dousing themselves with tin buckets of tepid well water on the sleeping porch before falling down on their rope beds as if poleaxed.

Yes, the heat was a misery, but it also brought me my freedom. While the rest of the family tossed and dozed, I secretly made my way to the San Marcos River bank and enjoyed a daily interlude of no school, no pestiferous brothers, and no Mother. I didn't have permission to do this, exactly, but no one said I couldn't. I got away with it because I had my own room at the far end of the hall, whereas my brothers all had to share, and they would have tattled in a red-hot second. As far as I could tell, this was the sole decent thing about being the only girl.

Our house was separated from the river by a crescent-shaped parcel of five acres of wild, uncleared growth. It would have been an ordeal to push my way through it except that the regular river patrons—dogs, deer, brothers—kept a narrow path beaten down through the treacherous sticker burrs that rose as high as my head and snatched at my hair and pinafore as I folded myself narrow to slide by. When I reached the river, I stripped down to my chemise, floating on my back with my shimmy gently billowing around me in the mild currents, luxuriating in the coolness of the water flowing around me. I was a river cloud, turning gently in the eddies. I looked up at the filmy bags of webworms high above me in the lush canopy of oaks bending over the river. The webworms seemed to mirror me, floating in their own balloons of gauze in the pale turquoise sky.

That summer, all the men except for my grandfather Walter Tate cut their hair close and shaved off their thick beards and mustaches. They looked as naked as blind salamanders for the few days it took to get over the shock of their pale, weak chins. Strangely, Grandfather felt no distress from the heat, even with his full white beard tumbling down his chest. He claimed it was because he was a man of regular and moderate habits who never took whiskey before noon. His smelly old swallowtail coat was hopelessly outdated by then, but he wouldn't hear of parting with it. Despite regular spongings with benzene at the hands of our maid SanJuanna, the coat always kept its musty smell and strange color, which was neither black nor green.

Grandfather lived under the same roof with us but was something of a shadowy figure. He had long since turned over the running of the family business to his only son, my father, Alfred Tate, and spent his days engaged in "experiments" in his "laboratory" out back. The laboratory was just an old shed that had once been part of the slave quarters. When he wasn't in the laboratory, he was either out hunting specimens or holed up with his moldering books in a dim corner of the library, where no one dared disturb him.

I asked Mother if I could cut off my hair, which hung in a dense swelter all the way down my back. She said no, she wouldn't have me running about like a shorn savage. I found this manifestly unfair, to say nothing of *hot*. So I devised a plan: Every week I would cut off an inch of hair—just one stealthy inch—so that Mother

wouldn't notice. She wouldn't notice because I would camouflage myself with good manners. When I took on the disguise of a polite young lady, I could often escape her closer scrutiny. She was usually swamped by the constant demands of the household and the ceaseless uproar of my brothers. You wouldn't believe the amount of chaos and commotion six brothers could create. Plus, the heat aggravated her crippling sick headaches, and she had to resort to a big spoonful of Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, known to be the Best Blood Purifier for Women.

That night I took a pair of embroidery scissors and, with great exhilaration and a pounding heart, cut off the first inch. I looked at the soft haystack of hair cupped in my palm. I was striding forth to greet my future in the shiny New Century, a few short months away. It seemed to me a great moment indeed. I slept poorly that night in fear of the morning.

The next day I held my breath coming down the stairs to breakfast. The pecan flapjacks tasted like cardboard. And do you know what happened? Absolutely nothing. No one noticed in the slightest. I was mightily relieved but also thought, *Well, isn't that just like this family.* In fact, no one noticed anything until four weeks and four inches went by and our cook, Viola, gave me a hard look one morning. But she didn't say a word.

It was so hot that for the first time in history Mother left the candles of the chandelier unlit at dinnertime. She even let Harry and me skip our piano lessons for two weeks. Which was just as well. Harry sweated on the keys so that they turned hazy along the pattern of the Minuet in G. Nothing Mother or SanJuanna tried could bring the sheen back to the ivory. Besides, our music teacher, Miss Brown, was ancient, and her decrepit horse had to pull her gig three miles from Prairie Lea. They would both likely collapse on the trip and have to be put down. On consideration, not such a bad idea.

Father, on learning that we would miss our lessons, said, "A good thing, too. A boy needs piano like a snake needs a hoop-skirt."

Mother didn't want to hear it. She wanted seventeen-year-old Harry, her oldest, to become a gentleman. She had plans to send him off to the university in Austin fifty miles away when he turned eighteen. According to the newspaper, there were five hundred students at the university, seventeen of them well-chaperoned young ladies in the School of Liberal Arts (with a choice of music, English, or Latin). Father's plan was different; he wanted Harry to be a businessman and one day take over the cotton gin and the pecan orchards and join the Freemasons, as he had. Father apparently didn't think piano lessons were a bad idea for me though, if he considered the matter at all.

In late June, the *Fentress Indicator* reported that the temperature was 106 degrees in the middle of the street outside the newspaper office. The paper did not mention the temperature in the shade. I wondered why not, as no one in his right mind spent more than a second in the sun, except to make smartly for the next patch of shadow, whether

it be cast by tree or barn or plow horse. It seemed to me that the temperature in the shade would be a lot more useful to the citizens of our town. I labored over A Letter To The Editor pointing this out, and to my great amazement, the paper published my letter the following week. To my family's greater amazement, it began to publish the temperature in the shade as well. Reading that it was only 98 in the shade somehow made us all feel a bit cooler.

There was a sudden surge in insect activity both inside the house and out. Grasshoppers rose in flocks beneath the horses' hooves. The fireflies came out in such great numbers that no one could remember a summer with a more spectacular show. Every evening, my brothers and I gathered on the front porch and held a contest to see who could spot the first flicker. There was considerable excitement and honor in winning, especially after Mother took a scrap of blue silk from her sewing basket and cut out a fine medallion, complete with long streamers. In between headaches she embroidered FENTRESS FIREFLY PRIZE on it in gold floss. It was an elegant and much-coveted prize. The winner kept it until the following night.

Ants invaded the kitchen as never before. They marched in military formation through minute cracks around the baseboards and windows and headed straight for the sink. They were desperate for water and would not be stopped. Viola took up arms against them to no avail. We deemed the fireflies a bounty and the ants a plague, but it occurred to me for the first time to question why there should be such a distinction. They were all just creatures trying to survive the drought, as we were. I thought Viola should give up and leave them alone, but I reconsidered after discovering that the black pepper in the egg salad was not pepper at all.

While certain insects overran us, some of the other normal inhabitants of our property, such as earthworms, disappeared. My brothers complained about the lack of worms for fishing and the difficulty of digging for them in the hard, parched ground. Perhaps you've wondered, Can earthworms be trained? I'm here to tell you that they can. The solution seemed obvious to me: The worms always came when it rained, and it was easy enough to make some rain for them. I carried a tin bucket of water to a shaded area in the five acres of scrub and dumped it on the ground in the same place a couple of times a day. After four days, I only had to show up with my bucket, and the worms, drawn by my footsteps and the promise of water, crawled to the surface. I scooped them up and sold them to Lamar for a penny a dozen. Lamar nagged me to tell him where I'd found them, but I wouldn't. However, I did confess my method to Harry, my favorite, from whom I could keep nothing. (Well, almost nothing.)

"Callie Vee," he said, "I've got something for you." He went to his bureau and took out a pocket-sized red leather notebook with SOUVENIR OF AUSTIN stamped on the front.

"Look here," he said. "I've never used it. You can use it to write down your scientific observations. You're a regular naturalist in the making."

What, exactly, was a naturalist? I wasn't sure, but I decided to spend the rest of my summer being one. If all it meant was writing about what you saw around you, I could do that. Besides, now that I had my own place to write things down, I saw things I'd never noticed before.

My first recorded notes were of the dogs. Due to the heat, they lay so still in the dirt as to look dead. Even when my younger brothers chivvied them with sticks out of boredom, they wouldn't bother to raise their heads. They got up long enough to slurp at the water trough and then flopped down again, raising puffs of dust in their shallow hollows. You couldn't have roused Ajax, Father's prize bird dog, with a shotgun let off a foot in front of his muzzle. He lay with his mouth lolling open and let me count his teeth. In this way, I discovered that the roof of a dog's mouth is deeply ridged in a backwards direction down his gullet, in order no doubt to encourage the passage of struggling prey in one direction only, namely that of *DINNER*. I wrote this in my Notebook.

I observed that the expressions of a dog's face are mainly manifested by the movement of its eyebrows. I wrote, *Why do dogs have eyebrows? Why do dogs need eyebrows?*

I asked Harry, but he didn't know. He said, "Go ask Grandfather. He knows that sort of thing."

But I wouldn't. The old man had fierce tufty eyebrows of his own, rather like a dragon's, and he was altogether too imposing a figure for me to have clambered on as an infant. He had never spoken to me directly that I remembered, and I wasn't entirely convinced he knew my name.

Next I turned my attention to the birds. For some reason, we had a great number of cardinals about the place that year. Harry tickled me when he said we had a fine crop of them, as if we had something to do with their number, as if we had labored to harvest their bright, cheerful bodies and place them in the trees along our gravel drive like Christmas ornaments. But because there were so many and the drought had cut down on their normal diet of seeds and berries, the males squabbled furiously over possession of each hackberry tree. I found a mutilated dead male in the brush, a startling and sad sight. Then one morning a female came to perch on the back of the wicker chair next to me on the porch. I froze. I could have reached out and touched her with my finger. A lump of gray-brown matter dangled from her pale-apricot beak. It looked like a tiny baby mouse, thimble-sized, dead or dying.

When I related this at dinner, Father said, "Calpurnia, cardinals do not eat mice. They live on vegetation. Sam Houston, please pass the potatoes."

"Yes, well, I'm just telling you, sir," I said lamely, and then felt furious with myself for not having defended what I'd seen with my own eyes. The thought of the cardinals driven to such unnatural behavior repelled me. The next step would be cannibalism. Before I went to bed that night, I took a can full of oats from the stable

and dribbled them along the drive. I wrote in the Notebook, How many cardinals will we have next year, with not enough to eat? Remember to count.

I next wrote in my Notebook that we had two very different kinds of grasshoppers that summer. We had the usual quick little emerald ones decorated all over with black speckles. And then there were huge bright yellow ones, twice as big, and torpid, so waxy and fat that they bowed down the grasses when they landed. I had never seen these before. I polled everyone in the house (except Grandfather) to find out where these odd yellow specimens had come from, but nobody could tell me. None of them was the slightest bit interested.

As a last resort, I rounded up my courage and went out to my grandfather's laboratory. I pushed back the burlap flap that served as a door and stood quaking on the threshold. He looked up in surprise from the counter where he was pouring a foul-looking brown liquid into various beakers and retorts. He didn't invite me in. I stumbled through my grasshopper conundrum while he stared at me as if he was having trouble placing me.

"Oh," he said mildly, "I suspect that a smart young whip like you can figure it out. Come back and tell me when you have." He turned away from me and began to write in his ledger.

So, that was that. My audience with the dragon. I counted it a wash. On the one hand, he hadn't breathed fire at me, but on the other, he'd been no help at all. Perhaps if I'd made Harry go with me, Grandfather would have accorded me more attention. Maybe he was peeved that I'd interrupted his work, although he had spoken to me in polite tones. I knew what he was working on. For some reason, he had gotten it in his head to figure out a way to distill pecans into whiskey. He apparently reasoned that if you could make fine spirits from common corn and the lowly potato, why not the princely pecan? And, Lord knows, we were drowning in pecans—sixty acres of them.

I went back to my room and contemplated the grasshopper puzzle. I had one of the small green grasshoppers in a jar on my vanity, and I stared at it for inspiration. I had been unable to catch one of the big yellow ones, even though they were much slower.

"Why are you different?" I asked, but it refused to answer.

The next morning, I awoke as usual to a scuffling in the wall next to my bed. It was a possum, returning to his lair at his normal time. Shortly after this, I heard the slap and slam of sash weights as SanJuanna threw open the parlor windows beneath my room. I sat up in my high brass bed, and suddenly it came to me that the fat yellow grasshoppers had to be *an entirely new species*, separate and apart from the green ones, and that I—Calpurnia Virginia Tate—had discovered them. And didn't the discoverer of a brand-new species get to put her name on it? I was going to be famous! My name would be heralded far and wide; the governor would shake my hand; the university would award me a diploma.

But what did I do now? How did I stake my claim on the natural world? I had a vague idea that I had to write to someone to register my find, some official in Washington.

I had heard debates at the dinner table between my grandfather and our minister, Mr. Barker, concerning Mr. Charles Darwin's book *The Origin of Species* and the dinosaurs they were unearthing in Colorado and what this meant to the Book of Genesis. They talked about how Nature weeded out the weak and left the hardy to carry on. Our schoolteacher, Miss Harbottle, had glossed over Mr. Darwin, looking discomfited as she did so. Surely such a book addressing the origin of species would tell me what to do. But how on earth could I get my hands on it when controversy still raged about such matters in our corner of the world? There was even an active chapter of the Flat Earth Society in San Antonio.

Then I remembered that Harry was due to take the long-bed wagon into Lockhart for supplies. Lockhart was the seat of Caldwell County. The county library was there. Books were there. All I had to do was beg a ride from Harry, the one brother who could deny me nothing.

* * *

IN LOCKHART, after conducting our business, Harry loitered on the corner so he could admire the figures of the ladies strolling by, exhibiting the latest finery from the local milliner. I mumbled excuses and slipped across the courthouse square. The library was cool and dark. I walked up to the counter where the elderly lady librarian was handing some books to a fat man in a white linen suit. Then it was my turn. Just at that moment, a woman with a little boy came up. It was Mrs. Ogletree and her six-year-old, Georgie. Georgie and I shared the same piano teacher, and his mother knew my mother.

Oh, no. The last thing I wanted was a witness.

"Good afternoon, Callie," she said. "Is your mother here today?"

"She's at home, Mrs. Ogletree. Hello, Georgie."

"Hi, Callie," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Um ... just looking at books. Here, you've got yours, you go ahead of me. Please."

I stepped back and grandly waved them forward.

"Why, thank you, Callie," she said. "Such lovely manners. I shall have to mention it to your mother next time I see her."

After an eternity, they left. I kept glancing around to see if anyone else was about to come up. The librarian frowned at me. I stepped up to the counter and whispered, "Please, ma'am, do you have a copy of Mr. Darwin's book?"

She leaned over the counter and said, "What was that?"

"Mr. Darwin's book. You know, *The Origin of Species*."

She frowned and cupped a hand behind her ear. "You have to speak up."

I spoke up in a shaking voice. “Mr. Darwin’s book. That one. Please.”

She pinioned me with a sour look and said, “I most certainly do not. I wouldn’t keep such a thing in my library. They keep a copy at the Austin library, but I would have to order it by post. That’s fifty cents. Do you *have* fifty cents?”

“No, ma’am.” I could feel myself turning pink. I’d never had fifty cents in my life.

“And,” she added, “I would need a letter from your mother permitting you to read that particular book. Do you *have* such a letter?”

“No, ma’am,” I said, mortified. My neck was starting to itch, the telltale precursor to an outbreak of hives.

She sniffed. “I thought not. Now, I have books to be shelved. You must excuse me.”

I wanted to weep with rage and humiliation, but I refused to cry in front of the old bat. I left the library in a purple froth and found Harry lounging in front of the general store. He looked at me with concern.

I scratched the welts that had popped up on my neck and yelled, “What is the point of a library if they won’t give you a book?”

Harry glanced around. “What are you talking about?”

“Some people aren’t fit to be librarians,” I said. “I want to go home now.”

On the long, hot, silent trip back in the wagon piled high with goods, Harry looked over at me. “What’s the matter, my own pet?”

“Nothing,” I snapped. Oh, absolutely nothing, except that I was strangling on bitterness and gall and was in no mood to talk about it. For once I was glad of the privacy of the deep sunbonnet that Mother made me wear to prevent freckling.

“Do you know what’s in that crate?” Harry said. “The one right behind you?” I didn’t bother to reply. I didn’t know and I didn’t care. I hated the world.

“It’s a wind machine,” he said, “for Mother.”

If it had been any of my other brothers, I would have snarled at him, Don’t be ridiculous—there’s no such thing.

“Really, it is,” he said. “You’ll see.”

When we got home, I couldn’t stand the noisy excitement at the unloading of the wagon. I bolted for the river. I ripped off my bonnet and pinafore and dress and threw myself into the water, casting terror into the hearts of the local tadpoles and turtles. Good. That lady librarian had ruined my day, and I was determined to ruin someone—or something—else’s day. I ducked my head underwater and let out a long, loud scream, the sound burbling in my ears. I came up for air and did it again. And one more time, just to be thorough. The cooling water gradually soothed me. After all, what was one book to me? Really, it didn’t matter. One day I would have all the books in the world, shelves and shelves of them. I would live my life in a tower of books. I would read all day long and eat peaches. And if any young knights in armor dared to come calling on their white chargers and plead with me to let down my hair, I would pelt them with peach pits until they went home.

I lay on my back and watched a pair of swallows racing up and down the river, tumbling like acrobats in pursuit of invisible bugs. Despite my hours of freedom, the summer was not proceeding as I'd envisaged. Nobody was interested in the Questions that I wrote in my Notebook. Nobody was interested in helping me figure out the Answers. The heat sapped the life out of everybody and everything.

I thought of our beloved, big old house and how sad it looked in the middle of the yellow dried-out lawn. Usually the grass was soft and cool and green, inviting you to take off your boots and run across it barefoot and play Statues, but now it was a scorched bright gold and as menacing to the feet as straw stubble. The yellow grass made it hard to see my brand-new species of big yellow grasshopper. You couldn't find them until you practically stepped on them. Then they would zing upward and fly ponderously on clacking wings for a few feet and disappear in the grass again. Catching them was difficult, despite their being fat and slow. Funny how the smaller and quicker emerald ones were such a snap to catch. They were just too easy to spot. The birds spent their days gobbling them up while the yellow ones hid nearby and taunted their less-fortunate brothers.

And then I understood. There was no new species. They were all one kind of grasshopper. The ones that were born a bit yellower to begin with lived to an old age in the drought; the birds couldn't see them in the parched grass. The greener ones, the ones the birds picked off, didn't last long enough to grow big. Only the yellower ones survived because they were more fit to survive the torrid weather. Mr. Charles Darwin was right. The proof lay in my own front yard.

I lay in shock in the water thinking about this, staring at the sky, looking for some flaw in my reasoning, some crack in my conclusion. I could find none. Then I splashed my way to the bank. I hauled myself out by some handy elephant ears, dried off with my pinafore, dressed as fast as I could, and ran home.

When I got back to the house, I found the whole family clustered around a busted-open crate in the hallway. In the middle of the excelsior nest sat a squat, black metal machine with four blades on the front and a glass reservoir on the back into which my father poured kerosene. In the middle of the blades, a round brass boss proclaimed in curly script, *Chicago's Finest Wind Machine*.

Father said, "Stand back." He struck a match and set the thing alight. It filled the room with a mineral stink and a great *whoosh* of air. My brothers all cheered. I cheered too but for a different reason.

Life in our house got somewhat easier after that. Mother retired at midday with her wind machine, and all our lives got better, especially Father's, whom she sometimes invited to retire with her.

It took me a week to get up the nerve to visit Grandfather again. He was sitting in his laboratory on a dilapidated armchair, the oozing stuffing mined by mice.

I said, "I know why the big grasshoppers are yellow and why the little ones are green." I told him my discovery and how I'd figured it out. I shifted from foot to foot

as he looked at me and listened in silence. After a while he said, “Did you come up with this on your own? With no help?”

“Yes,” I said, then told him about my humiliating trip to the Lockhart library. He stared at me for a moment with an odd expression on his face—perhaps surprise, perhaps consternation—as if I were a species he’d never seen before. He said, “Come with me.”

He didn’t speak a word as we walked to the house. Oh, dear. I had done the unthinkable, not once, but twice, by interrupting him at his work. Was he going to turn me over to Mother for yet another lecture on good manners? He led me into the library, where we children were not supposed to go. So he was going to deliver the lecture himself. Perhaps he would berate me for my clumsy theory. Or perhaps he would switch me across the hands. My dread grew. Who was I—Callie Vee Tate of Fentress, Texas—to think I could even contemplate such matters? A nobody from nowhere.

Despite my fear, I took a good look around the room, since I knew I’d never have the chance again. The library was dim, even with the heavy bottle-green velvet drapes drawn back from the tall double window. Right by the window sat a huge leather armchair and a spool table holding a lamp for reading. There were books on the floor by the chair and more books stacked in tall wooden shelves made from our failed pecan trees (you couldn’t escape the enduring fact of pecans in our lives). There was a large oak desk covered in intriguing oddities: a blown ostrich egg on a carved wooden stand, a microscope nesting in a shagreen leather case, a carved whale’s tooth etched with a bosomy lady not exactly contained by her corset. The family Bible and a huge dictionary with its own magnifying glass lay side by side next to a red plush album full of cramped formal portraits of my ancestors. So. Would I be getting the Bible lecture or the Letting-Down-My-Ancestors lecture? I waited while he made up his mind. I glanced around the walls, which were covered with shallow boxes displaying alarming stick insects and bright multicolored butterflies. Below each gay scrap of color was a scientific name in my grandfather’s careful copperplate script. I forgot myself and went over to peer at them.

“Bear,” said Grandfather.

Huh? I thought.

“Watch the bear,” he said, just as I tripped on the open sneering mouth of a black bearskin rug, its fangs a trap in the gloom for the unwary.

“Right. Bear. Sir.”

Grandfather unthreaded his watch chain to remove a tiny key. He unlocked a tall glass cabinet crammed with more books, preserved birds, bottled beasts, and other curios. I sidled over to get a better look at this irresistible display. A misshapen armadillo caught my eye, warped and buckled and lumpy, obviously stuffed by the most inept amateur. Why did he have that? I could have done better. Next to it was a five-gallon specimen bottle of thick glass containing the strangest beast I had ever

seen. A thick, blobby form, multiple arms, two big glaring eyes distorted by the glass into huge saucer orbs, the stuff of nightmares. What on earth was it? I drew closer.

Grandfather reached into the stack of books. I saw *Dante's Inferno* next to *The Science of Hot Air Ballooning*. There was *A Study of Mammalian Reproduction* and *A Treatise on Drawing the Female Nude*. He extracted a book covered in rich green morocco leather handsomely tipped with gold. He polished it with his sleeve, although I could see no dust on it. Ceremoniously, he bowed and offered it to me. I looked at it. *The Origin of Species*. Here, in my own house. I received it in both my hands. He smiled.

Thus began my relationship with Granddaddy.

CHAPTER 2

THE MEASURE OF THE MORNING

The laws governing inheritance are quite unknown; no one can say why ... the child often reverts in certain characters to its grandfather....

THREE DAYS LATER, I crept downstairs and went out onto the front porch very early before the daily avalanche of my brothers could crack open the peace of the morning. I scattered a handful of sunflower seeds thirty paces down the drive to draw the birds and then I sat down on the steps on a ratty old cushion I'd scavenged from the trunk room. I made a list in my red leather Notebook of everything that moved. Isn't that what naturalists do?

One of the sunflower seeds hopped across the slate tiles of the front walk. Odd, that. On inspection it turned out to be a tiny toad, a quarter of an inch long, hopping mightily after an escaping millipede, itself no bigger than a thread, both going for all they were worth until they disappeared in the grass. Then a wolf spider, startling in size and hairiness, streaked over the gravel, either chasing something smaller or being chased by something bigger, I couldn't tell which. I reckoned there must be a million minor dramas playing out around the place without ceasing. Oh, but they were hardly minor to the chaser and the chasee who were dealing in the coin of life and death. I was a mere bystander, an idler. They were playing for keeps.

Then a hummingbird careened around the corner of the house and plunged into the trumpet of the nearest lily drooping in the heat. Not finding it to his liking, he abruptly backed out and explored the next one. I sat a few feet away, entranced, close enough to hear the angry low-pitched buzzing of his wings, so at odds with his jewel-like appearance and jaunty attitude. The bird paused at the lip of a flower and then turned and caught sight of me. He hovered in midair for a second and then rushed at me. I froze. The bird stopped four inches shy of my face and hung there, I swear. I felt the tiny rush of wind from his wings against my forehead and, reflexively, my eyes squeezed shut of their own accord. How I wish I'd been able to keep them open, but it was a natural reaction and I couldn't stop myself. The second I opened them, the bird flew off. He was the size of a winged pecan. Fueled by rage or curiosity—who could tell—he cared not at all that I could have crushed him with the lightest swat.

I had once seen Ajax, Father's best dog, get into a fight with a hummingbird and lose. The hummingbird had dived at him and spooked him until he'd trotted

back to the front porch, looking very embarrassed. (It is possible for a dog to look embarrassed, you know. He'd whipped around and started licking his nether parts, a sure sign a dog is trying to hide his true feelings.)

The front door opened, and Granddaddy came out onto the porch, an ancient leather satchel strapped over his shoulder, a butterfly net in one hand, and a malacca walking stick in the other.

"Good morning, Calpurnia," he said. So he knew my name after all.

"Good morning, Granddaddy."

"What have you got there, if I may ask?"

I jumped to my feet. "It's my Scientific Notebook," I said grandly. "Harry gave it to me. I write down everything I observe in it. Look, here's my list for this morning."

Observe was not a word I normally used in conversation, but I wanted to prove my seriousness to him. He put down his satchel, and it made interesting clinking noises. He took out his spectacles and looked at my list. It read:

cardinals, male and female

a hummingbird, some other birds (?)

rabbits, a few

cats, some

lizard, green

insects, various

C. V. Tate's grasshoppers, big/yellow and small/green (these are the same species)

He took off his spectacles and tapped the page. "A fair start," he said.

"A start?" I said, hurt. "I thought it was finished."

"How old are you, Calpurnia?"

"Twelve," I said.

He looked at me.

"Eleven and three quarters," I blurted. "I'm practically twelve. Really. You can hardly tell the difference."

"And how are you coming along with Mr. Darwin and his conclusions?"

"Oh, it's marvelous. Yes. Marvelous. Of course, I haven't read the whole thing yet. I'm taking my time." Truthfully, I had read the first chapter several times and found it to be heavy weather. I had then jumped ahead to the section on "Natural Selection" but still struggled with the language.

Granddaddy looked at me gravely. "Mr. Darwin did not write for an audience of eleven-and-three-quarters-practically-twelve-year-olds. Perhaps we can discuss his ideas sometime. Would you care to do that?"

"Yes," I said. "Yessir, yes."

"I am going to collect specimens at the river. Order Odonata today, I think. Dragonflies and damselflies. Would you like to accompany me?"

"Yes, please."

“We shall have to take your Notebook.” He opened the satchel, and in it I saw some glass jars and *A Field Guide to the Insects*, his lunch packet, and a miniature silver flask. He tucked my red Notebook and pencil in beside it. I picked up his butterfly net and slung it over my shoulder.

“Shall we?” he said, and offered me his arm in the manner of a gentleman taking a lady in to dinner. I linked my arm through his. He was so much taller than I that we jostled each other down the steps, so I let go of his arm and slipped my hand into his. The palm was calloused and weathered, the nails thick and curved, a miraculous construction of leather and horn. My grandfather looked startled, then pleased, I think, although I couldn’t tell for sure. Nevertheless, his hand closed on mine.

We picked our way across the wild field to the river. Granddaddy stopped every now and then to peer at a leaf, a rock, a mound of dirt, things I didn’t find terribly interesting. What *was* interesting was how he stooped over and scrutinized each object before extending a slow, deliberate hand. He was careful with everything he touched, putting each bug back where he found it, nudging each pile of dirt back into place. I stood holding the butterfly net at the ready, itching to pounce on something.

“Do you know, Calpurnia, that the class Insecta comprises the largest number of living organisms known to man?”

“Granddaddy, nobody calls me Calpurnia except Mother, and then only when I’m in lots of trouble.”

“Why on earth not? It’s a lovely name. Pliny the Younger’s fourth wife, the one he married for love, was named Calpurnia, and we have been left by him some of the great love letters of all time. There’s also the natal acacia tree, genus *Calpurnia*, a useful laburnum mainly confined to the African continent. Then there’s Julius Caesar’s wife, mentioned in Shakespeare. I could go on.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.” Why hadn’t anyone ever told me these things? All my brothers except for Harry bore the names of proud Texas heroes, many of whom had laid down their lives at the Alamo. (Harry had been named after a bachelor great-uncle with lots of money and no heirs.) I had been named after my mother’s older sister. I guess it could have been worse: Her younger sisters were Agatha, Sophronia, and Vonzetta. Actually, it could have been *much* worse—like Governor Hogg’s daughter, Ima. Gad, Ima Hogg! Can you imagine? I wondered if her great beauty and massive fortune were enough to protect her from a lifetime of torture? Perhaps if you had enough money, no one laughed at you for anything. And me, Calpurnia, with a name I’d hated all my life, why ... why, it was a *fine* name, it was *music*, it was *poetry*. It was ... it was incredibly *annoying* that no one in my family had bothered to tell me any of this.

So, then. Calpurnia would do.

We pushed on through the woods and the scrub. For all his age and his spectacles, Granddaddy’s eyes were a lot keener than mine. Where I saw nothing but leaf mold and dried twigs, he saw camouflaged beetles, motionless lizards, invisible spiders.

“Look there,” he said. “It’s Scarabaeidae, probably *Cotinus texana*. The fig beetle. Quite unusual to find one in a drought. Take it in the net, gently now.”

I swished the net, and the bug was mine. He extracted it and held it in his hand and we examined it together. It was an inch long, middling green, and otherwise unexceptional in appearance. Granddaddy flipped it over, and I saw that its underside shone a startling greeny-blue, iridescent and shot through with purple. The colors changed as it squirmed in dismay. It reminded me of my mother’s abalone brooch, lovely and rare.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“It’s related to the scarab beetle, which the ancient Egyptians worshipped as a symbol of the morning sun and the afterlife. Sometimes they wore it as jewelry.”

“They did?” I wondered how you’d get a beetle to stay on your dress. I had visions of sticking it on with a hatpin or perhaps wallpaper paste, neither of which seemed like a particularly good idea.

“Here,” he said, and held it out to me.

He tipped it into my palm, and I’m proud to say I didn’t flinch. The beetle tickled as it wandered over my hand.

“Should we keep him, sir?” I asked.

“I have one in my collection in the library. We can let this one go.”

I put my hand to the ground, and the bug or, rather, *Cotinus texana* stumbled off and wandered away unconcerned.

“What can you tell me about the Scientific Method, Calpurnia?” The way he said these words, I knew they had capital letters.

“Um, not much.”

“What are you studying in school? You do go to school, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. We’re studying Reading, Spelling, Arithmetic, and Penmanship. Oh, and Deportment. I got an ‘acceptable’ for Posture but an ‘unsatisfactory’ for Use of Hankie and Thimble. Mother was kind of unhappy about that.”

“Good God,” he said. “It’s worse than I thought.”

This was an intriguing statement, although I didn’t understand it.

“And is there no science? No physics?” he said.

“We did have botany one day. What’s physics?”

“Have you never heard of Sir Isaac Newton? Sir Francis Bacon?”

“No.” I wanted to laugh at this ridiculous name, but there was something about Granddaddy’s expression that told me we were discussing mighty serious business and he would be disappointed in me if I didn’t take it seriously, too.

“And I suppose they teach you that the world is flat and that there are dragons gobbling up the ships that fall over the edge.” He peered at me. “There are many things to talk about. I hope it’s not too late. Let us find a place to sit.”

We resumed our walk to the riverbank and found shade under a hospitable tree in the pecan bottom. Then he told me some stupefying things. He told me about

ways in which you could get to the truth of any matter, not merely sitting around thinking about it like Aristotle (a smart but confused Grecian gentleman), but going out and looking with your own eyes; about making your Hypothesis and devising your Experiment, and testing by Observation, and coming to a Conclusion. And then testing the strength of your Conclusion, over and over. He told me about Occam's razor, about Ptolemy and the music of the spheres, and how everyone had been all wrong about the sun and the planets for so many centuries. He told me about Linnaeus and his system for naming all living things in Nature and how we still followed this system whenever we named a new species. He told me about Copernicus and Kepler and why Newton's apple fell down instead of up. About how the moon is always falling in a circle around our Earth. About the difference between deductive and inductive reasoning and how Sir Francis Bacon of the peculiar name got it right. Granddaddy told me how he had traveled to Washington in 1888 to join a new organization of gentlemen who called themselves the National Geographic Society. They had banded together to fill in the bare spots on the globe and to pull the country out of the morass of superstition and backward thinking in which it floundered after the War Between the States. All of this was heady news of a world far removed from hankies and thimbles, patiently delivered to me under a tree amidst the drowsing bees and nodding wildflowers.

The hours passed, and the sun moved overhead (or to be correct, we moved below it, rotating slowly away from the day and toward the night). We shared a thick cheese-and-onion sandwich and a wedge of pecan pie and a canteen of water. Then he took a couple of nips from his silver flask, and we napped awhile as the insects buzzed and ticked and the dappled shade shifted around us.

We awoke and dipped our handkerchiefs in the river to refresh ourselves, then poked our way along the bank. I caught various crawling and swimming and flying oddities at his direction, and we examined them all, but he kept only one insect, putting it in a Mason canning jar with holes poked in the lid, which I knew had come from our kitchen. (Viola constantly complained to Mother that her jars were disappearing, and Mother in turn always blamed my brothers, who were—as it turned out for the first time in recorded history—blameless.) There was a small, neat paper label pasted on the jar. I penciled the date and time of collection on it as instructed, but I didn't know what to put for the location.

"Think about where we are," Granddaddy said. "Can you describe it concisely so that you can find this spot again if you have to?"

I looked at the angle of the sun through the trees and thought about how far we had walked. "Can I put one half mile west of the Tate house, near the three-forked oak?"

Yes, that was fine. We wandered on and found one of the regular deer paths dotted with droppings. We sat down and waited in silence. A white-tailed doe came by, making no sound. I could almost reach out and touch her. How could such a large creature move so silently through the snapping underbrush? She turned her long neck

and looked right at me, and for the first time I understood the expression “doe-eyed.” Her deep brown eyes were huge, her gaze gentle and melting. Her large ears flicked in all directions, independent of each other. A shaft of sunlight caught the blood-rich ears and turned them a brilliant pink. I thought she was the most gorgeous creature I’d ever seen, until a few seconds later her spotted fawn meandered into view. Oh, the fawn broke my heart with its sweet, dished face, its absurdly fragile legs, its still-fuzzy coat. I wanted to scoop it up in my arms and protect it from its inevitable future of coyotes, starvation, hunters. How could anybody shoot such a beauty? And then the fawn did this miraculous thing: It folded up its front legs, then its hind legs, and sank to the ground where it ... *disappeared*. The white spots scattered over its brown back mimicked the dappled light so that one second a fawn lay there, and the next second there was nothing but undergrowth.

Granddaddy and I sat motionless for a good five minutes and then quietly collected our things and moved on. We followed the river until the shadows grew long and then we arced through the scrub and made for home. On the way back, he spotted the rarest and most delicate object in the wild, an old hummingbird’s nest, fragile and expertly woven, smaller than an eggcup.

“What extraordinary good luck!” Granddaddy said. “Treasure this, Calpurnia. You may go through your whole life and never see another one.”

The nest was the most intricately constructed thing, like something built by the fairies in my childhood tales. I almost said so aloud but caught myself in time. Members of the scientific community did not say such things.

“How can we carry it home?” I said. I was afraid to touch it.

“Let’s slide it into a jar for now. I have a glass box in the library that will be the right size. You can keep it on display in your room. It would be a shame to hide it away in a drawer.”

The library was so much Granddaddy’s territory that even my parents seldom went in there. SanJuanna was allowed to dust once a quarter. Granddaddy usually kept it locked. What he didn’t know was that on those rare occasions when there were no adults around, my brothers would sometimes boost each other over the transom. My second-oldest brother, Sam Houston, once got a long look at Mathew Brady’s book of battlefield photographs and breathlessly reported to us the butchered horses lying in the mud and the shoeless dead men staring at the sky.

We got back to the house around five o’clock. Jim Bowie and Ajax ran out to greet us as soon as they saw us coming up the drive.

“You’re in trouble, Callie,” J.B. puffed. “Mama’s really mad.” He ignored Granddaddy. “Mama says you missed your piano practice today.”

This was true. Our lessons had started again, and I knew I’d have to make up the practice, plus an additional half hour as punishment. That was the rule, but I didn’t care. The day had been worth it. The day had been worth a thousand extra hours at the piano.

We went into the house, and Granddaddy put the hummingbird's nest in a tiny glass box and gave it to me. Then I left him pottering about in the library and went off to plead my case before Mother, to no avail.

I managed to cram my piano punishment in before dinner, playing with a light heart and a sure, spirited touch, if I do say so myself. I went to bed that night exhausted and exhilarated, the hummingbird nest in its neat glass box on my dresser next to my hairpins and ribbons.

A week later, my morning list looked like this:

5:15 a.m., clear and fine, winds from the south
8 rabbits (7 cottontail, 1 jack)
1 skunk (juvenile, appears lost)
1 possum (notched left ear)
5 cats (3 ours, 2 feral)
1 snake (grass-type, harmless)
1 lizard (green, same color as lily stems, vy hard to spot)
2 red-tailed hawks
1 buzzard
3 toads
2 hummingbirds (Rufous?)
assorted untallied Odonata, Hymenoptera, Arachnidae

I showed it to Granddaddy, who nodded his approval. "It's amazing what you can see when you just sit quietly and look."

About the Author



Jacqueline Kelly won the Newbery Honor for her first book, *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate*. She was born in New Zealand and raised in Canada, in the dense rainforests of Vancouver Island. Her family then moved to El Paso, Texas, and Kelly attended college in El Paso, then went on to medical school in Galveston. After practicing medicine for many years, she went to law school at the University of Texas, and after several years of law practice, realized she wanted to write fiction. Her first story was published in the *Mississippi Review* in 2001. She now makes her home with her husband and various cats and dogs in Austin and Fentress, Texas. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

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