

## I Gotta Pee

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A Short story inspired by an interview with a woman who grew up in the Alabama back country in the 1940s.

“I gotta pee,” I said.

There was no reply. My sisters, sleeping next to me, either didn't want to help me or they really were asleep. There were seven of us huddled under the huge blanket that Mom had made. We were all in the same bed. Now, as I look back on it, it's a wonder we ever got any sleep at all. But I still had to pee. I had just turned five years old and was very afraid of the dark. Well, I was more of the snakes in the darkness than the dark itself. It was winter in south Alabama. It was cold. The closest place to pee was the outhouse thirty feet from the back door. I couldn't go by myself, but I knew I'd catch hell if I peed the bed.

I nudged Nancy. She was closest to me. “Nancy. I gotta pee. Can you come with me?”

“No,” she mumbled. “It's winter. It's cold. The snakes are all asleep.”

I knew she was right, but I was still afraid. I slid out of bed and was surprised at how cold the floor felt on my bare feet. In the summertime, the crawl space beneath the floor helped keep the house cool, but in winter, it only made things worse. I crept out to the front door, stopping at the fireplace to light the little lamp that Daddy kept there. There was a small fire still burning and its warmth felt good. But I still had to pee. The urgency of it all finally tore me away from the fire and out the back door. I went quickly, partly to escape the snakes that I knew were following me and partly so that I would spend less time in the cold. When I got to the outhouse, I opened the door cautiously and examined the insides for spiders. There were no spiders, and no snakes, but the walls danced with the flickering of the lantern and it was still scary. I finally brought up the courage to squat over the stinky hole that served as a toilet. When I sat down, I had to turn around to face the still open door and was relieved to see Nancy standing a few feet away, watching over me. That might have been the first time I knew that she loved me. She was eleven and had been taking care of me for much of my early life. She cared for Alice and Susie as well. They were seven and nine years old. My oldest three sisters, Jane, Emma, and Sandra, were all grown up enough to work, so the caretaking of the babies fell on Nancy. In a few years, she too would be off

to work somewhere, maybe in the fields, maybe at the cotton plant, but she'd be gone. By then I'd be seven or eight and wouldn't really need anyone to watch me.

"Are you done yet?" Nancy asked, shivering as she spoke.

I smiled and stood up, then ran past her into the house, completely forgetting the lantern. When Nancy came in, she joined me in front of the remnants of the fire, put out the flame in the lamp, and we warmed ourselves before getting back into bed.