

FIREFLIES



IN DECEMBER

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Fireflies in December

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TO MY PARENTS, JOE & BARBARA VALENT,
for believing I could do this.

AND TO MY SAVIOR
for holding my hand every step of the way.

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Chapter 1

The summer I turned thirteen, I thought I'd killed a man.

That's a heavy burden for a girl to hang on to, but it didn't surprise me so much to have that trouble come in the summertime. Every bad thing that ever happened to me seemed to happen in those long months.

The summer I turned five, Granny Rose died of a heart attack during the Independence Day fireworks. The summer I turned seven, my dog Skippy ran away with a tramp who jumped the train to Baltimore. And the summer I turned eleven, a drought took the corn crop and we couldn't have any corn for my birthday, which is what I'd always done because my favorite food was corn from Daddy's field, boiled in a big pot.

To top it off, here in the South, summers are long and hot and sticky. They drag on and on, making slow things seem slower and bad things seem worse.

The fear and guilt of the summer of 1932 still clings to my memory like the wet heat of southern Virginia. That year we had unbearable temperatures, and we had trouble, just that it was trouble of a different kind. It was the beginning of a time that taught me bad things can turn into good things, even though sometimes it takes a while for the good to come out.

The day I turned thirteen was one of those summer days when the air is so thick, you can see wavy lines above the tar on the rooftops. The kind of day when the sound of cicadas vibrates in your ears and everything smells like grass.

On that day, as Momma got ready for my birthday party, I told her that I wanted nothing to do with watermelon this year.

“We have some fine ones,” she told me. “Just don’t eat any.”

“But the boys will spit the seeds at us like they do all the time,” I said. “And they’ll hit me extra hard today since it’s my birthday.”

“I’ll tell them not to,” she said absentmindedly as she checked her recipe again with that squinched-up look she always got when trying to concentrate.

I knew I was only another argument or two from being scolded, but I tried again. “Those boys won’t listen to you.”

“Those boys will listen to me if they want to eat,” she replied before muttering something about needing a cup of oleo.

“They don’t even listen to Teacher at school, Momma.”

That last reply had done it, and I stepped back a ways as Momma picked up her wooden spoon and peered at me angrily, her free hand on her apron-covered hip. “Jessilyn Lassiter, I won’t have you arguin’ with me. Now get on out of this house before your jabberin’ makes me mess up my biscuits.”

I knew better than to take another chance with her, and I went outside to sit on my tree swing. If God wasn’t going to send us any breeze for my birthday, I was bound and determined to make my own, so I started pumping my legs to work up some speed. The breeze was slight but enough to give me a little relief.

I saw Gemma come out of the house carrying a big watermelon and a long knife, and I knew she had been sent out by her momma to cut it up. Gemma’s momma helped mine with chores, and her daddy worked in the fields. Sometimes Gemma would help her momma with things, and it always made me feel guilty to see her doing chores that I should have been doing. So I dug my feet into the dry dirt below me to slow down and hopped off the swing with a long leap, puffing dust up all around me.

I wandered to the picnic table where Gemma was rolling the green melon around to find just the right spot to cut into. “I guess this is for my party.”

“That’s what your momma says.”

“Are you comin’?”

“My momma never lets me come to your parties.”

“So? Ain’t never a time you can’t start somethin’ new. It’s my party, anyways.”

“It ain’t proper for the help to socialize with the family’s friends, Momma says.”

“Your momma and daddy have been workin’ here for as long as I can remember. You’re as close to family as we got around here, as I see it. I ain’t got no grandparents or nothin’.”

Gemma scoffed at me with a sarcastic laugh. “When was the last time you saw one brown girl and one white girl in the same family?”

I shrugged and watched her slice through the watermelon, both of us backing away to avoid the squirting juices.

“Looks like a good one,” Gemma said as the fragrant smell floated by on the first bit of a breeze we’d seen all day.

“All I see are seeds for the boys to hit me with.”

“Why do you let them boys pick on you?”

“I don’t let ’em. I always push ’em or somethin’. But they’re all bigger than me. What do you want me to do? Pick a fight?”

“Guess not.” A piece of the melon’s flesh flopped onto the table as Gemma cut it, and she popped it into her mouth thoughtfully. “I’ll never know why boys got to be so mean.”

“It’s part of their recipe, I guess.” I helped by piling the slices on a big platter, and I strategically picked as many seeds as I could find off the pieces before I stacked them. Never mind my dirty hands. “You come by around two o’clock,” I told her adamantly. “I’ll get you some cake and lemonade. You’re my best friend. You should be at my party.”

Gemma shushed me and shoved an elbow into my ribs as her momma went walking by us.

“Gemma Teague,” her momma said, “you girls gettin’ your chores done?”

“Ain’t got no chores of my own, Miss Opal,” I told her. “I figured on helpin’ Gemma instead.”

“Then you two make certain you keep your minds on your work, ya hear?”

“Yes’m,” we both mumbled.

Gemma’s momma walked past, but she looked back at us a couple times with a funny look on her face like she figured we were planning something.

In a way we were, but I didn’t see it as being a big caper or anything, so I continued by saying, “You know, I ain’t seein’ any sense in you not at least askin’ your momma if you can come by for cake. She’s usually understandin’ about things.”

“Every year it’s the same thing from you, Jessie. She won’t let me come, and besides, I’ll bet your momma don’t want me here no more than my momma does. It just ain’t done.”

“It just ain’t done’!” I huffed. “Who makes up these rules, anyhow?”

Gemma kept her eyes on her work and said nothing, but I knew her well enough to see that she didn’t understand her words anymore than I did.

Momma called me from the open kitchen window, but I ignored it and kept after Gemma. “Now listen. You just

come on by after we've cut the cake and pretend to clean up somethin', and I'll be sure you get some."

"Ain't no way I'm gettin' in trouble for some cake and lemonade that I'll get after the party anyhow," she argued. "You're just bein' stubborn."

I sighed when Momma called me again. "She's gonna tell me to take a bath, I bet. You'd think at thirteen I'd be old enough to stop havin' my momma order me to take baths."

"You'd never take one otherwise," Gemma said. "Ain't nobody wants to smell you then."

"I hate takin' baths on days this sticky. My hair never dries."

"Takin' a bath on a hot day ain't never bad."

"It is when the water's hot as the air is."

Gemma shook her head at me like she always did when I was being hardheaded. "Water's water. Cools you off any which way."

I didn't believe her, but I headed off to the kitchen, where Momma had filled the big metal tub we'd had to take baths in ever since the bathroom faucets broke. The sheet she'd hung across the doorway into the next room flapped as the breeze I'd prayed for began to pick up.

I hopped out of my dungarees in one quick leap and crawled into the tub. "It's hot as boiled water," I complained.

"Well then, we'll have you for supper," Momma replied as she measured out flour, obviously undisturbed by my discomfort. "Your guests will start gettin' here in a half hour, so don't dawdle unless you want everyone findin' you in the tub."

“Yes’m.”

“And don’t forget to clean behind your ears.”

“Yes’m.”

Water splashed as I washed with my usual lack of grace, landing droplets about the kitchen floor. It didn’t really matter since Momma always made a mess when she cooked and the floor would need cleaning after she was done. No doubt the flour and water would mix into a fine paste, though, and she’d have a few words to mutter as she tried to scrub it up. As she measured sugar, I could hear her praying, “Oh, dear Jesus, let me have enough.” Momma prayed about anything anytime, anywhere.

By the time I’d scrubbed and dried, the smell of biscuits was drifting through the house and Momma was putting the oil on for the chicken. She was a good cook, no matter the mess, and she always put on quite a show for these birthday parties.

As I walked up to my room, wrapped in a ragged blue towel, I heard Momma call after me not to forget to put on my dress. Then she added, “Please, Lord, let the girl look presentable.” I think Momma often wondered why, if she was to be blessed with a girl, she had to get one that mostly acted like a boy.

“No dungarees!” she added. “And put on your church shoes.”

I rolled my eyes, knowing she was nowhere near me. I would never have dared to do it in front of her. I hated dressing up, but for every birthday, holiday, church day, and

trip into town, I had to wear one of the three dresses that Momma had made me. She was as fine with a needle as she was with a frying pan, but I hated dresses nonetheless. Mostly because when I wore them, I had to sit all proper in my chair, and I couldn't do cartwheels, at least not without getting yelled at. But I put on the dress because I had to and buckled up my church shoes.

I could hear Daddy's footsteps coming down the hall, and I turned to smile at him as he stopped at my doorway.

"Lookin' pretty, dumplin'," Daddy said.

"That's too bad."

"Now, now. Ain't nothin' wrong with a girl lookin' like a girl."

"Who says wearin' dresses is the only way to look like a girl?"

Coming into the room, his dirty boots leaving marks that Momma would complain about later, Daddy tossed his hat onto a chair and helped me finish tying the bow on the back of the dress. "We don't make the rules; we just follow 'em."

"Well, someone had to make the rules in the first place. We should just make new ones."

"No doubt you will one day, Jessilyn," he said with a sigh. "But for now, you'd best follow your momma's instructions. She ain't one to be disobeyed."

"Are you gonna be at the party?" I asked hopefully, knowing full well that he'd been in the fields all morning and looked in need of a nap.

"Wouldn't miss it, you know that. I got the corn on

already.” Daddy rubbed his tired eyes, picked up his hat, and walked out, whacking the hat against his leg to loosen the dust.

He worked hard, especially this time of year, and no matter how many men were willing to work the fields, he would always put in his fair share alongside them. I had suspected of late, however, that he was working harder more out of necessity than a sense of duty. We’d had fewer men to help than in years past, and it wasn’t due to lack of interest, I was sure. I’d seen my daddy turn three men away just the day before.

Things were poor, especially in our parts, and for having a working farm and a good truck, we were fortunate. We even had some conveniences that other people envied, like a fancy icebox and a telephone, and Momma was pretty proud of that. We weren’t rich like Mayor Tuttle and his wife, with their big columned house and fancy motor car, but we were thought to be well-off just the same. Momma and Daddy never talked money in front of me, and I decided not to fuss with it. It caused too many problems for adults from what I could see. What did I want to do with it?

I made my way downstairs and stepped out onto the porch, disappointed to see Buddy Pernell was the first to arrive. I didn’t like Buddy very much. But then, I didn’t like many kids very much. I thanked him for coming—mainly because Momma’s glare told me to—and received the plate of cookies his momma handed me. In those days, we didn’t give gifts at

parties; it was too extravagant. But every momma felt it only proper to bring some sort of favor along.

By the time we had a full crowd, one side of the food table was filled with jars of jelly, bowls of sugared strawberries, a couple pies, and even one tub of pickled pigs' feet. I promptly removed those, but Momma stopped me cold.

"We accept all gifts with thanks, Jessilyn," she hissed in my ear as she replaced the tub on the table.

"Even pigs' feet?" I argued.

"Yes ma'am! Even pigs' feet."

It took only ten minutes before the first watermelon seed landed in my hair. All the other girls started screaming and ran for cover, but I fought back at the boys out of sheer pride. I did a little shoving, Momma did some yelling, but I got pummeled anyhow.

After we finished eating lunch, I spotted Gemma hanging laundry on the line and ran over to get her help brushing all those sticky seeds out of my hair.

"You ought to not let 'em do this to you," she said.

"I told you before," I said with my eyes shut tight to stand the pain of Gemma's brushing, "they're all bigger than me."

"I think they're too big for their britches. That's the problem."

"Maybe so, but that don't change nothin'. I still can't whip 'em."

"Well, I did the best I could." Gemma peered closely at my sun-streaked hair. "I can't see no more."

"Just wait till we go swimmin'," I told her. "I'll find some

critter to stick down Buddy Pernel's knickers. He's the one leadin' the boys in the spittin'."

"You best be careful. Them boys might do somethin' to hurt you back."

"I ain't scared of them," I lied. "Besides, they got it comin'."

Gemma shook her head and grabbed a pair of Daddy's socks to hang on the line. "You're stubborn as a mule, Jessie."

I figured she was right, but I wasn't about to give her the satisfaction of hearing me say it. Instead, I rejoined the party, grabbed a piece of cake, and stood by watching the boys scuff about with each other, playing some kind of rough-house tag. The other girls stood around watching the boys, giggling over how cute this one was and how strong that one was. I couldn't figure them out.

"All that fussin' over boys," I said through a mouthful of frosting. "If you girls had any smarts, you'd be playin' tag right along with 'em."

"Why don't you?" Ginny Lee Kidrey asked.

"I'm eatin'. Ain't no reason to stuff down cake when I can play tag anytime I want."

"You're just a tomboy, Jessie Lassiter," said Dolly Watson, who always wore dresses and perfume that smelled like dead roses. "What do you know about boys?"

"Enough to know that they ain't worth wastin' time on."

The girls turned their noses up at me—all but Ginny Lee, who was the only real friend I had outside of Gemma, and

even she had started to become more like the other girls of late.

The only reason I even had those other children at the party was because Momma insisted on it. She liked entertaining guests, but in our parts we didn't have much chance to entertain, and she took every chance she got. So every year I had to invite the kids from school to interrupt my summer vacation and celebrate my June birthday with a party. The only thing I ever liked about those parties was the food. I would have been satisfied to spend my birthday having boiled corn with Gemma.

Buddy Pernell stopped in front of me and tugged at my braid. "Still stuffin' your face?" he asked with a smirk. "Don't you like to do nothin' but eat?"

Knowing my short temper, all the boys loved to tease me just to see how much they could rile me. I responded to Buddy in my usual way. "I just like standin' here watchin' you boys beat each other up. And besides, ain't nothin' wrong with eatin'."

"There is if it makes you fat."

"I ain't fat!"

"You keep eatin' like that and you'll be fat as your momma."

Now, my momma wasn't fat. I knew that as well as I knew that Buddy Pernell's momma was. But it didn't matter. True or not, he'd insulted my momma, and it took me no time at all to react by shoving what was left of my cake right

into Buddy's face, making extra sure to push upward so the frosting would fill his freckled nose.

Buddy wasn't so brave then. He began clawing at his face like I'd thrown acid on it, crying something fierce about not being able to breathe.

Momma ran over, hysterical, simultaneously scolding me and coddling Buddy. I responded to her by saying I'd never heard of anyone suffocating on cake before, but she didn't appreciate my rationalizing. I got a whack from her left hand and Buddy got a wipe across his face from her right.

The other boys were laughing, throwing insults at Buddy about how he'd gotten shown up by a girl, but he was too worried about not being able to breathe through his nose to hear them.

I watched with a smile as Buddy's momma grabbed a cloth and ordered him to blow his nose into it. Buddy blew like his brains needed to come out, and eventually he found that he was able to breathe right again, although his momma insisted on getting a good look up his nose to be certain that it was clear of frosting.

The boys loved the picture of Buddy having his nose inspected by his momma, and they couldn't get enough of the jokes about it.

I got hauled into the house for a scolding and a whipping. I tried telling Momma that thirteen was too old for whippings, but she said if I was acting like a child, I should be punished like one. Every time I got another whack with that wooden spoon, I thought of a new way to make Buddy

pay for the walloping. After all, if he hadn't made fun of my momma, I wouldn't have made him snort up that cake.

I took my punishment without explaining because I didn't want to hurt Momma's feelings by telling her what Buddy had said, and I made my way slowly and sorely back out to the party with revenge in my mind.

Gemma saw the silent tears that I'd been biting my lip to keep from letting out, and she came over to wipe them with her apron.

I smiled at her halfway. "I'm okay. At least I will be once I get back at Buddy."

"Get back at him? He's the one who'll be wantin' to get back at you."

"Just let him try. I wouldn't have gotten that whippin' if he hadn't made fun of my momma in the first place."

"Don't you go talkin' like that. He's already got it in for you, and if you do anythin' else, he'll go and do somethin' awful."

"I ain't afraid of him!"

Gemma shook her braided head at me. "You talk tough, but you won't be so tough if Buddy Pernell hurts you bad."

I sniffed at her like she was worrying over nothing, but I knew deep down that I could have been asking for trouble by playing with Buddy. Boys with no sense can be dangerous, my momma had told me a few times, but my stubbornness didn't leave any room for being cautious. I was determined to hold a grudge against Buddy, and that was that. But I could see that Buddy was keeping his eye out for his first

chance to get back at me, and I watched him with a little worry in my heart as he and the other boys stood together in whispers.

I tried to pretend I wasn't nervous, and when Gemma got called into the house, I joined the other girls, who'd gone back to twirling their hair and talking about the boys.

With the boys standing around making plans and the girls standing around watching them, my mother got irritated and told us to find something active to do. "Go on down to the swimmin' hole. Get some exercise, for land's sake."

All of us girls went to my bedroom to put on our swimming suits, but with a knot in my stomach and a lump in my throat, I changed slower than them all. Gemma had been right, I figured. I'd be paying, and good, and the perfect place for Buddy to get me would be at the secluded swimming hole.

After I'd changed, I went downstairs to find my momma. "Maybe we shouldn't go to the swimmin' hole," I told her while she was making up another batch of sweet tea.

"It's hot as hades out there. It'll do you all good."

"It's not that hot."

Momma stopped scrubbing and looked at me strangely. "Were you in the same air I've been in today? It's thick as molasses."

"But swimmin' ain't no fun."

"You love swimmin'."

"Not today, I don't."

By now, Momma was curious, and she wiped her hands

on her apron before placing them on her hips. “Why don’t you just up and tell me what’s got you so ornery?”

“I ain’t ornery!”

“Don’t argue with me, girl. If I say you’re ornery, then you’re ornery.”

I looked down at my toes and sighed. I couldn’t tell Momma that Buddy had called her fat, and I didn’t want to show her I was afraid, anyway.

“Tell me one reason why you shouldn’t go to the swimmin’ hole.”

I continued staring at my dusty feet and shrugged.

“You don’t know, I guess you’re sayin’. Well, if you ain’t got a reason, you best be headin’ out to that swimmin’ hole. I’m too busy to wonder what’s goin’ on in that silly head of yours.”

I could feel Momma watching me as I scuffed out of the kitchen without another word, letting the screen door slam behind me. I took several steps before glancing back at Momma through the window, where she stood humming some hymn I remembered hearing in church. I took a deep breath. In my dramatic mind, it was as if I were saying a final good-bye. Who knew if I’d come back from that swimming hole alive? Momma would feel pretty bad if I ended up dying, and she’d have to live the rest of her life knowing she’d sent me to my death.

Poor Momma.

About the Author

Jennifer Erin Valent is the 2007 winner of the Jerry B. Jenkins Christian Writers Guild's Operation First Novel contest. A lifelong resident of the South, her surroundings help to color the scenes and characters she writes. In fact, the childhood memory of a dilapidated Ku Klux Klan billboard inspired her portrayal of Depression-era racial prejudice in *Fireflies in December*.

She has spent the past fifteen years working as a nanny and has dabbled in freelance, writing articles for various Christian women's magazines. She still resides in her hometown of Richmond, Virginia.