

WINNER
Adult
Short Story
Contest



About the Author

Shelby Harper is a former lawyer, unabashed country music fan and candidate for a Master of Arts degree in writing from Johns Hopkins University. She's currently at work on her first novel, *Persimmon*. Her writing can be found in *Outside In Literary & Travel Magazine* and in the forthcoming *Defying Gravity: Fiction by Washington Area Women*. She lives with her husband and three children in Bethesda, where she has learned to embrace the minivan. Her other endeavors include training for a half-marathon and triathlon, learning French and home brewing hoppy pale ales.



Northern Louisiana Sublime

By Shelby Harper

The adults were drunk on jungle juice, a frozen drink made with all the white liquors sold at Jim Ray's gas station and any combination of fruit found in the kitchen. I thought I'd gone unnoticed as I dove into the lake from Mammaw's dock and swam next door to my parents' dock and climbed into our 1970 mud-brown ski boat we called *Jackie Brown*.

"Penny, don't be running off with that boat, now. Supper's in 30 minutes."

"I'll be back in time, Mama. Promise."

Jackie was 16 years old, but she was my source of freedom. I squeezed some of the lake water from my T-shirt onto the pleather seat so that it wouldn't burn my bottom and the back of my legs upon sitting, and then pulled the T-shirt over my thighs so I wouldn't have to look at the bulge of puberty flesh that spread in all directions upon making contact with the seat. I took the butter knife from the center console and used it to start *Jackie Brown*. Nobody remembered a time when we actually had the key.

"Y'all kids go on and swim," I heard Mammaw, my great-grandmother and the family matriarch, yell to the dozen or so cousins, ranging in age from those

needing diapers to those of us who'd just entered junior high. "We'll keep a watch out for gators." Behind me, cousins jumped into the lake as I started the boat.

I pulled *Jackie* away from the dock and toward the middle of the lake, a smile plastered to my face. I quickly moved through the gears to fifth, anxious to get to Mr. Mackey's house on the other side of the lake.

I wasn't the only one in town fascinated by the new seventh-grade teaching assistant at All Saints Academy. New people didn't often move to town, and being from up north, Mr. Mackey was different from us. He didn't go to church and hadn't applied for any hunting licenses, but it was his ideas that were the most surprising.

Something I hadn't told anyone, even my best friend, Brandi, was that Mr. Mackey and I passed notes in between classes. He told me about books I hadn't yet read and music that wasn't played on either of the two country radio stations serving Northern Louisiana.

On days when Mr. Mackey had playground duty, a bunch of us seventh-

(continued on page 121)

graders liked to meet him over by the big tires and play a new game he taught us called Truth or Dare. Being new to the game and 13 years old, we almost always took the dare. Stacy had to perform 10 cartwheels across the playground, Jeff R. had to go down the slide headfirst, and Jeff P. ran over to the first-grade girls on the swing and said, "Hey, I'm a chicken!" Funny stuff like that.

The first time I tried a truth, Mr. Mackey asked which boy I most wanted to kiss.

"None of them," I said, but that wasn't totally true. Everybody laughed and I blushed. I couldn't look at him for the rest of the day. Something about the game felt like we were breaking the rules, so none of us told our parents or any of the other teachers.

I angled the boat toward Mr. Mackey's house and found him alone, sitting on his dock in one of two lawn chairs. I might have laughed at how out of place he looked, but to me it made him all the more attractive. Most guys from this part of Louisiana would sit around the lake in cutoff Levis and an unbuttoned plaid shirt, a John Deere box-top trucker hat on their head and a can of Skoal in a pocket.

Mr. Mackey had been *reading a book* and he was dressed like he was about to play golf. He wore khaki shorts, a polo shirt and a baseball hat. The koozie squeezed between his legs held a can of Budweiser and advertised his college, Oberlin, which none of us had even heard of. He waved me over, so I cut the engine and let the small wind carry *Jackie Brown* next to the dock. Mr. Mackey met me at the dock and helped to secure the stern and bowline. He offered his hand and helped pull me off of the boat and onto the dock.

"What's new, Penny?" Mr. Mackey walked back to his lawn chair and patted the empty one beside him.

I shrugged and took a seat. "Killing time before supper."

"Well, I'm happy to see you." Mr. Mackey smiled and I blushed and looked away, my eyes settling on the book in his lap. I caught a glimpse of the title: *The Interrogation*.

"Ever read *Le Clézio*?"

I shook my head.

"Third time through this book. I see something new each time." He reached into the small ice chest beside his lawn chair and pulled out a fresh can of beer. "You don't drink yet, do you?"

"No."

"Good girl."

"Well, I might try some."

He raised an eyebrow.

"What I mean is, I don't think drinking's a sin." There were plenty of Pentecostals who didn't believe in anything—no drinking, no dancing, they were even against women wearing makeup or doing anything with their hair except putting it up in a bun, for fear of being like Jezebel.

"What do you think is a sin?" His face held a serious expression.

"The usual stuff. What they teach in Sunday school."

He nodded and slipped the fresh Budweiser into the koozie. Mr. Mackey took a long, slow drink of his beer. "Do you think it's a sin that all the white kids go to the private school and all the black kids go to the public school?"

I held Mr. Mackey's gaze, but couldn't think of a thing to say in response. This conversation reminded me of the time he'd said he didn't believe in a devil. Before that moment, I'd accepted without question that there was a God and a devil, a heaven and a hell, because I'd been taught my whole life that that was so. I saw the connection here—I'd also never questioned the schooling arrangements, or why, even though we didn't have much money, all the children in my family went to the private school.

"Sorry, that's probably too heavy for a Saturday afternoon," he said.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, both of us watching the lake. He seemed to be captivated by the fishing boats across the water, pulled as far into the cypress trees as they could go. The air was thick and hot and smelled like a combination of fish water, pesticide from the crop dusters and a touch of petrol. I wanted Mr. Mackey to love it here

as much as I did.

"Do you really swim in this lake?" he asked me.

"Every day."

"Aren't you afraid of alligators?"

I shrugged. "They only swim in the shallow parts."

Mr. Mackey pointed to the water not far from us, closest to his property and the dock. "The shallow parts, as in right over there?"

"Gators only bother you when they are blind, hungry or young."

"And how is one supposed to know if the alligator they meet falls into one of those categories?" Mr. Mackey gently nudged my shoulder.

"Good point," I nodded. We held each other's gaze, smiling. "I guess that's why the Millers' dogs never last more than a year."

Mr. Mackey let out a big laugh. "You're funny, you know that, Penny?"

I blushed again and smiled proudly.

"What do you think, Penny?" he said, taking a drink of beer. "Do you want to live in Lake Providence forever?"

I shrugged. "I guess I will. My whole family's here. All together on the other side of the lake."

"I've seen your family's section."

"You have?"

"Yeah, once or twice when I've driven by on my boat." He smiled at me.

"Was I outside?" I couldn't believe it, and hoped I hadn't been caught doing something foolish.

"Maybe." Mr. Mackey smiled, and I loved his perfectly straight, white teeth.

"How come you didn't stop by?"

"I don't know." Mr. Mackey shrugged. Then he looked at me like he was studying my face. By now my hair was partly dry and partly wet, and he pushed a clump of it out of my eyes and tucked it behind my ear. I swallowed hard and looked down at my white T-shirt. I pulled it away from my breasts and my heart, which beat so fast I was sure Mr. Mackey could see it.

"It's probably better you didn't," I said, thinking about my parents' distaste for Mr. Mackey. "Not sure what my parents would say."

"Have you told them we're friends?"

"Oh, no," I looked at Mr. Mackey, with

his preppy clothing and book. "They just don't trust... anybody different."

Mr. Mackey laughed, and I smiled, proud to have made him laugh again.

"If you keep your grades up, you could go to college anywhere in this country."

"My uncle's the only one of us who ever left," I told him. "And he only moved to Fayetteville."

Mr. Mackey smiled as if I'd said something funny again. "Do you like school?"

"It's all right." The piece of hair fell back into my face, but Mr. Mackey didn't touch it again. "I like your class."

He playfully nudged my shoulder with his hand that held the koozie. When he didn't say anything for quite a while, I thought I better keep talking or I'd have to leave, so I commented on the music playing from his portable tape player.

"Is this that band you like?"

Mr. Mackey smiled and nodded. "The Clash. I'm almost finished with that mixtape I promised you."

Mr. Mackey set the beer down, leaned back in his lawn chair and adjusted his baseball cap. I tried not to look, but still noticed the muscle above his knee that was cut into his tanned skin. He confused me. He wasn't old, like my parents or the other teachers, but he was light years away from the boys in my class, whom I towered over in more ways than just physically.

"You're smart, you know," he said, looking at me again. "You could go away to college somewhere. If you wanted to."

"Yeah, maybe," I said.

Mr. Mackey stood up. "Come inside, I want to show you something." Together we crossed the small yard leading to his house.

Although I'd sat with him on the dock a few times, I'd never been inside Mr. Mackey's house, nor had I given much thought to what his kitchen might look like. I was surprised that it looked like a real grown-up's kitchen, but fancier, like something out of *Southern Living* magazine.

Two raw chicken breasts marinated in a bowl on the counter. He'd already made

a salad, which had been placed on the dining table, next to an opened bottle of wine. The table was set for two, with nice plates, silverware and cloth napkins.

"Is this what you wanted to show me?" I shivered, my half-wet T-shirt feeling cold with the house's air conditioning. "Cause I'm supposed to be home for supper soon. Catfish and shut-up dogs."

"Shut-up dogs?"

"You know—hush puppies."

Mr. Mackey laughed. "Sounds delicious. But no—this is for later. I'm having a friend over for dinner tonight."

"Oh," I said. My mood sank. I turned away from Mr. Mackey, hoping he wouldn't see the jealousy splashed across my face.

"A friend from Ohio, visiting for the weekend."

"So she's a Yankee," I muttered, sliding my hand along the back of one of his dining room chairs.

"Ouch." He laughed and rubbed the top of my head the way a grown-up does when he roughhouses with a child. "I never said it was a female friend."

I ducked out of his way, so that he couldn't rub my head any longer. I attempted to smooth down my hair.

"What did you want to show me?"

Mr. Mackey's expression was too complicated for me to read. He touched my cheek with his hand. His palm connected with my left cheek and it felt warm and soft. It wasn't calloused, like the hands of men who carried tackle boxes and guns and worked at the sand mill. "Some other time." He took my hand into his and led me back out, through his back screened porch. He let go before we reached the outdoors.

When we were standing on the deck, Mr. Mackey said to me, "You should know that you're a beautiful girl, Penny."

I could feel myself blushing and stared down at my chipped pink toenail polish.

"See you in class on Monday," he said.

I waved goodbye and climbed back into *Jackie Brown*, starting it with the butter knife. I pointed the boat toward home and tried not to look back at him.

By the time I parked the boat at my parents' dock, everyone was out of the water, wrapped in towels and hunched over paper bags full of food fried in the outdoor propane cooker. The bottoms of the sacks were dark with grease, despite the paper towel linings.

I hoped Mama had drunk enough jungle juice to forget that I had disobeyed her and was late for supper. I docked the boat, and thought about taking the long way to Mammaw's house, going through the yards. I didn't feel like getting wet again, but the quickest way back to Mammaw's house was to dive into the water and swim from our house to hers.

My dive cut through the glassy stillness of the water. I resurfaced and saw that nobody was paying me any attention, so I took in the group of them while softly treading water about halfway between the boat and Mammaw's dock. My grandma and her sisters were starting to pass out paper plates with slices of lemon icebox pie, my favorite.

I was staring at my family and thinking about what Mr. Mackey had said about leaving home to go to school. I watched Mammaw, sitting in the chair surrounded by three other generations of kin, the last of the day's light reflecting off her leathery tanned skin. I couldn't imagine not being surrounded by family each and every day. But then again, there had to be more people like Mr. Mackey, and I wanted desperately to know them.

I was lost in thought and not looking at the water around me, and therefore missed the signs that something was approaching. It wasn't until one of the cousins yelled, "Penny! Bubbles!" that I realized something big was about to happen.

Mama, Grandma and my great-aunts stood up from their lawn chairs and looked my way. A round of warnings and instructions followed: "Swim on in!" "There's a gator!" "Hurry up, now!"

And then, maybe all talk disappeared into their fear, or maybe they screamed louder and all at once. Or maybe they remained calm, having seen it before. None of it registered for me.

I saw the bubbles about 30 feet to my

left. For a moment, I told myself it was only a terrapin.

I turned to face the bubbles. As they grew closer—25 feet, 20 feet, 15—I knew that it was an alligator lurking beneath the dark water. I recalled the series of disappearing dogs owned by our neighbors. Except for my soft treading of water, I was unmoving, partly out of fear, but partly out of curiosity.

I was a fast swimmer, winning dashes even when handicapped by a long white T-shirt I wore to cover up the body I wasn't sure I was ready for. I could easily beat the gator back to the dock. All I had to do was move, start my freestyle strokes, before the alligator drew any closer to me. I had 10, maybe five seconds to swim to safety.

I turned from the bubbles to the dock, to the faces of my family and their desire to pull me in.

I turned back to the bubbles just as the top of the alligator's head lifted above

the water. The gator's black eyes stared right at me.

The voices of my family collected in the air as cheers and pleas. If I hadn't had my back to them and they could have seen my face, it would have shown my sense of calm as I faced down the alligator.

What if I had taken the longer, safer route, and walked around the lake? More importantly, would I make a different choice next time?

My legs and arms circled under the water, keeping my head afloat. In the eyes of the alligator, I learned this about myself: I was bold and careless, and just might be willing to follow my curiosity off a cliff. In that moment, I knew I wasn't going to race the alligator to the dock. I was going to stare him down. I swallowed against vulnerability and refused to blink.

One powerful shot rang through the air. It hit the gator square in his forehead, causing his eyes to roll back into his head.

As he disappeared into the water, there rose a trail of blood and bubbles.

I turned from the surface space once inhabited by the alligator toward the dock, looking at my family again. Mammaw was there, in shorts and a tank, a Camel wedged in her lips. "Got him," she said as she lowered her shotgun to hip level.

"Penny Lou, your supper is getting cold," Mama said. "And don't think I didn't notice you were out way longer than 30 minutes on that boat ride."

And then everyone went right back to talking and eating, and as I swam toward them I began to shake, cold from the onsetting shock. In the eyes of that alligator, I had realized some things about life: It was an experiment in fear and groundlessness, in hope and pain, and sometimes—for the daring, or perhaps the lucky—a taste of the sublime.

With a shivering body and a smile on my face, I rejoined my family. ■

Creating a Better You

Beautiful Natural Results.
Concierge Attention.

CALL: (301) 244-0277

•Now offering **ULTHERAPY!**

- Facial Rejuvenation
- Mini- Lifts
- Laser Skin Tightening
- Injectables
- Breast Enhancement
- Skin Care (Lasers and Peels)
- Laser Hair Removal
 - Rhinoplasty
 - Smart Lipo
- Laser Liposuction
 - Body Lifts
- Mommy Makeovers
- Gynecomastia

Get a Free Personal Skin Care Consultation with our
Licensed Esthetician today!

*Offer valid by appointment only.



WASHINGTONIAN
PLASTIC SURGERY

www.WashingtonianPlasticSurgery.com

NAVIN K. SINGH, MD

Brown, Harvard, and Johns Hopkins Trained
Dual- Board Certified Plastic Surgeon

Washingtonian Magazine Top Doc

as voted by doctors in the Washington, DC Metropolitan Region



Chevy Chase

5454 Wisconsin Ave. Suite 1710
Chevy Chase, MD 20815
(301) 244-0277

Tysons Corner

8200 Greensboro Dr. Suite 120
McLean, VA 22102
(703) 345-4377