

Excerpt from Grandmother and Aunt Brazzie Take Us to the Swamp, 1951

“Forget the fish,” he urged. “Jump off the log!”

I ignored him. The fishing line had my full attention and I tried hard to pull it in. I made no headway at all, but the fish steadily pulled me out into the river. By the time Kavanaugh’s calls and the laws of physics got my attention, it was too late. I couldn’t jump back to dry ground even if I dropped the pole.

He and I just looked at each other helplessly for a minute. “What should we do?” I asked.

He replied without a pause, “What do you mean, ‘we’, paleface?”¹

“It’s not funny. Can you reach me?”

“No!” he answered with a bit of irritation, “How can I reach you if it’s too far to jump. I think you can do it.”

“No, I can’t. I’ll fall in, for sure.”

Kavanaugh got a bit more serious. “Okay, let’s think.”

I finally dropped the fishing pole, and the log slowed its speed away from the bank and down the river.

After about another minute and several bad ideas for getting to shore, I spotted the swing that hung out over the river just ahead. “The swing,” I yelled. “Untie it and throw it out to me.”

Kavanaugh’s face lit up. He liked the idea as well, and he started along the riverbank toward the swing.

“Hurry,” I yelled. “I’m going to pass it before you get there.”

“Aw, keep your shirt on. I’ll make it in plenty of time.”

He got to the tree, untied the rope, and began to judge when he should throw it.

“I need to throw it once to judge how hard and when. Don’t grab it.”

“That’s stupid,” I replied. “If I can reach it, I’m going to catch it.”

“Okay. Just don’t lunge for it and halfway get it. If it ends up hanging out over the river and you don’t have it, I won’t be able to throw it again.”

I saw the logic in his warning and waited anxiously. He threw the knotted rope hard. It swung out about five feet down-river from me, and then back. He caught it and froze for a moment, calculating his next attempt. He swung his arm back and made two false movements forward like a batter checking his swing. Then, he threw it a second time accurately enough that it hit me in the chest. I managed to wrap my left arm around it and held on, then let go of the upright limb I had been holding and grabbed the rope with both hands.

1 This is a line from a joke every kid knew then. I’ll tell it as I would have told it then. The Lone Ranger and his Indian sidekick, Tonto, get into a battle with some hostile Indians. The Lone Ranger says, “It looks bad, Tonto. It looks like they’re going to capture us and scalp us.” Tonto replies, “What you mean, ‘us,’ paleface.” If you don’t believe me, watch the 1948 Bob Hope movie, *The Paleface*. American Indians generally don’t use the term paleface now and probably didn’t then, but the American motion picture industry used it and so did we. Given that we were just kids, I think our usage was more easily forgivable than the industry’s.

I pulled on the rope, expecting that I could get the log to drift over to the riverbank at least far enough that I could jump off. Instead of moving the log, I moved just myself, lost my balance, and, having no choice but to hold onto the rope or fall in the river, I pulled hard and lifted myself off the log.

The rope swung back toward the riverbank, but it didn't go far enough for me to drop onto the bank nor for Kavanaugh to catch me. I swung back out to nearly the middle of the river.

Beginning to panic, I yelled, "Catch me! Catch me now! I can't hold on!"

As I made my second approach to the bank, we saw that I didn't come as close as on the first time. I would swing less and less until the rope and I came to rest out over the river.

Faced now with pure necessity, I remembered our tree house in the back yard and how, if I jumped off and wrapped my legs around a knot in the rope, I could lock them in place and swing for a very long time.

The rope had a knot in it just below my hands, but not where I could lock my legs around it. If I had been on our tree-house swing, I wouldn't have gathered the strength to pull myself up, but propelled by the thought of falling in the river, I managed a couple of hand-over-hand grasps up the rope and latched my legs around the knot. Now I could hold on for a few minutes.

As I relaxed a little, I looked back at Kavanaugh. He showed absolutely no concern. He wasn't frantically looking for a way to rescue me. He sat on the ground, his legs stretched out in front of him, leaning back on his arms, and grinning from ear to ear.

Okay, he wasn't the one in trouble. He didn't have the motivation I had to solve this problem. But the relaxed pose, the self-satisfied grin got to me.

"Well, are you going to help me, or do you plan to just sit there, or go home and leave me hanging here? Just tell me, so I can figure out what to do."

"I'm going to help you," he said without moving a muscle.

I waited to see if he would get up, or at least tell me what he had in mind.

"How? What are you going to do?"

"Relax," he said. "It's all under control. Kavanaugh to the rescue." He yawned.

Again I waited. I didn't have the patience for more than a few seconds. "Then do it!" I yelled. I felt really frustrated and afraid. What if a halfigator came along, waiting for me to drop in the river? I remembered Josh Hollingshead and his missing thumb. I kicked my feet to spin around and survey the river. No beasts lurked—not right now. I could feel tears start to come, and I grimaced to hold them back. A whole list of dangers raced through my mind.

Cottonmouth moccasins can swim well and are completely at home in the water, but they don't just float around all the time like fish do. I didn't worry that a cottonmouth might be waiting below me.

I didn't swim very well, but I could keep my head above water and make slow headway. I could get to shore if I had to.

I knew little about halfigators and their habits except what Grandmother told us, and I remembered how one emerged from the tall grass just as the baptismal ceremony got noisy. Maybe all our shouting and my kicking the log around had attracted one's attention. That worried me. I decided if I had to drop in the river, I would look carefully first to make sure a halfigator wasn't around, then drop in and make a huge splashing commotion just for good measure.

But in spite of halfgators, cottonmouths and even having to swim for my life, I feared to return home wet more than anything. I would never be allowed to go to the swamp again. That's what made me feel like tears might come. That's what almost made me tremble. And to make matters worse, I suddenly thought I understood why Kavanaugh didn't seem so concerned. I suspected he would rather come to the swamp with Jack Stonecipher or some other of his friends who were nearer his age. His joke played back in my head, "What do you mean, 'we', Paleface?"

"You got a good hold on the rope?" Kavanaugh asked.

Thinking this was the opening part of my rescue, I answered calmly, "Yes, I'm sitting on the knot. I can hold on for a while."

"Good," he said. "First of all, if you hadn't hesitated to jump on the rope, you would have made it to the bank."

"Whaddya mean?" I objected. "I didn't plan to jump off the log at all."

"Then what did you plan to do?" he asked.

"I was going to hold onto the rope until.... I thought if I held onto the rope, the log would swing around and.... I'm not sure." I realized I had no idea what I'd planned to do.

"Well, I thought you would grab the swing, push off the log with your feet, and it would carry you back to the bank," Kavanaugh said with a shrug. "Never mind. Guess how I'm going to save you."

"What?"

"Guess how I'm going to save you. I'll give you three guesses. If you don't get it, I'll save you anyway."

His offer left me speechless for a few moments. We played the guessing game in a lot of situations, but never something like this. I considered just letting go, but decided I might as well play along first to see if it got me rescued.

"You're going to call a big yellow bird to swoop down and grab me and drop me on the river bank," I rattled off as fast as I could.

"Nope. Pretty fancy guess, but not very realistic. Your next two guesses have to be reasonable. Something that might really happen."

I said the first thing that came to mind. "You're going to swim out here, have me drop into the river and then you'll pull me to shore."

"Nope. It wouldn't help if I got wet too. Then we'd both get chewed out for getting wet and neither of us could come back to the swamp. Your third guess had better be a really good one or I'll make you keep guessing."

I couldn't think of anything to say. I think Kavanaugh sensed that I was near the end of my rope, figuratively as well as literally. He stood up. "Here's a hint," he said and wiggled his hips.

"What? What in the world does that mean?"

He turned his left side toward me and wiggled again. "Look, dummy!"

I finally got it. "The whip! You're going to use the whip!"

"Good guess, Paleface," he said as he took it off his belt.

“Hurry,” I yelled. “Hurry!”

Kavanaugh stepped up as close to the riverbank as he could, and swung the whip around his head a couple of times as he always did when he warmed up.

“Hurry,” I said, more in anger than fear now.

Kavanaugh stared intently at me and the rope. He drew his arm back and paused, then lowered his arm. “I need to catch the bottom of the rope,” he said. “Can you climb up a little?”

“No! I can’t climb up. Catch my leg!”

He considered a moment. “Okay,” he said, “It’s your choice. It’s gonna hurt!”

Again he raised his arm and threw the end of the whip back in the dirt. He didn’t like the way it laid, so he pulled it forward and snapped it backwards again. Pleased with the way it trailed out behind him, he stared directly at my foot. “Ready?”

“Yes! Do it! Now!”

Kavanaugh pulled the whip forward. It spun around his head and flew straight out at me. When he threw it, it moved too fast to be really seen. A bullwhip makes a cracking sound when it is thrown and jerked back because the tip goes faster than the speed of sound. I winced when it wrapped around my right foot. The last inch of the whip popped against my ankle and, boy, did it hurt. If I hadn’t been wearing thick socks, it would have made a blister for sure.

He pulled on the whip and I began to move toward the bank. I moved several feet toward Kavanaugh, but finally came to a stop about three feet from the bank.

“Pull harder!” I yelled.

“I can’t pull any harder. I’ll have to give you a swing,” he said. “I’m going to let go and you’ll swing out. Then, as you come back, while you’re moving, I’m going to catch you again and pull as hard as I can. It’s just like the tree-house swing. You’ll have to drop off while you swing over the dry ground. Got it?”

Without waiting for me to answer, Kavanaugh gave the whip a quick jerk, and it uncoiled from my foot. I swung out over the river, past the middle, reversed and headed toward Kavanaugh again. As I glided past where I had hung motionless, he shot the whip out again and caught my foot almost exactly as he had done the first time. As soon as the whip tightened around my foot, he pulled on it and fell backward on the ground. The extra momentum his pull gave to the swing took me all the way to the riverbank. Just before I stopped moving, I let go of the rope and fell on the dirt, feet first and then on my butt.

We both lay there for a while. I breathed heavily and began to calm down while Kavanaugh delicately coiled up his whip and brushed away a few specks of mud that had stuck on it. He wore an expression of smug satisfaction. I pulled down my sock and examined the spot where the whip had popped. It was very red, but not bleeding. It would blister for sure. It looked like the socks hadn’t been thick enough after all.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Aw shucks, he ain’t heavy Mister, he’s my brother,” Kavanaugh replied with his steady grin.²

2 “He ain’t heavy, Mister, he’s my brother” was the motto of Boys Town, an organization to help abandoned and neglected boys. In their ads that appealed for donations, the motto accompanied a picture of one boy carrying another smaller boy

I understood his reference and took it as a “You’re welcome.”

“I could have done without the questions,” I said.

“Aw, come on. I was going to help you. Just wanted to have a little fun.”

“It wasn’t fun,” I said.

“Well, it was for me!”

on his back. We saw the ads so often, the phrase had become a cliché for brotherly love.