



Freedom Summer

by Deborah Wiles

A Note About The Text

In the early 1960s the American South had long been a place where black Americans could not drink from the same drinking fountains as whites, attend the same schools, or enjoy the same public areas. Then the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became the law and stated that “All persons shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment” of any public place, regardless of “. . . race, color, religion, or national origin.”

I was born a white child in Mobile, Alabama, and spent summers visiting my beloved Mississippi relatives. When the Civil Rights Act was passed, the town pool closed. So did the roller rink and the ice cream parlor. Rather than lawfully giving black the same rights and freedoms as whites, many southern businesses chose to shut their doors in protest. Some of them closed forever.

Also in the summer of 1964, civil rights workers in Mississippi organized “Freedom Summer,” a movement to register black Americans to vote. It was a time of great racial violence and change. That was the summer I began to pay attention: I noticed that black Americans used back doors, were waited on only after every white had been helped, and were treated poorly, all because of the color of their skin . . . and no matter what any law said. I realized that a white person openly having a black friend, and vice versa, could be a dangerous thing. I couldn’t get these thoughts and images out of my mind, and I wondered what it must be like to be a

black child my age. I dreamed about changing things, and yet I wondered what any child—black or white—could do.

This story grew out of my feelings surrounding that time. It is fiction, but based on real events.



John Henry Waddell is my best friend. His mama works for my mama. Her name is Annie Mae. Every morning at eight o'clock Annie Mae steps off the country bus and walks up the long hill to my house. If it's summer, John Henry is step-step-stepping-it right beside her.

We like to help Annie Mae. We shell butter beans. We sweep the front porch. We let the cats in, then chase the cats out of the house until Annie Mae says, "Shoo! Enough of you two! Go Play!"

We shoot marbles in the dirt until we're too hot to be alive. Then we yell, "Last one in is a rotten egg!" and run straight for Fiddlers Creek.

John Henry swims better than anybody I know. He crawls like a catfish, blows bubbles like a swamp monster, but he doesn't swim in the town pool with me. He's not allowed. So we dam the creek with rocks and sticks to make a swimming spot, then holler and jump in, wearing only our skin.

John Henry's skin is the color of browned butter. He smells like pine needles after a good rain. My skin is the color of the pale moths that dance around the porch at night. John Henry says I smell like a just-washed sock.

“This means war!” I shout.

We churn that water into a white hurricane and laugh until our side hurt. Then we float on our backs and spout like whales.

“I’m gonna be a fireman when I grow up,” I say.

“Me, too,” says John Henry.

I have two nickels for ice pops, so we put on our clothes and walk to town. John Henry doesn’t come with me through the front door of Mr. Mason’s General Store. He’s not allowed.

“How you doin’, Young Joe?” asks Mr. Mason. He winks and says, “You gonna eat these all by yourself?”

My heart skips a quick-beat. “I got one for a friend,” I say, and scoot out the door.

“Yessir, it’s mighty hot out there!” Mr. Mason calls after me.

“I love ice pops,” says John Henry.

“Me, too,” I say.

Annie Mae makes dinner for my family every night. She creams the corn and rolls the biscuits.

Daddy stirs his iced tea and says, “The town pool opens tomorrow to everybody under the sun, no matter what color.”

“That’s the law,” Mama tells me. She helps my plate with peas and says, “It’s the way it’s going to be now—Everybody Together—lunch counters, rest rooms, drinking fountains, too.”

I wiggle in my chair like a doodlebug. “I got to be excused!” I shout, and run into the kitchen to tell John Henry.

I'm gonna swim in the town pool!" he hollers. "Is it deep?"

"REAL deep," I tell him. And the water's so clear, you can jump to the bottom and open your eyes and still see."

"Let's be the first ones there," says John Henry. "I'll bring my good-luck nickel, and we can dive for it."

Next morning, as soon as the sun peeks into the sky, here comes my best friend, John Henry Waddell, run-run-running to meet me.

"Let's go!" he yells, I got my nickel," and I run right with him, all the way to the town swimming pool.

We race each other over the last hill and . . . we stop.

Country dump trucks are here. They grind and back up to the empty pool. Workers rake steaming asphalt into the hole where sparkling clean water used to be. One of them is John Henry's big brother, Will Rogers. We start to call to him, "What happened?" but he see us first and points back down the road—it means "Git on home!"

But our feet feel stuck, we can't budge. So we hunker in the tall weeds and watch all morning until the pool is filled with hot, spongy tar. Ssssss! Smoky steam rises in the air. Workers tie planks to their shoes and stomp on the blacktop to make it smooth.

Will Rogers heaves his shovel into the back of an empty truck and climbs up with the other workers. His face is like a storm cloud, and I know this job has made him angry.

"Let's go!" a boss man shots, and the trucks rumble-slam down the road.



It's so quiet now, we can hear the breeze whisper through the grass. We sit in the diving board and stare at the tops of the silver ladders sticking up from the tar. My heart beats hard in my chest.

John Henry's voice shakes. "White folks don't want colored folks in their pool."

"Your wrong, John Henry," I say, but know he's right.

"Let's go back to Fiddler's Creek," I say. "I didn't want to swim in this pool anyway."

John Henry's eyes fill up with angry tears. "I did," he says. "I wanted to swim in this pool. I want to do everything you can do."

I don't know what to say, but as we walk back to town, my head starts to pop with new ideas. I want to go to the Dairy Dip with John Henry, sit down and share root beer floats. I want us to go to the picture show, buy popcorn, and watch the movie together.

I want to see this town with John Henry's eyes.

We stop in front of Mr. Mason's store. I jam my hands into my pockets while my mind searches for words to put with my new ideas. My fingers close around two nickels. "Want to get an ice pop?"

John Henry wipes his eyes and takes a breath. "I want to pick it out myself."

I swallow hard and my heart says yes. "Let's do that," I say. I give John Henry one of my nickels.

He shakes his head. "I've got my own."

We look at each other.

Then we walk through the front door together.

