

SWEET TEA
SECRETS

FROM



THE

DEEP-FRIED
SOUTH

*Sassy, Sacred, Southern Stories
Filled with Hope & Humor*

JANE JENKINS HERLONG

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SECRETS



DEEP-FRIED
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Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois



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Sweet Tea Secrets from the Deep-Fried South: Sassy, Sacred, Southern Stories Filled with Hope and Humor

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Portions of chapter 42 originally appeared in *Bury Me with My Pearls: Humor with a Spiritual Twist*, Lighthouse Publishing of the Carolinas, an imprint of Iron Stream Media. Printed with permission.

ISBN 978-1-4964-5591-8

Printed in China

28 27 26 25 24 23 22
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

MY JAW DROPPED after I hopped on a carriage tour in downtown Charleston. Our guide spoke with a heavy Northern accent, telling me all about Charles Town and the Civil War—but there was nothing civil about that war! (And in the South, we pronounce *war*, wa-wah.) I then spotted a car from Ohio with our sacred South Carolina palmetto tree positioned as the *I* in Ohio. The mutilation of our language and tacky adoption of our precious palmetto tree symbol affixed on the vehicle of an outta-towner was like kudzu winding around my neck. I could barely breathe.

Kudzu (pronounced cud-zoo) is a vine. The South's warmth and humidity provide the perfect conditions for it to grow prolifically, covering everything in its path. Kudzu engulfs buildings and property to the extent that some have called it "the vine that ate the South."

The South has been invaded, rebranded, reprimanded, and ridiculed. We are good folk, but I'm fully aware that some in our midst "need to be furloughed from wince they came." And don't start gaspin' for air like some of our over-the-top church people . . . you know who they are.

I'm going to put this right out there—if you are a born-and-bred Southerner, you will appreciate this book. If you moved here twenty-five years ago and think you are something of a Southern soul, you may chuckle.

If you fled some other part of the Union in hopes of enjoying our lower taxes, lax gun laws, long summer days, and relaxed way of living and talking, you will probably recognize your neighbors in this book. And maybe it will help those of you who aren't from the South to understand us better.

Many of us born-and-bred Southerners hold on to our traditions like we grip MoonPies, which some call pulpwood biscuits. We celebrate Southern-style until the last molecule of dirt is thrown on our face and our family and friends go to the church fellowship hall to talk about how much better we look dead than we ever did alive—all while they are eating potato salad.

I'm fixin' to tell some stories—stories that'll make you cry, tales that'll make you snort until RC Cola rushes from your nostrils. In the South, we never run out of stories. I'm a South Carolinian, and you can't get any more Southern in the South than the southern part of the southeast coast of South Carolina.

My stories will take you through tall coastal marshes that only survive because of the tight grip of pluff mud; so if you feel stuck, keep reading—we have more in common than it may first appear. You will find yourself between the lines of these stories, and although your home may not be my home, you will be reminded of long-lasting life lessons delivered with a Lowcountry Southern perspective.

So come along and laugh with all us Southerners as we attend family reunions that may evolve into dating services. And don't lecture us when we drink our sweet diabetic tea or when we talk about our other favorite beverage . . . gravy. I imagine some of y'all may add extra grease or sugar to your dishes too. Just remember that sugar and grease are not food groups. But some of our old-school Southern cooks may disagree.

If you want to know us, you need to read this book. We are eaten up with secrets, so I decided to do a tell-all Southern humor book. Story is how we speak in the South, so sit in a Charleston rocker, lounge in a Pawleys Island Hammock, or bounce on the joggling board, and enjoy some sweet tea secrets from the deep-fried South.

Introduction

A SOUTHERN LADY

SOMEONE WHO . . .

- Has a pitcher of sweet tea at the ready
- Always writes a thank-you note
- Knows pearls match everything
- Grows her own tomatoes and bakes pies for her neighbors
- Believes in monograms, Mason jars, and mindin' manners
- Is always blessin' someone

When I read the above description to my husband, Thomas, he gave me the yeah-right sarcastic look that only a seasoned Southern husband understands after years of marriage. And, of course, he was correct.

Here's my version:

A Johns Island Southern Woman

Someone who . . .

- Has a pitcher of artificially sweetened tea at the ready with an optional wedge of lemon
- Always writes a thank-you note that does not have the words *thank you* on the front of the note
- Wears pearl earrings but has been told since she was a child that it is not proper for ears to be pierced before age sixteen
- Loves picking vine-ripened tomatoes grown only by her daddy
- Knows that no one will ever be able to make Tootsie's shrimp pie
- Believes in limited use of monograms for clothing, shoes, and purses
- Says "yes, ma'am," and "yes, sir" until the day she dies
- Always refers to her parents as Momma and Daddy

Finally, if you do all of the above, you will be a blessing to your Southern family for generations, if you can keep a secret. 'Cause frankly, my dear, storytelling is our legacy; many in our Southland refer to these tales as . . . *therapy*.

Jane Jenkins Herlong



PART I



THANK DE GOOD LAWD DEY
BUILT DE BRIDGE





GULLAH, GULLAH JOHNS ISLAND

JOHNS ISLAND is the second largest island on the southern East Coast. For many years, the island was accessible only by boat. My grandfather (Gumpa) always said, “Thank de Good Lawd dey built de bridge” since up till then no one dared marry outside of the family. Actually, we did not have a choice. There was no bridge to get to the other side of the Stono River, so there was no way to infuse new blood into the family. I guess you could say our family tree looked more like one of those wreaths you see in a cemetery that someone forgot to prune.

My family takes pride in being “island people,” and our island has its own heartbeat. The pulse of the tides as they ebb and flow . . . the way the coastal breeze exhales as it lifts Spanish moss on gnarled branches . . . the faint buzz of mosquitoes vectoring on your neck and cheek . . . all these sounds remind us that our island is alive.

You won’t find much Lowcountry tranquility on the downtown Charleston peninsula. Tourists: that’s what you’ll find there. Tourists, traffic, rooftop bars, and all the trappings of a city that’s almost shed its Southern skin—but not quite. I’ll take Charleston over one of those cities north of Richmond any day, but Charleston’s not my island.

I grew up playing in old musty homes with large front porches. On lazy Sunday afternoons, I listened to conversations between

Cousin Wee-Wee and Aunt Fannie. Excitement after church was watching airplanes land on the small Johns Island airstrip next to the farm. I learned how to swim when Daddy threw me off the tall dock on Abbapoola Creek. He tossed my siblings and me into the water when the tide was coming in so we could drift down to the metal ladder attached to the floating dock. I crabbed, fished, and went boggin' in the pluff mud on low tide. I adored the Black community—their beautiful style of worship gripped my heart. Jesus was alive and woven into every fiber of their everyday life.

The Gullah language, mostly spoken by the Black community, has deep roots in the Carolina Lowcountry. My grandfather Gumpa spoke this beautiful, almost poetic language fluently. All of us grandchildren loved Gumpa's entertaining storytelling about fishin' in da crik and growin' cukes (cucumbers) in his guar-den.

Back in his day, most people seemed generally thankful to have the island and neighbors who looked out for one another and were kind and loving regardless of gender, skin color, or beliefs. Gumpa often left vegetables from his garden on someone's back doorstep as he sang a song no one recognized . . . just *de de de de*.

We all knew the milkman, and most days we also knew the exact time he exchanged the empty glass bottles for fresh ones of delicious, creamy Coburg milk. Vegetables and fruits magically showed up on your front porch—just 'cause. You see, down a long dirt road, everyone cared for each other. We looked folks in the eye or nodded or waved. Loving your neighbor came natural back then.

As the South of my childhood seemed to shrink, my life experiences and memories grew richer. I value it because we've lost some of its authenticity. I laugh when I recall the unusual events and people across the state who made growing up in rural South Carolina so defining. From the Lowcountry shores of Bird Key Beach to the Upstate and down to the Ridge, I've seen it, loved it, and can't wait to bring it back to life.

My journey begins on Johns Island. How I wish, just one more time, I could breathe in the indescribable scent of my grandmother Lou's biscuits baking while I watched Gumpa tie his jon boat to his dock. God willing,



when he takes me to heaven, I'll get to sit a spell on that old floating dock,
dangling my legs in that creek one more time, 'cause once upon a time in an
old tenant house down a long dirt road lived a little girl with blonde, curly
hair and big dreams.



A
SWEET TEA
SECRET

*This is one of my most important
sweet tea secrets: Just like my
special spot on our saltwater
dock, find your own place to
dream. Surround yourself with
folks who encourage you to
dream big and dream often.*





NEVER-NO

I WAS SIXTEEN years old. Standing on the Charleston Battery, I was surrounded by tourists, locals, and the festive trimmings of three hundred years of history. It was Charleston's tricentennial birthday; the city was in full party mode.

My long hair wrapped around my face as winds from the Ashley River ushered in another Southern spring. I leaned forward on the Battery rail in anticipation of the Tricentennial Boat Parade. And there was that nasty lump in my throat.

The first entry was a massive ship. Folks gathering along the Battery began a chorus of oohs and aahs. Not me; my stomach began to churn.

"Oh, look!" someone in the crowd exclaimed. "There's that gorgeous yacht from the Charleston Marina."

"Well, the next ship will surely win first place," shouted another parade attendee. In all of its glory, that boat was engineered with a fountain of cascading red and blue towers of water.

Then, there was silence. My anxiety was in full throttle. In the midst of the crowd I heard, "Would you look at that!" Ripples of laughter replaced the oohs and aahs.

I did not even have to wonder what caused their reactions. Into the middle of that grand Charleston celebration of yachts and ships floated the *Never-No*—Daddy and Momma's pride and joy. Amid all

the elegance and grandeur came our blue-and-white Scottie Craft with the flybridge—all twenty-seven feet of it. Seriously, the *Never-No* looked like a floating matchbox. I wanted to run for cover to hide my embarrassment.

That boat was decorated with every symbol of our state. Yellow jasmine wound up and down the outriggers. A massive blue-and-white South Carolina flag, almost as large as the boat itself, flew proudly over the stern. Bringing up the stern was a palmetto tree with a stuffed, homemade Carolina wren resting in its palms.

But the kicker? The crew—as rough and rowdy as they come. They were having the time of their lives.

“Lawd have mercy, those people sho know how to have fun. They don’t care about the size of dat boat,” remarked a woman in her Gullah brogue.

My heart swelled. I turned to the woman who made that comment and said, “Thank you! That’s my momma and daddy.” That dear woman understood—my family, my island, and my upbringing.

I will never forget that moment. It is frozen in time as I watched my parents and their best buds enjoy their own private party on the *Never-No*. My parents knew how to make the most of what they had. That moment represented years of hard work by a handful of Johns Island tomato farmers who toiled in the unforgiving Lowcountry heat to celebrate their field of dreams. I also realized that some out there will always throw tomatoes at your field of dreams.

I remember the evening when the Johns Island farmers gathered around the old yellow Formica table in our small kitchen to name the new boat. It was the Yalta Conference to this gang of tightly woven island friends.

After several names were thrown into the mix, my mother chimed in. “Let’s call it the *Never-No*. You never know when you are going, you never know what will happen, and you never know when you are coming home.”

It was the pull of the tide and the mounds of hidden pluff mud that my mother was referring to. Momma was spot-on. Life is filled with uncontrollable tides and hidden sandbars of uncertainty.

Today, as I see that old boat now parked in my nephew’s yard, I remember all of the fun times, hard work, and many changes. Just like the





name of our boat, life is loaded with “never-no” moments that challenge our character and test our future. I do know one thing for sure: If you love God and love yourself, you will know how to love others.

Memories of the *Never-No*, watching my parents and their friends celebrate, and hearing that simple comment from a bystander began to open my eyes to the gift of being reared a “Johns Island girl.” I realized that my life was a kaleidoscope of both nature and nurture. What a gift to be surrounded by some of the greatest teachers who made me proud of heritage and taught me that all folks are God’s special handiwork.

Maybe sharing that story gave me the courage to tell the next story . . . and the next.

As I type this story, I look to my right and see a prized possession hanging on the wall. A plaque engraved and adorned with gold commemorative tricentennial coins reads:

CHARLESTON TRICENTENNIAL

FIRST PRIZE BOAT PARADE

BEST TRICENTENNIAL THEME

NEVER-NO

BENJAMIN R. JENKINS

APRIL 12, 1970

It was not the size of the boat in the parade but the hearts and passion of those involved. Ya know, just like the name of my parents’ boat . . . you just *Never-No*.



A
SWEET TEA
SECRET

*When you learn to embrace who
you are, life will become sweeter
than a tall glass of honeyed iced tea
. . . with a refreshing sprig of mint.*





PART II



MY FAVORITE
BRETHERN AND SISTERN





THE TIE THAT BINDS ... OUR HEARTS

I LOVED 9:00 A.M. on the farm. I would drive down our long dirt road to pick up Tootsie. Her birth name was Ruth Blidgen, but her “cradle name” was Tootsie. I was only five months old when she came into our lives.

As Tootsie and I drove back to the house, we passed folks on the farm who had been working since sunrise alongside my father in the fields. Some were clearing ditches, others riding on the back of a planter or driving Daddy’s John Deere tractors cutting through fresh dirt preparing the land. All were working together, organizing the farm for spring planting. My favorite farm scent to this day is fresh dirt being turned over by plows. It was a team effort that created jobs, grew fresh vegetables, and created memories of Johns Island agriculture. Sadly, much of that environment has been replaced by large housing subdivisions—except on The Hut.

The Hut is a beautiful historic piece of property Daddy bought back in 1961. Forty four-hundred-year-old majestic live oaks spread their massive limbs across the land, resembling giant arms hugging memories from the past. If only those trees could talk—oh, what glorious tales would be told. The land is nestled on Hut Creek, whose flowing tides are continually filled with rich sea life from the Intracoastal Waterway. This was ground zero for our farm.

I remember seeing Daddy jump into his pickup after one of his

workers, James, had used it to drive around the farm. James's hearing was impaired, and when Daddy cranked up his truck, the sudden blare of music was earsplitting. I will never forget the look on Daddy's face. After he calmed down and got his hearing back, Momma made an appointment to arrange for James to be fitted with hearing aids.

When the doctor asked James if he knew what had happened to his hearing, James chuckled while telling the doctor that his brother said a cockroach had laid eggs in his eardrum. "Thank dah Lawd, Mrs. Jenkin done brung me down yuh to see you. My brother say he gwine spray some of dat Hot Shot in my ear!"

This is just one of many stories of how much Daddy loved and cherished all of this team; he wanted to make sure everyone was taken care of, even James and the cockroach eggs.

When the *Never-No* pulled into the dock on Abbapoola Creek after a day of deep-sea fishing, countless folks were invited to help themselves to dolphin (not Flipper), red snapper, and other deep-sea delicacies. Bags of cabbage and crates of tomatoes and corn were given away. Daddy knew exactly what he was doing. Some of the island's finest cooks would create amazing Southern dishes and bring them to our home.

Welcome to life on our Lowcountry farm.

I ugly-cried when I watched *The Help*. The life depicted in that movie was nothing like the way we lived on our Johns Island farm. We loved and respected the local community, and the feeling was mutual. My daddy would have never been a successful farmer without his team: Alonzo, Lab, Spike, James, Tootsie, Conchie, Robbie, Mena, Roseanne, and many others. These folks were our extended family.

I remember one time when Daddy came into the house for midday dinner crying and sniffing. "Alonzo has diabetes," he said as he buried his head in his worn, calloused hands.

Then the next week he told one of the funniest stories I've ever heard. Chuckling all the way to the table, Daddy said, "Boy, Lab sure put a cussin' on me today! He said, 'Mr. Benjamin, when you shet yo' eye fo the last time,



I gwine tell dem peoples to bury you under eight feet deep! Dat way, when Gabriel blow his horn, you be the last one up!”

Another story Daddy told was about taking our male cat to the veterinarian to be neutered. Daddy asked Conchie to hold the cat in his lap while Daddy drove. All the way to the veterinarian’s office, Daddy heard Conchie lamenting, “Good Lawd, kitt’nee, I sho glad I ain’t you.”

We slapped our knees when laughing and wiped our eyes when shedding tears of sorrow. You cannot put a price on those many moments filled with humor, hard work, and “heart” work. Next you’ll meet the rest of our family.



A
SWEET TEA
SECRET

I thank God I was taught to love others and appreciate different ways of living. Embracing others yields a sweet tea experience like no other.

