

SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES

Cynthia Blomquist Gustavson

The pops of a shotgun awakened me. It was a crisp, November morning, squirrel season, too beautiful to stay inside – but too dangerous to walk in the woods. It was our land, but Louisiana country folk don't cotton to northerners buying up land and posting "no hunting" signs. We'd already had our gas yard-light shot out, and my just-planted winter pansies rolled over by not-so-accidental truck tires.

So my husband and I decided to go to the local wildlife preserve for a walk through the sweet gum and cow oak turning red and gold against the evergreen of loblolly pine. We took the long trail, and when we finished, our stomachs echoed the squawking of overhead migrating geese. We headed to the closest restaurant, The Stumpwater Inn. Sounded inviting. We asked for stumpwater. They didn't have it. But they had fried catfish and the choice of three veggies. I took black-eyed peas, creamed potatoes, and flat Italian green beans. The customers next to us had pulled two tables together and were having some kind of reunion. We listened. Blanchard's 100th birthday – town hall dedication – flea market.

Blanchard was only 5 miles down the road, so after dinner we headed there and parked outside the white clapboard First Baptist Church. Across the street was a garage sale with tables full of home-made wild plum, blackberry and muscadine jellies.

We slowly walked the main street, stopping to look at hand-carved wooden toys, knitted Christmas ornaments. I was paying a quarter for a first edition of an Anne Morrow Lindbergh book when a child shouted, "Toot, toot. Get out of the way, Ma'am." A shiny replica of a Kansas City Southern rumbled past us, filled with children seated in painted green oil drums, set on wheels and strung together, looking more like a long, skinny alligator, low to the ground, whose tail, swinging side to side, would swipe unsuspecting revelers.

An elderly man in a VFW hat, with medals pinned to his navy colored shirt, asked us if we'd like to buy a chance on a rifle.

"We don't use guns," I replied hastily.

My husband, trying to be polite said, "I'm from Chicago. If I tried to fire one of those things, I'd probably shoot my foot off."

They laughed and the man moved on. I didn't care that I'd said the wrong thing. Just four weeks earlier we'd sold our house in the city and moved to our country retreat because we'd been robbed at gunpoint while standing outside talking to our neighbor. And only that morning we'd been forced to leave our own property due to hunter's gunfire.

I glanced at one last table before heading to the car. There, in the center of other Christmas crafts, hung a wreath, plastic greenery fashioned into a circle with red, orange and yellow shot-gun shells radiating out from the greenery, looking like bright Christmas lights. And on the bottom, tying it together, was a camouflage bow.

My neck stiffened. I called my husband to see the blasphemy. But when we looked at it together, and then looked at each other, we burst out laughing, as we simultaneously mouthed, "Swords into plowshares." We held hands as we walked away, down the main street of a 100 year old town, a street wide enough to accommodate the knitters, the jelly makers, the whole Kansas City Southern Railroad, veterans, hunters, reunion guests and northern transplants finding a home.