**STORY C—H’s Hickory Chips**

I look at the old tin building; it seems to have been there since the beginning of time. Its strong posts and nonchalant slouch make me wonder if it will be rooted in the same place forever. As soon as I walk in, the strong, rustic smell of hickory wood assails me. It takes me back to my family’s last Fourth of July barbeque, when the hickory chips smoking the ribs gave off their thick aroma. I wait for my eyes to adjust in the dark, humid place, not taking a step until they do because of the ageless spider that could have made its home in my path. My tongue already asks for a drink of water as I breathe the musty air littered with sawdust. Spraying on sticky repellent, I wonder if the thirsty mosquitoes will stay away.

I walk to my work area, making sure I do not trip over the precious finds and the hopeful antiques. I brush against a wall of the old building that is really more of a shed, and a mat of spiderwebs clings to my shirt and refuses to come off. The gentle hum of the small fans and the roar of the monster ones fight against the humid air.

I pull out a machine that is supposed to tie the two-pound bags that are full of hickory chips, but it has a mind of its own. Placing the bulky machine on the high bench with its layers of gritty sawdust, I hope it has decided to work today and load a bag into it. As I pull down the top of the machine, I stare it in its mechanical eyes, willing it to work. I pull the bag back out of the machine and look down on another battle lost. For now the brute has won the war of wills, and I prepare myself with a box of red ties to close all 1,000 of the smooth bags by hand.

The clang of the shovel dumping its first load onto the ancient scale can be heard throughout the shed, signaling that work has begun. The salty sweat begins to bead on my forehead, and for the first of many times, I wipe it away, leaving a smudge of dirt and dust. Already I yell “First shower!” to assure my place in line after our work is completed. I hear my three sisters shout numbers throughout the shed. Amanda, the last to call a number, frowns, knowing she will have to wait a long time for the hot water to return after all the showers.

My grandfather walks into the shed, a cane in one hand and a pack of icy cold colas in the other. His deep Southern drawl permeates the building as he asks if we’ve had lunch yet. Our eyes brighten and smiles play on our faces as we silently hope he will offer the traditional sloppy whopper and golden fries. He leaves as silently as he came in, and our stomachs start to growl with anticipation for lunch.

My sisters’ and aunt’s chatting and soft laughter has started as they begin to catch up on each other’s lives. I look around, wondering what people would say if they could see the Horne sisters outside of the house with no makeup on and their hair in disarray. I laugh and keep the thoughts to myself, listening in as my aunt’s next story begins.

At the end of the day, when all of the work is done, I pull the pallet—our makeshift gate—closed and pet my grandfather’s latest endeavor at a vicious watchdog. I sigh with relief that it’s over. Even though sometimes I dread the thought of work, especially when I know it is going to occupy another Saturday, the time spent with my family and the laughter shared will always be worth the sweat and scrapes. The memories will always be treasures in my mind and will continue to be among the things I laugh about and love the most.