

Nell Wise Wechter
a 16-chapter serial story

Taffy of Torpedo Junction

Chapter one: A Call in the Night, part one

Village of Buxton, Outer Banks, North Carolina, 1941



Taffy ducked to her horse, gently pulling the left rein of the bridle. The little Banks pony, shaggy from burrs in matted, reddish-brown mane, tossed his head as he turned off the beach and

trotted down the sandy trail through Buxton woods.

"Oh, but you're a proud one this morning," Taffy said to her horse. "Reckon you're thinking of those Barbary ancestors of yours that Sir Walter Raleigh's colonists brought over. Shucks, your grandpop might have been brought over by a Portugee sailor for all you know. Anyhow, you're just an old sandfiddler like me." She grinned, showing white teeth in a face as fair as an evening sunset off the Cape.

Sailor, we might as well ride down the back road. 'Tisn't mail time yet. Sure hope Gramp gets his check this morning."

Horse and rider passed through a thicket of pines under which stood hundreds of twisted yaupon bushes and green palmettos. Nowhere in the thicket could she see a tree or shrub whose leaves had turned brown or yellow. The Gulf Stream kept the North Carolina Banks subtropical all the year, as a general rule. Occasionally, though, a hard northeaster would whip up a

storm that would chill the island with a wintry blast.

The horse came to the end of the thicket. Taffy stopped the pony and stared at the big old gabled house sitting on a high sand knoll in the edge of the woods. The round wooden tower always made her feel as if Bluebeard were lurking somewhere close by to snatch her, lock her up in the tower. She wondered, as she had dozens of times in the past, why in the world the old tower was built and what it was used for now. Like all the Buxton folk, however, she respected the NO TRESPASSING sign and kept her distance.

Sailor snorted at a sand fly. "Steady, boy," she said to the pony, gently rubbing his flank where the fly had bitten. She squinted against the sun. "Seems like there's something a little different looking about the place this morning, but I can't figure what."

She wheeled Sailor around and galloped down the sandy trail, forgetting the whole business in her desire for Gramp's check to be in the day's mail. That was the real important thing. So much depended on the small stipend Gramp received each month from the government. So much depended on its not being late in arriving.

She jumped down from the pony and threw his reins over the scrawny limb of a scrub oak near the back of the post office.

"Did Gramp's pension check come, Miz Oden?" she asked in a sprightly, chipper voice over the high counter.

"Taffy, ain't Oi told you and told you not to bother me mornin's till Oi git the mail put up? Naow run along. You'll see the 'Mail's Up' soign when Oi get through."

"Yessum," the girl said meekly, sitting down on the steps. It seemed as if the postmistress had



been crotchety to her ever since she could remember.

Always had something sharp to say to her or criticized Gramp for letting her "run wild as a Banks pony." Taffy didn't mind about herself, but it made her plum mad all over to have anyone speak ill of Gramp. Gramp was her family. All she had. And she loved him devotedly. No matter if he was old. No matter if they did live in a fishing shack on the beach close to the big breakers of the ocean. And no matter if they were poor and didn't have electric lights and things like most of the islanders. They were happy.

Just then several cars and a coast guard jeep drove up. "Looks like the mail must be up by the way folks are going in," Taffy thought. "Gee whiz, I hope Gramp's check comes. We sure are short on rations."

People who had lockboxes got their mail and began leaving.

"Hi, Taffy," Big Jens of the DF Station called. "Your Gramp got any fresh mullet today?"

"Yes, sir," Taffy hollered back. "Fresh caught less than two hours ago."

"Tell him I want half a dozen big ones. I'll be down to get them in about an hour."

"Yes, sir."

Big Jens was chief warrant officer in charge of the Coast Guard Direction Finder Station on Cape Hatteras Island. He had been the commanding officer for nearly two years and had bought mullet from Gramp Morgan ever since he came to the island. Taffy liked the big Norwegian. She also liked his wife, who was kind and motherly. Twice, she remembered, Mrs. Jens had

brought them lemon pies. It was a wonder, too, the chief's wife could spare two whole pies when sugar was rationed so closely. But best of all, she liked Kenny Jens, the chief's fourteen-year-old son.

Taffy walked back to the post office door. "Any mail, Miz Oden?"

"Yes, yer Gramp's check come," the old lady snapped. "Reckon you'll waste half of it boyin' foolish mess at the store. Oi can't see for the loife of me whoy your Gramp lets you do it. Reckon he's jest soft in the head. Else he'd of put you in a foundlin' home when yer pa and ma got drowned."

"You leave my Gramp alone." Taffy gritted her teeth, trying to hold back the salt tears that ran down her cheeks. "He's the best Gramp in the world." She grabbed the letter and ran to her horse, choking down the big, angry sob that welled in her throat. "Giddap, Sailor."

Down the sandy trail they went flying. They took the sand fences like a bird on the wing, Taffy's red-gold hair spreading out behind her like a sail, the wind drying her tears.

Next, Chapter 2: "A Call in the Night" cont.

activity

The first chapter introduces several main characters, human and animal, and establishes their relationship to Taffy, the central figure. Identify characters in comics or different people mentioned in a feature story. Explain their relationships.

Visit www.ncnewspapersineducation.org for additional teaching ideas, background information about the author, photos, maps and explanations of the "hoi toide" brogue of the Outer Banks.



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