

Blue Herons



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Cletus Collier sat in the swing, waiting for his mother Pansy to die; his wife Dorine, worn out with caring for Pansy, was napping; Malvern, Dorine's son, as big as an ox and about as smart, sat on the steps, counting hickories he'd gathered from the shagbark behind the barn. "Two, free, six," he said. At least, he didn't have Wakeley's arrowheads again. Cletus tuned Malvern out and worked on his plans for the future.

When the Collier homestead became his, he'd do all the things Pansy would never allow--cut the timber, set up a sawmill by the highway, saw lumber for everybody. He'd sell the cows, rent out the tobacco patch, cornfield, pasture, give up everything he hated--milking, plowing, tobacco stripping.

Blue herons were feeding in the shallows of the lake, which used to be rich bottomland before the government forced everybody along the river to sell. Those birds knew how to feed off the fat of the land.

He got up to check on Pansy, but sat back down when he heard a motor. Probably the home-health nurse. She'd save him the trouble. He glanced at the car. Whoa! Not a nurse, but a Red Star Taxi.

A man got out--he seemed familiar, though Cletus didn't know many people who could afford to ride in a taxicab. The man waved. "Hey, Clete." He turned to take his bag from the driver.

The red star on the side of the shiny black taxi wavered before Cletus's eyes. Gilford, his brother. He'd taken off while their father Wakeley was battling cancer. They hadn't heard from him in years.

Dorine rushed out of the house in her tight red pants and silver sandals. "Gilford!" she screeched, "is that you?"

Gilford laughed. "It's me. Come here and give me a hug, you pretty thing."

He swung her around, her squealing like a slaughtered pig. "Where's Mama?" Gilford asked.

"Your mama's real sick," Dorine said. "She's been praying you'd come home before she dies." She led him to Pansy's bed.

Cletus followed. He caught a whiff of an aroma unlike the stuff Dorine used. Damn! After years of silence, the Prodigal Son come home, smelling like a whore, the very moment Pansy was dying.

"Look who's here, Mama," Dorine said.

Pansy tried to raise her head, but collapsed back on the pillow. Gilford leaned over. "It's me, Mama."

Pansy clutched his sleeve. "Gilford," she gasped. Tears rolled down her face.

Gilford patted her blue-veined hand, wiped his eyes. "I'm sorry I left the way I did, but I couldn't stand to watch Daddy suffer. I started to call time after time, but got cold feet. Afraid you'd hold it against me for being young and foolish." He patted her hand again, a smirk on his pretty face.

"You need to rest, Mama," Dorine said. "Come, Gil, I'll show you to your room."

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"He knows where his room is," Cletus said. He started to follow, but Pansy called his name.

"Malvern," she whispered. "Promise you'll take care of him when I'm gone." The pupils in her eyes were tiny black dots. She grasped Cletus' hand.

Cletus promised. He'd have promised anything to get away from the little chicken-foot hand, the rotten breath, the pain in her eyes.

"Swear." Pansy reached for the tattered Bible on the table, but her hand fell short.

"I swear." Cletus shuddered.

Pansy closed her eyes. Her lips were parched, the skin on her face stretched, her breath ragged. Cletus tried to tiptoe out, but his cowboy boots boomed on the hardwood floor.

Cletus hurried away from Pansy's grave, leaving everybody else there. He climbed the hill to the farmhouse so fast he started wheezing. He swatted a bumblebee with his black cowboy hat as he passed Pansy's lilacs.

Blossom, the bluetick hound, blind, deaf, and stinking, lay against the screen door. He'd wanted to put her out of her misery, but Pansy wouldn't allow it.

She couldn't interfere now. He pushed Blossom aside with a sharp-toed boot. She tried to get up, but moaned and settled back in the sunshine, sides heaving like a blacksmith's bellows.

Cletus went to Pansy's bedroom, opened the cedar chest, and searched for the papers that gave him the home place. They were supposed to be in the tin box with

Wakeley's tobacco sack of silver dollars. Cletus took out quilts, shawls, photographs, knickknacks and piled them on the floor. The box was gone, nothing in the chest but the tatters of Pansy's life.

The papers were probably ashes by now, the silver dollars in Gil's suitcase. Gil hadn't been there when they'd needed him, Wakeley suffering, Pansy grieving, Cletus following mules down long corn rows from sunup to sundown.

A pretty sixteen-year-old disappeared at the same time as Gilford. Pansy and Dorine said Gilford would never just take off with some silly girl the way everybody said he had. But Wakeley was so mad he wrote Gil out of his will, left everything to Cletus.

A short time after Wakeley's death, the government built the dam that flooded the bottomland, where Wakeley had raised the finest corn Cletus had ever seen.

While Gil was living it up in a far-off land, Cletus was trying to wrest a living from the rocky fields the government didn't want. Trying to make love to Dorine, the woman Gil didn't want. And he'd tried to raise Malvern as his own son, though Malvern was no part of him.

He'd gone about his business as if everything was the way he wanted. Even with Dorine, who had snookered him into marrying her right after Gil left. Things were all right between them until Malvern was born eight months later. Dorine insisted he was premature, and he was smaller than most newborns and had breathing problems, but what did that prove? Cletus knew the laws of birthtimes and moontides. When he called Dorine a whore, she struck the board that displayed his 4-H and Future Farmer ribbons. Ribbons flew everywhere, and before he thought, he pushed her into the wall.

She kept her arm in a sling for weeks. Pansy had to take care of Malvern, her eyes snapping when she looked at Cletus. Pansy never tried to understand him. She made him so mad he wanted to push *her* into the wall.

He'd had his bellyful of the women, and Malvern, but he loved the farm, even the lake, though it was polluted. What he loved most was the sun shining on the water, blue herons, still as statues, standing knee-deep in the shallows, long necks bent down like fishhooks.

It wasn't that he loved the herons and all that poetic crap; it was the message he took from them. Everybody said you couldn't eat fish out of the lake, but gobbling polluted fish hadn't hurt the herons. Nor flying over the nuclear silos, so tall they made the grain silos look like broken toys. If herons could thrive on polluted water and toxic air, he could, too.

He had to have the papers. If he didn't have them, half of it would be Gil's. Gil didn't want the farm. What he wanted was the money it would bring.

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As Cletus tossed stuff back into the chest, a photograph caught his eye. Gil and Dorine at the state fair. They'd left home before dawn, hitchhiking, and hadn't got back till after midnight. Dorine's old man, Houston Solway, was ready to start looking for them with his shotgun. Wakeley said he was going to take the horse whip to Gil, but after Houston beat Dorine half to death, Wakeley didn't touch Gil. Said he wouldn't beat a thieving dog the way Houston had beat his own daughter.

Cletus studied the photograph—Gil looking at Dorine with that sweet-clover smile on his pretty face, Dorine's cow eyes looking at the camera, her breasts out in front of her like headlights on an antique car. She used to look at Cletus like that, but now the very air they breathed was as polluted as the lake water, their passion festered with poison.

Dorine had complained of headaches, backaches, stomach cramps, and other problems all summer. He accused her of inventing pains, and she cried half the night. He slapped her, just a tap to shut her up, and she bawled louder. He had to sleep on the lumpy love seat on the back porch. For the next week, Dorine hobbled around like an old woman with rheumatism; Pansy snapped at him, thin lips pressed as tight as a miser's purse strings. Even Malvern wouldn't stay in the same room with him.

He ripped the photograph in half and tossed it into the cedar chest. He threw the rest of the junk in and dropped the lid.

He started out, but Blossom was in the way. He rammed the screen into her heaving side.

He went to the barn to feed the livestock. Malvern helped carry the buckets of cow feed and hog slop. While they worked, Cletus tried to figure out how to search Gil's room without being seen.

Dorine served the biggest steaks in the freezer for supper, ones Cletus had saved for a hunting trip. Gil, Dorine, and Malvern ate till he thought they'd founder, but he couldn't swallow. He gave his steak to Malvern, who wolfed it down as if he hadn't already eaten the biggest one on the platter.

After supper, he pulled Dorine's stunt, claimed he had a headache and was going to lie down. While Gil and Dorine sat on the front porch talking about childhood escapades, Gil eying Dorine's breasts, Cletus got a flashlight and sneaked into Gil's room. It looked the same as when Gil had left it years ago, posters of flashy cars on the walls, car models on the shelves, evidence that Gil had always had his sights on far horizons.

Gil's suitcase was on the floor. A rich brown color, fine leather. Cletus shined the flashlight on silk shirts, hand-painted ties, rich toiletries, a wad of bills. Who was Gilford Collier anyhow?

"Looking for something?" Gil asked. Cletus dropped the lid and rushed out, past Gil and Dorine, who stared at him with open mouth, past Malvern dozing in the swing, past Pansy's lilac bush.

He kept going till he came to the red clay of Pansy's grave, the clay as dark as blood. He threw himself down, his sides heaving. He lay there till the cold crept into his bones and the odor of lilacs stifled him.

He rose up and peered at the graves. Pansy's grave beside Wakeley's, raw red earth beside the grave covered with sod older than the lake of blue herons. At the heads, matching sprays of purple lilacs.

He went back to the house, joints moving like rusty hinges. He tiptoed in and lay down on the love seat. He rolled and tumbled, his head truly throbbing now. Every time he dozed off, Pansy's roosters started crowing.

He dreamed of black blood, toxic lilacs, grasping blue herons. He was startled awake, Malvern standing over him. "Breakfast, Daddy."

Cletus had a bad taste in his mouth. As he sat up, a sunray struck his eyes; a sharp pain zigzagged across them. He moaned and grabbed his head.

"Breakfast," Malvern said.

Cletus rose gingerly, avoiding the sunshine, and hobbled to the kitchen. Two cold fried eggs, three strips of bacon, and two powdery biscuits waited for him. He swallowed noisily and started to the bathroom, but Malvern said, "Mama going."

Cletus rushed to the window in time to see Gilford and Dorine get into a taxi. He ran toward the front door, but something rolled under his feet. He crashed into Pansy's butterchurn, which Dorine had painted blue and stuffed with plastic flowers. Pain shot through his head like a rocket and blood spouted from a gash in his cheek. Malvern screamed.

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Cletus rose up groggily. A black toy wheel was spinning before his eyes. The floor was covered with blood-spattered model cars.

Malvern screamed louder, a fit of hysteria coming on. Cletus got up, holding onto the churn until the blackness passed. The model cars were Gil's. He recognized the green T-model, like one Wakeley had owned. He supposed Gil had given them to Malvern. Gil didn't need them. He rode around in taxicabs, had enough money in his suitcase to buy one of his own.

Malvern pounded his head on the floor. Cletus pulled him up, led him to his room, and rolled him in the blanket. He'd soon calm down, and Cletus could question him about Dorine.

Cletus bandaged his cheek, which needed stitches, and started to lie down, but he saw a note pinned to his pillow.

Dear Cletus:

I've gone back to Daddy's. Seeing you with Gil's suitcase was the last straw. I left Malvern with you. He's afraid of Daddy. I loved you, but I can't live with you anymore.

Dorine

P. S. Gil was called back to San Francisco.

Had Dorine forgot the way Houston treated her? Never letting her go anywhere or have anything. She didn't have a dress to wear to her high school graduation until Pansy made her one. Houston never knew the difference, for he wouldn't go see her graduate.

Cletus couldn't believe she'd rather live with Houston than with him. Perhaps, he could convince her to come back. He'd been good to her. All he'd ever expected her to do was keep house, cook his meals, and do the gardening. He didn't care if she went somewhere as long as he knew where she was going and how long she'd be gone. He let her buy a dress once in a while if the price was reasonable. She understood they had to keep down expenses so he could make truck and tractor payments. Pansy had had a fit when he bought them. "You just got the old truck paid for. And why do you need a tractor? You could do all the work you're aiming to do with a garden hoe." She made him so mad. Her and her sharp tongue.

He read the note again. If Gil and Dorine were gone, where were the papers?

"I hot, Daddy!" Malvern called.

Malvern was all he had left. He couldn't stand him, but he couldn't stand to be alone either. He got up and unwrapped him. He was covered with sweat, but he was calm now.

Cletus gathered up cars and car parts and put them in a cardboard box. The papers? Had Gil taken them? Or Dorine? Malvern pulled his arm. "Hungry, Daddy."

Cletus was hungry, too. He would miss Dorine's cooking. He scraped his cold breakfast into the garbage can, found chicken noodle soup in the pantry, and heated it. He hated canned soup, but he'd be eating a lot of it. Unless he could figure out a way to get Dorine to come back. He'd promise her something.

Malvern gobbled his soup down, slurping noisily. "Hungry, Daddy."

Cletus sighed, but made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Malvern bit off a chunk and swallowed it without chewing. Cletus wanted to gag. Malvern with Houston Solway's big ears and crooked nose and Dorine's brown cow eyes. What did she think she was doing? Going to Houston's and leaving Malvern with him?

Malvern finished his sandwich and got the box of cars, but Cletus sat on. "Six, four, eight," Malvern said. Something clinked. Malvern was dropping silver dollars into the tobacco sack.

Cletus grabbed his arm. "Where'd you get them?"

Malvern pulled away. "Mine."

In Malvern's cardboard box, among the model cars, was the tin box. Cletus grabbed it, but it was empty. "Mine!" Malvern shrieked.

"What did you do with the papers?" Cletus held the box out at arm's length.

Malvern reached for it.

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He's as big as I am and a lot stronger, Cletus thought. He grasped Malvern's collar and tightened it on his fat neck. "Where are they?"

Malvern started to cry. "Where are the papers?" Cletus shouted, ignoring the tears dripping onto his hand.

"Garbage," Malvern said.

Cletus rushed to the garbage can. Under the cold fried eggs were the papers, covered with grease and congealed egg yolk. He wiped them off and hid them in his closet, along with the arrowheads and the silver dollars.

He put on his cowboy hat, went out, and sat down in the swing. He'd promise Dorine a car--he could probably get a good used one cheap. Or a trip. That wouldn't cost as much as a car. She'd love a cruise on an ocean liner, though he bet she'd come back if he promised to take her to Rock City. She begged to go every spring, but he always found an excuse not to take her. Why did he want to drive to Chattanooga to see a pile of rocks? They had rock piles all over the place. He knew of a place he wanted to see--Mammoth Cave. Dorine had never mentioned wanting to go there, but sometimes she wanted a trip so bad she'd go anywhere.

Malvern came and sat down beside him. He rolled the green T-model back and forth on the arm of the swing. Old Blossom scabbled over and lay near Malvern's feet. The stench of disease and death rose from the floorboards, overcoming the scent of lilacs.

The lake was shining in the sun. Blue herons stood knee-deep in the muddy shallows, gobbling fish out of the polluted water. One rose and flew over the nuclear silos, long neck stretched out, wings flapping like a prehistoric dinosaur.