

Little Herons

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MY SISTER AND I grew up near the Little Heron State Park in Markle. Our father ran a fishing operation in the summer for tourists. He also took people out on his boat for evening pleasure cruises. The first time I remember the boat engine breaking down was in the center of Lake Huntington on a really hot day. My father yanked on the motor's pull-start cord amidst the nervous mumblings of a few tourists. My father did not joke about it or ease their worries at all. He got serious. He turned red and sweated through his thin cotton snap-up shirt. His comb-over fell out from under his baseball cap. His Air Force sunglasses slipped down on his nose and cigarettes fell from his shirt pocket. It embarrassed him, and embarrassment was one thing he could never stomach. Watching him struggle, with no other recourse but to paddle back to the shore, I laughed. I laughed as quietly as I could—a peep of a chuckle—but he heard me, gritted his teeth, and drew an angry hand into the sun. But he immediately composed himself and stopped short of hitting me. The tourists on the boat had strong looks on their faces: indignant looks. Accusatory looks. One woman gasped as though she was going to lose her bed & breakfast omelet over the side of the boat. That was the last boat trip for me and my sister. We were both off my dad's crew for a few wonderful weeks.

To entertain ourselves, my sister and I spent time walking around the perimeter of the lake, exploring. Little Heron Park, as the name suggests, has plenty of herons around it, or at least it did back in those days. The birds would jump out of the brush after we had passed them—always after, not before. They would squawk, terrified it seemed, but only after danger had passed them by. Barefooted through the briars and brush, our feet quickly grew as tough as those herons' claws: thick-skinned and sharp-nailed.

One dewy sundown, we walked up on a rustling and popping sound. A boy and girl, both older than us, curled around each other in

the grass like two flower vines. My sister and I stopped, knelt below the tops of the weeds, and watched a real lusty display unfold before us. The girl's butt curved around, and her back showed no signs of freckles or scars—just a smooth, caramel silhouette arching against a purple evening sky. She kneeled down and kissed on this mop-headed fellow she was with. Then, she turned her back to him and did some bent-legged pushing, looking around behind her and smiling kind of with her eyes closed. The guy's face looked distraught, like he was steadying a tiller through some rocky soil. After a few minutes, the girl saw my sister and me crouched in the grass. Oh, what a shattering scream that smooth girl made. Like the herons, she squawked at a danger that had long passed. She even took time to put on her shoes, as though a real threat would wait for her to suit up for a run. These two soft-skins ran away on their tip-toes, cursing the thistles, holding their hands above the tips of the weeds, their love blanket trailing behind them like a ribbon. My sister and I, we stood straight up in the warmth, trees rustling behind us, leaves turning toward the thunder of an approaching storm. It was the first time we'd seen anyone other than each other naked.

On the western edge of the lake, a highway ran on pillars above a marshy lowland. In these swamps, water sits mosquito-breeding, shallow, and as black as a tar pit. Walking knee deep in that water, I had to lift my legs straight up and place them straight down, up to the knee in the oily water, toes flossed by roots. On the roadside, just past the bridge, a small market called "Stimpson's" sold gasoline from shiny new pumps, propane from a rusty tank near a parking area, and chicken tenders and corn dogs from under a heat lamp beside the cash register. During our weeks of freedom that summer, my sister and I made a midday habit out of visiting the boy behind the counter and getting him to fry us up a pair of apple fritters. It was a special request, but he asked us what he could make for us. He offered. His name was Audubon. That boy lived a good lifestyle, it seemed to me. He had a full kitchen of fritters right there at his fingertips and the run of the whole place to himself. Why would anyone eat anything but sweet apple fritters?

One afternoon after eating fitters, my sister and I walked to the back of Stimpson's market and used the garden hose to wash our T-shirts and hands clean. While we were back there tramping in the mud

dust, the Audubon boy poked his head around the corner and asked if we would like to walk with him to the “tar fruit” tree. We turned off the hose so we could hear him. Our shirts dripped rings around our feet.

“What’s tar fruit?” my sister asked. She was so young and naïve.

With our wet shirts sucking against our stomachs, I agreed we would follow Audubon on a path behind the store that led away from the lake, even though we both knew we were not supposed to cross to that side of the road. He was not supposed to leave the store, either, but he did. He put a sign in the window that said “Be Back Soon.”

“I like his feet,” my sister whispered to me as we walked. She did not take her eyes off his feet. “He walks kind of tippy-toed ... like a cat.”

“You would say that,” I whispered, squeezing her wet arm to discourage her from going on. My sister was not one to talk about people’s feet. She had been born with webbed toes and early on had to get over her comparison of her feet to other people’s. And she did not care about her webbed toes anymore, even the way the smaller toes pulled the longer toes over with the webbed skin. She was not self-conscious. We went barefooted everywhere, and my sister did not feel the least bit embarrassed. Not embarrassed at all. She preferred to see feet. She watched feet land. She kept track of feet she liked. Feet are what she liked about people.

I don’t know what everybody looks at when they meet another person. Maybe most folks look each other dead in the eye. I don’t. I look at chins and foreheads and tips of noses—any place on the face but the eyes. My father doesn’t look at people’s eyes, either. Most folks look at my hair, I think. They look down at the curling ends of my hair where it falls off my shoulders. It’s already a pale gray-white, like the picture I have of my mother’s hair. But my sister? She looks at feet. She even looks at my feet, and she’s seen them a million times. I saw her drawing one time in her room. She was drawing feet! She even rubbed those tar fruits on her feet and had Audubon lick on them. I could not believe he would do that. Boys will do that sort of thing, if you ask them.

So, anyway, it was the summer and hot and we were following Audubon on a trail that wound through spongy grass patches and rusty fence rows. We saw an old woman cutting holes into gourds in a

yard. We watched her for a little while. She strung these gourds up to make bird nests out of them. She had another set of gourds that were already dry and full of clutches of purple martens down near the water where we were standing. We meandered through a field full of metal drums that were losing paint and slowly leeching black from their insides. It was a mess around there in the backwaters. We finally came to a shallow skiff boat that had a piece of plywood bolted on where its engine should have been. Audubon poled the wobbly boat with a stick and pushed us all across a shallow patch of water, ferrying across a kind of moat to a muddy little island. We stepped out, sinking in the mud up above our ankles. My sister pointed at his footprints in the mud.

Audubon led us to a tree in a grassy clearing. "This is it," he said. The tree was short and gray with knurled branches and few leaves at all. The tree looked stunted, and in some junctions the wood supported spindles of cobwebs. Little worms crawled the tangles of those cobwebs. I suppose they were working to spread the cobwebs. Whatever has a dense cobweb must forever engage in the spreading of it. They were filthy little worms, you could tell, but they were busy. Industrious. At the ends of the branches of this tree hung shriveled fruits in single bulbs the shape and the color of rotten. Audubon plucked one of these tar fruits and held it toward me.

"A rotten pear?" I said with hands behind my back. "No, thanks."

"It's a tar fruit," he answered. How a boy with unlimited access to a kitchen and apple fritters could ever eat this shriveled fruit is beyond me. We could just as well have been back at Stimpson's helping ourselves to cold lemonade. Audubon held the shriveled fruit out toward me again. "Bite it," he whispered. I stood contemplating this filthy fruit.

"Trees with delicious fruit used to be all over this part of the lake," he began, his hands doing a lot of the talking. I noticed thin whiskers on his chin. The back of his neck had thin hair, too. He had a tour-guide voice going: mysterious and contrived. "Until that highway was built, there were fruit trees all over. To clear the land, hundreds of trees were cut down and the water was drained. The land was bulldozed and burned, and rainwater filled the empty sores where the trees had been. It rained and rained and formed this marsh. A thousand hours of rain."

Doubtful, I listened.

“One night, during the heaviest rainstorm, a huge truck hauling pure black oil and asphalt slipped off the bridge and fell over into these waters, spilling everywhere. You may have seen some of the old oil drums floating around in the water when we walked here,” he said to my sister. She nodded that she had seen the drums. She was so naïve, I’m telling you. It was like we were on one of my dad’s boat tours ourselves.

“Well, the birds had nothing to eat,” Audubon continued. “Hérons and crows and even bluejays were starving looking for food and finding nothing but black oil instead of the fruit they used to eat from the healthy trees. Now, the birds had nothing. One warm morning, a woman found her youngest and prettiest daughter with pieces of these tar fruits all over her body. And her eyes had been pecked out by the birds.” Audubon picked two of the tar fruits and held them up to his eyes for dramatic effect. “Everyone in town started to worry,” he continued. “During the summer, if a kid fell asleep with a window open, they would find him in the morning with these fruits all over and his eyes, his eyes would be pecked out by the birds.”

“That’s not true,” I whispered to my little sister, who seemed disturbed by this image. “Don’t listen to him.”

“It is true,” Audubon insisted. “Many kids around here were blinded. They would find kids covered with these fruits and sores on their skin. And the doctors told them not to worry about the sores, and not to pick at them. And their eyes would be pecked out the next day. They would go blind with the sores and the hungry birds.”

“That’s silly,” I said again.

Audubon grinned. “It’s true,” he said. “Taste this fruit.”

I shook my head that I wouldn’t, but he forced one of the fruits into my hands. It was sticky and oily-skinned. It had a few dry blades of grass stuck to it. I blew one of the little green worms off of it, too. My sister grabbed my wrist and pulled it down so she could look at it. “You want to bite anything that looks like that?” I kidded her.

“Yes, you try it,” Audubon encouraged her. He started to get another bit of that shriveled rotten from the tree, and then he stopped and turned to us as anxious as fishermen baiting a hook. Suddenly, my sister reached her mouth down and nipped at the fruit. She drew back a disgusted frown. She wiped at her lips and shivered, disgusted. She waved her hands beside her chin.

“It’s okay,” I said trying to calm her, “Does it taste that bad?” She had a smearing of black tar on her bottom lip. She touched her lip and held up a smeared finger. When she saw the black tar, she shuttered again. “Is it that bad?” I repeated. I wiped her mouth with my T-shirt, which was still moist from the water hose.

Audubon laughed and clapped his hands. “It doesn’t taste the same though,” he proclaimed. “It doesn’t taste the same.” He gave me a fruit. “Taste it,” he said. I bit and immediately recoiled, wiping my lips as my sister had done.

“Oh, it’s awful,” I said.

Audubon laughed. “When the birds tried to eat from the tree, they couldn’t eat the tar fruit either. It doesn’t taste good unless . . . watch this . . .” He touched my sister’s shoulder and wiped one of the fruits on her arm. Then, he licked the juice off her arm. He smiled, wiped the fruit on his arm, and had her lick it off in return. Hesitant at first, she eventually went for it. And then she smiled. She said it tasted sweet.

I have turned this over in my mind and tried to figure it out. Whatever the reason, if we ate the fruits directly from the tree, they were bitter disgusting. We could not stomach the taste. However, if we were to eat the juice off another’s skin, it tasted pretty good. Sweet like a Jolly Rancher or something. So we stood for a while under the tar fruit tree. One would rub the fruit on his arm and another would taste it. Then, from a cheek, from a shoulder, from the inside of a wrist, top of the knee, a belly: it all tasted good. But straight from the tree, forget it. Something happened in combination with our skin. It was a taste in context, I suppose, like pumpkin outside of pumpkin pie. And we lost ourselves in a tasting session, standing on a marshy island on the wrong side of the highway. “This is the only tar fruit we have left on Earth,” Audubon said quietly, not in his tour guide voice. Over and over, he said quietly, “This is what folks like us have left on Earth.” And he even tasted the juice off my sister’s feet. That was too gross for me, but she liked it. She loves feet.

My sister and I took a few tar fruits back home with us, wrapping them in a piece of yellowed newspaper we found on the ground. I hid my fruits in a big pickle jar under my bed. It was a jar with holes punched in the metal top, like ones you use to catch fireflies in the fall. Unlike the fireflies, however, the fruit did not die in the jar. Instead, the fruits began to change color. I checked them everyday, and watched

them change from the blackish shrivel we found on the tree to a softer purple. My sister and I would take turns licking the juice off each other's arms when my dad wasn't around. We ate only small amounts, trying to keep our supply undiminished and hidden. Once the fruits turned purple, though, I would wipe the juice on my own arm and lick it off when I was alone in my room. My sister was doing that, too, I know she was. I walked in one day, and she even had her webbed toes wiped with the juice. Said she was going to get the cat to try it, but I think she aimed to taste it herself off her own foot.

Of course, all of this came to an immediate halt when my father walked in on us. We were nibbling these fruits when we thought he had gone out on the boat for the day. He came into the house, red-faced with a look of embarrassment the same as when I laughed at him for pulling on the motor. He took one of the fruits from us and examined it under a desk lamp. He did not spank us or raise his hand in anger. "Oh, for Christssakes," he said when my sister showed him her collection of tar fruits, still wrapped in the yellowed newspaper. He tasted them and wrinkled his face. To tell you the truth, I do not think he would like the taste even off another person's skin. He always hated any kind of fruit or vegetable. So we did not try to explain it to him. He demanded to know where we got them. We told him parts of the story about going on the wrong side of the highway and about Audubon and the truck wrecking with the oil drums. My sister said he walked like a cat, and then she began to cry. She was so naïve that she would cry under even the smallest pressure to account for her actions.

After that, my father reenlisted us on the boat, demanding that we accompany him again as crew for the fishing and touring trips. However, it no longer felt like my sister and I went with him as his children. Now, we accompanied him as a condition of surveillance. He made us wear pants. "Put on some shoes and let's go," he said to my sister in the mornings if we were late, "And don't either of you embarrass me, damn it." But why, if a person in this world could eat apple fritters, would he waste his time trying to catch a fish? That's what I always wanted to ask him. Fish just don't make sense to me, and being on the boat never helped me understand any part of fish catching. Have you ever licked a fish straight from the water? It's disgusting. Beer is, too.

Later that summer, I heard my father tell a boat tourist that "two

girls are the devil for a man to deal with by hisself.” My father and the man made some joke about women and sipped their beer and fished. The man asked my dad about why my hair was so white, but my dad did not say anything about my mother’s hair, which is the same color as mine. Instead, my father called my hair “another kind of lure altogether.”

My sister and I never explained about the way the taste changed. And I never did mention the fruits under my bed in the jar. My sister had hers thrown out, but I kept most of mine that summer in secret. Eventually, they faded and began to lose their taste altogether. I threw them under the house with no ceremony at all.

We tried to find the tree ourselves on several occasions, walking the path behind Stimpson’s and getting lost in a dusky maze of confusing pathways. But I guess only Audubon knew where that tree was. By the time we would get off the lake and away from boat trips, the store would be closed down and dark, “Be Back Soon.” A few dogs would bark at us. A passing car would honk in the darkness to scare us off the road.