

A Confusion about Ears and Crows

Leon Sifford walked the roads alone. But Paula never knew where he walked in his head. Tall and slow, he would amble along like a mumbling tree, growing higher in the sky each step he took toward you. Hard to tell what he knew. She guessed nobody but his own people got close enough to find out. She'd been close only once. The one thing she'd learned for sure about Leon was that he carried a hawkbill in his pocket, and she wondered if he carried one when he walked the secret road in his brain.

Her daddy carried a hawkbill, and he kept it sharp like his eyes. Her daddy's eyes were blue, and bright like a blade. He said a hawk's eyes were sharp, too, and so was its bill. Said he watched her like a hawk. Paula didn't know if Leon's eyes were like her daddy's; she'd have to be able to see through his shadow to tell that. But the shadow that his railroad cap dropped over his face was kind of like a veil, like women in Arabia wore. What the veil was for, she wasn't sure. Maybe the women were shy, she thought, or scared their faces would show their private feelings. Maybe Leon was like them that way and needed his shadow. Most of the time, when she saw him come down the road, she'd wait as long as she could before running under the porch; maybe the darkness there was her veil, because in it she could hide that she was afraid of him. Her fear might hurt him if he knew, she thought. Or maybe not. Maybe his shadow protected him from other people's feelings, too. Anyway, to be on the safe side, she usually watched him from the dark.

Last September she was eight, waiting out the month to turn nine, and it was on one of those days of waiting to be older that Leon spoke words she could actually hear.

She was carrying two paper bags full of apples she'd picked from the Thorne orchard, and although Everett Thorne had sent his sons to help her carry them home, the boys tagged along empty-handed. Paula kept quiet. It was best while they walked with her that Mackie and Peanut stay *fruitless*. Because if they were *fruitful*, the Bible said they'd multiply, and that was bad arithmetic all the way around. The two of them were too much already. As they zigged and zagged on callused bare feet, their slingshots twitching in their back pockets, the Thorne boys were looking for something to hector, somebody's scab to pick. Just a couple of weeks ago, Paula had caught them rocking Pinto, the Turners' old tick-studded beagle, so she'd retaliated in kind. Her good arm had surprised them, she guessed. Probably the reason why she wasn't target practice now. That, and the fact that they were too busy discussing Leon, whom they'd seen walking down into the holler that morning.

"It's a wonder he don't get lost," Mackie said. "Ain't got no mind to speak of."

"Liar," Peanut shot back. "Ain't ever even talked to him. You're just actin' all Big Ike 'cause you're older than me. You'd drive the devil insane."

Mackie gave Peanut a shove. "Stop copyin' Mommy, you little shit-ass. I know where you got that devil stuff. Mommy's the one who told most of what I know about Leon anyways."

"Yeah," Peanut said, "probably 'cause you were ear-dropping like you always do."

As the three children reached the next rise in the road, a pine at the edge of the Blankenships' field started to scream: *Caaw-caaw-caaw!* Only Paula looked up into the branches. Her granddaddy McClarity used to see crows sitting up in the trees when he was digging graves, Ma McClarity had told her; she said they were bad-luck signs and

thieves. But Paula loved them anyway. Loving crows because no one else did made her feel special, like she had a secret power to see past what she'd heard about them and find something good. Besides, even if they did steal corn and eat roadkill, she could tell they were good protectors and looked after their own. And they used their brains. They probably even knew that she loved them, and loved her back. No doubt they were warning against the Thornes now. That just proved how smart crows were.

“. . . That time we went to visit down in Tazewell,” Mackie was saying. “Mommy was on the porch with Aunt Lorraine and they got to talkin’ about people up here on the mountain and what-all.” Paula shifted her bags, and the apples sent up a tang. She breathed it in while she listened. Mackie said when Leon was a baby they kept him in a box, away from the light and most every kind of people. So he didn’t get a chance to grow his brain right. Instead, it shriveled up, probably looked like a giant pinecone—but it was small as far as regular people’s brains go. Mackie said he bet a million dollars that if you shook Leon’s head you’d hear the pinecone knocking around in his skull. “That’s why Leon never says nothing to nobody but himself,” he explained.

Peanut wondered if a tree could grow in there by accident. Maybe a seed came off the pinecone? But Mackie just waved his little brother off like a sweat bee. “It ain’t a *real* pinecone, dummy. It only *looks* like one.”

“Next time we see him, let’s hide in the bushes and holler out to get him to jerk his head around,” Peanut suggested. “That way, even though we can’t see the pinecone, we can at least hear what it sounds like.” Mackie laughed, but Peanut could tell he liked the idea.

“A pinecone looks like a grenade, too,” Paula interjected, which made both Thornes turn to look her up and down.

Then leaning over close to his brother's ear, Peanut whispered loudly, "What's a grenade?"

"It's a bomb you can hold in your hand," said Mackie. "You know, like in Vietnam on TV. They pull out that metal thing and then throw it at the enemy to blow them up."

"What's an enemy?"

"Just shut up. Can't tell you nothing without you asking more stupid questions."

Infuriated, Peanut scowled at his brother in silence for several seconds, then thinking intruded again, and his anger gave way to worry. He turned back to Paula. "You think Leon'll see us as an enemy and blow us up with his brain?"

Paula just shrugged at him. The slight vengeance of not easing his fear was too pleasant to pass up. He looked to his brother next, but Mackie was no help. He was too busy trying to see how far he could hock his spit up the road to say anything. Realizing that no answer was coming, Peanut decided to pretend that he hadn't asked for one. Doing so, he reasoned, might fool his frightening question into being unthought.

But Peanut's strategy dissolved when he and Mackie topped the next crest. Not far down the road, a man shambled along muttering to his feet, and from time to time he jabbed his long hands out as though he were arguing with the air. Leon was coming, head down and, as yet, unheedful.

At first, the Thornes froze like pointers when they saw him, but then Mackie pulled Peanut by the neck of his T-shirt to turn him around, and they doubled back to a spot above the ditch to their left where they could hide in the overhang of weeds growing out from the bank. Paula had dodged the Thornes as they'd barreled toward her, and now she stood frowning back at the weeds. "What are y'all up to?" she said, but she

barely got to register the boys' snickers before she heard mumbling behind her. She turned at the sound and saw Leon coming down the rise toward her. Louder snickers whinnied from the bank, but Paula didn't turn again, didn't move. "Don't," she said. "Don't." The Thornes wouldn't listen, she knew, yet her brain wouldn't give her anything else to say.

Only Leon listened, but he heard her just as the Thornes began pelting him with gravel so that her words seemed to be the same as the rocks flying at him from the weeds. Same as the laughter, even though the girl didn't speak any more words from her mouth after "Don't. Don't." She was walking backwards, apples falling from the paper bags in her arms, but the laughter and the gravel kept coming at him. Rocks stinging his skin. She was selfish not to let him have his voice. His voice left his mouth and made him feel lighter, not like he was hauling stones in his belly. But the girl said, "Don't. Don't," and made the rocks hit him and try to go back down his throat. Made the laughing go in his ears. She was selfish. She shouldn't listen if she didn't want to hear. Should leave his voice alone.

Then there were two boys. A little one and a bigger little one. They jumped out of their hiding place, and then the laughing came out of their mouths instead of the weeds. They ran backwards. "Pinecone brain!" said the little. "Lee-MOR-on!" the bigger little said after that. They knocked the apple girl down, but the little fell when they made her fall. Red and green apples fell, too. Red and green rolling all over the road. Now he would have to show them. The big little, the little, and the apple girl should leave his voice alone. Shouldn't listen if they didn't want to hear. Leon grabbed his hawkbill out the left pocket of his overalls and pulled the blade open.

From the ground, over the top of Peanut's head, Paula saw Leon just a few paces away, the knife ready in his hand. Though he looked down at her, she couldn't make out his eyes. The knife shine was too bright, the shadow under his cap too dark. "I'm gon' cut y'all's ears off," he said, shoving the blade out toward the three of them. Paula still couldn't speak, but upon hearing Leon's threat, Peanut screamed and Mackie yanked him up by one arm and half-drag him as he ran. Leon still held the knife out as Paula scrambled upright. "I'll cut your ears off," he said. He didn't move toward her, but Paula took him at his word. She didn't dare quit running till her breath was scraping her lungs and she'd reached the Blankenships' field. When she did stop, she braved a glance back down the road. No one was coming for her. Yet.

She climbed over the fence and sank down behind the pine from which the murder had screamed earlier. Until Leon passed by, she couldn't go home. She would rest under the tree, and wait. As her breathing slowed down enough for her to hear the silence, Paula realized the crows were gone. She wondered if they could leave the quiet in the branches in place of their voices and, if they could, did that mean a part of them was still in the tree. In any case, she hoped the crows in their bird bodies had chased after the Thornes and pecked their heads bloody for what they'd done. Because of those two, Leon had thought she was in on their meanness. Scared as she was of him, she hated that he'd mistaken her for somebody bad.

But then, Paula thought, maybe Leon hadn't been all wrong. She hadn't thrown any rocks, but that didn't keep her from feeling guilty—guilty for being in the same company with Mackie and Peanut; guilty for not being able to stop their attack; guilty for being afraid of Leon even before he opened the hawkbill. There hadn't been time to see

past his strangeness, only a streak of moments to amplify her fear. And after he'd pulled the knife . . .

What would he have done with the ears? Paula wondered. Why were they so important to him? Why did he seem to think that losing them was the ultimate punishment? Mackie had said that Leon was kept in a box, away from the light, when he was a baby. If that was true, maybe Leon used listening like other people used seeing. Her developing theory reminded her of the big seashell on Ma McClarity's dresser. Her grandmother had told her that, if she put the shell up to her ear, she'd hear the ocean inside it. She hadn't understood how her grandmother could know what made the sound, since Ma McClarity had never been near a sea, but out of deference Paula hadn't probed further. Eventually she'd listened to the shell when she was by herself, and instead of ocean she'd heard what sounded like whispering or breathing in a cave. Maybe for Leon, his box had been his cave, and since he was in the dark a lot, he'd have had to count on his ears to tell him what was happening outside himself. When that dependence had become a habit and Leon was big enough to leave his box and see more, he would have had two pairs of guides to help him get around in the world, but since his ears were more experienced in telling him things, Paula guessed that they might have taken on the job of explaining what his eyes told him, too.

What would he want with other people's ears, though? If he'd sliced off hers and the Thornes', would he have just stuck them bleeding into his overalls pocket and walked on? Did Leon collect ears like she did arrowheads? Paula picked up a small stick and drew an image of an ear on a patch of ground that was clear of grass. She knew it was only a picture, not the real thing. But sometimes she pretended things in her mind and they seemed real for a while. She was good at thinking up whole make-believe places with

their own creatures and people, but she didn't like for anybody to know that she did. She kept her dreamlands secret for her own protection. If real people knew about them, they might think Paula was crazy like they said her granddaddy McClarity had been not long before he died. Doctors had shocked his brain quiet so that he couldn't dream at all.

Perhaps Leon had dreamlands to protect, too, Paula thought. Maybe that was reason why he pulled out the hawkbill. If his ears told him what was going on outside himself, then they probably talked to him on the inside as well. And when he mumbled, it could be that he was responding to what he heard from the dreamlands in his head. With that thought, Paula began to doubt whether Leon would have really carried out his threat against her and the Thornes after all. He seemed to have meant what he said, but it was possible that he'd just wanted to scare them away, to be left alone so that he could dream unharmed.

She drew another ear on the ground, and then another after that. She tried to picture what the world would be like in Leon's head. Because they were so important to him, she imagined that ears must fill his dreamlands. Ears that you could play like crinkled skin harps; giant ears walking down the road; ears hung on clotheslines, the wind blowing through them and making sounds like whispers in a cave or the flapping of crows' wings. Ears that would always listen and always speak to him, guiding him through the light he'd once been denied.

Paula stared down at her drawings absently. Leon would be passing by soon. She wanted to tell him she was sorry for what had happened. She wanted his ears to make him hear that she wouldn't hurt him, that she knew about his dreamlands but would never tell anyone about them. She wanted all this even when she heard Leon's mumbling and she turned to peek around the tree. He was walking as before but no longer had the

knife out. Instead he held an apple in each hand—one red, one green—and appeared to be conversing with them. Paula meant to step out from behind the pine and call out to Leon, meant to climb over the fence and apologize. Yet Leon kept walking and she did not move. Even after Leon was gone, she stayed still for a while, holding her fear tight inside her. Finally, she headed toward the fence, but before she climbed over it, she looked back at the tree and up into its branches. She wondered: If the crows had come back with their voices just now, would they have warned her against Leon, or him against her? Would they have chorused an accusation at her? Or would they have simply flown on by, having never taken notice of her at all?