

HEARKEN NOT TO THE ZURRY BIRD'S CRY

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Some say the zurry bird is called such because it migrated from Missouri. Some say it takes its name from its magnificent feathers.

--Folklore of the Old South

There's things in the bayous of Louisiana unseen by folks. Things that sleep under the mud by day or hunker in the hollows of dead trees. My granny told me all the stories jus' like I'm sure your granny told them to you. Lonesome Sam, the booger dog, the zurry bird.

You say you want to hear 'bout my run in with Caleb? There was only four folks what seen it, but the way they tell it, you'd swear half the town was standing right there.

I was in the grocery. Lorelei had called me at work and asked me to bring home some bread and milk and some canned goods. I told her why didn't she pick those up when she'd gone shoppin'? It didn't matter what she answered. Having me pay for extra groceries allowed her to waste some of her allowance on her love magazines.

I had just picked out a can of peas when I heard a buttery voice behind me. Caleb Lee.

He says, "Why, Billy Randall, how are you this evening?" He always talks sweet to people like he's their best friend, though most folks can't stand him.

I didn't say nothing, but give him this sharp look that said, *You don't want to mess with me, boy.*

He just grinned and kep' on. "Are you a-goin' out with the boys tonight? You shouldn't be leavin' that sweet little wife o' yours alone so much. I just might have to pay her a visit."

My hand tightened on that can of peas. He knew just how to get under my skin. Him and Lorelei were an item for a while, but I'm the one she picked to marry. She's been mine for more'n three years now, and it made me see red for him to talk like that.

"First of all," I says, "it ain't none of your business what I do of an evening. And second, you come sniffin' 'round my house and Lorelei's like'n to fill your backside with a load of birdshot."

That just amused him. “And maybe I’ll fill Lorelei’s backside with somethin’.”

Why would a man say that about another man’s wife unless he was aching to be laid flat?

I flung that can of peas just as hard as I could, right at his stupid, grinning face. He ducked fast as a cat on a lit stove. Them peas sailed ‘cross a couple of aisles and almost hit Missus Parker, but I didn’t pay that no mind at the time.

I jumped on Caleb and started to thrash him. Mr. Evans, the grocery man, he hurried right over and broke it up. It’s a good thing, too, else I would have put Caleb in the hospital and messed up his pretty face for good. His shirt was tore open and his hair all flying around. My lip was cut where he’d got in a lucky poke and I could feel my cheek startin’ to swell up.

Mr. Evans chased that boy right out. He knew who’d started the ruckus. I paid for my groceries and went home.

Lorelei got all frantic when she saw my face. I let her fuss over me and play nurse. She’s a good wife . . . was a . . .

Soon’s I told her what happened, Lorelei cussed Caleb good. She was upset but she did her best to hide it. We sat down to supper. Every time I looked up at her, she’d smile her brave little smile and be all stroking my hand. She gave my shoulders a squeeze when she got up to the stove to get me a second helping or to the refrigerator to fetch me another beer.

After supper, she started washing the dishes and I went and changed my clothes. When I come back she was all playful like. She tossed a handful of soapsuds at me and giggled. I felt so proud of her. I knew how lucky I was that she picked me. I could never dream of hurting her.

I told her not to wait up for me, but I’d maybe wake her up when I got in. She just smiled and hugged me and kissed me. That was how it was between us. We were happy as man and wife and anybody who says different is just a damn liar.

When I got to Bud’s Place, Larry and Henry were shooting pool. I ordered us a round of beers. Right off they start razzing me ‘bout my run in with Caleb Lee. You know how it is. Everybody knows everybody else’s business in a small town.

At first I took it good natured like, laughing and joking with them. But when they started in making cracks ‘bout how I should keep my eye on Lorelei, how she was a wild young thing that didn’t want to be kep’ in the corral -- well that was over the line.

I didn't say nothing, 'cause they were my friends, but I could feel myself boiling inside. It ain't right to talk about a man's wife like that.

Larry and Henry kep' laughing it up until they looked like hyenas. The tavern just seemed to get smokier, burning at my eyes. Every swig of beer, the sting just reminded me of my cut lip. I couldn't get Caleb's grinning face out of my head. Or his mean words in that cocky tone of his. I knew my wife could be trusted, but that didn't mean that snake wouldn't slither himself up to the door and try to tempt her.

Finally I couldn't stand it no more. Even though it was only half past nine, I threw some money on the bar to cover my part. As I walked out the door, I ignored the hootin' and hollerin' from Larry and Henry.

A full moon rode low in the sky, the same sick yellow my grandpa's skin had turned before his liver had killed him. It followed me as I drove home.

I didn't think about the zurry bird then, though might be I should have. My granny said it had bad eyes for a night bird so it only hunts when the moon is full. And its prey was human flesh. She said the zurry bird had a mouthful of teeth just like a gator. Sometimes when a body was found and it looked like a gator had been at it, it was really the work of the zurry bird.

When I come up to my driveway, some whim struck me to turn off my engine and walk up to the house. The night was hot and humid, the air like molasses. I worked up a bit of a sweat walking up the driveway -- a hundred yards of wild grass and loose gravel up to where the house sits by the crick. With no nearby neighbors, the house looked lonely and old. No lights shone in the windows and the only sound was the harping of the crickets.

When I saw the strange truck by the side of the house, my perspiration just chilled my skin. Still, I didn't want to jump to no unwarranted suspicions.

I creeped up to take a closer look at the truck, trying to recall if Caleb drove a Chevy pickup.

As I came along the side of the house, I heard a low moaning. My heart just about went out of me then. The sound was coming from the open bedroom window.

I stole up to it and peeked inside. A breeze stirred the curtains giving me brief glimpses, off and on, of them in the bed together. Golden candlelight reflected off their naked bodies. Lorelei moaned again and he gave a series of grunts.