PAINTED BUNTINGS

Lisa Harris

Jenny Conroy added a splash of half-and-half to her coffee thermos and then put the lid on before she gave it a shake. She took the two sandwiches she had made, threw them into her cooler, grabbed her Chesterfields, two cups, and her keys, and hurried to her car before she could drop anything or be interrupted by anyone. She hadn't told anyone, leastwise Tessie, that she was driving to Milledgeville to see Laura Jean, her old friend and Tessie's mother. It was time for them to talk.

She put her favorite Charley Pride eight-track in and began the drive. She set her coffee on the dashboard, lit a cigarette, and listened to a soulful Charley singing about lost love.

When she arrived at Milledgeville, Jenny went directly to the big room where Laura sat watching her birds, and without even saying her hellos, she started right in. "You need to swallow your tail and let the rainbow serpent in. God knows you need to get the hell out of this place with its pale pink walls; you got yourself locked up with a bunch of crazy people!" Jenny stubbed out her cigarette.

Jenny had caught Laura Jean in one of her lucid moments, because she looked Jenny straight in the eye, and said "What do you mean 'swallow my own tail'?"

"Accept who you are - head and tail, good and bad. I don't think you are crazy, Laura Jean. Stubborn, yes. Sad, yes. Afraid of your own husband, sure, and with good reason. In love with your daughter so bad, you're afraid you'll ruin her life, so you left her. Scared too, but I don't think you are any crazier than the rest of us, just a lot more scared."

To Jenny everyone was crazy, so she thought the trick was to keep your freedom at all costs and to protect your children no matter what. Of course, Jenny didn't have any children, except for Earl, her husband, who was like a child, but even with him, Jenny kept her freedom to run around. That's why Family and Children's hadn't let her have Tessie. The neighbors reported her as loose. Hypocrites. Most of the neighbors were loose, too, and too tight.

Jenny believed that Laura Jean was crazy because she let herself think she was, let herself think she needed to be taken care of, to be kept apart from her friends and her family. Living with a man as mean as Ray couldn't help but make you question all your thoughts and all your actions. Laura Jean turned timid and skitterish from Ray hitting her. She didn't have any of herself to return to. Intruded upon. Forced. Frightened. Living in a place where language has no power. Saying "no" doesn't stop a thing. Staying "yes" doesn't make good things happen.

Laura Jean was scared that soon he'd hurt Tessie too, like he hurt her, and "no" won't stop him, and "yes", I understand won't help Tessie, after he's hit her, after he's raped her. And saying "Don't drink" won't keep him from it. Where

words fall like rocks into water--down deep--never seen again. Where rivers and rain are the same, no distinction between things that rise and things that fall.

Jenny paused to light another cigarette. "What if when you got tired of Ray, you had kicked his sorry ass out your door and gone to work? Plenty of other women have done it before you. And if you couldn't do that, you could've just brought Tessie with you to my place?

"But, wrong or right, you ran away in your mind--and now look--you're stuck here, and your daughter's living with folks none of us know. When she can, she runs off to Josie and Annie's in the swamp, but they're black, and she gets found out and returned to social services. Pretty soon, some man's going to come along and take her off with him and hole her up in another trailer somewhere. And how's her life going to go then? Like mine if she's lucky and like yours if she ain't!"

Laura Jean didn't answer Jenny. She began rocking back and to, back and to in the chair that wasn't a rocker. How to determine crazy? Is it voices no one else hears – or is that prophecy? Is it seeing things that no one else sees – or is that vision? Is it hurting yourself instead of others? Is it losing the ability to talk – or is that silence? Is it leaving a place that's breaking your heart, or is it staying, but closing up? Which one is cowardice? Which one is bravery?

Laura Jean thought: So what does Jenny know about a place where she has no power, a place where words don't do anything? How does she know about fear when she has no daughter to worry about? Maybe she'd have 'went off' too – like I did, even though it meant abandoning Tessie. My staying couldn't protect her. And where could I find work? And what if I found another man who was as bad as Ray or worse?

"At least I can stop the confusion, Jenny."

"What's that, Laura Jean?"

"At least Tessie won't confuse being hurt by her daddy with being loved by him. Maybe she'll find herself a man who can love her – plain and simple."

"Leaving and abandoning can be the same thing, but they don't have to be. If you had left Ray and taken Tessie with you, you would've been saving yourself and your girl. And the hell with Georgia law! Who cares about shared property? That shit assed piece of tin we call our homes. You had nothing to lose, Laura Jean."

Laura Jean watched Jenny closely.

"If you can get strong enough to get out of here, I'll help you when you come home, Laura Jean."

The only sound in the room was Jenny's loud breathing--taking a hit from her cigarette, then exhaling the smoke.

"Think on it, Laura Jean. Tessie's gonna be fourteen on her next birthday. When are you coming home?"

"I'll think on it, Jenny. I'll try to come home soon."

No one at Milledgeville noticed much difference in Laura Jean, but she began to feel a difference in herself, and she recognized that difference as hope.

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Getting well and being well aren't the same thing. Even with hope, Laura Jean had to prove that she was well enough to be released. And it took her eight years to get out after Jenny Conroy asked her, "When are you coming home?" Laura Jean's ten years at Milledgeville were also ten years for Tessie, and they were ten difficult years when having a mother could only have helped.

Jenny Conroy talked about being a mom with Laura Jean, but the therapist wouldn't. The therapist wanted to know about Laura Jean's relationship with her father. He wanted to know if she saw herself as a frigid woman. The psychiatrist wanted to know if she still saw fairies, heard voices, and if she wanted to die. And she learned the responses he wanted to hear, so the shock treatments could stop. She learned his right answers.

"Did your father ever touch you when you didn't want him to?"

"No." Then she saw the furrowed brows and corrected herself. "Yes, when he put me to bed at night."

"How?"

"Under my panties."

"Show me."

"I see."

"How do you feel about the male organ, the penis?"

"How do I feel?"

"Yes, do you like it?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you wish you had one?"

"Do I wish I had one?"

"Yes, attached to your own body?"

"No." Again the brows and the tightened lip. "I mean, yes, sir. Doesn't everyone want to be a man?"

"You tell me, Mrs…" and here he had to flip to the front of her chart to remember her last name, "Sipes."

He eyed her suspiciously, trying to figure out tone, but after all, she was just some stupid woman from the coast, from some trailer park, who thought she heard voices and had abandoned her daughter-certainly not smart enough to be mocking him.

"Do you seem to freeze up with your husband, Mrs. Sipes? Says here on the chart, 'Husband denied access to his wife. Frigid woman.'"

"Can't hardly freeze up in coastal Georgia, Doctor."

"Please be serious, Mrs. Sipes. We don't have enough time here to be wasting it on jokes. One of your husband's concerns was your lack of sexual response."

"You mean concerns or complaints?"

"No, no, Mrs. Sipes, your husband is worried about you. He wants to have a normal marriage where desire is shared."

Laura Jean remained silent. The doctor noted, "Patient froze up." Who knew what Ray wanted, who knew how he defined desire? She had heard that he was serving time. Who knew how he met his sexual needs now in a north Georgia prision?

"Are you having visitors, Mrs. Sipes?"

"My daughter hasn't been here since you began the shock treatments. She sent me a letter telling me she couldn't come anymore, said it broke her heart to hear me say the same things over and over again, said she hated to see me drooling, see my hair all gray and stringy."

"No, no, Mrs. Sipes. Not those kinds of visitors. You know, your special friends, the ones with the wings, the ones only you saw."

Laura Jean didn't explain to him that of course she no longer saw them, because she no longer needed them. She had needed them when she lived with Ray to occupy him and keep him away from her.

"Mrs. Sipes, answer the question."

"No, sir."

"No, you won't answer the question, or no, they don't visit you anymore?"

"No, they don't visit me anymore."

"Are you hearing voices?"

"No, sir." But thank God she was. She could still translate the various birdsongs to help give her life meaning. And she had written a song that she sang at the beginning of each day, a song that made her heart into several birds. She sang the song to thank the birds for being her friends, for living within her, even in this closed-off place.

"My heart it is a hummingbird
And this is how it flies--
High up, high up!
It touches all the sky.

My heart it is a goldfinch
And this is how it sings.
With every twit and twitter
To me its life it gives.

My heart it is a raven
And this is how it cries-

Ah-ah, Ah-ah,
I cannot reach the sky.

My heart it is a bunting--
Tiny, true, and free
And when I am a wanting
It brings my love to me."

By love, of course, she meant Tessie. The buntings sent north and west from Savannah were surely from Tessie. Laura Jean could remember the early days of Tessie's life, when her shoulder blades were clearly the marks made by her wings having been amputated.

She could tell when she looked up that she had been quiet too long to be considered normal by this doctor. She blushed. What had he asked her this time?

"Could you repeat what you said, please, sir?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Sipes. I asked if you would rather be alive or dead?"

This question again. The one she couldn't lie on. The question that always landed her back on the ward, back in shock. She knew he wanted her to laugh and say in a sprightly voice, "Oh, I'd rather be alive, Doctor. Of course! How silly of you to ask!" If she could say that, why then he would have cured her, which would make him look good among the long line of doctors who had failed. But she couldn't say the magic words that would release her from the spell. So she did the next best thing. She used the right voice, all sprightly and gay. "Oh, I'd rather be dead, Doctor. Of course! How silly of you to ask!"

That's when he would send for the escort to take her back to her ward with another prescription for treatments.

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Laura Jean entered the electricity, walked right into the bolts, one after the other, her eyes filling with blood tears, her throat filling with salt. Her mind becoming a bowl of milk that has set too long-a skin forming, separating her from herself and the physical world. Inside the lightning bolt, she held onto as much of her life as she could-she held on by the skin of her teeth. And the skin that covered her body was both too thick and too thin. Sometimes so thick that nothing and no one reached her. Just the searing jolts of electric current. And at other times, so thin that they brought the needles to calm her. It was clear to her that the staff at Milledgeville preferred thick-skinned people and electricity. Perhaps Georgia Power gave them a special rate.

Laura Jean managed to save her skin by concentrating on the birds outside her window, watching them before she was taken for shock, and then watching the birds again after they brought her back. She though about her skin

and the bird skin, buried under layers of feathers. Her mind's eye opened before her actual eyes did, and it was within her mind's eye that she looked for the birds first. Seeing them naked, just puckered skin. And as she returned to herself, she began to see them flying, so that by the time she opened her eyelids, there they were, dressed, outside the glass, waiting for her. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

When she finally improved, it was because she responded to the doctor's question with, "I don't know." Everyone saw that as growth, even Laura Jean. And while it wasn't quite the right answer, it was right enough to get her released. When she was told she would be leaving soon, Laura Jean had nothing to say.

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Laura Jean sang her song while she worked in the kitchen, wiping down the stainless steel appliances. The hospital called this work "kitchen privileges," which in the outside world everyone would see as funny, but inside, here, it was a privilege to be allowed off the ward, to be with people from the outside, people who went home at the end of their shift or grocery shopping or to the bars--people who were more or less responsible for their lives. To whatever degree they were failing, they were still succeeding enough to be outside Milledgeville. She laughed at herself. At the end of their kitchen chores, they left the building, while she returned to her ward. They weren't breaking any big laws--anyway, they weren't getting caught--and so they were outside prison. And although they smoked and drank and ate deep-fried food all the time, they were well enough to be outside hospitals. No one thought they had lost their minds.

Laura Jean envied them and hated them. She envied them because they could make decisions well enough that no one labeled them crazy and locked them away, and she hated them for the same reasons. She knew she was getting better, because she no longer needed to be in Milledgeville; she no longer feared Ray, and she figured she made decisions as well as most of the folks who worked in the kitchen with her. She envied them going home to their children. Almost ten years of not seeing Tessie, except when Jenny drove Tessie to see her. Ten long, lonely years for Tessie and for Laura Jean, the ten years when Tessie was turning from a girl to a young woman. Laura Jean's heart seized up when she thought this, and so she polished the metal harder.

Laura Jean had learned to choose between fried chicken or Jell-O when she sat down at her tray. She knew if she wanted a bath or a shower. And she knew if she wanted to live or die. She ate Jell-O first. She took baths in the winter and showers in the summer. And for the past five years steady, when the therapist asked, "Mrs. Sipes, if you could choose between dying and living, which would you choose?" Laura Jean said, "Living."

The doctors noted improvement on her chart. "Suicidal tendencies subsiding." For five years, no shock treatments, and Laura Jean had gained

kitchen privileges. More importantly, she was allowed to go outside once a week, one-on-one--accompanied by a nurse, an aide, or an orderly. In occupational therapy, she began painting, since she was tired of embroidering birds. Now she painted them, but they were unlike any birds people had ever seen. At first she used small pieces of paper and painted realistically. But now she painted on paper the size of the long walls in the playroom. The director paid her ten dollars a wall for four hummingbird murals in the main entrance--each wall a close-up of some part of the tiny bodies, blown up to greet the "normals."

Next she did a series of more hummingbirds--one in flight, one stopped midair, one feeding, one hatching from an egg, one dead on the ground. The director and the psychologist thought they had been painted in this order: hatching, flying, feeding, stopped midair, lying dead on the ground. But they were wrong. Laura Jean painted the dead one first, then the one stopped mid-air, then feeding, then flying, and last hatching. But she didn't argue with them or try to explain her order. Sly Laura Jean, learning that the order of her world was different, that the logic of her world was unique, and knowing her world would never make sense to these people in power over her, no more than their world made sense to her. She had to learn theirs, but she didn't have to share hers.

She learned the right answers, over time, to most of their questions. She learned to read their faces, eyes, eyebrows, and mouths. She learned the response, "Just kidding!" for when she picked the answer that made sense to her but clearly was not what they wanted to hear. She was learning survival as clearly as she had learned it in the house of her parents and better than she had learned it in the trailer with Ray.

This time, though, she knew she was doing it, and she knew why: she wanted to be outside making choices--no better and no worse than Sam's, the cook, or Rita's, the nurse, or Dr. Johnson's, the therapist.

The biggest lesson she had learned at Milledgeville? She wasn't any crazier than the rest of them. Jenny Conroy had been right years ago when she told Laura Jean to swallow her tail. Her problem had been thinking she had no choices, that she couldn't stand up to someone like Ray, that someone else could raise her daughter better than she could. She had believed more in other people's power than her own.

Where was Tessie now? Why hadn't she heard from her or about her in such a long time? Rita could help her. Rita would know how to trace her. Laura Jean hurried to finish her chores so she could see Rita at the nurses' station before she left.

Rita tried to help. She phoned Family and Children's Services, but the last address they had for Tessie was Ray's trailer, after he was released, and Laura Jean didn't believe she was still with him.

"Call there anyway, Laura," Rita encouraged her, and Laura didn't correct her for calling her by only part of her name.

Laura Jean dialed the number, and Ray picked up the phone. He sounded the same. He didn't recognize her. Then he didn't believe her. So Laura Jean handed the phone to Rita, who made him believe the phone call really was from Laura Jean, who was looking for Tessie.

The next series of things began to happen fast and coincidentally. Before Laura Jean could write to Tessie at the address in New York, she was told she was being released and sent home by bus to Savannah. Laura Jean couldn't imagine how her girl had ended up in New York City.

Rita brought the newspaper announcement in the next day, and it confirmed all the rumors the workers and patients had been hearing for months.

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> "The Georgia State Legislature voted today 215 to 184 to close three state mental facilities and to greatly reduce residential care facilities. Most notably, the state under recommendations from a panel of prominent psychiatrists, has decided to release two hundred and seven residents from the Milledgeville facility alone, citing the first amendment and skyrocketing costs. Half-houses will take in residents who do not have family to provide shelter. All other residents who are not violent and who can function, at least minimally, will be returned to the care of their next of kin (*The Milledgeville Gazette,* June 15, 1985)."

So Rita called Ray, who sent a telegram immediately to Tessie.

Rita helped Laura Jean fix her hair. In the mirror, Laura Jean saw a sad, old woman whose lined face made a map of loneliness and fear, a map of indecision and terror. How to make a choice. Indecision pushed her back into the trailer, where she stopped midair in her life and hung until she fell forward into a world without time, without laughter, fell into this world of medication, shock treatments, questions about her father, her sex life, her periods, her depression, fell into the world of failed institutions with linoleum floors, cement walls, tasteless gravy, and bars on the windows--a prison built by her own mind and the world around her, where differences made her wrong, marred, forever a child, where real choice, which she badly feared, was taken away from her--the thing she thought she had wanted--not to have to choose, not to have to decide.

And the more she feared choosing, the worse she became at making an intelligent choice, overburdened always by the possible consequences of everything.

Half the decisions she had made when she was on the outside had been ignored anyway. Telling her parents how she felt and them telling her she was wrong, telling Ray yes and then no. Her folks and her husband telling her that men and women weren't equal, that blacks and whites weren't equal--that education was a waste of time and money, that children were property until they

grew up, and that females--grown or small--were forever the property of parents or husbands, because women didn't know how to make a choice, how to decide. Women couldn't be trusted to pay the bills or to know what to do with their bodies--when to have sex, when not, when to have a baby, when not, when to leave a man, when to stay. Laura Jean was a quick study, and she learned their rules well. In the fire of each rule was the maxim, "Never trust yourself." Her strongest memory of Milledgeville was summed up in lightning bolts and runny white gravy.

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Once outside the very real walls of Milledgeville, Laura Jean was shocked by sounds and smells. She had forgotten car horns, loud music spilling from open windows and washing down over her, crickets rubbing their hind legs together, jets rumbling through the sky, leaves sighing in varying degrees like the people on the ward at night.

She took the one-way bus ticket to Savannah that the state had provided her with and the forty dollars for traveling that she earned by painting the murals, and she boarded the Continental Trailways Bus--making sure she got the front seat behind the driver and directly beside the window, where she watched light reflect off tin roofs painted silver, off waxy magnolia leaves, off tarred road surfaces, and off the rocks in creek beds where the water ran to the sea. And she saw herself as water and rock, fluid and hard, blood and bone, returning with the birds, returning to the coast, returning to herself, returning to her daughter.