

## Fourth of July · *Jane Moreland*

ONLY THE MEN moved when the alarm clock sent clear bells through the shadowy sleeping porch air. My mother, Grandmother, and Aunt Grace didn't stir, so Cousin Amy and I didn't either. The women had made a pact that men who got up at dawn to go fishing could fend for themselves.

My father and Uncle Steven went right to the living room where all the clothes had been laid out the night before. I pretended to stretch and yawn in my sleep and peeked around the room. Amy had the covers pulled all the way over her head. The covers had just the faintest glow of a flashlight, which meant she was already into her daily stack of comic books. My grandmother and Aunt Grace were rock-still. My mother had her back turned, but I could tell she was awake by the way she twisted her wedding ring with her thumb. Grandfather tiptoed over to Cousin Nathan and my brothers, Freddie and Harry, and coaxed them from their beds. Freddie, happiest of all to be counted among the men, shot straight up and left the room quickly, unbuttoning his pajamas on the way.

The men spoke in whispers, but their feet and hands did not know how to be quiet. Through thin pine walls, we heard zippers zipping and rubber-soled shoes bump bump bumping across the floor. Water ran in the bathroom sink, and the toilet flushed six times in succession. Someone filled the tin coffee pot and set it down hard on a metal burner. Someone poured milk into tall glasses. Corn flakes sprinkled into tin bowls and were eaten with metal spoons. Ice for the coolers was chipped from big blocks. Sandwiches were chopped on the cutting board and wrapped in crinkly waxed paper. Then the screen door banged shut behind each one, and six sets of shoes clomped down the tall wooden steps of the house, then down the metal bank steps to the dock. And then the motor revved on Grandfather's brand-new, 1952, fiberglass boat. And then they were off in a roar.

"Well finally, the tornado has moved through," my grandmother said in the first female words of the morning.

"I thought they would never leave," Aunt Grace said. Aunt Grace was the mother of Amy and Nathan and was married to my mother's brother, Steven.

Now we opened our eyes, a roomful of women. The only man in our vicinity all day would be Lucas, the old caretaker who tied his houseboat to a cypress tree just down river, when he returned from his own fishing. I had heard his little motorboat pull away in the pitchy blackness before the bell on my father's windup alarm clock. Amy and I stayed away from Lucas because he scared us half to death. He always had something to say about snakes. He would squint his small eyes, twist his mouth, and say something like, "Did you see that snake swimming around my bait box this morning? Long as one of them canoe paddles." When he killed a snake, he would split it lengthwise, remove the innards, and nail the skin to his front door.

"I'll make more coffee," my mother said as she sat up in bed and in the same motion slid her feet into white eyelet scuffs. She smiled at me as she stood up, smoothed her wavy, dark hair, and tied the belt on her red chenille robe. "Just the girls now, Sarah," she said to me.

I looked over at Amy, and we shared the look of disgust that always came onto our faces when we got left. Amy and I were eleven and twelve, older than Freddie, Harry, and Nathan. And we fished as well as they did. We usually won the contests we would think up, the two of us against the three of them, to see who could catch the most fish in a day, in a week, for the whole summer. But age and ability did not enter into fishing trips with the fathers. We got left because we were girls. And girls stayed with their mothers. Especially on the fourth of July when they were headed fifteen miles up the Neches River to the fishing jamboree at Panther Creek.

One part of me was furious, but another part was glad they were gone because today the women had their own big plans. This was the day Aunt Lenore was coming. She was the younger sister of my mother and Uncle Steven. It had been three years since Aunt Lenore had come to the river house, three years since the tragedy. That's what people called it. No one ever said Kirk or the child who wandered away and got lost in the woods or drowned or whatever, just The Tragedy. Kirk had just disappeared. He had been gone one morning when we got up. Search parties had combed the woods and both sides of the river for miles above and below the house. Men in boats with big nets had dragged the river for days. But Kirk was never found.

None of us came the year after that. Then last year Grandfather said it was time we pulled ourselves together. Aunt Lenore and Uncle Bart

didn't come then because Uncle Bart had just been transferred to the Santa Fe office of his insurance company. Uncle Bart died right after they moved there. He was out running one morning last October, two weeks short of his thirty-fifth birthday, and his heart had stopped. A passing motorist had found him too late.

"I don't know how she can bear to come here," my mother said and my grandmother and aunt nodded in agreement.

All morning they worked out their apprehension in the preparation of chicken sandwiches, fruit salad, and a chocolate cake since Aunt Lenore would turn thirty on July fifth. Amy and I rearranged the sleeping porch and put Aunt Lenore's bed between ours. Before, she had slept with Kirk's crib on one side and Uncle Bart's bed on the other.

Except for Grandmother, who spent Easter in Santa Fe, none of us had seen Aunt Lenore since Uncle Bart's funeral. Aunt Lenore looked so pale in her black dress. Amy and I debated, "Would she or would she not wear black to the river?"

Something else stirred in the air. Widowhood was a subject dark and mysterious in our family like the cold, fast-running channel at the bottom of the warm river. It had run deep in my grandmother's life, and it had spilled over into her children's lives. Grandmother's father had died when she was eight, and she had been raised by her widowed mother. And Grandfather was twelve years older than Grandmother. Uncle Bart was younger than my father, I had heard my mother say at Uncle Bart's funeral. Now, the only widow in the family was about to arrive. The rest would be observing, taking secret notes.

Aunt Grace drove my father's boat the ten miles down river to Clayville to pick up Aunt Lenore. Amy and I rode with her. I will never forget the surprise waiting for us when we turned into the slough and pattered slowly to the loading pier, going against the current of holiday boats which were headed toward the main river.

"Over here," Aunt Lenore screamed and waved as we approached, as if we hadn't seen her, as if we could have missed her bright persimmon sun dress and curly goldenrod hair sparkling in the noon sun. Her hair had been straight and brown the last time I saw it. A small red suitcase sat at her feet, and over one arm was something like an Easter basket with a little white dog peeking over the side.

On the return trip, Amy and I took turns holding the dog while Aunt

Lenore talked to Aunt Grace. Aunt Lenore smiled and laughed and looked around as if she couldn't get enough of the scenery. She walked quietly through the house when we got back. And then we took tall glasses of iced tea and our sandwiches to the hammocks and chain swings in the cool shade under the house. Amy or I held the dog's leash when it wasn't looped around one of the tall, fat pilings.

"The place looks wonderful," Aunt Lenore said as she gave us presents from New Mexico, silver and turquoise rings and bracelets made by Indians. "I loved this place long before Kirk came along. I really missed it." Her eyes turned just the slightest bit dewy as she gazed off into the woods.

For the rest of the day, we all did what Aunt Lenore wanted. First, it was fishing. Amy and I dug the fattest worms we could find from our secret worming place. Mother drove us in my father's boat to the huge sand bar not far up river. We parked on the sand and waded out to our knees and fished.

Now and then I saw Aunt Lenore staring into the woods, and I could imagine what she was thinking. Sometimes when I looked at the woods, I thought I caught a glimpse of the top of Kirk's blonde head or the sleeve of his blue pajamas. Sometimes I imagined how thrilled we would be if we were swimming in the river, and Kirk just walked from the woods and joined us. Every time we passed a boat with children, I looked them over, hoping to see that bright little round face, hoping that some family had found Kirk. My best daydream about Kirk was set some years into the future. In it, Kirk wandered out of the woods after the rest of us gave up and went home, and he has been living with Azle, our caretaker then, all this time. Kirk is tall and tanned, a wild river boy who does not know how to read or write, but Azle has taught him everything about fishing.

After fishing, we stripped down to our bathing suits and swam. Aunt Lenore was no longer plump like my mother and grandmother. She was so thin I thought her dark blue bathing suit might slip away in the current. Grandmother said several times how much the blonde hair had changed Aunt Lenore's looks and how thin the head of curls made her face look, but it was more than that. It was as if she had melted away in the sadness.

After the swimming, we sat at the edge of the river, and Amy and I sketched with Aunt Lenore on some white tablets she had brought. I

watched Aunt Lenore's pencil as it made long, slow lines on the paper, slender willow arms bending over and stopping just above where the water should be. I remember the way she would try to sketch Kirk the summer he disappeared. Kirk would never sit still. She would plead with him to pose, beg others to interest him in something. She had worked incessantly with rapid strokes, as if some part of her knew there wouldn't be time to finish.

"Teaching art again was the right thing for me to do," Aunt Lenore said. "It's got me living again. I've even had a few dates with someone all of you know, someone who's been in and out of Santa Fe for a while on a law case."

"And who would that be?" my mother asked.

Aunt Lenore was slow to answer, like she didn't want to say. She looked down, and with her drawing pencil, made straight parallel lines in the damp, coarse sand. But she must have wanted them to know. Why else would she have brought it up?

Mother, Grandmother, and Aunt Grace waited for the answer.

"Charles Lindstrom," Aunt Lenore finally said.

My mother's spine stiffened slightly as her lips parted. She was speechless. So was Aunt Grace.

"Well, Charles Lindstrom," my grandmother said. "I haven't seen him for a while. How is Charles?"

Charles Lindstrom was my mother's age and had grown up in the house across the street from my grandparents, and they were crazy about him in spite of whatever it was that went on between Charles and Aunt Grace the year she and Uncle Steven were separated. Grandmother would always tell how Charles danced with her at wedding receptions. For years he had come for weekends at the river house. He always brought something that became the rage among us. He taught us to water ski, to rhumba, to play harmonicas. He was about the only person who could beat Grandfather at poker without Grandfather's minding. But I always felt the undercurrent about Charles. Besides the fact that Charles had figured in to the trouble between Aunt Grace and Uncle Steven, I knew that my mother had dated Charles some years before that. But then Charles had gone off to law school, and my mother had met and married my father. I knew for a fact that my mother still had at the bottom of her nightgown drawer a picture of Charles.

"Will you see him again?" Aunt Grace said after the long silence.

"Probably," said Aunt Lenore. She had gone back to her sketching, was adding the river under the willow branches. "His case has a while to go."

Lucas was cleaning fish on the bank near his houseboat when we pulled in to our dock. And now another, very familiar houseboat was tied up across the river. It was faded blue with red doors and shutters. A canoe with a small motor was tied to the back of it. Sitting on the houseboat porch was a bearded, barefooted man I knew only as Azle.

"Well look who's back," my grandmother said.

Azle had been our caretaker before Lucas. Azle had once told my father that he was named for the town his mother came from. I had trouble imagining Azle or Lucas or the other mud-caked men like Lucas's friends, Ditch and Fiddle, as having mothers. They seemed to me to spring from the deep woods like the orange-backed toadstools that sprouted suddenly on the bark of fallen logs. We never knew exactly why Azle went away that summer Kirk disappeared. He had stayed for a while to help Grandfather and the fathers with the search for Kirk. My grandfather had reported that Lucas had appeared across the river and had waited for weeks until Azle finally moved on. "They have their private grudges and wars," my grandfather had said then. Now was Azle going to wait until Lucas moved on? Did he want his old job back?

"Do you think we should ask what he wants?" my mother said.

"No," said my grandmother. "It's between them. Whatever it is."

About four in the afternoon, Grandmother and Aunt Lenore took the dog for a walk along the river bank while Amy and I and our mothers went to the kitchen to work on dinner. Amy and I tore the salad greens while they worked on the potatoes and the corn bread. My mother set out the oil and cornmeal to fry the fresh perch and catfish we were counting on.

The boats that had gone up river earlier in the day were starting to come back past the house. Each time Amy and I heard an approaching motor, we left the salad greens and ran outside. Late in the afternoon, we went down and sat on the dock. We waved at Azle, who was fishing on his front porch, and he waved back. After a while, he loaded his canoe with fishing tackle and headed up river. "Dawn and dusk is when the fish bite the best," Azle had told us once. Amy and I stayed put, exploring with

our fingers the box of sparklers, firecrackers, and Roman candles my father had brought for later as we waited for the boat that did not come, did not come, did not come.

The sun was below the trees that lined the river when Grandmother brought cheese and crackers and lemonade to tide us over. When it was all the way dark, my mother called us to the dinner table to eat by candlelight the salad and potatoes and some leftover chicken since the fish hadn't made it. We wouldn't turn on the lights, they said, because the generator motor would drown out what we needed to hear. What were we listening for? Cries for help? Anyway, my grandmother said, we shouldn't get so used to electricity and well water pumped to the indoor toilet that we couldn't get along without them.

I remembered when light in the evening meant kerosene lanterns, the thin, sooty smoke that rose from slow, golden flames. I remembered the trail through the woods to the outhouse, the nights my grandmother pulled me from a warm bed to go with her. How tightly we held hands as we followed the small beam of her flashlight down the dirt path, trying not to think of Grandfather's stories of what prowled the woods at night, ignoring rustlings on the ground and in the trees, glowing red eyes, dark wings passing through shafts of moonlight. She was as afraid of the night as I was.

After dinner, Amy and I sat on the floor and played gin rummy while the rest of them sat around the table. Thoughts of widowhood were again playing through the air like the minor chords of wind that had come up in the cypress trees. They sat in a tight circle, women alone, the candlelight flickering over their concerned faces.

"What's keeping them?" one would ask now and then. "It's been too long. Panther Creek is miles away. They would have left there before dark."

I closed my eyes and saw the thick woods along Panther Creek. "Not a summer goes by that someone does not find panther tracks along Panther Creek," Lucas had told Amy and me just two days ago. I thought of Grandfather's story about coming here to fish when he was a teenager. Once he was alone in a fine birch canoe. An alligator drifted up so quietly he thought it was a floating log. But then suddenly the old gator shot straight up, threw back his head, opened his mouth like he was having a good laugh, then came down hard and took off the front of the boat in one

bite. I remembered the time Azle caught one of the hundred-pound, deep-hole catfish we had heard about. In one of Grandfather's stories, a family was fishing, and a catfish like that turned over their boat, and all the children drowned.

The passing boats became fewer and fewer, but still Amy and I got up every time we heard one. The women at the table didn't move. Like they weren't really expecting any boat to be ours. They discussed going to look but decided against it since my father's boat didn't have a light. It was Aunt Lenore who thought of asking Lucas. As Lucas pulled away with us standing on the bank, the light on his forehead making a narrow, bright tunnel through the darkness ahead of him, I saw a vision vivid as a dream. This was it for us. This was the day all the families, as we knew them, ended. The men were lost. They had been swallowed up and like Kirk would never be found. We who were left would leave here a boat full of widows and fatherless children. Lucas and Azle could fight it out, and the winner might as well move into the house because we would never be back.

The next boat we heard was Lucas coming back empty-handed.

"I went all the way to the creek," he said. "No sign of them."

Near midnight, we heard a low-puttering motor. Amy and I were in our beds, but the mothers were still sitting up.

"Too small for ours," my grandmother said.

But when the boat cut its motor, we all ran outside. I was at the bank edge when Azle's canoe bumped the dock, and a man holding a lantern stepped out. It was my father.

We headed in a clump down the bank steps and crowded around him. No man had ever had such a welcome home from fishing.

Grandfather's boat had hit a log. Only with everyone bailing had they made it to the half-sunken dock of a deserted house. The boat went down as the last one stepped out of it. That's where Grandfather, Uncle Steven, Nathan, Harry, and Freddie were, back at the old house. Luckily, Azle had come along.

My father kissed my mother on the cheek. "Get out the Scotch. I won't be long," he said.

He bent over and untied his boat.



“And you,” he said, pointing to me as he stepped into the boat and pushed off, the sharp edges of his face outlined in the lantern’s light. “You get ready for some firecrackers.”