

# ¶ Poydras Review

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## Faster Than A Roller Coaster

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He's perched on that red armchair, as usual. My Pierce. Surrounded by bird nests. Mud and twigs. Leaves and bark. Some are hanging from hooks in the ceiling, like purses. Orioles. And there are tidy little cups. Goldfinch, I think. He's labeled some of the nests, the ones in glass cabinets; others are displayed on open shelves or falling apart on the scratched mahogany table his mother gave us.

"It's after midnight," I say.

He smiles up at me. I love his white hair. Premature at forty-two. I love his face, unlined, pale, boyish.

"I need an owl," he says.

"Pay attention, Pierce. She's sixteen and it's after midnight."

But there she is, my Clare, racing up the hall toward us, her red hair half out of her ponytail, bursting into the room we call The Museum, where Pierce keeps his collections.

“I’m sorry.” She’s panting. “We went for ice cream.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“I said I was sorry.” She brushes past me and wraps her arms around Pierce’s neck. “Wayne wants to meet you, Daddy,” she says. “I told him you play the clarinet. He plays piano, plays for parties and stuff.”

“What kind of piano?” Pierce asks.

“Jazz,” Clare says. “And dancing music, like Elvis and Buddy Holly.”

“Concentrate, Pierce,” I beg. “She’s sixteen years old, coming in after midnight.”

He pauses, looking up at me like he hears me. Then, “I *really* need a Great Horned nest.”

Clare giggles. A late night, giddy sort of laugh.

I give up. I love her. And she’s home.

~

The first time it happened, I was just her age, a high school majorette from the wrong side of the tracks. And he was a short skinny boy in the band, with hair so blond it was almost white and skin so pale he looked anemic. I could feel his eyes on me as I twirled my baton; he was marching along behind, tootling away on his clarinet.

And then one day he just disappeared; he wasn’t in class, wasn’t in the band. People said he had gone to a ranch out west to build up his strength. Which made some sense because he was so pale. He was just a boy in the band then, not yet my sweetheart, but I missed him. And was glad when he came back to school, after a couple of months, with some sun on his face.

I found out all about it years later, after he stood up to his old bully of a rich daddy and married me, after he started filling up our apartment with butterflies. At first it seemed innocent enough. He knew all about nature, could whistle bird songs, could say what kind they were when nobody else could see them flitting about in the trees. He’d capture butterflies, pin them to stiff cardboard, put them in box frames with cotton. At first, it was just on Saturdays; he’d be out there tramping around in the woods with his binoculars and butterfly nets. Then it was early in the morning weekdays before work. I had my job as a secretary for Dr. Newman and didn’t pay much attention until butterflies started to take over the apartment. Our place was pretty small then, living room, kitchen, bedroom. And he just filled it up with butterflies, live ones wriggling in nets, dead ones, wings all sorts of colors, plus caterpillars, dead and alive. Strange smells all over the house.

He hung glass-framed butterflies on all the walls, filled the shelves with messy, broken cocoons. Pretty soon heaps of wings covered the coffee table, the top of the refrigerator, the kitchen cabinets.

And then Pierce stopped, like he had wound down. He just sat in the middle of all that mess, staring at nothing, hardly talking.

I didn't know what to do; I was afraid to tell his parents. Afraid they'd blame me. They found out anyway because he stopped going to the Mill, where his dad had gotten him a job. So late one afternoon, old man Pierce burst in, took one look at the mess, and the next thing I knew, he carried my beautiful boy husband off in an ambulance.

That's when I found out it had happened before. It was a nervous breakdown, at least that's what his dad called it. They took him to a hospital down in North Carolina and put wires on the sides of his head and shocked him into getting better. His parents told folks he was traveling for business.

I'd done a lot of growing up before I ever married Pierce, keeping house for my hard-drinking daddy, getting myself a scholarship to secretarial school. But this was the worst. Pierce was the only person I'd ever loved except my mother who died when I was six. I loved his blunt fingers, his narrow body, the smell of starch his plaid shirts gave off, his sweet breath. I worried I had somehow brought on his sickness and I was scared out of my mind.

While he was gone, his parents bought us this house and moved me in. His mother told me she couldn't stand the idea of Pierce coming back to that tiny apartment where he'd had his breakdown. But the new place felt large and empty without him. And I was so lonely. I visited him several times before they decided to shock him, but that was worse than the loneliness. He just sat in a chair in his hospital room and stared at the TV. It didn't matter what the program was. He just stared at it. I couldn't get him to talk or even look at me. It was awful. I thought he didn't love me anymore.

It didn't last forever. He came home and was his old self. Playing his clarinet, collecting, bird nests this time, but in an organized way in his "Museum."

Then Clare was born. My girl. Named for my mother. And he's been more or less okay ever since. He's had his ups and downs, of course, and once, when Clare was little, he had to go back for a shock treatment. But he's on a new medicine now and it's going well. To Clare he's the perfect father. She has no idea. And I want it to stay that way.

~

Wayne's at the door. Polite as pie. He's a good-looking boy. Six feet at least, floppy brown hair. Dark sleepy eyes. I see why Clare likes him.

"Where you off to, baby?" Pierce asks.

"A party," she says.

“Where?”

“Moose Club.”

“No,” I say. The Moose Club is a lump of stucco, squatting on the edge of the river. The members are mostly rednecks, who shoot squirrel and rabbit and fancy themselves big game hunters.

“Wayne’s playing for somebody’s engagement party,” she says.

“I don’t like it,” I say. “There’ll be drinking and carrying on.”

“I’ll come,” Pierce says.

Clare grabs him round the neck. I stare at them.

“I’ll be the chaperone. Don’t worry, honey.”

It’s only after he’s climbed into the back seat of Wayne’s Plymouth that I catch a glimpse of his clarinet case on the seat next to him.

Pierce plays a beautiful clarinet. He studied in New York. All the classics, *Flight of the Bumblebee*, Mozart’s *Clarinet Concerto*. That was before we married. He’d had his heart set on being a musician, but his old man put his foot down, said you can’t earn a decent living tootling on a horn. Sent him to work in one of the Mill offices, where he was president. I never knew what Pierce did exactly, only that he didn’t like it. When the old man died, he left us enough money for Pierce to stop going to the Mill. He mostly stayed home and played his music and worked on his collections.

I wash the dinner dishes and pick up the *Ladies Home Journal*. But I can’t concentrate. Partly, because I’ve got that Moose Club on my mind. But I also keep seeing the clarinet case on the back seat of Wayne’s car. Pierce never plays in public, just has a friend or two come over occasionally to jam, as he calls it. He’s a snob, really, about his music. So I’m thinking, if he’s planning to play his clarinet tonight, I want to hear it. After about a half hour, I put on my coat and back the Oldsmobile out of the garage.

I’ve seen the Moose Club from the outside all my life but never had reason to go in. I open the door to a barn-like room full of crêpe paper streamers with big red cardboard hearts stapled to them and lots of loud music. Men in shirt sleeves and loosened ties are bouncing around with women done up in taffeta party dresses, blues and greens mostly, with full skirts out of net and black suede high heels. I recognize some of the patients from Dr. Newman’s office, where I work, but they’re too busy dancing to say hello. Besides, I’m looking all around for Clare and Pierce.

Wayne’s up on a stage, banging away at the piano, a Buddy Holly tune I recognize, and laughing and talking to the dancers. Then, in a flash, he turns his head toward somebody in the band and starts nodding. And that’s when I see Pierce. Up on the stage with all those boys. His eyes are closed, his square-tipped

fingers are flying over the keys, and his head is swaying, all in perfect time with the guitars and piano. His face so serious. And Wayne's laughing and nodding.

After a minute or two people stop dancing and stand around the band watching Pierce, clapping to the beat, and belting out, "*Going faster than a roller coaster.*" And there's Clare, up in front of the crowd, snapping her fingers with the others, her mouth moving. Pierce keeps playing that tune like it's the most natural thing in the world. When did *he* ever hear about Buddy Holly? The guitar player is grinning at him, and the short, skinny boy on banjo stops strumming long enough to let Pierce play solo. I push through the crowd, singing along with the rest of them, bumping into people, stepping on suede-covered toes. Trying to join my daughter. Getting the feel of it.

The clapping gets louder and louder. I see Wayne turn back to the piano. He tries a few chords but can't connect with Pierce's solo, so he stops and waits. I look at Pierce. His eyes are still closed, but now, instead of swaying to the rhythm, his whole body's jerking around. Buddy Holly is long gone. I have to reach Clare. Her eyes are fixed on her father, her cheeks are bright red, and she's stamping her feet with the beat. But the beat keeps changing and the tune seems to be lost. The noise in the room is getting louder. Pierce keeps on playing, faster and faster.

I don't know what to do.

It's Wayne who saves him. He picks up the microphone, walks over to Pierce and thanks him in a voice that drowns out the music. Pierce stops playing and looks around, like he's surprised.

Wayne says, "Well, folks, we've had a real treat here. Let's give a hand to the best woodwind player in the state of Virginia, Mr. Pierce Luther, Jr." He puts his arm around my husband's thin shoulders; Pierce gives a sideways grin and the two of them take a low bow.

"Thank you, Sir," Wayne says and walks him over toward me and Clare.

"What d'you think?" Pierce is beaming.

"Time to go," I say.

"No!" Clare says.

"Your Mom's right." Wayne puts his arms around Clare and Pierce, one on each side, and walks them to the door, with me following close behind.

"Thank you," I mutter, but he's gone, winding his way through the crowd, back to his piano.

On the way home Clare bounces around in the front seat next to me, talking a mile a minute.

"What about Dad's solo?"

“It was great. Most of it,” I say. At least that’s honest.

“Maybe my improvising was a bit sophisticated for the boys, huh?” Pierce chimes in from the back seat.

“Sounded like you were improvising on Mozart,” I say.

“That wasn’t Mozart. That was jazz.”

“He was riffing on Buddy Holly,” Clare says. “You’re too tone deaf to hear it.”

I let it go. Maybe this isn’t what I think it is.

~

“Quick! What’s the bird?”

It’s early on Saturday morning, a week after the Moose Club dance, and Pierce is peering through binoculars out the kitchen window, chirping: *Here I am-- in the tree-- look up-- at the top.*

“Red-eyed Vireo.” Clare’s answer is quick, automatic. She butters her toast, half asleep.

“Bingo!” Pierce has drilled those bird songs into her from the time she learned to talk. “Get dressed. Today’s the day.”

She’s wide-awake now, binoculars in one hand, toast in the other, heading for the door. She’s spent her childhood tramping the woods around Spotswood with her daddy, listening for bird songs, inspecting the forest floor for the telltale white splashes that might mean a nest, scrambling up oaks and elms and maples, easing the empty nests out of the tree limbs and carrying them home in a wicker basket lined with velvet. Whenever there are eggs, they wait until they’re sure the nest is empty before making the snatch. I know all this because I went collecting with him before she was born. And I still occasionally go along, just to watch the two of them conspiring together, standing silent in the woods, waiting. I wait with them. Holding my breath.

This Saturday, I watch him closely. Ever since the party at the Moose Club, I’ve felt kind of uneasy. So I call out, “Me too. I’m coming too.”

Pierce heads the Dodge pickup south on Route 29. About thirty miles out of Spotswood, he swerves suddenly onto a dirt road. We bump along for several miles, red dust flying up in all directions, coating the windows.

“Where’re you going?”

He laughs, a giddy sort of laugh.

And then he hits the brakes, jumps out of the car, and starts running.

“It’s up there,” he says, training his binoculars toward the top of a hill alongside the road. “Let’s go.”

He's running, up the base of the hill, kicking up red dust and brown pine needles.

By the time I get out of the car, he's a third of the way up the hill, hanging on to roots, a cotton mesh bag slung over his shoulder.

I look at the top of the hill through my binoculars. And there it is, on a low branch of a tree. A huge nest made of different size sticks with leaves spilling out the top. An owl's nest.

Pierce is inching up the hillside, grabbing roots, resting one foot at a time on rocks half-buried in the red dirt.

I call out in as calm a voice as I can manage, "Be careful, Pierce."

And then he's on the top of the hill, arms waving in triumph.

I look over at Clare. Her cheeks are bright. And she's grinning up at her daddy. We watch Pierce stretch his hand up to the nest and carefully place it in the mesh bag. Then he starts scrambling down the hill.

In a flash, a Great Horned Owl swoops out of the air, claws outstretched. Clare and I race to the car. The mother lands on the branch of the tree where her nest was, screeching and screeching.

"Turn the motor on," Pierce yells as he half runs, half slides down to the bottom of the hill, binoculars swinging wildly around his neck, the bag held out beside him. He dives into the front seat of the car, slamming the door just as the owl dive-bombs, crashing into the window beside him. For a split second, the bird glares in at us with large yellow eyes, then drops out of sight.

"Drive!" Pierce yells.

"Is she hurt?" Clare's voice is high pitched.

"Of course not," he says. "That bird is flying through the pine trees right now, swooping down on mice." He makes a perfect imitation of an owl's haunting call.

I want to scream at him, "It's not true. You know it's not true." But there's Clare.

"You think so?" she asks. She wants to believe.

Back home, Pierce sweeps two robins' nests aside to make space on the mahogany table for his latest prize.

"Look at the inside." Clare's voice is hushed.

I look down at downy feathers. The mother owl must have plucked them from her own breast. And there's squirrel fur in here. And then I see them. Two white perfectly formed eggs are resting on a cross hatch of downy feathers.

"What have you done?" I whisper.

Clare stares at her father. “We’re not supposed to take eggs.” She sounds close to tears.

“I didn’t see them.” Pierce looks sheepish.

I don’t believe him. I quickly put my arm around my daughter. “Even the experts make mistakes, honey,” I say. “I’m sure your dad thought the nest was old.”

Pierce smiles and nods.

~

Now that nesting season is in full swing, Clare is up early on Saturdays, out all day with her father, armed with binoculars, telescope, Sibley’s, sandwiches. They come home after dark, exhausted, her cheeks flushed. She talks all through dinner, hardly eating anything. They’re watching nests and the hatching of babies, red-tailed hawks, robins, cardinals. It’s June; the woods are full of song.

I watch Pierce, but he seems calm, happy. Clare wants to be with him, that’s all he needs. I tell myself, relax.

The owl’s nest sits there in the middle of the mahogany table, large, messy, the eggs stone cold.

~

“Mama!” It’s Clare’s voice. Coming from Pierce’s collections room.

I rush down the hall. The door is open. Mud and twigs, leaves and bark, thick on the floor, stop me.

Pierce is standing near the door. He looks at me, mouth open, eyes searching mine. I realize I’ve been expecting this. For weeks now. I’ve got to get her out of here before . . .

Then I see her. Her shoes are muddy and her sweater’s torn. She’s smiling, and for just one minute, I hope everything’s going to be all right.

But there’s something in her hands, something she’s holding tight against her chest.

“It’s my surprise,” she says. Her eyes are bright, her voice high-pitched, excited. “It’s because of the raccoons. Don’t you see? I had to. The raccoons.”

“Clare,” I speak softly. “Sweetheart?”

“It’s okay, Mama,” she says, kicking at the pile of broken nests on the floor. “I just need a broom. It was too crowded in here. I had to make room. I just need a broom.”

I reach for her.



She backs away. “Mama, where’s the broom?”

Fear hangs heavy. Weighs me down. Stops my breath. “Sweetheart,” I manage to whisper.

“I need to sweep.” Her voice is frantic. “Look at all this mess.”

But I’m not looking at the mess. I’m staring at the muddy fists she’s stretching out to me. A broken handle of a purse-like nest dangles from her thumb.

She spreads open her fingers.

I don’t want to look. I don’t want to know. I want to hold her.

“Aren’t they sweet, Mama? Aren’t they perfect?”

Two pink featherless creatures lie limp in her hands, their tiny legs drawn up close to their bodies.

About the Author, **Nancy Bourne**: Since retiring as an attorney for public schools, I have been teaching writing and composition to prisoners and incarcerated minors, making pottery in my home studio, and writing fiction. In addition to my **November 2017** publication in Poydras Review, my stories have been published in Upstreet, The South Carolina Review, Summerset Review, Carolina Quarterly, Quiddity, Forge, Persimmon Tree, The MacGuffin, Thin Air, Bluestem Magazine, The Long Story, Shadowgraph, Steel Toe Review, Five on the Fifth and Ursa Minor. My work has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

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