

GREAT BLUE HERON

The lady with the birds in her head, they say she died. Mom showed me the picture in the *Clifton-Fine Telegraph* this morning, of a tow truck pulling some car out of Star Lake. The caption underneath says the car is “the property of Mrs. Adele Winters” and that it’s a black 2002 BMW, but you can’t tell. The picture is all grainy like the ones in the *Telegraph* always are. If the car really was the lady’s, it should be shiny black with no scratches anywhere, and it should be so polished you could use the hood for a mirror while you combed your hair. But in the picture you can’t tell if it is or not. And the caption says too that “Mrs. Adele Winters” is “assumed drowned,” but she’s not there in the picture. If she’s not there, you can’t know anything.

When Mom showed me the article, she said at first she hadn’t wanted me to see it. She knew how much I liked the lady. We all did, Mom and Dad and I, and not just because she stayed at our motel for half of June and part of July this summer. For one thing, the first thing she did when she came was tell Dad how much she loved our motel’s sign. Our place is called the Blue Heron and Dad made the sign himself. He carved and sanded the wood, etched in the bird’s head, and painted it with those fine-detail brushes that are so small you can get every barb of a feather in. Until this lady came, nobody else but me and Mom had ever noticed how he got the colors exactly right, or how the feathers sweeping back from the bird’s head look like they should ruffle in the breeze.

And then she told all of us – even me – to call her Adele. We don’t have any money or fancy cars or anything, and she came from Boston and had the Beemer and these patent-leather high-heeled sandals. Those sandals were white like ice, and they had thin high heels that looked like they should snap off like ice, too, but she walked across the crunchy loose gravel in our parking lot like it was the floor of a mansion. And she liked us and wanted us to call her Adele, like we were her

friends. (And they didn't find her sandals either, they didn't find anything even though the paper says they dragged the lake all over. So you see, they don't know.)

Mom said at first she hadn't wanted me to see the paper, or the picture, but then she decided she'd better show me because everybody in Cranberry Lake gossips. She knew I'd hear about it if I went to Al's Grill for French fries or to Stewart's for an ice cream. Somebody getting their car pulled out of Star Lake, and the paper saying they probably drowned, is a very big deal. Mom didn't tell me this part, but I know she especially didn't want Andrew Young or Greg Adams or anybody else from that bunch of boys at St. Hubert's to find out about it and come over and shove it in my face, like they definitely would if they figured it would bother me. Mom knows how those boys picked on me all through eighth grade and how they probably won't leave me alone even though I'm going to a new school in the fall. Cranberry Lake isn't big enough for anybody to get away for good from anybody else.

Those people who wrote the paper, though, they didn't know Adele. They never saw her sandals, or her big sunglasses or her dark curly hair. They didn't know how small she was, shorter than me, and I was one of the shortest boys in eighth grade. They didn't know how she talked, how she called me "M'sieur Parady" instead of plain Rob, you know, joking around, and they didn't know how if you brought her a newspaper or some coffee she would say "Merci," and they never heard her laugh, or how it sounded like the first warm day in the spring. They never saw her sit on our back porch and stare out at the lake for a whole afternoon at a time. And they never knew about the birds in her head.

Nobody knew about her birds. Nobody but me.

She came to our motel on June twelfth, six weeks ago yesterday, and checked in for a week. We were all supposed to call her Adele right away, Mom and Dad and I, but to each other we called her Mrs. Winters. We talked about her in whispers, not the way mean kids in school whisper behind

your back, but the way you don't say something out loud in case you jinx it. We'd never seen anything like her before. I think we all felt like one day she might do something magic, like turn into a bird or something, and fly away.

When you run a motel, you shouldn't try to figure out stuff about your guests. Dad spends a lot of time in his woodshop, so he doesn't pay too much attention to anybody. Mom and me, though, we couldn't help watching Adele. I was the worst. I'd stand out back with the hose way longer than I had to, watering Mom's tomato plants and peppers and the basil and chives and marigolds till I practically flooded the whole yard, because from where I stood to water the garden I could see a slice of the little porch out back of Adele's room. Mom would always ask when I came in if I'd "happened" to see Mrs. Winters, and every time, I would tell her our guest was just sitting out there on the little porch, in the faded plastic armchair, looking out at Cranberry Lake.

To tell the truth, the lake isn't much to look at. A long time ago, somebody hung signs about every ten feet along the mile of highway on each side of our town: *Cranberry Lake Welcomes You*. The signs all have a picture of a turquoise lake on them, with pine trees around it and a great big red Adirondack chair in the foreground, like all anybody does here is sit around in their Adirondack chairs and stare out at the water. The signs are all faded now. The chairs look like somebody spilled bleach on them, and the turquoise lakes are more kind of mold-colored, but Cranberry Lake was never turquoise to begin with. Up here the lakes and rivers are all full of tannin, so the water is more the color of black tea if you let it steep a long time and then put lemon juice in it. But sometimes when the breeze comes up, the lake kind of crinkles like a soft brown sheet, and the sun makes the little waves sparkle, and the swallows go swooping and skimming around in the air. That's when you can stare out at it all day and never get tired of looking, and never want to be anywhere else.

So Mrs. Winters spent most of that first week looking out at the lake, as far as we could tell. When the week was up, she renewed her reservation. Mom invited her to eat dinner with us the

night after that. After all, she was our only guest, and from what we could tell she'd only been eating peanut butter sandwiches and cereal in her room since she'd arrived. It felt weird at first to have her back in the kitchen with us, and she was kind of shy about it, like she didn't want to put us out or anything, but pretty soon we were all eating and talking like we'd always known each other. Mrs. Winters asked about my school. Usually I don't talk a lot, but before I knew it I was telling her how I'd skipped a grade a few years ago and how I like to read a lot and all, and how I don't like field hockey or lacrosse the way practically all the other boys do, and how the fathers at St. Hubert's think the Internet means stringing a hammock up between two trees. She laughed when I said that, the warmest laugh you ever heard. And she said she was sorry about the boys in my class but she hoped I'd like my new school better in the fall, and she said I shouldn't let people bother me. I remember exactly what she said because I'd never heard anybody talk that way before. She said, "The world has too many disagreeable people in it. The best you can do is let them be disagreeable all by themselves."

That second week was when I got to know her. You see, she ate dinner with us, and she was talking and laughing and everything, but then the next afternoon Mom put a fresh pot of coffee on and sent me to see if "Adele" – we were practicing calling her that – would like some. I kind of rushed over there before I could decide I was too shy, and that was when I found her crying on her porch.

I didn't realize she was crying till I was practically a foot away. Then I wanted to tiptoe off, but she looked up from the handkerchief she had in front of her face, and she said in this very small, kind of thick voice, "Bon soir, M'sieur Parady."

I stammered something about how I was sorry to bother her, and I told her about the coffee and how Mom sent me over, and then I was going to run away as fast as I could, but she stopped me. "Merci beaucoup," she said. (I had to look up how you spell that. It sounded like 'mercy

buttercups.‘) She nodded over at the empty lawn chair next to her. Every porch at our place has two lawn chairs on it. She said, “I would like some coffee, but first I wonder if you would mind sitting here for a moment or two.”

I kind of edged into that chair like maybe it was going to bite me, and then I sat there with my mouth squeezed shut. She dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. The fabric was white with little pink flowers on it, and the flowers matched her sundress, which was exactly the color of these round wintergreen candies you can get at Stewart’s. She wasn’t wearing her sandals. Her bare feet looked like a kid’s; they even had grass stain on them.

She said, “At one time, you know, I thought I might have a boy of my own. If I had, I think he might have been a bit like you.”

I didn’t know how to answer. I’d known she was *Mrs.* Winters, but I hadn’t once wondered if she had kids or anything. Now I noticed she didn’t have a wedding ring on either. I felt pretty nervous and extremely dumb, but it seemed like I should say something, so I came out with, “Do you have, you know, girls?”

Dumb, like I said. She didn’t laugh. “No,” she said. “No children.”

I wondered if maybe she was sorry she didn’t have any, or if she was divorced and things were bad back home, or if her husband had died or something. I wanted to know why she was crying but didn’t know how to ask. Out on the lake, a breeze was blowing and the swallows were skimming around the way they do, so I stared at them and tried not to think about the sweat running down the back of my neck and sticking my legs to the chair.

She saw the swallows too. She held out her hand, the one with the handkerchief in it, and the fabric kind of fluttered as she pointed. “I love those birds,” she said. “They’re so free.”

I kept staring at them so I wouldn't stare at her instead. Even when she'd been crying, her face still looked all delicate and pretty. She was Mom's age, I guess, but she really didn't look like it. I said, "Yes, ma'am, they are."

She said, "This is a beautiful place. It has plenty of room to breathe."

My brain was kind of spinning around, the way it does when I'm taking a math test, and I tried to think if I should just say something polite like "uh huh," or if I should ask her what it was like back in Boston and say that I'd never known anybody who actually lived in a big city. It turned out that I didn't need to say anything at all. She told me, "I find all this space very helpful. You see, my head is full of birds."

You can bet I had never heard anybody say a thing like that before. I couldn't help it: I stared at her with my mouth hanging open like maybe an actual bird was going to come along and build a nest in it.

She laughed. It sounded clear and sparkly like a stream. "Don't worry," she said. "I may be a bit crazy, but I'm not dangerous." She said she knew how "odd" it must sound, her saying such a thing, but she had a feeling that I knew what it was like to be different and to get tired of it sometimes. And she said, "I know they aren't real birds, of course, but they are real to me," and then she told me.

The cockatiels were the bad ones. "At first I thought they might be parakeets," she said, "but no. Parakeets are too pretty." The cockatiels would scream and chatter at her, always wanting something, and she'd have to run from one of their cages to another, back and forth all day long. "They're insufferable, you see." They filled up her head with noise till she thought her skull would crack open. If you're wondering how she could have the birds inside her head and how she could be inside there herself at the same time, well, I guess you can wonder that. I didn't, while I listened. I could see those cockatiels, rows and rows of them all shrieking for something all the time, and I

knew exactly what she meant. It was like at school when I wanted to sit under a tree at recess and read *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, but Greg Adams and those other boys were making everybody play pick-up basketball and even though I was way too short to be any good, I had to do it because books and reading were for girls and I was asking to get beat up.

Adele didn't have only the cockatiels, though. She had to spend a lot of time with them, but sometimes she could get away and visit the birds she liked better. She had goldfinches too, she said, and hummingbirds and tanagers. She had never seen any of those in real life because you don't get pretty birds in the city, only sparrows and pigeons, but in her head she had a whole rainbow of them. And sometimes if she was really lucky, she could stay for a while with her nightingales. Those weren't as pretty to look at, she said, but they had soft feathers and quiet songs. When she spent time with them, she couldn't hear the cockatiels screaming anymore.

But her favorite bird, the one she loved best, she only got to see once in a long while when she was really, *really* lucky. That was the heron. It was a great blue, she told me, just like the bird on our motel sign. It had perfect gray-blue wings and a long white neck, and long slender legs and a crest of smooth black feathers. On her best days, when the bird unfolded its wings and took off into the sky, she could sail along with it. The rest of the world fell away from her then, and she was free.

While she talked, I watched her and saw every one of those birds too. Goldfinches like splashes of fresh yellow paint. Nightingales, gray and drab, but with voices like drops of honey sliding off a spoon. And that heron. I saw that heron as if it had been there in front of us, its wings spread, its neck stretched out, gliding over Cranberry Lake.

When she finished telling about it, she turned around to look at me. I didn't stop to think, and I didn't blush either. Straight out, I said, "What kinds of birds did you see today?"

"When you sat down with me, I was trying to quiet the cockatiels. I couldn't do it." She smiled. "But now the heron's come back."

That was when I learned about her. I knew why she had been crying, and why she liked to spend every day looking out at the lake. *Room to breathe*. I knew why she had renewed her reservation the first time, and I wasn't surprised when she did it another time, and another.

She never told me not to tell anybody about her birds. I never would have. Every day, she would say, "I saw some goldfinches in the garden" or "The nightingales were singing last night." It was like a code. She could say those things in front of Mom and Dad too, but I was the only one who knew what she meant.

In the middle of her fourth week, I asked if she would like to go for a bike ride. You can get plenty of space and breathing room in the hills above Cranberry Lake. She wasn't anywhere near tall enough for Mom's bike, so I took my old one and gave her the new one Mom and Dad got me this past spring. You should have seen her. She got on this boys' bike, barefoot, wearing a yellow dress the color of the daffodils we get in April, and she was laughing like a little kid on a merry-go-round. She said she hadn't been on a bike since she was maybe seven years old. We went out on Main Street and pretty soon, barefoot and all, she was whizzing on ahead and I had to pedal like crazy to keep up.

We went north into the hills. Nobody goes up there much anymore, but you can still see some old empty houses from back when the town used to be bigger. A long time ago, Cranberry Lake used to have lumber mills. A lot of people got rich off them – at least, that's what Dad told me, and he said his dad told him – but then the government shut the mills down and nobody was rich anymore. A lot of people headed out for better places and left their big fancy houses standing empty.

The old houses have huge porches and big windows, and fussy carved scrollwork over the doors and along the edges of the roofs. The windows are busted out in pieces, the way the lake ice melts in the spring and you get cracks and jagged edges and you can see the dark water underneath,

or sometimes somebody puts a BB pellet or even a bullet through the glass and it cracks in patterns like spiderwebs.

Adele and I turned onto this one old road and came up on a house that was falling down. The roof had caved in and shrubs and stuff had grown up through the floor. The window glass had all fallen out a long time ago, and you couldn't tell anymore what color the paint had been on the shingles or on the last of the fancy woodwork. Adele stopped in front of the house and sat there, looking at it, till I pulled up next to her.

"It's sad," she said. "It wasn't supposed to happen."

I didn't understand right away. "Well, it's made of wood," I said, "and it's been empty a long time. It had to fall down one way or another."

She looked around at me then. "I don't mean that. I mean that someone's life shouldn't have gone that way. Who lived here? Why did they have to leave?"

I'd never seen her look that way before, intense all of a sudden, staring at me from behind her sunglasses like maybe I was hiding something from her. I got stammering again, but I told her as best I could about the lumber mill people and how their money ran out. "I don't know who they were, or where they ended up or anything," I said. "A lot of them had to go someplace else. Maybe a city or somewhere."

Adele looked back at the house. "You make plans," she said. It sounded like she was talking to herself. "You think you know how your life will look, and then it falls apart."

She never told me what she meant by that. I still don't know. Maybe I'd been right and she did get divorced or something. Maybe her life was just kind of bad and crazy somehow, and that's why she had the birds in her head. Or maybe she'd had the birds to begin with, from when she was a kid, say, and then she got older and she couldn't fix things. I don't know, because she never told me.

We sat there together and looked at the house. It was a pretty day, sunny but not too hot. The sky was that turquoise color that the people who put up the *Cranberry Lake Welcomes You* signs thought a lake should be. Big fluffy clouds sat near the horizon, pure white and mounded up like double scoops of ice cream, and the grass was so green it looked like a Technicolor movie. By the time Adele and I got moving again, though, the colors had faded somehow. We turned around and headed back to the motel. When we pulled in the driveway, her face looked kind of tight, like the skin had gotten stretched too hard over the bones. She said, “The cockatiels are noisy today.”

For the rest of that fourth week, she went back to sitting on the porch a lot, but I thought she seemed okay. She’d been eating dinner with us now and then, pretty often, and she did it again on her last night. While she layered lettuce and tomato on her hamburger, she told me that she’d seen the heron that afternoon. Mom was all surprised because we don’t usually get herons out here this time of year. I had to try not to laugh.

The next morning, Adele packed up her things. She told us she planned to head further east, see this Lake Placid she’d heard so much about, even get as far as Champlain if she could. Mom asked her to keep in touch if she felt like it, maybe let us know when she got back to Boston. “You’re welcome back here anytime,” she said.

I helped Adele carry her two suitcases out to the car. That was all she had, two suitcases for however long she’d already been away from home, and however much longer she was going to stay away. We crunched across the gravel and I wanted to ask her all kinds of things. I wanted to ask whether she really had to go back to Boston, and if anybody was waiting for her there, and if she was sure she couldn’t stay longer in Cranberry Lake. Most of all, I wanted to ask her if sometime I would see her again.

It’s hard to say anything when you’re trying not to cry. Boys aren’t supposed to cry, you know. I hoisted her one suitcase, the big leather-sided one, into her trunk, and she put the smaller

canvas one on her back seat. Her car was a few years old but it still smelled new. The beige upholstery looked like no one had ever sat on it. I shut the trunk, and she shut the back door, and then we stood there and looked at each other.

She had a red-and-white striped sundress on, and her sandals and sunglasses. I didn't care about my bare feet or the ragged fringe on my old shorts. She held out her hand to shake. Her fingers were small and strong and warm. "Merci, M'sieur Parady," she said, and she smiled. "The nightingales are singing today."

I wanted to tell her I hoped they'd sing a lot more, and that she'd see the heron again, every day. I wanted to tell her I'd miss her. You get choked up, you know, even when you shouldn't, but I managed one thing. I'd looked it up and practiced how to say it: "Bonne chance, madame."

Good luck, instead of *good bye*. Her whole face lit up and she laughed. "Merci beaucoup. Bonne chance à vous aussi." I understood, before she explained it, that she meant *good luck to you too*.

Then she got in the car and started the ignition. I stood there on the gravel, listening to the Beemer's tires crunching, until the car went around the curve of the driveway and I couldn't see it anymore.

The Beemer didn't make it to Lake Placid or Lake Champlain. That's all we know for sure. It didn't get very far at all, only a few miles down the road. Star Lake is okay, though. It's bigger and deeper than Cranberry Lake, and there's plenty of trees around it, and room for birds of all kinds.

In the paper, it says she's "assumed drowned." I guess you would think that. If those reporters or whoever had known about her birds, or if they'd seen the way she looked when we sat there in front of the abandoned house, I guess they could think she meant to go into the water and not come back out. But nobody found her.

I know what I think happened. If it sounds crazy, I don't care.

She went into the water, but she left the door open and her seatbelt unfastened. She went because she'd seen the heron sailing over the lake, its wings spread, its neck stretched out. She'd seen that perfect plume of feathers stirring in the breeze. So she went out to meet it, and the Beemer sank because it was so heavy, but she floated straight up through the water and out into the air.

The bird was there and they sailed off together. Free.