TWO - Leslie Burke

Ellie and Brenda weren’t back by seven. Jess had finished all the picking and helped his mother can the beans. She never canned except when it was scalding hot anyhow, and all the boiling turned the kitchen into some kind of hellhole. Of course, her temper had been terrible, and she had screamed at Jess all afternoon and was now too tired to fix any supper.

Jess made peanut-butter sandwiches for the little girls and himself, and because the kitchen was still hot and almost nauseatingly full of bean smell, the three of them went outside to eat.

The U-Haul was still out by the Perkins place. He couldn’t see anybody moving outside, so they must have finished unloading.

"I hope they have a girl, six or seven," said May Belle. "I need somebody to play with."

"You got Joyce Ann."

"I hate Joyce Ann. She’s nothing but a baby."

Joyce Ann’s lip went out. They both watched it tremble. Then her pudgy body shuddered, and she let out a great cry.

"Who’s teasing the baby?" his mother yelled out the screen door.

Jess sighed and poked the last of his sandwich into Joyce Ann’s open mouth. Her eyes went wide, and she clamped her jaws down on the unexpected gift. Now maybe he could have some peace.

He closed the screen door gently as he entered and slipped past his mother, who was rocking herself in the kitchen chair watching TV. In the room he shared with the little ones, he dug under his mattress and pulled out his pad and pencils. Then, stomach down on the bed, he began to draw.

Jess drew the way some people drink whiskey. The peace would start at the top of his muddled brain and seep down through his tired and tensed-up body. Lord, he loved to draw. Animals, mostly. Not regular animals like Miss Bessie or the chickens, but crazy animals with problems—for some reason he liked to put his beasts into impossible fixes. This one was a hippopotamus just leaving the edge of the cliff, turning over and over— you could tell by the curving lines—in the air toward the sea below where surprised fish were leaping goggle-eyed out of the water. There was a balloon over the hippopotamus—where his head should have been but his bottom actually was—"Oh!" it was saying. "I seem to have forgotten my glasses."
Jesse began to smile. If he decided to show it to May Belle, he would have to explain the joke, but once he did, she would laugh like a live audience on TV.

He would like to show his drawings to his dad, but he didn’t dare. When he was in first grade, he had told his dad that he wanted to be an artist when he grew up. He’d thought his dad would be pleased. He wasn’t. “What are they teaching in that damn school?” he had asked. “Bunch of old ladies turning my only son into some kind of a...” He had stopped on the word, but Jess had gotten the message. It was one you didn’t forget, even after four years.

The devil of it was that none of his regular teachers ever liked his drawings. When they’d catch him scribbling, they’d screech about wasted time, wasted paper, wasted ability. Except Miss Edmunds, the music teacher. She was the only one he dared show anything to, and she’d only been at school one year, and then only on Fridays.

Miss Edmunds was one of his secrets. He was in love with her. Not the kind of silly stuff Ellie and Brenda giggled about on the telephone. This was too real and too deep to talk about, even to think about very much. Her long swishy black hair and blue, blue eyes. She could play the guitar like a regular recording star, and she had that soft floaty voice that made Jess squish inside. Lord, she was gorgeous. And she liked him, too.

One day last winter he’d given her one of his pictures. Just shoved it into her hand after class and run. The next Friday she’d asked him to stay a minute after class. She said he was “unusually talented,” and she hoped he wouldn’t let anything discourage him, but would “keep it up.” That meant, Jess believed, that she thought he was the best. It was not the kind of best that counted either at school or at home, but it was a genuine kind of best. He kept the knowledge of it buried inside himself like a pirate treasure. He was rich, very rich, but no one could know about it for now except his fellow outlaw, Julia Edmunds.

“Sounds like some kinda hippie,” his mother had said when Brenda, who had been in seventh grade last year, de-scribed Miss Edmunds to her.

She probably was. Jess wouldn’t argue that, but he saw her as a beautiful wild creature who had been caught for a moment in that dirty old cage of a schoolhouse, perhaps by mistake. But he hoped, he prayed, she’d never get loose and fly away. He managed to endure the whole boring week of school for that one half hour on Friday afternoons when they’d sit on the worn-out rug on the floor of the teachers’ room (there was no place else in the building for Miss Edmunds to spread out all her stuff) and sing songs like “My Beautiful Balloon,” “This Land Is Your Land,” “Free to Be You and Me,” “Blowing in the Wind” and because Mr. Turner, the principal, insisted, “God Bless America.”

Miss Edmunds would play her guitar and let the kids take turns on the autoharp, the triangles, cymbals, tambourines, and bongo drum. Lord, could they ever make a racket! All the teachers hated Fridays. And a lot of the kids pretended to.

But Jess knew what fakes they were. Sniffing “hippie” and “peacenik” even though the Vietnam War was over and it was supposed to be OK again to like peace, the kids would make fun of Miss Edmunds’ lack of lipstick or the cut of her jeans. She was, of course, the only female teacher anyone had ever seen in Lark Creek Elementary wearing pants. In Washington and its fancy suburbs, even in Millsburg, that was OK, but Lark Creek was the
backwash of fashion. It took them a long time to accept there what everyone could see by their TV's was OK anywhere else.

So the students of Lark Creek Elementary sat at their desks all Friday, their hearts thumping with anticipation as they listened to the joyful pandemonium pouring out from the teachers' room, spent their allotted half hours with Miss Edmunds under the spell of her wild beauty and in the snare of her enthusiasms, and then went out and pretended that they couldn't be suckered by some hippie in tight jeans with make-up all over her eyes but none on her mouth.

Jess just kept his mouth shut. It wouldn't help to try to defend Miss Edmunds against their unjust and hypocritical attacks. Besides, she was beyond such stupid behavior. It couldn't touch her. But whenever possible, he stole a few minutes on Friday just to stand close to her and hear her voice, soft and smooth as suede, assuring him that he was a "neat kid."

We're alike, Jess would tell himself, me and Miss Edmunds. Beautiful Julia. The syllables rolled through his head like a ripple of guitar chords. We don't belong at Lark Creek, Julia and me. "You're the proverbial diamond in the rough," she'd said to him once, touching his nose lightly with the tip of her electrifying finger. But it was she who was the diamond, sparkling out of that muddy, grassless, dirty-brick setting.

"Jess-see!"

Jess shoved the pad and pencils under his mattress and lay down flat, his heart thumping against the quilt.

His mother was at the door. "You milk yet?"

He jumped off the bed. "Just going to." He dodged around her and out, grabbing the pail from beside the sink and the stool from beside the door, before she could ask him what he had been up to.

Lights were winking out from all three floors of the old Perkins place. It was nearly dark. Miss Bessie's bag was tight, and she was fidgeting with discomfort. She should have been milked a couple of hours ago. He eased himself onto the stool and began to tug; the warm milk pinged into the pail. Down on the road an occasional truck passed by with its dimmers on.

His dad would be home soon, and so would those cagey girls who managed somehow to have all the fun and leave him and their mother with all the work. He wondered what they had bought with all their money. Lord, what he wouldn't give for a new pad of real art paper and a set of those marking pens - color pouring out onto the page as fast as you could think it. Not like stubby school crayons you had to press down on till somebody bitched about your breaking them.

A car was turning in. It was the Timmons'. The girls had beat Dad home. Jess could hear their happy calls as the car doors slammed. Momma would fix them supper, and when he went in with the milk, he'd find them all laughing and chattering. Momma'd even forget she was tired and mad. He was the only one who had to take that stuff. Sometimes he felt so lonely among all these females - even the one rooster had died, and they hadn't yet gotten
another. With his father gone from sunup until well past dark, who was there to know how he felt? Weekends weren't any better. His dad was so tired from the wear and tear of the week and trying to catch up around the place that when he wasn't actually working, he was sleeping in front of the TV.

"Hey, Jesse." May Belle. The dumb kid wouldn't even let you think privately.

"What do you want now?"

He watched her shrink two sizes. "I got something to tell you." She hung her head.

"You ought to be in bed," he said huffily, mad at himself for cutting her down.

"Ellie and Brenda come home."

"Came. Came home." Why couldn't he quit picking on her? But her news was too delicious to let him stop her sharing it. "Ellie bought herself a see-through blouse, and Momma's throwing a fit!"

Good, he thought. "That ain't nothing to cheer about," he said.

Baripity, baripity, baripity.

"Daddy!" May Belle screamed with delight and started running for the road. Jess watched his dad stop the truck, lean over to unlatch the door, so May Belle could climb in. He turned away. Durn lucky kid. She could run after him and grab him and kiss him. It made Jess ache inside to watch his dad grab the little ones to his shoulder, or lean down and hug them. It seemed to him that he had been thought too big for that since the day he was born.

When the pail was full, he gave Miss Bessie a pat to move her away. Putting the stool under his left arm, he carried the heavy pail carefully, so none of the milk would slop out.

"Mighty late with the milking, aren't you, son?" It was the only thing his father said directly to him all evening.

The next morning he almost didn't get up at the sound of the pickup. He could feel, even before he came fully awake, how tired he still was. But May Belle was grinning at him, propped up on one elbow. "Ain't 'cha gonna run?" she asked.

"No," he said, shoving the sheet away. "I'm gonna fly."

Because he was more tired than usual, he had to push himself harder. He pretended that Wayne Pettis was there, just ahead of him, and he had to keep up. His feet pounded the uneven ground, and he threshed his arms harder and harder. He'd catch him. "Watch out, Wayne Pettis," he said between his teeth. "I'll get you. You can't beat me."

"If you're so afraid of the cow," the voice said, "why don't you just climb the fence?"

He paused in midair like a stop-action TV shot and turned, almost losing his balance, to face the questioner, who was sitting on the fence nearest the old Perkins place, dangling bare
brown legs. The person had jaggedy brown hair cut close to its face and wore one of those blue undershirtlike tops with faded jeans cut off above the knees. He couldn't honestly tell whether it was a girl or a boy.

"Hi," he or she said, jerking his or her head toward the Perkins place. "We just moved in."

Jess stood where he was, staring.

The person slid off the fence and came toward him. "I thought we might as well be friends," it said. "There's no one else close by."

Girl, he decided. Definitely a girl, but he couldn't have said why he was suddenly sure. She was about his height—not quite though, he was pleased to realize as she came nearer.

"My name's Leslie Burke."

She even had one of those dumb names that could go either way, but he was sure now that he was right.

"What's the matter?"

"Huh?"

"Is something the matter?"

"Yeah. No." He pointed his thumb in the direction of his own house, and then wiped his hair off his forehead. "Jess Aarons." Too bad May Belle's girl came in the wrong size. "Well-well."

He nodded at her. "See you." He turned toward the house. No use trying to run any more this morning. Might as well milk Miss Bessie and get that out of the way.

"Hey!" Leslie was standing in the middle of the cow field, her head tilted and her hands on her hips. "Where you going?"

"I got work to do," he called back over his shoulder. When he came out later with the pail and stool, she was gone.