

“THE SCARLET IBIS”

by James Hurst

It was in the clove of seasons, summer was dead but autumn had not yet been born, that the Ibis lit in the bleeding tree.

It's strange that all this is still so clear to me, now that summer has long since fled. A grindstone stands where that bleeding tree stood, and sometimes, like right now, as I sit in our cool parlor, the grindstone begins to turn – and I remember – Doodle.

Doodle was just about the craziest brother a boy ever had. He was born when I was six and was, from the outset, a disappointment. He seemed all head, and everyone thought he was going to die – but somehow he didn't.

Mama and Daddy named him William Armstrong; but such a name sounds good only on a tombstone.

When he finally learned to crawl, he always crawled backward just like a doodlebug, so I began to call him Doodle, and I guess renaming my brother was the kindest thing I ever did for him. Nobody expects much from someone called Doodle.

Although Doodle learned to crawl, he showed no signs of walking. Daddy built him a go-cart and I had to pull him around wherever I went. Mama would call, “Take Doodle with you.”

When Doodle was five years old, I was embarrassed at having a brother of that age who couldn't walk, so I set out to teach him, down in Old Woman Swamp.

It seemed so hopeless from the beginning that it's a miracle I didn't give up. But all of us must have something or someone to be proud of, and Doodle had become mine. I didn't know then that pride is a wonderful, terrible thing: a seed that bears two vines – life and death. Every day that summer we went to Old Woman Swamp and I put him on his feet at least a hundred times.

Finally, one day, he stood alone for a few seconds and, when he fell, I grabbed him in my arms and hugged him, our laughter peeling through the swam like a ringing bell. Now we knew it could be done.

With success so imminent, we decided not to tell anyone until he could actually walk. At breakfast on our chosen day, I pulled Doodle to the door in the go-cart and had them turn their backs, making them cross their hearts and hope to die if they peeked. I helped Doodle up, and when he was standing alone, I let them look. There wasn't a sound as Doodle walked slowly across the room and sat down at his place at the table. Then Mama began to cry, hugging and kissing him. Daddy hugged him, too, and Doodle told them it was I who had taught him to walk, so everyone wanted to hug me, and I began to cry, too.

"What're you crying for?" Daddy asked, but I couldn't answer. They didn't know that I had done it for myself – for pride.

Now that I had taught Doodle to walk, I began to believe in my own infallibility. I would teach him to run, to swim, to climb trees – and to fight!!

That winter we didn't make much progress, for I was in school and Doodle suffered from one bad cold after another. But when spring came, rich and warm, we raised our sights again and success lay at the end of summer like a pot of gold!

So we came to that clove of seasons. It was a hot, sultry day and Daddy, Mama, Doodle and I were seated at the dining table having lunch. Suddenly, from out in the yard, came a strange croaking noise.

Doodle excused himself, went out into the yard and looked up into the bleeding tree. "It's a great big red bird!"

At the very top of the tree was a large bird, with scarlet feathers and long legs. It looked as though it could fall at any moment.

Doodle's hands were clasped at his throat. "What is it?"

At that moment the bird began to flutter, and amid much flapping and a spray of floaty feathers, it tumbled down, landing at our feet with a thud.

Even death
Did not mar its grace,
For it lay on the earth
Like a broken vase
Of red flowers.

“It’s dead,” Mama said.

Daddy replied, “It’s a scarlet ibis. A storm must have brought it here.”

A scarlet ibis! How many miles it had traveled to die like this, in our yard, beneath the bleeding tree.

Later that day, Doodle and I hurried off to Horsehead Landing and got into a skiff and floated down the creek with the tide. After we had drifted a long way, I put the oars in place and made Doodle row back against the tide. Black clouds began to gather in the southwest, and he kept trying to pull the oars a little faster. When we reached Horsehead Landing, the sun disappeared and darkness descended, almost like night. The lightning was near now, and from fear, Doodle walked so close, he kept stepping on my heels. The faster I walked, the faster he walked, so I began to run.

“Brother! Brother, don’t leave me! Don’t LEAVE me!” Doodle cried.

The knowledge that my plans had come to naught was bitter, and a streak of cruelty within me awakened. I ran till I could hear his voice no more. Shortly I stopped and waited for Doodle, but he never came. Finally, I went back and found him huddled beneath a red nightshade bush. His face was buried in his arms, which were resting on his drawn-up knees.

“Well, let’s go, Doodle.”

But he didn’t answer, so I reached down to help him up. Limply, he fell backward onto the earth. He had been bleeding from the mouth, and his neck and front of his shirt were stained a brilliant red.

“Doodle!!!!” (Shock & Realization) “Oh, Doodle – Oh, Doodle!”

I began to weep, and the tear-blurred vision in red before me looked very familiar.

I threw my body to the earth above his. For a long, long time, it seemed forever, I lay there – crying – sheltering my fallen scarlet ibis from the heresy of the rain.