HONEY BOY

A TRADITIONAL STORY OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH

The old woman sat on the old couch in the steaming heat of an August afternoon in Bayou, Mississippi, which is about ten miles from the County line. She was all alone, and sat looking around at her old furniture and the frayed rug on the floor. She got up to sweep the dust around a little bit, then settled back into her favorite chair, the one with the faded yellow pillow that her Aunt Ivy had made so many years before. Everything was old and still. Even the flies on the window sill were too lazy to lift themselves from their resting place in the cool shade of the sash.

Everybody called her Mom, although she had only had one child. She got up slowly and moved to the center of the room to turn on her radio. It was a splendid radio, new, shiny, of glistening mahogany wood. It stood out even more because it was the only new thing in the whole house. But Mom didn't like it for that, she worshipped that radio because it had been a present from Honey Boy. She still remembered the day he had brought it two years before, riding down the dusty road with his hot rod, blowing the horn and yelling and singing, with his best friend Big Blue, his sidekick he called him, right by his side. They had made her close her eyes and stand there in the middle of that room while they carried it in, all shiny and bright, all the time laughing like little kids. Then they turned her around and around like ring around the rosy in the second grade until she was all dizzy and faint. After that, they had made her open her eyes. Mom cried and cried and hugged Honey Boy and hugged Big Blue, and they had a celebration with iced tea and molasses cakes, and they sang and danced with Rudy Vallee and Eddie Cantor and laughed with Amos and Andy and Allen's Alley.

They called him Honey Boy because when he was born he had a big birthmark on his right shoulder that looked just like a beehive. Nobody knew his real name. Everybody liked Honey Boy because he was a good friend, a wild, uncontrollable sort in school but so genuine and unaffecting that even his teachers had a hard time scolding him. He was so full of life that he could never sit still. He was always squirming and plotting, he and Big Blue always, making big plans to get rich and take their mamas to live in big houses right in the middle of town.

Mom sat on the old couch that August afternoon watching the radio. She always said she "watched" the radio because she heard the voices and the music, but she saw Honey Boy's face on the front of the radio, with that big smile he always had. But when she heard the words "WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE", and then heard Honey Boy's name, she got up, turned the radio off, and began to wait. She didn't have to wait long. Just a few hours later she heard the car moving very slowly down the dirt road that led to Mom's house. It was moving so slowly that it sounded like it never wanted to get there. Mom knew. Mom waited. And a feeling of deep weariness came over her whole body, as if something was pressing down real hard on her.

The sheriff was the biggest man in the County, and the wooden steps creaked as he ascended. Despite his size, he could have the softest voice, just a little higher than a whisper, but everyone understood him just fine. You just had to look in his eyes to catch his meaning. His eyes told everything. The sheriff knew this, so sometimes he put on a pair of dark sunglasses. He had these on now, but when Mom came to the door, he took them off. His words were orderly:
"Hello, Mrs. Summers. Sorry to bother you. I hate to do this. But it's my job. I have to ask you to take a ride to the station house with me. It's official business. I wish you didn't have to. But it's official business."
Mom understood right away. Her face had no expression at all. She replied:
"All right sheriff. I just have to get my coat."

Now the sheriff didn't tell her that she didn't need a coat, in that great heat in August. Her dress was a little old, and had been mended in a few places. But she had a beautiful pink coat, spotless and new, that Honey Boy had given her one Sunday morning, as he came flying through town, ready to embark on a new adventure, and he promised her that he would come back rich and take her to live in a big house. With her new coat on, she was ready, and she accompanied the sheriff to the car.
On the way, the sheriff remained silent for a long time, and drove so slowly that you could count the weeds along the side of the road. Finally, he coughed a little, and began:
"Ma'am, I hate to have to do this, but I have to. You see, I have a dead body in my office, and they think it's Honey Boy. There was a $100,000 reward to turn in Honey Boy dead or alive, and Big Blue, he come struttin' in this mornin' and he say that he'd shot Honey Boy. For the reward. He wants the $100,000. So we need you to identify Honey Boy. You see, he was shot in the face, and we can't recognize whether it's him or not. So that's why I have to bring you out there. They say a mother always knows her son. I'm awful sorry. But it's official business, you understand."
When they pulled up in front of the station house, there was a big crowd of people, all talking and milling around. On the top step was Big Blue. He was telling a bunch of them what he was going to do with all his money.
Big Blue said:
"I'm going to buy myself a new car, and a house and some land. I'm going to buy myself some new clothes and get myself married, oh yeah."
But when Mom came slowly up the steps he hushed and bowed his head. She walked right up to him and said:
"Big Blue, how've you been. You've not been to the house lately. I've not seen you with my Honey Boy. Don't you like my iced tea anymore?"
Big Blue didn't say a word, but kept his head down.
The sheriff led Mom into the dusty station house. They moved slowly towards a small room in the back where on a table in the corner was a large mass covered with a bright white sheet. The sheriff apologized again:
"Ma'am, I'm terribly sorry to have to make you do this. But you understand. Now, I'm going to show you the body. As soon as you're sure, tell me."

Then the sheriff slowly peeled the sheet from the body, starting at the top of the head and unrolling oh so slowly down, past the disfigured, unrecognizable face to the broad shoulders. It seemed that he lingered a bit in this position, as they both looked at the beehive birthmark on the right shoulder. Mom did not make a sound, did not move. However, if you looked real close you might have been able to perceive a tiny tear welling up in the corner of one eye. Then the sheriff continued, moving down the chest, until Mom said softly:
"That's enough sheriff. I'm sure. I know now. You know that a mother always knows her son. That's not Honey Boy."

There was utter silence in the room. Neither person said anything. They just stood there looking at the whiteness of the sheet covering the body. Finally, the sheriff moved slowly towards her and said:
"Thank you ma'am. I'm real sorry. But you understand. It's official business. Thank you for your help. I'll take you home now. Could you wait in the car a moment?"
As Mom walked out the door, her face without a trace of emotion, the crowd outside hushed. She walked over to Big Blue and touched his face, and said to him:
"So long, Big Blue. Say hello to your Mama for me."

And she moved down to the car, opened the door and sat in the front seat and looked straight ahead at the dusty main street.
When the sheriff came out, the crowd suddenly came to life. Big Blue had a big smile on his face, and an expectant look in his eyes. The sheriff came over and said:
"Big Blue, put out your hand." He said: "Oooo eeee, sheriff. I can't wait to get that reward."
The sheriff continued, as if not hearing, "Big Blue, put out your other hand."
Big Blue went on, "Woooo, it's a powerful lot of money."
Just then the sheriff clapped the handcuffs on his wrist, and looked him right in the eye: "Big Blue, you're under arrest. For murder. Mrs. Summers has identified the body. It's not Honey Boy. You've killed an innocent man."
Big Blue just stared out, his eyes wide in amazement. Then he bellowed out: "What do you mean sheriff? Are you telling me I don't know my best friend? I killed my best friend! I killed Honey Boy!" He was still shouting as the sheriff led him away.

As the car rolled slowly down the dirt road leading to Mom's house neither spoke a word. It wasn't until he had brought Mom to the door, that the sheriff finally spoke: "Thank you ma'am. I'm just doing my job."

The old woman sat down on that old couch and looked around at her old furniture and the frayed rug on the floor. Now, in the calm of her sanctuary she looked at the glistening radio, which she never turned on again in her life, and started to cry very profoundly, to the accompaniment of a moan that sounded like a chant: "Oh, Honey Boy ... Oh, Honey Boy ... Oh, Honey Boy."