

## Leaf Hawk

The cake had been stored in an old Tupperware container with a red plastic handle. The sides and top of the container surely had once been transparent, but over time taken on a milkiness, a thickness, becoming almost opaque. Before they'd finished the angel food cake Mrs. Bridges had sent them, Irving and his mother had seen the dessert as a dark gray shadow looming behind the cover. Upon lifting the cover they found a tall, airy-looking golden ring. But now that the cake was gone, it was time to return the Tupperware.

"You should do it," Irving's mother told him. "Mrs. Bridges would be so proud of you." Later on in his life, Irving would come to know that by saying such a thing she meant only to get rid of him for a few hours. Those were the months immediately following his father's departure from the house, and his mother, reeling, needed the company of men. But as a child, he thought only his mother had this important errand to run, their household had this task to be completed, and he should be the one to do it; it would be significant for him to venture out on his own and return the cake container.

In his mind, Irving could see the house where he must go, as though visualizing it would help him actually get there. Mrs. Bridges lived alone in a long, low dark blue house that had once been painted olive green. It went to blue from olive after her husband died. A flag pole stood in her yard like an elongated silver sword. Irving always found it strange to see a flag pole in front of a house on a lane through the woods. Flag poles, he thought, should be reserved for officious, public government buildings: banks, post offices, schools. Not out here in the boonies.

Irving carried the cake container, looking at the tall gray trees on either side of the lane. Here were the bleeding gums, which every October turned red before any other trees, and which his father always pointed out to him. Here was the Monster Tree, as they called this scaly oak creature hunching over the road. Here was the sycamore, at the bend in the road, silently

sucking up the moisture (his father had told him such trees loved moisture) in the ground near the old well. He went up a hill and down its other side, then up another one.

See, it wasn't so bad. And in time there she was, waiting for him, her garage door open, she standing in the garage at the foot of some little steps leading to a paneled door. Mrs. Bridges wore what she always wore, a blue denim button-down, with blue jeans, and white Keds. She had short, cropped white hair like a man. She wore big faintly tinted glasses. She stood next to her red Jeep Cherokee (a "classic," she had once told him). Next to that was her son's yellow and white striped Jeep pickup.

Mrs. Bridges did not lift a hand, did not wave, but watched him approach. Irving curved around her driveway's big yellow rocks. There was the flag pole. He went up to her. With the Tupperware in his hand they stepped inside.

"Sit down," she told him, gesturing to a chair next to her dining table. Irving sat down. Mrs. Bridges went into her kitchen, a long kitchen, what Irving's mother had called a "galley" kitchen, and pulled out a box of Sweet-n-Low, the pink sweetener Irving's mother liked. She went to the fridge and pulled out a tall plastic pitcher of a dark liquid he knew was instant iced tea.

The old woman carried the pitcher and the sweetener in, then set these down on the dining table in front of him. She went back to the kitchen for two glasses, added ice cubes to these, then walked back over and sat down.

The cake holder perched on the table. It was easy to forget he'd come here to return that; it seemed this was a date for a social occasion rather than a practical thing like returning a borrowed item. Mrs. Bridges breathed loudly. The backs of her hands had bones protruding out of them in fanning, straight lines that seemed to lead to each of her fingers. Her skin was mottled, pink and apricot and even a little dull violet. As they sat there, a car rumbled past, and Irving didn't have time to see what kind of car it was. Mrs. Bridges looked out the window then back at him.

"Your mother requires all kinds of visitors," she said. "Delivery men, food guys, guys collecting trash—of course we get the Ricers brothers, too, guys delivering flowers, from Bloomington, plumbers, electricians... Rich always did all of our stuff around the house himself."

There was a large pale blue porcelain ash tray on the table; Mrs. Bridges pulled this over. She pulled out a pack of Salem cigarettes and lit one with a small plastic lighter.

Irving drank his tea. It tasted flaky, like there were little bits unstirred together.

Mrs. Bridges stared across the room, at the screened-in porch beyond which tree branches and green leaves could be seen. “Lot of deer lately, licking the salt blocks,” she said. “Your dad would love ‘em. It’s actually good he’s not always around anymore, out in the woods. I always thought he was going to go like Richard.”

She took a puff of her cigarette. Irving watched her. Her husband had been killed in the woods by a falling tree branch. Irving gripped the wooden chair he sat on. The prospect of talking about death with an adult was terrifying. Was that really what was going to happen?

“I just knew it would,” said Mrs. Bridges. “So I’m glad he’s not out there. But I am sorry about your folks. It’s hard for people to stay happy.”

No, not death—loneliness; she was going to talk about loneliness. But then she said, “I didn’t even hear anything that morning. It wasn’t even windy.” She stopped a moment and seemed to consider. “A widow-maker, made a widow out of me. Yes, a widow-maker,” she said. “That’s what we call one of those tree branches that dangles. One of those fellas just waiting to drop. All it takes is a strong wind. Or not even that strong of a wind, just the wind at the right angle, really. And down it goes. Right on to you.” She looked at Irving. Irving didn’t know what to tell her. He didn’t have a clue. *Widow-maker*. It reminded him of a spider. Black widow.

“You know when we first moved here, this road didn’t have a name. We were the ones to name it. It didn’t have a name, and the county told us, now that there were people living back here, we had to have a name for it. And it was kind of like the thing that took him, that gave us the name.”

Irving looked at Mrs. Bridges, knowing this was indication he should ask a question. “How did it get the name?”

“Well,” said Mrs. Bridges, “it was only a few months after we moved in. And it was a really stormy night. I mean, things were blowing around like crazy. It was a thunderstorm, so you know, lightning would flash, and the whole sky would light up green, and all that. And we’re out here, sitting on the porch, as we would back then, Rich loved to watch him a good storm.

And he says he sees something. See something? I say to him. Where? And he said, up there, in the tree. Well of course there's about a million trees out here, right, but I look to where he's looking, and even though everything is thrashing about, I can see what he means, up in one of them branches. And I look. And I look longer. I think it's a bird, I tell him. That's an awfully big bird, he says to me. And I say I know it is but what else could it be? And we don't say anything for a minute, just kind of keep watching, and then he says to me, You know what I think you're right, I think that's a bird. It must be a big hawk. Cause we'd been seeing these great big red-tailed hawks flying around ever since we moved in. We thought they'd be good to have. We couldn't get a kitten, of course, couldn't keep a cat, but hey we thought they'd keep the mice population down. Besides I don't like cats. Never have. Anyway, we say, look at that hawk, and we are just amazed, watching it sit there, in that tree, and the branches are all moving about, the whole tree is going side to side in the wind, and the rain is picking up, and the lightning is flashing, and thunder and all this, and the hawk is just sitting there, mild as can be, paying no attention to anything, not really moving.

"Well, eventually, we realize it's midnight, so we get on up and go on to bed. I turn out my light, he turns out his light. And we go to sleep. Next thing I know, it's morning, there's light in the room, and I am hearing Richard, putting his feet on the floor. I hear him go out into the hall and then I hear the door to the porch. It scrapes and bangs along real loudly. And then I hear him go, 'Well I'll be damned! The hawk's still there!' So I stand up and put on my slippers and go out and join him and stand there on the porch and look out and up in the treetops, in the exact same place as last night, in the same crook of the tree, I see this kind of thick dark brown shape, like a hawk. Only it's not a hawk. No. I look more closely. And Rich's smiling, now. Grinning real widely. No, not a hawk. A pile of leaves. We looked at the leaves then went in and made ourselves our coffee and then we sat down at the dining table and the thing both of us were thinking, was, how on earth, in all that wind, in all that racket, that wild storm, how did that clump of leaves stay in one place?"

Mrs. Bridges went silent, staring at her red cup, her tea. Irving looked at her face. "So you decided to name the road Leaf Hawk."

She nodded. "That's right."

"Because you thought it was a hawk but it was leaves."

“Right.”

Irving sipped his tea. It seemed he was supposed to make some significance of the fact the pile of leaves hadn't moved, had survived the storm without being tossed about. What was important about that?

“For the longest time those leaves were up there, no matter how big a storm blew in, even one of them tornadoes came in, I don't know if you remember that, you were probably too young, one of those just blew in and ripped all kinds of things up, and the leaves were all in the highway and water was flowing out of the ditches and all that, but the leaves were still there.” She paused a moment, her mouth a straight line. “Then, one morning, we woke up, looked out, and they were gone.

“Gone,” she said, again.

“Do you know what made them drop?”

“Drop, scatter, no, we don't know. Just looked out, and they weren't there.” Mrs. Bridges paused, seeming to stare at something. “Maybe they were right there on the ground under the tree, for all we know they were. But you couldn't tell, of course. Once they fell... They were just leaves.”

Irving didn't say anything. He took a drink of his tea. Mrs. Bridges puffed her cigarette, watched him. She rattled the ice in her glass. “Is your mother doing fine?”

“My mom?”

Mrs. Bridges nodded.

“I think so, yes.”

“Good. You keep an eye on her. She'll need you, you know.”

Irving nodded. He did know his mother needed him, but he seemed to need her more. She always seemed ready to leave his room at night, after saying good night to him. While he would prefer to drift off and fall asleep and find her there beside him when he woke up in the middle of the night, she always seemed eager to slip away. This sense he had of her desiring to leave him made him anxious and unable to fall asleep. It felt like she was waiting for the sign that he was asleep. Knowing this made it difficult for actual sleep to happen.

“I wish Torrance were better, but he's just not, you know. Your mother would never go for him. I don't blame her.”

Torrance was Mrs. Bridges' son. He had a very red face. Often he walked in the woods, alone, with a big stick. Sometimes he had a white

beard, sometimes he didn't. For a while he was the manager of the local McDonald's, the only one in town, and that was a big deal. He wore a periwinkle polo and had this fancy headset geared up to his right ear. They could remember seeing him a few times when they went through the drive-thru. It was wild seeing somebody you knew from out on Leaf Hawk Lane, in town like that, and in a place as busy and big-named as McDonald's. Like two worlds colliding. But that was a short-lived circumstance; before long Torrance was back out in the woods, with his stick, and soon it got to the point that Irving's mother didn't like to stop and roll down the window and talk to him when she saw him, in his plaid jacket, as she drove by. His breath always smelled funny. You could smell the smell he had even from feet away. It was a sort of sour smell, like the drink his father used to drink at night, the whiskey.

"No, I don't blame her," said Mrs. Bridges. "Anyway. I need some more tea. Would you like some more tea? Oh, no you still got some. I'll be right back." She stood, slowly, grabbing the sides of her arrowback chair, and then she walked toward her kitchen, slowly.

On the walk home, Irving observed yellow puddles in the lane, ovals of water colored by the road's silty mud. The branches formed an intricate web of wood overhead. Some of them had leaves, but most of them were bare. Some of the branches creaked. Irving walked in a mixture of contemplation and vigilance. Hearing about death and loneliness from Mrs. Bridges had seemed daunting, but really the subjects had been a little interesting, kind of enchanting, the way the books he liked to read—about girls who wear scarves so their heads don't fall off—were enchanting. The topics seemed removed and apart from him, far away.

A rumbling could be heard, and gravel skittering; a car roared down the hill in front of him. Irving froze. The pointy dark blue nose of a vehicle barreled toward him. So here it was. Death. He'd thought it was far away, but he'd been foolish. Wrong. The car kept coming. Something in him then activated itself, something that seemed bigger than he was, almost as though he was a puppet at the end of some strings. Maybe the trees with their branches were the puppetmaster, moving him. He leapt out of the way. He tumbled into some leaves and brambles on the side of the road.

At home, his mother opened the front door after he had climbed the front steps.

“Look who’s home. Look who walked all the way to Mrs. Bridges’ and back.”

“Your boyfriend almost hit me.”

“What did you say?”

“Your boyfriend almost hit me. He came flying down the hill and almost hit me. I had to jump out of the way.”

He’d never before used that word—boyfriend—but he knew that’s what the man in the blue Pontiac was for his mother. His father had used the word one of the last times he was in their kitchen. He had stood next to the peninsula counter while Irving was eating a Red Baron sausage and pepperoni pizza and said, “I think your mother’s going to leave us. She’s got a boyfriend.”

Irving’s mother closed the door behind them. Their German shepherd, Heidi, walked in, cut a circle around her. “What has Mrs. Bridges been saying to you?”

Irving walked out of the room to his bedroom.

That night, in bed, with his mother asleep across the hall, Irving turned and traced a finger along the train on the wallpaper. He could almost feel the sharp corner of the red caboose, the red square. And this blue rectangle. And this yellow triangle, he could almost feel its point. It was only flat paper, with different colors, forming a border around his room. But it seemed he could feel dimensions to each color and the geometric shape each made. His mother had come to say goodnight to him tonight, like usual, but tonight her breath had seemed sour, like Torrance’s, Mrs. Bridges’s strange son’s, and he’d been ready for her to leave even before she did. It had been a reprieve when she left him here alone.