



Don't Make the Blackbirds Cry

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Excerpt

ONE

Cory Don Sonnet secretly watched them cut the three little girl's throats, all the while trying not to scream his fool head off. Although it was a late humid June evening, he shivered in dread as he crouched behind the stack of discarded boxes and battered trash cans that old man Birdwell had always placed outside his small general store every Saturday evening at closing time. That was the reason for his dilemma now — Birdwell's damned store.

Fourteen-year-old Cory Don had arrived at the store an hour earlier, just past 11:00 PM, a full hour after closing time. After waiting a few minutes to ensure the place was locked up for the evening, he'd used his prized Buck skinning knife his brother Jack had given him for his last birthday to pry open the rear window, then quietly slipped inside. The knife had been Jack's favorite. He'd found it one day while cutting through the woods to their favorite skinny-dipping hole. Covered with rust and the point missing, it had obviously either been lost or discarded by an earlier hunter. Jack, who had a knack for doing things with his hands, cleaned and oiled the old knife until it looked like new, sharpened the blade and filed the point back even better than before. He liked to wear it whenever they hiked through the woods. Jack always knew how much his younger brother coveted that knife, and for Cory's thirteenth birthday, Jack had presented it to him. Years later, Cory always wondered if Jack had known he was dying even then, and that was why he'd parted with it.

Anyway, it'd come in handy this night because he would've never pried the window open without it. It had been dark inside the store but Cory knew what he wanted and made directly for it. Where Birdwell kept his weekly cash intake was no secret. Crap, the whole town knew he always put it in that old cigar box under the raw hamburger cases in the meat-locker. But it wasn't the money Cory was after. It was food he'd wanted — and maybe another box of .22 ammo for his single-shot rifle. He was half-starved. As much as he disliked stealing from the old man, it was either be a thief and survive or just lay down out in the woods and slowly starve to death.

Not that anyone in this stinking town would care much if he did die. Just another lowly Sonnet getting his just deserts. That's what they'd say. His father had drowned in Carver Creek last summer while on one of his famous drunken binges. He'd jumped into the angry swollen stream while trying to escape from Sheriff Brodie and two of his deputies. That was right after he came home drunk and beat Cory and his brother Jack into unconsciousness then choked their pregnant mother to death. One of the neighbors, probably nosey old Ned Scruggs, had heard screams as he drove past their three-room shanty they called home and finally phoned the law. Used to disturbances at the Sonnet household, the deputies had arrived too late to do any of them much good.

That crazy night had left him and his brother Jack completely alone. Jack was a very mature, two full years older than Cory Don. The two of them were all that remained of the wild and much despised Sonnet family. Oh, their dad had spoken of a sister in California somewhere who he absolutely detested. And he vaguely remembered his mother speaking of an elderly aunt in Maine, or maybe it'd been New York — if she was even still alive. Nobody knew either of their married names or how to contact them anyway. What was plain

though, was that no one in the town of Logan was going to step forward and volunteer to care for the two orphaned teenagers — two orphaned *Sonnet* children.

Although older than his sibling, Jack was even smaller and skinnier than Cory Don. That was due to a unique and rare medical condition that neither he nor his young brother could pronounce. Always frail and sickly, he'd done his best to act grown up and care for Cory Don, but when the end finally came he was just another scared little boy, crying for his dead mother. Jack had died only six months earlier of the incurable disease, no more than a skeleton at the time. For years to come Cory Don wondered that if Jack had been the son of one of those well-to-do families of Logan, would the doctors have found some way to save him?

The town did pay to bury him though — right beside his mother and father. Other than Cory Don, only five people attended the funeral; the pastor of the old Negro church, the graveyard caretaker and two laborers waiting impatiently to cover Jack up. Cory didn't cry at the funeral, a fact that was much talked about in the small town of Logan for some time to come. He did later though. Alone and scared in the old shanty, he cried all that day and the rest of the night. That had been the last time he'd cried since Jack's death, and he vowed it'd be the last ever. But it had been hard at times. During the following months, Cory Don had barely survived on nuts and berries. Sometimes when he got lucky, he had squirrels or rabbits and other small game he could kill with his dad's single-shot .22 caliber rifle. Often, he'd had to get by on what he could steal from people's gardens, and like tonight, from old man Birdwell's store. He didn't like it but it was either that or starve.

The night air had felt heavy with moisture through his thin tee shirt as he slipped back out through the window, leaving the air-conditioned interior of the store. He had just followed his plastic bag of treasures to the pavement when he heard them coming, giggling and hooting as young girls do. He knew who they were even before they came into view. Trapped with his stolen loot and nowhere to go in the narrow alleyway, he'd decided to duck behind the stack of cardboard boxes and trash cans until they passed. Peeking around one of the trash cans, he immediately confirmed it was Sally and Ella Reid and Betty Lou Parker. Eleven-year-old Sally and thirteen-year-old Ella were sisters, the daughters of the same black pastor who had spoken at Jack's funeral — Doctor Samuel Reid. Betty Lou was the daughter of Logan High's eighth-grade teacher, Rita Parker, a tall, striking blond widow with three teenagers.

Betty Lou's older brother, Randy Parker, was two years her senior. Her sister, Kay Sue, was two years younger than Betty Lou's sixteen years. The Parker sisters were the prettiest girls at Logan High, maybe even the whole county. Particularly, Kay Sue, who made his heart race each time he saw her. He'd pretend to ignore her as they passed in the hallway, ashamed of his torn, ragged jeans and long hair. She was royalty — an untouchable princess who resided on a higher level of humanity than Cory Don Sonnet. Secretly, he watched her with fascination every chance he got. If he were ever rich or famous, she would be the kind of girl he'd want for a girlfriend. Kay Sue Parker, the most beautiful girl in the world.

Well . . . maybe not, if she had a brother like Randy Parker. Her older brother had noticed Cory Don staring at his sister in the schoolyard one day early last year. That was back when Cory Don had still cared enough to even go to school. Randy and his tough crowd of older bullies crowded around him so he couldn't escape, then Randy gave him one hell of a beating. He was so sore he couldn't get up from bed for a week, let alone go to school. Cory Don Sonnet never returned to class at Logan High after that.

Trembling with excitement, he silently watched Kay Sue's older sibling and the little black sisters from his smelly hiding place. Despite his dilemma, he was amused by their naughty young girl talk. He'd always suspected girls talked about the same things boys did when they were alone. He snickered softly at some crass, sexual remark one of the Reid sisters made. Although it was unusual to see a mixed-race group of kids on the streets of Logan, especially this late at night, he was soon able to ascertain that sixteen year-old Betty Lou had tutored Pastor Reid's kids in math earlier in the evening and was now walking them back home. They seemed to be having a good time and enjoying each other's company immensely. That was when things went very bad.

At the identical time the three girls entered one end of the dark alley, a group of five men entered the other. They met less than twenty-feet from where Cory Don sweated in fear. Peering through a slight crack in a discarded Maytag container, he could barely make out the identities of three of the newcomers through the shadows. Joe Bob Turner was easy, due to his huge size and dumb way of talking. Eddie Dean Gash was equally easy because of his filthy whining mouth. And finally, Logan High's heart throb and quarterbacking hero, handsome Kurt Brodie, because . . . well, one could always identify Kurt anywhere, even in a crowd. He just had that kind of presence.

All of them were at least three or four years his senior. Cory Don knew them well, mainly because of he and Jack's constant bullying through the years. He had seen most of them do things at school that would've gotten almost anyone else kicked out permanently. They were looked up to and feared by the majority of the kids in Logan, and if the truth were known, many of the adults, too. The other two men stayed in the shadows and didn't say much, except to occasionally grunt and drink from a bottle each time it was passed to them.

At eighteen, Joe Bob Turner was bigger than most of the fully-grown men around town. More than a few had learned the hard way not to cross him, too. Small, skinny Eddie Dean Gash was the first to reach for the bottle from someone out of Cory Don's view. Gash reminded Cory of a weasel, the way his eyes darted around as though looking for a quick escape route. He was mean, foul-mouthed and shifty, but only when the others were around to protect him. Handsome Kurt Brodie was the son of the only sheriff the town of Logan had elected in over twenty years, and the best quarterback Logan High had ever produced. A year younger than Joe Bob, he was nearly as large, but better dressed and much cleaner. He was also the natural leader of this crowd, but tonight he seemed to be deferring to someone who remained in the shadows. Cory wondered who it could be. He wasn't about to move and try to find out though.

It was clear that Betty Lou knew some of the crowd and felt at ease with the situation. At first, the girls joked and flirted with the young men, giggling and flipping around the way all young girls do. Asking if they could have some of the whisky the men were sharing, they held their noses and backed away twittering when it was offered. When the men's talk shifted suddenly to the subject of sex, Betty Lou finally attempted to lead the other girls past them, but Joe Bob's bulk blocked their way.

"What's the hurry, girls? Me and the boys need a little affection. You just wait down by the corner for a few minutes Betty Lou, and we'll send these pretty little Coon sisters to you as soon as we're done with 'em."

Betty Lou didn't back down from the big lout at all, standing firm with her hands on her hips, her cute chin sticking straight out. "Get out of our way, Joe Bob! This isn't funny any more."

She turned her head and spoke into the shadows. "Pistol, you know better than this! Quit screwing around right now and let us pass."

Joe Bob laughed shortly and backhanded her, sending her sprawling against the brick wall with such force that she slumped down and didn't move. To Cory, it looked as though she were either dead or out cold. He was terrified, feeling warmness as his bladder released involuntarily. Screaming sharply, the two Reid sisters broke toward the light at the entrance of the street, but the males were too fast for them. Within seconds, two of the men were between their skinny dark legs, humping vigorously as the others held them down, covering their mouths with big hands. If he hadn't been so scared, it might've looked almost comical to Cory Don.

"Feel good, girl?" Cory heard Joe Bob ask, huffing and grunting between words. "Tell ol' Joe Bob now. Is it good?"

Behind their captor's big hands, Cory could hear the girls trying to beg or scream, as they moaned and whimpered in extreme pain. It went on for a long time, the men exchanging positions periodically with those drinking from the bottle and silently watching. Cory scarcely breathed, holding his own hands over his ears to shut out the brutal sounds, unnoticed tears streaming down his dirty face. He prayed it would be over soon and that they'd let the girls go home so he could get away. Movement in the shadows brought him back to the present. One of the men hidden in the darkness had knelt down beside Betty Lou. She had not moved or made a sound during the time the sisters had been repeatedly assaulted.

"She dead, Pistol?" Joe Bob slurred, taking a deep drink. From where Cory Don crouched, it didn't sound as if he cared one way or the other.

"No," the man with the soft voice said. "But from the looks of that hole in the back of her head, she may be soon."

"What do we do with 'em now?" Kurt said as he rose unsteadily to his feet while attempting to zip his trousers. He was the only one who sounded halfway concerned, now that his lust was behind him.

The shadow man Joe Bob had identified only as *Pistol* stood, and Cory could make out that he wore a hat, the brim covering his face. It was clear the others were willing to take their directions from him. Crouched in

the darkness a few feet away, Cory could hear their hard breathing as they silently waited for him to speak. The man in the hat silently stared down at the injured white girl for a full minute before he answered.

"Nothing we can do now. We have to get rid of the *Nigger* girls."

Silence followed, until Joe Bob said, "Okay, *Pistol*. Your call. What about Betty Lou though? She'll shoot her mouth off about this for sure first chance she gets."

"She'll have to go, too," the hat with the soft voice said. "But first, I'm going to sample some of that young meat. I've watched her prance around for years and I've just been dying to do her high and mighty ass. Now's my chance. I'll never get another one."

Joe Bob, shocked as he half-laughed, then blurted out, "*You?* Well fuck me to tears! This I gotta see! Yes sir, this will be a first! Right boys? Old *Pistol's* gonna do the old dirt road on Betty Lou!"

It didn't last long. When he was finished, the soft-voiced man rose unsteadily to his feet and moved back into the darkness of the shadows. He was out of breath when he finally spoke again. "Give me your knife, Joe Bob."

Cory Don watched in horror as the man in the hat knelt again, his arm rising and falling a dozen times before it stopped. The sounds from the darkness were like those made when sticking a knife in a green watermelon. When it was over, the slender shadow stood and handed the knife to Kurt.

"You first, then Joe Bob. Make sure everyone here takes a crack at it. That way, no one squeals."

The only man who'd been silent up to this point whimpered softly, his voice cracking as he said, "I can't do it, *Pistol!* I never killed no human before! I can't do . . ."

"*Shut up!* Just pretend like it's one of those illegal deer you spotlight, Pos. Nothing to it. Just cut her throat and bleed her like an elk. If you don't go along with the rest of us on this, we'll leave you lying here with these bitches. Now take the fucking knife and stick her!"

The man in the hat, *Pistol*, never raised his voice but it was clear that he expected the scared man to do it. Half-sobbing, the whiner did as he was told, his arm seeming to rise and fall almost reluctantly several times. Then he stood and stared silently down at his handiwork, his ragged breathing the only sounds in the dark alley. The meager illumination from the streetlight fifty-feet away fell on his face. Cory almost cried out when he saw it was a man he knew by the name of *Possum* Palmer. He was somewhat older than the others, disheveled, skinny and frail looking. Cory Don recalled he'd overheard some adults talking one day about *Possum* Palmer's *drinking problem*. Everyone said he was a moon-shiner and a spot-lighter, which meant he made illegal whisky and shot animals from county roads at night after blinding them with his truck's spotlight. It was obvious to everyone except *Possum* that the others in this crowd just let him tag along because he owned a new truck that they could use to get around, and he bought them whiskey. Holding his hand over his mouth, *Possum* suddenly wheeled around and ran toward the deserted street, but he had already spewed his dinner onto the pavement before he reached it.

Joe Bob laughed sharply. "Yellow bastard. We may have to do something about *Possum*. He's going chicken shit on us."

The man in the hat didn't move. He watched silently until *Possum* Palmer had staggered around the corner out of their sight. Then he nodded and softly spoke, as though to himself. "Yes. We might have to do something about *Possum*."

Then the others took their time, seeming to enjoy the task at hand....

Cory Sonnet awoke with a jerk, his clothing drenched with sour sweat. Glancing around quickly to see if any of the other passengers on the old Boeing aircraft had been watching him, he finally allowed himself to breathe a deep sigh of relief. Finally satisfied he hadn't gotten too loud this time, he settled back and looked out the window as they descended into Atlanta. He hadn't been here for years but as soon as sudden turbulence struck the small craft like a giant fist, he quickly remembered just why he'd avoided coming back. A day earlier, he'd been in Kuwait. The world got smaller every day.

Removing a white handkerchief from his inside coat pocket, he wiped perspiration from his tanned forehead with a trembling hand. Over thirty years had passed since that night in the alley behind Birdwell's store, but it still made him react this way. He thought he'd gotten over it a few years before. Lately though, the nightmares had returned, this time with a vengeance. It'd all started with an article by one of his colleagues at the Baltimore Sun. The article had been about some human bones the Logan County Sheriff had found in a dry well on the old Thomas farm. The short article stated it'd been a man who had simply vanished almost thirty years earlier. Nothing but bones now, he none-the-less was easy to identify because he wore a stainless steel watch with his name engraved on the back. The name was that of one, Charles Dale Palmer — old Possum Palmer, himself.

It didn't take a lot of brains to figure out that Possum disappeared about the same time as Cory had witnessed the three girl's deaths behind Birdwell's general store. That was the same day he'd left Logan County for good. Hitchhiking, he'd made it as far as Little Rock before being forced to stop running and earn enough money to live on. First there was a job of setting pins in a bowling alley. Later he'd sacked groceries and worked as a farm hand until he turned seventeen — old enough to join the military. The Marines had shipped him out immediately to Okinawa, then Vietnam. Of course the war was officially over by then, but it seemed the belligerent Vietcong had a bad sense of timing to capture a small naval vessel and hold it along with the crew on a small island just south of mainland Vietnam. He'd been unlucky enough to be a member of the unit chosen to go on the last raid of the war, a mission to get the boat and crew back from an island controlled by about a zillion Vietcong. His wounds had taken months to heal. When they'd finally healed, the government gave him a medal, and better yet, a full medical discharge with a pension. They'd also paid for his high school GED and eventually his entire college tuition. He'd studied journalism.

During those first few months in Little Rock, he'd kept track of what the papers were saying about the brutal murders of the young girls. At first, he was terrified — then furious. There he was, all over the front page of the Logan County Press. They'd used one of his old school pictures, and that was what had probably saved him. It was the one taken while his mother was still alive and she'd just given him a fresh haircut, starched and ironed his shirt, and scrubbed behind his ears in anticipation of the event. It looked just like a thousand other uncomfortable kids in any high school picture, but it didn't look a thing like him. The Logan County Press didn't exactly come right out and say he was the murderer of the three little girls — only that he was a "person of interest" to the investigators on the case. They couldn't have made him sound any less guilty if they'd included pictures of him standing over the girl's bodies with a bloody knife in his hand.

The newspaper was quick to point out that, after all, his fingerprints *had* been found at the scene and *inside* the store. It went on to say, that "local speculation" was that he had probably broken into the store and been seen leaving by the girls who were taking a short cut through the alley. It implied that he *could* have killed them simply to eliminate any witnesses to his crime.

The forensic report from the Highway Patrol lab, however, said it was highly unlikely that a frail, fourteen-year-old boy could subdue three girls nearly his own size, rape them repeatedly, then systematically kill each of them without even tying them up. He was quick to notice that the particular article about the lab report was buried on the fourth page, after the high school sports section. Still, speculation about one of those *terrible Sonnets* being responsible for such a gruesome crime probably made for good conversation during the next few weeks.

Finally though, the story began to grow cold and was gradually dropped by the national media. Eventually, the local papers fazed it out as well. But first the local news hounds drained every last bit of mileage from it they possibly could. After toasting Cory over a low fire for several weeks, they had started putting out half-truthful articles about his deceased family members. His mother and brother were sketchy at best, but their father had been low-hanging fruit — and an easy target.

James (Jim) Odis Sonnet had originally come to Logan from Baton Rouge where he'd eloped with a local schoolmaster's seventeen-year-old daughter, Coleen DeVoe. Jim Sonnet had been twenty-one at the time, handsome, headstrong, with a fire raging in his belly to make his mark in the world. There was an old photo of his dead parents from his mother's photo album. It'd been taken about that same time. It was the only one Cory still kept. The album had been lost when he ran, but the wrinkled photo of his parents in better days was safe in his room back in Baltimore. What always struck him was how handsome his father had been, and just how breathtakingly beautiful his mother was, and how happy they'd both appeared.

Something happened through the years to change his father. Maybe it was the constant struggle to provide food and shelter for his growing family. Or maybe it had been the abuse he'd suffered at the hands of the

locals, simply because he was married to "one of them *Louisiana swamp Cajuns*." The Klan had been powerful in Logan around that time, and people were quick to lump *Niggers*, Jews and likely as not, even Cajuns into the same despised group in order to gain favor with the local KKK Grand Dragon.

Although he'd still been very young, Cory could remember his father playing baseball with him and Jack. Sometimes their pretty mother had joined them in the games. Those had been happy days, the kind of stuff memories were made of. Then, around the time Cory had started school, Jim Sonnet had started drinking. Not a lot at first, but gradually it grew worse until he was coming home nearly every night from the fields, staggering, cussing loudly and throwing things.

On good nights, he simply staggered in and passed out on the living room couch, or sometimes the hard wooden floor. But there were some nights when he arrived half-drunk and angry over something that had happened during the work day — being cussed out by his straw-boss, cornered and belittled by some of the local toughs associated with the Klan, who knows? It was on these nights that his father became abusive, violent, cussing them all profanely, striking out at or kicking anyone who got too close. The last year of Jim Sonnet's shortened life had been a nightmare for all of them — he, Jack and especially their rapidly fading mother. Outcast from her own family, destitute and without skills, their mother had sought ways out of the life she was in.

She'd found an aunt up north who agreed to send money for her and the children to travel to a place she called the Puget Sound to find a job. It was out of the way and no one would ever look for her there. Jim Sonnet had found the letter while in one of his drunken binges and flew into a rage during which he'd killed the frail Coleen. Maybe it'd been an accident, maybe not. Cory never found out for sure, just as he never found out the truth about how his father died. There had been several stories about the events of that night. Some said that Jim Sonnet had run from Sheriff Brodie and his deputies, jumped into the swollen creek and drowned. One whispered story said the lawmen had caught up with him before he even got to the creek. During his arrest they had beaten him to death and tossed his body into the creek. There were variations of these stories, as well as others, completely different. The truth probably lay somewhere in between. After a couple of months of milking all that could be had from the torrid affair, the papers dropped the story completely and moved on to the POW talks, national elections and the closure of the local mill. Cory always suspected that had it not been for the death of the white girl, Betty Lou Parker, the whole thing might not have made the front page.

So here he was, doing something he swore he'd never do. Going home again. Home? He wanted to laugh, wondering if the Logan County Sheriff still considered him a "person of interest" in the unsolved case of the three murdered girls. Not that he was too worried about it. He was returning a different person than when he'd left. A decorated war hero, respected correspondent, and a man of property to boot. He supposed the whole town would erupt into a total riot when they learned one of the notorious Sonnet boys had purchased the old defunct Logan County Press.

He hadn't really planned any of it. Nobody ever *plans* on getting the *prize*. The *Pulitzer*. The granddaddy of them all. He'd been as surprised as anyone by the award. Probably more so, because he'd been so wrapped up in his own work that he'd failed to pay attention to the gossip about it. Anyway, he'd just won the Pulitzer for his story on "Crack Babies." While looking around for a smart investment for the cash award he'd received, he'd discovered the advertisement stating the old Logan County Press was for sale due to back taxes. The McCarthy family, who'd run the paper for over half a century, had all finally died off and either no one else was interested in publishing the news in Logan, or wasn't smart enough to do it. He suspected it was a little bit of both. His boss at the Sun had given him a leave of absence, assuring him his job would always be open should he chose to return. He may.

A plan had been slowly materializing ever since he'd bought the old press. Even now he didn't want to admit the truth to himself, but it was there nevertheless. In his uneasy mind it laid like a lead ball, always with him. He knew the time had finally come. It was time to write an end to the story that only he knew. The true story about the deaths of the three little girls.