



BARRY PEHLMAN

RED RIBBON MONDAY

a short story by SUSAN STRAIGHT

The phone rang just after Felonise had hung up the white clothes in the backyard. It was late October, and the laundry swayed in the California wind that blew hot and gentle from the moment the sun came up out here in the orange groves outside Rio Seco: the dish towels, the sheets from the fold-out couch where her grandson Teeter had spent the night when his brother, Lafayette, went to a piano concert, and the white socks her daughter Cerise called “Peds,” the ones Felonise liked to wear at night around the house. Could wash them after one night. Cleaner than slippers.

Back in Louisiana, Mama used to say, “Least keep the feet clean. All that dirt from the cane fields, but least don’t put dirty feet in my sheets.”

Felonise opened the back door and reached for the cordless phone Cerise had bought her from Target. “Hello?”

“Hi,” a woman’s voice said, “I’m calling about Lafayette Reynaldo Martin.”

“That’s my grandson.”

The woman hesitated. “Hold on, please.”

The receiver was jostled, and the school women’s voices murmured like distant puppies in a yard. Felonise hoped he wasn’t hurt. Stove clock said 11:03. They had probably called Cerise, but she was at work and couldn’t hear the cellphone in her purse. Last year Teeter had fallen off the bars, and the school had called Cerise, but she hadn’t answered. Cerise had come over to Felonise’s house that night, crying until her eyes were red and swollen as peach pits.

“I was in the bathroom, Maman,” she’d moaned. “The only five minutes all damn morning I didn’t have that damn phone with me.”

“He only have a sprain wrist, now,” Felonise had said. “Nothing he gon’ remember.”

Cerise had turned up her face to Felonise and said, “Maman, *they* remember. The ones at the office. You don’t know. They think, *Oh, another little black kid, and his mama’s some crack ho who doesn’t even care enough to answer when we call.*”

While Felonise held the phone, a black blur fell past her laundry and made a soft thump on the concrete patio.

“Mrs. Martin?” A different woman’s voice.

“Yes.”

“Your name is on the list to call for Lafayette, in case it’s necessary that he be picked up.”

“He get hurt there at school?” She saw white — a wrist bone poking out from his skin, a tooth in his palm.

“No. He was in a fight, and he’s been suspended from school for the rest of the day. I’ve called his mother, his father, and his baby sitter. There’s no answer.”

She didn’t like this woman’s tone. Lafayette wasn’t no foster kid. “His mama workin’, and sometime she ain’t hear that little phone. His daddy work carpenter, and he never hear nothin’. And Esther might be at the doctor. So, yeah, I come and get him.”

“Well, we’ll expect you soon,” the woman said.

Had to add that. Like I was fool enough to come tomorrow. So Felonise added, “You tell him I’m on my way.”

The crow lay dead on the patio beside the wash line. Another baby. Furry with baby feathers puffed out like a piece of black boa from some old costume, the small black feet curled like ink writing. Felonise pushed it onto the dustpan with her broom. She walked over to the trash can, and when she opened the lid, the two finches from yesterday lay there on top, stiff and dry.

West Nile virus, Cerise had said. She’d read it in the paper. That’s where she worked — at the *Rio Seco Register*, in the customer-service place out near the Pomona Freeway.

Felonise set the baby crow beside the finches. West Nile — something in the air, or in the blood, that came all the way from Africa to Southern California inside the birds and mosquitoes. Her yard had been nearly silent this month: no crows and jays and mockingbirds fighting over every scrap of stale bread and cold rice she threw out for them.

She left by the front walk and closed the gate behind her. Ten small white houses lined up along the gravel road. She would ask Enrique for a ride to the school downtown. Enrique was Lafayette’s grandfather. Cerise had once been married to Enrique’s son. The young couple had moved downtown when they had Lafayette, because Cerise said the school was better, and the neighborhood had good home values. Two years ago her husband had left her, moved in with his brother back here in the groves. He’d apologized formally to Felonise in the kitchen at Christmas.

“I couldn’t hang,” he said. “Gotta be perfect to live like that, Miss Felonise. Every minute. She got the boys in basketball and tutoring and piano. But I’m tired when I get home from work.”

“My daughter tired, too,” she told him. “She call it the ‘second shift.’ Say that her job, too, raise them two.”

Enrique’s truck was parked near the barn where they stored the picked oranges and crates and machinery. Even after thirty-five years, whenever Felonise saw the barn, she thought briefly of Raoul, her deceased husband. A flicker in her brain, like the news that appeared in the corner of the TV screen. He’d worked only a few seasons here in California, then gone back to Louisiana, to the town where they’d both been born, to help his uncle with the sugar-cane harvest. He was twenty-five. Raoul had been driving a tractor loaded too high with cane, in the rain, and the wheels had slipped into a ditch and the tractor overturned.

Enrique had bought this California land in 1960 and brought them all here. His wife, Marie-Therese, had grown up with Felonise in Louisiana. She saw him in the barn now, unloading boxes of fertilizer. Felonise said, “You give me a ride up there to that school? Cerise and your son at work.”

They headed up the long gravel road between the Washington navel trees. The dust was heavy on the leaves — no rain since spring. The green fruit was almond sized. “Which one sick?” Enrique asked, his hand on the gearshift. The veins were like yarn under his skin.

“Nobody sick,” she answered. Enrique waited to turn onto the blacktop road. Down that road to the left was the elementary school Cerise and all the other kids from the groves had

gone to: Agua Dulce Elementary. Mexican, black, and white kids from the small communities scattered in the trees. When they turned right, toward downtown, she said, "Lafie get in a fight."

"Like his daddy."

"No, not like his daddy. Fight back then don't mean nothin'. Now they can't fight. Can't bring a ChapStick to school. Can't jump off no swing." The truck went over the canal bridge. "I gotta take him home."

Enrique turned onto Palm Avenue, the big four-lane road that went through the business part of Rio Seco. Spanish-style bank buildings, restaurants, and stores. Then turned into the residential district with big two-story homes, historic plaques, hedges tall as walls. Finally he pulled into Olive Heights Elementary.

Enrique stopped the truck in the school parking lot. Felonise said, "Go ahead home. I stay with him at his *maman's*, wait for her."

Enrique said, "She be more upset than the boy, *oui*?" He knew her daughter well.

"She want him happy. That's the only thing."

Felonise had been to the school a few times, waiting with Cerise at the back fence when the kids were let out. Cerise worked 6 A.M. to 2 P.M., and she always said, "We gotta be early to pick up."

"Why?" Felonise had asked the first time.

"'Cause these other moms start lining up at the back fence an hour early so they can watch the kids on the playground."

"They don't work?"

"They work *inside* the home, OK?" Cerise put on lipstick quickly using the rearview mirror. "They're like a club. They volunteer at the school. They're here all damn day, bring their kids lunch half the time."

"Ain't no cafeteria?"

"Very funny, Maman. Their kids want something from Taco Bell or Wendy's."

"Why we gotta be early, too?"

Cerise gave her a long look, then parked her car behind a white SUV with soccer-ball bumper stickers. "So Lafie and Teeter can see us. See we're here. Like everybody else. So everything is exactly the same, Maman. You don't get it."

Cerise was right. There was already a parade of mothers down the sidewalk, standing with arms crossed in that waiting pose, laughing and talking, eyes hard on the playground. One woman, her hands splayed like starfish on the chain-link, called out to the toddler next to her, "There she is! I see Madison! She's playing tetherball. Do you see her? See big sissie?"

Felonise remembered sitting with Marie-Therese and having one last cup of coffee while the children walked home from school, their voices skittering down the gravel road. "There go peace and quiet," Marie-Therese used to sigh. "Here come war."

Now Felonise looked down the long line of chain-link by the playground, lit gold by the sun and vibrating a little in the wind. No children were outside.

She stopped for a drink at the fountain near the office door, and when she looked up, a drop hanging from her lower lip, tickling just exactly as it had when she was a child, a young man said, "Wow, I never see grown-ups drink from there."

He must have been a teacher. He smiled, his tie blue and shirt white, his jeans faded, and he held open the door for her. Felonise wiped her mouth with her wrist.

As he walked around a corner, she heard him say, "Hey, Lafayette. How's math?"

Her grandson answered cheerfully, "OK. Numbers don't lie. Like you said last year."

Felonise opened the office door. Two women at the front desk looked at her with blank faces. The door to her left was marked PRINCIPAL and was closed. A red-haired boy sat in a chair along the wall, staring at his backpack crouched between his legs like a fat black dog with tags dangling everywhere.

"Are you here to pick up a child?" asked the woman on the right. She was white, her hair short with dark wings around her forehead. Her hand rested on her phone as if it were glued there.

"Lafayette Reynaldo Martin," Felonise said. Add the middle name, and they knew you weren't fooling.

"Grand-mère!" He came down the hallway and entered the office. "I was in the bathroom."

The other boy lifted his head to look up at Lafayette. Then he said to the women, "I need to call my mom again."

Was he the one? Lafayette didn't even glance at him. He picked up his own backpack. "You have to sign, Grand-mère," he said.

(end of excerpt)