

Turtle Red

“Damn it!”

Kaleb’s yell shot across the four-acre pond and lost itself in a narrow ravine thick with oak, shagbark hickory, and black locust trees rising tall on both sides. No one was likely to hear him in the Indiana forest, not a house within miles. Kaleb’s boat was anchored by a fallen oak tree, a good spot for panfish and bass. He looked down at the tangled mess of fishing line jammed in his reel and sighed.

“Howdy,” a booming voice from across the pond surprised Kaleb.

He looked up and spotted two fellas walking down the grassy hill toward the opposite bank. When the two strangers reached the edge, the shorter man cupped his hands around the sides of his mouth and yelled, “Hey Mister, would you mind comin’ on over here fer a minute?” The taller man shaded his eyes with both hands against the sun falling lower in the west.

Kaleb cursed under his breath, laid his fishing rod down in the boat, and waved to the strangers. It was five-forty-five on a mild September afternoon and he had only another hour or so to fish, he figured, if he could get the darn line untangled. The timing of the snag had been unlucky, because he’d had a good one hooked and the fish had gotten off. It was probably swimming around right there telling other fish to watch out for that over-sized – but delicious-looking – blue plastic minnow that gave it a sore lip. He looked over the pond at the two men, one short, one tall.

Kaleb pulled up anchor and placed it gently in the boat, green strings of weeds and gray mud included, and paddled slowly over toward the men. A puff of wind from the east pushed the smell of a Swisher Sweet cigar across the rippling blue-gray water. The man who was smoking it was wearing jeans, a faded green shirt, and a crimson Hoosier’s baseball cap with a sharply cupped bill. Kaleb wondered if the man had developed tunnel vision on account of the way he’d shaped his cap. The taller one was wearing olive-green hip waders that had seen better days, a light blue short-sleeved shirt, and he had a full head of red hair like a teenager. He also had a scar across his forehead and a crooked nose.

When the boat touched the muddy bank, the shorter man with a friendly, wide grin said, “My name’s Luke by the way.”

“My name’s Kaleb.”

“We certainly don’t wanna bother ya, Mr. Kaleb. A man’s fishin’ time is certainly precious, but we was wantin’ to ask if we could hunt turtles here tonight?”

“By the way this ain’t my pond.” Kaleb touched his chest. “I’m livin’ here and takin’ care of the place till the Old Lady dies.” He held up his tangled fishing rig. “Damn thing just snarled up on me.”

Luke spoke right up, eyebrows raised in a hopeful pose. “My buddy here ...” He pointed, though there was no reason to do so. “He’s a wizard at getting tangles out. Hand it over here, Kaleb.” Luke took the rod and passed it to the tall man. “By the way, his name’s Turtle Red.” Turtle Red had sort of an expressionless expression on his weathered face.

“We work together at the highway department, drivin’ front-end loaders, graders, back-hoes, whatever needs to be done. Been at it bout twenty-five years now, right, Red?” Red nodded, unsnapped one side of his bib wader, and fetched a pocket knife out from somewhere inside. Kaleb noticed that Red was missing the last section of his middle finger on his left hand.

“Old Lady’s still kicking, is she?” Luke grinned at Kaleb and took a draw on his cigar. “Red and I used to come here regular, but it’s been a couple years, I bet.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Kaleb shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve never actually met the woman. I deal with her daughter who lives over in Iowa somewhere. Never seen her either come to think if it.”

“She’s a case, Old Lady.” Luke grinned. “She used to come out here to the pond every afternoon to give her poodle a stretch ’n sniff. She called her Miss Pinky, the poodle that is.” Luke seemed to be the talker of the pair, and his grin never faded, apparently one of those people who just wakes up happy. “She had wiry, white fur and Old Lady got her groomed by appointment over in Connersville at Pet-Wac-A-Doo. You know where ’at is?”

Kaleb shook his head. “I don’t own a dog.”

“Well that don’t matter.” Luke chuckled. “I like your sense uh humor, Kaleb. The reason she called that poodle Miss Pinky was ’cause she tied a pink ribbon on that dog’s tail and one on each ear. When the ribbons got faded or dirty, she’d tie on new ones. Bought a dozen rolls at a time, I heard. She looked like a queen and that’s how Old Lady treated her.” He paused for a little draw on his cigar. “Well, Miss Pinky loved to sniff around the edge of the pond, but Old Lady didn’t want her to get mud on her purdy white fur or the pink ribbons for that matter, so it was sort of a daily tug of war betwixt them when they came out fer a walk.”

Red cut off the wad of tangled nylon line and tossed it in the pond. Kaleb watched it slowly sink under thinking that he coudda done that himself but had intended to save the line. Red tied the plastic bait back on and when he handed the rig back, Kaleb noticed that Red was missing the little finger on his right hand. *Wow, that dude's had some tough luck*, Kaleb thought.

“Much obliged,” Kaleb said, as he tipped his straw hat. The expression on Red’s face never changed, and he said nothing. *Tight-lipped*.

“Old Lady went downhill fast after what happened to Miss Pinky,” Luke continued.

“What happened?” Kaleb asked, beginning to see his fishing opportunity slip below the water like the tangled nest of fishing line.

“It-ahs ’bout four years ago,” Luke said. “Least that’s what I heard. Old Lady was walkin’ Miss Pinky down round that corner bend in the pond, right over there.” He pointed. “Oh, I think I forgot to mention Old Lady’s favorite color was pink, and she always wore pink ribbons in her hair and around her wrists too.”

Kaleb nodded.

“Miss Pinky jerked the leash out of Old Lady’s hands and got right down in the muck beside those old stumps. And she sunk lower and lower till her belly was boggin’ in the mud and Old Lady was screamin’ at her to come back. And the louder she screamed the deeper Miss Pinky moved into the mud, like she was gettin’ a sustantial mount-a satisfaction at turnin’ her white fur mucky gray. Old Lady was wavin’ her arms and got herself so worked up she fell backards and landed in the weeds and it just so happened to be on top a purdy big mound of fire ants and they took to her like a sirloin steak covered with A.1. sauce. She screamed loud and long sos a fella who was livin’ in a run-down trailer over there in those woods came a runnin’.” He pointed. “Used to be migrant workers lived all up in there and they strung out long stension cords end-to-end way through those trees over there so they could get lectricity.”

A pair of wood ducks flew over their heads heading down for a landing in the narrow ravine at the far end of the pond. “Locals” Kaleb shook his head. “There’s about a dozen that seem to stay here year-round.”

Luke nodded, took another pull on his Swisher Sweet, held it in a second, then blew it out and sat down on the grass looking mighty pleased. Turtle Red showed no reaction whatsoever to the conversation. He just stood looking across the pond like he was gazing into eternity. Kaleb wondered if Red was hard of hearing.

“Ain’t you gonna tell me the rest of the story?” Kaleb asked, having given up entirely on the idea of getting in more fishing.

“Oh yeah, I forgot,” Luke said. “So the fella from the trailer came over and got Old Lady up and brushed most of the ants and sand off her pants and helped her get back to her house where he called 9-1-1 and they came and took her to ’mergency. I heard she had a lot of bites all over and some of ’em got in her undergarments and all.” He grinned.

“What happened to Miss Pinky?” Kaleb asked, surprised that he was now intrigued by the unfolding story.

Red stood studying the sky like it was a new phenomenon, both hands behind his back. Maybe he was listening to Luke’s story or maybe not, it was hard to tell what was going on inside Red’s head, if anything.

“So.” Luke spread his arms wide. “Miss Pinky got right down in the pond with just the top of her head and nose above the water, lookin’ kinda like a white beaver, and about that time a big-ass turtle snapped Miss Pinky’s left ear and took off with a good part of it. That little dog paddled right around and waddled back up the bank and flopped over on its side like it was dead. I think it was Mike.” He paused to catch his breath and enjoy his cigar.

“So I’ve got two questions,” Kaleb said. “Who is Mike and did Miss Pinky die?”

“Sorry, you don’t know about Mike yet, I fergot. Mike is the biggest old turtle I ever seen, anybody ever seen as far as I know, outside that real big un in the Indianapolis Zoo. Oh boy, I bet you could ride that one, though I spec they’d frown on that. Anyway, that one’s imported from somewheres else, I figure.”

“And Miss Pinky?” Kaleb asked.

“Yeah, the vet gave her a shot of stair-roids, I think, and she ’as alright in a couple-a weeks, although her ear was considerably shorter than before. And Old Lady, she got alright too and she tied a little pink ribbon around the stub of what remained of Miss Pinky’s left ear, but she never ever took her poodle back to the pond on account of being afraid that Big Mike might finish the job. And that’s when she started going down. Purdy soon she a heart condition, some kinda weird liver malfunction, and her himmer-roys got awful bad.”

“Are you talkin’ about Miss Pinky or Old Lady?” Kaleb asked.

“Old Lady, a course.” Luke laughed and slapped his knee. Kaleb thought he saw a hint of a smile on Turtle Red’s lips, but it was gone before he could tell for sure.

“I’m not gonna ask you who it was that saw what happened to Miss Pinky after Old Lady and the man who was helpin’ her left,” Kaleb said. “But that’s quite a story, Mr. Luke. I sure needed a little pick-me-up after my bad luck at the hot spot.” He glanced back over his shoulder at the place where the big one got away.

Kaleb, who was still sitting in the boat, looked up, smiled, and said, “Hey Red. Is Luke tellin’ me the truth?”

Red glared back at Kaleb, then looked over at Luke and moaned like he was trying to say something, like he needed help all of a sudden.

“Cat got your tongue?” Kaleb smiled at his own jest.

Red’s face turned pink like his blood pressure had suddenly shot up.

“Oh, don’t upset him,” Luke cautioned Kaleb, shaking his head. “Wait just a minute.”

Luke stepped up close to his buddy. “Red, why don’t you go back up to the truck and bring our food sack down here where we can share a little early supper with our new friend Kaleb. Don’t that sound like a good i-de?”

Turtle Red looked relieved, nodded, and started back up the hill where they’d parked their truck at the end of the dirt road. He walked slowly with a slight limp.

When Red was out of hearing distance, Luke knelt down and spoke. “Unfortunately, your question about *cat got your tongue?* falls purdy close to the awful truth about Red. You see, since he ’as a boy he’s loved huntin’ turtles more than anything else this great big world has to offer. It’s weird, I know, but people around here have accepted him for who he is, and you know, the world would be a better place, in my humble opinion, if that sorta attitude was spread on a lot thicker than it is. Know what I mean?”

Kaleb nodded. “So why’d he take offense? I was just tryin’ to include him in our little chat.”

“I know that and you know that, but Red, he don’t get that sorta new-aunts.”

Kaleb nodded again.

“Here’s what happened. Back two years ago, me and Red was huntin’ turtles in this here pond, right over about where Mike bit Miss Pinky’s ear off. Red was down low in the water ...”

“Stop right there.” Kaleb shook his head. “I’ve always heard it referred to as trappin’ turtles, not huntin’ turtles. And you don’t do it by swimmin’ in the water, that’s fer damn sure.”

“Normally, that is the case, you’re exactly right. You set out traps from your boat or the shoreline and come back later to see what you’ve caught. But Red, he’s different. When he was

about eight or nine years old, he learned how to catch 'em with his hands and now he's the best darn turtle hunter in Indiana, in my opinion."

"You're pullin' my leg," Kaleb said.

"No, no, I'm not. Just stay with me here." He held up the back of his hands in front of Kaleb with one little finger hidden and the middle finger of the other hand folded back. "Catchin' 'em by hand is hazardous, but you've seen Red. His front tires are not lined up exact parallel if you catch my drift."

Kaleb nodded.

"So me and Red was out here at night, 'bout September like now. I was sittin' by a fire over there behind those gum trees where we had our sleepin' bags laid out and Red was wadin' in the pond huntin' turtles. He'd been trying to catch Big Mike for a while, but Mike was purdy smart, for a turtle, elusive and stuff. Anyway, Red snuck up on Mike and lunged for him but before he could get ahold of the sides of his shell, Mike attacked and Red screamed when he saw Mike coming right at him eye-to-eye. And while Red had his mouth open wide screaming, Big Mike latched on to Red's tongue and wouldn't let go. I heard Red screamin' and all the commotion, so I grabbed my head-mounted flashlight and ran down to the pond, jumped in the boat, and right quick paddled over to where all the splashin' and racket was comin' from. When I shined my headlight on the scene, I saw Big Mike was clamped onto Red's tongue real tight. I had my .22 pistol with me, but Red and Mike were too close together for me to shoot and Red was thrashin' round in the water beatin' on Mike's shell with both fists like a bongo. So I did the only thing I could think of to do, and it seemed like a good i-de at the time. I yelled at Red to stand still and I raised the paddle up above my head and brought the edge of it down toward Big Mike's neck with a whoosh like that." Luke lowered his arms in a chopping motion.

Kaleb looked up and saw Turtle Red limping down the hill and he told Luke to hurry up.

"Well, when my arms came past my head they accidently brushed the headlight off and it slipped down on my neck so it wasn't pointed at Mike's neck anymore. And it was too late to stop my follow-through, so the paddle hit somethin' real hard and Red slipped underwater. Luckily I was able to find his shoulders in the dark just under the water and drag him into the boat. And Mike ... he had disappeared."

"Hurry, Red's almost back," Kaleb pleaded.

“The doctors did all they could, but Red lost a good portion of his tongue and hasn’t been able to talk since, at least in a way that most people can understand.”

Turtle Red arrived and pulled three cans of Vienna sausages, three stacks of Premium saltine crackers, and three cold Bud Lights, from a Shop-Rite paper bag and passed them out. He looked sort of pleased, Kaleb thought. The three men had supper a few yards up from the water’s edge in a grassy area that Luke had checked over for fire ants before they sat down. The sun was falling behind the trees and the blue sky slipped a shade darker.

After they’d had their fill, Luke spoke. “Getting back to my original question, Kaleb. Do you think it’d be alright for me and Red to hunt this pond tonight?”

Kaleb scratched his chin as he thought about it.

Luke continued, “Seein’ as how Old Lady is laid up in a nursing home somewheres and her daughter in Iowa that you’ve never met is not likely to come callin’ tonight, I figure it’s a mighty thin possibility that you’d get in any trouble whatsoever. Whadda ya think?”

Kaleb raised his can of Bud Light toward the evening sky turning pink in the west, looked at Red and Luke and said, “I don’t see why not. Here’s to new friends.”

Turtle Red smiled for the first time that afternoon. He was missing most of his front teeth.