



**SHARON J. O'DONNELL** was born in Raleigh in 1962. Her father, Samuel A. Johnson, owns a sewing machine sales and repair business and is a patented inventor. Her mother, Wiloree W. Johnson – the inspiration for this story – is a homemaker and doting grandmother. A graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, O'Donnell is a columnist for The Cary News and a freelance writer. She also leads writing workshops in schools as part of a United Arts Council Writer-in-Residence. She lives in Cary with her husband, Kevin, and their three sons, ages 11, 8 and 2.

## Sunday Reader

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*Each week, Sunday Reader features an original work of short fiction or poetry by a Southern writer.*

# Bluebirds Fly

BY SHARON J. O'DONNELL

A black crow soared through the sky as Willow splashed cold water on her face at the side of the tobacco barn. She was mesmerized as she watched the bird glide above the treetops, cawing loudly. She wondered where it was flying to, what it would see of the world below.

Pulling a wisp of brown hair back from her sweaty face, Willow looked at the tobacco fields surrounding her, engulfing her. As she squinted in the sunlight, she sighed loudly.

Turning away from the barn, she walked back to the fields where she'd been priming tobacco all morning with the other workers. Willow started working the rows again. Pulling leaves, pulling leaves, making a rhythm in her head. Lately she'd been humming "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" under her breath. Willow loved that song. She went to "The Wizard of Oz" last month when it first came out. It was a strange name for a picture show, and the preacher down at the Baptist church — Rev. Thomas — told people to beware of anything about "wizards." But her daddy didn't like Rev. Thomas much, so he let her go into town to see the movie anyway. It cost all of her Co-cola money she'd been saving, but it was worth it. Picture shows were always in black and white, but "The Wizard of Oz" was mostly in color. Her eyes had lit up when the screen burst into such bright, beautiful colors, and she'd reached over excitedly and squeezed her younger sister's arm. How she wished she were Judy Garland!

The workers loaded the leaves on wooden trailers and took them to the barns where they put the leaves on stalks and hung them in the barns. God, she hated the smell of drying tobacco. She hated working in the fields, hated the heat, hated being so tired at night she couldn't even read before falling to sleep. But this was her daddy's farm so this is what she reckoned she would do the rest of her life. She'd worked tobacco every summer she could remember of her 14 years. Sometimes she wondered if she'd ever see any place other than Timber Creek, North Carolina. Willow wanted to see New York City someday, to walk down a city street with a pocketbook on her arm outside a theater. The thought of going there made her tingle.

"Hey," a boy's voice said. She glanced up to see Danny, who was 15, standing beside her. He had dimples when he grinned and the deepest brown eyes.

"Hey," Willow replied, and looked down at the tobacco row. Her face was turning red, and she didn't want him to see. Danny had only talked directly to her about three times in her life. Maybe four.

"Hot, ain't it?" he asked.

"Yeah. But it usually is in August." She saw Danny's face turn crimson. He looked at his feet, scuffed the toe of his shoe in the dirt. "Hotter than normal today, though," she added. He smiled.

"I — I — I saw you reading the other day on your porch," he stuttered. "I — um — I — like to read, too."

Willow didn't know how to respond. She shrugged her shoulders. "Good, that's real good."

"What's your favorite book?"

Willow's heart did a little flip. "I like a lot of them. But I guess 'Red Badge of Courage' is my favorite." Danny's eyes brightened.

"Dinnertime!" Willow's daddy yelled, and the workers around her shouted with delight as they headed to the house.

"You hungry?" Danny asked, as he held his hand out to Willow. She grinned, embarrassed, but let him pull her to her feet.

"I'm starving," she said, releasing his hand. "I think Mama's having chicken today."

Danny started to go, but stopped and looked back at her. "I've read 'The Red Badge of Courage' three times. It's my favorite, too." He

shoved his hands in his pockets and walked briskly away toward the group of young men he worked with in the barns. Willow joined her sister and cousin as all the workers walked up the hill to her house where her Mama awaited with a meal of cornbread, butter beans, and fried chicken. She could smell it, making her empty stomach rumble. Willow didn't know how her mama cooked so much food every day for all the workers. She'd go plumb crazy if she had to do cook like that every day.

As soon as Willow got to the house, she went into the hallway and stretched out on the linoleum floor, its coolness feeling good to her face. She wished she could lie there forever. She relaxed, then closed her eyes for a moment when she heard the door to the outhouse slam outside. In that place halfway between waking and dreaming, she suddenly remembered. Her eyes flew open.

"Who in the hell wrote all over the inside of the johnny house?" her daddy shouted. "Willow, you were the last one in there before we left for the fields this morning!" Willow jumped up from the floor, her heart pounding. She hadn't known he'd get so mad about it. "Willow! Come here!" her father commanded.

She ran outside, her lips quivering. "I'm sorry, Daddy," she mumbled, wishing all the workers would turn away and ignore the scene unfolding in the yard. "I just like to sing that song when I'm out there by myself thinking and I —"

"The johnny house ain't for singin'!" he interrupted, as the workers tried to contain their laughter. Her daddy handed her a bucket of water and some lye soap. "Wash those words off now!"

"What words?" Mama asked Willow quietly as she followed her daughter into the outhouse, propping open the door. Mama's eyes adjusted to the dimness. Then she saw the words scribbled on the outhouse walls: *Somewhere over the rainbow/skies are blue/and the dreams that you dare to dream /really do come true*

"I didn't mean to hurt anything, Mama. I thought it made it a better place."

Willow's mother patted her shoulder. "I know, dear, I know." Her mama gazed at the walls and sung softly as she read the lyrics: "Somewhere over the rainbow/ bluebirds fly/Birds fly over the rainbow / why then . . ." Mama stopped, caught her breath as tears filled her eyes. "Oh why can't I?" she whispered. She reached up, wiped her eyes with her apron. "The peach cobbler's probably done now," she said suddenly, backing out the door. "I've got to go on in."

Willow watched her go, heard the screen door slam. Then she slowly picked up some rags, wet them and started scrubbing the walls with lye soap. With each letter she erased, she felt something inside her grow heavier. Hearing footsteps, she turned to see Danny standing at the outhouse door, silently reading the words. When he finished reading, he stared at the floor for a moment, his callused hands clenched into fists. He looked up, his eyes peering sadly into Willow's. He leaned over, picked up a rag, and helped Willow scrub away the words as a crow cawed somewhere in the distance.

*"Bluebirds Fly" is an excerpt from a novel-in-progress.*