

The Blue Jay

by Con Chapman

His mother hated blue jays, hated them with a passion she usually reserved for no-count trash who drank beer on their front steps and worked on their cars in the street. "They're annoying birds, the way they screech all the time," she had told him when he'd brought a blue jay feather inside to her.

"I think the colors are pretty," he had said.



"You should watch them dive-bomb Big Kitty every day when you're at school."

"They do?" he asked, amazed that an apparently innocent bird could be capable of evil that was linked in his mind with Japanese *kamikaze* bombers crashing into American aircraft carriers.

"They most certainly do, and it's unsanitary to handle bird feathers anyway," she said as she threw the feather in the garbage can under the sink.

"Then how do Indians make their war bonnets?"

"I suppose they don't know about germs and diseases, otherwise they wouldn't," she said, and went back to the wash.



He went outside and looked up in the trees, trying to spy a blue jay and perhaps catch it committing a crime against a family cat, which he would have taken as an act of war. He saw a robin on the lawn, but no jays. He would have to take his mother's word for it.

He went up to his room to look at his library books, picture books of planes and battleships of the world's armies. The books took a neutral stance in their depiction of the world's weaponry, as Russian MiGs co-existed within their covers with Japanese Zeros and his favorite, the American P-40 with the shark mouth of the Flying Tigers painted on it.

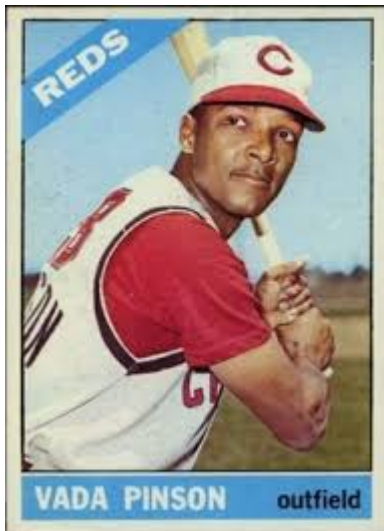
His dad got home from golf and the boy brought him a beer from the kitchen, stopping in the panty long enough to smell the Falstaff and take a sip, which always made him recoil at the bitter taste. He figured that drinking beer was something men did as a challenge, to keep themselves tough. When they were really thirsty he bet they drank lemonade or iced tea.

"Thanks, buddy," his dad said. There was a ball game on, the Cardinals against Cincinnati.

"Did you know that Curt Flood and Vada Pinson went to the same high school?" he asked his dad. He liked to impress him with his knowledge of baseball lore.

"No I didn't," his dad said, folding down the paper a bit to look at him with what the boy took to be pride in his encyclopedic knowledge of a subject that had receded in importance in his father's mind to business.

The boy was quiet for awhile, wondering if needed to preface the subject he wanted to bring up with any more small talk, then decided to plunge ahead since it was something that couldn't be introduced at the dinner table due to his mother's fixed opposition.



"Dad, can I get a BB gun?" he asked.

"It's all right with me," his father said without looking over the edge of his paper. "I still need to talk to your mother."

"I had marksmanship and gun safety at camp," the boy said. "I know how to handle a gun responsibly."

"We'll see," his father said, his attention focused not on the boy but on the police blotter, with its bland recitation of arrests for local offenses ranging from traffic violations to knifings on what used to be the main street of town, five blocks from his store.

"All the other boys have them," the boy said, trying to keep the subject alive in his father's mind.

"You know what the answer is to that, don't you?" the father said.

"I know, but I'm not talking about jumping off a bridge." He looked up at the game. Frank Robinson was up to bat for the Reds.

"I'll pay for half of it," the boy said.

"I don't think that's the issue for your mother," his father said.

"What issue?" his mother asked. She had come around the corner to call them to dinner.

"Oh, the gun again," the father said.

"I'll be twelve years old in two weeks," he said, a line of argument he hadn't tried before, but which struck him as particularly forceful now that he had voiced it.

"Twelve isn't old enough to own a gun," his mother said.

"It's not a gun—it's just a toy," the boy said.

"It's a toy you can put someone's eye out with," his mother said.

"The same's true of a bow and arrow, and you let me have those," the boy said.

"Not a suction cup arrow, and I took those away from you anyway," his mother said.

"Maybe if we kept it locked up in the hall closet with my guns," his father said. "That way he'd only shoot it when I was around to supervise."

"I don't understand," his mother said, sitting down on the wing chair that no one ever sat in—it was placed in a corner to "balance" the room. "We live in town, not the country. There's nothing to shoot at here."



"I could shoot at tin cans in the back yard."

"You can't point a gun towards the street," his mother said.

"I'd set up a shooting gallery against the garage."

"Then we'd get holes in it, and that's where my tulips are."

The father put down his paper, and looked at the two of them with the air of a judge exasperated at warring adversaries before him.

"Honey, I had a gun when I was twelve. He says he's been saving up his money and can pay for half of it. I think we ought to give him the other half, and keep it locked up in the closet like I said. If he's not responsible, we'll take it away from him."

The mother knew that when the father offered a compromise, that meant she'd lost. She thought that when it came to her children she should have the final say, but with the boy it was different. His father seemed to think that if he wasn't allowed to do the things he'd done when he was a boy, he'd miss out on something or be called a sissy by the other boys. She didn't think missing out on a gun was such a bad thing.

"Well, I guess you two have it in for me on this one," she said, and got up to go back to the kitchen.

The next Saturday the gun was purchased as a joint enterprise, the father and son driving together to the hardware store downtown with the toy department. The boy picked out the one he wanted, recounted the money in his wallet to make sure he had enough, and the father took it from him to the cash register.

"Gonna git you some squirrels?" the man behind the counter said to the boy with a smile.

"I don't know," the boy said.



"You ever shot a gun before?"

"I got my marksmanship merit badge at camp last summer."

"Good for you," the man said. "You'll want some bb's too I reckon."

"How do you sell 'em?" his father asked.

"There's three-fifty in each tube."

"One should do us for now," the father said, "unless we're attacked by Indians," he added with a wry look at his son.

"Or a buffalo stampede—you never know when they might come back," the salesman said.



The boy and the man went home and tried to suppress smiles as they walked in the house. They knew they should treat the purchase as a serious concession on the mother's part, and there could be no joking or gloating about it.

"You're going to put that in the closet like we agreed, right?" was all she said.

"Sure," the father said.

"I want to play with it now," the boy said.

"Well, I have to go to the grocery store," the mother said. "As long as your father supervises."

"I'm not going anywhere," the father said as he went to the refrigerator for the makings of a sandwich.

"You are not to shoot that in the house, do you understand?" the mother said with concern.

"Mom—I know how to handle it," the boy said.

She took her purse and car keys and went out to the driveway, where she got in her car and drove away to the west.



The father ate his sandwich and read the paper while the book unpacked the gun from the cardboard box and read the book that came with it. There was nothing in it he didn't already know.

"I'm going outside with it, okay?"

"Okay by me," the father said.

"Do you need to come with me?" the boy asked, wanting to appear responsible.

"I'm going to take a nap," the father said. "You know how to work that thing, right?"

"Right."

"Just stay in the backyard and shoot towards the side of the garage—understood?"

"Okay."

The boy went out the back door and into the backyard, which was half a block long and a quarter of the block wide. It was plenty big, he thought to himself; he didn't need to be out in the country.

He set up a board on top of some bricks and then picked some tin cans out of the garbage to shoot at. He positioned himself at the other end of yard, back where the trash burner was, and began to shoot. The bb's made a "ping" sound when they hit the tin cans, but didn't knock them over. He thought about how, with some wood and clothes line, he could make a real shooting gallery like the one they'd had at camp, with paper targets held by clothes pins to wires.

He heard a sound overhead, almost like an "ouch," and when he turned and looked up into the biggest tree in the yard he saw a blue jay. The bird's call was answered by another from the trees in the neighboring yard, and he scanned the yard to see if there was a cat around. Big Kitty, the yellow tabby who was the older of their two cats, was slinking around the corner of the garage, staying close to it as she made her way back to the house.

So it was true, he thought, what his mother had told him. The jays *were* in a war against the cats. He thought that maybe he could get her to appreciate his gun if he could shoot one of the jays that she hated so much.

He moved quietly across the yard to the garage where the cat turned and meowed at him.



"Go back to the house," he said, but the cat just stood there and chewed some grass.

He looked up into the tall tree and saw the jay sitting on a branch above the big dark spot where a limb had fallen off and they had tarred it. He raised the rifle slowly, drew a bead on the bird, and fired.

The bird fell to ground like it was a football stuck up there from a punt knocked loose by the wind.

"I got him," he said, looking over at the cat, who looked up for a moment but then turned back to the grass, indifferent.

The boy ran over to where the bird lay and looked down at it. It was twitching, and as he bent down closer he saw that the bb had struck the bird in the eye. It wasn't dead, just wounded.

There was blood oozing out of the eye, which seemed to stare at the boy as its torso shook.

He tried to think what he should do. He didn't want to shoot the bird again from close range, and he didn't want to hit it with the butt of the gun.

The cat came up from behind him and examined the bird, sniffed at it a bit and then sat back on its haunches a safe distance away.

"He's gonna die," the boy said. The bird continued to shake until it expired with a tiny exhaled breath. The boy turned it over with one foot and saw that the good eye had closed, while the injured one continued to return his gaze, propped open by the bullet.

He remembered what his mother had told him about how unsanitary birds were, and he got a rag from the garage and carried the bird back to the trash burner. He would take a load out later, as was his chore, and that would be the end of it, he thought.

He had imagined as he raised the gun that his mother would be happy if he told her he'd shot a blue jay. He decided he would still tell her, but not about the eye.

