

T

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Lee lay still under covers and watched the fuzzy early light expose his stuff: his limp clothes, scattered homework, a dead jumble of Mountain Dew bottles. Life, he thought, was taking shape like the enormous pile of shit behind the barn. Getting out of bed was like picking up a shovel; it took muscle and guts. Spread it or get buried in it, his father would say. Lee tossed aside the blankets, swung his feet to the floor boards, and then stopped. There it was, he could almost feel the ooze of his troubles rising past his knees.

He grabbed for socks. This first part, getting dressed, wasn't too bad. And the first part of the morning might be okay: chores here, eat breakfast. Later, after school, milking at the neighbors' farm was cool. Nice people, nice cows. He could work on remote control and get paid for it.

But school would be stuck there, sort of between barns and chores in his day. School meant Diane, and even thinking of Diane meant the uneasy quivering he had in his belly. With luck, she'd be out again. Christ. He pictured her crouched in her bathroom, puking her heart out, her Mom sighing in the shadows. He could hear her and he felt like poison. No, he thought, with luck she'd call right now and say, "Guess what, Stud? False alarm." Then he would start to breathe again.

He grabbed his books, realizing he hadn't finished his history paper. He'd meant to get up early. He could almost hear what his mother said about good intentions paving the road to hell and was glad she was gone for a few days visiting her sister. He didn't have to explain why he wasn't hungry for breakfast.

He headed out to do his chores before the bus came. All he had to do weekdays was feed and water the turkeys out in the heifer barn. He didn't used to like doing any chores before school, afraid he'd carry the smell on him all day and some one of the guys, or Diane, would kid him. These days he felt he could breathe easy only here, in the barn, relieved to be doing something responsible and useful and hoping he could wear the animal smells like a security blanket all day, making him repellent, protecting him from everyone, especially Diane.

Twenty huge white turkeys flapped to confused attention when he opened the coop door. This bird business was just a little side operation he and his father had decided to try this year to beef things up, so to speak, while milk prices were low. Only they hadn't done too well. Right off, ten chicks had died. They'd sat on each others' heads and drowned in the water dish, stuff like that. Weak and stupid, his father had said. Then it turned out that nineteen of the survivors were hens; only one tom and he was more hog than turkey. He terrorized the hens and grew two pounds for every one of theirs. Finally Lee suggested putting him in his own pen and only then did the females start to grow.

Now, in early November, they were still small but would be fine for the Christmas market. Lee called them all "Chris" names: Christine, Christie, Christa, Chrissy, and anything else in that line he could think of on a particular day. But he couldn't really tell them apart. They were unappealing animals, impersonal, easily spooked, unaffectionate, and dumb, dumb, dumb. Plus they were scrawny-headed and pot-bellied and just plain ugly. But Lee liked tending them and watching them move like magnets to the grain he spread in the tray. "Here Chris, Chrissy, Christa. Chow down. Just forty six

more shopping days 'til Christmas." He'd figured it out and wished now they'd grown properly so he could get money for them sooner.

He felt a sharp jab to his hip through his jeans. The tom, known simply as "T", was separated by a fence of chicken wire from the hens and Lee was standing too close. If he hadn't been in a distracted state of mind he would not have made that mistake because he knew that T was mean. As he had grown (Lee figured he was close to forty pounds now), the tom had gotten more aggressive and hostile. Several times he had attacked Lee or his father, drawing blood from their fingers as they scooped him his grain. Lee's father left an old fence post by the door to the pen and used it to ward off T at feeding time. Lee's father proceeded gently, though, not wanting to hurt the only bird of the whole project to be ready, as planned, for Thanksgiving. He had a buyer for T and said he looked forward to removing the cruel, greedy head from the enormous promise of dinner below. Mrs. Emmons wanted him delivered fresh, not frozen, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, three weeks away.

But Lee wasn't thinking of business when he unlatched the wire door and stepped onto the territory of T who fanned a display of vast white wing and tail feathers.

Lee was thinking of Diane. He was thinking of her words: "Don't worry, I don't want it. We can't do it." Lee felt like something slimy and sneaky - a weasel - sneaking out the hen house with stolen sweet chicken dripping from its mouth.

No, he'd said, we'll get married.

"No," she'd said, crying, "I don't want to, do you?"

Not really, but.

"Not really, but nothing," she'd said, "You don't know what it's like," she'd said, "I feel like I'm turning inside out and gagging and I can't get rid of this thing. It's making me crazy. I can't do it, and it's up to me anyway."

All she wanted from him, she said, was help paying.

T's grain dish was overturned in the far corner of the pen and as Lee went to get it a solid white fury of feathers struck him from behind in the bend of his knees. Lee stumbled backwards and the bird appeared by his head and with dumb inaccuracy pecked him fiercely beneath one eye. T's gobble was high pitched and sounded crazed so close to Lee's ear.

As he reached for his bleeding face and turned from T's round stare and his lunging beak and claws, something clicked. Christ, Lee thought, he would not be mauled by this cretin bird. He'd had enough.

"Dumb shit!" he screamed, rolled away from the repeated pecks and grabbed his father's fence post from its station by the gate. Rising, he smacked T squarely on the head. For a second, the head just seemed to retract into the neck feathers, pushing the huge pink wattle toward Lee like a grotesque offering. Then, the neck released like a broken spring and the head flopped to one side. Lee booted the stunned bird over and cracked the neck again with the post. T lay still.

"Fuck," Lee said, "fuck, fuck, fuck," and he swung his weapon at the wire covered wooden gate cracking the post in two.

The hens clustered in a corner on their own side, burrowing their heads into each other's feathers.

Lee was still sagging against the wall of the pen staring with a bloody, wet face at the dead turkey when his father entered the barn. He'd probably seen the bus go by without stopping and wondered. Funny, Lee thought, how school didn't seem like it would have been so bad compared to this new screw up of his.

Lee's father ran his hand over his eyes, scrunching them closed, rubbing the sockets. He'd been up since four, lots of little things probably gone wrong, sick cow, broken water bowl, but nothing he couldn't manage.

"Well," he said, "Judgment day."

"He was an asshole," Lee said.

"He was that," his father said.

"Mrs. Emmons won't take him now, will she?"

"Nope."

"We could freeze him."

"She don't want him froze."

Lee sighed. "Well, I'll pay for him."

"Only thing is," his father's keen brain seemed to be talking out loud, figuring, as if this was a dead engine they were discussing, "your mother's gone 'til tomorrow and T here needs to be dressed out today. She always done that job. So, how 'bout if I pluck him and you figure out how to gut him and we'll call it even."

Lee's father said it would take a while to arrange to dip that fat bastard into enough hot water to loosen those feathers and Lee might just as well take the truck over to school.

"Might ask some teacher about dressin' a bird," he said, "Or some of the girls."

Lee wondered what his father knew about him and Diane. They did a lot together around the farm, and talked some. But this was new territory and to Lee seemed all his own. He cleaned up and proceeded to drive himself to school. He was grateful to his father. Just the act of driving himself seemed like a gift. Things are looking up, he thought. He even finished his history paper in study hall and when he ran into Diane afterwards in the hallway, he blurted out his new problem, as though something existed between them besides their mistake.

Diane, too, with her sharp eager eyes, seemed relieved by the distraction. No problem, she shrugged, she could dress a turkey.

"How'd you learn to do that?" he asked.

"How'd you learn to kill it?" she asked.

That stung. He wondered if she was accusing him of something, or of everything. "I didn't mean to kill it. It was pecking at me."

She looked triumphant. "Now you know how I feel." She started to walk away.

As he watched her straight back travel away from him in the hallway he wondered if he knew anything. He felt a gnawing in his stomach. It was like being hungry but even after he ate some crackers from the vending machine, the gnawing remained and seemed to go deeper.

They'd agreed to meet at lunch time in the parking lot. Diane seemed unconcerned about leaving school although she was a conscientious student. That was something they shared. She agreed they had to do this before the bird stiffened and the meat went bad. They agreed it was lucky the day was cold. They didn't talk much on the way. Lee liked to think about driving. His father's truck was rarely in his hands, except during haying, and he lingered over each shift of gears. Sometimes he felt Diane's eyes on him, and then his face began to throb. He imagined his injured cheek dripping blood again. He tried to stop it by breaking the silence.

"Diane, when we get there, just tell me what to do and I'll do it, okay?"

She shook her head and shrugged. "It's easier by feel. I don't know if I could describe what to do in words."

"It's my way of paying my dad for screwing up," Lee said.

"Like: Naughty boy, clean it up?" she asked.

"Not really."

She shrugged again. "I can try. It's just easier to do it than talk about it."

They found Lee's father in the steamy milk house sweeping an armful of white feathers into a garbage bag. The last ones matted onto the damp cement floor and

stuck to the bristles of the broom.

"Lo there," he said to Diane and turned to Lee, pointing, "He's ready for ya."

In the center of the room filled with stainless steel equipment, by the floor drain, sprawled a great mound of pale, plucked flesh. The head was gone, as were the feet and feathers, and therefore, gone were all the distinctive features that could identify this blob as T. Except for the size. Naked, with no sleek, slimming feather outfit, T looked as imposing and harmless as a mountain.

Diane wrinkled her nose and crouched down. "Be easier up on a table, but he'll be lighter to lift when he's empty."

"Just what I was thinking," Lee's father said, rubbing his mouth and covering a faint smile as he did so.

Lee was watching his father. "Diane knows what to do, so she's going to kinda talk me through it."

His father nodded and handed him a small knife with a long sharp blade. It was the one his mother always used. If she were here she would want to do this and take care of everything. His father would have had to argue that Lee could manage, that he was well able to fix what he broke.

Lee felt a longing for his mother's loving doubt and wished he were six years old so he could deserve it. Maybe he should tell her what was going on. The knife gleamed and Diane said, "Okay? Ready?"

The three gathered around the remains of T: Lee's father up by the headless neck; Lee and Diane side by side at the bald tail end.

"We got to roll him on his back. Do you have a board to cut his neck against? Be a shame to hit this knife on that cement," Diane said.

"That's good thinking, Diane," Lee's father said as he disappeared into the cow stable and reappeared brushing off a wide slice of scrap board. "Lee, this girl's got common sense. Common sense. Better 'n money." Lee's father winked at Lee and smiled at the girl.

He helped Lee roll T onto the board and squatted back, watching. Lee could hear Diane sigh as she studied the bird on its back with a frown and moved her hands in a quick mime. It would be easier to let her do it; she wanted to, but he couldn't. Deal with his father or not, this sucker, old T, was his to handle.

"Start with the neck," she said, "Pull the skin back, or slit it, and cut close to the body."

"Like here?" Lee placed the knife and started to cut.

"Mm, well, closer. Yup, okay, right between the bones. They're vertebrae," she said.

Lee's father watched without a word while Lee found the crop and removed it intact, then, at Diane's word, turned T around and began eviscerating from the other end between the jutting drumsticks.

"Make a circle cut around there." Diane motioned toward the vent. "Don't poke too hard." She was squinting down at the pinched hole leading to T's insides, with perfect seriousness, and seemed, to Lee, like a fortune teller, looking beyond, seeing more than meets the mortal eye.

He followed her guidance with his knife, cutting carefully, reaching in with his fingers and easing out the slimy, ropey intestines, gently, without tearing until he found the gizzard, and scooped the mass into the bucket supplied by his father. The cavity was roomier now and as he went back in, searching for the anatomical details Diane described - the gizzard, the heart, the liver - Lee felt the lingering animal warmth not so much of T but of Diane at his side. His arm burned where it bordered hers, drawing heat up through his fingers and into his brain. He began to lose focus, desperately confusing

the source of the warmth.

He bent his head and shut his eyes.

"The heart, Lee. Did you get it?" Diane's voice reached him.

Lee's father stood then, stretched, and, clearing his throat, said he was going to fetch another garbage bag big enough to freeze him in. "Looks like you two can finish up okay. Diane, I hope you can make it for Thanksgiving dinner. Bring your whole family. Should be enough there for an army." He opened the door letting in a blast of November air.

"Thanks, Mr. Russell, we're almost done." She smiled squarely at the man.

Lee looked from one to the other in relief. The fresh air helped bring him out of his confusion. How he liked these two people, his father and his friend. Here he was, up to his elbow, handcuffed to a dead turkey, and neither had once made him feel like a jerk.

"Okay, now just the lungs," Diane said, "They're up in the ribs. Poke your finger in and peel them out. Yes! You got 'em."

Lee held pink, spongy wads of tissue in his hand. On the board at his knees lay the gizzard turned inside out and cleaned by Diane, the liver with the green bile still attached waiting to be carefully trimmed away, and a heart, the size of a person's ear only purple and chill. Pieces to be washed and bagged and saved. His mother would never forgive him if he went through this whole thing and didn't save all that was useful. She hated waste.

He turned to Diane who was at the sink starting to wash the knife. She looked cold and pale but moved like her voice, steady and decisive. He stayed on his knees before her.

"Not bad, Russell, for a rookie," she said.

"Thanks. Diane, I mean it. You're great. My dad thinks so too."

"Does he know?"

"I don't think so, but I want to tell him - and my mother."

Diane nodded. "But I won't change my mind."

"I know," he said, "But I want to go with you. When?"

She nodded again, her sharp eyes eager this time. "Friday afternoon," she said.

They grimly made plans for this next date but Lee felt hopeful for the first time in weeks. He rose stiffly and washed his sticky hands in warm water.

By the time Lee's father returned with the wrappings, T was done, hosed off and draining; the organ pieces and floor and board were all cleaned. Lee and Diane had dumped the bucket of odd innards into the bag of feathers. The bundle, still settling, rested by the door.