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Writer/s: Kristin Hannaford

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Greta placed the axe on the high bench and wiped her face with the cloth she kept tucked into her skirt. The chicken lay on the dirt to the left of her foot. Occasionally a nerve pulsed, jerked the bird's body in reflexive movement.

She looked through the barn window, her hands placed evenly on the bench. Her chest rose and fell heavily, the way a pillow sinks when punched. She moved slowly and hung the axe on two nails that jutted out of the pale barn wood.

She took another deep breath and bent over the chicken, picked it up by the knobbed legs and claws. Blood began to clot in the dirt.

'It's done' she said, and left the barn, the brown chicken swaying long by her side. Feathers loosened and lifted with each stride, lifting like the girl's brown hair in the afternoon light.

Greta entered the kitchen, delayed sounds of the screen door screeching and gusting shut behind her. Her mother turned towards her from the sink, and Greta noticed sunlight flickering shapes and shadows from the sink water on the wall.

'You must be pleased with yourself. That was quick'.

The girl nodded but remained silent in the large kitchen, watched as her mother wiped a hair from her forehead with the back of her pink rubber gloves, a peeler poised in her fingers. They looked at each other, her mother's eyes falling to the bird in her daughter's hand. In a swift gesture Greta lifted the bird into the large pot of boiling water on the stove. Small drops of moisture hissed as the chicken settled into the pot. Her mother started on the potatoes again, occasionally sniffing and clearing her nose in the heat.

'You can pluck it after that. Won't take long. Why don't you sit at the table and wait? Won't hurt you to finish a job properly'.

Greta moved to the table and sat down. She looked at her hands and began to notice blood on her fingers, rims of brown clotted under the nails. The girl lifted her gaze and stared at her mother, eyes large.

'I won't. I won't do it', she said and raced out the kitchen. Greta's mother watched the screen doors settle, the pattern of her daughter fractured through the gauze.

Greta walked the length of the yard. Past the Hills Hoist clothesline, her brother's Billy cart and the vegetable patch where great clumps of Italian parsley yellowed in the sun.

As she pressed her weight against the fowl yard wire and let her forehead rest on the mesh, her elbows shaped into strange white diamonds. Inside the hens paced and pecked, two hens racing the length of the run, circling back to the gate. Burrkkkk. Burrkkkkkk. Greta watched them intently. She reached inside the feed bag and scattered grain across the dirt, and addressed them generally as a group,

'I won't do it again.'

Her voice echoed within the corrugated iron chamber that hosted the birds' night roosts. Tears began to run in small rivulets down her dusty face as she pressed hard against the wire and her knees collapsed under her.

Eventually she lay huddled and small, her breath regular. She looked at the chickens and opened her mouth several times as if she were about to speak. In the end she spoke to only one hen, a large oily black Australorp which did a kind of four-step dance, two steps to the left and then two to the right.

'I promise I won't.' Greta looked back towards the house at the kitchen window. As she stared at the afternoon's colours on the glass, oranges and dusky pinks, she fingered a small brown feather in her pocket, separating the down as if she were flicking the pages of a book with a thumbnail, and closed her eyes.

That night Greta took herself to bed before dinner. She turned off the light and waited until her eyes adjusted to the dark. She undressed and slid her nightgown over her head, jeans hobbled around her ankles.

Clean flannelette filled her nose as her head lay on the pillow. She imagined the fencing of the chicken yard outside her window, a dark line into the shadows of trees near the barn; the feed tray swaying slightly in the breeze.

'You missed a good dinner', her brother Max said from the doorway. 'Mum made your favourite gravy. Roast potatoes. They sent me to see if you really didn't want any.'

Greta answered by way of a grunt and turned her head towards the wall.

'I don't want anything. Leave me alone Max. I'm going to sleep.'

He said nothing and waited.

'You wait till it's your turn', she continued, 'they'll make you do it too you know.'

'I won't care.'

'No. S'pose you won't.'

She chewed her fingernails.

'I won't. They're just birds Gret.'

Greta remembered the bird fighting and flapping its wings, and the difficulty she had settling it on the chopping block, the panicked cries as she kept it in place by forcing her knee against it, her hand pressed down firmly on its wings, the slow creaking of bones underneath.

Max left the room and disappeared down the hallway. Greta rolled over.

'Max? Max, are you still there?'

A light came on in the garden. Greta saw her father walking out towards the barn, walking in lengthy strides, his blue jeans changed yellow under the garden light. Greta straightened and tucked her knees under her so she could see through the glass. She watched her father through the barn window moving tools across the bench. He reached over and retrieved the small axe she had used to kill the bird. Wiping the blade of the axe clean with a cloth, he then picked up a soapstone and smoothed it along the blade's edge. Up down, up down, up down.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Kristin Hannaford.*