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## When It Becomes His Gun

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# WHEN IT BECOMES HIS GUN

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It's not dead. Ok. Ok. Dad says: If the bird's not dead, be ready with another shell if it decides to

take to the air. If I can get to it, put the bird on the ground, and smash it--smash it right on the neck--with

the butt of the gun.

When he reached the bird, it showed no signs of damage, but sat peacefully staring up at him. He

gently picked it up, wary of it, expecting a reaction of panic or distress from the bird, but none came.

Carrying it as he did the chickens back home, hand sliding comfortably under the breast, he balanced the

slight weight of the bird along its keel, while awkwardly shouldering the gun with his left arm. The boy

made for the nearest bank, searching for a patch of dry ground. His breath and pulse began to quicken

again, perspiration collecting between his brows and on his upper lip as he vainly searched for something

that resembled a hard surface. When he realized the best he could do would be the dried marsh grass, he

placed the bird down in the drier patch and positioned the butt of the gun upon its neck. It looked up at

him, unmoving, unresisting. Hands clasped tightly around the metal length of the sleek little Remington

20-gauge, he raised and brought down its end in one quick motion. The ground was too soft and absorbed

the blow intended for the creature. Again. Still, the same result and still the bird gazed unblinking and

unmoving at the boy. Tears made tracks down his cheeks to his neck and he said, "I'm sorry, so sorry," to

the duck, over and over. He let a choked sob escape his throat as he scooped up the bird again. Running

toward green Dodge pickup parked at the edge of the pond, the newness of his boots scraped his heels into blisters and made his run a stumbling gait. I'm so sorry. I'll just ask to take you home. You don't seem too bad-- we can put you in the chicken pen while you heal up. Ok?

His dad was smoking a Marlboro and sitting in a camp chair next to the truck when the boy came running up. Dropping the gun to the ground, he hugged the bird to his crisp camouflage vest, with his tanned left hand placed upon its back. "Dad I hurt it. Could we take it home and put it in the chicken pen? I tried to do like you said--with the gun, but it must've just rained or something 'cause the ground is too soft and I was trying again and again and it wasn't working and I didn't have any shells left--" he gasped for the air he had used up from his explanation.

The man laughed indulgently at his young son and walked up to the bird, as if to inspect it.

"No." There were still traces of amusement in the lines of his farming face, mixed with the seriousness that the man paired with all things hunting. He let the single word hit the boy and gave it time to diffuse into recognition.

"Give me the bird," he said. The boy reluctantly obeyed. "Pick up your gun, hold it out in front of you, and close your eyes."

With trembling hands he held the gun horizontally out in front of him, barrel pointed to his nineo'clock, toward the pond where the tiny piece of steel he had directed had lodged somewhere within the body of the placid creature; he grasped the stock in his right, arms extended unbent, as if the gun were an offering to his dad. He took one flash of a glance and quickly shut his eyes. And waited. A jolt vibrated through the gun as the bird's skull was smashed against the black steel; hot liquid spattered up the front of his neck and face, making him squeeze his eyes shut even harder. Hearing footsteps headed away from him, the boy cautiously opened his eyes to see his dad putting the bird in the back of the truck. Thinking of the long ride back, he was glad the bird would lay silently in the back of the pickup, rather than a shameful token resting between he and his dad on the way home. He looked down and saw small spots of blood on the front of his vest. All that was left in his hands was his gun.