

*Kansas, Summer of 1958*

Those damn sparrows and starlings. They were doing it again, pecking the grains we planted, nurtured, harvested, sold, or fed to the cows and pigs. They stole it off stalks or pilfered it from our grain storage building. They carried it to their young. Wheat stalks waved in the wind like ocean swells, heads protruding forward, grains already well developed by mid-June. We felt protective of our crop. With most of next year's livelihood burgeoning in those undulating fields, who'd allow sparrows and starlings to steal it?

Scriptural passages about birds of the air and lilies of the fields misled us. Birds could be carefree *because* we worked. It wasn't fair. They paid no regard to my mother's unsteady gait or her shaking hands covering her tears. They wouldn't notice our sacrifices to follow Jesus's message. They were blind to our toil from dawn to dusk that produced food and hopefully purified our souls.

Plenty of these birds would be shot when my ten-year-old male cousins gained birthday BB guns. I took action right along with my pacifist siblings and cousins. Like a snake up a tree, I crawled up the ladder to the highest shelf of the hayloft in the red barn. Those little nestlings, I knew they'd be there, and I plopped those translucent baby birds into a rusted coffee can. I grabbed more babies from hard-to-reach nests dotting the farm. My can stood just as tall and full as my cousins'. Those boys couldn't show me up.

One task remained: splat the baby birds from the can onto the outside planks of our hoary outhouse. When my turn came, I plunged my hand into the coffee can, squeezed my fingers around some squirming, featherless bodies, wound up my arm like a major-league pitcher, and *kabaam*. Dogs jumped up to lick the remains.

I'd watched Dad take his hunting rifle and chase coyotes, followed by neighbors also in hot pursuit. As a point of protective pride, they felt righteous, shooting the devils that tore apart our lambs. Shouldn't I feel as honorable about thinning out bird populations? I didn't care much about birds one way or the other.

But Dad returned and gave me a furrowed-brow look that said *don't ever do it again*. His eyes told me I should act like his daughter, and coffee cans of baby sparrows and featherless bodies splattered against the outhouse were unacceptable. Under his gaze my revelry turned to embarrassment. I looked down and studied the frayed rips in my sneakers.

I had been as dogged as most kids about stomping on stink bugs or trapping lightning bugs until my jar was lit. Dad raised no eyebrow to that. Still, I should have known that killing baby birds was a step too far. At least for a girl.

People who haven't lived on farms don't always get it. I stood up for Dad years later in the Boston College student lounge, when my friends berated farmers who butchered animals with their bare hands. They turned up their noses at butchering, yet they stuffed their faces with cheeseburgers. I didn't tell them what happened when my dad helped with our annual Butcher Day Fundraiser for Hopefield Mennonite Church: sick from killing, he came home green and vomited. I didn't tell these students that some people butcher and hate it.

There's a lot about farm life you wouldn't understand if you didn't grow up on a farm. I didn't tell them that when I was five and Mom and Grandma Schrag butchered a couple of hens, they both laughed till they cried—while I, eyes wild with fright, screamed like a banshee and ran in circles to escape the blood-spurting, headless chicken chasing me.

I didn't tell them about the day my sister Debbie and I tried to surprise Mom with a meal we delivered right to the table—we swung a dull ax against an old rooster's unyielding neck.

I didn't tell them I had the mark of baby birds on me.

I didn't tell them either that God saw the little sparrows fall. He didn't do a damn thing to help them. But according to our songs, *He so loves the little birds*, and therefore I should believe He loves me, too. He watched those birds splat against our out-house! What kind of love is that?

I didn't tell them because they didn't have eyes to see or ears to hear. Instead, I told those college kids who berated farmers for butchering, "I was raised on a farm where your hamburger comes from."

I should have asked them what they thought about their dads. They went to World War II, didn't they? They killed people, not cows, pigs, or chickens. None of these students approved of the Vietnam War. They had no desire to kill or be killed in Southeast Asia. Still, they didn't put their wartime dads on the same level as brutish farmers. I didn't ask why, because I didn't think of it until several hours later. But given time to ponder, anyone who ruminates would know we all have blood on our hands.