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MERCY

I should kill the duck. I know how to do it. Scott showed me one day with a deft hand. He split the skin where the leg meets the body and with his finger hooked, jammed it inside and found the heart. It dislodged with no sound and laid beating in his palm. He offered it with an open hand to my falcon who took it with dainty bites while the duck stilled.

Scott gauged my expression, wondering if I thought my fingers could do the same. I met his eyes and nodded that I could. I had been a falconer for eight years. I flew Anakin nearly every day, keeping his wing-beat strong and his heart wild. I slogged through mud and splashed into ponds, a bird dog for a duck-hunting falcon. I was determined to do my job. I had asked if Scott knew a quick way to kill a duck bound tight in the talon-tipped feet of a falcon. If what he had shown me was mercy, then it's what I would do.

I tried it myself several weeks later, but found that my hands were too small and clumsy. I couldn't find the grape-sized heart, and when finally, I did, I couldn't free it from the hollow of the duck's chest. It beat against my fingers and I wondered what kind of a monster I was, a failure of a predator, unable to dispatch my prey with casual quickness. I should kill this duck, but once again, I'm a failure.

Sometimes my peregrine falcon cuts through a flock of ducks, diving from a thousand feet. With two seconds to choose through a view that must be blurred with the speed, he picks a duck that stands out in its weak or uncertain wing-beat. These flights are an audible battle, the wind complaining through the falcon's feathers and bell with the same concern it gives artillery. When the falcon connects a high-speed dive, a stoop like this, there is no beating heart to seek with shaking fingers; the duck remains a piece of the sky and only its body careens to the earth. That's when I love a peregrine's flight, when it is serious and merciful.

My peregrine is rarely serious and never merciful. By now he understands that a forceful blow is neat, clean and so much easier. Yet he takes a

meal however he can get it even if he has to rip a duck from the sky and brawl like a graceless mammal on the ground. I've seen him tackle a drake mallard four times his size and win, but not without a price. He has cracked the critical flight feathers at the edges of his wings. I have seen a duck rip the central feather from his tail with the tip of its webbed foot. The broken feathers came back new the next season, but the tail feather never grew back. Feathers are crucial and protected by their flexible strength but can only withstand so much life-desperate prey. The peregrine chooses messy battles, and I believe I have no choice but to be in the middle of them.

The ducks are safe on the pond. They are only vulnerable in the air where they can be spun by a hunter's gun or struck by a stooping falcon. They understand this even in their first migration down the Pacific Flyway. So when my falcon flies and climbs to a pitch of a thousand feet above the pond, I see it is my job to put the ducks in harm's way. They bob in the water, their invisible feet paddling them into tight circles as their dark blinking eyes sneak quick glimpses above, and no amount of yelling and rock throwing will bring them to split their bodies from the water.

When my bird is so high that searching the sky for him gives me vertigo, that is when I feel most obligated by our bond. He believes I will make the ducks come off the pond. Even when he's nothing more than a flashing speck momentarily visible against the cloud-line, we are still an inseparable team. I've worked hard to convince him this is true, and he has worked hard to gain the thick breast muscles that allow him to mount the sky. There's only forty feet between the ducks and me, a short swim that seems incomparable to the peregrine's climb. It's the least I can do. If he flies well, I always flush the ducks.

Today I didn't have to swim. The duck that is now cinched in the falcon's feet came off the pond cleanly, a nervously powerful straight arrow flight. Sometimes the ducks hug the edge of the pond, drawing the falcon in, and when the power of his stoop is wasted, splash back into safety. Anakin knows these tricks now. He won't waste his pitch on a duck that hasn't reached the open. It didn't matter. This duck didn't bother with trickery. I watched it bolt off the water with so much grace and power I believed in the duck and doubted my falcon.

Even as a connoisseur of warm-blooded flight, I couldn't have designed a more perfect bird than a duck. I love the decadence of their down and the impossible colors of a breeding drake. I admire the wiles of the teal and how they randomly scatter at just a glimpse of my smile. I love the way the mallards are brazen enough to always leave the ponds first without looking over their shoulders and how the pintails wait for the other ducks

to focus the falcon like a heat-seeking missile and then slip quietly out the back way. I love it when the ducks get away, although, I love it more when they don't.

Today's duck was bigger than a teal or even a gadwall, bigger than a lazy mallard living on cracked corn. It rose from the pond, powering for the horizon, without a glance at the falcon above it. The peregrine hesitated only long enough for the duck's shadow to appear gliding across the ground, and then my bird tucked into a dive. I watched him fall with all the momentum his little body could gain from his 600-foot pitch and make contact with audible force. It was only enough of a blow to nudge the large duck, merging with its shadow, into the ground, and though it bounced with the meeting the duck still got up again, the falcon close behind. I lost sight of the two opponents and scrambled through the creosote to find them. The duck looked too heavy to regain the air, and I knew that Anakin would not relinquish any hold he might manage. I wondered what species of duck I had flushed. I didn't get a good enough look at it to be sure, but thought it had the drab colors of a female.

I found the falcon and the duck at the fence line and wondered if the mystery duck had dragged him there. The delicate feathers and gentle eyes of a duck in repose hide its sharp hard bones and commitment to staying alive. I've seen a duck drag the peregrine across a field of close-cropped alfalfa, whipping its wings in an attempt to knock death off its back. Waterfowl will roll, kick and struggle back to the water where a falcon might be drowned. These tactics occasionally leave the falcon with nothing more than a scatter of lost feathers surrounding his feet, stunned and unsteady, still standing where the duck broke free. Anakin could get badly hurt in a losing battle, but he's learned that I'll get there and turn the tide. I protect the falcon, but when I step in, I'm also responsible for the duck.

Now my falcon's beak and chest feathers are dipped in blood and his eyes wild. His wings and tail were in disarray and I know I have missed the real battle, but am thankful not to have to reach in between them at their full strength. The duck has lost but still weakly kicks and struggles.

I untangle their wings and let my falcon stand upright, examining their engagement. The duck is three times the size of my falcon. The long yellow toes of Anakin's delicate feet are wrapped securely around his prey's head and neck. I wince at the talon in the duck's eye and the spot where he has flayed her open to eat, wishing he had killed her outright. There is no way to break the duck's neck without wringing my falcon in the process.

I know I should kill the duck, but I don't want to fumble with its insides. Anakin is reveling in the taste of blood from her neck, and I know this is greater torture than attempted mercy from me, but I can't do it.

Instead, I look over the duck, stroking her wing and burying my fingers in her thick feathers. I still don't know what sort of duck this is. I wonder if it's a redhead, examining its rusty brown head and trying not to look in its one good eye. Admiring the delicate grey pattern of its back, I decide it must be a gadwall and not a hen at all, but a drake. However, it seems too heavy and its tail too short and I don't see the white scapulars. I don't know what species of duck this is, and when I step my falcon off of it, finally wringing its neck, I can't even thank it by name.

Walking back to the truck, the duck in my bag, the second duck of a truly difficult second season, I don't feel elated. Anakin rides on my glove, picking the last bits of food off his toes, his eyes almond-shaped and the beard of feathers beneath his chin puffed out against the early sun. My falcon is as pleased as I have ever seen him and deserves to be, but the weight of the duck tucked in the voluminous back pocket of my vest pulls against my shoulders and feels too much like guilt.

Back at the truck I mist my falcon with a spray bottle to cool him down and give him a drink. I clean his beak between my fingers and let him relish the sun for a moment longer. He doesn't fight me when I slip the hood on his head for the ride home. He steps onto his perch when I tell him "up" even though he cannot see past the calming dark of the leather. Then he pulls up a foot and rests his beak against the stockpile of food bulging in his chest, resting with the emotionless contentment of a raptor. I know when I get him home and tie him out in the yard he will wait until a stripe of sun licks the edges of his bath pan. Then he will douse himself, rowing his wings in a tremendous soaking bath, preparing his feathers for the next hunt, a victorious wild falcon in a sun-warmed winter puddle. I am happy for his wildness.

I pick up the cell phone to call Scott. As the phone rings I pull the duck from my bag, examining its markings again. I'm about to ask for help in identifying it, when I notice the white feathers in the wing.

"Hello?"

"Drake gadwall—six hundred feet—Whitewater."

"Right on! Did he bind to it?"

"No. He bounced it. It was a great stoop, but the gadwall got back up and he chased it down. Hell of a brawl. I think it drug him to the fence line."

"Nice. I'll see you when you get home."

Tucking the duck back into my bag, I nod to myself and name the duck quietly. Drake gadwall. I can turn up the radio and sing loudly the whole way home.

I have been home for a while before Scott says, "Hey. Where's that

drake gadwall?" I've been known to misidentify ducks and he can't help but ask it with a smile.

"It's in my bag on the patio."

"Let's take a look!" Following Scott, I forget for a moment I had ever doubted what the falcon and I had caught. "Yep! That's a drake...wait a minute. This isn't a gadwall."

"What is it?"

"I think it's a redhead, a hen."

"No. It has a black beak."

"Feel how beefy it is." He hands me the carcass and it lies heavy in my hand. "I'll go get the book."

"It could be a canvasback hen, but its head doesn't slope enough," I call to him inside and stroke the duck in my hands.

Scott returns with a field guide and we flip through the pages, eliminating species until we know what Anakin has caught. It's a hen canvasback.

"I should have known. Nothing is as heavy as a canvasback. *You* should have known too." Scott shakes his head at me.

Gauging her weight, I lift the duck and agree. "You're right. He caught one last year, too. I know better."

"Are they in season?"

"No. The season on canvasbacks is short this year. The population's still not doing well. It doesn't start until December."

"Well, you can't help it. There were other ducks on the pond, right?" He's trying to look me in the eyes, wondering why I'm upset. He would have hunted it anyway, but I know I won by cheating. "One canvasback isn't going to hurt the population. The gun hunters shoot them by the hundreds," he continues.

"They're so easy to catch, though. They always come off the pond clean."

"And when they do they get up to speed fast, and they're the fastest. Besides, he's a five hundred gram falcon, a canvasback is no small feat...two thousand grams at least."

I consider this for a moment, wondering if there was any way I could have stepped the falcon off and set her free in the field, but realized that I couldn't have. "I still can't do the heart thing."

"It takes practice." Scott answers casually and I wince.

"I had to wait and wring her neck."

"You got a duck, though."

"Yeah." I'm staring at the duck, searching silently for satisfaction. "Canvasbacks are good eating..."

“Yeah. You should clean it and stick it in the people freezer.” Scott turns to walk away, satisfied that the conversation is finished.

“Can we have her for dinner tonight?” I ask casually.

“We’re leaving tomorrow and we have all that leftover steak.” He turns to examine my silence, the duck cradled in my hands. He rubs his chin, thinking. “She’d taste a lot better fresh, wouldn’t she?”

“Yes, she would.”

“All right then. Go ahead and breast her. We’ll have duck for dinner.” He kisses me on my forehead and gives my shoulder a squeeze before he walks away.

I find a pair of scissors and lay her out on the cement, giving her wings one last stroke. I catalog her details, committing them to memory. *Hen canvasback*. Her body is still warm when I clean her, the dense down holding in her heat. I trim the wings and legs to freeze for Anakin and cut the breast out to wash and marinate. I wonder if I should keep her feathers, if we might use them for something, but decide that we won’t. I pull a single white flight feather and tuck it in the back pocket of my jeans.

When we have dinner, I will eat where I can watch the falcon preen his feathers back into place. Scott will bring me a glass of red wine with a smile. Canvasback will become my favorite meal, the meat nearly melting in my mouth like the tenderest cut of beef. I will toast the falcon and the duck and remember her with every bite. I’ll evoke her gracefully sloped bill that looked etched from ebony. Her grey feathering marked in intricate swirling detail. I’ll recall her short tail, narrow wings and heavy body, all attributes of an expert diver. I’ll remember she was perfect. Then I won’t forget again.