The Woodpecker Problem

An hour before the storm hit, Henry Leek killed a woodpecker with a rock.

It was a lucky shot, he told Bea afterwards. “I just wanted to scare him off, but I nailed him right on the noggin.”

He was trying to sound nonchalant, like Hemingway after bagging a rhino, but he shuddered as he recalled the feeling he’d had as the rock made impact—the dull thud of stone against flimsy bone. It was as if the rock had struck his own noggin.

Henry had been at the computer tracking the storm’s progress when he heard the unmistakable sound of beak against wood: Tap tap tap. TAP TAP TAP. He was surprised. Typically, woodpeckers chose calm, sunny days to attack the house. On those occasions, Henry would groan, sneak outside, arm himself with small stones from the garden and toss them at the offending bird, his shots wildly off-target but just close enough to spook the woodpecker back into the woods.

Today, the sky was dark gray, and the wind was starting to pick up ahead of the storm. It was the kind of weather that usually sends animals—birds, squirrels, deer—into hiding, leaving foolish humans to fend for themselves.

And yet there it was: tap tap tap.

He reluctantly left the computer, where the storm swirled off the coast in menacing reds and yellows and greens, and went downstairs.

"Where are you going, daddy?" his six-year-old daughter, Pearl, asked.

Henry had forgotten that school had been canceled today. Just when he was getting used to being home all day, here comes this storm—and the school closing—to throw him off balance again.

"Daddy needs to go outside for a minute," he told Pearl, unsure of why he needed to refer to himself in the third person. He made a mental note to monitor that habit, to see if he spoke that way in particular situations. "Daddy will be right back," he added, stepping outside before Pearl could ask another question. Henry loved his daughter, but the relentless demands, the questions—they exhausted him.

Dead leaves scuttled across the grass, trees swayed out of synch with each other. Just above the roofline, it seemed, pendulous clouds rolled across the sky. Henry had already moved the porch furniture into the garage, along with both cars, and was considering taping the windows. News reports were warning of an "unprecedented storm," with wind gusts of up to 100 miles per hour and several inches of rain.

"It's Armageddon!" he had joked to Bea, skeptical as he was of the media, but seeing that sky, smelling the roiled-up air—he was starting to get spooked.

Meanwhile, the woodpecker jackhammered away. Was it digging for insects before all hell broke loose? A cozy nook to hide in? Black, with a splash of red on its crest, the bird perched above the window at the rear of the house, unaware that Henry was peeking around the corner, rock in hand.

Truth be told, Henry really did want to nail the bird—just once, a solid killshot. He attributed his bloodlust to his genetically coded masculine instinct to defend his home. Just as in olden times a man might rush out with his musket to ward off a marauding bear, here he was armed with crude weaponry to challenge nature's brutal onslaught. Well, okay, he admitted, it may not be equivalent, exactly, but there was the cedar siding to consider.

The woodpecker paused in its task, looked around. Henry remained still. The fatal rock, about one inch in diameter, solid and smooth, felt good in his hand. He estimated the distance to his target at approximately twenty feet. He would get one good shot.

As Henry brought back his arm he imagined the face of his former boss, Mr. Kruger, superimposed on the head of the bird. He anticipated the joy he'd take in seeing Kruger beaned on the beak by a sharp rock. He pictured himself standing over his boss's supine body, the blood gushing from the old man's hairy nostrils, the terror in his eyes.

With this in mind, he threw the rock in an uncharacteristically rope-straight line.

Thud.

Henry watched the bird plunge toward the ground with a combination of elation (I killed it!) and sickening guilt (I killed it). Though it happened in less than a second, the moment of impact seemed to stretch on and on—it was happening even now, as the woodpecker lay lifeless on the ground. Henry kept watching it, hoping the bird would climb to its little feet, shake itself off, and fly away home, but the poor creature just lay there, as still as the stone that had crushed its tiny skull.

"Sorry," Henry said to the dead woodpecker before heading inside to tell Bea.

But before he could reach his wife in the kitchen, Pearl appeared, clutching a stuffed elephant.

"You killed the birdy," she said in a babyish voice.

"You saw that?"

Pearl's eyes looked shiny, as if she might cry. "You killed the birdy."

Why was she talking like a two-year-old? Normally Pearl came up with things like, "Daddy, I was thinking about God, and I'm not sure he really exists." She'd said this just last week, out of the blue, convincing Henry that his kid was a genius, and now here she was clutching a fuzzy elephant to her neck and saying, "You killed the birdy." Had he traumatized his daughter by slaughtering the woodpecker in front of her?

"Daddy didn't mean to, sweetie," he said, and then thought, Dammit, there I go again with the third person. He wondered if it was a way to distance himself from his actions.

"Mommy," Pearl said, headed into the kitchen, "daddy killed the birdy."

When she heard what had happened, Bea looked at Henry as if he'd told their daughter that everyone dies alone and terrified. Then she went to the back window to view the corpse herself.

"Oh, Henry," she said in a familiar tone of disappointment. "You need to bury him or something."

"Bury him? Now?"

The wind swirled against the house, whistling through the eaves.

"Yes," Bea said. "Do it before the storm."

Pearl grabbed her mother around the waist and stared unnervingly at Henry. He noticed for the first time their strong resemblance. It was as if, just now, Pearl had willed herself to look more like her mother. Until this very moment he'd considered her a small, softer version of

himself, but he realized with great sadness that his daughter had just crossed some line away from him.

The telephone rang, making him jump. Bea answered it.

"Oh, hi," she said, and Henry knew it was their neighbor, Sybil. "I know," Bea said. "It looks scary out there." As she spoke, she directed a stern look toward Henry, as if to say, Get out there and take care of business, buster. He nodded and headed for the door.

By the time he'd gotten a spade from the shed and reached the rear of the house, the wind had blown the woodpecker several yards across the lawn. This bird truly is light as a feather, he thought as he stood over the body. Its eyes resembled dark little seeds glued to its head. The black feathers lay smooth against its body. It looked like one of those stuffed birds you see in antique shops, fallen off its tiny wooden cylinder. He couldn't imagine now how he'd been able to see the cruel face of his former boss on this poor, dead creature.

A movement at the window caught his eye. Pearl watched him through the glass, her face still locked in an expression of bewildered grief. Henry smiled, shrugged, as if to say, "Stuff happens," but Pearl's expression did not change.

The wind picked up. Overhead, the trees swayed, shedding leaves and dead twigs across the yard. Henry looked hard at the waving limbs, the shuddering trunks. There was one tree, an old silver maple, that if it fell would likely land directly on the house. He pictured the thick trunk slicing through the roof, the attic, the second floor, into the living room, a carving knife through a layer cake. He pictured Bea and Pearl pinned beneath the tree, the breath knocked out of them, and himself, electrified with adrenaline, hoisting the tree off their half-broken bodies. A hero! There would be a photograph in the local newspaper (*Husband Saves Family*) where readers would finally put a face to the angry, sarcastic Letters to the Editor he regularly fired off. Maybe

Mr. Kruger would see it and offer him his old job back. After all, the company would look good re-hiring a hero. Pearl might even forgive him then.

He scooped the bird's already stiff corpse onto the spade. Though it weighed nothing, the bird seemed huge—as large as a crow—in the rusted spade head. Henry carried it to the garden at the back of the yard and dug a hole alongside the clipped stems of daylilies munched to oblivion by deer over the course of the previous summer. Bea often threatened to buy a gun and pick off the deer from a window as they obliterated her hard work, but Henry, the bird killer, always defended them. "They're hungry," he'd say, to which Bea would respond, "Yeah, well, *I'll* put them out of their misery." What would Pearl say to that, he wondered. "Mommy killed Bambi"?

He dug a good eighteen inches into the soil, afraid that some other hungry animal might smell the rotting carcass and dig the bird up, and then he laid the body in the hole.

He supposed a few words were in order. As he considered what to say, he glanced toward the window, where Pearl still stood watching. Henry turned away, unable to bear her judgment, and stared down into the grave. The bird's red, triangular-shaped crest seemed to glow in the dark hole. A pair of bold white stripes ran down the bird's neck, and the beak, as big as the woodpecker's head, was like a little chisel. Such a powerful little machine, useless now.

"Lord," he said, "here lies one of your beautiful creatures. I sure am sorry to have brought his life to an end—though he was of course damaging my property. Nevertheless, his life was sacred, and I hope you can forgive me."

As he spoke, Henry peered upward. Perhaps because of Pearl's reaction he couldn't help but fantasize that the black clouds represented God's wrath at his moral indiscretion. The sky looked like something from a crucifixion movie, where the mocking Roman centurions go pale

at the fury of Jesus' father. He felt his own face drain of blood as the first fat raindrops landed upon his cheeks.

He looked over at Pearl again and said, "Amen," before quickly scooping soil onto the woodpecker's body. From there he hurried inside, forgetting to return the spade to the shed.

"Why'd you bring *that* in here?" Bea asked, with her hand covering the phone's mouthpiece.

Henry opened the door again, intending to set the spade outside, but the rain was coming down thick now, blowing sideways against the storm door like buckshot. So he set the spade against the wall next to the closet, careful to keep the dirt-crusted point off the rug.

"Henry just came back in," Bea said into the telephone. She smiled at Sybil's response and asked Henry, "Did you give that poor bird a proper send-off?" Then, back to Sybil: "He looks sufficiently contrite." She laughed then, and Henry went upstairs to his computer. Parrot greens and yellows swirled clockwise around a pulsing crimson eye off the coast—just twenty miles away. From his office window he watched the rain bunch itself into smoke-like drifts above the lake's rippling surface. The sky had been taken over by one big cloud, office furniture-gray and descending like a movable ceiling. He had to switch on a lamp to make out his desk top—the stack of bills, the marked-up printout of his latest resumé, the legal pad populated by doodles of his own face (round, fleshy, a wisp of Charlie Brown hair). The lamp bulb flickered, and Henry's heart quickened. It was only a matter of time before some tree somewhere blew over onto the power lines. Some of his neighbors—Bob Lucas, Tony Waters, Walter Wittig—had advised him to purchase a gas-powered generator, but these were competent men who built their own decks and chopped firewood with axes, the kind of men, ironically, who were most

capable of surviving without electricity. In Henry's mind, a blackout was preferable to blowing up his house in a generator-related accident.

Along the horizon, lightning flared behind the clouds, like a flashlight beneath a blanket. The lamp flickered again, then died, as did the computer.

"Henry!" Bea called from downstairs.

"I know," he said.

Then the lamp came back on, and the computer rebooted.

"Oh, thank God," Bea said, and he heard her dialing the phone. "Talk quickly," she said to Sybil. "It's only a matter of time."

Henry found the weather website again and watched the red ALERT notices flash across the screen. Out in the front yard, the silver maple groaned. Though it was only three o'clock, it looked as though the sun had long gone down, or had been wiped out entirely, leaving the world to be lit by thin, fragile wires and the occasional flash of lightning. Henry felt his blood pressure rise, as it did whenever something terrifying loomed: Pearl with a high fever, his mother's heart surgery, a prostate exam. He was reasonably certain that he and his family would survive the storm, just as they had these other crises, but look at those clouds! Listen to that wind! He felt like … well, he felt like a tiny, weightless bird at the mercy of a cruel, rock-wielding world.

Out of curiosity, he ran a search for "woodpecker," and discovered hundreds of websites devoted to the bird. The first one he clicked featured a close-up photograph of what could have been the very one he'd killed, a pileated woodpecker. There was the shock of red on the crest, the long beak, the white stripes and black feathers. Apparently, he had killed a female.

At the sound of a creaking floorboard he turned to see Pearl in the doorway, still clutching her stuffed elephant.

"Hi, sweetie," he said.

Her expression had lost none of its judgmental quality as she stared at the image on Henry's computer.

"Come here," he said, motioning for her to come close.

She stepped slowly toward him and leaned against his knees. He scooped her onto his lap, and while she did not resist, nor did she scrabble on board the way she usually did.

"Are you scared about the storm?" he asked.

His normally motor-mouthed daughter just shook her head no and continued staring at the computer.

For the approximately one-thousandth time Henry felt ill-equipped to be a parent. How do you talk to these people, he wondered, without completely warping their plastic little minds?

"Did you know," Henry said, reading from the website, "woodpeckers' tongues can be four inches long? And they have some kind of sticky stuff on them to catch bugs? Did you know that?"

Pearl ignored him.

"Honey, Daddy's sorry—." He stopped himself. "I'm sorry I killed the birdie. I didn't mean to. It was an accident."

She finally looked away from the screen, toward the window. The clouds flashed. Henry waited for thunder, but heard only the sound of wind coursing through the trees and against the house. A gust sent a splash of raindrops against the glass, making Pearl flinch. He hugged her close, deciding this was better than words. When had words ever done any good, anyway? Well,

maybe the Gettysburg Address, things like that, but he was no Abe Lincoln—he wasn't even a James Polk or Calvin Coolidge—so he hugged his daughter instead.

"Ow," she said, pulling away.

"Sorry."

He watched helplessly as she climbed off his lap.

"I'm going to need my own flashlight," she said, "for when the lights go out again."

Henry grinned. *That's my girl*.

"Of course," he said. "Let's find you one."

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The power went off at about 8:30. Though the lights had been flickering for hours and had momentarily blacked out several times, this power loss felt definitive—so much so that Henry and Bea both said, when the house went dark, "That's it."

Bea lit a fat candle that smelled of vanilla and set it on the coffee table. Shadows danced across the walls like ghosts. They had agreed to remain downstairs, to put another ten feet between them and that old maple, and Pearl had fallen asleep on the sofa. Outside, the wind raged in waves that crashed against the house relentlessly. As he'd done every ten minutes or so all night long, Henry went to the window and gazed out into the maelstrom, hoping to see some sign that the storm was almost over. But all he could see were the vague skeletal silhouettes of swaying trees. Not long before, a branch had fallen to the deck with a loud clatter. He pictured the yard littered with them, like driftwood thrown up onto a beach.

Where would the poor woodpecker have sheltered, he wondered, had it lived? He imagined it lying a foot and a half in the ground, peaceful, quiet.

"How much longer is this supposed to go on?" Bea asked.

Henry could tell she was frightened because she hadn't spoken in nearly an hour, not since coaxing Pearl to sleep with a series of lullabies.

"They said it was moving very slowly," he said. He'd checked the weather website a few moments before the blackout. "We've probably got a few more hours of this."

Bea groaned. Henry sat down next to her at the foot of the sofa, but Pearl was taking up most of the cushion, leaving little room for both parents. He balanced one buttock on the edge and took Bea's limp hand.

"It'll be okay."

"I wish you hadn't killed that bird," Bea said, her face reflecting the flickering candlelight. "It brought bad luck."

Oh, okay, Henry thought, so the storm is *my* fault. But he said nothing, just squeezed her hand and tried to listen to Pearl's soft breathing as the wind whistled around the corners of the house.

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It lasted till just past midnight. First the rain lightened up, and then the wind slowly but steadily faded, like a siren on a fire truck heading into the distance.

Bea had fallen asleep. Henry did not know when, exactly, because she'd been so quiet. At some point he'd glanced over at the sofa to see her head lying back, her mouth open, as if she were aghast at something on the ceiling.

He got up and went to the window again. For the first time all night he could see beyond the yard. The sky had faded to a pale gray, and a hole had opened up in the clouds to reveal a patch of black. As his eyes adjusted, he could make out the lake through the trees, and a cluster of dark houses on the far side. He wondered when the power would be restored, but then decided

he didn't care. It would be nice to ignore the computer for a while. No TV or radio, no phone ringing. For a few days no one would ask him about his job search. Yes, it would get cold—the house was already chilly after just a few hours—but he would light a fire.

Earlier, after the girls had drifted off, he'd been certain this storm would never pass, that the wind would forever pummel his house, the trees would always sway and groan, the rain would never cease to batter at the windows. He'd waited, hardly breathing, for the old silver maple to come hurtling down from above. Maybe Bea had been right, he thought. Maybe if he hadn't murdered that poor woodpecker, the storm would have passed already. But now the squall had ended. The maple stood tall against the thinning clouds.

Should he wake Bea and take Pearl up to her bed? Since the wind had died down he could hear them breathing as they dreamed on the sofa together. He decided to let them be. He sat down and shut his eyes, and when he opened them again the sun was streaming in. From the angle of the light he figured he must have been asleep for at least five hours, without the inkling of a dream. The girls still slept on the sofa. He glanced over at the radio clock, but the face remained blank. Everything was so quiet. He wondered what had woken him, and then he heard it:

Tap tap tap.

He went to the back of the house. The sound came from the same spot as yesterday, a foot or so above the window. He went out the front door, careful not to wake the girls. As he rounded the side of the house, he glanced toward the garden, half expecting to see a hole where he'd buried the woodpecker—maybe it had been alive all along, and had dug its way out—but the spot remained mounded over with earth.

He peered around the corner and saw an identical bird—black, with a splash of red—hammering away at the siding. The bird paused, looked over at Henry, then returned to its work. *I dare you*, it seemed to be saying.

Henry looked around for a rock—he'd just scare it this time; he'd miss it on purpose. But first he leaned back against the house and looked up at the blue sky. The air looked and smelled as if each molecule of oxygen had been scrubbed clean. The trees, nearly leafless now, stood perfectly still. From the lake he could hear the water rushing over the dam. The house against his back felt warm, as if heated by the temperature of the people inside.

Tap tap tap.

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Pearl awoke and saw the room lit up with sunlight. Her mother sat next to her on the sofa, sleeping. From the back of the house came that familiar sound.

She got up and went to the back window. Outside, the grass sparkled wet in the sun. Twigs and branches lay everywhere, dead leaves in piles where they'd blown. Peering up, she could see the bird perched on the side of the house. It was black, just like the other one, with a long stiff tail that it rested against the wood as it worked. Tap tap tap.

She watched her father coming around the corner. She looked to see if he had a rock in his hand.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Go away!"

The bird stopped tapping.

"Shoo!" her father cried. "Go!"

He came toward the house, and the bird flew off in a great flutter toward the trees, showing bright white patches beneath its wings, its long feathers like individual fingers.

Pearl's father saw her in the window, and smiled.

Then the lights came on.