

Lift. Swing. Chop.

The oak logs would crack with the first strike of the axe, and break with the second- so long as my form was tight. Wood tumbled off the stump and lay scattered about the black, rooted dirt until I collected it with my calloused hands, which were cut-up and bloody because we could not afford gloves.

I stacked the cut wood in neat rows, flush with the brick of our small three-room house. Flush so no strays found shelter, tight because if it were shit Pop would make me tear it all down and start again. He stood there, mouth full of tobacco, watching as I set log after log on the stump.

Lift. Swing. Chop.

“I learned at a young age, probably younger than you, the importance of doing a job right the first time. Every job. Even something small. Know why?” I wiped my flannel sleeve over my forehead and looked up at him. His shoulders sagged and his back curved like a beaten rug.

“If it’s a small job and you do it like shit it will turn into a big one. Understand?”

Pop and I were chicken farmers with twenty hens whose eggs we sold up at the Sunday market to men with their families. Pop’s eggs were quite popular, which, naturally, made Pop quite popular. Men were dressed in slacks and women in church dresses. All were alive with the word of the Lord except Pop and me. I watched as they’d file out of church and walk past each of the small tables filled with the hard work of the local growers: cabbage, tomatoes, and various legumes. The butcher came on the first and third of the month, but Pop said he preferred the

hunting of venison to chops or beef cuts. I knew we could not afford to buy meat anyways.

We had our regular customers: Mr. Corvallis, the Pratts, and the Smithes. Pop greeted each and every passer-by with a “good morning” and a tight-lipped smile. These were the only days he bothered with the razor. Lack of practice often left his face scraped or cut but his demeanor never changed, even when stretches of folks were not interested in the eggs. He smiled and thanked everyone for his or her time.

A boy my age kissed his father on the cheek. The man had just bought him a wooden train from the table down the way. I figured if I became good with a knife I could carve one like it. Pop rustled my hair with his leathery hand and gave me a nickel. This was the first time I had ever been given money. I felt its weight in my hand and rubbed it gently with my fingers. The possibilities: hard licorice, gumdrops, flavored ice? No, I needed something more useful, maybe a new knife or a good handkerchief. Both were great options but I never decided on one. Pop took back the nickel right before we packed up.

“Unless you want to buy some eggs,” he asked.

He knew I hated the taste of eggs and did not say anything else after that. Dusk was falling and we were the only ones left. We were always the last ones to leave.

I read once that you can count the seconds between lightening and thunder to figure out how far away a storm is. That night both happened at the same time. The whole house shook. Pop flung my door open and threw my boots on the floor.

“Barns on fire.”

Rain was falling in buckets and I was soaked to the bone before I had even reached the barn, which was a blaze like a big burning log. I just stood there for a few moments and watched the fire spread over the Cupola. The rain was doing little to stifle it and the wind made it move faster. Pop was trying to drag the wagon out but I quickly determined that it was pointless for him to keep struggling. Part of the loft had collapsed onto the wagon trapping Muriel, our mule, inside. I knew she would not be saved. I think Pop knew too because after a while he stopped trying. By then, though, I had already gone inside to watch the barn burn from my bed.

The next morning we buried Muriel at the edge of the woods and then took a walk to see what trees the storm had knocked down. After we rebuilt the barn I figured Pop would have me chop these trees into useable logs. Firewood was a precious commodity in the winters and always seemed to be just enough to help us get by when the eggs ran low. Pop would need to buy another mule to replace Muriel and I knew he was thinking about this as we walked through the mud. Light rain was still falling when we reached the clearing where the land sloped down into the valley. This is where Pop's property line was. I stood at the edge and looked out at the new mills that were going up. I had come here many times to watch the slow rise of the metal walls but this was the first time Pop had been here since it all started.

I knew that he hated the mills. He had talked about the railroads before and how they cut through folks' land. How the trains were too big and noisy. How they would bring out people from the big cities in the east. This is what scared Pop the most. I thought of a story a man at the market had told us a few weeks earlier. He

said a black man out east had raced against this machine to dig a tunnel through the side of some mountain. Said a lot of folks came to watch and exchanged bets. The man won but died right after.

“Damn boy worked himself to death,” the man said.

“At least he won,” Pop replied. I wondered what he would have said if the black man had lost.

We stared out at the valley for a long time. I could almost hear the hammers rattling down below.

Lift. Swing. Chop. Lift. Swing. Chop. It did not rain for several months after that.

At the beginning of summer, about early June, we had two callers to our property: a man who looked a little younger than Pop and a girl about my age. He wore pressed slacks and a white cotton shirt. I could tell his boots had not seen much wear from the way he walked in them. He introduced himself to Pop and me as Thomas E. Cressman. She had bright red hair down the small of her back and deep blue eyes that were too pretty to look at. She had sun-kissed skin and freckles on her face. Her fingers played with her dress made of lace. She was nervous and I noticed. Her name was Daisy.

“What can I do for you Mr. Cressman?”

“Please, call me Tom. I understand that this is a chicken farm. You and your son farm chickens?”

“Layers.”

“Pardon?”

“We’re hen layers. We take the eggs when they been laid.”

“I see. Well I wonder if you would be interested in selling some of your hens. Excuse my frankness.”

“For what?” Pop eyed him up and down. “We ain’t interest in competition Mr. Cressman.”

“No, I’m sorry. I should have explained. I fancy chickens would make great pets.”

Neither of us knew what to make of this statement.

“I reckon a dog would make a better pet. More useful.”

“My little girl’s allergies act up to most breeds.”

“I ain’t parting with my hens. Not for anyone.”

“Then perhaps you would consider selling this farm.”

I could only imagine what Pop and that Mr. Cressman discussed after I left. Mr. Cressman suggested that I show Daisy the hens.

“Could I feel them?”

Her voice was as sweet and gentle as the way she mothered Grace in her arms. Pop thought it stupid to apply names to the New Hampshire Reds.

“Don’t turn soft on me. Everything dies.”

Maybe he was right.

She told me her mother had died the year before. She told me they had just bought the property down the road, how her father thought a quiet life was best, and how all she really wanted was a friend.

I had never felt happier than I had been earlier that day. I had looked into her eyes and she into mine and, for a second, everything was perfect. I no longer hated chopping wood. I did not love books or the rain. The taste of eggs did not bother me. None of it mattered. I was there in the back yard and she was with me and life was perfect. I decided that I needed to feel like that again. I needed to see her again.

I heard the screen door slam as I was pulling on my boots. Pop had shaken me awake and said that he had found a fox in the back yard. We were both used to finding an occasional fox but there was still urgency in his voice. It was well after midnight and he probably had not fallen asleep yet. I did not bother tying my bootlaces because I figured he would just fire a few shots into the woods to scare them off and I could go back to bed. A shell or two usually got rid of them. My job was to check on the hens. Some hens had been known to start brooding after a fox scare.

The floorboards creaked as I got my maroon pullover from the dresser. All was calm in the house otherwise. I thought of falling into my bed. I had been having a good dream- a happy dream. I wondered, even, if I had been smiling when Pop came in. It did not make a difference if I was or was not though and I let it go.

The shotgun was resting in the corner by the door. Maybe it was finally my turn to fire shots into the woods. I grabbed it and our lantern and quietly closed the screen door.

All was still in the backyard and Pop was nowhere to be found. I held the gun up in front of me and made my way to the hen house. It was silent. The eight white

Leghorns and twelve Hampshire Reds were sleeping. I closed and latched the door. That is when I found Pop.

He was sweating and his hands were stained with blood. His flannel was also wet but I could not tell if this was from sweat or from the same stuff on his hands. He was smiling. His eyes were glossed with a shade of navy. They were no longer black like his matted hair.

“Come here.”

I followed the tufts of fur to the base of the hen house where dirt and blood had collected in thick clumps. There would be no need for the gun tonight. I felt it slip from my hand.

Pop’s lantern lay a few feet away and allowed just enough light as he tore the hide from the skeleton. Each rip cast shadows onto the side of the hen house. That is how I noticed the small scarlet beads dripping down the boards. Pop had tacked the head up where the two halves of the roof met. The glossy blue eyes stared at me. I had never seen Pop smile that way.

Lift. Swing. Chop.

Logs were stacked four rows deep along the house. It had not rained all summer and folks were concerned for their crops. Some thought it was the worst draught in over a hundred years. Pop figured it was bad for business. He said that as the wells dried so too would folks’ pocket books.

“I’ve never known anyone to profit from a draught,” he said as we watched the men and women walk passed.

Daisy and her father came up to our table and invited Pop and me to supper. Pop declined because we had to stay until the market closed.

“Maybe your boy would like to come.”

“My boy has a job to finish Mr. Cressman.”

Pop sighed and looked down at me.

“If you want to go you can go.”

I knew it would be foolish to leave but I wanted to take Pop by his word. I left with Daisy and her father.

Their house was much bigger than ours. There was no barn and the yard looked smaller but a swing was dangled from the oak branch in the front. I liked this. I had never been on one before but I thought it looked nice even if it did not need to serve a purpose.

Mr. Cressman sat across from me and smiled as we ate.

“There will be work down at the mill once it’s finished. It might be good for a boy your age. Earn a decent living.”

I stared at my plate: mashed potatoes, beans and bread, a cut of beef with gravy. It was the best supper I had ever had.

I knew Mr. Cressman had something to do with the mills going up in the valley but I did not know what. Daisy said he was down there most days and that she was often left at home. She told me to visit. She told me to take her on an adventure. I wanted to. I wanted to run away with her. I knew spots in the forest we could go and never be found. There were small winding paths along the trunks of trees that no one except me had seen. There were openings too, with knee-high



grasses where we could lay and I could make animals of the clouds. I could compare her face to flowers while she whispered into my ear. Pop thought it foolish to waste a day this way.

I walked home by myself. Mr. Cressman offered to take me in his wagon but I insisted on going alone. It was only a mile or two until the bridge and then I could cut through one of my paths in the woods. There was a breeze and I enjoyed a quiet walk. This also gave me an excuse to see Daisy again since I would have to return the lantern.

The night was very still except for the quiet swaying of the branches. The moon was bright and the road was well lit. There were few bugs these days because of the drought but I swatted a mosquito as I neared the bridge. I was at least a hundred feet away but I saw part of it had collapsed. I walked to the edge and held out the lantern. Twenty feet below was shattered pieces of the bridge and our wagon. I shimmied down the ravine to the dried up riverbed.

Pop lay pinned under part of the cart. He was still breathing but his hair was thick with blood. I wrapped my shirt around his head. He was muttering something but was too weak to form words. The wagon was too heavy to lift off his chest but I kept lifting until I was drenched with sweat. I tried using one of the broken boards as a lever but soon dropped to the ground panting. My chest heaved. I could not leave Pop like this. He kept muttering. I crawled over and held his head in my hands. His eyes were glossed with a shade of navy.

“Axe.”

I willed my way back up to the road and ran to the house. I grabbed the axe from the barn and sprinted back through the woods. I had left the lantern with Pop but the moon was bright and I could see well.

Down the ravine I tumbled, scrapping my back and shoulder. Blood was seeping through the shirt and he had stopped muttering.

Lift. Swing. Chop.

The wagon would break and I would pull him out.

Lift. Swing. Chop.

I would carry him up the ravine to the house.

Lift. Swing. Chop.

I told myself he was not that hurt. That it would be fine.

Lift.

Everything was going to be all right.

Swing.

I started to cry.

Chop.

A small fox stood by the lantern and its shadow fell over Pop. It looked young- too young to be on its own.