

Easter Lamb

Tommy Goodnow was sad and angry and couldn't sleep. In the darkness he stared at the glowing hands of his alarm clock as they dragged slowly around its face. His family's conversation at dinner earlier that evening played over and again in his mind as the house went quiet.

"So, I suppose you'll be wanting lamb again this year," his mother had said dully, passing the potatoes to her husband.

"This is a sheep farm, Emma," Father replied. "What did you have in mind for Easter dinner – crepes suzette?"

"I suppose you're right," she sighed, sipping her coffee. "I'll put some mint jelly on the grocery list."

"I've got a good fat one picked out," Father said smugly, plopping a large spoonful of mashed potatoes onto his plate. "Remember that spotted male 42A had last spring? He'll do nicely."

"Dad!" Tommy gasped, horrified at his father's heartless reference to his favorite lamb. "Not Edgar!"

"How many times have I told you, son? The sheep are not pets. We don't give them names." Setting the serving bowl down with a frown he added, "We have a dog. Play with her."

"Juliet's a working dog," Tommy said under his breath. "Edgar is a hundred times more fun than her." He glared at his half-eaten dinner.

"Stop mumbling. You're eleven years old. Now grow up."

Easter was less than a week away. Tommy had fallen in love with Edgar at first sight when he was born the previous spring. The spotted newborn had more personality

than all of the other lambs combined. Tommy spent every spare minute he had playing with the feisty lamb – usually while his father was busy in the corn fields or tending the apple trees. The bond between the two grew strong, and now Edgar instantly came running whenever he saw Tommy or heard his voice.

Tommy sat at the table with a lump in his throat, unable to think of anything but Edgar’s grisly fate. Sheep farming was harsh. Since his earliest memories, the annual cycle of birthing, castration, shearing and slaughter had sickened him.

A week after Edgar was born, Tommy’s father had fitted him with the cruel elastic band used to castrate male sheep not selected for breeding. As a “spotty”, Edgar’s markings were considered undesirable. Tommy had watched the daily progress of the elastration with horror as Edgar’s little scrotum swelled to twice its size, then darkened, shriveled, and eventually fell off altogether. The memory of his friend’s suffering stirred an angry sorrow in his chest.

He struggled to control his emotions, but the image of Edgar slaughtered and served up as Easter dinner was more than he could tolerate. Surrendering to his sadness, he bowed helplessly over his plate. Large tears rolled down his cheeks and dropped onto his dinner.

“That’s it, Tommy,” his father had barked at him. “Go to your room and stay there until breakfast.”

Moonlight shone softly through Tommy’s bedroom window, casting shadows on his wall. While he contemplated what he might do for Edgar, Tommy re-imagined and transformed those shadows into figures from the fairy tales and adventure stories he had read – noble bandits and fierce pirates and great sailing ships. He cast himself in the role of Robin Hood, saving Little John from the gallows in fair Nottingham town. Then he was young Jim Hawkins, running the riggings of the Hispaniola and protecting her from the mutinous crew. As Peter Pan, he rescued Tiger Lily and turned Captain Hook over to the giant crocodile at the point of a cutlass.

The tick-tock of the clock measured out the hours until, a little after 1:00, the sound of his father’s steady snoring told Tommy it was safe to go. He slid out of his covers, got

dressed, and tiptoed downstairs. After putting on his boots and coat, he stealthily slipped outside, careful to hold the mudroom door from slapping shut behind him. Through fuzzy moonlight shadows he crossed the yard to the sheep enclosure. In the cool April air, their border collie Juliet stood faithfully alert just inside the gate. Her wagging tail and whining seemed to say “What are you doing here?” Tommy stopped for a moment to pet her, then grabbed a length of bailing twine from a nail on the wall. Edgar came running from across the dimly lit pen.

“Hello, Edgar!” Tommy whispered hoarsely. “We’re going on an adventure. Come on.”

Looping the bailing twine through Edgar’s collar he fashioned a makeshift leash and lead him outside. With the twine bouncing between them, they walked briskly around the side of the barn on a worn tractor path and onward into the apple orchard. Then crossing the stubbled corn field and leaving it behind, they mounted the nearby ridge that defined the eastern horizon of the Goodnow farm.

At the top of the hill they stopped. Tommy turned and looked back down the valley. The sight filled him with exhilaration. He found himself gently startled at how the farm struck him from that perspective – at once so familiar, and yet somehow new, transformed. How small the sheep shed, the barn, and the house appeared from that vantage point! And how odd it felt to look down onto roofs that he never saw – always above his head, out of sight. He sat for a considerable stretch of time, imagining that this was how God must see the world. He wondered if the ruler of all could possibly be concerned with the problems and struggles of an ordinary person like himself.

Meanwhile, Edgar had grown bored and was bouncing and frolicking on his end of the leash. As Tommy watched the lamb’s comical antics, he recalled how often lambs figured into the lessons he was taught in Sunday School and church. Innocent and pure, they were always offered up in sacrifice for some greater purpose. Bible verses he’d been required to memorize and lyrics printed on hymnal pages rolled by in his mind’s eye: lamb of God, sacrificial lamb, blood of the lamb. He frowned, wondering where the idea had come from that for life to be sustained, something innocent had to die. It felt wrong to him. Backward somehow. *Shouldn’t safety and salvation come by resisting evil in the world,*

rather than killing something innocent? he mused. *What does God care for a dead lamb? What kind of God would create and a world where that made any sense?*

Suddenly, Edgar turned and playfully charged him, butting his woolly brow against the boy's thigh. Tommy laughed and squatted down, gently grabbing the lamb by his jowls and pressing their foreheads together. After a moment of quiet joy, Tommy was suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that he had no idea what he was going to do next. He looked at the sky and realized he had lost track of the time. The full moon, now hanging ominously just a few fingers above the western horizon told him it must be nearly three o'clock. A disturbing sense of urgency fluttered in his chest.

Am I running away? he thought. No, that would be difficult, if not impossible, with a lamb soon to be a full sized sheep in tow. *Even so - where would I go? Is this a mistake? They probably haven't noticed us missing yet. Should I go back?* He sat down beside Edgar to think about his options. After some consideration, the difficult but most obvious answer occurred to him.

He quickly stood up and led Edgar another few more miles, deep into a large wooded area of state lands bordering the farm. When he figured they'd gone far enough, Tommy knelt down and removed the leash. He hated that he would never know Edgar's fate, but comforted himself with the thought that nothing could be worse than what awaited his lamb back home at the blade of his father's butcher knife.

Tommy put his arms around Edgar's neck and held him again, for what he believed would be the last time. Burying his face in the soft curls, he took in the lamb's oily musk. Overcome at once with both relief and sadness, he clutched his friend closely. He shed a few silent tears, then stood and wiped his eyes.

"So long, Edgar. I won't say good-bye. Maybe we'll see each other again sometime. You be careful and stay safe. Go on, now. Git!" he yelled. Edgar flinched, but didn't move. The boy frowned and yelled louder, pushing him away. Edgar retreated a few steps but stopped again looking glumly over his shoulder. Realizing that he would have to be more forceful, Tommy reluctantly picked up a rock and threw it. The rock flew with more speed and force than he had intended, and hit Edgar hard on one of his rear legs. Tommy cringed when the lamb bleated sharply and hobbled off into the undergrowth.

When he was sure Edgar had gone, the boy turned toward home and put one foot in front of the other, hoping all the way that he had done the right thing. The walk back, despite being downhill most of the way, felt far longer than the walk out had. By the time he reached the valley and was crossing the cornfield again, the full moon had nearly set. Streaks of dusty rose clouds were faintly brightening the eastern horizon against the grey sky.

As Tommy entered the orchard, he was considering what he could say to his father when he got home. The sudden yip of a coyote up on the ridge invaded his thoughts for a moment. A foreboding twinge tugged at his gut, but he walked on. He returned to his musing, but was soon distracted again by the coyote's cry behind him, which grew ever more purposeful and compelling. To Tommy's dismay, the solitary call was soon joined by a second. Then several more voices joined the chorus. The hairs on his arms stood on end as he heard the yipping swell into the full howling cry of a hunting pack. Then he heard it - the terrified bleating of a lamb rise above the clamor.

Tommy stopped, and turning back toward the cornfield froze with panic at the sight of Edgar emerging from the woods at the far side. He was running as best he could manage on three good legs. In fierce pursuit, a growling swarm of six coyotes burst from the tree line and quickly closed the gap between them. In a flash, the leader overtook Edgar and launched himself at the hobbled lamb. Predator and prey somersaulted to the ground in a tumble of gray hair and white wool. The remainder of the pack immediately fell in to share the kill.

Tommy gasped, his eyes wide. But he quickly realized that standing there dumbstruck was of no help to Edgar. As unready as he was to face his father, he knew he had no other choice but to turn and run back toward the house. His world suddenly oozed into slow motion. His legs felt like fence posts, like he was trying to run underwater. As he rounded the barn and entered the yard, he heard his own voice as if it was coming from somewhere else. "Dad! Help! Help me!"

His father almost immediately appeared on the porch.

"What is it, son?" Tommy didn't reply, but stood gasping, bent over at the waist with his hands on his knees.

Even before he had the breath to speak, he wheezed, "I set Edgar free."

"You did what?!"

"Dad! There's no time!" he said, pointing back in the direction of the cornfield.
"Coyotes!"

His father immediately ran back in the house, emerging seconds later with a double barrel 12 gauge and a handful of shells. As the two hurried back around the barn and through the orchard, Tommy's father shoved shells into the barrels and snapped the gun closed. Across the cornfield, they saw the six coyotes circling the lamb, their heads together, their bodies spinning like spokes on a wagon wheel and tails flailing the air above them.

Tommy's father shouldered the shotgun and fired a round in the direction of the feeding frenzy. The #6 buckshot couldn't do any real damage from that distance. The coyotes were so intent on their feeding frenzy, they barely reacted. They stopped for only a moment to look distractedly toward the sound of the blast, then resumed their attack. Tommy and his father hurried on, and when they were halfway across, Mr. Goodnow pulled up and popped off another shot. This time one of the coyotes yelped and tore off toward the trees. His pack mates quickly fell in behind him, and in seconds they had all disappeared back into the woods. Their yipping chorus echoed in the trees and rose into the distance as they retreated up the ridge.

Father and son slowly approached the lamb's mangled body. It was clear by the damage done that Edgar was dead. His throat was torn out. Most of the flesh of his back legs and lower torso had been consumed. Blood was everywhere. His eyes were fixed and dull.

Dumbstruck, Tommy took in the damage and fell to his knees beside his friend. He gently placed his hand along the lamb's cheek and cried a silent, open-mouthed cry of shattered sorrow. His father watched solemnly with the open shotgun crooked over his forearm.

"I'm really sorry about this, son" he said, after letting the boy cry it out for a few minutes. "I really am. But this is why we can't let ourselves get too attached to the animals. Do you understand?"

Tommy didn't look up, but only shrugged.

"Listen. We need to bury Edgar. I'm mad as hell about this whole thing, but we'll get to that later. Get up. Go to the shed and bring the pick and shovel. I'll wait here and make sure those devils don't come back for more."

Tommy's father loaded more shells into the shotgun. The boy stood up with a blank expression and woodenly walked away. A few minutes later he returned with the tools, and his father pointed to a small tree at the edge of the woods. "We'll bury him there. Under that young maple. You take the pick and shovel over and I'll bring Edgar along."

As Tommy dragged the tools toward the tree, his father knelt down and removed his shirt, carefully wrapping Edgar's remains in it. He followed Tommy to the maple, and laid the bloody bundle on the ground. Tommy handed his father the pick, and taking turns, the two broke ground and shoveled out Edgar's grave.

"That should do it," Tommy's father said, when they had finished digging. He stepped out of the hole and wiped his brow, then gathered up the lamb's broken body, still wrapped in the bloody shirt. He lowered it gently into the bottom of the grave. They took turns backfilling the hole – softly at first, then with more energy once the bundle was covered and out of sight.

When they had finished, Tommy found a few large stones nearby and carefully placed them on top of the gently curved mound of earth. He stepped back and stood for some time, staring down at the grave. His father stood beside him, holding the shovel in front of himself with the blade on the ground. He shifted his weight and looked back and forth from the fresh earth to his son's face.

"Is there anything you want to say, Tommy?"

"Like what?" he replied sullenly. "You don't pray for sheep, do you?"

"I suppose not."

"I guess all I can say is I'm sorry about what I did. I was trying to save Edgar, and now he's dead because of me." His father nodded solemnly, but didn't reply. "Can we go now, Dad?"

“Yeah. Let’s go.” He handed Tommy the shovel and the pick and carried the shotgun over his arm. The two walked slowly in silence back across the corn field, through the apple orchard, and on to the house. The upper limb of the sun was sparkling just above the eastern ridge as they reached the porch and sat down together on the top step.

Tommy’s mother came out to check on them, wiping her hands on her apron. “Is everything all right, Father? I heard gunshots.”

“One of the lambs got out and the coyotes got after him,” he replied. He jerked his head slightly at Tommy, who sat silently with his head down.

She looked back and forth between her husband and her son. She noticed the fresh earth on the pick and shovel. “Oh dear. You weren’t able to save him?”

“No. Tommy and I had to bury him.”

“Oh. I see. I’m sorry. Well, coffee’s on when you’re ready.” Mother bent down and stroked Tommy’s hair before she went back into the house. Side by side, father and son sat for a while, each in their own thoughts.

“I know now how much that lamb meant to you,” father said, breaking the silence. “But what were you thinking?”

“I don’t know. I just didn’t want him to die. At least not the way you had planned. I couldn’t stand the thought of him slaughtered and roasted and served up on a platter between the carrots and the onions.”

“Well that wasn’t your call to make, son. “

“I know, Dad. I really am sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t bring him back.” Father squinted, looking off into the distance. His jaw muscled flexed before he said, “I’m doubling your chores between now and Memorial Day. I need to spend more time in the fields and the orchard anyway. So I’ll be giving you some of my daily work to do. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“No Little League for you this year, either.”

“But Dad!”

“No. And that’s final. Be thankful it’s not worse. If I didn’t know how sorry you are, it would be. Know that.”

“Yes, sir.”

A long moment passed. The sun continued to creep up into the eastern sky. Tommy looked over at the sheep pen.

“So what are you going to do about Easter Dinner?” he asked.

“I’ll have to choose another one,” Father said, his gaze sliding over to a group of yearlings bouncing around in the pen.

“Dad?”

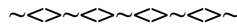
“Yeah?”

“I don’t want to be there when you – you know. The other lamb. I just don’t want to be there.”

“I understand, son.”

“And I’d like to be excused from dinner on Sunday, too - if that’s okay. I’d only be thinking of Edgar anyway.”

“Well, your Mom will be disappointed. But I’ll explain it to her.”



A little after noon on Easter Sunday, Tommy walks across the fields toward Edgar’s grave. His parents are back in the house after church. It’s a scene he knows well. The house is filled with the smell of roasted lamb and vegetables. His father is taking off his tie. Mom is putting on her apron to get dinner on the table. She was disappointed about Easter dinner, but his father must have convinced her somehow. Tommy relishes the

feeling of lightness and independence of being alone – free to think his own thoughts and sort through his feelings about everything.

The sun is bright. Warm, but not hot, it falls softly on the ground. The first green sharp shoots of grass are pressing up through last year's brown mat of dead vegetation. A fresh spring breeze carries that ephemeral scent of renewal that will linger for only a few weeks and soon be gone. He recognizes the songs and calls of birds seeking mates and establishing territories. They will not sound the same at any other time of the year.

Tommy carries a six-pound hammer in one hand and a wooden cross to mark Edgar's grave in the other. He is quite pleased with the cross, which he crafted himself. He used 2" X 2" oak stock, and put a proper dado joint at the center. Painted white, it bears Edgar's name neatly lettered in sky blue paint across the horizontal crosspiece.

When he reaches the grave, a pang of guilt and sorrow tugs at his chest as he looks at the peaceful mound of earth. But he does not cry. The time for crying is past. He takes comfort in the fact that, one way or the other, Edgar was not going to be alive on this day. Although his imperfect plan had failed, he had done what he felt was his best chance to save him.

Tommy steps up and carefully positions the pointed end of the cross on the ground at the head of the grave, and gently taps the top a few times to get it started. He takes a step back to make sure the location is right, then widens his stance, grips the hammer firmly in both hands, and swings the hammer down. The sound of the hammer strokes echo softly among the trunks of nearby trees. When he has driven the cross down to the proper depth, he takes a moment to admire his work. He is pleased with the result. It is a proper memorial for his friend.

After some quiet reflection Tommy, feeling more like a young man than a boy now, climbs up to the ridge and returns again to the overlook. Strangely, it feels a much longer time has passed than only the few days since he was last there, looking down on his home, the farm, and the fields, with Edgar playing nearby. Closing his eyes, he breathes deeply and relives the moment when he stood there wondering about God, and Edgar butted his leg. And he smiles.

