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Ducks Are Not Chickens

by Susan Knox

My father, Robert Bruce Unkefer, was named by his mother, Mary Elizabeth, for the medieval Scottish king, Robert “the Bruce.” Mary Elizabeth loved books and had read *A Grandfather’s Tale, a History of Scotland* written by Sir Walter Scott for his grandson. Scott told of Robert “the Bruce” hiding in Ireland after his troops were defeated by the English. While lying on his bed looking up at the cabin ceiling, he spotted a spider trying to attach a thread between two beams. Bruce watched her make six attempts, and it brought to mind his six defeats. He decided if the spider connected on the seventh effort, he would try a seventh time to capture the throne. The spider made it. Bruce went on to gain the Scottish crown and rule for twenty-three years.

Did my grandmother name her fifth baby Robert Bruce because she hoped to imbue her son with the same courage and persistence as the Scottish king, or did she simply like the name? Mary Elizabeth died before I was born, so I never got to ask her, but judging by the number of times my father told the story, his name made him feel special.

My father was the middle child of nine. He was said to be Mary Elizabeth’s favorite, but my mother said his siblings looked down on him because they thought he wasn’t as smart as they were. I’ve thought about this over the years and have concluded he was simply different. I think Mary Elizabeth recognized his sensitive nature, not valued or understood in a boy, and tried to safeguard him. Maybe the other children were jealous of her protection. He was a careful person who hated to make a mistake, easily took offense, and found it difficult to express his feelings (you know siblings—they seize on what they consider deficiencies and tease, which probably made him even more cautious.)

He died of colon cancer at age sixty-six, and I mentioned in conversations with my aunts that he should not have died of that disease. I believed he got insufficient medical care, but they said to me, “I’m so glad you know this. He always ate poorly, loved ham and other fatty meat.” In other words, it was his fault. Their pouncing on his responsibility for his death saddened and angered me for my father. The aunts were referring to the time when Mary Elizabeth had died at age fifty-three. Father was eighteen with four younger brothers at home. He used to fry ham for their dinner. He was proud of nurturing his siblings and often told us the story. I think it was part of his grieving and his way to make up for the loss of their mother. How could they not see this? Father never talked about his mother when we were growing up—evidence that the despair over her early death was deep and unexpressed.

My father was a handsome man, about five feet, five inches tall with brown eyes, thick brown hair, an engaging smile, and boyish energy. He was shy with strangers,

his co-workers, and his children. My first memory of him was after he'd broken his leg when the work horses he was driving were spooked by a pheasant flying out of the wheat stalks. He sat in our living room, his cast-covered leg supported on a pine-green ottoman. I was two and hesitant to approach him. He surprised me with his welcoming smile and held out his arms to take me on his lap. My vivid memory of gratitude for his openness tells me he was usually timid, even with his first-born.

Behind my father's shyness was a quick laugh, a vulnerability to criticism, and an enthusiasm for learning about the natural world. My father was a farmer like his father and his father before him. They did not own large farms, but they were able to raise livestock, grow grains to feed the animals, and provide fruits, milk, meat, vegetables, and eggs for their large families.

Father married Marie Worley in 1938, and they built a bungalow north of my grandfather's farm just outside the village of Minerva, Ohio. Father was working for his father, farming and working on his sawmill.

One summer morning in 1946 my father stopped by Minerva Grain and Feed and learned the Elliott property was for sale. In what I can only imagine was a fit of ecstasy at the thought of having his own farm, Father made an offer on the spot. With three children in a two-bedroom house, Father and Mother must have been talking about housing alternatives. My dad probably thought the farm was a perfect solution. I can see him hurrying home to my mother with his thrilling news. I imagine he was shocked when she wasn't enthusiastic. He offered to withdraw from the deal, but she told him no—he'd shaken hands. He couldn't sully his good name by reneging.

This behavior was typical of my mother. While she was a strong woman, she always deferred to my father. I've always believed she wanted to strengthen his confidence, maybe as his mother intended when she named him. My parents' relationship was a love affair. It was clear to me—there was a special look that often passed between them—that they valued each other above anyone else, including their children. My father always kissed Mother good-bye, even if he was just walking to the barn. And, he kissed her hello and patted her bottom when he returned. When we gathered around the kitchen table for supper, he held us in check. "Don't start eating until your mother is seated. After all, she made this for you, so honor the cook." He loved to tease her. One night at supper he said, "Marie, you like change so much. I'm surprised you haven't traded me in for a new husband." Their relationship was a wonderful example for their children.

We moved to the eighty-eight-acre farm in northeastern Ohio, two miles east of Minerva. The three-storied, eighty-year-old farmhouse was painted white and surrounded by maple trees that topped the slate roofline. It was a pretty place with a scarlet barn, milk house, chicken coop, corncrib, and shed.

The number of farms in the United States peaked in 1935 at seven million and were in decline when Father bought the Elliott property. Today there are two million. My father's siblings are a good example of this change. The three girls—Helen, Grace,



and Mildred—married professional men and moved away from the countryside. Of the six boys, only Kenneth farmed, but he also had a sawmill, which produced most of his income. The other brothers moved to Columbus, Ohio, and Phoenix, Arizona and formed their own businesses. A generation earlier, most if not all would have become farmers or married farmers. Only my father tried to make a go of farming.

Daddy's farm was his passion. I can still see him perched on the metal seat of his school-bus-yellow Minneapolis Moline tractor, plowing, harrowing, or planting his fields with an old brown-felt fedora on his head and an R. G. Dunn cigar clamped between his teeth. He was a hard worker, and I watched him clean cow udders every morning and every evening before attaching them to the electric milking machine, load the manure spreader after the cows and pigs wintered in the barn, or butcher a hog in the fall with the help of boyhood friends Oscar and Johnny Carson. The only time I saw him sit and relax was when he read *The Farm Journal* or we had visitors.

With Daddy's dedication, I've wondered why our neighbors with large families were able to live off the land, but he had to work as a linotype operator at the *Minerva Leader*. I still don't know the answer. Maybe others had more tillable acreage; maybe they cut corners; maybe they were better managers. I do know Father disapproved of our neighbors' ways, saying they didn't respect the land, and they cheated their customers by hiding rotten strawberries in the bottom of the baskets. Father never did that; he fed bad produce to the pigs. When he sold sweet corn (and people raved about the quality of our corn), he always added

extra ears in case one wasn't perfect. He rotated his crops and periodically plowed under a field of alfalfa so future farmers could continue to enjoy rich, fertile soil. He loved the land.

Even though it was clear he had strong feelings for his family, Father had trouble expressing them. I don't remember him ever telling me he loved me or that he was proud of me. Those sentiments were passed on by my mother in the form of "Your father said..." When my sister, Nancy, and her boyfriend, Chuck, decided to get married, they told my parents one evening while sitting around the kitchen table. Chuck opened the discussion, "I'd like your permission to marry Nancy." Father scraped his chair back from the table, stood up, said, "I have to go to the barn," and left my mother in charge of the blessing. He had difficulties at the wedding too. In a brand-new suit my mother insisted he buy, Father walked Nancy down the aisle at St. Paul's Lutheran Church. He stood with her at the altar, then abruptly stepped back, turned around, and sat beside my mother, leaning over to whisper that the flowers' scent made him dizzy. I think he was worried about his voice croaking when he answered the minister's question about who gives this woman. His voice often cracked; it may have been his only expression of emotion.

After he died and I was helping my mother with family finances, she confided that Father would never take a tax deduction for farm buildings and equipment depreciation—a legitimate deduction. She seemed frustrated by this and said he was afraid it would trigger an IRS audit. As a CPA, this knowledge saddened me. How fearful he must have been. It brought back some childhood memories of my father's approach to life.

Father always told us never to drive on a holiday—it was too dangerous. We were never to use the word "pregnant"; instead, a woman was "expecting." My sister and I never saw a cow artificially inseminated or a calf being born. We never saw an animal being killed before butchering. Father had a Victorian sensibility when it came to his daughters.

We were warned to be thrifty and husband our money. He recounted stories of people in our village whose lives had been ruined by bankruptcy. Others, especially during the Depression, who had no money, no job, no place to live, were sent to work houses—horrible, cruel places. Father related newspaper accounts of people who stole and were imprisoned—shoplifters, bank robbers, embezzlers, and petty thieves. One could never recover from the shame of being incarcerated and, after he or she was released from jail, normal life would be out of the question. These lessons were repeatedly taught, and even today, when I read of a seemingly reputable businessperson going to jail, I shudder with the shame of it. So when my father committed a crime, even though it was an honest mistake, I was scared.

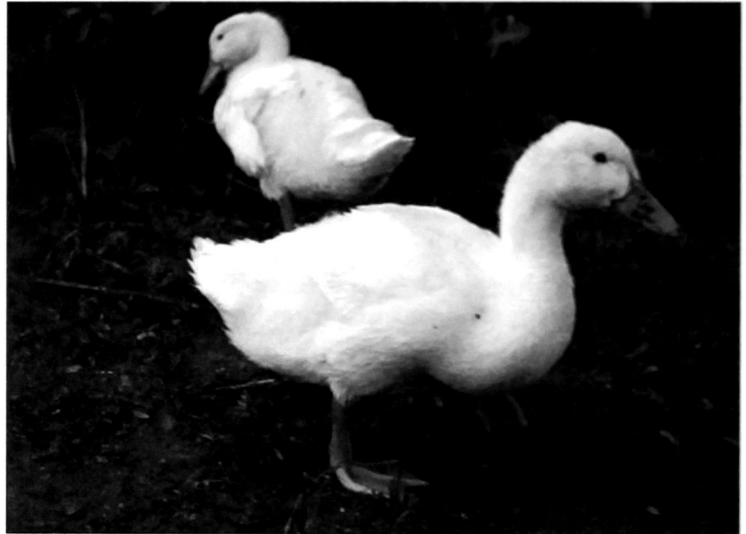
One summer day in 1953, Father noticed a large bird circling our farm. He thought it was a chicken hawk scoping out our Leghorns, scratching in the dirt for bugs and grubs. He got his rifle, loaded it, raised it to his shoulder, and sighted the bird. It was a true shot, and the bird plunged toward us. It landed on the lawn beside the house. We ran over to take a look. It was a bald eagle—unknown in our part

of Ohio. I'll never forget the stricken look on my father's face. He had killed our country's national symbol, an act punishable by a \$5,000 fine and/or one year in jail. Congress had passed the Eagle Act in 1940, and newspapers had carried the story with a lot of coverage, so my father was aware of the penalties. Even if he wasn't jailed, the fine would ruin us. Our farm had cost \$8,000, and my parents couldn't meet the monthly mortgage payment. My grandfather had paid off the debt, and they made small payments to him. How would they pay a fine? Father swore us all to secrecy and buried the bird. We never spoke of this again. I was twelve at the time, and I realized my father could make a mistake, that he was frightened, and that there are shades of truth.

Every Friday night, we butchered twenty-five chickens for Saturday delivery to regular customers. Butchering a bird consisted of catching, chopping, dunking, plucking, singeing, eviscerating, tweezing, scrubbing, and cooling. Father handled the head chopping. We gathered on a grassy knoll near the barn's lower level, formed a circle around a gray steel bucket of boiling hot water, picked up a chicken by its legs from the pile of carcasses, dipped it in the hot water, and started plucking—the sodden feathers clattering the grass like dirty snow. It was a family affair, like sitting around the kitchen table for supper, except here I felt on equal footing with my parents. We all had the same job to do, we all worked fast so the water didn't cool down before we finished, and we all took pride in how well we plucked our pullets.

Father always seemed happy as we gathered round. We talked about what was happening in our lives, and I sometimes cursed the way my father did, just to see him smile and wink at my mother, who was not happy with my language.

My father liked roasted duck and, with food on his mind, went to the hatchery where he regularly bought chicks. He smiled at our surprise and delight when he returned home with thirty Pekin ducklings in heavy cardboard boxes. We raised them in cages, and when the ducks lost their daffodil down and grew creamy white feathers, we took them to Little Sandy Creek that ran the length of our pasture and beyond. They swam as though they were swans—heads erect, orange bills protruding, and rumps slightly elevated. The drakes' tail feathers curled like a comma; think Donald Duck—he's a Pekin. Like Donald, our ducks couldn't fly—they were too heavy.



My brother, Jim, and I recently talked about our ducks. “They were smart,” he said. “They knew once the cows were driven in for the evening milking, it was time to waddle to the barnyard where they would be fed corn and wheat. They were well-fed, fat ducks.”

Father was proud of our ducks sailing up and down Little Sandy Creek. As he said, they were a picture. Neighbors commented on them, too, because, unlike our other animals—our Jersey and Holstein milking cows, American Yorkshire hogs, Leghorn chickens, and Trixie and Ginger, bad-tempered ponies—the ducks had no boundaries, no fences to keep them confined, and they swam miles beyond our farm, delighting our neighbors as they passed by—an example of Father’s fine farm husbandry.

Because we were old hands at dressing chickens, when it came time to harvest part of our duck flock, we expected to make short work of it. We assembled around the steaming bucket and dipped our decapitated ducks in hot water, and we started plucking. Those feathers did not come out. It was as though the feathers were glued to the duck. We looked to my dad for plucking pointers. His feathers were stuck too. Finally, we adjourned in the kitchen, the dead ducks on the grass outside, brother Tom guarding them.

Father ran his fingers through his hair as though he was trying to stimulate a solution in his brain. We huddled around the kitchen table, throwing out ideas. We tried using the blunt side of the butcher knife as leverage against the feathers’ shafts to pry them out. No luck. We tried pliers. The feathers didn’t budge. Mom suggested we dip the ducks in melted paraffin and peel off the feathers when the wax hardened. It didn’t work. At some point, we got the giggles because it was about the only thing we could do, and it *was* funny.

I was transfixed by our attempts to create a solution and impressed with my parents’ teamwork. It was one of those unforgettable moments of insight and clarity that comes in childhood. It was a harbinger of times to come, when I would lead brainstorming sessions with my staff or participate with others in coming up with new ideas.

Finally, Father called the hatchery where he’d purchased the ducklings, and they referred him to a meat processing plant. He loaded the duck carcasses into the back of his powder-blue Ford pickup, and the next day we had perfectly cleaned, ready-for-the-freezer ducks.

“Do you remember the duck massacre?” my brother Jim asked. I vaguely recalled the incident, but I would have been fifteen at the time, and I had boys on my mind—not ducks. Jim told me the story.

“We still had half the flock, and one evening the ducks didn’t come in for their regular feeding,” Jim said. “The next day, I hiked along the creek and came across their bloody bodies. Neighbor boys with guns had waited for our ducks to swim by and picked them off. One survived, his beak missing, and because he couldn’t eat, he starved to death. Dad was pretty upset about the brutality and waste, but there was nothing we could do. It was the end of our ducks. Dad didn’t have the heart

to start with a new flock.”

Not long after this episode, my father was stricken with rheumatoid arthritis. He was forty-one years old and spent much of the next year bed-ridden. He was prescribed Cortisone and took Bayer aspirin by the handful to abate the pain. He tried bee-sting treatments but had to discontinue them when he had an anaphylactic reaction to the shots of bee venom. Somehow he rallied, returned to his job, and maintained the farm. I still marvel at his resolve.

My father died twenty-four years later, in 1980. One of the last times we were together was in the farmhouse kitchen, where I was frying green tomatoes. I looked out the kitchen windows—my father’s wheat field ripened, sparrows flitted among the stalks, searching for grains, and Little Sandy Creek, brown and sluggish, twisted through the empty pasture. Father had sold his dairy herd.

It was August, two months since his colostomy. Father stood near me as I tended the tomatoes. He was shorter than I remembered, but still handsome and smiling his sweet smile. He pointed to the pan and whispered, “I wish I could eat those.” Thrush had coated his throat and mouth. I was sad to see him so ill, but couldn’t express my feelings for fear of crying. I felt closer to him than I ever had.

I kissed my father good-bye when I left that day. His shyness and mine mixed in a way that made it almost impossible for us to show physical affection, but I knew he was pleased, and I must have known it might be my last chance to show my father I loved him.

A few years after his death, Mother sold our farm and moved into town. I’m glad Father didn’t live to see his land sold to the neighbors, the house sold to strangers, equipment and household belongings auctioned off. I don’t think he could have borne it.

But, he never pressured any of his children to take over the farm. He wanted more for us. “You’ll always have a job if you have a college education,” he promised, the Depression still vivid in his mind. All four of his children adopted this mantra, we got our college degrees, and we went on to professional careers.

The last time I was in Minerva was for my mother’s funeral in August, 2003. I made a nostalgic tour of driving Route 30 east out of Minerva, turned on Stump Road, and slowly drove by my childhood home. The front porch had been pulled down. It looked as though the house had given up its welcome. A circular drive had been cut into the lawn in front of the house. The huge maple trees were gone; they would have been over one hundred years old. The two tall viburnums that had anchored the yard near the country road were gone. The lilac gracing the side of the driveway, the last bush to bloom in spring, was gone.

