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The Flock

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The Flock

As the sun eased into the sky, the tops of the maples turned a lighter shade of green. Stumbling out of bed, Jake Cranston tried not to wake Mary. He quietly slipped out of his pajamas and into a faded pair of jeans and a white tee shirt. He moved across the room to his dresser to view himself in the mirror, but his foot slammed into a chair. The leg of the chair found an unbelievably tender spot between his toes, the pain seeping into the ball of his foot. Wrinkling his face, he kept from making a noise. He put work boots on and headed outside.

After throwing some feed to his chickens, Jake watched them devour every morsel and chant for more. Another handful of assorted grains landed in the moist flesh of the earth and the birds raced like football players trying to recover a fumble. They argued and cackled at each other, but as always, some won and some did not.

"You want eggs this mornin'?" Mary called. Jake was surprised to see her standing in the doorway.

"What are you doin' up, hon? You should be . . ."

"I heard you kick somethin' . . . woke me clear up outa my dream." She coughed, then cleared her throat. "Don't matter anyway. You want eggs?"

"Sure, eggs'll be fine."

She turned and walked back into the house. He watched her, the pink nightgown he gave her a few years ago rippling as the wind squeezed in past her. The door closed and Jake turned and faced the east. The sun was warm on his face.

"You gonna bring some wood in?" Mary sneered. "Enough to last us through the night anyway?"

"What are you all huffy about?"

"Don't like wakin' up with a cold butt. Did this mornin'."

"Yep, I will. But can I finish my breakfast first?" Jake chewed his bacon and sipped his coffee. He loved the combination of the two. "'Sides, your butt wouldn't be cold if you slept next to me. We do sleep in the same bed." He chuckled. "I think."

"You ain't no ball of fire, Jake. At least you ain't under the covers."

"Hmph . . ." Jake thought about saying there was no fire anymore because she lost her spark, but that wouldn't make things better. He kept his mouth full of food instead. "Be a good day for huntin'."

"Jake Cranston, when was the last time you went huntin'?"

"Why, what are you talking about? I just went about . . . well, a couple a months ago."

"Who you tryin' to fool, huh?" Mary, washing last night's dishes, stopped and turned towards Jake. "Last time you was out in the woods was when our toilets broke." She began scrubbing again and looked out the window over the kitchen sink. "And that was years ago."

"What do you mean, years ago? I went huntin' . . ." He paused.

"Don't matter you can't remember, Jake. We're old. We're not as . . ."

Jake slammed his fork down on the table. "Damn it, Mary." He had always been a good, powerful speaker when he was angry. He wasn't like Mary, who when she got angry or upset, couldn't find the right words. She always got tongue tied. Jake knew exactly what to say when he was annoyed. It was almost as if he had planned out all of his angered responses beforehand, and then just picked one from a multiple choice list. His voice was firm and without a quiver.

"Don't start in with this rememberin' thing. I told you a million times already, my mind is the same as it was fifty years ago. I remember our first date . . . hell I even remember what you were wearin'. That little white lacy thing. And I know what the date is today, and I knew what it was two weeks ago today, and if there's one thing I ain't forgot, it's the last time I went huntin' in the woods." He wiped his lips with his napkin. "It was last Easter when I shot them two ducks. And you cooked' em up real nice for Easter dinner. And the Talmadge's came over and helped us eat' em."

Mary had stopped washing in the sink and was now facing Jake with one hand on her hip.

"Is that what happened?" she asked, pretending to concentrate.

"Ah . . . maybe you're the one loosing your mind." He half smiled, tasting victory. "That's right, that's what happened. So don't you go hollerin' about anybody forgettin' anything. 'Cept you." He paused for a moment. "If you wanna holler about your own senility, well that's fine with me."

"Well . . ." Mary said as she walked out of the kitchen. Jake could hear her rustling some papers around in the den. He finished his last egg and sat back sipping more coffee.

"What are you doin' in there, bird?" he asked. The rustling stopped and Mary mumbled something.

"Ha!" she said as she came back into the kitchen with something grey in her hand. "You think so, huh?"

She dropped what appeared to be some kind of pamphlet on the table in front of him. He picked it up and fumbled it through his stuff fingers. Mary stood across from him, staring at his face and waiting for his reaction. Reading the inner sleeve, a look of frustration and fear crept into Jake's face. He set the pamphlet down, and reached for the newspaper, rechecking the date. He looked back at the pamphlet and then up

towards Mary, who wore an "I told you so" smile. Jake frowned. It was a copy of the eulogy from Betty and Phil Talmadge's funeral. They had been killed in a automobile accident four years ago.

Jake rinsed his mouth twice. After drying his face with a towel, he looked carefully at himself in the mirror. A few scars from his teenage acne days remained on his cheeks, but he was the only one who noticed them. He was thankful he hadn't gone bald; he figured it was a stroke of luck. As a child, he was told that he was destined to loose his hair. "Baldness comes from the Mother's side of the family," his dad would say, "and your mother's father has got no hair at all. He uses a toothbrush to comb the five hairs behind his left ear. You're in trouble, son." But Jake had a full head of thick hair. Once it had been deep brown; now it was snow-white. Despite the color, he was glad it was still there.

Leaving the bathroom, he could hear Mary humming a tune in the kitchen. He thought it sounded like a hymn but couldn't think of the name. He sat down on the edge of the bed and glanced across the room and out the window. A group of mallards flew over the house next door.

"What are you doing, Jake?" Mary asked coming into the bedroom. She had a pile of clean clothes in her arms. She placed them down on the blanket chest at the foot of the bed. "Hey, anyone there?"

"What am I doin'," he said, "I'll tell you what I'm doin'." He paused for a moment as if he had to first think of something, then tell her. "I'm goin' huntin'."

"What on earth you . . ."

"That's right. I'm goin' huntin'. Too beautiful a day to pass up. And 'sides, the birds are flyin' south."

"Sure you're goin' hunting, Jake. You go right ahead."

"Don't start feeding me that sarcasm of yours, Mary. I don't like it."

"Well, I don't think you . . ."

"I know just what you think. Just because I'm gettin' older don't mean I'm goin' crazy."

Mary's bottom lip began to tremble a little. "Now Jake, I don't think you're crazy. Why, I do stupid things. I'm just not as smart as I used to be. It's just that . . . well, . . . I don't want you to go huntin' because . . ."

"Because what?" He turned and looked at her. "Because I thought I went a few months ago and I haven't actually been in years? Four years? You're damn right that's why I'm going."

Mary didn't know what to say. She stood looking at her husband, her eyes beginning to fill with tears. Irritated, Jake rose and went to the closet. He pulled from the top shelf an old, heavy, wool sweater that Mary had made for him a long time ago. He put it on and then walked to the back of the closet. There, on the last hanger, was his army-green

hunting jacket. He removed it from the rack and despite the strong mothball odor, put it on and fastened the buttons. He started looking for a cap to wear, then realized it was down stairs with his gun. He left the bedroom, not even noticing Mary, who was accidentally putting Jake's clean boxer shorts in his turtleneck drawer.

Wearing his neon-orange cap, and tucking a box of ammunition under his arm, Jake removed his shotgun from its carrying bag. He could hear Mary coming down the steps quickly, and figured the sooner he could be on his way, the less likely it was that he would have to continue arguing with her. She didn't want him to go. He knew that. But it was something he had to do. And anyway, he knew those woods well enough to walk through them blindfolded.

Closing the door behind him, Jake felt Mary grabbing the inner handle. He let go and started out of the house through the garage. Mary watched him, nibbling on her bottom lip. She called to him but he kept going. She called again, and this time he turned around.

"Be careful, okay?" she said.

"Don't you go worryin' about me. I'll be fine. I know these woods like the back of my hand." Warm air came out with his speech, turned to mist, and vanished. "And you might want to put a pot of hot water on the stove, or get the oven good and clean. Jake Cranston never goes huntin' and comes back with nothin'." He smiled at her. She blew him a kiss but he had already turned toward the woods. With his gun over his shoulder, Jake walked happily into the thick brush.

The cold air felt good on Jake's cheeks. His nose began to run as he kept his pace to a brisk walk. He had always wondered why it was that his nose ran when he was exercising in cold weather. The walk made Jake feel strong; his leg muscles worked hard carrying him over root and rock covered terrain. He had decided earlier that he would stay relatively close to Patriot's Path. Named during the Revolutionary War, it was a twenty mile pathway going through the woods before coming to another residential area. Every fifteen yards or so, trees that lines the pathway were marked with blue dots. He noticed some of the dots fading into the tree bark. He wondered when they had last been painted. It didn't really matter. Jake knew where he was going, with or without the dots.

Looking up, Jake saw a familiar clearing ahead of him. He came out of the woods and stood on top of a rather large rock, overlooking Ladelle Pond. The water appeared as smooth as glass, undisturbed by the nature surrounding it. Watching the clouds change in the water, Jake saw a ripple float through the sky. Two brown-tailed ducks had just entered the water on the northern edge of the pond.

Jake saw this as a excellent opportunity. Kneeling, he unbuttoned his

coat and pulled out the box of cartridges. Removing two of the cartridges, he loaded his gun, careful not to scare the birds away. He closed the chamber and raised the gun to eye level, but he had lost the ducks. With the gun following his line of vision, Jake found them nearing a bank. He waited until the first bird was just about to hop onto land. Holding his breath and concentrating, he pulled the trigger.

The sound shook the entire forest. A group of heckling crows in a nearby tree decided to take their discussion somewhere else. Letting the gun down a bit, Jake saw one of the ducks flying away. It lifted itself up, over the trees, quacking madly. Jake looked toward the bank where his shot had been fired, but couldn't see the other. He picked up the box of cartridges and hurried over to the bank.

Jake approached the water and searching for his prize, but it wasn't there. He heard something. He looked up and saw the other duck surface in the middle of the pond, hurrying to escape. Jake remembered the other cartridge in his gun. He lifted it and fired. The bird fluttered and dipped, and then soared high above the trees and disappeared.

Frustrated, Jake looked over at the rock he had been standing on earlier. His right knee ached a little. He considered heading for home, but the thought of returning with nothing made him turn and walk deeper into the woods. He knew of a field not far from Ladelle Pond where there were no trees to obstruct a line of fire. And Jake remembered, as he walked between two rather large oaks, that deer were known to graze there.

It had been a while since Jake had shot a deer. There had been a time when he enjoyed shooting them, not only for the meat but also for the sport. They were challenging targets, bounding across fields or darting between trees. But at some point, his interest switched to birds. They were smaller targets and usually flew faster than deer ran. To Jake though, the biggest difference was the meat. Venison was often tough. And if it wasn't cooked just right, it could be compared to a leather suitcase. Mary usually cooked it well; but duck was her specialty.

As he walked along, Jake could taste Mary's roast duck smothered in cranberry-orange sauce. The tender slices of dark meat were Jake's favorite. He savored every bite and it was odd if he didn't have second helpings, sometimes even a third. His stomach began to growl.

The shotgun slipped from his grip. He tried to catch it and in the process, tripped on a root and fell. He mumbled a four letter word as he wiped a tiny bit of mud from the knee of his jeans. He picked up his gun, stood and looked in all directions. He couldn't see a field anywhere near him, and wondered if he had gone in the right direction when he left Ladelle Pond. His watch read twelve fifteen. It had almost been a half and hour since he left the pond and he didn't think the field was that far. He

decided to return to the pond and maybe try another route to the field. The ache in his knee was getting worse.

Jake's breathing grew heavier. The cold air filled and exited his lungs, a small cramp pinching his insides each time. He figured he should probably stop to rest for a minute. At least to catch his breath. He leaned against a tree. The sky was still a magnificent blue, a few clouds changing shapes here and there. Jake checked his watch again. Twelve forty-three. He glanced around and didn't see Ladelle Pond. His stomach groaned and his feet were starting to get cold. He figured he should stay on them.

He looked up towards the sun hoping to get some sense of east and west. Unfortunately, it was directly overhead, blindly beaming down through leafless limbs. Jake sighed and continued walking towards where he thought Ladelle Pond was. Constantly turning his head back and forth, searching for something familiar, he thought he saw the edge of a clearing up ahead. There was a break in the trees allowing blue sky to enter the forest. Relieved a bit, he hurried toward the blue sky, but when he reached it he found that it was only a hill where someone had cut down trees with a chain saw. The felled trees still remained near their trunks; it was as if they had only been cut down for fun.

Jake was breathing quickly now. He put the butt of his gun on the ground, leaning the barrels against one of the stumps. Sweat was beginning to dot his forehead and moisten the white tee shirt under his sweater and coat. His hands began to tremble as he looked in all directions and didn't recognize anything. He picked up his gun and started down the hill, telling himself that if he kept going in the same direction, he would eventually get somewhere.

At the bottom of the hill, nothing seemed familiar to Jake. His knee, now throbbing, started to feel stiff. Despite the pain, Jake kept moving. He began imagining his leg becoming swollen and infectious. He envisioned a group of hunters stumbling across his stiffly, frozen body tomorrow morning. His mind began to work so frantically, he didn't even notice the flock of Canadian Geese honking loudly and flying over his head. He was breathing hard, phlegm building in his throat.

Stopping again to look around, Jake heard a thunderous boom followed by a couple of shouting voices. He turned toward the voices and ran through the trees. He tried to avoid as many branches as possible, waving his arms and gun in front of him. knocking most of them out of the way. Some small twigs lashed at his face, stinging his flesh.

Slowing down, Jake looked up and saw three men about thirty yards in front of him. The men were carrying on, jumping up and down, shouting and laughing. Jake slowed to a walk and approached them,

trying to collect himself. He cleared his throat, spit into the ground and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. The youngest of the three saw Jake and called out to him.

"Hey Mister! My brother shot a deer!"

Jake didn't say anything. He just continued to approach them, steadying his pace. When he was close, a man holding a shotgun spoke.

"Afternoon," he said, smiling.

Jake nodded, tipped his cap and took a deep breath. "Well, looks like you got yourself a pretty good sized buck." Jake looked at the deer and the gaping wound in its side.

"Oh no, my son shot this one." The proud father pointed. "Did it all by himself."

"Well, that's a fine shot," Jake said. "Give you enough meat for months."

"Years!" yelled the little one. Jake chuckled.

"You have any luck?" asked the father.

"No. Not today." Jake paused for a moment, then continued, "It's been a while since I been out here." He cleared his throat again and looked around. "Say, by any chance, you know where Patriot's Path is?"

"Sure. Right over there." The man pointed with his gun. "See the blue marker on that maple?"

"Yep, I see it. Thanks." Jake tipped his cap again. "I'm on my way back. My wife gets worried if I stay out here alone too long."

"Mine's the same way," said the man. "Good day."

Jake smiled and waved and started walking towards Patriot's Path. He forgot where the blue dot was.

"Where's that marker again?" he asked, turning to the group.

"There," said the son who had shot the deer. He pointed to it and smiled. Jake turned to look for it. He finally saw it on the maple tree, the blue paint fading into the bark.

"Thanks," Jake said, walking toward the marker, never once taking his eyes from it.

Carter Holland