

Derek Updegraff

## The Butcher's Tale

Here's a story. I heard it from an old-timer the other day after we showed up at the bus stop at the same time, with the bus having just pulled out and left us, so we sat on the bench, me in my apron, but I didn't know I had the damned thing on, and him in his itchy-looking scarf even though it was warm. And he said to me, "A butcher, eh?"

And I looked at my stained apron, and I thought about taking it off, but I didn't because I was tired and comfortable off my feet, and I said, "Yeah." And I didn't have anything to follow up with, because what could I say? An old man, eh? And of course I could see he was an old man, and I guess I could have asked about what he used to do, but why bother? I was tired, and he was whatever he used to be.

But then he started talking about this or that, and then he said, "Listen." And that got me. He had my attention then. I was listening. So he said, "Listen. I want to tell you a story. A story to pass the time until the next bus gets here."

And I said, "Okay."

And he said something like this. And I didn't interrupt him. I listened. And he said, "There was a guy who was a recluse, an old man, and the townspeople said that he was a wise man, or a holy man, a thinker who chose the solitary life out there in his house, which was on a mild hill surrounded by hedges, plants, and trees that were not quite overgrown but not tidy either, and he would visit the town once a week, sometimes twice a week, to buy the things he needed, like apples and paper, and the townspeople treated him with reverence, nodding to him in the streets, getting him his things in the stores and taking his money but not pressing him with questions, not trying to extract the wisdom they knew to be in him, strolling through his veins, knocking about his head, but the children didn't buy it, and the children jeered at him as he passed by, flicking pebbles at his brown leather boots, whispering their laughter at the dullness of his brown leather hat and his brown leather satchel, and one day one of the older kids said to the rest of the townschildren, 'I'm going to prove that

he's a stupid old man.' And he told them his plan, which was to hide a bird behind his back as he knocked on the old man's door and then ask him, once he opened the door, 'What do I have behind my back?' And if somehow the old man guessed it or sensed it, and he was able to say, 'A bird,' then the boy would ask, 'And is this bird dead or alive?' And if the old man said, 'It's dead,' then the boy would prove him wrong by pulling out the live bird, and they would all laugh at him, but if the old man said, 'It's alive,' then the boy would snap the bird's neck behind his back and prove him wrong by pulling out the dead bird, and they would all laugh at him."

And the old man on the bench, not the one in the story, the old man on the bus bench paused for a few seconds after talking through most of the story so far. And maybe he was remembering how the next part went, or maybe he just needed to rest his throat. But I didn't say anything because he really had me at this point. I was really wondering how this would all play out.

So the old man on the bus bench, he started up again about the old man in the story, and he said, "So the kids followed the older boy to the old man's house, and the older boy knocked on the door while the rest of the townchildren looked on behind him. And the old man opened the door, and he didn't look surprised or concerned at the crowd of gathered children. And behind his back the boy had the bird cupped in one hand and sealed with the other, and he said his line, 'What do I have behind my back?' And the old man looked at the boy's face, which is said to have been flat but with a mischievous lip, and the old man saw in his right peripheral, just through the crowd of children in the background, a white feather near the walkway to his house. So the old man answered, 'You are holding a white bird.' And there were gasps behind the boy, but the boy was unfazed, and he delivered his second question, asking, 'And is the bird dead or alive?' And the old man looked at him for a long heartbeat, and he said to him slowly, heavily, "The answer to that question is in your hands."

Now I'd been looking straight ahead as he was telling it. I was absorbing it, seeing everything he was saying, but when the old man on the bench finished, when he said, "The answer to that question is in your hands," which is what the wise old man in his story ended with, when all that was done, and there was a pause, I looked toward the old man on the bench, having been pulled out of all I was seeing, being pulled back into this world, and the old man was serious-looking, real serious, and he even grabbed my arm for emphasis, the way old people do sometimes, the way they want to touch you, cling to you, while they're talking.

And I said, "That's a good story." And he smiled kind of proudly, and we were quiet until another bus came, and we boarded and left each other's company inside. He got that story from somewhere. It's written somewhere, but I don't know where, but it's circulating, like this, making its rounds, though always a bit different in its details, I'm sure, but the story is the same story in its essence, and I suppose it's a moral thing. I suppose we listeners walk away and think about our choices and our power, maybe our

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intentions. I don't know. Something like that. We're supposed to think, to consider the lesson, which is a deep one, to be sure, but this a partial story, a beginning, really, and the ending is always better than the beginning in a story with any weight to it. I know that much. And I know this thing's not done. When he'd told this story to others, however many times over however many years, did the listeners wonder what happened next? Most didn't, I bet, but they should. Did they wonder if the boy relented? Did they imagine him growing frustrated, revealing the bird only to snap its neck after all and storm off as some young boys do when they've been bested, or did they imagine him releasing the bird, laughing at his own ignorance, his own blindness or misguided intention, laughing at himself, who was then a better and improved self, laughing in relief as he released the bird and felt the wind from its first flaps flutter his cheek skin while the symbol of power, of delicacy, of pride, love and hate, acceptance, and so much else, took off in majesty?

But I know better because I'm a butcher. I'm a reader—I read, too—and I watch the good movies, the films that press us a bit more—I like to watch those ones at home and the more popular ones in the theaters sometimes—but really I know that's not the ending because I'm a butcher, because the day after I heard that story, when there was new light again, and I was up again early, and I was in the shop early, I had in front of me a duck—a lot of ducks stacked to the side—but there was the duck in front of me, the one I was holding. And I'm holding it, and I've got my big hand around its narrow neck. It's so narrow when it's just skin, when all the feathers are gone, and it's so delicate, and this is a duck, much bigger than whatever the boy in the story was holding behind his back. I'm guessing it was a dove. That seems like the kind of bird for that story. But I'm holding this duck's neck, my right hand encircling its delicate skin. And the duck was already dead when it came to me, but I'm pretending it's alive. I'm pretending I'm the boy in the story, and I put the duck behind my back. The bulk of its rubbery skin, the main weight of it, its roundness, is nestled into the open palm of my left hand behind me, and its legs dangle over my fingers, its little flipper feet dangling off those skinny legs, and my right hand is still around its neck, and I'm alone in the back room. I'm next to the bigger chopping table, and I don't even have the knives out yet for the day, just the ducks, and I close my eyes, and I walk through the story, and I pretend I'm the boy, and I see myself standing in front of the closed door of the old man's house. And I need to knock, but I'm holding this duck behind me, and I'm pretending it's alive, and I'm pretending the skin feels like feathers, and I'm pretending that the coolness is a warmth and that my heartbeat is matching that of the delicate bird's behind me. I need to knock, but my hands are full, so how did the boy knock? He must have used his foot. So I use my foot to kick the door in front of me. And my foot finds a leg of the chopping table, and it's a sturdy leg, so I kick it, but now it's a front door because I'm still closing my eyes and imagining. And I kick the door two more times, and it opens, and there's the old man in the story, who

looks a lot like the real old man from the bus bench, except he's all in brown and gray, and he's scarfless. And I say my first line, and the old man says, "A white bird," and I know he must be cheating because how can he see? This bird is behind my back, after all. So I say my second line, and I'm so determined to make him slip up for some reason. For some reason I'm really wanting to show him to be a fool, and I'm waiting for him to say one of two things. I'm waiting for him to say, "It's dead" or "It's alive." I can't think beyond those two phrases. Those are the only fair answers. One or the other. Choose. And he's taking forever. And my heart's pounding, so the bird's heart must be pounding, and all of a sudden I want him to say, "It's dead." I want him to say it so badly because I want this bird to live all of a sudden. All of a sudden, that's what I want, for this bird to live. And if he says, "It's dead," I can let the thing loose. We can all watch it fly away with its hollow warmth. And my muscles are tense. And I'm waiting, and I'm waiting, and out of nowhere, he says, "The answer to that question is in your hands," and I'm thinking, not fair, but whatever. At least I can let this wonderful stupid thing go, I guess, and I'm about to bring the bird out just to be done with it all. I'm about to whip the bird around with my hand cupping its mass, but I feel then that my hand encircling its neck is too tight. There's practically no space in there, in the grip of my right hand, just enough space for the thinnest of skin, a tube of flesh wrangled while I was nervous. Wrangled while I was waiting. And the boy squeezed. And I tried not to have the boy squeeze. But he did. And it doesn't matter what the boy thinks of the clever man's response. It doesn't matter if the clever man wants to teach him something. Because our poor boy will kill the bird every time before the answer is given. Because the answer is always too late. At least for this bird. At least for this choice. And that's the way it is. And that's the way that things like that end.