The Day Of The Egret

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It was horrible, and after the first stream of blood spouted forth, she hadn't wanted to look, had wanted to run, but somehow her skinny legs wouldn't move. She stood mesmerized, rooted to the spot, her eyes held by the gory spectacle.

Only this killing had bothered her. She had watched her father take the chickens one by one to an old stump in the backyard and chop off their heads, the blood spurting as though released from a geyser. The decapitated hens raced crazily in circles until, lurching drunkenly, they fell to the ground in final death.

When the last chicken was killed, her father looked around and saw her. "You hadn't ought to have watched this, Francie. Get on back to the house now."

Heart pounding, she turned and ran, not to the house but to her secret place, a cottonwood tree with leaves so thick that when she climbed among its branches, she was hidden from sight. She stayed there the rest of the day.

Now, whenever her father would rest his hand on her shoulder, she'd look at the blunt, thick-nailed fingers and see the hand that had held the axe.

She often wondered, "Was it seeing the slaughtering that had opened her eyes, changed her, or did it all begin with Zip?"

Last year, when her father had brought the baby chicks home to raise for layers, she had picked up one of them and said, "Can't I keep one, just this once? I want it so much."

"It's only going to turn into a big ol' ugly hen," said her father, "but, go ahead, take it if you want it."

She had kept it by her bed in a shoebox with cotton wadding in the bottom. A tiny ball of yellow fluff, it made soft cheeping sounds and ate birdseed from her hand.

When it got big enough to jump over the sides of the shoebox, she put it in a large carton at night. During the day, she took it out in the grass and showed it the bugs and worms it could scratch for. When she'd move cans and flower pots, the half-grown chick would grab greedily at the fat white grubs that lay suddenly exposed. As quick in its actions as an automated toy, she named it "Zip," and it followed her everywhere.

"That chicken's getting too big to come into the house now, Francie," her mother said one day. "You'll have to make it an outdoor pen."

"Okay," she answered, "but it won't go in a cage like the layers. My chicken likes to run free."

"I 'spect they all do, but remember they're only chickens, and that means they're food and money."

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Having been brought up on an egg ranch, Francie had seen chickens in the battery cages all her life, had eaten their eggs and their bodies. But now it was all different. When she walked past the cages, she saw the birds crushed together so they couldn't turn, beaks cut so they couldn't peck each other, and feet deformed from standing perpetually on slanted wire.

"She could have been one of those," Francie thought, as she looked down at Zip strutting happily beside her.

The worst times were when her mother served chicken. She'd see her mother dip the bloodied carcass into boiling water so she could strip the feathers. Where each feather came out, a large round pore remained in the yellow skin. Next, her mother would reach inside, pull out the steaming guts and drop them with a plop into a feeding pail. Fran-

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cie's stomach churned as she smelled the warm, sickening odor, the same smell of blood and death that she had smelled at the slaughtering.

And while the chicken was roasting in the oven, the smell was the same. And when the dead bird was placed on a pretty table-

cloth with her mother's white china plates and carved open by her father, the same fetid smell came out of its roasted body.

Once, just because it made her parents so mad when she'd say she didn't want any chicken, she tried to eat some. When she took the warm soft flesh in her mouth, she could feel the filaments of muscle with their slippery edgings of fat. The chicken came alive against her tongue, and she had to run from the table to throw up the nauseous mess behind her father's barn.

That was the last time she ever tried to eat chicken. Her father, brows knit and a tight expression about his mouth, would say, "I never should have let her keep that chick. That was the start of all her foolishness."

But it wasn't only chicken. She'd watch her father carve a roast, the flesh soft and red, thin crimson blood trickling out as the knife sawed downward. When people took it on their plates, the blood, now pale, ran into their vegetables and mashed potatoes, turning them a muddy tan. She looked away as she saw her parents lick their lips in anticipation.

The worst of it was that she had no one to talk to about her feelings. Whenever she tried to tell her parents why she couldn't eat meat, they'd look at each other worriedly. Frowning, her mother would say, "Now, you'll just have to stop this. It's plain silly. We've all got to eat meat to keep strong. You don't want to get sick do you? Now, eat your food, and let's not talk about it any more."

She wondered why they got mad at her because she wouldn't eat meat. They seemed to hate her when she told them that the meat made her sick. "Why am I different?" she wondered.

But she was too big to be forced to eat anything. As upset as her parents were by her stubbornness, they finally had to accept the fact that their child would no longer touch meat. They continued to put it on her plate at every meal, then tried to hide their own unease by not looking as she pushed the meat aside.

So, in a sense, she had won the battle, but even knowledge of this didn't reduce her anxiety. She still felt alone, a thing apart, for she knew no one who felt as she

did.

Kids her own age understood least of all. They'd laugh and tease her when she'd turn down meat at the school lunchroom. Her best friend once said, "Francie, all the kids think you're so weird 'cause you won't even eat hamburgers. What's wrong with you, anyway?"

She hated it whenever her two cousins, Jamie and Ruth, came to visit. Farm kids, too, they both loved to fish and hunt. She'd make up excuses not to go with them when they did these, but she'd see what they'd bring home--the fish with their round glass eyes seeming to stare straight at her, their delicate mouths torn and bleeding where the hooks had been pulled out. She'd look and know that she could never eat their pale, glistening bodies.

Now the cousins were here again for duck hunting and had brought home the warm limp bodies of a male and female mallard. The boy had pulled them from his hunting sack and dropped them heavily on the kitchen floor.

As Francie looked at the shimmering green neck feathers of the male, Ruth suddenly grabbed the limp neck and, holding it upright, began pulling the duck around the floor, the bird's webbed feet dangling clumsily behind it. "That's how he looked when he was swimming," she said. "You oughta seen how I sneaked up on him and got him first shot!"

Francie thought, "I must go with them tomorrow. Maybe I can save the ducks. We had so few come to our pond this year."

The next morning, Jamie, blue eyes sparkling, said to her, "It's about time you came huntin' with us, but where's your gun?"

"I'm not gonna shoot. I'm only goin' along with you," she said.

As they started for the pond, despite her unease, Francie couldn't help noticing the beauty of the day. It was one of those days in early Fall when the temperature is just right, neither too hot nor too cold. The leaves of the deciduous trees had just begun to turn, the sun playing on them as they shimmered in a green-gold medley. The sky, almost devoid of clouds, was a pale cerulean, looking for all the world, Francie

thought, like her grandma's blue comforter in super-giant size that she could fall into and feel light as the fluffy stuff inside it.

As Jamie looked at her with eyes matching the sky and said, "Hey, I'm glad you're comin' today, Francie," she thought, "I really like Jamie. If only he didn't always want to go shooting."

"There's the pond," shouted Ruth, who had run ahead, and Francie looked up and thought she'd never seen the pond look so peaceful. Except for the occasional jump of a frog, nothing disturbed its quiet brilliance. The golden reeds that grew along its far bank swayed gently as though in greeting. Francie loved this pond and had spent many hours sitting quietly by it to watch the varied life it harbored. It served many uses on the farm, from watering the stock to providing a hunting blind for the wild ducks who came to it for rest on their migratory passage. Having been used for so many years for hunting, the ducks, now wary, seldom came any more. Only occasional laggards from the flock flew down and settled on the pond's glassy surface. This year, a few more ducks than usual had taken refuge there, only to be shot nearly as soon as they landed. Francie wondered, "Why did I really come today? I hate to see the killing, and I can't do anything to stop Ruth and Jamie." Now she wished she had stayed home.

As they crouched in the tall reeds by the side of the pond, Ruth said, "Shh, we gotta be real quiet. Maybe I'll get another one when it lands."

They waited and waited. It seemed no ducks would come that day, and Francie was glad.

Just when she thought they'd surely leave soon for lack of game, she heard the soft, gentle flapping of a bird's wings as it began its descent. Looking up, she saw it--not a duck at all, but a pure white crane. With a deep harsh croak it flew over their hiding place and continued its descent toward the pond.

Never had Francie seen anything so beautiful, the purity of its feathers almost blindingly white. Then, she remembered. Her father had spoken of a Great Egret that had once come to their pond, but that was years ago. Could this be the same one? Why had it

come today?

Transfixed by the bird's splendor, she forgot everything until, next to her, she heard the metallic click of Ruth's rifle.

Seeing Ruth take aim, she felt a blind fury and, lunging violently, grabbed for the rifle.

A shot rang out as she saw the egret begin its ascent to safety.

Then came the screaming! Screams like nothing Francie had ever heard, worse even than the screams of pigs at slaughter time. She followed her screaming cousin's frozen stare.

There was nothing left. Where Jamie's face had been, there was now a mass of pulpy redness. A great red-black hole in the middle of it all gaped one-sidedly as a hideous sound burbled forth through crimson froth.

Francie looked and saw no more.

When they found the children, Ruth kept pointing at Francie, "She done it; she done it," she said over and over.

Francie was stiff; eyes as glazed as the dead fishes; limbs as hard and unbending as the cocked rifles.

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ANTHROCENTRISM: A HUMAN FALLACY

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Webster's dictionary defines "anthropocentrism" as "considering man to be the most significant entity in the universe; interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values." This is, not surprisingly, a highly common viewpoint among members of the human race; in fact, many people may never have considered any other view.

Anthropocentricity is based on the belief that there is a firm dividing line between humans and non-humans. This belief is reaffirmed by such practices as the belittling use of inanimate pronouns such as "it," "which," and "that" in describing animals. For example, "Susan took her dog to the groomers to have its nails cut." This is not merely a question of terminology, for using these inanimate pronouns to refer to animals encourages us to treat animals like inanimate objects. It is easier to tolerate a trapper "harvesting" an it or a researcher "sacrificing" an it, than to face up to their killing a him or her.

The fear of embarrassment--"you're just sentimental and anthropomorphizing!"--associated with being compassionate beyond the human race is one of two main factors which entrench and promote anthropocentricity. You would think that compassion would be the last emotion requiring apology, yet many people cringe at being compassionate to animals and consider a dispassionate view of the animal world to be only sensible and mature.

The other factor promoting anthropocentricity is that humans, as a rule, very much enjoy considering themselves to be unique, superior, and the powerful rulers over all the other creatures on earth. Playing the role of gods is not easily given up. In ancient Greek mythology, it was through consuming ambrosia that the gods were maintained as gods; if they went without it even for a day, they would become weak and lose their immortality. Anthropocentricity is a kind of ambrosia for the human ego. But like the

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