

## My First Kill

by Jeffrey S. Jenkins

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I hold my patient's hand. She's but a few years older than I. However, her cancer has taken decades from her life while at the same time adding years to her face and eyes. She has long hair that at one time was auburn but now is more brown with gray.

She lies comfortably in her hospital bed. Her confusion and inability to communicate much allows my mind to drift as I ponder the purpose for her suffering and the courage she has shown journeying through it.

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"Jeff, go outside and play!" my mother says rather sternly. It's mid afternoon. Earlier in the morning I had already won the NCAA championship on our basketball court out back with a 40-foot shot at the buzzer (rehearsed 10 times before the shot was actually made). I have watched Match Game with Gene Rayburn, with his long bushy 70s sideburns and plaid three-piece-suit. During the noon hour I ravenously consumed a triple-decked toasted peanut butter and honey sandwich.

From lunch I have moved on to bug my mom about taking me to the Hobby Shop to buy a model airplane kit. Or was it a paint-by-number canvas, or some kind of silly science experiment? Whichever it was, I have been busily looking for something interesting to pass the time. She instead sends me outside so she can finish balancing the checkbook.

Earlier, shooting tin cans with my Daisy BB gun had been interesting for a while but had become monotonous. Now, on this hot summer afternoon, a real adventure is what this 11-year-old needs -- something to make my heart rush. Maybe there's some excitement in my toy rifle after all, so I grab it to give it another try.

My attention is drawn to the shrill of a grackle perched on a sturdy branch in our backyard mulberry tree. In that moment, no consideration is given to any real value she possesses, for I had learned to despise the grackle.

If not by the moniker my parents' had given the grackle, I would have known the bird to be a crow. Regardless, in our home there was a hatred for the beast and just the name spoken sent a shudder down my spine.

This despisement was reinforced by episodes of seeing my mom at nightfall doggedly head to the mulberry in the front yard, a few feet from my parents' bedroom window. She would clang the bottom of a pot with a soup ladle to scare the pests from their roost. Sleepless nights of piercing sound from the flock's incessant screeching had taken their toll on her.

I dig my toes into the broad blades of St. Augustine grass which richly carpet our backyard. The grass is cool and sticky from the honeydew which drips from two vibrant pecan trees that provide glorious afternoon shade. I kneel down and raise my rifle. Sparse rays of sunshine glisten through the branches of the tree. Squinting my eyes, I am able to find my target and focus.

At the last second, I remember to aim a little high to compensate for a less-than-straight trajectory. I pull the trigger and hear the slight ping as the BB is released, followed by a thud of metal hitting flesh.

The next couple of seconds go silent. All I hear or feel is the pounding of my heart. Why is it racing so?

The quiet lasts only a moment. The bird falls to the ground and lands with a thump. Her proud cackle quickly turns to a weak cry. She flaps her wings aimlessly, instinctively wanting to fly from the danger, perhaps wishing for a place to hide and die privately.

I approach her slowly, cautiously, not sure what to expect. I stand over her. She lies on her back and stares up at me helplessly. Her eyes speak volumes. They ask questions. Why had I injured her? Why the betrayal? I am too inexperienced in life to ask the paramount question: What purpose is there for her suffering?

With a heavy heart, I watch her die, and digging a hole to bury her does nothing to lift my burden. *I must bury her quickly*, I think to myself, not out of respect for her, but in hopes of covering up what I sense to be a wrong done. I scramble to find a shovel in my father's tool shed and I dig a deep hole under a bush.

I stoop to pick her up with my trembling hands. Her feathers feel greasy. I don't wish to hold her -- nor the remorse I feel -- any longer than necessary, so I drop her quickly into

her grave and fill the dirt over her. I look toward the house and over the wall that separates our yard from our neighbor's to make sure there have been no witnesses.

I go inside to my room and climb onto the trundle bed that has, over the years, become too small for my spiny frame. I lie on my back with my hands under my head and I stare at the ceiling with its pine planks varnished to a chestnut hue. I stew about my deed.

Why such guilt? There are so many ways to justify myself. After all, wasn't my victim just an ugly, obnoxious grackle? Is there really any difference between killing such a pest and squashing a spider or shooting a rattlesnake? Can't I chalk such behavior up to the normal mischievousness of an adolescent?

Juxtaposed with my guilt is the unasked question. It is unasked because of my innocence; I am but a child. The question escapes me and drifts out the open door to my childhood room, through the screen and into the shaded yard of my first kill. What purpose is there in suffering?

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My patient jolts me from my reminiscing. Looking up at me, she says rather abruptly, "Hey, I know you! You're Steve!" I smile at her, grateful for her attempt to communicate with me. She kindly laughs at a joke, which I offer mostly to ease the awkwardness of being misidentified.

As I depart from her bedside and drive home, I reflect on that seminal event in my life that occurred in the quietness of my childhood suburban home in El Paso, Texas. Nearly a half century has passed without me having given it a thought.

I not only go back those four decades, but I also go back 30 minutes to my patient's bedside. Both ladies – one with shiny black feathers and a red, bloody hole in her chest, and the other with flowing grayish hair and a freckled face – lie on their backs. Together they stare up at me. Their eyes speak volumes. They ask questions.

They ask questions about two very different kinds of suffering – a kind that cannot be helped, being a natural part of the human experience, and the other the result of my own choosing and behavior.