Promise Not To Tell

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Extract

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I

Late April, 1971

'Touch it,' she said.

'No way. Gross.'

'I dare you.'

'No way. God, what happened to its eyes?'

'Pecked out, I guess. Or just dried up and fell out.'

'Sick.' I shivered. Partly from the cold breeze, partly from the idea of those eyes. It was early spring. The ground below us was thick mud, still half frozen. The week before we'd had the last snowstorm of the season and there were still patches of it clinging to the ground, melting in pools and rivers across the lumpy field.

'Come on, Kate, you gotta do what I say. When you're at my house, I make the rules. You were the one caught trespassing. I could have you arrested. Or get my daddy to come out here with his shotgun. Now touch it!'

'I will if you will.'

Del's pale face contorted into a smile. She reached out and stroked the dead bird, starting at its head and moving her fingers with their dirty nails all the way back to its tail feathers. Her touch seemed almost loving – like the bird was her pet parakeet, a creature she'd named and fed. A bird whose song she knew by heart. Some Tweety Bird, Polly-Want-a-Cracker kind of pet.

The putrid crow swung heavy on its wire. She gave it a shove, making it fly toward me. It was as if Del and I were playing some sick game of tetherball. I jumped back. She laughed, throwing back her head with its stringy blond hair. She opened her mouth wide and I noticed that her right front tooth was chipped. Just a little corner was missing, not something you'd notice unless you were looking.

The crow swung, its left foot wrapped and tied with white plastic-covered wire – tougher than string, Del explained. It dangled about three feet from the top of a tall wooden stake driven into the center of the small field where uneven rows of green peas were just coming up. Smaller wooden stakes lined the rows, and rusty wire mesh was stapled to the stakes, forming a trellis for the peas to climb.

Del said her brother Nicky had shot the crow two weeks before. He caught it pecking the pea seeds up out of the dirt before they'd even had a chance to sprout and got it with his BB gun. Then he and his daddy hung the crow up just like they did each year, a warning to other crows to stay away.

I reached out and touched the greasy black feathers of its ragged wing. Bugs crawled there, working their way under the feathers and into the flesh. Metallic green flies buzzed in the air. Although dead, the bird pulsed with life. It stank like old hamburger left in the sun. Like the raccoon my mother once found under our porch back in Massachusetts, way back under the floorboards where no one could reach it. It just had to rot there. My mother sprinkled quicklime through the cracks in the porch floor, letting it fall down onto the bloated corpse like Christmas snow. For weeks the smell permeated the porch, worked its way into windows and open doors, hung on our

clothes, skin, and hair. There's nothing like the smell of death. There's no mistaking it.

I had been crossing the Griswolds' fields on my way home from school every day for nearly a month on the afternoon Del caught me and took me to see the crow. I had been hoping to run into her. Hoping, actually, to catch a glimpse of her – to spy without being seen. Maybe then I could learn if the rumors were true – that her daddy was really her brother; that she had chickens sleeping in her bed; that she ate only raw potatoes. And the best rumor of all: that she had a pony who limped and who some kids claimed they'd seen her riding naked in the fields behind her house.

I knew better than to make friends with a girl like Delores Griswold. I'd lived in New Canaan only six months or so, but it was long enough to know the rules. Rule number one for surviving the fifth grade was that you didn't make friends with the Potato Girl. Not if you wanted any other kids to like you. Del was a pariah. The kid all the others loved to hate. She was too skinny, and came to school in worn, dirty clothes that were often hand-me-downs from her brothers. She was two years older than most of the other fifth graders, having stayed back in kindergarten and then again in fourth grade.

She had dirt so thick on her neck that it looked like maybe she really was dug up from the ground like one of the potatoes they grew on her family's farm. She was pale enough to be from underground. And if you got close enough to her, you got a whiff of moist earth.

Maybe, just maybe, if I'd had any other friends back then, if I'd sworn allegiance to anyone else, I wouldn't have started cutting across those frozen fields hoping to catch a glimpse of her naked on a pony. Maybe then I wouldn't have met her at all. She wouldn't have shown me

her secret in the root cellar or made me touch the dead crow.

But I had no friends, and I, like Del, was an outsider. A kid from New Hope who came to school with a lunch box full of steamed vegetables, thick slabs of grainy home-made bread, and dried fruit for dessert. How I longed to be a white-bread-and-bologna girl then. Or even, like Del, to have the worn brass tokens the poor kids used in the cafeteria to buy a hot lunch each day. Something to link me to some group, some ring of kids, instead of sticking out like the sore thumb I was, eating my hippie lunch alone, smiling stupidly at anyone who walked by my table.

The Griswolds' farm was at the bottom of Bullrush Hill. At the top of the hill was the 120 acres owned by New Hope, the intentional community my mother had dropped everything to join the fall before. She'd met a man who called himself Lazy Elk back in Worcester, where my mother worked as a secretary and I had real friends – friends I'd known my whole life and thought I'd go on knowing, never needing to make new ones. Lazy Elk – whose real name was Mark Lubofski – swept her off her feet and talked her into going back with him to New Canaan, Vermont, where he had been living on and off for almost a year. He said a man named Gabriel was starting something big, something revolutionary there: a Utopian community.

The truth is, I was as enamored of Lazy Elk and his stories as she was. He had a kind face with deep, craggy lines around his eyes and mouth. Self-conscious about his receding hairline, he wore a wide-brimmed leather hat with a brown-and-white-striped turkey feather in the band. He took the hat off only when he went to sleep, and even then, it often lay at the foot of the bed where

some other couple's cat might sleep. He told me that the feather, which he'd found in the woods behind New Hope, was a talisman – a magic power object that helped keep his spirit free.

So away we went, free-spirited, in his orange VW bus, expecting to find paradise. What we found instead was a few run-down buildings, a well that drew water with a rusty hand pump, a herd of goats hell-bent on destruction, and a large canvas tepee that would serve as our home for years to come. Lazy Elk had carefully left all of these details out of his descriptions of New Hope, and while my mother and I couldn't hide our initial disappointment, we still believed that we could make a new and better life for ourselves there as we'd been promised. So it was with hope and determination that my mother filled the tepee with colorful woven rugs and clean sheets. She scrubbed the filthy glass globes of the oil lamps and trained Lazy Elk to take his muddy boots off before coming in. Our little circular home, though far from paradise, was at least bright and clean.

At the bottom of Bullrush Hill, on the corner where our dirt road intersected with Railroad Street, which was paved, even back then, was the Griswolds' farm. It was an old dairy farm, but they'd sold the cows off some years before. You could still smell the cow shit when it rained, though. That, like the smell of death, was not an odor that faded easily.

The Griswold place was a leaning white farmhouse badly in need of a new paint job. The roof had bald patches where shingles had fallen off. Swallows nested in the eaves. The faded red barn with its old tin roof had fallen in on itself long ago, and the collapsed remains seemed to be the home of about a hundred feral cats and several dogs with various handicaps (one had three legs,

one was missing an eye, and another bulged with large growths). In the front yard, which was more packed dirt than grass, beside the big black mailbox that bore their name, hung a white sign, hand-painted in red letters:

EGGS
HAY
PIGS
POTATOS

Beyond the sign, set back about ten feet from the road, was a little three-sided wooden shed with a rusted tin roof. There, on any given day, were three or four dozen eggs in cardboard cartons and some bushel baskets of potatoes, beans, corn, and whatever other crops happened to be in. The prices were written on scraps of paper thumbtacked to the back wall, and there was a metal box to put your money in.

MAKE YOUR OWN CHANGE. BE HONEST! THANK YOU read the sign taped to the top of the banged-up gray metal box. A dented scale hung from the ceiling, but the one time my mother tried to use it, the needle refused to move, the spring inside broken.

Another sign told you to ask at the house about hay, pork, piglets, and free kittens.

Before New Hope got chickens, my mother and I would walk down to buy eggs from the Griswolds' stand. We rarely ran into Mr Griswold, but sometimes we'd see him on his tractor off in the distance. His wife, we heard, had died of cancer years before, leaving him to care for his brood alone. Often we'd see one of the kids doing chores in the yard, or banging around under the hood of some rusted-out car on cinder blocks. There were so many kids – eight, including Del. All boys but her.

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'You live up with the hippies, don't you?' Del asked me that day as we stood looking at each other in the field of peas reaching up with tiny, pale tendrils, the dead crow between us.

'Yeah.'

'You a hippie?'

'No.'

'Hippies are stupid,' she said.

I didn't respond, just kicked at the clumps of cold mud.

'Hippies are stupid, I said!' Her pale gray-blue eyes gleamed with anger.

'Sure.' I took a small step away from her, afraid she might haul off and hit me.

'Sure what?'

'Sure, I guess hippies are stupid.'

Del smiled, showing her broken tooth. 'I have something to show you. A secret thing. Want to see?'

'I guess,' I said, somewhat concerned that just a few minutes before she'd asked me the same question, then led me to the decaying crow.

I followed Del through the trellised rows of young peas, then across garden beds full of spinach, carrots, and beets. I recognized the plants from the gardens at New Hope. Our soil was darker, less clumpy, than the Griswolds'. And although our gardens were smaller, they seemed healthier and better organized, with special walking paths covered with wood chips between the planting beds. The Griswolds' fields were full of stones, rusted plow blades, and forgotten rolls of barbed wire, and we tramped right through the crooked rows of seedlings. Watching over this landscape, as if daring any living thing to grow, was the upside-down crow, hanging from a wire.

Del and I passed a small fenced-in pasture where a large gray mare was chomping hay. A spotted pony stood beside her. He started when he saw us, running off behind the stall, and I could see that he had a slight limp.

'Is that your pony?'

'Yeah. His name's Spitfire. He bites.'

Just past the horse pasture was the pigpen, where five enormous pigs were lounging in thick grayish mud along with maybe a dozen piglets. A plywood hut, like a large doghouse, stood in the back right corner of the pen. Along the front fence was a big metal trough full of water and another full of slimy food scraps.

I stopped and leaned against the top of the fence, my feet on the bottom rail, trying to get a good look at the piglets. The ammonia stench of pig excrement made my nostrils twitch. I was staring into the tiny eyes of a large sow with swollen teats, thinking that I'd heard somewhere that pigs were smart, smarter than dogs even, when Del snuck up behind me and gave me a shove. It was a hard push, no playful little messing around kind of tap on the back. My stomach slammed against the top rail, my head and shoulders falling forward. I nearly toppled headfirst over the fence into the mud.

'Careful,' Del teased. 'Pigs'll eat ya. You fell in there, they'd pick you clean.'

I jumped off the fence and swung around to face Del, thinking I'd clock her one, but she quickly distracted me and the urge passed.

'See that mama pig right there,' Del said, pointing to the sow I'd just been watching. 'She ate three of her babies just last week. Pigs're savages.'

I unclenched my fists, let myself breathe.

Del led me toward the back of their white house, at the

crest of a small hill, as she described the scene of the mama pig gobbling up those babies.

'Teeth like razors,' she said. 'When she was done, there wasn't nothing left but three little tails.'

About fifty feet from the house, we came to a wooden door tilted into the hillside. It reminded me of the metal cellar door that led to the basement of our old rented house in Massachusetts. Del leaned down and unlatched the heavy door, pulling it open. Rough wooden steps led down into a dark pit that could have been a dungeon or a bomb shelter.

'Go on. You first. I gotta close the door behind us.'

I began making my way down the steps, and saw that it was a root cellar: a small room, probably eight by eight feet, with cinder-block walls and sagging wooden shelves that went from floor to ceiling. On the shelves were rows and rows of canned goods and bushel baskets full of spongy, sprouted potatoes, bruised apples, and limp carrots. Del closed the door and everything went black. I wondered if she'd stayed outside and locked me in, leaving me to die in that damp place. Maybe it was a dungeon after all, some kind of torture chamber. I took a nervous breath. The air smelled of moist earth, forgotten vegetables. It was Del's smell.

'Del?'

'Hang on, I'll light a match.' I felt her brush by me, heard her feel around along the shelves, shake a box of matches, open it, and strike one. The small room glowed orange. Del pulled an old jelly jar with a candle in it from off a shelf and lit it. She blew out the match, then held the stubby candle in the jar up to my face like she was studying me, unsure of who I might turn out to be.

'Okay, if I show you my secret, you gotta promise not to tell. You gotta swear.' Her pale eyes seemed to look

right through my own eyes, reaching all the way to the back of my skull.

'Okay.'

'Swear on your life?'

'Yes,' I muttered. She pulled the candle back from my face and set it on a shelf next to a row of dust-covered canned tomatoes.

'Cross your heart and hope to die?'

'Cross my heart and hope to die,' I said.

'I've got a tattoo,' she told me. Then she started to unbutton her dirty yellow shirt, which was embroidered with colorful little lassos, hats, and horses.

I wanted to tell her to stop, to say that I believed and didn't need to see, but it was too late. The shirt was off. To my relief, she wore a soiled white cotton undershirt with a tiny pink-petaled flower stitched at the center of the neckline. But then she peeled this off quickly, without hesitation, and I looked down, embarrassed, thinking that maybe the stories I had heard were true – and yet there I was, in the cellar with the Potato Girl. What was I thinking? If this ever came out at school . . . I shuddered. I struggled to think of an excuse to make a quick escape. The dirt smell intensified.

'Well, are you gonna look or what?' she asked.

I slowly shifted my gaze from the packed earth floor to Del's naked torso.

Del was a skinny kid – I could practically count her ribs. She looked like a person who'd had all the color washed out of her – even her nipples seemed pale. And there, over her bony cage of ribs, just where I believed her heart might be, was the letter *M*. I moved closer for a better look, trying to make myself forget that this was some strange girl's skin I was studying – not just skin, but the place that would one day be a breast. I could already

see the beginnings of them, slight swellings that looked out of place on her skinny frame. But what my eyes were drawn to was not Del's developing breasts, and how different they were from my own flat chest, but the tattoo.

It was a cursive capital *M*, delicate and swirling. It had been etched into her skin in black ink, and done recently enough to still be red and puffy. It looked slightly infected and terribly painful. I backed away.

The only tattoo I had ever seen in my life had been a faded anchor on the forearm of one of my mother's boyfriends who'd been in the navy. There was him, and there was Popeye, but cartoons hardly counted, and meant nothing in the situation I now found myself in.

I tried to look unimpressed. But a tattoo? On a fifth grader? Del was more alien to me than ever.

'What's the *M* for?' I asked.

'Can't tell you that.' She smiled at the power of her secret.

'Who gave it to you?'

'Someone special.'

'Didn't it hurt?'

'Not really.'

'It looks like it hurts now.'

'It's a good kind of hurt.'

I didn't ask what a bad kind of hurt might be. I didn't get a chance to ask any more about it before the wooden door swung open and the root cellar filled with light. I looked up and saw the silhouette of a lanky boy standing at the top of the steps.

'Del, what the hell you doin'? And who's this with you? Christ, you two making out down here or somethin'?' His voice was scratchy, as if he had a sore throat and it hurt to talk too loud.

Del turned away quickly and threw on her undershirt.

'Scram, Nicky!' Del shouted with her back to him, and I realized I was looking up at the crow killer. I squinted against the light behind him to make out his features. I could see raggedy pale blond hair and strangely long arms that seemed to hang awkwardly. Orangutan arms. As my eyes adjusted, I saw that this boy was as tan as Del was pale. A dark-skinned ape boy in torn jeans and a white T-shirt, heavy work boots on his huge feet.

'Yeah, I'll scram all right,' said his raspy voice. 'I'll scram right back into the house and tell Daddy what I just saw.'

'You shit!' Del spat up at him.

'Who's your friend?' he asked with a sly, thin smile.

'None of your beeswax,' Del answered.

The boy laughed, white teeth flashing against the background of his bronze face, then backed away from the door.

'Man oh man, I'd hate to be in your shoes. Daddy's gonna give you one hell of a licking.' And then he took off toward the house, leaving the root cellar door open.

'You better go,' Del ordered. 'But come back tomorrow. Meet me in the field after school. By the crow. Okay?'

'Okay,' I said.

She raced up the steps out of the root cellar, then stopped at the top and called back down to me, 'See you later, alligator!' before chasing her brother back toward the house.

I blew out the candle and crept up the wooden steps slowly, peering right, then left when I got to the door. I saw no one coming, so I bolted straight ahead, not daring to turn and look back toward the house, toward Del and Nicky. I ran past the pigs with their razor teeth; past the horse pasture with its limping pony; through the spinach,

carrots, and beets; and back to the field of baby peas where the dead crow hung still on its wire like some broken marionette.

At the edge of the back field, the woods began and I found the path that would lead me all the way to the top of Bullrush Hill, all the way back to New Hope. It was only a fifteen-minute walk home, but after being with Del, it felt light years away. In just an hour, Del had shown me a whole distant universe with its own set of dangers and rules. I couldn't wait to return.