

Autumn Journey

Chapter 8: “The Killing Part”

The sun beat steadily in a certain spot on Will’s back making it damp and prickly. Still he didn’t move. Hours passed before he even looked for his boots. When he found them, he put them on and returned to sit again by the edge of the pond, thinking, waiting.

In the distance, a dog barked and a boat horn sounded from somewhere on the Susquehanna. The shotgun lay nearby on the ground.

Will hadn’t touched the gun again, but tears welled in his eyes everytime he glared at it. The gunshot, he figured, must have jolted Grampa so hard it affected his heart. It was probably the loudest noise Will had ever heard. Grampa hadn’t been hunting in years. It must have been too much for him.

“Why didn’t I see it?” Will asked himself out loud. “All morning, Grampa was out of breath. When we walked up the hill. When we hauled down the boat. His hands were shaking. Everything wore him out.”

“I should have noticed,” he told the tree nearby.

“I should have seen it!” he screamed at the sky.

He dropped his head. “Now, if I lose Grampa, I lose the only *real* friend I have. And it’s my own fault. All because of a stupid hunting trip.”

Kicking at the ground with his heel, he felt the anger boil up again. “I *hate* guns! I *hate* geese!”

He held his face in his hands and cried.

And now, he concluded, he hated himself, too.

He knew he wasn’t supposed to hate so much. But what else could he do? Pray? He wondered about that. If he prayed really, really hard, would

God forgive him for pulling the trigger and making his grandfather have a heart attack?

He doubted it. But it was worth a try. Clamping his hands together he pressed them against his forehead. *You know I didn't mean it, God. My Grampa is good. He's a good person. We need him, God. Please let Grampa live. Please, dear God. Please let Grampa live.*

Cautiously, Will looked up toward heaven, searching for some sort of sign that he'd been heard. His eyes were blurry with tears. He had to blink several times. But there was no question about it. In the sky, there was a Canada goose.

It was a solitary goose and for the briefest moment, Will found that odd. He scanned the sky, looking for others, but there weren't any.

Quickly, Will unfolded his hands, wiped at his eyes and reached for the gun.

"You little bugger," he swore angrily. "If it weren't for you stupid darn birds my Grampa would be here right now."

As if eager for the company, the goose came steadily toward the decoys.

Will stood, lifted the gun and settled it against his shoulder. The way he felt, he could have blasted a whole flock out of the sky. Fixing a bead on the bird, he took aim and fired.

Once again, a shotgun blast shattered the still air. This time, Will kept the stock pressed tightly against his cheek and the recoil jolted him, but didn't throw him to the ground.

Lowering the gun, he was startled to see the goose drop from the sky. It landed heavily, with a splash, in the shallow water near shore.

Will's mouth opened in astonishment.

He took a step forward, not really knowing why and stared in disbelief at what he had done.

Suddenly, he felt as though he was going to throw up. He steadied himself by sitting on the log. When the wave of nausea passed, he had a slipping down sensation as though everything inside had drained out of him. Even his hands and feet felt numb and weightless.

He had shot a goose. A beautiful Canada goose. He wasn't angry anymore. Nor proud. He was simply empty.

He wondered, now that he had killed something, what he was supposed to do.

Carefully, he set the gun down and walked to the water's edge. He would at least have to pull the goose out of the water. You don't just kill something and turn your back on it, he thought. No life was that meaningless.

About five feet from shore, the goose floated awkwardly on its side, one wing bent upward. Will stared at it, dreading what he had to do.

It was a long reach, but finally, he was able to grab hold of one bloody leg and pull the bird to shore. When he let go, the leg jerked back. Surprised, Will jumped to his feet, only then realizing that the goose was still alive.

The goose stirred and tried to stand, but its right leg was broken and studded with pellet wounds. As the bird crumpled, it made a pitiful, high-pitched noise.

Will covered his mouth and shuddered. He knew from his father's stories that Uncle Lester would have picked up the wounded bird and, with one quick twist of his hands, broken its neck. It had always seemed like such a horrible thing; now, Will understood how merciful it was.

Turning, he went back to the bushes and picked up the gun. There was only one way he knew to end the bird's misery. The goose was no more than ten feet away. Surely, Will told himself, he wouldn't miss from here.

Carefully, Will pressed the little button that allowed him to "break open" the gun. Then he fished inside the knapsack, found the shotgun shells and took two more. One at a time, he slid them into the empty barrels. The gun closed with a heavy click and Will stood.

He hoisted the shotgun to his shoulder and tried to take aim. But this time, the gun felt like a cannon: cold and ponderously heavy. Worse, it felt terribly wrong.

Slowly, Will knelt and set the gun down. He pushed the safety back on.

Maybe the leg will heal, he was thinking. Maybe the goose could get better and fly away – like nothing ever happened! He couldn't remember the word, but Will was thinking about reparation as he grabbed the knapsack and rushed to the water's edge.

The goose lay motionless on the grass. It was so close to death that it allowed Will to stroke its long black neck and touch its quivering, open bill.

"Don't be scared," Will said gently.

Fumbling inside his pack, Will found the First-Aid kit and flipped open the lid. The liquid iodine caught his eye. He dumped the entire bottle over the goose's injured leg, then ripped open a roll of gauze and began to wrap the leg together, where it was broken. With his teeth, he tore off a piece of white adhesive tape and made the bandage snug.

The wing was a different matter. Clearly, it, too, was broken, possibly in more than one place. Will could even see where two pellets had lodged in

the bone. Wincing, he dabbed at the blood with a sterile pad and tried to apply some ointment.

The goose lay still, its brown eyes open, wide and wild. A soft breeze ruffled the black feathers on one side of its head.

“I don’t know what more I can do,” Will whispered. “I’m awful sorry.”

He spread his jacket beside the goose and, carefully, so as not to hurt the bird even more, lifted the warm, nearly lifeless body onto the garment.

After swaddling it as best he could, Will reached underneath and delicately picked up the bundle. He cradled the injured bird in his arms, the way he used to hold Molly and Megan when they were tiny babies. Then he carried the goose, slowly, gently, all the way back to the barn.