

Gorbachev was certainly a plucky fellow

As the Editor of Maclean's magazine's People section, Marsha had the high life. Then she made a dramatic change, becoming the only editor in Maclean's history to leave a choice position to become a shepherd on a farm in Minto Township.

Marsha has continued to write for many national publications while she actively farms. In 1989 her "Letter From the Country" made its debut on CBC Radio's "Later the Same Day" and it was an instant hit with city dwellers, which should come as no surprise because nostalgia for "the country" plays a powerful role in the psychology of modern society. Scratch almost any Canadian and you will find a farmer under the skin.

"Dear Aunt Jean" her letters begin... and with that the Herald welcomes a new voice to our pages.

Dear Aunt Jean,
Today we plucked Gorbachev. Gorbachev Duck that is.

A few weeks ago I had a semi-frantic call from my friend Mia, a poet and shepherd who moved to the country about six years ago.

Since I have been on the farm twice as long as she, Mia assumes I know a lot more about farm-type things than she does.

So when she decided that Gorbachev was ready to be dinner, she called to request a hands-on demonstration of the delicate art of plucking a duck.

I have plucked my share of waterfowl, and the one thing that I have learned is that I would far rather buy a fully naked bird at my local supermarket.

But Gorbachev, Mia's singular duck, had been grain fed and deliberately raised for a feast. So we gathered in the wood shed and assembled the tools of the trade - an axe, a few sharpened knives, pails of various sizes, and, of course, a hair dryer.

Mia's husband, Tom the philosopher, fetched Gorbie from the barn. He was a fine big muscovy duck, with a kind of huge red wattle on his bill, which spread in a red patch over his white head and earned him his name.

I expect Tom and Mia had discussed the actual killing of Gorbachev from a variety of philosophical, poetic and moral aspects.

Although I volunteered to do the deed and thus absolve them of guilt, Tom had obviously con-

templated the awesomeness of the task at great length and determined that he should take responsibility for his duck in death as he had in life.

Once Gorbie was released from this veil of tears, the business of plucking began.

Mia provided a large bucket of warm water. The theory is that the water helps loosen the feathers.

Getting a duck soaking wet is another matter. Ducks are virtually waterproof if you soak them head first. So we stuffed the duck in the pail tail first and swished him around until the water penetrated layers of feathers.

Then we put the wet duck on a table and six hands started to pluck. Feathers were flying and for the first five minutes or so we were going great guns.

An hour later, no one was in that much of a hurry. A 10-pound duck packs a lot of feather. And under the feathers there is down - tiny fluff with an uncanny ability to fly directly up your nostrils as soon as it is plucked.

I tried to save the down from a half a dozen geese I plucked many years ago. I had Harrowsmith visions of creating my

Letter From
The Country
by
Marsha
Boulton



own duvet, but in the end there was not enough for a whoopee cushion. Plucking gives you a lot of respect for feather pillows.

We were down to picking out pin feathers with tweezers when Tom decided to go to his study and memorize "The Critique of Pure Reason".

I cleaned the inside of the duck, while Mia marvelled at the various entrails - brilliant coral lungs, sleek and slippery liver and the hardened block of gizzard.

She examined each organ like some kind of Greek oracle as I explained what each part was. It turned into a sort of Duck Anatomy 101 session.

And although I do take the business of evisceration quite seriously, I did have to laugh when Mia gingerly touched the two almond-colored, walnut-sized globes that I removed from the mid-section of the duck.

"These are remarkable, almost opalescent, so very delicate. I wonder what they are?" she exclaimed, cradling them gently in the palm of her hand.

As it happens, those were Gorbachev's testicles, which caused Mia to drop them very quickly.

Tom hung the duck from a beam in the root cellar and Mia and I proceeded to blow dry Gorbachev and pluck the remaining downy feathers. It works quite well.

One year I tried covering the

down with melted wax which is supposed to harden and lift off with all the down cleanly affixed. However, I ended up with a sort of duck candle.

The final step was singeing the bird. Underneath all of those feathers, ducks have a smattering of hair that has to be burned off. It just takes a flick of the Bic to come up with a totally bald duck.

It took about three hours to get Gorbie ready for the roast pan and I'm sure that he will make a fine feast.

As I left, the look of the poet crossed Mia's face and she set off to compose a poem of grace for her Gorbachev dinner party.

I wonder if there is a word that rhymes with glasnost?

February is
Heart and Stroke
Month



Please give.

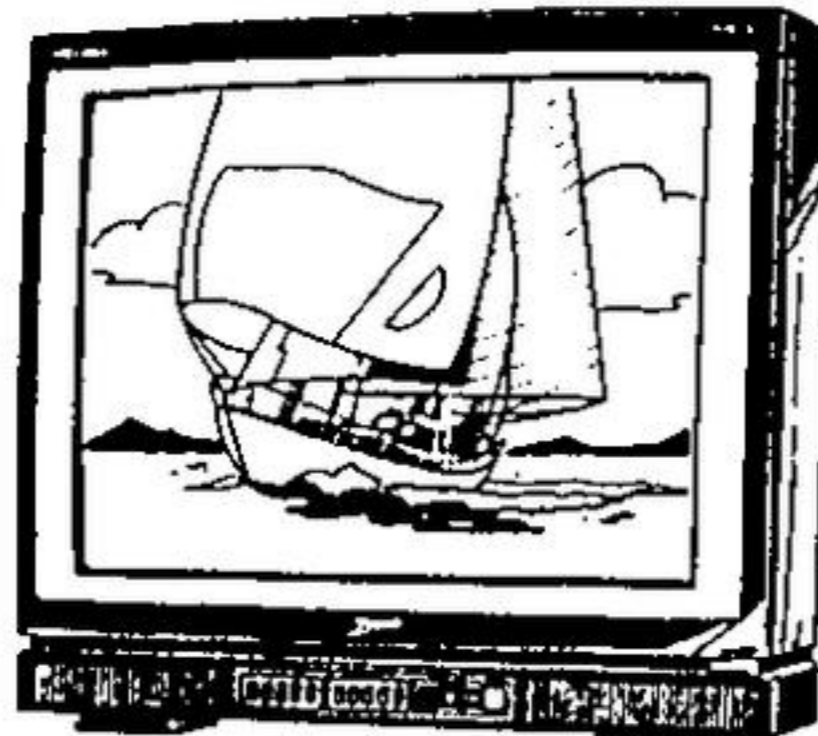


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