

THE IMMORTAL TURKEY

by Eleanor Thomson

He was an old turkey with faded wattles dangling like obscene growths on each side of his tight, cruel beak. Scaly legs supported ugly horned toes, his tiny, glassy eyes were bright with malice, and he was undisputed lord of this particular barnyard. As a youngster he had been cranky and ornery; as a senior citizen, murder lurked in the convoluted crevices of his small brain. He hated dogs, adults, smaller turkeys, and most things that moved. His real wrath was reserved for children.

Three little ones lived on, worked, and loved that outcropping of land, a part of the Precambrian Shield. Marshes alternated with soaring rocks, and patches of fertile land were splattered with pure, crystal lakes. Laughing, rushing streams glinted with fish, and quiet stands of hardwood and pine had sheltered wild game for centuries. These farm kids tormented the turkey as a matador does a bull; matching his dancing steps; ducking and dodging his furious rushes; making gobbling sounds and pulling ugly faces at his frenzied outbursts; then finally scampering to safety on the top rail of the fence, laughing down at him, as his clipped wings refused to lift his heavy body high enough to reach their dangling bare toes.

My friend's father had died in the little Outpost hospital, leaving him with his twelve-year-old brother, and his younger sister. Together, they joined forces with their mother, somehow managing to make payments on the old log house, run the farm, and pay off the huge medical bills. A flock of turkeys raised each summer were sold in the fall to buy the heavy material necessary for the clothes the brutal winters demanded. The old turkey tyrant had fathered many a clutch of eggs and was now a kind of insurance policy, a talisman against bad luck.

It was time to dig the fall crop of potatoes, and the kids left for school with orders to join their mother in the remote back garden the minute they got home. Ah, but it was a hard thing she asked of them. The golden fields coaxed them to run; the streams whispered of trout waiting to be lured from the shadows; their own special, spring-fed clear lake cradled their waiting canoe; and already there was that faint smell of snow carried on the autumn wind, grim reminder of the long months ahead.

Sullenly trudging across the yard to the tool shed for forks, their daydreams became nightmares as the old gobbler rose from his hiding place and stamped in screaming rage towards those bare legs so invitingly close to the ground.

The arm that picked up the rock was young, but already strong and smoothly muscled from carrying heavy pails of maple sap in the spring, shoveling snowy paths to the

barn, and chopping miles of firewood. But the boy's aim surprised them all, and they gaped in horror as the solid clunk of stone against skull echoed across the barnyard. Suddenly, the demon had become a lifeless flutter of feathers, smack in the middle of his small kingdom.

Three scared little kids ran for the potato patch and silently, desperately, attacked the hills. Their mother waved at them from the end of the field, they nodded, and silently, desperately, the potatoes tumbled out of the ground. About an hour later, she suggested they leave the rest of the patch until next day, and wouldn't a mess of fresh fish taste good for supper? They preferred to keep digging. Puzzled, but quietly pleased with their industry, she went back to her own digging. Their calloused hands grew more blisters, their backs threatened to never straighten again, but they dug silently on. Finally, with the sun well below the pines, their mother pointed out that the cows must now be waiting uncomfortably to be milked, there was firewood to bring in, and water to carry, and why in the world did they want to dig the entire patch at one time?

They trailed home behind her, stopping to lean against a favourite old ironwood tree as though it could somehow bring comfort. They averted their eyes from the horrible patch they knew waited in the middle of the barnyard. Sibling loyalty decreed that they had all committed the murder. Their mother continued serenely through the gate to the house and they turned as one to look for the body.

And then they were scrambling for the fence, running for their lives, a fury of feathers, wattles, gobbled screeching and horned feet reaching for chubby legs. Gasping to safety on the top rail, they stared in horror at this demon ghost screaming and stamping at them from the dusty ground. Then they rolled backward off the fence, doubled over with laughter and relief. No ghost could be that furiously solid.

Now those three children are senior citizens themselves. Comfortably retired from the responsible positions each of them eventually held, they laughingly tell their grandchildren about the day they killed the old Tom turkey. And how none of them ever again wanted to dig another hill of potatoes.

We now seem a world away from those days when Dad ceremoniously carried the fresh, twenty-five to thirty pound turkey through the house and into the kitchen on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, and dumped it on the table which had been cleared for that purpose. Then the female members of the clan gathered around with darning needles, tweezers, and fingernails, to remove all the pin-feathers. Modern cooks, who buy turkeys from supermarkets, wouldn't know a pin-feather if they

fell over one. And I admit it certainly cuts down on the time involved in getting a bird ready for the oven. But, again, maybe we've lost something: a ceremony, a tradition, where three generations of women gathered to prepare a special treat, and shared a lot of information about living at the same time. But they don't grow turkeys like that anymore.

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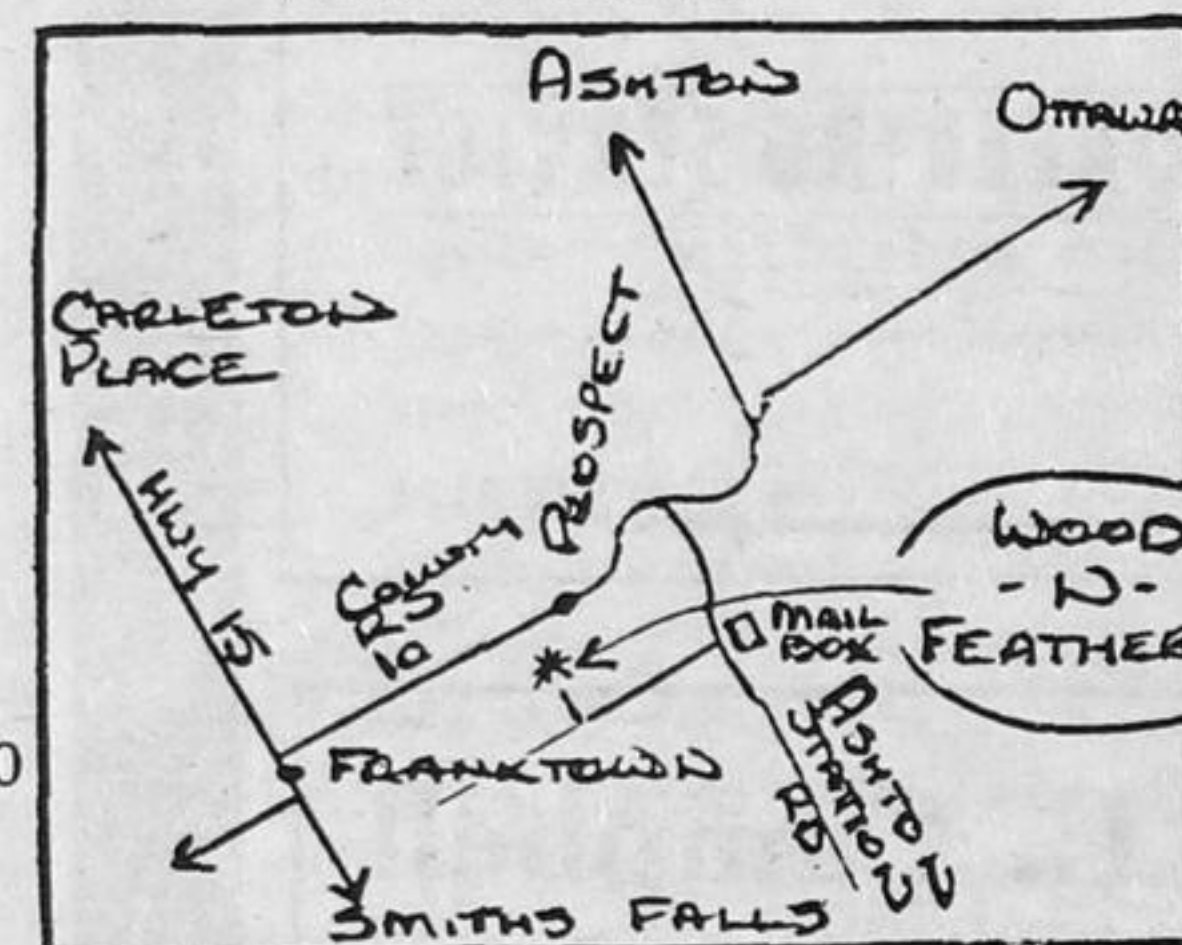
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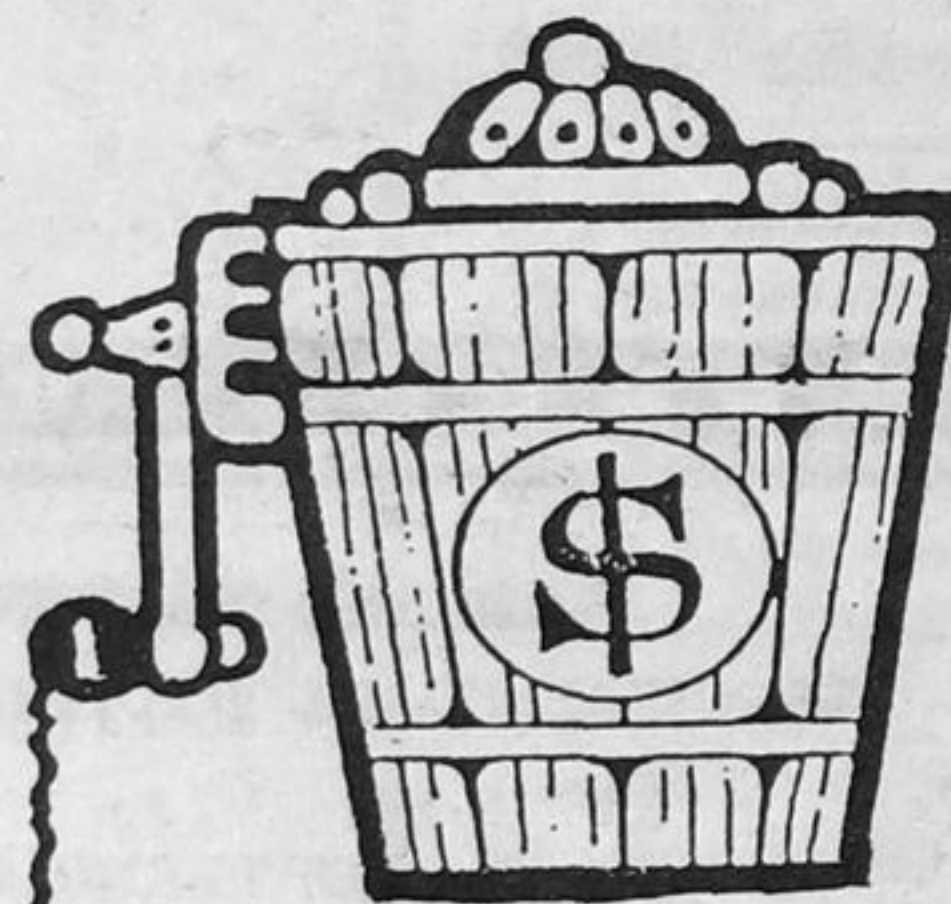
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