

Breeding Turkeys

By

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Billie had only been in the pen with the big turkeys for five minutes when she heard a hen squawk like something was hurting her. She ran through the turkeys, some of the toms as tall as her chest, until she found the hen pinned down by a tom. He was digging his claws in her back. The hen's head lay sideways in the dirt. She had stopped squawking and had given up fighting. Billie kicked the tom, but he was heavy and she couldn't budge him. She grabbed a stick and she hit him on his back. Her father came running from the other side of the pen where he had been putting out feed. He grabbed the stick and broke it across his knee. "He was hurting her," Billie said.

"Go to the house," her father said. "Talk to your mother."

Her mother said, "These new turkeys are breeding turkeys. They're not like range turkeys or brooder turkeys. This is what they're supposed to do."

"He was hurting her."

"We're getting saddles for the hens. That'll protect their backs. And don't ever hurt a turkey again. They're the way we make our living."

That night in bed, her sister Carol, who was in sixth grade, laughed at her. "They were screwing. Don't you know the f-word?"

"I hate you," Billie said. "I really hate you."

Billie was eight, the youngest in the family. Carol was twelve, and Laura was sixteen. When Billie was a baby, their mother was tired a lot so Laura was mainly the one who fed Billie and changed her diapers and played with her. Then, when Billie started school, Laura was in charge of helping with her homework. Now that Laura was going out with boys, Billie waited up to hear about her dates.

That night Laura tip-toed in with her shoes in her hand. She smiled at Billie, and held her finger to her mouth to tell her hush. Then she let Billie get into bed with her. Billie went to sleep surrounded by the smells of Wind Song perfume, hair spray, the cigarette smoke from the boy Laura had been out with.

They put saddles on the hens. Billie and Carol separated the hens from the toms and drove them into the pen where their dad grabbed each one and held its wings back while Laura slid the straps under the wings.

“They don’t look like saddles,” Billie said. She had expected more than a patch of green canvas.

“If you see one that’s flipped up,” her dad said, “pull it back down. These are valuable birds. We can’t have them getting their backs clawed up.”

Billie had been her father’s favorite since the day she was born. He said, “I’ve been saving this name for a son, but I guess I’d better go ahead and use it.” His name was Billy too, but spelled different. Billy Joe and Billie Sue – those were their names. When Billie was four, her mother went to work at the hospital switchboard. After that, Billie spent all day with her dad. She’d sit in the pickup when he went to the feed mill or the bank. She’d ride on the tractor and get down to open and close gates for him. When she was five she scooted an eighty pound bag of turkey feed to the back of the pickup so he wouldn’t have to climb up to get it. She didn’t get bored and complain like Laura or talk all the time like Carol.

Laura was their mother’s favorite because she was pretty and smart and because it had been just the two of them while their dad was at the War in Germany. Laura reminded their mother of herself before she had a husband and three daughters. Their mother had been a semi-finalist in a beauty contest once and she had an award for a poem she wrote in high school. She told Laura, “Don’t give up on your dreams. You can have a better life than this.”

Carol wasn’t anybody’s favorite.

When the days started getting short, they drove all the turkeys into a special pen every night. The pen had perches, and it had lights strung up high. The lights came on at four in the morning. The hens would think it was spring if the sun came up early. Then they’d want to lay eggs.

“Are they really that stupid?” Carol asked.

“Hens?” their dad said. “If there’s any animal stupider than a turkey hen, I haven’t run across it.”

Carol woke Billie up crowding against her and moaning. Half asleep, Billie poked her with her foot. “Get back on your own side.” She felt something wet. “Have you peed the bed?” she asked, her voice rising. “If you wet the bed, I will never sleep with you again. I’ll sleep with the sick turkeys before I’ll sleep with you.”

“Go get Mother,” Carol said. She was crying.

When Billie followed her mother back in, she saw a red foot print on the floor where she had walked. Her mother pulled back the covers, and there was blood on the sheets. Her voice was calm. “I wish you girls didn’t start so early,” she said. She got a towel for Carol and helped her to the bathroom. “Get those sheets off,” she told Billie. “Set them to soak in cold water.”

“Does she have to go to the hospital?” Billie asked.

“No,” her mother smiled. “It’s just her period. You help me with this mess and I’ll talk to you later.”

After a while, Carol came back in a clean nightgown. Her mother helped Billie put clean sheets on the bed and settled Carol in with a heating pad. “Do you understand what this is?” she asked Carol.

“Yes. I just didn’t know it would hurt.”

“Well, it does sometimes.” She put her hand on Carol’s head and smiled. “And sometimes it doesn’t. My little girls are growing up faster than I’m ready for. I’ll get you your own supplies, and I’ll get you a calendar so you’ll know your schedule. I can’t keep track of two, much less three. You’ll have to know when to expect this so you won’t make another mess.” She pulled the covers up under Carol’s chin. “I’ll tell your dad you’ve got the flu so he won’t expect you to help with chores in the morning.”

“He doesn’t have to know about this, does he?”

“No. He doesn’t like to think about things like this. And so he doesn’t find out, you’ll always have to check now to make sure you don’t leave any mess in the bathroom. And when you change your things don’t leave them in the bathroom trash. Take them on out to the barrel.”

After she left, Billie asked Carol, “What’s a period?”

“It’s what goes at the end of a sentence, dummy.”

It was way after midnight when Laura came in. She was all giggly and fell on the bed so that her petticoats bounced up around her. “Oh, Billie,” she said, “I am truly, truly in love. Truly, truly.”

“With Don Randolph?”

“No,” Laura rolled on her side and giggled. “This is a secret you mustn’t, mustn’t tell. Don just picks me up and takes me to meet Bobby Hibdon.”

“But Daddy said – ”

“Shush, shush, shush,” Laura rolled close to her on the bed and whispered. “This is our secret. Daddy doesn’t understand about love. He thinks it just stops if someone gets suspended from school. True love doesn’t work like that. You’ll know that when you grow up.”

Billie said, “I think Carol is grown up now. Mother said so.”

Laura was almost asleep still in her pretty dress. “That’s nice, Billie,” she said. “Would you turn off the light.”

They were driving the turkeys, but one hen wouldn’t move forward. She hunkered down in the dirt and shook all over. She made a rough throat noise and stuck her tail in the air. Even when Billie pushed her with her broomstick, the hen moved about two steps and then squatted down and stuck her tail up again. Their father came over and lifted the turkey with his boot over and over until she finally started walking on her own.

“What’s wrong with her?” Billie asked him.

“Talk to your mother.” By then Billie knew “talk to your mother” meant it was about sex.

When their dad was out of earshot, Laura said, “The hen’s in heat. They get completely stupid when they’re in heat.”

The nests were like little apartment buildings for the hens. Each long nest had eight separate compartments and each compartment had a kind of privacy door in front so that once a hen was inside another couldn’t bother her until she came out. One giant lid opened the top of all eight nests. Billie was strong enough to flip the lid of the nest by herself. One of her jobs was to keep the nests lined with clean yellow straw. She imagined snuggling down in the fresh straw inside the nest with the bar across the front. If Carol ever played hide-and-seek with her again, it would be a good place to hide.

Their mother was draining a chicken thigh over the skillet when it fell off the fork. Boiling grease splashed on her arm. All the girls fell silent as she turned out the fire under the chicken, moved to the table, and collapsed with her head in her hands. “I had so many dreams,” she said. Her voice was limp and soggy like a dishrag. “Everyone thought I would succeed. I was supposed to go to college. I showed promise.” Laura got Unguentine for their mother’s arm. Billie and Carol went back to their chores, moving carefully. They didn’t want to draw attention to the difference between what their mother had been promised and what she had.

While Billie set the table, Carol filled the glasses from the wide-mouthed milk jug. She didn’t spill a drop, but when she turned, wagging her eyebrows at Billie, she bumped a glass, spilling it across the table, wetting all the paper napkins.

Their mother stood up so fast she knocked her chair over. “I don’t know how much more I can take,” she said through clenched teeth. “Laura, you and the other two finish up. I’m going to lie down a while. Call me when supper’s ready.”

When the hens started to lay eggs, they were confused and dropped them under the perches at night. If they were just cracked on the outside, and the tough membrane wasn’t broken, their mother broke them into freezer bags and kept them for baking.

Some of the first eggs didn’t even have a shell, just the membrane. You could see the yolk inside. Billie thought she would keep one warm and watch a turkey grow inside. Laura said no, it wouldn’t work. So the girls played games with the soft, unformed eggs – water balloon toss, keep-away, ambush.

When Billie couldn’t sleep she made up questions for Carol. “How would you rather die,” she asked, “boiling or freezing?”

Carol thought a while. “Boiling would be faster. But it would hurt more.”

“Which would you rather be, deaf or blind?”

“Deaf. No blind. You wouldn’t have to do chores.”

“You could still wash eggs.”

“Yeah. You’d probably have to wash all the eggs by yourself. And you wouldn’t get to watch TV while you were doing it. Deaf.”

Billie said, “Imagine watching Mother get mad and not being able to hear the words.”

Carol said, “If you were with Daddy, you might not even know you were deaf.”

They lay there giggling.

Everyone said Billie was just like her father. She had his smile and his eyebrows. They were both quiet, and they were shy around people they didn’t know.

When her dad had to leave her in the pickup for a long time, he’d give her a puzzle. “Think of a tree for every letter of the alphabet” was one.

When he got back, she said, “I did pretty good.” She read her list as he drove. “A – apple tree. B – berry tree.”

He gave her a quick look. “I guess I’ll allow that.”

“C – cherry tree. D – dogwood. E – I don’t have an E. F – fir tree. H – happy tree.”

He tried to hold his mouth tight, but his smile broke out. “You got any more trees like that?”

Billy looked over her list. “I’ve got a sad tree and a lazy tree.”

All the way home her dad would point to trees and say, “Happy or sad?” They laughed the whole time; but when they told the story and showed the list, her mother and Laura and Carol didn’t know why it was funny.

One night they heard dogs barking and the next day their father found two half-eaten hens by the fence. “A hundred dollars,” he said. “A hundred dollars worth of breeding hens.” He bought an automatic cannon to keep the animals away. It went off every twenty minutes during the night. The first three times it exploded, they had to keep the turkeys from piling at the edge of the fence and suffocating each other. The fourth time, the turkeys stirred, gave a few quiet gobbles, ruffled their feathers and went back to sleep.

From the house, they could still hear the dogs barking, but they were farther away now.

Laura came in from her date laughing. “Bobby nearly shit his pants. We were making out in the driveway and when the cannon went off he thought Daddy was coming after him with a shotgun.” Bobby’s suspension from school was over and Laura was allowed to go out with him again.

“Birds are the ugliest animals and turkeys are the ugliest birds because they don’t have feathers on their heads,” Carol said.

“Baby turkeys do.”

“Yeah. But they get ugly when they lose their head feathers.”

“Hens are uglier than toms, but the toms are meaner.” Billie was quiet for a while. “I saw on TV that you just go to sleep in the snow. It doesn’t even hurt.”

All the farmers in the area had their names painted on their pickup doors. “Russell Heisten and Sons,” “Noel Stark and Son.” Laura said, “Daddy, our truck should say ‘Billy Joe Stockton and Daughters.’ We work harder than the Heisten boys.” But when the truck was painted it said, “Stocktons’ Turkey Farm.” Their dad said, “It’s plural. It means all of us.” But Laura told Billie and Carol, “He’s ashamed he has daughters.”

Starting in December, every day when they got off the bus, Laura ran for the mail box. She had chances for scholarships at three different schools. She told Billie, "I want to go someplace where nobody even knows what turkeys smell like. And I'll bring you up for weekends. You can visit enough so that when it's your turn you'll know what college is like and you won't be scared."

"Will Bobby go away with you?"

"No. Bobby's going to work on the night shift at the spring factory after graduation."

"Will you miss him?"

Laura bent down so she was looking Billie in the eyes. "Yes. I love Bobby. I really do. But people have to grow. I mean, can you imagine me married to someone who works at the spring factory?"

Eggs had to be gathered every three hours. The longer they stayed in the nest, the more likely that a new hen coming in would step on them. The longer they were out in the cold, the less likely they were to be fertile when they got to the hatchery.

Eggs had to have all the turkey shit and straw and yolk from broken eggs cleaned off them or they might explode in the incubator. If a dirty egg exploded, it ruined all the eggs with it. Every night after dinner, the whole family sat on low stools in front of the television with baskets of eggs. They wiped the eggs with damp cloths, stamped them with their flock number, and put them in crates.

A fertile egg was worth fifty cents. Every crate held 200 eggs. One night when her dad moved the third case to the mud room, Billie said, "We're going to be rich."

"How do you figure that?"

"Three hundred dollars just for today. That's a lot of money."

"That's good figuring, but a lot of them don't hatch. And we have to pay for turkey feed and electricity for the lights. And vaccinations. And nests."

"But you built the nests."

"The lumber wasn't free."

Fifty cents was ten Hershey bars or five Almond Joys or one egg that had a live baby turkey inside. The eggs were smooth and speckled. Billie thought of the baby turkey that would come out. She thought of the goose that laid the golden eggs. If they had that goose they wouldn't need the turkeys.

“Are you wearing one of those things?”

“You mean my Kotex?”

“I think it’s disgusting.”

“Then you think Mother’s disgusting and Laura’s disgusting. And you think you’ll be disgusting when it happens to you.”

“It’s not going to happen to me. I’ll be like Daddy.”

“You’re not like Daddy. You’re one of us.”

The day Laura got the letter about the scholarship, their mother stopped at the butcher shop on the way home from work and got five t-bone steaks. Billie made twice-baked potatoes. Carol rolled up napkins and tied ribbons around them so they looked like diplomas, and set up the candles they kept for power outages in ashtrays. Even though they had all seen the letter, their mother, who looked almost as young as Laura in the candlelight, read it aloud. “Full tuition, room, board, and books, and living stipend. Total scholarship award over four years, \$10,000. She made a toast with her iced tea, “To our oldest daughter who’s made us proud.”

Billie and Carol clicked their glasses. Carol said, “I get her room.”

Laura looked at their dad. “How about you, Daddy? Are you proud of me?”

“You’ve got a chance, Laura. Not many people get a break like this. I hope you make the most of it.”

“It’s not just a break. I worked hard for this.”

“Everyone in this family works hard.”

Their mother said, “You’re a special girl, Laura.”

Their father pushed back his chair. “I can’t see that she’s any more special than the other two.”

“I didn’t say that. I just meant this was a special night for her.”

A gust from the furnace made the candles waver and their father said, “Turn on the lights.”

Billie stared at her plate. She listened to the screeches when their knives cut through the steaks to the plate. She listened to herself chew.

Their father said, “One good thing. This’ll get her away from that boy.”

Laura began to cry. “Why can’t you be proud of me just once? Why do you ruin everything?”

Their father stood up. “Girls, help your mother clean up. Good dinner.”

They heard their father and mother through the bedroom door. “You make her think smarter is better,” he said. “She’s not better than the rest of us.”

Billie’s dad could swing a basket of eggs a full circle over his head and not break a one. “Centrifugal force,” he said, “it’s stronger than gravity.” It was a hard trick, but Billie thought of how surprised her dad would be when she showed him she could do it. He would smile and shake his head the way he did when she pushed the bag of feed to him the first time. She tried it a little at a time, first swinging the basket back and forth in a wide arc, always being careful when she changed directions so that she didn’t jar the eggs. She got so the arc was as high as her head. Then, one day, she said to her sisters, “Here goes.” She swung the basket up smooth and easy. When it got to the top of the circle, it hesitated. Eggs dropped to the ground. The eggs still in the basket made cracking sounds as the basket reversed direction and came back forward.

Billie looked at the eggs on the ground, the dripping basket. At least twenty eggs broken, maybe thirty.

Her sisters helped her. Even Carol’s face was pale over the broken eggs. They divided up their baskets so everybody had a little less than usual. They took the broken eggs into the woods and buried them.

That night their father wrote the count for the day on the chart on the wall in the mud room. Because Billie was good at numbers, her dad had taught her how to plot the egg production graph. She marked the dot for that day’s number. With her ruler, she joined the dot to the line that started low in October, climbed through mid-November, and stayed almost level after that. The segment she drew jagged down. Her dad pursed his lips as he looked at it.

Billie wanted to say she was sorry. Instead, she asked, “Will we starve?”

Her dad smiled and put his hand on her neck. “Nope. We won’t starve. Your mom’s just going to have to put more oatmeal in the meatloaf for a while.”

Most hens, when you flipped the lid on the nest, ran out scared. But some of them hunkered down and tried to stay on their eggs. Some of them, while you were still bent over from lifting the lid, raised up out of the nest and hissed in your face. If you reached down to push them out, they could peck you or fly up in your eye, so you poked their back with a broomstick until they left. Sometimes you had to poke a lot. They really didn’t want to leave their eggs.

Laura was supposed to spend Friday night with her best friend Susan. But when their mother called Saturday morning to ask Laura to buy bread on her way home, Susan's mother said she hadn't been there. Susan said Laura hadn't been at school on Friday. Bobby's parents didn't know where he was either. The police said to give them a few more hours.

Their mother walked from the kitchen door to the front door, back and forth. She talked about kidnapping and wrecks on deserted roads and about how Susan was probably wrong about school and maybe they'd misunderstood, that it wasn't Susan Laura was spending the night with after all, but another girl. She said, "That girl's not too big to spank." She said, "When she gets home, she's grounded until college."

Their father didn't say anything.

Laura and Bobby pulled into the driveway at noon just as Carol and Billie were coming back from gathering eggs. Their father, who had been way back at the pen a minute before, strode past them. He opened Laura's door before the car was stopped and pulled her out by her arm. "Get in the house."

Bobby got out his door. "You go home now and don't come back," their father said. Bobby stood where he was staring at the gravel in the driveway.

Laura rubbed her wrist. Her chin went up. "Where you send him, I'm going too." She held out her left hand. "We're married now."

Their mother had come out of the house and was halfway to the car. Her hand went to her throat. "No," she said, almost in a gag.

For a moment everyone in the yard seemed frozen.

"When's it due?" their father said.

Laura's chin was still high. "Why do you always assume the worst about me?"

Bobby spoke for the first time, "I love your daughter, sir. I'm happy she's my wife."

"Wife," their father said, like the word made him spit. "I asked when's it due."

Laura stared back, angry and stubborn as he was. Bobby looked at his feet and said, "May or June."

Laura said, "Come on, Bobby. Let's get out of here." As she was getting in the car, she looked at Billie. She tried to smile and gave a little wave, but her eyes were sad and scared.

Their father walked to their mother and put his arms around her. She pushed him away, and bent at the waist like she was throwing up. When her sobs slowed, he led her into the house.

Billie and Carol were alone in the driveway.

“What does it mean?” Billie asked.

“It means Laura is going to get big and fat and ugly and have a baby. It means Laura isn’t going to college. It means she’s a whore. It means I get her room now.”

Chores took a lot longer that night. Their mother was too sick to take Laura’s place. When they finished driving the turkeys into their night pen, their father said, “Carol you go to the house and heat some soup and make grilled cheese sandwiches. Billie, you gather the eggs. I’ll be in as soon as I get the feed wagon loaded.”

“You want me to go with you and open gates? Billie always opened gates for her dad. “Then I can come back and gather eggs.”

“No. Do what I said.”

“I don’t mind. It’d be a help.”

“I don’t want your help, Billie. Sometimes I just need to be away from all you females.”

It was dark when Billie opened the lid on the last nest, and her feet were numb from being out in the cold so long. She bent over to feel for eggs and didn’t see the hen that had hidden there until it raised its head and hissed right in her face, that noise that sounded like the devil coming after her in nightmares. Billie jumped back and cracked her head hard on the edge of the nest. She grabbed her broomstick. She poked at the hen, but it kept hissing. Billie started to cry, tears that came from her stomach the way her mother’s had in the yard. “You stupid hen,” she said. “You disgusting hen.” She swung the stick and hit the hen in the head. The turkey staggered out of the nest. Billie caught it with her boot hard enough to lift it off the ground. The hen tried to get away, but Billie hit it across the back with the stick. “You’re nothing but a dumb stupid bastard turkey whore.” She caught the hen on the head again. And again. “Stupid hen,” she said over and over. She was crying so hard she couldn’t even see the turkey. When she was too tired to hit it any more, she stood there catching her breath. The hen lay with its head on the ground, looking up at her with one stupid turkey eye.

She poked the turkey. “Get up now. Get up, turkey.” But the turkey didn’t move.

She’d killed a turkey. This was worse than breaking the eggs, a hundred times worse. She had to hide it. Once they’d found a dead hen in a nest. If she could get this one back into the nest, no one would know. She tried to push the limp thirty-pound bird through the front of the nest, but the swinging door knocked her face down into the turkey’s body. She lay there stunned for a minute, breathing in feather dust, breathing in the hen, feeling for a minute that she was the hen. She rolled over and gagged. She spit and tried to wipe the hen’s germs off her face. She took deep breaths and forced the turkey air out hard.

She dragged the hen to the back of the open nest, but she couldn’t get her knee under it and could only get it half as high as the top of the nest.

She thought of the turkeys the wild dogs had killed. She dragged the hen to the edge of the pen where they'd found those hens. Then she walked back scuffing up the drag marks.

Now that she was calmer, her drying sweat made her teeth chatter.

She could see the lights of the house beyond the pen. It would be warm in the house, but their mother would be crying. Laura would be gone, and Carol would be moving things into her room. With only three of them to do the work, they would wash eggs from dinner until ten o'clock and no one would talk. And tomorrow would be worse. Everyone would know she'd killed a turkey.

She looked inside the nests until she found one with fresh straw. She sat on top and swung her legs over inside, then lowered her body. It was tight, but she fit. She had to stand back up to a half-crouch to grab the lid and then duck quick when she pulled it closed. Through the slat in the privacy door she could see the outlines of the turkeys on their perches. She could hear them rustle and gobble low as they settled into sleep.