

The Turkey Stories

by

Julie Showalter

1. Baby Turkeys

Baby turkeys, unlike puppies or kittens, are most charming during their first days — bright eyed and energetic, soft and fluffy, ready to take on the world they just pecked their way into. They feel like powder puffs when you hold them against your face. Their hearts vibrate a staccato and their cheep is sweet in your ear.

They arrive in a heated truck packed in heavy cardboard boxes stacked ten high. The boxes are divided into sections, twelve sections per box, ten turkeys per section. As you take the turkeys out of the box, you do three things: you count to make sure the hatchery hasn't shorted you, you pinch off the snoot, and you check for defects.

The snoot is a growth at the top of the beak. In a full-grown tom, it is red, elongated, hanging off one side of his beak and ending with a bulbous growth that looks like a half-filled water balloon. The snoot evolved because it attracts females. When a tom struts and displays his tail feathers, the snoot becomes blood red.

But male turkeys on a farm don't need to attract females. Most of our toms would be killed long before they reached their sexual prime. Those who survived to mate were supplied with all the females they could handle. If they didn't handle them properly, artificial inseminators were called in to help them out. So the snoot was useless. Worse, it was harmful. Even when there are enough hens to go around, the toms strut and threaten each other. They

fight by grabbing each other by the snoot and pulling. You could lose a valuable breeding male to infection that way. Or to tripping over his own snoot.

But when turkeys are less than a day old, the snoot is tiny, like a protruding blackhead. You can pinch it off with your thumb and fingernail, pinch thousands off in a day and your fingers won't even get sore.

I was ten, my sisters seven and eight, the first time we got baby turkeys.

Defective turkeys are those whose feet don't open right, who have an eye that's clouded over, a wing that droops. "They won't live," Daddy said. "The other turkeys will kill them." Animals always kill the weak and malformed in their midst. "Better to kill them now," he said, and he picked up a turkey with only one eye and threw it hard against the wall. The turkey fell dead to the ground. "See," he said, "Quick. No pain."

But we could imagine the turkey's terror, and we loved the soft baby turkeys. "Let us keep them," we said. "We'll take care of them."

"Suit yourself," Daddy said.

We got an egg box which was big enough to hold twenty babies and deep enough they couldn't jump out. We put sawdust in the bottom and a light bulb for heat on top. We covered the box with a plaid tablecloth and put it at the foot of our beds. When Mother came home from work, she shook her head. "They'll learn soon enough," Daddy told her.

That night the room was filled with a green light filtered through the tablecloth, the smell of fresh sawdust, the cheeps of tiny birds.

The next day three of the birds were dead. We carried them to the gulch where Daddy burned everything that died.

The third day the turkeys spilled their water and turned the bottom of the box into pulp.

The fourth day the room started to smell like the brooder house.

The fifth day the turkeys started sprouting feathers and losing their cute, fuzzy look.

The sixth day, we found the one we called Droopy pecked to death.

We told Daddy, “You were right, we can’t raise them.”

“Suit yourself,” he said. “Now take care of them.”

We started by throwing the turkeys against the wall like Daddy had done. But we threw like girls. And besides, our hearts weren’t in it. The turkeys hit the wall, squawked in pain, and fell dazed to the floor. We cried and we threw them again. Soon, we discovered the most efficient way to kill a week-old turkey. Hold it by its legs and swing its head as hard as you can into the exposed wooden wall studs. If you don’t flinch or pull back at the last second, this kills them on the first try.

By the time we were in high school, it was a game. As we unpacked the baby turkeys, Daddy pointed to a spot on the wall and we’d see who could come closest to hitting it.

2. Debeaking

When turkeys are ten weeks old they have to be debeaked so they won’t peck each other to death. You herd them into a small area a hundred or so at a time. Then they are caught one by one and handed over a fence to the person running the debeaking machine, a hot blade brought down on the turkey’s top beak with a pedal.

The first time we debeaked, I asked Daddy, “Does it hurt them?”

“Nope. Not if you do it right. It’s like clipping fingernails.” But the smell wasn’t like clipping fingernails. It was like burning flesh.

In my family, my sisters and I did the herding, then took turns catching and handing turkeys to Daddy. Bend at the waist, grab a turkey under the wings, lift the three pound bird over the fence to Daddy. Bend at the waist, grab a turkey, lift. Over and over until the pen was empty and it was someone else's turn.

I was the oldest and always took the first turn. Then, once when I was twelve, I said, "I'll do the next batch too. If I get tired later, one of you can take my turn."

Daddy snorted, "That's Jan all over. Planning to take it easy when it gets hot and everyone's tired." I was the daughter who would rather read than jump rope, who got A's in math but couldn't throw a ball. In some families that would have made me the scholar. In our family, it made me the lazy one.

I vowed I'd show him. I caught the second pen, then said to my sisters, "You just herd. I'll catch. I'll let you know if I'm tired."

Bend, grab, lift. The turkeys throw up on you. They shit on you. Feathers in your nose. Bend, grab, lift.

Daddy said, "That's a thousand. It's the record. Let your sisters catch now."

"No. I'm not tired." He'd never be able to call me lazy again. This day would change everything. My sisters would look at me in awe; my father would be proud.

Bend, grab, lift. Two thousand. Bend, grab, lift. Three thousand. Six thousand.

Lunch break sitting in the shade, my legs were hopping. I bent over them to weight them down.

After lunch, "I'll keep going," I said.

There were thirteen thousand turkeys. If I could catch every one my life would be different. If I could catch every one, Daddy would see my worth. The scales would fall from his

eyes and he'd say, "Yes, you are my favorite. I love you most." Bend, grab, lift. Ten thousand. Ten thousand times three pounds. Thirty thousand pounds of turkeys I'd lifted. Nine thousand pounds to go. Bend, grab, lift. My hands were bleeding. It didn't matter. Fifteen hundred to go. I bent, my back locked. I staggered. If I fainted, died, Daddy would say, "I didn't realize." Mother would never forgive him.

"I can do it," I said. "Let me do it." I was crying, "Please let me finish." My sisters were laughing at me. Maybe Daddy was too. It didn't matter. I was better than all of them. I'd finish this job.

And I did. I caught every one. Official count, twelve thousand nine hundred and forty-seven. While Daddy and my sisters put away the machine and took down the temporary pen, I leaned against the wall, dizzy, every muscle jerking now. Most of the turkeys were eating, walking around, pecking at sawdust, at each other, like nothing had happened. But there was one in a corner, hunkered down, trembling, staring blankly ahead with its stupid turkey eyes, in shock. As I watched, a drop of blood formed on its beak — cut too short, not cauterized properly. The other turkeys cocked their heads at the bright color, walked toward it. "Put that bleeding one in the sick pen," Daddy said, "before the others start pecking at it." While one of my sisters took care of it, he put his hand on my shoulder. "Good job, girls," he said.

We headed back to the house, my sisters running ahead, challenging Daddy to race, then him chasing them with a bucket of water. Me alone behind.

3. The Night 3,000 Turkeys Died

The day before the night that three thousand turkeys died, we moved thirteen thousand turkeys to the range. I was fourteen then, still three years away from leaving my family and the farm.

Turkeys spend their first sixteen weeks in a heated brooder house, temperature held constant the first week at eighty-five degrees, at seventy-five after that. When they are sixteen weeks old, they are put outside to range in fenced enclosures. A flock of thirteen thousand needs about ten acres on the range.

By the time the turkeys have been in a brooder house for sixteen weeks, the air is filled with ammonia, feather particles, and dust. The stench is overwhelming. After an hour in the brooder house, your chest hurts for a day. You can contract disabling diseases from working only a week in a poultry house. Tiny barbed pieces of feather dig into the tissue of your lungs and never let go. But we didn't know that then. Sometimes we wore handkerchiefs over our faces. Most times we didn't.

Our farm was small and we brooded more turkeys than we could range ourselves. Usually giant trucks with crates came at night and we worked until dawn herding turkeys to the end of the brooder house, catching them, handing them up to the men waiting on the side of the truck.

This time we were keeping the turkeys ourselves. Daddy decided we would herd them to the range. It looked simple enough. We made a temporary chute of wire fencing that ran from the double end-doors of the brooder house, fifty yards to the pen. We would get behind the turkeys in the brooder house, shout, wave old shirts and gunny sacks at them, and they would run out the doors, through the chute, into the pen. And that's the way it worked in the first brooder house. The first turkeys hesitated at the door, walked out cautiously, then moved through the

chute and dispersed. The rest followed. It took about an hour. Daddy was pleased. “Let’s work straight through,” he said. “We’ll be done by ten.”

We moved the chute to the doors of the second brooder house. When we threw open the doors at the end of the second house, it was nine in the morning. The sun streamed in the open doors on turkeys that had never seen direct sunlight.

The one thing you can count on with turkeys is that you never know how they are going to react. I’ve seen turkeys clamor against a fence trying to get into a range fire. I’ve seen them rush toward a screaming child trying to kill it, seen them run from a screaming child, spooked and terrified.

These turkeys didn’t want to go into the sun. As we pushed from behind, they compacted. It was like an old adventure movie where the walls are closing in. But there was no wall at the end, only a patch of sunlight which the turkeys would not touch. We yelled louder, waved our cloths, kicked at the ones in the rear. Finally, Daddy walked through the solid carpet of turkeys to break the log jam at the front. He stood at the edge of the sunlight, lifting the turkeys three or four at a time with his feet. Stirring them with his legs, forcing them into the sun.

Suddenly, they broke free. As stubbornly as they had refused to go into the light, they now rushed toward it. They ran in a panic, piling on top of each other, knocking down the temporary fence. By the time Daddy could get the doors closed, at least a thousand turkeys had escaped and were running free on the farm, onto our neighbor’s farm, into the road.

We didn’t own the turkeys. We raised them for a company that owned the hatchery, the feed mill, the fleet of trucks that delivered and loaded the turkeys, the processing plant. We got a portion of the profits, if there were profits. With a thousand turkeys gone, there would be no

profits on this flock. Sixteen weeks of Daddy working fourteen hour days, of my sisters and me working along side him any time we weren't in school. All for no pay. No money at all for another sixteen weeks.

It took us eight hours to round up the escaped turkeys. Four of us trying to track down a thousand birds that had the whole world in which to hide and run from us. The sun beat down, and the air was thick and humid. We stopped once for water, and my sister Billie, the youngest of us, just eleven, vomited from the cold water hitting her stomach after hours of sun, heat and dehydration. As she lay on the ground, shaking and holding her stomach, I hated her for being the one too sick to continue. But even she was not too sick. We all went on. She got an extra five minutes to rest, but we all went on.

At six o'clock, we rebuilt the chute. We opened the doors, and the six thousand remaining turkeys, the sun now low in the sky behind them, walked through to the pen.

We cleaned up. We ate supper. And we went to bed.

That's the day we had before the night three thousand turkeys died.

At midnight Mother woke us up. "We have to get to the pen. Daddy needs us." We had been too exhausted to hear the storm. We ran out in the driving rain. Flashes of lightening showed Daddy picking up turkeys and throwing them, one after the other.

When people learn I grew up on a turkey farm, they invariably ask, "Is it true? Are they really so stupid that they open their mouths in the rain, look up at the sky, and drown?" The answer is yes, some of them do that. They are that stupid. But that's not how three thousand die in one night. They die because they are scared and they huddle together in their fear. They climb on top of each other, trying to get close, to find protection in the mass of bodies, and they

suffocate. We called it piling. It wasn't unusual for a loud noise to cause a pile in the brooder house. If there wasn't someone to pull them off each other, fifty could die because someone slammed a door.

But this was worse than any pile we'd seen. Turkeys who'd never spent a night outdoors, panicked by thunder, lightening, and rain in sheets. All we could do was pull them out of the pile and throw them away from it. They would run back, still seeking the comfort of the group. After a while, sliding in mud, grabbing soaked turkeys, throwing them, grabbing more, you don't know if the ones you are throwing are dead or alive. You don't care.

Maybe we saved some.

The next day, the sky was cloudless and the sun bore down on us again. We picked up dead turkeys, throwing them onto the back of a flat-bed truck. Daddy drove the truck into a field far from the house.

Three thousand dead turkeys sitting in the Missouri sun for two days.

The company that owned the turkeys had them insured against acts of God, so we couldn't do anything until the insurance inspector had seen them. He came, a man from town in a white shirt and tie who held his handkerchief over his face when he got close to the truck. He made no pretense of counting, just stood there gagging.

After he left, Daddy shoveled the turkeys into Dead Turkey Gulch. He poured gasoline on them and struck a match. They burned for days.