

YA SHORT STORY: TURKEYS TAKE FLIGHT BY CATHRYN BONICA

Summary: Told from the viewpoint of high school senior Lexi, not your typical girl. Smart, boyish, a good mechanic, and discovering she has possesses a dangerous power.

I know it's coming when I spot the gang of turkeys in the field across the road. Birds always show up first. Doors slam inside the house, rattling windows and bisecting angry voices. The Dick is packing and Mom is crying, so I keep my brothers outside. They don't need to hear that crap.

“Lexi, will you draw me a truck?” Ben says, holding out a green stub of chalk.

I take the chalk and kneel on warm tar, stroking out lines as the light changes. No clouds block the sun, but my world darkens by the minute. Negative energy does that to me, and the Dick is a garbage truck of negative energy. Sure he's a good-looking lawyer, but his personality sucks.

In the field, the turkeys yelp and flap into a tighter circle.

Ben rubs my hair as I draw, something he likes to do since I dyed it indigo and shaved it into a Mohawk. Mom isn't crazy about it, but the best part is Dick totally hates it. “What the hell have you done, Alexis?” he said when I came down to dinner that night. “You look like a freak. How do you expect to amount to anything but a grease-monkey?”

Mom gasped, and Ben and Brody just about wet themselves laughing.

Mom's husband's real name is Douglas which, in a sick twist of fate, happens to be the name of my absolute favorite actor—the gorgeous and talented Douglas Spain. I can't call the

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step Douglas, so I gave him a nickname. Dick fits him much better. And I know I'm different from, like, ninety percent of the girls in my high school. I'm tall and bony with no boobs. My two best friends are guys. I wear black tees and holey jeans and Converse. I work on engines, and I'm the smartest one in my AP Anatomy class. My grandmother used to tell me to be myself and good people would see how great I am. God, I really loved her. But I don't think the Dick can see the good in anyone who isn't like him: slayer of the lowly malpractice accuser; slicer of a nine iron in an Armani suit.

"Is Dad leaving again?" Brody says, sitting next to me. His shorts reveal legs covered with scabs and bug bites from playing in the tree fort I made, a place the twins escape to whenever I'm not around to be Dick's verbal punching bag.

"He's not our dad." I glance up at the house. The windows reflect black and gray images like a photo negative. "A dad doesn't put down his wife because she wants to paint for a living instead of selling insurance. A dad doesn't swear at five-year-olds or run over toys on purpose because he's late for golf. A dad doesn't call his stepdaughter a dy—," I catch myself, "a bad name because she plays the guitar and looks different. A real dad loves his wife and kids, no matter what."

Ben nods, but Brody's eyebrows go up. "Where did our dad go?"

"Afghanistan," I say, wiping green dust on my Metallica shirt.

"When's he coming home?"

The word sticks in my throat, a painful nugget. "Never."

"I don't remember him," Ben says.

"He left when you guys were babies," I say. "He's a hero. He loved us. Remember that."

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Brody frowns. The murky light colors his sun-drenched face ash. In the field, turkeys creep toward the road. A few break from the stand of pines lining the field, keekee-ing in panicked staccato, charging the gang. Mother hens cluck at their errant young.

It took me a while to figure things out. The day Grandma died, I didn't recognize the signs. The birds, the changing light, the smells. When Dad died in an ambush half a world away, a huge flock of mourning doves gathered in the tree outside my English class. The room went red, and a slick coppery stench flooded my lungs. I smelled his aftershave, dropped to my knees, and puked. The nurse sent me home. The flu, she said, but I was so freaked I couldn't talk, couldn't tell Mom what I knew had happened. She found out the next day. Two National Guardsmen caught her when her legs buckled on our doorstep.

I thought the signs were a kind of psychic blood-bond, something family members share, like how twins get premonitions if one of them is hurt or in trouble. Some claim to have telepathy, which is what I thought I had. I've seen it happen between Ben and Brody, and they have no idea how cool it is. Then, last spring on the drive to work, I passed a flock of blue jays perched along the fence at the horse farm. The sun was high, but the whole sky turned pink as sunset and the smell of chlorine made me gag so hard I nearly drove off the road. I was wrist-deep in a carburetor when I got the text. My good friend Julia Frost was dead. Freak accident during diving practice. No blood relations there.

I look at my drawing, a logging truck filled with huge tree trunks defying gravity, like the trucks that zoom by our house every day.

Voices pierce the air. "I'm sick of it, Holly," the Dick says. "I would've made partner if wasn't for you and those kids suffocating me!" Mom follows him into the garage, pleading, and he barks his stupid, self-absorbed motto: "I'm looking out for number one." I hate him.

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The pungent stink of rotting apples descends. When the garage door rolls up, I hurry the boys through the mudroom door. Mom stands there crying. “Take them to the den and stay there,” I say. “Don’t let them out of your sight.”

Her eyes go like saucers. She kicks the door to the garage closed and obeys.

I return to the driveway and watch the Dick back his Mercedes out and turn it around. The unrelenting stench reminds me of Candie Sparks. She bullied me for over a year, crapping on me all over Facebook. One day, I left my guitar in anatomy class. When I went back for it, it was smeared with frog guts from the dissection we’d just done. I was heading to work—mad as hell after cleaning entrails off my Jim Dandy Flat Top, the formaldehyde leaving pitted scars in the black finish—and I pulled into Flo’s to grab a soda. The roof of the place was crowded with crows, which should’ve been a hint, but I was eager for the smell of pizza instead of pickling chemicals. Candie sat at a table with her friends, cawing at me. As I paid for my drink, I heard her say the anchovies on her pizza smelled a lot better than frog guts.

“Choke on it,” I muttered and ran for my car, shaking. The sky turned the color of mud, and the reek of fish descended. I sat gripping my steering wheel, and soon the siren calls of emergency vehicles echoed down the corridor of Route Nine. An ambulance screamed around the bend and into the parking lot.

Holy crap. Did I do that? I wondered, not waiting around to find out what happened. I sped out of there and cranked some Seether to break free of the negative energy. Later it was all over Facebook, how Candie choked on pizza and passed out in a puddle of piss. People tried CPR, but the EMTs had to stick a tube down her trachea to save her.

She came back to school last week. I doubt she’ll bully anyone now. The EMT accidentally damaged her voice box. She talks like a bullfrog with laryngitis.

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I looked it up, what a flock of crows is called.

A murder.

The Dick's window is down. He's talking at me, but I haven't heard a word. Turkeys take flight, struggling to lift off, giant wings beating the air. Their cackles echo across the field.

Dick's face turns black. I've never seen this sign. I hesitate, then open my mouth to warn him, but he says, "Alexis, forget the stupid rock-star-wanna-be shit. You have a better chance of sprouting a penis than getting a scholarship for music school. You'll end up fixing cars for a living and won't catch a husband with that butch look. Then where will you be?" Without waiting for me to respond he rockets the Mercedes out of the drive and across the center line, not bothering to look both ways, nearly getting T-boned by an approaching SUV blaring a horn.

Incredible. He dodged it. What kind of divine justice is this?

The turkeys cackle to a landing on the soft shoulder up the road thirty yards away, flitting and pecking at the ground.

"Douglas," I say.

As if responding to my voice, the gang darts across the road in front of the accelerating Mercedes, putting and yelping.