

John J. White

GRACKLE TRAP

by John J. White

Eisenhower was president. Old wars had ended and new ones begun, each crisis more important than the last. But that was their world. My crisis was first grade. My world was school, friends, the backyard, Little League, Mickey Mantle.

Our yard had two acres of uneven, rock-strewn Vermont soil, one acre dormant, filled with delicate birches and strong maples, the other cleared and mown, though full of adventures.

Hours were spent exploring lines of hurried ants traversing knotholes in the lone poplar, its bark scarred by love oaths of older sisters and brothers knifing their devotion to their latest flame, the initials B.W. loves C.R. through a lopsided heart, pierced by a lopsided arrow. I was jealous, wishing it were my initials of my girlfriend who I would undoubtedly meet when I reached manhood in second grade. Then, my younger brothers could be jealous.

It was the day my older brother Ben showed me how to catch grackles. The blackbirds filled the cool sky, whirling dervishes of blue, black and gold hues. They grabbed for branches in the tree-walled backyard eyeing the rows of dry corn my sister protected as if she'd given birth to them. Hundreds of blue-necked grackles, white eyed, with cruel black dots for pupils, startled by the slam of the screen door.

Ben jumped the three concrete steps effortlessly, his gloved hand holding a hotdog. Twice my size, almost three times my age, he swaggered down the slope of the septic tank hump toward our burn barrel, a hundred feet from the house.

When he flashed the hotdog to me, I joined the trek, two of my strides for every one of his. I wanted him to hold my hand like he used to on the way to novena but he said I was too old to hold hands anymore and that I shouldn't tell him I loved him, either. I promised I wouldn't.

I glanced over to the O'Brien's yard. Maggie O'Brien ran back and forth in an arc near her house. She was four years old and she wasn't smart. My mother said she was a mongoloid idiot. I didn't know what that was.

Maggie's real name was Margaret, the youngest of seven. My mother said it served the O'Brien's right for having children after the age of forty. I pointed out my mother's pregnancy and how she was thirty-nine and was rewarded with a slap for not knowing the significance of their age difference.

Mrs. O'Brien had tied Maggie to a stump near the back door, one end of a stretchy cord to Maggie's belt, the other end to a metal eyelet that Mr. O'Brien had screwed into the stump. The cord kept Maggie within twenty feet of the house where she could only run in a half circle around the stump, the grass eroded from dirty Keds.

Mrs. O'Brien didn't want Maggie to play with her other children. She kept her outside, except for breakfast, lunch and dinner and sometimes when it rained or snowed. At night, one of Maggie's sisters brought her inside. The next morning she'd be out again, tethered tightly to the stump.

I'd play with her occasionally, but she wasn't very good at it. She drooled too much and when you tried to explain Lincoln Logs, she'd grab you by the head and try to kiss you. One time she chewed on my Yogi Berra rookie card and I didn't play with her for a week.

Ben lifted me over the burn barrel so I could see inside, ash floating out into the thin breeze. We burned everything in the barrel, trash, garbage, wood, grass. If you stood too close, the flames seared your eyebrows and eyelashes off. Mine always grew back darker and longer.

He held the hotdog above his head, getting the full attention of the menacing birds, their songs interrupted. "You let them see it first," he said, his muscles flexing in his T-shirt as he rotated, the gladiator teasing the hoard in the tree coliseum. "Some can smell it J-Dub, I'm pretty sure of it, but grackles are smart. We don't want to catch the smart ones though, do we?"

I nodded in awe. "We want to catch the stupid ones, like those." I pointed to three birds in a birch, their talons tight around a branch.

Ben shrugged and said, "Watch." He threw the hotdog in the barrel and slid the metal cover half on, leaving a semi-circle opening. We stepped back to the poplar to wait. Some of the grackles left their perch in a feint, stopping short of the curious barrel, then shooting back to their perch, safe once again from sure death.

But Ben was right. Two grackles couldn't overcome their hunger and dove rocket-like into the barrel. He sprinted to the trap, with me close behind, and pushed the lid over the top. One bird escaped through a hole in the side but the other was too fat, its wings flapping in desperation against the sides. Ben lifted me over his head and threw me in the air in triumph, then caught me, as we spun together until I was dizzy.

Before I could stand up straight, he handed me about four feet of thin cord, pushed the lid back, and reached in with his gloved hands. The grackle pecked and clawed fiercely at the gloves, its muscular body wriggling in Ben's grip.

"J-Dub, tie the cord to its claw," he said, and held one of the bird's feet out to me. I was afraid of it. What if it clawed my hand? He reassured me by isolating the bird foot with two fingers. With talons held immobile, I tied the cord and pulled tight a knot skillfully learned in Cub Scout Pack 17, earlier that year.

Ben gestured with his head to the rusty hole near the top of the barrel. "Tie it through there," he said. "And hurry up, my hands are getting tired."

I used the same knot for the hole. When Ben released the grackle, it flew directly for the trees, but four feet or so from the barrel it came to an abrupt stop, nearly ripping its foot off. It wouldn't do that again. I knew that and I was only six.

We backed off as the bird perched on the rim of the barrel for a few seconds, then flew off, but with less effort, as if it knew the pain to be had from an escape. It was a pitiful thing to watch, the graceful black bird hovering above the barrel, the cord stretched to its limit.

I turned to glance at Maggie, she also tugging on her cord at the end of its reach. She jumped, then yelled, then began her semi-circle run, back and forth, her ever-present smile glistening in the sunlight. Monotonous—to everyone but her.

Ben punched me playfully. "Tomorrow we'll take turn with the pellet gun. You want to try it with me, big fella? It's about time Dad took you hunting with us."

I tried to agree with a worried smile but was distracted by the grackle's caws and Maggie's screeches. I nodded and turned toward the house. I wanted to eat some macaroni and cheese and turn up the volume on the TV.

I had seen Ben and his friends kill trapped grackles before. They would line up near the back of the house, taking turns with the pellet gun. At first, the grackle would fly to the end of the cord to escape but after a few hits of shot, it would take shelter in the barrel. It was my job to kick the barrel and spook the grackle out for another round of gunfire. Eventually there'd be a successful headshot and the bird would topple off the barrel and hang upside down a few inches from the ground, its blue plume matted with blood. Tomorrow it would be my turn. As I shut the screen door, Maggie jumped from the stump, oblivious.

The quiet of the night broke with the squawk of the bird, the flap of wings against the air, against the barrel. Maggie screamed as each pellet hit, blood dripping over her smile as she hung upside down. I didn't sleep well.

The next morning I stood in the backyard against the wall of the house, my attention riveted on the desperate grackle, flapping its wings slowly in its shallow hover, exhausted by its night attempts at escape. Then I turned to watch Maggie gleefully running in her half-moon race to nowhere. Smiling. Smiling.

My head swiveled between the grackle and Maggie, then back to the grackle, and then to Maggie. I walked over and untied the cord.