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### The Shot Heard 'Round the... Cereal Field

The gray, dark brown, and orange hues of feathers encompassed the sky and swallowed the San Luis Valley in a state of momentary bliss. The majestic soaring of the birds and their distinct red forehead caught the eyes of those awaiting the bird's arrival. They ascended to the Monte Vista Wildlife Refuge and landed in the late afternoon, too late to travel to surrounding farm fields for cereal grains and other such crops, so they decided to bunker in the refuge until morning.

The flock set out for farmlands in the early morning, searching for prime lands with fields of grains and marshes or slow-moving water: the ultimate sandhill crane habitat. What was special about this migration was that young Leroy was along for the trip. This was his first migration season and had so much to learn and experience. Leroy, his mother, and the rest of the flock landed in the shallow waters of a marsh central to a cereal field. Leroy gazed at the vast influx of sandhill cranes packing into every square inch of the shallow waters. A group of about 15 cranes jumped at the opportunity of bounteous cereal grains and began feasting on the nutritious grains. Leroy was absolutely starving from the long flight from New Mexico and felt his stomach grumble beneath him. He then followed the role-model-birds who were devouring the grains.

For a moment, the environment was tranquil. The creek trickled into the marsh and the minnows navigated beneath the water's surface. The wind cascaded between the individual

cereal plants, creating an ocean-like movement to the field. The sun was beginning to set and large rays of purple, orange, and yellow blended into the sky above and illuminated the white, puffy clouds. Everything seemed so calm, so peaceful, until Leroy looked over to the edge of the marsh, and saw a largely-built man... with a gun.

Leroy began to panic. Other birds noticed the man and abruptly extended their wings to take off. The large swarm of birds overtook the sky and encompassed the colorful airspace with shadowy terror. The man began to fire shots and figures began to drop from the sky into the water and into the surrounding grains. Leroy's legs felt stuck to the ground, heavy, and frozen. He looked around trying to find his mother, but she was nowhere in sight. He looked into the swarm of grey above him and caught a glimpse of his mother. She looked terrified to the bone: eyes wide open, aware, and in an obvious state of trepidation.

"Mom! I'm down here!" Leroy tried to capture her attention. He continued to yell when she didn't notice him.

"MOM! MOM!" She finally looked down towards the marsh and saw Leroy. Due to her motherly instincts, she flew off the path of safety towards Leroy. What Leroy's mother didn't know is that the man had a direct shot at her across the water. He loaded his shotgun and took aim.

"Dumb birds." He pulled the trigger and hit Leroy's mother directly in the chest, and she plummeted towards the water.

"Mom!" Leroy immediately ran over to his mother who lay lifeless in the marsh's cloudy water.

“Mom, wake up. Please, mom.” Leroy desperately tried to wake his mother, but she didn’t stir.

Another shot was fired and Leroy felt a stinging pain in his left wing. He looked over and saw dark red blood begin to drip and stain his light grey feathers. He didn’t want to leave his mother, but he knew that if he didn’t fly away with the rest of the flock he would remain in imminent danger.

“I love you, mom,” Leroy spread his wings and attempted to take flight, but his feeble wing was no assist. Adapting to his unfortunate situation, Leroy took cover in the tall grasses to escape the vision of the man. He began to cry and felt the tears and blood drip into the crevices of his feathers. His momentary grief was interrupted by a high-pitched, younger voice.

“Dad! What are you doing? These birds did nothing to you,” the young voice yelled in anger.

“Those birds come back each year and eat all of my crops. No crops equal no money. I’m just protecting my land Timmy,” the dad replied.

“I’ll see you back at the house,” the dad walked away towards a small wooden house overlooking the valley about 100 yards away.

Leroy noticed the saddened look on Timmy’s face. Timmy observed the remains of 8-10 birds settled on the bank of the marsh. Timmy began to walk up to each bird and utter something that Leroy could not make out. Eventually, Timmy made it to Leroy’s mother and began talking softly.

“I’m sorry it had to end this way.”

Leroy was bewildered with the boy's defiance to his father and decided he was trustworthy.

"Me too," Leroy emerged from the tall grass, grimacing at the shocks of pain coming from his wing.

"You're hurt," the boy grabbed the wing when Leroy winced at the pain.

"I'm sorry I didn't mean to hurt you," Timmy looked concerned, "my father did this to you, huh? And that," Timmy gestured towards the mother, "that's your mom? I'm so sorry. What's your name?"

"I'm Leroy"

"Hi Leroy, I'm so sorry about this. My dad doesn't understand that he doesn't have to kill to protect his land," Timmy responded, looking genuinely upset, "I can help, let's go back to my cabin and get you cleaned up."

Leroy looked skeptical, the father had just headed that way and could finish Leroy off.

"Don't worry about my dad, we just have to keep quiet so he doesn't know I brought you back. He hates this time of year because flocks of cranes ruin his crops," Timmy reassured Leroy.

Timmy and Leroy headed up to the old cabin and went around back to the barn and stables.

"I know it's not much." Timmy grabbed a bale of hay and began spreading it out in one of the empty stalls. He fetched water and some grains and placed them into the musty stable.

"You should drink some water and eat, you've had a long day, I'll go get some first aid supplies to tend to your wing. Hopefully, you'll be able to fly by tomorrow," Timmy left and

closed the large barn door behind him, coalescing Leroy in the sounds of the heavy breathing of a horse, the calls of chickens, and the whistling of wind flowing through the gaps in the barn's walls. The barn door opened again with a loud, high-pitched creak and Timmy's head poked through.

"I got all I could find," Timmy began tending to Leroy's wing with his medical collection. He cleaned out the wound with peroxide then covered the wound in a calming antibiotic cream. Timmy finished off his work with a bandage.

"There that should do the trick. I would stay but my dad will get suspicious if I'm in the barn for any longer. Goodnight Leroy try to get some rest," Timmy closed the barn door behind him once again and Leroy drifted into a deep slumber.

Leroy was awoken suddenly by the booming yells of Timmy's father, "Why would you bring one of those birds back to our home?!"

"Sorry, Dad. He will be out this morning. I promise."

Timmy heaved open the barn door and walked over to Leroy, "It's time to go, Leroy. I'm sorry I can't let you stay longer. Will you be able to find your way back to your flock?"

"Hopefully I can catch them before they head to other cereal fields, but yes, I can make my way back," Leroy replied with saddened eyes. He wanted to stay with Timmy, but he knew he couldn't.

Leroy and Timmy walked out of the barn to a large, open area outside of the barn. Timmy reached over and pulled off the bandage on Leroy's wing. While it was obviously not healed, the wound had closed, which should allow Leroy to fly again.

“So I guess this is goodbye, Leroy. I’m sure I won’t see you again, you must be terrified of my dad,” Timmy shed a single tear that fell to the ground where it was quickly enveloped by the dry, thirsty ground.

“Timmy, I’ll come back. You saved my life I could never be more grateful. The least I can do is come back and visit,” Leroy reassured Timmy.

Timmy embraced Leroy in a hug, “you have to go.”

Leroy backed away from Timmy and extended his wings that were being lit by the orange hue of the sunrise.

“I’ll be back,” Leroy lifted himself off the ground with quick, rapid strokes. Once he reached a comfortable altitude, the strokes began to become more slow and graceful until he began to soar. Leroy looked back towards the little spot waving at him. Leroy cracked a small smile and turned his head towards his destination.

“I’ll be back.”

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