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THE WORST BIRTHDAY PRESENT EVER

For my tenth birthday, I got the worst present ever.
We moved.

The day after the ice-cream cake and new gym shoes, my mom and dad packed up the farmhouse where we'd lived my whole life and kerplunked us into the suburbs of Chicago. My new town, King's Grove, is only forty miles away from the farm. But it feels like a million.

Moving is worse than getting socks and underwear for your birthday.

Here's what you can't pack when you move:

The freedom to toss metal coffee cans into the air and shoot them with a BB gun.

My favorite chicken, Henrietta, who sits on my lap and even survived a tornado.

The way the sun sets behind our barn and turns the distant farm buildings into black silhouettes against the blazing orange sky.

And we couldn't pack my grandparents (for obvious reasons) who we had lived with on the farm in Goodnow all my life. They stayed to spruce up the place before they put it up for sale and moved too. They said the farm was just getting to be "too much." That's grown-up code for *too much work* and *too much money*.

But the worst thing? I couldn't pack the best fort in the world—the hayloft in our barn. It was one, two, three, four, five, six, *creak*, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven steps up the wooden ladder. Then a hop over the top of the ladder into the wide open space under the towering ceiling of wood timbers.

Since my grandparents had sold their milk cow and horse a few years ago, the loft wasn't stacked with bales of hay anymore. I guess the only "animal" left in the barn was Grandpa Ernie's old, brown Ford Bronco.

So the hayloft was all mine . . . except for two giant electric Christmas candles and Midge, my little sister. I had to let her play up there sometimes. Luckily, she doesn't like

dolls. And when I frown and say, “Do *not* touch my stuff,” she doesn’t.

I had the hayloft set up just right: plastic crates for chairs, eight cinder blocks and a piece of plywood for a table, and the bucket seat out of a long-gone car.

My grandpa had built the barn and the hayloft door by hand when my dad was a kid. The door’s oak wood, sanded smooth and stained brown as a big chocolate bar, was almost too fancy for a barn. Across the middle of the door, Grandpa had carved a Bible verse: “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.”¹

The verse is about Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people. When God told him to go to a new place, Abraham obeyed, even though he didn’t know where he was going.

Kind of like moving to the suburbs.



On the night before the move, I sat with my family around the kitchen table after dinner. Mom lit the lopsided one and zero candles stuck into the top of the still-frozen cake, and everyone sang.

I squeezed my eyes shut till it hurt, made an impossible

wish, sucked in a massive breath, and—Midge belted out the classic “you belong in the zoo” verse—then I blew out the candles.

My family clapped, even more enthusiastically than they usually do at birthdays. But it didn’t make me feel better that my wish hadn’t come true. Of course.

Moving boxes were still stacked up around us, ready to be packed into the moving truck in the morning. I just smiled the way I do in school pictures every year . . . like I’m supposed to be happy even when there’s such a thing as math.

Once the celebration was over, I velcroed on my new gym shoes and headed outside to the chicken coop to retrieve Henrietta.

The wind was whipping up, rustling the fields of shin-high cornstalks.

This was tornado season.

I tucked Henrietta safe and sound into my backpack and hurried to the barn so I could watch my last sunset. I grabbed my camping lantern off a nail on the wall and climbed up the ladder into the loft. I switched on the lantern and set it on the edge of the hayloft floor near the top of the ladder so I would be able to see my way back once the sun went down.

I had brought Henrietta to keep me company. I couldn’t imagine leaving her behind when we moved. I wondered if chickens could miss people.

“Will you miss me?” I asked her.

She popped her head out of the backpack. *Bok?*

“I’ll miss you too.”

I set the backpack on the floor. I let Henrietta go to peck at whatever bugs were hiding between the loft floorboards.

Then I dragged the bucket seat closer to the hayloft door.

Two years ago on my eighth birthday, I’d carved my initials J. F. (Jack Finch) and the date—June 2, 1993—near the bottom of the door with the pocketknife I got. The letters and numbers were carved right below the initials my grandpa and my dad had carved in the 1970s when Grandpa made the door and Dad was a kid my age: E. F. for Ernie Finch and H. F. for Howie Finch. They had faded on account of being old (the initials, not Grandpa and Dad).

Grandpa had rigged up the hayloft door with a long rope tied to the handle so I could pull the door shut. To secure it, I just had to drop the iron hook dangling from the doorjamb into the eye hook attached to the door.

I sat on the edge of the bucket seat and flipped open my pocketknife. I set the tip of the blade against the lower corner of the door, right below the J. F. I had carved two years ago.

I slowly dug into the wood: STILL HOME ’95.

I snapped the knife shut and pushed open the door with my foot. I gently scooped up Henrietta, who was pecking next to me, set her on my lap, and sat back to watch the sun set.

Henrietta was more like a cat than she was a chicken. More like a pet than she was breakfast or dinner. (Although I did have to keep reminding my grandma of that. Grandma Josephine is more farmer than pet lover. More about fried chicken than cuddling chickens.)

Henrietta could sit still for an hour as long as I stroked her back and didn't fidget too much. She clucked softly as I watched dark clouds march in and take over the yellows and oranges that had settled on the horizon.

A gust of wind rushed in behind the clouds and slammed the hayloft door against the outside wall of the barn.

I jumped out of the bucket seat to grab the end of the rope before it snaked outside and out of my reach.

Henrietta fluttered up into the air in a cloud of white feathers and frustration.

"Sorry, Hen!"

I snatched the end of the rope. Hand over hand, I took up the slack. A little more, a little more until I was in a tug-of-war with the wind. The rope was now almost short enough for me to pull the door totally shut and latch the hook.

Whoosh!

The wind grabbed the edge of the door and threw it open again. But I didn't let go of the rope. The door swung wide and yanked me with it.



I belly-flopped onto the floor . . . and nearly halfway out of the hayloft door.

I stared down at the water puddling in the black mud far below. Rain pelted the back of my head. The wind tore at my T-shirt.

I let go of the now-useless rope. I clutched at the edge of the barn floor digging into the top of my ribs to keep myself from falling all the way out. Carefully, I inched myself backward until more floor than air was underneath my chest.

Then something landed on my back with a heavy *thump*. Henrietta. She was freaking out. Her claws scratched through my T-shirt and her wings beat at me.

“Hen! You are *not* helping!”

Finally getting my hands underneath my shoulders, I heaved myself backward, sending Henrietta fluttering into the air again, just as the hayloft door flew back and slammed shut.

The door kept banging like something was trying to get in.

At least we were both safe inside. Real quick, I told God thanks.

For a second, I could swear I heard a voice mixed in with all the wind and rain. God?

I cautiously crawled back toward the door. I had to get it latched. I had to protect my fort.

Then I heard the voice again. This time inside the barn and right below the loft.

“JACK!”

Someone was grabbing my shirt and dragging me backward toward the ladder.

Dad!

“There’s a tornado warning on TV!” he yelled into my ear.

Dad started down the ladder first.

“I have to get Hen!” I shouted.

That wasn’t going to be easy. She was scurrying around the loft like, well, a chicken with her head cut off.

Chasing her made it worse. Her squawking almost drowned out the howl of the wind.

“Jack, we have to leave her!” Dad had started to climb back into the loft.

I didn’t want to leave Hen, but I didn’t want my dad risking his neck too. And I didn’t want to disobey him. So I said another prayer and followed him down the ladder.

I climbed down so fast, my feet barely touched the rungs. I glanced up for one last check on Henrietta. Now she was perched on the edge of the loft.

The bright lantern light cast a giant chicken shadow behind her. She would have looked pretty awesome if she hadn’t been screeching like, well, a big chicken.

Feeling desperate, I held out my arms.

She jumped, wings flapping madly.

I caught her (mostly she landed on me again), and I wrapped her up tight in the bottom of my T-shirt.

Then Dad and I sprinted out of the barn and into the night.

A hard rain bombarded us like a water balloon attack as we bolted across the backyard toward the farmhouse.

Mom was waiting inside with the back door open. The warm light of the kitchen flickered on and off behind her. She waved us on wildly. Not that that would get us there any quicker.

Dad, my chicken, and I tumbled into the kitchen, drenched but safe, and Mom slammed the door on the storm.

TAKE COVER!

The three of us hurried downstairs. In the basement, Grandma was lighting votive candles as happily as if she were decorating for Christmas. Candles flickered everywhere—on top of the washing machine, the ironing board, tool chest, and every other flat surface. We always lighted candles in case the power went out, which it almost always did during storms in spring and summer.

And let me tell you, the countryside is *dark*. I've been to bigger towns and cities where you can barely see the stars at night because of all the lights. Not here. Sometimes at night, you can't see your hand in front of your face.

Grandma blew out the match she was holding and hurried to the bottom of the steps to hug me tight. She smelled

like matchstick sulfur and sweet grandma perfume.

Henrietta, still wrapped up in the bottom of my soaked T-shirt, squawked.

“What in the world!” Grandma let go of me quick. “I swear that chicken is luckier than a skinny turkey at Thanksgiving.”

“You’re alive!” Midge cheered from the other side of the room.

She and my grandpa sat at the folding table listening to static on their radio. Grandpa fiddled with the radio’s long antenna until it caught a signal and the static turned into a weatherman’s voice: “Several funnel clouds have been sighted southwest of Chicago. Take shelter and get to the lowest level of your home . . .”

Shivering, I hurried over to the table. A bunch of candles flickered in the center surrounded by six steaming kids’ cuisine dinner trays with potato tots, dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets, and my favorite blue ice-cream dessert.

I plopped onto the folding chair across from Midge.

Her breaded T. rex nugget was battling a triceratops, Midge’s favorite extinct animal.

The radio announcer went on: “We’re experiencing a more-active-than-usual tornado season . . . people across the Midwest have already lost their homes . . .”

Midge bit the head off the T. rex. “Chomp! Triceratops counterattack!”

“The triceratops is a herbivore,” I said through chattering teeth.

“He didn’t *eat* the head. He just bit it off in self-defense.”

“With his triceratops beak?”

Midge popped the rest of the T. rex into her mouth. “Hello? They’re only chicken nuggets.”

Henrietta squirmed out of my shirt, and her head popped up over the edge of the table.

I covered my food with my hand. “Oops! Sorry about that, Hen.”

Mom opened the clothes dryer and pulled out a couple of towels. She handed one to my dad and wrapped the other still warm towel around my shoulders. She kissed the top of my wet head and whispered, “Thank God you’re okay.”

We all squeezed around the small folding table to eat.

Midge, who usually only shares food after she’s licked it, slid her blue ice-cream treat across the table to me. “I’m glad you didn’t blow away.”

“Thanks,” I said, just as the power went out.

The candles flickered, battling back the pitch dark.

My teeth chattered. Henrietta pecked at a potato tot.

And the weatherman crackled through the black-and-silver radio: “Take precautions . . . stay safe . . .”