

O. P. Climber

by

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Maggie woke to a flood of light. She looked over at the bunk beds. The white sheets were parted, the blankets thrown back over themselves. Bacon and coffee were on the air, but it was quiet. Danny and Carole must be outside doing chores already. She was wide awake with something. Something about today. What was it? Now she heard single footsteps and the clinking of dishes and swashing water. Those were her mother's just-after-breakfast sounds. It must be beautiful outside. The light was so bright slung through the windows. Suddenly she remembered. Today was the day of the slaughtering.

She scrambled out of bed, out of her flannel pajamas, dropping them on the others puddled on the floor. "You kids," her mother would scold. But maybe not today. She pulled on her levis, cowboy boots, a tee shirt, grabbed her jeans jacket, and hurried down the hall to the kitchen.

"Good morning, Merry Sunshine." Her mother turned, her hands still in dishwater. "Want some cereal?"

"Thanks Mama." She sat down at the kitchen table. "How come no one woke me up?"

"No one woke up Danny or Carole either." Her mother dished out a bowl of oatmeal, poured cream off the top of the gallon jar into a pitcher, and set them in front

of Maggie. "I think I'll have a cup of coffee with you," she said. She poured herself a cup and sat down in her usual place at the end of the table next to Maggie.

"What's Papa doing?" They could see him through the big kitchen window. He was standing with Pablo just down the hill, on the lower part of their five acres. He was gesturing, turning to Pablo, then resting his hands on his hips the way he did when he was thinking of how to do something.

"He's getting ready to build the scaffold."

She sprinkled sugar on the steaming cereal, dribbled cream around it, then took a bite. "How come they use a scaffold, Mama?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," her mother said sharply. "I don't know exactly. The steer's easier to quarter when it's hoisted off the ground. You'll find out. You'll see exactly how it all works this evening, Maggie."

"All the kids are coming over to watch."

"They are, huh." Her mother lit a cigarette.

The Laudenslagers' dad was going to help. He had the gun. "How can Papa remember how to do all this stuff?" He was a baker at Wonder Bread. They'd moved from San Diego to the outskirts only two years ago, and gotten all these animals.

"Why, you'd be surprised how much you remember when you're grown up," her mother replied testily. "Nat helped his father every year when he was a kid. After they sold the farm, your grandfather had the butcher shop in Fayetteville. He was around it enough."

Maggie looked at her. "I just asked, Mom, that's all."

Her mother's face softened. "Well look here. Your braid is coming undone at the bottom. Turn your head around and let me fix it."

Maggie turned, bending her head while her mother slipped off the loose rubber bands. She liked the feel of her mother's hands scampering about her neck and shoulders. She wondered what she would remember when she grew up. Maybe, she thought, she would live in Wyoming where Mama was from or Arkansas where Pop was from. Then she'd get to see snow.

"Maggie," her mother said. "There's something I think I better tell you." She wound a rubber band back around the end of one braid.

"Ouch. What?" Maggie dipped the spoon into the middle of the cereal. She scooped up a bite. Her mother didn't answer. Through the window Maggie saw Papa point to a post for the scaffold and Pablo turning to look at it.

Her mother wound another rubber band around the other braid. "Ouch! You always pull. How come you always pull?"

"Sorry, sweetie, I didn't mean to," her mother said.

The oatmeal slid down her throat. It was warm now, not hot. "What, Mommy?"

Her mother stubbed out the rest of her cigarette. "Nat's going to slaughter one of the goats too along with the steer."

It wasn't Harriet, her mother added quickly. He'd never take Harriet.

"It's O. P. Climber, isn't it. It's Harriet's kid."

"He's a billy, Margaret. Nat says we'll have to sell him anyway. We can't keep a billy around."

"I don't know how he could do that, Mama," she said. It was Papa who thought the goats might suit her. It was Papa and she who'd driven together alone in the fog to buy the goats. They'd never done anything alone before. He let her choose one of the nannies.

It was Papa who'd sent Danny from the barn to get her to come quick! quick! so she'd dashed down to the stall in her pajamas to watch her nanny Harriet giving birth. Legs, black and white, head, a male, and suddenly all of him at once - and then he stood wobbly a few minutes in wet sticky bewilderment, while Harriet bleated softly, her sides shrunken and heaving. Then Harriet licked him; he discovered her teats; his tail began to wag, faster and faster. When he finished sucking, he tried to climb the nearest thing: Maggie.

She named him O. P. Climber. She told Papa that night at dinner. Two months later he'd jumped the fence with the other goats. Cookie's new twins tried to clamber onto the pepper trees but O.P. Climber leapt right on top of the old Pontiac, down onto the flat lid of the open trunk, and perched there long enough for Mom to take a snapshot: proud, out of the pasture, the pen, king of the mountain. Maggie imagined how magnificent he would become full-grown, like the billy she'd seen in the goat barn when she and Papa had gone to buy the nannies. "You gave him the right name all right," Papa told her. "Climbingest kid I ever seen."

They heard the crunch of gravel underfoot and then footsteps stomping mud off the back porch and Maggie only said "I don't know how he could do that, Mama," in a soft pinched voice before her father opened the door and was there, filling up the kitchen.

"Christ! S'gonna be a long day," he said. "And a damn sight longer night." He took off his battered straw hat and sat down in his place at the other end of the table from her mother, who'd gotten up. "Yeah, I'll have a cup, Ruth," he said. "Can't get that Mex to understand what I want done."

Maggie pushed back her chair.

"Aren't you going to finish your cereal?" he asked.

"Danny's already milking, isn't he?"

"Oh hell, he doesn't need you. Sit down. Finish your oatmeal." He turned to her mother. "Ruth, what time did Laudenslager say he'd come over tonight?"

You can have it, Papa! she screamed inside her head. She ached, more than she ever had, from wanting to out loud; a huge lump filled her throat, her chest was burning.

"About 6:30," her mother answered. She was facing the stove, pouring his coffee.

Maggie stood up. She moved past them to the porch. She let the screen door slam.

Danny was on the proper side of the cow, the side she usually had. The goats were clustered way off near the ravine. She dropped her glance quickly before it singled any out. So he'd let them out already; maybe he'd fed them too. As she got closer she knew he was nearly finished because the sound of the squirting was soft and deep: shush, shush, shush, shush. The milk would be high in the pail with a thick airy layer of foam at the top.

She unlatched the corral gate and squatted down opposite. "The front teat's done," he told her. "The back needs some more."

She squeezed her fingers sequentially, pulling down at the same time, and the one squirt syncopated against Danny's two. Big Mary emanated warmth and thickness, her stomach rounding near Maggie's head, and all Maggie sensed was cow, the cow-heat and odor of the milk, the rumf-rumf of her chewing, the squat split hooves, and she thought, how could he.

"Milk her clear out now," Danny said.

"I will." The back teat was the hardest. There was a bump on it.

"That's enough," Danny said after awhile. "Let's do the calves."

He poured half the milk into two smaller pails with rubber nipples extending out the sides, gave her one, set the other outside the gate, and untied Big Mary. They carried the pails to the calves' stall, next to the goats. Mary heard Harriet's throaty baa-aaa-ing across the field. She did not know what to think. She could not seem to think about it. Only how could he.

"Hiyah!" Danny yelled, to back the eager calves off. They lowered the pails over the stall gate, anchoring the buckets against it, and the two calves jabbed at the nipples, sucking noisily. They'd gotten too big already to let them finish the cow the way they'd been, milking half and letting them on her for the rest. They were too strong now for her and Danny to hold in or pull off Big Mary. They'd be on dry feed soon.

"Are you going to help tonight?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "I guess so. If Papa lets me."

"Did you know he's going to slaughter Climber too?"

"Who says?"

"Mama told me."

Danny didn't say anything. She watched the calves' milky lips grasping the nipples. Then he said, "It's your turn to feed the nannies."

"I know. You don't have to always tell me everything just because you're two years older."

"I don't always tell you everything."

"Yes you do. Anyway, I want to feed them." The calf rutted up against the pail. "Stop it, Short Stuff! There's no more!" She yanked the nipple away from him.

"Stupid!"

Danny looked at her. He looked back at Punky, who was still sucking. "I'll take the milk up to the house."

"Good, because I'm not going up there. Anyhow," she said, over her shoulder, "It's your turn."

"No it's not," she heard him murmur. She went to rinse the bucket out.

Most days when she came up from milking she'd pass Papa at the white fence of Gypsy's corral. "Whoa, whoa" he'd be calling, "Whoa, Gypsy, whoa boy," all attention as the thoroughbred raced from one long end to the other, his black tail and mane like wind itself, nearly plunging, it always looked like, right through the fence, his chest nearly touching the top board, head high and nostrils flaring, before whirling to gallop again the other way. And Papa would call "whoa, whoa" watching fiercely as if they were racing together. He called "Whoa, whoa boy" in his sleep, in his afternoon naps.

The horse was fine, far finer than any of the other animals. The nose and body slender, a dusky grey, untamed and unriden, trim, young and wild. He was Papa's horse, Papa's alone, and he had another reason than the chickens, cows, goats, steer. A different reason than Dolly, the sorrel horse they all rode. Papa was going to train him. He had already begun to put a blanket on his back. He was going to take him to a trainer. Race him. Have him win. And he called "whoa" to him every morning, every afternoon, he fed him, curried him, raced with him in his dreams.

But this morning he wasn't at the fence, when she came up from milking. He was in the doorway of the shed with his back to her, squatting, bending over a stump.

It was the chickens. She had never liked the chickens. They had old feet. Their heads poked and poked. But now she saw among the others pecking along in the gravel driveway, two with bloody spouts sticking out of their triangular bodies, flailing and flapping around in circles. She had seen it before. She had asked her mother if they were dead or alive then. She couldn't remember what her mother told her.

She saw him raise an axe with his right hand and he did not seem like Papa, she thought, although in another way he seemed more like him than ever, and she saw him bring it down and the side of his face had a grim determined look and he swore softly, intensely, between held-in lips. She heard a squawk and then another headless bloody chicken ran around in circles, blindly, among the others.

She clenched her jaw with the same grim determination as her father's. She set out in search of Carole. She found her standing on a bucket currying Dolly in the back pasture. "You gotta help me, will you help me? He's going to slaughter Climber, "

They skirted the house, keeping out of sight by going through the tall weeds by the septic tank, and made their way down to the goat corral. "Stay here and pet him, keep him close, okay?" she told Carole. She climbed the ladder from the stalls into the barn and got the long rope they staked out Dolly with and climbed back down into the corral where Carole knelt with her arm over Climber and they tied the rope around his neck. Harriet was off near the Eucalyptus, reaching up for leaves. "I'm gonna go tell Harriet what we're doing," she told Carole.

She crossed the corral. Harriet butted her side playfully, and bleated, looking at her with her yellow eyes. Maggie scratched the bumps on her head where she'd been dehorned. "Harriet. We're taking your son away only just to save him."

They sneaked over to the next hill, out of sight of the kitchen window but in plain view from where the scaffold was being built, circled across the neighbor's pasture, crossed the creek to the cave where the wetbacks camped out when they came across the border, and all that way Climber bleated and yanked on the rope, first in one direction, then another, so that part of the way she carried him.

They stayed there all afternoon, going out to spy from around the scrub oaks and the tumbleweeds, to see the completing of the scaffold in the high afternoon sun. Now

He was there, now He and Pablo, now they were not, now Danny, now Him again. They romped with Climber, letting the rope out far, staking him out like Dolly, and once he jumped on top of the overhanging cave ledge and whirled away like Gypsy did from the fence and she thought, Oh Papa, what if someone were going to slaughter your horse. They fed him paper and weeds, dug up old beer bottles, found a note written in Spanish and a peso, ate the apples Carole'd got off the back porch, took turns leaving the other to go over to the old hand pump well to pump water and drink from the jar left there, and all afternoon the sun shone brightly as it had that morning and the February air was crisp and clear, and all afternoon she felt like salt, like wind, like thin stone, and then suddenly the lump in her throat would ache and she'd think,

Papa. Papa. Why are you going to kill my goat.

Mama. How can you let him do that.

And then Carole began to ask what would happen when it got dark, and she said we'll stay here in the cave, we'll stay all night like the wetbacks, but she didn't know what, really, would happen, she didn't think they wouldn't come and get them, she wouldn't go home until they were sure, she told Carole, but now she was tired and it was hard to keep up with Climber and Carole, and then they saw their mother by the shedbarn, saddling Dolly, mounting Dolly, she was riding Dolly, a thing she never did, she was riding towards them all right, and they watched her and Dolly get bigger and bigger until finally she drew up to them, and she said it was okay, they could come home now.

So Maggie had won. They had won.

But it did not feel like that.

Because Papa did not mention it. When they passed him at the scaffold on the way home, he did not look at her, or Carole or Climber. He did not speak about it at dinner when Mr. Laudenslager came. Nor after. Nor ever.

Nor did Mama explain. She did not tell how the decision was come to, nor who came to it, or how it was that she rode up in the clear blue late afternoon, saying "Children. You can come home now."