

PATRICIA LAWSON

## Dead Duck

NEXT DOOR LIVED A FATHER who was much happier than Carol's father. Like her father, he was a poorly-paid salesman—he had sold pop machines, kitchen cabinet hardware, and TV antennas, among other things—and he kept having to change jobs because of problems at work, but none of this ever seemed to depress him, but rather to make him buoyed, ebullient. He was a large man with slick, dark hair in his late forties, who, her parents said, was part Irish.

The family also was jollier. The children were fatter than Carol and her brother and sister, and when Carol was lucky enough to be invited to join the neighbours at supper, the family, whose name was Waters, had more food on the table. Following a quick Catholic prayer, the family ate joyfully and noisily. There was no parsimoniousness, but a huge platter of garlic toast, perhaps a large casserole of macaroni and cheese, homemade and very yellow, not some pale imitation originating in a box.

Carol understood that one of the reasons for Mr. Waters' happiness was the beer he almost always had at hand. Sometimes his temper would break loose, and he would turn red in the face and yell at his children, even pull off his belt and start swinging. But most of the time he was in fine fettle. He would hug his sons about the neck, kiss his wife on the cheek, tease his daughters. There were four pink-cheeked children, all very talkative, except the oldest girl, Mary Elizabeth, who was now dating and walked about thoughtful and remote.

The Waters were all devout. In the girls' room was a small statue of the Virgin, to whom Mary Elizabeth and Dorothy, the younger daughter, offered devotions and prayed for forgiveness of their sins. Dorothy, Carol's friend, explained the difference between mortal sins, like killing someone, and venial sins, like lying.

“You mean if I tell you your outfit looks nice and it doesn’t, it’s a venial sin?” Carol had asked.

“That’s right.”

“But if I say it’s ugly, that’s being mean. And isn’t being mean a venial sin too?”

“Yes, but you shouldn’t lie.”

“Then you have to sin. You’re trapped.”

“If you can’t be nice, don’t say anything at all.”

“What if the person asks?”

“Don’t answer.”

“But isn’t that being mean?”

Carol and Dorothy had these little discussions all the time, or they talked politics. Truman’s last year was ending, and Stevenson and Eisenhower were in the running, though Stevenson was not faring well, according to her father, who adored Adlai. He had never known a presidential candidate so droll.

The Waters were all pro-Eisenhower. “Ike’s sure to win,” Dorothy said. “Stevenson is dead in the water.”

“Eisenhower’s stupid. He doesn’t know a thing about running a government.”

“Yes he does. He’s a general.”

But the topic they returned to over and over was sin. Was cheating on a test mortal or venial? Venial if you just did it and didn’t think. What about having intercourse if you weren’t married to the person? “Sister Catherine said if you act on impulse, it’s venial; if you think about a sin, it’s mortal,” Dorothy said. “And she says everybody thinks about such a thing. You don’t think about it when you smack your sister, but you think about *that*. So you should never, ever do it. Because, unless you’re forgiven, you go to hell.”

During these discussions Dorothy smiled and answered with assurance while Carol listened in irritation, jealous because everything was so clear at the Waters’ house whereas at Carol’s house, everything was either unstated or understated by some glance or shrug. Sometimes, when her father had a drink in the kitchen after work, he could be happy, even silly; at other times he would keep quiet for long stretches, maybe eventually opening his mouth to make some running comment, usually sarcastic. “That child,” he might say of someone in a TV commercial, “looks rather pie-faced.”

The puzzling thing was that, according to her grandmother, Carol's father had at one time been a "hail-fellow"—in his teens and twenties anyway. In high school he had been in a group that called themselves The Wiseacres. At dances they had sat in the middle of the dance floor with crazy hats on; her father had given a speech in front of his high school in which he had said the teachers should feed bodies as well as minds and should cook chicken and dumplings for all. He had once been suspended for bringing a goat to school.

But now he was a quiet, thinnish man, who stretched his head around to catch something on television, looking as if he could not possibly have heard correctly, because it was so absurd. The local television newsmen reported flash flooding "in the bottoms." "In the bottoms?" her father would say quietly, lifting his eyes upward. Everyone, even the youngest child, Gerald, who was six, was expected to get the joke but not to comment. Her father was, to use her mother's word, "wry." One of his expressions was to raise his eyebrows, the way Groucho Marx did, in mockery or disbelief, but usually outsiders missed the look because he did not exaggerate like Groucho, and his voice was so deadpan.

"Your father is a pessimist," Dorothy said. "He's a nice man, but he isn't optimistic like my father."

"He's very optimistic," Carol said, though she was, at the least, committing a venial sin saying so. Yet she knew the importance of optimism. And her father certainly tried. He had read Norman Vincent Peale and *How To Win Friends and Influence People*.

The trouble was he was not by nature talkative or active. He mostly did not like to be disturbed when he was reading. "Kindly remove yourself," he would say to some noisy child. Or he would withdraw upstairs. He could not tolerate noise, unlike Mr. Waters, who was like a fish out of water without some kind of family ruckus going on.

But sometimes he did something that seemed to indicate the hail-fellow part of him was still alive and well.

One hot, mid-August day he had drunk several beers as he sat outside on the front porch. Carol was there too, reading *Photoplay*, and Gerald, her six-year-old brother, was reading comics as he lay on the porch swing, pushing it lazily with one foot.

Carol watched him turn the page excitedly with one hand and scratch his pecker with the other. Lying at their feet on the porch, panting, was their neighbours' mongrel dog, Lucky. The collie part in Lucky had given him long hair.

"He's suffering," her father said, grinning out of the side of his mouth.

Carol's mother stood in the screen door drinking iced tea. "Who is?"

"Lucky. He's dying in this heat. I'm giving him a haircut."

"I hope you're not serious."

"I'm very serious. Bring me the scissors."

"Cliff, you can't do that. The neighbours will kill us."

"They won't know who did it."

"Oh, yes they will."

"The dog is suffering." Lucky's ears twitched a little, and he half raised himself and bit at a flea. "He'll be so much happier without all that hair."

"Please, honey, he's fine as he is. Let him be."

Despite her mother's protests, Carol was told to go and find her mother's biggest pair of scissors. The dog, who was very placid, lay still while Carol's father removed hair from below the belly and legs. When the cut was finished and Lucky was standing again, everyone gasped because the haircut was much worse than expected. Big chunks of his coat had been taken out so irregularly it looked as if a child had gotten to him with a pair of grade-school scissors. The dog himself looked baffled; then he lay back down and bit at his tail.

Later Carol's mother called Lucky's owners to apologize, repeating several times how embarrassed she was. When she hung up, she said it was all right. They had taken it pretty well. Carol's father shrugged his shoulders, stared at the clumps of dog hair still lying about on the porch floor, and went back upstairs to read. Carol's mother said, "I hope dog owners don't form a posse and come after your father."

But none of the neighbours said anything, choosing to ignore the matter as either unimportant or in bad taste. Except for Mr. Waters. He came over to Carol's house to congratulate her father. "The damned dog's needed his hair trimmed all summer." He handed her dad a Hamms and sat for awhile on the front porch, talking about Ike. Carol watched and listened to them from inside

as she lay on the sofa by the front window with a small fan positioned to blow across her body. She could see her father wince from time to time.

Mr. Waters was now talking of how proud he would become November when Ike was “steering the ship.”

“You know I prefer Adlai, Francis,” her father said softly, sipping the Hamms, staring at his neighbour with worried eyes, then grinning a bit. “He has a bit more hair.”

Mr. Waters laughed and then did a strange thing. He walked over to where her father was sitting and clapped him on the back. Then he put his arm around her dad and gave him a hug. “*Frank*, Cliff, call me *Frank*. What the hell,” he said. “I know you like the man. You’ve got your goddamn sign up. It takes all kinds in this country.” Suddenly she liked Mr. Waters a little when she had never liked him much before.

Thus began a kind of friendship. Sometimes it seemed her father gloried in it. He had no other friends—he had long ago quit palling around with his former best friend, Lance Mitts, another ex-Wisacre. Outside, talking to his neighbour as they drank beer, his voice grew louder to match ‘Frank’s’ voice; walking behind him, he seemed to strut a little. But apart, he made disparaging comments. “He puts it away pretty fast,” he said of his neighbour, whom he had dubbed “the auctioneer.” “So many syllables, so little sense,” he said. He complained about his crudity. “He burps in syllables,” he told them. “Pitches too.” Yet, overall, he seemed to bask in this new friendship. He reminded them his buddy had suggested the two of them go duck hunting together in the fall. He was considering it.

“Duck hunting! You’d be crazy,” said Carol’s mother.

“I went hunting when I was a boy.” Her father winked at both of them—or perhaps neither. Just being asked to go hunting had put him in a good mood. “Lance and I were twelve. We killed several squirrels.”

“What did you do with them?” Carol asked.

“Nothing. Squirrel meat leaves something to be desired.” He rolled his eyes upward.

“People do eat squirrel,” said Carol’s mother. “It’s terrible to kill something you won’t eat.”

“That’s what boys do.” He stuck out his chest a little. Carol looked for the little lift of the eyebrows or the slight sideways grimace but didn’t see it.

The hunting idea had come from Mr. Waters after he had gotten pretty drunk one Saturday afternoon and begun shooting pigeons with a pellet gun. He had not only shot and succeeded in killing pigeons at his house, but earlier he had come next door, bearing the usual Hamms, to take aim at pigeons nesting on Carol's roof.

Hearing the gun going off from right outside their window had upset Carol's mother, and she had insisted her husband tell their neighbour to quit.

"All right, all right," her father said. He had been working on a crossword puzzle, and Carol watched him write *ankb* for 23 across. He put down his number-two pencil and went outside. Carol stared at the spaces he had left—a three-letter word for small boy, inf.; a five-letter word for hard candy, Br.—until she heard her mother's scream, followed by a shot. Her father was holding the pellet gun, sipping a Hamms, and aiming it at a pigeon, which was roosting right next to an attic window. He pulled the trigger, fortunately missing the window but also the pigeon, which fluttered up in the air and flew next door to rest on the Waters' roof.

"Stop it this instant, Clifford," her mother was shrieking. "You don't know where those bullets are going to wind up."

"Pellets, Lou," said Mr. Waters, "pellets."

"Frank's an expert," Carol's father said.

"It's still dangerous."

When her mother shooed Carol behind her, Mr. Waters laughed. Carol could tell by the laugh he had had quite a few. "Good try. Give it another one, Cliff." Her father glanced around timidly, pointed the gun at the pigeon which had just lighted at the very top of the Waters' roof and shot. A splat sounded as the pellet went into a shingle. This time the pigeon flew away and stayed. "At least you got rid of the bastard!"

"I did, Francis, I did." Her father's eyes were shining. This time it was he who clapped Mr. Waters on the back.

"Frank. We need a Hamms, Cliff. I'll be right back."

Mr. Waters went home and brought back two six-packs and a deck of cards. "Are you game for a little poker? Would you kindly put these in the refrigerator?" he said to Carol.

Her father looked a little worried about how long his buddy was going to stay, but he turned to Carol and said with a little smile that was half grin, half grimace, "And would you bring out the card table? This appears to be serious."

Supper that evening took place in the breakfast nook off the kitchen. "There's no use in fixing a regular meal," said her mother. "It's too hot, and he isn't going to come to supper anyway." Eventually she sent Carol out with roast beef sandwiches and potato chips to the men, who were slowly getting drunker and laughing louder and louder. She came in at the end of a dirty joke that asked the question, "How far is the Old Log Inn?" and her father looked a little embarrassed and exclaimed several times about the sandwiches.

She looked over their shoulders. They were playing five card stud, and her father held a pair of sixes and a pair of threes. Mr. Waters had three jacks. There were small piles of quarters on the table to each man's right, and Mr. Waters' pile was the larger. She would have clued her father in somehow about the three jacks, but he was looking out over the lawn, and Mr. Waters said, "You make me nervous, girl, standing behind me like that." He slapped at a mosquito with his big, broad hand.

Carol went to sit on the stone porch railing to eat her sandwich and watch their neighbour closely to make sure he didn't cheat. Mr. Waters told several more stories, and a joke about a dickless man. If he had a winning hand, he would slap his cards over on the table at the moment of the punch line. He also told Pat and Mike jokes: "A parishioner tells Father Mike that Father Pat has only told him to say a few Hail Marys after he confessed to sleeping with his neighbour's wife and isn't that terrible nice and easy of him. Father Mike says, 'Only Hail Marys! Why, Pat, the man committed a mortal sin. He told me he stuck it in her pussy every night for a week.' 'Well,' says Pat, 'The Hail Marys. And some catnip for the poor kitty.'" At "poor kitty" Mr. Waters slapped down a full house.

"My sincere apologies, sweetheart," Mr. Waters said to Carol after telling the last joke.

Her father did not laugh this time. "It's getting late," he said to Carol. "Shouldn't you be going in?"

"Sorry, Clifford, I'll tone it down." And for awhile he did, changing the subject to the jealous asshole at work.

After awhile Carol grew bored and went inside to watch television with her mother. Some time after ten, they were listening

to the news when they heard the men laughing again and Mrs. Waters haranguing her husband to get himself home. "It's late, and I need you to drive us to mass tomorrow," she was saying.

"Let up on me for Chrissakes."

Carol and her mother stood by the door to say it was time to come in. Mr. Waters lifted one side of his large rump off the metal porch chair and farted loudly. "I don't think the mosquitoes will trouble us any more," he said.

Carol saw her father's jaw drop a bit, but he only said "my my" in his mild way. The beer cans were spilling out of the trash can her mother had brought out. "Clifford, it's late. It's time for bed. Come in now," her mother said. Her father slowly rose to his feet.

"Time for bed indeed! I wish my wife was as friendly," said Mr. Waters. He too stood up. Just then, Lucky let out a piercing yelp. "I stepped on him," said Mr. Waters. "I didn't see him lying there. I must have tromped on his leg."

"No harm done," said her father. "He'll limp around awhile and then lie back down. He thinks he's a rug." He seemed to have caught something from Mr. Waters.

"Tomorrow we'll get us some more goddamned pigeons." Mr. Waters' deep voice boomed across the yard like a wave. "You're a hunter, Clifford. We're both hunters. We'll get those goddamned pigeons. And in October we're gonna get us some goddamned ducks."

"Right, Frank, right." When he went inside, he said with a kind of awe, "My buddy next door tells me we're definitely going hunting when it cools off."

And they did, though Carol's mother nagged. "Why are you going? You hate hunting. Why don't you go fishing?"

Her father did like to fish. When the family took their summer trips to the Ozarks, he went off by himself while the children stayed in the vacation cottage or swam or waded in the clear water stream. He would be gone for hours, not returning until late afternoon, when he might appear with a couple of middle-sized fish. He would clean them, and her mother would dutifully put them in the freezer until there were enough for a meal. Carol had once begged to be taken along, but her father was so quiet, he sat so



long in one place gazing into the water, the day was so sticky, she grew irritable.

She had read in one of her father's *Field and Streams* that fishermen who preferred creeks and rivers to lakes were of a "certain breed." "They prefer," the article went on, "a solitary splendor. In some hidden nook they find a still, dark pool; or, hearing the river's call, they stride into the rushing stream to cast their line. While the gregarious lake fishermen bob about in boats on the waters of some sunny lake, the river man knows deep inside that the lonely, wild, ever-changing river represents our lot in life."

She wondered how a man who felt this way would be able to put up with Mr. Waters for an entire weekend. Carol had walked out of Dorothy's house one day in the early fall when Mr. Waters had started making fun of her family as he brandished his Hamms while claiming to love them all.

"I worship your father," he said. "But I worry about him, about all of you, you're such a pathetic, puny bunch. You could sit the lot of you on a bale of straw. You're so dark, little girl, you'd think you were an Indian or a coloured. It's your mother's French blood makes you so skinny and dusky. The French are related to the Africans—it's a known fact."

When Carol reported this conversation to her mother, her mother became irate. "You're not going," she told Carol's father. "He's an idiot. He'll shoot himself in the foot, and you'll have to walk ten miles for help. Or he'll shoot *you*."

"I'll be careful." Her father was trying on his new red hunting cap in the mirror and looking quizzically at himself. He caught sight of Carol looking, grinned, and said "I think I make a swell hunter."

On Friday evening, her father set a small suitcase by the front door. In a heap beside it was a duffle bag with a hunting jacket, which had been loaned by Mr. Waters, the red cap, and a sleeping bag her mother had borrowed from a boy scout who lived three doors down. Propped up in a corner of the basement because her mother would not allow it upstairs, was a twelve-gauge shotgun.

Her father sat huddled in his old brown sweater sipping coffee with a little brandy for his nerves since Mr. Waters was driving.

“You aren’t going if he comes over here drunk,” her mother said.

“Oh, he’ll be fine, Lou. He’s driven that road many times.”

“If he’s been drinking, you make up some excuse not to go. Surely you have that much sense.”

When Mr. Waters pulled his Buick sedan around by their front steps and tooted his horn, her mother went down the front steps with Carol’s father to check out their neighbour. Carol was carrying her father’s small burgundy-coloured suitcase. Though Mr. Waters whistled at that, apparently he was not drunk because her mother made no objections and gave her husband a quick good-bye kiss.

Mr. Waters’ friend’s hunting cabin was about a hundred miles away. They would stop on the road for their supper and would get up early and hunt Saturday morning and do the same Sunday. They would have coffee and doughnuts each morning before setting out. For lunch they would take sandwiches their wives had sent along in coolers. Saturday night they would eat out in a local restaurant.

“And drink gallons of beer,” Carol’s mother had said to Mrs. Waters.

“Oh, don’t worry so much, Lou. Frank takes it easy when he hunts. Else he doesn’t want to get up as early as he needs to. Now he might take a nip out in the field now and then to keep himself warm while he waits by the blind.”

“Oh, Lord,” said Carol’s mother. “I wish you hadn’t said that.”

Carol’s dad had said he would be back home around four or five Sunday afternoon. “Make some space in the freezer for several enormous ducks,” he had said, raising his eyebrows like Groucho.

Her mother said, “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Nevertheless, Saturday afternoon Carol found her mother rearranging the frozen food and removing a roast to make space.

By four in the afternoon on Sunday her mother began to relax. Either her husband was dead in some farmer’s pasture or he wasn’t. Probably he wasn’t. They were due home any time now, and perhaps he would return triumphant, bearing game. Her mother said she hoped the duck would be processed and would come home defeathered, beheaded, and defooted, looking just like a

grocery-store chicken so she could treat it like a chicken.

When the men were not back by 6:30, her mother went next door to confer with Mrs. Waters. Carol went along, hoping they'd be invited for Sunday supper. Unfortunately, the Waters had already eaten. Carol could see the remains of pancakes and link sausages, and a large, empty can of grapefruit on the counter.

"If they're not home by eight, I may call the highway patrol," her mother said.

"They'll be fine. Don't you worry," Mrs. Waters said. She and Dorothy were scraping the leftovers into newspaper. Her mother was looking skeptically at the wall plaques. They all had verses her mother thought were sentimental. She had once said Rose Marie Waters was about the toughest woman she knew, considering she had Mr. Waters for a husband and four children to deal with, so why on earth would she have plaques with phrases like "Oh, mother of mine" and "sweetly dimpled smile"?

They hung around the Waters' kitchen chatting, her mother sipping a little coffee, and then went home to check on the younger children and fix a bite. By eight her mother was pacing. At 8:45 she was looking up the highway patrol number when Carol's sister hollered, "They're back." They went outside to watch the two men unload the car, and pretty soon her father trudged up their front steps, looking grey-faced, lugging his suitcase, the duffle bag, and something long, white and stiff, which turned out to be a partly frozen duck. From his silence in parting from his friend, Carol guessed the men had had a fight.

"You got one!" her brother, Gerald, yelled. "God almighty! Where's its feet?"

Her father sunk into a chair. "Lou," he said, "I need some aspirin and a stiff drink."

"That's the skinniest duck I ever saw," Carol's mother said. "But you got one." She poured him a drink from the brandy bottle. He sat there sipping, looking down at his shoes. Maybe he was feeling sorry for the duck. Carol hoped the duck had been good and dead when they had defooted it.

"He had to cut its feet off with an axe to get it into the cooler. I don't know why it's so skinny. I'm just so tired, I can't talk."

"How did it go with, you know?" her mother asked, nodding towards the Waters' house. Her father groaned softly.

“Oh,” he said, “you can’t imagine.”

“What did I tell you.”

“I know.” He said nothing more for awhile, but sat in his chair in the living room drinking his brandy and doing a little bit of the Sunday crossword her mother had set aside. After Lisa and Gerald went off to bed, he began to talk a little. Apparently Mr. Waters had not stopped talking and joking the entire weekend. And he had passed out “goddamn I-like-Ike buttons” everywhere they had stopped.

“I never saw a man with so much energy. The only time he stopped talking was when we were at the duck blinds, but then he drank. He sat and sipped from a flask all Saturday. He had two along. I never saw the like.”

“What are we going to do with this dreadful duck, Cliff?”

“I don’t know, Lou.” He looked tiredly at the duck as if it were some pitiful relative who had shown up at his door without having phoned.

“He got nine all told. One thing about him, he can shoot.”

“Nine!” said her mother. Her father went back to his crossword. Carol tried to figure out some of the words with him, then went to do her homework in another room. From the kitchen she heard the clank of dishes being dried and put into the cupboard. Then she heard soft voices and another groan from her father. She put down her algebra book and went back into the kitchen.

“What is it?” she said.

Her father shook his head to say her mother was to say nothing, but her mother frowned and said, “She’s almost a teenager, Cliff. She knows these things.”

“What! Tell me!”

“He tried to fix your father up with a chippy.”

“What’s that?” But she already had an idea.

“A loose woman. A woman in the tavern.”

He shook his head and said softly, “There were two women. He went off with one for an hour. I had to wait in the tavern because he took the car keys. They had the juke box turned up so loud. I tell you, Lou . . .”

“You mean he went off and did you know what?” Carol said. “If he thought about it, it’s a mortal sin!”

Her father shook his head wearily. “He left me with the cooler with all the ducks and told me to guard it with my life. Then

he went off. I had nothing to do, nothing to read, nothing, just the loud music.”

“That was terrible, Cliff. I can’t believe it.”

“I must have been crazy to go with him. I’ve never been so exhausted. How he had the energy for ....” He stopped and stared at Carol. Then he stared into space for quite some time and shook his head again. “He said I was a poor excuse.”

“What an unkind thing to do to you,” her mother said.

“He must have thought about it. He had to. That makes it a mortal sin,” Carol said. Neither parent paid her the least attention.

Her father rubbed the top of his head, puzzling. “But today he was nicer. He gave me this duck since I didn’t get one. Not a one.” He groaned and got up from his chair and went into the kitchen, retrieving the duck. It was missing part of its head. It had begun to unthaw, so that its footless legs swung around a little as her father, holding it out from his body, turned. “I missed every last one of them. I’m no good with a shotgun. I’m ridiculous.”

“Well, so what if you can’t shoot. We have grocery stores. Anyway, the one he gave you is pathetic,” her mother said. “We could just bury it in the backyard.” She laughed a little.

Carol picked up on her mother’s mood, hoping to cheer her father. “I know what we can do. We could stuff it and put it on the mantel. I know, I know!” She began to shriek. “We could cross its legs and put shoes on it. We could put a cap on its head to cover what’s missing.” She heard herself laughing louder than she felt like laughing.

Her mother laughed too. “It’s a pathetic duck. What we should do is take your picture with it, Cliff. Stand up. Now, hold it up. We’ll put it on our Christmas card. People will get a kick out of it. No, no, hold it out a bit. Higher.”

Held off to the side by its neck, the skinny duck’s body seemed to elongate even more, as if it had suddenly untensed. It was like the rubber chickens comedians used or the duck on *You Bet Your Life*, and somehow like a miniature version of her skinny father, except that the duck’s head was shattered, and her father had cocked his head to the side and was smiling out of the side of his mouth.