

THE HEART OF AN EAGLE

By Robin Moore

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IF THERE was anyone who loved birds more than my grandfather, it had to be my uncle Cliff.

Clifford even looked a little like a bird. He was tall and thin and bald on top, with a long neck and a big Adam's apple that stuck out above his shirt collar. He and my aunt Sarah raised chickens and turkeys and Canada geese on their farm down in Woodward.

One summery day Grandpa and I drove down the valley to pay them a visit.

Their farm was small but well kept, with a neat barn and outbuildings, a barnyard for the animals, and a little jewel of a pond.

When we pulled in, Cliff waved to us from his chair on the front porch.

"Good to see you boys!" he hollered. "What brings you down this way?"

Grandpa grinned. "Just came for a change of scenery. Why don't you show us around the place?"

Cliff proudly showed us the work he had done on the outside of the barn and a few extra chicken coops he had added.

As we were walking by one of the chicken coops, he motioned to us.

"I want you boys to come over and have a look at this," he said.

I hooked my fingers in the chicken wire and peered into the dusty enclosure. I strained my eyes in among the sea of milling, clucking hens. Toward the back, partly hidden by shadows, I saw a bird that was bigger and darker than the rest, scratching in the dirt.

"He looks like a crow," I said.

Grandpa laid a hand on my shoulder. "Look again. That's no crow, Robin. That's sure-enough bald eagle!"

I had seen bald eagles before, riding the wind currents along the mountain ridges. But this bird didn't look like any eagle I'd ever seen.

"Where are his markings?" I asked. My grandfather had taught me to pick out the eagles by the white markings on the head and tail.

"He hasn't got his adult plumage yet," Clifford answered. "He's an immature male, all dusky-colored now."

My grandfather just shook his head in amazement.

"I've never seen anything like it," he said. "I never thought I'd live to see an eagle in a chicken coop. Talk about letting the fox in the henhouse. Aren't you worried that he'll make a meal of your chickens?"

"No, I'm not."

"Why not?"

Clifford sighed. "Because that eagle doesn't know he's an eagle. He thinks he's a chicken."

"How come?" I asked.

"Well, it all started about a year ago. I got a call from a family that lives up near Bald Eagle Mountain, saying that they found a bald eagle's nest, full of eggs. But they didn't see an adult eagle anywhere around. Naturally, they were afraid something might have happened to the mama. So they called me to see if I could save the eggs.

"I drove over to have a look and, sure enough, it was a bald eagle's nest. I called Ralph Hebner down at the state police barracks and wouldn't you know, they had just arrested some durned fool who had shot a mature female eagle with a .22 rifle, for the fun of it."

My grandfather just shook his head in disgust.

"What'd you do?" I asked.

"Well," Clifford said, "only one thing I could do. We watched that nest for another day, just to make sure. Then I put a ladder up that tree and collected those eggs. I brought 'em home and put 'em underneath one of my chickens. I figured it was worth a try.

"As it turned out, only one of those eggs hatched. That little eaglet was the most pitiful-looking thing you ever saw: all pink and bald-headed and wrinkled. But my hens

didn't seem to notice. They treated him just like the other chicks and raised him as a chicken. He grew up around chickens. I guess being a chicken is all he knows."

My grandfather shook his head. "That *is* pitiful," he said. "That bird shouldn't be cooped up with these hens. He should be up in the mountains somewhere, flyin' around."

"I know that," Clifford said. "But when I let him out of the coop, all he does is wander around and peck in the dirt like a chicken. That's why I'm showing you this bird right now. I figure you might have some fresh ideas."

I looked up at my uncle. "You mean you want us to teach this eagle how to fly?" I asked.

"I wish you could," Clifford said, winking at my grandfather. "He eats about five pounds of seed a week and he hasn't laid me an egg yet."

My grandfather laughed at Clifford's joke, then turned to me. "What do you say, Robin? Should we give it a try?"

I shrugged. "Why not? But how?"

Grandpa scratched the back of his neck and stared down at the ground for what seemed like a long time. Suddenly he looked up.

"Robin, you know those leather work-gloves on the floor of the pickup?"

"Yeah."

"Go get 'em. I got an idea."

I fetched the gloves. They were the ones my grandfather wore when he ran his chain saw. They were stained with oil and flecked with sawdust. But they were made from thick cowhide, with stiff cuffs. Looking a little like a gladiator going into the arena, Grandpa pulled on the gloves and nodded toward the coop.

"Clifford, you get that door open for me."

"What are you gonna do?"

"Go in there and bring that eagle out. We can't teach him a thing as long as he's amongst all those chickens."

Clifford opened the door and my grandfather slipped past him, stepping into the shadowy coop.

From our side of the wire I watched as my grandfather made his way carefully through the milling chickens toward the back of the coop, where the eagle was feeding

at a bin of seed. Ever so slowly he moved up to the eagle. Then he crouched down and placed his gloved hand on the ground. This strange behavior aroused the eagle's curiosity. The eagle pecked at the glove once or twice.

My grandfather started speaking in a low, comforting voice, the kind he might use in talking to a small child.

"You're a fine bird," Grandpa said. "You deserve better than this. You don't deserve to be in a barnyard. Come on, boy, I'll show you some open sky."

The eagle watched him for several moments, curious but cautious. Then he surprised us all by stepping onto the glove, gripping my grandfather's fingers with his talons, and allowing himself to be lifted up and carried out of the coop.

"That was easy," Grandpa said.

Once he was outside, I half expected the eagle to take off. But he didn't. The bird just balanced there on my grandfather's hand, looking around.

I got my first really good look at him then. The curving hook of his beak and the powerful grip of his talons made him look dangerous. But he didn't act dangerous. He just sat there, like a chicken.

Clifford latched the door. "Now what?"

"Well," Grandpa said, "the way I figure it, this bird's problem is pretty simple. He doesn't know who he is. He's grown up thinking he's a chicken. He's got the habits of a chicken, it's true."

"But there's one thing those chickens couldn't change about him—he's got the heart of an eagle. Once he realizes that, his true nature will take over. Then he'll just spread his wings and take that first leap. Nature will do the rest."

"Sounds good to me," Clifford said. "Now all we gotta do is convince this bird."

My grandfather held the eagle up high, so the wind could catch his wings. Then he started talking to him.

"I know you think you're a chicken," Grandpa said, "but you're not. You're an eagle. All you gotta do is flap those big wings!"

But that eagle just sat there, his feathers ruffling in the wind.

Clifford stood with his hands in his pockets, leaning against the side of the barn.

"This is never gonna work," he said.

Then my grandfather had another idea.

“The hayloft,” he said.

“What?” I said.

“You heard me! What we need is some elevation. Clifford, can you get that second-story loft door open?”

“Well, sure, but I don’t think he’s gonna—”

“Don’t you worry about what he is or isn’t gonna do. You just get that door open.”

Clifford knew better than to stand in my grandfather’s way when he was working on an idea. I had seen my grandfather like this many times, when something in nature especially caught his attention.

Clifford and Grandpa went in the barn and took the steps to the loft. While Grandpa held the bird, Clifford swung the loft door open. My grandfather kicked out two bales of hay and had me scatter them on the ground to break the eagle’s fall.

“Now, Robin, you stay down there and keep an eye on things. I’m gonna toss this bird out into the air. Once he starts falling, he’ll just naturally know what to do.”

It was a bad idea.

My grandfather tossed the eagle into the air.

“Fly!” he shouted. “You’re a gol-durned eagle! Start acting like it!”

I was hoping the bird would take off in a flurry of feathers and sail out across the cornfields, majestic and serene.

But he didn’t. He dropped like a bucket of bricks and landed in the soft hay, looking around him as if to say, “What happened?”

I looked up at the two men leaning out the hayloft door. Clifford just shook his head.

After all that, any other man would have been pretty discouraged, but not Grandpa. He came up with a new idea.

When they came down from the loft he said, “This isn’t getting us anywhere. This bird needs to learn something he can only get from other birds. He needs to be with his own kind. Boys, let’s get in the truck and go for a ride.”

“Where to?” I asked.

“Up to Bald Eagle.”

I knew what my grandfather was thinking. Bald Eagle Mountain is the highest peak for miles around. An old state forest road winds up to the base. From there it’s a

short, steep climb to the top of the ridge. At the peak there's a rocky cliff face where we would sometimes sit for hours, watching the hawks and turkey vultures capering on the breezes. I knew that's where we were headed.

We drove the truck up as far as we could. Then the three of us set off up the mountainside, my grandfather in the lead, carrying the eagle in his gloved hand, then my uncle Clifford, then me following behind. I pulled the hood of my sweatshirt over my head. It was a windy day, a little cold, but the sky was clear and seemed to stretch out endlessly in every direction.

My grandfather was talking to the bird as we walked.

"You spend your whole life in a chicken coop," he was saying, "and you never get to see this much sky, all in one piece."

As we broke up through the trees and onto the rocky outcrop on top of the mountain, a full view of the valleys and ridges lay before us. From up there, the human world of roads and farms and cornfields seemed laughably small, like marks on a map spread at our feet.

Up on the mountaintop, in the world of limestone and hemlocks and sunshine, I felt as if my petty lowland vision had changed over into a sharper, clearer way of seeing. I swept my gaze in every direction, feasting on the lush sweep of the valley floor and the rolling, humped-back ranges of the Tuscarora Mountains, purple in the distant light.

The eagle was looking, too. He turned his head from side to side, taking it all in. The pupils of his eyes grew wider, and darker.

I realized then that a chicken would never have a view like this. A chicken lives on the ground and sees close. An eagle lives in the air and sees far. I thought that maybe, at that moment, the eagle was seeing with his eagle eyes for the first time. Maybe he was remembering who he was.

Then the wind came up, threatening to blow us off the mountain.

"It's a windy day for flying lessons," Clifford shouted.

My grandfather grinned.

"Don't seem to be bothering them," he said, pointing above us. High up, hundreds of feet over our heads, I could see hawks and turkey vultures riding the wind currents, gracefully turning the wind in their favor.

The eagle watched, too, with a strange look of concentration.

After several long moments, the eagle turned his beak into the wind and tentatively lifted his wings.

“They’re your relatives,” Grandpa said to the bird. “You’re one of them. They’re waiting for you.”

Then, holding the eagle aloft, my grandfather did a dangerous thing. He walked up to the very edge of the cliff. I knew that it dropped sheer for two hundred feet from that spot. Once, when the air was still, I had lain there on my belly, peering over the edge. But on a windy day like this, a sudden gust could send a person plummeting down the cliff face and onto the cruel rocks below.

I tried to shout to my grandfather, telling him to be careful, but he couldn’t hear me. Clifford and I slid as close as we dared to the edge. I could see that Uncle Cliff was as worried about Grandpa as I was.

But Grandpa didn’t seem worried at all. He just walked to the edge of the cliff, planted his feet on the rock, and held that bird up in the air.

“You’re not a chicken,” my grandfather shouted, “you’re an eagle. And you weren’t meant for the barnyard, you were meant for the snowpeaks and the sky...”

Then my grandfather dropped the eagle over the edge of the cliff.

I held on to Clifford and watched as the eagle fell, a pinwheel of feathers, tumbling down, down.

But just when the eagle seemed lost, a gust of wind came and caught him underneath the wings, lifting him up and away from the rocks below with the sound of a sword blade cutting the air. I watched as the wind lifted him up, his wings tilting, then straightening, flapping, once, twice. Then he glided out over the valley, sure and easy, just as if he had been flying for all of his natural-born days.

We watched the bird rise with the wind, higher and higher.

“You’re an eagle,” my grandfather shouted after him. “You’re an eagle, by God. You’re a sure-enough eagle!”

I’ll never forget the look on my grandfather’s face. His eyes were squinted against the sun and his mouth was formed into a toothy smile as he watched the eagle dancing on the wind. I’d never seen him so happy. At that moment I saw that he was a boy, no different from me, every fiber of his being filled with wonder and joy.

I glanced over at Clifford. He was smiling, too, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand.

Then that eagle did a strange thing. He circled back our way and made one low pass right over our heads. For an impossibly long moment, he hung there in the breeze, looking down at us with shining black eyes. Then he tilted his wings slightly and slid off toward the western horizon in a great graceful arc. That was the last we saw of him.

Grandpa and Clifford and I walked slowly down the mountain and climbed into the truck. We didn't say much on the way home; I guess we didn't want to break the spell.

We had seen something set free. We had seen a creature discovering its true nature. But most of all, we had seen something worth remembering.