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Hambone

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At 24 and 25, Bill and Wes met at a gun show and fell in love instantly. Bill was a farmer’s son, the heir apparent to a local gem that sold asparagus and strawberries in the summer and offered U-pick pumpkins and apples in the fall. Wes was a champion deer and duck hunter, and he knew it, too. If he wasn’t hunting, he was gutting, skinning, or grilling. In the rare moments in between, he fawned over Wes and Cricket, his hunting dog. He dealt in meat the way lesser men dealt in poetry. It was over a home-grilled venison dinner that Wes asked Bill for his hand.

It was the middle of an October night when Wes awoke with chest pains. He was 36, Bill was 35. Bill rushed him to the ER in their truck while Cricket howled in the backseat.

Not a heart-attack, but the overture to one. The cardiologist described Wes’s condition as “perilous,” claimed that if he wanted to see 37, he would have to drastically reduce his sodium and cholesterol intake.

“I don’t follow you,” said Wes.

Vegetarian: The word stung like a slap to the face. To the doctor, it meant a change in diet. For Wes, it represented the loss of a lifestyle. Wes was silent on the drive home. It was 3:00 A.M. The roads were empty. Bill couldn’t bring himself to turn on the radio.

“You have to sell Cricket,” Wes finally said. “If I keep him, I won’t be able to keep from hunting, and I won’t be able to stick with this. I can’t be the one to give him away. I couldn’t take it. You have to do it, promise me?”

“I promise,” said Bill.

“Tomorrow.”

“I’ll try.”

“Soon.”
“Soon,” Bill agreed.

With a little elbow grease and a lot of time on Craigslist, Bill started a correspondence with a woman that lived about 15 miles away, as the crow flies. Not more than 20 minutes of driving. She was looking for a high-energy pup to fill the vacancy left by her recently passed Weimaraner. Cricket would do just fine.

Bill and Cricket made the drive alone. Cricket sensed something was awry—a long car ride with Wes meant a hunting trip, a long car ride with them both meant a picnic or a lakeside weekend, but a long car ride with just Bill was unusual and disconcerting.

Bill pulled up to the woman’s house, a faded blue colonial surrounded by a plot of overgrown, but nonetheless charming, vegetable gardens. Cricket refused to jump from the backseat until the woman appeared with a baked potato and three Milk Bones in a pie tin and called him sweetie. With a wobbly rope of drool streaming from either jowl, Cricket barreled into her so quickly that Bill wondered if she would need reconstructive surgery.

“How much do I owe you?” the woman asked as she laughed and vigorously rubbed Cricket’s back.

Bill waved her off. “It’s enough knowing that he’s going to a good home.”

“God DAMN it Hambone, would you stop it with that shit.”

Before Bill could ask where she got off calling him “Hambone,” something dropped on the toe of his boot. He glanced down. It was a zucchini. Its evident harbinger was a mottled calico cat: Hambone, Bill presumed.

“Sorry about her,” the woman apologized as Bill knelt to scratch Hambone’s ears. “I hoped she would keep the chipmunks out of the strawberries, but all she does is eat kibble and bring home vegetables. Look at that: I don’t even have zucchini in my yard! Where’s she been off to? Useless animal, really.”

A foggy, hare-brained idea started to materialize in Bill’s head.
“Let’s trade,” he suggested before he knew what he was saying. “My dog for your cat.”

The woman shrugged. “If you can take care of her, she’s yours.”

Bill picked Hambone up in both arms and looked in her yellow-green eyes. “Do you want to come home with me?”

“Mrow,” said Hambone, which meant “rutabaga,” but Bill took it as a yes.

Hambone rode home on the dashboard of the pickup truck like a novelty bobblehead. When Bill arrived back home, Wes was at the kitchen table staring forlornly at a plate of soy bacon.

“I brought you a surprise,” Wes said.

“Not more tofurkey jerky, is it?”

“Hold out your arms.”

Wes did. Bill gently laid Hambone’s wiggly body in Wes’s grasp.

“A house isn’t a home without a set of paws on the floor,” Bill said. “Besides, look what she does.” He crossed the kitchen floor and pulled open the refrigerator door. Hambone leapt to the floor, trotted to the fridge, sniffed the air, and pulled open the crisper drawer with considerable effort, given the cat-to-crisper size ratio. She grasped a large stalk of celery in her jaws and hauled it across the floor to Wes’s feet.

“She’s a vegetarian hunting dog cat!” Bill grinned. Wes rolled his eyes.

“That’s stupid,” he replied, but the corner of his mouth quirked up in a half-smile.

That weekend, Wes drove Hambone out to the overgrown remnants of Bill’s family farm. Hambone dug up carrot after carrot, sugar beet after sugar beet, and even wound her way into the tangle of pungent, green growth that dominated the west side of the farm house, where she would tenderly, fastidiously pluck cherry tomatoes from the vine and carry them back to Wes in perfect condition.

Before long, Wes and Hambone’s “hunting” trips were a weekly affair. They drove out to Wes’s father’s property with empty milk
crates and drove back with crates full of tomatoes, cucumbers, snap peas, corn, and all manner of fresh greenery. Wes even started breaking out his old camouflage and neon deer-hunting duds.

"Why?" asked Bill. "So the pumpkins don’t see you coming?"

"It’s the spirit of the thing," Wes insisted indignantly.

For the next 19 years, the only meat in their house came in a Fancy Feast can. Wes became quite the ace with vegetarian recipes, and even won a blue ribbon at the county grill-off with his black pepper and garlic veggie burger. Bill was inspired to dust off the family business, and soon had the apple orchard and asparagus fields functioning again—though he left ten acres in wild disarray so his husband could maintain “the thrill of the hunt.”

Though they didn’t know exactly how old Hambone was, she was surely more ancient than the average cat. She stayed as spry as ever right up until the end, despite the fact that all but three teeth eventually fell out of her head. One night in October—Bill was 54, Wes was 55—Bill woke up to Hambone’s mournful cries. He came into the kitchen and saw her struggling to bat a single yellow bell pepper out from under the oven where it was lodged. Bill gave it a nudge with his foot. It rolled across the kitchen floor. Hambone looked up at him and blinked with gratitude. That night she curled up on Wes’s camouflage jacket one last time and died.

Wes was distraught. He bought a handsome custom casket from a local woodworker and buried her in the garden. Not on the farm; he couldn’t stand to have her too far away from home. Winter passed with a grey coldness that soothed and indulged Wes’s aching heart. Early in the springtime, weeks after the last thaw, the first prickly, determined shoot of a zucchini plant pushed through the soil right over Hambone’s grave.