

Goose Boy

To this day, Ernie MacPherson doesn't like geese and he has good reason, let me tell you. You see, when Ernie was a wee lad of seven he'd go stay for a good part of the summer on his grandparents' farm over in Tarbotvale. Now you'd think he had it made: beautiful old Cape Breton homestead nestled away in the hardwood hills, a real nice swimming hole just at the bend in French River, which was only a hop, skip, and a jump down the road; lots to do when he felt like it, and nothing to do when he felt like *that*. There was also a fine spot for fishing a little farther along the river and Ernie and his grandpa would take off any time they were in the mood, usually right about when grandma was looking for them.

"How come," she asked, "whenever I have a chore for one of youse, I can't find hide nor hair?"

"Pure coincidence, my darlin,' unlikely as it may seem," replied grandpa, who never gave too much away.

They'd sometimes linger into the cool evening, frying up their trout over an open fire on the rocky beach, and toasting marshmallows when it got dark. The stars in that summer sky hung so low Ernie thought he could touch them and when he looked all the way up, he could see more of them rising higher and higher into eternity.

"I'll bet there's more stars there than pebbles in French River, " he'd say to grandpa.

"I reckon that's so, Ernie," came the reply.

"I bet there's more than all the jelly beans in the world."

"Do you think?" said the old man.

"More than.... more than the salt crystals in grandma's big shaker she keeps by the stove."

"Well... I don't know about *that*," said grandpa, grinning at Ernie, his best buddy in the whole world.

Yes, it was a pretty ideal situation for a young boy – except for grandma's geese. There was eight of the nasty brutes and every one meaner'n a snake. Whenever Ernie had to

cross the barnyard or go for an errand down the road, he made sure they were nowhere in sight. Because if they were, they'd come a'chargin,' holding their wings out wide, hissing and pushing their long necks out, just like bayonets. They were huge and they terrified Ernie and, even worse, they tried to nip him. Ernie wore shorts and tee-shirts all summer long and his legs and arms were almost raw from the pecking. Grandpa, who didn't much care for grandma's geese either, advised, "Give 'em a kick 'n the arse," his eyes bright as he took the boy's measure. But that would have been like trying to rub the belly of a hungry alligator to lull it to sleep so it wouldn't chomp your left leg off. No, Ernie ran for dear life, avoiding those geese as best he could.

His grandpa, no doubt feeling a mixture of concern and frustration, said to him, "Ernie. You've got to stand up to them geese. They're just the first of a long line of bullies that will come at ya in life and if you don't figure out a way to deal with 'em, you'll be runnin' all your days."

"Yes, Grandpa," Ernie would reply, his head hanging down. But he'd always run.

One time, as summer was getting on, Ernie heard his grandpa use a strange expression. He said, "Faster'n shit through a goose." When Ernie asked him, the old feller pointed at all the goose crap lying around the yard, saying, "See that? Those damn things eat somethin' and first thing you know, instant shit. Especially pork, they can't abide that a'tall for some reason. Messiest creatures I ever know'd."

Hmmm, thought Ernie.

Next Saturday was a family dinner the likes of which Ernie had never seen. Every relative he knew was there, including his own folks who had come down from Sydney for the occasion. When they all sat down to eat, they had to put three big tables together in the front yard under the chestnut trees so everyone would fit. Good lucky thing it was a fine day, and being August, there were no bugs to speak of. The meal was enormous and kept a'comin.' Grandma and her sisters and daughters maintained the supply line and elbowroom was mighty scarce, the tables were so crammed with goodies. There were umpteen kinds of vegetables, cooked every which way, and as for meat they had roast turkey, barbecued pork chops, venison, and even a glazed goose. Ernie was glad for that and when he caught the eye of his grandpa, the old man said, "One down, seven to go," and gave Ernie a big wink.

After everyone had at the main meal, then it was the men's turn to jump up and bring in the coffee, tea, hot chocolate, apple and berry pies, and poor man's pudding – grandma's specialty – while the ladies sat back and had a glass of rum and a bit of

conversation. Cape Breton conversations are like none other on the planet, being rich, lively, and musical in nature – and rum was God’s gift to keep them rolling along.

Oh, it was a feast of good food, sharp wits, and deep-rooted relationships.

When the dessert was done, out came the fiddles, guitars, bones and spoons, Irish tin whistles, and even an accordion. The music was sometimes wild, sometimes so lovely that grown men cried openly, their big roughened work hands wiping away the tears with no embarrassment a’tall. People danced and sang, and when the musicians sat back for a break and more rum, up stood the story-tellers with a tale or two that had folks doubled-up in laughter, their sides a-splittin,’ trying to breathe and roar at the same time.

When the sun set, a bonfire was set alight, while a dozen or so colored paper lanterns with wax candles inside were handed up to several of the older youth who climbed the biggest chestnut as high as they could go, placing the lanterns in the most daring spots imaginable. When they were finished, the tree looked fairy touched and drew the eye as the evening got darker.

The other children helped clear the dishes and Ernie, doing his bit, was able to slip a chunk of pork off a half-eaten chop into his pocket without anyone seeing. Right about then someone decided the music needed a piano, mostly because the accordion player was passed out drunk on the wood-pile, so the men, laughing and stumbling along, picked up grandma’s piano from the front parlor as if it were made of cardboard, and set it down under the big chestnut tree where grandma plunked herself and ripped off a tune that had not been heard for many a year, singing along in Gaelic, her voice as clear and lilting as a young girl’s.

The singin,’ dancin,’ and fiddle playin’ went long into the night, but no child was told to go to bed – they all just nodded off when they finally got wore out.

The next day, after everyone had packed up and gone, and things were back to normal, Ernie made his preparations and stepped into the barnyard bold as brass. It took the geese a few minutes to realize it was *him*, but when they did, they came a’runnin’ like thunder and lightning. Ernie made his stand just in front of the wood shed, its door opened wide, and when the first goose was almost upon him, he threw the pork at its feet and jumped inside the shed, closing the door real quick. Now geese are eternally hungry and always on the lookout for something tasty, which is probably why they chased poor Ernie all summer. That first goose gobbled the pork and it didn’t seem to bother him a’tall that a long cord was attached. Peeking through a crack in the door,

Ernie watched as a few moments later, out came the pork, more or less in the same condition as it went in. This was promptly picked up by another goose, who also was not put off by the cord.

Ah hah, says Ernie.

And so it went until all seven geese had eaten the pork and were now strung together, which was exactly when Ernie stepped from the shed and, grabbing both ends of the cord, gave it a good tug to tie it off. He then went and washed his hands, picked up a strong willow switch, gave each goose a solid whack across the backside, while chasing the whole gaggle from one side of the yard to the other. When he got tired of that amusement, long after they did, he picked up his fishing pole and sauntered down the road, taking his own sweet time and admiring all the niceties of the farmyard that he had never been able to appreciate while running for his life.

In a while his grandma came out to pick some peas in the garden and as she was opening the gate, she noticed the geese walking by in a most peculiar formation and honking in great agitation.

“They were all connected, arsehole to appetite,” she later told grandpa. “When I looked closer to find out what was goin on, I see they’re all on a string, just like a set of pearls. Now how do you suppose that came to be?”

“Beats me,” says grandpa, “but, tell you what, I’m goin’ go get my fishin’ pole.”

“Your *fishing* pole? What’s that got to do with anything, you annoying man?”

“Well, fishin’ is a wonderful way to figure out things that just boggle the mind otherwise.” And that’s all that grandpa had to say on the subject as he, too, sauntered down the road, a’whistlin’ as he went.