

Faith, Hope and Fiction

Duck

By Kathryn Zygala

Animals are food and currency on a farm. Growing up I learned that lesson well, particularly when we ate my pet duck on Thanksgiving.

My sisters and I lived in town. Our mother wouldn't venture near a farm as an adult except to pick up eggs and milk from our uncle and aunt. My father's homestead on the farm was for visiting only. And what a great visit it was for us kids -- lots of great food and plenty of space to roam among the gardens and chickens.

I had three sisters, and two of us were only a year apart in age. One of us had a great sense of spatial relationship; one of us didn't. I was the one without, but I knew how to make use of the sister who did. Although my sister was legally blind since the age of three, she had an ability to see right where things were--how far, how near. She also wore beautiful pink-framed glasses.

The back lawns of all the houses on our street connected into one large expanse for exploration. It wasn't as big as the farm, but it was pretty good considering we lived in town. Next door was a childless couple who lived in a beautiful brick home with a koi pond--a magnet for curious children. Each time I cautiously approached the pond, I would spot the wife looking

out her kitchen window as if she worried that I would latch onto one of those fish and take it away with me.

I never did take a fish, but I did get a duck.

One summer evening, our neighbors offered to take us children to the carnival in town. Being without kids of their own, they wanted to borrow us for the evening. And so my sister and I, at ages five and six, were adopted for the evening.

At the carnival, we flocked to the game of tossing pennies into jelly jars. Adults became an easy target for pocket change. No little kid could do this, of course. Except my sister--the one with the beautiful glasses who had a great sense of spatial relationships.

Adding to the thrill of the game, live ducks were the prizes. In those days, fowl were sold at Easter at the downtown Woolworth's, dyed pretty colors. Pink and purple chicks and ducks sat in the store window attracting little children.

My sister tossed her pennies with dead-on accuracy, and a duck was hers. I told her to do it again and win one for me. And she did.

When we took the ducks home, my mother who wanted no part of such barnyard denizens sighed and said, "Oh, my..." My father set about making a chicken wire cage for two ducks that spent the night in the laundry room.

All summer, the ducks roamed the lawn. The day they were too big to live at our house they went to my grandparents' farm. "They'll be happier there," my mother said cheerfully.

Happy, indeed. Living the good life made those ducks happy, plump--and tender.

At Thanksgiving, my grandmother brought my duck to the dining room table with a flourish. My pet, wood-roasted, seasoned to perfection, languished still on a platter as it never had been in life. Dead meat, indeed, right in front of my nose and then sliced on my plate.

My mother left the table muttering something about “how could you do this to a child on Thanksgiving....!” Choke. Cough.

But I wasn't traumatized--just the opposite. I was hugely proud, and somewhat bemused. My little duckling had become nothing less than a Thanksgiving feast. I was elated, as if I had done something wonderful for the family (thanks to my sister's aim, of course).

I have never forgotten that duck or the dinner. As for my sister, Lasik eye surgery left her with 20-20 vision. Now she is a textile artist in California, and she still has a great sense of spatial relationships.

I continue to enjoy well-prepared duck to this day. While in China a few years back, I attended a Peking duck ceremony. I felt proud and honored--yet again.

Kathryn Farwig Zygala is exploring writing in media. Using memories and acquaintances as fodder, Kathryn is starting to write down impressions and events in story form. She holds a Master of Arts degree in reading education, and is a curriculum designer of reading and writing teaching methods.