

# THE CHOPPING BLOCK

By Rob Steele

The top of the hill had the most magnificent view. At least, according to Mike, it did. Not that he was a global traveler. The hill was overlooking his home. Everything looked so tiny from here. The house, the yard, the trees – all set to a smaller scale.

Unfortunately, the hill was, technically, off-limits. Mike wasn't supposed to leave the loving confines of the yard. He wasn't a prisoner, as such. He did feel like there was something wrong about keeping him cooped up in the small yard. Granted, when he was there, the yard was enormous. But looking down upon it from the hill, he could see so much more. Wide ranging fields, other hills, valleys, even a forest on the horizon. He doubted he'd ever be able to travel there. He had responsibilities to the farm. More than he'd care to think about.

And speaking of the farm, he'd better get back. The sun was still high in the sky, but nevertheless, they'd miss him if he were gone too long. He ran down the hill, letting the spring breeze cool where the bright sun had warmed him – both sensations equally pleasant. Soon, he reached the chicken-wire fence and crawled through the hole near the post.

“Chicken-wire” is such an odd name for the wiring. Sure, it was used in chicken coops everywhere, but when put on the posts like this, it kept all the animals near the farm from the tiniest chick to the largest cow in their place. All except this one spot where the wire curled up near the post. He wasn't sure if anyone else knew this part of the fence was faulty, but he wasn't going to tell anyone. It was his only way to get to the hill, and the hill was magnificent.

Someday, he'd manage to get Camilla to come with him. She was such an odd duck. He loved that phrase but laughed at its absurdity. “Odd duck” he'd come to learn meant either a strange one, or every other one that wasn't “even.” He could never really tell which when he heard the phrase. Mike wasn't terribly bright. That's one of the reasons he laughed at his own use of the phrase.

Ah Camilla. He loved her more than anything, except maybe the hill. No. More than the hill. She was his reason for living. They'd grown up together. Grown close. Spent most of their free time together in the yard at the farm. Even when enjoying the view and the breeze on the hill, his thoughts were of her. Especially now, after his return from the hill, he was always excited to tell her everything he saw.

She never seemed that impressed, though. She'd even admonished him for leaving the yard. “You're gonna get caught one of these days,” she'd warned him. “Then who knows what would happen.” But he was pretty sure that nothing horrible would happen. *What's the worst they can do?* he thought. *Banish me from the yard? That'd just give me the chance to live on the hill. Maybe even travel to that forest someday.*

But today was different. He'd seen the ducks flying in formation from the south. If the ducks are coming back, then winter must surely be over. The warm weather would return. The sun. The rain, even. And no more snow! He'd never liked the cold. It made everything uncomfortable, especially his

feet – and he hated that. He knew Camilla was like that, too. Most of their friends were. That’s why she’d be excited to learn about the ducks.

He ran through the yard, unable to contain his excitement. He passed all the animals without noticing any of the changes. The sheep looked dejected. The pigs looked despondent. Even the cows looked downhearted. All except Bernie, but he was a St. Bernard and looked that way all the time. One thing he did notice, was the tree stump. It was off to one side of the yard, as it always had been. It would be truly strange for that to move. But today, it had an axe stuck in it. And something else caught his eye. He moved closer and noticed something caught between the axe blade and the stump. A feather. His eyes widened in horror. No. Not just a feather. One of Camilla’s feathers.

I should probably tell you at this point that Mike and Camilla are chickens.

Technically, Mike is a rooster. But that didn’t lessen the pain of seeing one of his beloved’s feathers on the chopping block. He wasn’t sure how it got that name. He’d never seen it used, only heard the rumors when someone left the yard. “Where’s Steve?” “He was sent to the chopping block.” And everyone would shudder and recoil in horror. Mike didn’t believe any of that. What an absurd thought!

But if there’s an axe here, now, and Camilla’s feather... he rushed to the coop, catching his comb on the way through the door. All of the chickens were accounted for, except Camilla, and they were all weeping - as much as a chicken can weep. He asked where Camilla was. They could all see he was worried, but all they managed to tell him was, “the chopping block.”

He couldn’t believe it. She wouldn’t leave without him. She loved him too! He just knew it. He ran out of the coop. Someone else in the yard must know where she went. But who to ask. The sheep were closest. The closest sheep gave him a look of sympathy. That must mean the sheep knew where Camilla was! If only he spoke sheep. That won’t do him any good.

The pigs! Clarence has a good view of the yard. And he also had a good rapport with the pigs. They were raised together, after all. And Mike’s father had that showbiz thing going with Clarence’s dad. He was told that back in the day, before Mike was born, that his father did a comedy routine with Clarence Sr. called Bacon and Eggs. Mike was told that it was a sight to behold. Until that one day that Clarence Sr. disappeared. He was told it was the “chopping block,” but that doesn’t make any sense. How could a simple tree stump be responsible for all of the missing?

But when he got to the pen, Clarence was simply laying in the mud with a mournful expression. He tried to perk up when he saw Mike, but it was no good. The smile lasted but a nonce and was replaced with an even more dejected countenance. “I’m sorry, Mike,” he snorted. “It was that damned chopping block!”

Again, with the chopping block! Did no one around here have any common sense? It was like the time he announced that he and Camilla were a couple. The sheep were befuddled for weeks because Camilla was also the name of one of the cows. To this day, he’s told that some of the sheep still wonder how that works.

“Woof!” he heard from behind him. It was Bernie. “I know you’re looking for Camilla. I know what happened. But first, I need to know why you didn’t just come to me. I would have thought my downhearted expression would have been a giveaway.”

“Downhearted expression?!” Mike exclaimed. “You’re a St. Bernard! You always look that way!”

Bernie looked thoughtful for a moment before muttering, “Good point.” While Bernie’s expression returned to downhearted, Mike gave a silent thanks for the dog being so multilingual. “I know you have your misgivings about the chopping block. I know this will be hard, but you should probably look in the house.”

Bernie led Mike to a series of boxes stacked near the house. Mike had never been in the house. It had never even occurred to him to look in the house. He just knew it as the place where those strange things lived. No fur or feathers – like the pigs in color but walked like chickens. So many things about them didn’t make sense to Mike, but again, Mike isn’t that bright.

Bernie helped Mike unto the first box and from there, Mike bounded up the stack until he could look in the window. In the house Mike saw a table. Surrounding the table were these other shorter tables with one side considerably longer than the other three – very strange. On the table itself, he saw bowls of green things, red things, a long brown thing with a long yellow thing next to it, and, could it be, a large bowl of, my word, is that corn! He’d never seen so much corn all in one place before!

That’s when he heard a thumping. One of those things was entering the room. And it was carrying a plate of something brown. It was steaming, like the ground on a hot day after the rain. And the smell. Oh, the smell! He could hardly stand it! But then he recognized something. The brown thing had no head, but it looked like it had legs. But the legs had no feet! And are those wings? Camilla! My god! Is that Camilla!

Mike screamed! But it was cut off by a great hand grabbing him by the neck. It was one of those things that lived in the house. “Hey ma!” it said. “Looks like this one is missing his friend! Can we have this one tomorrow?”

From inside the house, Mike saw the one holding Camilla, his beloved, on the plate reply, “Yeah, take him to the block too. Damn bird keeps wandering off anyway. We’ll get a new rooster at the market this weekend.”

The large being carried Mike to the chopping block and held Mike’s head against it. A strange ka-chunking sound happened. While the hand released Mike’s throat, he found himself stapled by large straps to the chopping block.

He managed to catch Bernie’s eye. The dog merely looked guilty for getting Mike into this mess. Mike looked up and saw the weird being with the axe in his hands. He raised the axe over his head. Suddenly, Mike understood the chopping block.

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