

**Barbed Wire**  
**By**  
**Zach Shea**

That Wednesday we got up at five, just like every week, and I helped my father load up the truck with crates full of eggs. He told me to put on my shoes, but in the morning the dust on the ground was soft and cool, so I grabbed a crate and headed outside barefoot. I took each step slow, so the chilly clay could fold into the arch of my foot. The morning cold pressed against my feet and made my blisters ache perfectly to send a quiver up my legs. I pressed my left foot into the ground again and felt the dusty earth bite into me with sharp, cold teeth.

A small curl of barbed wire clung to the dry skin cracking on the bottom of my foot. I tugged at the curl, but it seemed to be rooted deep in the ground. It sprung back and flicked my blood onto the dry clay. I watched it sink into the ground with the dew, and imagined the root of the wire sucking the ground dry of blood as it grew, sprouting in thick, sharp curls out of the ground. I let my blood crawl down my foot and drip onto the cold metal. I watched the blood roll into the dirt, and saw the barbed wire spring up slowly, stretching back towards my foot with thirsty determination.

I rubbed my eyes and the wire receded back into the earth. It was still early, and I must have been tired.

“Martha, you’ve dropped eggs all over the ground.” I looked up at my father, then back to the ground where I had thrown the crate. I tried to clean the eggs up. “What are you doing, they’re gone. Go get another crate out of the house.” I got up and went back inside.

Wednesday was the day when my father and I set up our farm stand down the road. At the stand we sold eggs. Nothing but eggs. My grandma said that when my Father was young he used to grow all sorts of things in the valley, before it dried out. Back then the air was filled with a sort of cool green energy. The kind, she said, that made you jump up and run up and down the rows. And my Father had a magic touch when it came to his gardens. Grandma said his whistle could split a seed right down the middle and all the plants would sprout out when he walked by. And all that smiling and whistling made his face tight with the wrinkles of a happy man.

My father still has the wrinkles, but now they just hang of his face like damp scabs. They have been like that since the valley dried up years ago. The sky is burnt an awful grey color from the sun, and the soil turned to clay as red as bone. Nothing grows anymore but sick, oily chickens, whose feathers fall off and rot in my windowsill like rancid fruit. They rot quicker under the burnt sky. The chickens are mean, and their eggs smell warm and sour. And every Wednesday we try to sell as many eggs as we can to warm and sour smelling people. Nice people with long oily beards like a mean chicken's feathers.

But that Wednesday we didn't sell any eggs.

I saw all the same cars drive by on their way to town. A few of them waved, even less smiled at me. None of them stopped to buy any warm eggs. The day stretched on and less people came. By noon they had stopped passing altogether.

"I'm hungry." We usually did not stay out that late, and my stomach was beginning to make the most awful noise. It was starting to annoy my father, and he scowled whenever he heard it. I asked him again, but he just motioned to the week-old eggs. I was tired of eating eggs.

The sun glared in my eyes, but I could hear the cars again. This time they were coming back from town, all people driving back home to the valley, but none of them stopped. Maybe

they could see my father scowling, because they all drove by much quicker than before. Nobody waved this time. The ones that drove by the quickest made the stand shake, and the eggs shook in their crates, like they were scared. I had never seen my father's face hang from his head like that. I was scared too. Just as the sun flattened behind the mountains he got off of his little stool.

“Load everything back onto the truck.”

The sun set by the time we had gotten home, and the sky had turned from its usual grey to the color of dark soot slowly rising out of a long chimney. It was dark, but I could just make out the outline of our house barely standing up. The clay underneath my feet was warm in the worst way, and my toes curled in when I began unloading what would be our supper for the week. But I wanted to see if I could find the curl of barbed wire in the ground again.

I walked slowly and tried my footing in a few places to see if it was still there. I don't know what my father thought I was doing, but he grabbed me by the shoulder.

“Come on, you have to get up early tomorrow. The floor needs sweeping.” He pushed me forward. Behind me I heard the chickens hissing at me in the dark. They did not like me or my father at all. They always made sure to scratch us when we fed them. One was crying outside my room that night, and it cheered me up to know it was upset. After a while I was able to drown it out and get to sleep.

In the morning I could still hear the chicken crying. I had overslept, so I jumped out of bed and grabbed the broom before Father would know. The floor was always dusty, so he wouldn't know the difference, so long as I looked like I was sweeping. Father didn't care much

about the house work, just so long as the cooking was done for him when he was hungry. I liked doing the cooking. I hated cooking eggs.

Just as I walked into the kitchen, my father pushed the door out of his way, his arms with a few more scabs than usual, kicking red clay into the house. Like I said, he didn't care much about the house work. A minute or two later he pushed his way out the door again, a pair of wire cutters in hand. I followed him to see what was happening.

One of the chickens had gotten got in a large tangle of barbed wire which was growing out of the ground like a bush. The wire twisted up and out and around the sickly chicken's body like a hungry boa. The chicken's feathers were damp with oil and blood, which helped it to cling to the barbed wire in rotting purple and red clumps. Father cut the chicken free bit by bit. And when it had room to walk out, he cut its neck and handed it to me so it could bleed on my overalls.

"Make us something good. I'm not in the mood for eggs. And bring me the gloves."

The blood made the dead bird sticky in my hands. I ran it inside and washed the blood with some of the brown water from the sink. The chicken smelt a bit like urine, but I was excited to have something other than eggs. I was more excited to see one of our rancid chickens rotting in the kitchen sink.

A week later I got up extra early to go out before Father did. I wanted to go outside before I had to load the truck. The barbed wire had begun sprouting up in patches all over the yard, and I wanted to see how thick it had become. A few curls stretched up in the stale air as high as my shoulders. That morning a couple of chickens had gotten their wings caught in a few bushes of wire the night before. I thought that it served the stupider birds right, and kicked a few

out of reach of the growing chicken traps. I hoped one might get caught inside the wire so that we could have chicken for dinner. Father was in a good mood that night. But that quickly passed, as did my alone time with the wire weeds. Soon my father was up, and I was weaving between the wire patches to get the crates of eggs onto the truck.

I looked out the window at them as my father started up the engine. Winter chills was rolling into the valley, and frost covered the windows, but I had scrapped a whole on the passenger's side so I could watch while the truck and my father thawed out. I had never seen so many things grow out of the ground. The more Father cut at the barbed wire, the quicker it grew back, and it was thicker and curlier than ever. Perhaps he had his gardening touch back.

Nobody bought any eggs that day. More people drove past our stand than ever before, but not a single car stopped. Some I had never seen before honked their horns, and even a few kids waved at me, but nobody slowed down.

Trucks drove by. They were big trucks with more wheels than I could count, and paintings of all sorts of colorful foods I had never seen before. Father watched the trucks drive by and sank in his spine until his shoulders rubbed against his ears, which had turned red from the new cold that was rolling in. A little after midday he shot up, his face red, threw all the eggs back in the truck, and drove me home. He left me in the dusty yard to carry all the eggs back into the house.

“I'm going into town.”

Father didn't talk at all the next week. He didn't feed the chickens, and he didn't collect the eggs. He didn't do anything. He just sat on the porch and watched frost collect on the bushes

of barbed wire that now surrounded the house. The cold was less kind to my feet, and the ice stung my blisters though the holes in my shoes. But I didn't say a word to Father. I just let his sad face watch the frost.

A store had opened up in town. One with bright lights and green walls with big writing. The floor was made of tiles so clean when Father looked at them he could see his face better than in our bathroom mirror. They had shelves of meat, and vegetables, and milk, and cheese, and fruit, and eggs... so many eggs. They had eggs of different sizes and colors, and all of them were cheaper than Fathers. Every day people bought so much food that the scanners beep echoed in the store aisles. And every day trucks full of new meat, and vegetables, and cheese, and fruit, and so many eggs.

The barbed wire grew even thicker, and we gave up on clipping it. The chickens stayed inside the house so as not to get trapped when the wire stretched out in the night. My father stayed outside and watched it grow. I had often seen my father upset, but never sad. I was worried that the wire thickets would grow too thick.

That Wednesday we couldn't get to the truck. The barbed wire bushes had grown in a circle around the house. I tried to squeeze through but tore my overalls. Frustrated, I sulked into the house to throw on my bad pair. When I came out Father was furious. He had the wire cutters in his hand, and he was pulling out the bushes of frosted wire, throwing each one into the truck. He went to each bush and grabbed it with his bare hands, letting the cold metal cut up his palms while he pulled each curl high up into the air before cutting it out and throwing it into the warming vehicle. Then he threw himself into the truck, and drove off, without me or any of this week's eggs.

He came back that evening without a scowl on his face. The truck was empty, and he had a bag of fruit with him. I asked him what he had done today, and he handed me a new pair of gloves and wire cutters.

“Don’t worry about your chores tomorrow. Be sure to get up early and make us both breakfast.” He went inside, kicking the chickens aside.

I started getting up earlier every day. Every morning the barbed wire grew thicker, and I had to pull out as much as I could each day. If I forgot my gloves the edges would cut morning frost into my old scabs, and the blood would freeze to my hands, which stopped the bleeding. We set a rug out on the ring of wire bushes around the house to help climb over. It was getting to thick to cut through. I tried every day to clear a path, but it always grew back. So I would go back to pulling and cutting. The worse the cuts on my hands got the better the food we ate that night. I hadn’t had any eggs for almost the whole week.

People started coming to the house. Sometimes it was one of the greasy couples who use to buy eggs. They would come pick up a bundle of wire while telling my Father about a problem with coyotes or something like that. A few times it was someone I didn’t recognize, with our address scribbled down on a piece of scrap paper. But once a week a hairy man driving one of the colorful trucks would come and take all the wire we had. On those days the cold did not keep my hands from bleeding at least a little. But I also got the best food on those days.

We even started getting people coming out just to see the barbed wire. The separate thickets had begun to curl and tangle into each other, and after a while it was rare not to get a few people coming to take pictures. We even sent a picture to Grandma, who wrote back saying she hadn’t seen my ather grow so much since my mother had left. That letter made Father angry. He

didn't like talking about Mother or the drought. My grandma always said that's when the drought started. But now things were growing again so it must have been something else. Father was still angry all that week, the wrinkles in his face carving sharp lines, like he had been cut up from looking at the wire all day.

It didn't become a problem until a few weeks later. By then we were getting tourists every day, taking pictures of the barbed wire that now grew far over my father's head. The man in the truck started coming later in the day, to give my Father and me enough time to cut through the dens wire and get out to his truck. Some days we didn't even make it, only heard people taking pictures on the other side. Sometimes I would try to talk to some of them while I worked.

It was a Monday morning when I woke up and found the barbed wire stretched high above the roof of our house, funneling at the top into a small porthole, letting in some sunlight, but not enough to make the wall of barbed thickets less intimidating. I spent the day trying to cut to the other side, but only streams of sunlight trickled through to mix with blood from my palms. I couldn't hear anyone outside taking pictures, but I tried to call out to them anyway. My father stood on the roof and tried to get a good view, but the top of the growth was just beyond what he could see.

We had eggs that night in the cold. Father ate his eggs quickly and went back outside to try cutting his way out. When I woke up he was still out there, though his face had gotten tighter. Perhaps he had cut himself a few too many times. His blood was frozen on the ground and had stained the bottoms of his feet. The hole at the top had gotten smaller. The air had gotten much colder.



By midday we stopped cutting at the wire and tried calling out whenever we thought we heard a car. Truthfully we heard nothing, but we were scared enough to mistake nothing for a chance. The cold wind made the dome of wire creak in time with the groaning creak of our old shack, and when it did I plugged my ears until I couldn't feel the wind anymore. Father got mad at me for that. He told me I was going to miss it when a car did go by. But that was silly because he was listening.

I spent a lot of my time sitting on the porch reading the letter from Grandma. The one that had made Father so mad. I don't believe Father ever whistled. I'm not even sure I know a woman who would marry a man as bitter as he was. I looked up and asked him what Mom was like. He threw down his wire cutters and slammed the house door behind him. Maybe I shouldn't have asked him anything. The next day the barbed wire had formed closed a perfect dome around the house. I couldn't see ugly burnt sky at all.

Each morning I got up, prepared breakfast for my father and myself, walked outside in the cutting cold and measured the distance from the porch to the barbed wire. Every day we lost about a foot. Every day my father got up late and demanded a new breakfast.

Some days I would find the wires had squeezed another one of the chickens to death. On those days dinner wasn't too bad. My father still did not speak but he at least ate. At that time I wasn't sure if we would run out of chickens or space first. Turns out the chickens were as stupid as I thought... or at least very careless.

I hadn't seen the sun for almost a week when the barbed wire reached our front porch. I had tried to cut my way out a few times, but every time I would slice my arm open and my warm blood would begin to steam on the cold curls of barbed wire, and the next day the wires would

have grown twice as fast. Sometimes I would try whistling to the wires, like my father used in Grandma's stories. I don't know if the wire ever grew, but sometimes I would see the wire shiver like eggs on the side of the road.

This morning the barbed wire pushed through the door. The glass on all the windows is broken and in some places it has pushed up through the floorboards. It wasn't the sun that woke me up, but the sound of my bedroom windows shattering. I left to find a light, and when I got back the wire had already crawled into my bed and torn up my sheets. I walked down the hall to find my father, but he wasn't in his room. I could hear something moving around in the house. The floors were creaking and I could hear whoever it was knocking things over wherever they went. I called out to my father but I didn't get any answer.

That's when I felt the wire slice open my ankle as I tripped across an extended branch that had come up through the floor. I thought about screaming but instead I lay down on the floor and let my blood trickle onto the wire. It stirred slightly, like it was about to recede back into the floor. I saw a tangle of wire up the stairs that smelt like warm eggs and my Father's chilling blood, mixed with his sweat. I didn't want to go and check just yet. I laid-down and watched the wire quiver a bit as it wove its way into the roof.