

NICKED NECK

BY LAIRD LONG

I WAS FASHIONING a festive turkey fantail out of cardboard and crepe paper to affix to Happy Cat's hindquarters, when Mom sounded the alarm in the kitchen. And not the smoke alarm, this time.

"Who took the turkey neck?" she cried fowl from the heart of the hotbed of Thanksgiving activity.

I instantly dropped the turkey tail and dashed out of my bedroom, slamming the door on Happy Cat. I raced down the hallway into the kitchen.

Mom was standing by the counter, a large tent of aluminum foil in her hand. She was staring down at the golden-brown bird just unveiled in the black roasting pan, a look of distress on her face. The turkey was cooked, its neck hot—as in stolen.

"Don't get your feathers ruffled, Mom. I'm on the case."

"No, Amy, please! It doesn't matter. It's only the neck."

But it was too late to turn back on this turkey run. No case is too big, or small, or long, bent, and wrinkled, for . . . Amy Fujita, Kid Detective.

Suddenly, Dizzy and Dad crowded the kitchen entrance behind me, wandering in



from the adjoining living room to see what the squawk was about. I waved them back with a wing of my own.

“This is a crime scene,” I informed my brother and father.

Thanksgiving had become Thanksgiving. Somebody had helped themselves to firsts of the turkey’s neck before anyone else had a chance to wring it up for themselves. Neck “nicked,” as the pilgrims would say in the king’s English.

I knew Dizzy and Dad both liked the turkey neck. There had been squabbles over that part of the squab in previous years, each beaking their case to lay claim to the bony portion of meat. But never a birdbrained scheme of premeditated tom-thievery like this before.

“You like white meat, don’t you, Mom?” I queried now, just to set the record straight.

“You know I do!” the woman clucked indignantly. “What? Do you think *I* just ate the neck this instant?”

“You’ve had access to the bird all afternoon,” I observed, cutting off her gobble.

I snapped my left wrist up. Six o’clock on my Hello Kitty watch. Thanksgiving suppertime, right on schedule. “You *claim* you noticed the neck missing just now. But when did you pull that bird out of the oven and set it on the counter to finish cooking in its foil cocoon?”

For a twelve-year-old, I knew my way around a kitchen, as well as a criminal investigation.

“I took it out of the oven at 5:40,” Mom said, “after letting it cook for three hours.”



I surveyed the basted bird with a forensic eye and twitching nostrils. The legs and wings (my favorite parts) were still attached, stuffing fluffing out of the uncarved carcass. But there was a neck-shaped outline in the drippings at the bottom of the roasting pan.

It was too hot and buttery to dust for fingerprints. So, I dropped to my knees on the tiled kitchen floor, searching for a greasy trail that could lead me to the missing neck—and possibly the neck-napper. I found nothing but shine.

“Hey, you *promised* me the neck this time, Mom!” Dizzy whined.

SQUAB IS
ANOTHER
NAME FOR
PIGEON.



FORENSIC REFERS TO GATHERING
SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE FOR A
COURT OF LAW.





Apparently, that bit of information was news to Dad, if not to Mom. “Well, that *is* a pain in the neck, isn’t it?” Dad gloated, grinning at disconsolate Dizzy.

Or *was* it news to Dad? He could be nesting a grudge.

“Where were you for the past twenty minutes?” I questioned him.

His smile turned upside down. “I was in the living room with Dizzy, watching the football game.”

“H’m, easy access for either of you to sneak in here to filch and feast on the neck,” I mused. “Can you confirm what Dad said, Dizzy? Neither of you two left the living room and came into the kitchen in the past twenty minutes?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess so,” the tubby teenager offered reluctantly, glancing at Dad. “I was kinda dozing off every now and then, though. The game’s a blowout. But I would’ve noticed someone munching on a turkey neck.”

Dizzy did have an ear for eats.

“Well, I was dozing off, too,” Dad put in, still in a flap.

I sighed. Eyewitnesses aren’t much good when they have their eyes closed.

I jerked the bottom kitchen cupboard open where the trash can was kept. I toed the lid release and dove into the garbage up to my wrists.

I came up soiled, but empty-handed. No turkey neck or bones disposed of there.

The kitchen windows were closed, the backdoor shut. It was chilly outside with a light dusting of snow on the ground.

I yanked the door open to scour the ground. There wasn’t a trace of a turkey neck imprint in the white stuff, nor any footprints.

So where was the missing neck, or its remains? I had to get to the bottom of this case, before the trail, and the bird, got cold.

Then an idea dawned on me like an oven light. “Where’s Suzy?” I blurted.

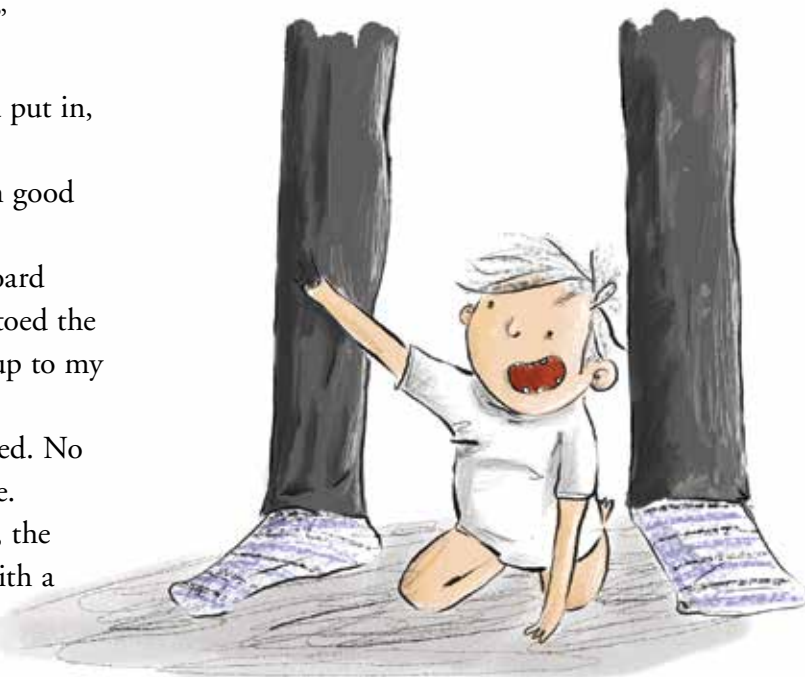
The mischievous rugrat had been conspicuously absent—on the crawl with the missing neck, perhaps, if not on the lam. The thing did look a little like a rattle.

“She’s in our bedroom,” Mom answered. “I’ve been looking after her—*while* I’ve been preparing the Thanksgiving dinner.”

Sure enough, just then, Suzy crawled in between Dad’s legs into the kitchen.

Dad hoisted the infant. “Bitty baby didn’t steal Dizzy’s tasty turkey neck, did ‘oo?” he baby-talked.

ON THE
LAM IS
SLANG
FOR ON
THE RUN
FROM THE
LAW!



“Did you have your eyes on that creepy-crawler all the time?” I asked Mom.

“Well, I did go to the bathroom about ten minutes ago.”

I grimaced. You give a baby an inch and maybe she’ll take a half-foot of turkey neck.

Suzy giggled and clapped Dad’s neck—leaving no shiny grease spots behind, I noticed.

I said, “And where’s—”

“Looking for me, Duncy Drew?” Miko, my big sister, sneered, making her appearance. “What’s the problem now? Somebody spill the beans on your Beanie Babies?”

“The turkey neck has flown the coop,” I filled the teen queen in.

All the suspects were assembled now, the entire Fujita family. Except for Happy Cat, who was always quarantined—this time, in my room—around suppertime to prevent unwanted mooching.

“What have *you* been doing for the last twenty minutes?” I roasted Miko.

“Probably texting Ashley,” Dizzy taunted in a high voice, rolling his eyes.

I was well aware that Miko and Dizzy had just battled over the upstairs bathroom that morning, yet again. There was bad blood between that pair of our brood.

“I was upstairs in my room, if you must know, Hercurl Poirot,” Miko sniffed.

“Alone?”

“Texting with Ashley,” she admitted, holding out her mobile phone. “No one else was upstairs.”

I snatched the gadget out of her hand, studied the touchscreen. There was a bliz-

zard of texts logged in between Miko and her BFF for the past two hours, mostly turkey scratches about cute boy bands.

But that didn’t prove much. I’d seen Miko ride her bike, drink a soda, and do her fingernails all at the same time—*as* she texted! The teenybopper was a multitasker, for certain. And Dad and Dizzy might’ve been on one of their eyelid timeouts, with Mom minding Suzy in the master bedroom at the end of the hall, when Miko preened down the stairs and plucked away the turkey neck.

“Well, Amy?” Mom demanded.

Dizzy, Dad, and Miko all stared at me. Suzy burped.

My neck was on the chopping block now, my rep as a crime solver on the line. And I



was coming up empty, grasping for turkey straws. *Anyone* could've taken that neck.

Then the fog came out of my brain on little cat feet. Happy Cat squeezed his furry bulk through the thicket of human legs crowding the entrance to the kitchen and sauntered inside the savory room.

He'd busted out of my bedroom somehow and made a beeline for the chow room. Now he lifted his head and sniffed at the delicious, turkey-scented air.

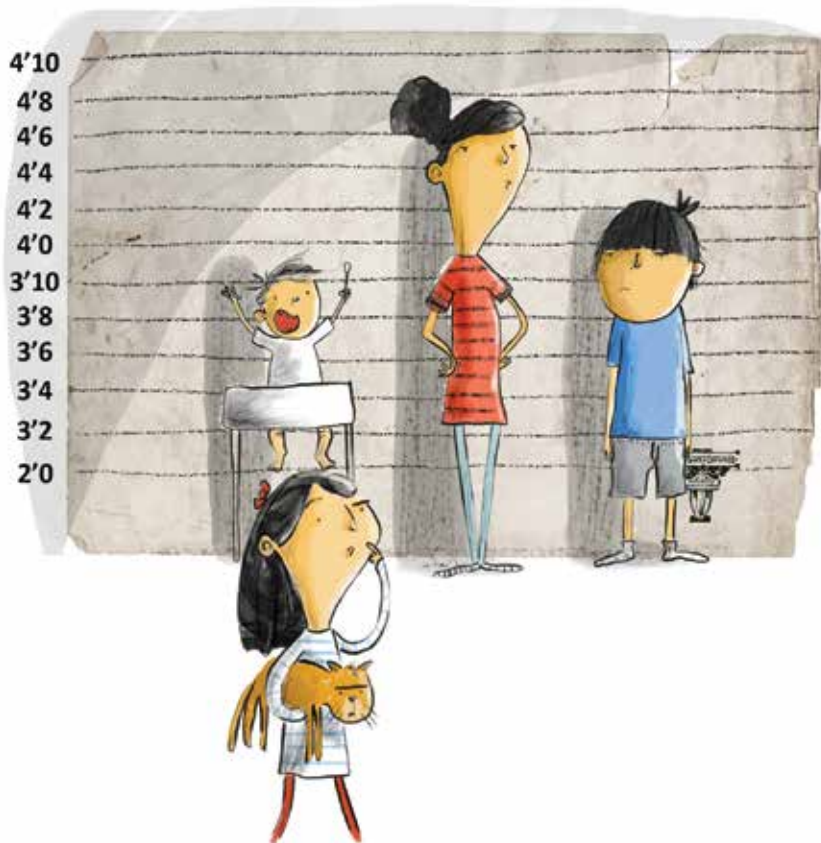
I scooped up the salivating kitty, squeezed past Dizzy, Dad, Suzy, and Miko, and broke out of the kitchen. "My tracker cat," I purred happily. Just the break this case needed. Happy Cat had a nose for food, and the belly to prove it.

I pussyfooted off down the hall, the Fujita Five hot on my trail, and popped into Mom and Dad's bedroom. "Food, Happy Cat?" I questioned.

Happy Cat sniffed the air, his wet, powerful, black nostrils dilating, his head bobbing. But his slightly crossed blue eyes didn't lock onto any hidden food cache.

I spun around and thrust the cat at the gandering group of suspects.

Happy Cat licked morning-old egg crust out of the corner of Dizzy's mouth, turned



up his nose at the mashed blueberry breath of Suzy, and hissed at Miko, the perfumed princess. But he didn't nose out any turkey neck.

We pawed our way through the crowd and padded up the carpeted steps to the second floor. The pack of possible perps chased after us.

I ran into Dizzy's bedroom and let Happy Cat take a whiff, as I held my own nose. The feline's dark whiskers suddenly quivered, his head pointing down, ears back, his nostrils locked onto something. He mewled and squirmed and jumped out of my arms, landing with a plop on Dizzy's unmade bed.

"What's he doing?" Dizzy yelped from the doorway.



Happy Cat dug his paws into the rumpled bedspread, clawing to pull it back. I gave the sniffer cat a full-body pat reward. Then I picked him up and deposited him on the floor. I flung back the grungy bedcovers myself.

Revealing the missing turkey neck! It was staining the white sheet beneath, the edible bird part still warm to the touch.

“There it is!” Dizzy exclaimed. He lunged forward, as Happy Cat leapt back onto the bed. The pair wrestled over the uncovered Thanksgiving spoils.

I crowed, “Looks like I solved another case.”



Dad and Mom glanced at each other. Suzy gurgled. Miko fanned her face to counteract Dizzy’s bedroom aroma.

“And I’ve got you cold turkey—Miko.”

“What!” she protested innocence.

“This is no hunger game. This is a case of revenge, served piping hot from the pan,” I stated, jerking my head at the bedded bird part and the soiled sheet. “Retaliation for a bathroom brawl earlier this morning.”

“You can’t prove it, mini Miss Marple,” Miko huffed.

I laid out the giblets of the case. “Dizzy didn’t have to take the turkey neck. He was going to get it anyway. And Dizzy was with Dad while the tented turkey was resting on the counter; he would’ve noticed Dad necking. Mom had no motive, since she’d given the neck away to Dizzy. And Suzy, as a crawler, couldn’t possibly reach the roasting pan up on the kitchen counter, let alone handle the hot goods without making a mess.

“You were the only one upstairs, Miko. Therefore, *you* had to be responsible for the fowl deed,” I concluded with a cluck of satisfaction. “Using plenty of paper towels, no doubt—evidence now flushed.”

Miko gulped like she had a bone stuck in her throat.

It all ended happily, befitting the occasion. Dizzy and Happy Cat shared the turkey neck. Mom and Dad were thankful to get through the dinner without any further food fight. And I’d feathered my nest—as Amy Fujita, Kid Detective. 