
FARMGIRL ANGST

BY MARILEE FOSTER

THE STORY OF CHICKEN



Chickens were banished from our farm for the third time about 10 years ago. We'd lost our best ridding dogs, the rats became too numerous and my father's temper blew. The coop, a dilapidated, brittle building of found parts and scavenged storm windows was loaded into a 30 yard dumpster: plumes of dust and clatters of glass and in a half hour it was gone.

Chickens returned to our farm when someone dumped "Chicken"—a week old chick—on our front stoop. It was October of '04. My mother and I had talked about getting chickens again, but we were a long way from committing. Now this peeping refugee, an offspring of some other family's tragedy, was now ours. We set up a box with a heat lamp in my studio. We clucked like a chicken, directed it at food and held it to simulate a mother's brooding warmth. At first from fate, then with pity, even existential guilt, I doted, doing everything I imagined in my power to compensate this dependent bird for the maltreatment he'd unjustly survived. And yet Chicken, as we came to call him, became spoiled and solipsistic. If you sat in the chair, he flitted onto your lap, climbed your shoulder and poked behind your hair. You could feel him poised there, rigid—suddenly alerted for the hundredth time to the chubby lobe of your exposed ear. He would peck at your batting eyelash or take hold of your moving lips. He would crap on my office work and knock over my artwork. He had no sense of boundaries and no inclination to learn. Still the most horrid traits in people are, in other animals, very engaging. Chicken was genuinely fun to be around and, likewise, he seemed to enjoy our company greatly.

I decided it was not natural for a chicken, poultry on a farm no less, to be living this bohemian lifestyle, when I found him in front of the heater, reclining, opium drunk on BTUs. Like a cat who kneads in soporific ecstasy, Chicken's three pronged feet did the same. First the left foot, then the right; his toes open and close, gripping and releasing the emanating heat. With feathers all spread and both his wings flopped, so

happily out of place, on a painted white floor. It was time that I must choose; would I put him on Swap and Shop or would I eat him myself? The third choice was the most obvious one, I'd get more chickens; just as hens need a rooster, so too does a rooster need hens.

Chickens are more work than their bucolic stance purports. I hadn't had serious animal chores since my teens and had forgotten the strict arrangement of animal husbandry, the daily care, weekly tasks and a constant "on-guardness" required. And yet as labor and fret intensive as the birds might be, I'd also forgotten that there is no easy-to-come-by equivalent of the charmed sensation I get when I take care of them. These chores, unlike many paid jobs, allow me a modest sense of purpose.

Furthermore there is watching the chickens. This spring I have 25 chicks to care for and I know I have sat there with them when I should have been doing other things. Their personalities by breed are distinct. The Rhode Island reds come close and will challenge my hand when I pet them. The Buff Orpingtons are much like their name implies, laid back, fluffy. While the Silver Spangled Hamburgs remain aloof. I also got Barred Rock, Columbian Wyandotte, Black Australorp and two Araucana. I also received one free "rare-exotic" whom we refer to as Topknot. She is one of those crested types; she has the most extraordinary coiffure. A bushy halo of white feathers atop a comically stern looking chick, who though smaller than the rest is very fast and by far the best at finding worms.

One book about raising poultry claims that watching chickens is relaxing. The author goes on to say this is probably because doing so connects us with a time when things were simpler. My mother suggests that the chicks are like the flame in a fire, mesmerizing. Their élan is constant activity and so if that's what the author means, a time when things were simple, I'll be that Neanderthal, awed at the discovery of something he both made and didn't. □