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Chicken Eyelids

The hippies, in my opinion, did one thing, and one thing only, right. As they got some age on them, they began raising families (what did you expect with all that free love going around?) and they rejected artificiality. Butter made of some contorted oil goo; meat injected with antibiotics; dried spices, milk, and vegetables when fresh was available and ever so much better; and plastic fantastic furniture, toys, and clothes—summarily repudiated. The hippies got busy building A-frames and log cabins—sometimes A-framed log cabins—and growing vegetable gardens. As the sixties eased with a newly creaking back into the seventies, people began making apple butter, funky quilts, and cooking with fresh eggs. I approved only because what the hippies were doing reminded me of the pioneers.

I loved pioneers and pioneer times. If I had had my way about it, we all would have lived a hundred years earlier and worn hoop skirts and traveled in covered wagons. I lived for the next pioneer book on the shelves of the library. I was beset with troubles unlike any other ten year old. Because my test scores were so high and I was bored in my classes, my school and my mother made me skip ahead two grades. The work was then challenging enough, but the literature in the classes turned into what I called teenage angst stories. All I wanted to do was read about the pioneers. It seemed that everyone else could tell me what to read in school, but on my own, I returned to what seemed real and familiar to me. I did not care if the stories were below my reading level because I was memorizing them. I wanted to be the expert in all things pioneer and basic and natural.

The getting back to basics thing is what my sister did. She and her husband, who constantly spouted words such as copasetic, pootangey, far-out, and (oh, that dreaded, hated word) love, were finally doing something of which I could approve: they were going to live off the land. Some five acres, dozens of apple and pear trees, a working beehive, a real well pumped by hand in back and antiques pilfered from abandoned houses later, began their inroads to their

business—selling eggs for profit. Who says hippies can't be capitalists? Just look at Ben & Jerry.

Two days after bringing home one hundred fifty baby chicks to the farm's old hen and goat houses, Saturday came and Mother drove us the twenty-five miles out of the city to see them. Shamba-La, my niece, was there. My very own live baby doll, in a darling pageboy haircut and flare-leg, patched jeans.

She and I entered the warm henhouse. Pamela yelled in the background to keep the door closed, so I shut it swiftly. The song of the chicks filled the air, each tiny yellow fowl saying, "Cheap."

We held them, carried them, played with them and fed them. The morning passed quickly, the afternoon was spent exploring the orchard.

"Why can't the chicks come outside?" I inquired, slyly.

"Because hawks might get them," my sister with new expertise replied.

"Why can't the cats come in?" I tested.

"They'll eat them, silly."

"When can we let them out?" I knew the answer—Laura Ingalls Wilder had to watch the little chicks in the Dakota Territory. She had taught me.

"When they're older and can fend for themselves."

"When will that be?"

"Oh, I don't know. In a few months, I suppose."

"It's awfully unfair to them." I was a bit dramatic, as a child.

"They'll survive." She giggled, "Yeah, that's why, so they'll survive. Look, you wouldn't want Mom to just leave you out in the cold, wouldja? Well, we can't let them out or something'll happen to them. They'll get eaten or something."

"Why can't you just watch over them so nothing gets them?" as an ultimate test. The pioneers would have been more responsible.

"I don't have enough time."

I pondered this. What was she doing with all her time? Out, out of the city in the fresh

country with nothing but time. Just like in the Old Days.

“Can’t we train the cats not to eat them?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because.” She was distracted by what Shamba-La was doing. It was something to do with placing an inedible in her mouth.

“Because why?”

“Because.” She turned to look at me. “Because I said so.” An eyebrow quirked.

Better leave that alone. She’s somewhat smart, but a bit indolent. And she knows it.

Mom announced, “Time to go.”

“Awwwww. Can’t we stay a little bit longer?” I immediately, automatically, pleaded.

“No. We won’t make it to Chicago in time to pick up Daddy.” I hated it when she called my father daddy. He was my daddy, not hers. Besides, I would never, never in a million years call him Daddy. He was Dad. Or, if I were in a particularly affectionate mood, Popsy-doodle. But never daddy. It seemed age-inappropriate for her to talk to me like that. My age, not hers. She was ancient. Since I was the youngest of all our eight kids, she was already over forty when I was born. Imagine it. *Forty*. Who knows what was appropriate for her age, anyway. She lived through the Depression. She could tell you everything you ever wanted to know or not know about the Second World War. She could tell you how to build a ship, for Pete’s sake.

“What time is he landing?” Pamela asked.

“7:35, if his flight is on time.” Mom was getting her purse and finding her keys.

Shamba-La cried when I left, as she always did. In one way, my heart was torn, thinking that she would be so much better off if she could just come home and live with me, and in another way, I was glad. I was her favorite.

Mom insisted on seatbelts. Why, I could never tell. It wasn’t like it was a law or anything. And as she drove, negotiating her way through toll booths and over the stupendous-sized potholes, she expertly refreshed nail polish, lipstick, powdered her nose, and miraculously,

applied mascara. The scent of nail polish filled the station wagon and I rolled down my window in protest.

“Don’t, Tina. You’ll mess up my hair.”

“Don’t put nail polish on in the car. I’m gonna barf.”

Mom didn’t answer. *Stalemate.*

We parked and walked. I secretly loved the airport as much as Mom did, though I didn’t want to be obvious about it. There was just something about the jets coming in, their rumble, the roar of reversed engines, the smell of jet fuel that made me think of faraway places. Family vacations flickered like an old reel-to-reel in my mind. The year we went to Disney World in Florida. Mickey Mouse, though somewhat creepy, gave me coloring books and crayons. I forgave his creepiness for that. There, Jimmy laughed so much he made milk come out of his nose. Our trip to Germany. Bavarian castles, sausages, and lederhosen. I still had a pair of those. Rio de Janeiro, carnival, beaches, and fun.. A few too many naked ladies, though.

The pinnacle of all our travels was coming next summer. Having gotten Lucy, Samantha, and finally, Jason, off to college, Bob accepted into the Air Force Academy, and Shamba-La’s baby days over with, we were off to Hawaii. All through the dreary winter, I dreamed of palm trees and grass skirts. It was just going to be Mom, Dad, Katrina and me. Jimmy was going to baseball camp, instead. Hawaii, Honolulu, Maui, hula, and macadamias flitted through my mind. Pineapple. Coconut. I practiced the words.

Mom looked at me sharply, “What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Is that Dad’s plane?” We stood at the window near the gate.

“Nope. That’s TWA. He’s flying United.”

Sitting down in the chairs facing the windows, I realized I had forgotten my latest library find—a “new” Little House book—at Shamba-La’s house. I had been forced by the short-sighted librarian to return it to allow others to check it out nearly three months ago. Since then it had been absent in the library until just last week. When I saw it, I grabbed it up and figured out how long I could keep it with renewals. By the time it had to be returned, I would have how to build

a log cabin AND make cheese down flat.

“Pamela has to come into the city this week, anyway. She’ll bring it then.”

“Alright.” I was glum.

“How’s algebra going?”

“Okay. Mrs. Tann says we’ll have to bring in our calculators next week. She says it doesn’t matter so much about the actual calculations as long as you know the formulas.”

“That’s what I have always thought. Seems silly to have technology if you don’t use it. Besides, you mastered the calculations on your own in fourth grade. What’s the point of just repeating it?”

“I wish I could do it all in my head.”

“Why?”

“Well, I could do it like the pioneers did it.”

“What?”

“Laura Ingalls Wilder did long division in her head, without a chalkboard, let alone a calculator at the school exhibition.”

“Really!”

I could see the exasperation on Mom’s face.

“That way I wouldn’t have rely on calculators.”

“And why don’t you want to rely on calculators, Miss?”

“Well, what if something happened and you didn’t have batteries or electricity or anything? In the Old Days, you could just figure it up in your head.”

“Not everything about the old days was better, Tina. Trust me. I know.”

“Well, nothing was fake. People just lived on their own. They made their own butter. They had dances and real music. They lived on farms. You know?”

“Yeah, I do know. And it would take them two days to go from home to the train station. They had to haul wood to cook. They were poor, you know.”

“Money isn’t everything, Mom.” I regretted it the moment I said it. I sounded like a

hippie. Harley Davidsons, tattoos, long, greasy hair, nudity, teenagers slimily kissing one another in long, locked lip embraces, looking nothing like the beautiful people on *Days of Our Lives*. Washington Park Square overrun with wild-looking people, loud druggey music blaring, and Bob yelling out the open windows of the car at them, “Long hair hippies! Go get a haircut! Get a room! Take a shower!”

I disliked them as much as my newly uniformed brother did, but when he would yell at them, I was afraid for him. In Chicago, just the year before, there were riots. We saw it all on TV. When the police had to go out and try to control the rioters, it felt as though everything I had ever known and loved was coming to an end. I imagined riots in my town. It was bad enough that since the riots I was afraid to go into certain parts of the city, that magnificent place that had always been my backyard. The thought that the world might come to an end in my town was terrifying. I hated hippies and I was miserable with realization.

“Yeah, well, they also had slavery, monkey.”

Stalemate.

Okay...” Mom checked her perfect face in her compact. “Come on, here comes the plane.”

We stood together at the window watching ground control bravely stand in front of a plane four times taller than he, waving orange flashlights in the dusk. He crossed them and the plane stopped. A combination of engineering and human cooperation. It was a beautiful sight. Mom and I positioned ourselves in the crowd so Dad could see us the moment he left the jetway. Mom gave me a boost every now and then, not minding her pink suit and that her hair might get mussed, so I could see above the crowd. Dad came home every week when he traveled for his job with a jet manufacturer, so why we were always so excited, I just could not say. But the moment I saw him, tall in a gray suit and black tie, I squealed. Stupid, I know.

He would stop. Yes, stop. Holding up all those passengers just for a moment, and saying, “There are my girls!” And Mom and I would run to him, pull him out of the crowd and back to us, our family, our reality. He would always laugh and we would talk. Mom, me, Dad,

sometimes interrupting each other, bumping into each other as we walked with Dad's arms around our shoulders, laughing, teasing, ignoring the Hari Krishnas coming up to us for money or our souls or whatever.

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Our vacation to Hawaii was delayed. "Delayed" is what Mom called it. I called it something else. We couldn't go to Hawaii because our family was in crisis. "Crisis" is what I called it. Mom said I was being dramatic.

"What would you call it when everything you've ever known—everyone you've ever known is going to be gone? Gone in an instant!"

Mom sighed and narrowed her eyes at me. She was making a list instead of making the sunbonnet I had asked her to sew. She glanced around the room, "That'll just about do it."

"What?"

"What needs to be picked up before the movers get here. I'm not moving all this stuff to L.A. Pamela will just have to come get some of this junk, if she wants to keep it. I'll box up Lucy's, Sam's, Jay's, and Bob's and leave their things at your grandmother's. That is, if they won't agree to a garage sale."

A garage sale? Yes, let's just throw away our history.

"I'm not going, of course."

"Good. You'll be out on your own ahead of the game, then. You can make payments on this house." Mom smiled.

"This house has history."

"California has history, too. We'll go see the missions."

"What am I going to do while Jimmy is at camp?"

"You and Katrina are going to spend a week with Pamela. We'll get the movers all done here, so you won't have to see everything all torn apart."

“I wish we were going to Hawaii.”

“So do I. But we’ll go. It’s just delayed.”

“I don’t know anyone in California. Why do we have to move?” I whined.

“Daddy has been promoted. It’s a good thing. And soon, you’ll make new friends. You wouldn’t want Daddy to be . . . unsuccessful, would you? If he is going to be successful, he has to go work in California. That’s all.”

I hated it when she called him Daddy.

The next week I was at Pamela’s house. The sweet little chicks were now grown into mature chickens. The yellow fuzz was gone and white feathers had taken its place. And they were now allowed outside in the hen yard.

In the morning, Katrina, Shamba-La, and I spread chicken feed for them to eat, then Pamela would gather the eggs. There weren’t as many as she had planned, but I still got to taste a freshly laid egg. They tasted the same as the ones bought at the grocery store, but were a bit firmer in texture. The orchard was in full leaf. As I sat on the rail of the fence, I ate watermelon in the summer heat and practiced spitting watermelon seeds. I mused about moving and challenged Katrina to a contest. Katrina could spit farther than I. No matter how much I voiced my opinion on moving to California, it seemed we were still going to go.

Katrina didn’t care as much as I did about it, so I stopped talking and headed off for a shady spot to read. After I finished my library book, I looked around for entertainment. Pamela was busy indoors cleaning the kitchen and talking on the telephone to Mom.

I split up the watermelon rind and fed it to the chickens. A rooster seemed to be in charge of the hens. Where he strutted, they moved. Upon feeding the hens the rind, the rooster strode in and the hens ran away. One hen ran and put her head into the corner by the fence and henhouse. Then she stayed there. A second later the rooster ran up behind her and started pecking. Pamela was suddenly outside, “Get outta there! Shoo!”

Pam was angry. She slapped a towel at the rooster. “Get outta there!”

“Why is he doing that?” I wondered aloud, not recalling chicken fights in the Little

House books.

“Get!” she said between clenched teeth.

I waited until the rooster strutted away for an explanation. “Doesn’t he like her?”

“That’s not a her. It’s a him and the other rooster doesn’t want that other male there. If you don’t keep ‘em apart, he’ll peck his eyes out. That’s why he hides his face in the corner. I’ve got to get him out of there.”

Yuck. How disgusting is that?

A hour was spent separating the two males, with the empty-headed hens dashing this way and that after the rooster. I had to leave the pen because I had worn sandals and the hens thought my bare toes were corn kernels and they pecked my little toe until it bled.

“Chickens are gross,” I told my mom later on the telephone.

“Yes, they are,” she said and I remembered that she had raised chickens when she was a child during the Depression. “Just wait until you butcher them.”

“Whoa. Not me. I would *never* do that.”

“Well, we’re going to need your help, sweet pea.”

“*What?*”

“Umm, yeah. Didn’t Pamela tell you?”

“Oh my god. Tell me what?”

“Oh. She didn’t.” Mom’s voice dropped as if she should have known. “Oh, yes. Pamela and Matthew haven’t made any money on the chickens and they’re old enough to be butchered, so we’re going to help. They’ll need to be cleaned so Pamela can freeze them.”

I felt dizzy and sick. *No way.* “Not me, Mom. I can’t do it.”

“Well, if you were a pioneer, you would.” *Stalemate.*

“Why can’t they just keep ‘em as - as pets?” knowing all the while that those chickens would make nobody a decent pet. I stared at my bandaged toe.

“It takes money to keep chickens. You have to keep buying the feed and taking care of them. No, we’ll just do it and get it over with.”

It's no wonder she built ships in the Second World War.

“Fine! But I’m not killing them.”

“No problem, Matthew will do that. All you have to do is clean them with me and Pamela.”

I couldn’t imagine anything worse.

At the end of my stay at my sister’s house, Mom showed up and doomsday began. I had always heard that to kill a chicken, one would chop off its head. But Matt, Pam’s husband, chose not to follow that course. Instead, he picked up the chicken by its feet and slammed its head against the fence in a quick downward motion. It would die, immediately, and there was no blood.

This isn’t that bad.

The sky was blue and we had set up our tables under the trees. The wind was blowing keeping the flies at bay while we dunked the dead chickens into boiling water and plucked feathers. Mom could do the most in an hour, but Pamela wasn’t far behind. I thought about how angry she was at that rooster and how disgusted she looked and I figured this butchering was all she needed to cleanse her soul of those vile creatures that never did earn her any money. The abdomens were split open and guts and other innards we were supposed to keep were taken out. The living chickens that had gotten loose and were roaming the orchard came running and dashed away with the intestines of the other chickens, still full of feed. Pam had to stop dunking and chase chickens away from each other several times so they wouldn’t peck each other to death before we had a chance to kill them.

We worked in cycles. First, Matthew would come outdoors to kill the chickens, swinging his long hippie hair over his shoulder, then heap the fowl into dead chicken piles. He had been unfortunate enough to schedule a vasectomy the day prior, so after killing several dozen chickens, he would waddle back indoors. *He doesn’t have to clean these things. How nice for him.*

Toward the end of the afternoon, after numerous cycles, Pamela was about to pick up a

chicken, when she gasped. "It's still alive!" she screamed.

Sure enough, when Katrina, Mom and I came close and peered at it, its yellow eyes blinked. We all screamed, even Mom.

She hates this. She is as grossed out as I am. I looked at Mother, suddenly admiring her determination. When she looked back at me, I could see she had tears in her eyes.

"Oh my god. Go get Matt. He hasn't killed it," she said to Pam.

Pamela went yelling into the house and Matthew came out, bowlegged, but walking fast.

"Oh shit." He snatched it up and whacked it again on the fence, then a few more times, just to make sure.

"I thought one of you had died with all the screaming," he grinned. I looked at his stupid, long hair and thought about hippies. *I hate hippies.* Then he wide-spreaded it back indoors.

It was quiet for a bit longer while we all worked, but then Pamela said quietly, "Mom?"

"What?" Mother didn't want to move from her position cutting open dead chickens.

"It's still alive."

Mother came out from behind her table and Katrina and I crowded in. The chicken's eyelids blinked. Blink. Blink, blink. *Good God Almighty! It's alive!*

Katrina couldn't handle anymore. She ran into the orchard and stayed. I could see her down there in what was once a paradise for a kid like me. I wished I was down there with her, too. But I couldn't go. I couldn't leave Mom.

"What are we going to do?" I asked.

"Go get Matthew," Pam answered and she disappeared inside. Mother would have put her arms around me, but her hands were dirty so she just stood next to me, without saying anything.

Matthew came out again, this time with a rifle.

"It's just nerves," he said. Then he shot it and shot it and shot it. And each time, after a few minutes of our waiting for it to die, blink, blink, blink. In the end, Matthew shot that chicken seven times. Then, no more blinking.

We waited until the very last to pluck that chicken. The very last chicken out of one hundred fifty. Pamela checked to see if its eyes were blinking. They weren't. She dunked it into the boiling water. We all screamed when the chicken began kicking, trying to get out of the water that was cooking it alive. Then, it was quiet. Mother and I held onto each other and cried. Pam ran into the house to yell at Matt, who didn't even bother to come outside again. After all, what could he do?

And Katrina stayed in the orchard, climbing trees.

At the end of that long day, Mother and I and Katrina went home to our empty house and showered all the chicken death off us. In the morning, we were heading to Chicago to pick up Daddy from the airport, then we were to pick up Jimmy from camp, and then we were all heading to Los Angeles. We were riding in our new van, air-conditioned, with electric windows, and a third row of seats. We were going to California, but not like the pioneers. Nothing like the pioneers.