

## Feathers

Several times, I've heard about the rooster that spurred Laura. She didn't forget she told me and tell me again, but I've been there when she told others.

When she was five, the rooster flew into her face and spurred her above her right eye. She still has the scar. She remembers it clearly now, thirty-five years later. The rooster was her friend, along with all the chickens, the dog, and the cats. She played in the yard with her friends all around her. Suddenly, the rooster flew into her face, spurred her close above her right eye, and the day filled with noise and pain. She screamed and bled and ran.

Her mother cleaned the blood from Laura's face. Her father ran out into the yard and killed the rooster.

The next day, they ate him for dinner. Her father put a piece of rooster on Laura's plate and said, "Well, here's what happened to the old rooster who spurred you. He's tough, but he tastes good."

Laura wouldn't eat any of the meat, but everyone else in the family did. She didn't say anything. If words existed for what Laura felt, she didn't know those words yet. By that night, the rooster had been reduced to bones and feathers in the garbage can.

Laura thought of that rooster every time she saw chickens and every time the subject of chickens came up in conversation. She thought of more than the rooster. That happened near the beginning of hard times in her family.

Hard financial times wore her father down. He founded a church and preached in the church, and he repaired cars in his shop. He was a soft touch for people who ran up bills and didn't pay them, usually people who were in much better financial condition than he was. Church, and people who came to the minister of their church for counseling, and trying to earn a living took all his time. He didn't have much time for his children. He didn't have time to rest and to enjoy life.

Laura was a late accident. Maybe he held that against her. I don't know. I wasn't there. I just know what Laura told me.

Her father died too young, too tired, and too broke. The years before he died, when the older kids left home and Laura came into her teen years, weren't very fruitful for Laura, maybe not for anyone in the family. Hard times can grind people down

and drain the joy from their lives. Laura said lack of joy permeated the house and the family.

When Laura was three, the current in the river caught her. Her father ran to save her. Just before he hit the water, her mother called out, "Harold, your Sunday clothes." Years later, I was there when Laura told that story to her mother, not accusing her of anything, just remembering old times.

Her mother blushed deep red and said, "Laura, I never did. I never did that."

I don't know if she did or not. If she did, she wasn't trying to choose her daughter's drowning over her husband messing up his only suit, I'm sure, but still, it indicates something, and Laura knew it.

She didn't hold a grudge against her parents for any of that, like her older sister did. Laura recognized their humanity and forgave the mistakes they made, but she did remember. I think remembering helped her be more loving and careful with our children.

The big red and green rooster, with long, iridescent green tail feathers that curled at the ends, became a problem. Laura told our daughters about what happened with the rooster when she was five. It might not have been the first time she told them about the rooster.

We managed the rooster on the Girl Scout camp well enough at the start of the summer. I told the program manager a rooster needs eleven or twelve hens. He can take care of that many. I told her if a rooster has too few hens, he's after them too much. A rooster drives a hen to the ground to mate, and he pecks the back of her head and her neck. If he has too few hens, they don't get a break. They lose too many feathers, and the rooster might injure them.

The program manager said we had all the chickens we were going to get. That was it. I couldn't do anything beyond telling her what I knew, so I dropped the subject.

My daughters take care of the animals all winter and spring and turn them over to the program people when summer camp starts. The program manager hires a specialist to take care of the animals during summer camp.

My youngest daughter, Amanda, said, "That's not right. She doesn't know anything at all about chickens. She shouldn't be the one to make the decision about how many hens there'll be."

"She shouldn't be, but she is."

"Chickens have rights, too. People think they're everything, but they're not. Animals mean something, too. I'm going to write her a letter about it."

"You can, but I don't think it will do any good."

“At least it will do me some good, to say what I’m thinking.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a lot of argument and bad feeling between the program department and the property department. Raising a fuss about the chickens might add to that bad feeling, without doing the chickens any good. I think she’s made up her mind, and any argument is going to increase her stubbornness.”

“I guess she never has yielded to reason. Maybe you’re right. I’ll have to think about it.”

Amanda didn’t write the program manager a letter. She said something once, when the program manager came up, but she said it was as if she hadn’t spoken at all, as if the manager didn’t hear what she said.

Ten or twenty or thirty Girl Scouts toured the barnyard most days. Most of the Scouts who came up to camp were city kids. If the animal specialist said keep quiet in the barnyard, the quiet held for about thirty seconds. That was just the way it worked.

Early in the summer, the rooster started flying at people and trying to spur them. The animal care specialist told us that happened, and Amanda was down there twice with groups when it happened.

The animal care specialist knew the rooster just tried to protect his territory and keep intruders out. He reacted to excitement in the barnyard by getting aggressive. That was his job, as rooster in charge of all the hens, so the specialist didn’t hold it against him. She quit taking kids into the chicken pen. They could see the chickens through the wire.

Sometimes, the animal care specialist went into the chicken pen and brought hens out so the kids could hold them. She’d worked around animals all her life, so she knew how to keep an attacking rooster from hurting her. She kept him locked in the pen and brought the hens out. We had ducks, turkeys, goats, sheep, llamas, horses, donkeys, and rabbits, so the barnyard tours didn’t have to concentrate much on chickens.

Summer camp ended. Autumn settled and worked its way into winter. Amanda and Juniper took care of the animals again. We thought the rooster might calm down, now that there weren’t so many people around, but he didn’t. Amanda and Juniper said they couldn’t get in the chicken house to clean it, because he flew at them and tried to spur them.

I said, “Carry a broom or a short-handled shovel. If he flies at you, hold it up like a shield. That should stop him.”

They weren’t convinced that would work, so I went out with them to show them how to do it. When the rooster flew at me, I

held the wide, square-ended shovel up in front of me. The rooster caught the shovel with one foot and came right over it, straight toward my face. I dropped the shovel, hit the rooster with my fist, and knocked him away from me. I backed out of the chicken yard fast. The rooster flew at me again and hit the gate when I closed it behind me.

Amanda said, "Well, so much for the shovel as a shield. Any other good ideas?"

I laughed. "Determined little beggar. Let the chicken house stay dirty for now. I'll try to come up with something."

First snow fell for winter.

The rooster killed a hen. Juniper said she was sure he didn't mean to do it. "He stood by her and looked really confused afterward. He kept looking at her as if he thought she should get back up." I wondered, *how can a rooster look confused?* But my daughters know things about animals I've never suspected.

Juniper and Amanda chased the rooster out of the pen into the larger, fenced barnyard, so he couldn't kill any more hens, but then he attacked Juniper and Amanda every time they went into the barnyard.

We talked it over. We called it a trial and tried to maintain a sense of humor about it, though Amanda and Juniper are usually opposed to killing anything. The charge was murder.

We reduced the charge to involuntary henslaughter, since it obviously wasn't premeditated. Juniper said, "He can't think of anything but getting back into the chicken yard. He spends all his time running up and down the fence. He looks in and tries to find a way to get in, but, if we let him back in there, he's probably going to kill another hen, and the hens don't deserve that."

I said, "I need to ask your mother if she wants to join us." I walked into the house and found Laura, "We're deciding what to do about the rooster, Would you come out and join us?"

She said, "I don't have anything to do with the chickens. You take care of them. You decide what to do."

I could see she was getting upset about something. I said, "What's up?"

She looked at me like smoke swirled inside her head and showed through her eyes, but she wouldn't say anything. She turned her back to me and grabbed the vacuum cleaner.

I said, "Can you think of a better way to deal with the rooster?"

She started the vacuum cleaner and vacuumed the rug. I never did like that howling thing. I went back outside, and Amanda and Juniper and I continued with the trial.

We reached a unanimous verdict, so I took the .22 rifle out

to the barnyard. When the rooster stopped pacing up and down the fence long enough that I could line up the sights, Cutie, the dwarf female goat, jumped up on me from behind. I got upset. I wanted to get it over with.

I leaned the rifle against the barn and took Cutie over and shut her into the goat house. I walked back to where the rooster ran up and down outside the chicken pen, and I started over. I rested the rifle against the corner of the barn and waited until the rooster stopped pacing back and forth and stood still.

I shot him at the base of the skull. He flew wildly all the way across the barnyard and back again and hit the ground and spun around in a circle. Then he lay still.

I picked up the dead rooster and carried him upside down by his feet. His wings, shiny red and green, spread out and drug on the ground. I carried the rifle in my other hand.

Wind picked up swirls of cold, powdery snow from the ground and blew down the mountain toward Denver. Heavy rooster. I looked behind me and saw my own footprints and the marks of the rooster's dragging wings in the snow, already blowing away in the wind.

Nobody wanted to eat the rooster. I asked, "Shall I save some of the tail feathers?"

Amanda said, "Yes. I want one."

Juniper said, "I guess I do."

The tail feathers were long, curved, green. I pulled out the longest feathers. Then I carried the rooster up and buried him in the garden.

Laura didn't want me near her. I approached her, and she backed away. I grinned, and I could see that made her mad. I said, "I didn't mean to make fun of you, and I didn't mean to take your reaction lightly. I didn't grin from humor, just something to do with my face when I felt self conscious."

In the bedroom, getting ready for bed, I reached to touch her, and she drew away again.

"Is it because I became the executioner?"

"No. I don't know. I don't think so. I don't know."

"Is it because I'm too similar to your father? or too different?"

"Stop asking me questions. I do not know. I really don't know. If I knew, I would tell you, but I don't know."

I dreamed I kept approaching my wife, and she kept backing away, and I got crazy about it and unintentionally injured her. Yes, yes. I don't know why my dreams are so obvious. I stood trial, in an amphitheater, and I was found guilty and shot in the neck. Okay, God, or the muse of dreams, or subconscious, or whoever. But then, sometimes meaning

seems too obvious, and something more subtle is hidden. I look so intently at the obvious, I miss the hidden meaning.

When I was a kid, fourth grade, I raised rabbits. To sell the meat, I had to butcher the rabbits, and after a while, I couldn't kill the rabbits anymore. I gave up raising rabbits, even though I wanted the money they brought me.

I wouldn't be a chicken rancher. I took the job of caretaker of the Girl Scout camp, and the chickens are a small part of the job.

Maybe I should have plucked the rooster and gutted him and cooked him, and maybe we could have eaten him for dinner. But then, he is as fruitful in the garden as he would be on the table. Peas and strawberries and cabbages will feed from his decomposition in the soil.

I think of asking Laura if it would have been better if we had cooked him and eaten him, but I know I won't mention it. She said she doesn't know, so she really doesn't know. She'd tell me if she did.

In the morning, Laura hugs me before I sit down for breakfast. I can see she has to work at it to get it done, but that's Laura. She will work at it. Amanda and Juniper, they're just themselves. They aren't troubled by unknowable reactions, conflicting ideas of morality or strange, apparently obvious dreams.

The camp director knew that rooster. We give her one of the long, iridescent green feathers. The cats play with some of the feathers, and they begin to look bedraggled. Two of the long, curved, brilliant green feathers curl up from the glass I keep pencils in on my desk.

The next winter, we move north in the Rocky Mountains, to manage another camp. By then, all the feathers are gone. I think Laura gathered up what we had left, when she knew no one was thinking about it, and put them in the garbage.

When I packed the materials in and on my desk, I saw I had no feathers. I stood there looking through the window at the ridge of wild forest rising beyond the meadow that holds the barn and the barnyard. I couldn't remember when I last saw the feathers.

I saw motion deep in the forest, but whatever moved faded behind deep green pine trees, and I couldn't tell what it was, elk, deer, some kind of predator.

I decided not to ask Laura if she knew what happened to the rooster's feathers. It didn't matter enough to bring the subject up again. I put my pencils into the cardboard box with my journals and other manuscripts and taped the box closed.

Feathers are only feathers.