

This Didn't Really Happen  
Or  
The Story of the Rooster

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I don't remember the rooster's name, but I remember he didn't like me. He used to chase me around the barnyard with his wings flapping, stirring up dust. He seemed bigger than a rooster when he did that, like a blurry, winged goblin, screeching after me. He moved fast and I was small, just a little girl, but even smaller than that when the rooster gave chase. Later, when I complained, my stepfather suggested we cut off his head and cook him up for dinner. Then he laughed at his own joke. I laughed too, so he wouldn't think I was afraid.

The goat scared me too. I don't remember why. I think it was his eyes, the way he looked at me, like he could peer into my soul and see all the bad things I had done, only the bad things. And the sound he made was pure evil, a high-pitched growl.

The story is that I am standing at the entrance of our little barnyard, a circle of packed dust surrounded by animal pens and little shacks where feed and tools are kept. The corral

where the ponies live is at the far end of the yard. My stepfather takes the ponies to local carnivals and church picnics and charges money for children to ride them. He loves children.

In the story, I am just standing there, when all of a sudden the goat jumps on my back and starts butting me in the head. I remember describing the hooves slung over my shoulders like I was going to give him a piggy-back ride.

At the same time, a cloud of dust appears in front of me and up flies the rooster, pecking at my face. I try to slap him away with my hands at first, but he lands on top of my head. Then he pecks me just below my right eye.

As fast as it started, the story is over.

I tell my mother the story, and she screams, "Oh my God!" She holds me and says, "My poor baby, my poor baby!" Just like she's seen in the movies.

The vein in my stepfather's forehead bulges and all his muscles tense up. He's nervous, he can't stand still, so he paces back and forth, rubbing his veins. He acts like this is the worst thing in the world that could have happened. He holds up his fist and yells that it is time to cut off the rooster's head, god damn it!

My aunt comes over and puts makeup over my black eye so that nobody will see it during the ballet recital.

My mother makes me tell the story again and again to everyone who asks about my eye. I do impressions of the rooster flapping his wings, and everyone laughs. I am good at telling stories. Sometimes my mother tells the story to strangers, but she adds things to it that I hadn't told her. It makes me mad because it's my story, not hers.

People say, "Oh that's terrible." My mother says, "That rooster is a menace," and everyone agrees. We all nod our heads. Nobody asks about the goat.

My stepfather calls me out to the playground when it is time to kill the rooster. He says out loud, to everyone, that I want to watch and he makes me go with him. He is the hero. That's how we see him.

The playground is a fenced off area with a little patch of yellowing grass, a picnic table and a rusty swing set. My favorite thing to do in the playground is to watch the ants in the dried up flowerbeds. I sit for hours watching them. They always seem so content in their work. When I poke at them with a stick, they aren't at all bothered by it. They just march right around it, like the stick had always been there. When I take handfuls of sand and cover up their tiny ant hole, they dig out of it in seconds and act like it never happened. They are determined, unaffected, no matter how I attempt to mess up their world. I ask for an ant farm for Christmas, but my mom says, "That's not what girls want," and she buys me plastic dolls.

When it is time to kill the rooster my stepfather uses his dirty boot to hold him down. The rooster is flapping and screeching, stirring up dust and dark brown feathers. It's chaotic under his boot, but my stepfather is heavy and still, like a weight. Axe in hand, he lifts his arm up high, pauses, then comes down hard and sharp on the rooster's neck.

With its bloody, stump of a head pinned under my stepfather's thick boot, the rooster's body sprints forward, to get away. It circles around, nowhere to go without a head, then stops short and drops sideways like a fallen tree. My stepfather lifts his boot and I watch as the rooster's beak opens wide in a silent, slow-motion scream.

My stepfather is laughing. It's a strange laugh, high-pitched and maniacal, like a madman. He hooks his finger in the top of the rooster's beak and he dangles it back and forth, blood running down his arm. I look up to meet his pale blue eyes, held in his face by weathered, downward slants of skin. He is still laughing as he swings the rooster's head like a pendulum in front of my face. I look away when I realize, just for a second, that he is the goat and I am the rooster.

Then as fast as it came, that thought is over and only the story remains.

I laugh too, so he doesn't know I am afraid.