

Chicken

R.F. Tripp

He couldn't see himself as much different from a chicken. He wanted to of course. A chicken is not beloved of God, he would venture. A chicken is just, well—what—something to pick up at the grocery store, on the way home. Or, if you're in a hurry, at Chick-Fil-A, or Church's—not a whole chicken of course: two drum sticks and a thigh maybe. Anyway, he had this suspicion that he and the chicken were brothers, or brother and sister, if that be the case...it's hard to tell with a chicken.

For reasons that eluded him, he figured he and the chicken didn't have souls; or, if they did, chicken souls. He had the soul of a chicken? He supposed that if they could put shrimp genes in the tomatoes he buys he could have a chicken soul. Whoever or whatever the creator is, he, she, it apparently favored variety. Maybe the creator thought: *I think I'll try this*, and commenced to put chicken souls in a few individuals—like him—just to see what could happen.

Yesterday he was watching an old movie on TV, made in the 30s he figured, and it occurred to him that the scenes he was watching—the people, the sets that looked like rooms in his parents' house when he was a small boy, the actors in their period clothes—they were all gone. And for a moment he suspended his suspension of belief and the characters became the actors again, and the rooms became props, and he wondered: After they shot that scene, or that scene, did they all go out to eat? Chicken? Where? He remembered going to a place—he couldn't remember the name—on Sundays after church with his parents: all-you-could-eat-chicken. Big pieces of deep-fried chicken that got your chin wet with fresh, warm juice when you bit into them.

He saw a documentary once about chickens, as pets. This one lady made little outfits for her chicken—a hen—and she and the chicken slept together, or maybe the chicken had its own bedroom, he couldn't quite remember. At any rate, he watched as the lady put several outfits on her chicken, like a little girl will do with her dolls. She would also bathe it, several times a week, and take it on outings—

shopping for instance. The chicken didn't seem to mind, though it's hard to tell with a chicken. The whole documentary was about the enjoyment these people got from having chickens as pets, their recommending it to everyone, plus some of the trouble the owners had with the authorities, who would tell them they couldn't keep pet chickens within the city limits. So the people would have to hide their chickens, or at least be discrete—often with the help of their neighbors, some of whom had also gotten attached to the chickens, although others were pretty irritated with the whole business.

When he was growing up, this father raised chickens—thirty, forty at a time—under their back porch, and in town. Maybe there were no zoning laws back then. And every few weeks—about one chicken generation—his father would organize a mass neck-ringing. First, he would roll out a fifty-five-gallon drum from behind the garage and place it over a pit filled with old pieces of wood siding and some charcoal. Then he would get a garden hose and fill the drum about halfway up with water. After that he would get a fire going under the drum. For an hour or so his father would busy himself poking at the fire. When steam started to rise, it was time.

His father taught him and his brother how to wring a chicken's neck. There's really nothing to it. You pick up the chicken, tuck it under your arm, grab it around the head, then let go of the body while keeping a tight hold on the head. Gravity does the rest, mostly. And right when you feel the body tug against the neck, you give a neat little twist, and bingo, there you are, holding a wide-eyed, open-mouth chicken's head, looking for all the world like it knew at the last instant something huge was about to happen.

The moment the headless body hit the ground, "it" was up and running. Seriously. Run and stumble, run and stumble. There could be five or more at a time bumping into each other, like blind men on a drunk. It was almost comical. Then, one by one, each would stumble for the last time, give a little shiver maybe, maybe stretch out a leg, and it was over.

The headless birds running around was a large moment for him. He wondered if they knew, at some level, that they just needed to *go*, even though there was no place *to* go. He wondered if there was a sense of nightmare in it for them, if maybe they felt a crack in the universe, or that nature had wrinkled and they had been caught in the crease. He wondered if God had time for any of this...if maybe God would be waiting for them with big towels as their souls wafted skyward, to soak up the water used to scald their skin and soften their feathers. He wondered why fried chicken was so good, and how different a baked hen looked on a platter, garnished with parsley and ringed with new potatoes, with some broccoli maybe, and how baby Easter chicks, with their pastel, downy feathers, seemed like pets—until evening, when they started to look more like regular chickens again.

He saw this program once about commercially produced chickens, how the eggs were incubated in these great rotating racks, then transferred into warming drawers just before they were about to hatch, to “finish out,” as the narrator put it. And when the hatchlings came they came with a vengeance. Thousands at a time. Then they showed this long conveyor belt carrying all these little yellow bodies, peeping and chirping and rolling around as they fought to get their sea legs on the moving deck. He watched as the conveyor belt carried them up an incline, until suddenly the whole lot was dumped over the end of the conveyor to who knows where (because the camera didn’t show where). It reminded him of that story in the Bible, the one where the swine are driven off a cliff because they’re possessed by demons. And all the workers at the hatchling factory had these blank looks on their faces, like the whole business was just about the most boring thing that could have happened to them. He thanked God he didn’t work there, although he wondered what it would be like, because you never know unless you're actually there.

Anyway, the other night he bought some skinless breasts on his way home from work. His initial thought was to coat them with bread crumbs but discovered he was out of eggs, so he mixed some fresh lemon with a little extra virgin olive oil, spread it over the breasts, sprinkled them with crushed pepper,

then let them marinate while he watched the evening news. About halfway through the news he put water on to boil to make a side of spaghetti, then threw together a fresh salad so he could finish off the last of some balsamic dressing he'd found in the refrigerator.

That night he dreamed he had a chicken soul—the actual soul of a chicken—and he was in heaven. And to his surprise he had been numbered among the chosen, one of God's minions. He and billions like him were floating around, praising God on high, and peeping hosannas. Like the rest, he was small, soft, and downy yellow. Yet, as is typical of dreams, he self-consciously stuck out because he still had his human head, something that was disconcerting both to him and to others close by. Fortunately, however, worker angels kept the crowd moving and focused on the singing.

When he awoke that morning he vowed never to eat another chicken. He got dressed, read the paper over coffee, brushed his teeth, then left for work. Once at the office, he went through his mail, attended a meeting, and tried to make a few phone calls. By noon he had almost forgotten about the dream. Something about chickens...and that got him to thinking...