

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

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The Egg

HE HAD THE ANSWER TO THE OLD QUESTION. The chicken came first. In the beginning, there was a hen, a Rhode Island Red, orphaned after the grade school spring semester ended and students stayed home. Except the chicken, which his wife adopted. He did not know why she wanted a chicken. A feeder arrived, and then a waterer, and a coop. And then there were eggs. Without a rooster, the eggs had no future, except in omelets and baked goods. He remembered she had been around chickens when she was a little girl.

During summer she stayed with cousins on their farm. The coop smelled of rich wet manure and damp feathers. She could not say it was a fond memory. That memory mixed with nights when dark things happened that she did not wish to remember. Yet here was this hen, a Rhode Island Red, who had no home. She was a sweet hen, that liked to be held. This hen would help her build new memories. The eggs made her wonder about raising chicks.

He did not know where the five chicks came from. They were just there one day. They had their own cage, warming lamp, chick-sized feeder and waterer, and a large bag of chick starter feed. He watched his wife pick them up and cuddle them, one by one, as if they were babies. He thought she wanted them as proxies for a baby. Each day the chicks grew larger. He watched his wife clean the cage, fill the feeder, and coddle each chick, as well as the full-grown hen. She seemed happy in her new flock. He thought of her now as mama hen and he was happy she was happy. And then one day, one of the chicks let out a pitiful squeaky crow.

The nascent rooster made her wonder about taking the next step. She felt that raising the chicks was not enough. She wanted to incubate fertilized eggs, watch them hatch, start the process of nurturing from the beginning. The chicks had grown through their awkward adolescent weeks and began to look more and more like the adult red hen. Except the rooster, who grew larger, began to practice his cock of the walk strut, and to exercise his vocal cords. His squawk soon became a crow.

He was not prepared for the crowing. It was irritating at first to hear the crowing. The rooster did not crow just at dawn but at all times of day. He watched the little cock strut and crow and take an interest in the mostly grown chicks. The adult red hen mostly kept out of his way. The rooster would approach the hen from behind and just at the crucial moment, she would step to the side.

She watched the rooster try to mount the red hen and then act as if nothing had happened when the hen avoided him. She could respect this rooster, who took no to mean no. She wanted fertilized eggs, which meant she wanted him to succeed. Her mother would have called that God's will. It had nothing to do with choice but rather with duty. She did not want the hen to be forced against her will. That was a monstrous thing to want. It made her shudder to think about it and she could not watch anymore.

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He watched the rooster fertilize eggs. He could no longer eat the eggs in omelets. He especially missed the cookies made with fresh eggs. But he could not eat what he thought was now an embryo, a tiny bit of life set to grow. Yet he was more disturbed when his wife put an egg in an incubator on the kitchen counter. He did not know they had an incubator. Now it was heating and gently rotating the egg freshly fertilized by the rooster.

She did not think about ordering an incubator and incubating eggs. She just ordered one online one day and it showed up two days later. It was not a choice, or a conscious decision. She just followed an instinct. It was something her mother did not understand. She waited to find an egg that was still warm in the brooder box. She knew it was the one when she picked it up. This egg would not go into the refrigerator. She shivered at the thought and felt like she was playing god.

To him, the incubator was just what came next in this story. First came the chick, then the egg, then the incubator. And the egg went slowly around the circle of life under a plastic dome. And he watched, and waited for what came next.

In placing the egg in the incubator, she fulfilled a duty long since overdue. She and her mother had written letters after they parted ways, back and forth, separated by weeks or months. Her mother had told her back then that if she made the choice, then she, her mother, would no longer be there for her. She needed to understand that. To ensure that the egg was viable, she candled the egg periodically. After a week, there should have been a significant darkening of a spot within the egg, the embryo.

And then he stopped watching. There would just be one more chicken. It was not a circle but one long run-on sentence.

She was worried when she did not see the expected development when she candled the egg. In the letters she exchanged with her mother, it seemed like they would come to an understanding, a reconciliation of sorts, that then was then and now was now. Yet the letters did not leave it at that. She decided to give the egg another day.

He saw her candling the egg but did not really know what it meant – whether it was good, or bad, or it just wasn't yet time to know one way or the other. He thought it was taking longer than it should. He saw that his wife was no longer smiling.

She knew the egg was not developing. It was not viable. She needed to make a decision to abort this egg. She felt a deep sadness that this embryo did not have a chance. In the back of her mind, her mother crossed her arms and tapped her foot while shaking her head. She waited another day. She was afraid there would be no baby chick, to admit that this was merely another failed idea.

After the seventh day, he decided to overcome his fear of her reaction and to intrude. There was a decision to be made and he would have to make it. He did not want it to crack. Think of the stink. He took the egg from the incubator when she left the room. But then he could think of no decent thing to do with the egg. He put it back in the incubator before she discovered what he had done.

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She felt she needed to remove the failed egg. She is confused by his lack of comment on the situation. She pulled it out and held it in her hand. She did not know what to do. It felt wrong, just as it had always felt wrong. She knew she had only to turn off her feelings. This time, she failed. In the end, she returned the egg.

Days passed. He watched her candle the egg and adjust the humidity and prepare for the time when the egg was supposed to hatch. He became frustrated with her inability to recognize reality. His frustration battled with his fear of her reaction. Then the incubator stopped rotating. He waited for what would come next.

She thought she heard peeping and swore she saw the egg move. She turned to her husband and told him the egg was moving. The baby chick was alive. She was getting ready to peck through the shell, to be born. She was peeping.

He looked at the egg. He saw no movement. He leaned in and placed his ear against the plastic dome. He heard no peeping. He would be happy if it were alive. He heard only his wife's hope.

See, she said to him, I told you that I could incubate the egg and bring her to term. He only saw that the egg was not hatched. Yes, he said to her, I can see it moving and I can hear it peeping. He left the room. He did not know what to do, except to give her time.

He frustrated her with his disinterest. She watched for the egg to crack, for the pip, the end of the beak to appear. The egg did not hatch. Soon, she was unsure that she had seen any movement. She listened closely. She heard no peeping. She called to her husband. She asked him what he thought she should do.

He said that she should do what she felt was best. It was her choice. He thought that best would be to get rid of the egg. That is what he thought. He knew she did not want to give up this time. He was afraid she would try to break the shell. The stink would be an undeniable truth. He feared what she would do with the truth.

She felt her fist tighten. She wanted to hit someone. She turned to the egg. She felt sorry for the chick. The little red hen that never would be. She could not face putting an end to its future, a future that did not exist. She could not face going through it all again.

He decided to take matters into his own hands. She had reached the point where there was no next step that led to happiness. It would be hard on her and he knew the consequences he would have to live through.

She imagined what should be. The chick would hatch and hop around and peep. When she put her face close to the plastic dome, the chick would hop over toward her and peep. She could not give up now. It was a test of her faith in her ability to nurture life. She felt her mother watching her and shaking her head. She did not know if she was more angry with him or with her.

He could only watch and shake his head. He was careful not to let her see him shake his head. He knew he would be the grim reaper and he thought of the strain on their relationship. He raised his hand toward the incubator.

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She did not see his hand. She gave up on him and saw only the egg. She felt it was time to remove her and she had to prepare a box for her. She felt sad for the chick she had tried to give the opportunity of life. She did not know what else to do. She just wanted more time. She left to find a box.

He saw his opportunity when his wife left the room. He unplugged the incubator and carried it into the bathroom to do what must be done. He then took the incubator to the basement and set it on the shelf.

She heard the sounds from the kitchen. She did not want to return to the kitchen. All she had was the ability to make the choice for herself. She had just needed the time. She needed another lifetime to choose not to be her mother. She looked out the window at the rooster that hopped and skipped around the hens. When the rooster crowed, she knew what she must do next.