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The Chicken Chronicles

Written by Alice Walker

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The Chicken Chronicles

Sitting With the Angels Who Have Returned
With My Memories
Glorious, Rufus, Gertrude Stein, Splendor,
Hortensia, Agnes of God, the Gladyses
and Babe

A MEMOIR

Alice Walker

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1

PAX AMERAUCANA, OR THE CHICKEN CHRONICLES

ONE AFTERNOON, I noticed, as if for the first time, a chicken and her brood crossing the path in front of me. She was industrious and quick, focused and determined. Her chicks were obviously well provided for and protected under her care. I was stopped in my tracks, as if I had never seen a chicken before. And in a way, I hadn't. Though I grew up in the South where we raised chickens every year, for meat and for eggs, and where, from the time I was eight or nine, my job was to chase down the Sunday dinner chicken and

wring its neck. But had those chickens been like this one? Why hadn't I noticed? *Had I noticed?*

Years went by. As they do.

Once I stopped moving about quite so much my interest in chickens, and memory about that particular chicken, asserted itself. I realized I was concerned about chickens, as a Nation, and that I missed them. (Some of you will want to read no further.) I also realized I ate so many eggs, I should get to know the chickens laying them. Whenever I visited someone with chickens that they tended with respect, I felt reassured. I wanted chickens of my own.

One night at dinner with the Garcia-Balandrans, a young couple and their sons who are my neighbors, I broached the subject of my longing. The youngest boy's eyes glowed at the mention of chickens, which I thought a good sign. He is five. The older boy, nine, seemed interested as well. Their parents and I, and my partner, theorized about how to handle the logistics of raising chickens for their eggs, and of course, sharing the eggs. At first we thought we'd have a cage on wheels that we could drive back and forth from my house to theirs, letting the chickens fertilize our respective gardens on a rotational basis. We soon dropped this idea because it seemed cumbersome and messy. Plus we

both have raised beds. What we decided might work would be for them to get the chickens started, when they were chicks, and then transfer them to my place when a chicken house I was dreaming of building had been completed.

This actually happened.

The boys loved the chickens and enjoyed caring for them. By midsummer when the beautiful chicken condo was ready for occupants, more chicks had been ordered to raise at their house, and their parents had bought them a dog. The day of transfer was joyful. Everyone loved the chicken house and yard, right next to my garden, so the chickens would have plenty of fresh produce, and admired the spacious interior of the chicken house, its roosts and its laying nests, which I had lovingly and with hopefulness filled with straw.

Sitting on the ground inside the chicken yard, I was astounded when a chicken strolled over and hopped up into my lap. The boys had interacted with the chickens so tenderly that they had no fear of humans. Instead this one sat very still, as I instinctively cradled it and began to coo and stroke its reddish-colored feathers. I instantly named her Gertrude, and later would call her by her full name: Gertrude Stein.

She looked nothing like Gertrude Stein, of course, but I found whenever I called her Gertrude (I soon abandoned "Gerty") the Stein naturally followed. Over the next few weeks there would be Babe, Babe II, Hortensia, Splendor, Glorious, Rufus, and Agnes of God, to name a few.

2

WHO KNEW WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT?

WHO KNEW WHAT would happen next? Who could guess? That I would fall headlong into a mystery. That I would find myself pulled into the parallel universe that all the other animals exist in, simultaneous with us. In other words, before a couple of days had passed, watering and feeding the chickens, I had fallen in love with them. They were so undeniably gorgeous, their feathers of gold and orange and black, the designs on them. I couldn't believe I had gone years without seeing such extravagance of wearable art. And of course

I did not know who they were. I asked E.G., who calls me Mom. I call him *Hijo*. Son. *Hijo, how did you manage to find such beautiful chickens?* He shrugged: *Well, Mom, I just said five of these and six of those and three of the other guys*. And it was true, they were different. The Barred Rocks were black and white and I'd seen their kind before. There were three of them, already aggressive and jumpy; we thought they'd turn into roosters. The others though, who seemed dressed to dazzle?

I looked on the Internet (another dazzling creation: the thing most like the wonder and spontaneity of Nature, it seems to me, that humans have conjured): there are so many kinds of chickens! Who knew? Growing up, my mother had mostly ordered, from the Sears and Roebuck catalog, Rhode Island Reds.

At first, going by their feathers, I thought they might be Araucanas, a South American breed. But it turned out those chickens are rumpless. Imagine. And that the people who raise them like this because . . . without a rump it is harder for creatures, in the jungle and out, to catch them. This is too basic. Anyway, looking further, I saw the tufted ear feathers, the glowing, perfectly variegated back and tail feathers that my new chickens were sporting. They were Ameraucanas, and apparently, among other wonders, they lay blue and green eggs. Aquarians love these colors. But for eggs,

I have to say, I've always preferred brown. It's content of character though, as we know.

Years ago I had bought a tiny metal stool and for a good twenty-five years never had time to sit on it. I had painted it green, though, with a bit of hope. I found it, placed it in a corner of the chicken yard, and sat.

They were making a sound I hadn't heard since childhood, maybe infancy, and had forgotten. A kind of *queraling* (I made up this word because that's what the sound is like: part chortle, part quarrel). When I offered cracked corn they crowded round and ate it from my hands. When done, the one I would name Babe jumped into my lap, much to the interest of Gertrude Stein who considered my other knee also a lap. They liked to roost, I saw, and chose any elevation above the ground: the garbage cans in which their food is stored, the water dispenser, the roosting bars that I made from a few odd sticks. Babe settled into my arms (Gertrude S. having hopped away in search of a bug) like she'd always been there, drowsy and quiet, as if she were a cat.

Who knew?