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Joyce Carol Oates

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Mr. Rooster



Joyce Carol Oates

The behavior of barnyard roosters, replicating the more belligerent, strutting-preening-aggressive macho behavior of many male creatures, was a source of endless fascination, and trepidation, to me as a young child growing up on a small farm in the “north country” of western New York State.

First of all, the obvious: our Mr. Rooster was a gorgeous bird. He was a Rhode Island red who (to my affrighted child’s eye) was nearly my height. His tail feathers were spectacular, burnished red-brown, red-maroon, golden-red, that shone in the sun. His comb was erect, and rosy-red; his ruff-feathers were full, and bristling; his scaly-sinewy legs carried him swiftly to his target. His beak was sharp, and its prowess must have been enabled by tough neck muscles, like those of a woodpecker. Most uncanny were Mr. Rooster’s sharp suspicious eyes that squinted at me in the instant before he rushed at me to peck at my bare legs and hands.

For a long time it was my hope that Mr. Rooster would like me, and would not rush to peck me as soon as he saw me. Was this a childish and outlandish wish? *Not to be pecked, with no provocation?* Let us

think of such a wish as the cornerstone of all ethics: in order that I can be protected from your violence, let me try in whatever ways I can, with whatever strategies in my possession, to induce you to “like me.” Let me try to suggest to you what is “good behavior” on your part—that would lessen your propensity to peck at me until I bleed.

It was the great thrill of my childhood when as a child of eight or nine I was given the responsibility of gathering eggs from the nests in the coop and feeding our little flock of forty-odd chickens under the tutelage of my Hungarian grandmother.

Chicken feed consisted of small kernels of corn, that exuded a flour-ish dusty pleasant odor; it was purchased in a hefty cotton-cloth 20-pound bag, with a decorative pattern (to make it suitable for refashioning as skirts or blouses for girls), but in the barn had to be secured in a larger canvas sack to keep out rodents. To get the seed you lowered a pan deep into the feed-sack, and from out of this pan you distributed feed in zestful handfuls while calling out, in a high-pitched voice, “CHICK!-chick-chick-chick-chick-CHI-ICK!—repeated many times as chickens came rushing and clucking to peck in the dirt around your feet. (All our chickens were “free range”—though the expression did not yet exist in the benumbed 1950s.) This seed you scattered in concentric circles, trying not to concentrate too much seed in one area, where the more aggressive chickens would converge and contend with one another in a maelstrom of clucking and wing-flapping. There is no activity like feeding chickens more conducive to making a young child feel important, powerful, “popular”—though even a very young child

soon understands that the frenzied chickens have not the slightest interest in her but only in the seed she has tossed to them.

Prowling out in the cornfield Mr. Rooster came rushing as soon as he heard the call, knocking aside the hens in his eagerness to get to the seed. Sometimes in the midst of gobbling he might glance up at me and decide to rush at me and peck my bare knee with his beak—who knew why?

Comical as it sounds this attack came frequently. Yet it was always surprising to me, astonishing. I never seemed to escape in time as if, despite my experience, I could not believe it was really happening.

Why was Mr. Rooster so *hateful to me!*

Why was the rooster's beak so *swift, so sharp and so mean!*

Yet more cruelly Mr. Rooster sometimes chased me across the yard, squawking and flapping his wings. If I ran fast enough I could escape into the house, if not he pecked me amid a flurry of wings, drawing blood. If my Hungarian grandfather was around he mostly just laughed. The terror of children in that long-ago time was not taken seriously. If sufficiently annoyed, my grandfather might give the squawking rooster a kick into the air.

And yet: I adored Mr. Rooster. That Mr. Rooster was hostile to me, nothing at all like my pet Happy Chicken who would snuggle against me and allow me to stroke her back and wings, even to kiss her hard, feathered head, did not make me admire Mr. Rooster less. Where the smaller, plainer red-brown hens were predictable in their behavior, usually timorous and boring, Mr. Rooster was unpredictable and anything but boring. In the midst of preening his feathers he might suddenly turn upon an unsuspecting hen and

peck her savagely; he might leap into the air with dazzling accuracy to swallow a fly; with much commotion he might flap his way onto the lowermost limb of a tree, to perch and doze. Mr. Rooster was ceaselessly hungry, on the prowl for a treat. And Mr. Rooster was ceaselessly belligerent, on the prowl for a fight. The rooster is the very icon of male vanity: if he knew how only a minuscule percentage of male chicks were allowed to live, ninety-nine percent of them squashed to death within seconds after hatching, such a fact wouldn't fill him with existential horror but with a confirmation of his own assured destiny. *I am he who was chosen to exist.*

From Happy Chicken as from numerous beloved pet cats I learned to love creatures unlike myself, and to inspire in them what felt like affection for me, a little girl; from Mr. Rooster, I learned that there are those who will never love me, nor even like me, who might at the slightest provocation, or no provocation at all, try to hurt me. This simple, intransigent fact: Nothing we can do or say will placate those who are determined to dislike us. Indeed, they might well like to squash us out of existence, to make more room for themselves.

As a little girl I ran crying to my grandmother to ask: Why does Mr. Rooster hate me?—and my grandmother told me in her heavily accented English, Don't be silly. The rooster doesn't hate you, he is just a rooster. Always you should know, that is what roosters do. My grandmother lacked the knowledge to have explained *The rooster is hardwired to blindly attack, it is his instinct.* She could not have said *To allow us to behave other than instinctively, like a brute creature—that is the purpose of education, of morality, of civilization.*

A shortened version of "Mr. Rooster" was published in *The New York Times Magazine*, May 21, 2017.