

HONEYGUIDE

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Roosters and Roses

Kate Mayer Mangan



*A*pril of 2020, and I was struggling to keep trudging. It was piercing, as I was trying to keep going not only for myself, but for my boys. Quarantined from school, they looked to me to sort out overwhelming problems too big for any one of us to fix. Australia was burning, the creatures were going extinct, a virus raged. My list of scrawny tasks felt more meaningless than ever. What was the point of wiping surfaces or forcing children to learn fractions while the world crumbled? I couldn't say.

Then, a rooster appeared in the yard across the street. This was somewhat surprising, as our neighbors do not keep chickens. They do occasionally bring home live roosters—to kill— but we had never seen any of the birds before. The condemned roosters would crow for an hour or two, hidden from sight, then fall silent. I assumed that, like his predecessors, this fellow would be dead before sunset.

I don't know if I stopped to look at him because I was sick of the news or tired of

scrolling or just bored. Whatever it was, my whole family—husband, two boys,

me, and the dog—dropped our tasks and gathered at the window to watch this splashy orange fellow peck at the frosty earth. He was gorgeous: shiny copper feathers, bold red head, and on his chest a pattern of green and black like dragon scales. Regal. When he wasn't eating, he'd stand with his head back, face raised to the sun, chest puffed out, often on one foot, as though proclaiming, Here I am, look at me.



At some point during the morning, he escaped from the neighbors' killing yard and set up shop under our bird feeder. The boys pressed their faces against the window and giggled while they watched him. He feasted on the birdseed that the cardinals, finches, and blue jays dropped. I found myself grinning every time I passed the window and saw him guarding his territory against squirrels and mourning doves.

"Tell us about him, Mom!" the kids begged. I didn't know anything about roosters, never having paid them notice, so we looked him online. We discovered that he was a Rhode Island Red, an impressive beast. They can survive the cold down to 20 below, they fiercely protect their flocks, and their feathers are so sensitive that they can detect changes in air current and vibration. Perhaps that was how this bird knew we were trying to sneak up on him before he could see us. He was also very fast. Nobody was catching this guy.

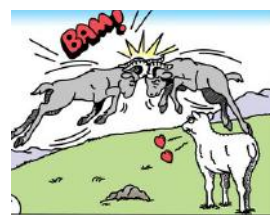
Thich Nhat Hanh has a mantra: "Breathing in, I notice that my in-breath has become deep. Breathing out, I notice that my out-breath has become slow. Deep. Slow." Deep, slow noticing may be the foyer to hope, where we stand just before we begin to defeat despondence. My mother knew this. Pausing to notice this bird, I remembered that, when a hard rain or a hail was predicted, she cut rosebuds from the garden. She would fill pretty vases—often old sake bottles in rich blues and greens—with water and place the cut stems in them. She would turn the vase, looking at the bud from all sides, then gently ran

her fingers along the petals to get to know their seams and edges. Slowly and tenderly, she would slide her fingernail under one of the petals to see if it was ready to open. If it wasn't, she would stop. Maybe try later. But if there was any give, she would gently loosen the petals to coax open the blossom. "It's a little nudge for the flower," she said, "to help it bloom sooner."

By dinner, the boys had named the rooster. They tested out "Dominic," but it didn't stick. The bird fanned his tail feathers, tucked his chin, and charged a large crow who dared try for a fallen seed. After the crow flapped away, the rooster was no longer Dominic. He became Reggie.

"Don't get too attached," my husband warned when he learned of the name. "That bird is going to end up as somebody's dinner. An owl, a fox, heck, a big raccoon, will get him. Or the neighbors will hunt him down."

Although I nodded, I pictured my mother's smile when her rosebuds bloomed, and I wondered whether attachment might be exactly what we needed. The boys seemed to think so. They rolled their eyes at their father and ignored his warning. Maybe they understood something I had forgotten—that loving, even if it risks pain, also means beauty, laughter, hope. (Or maybe they didn't fully understand the probability that their new friend would get eaten.) We adults were still tightly guarded, condemning ourselves to the duller, more insidious pain of not engaging.



It took my husband and me until the next morning to admit how fond we'd become of Reggie. He woke us, vigorously announcing his presence outside our bedroom window. And we laughed. A fingernail had slipped under the tight petals around our hearts and nudged us open. We started to plan his rescue. We couldn't keep him because we'd be reported to the police for violating noise ordinances. Plus, the dog salivated whenever

he saw Reggie.

I began reaching out to dozens of humane societies and animal sanctuaries. All were kind, apologetic, and far past their capacities for roosters. There are legions of unwanted roosters, many casualties of the backyard chicken movement. People buy baby chicks before they can tell the sex. Then, when they realize they've bought boys who will never lay, they abandon the birds. Few people want a rooster.

I felt like a failed telemarketer. Rejected again and again. Nobody would or could take Reggie. Maybe my husband was right; maybe we shouldn't have named him. Then finally, just before despair set in, I found Angel Eyes Farm. It was run by Debbie Bowers, who started rescuing animals after her son died of leukemia. She said she did it as a way to not to go crazy when she lost her child. Another mother curing despair by saving lovely things.

Debbie said she would take Reggie if we could catch him ourselves, but she seemed to doubt that we'd manage. Semi-wild roosters are wily, so our only chance was to wait until dark when he slept. And we needed to get him on the first try. If we missed, he'd wise up and become virtually impossible to catch.

At dusk, Reggie hopped up on the windowsill behind the lilacs and settled in. When the night was deep and he was sleeping soundly, we made our move. We pulled out our camping headlamps, poked holes in a Home Depot moving box, and plotted the exact angles of our ambush. My husband crept up from one side, and I waited with the box. The red light from his headlamp bobbed closer to Reggie as he slept on. I held my breath. I anticipated squawking and flapping, a mess of feathers, and spurs and blood. But my husband simply wrapped his arms gently around Reggie, who gobbled a bit, and slid as easily into his box as my mother's stems slid into their vases.

Once we had taped up the box, I peeked through a hole, and he seemed to be sleeping peacefully. He was so pretty. I wanted to stroke his feathers, but I didn't. More than I wanted to touch him, I wanted him to feel safe. Saved. Neither my husband nor I

mentioned returning Reggie to our neighbors' yard. We smiled at each other and wished Reggie a good sleep.

The next morning was sunny and cool when we drove Reggie to the farm. A huge Gampr dog announced our arrival. As we waited for Debbie, we watched the residents of Angel Eyes: a white peacock stretched, dozens of ducks waddled about, a pig ambled across the yard. The kids laughed and pointed. Somewhere, out of sight, a rooster crowed.

Debbie emerged, smiling. She had peaceful eyes and strong arms. I recognized in her a ferocity threaded through with tenderness that was familiar. My mother had been like that: her eyes misted easily but, beneath, were steady and resolute. With a catch in my throat, I breathed in the crisp spring air and straightened my back, glad we'd named Reggie and glad we'd brought him here.

Debbie opened her arms to take Reggie. The boys said good-bye through a gap in the box. "See ya, buddy," they whispered, holding my hands. I hoped for a climactic release scene, perhaps with Reggie running across the dirt to join his new friends, but this was still the real world. Reggie had to go into quarantine to avoid infecting the rest of the flock. Better quarantine than the guillotine.

The relief was short-lived. Driving home, less than a mile from Angel Eyes, we passed a big sheet of plywood with hand-painted white letters that read: FOR SALE FRESH LOCAL CHICKEN MEAT. I sighed.

For a moment, I couldn't decide if this one rooster's life was irrelevant and trivial in the face of a global pandemic, millions of chickens slaughtered every day, and the hottest year on record, or if it was essential precisely because of those facts. One soul saved against so much suffering and death, one soul that brought joy and beauty, one soul that I cared about. I decided that's essential even, or maybe especially, now. Before Reggie pranced into our yard, just a few days earlier, I had been caught in a pervasive lie: that only huge problems are worth tackling and that only huge differences worth making. That nothing

small matters. But if that is true, then rescuing a single rooster or a single rose doesn't matter at all. And I know it does, because I did not feel despondent even after seeing the sign. I felt engaged, connected, awake. Reggie had reminded me that the size of the dent we make in a problem does not determine what matters. What matters, what safeguards and sparks vibrancy, is noticing, then protecting, little patches of beauty, grace, and laughter.

Driving home, the sun filtering through the still winter-bare branches, I thought of my mother's fingertip sliding beneath a butter-yellow petal, of my husband's arms looping around Reggie, of Debbie staying sane with her rescue animals, and I smiled. By rescuing Reggie, I remembered what my mother had taught me long ago. Rain and hail and catastrophe will destroy so much, and you will never be able to save everything. But you can protect a few roses

or a rooster, and that is the antidote to despondence. That day, and when I remember the lessons of Reggie and my mother's roses, the trudging goes a little easier, maybe even giving way to gliding.

Kate Mayer Mangan lives in Western Pennsylvania with her husband, two boys, and rescue mutt, and she works as a lawyer. To date, her writing has appeared mainly in legal documents, though she has written about well-being in The Huffington Post, Lawyerist, Women Lawyers' Journal, and elsewhere. This is her first creative non-fiction work.

