

PECKING ORDER

by Jennifer Fergesen

They bought Alouette at Smilers Farm, a former stable turned chicken dispensary outside town. In the red brick stalls that once housed horses, chickens huddled in mottled clumps: Columbian Blacktails, tall and leggy, long-feathered Silkies like piles of straw, Speckled Marans so variegated the eye struggled to focus on their pelts. The farmer had thrown them all together where they fit, Marans and Blacktails mingling in the stalls, but they sorted themselves; the chicken clumps were as color-coordinated as a tidy sock drawer. Only Alouette remained apart.

While the rest of the chickens huddled in the shade of the corners, Alouette stood in the late-afternoon sun that streamed through the skylight as if she knew it suited her. It did: in the light her feathers glinted like a horde of gold coins of various denominations and ages. Some were pure yellow, some tarnished to bronze, all rimmed around the edges with a ring of black like kohl around a woman's eyes. Alouette's own eyes were not the dull brown of her sisters'; they were gold like her feathers, and stared out of the sides of her head with such a suspicious intelligence Lisa had to look away.

"What breed is she?" Lisa asked the farmer, who had accompanied them to the stalls.

"Oh, Alouette's no breed," he said. "She's a hybrid. Got her from a neighbor who let some wild fowl into his coop. Don't know where she came from, not really."

John was looking at the laminated price list posted on the wall. "Chickens are pretty expensive," he said.

"I'd give you that one for cheap," said the farmer. "Not much of a market for hybrids. She probably won't be much of a layer." It was clear that he had had a hard time finding a buyer for Alouette; she looked more fully developed than the rest of the birds, her comb and wattle plush and red.

"Hm," said John, "we were hoping for fresh eggs —"

"We'll take her," said Lisa, looking back into the chicken's gold eyes.

John didn't argue. He had become very compliant in the weeks after the trouble, when Lisa flitted from project to abandoned project. If a gold chicken could anchor her back to reality, she would have a gold chicken.

On the ride home from the farm Alouette passed so much foamy fear-caecal that she soaked through the cardboard box and stained their upholstered backseat. Lisa did not want to touch her in that state, so it was John who cleaned her in the laundry sink. It was he who carried her to the coop





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they had built in the backyard from pre-cut slices of pressboard, like a gingerbread house from a kit. Lisa watched: he cradled her in his arms, her clipped golden wings ruffling against the dark of his skin, and brought her over the threshold of the coop. Like a bride, Lisa thought. Alouette scratched at the clean straw with her long white feet and flapped in concern. “Braaa bap bap bap,” she complained. Her freshly-clipped wings did as little to help her escape as Lisa’s naked arms would help Lisa, if she flapped them.

“Hey, lady,” said John, strong and soft, stroking her back like he stroked Lisa’s on the nights when she was inconsolable. “You’re ok.” It took half an hour of quiet words and gentle pats for Alouette to calm down and roost on one of the perches in the coop.

John joined Lisa in the kitchen, where she had been watching them through the window in unplaceable discomfort. “I have a good feeling about this girl,” he said. “I hope she gives us some eggs.”

“Ooh, eggs,” said Lisa. “Yummers.”

In the weeks that followed, Alouette ate quantities of poultry pellet and scratched up nearly all the grass in the backyard but did not give them a single egg. Lisa watched from the upstairs window as John checked her nesting box every morning, patted through the straw of the coop, even checked the grass outside to make sure Alouette hadn’t hidden her own nest somewhere. Nothing. Still he poured her pellet and raked out her straw and carried her through the yard every evening, singing chicken-themed songs. “We have to get her used to being handled,” he explained. “That’s what all the how-tos say.” Alouette would coo along as he sang.

Lisa, meanwhile, passed her own egg, blood, and mucosal tissue as scheduled. On the day it came Lisa went into the yard and stared into the window of the chicken coop. Alouette sat roosted on her perch as if the six inches it separated her from the ground would protect her from all the predators of the world. She did this when an airplane passed overhead, the closest thing to birds-of-prey their suburb had to offer.

“You think you’re so great,” said Lisa.

“Barp?” said Alouette, startled by her voice.

Lisa opened the door and crawled into the coop. It was just large enough for her to fit inside if she folded like a fetus. Alouette, offended, hopped to a higher perch. She scolded Lisa but didn’t try to peck her, recognizing her place in the order.

The coop smelled of earth and ammonia, faintly honeyed, like John’s sweat after sex. Hatred throbbed in Lisa’s uterine muscle. She looked up at Alouette, who had puffed up her kohl-lined feathers to make herself look larger — but Lisa, of course, was larger still.

From her place below Alouette’s perch Lisa could see the margin where the long feathers of tail, overlapping finger-like at their tips, met the fine pale down of her lower abdomen. Alouette’s whole body heaved the way bosoms do in novels, the rosebud of her cloaca winking in and out of view. Her comb and wattle were scarlet as painted lips. She was such an

image of youth and health she could have modeled for the chicken branch of the NS-Frauenschaft — why, then, no eggs?

Lisa heard John’s car pull into the driveway. She climbed out of the coop, which was harder than climbing in. By the time she worked herself upright John was there with the straw-sweeping broom.

“Why were you in the coop? Are you taking care of Alouette today?” said John, nonplussed. The chicken chores became his sole responsibility soon after they bought her.

“Just hangin’ out,” said Lisa. “Us girls.” She winked sweetly.

John brushed a feather out of Lisa’s hair. “You have shit on your head,” he said. “Maybe take a shower.”

In the shower, Lisa passed a clot of blood so large it felt solid. The water diluted the blood to rivulets of pink, the color of Charlotte’s winking cloaca. Lisa stomped the pinked tile.

Lisa never dealt well with her periods, not since they started in seventh grade. They didn’t hurt much, not physically, but the blood always came as a shock. Now, periods were worse than ever, colored as they were by failure.

In bed that night, John reached for Lisa’s freshly-showered skin. Lisa moved to the edge of the bed. She didn’t like being touched when she was bleeding; why bother?

“Are you doing ok?” said John.

“Fine, honey munchkins,” said Lisa.

John sighed. “Alright.” He stood up and put on a pair of sweatpants. “I’m going to check on Alouette. Joe said he saw a raccoon going after his girls.” Joe, next door, had a noisy rooster with unclipped wings and a whole harem of hens.

Alone in bed, Lisa felt hate rise through her digestive tract like bile. She curled herself around her middle, making herself tight and small. She was asleep before John came back inside and didn’t wake after he left for work.

In the morning Lisa brushed gold powder over her eyelids and lined her eyes with black. Her eyeshadow was realistically metallic, but something was off about the color. She went to the coop to check.

As soon as she opened the door of the coop, she knew something had changed. Alouette shrieked at her, a long high sound Lisa had never heard before. When her eyes adjusted to the dark she saw that Alouette had flattened herself into a corner of the coop, all the height of her body settled around her like a deflated basketball. The straw around her was littered with her own plucked feathers. Lisa put out a hand to touch her. “Braaaak!” Alouette screamed, puffing her feathers into a golden frill. She lunged her beak at Lisa and barely missed.

“Nothing’s wrong with her,” said John, when Lisa called him at work. “Sounds like she’s broody. I read about it — it happens when hens want to have a chick.”

“What are we supposed to do about it? She’s



stuck in a corner and it doesn't look like she's eaten anything."

"I'll deal with it when I get home," he said. "She just wants an egg. Give her one and see what she does."

Lisa took a pale white egg from the refrigerator and placed it in front of Alouette like an offering. Alouette tilted her head at it, staring with each of her golden eyes. Then, in one startling movement, she jabbed out her neck, caught the egg under her chin, and tucked it beneath her flattened body. In the terrible split second before she settled back into the straw Lisa saw that there was already an egg there, the pale brown color of John's skin.

"The raccoon got to Alouette," Lisa told John at dinner. "All he ate was her crop. Just left the rest of her there. Tragic. And so wasteful."

"So you fried the rest of her?" said John, turning over one of the golden-brown drumsticks artfully arranged on the antique cast-iron pan in front of him.

"No, I buried her," said Lisa. "This is from Temple's Kosh'r Chick'n." In fact, about two-thirds of the breaded parts were from Temple's, bought to supplement her amateur butchering job.

John shook his head. "What a shame." He held up the drumstick and gazed into the ceiling. "To Alouette," he said, and took a hearty bite.

Lisa waited for remorse to drip down John's face, but men murder their mistresses all the time; perhaps she expected too much.

John, feeling her hot stare, looked up. "Is there something wrong with your eyes?" he said.

Lisa brought a napkin under her eye and smeared away gold metallic eyeshadow muddied with black. In the exertion of the kill her makeup had run almost to her cheekbones. Her eyes blurred. The napkin came away with more smears of black.

John stopped going to the coop after Alouette's death, so he never noticed the incubator that Lisa kept

there. Chicken eggs incubate for about twenty-one days: three weeks for John either to confess or to be proven innocent. After eighteen days Lisa held the egg to the light and saw a dark shape inside. She placed it back in the incubator, resisting the deep-set urge to crush it in her fist.

On the twenty-first day Lisa's period returned and the egg began to hatch. First, a tiny hole appeared near the tip of the egg, barely a pinprick, with a fragile chirp emanating from somewhere behind it. Over the course of a day, the pinprick spread across the surface of the shell like a crack in a sidewalk. The process was slower than Lisa had imagined, but she still wasn't ready when the chick burst out of the shell. The chick didn't look ready, either; wet and ragged, she seemed underbaked, as if a toothpick stuck into her middle would not come out clean. She would chirp for a few seconds then take a break to close her swollen eyelids before starting again. In the moments when her eyes were open, Lisa saw they were brown, like Alouette's sisters at Smilers Farm — and like John's. Her feathers, slicked tight to her skin with wet, looked as dark and straight at John's hair.

After a day in the incubator, the chick was dry enough to stand under its own weight. Lisa let her fortify herself with a bowl of infant mash before taking her to meet her father.

"You bought another chicken?" said John, when Lisa showed him his daughter. "That's good. The coop was going to waste."

"I didn't buy her," said Lisa.

"Oh, is it from Joe?" said John, taking the brown chick in his brown hands. "What a cutie."

"She's Alouette's daughter," said Lisa. "She's your daughter."

John blinked at her, the chick squirming against his fingers. Lisa waited, but there was nothing to see in his face. "Because she's your daughter, too, right?" he said, smiling at last. "She'll be our baby for now."

“Yes,” said Lisa. “That’s why she’ll be living in the nursery.”

They had bought the house because of the nursery and acquired most of its furniture soon after moving in. Lisa pulled the pieces of the crib and the dresser out of the crawl space, where John had packed them away when she was too far gone to help. The rest was a matter of accessorizing. Lisa bought the wooden “Charlotte” blocks, pink instead of blue. Charlotte watched her from her brooder box as she painted glow-in-the-dark constellations on the walls.

On a diet of poultry pellet mixed with human food — blended by Lisa to meet her hybrid needs — Charlotte grew tall and fully-feathered in a month. At six weeks she had the blend of awkwardness and supple grace that typifies a nubile adolescent. Under Lisa’s care, she never grew out of her infant neediness; she cried like a six-week-old human, though a six-week-old chicken is already old enough to mate.

Maybe she would have had a healthier emotional development if John had been more involved in raising her. He was used to taking over for her projects when she got tired of them, as with Alouette, but now when he offered help she refused. She had a new source of energy powering her through Charlotte’s attention-hungry first weeks. It was spite that woke her up before dawn to feed her every morning, spite that drove her to keep the nursery in human order when Charlotte threw it into animal chaos, spite that prompted her to remind John, every morning, that Charlotte was his daughter.

Lisa watched Charlotte grow more like her father every day of those first six weeks. She was shaped, of course, like a chicken — Lisa assumed chicken genes were dominant — but her coloring was entirely John. Same eyes, same plumage. She was even developing a peak of black feathers near her crown that resembled John’s cowlick. And she looked more like her mother, too. She had none of Alouette’s dazzling color, but in her brown eyes Lisa could see the same taunting intelligence.

“What are you looking at?” Lisa said one morning, gathering the soiled sheets from Charlotte’s crib. Charlotte tilted her slim brown head at her, looking at her with one brown eye and then the other. They were so similar to the slanted, suspicious glances John had lately taken to giving her, though Charlotte had no eyebrows to furrow. The resemblance filled Lisa with more anger than she ever allowed herself to direct at John.

“Coquette,” she growled. She lunged at Charlotte, who threw herself backward and slammed into the star-painted wall, shrieking. Feathers scattered in the air like snow. Lisa tried to cover her with the bundle of soiled sheets, but Charlotte hopped onto the low-slung nightstand, out of reach. Stomping towards her, Lisa stepped on a heart-shaped plate of pellet that she had left on the floor. It split in two, and the sharp plastic edges jabbed through Lisa’s slippers’ thin soles. She screamed incoherently and placekicked one of the shards at Charlotte. It hit the glow-in-the-dark Cygnus behind her

and broke again. Charlotte, terrified, hopped to and fro on the nightstand, crying her overgrown chick’s cry.

“What’s going on?” said John, standing at the door. In the commotion Lisa had not heard him run down the stairs.

“Nothing, apple dumping,” said Lisa, pushing the hair out of her face. “Just a little catfight. Meow.” She bent her hand at him like a paw.

Charlotte, chirping pathetically, hop-flapped across the alphabet rug to John, who scooped her up in her arms. “Why don’t you go back to bed?” he said to Lisa. “I’ll deal with Charlotte this morning.”

Lisa picked up the pile of sheets to take them to the laundry room. In the kitchen, struck with a wave of nausea, she sat down at an island stool. The cast-iron pan where she had fried Alouette sat on the island, gleaming black and lubricious. Broilers reach slaughter age at four to seven weeks. Lisa put down the sheets and took the pan by the handle.

“Sweetcake?” called Lisa, as she walked back to the nursery. “Go get ready for work, I’ll take care of Charlotte —”

The nursery door was open half a hand. Through the crack, Lisa saw John soft-shoeing on the alphabet rug, Charlotte in his arms. He was pressing kisses onto the fine brown feathers of her head. She clucked small sounds of contentment. Behind them Lisa’s constellations glowed white and hot. She felt the heft of the cast iron in her hand, an easy weight thanks to years of heaving it from stove to table, and imagined the yielding thud of metal against bone.

John, who knew his wife’s step as well as a child knows its mother’s voice, looked towards the door. “Lisa!” he called. “Come have a dance with your daughter.”

Lisa looked from his smiling face to Charlotte’s chicken one. Both were brown, as are about a third of all of the twenty-one billion chickens on the planet. Three chickens for every human. And she had already used two of her chances.

Lisa put down the pan and stepped into the room. She ran her fingertips along the

feathers of Charlotte’s back. John gently passed Charlotte to her; she shifted nervously at first, but soon nestled into Lisa’s warmth. Chickens are not smart enough to hold a grudge.

“What a pretty baby,” Lisa said.

“Our baby,” said John, and kissed his wife. 🍷

