

THE EGGS AND I

When grief took the flavor out of life, raising chickens brought unexpected comforts

BREAKFAST WAS SALVATION. That summer, a stranger might have thought that we were making a sacrament, or a fetish, out of breakfast: the eggs still warm from the henhouse, the toasted homemade bread, the rough-cut bacon, the occasional squash blossom picked from the garden, stuffed with mozzarella, and deep-fried. But anyone who knew my husband and me would have understood that those perfect eggs over easy were life preservers in disguise. Breakfast was making it possible to get through the rest of the day.

It was the summer of 2005. My mother had died in May. She was elderly, and her illness was brief, but we were blindsided by grief. As everyone knows, there's nothing you can do to prepare for such a loss, but I think that my husband, Howie, and I sensed, early on, that our fragile psyches would either shatter or endure on the tensile strength of small (mostly edible) pleasures. That spring, we doubled the size of the vegetable garden at our house in the Hudson Valley, and a few weeks after my mother's death we got the chickens.

Their arrival—and, later, their

departure—had much to do with Michael and Laura, the house's caretakers, who keep the pipes from freezing in the winter and mow the lawn when we're not around in the summer. An avid reader of *Mother Earth News*, Michael persuaded us that poultry husbandry was simpler and less demanding than we might have imagined. It was Michael who installed the coops in an empty shack, which he proceeded to cover with so many layers of scrap metal that the wiliest fox or coyote (at night, we could hear both giggling and howling nearby) would have needed a blowtorch to get in. And it was Michael who found the old woman who sold us the chickens—year-old rhode island reds, five dollars apiece, plump and healthy and gorgeous and ready to start laying.

Our ten chickens made their entrance in unglamorous cardboard boxes. Unpacked and released into their new home, they adapted so quickly that it was as if they'd always lived here. How pretty they were with their glossy, russet feathers, catching and beaming back the sun as they scurried across the green

lawn! And who would have imagined that they were so intelligent! The birds almost instantly found their roosts and started pecking at the corn that we tossed at their feet. We watched anxiously, proudly, like the parents of newborns, as they settled into their comfy, straw-lined metal cubbies. Within an hour, one of them began to make restless, clucking noises that, even to a novice, seemed to hint at the imminent arrival of an egg.

"You go get it," Howie told me, as if, being female, I'd be better suited to deal with matters of parturition. I hesitantly nudged the hen aside and groped beneath her warm feathers. My God, there it was. Of course, I knew that's what chickens did, and yet, as I cradled the egg in my palm, I couldn't have been any more surprised if I'd produced it myself. Encouraged by their friend's example, several other hens followed suit, and by the end of the morning we had enough eggs for breakfast.

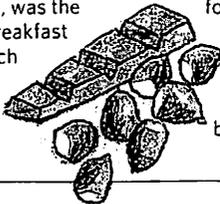
I remember how shockingly bright the yolks seemed, the dazzling marigold orange that made me wonder, Hey, what were those pale, bleached globs that passed themselves off as egg yolks? But

it was the taste that surprised me the most: the sweet, concentrated intensity of flavor; the pure, unadulterated eggness. The difference between a store-bought variety and what our hens had brought forth was akin to the chasm between a garden-ripened tomato and those greenish rocks that you used to see in the supermarket before agribusiness discovered a better way to fake the appearance of ripeness. What I remember the most clearly was the sudden recognition that this was the first meal I'd felt like eating, let alone enjoyed, in months.

Simply frying a just-laid egg was an experience completely different from anything I'd known before. No matter how distractedly or awkwardly I turned my eggs over easy, the yolks held their shape, perfect orange islands rising from the cratered lunar landscape of the crisp-bottomed whites. At some point early in the season, I read an article that said that free-range eggs were lower in cholesterol than their mass-produced counterparts. I didn't check the research; I didn't wait to read the statistics. I took it as license to eat as many eggs as I wanted, without anxiety or

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ITALY Gianduja, a paste-like confection of chocolate and hazelnuts native to Italy's Piedmont region, was the inspiration for the breakfast spread *Navelle*, which was introduced to the world in the 1940s by the Italian



pastry maker Pietro Ferrero. Loved by children (and quite a few grown-ups) as a topping for toast, Nutella is now sold in more than 75 countries and is more popular than peanut butter.

VIETNAM A steaming bowl of the aromatic noodle soup known as *pho* starts the day for much of Vietnam; indeed, it could be called the country's national dish. Even so, *pho*'s origins are international: the noodles are courtesy of the Chinese,

and the rich beef stock is French influenced.

SOMALIA A Somali breakfast wouldn't be complete without *injera*, a sourdough flatbread, similar to Ethiopian injera, that's traditionally eaten with honey, butter, or beans.

EGYPT *Fai mezzames*, the breakfast specialty consisting of fava beans simmered with garlic, is Egypt's national dish. Many claim that it's as old as the pyramids, based on the evidence of favas found in pharaonic-era tombs. (See page 86 for a recipe.)

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guilt. From then on, there were sponge cakes, eggy homemade pastas, frittatas, clafoutis, flans, and wobbly, delicious puddings. No matter how many times I'd been warned about the possibly harmful effects of overindulgence in omelettes, to eat eggs that summer was to choose life over death. Our hearts had been broken, and the notion of heart-healthy had come to seem beside the point. The closest I came to pure happiness during those difficult months was when I was eating a breakfast that Howie cooked, one that I'll never forget: two fried eggs draped atop paella left over from the night before, fried until it too had formed a delectably dark crust.

THE BEST THING about the evenings was the way the chickens somehow knew that it was time to wrap it up and how they scurried in an uneven line toward the nice, locked-down henhouse, where they would be safe for the night.

I felt gratitude toward our chickens. I wanted them to be happy. That was why, at the beginning, we took "free range" too literally. It was amazing how quickly the hens discovered the flower beds, how they enjoyed digging up and scattering the flower bulbs. Just before our entire farm began to look like a barnyard, Michael built the chickens a large enclosure that they could reduce to dust, in which they could then happily frolic. Eventually, a neighbor helpfully pointed out that a chicken's disposition and productivity had less to do with real estate than—as is

so often the case throughout the animal kingdom—with loneliness and sex.

We needed a rooster. The search for one brought us to an odd local institution: a shelter dedicated to the rescue of farm animals who would otherwise have been eaten. The shelter's standards for adoption were so selective and strict that, we were warned, a home visit might be required before we could have the roosters. The director, an idealistic young woman (her chest crisscrossed with angry welts inflicted by a furious rabbit) took us on a tour that featured the largest hogs I'd ever seen, including one that had been saved from a pig race in Colorado, a contest in which the winner received the prize of being killed and roasted. I didn't ask how the hog had gotten here from the Rockies, nor did I ask about all the humans in need of rescue, perhaps with plates of roast pork. I kept quiet. I wanted the roosters.

And, oh, how desirable they were, strutting around the poultry yard, switching their ebony tail feathers banded with butterfly wing blue, their puffy chests covered by plumage that ranged from bright yellow to deep brown. I say roosters because there were two. "Two mellow brothers from Woodstock" was how the director described them. They had to be adopted together. Were we willing? Yes, we were.

We took them home in cages and set them free, and within a matter of minutes the two mellow brothers had gang-raped all ten of our hens. For those who have

not watched chicken sex—well, it's not a pretty sight. Rooster love is nasty, brutish, and short and often involves the rooster's stepping on the chicken's head. I watched in horrified fascination, and when it was over I wondered at the utterly strange things that have the power to distract us even briefly from grief.

BREAKFAST BY BREAKFAST, we got through the summer, inching back toward what I suppose you could call normal life. I talked about the chickens a lot. It seemed that chickens and books were the only subjects I could safely discuss without the fear that tears would well up in my eyes.

Whatever we might have thought of the roosters' courtship style, the chickens seemed to like it. They got fat and gave us so many eggs that we were giving them away to friends, which, I can tell you, is a wonderful thing to be able to do. The roosters developed a dominance pattern. The alpha-mellow brother ruled the roost, as they say, and kept all the hens to himself, while the less powerful brother vented his frustration by (ineffectually, thank heaven) attacking our daughter-in-law and a friend's son. The beta rooster started to scare me.

Fall came. We returned to the city and went up to the country on weekends. When we drove into the driveway on our first return trip, we rushed to say hi to the chickens before we walked into the house. Over a few weeks, one of the chickens and one of the roosters had escaped from the fencing and been killed—one by

a fox or a coyote, one by a neighbor's dog.

In October, Michael got a puppy. And in November he called to say that the dog had proved smarter than the foxes and the coyotes. Michael was truly sorry. All the chickens were dead. I cried, but in my heart of hearts I was a little relieved. I'd been worried about how the chickens might do if the winter proved severe.

A summer passed, then another. We still talk about getting chickens, eating those fresh eggs again. But Michael has a more demanding job, beyond taking care of us, and neither Howie nor I wanted to devote the time or energy that animal husbandry, however undemanding, demands.

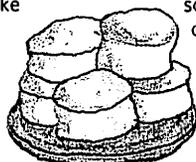
But I can still see them crossing the lawn; how shiny and attractive they were, how pleasant it was to watch them. And I can remember exactly how the morning sun lasered across the kitchen and sought out two blazing-orange yolks surrounded by buttery coronas of white, in the center of a blue plate. I'm more thankful than I can say for that sweet gesture of condolence. Those chickens gave me their everything, and I haven't forgotten.

Now, when a friend is suffering, there's advice that I long to give but never do. I suppose I'm afraid of sounding flippant or facile, of hurting the already wounded. But, dear reader, let me give it to you. You can take it if you want. When things are really, really bad, if possible, raise chickens. —Francine Prose, author of the novel *Goldengrove* (HarperCollins, 2008) and other books

UGANDA This is the only country in the world where cash-strapped students queue up to buy rolexes: not the wristwatches but the breakfast specialty that happens to bear the same name. A rolex (the word is derived from the phrase *rolled eggs*) is an

omelette loaded with tomatoes, cabbage, beans, and onions rolled up in a fresh chapatti, a tortilla-like flatbread.

USA The flaky Southern-style quick breads



known as biscuits serve as a conduit for regional flavors. In Appalachia, sweet and heady sorghum syrup is ladled over hot biscuits. In the deep South, flour-thickened white sausage gravy is the favored accompaniment. In the Ozark

Mountains of Arkansas, there's even chocolate gravy for pouring over biscuits. And almost anywhere below the Mason-Dixon Line, fruit preserves are a biscuit's best friend.

RUSSIA *Kasha*, a porridge made from grains such as

buckwheat, oats, and wheat, is a key player in the traditional Russian breakfast. Mothers often start their babies on jarred kasha—flavored with sweet ingredients like apples, apricots, pumpkin, and prunes—ensuring lifelong loyalty. (continued on page 80)