

Fear the Feathers

A phobia is a heavy burden to carry through life. It is at best an uncomfortable state and at worst very limiting to the sufferer's joy in life. Most phobias have a degree of realistic danger, which allows for some level of understanding. Water *could* drown you, heights *could* kill you (actually it's the landing), dogs *could* bite you, and snakes *are* vile enough to strike terror in most hearts. Phobia, by definition is an irrational fear and so my own phobia evoked little sympathy or understanding. I am dreadfully afraid of birds. Not all birds, of course, just the subcategory of chickens.

It seemed that the people who were least understanding of my grievous fear were my parents. Now, I was plenty loved and cared for, but my parents were busy with the serious business of scratching out a living on a hillside farm in East Tennessee. I'm not certain -in that place and time (sometime in the late 1960's)- that they had even heard of a phobia, much less, seen one. And Lord knows there were enough real worries to go around without acknowledging something as far-fetched as a fear of birds(chickens). In truth, I might have hurt my credibility by being horribly afraid of werewolves at the same time. Mom and Dad just had a hard time taking it all seriously. And, in all fairness, they had never witnessed any real proof of this alleged fear aka phobia.

I had been charged with the task of feeding the phobias(chickens) since I was eight years old. Way too young to process the horror. The task took hours, or so it seemed and I always needed a nap afterwards. I stood outside the hen house peeking through the cracks. My heart pounded in my ears and the sweat puddled in my hand as I clutched the chicken feed bucket. My plan was always the same. Walk confidently into the middle of the coop, deposit the feed into the bins and exit pronto. I opened the door to

my phobia. CREAK! Like feathered zombies they all turned towards me. Cluck-cluck-cluck. It sounded like attack-attack-attack. They waddled my way, steely eyed and determined. Stamping and shooing, I finally made my way to the middle of the coop, all confidence gone and deposited the food, all the while watching behind me for ambush. A hyped and hungry few would venture past the shooing and come behind for a peck with their beaks, nearly causing me complete heart failure. I kept my eye on a particular red feathered one that had ambushed me before. I backed out of the coop watching every angle. I turned to exit and there she was the red feathered B. So startled and amazed that she got past me I dumped the remaining feed at her feet which caused a frenzy of clucking and feathers flying as they pecked like crazed crack addicts at the feed knocking my ankles in the mele.

NAUSEA! I bolted out, tossing the empty feed bucket at the shed and doused myself with the hose, the cold water eventually abating my strong desire to hurl. My parents always gave me the same look when I entered the kitchen. Their side glance wondered why I was always wet but not a word from their mouths. My sister asked if I'd been swimming to which my brother yelled "we aint got no pool!" My parents turned their attention to the snarling innocence and I thwat-thwated off the linoleum floor with my soaked sneakers to my room.

No, my parents couldn't grasp that I had a real fear, but that was to change in a big way.

A trip into town on a sunny, summer morning put the whole thing in motion. About once a week we took a family trip. We grew most of our own food and milked our own cows, so weekly was good enough. My life was rather simple, really, growing up in

our little hollow with hills and trees all around, and where it was usually quiet, except for the occasional tractor or cattle noises. Things were so quiet that a car passing our house would invoke a curiosity so strong that you just had to rush to the window to see who that might be. Since it was a dirt road that lay by our house, no one could just sneak by, since all cars were trailed by a cloud of dust, rising from behind. Our “car” was actually a single bench pick-up truck, which for a family of five, made for a tight fit on any outing.

It wasn't unusual to see a stray chicken or two puttering around our driveway and yard, and our truck was usually left sitting in the driveway with the windows rolled down on hot days. One adventurous feathered-varmint(the aforementioned red feathered demon) had the very bad habit of boldly hopping into our truck and nesting under the seat. Any excursion began with someone checking under the seat for that chicken, often retrieving an egg to boot. On the fateful day, I was tightly sandwiched smack in the middle of the seat, quite oblivious to the fact that the chicken-check had somehow been forgotten.

Content with the warm sun beaming in on us, we bumped along on the narrow-graveled road. My dad kept one eye on the road and one eye trying to retrieve a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket. The road was more of a “negotiable” two-lane rather than a true two lane and the oncoming car was ever present by the time my dad looked up. He jerked the truck to the right to allow more room for passing. We were engulfed in the usual dust cloud and then much to my surprise, a perturbed and panicky chicken suddenly emerged from under the seat! From between my legs to be exact! Hovering in wing-flapping suspension directly in front of my face. The sound of wings flapping, and the feel of feathers were the stuff of my nightmares. NAUSEA!

Shear panic engulfed me as I flailed my arms as wildly as the chicken was flapping her wings. I was screaming uncontrollably, and the chicken was doing her version of the same. My parents sat in stunned, helpless silence, while I seemed to be fighting for my very life. Their opened mouths said it all. My younger brother and sister were the first to react to the commotion by loud wailing themselves. The noise was such that the people in the passing car stopped and gawked at the great to-do.

Thankfully, all things must finally come to an end, even if nobody has their wits about them enough to stop it. The chicken left our lives for good. Feathers slowly drifting downward were the only remains of the ruckus.

Normally as we near the town my brother and sister start sing-songing about ice cream and even after the life altering event, they started begging. My dad lurched to a stop right in front of Carl's apothecary and malt shoppe. He pressed a five-dollar bill into my hand and my mom got out and implied via a stiff arm for us to exit quickly.

My siblings skipped into Carl's and soon after we were enjoying our individual idea of heaven. My sister licked a double scoop chocolate cone, my brother slurped a large strawberry milkshake, and I had a banana split. We had a nickel left over and it sat in the middle of the table. My siblings seemed recovered from the calamity that had happened just twenty minutes ago, but I watched my parents sitting in the truck like statues, eyes forward. The truck was askew across two parking spots.

The memory of the red feathered hussy finally getting her comeuppance as she bounced/flew out the window made me smile.

As my sister crunched the last of her chocolate cone she asked what had we done to deserve the treat and could we do it again.

“Maybe” I said. “Got any phobias?”