

The Chicken Tree

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The house stands on the hinge of the road, where the paved section ends and the gravel part begins. It's an old house, of a style you often see in rural areas, with a porch in front, and another on the side, off the kitchen. Torn blinds hang in the upstairs windows, blinds that never seem to go up or down. The house needs paint, the front steps droop, and the gutters teeter precariously from the roof line. But the grass is always neatly mowed, and every spring the clumps of blood red roses and wild purple phlox bloom sweetly.

On sunny afternoons and mild evenings an elderly couple sits on the front porch, while their middle-aged Down's Syndrome daughter swings slowly across from them, saying, 'Momma? Momma?' over and over. A dog tied out back barks half-heartedly; Banti chickens run free, clucking and scratching in the sideyard. A big, proud rooster herds his hens back from across the road when he sees us, and squawks at us indignantly for his trouble.

Whenever we stay at our river cottage, which we do as much as possible from early spring to late fall, we pass this house on our walks. Always, it's the object of our curiosity, this house hints of old ways, of things forgotten. Last fall, before we closed up our cottage for the winter, we discovered one of its secrets.

It was a beautiful evening for a walk, still warm, fragrant with the scent of fallen leaves, the aroma of things ending. The sun was inching toward the horizon, the crickets rowdy and restless. When we reached the end of the paved road, we looked over at the old house and its yard, as usual.

'Look!' my husband said. 'In the tree!'

He pointed to the wild cherry in the sideyard. Most of its leaves had fallen so its branches were silhouetted clearly against the sky.

'What?' I said, then saw them. Chickens! At least a dozen, perched in the branches. Below, the big rooster cackled and fussed, and sure enough, one of the remaining hens scuttled up a low branch and made her way to a cluster of other chickens.

I stood there with my mouth open, amazed.

'They are birds,' my husband said. 'And Bantis are still partially wild. They must feel safe roosting there.'

'Don't they have a henhouse?' I wondered aloud.

'Oh they probably do,' my husband said. 'But it gets hot in a hen house. They probably prefer to be outside, especially on a night like this.'

While we watched, several of the chickens drew closer together, fluffed themselves up, and settled in. Though the light was fading, we counted twenty dark shapes among the branches. I tried to imagine how it must feel to them, sleeping out under the stars like this, in the fresh air, surrounded by night sounds. Like children in a tree house, I concluded, charmed.

The old house was silent, its windows dark except for a small light in the kitchen. It seemed, now, to be full of secrets, things that it knew, but we didn't. All those times we'd passed and never noticed the chicken tree!

The memory of the roosting chickens stayed with us over the winter, so this spring, when we reopened the cottage, we made a point of walking by the old house at dusk. The trees had not yet completely leafed out, but the ground was warming and everything seemed restless and excited. The chickens were in their tree again, and though we could barely see them in the thickening canopy, we could hear their soft, contented sounds. We paused to listen, and for a moment it seemed as if the tree itself was clucking in happiness.

Once, all chickens roamed free like these. But that was before industrial farming, before chickens were crammed by the thousands into tiny spaces and force fed, chickens destined never to feel the sun on their backs, never to eat a worm, never to climb a tree. Such chickens no longer even know how to fly. The Bantis, I reflected, were relics of a time when the human grip on the earth was looser, when the world was a wilder, more mysterious place.

I looked over at the old house, locked in its silences. It seemed, now, to bear witness to what we have lost. As I listened to the drowsing chickens, I could easily imagine it: a world still partly enchanted, full of small wonders, like chicken trees.

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