

ENTROPY

Mother Hen

By Gina Rich
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Illustration by Linda Bleck (lindableck.com)

One spring afternoon in 1992, my mother and I went to the pet store to buy birdseed and walked out with four baby chicks.

Whenever our family acquired a new pet, my mother was the driving force in the transaction. She often spoke dreamily about retiring and owning a farm. My childhood home became a veritable mini zoo over the years, hosting pet mice, hamsters, guinea pigs, fish, cockatiels, cats, garter snakes, and a lizard. There was also a strong-minded rabbit that chewed electrical wiring underneath the house – a misdemeanor that’s still a sore subject for my father.

I don’t recall who noticed the chicks in the store first, only that the decision to bring them home happened with little fanfare. Soon my mother and I were walking up our front porch with a cardboard box, feeling the weight of the tiny birds – two Rhode Island Reds and two Leghorns – scampering about inside as they emitted quiet chirps.

In the northern California suburb where I grew up, a city ordinance allowed households to own up to four hens, but I knew of no other families who kept chickens. Sandwiched between a freeway and a sleepy mobile home community, our neighborhood was perhaps less than idyllic for roaming farm animals.

None of this bothered my mother. She hired a family friend to construct a plywood coop in our yard, and thus began our spontaneous stint in chicken keeping.

Every morning, we’d fling open the coop door and the chickens tumbled out in a swirl of feathers, squawking at our feet. They soon recognized our voices, darting over to the kitchen window whenever my mom called, “Here, chick chick!”

Chickens are not the most huggable creatures, but I give our hens credit: They tolerated our attempts to cuddle them, allowing us to pick them up and stroke their feathers. In our family video archive, there’s a blurry clip of a 13-year-old me sporting curled bangs and an oversized sweatshirt, cradling a Leghorn in my arms.

By day, the birds moseyed around our yard and sometimes those of our neighbors, scouring the ground for bugs and tender green grass. Occasionally, the hens got into mischief and wandered onto our next-door neighbor’s immaculate lawn. But they always came back by dinnertime, happy to hear my mother’s familiar croon from the window.

In parenting and chicken keeping, my mom was the same: loving, unfussy, and equipped with seemingly endless affection. While my father wanted nothing to do with the birds, my mother was unperturbed by their noise, mess, and disregard for boundaries. At least once a

week, the hens wandered up our porch steps and into the house, and my mother chided them playfully as if they understood her. “Now, girls, did I say you could come inside?”

It was not simply that my mother tolerated the chaos the chickens generated; she welcomed it. She was happiest when surrounded by her brood, and my brother, sister, and I were its inaugural members. Years before our fateful visit to the pet store, my mother nicknamed me “Miss Chick” – and the moniker stuck well into my teenage years.

Even though our chickens appeared content, there was unrest in the brood. Three of the hens pecked at one of the Rhode Island Reds until the poor creature was scantily feathered and beyond saving. Heartbroken, my mother insisted on going to the vet so the bird could be euthanized. My aunt was visiting from out of town and reluctantly chaperoned the excursion, holding the ailing hen on a towel in the passenger’s seat as my mom drove.

“Pet her, and stroke her,” my mother instructed. My aunt was appalled. “I am not stroking this *mangy* animal!”

Back then, it cost about \$30 to put down a chicken. My mother paid cash for the procedure so my father wouldn’t find out.

In high school, I started to realize that our birds didn’t fit the definition of the quintessential family pet. Most of my peers had cats or dogs. I sometimes wondered if my first boyfriend never kissed me on our front porch because the sound of hens clucking a mere few yards away was off-putting.

While our neighbors appreciated our offerings of fresh eggs, the obviously meandering chickens became problematic. The summer before my junior year in high school, we donated the hens to a local ranch where we knew they would have ample space to roam and forage.

My siblings and I made vague promises to each other. “We’ll come back and visit them on the farm,” my brother said. But we never did.

A few weeks later, we brought home a Labrador Retriever puppy – the first dog my family had ever owned. I was thrilled that our family finally had something in common with the “in” crowd.

“Mom,” I said, incredulous. “I never thought our family would be *normal* enough to have a dog!”

She laughed for months over this statement. Normalcy had never been her goal.

I didn't realize it then, but the chickens left us during the last carefree chapter in my childhood. My final two years of high school were a blur of coursework and late night study sessions.

A couple of years after I left for college, my mom learned she had cancer. Recurrences plagued her in the years that followed. In early 2004, as I sat with her in our kitchen, her breathing was labored despite the oxygen tubes cascading from her nose to a silver canister on the floor.

She turned to me, her voice barely a whisper. "Dad told me I should say anything I want to tell you. So I want to say that I expect to come out of this."

I wanted to rail at her to stop with the cold bravado and instead sweep me up in a final declaration of love. I wanted my warm, tenderhearted mother, not this stoic, dead-eyed creature who was only a shell of the woman I'd known all my life. But my mom's once limitless supply of affection had finally run out.

I didn't understand until later – when I could feel something other than the sharp edges of grief – that she'd spent it all raising my siblings and me.

After my mother's death, our few remaining pets found new homes with neighbors. It was the end of an era for our makeshift farm.

Now that I have two daughters of my own, I've tried and failed to replicate my mother's spontaneity in parenting. Anxiety runs in our family, but my mother and I chose to face the unknown in different ways. Her approach was to lean into uncertainty and expect the best; mine is to prioritize predictability and routine, and control whatever small piece of the equation I can.

This means I feel calmer when there is some semblance of tidiness and order in my house. It means that if I go to the pet store for fish food, I will not return with a litter of bunnies or a brood of chicks. Still, I relish the chance to tell people that I used to have chickens as pets, and how my mother nurtured the happy chaos that defined my childhood.

The average lifespan of a backyard hen is eight to ten years, so I know that our beloved pet chickens are long gone by now. But I like to think that somewhere in the universe, they've reunited with my mother, and she finally has the farm she always wanted.