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Kellie Wells

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Telling the Chicken

Kellie Wells

The skinny is this: Last night I dreamt of chickens, glowing fat and white. They were spinning in circles on the tips of their tangerine claws, their feet and legs a thorny axis. They whirled, beaks skyward, and feathers flew. They were perfect in their gyrations, as if their movements had been divined by some force long ago when cosmic laws were set. And I thought to myself, this is what happens when the magnetic fields reverse, an event for which I have been waiting patiently for quite some time.

It gets hotter than Dutch love in Lucas, Kansas in August. The cicadas scream with the heat. Public records tell us it was 112 here on August 18, 1909, so global warming hasn't touched us much, though the rest of the world seems to be catching up. I've got my eye on those polar ice caps.

Lotta was a bonafide beauty. She had bobbed, black hair and milk white skin so pure and clean it made you want to go home and take a bath. When Lotta got sick, her lips went funny. They were thick lips long before collagen, but an odd wet brown-blood color would rush into them at night, and they looked like pieces of raw liver. Sometimes my heart ached so bad for Lotta, I wanted to take her head into my mouth and hide her from herself.

The Garden of Eden is located here in Lucas. In the summer, curious tourists flock to gander at the cement rendering of the famed creation. I must admit it is impressive. The brittle, reposed body of the Garden's architect and sculptor is preserved in a glass case in the backyard. Age-wise, he appears to have given Methuselah a run for his money. Lotta and I would often sit beneath a long stretch of cement serpent and discuss the wages of sin. Her papa was an occasional minister at the Open Door Baptist Church.

Lucas is only a nod and holler from Cawker City, where

the Largest Ball of Twine sits proud and bulbous. It's something you can be part of, this ball of twine, you can be responsible for making it larger, securing its spot in the Guinness Book of Records, so no made-in-a-day coastal ball can squeeze it out of its rightful place. When Lotta died, I drove to Cawker City and donated a fair bulk of fine hemp in her name. They wound it on right then and there with a makeshift rod and spool device. The ball of twine is big and round as anything. It's bulging symmetry makes your eyes water.

Lotta's papa was a chicken farmer. He could balance and egg on its end when it wasn't the vernal equinox. When Lotta died, he gave me a gross of fertile eggs. Sometimes I crack them open in private and touch the blood spots.

Lotta's papa killed all the chickens except one. He cracked neck after neck, loaded them into trash bags, drove them to the church parking lot, and flung the lot of them into the mouth of the dumpster. The one he kept was Lotta's favorite, a fancy bantam. It rode her shoulder and whispered sweet things in her ear, nibbling at the kernel of her lobe. When Lotta fell sick, it took to walking in circles like a carnival pony. Lotta's papa coddled it after the funeral. He blew on its beak and massaged its feet. He asked me if I'd talk to it, try to explain what had happened.

I took the chicken to the Garden. It wouldn't stay on my shoulder, so I held it under my arm. It knew the blond hair it tugged at was not Lotta's. I pointed to the long, skinny figure of Eve. "People blame a heap of heartache on her," I said, "but I don't think she had any foresight of histoplasmosis." The chicken kicked then went limp, crossing over from denial to acceptance.

Everyone's lawns are jaundiced with heat. Sometimes with the last hot gasp of summer we get quick, hard rains and meteor-sized hail, but not this time. The street is no place to fry an egg, despite the TV meteorologist's suggestion.

I am taking shepherd's pie to Lotta's papa tonight. He has bought the chicken a toy piano. He will prod it to play

with a handful of feed on the keys. It will peck out an unfamiliar tune then turn round and round till the next request. Lotta's papa will sing about the sweet sound of grace, and the chicken will roll on its back with a soft gurgle of clucks, and we'll both rub its stomach.

Tonight the world will turn on its ear, chicken, I can feel it. Glaciers will thaw and drip, fat magnets will fly up towards a hot shower of stars, and a shiver of moist dreams will shake me awake as eggs crack and scatter.

Papa's Remedy

Kellie Wells

Papa says he must brand the Good Word onto my soul in order to soften its sharp edges. I am part of his flock, his prize lamb, and if blood is spilled, it will only sanctify the soil. I don't mind that he is unable to spare the rod. I am sure I would ask for it, did he not think of it so often himself. Sometimes at night when he is called by some distant neighbor, a member of the fold, to help with a cure, he packs up the belladonna and leeches and bone marrow salve. He can be gone for days, and I help myself. It aches not to hurt for such a long time, so I suck the bad fluids out of my arms until the skin is measled with God's love. And it makes me forget the shameful changes that are taking place, the swelling and tingling I try to ignore. I can feel my skin fizz with a soft prickle of bad thoughts, and then I bite into my hands and rub burrs against my thighs, until finally it is only the dark, thorny crown syruped with His blood that heats my imagination. And when Papa returns, he weeps, he is so pleased that I can carry on the treatment without him. He licks each red moon on my arm and sings soft and sweet into my stomach, "Up from the grave he arose."

I have not eaten now for six days, and I am beginning to smell foul, like singed hair and spoiled meat. Papa says it is the smell of mortified flesh. We are burning away the fatty tissue behind which sin hides, so that I may be pure and

lean as bleached bone.

It is hard for me to walk. A feeling washes over me between steps, and I feel like thrown feathers. I must rest with each breath and sometimes I see things. I see bright, white circles, hear wings beating, and feel soft, hot hands on my back. Then I see the angel. He is happy to see me because we are so much alike, and it comforts him. His cheeks are yellow and blue, bloated with bruise, and his arms are crooked and knobbed where they've been poorly set. The scars on his stomach and legs create a jagged scrawl of lines and arcs like an ancient script. He swallows me in a hush of pink wings, and I am warmed.

Papa's beard curls down and rests on my face as he rocks me. I am so cold now, I can feel the blood beading inside my veins. I asked Papa if I could have just a peach, but he pressed his thumb against my gums and showed me they were soft and dark and my loose teeth unfit for chewing. "It will be over soon, child," he says. I know Papa only wants what's best for the spirit. He says this way I'll be fit for a Messiah when the time comes, and I know he'll be swollen with pride.

The locusts are everywhere this year just like Papa said they'd be. He has opened the doors and windows and welcomed them. They are in the flour, the bed, the churn, in my pockets. They look at me with those blank, tiny eyes like rape seeds, and I can tell they are waiting for me, waiting for me to touch myself so they can spit up their black cud. I watch them click their hinged legs and chew, waiting for me to scream or bleed or ask for sleep cure.

My skin is grey as old ham, and I am knotted up with sickness, but I know on the other side, where they wait for me, I'll walk barefoot down the jeweled streets, my worn feet relaxing against the cool press of pearls. Papa says my body will hum with the heavens at the wavelength of blue, like the sky. There it will smell like lilacs and basil. The scabs and spots and pocks will slip away and the hurting be silenced like a voice after dumbcane, and my soul will swim back though the thick muck of my sins. And I'll never be cold again. Papa says.

Papa's thick, rough lips on my throat make me shake.