

Attila the Hen

by G. Murphy Donovan (February 2016)



“If I hadn’t started painting, I would have raised chickens.” –
Grandma Moses

It all began as a bit of an experiment. Three neighbors discussing the virtues of fresh eggs. My wife eats eggs like a ferret. We all like breakfast and baked goods too. So why not get a modest flock of chickens, thought we all. So the women made plans and the men built a coop; a natty cedar affair with a fenced run, a ramp, a roost, windows, doors, and two nesting boxes.

We started with Silky chicks and then traded them in for six Rhode Island Rock Barreds. The Silkies turned out to be hostile, homely, and oblivious to predators due to a surfeit of head feathers. In fact, the Silky breed looks like a double ended rear end.

In contrast, the Yankee hens are a stately study of chaste pin stripped productivity and, unlike their Silky sisters, they are agnostic about humans – coupled with lethal hostility towards most other critters, including cats, rats, and the neighborhood pit bull.

When the gal pals came of age they served notice on predators large and small. An impudent brown rat tried to raid their duplex and the girls made short work of him. Had we left the prostrate rodent where he fell, I’m fairly certain the sorority would have eaten him too.

Chickens love meat.

If you give them a ham and cheese sandwich, they will fight over the ham, share the cheese, and leave a pile of scat on the bread. Ironically, store bought chicken feed, like dog food, is mostly carbohydrates. Small wonder then that chickens prefer pill bugs, beetles, worms, and the occasional pizza.

Yes, pizza! The morning after a teen soiree on our street we found an unmolested boxed pepperoni pizza pie on our lawn under the butternut tree. We donated the

soggy pizza to the hens and the tube steak topping started a feathered food riot.

Hens that eat protein will give protein – omelets, custard, quiche, hollandaise, and cholesterol too. Chicks also eat each other if they get too cranky. Surely, the first real bullies were hens, not tweens and teens.

In all hen parties, there's usually a bird that ruffles too many feathers for whatever reason. So it was with our Hillary, the runt of her litter. Our petite one is so named because she is more than a bit shifty, ambiguously unpopular, and annoying in ways that only other hens appreciate; in short, a victim by default midst cool gals with attitudes.

Alas, unlike lady lips, chicken lips are lethal weapons. The big hens started with Hillary's comb and then pecked her bald. "Pecking order," in the bird world, is no metaphor. Nor is hair pulling. When we saw blood, we had to separate the runt from the rest.

Hillary now roosts with immunities in a big blue recycling bin, safe from abuse. Hens are a little like politicians. Some require special treatment, a kind of aviary affirmative action, if they are to thrive. Martyrs, nonetheless, are still very marketable in their own way.

By day, she is free range, to the everlasting consternation of her sisters. If you let one, or some, of the hens out of the run, and keep some in; the outhouse birds will stay close to the coop. Free-range is a sometime thing for the entire flock. Absent the bonds of sisterhood, a gaggle of hens might play in traffic, become street walkers, or flock back to Rhode Island.

At night, the chickens are confined to quarters, as it is after dark that all girls in violation of curfew become witless or clueless. The fox, the coyote, and the owl dine after nine.

Indeed, at dusk when the birds must be tucked in, it's a race with the sun. If we are too late, the hens take to the trees. Once aloft, they have to be lifted down with a lacrosse stick which presents its own problems. Having found a good weave, a hen's talons are reluctant to part with it.

It's a safe bet that no Chicken is born Jewish either, fond as they are of meat

and dairy at the same table. However, they often become converts after being disrobed by feather pluckers. A Christian might begin her days with a cold bath, a kosher chicken ends hers with a healthy salt water soak. Before the pot, six Yankee hens can be models of Smithsonian productivity, four to six eggs a day, up to 2200 eggs a year.

Without celibacy, chicks might rule the world. On occasion, rainy days it seems, we get twins, seven eggs from six birds; something to cluck about indeed.

Alas, most chickens are virgins without vows, a deficit which may explain demeanor, eye rolling, and mood swings. Roosters are only necessary if you need fertilized eggs, more chickens, or lack an alarm clock. The few dudes in the chicken world make too much noise, get up too early, and only earn their keep in bed – where they seldom snuggle.

Hens make good neighbors, roosters not so much. Indeed, calling a hen house a coop is not necessarily the best moniker. Chicken cloister is more accurate; no boys and perpetual ambient noise. The muttering of hens and the murmurs of Matins are cell mates.

Alas, chastity is not necessarily voluntary – or a virtue. “No boys” does not equate to no joys. Some girls prefer girls if the night and the light is right. A neighbor kid put a GoPro camera in with the hens overnight; for social research purposes only mind you. Turns out the ladies do snuggle when the lights go out; more than a bit of a surprise when you see how they treat each other in daylight, in public, or at a pizza party.

There’s something to be said about hen hygiene too. When confined, and not squabbling over roosting boxes, the girls all sleep in a neat row, facing the same direction. Even the best of girlfriends know not to turn their backs in close quarters. Every morning there’s a bonus, a very tidy row of shovel-ready guano under the roosting pole, not unlike wedding cake gargoyles.

Indeed, the ladies seldom soil their nesting boxes, leaving only tasteful beige colored eggs in the ovulation bays.

Chickens are an endless source of amusement or jokes for the neighborhood kids too. My favorite so far in 2016 is about aviary ambition. Question: “What do you call a chicken that has gotten to the top of the pecking order?” Answer: “Attila

the Hen.”

G. Murphy Donovan is a sometime chicken wrangler who usually writes about the politics of national security.

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