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The Girls

I feel like a bad parent, coercing my daughter into the car by promising to inject ten grams of sugar into her bloodstream. But she takes a small step forward on the crushed gravel drive-way. Apparently, just ten grams can outweigh even the worst of a child's fears.

"Get in the car, Nicola," I say, gently, from the driver's seat, and I again earnestly offer the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup. At least I tell myself I'm saying this gently. But she won't budge. She's afraid of the girls.

My frustrated wife, Cynthia, stands next to our four year-old and the open, passenger-side back door. She lays a tense and frustrated hand – gently of course – on Nicola's shoulder, and gestures to the car interior with her other frustrated hand.

My wife: she's frustrated. My daughter Nicola, who's wearing the cutest little denim dress bound at the waist by a pink ribbon, and her sparkling red ruby "dress-up" shoes: she's now almost in tears. My two-year old son Kalu, who's already in his booster seat behind me: he's kicking his legs up rhythmically next to the girls, insouciant.

"Hi chickens!" Kalu says with a smile to two cardboard boxes wedged between his booster seat and Nicola's. One box contains a pair of black Austrolorpes, the other a pair of Red Stars. Kalu eyes one of the 13-week-0ld pullets through an egg-sized hole that I'd cut at beak level.

This isn't at all what I'd had in mind. We'd been expecting the girls a full nine months now. I'd built a coop and purchased feed. We'd talked endlessly about how much fun it'd be to tend to them, to show them off to our friends. Our kids would get in touch with their food, and with nature. And it even made practical sense; after doing the math, I figured we'd eventually save money having these chickens, our first pets. A dozen free-range eggs at Giant Eagle or even the farmer's market costs at least three bucks.

But now kids are grumpy. Mom and Dad are grumpy. It'd been a busy Memorial Day weekend visiting my parents on their five acres, my childhood home in southwest Ohio. We're just fifteen minutes into a four-hour drive back to Pittsburgh. I'd just handed Jill, the matriarch of this country homestead that Cynthia found through Craigslist, thirty-two dollars and we've said our good- byes.

"No, I'm afraid." Nicola says and shuffles back one step. The girls give a few quiet clucks, and their clawed feet scratch against cardboard.

I offer the candy again. Nicola finally, reluctantly, climbs into the car. Cynthia buckles her in. Nicola suckles the candy and nuzzles with the car door. Anything to keep her distance from the girls.

So it was that I forced my kids to sit just inches from four restive hens with sharp beaks and claws, enduring a 250 mile trip, during which the chickens themselves were surely left to wonder what providence had in store for them.

As we pull out of the driveway and wave good bye to Jill's two daughters, just a few years older than our kids, standing there in rubber, knee-high work boots, their hands adroitly balancing buckets of water and feed, Nicola whines quietly. She

doesn't stop until twenty minutes later when we pull off for gas.

Me, I grew up with chickens – leghorns, up to twenty-eight of them at one point, according to my mom.

"Dad and I would dress four or five of them some mornings before the boys woke up," she said to me one afternoon on the phone, speaking of "the boys" as if I wasn't one of the five. I'd called seeking advice on how to care for chickens of my own, in my small city yard. "I don't think the boys even knew about it," she added.

Apparently, my dad cut off their heads with a hatchet, and mom learned from a neighbor how to pluck and clean them. At first, she had a tough time stomaching the smell and ignoring the warmth as she ripped into the fatty carcass and shoved her hand, well past her wrist, up the chicken's backside to extract the intestines and gall bladder and other viscera. But she got used to it.

Before getting on the interstate, we stop at a Love's Gas Station to empty bladders and fill the tank. I unbuckle Kalu's seatbelt, and as I help him down he looks up at me. "Chickens, too?"

"No, Kalu, the chickens can stay here," I say, though as I run my credit card, pump the gas, and squeegee the windows while Cynthia and the kids go potty, I have a kind of poultry OCD attack. I peep and peep and peep again into the car, swiveling my head like a watchful hen and I'm just waiting for a squawking, feathered flurry to burst through the box lids and through a window and into the countryside, free. Something about having these farm animals contained in the back seat of the vehicle that I usually park against a crumbling city curb – this just doesn't line up. So I'm waiting for the girls to catch on and beg out of this journey, as if they're going to hotwire the car and bolt – *Because no way, city boy, are we going to live in that pen you call a chicken tractor, away from open fields and all we've ever known.* And who could blame them? Without ceremony, we've now destined these girls to a life of celibacy, in a cloistered coop with no rooster for miles. And we'll take every egg they produce. They have no choice in the matter.

Nicola and Kalu climb back into the car without incident. As I accelerate out of Love's, I hear claws scrambling for a hold.

"Sorry chickens," I say, though I laugh quietly through my nostrils. Cynthia does the same. I picture feathered parts awkwardly flopping around inside the boxes, pushing against one another the way my brothers and I used to exaggerate the g-force of turns in the back seat of my parents' station wagon, thrusting elbows and leaning into one another, drizzling crocodile apologies all along the way.

While speaking with my mom, I had envisioned my dad's chicken chopping block, a bloody upended log teetering in the grass where my kids now play for hours on end, and I felt dissonance. It's not that this vision surprises or troubles me; even as a kid I understood what befell our chickens. It's just that the place has changed. Though we weren't a farming family, we kept goats, Dutch rabbits, ducks, cats, and always a mutt dog or two in an open yard that bled into raspberry brambles and forest of ash, oak, and maple. There we built and rebuilt forts of old plywood and carpet swatches. And we kept a large vegetable garden – each September, my brothers and I broke into all-out tomato fights with whatever rotten and buggy fruit remained dangling. So we finished our days grimy and worn, having explored the woods, weeded the green beans, collected eggs from a dusty coop.

But my parents' home has since been sanitized and sedat-ed, renovated to accommodate a new life season. They grow herbs and wildflowers now, rather than labor-intensive veg-etables. Their chicken coop now stores rusting garden tools and lawn sculptures. They keep no animals, unless you count ceramic garden trolls and the deer and hummingbirds they attract with salt licks and sugar water. And surely, that bloody

stump has long been burned.

My kids and their cousins are of course helping reshape this landscape. They water oregano and rosemary, smell crushed spearmint cupped in their hands. They giddily kick their feet in the air on a tree swing, roll down the well- manicured back hill. I never thought the simple act of watching another human being run could bring me such joy, but during that same Memorial Day weekend on that lush back hill Nicola's and Kalu's legs pumped, her long hair flowing, his round, two year old body bounding awkwardly, both of them laughing. I wanted nothing more than to continue watching them from under the back porch lattice, ice tea in hand.

At every turn I told them about how Daddy used to climb trees here too and played football on the hill with their uncles. And how he'd run through cornfields across the road – omitting, of course, details about the agonizing pins and needles caused by cornstalk leaves lacerating his sweaty arms and legs. And how he and his brothers would get lost amongst the corn-rows.

In his essay "Once More to the Lake," E.B. White takes his son to a lake in Maine that White frequented as a child. Observing dragonflies and other campers and damp moss, White mantras the phrase, "There had been no years," as if nothing has changed in this place rich with boyhood discoveries. I too have moments with my children in which I feel "there had been no years." At my parents' home, we walk the same stubbled trails that my brothers and I blazed with pruners and a hacksaw. As a child, I'd run that same hill.

And yet, of course, there have been years. Our end zone is now mom's butterfly garden.

We're an hour into our drive when I veer to the right and exit I-71 for the bypass around Columbus, east towards Wheeling, West Virginia.

"The chicken's looking at me," I hear Nicola complain. Except for a few whiny moments, she'd been quiet since we left the gas station.

Cynthia half-turns in her seat. "Maybe she's trying to play peek-a-boo with you, Nicola. She wants to be your friend." Nicola doesn't respond.

"Just play with her," Cynthia adds.

Waiting for the girls in Pittsburgh is an unoccupied, freshly minted one- story, one bedroom A-frame with a fenced in yard – a chicken tractor home with forty square feet of living space that I'd labored over for months.

Chicken tractors, unlike regular coops, are equipped with wheels and can be moved. This gives chickens fresh grass and soil for scratching up grubs and insects, and fertilizes the yard evenly with their droppings. I'd been inspired to build one after reading about Polyface Farm in Swoope, Virginia, where chick-en tractors anchor a self-sustaining farmstead. Then online I discovered just how many chicken tractors are out there, some framed simply by white-washed one- by-fours, others as elab-orate as Victorian dollhouses. After several visits to a housing rehab store, I assembled ours out of plywood odds and ends, scraps of lattice, chicken wire, kitchen cabinet knobs, door hinges and latches, and cinder shingles. I fastened two wheels from an aluminum geriatric walker to one end, so that a single person could, by lifting the opposite end, move the tractor wheelbarrow style. A plexiglass skylight, cut into the center of the roof, will give us a peek into the girls' home life. And our tractor comes fully-equipped with multiple nesting areas, in-door and outdoor perches, a closable vent, and backdoor access for easy egg retrieval. Because most of these materials were used or even free, construction costs came to just eighty bucks.

The kids helped. Nicola banged some nails. Kalu moved small boards from one pile to another and then, as each load fell upon the next, raised his hands victoriously, shouting, "Did it!" They both helped paint the tractor, all in white. At first they brushed blithely, in stops and starts, before strewing puddles

that marked their paths from paint can to floorboard to wall to perch and back to the paint can. Then they painted the grass, and then themselves. Then one another. I sent them inside the house.

This coop awaits the girls' arrival on a precipitous slope, the same hill as our two-story rental, just as our entire neighborhood, Poli sh Hill, is, like the rest of Pittsburgh, on a hill. Our yard is, thankfully, large enough to accommodate the roving chicken tractor, but the girls will have to adjust to this steepness. And in Polish Hill we're crowded in by fences and neighbors, an alley in the back, a narrow street in front. From my parents' back porch, you might see just two neighbors' homes, if you strain to peer through thick tree stands. But in Pitts-burgh, dozens of facades and a complex geometry of rooftops and eaves step their way up and down our vertical landscape. With this congestion comes noise – trains chugging through the valley below, the revving of cars on Bigelow Boulevard above us.

But we do a lot with what feels like little. Nicola and Kalu make a game of rolling down this hill through fresh-cut grass whenever I finally get around to mowing. Two tire swings hang from a rusted pole. Cardboard boxes and duct tape make a hideout on our front porch. Old garbage cans collect rainwat er for a small vegetable garden. In the city, this small yard has meant the world to us.

The kids are beginning to gripe: How long before Pittsburgh? We tell them to read books, eat graham crackers. And of course we reassure them: Not much further.

I weave our car between the foothills of eastern Ohio that run steep and motionless, and yet they pass in a blur. I know countless flora and fauna live among these hills, but the timelessness that is travel can make them, and even the whole of nature, seem like mere backdrop for the real life occurring in front of them, beyond them. Still, I'm reminded often, even back in the city – and with a touch of chagrin for even thinking otherwise – that nature is more than background or landscape. Even in my Polish Hill yard, a groundhog steals our tomatoes, and great grey slugs invade the sidewalks. A lilac bush shields us from the alley, and the sugar maple in Bob's yard dumps both shade and autumn leaves upon us. Red-tailed hawks circle overhead. I've come to appreciate the clover crowding out our grass, an attraction for so many bees, glorious and teeming in a space I once viewed as scarce.

We weave past Zanesville and then Cambridge, Ohio, through Wheeling, and into western Pennsylvania. In this stretch of about 150 miles, I count no less than sixteen deer carcasses strewn along the roadside, exploding like cherry juice spilt across kitchen linoleum. Do the math, and we saw one carcass for every ten miles. I see so many that I scan the landscape for more mounds in varying degrees of decay and dismemberment. More than once I see a shredded tractor- trailer tire and say something like, "There's another one, honey. Boy, I can't believe ... Oh. Never mind."

Nicola and I had been reading a bit about death. The book that E. B. White is perhaps most famous for, *Charlotte's Web*, introduced us to farmer John Arable's plan to kill off a runt pig, until his eight-year-old daughter, Fern, begs him not to. That very weekend at my parents' place, as Nicola and I snuggled together "all warm and cozy" like we do, against a down pillow, atop the comforter, we'd read Charlotte's graphic description of how she eats flies.

"Do they taste good?" Wilbur the runt pig asks.

"Delicious," Charlotte responds. "Of course, I don't really eat them. I drink them – drink their blood. I love blood."

Death had also been on my mind as we prepared for the girls' homecoming. In addition to keeping chickens dry and warm, a good chicken tractor keeps occupants safe from wily critters. Bud, our burly, grey-haired neighbor who'd play a perfect Ahab, keeps pigeons, and he'd been peppering me with accounts of how peregrine falcons, living right here in

Pittsburgh, had snatched a few of his birds mid-flight. Now his pigeons never even leave their cages. So I'd designed my chicken tractor's A-frame to completely enclose my girls. As for land-loping beasts, I'd been sure to leave no gaps in the structure, but on evenings that I bump into Bud in our back alley, he rehashes mythic tales of raccoons ripping through chicken wire, grabbing the chickens' necks, and, with a ghastly wrench, ripping their heads clean off. So even in the middle of Pittsburgh, we have no idea how well our kids' first pets will survive. But we also know that death is part of having pets.

Later, at bedtime, Nicola would quietly ask her mommy about those "critters" we feared getting our girls. "What will the raccoon do with them if he gets one?"

Cynthia frowned, looked Nicola in the eyes, and said, "He would probably eat it, honey."

Nicola cringed and then became quiet, as she does. I half expected her to echo Wilbur's plea to Charlotte as she describes her bloodletting, part of nature's provision when dinner doesn't come in a pail, as it does for Wilbur. "Don't say that!" Wilbur groans to Charlotte, in the same way Nicola's eyes begged her mother to reinvent creation. "Please don't say things like that!"

Cynthia and I debated on whether or not we should even name the girls, whether it'd be easier on the kids – on all of us really – not to grow too attached. We'd been considering, at the kids' suggestion, Lulu and Strawberry Shortcake for starters, the names of Nicola's dolls. I'd even emailed two of my brothers for input: *Hey, ETA for the chicken coop is about 24 hours at this point. Any name suggestions? I'll name the runt in the litter after Mike.*

Bright as always, my brothers thought I was soliciting names for the coop, not the chickens. Believe it or not, our childhood home, my parents' home, is on Henville Road. So one of my brothers suggested *New Henville.* Then, referenc-ing the name of my Pittsburgh street, *Melwood State Heniten-tary.* Other suggestions included *The Yoke-A Corral, What's That Smell?*, and *The Local Yoke.*

Then Mike added, *As for naming the runt after me, won't it be a little odd to have a small chicken named The Dark Punisher?*

In the end, we decided to wait, let the girls' personalities christen them. I stapled extra wire skirting around the edge of the tractor to discourage burrowing predators, and we planned to latch the girls' front door each night rather than leave it open to their fenced grazing area. As I caulked the skylight's seams and painted a few, final bare spots, we hoped for the best.

About an hour out of Pittsburgh, Nicola pipes up. "Hey Mom, we're playing hide-and-seek."

In my rearview mirror I watch Nicola, glancingly, as she leans toward the box from her car seat, and then pulls back. A beak pokes out of a hole in the box closest to her. Then it disappears. Kalu is doing the same on his side, and getting a similar reaction. He leans in, but then jumps, startled when a beak gets too close. But he remains giggly.

During these nine months, I'd had moments of uncertainty about whether it was wise to adopt fowl that the neighbors might find pesky, pets that will likely demand more attention than I want to give, that will have the audacity to make a mess – nitrogen-rich as this mess might be – in the back half of our yard (not to mention in my pristine, white chicken tractor). But as my kids play hide-and-seek with poultry, this all starts to feel right.

"Mom," Nicola says, peering again into the box. "I'm not afraid of the black chickens anymore."

"That's wonderful," Cynthia says, turning toward her. We're almost home now, to our home in Polish Hill.

Then Nicola adds, "I'm not sure about the red ones though." §