

## Chickens Saved My Life

# 1

SEPTEMBER 28, 2011

Chickens changed my life. Saved my life. Though it is also true to say that as we ride the stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death, many things, people, and events change what we call *life*. A life is merely a conglomeration, a concatenation of effects and affects, often unpredictable, though even when predicted, things seldom turn out as expected.

And it was not by chickens alone that I have been saved. But among all the therapies—chemo, meditation, acupuncture, Feldenkrais, naturopathic treatments, exercise—chickens, four glorious chicklets-becoming-hens, have changed things most dramatically. Holly, Lula Mae, Sabrina, and Funny Face flap, flutter, and jump onto anything that might resemble a perch, including human shoulders and heads. They frequently land together on one side of their feeder and tip it over. They also landed like a miracle, about six weeks ago, on me, and tipped the balance from death to life.

I have an incurable cancer, a form of leukemia called CLL (chronic lymphocytic leukemia), so like everyone else I am going to die but probably not tomorrow. Still, life was becoming rather hard to live. Now, after spending the summer in chemo-and-chicken therapy, I have been given a reprieve. I have been wanting chickens for years, and for years have been putting it off, there were always other things to do, work to get done, fetish desires to satisfy. CLL is one of the slow cancers. For some people it does not progress beyond what used to be called the indolent stage, for others it can race along alarmingly fast for a slow cancer. My symptoms just got gradually worse, though I wanted to defer treatment for as long as possible since once you start treatment you also start damaging your body's ability to fight back.

As my oncologist, Dr. K, says, there are no such things as side effects. All drugs have a range of effects, some good, some not so good (and sometimes the connection between good and not so good is knotted, complicated, measurable only over time). So when he said, I think it's time to start treatment and I saw the summer disappearing into an infusion center, the absolute ghastliness of my condition (so far no treatments have lengthened life for CLL patients) took hold, gloom defeated a habitual Pollyanna-ish reflex. And then, in the midst of gloom, my thoughts turned to chickens. Chickens turned into obsession.

Soon I could think of nothing but breeds of chickens and what color eggs they lay and coops and ventilation and chicken manure and compost and predators and fencing and automatic watering and mites and fleas and worms and herbal remedies, and the chirruping noise that chicks make. I dreamed of collecting fresh eggs from free-ranging chickens fed on weeds and greens and fruit from the garden. I could smell the omelets made from these eggs, buttery and sizzling, sprinkled with herbs. I could also smell the chicken shit and rapturously and endlessly imagined the compost we would have, how contentedly my garden would grow. J, my partner, embraced the idea even more wholeheartedly than I, encouraging a flagrant defiance of budget in order to get the project happening. I spent endless hours on the internet, ordering books from the library, reading back copies of *Backyard Poultry*, visiting friends and perfect strangers with hens in their yard. Planning in minute and exacting detail. My treatment lasted three months, and some of that time was spent backbreakingly (not me) and obsessively (me) assembling *el palacio de las princesas*, so named by my friend Isabel. And then the ordering. And then the arrival one morning, through the mail, of a cardboard box containing four day-old chicks. Through all this demented focusing on chickens I had been feeling not too bad, forgetting the "C" word. And now my forgetfulness morphed into full-blown happiness. We started laughing. The tiny chicks are fluffy and adorable but also absurd in their pomposity. As the chicks grow their absurdity expands, keeping us laughing, tickling a severely compromised immune system, kicking it into gear.

Two weeks ago I saw Dr. K, and he told me what I already knew, could feel, that so far the results are good. This isn't the end of the story; there will be more tests and more treatment sooner or later. But for the moment I'm feeling better than in years and it feels extraordinary, though I guess it's actually normality that I'm feeling.

This book was sprung into being by the chickens, and it will follow, through many detours, the ways that a vague idea becomes focused as a consuming passion. It's also about other things: just as a life can be changed by a chromosome going awry, so it can be transformed by a chicken, or a book that one is reading, or a feral plant that takes root in your garden and slowly grows into an intriguing presence, altering the culture of the garden and making you see and feel differently.