

Chicken Coup

by Michael Mortenson

I regretted forgetting my helmet as soon as we turned off the highway onto Whetherby Lane. I tightened my grip around Sam's middle as she powered Rivet—her newest motorcycle—down the pocketed road, throwing up a cloudy trail of dirt and silt between the cornstalks.

“Can we slow down?” I yelled over the roar of Rivet's cylinders. Instead, Sam leaned on the gas and I was nearly thrown from my seat as we lurched over a bump in the road. I hung on desperately with my knees. I should have worn a helmet. Fourteen years of wisdom packed in my brain, and still I didn't have the sense to wear a helmet. Of course, neither did my older sister. Sam didn't seem to care about safety—not when she built, and then crashed, her first motorcycle, not when she homemade torches dipped in gasoline out in the work shed during a blizzard last winter, and definitely not when she drove down country roads. At this rate, she would never manage to legally get a driver's license.

I closed my eyes and hugged Sam tightly, waiting for the rows of cornstalks to slow down. This wasn't exactly what I'd imagined when I'd volunteered in science club to do service hours on a farm. When Sam did finally cut Rivet's engine, I opened my eyes and shakily clambered off the motorcycle. A thick coat of dust covered Rivet's red and silver exterior.

“We almost died!” I said. Sam laughed and ran a hand through her messy blonde hair.

“Nah, Theo,” she said, “we almost *lived*.” She dusted off her jeans and then turned toward the front door of the farmhouse, boots crunching on the ground.

“Sam!” I called after her, “You can't just—”

But apparently, she could. I hurried to catch up to her, clomping up the white steps to the porch as Sam pressed the doorbell. A hollow chime sounded from inside and a few seconds later we heard footsteps.

First the inside door, and then the screen door swung open to reveal a beefy man in a flannel shirt. He frowned at us and spit a sunflower seed to the side of the porch. “You Bart’s kids?”

“Yeah,” said Sam. My stomach grumbled hungrily at the thought of sunflower seeds. ‘Bart’ was Mr. Bartholomew, our science teacher at Flintwood Junior High and the advisor for the science club. The beefy man was supposedly Mr. Bartholomew’s cousin, but I couldn’t see the resemblance. While Mr. Bartholomew was skinny and had a mustache, this man was thick and could probably rip a mustache off your face with his bare hands.

“Come in. I’ll find Jim. He’ll show you ‘round.”

I followed Sam into the cool of the farmhouse. “Jim!” the man hollered, “Bart’s science kids ‘re here to see you!”

To us he said, “Jim ‘ll be here soon. Have a seat.” He disappeared into another room, and Sam and I took a seat on one of the stiff couches in the front room. Oval framed portraits with black-and-white photos hung on the walls between windows draped with old-fashioned lace. An upright piano sat in the corner, covered with a sheet.

When Jim came in, I didn’t have trouble seeing his family resemblance to Mr. Bartholomew. Jim was tall and skinny too, but instead of a mustache, Jim had long hair and a squinty eye. “I’m gladder than a fat hog at feeding time to see you two kids,” Jim said. “What’re you called?”

‘I’m—’ I started, but Sam answered for both of us. “I’m Sam,” she said, “and this is my kid brother, Theo.” Jim nodded his welcome, squinting at each of us in turn.

“You must be Jim,” I said.

“That I am!” he said.

“Mr. Bartholomew said you needed help on the farm?”

“Help, oh boy, do we need help! We’ve got a problem—a right-nasty quandary,” said Jim

“What sort of quandary?” asked Sam.

“Maybe we can help,” I added.

Jim plopped down in an armchair. “How to begin,” he said, rubbing his chin.

“You remember that terrible storm a few days back?”

I nodded my head. The rain had come down so hard that a stream of water had knocked Rivet over. Sam had spent a whole afternoon cleaning the mud from Rivet’s inner workings, frustrated with herself for leaving him out in the rain.

“It was raining like the devil’s tears, and I went to check on the chickens. They were all in their coop except for Chuck—he was standing in the rain all proud and mighty, starin’ at me.

“I opened the gate and then *BLAM!*” Jim slapped his knee and his eyes got really big. “There was a blast of lighting. All I could see for the next few minutes as I held onto the fence was an image of Chuck the chicken, proud and puffed up, starin’ me calmly in the eyes, surrounded by a brilliant flash of blue lightning.

“I was sure he was frittered, but when my vision cleared, and my ears stopped ringing, there was Chuck, unruffled, standing right where he was before with a rebellious look in his eyes. Still, I was worried about him being out in the rain, so I went over to pick him up, and the strangest thing happened—he zapped me!”

“Zapped you?” Sam asked raising an eyebrow and crossing her arms.

“You bet your bootstraps, he did,” said Jim. “He pecked me and zapped me with an electric shock.”

“So, what did you do?” I asked.

“I let him go, of course. What else was I supposed to do? I said to myself, ‘Jim, if that stubborn chicken wants to be out in the storm, let him.’

“Chuck ruffled his feathers and puffed himself up real big when I turned to go. It was like he thought he had won a battle. But I wasn’t about to get beaten by a chicken, no sirree! I tromped

around the pond out there, where Ruffles' doghouse is," Jim pointed through the lace curtains to where a small shack was just visible on the far side of a pond.

"Ruffles doesn't like the rain, but she came out when I whistled. I thought that maybe I could scare Chuck back into the coop if I sent Ruffles in, but when I sent her in, Chuck stared her down. He strutted up to her, dripping in the rain, and gave her a peck. Well, Ruffles howled like the end of the world—I think he zapped her too—and when she finished, she started to whimper. Then Chuck took a step forward. Ruffles took one back, and then another. And another and another until Ruffles was backed up right against the chicken coop with nowhere to run. Chuck gave a mighty cluck and then rushed at Ruffles with a furious flurry of feathers. Poor Ruffles dove through the door to the chicken coop.

"Then Chuck turned to look at me. I could see Ruffles peeking out the door at me behind him. By the look in his eye, I could tell two things. First, that he knew he had won this round. And second, that he was not going to let Ruffles out anytime soon."

"Mr. Jim, with all due respect," said Sam, "are you telling us the truth? Chickens can't electrocute people. It's not scientifically possible."

Jim opened his eyes nice and wide and put his hand over his heart. "Honest Able," he said. "You don't believe me? How 'bout I just show you?"

I had to side with Sam on this one. Jim's story sounded crazy, but there was a part of me that was curious anyway. We arose and followed Jim through the old farm kitchen out the back screen door.

I immediately picked out the chicken coop—just beyond a couple of dry garden beds. The coop had white-washed sides like the house and a little yard enclosed by a fence with a gate at either end. The little yard was empty save for one rather fat, white-feathered chicken that I took to be Chuck. He watched us as we approached with his head cocked to one side, sizing us up. It felt

uncomfortable to be sized-up by a chicken. At the door of the chicken coop, I glimpsed several chicken heads and one dog muzzle peering out at us. Jim's story looked true so far.

Sam clapped at the Chuck to scare him, but he didn't even hop. He regarded Sam with a beady eye. The bird sure looked normal to me. Could this chicken really electrocute people?

Sam kept clapping, louder now, but Chuck didn't lift a talon.

"What if we all clap at once?" she asked. "On three."

"He can hear you, you know," said Jim.

Sam rolled her eyes. She counted down to the clap on her fingers, and I clapped as loudly as I could. Chuck, unperturbed, pecked about in the dirt.

When nothing happened after more clapping, Sam said, "Why don't we spread out? Theo, you take the far side by the gate. I'll take the middle and Jim can take the other side."

I could see where she was going. Maybe we could disorient the chicken. We spread out, churning up dust, and started clapping again. But Chuck ignored us. I'm not very good at reading chicken expressions, but I think he was grinning at the corners of his beak.

"This isn't working," said Sam. "Hey, is this food?" She stooped down to pick up a small gunnysack beside the fence.

"If you're thinking about feeding him, you'd best be careful," said Jim. "Maybe I should do it."

"Oh please," said Sam, withdrawing a handful of corn. "He's just a chicken."

"Maybe Mr. Jim's right," I said. "Maybe you should—"

"Aw Theo," Sam said. "Relax. Live a little." She confidently opened the gate, stepping inside the enclosure.

Chuck regarded her with beady black eyes. She pinched a couple of kernels and tossed them experimentally. He followed the kernels through the air to the ground. Then he looked back to Sam,

and without taking his eyes off her, side-stepped until he was right next to a kernel. Keeping eye contact, he lowered his ample chicken neck, and then, in a flurry of motion, pecked at the kernel. The corn popped instantly, and Chuck tossed it into the air and then caught it in his beak. I heard a crunch before he swallowed. Ignoring the rest of the kernels, he turned back to Sam.

Try it. I dare you. He seemed to say. *I am King of this coop, and there is nothing you can do about it.*

Sam put the bag down, but kept a handful of kernels, fingering them thoughtfully. She had that look on her face—the one she gets before she does something incredibly risky, usually involving a motorcycle and a rooftop.

“Sam, don’t do it,” I said. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“He’s just a chicken,” said Sam.

“He can hear you!” Jim whispered loudly.

“Yeah?” Sam rolled her eyes, “But can he do . . . this?” She tossed a handful of corn kernels high into the air and darted forward. Chuck stood mesmerized in chicken fascination, watching the kernels rise into the air. As they started their downward track, he noticed Sam nearly to the entryway to the coop.

“Sam!” I called, but it was too late. Chuck ran up behind her as she was reaching for Ruffles and gave her a peck in the backside. Sam’s hair stood straight on end, like the rays of sun on a little kid’s drawing. She cried out and fell head-first into the coop.

“Sam, are you alright?” I called as Chuck took up his position in front of the chicken coop door.

“Electrocution powers: real,” Sam grunted, her face reappearing in the doorway. She tried to crawl out, but Chuck ran forward to give her a peck. “Ouch!” she cried. “Okay, I get it. I’m a hostage.”

“What’s all the racket about?” boomed a voice from the farmhouse. The screen door slammed, and a bulky figure moved in our direction. “Where’s the girl?”

“Hey Lester. I’m just showing these kids—”

“Tarnation, Jim!” said Lester, catching sight of Sam’s silhouette in the chicken coop door.

“What were you thinking?”

“I was just—”

“If Ma was still alive, she’d whoop you straight to kingdom come. How are we supposed to get her out?”

“We’re going to be able to get her out, right?” I asked.

“Yeah! You can’t leave—” Sam said from inside the coop, but fell silent when Chuck gave her a warning look.

“Of course we will,” said Jim, patting my shoulder a few too many times. “Isn’t that right, Lester?”

Lester didn’t reply. He tromped past us, grumbling something about always having to be the mature one under his breath. He went around the back of the coop, spitting a handful of sunflower seed husks in Chuck’s direction on the way. Then, a few seconds later, an engine revved to life and Lester returned with a chainsaw in hand.

“I’ve had enough of this nonsense!” he yelled over the roar of the chainsaw.

“Shouldn’t we think this over. . .” said Jim.

“I’m not going to lose this farm to save a chicken.”

Lester grabbed the gate and threw it open brandishing the chainsaw at the chicken. Chuck stood unflinching.

“This ends now, chicken,” he said, stepping threateningly forward. Chuck didn’t move. If anything, he looked a little bored.

“Now!” yelled Lester, taking another step. “It ends *now*.” Chuck didn’t budge. He didn’t take a step back. Instead, he closed his eyes slowly and took a deep, chicken-sized breath. Then he opened his eyes.

Chuck opened his beak and a jet of blue lightning streaked toward Lester and his chainsaw.

“Les!” screamed Jim. The chainsaw pattered out and slipped from Lester’s beefy hands, as he fell to the ground.

Jim dashed to his brother’s side. “Les! Speak to me! Are you alright? Can you hear me?” Lester didn’t say a word. His face was frozen with an expression somewhere between shock and fear. His hair gently smoked in the breeze.

“Let’s get you back to the house. You can rest. You’ll be fine. Breathe. Just breathe.” I wasn’t sure whether Jim was talking to his brother or himself. He helped Lester to his feet and walked him out of the enclosure.

“Do you want me to call an ambulance?” I asked.

“No,” said Jim quickly. “No. Just keep an eye on Ruffles and your sister.” Then he added over his shoulder, “And whatever you do, don’t touch the chicken!” before he disappeared with his brother into the house.

I stood for a moment trying to decide what to do. Chuck eyed me warily. “I’m not going to do anything to you,” I told him.

“But you are going to get me out,” said Sam. Chuck whipped his head in Sam’s direction and let out a warning cluck.

“Don’t make him angry,” I said. “Let me see what I can do.”

I went around to the back of the coop. Built into the back of the coop there was a small shed. I could hear nervous clucking coming from the other side of the wall as I searched among the

disorganized assortment of rakes, shovels, buckets, and rope. Something shiny caught my eye. It was a garden spade—brand new by the look of it. I could use that.

I returned to the front side of the chicken coop to find Chuck was exactly where I had left him, guarding the coop entrance. Where did Jim and Lester find such a focused bird? It was amazing.

Carefully positioning the spade, I caught the gleam of the sun and reflected it onto the roof of the chicken coop. I maneuvered the patch of light onto the ground next to Chuck, where it stayed, quivering. *Come on*, I thought. *Come on!*

Chuck glared at the patch of light. I could see the cogs turning in his bird brain. They stopped, and something dropped into place. Chuck slowly straightened. He saw the spade. He knew it was a trick.

Oh, you think you're smart, do you? I thought.

I twisted the spade slightly, shining sunlight directly into Chuck's eye. That did the trick. He let out a startled cluck and ducked to escape the burning brightness. But I wouldn't let him. I kept the light focused on his eye, guiding him toward the far side of the enclosure as I made my way toward the gate.

Chuck flailed desperately under my beam, but just as I opened the gate, a brilliant flash shot across the enclosure. I involuntarily dropped the spade to the ground as heat grazed my hand. On the ground lay the smoking rubber handle of the spade. The head was gone—melted clean away.

Chuck shook out his feathers and stalked back to his post in front of the coop. I backed away slowly, trying not to bother the bird. Jim and Lester weren't kidding. This chicken was dangerous. From a safe distance, I watched Chuck preen himself, checking every feather.

What did he want? I thought. *Food? Freedom? Both?* Maybe that was it. Taking a deep breath, I crept forward to try one last thing.

First, I opened up the front gate and then I crept around the fence to open up the back gate. I left the gates wide open and scooped up the bag of corn. I sprinkled its contents on the ground making a path out of the coop. Retreating to the farmhouse, I took up a post on the back steps to watch and wait.

Inside the chicken coop, the other chickens clucked nervously, hungrily eyeing the corn. Ruffles let out a short whine. *I've given you freedom and food*, I thought. *All a chicken could ever want. Take it.* But Chuck couldn't be fooled. I could have sworn he raised an eyebrow at me, except that chickens don't have eyebrows. Through the window I could hear Jim helping Lester get settled on the couch.

"Do you need something else?"

"Water," croaked Lester's voice. I felt a wave of relief. At least Lester sounded like he was going to be all right.

I sat on the steps and watched the chicken coop while Jim got Lester a glass of water inside. Twenty minutes passed in the late afternoon sun. Chuck didn't move. I don't think he even blinked.

This chicken was good. Mom would not be happy if I returned home without Sam. *Think! You can figure something out. Mr. Bartholomew trusted you to help his cousin out.* Of course, Mr. Bartholomew hadn't known about the chicken. He probably guessed that his cousins needed help weeding, not volunteer chicken-fighters. *Think.* But it was all so dangerous. I really should have brought a helmet.

The screen door opened behind me and Jim emerged. "How's it going, kid?" He sat down next to me on the steps in the shade and handed me a cold bottle of root beer.

"Not so good," I said. Jim popped the lid off his root beer and handed me the bottle opener. "Is Lester okay?"

Jim took a long drink before answering. "Les'll be fine. I wish that darn chicken didn't run circles around us every time we tried to—"

That was it! I put down my root beer. “I just had an idea,” I told Jim. “Wait here.”

“Don’t you want to finish your root beer first?”

I shook my head. “No.” I needed to try this idea now before I lost my nerve. Sam was going to kill me.

I ran around the side of the house to where Rivet stood, leaning casually on his kickstand waiting. I hadn’t ever tried to ride Sam’s motorcycles—she never let anyone else ride. But I’d seen her ride hundreds of times. It couldn’t be that hard.

Mounting the motorcycle, I made sure the choke was all the way out. Then I checked the gear shifter to make sure it was in neutral before I turned the key that Sam had left in the ignition. Taking a deep breath, I squeezed the clutch and pressed the start button. Rivet roared to life beneath me.

Powerful.

So, I thought to myself, *this is what Sam feels like*. I shifted gears, gave a little starting push off the ground, and let go of the clutch lever. Rivet rocketed forward.

I screamed. All the confidence and power I had felt just moments before vanished in a cloud of dust as we shot forward. I struggled to maintain control lurching over the uneven ground.

Rivet and I hurtled around the side of the house. “THEO!” Sam yelled, but I could barely hear her over my own maniac yelling. Dust churned in the air and I caught a glimpse of Chuck with his head to one side, looking very confused.

I wrestled the handlebars to turn across the yard in a wide arc around the coop. I kept my trajectory, orbiting the chicken coop like a crazy, screaming moon. *Stop screaming!* I told myself. *If this is going to work, you need to focus.*

Rounding the coop the second time I caught a glimpse of Lester's worried face in one of the lace curtain windows and Jim waving his arms wildly near the house, calling something I couldn't hear. The dust was thick, and Rivet was hot beneath my hands.

We took one final loop around the chicken coop, closer than the others, before I gave up the orbit and shot away from the coop. I slowed and turned to get a look at the chicken coop. It was time to deliver my challenge.

"Stop!" Yelled Jim, running toward me, but I wasn't finished. I pushed off and Rivet and I streaked past Jim straight toward the coop. My world lurched as we hurtled toward the enclosure. The first gate flew past and then the other, so close I heard it whistle past my ear. Above the engine I heard a startled cluck. I glanced behind me but couldn't see anything through the dust. Had my plan worked? Could I draw Chuck out?

I slowed to a stop and waited for the dust to settle. As if in response to my questions, a blast of electricity scorched the ground directly to my left. It worked. I leaned on the gas.

Behind me, I could hear the sound of furious clucking. A brilliant flash grazed my left elbow and I veered to the right, a black patch of earth smoking to one side. I swerved back and forth, avoiding blasts of electricity. I caught sight of the pond and angled toward it, ducking low to avoid a bolt of electricity aimed at my head.

Fifteen feet from the pond, there was a loud pop as the rear tire exploded, dropping Rivet's back half a couple inches. Rivet and I rattled over the ground toward a sizable rock. I tried to veer to the side but couldn't move. Rivet slammed into the rock, launching me into the air. I smelled burnt rubber as I pinwheeled helplessly through the air and plunged into the pond.

I looked up just in time to see a furious screeching ball of feathers barreling through the air directly toward me. I sucked in a breath and ducked underwater, bracing for electrocution or impact, whichever came sooner.

But the electrocution and impact never came. I came up for air and opened my eyes. The chicken was gone—vanished. Jim and Lester appeared on the bank, chests heaving. “Kid! Are you okay?” called Jim.

I gave them a soggy thumbs-up and started to paddle to the bank. My clothes were heavy and constricting, but I wasn’t going to drown. I felt a prick in my side. I looked and saw a feeble, soggy Chuck the chicken struggling to swim. He reached out desperately to me with his beak, sparking feebly and steaming. For some reason, I felt okay letting him hold on. The belligerent gleam was gone from his eye.

A happy yap from the bank announced Ruffles’ liberation, and Sam joined the group a few second later. She helped me out of the pond. “Theo,” she said, wrapping me in a hug. “I’m so glad you’re alright. You could’ve died!”

“Nah,” I said, “I could’ve *lived*.”

She punched me in the arm.

“Ow!” I cried. “I just saved your life you know!”

“Look,” said Jim. “The chicken’s shivering,” and he was right. Chuck, looking significantly less imposing, stood sodden and shivering in the mud on the bank of the pond. Over Sam’s shoulder I saw all the other chickens, now freed from their prison coop, charging across the yard.

The other chickens swarmed around Chuck, clucking and crowding in to get a closer look. For his part, Chuck looked confused and tired.

“You sure you’re alright?” asked Jim

I nodded.

“Well, Ruffles here thinks you’re alright too.” He gave the dog a rub on the top of her head.

“Let’s go inside and I’ll find you a towel,” said Jim. “Cold root beers on the house.”

As we turned back to the house, I caught sight of Rivet. Sam kneeled next to the crumpled motorcycle, examining it.

“I’m sorry about Rivet,” I said in a quiet voice, joining Sam.

“It’s okay,” she said, rising. “I can build another one. Let’s go have some root beer. We’ve got a long walk home before dinner.”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “Home. Dinner. That sounds really good.”

“You know what were having tonight, don’t you?” Sam asked.

“No,” I said.

Sam smiled. “Fried chicken.”