

Fringe of Heaven

Alice stood in the corrugated iron shed, listening to the chickens clucking and cawing to each other in the early dawn light. She reached under the chickens in the nesting boxes to feel for the smooth eggs in the warm hay.

The chickens in the shed scattered over their dung, hungry and agitated, as she walked amongst them.

She saw Curlymo, her pink stumps of wings held up in the air, her boiled-chicken body devoid of feathers. The pecking order ended up with her, and so she was persecuted, her feathers pecked out one by one. Her bloodied comb was flecked crimson above her watchful eyes as she dived away from her tormentor's outstretched beaks. Curlymo's own beak was deformed, the top curling around the bottom, and she found it hard to eat the grains of wheat from the concrete floor.

Alice's father said Curlymo was different from the other hens and that made them angry. It was not just that she was ugly, disfigured as such, "Be different and you will be attacked by your own, that's a lesson learnt" he said, pensively.

When he had killed the chickens last year, he had said:

"We will give Curlymo another chance, she deserves it, the poor thing" and so Curlymo had seen her last batch of tormentors dragged out squawking in terror to the inept axe-wielding of father. But the new chickens just as cruel to her, if not worse, as if the dead chickens had managed to communicate back to them that Curlymo, even though bigger than them, was still at the bottom of the heap.

"Alice, where are you?" Mother was calling from the house.

On the way up the path to the wooden bungalow, Alice looked back, and saw the frosty paddocks behind the farm, the cows grouped quiet under the dark trees, and nearby, the tiny Victorian roses closed tight against the crisp air.

"Getting the eggs" she called back.

"Brush your hair, we have a visitor today."

Alice looked up at mother surprised, a visitor? But they never had visitors, as such. Only vacuum machine salesmen and people selling religion came to the door, and they never got into the house. Mother did not like the people here and so she had no friends, and having emigrated, no family was around.

The pretty printed faded flowers that garlanded mother's house dress belied the unspent fury that Alice supposed every mother to feel. "if it wasn't for you I *could*, or would, or *will*" but mother never did, they were dreams of her Land Army days, and her job during the war, just a moment of freedom amongst the young boys and old men.

She churned the clothes up in a copper boiler with the big stick with big angry strikes, and the clothes all followed the churning water willy nilly just as Alice followed her, as she had to.

Like the boiling water mother rampaged around the bungalow- the untidiness within like some devil tormenting her so that father would say laughing, "She thinks Yuri Gagarin is looking through the Venetian blinds!"

But she would howl like a lone wolf in a canyon, every hour her fantasies were stripped down, until they had no core, she would never leave. Everything was not how she had imaged life would be.

She would dress up, and dress Alice up- and walking past the cow pats and the milk churns Alice would say, "Why bother, we are in the *wopwops*, and get a slap, and the cows looking over the fence would sympathise, and Alice would scowl at them until they turned away.

But outside in the suburban wilderness of the street, Alice's mother looked so pretty, and she laughed so gaily, and said how happy and contented she was, living there.

When she was in her rages, Father would say, "Take one of your pills! Then there was an unearthly silence which unnerved Alice, and then Mother would appear, tiny, childlike, like a baby, and Alice would play with her, and be Mother, and Mother would be Alice, or Tonto, until the next rage turned her into the Red Queen. Father corrected her, he said sadly, "No, it is the Queen of Hearts.

Alice's father was just so different from her mother. Father was like a clock work man, Alice never saw him relax, even when he was asleep in his chair, it was if one kick would set him off again, his mechanism starting up and jerking him out to stride across the carpet. Sometimes Alice would try and make him angry, to see if he was human, but he just looked at her sadly. Alice did love him, and she wanted him free of this spell, and to be free to reach out and kiss her like she thought he might.

Alice felt protective of his jerky awkwardness, his secret, when they were with outside people. The outside people were so easy, so fluid, and so warm, and her stick man would jerk and say the wrong thing, and the outside people would raise their eyebrows slightly and say;

"Y-E-E-S" very slowly and glance down at Alice.

But father would notice as well, and a sad look would come into his eyes, and Alice would have to distract everybody to stop the silence.

No matter where they were, they seemed to be wrong, different from everybody else, even separately by themselves, they looked out of place, whether it was a store, on a beach, in the town, and then when they were all together, all different from each other, and yet so much the same because each of them stuck out, well, everybody stared and smiled at them.

On one hand Alice was proud of their strangeness, the way they stood out amongst the other families, at other times she yearned to fit in, to be part of a bigger group, to be accepted without hesitation, to be quiet and drab and neat, and go to church, to be plain and become a real part of the place.

But she knew there was a large part of her that did not fit, anywhere, anywhere in the whole world, because her parents moved somewhere else, just as their parents did, just as she would.

Perhaps when she travelled, she would learn what was strange, and change to suit everywhere. But what would be left? You could never go home, because trying to fit in everywhere- would change how you saw your place, and you would be out of place all over again.

So Alice would sit on her beach towel as her parents out- of- place voices would jar against the wind-ribbed sand hills and the wooden jetty, as Alice would self-consciously hear the people say to each other- "Where do they come from? Which road do they live in? How long have they *been* here?"

"He coming, he is coming up the drive!" Mother dashed around hands fluttering,

small cries of distress coming from her throat.

A heavy knock shook the fly screen on the front door and Alice went shyly to open it. The neighbour stood there, she knew him from four sections away.

She smelt his strangeness, the soap he used, the brilliantine in his hair, and felt covered in confusion, so near to his strange normal presence, his ruddy blond haired forearms, the wide blue set eyes, the thick neck and jaw, the checked shirt open to show a triangle of curling fur, the heat radiating from his body towards her.

-My haven't you grown!ø He exclaimed. -You look like that girl in Gigi!ø

-Leslie Caron. No I don't, I'm only ten,ø she said levelly. The neighbour looked embarrassed, -When you grow up I meanø he said, -you will look like her.ø He looked at the step between them.

Mother suddenly pushed Alice away from the door and cried;

-Oh you have come. How lovely of you to take the time please come in and meet my husband.ø

She ushered him in to the house, all fluttering around him her nervous eyes looking in vain for father, who had left her to greet the neighbour all by herself. Mother darted over to the window as if stifled by his presence and said;

-Oh there he is, down by the shed.ø

She rushed back to the man in the middle of the room, who stood there brawny, easy, as she fluttered about him. She moved in close to whisper;

-You are so good to do this for me, he does not do it properly. You should see the blood over the grass. And then he misses sometimes and then they run around with half a head, and then I make Alice help.ø

Alice was shocked. So that's why he had come to the house, to kill the chickens, that was not the right thing to, to kill their chickens, what would the outside people think of father now? At least he tried, even though he didn't like doing it, standing there on the lawn in his terylene trousers, his black polished shoes and his white shirt, holding the bloody axe. Alice would feel the power of her mother then creeping out of the house, along the veranda, across the lawn, towards him.

-Somebody has got to kill them properlyø Mother said, smoothing out her dress, betrayal suffusing her features.

They all went out to join Father near the shed. The neighbour was smooth and relaxed as he shook father's hand as men do, showing their hidden strength to each other.

The neighbour went into the shed, and grasping a surprised chicken by the neck with the same hand, twirled the body around in a great flash of white feathers, and the head was now drooping, the sharp eyes covered with soft blue lids of skin.

He picked them up one by one, until there was a big quiet pile to present to mother.

-No more blood!ø mother shrilled like a little girl, clapping her hands in excitement.

The three adults stood around the white heap, laughing, the killing tension gone, but another tension creeping in. Alice watched them from beneath the tamarillo trees, their acrid smell in her nostrils.

-Look over there! I've forgotten that oneø the neighbour pointed at Curlymo who was tentatively coming out from behind the feed drum, picking her feet up daintily like a lady in a pink ball gown. The neighbour strode over to her and said;

-Christ isn't she ugly!ø Father ran up to him and touched him on the shoulder and said

-No wait-it does not matter, I will do that one.ø

The man turned, surprised, and said,

-You don't make a pet out of them, do you? You will have to kill it, it won't lay

anymore, you knowø Father saw the smirk on the man's face and said -I know, so why

don't you have a beer, or the wife can put the billy on if you prefer.

Mother simpered, embarrassed, "Oh get rid of the ugly thing! I'm sick of the sight of it, it makes me feel sick." But father stood as straight as the tin man, with Curlymo pecking the ground at his feet, pleased to have lost the other hens. The neighbour let his shoulders drop back, and directed his attention to Mother.

Alice felt uneasy she noticed that the stranger was a flesh person like Mother. He had the same dancing eyes, the same meaty glow, the same languid movements-ready to be charged with electric blood, and father did look stiff and frail, and brittle, beside them.

The two flesh people looked the same, with a stranger with them- and Alice felt bereft, the fear bringing a clammy sweat to her hands, her heart cut free and was winging over a large chasm. The stick person in her felt threatened, and she heard Father's laugh become more robotic, strained, as if he had felt his robot fingers brush his robot legs for the very first time.

Alice watched as mother went in to make the tea. She brought it back on a silver tray, which took up the bright sunlight and sent a dancing ghost of light across the trees and shed.

It stung their eyes so she put it down in the shade near the plum tree. Alice saw the man move right up to mother's bent form, and say,

"That looks like a good cup of tea."

Mother turned flustered, and giggled, and her blond hair glowed prettily around her tanned face. The stranger lifted his hands up and placed them on her upper arms, and their bodies came together fleetingly, so they formed a golden statue there in the darkness behind the shed.

Mother's face became clouded and angry, upset, distraught even. It was as if she was a chicken, innocent and outraged when you picked it up, holding its wings out, its neck stretched towards the ground.

Alice felt embarrassed for her, she could not handle his advance, dreaming, shut away in the wooden bungalow, and now at last the outside had come to set her free, and she could not handle it.

The man gave her arms a little squeeze, and lent down carefully to lift the china teacup in his strong brown hand, and said, "Nice tea," laughing.

Mother skirted down the path crying "Tea" up, looking plaintively around, fear propelling her towards father, who had put Curlymo back in the shed.

The neighbour left with a white body dangling from his fingers, giving Alice a secret little wave. She smiled back, for mother was right about the blood over the lawn, and why did they keep chickens anyway? It was Alice who had to draw the innards and pluck them. "Teach you to be strong," father said. "When the next war comes- well, the Russians were eating grass in the last one, they would have done anything for a tasty chicken!"

Mother was still angry at father, her face set in a mask of resentment.

"How could you behave like that, showing me up, keeping that stupid chicken! What will people think of us, keeping a chicken that does not lay and has no feathers and has a deformed bloody face?"

Father was angry too and shouted "Alright, alright. Alice help me, where are you?" Get the block and string. He went to the shed and pulled the axe away from the other tools.

He went and picked up Curlymo who sat contented in his arms, trusting him. Alice didn't look when he tied Curlymo's feet to a stake in the ground and tied the string to her neck, putting the other end in Alice's hands, "Now pull!" he said as the bird's surprised head lay on the block. "Pull!" he shouted. There was the clump of the axe falling and the string went slack in Alice's hands and she could smell the cold sharp smell of blood. Her father then cut the string on Curlymo's legs, but Curlymo was up, minus her head, powering around drenching the lawn in a whizzing fountain of red, guttural cries coming from her neck. Alice looked on in horror as Father said in wonderment, "Still a plucky little thing!"

The blood stayed on the lawn but mother did not say anything, and it lay there as black as tar.

The next day Curlymo now sat steaming on a serving dish in the middle of the table. Alice cried, "I won't eat it, I won't."
"Don't you know how lucky you are to get a meal with meat in it -you wait until the next depression, with swaggies beating at the door for a crust of bread and starving men rioting in the main street!"
Alice stood away from the table. "I won't," she said.
"Just because she was ugly does not mean she won't taste alright -sit down!"
He carved the carcass, and dropped the meat into mother's plate. Mother's eyes were down cast, and Alice could feel the humiliation brooding in her plump body, heavy with petulance. The Red Queen had lost. Mother lifted the meat gingerly to her lips, pushing it in with her fork and chewed slowly, her face pale. Father's knife and fork rested on her plate, his hands still, as he watched her. "It's like *leather*!" she exclaimed as she swallowed, tears in her eyes. Father gave a short cruel guffaw, and said "I suppose it does, that girl has been running away for years!"
Alice grabbed the top of her chair and shouted "Just throw it in the bin, won't you, just throw it away!"
But nobody was listening, nobody understood, locked in their looking glass world. Father's hand took mother's plate, and she looked at him gratefully.

Alice spun on her heel and ran into her room and cried into her pillow but nobody came. She thought about mother, and wondered would she grow into her, growing large breasts and wide hips, to petulantly live behind the brown side of the silvered glass forever.

Out of the window the sign creaked, Fringe of Heaven Farm. Alice thought, if she was trapped in this world, there must be a way out. Mother must have seen it once, that is why she was so bad tempered, but too cowardly to free herself. The cows huddled together under the wet trees, their warm flanks heaving softly together, with the evening light catching the steam from their nostrils, and above the farm reflected in their liquid brown eyes.

The morning would frost the blackboy plums with silver light, as it did every morning, under a hard white sky.

Alice wanted to grow up and be one of the big girls, with a slim waist and pointed breasts, her printed dress swinging around her calves, and she would pass through the looking glass so easily, waving goodbye to Mother, Father , the chickens, and Fringe of Heaven Farm, forever.



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