

Chicken Pieces

by [Robert Gear](#) (December 2018)



A Donnybrook, Jaclyn Conley, 2012

Mrs Agnes Mcnall, a stout woman of more than sixty summers, with a downturned mouth and an unflattering jaw line, spent her complacent latter days comfortably surrounded by an accumulation of ceramic and porcelain chickens. They roosted and perched, immobile, on the available flat surfaces of her

small detached house in suburban Des Moines. The assemblage ranged from proud Chanticleers rendered in deep reds and forest greens through the more mundane but collectible rust-colored farmyard hens and yellow chicks with shiny orange beaks. This was a teeming fragile farmyard encompassing exquisitely hand-decorated Meisen all the way down to tacky, but still loved, charity-store castoffs. The chickens had their own pecking order, the pricier and more costly models poised on higher shelves or protected behind the glass front of upright cabinets.

Mrs. Mcnall's neighbor, Mrs. Belva Angelis, was a woman of similar age with a high purpled bouffant who habitually sported a classic twin-set defining an evident fullness of bosom. In an unguarded moment on her first visit and after a cursory perusal of the ceramic menagerie, she had regaled Agnes about the tragedy of a European relative's valuable assortment of Meisen figurines.

Catastrophically, a visiting relative's clumsy nine-year old had run into a table display of these beautiful pieces and sent the artfully placed group plummeting onto a polished hardwood floor. Much of the immediate damage had seemed irreparable. Only the Dancing Rustic Figures group had been completely undamaged. The teapot with gilded and fluted molding had been rendered spoutless and the much-cherished Fleeing Stag had lost one of its antlers. An expert porcelain restorer had been employed and had made a creditable job of repair, but the emotional damage to the owner may have contributed to his early demise.

Both women were widows of long standing. Agnes' first husband had perished in a farming accident in rural Iowa. Topsy, he had slipped while scattering seeds for an energetic poultry flock. His head had made contact with the engine housing of a rusting but serviceable John Deere front-end loader. He had thought little of it and was back at work after a brief rest and a hearty tipple. But within three days

he succumbed to the injury which had a delayed but uncompromising outcome. The loss was not great from an emotional point of view, for their marriage was by then passionless, the deceased having long since dismissed his wife from the contours of his carnal imagination. But the episode had left Agnes with three growing children combined with ignorance of farm husbandry, and a tendency to deafness brought on by the too frequent use of a shotgun discharged against predatory carnivores.

Agnes's second husband had owned a rural gas-station-cum-diner which had sold a variety of baubles and traveler's accessories. These were retailed optimistically to supplement the moderate income generated by the main business. When husband number two had died suddenly of an unexplained illness, Agnes sold up to a multinational oil and gas conglomerate. She moved to the one-story house, enclosed in woodland-green vinyl siding, along with her 'hoard' as her one son, Bernard, termed it.

Bernard was still living at home, or rather in a converted garage at the back of Agnes' yard, which on a whim he had decorated charcoal black. He had then cleared a path all around the cuboid structure and congratulated himself on the unsightly creation. This, he circumambulated at regular intervals.

Belva, the good neighbor, had married in her twenties to a haberdasher of at least local renown in Galveston, Texas. Within a year, her husband had disappeared while on a buying expedition to Toledo, Ohio. Was he alive and living under a pseudonym in Toledo? Being a second-generation Greek, perhaps he had vanished incognito into the Aegean with a Circe-like mistress. Belva had waited forlornly for several years pacing daily the widow's walk of her gabled Victorian house, enshrouded in sadness. She, like a faithful Penelope, had vetoed the suitors who insistently and sometimes forcefully announced their matrimonial expectations. The years

of waiting turned into decades, and she had forsaken Galveston in stoical acceptance of her loss and moved to the rural Midwest just as desperate men once joined the French Foreign Legion, seeking in the Sahara a sandy emptiness in which their memories could be erased.

Belva's younger brother, Gregory, whose life had not quite panned out as his 10th grade teacher had foretold, lived locally, near a recently renovated strip-mall. Gregory served hamburgers and cleaned tables at a nationally mushrooming hamburger chain, once known for its zany TV commercials in which a chimpanzee apparently devours a crateful of burgers and then exits swinging happily on a circus trapeze. That ad was quietly shelved after vociferous complaints from animal rights groups. The hamburger chain substituted a nationally-known football quarterback (whose notoriety was later magnified in an unflattering court case) in place of the chimp, and sales had boomed, while complaints diminished appreciably.

But Gregory, who had graduated near the top end of his senior high-school class, had rarely been able to hold down any position due to his flippant sense of humor, which had not always amused employers, current or prospective. Recently, he had been let go as a trainee assistant manager of an expanding supermarket chain. The dismissal had been precipitated by his choosing to walk the aisles balancing a stack of frozen whole-wheat tortillas on his head while attempting an impression of an Egyptian water-carrier, at the same time intoning extemporized incantations to the god Anubis.

"Haeya, haeya, wallah willah, hmph, haeya!" he had explained to startled customers, their trolleys parting on either side of the bleach, detergent and stain-removers aisle like a clanging metallic Red Sea.

One late afternoon, Gregory, who had made the

acquaintance of Bernie, announced to all present that Bernie had just purchased a state-of-the-art barbecue grill.

“It comes with a free 5-piece knife set. And it can cook 50 lbs of meat at one time—enough for a family reunion and more.”

He made a furtive sign to Bernie who was taking it all in with a foolish expression, but with a sustained grin and with one open eye staring Cyclops-like.

“Let me show you the knife set, mother,” put in Bernie. He proceeded to withdraw a walnut case from an unzipped canvas bag at his feet.

The knives, of Chinese manufacture, rested chastely in their container, unconscious of any possible future employment.

The day drew on and Bernie left his newly acquired kitchen utensils on a hallway table. He finally retreated, threading his way among the avian garden ornaments and around the monolith in which he slept. Then, indistinctly, he heard a clucking noise coming from a shadowed patch of ground. On closer inspection, the sound proved to be made by a solitary rooster which had possibly wandered through a gap in the chainlink fence. Having taken a liking to the invertebrate content of the recently turned-over soil it had stayed on to feast, pecking and ducking its beak rhythmically. Perhaps he was attracted to the life-size wire-frame chicken ornaments frozen in seeming obeisance to the suburban bungalow. The dark edifice of the garage loomed over their initial meeting.

Bernie was no stranger to the world of poultry having as a child helped out at his parent's hatchery raising chickens. Since moving to the town he had missed their soothing sounds and varied humors. And having few other virtues with which to bring on career advancement, he had developed a nostalgic attachment to his previous rural

poultry-involved existence.

He quickly stooped and putting his hand on the rooster's back pinned him to the ground, then in a sudden movement tucked him under his arm holding his feet and showing the now still creature who was dominant. In the fading evening light, Bernie noticed that one eye had been damaged, with the remnants of a deep scar flashing out on either side like a coronal flare, perhaps the result of a fight with a competitor.

Bernie decided to name this avian newcomer "Mo" after an indistinctly remembered, pugnacious yet jovial strip-cartoon character.

Gregory visited the very next day and was greatly interested in the living addition to Agnes's ceramic menagerie. "A chicken, a chicken," he announced, as though a common thread linked him to Xenophon's ten thousand, on catching the long-awaited view of The Euxine Sea.

Mo took to the environment of the back yard. He always had food enough for his omnivorous tastes and saw no reason to break out from the fenced-in yard. If he missed the companionship of living hens he showed no sign.

And so, for the unwitting residents, life moved onward for a time. No tipping point was on the horizon. The neighbors, though, much to Agnes' alarm, began to complain about the early morning calls, a caterwauling that the bird repeated several times a day. And truth to tell, after a few weeks of this noisy alarm clock, even Bernie was beginning to doubt the wisdom of keeping his farmyard companion.

Belva raised the issue on her next visit, her purpled hair glistening and bobbing. And Gregory, who had tagged along, made imitation poultry-like sounds. He grinned and then produced a variant sound, half Egyptian water-carrier and half laughing hyena.

“Alright, I agree. The bird will have to go. I don’t want trouble,” said Bernie. To tell the truth, he was having second thoughts about the wisdom of keeping the noisy newcomer. Besides, Mo was creating unforeseen expenses, in the way of feed procurements and visits to a small-animal veterinary clinic. And Belva, from some deep ancestral instinct, egged him on to banish the creature she had by now grown to loathe, as she had long ago banished persistent suitors.

“Alright, that’s settled’ said Gregory. “I say you shove him in that old pantry room for his last night. It’s nice and dark in there. That means he won’t crow, right? He won’t be a problem for anyone. He might make a mess, but we can clean that up tomorrow.”

And so it was agreed. With careful foresight, they laid a canvas cloth over the pantry floor, a plastic bowl of water and some suitable feed. The rooster was brought in, his wattles and comb flapping as he took in the unfamiliar artifacts of the interior space. He settled himself into his new temporary home, clucking and scratching and staring with almost reptilian sagacity. Bernie closed the door, and after wishing the others good night, retreated to his private domain across the dimly lit back yard.

The night closed in. Agnes snored soundly under her cover, purchased from her neighborhood quilting club, an embroidered chick in every square.

But Bernie, in his hasty departure, and with a residue of guilt at his decision to reject the bird, had not ensured that the pantry door latch was firmly seated. A gentle shove and the door could swing open. Past midnight, Mo hopped stealthily onto the floor and explored his new environment. His good eye gleamed rhythmically. The faint glow of a low wattage nightlight gave slight illumination. Nodding and pecking, he pushed against the door until it swung open. He

traversed the kitchen and strutted through into the main lounge. Across the hallway, Agnes slept on, oblivious.

In the dimly illuminated room, he made out the ranks of Agnes' treasured collection. Then, on a sudden urge of deep-seated antipathy, he swept his wings back and summoned enough strength to flutter onto a nearby side table. A large swaggering terra cotta cockerel toppled over and landed with a thump on the polished floor. The startled bird again flapped his wings and another and then another object fell to the ground. He pecked vigorously and shattered the glass front of an upright cabinet.

Agnes stirred but did not waken. She slumbered on, insensible.

Early in the morning Mo's circadian rhythm kicked in, and he crowed boisterously. The cacophony from across the hallway woke Agnes, startling her from a strange dream which involved snakes and a horse whispering in her ear and some towers toppling over. She arose clumsily, and gathering her wits managed to engage with her bedroom slippers. Now with stealth, her heart beating thunderously, she tiptoed across the bedroom into the dim hallway. The knife set lay on the table where Bernie had left it. On an impulse she grabbed the largest of the knives and opened the door to face the intruder.

The scene which met her eyes was unspeakable. The room had been wasted beyond recognition. The creature, in seemingly vengeful glee, had flown from shelf to chairs to hutch and back, flapping violently in a frenzy of barnyard commotion and iconoclastic fury. Many of the pieces had been harshly mutilated with wings broken and beaks and heads severed. Drapes and furnishings had been shredded. The highest-perched, those with the heftiest price tags, had fallen furthest, and in their unknowing hubris had suffered the severest indignities. Droppings mingled with feathers to

complete the tableau.

Agnes stood frozen, her mouth agape, her eyes staring, soaking in the almost Wahabist level of desecration. And then she lunged squawking with unscriptable and elemental rage. Her lunges and thrusts sliced the air and inflicted further damage on the bedraggled soft furnishings. Mo leapt and flew and kept ahead of the maddened widow. She aimed for his neck hoping to sever the demon's head with its nictating eye from the plumage of the ebony neck and body. But the animal leaped and fluttered, evading all her vengeful lunges.

At last, exhausted, Agnes sank down onto the besmirched and yawning sofa and wept. Her mind in turmoil, she surveyed the wreckage and panted shallowly. Her enemy rested too, and head to one side, regarded her with seeming malevolence, looking down from a vantage point, ready to spring if the stout lady elevated herself from her sitting position. But Agnes didn't move. In the recesses of her mind, the neurons flickered and fizzed unhappily as she cogitated on the remains of her lovingly congregated assemblage. The dawn was slowly gathering, yet she gazed unseeing, unbelieving.

The sun now above the residential subdivision, the rooster tottered to the open door into the hallway, then to the back door of the house. He waited and with an occasional backward look, crooned softly.

When Bernie entered the back door for his customary morning coffee, Mo marched unevenly out into the back yard, and then gathering strength hopped onto and over the chainlink fence and toward pastures new.

Would-be Schliemanns of suburbia three thousand years hence would find only the slimmest evidence of the destruction. Bernie, Belva and Gregory, with great tact, adopted the custom of some aboriginal tribes to abstain from ever mentioning the devastation. For that would be a gross

violation of a sacred prejudice.

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