

Flightless Birds

Sunday supper was the same as Sunday breakfast: chicken fried chicken and biscuits with sawmill gravy. Monday supper was livers and gizzards with turnip or collard greens. Tuesday was chicken and dumplings (Aunt Pearl's recipe). Wednesday was homestyle-fried, dredged in buttermilk and crushed Kellogg's corn flakes. Thursday was butter-baked chicken with okra or string beans (fresh in season, otherwise pickled from the pantry). Friday was chicken pot pie, except when it wasn't. Claire went to the Ladies Auxiliary dinner at the VFW once a month and they went to the fish fry at Saint Anne's during Lent, too. Saturday was leftovers.

Claire and Albert both woke to the rooster. And so, with the exception of some chicory coffee, breakfast had to wait until chores were done and the rest of the farm was fed. It was late enough and hearty enough to hold their hunger until supper. Depending on the day of the week, breakfast was over easy, sunny side up, scrambled, poached, coaxed into a soufflé, carefully cracked to make eggs-in-the-basket, or coddled in porcelain cups. There were creamy grits, biscuits, apple butter and jam. On days that Claire was fortunate enough to serve a thick slice of ham, there was also redeye gravy.

Claire was a fine cook made better by the quality of her ingredients. The Rhode Island Reds were free range birds and their eggs were too large to fit in a standard carton. Albert had to special order oversized crates from King's supply. The yolks were creamy and as yellow as the buttercups in Claire's childhood. *Hold the buttercup under your chin*, her sisters would tease, *if it reflects yellow, it means that you like boys*.

She had liked one boy and that was enough. Albert was as docile, quiet and friendly as the birds. He was gentle to the brown-striped chicks in their warmers, yet an efficient dispatcher of the less productive hens. The temperature had dropped below freezing several times that winter and the good layers had become less so. The seven pound hens kept them well-fed.

Though she was too polite to say so, Claire didn't much care for the other ladies at the VFW. She went for the food: chafing dishes of pot roast or beef brisket or spiral sliced ham. Buffet-style, take as much as you like. And so, when the February dinner turned out to be chicken a la king, she quietly put on her coat and left the hall.

Claire sat in the truck and considered her options. She felt the delicious freedom at the thought of three hours of her own. After the truck warmed up, she headed to town.

The restaurant was one of only seventeen of its kind in the country. It was profiled on public radio. blinked. The neon sign tossed colors onto the snow at her feet. Claire checked the amount of cash in her wallet, touched up her lipstick, and entered.

It was a jewel-box of a place. Perhaps eight tables of sophisticated diners in cashmere turtlenecks and twinsets. Claire didn't try to pronounce the dishes, but simply pointed at the menu, reassured by the waiter's effusive agreement. The boxes were elegantly arranged, the offerings as bright and delicate as her other's brooches: an eel napoleon of fried tofu, crispy won-ton, mashed eel, pumpkin and ginger; yellowtail steak with baby bok choy, enoki mushroom and sake; uni marinated in coconut milk; negitoro roll plump with fatty tuna and scallion; and a petite salad of sliced sashimi, hearts of palm, plum caviar and lotus root. Claire ate it all. Her cheeks bloomed more fervently with each tingling bite. And when she was finally satiated, she asked to thank the chef.

Her waiter escorted her to the kitchen—the counters so clean, the aromas so foreign from her own—and assured her the chef spoke very fine English.

“Oh, thank you,” she effused. And then she started to cry. She told him about the farm and the hens, about Albert and about the 350 days of chicken suppers each year. She talked more than she had in quite some time. And then, just as she began to doubt that his English was indeed very fine, he clasped her hands. “Special ingredient,” he said.

The chef motioned to a metal box the size and shape of a Quaker Oats canister. He placed a little brass key in her palm. She smiled gratefully and made the long drive home to Albert.

Despite her competence in the kitchen, leftover gizzards did not fare especially well. They were chewy when hot, and positively squeaked when cold. Claire tried to season them with a bit of paprika plus corn relish on the side. She took the key from her pocket and unlocked the box. She didn't dare cook the secret ingredient, lest it lose its special flavor. She simply rolled it in cornmeal and plated it with the gizzards and a sprig of parsley.

Albert sighed happily as he sat down to supper. "Well, dear, the weather seems to be turning for us. Our Reds will have us rich in big brown eggs again soon. It's going to be a good..."

Year, he would have said. *It's going to be a good year*. Except he didn't. He stopped in the middle of his sentence and collapsed on the kitchen floor. Claire wiped the kitchen counter, took her keys, and closed the door behind her.

In the truck, she searched the dial for the station that kept her company so many plucking afternoons. *Oh, public radio is just so wonderful. How lovely to be connected to the rest off the world*. A great white expanse of snow lay glistening on the road ahead. *For instance*, she thought, *the liver of the tiger blowfish, or fugu, is 1,200 times more deadly than cyanide. And there are only seventeen chefs in America licensed to use the fugu hiki to cut it out*.