

The Little Red Hen Redux

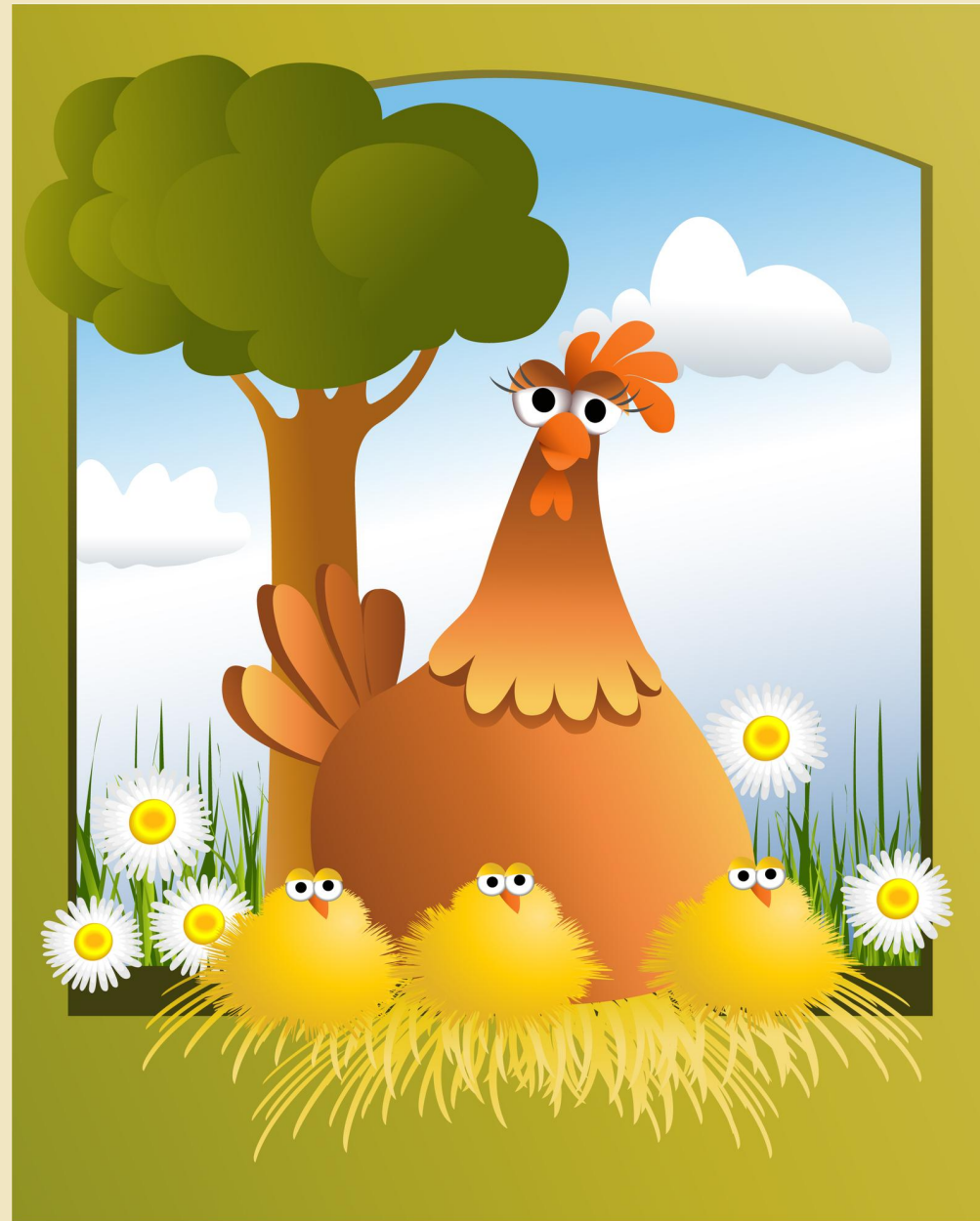
How A Matriarch's Perspective Rewrites a Patriarchal Tale

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Looking around the barnyard, the Little Red Hen sighed and admitted she was trapped. Between the white picket fence and being under the claw of Big Red, she was cut off from the possibility of being anything but your ordinary barnyard babe, scratching a living out of the dirt.

Little Red Hen. An apt moniker, she thought. Although she was old enough to lay eggs, she hated how she still acted like a little chick, never able to break out of her shell and face the world around her. And Red, well, he used to treat her like she was special. But now all he did was strut around and crow about the hatchlings she had given him. So she thought it fate that after “Little” and “Red” she was most often called simply, “Hen” as she was already matured to a full, fat state of nothingness; and couldn’t hope for a future any different than all the other hens in the barnyard.

When she was a little fluff of a thing, she had looked like a bird of promise: She was not your typical chicken when it came to mixing with other animals. She was so sunny and bright, she easily made friends from every genus and species that crossed her path. She even had a love affair with a bird of a different feather – Duck. But the constant pecking from her peers eventually got to her. So when Big Red set his comb for her, she tumbled down into a life built around the barnyard and watched her loftily dreams just fly away.



Although she longed to break out of this endless cycle, the pull of the usual was so strong that day after day passed in the same way. Every morning she would waken with the rest of the scratching mass when Big Red crowed. But when the hens all went cluck, cluck, cluck in answer, she took secret comfort in the knowledge that her first cluck assured her little ones that she loved them, and her second gave voice to her resignation at being part of such a motley flock. But the third cluck always seemed plucked from somewhere deep inside, where she still felt hope and possibility. Maybe she could still make her dreams come true by teaching her little ones how to be more than fowl.

Then one day, she was shocked to see something golden in the dirt just beyond the fence. It called to her so strongly that she forgot her place in the pecking order and just went over and took it. When she and her chicks were off on their own, they examined the prize and found it was a piece of wheat.

The little ones were amazed. "Give it to Daddy! He'll know what to do with it!" they peeped. For a minute she thought she had turned into a snake because she fairly hissed back at them, "I know what to do with it!"

"You do? Oh Mama! Show us!"

She wished she had kept her big fat beak shut. Because while all chickens have dreams beyond the dirt, how many have you heard of that ever bring them to life? Even Red, as high on the roost as he was, only did what came naturally. Wheat was not your usual chicken thing. This could mean a lot of bread in the future. She needed some help.

So she asked her old boyfriend Duck to help her plant the wheat. But he was off for a swim. It didn't surprise her much. Although he had claimed to be broken-hearted when she went with Red, even he knew it would have never worked between them. He loved the water far more than he could ever love her, and today he proved it true.

Little Red Hen then asked Cat, whom she considered a friend, for help. Cat had always listened to Little Red's hopes and dreams. It would be only right to share her good fortune. But Cat said no. She was quite busy sitting in the sun right now, and was more expert at biding her time than scratching other's backs. In her own private thoughts, Cat figured Little was desperate enough to do the work on her own. Cat could then jump in whenever her interests were best served.

The little red hen was discouraged. She was ready to give up the whole thing. Then she saw how her babies were watching her, and she knew what she must do: "Very well," said Little Red Hen. "I shall do it myself."

She scratched out a little space for it in the dirt, hoping it would be enough. Soon, Little Red saw a small patch of golden grass growing! And overnight it seemed that weeds sprang up too. So she found herself wondering aloud, "Who is going to weed this wheat?"

"Not I," said the duck. "That sort of work doesn't agree with me."

"Not I," said the cat. "I would not be able to tell the weeds from the wheat".

"Very well, then I will," said Little Red Hen and she did.

Not having weeded before, Little Red found the work hard and unnatural. But after a while she realized she enjoyed putting her beak into the sweet-smelling wheat, and ferreting out the weeds that would choke it. "Hmmm", she mused, "I never considered how like weeds and wheat my thoughts can be: Some do so much good, and others are such drains on my peace and focus."

After a while the wheat began to ripen. "What fine wheat we have," said the cat and the duck.

"Yes, indeed, it is time to reap the wheat", said the little red hen, pleased that they could share her joy in such a fine harvest. Perhaps they would like to partner with her, so she asked, "Who would like to reap it for us? "

"Oh, not I," said the cat.

"Not I," said the duck.

Disappointed, but not deterred, she said, "Very well, then I will". She cut the heads off the grain very carefully and put them in a bag. Then she called to the cat, the duck and she asked. "Now, who will take this wheat to the mill to be ground into flour?"

"Not I," said the duck.

"Not I," said the cat.

"Very well, then," said the little red hen. Then I will take it myself".

Little Red Hen wanted to wring the necks of Duck and Cat at this point. Instead, she trudged off to the mill, and in a few hours she was back with a sack of fine flour. And on the way, because she

loved Duck and Cat still, she tried her best to see the situation from their point of view. But by the time she came back with the flour, she had decided they were nothing more than fair-weather friends, and she intended to prove it with her next question.

"Now, who is going to make this flour into bread?" asked the little red hen.

"Not I," said the duck.

"Not I," said the cat.

"I will then," said Little Red, and she did.

By this time, Little Red had begun to feel just as isolated with her great treasure of wheat as she had without it. Big Red just laughed at her. Her chicks didn't seem to care about the fact that she was tired from all her extra work – they still wanted her full attention, just as if she had nothing better to do than fluff their feathers. In truth, she felt even lonelier, because Cat and Duck had proved to be not the friends she had thought them to be. But even with her little bird brain she knew there was more value in keeping on than giving up at this point.

"Now, who is going to make this bread?" asked the little red hen.

"Not I," said the cat.

"Not I," said the duck.

"Very well then," said the little red hen. "I will do it".

And soon the loaf was ready for the oven.

At this point, Little Red was pretty steamed. Although she was looking forward to the reward of her hard work, she was angry that there would be no appreciation of it. The chicks, of course, would be nourished, but to everyone else, it was clear she was still Little Red Hen, no different than before this whole saga began. When she wasn't angry she was desolate that all her efforts to change her life seemed to change nothing.

So the loaf of bread was baked and it was beautiful, golden and crusty. The little red hen put it on the kitchen table, and the cat, and the duck came into the house and looked at it longingly.

"Well now, who is going to eat this loaf of bread?" asked the little red hen.

"I will," said the duck quickly.

"I will," said the cat, stepping close.

For a minute, Little Red thought of grabbing the knife and whacking the cat, then the duck, and then tracking down Big Red and putting an end to all her troubles. What satisfaction! But then, being a vegetarian, she realized they would be nothing but dead meat. And though they hadn't proved much use to her, she had a new respect for all life, after what she'd been through.

As she looked in the eyes of Cat and Duck, she began to see that things actually had changed – she felt more alive than she ever had, appreciated or not. She had gotten out of her rut. And although it would have been less scary and more fun if Cat and Duck and Red had helped her, maybe she wouldn't have become strong enough to even think of righting a wrong. As weird as it was,

she saw that what they had done –or not done– was also a gift they had given her, and her heart began to melt.

"Here. Come to the table. And eat," she said.

She surprised herself as she realized this moment had brought her more than she ever believed possible. She had a new loaf of bread to share, friends to share it with, chicks who would grow to learn by her example. She felt the room, already filled with the smell of fresh buttered bread, also take on the warmth of the feeling of love.