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## The Last Great Western Stock Drive

When they ran out of money where I worked, I offered to finish the job I was doing in trade for chickens and a trailer to haul them.

Then I called Steve and told him I'd be there early with a trailer-load of Aracauna chickens. "Just what we need. Very hardy chickens. They lay colored, low-cholesterol eggs. Try to get a chicken house and pen set up."

I built cages on the trailer and stretched a tarp across the top. I headed for Oregon April 10 with everything I owned, 150 chickens, and two dogs.

It snapped cold before I got to Yreka, and I drove back down into the valley so the chickens wouldn't freeze to death traveling. I set up camp in the foothills east of Redding.

I let the chickens out of their cages, and they scattered out and started scratching and pecking. I said, "Find everything you can, because we may be here a while, and we're not carrying much feed. I didn't expect to get delayed like this."

Kylie, the pup, went after a chicken and sank his teeth into it. Chickens screamed and flapped and scattered. I yelled him down and yelled him down until he heard me and quit while the hen was still able to squawk and flap away. The pup cowered on the ground. "You're a stock dog, and chickens are stock. Don't kill them. Don't even bite them. Guard them and learn to drive them." His mother understood better than he did, but he understood at least that he was not to injure any chickens.

The chickens calmed down and began to develop their social positions. Chickens threatened other chickens, pecked and clawed, clucked and squawked. From the cacophonous mass, seven hens emerged dominant. Those seven seized territory and defended it. Only those hens who would acquiesce to leadership could share the territory. The roosters roamed at will. One scratched and pecked at the ground, then made a feather-flapping run to drive a hen down and mount her. He ran to scratch the ground again, while another rooster pursued another hen. Roosters paired off and fought more savagely than the hens. I thought I probably had too many roosters.

I caged most of the chickens that first night, but some of

them roosted in nearby trees, and I couldn't get them down. The second day, I worked on the cages in the morning and watched the chickens the rest of the day. They were easier to put up that night because I penned each band up together. When I got the leaders of a band into a cage, the rest followed. They liked being together in a secure place for the night.

The cold weather hadn't lifted by the fourth day, and scratching around camp thinned out. If we dipped too far into the grain, we wouldn't have enough to make the trip. So we drove the chickens to better feed.

Chickens scattered in every direction. I ran around the herd one way, tried to push them, got in front and tried to lead them, called and clucked to them, and then ran around and tried to push again. The dogs figured out what I was trying to do and joined in to help, and we got shape and direction to the herd and made the trip. Five chickens drowned immediately they got to the creek, and about fifteen holed up in some dense manzanita and wouldn't come out, though some of them rejoined us on the drive back to the pickup and trailer just before dark.

The next morning dawned warmer, so I fed the chickens in their cages, and we headed up the highway. It was a good day to drive, bright sunshine, clear air, good times ahead. The trailer tracked well, and I took it steady at fifty miles an hour.

I picked up a hitchhiker just after I drove into Oregon, and we rode along quiet for seventy miles. The oil pressure dropped, and I pulled off the road and poured three quarts of oil into the engine. Forty miles down the road, I had to put in two more. Roger, the hitchhiker, slid under, took a look, got back up, and said, "The rear main seal is out."

I drove a ways, and then he said, "My place is about ten miles off the road up here. If you want to go up there, I can fix it. My wife wants to get some chickens. Maybe you could trade us some chickens for some work on the truck."

"Sure. I have plenty of chickens, but I don't have enough oil to get to the next town at the rate it's pouring through."

Ten miles up a gravel road. Their house is set into the south slope of the ridge, well-designed to use the sun's heat in winter and exclude it in summer. Large garden. Greenhouse.

Darla, big with child, came out to greet us. I parked the trailer between the garden and the forest and let the chickens out. Darla said, "Roger said you'd trade us some chickens. I'll have to get the fence finished and the chicken house set up. Come on. I'll show you where to wash up, and then I have to see what else I need."

Roger went to work on the truck. I helped Darla finish building the fence.

The dogs did a good job of keeping the chickens together and out of the forest, so the next morning, we all went into town to get parts for the truck and lumber to finish the chicken house.

Roger finished the truck about the same time we finished the chicken house, and he and Darla worked on details in the chicken house while I worked with the chickens. When door and gate locks and storage bins for chicken feed were ready, I said, "I have this band separated out. Let's drive them in."

We funneled them through the gate while the dogs stayed with the main herd. I said, "That's fifteen. Let's watch the herd a while, give them some time. They'll restructure, and then we can separate out another band. We'll try to get about thirty chickens all together. There's still too many roosters, so let's keep picking them out and eating them."

Darla cooked roosters ten different ways, ten meals in a row, and Roger said, "I hope they reproduce fast, because with you turning out meals like this, I could eat a lot of chicken." The last morning I was there, Darla proudly divided two eggs three ways; her chickens had begun to settle in. She brought the shells to the table, a green one and a blue one. "They really do lay colored eggs. I mean, I believed you, but I didn't completely believe it until I saw it."

I left there with about a hundred chickens in good shape from scratching ample feed and doing some ranging around. The engine sounded good, and I relaxed into the day. I drove out through back country, old paved roads, gravel roads, slow driving, nobody anywhere, the shortest way home, directly northeast

Way out in the flatlands, ninety miles from anywhere, the truck started to vibrate and rattle. Sounded like a u-joint going, and I kept praying for a few more miles, because we were in the middle of a long dry stretch, no way to get through if it gave out there. The truck rattled and vibrated thirty miles more, until a stream ran near the road, and I drove down, forded the stream, and parked in some brush, out of sight of the road.

I let the chickens out and talked to them. "There's no traffic on these back roads. If I tried to get into town and get parts and get back here, it might take me several days, and most of you probably wouldn't survive. The only thing I can see to do is make the rest of the trip on foot and get you all set up in a secure place, then come back and get the truck."

"You chickens have to work on this. You're a lot smarter

than you think you are. You have to keep organized and keep moving when we leave here. Your survival depends on it. There's hawks and owls and weasels and coyotes out there, and you're smarter than you think you are, that's for sure, but they're smarter and faster than you are. Trust yourselves to the dogs and to me, and we'll protect you from predators and get you to a place where most of you can live to a ripe old age well protected and well provided for. But you must cooperate, and the main thing is, think. Take care of yourself all you can; help your fellow traveler when she needs it and keep in mind our distant goal and the fact that we want to arrive there together and in good shape."

I took the dogs aside and had a private conversation. "You did well last time, getting these chickens herded, and I'm counting on you to help me get them there. We're going short-rations, because I'm the only one set up to carry anything. Now, we find ourselves in a complex, not to mention morally hazy situation. You can't hunt for food, because it's going to be all the three of us can do to keep these chickens moving right, and you won't have time." The mother dog wagged her tail, and the black male kept his tall ears pointed at me.

"We have somewhere around a hundred and thirty miles to go, if we don't have to detour too much for water. These chickens need water pretty often, so I'll carry all I can. But that means I can't carry food for you. So how does a chicken diet sound? Yes, I thought it might. Phew. But I do not want a couple of chicken-killing dogs on my hands, so I guess I'll have to kill the chickens and pluck them and cook them, so you don't even know it's the same animal. I don't like that, but right now I can't see what else to do. You just absolutely can't kill a chicken. Run off anything that looks like a chicken-killer, and you have to stay close at night. If you go off in the morning, you have to show up by sunrise. If you miss move-out call more than once, I'll have to chain you up nights.

"Well, if you don't have any comments, let's get a good night's sleep and hit it about sunrise. Feast up on dog food, and maybe we can get by without eating tomorrow."

The dogs did take off that night, and they didn't return until midmorning, but it worked out all right, because it took me that long to get the chickens unloaded and grained and watered. "Load up, because it's what you can scratch from here on out." Three chickens drowned from stupidity, walked into the water, fluttered and squawked, waterlogged and sank. Three more got pushed in and drowned, but the rest got wise and did okay. I

went downstream and pulled the drowned chickens out of the water, threw them up on the bank for some hungry animals.

I tied three gallons of water to my pack and a canteen on my belt, and we set out as soon as the dogs came back. Waiting had given the chickens time to arrange order within the herd. They scattered quite a bit when we tried to move them, and for a while, we didn't make much forward direction. "Keep it together. Northeast. Northeast. Move it out. Get some direction to it."

I got up front, scratched, clucked, bobbed up and down like I was pecking, flapped my elbows like wings, ran forward a ways and scratched and pecked some more. The chickens looked at each other, looked back at me, and then started to follow me. "Hey, hey, you dogs, look at me. Buck buck, buck, squawk, I'm the biggest chicken. Buck, buck, buck. They're following. Keep the stragglers rounded up. Come on. Come on. Buck, buck buck buck. Good scratching up here. Lots of good stuff."

I was soon able to give up most of the scratching and clucking and still maintain a good point to the herd, with renewed sessions of big-chicken behavior when their attention wandered.

I had to work with Kylie to keep him from forgetting about the chickens and laying up in the shade or just taking off over the hill. "You dogs were energy spendthrifts, taking off last night, and now you're paying for it, but we're going to keep moving."

We did make fair progress, but the dogs quit early in the afternoon, took to shade and would not budge. I said, "Okay," and I let the chickens scatter out and scratch for a couple of hours.

Then I said, "Okay. Let's put some more ground under us. If you dogs rest all afternoon, you'll be off again tonight, and that could lead to hassles between us, chains and unpleasant things like that. Bring those stragglers up. Move em. Come on. Move. Let's go. Move em out."

The chickens moved well that afternoon, and I ranged a little, dropped back and walked alongside or at the back, though if I stayed off point for long, it began to dissolve; direction dissipated.

Four chickens straggled so severely, they were holding us up, and I finally said, "All right. Leave them. We just can't keep them with us, so they're on their own." From the top of the first ridge, I looked back and saw one of them scratching and

pecking out in the sagebrush. Two more quit a little farther on, and I dropped back of the herd and killed and cleaned them, put them in a plastic sack in my pack and caught up with the herd, that had started to scatter and lose all direction.

We made it over the ridge into a hollow behind it, where a few juniper trees grew. At dusk, the chickens flew up into the trees and roosted on the limbs in small groups, ten to twenty feet off the ground. I cooked the dead chickens and shared them with the dogs. We all settled down for the night.

The chickens came out of the trees at daylight, flapping, feathers flying, discussing and disputing. I rationed out six quarts of water to the chickens. I tried to be sure they all had some, but with about ninety chickens jumping and changing positions, climbing over each other and running around, it was hard to be sure. I gave the dogs the rest of the cooked chicken and a cup of water apiece. I ate dried fruit and had a cup of water.

The dogs worked well that day. We made steady progress, but we didn't reach the creek I hoped for. I rationed the remaining water, didn't save much for the dogs or me. "We can go a couple of days if we have to. These chickens aren't too good at it." Four chickens dropped dead the next morning, and we just left them behind. The next three that died, in the afternoon, I gutted and plucked, stayed well back from the herd so the offal didn't attract the dogs or chickens and interfere with our progress.

We reached the stream in the middle of the afternoon, and everyone watered down well, with no losses. The chickens harvested a good crop of insects, seeds, and young plants. The dogs laid up in the shade. I roasted three chickens and cooked a pot of brown rice, and the dogs and I ate together. I found the next water on a Forest Service map, a spring not far out of our line of travel, and we set out for it at daylight.

Scratching was sparse on the Oregon desert, and we pushed for distance. I kept saying, "Make distance while we can and get to water. There's not much to eat out here anyway. Just keep moving."

That day, six chickens dropped dead, I suppose from thirst. I gathered and cleaned them and hauled them along until we got to the small, open spring with five cottonwood trees around, and one old willow below the spring. I had to guard the head of the spring from the chickens to keep them from spoiling the water, as they crowded around to drink from the runoff before it soaked into the ground.

I tried to get Kylie to do guard duty, but he didn't see how to keep them away without force and snapped at them and killed one chicken, so I took him off duty, filled all my containers, and gave the spring up to the chickens.

I roasted four chickens and cut up three more. When the chickens came down out of the trees in the morning, I fed them the pieces. "They are also served who only fall by the wayside."

We made good distance that day. In the early afternoon, we reached a stream that wandered through meadow country. I dumped my water containers, glad to be relieved of the weight as we traveled upstream.

We had covered a good distance from the truck and trailer, but the chickens were thin and ragged, so we took it easy up through the meadows. The chickens found plentiful food, including many grasshoppers, which they caught with quick skill. "You'll be good for keeping the grasshoppers under control in the canyon. Keep em from eating the garden."

High, quiet, and clean country. We kept direction but made only four or five miles a day. A rattlesnake killed a chicken, and I drove the herd around and left it there to try to swallow it.

Clouds gathered dark north of us, and I heard a distant rumble of thunder. I tried to get the chickens up to some speed. We headed for the shelter of the forest, but the storm rolled down the mountain. Lightning snapped and thunder rolled, and the chickens stopped and milled in confusion. Lightning struck in the trees across the creek. Thunder roared. The ground shook, and the herd split.

About a third of the chickens ran for the woods and flew up into trees, but the largest part of the herd turned and stampeded wildeyed down the meadow, trampling everything in their path.

Chickens fell, and the herd trampled them.

Darkness settled into the high meadow country as rain began, and all I could do was get out my poncho and take what shelter I could find under the trees. A cold, wet night.

Clear sky and sunshine in the morning. Fresh, clean smell. I walked five miles down one side of the meadow and up the other. I found chickens roosting in trees and rousted them out when I could, but some of them sat in shock and wouldn't move. I found small groups of chickens out in the meadow, scratching and chatting together. I found loners out scratching here and there.

We kept grouping them up.

A large hen came out of the tall grass, running full speed. She leaped right for me, flapped her wings squawked, and

feathers flew. I backed up, ducked, turned, and I tried to run, but I tripped over the dogs and sprawled in the grass.

The hen flew by me full speed, and I tried to slow my hammering heart as I realized she had been and still was in pursuit of a fleeing grasshopper.

When I got up, both dogs were watching me. "I wasn't afraid of her. I ran because, well, I wanted to catch her, so I was trying to stay ahead of her. Okay Kylie, don't forget that time a little doe called your bluff and charged you, and you ran from her. And Spot, you're afraid of motorcycles. Come on, let's get her rounded up."

We grouped up more than sixty chickens. I gathered the carcasses that were in good shape and roasted the meat. "It's just as well it went that way, because this is an easier herd to handle. Water lasts longer; feed lasts longer, and we have meat enough to last three days if we eat all we want. We're in good shape. Let's be thankful the stampede didn't bust up the chuck wagons and destroy our supplies like they usually do."

The herd was faster and more responsive to our direction than it had been before the stampede trimmed it.

We kept a rapid pace up through the meadow country and onto the high plains. I figured out I had four bands of about ten chickens each; and about fifteen chickens that kept changing band to band without quite attaching to any one band. By early afternoon, there were only eleven chickens that had not attached to one band or another with fair stability, and those chickens started to get confused. When we stopped, the unaffiliated chickens were excluded from the herd. They entered only at the price of blood.

The same chickens were more confused and excluded the next day. It slowed us down to try to keep them with us. That evening, I drove them out away from the herd. I killed eight of them, and the other three figured out what I was doing and escaped into the sparse brush. I went after them, but they were fast and expert dodgers, so I left them, hoping they'd make a life for themselves there.

I cleaned and plucked the eight. I was tired of the smell of blood and chicken guts and tired of feathers sticking to me, but I saw the job through. I roasted three carcasses and fed the other five to the rest of the chickens. "Eat all you can, because tomorrow, we're going to sprint, try to make Bear creek in one day."

I had about forty-five chickens left, in four well-defined bands. The new herd kept good speed and direction. I was

pleasantly surprised to make it to Bear creek about three hours before sunset. The remaining chickens were strong and aggressive food-grabbers, and they went right to work scratching and eating while I took a much-needed bath in the icy water, and the dogs took time off in the shade.

Something got up with the chickens during the night and killed two of them before the dogs and I could run it off. One of the chickens killed was apparently a leader of a band, and the chickens discussed and retested and restructured the herd, but we put respectable distance under us by noon, and we topped Strawberry ridge midafternoon.

The ridge fell away in front of us. Sparse scrub brush and stunted grass grew in the dry soil all the way to the edge of the wide reservoir. Far below us, a long way across dusty, hot earth, flat, brown water reflected sunlight toward the sky above us.

I pointed across the wide water, upstream to where Wolf creek ran into the reservoir. "See that? That's home. Right up that canyon. Chicken houses and good places for dogs to take it easy, and a good bed for me to sleep in. We'll be home tomorrow."

We made a good drive the next morning, until we took the ferry to cross the reservoir. All the people on the ferry stared at us. Dirty clothes, dirty pack, greasy sleeping bag tied on the pack frame; the strong smell of rancid chicken fat had soaked into the pack. Tall, thin, dusty man headed down the hill toward the river, forty-five chickens grouped closely at his heels, pacing it out. Two dogs brought up the rear. Chickens squawked and clucked; dust rolled up behind us.

The ferry man demanded three dollars. "I got to charge you the same as if you took them in a truck. I should charge you more, cause this way, I wind up with chicken shit all over my ferry."

There were nine people in four cars, a man on a horse, and the ferry man. Everyone except the ferry man looked us over. He didn't care. I tried to be at ease.

The man tied his horse to the railing and came over. The chickens grouped up close behind me and talked nervously among themselves. "You for real driving them chickens? Every man, dog and chicken on foot like I think I seen?"

"You seen it right."

He shook his head and walked over and leaned on the railing, but every minute or two he looked back at me, the chickens, and the dogs and shook his head again. The ferry rode

smoothly east. A wide, low wake spread out behind us on the muddy reservoir.

A young man, with his lady closely entwined, came close and said, "Hey man, are you for real? I mean this what you're doing, is it real? You working for the movies or something? You doing this all by yourself, or are you doing this for movies or t.v.?" He looked around for anywhere a camera might be, and I said, "It's for real. No movies. The real thing."

"Phew. Wow. I just never would have thought. Phew. Hey, you know, these are kinda funny looking chickens. I never saw any like that before."

"They're Araucana."

"That right? Araucana, huh? They look different, you know?"

"They're from Peru."

"Is that right? Way down there in Peru, you mean way down there?"

"Yeah. They're Peruvian chickens. Araucana."

"You told me that part."

"They lay colored eggs."

"Colored?"

"Yeah. Kind of like easter eggs. Blue eggs, and green ones. Pink eggs and gold-colored eggs."

"Is that right? Hey man, you got yourself an act? I mean, you go around doin this, tellin people this stuff, getting friendly people and layin this stuff on em, making fun of em, what d'you get out of it? Somebody pay you for bein funny to people?"

"I wasn't doing anything funny. Just answering your questions."

"Yeah. Hey, I come over here to be friendly. Make a conversation, see what's up, you know? Cause what you're doing here is different. Whatever it is, it's different. But you got to get smart. I mean I just ask some questions to be friendly, and you start tryin to make me look dumb. Maybe you think I'm dumb."

"No. I don't think that. I don't know you at all, so how would I know if you're dumb or smart?"

"You been drivin them chickens a while? Yeah? You look like it. I mean, you look like you been on the trail for a while. All the way from Peru, huh? You look kind of jumpy, you know, kind of wired up, a little bug-eyed, like some kind of wild man. Another thing, you know, you're really dirty. With a strong smell to you. What? I can't hardly hear you, you say it so quiet. You took a bath, but you come through a lot of dust?"

Well, you're even dirtier than you think. Here, I'll give you a mirror, and you see what you think."

He detached himself from his girlfriend, pulled her purse around, took a small mirror from it and held it out to me. I made no move to take it, and he stepped a little closer and held it up to my face, and I said, "Back off."

"Well sure, man, but you know, you got somethin in your beard. Looks like some chicken shit right here." He reached for me, and I caught his arm, stepped under and up, brought his arm sharply up behind him, grabbed the seat of his pants, and goose-stepped him over to his car, shoved him down in the seat. "Stay off me, friend." The girl got back in the car, and they stayed there the rest of the way across.

Nervous chickens scattered out and regrouped, got under some of the cars. Nervous dogs couldn't work well in close quarters. The kid took off in his bright yellow car the instant the ramp touched down. Fortunately, there were no chickens under his car, and though they were hard to handle after the noise of the car driving off, some of the people worked with me to get them back together. An elderly man who drove a pickup spoke up, "Let's all wait here and let him get these chickens driven up across the road so they don't get upset when we start our cars."

The ferryman said, "Hey, I can't wait all day," and the old man said, "This will take just a few minutes. It'll be faster to get the ferry cleared in order than if we go in confusion."

We grouped the chickens, went up the ramp and onto the gravel road, heard the accelerating engine, and I realized the kid had waited down the road and was coming back fast. I yelled, "Go. Run. Go," ran at the chickens, yelled at the dogs, "Up, up, go on."

The chickens, the dogs and I hit the bank in tightly packed formation and climbed it, apparently clear of the road, but my momentum carried me into the herd, and seven chickens scattered away from me back onto the road. The bright yellow car hit five chickens square, sent two more glancing along the road, swerved, slid, and came to a stop slewed off in the shallow ditch.

The kid piled out and started running back, with his girl friend close behind. I slid down the bank and started to pick up the two mortally wounded chickens, and then the kid was on me.

"You think you got away with putting me down in front of all those people? I'm gonna kick the shit out of you while they're still watching."

He hit me in the side of the head. I sidestepped the next swing, swung him by me, and he slid full length in the gravel. He got back up with a rock in his hand.

“Them fucking stupid chickens of yours broke my windshield, you fucking dumb dirty hippy chicken-fucker.” He threw the rock, and I ducked it, but up close he threw another, and it caught me heavy under the eye and glanced off. I felt sick and went to my knees, but I still kept track of what was happening, and I fell out of the way as the kid threw another rock.

He rushed me. I rose from the ground and smashed him in the face with both fists in one motion. He fell away from me, skidded in the gravel, and rolled over, started to get up slow. I picked up one wounded chicken, still kicking, and when the kid made it up, I hit him full in the side of the head with the chicken. “You dumb stupid kid jerk. You killed my chickens. You coulda killed my dogs and me too.” I slapped him open-handed with the back of my hand, which rattled his head and broke three of my fingers.

He came back at me, and I hit him with the chicken, first from one side and then from the other, and then again, and again, and the chicken came apart and splattered guts and shit and blood all over the kid, who went down and looked like he might stay down.

One chicken, badly smashed but still alive, spun itself in circles in the dirt. I picked it up, and the girl ran between me and the kid. “Don’t kill him, mister. You keep hitting him, you’re going to kill him. Don’t kill him. He’s a no good son-of-a-bitch, but he don’t need to die. He won’t bother you no more, but don’t kill him.”

I sat down on the edge of the road and tried to gather my senses. The girl said, “You got hit pretty hard. Don’t look too pretty.”

The elderly man and the man with the horse came up. The older man said, “She’s right. We’ll have to get you to town.”

“No.”

“You need to have a doctor look at you.”

“No. What happened to the rest of the chickens?”

“Your dogs have them grouped up the hill. They’re all right.”

I felt dizzy and weak. I said, “Leave me alone a few minutes.” I took deep, even breaths, gathered myself together, put down the sick feeling, thought of wholeness and completeness until my vision cleared. I stood up, and I walked

around.

I said, "I appreciate your concern, but I'm going on up with these chickens. I've brought them over five hundred miles, and I'm going the last five. I'm all right."

The kid got up and walked around like he was looking for something but couldn't remember what. He wiped chicken blood and shit from his face on his sleeve. The men talked to him and got him started for town.

He tried to take the girl with him, but she said, "You tried to mess over this man, and I'm not sure he's okay, so I'm going to help him get these chickens up there, make sure he gets there. Don't you get tough with me, you son-of-a-bitch. You get your ass in that car and drive it to town and get yourself cleaned up and stay put until I get back, or you'll never in your life see me again, I swear to God." He got in and drove away.

It was some work to get the rest of the people assured that I was okay so they'd leave me alone, but I got it done, and then I tried to get the girl to go back to town, without success. We got the chickens pushed up to Wolf creek road and started up the canyon. I felt kind of weathered and had to sit down a while. I was glad the girl was with me, because she kept calling me into consciousness until I could work on it and pull up out of feeling sick.

My hand hurt and started puffing up. I had trouble putting that away because I knew I'd been stupid, hitting him back-handed like that, shades of ten years gone by.

Steve has bladed out the road. The bulls are gone. The house on the river is unoccupied. Midafternoon sun hot; we head up the road. One man, one woman, thirty-five chickens, two dogs. Strung out over a hundred yards, the chickens make no scratch in the barren road but stick to it without complaint. They sense the end of the journey.

Dust kicks up around us. Kylie circles out and drives back four chickens that head for green grass. Step step step, thump thump, pacing up the road. A flutter and a cluster of clucks. I start to feel dizzy, put it away, focus on the day around, heat of the sun, clean smell of the canyon.

Steve saw us from up the hill and came to meet us. "Right up this way to the chicken yard."

In the morning, he said, "The chickens got out of the pen and roosted in the trees by the creek last night. There's an old raccoon been living on this creek for years. I think he got a chicken. I just built the pen for normal chickens, so we'll have to revise it some."

The girl came into the kitchen and examined my face and hand. "Your face looks better than it did last night. Your hand is puffing up, but like you said, you did that one yourself. Dizzy or anything?"

"No."

"Is anybody going into town?"

"Steve's going in for fencing in a while."

"I'll catch a ride with him."

"Why don't you stay around a while?"

"I got things to do in town."

"Come back out for a visit."

"Look. Don't get any romantic ideas. You like me cause I helped you in a jam and cause I was tough, but I helped you cause my boyfriend messed you up in the first place and cause if I was tougher when I shoulda been, I coulda stopped him from doing that stupid car stunt in the first place. Don't get any dreamy ideas, cause what I'm going to do is go back to town and marry that dumb, hotrod cowboy and get him tamed before he messes somebody up bad and gets himself in real trouble. I'm glad you're feeling okay, and I hope everything goes like you want it to here."

That afternoon, Steve and I revised the fence, got the chickens secured, hiked up to the foot of the mountain, and watched the sun set. We stood there in all the changing light, under a wide sky golden and red with sunset, quiet until the colors faded to grey. Then Steve said, "That girl's going to remember those chickens when she's eighty years old and somebody's grandmother."

"Me too."