

The Prodigal Rooster

By Julie MacKissock

Harry woke up that morning to the crooning racket of that goddamn rooster. It was 4:15 am and the rooster was prompt with his call to the sunrise. Harry had not slept through to his alarm for almost a month.

“GoddamnmuthahuckingdamitBIRD!”

Harry threw the covers off, his arms and legs getting caught in the midst of the grey goose down comforter. When he finally escaped, his feet hit the cold wood floor and instead of getting up, he remained seated for a minute. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and sighed. There was a moment's peace before the rooster crowed again. Getting back to sleep would be a challenge now. Resigned to start his 27th day without a full night's sleep, he lumbered to the shower and in a zombie-like daze proceeded to get ready for the day ahead.

Standing underneath the cascading hot shower, he plotted the death of the rooster. It was something he had done almost every morning since the damn thing had arrived, cock-a-doodle-doo-ing his way into Harry's peaceful slumber. At first, Harry did it just as a joke – something to make him feel better about the whole situation. Now. Now, it was serious. Harry's thoughts were consumed with thoughts of neck cracking. He would eat the damn thing, savoring the meat and his triumph. There was really nothing stopping Harry from pursuing the grisly end of the bird...just time and opportunity.

He stepped out of the shower and looked around the tiny apartment. Harry had lived in Denver his whole life. He'd spent his childhood in a two-bedroom bungalow in the highlands. His parents slept in the room across the hall from him and his brother, Adam. They had shared that space for almost 20 years. When Adam moved to New York, Harry had reluctantly moved out of the house he loved and into a little apartment right down the street. It was a one room, attic apartment, the bed separated from the rest of the space with a faded, blue, woven cloth that you might buy at a summer festival. It was ragged with wear and time, but it served its purpose well enough. The kitchen was miniscule – one person could barely fit in the space – the cabinets went all the way to the ceiling, and most of the doors were falling off of the hinges. The whole space was crammed with books.

Water dripped off of Harry onto the faded, braided rug he had inherited from his grandmother. Everything in the room belonged to someone else, everything a hand-me-down. Light barely filtered through the only window, cracked and dirty with age and time. As he walked to his closet, Harry ran his foot into the bedpost. He wailed in pain – it was the same toe that he kicked at least once daily. Again, he thought to himself that he should probably move the damn bed...but he just never seemed to get around to it.

Harry lived a hand-me-down life. Hitting his foot against the bedpost was the fault of the universe and was completely out of his hands. The rooster was God punishing him for existing. Most days, he felt as if it was nearly impossible to get out of bed. He was obese with the weight of his monotonous life and in some deep part of himself, yearning for an escape. Somehow, he thought, if he could murder the rooster, his life would be back on track. He would be able to show the universe that he was somehow still in control.

Harry decided that since he was up so early, and didn't have to be at work for three more hours, that he would spend a little time researching. He sat down at the computer, pushing aside the mail that had piled up next to his keyboard, and opened his web browser to Google.

He typed in: "How to kill a rooster?"

The list of web links was pretty extensive. There were even several hundred YouTube videos. Harry clicked on the first link. It was a brutal demonstration of violence. It was perfect. Next, because he felt that just watching videos was less productive he clicked on a link about farming – one that discussed a humane way to kill a rooster. He glanced at the directions and quickly decided against it – because right at that moment - the damn thing started squawking again.

It was 5:30 am.

Hanging was too good for it. Burning was too good for it. Being chopped into little pieces starting from its damned feet seemed like the only way to satisfy Harry's blood lust for the cursed fowl.

While he was searching for more information, he opened his email and saw yet another message from his brother Adam. He added it to the folder that was already filled with emails from him. The total was 23 as of today. Adam had been sending him an email or calling Harry's phone nearly every day for the last month. Harry stood up from the desk and walked over to the

window. He looked out at the alley and watched a black cat walk across the cement and head behind the dumpster. He stood there for a long while, thinking about that time.

One year ago, Harry and Adam were sitting together in the waiting room of the hospice care center where their father was living out his last days. For most of their father's battle with cancer, the two brothers had made every decision together. They didn't argue, they didn't fight, and they didn't bicker. It was the first time in years that they had gotten along so well. Their mother was destroyed by their father's illness, and so all decisions were left to her two sons. They spent every free moment together at the hospice and the family home. 265 days ago, they were the best of friends.

264 days ago, their father died. At the funeral, everyone patted them on the back or shook their hands.

"You did a great job with your dad, Harry."

"Way to make it easier for your dad to pass, Adam."

"Your dad really felt he could finally let go." Their friends and family were solemn and proud. The brothers carried out their tasks with grace and dignity and everyone said how much easier they had made their father's last days.

262 days ago, when their mother died, Adam finally fell apart. It was two days after their father's funeral and Harry and Adam were at the house. Harry had picked up some take out for dinner. The house smelled like pad Thai.

"I have a small headache, boys. I think I am going to go lay down. Thanks again for taking care of everything. I am so grateful for it all. I love you both." Their mother smiled and patted their heads as she walked by each of them. Harry and Adam gave each other a look that said "we are not little kids anymore." But neither of them really minded. They loved her. A few hours later, Harry went upstairs to check on her, and he found she had passed, peaceful; looking as if she was sleeping. He called Adam upstairs and before he could tell him what happened, Adam lost it. He started screaming and clutching at their mother. He kept saying "NO! NO! NO!" over and over again. Harry tried to pull him off of her, and Adam punched him.

Blood dripping from his nose, Harry went to the kitchen and called their neighbor, John.

"John, can you come over. Mom. She uh. Well mom she passed. Adam is freaking out. Thanks, see you in a second."

The next few hours were a blur. Harry and John finally got Adam calmed down and into bed. They called the funeral home and they came and got their mother. When Harry went to bed, at around 1:30, he was exhausted, but didn't feel like he had anything to worry about, other than another funeral.

The rooster crowed again, and startled Harry from his memory. He still couldn't believe that both of his parents were dead. The rage that had been focused on the rooster was now focused on remembering the final fight with his brother.

254 days ago they were speaking with the family lawyer. They were in the living room of the house they had grown up in; the house they had shared for 20 years.

"Harry, Adam, I'm sorry to have to meet like this. I can't believe that both your parents have passed so close together. I have a few papers for you to sign. We will take care of the house and the funerals and insurance to cover everything, ok?"

Adam just stared at Harry. He hadn't spoken a word since the night their mother died.

"That sounds good, sir, just tell us what we need to do and where we need to sign."

"Well, actually, there is one thing that is not so straight forward. You have to decide what to do with the house. There isn't really anything written out, so it goes to you and Adam. What do you boys want to do with it?"

For the first time in days, Adam spoke. He and Harry said at the same time: "I want the house."

Harry looked at Adam and asked, "What do you mean? You live in New York . Why do you want the house? Are you moving home?"

"Yes."

"That's all your going to say? 'yes' You don't even like the house. You've never liked it. Why now?"

The fight that ensued was pretty epic – lasting for hours – Adam certainly made up for not talking for so many days. Harry walked out of the living room and hadn't been back since. He had called the lawyer and told him he never wanted to speak to his brother again – he asked him to just take care of everything. Harry asked him to just sell the house and split the proceeds. Their lawyer wasn't optimistic. "He's moved in, Harry. He doesn't want to leave."

"I don't want to talk to him. Just take care of it."

They hadn't spoken since.

Harry looked around the apartment he hated, and thought about the life he hated. He couldn't help but blame Adam. The last year would have been hard with him by Harry's side. Without him, it had barely been possible. Harry's hand-me-down life was barely a life at all.

The next day, when that goddamn rooster woke him up at 4:15 again, he decided today was the day that he would do something about it. About his life and about that f-ing bird. He grabbed the sharpest knife in the kitchen and headed out the door. Harry thought he knew where the rooster was living; the sound was definitely coming from near his parent's house. He thought the best chance he had to find the thing and kill it would be to go out when it was squawking. He wandered around the streets for a while, listening for the crowing, and moving in the direction of the sound. After about fifteen minutes, Harry found himself right in front of his old house.

"No." He stood outside the red door of his childhood home and just stared, dumbfounded that the damn bird belonged to his damn brother. He sat down in the road and contemplated what to do. "That asshat. What the heck is he doing with a rooster in the middle of Denver?" Harry wasn't really upset any more. He could not have said why, but somehow, he felt the weight of his anger leave him, and he just had to laugh. Sitting cross-legged on the asphalt, twisting the knife's point into the ground, he came to a decision. If the universe was really out to get him, he wasn't going to let it happen. The coincidence was just too much. Harry got up and walked home, smiling to himself the entire way.

Harry sat down at his computer and opened the first email.

"Bro, I'm sorry I wiggled out...I didn't know how to tell you I was broke. I just didn't have the words at the time. Mom dying was the last straw. I just lost it. Please get at me. I have this crazy idea for the house and I totally want you to be a part of it...call me, dude."

The rooster, with ever-perfect timing, crowed loudly, and Harry just smiled. He picked up his phone and dialed.