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## The Chicken's Eggs<sup>4</sup>

Every Sunday at dusk, the women —young and old— gathered at the Virgen who protected the entrance to the village, adorning her with feathers. She was short and round and eternally pregnant. In Peña Blanca, only the women finished high school, though most ended up devoting themselves to sewing or raising chickens. The village was well-known for its eggs and, once a week, Don Heladio would come through town to pick up fifteen carton flats, thirty eggs each, and then hurry off to Hidalgo to sell them.

There in the village, the cacti grew tall and always had ripe fruit decorating their crowns. The cactus pear would hang there until it fell to the earth, the rejected heart stirring a sigh of dust around it. The pears fell just like that: nobody bothered to collect them anymore. For some years now, not a single male adult had remained in the village.

It never came as a surprise when a young man's face would suddenly lose color as soon as his shoulders started bulking up: leaving his girlfriend, the nopales and sand, the yolky sun,

his mother's kiss... Each face reflected a faraway desert, a journey all the men in town had taken, with or without success, except for those who died in the white house at the edge of the village where the women cared for the sick (aging señoras, some kid with chickenpox, and a couple of wayward boys who hadn't managed to get out, clutching their guts and hugging their knees). In that white house, like in all the houses, the women raised chickens.

A few Mondays ago, when Heladio came to pick up the flats at first light, he had to wait. He killed time, getting out of his truck, climbing back in. He polished his shoes and smoked a few cigarettes until he decided he'd better go knock on someone's door, to see if they could let Doña Clemen know that the girl was running late. Fed up with kicking the dirt, he saw the kid running towards him.

"I slept in! I'm coming!" cried Viviana.

In no time they had exchanged the money and eggs and Don Heladio tore off down the road for Hidalgo, leaving



the village to the girls. The exile had started back in the 70s. The village belonged to the women now, governed and worked by them, as the walls at the US border were surveilled more by the day, pushing the men towards increasingly remote and dangerous paths through the Sonoran desert. Altar, Sonora became a shrine as much in praise of God as of the migrant dead. Before, the men would come back to visit, maybe knock up one of the women before leaving, but now that was rare. The migratory law penalized all crossing. Still, the young men couldn't stay home. Their pale faces bore that knowledge. Instead of worrying, the women kept knitting, cleaning the chicken coops, and nagging the little ones.

Another Monday came and, just as he'd done for the last thirty years, Heladio arrived in Peña Blanca with the dawn. As he drove, he thought of Viviana. She had been a beautiful girl, with strong legs, since she was little. He had always imagined how the years would pass: her small breasts would start to form, like two tender geraniums. Time was good to her. He, on the other hand, was one of those people whose age is hard to guess:

with his filled-out belly and that hat he always wore, you couldn't tell if he'd lived forty hard years or well over fifty.

He'd brought a cowboy novel this time, but, even still, when he saw that more than fifteen minutes had passed, he got annoyed. Like last time, the girl came running.

"Ay, I'm sorry. It's just that the rooster died on us, and I went around asking, but all the neighbors' either got sick or died ten days ago too, and, you know, it really is hard to get used to waking up without their crowing."

"Just don't make me go waiting around, *mija*, I wouldn't want to get outsold at the market. The eggs'll just get too hot when the sun comes out strong, and if people start to see the outline of a chick 'cause of the heat, then I'm really in trouble. Nobody's gonna want chilaquiles with a chick surprise."

Viviana lowered her eyes and started digging her toes into the dirt. Heladio immediately twisted his face into a smile and added, "I'll bring you all a rooster then, so you don't have to run around in a hurry. Just give me an advance and no problem, I'll bring a good one from the market."

"Oh, thanks so much. I'll tell Doña Clemen about the rooster and the advance. See you next Monday, God willing."

"God bless, gorgeous."

Heladio returned to the village the following Monday, as always. The young lady really was pretty, so even without the advance, he brought her a rooster as a present—or some kind of bargain. They weren't cheap either, could cost as much as two thousand pesos, though his brother-in-law had cut him a deal. He entered the village and saw the girl was already there, waiting.

"Could you help me, Don Heladio? The neighbors brought more *huevos* and I couldn't carry them all."

"Coming from someone as beautiful as you...how could I say no?" Don Heladio answered and followed her to the house. He would tell her about the rooster after helping out, to impress her even more. But he had to move a little slowly, his stomach had been tied in knots since the night before, no doubt due to his nerves about giving her the surprise rooster.

At the house, he followed her into the courtyard, but was surprised to see—to one side of the egg flats—a whole brood of chicks making a ruckus.

"Hasn't it been weeks since there were any roosters here?" Don Heladio asked, fearing his gift would no longer be as prized. He thought of how much it had cost him.

"Well, I haven't heard of any. Not a single crow either. I still have to keep my eyes on the sun in the morning, *señor*. You know, I hardly get any rest..."





Don Heladio felt a lurch, his guts sunk with all the disappointment, nervousness, and indigestion.

"Ah, ok...mija, may I use your bathroom?"



Don Heladio had to stay in the village longer than he'd hoped, shame and all, since his stomachache lasted the entire afternoon. Hours passed and the poor rooster overheated in the sun. It was on its last leg in the truck.

Don Heladio felt so ill that he eventually realized he would have to stay the night. He asked the young lady to find out where he could sleep. Finally, she took him to the white house, with the sick people.

"You can stay here since there are other males. Of course, you can't stay at mine, since it's just my Mamá and I, and we can't go hanging around with men. Even though my Papá lives in Texas now, she respects him, so that's why nobody can stay with us."

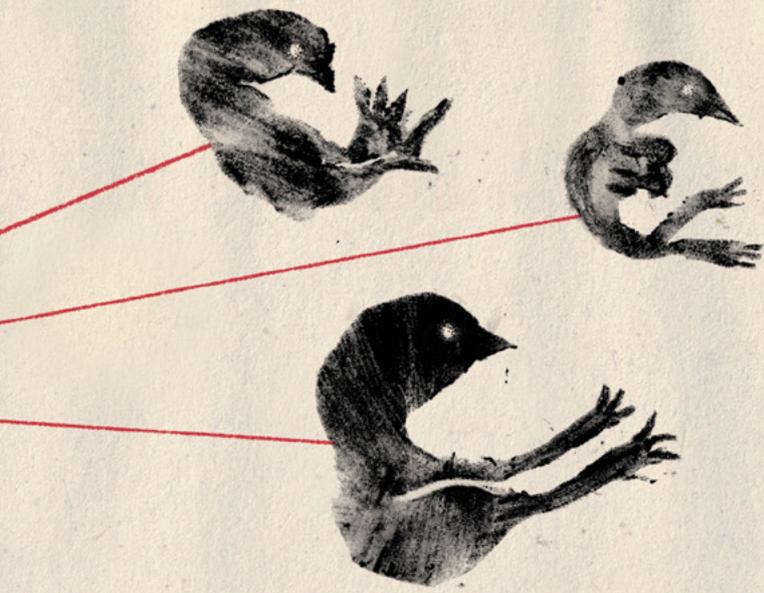
The driver agreed to stay in the hospital that night.

Lights started to turn on in the village as the sun went down. An amber glow saturated the walls and spread like a

runny yolk. Don Heladio observed the cases filled with ibuprofen, acetaminophen, amoxicillin, a pair of glass vials with white liquid inside, and jars of cotton, glinting in the sun's final rays. He scanned the room from left to right and tried to shut his eyes. In this hospital, the walls were always well-painted, no chipped layers falling to the floor like in the other villages. There were only three rooms: one for check-ups and simple surgeries, another larger room with six aluminum cots, and one where they kept equipment. There was also a bathroom with a sink and a chair, and outside, like at all the houses in the village, a fence for the chickens. Heladio laid back on one of the cots, which he noticed barely fit him. By then he was so tired and in pain, he just wanted to fall asleep, but the other patients in the room whimpered incessantly. There was no privacy. Also, it seemed like the painting of the Virgen was eyeing him. Almost all the village houses had some painting or statue of her.

Below the portrait of the virgin, the women had drawn a chart. It was organized from one to five, with drawings of what seemed to be developing embryos. Beside the images, cursive letters read: "Gracias, Virgencita, for the knowledge we all share, which you reveal to us every evening in the light of your shadow."

After a few minutes looking at the wall, his mind wandering, he was startled by hens making a fuss outside—they should have been asleep at that hour. He shut his eyes and tried to breathe deeply, though his stomach still grumbled. He stared at the guy next to him. In the village, they didn't let the wayward boys out: they had to stay in the hospital, as



penance. Once he'd heard about a fifteen-year-old kid who kept trying to pick up a young girl. Maybe her name had been Angélica. Story goes that one day, when she was coming home from the granary, the kid forced himself on her. Clearly he'd just gotten fed up with her not giving him the time of day. It was pretty bad... Sometimes he wondered what would happen if he was alone with Viviana, but best not to overthink the whole thing. He sighed and let his eyes, now heavy, close. Soon enough, he fell asleep.

That night, he dreamt he'd gotten up to check on the chickens and, taking care not to let the straw crunch beneath his shoes, crept up to one of them: it was sound asleep. He went over to the boxes of eggs in the hallway and took one of the cartons. He returned to the room and, feeling his way, took out a match to light a candle. He knew if he raised the eggs up to the flame, he'd be able to tell if they were fertilized. By candlelight, he would make out the developing embryo's dark speck, the reddish veins radiating out like a macabre spiderweb, the cabaret pink of blood tinting the shells, and, down below, a little pocket of air to carry oxygen to the fetus. He tried one egg: orange, normal. Then another: questionable, but no, it wasn't flecked either. One more, orange, and that was it; he shook his head. Why had he worried? Surely the young lady's chicks were the stock of some rooster's last dance, but now there would be no more. For a second, he remembered the rooster he'd left in the truck and his heart sank. He blew out the candle and laid back down.

But he couldn't sleep and turned over towards the guy in the bed next to him. The kid looked about sixteen. After a while,

the boy opened his eyes and his face paled. He opened his eyes even wider, as if trying to say something, and let out a sharp groan, like a scratch on a wall. Rattled, Heladio shut his eyes.

Waking from a cramp in his stomach, he decided to get up to use the bathroom, but, once again, got distracted by the chickens flapping around. He turned towards the yard, where the birds were, and saw some women there, with those white vials he had seen in the cases. The women extracted a white substance with a syringe, let a few drops fall from the needle, and injected it—God knows where—into the chickens. No wonder the ruckus. He tried to hold his breath and make himself as dark as the hour, but his stomach suddenly let out a groan. It echoed loudly and one of the women turned towards the window where the sound had come from: she had seen him. Her eyes opened wide, wider. Then, three women stood up and approached him.

"What are you doing awake, Don Heladio? Don't you know it's the middle of the night?" they whispered sweetly, as they took him by the shoulders.

"But, what are you doing with those vials?" Heladio answered, trying to hide his worry and the pleasure excited by being with them, at night.

"They're vaccines, Don Heladio," they answered, stroking his arm. Unexpectedly, he felt one of their arms fall and graze his ass. Then another stroked his chest.

"This is women's business," they said to him. He felt a sting and saw one woman staring at another, trying to transmit some message through her teeth. They yanked him by one of the arms, but then a hand with long feminine nails caressed his skin. He relaxed.

"You shouldn't be here." They laid him down in his bed and one of the women stayed by his side to lull him back to sleep. Don Heladio gave in to a slippery and delicious slumber.

He woke up sweating, with the sun already high, but quickly felt relieved at the thought that the previous night had been nothing but a haunting of strange dreams. In fact, his stomach felt much better. He saw his boots right where he had left them when he came in. Surely he hadn't moved from the bed the whole night, seeing as he felt so well-rested. Seven cases of eggs would be waiting for him beside his truck, and that carton of eggs he'd examined against the light, of course, had never existed. It must have been really late. There had certainly been no rooster call.

He sprung up, eager to finish his final errand before leaving Peña Blanca behind. He felt a luminous adrenaline pumping through his veins. He would hurry... After all, being in a village

made up purely of women could throw anyone off-guard, out of sorts.

He went to find Doña Clemen. Before being elected as the first female mayor of Peña Blanca, Clemen had been a landholder and moneylender. She was in charge of practically all matters in the village. Don Heladio had already gotten wind of the challenges she faced: there was no longer a soul who could teach in the high school and it had been ages since the government had fixed the video projector for those pre-recorded classes. With nothing else to do, the girls just wandered the streets. Heaven help them... Anyway, there were never too many hands for raising chickens.

When he found her, Doña Clemen asked how he had slept. He assured her he'd gotten a good night's rest and began to recite what he'd been practicing on the long trip to the village the day before:

"Doña Clemen, as a matter of fact, I wanted to talk to you. I think our agreement suits the both of us, right? I sell for you and buy from you and, truth is, now I have a soft spot for this village. And I have to confess that I've been smitten. I know you all trust me and I trust you, but now I can't think about

anything else. I would like for you to give me your blessing to take Vivianita away with me. I've been fond of her since she was a child, and she's so hardworking... It'll be better than her sticking around here with nothing to do. You know, there's no need for her to go on without a man to take care of her. And my kids are still home and they need someone. Look, as you can see, if you help me, I'll help you all, too, right? That's the trade. Give me a hand, Doña Clemen..."

"Did you talk to Viviana yet?" Clemen interjected.

"Why would I, señora? The point is, you could tell her how important it is for the village that she comes with me. I even brought her a rooster as a gift..."

"We don't need roosters here."

"What do you mean? You live off of chickens. They need a rooster to tread them!"

Clemen responded with a blank stare.

"Let me think about it. Maybe I'll have an answer for you by next week."

Don Heladio nodded and extended his hand to Doña Clemen. Then he turned around to finally leave the damned town. He got to his truck and saw the rooster between the seats,



completely stiff. At least only one night had gone by. It didn't stink yet. He would chuck it on the highway a few miles out.

A woman, a few months pregnant, approached him before he left and gave him 60 pesos for the trip. He could give her the payout from the eggs later.

"And what village is the father from?" asked Don Heladio, since he hadn't seen a single man around there all year. The woman turned to leave and, gesturing vaguely, hurried home without a word. He imagined Vivianita like that.

Don Heladio took his things, the egg flats, and the dead rooster, and went on his way. On his left he saw the statue of the Virgen, decorated with all those feathers and flowers. From afar, Doña Clemen crossed herself and followed him with her eyes until he'd gone out of view.

After passing Aculco, Don Heladio felt another sharp pang in his abdomen, stabbing his intestines. He decided to stop at the gas station to use the bathroom. He left the eggs in the truck, next to the dead rooster, paid his five pesos, and sat down on the toilet. He felt the urge to empty his bladder, but a strange sensation caught him by surprise, like a loss of gravity. When he felt for his penis with his hand, it seemed light-

er. He kept searching for the weight, but they didn't turn up. Breathing heavily with sweaty palms, he stood up with a jolt and saw a few blue threads poking out.

He turned to the mirror in disbelief: a flat belly, a penis, and two incisions in his pubic area. It couldn't be true. The motherfucking daughters of bitches had stolen his virility. Was that why they didn't need men anymore? Was that what they'd had in the vials? He would get back into his truck and go kill them all. Or, hightail it the fuck out of there, as far away as possible. Better if no one finds out.

As if entranced, he dressed himself in a hurry and ran for the eggs. He took a carton and sprinted back to the bathroom. He covered the light with the pale shirt he was wearing, to diffuse it. Then, like a madman, one by one, he began to raise the eggs up to the light to examine them. The first one was orange. After inspecting it, he smashed it in the sink. The next was orange, too. Shattering it against the porcelain with all his strength, the whites creamed his entire hand. Each one that came up orange, he smashed there on the floor—a thick puddle of whites and yolks, like vomit on the highway, with bits of shells sticking out. Finally, an egg glowed dark, revealing the foulest bruised root, the red burning from a violent sun, a chicken in formation. Hens, without a rooster, could also carry.

Dazed by rage, Don Heladio ripped off his pants again and hurled them on the toilet. His ears were buzzing and the tiles shook. He stood in front of the mirror as it rattled against the wall and pinched the blue threads: he tugged at one, then the other. He felt a shooting pain as he watched the sutures come open and began to pick at the opening with his fingers. He nearly fainted, feeling his tender warmth, textured, fleshy. He took his shirt and bit down hard to finish opening the wounds, his anguished grunts echoing outside. When he finished opening his groin, he took an egg and pushed it into the wound on his left side. Then he took another and forced it into the right, though this time, the egg burst: it shattered to pieces in his flesh. **MM**

## Notes

- 1 María Cristina Hall is a Mexican American writer and translator.
- 2 Xanic is a visual artist; @XanicGe
- 3 Jacqui Cornetta is a writer, translator and musician.
- 4 First published in *The Offing*.

