Chickens

Rachel Trezise

As a playmate my grandfather was like a cheetah. His energy came in fast swoops but it rolled away again without warning and he'd need to rest again until his boring fatigue had passed over like a black cloud. He'd begun to wave his NHS walking stick in front of him, to detect potholes and kerbs, like a blind man, frowning perpetually, as though everything confused him. Ever since his knee joints had become inflamed, which seemed like forever ago, his stick had become a talisman, used once at Longleat Wildlife Park to gently push the roaming monkeys from peeling the rubbery windscreen seal from his gold car, only for the ringleader monkey to grab it and start hammering dents into his bonnet. The monkey seemed to smile in at us with his crinkled eyes, and laugh with a breathy cackle, like Muttley the dog, while I held onto my mother's hand so tight her fingernails began to bite into my skin, and everyone stared at the back of Tad's grey head, wondering why he didn't jump out and throttle it.

'Chelle bach,' he said, 'we'll need to go home soon. Mamgu Blod will be looking for us.' He patted the flat top of my head, between my sprouting bunches and squinted at the goldfish he'd won aiming darts. 'And mind that fish now, don't drop him. Don't squeeze him too tight.'

'Just one more ride,' I said, looking through the murky water of the plastic bag at the red fish not swimming but

floating inside. 'Just one more.' The fun-fair seemed to become more glamorous as the warm day turned into a cool and fuzzy evening.

Eventually my grandfather began to bribe me. He promised lashings of *Mr Creemy's* Neapolitan after roast dinner on Sunday; a return visit with two pounds spending money on Saturday and that evening, a glass of Brains SA beer he affectionately called 'whoosh', none of which interested me. But then he mentioned chickens. 'I'm going all the way to Glyn Neath tomorrow,' he said, 'because my chickens are getting old.'

'Why?' I said. I wasn't particularly asking why he was going to Glyn Neath or particularly asking why his chickens, like him, were getting old, but using the word as a prompt to prolong my time at the fair like the word *discuss* in an essay question keeps a student in his examination chair, his brain ticking.

'They don't lay eggs anymore, bach,' he said ignoring this question, 'and Mam-gu Blod needs eggs to bake sweetmeats for you kids. I'll have to get more. We need more chickens Chelle!' He stamped the grey rubber tip of his stick against the floor as though this confirmed his statement. 'If we go home for tea now you can come with me, all the way to Glyn Neath, tomorrow!' He struggled to smile through his pain.

I gritted my teeth and walked as slowly and as stubbornly as I could, without actually stopping. Getting to the fair in the first place had seemed like such a coup, it was a travesty, a tragedy, to leave. Every May holiday it stopped in our town for a week, the men with moustaches, rippling arms and tattoos sprawling over their naked chests dismantled and erected their vast metal contraptions on the wasteland in front of the rugby pitch, dog ends balancing in their lips. 'Gyppos', my grandmother called them, spitting, as though to shake off her own Romany ancestry. From her front window you could see the thin figures dance around the lot, transforming steel girders and cuts of canvas into rotating

waltzers and ferris wheel cars. I'd patiently watch until the flashing neon lights were on, and then cry to go down. At this point Mam-gu would try to scare me, telling me that the men were thieves, and sometimes cannibals, and I gave up, frightened not by the travelling people but by my own grandmother's determination not to be in any way associated with them.

I was staying at my grandparents' house because my mother had gone away. 'Gone away', is all they said, which inevitably meant that there was more to it. In the six and three-quarter years I'd been alive, she had never 'gone away'. I was clumsily shelling peas from their pods and dropping them into a ceramic bowl. I'd watched the dodgem track appear, and then the teapots, and then the red and white striped roof of the shooting gallery. My grandfather had merrily ventured into the living room while Mam-gu prepared gammon with pepper and butter in the scullery, singing 'Calon Lân' loudly, warbling through the high notes, holding her hand flat on her big, left boob.

'Chelle bach,' Tad-cu said, seeing me stare out over the terraced rooftops. 'Shall I take you down there? Shall I?' He put his finger to his lips, instructing me not to shriek. He took my small hand with his stiff, square fingers and happily, repeatedly shrugged his shoulders, like Tommy Cooper about to do a trick. I heard Mam-gu bellow as the front gate sprung closed behind us.

'Danny? DANNY?'

Danny was Tad-cu's real name. For a long time I'd thought the Irish song 'Danny Boy' was written about him because he lived at the foot of a mountain side, and often, as though to deliberately exacerbate this, he'd cock his head and tell me he could hear the pipes calling. I ignored Mam-gu and struggled with Tad's inflamed knees down the hill towards the fair. At first he was delighted to be there.

'What do we want to go on first, bach?' he said, swinging his stick like a dance routine. We'd sat in a spangly red

dodgem car and he'd steered it into a blue one a travelling boy was driving, the force throwing me into a mild shock and sending a series of blue and silver sparks across the circuit ceiling. I laughed wildly at his spectacles smoothing down his nose and his fine hair thrashing in the air. He eagerly reversed for good measure and rammed right into the boy's big shining backside again.

But now it was time to go. As we walked over the bridge, Tad, who needed support now from the handrail as well as his walking stick, noticed the ducklings in the river below. Five brown baby ducks followed their brown mother duck in single file, waddling along the pebbles at the edge of the water, the oncoming wind ruffling their soft feathers. They looked like little girls trying to walk in their mother's stilettos, as I had done years before, but got smacked for scuffing the heels, or fell over and grew scabs on my elbows which my auntie checked daily to see I hadn't picked.

'Look Chelle!' he said, halting, 'ducklings. Have we got bread? What have we got?' Forgetting his sore bones, he knelt to the floor and fumbled with the bags in my hand, gently uncurling my digits, one by one, little by little to lift the candy floss out of my grasp, leaving only the fish. He scratched the cellophane open and broke cotton wool balls from the spun sugar. I frowned, hiding my eyes from the other children leaving the fair, my hands held like horse blinkers either side of my head. As a child, nothing can embarrass you as much as an adult to whom you are related.

'They're hungry, bach!' Tad said. He lifted me up over the railing so I could watch my clouds of floss blow like snow into the darkening river. The animals' beady, black eyes followed the pink flakes from the sky to the water but they did not move from the river bank.

'They're not eating it,' I pleaded. 'Look Tad, it's just vanishing in the water.'

'That's their choice,' he said releasing me. 'The important thing is that we offered.'

I sulked all the way across the road, past the Red Cow pub and into Mam-gu Blod's parlour, my right thumb planted between my lips. Like her, I'd learned to roll my eyes at Tad's impromptu Dr Dolittle impressions but secretly I was impressed with Tad's ability to tolerate his own suffering when he thought he sensed suffering elsewhere, and I kept quiet, reminding myself to remember his strangely noble gesture.

My cousin Anna was sitting at the fold-out dining table in a velveteen pedal-pusher set, the colour of my absent candyfloss, her cutlery set out before her and opposite, another place was set for me.

'Danny?' My grandmother roared like steam from behind the bead curtain in the scullery doorway. 'Where the hell have you been with that child?' She made *hell* sound like it had jumped from the mouth of a nun. A saucepan slammed on the draining board. 'I've been worried sick.'

'Never mind that, Blodwyn woman,' Tad said, taking the only bag we had left into the kitchen. 'Where's the salt? This goldfish has got white-spot.'

I sat down cautiously at the table looking at the crochet cloth instead of up at my cousin. I hated Anna, mostly for aesthetic reasons, her plaits were longer and lighter than my own, her dresses prettier. That weekend I hated her more than ever. The night before, I'd heard Mam-gu fretting through the bedroom wall. 'Oh Danny,' she'd said, 'what are we going to do? If she goes to prison?' her voice a low, unfamiliar hum. They talked about the details of the situation in Welsh and the most I could decipher was that my mother was on remand for stealing my estranged father's new car. 'We'll look after Michelle,' Tad had said, 'that's what we'll do.' I heard him drop his teeth into his tumbler of water. I didn't know what prison was exactly, only that robbers went there and I knew it was bad if it worried my grandmother. She had a nervous system like titanium. What was plain, was that it wasn't simply a case of going away,

which had sounded nicer, albeit selfish. Now Anna reminded me of it all. She was there because she wanted to be. At night she'd go home again.

Mam-gu put our plates of ham, peas and salad down in front of us, her apron still tied round her waist, her tightly-permed grey hair flattened with sweat. She carried my grandfather's and her own meal through to the living room. I ate in silence, the pungent spring-onions smell rising from the plate to tease tears from my eyeballs. After a while I noticed Anna was watching me carefully and slowly, mirroring my actions, even down to the foodstuff I chose to lift with my fork. She pushed her peas and shallots around in circles, her pink ham gone except for the soft, white rinds lying limp like dead snakes.

'Don't you like jibbons?' I said quietly, waiting for her taunt, or the punch line to her joke, knowing I'd be the butt of it.

'No,' she said dramatically, 'can't stand them.' She suavely popped a sweet pickle into her mouth. She was good at performing; she was going to be an actress. She was already Snow White at the Parc and Dare amateur theatre group. 'That's it,' she said, chewing it. 'I have finished.'

'You have to eat it,' I said.

'I don't, I'm going to throw it in the bin.' She shook her head so her gold braids danced.

'You can't,' I said, whispering.

'We can,' she said, 'watch.' Very slowly, as though the parlour was a safe in a bank, protected by laser alarms, she tiptoed to the bin in the corner and scraped her greens down into the rubbish with her fingertips. 'Now give me your plate.' I sat looking dumbly at her empty plate. Her hand gripped its edge, eclipsing the brown, floral pattern around the rim. It had to be some nasty prank in which she'd turn the blame on me.

'No,' I said.

'Do you want to have to eat all that?' She nodded at my

mound of leaves as they turned purple with beetroot pickling juice. I passed my plate to her uncertainly. As she silently flicked stubborn lettuce from the plate I noticed my colouring book on the spare dining chair. Cleverly I ripped pages from its stapled centre and crumpled them into balls of yellowing paper, precisely placing them in the bin to obscure the awful food. According to my grandmother, oxygen was useless without a well-prepared meal to go with it, so getting caught disposing of fresh produce was not an option. She would have smothered me.

'Oh good, girls,' she said coming into the parlour and eyeing our progress, her tea tray loaded with crockery. As she passed, she stopped, as though able to sniff our nefariousness in the air and manoeuvred herself toward the bin. She stepped on its pedal, her enormous, round bum spreading oval as she bent to look inside. I held my breath as Anna's green eyes widened to the point of rolling out of their sockets. Immediately afterward, as though realising how silly an accusation it was, she stepped off the pedal and the lid crashed down. She shuffled into the scullery where I heard the oven door open. The hot, inviting aroma of strawberry jam tarts wafted out, choking the watery smell of salad.

Anna and I sat on the settee, Scruffy, our grandparents' three-legged Yorkshire Terrier separating us on the middle cushion like a pillow between reluctant lovers. Mam-gu was drinking Guinness from a pint glass. She was a feminist through and through, her fiery French mother's genes bubbling around inside her as she worked and scolded and cared, but if you had ever told her, she wouldn't have known what the word meant. Tad slept, blinking during his lucid moments at the recovering fish in its bowl on the table, or the television where Steve Davis was playing snooker. After bedtime I heard my grandparents make an aggressive argument out of which cushion of the billiard table was the bottom, boasting a long and patience-sapping marriage with continuous ebbs of annoyance and easy flows of acceptance.

Tad-cu's garden stretched for an acre up along the uneven edges of Maerdy Mountain. The stray cats scattered from their tinned stewed steak breakfasts left in rows on the clear, corrugated scullery roof, their triangular ears sent back on their heads by cautious irritation as I climbed the steps in my yellow wellies. Dew glistened on the grass blades. I hiked to the top of the garden, pulling on fern stems for support, avoiding the pet cemetery hidden behind a holly bush, which on less eventful mornings was my castle. Tad was in the chicken run, two small, freckled eggs caked in muck and ginger feathers balancing in his open palm.

'Tad,' I shouted, 'we have to get new chickens, remember!'

'After breakfast, bach,' he said clipping the gate behind him as the army of birds hopped towards us, jutting their funny heads quizzically. I didn't like chickens very much. What I was really looking forward to was a long journey. I loved being in transit because that somehow meant that life was on pause, and that was quite exhilarating. He gave me an egg to hold and we steadied one another back to the house.

'Are we going to eat those chickens when we get new ones?' I said.

He didn't answer me but scoffed as though it was a ridiculous suggestion. This after all was a man who trapped rats only to carry them in their cages to the top of the mountain and release them unscathed. He ate chicken, but never one of his own. They all died of old age.

'Know what I'm going to do?' he said. 'When you marry a prince I'll dig this whole garden over and find enough Welsh gold for your wedding ring! C'mon, let's give these eggs to Mam.'

In Glyn Neath, the egg factory sat unremarkable like a massive brown crate at the back of an industrial estate, the paint chipped from its zinc walls.

'Now hold my hand Chelle,' Tad said in a squeaky wheeze, his nostrils tightened to black slits. Inside there was only the

sound of machinery although hens lined the walls in box cages, balancing on one another in stacks, like Barbie dolls in Toys R Us. Fluorescent lights gave the warehouse a blunt and unnatural appearance. Tad talked with his new, high voice to a boy in an overall while I stared at the birds. They hadn't enough room to stretch their wings, let alone fly, and reminded me of the *Return to Oz* wicked witch's hundred heads, dead and locked in a cabinet, each one individual and capable of living, if only given the freedom.

'Why aren't they squawking?' I said as Tad pulled me away.

'They're probably too tired, bach,' he said.

'What's that smell?'

'Fear. Fear and poo and death.'

We walked back to the gold car and the boy in the overall followed, a twill brown sack clutched in his fist which moved of its own accord like a bag of magic potatoes. He passed it to my grandfather.

'Fiver,' he said. 'Not much use for eggs, them, but there's a fair bit of meat there.'

'You'd be surprised what a chicken can do when it's given free range,' Tad said dryly, although many of his chickens never laid eggs. They were left to live as normal with the ones that did. He put the bag in the boot of the car and paid the boy. We sat in the car for a minute, listening to the soft creaking a hen makes when it uses its legs for the first time. Then Tad leaned over into the hatchback and whipped the brown sack out of the gathering of heedful chickens. As he did, one small hen which had still been inside fell out flaccidly, its fleshy mohican which should have been red, was white.

'Is it dead?' I said.

'Michelle,' Tad said, taking it in his hands like a baby, 'it's not dead but I'm going to have to kill it. I have to put it out of its misery or it'll die in pain by the time we get home.' As he spoke he deftly twisted the hen's neck between his thumb

and forefinger as though giving it a massage, which he did sometimes on my grandmother's big, knotty shoulders. 'It's for his own good Chelle,' he said, looking at me mysteriously for a moment as though wondering if I still loved him. He reached past me to the glove box for a plastic bag and wrapped the chicken inside it. He always had plastic bags on him, for collecting dandelion leaves for the rabbits. 'We'll bury it in the garden.'

'Is it dead?' I said again.

He nodded and started the engine.

My grandfather drove slowly over the peak of the dusty mountain. He drove slowly anyway on account of the infamous accident. When I was just a newborn he'd backed his green Mini over the edge of a cliff with Mam-gu beside him. Neither of them were hurt but Mam never forgave him for having lost her knitting. (She'd been making a white cardigan with pearls encrusted around the cuffs and it flew out of the window. The wool was an offcut from Ponty market and she never, ever matched its ivory colour.) After a jolt, Tad'd check in the mirror that the chickens were OK. I could see them through my wing mirror. They huddled stiffly like one body of balding, pimply skin with ten legs. Their eyes seemed to be focused on me, whichever direction they looked.

We stopped at the top of the valley for petrol and Tad left me in the car while he paid for it. I'd been sitting in the passenger seat for two minutes when one of the hens moaned from deep down behind its dirty feathers. There was a moment of silence before another hen followed suit. Collectively their noise sounded like a mass complaint, voiced with a woman's yelp. Volume seemed to give them confidence and they parted, pecking one another, like death warming up. The smallest pale and shaking chicken didn't move at all. It sat in the middle of the boot while the others began to prod and butt it, its orange pupils fixed on me. Sometimes, animals instinctively knew when one of their

brood was ill. Before my father became estranged, there was a fish tank in the living room and if one angel fish inside it became diseased, the others would push it to the surface of the water, like aquatic undertakers. I reached for the chicken, lifting it easily, like a toy.

Swiftly, I wrung its neck, as my grandfather had done. He made it look easy. In actual fact it was easy but I could feel its warm muscles moving and its life jumped from it with a bustling start.

Then the other chickens noticed me. The largest came towards the seat, flapping its wings and bucking like a frightened she-cat. The others followed, cocking their heads one way then the other as though they saw me through their ears, which I couldn't see but I guessed were situated somewhere around their popping, wan heads. At first I covered my own head and waited for it to stop, but it didn't, the other chickens joined in, wailing and striking my hands with their sharp and brittle beaks. It was important not to cry, because that meant I'd never collect chickens again. There was only one other solution.

'What have you done?' Tad said, his eyes circling the car anxiously where dead birds and emaciated feathers lay like litter. He lifted his fingertips to his temples.

'It was for their own good Tad,' I said. 'They were howling. They were in pain.'

'MICHELLE,' he said, and he was about to continue shouting, like the chickens, attacking me with thunderous nonsense, but words did not come. He sat down in his seat, placing his stick beside him, breathing quickly; his energy seemed to spill out of his pores, as his face turned somnolent in seconds. I gazed at the dry red mud on my sunflower-yellow wellies. After a while his jaw dropped and he spoke. 'I suppose they won't be much use for eggs after all,' he said calmly and he started the engine again.

One day in the playground I overheard Anna tell her theatre friends that the judge had thrown the book at my

mother, not for her crime but for her insolence. 'Cheeky cow', she'd called her, her own auntie. I was never really sure if she had been acting, or repeating what the family said when I was out of earshot, or both. A year passed while she served her sentence, or as I preferred to think of it, tanned herself on a beach in the south of France. My grandfather didn't go back to Glyn Neath for any more chickens. Gradually the ones that were left stopped laying altogether. On the Monday after my failed gesture of nobleness, I asked Mam-gu for jam tarts.

'Oh Chelle,' she said, as though remembering something, 'we can't have tarts, there's no eggs.'

'There aren't any eggs in jam tarts,' I said.

'But there is, bach,' Tad said, 'in the pastry.'

'Can't we buy some eggs?' I said.

'Tad spent all his money on those chickens, cariad,' Mam said.

We had similar conversations for months on end. There was no scrambled egg for breakfast, no pies to go with our chips and malt vinegar on a Saturday, no quiche lorraine for days out, no Yorkshire pudding with our dinners, no hard-boiled eggs in our summer salads and no Christmas cake at Christmas. Even at Easter when all the children in my class took eggs to school for the teacher to blow and then paint stripy with primary colours, I wasn't allowed to participate. It was amazing how much of life's foundation was made from egg. All along I had admired the way Tad had punished me. I realised how we needed to appreciate the things that provided for us, even down to the lowly battery hen, but I never thought he'd keep it going for so long.

At May when the fair was due again, an odd woman walked up our front path.

'Chelle, baby,' she said, 'come to Mammy.'

'My mammy has got blonde hair,' I said backing away. Janet Goodwin, who lived in Anna's street, had escaped from

a kidnapper the week previous and we'd had talks at school about not bothering with strangers.

She pulled me to her chest and smelt my scalp.

'I used to have blonde hair,' she said. Tears were welling on her bottom eyelids and I could hear them too, in her words. 'God I've missed you. What do you want?' she said. 'You can have anything; let me get you a treat, anything in the world, a doll? A knickerbockerglory from Ted's Supper Bar? Say, what do you want?'

I wanted to push her away. '*Welsh gold for my wedding ring*,' I was going to say. '*My grandfather'll get it, I don't need you*.'

'Come on Chelle, baby, say,' she said, pulling me tighter so I was hugging her without really wanting to. 'What do you want?'

I looked at my brunette mother. 'An omelette please,' I said.