

## Chicks

Her grandmother, Ann, stood in front of the chicken shed with two cardboard boxes at her feet. Ann bent over and picked up a fuzzy chick, pulled up its little tail, peeked, then dropped it into the appropriate box. Boys on the left, girls to the right. Ann said girls were always right. Meanwhile, Emma scurried around the chicken yard chasing chickens and occasionally scaring a kitten out of the coop.

When grandmother's back started to ache, she sat with Emma on the old tractor tire and lit one of the cigarettes she kept in the front pocket of her denim overalls. Emma watched her grandmother puff on her cigarette and admired her thin red lips curling up in the corners. Her grandmother's slight smile apparently held a secret.

Ann raised her floppy straw sun bonnet and scratched a spot in the middle of her head then all of her lavender-gray curls fell back into position as she replaced the hat. Emma stomped on the cigarette her grandmother dropped and ground it into the mud with her small yellow rubber boot.

Her grandmother stood up and said, "Have you ever rocked a chicken to sleep?"

"No", giggled Emma, " you don't rock chickens to sleep!"

She looked at the mud dotted with chicken droppings and dug a hole with her heel as she mused over her grandmother's idea. Ann looked around the chicken yard and rocked back and forth on her muddy bare heels.

"Emma," she said, "grab a chicken and I'll show you how to make it sleep."

Emma ran around the yard trying to catch a small white chicken. She laughed when it tried to jump over the fence but would fall back on the ground and zoom about some more. The white chicken ran into the coop and Emma finally cornered it. She strutted back into the sunshine cradling the chicken in her arms and presented it to her grandmother.

Ann lifted the chicken from Emma and held the chicken against her chest with a bony old arm. Using her free hand, she then raised a wing and tucked the chicken's head under it. She rocked the chicken back and forth while gently holding its head curled under its wing. The chicken quit squirming and laid quietly in her arms. Ann silently bent over and tucked the sleeping bird into the center of the tractor tire.

They watched the motionless chicken for a moment and then Emma breathed, "Is it dead?"

Her grandmother laughed and at that moment an alarm clock rang in the chicken's head. It lurched up, tousled its feathers, and leapt out of the tire and darted towards the chicken coop.

Emma skipped into the shed and returned carrying a red chicken in her grubby hands. Following the actions of her grandmother, Emma rocked the chicken then carefully placed it in the tire.

Ann lit another cigarette and returned to her boxes of chirping chicks. As the free chicks scurried by, she'd grab one, determine its gender, and plop it into a box. Boys on the left and girls were always right.

One after another, Emma tucked a sleeping chicken into the tire. After rocking her fifth chicken, another awakened and the rest immediately followed. The chickens clucked and squawked and tumbled out of the tire.