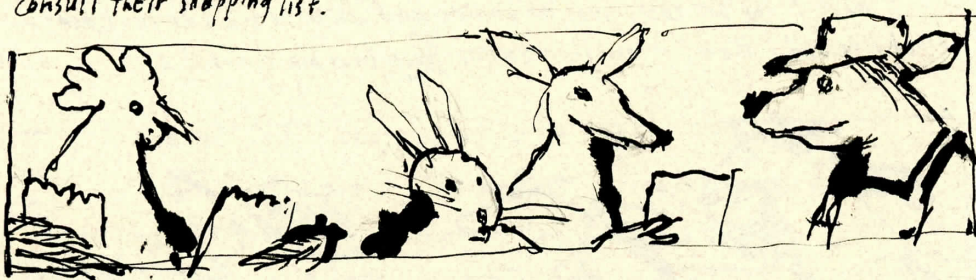


# A Lovely Walk

## 1.

At Furlong's Feed & Seed, Clarice orders four pounds of laying crumbles and a sack of dried mealworms. Mr. Furlong scribbles the bill while Haywood ambles out back to weigh up the feed.

Clarice loves Furlong's, with all its supplies. She looks contentedly at the skillets and pitchforks, the watermelon pickles and big heavy chain hooks, the kerosene lamps, the canning funnels and the old molasses barrel. And better yet, she loves all the interesting customers. Such as Yvette and Heather who now consult their shopping list.



"Mr. Furlong," Yvette says, "we need a quarter pound each of Dixie Lee peas, Silver Queen corn, and Annie Oakley okra. And an eighth of a pound of Sweet Princess watermelon..."

"Don't forget the Trucker's Favorite!" says a gruff little voice. It's Heather, whose ears just barely clear the counter.

"I did!" Yvette laughs. "That'll also be a quarter pound of your Trucker's Favorite Sweet corn, please sir."



Mr. Furlong snaps open five paper bags in a row and then turns towards the bins. "Coming right up, ladies."

Outside, Clarice glances at the headline on the newspaper in the rack - The Weekly Quack and Whinny. "Local Preacher Defends Family."

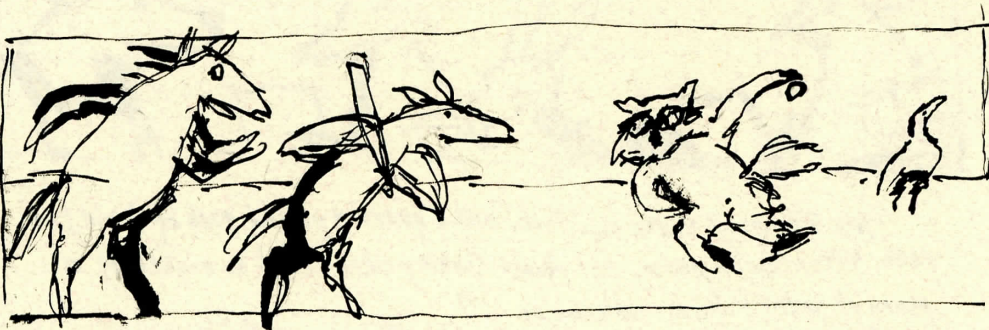
"Whatever is that about?" she wonders.

## 2.

Walking along School St., Clarice hears a commotion on the playground. Mr. Caballo, the principal, is refereeing a baseball game. And just now his daughter strides up to the plate.

"Slug it, Juanita!" Mr. Caballo hollers. Clarice isn't sure that's the referee's responsibility, but she does know how proud he is of his girl.

Crack! The ball soars over the bushes and Juanita rounds the bases - first! second! third! - and then gallops home in a big cloud of dust.



"Hey Clarice! Looky here!" She scans the schoolyard and finally spots a boy way out in right field. It's Odell and he's waving something at her. She puts down her parcels and goes to see.

"A four-leaf clover," he says. "For you!"  
"Why Odell, what a sweet surprise!"  
"And see that cloud?" he points. "Don't it look like a magic carpet? And look there! It's a bee-utiful parade!"

"It looks like rain to me," Clarice says. "And I think they're changing teams."

"Oh, I stay out here the whole game," Odell tells her. A ball whizzes between their feet.

"Throw it! Throw it!" voices shout.

Odell smiles up at Clarice, squints and shrugs.

"What an elegant necklace!" Clarice says.

He holds up the clover chain that dangles around his neck.

"I made it myself!"

## 3.

Clarice trots along, trying to outrun the dark clouds.

"I should have thought," she mutters. Usually she can tell about the weather. But the storm comes on fast and in no time, Clarice is getting soaked.

The next gate is at the old Whiffletree place, where she sees the new residents sitting in the Whiffletree's rocking chairs. They're all in order from the big father down to the little toddler, but nobody's rocking.

"Hey there!" she pants as she splashes up the walk. The family has only just moved in and Clarice hasn't yet found the time to be neighborly.

"Y'all mind if I join you?" she asks, staggering up the steps with her bags.



"Why of course not!" That's what she expects them to say. But instead they all narrow their eyes, and no one speaks.



In a split second, right before her rump lands on the one empty chair, she sees the parents and the children glancing back and forth — Are they hostile? Are they hungry? — and just like she was in an old cartoon Clarice goes into reverse.

"'Scuse me!" she says with a little laugh, which catches in her gullet. She's down the steps and out the gate as quick as her bags will allow.

"Some people!" Clarice clucks.

At least the rain's letting up.

4.

"My word!" says Clarice. "What's that delicious smell?" "Our pie," comes a sharp voice from the open window she's just passing. Then a long face looks out through the curtains. It's Lyle.

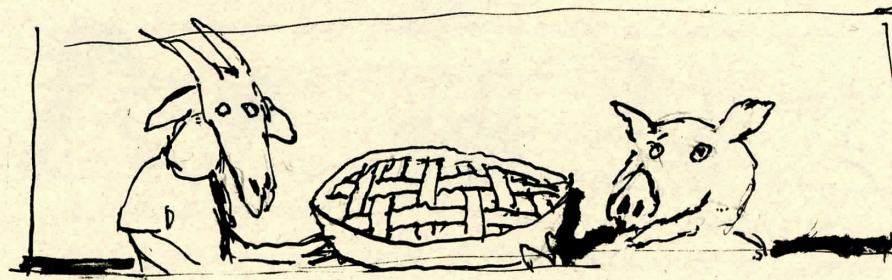
"Might as well come in and have a slice."

In their kitchen a handsome pie cools on the shelf right below the window.

"It's strawberry..." says Garland, his round, red face smiling over a steamy washbasin where dishes clatter.

"...And rhubarb," Lyle interrupts. He's skinny and stiff, and he scowls at the plates he's setting out on the tablecloth.

Clarice smiles to herself.



"How nice to dry off," she sighs, fluffing her damp feathers.

"You are a sight for sore eyes!" Garland chuckles, wiping his hands with a dishrag.

"Perhaps that's why those new folks seemed so unfriendly," Clarice says.

"I wouldn't bet on it!" Lyle snaps.

"Oh well, this pie is just what I needed," she says. "Such a perfect combination! Thank you both."

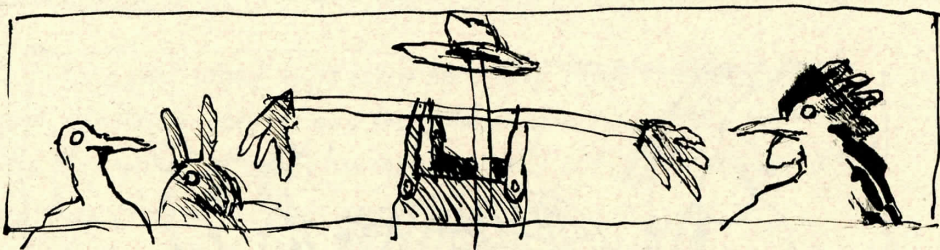


5.

There are patches of blue overhead when Clarice drops her sacks by the fence at Heather and Yvette's.

"Whoo!" she groans.

Two brown rats poke up above a grey green thicket. "What a mess!" Heather chortles. "That storm blew these onions to kingdom come!" She snips some twine with her sharp front teeth and ties up another bunch of floppy leaves.



Beyond a tangle of vines, an elegant head rises up on a long neck. "Come visit!" Yvette calls from across the garden. "Just watch the mud." She's trying to straighten out the peas.

Inside the fence Clarice watches as several muddy children jostle to raise a fallen scarecrow. She doesn't mean to seem disrespectful but they do resemble Iwo Jima.

At last the patched overalls hang limp on their tomato-stake frame again, and the battered hat tilts overhead.

"Wait!" squeaks the littlest gardener. He's just found the old Halloween mask.

It looks like George W. - uhh - Boxwood? Clarice guesses. Or maybe Gardenia. Or is it Dick Chainsaw? Something like that. They all look so much the same.

She stands on tiptoe and pushes the faded face back onto its rusty nail. All the youngsters whoop and holler.

6.

She closes the garden gate behind her. Then Clarice hoists her sacks and turns towards home. It's been quite a walk from Furlong's Feed & Seed!

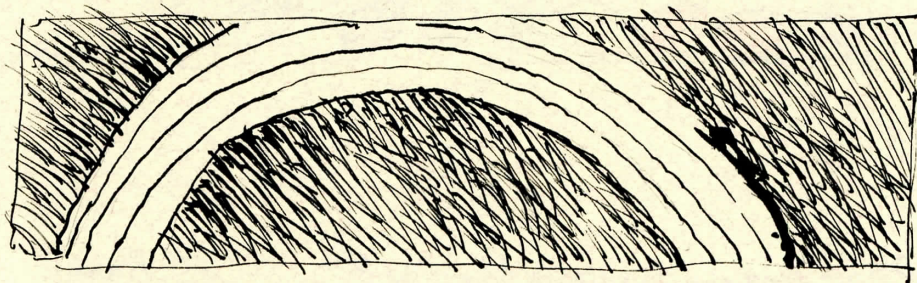
"I am one lucky chicken," she thinks. "To have such wonderful neighbors.

"They all seem to love what they do - their work and their play. And better yet they love one another. For the most part."

She takes a long, deep breath and looks up at the clearing sky.

"My heavens!" gasps Clarice. A splendid rainbow curves above the town, all the way from Furlong's to her place. It gleams against the late afternoon sky.

Her happiness is complete.





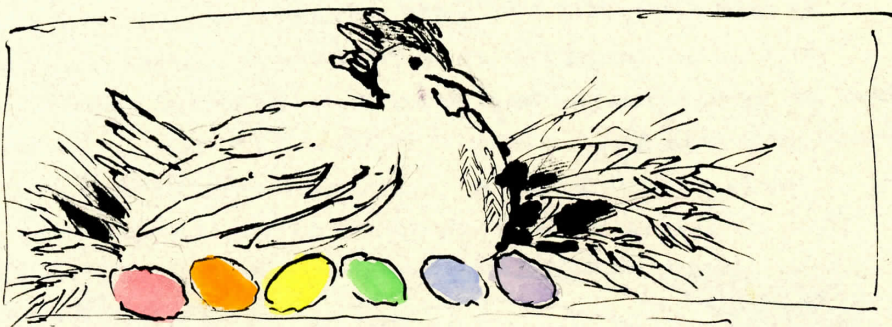
Back at home Clarice puts out some clean straw for her wobbly parents. She checks to see that all is well — fresh water, plenty of scratch — and then into a dish she sprinkles some mealworms, which they enjoy best of all, her old mother and father.

Into her own bowl Clarice pours some of the laying feed that she's toted all afternoon long. By now the sky is getting dark.

Then very slowly she wiggles down into her comfortable nest and closes her eyes.

It's not easy being a chicken, she thinks. There's the perpetual search for food. And there's the weather. And predators. (She shudders slightly, thinking of the new neighbors.)

And then, she muses, there will be a rainbow.



Please remember to vote on May the 8<sup>th</sup>.

E. Bunny