THE CHICKEN MAN

When I was older, I realized that spring came on March 21, the spring equinox, when days and nights everywhere on earth were exactly 12 hours long. But as a kid growing up, spring started when the Chicken Man showed up. He would bring a handsomely multicolored rooster to live among our barnyard hens for several weeks. Then the Chicken Man would come again, reclaim his rooster, and leave another rooster with us. We would usually have three or four consecutive roosters each summer. In the winter he kept his roosters in cages in his heated garage in town, which was Muncie, Indiana. The Chicken Man was really Watson evans, who worked in the same factory as Daddy, who let him bring roosters out to our farm to get them in good physical shape for chicken fighting.

The Chicken Man raised fighter roosters and placed bets on his own birds. Fighter roosters are bred to fight another rooster until one is killed or a human intervenes at the pre-death moment. Two roosters are thrown into a pit or barn stable from which they cannot escape and allowed to fight each other until one wins or dies. As soon as the roosters first grow the red combs on their head, their combs are cut off because full-grown, blood-filled combs would easily lead to bleeding birds and spoil the gambling fun. The roosters are also fitted with sharp metal spurs placed over their natural spurs on their inside legs. The men—owners and onlookers alike—gather around, often with liquor to drink, and cheer on their favored birds. The winning owner, in addition to what he wins on his own bets, normally gets a cut of the total bet. The owner of the losing rooster wins nothing but chicken dinner, if he wants to bother.

The Chicken man’s roosters could not build up enough stamina to win a chicken fight living in a small cage in a garage. They needed the freedom to roam all over the barnyard, eat corn, grass, and insects, and have sex with the hens. Since we could keep only one rooster at a time, or else they would fight one another to the death, the sole rooster was in charge of all the hens. Our hens were all white Leghorns, except for the mixed Leghorns and fighter roosters’ offspring. The rooster’s strategy with the hen was not much different from that of human males. He would find a sweet tidbit of food, cluck in a certain voice to attract the hen, who would run to him. He would wait patiently for her to swallow the food, and then jump on top of her back. It was in these ways that the fighter roosters grew strong, hearty, and confident.

There were some unanticipated consequences of raising fighter roosters on our farm, however. One consequence was what happened to my beloved pet rooster Button.

The Leghorn hens represented an all-purpose breed of chicken with all-white feathers that is known for laying large eggs on approximately 225 out of 365 days a year and is also large enough to be a decent Sunday meal. Other breeds, such as the Buff Orffington, provide more meat but fewer eggs. And so on.

Well, when our Leghorn hens hatched chicks from the fighter rooster fathers, the baby chicks grew all sorts of different kinds of colored feathers, some actually all white, but most mixed with colorful plumes. I named my pet rooster, which I raised from a chick, Button, because he was all mam-white-feathered except for one (and only one) small black feather on his body just behind his left wing. That was his button. He was a baby chick during the previous summer, and , when the spring-time Chicken Man arrived for his first visit of the year, he was a full-grown rooster. He was already first chief in the rooster pecking order when we still had several first-year roosters. We gradually ate off the other roosters in preparation for the visit of the Chicken Man because his fighter rooster, though lethargic and out-of-shape from the long winter rest, could still kill off a Leghorn rooster, which would try to run from the fight but would be pursued to his death. I would not let my parents kill and eat my Button.

So Button was still around when Watson Evans, the Chicken Man, made his spring visit. He let out his rooster to watch the sex-starved critter check out the many hens. Then Button spied him and attacked him. Button flew at the Chicken man’s fighter rooster, pecked furiously, instinctively thrust his almost fully grown leg spurs into the colorful fighter chicken. In no time, Button had him down, preparing for the kill. The Chicken Man stopped the fight, as no money had been bet. Although Button had only one black fighter-daddy feather, he apparently had inherited the fighter rooster’s killer genes.

The Chicken Man was astounded. He said, “Can I buy that rooster? How much do you want? Five bucks? I’ve never seen such a tough, natural fighter!”

I said, “No.”

But since we could not have two roosters, even though Watson Evan, the Chicken Man, never paid Daddy one cent to host his rooster birds, Button had to go. He could not go in the Sunday chicken pot, so he was carried 45 miles away to my Grandpa Wheeler’s farm, where he continued to be the top-pecking rooster. We transported him in a burlap feed bag on the floor in front of the back seat of my daddy’s brown 1940 Chevrolet. It seemed a satisfactory solution, as my Grandpa Orton Wheeler and his family could be trusted not to eat Button. He got along grandly and happily on the Grandpa Wheeler farm, as I would check him out on our monthly visits.

On Christmas of the next year—when the Chicken Man’s roosters were all caged up in his garage—we went to visit Grandpa Wheeler and Button. Button was always happy to see me in his exile, even in the snow of Christmas. With no fighter roosters on our farm, I convinced everyone to take Button home for the winter. It was time for Button to come home to the place where he was hatched and grew up to be such a hearty and healthy rooster, a favorite of the hens (would he remember any of them?) and a fighter rooster if he had to be.

Here is why the Button story is sad:

Upon returning home in a burlap bag on the floor of the back seat of the car, Button became a broken chicken. I came to believe in chicken psychology. He was never the same. He could barely eat. Instead of calling to attract the hens, he was afraid of them. He would trot away when any of them came within a few feet of him. (And to think he was so tame that he would allow me to pick him up as a baby chick.) He was afraid of everything. Maybe he was psychotic.

Button died in a few weeks, before the Chicken Man came with another spring rooster, almost exactly one year after he won his famous and only chicken fight with a rooster that I later learned brought his owner—the Chicken Man—over $2,000 in winnings that summer while Button had been exiled to a farm 45 miles away.

That was the last year we allowed fighter roosters to visit our farm to get in shape.

It was not a very Merry Christmas for Button and me. I buried Button in a field two weeks after Christmas exactly 45 feet southeast of the southeast corner of our old red barn.