

UNIQUE CHICKEN GOES IN REVERSE

ANDY DUNCAN

Father Leggett stood on the sidewalk and looked up at the three narrow stories of gray brick that was 207 East Charlton Street. Compared to the other edifices on Lafayette Square—the Colonial Dames fountain, the Low house, the Turner mansion, the cathedral of course—this house was decidedly ordinary, a reminder that even Savannah had buildings that did only what they needed to do, and nothing more.

He looked again at the note the secretary at St. John the Baptist had left on his desk. Wreathed in cigarette smoke, Miss Ingrid fielded dozens of telephone calls in an eight-hour day, none of which were for her, and while she always managed to correctly record addresses and phone numbers on her nicotine-colored note paper, the rest of the message always emerged from her smudged No. 1 pencils as four or five words that seemed relevant at the time but had no apparent grammatical connection, so that reading a stack of Miss Ingrid's messages back to back gave one a deepening sense of mystery and alarm, like intercepted signal fragments from a trawler during a hurricane. This note read:

OCONNORS
MARY
PRIEST?
CHICKEN!

And then the address. Pressed for more information, Miss Ingrid had shrieked with laughter and said, "Lord, Father, that was two hours ago! Why don't you ask me an easy one sometime?" The phone rang, and she snatched it up with a wink. "It's a great day at St. John the

Baptist. Ingrid speaking.”

Surely, Father Leggett thought as he trotted up the front steps, I wasn't expected to *bring* a chicken?

The bell was inaudible, but the door was opened immediately by an attractive but austere woman with dark eyebrows. Father Leggett was sure his sidewalk dithering had been patiently observed.

“Hello, Father. Please come in. Thank you for coming. I'm Regina O'Connor.”

She ushered him into a surprisingly large, bright living room. Hauling himself up from the settee was a rumped little man in shirtsleeves and high-waisted pants who moved slowly and painfully, as if he were much larger.

“Welcome, Father. Edward O'Connor, Dixie Realty and Construction.”

“Mr. O'Connor. Mrs. O'Connor. I'm Father Leggett, assistant at St. John for—oh, my goodness, two months now. Still haven't met half my flock, at least. Bishop keeps me hopping. Pleased to meet you now, though.” You're babbling, he told himself.

In the act of shaking hands, Mr. O'Connor lurched sideways with a wince, nearly falling. “Sorry, Father. Bit of arthritis in my knee.”

“No need to apologize for the body's frailties, Mr. O'Connor. Why, we would all be apologizing all the time, like Alphonse and Gaston.” He chuckled as the O'Connors, apparently not readers of the comics supplement, stared at him. “Ahem. I received a message at the church, something involving ...” The O'Connors didn't step into the pause to help him. “Involving Mary?”

“We'd like for you to talk to her, Father,” said Mrs. O'Connor. “She's in the back yard, playing. Please, follow me.”

The back of the house was much shabbier than the front, and the yard was a bare dirt patch bounded on three sides by a high wooden fence of mismatched planks. More brick walls were visible through the gaps. In one corner of the yard was a large chicken coop enclosed by a smaller, more impromptu wire fence, the sort unrolled from a barrel-sized spool at the hardware store and affixed to posts with bent nails. Several dozen chickens roosted, strutted, pecked. Father Leggett's nose wrinkled automatically. He liked chickens when they were fried, baked or, with dumplings, boiled, but he always disliked chickens at their earlier, pre-kitchen stage, as creatures. He conceded them a role in God's creation purely for their utility to man. Father Leggett tended to respect things on the basis of their demonstrated intelligence, and

on that universal ladder chickens tended to roost rather low. A farmer once told him that hundreds of chickens could drown during a single rainstorm because they kept gawking at the clouds with their beaks open until they filled with water like jugs. Or maybe that was geese. Father Leggett, who grew up in Baltimore, never liked geese, either.

Lying face up and spread-eagled in the dirt of the yard like a little crime victim was a grimy child in denim overalls, with bobbed hair and a pursed mouth too small even for her nutlike head, most of which was clenched in a frown that was thunderous even from twenty feet away. She gave no sign of acknowledgment as the three adults approached, Mr. O'Connor slightly dragging his right foot. Did this constitute *playing*, wondered Father Leggett, who had scarcely more experience with children than with poultry.

"Mary," said Mrs. O'Connor as her shadow fell across the girl. "This is Father Leggett, from St. John the Baptist. Father Leggett, this is Mary, our best and only. She's in first grade at St. Vincent's."

"Ah, one of Sister Consolata's charges. How old are you, Mary?"

Still lying in the dirt, Mary thrashed her arms and legs, as if making snow angels, but said nothing. Dust clouds rose.

Her father said, "Mary, don't be rude. Answer Father's question."

"I just did," said Mary, packing the utterance with at least six syllables. Her voice was surprisingly deep. She did her horizontal jumping jacks again, counting off this time. "One. Two. Three. Five."

"You skipped four," Father Leggett said.

"You would, too," Mary said. "Four was hell."

"Mary."

This one word from her mother, recited in a flat tone free of judgment, was enough to make the child scramble to her feet. "I'm sorry, Mother and Father and Father, and I beg the Lord's forgiveness." To Father Leggett's surprise, she even curtsied in no particular direction—whether to him or to the Lord, he couldn't tell.

"And well you might, young lady," Mr. O'Connor began, but Mrs. O'Connor, without even raising her voice, easily drowned him out by saying simultaneously:

"Mary, why don't you show Father Leggett your chicken?"

"Yes, Mother." She skipped over to the chicken yard, stood on tiptoe to unlatch the gate, and waded into the squawking riot of beaks and feathers. Father Leggett wondered how she could tell one chicken from all the rest. He caught himself holding his breath, his hands clenched into fists.

“Spirited child,” he said.

“Yes,” said Mrs. O’Connor. Her unexpected smile was dazzling.

Mary relatched the gate and trotted over with a truly extraordinary chicken beneath one arm. Its feathers stuck out in all directions, as if it had survived a hurricane. It struggled not at all, but seemed content with, or resigned to, Mary’s attentions. The child’s ruddy face showed renewed determination, and her mouth looked ever more like the dent a thumb leaves on a bad tomato.

“What an odd-looking specimen,” said Father Leggett, silently meaning both of them.

“It’s frizzled,” Mary said. “That means its feathers grew in backward. It has a hard old time of it, this one.”

She set the chicken down and held up a pudgy, soiled index finger. The chicken stared at the digit, rapt. The child took one step toward the bird, which took one corresponding step back. The child stepped forward again, and the bird retreated another step, still focused on her finger—its topmost joint slightly crooked, its nail gnawed to the quick. Third step, fourth step, fifth step. The chicken walked backward as if hypnotized, its steps both deliberate and without volition, like the plod of a marionette in unskilled hands.

“Remarkable. And what’s your chicken’s name, my child?”

She flung down a handful of seed and said, “Jesus Christ.”

Father Leggett sucked in a breath. Behind him, Mrs. O’Connor coughed. Father Leggett tugged at his earlobe, an old habit. “What did you say, young lady?”

“Jesus Christ,” she repeated, in the same dispassionate voice in which she had said, “Mary O’Connor.” Then she rushed the chicken, which skittered around the yard as Mary chased it, chanting in a singsong, “Jesus Christ Jesus Christ Jesus Christ.”

Father Leggett looked at her parents. Mr. O’Connor arched his eyebrows and shrugged. Mrs. O’Connor, arms folded, nodded her head once. She looked grimly satisfied. Father Leggett turned back to see chicken and child engaged in a staring contest. The chicken stood, a-quiver; Mary, in a squat, was still.

“Now, Mary,” Father Leggett said. “Why would you go and give a frizzled chicken the name of our Lord and Savior?”

“It’s the best name,” replied Mary, not breaking eye contact with the chicken. “Sister Consolata says the name of Jesus is to be cherished above all others.”

“Well, yes, but—”

The hypnotic bond between child and chicken seemed to break, and Mary began to skip around the yard, raising dust with each stomp of her surprisingly large feet. “And he’s different from all the other chickens, and the other chickens peck him but he never pecks back, and he spends a lot of his time looking up in the air, praying, and in Matthew Jesus says he’s a chicken, and if I get a stomachache or an earache or a sore throat, I come out here and play with him and it gets all better just like the lame man beside the well.”

Father Leggett turned in mute appeal to the child’s parents. Mr. O’Connor cleared his throat.

“We haven’t been able to talk her out of it, Father.”

“So we thought we’d call an expert,” finished Mrs. O’Connor.

I wish you had, thought Father Leggett. At his feet, the frizzled chicken slurped up an earthworm and clucked with contentment.

The first thing Father Leggett did, once he was safely back at the office, was to reach down Matthew and hunt for the chicken. He found it in the middle of Christ’s lecture to the Pharisees, Chapter 23, Verse 37: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!”

Mrs. O’Connor answered the phone on the first ring. “Yes,” she breathed, her voice barely audible.

“It’s Father Leggett, Mrs. O’Connor. Might I speak to Mary, please?”

“She’s napping.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I wanted to tell her that I’ve been reading the Scripture she told me about, and I wanted to thank her. It’s really very interesting, the verse she’s latched on to. Christ our Lord did indeed liken himself to a hen, yes, but he didn’t mean it literally. He was only making a comparison. You see,” he said, warming to his subject, to fill the silence, “it’s like a little parable, like the story of the man who owned the vineyard. He meant God was *like* the owner of the vineyard, not that God had an actual business interest in the wine industry.”

Mrs. O’Connor’s voice, when it finally came, was flat and bored.

“No disrespect meant, Father Leggett, but Edward and I did turn to the Scriptures well upstream of our turning to you, and by now everyone in this household is intimately acquainted with Matthew 23:37, its histories, contexts and commentaries. And yet our daughter

seems to worship a frizzled chicken. Have you thought of anything that could explain it?"

"Well, Mrs. O'Connor—"

"Regina."

"Regina. Could it be that this chicken is just a sort of imaginary playmate for the girl? Well, not the chicken, that's real enough, but I mean the identity she has created for it. Many children have imaginary friends, especially children with no siblings, like Mary."

"Oh, I had one of those," she said. "A little boy named Bar-Lock, who lived in my father's Royal Bar-Lock typewriter."

"There, you see. You know just what I'm talking about."

"But I never thought Bar-Lock was my lord and savior!"

"No, but 'lord and savior' is a difficult idea even for an adult to grasp, isn't it? By projecting it onto a chicken, Mary makes the idea more manageable, something she can hold and understand. She seems happy, doesn't she? Content? No nightmares about her chicken being nailed to a cross? And as she matures, in her body and in her faith, she'll grow out of it, won't need it anymore."

"Well, perhaps," she said, sounding miffed. "Thank you for calling, Father. When Mary wakes up, I'll tell her you were thinking about her, and about her imaginary Jesus."

She broke the connection, leaving Father Leggett with his mouth open. The operator's voice squawked through the earpiece.

"Next connection, please. Hello? Hello?"

That night, Father Leggett dreamed about a frizzled chicken nailed to a cross. He woke with the screech in his ears.

The never-ending crush of church business enabled Father Leggett to keep putting off a return visit to the O'Connors, as the days passed into weeks and into months, but avoiding chickens, and talk of chickens, was not so easy. He began to wince whenever he heard of them coming home to roost, or being counted before they were hatched, of politicians providing them in every pot.

The dreams continued. One night the human Jesus stood on the mount and said, "Blessed are the feedmakers," then squatted and pecked the ground. The mob squatted and pecked the ground, too. Jesus and His followers flapped their elbows and clucked.

Worst of all was the gradual realization that for every clergyman in Georgia, chicken was an occupational hazard. Most families ate chicken only on Sundays, but any day Father Leggett came to visit was *de facto*

Sunday, so he got served chicken all the time—breasts, legs, livers and dumplings, fried, baked, boiled, in salads, soups, broths and stews, sautéed, fricasseed, marengoed, a la kinged, cacciatoroed, casseroleed. Of all this chicken, Father Leggett ate ever smaller portions. He doubled up on mustard greens and applesauce. He lost weight.

“Doubtless you’ve heard the Baptist minister’s blessing,” the bishop told him one day:

“I’ve had chicken hot, and I’ve had chicken cold.

“I’ve had chicken young, and I’ve had chicken old.

“I’ve had chicken tender, and I’ve had chicken tough.

“And thank you, Lord, I’ve had chicken enough.”

Since the bishop had broached the subject, in a way, Father Leggett took the opportunity to tell him about his visit with the O’Connor child, and the strange theological musings it had inspired in him. The bishop, a keen administrator, got right to the heart of the matter.

“What do you mean, frizzled?”

Father Leggett tried as best he could to explain the concept of frizzled to the bishop, finally raking both hands through his own hair until it stood on end.

“Ah, I see. Sounds like some kind of freak. Best to wring its neck while the child’s napping. She might catch the mites.”

“Oh, but sir, the girl views this chicken as a manifestation of our Lord.”

“Our Lord was no freak,” the bishop replied. “He was martyred for our sins, not pecked to death like a runty chicken.”

“They seem to have a real bond,” Father Leggett said. “Where you and I might see only a walking feather duster, this child sees the face of Jesus.”

“People see the face of Jesus all over,” the bishop said, “in clouds and stains on the ceiling and the headlamps of Fords. Herbert Hoover and Father Divine show up in the same places, if you look hard enough. It’s human nature to see order where there is none.”

“She trained it to walk backward on command. That’s order from chaos, surely. Like the hand of God on the face of the waters.”

“You admire this child,” the bishop said.

I envy her, Father Leggett thought, but what he said was, “I do. And I fear for her faith, if something were to happen to this chicken. They don’t live long, you know, even if they make it past Sunday dinner. They aren’t parrots or turtles, and frizzles are especially susceptible to cold weather. I looked it up.”

“Best thing for her,” the bishop said. “Get her over this morbid fascination. You, too. Not healthy for a man of the cloth to be combing Scripture for chickens. Got to see the broader picture, you know. Otherwise, you’re no better than the snake handlers, fixated on Mark 16: 17-18. ‘And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.’”

“Perhaps this child has taken up a chicken,” Father Leggett said, “as another believer would take up a snake.”

“Not to worry, son,” the bishop said. “Little Mary’s belief will outlive this chicken, I reckon. Probably outlive you and me, too. Come in, Ingrid!”

A cloud of cigarette smoke entered the office, followed by Ingrid’s head around the door. “Lunch is ready,” she said.

“Oh, good. What’s today’s bill of fare?”

“Roast chicken.”

“I’m not hungry,” Father Leggett quickly said.

The bishop laughed. “To paraphrase: ‘If they eat any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them.’”

“Mark 16:18 wasn’t in the original gospel,” Ingrid said. “The whole twelve-verse ending of the book was added later, by a scribe.”

The bishop looked wounded. “An *inspired* scribe,” he said.

“Wash your hands, both of you,” Ingrid said, and vanished in a puff.

“She’s been raiding the bookcase again,” the bishop growled. “It’ll only confuse her.”

As he picked at his plate, Father Leggett kept trying to think of other things, but couldn’t. “They shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” Mary O’Connor had placed her hands upon a frizzled chicken and ... hadn’t healed it, exactly, for it was still a ridiculous, doomed creature, but had given it a sort of mission. A backward purpose, but a purpose nonetheless.

That day Father Leggett had a rare afternoon off, so he went to the movies. The cartoon was ending as he entered the auditorium, and he fumbled to a seat in the glare of the giant crowing rooster that announced the Pathe Sound News. Still out of sorts, he slumped in his seat and stared blankly at the day’s doings, reduced to a shrilly narrated comic strip: a ship tossing in a gale, two football teams piling onto one another, Clarence Darrow defending a lynch mob in Hawaii, a glider

soaring over the Alps—but the next title took his breath.

UNIQUE CHICKEN GOES IN REVERSE

“In Savannah, Georgia, little Mary O’Connor, age five, trains her pet chicken to walk backward!”

And there on screen, stripped of sound and color and all human shading, like Father Leggett’s very thoughts made huge and public, were Mary and her frizzled chicken. As he gaped at the capering giants, he was astonished by the familiarity of the O’Connor back yard, how easily he could fill in the details past the square edges of the frame. One would think he had lived there, as a child. He thought he might weep. The audience had begun cheering so at “Savannah, Georgia,” that much of the rest was inaudible, but Father Leggett was pretty sure that Jesus wasn’t mentioned. The cameraman had captured only a few seconds of the chicken actually walking backward; the rest was clearly the film cranked in reverse, and the segment ended with more “backward” footage of waddling ducks, trotting horses, grazing cattle. The delighted audience howled and roared. Feeling sick, Father Leggett lurched to his feet, stumbled across his neighbors to the aisle, and fled the theater.

He went straight to the upright house on Lafayette Square, leaned on the bell until Mrs. O’Connor appeared, index finger to her lips.

“Shh! Please, Father, not so loud,” she whispered, stepping onto the porch and closing the door behind. “Mr. O’Connor has to rest, afternoons.”

“Beg pardon,” he whispered. “I didn’t realize, when I bought my ticket, that your Mary has become a film star now.”

“Oh, yes,” she said, with an unexpected laugh, perching herself on the banister. “She’s the next Miriam Hopkins, I’m sure. It was the chicken they were here for. Edward called them. Such a bother. Do you know, they were here an hour trying to coax it to walk two steps? Stage fright, I suppose. I could have strangled the wretched thing.”

“I’ve been remiss in not calling sooner. And how is Mary doing?”

“Oh, she’s fine.” Her voice was approaching its normal volume. “Do you know, from the day the cameramen visited, she seemed to lose interest in Jesus? Jesus the chicken, I mean. It’s as if the camera made her feel foolish, somehow.”

“May I see her?”

“She’s out back, as usual.” She glanced at the door, then whispered again. “Best to go around the house, I think.”

She led the way down the steps and along a narrow side yard—a

glorified alleyway, really, with brick walls at each elbow—to the back yard, where Mary lay in the dirt, having a fit.

“Child!” Father Leggett cried, and rushed to her.

She thrashed and kicked, her face purple, her frown savage. Father Leggett knelt beside her, seized and—with effort—held her flailing arms. Her hands were balled into fists. “Child, calm yourself. What’s wrong?”

Suddenly still, she opened her eyes. “Hullo,” she said. “I’m fighting.”

“Fighting what?”

“My angel,” she said.

He caught himself glancing around, as if Saint Michael might be behind him. “Oh, child.”

“Sister Consolata says I have an invisible guardian angel that never leaves my side, not even when I’m sleeping, not even when I’m in the *potty*.” This last word was whispered. “He’s always watching me, and following me, and being a pain, and one day I’m going to turn around and catch him and *knock* his block off.” She swung her fists again and pealed with laughter.

Mary’s mother stood over them, her thin mouth set, her dark brows lowered, looking suddenly middle-aged and beautiful. Her default expression was severity, but on her, severity looked good. How difficult it must be, Father Leggett thought, to have an only child, a precocious child, any child.

“Mary, I’ve got cookies in the oven.”

She sat up. “Oatmeal?”

“Oatmeal.”

“With raisins and grease?”

“With raisins and grease.” She leaned down, cupped her hands around her mouth, and whispered, “And we won’t let that old angel have a one.”

Mary giggled.

“You’re welcome to join us, Father. Father?”

“Of course, thank you,” said Father Leggett, with an abstracted air, not turning around, as he walked slowly toward the chicken yard. The frizzled one was easy to spot; it stood in its own space, seemingly avoided by the others. It walked a few steps toward the gate as the priest approached.

Father Leggett felt the gaze of mother and child upon him as he lifted the fishhook latch and creaked open the gate. The chickens

nearest him fluttered, then stilled, but their flutter was contagious. It passed to the next circle of chickens, then the next, a bit more violent each time. The outermost circle of chickens returned it to the body of the flock, and by the time the ripple of unease had reached Father Leggett, he had begun to realize why so many otherwise brave people were (to use a word he had learned only in his recent weeks of study) alektorophobes. Only the frizzled Jesus seemed calm. Father Leggett stepped inside, his Oxfords crunching corn hulls and pebbles. He had the full attention of the chickens now. Without looking, he closed the gate behind. He walked forward, and the milling chickens made a little space for him, an ever-shifting, downy clearing in which he stood, arms at his sides, holding his breath. The frizzle stepped to the edge of this clearing, clucked at him. The hot air was rich with the smells of grain, bad eggs and droppings. A crumpled washtub held brackish water. Feathers floated across his smudged reflection. He closed his eyes, slowly lifted his arms. The chickens roiled. Wings beat at his shins. He reached as far aloft as he could and prayed a wordless prayer as the chicken yard erupted around him, a smothering cloud that buffeted his face and chest and legs. He was the center of a tornado of chickens, their cackles rising and falling like speech, a message that he almost felt he understood, and with closed eyes he wept in gratitude, until Jesus pecked him in the balls.

One afternoon years later, during her final semester at the women's college in Milledgeville, Mary O'Connor sat at her desk in the *Corinthian* office, leafing through the Atlanta paper, wondering whether the new copy of the McMurray Hatchery catalog ("All Flocks Blood Tested") would be waiting in the mailbox when she got home. Then an article deep inside the paper arrested her attention.

Datelined Colorado, it was about a headless chicken named Mike. Mike had survived a Sunday-morning beheading two months previous. Each evening Mike's owners plopped pellets of feed down his stumpy neck with an eyedropper and went to bed with few illusions, and each morning Mike once again gurgled up the dawn.

She read and reread the article with the deepest satisfaction. It reminded her of her childhood, and in particular of the day she first learned the nature of grace.

She clipped the article and folded it in half and in half and in half again until it was furled like Aunt Pittypat's fan and sheathed it in an envelope that she addressed to Father Leggett, care of the Cathedral

of St. John the Baptist in Savannah. Teaching a *headless* chicken to walk backward: that would be *real* evangelism. On a fresh sheet of the stationery her grandmother had given her two Christmases ago, she crossed out the ornate engraved “M” at the top and wrote in an even more ornate “F,” as if she were flunking herself with elegance. Beneath it she wrote:

Dear Father Leggett,
I saw this and thought of you.
Happy Easter,
Flannery (nee Mary) O’Connor

When Miss Ingrid’s successor brought him the letter, Father Leggett was sitting in his office, eating a spinach salad and reading the *Vegetarian News*. He was considered a good priest though an eccentric one, and no longer was invited to so many parishioners’ homes at mealtime. He glanced at the note, then at the clipping. The photo alone made him upset his glass of carrot juice. He threw clipping, note and envelope into the trash can, mopped up the spill with a napkin, fisted the damp cloth and took deep chest-expanding breaths until he felt calmer. He allowed himself a glance around the room, half-expecting the flutter of wings, the brush of the thing with feathers.