



We had a rooster named Mr. Pecker. When he was a chick, he had a distinctive style of pecking his food, as he would peck one piece of grain many times before actually ingesting it. Occasionally, my baby brother Joel would observe this quirky behavior and exclaim, “Oh boy, look at that one peck, peck, peck. That’s Mr. Pecker!”

When you are 13 like me and understand that “pecker” can mean other things, you are pleased with your own worldly knowledge (severely limited as that may be), and therefore you are joyful when your brother selects this name for a chicken. Specifically, you are happy for the opportunity to say the words “Mr. Pecker,” especially in the presence of adults.

“Here comes Mr. Pecker!” you can say. Or you could try, “Mr. Pecker sure is happy when he sees the girls!”



If you get a harsh look, you respond by simultaneously acting innocent and indignant. You can say “*What?!* That’s what my little brother named the chicken. God.”

This is a highly satisfying verbal interaction with adults when you are a teenage girl.

However, it’s important to know your limits. Case in point: Mr. Pecker was a large Rhode Island Red rooster. You might be tempted to say, “Mr. Pecker is a big red cock,” and that’s a good one! But trust me, from experience you’d be taking the joke too far, especially if

your mother is within earshot. That said, it is strange how, when you name something, it sometimes takes on qualities associated with that name. For example, my friend Leslie had a yellow lab named Julep. Julep kind of staggered around the house with a pleasant doggy grin, giving the impression that she was blissfully buzzed the better part of her life.

So things really can take on qualities of their name, and this was true for Mr. Pecker. As a youngster he was friendly enough, but as he aged he grew hostile and paranoid like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. By the time he was a year old, he was a bastard of the first order.

Despite having full run of our 12-acre Colorado ranch property, including the barn and garden areas, Mr. Pecker was hell-bent on terrorism. Plagued by delusions that his hens were cheating on him, or even worse, eating all the good grasshoppers, he viciously and regularly attacked. He pinned his squawking victims to the ground, bit their heads until they bled, and stripped feathers from their bodies as he clawed their backs.

You may suggest that Mr. Pecker was simply doing his natural business in the way of helping the hens make baby chickens, but trust me, our rooster was not engaging in normal behavior. He was sociopathic. And as the heat of the summer set in, the Pecker situation grew worse.

When I entered the barn to feed the horses, he would stampede

toward me, red feathers pricked on end, head held high, stopping just short of the boots on my feet. Not to be intimidated by his threatening behavior, I bravely urged my dog Banjo to proceed through the barn door before me each morning. Obviously I did this so I could better defend Banjo if Pecker attacked, or at the very least I could run away. To warn others.

Banjo and I learned to hate Mr. Pecker, but like inner city youth growing up in gang territory, we adjusted our lives around his menacing presence. We never let down our guard and always kept a watchful eye, as one never knew when Mr. Pecker would charge from the shadows.

My mom, however, was not so vigilant or prepared. She did not possess the skills required to combat the Pecker. More accurately: my mom did not possess the skills required to fight anything. Ever.

As a child, my mom dressed kittens in handmade baby clothes and pushed them around her neighborhood in a stroller. Later in life she became adept at weaving textiles on a loom, nursing orphaned sparrows back to health when they fell from nests, and baking cream puffs from scratch. My mom adored children, even her own. The most violent thing she had done in her life was chop an onion, and after that she always cried.

It was a midsummer morning and our vegetable garden was teeming with zucchinis, cucumbers, sweet corn, cherry tomatoes, lettuce, peas and string beans. My mom enjoyed gardening almost as much as making an angel food cake. She spent hours on end weeding, watering, and generally tending every aspect of our homegrown bounty.

There, in her summer haven, as my mom stooped over the zucchini and was generally minding her own garden business, Mr. Pecker attacked.

My brothers and I did not witness the actual incident, but we had front row tickets to the aftermath. We were on the back porch when we heard several sharp shrieks followed by a

prolonged squawk. A few seconds passed in silence. Being children of action and concern, we froze like rabbits in our places.

Seconds later Mr. Pecker came bursting through the hedge that bordered our driveway, my mom following close behind, although her trajectory was not so much through the hedge as over it.

It was then that we saw our mom, the gentle garden lady who dressed kittens in baby clothes, chasing Mr. Pecker with a lasso she grabbed from the barn. Given the tangle of rope that swirled around her person, it was clear she couldn't handle her weapon; in fact it is likely she had never touched one before that moment. My mom was not Annie Oakley. She was raised in the city, and before my dad coerced, I mean convinced her to move to the country, my mom was a proud, culottes-wearing member of the Denver Junior League.

At this moment she sported blue Bermuda shorts, cork sandals, and a significant amount of blood. The shorts and sandals were standard attire but as you can imagine the blood part came as quite a surprise.

"Get him! Get the rooster!" she commanded as she and the bird whizzed by.

As ordered, my three brothers and I jumped off the porch in hot pursuit. Chris ran because he was the oldest and, besides, it was his lasso mom had commandeered. I ran and wept simultaneously because, at the sight of blood on her legs, I surmised my mom was dying. Drew ran because he was thrilled by a hunt of any kind and once 'accidentally' shot Lilac, my escaped pet rabbit, at a distance of fifty yards with a BB gun, and Joel ran because the house was on fire. In crisis situations, Joel defaulted to the assumption that something had caught fire, as he was a nine-year-old pyromaniac who once singed off his own eyelashes while setting fire to a small pond.

With five humans on his heels, Mr. Pecker had little chance of escape so of course he was caught.

By our dog.

Hearing the commotion, Banjo ran around the house in the opposite direction of our own circular pursuit, which set him on a bull's eye course for rooster apprehension. Observing that his arch nemesis was vulnerable at long last, Banjo grabbed and tackled Mr. Pecker. Then the five of us grabbed and tackled Banjo because you don't want your dog getting the idea he can attack chickens willy-nilly anytime the fancy strikes.

It took about thirty minutes for Mr. Pecker's future to be decided. Banjo had been banished to the garage, Chris retreated to his bedroom and now was blaring the Beatles' *White Album* on his stereo for all to hear, while Drew and Joel alternated the duty of holding Mr. Pecker custody in the yard.

I watched as my mom cleaned the scratches on the backsides of her knees with dish soap in the kitchen. Mr. Pecker had spurred her viciously, but after incessant helpful questioning on my part, I had been assured she would survive. Repeatedly.

"Oh honestly, Wendy. It's just a few scratches. Pretty sure I'll live another day." However, my mom said, Mr. Pecker would not do the same.

"That's the last straw for him," she sighed. "He's been running those poor hens ragged. We're having chicken for dinner tonight."

"GOOD!" I cheered, "Let's kill him dead, mom! I always hated that stupid bird. I hate his dumb stupid guts."

My mom and I had recently endured a series of spats with one

another. For example she lacked a sense of style and hence failed to appreciate the perfection of my face when I applied comet blue eye shadow from the line of my lashes all the way up to the bottom of my brows. If she wasn't gasping at my makeup, she was recoiling at my wardrobe. One time she even forbade me from wearing a tube top to the grocery store. I tried my best to be patient with her because this was 1979 and she was born in the '40s when beauty wasn't really understood.

Given our history of differing opinions, it was gratifying to take sides with my mom against Mr. Pecker. We had a common enemy, and already I could feel the hatred bringing us close.

Another thing my mom and I shared in common was the fact that neither of us had ever killed anything. Oh, yes, obviously both of us had swatted flies and smooshed bugs; we caught the odd sunfish now and then when my brothers went fishing, and (despite swerving) my mom occasionally hit a rabbit while driving. But all of that is just your typical garden-variety killing when you live in Colorado.

Killing a rooster, however, was not something done everyday. At least not for us.

"Drew can kill Mr. Pecker easy," I advised. "He's got that BB gun."

My mom shook her head. "That's not how you do it. You have to slaughter a chicken properly if you're going to eat it."

I must say, the idea of eating Mr. Pecker intrigued me. It was appealing, even. Like the ultimate revenge. "Yes!" I said. "Let's eat him. But how do we kill him?"

Of course I employed the word "we," in the sense that means "you," and I was grateful my mom understood this exactly.

"I'll handle it," she said. She had been soaking a blood-stained spot on her shorts with cold water from a dishrag. She wrung out the cloth and hung it over the faucet, then headed for the knife drawer.

"You're going to stab him?"

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"No, I'll cut off his head. That's the way you do it."

"Have you done that before?"

"No, but it's no big whoop. Easy."

Most things came easily to my mom. She was self-taught in so many disciplines I could hardly keep track. This was a woman who painted brilliant landscapes with oils, wove tapestries on a six-foot loom, and devised original, award-winning recipes. She had no formal instruction, not so much as a class at the YMCA or a lesson from a friend, in any of those fields.

Since being moved against her will to the country on account of my dad's insistence that my three brothers needed a place to run and hunt, and I needed a place to ride, my mom became a master of many new arts. Importantly, this was her way of rebelling.

If you are a woman from my mom's side of the family, the Casements, you learn to send very powerful messages to others without using words. This is a required skill, a time-honored tradition passed down from generation to generation of Casement women. It's like you get a full-ride scholarship to Passive Aggressive University.

My mom employed her training in this regard by overextending herself in all things "country." She didn't want to live on a ranch, but feeling she had no choice, she morphed into a ranch maniac. That would show them!

Once a fan of Barbara Streisand and Billy Joel, mom tuned every radio in the house to the likes of Dolly Parton and Merle Haggard. Before moving to the country she doted on a lovely flower garden of roses and pansies; now it was hardcore vegetables and stone fruit trees. She learned to can preserves, bake bread from scratch, and she volunteered as a leader for the local 4-H Club. My own mother grew her ash-blond hair long and went so far as to wear it in a bun like Ma Ingalls on *Little House on the Prairie*.

If you are a Casement woman, you plainly understand these radical actions and their clear meaning and purpose, just as you would understand that intentionally leaving off the cheese from a ham sandwich request is an effective way to communicate dissatisfaction with another human being. If you are a Casement woman, you know these to be infinitely clear expressions of revolt and mutiny.

If you are my dad, you are oblivious.

Undeterred, however, my mom was steadfast in her mission to 'up the country bar in my dad's face,' as it were, and killing Mr. Pecker presented a sparkling opportunity. She opened the knife-drawer, selected her weapon of choice, and strode out the door. Justice comes swiftly in the American West and the Nelson backyard.

Our massacre—I mean chicken slaughter—was a full entertainment venue, complete with background tunes courtesy of the Beatles on account of the open window in my brother's second-story bedroom. "You say you want a revolution?" Well, you're in luck because Mr. Pecker and his reign of terror were going down.

Drew and Joel were equally pro-death penalty as me and there was a feeling of cheer and excitement in the air, just like we were witnessing a hanging at the Tower of London. We were not disappointed as my mom dramatically laid the knife down on the three-foot wall of railroad ties that formed a retaining border for the garden. (On second thought, she was *not* very dramatic about the knife, but it is easy to add extra drama with your own brain when you are about to witness a killing.)

What came next, however, surpassed even our wildest imaginings.

With calm authority, my mom took Mr. Pecker from Drew's hold. She then turned the rooster upside down and, with her right hand, firmly gripped his scaly yellow legs. Mr. Pecker looked larger than ever in this unexpected position, as the full length of his red body now stretched downward, bat-like, and his wings draped outward slightly. Then, with the bird in proper starting position, my mom commenced whirling Mr. Pecker in rapid, giant circles, helicopter style, over her head.

This particular turn of events was surprising for two reasons.

First, although certainly I was no judge, my mom obviously possessed a natural talent for swinging birds in the air. There was a graceful ease to her movement, a gentle bend in her knees (which is key to so many athletic endeavors), her hips centered squarely over her lower body, and her feet planted firmly on the ground. You can observe a somewhat similar form in Olympic shot-put champions. Watching the beauty of her motion, her oneness with the circling rooster overhead, caused me to momentarily marvel at her previous failure with my brother's lasso.

That was the first surprise.

The second surprise is that my brother Drew, the 11-year-old avid hunter of our family, a boy who had more rabbit, sparrow, and squirrel kills than Daniel Boone, began sobbing. "Mom, why are you swinging Mr. Pecker?!" he implored.

"It's OK, Drew," my mom assured. She talked in a louder voice than usual on account of the ambient swooshing noise of the swinging rooster near her ears. "This will make all the blood run to his head," she helpfully instructed. "That way, when I lay him down he'll be still. He won't feel anything, don't worry. This is how you do it."

Despite the rapidly deteriorating confidence of my brother, I maintained absolute faith in my mom's technique because she possessed the same air

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of cheerful competence you frequently see in flight attendants.

After what I guessed to be fifteen or twenty rotations, my mom ceased swinging and laid Mr. Pecker on the railroad tie, near the knife. It appeared to me that all was going according to plan, because Mr. Pecker was very still, apparently profoundly confused or at the very least incredibly relaxed following his dizzying stint on the poultry tilt-a-whirl.

At this point I'd like to mention the importance of using proper tools when slaughtering animals. If there is even the *teensiest* chance that your knife or hatchet or axe is not in its sharpest possible condition, then perhaps the scheduled slaughter should be delayed or cancelled altogether, as chicken meat in particular can always be found at the market, tidily wrapped and at bargain prices.

Knife in hand (and, unfortunately there is no way to put this delicately), my mom attempted to cut-off Mr. Pecker's head. "Attempted" being the operative verb, as quickly my mom recognized the knife was not performing as expected, and therefore, slightly panicked, she commenced a fervent sawing motion at his neck.

Fervent sawing motions are jarring by nature and instantly Mr. Pecker transformed from a limp and compliant victim into a screaming, furious protester.

With equal rapidity I experienced a major personal transformation of my own. Formerly a happy-go-lucky supporter of chicken death, I now was a most ardent proponent of poultry right-to-life. I felt compelled to immediately and loudly communicate my new philosophical position by screaming, "Jesus *Christ*, Mom, you are hurting him! You are hurting Mr. Pecker! Stop it! *Stop it now!*" I began jumping hysterically up and down in place on the grass. Also, I waved my arms and hands in front of my body, fingers spread widely, in the universally understood sign-language motion that means, "halt the chicken murder."

Horrified by mom's failure as an executioner and now ponderous at my own hysteria when previously I cheered Mr. Pecker's demise, my two brothers entered a rarified realm of clear thought. "Kill him NOW," they shouted, "Kill him faster or you're just torturing him!"

Spurred by their words and astounded by my own actions, I leapt forward to assist my mom in pinning down the rooster and then, with the full strength and weight of both our bodies, together we heaved downward on the knife, at last taking the short, miserable life of Mr. Pecker.

By comparison the remainder of the day was unremarkable, although I will say there are many smells associated with butchering a chicken from scratch. If people knew about these odors, especially the smells involving wet feathers, they would eat more naturally fragrant animals like pigs and cows.

My dad came home that evening and after putting his briefcase in the den, he joined us in the kitchen. "What's for dinner?" he asked, not really listening for an answer.

"Oh, just Mr. Pecker," cheerfully answered my mom. And with that, she handed Mr. Pecker on a platter to my father.

If you were a Casement woman you would immediately comprehend the stark and deep meaning of this seemingly typical dinnertime gesture. Namely, you would accurately perceive that my dad's insistence on moving to the country had plunged his family to levels of darkness previously unknown to humankind, that my mom was woefully in need of a new set of kitchen knives, and also that she likely would never successfully remove the one remaining blotch of blood from her favorite blue Bermuda shorts.

After dinner my mom and I put away dishes in the kitchen. "Hey,

mom," I asked, "are you sad that we killed Mr. Pecker?"

"No," she responded, perhaps a bit too quietly. And then to boost confidence she added, "I'd kill him twice if I could. He was a hateful bird."

A few minutes passed in silence and then she asked, "Are *you* sad we killed Mr. Pecker?"

"Yes," I answered. "I'm glad we ate him, but I'll sure miss his name."

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Originally  
from  
Colorado,  
WENDY  
CLAUS  
lives on a  
miniranch  
in the  
heart of  
Scottsdale,



Arizona, with 25 chickens, three dogs, two cats, four horses, and two remarkably kind loving humans — her husband, Scot, and her son, Spencer.