

Lydia Conklin

A Nice Number

A nice number of chickens was all that she wanted. Three at most, maybe four. That was what she had told her neighbor before the shipment came in.

"Three chickens, please", she had said. "Maybe four. Maybe, in the most extreme case, *maybe* five." But she didn't say that part. She thought it was implied.

That's why Emily didn't understand why there were now five hundred chickens munching away at her yard. If she'd counted them once, she'd counted them a thousand times. There were five hundred exactly, including the runt and the two missing most of their feathers. Five hundred chickens, she thought, was a few too many. She had triplets to care for, young ones, and a chicken is more work than you may imagine.

The first few hours the chickens were there Emily didn't do much about the situation besides count them as many times as she did. This took a lot longer than you might expect, because chickens are moving beings. After she was sure there were five hundred, Emily went over the conversation again and again in her head in case she had missed anything. Agatha had come to her door with a clipboard, all business with a tight frown and no word of gossip. She'd said,

"I'm getting in a shipment of chickens, you know. Wondering if you wanted one."

"Oh, sure," Emily had said, more just to be neighborly than anything else, "I'd take a chicken or two."

But when Agatha had looked so disappointed, tightening her frown and sighing, Emily had added,

"Maybe three."

Agatha had seemed satisfied at that, and had even snickered a little as she walked back to her own yard. Emily hadn't found it ominous at the time, but when she woke the next morning there were the five hundred chickens in her front yard, their feathers pulsing like a sea of flakey scalps. The fattest one was tied to her stoop with twine, and on it was a note that read:

Ms. Emily Anderson-

Here are the chickens you ordered. There should be five hundred in count. Please consult our offices at 18 Hermit's Way if you have questions or complaints.

Yours,
Agatha Helms

That's when Emily began to count. But she didn't have a husband or son to double check for her. All she had in the world were the triplets, standing in the doorway in matching purple party dresses. The first one said,

"Hey look."

And the second one said,

"Chickens."

And the third one (the one with the pigtails) said,

"Yum."

And with that they turned and went inside to play, never speaking of the chickens again. Emily sighed as they left and stared back out over the mass of clucking creatures. She decided that there was nothing else to do but go next door and talk to Agatha. A husband could have done the job properly, with stamping feet and all that, but Emily would have to settle for her own womanly

way.

“Excuse me,” she said, when Agatha answered the door. “But I think you’ve given me a few too many chickens.”

“Too many chickens?” Agatha said. She was wearing a black evening gown with an ornamental necklace and white gloves.

“That can’t be right. We keep very accurate records.”

With that Agatha pulled from a drawer a “Chickerie Doo Order Form” with names and numbers neatly listed. Agatha and Emily scanned the form together until they came to the line that read Emily Anderson, 20 Hermits Lane. When Agatha ran her finger along the sheet to the corresponding column, sure enough there was a plain black “500”, clear as day. There was nothing Emily could do.

“Well...” she stammered. “I guess there’s no arguing with that.” Emily paid the large sum she owed for the chickens. Agatha counted the bills and went back into her house, which now was strangely well furnished.

That night when the triplets were in bed Emily laid down with the chickens, resigning herself to a life of ceaseless pecking. From the gravel she could see through feathers and crusted anuses, the stars in the velvet sky. This was her home. From under the chickens she felt a movement and a company that had not been there before. She fell asleep to the smell of cracked corn and the new sound of champagne glasses clicking next door.