A deep hatred pervaded Zalmen the Carpenter’s home for the yellow hen with speckled feathers that Leah-Gittel bought about a year ago off a peasant woman from the neighboring village of Chudlin for 55 groschen.

Leah-Gittel could only curse this peasant woman, the witch. She thought her an old shrew: toothless, with sunken cheeks and a pointy little chin.

“May her little hand shrivel even more!”

Zalmen the carpenter was no spendthrift and a half-crown or even a couple groschen was not something he let fall by the wayside, he’d swear on his Jewish life to that. And, if he could have mustered it, he would have grabbed hold of his lathe or saw, his hatchet or his hand plane, thrown it, smashed in her head and be rid of her.

Such was the hatred for her.

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And they hated her because she was a fiend, a demon, a devil. You needed to watch out. She paid no notice to the house. Was there even a house to notice?

When Leah-Gittel brought her home from the market, as soon as she had purchased her — this was at the start of summertime — she bound her up and, as is Leah-Gittel’s custom, wrapped a piece of red chintz cloth around her right foot, colored a wing with a bit of laundry bluing to distinguish her, and walked her seven times around the base of the table saying:

“Just as this table stands unmoving from its place, may you be so steadfast to our home.”

She crumbled a piece of bread for her and let her walk about the house. For a few days the hen stayed indoors. But after someone opened a window, she hopped outside and from that day on she was a free bird. She took on the entire world. Wherever there was a garden, she would scatter the beans or onions about, peck out the cucumbers. In the street people clutched at their chests yelling: shoo, shoo, shoo, raising the alarm to chase after her, pelting her with any sort of stone they could grab, wishing that she would drop dead of apoplexy and so too any owner of such a chicken . . .

Whenever she came to the house, she searched for crumbs and snatched up whatever was thrown her. If not, she would approach a kid on the stoop sitting with a bowl of barley soup or some buttered bread in hand and snatch a potato out of the bowl or a nibble of the bread right out of the little hand holding it, the child bursting into tears, shrieking to high heavens, and she was gone.

Where she spent the night, nobody knew. Every night a new place: up a tree, on a fence post, atop a roof, in an attic.

No one could ever pinpoint where she was or where she laid her eggs. Sometimes you’d find eggshells in the garden — a heart-rending sight: surely, she had dispatched the egg herself.

In wintertime, when calm hens gathered in the warmth of the house to eat and drink, laying inside here and there, she slept outdoors somewhere, the devil knows where, in biting frost, in blizzards when it would be a sin to drive a mad dog out into the streets. She walked about undaunted on the icy ground, trudging through the snow — you can only imagine it — returning to the house in the morning, worn out with her comb frozen and black, shivering from the cold, standing in front of the door. Something would be tossed to her and she’d snatch it right up, choke it down, look around nastily, always on edge that someone might sneak up and grab her.

If she ever got tricked into the house, she would start fluttering about, plucking off hats and caps, clawing at eyes, perching on a shelf, knocking over pots and plates, smashing open a windowpane to escape outside.

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Once on a summer evening after work, Zalmen was struck with an urge to follow her, to see where she slept. He searched for her and trailed after her footsteps. As he snuck along behind a coop, he caught sight of her. But she was a smart thing and sensed right away that she was being followed. She started up and leapt over Meyshe the Healer’s fence and into the garden. Zalmen crawled after her and hid among the plots. He didn’t let her out of his sight, tracking where the greenery rustled and followed her. It grew dark. It was time for the afternoon prayer. He rubbed his hands with a bit of dirt and began to recite the liturgy.
murmuring one prayer after the next as she led him down one street onto another, through gardens and over fences, past backstreets, coops, and rubbish bins. In the meantime, he noticed the stars had come out in the sky. Spitting to the ground, he let her be and headed to the prayer house to pray the evening prayer with the assembled crowd, standing for two counts of the Eighteen Benedictions.

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Sometimes, after a full evening search, she’d be found in an attic or sitting in a tree. Some rascal would climb up and take her down. She raised such a rumpus over the street that night that people wanted to kill her. At her wild shrieks, people leapt from their houses half naked, frightened to death. And when they found out the source of all the ruckus, they poured out their wrath — on her head, legs, and feet, and then went back to bed.

When she needed to be carried, everyone lent a hand:

_Come on! She’ll slip right out of your hands. You have no idea how to hold a hen!_

She was confined to a coop, under the furnace, when her time came to lay eggs. She was put on her roost, under her a nest egg was placed, and a basket on top of her. The basket was covered with something heavy: a cleaver, a women’s bible, a hand plane from the workbench. Everyone stood and watched, perhaps she could lay just one egg? In the meantime, one would get impatient and sneak a peak under the basket: _Maybe, already?_

Right away she bolted out, right through the window, and everybody followed after.

All started rushing and running: Zalmen, Leah-Gittel, the children, the shop apprentice, the other kids on the street. Someone who chanced upon her tried to stop her, holding out his arms, pulling up his coattails, and she jumped right over his head and kept running.

They ran after her until they were exhausted, winded, gasping for breath: _bb–bb–bb_. She was like a drunk, her eyes darting about, wings spread wide, mouth agape, tongue stuck out, breathless.

Then she slipped and tumbled over. And Zalmen had her in his grasp and pinned to the wall. All eyes were fixed on the spot and a _Caught her!_ burst out of everyone’s mouth. But then she slipped out of his hands and left Zalmen sprawled on the floor.

She headed into the priest’s garden, stealing in through the fence post, and there she remained. The priest would surely kill anyone who approached his garden and he kept dogs, like a pack of wild wolves, and the egg was lost.

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Once they came to a conclusion that she wasn’t a chicken fit for domestic life. She should be sold and an end put to it already. But she was so gaunt and thin, skin and bones, really — more a kite than a chicken. There was no way it would be possible to get back even what was paid for her. You could probably get at most a half-crown or a handful of groschen. But when it came time to sell, the anger had subsided and the estimation changed completely: “She’s a settled-in hen, who returns home from the middle of the town, won’t let anyone catch her, lays eggs every day (or so they thought), she’s been given food for a full year and you’d go now and sell her for less than you paid?”

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About a week after Purim, out of nowhere, suddenly, she just disappeared. At first no one noticed, but after several days without her, people got to suspecting something was amiss.

Zalmen took heart, justifying it all saying:

“A beautiful, faultless foul to redeem us… and save us from having to feed her in vain…”

But Leah-Gittel’s heart ached. Just before Passover when we need eggs, out of nowhere, she disappears! And she could swear that the hen had just begun laying. Recently she had been going about clucking and singing.

Leah-Gittel cast aside all of her work and went about in the streets looking at all the chickens, calling: _Here chick, chick_, asking neighbors, going up streets familiar and not, asking if anyone had seen a yellow hen with speckled feathers and stub tail. If someone somewhere should see such a one, they should not let it out of their sight until it could be determined whose she is and how long she had been there.
Zalmen, though, seemed to take it in stride, unbothered. But whenever he went off to the prayer house or came back, he’d keep an eye out on the way. And whenever he passed a courtyard he peeked into the coop: maybe she’d turn up somewhere.

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On the fifth day, completely unexpectedly, when hope had given out and feet already tired of hunting for her, she suddenly just returned. Her body had swelled, her wings wider, feathers erect, squawking, she stood at the doorway and demanded some food to eat.

Over the streets the news spread: “The hen showed up,” they laughed.

Leah-Gittel threw her a scrap of food (she didn’t want her eggs to catch a sniffle), and cursed it with affection:

“She ate all up whatever was tossed to her and then she was gone . . .”

From that day on, the yellow hen would come back every other or every third day. In the house, everything had a pre-Passover sort of smell about. Hens were let out into the streets, gathering what they could from under the melting snow, scrabbling in the rubbish outside the house, and flirting with the neighboring rooster.

The yellow hen, however, did not give the other hens as much as a glance. It was as if she had never even known them. She planted herself by the doorway, clucking at whomever came out of the house to throw her something, which she snatched quickly and gobbled up.

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At noon just before the first evening of Passover, the yellow hen appeared suddenly from the priest’s garden and with her was a troop of puffy, delicate, yellowy, downy little chicks with their outsized feet, with all the children of the street behind them shrieking and giggling up into the house.

Thereupon they stormed through the open door, scampering and hopping over the threshold into the house. The whole house was filled with deafening clucking and squawking. It was as if she were saying:

“It wasn’t for nothing that I’ve been starving for the last three weeks.”

Leah-Gittel had her hands full. Knowing that they were probably ravenous, she threw the chicks whatever she had at hand: some matzo meal, a nut, some cinnamon from the grinder. She grabbed a “non-

kosher” egg that had a blood spot found inside and roasted it. She crumbled it into bits, spread it out before them on the floor, crossed her arms and watched them in sheer delight. The hen broke the egg apart into tiny little pieces and scattered them with her feet and called all her children together: chuck-chuck-chuck.

The little ones heard her call and came running, looking at her and mimicking her, scattering the pieces about with their little feet, each on its own.

Then, she taught them how to eat. She gave them a sign and then all began pecking at the ground. They got the hang of it right away, spilling out over the house peck-peck-pecking away, all together convivially, resoundingly, diligently, until the last bit was swallowed up.

After she had taught her method to them, the yellow hen lifted herself up and, refraining from indulging more in eating, looked on with tender, maternal affection.

Zalmen reveled in it all. In his joy, he didn’t know where to begin. He tried to count the chicks and each time lost count, sometimes they numbered fifteen, sometimes fourteen. Beaming with joy, he asked:

“Look, Leah-Gittel, give them some more. I just knew that she’d come. From the depths she would return! Could the devil ever get lost?”

On the first night of Passover, as they sat around the table at Zalmen the Carpenter’s house and began the seder, the yellow hen sat just across from them under a bed on a fresh mound of hay. Under her outstretched wings, the chicks cuddled together and kept cosy, snuggling close to each other quietly, quietly twittering. Sometimes, one of them would pop a little head out and regard God’s new world before hiding back under a wing.

When the table grew quiet with everybody sleepily dozing off, a soft, tender and sweet holiday melody lifted up from under the bed — the tune of five-quarters of a dozen, pure and perfect little beaks dribbling out like warm, clear droplets of oil, filling Zalmen the Carpenter’s home.

Warsaw, 1908
Translated by Roberto Aguiar