

Red

It is ironic how we can look back at something that scared us when we were younger; yet, the memory brings tears of laughter to our eyes now. That is what memories of Red do for me. The funny thing is that Red was not someone or something. Red was a white Leghorn rooster.

Red stood 30 inches tall with shiny white feathers, making his red crown and wattle more predominant. He weighed over twelve pounds, which is twice the size of a typical cock of that breed. His little, beady, devil eyes watched every move you made. What made him dangerous were his two-inch claws and beak. You would think that they would be fairly dull from Red scratching the ground for food, but that only sharpened them for the torment he used them for.

When Red was alive, we lived on a hobby farm in the dry, prairie field state of Wyoming. We had a nice set-up thirty miles from town in a little country suburb. Our ranch style house sat across the garden and barn. Our barn was more like a shelter with an attached rectangle shaped corral. There was a 30 foot passageway separating the house and back yard from the wood pile and hay stack. Behind the hay was our round corral we used for the horses. My dad had set things up to be straight and in line with everything else around it. The back of the barn had to be in line with the back fence of the garden; thus, the back fence of the garden had to be in line with the fence for the back yard. However, there was an exception to this rule of order. Behind the barn shelter stood the only building that was out of alignment with the rest up of the arrangement– the chicken coop. It stood at an angle. It was off balance from the other structures. It broke the harmony and set-up of my dad's configuration. Yet, it fit in well with Red.

Red was the king of 'his' domain and made sure we knew it. You did not enter his territory without fear. Every inch of land from the left edge of our house to the big rock on the right side of the barn was his. The chicken coop was Red's house. It was a safe haven for the chickens to lay their eggs and sleep. Red protected it from predators with every ounce of energy he could muster. It was definitely off limits to us. Red did not care that we fed and provided water for him and the chickens. He did not like anyone or anything in his chicken coop. Who would have thought a rooster could have such control over humans? Until one bright morning in early spring, we certainly didn't.

As my brother, sister, and I were getting ready for school, our mom came through the back door looking frazzled and out of breath. Astonished to see our mom this way, we asked what was wrong. She started to tell us about her incident with Red, "I was feeding the chickens, ducks, and geese when I felt a sharp pain on my back. I couldn't help, but scream out. Wondering what it could be I turned around to see Red coming at me once again. I tried to get away, but he was too fast. He leaped up, flapping his wings, stretched out his legs, and thrust his claws into my legs and struck my back with his beak. I quickly turned around and threw the bucket of feed at him. Red jumped back, but wouldn't run off. He just stood there watching, daring me to make a move. I never took my eyes off him as I reached for the bucket and started yelling at him. Red backed up a few feet while I moved the bucket back and forth trying to scare him. I started to breathe a sigh of relief. Suddenly, Red turned to face me. I crouched down in a defensive mode. I got ready by grabbing the bucket handle really tight to hit him if he decided to come at me again. Red didn't move. He just stood there and shot daggers at me with his devil eyes. I kept swinging the bucket. Red took a few more steps then turned around. He was pushing my every last nerve and enjoying the game of toying with me. Red's gaze made me nervous. I started to back up slowly. When there was enough space between Red and me, I took off running to the house."

What a story! We stood there and laughed. There was no way it could have been Red. To prove to us that Red was capable of hurting us, my mom showed us her legs and back. The bruises were already forming around the broken skin. Red cut right through her clothes. How could we at eleven, ten, and eight years of age defend ourselves against this monster rooster? I shivered at the thought of him grabbing me with his claws and pecking me with his beak. That settled it. I was scared. A great fear of

Red spread throughout the room. We would soon find out that this little incident was just the beginning. Red was on the prowl.

From that day on, we stayed clear of Red. He made it apparently clear we were on his hit list as he continuously watched our every move. If we were outside playing, he would slowly creep up on us. My brother, Byron, and I would run off screaming as if our heads were cut off. When we would look back to see where he was, Red would just be standing there watching us. It was as if he were laughing at us for acting so crazy. We would get so mad at ourselves for letting this *rooster* chase us around scaring the bajebers out of us. What could we do? I thought if all he did was chase us then it might not be so bad; yet, we soon learned that chasing us was not enough of a thrill for him anymore.

Red's new thing was to chase us until we hid behind something or were no longer in his domain. He would even come after us when we were fifty feet away and especially liked coming after us when our backs were turned. He would just look at us and start running. It was dreadful. We had to look out the door to see where he was before we could even go outside. We even started to peek around the corners of the buildings just so we knew where Red was. If you didn't know where Red was you were in danger. We were walking on egg shells. We started to tire of always being the ones to run away. Byron and I wanted to see Red run. We thought it would be fun to beat him at his own game, so we came up with a plan.

My partner in our schemes against Red was Byron, my younger brother. Byron had been the victim of many attacks by Red. He wanted to get even more than any of us. I stood barely four feet tall and Byron was not much shorter than me. His muscular build and strength as a child always amazed me. Unfortunately, his downfall was that he couldn't run fast enough in a short period of time to save him from Red. His lack of speed made him easy prey to Red. That's where I was lucky. I had the same athletic build, but I was a sprinter. I could get away from Red, when my brother couldn't. We started to think of ways that we could make Red run instead of us. Red needed to be scared for once. In order for us to beat him at his own game, we knew we needed something that was faster and had more endurance than my brother and me. That is when we involved our trusty steeds.

We went out to the pasture to get our horses and put the saddles on them. After we were situated in our saddles, we started to look for Red. We were on the prowl now. Red was standing by the chicken coop. Byron looked at me with a sly grin on his face. I looked out of the corners of my eyes at my brother and nodded in approval. It was Red's turn to run. Byron kicked his horse. I kicked mine. We were off and charging at Red. He turned and looked at us. Next thing we knew he started to run. He was actually running away from us! "Yippee!!" we shouted. We pulled the horses to a halt when we were by the barn. We did it! We chased *him!*

Out of breath and laughing, Byron and I started bragging about how we ruled the roost now. It felt good and righteous. Before we could truly enjoy our new sense of pride and confidence, Red took a peek around the side of the barn. Once we were in his sights, Red walked around the side of the barn. He just stood there staring at us. I pointed at Red breaking my brother's laughter. When Byron was turning his head to look at what I was pointing at, Red started running at us. We started screaming while we frantically kicked the horses and turned them around to get away.

We were so frightened we didn't look back. All I could think about was him flying up at us and getting us with his beak. We stopped the horses at the round corral. We couldn't believe our eyes when we turned around and saw Red standing at least a hundred feet away! Byron and I looked at each other in disgust. Our plan had failed. We wanted and needed to rule the roost, so all summer we kept trying our plan again and again. We failed every time. Finally, we came to terms with the fact that Red was going to always be the king of the roost; but, that didn't mean that Byron and I couldn't enjoy our attempts to dethrone the almighty Red.

Our new plan came about by fate. My sister, Anisa, had been attacked by Red while she was out in the pasture petting the horses. This time Red went out of his domain to get her. Byron was next. He was attacked while playing with our dog, Heidi. Byron took off running as Heidi came to his rescue. She went after Red. Red came at her. They were fighting. We thought for sure this would be the end of Red. We stood there cheering Heidi on. To our amazement, they started going in circles chasing each other. Our jaws dropped to the ground as Red and Heidi playfully chased each other for five minutes. We couldn't believe it. Red was actually playing. For those five minutes, Red didn't seem so bad. When they were done playing, they just walked away from each other. It was as if they had this hidden language between them. This started their daily playing ritual. I turned to my brother and said, "I have a new plan. We can use Heidi to get Red for us. We will have her with us every time we are near Red."

Byron and I used Heidi quite often. If we were going anywhere near Red, we made sure Heidi was beside us. She would run after Red if he decided to come after us and they would start playing the chase-each-other-in-a-circle game. My mom and sister started to use Heidi after they had been attacked a few more times by Red. My dad and I still were the fortunate ones. We had not been attacked by Red yet. My dad was just plain lucky. Red would just turn around and walk the other way when he would see my dad, standing six feet tall, coming. I was still scared. I felt like he wanted to add me to his list of conquests. He wanted me to surrender to him. I kept my eyes on Red the whole time and would run if he headed in my direction. I was fortunate to have been blessed with fast feet. Red still was not able to catch me. I think it angered him because he quit chasing everyone else. He wanted me. He had a lot of patience, especially when I had to collect the eggs from the chicken coop.

The chicken coop was the size of a small shed with a front entrance door that we used and a back door for Red and the chickens. To go in and get the eggs, I would have to run in the front door, close it, and then quickly close off the back door with a piece of plywood. This way Red couldn't get in and attack me. The thought of being alone with him in the chicken coop was most horrifying. He would have free reign at attacking me. I would be stuck without a quick way out. It definitely sent shivers down my spine just thinking about it. These thoughts ran through my head the whole time I was getting the eggs; however, the real challenge was trying to leave the chicken coop without breaking them.

First, I would have to find out where Red was. Second, I had to open up the back door and then quickly get out the front. It took great calculating. I had to sit in the chicken coop many times waiting for Red to get far enough away so I could get out. A few times I had to wait fifteen minutes for my dad or brother to come and help me get out. Red would hear the back door open and run to try to get in. He would enter the back door at the moment I was getting out the front door. I admit that I felt some satisfaction when I would slam the front door in his face. Of course, I would have to run like crazy to get to the house because he would run right out the back door and chase me down. That's when I got the enjoyment of throwing an egg or two at him if he got too close. I always got yelled at for wasting the eggs when my dad would see the broken egg shells on the ground. Yet, it felt so good to waste them on payback for Red.

All things must come to an end. One day in early fall, my dad was out feeding the chickens, ducks, and geese when he felt a sharp pain. He turned to see that it was Red hanging on his leg and about to bite him. In one quick swoop, my dad grabbed Red by the neck, wrapped his other hand around the upper part of Red's neck, and twisted. Red lay limp in his hands. Our months of fear and torture were over.

My dad stood by the patio door with something in his hand. He called for us kids to come outside. He showed us a leg from a chicken with two inch claws. We asked him where he got it. He told us the story of Red attacking him and now he was gone. We were in shock. He couldn't be dead. I looked out at the chickens pecking the remains from the garden. Red wasn't there. I felt sad and relieved. I was glad I wouldn't have to worry about Red attacking me anymore. At the same time, I knew I was going to miss the challenges, the dreaming, the hope, the disappointment, overcoming my fears, and the laughter that accompanied our many excursions with him. He would forever be fixed in my memory. I laugh when I tell

my kids the times we had with Red growing up. I laugh so hard that I cry. I miss ol' Red and the times we had. I will always remember the lessons he taught me. My kitchen is decorated with roosters to have these memories nearby and lingering – just like Red.

September 30, 2003