

'Ole One Eye

Gus eased down into his old rocking chair, which was strategically positioned on his front porch to allow him to survey his neighborhood. On this bright and humid spring afternoon, Gus felt every one of his eighty-four years. His back hurt, his knees hurt, heck, everything hurt. It kind of made a guy mad at the world.

This morning Gus found himself looking down at his boots. Was that his big toe peeking out of the worn leather? He snorted. Gus was of a mind that something you paid over \$50 for should last a lifetime. He couldn't have been wearing these boots more than five or six years.

With a sigh Gus leaned back into his chair, looked up, and studied his surroundings. He was proud of his old farmhouse and the farm ground beyond it. He had been born on this farm, and God willing, he would die here. At one time his family had owned the property as far as the eye could see. Gus had hung on to the land he farmed along with his house. There was a trio of farmhouses where he sat: one was his, one had belonged to his pa, and the third was the oldest and biggest. That one had belonged to his grandparents, who had established this farm and which was where they had raised their eight children (7 daughters and one son, his pa).

Gus found himself thinking back to the old days on the farm when family surrounded him. There were always cousins to play with, always chores to help your parents with, always an aunt or uncle or grandparent to give you a hug. Gus sniffed. Now with new owners in the other houses, he just wanted to be by himself.

After his grandparents and parents had passed on, Gus (a lifelong confirmed bachelor) found taking care of three houses was too much for him and he sold off the other two as acreages. The money came in handy to pay the property taxes and his hired man, but he had no use for the city people he considered to be invaders of his domain.

His attention turned to the houses that now belonged to those invaders. In his grandparents' big house now lived the Uppity family. Their name was really something else that started with a "U", but all Gus could think when he looked over there was that they were too good for their britches. After buying the house they had swarmed in with construction crews and made the place over into some kind of palace, complete with fancy patio and swimming pool. With two teens in the family, there were constant comings and goings, way too much commotion as far as Gus was concerned. It looked like something was set to go on tonight. Mrs. Uppity was running around the place picking up, sweeping up, putting up lights, and just generally getting herself worked up into a tizzy.

Gus turned his attention to the other house, which now belonged to the States family, Virginia and Tex (short for Texas). They thought they were so clever, since they themselves had state names, they named their kids after states, too. They had three young daughters: Georgia, Carolina, and Kentucky. "Ridiculous," Gus grumbled to himself, "Whoever heard of such nonsense?" His given name was August, and his ma's name happened to be May, but you didn't see her naming every one of her kids after a month of the year.

The States family raised chickens. Gus snorted again. Chickens! There never were chickens around when he was young; his grandpa would not have stood for it. Smelly, noisy, pooping everywhere....Gus could still hear his grandpa's complaints. Gus could not tolerate it either. The rooster had a habit of coming over and strutting around his yard. Gus had half a mind to give the thing a boot and send it over to the next county. He settled for regularly chasing it out of his yard. At some point the rooster must have tangled with some barb wire and lost an eye. In the coming weeks the rooster's feathers grew in over it, and the neighborhood began to call the bird 'Ole One Eye.

Today the three young States girls were running around the yard chasing the chickens. 'Ole One Eye stood his ground in the center of it all. Kentucky States, known for having a soft heart, gently petted him while her sisters and the hens ran circles around them. Gus shook his head. Only one thing drove him crazier than those darn chickens.....kids.

Across the way, Roberta Upstead was frazzled. Tonight was prom night for her two teens, one a junior and one a senior. As she usually did on special occasions, she had volunteered to have all the kids and their friends come out to the farm for pictures to be taken in all their prom finery. Roberta took pride in her beautiful yard, patio, and swimming pool. She had been babying her planters full of flowers all spring and they were bright and overflowing in their pots, ready to serve as backgrounds for her photography. The swimming pool water was clear and sparkling in the sun. The patio furniture was strategically arranged for optimum seating.

But she couldn't find her camera. Most people just used their phones these days, but Roberta had a top of the line camera that gave her photos a truly professional look. Everyone was counting on her to take the pictures that would ensure they would forever have memories of this special night.

Roberta looked next door at the States house and frowned. Those three girls (she could never remember their names.....Montana? Dakota? Mississippi?) Could they have been playing around and picked up her camera?

She looked the other way and spied Gus sitting on his porch. She knew Gus had no use for her and her family, and she wouldn't put it past him to pick up and hide her camera just for spite. She sighed and took up the search again.

Kentucky States looked up at the oversized American flag flying in her yard as she petted 'Ole One Eye. Her father was fond of pointing out which state each star stood for, and Kentucky (named after the fifteenth state to join the union) knew exactly where the fifteenth star was on the flag. The breeze made the flag look even more majestic than usual. Kentucky suddenly felt so moved that she sang the Star Spangled Banner to 'Ole One Eye. The rooster's one good eye looked at her and twitched, seemingly in time with the music.

As she finished singing, Kentucky realized her sisters had lost interest in the chickens and had disappeared. The hens took advantage and were rapidly heading toward the open

gate. Not to be left behind, 'Ole One Eye let out a squawk and ran after them, soon taking the lead. Kentucky leapt to her feet and chased behind.

Roberta had searched everywhere she could think of and still no camera. She grew increasingly frantic as the time neared for the prom-goers to start arriving. Roberta scanned the list of pictures she hoped to take: the senior class, the junior class, the kids with their dates, the kids with their best friends, and the group shots she was famous for—the kids who had gone to preschool together, the band kids, the football team, the speech team, etc. Sometimes the kids grew frustrated with her as the picture-taking went on and on, especially when they had to re-do everything when invariably somebody showed up late, but boy were they happy when they got all their photos back. Roberta would never admit it aloud, but there was nothing that made her happier than to see all those kids oohing and aahing over her hard work.

She considered: should she go over to the neighbors and ask if they had seen the camera? One look at Gus' grumpy face and those girls surrounded by chickens helped her quickly decide to stay put.

And now the cars had started to arrive. Fancy dresses of every color of the rainbow shimmered in the sunlight; the boys tugged at their ties, at their jacket sleeves, at the bottoms of their pant legs trying to get comfortable in their formal wear. They looked expectantly at her, waiting for her directions on where to line up. Roberta reluctantly pulled out her phone to use instead of her good camera, and was horrified to see, while she was preoccupied with getting everything ready, that she had forgotten to charge the battery.

Seeing that her mom was preoccupied looking at her phone, Roberta's daughter began to organize the senior class for a photo. Roberta began to head over to her daughter to borrow her phone, when out of the corner of her eye she saw a whirl of motion coming her way. Leading the pack was that strange rooster, closely followed by chicken after chicken after chicken, with the youngest States girl right behind. The birds jumped into and out of her flower pots, managing to upend several of them. Squawking and squeaking they ran and flew into the prom-goers, causing the girls to shriek as they stumbled in their high heels and their fancy hair-dos began to come undone.

Looking to get away from all the legs and swishing skirts, 'Ole One Eye and the rest of the chickens headed toward the pool. Despite the efforts of Kentucky States to shoo them elsewhere, they jumped right in.

Kentucky became frantic. She *loved* her chickens. Someone had to save them!

Roberta's son, who happened to be captain of the swim team, ordered his fellow teammates into action. Kicking off their shiny black shoes and shrugging off their tuxedo jackets, they jumped into the pool.

Georgia and Carolina States had rounded the corner of their house as they played tag and saw the commotion. They called for their parents, and the family headed for the pool.

Gus, in a rare burst of neighborliness, took off for his barn and the long-handled fishing nets he kept there. Unable to move very fast, he nevertheless headed for the big house with his

arms full. Seeing him struggle, Tex States ran over and took the nets from him and Virginia took his arm to help him make his way.

Working together, the neighbors and the prom-goers managed to safely empty the pool of the birds. Ignoring the mess the chickens made on their fancy dresses, the junior and senior girls each carried a chicken back to the States' chicken coop. For the first time the neighbors from all three houses were face to face. The States parents apologized profusely for the mess the chickens had caused. Gus was feeling pretty puffed up about the fact his nets had saved the day and actually smiled. Roberta, resigned to the fact that the evening had become a disaster, smiled back. Everyone shook hands and agreed they needed to get together for a neighborhood barbecue soon.

Meanwhile, over at the coop Georgia, Carolina, and Kentucky were counting chickens. Each girl counted, and each girl came up one chicken short. "It's 'Ole One Eye!", said Kentucky solemnly, "He's missing!"

'Ole One Eye wasn't far. He had stopped just short of jumping in the pool with the others and had half hopped, half flew up to a ledge on the patio. The ledge was shaded by an overhanging tree branch, and 'Ole One Eye nestled in to escape all the yelling and screaming that was going on.

As he settled back onto the ledge, 'Ole One Eye bumped into a small rectangular object. He jumped up on it and discovered to his delight that the object had a button that would click and blink light when he would jump on it. 'Ole One Eye occupied himself for a long time jumping up and down. When at last he had tired of jumping up and down, he made his way back to his house and chicken coop.

Three days later Roberta was still trying to get her outdoor space back in order. She lifted the overhanging tree branch by the pool and prepared to trim it. As she set her trimmer down on the ledge, she spied a glint of something black and silver. She pushed the branch farther back, and there on the ledge sat her camera. Upon closer inspection she noted the film had all been used. Had one of the children found her camera, taken photos, and laid the camera here?

Roberta took the film to be developed. She picked up the printed photos early one evening along with hamburgers and potato salad for that night's neighborhood barbecue. Once she got home she was so busy setting up for the get-together that the packet of photos slipped her mind.

Over dessert the neighbors laughed about the events of prom night. "The only bad thing", said Roberta ruefully, "is that we don't have any good prom night pictures." The thought reminded her of the envelope of photos she had picked up. Curiosity got the best of her and she went into the kitchen to get it.

Settling back into her lawn chair, Roberta began to look through the photos. There was the senior class her daughter had lined up. And there was the swim team, all together, and all preparing to rescue the chickens from the pool. There was a sweet picture of Georgia, Carolina, and Kentucky; all happy once the chickens had been rescued. And yet another photo showed the neighbors all smiling and shaking hands.

Showing the pictures to the others, she asked “How in the world.....” As if in answer to her question, a loud crow came from next door. Kentucky and Gus looked up from their ice cream and looked at one another. “Yup”, said Gus, “It’s that darn fool rooster at it again.”

In his yard, ‘Ole One Eye looked with satisfaction at the group talking and laughing next door. He flapped his wings and crowed again. If anyone could have seen him at that moment, they would have sworn his beak curled into a smile.