

CHICKEN FOOT FARM



ANNE ESTEVIS

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*Chicken Foot Farm is dedicated to Francisco, a good
husband and a trusted critic, who inspires me
to do something with my stories other
than just talk about them.*

I



Little Chicken Feet

Chicken Foot Farm was the nickname given to our land after an incident happened one stormy day when I was about seven years old. It occurred at the end of summer when the days are usually humid and hot in deep South Texas. I had climbed up into the fresno tree to see if there were any eggs in a grackle's nest. My mother was nearby in the large chicken yard. I sat in the tree and watched her as she tended to her chickens. She was tall and slender with long black hair that she wore pulled back in a bun. Her homemade dresses were usually kept covered with aprons in which she always tucked dainty handkerchiefs edged in lace that she had made herself.

Mamá looked up at me and beckoned for me to come down. "Alejandro, bring a bucket and help me gather my *pollitos*. There's a wicked-looking storm coming, and I don't want the chicks to drown."

Mamá gave her poultry a lot of attention and in return we always had chickens and eggs to eat. When she sold eggs and chickens, she hid the money in a lard can that she kept on top of her chifforobe. We all knew it was there.

"*Mi'jo*, hurry!" Mamá was struggling with her apron that was sagging from the weight of the chicks that she had already collected.

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I knew what needed to be done because I had helped her on a number of stormy occasions to gather the tiny little chickens and place them in the big galvanized tub in the bathhouse. Mamá always placed a piece of old chenille bedspread in the bottom of the tub to keep the chicks comfortable until it was safe to put them back out on the ground.

Just as the wind began to whip the dust across the family compound, I jumped to the ground and grabbed one of several buckets that sat by the bathhouse door. I hurried to where Mamá was gathering chicks. A low rumbling caused me to shiver. I was afraid of the lightning that usually follows thunder, so I hurried to carry out my task.

I had gathered several chicks into the bucket when I saw Tía Inocencia rushing toward me. My aunt was married to my father's brother Erasmo, and they lived in a little house not far from ours. Tía Inocencia's ill-fitting shoes made a flip-flopping sound as she moved them quickly along the ground.

"Leave my chickens alone!" she screamed as she picked up one of the chicks I had already captured. "Where are you taking these chicks? Why are you stealing them?" She looked at me really mean-like, and I saw her bottom lip quiver.

Alarmed, I turned toward Mamá.

"Look, Inocencia, there's a storm coming," Mamá calmly said. She walked over to stand just a few inches in front of Tía Inocencia and looked sternly down at the short robust woman. "We need to protect all of the chicks."

"Oh, no, Ramona, you just want the biggest and best ones for yourself." Tía Inocencia grabbed at the batch of chicks huddled in Mamá's apron. Her shoes flipped and flopped, and one fell off.

"Believe me, Inocencia. I know my chicks from yours. I don't want yours at all. I just want to protect our investment," Mamá said.

“Well, I don’t believe you!” Tía Inocencia yelled, the spit-tle flying out of her mouth.

Thunder roared, and I saw a streak of lightening flash across a darkening southeastern sky. A few drops of rain formed muddy dollops on the dusty ground around us. Mamá said nothing but bent down and released the chicks from her apron. She turned and went quickly into our house. I started to follow her, but she came right back out with her hand in her apron pocket. She immediately returned to where Tía Inocencia was attempting to tighten the strap of her floppy shoe.

Mamá reached down and swooped up a fluffy yellow chick. “This one is mine.”

“It is not!” said Tía Inocencia. “It’s mine! Here’s one of yours!” She handed Mamá a skinny, scruffy-looking chick. “And this one’s yours, and that one’s yours.” Tía Inocencia indicated by pointing with pursed lips and a jutting chin to several other rather poor-looking little *pollitos*.

“And you’re sure this one is mine?” Mamá held out the scruffy chick that Tía Inocencia had given her.

Tía Inocencia slightly smiled. “Oh, yes. That one is definitely yours.”

Mamá held the chick against her breast and splayed its left foot between her thumb and index finger. With her free hand she pulled a pair of small scissors from her apron pocket and quickly cut off the end of the chick’s shortest toe. The chick let out a string of staccato peeps, and Mamá pressed tightly on the toe stump to suppress the bleeding.

“¡Válgame Dios! Ramona, what are you doing?” Tía Inocencia asked with a startled look on her face.

Mamá stood erect and looked squarely at Tía Inocencia. “I’m marking my chicks.”

Tía Inocencia waited a few seconds before responding. “How brutal you are!” She pushed back two strands of oily hair

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that had fallen over her face and frowned at Mamá. “And how do I know you won’t cheat me? How do I know you won’t cut the toes off of my chicks, too? Can you please tell me that?”

“*Por que yo soy Martínez.* That’s why,” Mamá responded and put the peeping chick in my bucket. “*Yo soy Martínez.*”

I really didn’t know what Mamá meant by telling people that she was a Martínez. She usually said that when she seemed angry or hurt. She didn’t need to say it because we all knew that indeed she was a Martínez. After all, she was Marcos Martínez’s oldest daughter.

Tía Inocencia placed her hands on her hips. “Ramona, give me those scissors and let me mark my chicks. It’s better to leave yours unmarked. That way I’ll know for sure you’re not cheating me.”

“Absolutely not,” Mamá answered and shook the scissors in Tía Inocencia’s face. “The deed has already begun. I’ve marked my first chick. You said it was *my* chick. Now show me the rest of my *pollitos*, and I’ll mark them too.”

And so, as the rain began to fall on the compound, Tía Inocencia gathered all of the skinny and scruffy chicks and brought them to my mother who unabashedly cut off the ends of the shortest toes of their left feet. I think Tía Inocencia told all of the family members, and even some of the neighbors, what Mamá had done to the chicks’ toes. She also complained that Mamá was cheating her, so she had Tío Erasmo build her a separate poultry yard for her chickens. It wasn’t long after that incident that Mamá’s skinny, scruffy chicks became handsome pullets. Tía Inocencia’s chicks didn’t do as well, and they soon became skinny and sick-looking pullets. Abuela Luciana said that someone had put a hex, like the evil eye, on Tía Inocencia’s chickens. Abuelo Angel said that Tía Inocencia didn’t know how to raise poultry and shouldn’t have separated

her chickens from Mamá's. My grandparents usually didn't agree on the evil eye issue.

Soon after that someone jokingly called our place Chicken Foot Farm, and the name stuck. Whenever any of us sold or killed a chicken, we always checked to see if it was missing the end of its little toe on the left foot. Mamá's chicken business thrived, and the lard can on top of the chifforobe always held money. Tía Inocencia seemed to lose interest in the endeavor. In time, all of the chickens on our farm were missing part of their little toes on their left feet.