How to Deal with an Aggressive Rooster

Kill the chicken. Know that you have to kill the chicken. Hold it over the garbage can full of water, the sea of its death, and don’t look in its eyes. Maybe catch Hank’s eyes accidentally (don’t call him Hank, he’s the chicken, not even the chicken, just a chicken) and try to ignore the storm of guilt billowing in your stomach.

Suddenly realize what you’re about to do and turn away from the garbage can of water. Clutch Hank to your chest while your heart races. Remember your real-life human child and that you did not give birth to this chicken and are not its mother. Remember the way Charlie, your real-life human child, screamed so loud you heard him from your office. Remember the way you flew from the house, Peter right behind you. Remember the fear you felt upon seeing the blood streaming down Charlie’s arm. Remember the way Peter had to hold and console you for hours after Charlie went to sleep, arm stitched closed.

“We did this,” you cry after it happens, face buried in Peter’s neck. “We should have never bought a rooster.”

Peter murmurs ‘it’s going to be okay’ and ‘it isn’t your fault’ over and over. Let him convince you that those things are true. Charlie is resting in his bed, safe from the monster outside, but you are still scared.

“Hank was probably just scared,” Peter says. “Charlie must have spooked him. It was an accident.”

Do not believe this one entirely. Be uncomfortable with the suggestion that your child has done something wrong. Feel a stronger sense of protection than you ever have in motherhood. Know, deep in your heart, that you have to kill the chicken.
Wait three days to share this information with your husband. He doesn’t want to kill Hank. Although he’s never said this, know that he thinks it was Charlie’s fault. Begin to resent him for this. Begin thinking of ways to tell him that Hank has to die.

Tell him this over breakfast: “We have to kill Hank.”

Peter looks at you like you’ve just suggested you take a small group of children out back and execute them. His fork hovers over his plate, the impaled piece of sausage hanging off of it. His jaw has dropped open. The sun comes in through the blinds, leaving slants of light across his cheek. Think that he looks straight out of a Hitchcock movie where you’re the villain.

Spare a glance at the coop in the backyard, Hank’s home. It sits and taunts you. Do not feel deterred by its foreboding presence.

“We can’t kill Hank, Tara,” he says. “We can,” he steals a look at the coop beyond the window, “we can tame him. We don’t need to kill him.”

Feel like he is trying to sympathize with a beast. Think that Hank would kill Charlie, given the chance. Even though Charlie is not allowed in the backyard anymore, fear that the rooster will find a way to finish the job.

Keep eating your cereal. Appear unbothered by the idea. Give the impression that you firmly believe this is the only choice.

“It bit Charlie,” is your explanation. Believe that it is reason enough. “I have to take care of it.”

Peter drops his fork onto his plate. He stands from the table, which makes him appear to be larger than he really is. Hold your ground in the face of his anger.

“We are not killing our rooster,” he says. Know that he is using his ‘end of discussion’ voice that he uses to deny your child what he wants.
“Not we,” you say and stand to meet Peter’s eyes, “I am killing my rooster.”

That night, before going to bed, open the drawer in your nightstand. Take out the picture of a three-year-old girl and a seven-year-old Charlie. Feel a tightness in your chest when you realize that, when you picture the girl in your head, you had been forgetting the freckle above her left eye. Study the way her blond curls are pulled up into two pigtails. Remember that morning, how much she cried as you wrapped the elastic hair tie around and around her hair. Wish that you hadn’t made her wear the pigtails. Wish that you hadn’t made her cry.

Flip the picture over. Charlie and Lily, ‘19. Know that the little girl never turns four. Remember that she wanted a Barbie dreamhouse for her fourth birthday. Remember the conversation you had with Peter about how, even though they were expensive, you both wanted her to have one. Remember the excitement of buying it along with a roll of wrapping paper with princess crowns on it. Remember picturing her smile when she opened the box. Remember smashing it with a baseball bat after the accident. Remember the screaming, the crying. Remember. Remember. Remember.

Hear the door open. Shove the picture back in the drawer. Strive to avoid talking about your daughter who used to exist. Kiss your husband goodnight, a little longer than usual. When you close your eyes, see the blood dripping from Charlie’s arm as he screams. See the blood pouring from Lily’s head as she lies on the pavement. See the two of them mix together. See them as one person, one set of precious little baby teeth, one pair of ocean blue eyes just like yours.
Turn over in bed. Inch closer to your sleeping husband. Wonder if he sometimes wishes it was Charlie who was hit by that car. The one that wasn’t his. Lily had your eyes, but his curly blond hair. She was the perfect mix of the two of you.

Wonder if maybe that’s why he’s blaming Charlie for Hank’s violent attack. Because Charlie is not his blood. Because he didn’t know you when Charlie was born. Because, in every conversation you’ve ever had about your relationship, Charlie has been a part of it. Because Charlie is a living reminder that you loved your son before met your husband.

Before you drift to sleep, realize that you would do anything to protect the child you can still hold. Anything.

As you sleep, dream. Dream of the red 2014 Toyota pickup truck that took your daughter from you. Dream that it is a giant chicken. Dream that, with one foot, it steps on your perfect little Lily while, with the other, it crushes your beautiful Charlie.

Dream of all the ways to kill a chicken. Dream of decapitation, asphyxiation, loss of blood, gunshots, smoke inhalation, knife wounds. Dream of blood pouring out of Hank, spurting with each heartbeat. Dream of your high school anatomy teacher explaining to you how arteries work.

Dream of how you hate blood. How it makes you faint. Wake up and feel nauseated from the memory of it all over your hands.

Get up in the morning with a renewed desire to execute your chicken without trial. Refuse to care whether or not your husband agrees.
Walk down the hall to Charlie’s bedroom. Pause outside the white wooden door. Hate the fact that you have to disturb him from his slumber. Creep slowly inside the room, tiptoeing, past the threshold. Soft light emanates from the night light in the corner—remember him saying that he never used it anymore. Wonder if he is embarrassed, and if that is why he lied to you. Sit on the plush comforter, patterned to look like a robot’s circuit board. Gaze upon your child, so still in sleep that he looks like he may be dead in his racecar pajamas.

Press a kiss to your sleeping child’s forehead, then whisper: “Good morning, sweetheart.”

Watch him slowly open his eyes, sleep still fogging in front of them. Wait for him to wake fully, realize what’s going on. “Hi, Mommy.”

Let the sound of those words bring a certain level of warmth into your heart. Think that you want to hear it every day, for the rest of your life. Brush a strand of brown hair from his face. Take his arm into your lap. Lift the gauze tape from his skin and ignore the way he winces at the sting. Peek at the stitches keeping his wound together. Forget what the doctor told you to look for but feel the maternal sense that everything is fine.

Tell Charlie he is being so brave. Think about how you said that to Lily, in the ambulance.

Ask: “Are you scared of Hank, now?”

Try to guess his answer before he says it. Look at the way his eyelids close slowly, rest for a moment, reopen. Think that he must be afraid to tell you what he really means.

“No,” he says, “it was an accident.”

Accident. Recall the way your husband used the same word, the day that it happened.

“Did Peter tell you it was an accident?”
Charlie shakes his head. The lock you brushed off his forehead falls into his eyes. “No. Is Dad going to make pancakes?”

Hope with everything that you have that your husband is downstairs making pancakes.

Walk downstairs with the conviction that Charlie has lied to you because he is embarrassed. Think of the night light, of how he told you he was too old for that stuff. Think of how the gentle yellow light filled up the room.

Go out to the coop, like you do every morning, ready to collect the eggs from your hens. Look forward to holding your favorite hen, Michelle. She was your first, when you initially got the coop for the backyard. You just wanted fresh eggs for breakfast.

Droplets of dew rest on the tops of the blades of grass in outside your house. As you step barefoot toward the coop, they wet the bottoms of your feet. It is foggy today. Squint through it to see the coop in the distance.

Nearly jump when Peter emerges from the haze. He is carrying a wire basket full of eggs. Think, *He doesn’t do this. This goes against our routine.*

“Morning,” he says and kisses the top of your head. “I thought I’d go ahead and collect the eggs today. Let you sleep in a little.”

Be distrustful of this, immediately. Peter knows that you wake at the same time every morning, for all the years you have been married. He knows that you wake up Charlie at the same time every morning. If he wanted you to sleep in, why didn’t he wake up Charlie?

Remember that Charlie wants pancakes. Feel a knot of anger begin to twist in your gut, brought on by this favor.
Scramble to prepare pancakes as quickly as your body will move you. Throw together flour, milk, fresh eggs from the wire basket Peter carries inside. Aim for perfectly circular puddles of batter on the griddle, but create ugly, misshapen messes. Move too fast and swipe the tips of your knuckles across the hot surface, giving birth to red burned welts on three of them. Flip some of the pancakes too soon, and others too late. Stack a pancake that is blackened on one side and white on the other on top of a pancake that is so undercooked it is falling apart at the center.

When you finish, Charlie is waiting impatiently at the table. Set the plate of pancake rubble in front of him.

“Moooom,” he whines and lifts one of the fully blackened pancakes from the plate, “why did you make pancakes?”

Peter snorts from his place on the couch. “How bad are they?” he asks, then approaches the scene of the crime. He looks down at the plate on the table and frowns.

Feel upset that you have disappointed your child but infuriated that your husband doubts your pancake-making ability. Watch as Charlie attempts to eat a hardened pancake, then moves on to one that is still mostly batter. Peter pours himself a bowl of cereal.

Note the time. The bus will arrive soon.

Move to put on your shoes, then say: “Charlie, honey, it’s time to go.”

Charlie swallows a bit of pancake that he has drowned in syrup. “I wanna walk by myself.”

Peter looks to you. This is an argument you’ve had before. The bus stop is just at the end of your driveway, but it is a long and winding gravel path that is surrounded entirely by trees on both sides. Do not feel ready to let Charlie make that walk alone.
“Not today, honey.”

“Tara?” Peter says abruptly. There is an edge of anger evident in his voice. Feel upset that he is letting it show in front of Charlie. “Can we talk in the other room?”

Follow your husband into the laundry room. This is the place where you’ve always had your adult talks away from your children. Smushed between the washing machine and the wall, you have had almost every argument with your husband in this tiny space. Fall into the routine of fighting with Peter: you next to the washer and under the shelf that holds your neglected beach towels, and him perpendicular to you, leaning against the dryer with arms crossed. There is a redness to his cheeks that creeps up to his temples. This is the signal that he is angry.

Pull the weak strings that make your defense together and begin: “The driveway is—”

“Stop it,” Peter snaps, interrupting you. Feel shocked. He usually hears you out, at the very least. Recognize this is as new behavior. “You need to stop fucking babying him.”

Feel that this has come out of nowhere. Feel your chest tighten, your heart begin to beat faster. Have you ever seen your husband so angry?

Try to think of a way to protect your innocence here. Ask: “What are you talking about?”

He sharpens his eyes. “He can walk a couple hundred feet to the end of the driveway. He’s nine, Tara.”

Cross your arms over your chest. Think of when you let your child out sight and he ended up crying and bleeding. Think of the reddened skin of Charlie’s arm, held together by a row of black sutures. “What if he fell and burst open his stitches?”

Peter steps forward, jabbing a finger to your chest. Feel like it might burn a hole through your ribcage and poke right into your heart. His breath is hot on your face. “You need to give this fucking chicken thing a rest.”
Take a step back, so your back presses against the wall. Though you did this yourself, feel like you have been pushed. “That ‘fucking chicken,’” use your best impression of Peter’s voice: droning, slow, “bit our child, Peter.”

Peter groans, briefly presses his palms into his eyes. “Charlie antagonizes Hank, you realize that, right? He chases him around the yard and throws rocks at him. Charlie needed to learn to cut that shit out.”

Let your mouth hang open. There it is, laid out for you: Peter believes this was Charlie’s fault. Venture to think that he even wanted this to happen. Look in his burning green eyes and think you may never look at him the same. Know that you will always remember that he wished harm upon your child.

Lose control over the words coming out of your mouth. Bring up the one thing you promised yourself you never would. “Lily—”

Peter moves impossibly fast, grabbing your shoulders and pressing you hard against the wall. Shut your mouth as he grips into your flesh. Feel every finger tightening around you as he shakes you ever so slightly. “This,” he seethes, “is not about Lily.”

Open your mouth to find some sort of way that it is but be cut off by your husband.

“I thought we were going to be able to have a life,” Peter says, shaking his head. He releases you and steps away. Think that he seems unable to look you in the eyes. “They all told me that we would be able to keep living, that we would be a family again. But I can’t do this, Tara. You’ve taken your fucked-up motherly instinct so far that you want to kill our rooster for no goddamn reason.”
Be speechless. Think that he is trying to tell you to get over it. Never was that something you considered, getting over your dead daughter. Since it happened, know that was never going to happen. Know that everything you have done following that day has been your new normal.

Hear the door shut. Feel your heart plummet into your stomach, then drop down into your toes. Push Peter into the dryer and squeeze past him. Run to the kitchen first, to see the empty table and missing backpack. Move to go rip the front door open but be pulled back by some unknown force. Turn to see your husband pulling on your forearm, preventing you from chasing after your child.

Struggle against his grip with as much force as your body can muster. “Let me go!”

“He’s going to the bus stop,” Peter says, eerily calm, “because it’s time for him to go to school.” Pull again but fail to get free. “Do not go after him, Tara.”

Stare your husband down with a death glare. Think that you might be able to scare him into letting you go with just your gaze. Fail at this. Snap your head in the direction of the clock hanging on the wall. 7:17. The bus pulls away at 7:15. Peter follows your gaze, realizes the bus will be gone, then releases you.

“The school will call if he doesn’t show up,” Peter says, sounding defeated. He seems worn. “But I need you to trust that he did.”

Say nothing. Think you might say nothing to Peter ever again.

He takes your face into your hands. He seems relaxed, now, though you are a burning sun of rage.

“I’m going to work, now, okay?” he says. “Call me later. I love you.”
Stand in place as Peter gathers his things. Though he spares uncomfortable looks at you, remain perfectly still. Watch as he puts on his shoes, gets his briefcase, walks out the door. Wait until you hear the sound of his car over gravel before you move again.

Once you begin moving, do so quickly. March to the backyard and toward the coop. Find Hank roaming outside, pecking at feed scattered on the ground. Wonder if he is enjoying his final meal.

Think of how Hank should die. The first option is decapitation. Fast, simple, guaranteed quick and painless death. Feel your stomach churn at the thought of blood gushing from the rooster’s neck. Realize the amount of cleanup. Discard this idea.

Bloodless. Think bloodless. Turn toward your house, see the hose spicket coming out of the wall. Pull the garbage can around from the side of the house toward the hose. Kick it to its side, let the trash bags spill out. The last thing Hank will smell is rot.

Drop the hose into the trash can and turn it all the way on. Walk, practically run, back to the coop. Approach Hank from behind, slowly. Move so slowly that the adrenaline makes your hands tremble. Take Hank by the neck and bring him into your arms. He panics at first, then relaxes. He is used to you carrying him. He knows not what comes next.

Watch the garbage can fill with Hank in your arms. Fear that, if you risk a hand to turn off the hose, you will lose your grip on the chicken. Do it with your foot, instead.

Hold the chicken over the water. Don’t look in its eyes. Feel the guilt. Turn away and clutch the chicken to your chest. Feel your heart beating hard against your ribs as they press into the chicken’s feathers, like it is trying to escape your body and sink into his.

Know that you have come too far now. Imagine the chicken biting Charlie, again and again, until his flesh is nothing but bite marks and blood and he is slowly dying in your
backyard. Imagine having to bury him next to his sister. Stand up straight. Desire vengeance.

Turn back to the garbage can. Hold the chicken over it. Release.

   Watch it panic. Struggle. Let out one final cluck. Then sink.

   Lean over the garbage can. Watch it die.