

Chicks

By Jackie Shannon Hollis

In 1956 in the small farm town of Springs it wasn't right to make a big production out of a wedding that had to be fast. People knew what a fast wedding meant and, though they wouldn't approve of the reason, they'd appreciate that it was taken care of quietly and decently. The wedding between Frank Cross and Lydia Sawyer was a fast one. Up to the Justice of the Peace at eleven on a Saturday morning in March and a small luncheon after, at the hotel restaurant.

The groom's mother, Kitty Cross, took charge of the arrangements. She helped Frank buy a new suit at Easton's Dry Goods store. It was deep blue, an eighteen ounce wool serge that would serve for the wedding as well as a funeral or a baptism or other event that called for a suit. Kitty ordered a bouquet of flowers from Mrs. Lawson who ran a special occasions flower business out of the back porch she'd enclosed for just that purpose. The flowers were for Lydia to hold during the ceremony and to dry and keep for a memory. A bouquet of roses dries well if it's hung upside down in a dark room. The

roses were a dusty pink. After a summer in the cellar, that bouquet would still be lovely, though in a different way than it was on the wedding day.

Kitty made a reservation at the hotel for Lydia's older sister and her husband. The room she chose had a sitting area where cots could be set up for Lydia's two younger sisters. The older sister wasn't much help but perhaps she felt she'd done more than her fair share over the last three years. According to Lydia, the sister and her husband had taken all three girls in after their parents died; much more could not be expected.

They did not use the reservation for the night at the hotel. "We have to get back to the city," the older sister said, as if that explained everything. It seemed to Kitty Cross that the woman was brushing her hands together, like she was getting rid of stray crumbs, glad to be done with the burden of Lydia. One down and two to go, never mind the circumstances.

After a honeymoon at the ocean, paid for by Frank's parents, the young couple settled into Frank's bedroom at one end of the upstairs of the Cross family farmhouse. While Frank and Lydia were at the ocean, Kitty changed the bedroom from a boy's room into something suitable for a married couple. The twin bed was changed out for a double and Kitty put the Wedding Ring quilt on it. She'd made that quilt years ago, one of her first efforts and a fine one if she did say so herself. Kitty boxed up all Frank's trophies and ribbons from sports and the county fair and moved the box up to the attic. She had Herb and the hired hand, Clyde, move in the empty dresser that matched the double bed. She cleared out room in the closet. There was a small vanity that went with the bedroom set and Kitty moved that in too. She put one of her tatted lace runners on it and finished it

off with the silver brush and mirror set that had belonged to Herb's mother. She placed a small bouquet of daffodils, just come to bloom in her garden, on top of the dresser.

A few nights after the couple came home, Herb and Kitty Cross were in their room at the other end of the upstairs. Kitty Cross got in bed next to her husband and pulled the covers up to her chin. "That girl doesn't know a thing about a thing." She tapped the bottom of her foot on the top of Herb's. "Are you awake?"

"I'm awake," Herb said.

"Whew, the weather has taken a turn to cold. My nose is an icicle." Kitty pulled the covers up over her nose, which was much broader than an icicle would have been, and then she put the covers back down to her chin so Herb could hear her. "She's a city girl sure enough. Doesn't know how to cook a thing. Nothing about growing a garden or putting up vegetables." Kitty turned to her side and put the bottoms of her feet on Herb's leg. "My feet are ice blocks. Maybe we should think about moving our bedroom downstairs. It'd be warmer and give the kids more privacy."

Herb breathed some deep breaths and Kitty thought maybe he was asleep but she went on anyway. "She's does sew though. A pretty fine stitch too." Talking was a distraction from the cold and would cover up any noises that might make their way from the other end of the upstairs down to this end. "She was fifteen when her parent's died. I don't understand why her mother never taught her a thing. Other than the sewing." Kitty's feet were getting warm, so she moved them away from Herb. "I've got my work cut out for me."

Herb's deep breath's were replaced by one long slow snore. And then another.

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At the other end of the upstairs, Frank and Lydia Cross were spooned up so tight there was no question of shivers. They talked, as they did each night, of how nice it was to be together this way. Frank started to doze off with his hand on the place on Lydia's stomach where he figured his future son was.

"Mother Cross doesn't like me so much." Lydia's breath was warm on Frank's arm.

Frank rolled onto his back but kept his arm out for Lydia to rest her head on. Lydia turned in to him and found the right place on his shoulder. "No," Frank said. "It isn't that she doesn't like you, this has all been maybe a little fast and she just has to get to know you." The ceiling had tiles that were made out of something that was firm and soft at the same time. "Just help around here. Mother will teach you." The tiles were off-white, almost yellow now. Even in the dim light, Frank knew there were eighteen full tiles and six partials and that two of them were joined together by a brown-edged stain, in the shape of a pistol, where there had been a leak.

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On a Tuesday in April, Kitty took her new daughter-in-law into town with her to pick up the chicks. She pulled the car into one of the diagonal spaces in front of the post office and glanced over at the girl. Lydia's profile was soft curves: a round forehead, a small round tip of nose, full pink lips, and a soft arc of chin. That face was probably what had drawn Frank to Lydia, that and the curvy round figure that she showed off in clothes that were the latest style but were of her own making. Like any young man, a pretty figure would be all it took to get Frank's mind off the studies he was supposed to be doing in the city and on to Lydia Sawyer working at a café restaurant near the campus.

Well, the girl better start some new stitching since what she had was already pulling at her waist. Kitty hoped Herb would agree on an outing to Washton on Saturday. All four of them could go, Kitty and Herb, Lydia and Frank. She and Lydia could go to the fabric store there and maybe they could all take in a movie at the new drive-in theater she'd heard about from her friend Bee Hall.

Kitty left the car running and the heat on, for when they brought the chicks out. She opened the car door, turned sideways in the seat and used the door handle to pull herself up. She'd turned fifty a few months earlier and her bones were feeling it. She'd begun to understand what old Wes Miller meant when she saw him at church. He repeated the same thing every time she asked how he was feeling. "Old father time is a nippin' and a snappin' at my butt." Of course Wes Miller was 92 years old, so he knew what he was talking about.

"You come in with me and help with the crates," Kitty said. She got steady and straightened her dress over her round hips, then ran her hands up over her short grey curls. Kitty Cross had a strong jaw and chin and she'd learned to hold it proud. After all these years, she didn't even have to think about it. Her chin led the way to the post office and Lydia Sawyer Cross followed.

The bell over the post office door settled down and that's when they heard the chick peeps. The girl knew nothing about living on a farm and these chicks would be a good way to get her started. Who wouldn't fall in love with a crate of new-hatched chicks? They came twenty-five to a crate. Kitty ordered two crates a month ago, after old age and coyotes had whittled her brood down to just three laying hens in the coop and a handful of fryers in the deep freeze. She missed the pin money she got from selling the

extra eggs and fryers. She did all of the work with the chickens, except for a big clean out of the coop now and then that Clyde took care of. Herb let her keep the money to spend on herself, even though the cost of the feed and straw came from the farm budget.

Millie Vickers poked her head around the opening to the inner workings of the post office, where the peeps were coming from. Millie was a local girl. Her father had moved to Springs and set up a pharmacy before Millie was born. “Oh good,” Millie said. “Your chicks just got in. They’re over by the heat there.” She pointed back behind her. “All that peeping just makes me want to giggle.” Millie was in her forties. She’d never married, not for lack of wanting, more for a lack of looks and the kind of good sense that a man would want in a wife.

“Millie.” Kitty stepped in before Millie went off on one of her talking jags. “This is my new daughter-in-law, Lydia.” Proper introductions were important and Kitty always followed the rules: name and some personal information. “Lydia, this is Millie Vickers, she and Clark Myers run the post office.” Clark Myers was further back in the inner workings and he nodded their way. Clark Myers was a professional. He was also an attractive man with thick black hair and slim features. When he sorted the mail he put it directly into the proper slots. However, Kitty had seen how Millie checked over every piece of mail before she slotted it. Kitty would need to warn Lydia, though there was no reason for the girl to have anything that needed to be kept secret. Not now.

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Lydia was glad to get back in the car and out from under the eyes of Millie Vickers. Millie had talked on and on and took forever to bring the two crates of chicks up to the counter. Her eyes kept coming back to Lydia, pausing at the place where Lydia’s

blue dress was snug at the waist, where she'd had to suck way in to get it zipped this morning. Lydia didn't know that Millie's eyes were eyes of envy, not judgment. Next to a husband, a child was what Millie wanted most in life and it was fast occurring to her she might not have either.

What Lydia did know was that the waist of her dress was tight and the chicks were peeping up a storm and it was too warm in the car. At least she never had the sickness that Sylvie, one of the girls she'd worked with at the café, had told her about. Sylvie had tried to talk Lydia into getting rid of the baby. "You're just ending your life if you marry that boy and go out to his old farm." Sylvie had waved a hand in the air. "Say good-bye to the city." She waved the other hand. "Say good-bye to the good life." She waved both hands at the same time. "Say goodbye to your freedom, and your looks and that figure and a good night's sleep." But Lydia had been hopeful about her new life. She get out of the café where almost all the money she earned went back to her sister, to help with expenses. If it wasn't for the baby, Lydia might have to keep on at the café, keep living with her sister and her husband, keep having to share a small bedroom with her two little sisters. Lydia was happy to say goodbye to all that.

The chicks peeped from the back seat of the car. "They're upset," Mother Cross drove with both hands wrapped tight around the steering wheel and her back perched up straight. "If they're all peeping then something's wrong." She glanced into the back seat, "Of course all this noise is just from the traveling they've done."

Mother Cross had talked to Lydia a few days ago about the chicks. "I'm sure your mother didn't have chickens there in the city." Mother Cross was kneading bread dough

on the lower counter and Lydia was next to her with her own circle of dough to knead. There was the musky smell of yeast in the room and a fine mist of flour dust in the air.

Mother Cross made bread on Mondays and Thursdays. She did laundry on Tuesdays, made butter and cottage cheese and soured cream on Fridays, tended the garden on Wednesday and Saturday mornings. She cleaned the house every day, in some form or another, with mopping on Mondays and Thursdays (after the bread), dusting on Fridays and Tuesdays (after the butter; before the laundry), new bedding on Wednesdays (after the garden). Every day Mother Cross swept all the floors, the front porch and the back stoop; she prepared three full meals for the men, wiped down the bathroom, took care of the chickens and did all the other general business of being a farmer's wife.

One night, not long before this, Lydia had complained to Frank about having to go to bed so early and getting up in the mornings when it was still dark. "There's always so much to do," she'd said. They were in their bed and, though Lydia was cuddled up next to Frank, it would be the first night since they got married that they didn't join together in their love.

Frank was silent after Lydia made her complaint. He hadn't heard anything like this from her before and he needed to think it over. After his moments of pause, Frank made his voice stern, like he'd heard his father do with his mother. "Everything inside and everything outside has a schedule. That's what makes the difference between a farm that works and makes money and one that doesn't." Frank didn't have much to say after that, he just drifted to the deep sighs of sleep. He was a more tired man on the farm than he'd been in the city.

Lydia got up that night and sat at the vanity. The moon gave her enough light to see the silver brush and mirror. She used her finger to trace the engraved initials of Frank's grandmother. It wasn't easy here, but there was no going back. She needed to be more grateful and she needed to not complain and end up with a distance between her and Frank.

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The chicks kept up their peeping all the way back to the farm. Their chatter cluttered up Lydia's mind. The wind blew dust and tumbleweeds across the rutted dirt road that led off the highway and up to the farm. It left her feeling tired and far away from herself. Lydia wanted more than anything to lie down and have a rest. But Mother Cross drove the car right up to the front of the chicken coop. "This will make it easier to unload them and we won't be keeping them out in this wind. In a normal circumstance they'd be under the mother 'til they feather out."

They each took a crate into the coop where the area for the chicks, a small round enclosure with no corners where the chicks could pile on and suffocate, was warm from heat lamps.

The floor of the enclosure was covered with wire mesh, from two old window screens. They were laid over newspapers that would be changed out every few days. Kitty Cross had learned the wire mesh trick from her own mother who had kept chickens all her life. It made cleaning easy and the wire mesh gave the chicks a good footing.

They set the crates inside the enclosure. Mother Cross opened the lid to her crate and lifted one corner to spill the chicks out. Lydia also tipped her crate. Pretty soon forty-seven fuzzy yellow chicks were huddling together under the heat lamps.

“There’s one still in here.” Lydia set her crate all the way up and a last chick dropped out on the floor. It didn’t move. Lydia took in a short breath, “Oh. Is it dead?”

Mother Cross picked up the chick and put it in her crate. She put the lid on, covering up two more dead chicks. “You always lose a few.” She took both crates out of the enclosure. “Three isn’t bad.”

Lydia lowered her head and took her breath deep and slow, a way to stop the tears that came on so sudden they made no sense.

Mother Cross picked up two of the chicks that huddled under the heat lamps. She held them loose in each hand, with just their heads poking out. She dipped their beaks into the water of the drip reservoir. The minute they were let go, the chicks moved back to their group and the heat. Then they came back to the reservoir. They dipped their beaks in and tilted their heads up, to let the water go down. Other chicks came to the water, crowding one another and lifting their small wings to make space for themselves.

“You have to teach them everything,” Mother Cross said. She and Lydia were squatted down together, on the outside of the enclosure. Lydia had got her tears put away. She’d never seen such a thing as these chicks; they tickled and warmed her in a way that was new.

Mother Cross took two more of the chicks and put them by the feeders. “These crumbs are special for the chicks.” She held her hand in amongst the chicks. There was a small turning up at the corners of her mouth and a way that the taskiness of her eyes took a rest. “They are something aren’t they?”

She didn’t pause there long. Her face took its strong focus again. “When they get older you have to teach them to go out in the morning and in at night and to roost as

well.” The two chicks by the feeder took to the food. But that’s for later.” The chicks started scrabbling their feet in the feeder, flinging the crumbs around and then pecking them up off the floor. “You put one or two of them to a thing, the others will follow on.”

Mother Cross reached her hand out and used Lydia’s shoulder to push herself up. “Oh my,” she said, “it just gets harder and harder on my old knees to squat down like that.” She put her hand out to help Lydia up. Her hand was warm and softer than Lydia would have expected what with all the work Mother Cross did.

That touching seemed to loosen something in both of them and the question was out before Lydia had a chance to think it over, “Didn’t you ever want more children besides Frank?”

Mother Cross’s jaw lost some of its set in a moment of surprise at the boldness of the question. “Of course I did.” Mother Cross put her hands on her hips and looked down at the enclosure. Most of the chicks were busy at the water and the feeder. A few were off by themselves, their eyes were closed and they almost tipped sideways in their sleep. “I had them too. Twins. They died just short of six months.” She brushed straw from her dress.

Lydia and Mother Cross stood over the enclosure, their shoulders almost touched. The tears Lydia had just managed to put down came back up again. She put both hands to her stomach and wondered what she could say. With just a small movement, a movement that could seem like it was unintended, Lydia’s shoulder touched the older woman’s and they stayed there for a moment longer.

Mother Cross leaned down and pushed a chick back under the light. “Frank was just two then. He probably doesn’t even remember. I couldn’t manage to have any more.”

She straightened back up and turned away from the chicks and from Lydia. The broad of her back rose in a deep breath. “But I had my Frank and that was enough.” She nodded once and reached for a bucket that hung on the wall. “We need to give the older birds some scratch. What’s left of them.”

Lydia took another quick look at the chicks. She breathed in the smell of chicken feed and feathers and straw, and the smell of the droppings that were already gathering on the floor of the enclosure. She nodded once too. She went out to the chicken yard where Mother Cross and the three laying hens were having a conversation.

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