

CHICKEN MAN

By Sasha Sanders

He'd been doing it for 24 years: chicken farming. Every 42 days, 30 000 new chickens would be delivered to Roger Wood's barn and stay there for 36 days before going off to the production plant for slaughter, after which he would clean the barn out thoroughly and then have a few days to wait for the next batch of chickens to arrive.

The entire chicken farming and production process – which started long before the birds got to Roger's barn and ended after they left – had certainly become more scientific and controllable during his years as a farmer. And there were some technological improvements that had assisted Roger directly, for instance the temperature in the barn was now regulated by computer, feed bowls were lifted and lowered by machine and there were various factors that, on the whole, had made the chickens healthier. But Roger's work and daily routine had, essentially, changed very little over the years. He still had to see that there was enough food and water. He still preferred to manually turn the lights in the barn down twice a day to simulate nighttime. And he would still walk through the barn several times each day to look for dead chickens, or "losses", which he might find between three and five of per day – an acceptable amount out of a total of 30 000 chickens.

Visitors to the barn would, once they got past the initially overwhelming smell, be struck by the beauty of the chickens spread so densely over such a vast area. The barn was not a quaint wooden farm structure out of some children's story, but was well over forty metres long, and the carpet of white feathers that

covered almost all of it made quite an impression. The only part that was not covered by the tame white young chickens was the small section around Roger and whoever came with him as they walked through the barn. The chickens would spread out around them, parting like the Red Sea before Moses and his followers. That was how Roger liked to think of it, anyway. He had always been impressed by that bible story.

It was not a life that many people would find glamorous, but Roger was both content and proud. Neither he nor his ambitions were worldly. He had never been out of the country and had hardly ever been out of the Boland – just an occasional visit to Cape Town or day trips to the coast, and a trip to Mpumalanga once (in the days when it was still called the Eastern Transvaal) to the chicken breeder. Here, as a farmer, he held responsibility and had a small share in the co-op. In that context Roger had as much as he had ever wanted. He liked his work and he was good at it.

In mid-January, Roger and his labourers spent a few hours putting chickens into crates and the next day cleaning out the barn at the end of a cycle. They had a few days' rest before the new cycle would start. Near the end of the month 30 000 new chickens arrived.

The day after their arrival, Roger entered the barn for the first feed of the day. The routine on these first days was just like that of all the other days, but – in Roger's mind at least – there was always something ceremonial about the first

feed of the first day. More than an introduction, it was like an inauguration. Roger would welcome the chickens verbally and would take some time to acquaint himself with them. He would pick a few of them up, one at a time, and, almost metaphorically, speak to the whole barn by speaking to each one he picked up. He would compliment the birds on how pretty and healthy they looked, tell them that he was sure they would be happy in his barn, that kind of thing. This little ritual took no more than five minutes, after which he would get down to business and feed the birds.

But on this day he had a sensation that he had never had before. While he was lowering the feed bowls, he looked at one chicken near the barn entrance and had the distinct feeling that the chicken was looking back at him. Not that it was out of the ordinary for a chicken to look at him – most of them did – but there was something about this chicken in particular that made Roger feel it was looking at him the way a pet dog would, and that was out of the ordinary. Roger shrugged it off and by the time he went to sleep he'd forgotten about the chicken.

The next day when Roger entered the barn, he had the same sensation with one of the chickens. More than that, he was almost sure it was the same chicken. It made him feel a little awkward. He was certainly fond of chickens in general, and every batch in particular, in a warm if distant way. But never before had he thought of them, or any single one, with any attachment. It had never occurred to him to, and in any case it was probably not recommended,

considering the inevitability of what would happen to them when they left his barn. Nevertheless, he looked at this chicken and felt it looking familiarly back at him.

The next morning he looked for the chicken with some intent and found it easily. At least, he was sure in his mind that he could identify the chicken. Of course, chances were fairly good that it was the same one, because once chickens got to the barn, they never moved more than a few metres during their entire stay. But more than the favourable odds, Roger had a sense about this chicken. He went up to it, stroked its neck a few times and then got on with his job.

The work got done – it was routine and Roger could do it blindfolded. He often daydreamed while he concentrated on the job at hand, and on this day his mind wandered to places it had never been. He wondered if he should give the chicken a name (something he had never done before). He wondered about taking the chicken out of the barn and keeping it. And on this he wondered if it was ethical, if anyone would find out, and also, oddly, he wondered how the other chickens would feel about it. Sanity prevailed when he realised the other chickens probably wouldn't care or notice if it was gone. Dead chickens left the barn every day, after all.

Nevertheless, as the days passed, Roger became more and more attached to this chicken. He had long stopped thinking about whether or not he wanted to be a chicken eater but, for the first time in years, he started asking his wife to

make more vegetarian meals. Uncommonly, it was more expensive for them to buy vegetables than to buy chickens, which were greatly discounted to the farmers, but Roger was happy to pay the extra.

One night he dreamt that he was at the dinner table cutting up a delicious roast chicken. He dished up for his wife and son, then took a drumstick and a thigh for himself. But he sat staring at the two portions, wondering if he had just served himself the chicken that might have been his pet. His wife asked him what the matter was and why he was just looking at his food, but he didn't answer her. Instead he put his two pieces back where they came from on the carved-up carcass, told his wife he had had enough and that he had decided he would not be eating chicken from then on. She laughed at him and mumbled something to their son about the perils of chicken farming and its effect on mental health.

Then, towards the middle of the cycle, Roger began to panic. He started to picture the chicken arriving at the production plant, being lifted impersonally out of the crate and hung upside down by its claws on the overhead conveyer belt. He saw it being dunked into warm water and stunned, then seconds later having its neck cut. He followed the course of the chicken, still hanging by its claws, as it passed quickly through four phases of de-feathering, each time disappearing into a big, hot cube of metal and then reappearing again, more naked and yellow than before. And he thought about the machine that drilled a

hole through its body, creating a cavity large enough for its remaining intestines to be evacuated.

There were several things that stopped Roger from removing the chicken out of the barn. Firstly, it was considered theft and he could get into trouble. Secondly, the other workers may laugh at him for going crazy and rescuing a chicken. But mainly, Roger knew that if he went through with it his whole livelihood would be ethically cast into doubt: if he couldn't send one little sexually immature chicken to its perfectly planned and inevitable death, how would he be able to continue to be a chicken farmer?

Nevertheless, the closer the end of the cycle got, the more anxious Roger became. It was his responsibility to supervise the packing of the chickens into crates. He simply had no way of avoiding it.

It occurred to him that nearly 30 000 other chickens shared this one's fate. But he had a sense that this one particular chicken had some kind of almost biblical significance. Perhaps the chicken was a kind of Moses, parting a cloudy sea of ignorance for Roger and clearing the way for a life of purpose and meaning. Or perhaps Roger was a kind of Abrahamic figure, tasked with the ultimate test of faith by having to sacrifice the beloved chicken.

It ate away at Roger, who each day thought himself utterly ridiculous and yet couldn't stop himself from becoming less and less comfortable with what would

happen to the chicken. Who would the chicken go to? Would it be a good home? Would it be cut up and put on a braai? Would it end up gathering ice in the back of someone's freezer?

Roger tried to come to terms with it, without luck. Each day he tried to get his mind back to the way it was, without luck. And each day he tried to think of ways to spare the bird, without luck. Until, 35 days after the batch of chickens had arrived, a day before they were due to be removed, Roger could bare it no longer.

It was after supper, after Roger had brushed his teeth and got into his pyjamas, that he told his wife he was going for a walk.

"What, now? What for?" she asked him, shocked. He had never gone for a walk after sunset, not since she had known him, and that was nearly twenty years.

"Just feel like it. Get some fresh air," he said unconvincingly.

She shrugged. She was amazed at how quickly she was getting used to Roger's little oddities.

Roger put on his slippers and began walking towards the barn. With each step he asked himself what the hell he was doing, but he knew exactly what he was going to do. He walked through the disinfectant at the barn entrance, wetting

the soles of his slippers. He opened the door, stirring the nearby chickens. He walked half the breadth of the barn to the light panel and switched them on, unwittingly simulating daytime for the first time in his life. 30 000 chickens knew no better and their little waking movements gained momentum throughout the barn. Then Roger headed back towards the barn entrance, his eyes transfixed on the chicken that was, even now, looking straight back at him. Roger gently picked the chicken up, walked back to the light panel to switch them off, then exited the barn, its chickens already settling down again.

Roger stroked the soft feathers on the chicken's neck. He walked for ten minutes, not knowing or thinking about where he was going with the chicken, until he reached a fence at the edge of the farm boundary.

He sat down, still holding the chicken, stroking it and looking at it. Then, gently but firmly, he snapped the chicken's neck and held it until it stopped kicking and twitching. He dug a shallow hole, put the chicken into it and covered it up again with sand. Then he returned home, washed his hands and went to bed.

The next day, Roger supervised as 29 865 chickens were packed into crates in just over two hours before being loaded onto trucks and taken to the production plant.