P.P.

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My Dad, Louis J. Luzar, loved poultry. He loved all poultry, but especially chickens. Growing up in Haughville, a Slovenian ethnic community in Indianapolis, his family yard was large enough for a garden and some free-range chickens and ducks. He said as a little boy he would enjoy feeding the baby ducks and chicks the leftover hops from beermaking to get them drunk. His love for chickens lasted through high school and eventually led him to major in Animal Sciences at Purdue University. He said that the smarter students were steered to Poultry Science where faculty were actively conducting genetic research.

As kids on our farm in Indiana, we always seemed to have some sort of poultry. We had an incubator in the tool shed where eggs were carefully marked with X's and O's so that we could turn them every day. I remember that we mixed ducks and chicks with abandon. I have a memory of one of our hens, Henny Penny, who was raising ducklings, in great distress one rainy day. She was sitting in the entrance of her red doghouse, all aflutter, as her baby ducks were frolicking in the rain.

My older brother, Little Louie, had a chicken coup with Bantams. That breed is about half the size of other chicken breeds. That may have helped them with their nonstop escapes from the coop. We also had White Leghorns for eggs and meat. We had a special stump in the backyard where my dad would cut their head off. They ran headless wildly through the yard while we tried to keep our Beagles from attacking them. We eventually caught the chicken, and my dad would hang it by the feet from the clothesline to drain the blood. The idiom "running around like a chicken with its head cut off" always had a very graphic meaning for me.

Many years later, I was excited to be safely home after a long drive from Baton Rouge. The minute I stepped into the house, I knew something was different. My parents were in our family room, up late watching TV and waiting for me. What caught my attention immediately was the small white chicken sitting on a newspaper on the back of the sofa, peacefully nestled in my Mom's full head of white hair. My Dad picked up the chicken and introduced me to Peep Peep, P.P., for short.

Dad explained that P.P. was the only survivor of a snake attack on his nest. Dad's friend Bob showed Dad the bloody nest full of broken eggs and the dead hen. They heard a noise and realized

that one chick had survived. Covered in blood, one chick emerged from the broken eggs, repeatedly calling out “peep peep.” My Dad immediately adopted the chick and named him Peep Peep, P.P. for short. P.P. was a Silky rooster, an ancient Asian variety of chicken. Silkies are small chickens, with abundant soft, fluffy, white feathers.

Dad had other poultry on the farm over the years, including Clyde the Rooster, Turkey Liz (named after my Mom), and some really mean geese, Granny and Slim (named after my maternal grandparents). These were farm animals, whereas P.P. was clearly a pet. As young poultry will, P.P. imprinted on my Dad. As kids, Dad showed us this trait. He would let a young duck or chick, fresh from the incubator, imprint on him. As the first moving object they see after hatching, the chicks and ducks formed a strong bond with Dad and would follow him everywhere. Filial imprinting creates a very strong attachment, as was evident with P.P. and my Dad.

P.P. was a few months old when I met him. He had established a strong bond and a routine with my Dad. He enjoyed driving around the farm with Dad and especially enjoyed their bike rides together. I was fortunate to photograph them on one of their rides. Much to my dismay, I discovered that the special, fresh pecans I had been mailing to my Dad from Louisiana were for P.P. They took naps together and watched T.V. together, nightly. My Mom chose to not fight what would be a losing battle as P.P. clearly had most favored pet status. The whole family decided to go with the flow and just embrace P.P. That worked well for me until P.P. showed up at my house in Baton Rouge on vacation.

My Dad and my youngest brother, Jim, planned to drive from Indiana to Louisiana and stop at a number of sites along the way. From their phone call updates, the trip had been going well. No mention was made of P.P. joining them on the road trip until they pulled into my carport. Dad stepped out of the pickup holding P.P. and said, “I knew you wouldn’t mind one more guest.” With no options, I welcomed P.P. to my home.

I decided that P.P. could sleep in my laundry room. I did not anticipate him crowing loudly at sunrise. The first morning when the crowing started, I rushed into the laundry and picked him up. He stopped crowing and nestled into my arms. It was barely daybreak, and I was not prepared to hold him until my Dad awakened. I put a load of laundry in the dryer and turned it on. He immediately liked the sound of the dryer motor and leaned against it. Problem solved. Solved, until I talked that morning with one of my neighbors who asked me if I had heard a rooster crowing earlier. I explained P.P.’s situation and they immediately wanted to meet him.

P.P. became something of a neighborhood celebrity on that visit. Some of the local kids saw him and ended up playing with him in my backyard. They gave him a bubble bath (something he seemed to enjoy) and we blew him dry with my hair dryer. To complete his Louisiana makeover, we painted his toenails bright pink. And, he ate lots of pecans.

As the visit drew to an end, my Dad decided to adopt two abandoned puppies my neighbor was fostering. As he and Jim loaded up the pickup for the drive back to Indiana, we created a nice, crated space in the back for the puppies (now named Spot and Ace) and for P.P. Jim pulled away and stopped after about 200 feet. I watched as my Dad got out of the truck and carefully extracted the two puppies and P.P. and put them in the seat with him. Thei trip back was interesting, to say the least. They were thrown out of two motels for a rooster crowing and puppies barking. They eventually made it home where P.P. and the puppies became lifelong friends.

P.P. made one more interstate trip to visit my sister in Fall Church, Virginia. I told her about the dryer solution to crowing but it did not seem to work as well for her. Her neighbors were also less forgiving. After that trip, P.P. stayed on the farm.

P.P. was very popular with all the nieces and nephews who visited the farm. In preparation for our family reunion, they gave him a bubble bath and did his nails. He was a big hit throughout the reunion, wearing different people's nametags.

Silkies only live five to seven years. P.P. died at seven years, after a full, well-traveled life. I still talk about P.P. with my nieces and nephews, who loved him. Most of the family tolerated him for my Dad's sake. The family never had another pet chicken, and that is fine.