

Summer

By Juan Francisco Lara

Growing up in San Francisco had its advantages. Wherever you went, you could always say "I'm from the City," and no one ever asked, "Which one?" Every year I spent the summer living "down in the country" with my Mother's best friend and her family. Even though I was supposed to go alone, I secretly hid my own Mother and took her with me.

We'd get up early each morning to taste the dew and listen to the Blue Jays and Robins open the days conversation. A well trodden path formed a clothes line from the house to the chicken coop door. The coop was separated from the main house by a garage that served as a small tabernacle, holding the precious body of an old car, a work bench, jars of preserves, and bins of scratch for the chickens, pellets for the rabbits, and stale bread for the ducks. We took turns filling the bucket with scratch, a minute assortment of grains and corn kernels. The burlap gunny sack belched a deep hardy scent, like fermenting wine, and the scratch left a fine powder dust underneath your finger nails. "Never clean your finger nails with your teeth," I was told, "because if you do, some day you'll get that tell tale old man chicken neck." I never did, or so I said, but I fibbed, since now she and I both know that I licked my fingers.

The rabbit hutches were lined up flush against the garage wall facing the chicken coop. Announcing us with a serenade, they ran back and forth across the wire floors of their hutches like fingers playing a harp. The ducks quacked cadences as our procession marched down the lane, while birds circled knowing the spoils would soon be theirs. To our left stood the swing set, a cold steel sentry with four leather saddles, waiting to duel with even the tiniest derriere at high noon. During one late summer storm, the swings set the yard record by performing a double somersault, a loop de loop that even the bravest among us never dared attempt. These four horsemen stood at attention as we passed, their cinctures reined tightly in place by a length of chains.

Arriving at the entrance to the chicken coop, the largest brown hen would always greet us, anxiously waiting to sample the first handful of scratch, like a portly matron selecting hors d'oeuvres at a buffet. Near mid morning we would return to collect the eggs. Life and death hung in the balance for a hen, who hadn't laid an egg for a week. It's fate? To be the centerpiece at our

Sunday feast! More than once, while my Mother was busy counting eggs, I would sneak an egg underneath a hen, signing a brief stay. I never resolved which came first, but I learned that even the poorest among us can savor a reprieve from a Sunday supper.

Gliding towards the kitchen stairs, so eager to display these newly found treasures, even the flower patch brightened with a waltz of the flowers as we sat down for lunch. Everyone at table always marveled at how much I ate, never noticing the obvious, as I passed my Mother another serving. Summer ended when I heard the old car coughing, "say good-bye and let's go!"

I did to all my friends, but I often worried; who'd I forget? We shared such lasting moments. "Old tree fort!" I left my pocket knife strapped on your highest branch. "Vegetable patch!" I almost forgot the taste of fresh squash, tomatoes, string beans and lettuce. "Corn field!" Your ears were never sweeter! "Little Bantam chicken!" I'll catch you yet! "Bale of hay!" Hold my arrow in your target. The ride back up to the City ended too quickly. I awoke to the old car coughing at me: "Out ya go: see you next summer."

My Mother jumped out of the car, ran to the stairs of our flat, turned around and welcomed me: "Did you have a good time?" "Oh, Yes! I have so many stories to tell you, Mom." Embracing, we smiled knowingly at one another.