

We Were Greeted as Liberators

KRISTINA MARUSIC

ON AN OPPRESSIVELY HUMID NIGHT in the summer of 2005, I suited up in all black like a bank robber and headed out in an unmarked white van to steal live chickens under the cover of darkness. I was twenty-one years old.

I had planned this mission last-minute with my on-again, off-again boyfriend, Jake, and our close friend, Paul. Earlier that evening, we had stood together on a darkened street corner in a disconsolate, gunshot-plagued neighborhood, watching Cadillacs with black-tinted windows roll by slow as sharks. The boys lived up the block, and we suspected their house might be bugged, so we went outside to talk. The three of us had run a campus animal rights club together, but Jake and Paul had graduated; I was still in school and was visiting them for the summer. In their new city, Paul had founded a fledgling animal rights group, which still had few official members other than us.

“We have a van full of cages, just for tonight,” Paul told us. He explained that another local animal rights group was planning to do a laboratory rescue for primates but had to postpone it and

KRISTINA MARUSIC works as a writer for MTV News's social justice vertical, “Issues,” covering topics including the Black Lives Matter movement, LGBTQ issues, and feminist pop culture. She holds an MFA from the University of San Francisco and is working on a memoir about her undergraduate career as an FBI-monitored animal rights and anti-war activist.

thought maybe we could find some way to make use of the equipment. I didn't ask for more details. When it came to the extra-legal activities of others, I preferred to know as little as possible. I'd already been questioned by police and the Department of Homeland Security numerous times, and historically, I hadn't demonstrated any great talent for keeping secrets under pressure.

Our fledgling group had recently launched a campaign against a large egg producer that supplied McDonald's and several supermarket chains. Their website prominently featured a claim that their chickens laid "top-quality eggs" because they were "well cared for" and "happy." We were gathering evidence for a formal complaint of manipulation of terms, or false advertising, to be filed with the Council of Better Business Bureaus and the Federal Trade Commission. The same tactic had recently been used by other animal rights groups to force United Egg Producers to remove the "Animal Care Certified" logo from their egg cartons in a case that embarrassed the company, brought unprecedented national media attention to the use of battery cages in egg production, and ultimately cost the company \$100,000 in settlement claims for false advertising complaints filed by the attorney general offices of sixteen states and the District of Columbia.

Because our campaign was very public, we planned to rescue chickens not from the company we'd been investigating, but from another nearby factory. At first, Jake was against stealing the chickens. He'd appeared on the local news a few times to speak about the campaign. If we got caught on this mission, it would ruin that campaign, and it would be Jake's face on TV for it. Paul and I convinced him it was worth the risk by promising to take the chickens to . . . let's call it "Utopia."

Utopia was a sprawling twenty-five-acre sanctuary a few hours outside the city. Most of the animals had been rescued from factory farms or laboratories, but without the before and after pictures, it was hard to believe that the cows had once been anemic veal calves or that the hens had arrived nearly devoid of feathers and with their eyes crusted shut with blood and feces. Four-hundred-pound pigs foraged noisily in the mud near a simple red barn, playfully

shoving one another out of the way to get at a fresh trough of slop. Brown and white cows with long eyelashes lazily swatted flies beside a babbling clear-water brook, and near a quaint white farmhouse, bright white and red chickens and fat turkeys kicked the dust self-importantly, giving out loud clucks of warning to anyone who got too close. The proprietor was a veterinarian with a literary bent. The restored animals bore names like Atticus, Humbert, Ophelia, and Ishmael.

"We'll basically be taking those chickens out of hell and transporting them to chicken heaven," I said. Jake sighed, but nodded his consent. I knew it wouldn't take much for him to start imagining himself as one of those suffering bodies in need of saving – I loved him for his empathy.

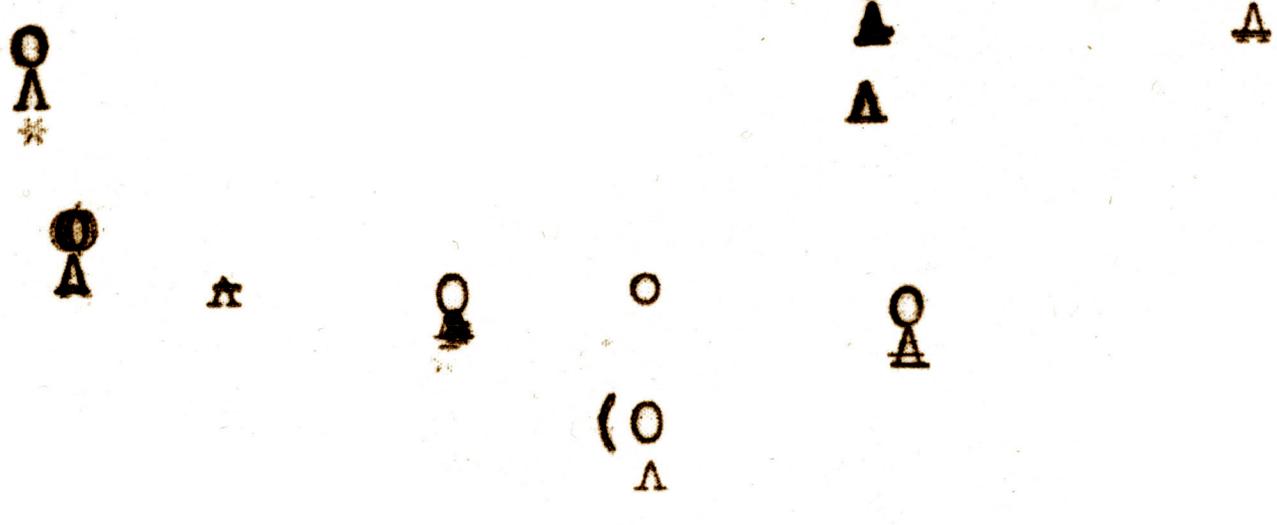
Still, in the hours before leaving, Jake worried about everything, down to the brightness of his new white shoelaces. In an attempt to calm him down, I colored them black with a Sharpie and promised to buy him a new pair. Paul filled a backpack with spotlights, two black ski masks, a set of walkie-talkies, spare batteries, two pairs of heavy gloves to protect our hands from chicken talons, and wire cutters just in case, though in our experiences, the doors and cages were always unlocked at the factories. The boys wore long pants and sleeves despite the heat. I was the getaway driver, so I could get away with a black T-shirt and jeans, and in lieu of a ski mask, I tied a black bandana dabbed with rose oil around my neck.

When we were a few miles out from the factory, Paul cut the headlights, and we drove slowly along a moonlit country road. Jake and I shared the passenger seat, but he stayed quiet and sullen while Paul and I tried to make jokes and small talk. As we got closer, the van filled with the smell of feces and rot from the egg factory, and I pulled my black bandana up over my nose and tried to breathe in the scent of rose oil. I'd volunteered to be the getaway driver because I'd been in chicken sheds before and had no desire to go in again.

"If you can see that we're about to get caught," said Paul, "and you can get away, just drive away—there's no reason for all three of us to get caught, or for the van to be impounded."



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I nodded. Three large cages rattled in the cavernous back of the van.

“And if somehow I get caught and you don’t?” I asked.

“Tell them you’re there alone, and don’t say another word,” said Jake, suddenly eager to talk. “We’ll sneak away, walk or hitchhike home, and bail you out as soon as we can.”

When I met Paul, he had big dreadlocks and was referred to around campus as “Jesus.” Three years later, he still had the olive skin, kind eyes, and gentle demeanor, but his brown hair was short—I helped him saw off the dreadlocks with a serrated kitchen knife after two pairs of scissors broke with the effort. Jake looked like a teen pop star: baby-faced and blond, with a delicately sloped nose, blue eyes, and dimples. The iron-on letters falling off his favorite baby blue T-shirt read, “Kiss me, I’m Jake.” His mother made it for him. Other girls kissed him with some regularity.

“If you see someone coming up the driveway, honk twice and drive away if you can,” said Paul. “If we hear it, we’ll run into the fields behind the factory, and you can come back to look for us in the morning. We’ll have the walkie-talkies.”

“Got it,” I said. I loved the familiar tickle of nervous adrenaline stirring in my chest. I felt a little bit as if I was outside myself—as if

I was somewhere safe and far away, watching a film about a wildly badass, adventurous girl I admired. I *knew* there was danger, but I felt utterly and totally invincible. Now, ten years later, the parts of my brain responsible for weighing how my present actions might affect my future are too far developed to let me make decisions like these again, but I can’t help but feel a little proud of that girl. Sure, she was a bit reckless, but at least she chose to channel her need for high-stakes adventures and her natural inclinations to flout authority into activities she truly believed would bring at least a little bit of goodness and justice to the world. That delights me, even now.

In the ’90s and early 2000s, “open rescues” were regularly used as a form of exposé. I can remember seeing footage of several women who walked into a foie gras farm with camera crews, unhooked the feeding tubes from the beaks of several greasy ducks, lifted them from their cages, and carried them out. A 2002 *New York Times* article documenting an open rescue of ten egg-laying hens from battery cages explained, “After focusing for years on fur coat manufacturers and researchers using animals to test cosmetics and other products, the animal welfare movement has a new target: farmers who raise millions of chickens, cows and pigs in closed, confined areas—what activists call

‘factory farms.’” It’s clear from their definition of the term that *factory farming* was still an unfamiliar phrase for many Americans.

I didn’t start out as an animal rights activist; I ended up stealing chickens as a result of painful disillusionment with other forms of activism. The flames of Shock and Awe burned fiery and bright on the news a week before my nineteenth birthday, killing an estimated six thousand Iraqi civilians. I was alarmed and outraged, and also convinced, deep in my naive and painfully empathetic bones, that if I yelled “Stop!” loudly enough, and got enough others to join me, it was within my power to facilitate the end of the war. I fought the war obstinately for two years, always convinced we were on the verge of forcing its end. I co-organized a campus-wide walkout that almost got me suspended, and began spending all my weekends traveling the East Coast for demonstrations. During that time, I also maintained straight As, worked two part-time campus jobs, helped organize a local chapter of Food Not Bombs, and worked on other national college campaigns—to stop Coca-Cola from sponsoring the kidnap and murder of union leaders at its bottling plants in Colombia, to stop Citigroup from funding rainforest destruction and displacing indigenous people in the Amazon and Cameroon, to stop Disney’s use of child and sweatshop labor.

None of it stopped. The war got worse. Boys from my hometown died fighting it. The body count ticked steadily upward, the reports of soldier suicides and pictures of dead Iraqi kids multiplied, and there were never any WMDs but our own. I started to feel like I was drowning. I was exhausted and began to suspect I’d been a fool to think we could do anything—about anything. But I still felt the fundamental wrongness of it all viscerally, uncomfortably, constantly—as if the universe was a snow globe permanently stuck askew, and I was stuck at a tilt inside, and despite all my flailing efforts, I just couldn’t make anything right.

Animal rights activism had always been a side project. I’d been a vegetarian since I was sixteen and had gone vegan with Jake freshman year. I’d watched every video and read every book available about factory farming, and had less-

than-gracefully persuaded a number of friends and family to give up factory-farmed meat. Then, near the peak of my burnout, I worked on a small “fun” campaign to raise funds for a local no-kill animal shelter, and they invited us to come meet the four dogs our donation had allowed them to save from death row at the SPCA. I crouched on the floor to greet the dogs, and while a fat Labrador waggled his butt and licked my face, something clicked: *I have agency here.*

My actions, though relatively small and simple, had stopped suffering and death in a quantifiable and very material way.

AS WE APPROACHED the factory, Jake said, “We better back up the driveway so Kristina can just drive straight out.”

“Good call,” Paul said. He lifted himself in the seat and craned his neck around, but keeping the van on the winding dirt driveway was impossible, and we laughed nervously while he fishtailed back and forth, speeding up and eventually landing about twenty feet from the entrance to the sheds. He shut off the engine.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” said Jake.

“I think you should keep the van closed up in case you have to drive away quickly,” said Paul. “When you see us running out, open the doors and the cages for us.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

“If we’re in there too long, something is probably wrong, and you should just go,” said Jake.

“What’s too long?” I asked.

“Like more than an hour,” he said. “We should be in and out.”

“OK,” I said, kissing him. “Be careful. I love you.”

“I will,” he said. “You, too.”

They rolled down their sleeves and pulled on their ski masks and gloves. Paul took out one of the walkie-talkies, clicked it on, and set it on the floor of the van. We planned to use them only to warn each other if something was going wrong or to find each other the next day if necessary. Paul pulled on his backpack, and we all smiled at each other, still for a moment, and then he said, “Go!” and they both opened their



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doors and sprinted toward the sheds. I watched them get smaller in the rearview mirror until they disappeared around the back of the sheds, and then I climbed over to the driver's side, adjusted the seat, and tested the brake pedal while staring down the long driveway to make sure no one was coming. No one was. I settled in to wait.

BY 2013, when *Rolling Stone* published a hard-hitting, widely read investigation of factory farming titled "In the Belly of the Beast," the advent of foodie culture and the popularity of books like Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* had already established a new degree of public awareness regarding the dark side of factory farming in the United States. Before that, though (and even now, in many ways, despite those cultural advances), working toward factory farming reform was a radical, dangerous endeavor.

In 2006, George W. Bush signed into law the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA), which stipulated extended prison sentences for activists who caused "economic damage" to an animal-related industry, and in subsequent years, the factory farming lobby encouraged many states to pass "ag-gag" laws, which explicitly make it illegal to investigate or film factory farms at all. In May of 2005, just before the summer I spent going into the chicken sheds, John Lewis, a deputy assistant director of the FBI, declared, "The number one domestic terrorism threat is the eco-terrorism, animal-rights movement."

Sitting in the van, waiting, I thought about whether I felt like a "domestic terrorist" and recalled the last time I had gone into the chicken sheds—the time we were almost caught. Jake was out of town, so it was just Paul and me. We were there to film evidence for our manipulation of terms case. Before we even arrived at the door to the egg warehouse, I felt like chicken shit was pushing its way into my lungs, and I had to use my inhaler, which always made me feel like a nerdy, asthmatic child. We crouched in front of the unmarked door to the warehouse so Paul could pull the video camera out of his backpack and I could get the spotlight from mine. He handed me a pair of latex gloves, and I wriggled my sweaty fingers into them, watching him do the same.

"Ready?" he asked.

I've made a huge mistake, I thought, wheezing through my bandana.

"Ready," I said.

Paul pushed open the warehouse door, and we ducked inside. It closed behind us, and for a moment, it was completely black. It was stifflingly hot, and I started to sweat and itch immediately. I heard the flapping of a thousand wings, muffled clucking, and a chorus of mournful, throaty wails, unearthly but also eerily human. Like hysterical ghost women. It stirred a nauseating dread in my stomach, and I fumbled for the switch on the spotlight.

In the hazy beam of light, feathers churned through the air, and rows of cages full of sparsely feathered chickens came into focus. Their wings, mostly barren, looked like long fingers of bone smacking against the wires. The cages were stacked floor to ceiling, so the excreta of the birds on top fell onto the birds below, coating them in feces. I shined the light down one of the rows of cages and realized we'd have to walk single-file. I strained my eyes, but I couldn't see to the other end of the aisle. There were only chickens and metal cages as far as I could see in any direction, and I thought, *It would be easy to get lost in here*. I willed myself not to run back toward the open sky.

"Let's go," said Paul loudly so I could hear him over the wings and the wailing. "Keep an eye out for dead ones and bleeding ones."

We turned down one of the aisles, and I shined the spotlight along the floor and up along the rows of cages. Mice writhed in thick beds beneath the cages and scampered over our feet as we walked. Occasionally, they dropped from cages high above our heads, where they'd been eating eggs, so it appeared to be raining mice and chicken shit.

Almost all of the hens had been de-beaked and de-clawed with a hot blade to keep them from killing each other in the cages, so they had little orange stumps instead of full beaks. Some of the beaks had been cut too short, and the hens' tongues lolled out crazily against the sides of their faces when they yowled.

We didn't have trouble finding bleeding or dead chickens. Their necks flopped out through

the front of the wires, limp, while the other chickens flapped their bony fingers over them. We found an especially mangled one, and Paul took out a newspaper from that day. I shined the spotlight on the front page while he filmed the date and panned over to the bloody hen. It twitched, startling us, and then Paul took out the measuring tape and held it up to the cage in front of the camera to show the size. It was about eight inches tall and eleven inches wide with six hens inside.

We'd been in the shed for around fifteen minutes when I thought I heard voices.

"Shhh!" I said.

We stopped walking, and I held my breath to listen. The beam of a flashlight swung into view at the end of the long row.

"Turn off the light," said Paul, half whispering, half shouting.

I grasped for the switch with a shaky hand, flipping it off and on twice before I managed to keep it in the off position.

"Get down," Paul said.

We crouched against the floorboards, and Paul grabbed my hand. We'd slept together once, during one of my breaks with Jake, and I felt a hint of the old thrill and angst of holding his hand in the dark. Even through latex. Even here.

The beam of the flashlight paused at the end of our aisle. If they turned in our direction, we'd be caught in the light. I held my breath. The light stayed still for a long moment before moving a few feet and turning into the aisle beside ours. Slivers of light shined through the cages to our left, and we ducked our heads lower, below the scope of the beam, keeping very still while it passed over our heads. As soon as the light had faded from view, Paul pressed his mouth to my ear and whispered, "We need to run."

I shoved the spotlight in the backpack, zipped it, and swung it over my shoulder as we got to our feet. I held onto Paul's shirt, and we jogged softly through the deafening dark, back in the direction we came from, feeling the mice skitter under our feet. When we reached the front of the aisle, we turned and ran toward the exit. Paul felt along the wall with his hands until he found the door, flung it open, and stumbled

loudly down a flight of metal stairs onto the muddy grass between the rows of warehouses.

He was already sprinting away by the time I reached the bottom step. I ran after him but tripped and landed sprawled out, face down in the mud. I scrambled to my feet again, and Paul was nearly out of sight, headed toward the bushes. I ran after him, fast, my legs burning, watching the ground this time. After I slipped through the gate between the bushes and the warehouse, I paused to look back. There was no one there. The chickens must have drowned out the sounds of our clumsy exit.

NOW IT WAS 2:48 AM, and I sat silently in the white van, still waiting for Paul and Jake to come out. They'd been gone forty-five minutes. Too long. *Something is wrong*, I thought. *They should be out*. I turned the radio on softly but quickly turned it off, afraid of not being able to hear if a car was approaching. Had they run into the fields when I wasn't looking? Would I even hear it if a shotgun went off in there? I scanned the property again, but there was nothing to see.

I squinted into the rearview mirror, willing them to appear—and then they did.

I flung open the driver's side door, ran around to the back, and pulled open the rear doors as Paul and Jake ran toward me in their ski masks, their gloved hands pressing several small chickens against their bodies. The chickens craned their necks around wildly, and their cartoonish squawks pierced the quiet with alarming volume. The loudness of it was both terrifying and comical. When they got close enough, I could hear Jake and Paul laughing.

I laughed, too, as I clumsily pried open the doors of the cages. This was a top-secret undercover rescue operation. This was maybe considered domestic terrorism. What it was most of all, though, was chicken thievery. Paul thrust his arms inside and released the hens, which immediately began flapping wildly and squawking even louder.

"Hey, baby, I brought you these chickens," Jake said, winking through the eyehole of his ski mask and dancing toward me with his hens, all of his anxiousness from earlier evaporated.

“Oh, babe,” I said, “just what I always wanted!”

Paul sprinted back toward the shed, and Jake pushed his armful of birds into the cage, then turned to run back for more.

Alone with the hens in the moonlight, I gazed over their scabby bodies, their bony wings, the little orange nubs of their severed beaks. Their volume was incredible. It was different from the sounds they made in the sheds—less mournful, more panicked. Mostly hilarious.

“Shhh, it’s OK, girls,” I said softly. “It’s going to be OK. We’re taking you away from here.”

Four more times, Jake and Paul rushed out with armfuls of hens, and each time, the van grew louder, the smell more acrid.

“Last trip,” Paul said breathlessly.

As they jogged toward the shed again, I climbed into the driver’s seat and started the van, and as soon as they slammed the rear doors and climbed into the front seat, I had us barreling down the driveway in the dark, headlights still off, the hens blaring in the back. We couldn’t hear ourselves over them, so after a few smiles and thumbs up, we rode in silence.

I stayed on the back roads, drove under the speed limit, and strained my ears for sirens. The van had no AC, so I pushed my bandana up over my forehead to keep the sweat from dripping into my eyes, and the boys peeled off their shirts. Jake leaned sleepily against the passenger-side window, and Paul smiled stoically from his position on the floor between the seats. When we arrived at the locked gate at the bottom of Utopia’s driveway, Paul called the vet repeatedly, but there was no answer.

I put the van into park and wondered what the fuck we’d do with all these chickens if we were stuck with them. I couldn’t take them back to college, and the boys’ house, with too many roommates and no yard, in a rough city neighborhood, was decidedly no place for chickens. Could chickens just be set free? That seemed unlikely.

Eventually, the gate swung open, and I pulled up to the farmhouse. The vet came out to meet us.

“You really should have called me ahead of time,” he said irritably, “or at least called on the way.” He was older than us, in his late thirties or early forties. His hair was disheveled,

his glasses foggy, his knee-high muddy boots pulled over a pair of thin blue pajama pants.

“Sorry,” I said, feeling a little like a kid who’d woken a friend’s dad at a slumber party.

“Sorry,” agreed Paul. “Next time.”

We helped unload the chickens into a quarantine pen in the barn. The vet would treat their injuries and monitor them for signs of disease before letting them join the healthy birds. They squawked and flapped and fought us, then clucked around the pen nervously, investigating. It was the first time they’d ever been outside of a cage. Once the van was empty, the vet was a little less gruff. He said the birds looked healthy enough to make a good recovery and thanked us for bringing them, but reminded us again to call ahead next time. We thanked him, too, promised we would, and climbed back into the van.

After a celebratory round of high-fives and some relieved laughter, Jake and Paul promptly fell asleep, and I drove toward the city in silence, the hot summer wind whipping my hair around. I imagined the hens feeling the sun on their backs for the first time, cautiously outstretching their newly feathered wings, digging their arched talons into the alien softness of dirt. The rest of the wide world might still be suffering and disordered, but for twenty chickens, at least, the whole alarming, confoundingly askew, tiny snow globe of a universe had just been inverted and shaken back to right again. ■

