

There were three of them that night

There were three of them that night. Three figures dressed in black, with balaclavas to hide their faces. They drove in silence. The driver had picked the other two up when it was already dark. Whoever had made the plan knew where the darkest places were, away from street lights. Nobody was to see anybody else's face, or know the identity of any other.

They turned off onto a side road, and then took an unmarked single-track lane. The driver stopped, turned off the headlights, then lifted up a contraption and fitted it onto his head. He pulled the wool of his balaclava this way and that so that telescopic tubes could fit over his eyes. He released the brake, and the car moved off, plunging through the pitch dark night. His passengers gripped on with nervous hands.

The car slowed and the driver got out, then opened the doors for the other two. They were to form a chain, with the driver and his night vision goggles in the lead. The night was starless, and utterly dark. Without the sound of the car's engine, and being so close to one another, they could now hear the rasp of each others breath. One of them smelled of a floral perfume, and was so very

likely female. The driver was small, compact, wiry, and his every movement full of strength and energy. Of the other two, one was large, bulky, and prone to stumble, and the other, the wearer of perfume, was light of step.

After initial stumbles, their movements steadied. Their progress along the lane was swift, but then slow across what must be ploughed earth. Heavy anxious breathing could not now hide a distant sound of chickens, muffled now, but growing clearer with every step.

At last a halt, then blinding red light from a door that opened suddenly in front of them. Unaccustomed eyes would take their time to adjust. The leader however would not wait. With a surge of effort he hauled the other two with him into the crimson glare.

The three now took stock, the leader with his contraption raised and locked above his head. The three were all dressed in uniform black, with gloves and balaclavas. The slit through which they peered showing only the glint of bright and lively eyes. They stood in a vast hanger-like void, a plain that stretched as far as the eye could see, carpeted by a living sea of chickens, illuminated powerfully from above by blood red light. Underfoot was a wire

mesh floor, strong enough to walk on, but made this way so that the chicken's shit and piss would fall below and disappear into some kind of disposal mechanism. Even so, there was a powerful acrid stench, a reek of ammonia that would scour even the most insensitive nose.

The bulky one could not help himself. He burst out with one word that revealed that he was male, and that he lisped: "bathtardths!".

The moment of discovery over, the three remembered their instructions, and set off in three different directions. The chickens gave way around their swinging legs, with ripples of anxious clucking, and darting frightened movements. Such was the vast scale of the hanger, that it took a long while for the three to reach the margins. They turned, and waited until the last was in position.

Then with waving arms they began to drive the birds towards the far off open door. The timid chickens needed little encouragement, and fled before the flailing figures. The aim was to herd the birds into the night and new freedom.

All seemed so very orderly, the birds moving towards the door, their squawks louder but not too loud, their heads jerking rhythmically as they went.

The ocean of birds were bunched tight now, and should have begun to flow out into the dark. But they would not. Though the mass at the lip of the door were all but obscured by a rising cloud of dust, they were clearly refusing to go as planned. Driven on by the agitating running to and fro of the figures in black, more and more chickens were driven forward towards the door. The jam of birds grew tighter and the commotion of bird cry deafening.

At last, the leader, with his contraption rocking on his head, risked a shout, a shout that he must have hoped would break the log jam and send the chickens through the door.

It failed. Instead, the clucking grew louder, and the dense mass of chickens near the door, flailing and flapping, now mounting one another in the desperate tight mêlée. They simply would not pass through the door.

All three figures in black now joined in with shouts and whistles. It was to be all or nothing.

The situation deteriorated. A mass of chickens now broke free and ran back towards tempting open space. The three black figures sprinted to cut them off. At that very moment another door opened, and two men in tee shirts and jeans ran in.

All five human beings stopped in their tracks.

The chickens in uproar now broke from the tight packed mass, like a river's torrent, back to fill the empty space.

The spell was broken when the leader, like whippet let off the leash, sprinted for the door and the dark night. He had his hand raised to steady the contraption on his head, but he was fast, very fast.

The men in jeans set off after him, hoping to catch him before he made the door. The leader never broke his pace. He met the dense mass of chickens, slamming his feet down among the birds. With each powerful leaping step he hoisted his knees high. His feet came down indiscriminately on a living carpet. The clucking reached a deafening roar.

The pursuers called out abuse, but their pace was slowing. As they approached the churning mass of chickens, they stopped.

The two remaining figures in black never moved an inch.

Calm would take time to be restored. The chickens were moving away from the door, heads darting, their frightened clucking. And as they went, a trail of stricken birds was revealed. Wherever the leader had brought down his feet, there were stricken birds, like so many dirty footsteps in snow.

The two burly men in tee shirts now turned to face the two remaining figures in black. They were clenching fists.

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