

THE HISTORY OF WHY THE CHICKEN CROSSED THE ROAD

by JENNYE JAMES

CHARACTERS

CLARK

ELIZABETH

SETTING

Office of Knickerbocker Magazine in New York City, 1847.

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[At rise we see a small print shop with a large desk, a printing press, and papers stacked everywhere. There is a window looking out on New York City. We see that the sun is setting. LEWIS CLARK sits reading at the desk. He is wearing a suit that is unkempt. A clock chimes. CLARK looks up to see what time it is.]

CLARK

Elizabeth! Elizabeth, hurry up with that. The draft is due in an hour!
[ELIZABETH rushes in carrying a large stack of papers. She is wearing a simple dress and an apron smeared with ink.]

ELIZABETH

Here they are sir ...
[Just before she reaches the desk, she trips and the papers go flying.]

CLARK

Elizabeth! Must you be so clumsy.

ELIZABETH

I'm sorry sir. So sorry.
[ELIZABETH begins to pick the papers up off the floor.]
It's just been a long day.

CLARK

Yes it has been. And it will be even longer if you don't hurry up! You know how these writers get if the magazine isn't on schedule. If *The Knickerbocker* is even one day late they will have my head ...
[ELIZABETH finishes gathering the spilled pages and sets them in front of CLARK.]

ELIZABETH

I'm sorry Mr. Clark. I will be back in jiff with your tea.
[ELIZABETH exits. CLARK begins to sift through the pages. Music begins to play softly.]

CLARK

What a mess that girl ... Elizabeth. I swear sometimes ... I don't know why I hired her.
[He sings.]

SHE'S CLUMSY
SHE'S LATE
SHE'S WAY TOO CHEERFUL
THAT GIRL ...
HER TEA IS AWFUL
I'D RATHER DRINK COFFEE, UGGH
HER SPELLING'S ATROCIOUS
HER WRITING EVEN WORSE
THAT GIRL

I DON'T KNOW WHY
ELIZABETH ...
THAT GIRL

*[ELIZABETH returns with the tea, narrowly avoiding a second spill.
She sets it on the desk.]*

ELIZABETH

Anything else sir?

CLARK

No. No that's all.

*[ELIZABETH begins to exit, but just before she gets off stage,
CLARK calls her name.]*

Elizabeth!

ELIZABETH

Yes Mr. Clark?

[CLARK picks up a page and points to it.]

CLARK

What is this?

ELIZABETH

A riddle, sir.

CLARK

A riddle?

ELIZABETH

Yes. You told me just last week that I could write one riddle for this next edition

...

I did?
CLARK

Yes Mr. Clark.
ELIZABETH

Hmmf. And this is your riddle?
CLARK

Yes.
ELIZABETH

I don't like it.
CLARK

You don't?
ELIZABETH

No I don't.
CLARK

ELIZABETH
Does that mean you are not going to print it...? I worked so hard.

CLARK
Hard work alone does not merit a place in my magazine. It must be worthy as well. And most importantly ... I must like it. Otherwise what kind of an editor would I be?

ELIZABETH
[To herself]
A fair one ...

CLARK
I'm sorry Elizabeth. I just think this particular riddle is ... well ... bad. If you can come up with another within the hour I will consider printing it. Otherwise ... there is always next month.

ELIZABETH
There is no way I can come up with another in an hour! Are you sure you won't consider this one? Do you even understand it?

CLARK

How dare you question my understanding!

ELIZABETH

What I mean is ... will you let me tell the story behind it?

CLARK

We haven't the time.

ELIZABETH

Please Mr. Clark! It will only take a minute or two. Maybe after I explain it then you will underst ... like it better.

CLARK

Alright, you have two minutes to convince me that this riddle is indeed a valuable addition to this edition. Although I'm not sure how much that it is going to do ...

[Music begins playing softly as she speaks.]

ELIZABETH

Thank you Mr. Clark! You see it all started on Monday morning ... I was running late ...

CLARK

You are always running late ...

ELIZABETH

Anyways ... I was coming down Forty-fifth between Broadway and Sixth I think ... when all of the sudden this thing appeared out of nowhere and ran across the road ... nearly tripping me ...

CLARK

Doesn't take much to do that ...

ELIZABETH

[Sings.]

THIS THING
A BLUR I COULD NOT SEE
RAN RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME

WHAT WAS I TO DO?
WHAT HAD CAUSED MY SLIP?
WHAT HAD INTERRUPTED MY MORNING TRIP?
WHEN I LOOKED TO SEE

WHAT HAD STARTLED ME
ALL THAT WAS THERE
WAS A LITTLE CHICKEN

CLARK

A chicken?

ELIZABETH

A CHICKEN HAD CROSSED THE ROAD
I BEGAN TO CONTEMPLATE

WHERE WAS HE GOING?
WAS HE LATE?
WHY DID THE CHICKEN CROSS THE ROAD?

CLARK

That makes no sense ...

ELIZABETH

Exactly!

[Sings.]

WHY DOES A CHICKEN CROSS THE ROAD? I SAID
THE PEOPLE, THEY ANSWERED

THE BUTCHER, HE SAID
TO AVOID MY KNIFE

THE HUSBAND, HE SAID
TO FLEE FROM THE WIFE

THE GROCER, HE SAID
TO GET TO THE GRAIN

THE BAKER, HE SAID
JUST TO BE A PAIN

THE MAID, SHE SAID
TO SEE WHAT IT'S LIKE

THE WORKER, HE SAID
GOIN' ON STRIKE

THE POET, HE SAID
I DON'T KNOW WHY

AND YOU KNOW
NEITHER DID I

Why does a chicken cross the road? Where could he possibly go?

THE CARPENTER, HE SAID
TO GET A PINT

THE WIFE, SHE SAID
HE GOT A FRIGHT

BUT THE PAINTER
OH HE WAS BRIGHT
A GREAT IDEA, HE HAD
WHAT IF?
WHAT IF IT CROSSED?
TO GET TO THE OTHER SIDE

I THOUGHT AND THOUGHT
AND DECIDED
THAT THIS CONUNDRUM
THIS MYSTERY
MAYBE, JUST MIGHT
MAKE A GOOD RIDDLE

CLARK

But does it? I still don't know if I like it.

ELIZABETH

But Mr. Clark...

[Music begins.]

CLARK

Don't "but Mr. Clark" me.

[Sings.]

ELIZABETH
DEAR LITTLE ELIZABETH
YOU ARE SO YOUNG
SO NEW IN THIS WORLD

ELIZABETH

But...

CLARK

DON'T FRET
YOU'LL GROW
YOU'LL LEARN
YOU
WILL
SEEEEE
YOU WILL SEE
MY DEAR
THAT THIS WORLD
THIS PLACE THAT WE LIVE
IS HARD TO UNDERSTAND
BUT YOU MUST
KEEP A COOL HEAD
SO AS NOT TO SEEM
LIKE A GIRL
A GIRL WHO DOESN'T KNOOOWWW

KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE
TO LEARN ABOUT
DIFFERENT THINGS
TO KNOW WHY
THE SKY IS BLUE
THE GRASS IS GREEN

IT'S A PRIVILEGE
TO KNOW
TO LEARN
TO UNDERSTAND
TO BE A SCHOLAR
NOT FOR EVERYONE
IT ISN'T

ELIZABETH

But I want to know ...

CLARK

What do you want to know, my dear? I will tell you.

ELIZABETH

I want to know everything.

CLARK

Well I can't tell you that ... There's not the time and I must return to my work.

ELIZABETH

Wait! I have one more thing to say about the riddle.

CLARK

Alright. One more thing. I still don't like it though.

ELIZABETH

I was thinking just now ... what if the chicken? What if it's like everything?

CLARK

What do you mean child?

ELIZABETH

What if the chicken crossing the road is like everything? The same as the reason we do anything. Like why we print a magazine every month.

CLARK

We print the magazine because people read it.

ELIZABETH

But is that really why? Why do people read? Why do they do anything? What if the chicken crossed the road, just because others did before him. Just because that's all he knew how to do. What if it was just to fill his time?

CLARK

Elizabeth. Are you suggesting that this riddle is akin to the great question of the universe?

ELIZABETH

I don't know ... What is the great question of the universe?

CLARK

"For what purpose do we do the things we do throughout our life?" The meaning of life, child.

ELIZABETH

Then I guess I am.

CLARK

Hogwash!

ELIZABETH

What?

CLARK

I still don't like it. Come up with another for next month and we will see.

ELIZABETH

But Mr....

CLARK

No. No. You go finish cleaning the types. You may go when you finish.

ELIZABETH

Yes sir. I will see you tomorrow.

[ELIZABETH exits and CLARK returns to his work.]

CLARK

Now. Where was I? Ahhh. "Why did the chicken cross the road? A riddle by..."

[CLARK takes his pen and crosses out ELIZABETH's name and replaces it with his own.]

"Lewis Clark."

[Blackout.]

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