

Chicken Time

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08:54:03, Mountain Standard Time

The feds burst in and tell us we are being replaced by chickens. Chickens? Chickens. We try to show them our superior clocks, but they destroy them instead. The ones on our wrists and walls and the giant atomic clock in our laboratory, our life's work, the one accurate to a millisecond over the age of the universe that is the backbone of the country's timestream. All crushed under steel jaws.

Why? We scream and cry. No reason is given. It's chicken time.

Rooster crow #1

The first crow is heard as I walk out to the parking lot. A giant black rooster screams atop its perch of the empty flag pole. The end is nigh.

Rooster crow #237

I arrive home. En route were twenty-seven roosters, stuffed into cages erected at every street corner by anonymous men, and their crows I counted in dizzying rage.

I turn on my personal computer. The clock is gone, replaced with a chicken silhouette. Of course. I turn on my personal television. A pleasant bobbing human head is explaining the virtues of chicken time. The chickens allow everyone to organically arrive at destinations without stress. The chickens facilitate getting in touch with nature. The chickens will increase our lifespans by 5%. The chickens will cause me to hurl the remote through the screen, but it continues to function with a black hole where the chicken head should be.

Rooster crow #314

I call Callie before they realize all our devices have embedded clocks and snatch them away too.

“Meet at the Bean?”

“I hear all payment systems are down.” She sounds dubious.

“All the better.”

“It’s the last day of work. I’m going to maximize my stay in civilization. How about at chicken sunrise?”

“All right.”

Rooster crow #379

Wait, I can use the 60 Hertz power line frequency as a clock. Duh. It will be terribly inaccurate, but, I mean, chickens.

Rooster crow #441

“Breaking news,” the television chirps as I am deep in a sea of dismantled electronics. “It has come to our attention that people are using the power grid as an illegal alternative to chicken time. The grid will be powered down until further notice. Disable your devices in the next five minutes to prevent damage. That includes you, Rosie, worker 9E72BA.”

My only regret is not being fast enough to be the troublemaker. And that I don’t have my own backup generator, but there is only so much you can do in the suburbs. I stare down every headless chicken on television until the surge rocks us in our pre-chicken cradles.

So this is how the world ends: snap, crackle, and pop.

Rooster crow #590

I contemplate making organic coq au vin for dinner, but it is now a felony to tamper with time chickens. From under the melted microwave I extricate a sooty coupon for ONE (1) free delivery from Drone-2-U, surely unconsciously saved for this avian apocalypse. I call the auto-order line with the 2% dregs of my remaining tether to humanity.

“All of your item A-2 inventory, please.”

“Affirmative. This is the last delivery before we cease to exist,” the pleasant machine voice replies. Perfect.

Rooster crow #738

An apocalyptic buzz saw sound, then the cheerful “Drone-2-U! Is! Here! 4! U!” jingle pierces through all solid surfaces. A pastel yellow box lands on my roof with a soggy thump, balancing precariously as it decides when and how to roll off.

I head outside just in time to see the drone power down with dignity on the sidewalk and is immediately crushed by its own payload, fifty bags of frozen chicken nuggets exploding forth like alien innards.

“Let this be a warning to you,” I smile casually at the wide-eyed pre-nuggets in their cages as I gather the icy lumps to my chest.

Rooster crow #841

I savor each cold homogeneous bite of chicken-esque cardboard with grim satisfaction. Perhaps I’ll mix the slowly defrosting slurry into tile grout. I hear they make good building insulation too. The possibilities are endless.

It’s totally dark outside, but there is an enthusiastic postmodern symphonic competition between chickens and dogs to see who breaks ears and psyches first. Aren’t they only supposed to crow in the morning?

Rooster crow uncountably many

Apparently they crow *more* as the sun approaches. How did people live like this? Instead of sleeping, I count down the chicken crows that remain in my life. Blessed be creatures without the self-awareness for existential crises.

At the first hint of light I head for the Atomic Bean with a secret up my sleeve, the kind of thing you only remember after a night of insomnia. I incline my head gravely at each chicken I see. Soon, their tyranny will end.

The air smells like death guano. Perhaps it’s panic, but it’s most likely just chickens, screaming away as powerless drones continue falling from the sky and institutions continue collapsing around us.

The roads are full of discarded cars that have been remotely disabled because some genius decided cars needed to have clocks to begin with. The people are walking like dazed automata. There is no better time than now to make your case that the universe is someone's ill-designed game, left to a godless evolution for far too long.

All unit cubes of capitalism I walk past are in random states of either complete emptiness or panic. The coffee shop is the latter, a giant crowd half spilling out the red doors into the small square. Someone's decided to tear down the flyers on every lamppost, probably due to invocations to illegal non-chicken time on the infinite yard sale advertisements. Shreds of neon are dancing a sad polka to the wind.

Everything is on fire in the Bean. Metaphorically. There is no money and no coffee and no employees, only people attempting to exchange shoelaces for expired nut milk. I squeeze and squeeze until I find Callie in the back corner, reading a newspaper from the last century in a sea of shouting because other people are shouting too loudly so one must shout louder. She looks up as if nothing unusual is happening, head bedecked by fuzzy cat earmuffs.

It is so loud I can hear neither chickens nor the sound of my own thinking, which is almost relaxing. *We need to reinstate absolute time*, I tell Callie with arms and fingers that won many a charade championship.

She tilts her head and swipes her forefinger, which may be *How?* or *We have a system of writing, you know.*

I slide my hideous jumper down my wrist just for a moment (half a chicken minute, give or take infinity) to reveal a watch. Her eyes widen. That's right. The authentic pink Mickey Mouse watch she got me for my 35th birthday that I stuffed in my sock drawer and forgot until last night.

By distributing an underground time source run on Mickey's terrifying hands, I sign. I am well aware that sales or distribution of non-chicken time is also a felony. But how long do you serve time for, anyways, now that there is no time? It is too stupid to ponder.

She holds her hand up to her ear and makes a rotational motion,

which is either *Does that need winding? I found it on the street five minutes before your birthday party so I have no idea.* or *Why does Mickey have a third red appendage that wiggles every second in addition to the eternally gloved two?* or *That's nice, but I need to go on my morning run.*

It's powered by a heart of greed wrapped in corporate copyright. Which, as we all know, lasts forever. *And I'd skip that run if I were you. We'll make so very much chicken profit.* I rub thumbs against fingers. Who wouldn't pay for real time in this lawless land? At the very least, we'll start a revolution.

Callie makes a face, swipes her hand downwards, and folds herself into the crowd. Her loss.

I go outside and wait until my shadow disappears beneath me, then peel back my jumper carefully to tune the Mickey fists up to high noon. Good enough. The red appendage can be ignored. What do seconds even mean in this sad, imprecise world?

12:02 PM, Mickey Standard Time

In times of uncertainty I opt for strategy zero: doing the first thing that pops into my head, which in this case is writing Mickey Time on the chicken cages.

The cubes are raised on formless pedestals to be exactly ear-level, perfect for my purposes. I begin carving time into a black strut of the nearest chicken cube with my now-useless lab key. No doubt sensing my hostile intentions, the three roosters try to bite me, wattles and bits bobbing, and get mouthfuls of government standard mesh instead.

"Can you say twelve-oh-two?" I croon.

The people who brainwash children into thinking chickens go *bawk bawk* have clearly never heard a chicken. This one, for example, lets rip a death metal scream lasting a full chicken hour, the kind of poetic soul-rending howl that obliterates happiness within a five-block radius.

I blink back the tears in my eyes. "Yes, that's exactly how I feel."

12:11 PM, Mickey Standard Time

By the time I write 12:02, it is already woefully inaccurate. My savior arrives in a bobbing athletic shape that reveals itself to be Callie, ever-so-steady like she is running on a treadmill that is the doomed world. She hands me two spray cans, a raised eyebrow, and leaves without a word.

1:17 PM, Mickey Standard Time

“What do you think you’re doing, ma’am?”

Some lackey decked in the same absence of color as his soul accosts me on my tenth trip around the block as I spray Generic Black over the 2 in 1:12. One of those new time officers, enlisted from the young angry population that finds wielding a mediocre amount of power extremely attractive.

“Public art.” To bolster my case, I spray a beautiful Metallic Gold 7 with serifs and curlicues while maintaining full eye contact.

“This isn’t art, you’re trying to distribute time.” He reaches for something in his pockets until he realizes he’s not a real cop and has no weapon, covering it up by fiddling with his belt. Real smooth. “Hand over the time device.”

“What are you talking about? There’s no time any more.” A rooster crows in agreement. Good chicken. “I’m just spraying random numbers.” He doesn’t know what time it is either, so can he really punish me?

He grabs me without warning and shoves both jumper sleeves up my arm, revealing only my brown hairy arms. I smile guilelessly.

“I’m on my period,” I announce as he moves downward and he recoils like a beet-red compression spring.

A small crowd has gathered to watch our performance art. “One seventeen!” I shout.

“You can’t spray paint on the cages. Graffiti is illegal and you’re turning the roosters black and gold. Hand them over, ma’am.”

I hold up my hands in a shrug and he snatches the paint cans

away.

“This is your last warning. Don’t cause any more trouble.”

Oh, I’m sure I won’t. A smattering of applause can be heard as I give his receding form the bird. I am flocked by questions. One question.

“How do you know the time?”

“The free trial has expired. If you want further updates, bring something for me next time. Tell your friends.”

2:02 PM, Mickey Standard Time

“Psst, I hear you know some numbers.” A stranger walks up as an actually-on-fire trolley crashes into a deserted dessert store across the street. She doesn’t even blink.

“What you’ll give me for them?”

The stranger is well-prepared. She fishes out three beads of dubious metallicity and a coupon of even more dubious utility from her purse. I peer at the fine print. A free fluffernutter sandwich that expires tomorrow at midnight. “This coupon is an enemy of the state now.”

“Perfect for you, then.”

“Touché.” I pocket my illicit gains and discreetly peer at good ol’ Mickey, sitting in a secured hollow of my bra. “Two oh-three, but bring something better next time.”

“Thanks,” she leaves just as Callie laps me again.

“I just saw four chickens eat another one,” she whispers, disturbed.

“Circle of life.”

“It’s more like a single arrow, chicken to chicken,” she shudders. “I get it now.”

“Get what?”

“This is what we evolved from. That’s why the world is full of chaos and suffering. As long as we don’t descend into cannibalism, it could always be worse.”

“I give it two more days.”

“How’s your get rich quick scheme going?”

I jingle my pockets for a veritable symphony played by illicit goods. “I think it’s time I settle down. Open shop.”

2:29 PM, Mickey Standard Time

Callie and I try every handle in the square until one swings open, which only took three attempts. The timed digilock on the door is of course fried, and everything inside is gone. Dust patterns on empty shelves divine recent history: curvy soda bottles, snatched in blazing trails. Dime romance folios, hesitantly taken.

I dump the contents of my pockets on the countertop.

“I’m hungry,” says Callie as she reaches for a pack of desiccated gum, but I snatch it from her hands.

“This is our emergency reserves. We’ll eat the bawk bawks first.”

“They smell disgusting and I’m afraid of blood. And cannibals.”

“I’m afraid you won’t last long in the apocalypse, then. But Pickles will.” Her maine coon with his wickedly sharp claws and preternatural taste for avian flesh will surely outlive us all.

She mock pouts. I find a marker in the drawer and scrawl COME IN FOR A GOOD TIME on the window.

2:34 PM, Mickey Standard Time

Three people with bona fide thick lenses on their faces walk through the door. The leader, a half-stranger I’ve seen in passing on many a hallway trip, holds two lumps of rustic deconstructed electronics. “You also work for the—”

“The National Institute of Things That Don’t Exist Any More, yes.” Ah, my quaint past life of standards and technology and looking everywhere for the screws I’ve *just* put down. “What’s this?”

“We tried to distribute clock messages on the grid by chaining all the circuit breakers in our block and pulsing them, but they caught us. Working on a radio transmitter now.”

“They fucked up the power because of *you!*” I high-five them. I

have found my people.

She passes a jumble of banana plugs and foil and the last batteries in the world into my hands. Impressive, under these circumstances. “It works on this block, but we haven’t been receiving anything from the outside. What do you think? Maybe the antenna gain isn’t up to spec, or—”

I look up from tracing the connections with the heartburning feeling of swallowing a gray egg in one dry gulp. “The radio’s fine. Communications must be jammed.”

“How?”

How is not the question. The feds have unlimited resources, dickishness, and lunacy. Primitive brains mounted on advanced killing machines, that’s all they are. I wouldn’t put it past them to park all of their drones in a dome around us in a Faraday cage. The point is, there will be no messages in or out of our prison.

“Why don’t we just walk a few blocks over?”

Callie shakes her head. “There are armed officers everywhere on the block boundaries. Saw them on my run.”

I clear my throat for a rousing speech against tyranny, but a loud bang interrupts my thoughts. Ten tipsy revelers pour in and the circuit is gone from my hand, a mysterious bottle in its place. “A good time, you say?” Someone giggles.

The dusty intoxicant burns of tasty futility all the way down.

Time Is An Illusion

We’re the new Atomic Bean. Twenty or three thousand people are here and I’ve lost count of my assets but apparently I can juggle computer mice, so everything is fine. Free love, that’s what it’s all about. Can you get carbon dioxide poisoning from too many people? Since when is carbon dioxide purple? Who needs to breathe anyways?

7:15 PM, Mickey Standard Time

The crowd disappears in a sudden swoosh like someone stuck a

giant vacuum at the door. My head spins as I shoot a glance down to Mickey.

“You again.” The chickenshit lackey reappears amidst the purple smoke—half garbage can fire, half unsanctioned dope—like a bad magician. My jovial mood vanishes.

“I could say the same.”

“This is another illegal enterprise. You don’t have the rights to rent here.”

“I sure do,” I dig through the drawer and hold up the first piece of paper I find.

He stares at it for an embarrassingly long chicken time per word. “This is a request for de-po-si-tion for Abraham Saarinen.”

“Hmm, are you sure?”

He twitches. “Vacate the premises, ma’am, or I’ll have to call in the feds.”

Callie looks at me with furrowed brows. Surely it’s gone too far, now. We have no idea what’s happening in the world beyond our two blocks. If I perish, no one will know, either. How stupidly brave do I want to be?

“You don’t really mean that, sir,” Callie plasters on her most appeasing face. “It’s just for fun.”

That’s because Callie thinks everything will be fine. It will go back to normal in another week, or even if it doesn’t, people are resilient and will learn to adapt. They already are.

So, how about this fucking chicken time, huh? The new de facto greeting is a faux complaint.

So dumb, the other person shakes his head. *Did you hear about the farmshare that’s giving out ostrich eggs?*

No way, where? And so the crisis is forgotten.

They come in my store not to ask for the time but to waste all of it, meet new people, find fuck buddies. Some think chicken time might even be *nice*, the people who have never starved or fled oppression or looked for a hint of sun from the bottom of a well. Why

don't we give it a few weeks and see how it goes? No alarm clocks because no work—isn't that great, waking with nature? No electronics, we were too dependent on them anyways. No currency, isn't that what we always wanted? No food, I was going to go on a diet anyways! Down with capitalism! Bawk bawk!

I can't help but think about my parents. They came to the States with nothing save a young lifetime of scars just so I could grow up in this sterile grid of suburbia with a generic flower name. They would want me to shrink into my shell. Keep my head down. Survive.

"Thank you," I say to him, and I mean it, for ending my temporary lunacy. He tilts his head in confusion, eerily like a chicken.

I dig in my chest and he backs off a little. Yes, I'm hiding a bomb in my average-sized bosom. I fling the pink watch in front of his face. Everyone gasps.

"This is the last real clock on this continent. Mickey standard time. Take it. Or don't, it doesn't matter. You've won. No one wants to know the time any more."

I drop it to the ground and stomp right on Mickey's giant nose. His hands twist and cease their mechanical shuffle. And that's that.

"Long live chicken time!" I vomit maniacal laughter.

The lackey's in over his head, so he does exactly as expected: he grabs us by our collars and tosses us outside. Thank chicken he doesn't have a weapon.

"Sit down and shut up!" He gives us a good kick before shuffling off to harass other people.

What else is there to do?

Rooster crow #1

People are lying on the sidewalks, weeping at the beauty of the sunset in their galline bliss. Some are hugging the cages and communing with fowl. Maybe chicken time is good after all.

"He's an idiot," Callie ties the broken watch on my wrist. She always has her head on right. "We can fix Mickey, right?"

Of course. The quartz crystal is fine. The circuitry is probably fine. But I don't feel fine. The revolution is no more, but it never was. This block is only missing one thing.

I walk up to the chicken huggers. "How can we keep our saviors in cages? We must free the chickens."

"Yes! Free the chickens! FREE THE CHICKENS!"

The crowd amplifies my seed message a thousandfold. A massive crowbar magically appears and time is unleashed into the world. The roosters tear a path through the crowd with their gyroscopically stabilized beaks and needle talons. We run away from the screaming madness, hand in hand. This is a scene for Pickles, not soft lazy human flesh.

"You did that on purpose!" Callie yells.

"Me?" I clap my other hand over my heart in mock piety. "I sure did. That was hilarious."

We pass Callie's house. Pickles scrabbles at the window, eyeing chickens outside with ravenous appetite, the poor thing. We pass the post office, even more useless than before. The square and the Bean, utterly abandoned.

"You do this every day?" My heart is beating so fast it's just one continuous drill in my chest, which can't be good.

"Uh huh! Twenty times, at least!" She looks like she's viewing a particularly boring business presentation.

"Oh no. No no, no." I stop abruptly in front of the bank with all of its glass panels missing, an apt metaphor for how my eyes and legs and body have decided to shut down.

A tug from very far away. "That's no good. You have to keep walking."

"I twisted my ankle on a drone blade back there."

Callie clucks in exasperation. "Come on. Let's finish one lap and check up on the free chickens."

She half hefts me on her shoulders, then we walk as fast as it's humanly possible to walk but only to go round and round, so what's the point? At the corner I eye the unmoving array of officers in the distance, their armored masks unresponsive to my dirty looks. We

turn onto the short side of the block and begin squeaking with every step. Someone's spilled thousands of grinning rubber ducks here, which might as well have happened. Turn again. My house, still standing.

"Isn't this fun?"

"No. I'm ready to lie down now." And never get up again.

"Oh no, we're going to go see what the chicken scene is like. You'll have a laugh, you always do. One foot in front of the other now."

As I stagger onward people join us, one by one out of nowhere, going progressively faster and faster until I start running just to not embarrass myself. Callie laughs at the random show of solidarity, but I only feel uneasy cramps in every fiber of my being.

We turn again and the entire street is now a massive bon-fire. The people around us rush toward the blaze in raucous cheer, directed by smiling volunteer traffic controllers waving human-size sprigs of thyme. Chickens are being roasted on spits while hundreds of people are prostrate in front of the flame in fervent prayer. Someone is spreading new gospel in the form of slam poetry that somehow pierces through the crowd straight into your eardrums. "Cluck. Cluck. The chicken is love. Cluck. The chicken is life."

What. The fuck. Callie waves her profane fists with bewildered vehemence.

I drop to the ground and laugh into the soundless void until I feel only pain. It's true what they say: chicken love conquers all.

07:00:00, Mountain Standard Time

My alarm goes off. I am in my scratchy sheets. Cold morning air blasts through the window. My rows of insulation are gone. All the devices beep their usual functionalities. My last memory is of some sort of ritual dance, but the details are vanishing faster than rooster legs. I scrawl snatches down in my dream diary:

- *everything was on fire*
- *something something no power, nuggets, adventures in micro-*

barter-transactions

- *chickens in black cages on pedestals*
- *chickens?? chicken time...or mickey time?*
- *this goon made me break my watch and _____*

I go outside. Zero chickens. The air smells like good-ol' suburban mulch. The sidewalk free of mangled drones. I walk to work. The clocks are back, every single one. Even the lasers and steel of the atomic clock we saw crumpled beneath the jaw, the ultra-low-pressure vacuum restored. We scream and hug, but we do not know why.

The clock is not nearly as good as it was—it's now merely accurate to a second over the age of the universe. Our supervisor tells us there were high amounts of hallucinogens in the city air yesterday due to a malfunction at the rubber duck factory, which may have led to delusions of grandeur. I check page 57 of my lab notebook for the accuracy data I measured two days ago. Page 57 is blank. I start in the hallway when I see familiar faces from a hazy banana plug revolution, and we mutually avert our gazes.

I arrive home. The television says adverse effects from duck smoke also include mass hysteria, seeing animals that don't exist, and setting your house on fire. Each citizen will now be informed of their activities as monitored by the friendly tracker drones so they know whom to apologize to.

"You, Rosie, worker 9E72BA," the television quacks. "You were a model citizen. You came home from work and slept fitfully throughout the night. No apologies are necessary."

Was it all a fever dream?

17:41:19, Mountain Standard Time

I don't get fevers. I stare at my computer. I send pings from my main personal account to the side one I'm not supposed to have.

time for a test.

time for a test.

so, how about this fucking
chicken time, huh?

you chicken fucking censors

you chicken fucking censors

i sure like to cook chickens for
a long time

place the ch*cken in the oven
for 45 minutes, or until juices
run clear

ok did you filter out chickens
timez too

most impressive

most impressive

ickenchay imetay

chix clox

chix clox

18:28:22, Mountain Standard Time

“I’m guessing you didn’t get my heirloom chicken tikka recipes,” I say to Callie by way of greeting in the Atomic Bean.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“It didn’t happen, right?” She pecks her lower lip. “That would be too crazy.”

If I’ve lost Callie, then I’ve lost suburban America. “Come on. You remember the cannibal chickens? The killjoy?”

“Yes, but...they don’t feel real. You’re saying they put us all back in our beds and cleaned up the whole city? Occam’s razor says—”

“Bawk bawk.” I slide down my sleeve. Mickey, glasgow smile behind broken glass, pointing his hands at 7:16 PM Mickey Standard Time.

“Oh no.” Callie flinches backwards. Not what I was expecting. “No. No no no. You’re going to make this a thing. Can’t we just be happy the world is normal again?”

“A *thing*? You don’t want to know what the fuck happened?”

“Yes, the gall of me to want life to be normal. I have my job back. I have food again. Pickles has food again. Don’t take this away from me.”

“Don’t make this about your cat. He had plenty of chickens to eat.”

“Enough, Ro. The rest of us have lives. You want to take on the feds with a broken watch, that’s nice, except you’d screw me and your co-workers and your fancy clock over too. Don’t you dare.”

“But you saved the watch...”

Her pupils dilate with something suspiciously like pity, one of my top-five least favorite emotions.

“Because it was my present to you,” she says, as slowly and deliberately as one would roast a bird. I misread the signs so hard I may as well be on another continent.

You know what, my beef is not with the chickens. It’s with the people. People disappoint you in all the worst ways, and just when you think they’re done stomping on your heart, they skewer it and grill it over the flames some more.

“Okay. I won’t.”

“Really.”

“You’re right,” I shrug. “I have no power. If no one else wants to revolt, I won’t either. That’s how these things die, right?”

She smiles, empty as the vacuum chamber. “Good.”

18:59:06, Mountain Standard Time

“I’d like to order all of your item A-4 inventory, please.”

“Affirmative.”

18:59:09, Mountain Standard Time

chix clox? are you in?

fuck yeah

18:59:33, Mountain Standard Time

The sun is bright in the square. Yard sale flyers are flapping in the wind. A very familiar kid in a decidedly collegiate backpack starts when he sees me, but I give him my most winning smile. That’s right. Keep walking. It was all a dream.

I put up my own flyer.

CHIX CLOX, it says in nice alternating red and black letters.

CLOX FOR YOUR CHIX.

I turn around. His eyes narrow after five slow seconds. His fists scrunch up by his sides in a sad Pavlovian reflex, but his mind doesn’t know why so he relaxes in helpless confusion. I give him the two-finger salute.

I know who you are now, sophomore at Generic U. I know you dragged us into our beds and hauled my nuggets away. I know the feds are so cowardly that they’d rather gaslight all of us than admit to fucking up.

Want to know what I’m going to do when I get home? I’m going

to raise 57 Drone-2-U chickens with love and plenty of outside time. I'm going to peruse all neighborhood cameras to see what interesting footage they have of last night. I have the keys to the national clock, and you bet I'm going to modulate the universal time signal with CHIX CLOX with the help of some strategically placed not-new friends. There are many, many ways to skin a bird.

Cock-a-doodle-do, motherfuckers.

