

The Little Hen

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

Janet must not have known that she was just a little hen with not much more brain than a tiny bird. She believed she knew everything, how to get around the place, how to defend herself, and how to make up her own mind. She felt she didn't have to learn and was convinced she was better, braver and more independent than all the others. Janet loved her sisters dearly, even her brother. They all kept her warm at night on the roost, and lullabied each other to sleep. The chattering on the grass in the afternoon was also a time for opening their hearts to each other.

Janet was usually content with any type of weather with strong winds simply guiding her and her friends along the hedges; but one thing she disliked was rain even though she enjoyed bathing her toes and claws in puddles. She was quite pleased with her black and white plumage and tried not to get too muddy and soggy while wading through the veggie patch. On those rainy mornings though, Mrs Matt would rarely attend her garden even with boots on and a raincoat. She was stubborn, Janet thought in a sulky mood.

Very wet days meant days spent with the flock. No walk down the narrow path leading to the garden as Mrs Matt wouldn't be churning out the tasty meals. The gentle words of the lady, complimenting her on her clean, lustrous feathers still resonated right now in her chook mind. Janet liked the sound of her voice. She tried to emulate her with her own cackling and impressive flapping jumps just to show a bit of prowess. Well, never mind, it couldn't always be great, so she just had to resign herself to spending the morning going through the compost. If bored, she could shake herself in a dust bath under shelter to renew her gloss and beauty. She might also spend more time on her nest before and after laying her egg, nodding now and then while dreaming.

In the last minutes of her life, Janet felt really happy; she had just spent two hours with Mrs Matt, helping her with her gardening. Surely, Mrs Matt would have been grateful to her for gobbling up all those slimy little worms. Her gizzard full of her gourmet meal, her crop feeling a bit heavy, she delighted in carrying it around like some showy appendage. Later on she might join the others and, like a drunken chook, would tell them what a glorious morning she had had.

On that final day, as a habit, she continued to forage for the odd grain or seed that had dropped on the gravel. So, when the postman arrived in his yellow car and stopped in the courtyard by the house, she lingered around, pecking away. He knocked at Mrs Matt's door to deliver the mail then sat back at the wheel. With a vroom vroom and a swirl of dust he was gone.

Janet had never thought that sometimes you do need your flock to alert you to danger in case you yourself were blind or deaf to it. Within a second the wheel had rolled over her body. She never made a sound. She died peacefully, one might say, and flew, invisible like a thought, over the rainbow. On the ground Mrs Matt simply saw a mash of red-stained flesh, feathers and broken bones. Janet's head and her bright red comb were all intact. Her eye, still open, was staring up at her garden friend.

