THE HEN WHO DREAMED SHE COULD FLY

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I REFUSE
TO LAY ANOTHER EGG!
The egg rolled to a stop upon reaching the wire mesh of the coop. Sprout looked at it—a chalky egg flecked with blood. She hadn’t laid an egg in two days; she doubted she could anymore. Yet there it was—one small, sad egg.

*This cannot happen again,* she thought. Would the farmer’s wife take it? She’d collected all the others, complaining every time that they were getting smaller and smaller. She wouldn’t leave this one behind just because it was ugly, would she?

Sprout couldn’t even stand upright today. No wonder—somehow she had managed to lay an egg without having eaten a thing. Sprout wondered how many eggs she had left inside her; she hoped this was the last one. With a sigh she peered outside. Because her cage was near the entrance she could see out beyond the wire mesh walls. The door to the coop didn’t quite fit its frame; through the gap she could see an acacia tree. Sprout loved that tree so much,
she didn’t complain about the cold winter wind that made it through the gap, or the pelting summer rain.

Sprout was an egg-laying hen, which meant she was raised for her eggs. She had come to the coop over a year before. Since then, all she had done was lay eggs. She couldn’t wander around, flap her wings, or even sit on her own eggs. She had never stepped outside the coop. But ever since she had seen a hen running around the yard with the adorable chicks she had hatched, Sprout had harbored a secret desire—to hatch an egg and watch the birth of her chick. But it was an impossible dream. The coop was tilted forward so the eggs would roll to the other side of a barrier, separating them from their mothers.

The door opened, and in came the farmer, pushing a wheelbarrow. The hens clucked impatiently, creating a din.

“Breakfast!”

“I’m hungry, hurry hurry!”

With a bucket, the farmer scooped out the feed. “Always so hungry! You better make it worth it. This feed isn’t cheap.”

Sprout looked through the wide-open door, focusing on the world outside. It had been a while since she’d had an appetite. She had no desire to lay another egg. Her heart emptied of feeling every time the farmer’s wife took her eggs. The pride she felt when she laid one was replaced by sadness. She was exhausted after a full year of this. She couldn’t so much as touch her own eggs, not even with the tip of her foot. And she didn’t know what happened to
them after the farmer’s wife carried them in her basket out of the coop.

It was bright outside. The acacia tree on the edge of the yard was blooming with white flowers. Their sweet scent caught the breeze and wafted into the coop, filling Sprout’s heart. Sprout got up and shoved her head through the wires of her cage. Her bare, featherless neck was rubbed raw. *The leaves laid flowers again!* Sprout was envious. If she squinted, she could make out the light green leaves that had matured and given birth to fragrant flowers. She’d spotted the blooming acacia tree the very day she was shut in the coop. A few days later, the tree shed its flowers, which flew around like snowflakes, leaving behind green leaves. The leaves lived on until late fall before turning yellow and then dropping quietly. Sprout was awestruck as she watched the leaves stand strong against rough winds and heavy rain before fading and falling. When she saw them reborn in light green the following spring, she was overcome with excitement.

Sprout was the best name in the world. A sprout grew into a leaf and embraced the wind and the sun before falling and rotting and turning into mulch for bringing fragrant flowers into bloom. Sprout wanted to do something with her life, just like the sprouts on the acacia tree. That was why she’d named herself after them. Nobody called her Sprout, and she knew her life wasn’t like a sprout’s, but still the name made her feel good. It was her secret. Ever since she’d named herself, she’d gotten into the habit of
noting the events occurring outside the coop: everything from the moon waxing and waning and the sun rising and setting to the animals in the barnyard bickering.

“Go on, eat so you can lay lots of big eggs!” the farmer bellowed. He said this every time he fed the hens, and Sprout was sick of hearing it. She gazed into the yard, ignoring him.

The animals out there were busy eating breakfast. A large family of ducks surrounded a trough with their tails pointing up to the sky, swallowing their food without once raising their heads. The old dog was nearby, stuffing himself. He may have his own bowl, but he had to scarf down all his food before the rooster got wind of it. Once, he refused to let the rooster eat out of his bowl and received a vicious pecking that drew blood from his muzzle. The rooster and hen’s trough wasn’t crowded. Because they didn’t have any offspring right now, they were the only ones who could eat leisurely. Even so, the rooster still showed interest in the old dog’s bowl. He cemented his status as the leader of the barn by refusing to back off even when the dog lowered his tail and growled. He was handsome, with a tall, awe-inspiring tail, a bright red comb, a fearless gaze, and a sharp beak. It fell to him to crow at dawn, and after that he would saunter around the fields with the hen.

Whenever she saw the yard hen, Sprout couldn’t stand it—she felt even more confined in her wire cage. She, too, wanted to dig through the pile of compost with the rooster, walk side by side with him, and sit on her eggs. She couldn’t
get to the yard where the ducks and the old dog and the rooster and the hen lived together no matter how far she stretched her neck through the wires; they just plucked her feathers. *Why am I in the coop when that hen is out in the yard?* She didn’t know that the rooster and the hen were organically raised native Korean chickens. Nor did she know that an egg she laid on her own would never hatch, no matter how long she sat on it. If she’d known that, she might never have begun dreaming of hatching one.

The ducks finished eating and filed under the acacia tree, waddling toward the nearby hill, trailed by a slightly smaller bird with different coloring. His head was green like an acacia leaf—maybe he wasn’t a duck. But then again, he quacked and waddled. Sprout didn’t know how a mallard duck had come to live in the yard, she just knew he looked different. She was still gazing outside when the farmer came up to feed her. He cocked his head as he noticed the previous day’s feed still in her trough. “Huh? What’s going on here?” he muttered. He usually left after pouring the feed, to be followed by his wife collecting the eggs. But today he was doing her job. “Not eating at all these days. Must be sick.” The farmer tutted, then glanced at Sprout with displeasure. He reached down to pick up her egg. As soon as his fingers touched it, it gave way; thin wrinkles rippled across its surface. Sprout was shocked. She knew it was small and ugly, but she had never imagined it would be soft. The shell hadn’t even finished hardening! The farmer frowned.
Sprout felt her heart tearing in two. Her sorrow each time her eggs were taken away was nothing compared to how she felt now. Sobs filled her throat; her entire body stiffened. Poor thing came out without a shell. The farmer tossed the soft egg into the yard; bracing herself, Sprout squeezed her eyes shut. The egg broke without a sound. The old dog lumbered over to lick it up. Tears flowed freely from Sprout’s eyes for the first time in her life. I refuse to lay another egg! Ever!
FLYING THE COOP
Sprout liked to stare out into the barnyard. She would much rather watch the ducks scuttle away from the dog than peck at feed. Closing her eyes, she imagined herself wandering freely about. She fantasized about sitting in a nest, on an egg, about venturing into the fields with the rooster, and about following the ducks around. She sighed. It was pointless to dream. It would never happen to her. She had not been able to lay an egg for the past few days. This was no surprise, since she could barely get to her feet.

On the fifth day without an egg, Sprout woke up from a deep sleep to hear the farmer’s wife grousing, “We need to cull it. Take it out of the coop.” Sprout had never thought she would leave the coop. She didn’t understand the word “cull,” but the thought of getting out of the coop gave her a burst of energy. She lifted her head with effort and sipped some water. The next day, too, she failed to lay an egg. Sprout could sense it—her body could no longer make eggs. But she still took in a bit of water and feed. She
couldn’t wait for her new life to begin. She would hatch an egg and raise a chick. She could do it if she could only get out into the yard. She waited, brimming with anticipation. She slept fitfully, imagining playing in the fields with the rooster and scratching at the ground.

The following day, the door to the coop opened and the farmer and his wife entered, pushing an empty wheelbarrow. Sprout was so weak she couldn’t stand up straight, but mentally she was sharper than ever before. She raised her voice for the first time in a long while: “I’m flying the coop!” she clucked. The most wonderful day since she was shut in the coop had dawned. The scent of the acacias filled the air.

“We can probably get something for the meat, right?” the farmer’s wife asked her husband.

“I’m not sure. It looks sickly. . . .”

Their conversation didn’t register with Sprout, whose heart pounded at the thought that she would finally live in the yard. The farmer grabbed her by the wings and pulled her out of her cramped cage. Sprout landed with a thud in the wheelbarrow. She was too weak to resist or even to flap her wings. She craned her neck but for only a moment. Then other weak hens landed on top of her, smothering Sprout. In a separate wire cage, the farmer and his wife loaded up old hens whose egg-bearing years were behind them but who were otherwise healthy, then loaded them into a truck that drove off the farm. Sprout remained in the wheelbarrow, weighed down by hens on the verge of
death. The last hen landed on her head. Sprout was scared. She tried not to lose consciousness, wondering what was happening. The loud clucks gradually died down, and soon she couldn’t hear a thing. It was getting difficult to breathe. Is this what it means to be culled? Sprout’s eyelids drooped. I can’t die like this. She tried to muster up courage but grew only more frightened. Sorrow bubbled up from the bottom of her heart. She couldn’t die like this, not before getting to the yard. She had to escape from the wheelbarrow. But the hens stacked on top of her were crushing her bones.

Sprout focused on the image of the acacia tree blooming with flowers, the green leaves, the wonderful scent, and the happy animals in the yard. She had only one wish, to hatch an egg and watch the birth of a chick. It was an ordinary wish, but now she was dying before she could fulfill it. As her consciousness wavered, Sprout began to see things. She saw herself sitting on an egg, warming it in a nest. The noble rooster stood guard at her side and acacia flowers fluttered down like snow. I’ve always wanted to hatch an egg. Just once! One egg just for me. I’ve wanted to whisper, I won’t ever leave you, Baby. Go on, crack the shell, I want to meet you. Don’t be scared, Baby! And cuddle my baby upon birth. Believing she was really incubating an egg, she lost consciousness, a smile on her beak.

Sprout opened her eyes. How much time had passed? It was raining, and she was soaked to the bone. She didn’t know where she was. I guess I didn’t die. She was freezing. Even after her mind cleared, she couldn’t move. She would
feel better if she shook her feathers out, but she didn’t have the strength.

She heard something from above. Only after that noise repeated itself did she understand.

“Hey, you. Can you hear me?” the voice called.

Sprout managed to lift her head. She could smell a terrible odor but couldn’t see what was around her.

“You’re fine. I knew it!” The excited voice grew louder. “Get up! Take a step!”

“Take a step? I can’t. It’s too hard.” Sprout looked around at the trees on the dusky slope and the grass dancing in the wind on top of the dike. From somewhere over there she heard the voice again.

“You’re not dead. Come on, get up!”

“Of course I’m not dead.” Sprout flexed her wings and stretched her legs and shook her neck to and fro. Everything was intact; she was just weak. “Who are you?”

“Stop talking. You need to run away. Hurry!”

Sprout staggered to her feet. It took everything she had to take a few steps toward the voice. When was the last time she’d walked? One step, two steps. She froze in place, then sat down, stunned. “Oh, my god. What is this?”

Dead hens were piled all around her. She was stepping on them. She was stuck in a large open grave.

“But I’m still alive! How can this be?” Sprout sprang up and ran around, clucking in panic. But she couldn’t escape. She trod on corpses with every step she took. Her terror was bottomless. She couldn’t believe her eyes.
“What in the world are you doing?” the voice asked from beyond the grave.

But Sprout was too busy running around and clucking. “Oh, no! What am I going to do?”
“Watch out, be careful!”
“I’m not dead! How can this be?”
“Look over there. You’re being targeted!”
“What am I going to do? What am I going to do?”
“Run away! Can’t you see you’re a target? You dumb hen! Those eyes are on you!” the voice hollered.

Only then did Sprout stop making a fuss. Something was slinking in the grass opposite from where the voice was coming. Two eyes were glaring at her. A chill shot down her spine.

“If you stay there you’re going to get into trouble!”

Sprout didn’t know who was ordering her around from outside the open grave but decided he was more trustworthy than the glinting eyes. “You must be the rooster!” she cried. Only he would have the courage to shout in the dark like this. Sprout followed the voice to the edge of the grave. The hole was shallower there, so she was able to hop out easily.

“Good job,” her new friend said in a calm, kind voice.

Sprout shuddered and took a good look at her friend. It was the mallard duck from the yard—the mallard with extraordinary green and brown feathers, the loner who always trailed the family of ducks. It began to sink in that she had indeed left the chicken coop. “Thank you for saving me!”
“No need to thank me. I couldn’t let him get you. When he gets someone alive, I get so unbelievably angry.”

“Who?”

“The weasel!” The mallard shuddered, his neck feathers bristling.

Sprout trembled, too. The weasel stood proudly on the other side of the open grave. He was glaring at them, angry that his meal had escaped.

“Go back, now that you survived,” the mallard said and waddled off.

“Wait, where?” The mallard wasn’t planning to take her along! She wanted to follow him into the yard. Why would she go back? “I’m not going back to the coop. I just got out! I was culled.”

“Culled? What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it means I’m free.”

“In any case it’s dangerous to stay here. Just go. I’m late. Everyone will be in bed.” The mallard waddled on, looking tired.

Sprout glanced back at the weasel and hurried after the mallard. “How did you know I was in the grave?”

“On my way back from the reservoir I saw the weasel hanging around, which meant there was still a hen alive in the Hole of Death. I know that awful creature!” The mallard shuddered again, his neck feathers trembling. “He’s really something—he always hunts the living. And he’s big—bigger than any of the other ones. He hunts the living to show how powerful he is. A living hen like you
is good prey. He gets what he’s after from time to time. You were lucky.”

“That’s right, I was lucky. It’s all thanks to you.” Sprout trotted right behind the mallard. Hearing that she was good prey made her feathers stand on end.

“I’ve never met a hen like you. It’s good that you made a racket. The weasel must have been wondering how he could snatch such feisty prey.” The mallard laughed gleefully and looked back at the grave.

There was the weasel, still standing there studying them. Sprout quickly averted her eyes, but the mallard was unruffled. “I’m sure you’ll meet him again. That one doesn’t give up.”

“Really?” Sprout sputtered.

“I think you’re the first hen to come out of there alive.”

“But I was never dead,” Sprout murmured.

The mallard continued on his way. They passed under the acacia tree. “Where will you go?” he asked.

Sprout hesitated. “Well . . . I don’t have the tiniest desire to go back to the coop.”

“You already said that.”

“Riiight, I did.” Sprout hoped the mallard would help her out. “Um, couldn’t you take me with you?”

“Where? Into the barn?” The mallard shook his head. Sprout had put him on the spot. But, perhaps feeling sorry for her, he didn’t say no right away. “I’m not from here. But you’re a hen, so maybe . . .” The mallard led her to the barn, where the animals slept at night.