

## Chicken Soup

by Carol Gall

Ryan wasn't going to let the fact that she hadn't done it before change her mind. She could remember many occasions where she had tackled something without having a clue. This month with that blasted car repair, house insurance and the element for the oven sputtering out, she was out of money for groceries, existing on potatoes and greens mostly. The offer of a free hen, albeit a very old hen, probably tough as a piece of leather Marie had told her was too good to pass up. She envisioned a nice flavor-infused stock, with rich yellow fat, bits of meat to add to the next installment of potatoes and greens. Her stomach let out a serious grumble at the thought. And in this YouTube age where every step was laid out, seriously, how hard could it be?

She'd brought the apple-boxed hen home in the back seat of the Corolla, tipped her into the storage shed last night with a little tray of water. Marie said not to feed her so the eviscerating was easier. But Ryan felt that keeping the bird in a strange place without any kind of food was cruel, so she'd slipped in a dish of black oil sunflower seeds and left the porch light on.

Early the next morning, Ryan aproned up. She lit the burner under a pot of water big enough to dunk the whole bird. Outside she brought the hose close, laid out her cutting board and sharpened knife and hung a string from the maple for plucking. When the water was hot she carried it out to the patio and went to get the bird.

Her favourite YouTube slaughtering video, if you can actually have such a thing, was a young woman who was given older hens past their egg laying peak. She gently laid them in a towel on her lap, stroked them, thanked them and cleanly cut their throats. Ryan thought this looked much better than the brusque force of an axe.

Inside the shed the chicken stared up from her perch on a leaning ladder. The sunflower seeds were gone, traded for a tidy tower of chicken poo on the concrete

floor. Ryan leaned in for the bird with a second's hesitation before grabbing and it darted left, flew down, dashed between her legs and out the shed door.

No instruction video covered how to catch a runaway chicken and as Ryan was discovering it wasn't an easy task. She'd get close, corner it and just as she reached, it would fly up or tear sideways. She was very thankful the yard was fenced but even that didn't seem to be making a difference. Part of it, okay, she admitted it, was that tiny bit of fear, that she'd get it in her hands and it would put a beak size hole in her arm. She didn't know how aggressively a chicken defended itself, especially one who didn't know you. Pausing to catch her breath, she wondered how long a chicken could keep going, an old chicken, before it passed out and she could gather the comatose bird and quickly do the deed. After nearly an hour of the chase me, chase me game, it was clear it could be a very long time.

Ryan sat down to rest, the chicken head-down in the corner garden, acting oblivious to Ryan's presence (which she knew was a ruse; that hen was calculating the exact distance between them as she pecked). The pot of water on the patio had long lost its steam. The sun was climbing and she calculated maybe another half hour of shade before full sun would be heating up her carefully prepared processing area. She decided she'd leave this whole business until later. In the meantime, she refilled the dish with sunflower seeds, another with bits of leftover potatoes and greens from the fridge, made sure there was water and left for a few errands.

It was a day that didn't get much better. Traffic was slow on a route that was usually quiet. The part for the oven that they'd emailed was in, wasn't. The specialty bookstore her mom said was the only place to get the paperback she wanted was as far across town as humanly possible and it was closed. The bank had a four-person line-up at every ATM and when she finally got her turn it burped and instructed her to please see a teller, a queue that was snaking near out the door. When she finally got to the front the teller laughed:

“Oh that machine has been doing that all week, just ignore it and continue on” And how exactly was I to know that, thought Ryan, smiling back.

So when she arrived at her mom’s much later than planned, without her late birthday present, she felt the least she could do was to accept the invitation for just a very simple dinner, honey, which was, (she couldn’t believe this) potatoes and greens. It was near dark when she arrived home.

The backyard was quiet, food dishes empty, the hen nowhere to be seen. She looked in the shed and sure enough, there she was, back on her ladder roost, looking all sleepy eyed and innocent. I wonder if I could catch you now, Ryan thought, moving closer. The hen looked at her with droopy eyes, grumbled but didn’t move from her perch. Ryan reached under and picked her up; the hen gave a small stab of alarm but then settled her feathers against Ryan’s chest and cooed. Ryan didn’t know a chicken could coo. It wasn’t until she put her gently back on the ladder and closed the door that she realized she had her in her hands and could have done the deed. She sloughed this off with the late hour; it would have to wait until tomorrow.

The next morning the phone woke her, someone was sick; she had to go into work. The hen was waiting at the door when Ryan opened the shed. She put down a dish of leftovers from her mom’s potatoes and greens, a few popcorn kernels and crusts of bread that she’d put in the freezer for croutons or something. The hen followed the plate to the bricks outside and began pecking.

One thing and then another. Her co-worker, Marly, was sick all week and along with her own shifts, she’d picked up most of Marly’s. She was happy for the hours, justified an extra 20 bucks out of her excruciatingly meager budget to buy some on-sale clearout sausages, a family size bag of brown rice and a rainbow of veggies. That made her feel a whole lot better about not getting down to the business of chicken soup.

The chicken, meanwhile, seemed to be having a dandy little life here in the backyard. Red, she'd began calling her, had started to dig holes in the shade under the maple. Ryan found her when she arrived home from work, tucked in a little hollow, rolling around, dust flying. The hen stopped when Ryan came close, shook out her feathers and jumped up on the birdbath. From the pile of droppings, she'd been there before. Ryan noticed Red had helped herself to the flowers, not a blossom to be seen anywhere and the kale had little bites all the way up the stem.

*Okay little chicken, your time is near.* She mentally booked in next Sunday as butcher day.

Friday morning she found eggs in the corner, under the shovel where a pile of leaves and lawnmower grass had collected. She might not have noticed if she hadn't lifted the shovel to collect the droppings, but there they were, 3 extra large brown eggs, one still warm.

Wow, Red. She dumped an extra scoop of wild bird seed into her bowl.

Back inside she put two eggs on one plate, the warm one on another and put both plates in the refrigerator. She called Marie on her lunch break.

"You know that hen you gave me?" Ryan said.

"Yeah, how was she, did you get that rich yellow broth I was telling you about?"

"Well, not yet. Actually I haven't got around to it and she's still in my backyard."

"What?"

"The hen, I didn't get around to butchering her because I couldn't catch her and now she's laying eggs."

“No way, she’s a very old chicken.” Marie said.

“Well, I’ve got three eggs in the fridge.”

“Well, how about that. “

“Is she going to keep laying them?”

“Who knows, maybe, maybe not.”

“You want her back?” Marie asked, pacing back and forth in the coffee room.

“Nah, you keep her, might just be a last ditch attempt to avoid the chopping block, or maybe just the alignment of the moon and the planet or something. She’s a very old chicken. “

“And those eggs, can I eat them? I mean one was warm so that’s today’s but the others weren’t in the fridge.” Ryan asked.

“The eggs are fine, they have a protective layer, most of the world in fact doesn’t refrigerate eggs. And we know they are less than five days old, unless you’ve got another chicken laying eggs in ... where are you keeping her?”

“In my garden shed.”

“And what are you feeding her?” Marie asked.

“Veggie scraps, wild bird seed, old bread, leftovers.”

“You’re falling for her, aren’t you?”

Ryan laughed, "goodbye Marie."

Ryan collected a few sandwich crusts left lying on the lunchroom table, tucked them into her empty sandwich tin.

"What are you doing?" a coworker asked as Ryan reached into the garbage can for the crusts of a rich looking roast beef sandwich.

"Just feeding my chicken soup," Ryan replied, snatching the morsel and an apple core and snapping the lid of her container shut.