

Mighty Mouse

Jane Wodening

 It began with one of those grade school projects where the teacher buys two dozen fertile eggs and incubates them and breaks one open every day to show the children how the embryo develops. The first few days, the eggs seem to get more and more yukky and then gradually across a few days one can see the growing purpose, the unfinished bird stopped in early development there in the dish before the children. The closer they are to full term, the longer they take to die, but they're only eggs, after all, to make omelette out of, or pumpkin pie. One hundred million possible chickens out of each egg, the rooster's sperm speeding with rhythmic intensity toward the goal, each sperm's purpose to touch it, enter the egg and merge its individuality with the individuality of the egg, making an individual and never-repeated chicken. But life is so fulsome. There are enough chickens in the world, even with everyone eating them so much, two over easy, a chicken in every pot, chicken soup with rice, Cacciatore, etc., all across the land. If we didn't eat them, they would be made into dog food like the horses were when the car came in and replaced them.

At the twenty-first day there were three eggs left in the incubator and the fifth graders watched in awe as little cracks and holes appeared in the eggs, took turns bending their heads down to hear the tiny tapping of the

chicks still in the eggs pounding with all their little might to get out now of the shell that had kept them safe and alive so far. If they didn't get out this day, they would suffocate and die, so they had to have a certain amount of strength and determination.

The littlest egg broke open first, before lunch, and there drooped a soggy, exhausted creature, his bulging belly still showing the workings of his digestion through thin gray skin lightly streaked with sparse wet down. His bare, three-toed feet couldn't hold him up and he sagged there amid the shards of his shell and all the fifth graders thought he would die like the others had.

But he didn't die. And the two other chicks hatched out before the end of the day and Cheri said she knew a lady who was raising chicks and could take them and that lady was me.

I put the three in a box separate from the Leghorn chicks I was raising because the Leghorns were considerably older and looked monstrous next to these newly-hatched infants. The one from the littlest egg grew but was always the littlest. Soon, he revealed his masculinity by growing a comb at the same time he was growing black and white striped feathers. Unlike the other, bigger chicks, he seemed unafraid of our hands and would even climb up on a hand, stretch his neck and look into our faces. We named him Mighty Mouse for his bravery and his small stature.

Soon, we put all the chicks out in the chicken house where the three or four older Rhode Island Reds could see them but not peck them and they grew, then I released them into the yard.

One of the Leghorns was a rooster too and I watched them as, instead of fighting, they became buddies together. Mighty Mouse, less than half the size of the other, proud and yet amiable. The two would crow together, answering each other from across the yard. The other two chicks from the school project grew to be fine full-size hens, one black, one brown, but neither one lived long. The black one I believe was killed by a raccoon named Alice whom we raised then later released. Alice would come back to visit sometimes, leaving a partly-eaten chicken as a calling-card. It was a devastating time for the fowl that next spring when Mighty Mouse was a year old.

There were about a dozen chickens roosting in the chicken house and one hen, Sunshine, on the porch. Sunshine was lame and had suffered so

much at the beaks of chickens that she would not live with them again so she roosted in a box on the porch.

There was a great deal of peace and harmony, cheerful scratching and clucking, the white rooster crowing with enthusiasm and Mighty Mouse answering amiably, “All’s well,” from two places in the yard. There is something particularly sunny and sweet in the sounds free chickens make in their daily tasks of finding food, laying eggs, and keeping track of one another. There’s the contented murmur of hens feeding which sometimes the rooster will speed up and accentuate to a rapid-fire enthusiasm. When he’s found something good and plentiful, he makes a special call and the hens run to him and they will all peck and scratch together for awhile, gathering close around him. There’s the ecstatic song of success a hen makes, when she’s laid an egg. Sometimes the rooster will join her in duet. Sometimes the whole flock will sing together in chorus to celebrate the goodness of a day, the happiness of being together and the joy of life. Chickens have a lot of emotion, they’re sensitive creatures and, being social, they have many forms of expression. Song, tone, stance, style, distance, speed, angle, personal relationships which sometimes change. A laying hen, her comb deep red and full, her stance proud, has a place in the world, work to do. A hen on an off-month, not laying, her comb pale pink and withered, keeps her head lower, is more wary, her song is often a grating growl of warning. She pecks her inferiors and is pecked by her superiors. Life is one tenterhook after another. She keeps more to herself, doesn’t join in group singing, looks to find comb-reddening egg-making food for herself somewhere.

Mighty Mouse’s crow did not mature for many months. This was, I suppose, a necessary ploy to keep his secondary position, probably his life, intact. The white rooster, at a few months of age, learned to crow with the full barnyard sound, very satisfying to hear. But Mighty Mouse’s crow stayed half-finished, as though he was not full-grown. It was a cute crow. We humans liked to hear it and we would smile at how cute it was. Anyone could know to hear his crow what place he’d taken. He seldom crowed until the other one had done so and then he would answer. But he stood at his full height, small as he was, held his head very high and I could see his eyes looking at things, judging, figuring, treasuring the attitudes of every living

thing around him. Unlike all the other chickens except Sunshine on the porch, he trusted the family of humans who lived in the house and let us pick him up and pet him, ate out of our hands, even crowed in our arms. He was not fearless, his eyes were too intelligent, too busy watching, for that. But he was very brave. He made quick judgements and lived by them. And he loved grandeur, loved a good show.

Sometimes, in spite of the fact that Sunshine was terrified of chickens, Mighty Mouse would visit her on the porch. Sunshine never left the porch; it gave her a certain distance from the chickens, a height above them, and a territory that was her own. The ground slopes under the porch so that on the north end are three steps going to the yard and on the south end, a sunlit deck nine feet off the ground. Sunshine kept away from the steps and stayed on the south end. If she wanted shade, she'd get under the table. The rest of the chickens respected her territory most of the time. But now and again, mighty Mouse would hop contemplatively up the steps and wander, clucking quietly, to the far end where Sunshine stayed. Sunshine set up a rumpus whenever he did this and we would come running out, fearing the worst. We'd see then Mighty Mouse quietly pecking and murmuring some feet away from her as she squawked hysterically behind a chair. At first when he visited her, we feared he was mistreating her so we'd pick him up and drop him off the porch and he would fly down the nine feet with some grace, land neatly on his feet, crow with his adolescent call and strut, scratch and peck his way back to the flock. But we saw after the first few times that Mighty Mouse was acting the perfect gentleman. Gracious and gentle, he kept some feet away from her, pecked and chattered slowly about the porch. Sometimes he'd get up on the table and look in the window. He had, I think, some hope that he could tame Sunshine and have her as his own hen. When we saw all this, we watched him in action, allowed him to carry on his courtship if he could. He would wander about the porch approaching her and moving away, always gentle as she had her hysterics adamantly behind the chair. Then he would fly up to the railing, which put him twelve feet off the ground stretch his body up into a crow then fly heroically down to the ground below, but Sunshine never thought of him as anything but the enemy although he visited her many times.

Alice the raccoon got her in the end; I chased Alice away before she quite killed Sunshine, which left her blind and semi-comatose. I brought

her in the house and she lived for days in that state. Once I put her out on the porch, hoping that the sun and her old territory might bring her back but she fell off the porch and landed, screaming and stuck in a cranny. Mighty Mouse and the white rooster got there before we did and we saw them then, the two roosters, squared off for a fight, neck feathers standing out straight in a ruff around lowered heads, beaks open and ready to clash, wings open and pointed down, rumps high to accentuate the curled tail-feathers. I broke it up quickly, took Sunshine back in the house. A day or two later, she finally died.

But since the white rooster could easily have killed Mighty Mouse, I gave the white rooster to a neighbor right away, and it was then that Mighty Mouse developed his full adult crow. He had fought now, or at least had squared off to fight, over his hen. So Mighty Mouse had the chicken yard to himself.

But Sunshine was dead now and what with Alice the coon and the neighbors' dogs, all the chickens died or were sold except for Mighty Mouse. For some time, he was alone without any other chickens and I had become disenchanted with chickens because they were so busy being killed by everyone, they seemed to have little time to lay eggs. And we enjoyed Mighty Mouse, bringing him in the house sometimes for children to pet and feed, putting him on the table after supper to clean up the crumbs and crow. But one day I went out to the barnyard and as I walked through the gate, Mighty Mouse walked toward me with a purposeful stride, looking into my face. It came to my mind that he needed hens, he needed a real life as a rooster. It seemed to be a powerful moment of communication between us, powerful but quick. I remember fighting briefly inside myself, not wanting the trouble of more chickens, wanting also the pleasure of his lonely need for society pulling him to us. But I felt that he was placing his life on the line. If he didn't get hens, he would die. It only took a few seconds to perceive and then decide. I stood, the gate still open in my hand, and I spoke aloud to him. "All right," I said, "I will get you hens." He turned then and strutted back and forth in front of me fluffing his feathers. I could see hope running through his body like lifeblood, reddening his comb, pulling his head high, sparkling his eyes. "Give me a week," I said.

The children patched the fence and Esta brought us Marlena and her

two chicks. Mighty Mouse was gallant, not pushy. Marlana, her chicks being the main thing in her life at the time, paid little attention to Mighty Mouse. But he was full and happy now. He watched them, guarded them, showed them food, went with them about the yard. The chicks, Marly and Lena, grew up to be hens; Esta brought more hens: Pearl, Dokey, Hattie, half a dozen at any time. The fixing of the fence kept the dogs out and Alice, after killing Sunshine and seeing how upset I was about it, never returned.

Marlena was Mighty Mouse's queen, his partner, and his great love. He followed her, kept his eye on her, crowed in relation to her. She took her place as queen with thoughtful solemnity, helped him lead the other hens where the best food was, led them back to the chicken house when it rained. But the next summer, she took sick and for many days sat ruffled in the sun and Mighty Mouse sat by her day after day. When she finally died, he refused to leave the chicken house, wouldn't even crow in the morning, and we thought he'd die too.

For a couple of days, he sat on a shelf, his head crunched into his body his feathers askew. But Mighty Mouse, though small and lacking power, had endurance. On the third day of his mourning, I went into the chicken house and said to him sternly, "You have all these hens now; you must take care of them. You have responsibilities." Mighty Mouse glowered at me and then I stalked off into the house. In a few minutes, he emerged from the chicken house, crowed, and again took up his duties as a rooster.

The responsibilities of a rooster are many and no doubt I don't know them all. They crow to announce the day in the morning and they crow throughout the day to keep the hens in touch with the flock. They court and copulate with each hen every day to keep the eggs fertile. The courtship is done in this way: Mighty Mouse would approach a hen at an angle with the wing nearer to her, feathers rattling, pointed to the ground, his feet rising high and thumping the ground rapidly as he turned away from her to show her his wing broadside. Then he'd approach her from the other side, dancing with the other wing down and rattling. If the hen put her head down, he could then climb on her back and mate with her. If she raised her head and ran a few steps forward, she was refusing him and he would try again later in the day. Many domestic roosters find it unbearable to go through all this courtship ritual daily with each hen, and simply jump unceremoniously onto the backs of their hens, very often causing bloody

eggs and neurotic hens but Mighty Mouse went through the whole routine every time. If he found a supply of food he would call them to him. He watched over them, guarded them, led them to food. And in the evening, he called his flock home, counted them, and refused to go in the chicken house unless they were all in before him.

Across the next few years, Mighty Mouse's life was full and complex. One way or another, we kept about half a dozen hens in the yard. If a hen timed it right, I would allow her to set and raise chicks. Mighty Mouse was not very fertile and a couple of times Esta gave me fertile eggs from under her hens for my hens to raise.

Mighty Mouse had one sure daughter, striped like he was, and the tiniest chicken I've ever seen. We named her Speck. She was, nevertheless, a good layer, laying lots of tiny eggs for the two years that she lived. Since she wasn't tame like her father, I can say little about her life but that it was cheerful, sensible, and productive. Her death, however, was dramatic.

We knew the weasel lived under the house. She was a Lesser weasel, weighing only a very few ounces, long, lithe, softly furred, dainty, with that tender innocence of expression only to be found in the most dangerous predators.

In early spring we found—first an unfinished egg in a circle of striped feathers, then, some yards away, her headless body, one leg bone cleaned neatly of meat. The boys set traps all over the place, one of them baited with Speck's body but the weasel was too smart for us all and some weeks later paraded in broad daylight, as we were sitting on the porch, across the front yard. Speck was a lovely creature, light brown now, dancing along, inspecting everything with delighted curiosity, ducking into a ground squirrel hole and out again. She didn't, after all, get any more chickens and eventually moved away.

There was one time when Esta brought up a Cochin bantam rooster, a beautiful golden creature with feathered legs; and across the winter, the two roosters got along. But one evening in a snowy late winter, I found Mighty Mouse covered with blood from a broken spur, shivering and miserable. I brought him in the house, washed off the blood and warmed him in my arms until he stopped shivering. I didn't want to put him back out there until I could take the Cochin back to Esta, so I thought to let him roost on

a kitchen chair and I went off to my bedroom but he followed me and stood rustling his feathers outside the door as I started to read. I brought him in then and he first sat in my lap then flew up to the top of the headboard and fell asleep. Somehow his sleep was contagious and, early as it was, I could no longer read, put down my book and slept like the proverbial log. Then at about five in the morning, he began his full-bodied resonant crowing. The sound crashed through my dreams, seemed to bounce and echo about the room like a lightning bolt. Knowing as I did that it would be repeated again and again for the next couple of hours or so, I staggered out of the bedroom, put the Cochin in a cage to take him back to Esta and got Mighty Mouse out of the house.

Mighty Mouse lived nine years. And during those years, he often found ways to contribute to our lives. I remember once a man stopped by who was not a friend and who would have liked to disrespect us. Not wishing to invite him into the house, I sat on the porch talking with him, leaving him on the road below, dueling with him in that quiet way folks have, disguised as an exchange of news. Mighty Mouse came to me with his questioning look. I took him onto my lap and when Mighty Mouse stood on my knee and crowed, the man had the sensitivity to acknowledge defeat and leave.

Often in the summer, we would gather with friends on the porch with a layout of food and drink and Mighty Mouse and one or two of the more intrepid hens would come to the porch, the shyer ones underneath on the ground, waiting for handouts. One summer we were plagued with flies and a flyswatter was installed on the porch. Mighty Mouse loved to eat flies more than any other food but they were beyond his abilities to catch. But that summer, he got his fill of flies as everyone swatted them and presented them to him. His enthusiasm spread to every gathering and that whole summer he seemed to bless us and our friends with the joy of life. He had the amazing ability to charm people who didn't even care for animals. He would quietly join people with a style that was gentle, gracious and interested so that people again and again found themselves touched by his attention, then embarrassed to be so moved by a rooster. He just always had a certain courtly grace, and one couldn't help feeling honored at his attentions.

Toward the end, his legs bothered him. His spurs were so long, even the one that had broken off in the fight with the Cochin. He had to pick his feet up very high and raise them over the spurs for each step. There was some

arthritis in his feet and legs too, so that it got to where he couldn't fly up to the roost but had to sleep on the floor of the chicken house. And he had stopped crowing. For weeks, he didn't crow. It was summer when it came to this point. One evening when I put the chickens away, I saw him looking, so dejected that I brought him into the house again. Even in summer here in the mountains, it's cold at night and that night it was raining; some of the water was seeping onto the chicken house floor where he was, and he couldn't get away from it. Again, I warmed him in my arms in the kitchen and he ate some seeds out of my hand. He knew he was dying, the hens knew it and showed it by their ruffled and wary stances, the few eggs they produced, their lack of enthusiasm about everything. They seemed to scorn him for his weakness and mourn his lack of presence. And Mighty Mouse knew it too. There was no question now of saving his life, it couldn't be done. But for several days we kept him in the house where his legs could be warm and dry. He seemed to enjoy it when I would gently massage his feet. He sat on our laps, he followed us from room to room, limping painfully but still characteristically game and totally unafraid of us, liking our company. And we liked his. He particularly enjoyed mealtime, sat in my lap and I shared with him whatever I ate. Within a couple days he was extraordinarily adept at snatching food from my fork before I brought it to my mouth. I remember my first shock at his enthusiasm for scrambled eggs. A young couple came to visit during that time and were totally charmed by him, petting him, feeding him, worrying over him. "He's too nice to die," they said. Since he was no longer crowing, he was no trouble in the house except for the droppings everywhere he went which I was glad to pick up. The feeling was that we were being honored greatly by his presence in the house, his charm and kindness to us in his last days, his grace in giving us this attention.

Then the rainy spell stopped and we went out on the porch to celebrate the sun. Mighty Mouse, of course, went with us. It was that same porch where Mighty Mouse had first courted Sunshine. It was one of those glorious days that happen when the sun comes out after rain, lush greenery, pure air, a faint haze of moisture rising through it, and the sun intensely welcome to everything. The birds singing passionately in the trees, rabbits and squirrels bustling everywhere, insects crawling, hopping, creeping and

buzzing about. And in their wake, the hens scattered below us and across and down the road.

At first, Mighty Mouse responded to the sun, shaking his feathers, stretching his neck, walking back and forth on the sunlit deck., but the sound of clucking from underneath the porch called his attention to the two or three hens on the ground directly below us and he went to the edge of the porch and looked over, his head tilted to the side to see down the nine feet to where they were. For some long minutes he looked down, leaning further and further, his body crouched in yearning. Then he raised his shoulders, stretched out his wings and flapped down. I cringed at the thought of his crippled legs taking that landing, rushed to the rail to see but he was standing, standing tall. He started pecking the ground then and giving the staccato pecking call that says, "I've found food!" Our eyes teared up when we saw the hens come running, stretching their legs, their necks lengthened out, wings held up and flat, coming lickety-split from down the road and way across in the field to join him. Then there was such a clucking and scratching and bubbling and jostling of chickens down there on the ground beneath the porch that it seemed it must be radiating happiness for miles. After some minutes, wobbling on his bad legs, his head high, he crowed, not the full-bodied crow of his prime years, but the adolescent crow he had used at the beginning.

Naturally, I left him out with his chickens. And two days later, when I went to let them out in the morning, I found him dead in the chicken house.

Jane Wodening is a writer based in Denver, Colorado. Her most recent books include *Brakhage's Childhood* (Granary Press, 2015) and *Driveabout* (Sockwood Press, 2016). For more, see <http://janewodening.com>.

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