

Funny Girl

Fanny and her friends

► **By Pattrice Jones**

Fanny was the most outgoing bird at the Eastern Shore Sanctuary, as well as our longest resident and oldest hen. She greeted all visitors, constantly on the lookout for a handout. Since few people have had a close encounter with a live chicken, most were thrilled to feed a bird by hand.

Fanny came to the sanctuary after an 18-month term in a North Carolina egg factory. Usually, so-called “spent hens” who can no longer lay eggs every day are slaughtered for low-grade meat or simply buried alive in landfills. Fanny and 19 others were saved from that fate by a kind woman who brought them here.

Like all hens from egg factories, Fanny had been subjected to “debeaking.” The painful operation burns off the tip of their beaks to prevent bored and hungry hens, crowded into cages so small that they cannot spread their wings or even lie down comfortably, from pecking themselves or each other to death in frustration. Fanny’s injured beak gave her face a blunted look that always reminded me of what she had been through.

When Fanny arrived at the sanctuary, she was shockingly skinny and had very few of her lovely red feathers. She and her peers bore little resemblance to birds. Years spent perched on wire in cramped cages meant they could hardly walk. They had never seen sunshine or grass, and weren’t at all sure what to do. Some were frantic while others seemed to be in a numb state of shock.

To help the birds become less fearful, I sat very still on the ground and spread food around me. After the birds came close enough to eat that food, I put food on my shoes and pants. Very gingerly, some of the birds began eating that food too. One bold bird jumped right into my lap. The Band song instantly popped into my head and I began singing to her:

*“Take a load off, Fanny,
Take a load for free.
Take a load off, Fanny,
And put the load right on me.”*

The name stuck. From that moment, this bold bird became “Fanny.”

This was the first group of hens we had taken in from an egg factory, so I spent a lot of time observing them as they were observing me. I got into the habit of offering each bird food from my hand as well as from their food bowls. Offering some cracked corn or sunflower seeds to a hen, I would say, “This is for you. I want you to have it,” because everybody likes to have someone prepare a meal especially for them.

Between that and my tactic of encouraging the birds to walk all over me, Fanny got the idea that the food came from my body and would scratch at my jeans and work boots, as chickens scratch in the dirt, to try to get the food to flow. Eventually, she figured out that the food was coming out of the containers I carried and started ducking her head into them. But for the rest of her life, Fanny always preferred food from the hand over food from the bowl, even if it was exactly the same.



Fanny loved to hear her song (or, to be honest, any song). She would come if we called her name, not because she was being summoned but because she wanted to see what was going on. Unlike many of the birds, whose feathers get ruffled by any departure from their favored routines, Fanny liked visitors and excitement and changes of pace. She expected to be greeted whenever we saw her and, just like any friend, would feel snubbed if ignored. We made sure to say “hello” to Fanny every morning and several times each day before saying “goodnight” every night.

When she got too old to deal with the hustle and bustle and randy roosters of the main chicken yard, Fanny began to greet visitors from our front yard, where she spent her days. She was joined by her friend Carmen, who had been with her in the egg factory; a younger hen called Darwin, who had lost a wing in a freak accident; and a delicate but tenacious half-blind hen called Felicia.

Carmen and Darwin were gregarious red hens like Fanny, so the three of them hung out together. Felicia, a shy white hen, spent much of her time alone until a feral hen had chicks and decided to let Felicia help out with them. The mother hen wouldn’t let any other chicken near her chicks, so that was quite a compliment to Felicia, who became very attached to her new family. Eventually, the chicks grew up, and Darwin and then Carmen died. Fanny then became fast friends with Felicia. They were like next-door neighbors who don’t have a lot in common at first but become close over time due to shared experiences.

Felicia had once been so sick that we were sure she would die. But she recovered and went on to enjoy two more times around the seasons. When the cold weather came again this past winter, her little body finally gave out. That was very sad for us and for Fanny, who had lived to see all of her closest friends die. She kept up her usual routine but just didn’t seem herself anymore. Sometimes we would see her standing out in the yard alone. She spent some time with the elderly roosters and a juvenile rooster named Dizzy, but didn’t seem to have the same bond with them that she had had with her hen friends. Luckily, a red hen named Rosalita moved in from Washington, D.C., and she and Fanny hit it off right away. Fanny’s mood improved overnight.

Now Rosalita is the one standing in the yard alone. Fanny suddenly began slowing down. Each day, it took her longer to get going in the morning, and she slept more during the day. She still came running for treats and visitors, but she drooped a bit in between

those moments of excitement. We knew what was coming.

On the morning of what would be her last day, Fanny had a slow start but came running when my partner mixed up her favorite treat for breakfast. Later in the day, I noticed Fanny drooping and brought her some mulberries. She ate one berry eagerly but dropped the next and couldn't find the rest. Seeing that she was slipping into a stupor, I gathered her into my arms and reclined with her resting on my chest. She fell asleep as the life began to ebb from her body. Just before she died, her wings began to flap, as birds' wings often do when they go into their death throes. I wanted to say "No, don't go" but instead I said, "Go, fly away with the wild birds. You're free."

Fanny had almost five years here after two years in an egg factory. She survived all of her original hen and rooster friends, and the cats with whom she used to huddle in a dog house when waiting out rainstorms.

Fanny was one in a million, literally and figuratively. She was just one of millions of hens crowded into tiny cages in egg factories. And, like every one of them, she was unique in the sense of having her own characteristics, her own likes and dislikes, and her own way of looking at the world. If, by speaking and writing about Fanny, we can help people to see hens as individuals and stop treating them like objects, then Fanny really will live forever. Still, she leaves two deeply grieving people and a host of human admirers. 🐾

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FLOWER OF DAWN



Eerily,
 In the first, radiant
 Rain-lit ray,
 The ragged ravens,
 Reckless gods of a day
 Long gone,
 Gentle, miscreant,
 Black angels
 Of prophecy,
 In whose eyes
 Shimmers the mystical
 Sea
 Of a far
 Realm, who
 Foretell
 The ebb
 Of an age of dust; the ravens,
 Gleeful,
 Skreak,
 And tumble
 Through
 The tattered web
 Of time, to pursue
 And overcome
 Their phantom
 Foe,
 Down the canyon wall
 And along the glinting creek
 Where none will ever go.
 Who lives within the fire?
 Within the lily?
 Within the setting star
 In open skies?
 Within the tall
 Candles,
 Watching well,
 Of smoking tallow?
 Or free within the sacred
 tree,
 Unbound,
 On wings
 Of mist? A hummingbird
 dips her beak
 Into a white bowl of petals
 In the pale circles
 Before the beginning.

Would we now inquire
 Who we are?
 Or rather, if we are
 At all?
 Or would it not be
 Nobler to become
 Merely the gray
 Wind that runs
 Round
 The horizons
 Of a raven spell,
 Or even only the echo
 Of a distant bell
 That rings
 Within the silver flower
 Of this ever-haunted hour
 Of the dawn?

– Sharon St Joan

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