

RiverBender Blog: Townie Babysits Chickens

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With a deep breath, I braced myself for the harrowing experience ahead. Speed was the name of the game. Go fast, then get out of the way. The morning sun glinted off the fence of the chicken coop as agitated caws from inside grew louder. Now or never.

I flipped the lock and pushed open the door of the coop, then backed up.

A parade of chickens. A gushing stream of chickens. In a great shove, 20 chickens came tumbling down the coop's steps and landed in the dirt, basking in the safety of sunlight, strutting around the enclosure with cocky looks that said, "Well, I survived the night. Where is breakfast?"

There's evidence to suggest that chickens descended from dinosaurs. I had never given much thought to that until the week I spent house-sitting for a family friend, complete with chicken duty. The chickens stared with beady eyes as I approached each morning, shaky hand offering a scoop of feed. "Jurassic Park" had nothing on me.

I grew up in the rural Riverbend area, near farms but not on one. A lot of my friends have chickens, but this was the first week I spent with them up close and personal.

Intellectually, I knew chickens were reputed to be mean but were truly very vulnerable, especially at night when predators could slink into the coop and decimate an entire flock. But being in charge of the chickens, the one person who could give them a chance of staying alive by keeping an eye out and making sure they were locked up at night, was a different experience. I was their savior and their jailer and their food delivery person.

Needless to say, I quickly grew attached.

Before the family left on vacation, my friend's father had put his hands on his hips, surveyed the chicken coop, and said, "As long as a few of them survive, I'll be happy." Yessir. This was the goal I took into the week.

By morning three, I was chatting with them as they clucked around the enclosure and I collected eggs. I found myself saying things like, "Good morning, girlies. Good job on eggs! You are strong, powerful chickens." Nothing like a few affirmations to start everyone's day off right.

On night five, I was presented with a new problem: two chickens had roosted outside. I had been running late and arrived at the house after sunset. Most of the chickens had marched dutifully into the coop as dusk approached, a deep-seated instinct taking over and warning them that they were unsafe in the dark. They always made it into the coop and waited for me to lock them inside, thereby locking out foxes and raccoons so the chickens could sleep safely through the night.

These two troublemakers were testing their survivability, in a deep, hypnotic sleep out there in the open.

I now had two options. There could either be two annoyed chickens or 20 dead chickens.

“Sorry sorry sorry sorry,” I repeated as I gently prodded the chickens awake with a stick. They both opened one eye to glare at me, simultaneous and haunting in the moonlight, like the twins in “The Shining.” I kept apologizing as I poked them, guiding them up the stairs and into the coop. As the last chicken disappeared inside, I am certain she would’ve flashed me the middle finger if possible.

No matter. The sun rose, 20 chickens tumbled out of the coop, and thus we all began another day.