

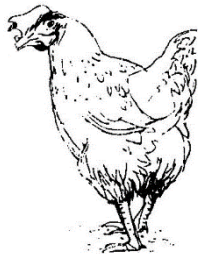
Goosie's Story



Louise van der Merwe

An English workbook based on Goosie's Story,
suitable for grade 4 pupils, has been compiled by
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©Louise van der Merwe

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Prologue

Goosie's Story

First published by Avon Books in 1995,
and by Gecko Books in 1996

Note from Publisher, 2025:

She was named Goosie because she loved to dust-bathe in the soft earth beneath a gooseberry bush. At the time of her rescue from a battery farm in Paarl, South Africa, in 1990, there was not a single cage-free egg available in any supermarket anywhere in South Africa.

After her rescue, Louise van der Merwe, founder of the animal rights organisation Humanity for Hens, laid a complaint of cruelty to animals with the police on the grounds that battery farming violated the Animals Protection Act on three counts — namely: it afforded the hens grossly 'inadequate space', 'maimed' them by debeaking, and caused them 'unnecessary suffering'. The complaint was referred to Western Cape Attorney General Frank Kahn who, in turn, appointed prosecutor Billy Downer to investigate. In 1993, Attorney General Kahn formally declined to institute a prosecution on the grounds that there was no chance of a successful outcome.

Concurrently, however, Humanity for Hens and its supporters strenuously lobbied supermarkets to offer customers the option of free range eggs, and thanks to the publicity generated by Goosie, achieved some success. Woolworths and Pick n Pay launched their 'new line' of free range eggs within a day of each other in 1991.

Today, although 'free-range' has become a misnomer because of over-crowding, nevertheless cage-free eggs are available in virtually every supermarket everywhere.

Goosie's Story is dedicated to Goosie whose story set free millions of laying hens from battery cages. It is also dedicated to the billions of laying hens who remain incarcerated in the lifelong torment, deprivation and misery of battery cages around and the world.

After 35 years of campaigning for hens, Louise hopes now that the young people of Africa will take up the cause of the humble hen and achieve for her, a life worth living.



Chapter one

It was terribly cramped in my cage. There were two other hens in with me, always shoving and pushing and pecking, and pulling out my feathers. Always irritable.

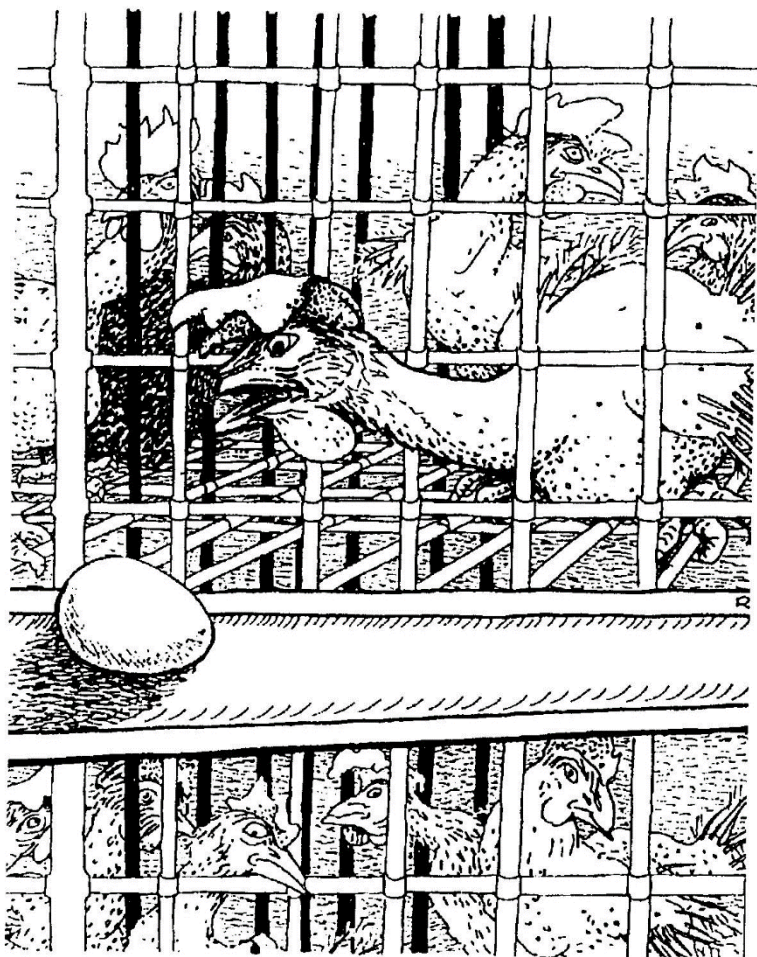
Not that I was a saint myself. I pecked them right back and sometimes I clambered over them too, to get to the food in the front.

For a whole year I'd been stuck in that horrible wire cage with those two petulant birds. I nicknamed them Moaner and Muddlehead. They called me Quizzie.

There were thousands of us in the shed, all in wire cages, row upon row, all stacked on top of each other.

Our tempers got particularly bad when it came to our daily duty to lay an egg. The trouble was, there was no place to hide an egg in that cage. And there was something in me which said that eggs should be hidden – somewhere safe, somewhere cosy.

But our eggs just rolled away once we'd laid them. Down the wire they rolled. I often poked my head out between the bars and craned to see where my egg went to.



I couldn't see, no matter how far I tried to stretch my neck. But I always hoped it landed up somewhere safe.

That's why I had no feathers left on my neck. All that poking of my head out between the narrow bars had rubbed my feathers away.

And those two cage mates of mine were responsible for my back being so bare – what with pecking and scrambling over me. I was grateful that at least they weren't mean by nature. You can get very mean hens in a battery. Bullies. Oh yes.

That's why all our beaks were taken off. While we were very small, just newly hatched out of our eggs, still all fluffy, the farmer burned the ends of our beaks off against a red-hot blade.

It's all a bit hazy in my mind now. But it makes me feel queasy just to think about it. Anyway, the reason for that horrible operation was to prevent any of us pecking each other painfully when we grew up. So you're left with just a stub of a beak because in a cage there is no place to hide. No escape.

Frankly, I felt mean myself sometimes. The ache in my feet from standing on those wires all day and all night was driving me crazy. And all the space I had in the world was not even big enough to stretch a wing.

Well, never mind.

Soon I would be out of there. I'd laid my 300 eggs.
Soon a nice young feathery hen would be put into the cage
in my place so that she could start to lay her 300 eggs.

I expected the catchers to come any time now. Those
clumsy catchers come and yank you out and put you into
a crate on the back of a truck. Going where, I had no
idea, but I felt sure it could only be better than this.

Chapter two

It was very rare that we got a visitor in the battery. Our food was brought to us on a conveyor belt that rolled along the front of our cages, our water-containers filled up automatically and even the lights went on automatically. Yup! At 3 a.m. every morning when the night was at its blackest and I could hear the rats scratching and shuffling all around, the lights would suddenly switch on. That got us into the laying mood.

But then came the day that changed my life. The farmer came in accompanied by some visitors. They walked down the passageway between the rows of cages, stopping occasionally and staring at the hens. Muddlehead, as usual, got herself into a flutter, frantically trying to escape at the back of the cage which she knew quite well was impossible. But I was interested in the visitors. I poked my head out between the bars, stretching my neck as far out as I could, and tried to sum them up. After all, I'd never seen a small human before!

They walked towards us and then stopped, right in front of our cage. "Choose anyone you like," I heard the farmer say. "They're all headed for the pot tomorrow but they've still got a few good eggs left in them." At his words, a shudder rippled through my body. Muddlehead became



even more frantic, thrashing against the cage walls with her featherless wings. I glanced at Moaner. Would you believe it! There she was — trying to impress them! Fluffing up the few feathers she had left on her miserable goose-pimpled body and blow-me-down if she wasn't trying to preen herself! Yes, with that little stubby no-good beak she was trying to preen herself!

"I'll take that one," I heard the small girl human say. "She's got such beautiful amber eyes. Just like jewels!"

I looked at Moaner's eyes to see if they really did look like jewels.

Then the cage door slid open and the big hand of the farmer grabbed me by my legs. Not Moaner. He pulled me through the doorway and then started to walk back down the passageway with me suspended upside-down by my legs in the most unbecoming manner. "I might not have any feathers left, but I still have my dignity," I thought reproachfully as I passed by the rows of hens that I was leaving behind.

Outside, the light dazzled me. I closed my eyes against the glare. I was put into another cage and placed next to the small human. We began to move. I felt my heart racing inside my rib cage. For a few uncertain moments, I wished desperately to be back with Moaner and Muddlehead.

Then slowly, slowly, I became aware of a strange warmth streaming through the window and sinking into my skin. A beautiful warmth. A warmth that calmed me and made me feel sleepy. A warmth that made me stretch out my wing so it could fall on as much of me as possible.



Chapter three

We finally came to a stop and the little girl carefully lifted me out of the cage. She carried me quite a way, tucked under her arm. Then she bent to put me down.

I looked around to see what I was standing on. The ground was brown. It felt knobbly beneath my feet. Next to me a clump of green grew. I took a few pecks at it.

“Let's go and get her some food and water,” the little girl said to her mother, and together they went off, leaving me alone.

I looked again at the soil. Nearby it looked softer. More powdery. I was fascinated. I longed to go and wallow in it. But how was I to get there? Clambering, I knew. Pushing and shoving and pecking, I knew. But walking forwards is something I hadn't tried in all my time in the battery. First, I lifted one leg, and put it down. Then I lifted the other. But both legs just came down in the same spot as before.

Slowly, slowly I got the idea. I began to put one foot in front of the other. I reached the soft soil and let my body rest on it. It was warm. I moved my body from side to side.



I nestled into the soil, deeper and deeper, kicking it over myself with my feet and the shafts of my feathers.

Glorious.

I pecked at the soil as I wallowed in the warm dust. The little girl's voice startled me. "Oh look," she cried, "she's dust-bathing in the gooseberry patch. Let's call her Goosie!"



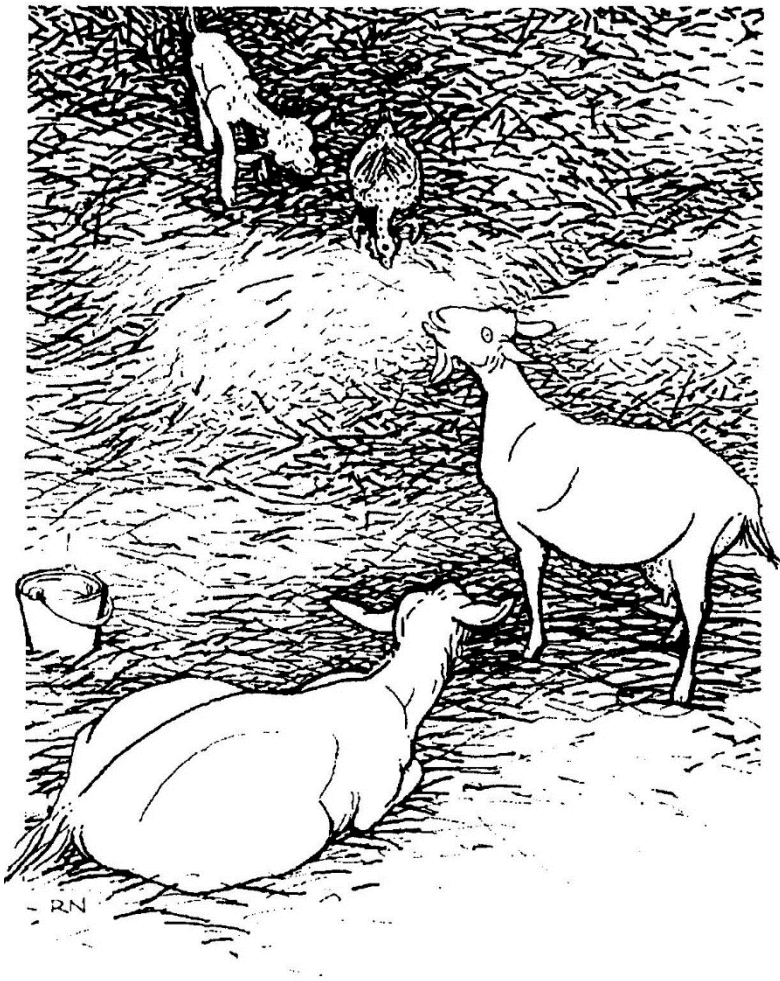
Chapter four

Up until that evening, I had always thought that there were only three kinds of animals in this world: thousands of chickens, hundreds of rats and a few humans. That's how it was in the battery where I came from.

But on the first night in my new home, I discovered another creature altogether. Gabrielle (for that was the young girl's name) put me in the stable for the night, allowing me to roost on top of some bales of straw which were stacked in one corner. How nice that straw felt.

I was just settling down, ready to put my head under my wing, when in came two creatures I would come to know as Heidi and Clara, the nanny goats. There was also a small goat which evidently belonged to Clara since every time it ventured too close to Heidi, it got a sharp ear-tug.

The big goats settled down for the night but the little one took some time, prancing around, kicking its back legs in mid-air, then standing cheekily upon its mother's back before leaping off with a double kick in mid-air once again.



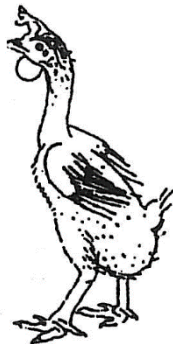
As darkness fell, I became aware of the strange and wonderful smells all around me.

All was still except for the rhythmic cudding of Heidi and Clara as they chewed and chewed and chewed. There was a peace about them which made me feel peaceful too.

I woke up late the next morning. Late for me, that is.

I awoke to see that the darkness was seeping away slowly, and from all around I heard the voices of birds. Trilling, piping, whistling. I was used to the deafening chorus in the battery of 20,000 hens preparing to lay an egg. This was different. There was no anxiety in these voices. Just a glorious celebration of the new day.

And then, through the song, I heard a voice that was calling me. It came from afar. I'd never heard it before. Yet I knew it was for me. It was proud. It was strong. It was a voice that called again and again. For me.





Chapter five

To spoil it all, a familiar anxiety began to creep over me. I'd had that anxiety, like a headache, every day since the first day I started to lay eggs.

Where was I to put my egg? In the battery I had tried all four corners of my cage again and again. Stupid old Muddlehead had even tried to lay her egg on top of me once. That was in the early days when I still had feathers on my back.

Now, as my anxiety grew, I began to search my new surroundings, desperately hoping to find a comfy hiding place in time to place my egg in it.

But where?

The door was opened. The goats trundled out and the sunlight streamed in.

I wandered around, murmuring to myself. The goats were standing in the next stable now, being milked by Gabrielle's father. Squish-squish, squish-squish, squish-squish went the jets of milk into the bucket.

I jumped into the goats' crate of lucerne but the stalks were too prickly.

Where, oh where?

Then I crept into the crevice made by a bale of straw leaning against the wall. It was quiet and dark in there.

I nestled my body down so as to make a hollow in the bits of straw that had fallen onto the floor. Down and down and from side to side. I felt the lovely softness beneath me.

My headache was gone. In fact, I think that making my nest was the most wonderful happiness that I'd experienced in my whole life.

I sat there in the darkness, feeling quite brilliant. To think that I'd made my first nest!

I thought of poor Muddlehead. Poor Moaner. I would have shared my nest with them if they'd been with me now. After a while I laid my egg. I wouldn't have minded if it had taken me all day.

Then I got up to inspect it.

Oh! I could hardly believe my eyes! How beautiful. How smooth it was. What a perfect shape. What a delicate colour. And it was not rolling away to disappear from sight!

If only I'd known all this time how beautiful my eggs were, I'm sure I would have been kinder to Muddlehead and Moaner.



I jumped out of my hiding place and scuttled out of the stable door. I had to tell the whole world. I wanted everyone to know. And how I cackled!

Gabrielle came running. "What a commotion, Goosie," she said. "Have you laid an egg?"

She glanced around the stable, then reached into my hiding place.

In her hand she held my gift to her. "Thank you, Goosie," she said.

Later she came down to sit on a log and share her sandwiches with me. Peanut-butter and jam became quite my favourite.

"This'll put the feathers back onto you, Goosie," she'd say, breaking off a piece of her sandwich and holding it out for me to take. And she was right. Gradually, as the days and weeks went by, my feathers began to sprout again.

Chapter six

Well, I don't know where he came from, but the first time I set eyes on the big, gleaming cockerel that suddenly appeared in my part of the garden, I ran. I ran to where some sticks and twigs were piled up against the garden wall and pushed my head into them. I wished they would swallow me up. I desperately hoped he wouldn't see me.

But he did. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him charging towards me, wings down. Then he pounced, holding me down by my comb.

Well!

What a fellow he was! I couldn't but admire him. Gabrielle called him Jack.

He was tall and broad with long gleaming tail feathers and a comb and wattles as red as blood. His beak was sharp and his spurs on each leg even sharper.

Thankfully, my feathers had mostly grown back by this time. I tried my best to preen them with my stumpy beak.

"You're beautiful, darling," he'd say. Then he would flap his wings and crow at the top of his voice for all the world to hear.

Yet, for all his pride and his swaggering, he was a gentleman. He introduced me to the delicious delicacies to be found in the compost heap. Just one or two good strong scratches with his powerful claws and he would unearth a nice fat white worm.

“Come, come, come,” he'd call, to give me the first bite.

Sometimes, though, he was rather devilish, I must say. He would pretend he'd found something delicious and would call and call, his eyes fixed to a spot on the ground, pecking at the 'thing' as though to keep it still. I would come running and just as I got close enough, he would jump on me and mate with me, feeling no remorse whatsoever that it had all been a bluff.

“Shame on you,” I'd mutter, ruffling my feathers indignantly. But he just stood there as pleased as punch with himself.

Early on Jack decided he didn't like the location of my nest. He took it upon himself to find a new, much safer place beneath the very pile of sticks I had hidden my head in when first I saw him. He went in there and rounded out a hollow in the dry leaves beneath, with his big, broad body. “Come, come, come,” he called, inviting me to admire his work.

He didn't like where I slept at night either. Nothing but the trees were good enough for him. Up we'd flap and flutter

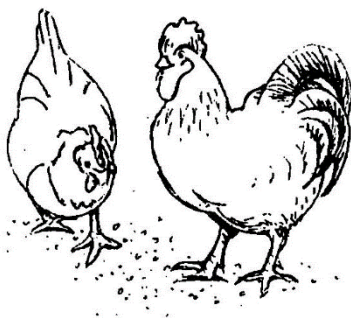


every evening, to roost in the branches. "What was good enough for our ancestors, is good enough for us," he said.

For me he was the best thing on two legs. I adored him. We sun-bathed together, we dust-bathed together, we scratched in the compost together. He was rather perplexed at first when I didn't manage to peck up all the titbits he found for me. He studied my beak with his head cocked on one side. "Not a problem," he concluded after a moment or two. Fortunately, Gabrielle always put a bowl of food down which was deep enough for me to dig into with my beak.

I was happy. I would stand beside Jack, pecking at his wattles and comb lovingly, like any good wife should do, to keep him clean and groomed.

Then, just when it seemed that life would last forever in blissful contentment, I found myself in the grip of a strange mood over which I had no control.



Chapter seven

I had laid six eggs in my secret nest beneath the twigs and sticks. Quite suddenly, the sunshine and the earth, the compost heap and even Jack became quite unimportant. All I could think about was the safety of my eggs. I sat myself gently upon them, making sure they were all well within my downy feathers.

On the first night I started sitting, I felt sad about my friend, Gabrielle. She had called and called me during the day. But this time, I couldn't come running as usual. If I had, she might have found my secret nest. She might have thought I'd laid the eggs for her. She might have reached in and taken them.

That evening, as darkness fell and Jack sat alone on the branch we had shared, Gabrielle and her father came down to our garden, calling me and shining a bright light all around. Gabrielle started to cry. I heard her say that I'd been stolen. How I longed to tell her I was very nearby and quite safe.

The next morning at about the time Gabrielle usually came down to feed us, I slipped out and went to wait for her by the stable.

"Oh Goosie!" she cried when she saw me. "Oh Goosie, you're safe!" She quickly realised something big had happened in my life. She didn't even try to follow me back to my nest. She simply watched me from a distance.

Even Jack knew better than to come too close to me at that time.

For me, my six eggs were the most precious thing I'd ever known. I kept them warm, turning them gently beneath me with my feet every so often. I ate and drank only when I had to. Once in three days was sometimes enough. Then, anxious that my eggs shouldn't grow cold, I hurried back and was always relieved to find no harm had come to them in my absence.

Gabrielle took the greatest care of my eggs too. She put a bowl of water and food nearby so that I would not have to go far if I felt hungry or thirsty. If I felt the first drops of rain, I could be sure that very soon I'd hear her quick footsteps coming my way. She'd spread a heavy plastic sheet across the top of the sticks. Then she would stoop to peer through the sticks at me from the side. "Just checking, Goosie," she would say softly.

I sat there contentedly, hour after hour, day after day. Sometimes, as I sat, fragments of memory from my very early life would slip in and out of my mind.

A deafening whirr of machinery. Hundreds of eggs hatching in a tray. The high-pitched peep-peep-peep of baby chickens in distress. Some of us – the girls – being thrown with great speed into one crate. The boys in another. All around, the peep-peeping of distress. I didn't feel comfortable then, and I would shift my position and shake my head to get those thoughts out.

Sometimes the neighbour's big black cat, Timothy, came and whiled away the hours with me. Sitting on top of the garden wall he would groom himself in the sunshine, licking and licking his fur till it gleamed. Satisfied with himself at last, he then simply sat there basking in the warmth, his big green eyes gradually closing in a blissful siesta.

Gabrielle, however, would rudely awaken him if she happened to come along. "Shoo!" she would yell, charging towards him, waving her arms about. "Shoo! Go away!" It wasn't that she didn't like Timothy. She just didn't like him sitting so close to me. But I wasn't afraid of that cat.



Chapter eight

After 20 days of sitting, I heard my babies calling to me. Yes, from within the eggs, they were peep-peeping. Calling to me. I answered with a deep cluck-cluck. My voice had never sounded like that before. Now, I cluck-clucked to reassure them. And to encourage them to use their little egg teeth to break out of their shells and come into the warmth of my down. I felt good and strong and glad. That night and the next day, six baby chicks hatched out beneath me.

Precious sparks of life.

I can never describe how proud I was when Gabrielle came down and found two little yellow fluffy heads poking out from under each of my wings. She called out to her mother in excitement. "Goosie's chicks have hatched. Come and see! Come and see!" she cried.

Jack came to see too. From a short distance away, head cocked to one side, he viewed his offspring as they poked their heads in and out, and climbed onto my back, taking little pecks of curiosity at my wattles and comb. Then he flapped his wings, stood tall and crowed his supreme approval.

Every morning Gabrielle would bring seeds and crumbs and other delights to start us off for the day. After that I would take my brood to where the leaves lay thickest on the ground and we would scratch and feast till the day grew cool and my chicks grew tired. Clucking encouragement all the while, I'd bring them safely back to the nest where they would tunnel into my feathers and sleep, warm and content, till their father's proud voice awoke them for the new day.

It was on one of these occasions, while I was busy unearthing the most tasty of delights and my chicks were squabbling over who should get what, that something suddenly caught my eye. Instinctively, I clucked the cluck that says: "Take cover!" Instantly, my chicks dropped low to the ground blending with the yellow leaves and dappled sunlight.

I clucked again. The cluck of alarm. Then I saw clearly what it was that I'd seen. Crouched low in the grass, his eyes fixed upon one of my chicks, his back legs rhythmically lifting up and down in readiness to pounce, his tail flicking in greedy anticipation, was Timothy.

I flew at that black furry beast. Squawking furiously, I jumped at him, kicking him, clawing him, beating him with my wings.



Jack charged up, wings down, beak and spurs at the ready.
But it was all over.

I had routed the enemy all on my own.

In less time than it takes to scratch for a worm, Timothy had jumped with all four feet into the air. His tail bushy like a squirrel's, his fur standing on end, he let out a terrible yowl, streaked up a tree and, from one of the lower branches, sat staring at me in horror and confusion. Tail still bushy. Hair still on end.

I ruffled my feathers, then called my brood. Obediently, they ran towards me and, still a little flustered, we walked together to the nest to settle down early for the night.



Chapter nine

All that happened quite a while ago now. My chicks grew into fine-feathered cockerels and pretty plump hens laying their daily eggs for Gabrielle to collect. We lived in peace and contentment.

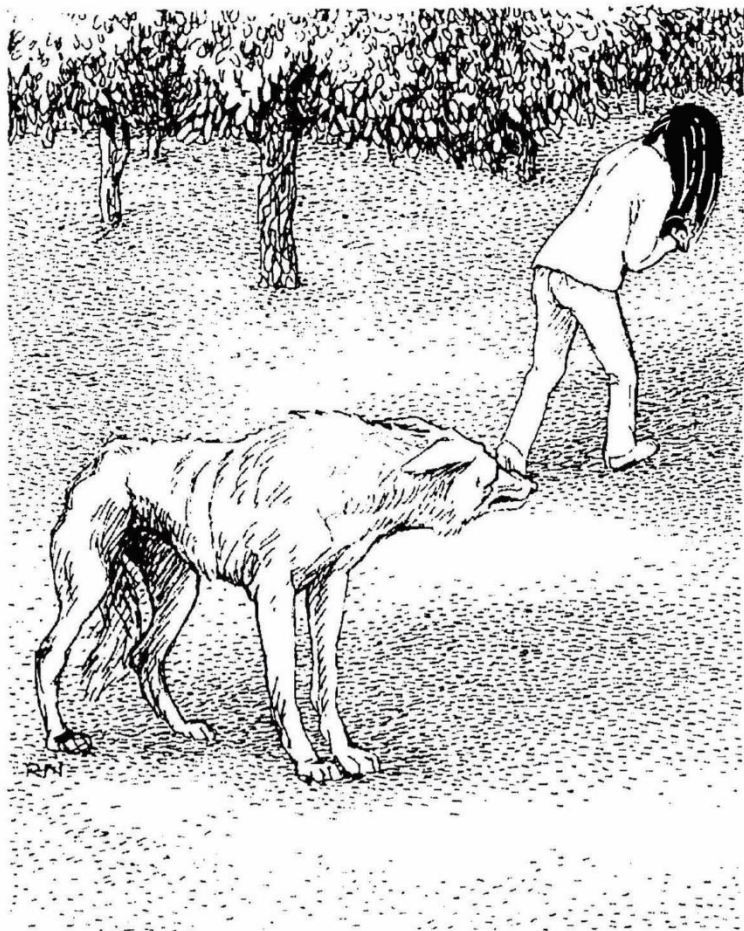
Then one morning, quite recently, a hungry dog dug under our fence and came into our garden.

He was horribly thin. A stray for sure. His rib bones stood out and his eyes held no light in them.

But I had learned to trust the world in that beautiful garden. Foolishly, I went on pecking about nearby, paying little attention to him.

Suddenly, without warning, he made a grab for me, tearing my wing from my body. I flapped lopsidedly and cackled dreadfully, frantically searching for somewhere to hide.

Gabrielle came running. She let out a yell of panic when she saw the blood on me. "Oh Goosie, oh Goosie," she cried. "Are you badly hurt?" Carefully she picked me up and took me to the house, her tears dropping onto my head.



Chapter ten

Well, although I thought my last hour had arrived, fortunately I have made a good recovery.

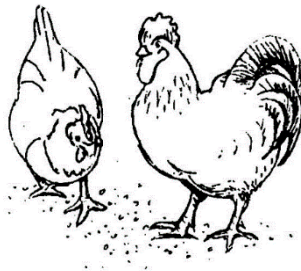
My wing is still in a bandage but the vet said it should heal completely, given time. To tell the truth, with all the fuss and attention I'm getting, I don't mind how long it takes to mend. Gabrielle treats me like a new-born chick with special tit-bits of food every day and a cosy basket in her own bedroom for me at night.

As for Boy (that's what she's called the dog), he's gaining weight nicely and Gabrielle has introduced us so that he clearly understands that chickens are not part of the menu in this garden. The light has come back into his eyes and Gabrielle says he's soon going to be the most handsome dog around.

If ever I get to make a wish one day, I'll wish that the whole world could be filled with people like Gabrielle. Then Muddlehead and Moaner and all the others could have had a chance too. I'll close my eyes very tight and wish for a world like that.



In memory of Goosie who
enjoyed her freedom so much.



Also in dedication to the millions of
battery hens who never see the sun
nor feel the earth beneath their feet
and
for you, my family.



THE **HUMANE** TRUST
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Goosie's Story is about a battery hen who is given a second chance to lead a normal life. We share her belated discovery of the world and realise that far from her being a mere unit of production, she has a robust ability to live life to the full.

Louise van der Merwe lives with her family in Somerset West near Cape Town. A journalist by profession, she hopes that her writing will help hasten a new world dispensation which acknowledges the sentience of all animals and their right to enjoy life's basic gifts.



Humane Education Series