

HELPING HENRIETTA

by Renata Hopkins

As he eats breakfast, Joe can't stop grinning. The world is covered in thick white icing. It's on the trees and the shed roof and the lawn and the trampoline. The first snow in two winters. Joe can't wait to get out there. He grabs a piece of paper and writes a plan:

1. Make a MASSIVE snowman.
2. Sled down Semi's drive (time ourselves).
3. Make shaved ice with snow.
4. Build an igloo.

He thinks about the last idea and adds a question mark. Maybe they won't have time.

"Busy day," Mum says, reading the list over Joe's shoulder. "But first, the chooks need feeding."

"Can't you do it?" Joe pleads. "Just for today?"

"Nope. I clean out the coop, and you feed them. That's the deal."

"But what if the snow melts before –"

"It won't," Mum says, "and pets need feeding, even when it snows."

Joe pulls a face. "Chickens aren't pets, not proper pets anyway."

"They laid those scrambled eggs. That's pretty clever."

"Mum!" Joe laughs, but he still means it about chickens. They aren't pets. You can't teach them to talk, like Semi's budgie. You can't even take them for a walk. In Joe's head, "proper" pets can be ranked in order: dogs, cats, birds that can talk, then guinea pigs and rabbits. (Rabbits come last because they can't sleep in your room, which is the main reason he wants a pet.)



"Mum," he begins. "You know how –"

"Right now," Mum interrupts, "I'm only interested in the chooks getting breakfast. They'll be even hungrier in this cold."

Grumbling, Joe takes the scraps and goes to put on his gumboots.

The snow is clean and perfect, and his boots make a sound like eating cornflakes. Through the chicken wire, he sees two of the hens – Goldilocks and Big Bird – picking their way round in the snow. If chooks could talk, Joe is sure they would say, "What is this stuff?"

When Joe lets himself into the run, he sees that something is wrong. Their third chicken – Henrietta – is lying on her side, half under the nesting box. She’s breathing strangely, panting almost.

Joe kneels down next to her. “What’s wrong, Hettie?” he asks. “Did you get too cold?” The hen kicks out weakly, but she doesn’t get up. Joe knows that chickens don’t lie down to sleep. They sleep sitting up, on their roost. He slides his hands under Hettie and lifts her gently onto her feet – but when he lets go, she topples over again. He takes a handful of scraps and holds them under her beak.

“Look,” he says. “Rice and cheese. Yummy.” Hettie doesn’t even try to eat. Instead, she gives a strange sort of shudder. Joe runs to get Mum.

After she looks Hettie over, Joe can see on her face that it’s serious.

“Are we going to take her to the vet?” he asks.

“You heard the radio this morning,” Mum says. “No driving in the snow unless it’s an emergency.”

“This is an emergency. You didn’t see that weird twitching she did.”

“Let’s try to make her a bit more comfortable.”

But as Mum says this, Hettie starts to shudder again. Mum speaks softly and strokes Hettie’s feathers until the shaking stops.

“Why is she doing that?” Joe asks.

“I think it was a seizure.” Mum gives Joe a look, and he knows he won’t like what’s coming next. “I don’t think the vet can help her, even if we could get there.”

“So we’re just going to let her die?”

“Actually, we need to ...” Mum looks uncertain about what to say next. “We can’t let her suffer.”

Joe understands, and he’s suddenly very glad that chickens aren’t like Semi’s budgie.

“What are you going to do? Are you going to chop her head off?” Mum tries to pull him in for a hug, but he won’t let her. “You can’t kill my pet.”

Mum doesn’t say anything, but Joe can guess what she’s thinking. Ten minutes ago, he’d said that chickens weren’t pets.

“She might just get better,” Joe tries. “Let’s wait till Dad gets home.”

Mum puts an arm round his shoulders, and this time, he lets it stay. “Joey,” she says, “I’m pretty sure she’s dying, but that could take a long time, and Dad’s away till Friday. I don’t think it’s fair to leave her like this.”

Joe looks at Hettie. He remembers the time he held her so that Dad could clip her flight feathers. She’d flapped at first – trying to get away – but Joe had talked quietly, and Hettie had calmed down. Dad was finally able to fan out her wing. While he worked, Joe could feel the hen’s heart beating through her warm feathers.

He thinks about collecting eggs from the nesting box – an Easter egg hunt every day. Hettie must have laid hundreds. Once or twice there had been a double yolker – a secret surprise, just for him. Joe still doesn’t know if Hettie’s a pet. All he knows is that they need to help her.

“Mum,” he whispers. “Will I have to hold her when you ...” He can’t make himself say it.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Mum replies. “It’ll be quick, but it still won’t be very nice.”

Joe tries hard not to imagine that part.





“I’ll get what I need,” Mum says. “You look after her.” She lets herself out of the run and goes to the garden shed. Even though Joe’s wearing a coat and scarf, he feels shivery. He takes his scarf off and drapes it around Hettie.

“Mum’s going to help you,” he whispers. “I wish I could help, too, but I’m too chicken.”

Chicken? Joe wishes he hadn’t said that, even though he knows Hettie can’t understand. “Sorry,” he says. “You know what I mean.”

Hettie’s eyes are closed. Her beak opens and shuts and half opens again. It looks like she’s forgotten something she wants to say. Joe waits for her to move again, but she is very still. Something has happened. He slides a hand under the scarf. This time, he can’t feel Hettie’s heart beating. He waits. Nothing.

“Mum,” he calls out, his voice wobbly. “You don’t need the axe.”

“I’m glad you were there to help your mum,” Dad says on the phone later that night. “I hear you were brave about it.”

Joe shrugs. He’s not so sure about that part.

“What else did you do today?” Dad asks. “Did you build a snowman?”

“I was going to,” Joe says. “But then I had a better idea.”

After they finish talking, Joe emails his father a photo. Big Bird and Goldilocks can just be seen, red-brown blotches in one corner of the run. In the middle of the lawn there is a huge white chicken: a snow Henrietta. Beside her, as if freshly laid, is a huge snow egg. Joe imagines a perfect double yolk hidden inside.



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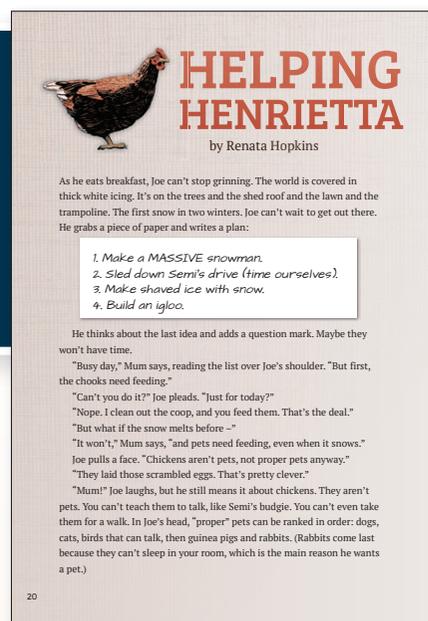
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