

The egg rolled to a stop upon reaching the wire mesh of the coop. Sprout looked at it—a chalky egg flecked with blood. She hadn't laid an egg in two days; she doubted she could anymore. Yet there it was—one small, sad egg.

This cannot happen again, she thought. Would the farmer's wife take it? She'd collected all the others, complaining every time that they were getting smaller and smaller. She wouldn't leave this one behind just because it was ugly, would she?

Sprout couldn't even stand upright today. No wonder—somehow she had managed to lay an egg without having eaten a thing. Sprout wondered how many eggs she had left inside her; she hoped this was the last one. With a sigh she peered outside. Because her cage was near the entrance she could see out beyond the wire mesh walls. The door to the coop didn't quite fit its frame; through the gap she could see an acacia tree. Sprout loved that tree so much,

she didn't complain about the cold winter wind that made it through the gap, or the pelting summer rain.

Sprout was an egg-laying hen, which meant she was raised for her eggs. She had come to the coop over a year before. Since then, all she had done was lay eggs. She couldn't wander around, flap her wings, or even sit on her own eggs. She had never stepped outside the coop. But ever since she had seen a hen running around the yard with the adorable chicks she had hatched, Sprout had harbored a secret desire—to hatch an egg and watch the birth of her chick. But it was an impossible dream. The coop was tilted forward so the eggs would roll to the other side of a barrier, separating them from their mothers.

The door opened, and in came the farmer, pushing a wheelbarrow. The hens clucked impatiently, creating a din.

“Breakfast!”

“I'm hungry, hurry hurry!”

With a bucket, the farmer scooped out the feed. “Always so hungry! You better make it worth it. This feed isn't cheap.”

Sprout looked through the wide-open door, focusing on the world outside. It had been a while since she'd had an appetite. She had no desire to lay another egg. Her heart emptied of feeling every time the farmer's wife took her eggs. The pride she felt when she laid one was replaced by sadness. She was exhausted after a full year of this. She couldn't so much as touch her own eggs, not even with the tip of her foot. And she didn't know what happened to

them after the farmer's wife carried them in her basket out of the coop.

It was bright outside. The acacia tree on the edge of the yard was blooming with white flowers. Their sweet scent caught the breeze and wafted into the coop, filling Sprout's heart. Sprout got up and shoved her head through the wires of her cage. Her bare, featherless neck was rubbed raw. *The leaves laid flowers again!* Sprout was envious. If she squinted, she could make out the light green leaves that had matured and given birth to fragrant flowers. She'd spotted the blooming acacia tree the very day she was shut in the coop. A few days later, the tree shed its flowers, which flew around like snowflakes, leaving behind green leaves. The leaves lived on until late fall before turning yellow and then dropping quietly. Sprout was awestruck as she watched the leaves stand strong against rough winds and heavy rain before fading and falling. When she saw them reborn in light green the following spring, she was overcome with excitement.

Sprout was the best name in the world. A sprout grew into a leaf and embraced the wind and the sun before falling and rotting and turning into mulch for bringing fragrant flowers into bloom. Sprout wanted to do something with her life, just like the sprouts on the acacia tree. That was why she'd named herself after them. Nobody called her Sprout, and she knew her life wasn't like a sprout's, but still the name made her feel good. It was her secret. Ever since she'd named herself, she'd gotten into the habit of

noting the events occurring outside the coop: everything from the moon waxing and waning and the sun rising and setting to the animals in the barnyard bickering.

“Go on, eat so you can lay lots of big eggs!” the farmer bellowed. He said this every time he fed the hens, and Sprout was sick of hearing it. She gazed into the yard, ignoring him.

The animals out there were busy eating breakfast. A large family of ducks surrounded a trough with their tails pointing up to the sky, swallowing their food without once raising their heads. The old dog was nearby, stuffing himself. He may have his own bowl, but he had to scarf down all his food before the rooster got wind of it. Once, he refused to let the rooster eat out of his bowl and received a vicious pecking that drew blood from his muzzle. The rooster and hen’s trough wasn’t crowded. Because they didn’t have any offspring right now, they were the only ones who could eat leisurely. Even so, the rooster still showed interest in the old dog’s bowl. He cemented his status as the leader of the barn by refusing to back off even when the dog lowered his tail and growled. He was handsome, with a tall, awe-inspiring tail, a bright red comb, a fearless gaze, and a sharp beak. It fell to him to crow at dawn, and after that he would saunter around the fields with the hen.

Whenever she saw the yard hen, Sprout couldn’t stand it—she felt even more confined in her wire cage. She, too, wanted to dig through the pile of compost with the rooster, walk side by side with him, and sit on her eggs. She couldn’t

get to the yard where the ducks and the old dog and the rooster and the hen lived together no matter how far she stretched her neck through the wires; they just plucked her feathers. *Why am I in the coop when that hen is out in the yard?* She didn't know that the rooster and the hen were organically raised native Korean chickens. Nor did she know that an egg she laid on her own would never hatch, no matter how long she sat on it. If she'd known that, she might never have begun dreaming of hatching one.

The ducks finished eating and filed under the acacia tree, waddling toward the nearby hill, trailed by a slightly smaller bird with different coloring. His head was green like an acacia leaf—maybe he wasn't a duck. But then again, he quacked and waddled. Sprout didn't know how a mallard duck had come to live in the yard, she just knew he looked different. She was still gazing outside when the farmer came up to feed her. He cocked his head as he noticed the previous day's feed still in her trough. "Huh? What's going on here?" he muttered. He usually left after pouring the feed, to be followed by his wife collecting the eggs. But today he was doing her job. "Not eating at all these days. Must be sick." The farmer tutted, then glanced at Sprout with displeasure. He reached down to pick up her egg. As soon as his fingers touched it, it gave way; thin wrinkles rippled across its surface. Sprout was shocked. She knew it was small and ugly, but she had never imagined it would be soft. The shell hadn't even finished hardening! The farmer frowned.

THE HEN WHO DREAMED SHE COULD FLY

Sprout felt her heart tearing in two. Her sorrow each time her eggs were taken away was nothing compared to how she felt now. Sobs filled her throat; her entire body stiffened. *Poor thing came out without a shell.* The farmer tossed the soft egg into the yard; bracing herself, Sprout squeezed her eyes shut. The egg broke without a sound. The old dog lumbered over to lick it up. Tears flowed freely from Sprout's eyes for the first time in her life. *I refuse to lay another egg! Ever!*