

Clare's Story

Clare came into the world on Mother's Day, along with eight other little chicks, hatched out in a neighbor's incubator. All of them were precious and perfect, except for Clare, who was far from perfect, but more precious than words can say.

It was her legs—oh, her poor little twisted legs, which went this way and that; in every direction but any that would do her any good.

When I first saw her I took myself on an all-expenses-paid Guilt Trip. Was she deformed because of the incubator? It was unnatural. What if I caused her to suffer by letting the chicken's eggs go into the incubator along with my neighbor's turkey eggs? Maybe the incubator worked better if it was filled, but at whose expense? Clare's?

It made no sense; all of the others were fine; only Clare was cursed with crippled legs. What kind of a life could she have, with legs that would never walk?

The men said "you should put it out of its misery." The women said "No. Wait and see if she can get around. Give her a chance."

Being a woman, I wanted to wait and see. Just the thought of taking a chick whose body was about the size of a cotton ball and... what? Crushing her? Wringing her tiny neck? Suffocating her in a plastic bag? How did the men intend to end the misery that I wasn't so sure she was in?

No. There would be plenty of time for untender mercies later, and if it came to that, I would have the vet do it. The men laughed and laughed. "You'd take a chicken to a vet? You're kidding, right?"

I boxed up my new babies and took them home, the men shaking their heads as I drove away.

Clare couldn't walk, but that didn't stop her from getting around, even though she seemed to navigate by nothing more than her own will. My main concern was that the other chicks would begin to pick on her, to peck at her, as is normal chicken behavior. If that happened, I'd have to decide if raising a flock animal in isolation was crueler than death, but it never came to that. The other chicks not only left her alone, they actually got out of her way when she was trying to get to food or water. And her way was the long way around; she used her wings as legs and her legs sometimes as rudders, sometimes as obstacles to overcome, depending on the position they happened to be in.

The camaraderie the other chicks shared with Clare only intensified as they grew older. Lilly, so named because she was white when she hatched, seemed to be Clare's special friend and protector. Clare was a beautiful mixture of white blending to pale blond blending to a lovely honey color. As Lilly grew, it became apparent that a new name was in order, because Lilly was obviously turning into a beautiful rooster with coloring similar to Clare's. So Lilly became Louie, and the young chickens got big enough to go outside with the other, older chickens, and feel the sweet green grass beneath them.

At first Clare, sensing her own vulnerability, wouldn't venture outside with the other chickens; she preferred to stay inside the chicken house, playing it

safe beneath the lawn mower. She managed to hop, flop, and fly her way around the floor to get to where she wanted to go. I felt sorry for her always being left behind, so I started spending time with her. She was sweet and friendly, and she loved to be in my lap to eat treats out of my hand and be stroked and talked to. Her favorite spot was the top of her head. A gentle finger or thumb stroking her head always made her beg for more, and start her chirping in reply to my words and songs. Head stroking lead to her settling down in my lap for a nap in the sun. Sometimes I took her outside, so that she could enjoy the feel, taste and smell of the grass, and the unlucky bug who wasn't paying attention and landed too near her.

Before long she was venturing out every day, gallantly trying to be just another chicken. She went where they went, and gave me fits when she would go where no other chicken would dare to go.

I heard her cry for help once when I went to shut them up for the night, but I couldn't find her. I kept calling her, and she kept answering me until I followed her chirps to the tiny space beneath the hen house with its block foundation. I ran to get the flashlight—there might be snakes under there—and belly to the ground peered in and saw her. She was stuck, stopped by rocks and dirt and the floor of the henhouse above her. She'd peep and leap, peep and leap, but it got her nowhere. She was too far back for me to reach her, and I started to cry. I dashed back into the house, frantically thinking of how to get her out. I got a broom, an umbrella and a coat hanger, and ran back outside. It took me all three to finally be able to maneuver her to where I could finally reach in and grab her. She was dirty, wet and tired, so I brought her inside to clean and warm her up before returning her to the chicken house for the night. Then I closed up the holes that led to the dark and dangerous space under there.

Time passed, and she continued to delight and amaze me. I thought she would grow up with the other chickens and even begin to lay eggs. I was wrong.

Clare was nearly four months old when I found her dead in the henhouse one morning, the victim of a huge blacksnake who had somehow squeezed in. It had swallowed her, head first, up to her shoulders. But she was too big for it to eat, so she was spit out dead. I cried and cried and blamed myself for not knowing that this could happen. I didn't know that snakes will kill what they can't eat, and I no longer have any tolerance for blacksnakes in or around my chicken house.

I still miss that sweet little crippled chicken with her brave heart and strong will to live her life and enjoy all the things everyone does.