



# **A FRIEND for MATHUSALEH**

**A true story**

**By Joyce Wilson**

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We realized something was wrong when we saw how the Old Chicken was sitting apart from the others.

It was late summer. Like the oldest man in the Bible, she had lived a long time, much longer than expected. As far as we knew, few chickens reached the age of ten years old, and she was now twelve. The younger hens changed toward her suddenly, as if they were frightened by her oncoming weakness and frailty of age. They scolded her. Then one attacked her, leaving marks on her head near her red comb. Perhaps they were all following some deep-seated impatience to hasten her death by pushing her away from them. Perhaps they wanted to prove that, once provoked, she would fight back and be the way she had been, a vibrant young hen like them. She lay off to the side by herself for most of the day.



The other hens were six years younger. The five Brahmas and four Wyandottes had acquired names that expressed their personalities, such as Pushy Polly and Messy Maggie. Clucky chatted excitedly about her food, Sleepy Doris rested all morning before she laid an egg, and Lacey announced that she was the first to lay an egg, every day. The hens who did not distinguish themselves were called White Hen, Whitey, Black Hen, and Dot. Soon the Old Chicken, a Plymouth Rock, would earn the name Mathusaleh.

At the end of October, a storm was forecast for Hallowe'en. "Get prepared for the Frankenstorm," everybody was saying. We decided to take the Old Chicken into the basement where she could have some safety away from the younger hens for the duration of the storm. We could protect her there and check up on her if the power went out. We suspected that the winds might restrict our trips to the hen house, which was bolted closed every night and opened every morning. The feeling of safety among the hens depended on their bonding and harmony within those closed doors, one large and one small.

In the cellar, we made the Old Chicken a bed by layering straw over newspapers on the cement floor and enclosing the space with a three-foot high folding puppy fence. With her food and waterer there, she lay quietly with her feet tucked under her and her feathers fluffed out around her. She watched us come and go, sorting clothes, running the washing machine and dryer, testing flashlights. She

seemed quite contented. As the storm unleashed its force, the beaches and streets, tunnels and subway stations were flooded. Roads and bridges were washed away. Several deaths were reported. The storm would no longer be associated with Frankenstein's monster and became known as Hurricane Sandy.



The Old Chicken seemed perfectly happy with her new life on her own in the cellar. Through November, we let her out in the back yard in the afternoons so she could have some fresh air. Soon we noticed that she was forming an attachment to our dog Gus. At this time, sensing that she might live a lot longer, we began to call her Mathusaleh.

We named her for the oldest man in the Bible, Methusaleh, who lived at the time of the great flood when Noah built his ark. Because she was female, we

changed the spelling to Mathusaleh. When we began to tell her story, we were struck by the connection between the biblical story and our Mathusaleh, who did not need to escape the rising waters in an ark, but who did survive a time when the shores and lives were permanently changed as a result of days of heavy winds and rain.



Gus and Mathusaleh kept their distance from each other, a close distance, often no more than several feet apart. One day, when I arrived home from work, I found the two of them on the back step near the door to the house. On another day, each had chosen a step to lie on: Gus at the top with his chin resting neatly on his front paws, Mathusaleh two steps down, with her feet tucked under her and her feathers fluffed out around her.



Gus seemed worried that Mathusaleh would come into the house. Even in December with the first snow on the ground, Gus gave us a look that said he did not think that any chicken should come through the back door into the kitchen.



We took Mathusaleh through the bulkhead door and down the stairs into the cellar. All winter we kept her there. In the spring she continued to enjoy sunny afternoons pecking and scratching among the herbs and daylilies in our back yard, where Gus was always nearby. Then she would agree to being carried back downstairs to nap and spend the night next to her food and water, the washing machine and dryer, and the radiator on the exterior basement wall.

Gus and Mathusaleh continued their friendship on the back step into the spring. Although cautious, Gus was fond of her. He gave her a poke with his nose now and then to show his affection.



That July we had a heat spell. I cleaned out the chicken house and filled the middle compost bin with straw and feed waste. Then I spread white pine shavings in the chicken house and in Mathusaleh's bed in the cellar. She seemed indifferent while the younger hens were very upset! They hesitated to walk on the new shavings and spent the night pressed against the bolted door. It seemed they could not sleep unless they were near the exit, ready to flee the new stuff with the strange smell as soon as morning arrived. They wanted their routine to remain as it always had been, without change.

At the end of July, nine months after she began to spend the nights in the cellar, Mathusaleh finally started to die. She was thirteen years and three months old.

Her dying took ten days. First she stopped eating. She no longer wanted mash or her favorite cracked corn. Then her appetite returned at the sight of cucumber peels and greens. She ate so much so quickly that her stools became green. She sat upright on the straw in the cellar for several days without eating or drinking. She was lying on her side all day at the end of the week. Once I thought she had died, but she lifted her head when I called to her Saturday afternoon. Finally, by Sunday morning, she was still.

We buried her near our vegetable garden.



All fall, Gus looked for Mathusaleh. After he didn't find her, he brought over his blue ball. He liked to fetch it, especially if we threw it three, maybe six times. He is good at counting, as it is important for us to account for those around us, the living and the dead.

The End

