

The Rescue of Kukkuta and the Rooster Dilemma

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On the Saturday before Easter I got a call from a friend who was worried about an injured rooster in the Walgreens parking lot about five minutes from my house. A feral population of roosters and hens have made their home in the fields of tall grass and parking lots around Peet's Coffee and Walgreens in Cotati, California. It's the same area where I recently rescued a mama hen and her six newborn chicks and took them to a local farmed animal sanctuary. The chickens have become a novelty around there. Peet's puts out water for them and people come just to hang out with the colorful birds, feeding them bits of scone and taking their pictures. But the population is growing and more and more roosters are being dumped there.

I drove out to see what was going on and there was a police car parked outside the Walgreens. I asked the officer if she was there because of the rooster and she said yes, that Walgreens had called the Cotati police concerned about him. Apparently a larger rooster had been bullying him for hours. We found him lying on the ground in the middle of a parking space with blood splattered around him on the pavement. The triumphant rooster was pacing back and forth, hovering over him on the curb. We shooed away the tormenter and had a look at the poor guy. He was frozen in shock. His face, head, neck, and comb were covered in murky blood and his left eye was swollen shut with fresh blood dripping out of it.

I asked what she was going to do and she didn't know. I sat next to the pitiful little guy and was able to put him in my lap and get a good look. He had a lot of blood on him, but the only injury I could find was to his eye. I couldn't find any wound on his body or neck or comb. I told her there was a good chance he could recover, but she said they would probably "put him down" as no one would want to drive him all the way up to Animal Control on Easter weekend. He would likely be euthanized at Animal Control anyway, so I ended up with a rooster in my car. I knew he would be my responsibility. I had just tried to help someone find a home for a rooster a few weeks before and no sanctuary in the area could take a rooster, but there was no other choice. His life was in my hands.

For seven days he didn't move. We put him on soft towels in an animal carrying crate and he just sat, frozen. The poor soul was so traumatized. He was not interested in food or water. We tried to entice him with blueberries, pasta, apples, rice, bananas; nothing worked. His eye was so swollen it was the size of a marble and the blood had dried stiff and black all over his head. I got some

antibiotic cream and applied it twice a day. A few times, I took him out of the crate and set him in the sun for a while, trying to enliven him, but he would just sit, motionless and listless. Every morning I ran to the crate to check on him, so afraid that he might have died during the night. We named him Kukkuta (which means rooster in Sanskrit).

THE TRAGEDY OF UNWANTED ROOSTERS

Kukkuta needed to be rescued because people eat eggs. You don't see the connection? Let me lay it out for you. Because of the tireless work of animal advocacy organizations like United Poultry Concerns, there's a growing awareness that hens suffer in the egg industry. In Sonoma County, people have bought into the "farm to table" ethos and want a more natural and "humane" experience. The area is largely wealthy and rural people buy chicks from feed stores and off Craigslist, and raise their own chickens for eggs. This may seem like a positive trend, but there is a hidden hindrance — for every hen born, so is a rooster.

Roosters are unwanted because, of course, they don't lay eggs. They also crow so they aren't welcome, or even legal to keep, in many neighborhoods. Most areas of Sonoma County will allow up to 12 hens, but no roosters. Because they are worthless to the egg industry, male chicks are killed just hours after emerging from their shells in the hatcheries. They are thrown away alive by the billions, dumped into huge trash bins to suffocate on the weight of their brothers and die slowly of dehydration or freezing to death. Many are ground up alive in maceration machines where sharp blades like huge blenders chop up their tiny bodies for fertilizer, pet food, and other products.

Determining the sex of a chick is not an exact science, so many males are shipped to feed stores and sold as hens. A backyard "enthusiast" discovers that one of her "hens" is a male so she "gets rid" of him. It's increasingly difficult to find homes for roosters. Overwhelmed animal shelters end up euthanizing most of them. Other roosters get dumped on the side of the road. This is what's happening in Cotati at Peet's Coffee. People see chickens there, so they dump their unwanted rooster thinking he will be fine, but not necessarily. Roosters are territorial, and as the numbers increase, the newcomer may have to face a bird defending his territory and be injured, stressed, or even killed. My guess is that this is what happened to our sweet rooster.

KUKKUTA'S ROAD TO RECOVERY

Slowly the swelling of Kukkuta's eye subsided and on the seventh day of being a guest in our small backyard, he stood up and walked out of the crate and started drinking some water. We were thrilled! He dunked his head under the water again and again, washing the crusted blood off his face and comb. The next morning we heard him crow for the first time and it was a joyful sound! A robust celebration of life! He is doing great now and he has been a perfect gentleman, never pecking when I reach for him or kicking when I pick him up. He is a gentle soul.

At first he needed about a four foot radius around us, unsure of his rescuers' intent. But now he comes right up, following us around the yard and crowing when we go inside because he misses us. He will come right up to the sliding glass door on the deck and hang out, peering in, waiting for our attention. He talks to us with sweet clucks, bocks, and coos of affection and gratitude when we give him food. He is so full of life, busy all day and loves to interact with us. We are mesmerized watching him.

A NEW LEVEL OF LOVE

Being vegan for 28 years, I have long respected chickens' lives, but I had never lived with a chicken. Kukkuta has awakened something incredibly special in me. I love him so much, and while I had a strong vegan philosophy before, now more than ever I simply can't imagine anyone purposely killing a sentient individual like Kukkuta. It's a different level of unimaginable now. Everything in me wants to protect him and keep him alive. This is a love I wish everyone could experience, for you can never again think of harming an animal after knowing this kind of love and compassion.

My husband and I unfortunately can't keep Kukkuta because we rent our small duplex. A vegan activist friend who lives out on Cobb Mountain has agreed to adopt him and we are overjoyed that he will be "staying in the family" by going to a vegan home. She has an acre of land and three rescued hens, but no rooster. When she saw my post on Facebook, she and her partner had already been talking about rescuing a rooster to be with their hens. They are setting up and securing a space for him. We are going to miss him so much and we've already cried a few times this week thinking about him leaving. But we're glad he is going to a home with other chickens because he needs friends.

This whole experience has enriched my life, strengthened my understanding of veganism, deepened my commitment to protecting chickens, and most of all, I will never forget my friend Kukkuta.