

# More Havoc in the Henhouse

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About a year ago I acquired a couple of laying hens and have been enjoying their scatty, sociable presence and abundant fresh eggs. One can get absurdly attached to chickens. Maude and Mabel would run to greet me when I visited the pen and sit contentedly on my lap, making little clucking noises. They crowed with victory each time they delivered a new egg, then turned around and regarded it with deep puzzlement. On very good days, when all the stars were aligned, they would lay two eggs each. Mostly it was one egg per hen per day, though, which kept me in breakfasts with some extras to give away.

These were possibly the most expensive eggs in the Republic of Indonesia, since Wayan fed them fresh greens, corn, red rice, scrambled eggs (the commercial ones), powdered dried eggshells and, occasionally, chicken meat from an offering. They loved meat. (I have a Swiss friend here who feeds beef to her hens, and they are still laying enthusiastically six years later.) They spend the day scratching contentedly in the dirt and dry rice straw of their pen, accepting gifts of grubs and grasshoppers from the garden, wallowing in dust baths and busily doing other chicken things in the hours of daylight. At night they were locked inside a bamboo coop, securely covered in fine netting to keep out snakes, which was located against my bedroom window. It was pleasant to drowse awake to their inane chicken mutters at first light.

About 0100 on a very dark night recently I was woken by what sounded like a feral cat being strangled directly outside my window. It took me a minute to wake up and realize that the hysterical bumps and distressed chicken noises signaled a drama that would have to be dealt with. The dogs, slumbering on the carpet beside my bed, woke and watched me grab the flashlight. "Let's go, there's something happening out there," I ordered. Avoiding my eyes, they both put their heads down on their crossed paws and feigned sleep. Kalypso considers herself too dignified for nocturnal adventures, and Hamish is conflict-averse.

The night was cold and black. I picked my way around the house to the chicken pen and let myself in. One of the hens was flinging herself wildly against the door of the coop. I shone my torch through the netting at the other end of the structure. A snake as thick as my arm was coiled there, its head out of sight, wearing the unmistakable silver, gold and black livery of a reticulated python. There was no sign of Mabel; presumably she was being dealt with by the business end of the snake out of sight under the roof of the coop.

I opened the door at the other end and Maude exploded out of the coop like a cannonball. Closing the door carefully, I ran after her. The frantic hen rushed round and round the dark garden with me close behind. I headed her back toward the

house and she promptly fell into the fish pond with a muffled splash. It was soon clear that Maude could not swim, and I had to go in after her. Wet to the waist, plastered with pond plants and with a soaking and traumatized hen under my arm, I climbed back out onto the grass. I took a moment to reflect how difficult it was to explain this sort of thing to my friends in orderly, placid urban Canada.

Both Maude and I were shivering by this time. I towed her dry and for lack of a better option locked her into the pantry for the balance of the night. Back in bed in a dry sarong as the python lay a few feet away assimilating my best laying hen, I pondered how the snake had gotten into the coop in the first place. It had been designed to be predator-proof because I live on a river bank and the wildlife of the undercliff -- pythons, musang and monitor lizards – is very fond of chicken. So the walls of the coop were fine mesh and the wire doors had gaps of no more than 2cm. A snake the size of the python couldn't possibly have gotten in... but it somehow it had. In the morning it would still be there, with a large, Mabel-shaped bulge in the middle, unable to escape. I fell asleep making plans to release it far, far away.

But dawn arrived to reveal that, impossible as it seemed, the coop was empty except for a few red feathers. This sizeable python, now containing a rather large chicken, had Houdini-like exited the secure coop as effortlessly as it had entered. I immediately contacted one of my reptile-obsessed friends, who assured me that it could not have gotten far. Wayan Manis and I gingerly searched the area but there was not a sign of the offender. We carefully checked every centimeter of the coop and could not find a hole. "Ghost snake," suggested Wayan helpfully.

Maude utterly refused to go back into the coop, which undoubtedly vibrated with an unpleasant energetic signature from the previous night's tragedy. She was happy enough to putter around the run all day but at bedtime showed immediate distress when I placed her in the coop. So for several nights she slept in the house – not exactly inside the house, but on the porch, in a collapsible metal cage well lined with straw.

I was concerned about her mental health, though. She had lost her long-time companion and was probably suffering from post traumatic stress disorder. Wayan and I decided that she needed a friend. Mildred arrived the next day, tenderly cradled in a cloth bag under Wayan's arm (we do not hang chickens upside down by the feet in this household).

Now, Mildred was the local equivalent of a battery hen. Wayan had bought her from a woman who kept 20 laying hens in a small coop 24/7 and fed them only dry commercial food. So Mildred was horrified to find herself standing all alone in a roomy pen. She hid under a bush, motionless, for the whole day, clearly suffering from a severe case of agoraphobia. Also she didn't recognize fresh corn, papaya and brown rice as food.

Now I had two traumatized hens. It occurred to me that although I had a short shelf of books on dog, cat and parrot behavior I had never seen a manual on how chickens think. Fortunately, Ubud teems with retired psychologists and I consulted

a couple of them, but there did not seem to be any appropriate non-verbal therapies for hens. Your chicken, unlike your parrot, is not a thinking bird. "You have to have a mind before you can lose it," one of these mental health professionals pointed out. "Cuddles and Rescue Remedy," suggested another. "Maybe a little powdered Valium in the food," Margie recommended.

Nyoman dismantled the scene of the crime (the old coop) and fashioned another from strong metal mesh. This one had a floor as well and we reckoned it to be absolutely and completely snake-proof. But when we put the hens into it together, Maude began to peck at poor Mildred, already neurotic, to whom she had taken a dislike. For Mildred's protection, the hens had to take turns being shut up in the coop during the day while the other put in her scratching time in the pen. Maude was still sleeping on the porch.

Our lives were becoming so complicated moving around hens like chess pieces that we decided to let Mildred live in the new coop, move Maude's cage next to it and make two separate pens so they couldn't fight. This worked for a couple of days until one of them figured out how to break into the other pen. Soon they were peaceably scratching together in the straw. Things are back to normal now. Mildred has learned to love taking dust baths and making deep nests in the fragrant rice straw. She eats real food and occasionally presents us with an egg. Maude is back to her bossy self and cranks out an egg daily.

But a python that size requires feeding every two or three weeks and it's getting to be that time again...

Ibu Kat's book of stories *Bali Daze - Freefall off the Tourist Trail* is available from:

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