

# The Chicken Pen

## By ReadWorks



Cathy noticed when I didn't come into the house after a while so she came outside to find me. She stepped inside the chicken pen and stood with her arms crossed, looking at the dead hens and muttering about what it might have been that killed them all. She fed the others and then picked me up over the fence, and we walked back with my hand in hers. She didn't cry. At the time, I remember wondering how on earth anyone could ever get used to her own animals dying. "After farming for ten years, you look at things differently," she told me. "It's not that I don't care. I just think about chickens less as pets and more as...business, I guess." I sniffled into my cereal.

After the frosty chicken massacre, I started feeding the hens most mornings, and I stopped crying when one of them got sick or disappeared overnight with only a puff of feathers to announce its unfortunate departure. Not that it's fun to deal with dying chickens; I promise you, it's not. I just mean that like everything else, I was able to handle that obstacle after a little while.

I was adopted when I was nine. I moved from a really crowded, really noisy building in a really crowded, really noisy city to a really quiet, really empty house in the middle of nowhere in one day. One day full of driving and stinky rest stops, and I was at my new home. My parents were Mainers, and they lived on a farm two hours north of anything that even pretended to be a city.

At first, as you might guess, I hated it. I had no siblings, even foster siblings, and my folks waited a week before sending me to school because they wanted us to have some bonding time at home. When they did send me to school, my class was small, and I couldn't take a bus

there. Anson, my dad, had to drive me. I was used to being on my own as far as getting to school, and I felt kind of like my freedom was being dug up from under me.

I stopped hating my new home after about a month of sleeping and waking and living on the farm. It's funny how adjustment works: we hate something at first, but it's just because we don't know it, and then we start to get used to it, and sometimes after a while, we even start to like or love it. After that first month, I was used to waking up to roosters screaming; waiting for breakfast until Cathy, my mom, gave the hens theirs; and used to sitting in the backseat of Anson's car on the way to school.

I got used to one set of things, though, and then a new set of things came up, and I had to start over. One morning, for example, Cathy asked *me* to feed the chickens, and while I'd watched her do it a hundred times, I wasn't entirely sure I could or wanted to do it myself. I didn't much have a choice, so I filled a bucket with feed and a bucket with water and waddled around the back end of the barn to the chicken pen.

Autumn gets a lot colder a lot quicker in central Maine than it does in the city, so at that point, in mid-October (when I used to get by just fine with a hooded sweatshirt waiting at a bus stop in the morning) I had on pink gloves and a winter jacket. The sun was coming up, but it was still kind of dark outside, which made the little frosty patches of grass along the barn look like they were glowing. It made me feel like I was still partly asleep. But then the dream got weirder.

I walked up to the chickens' pen; some of them had woken up and hopped from their roosts to crowd the spot in the fence I was heading toward. As a nine-year-old, I had to do some gymnastic swings to get over the top of the mesh, and I nearly fell onto my knees doing so. The water trough had frozen solid overnight, the grass in the yard was crowned with white—I caught myself just before landing on frozen chicken poop. And when I stood up, I noticed the first one: a little black hen, a feathery lump on the ground, covered like the grass in a layer of frost.

I breathed in quickly, that sort of long hiccup people make when they're surprised. Bending over to make sure I wasn't just looking at a fluffy rock, I noticed another hen to my left, and another in front of me. There was no mess, no explosion of feathers, and no carnage. The chickens looked like they'd just fallen asleep in the grass instead of their coop. But even at nine, I knew better. I turned in a little circle and saw five more birds, and the sun cleared the tree line and made them all glitter. I stood in the middle of it, surrounded by frost-covered dead hens, and sobbed.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Why does the narrator go to the farm in Maine?
  - A) She moves with her parents.
  - B) She is adopted.
  - C) She is on vacation.
  - D) She is on a field trip.
  
2. How do the narrator's feelings toward living on the farm change in the story?
  - A) At first she hates living on the farm, but then she gets used to it.
  - B) At first she is excited about living on the farm, but then she starts to hate it.
  - C) At first she is scared of living on the farm, but then she gets used to it.
  - D) At first she is happy about living on the farm, but then it starts to scare her.
  
3. The narrator likes to be independent. What evidence from the passage best supports this conclusion?
  - A) "When they did send me to school, my class was small, and I couldn't take a bus there. Anson, my dad, had to drive me."
  - B) "One morning, for example, Cathy asked *me* to feed the chickens, and while I'd watched her do it a hundred times, I wasn't entirely sure I could or wanted to do it myself."
  - C) "I was used to being on my own as far as getting to school, and I felt kind of like my freedom was being dug up from under me."
  - D) "I had no siblings, even foster siblings, and my folks waited a week before sending me to school because they wanted us to have some bonding time at home."
  
4. How can the narrator best be described?
  - A) stubborn
  - B) lonely
  - C) outgoing
  - D) adaptable
  
5. What is this story mostly about?
  - A) adapting to changes in life
  - B) how to run a farm in Maine
  - C) what it is like to be adopted
  - D) taking care of chickens

6. Read the following sentences: “As a nine-year-old, I had to do some gymnastic swings to get over the top of the mesh, and I nearly fell onto my knees doing so. The water trough had frozen solid overnight, the grass in the yard was **crowned with white**—I caught myself just before landing on frozen chicken poop.”

What does the narrator mean when she says the grass is “**crowned with white**”?

- A) The grass has been painted white.
- B) The grass is covered with crowns.
- C) The grass has frozen over.
- D) The grass is covered with feathers.

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

According to the narrator, even if at first you do not like something, \_\_\_\_\_ you will probably get used to it.

- A) therefore
- B) later on
- C) however
- D) above all

8. According to the narrator, how does adjustment work?

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9. How does the narrator adjust or adapt in the story? Give two examples from the story.

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10. What do you think the main theme of the story is, and why? Support your answer using details from the story.

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