

2000: My Chicken, Lily-Ann

I live in San Francisco, a crowded, bustling city known for its architectural beauty and cosmopolitan ways. The people here are generally compassionate, perhaps no different from people anywhere. Pets are common, but people usually have dogs or cats. Few realize that many here, like me, have chickens for pets.

I have five chickens. In order of dominance, they are: Tasha, Veronica, Buttercup, Spot and Lily-Ann. Each has a unique personality. Each gives me much pleasure and yummy eggs. But my favorite chicken is without a doubt, Lily-Ann.

She's a Cochin, black with gray and white swirls. She looks like a grand dame in a fancy fur coat. Her matching feathered legs give her the appearance of having run out in public in her pajamas or having dressed in a pant suit for a day at the office.

Lily-Ann was named after my corpulent Aunt Lillian and my partner's grandma Ann who had eyes that looked old and wise because of the wrinkles under her lower lids. Lily-Ann looks like a victim, acts like a victim and touches my heart.

She's truly hen-pecked. She gets the least to eat, avoids trouble at every turn and keeps to herself a good deal of the time. When she does commune with the others, her best friend seems to be Tasha, the leader of the pack. How curious it is that these two would find pleasure in each other's company. Tasha doesn't protect Lily-Ann from the others. I guess Tasha feels it's every chicken for herself. Still, the two of them will share a hole and spray each other's feathers with dirt. They can be seen together at night, nuzzled together like best friends at a slumber party.

Lily-Ann even lets me pick her up and pet her. She gives in to any form of authority, any voice that commands. Compliant is the word to describe her. Gentle is her credo - a peace lover. She'd never attack the others or take up more space than her seven little pounds would take up.

When Lily-Ann developed a respiratory infection recently, I was truly saddened and worried. I've only enjoyed the company of chickens in my home for about two years and had no experience with chicken illnesses. I took her to a vet, but after growing a culture, she could find no biological cause for Lily-Ann's wheezy breath and lack of energy.

The ol' girl is on antibiotics now, twice a day. She doesn't even have to have the syringe forced down her throat. She willingly laps it up. What a gal! I've put food and water by her side, but she doesn't get around much anymore.

The vet suggested blood work, but I said no. Lily-Ann will have to work it out herself. I love the old bird, but I've spent as much money on her as I want to. I've taken the vet's suggestions on things I can do for my chicken that don't cost any more money. That feels good.

I feel funny making a decision about medical decisions based on money. It doesn't seem right somehow. Yet, there are countries in the world where people's annual income is less than I've already spent on medical cost for one chicken. What should my priorities be? Where should my money go?

These questions have been laid down before me for my attention. I don't wish to burden others with them. Like Lily-Ann, I try not to take up more space than is mine. I try not to burden others with my problems. Yet, I have the ability and the urge to communicate, to express my feelings to other people, not just to birds.

What will happen to Lily-Ann? What will happen to all the people in the world who have less than me? What will happen to those [man or beast] who find it difficult to speak up for themselves?

What will happen to me? I'm the master of five chickens who teach me more about myself than I could have ever imagined. I see that the mirrors of my being can be anywhere, in city life or in nature.

Lily-Ann has a lot of inner strength. I think she'll make it with or without antibiotics. Happy ending to a bittersweet story. I'll make it, too.