

Freedom and the Broody Hen

My aunt's house in Willsgrove was a paradise for me, providing an endless supply of insects, birds, reptiles, and mammals. In addition, my uncle ran a small chicken farm on the property. And besides the chickens, he also kept a few Muscovy ducks.

Often, a hen would go broody, so to keep them happy, he would let them sit on dummy eggs. Ducks aren't always good parents, and through their neglect, many eggs broke or never hatched. So, when one of the Rhode Island Reds became broody, my uncle gave her a batch of fertile duck eggs.

A diligent mother, she sat on the eggs for over five weeks, instead of the usual three weeks for chicken eggs. Soon the red hen roamed the farm, and everywhere she went, yellow ducklings followed her in a row. The little caravan stopped every few steps to peck the ground for insects or spilt grain.

One sunny afternoon, the hen and her brood passed by the shallow duck pond, and upon seeing it, the ducklings raced into the water. The mother hen panicked and tried to stop the laggards from joining the others. But it was no use, and soon, all the ducklings swam, splashed, and squeaked in delight. The poor hysterical mother hen ran around the pond, clucking at the ducklings to come out.

This comical scene continued for the next two days, but then, the hen got used to the idea her offspring possessed superpowers. Like a mother at a public swimming pool, she sat on the edge of the pond and patiently waited for her kids to tire of the fun. After the swim, the party would troop back to their enclosure, tired and hungry.

The fun wasn't over yet. Soon, the ducklings established a routine and waddled to the pool twice a day, early morning and early afternoon. Despite the sunny days, winter nights in Bulawayo could be cold. One night, the duck pond froze over, but the ducklings stuck to their schedule. They all ran into the pond and slipped. None of them could stand on the ice, and the mother hen raced around the pond in a clucking panic. The ducklings slid on their stomachs, using their feet like the oars of a rowing boat. They got out one by one and stood staring at the pond in disbelief. By early afternoon, the ice melted, and the ducklings once again splashed happily in the cold water.

Eight years later, on my last day in the Sixth Form at Milton Senior, an incident reminded me of that mother hen and the ducklings.

The master in charge of the Sixth Form held a private discussion with each senior student leaving the school. Near one o'clock, it was my turn. He wished me well for the future and said, 'LTK, your schooldays are done. Never again will you have to follow orders from anybody, unless you so choose.' With those words, I felt liberated. He was wrong, of course. Straight after university came my national service in the army, followed by endless call-ups. But that is another story.

What does a group of polite, responsible, law-abiding young men do when liberated for the rest of their lives? A little mischief, perhaps? I cycled with my friends John, Desmond, and one other, whose name I forget, to John's house nearby in Kumalo, on the Johannesburg Road, opposite the Bulawayo General Hospital. We intended to have a cool drink and chat about our plans for the next year.

It was a weekday, and both of John's parents were out. So too were the neighbours, who possessed a beautiful light blue swimming pool on that hot sunny day. Polite, responsible John suggested we go for a swim, as his neighbours weren't home during the day and their servant was away on leave.

No sooner were we splashing in the pool, throwing a tennis ball between us, than a car pulled into the driveway. The unmistakable sound of trouble came closer—the hurried, sharp footsteps of the irate female house owner. Someone said, as we never needed to follow orders again, we should ignore her. 'Let's pretend we can't hear her and carry on as if she's not there.'

'You boys! What are you doing in my swimming pool? Come out at once!'

The ruse only lasted a couple of minutes, but seemed much longer. The woman ran around the pool, shouting out her objections and trying to catch the eye of one of us. My mind flashed back to the mother hen when she first saw her ducklings jump into the pond. There we were in the pool, throwing the tennis ball and splashing, 'oblivious' to the clucking of the outraged house owner.

We did, of course, concede to her demands, all the while claiming we thought we had permission to swim there. I don't know if the woman recognised John, though I suspect she did. What did she or her husband have to say to his parents? What did they say to John? I don't know. I saw John once again, years later, but forgot to ask him that question.