

PUTTING THE BIRDS TO BED

by Bob Tarte



Bob Tarte,
author of
Fowl Weather

with any family, inevitably you have to get everyone settled down for the night. In the Tarte house, it's a little more complicated.

ish scratch feed and water, slosh out the wading pool, shoo in the ducks and hens, distribute treats, referee food squabbles, search behind the pottery kiln for hiding birds, gather eggs, and switch off the lights. On the way back to the house, I tossed scraps to the backyard geese, checked food and beverage buckets, and double-checked the pen door latches as Linda prof-fered a final toy for Dusty to attack.

That was the nightly "night-night" routine. Nothing complicated about it—at least not until we added a few more animals.

As I opened the basement door, a pair of juvenile grackles croaked for mealworms. Linda had raised and released them two weeks ago, but they continued to hang around demanding handouts. "Over there, you big baby," I told Jabba the Hutt. Standing with his beak wide open, he pleaded with me to pop the food directly into his mouth as his brother scarfed up the worms I'd scattered. Upstairs, Linda

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *In Fowl Weather, Bob Tarte learns that a good family can help you through the roughest of times, and it need not be limited to your own species. As*

Putting our birds to bed after dinner was usually a snap.

While I chased a dove and parakeet around the dining room, Linda retrieved the peas, green beans, and corn that our parrots had flung in all directions and dumped them into a bowl. Once I'd caught Howard and Harvey and returned them to their cages, I said good night to our African grey parrot Bella, cockatiel Louie, two doves, and two parakeets before covering their cages with sheets. While Linda vacuumed, I barricaded the dining room with a board to discourage the rabbits from eating the living room rug when they came out for their evening romp.

"Be nice to your Donald," Linda told African grey parrot Dusty while wiggling a decapitated duck toy in front of him. "You don't have to bite your Donald so hard."

Bowl of table scraps in hand, I trudged out to the barn to hose down the cement, replen-

fed six baby robins with a syringe. Halfway to the barn, I stopped and turned around. I had forgotten to grab the dog food for our large white turkey, Albert.

Animal rehabbers Marge and George Chedrick had raised Albert, a sickly refugee from a turkey meat farm, in their house. While recovering, he had developed a taste for Alpo and would muscle the Chedricks' yellow lab away from her dish.

Albert bore down on me as soon as I entered the barn. Despite his fanned tail, steely look, and intimidating snort, he was about as threatening as an animated ottoman. But he blocked the narrow passage between the wall and stanchion, and I had to sidle past him, touching the hot flesh of his head hello as I held the food pail high. He quickly caught up with me. He wouldn't leave me in peace to clean the floor until I'd set down his dish—but I couldn't set down his dish until I'd cleaned the floor. So, with the stubbornness of a dinosaur he planted himself directly in my path, ignoring the thrusts of the push broom, the water washing over his feet, and the irritated squawks of Dottie, a persistent white bantam hen, who played Laurel to his Hardy.

"You'll get your treat in a minute," I told them.

Demonstrating her lack of faith, Dottie flew up to the shelf where I had stashed the food bucket and lectured me on making her wait.

When I produced Albert's bowl, he trotted to my side with outstretched neck, eager to wolf down his snack. To keep him from trampling a smaller bird, I trailed table scraps behind me from a second dish as I led the

dancing turkey to the first unpopulated spot I found. In three resounding pecks, he emptied and tipped over the bowl, then began vacuuming up the peas, green beans, and corn from the floor, bulldozing his way through the ducks and chickens.

Now came the tricky part. Marybelle was still out in the pen with the ducklings she had secretly hatched behind the kiln. Taking her youngsters outdoors involved a short hop to the gravel from the barn floor. But they couldn't get back inside without navigating the slanted board that I'd set down for them.

After hustling them around the pen a dozen times, by sheer accident the flock finally began toddling up the ramp. Success loomed until a single duckling hopped off, causing instant chaos as Marybelle abandoned the flock in pursuit, and the other ducklings followed, and I took up the chase. After several circuits of the pen, I managed to herd them onto the board, but another nervous duckling jumped ship. When I reached down to snatch him up, I transformed a normally docile mother duck into a quacking, snapping machine that punctured my hand in a flash of brown feathers. Dottie ambled outside to see what I was up to; three hens and four ducks joined her for fear of missing a snack; and Albert barricaded the entrance with his impressive bulk.

"How did it go?" Linda asked after I'd staggered back indoors. She was treating Dusty to an herbal tea nightcap before covering him for the night.

"Piece of cake," I said. Then I walked over and bit Dusty's duck toy, hard. ■

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—BOB TARTE