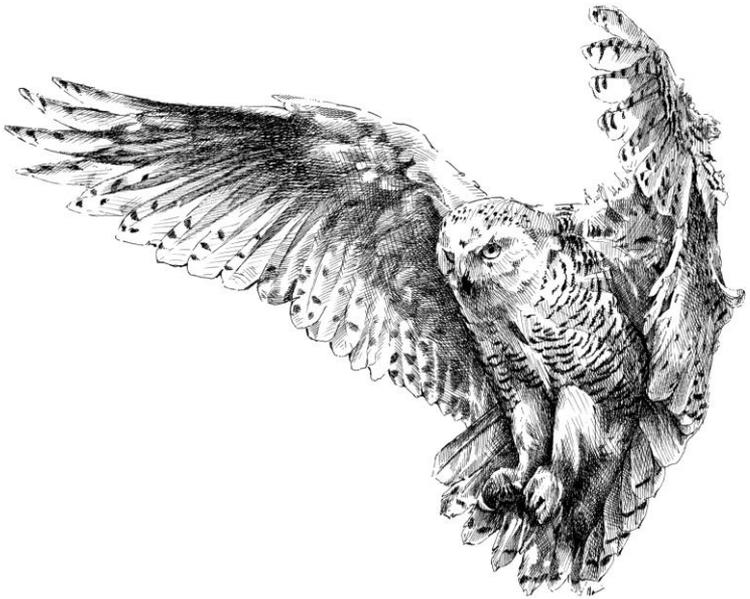


WHO KNOWS



By

Fran Heckrotte

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WHO KNOWS

"Who?"

Sophie opened one eye, searching tiredly for the source of the question. Not seeing anyone she closed it wearily.

I didn't know being a mother was so hard! It's only been one day since my chick hatched and I'm already exhausted.

"Who!" the voice called out again.

"Who?" Sophie asked looking upward toward the darkest corner of the loft. "Is that you Who?"

"Who else would it be?" A barn owl launched its massive body from the shadows onto a nearby rafter.

"Would you two mind lowering your voices?" another voice, much higher, piped in. "I'm nesting!"

"Nesting? Are you going to have some chicks?" Sophie's ears perked up with excitement. *My chick will have playmates.*

A large white hen waddled from a different area of the loft and squatted next to the owl.

"You know I don't like chicks. They're too noisy, not to mention needy. If they're not walking all over their food or pooping in it, they're trying to crawl under you interfering with your sleep."

"Oh, Lynne," Sophie exclaimed. "That sounds awful."

"Uhh hummm!" the owl interrupted, appearing to clear its throat.

"Sorry Who. I didn't mean to ignore you. I'm just sooo tired. Did you need something?"

"Not really. I thought I'd see how your, umm, **chick** was doing."

Sophie nuzzled the tiny body resting against her belly. Its tiny mouth was latched onto one of the dog's teats but it wasn't suckling. The chick was sound asleep.

"It's fine. Thank you for your concern. You're up awfully early."

Who's large golden-brown eyes blinked twice. Then the owl rotated her head to the left and then to the right.

"I thought I'd see if you needed to get out for a while before I go hunting. Maybe get something to eat and drink. You need to keep your strength up."

"Not to mention poop," Lynne the Hen added. "No messing the nest."

"I know. You warned me about that before. What do I do about my chick's. . . ?" Sophie stopped, too embarrassed to finish her question.

Flapping her wings wildly Lynne the Hen stepped off the rafter. After landing next to Sophie she strolled around the dog and baby.

"Fortunately it isn't pooping much now but as it gets bigger you're going to have a problem."

Who, who had remained silent during the discussion, lifted her great wings pushing her body upward. She then circled twice inside the barn before gliding to a gentle landing next to Lynne and Sophie.

"You have to do something," the owl said. "I'm not an expert but I've heard that dogs clean their babies with their tongues."

"You mean lick them!" Lynne the Hen squawked, her voice rising in disbelief. "That's disgusting! Who would want to lick poop?"

"That's a question, not a statement, right?" Who said, rotating her head to stare at the old hen.

"Of course."

Who raised her wings in a typical owl shrug.

"It's what I heard. How else could you clean baby butts?"

"Chickens don't have to worry about such things," Lynne replied. "When our babies hatch they are quite self-sufficient."

Sophie considered Who's question for several moments. Butt-licking did not sound at all attractive but the owl was right, as usual. There really wasn't an alternative.

At least there isn't very much. Rubbing her tongue back and forth across the roof of her mount, she worked up enough saliva to give it a good coating. *Okay, here goes! Slurp! Yuck! Slurp!*

"Ach! That has got to taste awful," Lynne said, shaking her body so vigorously a few feathers dislodged and floated away.

Who's head bobbed up and down.

"Definitely we birds are more evolved."

"Izz nah zo bad," Sophie replied, swallowing reluctantly and then worked up more saliva. Just as she was about to give her chick another lick, a small amount of brown goo oozed from the baby's rump.

Lynne the Hen squawked. "I just remembered I have to rearrange my nest. I'll be back later." Without waiting for a reply, she jumped into the air flapping her wings wildly. Seconds later she disappeared into the shadows muttering to herself. "Peculiar. Most peculiar."

"Not everyone can be a mother," Who said turning back to Sophie. "Do you want to finish that and take a break?"

Gathering up her courage, Sophie gave one quick flick with her tongue and then made a mad dash out of the barn. Who blinked

twice. A whimper drew her attention back to the abandoned bundle wiggling in the nest.

"You certainly are ugly. I'm not even sure I could eat you if Sophie didn't want you." Hopping forward she stretched out a sharp talon to touch the squirming body. When it shivered she wrapped her toes around it, tucking it under her left wing. "There. That should keep you warm until mom gets back." Who folded her legs under her and squatted down on the nest of straw. The whimpers subsided, only to be replaced by a sucking sensation against her ribs. *I hope Sophie gets back soon. This can't be good for my feathers.*

CHAPTER 2

Running to her bowls Sophie lapped vigorously at the cool water, washing the poop from her mouth. It wasn't necessarily a bad taste. It just wasn't good. Fortunately her appetite hadn't been ruined. She gobbled up the food her Mistresses had left for her, took another drink and then trotted off toward an area behind the barn to empty her bladder and bowels. When she was finished she raced back to her nest, skidding to a stop next to the large mound of straw. Who was calmly preening her feathers.

"Are you done already?" The owl asked.

"Yes, thanks." Sophie looked all around for her chick.

"She's fine. I wouldn't let anything happen to your baby." Who raised her wing to display the small bundle. Standing she moved away. Sophie crept in to take her place.

"Well, I guess I'll see you later." Jumping upward, Who spread her massive wings and pushed downward lifting her body high into the air.

"Where are you going?" Sophie called after her.

"Hunting. I'm hungry."

Lynne the Hen appeared on the rafter but the owl had already flown out the loft door opening.

"What's all the ruckus now?" Lynne clucked, clearly irritated. "Can't a chicken get any rest in this place?"

"Who's gone hunting." Feeling her chick nuzzling the bare skin on her tummy, Sophie rolled onto her side making access to her teats easier. "I hope she doesn't bring her dinner back here."

"I wouldn't worry about that. Who never eats in," Lynne said. "Too messy. Besides, I'd never allow it. I've seen how owls eat. It's not a pretty site."

Sophie shifted slightly to sniff her baby. Inhaling deeply she savored the sweet scent. Fortunately it hadn't pooped anymore.

"I never realized before how nice newly hatched chicks smelled."

"That's because chicks don't smell at all. Only their poop. All poop smells. Chicken poop, turkey poop, cow poop. . ." Realizing that Lynne was on a roll," Sophie sighed. "Pig poop. That's the worst. Of course they can't help themselves. They'll eat anything you know. Why they'd probably even eat—"

"Mother Sophie!"

"Mother Sophie!" several voices called out interrupting Lynne's observations. Several young chickens charged through the barn door half running, half flying. "How's your chick?" They called out in unison.

"Hi, kids. It's fine. Want to see?"

All of the chickens jumped up and down excitedly.

"Can we?"

"Oh yes."

"Please."

"Me first."

"Okay, you first, Butterscotch," Sophie said to the light brown hen.

Stepping tentatively forward, Butterscotch leaned forward and eyed the small bundle sucking on Sophie's teat.

"What's it doing?"

"Feeding."

"Oh! Do you have bugs in you?"

"No," Sophie replied.

"Oh. Then what's it eating? Chicks always eat bugs. Mother showed all of us what to look for the day we hatched. I don't

remember ever doing anything like that. Are you sure you don't have bugs?"

"I'm sure."

"Does that hurt? It looks like it would hurt," Butterscotch said.

"No. It actually feels nice."

"Can I try it?"

"Umm, I guess," Sophie agreed reluctantly. Leaning forward, the young hen pecked at one of the dog's other teats. "Ouch!" Startled, Butterscotch jumped back.

"Sorry, Mother Sophie."

Sophie licked the area.

"That's okay. I'm fine."

Butterscotch looked doubtful.

"I don't understand why it doesn't hurt you. And what it's eating."

"Maybe you have tiny bugs," Tiramisu piped in. "You know, like those things that make us itch sometimes. Mother showed us how to take dirt baths to get rid of them."

"I definitely don't have those."

"Do you think Mother would know?" Fluffybutt asked. He was the only male present and quite handsome. Still he preferred the company of his sisters. They were fun, unlike the cranky old roosters that strutted around the barnyard trying to impress the hens.

"Let's go ask her." Tiramisu dashed from the barn, followed by all her siblings except Butterscotch.

"There they go!" Butterscotch said shaking her head. "They have the attention span of a butterfly." The young hen turned, eyed Sophie's chick and then looked hopefully to Lynne the Hen. "Do you know?"

"Nope. I have no interest in babies. They're too much trouble. Noisy, disrespectful, always asking questions."

"Oh."

"Ignore her," Sophie said to Butterscotch, giving her a tender lick. "Chicks are supposed to ask questions. It's a great way to learn. You'll probably find the answer before anyone else. Who knows?"

Shaking her head, Lynne the Hen flew back to her nest in the loft.

"Who knows? Who knows indeed!" She clucked. "Who knows about everything."

The End