

## **BIOPHILE 5 – NOVEMBER 2007**

I bought her to kill her, so she didn't get a name. Somehow it was easier that way. And, after all, I only knew her for a few hours.

We met on a rowdy, dirty street in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg. She was crouched in the corner of an apartment block of cages which stank of feces and fear. Her eyes were closed, and her body motionless. I thought she was dead, but the jabbing, wire hook which dragged her out of her small corner of hell soon had her eyes wide open in shock. No outraged squawk emitted from her, though. She was way beyond that.

Her skin was an angry pink and utterly nude. Poking through it at regular intervals were the white shafts of what were once feathers. A ghastly, rasping sound came from her throat, as she battled for each breath through lungs drowning in a broth of puss. No one would buy *her*, that was clear, and a cold and rainy night was approaching. The least I could do was to hasten her descent into that final sleep which awaits us all. Her jailer looked at me in amazement as I forked out R30 in exchange for her sad, sorry form, and then headed off for the sanctuary of my less odorous suburb.

The vet's waiting room was busy. Inquisitive children with their floppy puppies and old faithfuls poked their heads into my cardboard box and recoiled in revulsion. Every now and then my ugly little charge rallied and made a brave but pathetic attempt to escape, poking her wild-eyed head through the flaps of the box, and pecking at them with every last ounce of energy she had. She sneezed often, and arched her bruised and blue neck as high as it could reach, desperately sucking at what little air her squishy lungs could accommodate, desperately clinging to her miserable life.

I held her prickly, diarrhea-smudged body while the vet injected that merciful green juice into her thigh. Slowly her wild, snaking neck began to quieten until it finally folded back on itself and she was at peace.

But I was not. I began to sob and sob. The vet quietly left the room, no doubt mystified as to why the death of an ugly, common, nameless bird should provoke such grief. You see, she wasn't a Martial Eagle, a Pel's Fishing Owl or a Narina Trogon. She had no aesthetic appeal, no

environmental import, no scarcity value. She was just a chicken. 'Just' a chicken.

And she was one of over 5 million chickens who die EVERY WEEK in South Africa, having spent their short lives crammed into massive, windowless sheds along with, on average, 40 000 others of their kind. One of over 5 million sentient creatures who inhale so much ammonia and fecal particulate that many of them suffer from chronic respiratory disease and stinging eyes. One of over 5 million fowls who peck relentlessly at each other in frustration at their cramped conditions. One of over 5 million birds that are pumped so full of growth hormones that their little breasts often expand to the point where their legs can no longer carry them.

She was also one of thousands of birds that are so sick or weak that they are ejected from the commercial chicken chain and sold live to township dwellers for back-yard slaughter. You'd think they'd made payment enough for the broiler farmers to give them a quicker end. But no, more pain is due, more suffering is required so that our nation can have cheap animal protein.

And that's why I sobbed. I sobbed for over 5 million chickens that, weekly, 'donate' their anguished lives for people who either remain ignorant of their plight or simply don't care about it. I sobbed for the abomination of it all.