

Heart-to-Heart

by Jeanne Gulbranson

Jimmy crouched low in his safe place behind the tool shed and held the warm egg close to his body. The mama chicken had walked away, just like his Mama had walked away from him. If the neighbor boys saw him, they'd laugh and point and say again, "Your Mama's gone! She's no good, and she hates you! You're an orphan kid!" They'd see his egg and try to hurt it like they hurt him with their sticks and clumps of dirt. But they couldn't hurt his egg. They couldn't make it cry. He whispered, "You're safe. I'm here. I'll be your mama now."

Jimmy knew that his egg needed a warm place—a safe, cozy house—so that the baby chick inside would come out and play with all the other chickens that lived in their yard. Jimmy held the egg with both hands, oh so carefully, as he edged through the hole in the bushes that led to the road in front of his house. "It takes just a little longer to get home this way, but I have to see if Mama's coming," he whispered to his egg. Jimmy had walked along that road every day since his Mama left. He'd stood by the side of the road again and again, looking as far down the dirt lanes as he could, ever since that last time his Mama had held him. Jimmy put his egg close to his mouth. "We'll just take one more look, and then I'll take you to your new place...where I live too."

Being careful to avoid the ruts in the road, Jimmy thought again about the last time he'd seen his Mama. He didn't know exactly how long it had been because he couldn't read the paper hanging in the kitchen that had the days on it. But he knew that there had been lots of sleeps since his Mama was home.

There had been loud talking and noises from his Mama and Daddy's bedroom the night before Mama left. He had heard the sounds of things getting thrown around the room, and too much shouting, and his Mama crying. Jimmy had tip-toed to their bedroom door, being careful not to step on the squeaky boards in the wood floor. But even with his ear close to the door, he could only hear a few words of what his Daddy was saying because Mama was crying so loud. "Larry...in our bed...whore...whore just like your mother...ungrateful...Larry...out." Jimmy didn't know what "whore" meant, but his Daddy kept

shouting that word over and over. Jimmy knew what Horehound candy was—maybe that’s what his Daddy meant. Jimmy figured that Daddy must be talking about the nice man who drove the red truck and came to visit Mama sometimes when Daddy was at work. He’d told Jimmy to call him Uncle Larry, and every time he’d brought Jimmy a piece of Horehound candy and told Jimmy to “take it outside and suck it—hard.” Then Uncle Larry and Mama would laugh. Jimmy was worried because his Mama was crying so much, but he knew better than to open their door when it was closed. He’d gotten whipped more than once for doing that! So, he’d crept back to bed and held very still until the darkness came over his eyes and he drifted off to sleep.

Jimmy had woken up a little later than usual that next morning, and although the sun was already up, his Mama didn’t have his breakfast toast in the oven. She wasn’t even in the kitchen part of the house; she was sitting in the big chair by the front window. When he’d asked her where his toast was, she had only said, “Heart-to-heart,” so he ran over and got on her lap. That was their favorite thing.

“Heart” was the first thing that Jimmy’s Mama had taught him. He could point to his heart before his eyes or mouth or ears. She’d say, “Heart,” and Jimmy would first point to his and then to his Mama’s, and then she’d pick him up and hold their hearts together, and say, “Heart-to-heart.” When Jimmy got to be a big boy, like he was now, he’d climb into her lap and they’d put their hearts together—like they did on that last morning.

After a while, Mama said, “Go on, now. Daddy’s going to take you to Aunt Marion’s. She’ll make you toast.” Jimmy was glad to go to his Mama’s sister’s house because her big brown dog had new puppies, and he knew he’d get to play with them. His Daddy hadn’t said anything all the way over to Aunt Marion’s house, but that was okay, because his Daddy didn’t talk much anyway. When Jimmy got to Aunt Marion’s, she’d grabbed hold of him and hugged too long and she was crying just a little, but finally he’d wiggled away and run through the yard looking for the puppies.

It was a long time after lunch when his Daddy came back to get him. Through the dust that the truck tires stirred up, Jimmy could see his Daddy waving at him to get in. As soon as he’d climbed

inside, his Daddy said, “Your Mama’s gone and she’s not coming back. Don’t talk about her, and don’t ever say her name.” Jimmy couldn’t stop the flood of words. “What do you mean Mama’s gone? Where did she go? When is she coming...?” His Daddy had hit the steering wheel hard with both of his hands, cutting off his words. Daddy had shouted, “I told you not to talk about it!”

Jimmy had raced into the house as soon as they got home. He looked everywhere, but there was no sign of his Mama—all her clothes were missing, and even her little statue of the girl with the kitty and the umbrella was gone. All of Mama was gone—except for her apron that was hanging on the nail behind the door. After Jimmy dragged a kitchen chair across the floor, he climbed on it, and carefully lifted the apron off the nail. It took a long time, but his Daddy was looking inside the hood of the truck again, so Jimmy knew he wouldn’t catch him.

As he held the apron close, Jimmy could smell his Mama in the biscuits she’d cooked the day before and the fish she’d fried for supper. He knew his Mama would need that apron when she came back, so he went to his treasure place to keep it safe for her. Jimmy had crawled under his bed, pulled up the loose floor board, and removed the broken bicycle bell that he’d found on the road. He didn’t want it anymore—that was his old treasure. He had folded the apron the best that he could and laid it under the loose board. “Mama will be happy when she comes back and I get her apron out of the treasure place,” he’d thought.

When Jimmy got home with his egg, he knew just where it would want to be. Like he did every night, Jimmy lifted the apron out of the treasure place and put it over his face to smell his Mama again. Then he laid his new egg on the apron, folding the sides around the egg like it was getting a big hug. Slowly and gently, he put both of his treasures back into the special spot and slid the board over them.

Then Jimmy climbed onto his bed and reached underneath the low mattress to feel for the board. No, he wasn’t lying in the right spot. He scooted down just a little and checked again. That was right. His Mama and his egg were right beneath him. Heart-to-heart.