

The Big Rescue

by Steph Matuku

My aunty and uncle were always really busy, so I hardly ever saw them. Uncle Henry was a nurse at the hospital and looked after sick kids. Aunty Elsie travelled around the world helping refugees. But for once, they were both at our house, talking up a storm with Mum.

I plopped onto the couch between Aunty and Uncle and said, “Can you tell me the story of the big rescue?”



Mum loved telling stories, and she often told me about the big rescue. It happened before I was born. One day, Uncle was walking along the street when he saw smoke coming from the top floor of a library. He climbed up two storeys, crawled through a window, and rescued a baby from the fire!

It was the most exciting story I’d ever heard – although I’d noticed it changed every time Mum told it. One time, she said Uncle was wearing a red hat to match his red sneakers, and the next time he was wearing a blue hat that matched his blue shorts. Another time, she said it was raining, and he caught the baby in an upturned umbrella. But the next time, she said it was windy, so Uncle tied a blanket around the baby’s shoulders so it could parachute to the ground. I was dying to find out what had really happened.



“I remember the big rescue,” said Uncle. “Your Aunty Elsie was a hero that day.”

“What?” I said in disbelief. “I thought you were the hero, Uncle.”

I looked at Mum, who shrugged. “I wasn’t there,” she said. “I heard the story from Koro.”

“He wasn’t there either,” said Aunty. “He was at work. Anyway, I was walking home and –”

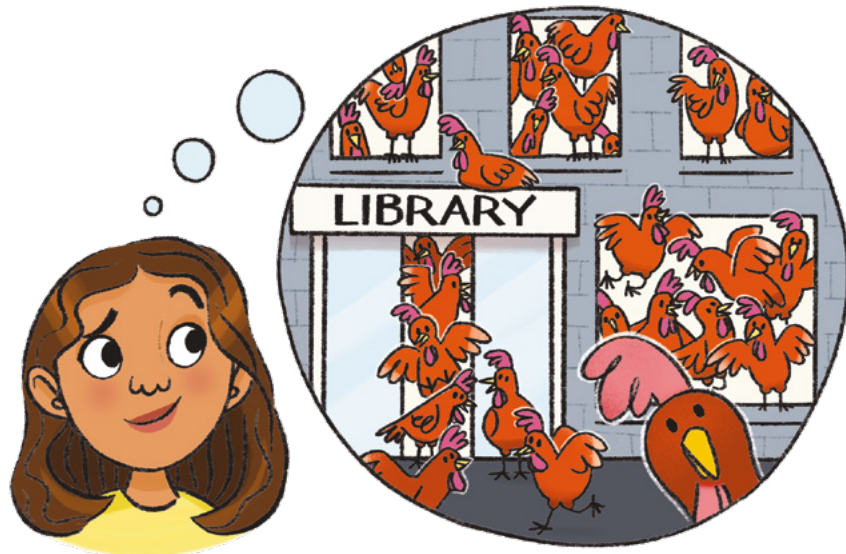
“And you saw a library on fire!” I interrupted.

Aunty frowned. “A library?”

“That’s what Mum said. A building full of books.”

Uncle laughed. “No – it was a building full of chooks! It was our neighbour’s chicken shed.”

I frowned. That couldn’t be right. Chicken sheds don’t usually have two storeys. “But it must have been a big chicken shed if it had two floors.”



“No,” Aunty said, shaking her head. “It had two doors. A back door and a front door.”

I couldn’t believe it. The two-storey library had suddenly shrunk into a little old hen house. But the exciting part was still to come.

“And then you climbed through a window and rescued a baby from the flames?” I asked hopefully.

Aunty Elsie’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Goodness – where did you get that from?”

“From Mum,” I said, glaring at her.

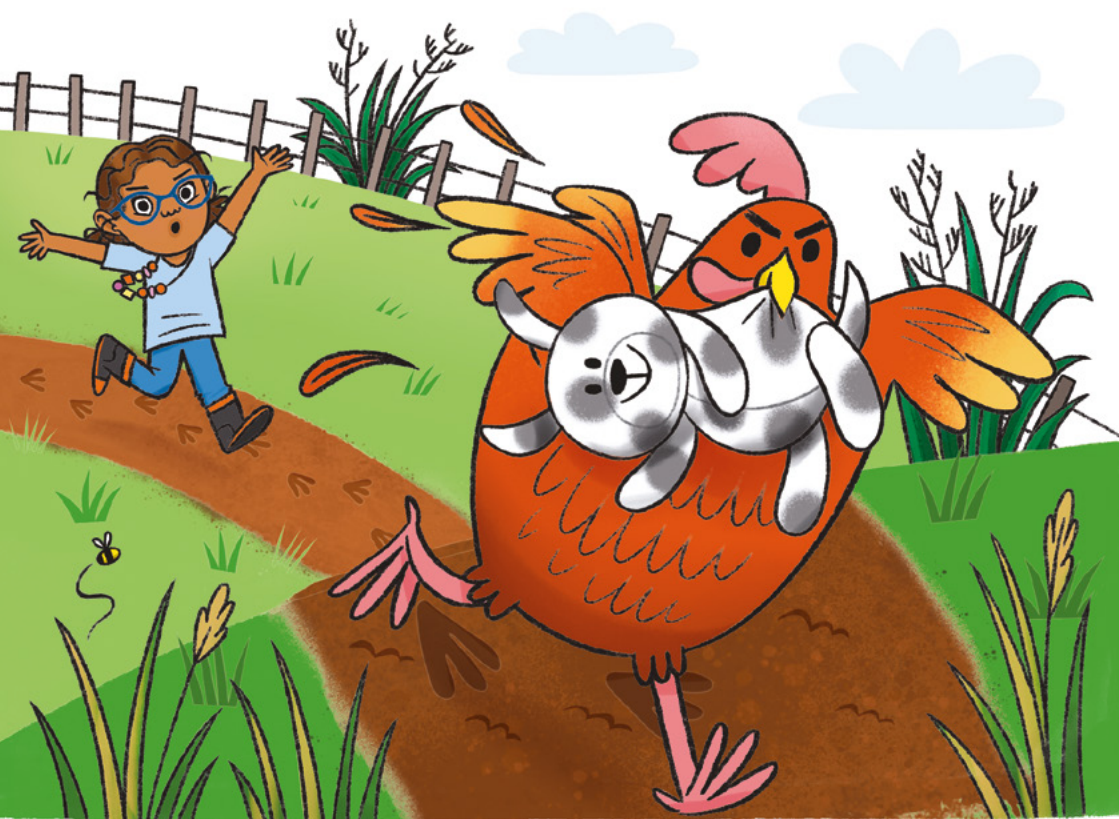
Mum grinned. “Sorry. That’s just what I heard. He was a bit of a fibber, your koro.”



“It wasn’t a baby,” said Uncle. “It was a puppy. A cute little puppy with spots.”

“It wasn’t even a puppy,” said Aunty. “It was a little toy dog I’d won at the winter show. It did have spots though.”

“But ... you rescued it from a raging, fierce fire?” I asked, crossing my fingers behind my back. Surely some part of this story had to be true.



Aunty Elsie smiled. “We had a raging, fierce old chicken called Whaea Peck. We called her that because she’d stab you with her beak if you tried to take her eggs.”

“It wasn’t a real fire? It was a chicken called Whaea?”

The tips of Mum’s ears grew pink, and she gave a guilty cough. “Er – that may have been my fault. I was trying to make the story more exciting.”

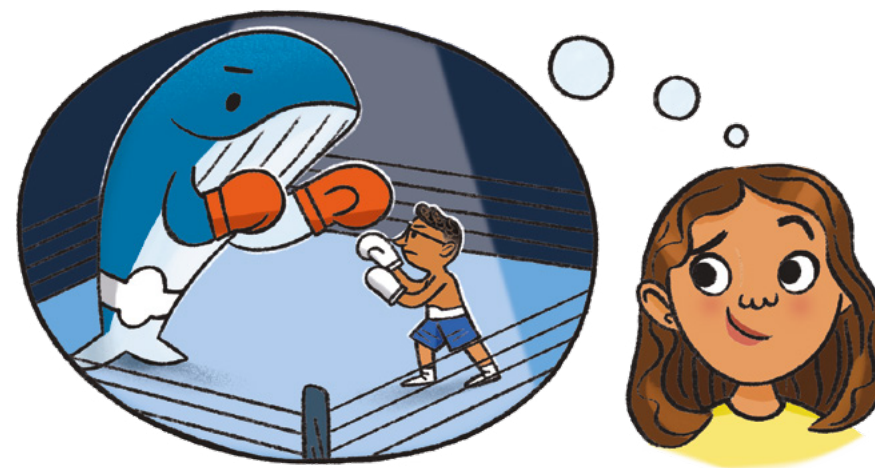
“But it was exciting!” Aunty protested. “That sneaky chook got through the back fence and stole my dog. So I followed her muddy footprints and tracked it down. She’d hidden it in her nest in the chook shed. Boy, was she wild when I found it!”

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You didn’t rescue a baby from a burning library. You rescued a toy dog from a chicken. That was the big rescue?”

Aunty Elsie looked proud. “Yes. And do you know, I still have that little toy dog. Not a scratch on it – unlike me.” And she showed me a tiny silvery scar on the back of her hand made by Whaea Peck’s beak all those years ago.

“Wow. That’s awesome, Aunty,” I said, rolling my eyes. So much for the big rescue. Still, there was another bedtime story Mum used to tell me, and I was hoping that this one was true because after the big rescue, it was the most exciting story I’d ever heard.

“So, what about the time that Uncle Henry fought the big whale?”



Mum, Uncle, and Aunty looked at each other and laughed. “It wasn’t actually a big whale,” Uncle said. “It was a ...”

illustrations by Carol Herring

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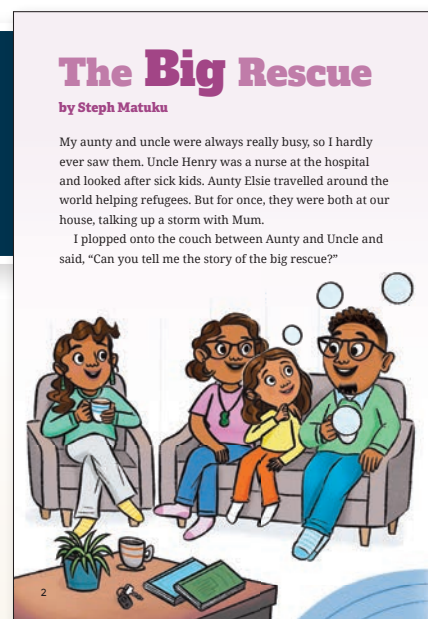
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