

# Refiloe and the Washed Chickens

A story by Marion Drew

Illustrated by Wiehan de Jager



African  
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It was the first wedding in the Tenane family, and Refiloe had never been so excited in her life.

'I'm going to be Palesa's bridesmaid, with a new dress and shoes! Isn't that wonderful?' she said to her chickens as she shooed them to the back of the house out of everybody's way.

Refiloe told her chickens everything.

Her father had given them to her as a birthday present, and they were her most prized possessions. Nobody else was allowed to touch them, not even her mother who did not like chickens running around her yard.

'If those scruffy chickens of yours misbehave,' she often said to Refiloe, 'you'll find them in my supper pot.' Mme says that this is going to be the best wedding ever seen in Malealea,' Refiloe went on, scattering corn for her chickens, 'and she says that I can help all the older girls with the cooking.'

The chickens paid no attention to her.

'Refiloe!' called her mother from inside, 'leave those good-for-nothing chickens of yours and come and help me with these pots please!'

'And there will be such a lot of people,' Refiloe called over her shoulder to her chickens as she ran off into the kitchen, 'even Mme Ngwe and Mme Pedi are coming all the way from Mafeteng!'





Mme Ngwe and Mme Pedi were Refiloe's aunts. But even though they were sisters and lived right next door to each other, they did not like each other at all.

Mme Ngwe was a short woman, and very fond of a bite to eat. She had many, many chins that rolled down her neck all the way into the front of her seshoeshoe dresses.

Her seshoeshoe dresses were always just a little bit too tight, so she had to hold her breath as she walked in case she should split a seam while shopping. She held her breath so tight that she could not open her mouth to greet anyone.

When she wasn't holding her breath or shopping, there was nothing she liked better than sitting in the sun chatting and talking behind her hand about so-and-so and such-and-such in the village.

'You are truly a greedy woman, Mme Ngwe,' Mme Pedi would say, 'and I wish I had nothing to do with you. You have no idea how to behave; you eat far too much and do far too little. You are a lazy fat gossip!'

Mme Pedi herself got up at four o'clock every morning and did not go to bed until she had cleaned every room at least twice, and made at least three dishes of food.

But she hardly ever ate anything.

The only reason she did stop every now and then was for a pinch of the finest Mafeteng snuff, and she always kept a little tin of it in her pocket.

'Well you haven't got anything to shout about,' said Mme Ngwe in reply, 'you are a skinny little stick insect that can't even eat those cakes and fat chickens and *lekoenya* you are forever cooking. You jump about here and there like a silly goat. And as for putting that snuff up your nose every five minutes, you must be quite mad!'

The aunts had been preparing for months for Palesa's wedding.

But when the time came to leave for Malealea for Palesa's wedding, they would not even think about riding together in the same taxi.

'I'm not going in your taxi,' said Mme Pedi to Mme Ngwe, 'you are so fat that even if you manage to squeeze into it, the taxi will overturn before it gets to Motsekuoa.'

'Suit yourself you scrawny hen, the taxi will go straight past you standing on the side of the road, you look exactly like a mielie stalk,' replied Mme Ngwe.



On Friday, Refiloe was allowed to stay at home from school for the whole day to help with all the many things that needed to be done.

Everyone in the Tenane household was tremendously busy.

Palesa's friends decorated the tent with ribbons and white cloths, and they put pink sweets and beautiful paper flowers on the tables, and pretty pink bows on all the chairs.

'I wish I could let you into the tent to see them,' Refiloe told her chickens, 'it is too, too beautiful! Palesa is so lucky!' and she clapped her hands in delight.

Palesa's mother and the other women made a huge fire for the big pots. There were potatoes to be peeled, moroho to be washed, beans to be rinsed, big round breads to be baked, samp to be soaked, cabbage to be chopped, mutopo to be prepared, nama to be cut up, there was so much to do!

'I want you to help with the carrots and moroho, Refiloe,' said her mother, 'do exactly as Mme Pedi and Mme Ngwe tell you. That is if we can get Mme Ngwe off her bottom for ten minutes,' she added.

'Oh my, all this food smells so good,' said Refiloe to her chickens who were scratching around the pot hoping for something delicious to fall from the table, 'tomorrow we are going to have the most amazing feast Lesotho has ever seen!'

When the moroho was slowly bubbling, Refiloe went off to watch Palesa try on her wedding dress in her mother's bedroom.

It came in a big box full of lots of soft paper, and it was simply gorgeous. Refiloe was enchanted.

Palesa even let her touch it, but only once.

'It's got lace sleeves, and a perfectly enormous bow at the back, and a frothy petticoat underneath and tiny buttons on the sleeves. You never saw anything like it!' she ran to tell her chickens. 'Come! If you promise to be very quiet I'll show you,' she said, and she lifted them up one by one to peep through the bedroom window at the dress that was laid out ready on the bed.

The chickens were not impressed.



Refiloe's mother was very proud of her house, and fussy about cleaning it. She wanted it to be perfect for the wedding. She cleaned and washed and scrubbed and scoured and polished everything in sight. When she had finished, she could see her face in the kettle, the windows sparkled brighter than the clearest mountain pools, and the curtains were so fresh that Mme Makomiti from next door came over to ask if they had bought new ones for the wedding.

There was not a single speck of dust anywhere.

Last of all, Refiloe helped her mother make a new Basotho carpet for the sitting room. They gathered the dung and mixed it with just the right amount of mud and smeared it on the floor until it was good and thick and lovely to walk on.

'That's better,' puffed her mother when they had finished, 'now I am perfectly happy!'

The chickens poked their heads inside the front door. 'Out!' shouted Refiloe's mother, 'out you scruffy things with your dirty feet and beaks!'

Refiloe followed her chickens out into the yard. She stood with her hands on her hips and looked them up and down. It had rained on Thursday night and their feet and feathers were covered in mud.

'Mme is right, you are a disgrace,' she scolded them, 'we cannot have you at Palesa's wedding looking like that. And if you upset Mme in any way, she will put you into the *you know what!*' She looked at them again. 'What can I do?' she asked herself.

She went to her grandmother who was the wisest person she knew.

'How do chickens get clean?' Refiloe asked her.

'Oh, they just scratch up a little dust into their feathers,' said her grandmother. 'They don't bother about it much, they are far too busy getting enough to eat.'

'But my chickens need to be extra clean for Palesa's wedding,' Refiloe told her.

'Well then, you had better use your Very Good Brain,' her grandmother said smiling, 'and don't let it rot in your head like a piece of old meat in the sun, like some people I know from Mafeteng,' she added, looking across at Mme Ngwe and Mme Pedi.





So Refiloe thought for a while. Suddenly she smiled, 'I have an excellent idea,' she said to herself. She went and filled a bucket with water from the spring and set to work.

She had a lot of trouble catching her chickens; they did not think that a bath was such a good idea. She had to get them into the corner by the pigsty to catch them.

It took quite a while, but in the end she shut them all into the chicken coop to wait their turn to be washed.

They looked very unhappy.

Refiloe put the first chicken into the bucket of water.

She had to hold it very tight because it clucked at the top of its voice and flapped its wings like crazy.

'Hold still you silly thing,' Refiloe shouted, 'this won't take long!'

She got a good grip on the chicken, and scrubbed its muddy feet.

Then she ducked the chicken under the water to make sure that all the feathers got wet so that she could give it a really good wash.

The chicken went quite wild.

It twisted and turned in Refiloe's arms until she was soaked with water.

'Don't flap so much,' shouted Refiloe, 'I'm washing as quickly as I can!'

It was when Refiloe started to wipe the chicken's nose and eyes and scrub its scrawny neck that it suddenly went limp.

It flopped over the side of the bucket and Refiloe could not make it stand up.

It lay there with its head hanging over the side and its feet floating on top of the water.

Refiloe was very annoyed.

'This is no time to sleep,' said Refiloe, and she gave it a good shake to get all the water out.

The chicken flopped around like an old dishcloth.

'Well, if you are not going to wake up now, I'll have to put you somewhere to dry nicely,' she said, and she laid it out on the grass at the back near the toilet to dry.

The chicken lay on the grass, completely still.

It took her a long, long time, but Refiloe washed each and every one of her chickens in turn, making sure that they got a thoroughly good scrubbing.

And each and every one of them went limp and floppy before she was finished with it.

She was not happy about this, but she put all those eight chickens in a row on the grass to dry.

There they lay.

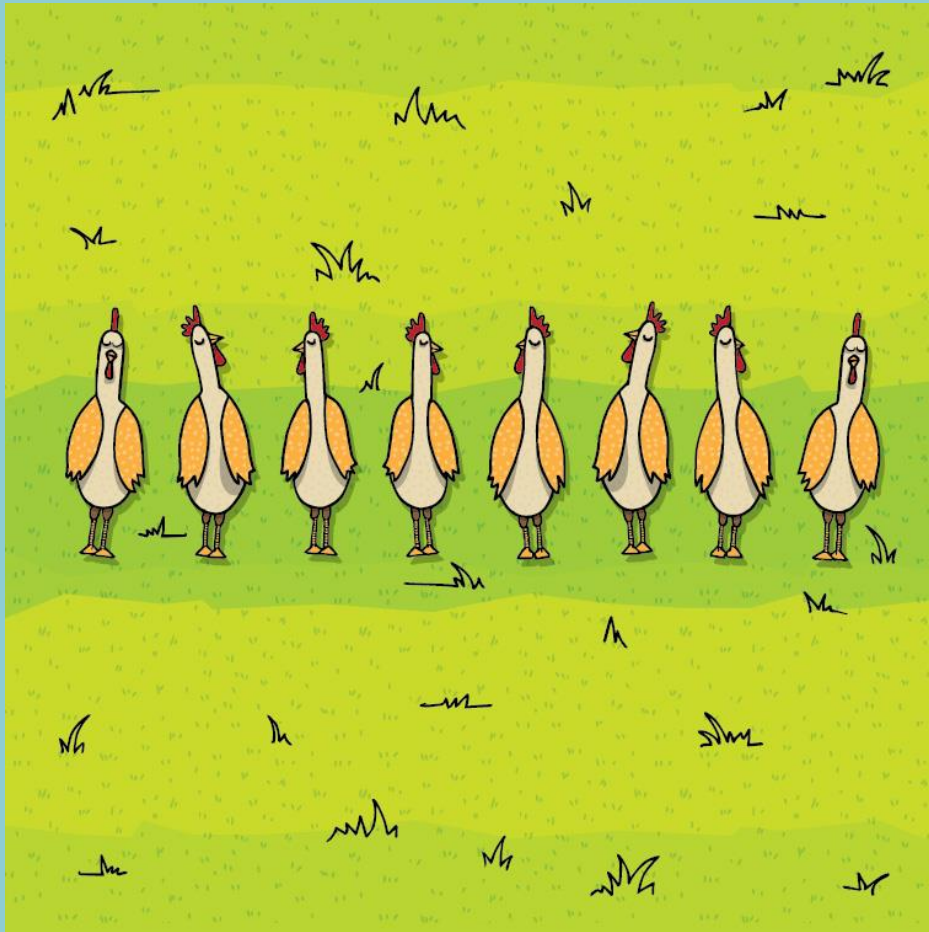
Not one of them moved a single feather.

'I'll leave them to sleep a little,' Refiloe thought to herself, 'they are probably very tired after their wash. I need to go and check on that moroho,' and off she went.

Mme Ngwe was doing as little as possible to help with the wedding preparations.

She hated chopping likhoete and grating beetroot and making papa, even though in Mafeteng she was known as the papa Queen because she could eat more of it than anyone else in town.

She did not help decorate the tent, or clean the house, but simply sat in the kitchen and did a lot of chatting and tasting of food and even more drinking of tea, and that was why she was going to the toilet for the seventh time that afternoon.



'Khelele, what's this!' she said as she waddled across the yard and spotted Refiloe's chickens laid out to dry.

'I see a row of freshly washed chickens, just ready to be plucked and eaten. What a nice little snack for me to take home!'

She looked around, and since there was no one else in sight, she took off her chale and carefully wrapped all those chickens up in it.

Not a single chicken moved.

'Perfect!' she smiled, 'now I shall put them somewhere where Mme Pedi will not ever find them,' and she put the bundle around the corner amongst the pumpkin vines.

'I bet she is up to no good,' she said under her breath, 'fiddling with the pumpkins. Just look at that wobbly bottom of hers, the greedy woman.'



Mme Pedi was working tremendously hard for the wedding.

She had decided to make her famous pumpkin dish. 'It's going to be the most delicious ever tasted in Malealea,' she said.

She took her big bowl and started off for the vegetable garden. As she drew nearer she saw Mme Ngwe there, busy with something.

Mme Pedi stopped and waited until Mme Ngwe had hidden her bundle and gone into the toilet.

As soon as Mme Ngwe had squeezed herself in, Mme Pedi walked over to the pumpkin patch, reached under the pumpkin vine and undid the bundle.

Out fell all eight chickens. 'Eish!' she cried jumping back in surprise putting her hand quickly over her mouth so that Mme Ngwe would not hear.

She looked more carefully at the birds that were lying absolutely still.

'Oh my, but aren't you the cleanest, prettiest chickens! Just plump and ready for my pot. I can't let you go home with that disgusting Mme Ngwe now can I my little snick-snacks,' she crooned.

She picked up each of those limp chickens and placed them neatly into her bowl, filled Mme Ngwe's chale with old mielie cobs and put it back under the pumpkin vine.

There were so many grunting and rumbling noises coming from the toilet, that Mme Ngwe had not heard a thing.

'Heh, heh, heh,' Mme Pedi chuckled, 'I hope you sink into that toilet forever Mme Ngwe. Now, where shall I hide you my darlings?' she said looking all around the yard, 'I'll have to find a very good place. Mme Ngwe might look like a lump of sheep's fat, but she's a crafty one,' she said walking round the house.

'I know,' she said at last, 'that woman can't lift her head out of her fat chins, I'll put you on the roof, she'll never spot you there!' and Mme Pedi climbed up onto the garden wall and put the chickens in a row on the thatched roof.

She felt very pleased with herself as she went back into the kitchen.



The next day the sun rose in good time for the wedding. The whole family was up early, but Refiloe was the first. She bounced out of bed and went to see how her chickens were doing. 'Oh good,' she said when she saw that they were no longer lying on the grass, 'they must be nicely dry by now. I'm sure they have gone to look for their breakfast. I'll put on my new bridesmaid dress before I feed them, then I can show them how pretty it is,' and off she went. She had just finished tying her new white hair ribbons, and putting on her socks with frills around the top and her new white sandals with the silver buckles, when her father came to ask, 'where are your chickens Refiloe? I hope they are not anywhere near that tent.'

'Oh no, they are dry now after their bath,' Refiloe told him.

He looked very surprised, 'bath?' he said. 'Yes,' she said, 'I gave my chickens a good wash so that they can be clean and tidy for Palesa's wedding,' Refiloe told him. 'You what?' he exclaimed.

'I washed them,' said Refiloe, 'they all had a very nice bath, ready for the wedding. Mme will be very pleased.'

Her father was too surprised to be angry. He just shook his head and went off to check on the gentlemen's beer.





Palesa's wedding was a wonderful affair. Palesa looked like an angel in her frothy white dress, and her new husband, Liau, looked so handsome that Refiloe wished she could marry him too.

Those chickens did not get up off the roof to join in when Liau arrived in a smart white car, and all the bridesmaid ladies danced with him into the yard.

Not one of them stirred when the church choir that had come all the way from Mafeteng sang in their loudest, sweetest voices. So loudly and sweetly did they sing that Small-Dog-Big-Noise joined in with her most deafening bark, and had to be taken away to the neighbour.

The chickens were still lying on the roof when the priest gave his sermon about how new husbands and wives should behave.

They did not even twitch a feather when the pigs and Refiloe's grandfather all snored so loudly in the middle of the sermon that the priest had to stop for a moment.

Not one foot of those chickens trembled when the aunts and nieces from Mafeteng screamed at the sheep wandering into the tent.

The sheep ate fifteen napkins and two bowls of flowers, and trampled all over the ladies' feet, nearly knocking over the wedding cake before they were removed, but those chickens lay as still as could be.

It was only when the groom's father was halfway through his speech that things started to change on that roof.

Ntate Lesome was an excellent man, although a little boastful, and he spoke very well. But there was one small problem with his speeches; he just didn't know when to stop.



Ntate Lesome started off in quite a simple way. He talked about Liau and Palesa, and what a fine couple they were, and what a good thing it was that they were getting married. Everyone clapped and cheered, happy with the thought that soon their bellies would be filled with good wedding food.

But then he got to talking about the new BMW that he had brought to the wedding, and how beautiful it was and how lovely the engine sounded, and people began to realise that the eating of the wedding food was some time off.

They started to fidget. Mme Pedi adjusted Mme Ngwe's duku on her head for her, and Mme Ngwe slapped her hand away. Whereupon Mme Pedi stamped on Mme Ngwe's foot under the table and the two of them started an argument under their breaths that just about everyone could hear. There was some tittering among the guests.

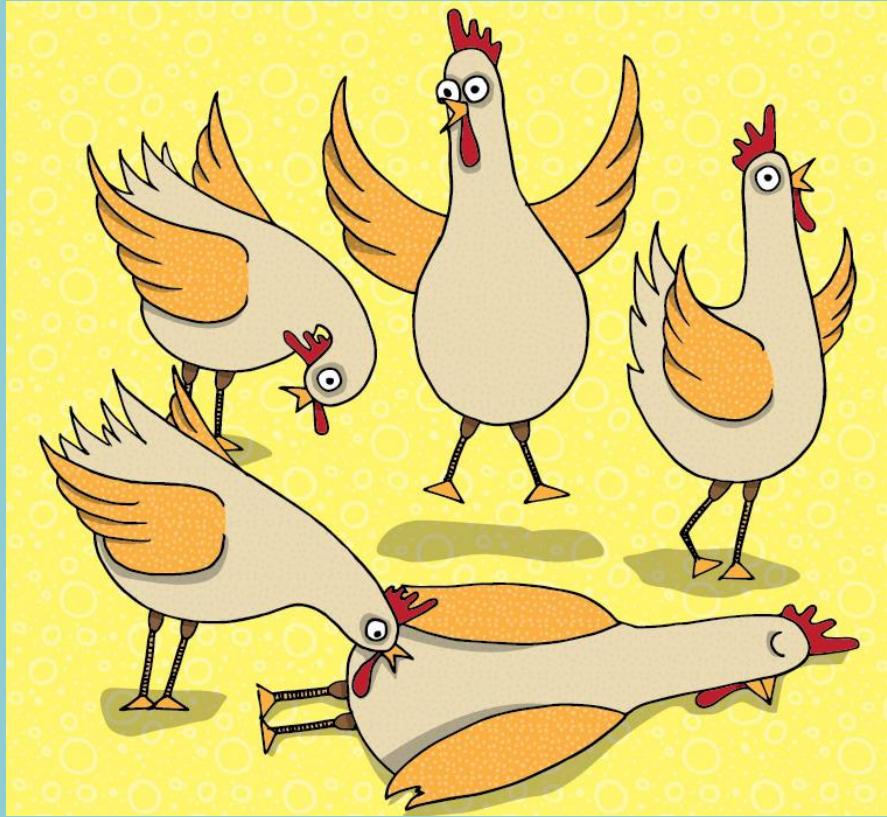
Refiloe's mother frowned deeply.

When Ntate Lesome went on to talking about the extended, extended members of his family who had not been able to come to the wedding, a few people closed their eyes as if to sleep, and a few bellies could be heard rumbling in hunger. The smell of the food wafting through the tent was too tantalising for words.

Refiloe's mother was becoming very annoyed and tried to catch Ntate Lesome's eye to let him know that time was passing. But he ignored her and passed on to the subject of exactly where and how he had got such a smart suit for the wedding, and how many people had complimented him on it. After a few minutes of this, some people got up to stretch their legs.

Refiloe's mother shook Refiloe's father's arm. 'Do something!' she said, 'the food is getting spoiled!'

Refiloe's father turned to Ntate Lesome and tapped his watch, but Ntate Lesome smiled and carried on.



After he got to the point of describing in great detail the house he had built for Palesa and Liau, the one that so many people admired, he stopped and paused for a minute. Everyone sat up in their chairs and got ready to clap.

'He's finished at last,' said Refiloe's mother to her father in relief, 'now we can serve the food,' and she started to stand up.

Ntate Lesome had just taken a new breath, when the first chicken spread its wings and took flight.

It landed on Mme Ngwe's bosom, put its head on one side and stared straight at her with its little bright eyes.

Mme Ngwe was far too surprised to do anything. She stared back at the chicken right under her nose.

When it pecked at her seshoeshoe dress with the beautiful yellow corn pattern, Mme Pedi next to her started giggling.

Mme Ngwe flapped her hands at the chicken, 'go away you stupid thing,' she said in a very loud whisper, trying not to make too much noise.

The chicken flew up onto Mme Ngwe's new duku and stretched its wings. The people at the next table tried not to laugh.

Mme Ngwe shook her head, but that chicken did not move.

'Paaak, pak-pak-pak,' it clucked, spreading its wings and pecked again.

Then it sat down.

The woman next to Mme Ngwe could not help herself, 'ha, ha, haaaaa, he, he, heeeee!' she laughed, and the other people at her table held their hands over their mouths. Their shoulders were shaking.

At this moment, another chicken decided that it was time to join the first.

Down it flew onto Mme Ngwe's shoulder, and pecked at her beautiful seshoeshoe sleeve with the lovely corn pattern.

The lady next to Mme Ngwe had to put her head down onto the table, 'ai, aai, aaaaii, he, he, heeeeeeee!' she cackled.

Mme Ngwe flapped her napkin at the chicken.

'Paaak, pak-pak -pak!' it clucked, spread its wings and sat down right there on Mme Ngwe's shoulder, holding on with its scratchy feet.

The other chickens decided to join the first two and down they flew. One flapped down onto Mme Ngwe's other shoulder and the others clustered on her lap and started clucking and squawking and fluffing out their feathers to make themselves comfortable. You couldn't see Mme Ngwe for all those chickens!

Even the guests at the far side of the tent were now laughing behind their hands, and the priest had to cover his face with his Bible.

By this time Mme Ngwe was so flustered and upset that she could not help herself. 'Ooh, ooh, ooooooh, ai, aai, aaai!' she shrieked, standing up and flapping her hands wildly. She stamped her feet and wiggled and waggled until everything about her wobbled like a giant seshoeshoe jelly.

She shook those chickens off her chest and shoulders and they flew down onto the tables where they started strutting up and down, flapping their wings and clucking, scattering cake and sweets and flowers all over the place.

Mme Ngwe dusted herself off and sat down again.

Unfortunately there was a chicken on her chair and when she lowered her large bottom onto it the chicken squawked at the top of its voice.

'Whoooooeeaaaaa!' screeched Mme Ngwe leaping out of her chair in fright.

She lost her balance and toppled into Mme Pedi's lap.

The chair was simply not strong enough for the two of them, and it cracked in half, dumping both aunts on the floor of the tent.





This was too much for the wedding guests and the whole tent full of people burst out laughing. The bridesmaids were beside themselves, they just could not stop giggling.

All except Refiloe.

She was horrified.

This was terrible!

Now her chickens would surely go into Mme's pot!

She looked across at her mother and father, but to her surprise they too were struggling not to laugh.

Her mother had stuffed a napkin into her mouth and her father had disappeared under the table.

But Refiloe was dreadfully worried. What was she going to do?

The chicken was astonished, it dropped the sweet it had picked up off the table, flapped its wings and flew up into Palesa's wedding veil.

Liau pulled the veil off Palesa's head, gave her a big kiss and tossed the veil with the chicken still in it across the tent.

It landed back on Mme Ngwe's head.

The guests could not contain themselves. They screamed with laughter.

The tears rolled down Refiloe's mother's cheeks. The men had to hold onto their bellies. The women rolled around in their chairs. The boys and girls were hanging onto each other. The grandmothers could hardly breathe for laughing. The grandfathers stamped their walking sticks.

Refiloe couldn't believe it!

Small-Dog-Big-Noise barked her heart out. The donkey kicked up his back legs and brayed until he went hoarse. The sheep wandered back into the tent to see what the fuss was about.

The guests chuckled and snorted and hooted with laughter, they simply could not stop.

Then the two aunts looked at each other and started giggling. Mme Pedi rolled over and opened her mouth wide with laughter. Mme Ngwe threw back her head and laughed until all her chins shook. They held onto each other and laughed for a full ten minutes before either of them could catch her breath.



When at last the chickens were removed, and Refiloe's mother and the other women finally managed to stop laughing and control themselves, the food was served.

All the guests agreed that it was the finest they had eaten, especially the pumpkin. They also agreed that it was the best wedding entertainment ever known in Malealea.

'Well Refiloe,' said her mother when the last of the guests had gone and the two aunts went happily off together in the same taxi, 'we have you and your chickens to thank for a perfectly wonderful time,' and she gave her a big hug.

'Oh you are so lucky!' Refiloe said to her chickens as she put them into their coop for the night, 'Mme says that never again will she tell me that you belong in the supper pot.

'But just look how dirty you are again,' she told them, 'all covered in wedding cake and flowers. I think I'll have to give you another wash tomorrow!'



# Refiloe and the Washed Chickens

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