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Opening extract from

Michael Morpurgo Christmas Collection

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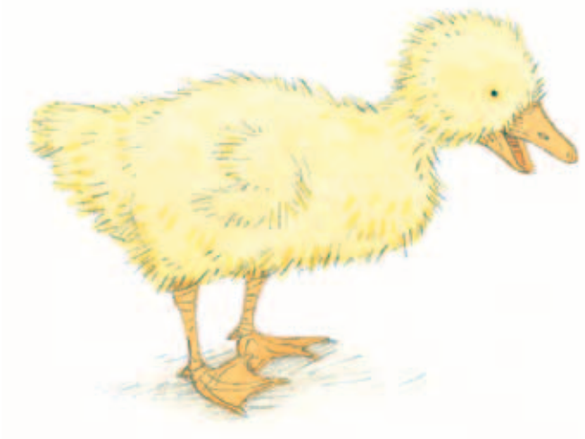
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In memory of so many wonderful Christmasses together:
For Edna, Mac, Seonaid and Stuart,
and for all their families since.

M.M.



THE GOOSE IS GETTING FAT



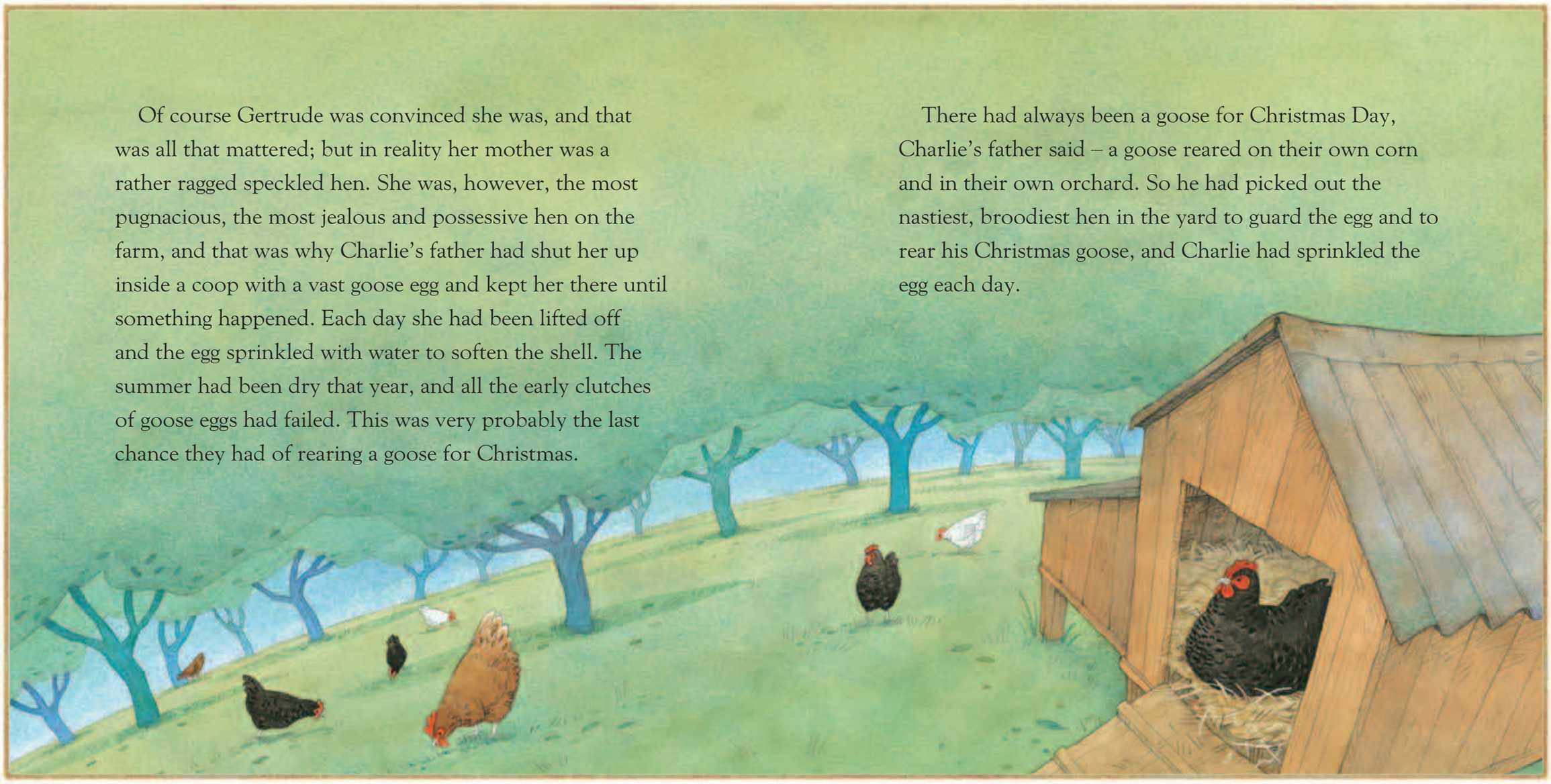
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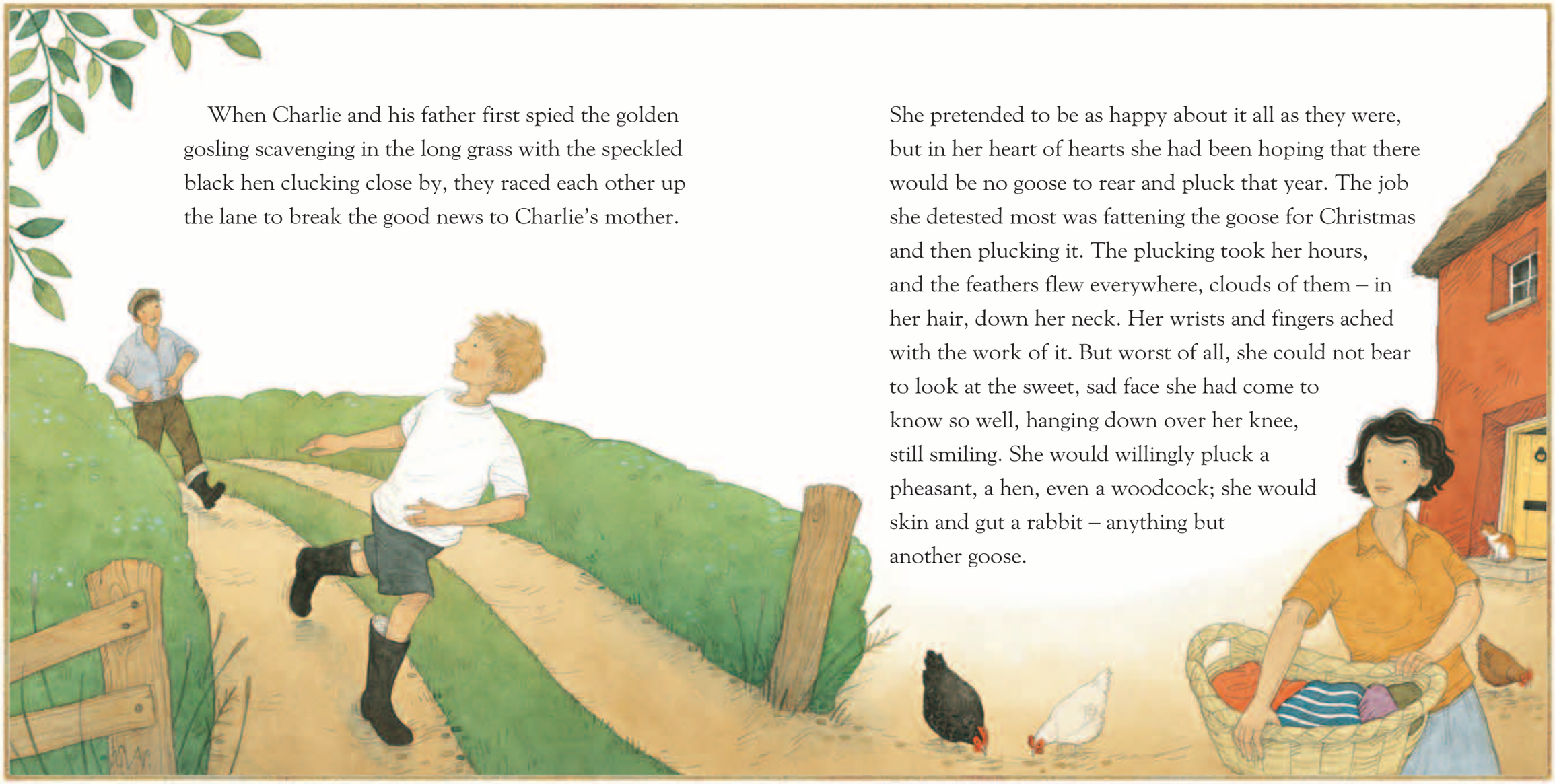
Gertrude was a goose like any other goose. Hatched out in the orchard one drizzly morning in June, she spent those early weeks looking at the world from the warm sanctuary of her mother's all-enveloping softness. It might have come as a surprise to her to know that her mother was not a goose.

Of course Gertrude was convinced she was, and that was all that mattered; but in reality her mother was a rather ragged speckled hen. She was, however, the most pugnacious, the most jealous and possessive hen on the farm, and that was why Charlie's father had shut her up inside a coop with a vast goose egg and kept her there until something happened. Each day she had been lifted off and the egg sprinkled with water to soften the shell. The summer had been dry that year, and all the early clutches of goose eggs had failed. This was very probably the last chance they had of rearing a goose for Christmas.

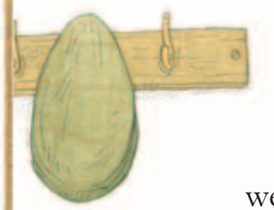
There had always been a goose for Christmas Day, Charlie's father said – a goose reared on their own corn and in their own orchard. So he had picked out the nastiest, broodiest hen in the yard to guard the egg and to rear his Christmas goose, and Charlie had sprinkled the egg each day.

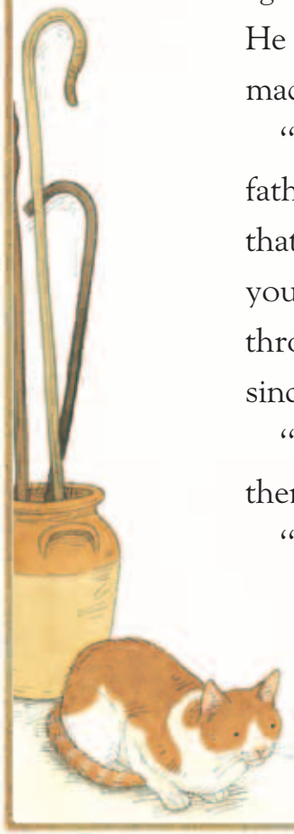


When Charlie and his father first spied the golden gosling scavenging in the long grass with the speckled black hen clucking close by, they raced each other up the lane to break the good news to Charlie's mother.



She pretended to be as happy about it all as they were, but in her heart of hearts she had been hoping that there would be no goose to rear and pluck that year. The job she detested most was fattening the goose for Christmas and then plucking it. The plucking took her hours, and the feathers flew everywhere, clouds of them – in her hair, down her neck. Her wrists and fingers ached with the work of it. But worst of all, she could not bear to look at the sweet, sad face she had come to know so well, hanging down over her knee, still smiling. She would willingly pluck a pheasant, a hen, even a woodcock; she would skin and gut a rabbit – anything but another goose.





Now Charlie's father was no fool and he knew his wife well enough to sense her disappointment. It was to soften the news, to console her and no doubt to persuade her again, that he suggested that Charlie might help this year. He had his arm round Charlie's shoulder, and that always made Charlie feel like a man.

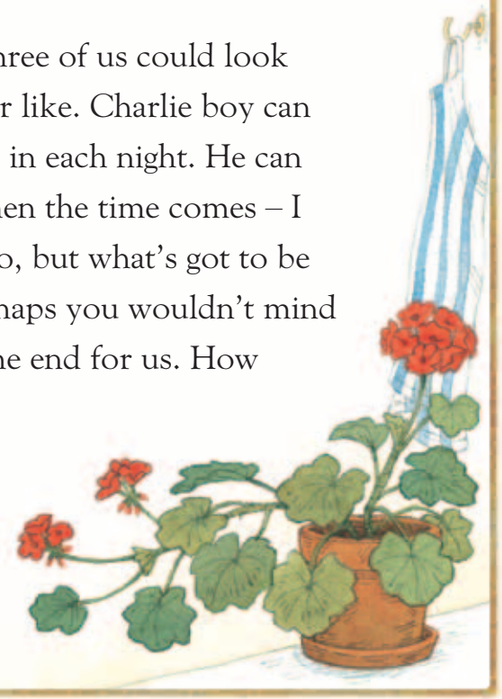
"Charlie's almost ten now, lovely," he said. Charlie's father always called his mother 'lovely', and Charlie liked that. "Ten years old next January, and he'll be as tall as you next Christmas. He'll be taller than me before he's through growing. Just look at him, he's grown an inch since breakfast."

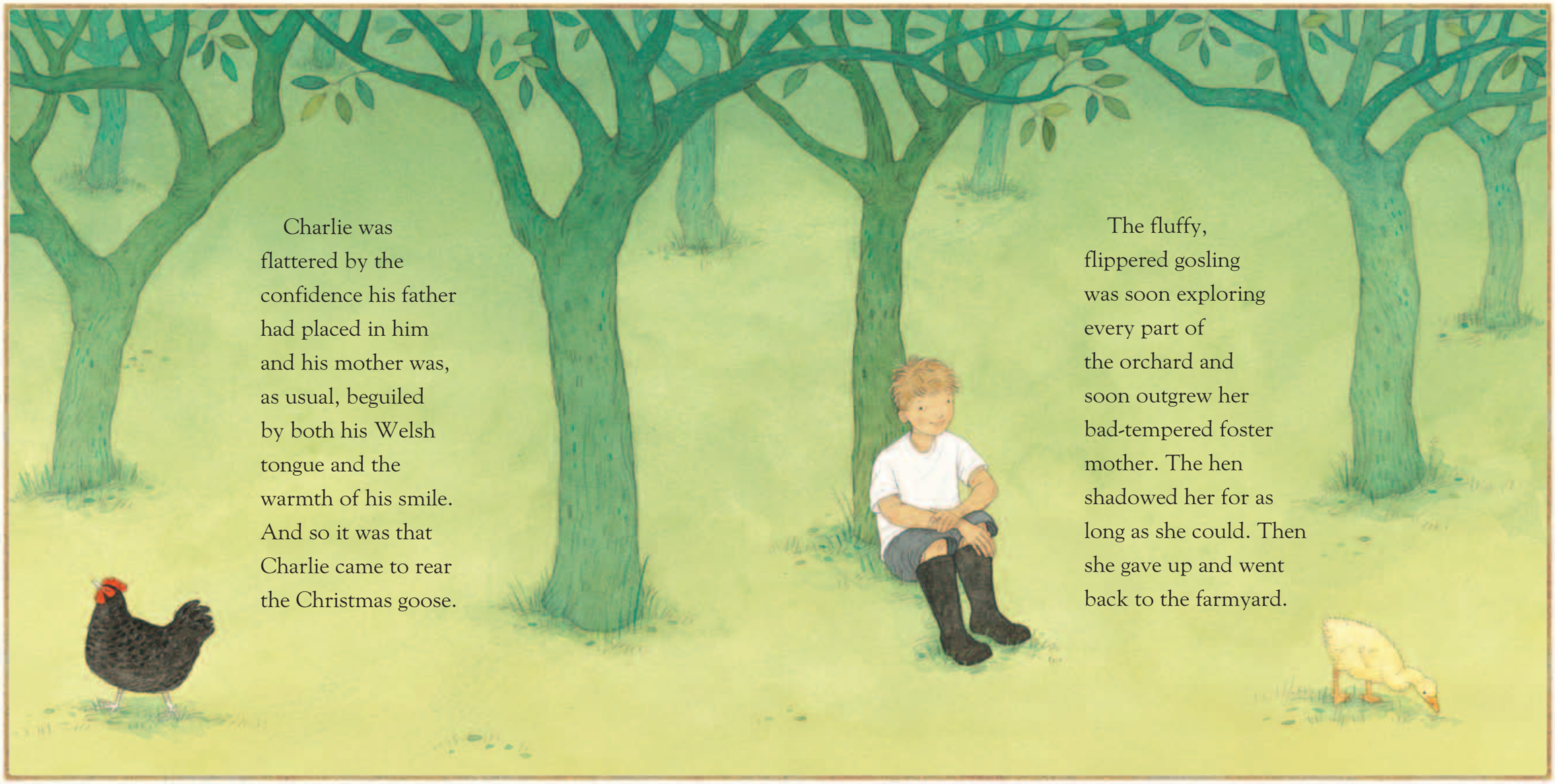
"I know Charlie's nearly ten, dear," she said. "I was there when he was born, remember?"

"Course you were, my lovely," Charlie's father said, taking the drying-up cloth from her and sitting down at the kitchen table. "I've got a plan, see. I know you've never been keen on rearing the goose for Christmas, and Charlie and me have been thinking about it, haven't we, Charlie?"

Charlie hadn't a clue what his father was talking about, but he grinned and nodded anyway because it seemed the best thing to do.

"We thought that this year all three of us could look after the goose, you know, together like. Charlie boy can feed her up each day and drive her in each night. He can fatten her up for us. I'll kill her when the time comes – I know it seems a terrible thing to do, but what's got to be done has got to be done – and perhaps you wouldn't mind doing the little bit of plucking at the end for us. How would that be, my lovely?"





Charlie was
flattered by the
confidence his father
had placed in him
and his mother was,
as usual, beguiled
by both his Welsh
tongue and the
warmth of his smile.
And so it was that
Charlie came to rear
the Christmas goose.

The fluffy,
flippered gosling
was soon exploring
every part of
the orchard and
soon outgrew her
bad-tempered foster
mother. The hen
shadowed her for as
long as she could. Then
she gave up and went
back to the farmyard.

The gosling turned into a goose, long and lovely and white. Charlie watched her grow. He would feed her twice a day, before and after school, with a little mixed corn. On fine autumn days he would sit with her in the orchard for hours at a time and watch her grazing under the trees. And he loved to watch her preening herself, her eyes closed in ecstasy as she curved her long neck and delved into the white feathers on her chest.

Charlie called the goose 'Gertrude' because she reminded him of his tall, lean Aunty Gertrude who always wore feathers in her hat in church. His aunt's nose was so imperial in shape and size that her neck seemed permanently stretched with the effort of seeing over it. But she was, for all that, immensely elegant and poised, so there could be no other name for the goose but Gertrude.

