

Myles

The first eggs I ever took were from a magpie we called The Red Baron, a mad-eyed bitch of a thing that nested in the local schoolyard every year and dive-bombed any kid that walked within a hundred yards of her tree. Red eggs they were too, real beauties. The thing about maggies' eggs is there's hardly two clutches the same. They come in greyish-green through every shade of blue and purple and red that you can imagine, some blotched and streaked with darker shades of what's underneath, others smeared or spotted and speckled with entirely different colours. If you didn't know better you wouldn't even think you were looking at eggs from the same *animal* let alone the same species. But we all knew, back then anyway, and every boy at our school also knew The Red Baron's eggs were red, which was partly why we gave her the name in the first place – that and her tendency to launch an aerial assault and gouge a divot from your skull if you didn't duck. One kid even had to get stitches he was hit so bad, and we were all pretty jealous the next day when he told us he got jelly beans at the doctor's surgery and an ice cream afterwards.

You never saw her coming, this bird, even when you knew what to expect, and we used to send the new kids down to The Red Baron's corner to feed the horses in the next door paddock – here take my sandwich kid and feed the horseys sure they'll let you pat them – and then watch the poor suckers run for their lives. Mostly though we all wanted a clutch of her eggs because they were doozies like I said, and because you had to suck it up to earn them. Usually the bigger boys got to them one at a time while she was still laying – they didn't care about the aesthetics of a full clutch – but The Farm was across the road from the school, so one spring holidays I put Grandad's army hat on and climbed. She dive bombed me a couple of times on approach and almost knocked me out of the tree once on the way up, but it was almost an anticlimax without the other kids there to dramatise the show. And when I reached the nest and looked over the rim, breathless and shaking as much from anticipation as the climb, I was enchanted by the sight: she had four eggs, fresh as a daisy, pretty as a song.

When I showed The Old Man he narrowed his eyes and looked real hard at the eggs, then said he reckoned he and Uncle Bennie probably took eggs from the same bird's descendants when they were kids, the resemblance was so strong. So I told him about The Red Baron and how fierce she was and he said it was probably the cock bird doing the swooping it usually is. You can tell by the patch on the back of their neck, he reckoned, the cock's is pure white, the hen's got a greyish tinge. I told him I wasn't paying much mind to the backs of their necks it was all I could do to climb up and down without breaking my own neck. What do I do with the eggs now?

So he taught me how to put a hole in both ends and blow the guts out till there was nothing left to go rotten, and sit the blown eggs in a shoebox lined with flour. Later would come naphthalene for the weevils and glass-fronted display boxes and detailed legends to identify the eggs, but for now I had the makings of a hobby that kept me occupied for most of my childhood, and the local bird population on edge from September to January, even though The Old Man always cautioned restraint.

Take only the one clutch and then leave them be he'd say. The birds'll go back to nest soon enough and no harm done. How do they know I asked him and he told me they just do it's instinctive, they work it out for themselves and then get on with it. Failure's a fact of life out there whether from fire or foxes or fools like you, so it won't make much difference in the scheme of things. In a week she'll have no memory of the clutch you took and in a month she'll be sitting on another.

That way I justified a boyhood pastime I'd surely get lynched for today.

Next came a succession of white eggs and some might wonder why I bothered, why would anyone bother collecting things that all look alike, but then that would be missing the point. Brown Pigeons – okay so they call them Brown Cuckoo-Doves now even though the bird's no more a cuckoo than I am a hamburger with the works – build flimsy stick nests you can see through from below and lay one pearly white egg about the size of a *pigeon's* egg of all crazy things, while Tawny Frogmouths lay up to three eggs of about the same size in a similar slap-together nest but the eggs are chalky white! Which is the point I'm making! It's all about subtlety. Whites aren't all the same any more than Mondays are all the same even though we often make the mistake of thinking they are. Everything comes with its own history its own story and marches to the beat of its own little tin drum.

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Like the next Monday night I catch up with Lorelei for example. My intention is to show up for a pleasant evening over a home cooked meal collect my glasses and kiss the whole thing goodbye. But I didn't factor in the subtle power of white. To begin with I arrive on time and she looks so good when she answers the door it's all I can do not to kiss her every which way *but* goodbye. But then I remember how the kissing goes and I tell myself to slow down cowboy, slow down. This is not the start of anything here but a civilized finish, a last polite hurrah.

Then she leads me into the kitchen which smells of home cooking and fresh bread and tells me she's bought a bottle of wine she wants me to educate her on. Now there's nothing more flattering than a woman pandering to your vanities

even when it's blatantly obvious what she's doing, so I'm half seduced even before I sit down. And by the time she presents me with a premier cru white burgundy to open 'because that's really the man's job' – there it is again, so easy to see, so hard to resist – I've forgotten I don't even like chardonnay and I'm banging on about French terroir and Burgundy royalty and generally being a 24 carat tosser who can't shut up to breathe.

How very interesting she says with the perfect mix of charm and grace as if she's genuinely interested in my every dribbling word. You obviously know a lot about wine Myles.

So I preen and she strokes and my ego grows proportionate to the stimuli and soon we're laughing and eating and the wine's sliding down like buttered honey so we open another and then we're kissing sweet and lovely now no sign of last week's suckerfish as we move in on each other so close I can barely feel the division between us how the hell we reached this place I couldn't say but the next thing we're upstairs on her bed about to see if everything still works like it used to forty years ago if it's still as good as it was back then and I have to make myself ... slow ... down ... cowboy.

Lorelei senses the change of pace and stretches out like a cat beneath me, smiling a little self-consciously.

Four kids, forty years, she says with an apologetic shrug.

I shake my head and shush her with my forefinger to my lips.

Don't be afraid, I say. I'm expecting a woman not a girl. I hope you're expecting a man.

Damn, is he here already?

And we laugh as we undress one another, easier now the ice is broken, easier to joke about the changes we bear, the raggedy show and tell of four decades of living – her turkey's neck and fallen angels, my own budding breasts and sad old pair of agates, our collective belly fat, the scars the bumps the blemishes – in short the undeniable reminders that youth burns its bridges when it flees.

Yet there's something forgiving and wonderful going on here tonight. In this light in this time in this mood Lorelei seems suspended somewhere between sixteen and sixty, like she's one of those lenticular images you can alter by changing your point of view. I know it's not real, but it *feels* real, and it's a heady sensation to be holding in my arms a woman I held as a beautiful young girl so very long ago, way back when I knew nothing and wanted it all.

Sometimes sex punches well above its weight. I can see I'll have to be very careful here or I'll end up caught in the oldest trap of all.

What are you doing Myles?

I have to go, I'm sorry.

It's one o'clock in the morning why don't you come back to bed?

I look at her and smile and she looks bemused in the dim lamplight and says what's the matter?

Nothing I say, nothing at all. I find my trousers and almost fall over pulling them on which makes her laugh soft and sleepy. Then I try to put my shirt on inside out but the buttons are on the wrong side for doing up so I take it off and start again. One shoe has found its way under the bed and I sweep the carpet with ever-increasing arcs of my arm before I find it. And both socks are at liberty. All the while she watches me, head on the pillow hair spilling out eyes shiny and mirthful like she's poised on the brink of saying something funny or silly, and then she surprises me.

Remember when you wondered if it would be any different to before?

Did I say that?

Yes you did she says. Was it like you remembered Myles?

It was better I say, kissing her gently on the lips hoping she's not going to guilt trip me for scarpering, but I should have remembered Lorelei never does as expected.

Sorry I have to go.

That's okay she says, don't spoil a good thing right?

Right I say, and anyway I didn't bring my contact lenses case.

So you'd have nowhere to put them, right? she says, eyes twinkling again. And that would be a terrible catastrophe, wouldn't it? No place for your contacts.

What a disaster!

I laugh but don't engage for fear I might falter in the face of reason or ridicule or both, and kiss her again warm and lovely and say I had fun thanks and she says likewise, and don't forget your glasses this time.