

"EGG"

You were born with a bird's egg tucked inside your hand. It looked like a starling's egg, but it could just as easily have been a robin's. They are a very similar shade. Your eyes are the same high August blue. You are also lightly freckled.

At first, I did not notice the egg. I was drunk on the just-born smell of you. Your foldable arms, your ears, and feet –which were just like adult feet, only greatly reduced. I was worn out from all the pushing and shoving. Then, the sudden rush of you, coming in a flood at the end.

'This is really happening,' your father said. And just like that, it was already over.

You came thundering out of me fist-first. Fingers curled round your thumb, tight as a walnut shell. After your arm came your head, a second arm and a single torso, a pair of pancake-flat buttocks and two legs with feet like full stops clamouring on either end. You were all there. Every bit of you in the proper place and working. Every bit but your left arm, which stayed stubbornly up for almost a week.

"He's ready to punch anybody that gets in his way," your father said, and laughed like this was a good thing. I didn't think it was. You seemed far too furious for a brand-new person. "Is this normal?" I asked. It was not normal. The midwife had never delivered a fist-first baby before.

"Don't panic," she said. "He seems fine. I'll just check him over to be sure."

Then, she whisked you away for weight and length and swaddling in a clean, white blanket.



When you returned, you looked exactly like babies are meant to look. All blink-eyed and freshly pink. If I held you right I couldn't even see your strange arm sticking up from under the blankets.

'Isn't he perfect?' I said.

Your father didn't reply. His face was trying not to fold.

'What's he holding?' he asked, unpeeling the blanket to examine your curled fist.

'Nothing,' I said. 'It takes babies a while to uncurl. He's been bunched up inside me for nine months. No wonder he came out funny.'

'I think he's holding something,' your father said. He could see the pale of it glowing between your fingers.

I took your little nugget of a hand in my own and began to unpeel your fingers.

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It was read by Roisin Gallagher and produced by Michael Shannon.

I went at you slowly, gently, like tiny steps on ice. Baby fingers are brittle as bird's legs. I didn't want to snap you. It took a minute, maybe ninety seconds to prise your hand open. Your father and the midwife hung over me, holding their breath as if just the thinnest puff of it might break you. I could see parts of the egg straightaway but I didn't say anything until it was fully exposed.

'It's an egg,' I said. 'The baby's come out holding a bird's egg.'

No one spoke. There wasn't even a peep out of you.

I lifted the egg up and held it, very gently between my finger and thumb. It was almost like holding air. So light. So easy to ruin.

'This was inside me,' I said. 'How did it get there?' My own voice was swimming away from me. I thought I might faint.

'Did you swallow it?' asked the midwife. 'No, that makes no sense. How would the baby get hold of it?'

Your father had gone a funny shade of gray. Like a thing that was once white, then washed too often.

He perched himself on the edge of the bed and asked to see the egg. I tried to place it directly into his hand, but he insisted on a tissue. He would not look me directly in the eye.

'You don't think there's another baby inside it?' he asked.

'It's a bird's egg,' said the midwife. 'Probably a starling. Babies don't come out of eggs.'

'A starling,' your father repeated softly. He lifted the egg to his ear the way you would with seashells, listening for the ocean. The egg didn't make any noise.

He looked disappointed. Then, he shook it, reasonably hard.

'Stop,' I yelled, 'you'll kill it.'

'It's only a starling. There's hundreds on the telephone wires at the end of the road.'

'This one was inside me. It's mine. I want to see what comes out of it.'

Later, looking back I would realise this was the precise moment I began to love the egg.

We had not been expecting an egg. It hadn't appeared on any of your ultrasound scans. We'd printed them all out and stuck them on the fridge door so our friends would see and know you were finally a real thing. Not just wishful thinking or fingers crossed for the next try. Your scans are still up there, next to the grocery list and the takeaway menus. Next to a photo of the egg on its fifth birthday. Apple-sized you, curled up into yourself like a neatly tied lace. Banana-sized, with your feet scratching the ceiling of my belly. And finally, you, swollen to the size of a large turnip, staring straight at us, as if to say, "I'm ready for out now." Later, your father would stand in front of the fridge for hours, forgetting what he'd come for, as he stared at these grainy images. I'd find him there, just standing with a glass or empty bowl, his eyes microscoping across the fridge as he tried to see an eggshell ghosting through your clenched fist.

It was harder for him. He hadn't carried you. Or the egg.

No one had expected an egg. It was not normal. When the consultant arrived, he was unable to contain his shock. He called it a deformity, clamping a hand over his mouth to keep the disgust from creeping out. I could have clawed him for bringing such a dirty word into the room. I opened my mouth and howled. I couldn't stop.

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'Now, you've gone and upset my wife,' your father said. 'Did you have to use that word in front of her? If you ask me it's not a deformity at all. It's more of an oddity.'

Oddity was not much better. This was how we spoke of your Great Aunt Lil who did not believe in washing or speaking to anyone who wasn't close kin. Shortly after this, your father would revise his thinking. Then, he'd call the egg a "miracle," and wonder if we shouldn't get the papers round for a photo. There was money to be made, he said, referencing the family down the road who'd found the face of Mary looming out of the muck on their Land Rover's windscreen. Hadn't they made a fortune selling their story to the press? Enough for a conservatory, or so the story went locally.

The word deformity hung sourly in the air. The consultant carted you down the corridor to a room where you were examined for other extra parts. Wings. Horns. Halos. The possibility of a second heart, murmuring softly behind your ribcage. Of course, they found nothing. You were just a normal baby, born with a bird's egg. No one knew how it got there or why it had not shattered beneath the pressure of your fingers or the force of being born.

After a week they let us take you home. The egg came too. I know you wish we'd left it behind. Your father felt similarly. He was all for throwing it in the bin.

'Nothing's coming out of that egg,' he said, 'let's go home and get the baby settled.'

But I couldn't shrug the feeling that there were two of you to look after now.

'I can't leave the egg behind,' I said, 'it grew inside me. It might still hatch.'

Your father could see the strain of this stretched into my jaw. A tiny nerve flexing just beneath the skin.

There was no turning me, not when I dug my heels in. We took the egg home and made an incubator for it. An old shoebox lined with tinfoil, some cotton flannels and a desk lamp angled down like a drooped tulip. I hoped the heat would bring it on.

'I'll set it up in the utility room,' your father said, but I insisted upon the nursery. I wanted the two of you in the same room. Together. Equal. Neither child favoured. I dragged an old armchair into the space between you, measuring the distance so I was not a centimetre nearer to either one. I dozed constantly, waking to feed you, to bathe and change you. I told you you were the most precious boy in the whole world and meant it. Please remember that. I woke to turn the egg, back to front, to back again, shuffling the heat gently round its shell. I leaned over the incubator and whispered soft, coaxing words, 'Come on out now. We can't wait to meet you.' I meant it. Every whispered word.

When I dreamt, it was mostly of the egg. The way the shell would one day split in two, fracturing and peeling in strips, to reveal a small creature inside. Something which required care. Sometimes this creature was a bird, sometimes a very small child, no bigger than a bottle top. Mostly it was a warm but indefinite impression, not quite a ghost, but similar and equally hard to describe when awake. In the early days, I told your father these dreams, explaining each one in detail. Then I stopped. Your father wasn't interested in the egg. He never had been. It was all just an oddity to him. All for the need to humour me.

You thrived. You slept all night. You sat up, moved on to solids, took your first fumbly steps. You made noises, then fully formed words. The egg didn't. The egg grew no bigger or smaller. It simply sat there on its flannel, occasionally vibrating when a large truck drove past the house.

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But I couldn't bring myself to give up on it. I kept turning it front to back four times an hour for months. Then years. I put my back out leaning over its incubator to whisper stories and sing happy songs. I took photos of the two of you together on birthdays and at Christmas, ringing the egg's box in tinsel or birthday banners so it might know it we were celebrating and take some small pleasure from this. I refused to go on holidays. 'We can't take the egg,' I said, 'and we can't leave it here by itself. It might hatch.'

'It's never going to hatch,' your father said and, when you were old enough for the rides, took you to Euro Disney. Just the two of you, for a long weekend. I stayed home with the egg. Reading. Sleeping. Hoping it might hatch while you were away and justify my absence. The egg did not hatch, and now I am in none of the photographs from your earliest holidays. Later I would also miss out on sports' day, Edinburgh, Legoland and parents' night at your new school. There was no one else to sit with the egg. You grew old enough to find your own tongue.

'It's not fair,' you said, over and over. 'You love that egg more than me.'

'I don't,' I said, 'it's just that it needs me more. It can't do anything for itself.'

"I need you too," you said. But the truth was, you didn't. You'd learnt to do almost everything for yourself. Your father was there for the rest: shoelaces, doctor's appointments and the like. You went to him first for everything. I was proud when I saw you using the toaster and washing your own uniform and sometimes, even, fixing dinner for us all. I was also utterly ashamed. You were six then and already refusing to stand next to the egg in photographs.

'It's just an egg,' you said. 'It's not an actual person.' Even though I told you the story of how you'd come out of me, holding it gently, in your left hand. You did not seem to see the miracle in it, only the oddness.

'Please,' you'd say, 'can you just get rid of the egg?' Your father would be there too, looking at me like I was the sort of soap opera character who is always saying, 'I don't have a problem. I can give up, any time I want,' and is actually addicted to alcohol or heroin or takeaway food.

In the end, the egg broke. It was not your fault exactly. Your father has said this more times than I can count. You were only playing in your room, only getting on like normal boys do. You knocked into the box. The egg fell out and cracked itself on the floor. You didn't tell me immediately. You waited until we were all sat down for dinner.

'Sorry mum,' you said, 'I broke the egg. There was nothing inside it.' I kept myself from crying in front of you. Your father would not let me punish you. Not even bed without supper.

'It was an accident,' he said. I could see he wanted to smile.

Later, when I went to clean the egg up, I noticed that it was not entirely empty. There was a tiny fleck of blood in the middle of the white, peering up at me like the eye in an overflashed photo. I thought of you then, tucked inside me with an egg in your hand and an eye inside this egg. One precious thing inside another, like Russian dolls. Or how we all are, secretly inside.

Jan Carson is a writer and community arts facilitator based in Belfast. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and on BBC Radio 3 and 4. She specializes in running arts projects and events with older people, especially those living with dementia.

