

Courgette Soup

Nora sets out Jonah's breakfast things, her fingers cracked and worn. *His* fingers straddle the old farmhouse table, inherited from her mother, but Jonah's empire now. A round-bellied *conquistador*, his fat hands clasp mother's silver knife and spoon like spoils of war.

Before lifting his soft-boiled eggs from the pan, Nora carefully returns the antique egg-timer to its mahogany box. The intricate chick carved into the lid remains, but the bright yellow paint remembered from childhood is rubbed and faded now. Her old hands move to stroke the chick as she did as a girl – then stop. Jonah plays merry hell if his daily eggs are even ten seconds overcooked. When she slides them into silver eggcups, Jonah inspects both, impatient fingers drumming, barely glancing at *her*.

'*Your daughter* sets her *phone* to time boiled eggs! Damn thing buzzes like a fly when they're done! *Buzz, bloody buzz!* Buy the stupid girl an egg-timer! What's wrong with the force of gravity on dry sand? One globe empty, one globe full!'

My daughter is not stupid, and she has a name, says Nora – but only to herself. She's *Beth*. And when it comes to glass globes, I'm the empty one - and *Jonah* the dry sand that's emptied me.

'Don't eggs taste the same, however they're timed?' she asks, watching Jonah's lard-fingers clamp round his spoon. Oh, for the biblical whale, she thinks, to flood the

kitchen and swallow Jonah. But *Jonah* has swallowed the whale, bloated stomach sagging against the pine table like a pregnancy.

Because she's disagreed with him, he whacks his angry spoon into the flimsy eggshell, so hard the yolk sprays out like a yellow volcano, splashing onto his clean shirt - white, the colour of albumen. And ironed, too, yesterday, by Nora's worn hands. Once they'd changed the bed, cleaned the loo, done the shopping, cooked dinner, and dealt with the piled-up mail. Still only breakfast, but already she's made the stock and sliced the courgettes for his lunchtime soup.

'Bugger!'

One more thing to wash, sighs Nora, as Jonah scrapes yellow yolk from the linen cloth and spoons the scrapings into his greedy mouth. Time he grew some manners, but too late for that. The thin white shell of her own boiled egg remains untouched, all appetite gone.

Her eyes drift to the white envelope on the hard marble worktop. Today's mail is a single letter, stamped *PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL*, in block capitals and bright-red-ink.

Pouring his tea, she says, 'The hospital sent a letter. A letter about the-'

'Want to stick more needles in me, do they? More tests? *Tests!* Like bloody school!'

She gazes at the envelope, addressed to her, not him, confirming her diagnosis. Slim and young, the consultant. Mr Dendriakos. Not Dr, but *Mr*. All that time and money becoming *Doctor*, she thinks, then you're promoted back to plain old *Mr* Dendriakos. Why not just stay as you were before...? At the suction-pump sound of Jonah debauching his egg, Nora wishes *she* had.

Why is it always you, you, you? she wants to scream. *Do I even exist?* Well, no. Not for much longer. And why can't my letter be yours, confirming *your* bad news, instead of mine? She hears Jonah stab at the butter dish, his silver knife a machete, and wonders how to break the news to Beth. *My daughter*, not Jonah's - thank God.

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The sword-spoon in Jonah's fat fingers beheads the second egg, but Nora sees only the slow patient fingers of Mr Dendriakos, caressing his keyboard, gently adding *prognosis* to her notes. His soft voice had asked, *Have you made a will?* She had. And left everything to Beth. *Her* daughter. The savings bonds. The other house, little more than a wooden shack by the sea, but Beth was born there. And dear Michael, Beth's father, died there too – so gentle, patient, young.

Don't look back, Michael had told her, his final words. *I have no future, but you do. Look ahead.*

Nora took Michael's advice - but should have been less needy and worn stronger glasses when she 'looked ahead.' Because she ended up with Jonah, nice as pie till his feet crossed the threshold, then rude, crude, and slobbier by the day. Thank God she never married him. He will live on in her house because, alas, *the due process of the law* decrees it.

Glancing at the egg-timer, *hers*, not his, its antique mahogany box like a tiny coffin, she decides to bequeath it to Beth, the 'stupid girl' who times eggs on her phone. *I'll place a codicil on my last will and testament*, Norah decides, *and Jonah will turn purple when he finds out.*

Her breakfast mask almost drifts into a smile at the thought of Jonah shifting his lazy bulk and going *out*, to buy an egg-timer of his own. *An egg-timer, antique, inherited, in a carved mahogany coffin, in a codicil.* How ridiculous language is, sometimes.

Jonah, alas, is ridiculous *all* the time. And Nora's time, like sand, is running out.

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Ignoring the splurge of yolk swilling down his mineshaft of a throat, she watches the minute hand on the kitchen clock tick down, down, towards the hospital letter, its red ink warning part-obscured by recipe books. From where she sits, it says *Private and Con.*

Private. And Con.

A Jonah slurp jolts her back to the deliberate terms of her will. Beth will inherit the little shack by the sea, and when Jonah's organs succumb to their slough of whale-blubber, will inherit this house too. Watching his boorish tongue lick spilled yolk from monstrous fingers, a jolt of realisation fizzles into her.

Inherit! The implications of *inherit* make her shiver in her dressing gown.

Beth. Might Beth inherit a coercive *Jonah* too? Might a new cycle begin, the dry unstoppable sand filling his glass globe and draining Beth's?

I love my daughter, Nora whispers in silence, glaring at the unloved mass of blubber, wedged like a beached whale in the opposite chair. Beth in mind, dear Michael's dying words echo with new meaning. *I have no future, but you do. Look ahead.*

She gets to her feet, hurries past Jonah to the kitchen sink and runs the tap.

‘Starting my lunch, are you?’ he says, between mouthfuls. ‘Better not be bloody courgette soup again! Can’t you cook anything else?’

Her back turned, Nora stares in panic at the stock pot, the soup ladle, the bowl of salted, sliced courgettes. ‘No, no, it’s...for the egg yolk, on your shirt. I’ll dab it, so it doesn’t stain.’

Is it hot or cold water for egg? She’s forgotten, confused, worried what to cook, now Jonah has sabred courgette soup from the menu. Water drumming into the sink echoes like a tolling bell - cold, cold. But the cold turns warm, warm, then boiling hot – the rising steam condensing on the soup ladle’s heavy steel, redundant now. With a sigh, Nora slides it back into its earthenware jar.

The rising steam coats Nora too, as the minute hand ticks down, the tick-tick drowned by the piercing slurp of tea swilling into Jonah’s gullet like sludge in a drain. And reflected in the kitchen window is her own white hair and yellow face, her illness clear as day, yolk-coloured cheeks thinner now than they have ever been. And Jonah’s fat bald pate reflected too, tufts of lank hair straggling across his boiled-egg skull like snakes in a mangrove swamp.

Beneath the clock, steam condenses on the cold earthenware jar, bristling with tall utensils: the heavy silver ladle for now-forbidden soup; a potato ricer, never used; a steel spatula; a weighty wooden rolling-pin.

‘*Kill that damn noise!*’ hisses Jonah. Her mind a trampoline, Nora turns off the offending tap but when the drumming stops, she hears him greedily eviscerate his second egg - the spoon a guillotine, a shovel, a gouge.

‘Mind your shirt.’ Automatic, her words. Like the movement of her hand towards the earthenware jar, fingers riffling across the implements it holds.

Was my selection deliberate? she will afterwards wonder, lifting the steel soup ladle from the jar, as Jonah’s sullen, sniping words come back to her. *What’s wrong with the force of gravity on dry sand?*

And hoisting the ladle high in the air she rams it down with enough sheer force of gravity to impress Mr Dendriakos, had he witnessed it.

A spoon to an egg, she thinks, as the ladle thunders home and the shell splits and bursts. She feels a tiny splash on her cheek. *Ah, Jonah’s final kiss.* She wipes it away with the cloth she has moistened to dab at the egg stain. ‘And one less shirt to iron,’ she says, aloud.

The ladle, an avenging sword, seems welded into Nora’s fist but, as the numbness starts to ebb, her fingers relax, and she finds herself in a void, afloat on an unexpected sea of calm. Whose invisible hand, she asks herself, has made such a mess on mother’s old pine table? To the pair of cracked boiled eggs, someone has added a third.

The clock’s tick fades to a long, aching silence. But when the sound returns her calm sea breaks on the kitchen shore. When the waves recede, it is a dead beached whale she sees.

‘Oh. Goodness,’ she murmurs. ‘I must pay for this, mustn’t I?’ Her eyes fall on the bright-red-ink of the hospital letter. ‘But only for a little while.’

Dragging her gaze from the letter to the mess of fractured shell, Nora’s thoughts turn to Beth. ‘Both houses will be yours now, Beth,’ she tells her absent daughter. *Her daughter,*

not his. 'After *the due process of the law*, might one house be for you, and the other set aside for the grandchildren I will never see?'

She runs the tap and rinses blood - or is it brain? - from the soup ladle, sliding it back into the earthenware jar. Wiping the worst of Jonah from the ruined table, she rinses him from her dishcloth, flushes him down the sink and dries her hands. For one last time, her cracked fingers caress the carved mahogany chick on the antique egg-timer's lid, as her soft fingers used to do, in childhood.

'*But I must get on,*' she says. '*I must serve time.*' And with a final glance at the three ruptured eggs, Nora trembles down the hallway, where the silent telephone gently awaits.