

AI-generated egg.



The Green Egg

Claire Rakich

Once there lived a woman whose father possessed an egg. It had once belonged to her grandmother, she knew, but she had never been told where it came from. As a child, she had asked, but the subject had been forbidden and she had been warned in the most serious tones never to tell anyone else of its existence.

The egg was large and shone a burnished golden-green. It was kept hidden beneath piles of blankets at the back of an out-of-the-way cupboard, the key concealed in the roof's low rafters.

When she had been very small, the woman had simply accepted its presence and had thought very little about it. As she grew older, however, she began to notice her father's troubled expression each winter when the blankets were needed and he was forced to look upon the egg. Soon, she too began to view it with fear and resentment, and to wonder why their family had been cursed with something so strange and shameful.

One terrible day, her father died and the egg passed to her. Red-eyed from crying, she opened the cupboard door and pulled it gingerly from its hiding place. It glowed faintly between her fingers, as if it mocked her, and she knew she had to destroy it.

She beat it with a rock, but stone left no mark on it. She dropped it from a high precipice; she threw it into the river; she abandoned it deep in the forest. But after every attempt, she returned wearily home to find the egg waiting for her on the kitchen table.

After a while, she returned it to its hiding place and attempted to put it out of her mind. Try as she might, though, she lived with the daily fear that one day her secret would be exposed.

To divert suspicion, the woman worked hard to be a respectable member of her village. She bound her hair in a tight plait, wore plain dresses of dark blue and green, and each night, she sewed other dresses which she sold by day in the marketplace. Her garden, which faced the street, was neat and ordered, and in it she planted the same white roses, cornflowers, and rows of potatoes and cabbages which grew in all the others.

One day, the woman met a man who was visiting the village. There was little affection between them, and few tears shed when he returned to his own people,

but shortly after, she gave birth to a daughter. Her baby was placed in her arms and, as she stared into unfocused blue eyes, at the tiny starfish fingers, she knew it was her turn now to encumber a precious creature with a terrible burden. Tears dropped upon the tiny head.

Time passed at the cottage. The woman sewed and the girl scampered to school on spindly legs, her lengthening plait swinging like a rope behind her. It was several years before the child learned of the egg. The woman, horrified that the moment had come, begged her never to speak of it again. She saw worry flicker over her daughter's face, but the girl did as she was told.

That winter, the worst snowstorm anyone could remember came to the village. In every house, people stuffed their windows with moss and rags, plugging up draughts and blocking out the light. They gathered provisions together, bolted their doors, then settled inside to wait out the storm.

One night, as snow battered the house and the wind shrieked, the girl, wrapped in an enormous blanket, looked up from her seat beside the fire.

"Is someone knocking at the door, Mother?"

The woman paused in her sewing. There it was: a sharp, insistent tapping. She went cautiously to the door, pressing her ear to it. A voice spoke, barely audible over the cry of the storm.

"Please, friend. The wind howls and no one will let me in. If you do not open your door, I'll be dead by morning."

She stepped back quickly. To open the door would be madness; the wind was so strong, it might never shut again. Frowning, she returned to the hearth. Whoever it was should have prepared better for the storm.

"Please, friend," came the voice again, louder this time. "The wind howls, and no one will let me in. If you do not open your door, I'll be dead by morning."

The woman picked up her sewing once more. The voice would soon be gone. Besides, nobody could enter the house – there was the egg to consider. She had been too careful for too long to risk everything now.

The voice spoke a third time: "Please, friend. The wind howls, and no one will let me in. If you do not open your door, I'll be dead by morning."

Glancing up, the woman saw that the girl was watching her, waiting to see what she would do. The memory of her own father's kindness suddenly came to her; how he had always tried to help a person in need. She looked into her daughter's eyes. One day, the girl would suffer the curse of the green egg. But today, if the woman chose, she could also pass on a different legacy.

The garment fell from her knees as she returned to the door. Loosening the heavy bolt, she took a deep breath, then wrenched it open with both hands.

The driving snow felt like a fist in her face. Something hurtled past her into the cottage and she pushed hard against the door, fighting to close it. She felt her daughter beside her, lending her strength, and for one terrible moment, it seemed as though the storm would win; then with a last effort, the door finally closed. Re-bolting it with stiff fingers, they sagged against the wood. Snow lay on the flagstones. The fire had gone out.

A magpie hopped from behind the table to examine the fireplace. It flew to the roof, retrieved a large beakful of thatch and descended to thrust it into the embers, beating its wings until the flames returned to life. Ignoring the woman's protests, the bird dragged her unfinished sewing over to soak up the thawing snow. Then, settling itself on the girl's cushion, it turned its head to the woman.

"Thank you, friend, for saving my life," it said. "One day I will repay your kindness."

For a moment, there was silence. Then the girl laughed and resumed her seat by the fire, placing the magpie on her lap. With a sigh, the woman joined them.

The magpie stayed with them through the winter. It was often infuriating; relentlessly nosy, it stole food from their plates and chattered and jabbered so much that the woman sometimes wished she had left it on the doorstep. But the creature was kind and loyal, and it cared for them. Very soon, they could not imagine life without it.

One day, when the snow had melted, the school had reopened and the first shoots of spring had emerged, the magpie found the green egg.

When the woman entered the room to discover the key in the open cupboard door, blankets on the floor and the egg gleaming in the sunlight, she gripped the door frame to keep herself from falling.

The magpie was hopping around it excitedly. "What's this?" it chattered. "An egg, a shiny green egg!"

With a roar, the woman kicked out at the magpie, who squawked and flapped away. She fell to her knees, fumbling to conceal the egg.

"Meddling bird!" she cried, "I should have left you in the snow!" She glared at the bird, who was now gazing down at her from the thatch, out of harm's way. Her mind was racing. Now that it knew, it could not be allowed to live. She would catch it in a net, wring its little neck. When her daughter returned, she would tell her it had flown away, back to the forest and the other birds ...

The magpie appeared to be watching her closely. "Why does it trouble you so much, friend?"

For a moment, the woman said nothing. Then tears filled her eyes.

"The egg is evil," she muttered. "It has blighted my family for generations, and it cannot be destroyed. My father lived a life of fear and shame because of it,

then I was cursed too. One day it will pass to my poor girl. It was meant to be hidden, until you came."

"So that is what it is." The magpie seemed to ponder her words for a long time. Then it flew down and perched on the cupboard shelf to face her.

"By saving my life you gave me a great gift," it said. "Now I shall give one in return. These eggs are forged within us and they are shaped by the trials and fortunes of those who came before. This is not your father's egg, or your daughter's – it is yours. And so, it is you who must decide: will you hide it and keep yourself small and fearful, or will you hatch it and see what comes?"

The woman stared at the bird. She had never heard such madness. And yet ... how might it feel to do as the creature said?

The magpie fluttered its wings, hopping to the shelf's edge. "I have said what I can – now I will return to the forest. Farewell, my dear friend. Perhaps one day we shall meet again." Then, spreading its wings wide, it shot through the open window and was gone.

The cottage was quiet after the magpie's departure. On the fourth day, the woman took the egg from the cupboard, cradled it in a blanket and placed it in front of the fire. When her daughter asked, she told her: "I have decided to stop being afraid."

At first, its presence in the room made her uneasy. As the warmer days went by, though, she found herself talking to it in the morning while she made breakfast, and singing to it in the evening while she sewed.

One summer morning, the woman was roused from sleep by her daughter.

"Mother, wake up!"

"What has happened?"

"Come and see."

They ran past the empty fireplace – where shards of iridescent shell strewed the floor – through the open door and into the garden. The girl whirled back to face the house, her exhilarated face illuminated by the early sun.

"Look!"

There upon the roof sat a gold-green bird. Its body was as thick and stocky as an owl's and a lustrous plume crested its peacock-like head. The large wings were spread wide like a cormorant's, its long feathers gleaming emerald, turquoise and jade. Gold talons gripped the thatch, and when it opened its mighty beak and sang, the sound entered the woman's heart like a shard of sunlight. As she stared up at the green bird, she felt warmth spread through her chest, her limbs, her face.

As the girl danced in the dewy grass, neighbours emerged from nearby cottages to marvel at the bird.

“Where did it come from?” they asked. But the woman just smiled.

The bird remained on the roof, as did the warmth in the woman's heart. Changes began to occur. She still sewed as hard as ever, but her garments seemed dull and lifeless now. She traded some with a traveller for bolts of crimson and sapphire velvet, and cut the dresses into pieces before patching them with bright windows of colour. She began to wear them herself to sell them in the market square.

Unbinding her plait, she wove scarlet ribbons through her unruly hair. Her daughter ran to school in skirts of red and blue. In her garden, she planted fiery nasturtiums amongst the cabbages, outlandish delphiniums beside the potatoes and strange shrubs transplanted from the forest beside the garden gate. When the midsummer sun shone, she lay beneath them to watch their gigantic leaves glow overhead, as the bird on the roof continued to sing.

The villagers were perplexed; surely their neighbour had gone mad. When they counselled caution, she smiled and continued about her business. They muttered and shook their heads, but they had their own lives to lead and were preoccupied with their own concerns. After a while, they merely sniffed disapprovingly when they passed her in the street. Besides, they had to admit that the green bird was beautiful. Fancy it coming to their village of all places.

There was one among them, however, who looked at the bird and felt terror take root in their heart. They made admiring sounds along with the others, but they thought of the pearl-pink egg buried beneath the floor of their own cottage, and found they were unable to sleep for worry. The bird was clearly dangerous. And what if people began to wonder whether there were other strange things in the village? What if a search was made? Their own carefully constructed world would come tumbling down around them.

One night, when the first autumn leaves began to change, the village slumbered and the creature crooned to itself drowsily upon the roof, the fearful villager crept outside with a slingshot, took aim, and shot the green bird.

With an ear-splitting cry, it tumbled from the roof in a flurry of feathers. The neighbour fled. The woman and her daughter rushed outside to find ... nothing. The bird had vanished.

The woman stared at the empty spot on the roof, and as her daughter began to sob beside her, felt her heart break in two. She was the cause of this. The egg had been safe, hidden carefully for generations and yet *she* had been the one to expose it to the world. She hadn't even thought to keep watch on it. Now she finally knew the real curse: that she had never deserved something so precious and true. Now her daughter would go to her grave with no egg, no bird. She had deprived her child of any chance to do things better. What a fool she had been.

Shutting her ears to her daughter's cries, she ran blindly into the forest. Without her, her girl would at least have some chance to live an unblighted life. The best thing she could do now was to stay far away.

The woman stumbled through undergrowth for hours. At last, she came upon a cave used for storing animal pelts, now long forgotten. As birds left the forest for warmer lands and the year began to die around her, she gathered firewood and foraged for food amongst the fallen leaves.

When the dark nights came and winter dropped an icy blanket on the world, she shivered under layers of furs, gazing unseeing into the fire. She only stirred to eat what she needed to keep herself alive, unsure why she was bothering. Sometimes when the wind howled, she thought she could hear her daughter calling, but she did not stir. The girl was better off without her.

After what felt like an eternity, the cold winds ceased. One day, when buds studded the branches like pearls, the woman heard her daughter's voice calmly calling for her amongst the trees.

Unable to ignore her, she emerged from the cave. The fragile sun warmed her face and birdsong echoed around the clearing. She approached her daughter, taking a breath and finding courage in the smell of the damp, rich earth.

The girl smiled at her mother and held out her hand. "Come home."

The woman shook her head. "I can't." Looking down, she noticed how thin her own hands had become.

"You can," the girl insisted, a stubborn look on her face, "come home and learn the truth at last."

The woman lifted her gaze to her daughter. The girl was taller; almost a woman herself now, she realised with a wistful pang of love. At last, she nodded.

Mother and daughter emerged from the forest. Soon they were passing familiar streets, then rounding the corner to their own home. There was the garden with its bright new leaves, there was the cottage, and there, on the roof, proud and beautiful as ever, was the green bird!

Catching sight of them, it flapped its wings as if to shake something from its feathers and began to sing. As though they had been waiting for a signal, her neighbours burst from their houses, calling greetings to her, and shouting for joy.

"Why are they cheering?" the woman asked, astonished.

The girl was smiling up at the bird. "Because it has not sung since you went away."

"Sung? It was dead!"

"No, Mother. The next morning, it was on the roof again as if nothing had happened. I have been searching for you all winter to tell you!"

"But ... how?"

Her daughter took her hand. "There is so much you do not understand. The bird cannot be killed, not while you breathe. You give it life and you make it sing." The girl blinked back tears, "You have taught me not to hide. One day, a bird will sing on my roof, because of your courage."

A lump formed in the woman's throat. "But I left you."

The girl shook her head, pointing at the green bird. "No, you didn't."

The woman could not speak; she simply embraced her daughter. Hand in hand, they returned to their cottage. Outside, the green bird continued to sing.

In a nearby cottage, a man looked up and smiled at the sound. He stood for a moment, listening. Glancing down at the bright vermillion egg he had retrieved from the hidden space in the wall, he nodded to himself. Then he moved across the room and set it carefully upon the windowsill in full view of the road. Stepping back, he watched as the strengthening sun illuminated his egg like a piece of fiery coal.

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