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Opening extract from

Eggs

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"I don't even like eggs," David said.

"It's not just the eggs," said his grandmother.

"So what is it?" He no longer bothered to trim the surliness from his voice when speaking to her.

She thought for a moment. "Well, the activity. Participating." Her fists gripped the steering wheel. Her face was locked straight ahead. She was a rotten and terrified driver. "Making friends."

Make friends. Make friends. Same old garbage. "I don't want to make friends."

"Everybody needs friends."

"Not me."

"We all do, David. We're all human."

"I'm not."

"No?"

"No."

"What might you be, then?"

"A moose."

He knew she wanted to give him a look, but she dared not take her eyes from the road. She settled for a sigh and a purse of the lips. "Now you're just being silly."

He let it hang there: "silly." He said nothing. Unreplied to, the word would get bigger and bigger, filling the car, suffocating her, forcing her to open her mouth and take it back, swallow it. That would be her punishment. Maybe then she would turn around, take him home, let the Easter Egg hunt go on without him. It wasn't even her idea anyway, it was his dad's. They could tell him the hunt was called off, or they got there too late.

She opened the window on her side. She said, "Would you like your window open?"

He did not answer.

"David?"

"No."

"Want the radio on?"

Question time. Try to get him to say yes.

"No."

"Are you ever going to smile again?"

"No."

"Are you a boy?"

"No."

Drat. Tricked. Didn't she know that tricks only made him hate her more? Wasn't the trick his mother had played on him enough? More than enough? Did the world have to go on playing tricks on him?

Houses, street corners went by. This was all his life had been since the 29th of April of last year: a ride to somewhere he did not want to go.

They were stopping, pulling to the kerb at the end of a line of cars. "We'll have to walk from here. Looks like a good crowd," she said, her voice all peachy cheery, like nothing had ever happened. She came around to his side. She opened the door. He stared straight ahead.

"David? Ready?"

"No."

"They're going to start in ten minutes."

"Good for them."

She reached in. She touched his shoulder. "Davey—"

He jerked away. "My name is David."

He did not look up into her face, but he knew she was closing her eyes, trying to be patient. "Excuse me. David. You know what your father said."

"Tell him we came and it was too crowded."

She made a thin, wincing smile. "I don't think so."

He looked at her. "We could dye some eggs ourselves and say that's what I found. *I'll* dye them. You won't have to do a thing."

She closed her eyes, smiled painfully, shook her head.

David kicked the door and got out. His father had told him to go, but he hadn't said anything about sticking to his grandmother. So he walked fast, zipping ahead of her. He knew she couldn't catch up.

He walked past the slide and merry-go-round and the tables and benches and barbecues in the picnic area. And he did something that he often did at times like this. He pretended. He pretended he was doing this for his mother. He pretended she was not lying in a grave in a faraway state, but that she had awakened him the next morning, while it was still dark, just as she had promised, and they had gone out to the lake to see the sun come up, just as she had promised.

2

Still groggy with sleep, Primrose fumbled for the curtain and pushed it aside. At first she thought she was seeing the morning sun – then she realised it was not the sun after all. It was an egg, dried and splattered upon the window. Then she remembered the thumps in the night, half-heard as she lay sleeping.

She wasn't surprised. They had egged the other place too. She knew that sooner or later her new place would be discovered. She didn't care. Let them throw a *farm*ful of eggs. They weren't going to stop her from having a room of her own.

She closed the curtain. She flung off the sheet and got up – and banged her head. "Oww!" she squawked, plopping back down. She kept forgetting the low ceiling. No matter. It was worth

the crouching and duckwalking and occasional bump on her head.

She sat cross-legged on the bedroll. She looked around: curtains, beanbag, chest of drawers, her dad's picture, makeup tray, the neat stack of *House Beautiful*s, her trainers side by side on the floor, just like anybody's. Sure, there was plenty more to do – maybe a poster for the ceiling – but it was a good start. She grinned. She giggled. She pressed her fists into her chest. She whispered up the scale to a squeal: "A room of my *own*!"

She stared down at the bare knees protruding from her red-hemmed nightshirt. Last night was the third time she had slept here, but only the first in her nightshirt. You can't say a room is yours till you've slept in it in your nightshirt. That's what made last night so special. She giggled again.

For a good ten minutes she sat there, grinning, soaking it in. At last she folded the sheet, rolled up the bed, got dressed, and went outside.

The white of the egg-sun had slimed and dried down to the door handle. It looked like the silvery trail of a giant slug. Another egg splat yellowed the bumper.

She stepped back to the street. From the inside, with help from the curtains and a little imagination, it was easy to call it a room. But from the outside, from any angle, there was only one thing to call it: a rusty, tyre-less 1977 Dodge van. A car. A heap of junk.

But that would change. In her mind's eye Primrose saw a houselike paint job – maybe white with blue trim – and a little white picket fence and a patch of grass and a birdbath and flower boxes for the windows. She pictured it for a little longer and went into the house. The other house.

Even now, five years after moving here, the size of the house surprised her. It was so small that, upon first seeing it, she had assumed it was a garage. Some stubborn eye within her still looked about for the house, not believing this could be it. But it was. All four rooms of it: reading room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom. She had once seen a picture of a film star's wardrobe in *House Beautiful*. They gave the wardrobe's dimensions. She found a ruler and measured her house. The wardrobe was bigger.

The reading room, as always, was dark, soft, creepy, unreal. In the bedroom, her mother slept

with Willy. They lay shoulder to shoulder, on their backs, sheet under chins. The sheet's rise and fall with her mother's breathing sometimes fooled Primrose into thinking Willy had come alive.

She looked down at them: one mother, one teddy bear. Take away the bear, and you'd swear that was one perfectly normal mother sleeping there. Well, not quite. The dark, hushed, spooky reading room – you'd have to take that away too. And the world's tiniest house, which would make the cover of *House Ugly* if there were such a magazine. And the sign out front saying READER AND ADVISOR. And of course the bedroom, the *one and only* bedroom, the bedroom her mother actually, seriously, unbelievably (but believably too) expected to share with her teenage daughter. Take them all away and leave nothing but the lady in the bed, and then maybe you'd have yourself a normal everyday mother.

Hah! Until she woke up.

Primrose got a bucket of soapy water, a spatula, and a rag from the kitchen and returned outside to tackle the egg splats. She hated removing egg splats. It was both difficult and degrading. Raw egg dried hard.

Finished, she realised she was hungry.

3

David felt for the memento in his pocket, something he often did at rotten times. He did not want to be here. Did not want to be standing at the top of this hill with a million other yowling and shoving kids. Did not want to go racing down the hill. Did not want to hunt Easter eggs.

Did not.

The parents were behind, cheering on their little darlings. Lots of mothers. A whole flock of mothers.

A man in a straw hat was talking through a loudspeaker. The grass at the bottom of the hill was tall, shaggy. The man said that's where the eggs were, in the grass, in front of the trees. David stared and squinted as hard as he could, but he couldn't make out a single egg. He wondered if this whole thing was a trick just to get him to make friends.

"Get ready!" commanded the loudspeaker. Several big kids darted forward. "Hey!" David heard himself say, but the big kids were already swaggering back to the line, laughing.

"All right. Once more. Get ready!"

Again the same kids broke. This time they went halfway down the hill. The loudspeaker yelled at them, told them they would be kicked out if they did it again. They came back making honking noises. Big kids.

"One last time. Get . . . *rrrrready*!"

The man lowered the loudspeaker and glared. There were giggles and flinches, but no one broke.

"Get . . . *set*!"

Glare. Silence. Eyes. Loudspeaker. Wait. Wait. You could almost hear the eggs. David's toes tightened, and suddenly a boy was lurching down the hill, head over heels. He came trudging back up, yelling at the loudspeaker, flinging his arm. "They pushed me! It doesn't count!" He grabbed another big kid and heaved him down the hill. "That's what they did!" Little kids shrieked with delight.

Somebody pushed another big kid. The kid went lurching, his legs wheeling as if on ice – *as if on*

a wet floor – and for a moment David felt his heart stop. That was how his mother died – from a slip.

Another kid popped out of the egg-hunt line, and another. The line was no longer a line, but a smear – surging and howling, "Eggs! Eggs!" The boldest of the little kids breaking away now, and the first kid yelling, "I can see 'em!" and the landslide was on, an avalanche of kids, the loudspeaker bleating in vain: "Stop! Stop!"

Alone at the top, David screamed, "Hey! Didn't you ever hear of rules? Hey!"

David had always been a pretty law-abiding kid, but ever since April 29th of last year, he had become a stickler for rules (except his grandmother's).

And so, as the fastest kids were already plucking eggs from the grass, David remained at the top of the hill, calling, "Hey! . . . Hey!"

And now the loudspeaker was aiming right at him and the voice was booming, "Young man! Go! Now!"

And down he went.

4

Eggs everywhere! Sky blue. Pink. Yellow. Lilac. Pastel treasures in a shaggy grass pie.

There were too many. He wanted them all. He wanted piles. He wanted armloads. He could not aim his attention at only one. He could not pick out the first.

Meanwhile, eggs were disappearing. Hands, as if triggered by his eyes, were snatching them as fast as he could spot them. There was a pink one! Gone. Over there! Gone. There! Gone. David was already breaking the Prime Rule of Easter Egg Hunting:

Be quick.