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opening extract from

My Brother's Hot Cross Bottom

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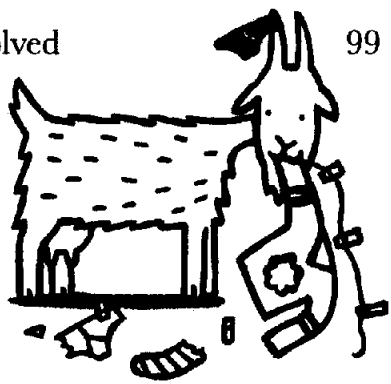
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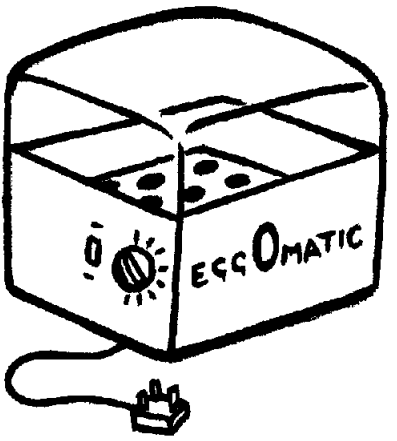
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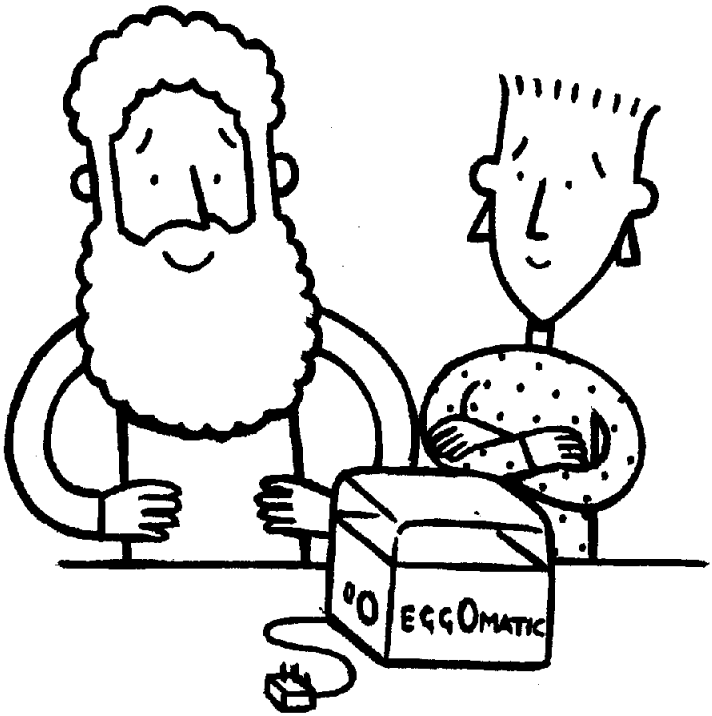


1. Inky Potatoes

'What on earth is it?' asked Mum, wrinkling her nose as she stared at the box. She always does that when she's puzzled by something and thinking hard. I don't see why wrinkling your nose helps. I've tried it at school when we have maths but it doesn't work.

Mum bent forward and peered at the big, plastic container. The bottom half was white, the top half clear. On the side was a dial and a switch. An electric plug hung off one corner like a bedraggled tail.





Dad stood there, hands on his hips, grinning with excitement. 'Isn't it great?'

'I don't know,' said Mum, 'because you haven't answered my question yet. What is it?'

'Have a guess,' Dad prompted.

Mum rolled her eyes and sighed. 'It's a box, Ron,' she said flatly. Dad's grin began to fade.

'Of course it's a box. Anyone can see it's a box, but what do you think it does?'

'It makes me cross,' Mum shot back. 'That's what it does.'

Dad's grin vanished. 'What do you mean? How can a box make you cross, for heaven's sake?'

'Because I don't know what it does, Ron, and I want you to tell me and stop asking me to guess when I haven't the faintest clue and if you don't tell me very, VERY soon I shall run away from home and join a circus. Anything for a quiet life.'

Dad looked at me helplessly. Mum wasn't going to play along with his little game so now he wanted me to have a go instead.

'Nicholas? What do you reckon?'

I shrugged. 'Think I'll join Mum at the circus.'

Dad turned to the twins, Cheese and Tomato. If you are wondering why my four-year-old brother and sister are called Cheese and Tomato it's because they were born in the back of a pizza delivery van.

They were! Our car broke down on the way to hospital and Mum climbed in the back of the pizza van. By the time she finally reached the hospital the twins had already been born. Their real names are James and Rebecca, but Dad thought it would be fun to call them Cheese and Tomato and the names have stuck.

Now Dad wanted the twins to guess what the box was. Cheese pulled the plug-in tail.

'Elephant,' he said, and Tomato jumped up and down with laughter. I could tell from her face that she was trying to think of something as silly as possible so as to outdo her brother.

'Sausage-car-bird!' she yelled, pulling her brother on to the floor, where they rolled about in hysterics, repeating their nonsense in as many ways as they could think of. 'Elephant-sausage!'

'Sock-bird-banana!'

At least that was an interesting change but Dad was not amused.

'Sometimes I wonder why I bother with you



lot. What's wrong with this family?'

'Their father, probably,' smiled Mum, smoothing Dad's hair with one hand, as if he were a small child. 'Tell us what it is, Ron,' she suggested. 'Then we can all get on with our lives.'

'You're no fun at all, any of you,' grumbled Dad. 'OK, it's an incubator.'

Now my nose really did wrinkle. 'A what-a-bator?'

'In-cu-ba-tor.'

'But what does it *do*, Dad?'

'Ah,' he began, and his excited grin came bouncing back. 'That's my brilliant idea, you see.

It's for chickens. It's a bit like a sunbed.'

'Since when have chickens needed a sunbed?' asked Mum. 'Do they want a suntan? Most of them are brown already. You'll have them strutting about the garden in dark glasses next.'

'I said it was LIKE a sunbed!' yelled Dad. 'And you don't put *chickens* in there, you dopey doodle, it's for their eggs.'

'Eggs need a suntan?' Mum asked, winding up Dad even more.

'NO! OF COURSE NOT! The box keeps the eggs warm until little fluffy yellow chicks hatch out, going cheep cheepy-cheep, and guess what? We shall have more egg-laying hens. Plus, it will be Easter in a few weeks and lots of people will see the chicks and they'll probably want some for themselves and I can sell off the ones we don't want. Now, am I brilliant or what?'

Mum was desperately pressing her lips together to stop herself bursting into giggles. 'I think you're probably more *what?* than brilliant.'

'Thank you for your support,' growled Dad. 'Huh, I go to all this trouble and you just make fun of me.'

Mum slipped an arm through Dad's. 'There, there. We all love you really,' she smiled. Dad grunted.

I guess I should explain that our back garden is like a mini-farm. We grow lots of vegetables and we now have eight chickens. The first five we got were the cockerel – he's called Captain Birdseye – and four hens, Mavis Moppet, Beaky, Leaky and Poop. Last month we got three new hens, Big Betty, Fusspot and Duvet (who is obviously VERY fluffy), but Poop has always been Cheese's favourite. Tomato loves her too because Poop likes to follow them everywhere.



'Inky-tater,' said Cheese. 'Poop can get a suntan.'

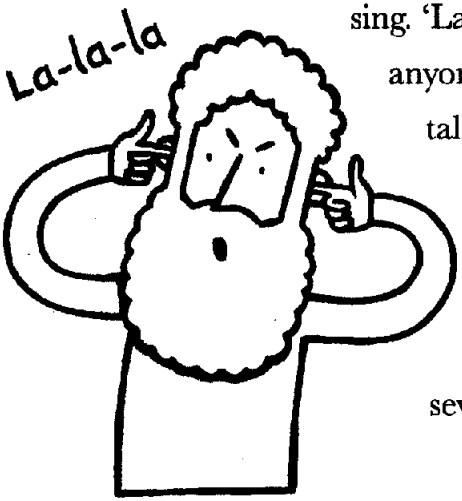
'No,' said Dad. 'You cannot put your pet chicken in here, Tomato. It's for eggs. And it's an incubator, not an inky potato.'

'Can Poop have sunglasses, Daddy?' Tomato pleaded. (She's got some big red ones that she loves.)

Dad groaned and eyed Mum. 'See what you've started?'

Mum smiled back at him. 'Well? Can Tomato's chicken have sunglasses?'

Dad stuck his fingers in his ears and started to sing. 'La-la-la, I can't hear anyone. La-la-la, you're all talking nonsense.'



I took the lid off the box and peered inside. A plastic foam lining covered several rows of heating

elements. The lining had lots of egg-shaped hollows in it, enough for thirty eggs.

'Not all the eggs will hatch,' Dad explained. 'But we should have a pretty good success rate. I thought we could take the chicks down to the Easter Fair at your school, Nicholas. Children will love holding them and we can raise money for the new library.'

'Cool,' I said. 'I'll tell Mrs Morgan in class on Monday.'

'Now you're beginning to talk sense,' Mum admitted.

'I always talk sense,' said Dad. 'And don't raise your eyebrows at me like that and you can stop laughing. You too, Nicholas. I expect some support from my eldest son.' Then he strode off in a huff.

He won't be grumpy for long. My dad's not like that. He's always cracking jokes and being daft. He's a bit embarrassing at times but he's great!