

Egg

Her mother said he loved animals more than anything. That if it was a choice between an animal and a human lying down dead, he would look to the animal first. Guaranteed.

It always left Meg silent, that statement.

Eventually, her mother would say ‘snap out of it’ and Meg would drag herself away from her fantasy of lying on cold concrete next to a bird or a rabbit, closing her eyes and waiting to see who her father would save.

But she never tested him. It seemed like a waste of time. He would catch the overnight bus and arrive in the morning with a beard and a bag. He would take her to the museum or the Tall Ship and they would sit on benches. She liked it when he performed animal calls and attracted the attention of seagulls, dogs and passers by. ‘God, what a mess it all is,’ her mother would say. He didn’t sleep in the house. He stayed at her mother’s sister’s on the blow-up mattress.

When Meg was eight she asked if she could visit her father. Her mother said ‘I’m not sure Meg. He doesn’t cope with a crowded house.’ But Meg persisted; keen to touch the bones and feathers her father said he kept in a chest. There were phone calls and her mother’s words, ‘A trial, Kevin. Tell me if it’s too much and I’ll come straight away.’ A pause. Then, ‘I think you’ll be fine. I think you should try.’

Meg was excited. Her father lived near the petting zoo he helped at and she wondered if he took animals home with him; if there would be a sheep in his bed or a duck in his bath. ‘Be patient with him. Don’t annoy him,’ said her mother and took her to the train station where her father was waiting. He slept for most of the journey and Meg thought he looked the same, but messier, checked for hay in his hair and sniffed his jumper for zoo smells.

‘Caw, caw,’ she whispered, close to his face.

In London, on a street full of shops her father said, ‘We’re here.’

‘But where is the petting zoo?’

‘Round the corner.’ He pushed on a heavy door. ‘You’ll see it tomorrow.’

‘But where *is* it?’ Meg said.

‘Behind those buildings. You’d be surprised what fits in here.’

Meg was surprised.

While he opened cans in the kitchen she stood on a small table and looked out of the window. She saw blocks of flats, shops, street lights and a billboard that flipped its pictures. She heard the braying of motorbikes and lorries but no zoo noises. The sky was dark. Turning around, Meg surveyed her father’s room: a pile of yellow magazines, a lamp, a television, a couch, a blanket and a piece of thin scarf pinned to one wall. There was no chest of bones and feathers. She wasn’t sure if she liked this flat.

Her father’s lips were orange from the tomato sauce. He bent over his bowl.

‘You’ll have to come to the zoo with me tomorrow,’ he said. He pierced three ravioli pieces onto his fork and put them in his mouth.

Meg pierced two ravioli pieces and nodded. They ate in silence. Meg leaned back on the sofa between mouthfuls, chewing and thinking. Her father sucked sauce from his fingers.

‘How’s school?’ he asked.

‘Fine. I got a green sticker.’

‘Good.’

‘It was for naughtiness.’

‘Oh.’ He wiped his plate with buttered bread.

‘Have you seen a dead animal?’ Meg asked.

Her father put the bowls one on top of the other. ‘Not for a while.’

He left the room and Meg heard him moving about in the kitchen.

‘What did it look like?’

Her father didn’t answer.

He watched television. Meg explored. There was a cupboard of mud – boots, trainers, buckets, tough fabric bags. A plastic box of medicines. A wardrobe with clothes and belts. Meg pulled at a tie and watched it flop to the floor. She dragged it beside her as she walked, saying, ‘Come on pony. Time for your chocolate milk.’ Eventually she sat beside her father on the sofa, drew in her knees, put the soles of her feet together so her legs made a diamond and watched television too. Once, she said

‘Cockadoodledo!’ thinking her father might join in but he didn’t. He just looked at her and rubbed his fingers on his beard a few times.

‘I go to bed now,’ Meg said at ten o’clock when she knew, at home, she’d have been asleep already.

‘I’m tired too,’ her father said. ‘What do you do for bed?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Do you have a story?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you bring one?’

‘No.’

Meg got off the sofa and looked in her wash bag for her toothbrush.

On a thin mattress rolled out next to the sofa, she kicked her feet against the duvet.

‘Will you be comfortable?’ he said.

Meg looked at the whiskers in his eyebrows. ‘Can you tell me a story?’

‘What about?’

‘A poor dying animal.’

‘That’s not a bedtime story.’

‘Mum says you like animals more than people.’

He laughed. The telephone rang.

‘Hello,’ Meg’s father said. ‘Hi.’ He looked at Meg.

She tucked the covers around her shoulders and listened.

‘Yes, she’s fine. Yep. No problems. No, I knew that. She put herself to bed really. She’s asleep.’

He looked at Meg. Meg looked back.

‘I’ll manage. Will do. Bye.’ He put the phone down.

‘That was your mother.’

Meg nodded.

‘She wanted to know if you were in bed. And if you were settled in all right. She said to phone her tomorrow. You didn’t want to –?’

‘It’s okay.’

‘Right, bed.’

He switched off the light. Meg hoped the next day would be more like their other days.

In the morning they dressed for the zoo.

‘Where are your boots?’ her father said as he tied the laces of his own.

‘I don’t have any. Only these.’ She pointed to her trainers.

‘You’ll ruin them.’

He made her stand in plastic bags which he sellotaped to her ankles.

‘What about your coat?’

‘What about it?’

‘Is it warm enough?’

‘I think so.’

‘You’ve had breakfast?’

Meg nodded. ‘Can I speak to mum?’

‘Meg, oh, Meg, sorry. I can’t be late.’

He locked the door and they started down the steps. Then he turned and ran to the door, unlocked it, pushed it hard and stepped inside. Meg waited. The door swung back in its frame and clicked shut. She heard her father’s footsteps. Then he was back through the door, locking it and passing her on the stairs.

‘Money! What’s a man to do without money?’

He forgot one more thing and Meg waited while he unlocked and locked the door all over again.

It was a flat, cold morning. They crossed the street at the pelican crossing and turned left onto the road with buses, cars and motorbikes. Meg watched her strange feet as she kept up with her father’s long strides.

And then she saw the petting zoo. Her father took his hands from his pockets and walked faster.

Inside, it stank. A hall, a classroom, an office. Dried mud on the tiles. Meg followed her father. He walked into the classroom, his hard boots making hard noises on the floor.

‘Alright Tony!’

A man with a woollen hat said, ‘Kevin, you’re down for the schools’ talk this morning. Who’s this?’

‘My progeny. Say hello, Meg.’

‘Hello.’

‘Off you go! Entertain yourself.’

‘That’s not a good idea, Kevin.’

‘What?’

‘Health and Safety. You can’t let her out without supervision.’

‘Oh yeah. Meg, wait there. I’ll take you outside later.’

Meg stood by the doors and looked out at a courtyard with stables, pens, sheds and a cobbled path that led to a gate and a hedge. She saw hens pecking at grass between slabs of paving stone, saw a wheelbarrow and a block of hay inside the door of a shed.

Her father was saying, ‘yes’ and ‘sure’ and ‘I’ll do that first.’ He nodded his head as the other man spoke.

‘Dad.’

‘What?’

‘You said there’d be cows.’

‘In the field!’

‘Can I look?’

‘In a minute. You can tag along with the school.’

The man called Tony continued speaking.

Then Meg heard children’s voices, high and cluttered like echoes in a cave, and she saw a queue of kids outside the door. They filed into the classroom, removing hats and gloves and scraping seats against the floor as they sat. Meg stayed by the window until she saw her father pointing to a seat at the back. Some of the kids made animal sounds. A few stared at her. Most ignored her. Then the room was quiet as Meg’s father walked to the front and placed a box gently on a table. There was not a sound as he put his hands inside the box and scooped out a chick. Some children said ‘ah’.

‘A baby Sussex hen.’

He spoke to the schoolchildren like he spoke to her on the benches in Glasgow when they had the whole day with each other; his voice soft and interesting, his eyes intent.

‘A Sussex hen is a docile bird. It has short legs and strong thighs and lays around 260 eggs a year. A very good layer.’

One boy got to hold the chick. The other children stood up to get a better look.

Meg presumed her father would take her round the petting zoo, on her own, when the children had gone.

Outside, her father's arms billowed like sheets on a line as he talked. He paced the cobbled courtyard. The children laughed at him. He made animal noises and asked the children to guess how much a cow ate in a day, asked who liked milk, checked the labels of the kids' jumpers and told them about the manufacture of wool. He pecked his head as they walked to the hen house.

'He's my father,' Meg said to a girl next to her.

'He's a loony,' the girl said.

It was a fusty squeeze to get everyone in but they managed.

Her father said, 'Meg, let the little girl stand in front of you.'

Meg stepped back. She wondered if her father preferred schoolchildren to her.

'Now,' her father said. 'Who's going to look for eggs?'

'I'm hungry dad,' Meg said and her father looked surprised. Some children turned to stare at her.

'Who's going to hunt for eggs?' her father said again and chose a girl with plaits.

The straw rustled as the girl trod delicately, looking for eggs.

'Try on the slats over there,' her father said.

She found one. The children gasped. The girl gave the egg to Meg's father and he held it in his hand like a stone. Then he put it in the pocket of his duffle coat.

'Can I go now please?' Meg said.

Her father said, 'Any more for any more?'

The girl found another egg and when she gave it to her father he pretended to drop it, let it fall from one hand to the other, and the children laughed. He looked at Meg as he put the egg in his pocket. A black-eyed glare. As the others left, Meg touched her fingertips to the wood of the wall and waited. She didn't follow.

There was a soft quiet inside the hen house. Lines of pale light shone through the slatted walls. Meg looked at the plastic bags on her feet and kicked up some straw. She thought about her father telling stories to the schoolchildren and wondered why he hadn't told her any. She sat down, careful not to sit in any shit. A hen pecked at the floor by the door then turned and went back outside into the light. There were no hens inside. Only feathers. Meg thought about looking for eggs but decided the girl with the plaits had probably found them all. So she settled on collecting feathers. She searched for them in the hay, found patches of soft tiny arse feathers and scooped them up in her fingers, picked up elegant quills, blew sawdust from them, ran her fingers along their edges – brown, cream, white, red, leaf colours. She put them in a

pile and the pile looked like an explosion. She imagined a farmer's gun, squawking, the scrabbling of milky feet, thought about a snapped, bare neck and plucked feathers falling to the floor.

That's what gave her the idea.

Sounds of the schoolchildren were getting louder like a herd of sheep, a swarm of bees, a box of pups. Meg shaped her pile of feathers, lay down, then closed her eyes and felt cold slink into her body.

The man with the woollen hat found her. 'Christ!' he said and grabbed at her shoulders, put his panicked face close to hers. 'What happened?'

Meg felt her hair heavy with dirt. Her head was dizzy.

'I found a dead hen.'

'Where?'

'There.'

He swept his fingers through the pile of feathers.

'There?'

'I thought. . .'

'You crazy girl.'

She stood up and wondered how her father hadn't seen her.

They walked to the classroom.

'What are you doing out of school anyway?' the man said.

'I'm on my holidays.' The classroom was empty.

'Must be different in Scotland.'

'Aye.'

Meg sat down and shut up.

Her father returned dragging a tree branch.

'Like father like daughter,' the man said. 'What are you doing with that?'

'Found it in the field. The horse can use it to scratch its back.'

'See to your kid first! It's irresponsible to leave her Kevin!'

They didn't speak while they walked to the flat. Meg's father kept his muddy boots on as he picked up the phone. He shook his head. 'Debbie, it's no good. You said to ring. It's no good. Phone back, will you?'

Meg sat on the doormat unpicking the sellotape from around her ankles.

‘I can’t,’ she said.

Her father sat next to her and cut through the hard loops with scissors.

‘Why did you play up at the zoo?’ he asked.

Meg said she didn’t know why.

‘What’s got into you?’

Meg said she didn’t know.

Her father sighed, stood up and put a pan of water under the tap.

‘You don’t deserve eggs. I should have given them to the schoolchildren.’

Meg leaned against a cupboard in the kitchen and watched her father take the eggs from his duffel coat pocket and place them into the pan. He lit the stove then took his boots off and his socks made footprints on the floor. Meg stared at his footprints and wished she was back in the hen house.

The boiling eggs tapped against the sides of the pan. Her father put slices of bread into the toaster and waited with butter on a knife. It was a noisy sound, the scraping of butter onto the toast and the rattling of the eggs.

When they were ready he put the saucepan into the sink and turned on the cold tap, put the eggs in egg cups.

Meg paused.

‘Can I have mine in a cup?’

Her father frowned. ‘This is an egg-cup,’ he said.

‘No, a mug,’ Meg said.

‘Why?’

‘Because that’s how I have it.’

‘A boiled egg in a cup?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘I remember.’ He might have smiled. ‘Show me.’

At the table, Meg chapped her egg against her plate and picked at the shell. Her fingers hopped about the hot egg. Her father helped and peeled his own egg too.

Meg put them in the cup.

‘What next?’

‘We mash.’

Meg dug the prongs of a fork into the eggs.

‘What next?’ her father said.

‘Butter.’

A knife's side of butter went in. Meg mashed.

'What next?'

'Salt.'

Her father sprinkled salt into the cup.

Meg mashed.

When she was finished her father said 'Let me see' and peered into the cup. 'Egg in a cup,' he said. 'Your mum used to make that. Egg in a cup.'

Meg smiled. 'Did she make it for you?'

'She made it for herself, mostly, on Saturdays.'

They balanced mashed egg on their knives then spread it onto the toast.

'Now we eat it,' Meg said and they ate in silence except for Meg's father saying 'mmm' and Meg joining in. They each said 'mmm' until they'd finished their toast.

'Truly delicious.'

'Truly delicious.'

Meg's father didn't go back to work. He read a yellow magazine and gave one to Meg. She looked at pictures of a jungle.

'Are we not going back to the farm?' she said.

'I only do mornings. They don't need me for the afternoons.'

'Why?'

'That's just the way it is.'

'What do you do in the afternoons?'

'Same as what I'm doing now.'

Meg liked the sound of the two of them reading magazines. She liked licking a finger and turning the pages. She thought her father liked it too.

So, it was a surprise when the telephone rang and her father answered and looked at her and said, 'Thanks for phoning back. We've had a busy day. She's here. Things are better now. I don't know. No, it's not been too bad, but I just feel as if, I don't know what to do for her, you know.'

He passed the phone to Meg. 'It's your mother.'

Meg's mother said, 'Margaret, it's me. Your dad said you're not settling in very well.'

Meg said nothing. She didn't look at her father; kept her eyes on a picture of a parrot instead.

‘Do you want to come home?’

Now she did look at her father whose mouth was closed, whose eyes were blinking, who wasn’t looking at her. She thought she knew what he wanted her to say.

‘Yes,’ she said and saw the tiny nod of his head.