

The Noise, and After the Noise, the Calm

The noise first. Constant, insistent, composed of how many single intermittent fragments, like mosaic, Kate thinks, one of those pictures that from a distance seem to be made of a single color, that only reveal themselves close up. Each single tile a slightly different shade of blue, or green, depending on the scene. The noise, as she crosses the yard, and then the stench. Or maybe the other way round; she can never
5 decide. You can't have one without the other, she supposes, cautiously pushing open the door. She's cautious because she surprised a rat once, where they keep the feed, darting down beneath the sacks. Since then, she's entered the room with her heart in her mouth. Sometimes, before the fluorescent lights come fully on, she imagines she sees the tail for a second before it disappears, pink and hard like those sticks of skin-colored liquorice she used to sell in the shop, the ones that stretch and then snap.

10 She opens the second door, leading into the long shed, and holds her breath, although she knows it does no good; she'll have to breathe in sooner or later. Victor has rigged up a sort of wooden trolley, with shelves on it, and trays on the shelves, that she can push along the aisles like a pram. She knows she ought to wait for Robin to get home from school. It's his job to collect the afternoon eggs, Victor has told them both a thousand times, with Robin sulking and Kate herself biting her tongue. She doesn't want to think
15 about last night.

She's been here on and off all day, collecting, cleaning, buffing the eggs clean with a cloth, grading and arranging them in the trays, humming along to *Music While You Work*¹, wondering what she'll say to Robin about the condom she found in his bed this morning. Pushing the trolley before her, she picks up the eggs from the rack at the front of each cage and sits them in the tray. When the tray is filled, she moves it down
20 to the lower shelf and starts again. Some of the eggs are streaked with blood; others have soft shells, which makes them useless except for cooking at home. They eat so many eggs, she'd never imagined she would find all these uses for them. I wonder if they're doing us any harm, she thinks, she's heard that too many eggs can clog the blood; at the same time she's planning a cake. How odd the mind is, her hand movements automatic by now, that it can do two things at once, as though it weren't one at all, but divided, or
25 doubled. Like a two-yolked egg. It must be like this when people go mad. She's trying not to look into the cages and almost succeeds, except that some movement catches her eye every now and again and there the bird is, staring out at her, always the same bird, it seems to her, with the same blank stare that won't let her be. She used to apologize under her breath: I'm sorry, she'd say, it's not my fault, and the hen would turn away sometimes, as if her apology were enough, or not, and she would feel sad for hours. She'll
30 confront Robin with it, she decides. There's no other way. She can hardly ask Victor after the scene at the tea table yesterday.

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Robin's dragging his satchel through the dirt of the yard. He hasn't raised his head since he came through the gate. If he had done he'd have seen her, standing behind the glass door, holding the thing between

¹ *Music While You Work*: former British radio programme

35 finger and thumb. It's limp, empty, thank God. If it had been, well, *used*, she shudders to think what she'd have done. Is he even old enough for it to be used, she asks herself. How old do boys have to be? He's 12. Is that old enough? She'd hidden the condom at first, in an envelope from Victor's desk, but then changed her mind, and slipped it into a pocket in her bag. She'd reached in for something else and found it, soft and clingy, like skin, and pulled her hand out sharp, forgetting.

40 She watches him cross the lawn. She hates to see him like this, so listless, beaten down. She loved school, she can't understand why he doesn't. She's tempted just to put the thing away somewhere, say nothing, but she knows this is her only chance. If only she were Victor, she thinks. This isn't a mother's job. She opens the door and waits for him to lift his eyes to look at her. When he does, sullen, resentful, she holds the thing up.

'Do you know what this is?' she says, her voice higher-pitched than she'd expected.

45 He looks startled. His face sets hard again. 'Yes.'

'Do you know where it was?'

He shakes his head.

'It was in your bed.' she says. She's found her tone now. Steady, detached.

He shrugs.

50 'What do you have to say about it?'

He shrugs again, then puts his satchel on his shoulder as if he's about to walk off.

'Do you know what it is?' Because perhaps he doesn't, she thinks. Perhaps he is still my little boy after all.

He smirks. 'Of course I do.'

55 'Where did you get it?' she says, despairing.

'Dad's wardrobe,' he says, and smirks again, then walks towards the door, and her, as though the conversation were over and she had been dismissed.

60 She steps to one side. 'You haven't heard the last of this,' she says, half-heartedly. She watches him disappear into the kitchen, his walk a little jauntier than before. He knows he's won, she thinks. We both know it. But is that what it is? A war?

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The row had happened at tea. She'd made a salad with the pork left over from the Sunday roast, sliced eggs, tomatoes from the neighbor's greenhouse, cucumber, lettuce. Victor was home unusually early and the three of them ate together in the kitchen. Victor told them about his day, she listened, while Robin picked at his food and she tried not to notice. When she and Victor had finished and she was about to clear the plates away, Victor asked Robin why he hadn't eaten the egg. Robin didn't answer. His father asked him again.

'I don't like eggs,' Robin Said.

'That's no excuse for leaving good food on your plate.'

'They make me feel sick.'

70 'Well, this is a novelty,' said Victor, his tone thick with sarcasm. 'Since when have you had such a delicate stomach?'

She reached across to take Robin's plate, but Victor caught her wrist.

'I thought it was Robin's job to clear the table?'

She sat down again.

75 Victor looked at her, exasperated. 'Did he collect the eggs after school, as we agreed?'
Before she could answer, or decide what to answer, Robin spoke.
'I'm not going into that place again. Ever.'
'That place?'
'It's a torture chamber,' said Robin. His voice broke.
80 'Is it?'
'I'm never eating eggs again,' Robin said. 'Not while they come from that concentration camp.'
Victor flushed. 'That's very humane of you.'
'He doesn't mean it,' said Kate.
'I do,' said Robin, with a flare of anger.
85 'Well, perhaps you'd like to do without shoes as well,' said Victor. 'And clothes. And books. All those
books you expect us to buy for you so that you can lie around doing nothing all weekend.'
Robin stared at his father.
'Perhaps you'd like us to live in a slum.'
'I'd rather live in a slum than a cage,' said Robin, in a low voice.
90 Victor stood up. 'I've had enough of this.' He looked at Kate. 'Perhaps you can talk some sense into him
before I lose my temper. How the hell does he think we live?'
'It's the noise they make,' Kate said quietly. 'You can hardly hear yourself think when you're in there.'
'Oh, so you're on his side too, are you?' Victor snorted. 'I might have known.'
'I just think maybe we expect too much from him sometimes. He's only a child.'
95 'I can assure you,' said Victor, in his professional voice, 'that I expect less every day.' He picked up
Robin's plate. Kate expected him to fling it across the room, and realized, surprised, that she didn't care if
he did. 'My father would have given me this plate every mealtime until it was cleaned up. You're lucky I'm
not my father.' He put the plate down with a bang. Kate jumped. When he left the room, she sat there,
looking at the wall. She felt she'd been skinned, every pore of her flinched. She couldn't bear the thought
100 of being touched by anyone, Victor least of all. He was right, she knew that, but being right wasn't enough.
Perhaps it never is, she thought. She said nothing when Robin scraped the uneaten egg into the bin and put
the three empty plates into the sink. He stood beside her for a moment, as if waiting to be thanked, then
walked away.

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105 She thinks about this now. She hears herself saying, he's only a boy. And then he must have gone upstairs
and stolen the condom from Victor's wardrobe, and taken it to bed with him. To do what, she wonders.
Unless he already had it, squirrelled away somewhere. Perhaps he'd sneaked into their bedroom over the
weekend, when Victor was cleaning the hen house and she was cooking, or cleaning the eggs. He is only a
boy, she thinks, but the truth is that she doesn't know what she thinks. She's about to follow him upstairs,
beard him in his lair, suddenly angry at how *incomplete* their conversation was, but what else does she
110 have to say? All she has are questions she dare not ask. What she ought to do is tell him he'll be in trouble
with his father if he doesn't collect the afternoon's eggs. But she can't do that, not while she's half
convinced he's right. The words 'concentration camp' have been with her all day, like the eyes of the hen,
the one hen, following her every move.

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115 The first time she saw a hen die was at Victor's hands. The bird had been attacked by the other birds. She'd tried not to notice it, turning her eyes away from the bloodied heap of feathers at the back of the cage, but it was still there the next time she came round with her trolley, a greyish-yellow leg sticking out horribly to one side. She showed Victor when he got back from work, watched him reach into the cage and pull the bird out by a wing. Not here, she wanted to say, not in front of the others, but he'd wrung its neck before she had a chance. She'd imagined wringing a chicken's neck would involve a twist, but he'd tugged so hard she'd thought the head would come off in his hand.

120 Later, after he'd plucked it, he pushed his fingers into the bird and pulled its innards out. He showed her the ovary, with its seemingly endless tangled necklace of already-formed yolks, diminishing in size to pinheads, so vividly orange she wondered later where the color went. The heart of every egg the hen would ever lay, coiled and waiting; such brightness, she thought, such life, the chain of life. And here we are, its keepers, because without life we would die. And life equals money. And you can't have one without the other. This is what Victor would say, and he's right. She can't afford to be sentimental. But she can see it now, each glistening bead of yolk so perfectly separate from the rest. Standing in the kitchen, she whispers to herself, my darling, my darling Robin, I love you so much. She has tears in her eyes, as if he were still a part of her and she could feel him being torn away. The condom is cold and damp-feeling in her hand. She slips it into her apron pocket and goes upstairs.

130 She can't find him at first. She looks in his room and then, more cautiously, in theirs, half-expecting half-dreading to find the wardrobe door open. She's on her way down the stairs when she sees him through the landing window. He's in the garden, facing the wall of the henhouse. For a moment, she wonders who he is, he looks so small and angry down there, alone. She hardly recognizes him. Then he bends over and picks something up and she sees an egg tray in the grass at his feet. He raises his hand and flings whatever he is holding in his odd ungainly way towards the wall. Her hand flies to her mouth.

135 He doesn't see her as she walks round the corner of the wall towards him, not until she's almost next to him. He stops what he's doing. She bends, as she saw him bend, and takes an egg from the tray. It is soft and still warm, like a small, soft bag, a purse perhaps; she can see the dark patch of the yolk through the semi-opaque yielding shell. The whole of it moves between her fingers as she turns, her son beside her, and throws the egg, with all her strength, towards the wall.

(2015)