

Incidents on a Sunday Afternoon

An ostrich egg is the size of a softball. Larger, actually. Closer to the size of a bowling ball. I received one from a friend who knew a guy who owned an ostrich farm. Why a man owned ostriches in the Midwest, I don't know. Buffalo burgers, maybe. Ostrich eggs? I had to try one.

I planned to open it Sunday, after church. It would be the highlight of my weekend. Somehow, no matter how busy Lindsey and I are during the week, come Sunday afternoon, we sit on the couch staring at each other like senile grandparents, bored as spit. Most Sundays we stop by her parents' house just to have some company. We could have watched TV at home, I guess, but it felt less desperate in the company of others. Plus, her dad and I talked choppers while Lindsey and her mom washed dinner dishes.

This particular Sunday, her parents were out of town. We planned to pick them up at the airport that night at five, but that left us a whole afternoon to ourselves, trying to decide what we wanted to do when nothing sounded entertaining.

God bless the ostrich egg.

After a mostly pleasant lunch at Applebee's, we returned home. My wife, five months pregnant, has largely avoided the legendary pickle and salt fetish, but she *must* eat her meals, substantial ones, or she gets cranky. It's best to take the whole question of what to cook out of her hands whenever possible. My new best friend, Applebee's.

Now, my wife showed little interest in the ostrich egg. I could not understand this. How could you not be *fascinated* by the thing? The size! The texture! The idea of a bird laying it! But, no, she meant to walk our pug, Napoleon, and read a book by the author who wrote everything she read.

I did not want to crack the egg. Sure, that'd be the easy way to go about cooking a half-pound omelet, but I wanted to keep the shell intact. I knew you could drain the yoke and keep the hollowed shell. I didn't know what I'd do with it, but the idea of painting a face on it and adding it to our small but growing collection of Christmas ornaments enticed me.

Lindsey frowned when I set my toolbox on the kitchen counter next to the egg. "Do you need *all* of that in here?"

I explained that while, technically, I did not, it's always better to be over-prepared. I keep matches, a can of SPAM, and an unopened poncho in my glove compartment.

"Be careful, okay, honey?"

I didn't know what she meant to imply. It was only an egg, if a gloriously, marvelously large and well-formed egg. I was a man, with opposable thumbs and a craving for something scrambled.

I studied the egg. I held it in my hands, felt its weight. I reenacted (while my wife wasn't watching) the opening scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, switching the egg with an appropriately weighted sack of flour. I considered lining our plastic cups on the kitchen floor and trying for a strike, but thought better of it. Lindsey would make me wash all the cups.

"Honey?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Napoleon's pacing."

I waited for more. Likely the dog was pacing because she just realized she was named after a man — no, a *French madman*. "She's probably plotting world domination."

"I think she's going to have her puppies."

"She's not going to have her puppies."

"Eric, you need to look at this. I think she's going to have her puppies."

The egg sat on the kitchen counter, unblemished. I sighed and walked to the living room. There she was, the great French commander with great googly eyes, crossing and recrossing a patch of carpet relentlessly. She was very fat, a belly with feet, but quite intent as she walked. Maybe she really *was* plotting something.

"She's fine. She's just restless."

"I really think she's going to have her puppies." She paused. I could tell she was worried but trying not to appear irrational. "Should we call a vet or something?"

"It's fine. She's not having her puppies. Dogs don't just drop them as they're walking about, now, do they? Elephants do that, but not dogs." I made up that last part. I have no idea how elephants give birth. I don't care to know. But it gave my argument more support.

Back to the egg. I looked over my tools. Yes, the electric drill. Very good. I inserted the proper head, placed it firmly against the top of the egg. My younger sister, when she

was young, once dissected a banana with old dental tools, determining conclusively that bananas were made of mucus. Somehow — I knew not how — she had grown into a senior in high school. I thought of her now and the intense concentration with which she had prodded that banana. I understood. I pressed the drill button.

Ten minutes later I returned from the garage with the battery charger. Brushing off the cobwebs, I placed it on the counter beside the untouched egg and attached the dead drill battery. Nothing to be done but to wait. I'd give it fifteen minutes to charge and try again.

The phone rang. "Get that, will you?" my wife called. I prepared myself to hang up if someone didn't respond in the first half-second. I was too polite to hang up on a telemarketer once he spoke. I had once spent half an hour on a Friday night refusing to accept a free satellite dish while Lindsey waited impatiently to unpause the latest Hugh Grant movie we had rented.

"Hello?" I said.

Static buzzed on the other end of the line.

"Hello?"

I heard something like words. I hung up.

"Who was it, Eric?"

"No one."

Again, I held the drill over the egg.

Ring!

"Eric?"

"I'll get it, I'll get it."

Ring!

I leaned against the drill, pressed the button. The egg rolled out from under it, sliding across the table.

"Eric!"

"Just a second!"

Ring!

The egg fell off the table and jammed my middle finger when I dived to catch it. I didn't even stop as I rushed for the phone. Lindsey was in the doorway now, her arms crossed. Sometimes, she looks adorable when she is angry. Right then, not so much.

Click. The machine picked up.

“You have reached Lindsey...”

“...and Eric...” a male voice added after a pause.

“...Hescott. We can’t make it to the phone right now.”

“A shame, really,” the male voice said.

I picked up the phone, heard static, and hung up without waiting for more.

“Why’d you do that?” Lindsey asked angrily.

“It’s just static. Some prank call probably. Don’t worry about it.”

“What if it was my parents?”

“Your parents? They’re on a plane right now, knowing it’ll be too cold for short-sleeved tropical shirts but wearing them anyway, because, who knows, winter might have passed us by during the week.”

Lindsey smiled. “Mom’ll wear her sunglasses all the way home, and she’ll complain she can’t see a thing.” She uncrossed her arms. “But get the phone next time. It could be important.”

“Of course. Honey?”

“What?”

“Do you want to hold the egg while I drill?”

She didn’t *want* to, but she did.

“How do you put up with me?” I asked.

“You’re wasting time. Drill.”

My bit broke after a few seconds. Figures. I bought 50 of the same type for \$5.00 from a guy in a tent in an empty parking lot. I bought ten tubes of caulking from the same guy, but that’s another story. A few minutes later, I had a new bit on. I told Lindsey to stop grumbling and finished the job.

“Watch this. It’ll blow your mind.”

So Lindsey waited as I rummaged around for our large mixing bowl. It was in the sink, so I rinsed it; then, under Lindsey’s scrutinizing, I washed it more slowly and dried it with a different towel than I dried my hands with.

With some ceremony, I turned the egg upside down to drain the yolk into the bowl. Nothing happened.

“What am I waiting for?” Lindsey asked.

“It’s supposed to ... come down, and ...” Despite my knowledge of *Looney Tunes*, I lifted the egg above my head and peered into the hole with one eye open. Still, nothing happened. Curious.

“Is it stuck?” she asked. I was secretly satisfied. Even she could not resist the egg’s mystique.

“I don’t know.” I yanked the junk drawer open, searching for something to fit in the hole. I found a stash of unused restaurant chopsticks. I ripped a package open and pressed the thin wood into the hole. It didn’t fit.

After a little more drilling, the chopstick slid in. Pulling it out, I saw it was covered with yellow stickiness. Maybe egg insides were made of mucus, too.

“It’s too thick.”

“Uh-huh. Good luck with that. I’m going to read, okay?” She kissed me on the cheek.

I set the egg down and pondered. Picking it up again, I covered the hole with my thumb and shook it violently. I peered in, knowing I could see nothing.

“Napoleon!” Lindsey’s voice drifted in from the living room.

I stuck the chopstick back in the hole and stirred the inside violently. I had to break the yolk.

“Napoleon! Eric, do you see Napoleon in there?”

“No.”

I turned the egg upside down again. Nothing happened.

Lindsey gasped so loud I nearly dropped the egg. I ran to her still holding it. “What happened?” She didn’t seem hurt. I looked where she was pointing. Napoleon was in her cage and she was — ew....

“Call the vet.”

“Lindsey, it’s a dog.”

She looked at me like I had called her the Wicked Witch of the West ... and her little dog, too.

“I only mean, dogs know how to have babies. They’ve been doing it for a long time. If you want, I can go find a rabbit midwife. I think there’s one still living under the deck.”

Lindsey took my hand gently, leaned close, and whispered in my ear, “When it’s my time, honey, can we just stay here, maybe build a little nest of blankets and cushions, and let nature take its course? Just you and me?”

Sometimes, it's best not to argue.

I started to look up the vet's number when Lindsey rattled it off, forcing me to search for a pencil. I found a purple Sharpie and wrote hastily on my hand before I forgot the digits. I dialed rapidly, pulling up my sleeve to see if it was a '76□ or '67□ at the end. I put the receiver to my ear. I didn't hear any rings — I heard a voice.

"What is this? Dad, come here, listen to this. It's beeping at me."

The voice sounded familiar. "Ellen...?"

But a man's voice answered me. "Oh, hello, Eric. Just a second." Lindsey's father's voice addressed someone on the other end. "Ellen, I don't know what you're talking about. Eric's on the phone. You want to talk to him?"

"Eric?" Lindsey said anxiously. She was crouched over the cage protectively. "Is that the vet?"

"No, it's—"

"What's taking so long?"

I panicked. I hung up the phone and dialed the vet.

As it so happened, the vet was out of town to attend a daughter's wedding. The answering machine sounded as regretful for his absence as could be expected, with the daughter stationed in Hawaii.

"He's out of town?" Lindsey's voice held an edge of panic. Soon would come either shouts or tears. "Get me some hot water." I tried to control my face, but she must have caught my expression. Or maybe I didn't move fast enough. "What?"

"Hot water?" What in the blazes was she thinking?

"I don't know. It ... it sounds like something you should—" *Ring!* "Get the phone!"

"Hello?"

"Eric, is that you? Oh, thank goodness! We've had the most awful time. First Dad tries to call you on his cell phone. Worthless thing. I keep telling him to give it up. He's just not suited for those computer things. And then the beeping and getting cut off. Heavens! I thought we'd never get a hold of you. Do you know—"

"Lindsey, it's your mom. She wants to talk with you." I forced the phone into her hands and pulled her to her feet and away from Napoleon's cage. I could already hear her mom speaking on the other end. Lindsey listened, but when I tried to sneak away to my egg, her eyes pinned me.

Get back there, now, she mouthed.

I couldn't watch. I saw the beginning of a puppy birth by accident. It was enough. It was a wet, gooey, slimy thing. I looked about for something to focus on, a strand in the carpet to pick, a rubber band to wind around my fingers. I happened to look in the direction of my wife. She was glaring at me.

Clean them off, I thought.

Scared, but filled with strange urgency, I ran to the kitchen, snatched the plastic bowl off the counter, filled it with steaming water, and hurried (carefully) back to the cage. I steeled myself.

"What are you doing?" Lindsey screeched. I heard her mother respond sharply on the other side.

"I was just...." I was in middle school again, explaining why I still wore Velcro shoes. "You know, you wanted me to wash them off." She continued staring at the bowl. I dare not tell her I envisioned baptizing the puppies head first. "Hot water?"

"Sorry, mother, what were you saying?" Lindsey returned to her conversation, keeping an eye on me.

When I risked a glimpse of Napoleon, my problems were solved. Not the most pleasant thought, the taste of newborn pup on her tongue, but it did save me the effort.

Lindsey hung up the phone. "My parents are in Albuquerque."

"What?"

"Some sort of flight mix-up, or a delay or something. My mother was frantic. You know how her feet swell up when she travels."

"What does that have to do with ... with her being frantic?"

Lindsey rolled her eyes. "It's all connected. Why do you think everything remains in its own box? Look, I'll show you things are connected. I'm mad at you right now, but it's not because of whatever you thought you were doing to help the puppies." She looked at Napoleon. Her voice softened. "How's she doing? How many are there?"

There were three, and Napoleon looked resigned, a prisoner whose spirit had finally broken. More were on the way.

"Can I go...?"

Lindsey shooed me away. I took the plastic bowl with me, emptied it, and set the egg in it again. Suddenly, I knew what needed done. I called through the house, "Where's

your purse?”

Silence, followed by a hesitant, “On the counter.”

And there it was, two feet from where I stood. I opened it. (It had taken me two years of marriage to reach the point where I could hold her purse in public without laughing nervously and lifting it apologetically every time someone passed. Another year taught me that the contents, while tainted with that alien femininity that baffles Mankind, could be safely handled as long as one always washed one’s hands afterward, to erase the soft, clingy fragrance of Woman.)

I muttered to myself as I searched. “Gum, wallet, checkbook, reading glasses, ketchup packet, torn notebook paper with phone number, lipstick, fingernail clippers, toothbrush, moist towelette, this week’s church bulletin, envelope with coupon clippings, to do list ... what’s this? ‘For Eric to do around the house.’ I’ll just pocket that. Some sort of hair thing, spare keys, pepper spray, pencil, blue pen, red pen, gold sparkly pen, last week’s bulletin, aspirin, Hershey Kiss — I wonder how old that is? — chew toy, cell phone, bank statement, organ donor card...” I was nearing the bottom. “Jim Croce tape. Tape? Where does she play that? Two nickels, an arcade token ... oh, we were dating then ... ah, here’s one.”

I pulled out a plastic straw of the genus ‘bendy.’ It took a little widening of the hole, but I thrust the straw into the egg. Then I blew. It was like inflating a stiff balloon. Some yolk overflowed the hole and spilled down the side.

I laughed. It must have frightened Lindsey, because she asked if I was all right. “Fabulous!” I continued to blow as hard as I could, until I had to step back, black spots dancing in my vision. When it cleared, I saw I had a long way to go yet. Only a thin layer of yolk — it was wet, gooey, slimy stuff — covered the bottom of the bowl.

“Eric.” Lindsey’s voice drew me to her, though I did not want to leave. The look on her face aged her. It is a strange thing, that a face can take on so many shades and tints. I knelt beside her. There were six puppies now.

“Help it,” Lindsey pleaded.

I knew the one was dead. Napoleon hadn’t licked it off. I picked it up gently in my hand, shielding it, as if it were alive. Lindsey stroked its nose.

“How many do pugs usually have?” I couldn’t look at the puppy in my hand. I couldn’t speak of it.

“Two or three,” she said. “Six’s large, I think.”

I sat there for a few minutes. I didn’t know what I should do. I finally stood, deciding I needed to do *something*. To sit there, just thinking....

I didn’t know what was proper. I thought of the trash can, but horror overwhelmed me. “I’m going outside.”

I put on my coat and shoes, found a shovel, and headed out. In the corner of the yard, I dug away the snow, then, with a good deal of effort, the frozen ground. I lowered the puppy into the rough tomb. I hated covering him. Afterward, I stood around, trying to manage a prayer. It was such I might have laughed at another time, but which affected me.

I stomped the snow off my shoes and slipped them off by pressing the toe of one foot against the heel of the other. I swung my coat over the nearest chair and returned to my wife. She sat rather impassively, looking at her dog. I followed her eyes. Another puppy had been born, this one half-formed. It was a simple thing, a few curved lines, a lump of clay abandoned. Without a word, I lifted it from its place. There was a shoebox in the bathroom, in which Lindsey kept all manner of hair ties and clippies. I dumped them out. I smashed my feet back into my shoes. I grabbed the shovel without bothering with my coat. Tenderly, I unearthed the first puppy. I placed both in the box together, their little heads ear to ear. I covered them, widened the hole, and lowered the box with as much reverence as I ever felt at a funeral.

I was a little afraid of entering the house again. I had seen that Napoleon wasn’t finished. How could the eighth survive when the sixth and seventh hadn’t? And how did a pug have eight puppies? No wonder the mother had looked a miserable whale. But inside I found the eighth born and not dead. Lindsey looked at it worriedly, though, and I saw that it had trouble breathing.

“Come here,” I told her. She tried to shoo me away. “You can’t pick him up right now. Come here. I know something that will distract you.” And to the ostrich egg we went. I showed her how to blow in the straw. She laughed despite herself at the sound it made as it gurgled thickly over the edge of the hole. “Try it.” When she hesitated, I wiped the straw off with the kitchen rag.

“That’s disgusting!” she cried.

“I thought you didn’t want to do it because my lips had been on it.” For reasons I

could never comprehend, Lindsey refused to drink from the same cup I did, or use silverware I had used. Apparently, kissing didn't count.

"You don't know what's on that!"

"Dishwater and soap, probably." But I took a clean dish towel from the drawer and wiped the straw again.

We spent a long time blowing in the straw, giggling at the littlest thing like we had on our first dates. And why shouldn't we? To inspire us was the sound of the thick yolk propelled out, a sound like a Whoopee Cushion, only wetter. No one can fail to laugh at such a sound. Even God, I think, enjoys a bit of toilet humor now and then.

Lindsey wandered back to the cage sometimes. "He's breathing harder," she said, returning with the puppy in her hands.

"Come on, it's almost empty," I said, preparing for another bout with the straw.

When we could force no more out, we turned the egg upside down over the bowl. Slowly, the last of the yolk oozed out.

Lindsey had returned the puppy to the cage. Together, we prepared a massive omelet. It covered the entire pan, and with great delicacy, I began to flip the egg. Lindsey swiped the spatula out of my hand. "You're doing it wrong." Watching her, I did not admit I had been, but she did make it seem easy.

I was finishing setting the table and cutting the omelet in half when Lindsey reentered the kitchen with the puppy. I had hoped to the point of absolute belief that the puppy would recover. I even, seeing the sadness in Lindsey's eyes despite her laughter, prayed for the puppy's recovery and did not doubt that it would happen exactly as I prayed. I had comforted Lindsey with such confidence.

We buried it together, setting it alongside its two siblings in the box.

A little later we sat to dinner, neither of us hungry. "This would've been a baby ostrich," I said.

"I know."

We were tempted, briefly, to bury the omelet with the puppies. We decided to throw it in the trash.

Lindsey cooed and petted the five puppies for most of an hour, insisting that she wasn't hungry. I certainly was. I don't know how she could spend *that* long speaking nonsense to what looked like nose-less rats. I enjoyed watching her with them, though,

for at least fifteen minutes.

“What time is it?” Lindsey asked when her adoration for the puppies finally subsided.

“Seven-thirty.”

“Too early for bed.”

“Yeah.”

“We pick up my parents at one o’clock tonight.”

“Oh. Great.” A vague, haunting emotion filled me. “Lindsey, I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For the puppies, for making fun of Napoleon, for not getting the phone fast enough, for hanging up on your parents, for being so concerned about that egg. I don’t know. Something’s wrong. I think it’s me.”

“It’s been a strange day.”

“Does any of it fit together? My mind’s jumbled. What is today supposed to *mean*?”

Lindsey didn’t answer me, but after a pause, she said, “I was mad at you earlier. You didn’t believe me when I said Napoleon was going to have her babies. And you didn’t believe my parents might be calling.”

She was right. But how was I supposed to know she would be right? No, that was not my true thought. The pall of the day hung over me, and I was truly sorrowful at her words. I apologized, and she forgave me, with a kiss even. “Let me make it up to you,” I said. “I’ll take you out to eat.”

“We can’t leave the puppies alone.”

“Well, then, we’ll get carry-out Chinese. We have lots of chopsticks in the junk drawer.”

We shared a quart of shrimp fried rice. We didn’t bother with the chopsticks. We ate in silence for a long time, until Lindsey spoke.

“We fit, don’t we?”

It has taken me a long time to figure out what line of thought brought her to that question, and still, it’s only a guess. I wanted to say, “Yes, of course!” in a tone that implied she should never have doubted. That would probably have offended her, so I didn’t say it. A day like that Sunday, with all its eccentricities and inexplicables unsettles all one’s foundations. So, I hugged her and whispered in her ear, “Yes. Perfectly.”

Incidents on a Sunday Afternoon - Nick Hayden

We didn't go to bed until three that morning, after picking her parents up at the airport. I lay there, cradling my wife and feeling the swell of her belly, oddly happy with life, and fell asleep.

THE END