

Happy Easter

It was the middle of March when the eggs appeared. A Tuesday morning, in fact, between ten past eleven and noon. Celia knew this because it was unseasonably warm for the time of year, a glorious sunny day, and she'd enjoyed her elevenses of coffee and chocolate biscuit (just the one, she was keeping an eye on her weight) sitting on the stone bench in the garden. Tom had bought it for her 60th birthday. They had pictured themselves relaxing there, companionably, on summer evenings with a glass of rose, or wrapped up against the chill of autumn drinking hot chocolate. And so they did – but the seasons only rolled round twice before Celia found herself alone on the bench, mourning a beloved husband.

Anyway, the eggs weren't there then.

At just after midday, Celia strode across the lawn, secateurs in hand, to do a bit of tidying up, and saw an egg. It was nestled among daffodil seed heads and droopy leaves, in the border near the bench. Strange, she thought, where did that spring from? She bent down to look at it more closely. It was a little smaller than hen size, rather like the eggs produced by her father's bantams when he was a lad, and a very pale green in colour with a sheen, almost iridescent. She didn't recognise it as being from any particular bird but she was no expert. But it must be a large one. What sort of big bird would fly/waddle/hop into her garden and lay an egg in her flower bed?

She was pondering the possibilities when, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted another egg. This one was on the edge of the pond, beside the bench, and most definitely had not been there earlier. *What?* She walked over to it and examined it. It was exactly the same as the first one. Now this was getting silly. Even if some large bird had taken a fancy to her garden, it wouldn't have laid its eggs in two different places. A possible explanation struck her. Could they have been stolen by a raptor – a hawk, say – which couldn't hold onto them so dropped them? This seemed an unlikely scenario. It might, maybe, account for one egg but two? Well, it was all she could come up with. She would leave the eggs where they were and see if anything happened.

Almost 5 and time for Buck's dinner. Whatever adventures he'd had that afternoon, he was always there, on the dot, his inbuilt clock telling him that food was on the table. Not literally, of course – he ate his meals out of his blue bowl decorated with a fish, on the floor of the utility room. When Celia adopted the scrawny kitten he looked so like a pirate with a black patch over his eye that she promptly christened him Buccaneer Bill. He'd grown into a handsome cat, proud of his luxuriant coat and bushy tail, affectionate when it suited him but independent, with a certain *hauteur* and a passion for the great outdoors. Her house backed onto fields so there were lots of exciting places for him to explore. Often, after he'd devoured his breakfast, Celia wouldn't see him again until dinner beckoned. She'd fitted him with a soft leather collar with an ID tag attached; inscribed in minute letters, just about readable, were his name and (her) phone number. So she didn't worry about him.

But it was past 5 now and he hadn't breezed in as usual. Celia went to the back door to call him. Then she saw him, crouched near the flower bed and staring fixedly at the egg. As she watched, he got up, sniffed and tentatively patted it. Then he hastily withdrew his paw, as if he'd been stung, and scampered into the house. Head down in his bowl, whatever fright he'd had was obviously soon forgotten.

The next morning, as soon as she was up and about, Celia went to see if the eggs were still there. Where, and how, they would have gone, goodness knows, but their sudden appearance yesterday seemed unreal today and, after a sound night's sleep, she was beginning to question whether she'd

actually imagined them. Perhaps she'd dropped off in the sunshine and dreamt the whole thing. But then there'd been Buck's reaction.

The eggs hadn't moved. They were shimmering in the already bright sun.

Celia shrugged and left them to it. She had other things to do. She'd made an effort to broaden her social life after Tom passed away. She'd been quite content at home since retiring from her pressured job but now, the house was too empty, too confining; she needed to get out more and seek company, limit the number of lonely hours spent on her own. She became a member of her local u3a and met lots of new people. Most were acquaintances she saw once or twice a month in one of the several groups she'd joined rather than what you might call *friends*, but she had struck up a friendship with another widow (how she hated that word!), Prue. They met at one or other of their homes every couple of weeks for a cuppa and a chat and to put the world to rights. Prue was coming this afternoon and Celia decided to treat them both to a slice of home-made Victoria sponge. She used to bake quite a lot of cakes but it wasn't worth it just for herself, so it was nice to have an excuse.

Of course, Prue had to be shown the mysterious arrivals. She was intrigued but she couldn't come up with any other theory as to their origin.

'They are pretty, aren't they?' she said, 'You may as well leave them where they are to enhance your garden!'

Soon, Celia accepted the eggs as part of the landscape and stopped wondering about them. Buck, though, was fascinated by them. Often, Celia would pop outside for some reason and catch him sitting, motionless, next to the egg in among the dying daffodils. It was always that one he focused on: despite his name and eye patch, Buck was no water baby and he gave a wide berth to the egg balanced on the edge of the pond. As the days went by, she found the cat's behaviour – well, *unnerving* was the only word for it. He no longer set out on excursions but spent hours by the egg. He never touched it but stared at it intently as if... as if he were *waiting*. But waiting for what?

It was a week since the arrival of the eggs. Celia was on her knees doing a spot of much-needed weeding when the first egg caught her eye. Surely, it was bigger? She scrambled to her feet and went to check the one by the pond. Yes, it had definitely grown. But how could it have? Eggs didn't grow once laid, did they? A shiver ran down her spine. Uncomfortable for reasons that she couldn't fathom, she left her trowel stuck in the soil and went inside to make a pot of tea.

With the eggs, apparently, putting on a growth spurt, Celia couldn't stop herself from mentally measuring them. She didn't go near them but whenever she was in the garden, to hang out the washing or to wheel the bin round the front for collection, she glanced at them, surreptitiously. When she'd been out, shopping or to a meeting, she peeked over the fence before going in the house. She was becoming as obsessive as the cat, she reflected, wryly. One day they were the size of a hen's egg, three days later, a passing duck could have deposited them. By the second Tuesday AE (After Eggs), they were as big as goose eggs. Buck still had them under observation but she noticed that he'd progressively shifted back until he was hunkered down in the middle of the lawn.

She could feel herself getting worked up, she was anxious in the day and sleepless at night. She didn't know what to do. The sensible thing would be to destroy them, to fetch a spade from the shed and smash them. But, somehow, she couldn't bring herself to do that. This is ridiculous, strong Celia scolded indecisive Celia, just do it! But she felt a weird reluctance. No, it was more than that – it was fear.

The following morning, she woke up determined on a course of action. She'd invite Prue for coffee. It was Prue's turn to entertain but she wouldn't mind. She was beginning to doubt the evidence of her own eyes. Probably, the eggs had always been this size, and she'd blown up the situation out of all proportion. If only she'd thought to photograph them that first day! Sensible Prue would put it into

perspective, she'd laugh and tell her she was being foolish, of course the eggs hadn't grown, she should just get rid of them. She didn't say any of this when she called her friend. They would stroll round the garden and she would note Prue's reaction.

It was a holiday weekend, Good Friday. This wasn't a problem – Prue's daughter and grandchildren rarely visited and Celia and Tom had felt neither desire nor need for children. The cups and saucers (more civilised than mugs) were laid out on a tray, sugar and milk to hand, and the hot cross buns were ready to be toasted. Celia walked into the garden to check if, by some irony, the eggs had disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. Buck was not in his by now accustomed position. In fact, he was nowhere to be seen. She'd heard him yowl an hour or so ago and assumed he was chasing off his sworn enemy who occasionally dared to venture into his rival's territory. She was pleased that, at last, he'd given up his vigil and returned to his offsite expeditions.

She glanced towards the flowerbed where the egg... wasn't. Pieces of shell were scattered on the earth but that was all. She bent down to peer at the remains. A greenish slime covered several of the fragments. There was no sign of anything else. The shell must have swelled to such an extent that it burst open. That was why Buck had left his post!

A wave of relief flowed over Celia. If one egg had reached the end of its life, so must the other. She almost ran across the grass to the pond. The second egg was still there but cracks were networking its surface. As she watched, mesmerised, the chinks in the shell expanded until there was a distinct hole. Could it contain a baby bird after all?

She bent down and squinted at it. She could just make out something curled round.

She leaned in closer. Were those *coils* she could see? Could there be a *snake* inside?

She recoiled.

A gaping mouth pushed its way through the broken shell, a mouth full of teeth sharp as needles, a mouth that grew wider and wider, impossibly vast...

Celia's scream came too late.

*

'Cooee, Celia! It's Prue! Where are you?'

Prue had banged the dolphin's head knocker on the front door at 11 on the dot. No response. She knocked again. No sound of hurrying footsteps, no sound at all. Celia might be in the kitchen, kettle boiling, her hearing not as sharp as it was. She went down the passage to the back door. It was open. She tapped, then popped her head in. On the kitchen table was a tray set for two; next to it, a packet of hot cross buns. But no Celia. Prue walked right in, through the dining room and called up the stairs. No response.

She's in the garden, that's it, she's engrossed in a task and lost track of time. She walked outside and round the back of the house. The garden was quite extensive but, even so, there were only so many places Celia could be! She looked in the shed, behind the shrubbery, over the fence into the field. But Celia wasn't there.

Odd. Perhaps she was talking to a neighbour. Prue returned to the front and hovered uncertainly. The man next door came out to start his car.

'Excuse me! Have you seen Celia?'

'Today, you mean? No, I haven't. Sorry.'

She tried the other side, same result. Now she was getting worried. This was out of character for Celia. She tore a sheet off the memo pad stuck to the fridge and scribbled a note asking her friend to ring her urgently. She underlined the last word and tucked the paper under a jar of blackcurrant jam so it wouldn't slip off the table. Then she shut the back door behind her and went home to wait until...

When? How long would she delay before contacting someone (she hesitated to say the word 'police') to report that her friend had vanished?

*

It was a week later and the police had finally taken Prue's concerns seriously. She was adamant that Celia would have got in touch. Something must have happened to her. They had tramped through the house and secured it afterwards. Now a team was investigating the garden. The only slightly unusual things were scattered shells from what seemed to be two very large eggs, one in a flower bed and the other by the pond. The youngest officer was new and keen to impress. He carried out a fingertip search around the pond. Not that the missing woman could have fallen in: the pond was ornamental rather than practical and the water only a few inches deep. Nonetheless, he poked about in the dandelions and reeds around the edge. His fingers touched metal...

'Sir, sir! I've found a necklace!'

Prue identified the bold gold chain as a favourite of Celia's that she often wore.

Celia was never seen again.

Nor was her cat. If anyone gave him a thought at all, it was presumed that he'd simply run off and that a kind person had given him a home. No-one noticed a tiny, silvery disc hidden in the long grass just outside the gate into the field. On it was inscribed minutely *Buck* and a phone number. The disc was attached to a slim collar. Had the eager young officer discovered it and inspected it closely, doubtless he would have detected the imprints on the leather. They could have been teeth marks.