

Old Egg

by Mark Cecil Stevens

Although the rain fell in pitchers around him, Oleg draped his slicker over his head by the hood. His arms were outstretched into the wind and he leapt into the torrent, his feet leaving the earth for only a short second, but long enough to capture the sensation of flight. His arms had taken on a waxy white aspect, an otherworldly look that he imagined a hero might have, a sign that he had traveled from far across space to the city to aid the helpless or to fulfill some as-yet undetermined destiny. His conceptions about this aspect of his dream were all undetermined, mere evocations rather than solid thoughts. But they gave him more comfort than the slicker would have, had he worn it to protect him from the rain.

When he got home, he rubbed at his arms to put color back into them, but only managed to stroke red lines and blotches onto the skin, giving him a more sickly look than he had initially displayed. He slapped at his cheeks, trying to exhort a rosy flush. He could feel the flaccid skin warm, but only spottily. Still, he knew that he had to go in and face his mother. Being pale was much better than being late.

“My God, Oleg, are you feverish?” She held the back of her hand to his forehead, the fat of her upper arm swaying in front of his face. “Your shirt is all wet. You will get the scarlet fever.”

She often worried about scarlet fever. Oleg was not sure what that was, but he was reasonably certain that it had never happened to him, or to anyone that he knew, but he did not countermand her. He sat at the table and waited for the inevitable cup of tea.

She plodded into the kitchen, shaking the joists with her anger. She filled the teapot and set it on the stove. He could here her muttering in Russian.

“Why do I buy you the slicker when you run home in shirtsleeves?” She shouted from the kitchen as she banged the tins

of dried flowers and other medicinal herbs on the counter. Oleg knew not to answer.

“No one in Odessa runs around in their shirtsleeves in such weather.” She finished the sentence with another hard burst of Russian, so intense that it must have been a curse. Oleg flinched at the clause “no one in Odessa”. It portended a poultice.

The teacup came slamming down onto the table in front of him, though not a drop spilled over the lip. He jumped-- not from the jarring of the cup, rather, from the medicine stench of the tea.

“What am I to do, Oleg?” He still failed to answer. He took the teaspoon and poked at a woody stem floating near the rim of the cup, trying to submarine it.

“All right. You drink it all up.” Her rage drained as she spoke. She sighed and tottered back to the kitchen to begin cooking dinner and pounding out a poultice for the night.

Oleg turned to the cup and made a secret face of disgust. He looked over at his mother's cat, but she turned haughtily away and flipped her tail. He held his breath and started to drink. He knew that dinner would not start until the tea was finished.

That night, as she lay him down to sleep, his mother spread the medicine patch on his chest and told him to lay still on his back so that the medicine could work. He sensed that she meant that the medicine could erase his mistake, to let her love him again and to forget her anger and disappointment. She looked down at him, a caricature of beneficence. When she smiled, her fat face swallowed up her eyes almost completely, leaving only mysterious black slits so alien they could hardly be recognized. He smiled back, looking at his alien mother and knowing that she had brought him from some elsewhere, a distant planet called Odessa where black-eyed creatures practiced magical arts to make their children strong. She patted him on the breast, each strike bringing up a scent that burned his nose and eyes.

In the morning, the mustard and camphor smells of the poultice hung on his skin. His shirt and sweater failed to cover it. When he moved the scent rose from his breast and overpowered the

sour milky smell of his own breath. His mother sensed something in his carriage as she handed him his workman's lunch box. She placed her hands on his shoulders and looked at his eyes, a parody of concern playing across her features. The weight of her arms folded his shoulder blades down from his neck, stretching it out into an exaggeration of its slump.

“Olezhka, what is the matter?” She sang the question in a nursery rhyme voice, shaking his arms higher in time with the cadence of the query. Oleg shrugged her hands off, which she took as a dismissal. She made a sour face, a fat pout, and turned to the table which she washed in long, slow circles. Oleg slipped out the door.

At school, Oleg sat in a fog of his own stench. The smell of the poultice had permeated his shirt and sweater so that it had grown stronger over the course of the day. He heard nothing that his teachers or classmates said, and took no notice of their actions, other than to suspiciously attempt to divine if they smelled him. Nobody addressed him at all until lunch.

He sat at a bench at the back of the cafeteria and opened the lunchbox. He had asked his mother for one of the soft-sided coolers that the other kids had, screen-printed with overdeveloped heroes bursting from the zippered lid, but she had objected that they looked too fragile, that they would never last the year, and had bought him the matte black tin box with a stony green thermos bottle inside. The thermos was always filled with tea which he faithfully poured out on a bush in the park on the way to school, but he usually ate the lunch-- a piece of crusty bread, a slice of sausage, and a hard-boiled egg. He was eating the egg when two boys, a Peter and a Paul, sat on either side of him. They unzipped their lunch bags and pulled out a shiny array of plastic-wrapped bars, bags and pouches.

“How old is that egg?” Peter wrinkled his nose as he asked. Oleg stopped chewing and wrapped the egg in his cloth napkin. He closed his box and stood, but stopped short of leaving.

“Yeah, what do you eat? Old egg?” Paul smiled at his own joke.

Oleg made to protest that the egg was fresh and leaned over the table to show them the proof. As he bent down, the other boys choked back laughter.

“It's you! You're the old egg!” Paul shouted, while Peter took deep breaths in through his nose, conspicuously smelling him. People from the surrounding tables turned to the noise, faint smiles beginning to work across their faces.

“Oleg the old egg,” Peter sang. He must have been pleased with his composition, as he repeated and repeated and repeated it. Paul joined in the song. Then the children at neighboring tables joined too, until the song rose into a dining hall chorus. Oleg felt a heat stir in his gut, rising to his arm. He knew that some foreign power was swelling in his arm and he took and swung it at Peter. He felt that power, however, drain with the motion so that when his blow fell it thunked softly off the other boys' cheek. Peter and Paul jumped on him and pushed him down. They kicked and stomped at him, and before he could crawl off other feet and legs joined, until there was no space to escape, and he curled up, waiting for a teacher or school administrator to break it up.

He was not surprised that the blame was laid on him for the fight. He had thrown the first blow, and in the simplicity of schoolhouse rules therefore the aggressor. He quietly endured lectures from lunchroom attendants, and then from teachers, secretaries and deputy administrators. Each of their speeches echoed the sentiment that his mother seemed to lament-- a sort of “whatever can we do with you?” elegy that differed only in tone from one to another. The outraged croaks in the lunchroom mellowed to a solicitous chirp in the school office. Still, he would have to be sent home for the day. His mother was called and she appeared with a clucking speech of parental concern and gentle chiding that he knew would build to a cackling flap when they were alone.

The next day passed without acknowledgment of the incident except that the other kids started to refer to him as “Old

Egg”, but that failed to trouble him. Each time that they did it he could feel the dull ember of the flame that had risen in him a day ago. He kept and stoked its warmth. He wondered why it had deserted him in the fight and guarded it against another extinguishment. In this vein, he kept silent and confronted no one. He sat out on the playground steps at lunch and slunk out the door after school.

The warmth of the spring day gave him an indolent mood on the way home, and he indulged it at the park. The late spring day's gentle heat had burned off the rains from a few days earlier, leaving a moist scent of blossom in the air. Oleg sat at a table and let the sun work on him, warming his face into a smile. He lazily looked around the park, watching the paradoxical shivering of the leaves in the breeze. As he looked into a bush, something caught his attention, a movement or color that opposed the sweep of motion through the swaying green. He parted the branches and pushed his face into the gap, where he found a mottled brown little bird, still almost in the shape of its egg, stumbling under the shelter of the bush. The presence of Oleg's face in its enclave led the bird to cock its head in a noiseless plea, a jolting bump of its open head crying for food. Oleg withdrew and chewed some of his sausage, returning to pinch a bite into the little bird's yawning beak.

The warmth of the sun on his back at first threatened to cover the swell of heat that he felt rising in his belly, but it grew strong enough that it filled him from top to toe. The bird stopped its dance after only a few bites. Each mouthful filled Oleg as much as the creature itself. He felt swollen inside when the little bird refused his last bite, as if there were something hot and strong ready to burst from his gut and consume him. Although he did not have the terms to describe this totem, he sensed that the bird itself was the source of the power that he could feel rising inside, and suspected that this new feeling would not desert him if he could keep it. He took his napkin and lined his lunch box, nestling his charm inside.

When he arrived home he could hear his mother fussing in the kitchen. He would have to surrender his lunch box if she heard him. He held the black tin close to his middle and wished himself invisible. His mother, seated on the couch in the front room, was reading from a Russian newspaper, printed with the alien lettering that Oleg imagined was filled with mystic communiqués from distant space. She slurped the last of her cup of tea and stood to refill it from the huge pot that she kept hot in the kitchen in case of visitors that never seemed to appear. As she turned he could feel the chill of her stare pass over him without the icy stab of recognition. She walked past him without stopping. He quietly slipped up the stairs and hid the box in his room. He returned to the entry and made conspicuous noise to alert her that he was home.

“You are late.” She folded her fat arms across her chest.

Oleg shrugged. He ignored the implicit question of his activity.

“Where is your lunch pail?” Her arms pulled in at her sides, creating a second waist that gave her an insect shape. A second shrug from her son sent her thudding back to her cannisters in the kitchen and to the concoction of some curative. Oleg wondered for what ill it was intended, but resigned himself to dispense with it quickly so that he could attend to his bird.

Over the next few weeks, Oleg found himself faced with fewer potions and patches. He stayed out of trouble with his invisibility, slipping out of school every few hours to feed the bird food stolen from the cat's dish. The cat rubbed his mother's legs and cried for more food, but she scolded him in her native tongue for his greed. She never noticed the comings and goings of the invisible boy, though he grew downright bold. No teacher or other student noticed his absence either, with one exception.

She was a thin, awkward girl he had hardly noticed in his class. She fairly hid behind a series of black, leather-bound notebooks in which she was always writing, or drawing. He was not certain which. She was sitting on the back stairs at lunch each day as he slipped out to feed his hatchling. He noted that she could see

him as he went by, because she looked up from her scribbling, a look of recognition without acknowledgment briefly passing her face with his shadow.

The cat also seemed to be able to see through the veil that he had learned to draw over himself. It yowled constantly when he arrived home to feed the bird and had to be forcibly expelled from his room. The cat's babies' scream voice was answered by his mother's old world curses so that they joined in a refrain that screened the happy tittering of the chick as it fed. Oleg could feel his heat swell each time that he fed the bird, and its development over the weeks stoked it. The bird's silky down began to coarsen and fray, and its beak began to harden and grow. As it took on a more mature form, Oleg imagined his familiar growing into a giant raptor or scavenger that would protect him when his invisibility failed.

Oleg passed the time happily in this way, but felt that happiness diminish in the routine. He sensed that something was building and he felt that he needed some guidance to help him divine if it was some good or some evil looming. He was uncertain to whom he could turn. His mother? The cat? The bird? His mind turned around the question frequently when he wasn't concentrating on eluding the notice of some tormentor or figure of authority, but it was at a moment of deepest concentration that he found the answer. He was slipping out the door at lunch time one day when he passed the girl from class. She looked at him peremptorily, and he met her gaze for an instant. The formative smile that started on her lips caused him to slow for just an instant, and unable to look her in the eye for embarrassment, he caught a glimpse of the sketch that she was drawing. The picture was of some bird-like creature, fanciful almost to the point of mythology, so skillfully rendered in graphite pencil that the shading evoked colors so clearly that his mind furnished what the picture merely evoked. He turned and ran home to his bird.

It took him several days to work himself into the courageous state necessary to speak to her. Over the last weeks he

had honed the ability to make himself unnoticeable, but he was uncertain how to approach the girl. His fear, however, was overawed by his need to share and explore the development of his abilities and that of his bird. He felt certain that the girl could unravel the knot of confusion that he carried and set him loose to find and to execute his unspecified destiny. He sat down next to her one day on the rear stoop as the other children shouted and spat their lunches in the cafeteria. He told her that her drawing was good and then he sat next to her, astonished that the scent of her skin matched its scalded milk color. She continued drawing for a time, another bird, and he waited for her answer. When she spoke, he was amazed at the throaty whispering quality of her voice. She told him that her name was Rebekka, and let him leaf through her notebook. Their conversation was comprised entirely of niceties and commonplaces, and she could not discern the reason for his introduction any more than he could find a way to express it.

They began to meet like this each day at the concrete step, and he made little headway in explaining his need for information from her. She liked the way that he carefully studied each picture, confusing his attempt to decode the drawings to explain the indeterminate questions of his future for a profound love of art. He gave her no clue as to his own muddily understood searching, except to tell her that he had his own bird, up in his room at home. She took this to be a flattery, intended to impress her, and she did not reply, although it secretly did thrill her. She was a lover of birds as much as she avoided people and spent a good deal of her time in school and at home researching birds and their habits. She could have told Oleg that his bird was a simple house sparrow, and no amount of wishing and stolen cat food would nurture it into the vengeful beast that he dreamed of, but she told him nothing because he didn't press the point. Still, they enjoyed each other's company more than the solitudes that they had devised for themselves.

Oleg's bird was growing now to the stage where its down was nearly completely covered in the feathers of flight, and Oleg sensed that its captivity would soon have to end. Its calls became

louder and more musical, and he found it difficult to camouflage the noise and the smell of offal. He washed the napkin in the sink and smuggled hand-towels into his room. He hung the cleaned bird bedding to dry in his closet, but the dank space was ill-suited to the intent and his clothes began to smell of mildew. His mother frowned perceptibly when she noticed the smell, and he worried that she would dig around in his room to find the source.

As the time passed and he never found a way to elucidate his thoughts to Rebekka, Oleg began to think that their meeting was the impending event that he had sensed. He felt enriched to have a friend, and began to truly appreciate the nuances in her drawings, in her ability to tease out such an array of subtleties from her singular theme. Their conversations almost always revolved around her drawing now, although he occasionally asked her about the nature of birds in general. He wanted to ask her how to keep the bird hidden, but he never talked directly about it for fear that she would ask about his home life. The subject went unacknowledged until she brought it up one day. She began to ask him about his bird, about its shape and behaviors. He sighed as he began to speak, as if he were clearing the space around him for the torrent of words that followed, and he needed all of the room and then some. He told her about the bird, its size and growth and the love that he felt when he fed it, and then he found himself telling her about its magical properties-- its conferring of invisibility and protection from his mother's rage and medicines and mostly about the heat of raw power that it filled him with. When he finished speaking, he folded in on himself with an even larger sigh than the one that had signified the onset of his monologue. He almost took the look of surprise on Rebekka's face as a sign that he had shared too much. He feared that he had shocked her with this gushing, but in reality she was impressed with the articulate expression as well as with the fancy of his imagination. When the look on her face dissolved and she asked him to bring the bird for her to see, he agreed with as much relief as enthusiasm. They sat in satisfied silence for a while until they were discovered.

Peter and Paul rounded the corner of the schoolhouse in a brisk walk. They were clearly trying to distance themselves from some wickedness that they had committed, their attempt at nonchalance speaking as much guilt as the smugly pursed lips that they both wore. They walked in mirrored lockstep, their arms swinging together in such unison that it gave Rebekka the image that they were holding hands. They had not noticed her until she tried to stifle a giggle at the image, and as soon as they spotted her their gait slowed and their smiles broke into grins.

"Oh, look. It's the chicken girl," Paul said. He steered the duo to the steps.

"Chicken girl, lives in a coop," Peter sang, showing his nascent talent for composition again.

Neither boy had acknowledged Oleg, and he realized that he must have instinctively become invisible. As the boys approached, baring their teeth and malice, he stood and barred their progress. He could feel himself become visible, or rather he noted it in the surprise that registered in their eyes. He felt the warmth in his gut grow and heave against his chest. He could feel the steam swell against his throat and when he spoke, he spoke in such a measured timbre that it belied the ferocity of its heat. He commanded the boys to leave Rebekka alone, and when they tried to respond, their voices as well as their sneers evaporated. They seemed to choke on the blaze of Oleg's stare, and he swore that he could feel flame licking at his brow. The boys turned and stalked away, their voices returning as they left the direct calescence of his gaze. Oleg stared them off with a stern look, but broke into a smile and laughed when they were gone. Rebekka released the caged mirth that the boys had forced back on her, and the two fairly danced.

Oleg carried a smile that he was able to confer his invisibility upon as he dreamed through the balance of the day. He had an incomplete conception that when he brought the bird to school on the next day, that they would form some kind of mystical family, where he would occupy the position of father and protector

as Rebekka brought her expert nurturance to bear on their little birdling. This daydream carried him through the rest of the school day, and he was so distracted on his walk home that he found on arriving home that he had no recollection of it. He stepped into the door, his reverie swirling around him like smoke which cleared as soon as he saw the cat. It mouthed the body of Oleg's bird with a gentleness that belied the certain violence of its death. Oleg shouted at the cat to drop the little corpse, but somehow the heat of his scream had no effect on the creature. It sat, a self-satisfied countenance punctuated by the flip metronome of its tail, staring fearlessly at the boy. Oleg's mother came bounding at the shout with a nimbleness that she had not displayed before in his memory. She stopped short at the sight of the kill, shrinking from the spectacle that the cat presented. He slithered over and dropped the body at her feet and cried for praise, and she picked up the offering in a kitchen towel that she unslung from her shoulder and whisked out the door to dispose of the package.

Oleg stood and faced the creature, knowing that the flame radiating from his gaze left it cold. He began to feel doubt, wondering if he had perhaps left the door open a crack when he had last fed the bird. His vision of family with Rebekka beside him began to fade. He wondered if she would think him a failure or a liar if he told her of the dead bird. He could feel the heat dying in his belly and sensed the smile in the cat's eyes that he had evinced this powerlessness. He climbed the stairs and lay on his bed. He felt tears at the corners of his eyes, but could not coax them out.

After a time he felt his mother's weight on the corner of his bed. She made an exasperated noise, and when he failed to respond she repeated it. He sat up, the humidity of his eyes still not breaking over on his cheeks. The pit that he sensed in his center seemed to pull the tears back inside.

"Birds carry the fever." She pronounced rather than insinuated this fact. He knew to which fever she referred.

"This will make you feel better." She proffered a mug of tea, its steam a reminder of his own cold powerlessness. He took the

mug but hesitated before drinking. The smell, bitter and medicinal, raised anger, not revulsion in his gut and he felt the heat that the bird had granted him flicker in his center. He set the tea on the night stand and looked at his mother. The heat within him dried the tears from his eyes and his gaze steeled as it settled on his mother.

“I am not sick.” He felt his power in full roar and could see his mother struggle to look him in the eye. As she turned away and cleared the mug, he heard her mutter in Russian. The only word that he could make out in the foreign pronouncement was “Odessa”, but he paid it no mind. He knew that there would be no poultice tonight.

