Go Find the Egg

NATHAN DUNNE

When Owen Walsh was seven years old, he discovered that golden eggs could save anyone, despite the sins a person had committed. His mother became very serious at Easter and before the hunt she gave the children a religious lesson. "Remember, it was on this day Jesus rose again. When you unwrap the eggs, remember that our Lord was released by a golden angel." When Owen brought in his bounty of eggs from the garden, she made him mouth the word *forgiven*. Biting into the chocolate, he thought of all the bad things he'd done: pushing Melinda Neesdon down the stairs and stealing persimmons from the Crockers' tree. But by the time he swallowed, all his badness had left him. He was free of guilt, his soul saved. Owen was a pudgy boy and always looked forward to Easter. Most of the neighbours weren't as devout as his own family but they embraced the egg hunt with great excitement, leaving pieces of golden paper in the grass.

Some forty years later, on a hot September afternoon, Owen was caught in the memory of this Easter ritual. He sat at his desk on the fourth floor of the Taylor & Macy office building in Chifley Square, waiting for a meeting with his boss, convinced he was about to be fired. Refreshing his browser, he had no new emails and nothing to do. Having lost his youthful fat, he'd grown to be a tall man with a light beard and several prominent fillings in his teeth. He parted his hair to the right, unlike other men in the office who had sharp sides and designer stubble. He did his best to appear busy, toying with his stapler and drawing shapes in the corner of a note pad, but if one of his colleagues had approached they would have noticed sweat growing on his upper lip.

He'd seen this day coming for months. That stupid presentation where he'd mislabelled the datasets. Then the client follow-up that had to be redone from scratch. His boss, Nina Walden, hadn't said anything at the time, but her silence was worse than reprimand. Recently she'd taken to leaving notes on his desk in ALL CAPS, as if he was a child who needed basic instructions.

Now she would be at his throat. There was nothing to be done except brace for impact. Be polite, and once the slaughter was over just make for the exit.

An assistant came to Nina's office door, and after a gentle knock his boss appeared. Nina chatted with her for a minute before throwing a glance in Owen's direction. But it wasn't time. Not yet. There was nothing to do but wait it out.

This was when the Easter memory began to play on Owen's mind. Every year there was one big golden egg to be found among the others. Despite its size, the biggest was often the hardest to find, and before Owen and his neighbours went digging under bushes and tarps his mother would say, "Go find the egg. Whoever can find

it will be this year's Saint Francis." Maybe redemption was still possible, maybe he'd be allowed to keep his job a little longer. Maybe it would be like before the egg hunt, when the guilt was so strong that it would feel like he couldn't breathe, and then after unwrapping the gold it would be all washed away.

"Owen! Can you come and see me?"

The door to Nina's office had swung open and she was standing in it, arms clean and relaxed. When Owen had got the job at Taylor & Macy he and his wife had moved to a larger house in Cremorne. His salary was far more than he'd been making at his last job, which meant better Christmas presents for his children, larger donations to the missionary effort in Ghana, and summer trips to Los Angeles in new sneakers. The four years he'd been at Taylor & Macy seemed like forever, although he could sharply remember the financial anxiety that accompanied his life before it.

"Sure, Nina. Coming now."

The open-plan office felt larger than on ordinary days, as if the rows of computer screens and coffee cups and warm salads and fake plants and soiled tissues and breath mints and blunt HB pencils, and framed articles from the *Spectator* and *Forbes* above the WELCOME sign, had somehow drifted further apart, the carpet having stretched to make Owen's steps slower. A few colleagues looked in his direction. Keep upright, he told himself. Shoulders back. Chin forward. Just look straight ahead. He entered the office and closed the door behind him.

A siren went by in the street below.

"Have a seat," said his boss, nodding at the chair across from her. "Would you like some lemon water?"

He nodded, and Nina poured him a glass.

For a whole minute, Owen sat balancing the glass on his knee, and although he did his best to avoid staring at the framed baby photograph on the desk, he couldn't look away. The baby was smiling.

"I'm going to do you the courtesy of being blunt about this. Owen, are you listening? You seem to be in your own little world. I feel that your work has been slipping lately. Your lunch breaks have been getting longer and, quite frankly, I don't think you're as capable as some of the others in our team. I thought at first you were suffering from burnout, but now I think it's much more than that. In the last month there's been numerous occasions where others have had to redo your work. There are some complex equations, that's true, but it shouldn't be an excuse with our software. Managing your own spreadsheet shouldn't be this hard. I think the best remedy is for this to be your last day with us."

Nina leaned back and drained her lemon water, setting the glass down with care. The glint off the glass made Owen flinch. It brought to mind the spreadsheet from last week, the one where he'd switched columns C and F. No one had said anything, but the correction had gone around. He knew they'd all seen it.

"I'm not sure what to say," said Owen, averting his eyes from the glass. "I guess that's it."

"I suppose it is," said Nina, keeping her voice level. "And don't worry, you'll be paid until the end of the week."

He hadn't always been so bad at his job. But the stress of his affair with Caitlin had undone his competence, leaving him unable to focus. His mind was a loop, constantly replaying the moments when it all began. That damn Christmas party. If only they hadn't ended up in the back seat of her new BMW, their drunk, desperate breaths fogging the windows. Then the work retreat weeks later to the Gold Coast, where he lost himself in her flesh. Those soiled sheets at the Crown, how ugly they looked in

the morning light.

"I do have one question," Owen said, after a pause. "Am I being fired because of the new policy?"

"Which one would that be?"

"In the meeting last week. The Equal Opportunity policy, with the quota to hire more women. There was an email that said the board approved it."

"That's a separate issue. The policy is a long-term company strategy, and nothing to concern yourself with now that you're leaving us." Nina came around in front of the desk and stood before Owen. "I would shake your hand, but I'm afraid I might be coming down with a cold, and I wouldn't want to give that to you."

When Owen opened the office door and looked out into the wide open plan, baby photographs seemed to be everywhere, shiny, prominently displayed. His heart began to race, and for a terrifying moment he thought he might start screaming. He walked slowly back to his desk, eyes misting up, sinking into the carpet among the divot-ridden cork boards and cough drops and silver spoons. There were whispered conversations about deadlines and updates to monthly spending. Stephen Bonner, who'd covered for him on the big insurance job, dangled a limp teabag over a Broncos mug. At the last moment, with his mouse-pad in view, Owen turned into the photocopy room and stood over the machine, trying to breathe.

Go find the egg.

Chocolate and gold.

Who will be this year's Saint Francis?

The end of his affair with Caitlin had come with a simple, devastating announcement: "I'm pregnant." They cried together at first, a panicked, emotional mess, but it quickly devolved into a shouting match. As Owen fumbled a quote from the Psalms about atonement, Caitlin countered, accusing him of using her to absolve his guilt. She claimed his rigid beliefs were "straight out of the patriarchy". Owen was adamant: he would confess the affair to his wife and be a father to the child. But Caitlin was equally firm, arguing she was too young, too successful, and that their brief, sordid affair proved they didn't even know each other—let alone possess the shared values to raise a child.

A moment later, Caitlin appeared behind him. Her voice was cold, without glaze. "People are saying you've just been fired?"

"That was quick," he muttered to himself.

Owen turned to face her, and as their eyes met, he began quietly shaking. Icy tremors grew up from his waist. For the past week, wrestling with 3 a.m., he had dreaded this moment. He had seen Caitlin's face, singular, contorted, impossible, just as it was before him now. Her makeup and hair were immaculate, her black dress tight above the knee—an assassin. She was younger, twenty-eight, and yet far senior to him, having joined Taylor & Macy right out of school, working her way up to Junior Executive. It was no secret she'd brought in $5 million last year. On her way up the corporate ladder she'd cleared the room of lesser colleagues.

"I'm sorry for shouting at you," Owen said.

Caitlin stood firm, a polished student of modern dance. "I didn't realise how deep this runs for you. You never talked about it, not properly. I had no idea you were so *Catholic*."

He was visibly trembling. "But it's a life. We made a mistake. We have to account for our—"

She shook her head. "Don't turn this into a sermon, Owen. We're adults. It happened. Don't try and make this some parable. It won't change anything."

"Was it you? You had me fired?"

"You made it easy."

The room's stale air shifted at their heavy breathing. Dust motes gathered and separated.

Owen began to blink rapidly, and walked over to a small bookshelf and stared at a piece of chalk. He couldn't scream. Couldn't cry. He picked up the chalk, and wanted to write something. But what? *Everything.* He snapped the chalk and began to draw frantically on his trousers, white on black. At first he drew small lines, like nicks of a blade, and then built up the pressure into great spirals, drawing so fast that it felt he might be able to make a tear and get through to his skin.

"What are you doing?" said Caitlin, as Owen drew all the way down to his ankles. He started working on a sleeve of his shirt, drawing right down to the elbow, the chalk breaking off in tiny pieces of white dust.

"Owen. Seriously—what are you doing?" She snatched the chalk from him like a mother grabbing a knife from a toddler. "Keep it together."

He beat his fist on the photocopier. "Why? It's all over for me."

Caitlin ran out of the room, while Owen reached for his phone and began scrolling through his contacts for the number of Father Medley. He longed for his guiding voice, a steady word on the track. Only two nights before they'd spoken for several hours about his troubles—Father Medley knew everything. Waiting on the line, he pictured the priest by the altar at St Laurence, nodding at the sparse Sunday pews and ageing nuns. But the line was busy and there was no option to leave a message.

He tried again. "Father! Is this a bad time?"

"Oh no, Owen. I've been thinking about you. I'm visiting Mrs Gulliver at the school. Her youngest daughter— Is everything okay?"

A clot of shame coarsened in his throat. "I was fired today."

The priest gave a slight gasp. "They really did it? Just like you said? I'm very sorry. Did they give you a reason?"

"No. Well, not really."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm still here, Father, in the office."

The priest's voice was hard and sharp. "Was there another confrontation? Did you speak about the importance of children?"

"Abortion. We spoke about abortion."

"I'm sure you spoke from the heart."

"Father, I was wrong."

"The first thing we should do is pray together," said the priest. "Will you join me in—"

The line went dead. For a moment Owen thought it was part of the prayer—a long, sacred pause—until the silence kept going.

"Father?" he whispered. "Hello?"

The divine connection, dropped like bad Wi-Fi.

Voices grew beyond the photocopy room, and rather than hide away any longer, he stepped out into the fray, making a bee-line for his desk. He began frantically emptying the drawers of its business cards, sticky pads, plasters, pill container, batteries, cough drops, lip balm, receipts, coupons, endurance quotes, birthday cards and all the stupid ticket stubs he'd meant to throw away. Everything went into a shopping bag. Even his boss's note from the day before, written in sharpie across a pie-graph: CHECK THE NUMBERS. ALL WRONG. DO OVER!! The only thing left was his coffee mug, still half full.

"Make it to the stairs," he told himself. "Not the lift. I'm not waiting for any lift."

As he began to walk the slow carpet it became apparent that everyone knew what was up. Cillian Oaks came to shake his hand, as did Trevor O'Neill, who hated Owen and wouldn't miss him a bit. Several more of his colleagues surrounded him, and he was unable to move. When someone made a remark about the chalk on his shirt he lurched towards a large rubbish bin and tossed his shopping bag inside. It made a loud clunk.

"Well, thank you all," he found himself saying, turning for the stairs.

Only steps away from the exit, his last goodbye, Owen caught sight of Caitlin beyond the scrum. She was standing next to Nina, shoulders high, a wry smile on her face. He couldn't leave, not yet, not with her watching like this, and at the final moment he changed course and ran into the toilet. Surrounded by mirrors, he was overcome with a wave of exhaustion and lay down on the tiles, stretching out his entire body. He shut his eyes.

The Easter sun broke over the lawn, and Owen watched his mother step down from the back porch onto the grass. He pushed past her in search of the egg, his legs joining the gaggle of neighbours. In a matter of minutes, he beat them to the prize, plucking it from beneath a heavy rock. The neighbours stood around in awe as Owen peeled away the golden paper. His mother looked over his shoulder, beaming a smile, muttering: "The stone was rolled away … the stone was rolled away …" Owen held the chocolate egg tight, and as small pieces began to break off, he felt his childish body glowing from within.

"Are you okay, Owen?" a voice asked.

"It's no use," said another colleague, bending down. "We've been talking to him for a while now, and he hasn't said a word."

"Should we call a doctor?"

"We checked his pulse. He's fine enough. It's the shock. The poor man's just staring into space."

Time slowed among the cold tiles. Colleagues came and went, shaking their heads and whispering about workplace health and safety. Even Nina poked her head in to make sure he wasn't dead. Finally, an outsider appeared, one that made Owen sit up. Father Medley. He was holding Owen's coffee mug, the last of the possessions on his desk. It had been rinsed out. The priest picked him up off the floor, taking his full weight, and when they were out of the toilet door, the entire office stood watching them in silence. There were no coughs or stifled laughs, no pen drops or water spills, no huhs or ers or hmms. They simply stared at two sorry men hobbling towards the stairs, men they would never see again.

Standing at the glass doors downstairs, just before they stepped outside, Owen muttered, "The stone was rolled away."

The words surprised him, but Father Medley nodded and said, "Exactly right."

Out on the street, with the sound of traffic in his ears, Owen was inconsolable, tears streaming down his face, but Father Medley held on to his arm as they crossed Hunter Street together.

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