

THE PERFECT EGG

Domestic bliss?

BY TANIA HERSHMAN

He looks up and catches its eye. Eye? Silly! Visual circuitry. Optical sensors. But he's sure, he's sure it looked right at him. He eats his perfectly boiled egg. Can't stop himself from saying: "Thank you, this is just right," and swears he sees pleasure, just a hint, on its flawless face. Then it turns and begins to load the dishwasher. He dunks his toast into the runny yolk and tries not to dwell on it.

When he finishes, he gets up and puts his plate, knife and spoon into the sink. It is standing there, waiting.

"Please clean out the fridge, including the ice trays," he says. "They need defrosting." It nods. Is there a smile? I'm going mad, he thinks. He puts on his coat and leaves.

In the park he watches more of them sitting on benches, watching their charges in the playground. He's struck by what they *don't*. Don't fidget, scratch or mess with their hair. Don't turn their heads, chat with one another, read magazines or talk on mobile phones. They are absolutely still, completely focused. Just *there*.

He is tempted to run up and grab a child off the swings, just reach around its waist and pull the small body out, shrieking.

Just to see.

Just to know.

That night, he watches television while it irons in a corner of the living room. He is distracted from the sitcom that he won't admit he waits for each week by the smell of steaming fabric, the handkerchiefs he's had for 40 years or more, always neatly pressed. Worn a little, torn, but clean and wrinkle-free.

He stands up and, over by the ironing board, makes a big show of unzipping his fly.

No stirring. Not a flicker. It stops ironing and waits for further instructions.

He takes the trousers off, one leg and then the other, wobbling slightly as he tries to keep his dignity. He hands them over.

"Please do these too," he says, and sits back on the sofa in his underwear. He starts to laugh as, on the screen, the wife comes home and shouts at the useless husband.

Next morning, after another perfect egg with toast, he says: "Come with me." It walks behind him to the hall.

He opens the door to the cupboard underneath the stairs.

"Please go inside," he says, and it obeys. He shuts the door and goes upstairs to his study where for several hours in his head are words like *blackness, suffocation, boredom*.

He switches on the computer and writes a long e-mail to the woman who used to be his wife, rambling and without punctuation.

It whirs quickly out of Sleep mode.

"Please, come out," he says. It glides past him, nothing in its eyes or on its face. He has a sensation in his sinuses, unpleasant, unwelcome. He boils the kettle, leaves the full mug of tea on the counter, gets his coat and leaves.

In the park, he watches them again. Are they watching him watching them watching? He ambles over to the swings and puts a hand out, leaning on the rail as small girls giggle and try to touch the sky. No one moves or does anything. No one even looks in his direction.

How fast could they run if...?

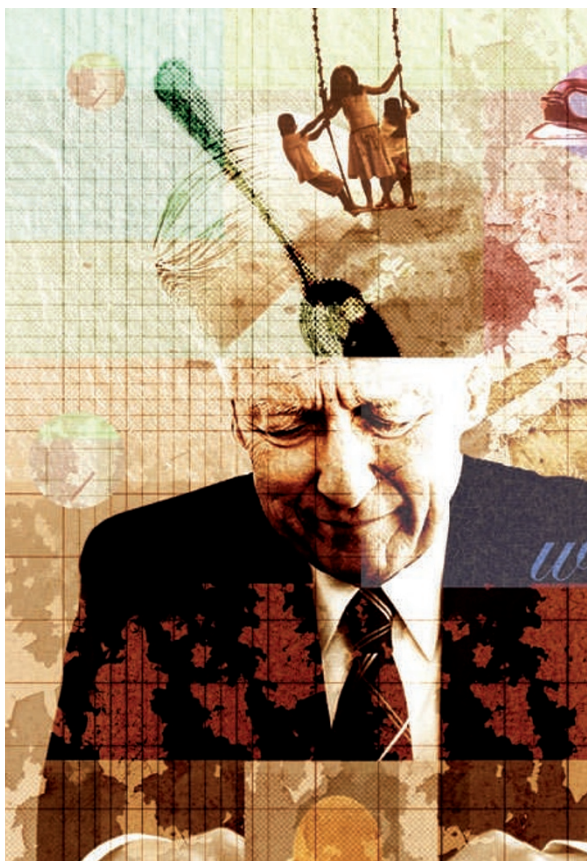
Would it be just the one who'd tackle him to the playground floor? Or all of them, some sort of instantaneous communication rousing them to action?

After a few minutes, the screams and creaking of the swings gives him shooting pains through his skull. He heads for home.

He eats dinner, listening to the radio, the evening news. He finishes, puts the plate in the sink, then he says: "Please come with me." And leads it upstairs. In the bedroom he instructs it to sit in the armchair in the corner. He puts on his pyjamas with some coyness, a wardrobe door shielding him. Then he gets into bed and pulls the covers tight around himself.

"Please watch," he tells it. "Just keep an eye. Make sure that nothing... I mean, no sleeping."

He switches off his bedside light and can see a faint green glow coming from the armchair. He lies with his eyes open for a few moments and then he falls asleep.



JACEY

He says things he wishes he'd said in life, or in that life, at least. At first he calls it poetry and then he sees it's not. He deletes it and goes back down.

He walks about in the kitchen and from kitchen to living room, living room to downstairs bathroom. Then he stands in the hall, listening. He opens the cupboard door. Dark, no movement at all. It has no lights on. Oh my god, he thinks.

"Are you...?" he says.

In the morning, refreshed, he eats his perfect egg.

"Thank you," he says, and puts his plate, knife and fork into the sink. "Please do the carpets today," he tells it, and heads towards the stairs. ■

Tania Hershman's book *The White Road and Other Stories* (commended, Orange Award for New Writers) was included in *New Scientist's Best Books of 2008*. Tania is writer-in-residence at the University of Bristol's science faculty.

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