

*Bernice Friesen*

## **Breaking Eggs**

I stare at the egg. It sits on my desk in a sour-cream container, in a nest of white and pink kleenex. On it is a happy face, slightly screwy, and a squiggle of yellow marker on top for hair. Real cute, Mrs. Bowman. The assignment is to carry it around for a week, pretending it's your kid. Dad could hardly believe it when I told him Mrs. Bowman makes the Family Life class do this every year. He told me to do what I want—even to scramble it and lose the ten marks if it would make me feel less silly. I don't know why I'm taking this stupid class anyway. Just because Stephanie's here and everyone else is doing it, I guess.

". . . and at this point, the sperm meets the egg."

Mrs. Bowman's flabby cheeks get redder and splotchy. Reproduction embarrasses her almost as much as it embarrasses Stephanie. Stephanie's only 16 like me, so it's forgivable. Mrs. Bowman has three kids, so it's not.

"Can you imagine Mrs. B. having sex?" I whisper, and point out Mrs. B.'s bulgy panty line. Stephanie once told me I was the funniest person in the world. She's weird with jokes. She laughs the hardest at the dirty ones, but she won't tell them. She absorbs them and won't let them escape.

"Shh, Lori." Stephanie's white skin blushes roses when she giggles. She's so pretty with her long blackbird hair, and fine bones, you'd think that even if she did decide to spit, which is very unlikely, it would come out and freeze into something wonderful like marshmallows or gumdrops. It's very annoying. I'm not as good looking as she is.

"Our next topic is motherhood, the most important part of the Home Economics course," Mrs. Brown says, right after she skims over the pregnancy handouts with us. She'd been sick, so we were way behind in our notes. I think she was sick on purpose, just so she could quickly skip over the sex part.

I squash the new heading under the last squiggled notes, and wish I hadn't been late for class so I could have gotten some paper from my locker. I saw Stephanie, Lill and Faith giggling at the locked door, and when I got there, they stopped, guilty looks on their faces, especially Stephanie. At first I thought they were talking about me, but Mrs. Bowman was walking right behind me jangling her keys, so I couldn't be sure, and I don't really consider Lill and Faith to be people anyway. Stephanie looked worried and kept her mouth shut like she hadn't yet swallowed a melty piece of chocolate. I'll try to fit all of today's notes on the rest of this sheet before I'll go begging from anybody.

"You know, we were talking about you just before you came," she says, forcing an elf smile on her face. "We think you need a guy."

"I don't *need* anything."

She sucks her lips inside until you can't see them, and her mouth is a thin line, like she's thinking. She used to say I should learn how to flirt. I can't. You can't when you're sort of one of the boys. It's too phony.

She writes the word "Motherhood" at the top of a fresh white paper. She underlines it neatly in red ink, using a short plastic ruler. Stephanie has been my best friend since we were ten, but she's changed a lot. We used to have to do everything together—play catch, horses, pirates, explorers, then Stephanie thought she had to grow up. She started wearing skirts and make-up, and forgetting the fun things. Really, this is what her mother told her to do. Act like a lady now.

I've never acted like a lady, and I never will. That's because I've got something ladies aren't supposed to have: a good arm. I can pitch as hard and fast as any guy in the school. Matter of fact, the rest of me is as good as my arm. I'm tall and I'm fast. Dad started me training in track two years ago in Saskatoon. I've already won a gold for the 100 meters at Provincials, and this summer, I'm going to the Canada Games. Ha-ha to all those people who think I'm crazy to get up at six a.m. to run. Dad says shoot for the stars. Maybe the Olympics one day. I've been taking his advice and trying everything. Grassbank is too small to have hockey

for girls, so I joined the boys' team—not without a big ruckus, of course, but Dad went to bat for me. He's the Phys. Ed. teacher here, and he used to play for the Saskatchewan Roughriders way back when men were men and women did a lot of unnecessary ironing.

"The mother-child relationship is the only truly natural relationship," Mrs. Bowman spouts. "The mothering instinct is one of the most powerful urges of nature." The woman is flying now. If there was ever a motherhood cult, she would be the high priestess. I doubt my mom and her would hit it off. Mom's always complaining about how little time she gets to herself with me and my three fiendish little brothers. I guess you can't get to the Olympics if you've got kids. That's what my coach says.

"Oh, oh. I have this terrible urge to have a baby—right now!" I hold my stomach and whisper to Stephanie.

For a second, I think she's going to laugh, but then she stiffens and readjusts herself in her seat. I'm being disrespectful, I guess. Her mother wants lots of grandchildren. I think her mother is crazy. If you wanted a lot of grandchildren, why wouldn't you tell your only child about sex? Huh? Insane, or what? When Stephanie got her first period, her mother had showed her how to wash the blood out of her panties, and given her a big box of Kotex—the antique kind that you still had to wear with a belt. Nothing was said. Stephanie was afraid to ask her questions too, with her mother never saying the words "brassiere," "panties," or "pads" above a fearful whisper. I had to take over on the sex subject. I told Stephanie all about it. She says I'm smart and I'm tough. I think she sort of depends on me.

". . . take the female bear. I'm sure you've heard of how dangerous she is when her young are threatened. Female bears must protect their cubs from male bears, who will sometimes kill and eat even their own young."

"Eww . . .," Stephanie whispers to me, but I'm not as impressed.

"Female fish eat their own minnows," I say out loud, being fake and perky, pretending I'm helping somehow. Mrs. Bowman opens and closes her mouth, maybe swallowing a guppy. There's a laugh from Lill in the back, and a lot of quiet giggles. I look back instead of taking a bow, and everyone is looking at me strange, like they're trying to figure me out. For the first time, I feel more laughed at than laughed with.

"I was talking about the *higher* animals, Lori." Mrs. Bowman sticks her boobs out. Old bag.

Stephanie looks over at me, worry mounds between her eyebrows. She's not copying the notes Mrs. Bowman is putting on the blackboard. She's cutting a half circle out of a piece of blue scrap paper. She takes some Scotch tape out of her pencil case and tapes the paper to her egg like a baby bonnet.

"It's a boy. His name is Bartley."

I point to my egg. "It's an egg. Its name is Humpty."

She laughs and laughs, hand over her mouth, and Mrs. Bowman gives her a glare.

"You can be such a scream," she whispers to me, and we look each other in the eye the way we used to when we were planning to cram newspaper into Alex the Chicken's locker. "I can never think of those things." The smile on her face goes still, sinks into worry. "We—the girls—were talking about you before class."

"Yeah? I knew that."

She leans her head to one side and gives a little breathy laugh, as if apologizing for what she's about to say.

"We think you need a guy."

"Who is 'we'?"

"Well, you know. Everybody."

"So?"

The bell rings. Noon. This topic of conversation better be over. I slam my binder, which now has Family Life notes written down the cover, and stand up, pushing the chair behind me so it vibrates. I pick up my stupid egg. It grins at me, lolling in the kleenex I feel like blowing my nose in. Stephanie follows me into the hall.

"Rod like you."

"Rod is studying to be the Antichrist."

"But he's awfully cute."

I stop and look at her.

"Do you know what that idiot did at hockey practice last night? Asked me if I wanted to screw him, on the ice, in front of all the guys."

Her eyes go wide. She puts her hand over her egg container as if to protect her fragile white child. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. Nick and Mur told me they'd help me punch him out after, but I high stuck him once when Coach wasn't looking. Too bad he was wearing his cup."

She sputters and laughs, trying to hold her mouth closed with her hand, her other hand holding her books and egg to her belly.

"Ok. Not him. There are others."

We put our books in our lockers and take our lunches to the senior lunch room, the social studies and biology room. It's more crowded than usual because some of the town kids bring their lunch when it's really cold outside and they don't want to walk home. Rod and Darren are sitting on desks in the corner, underneath the big poster of the food chain. Lill and Faith are in the desks beside them by the cold snowy windows. The only empty desks are in front of them. Great.

Rod swings his long legs slowly, like a cat twitches its tail watching its possible breakfast. He's over six feet tall and a hockey star. His eyes are this cold clear blue: way below zero. His muscles are as thick as his bones, his shoulders rounded with them. His chin always looks a little unshaven, as if the animal inside was pushing its way out. He looks at my paper bag and my egg container, but mostly at me.

"What you got for lunch, Lori?"

"Seaweed." I sit sideways in the desk in front of Lill. I stare him in the eye, take out a peanut butter sandwich, and chew slowly, like I'm eating his face. Stephanie is behind me, talking to the egg girls. She sits in front of me, wiggling to get on the desk, and waits for Darren to walk over. He's been chasing her a few weeks and they're an almost-couple.

Stephanie opens her sour-cream container and fluffs the kleenex around her egg. She tickles its cheek and then pulls a Tupperware container of salad out of her lunch bag. Darren walks over and sits on a corner of her desk.

"What, is it Easter already?"

"This is Bartley. He's my baby." She smiles up at him: play along?

"He's kind of small, isn't he?"

"Looks just like you, Dar!" Rod makes a pumping motion with his fist. "But it's a stupid name for an egg."

"Well, I think he's perfect." Stephanie lifts her nose and swivels on her desk to face Lill and Faith. "So, how many children do you want after you get married?"

"Two. Maybe three," says Lill. "What about you, Lori? How many do you want?"

"None."

Everyone gets quiet, like they want me to say more.

"You don't want any?" asks Faith. "Isn't that kind of . . . queer?" She sits up straight and takes a deep breath, trying to hold the corners of her mouth still, eyes darting back and forth to see if she's being appreciated. Stephanie tangles her hands together in her lap and gives Faith a funeral smile. Lill giggles.

"As queer as you, Faith?" I say, and the peanut butter sticks to the roof of my mouth. I've heard this before. Just because I'm big and I'm a jock and I tell people what I think, they whisper that I'm gay. It's not true. At least I think it's not true. Sometimes I'm not sure. My Uncle Wallace is gay. Mom can't seem to get over it. She keeps saying that it was because he was different and everyone kept telling him he was gay. He heard it so often, she thinks, he got to believe it. Nobody's going to tell me what to be.

Stephanie looks at me, maybe worried my feelings are hurt. She doesn't see Darren grab her egg container and balance it on his head.

"Whee! Hey, Mommy! Look at little eggy!"

Stephanie looks back and Darren does a dance, as if the egg was a child going piggyback.

"Give it back! That's my assignment. If you break it, I'll lose marks." She jumps off the desk and tries to snatch the container off his head. He lifts it arm's length.

"That's pretty difficult stuff," Rod growls. "Girls get to carry around eggs and get marked for it." He nods slyly at me. "Go Darren! Let's see her jump for it!"

He watches Stephanie's body bounce when she tries to tug Darren's arm down, and I'm embarrassed for her. I get up.

"Look out. There's a big defenceman coming for you!"

Rod leaps up and stands in my way, but I'm fast. I dodge around him, and then both Darren and I have our hands on the egg container. I push him into the blackboard and try to wrench it out of his hands.

"Lori, don't. Just let him, o.k.?" Stephanie says. "It's going to break if you do that."

"Hey, I'm not the one who's doing something wrong." My voice comes in little grunts of breath. Darren tugs once, hard, and my thumbs slip off the stiff lid edge to the soft middle of the container, crunching it together.

"Oh no, Lori!" Stephanie whines, as Darren and I let go of each other, and open the nest. Even the yolk is broken, the kleenex yellow, slimy, and sopping. The blue baby bonnet has Bartley's guts all over it.

"What are you blaming me for? I wasn't the one that took it in the first place."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Steph," Darren says, and she turns away from him, pretending hurt feelings.

"You're such a pig, Darren," she says, but I can see her smiling, and there's only flirtation in her voice. It makes me angry.

"Hey, look what I've got!" Rod's standing by my desk, holding my egg container to his stomach. "Come and get it Lori. I know you want it."

I walk over. Too bad Nick and Mur aren't here. I'd love to wipe that grin off Rod's face. His smile gets bigger as he tightens his grip on the container. The lid pops up and rests loosely on top.

Quick, I knock the lid off with one hand, grab the egg with the other, and sprint out of the room, clawing the door so it slams behind me. I run, the egg like a glass football in my hand. If I can get to the gym stage without them seeing me, I can go to the place Stephanie and I always use to go to talk about guys. I'll be safe.

All the big sports equipment is kept on the stage, and because the equipment room is being remodelled, there are boxes of baseballs and basketballs, dozens of pairs of skis leaning up against the wall, and a mound of volleyball nets next to the high-jump pit. I hop over the volleyball post and make my way to the far end of stage left. Through the curtains come the noon-hour screams of grade-seven floor hockey. Then, there's another sound: my name. My name is being howled out by Rod, Darren, Lill, Faith, and . . . Stephanie. I hide behind the vaulting horse and look around the side through a draped badminton net. I watch them push through the curtain and stand on the green stack of tumbling mats. They look right toward me. Stephanie told.

"I want your eggy, Lori," Rod calls, sing-songy, and he walks closer. I look around for something to protect myself. There is an old, soggy

volleyball stuck between the wall and the springboard beside me. I tug it loose, stand, and get Rod in the forehead.

"Bitch."

He's looking around like he doesn't know what to do. I drop down. Another volleyball, hard, hits the top of the vaulting horse. I look around the side. He's got a whole box of them.

"Lori, come out," Stephanie calls, as the hard white balls slam into the equipment around me, coming closer and closer. Then one hits. I get it off the wall, in the back of the neck. I clench my teeth so tight they almost break, stand up, and throw. The egg hits him in the mouth.

"Fucking dyke," he spits through the yolk. Stephanie won't look at me.

I walk past them into the gym. I feel as if I've won a gold at the Olympics, but no one is cheering.