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Eggzactly

by

Joe R. Christopher and Donald H. Hinkle

He was either asleep and dreaming or he was mad, he thought. Henry Fields stepped over the small stream that gargled through the rocks, and went on, pushing the evergreen branches from his face and heading for his goal—a white ellipse painted on the background ahead.

He remembered going to bed, and then there was this. Henry also had a vague memory of talking with someone in white . . .

But what has that to do with the price of eggs?

There was something about eggs and one costing more than two . . .

Only you must eat them both, if you buy two.

Henry Field, after watching the ellipse up ahead grow more like an egg with every step he took, remember what was itching at the back of his skull. It was from *Alice in Wonderland*—no, it was that *Looking-Glass* thing. He remembered it from TV back when he was a teenager. Alice bought an egg from either a Queen, a sheep, or a porcupine—in his mind they seemed to change back and forth, and the egg turned into Humpty Dumpty.

Henry thought of something new as he came closer. How did one start a conversation with an egg? Was it a chicken egg? Did it make any difference if it was? Maybe, from its size, an ostrich egg. He couldn't remember how Alice had tackled the conversation. For a moment he wished he had actually read the book. Or paid more attention to the TV set.

Well, here he was. Now what to say? *O egg*, perhaps? Was that right? *Hail, O egg?*

He stopped walking near the six-foot wall on which Humpty Dumpty was seated. “Hello,” said Henry. Not formal enough, he thought. Should I add *sir*? If not, what then? This is all foolish, he thought—but I can't say that. “Hello”—making it twice in case he hadn't been heard the first time.

Humpty Dumpty scowled. “And just exactly what do you mean?”

“Why . . . it's just a greeting . . .”

“When I say a word, there's a purpose to it. It means what I say it to mean,” he said, “not what usage suggests.”

“That's sensible,” said Henry. This is *damn* foolish; I won't stand another minute of it, he thought. I'll get out of here.

“How old did you say you are?” asked Humpty Dumpty, starting a new topic.

“I didn't,” said Henry, feeling he had won a point. “But if you want to know, I'm a little over twenty-seven.”

“And if I don't want to know,” Humpty Dumpty trumped, “what then?”

Perhaps it was the verbal sparring, or card-playing—his mind struggled with mixed metaphors—but yet the glade he was in was surrounded by darker, more gnarled woods than the TV show had suggested. It didn't seem gay and carefree. Henry looked at the trees—someone could be watching from them.

There was a long silence. Humpty Dumpty smirked. “I suppose you have only one birthday a year?”

“Yes.” Henry wished he could think of

something to say, some topic to discuss. He disliked being forced into a monosyllabic answer. He shifted his feet nervously.

“That seems to be the general rule. How many days are there in a year?” asked Humpty.

“Three hundred and sixty-five.”

“And how many un-birthdays do you have a year?”

“What? Oh—three hundred and sixty-four.” He laughed as he thought about un-birthdays and Alice and the crazy tea party. “Skoopy-diddle,” Henry said. His nervous mood had abruptly shifted to a heightened awareness of the ludicrousness of it all. He’s going to fall off that wall, Henry thought.

“You take one from three hundred sixty five and get three hundred sixty four? Ridiculous? When *I* subtract it, it get at least six hundred seventy eight.” Humpty Dumpty paused for a breath, and then explained kindly. “More un-birthdays that way, you see.

“Whose method of logic do you use?” he continued.

“I don’t know,” said Henry. “I don’t particularly care.” He smiled broadly.

“I use my own. Superior logic, that’s what I always say. You should hear me call for enthymemes sometime, or watch me dig up square roots. There’s glory for you!

“Alice liked it,” Humpty Dumpty added. “She admired me greatly.”

“That wasn’t the way I remember it,” said Henry, wondering what the book had said.

“Of course not,” replied. Humpty. “I don’t give away all my secrets to the first nincompoop who comes along.”

Was Alice a nincompoop? But Henry stopped listening to the egg and started thinking. A crazy logic—non-Euclidian, was what it was called. All the characters here use it, and the chess game—he remembered by now that the *Looking-Glass* dealt with a chess game—was based on it.

Something like that fairy chess. You invent your own players—the grasshopper,

the double—and you make up your own rules, like a circular board. He had been dragged by a girl friend to some sort of meeting once where he had seen such things.

Lewis Carroll had substituted Alice for a white pawn.

Use *x* for Alice; all the other pieces are known. Solve the equations by substitution.

Alice—a piece that could be on the same square with another piece, that could not take and could not be taken, that seemed only to move directly to the eighth row, be queened, and then be removed from the chess board. What good is a chess piece like that?

Non-Euclidian logic, he thought, as if the term explained the significance. But, after all, I’m really not much of a chess player, thought Henry. His girl friend told him in chess he was a fish.

Humpty Dumpty said something in a loud voice.

“Huh?” Henry was startled; he had forgotten the egg.

“What did you mean that to mean?” asked Humpty, watching him carefully.

“Just ‘huh,’” said Henry.

Humpty Dumpty squinted up at the sky: “Idiom’s delight,” he murmured. After a few moments he went on, “I said that you have not been paying attention. Just before that—*à propos* of ‘a little over twenty seven’—I remarked that, if I were you, I would have stopped growing at twenty seven exactly.”

“But you can’t help growing older.” Henry answered quickly. He wondered if he himself were a chess piece. He was growing more disdainful of Humpty Dumpty and his “topics.”

“Perhaps one can’t, but two can. Do you want to stop growing older?”

Eternal youth! Henry suddenly plunged from his thoughts on chess into the promise before him like a cool, clear pool.

“Yes!”

So Henry Fields stopped growing older.

*And, in another world, a landlord was
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shaking the shoulder of a tenant who had not answered his employer's phone call. "Mr. Fields, Mr. Fields, wake up! Wake up!" The body was still warm, in the hot summer without air conditioning. The curtains hung straight. "Oh damn, Marge," the landlord said, after feeling for a pulse, "he's gone. We'll have to phone the police."

From the doorway, his wife asked, "What do you think it was—a heart attack?"

He checked Field's wallet on the night stand, and took out all the dollar bills.

"Who knows? Maybe." He crossed to the door, stepped outside with his wife, shut

the door, and locked it. "I guess they'll have an autopsy. . . . I wonder," he added, as they started downstairs, "if he left any way to get hold of his relatives."

His wife said, "Probably at work."

Elsewhere, somewhere behind a mirror, all the king's horses and all the king's men were giving Henry Field's body (or what passed for his body in their world) an elaborate funeral. The drums were beaten slowly. Black banners waved in the air. The funeral cortège made its way down a winding road.

--END--

The Third Mercy

by

William H. Wandless

The Mayawari were a hard people, which is why the mercy of the ocean almost broke them.

Over centuries they had learned to bear the yoke that fell to them as a consequence of their great ancestor's ingratitude. At the dawn of all things, when earth and sea and sky still honored one another, the sea had gifted its loveliest child to the earth, heaving up the willful boy on the island's splendid shores. The earth had welcomed the sea's son warmly, arraying all the delights of seed and soil before him, but Mayawi had scorned her embrace, wishing only to drowse once more in the arms of his father. Ashamed of his scion's behavior, the sea vowed never again to receive him, and the spurned earth nursed evermore a mother's grudge against him. He cried to the heavens for help, but sister sky, impartial as always, offered

Mayawi neither succor nor solace.

Mayawi's pride and folly left the soil sour and the ocean unforgiving. The sea still yielded fish, as it must, but they were hard to catch and their flesh was foul; the earth still yielded fruit, as it must, but the crop was small and the best were bitter. Mayawi toiled day and night to earn a scant subsistence, and when he slept he dreamed of only toil yet to come.

The first mercy was an act of concerted compassion: the earth and sea agreed to yield up young to share Mayawi's labor. He fashioned crude figures from soil and salt water and set them to their tasks as they writhed on the sun-bleached shore. Mayawi did not love them, nor did the Mayawari love their father. Theirs was a slender bond of debt and grim dependence, sullen service rendered for the gift of borrowed breath.

The Mythic Circle #31, pg. 38