



Source: Stephen Erlanger, 'Palestinian aid up amid embargo', *New York Times* in *The Age online*, 22/03/07.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [home](#), [food](#), [sexuality](#)  
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'I don't wanna get the eggs' she said again, more insistently, with more of that oh-so-effective whine in her rising voice, her nasally, whining, rising voice, octave after octave, a crescendo mid-scale on the brink of full-blown orchestral accompaniment, against the roar of the maternal, the cymbals crashing, the winds soaring and the slamming of things, things, things, knife handles, breadboards, brooms, drawers, doors.

'When you get out and get a job and pull your own weight, you can do as you please, but while you're under this roof you'll do as you're told: Now go and get the bloody eggs!'

The girl snatched the money and went next door: it was, after all, her job, as the youngest, to get the eggs. The neighbours kept chickens in their backyard and the eggs were fresh and cheap, covered with feathers and chicken shit.

On that morning, the sun shone and the air was sharp and clean. A kookaburra sat on the telegraph pole and laughed. So it was that she went to get the eggs as she had been doing for as long as she could remember. The house next door was a practical fibro box, symmetrical like a child's drawing of a house, with one window either side of the central door and a scribble of smoke from a chimney made of brick. The house was a faded turquoise blue, painted more than a few years ago, and with dull red steps leading to a shallow porch. The front door had a square crinkled-glass window through which one could see the wavering form of anyone come to answer her chirpy knock, knock, knock-knock, knock. For a minute or so she stood there, small hand warming the coins within. Everything had gone quiet. Perhaps there was no-one home. But they were always quiet in this house, and there was always someone home, and if she went back to her mother without the eggs, well, she didn't want to think about that. They were just very quiet people. Even the children were quiet with their opaque eyes that let in no light, windowless and, like their house, full of cold shadows. So she waited. A wavering form appeared: tall, square, filling the window, light grey against the dark ground of the unlit hallway within. It was him. She screwed herself to the sticking point.

Mr. Mann opened the door.

Mann by name, Mann by nature, Mr. Mann was tall and hairless, very tall, broad, muscular. He could leap the back fence with one step. His lips were thick ropes of flesh, sitting lurid pink on his mauve-milky skin. If she had known what it was, the girl might have said that he looked all the world like a thick, erect penis. Her brothers loved him. He was kind to them and sometimes, taking them under his wing, he made bicycles from spare parts for them or a swing for the backyard. She hated him. He even took the space of her bath in the morning. Before

school she would fill the tub with two inches of tepid water, just enough to moisten the length of her body. She would lie on her stomach as the water cooled, and stare for as long as she could, alone in her reverie. The morning light would shine through the crinkled glass windows of the bathroom—crinkled glass was popular back then—and hit the enamel of the tub in just one spot and in such a way as to send out crackling webs of electric patterns, like blood pulsing behind one's eyelids or the delta of veins at one's wrist or like cosmic fissures in the universe. They were rainbow hued, these crackling lines, oranges, lightning blues, crimson pinks, gold, web upon web, sparkling like a Christmas Tree, entrée to an imaginary world in the secret space of the bathtub enamel in sunlight. She wandered blissfully through its twinkling depths. Then she would hear him. Mr Mann. He would be whistling, just feet away, in his carport, bridging the space between her home and their house, between him outside her window and her in the bath. Tinkering with his car, moving slowly but somehow purposefully, he would be whistling, whistling, whistling. She would creep up to the windows, and, careful not to show herself to him through the opening, close them tight. The moment of sunlight would be gone. Even through the closed windows she imagined him imagining her closing them from behind, wet and naked: the space so close, she knew he would have noticed the sound of wood against wood, as the windows resisted their frames. Still he whistled, tuneful as he worked, and always he whistled Amazing Grace. Amazing, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.

Mr. Mann worked shifts at the Goodyear tire factory and was home that morning. So it was that he came to the door. He leered his greeting into her. She hunched her shoulders and pulled herself as much into a ball as possible, which was not very much, and skidded into the hall, skirting the walls in the narrow, frugal space, turning her shoulders to avoid his greedy embrace, moving, moving, moving toward the kitchen, the pantry, the eggs, Mrs Mann, moving to keep him at bay. He veered her into the dining room, where, the summer before, he had made more than a little headway. He had been wearing shorts that day and had told her how her breasts would soon grow big and firm. On this morning she squirmed away from his squeezing, crushing grip, his favourite greeting, an inchoate sense of why she didn't like it. Ah, there was Mrs Mann in the doorway, and for one more time, she was safe.

Years later the girl learned that the wife's first name was Amy, with a sweetness like turquoise, as incongruous as her husband's name was apt. The girl never could stomach eggs. Like bath water, hers always ended up down the sinkhole.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Margaret Morgan.*