

## The Meaning of Eggshells

The wind howls through the trees as the full moon stares out of the black night sky. Scents from soggy earth and closed flowers combine in the churning air. Sebastian pulls his fur-lined hood back up over his head. The wind fights his efforts to keep warm on the cold spring night. He hunkers down behind an spreading black oak trying to block the gale. A bright red swing dangles from one of the tree's enormous sweeping branches.

Sebastian watches the red plastic move in concert with each gust. He blows on his hands and whispers, "There's room for another swing. There'll be need for two." The company of his own voice does more to stave off the night's stinging chill than his breath does. The oscillating movements are hypnotic. Despite the cold, he nods off.

Shivering, Sebastian wakes with a start. He feels like someone is grabbing his jacket. His breath comes quickly, and his pulse pounds in his ears, drowning out the yowling air. His gaze darts from the dark house to the bright moon still high above the horizon, but no one is there. The sweat that broke out a moment ago dries quickly, chilling him further. His heart slows to a normal pace. Unconsciously, he pats the bundle under his coat. Everything is in place, just as it should be. Sebastian sighs and hunkers down; this is the hardest wait he's ever had to endure. Will the moon ever set?

The molded plastic swing pulses back and forth. Sebastian counts each time it comes closer to him. "Fifty-nine... Sixty..." He shivers and hugs his knees to his chest trying to keep his core warm. He's careful not to disturb the package resting over his heart. A blast of air sends the swing toward Sebastian, suspending it above his head before releasing it to oscillate back the other direction. Sebastian moves around the trunk to avoid getting hit in the head. "Ninety-eight."

A flicker of light inside the house draws his full attention. Is Heather going pee for the hundredth time like all pregnant women seemed to do? Is it warm in the house? He feels colder just wondering. Resolute, he turns away from the softly glowing window. "One hundred and twenty-four," he whispers. The light disappears. She is back in bed. Maybe she was just checking on Ava. Maybe it wasn't Heather at all, but her mother, Mrs. Jenkins. He wouldn't be hiding in the bushes if not for her.

Four years ago, sixteen-year-old Sebastian sat in eleventh grade health class unable to believe his good fortune. He'd managed to land Heather, his best friend, and the girl he had a major crush on, as his partner for the "family project." The students were paired off and given a raw egg as their "child" for the week. Each student kept their own journal and wrote a report about their experience. The project was worth half their grade. Sebastian saw the assignment as the opening he'd been waiting for to tell her how he felt. He'd also hoped to impress his teacher, Heather's mom.

Everything started off well. He partnered with Heather to work out a schedule to care for their egg. They stuck to it until Friday at lunch when Heather sat down at their table with a wide smile and a request. Sebastian got lost in the curve of her lips, even when they betrayed him.

"Donnie Fowler asked me out! Me!" the lips said. Sebastian was too mesmerized to do more than grin back. "He wants to take me to dinner tonight. Me and Donnie Fowler. I could swim in his big blue eyes," she'd sighed. "Sebastian, is it okay if we meet later, around 9 to work on our reports?" He nodded without comprehending. "And can you take Eggy? I know it's my night, but I never in a million years thought I had a chance with Donnie Fowler."

"Yeah, sure," Sebastian replied. Befuddled by her beauty, he took their egg without hesitation. Later, he labels agreeing too fast as his first mistake. His second came when he arrived half an hour early via the alley. That's where he saw Donnie's car. Sebastian smashed their egg on the steamed up windshield.

Their egg wasn't the only thing that broke that day. His whole life seemed to fracture into more pieces than that white shell. He never completed the assignment and flunked health class. The following week, Sebastian refused to come out of his room for anything. His parents put up with his behavior for seven days, and then shipped him off to Harrington Military Academy. For the entire year and a half he spent at military school, he wished he could go back in time and confess his love to Heather. He'd longed to return and tell her to care for their egg together, Donnie could wait. He knew Heather would never forget Donnie after that night. She couldn't. Ava looked too much like her father.

He shivers. Even thinking of the creep who ran out on Ava makes Sebastian mad. Donnie has no idea what a sweet, wonderful girl he's missing. He put his hand over his chest pocket.

Soon Ava will have a father. Sebastian just has to make it through the night. The new baby will have a father too. “One hundred forty-three,” he counts the swing coming towards him with another gust of frigid wind. Sebastian wonders if the chilly air will pull at his dark coat all night, seeking to steal his warmth. He adjusts his jacket and curls protectively around his chest pocket. He wishes he’d curled as protectively around Heather after graduating from military school.

After graduation, Sebastian returned to Dapletown, with a desire to find Heather and finally ask her out. He hadn’t seen her since smashing their egg. The only contact they’d had was via snail mail, no cell phones, email, or social media were allowed at Harrington Academy. He was trying to adjust to life back under his parents’ roof for three long weeks before running into her at the hardware store.

His heart sped up when he saw her. “Heather?”

She looked up when she heard her name and smiled at him. “Sebastian? Is that you?” she asked. “When did you get so tall? What happened to your hair?”

His hand lifted to the close cropped honey-colored fuzz on his scalp. He tried to think, but her shining dark hair and green flecked mocha eyes were all that registered in his brain. “Military school,” he sighed and shifted his shopping basket to the other hand.

“Mama!” squealed a little girl with the same dark hair as Heather. She turned a pair of eyes the same pale blue as the morning sky when the sun first touches it toward him and smiled.

Sebastian’s stomach flopped. He knew those eyes; a set just like them belonged to Donnie. He decided they looked much better on the toddler. “This must be Ava. She looks just like the picture you sent me.”

“She’s the best.” Heather’s voice glowed with pride.

“Of course she is. She’s yours.”

Heather gave a small shrug and cocked her head to the side. “Yeah, sure. Anyways, how long are you back in town for? Do you have big college plans?”

Sebastian was about to answer when the thing he’d feared the worst happened: Mrs. Jenkins walked up. She glanced at him from head to toe, her mouth drawn into a firm line. “Well, if it isn’t Sebastian. You’re back are you? Please, don’t let me interrupt. I’d like to hear if you ever got your GED. I understand you would need one before you could enlist.”

Her words hit him like a steamroller. “I graduated,” he muttered.

“What was that? Speak up, don’t mumble.”

“I graduated, Mrs. Jenkins,” he answered.

“Well, now that’s something, isn’t it? What have you got there in your basket, sandpaper and tools?”

“Yes. I’m refinishing the old creamery. My grandfather left me the building when he died last summer. I’m going to turn it into a coffee shop.” He made sure to speak with respect. Mrs. Jenkins had known him his entire life. Ever since flunking her class, he felt like all she saw when she looked at him was egg shells and disappointment.

Mrs. Jenkins nodded. “Well, we should be going. Ava will need a nap soon.”

“Is that for Ava?” Sebastian asked. He pointed to the red molded plastic swing in the cart. “I’d love to help you hang it.”

“We’d love your help,” Heather said before her mother could say anything.

Mrs. Jenkins eyes narrowed, but she gave a curt nod before turning her back to him and walking to the checkout stand. Heather shrugged and followed. Sebastian shook his head, wondering what he’d have to do to show Mrs. Jenkins he wasn’t the sixteen-year-old kid who failed.

Sebastian lost an afternoon’s work getting reacquainted with Heather and helping hang Ava’s swing. He had to endure Mrs. Jenkins’ disapproving glare the whole time, but it was worth it. His crush on Heather had matured while he was away.

He swallowed those feelings and decided not to ask her out for six months. He threw himself into refinishing the coffee shop he’d bought with his college fund. Heather, with Ava in tow, was his constant helper after that. Together, they picked the paint the color of Ava’s eyes for the walls of his apartment over the shop, and the matching mugs and plates for his business.

Heather painted the sign they hung outside: Last Bastian Coffee House. Those months were some of the happiest in Sebastian’s memory. He opened the shop with three weeks left before he decided he could ask her on a date. He had one part time employee those first few months, Heather. Two weeks after they opened, Donnie came home from college for a weekend and fractured Sebastian’s happiness.

Heather was working the day Donnie blew into town with the full force of a windstorm. Remembering how he’d stepped into the coffee shop like he owned the place still made Sebastian’s blood boil. One glance at Donnie and Heather dropped a tray of mugs. They

shattered as they hit the ground, just like the egg. She rushed to Donnie's side like he'd never abandoned her and Ava. "Did you come back to see me?" she gushed.

He hesitated, then flashed his even white teeth. "Uh, yeah, of course. Let's get a bite to eat."

Sebastian watched Heather morph into the teenage girl she'd been before he went off to military school. "You don't mind if I cut out early, do you Seb?" she asked and flashed her grin his way.

When she smiled, he wasn't the confident owner of a successful coffee shop, he was the teenaged geeky tag-along to Heather. The one who had a crush on her and hoped she'd realize he was in love with her. The boy who was waiting for her to turn to him and confide she was going to forget Donnie because she was truly in love with her best friend, the faithful Sebastian.

"Yeah, that's fine," he muttered and grabbed a mop to clean up the mess. "She called me Seb," he whispered. She hadn't called him that since high school.

"Two hundred and fifteen," he counts. "I was such an idiot."

Headlights penetrate the windy darkness. They creep forward and come to a stop. Sebastian ducks his head, hoping his hood will hide his face. A car door squeaks open. He tries to flatten his body against the tree. A smaller beam sweeps the yard. It barely misses his left shoulder. His toe itches. If the police officer shining the flashlight sees him, he'll have too much explaining to do. His stomach clenches as he thinks how bad it would look if they found a twenty-year-old man crouched in the bushes at this hour. The beam sweeps past his irritated foot.

The car door shuts. The headlights inch forward again and the engine noise fades, covered by the howling wind. Sebastian releases his breath, not remembering when he began to hold it. He leans heavily against the oak and pats his pocket to reassure himself everything is where it belongs.

If Donnie hadn't come back again last Summer, Sebastian wouldn't be hiding in the bushes during a gale warning. Just like each gust keeps pushing the swing, Donnie kept invading Heather's life. Sebastian knew he invaded her dreams of a happy family too. A complete family, not one as fractured as their egg.

Up until July, Heather had told Sebastian her only idea of a complete family meant her and Donnie raising Ava together. She said she still held out hope for a happy ending despite Donnie coming and going from hers and Ava's lives like a broken yo-yo over the past three years. Sebastian played the role of best friend, confidant, and consoler since his return to Dapletown. Donnie had broken her heart more than enough times to fill an egg carton, but this summer was different. Donnie came back from college to serve a month long internship at his dad's investment firm.

He was back in town nearly two weeks before bothering to come see Heather. The moment Donnie set foot in Last Bastian, Heather was sixteen all over again and Donnie Fowler got yet another second chance. Sebastian, on the other hand, ripped open a bag of coffee beans, scattering them across the floor like a physical embodiment of his dreams. This time, he was angry. He treated Heather like nothing more than an employee the rest of that day. After they closed up shop, and the other employees went home, she confronted him, questioning why he'd turned so cold.

All the years of swallowed feelings roiled out of him that night. He still couldn't believe some of the things he said to her. "What's wrong? Everything!" he yelled. Sebastian remembered how wide her eyes had gotten. He hadn't yelled like that since he smashed their egg. "He's back in town."

"Donnie?"

"Yes, Donnie! He'll be charming and buy presents for Ava. Then he'll leave. Only this time, everything will be worse because he plans to be here for a month. How much damage do you think he'll cause in a month? And when he leaves, you'll be heartbroken again and I'll be here to console you. I'll try to teach Ava real men don't leave, and just when you start to really heal and I think maybe, just maybe I can confess how much I love you; he'll come back to town and start everything all over again. I've been in love with you for the last five years." By the time he'd finished speaking, Sebastian's voice was twisted with anguish and pained tears streaked his face.

Heather didn't move. Her face was frozen, mouth hung slightly open. Her eyes glistened as she watched Sebastian. He held still, waiting for her reaction. Tears leaked steadily onto his pale blue apron. A car horn blasted in the parking lot. Donnie's horn.

“I’m supposed to have dinner with him,” Heather said mechanically. She sounded like a cheap GPS giving turn by turn directions.

“With Ava, too?”

“She’s with Mom.” Beep! Beeeep! Beep! The horn blared again. Heather glanced at the door, then back to Sebastian.

He stepped toward her and took the broom from her hand. Tears brimmed in Heather’s eyes, highlighting the green flecks. “Go,” he whispered, his voice caught on a lump of emotion he could no longer swallow.

“But, I...”

“Go.”

“Sebastian, I...”

“Go. GO!” he exploded and turned his back on her. He couldn’t stand to see her tears fall.

She’d stumbled out of the coffee shop in a daze. She hadn’t even taken her apron off. That night, Sebastian tried unsuccessfully to sleep. He was tormented with images of broken eggshells and Donnie’s steamed-up car windows. Well after midnight, Sebastian’s phone rang. It was Heather. He drove out of town to the back road where Donnie had thrown her out of his car. On the ride to her house, through wracking sobs, she thanked him over and over.

The next day, Heather wasn’t scheduled to work. Exhausted, Sebastian was gladder than ever he’d chosen a profession where caffeine was abundant. He struggled to survive through the day, but made it with more shots of espresso than he cared to admit. He was in the back washing mugs when the bells on the front door chimed.

“It’ll have to be to go. We close in a few minutes,” Sebastian called. There was no response. Footsteps echoed on the hardwood floor, familiar steps.

“Sebastian?” Heather called as she rounded the doorway into the kitchen. “Seb?” She held her apron in her hands.

Sebastian turned and looked at her. Words froze in his throat. He tried to clear out the lump stuck under his vocal chords. He couldn’t read Heather’s expression.

“Sebastian, I- I didn’t know. I didn’t know how you felt. I should’ve, but I didn’t even guess.” Tears began to fall down her cheeks. “I took you for granted. I never saw you. I’ve loved you for a long time, but I never realized it. I love you Sebastian, I...” Whatever else she was going to say was cut off by his lips pressing against hers.

Sebastian pulled her into his arms like he'd wanted to for so long. When the kiss ended, he whispered, "Am I dreaming?"

"No," she said and nuzzled his neck.

Her tears soaked his shirt and apron. He tightened his grip on her, his yellow dish washing gloves squeaking behind her back. He smiled and started to make a joke, but Heather cried harder. Sebastian pulled back and looked at her. "What's wrong?"

"You were, right," she wailed. She sniffed and tried to get her sobs under control without much success.

"About what?" he prompted. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

She cried a while longer before continuing. She pulled back a half step and met his eyes. "I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to mess up any more. I don't want to hope for something that was never going to happen with Donnie. He never had any interest in being Ava's father. I love you Sebastian, but I don't deserve you."

"Don't talk like that. You deserve better than me, you always have."

Heather shook her head. "No, I don't. Sebastian, I don't. I heard what you told me last night, but I couldn't deal with it. I didn't want to believe it. After dinner, Donnie drove up to the lookout and we..." She trailed off and looked down at her shoes.

Sebastian used a yellow-gloved finger to raise her chin. The green flecks in here eyes shone through fresh tears. "And you steamed up the windows of his car just like the night I smashed our egg and got myself sent off to military school."

She nodded. "How? How could you know that?" she asked, searching his face.

He laid his finger on her nose and said, "I know you. Every time you see him, you're back in high school and your dream date is standing in front of you again. You're a single mom who loves her daughter so much, she can't even begin to think it possible anyone in the world could exist who doesn't love her just as much."

She snorted and flashed the beginning of a smile. "Don't you care that I had sex with him?"

"No."

"Do you care that I called out your name when I was supposed to say his?"

Sebastian laughed, cried, and kissed her again. He could've stood there holding her forever. Heather pulled away and looked at him. "What are we going to tell my mother?"



Sebastian and Heather didn't tell Mrs. Jenkins anything at first. They hid their relationship from everyone. They simply enjoyed each other's company and worked side by side at the coffee house. Sebastian watched Ava sit in the coffee shop's Kidz Korner at the little pink table with her name on it. He'd always hoped she might one day call him dad.

For two blissful weeks, they stole kisses in the back room or stood close together working at the counter. They smiled and laughed more easily. Sebastian swore birds were singing more than any previous time in his life. But, just as the nights had to get shorter and the seasons change, life had to carry on as well. A day or two after Donnie slunk out of town without another word to Heather, worry crept into her eyes.

Sebastian tried his best to tease the shadow away, but he knew Heather too well to take her "I'm fine" on face value. Her eyes didn't lie. He grew concerned that she held something back. He could tell she was struggling to make some kind of decision and was afraid if he pushed too hard, he might drive her away. Three days after Donnie left, he found out what was troubling her.

Heather came in late that morning and apologized without explaining where she'd been. She seemed distracted. She mixed up three orders and over-roasted two batches of beans before Sebastian couldn't stand it any longer. He stepped into the back room to ask Jeff, another employee, to take over the register.

"Will you go cover, and send Heather back here please?" Sebastian asked.

"Sure thing, boss. She's been off since she got here," Jeff replied.

Sebastian nodded and waited for her to show. After a few minutes, he grew impatient. "Where is she?" he muttered. He peeked through the diamond shaped window in the door between the back room and the area behind the counter. He didn't see Heather. Jeff was taking an order from a couple regulars. There were only a half dozen other patrons spread out at their favorite places in the Last Bastian as content as cats napping in a sunbeam.

Sebastian went through the door as Jeff was handing two steaming lattes over to the couple. "Where's Heather?" he asked when Jeff finished with the customers.

Jeff's brows drew together and he shrugged. "She said something about the bathroom and rushed off. She looked upset. Is her kid sick or something?"

Sebastian's heart skipped a beat. "I hope not, Ava just got over a little cold. She was fine last night." He didn't add that she was fine when he kissed her goodnight after reading her a bedtime story at Mrs. Jenkins' house.

Jeff was about to say something, but the bathroom door opened and the look on Heather's face evaporated all other concerns. All eyes in the coffee shop turned to see her tear streaked face. Her wild gazed darted into every crevice of the room. When she found Sebastian, they locked on, and any composure she'd gained in the bathroom melted away.

They forgot they were in a relationship no one knew about and moved toward each other without thought. In the middle of Last Bastian Coffeehouse, they melded into a two headed being. One head cried, the other navigated a way to the back stairs and up to the privacy of his apartment. Sebastian didn't even bat an eye when Heather said she was pregnant by Donnie again. She kissed him.

The gentleman in Sebastian longs to say it stopped at kissing, but it didn't. That afternoon Sebastian learned what it truly meant to make love. After they were finished, he left Jeff in charge of the coffee shop and went with Heather to the drugstore to get another pregnancy test. The second one was just as positive as the one she said she'd thrown away that morning. By then it was early evening, he took her to dinner and ended the night holding her hand while she broke the news of the second pregnancy to her mother.

Mrs. Jenkins took one look at their clasped hands and her eyes grew stony. She turned to Sebastian and used the same disappointed tone she used to tell him he flunked her class to ask, "You couldn't keep an egg from breaking with my daughter. Just what do you think you're going to do with a baby? You should leave."

It wasn't really a suggestion. Sebastian returned home that night. Heather called in sick the following week. He tried to get a hold of her until she finally told him she needed some time to explain everything to her mother. Sebastian let it be. Slowly, Mrs. Jenkins began to tolerate his presence and his role as boyfriend. Things got considerably easier when she learned he wasn't the father. He didn't miss a doctor's appointment or an ultrasound. Neither did Mrs. Jenkins.

"Four hundred eighty-two," Sebastian counts. The moon has drifted close to the horizon. He only has to endure the howling wind a little longer. He pats the small package over his heart

and smiles. The people in Dapletown are divided on whether Donnie is the father of the occupant in Heather's growing belly or if Sebastian is responsible.

Jeff and the other employees at Last Bastian know the truth. Mrs. Jenkins knows too, that's part of the reason Sebastian is hiding in her front yard waiting for the moon to set. "Five hundred and two," he counts.

The lights come on in the house again, another bathroom trip maybe? Sebastian tucks his hands into his armpits and tries to warm his aching fingers. He tries to hold still, but the temperature drops. He loses that battle with the cold wind and shivers. He clamps his mouth shut so his teeth won't chatter. The only part of him with any warmth left is his core. A latte would hit the spot. Or even a pause from the incessant wind.

If he was home, he would've smelled the first loaves coming out of the bakery next door. Instead, the wind brings faint skunk spray and grass wet with fresh dew. He would hear his alarm clock, not the oak's spreading limbs creak with each gust. A dog yelps and the skunk smell increases. "Hope that skunk isn't coming my way." He shivers.

"Six hundred ninety-one," Sebastian counts. The very last bit of the moon's glow slides silently behind the horizon. The quiet is broken by the squeak of a turning door knob and the quiet scrape of opening hinges. "Well?" asks Mrs. Jenkins. The word slips out in a hushed tone and hangs on the cool night air.

To Sebastian who has had only crickets and the howling wind for company, the word sounds overly loud and accusatory. He stands slowly, stretching his stiff limbs. His feet feel like they're encased in lead. He forces one step after another up toward the front door and his fate. Has the path always been this long? Reaching the porch, he carefully unzips his jacket. He pulls out the bundle.

Sebastian opens his left hand. Laid out in stark contrast to his cold reddened palm are the white shards of broken egg shell. Mrs. Jenkins' shoulders slump, and her eyes meet Sebastian's. He reads the depth of her disappointment before smiling. He drops the broken pieces on the ground and holds out his right hand for her inspection. Slowly, he unwraps one finger, and then another. Her mouth drops open when he moves his third finger. He doesn't dare flatten his hand anymore for fear of dropping the newly hatched chick. Sebastian steps forward and lays the bird in Mrs. Jenkins' hands.

Wordless tears well up in her eyes and spill unchecked down her cheeks. They form small rivulets following the smile lines little Ava has etched in her grandmother's face. Those lines curve upward as Mrs. Jenkins steps back, inviting Sebastian inside the warm house. "It's on the coffee table, Son," she whispers.

Sebastian blinks away moisture as he scoops up the ring box. His fingers numb from the cold, he opens it and sees two months worth of scrubbing dishes at the cantina next to his coffee shop and midnight truck duty at the hardware store after hours. Those extra jobs are all wrapped in faceted princess cut diamond set in twenty-four karat gold. This time there is no Donnie to get in his way.

He creeps into her room. The light is on. She's in the bathroom. She groans as she returns. Her eyes fly wide at the sight of him kneeling on her floor. "Sebastian! Are you crazy?" she hisses. "If my mom sees you, we'll never see each other again!"

"She let me in," Sebastian replies.

"She what?" Heather is confused.

Sebastian smiles and looks down. When he gazes back up at her, he opens the box. Heather gapes at the ring. Slowly, she begins to shake her head and cry. "You don't want me. I'm no good for you."

"You're perfect."

She shakes her head again. "What about Ava?"

"She's beautiful, I always wanted a daughter."

More tears fall. Heather pats her swollen abdomen. "And what about this one?"

"I spent the night staring at the oak tree out front. Remember where your dad hung the tire? There's only one swing there now. But, I kept thinking I could move Ava's swing down a little and make room for the second one."

"You have to put the ring on before I'll let him hang that swing," says Mrs. Jenkins from the doorway. The chick peeps in her hands.

"Mother, I..." Heather trails off. She looks from her mom over to Sebastian and back again.

"Well," says Mrs. Jenkins. The word fills the room.

Slowly, as if time has stopped, Heather extends her hand toward Sebastian. With the same tender care he used to kiss Ava goodnight before squatting in the front yard all night, he slides the engagement ring on her mother's finger.

“Yes,” whispers Heather.