

Eggstreme Measures

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So, I'm co-dependent. Sue me if you want. I was born needing to be needed. To take care of someone, anyone—anything—besides myself.

That's why I'm sitting here inside the aviary at the Arizona Wildlife Park—staring at a duck nest. It isn't the nest that has my attention, though. It's the baby pink egg perched smack dab in the middle of the army-green Mallard eggs. There's got to be something special growing in that egg.

And the Park wants to get rid of it.

It burns my bridges just thinking about it, makes me want to lay down in this brook babbling beside me and take a good roll like one of my dogs, just to cool off.

We've always had a good relationship, the Park and me. We've got co-dependency in common: the Park gives a home to wild critters who've been hurt so bad they can't be rehabilitated, taking care of those who can't take care of themselves.

Like I do.

I spent most of my adult life looking after my husband and daughter. I'm still a bit miffed at Davey for passing away after I took such good care of him. With Davey gone and my ungrateful daughter living two continents away, I had to do something to keep from climbing the walls. Figured I'd work here at the Park, in their docent program. But the program's full, least that's what they keep telling me. No ranger positions either, and they've got plenty of animal keepers. So, I started taking in abandoned pets: If you don't want them, I do. Got a whole houseful of critters—cats, dogs, guinea pigs. Even got a parrot.

Every day I make a point to come back to the Park and make sure the keepers are doing their jobs. Lucky thing I did. Yesterday I overheard the bird keepers talking. They said the rose-colored egg was just a starter and didn't need to be in the nest anymore. Said it was time to get rid of it.

Can you imagine that? Get rid of something just because it was born first!

I couldn't believe my ears. Walked right up to the head bird keeper, Joselyn, told her I'd

take care of the egg. She just laughed. I even complained to the Park director, but he just said the keepers knew what they were doing.

So last night I came to a decision—that egg needs someone to care for it and I am just that person. I got here early this morning. Feeding time's a perfect time for egg napping.

That's why I'm sitting here in my little hidey spot beside the concrete tourist bench, waiting for the keepers to move on with their feed buckets. The sun barely peeks over the mountains, highlighting those big old saguaros so their spines glow and their long shadows flow over the prickly pear and barrel cactus scattered at their feet like peasants paying homage to their king. Day's already too warm for the heavy safari jacket I've got on, but I need the deep pockets the jacket provides, so I put up with the armpit stink and sticky sweat.

Still can't figure out why they don't beg me to be in their docent program. They couldn't find a body more accommodating than me, but that hot shot director said I was too helpful.

How can someone be too helpful?

Just as my legs start to cramp the keepers move out of the aviary and the small clearing around the brook is deserted. An Inca dove coos above my head, its sleek silver-gray body obscured by large grey-green magnolia leaves. Above the doves and trees a cloud of netting darkens the morning sky. I wipe damp hands against my jacket and stand. Bruised sage fills the air with a pungent scent that makes me want to sneeze. I look down. Move my foot out of the bush. Check around to see if anyone is watching.

Step forward.

Listen.

Splashing joins the sound of burbling water as the Mallard hen takes her swim. In a few moments she'll come waddling back to her nest, so I have to hurry. Though it's about the same size as the Mallard eggs, my egg sticks out like a rattlesnake in a gopher's den: it resembles a football with both ends pointed instead of one end being fat and round. Guilt shivers between my shoulder blades and races up the back of my neck as I snatch the football egg and tuck it deep into my jacket pocket.

Everything stops—a moment of silence as if the world is catching its breath. Behind me a thousand eyes stare, watching, waiting. If I turn quickly enough, I'll catch amber-red eyes gleaming in the morning light .

“You're bright and early this morning.”

I strangle the shriek rising in my throat, swallow hard as I look over a shoulder. Ronald Feldman, Park Director, He-Who-Thinks-I'm-Way-Too-Helpful, stands beside the concrete bench, a smile on his chubby face. I wave at the Mallard nest with my free hand.

"Just checking on Mildred." I bask inside my safari jacket and try to look nonchalant.

Peppermint wafts through the air as Ronnie eases down onto the bench. He looks at me from the corner of his eyes and nods. "That's nice of you, Nora."

I don't trust Ronnie. He's too nice, too happy, too everything. His bald, pointy head glistens even in the shade. His smile reminds me of a toothpaste commercial. His shoulders are small; the lower half of his body wide. Kind of like a pear.

The little brook sounds like a roaring river as the egg in my pocket presses against my palm. My special egg, warm and nubby, not smooth like those common eggs. The burn starts again deep inside my gut. How dare the Park be so two-faced! If you're gonna take care of critters, you take care of them, no matter if the shell's green or pink. It's all I can do not to stomp on Ronnie's toe, grind some of that "too much" into the dirt and stone.

Time to think of an excuse to leave and quickly before Ronnie realizes my red face comes from more than the warming air. Unfortunately, the director has a way of getting into a person's space and sticking like a cactus spine in a finger. I make up a fast story.

"Joselyn asked me to help feed this morning. Guess I'd better get to it."

Ronnie lifts an eyebrow as I edge my way around his knees without falling into the brook. He makes no move to follow me, and I stop a few yards up the path, pretend to peek under another bush, sneak a glance back at the bench.

Ronnie still hasn't moved.

A pair of nesting doves catches my attention. Even though I know exactly where the nest is, it takes my eyes a moment to register the fact that I'm not staring at a largish rock, but a pair of birds.

On the other side of the path spotted cactus wrens search beneath the trees and bushes for any tidbits they can find. Deeper in the dusky undergrowth, quail scurry amidst lizards and mice. Usually I'd stay and watch until tourists begin to show up. This morning, however, I'm on a mission. I move on toward the sallyport. Breath sticks in my throat as I tug open the door, pass through the cool inner chamber, and squeeze through the outside door.

Myrtle and Fred, desert tortoise ambassadors, watch my departure. Their leathery heads

look like a pair of saggy old women's purses with black pearls for eyes. I wave and move on—faster than the speed of tortoise light. I do need to ask Joselyn a few questions. About egg raising.