

Moonshine Eggs

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Introduction by Murray Edmond



Titus Books

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A Painted Box Filled with Symbols

Harry Rejekt listened to his friend but he found it hard to pay proper attention to Joseph. Somehow he couldn't get a clear focus on what Bartleby was saying. Harry's mind drifted. Look at his mouth, he thought. Try to lip-read. But it was too difficult. Joseph's lips hardly moved at all. He was a habitual mumblor. It was a little like being at a party where you only catch every other word of the person you are with because another nearby guest is saying something completely fascinating. You feel your ears stretching up like a hare's. They're talking about the origins of the universe. Or they've just returned from Machu Picchu that Pablo Neruda always spelt with double 'c's in both words and they're wearing a thick, colourful hand-woven alpaca-wool cape and a green bowler hat. Except there was no party – just the two of them, Harry and Joseph, in the back room of Bartleby's shop, the Antique and Opportunity Store in Tirau, New Zealand. Well, three if you counted Harry's dog. And Sako was fast asleep in his favourite corduroy chair.

'You haven't heard a thing I've been saying,' Joseph Bartleby scowled fiercely at Harry Rejekt. 'Go on! Did one single word penetrate?'

'Ah,' Harry murmured. 'Sorry, I was'

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‘I know, I know.’ Bartleby drank his tea noisily. ‘Away with the fabulous fairies as usual.’

The trouble was – Harry had just recalled a vivid dream from last night. Saskia Rejekt, Harry’s Gypsy great-grandmother, sat astride Tsigan, her horse, outside his bedroom window up there on his small block of land above Lake Karapiro. She gazed at Harry very oddly, as though she were trying to work out who this strange man could be. And he saw himself lying flat on his back, fully clothed in a shabby black suit. He was asleep on his own bed with his eyes slitted open like a dreaming dog’s. Then the mare breathed out through her soft nostrils and the glass panes completely fogged over. Saskia and Tsigan disappeared. So did Harry.

Now what could something like that mean? Horses often represented the instincts, powerful unconscious forces. Sigmund Freud’s pet starling could have told you that if he’d had one. But surely Harry’s great-grandmother wasn’t standing in for anything or anyone other than herself. Was she?

‘I know – you’re thinking about this new girlfriend of yours, eh? What’s her name?’

‘Shelly,’ Harry said. ‘Shelly Nairne. No penultimate ‘e’ on her first name. Nor on her surname for that matter.’

Bartleby sighed elaborately and stared at Harry’s nose.

‘But I wouldn’t say she’s a girlfriend. I mean we’re not ... and you can’t call a mature woman a girl.’

Was there something wrong with his proboscis? A bogey perched on the tip perhaps. Harry drew the palm of his hand all the way down his face from his forehead. Nothing untoward there.

Joseph groaned for no apparent reason at all and sucked at his hot tea.

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‘All right,’ Bartleby said carefully. ‘Lady ... woman ... sheila. But go on – she’s got to you hasn’t she? Befuddled by a spunky redhead from Te Aroha. Whenever you think about this Shelly with no second to last ‘e’, Ms Meringue Pie, your eyes go foggy and you look as though you’re going to dribble.’

Harry shook his head. He hated the word ‘spunky’. How on earth could a grey and blobby adolescent word like that have got into common usage? Harry pulled a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and pretended to blow his nose – his second line of defence against embarrassing blebs of snot. And he furtively dabbed at his lips just in case they were a bit ... what? Well, if they were moist it was only because he was drinking his cup of tea.

‘And you reckon you’re not engaging in erotic contortions yet?’

‘We’ve avoided rushing into anything,’ Harry said. ‘We’re definitely not being precipitous.’

The truth was – he and Shelly had only met twice. The first time in a pub in Thames on Saint Patrick’s day and they had gone to the movies once in Hamilton. But they had exchanged a number of notes. And, yes, they’d talked on the telephone when he looked after the shop on a Thursday or Friday afternoon. But he was being careful not to let Joseph know more than was necessary about his private and personal life. His friend was a merciless teaser.

Bartleby breathed heavily in disbelief and eased his massive haunches away from the sofa’s leather covering. The springs were definitely under strain and the upholstery made deeply suspicious noises.

‘They’re the same as Spanish women, though. All that whirling around, skirts flying, hammering their heels on the dance floor. Everyone knows what that means.’

‘Who?’ Harry had lost the thread. ‘Who are you talking about?’

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‘Carrot tops. Scarlet-haired women. Ginger nuts.’ Bartleby yawned. ‘Have you ever read Simenon? The French murder writer.’

Harry shook his head impatiently.

‘Weird bugger. He thought that females with red hair were a different species than the rest of us.’

‘From,’ Harry said. ‘Different *from*. But he’s completely wrong. We’re all *Homo sapiens* – red, brown, or creamy coloured. And we haven’t done anything. I don’t even know if Shelly is ... er ... keen on that kind of thing.’

‘Oh, of course! Women never have any inclinations that way. It’s all down to us feeble jokers to keep the world turning.’

‘No, I mean she might be ... physically inclined. But maybe not with me.’

Harry tried to open his eyes wide. His lids felt sticky. Perhaps he was due for a bout of hay fever.

‘She’s had three children so she must be ...’

‘Fertile?’

‘Well, yes. No. What I was going to say was that she’s obviously interested in that side of things. Or has been.’

‘Still, if you’ve known her for what? A month? Six weeks? It’s about time that something happened. Time you got a bit more active yourself.’

‘Maybe next month,’ Harry said shyly. ‘I’m going up to Te Aroha for a family wedding.’

‘Oh yeah!’ Bartleby smiled broadly at his friend. ‘Now there’s your chance. Young brides are showing off more and more of their top shelves these days. Grooms limping horribly into church, hymn books covering their peninsulas. I reckon a nice white wedding tickles everyone’s fancy pants.’

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‘I think this one’s going to be pretty quiet.’ Harry reached down and put his mug on the bare floorboards. He really ought to vacuum this room in a minute except it wasn’t one of his working days in the shop. He was just visiting. Balls of fluff and dust were multiplying by parthenogenesis under chairs and tables. Thursday. He’d clean the place on Thursday.

‘It’s Shelly’s daughter who’s getting married,’ Harry said.

‘Right. So your fecund lady friend has a daughter.’ Bartleby sighed. ‘You know, Harry, getting information out of you is like cracking ball bearings.’

‘She has three. This one, Charlotte, by a first marriage and the other two with someone else – a Dutchman I think. Shelly kicked Charlie’s dad out because Keith blew all his wages on the horses, every week. The second husband bugged off to Vanuatu with a younger woman.’

‘Well there you go, Harry. Feast or famine.’

‘Yes, and the reason why I was quiet was because I was thinking about what kind of present I could give them. Something different, unusual.’

‘A toaster,’ Joseph said. ‘All married couples need a toaster.’

‘I’d like to take them, I don’t know, a kind of symbolic thing. You need to give people something significant when they get married.’

‘OK,’ Bartleby said. ‘Make it a microwave then.’

Sako woke up and yawned. He stared at the two men as though he were trying to work out why the three of them were sitting in the back room of Joseph’s dusky shop when there was a whole world of bright new smells out there beyond the front door.

Harry smiled at his dog. ‘Won’t be all that long,’ he said.

Sako put his head down on his front paws and dozed off again.

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Perhaps the collie's favourite chair was actually puce rather than purple but the vintage wingback had certainly been Harry's first mistake when he started his part-time job at the store. He'd bought it from a dubious forty-year-old with a ponytail, always an ambivalent sign in Harry's view, but he had still found the man's story irresistible. Monsieur Hairstyle needed to buy some special bronco-dilation medication for his old mother who was gagging for breath in her miserable brick-and-tile unit, somewhere behind the college playing fields in Te Awamutu. She was nearly a hundred years old. So Harry bought the chair from the back of the man's Holden station-wagon on the very first day he'd worked for Joseph. Bartleby had shifted it immediately into their lunch room while proclaiming loudly that Harry was a top-notch buyer. Excellent. He had an utterly incredible eye. Absolutely. Harry would acquire a mound of Egyptian horse shit if the turds were stuck together. And shaped like a pyramid. But at least the chair was now merely a joke, a tease, rather than a major issue. Harry's folly. Rejekt's purple thunder-chair. But Sako loved the monstrosity. He fell asleep within seconds of jumping on to the seat. Maybe the upholstery was stuffed with some illicit narcoleptic drug.

Harry retrieved his mug and wandered over to the bench where he poured himself more tea. He ought to scour this sink too. The stainless steel was the colour of lead and it was anything but pristine. Perhaps they made their tea too strong – three mounded spoons to the pot. You could dye white shirts the colour of volcanic soil with their dregs.

'Yes please,' Bartleby said. He held out his special mug which was shaped like a pot-bellied stove with a handle. Harry wondered if he'd cut enough firewood for the coming winter. They

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were easing into April and the first cold snap had arrived without announcement that morning. He'd felt chilly out in the garden in just a T-shirt and too hot when he put on his old Swandri. At this rate he'd almost certainly be lighting fires before Anzac Day. Then he'd have to dig out his hot water bottle and inflate it to see if the rubber had perished during the summer. At least he believed he still had enough wind left to blow up his bottle. Perhaps the new smoking regimen really was working. Two cigarettes on an evening but only every other day. He had stopped completely last year and when he felt as fit as a fiddle he had decided he could try being an intermittent smoker. It was a painful system but so far, almost a week gone, it appeared to be a success. Though to be honest he still rather fancied a thin roll-up right at this minute despite the fact that Joseph was looking at him as if he could read Harry's thoughts.

'Yum,' Bartleby said. He guzzled his tea and gazed at the Alma-Tadema reproduction that graced their smoko-room wall. Actually, Harry wasn't all that keen on this ... what was it called? This Russian Gunpowder concoction that Bartleby had bought in Cambridge. Harry thought the tea smelt as though it had been brewed from a twist of old ship's rope. It had the same odour as the Wright's coal tar soap that Harry sometimes used when he despaired of his spotty middle-aged complexion. Well, there were white bumps under his skin rather than pimples on the surface, but Harry was very self-conscious about his stippled appearance.

'I still prefer her on the right,' Bartleby said. 'She's got a delectable bum, eh? Like a pink marshmallow only firmer.'

Harry glanced at the painting which, inexplicably, he'd not looked at today. He'd have to think about the reasons for his avoidance later. The picture was, yes, still very ... stimulating.

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There were no zits on the young woman's bottom. And its erotic effect wasn't wearing out, growing stale. Perhaps that was why he'd been trying to ignore the artwork. Best to quell the beast until you found the right time and occasion to let him loose. And today wasn't it. But was it ever it? Harry sighed. Possibly soon. As soon as tomorrow would be handy ... be nice.

Joseph had bought this reproduction from a deceased-estate sale in Matamata years ago. He'd had good offers for the picture from more than one bachelor share-milker. A stock and station agent, a widower naturally, had said he'd give Joseph three times what he'd paid for it but Bartleby hadn't been able to part with the painting. So, he moved Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's 1909 depiction of a ladies' bathhouse to his private quarters where, like Sako's livid armchair, it was now a permanent fixture.

Joseph always dwelt lasciviously on the strawberry blonde who was just about to splash the other nude bather. Harry also used to like her a lot but now he preferred the young woman in the left foreground. She looked like a Roma, a Gypsy. He identified with her because he too was descended from Romany stock. Well, yes, she had a very pleasant shape too. Everyone, of course has a shape, a figure, but some combinations of swellings and hollows are nicer than others. Shelly, for example, had an appealingly sculpted face though Harry scarcely dared think about what she might look like under the baggy clothes she wore the night he met her. It was quite possible, though, if they ever got to know each other really well, that Shelly could resemble the Gypsy nymph who stood there forever in the cunningly painted water.

'We should give them names,' Harry said firmly. 'We've been eyeing them up for at least a year now and it's starting to make me feel'

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‘Tumescient?’

‘No ... I feel perfectly ... but it doesn’t seem right just peering at their bodies. They’d be more human, real female people, instead of just things.’

‘So what would you call yours?’

‘Rosa,’ Harry said promptly.

‘Not bad. So how about mine?’

Harry hesitated briefly and then plunged ahead. ‘Symphony,’ he said.

‘Symphony?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s a truly bloody awful name, Harry,’ Bartleby yelled. ‘Symphony my oversized arse.’

‘But it’s perfect for her,’ Harry said. ‘All her various parts are in harmony, you know. She’s nicely formed.’

‘I’ve warned you over and over about reading that poetry garbage,’ Bartleby said. ‘Look where it’s got you, man. You’re a babbling wreck.’

‘I’m happy the way I am, though.’ Harry smiled. ‘But I’d like to close a bit early on Friday if that’s OK.’

‘Fine. I’ve got to get back here around three anyway.’ Bartleby stood up and headed for the stairs which led to his flat. ‘Dunny time,’ he said.

Harry risked a gulp of cold tarry tea. Ahhh! Yes, it was like being at sea in Antarctica on a windjammer or a schooner. Creosote and icy brine filling your nostrils. He breathed out and almost wished he could see a puff of condensation. Your breath hanging icily in the southern air and then dropping with a thud. Small clouds of carbon dioxide littering the snowy ground. Still, it would be cold soon enough and then he’d be grumbling about cutting wood and

lighting fires on an evening.

His gaze shifted again from the painted ripples on Alma-Tadema's marble-lined pool to the young woman in the green turban. Rosa. One bosom was above the surface of the water – the other was submerged. Though could you say 'a' bosom? Didn't that word indicate the whole female upper front, the bust. Words were such strange and slippery things. Why did you put on a pair of trousers on a morning when you actually dressed your lower limbs in one garment? Of course you'd also put on a pair of underpants if you'd managed to do the wash that week. Technically speaking, though, you ought to slip on a singular underpant and haul up a solitary trouser.

Well, he'd certainly have to check on all this later when he could get at his dictionaries. The pair of them. The battered New Imperial and the thirty year old Random House with line drawings for difficult definitions.

Harry picked up a tattered Australian *Women's Weekly* from a pile of magazines. 'Canadian Capers,' he read. 'Why not Holiday in Newfoundland?' Excellent. Harry settled back in his chair. He loved reading about out-of-the-way places. One of these days he really would go overseas. Definitely. Get away from New Zealand for the first time in his ... what? Fifty-four ... fifty-five years.

Bartleby clumped down the stairs and stood in front of the Alma-Tadema reproduction. He stared at Symphony bleakly. 'Not a sausage,' Joseph said. He turned to look at Harry as though he expected a sympathetic response to his condition.

Harry began to search through his pockets for a pen and his notebook. Perhaps he ought to write down a few facts from that article he'd just read and then Joseph wouldn't pursue a dissertation on the state of his bowels. There was a place called

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Fortune in Newfoundland and from there you could sail on a ferry to the small island of St Pierre. This settlement was French. Stroll the character-filled streets. Admire quaint Breton houses. Happy enfants. Baguettes under their arms. A gendarme touches his képi. Yes. In fabulous St Pierre the police smile a Gallic welcome.

Actually, though, Harry didn't really fancy going to a French island. The cops were probably armed with sub-machine guns. And French bread was a kind of emptiness baked into a froth. No, he preferred the sound of that small town on the Newfoundland coast – Fortune. Imagine visiting a place with such a positive name. Yes, he'd much rather spend some time in Fortune than in ... well, Tristesse for example. Who'd want to live in Misery when they could settle down in Luck?

'You know, Harry,' Bartleby said, 'you never move your lips when you read but you do when you're thinking.'

'Oh.' Harry felt his face growing hot. 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't worry about it.' Bartleby wheezed with amusement. 'It's a charming personal idiosyncrasy.'

Harry wished that there was some way to know how you looked to others in the moment when you were talking to them. He could experiment with the next woman he met. There should be a reflection of his whole face, the correct way up yet miniaturised, in this hypothetical woman's eyes. Because she would have to be a woman, by necessity and by preference. A man would feel threatened by another man's eye contact: a female would think he admired her. Then he could see if his lips really did move while he was thinking and if that were the case he would try to break this dreadful habit.

Bartleby turned to examine the painting again. 'And what did you mean – something symbolic? For this wedding present?'

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Rings are the only things I can think of and it's not up to a guest to buy those.'

'Oh, symbolic ... oh ... I'm not sure but something that stands for something else.'

Harry was relieved that it didn't matter that your mouth moved when you spoke. Unless you were a ventriloquist.

'Ah ... what I really want is a whole bunch of things that will represent what Charlotte and her young man are getting into. Because marriage is ... well, as far as I can see it's a complicated business.'

'Now here's something!' Bartleby whistled and swung round from the picture. 'Come and look at this other woman.'

Sako woke up, startled. He jumped out of his chair and barked in surprise at Harry's friend. Was Joseph calling him? Had a rabbit managed to get into the room? Harry patted the collie's head to quieten him and joined Bartleby in front of the painting.

'See? Look at her.' Joseph prodded at the picture with a thick finger.

A tall woman dressed in a long gown was walking towards a flight of steps that led down to the pool. She too had her hair caught up away from her neck and shoulders.

'She's wearing a turban thing like Rosa,' Harry said.

'Nah,' Bartleby said. 'That's not it.'

'All right. I give in.'

'Good,' Joseph told his friend. 'Just take a look at what she's carrying.'

Harry looked closer. 'Towels,' he said.

'Right. Towels and a bloody great loaf of bread.'

'Sorry,' Harry said, 'but I think that's a loafah. Yes, I'm sure it is.'

'So a loafah is what? Some special kind of big round bread?'

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Baked in a stone oven in Turkey or somewhere?’

‘It’s the inside of a dishcloth gourd. A sort of fibrous mass,’ Harry told his friend. He’d seen a drawing of a loofah in his dictionary. ‘People used to scrub themselves with them.’

‘You might be right,’ Bartleby said, ‘but it still looks like a farmhouse cob to me. And anyway – she reminds me of something my grandparents did every Hogmanay when they were still alive.’

‘I hate New Year’s Eve,’ Harry said. ‘Whenever I hear “Auld Lang Syne” I want to hide under the sheets.’

‘Listen, will you.’ Joseph glared at his friend. ‘This thing’s called ‘First Footing’ and it means that the *numero uno* joker to come in through your door after midnight should have black or dark brown hair. And they bring simple presents for the household. One of which is bread!’

‘That might be a huge loaf she’s carrying,’ Harry said. ‘So they can all have lunch when they’ve finished bathing.’

‘Thank you for that vote of confidence,’ Joseph said. ‘So – this first footer also brings a coin and a piece of coal. Food and wealth and warmth for the coming year.’

‘Ah,’ Harry said. ‘I see.’

‘You’ve got it! There’s your bundle of symbols.’

‘Wonderful,’ Harry said. Though he wasn’t entirely convinced yet. ‘Brilliant. And if I put these things in a flax basket, a kete it would make it more’

‘Local,’ Bartleby said. ‘And because it’s symbolic you’re probably allowed to change some of the things a bit and add others if you want. Hardly anyone uses coal around here any more. You could chuck in a log instead.’

‘Excellent,’ Harry said. ‘But you’ve never told me before that your grandparents were Scotch.’

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‘Scottish,’ Bartleby informed his part-time assistant and friend. ‘You never say “Scotch” except when you mean whisky. But they weren’t anyway. They came from somewhere called Pudsey in Yorkshire but they knew all about that kind of crap.’

Harry had just finished painting a cardboard biscuit box with some orange gloss enamel left over from rejuvenating his front door last year. Or possibly he’d done that the year before. Anyway, the paint was still in good condition. He’d banged the lid on hard and stored the can upside down. The orange box didn’t look too bad actually. The oil-based paint had soaked into the cardboard a little but for the most part the container would look pretty good. He could always get some cellophane wrap from New World to disguise any rough patches.

Sako sat on the veranda and eyed the orange thing. He cocked his head and pricked his ears up. Harry watched his dog’s attentive behaviour. They couldn’t really be colour blind, could they? A world filled with grey dogs, pencilled cats and monochrome trees. And if Sako couldn’t see the colour of Harry’s creation then why was he looking at the box like that? Well ... it had once held packets of Shrewsbury biscuits. Maybe the collie-cross could still smell that red jam taste under all the layers of fumes.

Right. So once the carton had dried he could arrange the symbolic gifts in it. He’d mix up different flours in his new, second-hand breadmaker and bake a special wholegrain loaf to represent ... it had to be, didn’t it? The staff of life. And a bottle of red wine for exhilaration, that special touch of something close to madness, intoxication with each other, that any good marriage ought to have. Or could a pair of teatottlers achieve the same kind of thing in some other way. Sitting watching *Coronation*

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Street and studying accountancy at the same time? It might just be possible if they sat there in the nude or wearing some horrible pervy arrangements of straps and plastic and rope.

So he'd buy a top flight bottle of cabernet sauvignon. Something costing at least \$14.95. What else? What else? Eggs, of course, from his own hens. Pre-historic Swedes and Russians used to bury their dead with clay eggs in the graves. Not so the departed would have something to eat when they got to Valhalla or Never-never land. But to symbolise immortality. Harry himself didn't believe in that kind of dream. When you were dead you were dead so you'd better get on with all the good and pleasant things right now, this instant. It would be nice though for the young couple, Shelly's daughter and her bloke, to look at those shapely brown eggs and think about what they might produce one day. He'd cut a small manuka log already so the symbol for warmth was ready. Would that do it? What were the really basically important things you needed when you were setting out in married life? Health? That was probably the most essential gift of all but how would you symbolise that? You couldn't bung in a packet of extra-strength Disprins, now could you?

Harry clicked his fingers at Sako and the pair set off on a stroll around the property. The seasons were oddly out of kilter this year. Harry was still picking more runner beans than he could possibly use himself. His courgettes were bursting into a welcome late crop. And the roses were having an Indian summer. So he could cut a single bloom of this lilac-coloured one whose name he couldn't remember. Blue something. Blue Hawaii? Blue Bayou? Whatever the cultivar was named, it had the strongest perfume of all the roses growing in Harry's garden. Yes, pin the rose to a card saying the whole she-bang was from him. Or Harry and Sako.

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And if a flower like that, smelling like this, didn't suggest health and happiness, then Harry Rejekt couldn't think of what else would do the trick.