

Goose Eggs

A Short Story

By Cathryn Vogeley

Jess Hargrove was afraid of people his age, afraid he might embarrass himself. The eighteen-year-old's body had softened into an egg-shaped figure and with the unruly upside-down U head of hair. Most of his free time was spent in his darkened bedroom where he'd disappear into the virtual world of gaming.

But one afternoon at his cousin's house up in Pittsburgh, an hour from home, there was this girl. Jess's mother insisted that he make an appearance at the graduation party and even though he grumbled that he hated parties, he'd driven up from Steubenville in his old Kia with the broken radio and cracked windshield. He planned to show up, eat and leave.

Cars lined the block on both sides so that Jess had to park two streets over. Light zippy music vibrated out the open windows of the little house. The minute Jess opened Aunt Hanna's front door, a full-face overfed woman spied him and from across the room, with a serving spoon full of potato salad, as if he'd risen from the dead, she shrieked, "Jess! Jess, oh my little bubba. It's been way too long. And in my back yard you live. Why wait so long? Can't you visit your Aunt Hanna once in a while? Come here, give us a big hug."

Jess muttered a greeting and endured the embrace, but when she zeroed in on his lips, he kissed her cheek and let her do the same. "Your cousin'll be so happy to see you. Go on in. Get some food. Want me to fix you up a plate?"

"No need, I'll get some."

Around a long serving table, old and young lined up shoulder to shoulder holding paper plates piled high. Jess squeezed in between two small girls and filled his plate with pigs'n a blanket,

kielbasa, scalloped potatoes and whatever else fit. He picked a bottle of Coke from an ice-filled cooler. So much noise, and so many questions. All he wanted was to be out of there. But first he had to satisfy his mother's wish and speak to his cuz who perched on the flowered sofa in the middle of a room full of relatives.

Jess stopped at the living room doorway. Holding up a plastic fork he said, "Hey Lenny. Good times. Happy graduation." Lenny began to stand but Jess had already slipped away, focusing on the floor; he took off for the empty screened porch, scarfing down the food in minutes. Finally, he felt full. He just wanted to lie down, but stayed there and tipped up the bottle of Coke.

The screen door squeaked. A young woman walked onto the porch carrying a plate of chocolate cake and mint patties. His shoulders tensed as he took in her pretty face and long shiny dark hair. He had the urge to take off like a frightened deer.

"Hey, do ya mind if I sit awt here? So noisy in there," she said.

He gestured with his bottle, swallowed the mouthful. Pittsburgh accent. Polish Hill.

"Be my guest." Inside he groaned, so lame.

She took a bite of cake then with her mouth full, she said, "This is some party, right?"

"Yeah, some party."

Her hands were long with pretty white fingers and short squared nails painted dark purplish-red. He watched her slip a mint over her tongue, quickly licking her lips. Her eyes met his but she didn't look away like every other girl. No, she seemed okay with him. She raised her eyebrows and sighed.

"It feels better awt here, just talking with one person. Yelling over a crowd isn't my thing."

A piece of cake had fallen on her white blouse and sat there like a boulder on the edge of a cliff. Jess looked away. He took another drink of Coke.

He said, "No kidding? I'm that same way."

"I'm Jasmine. Jasmine Szoszorak."

"Jess. Jess Hargrove."

For the next fifteen minutes, a lifetime to Jess, she chatted aimlessly about her summer, her plans for the fall. He nodded with his entire upper body. He couldn't believe his luck. She seemed to

really hear him even though he gave short answers. He didn't need to hold up his end of the conversation. Jasmine did it all.

An oversized shaggy dog, white and gray, whined outside of the screen door. Jess twisted around and said, "Whatsa matter big boy? Coming in?"

A quick bark followed and his tail buzzed. Jess scooted to the edge of his chair and pushed up against the arms to stand. He opened the door letting the dog in, rubbed his head, and patted his back.

Jasmine moved her plate to the table and cooed to the dog's face.

She said, "Oh, aren't you so sweet, you big teddy bear." He barked again, rocking back on his legs as if to play. Jasmine let out a relaxed easy laugh.

She tilted to one hip, looking around Jess so that he turned too. A couple, who Jess had never seen before, was standing by the picnic table gazing at each other.

"You know them?" Jess asked placing an open palm on the dog's back, gently raking the fur.

"Oh, sort of. He used to be my boyfriend." There was something different in her voice as if the gears had shifted into low before heading downhill.

Ex-boyfriends, always a fly in the icing. Jess sized him up. Yeah, that jock, tall, blond, could get any girl he wanted.

"Hey, what are you doing tonight?" Jasmine said biting her lower lip.

"Me?"

Jasmine laughed. "Of course, you. Silly boy. If you're open, let's do something. I mean, if you're not busy. But you probably are. I'm sorry. That was so forward of me. You probably have a girlfriend. Never mind. Forget I said anything."

Jess had never been on a date. "Uh, wait. I'm not doing anything. Well, just upping my ga—" He stopped. "No, I'm open."

She eyed the picnic table one more time. She'd lost her smile, but her voice stayed light. "Good. What should we do? You choose."

Jess hardly knew what to say. If Jasmine were a buddy, he'd ask him over to do some Minecraft. He blurted out, "Hey, you want to go bowling?"

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The evening had gone okay, Jess decided. He'd thrown a couple of goose eggs and berated himself for suggesting bowling. He'd never thrown a strike in his life. But Jasmine made it fun, said it gave her a feeling of freedom, not worrying about meeting someone's expectations. She was a decent bowler, even though she had only tried it one time, back when she was ten. Jasmine filled in any empty air space with her chatter.

She lived in the Polish Hill neighborhood where the roads were steep and the houses were smacked up against each other. Hers was a gray shingled place with a crooked aluminum awning over the door. He parked his old clunker and they walked to her door. "I had a great time." The sound of his voice suddenly coming back at him, too happy, too eager.

"Me too," Jasmine said, rooting through her bag for house keys.

Jess looked across the street at an abandoned house. "Well, good night then. Sorry I was so bad at the game."

"Aren't you going to walk me to my door? That's what you're supposed to do," she said and laughed her easy way, not mocking him like his sister.

When they arrived at her doorstep, she kissed him, right on the mouth, a good kiss. Her lips, smooth as a fresh marshmallow, soft and sweet, her warm breath mingling with his, her hands on his shoulders as his arms hung at his sides, he imagined his hand on her back at the waist, pulling her closer. A car idled at the stoplight of Hawkins and Fifth with its radio turned up high, playing *You and Me*.

It turned out to be the best evening of his life. She'd made him feel important, and for those hours, he pretended he was normal, like everyone else. After the kiss, she had looked into his eyes and said "Thanks for the evening. I really appreciate it." And she opened the door, stepped inside, and closed it while he stood there not wanting to move, afraid to lose the moment.

He never saw her again. He called, left messages, but she didn't call back. The drive between his house and hers took the better part of an hour. With each trip to Aunt Hanna's he plotted a new approach to his search for Jasmine. But at last, after hanging out for an hour parked one block away, there she was, her dark hair up in a ponytail that swung with every step. Her laugh. It made his throat hurt, the familiar sound from that night at the bowling alley. The sun had set but, in the dusk, he made out the figure beside her. Tall, athletic with light hair; an arm around Jasmine's shoulder.

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Ten years later, Jess Hargrove still lived in Steubenville but that evening with Jasmine started his evolution. His grief pushed him out of his room, away from the games. He discovered exercise. Walking at first, then running, then weight lifting. He lost fat and put on muscle. He'd made friends at the gym and met once a week for pick-up basketball. Animals were still his best friends.

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He hated it when a dog yelped. "Oh god, I'm sorry," he said and rubbed Chief's thick dark fur. The Newfie lay below the counter, to the right of the high stool where Jess worked. The dog weighed as much as an adult woman but suffered the same as a chihuahua when his paw lay between Jess's foot and the floor. The dog's eyebrows lifted, he looked up with his one eye, the second closed in a perpetual wink.

"Ah, Chief, I'm sorry bud. You gotta move, you know?" Chief's tail began its wag, always ready to forgive, holding no grudges. Jess sat down on the cold concrete next to the dog and finally lay down beside him, burying his face in the dog's fur. Chief made a satisfied slow grown, sighed, and lay his head down.

"Okay old boy, enough of this," Jess said and stood up easily using only his leg muscles. "I have to get something done. He reached for Chief with both hands, rubbing the spongy head and ears.

"Chief, move. Go. Bed."

The dog stood and wandered to the thick square bed on the floor in the corner, beside the wood-handled string mop and bucket.

Five years back, from his bicycle a block away, Jess spied something, a bear he thought, half laying, half sitting, with a frayed clothesline tied around its neck. Blood covered the rope.

It was a Newfoundland dog, with a torn ear and mashed in eye. The vet cleaned and sewed up the ear. But the eye was beyond saving. The lids were stitched together, covering the empty hole. The dog would be put down within a few weeks if no one wanted him. Each time Jess went in to work, he'd go first to the Newfie's cell.

"How're ya doing chief?" he'd ask, like his Dad would say every morning, back when he was still at home and his Dad was still alive. Jess began stopping by the shelter even on his days off.

Visitors walked past the dog, saying things like, “Ewww, look at that dog. He’s so big. And ugly with that eye missing.” And, “Oh, look at that poor bear of a dog. Too big to take home but he sure looks sad.”

Jess lived in a crowded studio apartment. A couch, TV, a bean bag chair and an end table were jammed in. His bike was suspended from the ceiling. Jess imagined the dog at his place. The food. The dog hair. Barking. Trips outside for potty breaks no matter the weather.

Two weeks later, time ran out for the big dog. Jess sat on the floor next to him, talking to him in a quiet way, reassuring him that things would be okay. The dog looked at Jess with that one brown eye.

That day, Jess signed the papers, named the dog Chief and took him home.

Jess was the ‘manager’ of weekend services at the re-purposed gas station, now animal shelter. The place had windows on two sides and old garage bays that smelled of grease and oil mixed with wet dog fur and kitty litter. Today he had a ‘crew’ of twenty-six canines, weighing between twelve pounds and a hundred. Each one had their own crate space. Mostly they slept, but if a sudden noise like the dumpster lid slamming, the whole place exploded with every dog barking at once until one by one, they’d quiet down.

That afternoon a pair of terriers would be taken out, which meant mopping and wiping surfaces before the new owners showed up. The lower half of the glass door was opaque with dried stuff from waiting dogs. Jess found the Windex and a paper towel roll, carried a step ladder from the back out to the reception area. He’d clean the door later, right before the couple’s appointment. Outside, wheels thunked into waterfilled potholes, splashing sooty water onto the low windows. A woman dressed in capris and sleeveless shirt sauntered by the window pushing a three-wheeled baby stroller with a kid inside that looked old enough to walk on his own, and a second one holding onto the stroller.

Allison had called in sick that day. She normally worked the desk, greeting visitors, yakking with little kids. She had a knack for children, getting them to talk and laugh whereas when Jess tried, they held onto their parents and hid. Maybe it’s your beard, Allison had said. But he’d cut it to stubble and still, the kids would have nothing to do with him.

The electric wall clock said five to twelve. Jess flipped the deadbolt and hung the dog-shaped sign with the words “*on break, please ring buzzer*”. Few people came in without an appointment so he felt comfortable unfolding the lounge chair, taking out his sandwich and phone.

He sank his teeth into the sub sandwich, tasting the peppers and onions, the cheese and turkey, hot peppers and sauce. The flavors mixed into a satisfying combo. He flipped through social media and pushed the lounge back.

The buzzer sounded. The kennels erupted again.

“Man, they’re early.” He took a swig of sweet tea, capped it, and hurried to the welcome room.

It was the woman with the three-wheeled stroller. The child leaned against the door window then backed up and kicked at the glass while the woman held her hand over her forehead against the door, peering inside.

Jess took a deep breath, waved toward the door.

“Just a minute.”

He rushed to the kennel room, to the bathroom, back to the kennel room, wishing them away.

Hiding around the corner, he checked the reflection in a window. Still there, the kid pounding his small fists on the door. He checked the time: twelve-fifteen.

He considered telling them to come back later. The kid had snot on his upper lip. Germs. Chief wandered in from the back room and to the door. The kid stopped and stared. Chief’s tail wagged. He let out a whine.

Jess straightened up, rolled his shoulders forward and back, his head to shoulder both sides, breathed in and out. He turned the deadbolt.

“Thank you,” the woman said in a tired voice. “I was abawt’a forgit it, but my son won’t stop till he gets ta visit da cats. I said, “Yinz kids behave at the store and we’ll go see da kitty cats. They’d a’ been yammering the whole way home if we couldn’t get in.”

Jasmine Szoszorak. She had that Pittsburgh accent that he couldn’t forget. Her hair was red now, not the dark brown from ten years ago. And she’d aged as if life pulled on her face till it couldn’t spring back. She smiled at Chief, exclaiming at how sweet he was, and asked about the missing eye. Jess watched her, amazed that after so long, she was right in front of him, real enough that he could reach out and touch her.

She drew out her phone and began scrolling, tapping her thumb on the screen.

“Uh, sorry, but all we have right now are the dogs.”

Jess rubbed his palm over his close-cut hair, down the back of his head, landing on his neck, he watched Chief behind Jasmine. The big dog’s head twisted slightly to one side as if saying, “Go on, tell her. Tell her you know her already.”

“We’ll be getting a clowder of cats next week,” Jess said. “not sure of their colors yet, but if you leave your information, we can give you a call when they come in.”

The kid said in a squeezed voice, “Clowner? Clowner cats?”

Jess’s face eased. He smiled a close-mouthed smile, “Sorry, I said clowder, not clowner. It just means a bunch.”

The kid stared up at Jess with his mouth gaping.

Jess said, “It’s okay, I didn’t know that word either till I started working here.”

The boy put two fingers in his mouth and hid behind Jasmine.

The room suddenly looked spare in a pathetic way with Jasmine absorbed in her phone, tapping away. Without looking up, she nodded, and said, “Uh, next week. Sure, that’ll be good.” She stuck her phone in the shoulder bag and pulled out her wallet. “Here’s my ID.”

Her ID said Jasmine Zorak. Her hands were ringless. His hand quivered as he wrote her name on the form. “There you are, Jasmine.” She smiled and took the card back, tucked it in her wallet.

The children began crying, “Momma, you promised, you said we could see the kitties. Please?” She rolled her eyes.

Jess stared at the boy. “Um, I haven’t had lunch yet. I can lock up for an hour. You want some ice cream? You like ice cream, don’t you?” The littlest one smiled, and the other hopped around like a cute baby goat, “Ice cream, ice cream.”

“Hang on for a minute, I have to settle Chief.”

Jess called Chief to the dog bed and knelt beside him. Chief never spoke words but his face talked to Jess. “I’m telling you, buddy,” the dog’s expression said, “she really liked you back then. She probably’s been pining for you ever since. You look different now, right? More muscle, better hair. Go on, tell her.”

Jess leaned close. He whispered, "I'll just be a little while. You hold down the fort. I'll try, boy. Not sure, but I'll try."

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The four of them settled at the ice cream parlor's table, kids with small vanilla cones, Jasmine's was a dipped chocolate cone, and Jess with a small fudge sundae.

Jasmine said, "It's sweet of you to help calm da' kids. I can sure use the company. I'm embarrassed to ask, but what's your name? Maybe you said, but I didn't catch it."

He sucked in his bottom lip and rolled his tongue over it, looked toward the door. She really didn't know who he was.

"Jess."

One of the kids dropped a crayon and yelped.

"Oh, come on Frankie. Try to hold onto your things." She picked up the crayon and laid it on the coloring book. Just then, a chunk of frozen chocolate landed onto her white tee shirt and hung there waiting to fall.

"Now. What did you say? I'm sorry. These kids are always making noise."

"Jess," he said and took a deep breath, "Jess Hargrove."

"Well, nice to meet you, Jess Hargrove. We're from Pittsburgh, just down here visiting my aunt Milly."

So, she really doesn't remember. He sighed and took a long drink of water.

She said, "It's so nice of you to join us for a treat. I really appreciate it."

He remembered those last words from that night.

"Hey, Jasmine, your shirt. Here, here's a napkin, if you hurry, it won't leave a mark."