

Conversation Pieces
Volume 29

A Brood of Foxes

A Novella
by
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In memory of my grandmothers, Dorothy
Hegge Livdahl and Thelma Calnon Price,
strong and independent women.

Joey took the eggs, one at a time, in her right hand and cracked each against the edge of the bowl, letting the insides slip out, then dropping the shell into a pile to be composted. Behind her, Mudhen hummed as she sifted flour and mixed the other dry ingredients. Joey took a whisk and started blending the eggs into a lemon colored glaze. In Mudhen's hands an egg was a mutable metaphor able to lend itself to different situations. The hard outer shell protected the hatchling from the world until it was ready to emerge—yet the shell was so easily broken. Just a little tap on the edge of the bowl and it cracked, the yolk slipping out surrounded by its slick of white. The white, clear in its natural form, rubbery white when cooked, provided nutrients and a soft cushion for a growing embryo. Then the yolk, the real heart of the matter. In an unfertilized egg, it was a blob of yellow that sat atop one's breakfast. When fertilized, it was a whole other thing. A fertilized egg was a self-contained world where wonders unfolded, a little like a story.

Part One: A Bare Shell of a Tale

Joey was thinking about a boy, a boy with dark glasses and sweet, gentle kisses that tasted dangerously of cigarettes. She sat with the side of her head on the table and played with a piece of carrot that had escaped the bowl of vegetables she'd chopped for Mudhen's soup.

"I wonder what he's doing now," she whispered, but a little too loud. Mudhen heard her.

"When you came to me you were boy-crazy, and it appears that time has done nothing to change you." Mudhen stood across from her with her back turned, facing the stove. She had appliances that could do the cooking for her, but she liked to make soup and bread the old-fashioned way.

Joey tried to protest, but Mudhen turned, raising the spoon and pointing it at her.

"Don't deny it. Every night I hear you moaning about him in your sleep. A man is good in his place. Men can scratch certain itches, but they don't stick around when things get tough, and those that do are worse than useless." She waved the spoon as she said this, and Joey was spattered by vegetable soup. She licked her lips and thought about chicken soup. It had

been a long time since she'd tasted chicken soup. She looked away from Mudhen, who was a vegetarian. It was hard to eat chicken when a person had feathers.

“Josephine Napoleon, you'd save yourself a lot of heartache if you'd listen to me for a change. You've got important things to focus on, like figuring out who you are.”

Marie was Joey's given middle name, but she'd switched it to Napoleon when she was six, and even her parents had had to give in eventually. Like her mother, the more exasperated she was with Joey, the more of her name Mudhen used.



Joey barely remembered the time before she met Mudhen. Mudhen had done what she called casting stones. She took a stone from her garden, one that was smaller than an apple but larger than an egg, and threw it through her garden gate. Whoever got hit would stop and wonder and maybe come through the gate. The rock that hit Joey hadn't hurt. It hadn't been like a real rock at all. She'd just gotten this sudden feeling of being invited, a feeling that someone was interested in her, and she'd stopped. She'd opened the low chain link gate in front of a cement path leading to a nondescript stucco house and with one step, entered Mudhen's world. The gate she closed behind her was carved wood with decorative leaves and curls of verdigrised metal. Exuberant gardens stretched out from both sides of the slate-paved walkway. The walk led to what looked like a small cottage. She'd already learned enough in her own life to know that appearances could

be deceptive. She didn't know that applied to houses, but then Mudhen's house was unlike any house she'd ever known. As she approached the cottage, she noticed that there was no front door, just a curtain of what seemed to be mist that obscured the view into the room.

"Come in," she heard a warm female voice say. Joey put her hand to the mist, and when it gave way, she followed it. Suddenly she was in a large, sunny kitchen. She turned and found the mist was gone. Later, she learned that Mudhen didn't like doors. She said they gave people a false sense of security and cut them off from opportunities. Unless it was too warm or cold out, Mudhen kept the mist turned off and relied on the bats to keep the flying bugs out of the house and in the garden where they belonged.



"Who am I?" she asked Mudhen a short time after the boy crazy discussion.

"What you are deep inside yourself that no one ever sees."

Another time. "Who am I?"

"Whoever you want to be."

Mudhen never gave the same answer twice. She said that if a question was important enough to ask more than once, there was no single answer.

Joey caught herself looking out at the garden gate, wondering. At night, she dreamt of places outside of Mudhen's house. During the day, they continued with their slow cycle of lessons and chores. They flushed out the filters and pipes in the greenhouse that also

held Mudhen's lab where they grew and tended things that couldn't survive outside in the temperate climate or without environmental support: herbs and other plants for her remedies, cultures that could grow into any number of alternatives for burns and severe injuries or infections. They turned and sifted compost. They cleaned the barn and house from top to bottom. Mudhen pulled out maintenance manuals, and they tuned and dusted all the intricate machinery in the hidden parts of Mudhen's house—some of which Joey had never seen used, some like the clothes washing system that was used every week. Mudhen's house was a marvel of technology and magic, but Joey had seen and done it all before. No one came seeking help or to visit. She grew restless. Impatient.



Joey was thinking about a boy, a boy with dark hair that fell over his eyes when he looked down at her and sweet, gentle kisses that tasted dangerously of cigarettes. She wondered where he was and what he was doing. Mudhen snorted. Joey didn't want Mudhen to know what she was thinking. She was a little angry with Mudhen for reading her so easily, so she said, "What else can you teach me?"

Just a few days later, Joey was thinking about chicken soup again. Chicken noodle soup. Chicken with rice. Chicken vegetable. Chicken with the noodles cut into tiny stars that felt so good on her tongue. Soda crackers soaking in chicken soup. She decided it was time to leave.

She rinsed the last plate and put it in the rack to dry. Mudhen never made Joey wash dishes by hand unless she was trying to teach her something. Whatever it was, Joey decided she was better off without it. There wasn't anything else that Mudhen could teach her, at least not anything she wanted to learn. She needed to be out there experiencing life. She was leaving, but she was leaving with all of her chores complete. She dried her hands on her apron and left it hanging on the back of a chair.

She went to gather her few belongings from the small table by her bed. None of them was worth anything when she looked at them with a hard practical eye, but when she softened her glance, she saw the happy times they represented. In the end, she chose to take with her only two things, the only things she had that she felt were worth anything: an iridescent black crow's feather and a small stone, smooth and gray, shaped perfectly to fit in her hand. She slipped them into her pocket and turned her back on the space that had been her own and went downstairs to Mudhen. She stood in the doorway looking out into the yard and toward the gate.

"Joey, where are you going?" Mudhen said, and Joey turned to see her sitting at the kitchen table. One look told her that Mudhen knew exactly what Joey was doing.

"A lot of time has passed there," Mudhen said before Joey could answer.

"How much?"

"A lot. Time is different here. It will be a different world."

When Mudhen had told Joey she could stay for a while if she was interested in the things Mudhen could teach her, Mudhen hadn't said anything about how much time would pass outside. The look on Mudhen's face said she had probably withheld the information deliberately. For a long time, Joey thought several years, the house and its yard had been her whole world, and it had been more than enough, but it wasn't any longer.

Joey didn't think about her parents; instead she thought about a certain boy, and his soft lips and breath that tasted of cigarettes, sweet and dangerous. She missed that boy and wanted him. She wanted those kisses and his hands touching her hair and tracing the bare skin of her arms. That was what she took a moment to mourn before thinking of the present. Joey knew that any future she could imagine wouldn't be what she found. The world would be alien, but familiar in tricky ways. Joey wasn't worried. She'd learned enough from Mudhen to take care of herself.



Joey shrugged away any concern and walked down the slate path to the gate.

Mudhen called out, "Once you leave, you can't come back."

When that didn't stop Joey and she had her hand on the gate, Mudhen called, "You might be able to come back."

Just the same way she'd entered Mudhen's world, Joey left it. She re-entered her own world on a street lined with houses. She took a deep breath and decided to continue in the direction she'd been going

when Mudhen's stone hit her. She couldn't remember where she'd been going that day. But then, she didn't remember a lot of things from that time. She wasn't that person anymore, and her parents had faded in her memory to images attached to conflicting emotions. They'd never really understood her, and she'd never been able to relate to them. Mudhen was the first person who seemed to understand her.

It was warmer than the late spring weather she'd left, so she was able to slip off her sweatshirt and walk around in just her t-shirt, enjoying the sun on her arms and face for the first time in months.

Joey found that the world was different—but she didn't know if it just looked different but wasn't, if it was just a little different, or if it was so different she couldn't fathom just how different.

In the future, people still shopped, at least that's what Joey thought they were doing as they browsed through the outdoor groupings of beautiful things. It might have been performance art or something else entirely. She felt out of place with her plain jeans and t-shirt, but no one seemed to notice. She moved from group to group, staying on the outside, listening and trying to learn as much about the world as she could. She was relieved to find them speaking the same language she did, but she often didn't understand what they were talking about. It didn't concern her overmuch. She figured understanding would come with time and just wandered around absorbing everything.

Joey was admiring one of the dresses hanging from the branches of a broadleaf tree when a woman gave it to her.

“I can’t take this,” Joey said handing the dress back to the tall, dark woman. “I don’t have any money.”

“What’s your name?” the woman asked.

“Joey.”

“Joey, I’m Lang. Now we can be friends.” She held the dress up to Joey and moved a piece of Joey’s auburn hair to lie against the fabric. “It will look beautiful on you.” She pulled the dress back and looked at Joey. “You can accept a gift from a friend?”

“What color is this?” Joey asked touching the shimmering fabric.

“The designer, Juli, he didn’t name it.”

Joey felt in her pocket, found the stone, which she transferred to her other hand, and then pulled out the feather.

“How about a trade instead?” she asked showing Lang the feather and telling her the tale that came with it.

Lang nodded taking the feather and running it through her fingers.

“A very good trade,” she said and tucked it away in her hair. Lang put the dress on Joey, somehow removing Joey’s clothes without making her feeling naked. When she finished, Lang twirled Joey into the street and Joey walked off, forgetting her old clothes. When she tried to put the stone in her hip pocket, she found the dress didn’t have one. She stood for a moment feeling the stone in her hand and wishing for a pocket. When she looked down, she was surprised to find a pocket where there had been none before. She smiled to herself and slipped the stone in the pocket and continued down the street.



He stood out because he was wearing clothes that didn't glow or shimmer or absorb the light or sing or float. They just fit snugly on his body. He was beautiful, like most of the people here. There was something special about him, though, something about the way he sprawled against the wall totally relaxed but filled with tension at the same time. It might have been that he, like Joey, was slightly on the outside, observing everything. She watched him a moment, then decided to find out if she was going to be able to make a life for herself in this new world.

She walked by him slowly, making sure he saw her smile, and then she went to stand by a fountain. At least she thought it was a fountain, but the water was falling up instead of down. He appeared beside her and put his hand into the water. It rolled off and continued going up into the air.

She took his hand, and it felt damp.

"Your name?" he asked. His voice was deep and husky and made her tremble.

She didn't want him to see his effect on her so she smiled and said, "Joey."

"I'm Tarn."

They stood next to each other, and she watched the water going up, up, up until it disappeared.

"You're new here," he said, and she nodded.

"You're not from here, either, are you?" she asked. His accent was different from most of the voices she'd heard that day.

“No, but I’ve been here long enough to know it well. Let me show you more of the park.” He took her hand and led her to a trail through a grove of tall pine trees.

“Where are you from, Joey?”

She told him about Mudhen and leaving and finding the world so different. Either he’d believe her or not. It didn’t matter to her. She never liked hiding who she really was from anyone.

Then he talked. She listened, not catching the words but liking the rhythm and timbre of his voice. She was getting tired. When he started to ask her another question, she kissed him to shut him up. She knew a pretty exterior could be all there was to him, although he carried a hint of mystery. She could spend time chipping away at that brooding, dark surface only to fall through the emptiness to the other side—his exterior just a shell like an egg sucked clean of its yolk. She didn’t want to find that out until later, if at all.



Joey went looking for her sweet boy, a boy she imagined had become a man, then an old man, and then was dead for a long time. She went looking for a boy, but she found a man instead, a man who was really a fox. When she first saw him, she knew she wanted to kiss him. She knew when he kissed her it wouldn’t be sweet and gentle, but it would be good. Although Joey looked almost the same as she did when she first came to Mudhen, a lot of time had passed, and she wasn’t a girl inside anymore.



When that first long kiss ended, she rested her cheek against his chest, feeling him breathe. She glanced down and saw a quick movement behind him. She pushed away from him and saw his tail. She climbed the tree before he knew what was happening. Soon she was near the top, sitting on a branch and rubbing at the resin on her hands. He'd be too big to follow her.

“Joey, what are you doing?”

“You're a god-damned fox. I saw your tail.”

“Joey, why don't you come down and we can discuss this?”

“Get the hell away from me.”

He sat down and leaned back against the tree and he talked.

She ignored him and mulled on how quickly she'd been caught. Obviously, there was still a lot that Mudhen could have taught her. She'd been on her own for only a few hours before she was fooled. Mudhen had warned her about foxes. One hand on your ass and the other on your last egg. Rarely up to anything good. Always trying to trick honest folk.

“Why were you hiding your tail?” she yelled down at him. “Why were you trying to hide that you're a fox?”

He talked and talked and talked, but didn't answer any of her questions. She tried to drive him off with a steady rain of pinecones and twigs, but he managed to stay nearby. When she ran out of ammunition and didn't come down, he lay down and went right to sleep at the base of the tree.

Mudhen wasn't much of a talker. She tended to say only what was necessary, so Joey had grown accustomed to long silences. With the fox there were no silences until he fell asleep. She sat watching him, wondering that someone with a guilty conscience could sleep so easily. She decided that if anyone could, it would be a fox.



It wasn't long before Joey started missing Mudhen and she wanted to go home. She was getting bored and more importantly, she was hungry. She thought about all the animals and how she hadn't said good-bye to any of them. She thought about her little sleeping loft. She thought about the feeling of welcome she got when Mudhen cast the stone, and suddenly she knew the way back. Joey waited until after it got dark before she climbed down from the tree. She leaned over and kissed the sleeping fox before slipping away from the park. As she walked back to the gate, she noticed that the fox had made her tear her new dress. She wanted to go back and kick the horrid, awful thing. When she brought the edges of the tear together, though, the dress mended itself, and she felt much, much better.



A fox can be wild and beautiful and clever and more than a little cruel. Mudhen always told her that you could tell a fox by its tale, although sometimes you could tell by its tail. Joey wasn't sure about the fox's tale, but he sure did talk a lot.