

**Once**  
by Adam Casalino

Once upon a time there lived a boy named Andrew. He lived on the outskirts of a small village with his mother and father. His father was a woodsman and spent each day providing for his family from the spoils of the forest. His mother stayed at home and put the care and nurture a family needs into their daily lives. Andrew spent his days exploring the rolling hills and green fields that were plentiful around his house. It was a happy life, the only life the boy knew.

One April morning Andrew's mother grew ill. She lied in bed and was too weak to move. There were no doctors in town and no one knew what was wrong with her. Andrew and his father did what they could to help her, but after a few weeks she only grew worse.

Frequently they visited the town to purchase supplies for her. The inn where they received their goods was crowded with people. Andrew clung to his father's leg as they slowly moved around the room. Everyone seemed to know about his mother and they sadly bowed their heads when they passed. As they went to leave, an old man in the corner shouted at Andrew's father.

“Gerald, I know what can cure Amelia!”

Andrew's father nodded his head politely as he continued to the door. “It's quite alright, Edward,” he said, “we are doing everything we can.”

Since his wife had fallen ill, every townsfolk recommended their own strange remedy. Most were absurd, some sounded dangerous.

“No, listen! You need the rainbow *stone*. It's said to cure any ailment. Most people think it's a rock—but it's really an egg! The mottled magpie lays 'em, but you have to find a chick. They only lay eggs when they're young—that's why they're so rare!”

The general noise of the inn grew and Edward was drowned out. Gerald gently signed and nodded his thanks. Andrew looked intently at the old man, who was still talking and waving.

“Come now, son.” Andrew's father laid a hand on the boy's shoulder and guided him out the door.

They walked in the growing twilight, Andrew's thoughts still on what the old man said.

“Is there really a mottled magpie?” he asked his father.

Gerald smiled kindly as he looked down at his son. “I’m afraid not, my son. I’ve crossed every inch of every forest for miles around and have never seen one.”

“But if we *do* find one, maybe we can get its egg and cure mother.”

“Ah, Andrew... we are doing all we can for her now. We can only hope that in time she will recover. It’s best not to dwell on wishes that won’t come true.”

The next day Amelia was too weak to even talk. Gerald stayed by her side the entire day. Hoping to spare his son more heartache, he sent Andrew outside. The boy wandered his usual fields. Not in the mood to explore, he simply walked around aimlessly. He turned a particularly large hill and stepped into a field of tall grass. Andrew stopped and looked around. He was lost.

The grass was almost up to his chin and he did not recognize anything. He opened his mouth to shout. Before he could make any noise, there came the sound of a bird. It was an unusual song—light and sweet like a morning flute. He had never heard it before.

Above the grass to his right he caught the flitter of wings. A small bird popped into the air. It was incredibly bright and colorful. Its chest was yellow and red. It had wings of green and blue. The tail feathers were a blaze of gold and in the sun looked on fire. He made no mistake of its shape, however. It was a magpie.

The little bird floated above the surface of the grass for merely a moment. It looked at Andrew, gave a sharp whistle and disappeared beneath the green. He could already hear it running away. He chased it.

He could barely see the ground through the thick grass, let alone the bird. It kept singing however, and Andrew followed the music. He ran until he was out of breath. The little magpie’s voice was carried off into an encroaching forest. Without thinking Andrew jumped into the unfamiliar woods.

The ground dropped off and Andrew began to fall. He rolled down the rough incline, landing in a heap of dust across the forest floor. The shadows were deep and he could see little. Andrew caught glimpses of the colorful bird by the rays of light that poked through the canopy. The magpie stopped and turned to look at him again. It peeped brightly, before diving into a thick bush of nettles.

Andrew brushed the dust from his clothes and darted to the bush. It was a wild hedge, stretching across two great trees. Cautiously the boy peeled back a few of the prickly branches and looked inside. Beyond the wall of thorns was a small clearing. Sunlight bathed a circle of carefully entwined sticks, leaves and feathers. Cuddled within this nest were smooth eggs, each a different color.

Andrew gasped in surprise. The eggs were real. He pushed passed the thick bush and forced his way into the clearing. Crouching low, he edged towards the nest. With a shaking hand he reached for the nearest egg.

The little magpie leapt from the shadows. “What do you want with my eggs?”

Andrew fell back. He stared at the bird, who looked back intently at him. The boy was unsure how to respond. He never spoke with an animal before.

“Well?” came the small, musical voice. It did not sound angry, but genuinely curious.

“I.. I need one of your eggs,” Andrew answered. “My mother is sick and your eggs can cure her.”

“But I need my eggs.”

“*Please*,” Andrew said, “I wouldn’t hurt it, I would only give it to her.”

“Why should I give you one of my eggs? You don’t care much for the forest and the fields. You never speak with the animals you meet. You throw stones, you pull up roots. The creatures run when they hear your steps.”

Andrew was shocked. “I did not know what I did upset anyone. I did not know I could speak with the animals.”

“You never tried.”

“Please, little magpie, if you give me one of your eggs, I *promise* to do all that you ask!”

The little bird turned its head as it looked at the boy in silence.

“Very well, then,” it finally answered. Andrew sighed and smiled. “But these are not the eggs you’re looking for.”

The magpie hopped out of the nest and disappeared into the shadows. It popped back out, carrying a small, gray egg in its beak. Andrew held out hand and the bird gave it to him.

“This is the rainbow stone?”

“Hold it up to the light,” the magpie said, a little indignant.

The boy lifted the egg into the sunlight. Bands of luminous color radiated through the shell. It filled the small clearing with a shower of oscillating hues.

“The egg will never hatch into a bird,” the magpie said, “for that is not its purpose.”

Andrew clutched the small egg and thanked the bird as tears welled up in his eyes.

“Now come. I’ll lead you back to your home.”

The magpie flittered from the nest and into the forest. Andrew followed, scrambling up the hill. When he reached the field he heard the magpie's music. The bird soared through the air, its colors painting a streak across the sky. The boy followed the path back to his familiar surroundings. As he walked towards the small house at the edge of town, he could still hear the uncanny song, softly fading into the wind.