

The Thief

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They bring the bird in and it's a handful of disgruntled feathers clutched in the well of Tommy's fingers. I know that look and the frantic sound of its complaints only too well. The origin of its defensiveness is tucked against the flash of white: a crooked wing bent up in pain. I stare at it and know how this is going to go.

"What is it?" Jenna asks.

"It's a magpie- No Tom, *not on the table!*" All three of them freeze in shock, a tableau of my greatest achievements and I hurry to amend the outburst for the sake of wiping that look from their faces. "Here, on the floor. Put it by the Aga; it'll be warmer there."

We crouch around it, a huddle, staring down at this one thing on its own, this lonely, frightened thing. Its eyes are like two deep holes in its head; wide and black.

"What do magpies do?" Jenna asks.

"They steal things." I reply. "Shiny things. Precious things."

"Why? Do they eat them?"

"No." Jack answers. "Of course they don't eat them."

"What do they do with them?"

"I don't know, Jen." I say. "They just like to collect them."

Tommy tears a chunk away from the fresh bloomer on the countertop.

"No." I stop him. "Bread isn't good for birds."

"But what about the ducks at Millworth pond?"

"You're not supposed to feed them bread. You're supposed to feed them corn and grains and things."

"What about magpies?" Jenna asks, looking at me.

"I think they eat bugs. Insects."

"Spiders?" Jack exclaims.

We have plenty of fat black things that squat in the corners of our converted farmhouse. The shallow rooms and drafty doorways aren't ours but we've been here since Jenna was born and they know every nook and cranny in this two storey building, every eave and crawlspace. With one nod from me, they scatter like marbles and race to be the first to

tease an unsuspecting victim into the open. I'm left with the bird.

I find a cardboard box and line it with kitchen towel, listening to the sound of half-sized footsteps creaking on the boards. It's hard to remember a time when I had such a lust for poking and prodding at things that scuttle. Before I became a mother, certainly. Before the articles and newspaper clippings about false widows that my own mother kept were pinned to the refrigerator as a warning. Before I became too afraid to gaily throw my hands into bunches of supermarket bananas and punnets of strawberries, back when I was Jack's age and things like arachnidism didn't seem to bother me. By the time I was eleven, I'd found a bird of my own to bring into the kitchen. It was a blackbird. A fox had tried to take its leg.

Before dinner, I make them all wash their hands.

"But why?" Tommy moans, hating anything and everything that smells like soap. It's a phase, I tell myself, he'll grow out of it.

"Because it might be carrying a disease. We don't know."

"But it doesn't look diseased."

"Yeah, well, sometimes you can't tell." I say, pumping the dispenser.

I watch them at the table, captivated, twisting in their chairs to get a better view of the box. Feeble chatters emerge as it picks at the crushed granola bar; the only thing I could find after all of them came back spiderless. It's when it goes quiet that I have to worry, it's when it stops eating, when it tucks its head beneath its crooked wing that I have to think about how I'm going to explain death, how I'm going to talk about dying. They've never had a cat or a dog or even a goldfish. They don't know what death is.

"*Jack.*" I scold. "No phones at the table."

"But I'm texting Dad." He says, his lasagne half-devoured. "I want to tell him what we found." I sigh, caught in a hopeless situation; I know that Will won't reply.

I take them out to the cinema even though I know it's too late for Jenna to be up. Maybe I think it'll be easier if they come back to find that the magpie's already dead; it was one thing and now it's another. Two different states and no messy transition in the middle. Or maybe it's because I'm still trying to make up for the shouting, the drawn-out divorce. I'm still trying to grasp at the fallacy of 'cool-mum' because I know that Will won't ever do these things with them. I let them get popcorn. I let them pick up movie magazines and shred them in their laps while the film plays. I let them sit until the very end of the credit roll when the rest of the seats have emptied and, for a moment, the whole cinema feels like it's ours. They

go to bed exhausted and happy, the bird forgotten for now.

I read for a while in the dim light of the lounge, my sentences interrupted by subdued cackles from the other room, and then, when the letters start falling together, I get up from the window seat and do the things that Will used to do, the things that made me feel safe. I double lock the front door and pull the curtain across. I put my hand against the gas fire and make sure that it's stone cold. I hide the backdoor keys in the cupboard, checking that every one is accounted for and, finally, I make myself go and check on the bird.

It's not alone. Jenna is crouched over it, her face in profile, staring down into the box. I stop for a second in the doorway; she hasn't heard me yet and I have a chance, a rare chance, to watch her before she realises that I'm here.

I used to think that she was all Will, that they were all all Will; his curly hair, his pretty pinched mouth. I see her with her nose almost disappearing amongst the cardboard and I realise that, actually, she's me. In the half light of the kitchen shadows, she is me, watching over her bird. Her bedding is gathered around her on the floor, her own little nest.

"Mummy?" She looks up.

"Sweetie, it's late, what are you doing?" I ask even though I know the answer.

"Can I sleep here tonight? I don't want him to be alone."

"Jen..." I crouch beside her, glancing in and seeing the frightened creature pressed into the corner. How huge we must look. "You know there's a chance that..."

"That what?"

"That it might not make it..."

"How do you know?" She asks insistently.

"Well, when I was Jack's age, I found a bird just like you guys did but it was very poorly and it didn't survive... Sometimes things just happen and we don't want them to but they do."

"Was it a magpie?"

"No, it was blackbird."

"But that's different." She says. "See? I'm going to make him better."

I look into her face. She doesn't look like me anymore or, rather, I don't look like her anymore. I've lost that self-assuredness that everything will be alright. Because it isn't. It isn't always alright. I sat up all night with my blackbird, making gentle sounds with my lips every time I saw it shudder but, in the morning, we were both cold and stiff on the kitchen floor and one of us was lifeless. I grew up. Not over the course of that one night but in a long,

drawn-out, painful way. Age. It steals things from you, precious things like hope and turns them into cynicism so slyly that you don't have the chance to notice until it's too late.

Growing up, growing old, that's the real thief. I look at Jenna and wonder when it will visit her, steal this hopefulness in her sleep, piece by piece.

"Come on." I say. "You need your real bed."

She protests and squirms in my arms.

"Who will watch out for him?"

"I will."

"Do you promise?" She asks.

"I promise I'll do whatever's best for him." I answer carefully and I tuck her into bed.

The magpie is alive but only just. I watch it for a while, remembering myself as a child. I've changed. It's not just the tired eyes that I see in the mirror, it's the tired optimism. It's worn thin inside of me like an old elastic band; pulled taught and tested too many times.

I take the bird outside, tucking it under my arm. It barely has the strength to fight against me; its beak nips me once and then rests against my bare skin, flat and shiny like a pebble from the beach. I should have let my mother take my bird to the shed, I should have let her put it out of its misery but, instead, I stared at it all night, my eyes forcing it to remain in this world and suffer. I should have let a lot of things end sooner than I did.

My hand comes down across its eyes and I feel the thin veil of its avian lids fluttering. One short, sharp crack and then it won't be suffering anymore... A light strikes the patio and I glance up. It comes from Jenna's bedroom window.

When she was born, I bought her a lampshade that looks like a carousel; something that I thought would be pretty. Perpetually paused in motion, the glowing horses throw her face and curls into silhouette and I can't tell if she's scared or sad or just disappointed. Is this it? Is this the night that she begins to grow old; the first time she sees death? I've tried to keep them protected for so long. From this. From everything.

The three of us are frozen; mesmerised by one another: my daughter, the bird and me, and I realise that I'm wrong; there is no nest that age keeps for itself, filled with shiny, precious things. Nothing is stolen; it's just forgotten. And maybe I can remember it. Maybe, the more I gaze into her eyes, I will remember what it looks like and, piece by piece, it will come back to me. I take my hand away from the magpie's neck. Maybe this time it will be different.