

## The Pie Bird

The house was cold and dusty. Their mother was gone.

Gareth and Laura stood in the living room, surveying the scene. They had been here before, so many times, but this was the last time. Cardboard boxes and bin bags were the basis of a rudimentary filing system. Keep this. Donate that. The rest is trash, get rid. Trash. Thinking of their mother's belongings like that didn't feel quite right.

"You start in the bedroom, I'll do the lounge."

"What? No. We'll do it together. Both. Do both together."

Gareth shook his head, and Laura felt like she was seven years old again. You can't climb the tree with me. You'll fall. You'll break something. Always the same.

"Whatever you want...Lolly."

She grimaced.

"No one calls me that."

Gareth shrugged and shuffled into the living room. They began. Beginning was the easy part. Continuing was more difficult.

Laura stood holding an ornament made out of seashells. The figure was man-shaped, albeit with an oval cockle-shell head. Two stuck-on googly eyes stared at her.

“Bin it.”

Laura held on.

“Lolly, come on. This is going to take a long time.”

“I’ll put what I want to keep in this box here. If you think it’s trash, what does it matter?”

Another shrug.

“Fine.”

A pack of playing cards, the Queen of Spades missing, replaced by a Joker with a scrawled on QS. Her mother’s handwriting. That went into the box. A peacock feather, a cribbage board, a small, old tobacco tin filled with assorted buttons. All into the box. One after another, she packed everyday treasures into cardboard.

Laura had one eye on Gareth. She watched as he wrapped a silver-plated bowl in newspaper, dated two years earlier. He placed it into the box like an eggshell. Then, he reached back into the sideboard. He pulled out some placemats with a fruit-print design. He threw them into the bin bag. No point being careful with the junk.

He paused, holding a boxed game of Monopoly, and looked over to his sister. He was always the thimble. She was the dog. Mum. What had mum been?

“Lolly. Remember this?”

He waved the box so that the pieces inside shook against the sides. Relics in a casket. There was a large rubber band around the outside of the box. The lid was secure. The elastic kept everything together.

“You never let Mum be the thimble. And she always let you win. Every time. I hated playing that. I always knew she’d let you win.” Laura had that fire in her eyes.

“Me? She always let you win. Little precious Lolly. Mummy’s little princess.”

The spark glowed brighter. If he carried on, it would spread. She could set fire to this whole house. Maybe that would be for the best.

“Listen, stop calling me that. Will you stop?”

“I’ve always called you that...”

“You haven’t even spoken to me, not properly, for...how long? I don’t even know. How long has it been?”

Gareth raised his hands. I don’t know. I don’t care. Which was it?

“It’s just a word. It doesn’t matter.”

“It’s my name. It’s my fucking name.”

“Okay. Laura.” He spoke the word in the same way that he had wrapped the silverware in the newspaper. That delicate word, secured in aged paper.

“You don’t have to say it like that.”

“How about I don’t say anything? I don’t know what you want. You complain that we haven’t spoken, and you complain about everything I say.”

The silence began. They carried on picking up the things that belonged to their mother. They sorted through the pieces of her life. Soon, the silence was so loud that it deafened them.

They sifted through the rest of the living room, and then moved on to the bedroom. Laura pulled clothes from the wardrobe that still smelled like their mother. Not perfume, nothing that could be replaced or reproduced. Her. Her natural scent. Laura buried her face into a woollen jumper. Hand-knitted. Home-made. Had her mother ever bought new clothes? Laura had never thought about it. That fragrance. It triggered a stream of memories, none of them concrete. She had the sense of places and feelings. Feelings.

Gareth placed a hand on her shoulder and she almost jumped. She was somewhere else, and he brought her back. He reached down into her reverie and pulled her up.

“Let me stay here a minute,” Laura said. She didn’t want to let go of the warmth. She needed it.

“Okay.” That was all he said. He left her there, her head in their mother’s clothes. He moved on.

The kitchen seemed like a safe zone. Laura joined Gareth, her eyes red. He said nothing. Safe. Simple, inoffensive plates and pans. Tupperware bowls and their matching lids. The drawer full of cutlery, tipped into a box for the charity shop. The knives, forks and spoons tumbled together in a jumble of stainless steel. A tea towel bought on a summer holiday in Devon, back in 1975. The cotton was so faded that its shapes had blurred into the background. There was a worn hole in one corner that their mother had stitched over, at some point, in white blanket stitch. There was no one left to mend things now. If Laura had a run in her jumper, it went into the bin. There was a time, so long ago now, that mum would have taken a needle and in two minutes the sweater would be as good as new. Maybe better.

Under the sink, behind the wire cooling rack and brown earthenware mixing bowl was the pie bird. Standing around the height of a large sparrow, it glared an accusation at them. Its black eyes were only distinguishable from its black body by a cracked white circle border. Its mouth was set in the same hungry yellow gape as always. It was like

some tragic Greek mythical creature. The bird destined to always sit in the centre of the pie, and to never be able to eat it.

Gareth picked the figure out of the cupboard and turned towards the bin bag.

“No. Don’t. I want that.”

“When do you ever bake?”

“It doesn’t...I don’t...” She reached for words and reached for the ceramic bird. Gareth pulled back, away from her.

“Look at how much you want to keep, Lolly. Laura. Look.” He pointed to the box that she had crammed full of memories. “It’s just stuff.”

He clenched the bird, his grip tight around its throat, as if it were a real blackbird, liable to break free.

“You can’t take everything. You can’t keep all of it, Lolly.”

He thought the fire would burst from her, but instead she turned to water. She cried like he had not seen her cry since she fell from the oak tree in their garden. A seven year old girl trying to follow her older brother. He loved climbing. She loved him. She had to follow him and he had to reach down and pull her up.

Then, he called for mum. She would know what to do. She ran from the kitchen, not this kitchen, but the kitchen of their childhood. Apron billowing, face red with panic and the heat of the oven. Mum covered Lolly with kisses and rubbed at her bruised knee. Gareth was sent to his room for the rest of the day, but he got to come downstairs to the table for steak and kidney pie. The blackbird, this pie bird, sitting there proudly in the centre of the brown pastry circle.

Laura sobbed silent tears, staring at the bird the whole time. Gareth released his grip, as though giving the inanimate creature the chance to escape.

“I...” She tried to speak.

“I know. I know. But you can’t. You can’t hold on to everything. You have to let go.”

“This is all I have left. It’s all we have left. Things. Memories. Don’t you see?”

“Things,” he said, “are just things.”

He tossed the pie bird towards the bin bag. Laura leapt forward to catch it as it flew. She nearly made it. The tips of her fingers brushed the tips of its shiny smooth wings.

She squawked in anguish as the never-living creature crashed to the floor and split into two sharp shards.

“What have you done? Why did you do that? What’s wrong with you? Why do you always have to ruin everything?” Her voice was a whine.

She knelt on the cold tiles, holding both halves of the bird, pressing them together. A little glue. That’s all she needs. A little glue. I can fix this. I can...

Gareth stood. He watched Laura. He looked at the pie bird. What would mum do? She would fix this. She would fix everything, but she was gone. The words I’m sorry swam around his head, but they didn’t come out of his mouth.

Lolly ran her finger along the crack between the two sections of ceramic. Could she channel some kind of magic from her mother? Something that would repair the bird, make everything better?

The brother stood and the sister sat, both silent. There were no words.