



One for Sorrow, Two for Joy

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Animals

‘Sly, crafty old magpie,’ grandma said. She smiled and we watched wide eyed as she smiled her hundred-times grin; each crease in her face beaming another curve; sideways, upside down.

‘They steal you know.’ We watched her reach up to the tufts of twigs in the apple tree, blinded by the sun. We ducked from it as she strained to the glints.

‘Shiny things.’

The chitter of the monochrome magpies heightened as she pulled out tarnished silver and broken pieces of necklaces and handed them to our wide-eyed, wide hands.

‘Five for silver, six for gold. Do you know that on the other side of the earth, magpies don’t chatter, but flute? And they don’t steal, but swoop down and attack your eyes.’

We flinched. Grandma’s stories. Silver, gold, secrets, violence. Keeps you meek and the world magic, keeps you safe, keeps you fed your supper with no complaints, and in bed by eight.

Grandma winked at us and we stepped back as the bickering chatter of magpies scattered in a shimmer of eye aching blue and ebony.

‘Time for tea girls.’

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Over our bread and jam, grandma taught us the full rhyme. We ran upstairs after supper to the attic to sit cross legged on the floor and face each other. We were captivated by these thoughts of silver and gold and the secret lives of magpies.

‘So when you see two magpies, it’s good luck?’

‘Yes, because they’re married.’

‘What do you think a magpie wedding is like?’

We are momentarily lost, thinking about this.

‘Well I think they have to bring silver and gold.’

‘What sort? In sort of thread and material? Or piles of coins? Or goblets?’

We ponder again.

‘Coins have got to be hard to carry around for magpies. Maybe silks they can tie to their ankles like streaming ribbons. And thin pendants they can carry in their beaks. But what about the bad luck?’

‘Well, if one is alone, it means his wife has died.’

‘Or her husband.’

‘But why is it bad luck for three for a girl?’

This is troubling. Are we bad luck too; double bad luck? Were we not supposed to be born? We stare at each other seeking comfort in the endlessly renewing fascination of our matching faces. We had rather look at each other than in a mirror, because the glass shows the less familiar thing. We are more accustomed to each other’s face than our own.

‘Maybe it’s more simple. It’s just a married pair, plus one.’

We look at the floor, doubtful, and tug our skirts in thought. Then a chitter by the window disturbs us and we skip up to lean out of the sash from grandma’s attic and watch the magpies going to bed.

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Grandma combs our hair into bunches which we hate, and we go out into the lane. We skip along holding hands, reciting ‘one for sorrow, two for joy.’ We stop every time we see magpies to count them and whenever we see a solitary one in its white waistcoat and shiny black jacket, we remember to shout, ‘good morning Mr Magpie, how’s your wife?’ We alternate this with ‘Mrs’ and ‘husband,’ to make sure we’re fair.

A man stops to watch us throwing bread to the magpies.

‘They could be your witch familiars!’ he laughs, while grandma frowns. ‘Those two look the same. Just like you two.’

We don’t really know what he means, but we like the sound of it.

Next door had a cat. It used to chase the magpies and we laughed to see ten of them see it off; ‘what’s ten magpies grandma?’ ‘ten for a surprise!’ and the cat slunk off to sulk. Grandma told us other versions and used to chase us when we saw ‘eight for a kiss!’ but it always ended up with the devil somehow.

‘Are magpies evil?’ we ask each other. We’re not sure.

'But it's always two for joy.' We are calmed. Whether three is for a girl or a funeral, the two of us are always for good luck.

* * * *

We go into the forest at night. We planned it for weeks like a midnight feast, like a treasure hunt. We would find the home of the magpies and bring back everything they stole. We imagined reuniting tearful princesses with their jewels, and we would be heroes and be rewarded. It felt a bit like a betrayal of the magpies, but maybe we never thought we'd really steal their treasure. We just wanted to see it, shining and heaped up with the magpies dancing round it.

We went into the forest at night.

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We were afraid in the dark, but we held hands and took turns being the bravest. We reminded ourselves that there are no bears and wolves; those mindless savages that can't be reasoned with or be moved by two little girls in the woods. We were not lost, we marked two notches (two for joy) in a tree every time we changed direction.

Into the forest.

The moon is half full exactly and we can see the ghostly outline of its shadowed half. Black and white, a bit like a magpie. It's a cool night, but not as cold as winter and we have our jumpers on. The forest is thick and shudders around us, leaves whisper and we tighten hands. We follow a crook in the path into a clearing. And here is the Magpie King and all his court, resplendent in black and white, the green blue shimmers of their feathered coats gleam in the light from a vast pile of silver and gold heaped before him, and all the other magpies skip and flap around him. The sound is deafening and the movement of black and white, white and black dizzying until all colour and shapes break down and become each other, identical twins, and we stop pretending to be brave now. The Magpie Court has us in its beak.

When the Magpie King steps forward, we see his silver chain of office resting on his white breast and there are gold ribbons streaming from his legs. Behind is his throne in giddy opal and amethyst and there are pillars framing it in emerald and gold, like the moon floating in the forest. When he speaks, it is the corvid call and chatter.

'What two little girls dare to leave their beds in the middle of the night to wander my forest?'

We look at each other. No heroic plans of returning treasure now. We speak up.

'We wanted to admire your beautiful court. We wanted to see your silver and gold.'

We wanted to tell the lonely magpies not to be sad and give them company.

'So you wanted to gawp at my riches, not bring any?' the king squawks. The talons on his feet gleam and his beak is razor sharp. His eyes widen and the rage swells his huge wings.

We shuffle awkwardly. We apologise. We beg to be allowed to go forth from that place and return again with gifts for the magpies.

'No,' the King's voice ratchets. 'Thieves fear thievery most of all.' He circles us, inspecting us both, our bunches, our socks, our jumpers, his wings barring us from the rest of the forest. 'You have seen our secret to never be told. Now I need a bargain to be sure you won't steal our secrets or our treasure.' And he lunges for us and drags at us and all the magpies peck and push and the world is black and white and sharp and we are pulled apart for the first time in our life.

It always ends with the devil somehow.

'Bring back treasure,' the king commands. 'Before you can leave here together.'

I run alone through the forest.

* * * *

Our eyes are both stinging, we know, and our throats both breathless and shut; we both feel the empty air at our side, but I am so cold in the forest.

Back home I slam through the door sobbing and empty drawers – I have become magpie eyed for shiny things. I scoop up teaspoons, clocks, small figurines, I steal granddad's watch and grandma's wedding rings and pearl earrings from the painted china pots she keeps on her dresser.

Out again into the night I run with these offerings for the magpie king to pay for my sister back again.

* * * *

Crafty magpie, grandma said. Sly old bird.

Back into the clearing, there are no birds; no opal amethyst throne, no court, no sister. I lay down with my bag of offerings and wait. I watch the moon sink and the sky fade from black to white. I wait until I get hungry, and I get cold and I stay waiting. I wait alone for days with the seven-magpie secret.

Crafty old magpies. They steal things.

In the grey dawn, a single magpie drops onto the branch of the dead oak above me. It chatters mournfully.

One for sorrow.

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