

Chatelaines
Elly Strigner 2012

I woke before six o'clock on my sixteenth birthday, and when I looked outside, there was a stork sitting on the bonnet of my neighbours' Fiat Panda. I don't know what woke me up so early; maybe it had been the soft thud of beating wings finding their way into my sleep, for after a few minutes, when I sat up in bed and drew back the curtains, there it was; a stork, standing gracefully on one leg, its long neck curved in a capital 'S'.

The sky was opaque with clouds, it was cold and there was a smattering of half-hearted rain on my window. I stayed very still, listening to the cat wheezing on my bed, and to the gentle shuffle of water hitting glass. The bird was bright white against the grey sky and rain-sodden concrete. Doing nothing. Just standing, watching.

Then my alarm clock went off, and the 6 o'clock news pip sounded on the radio. The cat clawed at my pajamas, I looked down to shoo him away – and when I looked out of the window again, the bird had gone.

The house was empty; the sort of emptiness you can sense before you're certain of it. I was alone, but this wasn't unusual. My Dad is a doctor; he was on nights at the hospital this week, so he wouldn't get home until mid-morning, when he'd sleep and then be out again in the afternoon. My Stepmother, Nancy, worked long, unpredictable hours as a freelance seamstress for theatre productions. She had been away all week on a particularly demanding job, but I hoped I would see her this evening. Nancy reminds me of a rag doll that has been loved almost too much; she is pretty, but always falling to pieces. I think my Dad felt protective of her, when he met her, a couple of years ago – she was rushed to hospital after accidentally stitching the index and middle fingers of her left hand together with an industrial sewing machine; my Dad had to unstitch them, then stitch them back up again individually. It would not be good enough just to mend her, and then send her back to wherever she was from – she was worth keeping. My real Mum is more like an expensive china doll that we could not afford. I don't see her any more.

So this morning I was alone – well, apart my goldfish, Robert, and the cats. I call them Satan and Fusspot, though their official names are too boring to mention. I think a name should reflect a personality. Robert, for example, is the perfect name for my goldfish, which is just a bit ordinary. He's very elusive, as he's usually being watched by Satan, and ends up cowering somewhere inside the plastic castle in his tank. Mum gave him to me when I was twelve – my last ever present from her, a few months before she left. I think he comfort eats to try and forget that the cat is always watching; when I first got him, he came in the same big, blue tank that he now lives in, and he was smaller than my thumb, and in four years he has grown to be as big as my index finger. Goldfish can live for a long time, often more than ten years. But I sometimes think he'll be dead before I see my Mum again.

I showered, dressed and tried not to check the post when I went downstairs, just to prove to myself how unimportant the day was. Or maybe, secretly, it was to prolong the bubble of suspense hovering somewhere inside me. But I couldn't help myself.

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Six brightly coloured envelopes were already waiting for me on the mat, flashing like promises.

So, with Satan rubbing against my legs, I gathered the stash and went through to the kitchen, suppressing my hope that one of these envelopes would be from her. I ate my toast surrounded by a little fortress of cards.

I dawdled on my front step, clutching my coat and gloves. Had I really seen a stork? Little beads of doubt started rattling in my head, but I had to shake them off and get to school. Nothing had arrived from my Mum, but the strangeness of seeing that bird had reignited a tiny pink birthday candle of hope in the back of my mind. Hope makes you expectant; it makes you want to hang around for something more. I exhaled softly; watching my breath twist upwards in a fluffy mass, trying to find new shapes in the damp air. The piercing cold numbed my disappointment a bit, so I began walking.

I knocked on Jenny's door on my way to the bus stop. I have only known Jenny since we got put in the same Maths set earlier this year, but now we walk together every day. I still haven't been inside her house. The only part of it I ever get to see is the utility room, through the back entrance, and even then Jenny always opens and shuts the door so quickly that I've only caught glances of the washing machine and the tumble dryer.

I have a sort of collage in my mind of what the room looks like, an assembly of clippings from a 1980s interiors magazine. If I'm waiting ages for her, I go off into some weird daydream, where I imagine Jenny is hiding something from me – dead bodies, stolen zoo animals, a sphinx - but actually it's just that she has two highly strung Yorkshire terriers, and if she stands there with the door open they'll come running out onto the road. Their last bid for freedom, I like to think.

Jenny's Mum is as mysterious as the house. I never see her, but I'll nearly always hear her, yelping out a single, monotonous command - to shut the door properly. In my mind she has the body of a woman and the head of a dog, and stands there in an apron, folding the laundry or unpacking the vacuum, lips peeled back over pointed teeth, her black beady eyes darting about beneath a shaggy fringe. My ears unwittingly prick up at the sound of her voice, because it proves she is there. She is present. Not like my Mum, whose voice I can hardly remember.

'Happy Birthday!' Jenny trilled musically, stepping onto the porch and pulling on the door handle with great emphasis. She handed me a card and a little shiny packet. 'Did you get anything good?'

My friends and I huddled in our usual shelter near the I.T block at lunch, sharing the ends of cigarettes and the chocolate Jenny had given me. We linked arms to keep warm, and made plans for the weekend; I opened a few more cards. In Maths I drummed my pen against the desk and looked for things outside the window, but the only white birds I could see were the seagulls, which came every day to scour the

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bins in shabby clusters. They mingled with the crows on the empty football pitch; scattering and bouncing to and fro on the slick gravel, like black and white paper cutouts. The sky had hardened into a sheet of colourless marble, interrupted only by the stark trees lining the playing fields; black branches scraped and crackled against the grey. There might be snow, later, I thought; although I knew the ground was too wet for it to stick.

Last lesson of the day was Art, and we made linocuts. I was mildly sleepy from food, fresh air, and the monotony of the day. I hacked at my design distractedly. Within minutes I had sliced my thumb open with the cutter, and watched in surprise as a scarlet pearl swelled, quivered and tipped onto my desk.

'Eurgh, blood! Mrs Evans!' my friend Kate squealed, pointing at me. Mrs Evans sighed; as though it had been deliberate. 'That's exactly what we don't want to happen when we're working with sharp objects'.

She swathed my thumb with brown paper and sent me off to the medical room.

Freshly bandaged, I dawdled back to class through the empty corridor. It was dark and peaceful. I spun lazily on one heel, pushing backwards through the double doors, and reached the stairs to the art block. It was only after three but outside the sky was racing towards nighttime. I looked for patterns on the muddy floor, chasing the fragmented shadows that pulsed across it in the dim light. I walked past an open office door on my left; against the sound of a kettle boiling, two women were chatting inside. Then I noticed there was a pair of scissors on the floor, pointing directly at me.

They were large and, although they looked brand new, had the weight of something old. I picked them up and held them carefully with both hands, blades pointing to the floor, and ran my good thumb over the brass pivot, then around the inside of the heavy black bows. Where I expected just smooth, cold metal, I felt an irregularity on the surface. I peered closer; a single word - 'Chatelaine' - was neatly engraved in a curling font.

I stood in the doorway of the office, ready to hand them in, and waited for the women to notice me.

'Just take them', said the younger one, without looking up. 'Somebody came tearing down the hallway a minute ago. They probably fell out of their bag.'

'Yeah, it's their own fault if they've lost them,' the older woman chipped in.

'Everybody knows you shouldn't run with scissors!'

She gave a huge cackle that pierced the air. The first woman winced at her computer screen. Why not take them? It was my birthday, after all. I thanked the ladies and walked on, wondering how somebody could have dropped them without hearing them clatter on the floor.

Back at my desk, I tested them out on a sheet of paper. They were sharp, quick and splendid at their job, and the slicing sound they made was a delightful cackle; not like my well-loved, now nearly blunt pair, that I'd managed to hold onto since year 7. I picked up the old ones. Their gummy blades chewed sadly through a scrap of paper, only just moulding the edges, making no distinctive shape. Nothing but a muffled sigh. They had once been new and sharp. I suddenly felt guilty - who wants to feel as though they have been replaced by something better? That was the sort of feeling I could understand. 'Sorry', I whispered, and slid them carefully into my leather pencil case.

I sat back down next to Kate, and placed the new pair on my desk by the window. They sat there smugly, winking and flashing, and I felt for a second that this was no coincidence – that the scissors had found me.

When I got home, a mist of smoke was hovering in the kitchen, and Nancy was waiting for me, holding a slightly singed cake and a bottle of fizzy wine. I showed her my wounded thumb, and we toasted our glasses, and sat down to eat the cake. It was somehow better for being a bit overcooked. I unpacked my bag on the kitchen table as we talked.

'Look what I found', I said, handing her the scissors.

Her mouth formed a little 'o'. I told her how I found them. Or rather, how they found me.

'Ah - *Chatelaines*' she said; pointing out the word I had noticed earlier on the bows. 'They're rare. They don't make these any more. Do you know where that word comes from?'

I shook my head. It sounded like a French cake.

'Well it is a French word...hold on a second.' She darted up the stairs, and I heard her shuffle around in her little sewing room for a few moments. She returned holding a book – 'A History of Jewellery' - in one hand, and something too small for me to see in the other.

'In the olden days,' she sat down again, and flicked through the open book on her lap 'women used them to carry their sewing tools around. Like a Swiss army knife, but for ladies.' She traced a paragraph with her finger. ' "*The name Chatelaine derives from the French term Châtelaine, meaning Mistress of the castle...it was designed to carry tools that may be necessary for the woman of the household to tackle domestic issues she may encounter in daily life.*" ' She paused, and held the book out, so that I could see the page. 'Look at this. Lovely, isn't it?'

There was a drawing of a lady in profile, wearing a buttoned corset and bustle and a large, feathered hat on her head. You could see just from her posture that she had the confidence of somebody wealthy, who was used to being thought of as fashionable. Little charms were peeping out from beneath the hem of her waistcoat.

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'She's got *three...*' said Nancy, 'that means she's a show-off. Very rich.'

The lady in the picture stared off into the distance loftily, as if she knew we were looking at her.

'The company just pinched the name for their brand of scissors, because they were considered the finest. But these', Nancy said, prising open my palm and pressing a small, cold thing into it, 'are a real pair of Chatelaines.'

The small, gold-coloured scissors glistened in my palm, attached to a fine, clinking chain. The bows were engraved with curling feathers, and their blades tapered off into an elegant beak. The dainty pivot gazed up watchfully.

'A stork', I said.

Nancy topped up our glasses. 'They were my Granny's. She wore them around her neck almost every day I saw her. I loved them so much she gave them to me; well, I had to give her a penny for them.'

'Why did you have to give her a penny?'

But Nancy had turned her attention back to the bigger pair. I watched as she turned them over, examining them with long fingers. Nancy's hands were the most graceful of any I'd ever seen. The skin surrounding her nails was red and hardened, little nicks and scratches floated all over her knuckles, and of course two long trails of deep white spots, like tribal tattoos, danced forever across two fingers of her left hand. But they moved as quickly as Catherine wheels.

'These are a very good find, Lottie. We used to use these in costume all the time, until they stopped making them. They're very reliable.' She took a sip of fizz. 'Someone is probably missing them.'

'I did try to hand them in', I said, a little guiltily. 'Do you want them?'

But it seemed wrong to offer those commanding blades to soft, pretty Nancy, and suddenly I understood why she had paid for her Granny's scissors. A pair of scissors performs one universal action, and it's not the sort of thing that should be flippantly passed on, or stumbled across, or stolen. It should be paid for.

'No...', said Nancy, vaguely, and for a moment I wondered if she'd read my mind. She smiled kindly. 'They're not really yours to give. Anyway, I definitely don't need them. Do you have any idea how many pairs I actually own?'

I looked at the smaller pair in my palm. As pretty and elegant as they were, I had no doubt that those beak-shaped blades were razor-sharp, and perfectly efficient. I handed them back to Nancy, making sure I held them properly, blades pointing away from her.

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Maybe the big pair had just felt unappreciated, unfulfilled, and needed to cut themselves free from the bleak interior of somebody's rucksack. But that wasn't my problem. I put them back in my bag, next to my soft, protective pencil case, ready to take back to school. They would just have to become lost property.