

THE GIFT**1152 words**

She can barely remember the reason for her enmity, but it has been stoked so large now that Jess is all but consumed. It is a swelling, bitter thing that barges into the corners of her thoughts. She feels compelled to act.

Why now? She's had a skinful. She has barely been able to watch the movie, with its accompanying doleful and unsettling sound effects, so charged is she with feeling. She has been carrying it around for days like a chalice. It must spill its contents or she might never find release.

She finds the bleach bottle under the kitchen sink, and picks up her torch. She is on a mission. In her urgency she does not put on shoes. With a feeling of wild excitement she climbs over her neighbour's locked gate. The intermittent moon casts shadows on a grey landscape.

The grass is damp under her feet and there are night sounds, the rustling of other creatures on the prowl, accompanying her movement through the garden.

Slipping to the lawn at the end of Pearl's garden, she opens the cap on the bleach and writes "Bitch" over the damp grass. It is difficult. She needs to hold the bleach with both hands, together with the torch. She curses as the bottle top disappears into the undergrowth.

THE GIFT

She has forgotten to breathe. On her mad stumbling return to the gate, her feet meet with old holly leaves and she cries out.

Back in the safety of her own house, Jess she is so high that she paces the kitchen, a cigarette in tow to calm herself down. She is brimming with elation. She will not sleep. In bed, she will press her face against her pillow in glee, letting out puffs and snorts of derision for her neighbour, wishing she could see the results of her action.

Later, Jess will find the bleach stain on her jeans. She will have to even this up with more bleach on the other leg. After two washes the jeans will still smell of chemicals and will now be too tight, displacing her flesh and pulling at her hip bones so that she can't sit down in them. She will blame Pearl.

In Pearl's home, all is quiet and the day promises loveliness through the weave in the curtains. When Pearl wakes, she remembers the scream of a fox in her garden. She hugs the memory to herself. She has glimpsed their red coats and encountered them peering through the shrubbery, on their way who knew where? Sometimes cubs have gambolled on the lawn, lit by the brightness of the moon, playing ragtag and leaping on each other, mock fighting. It is thrilling to share her garden with such bold and alien creatures.

THE GIFT

It is a full two days later that she puts on her gardening shoes and visits the favourite corners of her garden. She first senses something displaced and wrong. Then the writing on the grass hits her. "Bith", it says. She gasps in surprise and turns round in case there is someone behind the tree, behind the shed, the greenhouse. Behind her.

She feels heavy with trepidation as she quarters the area, searching for signs, for a reason. The blue cap from a bleach bottle is found in a rough area of grass resplendent with foxgloves and wild flowers. It confirms the perpetrator's method of attack. She can find no point of entry, though the hedge gaps where the foxes visit are wide enough for man and beast.

Just as she feels she must share her consternation with some other human being, Markie - that feral boy next door - has spied her from his bedroom window. He has been busy marking his homemade age chart and is officially 6 years, two months and 5 days old that very morning. She hears pounding footsteps followed by scrabbling on the wooden fence between her plot and his home at "The Brambles". Here is Markie, clinging to the fence top by his armpits. She can see his red shorts through the perforated fence, for there are extensive knot holes.

THE GIFT

She registers that his tawny hair has been shorn like an animal pelt against his delicate skull and that one ear sports a blue Elastoplast, the result of his mother's economies on the haircutting front.

"Happy birthday Pearl!" he shouts. It dawns on her with a surge of relief that it must be his work, that he has tried to write "Happy Birthday" but failed badly. "Oh, Markie! Did you do this? Whatever made you think of it? What an amazing present".

Markie's face shows delight. "No, it wasn't me. I never done it". He loses his grip, falls and reappears, pink-faced with effort as he avidly surveys the scene. Pearl's garden is exciting but he has never seen anything like this in it. He might try the same on the lawn on his side. His dad sometimes lets him cut the grass so it would be alright.

From Markie's house a voice calls his name and he slips from view. Pearl hears his feet pound into the distance. Then the scrape and clatter of his bike against the wall of his house and he is off on an adventure, deep in his own world.

THE GIFT

Pearl's relief is mixed with a curious admiration. What an extraordinary child Markie is to think of such a thing. She loves his strange way of doing things. His oddness. His daring. Now that she thinks about it, whoever else would do such a thing?

For days, she will visit the grass, noticing the change in its colouration where the word has magically appeared, how its colour relates to the bark of that shrub and these yellow flowers. It is a mess. She had thought of it as despoliation, but she will find that she misses it when it is gone and will remember it every time she is in this patch. It will become almost sacred ground.

For now, she returns to her home. She decides to put on something pretty. She will even wear her pearl earrings. As she sits at her dressing table, Pearl finds them in the painted box of old treasures and, fitting them into her ears, thinks of her younger sister watching raptly when she first wore them. "When I'm your age, I'm going to have my ears pierced too!", They had, between them, used the word ever since.

Pearl's face is lit up. It is a quiet light of gladness and that expansive feeling, half fond and a little sad, which arises when you think of the past and the people who accompanied you there.

THE GIFT

She will never forget her “Bith-day”. It is a special gift. She feels truly blessed.

She must visit Jess to tell her about it.