

# The Show Off



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*The Story of Mags the Magpie*

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This is a work of nature storytelling. The events depicted are drawn from observation and imagination. Names and characters are products of the author's imagination.

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*The Story of Mags the Magpie*

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a 321Lumina.com book

*For everyone who has ever flown  
a little too fast past a puddle.*



I know this sounds funny, but I never used to like looking at myself in a pool of water.

Other magpies can't walk past a puddle without stopping. Not me. I fly over fast and hope the water isn't too still. If it is, I see him. The magpie under the sky. The one who looks like me, but not how I want to look.

His tail sticks out at a funny angle. His feathers never seem smooth enough. His eyes are too big, or too small, or too something. I flap my wings and blur him away. I tell myself it doesn't matter. I tell myself I'm busy. I'm a serious bird. I don't have time for puddles.

But that's not really true. The truth is, I just don't like him looking back at me.

THE CABIN

# By the Creek

...

I live near a cabin by a creek. A man lives there who turns a little wheel in the water and grows green things in his window and goes out on the lake every morning in a flat boat. He is quiet and he minds his own business and I like that about him. I mind my own business too. Mostly.

The creek is full of good things. Seeds. Crusts of bread the man leaves on the bank. Insects in the warm months. I am good at finding things. That is one thing I will say for myself. I have a sharp eye and a good memory and I know where everything is within a long flight of that cabin.

I know this sounds funny, but finding things is the one thing I have always been proud of.

I just never found anything that made me feel better about the magpie in the puddle.

Not until that morning by the creek.

THE FINDING

# A Little Piece of Sky

...

It is an ordinary morning. I am not looking for anything special. I am looking for breakfast.

I land near the cabin where the creek bends and the little wheel turns and the water catches the early light. I hop along the bank pecking at things. A seed here. A crumb there. Nothing special.

Then I see it.

A little piece of sky lying in the dirt.

I stop. I hop closer. I stretch my neck to look. It is not sky of course. It is glass. A broken shard from something the man dropped or left behind. It is no bigger than my wing but it catches the sun and throws it back at me like a tiny bright door.

I know this sounds funny, but my first thought is to fly away.

My second thought is to pick it up.

I pick it up.

It is heavier than it looks and smooth and cold against my beak and I nearly drop it twice getting it off the ground. I carry it to the old root near the bend in the creek where the grass hangs down like a curtain and I put it down and I look at it and I think about what to do next.

I already know what I am going to do next.

I am going to look.

THE FIRST LOOK

# Two Bright Eyes

...

The first time I look into the mirror shard I see my eyes.

Not my tail. Not my feathers. My eyes.

I know this sounds funny, but I expected to see everything wrong with me all at once and what I see instead are two bright sharp eyes looking back like they know something I don't.

I blink. The magpie in the glass blinks.

I tilt my head left. He tilts his head left.

I take a step back. He takes a step back.

I say out loud very quietly, to no one in particular, "You don't look like I thought you did."

He doesn't answer. He just keeps looking at me with those two bright eyes.

I pick up the mirror shard and carry it deeper under the root and cover it with a little dry grass so no one will find it. Then I fly away and try to go about my day as if nothing happened.

But something happened.

THE PRACTICE

# Every Morning

...

I visit the mirror every morning.

I am careful about it. Early, before the other birds are too active, I slip down to the root by the creek bend and pull back the dry grass and tilt the shard until the light falls right and I look.

I know this sounds funny, but at first I am practicing. Like a performance with no audience. I puff up my feathers and smooth them down. I spread one wing just slightly and fold it back. I hop left. I hop right. I tilt my head this way and that.

The magpie in the mirror does everything I do. He is very helpful that way.

Some mornings I don't like what I see. My tail is still at a funny angle some days. My feathers still won't all lie flat at once. On those mornings I put the grass back over the mirror and fly away quickly and try not to think about it.

But other mornings.

Other mornings I stand very still in the early light and I look and I see something I didn't know was there.

## THE COLORS

# Blue



Blue.

I know this sounds funny, but I didn't know I had blue. I thought I was only black and white and not enough. But when the morning light catches my wing feathers just right there is blue in there. Real blue. The color of a deep cold lake. And green too, a shimmer like dragonfly wings, running along my tail where the black goes glossy in the sun.

I stand very still the first morning I see the blue and I say out loud to the magpie in the mirror, "You have colors I never knew about."

He looks back at me with those bright sharp eyes and I think he is agreeing.



I know this sounds funny, but I like the magpie in the mirror for a long time before I start to like the magpie in my own feathers.

I keep visiting. Every morning. Early, before anyone is watching. I pull back the dry grass and look and practice and sometimes talk quietly to the magpie in the glass. I tell him things. Small things. Things I notice during the day. A good seed I find. A new call I hear and try to copy. The way the man's little wheel sounds different when the creek runs fast after rain.

Sometimes Maggie flies with me. She looks like me. She is smaller and she sings all sorts of different songs. I really like her.

THE STARLING

# Why Would You Want to See Yourself?

...

One morning a young starling lands near my root and watches me pulling back the dry grass.

I freeze.

He tilts his head. “What’s that?”

I know this sounds funny, but my first thought is to hide the mirror and fly away and pretend I was doing something else entirely.

Instead I say, “It’s a mirror.”

He hops closer. “What’s a mirror?”

“Something that shows you yourself,” I say.

He thinks about this. “Why would you want to see yourself?”

I open my beak to answer and then close it again because I have to think about what the true answer is. Not the easy answer. The true one.

“Because,” I say finally, “if you don’t look, you only see what you imagine. And what you imagine is usually worse than what’s actually there.”

The starling looks at me for a long moment. Then he says, “Can I look?”

I hold up the mirror shard.

He looks.

I know this sounds funny, but he goes very quiet for a while. Starlings are beautiful birds, glossy and spotted and iridescent in their own way, and I think maybe he didn’t know that either. I think maybe a lot of birds don’t know what they actually look like.

After a while he says, “Oh.”

Just that. *Oh.*

I put the mirror back under the grass. “Come back tomorrow if you want,” I tell him. “Early. Before the others are up.”

He nods and flies away and I watch him go and I feel something warm in my chest that takes me a moment to identify.

It is happiness. I'm happy. But not the kind I expected. Not the kind that is about me at all.

## THE PUDDLES

# I Remember the Blue



I know this sounds funny, but I am still not great with puddles.

I still fly over them a little fast sometimes. On gray days when the light is flat and everything looks dull I still sometimes see the magpie in the water and think unkind things about him before I catch myself.

But then I remember the blue.

I remember that I have colors I didn't know about. That my eyes are sharp and bright and know things I am still learning. That I found a little piece of sky in the dirt one morning and picked it up and carried it to a secret place and looked at it every day until I understood something important.

I am a good finder. I always knew that.

I know this sounds funny, but I think what I find in that little broken mirror is a happier me.

THE OTHERS

# Whoever Needs to Look

...

There are a few of us now who visit the root by the creek bend in the early mornings.

The young starling comes most days. A robin who never says much but always leaves looking a little straighter. Sometimes a small wren who I had to tilt the mirror quite close to the ground for, but who stays the longest of all and leaves making a sound I have never heard her make before. A sound like she is pleased with something.

Maggie, my girlfriend, comes to my mirror and we laugh and dance and show off to each other. I really like her.

I don't call it anything, this thing we do in the mornings. I don't make rules about it. I just pull back the dry grass and hold the mirror in the early light and let whoever needs to look, look.

I know this sounds funny, but the mirror shard was broken when I found it. A little cracked, a little uneven, not a perfect reflection by any means.

And yet.

And yet somehow it shows us all something true.

THE LAKE

# Exactly the Right Kind of Magpie

...

Some afternoons I fly out over the lake and look down at the water as I pass. The big flat mirror of it, blue and silver and moving.

I know this sounds funny, but I don't always look away now.

Sometimes I look right at the magpie flying below me, his wings spread wide, his tail streaming, his colors catching the light, and I think he is actually quite something.

He is black and white and blue and green and loud and curious and a little too much sometimes and not enough other times and very good at finding things.

He is, it turns out, exactly the right kind of magpie.

I think I knew that all along.

I just needed to look long enough to see it.

...

*The End*

*I know this sounds funny, but being a show off feels pretty good when you're showing off the real you.*

— *Mags*

*Look long enough to see it.*

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