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Opening Extract from...

Of Things Gone Astray

Written by Janina Matthewson

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Janina Matthewson.

Of Things Gone Astray.



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Mrs Featherby.

MRS FEATHERBY HAD BEEN HAVING pleasant dreams until she woke to discover the front of her house had vanished overnight.

They had been dreams of when she was younger and more energetic, dreams of a time when she had full use of her knees. She had saved someone in one of them, someone helpless, she thought, but once awake she couldn't remember who or why or what had happened next.

It was the breeze that woke her, naturally. It wasn't that it was a cold breeze, or even a particularly strong one, but when a person has gone to sleep in perfect stillness, the unexplained movement of air around the room is a rousing influence, and Mrs Featherby had never been a deep sleeper.

She looked around her for a moment in that state of bewilderment that often occurs in the moments after waking. The light from the street was flooding into the room through the gaping hole that the previous evening had been her bedroom wall. Mrs Featherby blinked hard twice and decided to pull herself together. She stepped out of her bed and walked to the edge of the floor, the wind whipping the hem of her ancient nightgown and pulling at her long, flint-coloured hair.

It was early, barely five o'clock, so there were no people around, but Mrs Featherby knew that when there were people, those people would stare. She knew that they might even approach the house. That they might ask questions. That they might attempt to breach

the sanctity of her home, of her fortress. She set her mouth and turned away.

Mrs Featherby, whose first name was Wendy, or had been many years earlier, did not waste time in wondering how a tonne of brick and mortar could have been uplifted and transported away without waking her or leaving a trace of masonry on the road. She did what was practical and called the police. She didn't particularly trust the police, but she felt that it was the correct procedure.

She was informed that an officer would be sent within the hour, so, thanking her stars that the bathroom was at the back of the house, she performed her ablutions efficiently and impeccably and moved downstairs to the sitting room to wait.

She wondered if she should have anything ready for the constable when he arrived. She'd always considered herself lucky to not have had the police in her home before, but the downside to this was becoming apparent: she had no idea of the correct etiquette.

Indeed, it had been so long since she'd had anyone of any kind in the house that she'd all but forgotten how to go about it. The only person that had crossed her threshold in recent months was the young man who delivered her groceries at nine fifteen every Tuesday.

Was it correct, Mrs Featherby wondered, to refer to the impending officer of the law as a guest? If he was to be a guest she should certainly have, at the very least, a cup of tea waiting, and possibly a biscuit. The cake she'd made on Sunday had been past its best yesterday and she'd thrown it out. She had intended to bake a replacement, but doing so before seven in the morning simply for the imminent arrival of an officer of the law seemed a little extravagant. And he might arrive in the middle of the process, which would be entirely inappropriate. She would make some biscuits later in the day, she decided, as she'd intended. There was no need to rush the process.

Tea would do, she decided. Tea would be enough.

Mrs Featherby sat still and upright in her chair, gazing through her absence of wall into the garden beyond. She sat still and upright and waited.

Cassie.

CASSIE WAS LIT FROM WITHIN, or so she felt. She gloried for a moment in how little she cared about the strangers that surrounded her, that may have noticed her. Let them look, she thought, let them marvel at her secret joy. Let them recognise her as one of the few for whom life holds wonder. For it must be only a few, she thought, who are designed to know this kind of exultation. If it were everyone, the earth's orbit would be altered by it, forever thrown off course by the collective gladness of its inhabitants.

Her eyes seemed to throb with the smile hidden behind them. The corners of her mouth were set in a curve that any moment threatened to beam.

Cassie ran a hand through her hair and looked at the arrivals board.

IB2202 from São Paulo: LANDED

The letters rearranged themselves: FLOSS IS HERE.

Cassie had been playing this moment over in her mind for weeks. Months. All her life. There were many versions.

There was the one where Floss ran through the gate, paused for a moment on her toes, scanning the crowd like a blithe and confident huntress, until she spotted Cassie and soared into her arms.

There was the version where she walked through slowly and carefully, not even looking at Cassie till they were six inches apart, but smiling all the while.

There was the version where she stopped as soon as she'd come through and the two of them stand there for fully five minutes, for forever, just looking. Staring at each other, right in the eyes, across the space between them, both knowing they have an eternity in which to touch.

Now, though, now it was moments away, she couldn't imagine anything at all. All she could do was wait and watch.

IB2202 from São Paulo: LANDED

Cassie watched the steady stream of people walking through the gate. She wondered how many planes had recently landed and how many passengers there were on each plane and what the statistical likelihood was of Floss being the next person through at any given point. She knew it was stupid, but it thrilled her to think that the odds were rising with each reunion.

IB2202 from São Paulo: LANDED

There was a child crying. Cassie watched. The girl's mother was trying to make her hug her father, but she wouldn't. He was in uniform and Cassie wondered if he'd been away so long his daughter had forgotten him.

The crowd around her thinned and swelled again.

Cassie hadn't noticed, but the corners of her mouth were no longer curved. She gazed at the gate.

A flight attendant led through a boy of about seven. His mother hugged him briefly, cautiously, and took his bag.

IB2202 from São Paulo had disappeared from the arrivals board to make way for other flights.

A woman jostled Cassie in an attempt to get to a tanned teenage girl with a pack on her back. Cassie planted her feet more firmly on the floor.

She planted her feet and waited.

She gazed at the gate.

Delia.

DELIA TRIED TO BE QUIET, she tried really hard, but there was that door, that one door, the one into the kitchen, which always, every time, in spite of her best efforts, banged just a little as she closed it.

‘Bloody bollocks,’ she muttered, screwing her eyes closed and waiting.

It was thirty seconds before the tremulous ‘Dee?’ floated down the hall, but it felt longer. Still, it was always going to come, obviously.

‘Morning, Mum,’ Delia called back. ‘Go back to sleep. I’m heading out for a couple of hours. Not long. I’ll be back to make breakfast before you’re ready to get up.’

‘Why? Why are you going out? It’s so early.’

Delia fought the urge to answer with a petulant ‘I do what I want’.

‘It’s a clear morning, Mum,’ she said instead. ‘There’s not another forecast for ages.’

Delia waited hopefully, barely breathing, until she was sure there was going to be no further reply. She grabbed her bag off the floor, where she’d left it in preparation, and let herself out. The heavy front door was so much easier to control than the flighty ones inside.

The two girls who lived together over the road, the ones Delia always thought seemed about twelve, were coming back from a party, turning into their house casually, as if this was a perfectly

normal thing to be doing shortly after five o'clock in the morning on a weekday. Watching them, Delia felt immediately that she was always, and by nature, simultaneously underdressed and wearing too many clothes. She didn't remember ever going out with so little covered, not even in what she had always considered a comparatively wild first year of university.

She wondered briefly what was going on with teenagers these days, whether they ever properly considered the impression they were making on the world, before she felt suddenly that she was in danger of turning into the worst kind of maiden aunt. At least, she would be if she had any brothers or sisters. The worst kind of nosy spinster. If she continued on this way, she'd end up a bitter old woman who lived alone and never spoke to anyone. Who resented the laughter she heard on the street because it interrupted her peaceful, isolated days; trapped in a prison of her own bitterness, she'd wither and die and no one would know.

She sighed, and resolved, not for the first time, to be less judgemental of how stupid all the young people were. To be less judgemental in general. After all, those girls couldn't have been twelve – they lived alone, that would be ridiculous. Probably they were twenty, maybe even as old as twenty-two. They may have been at high school at the same time as Delia. If they'd gone to the same school, she could have been their prefect. She could have told them that skirts are traditionally worn to conceal the buttocks, rather than to reveal them, and that they can actually do so and still look quite alluring. Presuming that still held true, of course; Delia suddenly felt unsure.

As she wended her way through the neighbourhood, Delia began constructing a detailed fantasy in which the two girls ran into a string of amusing mishaps, and came to Delia for advice. They looked at her in wide-eyed gratitude as she dispensed the theories she held on life and love and the world, that a serious lack of life experience had thus far prevented her from proving correct.

She walked with a kind of sick eagerness. It had rained brutally for the last two weeks, leaving her in dire need of escape.

There was a small square on a small hill a short walk away from the house. Delia planned to sit in it, on a certain bench, and breathe the air, and let the world wake around her.

After half an hour she realised to her surprise that, instead of being at the small square, she was drawing close to the much larger park. She was disconcerted, the park wasn't anywhere near the square, she couldn't figure out how she'd got there. Probably she'd just not been paying attention to where she was going. Her feet had heard park and her head had said square and the two hadn't communicated. She told herself to be more of a grown up, and headed into the park.

This was a park she'd once gone to every fine day.

There was a picnic rug she used take, and a thermos, and a basket with room for books as well as food to last her hours. She'd sit near a particular tree, an oak tree, moving in and out of the shade every so often, books and notes spread out around her, which she'd weighed down with rocks to stop them flying away.

Being outside had made her feel like her studying was less fevered and panicked. It had made her feel like the stakes were lower, or as if the outcome was already assured. When she was outside, even if it was the day before an exam, it felt like a gentle, pleasant pastime, rather than a stressful and emotionally fraught step on the way to her happy and successful future. She always did better with assignments and tests when the weather was fine. When she'd moved away to university, she'd spent an entire month trying to find a tree as effective as the one in this park.

Delia wandered through the park looking around; suddenly she wanted to find her old study tree. Maybe she'd read beside it for a while. Maybe she'd just sit there and watch the sun rise. She walked around what she thought was the entire park without finding it, wondering if maybe it had been cut down. Of course that was a ridiculous thing to think; the tree had been large and healthy, and if someone had been foolish enough to slay it, there would have been a giant tree trunk in place of the tree itself.

Delia was becoming petulant. The tree, her tree, didn't seem to be anywhere. She felt betrayed, as if the park, unhappy at her long absence, had reconfigured itself like a labyrinth, had made itself a stranger to her. She walked round and round and up and down, until, frustrated, she threw herself down on the top of the hill in the middle of the park. She drew her knees up and buried her face in her crossed arms.

She stayed like that for several moments, before raising her head and looking out.

The clear dawn that had been promised turned out to be twenty minutes of low morning sun before a bank of clouds swallowed the light. The city was now spread grey before her, but Delia kind of liked it that way.

She knew her mother would be up soon, and she knew she should be there to help her, but she couldn't resist staying a while longer. She would only be ten minutes. Ten minutes couldn't hurt.

Robert.

IT WAS AS IF THE alarm clock had gone off. But it hadn't. Robert lay, blinking, feeling the ring echo in his ears as if he'd heard it moments before. But he hadn't.

Mara was asleep beside him, her face serious in a way it never was when she was awake. The light of the alarm clock spilled across her forehead.

5:07

Robert was at a loss. He hated being inactive and he very rarely was. There was always something to do. There was always an excess of things to do. But not at just after five in the morning.

He groaned with frustration, and then grimaced with guilt and glanced at Mara. She slept on.

Robert carefully slid out of bed. He'd go for a run. It had been months since he'd found the time, and here the time was, gifted to him out of nowhere. He hunted out his battered running shoes, the same he'd had since university, and changed into an old t-shirt and shorts.

The air was clear and easy to breathe, and Robert felt energised and enthusiastic as he jogged past the silent houses on his street.

After half a mile a frown crossed his face. This was harder than he'd thought it would be.

He jogged onward.

He reached a nearby park and slipped inside to run on the grass, feeling a moment of relief as his knees registered the absence of concrete. Then he promptly developed a stitch.

He came to a panting halt and bent over, clutching his sides. Taking a couple of breaths, he staggered on.

By the time he got back home, his face was red and streaming and he was limping. He stood outside the house for two minutes, arms akimbo, gasping for air, before he opened the door and dragged himself upstairs. As he walked into the bedroom Mara stirred and opened her eyes. She blinked at him a couple of times and burst out laughing.

Robert poked his tongue out at her and headed for the bathroom.

‘You shouldn’t laugh you know,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘This is me recognising the need to hang onto you by maintaining a slammin’ bod.’

‘Oh god, please don’t take my laughter as a sign I’m not grateful.’

‘I’ll fill your grate,’ Robert said. ‘Be quiet and let me shower, woman.’

He could hear Mara chuckling into her pillow as he closed the bedroom door on her, trying to make sure she didn’t see him wince.