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The Messenger

Written by L. M. Shakespeare

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The Messenger

By the same Author
LODESTAR
THE GENTLEMEN'S MAFIA
DEATH VALLEY
MALICE

The Messenger

A Novel

L.M. SHAKESPEARE

HOPCYN PRESS

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Somewhere there flies
a small sweet feathered bird
that flickers like fire
in the higher
air.

And in my dreams
I think that once I heard
the song it sings
there.

Chapter Three

When Bethan was fifteen, Dan bought a twelve month old bird from John Strachan for her birthday. At that time, in order to conform to the law she still attended school for half the day, but would spend most of the time in the playground by herself. The teachers were very good, and if it started to rain they remembered to come out with an umbrella, and entice her with sweets to come indoors. On the few occasions when her father had been able to stay with her it was possible to integrate her into the school activities to some extent. She would be given books to hand out, and would sit, apparently attentive, in a chair. But as soon as Dan was gone she seemed to lose her ability to see or hear anyone.

Not that she was unhappy. She merely drifted apart. At the end of the day Betty had to fetch her, and she would then follow her aunt home. They had achieved that much.

Bethan's birthday was in October. When the sun came out it cascaded down, the colour of rusty water out of an old tap. The bracken had turned brown on the mountains, both in front of and behind the house. The one in front was a bare mountain without trees. Its entire charm lay in the washes of colour or cloud shadow that poured over it. It had streaks of purple heather, patches of russet gold or green from the

bracken, and rock sticking out like rounded bones. But the mountain behind had paths and shale; it had rowan trees with scarlet berries, and sheep who cropped the turf and clacked with their hooves against the stones. It had thorn trees and the ruins of some cottages, and a delicious little stream that tumbled over stones and moss. Most people liked the back mountain best.

On Bethan's birthday her aunt was kind to her. She remembered Beth and the suffering that poor woman had. She had got on very well with her sister-in-law, and Betty didn't get on well with everyone. "Oh, it was terrible," she'd say to her friends when they talked about what had happened, taking off her glasses and wiping them as if there were tears on the lens. "Terrible. And all for what?"

So when she fetched the culprit from school on that particular day of her birthday she talked to her more kindly and told her that she had baked a cake, with icing and candles. The child would always respond to the mention of any form of sweets. If her father was absent, it was the only way to communicate with her.

On this day Dan was on the morning shift, and so already back from work and waiting in the kitchen when they got back. After the cake and the candles, he said, "Now I've got a present for you, Bethan, but it's down the garden." He went out of the back door and she followed him. There was a bench just by the loft that Dan had made to sit on when waiting for the birds to fly in after their exercise. The birds were exercised nearly every day. That's why you'd see them if you went up either mountain and looked down on the village during about half an hour after the day shift was over. Various teams of pigeons would be flying together, wheeling over the rooftops in their loose packs, changing colour as the blade of the formation tipped on the turn and every bird caught the light

for an instant under its wing. The men could recognise each others' birds from a phenomenal distance.

While their birds were out in this way, Dan and Bethan would clean the loft and the boxes and do anything else that had to be done; and then they would sit together on the bench and watch them in the sky. When they were almost ready to come back to the loft, the male birds banged and clapped their wings in flight—a noise caused by the wing tips meeting over the shoulder.

This afternoon of Bethan's birthday, when Dan and Bethan got to the end of the garden there was a box waiting on the bench. It was quite a plain cardboard box, with holes in it, but it had a bright red ribbon tied around and knotted with a bow.

"It's your birthday today, isn't it Bethan," Dan repeated. "This is your birthday present. Open it, Bethan," Dan said. "No. Wait a minute. We must take it into the loft first." He let her carry it, and they went into the shed. There was plenty of light from the wire mesh flap opening of the side wall through which the birds flew out when it was hooked up. "I'll hold it for you," he said, taking the box "Look now." He showed her how to pull the end of the ribbon, and when it fell away he held the box firmly while saying to her, "Lift the lid now. That's right. Lift it up."

She bent forwards. Sitting in the box on a layer of straw, was a beautiful pale grey hen bird, with a scattering of white across the top of the head and down the back, and check white flights against a blue bar. Quite unafraid at finding the box open and the large pale face of the child hanging over her, the bird cocked her head, and looked about her first with one eye and then the other. Her eyes were caramel coloured, and as bright as jewels.

"Pick her up," Dan said gently. "You know how to do it, Bethan. Take her out of the box. She is your bird." The child,

breathing almost as heavily as a cow in a field of parsley, put her spread hands on either side of the bird in the box. The hard and soft structure, the mixture of silken feathers and the baskety resistant quills, held firm against the grip of her fingers. Although her hands were small she could lift the unprotesting bird out, and held her correctly so that the little legs poked out between her fingers, and the creature was secure.

Dan's own breath was quite taken away. Look at her! A sort of effulgence had spread over the child's face, and she simply stood holding the bird as it moved its little head this way and that and made gestures of settlings, and stirrings of contentment.

"What will you call her?" Dan said. The girl didn't answer, and he coughed to clear his throat, waiting. "She'll have to have a name."

There was a long silence. He could count the number of times Bethan had ever spoken. She might not speak now, in which case he would use the bird's registered name of Abercwm Flyer. But eventually Bethan lifted her glowing face and said, "Birthday."

"Birthday?" he repeated, with some surprise. "You mean you want her to be called Birthday?" Bethan gazed at him as if she was hearing celestial music. There was no doubt about it at all.

"Well," the man said. He lifted his eye brows in that way he had when he was amused, while a suppressed laugh pinched the outside corner of his eye. "Birthday it is then. Welcome to the loft, Birthday."

The young bird was put in a perch that Dan had prepared. He had already decided on a mate for her. They had a cock bird called Black Rill, with dark checkered feathers and a very strong eye. He put this bird together with Birthday in the vacant compartment among all the others. At that point all but

four of the boxes built against the wall were full.

"Shall we enter Birthday for her first race in the new season, Bethan? In April?"

He talked continually when he was with Bethan, like someone carrying on both sides of a conversation. Like the Minister in chapel with God. You never could be sure, after all, how much Bethan might be able to understand. The girl couldn't ask questions like other children. One could not tell what she might be wanting to know. So he kept up a running commentary of information, stories, and general remarks. Betty might criticise him. "You're like an old woman who talks non-stop to her cats," she said more than once. "And that one doesn't understand a thing." All right then; he didn't mind. Let his sister say what she liked, but he carried on as before.

"Birthday is twelve months old now," he continued on this occasion to Bethan. "Still got a little bit of down on her head, but did you look under her wing? No. Well, look now." He picked the bird up again and spread the pinions wide. "Look under there. Beautifully full feathered. She'll be ready to race by the beginning of the season if we can time her chicks just right. Now she'll have to go in a cage on the roof for two or three days so that she can see around her and get her bearings before we let her out to fly. And then, what with the new mate and being more familiar with where she is, she will lose her inclination to fly back to her old loft."

He was fetching a small wire cage as he spoke, and then holding it for Bethan to put the bird in. "Once she's out there in the cage, you'll see her turn her head this way and that. She will notice where the sun rises and sets. She'll look over towards the end of the valley, where your friend Mrs Isaacs teaches at the infant school, and the stream where you used to sit with your feet in the water when you were a little girl. And she will look on the other side. She'll see the Price's farm and

the back mountain. She'll get to know where she is."

He fetched the short ladder and put the cage on the roof, latched down on the edges with a sliding catch, before letting the other birds out for exercise. Then out they came, flying straight up into a loose pack, circling the loft a few times before widening the trajectory of their flight. Dan stared into the sky until his eyes watered. "I think they're going to fly down to Weeks's farm," he said. "Yes, there they go." And away the birds went.

Dan and Bethan cleaned the loft. The shadows lengthened. They sat down on the bench Dan had made, waiting for the other birds to return, listening to voices calling just below in the street, the bus going by, Jenkin's dog barking.

"What is Birthday doing, Bethan?" She got up to look. Birthday was perched inside the wire, peering out this way and that with her little bright eyes.

"She's doing the same as we are," Dan said. "Noticing what's going on." He was silent for a moment, and then he said, "We must watch out for cats. Miss Thomas kept three of the last batch of kittens, and the ginger tom from the other side of the chapel is back."

Eventually a scattering of bird shadows flowed over the two of them once more where they sat. The pack wheeled nearer home and swung away again; wheeled and swung. A cooler wind—the forerunner of darkness—sent a chilly shadow across the rough grass. The spinach in Betty's little garden patch had almost had it. It was time for Dan to go to the pub. He felt ready for soft light and the smell of beer and the company of other men. And as the thought came into his head, almost on cue the first pigeon folded its wings back like a falcon, and disappeared in a steep dive through the open flap of the loft. One by one, in a race, the others followed, cascading down. Dan got to his feet. He gave Bethan the grain

tin and she shuffled it softly. Four birds had landed on the grass and shifted tantalisingly about; even spread their wings and did another little curvette over the loft roof. Dan shook his head. "Remember what I said, Bethan? There are only two places for a pigeon to be: in the sky or in the loft."

He took a whistle out of his pocket and blew on it softly; a sound that was comforting, somewhat wild and triste; a sound calculated to appeal to birds. The procrastinators allowed themselves to be driven like chickens into the loft, followed by the man pocketing his whistle and the child with the grain tin. They closed the doors.

"One more job to do," Dan said. "We must fetch Birthday down and put her into her box with her new mate for the night."

He took down the wire cage, and he and Bethan carried it inside the loft and transferred Birthday into her perch. There was a shallow bowl ready for nesting. From among the birds now slackening their attention to the feed on the loft floor, Dan picked up the cock bird he had selected for Birthday's mate, and put him in the adjoining box. Almost immediately the cock started crooning deep in his throat.

By the time that Dan and Bethan had closed the loft door and were walking away towards their house the cock bird started to brush with his tail and drop his wings in front of the hen. And outside, the night, just as predictably, first wooed, and then settled onto, the earth.

Chapter Four

THE FOLLOWING MORNING WAS, FOR some people, a day like any other. Betty, for example. She kept everything very clean and tidy, and had quite enough to do. "We've got the Welfare calling today," she announced, "and if Bethan behaves like she did last time, I'm not answerable for the consequences."

Dan looked at his sister from the chair in which he was reading the paper. She was collecting the dishes off the table. She had perfect skin, which Time had as yet only rendered slightly leathery. On important occasions she painted her lips with a colour called Mayfair, which was always in stock in the chemist's. Her brother noticed that she had got it on this morning.

"But I'm on night shift from today," he said.

"It's nothing to do with me," she rather snapped back. "I don't ask them to come, do I? For all the use they are they could stay away and not waste my time. As I've said before, I can't see why it's any business of theirs if Bethan is – like she is." Betty would have said 'twp' if she hadn't been talking to Dan, being the local word for stupid, but she knew better than to use it to him. "We look after her, not them. They don't do anything to help. Nothing at all. She's never ill anyway, but when I wanted to go with the choir to Llanebry would they

send a woman to look after Bethan for two days? No fear! It was Margaret had to come in. And Margaret wanted paying because of Billy's music lessons. Move your feet Dan. So I think it's an absolute cheek that they think they can just announce that they are coming today and I have got to make arrangements to suit them."

"I'm sorry if it's awkward, Betty."

"Well it isn't. But it might have been. And look what happened last time!"

"It wasn't Bethan who caused the trouble Betty. It was that Welfare Officer from Cardiff. When are they coming anyway?"

"At three."

"But I've got to clock in at five to two for my shift." Dan protested, looking worried. "I'd better go and speak to Bethan. I sent her down to the loft with the grain."

He got up and went into the garden. He could see Bethan as soon as he was out of the back door. She was looking in at the birds through the wire mesh. He ran his hand through his hair in a gesture both weary and amused. He started up the path.

When Bethan saw her father, she came running towards him. There was a lack of coordination in the way that her ankles and feet moved. Her body got thrown forwards and now that she was almost grown up a smaller man might have felt quite intimidated by her. She stopped short, and Dan could definitely see something new shining behind the habitual slackness of her solemn face. He hadn't thought that it would make quite such a difference, when he decided to give the bird to her, but now he realised that he was looking at a girl who Owned Her Own Pigeon. He gave a short laugh and put his arm around her shoulder.

"How's Birthday today, Bethan?"

She smiled. He couldn't see it because she kept her face

down, her neck hanging.

"You know I'm on night shift for the next four days, so Fred will have to come and exercise the birds. But we'll put Birthday on the roof in her cage again now, and you and Fred will have to bring her in after the exercise."

They had reached the loft and went in.

"Look. Birthday's mate has already put some straw in the nest." Clean wisps were laid neatly across the bowl, and Birthday was sitting on them. Bethan reached up and put one of her little hands on the bird's shoulder. The cock was on his feet, but Birthday didn't move.

"Work to do. Here's the scraper," Dan said. She responded at once, as always, to her father.

"You do the floor, Bethan."

Down she went.

He swept the droppings into the pan, replenished the water tubs and the feeders. Outside, they went together over to Betty's garden patch and scattered the contents of the bucket over the soil. He gave Bethan the rake for her to scratch it in, and started on the subject of the Welfare Visitor.

"Betty tells me that the Welfare Visitor is coming again today."

Pause. He did not expect any response, but he knew that she was listening. She continued, in that clumsy, but always, in the end, quite exact way to rake the soil.

"On one occasion you didn't like the Welfare Visitor, Bethan. Do you remember when that was?"

The rake suddenly stopped.

"I'd have preferred to be here to help you this time, but I'm on night shift. Like I told you, I've got to clock in at two today. So now, will you be a specially good girl. I know the Welfare Visitor who will call today. He is a friend of mine, you see. A friend of Dad's. Not like the other one. So you don't have to

be afraid of him. I'll be home later and nothing can happen to you."

He waited a minute, and decided to repeat it one more time.

"Be a good girl for the Welfare Visitor and he'll go away nice and tidy. Now rake that little patch there, and that will do."

When the Welfare visitors arrived later that day they sat in Betty's kitchen for twenty minutes until Bethan, who was keeping a look out for Fred, dived suddenly out into the garden by the back door.

She went without even saying thank you to the young woman for giving her a present. For, surprisingly enough, this Welfare worker had a sister of her own with the same disability as Bethan. That very day she happened to have bought a hair slide with a bunch of red lacquered cherries stuck on the bar, intending to give it to her sister. But seeing Bethan, she decided to give it to her, and buy another tomorrow. Aunty Betty had put it in the child's hair, although to her mind the cherries were rather ridiculously big. It was there now as Bethan stumped down the path towards the loft and Fred, seeing her, turned in his tracks and said, "Hello, girl. How are you today then? That's a pretty hair slide you've got."

They went together into the loft. He held the door open for her to go in, and closed it after her.

"Right now, We've to put – Birthday, is it? I've heard all about Birthday. Is she already in the wire cage on the roof? I forgot to look." He opened the door and peered up. "Ah! Right you are. I see her."

He went out, climbed up the ladder and replenished Birthday's feed and water in the little cage. Then he came down again and propped open the wire mesh side of the loft to let the other birds out for exercise. They flew away. Then Fred and Bethan together worked away in the empty loft until all

the jobs were done.

"I'm off down to the shop a minute," Fred called over his shoulder to Bethan once they'd finished. "I'll be back before the birds return."

Bethan sat down on the bench, her eyes fixed on the little wire cage on the roof. Birthday was shifting about, looking here and looking there. Over the dry stone wall that backed onto the next garden the ginger tomcat sprung down clear of the brambles and lay crouched in the grass, also watching the bird. The children were out of school. The buses came and went.

Bethan got up and wandered back towards where Betty had her washing line. A group of boys aged about eleven were playing on the open piece of ground by the side of the shop. She watched them, while behind her the catch of Birthday's cage, which Fred had only partly put back in place, worked its way loose, and the bird fed from the grain tin attached to the wires. When at last the door swung open Birthday, with a soft alertness, jerked her little head to one side and looked out. For a moment she settled again. But when a gust of wind blew by, she advanced to the edge of the cage.

The tomcat, who had been watching the caged bird from the very beginning, slid round to the front of the shed and crouched beside the soil bucket. He had his eyes glued to Birthday as if there was an invisible pathway between himself and the delicious bird, extruded from his very soul.

The pigeon stepped onto the roof of the loft. She gripped the roofing felt with her neat claws. The cat could see the red brown tag of her registration ring around one leg, and every other minutest morsel of detail. The bones under his fur slithered into a new alignment that provided more torque from which to spring.

It was a beautiful afternoon as far as the weather went.

Fred was remarking on it as he placed a small bet in the shop down the hill. "I must be getting back," he said. "Dan's birds to see to."

"How's the girl?"

"Oh, she's the same as ever."

Birthday flew down onto the bench. Bethan heard the loud snap of her wings. She turned around at the very moment when the cat, having coiled his inner spring to such a pitch, launched himself from the ground. In slow motion Bethan saw him rise in a murderous curve. But before the sound that had started up in her throat had had time to break through, something hit the cat in mid air. It was something small that struck him hard near the eye. He collapsed. The weight of his own body brought him crashing down within inches of the pigeon, who clattered her wings, but moved not very far away.

A terrified wailing sound came out of Bethan's mouth. The pigeon nervously stirred. And then a small boy, looking very pleased with himself, strutted into the garden swinging a catapult in the direction of the unconscious cat lying sprawled in the grass.

"Never mind, Bethan. Don't cry. I got him in the nick of time. He didn't do any harm. I got him with my catapult, see?" He swung it again by the thick elastic thong.

"It's a pity that you don't often talk, Bethan, because I would very much like you to be able to tell John Daniels and the others what I just did there.They might not believe me."

He swaggered right up to the cat. It was not dead; but having said that, it was going to be a long time before it felt well again.

"That's what a catapult's for, you see," he said, showing it to Bethan. "CAT a pult. For shooting cats."

At that moment, Birthday flew up into the air. Rigid from head to foot, Bethan watched to see if she would fly away. The

whole wide world was around Birthday. Between that vast expanse and herself not one single bar or mesh of wire existed. Above, the massive dome of the sky was clear with only a few clouds put there as if on purpose to make more clear the alluring perspective of space. A light breeze ruffled the grass. The bird moved her head, and blinked one eye. A child called in play from way up towards the end of the valley. A distant motor went past the far end of Fforchaman road. One clawed foot stepped forward and then stopped. Birthday opened her wings, and then suddenly she was up, giving the small boy Emrys the impression of air and feathers all mixed as if they burst out from an exploding pack of cards. He expected her to be off. He could already hear himself; "She'll only have gone to her old loft won't she, Mr Pugh; you heard that, Bethan, don't cry, we'll go and fetch her home, won't we Mr Pugh. Look, the cat could have eaten her and then there would have been something to cry about. I've seen them do that, they get the blood and feathers everywhere, when I'm grown up I'm not going to have a cat near my house, if my wife likes cats she'll have to go back to her mother I mean it Mr Pugh..." But before he needed to even open his mouth, Birthday had dropped down to where those brightly lacquered cherries shone in the sun, and landed on Bethan's head.

That was how Fred found them when he returned; the boy bragging and swinging his catapult, the Tom cat still unconscious in the grass, and the pigeon sitting on the girl's head.