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Advanced Writing Practice: Fiction

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Pheasants

The sun was low in the sky, sinking behind the fields that backed onto the garden. A final stream of light pierced the kitchen window, splashing onto the table. Tired of shielding her eyes with her hand, Jennie finally abandoned her book on the table and got up to draw the blind down halfway. She lingered to watch a tractor trundle over one of the fields towards a barn out by the cricket ground. It looked tiny in the distance, like part of the plastic farmyard set her mum still had stashed away somewhere.

The front door slammed, rattling the windows, and Jennie thought she saw a patch of plaster fall from the ceiling in fluttering specks.

'Balls,' a man muttered from the hallway. The latch lifted and it opened a crack, just enough for her dad to poke his head round. His mouth was stretched into a downturned smile, as if he were making a screeching sound.

'Where's mum?' he said, wincing, scanning the kitchen.

'Garden.'

He breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief and pushed the door wide. He was more dishevelled than he had been in the morning, Jennie thought, but he'd managed pretty well. His green cords were still tucked into those funny tasselled socks that stretched almost to his knees, and his checked shirt was still hidden under a khaki jumper and heavy tweed jacket, though he'd taken out the cufflinks and rolled up his sleeves. He took off his flat-cap as he came in and tossed it at her. She dodged. It landed on the tiles, deflated, and she wished she'd tried to catch it on her head.

Slung over his shoulder were three pheasants. They hung upside down from a length of thick twine tying their feet together. The other end was looped around her dad's gloved fingers and their heads swung slightly when he moved. He spread out the open *FT Weekend* on the table with his free hand and lay the birds gently down on top. Pulling off his gloves, he nodded at Jennie.

'Quite chuffed, actually,' he said.

'Good day?'

'Really good, yeah.'

'Looks like it,' Jennie walked over to hug him. She remembered a time when her little arms could barely reach around one of his legs.

'No it was good, very relaxed,' he said, rubbing circles on her back as she leant into him. 'Cupet just gets that little bit competitive,' he continued, 'and he loses focus, stops his shoulder staying steady. Actually got seven in total, but our freezer isn't that big – we shared them all out.'

'Should'a let him win,' Jennie tutted. 'He won't invite you out again.'

'He's a big boy,' he said, shrugging off his coat, smiling. He walked over to the garden door, opened it and stood outside on the paving stones, tilting his head back to feel the last minute of sun. He bent over to unlace his boots, paused and straightened again, slowly, pressing one hand to his lower spine. Then he sat on the step and yanked his boots off. Standing up again, he moved away from the door and held them as far from his face as he could and began to smack them together. Clumps of dirt and grass flew off as he beat them harder and harder. She watched him whack them together six or seven times after there was no more mud to come off.

'Dad?' He didn't seem to hear. She tried again, louder. He dropped his arms, shaking his head slightly.

'Right,' he said, raising one arm to point the boot inside. 'To the birds!'

He struggled with the twine.

'Jen, how are your nails?'

'Nope.' She turned a page dramatically and didn't look up. Her feet were resting on the table.

'Oh come on,' he said, rolling up a sheaf of newspaper and swatting at her slippered feet. 'Please.' She got up, rolling her eyes and smiling. She freed the corpses.

'Thanks. Stubby fingers. Ready to pluck?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Why?'

'Come off it.'

'If you're not prepared to prepare it, you shouldn't eat it.'

'Dad-'

'Really, what're you having for supper?'

'Right, fine, stop it. How do I do it?'

'Not surprised you don't remember.'

'You've never shown me.'

'I have. You weren't that young.'

'When?'

'Must've been about eight. No, yes, eight, I'd just finished that treehouse.'

'Treehouse? I don't think-'

‘Only played in it for an hour and got bored, all that bloody wood-‘

‘Dad.’

He looked at her. Her eyebrows were pulled into a gentle frown. He pressed his lips together and squeezed her.

‘You made it for Claire, dad.’

‘I know. Sorry Jen.’ He inhaled deeply and her hands broke apart as his stomach expanded. ‘When you get to my age,’ he said, softly, ‘it all blurs together a bit.’

‘It’s ok, really. Show me now though, before I change my mind.’

Jennie gave him a final squeeze and stepped back to let him demonstrate. After a few trial feathers, she took over. She gripped a feather near its base and placed her left hand on the body. It felt like pressing into a full hot water bottle that’s been left to go cold, like it could burst if she pushed too hard. She began to pull. Her dad had drawn the feathers out in short, swift tugs, but hers wouldn’t give.

‘Bit harder,’ he said, quietly, placing a hand over hers to help hold the pheasant down. It came out eventually. It was relatively clean, except for one dark spot of blood right at the very nib. Jennie remembered asking if she could fashion them into quills and her mum saying no on account of hygiene. She remembered Claire hopping out of bed after lights out and slipping a feather out from under her pillow. ‘I’ll make you a quill,’ she had said.

Jennie put it down on the table and hurried on. None were as difficult as the first. She pulled them out, feather after feather, getting into a rhythm, a controlled frenzy. She had pulled clean nearly half of the torso when she noticed the skin. It was white and rough, remarkably human, and puckered with holes. She wondered if that was what a body looked like after it had been shot.

When the only feathers left were around the feet, wings, and above the neck, her dad held the body up in the palm of his hand, the way she’d seen him balance newborns.

‘There’s a picture somewhere of you holding me like that,’ she said.

‘Anything to stop you screaming,’ he chuckled. He put the bird down.

‘I used to hold you in one hand,’ he said, holding out his empty palm, ‘with Claire balanced on my hip, and walk around the garden until you both stopped crying.’

He stood holding the imaginary children, looking into the garden. The sun finally sank behind the fields and Jennie drew the blinds.

Owl

It tried to flap its wing. Anna winced with each pathetic attempt and Rich frowned at her, pulling the handbrake up.

She opened the door and got out, stood a moment in the air, then ducked back in, yanked the seat forward and retrieved a suitcase from the backseat footwell. She took out her coat, zipped up, and shut the door gently. Rich waited in his seat, watching her take a few steps. He put on the hazard warning lights, pressing harder than needed, and got out too, checking behind for cars before he opened his door.

'What are you doing?' he said, leaning back against the bonnet. Anna shushed him and took another step. Rich crossed his bare arms over his t-shirt, pressing his hands under his armpits. Every few seconds he looked over his shoulder into the dark.

'Just leave it.'

Anna turned to scowl at him. 'How could anyone just leave it like this?'

'We can't just sit here on the road. Anyone could come round that corner.'

'Right, well, let's get it off the road at least. Might sort itself.'

She crouched down next to it. Rich craned his neck, stepped forward a metre, and was disappointed to see its breast moving in short, sharp breaths. Bloody hell, he thought.

'Come on,' he said, his voice whinier than intended. 'It's not safe.'

'You're right,' she looked back at the car. Rich stood up straighter and uncrossed his arms.

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. Hang on.' She ran back to the car, tottering in her strappy heels. Rich lurched forward as she almost went over on one ankle.

'Oops,' she said, steadying, opening the passenger door. Rich got in, relaxing his shoulders, but Anna had shut the door again and was walking back to the bird. She knelt down, bent over the thing, and eased back upright. It's her own fault if she gets a bloody ladder, Rich thought.

She turned round. Oh Christ, he thought. She had wrapped the broken thing in a cardigan and was holding it to her chest. A patch of red was already seeping into the clean wool. His mum had got her that.

Anna got into the car.

'What are you doing?'

'Let's go.'

'You're getting blood all over that. Why have you brought it in here?'

'He's barely bleeding.'

'What do you think you're going to do?'

Anna looked at Rich. Her expression was one he hadn't seen for a while. He suddenly became acutely aware of his breathing.

'I'm going to fix him,' she said. She strapped in her seatbelt, carefully holding the bundle out of the way. The owl had stopped trying to move and was looking up at her with black eyes. Rich couldn't see any emotion in them. He exhaled slowly.

'Look, let's be rational. We can still make it in time. Dump our bags and go straight to the restaurant. Right on the water, remember?' He placed a hand on her knee.

'Take us home.'

'You're being ridiculous.'

'Please, Rich. I won't leave him.'

She rocked the owl gently all the way home. Every few minutes she would whisper something. 'What a brave boy,' she would say.

They turned up the drive, juddering towards the farmhouse and breaking off before they reached the large family home, swinging left at the exit to the cottage. Rich had switched off all the lights and locked up completely before they'd left. It felt like returning after a holiday.

He let her have the night. He made a toastie, opened a Merlot and spent the evening in the lounge. He quite enjoyed full control of the remote. Dropping the Merlot bottle in the recycling tub by the back door, Rich turned off the downstairs lights, checked the locks, and went up to bed. She wasn't in the bedroom and he was afraid to look for her. As he got into bed, he heard her voice, singing, seeping under the door. He pulled the duvet over his head and prepared for the turbulent nightmares of a wine-induced mind.

Eyes closed, Rich stretched out his arm and patted the space next to him. He sat up too quickly and waited for the dull ache in his head to subside. Blinking, he took in the pillow next to his, still plump, floral pyjamas folded on top. He tied his dressing gown and opened the door. Anna almost ran into him.

'Oh, you're up, fab.'

'Where have-'

'Just watch him while I take a quick shower will you?'

'What?'

'Nursery – I'll be two ticks.'

'What?'

Anna shut the door of their ensuite. Rich stared at it until he heard the shower running. He looked back out of the bedroom.

The nursery door was opposite theirs. Anna had wanted to be able to hear the baby, in the night. The wood was brown now, and didn't quite match the other doors. But if you scratched it you would see little lines of colour coming through. Anna hadn't seemed to care but he couldn't bear to look at it every time he left the bedroom.

He didn't know what he'd expected. Possibly exactly what he found: the owl in the cot, swaddled in a blue blanket. An armful of cushions spread along the floor next to it in a line, a pillow at the top. The nightlight was still on.

Rich had never seen an owl asleep before. He walked towards it, wondering if she had really managed to nurse it. She did impress him sometimes. He looked for movement in its chest and the black eyes stared up at him. He waited for them to blink.

He walked out, looking at his feet and trying to forget the colour of the walls. He sat on their bed and stared out of the window, up the drive, watching as the farmhouse door opened and Mr Jennings walked out. He thought he might pop round, thought they might talk. They had more in common these days. Then the daughter came out too and packed Mr Jennings into his car, waving as Mr Jennings drove off, past their cottage.

The sound of the hot water tank, coming from somewhere in the walls or ceiling, stopped. Rich turned. Anna stood rigidly, gripping the towel wrapped around her. He took a step towards her and extended one arm, like he was asking her to dance. He waited.

Magpie

A magpie dropped onto the fencepost. It shuffled on its twig legs and twitched its head, pointing a black eye down at Liv. She lifted a hand to her forehead in a quick, covert salute, then tucked her hair behind one ear and shoved both hands into her jacket pockets.

‘How do you think he did it?’

‘Hm?’ said Liv, watching the bird as it twitched its tail and took off again. She followed it for a few seconds before it was sucked into the dense strip of trees separating the field and cricket pitch.

‘You know,’ said Jess, standing up and slapping away the dirt from the back of her jeans, ‘how do you think?’

‘Christ.’ Liv leant her head back against the fence and closed her eyes. ‘How would I know?’

‘I reckon drugs. Like, not intentional, you know, accidental.’

‘Jess-’ Liv opened her eyes.

‘Maybe it was a sex thing-’

‘Jess.’

Jess held up her hands. ‘Alright, alright, fine. Just speculating.’ She offered Liv her hand and pulled her up. She was too strong and Liv stumbled into her, pausing a moment with her hand on Jess’s shoulder. She let go and brushed down her jeans.

‘It’s none of our business.’

‘Irrelevant.’

They followed the fence down the length of the field. The wood was clean and sprouted fresh splinters. What a waste of money, Liv thought. They’ve only gone and given us a challenge.

They reached the barn just before the main road. It loomed over them and Liv felt a subtle nausea, like she was standing under a cathedral. They walked down one long side, Jess half a stride ahead. Just as Liv stepped past the end, Jess sprang back, grabbing Liv’s arm and yanking her back behind her. She pressed Liv against the barn with one strong arm flat against her chest.

‘Jess, what the-’

‘Shut up,’ Jess hissed. Liv listened to the faint rumble, keeping silent as the grinding motor grew louder. The tractor came past and Liv felt the warmth from the engine, smelt the rubber of the tyres. Its body wasn’t massive, but the tyres were taller than she was. The seat was high up above and the driver stared ahead, one

hand on the wheel and the other elbow propped on the back of the seat, oblivious to the girls. They each held a hand over the other's mouth, stifling laughter. The tractor trundled away. Jess licked her hand and she snapped her arm back.

'Jess! Grim,' she tried not to smile. 'What do you think he'd do if he saw us?'

'Dunno.' They started to walk away. 'Offer us a lift?' She wiggled her eyebrows and dug her elbow sharply under Liv's ribs. Liv shoved her back.

'Bugger off,' she laughed.

'Did you see his arms? Yes *please*.'

'Alright, you. But what if his dad caught us, you know, standing about the fields?'

Jess narrowed her eyes and grinned. 'Do you even want me to go there?'

'Christ. Right, let's go.'

They slipped out of the field through a gap between the fence and hedge and followed the main road back into the village. A car had to swerve as it approached them too quickly. Liv glimpsed the couple from the cottage, waving their embarrassed apologies. Dying to get out of the village. Can't blame them, she thought. Jess paused outside The Middle.

'Pint?'

Liv looked through the window. Inside, the usual clan stood, most with a pint in hand. They were dressed in unusually smart attire. There were others, people she didn't recognise. No one appeared to be talking, and they were all facing something or someone she couldn't see. She scrunched her nose at Jess.

'I think it's the wake, you know.'

'Shit, so it is. Who's there?'

They both peered in, trying not to look too conspicuous.

'Alex and Jane, all the Johnsons, some guys from work, Paul.' Liv zipped up her jacket and pulled her sleeves over her hands. 'He found him, apparently.'

'Oh?' Jess stepped away from the window.

'Yeah, I mean, I don't really know, so.'

'What did you hear though?'

'Just, like, he's been painting the outside, after they redid the pebbledash. He was up the ladder and looked in a window.'

'Lucky he didn't fall off his ladder.'

'Near enough did, I think. It's only what I heard though, I don't really know.'

'Yeah, 'course.'

They both turned back to the window as a low hum of voices seeped out.

'Which window?' said Jess.

'What?'

'Might give us a clue, you know, what happened.'

'Jess.'

Liv opened the garden gate. Crossing the lawn, she saw a bird perched in the magnolia. Black and white; its legs melted into the branch and it looked like it was floating. Liv scraped the mud off her trainers on the step and walked in through the back door.

'That you, Liv?' a voice called from the kitchen.

'Hi,' she called back, coming in from the hallway. 'Is that kettle on?'

'Tea?' said her dad, lifting the kettle from the Aga. Steam was shooting from the spout in a thin stream, slowing and drifting into nothing as it rose.

'Tea,' she said. He brought two mugs to the table and they sat opposite one another.

'Where'd you go, then?' he said.

'Fields.'

'With Jess?'

'Yeah.' They both attempted a sip, recoiling as their lips met the scalding tea and exchanging a sheepish glance.

'Haven't they put a fence up?'

'Doesn't make a difference. We didn't stand on anything, or owt. Besides,' she smiled, 'Jess likes Miller's boy.'

'That so?' he chuckled. 'Good luck to the lad.' He slurped his tea tentatively. 'Not one fer you then?'

'Dad,' Liv frowned, 'come off it.'

'Hey, hey, just asking. Interested in yer life, is all.'

After another minute, Liv heard herself speak. 'We went by the pub. They're having the wake there.'

'Ah. Dropped by Angie's earlier, paid our respects. Thought I'd leave the wake fer his close friends, and the family.' He cupped his mug in both hands and looked at Liv. 'She asked after you, you know.'

Liv kept her eyes on her tea.

‘Kind of ‘er to keep you in mind, even in this. She said he talked about you, after shifts and such.’

Liv took a big gulp. It pushed hard at the sides of her throat as she swallowed. ‘Yeah, yeah she’s nice. Lovely.’

‘Sorry, sweetheart, we don’t have to talk about it. We were just talking about when you were little. Played in the under elevens together, remember?’ He reached out and wrapped her whole hand in his, warm from the mug.

‘Yeah, I remember, a bit. Helped me with my bowling. Never got any better though.’

‘I wondered – you don’t have to say, if you don’t want – I just wondered if he, if he said anything, if you knew anything. Sorry,’ he rubbed her palm with his thumb.

‘Yeah, no, I didn’t,’ she frowned. ‘I don’t know, we didn’t talk loads. He was just funny. He had this laugh – you would hear it and you were gone. Last shift, we were laughing, drying glasses and laughing at something, after last orders, and he just stopped in the middle of it. He just stopped and watched me laughing. And I didn’t know how to stop.’

Her dad dabbed at her face with his rough thumb. The tears had filled up her waterline and spilled over, dripping onto the table and catching on her cheeks. ‘When I came out of Angie’s,’ he said, shifting his chair round the end of the table. ‘There were magpies on the drive. Pair of ‘em, just standing. Funny little legs they’ve got. Angie was happy, said it was a good omen. Two fer joy and all that.’

Liv leant her head on his shoulder and shut her eyes.