

Diamond in the Rough

When she lifted me, they would wink through her white hair. When I sat on her knee, her earlobes would twinkle. When she came to meet me from school, it was her earrings that I spotted first, glinting across the playground.

Her diamond earrings were the last thing Granny took off before bed and the first thing she put on in the morning. They sat on her dressing table overnight, attached to a scrap of red velvet. She said they made her feel like a movie star, like Marilyn Monroe, even when she was just doing the dishes, or making the supper.

One morning she caught her comb in her earlobe, felt a tug and heard the clack as one diamond earring dropped onto the floorboards in her bedroom.

We were all called in for the search.

'If I kneel down myself, I'll never get back up again,' said Granny as she clutched her figurine of Saint Anthony, the patron saint of lost things.

Jamie and I were singled out as we could fit under the bed and in behind the dressing table, and our fingers could squeeze into places that grown-up hands couldn't.

Granny shouted instructions to us as we crawled about on the floor.

'Saint Anthony, he's never let me down yet,' she said, 'if only I could get to Italy, I'd slip him a few Lira.'

'It's Euros, Mum, not Lira,' replied Aunty Lorraine.

After a while the searching stopped. Granny took the remaining diamond earring out of her earlobe, fastened it to the piece of red velvet and laid it on her dressing table.

'I don't want to look like a pirate, do I?'

She was never quite the same after that. The twinkle in her eye disappeared along with the twinkle from her ears.

Every so often she would sigh and stroke her earlobe.

'I miss my diamonds. I feel naked without them.'

It was Jamie who suggested we start the search again.

We both took one of Granny's silk scarves and tied it around our mouth and nose, to stop the dust from making us sneeze. The scarf smelt of Granny's perfume and made me sneeze anyway. Granny never had carpet in her bedroom. She liked the floorboards; she said the creaks they made was the house talking to her.

'Sometimes it's the most sensible conversation I have all day.'

After she lost the earring, she stopped sweeping in there.

'You don't want to Hoover up your inheritance, do you?' She said, when Mum threatened to clean the floor.

Jamie and I knelt in front of Granny's dressing table and prayed to the figurine of Saint Anthony. His bald head, his baby and his bunch of flowers, reflected in the glossy, varnished wood. Granny still kept her surfaces clean, even if the floor was dusty.

'Dear Saint Anthony, please help us find Granny's diamond earring. Amen.'

I used Granny's metal nail file and Jamie her letter opener, and we began to dig into the gaps between the floorboards. We flicked out anything that was wedged stuck; laid it all on a white handkerchief on the dressing table. After a while we stopped to see what we had collected; stuff that Granny had lost over the years. Jamie thought some of it even dated back to Grandad.

Five needles.

Two paperclips.

Four earring butterflies.

One pen lid (blue).

One gold chain.

One screw.

No diamond earring.

'Under the bed?' Jamie shrugged.

We'd been avoiding the bed.

We could still see the ruffled dent on top of the duvet, the head-shaped hollow in the pillow: where Granny had lain before the men in the black van came to get her.

Jamie and I had been playing out the front when we heard the sirens. Even when the ambulance stopped outside Granny's garden, we didn't realise what was happening. It was only when Aunty Lorraine came out and the men from the ambulance followed her into the house that we knew something was wrong, and by then we'd been told to wait outside.

When the men drove the ambulance away, we went back in. Mum and Aunty Lorraine were in the kitchen. They were both crying and Mum was using kitchen towel to mop up a puddle on the floor. There was a broken mug on the table.

'Don't go in Granny's bedroom,' Mum told us.

'She didn't even get to finish her tea,' said Aunty Lorraine.

We sat on the front wall until the men in the black van arrived. As we watched them drive away, Jamie said we should go and look for the earring.

I lifted the bedside lamp. Next to it lay Granny's glasses and her book, the bookmark poking out from between the pages.

'She won't get to find out what happened.' I said.

I switched the light on, and angled it under the bed. The dust was thicker under there, like a carpet, all fluff and grey hair. We moved Granny's slippers out of the way, crawled underneath and began to search the floorboards.

You could tell which side of the bed Granny slept on because the mattress had sagged down, and some of the bed slats were bent. Jamie didn't think she looked big enough to buckle a bed board.

Under the bed we found:-

Two drawing pins.

Four Kirby grips.

Three matches.

One silver bracelet (broken).

One poppy.

Three slaters (dead).

Still no earring.

We took off our silk scarves and stood in front of the dressing table.

‘Thanks for helping us find all this treasure, Saint Anthony,’ I said, ‘but we were really hoping to find the diamond earring.’

Jamie picked up the velvet with the one remaining diamond, and held it in front of the figurine.

‘This is what we’re looking for,’ he said.

As he put the earring back down, he caught Saint Anthony with the velvet. Saint Anthony toppled over, spun on the polished surface and flew off the edge of the dressing table. As he hit the floor, his bald head broke off and disappeared under the bed.

‘Quick,’ I said, picking up the headless Saint Anthony, ‘we can glue it back on before anyone sees.’

Jamie crawled under the bed.

‘Got it!’ I heard him shout.

I knelt down and moved the lamp towards him. It lit up his face and I could see cobwebs in his hair, as he prised something out from between the floorboards and wiped the dust from it.

The diamond sparkled against the dirt under his fingernails.

I pulled him out from under the bed, and we attached the earring next to the other one on the velvet, using one of the butterflies we'd found earlier.

Mum and Aunty Lorraine hadn't moved from the kitchen table.

'You two are filthy, what did I tell you?' Mum said, when she saw us.

'That's not, is it?' said Aunty Lorraine.

Jamie nodded as he handed her the piece of velvet.

'Where was it?' Mum asked.

'Remember when Dad went to get them insured and found out they were glass,' said Aunty Lorraine, as she rubbed her thumb over the earrings.

'Aye, he didn't have the heart to tell her.' Mum replied, and she and Aunty Lorraine started to laugh; big gasping laughs that shook the table.

Jamie looked at me; have they gone mad?

Aunty Lorraine put the velvet down and reached for the kitchen towel.

'Stop, don't look at me, stop it,' Mum said, hiding her face behind her hands, as Aunty Lorraine ripped off a piece of kitchen towel and wiped her eyes with it.

I looked at the earrings lying next to the broken mug. They were winking at me.