

The Gift of Yellow

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Ruth Stacey

The Gift of Yellow

‘Are you doing this deliberately to hurt me?’

It was a question that fell to the floor like a dropped cup. It smashed for a moment, the echo of that last vowel overly loud in the butter yellow kitchen, and then there was silence. Just the waiting indrawn gasp of breath held in her daughter’s lungs. Claire regretted her question instantly, but it was too late. Grace was staring at her with an expression Claire hadn’t seen before; disappointment pulled her features taut, remoulding her into a stranger. Grace’s dyed hair was stuck up from sleep and Claire fought a desire to reach out and smooth that parched, orange hair into neatness, but it would be like trying to pet a cat’s paws. Hiss and sharpness. Instead, she stood up from the breakfast table and began to clumsily gather the plates and cutlery. The clinking and domestic movement changed the atmosphere and Grace grabbed her denim rucksack covered in badges, pushing past Claire to leave the house to catch the bus for sixth form. Claire heard the bus pull away, then silence. Far off she could hear the sound of her neighbour, Mrs Haggerty, cutting her yew hedge with those annoying old-fashioned shears.

Now there would be seven hours of waiting to see if Grace would come home after her lessons or if the bus would go past without dropping her, leaving Claire to wait for a text to say Grace was staying out. She angrily put the dirty things into the sink and filled it with boiling water. She washed and dried them, putting them back onto the open shelves and throwing the cutlery into the drawer. There wasn’t much considering there was only her and Grace to look after. Claire squeezed the tepid water from the dish sponge and placed it at the back of the sink. She was a tall woman, with long legs and big feet, which she had always been slightly shy about when she went for shoe fittings. Her hands were slim and her fingers long. When she

was young, she had a whole box of rings with paste jewels in them, a different colour gem for every day. Her dark hair was cut in a neat bob, with one side fashionably longer, touching her shoulder.

The white plates and bowls looked so elegant on the shelf. Claire moved them so that the turquoise flower pattern lined up neatly, just like her mother had taught her to do. Then she sighed because her mother would have known exactly what to say to Grace. The sigh sounded theatrically loud, and Claire felt fourteen again, with her mother scolding her for sulking. Mam would have had some good advice for whatever was bothering her though. Claire's mother, with her small, hazel eyes in a round face, had been the master of a useful idiom or fragment of folk advice. There's no point worrying until it happens. A watched pot never boils. Rome wasn't built in a day. Claire sighed again, because what use was ancient Rome or making tea in this situation, but she knew what her mother would have meant by those things. Patience. She needed to give Grace time, but she had. This turmoil had been going on for over a year now and nothing seemed resolved. Claire glanced at the clock above the door. She had a million things she could be doing for work but the thought of going up to her office and opening her laptop made her feel sick.

The trouble had started when Grace lied and caught the train to visit her new boyfriend, who was older than her and lived in the city. They had met online, which terrified Claire. Joe was twenty, in a band, and didn't seem to work much, although Gracie said he was always making art to sell online. Grace was seventeen, old enough of course, but somehow, she seemed so young to Claire. So naïve. At least, having met Frank in person, Claire was reassured he wasn't a predatory old man hiding behind a young profile picture, but he wasn't a good influence on Gracie. She smoked all the time now, getting up in her dressing gown to smoke on the front porch, hunched like an old lady over a mug of coffee and the hand-rolled cigarette hanging from her little hand. Everyone used to smoke, back in the day, but it was clear now how damaging it was, yet Grace just smoked more as if it were a new hobby she had taken up that she was determined to master. Claire

was struck by a memory of Grace, aged about eight, practising on the balance bar. Her small limbs held precisely, a determined expression on her little face. Each foot lifted and pointed so that the toes didn't falter, her limbs making neat lines.

Claire picked up a basket and went out though the back door into the warm September sunshine, down the pale, sandy coloured steps, and into her herb garden. The smell was thick in the air, almost like a green cloud was hanging around her face. Beyond the wall was her vegetable patch and orchard. It wasn't large, but she had planted it carefully so that each narrow path was bordered by overhanging beans, and marrow and courgette plants escaping their boundaries. Orchard was a romantic nonsense. There were exactly three small trees. The bees were humming in the flowers as if they had never heard of teenage daughters. Claire had a sudden image in her mind of running to get into Bill's car when he had arrived to take her out on their first date. He had stood up to wave to her through the rolled back sunroof, with his Citroën 2CV giving off the feeling of Europe and escape, its cream paint warm like a Provence afternoon.

'Her name is Francoise,' he had said, 'My faithful steed.' Bill patted the dashboard like it was a horse as he helped Claire pull the seat belt around herself, 'Should I be jealous?' she had answered with a smile, and he had kissed her. A memorable first kiss, one to write in her diary, which she had. Gracie had heard this story before, of course, and had loved looking at photos of those days when her parents looked like lithe strangers, Bill with his blue flares and long hair, and Claire shyly looking at him with adoration through her dark fringe, with a long plait hanging over the shoulder of her white dress.

'What was your first kiss like with Frank?' Claire had asked once, when she had Grace had a truce and Claire was trying to build bridges. Little, fragile bridges made of straw that would tumble at the least moment.

'I don't know, I was drunk. It's no big deal.'

Claire said nothing, but her face said enough for Grace to get angry.

‘Why are you always disappointed in me, why do you always compare me to you?’

‘I don’t.’

‘Yes, you do.’

Another mishandled moment. Grace had been right, Claire was comparing and dreaming, imagining a future for Grace. Instead of just letting her be, letting her travel on unencumbered by the threads of past. They started rowing, thin layers of words said clumsily, almost weightless, but combined it made a weight of misunderstanding. Often, once they had both gone to bed for the night, Claire would go in and apologise in the dark, or Grace would get up early and make her tea.

Claire decided she wasn’t going to do any work today, the accounts for the local farmer she was working on could wait. Instead, she would collect some produce for dinner, and perhaps make some jam from the damsons she could glimpse— dark purple splodges against the green leaves. Claire’s mouth watered at the thought of them warm from the cane, making her realise she hadn’t eaten anything at breakfast. Claire looked back at the white porch with the clematis growing over it like a veil. This house, envied by many, was like a rose bush with many thorns. Claire could not relax there, without Bill. Dying in a car crash of all things, pulling out of a junction into an overtaking vehicle, not his fault, and not in that fragile little 2CV, but a company car built like a modern tank. He had taken tuna fish sandwiches with him that day, she remembered. She had been on pause for six years, like when Gracie used to stop her video of a Disney film and forgot about it, and Claire would go in to find the face of some character flickering on the screen. Almost moving onward but held in this tremulous flutter.

She put down her basket and sat on the bench by the lavender bush. The smell was all encompassing. Claire picked a piece of lavender to rub between her fingertips. Bill had hated the smell of lavender, like soap, he would say. The bench was crooked, an ugly thing made by him in one of his enthusiastic moments where he took up a new hobby, a thing she often moaned about spoiling her garden layout. But she thought, placing her hands on the warm planks, she

wouldn't ever get rid of it. What would Bill have thought about Grace's new boyfriend? He would have liked him, and talked about art with him, probably encouraged him to keep following his artistic aspirations. Bill had been a violinist, studying music at university and dreaming of orchestras when they had met, until what he called 'real life' had made him take the bar exam and become a lawyer. I was his real life, Claire thought, moving her platinum wedding ring around her finger. Through the hedge Mrs Haggerty's geese were honking abrasively. The smell of their muck would waft in certain weather making Claire furious.

Claire had only met Frank a few times and he hadn't really explained his art to her. They had met at the front door when he came to collect Grace for the cinema. He was a short, stocky young man, with a crooked mouth that was emphasised when he smiled. His ears, curved like clam shells you might find on the beach, stuck through his wavy, brown hair. He was nervous, of course, and stumbled over his words, but he seemed earnest and looked at Grace with the expression of an explorer that had just discovered a new world in his brown eyes. And Grace, when she smiled at him, she was radiant, as if someone had turned a bulb back on inside her. A lightness to her that had been absent at home. It made Claire very happy to see her like that. She had almost laughed out loud on the doorstep, a bubble of laughter curled up her throat, but she bit her lip to suppress it. Grace had reached up and picked something from his hair, a white feather, and laughing too, she had held it out to Claire before turning with him and heading to the car leaving Claire standing under the porch staring up the empty lane with the little tuft of down held carefully on her palm.

Then he came for dinner, and Claire had tried to make it informal by making a normal week-night supper of jacket potatoes and cheese, only to find out he was vegan. He wouldn't let her make him something else, just carefully scrapped the cheese topping off and gamely ate the potato underneath.

'Why didn't you tell me that he was vegan?' Claire had hissed at Grace in the kitchen as they got the dessert.

'I did, you just never listen properly.'

'I listen to everything you say.'

'You are so pretentious Mum, asking him what his parents do for a living and what university he is going to.'

'I was just making polite conversation Gracie, that's what people do.'

'Don't call me Gracie! I hate it. I hate you!'

Bill could have called her Gracie without this explosion. She thought of his easy smile, his blue eyes, and red hair that had faded to the colour of sand. She thought about the way he would start speaking in clumsy French when he had drunk some Chablis and was feeling romantic. *Oh mon petit lapin, je t'aime!* He would have been worried, of course, but he wouldn't have been so afraid that Grace had decided not to apply for university. Why was it so important to you that Grace went anyway, he might have asked, is it because you didn't go? You could go now, his voice whispered.

A robin landed on the bird bath, its red breast really a dull orange. Claire and Grace loved this bird. They called him Romeo, and amused themselves watching him strut around the garden, scooting other birds away from the seeds or worms. He would land on their hands to take a treat, the closest thing to a pet they had. Bill had always read to Grace, told her stories from Shakespeare, or Greek myths. The summer before he died, he had read the whole of the *Lord of the Rings* to Grace, and Claire would sit on the top step of the stairs to listen too, hear all about the made-up lands, the elves, and hobbits. Claire heard someone calling, 'Cooee,' from beyond the vegetable patch, and thought, it's her: Mrs Haggerty.

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Grace worked part-time at a hotel in the next village, making beds, cleaning bathrooms, folding towels. All the things people hated doing for themselves. Her freckles were covered with a thick layer of pale foundation, which gave her face an eerie mask like appearance in the gloom of the mid-priced hotel. Her pretty eyes were circled in black

kohl, with an expert flick in the corners. The place had been an inn once, fit for men on horseback, but now it was extended and soulless. Grace stacked mini samples of shampoo and conditioner into the ceramic pots in the bathroom. She was pissed off. Fuming, in fact. That was the last time she would let *that woman* talk about her boyfriend like that. The pure disrespect that lingered in every word her mother uttered had created a hot pit in her stomach that rose through her lungs, smoked along her windpipe and sprung out in three flaming words:

'I hate you!'

The statement was, of course, untrue but Grace said it with such conviction that she even convinced herself. Hate was not an appropriate word in their relationship, though resentment had begun to grow. Grace felt like a young tiger, a wildcat her mother called her, well then if she was a wildcat her mother was a boring tabby who only ate posh food from little silver tins. Grace bared her neat white teeth at herself in the bathroom mirror; a tiger who had been reared by a meek housecat. And ever since Frank had come into the picture, the difference in world view between the two women had spiralled. Frank had no fault in the feud, Grace even understood her mother liked Frank, certainly she smiled at him and made him vegan food, but it was the perception he was at fault for leading Grace astray that was so infuriating. Grace chuckled as she hugged a pile of warm towels she had collected from the laundry, imagining Frank leading her anywhere. He was so soft; he wanted to get to know Grace's mother and even considered her point of view when Grace ranted about the latest dramatic affair which had ended in another knot being created in the fabric of her relationship with her mother. Frank was so funny and interesting. But Claire clearly wanted Grace to have been with one of the boring boys from school who had no more than five thoughts a day but would inevitably make a ridiculous amount of money for giving society the privilege of their dull company. Grace sprayed antiseptic on the toilet and attacked it with a cloth. That was possibly unfair. Claire didn't really care about money. It was Grace's brains she cared about. That Grace used them properly.

In fact, she thought crossly, her slim arms reaching for the cobwebs in the corner of the shower cubicle, Claire almost seemed to think that Grace was with Frank to spite her, as if the stressful feud did anything but make everything feel worse: work, school, home. After a lovely day with Frank, a sinister text from Claire about miscommunication would have Grace nervously sweating and Frank confused. After all, Grace was always safe, she wasn't stupid. And Frank would protect her. Grace could hear the landlord calling up the stairs asking her to come down and start helping the waiting staff. She felt like putting all the warm towels under the double bed and crawling into them and hiding like a hibernating animal. She had done that once when she had a hangover and got away with it, but a second time she might not be so lucky. Dad would have laughed, Grace thought, and then immediately pushed Bill out of her mind.

Checking the boss wasn't near the door Grace looked at her phone instead, pulling it out of the pocket of the stupid white apron she had to wear. A text from Frank, saying that he had brought a lemon pudding for their dinner tonight. Grace loved cheesecake. She sent him a snapchat of her face next to the toilet with the word, Help! He lived in his parent's downstairs flat, and they never gave him any hassle. Scrolling down Grace saw a text from her mum. She didn't want to read it, as it would probably be something to make her feel guilty, or angry, but her curiosity was too great. She clicked open. It was a picture of the stupid robin in the garden. Grace shook her head and smiled to herself. Oh Mum, she thought. She replied with a yellow heart.

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'Claire, I've got something for you,' the old woman was pushing her way through the gap at the side of the garden. Claire had dropped her basket and rushed down the path, past the courgettes and plum tree to see Mrs Haggerty emerging from the yew hedge. There were big gaps, because Grace had made dens in there when she was younger,

but Claire hadn't imagined they were large enough to fit her elderly neighbour through.

'Are you ok, may I help you?'

'Two things actually, I have too many and you are just the person to help me out.'

'Two things?'

'For you. Aren't you listening? You never listen, I hear Gracie shouting that at you.'

Claire felt a feeling of anticipation, something like she used to get when her mother would come home from town with the grocery shopping. There might be warm spiced buns, or an iced cake, perhaps a pie with a glazed top. That anticipation had dulled over time, and she had begun to view the grocery shopping as something embarrassing, done on the bus, not like the other children who had cars. It had left a taste in her mouth, something metallic, like pressing her tongue against a rusty gate to try and taste the colour of that specific shade of red. Claire clenched her teeth together to try and dismiss the memory of her mother, once so large, now diminished and shuffling in her headscarf but refusing to let Claire do her shopping for her. Claire suddenly remembered she had been wearing Bill's jumper, its oversized knit drowning her slim frame, his scent in the pattern. Mrs Haggerty was staring at her, with an expression of amusement.

'It's alright my dear, I'm sure all mothers have moments like this. The key once so easily in the lock won't turn, am I right, but it will again. You know that.'

'Key? How, how... did you know I was thinking about my mother?'

Mrs Haggerty pushed her green hat up to reveal her ice-white hair, thin and wispy.

'Your mother? You are the mother; Gracie is the difficult key. Or she is a duckling, not yet a swan.'

'Mrs Haggerty, I must insist you sit down and stop talking like this. Perhaps... perhaps, a cup of tea?'

'No, thank you. Claire, we don't talk much because you hate

my geese, but geese are very good pets. So are ducks. These are for you.'

Haggerty opened the brown box. Inside were two yellow ducklings on a bed of straw.

'I'll send my Sean round to dig you a little pond and set up a house for them. No, don't say anything, it's no trouble, no, you will love them, I promise. Ducks are a delight.' The old lady's voice was trilling. The robin flew in and landed on the bird bath. Claire picked up a duckling and felt its warmth.

'One for each of you. And, my Jip is having puppies later in the year, I'll give you one. Just what you need Claire, get you out of the house more. About time you had a real pet.'

Claire nodded; all she could feel was the duckling.

'And stop worrying about the young man who looks like Dylan from *The Magic Roundabout*. Bit of wacky baccy won't hurt them.'

'Who, Dylan?' Claire sounded like an owl, who, who.

'The young hobbit that calls on your daughter.'

And Claire laughed. A loud squawk that made the duckling jump so she cupped it and brought it to her heart. Yes, she thought, yes, he is very like a kindly hobbit. And then, she understood everything, hearing Bill's voice curling around Grace's mesmerised face, Middle Earth laid out like a blanket between them.

'Hobbit, yes dear, perhaps the puppy could be Sam. We won't tell the young hobbit though, shall we.'

'No, Mrs Haggerty, let's not. Tea? I insist, I have a lemon cake.' She put the ducklings back in the box and pulled Mrs Haggerty towards the house. Claire stopped to open the box and take a photo of the ducklings on her phone and send it to Grace. She saw Grace's heart.