

NEIL GAIMAN AND CHARLES VESS'

★ ★ ★ A FALL OF ★ ★ ★
STARDUST



WALL

A PROLOGUE



BY NEIL GAMAN
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Walt, A Prologue
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WALL-A PROLOGUE.



It wasn't black and white, not when you saw it up close. Jenny held her breath, frightened of scaring the bird away.

Its long tail was raised clear off the ground, and it strutted inquisitively across the neatly-trimmed grass of the Kerton's lawn.

Jenny stared at the magpie in fascination. Its belly and the flash on its wings were pure white, but the black that covered its head and back, wing tips, and tail, was far from black, when seen from close to: she could make out red and violet and green in its tail, blue and green in its wings, and overlaying all was a pure viridian sheen.

'One for sorrow', thought Jenny.

She was twelve.

She stood on the grass in her bare feet, feeling the turf between her toes, smelling the evening air. It had rained earlier, and the grass was still wet.

That's a pity, she thought. I don't want to have to be sad.

There was a whirring from above her, and, as if in answer to her thought, another magpie fluttered down from the autumn sky.

'Two for joy', thought Jenny. That's better.

The two magpies walked around each other like fat men in evening dress, eyeing each other as if they were wondering which of them was to begin the conversation.

The early evening air was quiet. The sky was overcast, the air was grey and cool. Jenny was wearing her print cotton skirt, and a white cotton blouse.

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It was Friday, the Eighth of November, 1963, and tomorrow was her birthday.

Whirr.

A third magpie joined the other two.

'Three for a girl', thought Jenny. That must be me.

She wondered if she'd feel any different when she was thirteen. She doubted it. Jenny distrusted birthdays; despite the presents, she was wary of them. You go to sleep one age, wake up another, with no say in the matter.

Tomorrow she'd be a teenager.

Whirr.

It landed awkwardly, hopped to the side to regain its balance.

'Four for a boy'. She thought about that, staring at the four birds the while, then shook her head. No, no boys. Only her brothers.

The magpies were now ignoring each other, industriously scanning the wet grass, occasionally picking at something with their curved black beaks.

They weren't as big as she had thought, either, seen up close. Most of the length was in the tail. The magpies' tails bobbed up and down as they circled on the patch of lawn in front of her.

She had read a book a week or so back, set in a girls' boarding school: Alison, the scholarship girl, was blamed for the theft of some rings belonging to Marjorie, the snobby girl and captain of the lacrosse team. In the last chapter the rings were discovered in a magpie's nest, however, and when Marjorie had sprained her ankle Alison had led the lacrosse team to victory.

Jenny wondered if magpies really stole shiny things.

She wondered how long she could stand there without moving. She really didn't want to scare them away, but she was beginning to get a cramp in her left thigh.

Whirr.

Whirr.

Two more magpies. One fairly small – a young one. Jenny ran through the rhyme in her head. 'Five for silver. Six for gold.'

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Did that mean she was going to be rich, one day? Jenny wasn't sure if she'd like that.

Six magpies.

She could hear, some way off, her brothers calling to each other, in the woods behind the house. She hoped desperately that their game wouldn't bring them any closer, that they wouldn't scare the birds away.

Somehow she knew that you didn't get many moments like this in your life: moments when you knew, without any doubt, that you were alive, when you felt the air in your lungs and the wet grass beneath your feet and the cotton on your skin; moments when you were completely in the present, when neither the past nor the future mattered.

She tried to slow her breathing, hoping somehow to make this moment last forever.

The magpies had stopped circling, had stopped hunting and pecking. One of them was staring at her, its head tipped slightly to one side. The others were just...

They were waiting.

Jenny waited with them. She wriggled her bare toes in the wet grass.

She couldn't hear her brothers any longer. They must have gone into the house, or further into the woods.

Whirr.

This magpie was huge.

It's the last of them, she thought. 'Seven for a secret never to be told.' It's the end of the rhyme.

She stared at it in awe: it must have measured almost two feet from the tip of its beak to the end of its tail. And the colours. There were colours in the feathers of its wings and tail she wasn't even sure she could name. The other six magpies shuffled and hopped around it, until they had arranged themselves in a rough semicircle, all facing Jenny.

Jenny looked at the magpies, in the cool of the autumn twilight.

The magpies looked back at her. They seemed to be waiting for something.

'Seven for a secret, never to be told.'

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She had always counted the magpies they had passed in the car, but had never seen more than three together, before now.

"All right," she said to the birds. "What's the secret?"

For a moment she thought that she had scared them; that the action of speaking might somehow have broken the spell; but the birds didn't move.

The last magpie stared up at her. It put its head on one side, as if it were weighing her up, as if she were a shiny ring, and it was trying to decide whether she was worth taking back to its nest.

"You're going to Wall," the magpie said, in a rough, metallic voice.

Jenny opened her mouth to speak, and hesitated.

"Where?" she asked. "Where am I going?"

The smallest of the birds walked forward. "But it's a secret," it told her. "You can't tell anyone."

"But--"

She never finished her thought. As one, the birds took off, and it seemed like the air was filled with black and white – and green and blue–, as if she could hear nothing but the beating of wings. She took a step back in alarm, heart thumping in her breast.

The birds were gone.

The magic was over, and suddenly Jenny felt sick. Her stomach felt tight, and her heart was beating too fast. Panic took her, and she didn't understand why.

She ran across the damp lawn, into the house.

Her mother was in the kitchen, sitting at the table stringing runner beans. "Jennifer? You all right, love?"

Jenny nodded, without saying anything, and ran into the hall. She felt like her stomach was pinching, hard, inside; she felt nauseous, and strange.

She went up the stairs, two at a time, and into the bathroom at the top of the stairs. She locked the door behind her, leant against it heavily. The pain was getting worse, and she was feeling dizzy.

She sat down slowly, easing herself onto the cold lino.

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She closed her eyes.

In her head the magpies were still flying, black eyes staring down at her, wings flapping in slow motion, huge black and white birds trapped in time, held behind her eyes.

She felt something wet between her legs.

Jenny opened her eyes, pulled at her skirt, uncovering her thin white legs, until she could see her white cotton panties. A red stain had begun to spread across the crotch.

She shivered and closed her eyes again.

You can't go back, she thought. It's the dividing line. I'm not a little girl any more.

Maybe that's what the magpies were trying to tell me.

She put tissue paper in her panties, and went back downstairs, to talk to her mother, to find out what to do now.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

She knew that now.

Jenny Kerton never forgot that day, although, as time went on, the time in the bathroom, and her mother's explanation, and the fitting of the sanitary pad, and the bitter taste of the aspirin her mother dissolved in a glass of water for her, gradually took prominence over the event that preceded them.

And after thirty years had passed, all that remained in her memory was the sheen of green and violet on a magpie's wings: the knowledge that, when you got up close, it wasn't simply black and white.



SEPTIMUS' TRIOLET



The little joys of arsenic
Leave many fellows cold.

The little joys of arsenic
Are certain, though they are not quick,
And though perhaps they'll make you sick
They will not leave you old.

The little joys of arsenic
Leave many fellows cold.



SONG OF THE LITTLE HAIRY MAN



here's some as goes a-wandering
From Zanzibar to Dover

But me, if you was pondering
It's only time I'm squandering
—For "Sir, how much for yonder ring"
I'll walk the wide world over.

And when the night's all thundering
I shall not fear the thunder
Nor fear the mammoth's blundering,
nor bandits and their plundering
— For "How much, we was wondering?"
I'll walk the wide world under.

So through it all I'm ambling
with never an end in view
And with my pack I'm rambling
I'm pushing through the brambling
And up steep hills I'm scrambling
And down 'em skimble-skambling
to bring my wares to you.
—For "it's a steal, I'm gambling"
I'll walk the wide world through.



THE OLD WARDLOCKS REVERIE:

A PARTOUM.

S

hrieking shapes that stalk the night,
I can hear them scream and moan:
Fox or wolf, they love or fight,
And I wait here on my own.

I can hear them scream and moan:
Clench my nails into my palms --
And I wait here on my own,
Pondering forgotten charms.

Clench my nails into my palms.
-- Where's the girdle made of pelt?
Pondering forgotten charms:
--Where's my lycanthropic belt?

Where's the girdle made of pelt?
Did she burn it, steal it, hide it?
Where's my lycanthropic belt?
(Never knock it till you've tried it.)

Did she burn it, steal it, hide it?
-- Pour myself more wormwood gin --
Never knock it till you've tried it;
Trying too much does you in.

Pour myself more wormwood gin,
Blessed drunkenness eludes me.
Trying too much does you in,
True, but just a little soothes me.

Blessed drunkenness eludes me.
Once, beneath the moon, we ran,
True, (but just a little soothes me)
Wolf or fox or cat or man.

Once, beneath the moon, we ran.
That was then. She has not aged.
Wolf or fox or cat or man,
Shapes in which our love we waged...

THE OLD WARLOCK'S REVERIE:

A PARTOUM.

That was then, she has not aged,
And the pale moon discovers
Shapes in which our love we waged –
Now she shares with other lovers.

And the pale moon discovers
Shrieking shapes that stalk the night.
Now she shares, with other lovers,
Fox or wolf, they love, or fight.





