

The Word Thief

It's the nouns that go first. Oh, not all of them. Just the ones you can use to describe feelings with.

'How are you feeling, hon?'

Your mother, with her tired face and lost questions. She looks between you and the congealing meat on her plate, torn between the hunger left by her thankless job and exhausting commute, and the important task of filling her daughter's cup.

'Oh, I'm feeling...' and you search and search but there's nothing there where the words used to be. You can find words, but they aren't the right ones for the answer. Table. Chair. Oven. Plate. Those nouns are still there. Knife, fork, spoon, all still available, but where are the ones you actually want?

The ghost of them is there: a memory, a shadow, a whisper, like a half-forgotten dream. You grasp, but they're just out of reach. Later, you'll search and search and find, not the words, but the person who took them. But for now, you're torn between *lumpy* and *overcooked* to convey what you are feeling. By the time you opt for *soggy*, your mother has moved on.

You thank your father for dinner, kiss your mother's sagging cheek and take yourself to bed where, in the dark, distraction free, you can search the recesses of your mind for the missing words.

It's like a picture being taken down from a wall: a picture that has hung there for years, leaving behind a bright space where it once was. On the wall, a mocking outline.

That's when he comes: the word thief.

He's tiny, dressed like a silent movie villain in stripes, a sack marked SWAG hanging over one shoulder. Across his eyes, a black mask, hiding just enough that you won't be able to identify him in a line up.

The thief tilts a ladder up to your head - where was he hiding that? - and climbs silently up, up, up to the dark space in the middle of your ear.

'No, please,' you whisper, but you are paralysed, calcified like the stone bras and teddy bears hanging over the well at Mother Shipton's cave. 'I need the words,' you say. 'Don't take any more from me.'

But he doesn't listen. He is efficient: he enters, he takes and he is gone.

You cry into your pillow, wondering what words he has taken this time.

'Don't go,' you beg your mother. She is needed at a conference. Four days, other end of the country. She'll be in a nice hotel, she tells you. Branded robe and expensive toiletries.

'I'll bring you some back,' she says. Then: 'I'm sorry sweetie. You and Dad will be fine without me for a couple of days.'

'But I'm...' *What are you?* They're still lost, those words. You try something else. 'When you're not here it's...' *It's what?* You roll a few words around in your mouth, but they're stupid.

Fish. Egg. Bicycle.

That's when you realise that the adjectives have gone.

Damn him. That bastard is clearing you out.

The first night your mother is away, he comes for the verbs.

You knew he'd come for those next. You're prepared you see, ready to fight for them. While he is at work, you grasp as hard as you can for the verbs. You screw your eyes tight shut and try to hold on.

Run. Yell. Shudder. Scream. Slide. Shift. Cower. Propel. Kick. Lunge. Evade. Flee.
Press Pound GrappleScrapQuarrelDodgescamperexitsbove

But as he stuffs each one in that bag of his, you know that you have lost these ones too. That the thief has taken more words from your mouth and head and heart and bone and lungs and you're not sure that you will ever get them back.

On her return, your mother is frowning.

'Are you sure you're okay, sweetheart? You seem...'

You overhear your father muttering in her ear. 'Not talking properly...attention seeking if you ask me...it's her age...'

It's hard not to think *well, I must have done something to deserve this*. After all, your friends at school are all full of words, even if recently they've taken their words a little further away from you at lunchtime. Even if you might have heard them use some of their words to call you names. Odd now that you can't recall what they said, but really, would you have told anyone - *could* you have told anyone - what they're saying anyway?

He comes for the adverbs. Easily, quickly, effortlessly he comes. Quietly, carefully, completely you watch him take them.

You let him, because what choice do you have? He's taken so many words from you already that your arsenal is depleted.

'Take them all' you whisper, and for the last time, you whisper it bravely, before he tucks that too into the bag.

There is a man who is a doctor and your mother and your father in a room.

The room is full of words you don't recognise: *neurosis, anxiety, depression, dissociation* and your father again saying *attention-seeking*. You've heard them, but you don't see how they apply to you.

'Over', you say when the doctor finally asks you a question. You know that it isn't the right answer by the way his face is, but it's all you've got. 'Over, under, inside,' you say. 'Amid, atop, within.'

The doctor hands your mother a prescription for something you know you will flush down the toilet.

Behind, below, he comes for the prepositions. Punishment, because you threw them at the doctor. Above, beyond, between he takes them and tucks them in his bag. Since he can. During the night. Across, within, towards. On, on, on until dawn.

Meanwhile, your mother cries. Therefore, your father shouts. Despite the noise, the neighbours don't complain. However, next door's dog does. Furthermore, he develops a piercing howl. Consequently, nobody's sleeping and the thief can't come because he knows

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he has to wait until everyone slumbers. Nonetheless, you lie in fear of what he will take next.

By the time the dog has been given lavender tablets and a new cushion, the thief comes for the conjunctions.

‘My zero that,’ you tell your mother. ‘Every whose these.’

She is a husk and grey and crying.

‘The either neither. That. An.’ Your fists ball. ‘Your. His.’

‘Sweetheart, you’re scaring me,’ she says.

The word thief takes the determiners.

You are determined to bring him down.

There is a doll and the doll is you and you bring the doll to your mother along with the thief doll you have made from a peg and the wire ladder you twisted between bleeding fingers last night. You stayed awake all night so he wouldn’t come and take the only words you have left.

You can do this with pronouns.

‘You,’ you say and point at your eyes. You lay the doll on the kitchen table where you three have eaten meals together as a family for years. Your mother sits down and stares at the doll.

‘Me’ you say, jabbing the doll in the chest.

‘You,’ she says.

You lean the ladder against the doll’s head and bring your finger to your lips. *Shhh.*

The thief doll peeps from your pocket. He glances around, before darting to the ladder. You

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make him step carefully up, up, up until he reaches the doll's ear. *Shhh*, you indicate again, *shhh*. You have armed him with a swag bag made from an old tshirt you outgrew when your breasts started budding. *Swag* it says, and it is bulging. You hand your mother the bag.

'Mine,' you say. 'Mine.'

She's looking at you, not the bag as she unknots the drawstring. You hold your breath, ready to flip your worlds into a tilt. She pulls the bag open, and scraps of paper fly out, a blizzard of confetti whirling around you both. She is on her feet, grabbing at scraps of paper on which you have carefully scribbled the words. You wrote the ones you knew he would steal next, tucked them under your pillow where you prayed they wouldn't be found.

Your stolen words.

Your mother runs her lips around the letters, nouns first:

Frightened.

Dirty.

Scared.

Then the adjectives:

Repulsive.

Broken.

Despicable.

And the verbs and adverbs:

Forcefully, grab, harshly, push, take, take, take.

She spits out the prepositions, the conjunctions, the determiners, hers, yours. *For, with, during, since, now, because, the, my, some.*

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And then she has them all in her hand and her mouth and her head and all you have left are the pronouns.

‘Who?’ she asks.

You stretch a finger across the room, to the open door, to the lounge, to the source of the cheerful whistle and the hooded eyes of your father.

‘Him,’ you say. ‘Him.’