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## One for Sorrow

by Holly Raber

I was six years old when my mother taught me the art of inner strength. It was the day of my Grand Father's funeral and sadness threatened to overwhelm my small self at any moment. We were on a train travelling north through a flat grey world, rain streaking angrily across the windows pooling in the corners where it wobbled and spilled like tears on the tracks.

Mother leant forward, "George," she whispered conspiratorially, "imagine that you have swallowed a Magpie."

"A Magpie?"

"Yes darling, a Magpie. You must hold it carefully, don't let anyone know it's there. You can't see but I swallowed mine right after breakfast."

I shut my eyes and tried to visualise a large black and white bird, Mother held my hand as it slipped like a herring down my gullet and settled uneasily in my chest. As its powerful wings beat increasingly feebly within the bony cage of my ribs I found myself sitting up a little straighter.

The day passed slowly, I walked stiffly and spoke little, fearful that at any moment my avian inmate might try to escape and reveal my secret. The magpie and I sat silently in a pew, its beak stabbing meanly behind my eyes its scaly claws scratching my throat. I swallowed hard tasting blood and feathers.

Released from the sombre confines of the church my cousins spilled noisily into the vicarage garden, painfully aware of my feathery fullness I perched in the crooked apple tree by the

gate. I watched my mother intently. The weak sunshine cast an oily sheen on her black dress as she flitted from one group of mourners to another, inclining her head, this way and that, exposing the froth of white at her throat.

All that long afternoon I felt the heavy beat of wings in my chest. As the shadows grew longer I saw my grandmother approach my hiding place, picking her way delicately through the damp grass. I wondered if she too had a magpie.

“Georgie,” she called softly stretching out an arm and helping me down from the tree, “George you silly goose what are you doing up there?”

I could only manage a miserable squawk as the magpie erupted unceremoniously from my raw throat.

“That’s it...let it go.”

From the safe sanctuary of her arms I watched the magpie, it hopped uncertain at first from one branch to the next ruffling its feathers then stretching its wings flew in a wide arc, settling high in the tree where another of its kind sat patiently waiting.

