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The Lost Ring

Teatime in the Gibson house was usually a happy occasion with the family all together around the table. Candice sat next to her younger brother Josh, and their mum and dad were either end of the table. Candice noticed a concerned look on her mother's face, and also that she kept looking at her hand. "What's the matter Mum," she said, "Is something wrong?"

Her mother held up her hand. "I've lost my ring," she replied. "I was doing some gardening and it must have come off. I've searched everywhere, but there's no sign of it."

"Maybe you should ask Saint Anthony," suggested her husband.

"Who's Saint Anthony?" asked Josh.

"He's the Saint of lost things," explained their dad. "When you lose something, if you ask Saint Anthony to find it, quite often it just appears, even in a place where you thought you'd already looked."

"Sounds a bit airy-fairy to me," retorted Candice. "Me and Josh could go look for your ring and we could ask our friends to help."

Her mother scowled. "I don't want a bunch of children tramping all over my garden," she grumbled.

"Our friends aren't kids," offered Josh, "They're creatures: like Rummage – he's a hedgehog – then there's Shine the butterfly and Weanywun the little mouse. He's always grubbing around in the weeds. Maybe he's seen it."

Their mother was about to dismiss the idea when her husband cut in: "There's no harm in them looking." He glanced at the window. "It's still light outside." Addressing the two children he added: "No more than an hour, though; and try not to get dirty."

Once tea was over the children were heading off to the back door. Their mother frowned as Josh picked up a piece of bread and took it with him. "You should finish that before you go out, young man," she said.

"It's not for me," explained the boy, "It's for Freckles the magpie. She likes bread..."

"Now," said Candice as the pair walked across the lawn. "We need to muster the troops. You give Freckles the bread and ask her to put the word round. We need as many on the search as we can get." Within a short space of time there was quite a gathering around the two children.

Their father had been watching through the kitchen window and called to his wife: "Come and look at this, Marion. I thought Josh was making it up about creatures being their friends, but now I'm not so sure."

Marion was at his side and looking out. "I've never seen so many animals on the lawn at any one time," she commented. "There's even a rabbit. I didn't know we had one. I bet that's what's been eating my lettuces."

"Well," said Harry, "If it helps to find your ring, a lettuce or two is a fair trade, I reckon."

The two grown-ups continued to watch. Josh was crouched down, presumably talking to some creatures grouped around him, while Candice was saying something and was pointing across the garden. Surprisingly, the hedgehog started out in that direction followed by a number of other animals including a mouse, a squirrel and a small flock of birds. Marion frowned. "This is really weird," she said. "It seems like our children can talk to the animals. Is that possible?"

In the minds of the youngsters there was no doubt. As if to prove it, Candice was speaking to a butterfly perched on her finger: "Maybe you could get some of your friends to help, Shine: sort-of fly around and see if you can spot Mum's ring."

And so the search began. Animals which could only walk hunted in the flower beds, the vegetable patch and under bushes. Like Shine and the other butterflies, the birds flitted around, swooping low if they thought they'd spotted something, rising in the air when it wasn't what they were looking for. Josh was watching them and said: "No sign of freckles since I gave her the bread. I hope she's alright."

"Don't worry," advised his sister. "She'll be back."

As it happened, Freckles failed to re-appear, and as for the search nobody had found the lost ring. "Maybe I didn't make it clear what to look for," muttered Candice gazing dismally at the collection of objects on the lawn. There were three ring pulls from drink cans, a metal washer, two screws and an assortment of gold and silver wrappers from chocolates and sweets.

Then their father came out. "Any luck?" he asked.

Josh shook his head. "Nuh."

"Better come in. It's getting late." And he added: "You ought to say thank you to your friends for trying."

It was as if their father really believed the children could talk to animals – wonders would never cease. Candice nodded in agreement and spoke to the gathering of creatures: "Thanks all of you. Perhaps we could have another look tomorrow..." She hesitated when a butterfly flew over and perched on her shoulder. The little girl listened for a moment and her eyes widened. Her father and brother had already started to make their way to the house. Candice called after them: "Hang on a minute, Dad. Shine just said she spotted mum's ring. It's in Freckles' nest. I should have thought of that – magpies collect shiny things."

Harry and Josh returned. "How can we get the ring out of Freckles' nest?" asked Josh.

"That's all in hand," Candice told him. "Shine tried to convince Freckles to bring it back, but she didn't take any notice. So she went and got Willy Wagtail and you know he can get really cross at times. He's giving her a talking to and he won't take no for an answer. With any luck Freckles will give up Mum's ring."

Quite soon a sharp chattering sound could be heard in the distance, and it was coming closer. In less than a minute Freckles could be seen flying in with Willy Wagtail skipping around above her, chattering loudly. Freckles landed on the lawn in front of the children and their father. Willy stayed in the air, presumably in case Freckles decided to fly off. Candice approached the magpie and crouched. "Do you have something for me, Freckles?" she asked, putting out an open hand. The magpie certainly did have something – the missing ring which she dropped into the little girl's palm. "Thank you for giving up Mum's ring, Freckles. Tomorrow I'll bring you something shiny in its place." She turned to the group of creatures on the lawn. "And thank you all for being so helpful."

Back in the house Marion was so pleased to have her ring returned. Josh said: "Next time you lose something maybe our friends can help you find it."

"As long as it's outside," commented their father. "But I don't think it's a good idea to have animals running around in the house. If we lose something indoors, we may just leave that one for Saint Anthony."