

# **Magpie**

Jude Reid

## **Part I: The Sin**

*1350, Selcouth Priory, North Ayrshire*

“Do you think it’s an omen?” Sister Magrete asks.

A single magpie is standing on the grass in the middle of the cloister. It’s not uncommon to see the birds here, digging for worms or picking at a carcass, but this one is poised and still in a way that makes Ishbel think of an illumination on vellum. It’s bigger than the usual, too, the size of a raven, each fine pinion feather outlined against the next in stark rows of black and white. If it spread its wings it’d stretch a full four foot wide. If Ishbel was prone to fancies she’d swear it was watching them.

“The bird? An omen?”

Magrete nods, her teeth worrying away at her lower lip. She’s new to the cloister, still learning the shape of days bounded by prayer and contemplation instead of milking and

churning, but the work's hard all the same. A few minutes for a quiet walk is all the peace Ishbel will have until Compline, and the girl is filling it with chatter.

"It's a bird, Magrete. I don't think it's an omen."

The girl's red-raw hands wring at the black skirts of her habit. "My granny says they're the devil's bird, cursed because they wouldn't mourn for Christ."

"If the prioress hears you at that nonsense she'll send you back to the byre."

Magrete is undeterred. "And they appear when death's on its way, to carry away the souls of the dead."

"Best expect a few more, then."

A cool wind stirs the quiet cloister air, and a shiver runs down Ishbel's spine that has nothing to do with the magpie. The priory sits on the pilgrim route between Whithorn and the Glasgow Cathedral, and between spring and autumn fresh news comes with every pair of walking feet. This year the same tidings arrive each time: the pestilence is creeping from the south like a rising tide, and its arrival can only be a matter of time.

The bird turns its head to one side and takes a casual hop towards them. Magrete makes a little mock-rush at it, waving her arms to scare it away. It doesn't seem much concerned, but its wings beat the air long enough for it to perch on the stonework, amber eye still glittering down at the cloister below.

“It’s an omen, I tell you.” Magrete juts her jaw stubbornly forward. “Where the magpie goes, death follows.”

“You’re havoring,” Ishbel tells her. “Leave omens for the farmyard and stick to your prayers.”

But omen or no omen, death comes to Selcouth that night, soft as a first kiss.

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“The pestilence has reached Ayr,” the prioress informs them over supper. No one speaks, but a soft rustle moves along the trestles as cups stop short of lips, bread returning uneaten to the table. To Ishbel the news comes as no surprise, but plenty of the older women have clung to the hope that the channel, or the English border, or God’s grace alone might save them from what’s to come.

They’ve all heard the stories. Coughs and fever that soon turn to blackened swellings of the flesh, bloody froth on the lips and a swift, suffocating death. For each hopeful tale of survivors, there’s a report of a village where the dead rot in their homes with no one left to bury them. Some say that the plague is God’s judgement on the wickedness of the world, a second flood to winnow the sinners from the righteous. If the stories are to be believed, godly folk are thin on the ground these days.

“We await guidance from the Abbot in Kilwinning as to where our duty lies. For now, we continue as we always have, in service to God and Christ Jesus.”

A soft, murmured 'amen' passes from sister to sister. Magrete's eyes are closed, her red knuckles clenched tight around her rosary as her lips move in silent, fervent prayer. Nothing stirs in Ishbel, no surge of divine love, no faith in the rightness of what is to come, not even a renewed commitment to serve and obey.

Nothing but a heaviness in the pit of her stomach, a slow-growing, creeping fear.

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Ishbel lies awake after Vespers, the crawling unease making sleep an impossibility. Instead of staring into the blackness she rises, throws her mantle around her shoulders and takes to walking the cloister. She half-expects to see the magpie again, its white feathers gleaming like a shroud, but the priory is silent, empty. She prowls the herb gardens, a cloud of scent rising from the lavender bushes as her skirts brush past, then follows the boundary wall, her fingers trailing along the rough stone.

The knock comes just before she reaches the gate. Not the firm, imperious knock of a townsman, nor the urgent rattle of hungry pilgrims, but a soft, slow, repetitive thud. Something on the other side of the door is breathing, a rasping, laboured sound.

"Is there someone there?" The voice, muffled by the thick wood, is a woman's, hoarse and faint. "For the love of God, please, open the door."

Ishbel takes a step forward, and slides back the panel that covers the narrow slit at eye height. At first the world outside is empty, but then a shape resolves just at the lower limit of

her vision into a cloaked bundle hunched against the door. The woman looks up, and Ishbel catches a glimpse of a pale face, its cheeks flushed crimson, before a paroxysm of coughing racks the huddled figure and she turns her face away.

*Pestilence.*

Ishbel slams the window-slit shut and steps back. The plague has come to Selcouth, just as she knew it would, but still there is something appalling about this confrontation with the inevitable, the possible finally becoming real. Her vows dictate that she should open the door, should provide succour to all God's children — *whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me* — but it is fear that stays her hand, fear of opening the gate and letting death in, fear that stays locked tight around her guts as she turns on her heel and walks away, back through the garden and the cloister to her cell. The sound of weeping follows her through the hours she lies awake until Matins, knowing that even if it were Christ Jesus himself at the door she would lack the strength to open it.

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Sleep must have taken her in the end. She wakes from thin, uneasy dreams to the touch of shaking hands and Magrete's insistent voice. "Ishbel — Sister Ishbel — you're to rise, something terrible's happened."

Blinking and drowsy, it takes a moment for the events of the preceding night to take shape in her mind, a fresh dread to add to all the worries that come a moment after waking.

The knocking at the gate, the crying and coughing, her cowardice — or had it been cowardice after all? Surely she had a duty to keep her sisters safe — did that not exceed any care she owed to a stranger from God alone knew where?

“What is it, Magrete?”

“The gate — there’s a body at the gate — a woman, dead of the pestilence.”

Ishbel keeps silent. For all anyone knows, this is the first she has learned of their visitor. With no one to witness her shame of the night before, it might as well not have happened. She follows Magrete from her cell, through the cloister to the front door, and finds it already open, a group of sisters clustered tight around it like black-and-white birds. The body has been laid out on the ground — a woman, younger than she had appeared in the darkness, but it is not the youth on her face that causes Ishbel’s stomach to clench like an angry fist. It is the baby laid on her chest, tightly swaddled, eyes closed as though in sleep.

“She must have arrived in the night,” Magrete says, “And no one was there to answer.”

The prioress closes the young woman’s eyes. The head lolls to one side, muscles slack. The puffy, bruise-purple swellings beneath the jaw are unmistakable. “It was only a matter of time,” the prioress says, rising to her feet with an air of dignified resignation. “We shall do what we can for these two poor souls. What comes next is in God’s hands.”

By the time the grave is dug in the little churchyard just inside the perimeter wall, Magrete is already coughing.

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Magrete dies two days later.

Ishbel washes the blood and sweat and filth from her body, fascinated by the rough red patches of skin in the creases of the dead girl's elbows and knees, the tiny cracks running across them like a dry riverbed. Death did not take her kindly, and it is a relief to shroud the dead face, covering the swollen black tongue and the gaping eyes in bleached linen. By the time they have dug out the grave, another sister is coughing; by the time they gather to commend Magrete's soul to God, so is the Prioress.

They paint a cross on the door, bar it from the inside, and wait to die — and die they do, one after another, until all of Ishbel's days are spent in tending the sick and digging shallow graves. The prioress rallies at the end of the first week, and for a while Ishbel thinks she might yet live, but the pestilence takes her all the same.

Ishbel scrubs the priory from top to bottom, washes the sweat-soaked bed sheets, burns the bloody rags. She tidies the scriptorium, neatly filing every completed page, making a separate folio of the copies left unfinished by each failing hand. Ink is returned to bottles, quills washed and sharpened, desks tidied for scribes who will never return. She sweeps the stores, takes inventories, weeds the flower beds.

She places a marker at the head of the prioress's grave — a simple piece of wood, inked with her name and the date of her death — and looks up to see that the magpies are gathering.



Not one bird, this time, but a dozen, staring bright-eyed at her from every part of the little cemetery. In a way Magrete was right, she thinks — they come hand in hand with death, not to bring it, but to profit from it. Her hands are bruised and aching from digging. She can only hope she has buried her sisters deep enough.

“Go,” she says, and is shocked by the unfamiliar sound of her own voice. How long has it been, now, since she spoke? Hours? Days? The nearest magpie answers with a coarse, rasping chatter. She picks up a stone and tosses it underarm; the birds flap and hops away, and the pebble bounces harmlessly to the ground. “Go on! Away with you!”

For a moment, the birds watch and wait, and then in a sudden flurry of wings that darkens the sky like gathering clouds they are gone. She is completely alone.

Just as she has done every day since the pestilence first came, she feels at her neck and under her arms, waiting to feel the hard swellings that herald death’s coming, but there is nothing there but her own over-familiar flesh. She swallows and coughs by way of experiment, but no pain comes. Either the pestilence is brewing far slower than she has ever seen, or she has escaped it entirely. Eventually, she thinks, she will have to open the doors in the front walls to see what has become of the world outside, but for now, they remain closed.

The air is silent. She might be the only living thing in the world. Solitude presses down on her like a leaden weight. The skirts of her habit brush a damp trail across the flagstones as

she heads to the chapel. She has never seen it empty before, and it seems both made vast and yet diminished by absence.

Fresh candles burn on the altar. She realises as the door closes behind her that she is not alone. A man — a living man — dressed in a simple pilgrim's robe with a staff in hand is gazing up at the effigy of the crucified Christ. The shock is enough to make her gasp. He turns at the sound, and the candlelight illuminates a bronze, weathered face, deep set amber eyes, black hair turning to grey at the temples.

“This is a house of God,” she says, and the air swallows her voice.

“I'm not here to harm you, nor to steal.” A faint accent lingers at the edges of the pilgrim's words.

“You should leave. The pestilence is here —”

“I'll be gone soon enough.” His eyes are level, watchful. “The pestilence has taken them all, hasn't it, Ishbel? All but you.”

She presses her lips tight shut. He knows her name. Fear caresses the nape of her neck.

“The magpies know you now, and they will not take you.” His voice is soft, the words carrying the force of a litany. “Disease and hunger will not touch you, nor age claim you, and all the earth shall be yours to walk until your penance is complete.”

The world spins, the candle flames burning bright streaks across her eyes. This pilgrim is surely a fool, surely a madman, perhaps sickening with the pestilence himself. She searches his face for an answer, but his eyes hold only a timeless sorrow.

“Are you the devil?” she whispers. He makes no answer, only touches one soft, warm hand to her shoulder as he passes by, his steps slow and heavy as though the purse jingling at his waist was full of lead and not silver.

The chapel door swings shut like the closing of a tomb.

Ishbel sinks to her knees, and then to the floor. The numbness that has enfolded her in a soft, muffling cocoon since Magrete’s death cracks open like a chrysalis, and suddenly she is weeping, great racking sobs forcing themselves from her throat, scouring her insides hollow.

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## **Part II : Contrition**

*1919, Ardrossan Fever Hospital*

There was a time when she could have named each one, counted them off on the fingers of her hand, but those days are long by. Smallpox, polio, influenza, the plague again; the memories merge into one, an endless parade of rising fevers, straining lungs and exhausted faces. Ishbel knows when they're coming. Every time it begins with a faint, tugging sensation, at first easy to resist then inexorable, pulling her towards the appointed place. The world opens and closes seamlessly around her, a place always prepared and ready — and then a few days later the disease follows, and there she must wait until it has run its course.

Newspapers make it easier to know what's coming, now. Before, information was so unpredictable that it was impossible to tell what form the plague would take this time, but the modern world prizes accuracy in its reporting. There are other diseases, other outbreaks

elsewhere in the world, but she has never felt the inexorable pull to Hong Kong, India or the Americas. From time to time she idly wonders if there are others like her, condemned to wander the steppes of Russia or the antipodes, but she has never met one. For all she knows she is the only one like her in the whole world, and for all her searching she has never found the pilgrim who delivered her sentence again.

This time it's influenza, the so-called Spanish Flu, though it's Ayrshire where she's called to bear witness. Whether she brings the disease or simply arrives at the same time she has never been able to tell, but always she moves untouched through it, like a ghost through ancient stone walls. Fever hospitals have sprung up like spring fungus across the district. She knows every one of them.

The magpie watches her as she makes her way down the ward, perched on a bare elm branch outside. They are all young, this time, the disease sparing the middle aged and old. Who survives and who succumbs seems entirely unpredictable. Strength is no defence.

She pauses at the end of the room. The last bed holds a young man, the blankets that cover him dropping sharply at the stump of his left leg, truncated a little below the knee. So many of the patients she sees survived the war and all its horrors, only to succumb now to a quieter enemy. She visited Endell Street once during the war, saw the surgeons there struggling with knives and cat-gut to save lives and repair mangled bodies. The futility of it all is staggering.

She draws closer. The man's eyes are open, watchful. His skin grey except for two bright spots on his cheeks, his breath coming quick and shallow. He reaches out a hand, and she lets him take it. His fingers are dry and cold.

"I ken you," he says.

"Yes, I saw you this morning."

His eyes glitter, fever bright. "Naw, no that." He draws a deep, rasping breath.

"Glasgow. Nineteen hundert."

She laughs, lightly. It isn't possible that he remembers. No one ever remembers, but the man is right. She was there when the ships brought the Black Death back to Glasgow where it caught light like a match on dry tinder, scorching through the tenements until it burned itself away.

"My da wis took intae the Royal. I saw you there." His grip tightens around her hand, almost painful. She tries to tug it away, but he holds her fast.

"I wasn't in Glasgow then."

He shakes his head. "Aye ye were. An you looked jist the same."

She shoots an anxious glance around the room, but the nurses are busy with their own patients, winged headdresses bowed low over pillows and papers.

“It’s alright.” His voice has dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “I’ll no tell. I jist wantit to tell you I remember you.” The glittering eyes close, and his head sinks back to the pillow. He squeezes her hand, gentle this time. “Are you here to take me away?”

A lump rises in her throat. It should be easy, now, to bear witness to death; she has done it now so many times.

“I don’t know what I’m here for.”

“That’s alright. Will you wait with me but?”

Vision blurring, she perches herself on the edge of the bed and smooths the blankets around him. Together they wait for his breath to slow and the lines of tension in his face to ease.

It doesn’t take long. It never does.

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### **Part III: No Absolution**

*2020: University Hospital, Kilmarnock*

She'd tell the woman not to bother if she could, but she's working so hard, her expression so earnest as she fits the mask that Ishbel hasn't the heart. Besides, what would she say? No one would believe the truth, and there's no lie to explain any of it.

Instead, Ishbel turns her head obediently from side to side inside the plastic hood, all the sounds of the world outside muffled beneath its translucent shroud, and lets the woman flood the trapped air inside with puffs of bitter vapour.

“Can you taste it now?”

Ishbel shakes her head. No point in drawing this out any longer than it needs to be.

“That's good!” The woman beams behind her paper mask. “Now you can try reading out loud.”



Ishbel picks up the document from the trestle table and squints to read it through the rippling plastic. *Rainbow Passage*, it says. No doubt it's a carefully constructed series of syllables, designed to move the jaw through its full range of motion to test the seal around her face. The words are insipid.

*"A rainbow is a division of white light into many beautiful colours."*

She thinks of the shattering of light on a magpie's wing.

"How about now?" the woman is asking. "Can you taste it yet?"

The bitterness is thick in the back of her throat. If she opens her mouth she'll gag. She shakes her head again.

"Then we're finished!" The woman is already filling out the paperwork, signing forms ready to hand over. "There you are, doctor — one copy for you and one for your line manager — and that's you safe."

Ishbel smiles. The woman's right, though not in the way she means.

The hospital is full of a breathless, familiar hush. The air is crisp with anticipation, the sense of a tidal wave drawing out before the onrushing storm. The corridors are quiet, but those who pass nod and smile with anticipatory camaraderie as she opens the door to the brand-new staff sanctuary, once a suite of clinic rooms, now transformed with bean-bag chairs, soft lighting and a kitchen of its own.

In a few weeks they'll need this for more than a cup of coffee and a free biscuit, but for now it's a novelty. She joins the queue for the coffee machine and listens to the chatter rise around her. It's all on the same subject. Nurses are being deployed to different departments, intensive care facilities expanded, surgeons discussing which cases to rush through and which to cancel.

"It was only a matter of time, if you think about it," one of the surgeons is saying. She's a tall, sparse woman in a blue scrub suit, untidy brown hair snared at the nape of her neck. "Bound to happen eventually. And there's nothing to treat it except oxygen and time. So much for modern medicine."

The coffee is bitter, and burns her tongue. The sanctuary space is suddenly hostile, the lights too bright, the chatter forcing its way through her ears and grating her nerves raw. She drops the paper cup in the bin and blunders from the room, even the sound of her own steps jarringly loud. So little silence in this place, even now. In a month, the air itself will be roaring.

It takes ten minutes of walking the corridors before she finds what she needs: a back staircase, dusty and grey, a headless mop resting in a bucket at the foot of the steps. A strong smell of cigarette ash tells her what it's used for these days. She picks her way up to the top, turns the handle, and to her relief the door opens onto the roof.

Outside, the air is cold and clear and blessedly quiet. The hospital below is a sprawl of roofs and cables and ducts, the great oxygen tanks at the far end of the car park still full of life-

sustaining gas. Beyond its bounds, Ayrshire stretches out in a familiar patchwork of fields and roads and towns, the snow-topped mountains to the south blending seamlessly into the grey clouds of the sky.

A loud caw from her left attracts her attention, and Ishbel turns to see a solitary magpie, head cocked to one side, a bright eye regarding her with a quizzical air. It opens its mouth, caws again, then takes a hop towards her. She finds she is standing very still.

Careful not to frighten it, she hunkers down against the door, reaching out a hand as though she were coaxing a cat to come and be stroked. The bird takes another hesitant hop, turning its head back and forward to look with first one eye and then the other. Almost eight hundred years. She can't tell whether the sudden tightness in her chest is excitement or fear.

“Is it time?”

The magpie moves closer still, this time stepping first with one clawed foot and then the other, until it's so close she can make out the amber ring of its iris and every shade of the dark rainbow feathers.

The door behind her swings open, and the magpie explodes upward in a squawking flurry of wings just as the door hits her squarely in the back.

“Shit, I'm so sorry.” A man's voice.

“No, my fault — I shouldn't have stood so close to the door.” A solitary black and white feather is lying on the ground like a discarded glove. She picks it up and turns it over in

her hands, the black filaments shading to green to purple and back again. Hot tears of frustration well in her eyes. So close.

“Are you all right?” the stranger asks. His eyes are amber like a magpie’s, soft and warm and deep, the weathered, faded bronze of his skin a contrast to his blue nurses’s uniform. She shakes her head.

“No. Not yet.”

“It’s been a long time, Ishbel.”

She nods. Has it, though?

Age has touched neither of them, but the same cannot be said for time. Eight hundred years. The blink of an eye.

“It’s not finished, is it?” she asks.

“I don’t think so. Not for any of us.”

The pilgrim offers her a cigarette from a crumpled paper packet, and she takes it, rolling it unlit between her hands. He lights his own, and a cloud of blue smoke billows around them both. “Those’ll kill you,” she says.

He smiles, his eyes crinkling along well-worn lines. “If I thought they would I’d be on eighty a day.”

“I’m sorry,” she says abruptly. “I wish I could take it back. If I could open that door I’d do it in an instant.” The image of the dead woman and her child is as fresh in her mind as

though it had been yesterday. The grief and the shame have flowed down familiar paths these last centuries, but the relief that comes with articulating them to someone who understands is new, so intense it's almost painful.

He nods. "So would I."

"What was it you did?"

He takes a long, weary drag on the cigarette. "Sold out a friend. A long time ago."

"Is there anyone else like us?"

He nods. "I've met you all. My penance, I suppose, to watch you suffer. To witness your guilt but never ease it."

In the distance, an ambulance siren starts to wail. A cold wind gusts across the roof, stirring dead leaves from the gutter.

"Does it ever end? For any of us?"

A bird's shadow passes overhead, its sharp caw piercing the empty air. Coins jingle in the stranger's pocket like tiny silver bells, and her heart is a magpie, black-and-white wings beating against the bars of its cage.