

**Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Adult Short Story section
Second Prize: Oh, to Shake the Magic Eight-Ball by D.R.D. Bruton**

OH, TO SHAKE THE MAGIC EIGHT-BALL

Daddy says I am unclean now. That I'm shop-soiled goods. That I am second hand. He says it through the clench and grit of his teeth. He says it through hold-back tears and all his words are hot, like the start and sting of swear words. Mam says nothing.

Mam holds her hand to her breast, the space beneath, as if feeling for the muffled beat of her heart, as if she is not sure she's still alive. Her face is all pinch and pain and her eyes as sad as drowned kittens or hanged puppies. It's as if mam is the one who has lost something.

I think of St Anthony of Padua then and he's the patron saint of lost things. If you pray to him hard as stone-kneeling, then just maybe he will find what you lost and return it to you again. That's what mam did when she'd misplaced her wedding ring and daddy never knew and did not notice. And the ring was in mam's purse all the time, tucked into a small pocket there, and praying to St Anthony was how mam found it again. She never did afterwards tell me why she'd taken it from her finger, why she'd put it in her purse.

'Dirty,' daddy says.

Daddy runs his fingers through his crow-wing black hair, and he sucks in air as though he holds a straw between his lips, and he shakes his head. I think of the magic eight ball and when it gives you an answer you don't like, then you can shake it again and out of the dark it gives you a different answer – one you can live with. From 'outlook not so good' to 'outlook good'. And I think my daddy, shaking his head, he's maybe looking for a different answer.

Daddy stands blocking the door and mam stands beside him. Behind me is the street and I don't know if it is listening, but I think maybe it is. I want to take this inside but daddy is not for getting out of the way and neither is mam.

'Dirty down to your soul,' daddy says.

We've all done wrong things. That's what I know. Like when daddy was drinking at the Crossed Keys bar and there's a girl serves regular there, her name's Lydia and she's got a soft word for you anytime you want it. Daddy

deep enough in drink one night, he took Lydia out back and soft words were softer kisses and breathless vows. And the stars their only witness, the stars and the tinker that lives on the hill – but if the tinker knows then the whole world knows in time.

I recall mam forgave daddy for what he did and daddy hung his head and called himself for an old fool and he made promises to mam that it was nothing and the girl was no-one. He stopped drinking at the Crossed Keys and there was an end to it. Nothing 'bout daddy's soul being dirty. It was after that when mam put her wedding ring in her purse and forgot that she did, and prayed to St Anthony till she found it. I think they're somehow connected, mam's ring in her purse and daddy kissing Lydia in the star-lit dark.

Some good came out of that Crossed Keys kissing, at last it did, 'cause daddy didn't take mam for granted no more, and he fussed over her and was kissing her again before he went out to work in the morning and kissing her again when he came back home. And mam was lighter on her feet and laughing, like she was dancing and singing both at the same time.

And now daddy saying I am dirty down to my soul.

I want to tell him it was nothing, what I'd done. It was nothing and no-one need know and it's just what girls these days do and these days are not like their days, not like the days of daddy and mam. I want to shrug and say they are making mountains from molehills, a song and dance over nothing, that it is not as big a deal as they are making out.

Kitty from next door, there now and she's the brightest girl in school, and daddy's always saying how I should be more like her. She's church-good, is what daddy says, and sweet as peaches, and she's pretty enough she turns heads in the street. But daddy don't know the half of it. Kitty's done it and done it with two different boys and daddy saying I should be more like her, well, I am – if he only knew.

'It's nothing,' I say in my head, and I would say it out loud if I thought daddy would listen. Instead, I keep quiet, my lips tight as a shut clasp purse, and I drop my head.

For, if I tell the truth to myself, in the dark of my room and under the covers on my bed, telling it so nobody can hear, no one 'cept God, and talking the truth in whispers like it is something sacred and something for church,

then the truth is that it *is* something and everything. And I wish and I pray for St Anthony to find what I lost and to give it back to me, easy as finding a misplaced wedding ring.

And I call Caleb 'bastard' and 'cock' and 'cur' for what he did – what *we* did – all his honey-sticky words and his fiddling fingers and his breath hot as fever or sting. But didn't I undo the buttons for him, of my dress, scared he'd tear something? And I shifted my hips so he could take down my panties, and that was like dancing to slow jerky music. And he laughed and I laughed and that made it easy and he said I was his first and he said he was losing something, too. I sighed and I moaned, even when it hurt a little, and then it did not hurt at all, though Caleb was heavy and pressing on me so I could scarcely breathe. It was over before it had really begun and afterwards I couldn't really see what all the fuss was.

'It was nothing and she was no-one,' daddy said of Lydia behind the Crossed Keys. At least Caleb said he loved me when he was done. To the moon and the stars and back again, and he said there'd be no other after me and there never could be. I don't put much faith in what Caleb said, but saying it felt a little more honest than daddy saying that about Lydia.

And mam and her hidden wedding ring, and didn't a man call the house-phone about the same time and he would not give his name and he said he wanted to speak to Connie, his voice all breathless and sighing. When I said my mam wasn't home he didn't leave no message. And, well, I'm not the cleverest girl in school like Kitty is, but I can do simple maths and I do not think my mam or the man on the phone was either of them honest.

I look at her, at mam, silent by my daddy's side, her hand still touching 'neath her breast and feeling for heartbeats, and I am shrunk to a plea for her help. Surely she understands. Surely she knows. Didn't she tell us once how she stuck her hand into a nest of bees, her fingers scooping out torn scraps of comb, and honey dripping like gold from her fingers and the fizz-angry bees stinging her arms. And it was the best honey this side of heaven is what mam said and she'd brave those pins and needles of bees again for one spoonful of that honey – that's how she tells it. And just maybe it was more than bees and honey she was talking about and it was all just a metaphor for what she did with a man that called her Connie and wouldn't leave no message for her

when he phoned, and her forgotten wedding ring tucked into her purse, and surely mam understands.

‘I don’t know how you could,’ daddy says. ‘What the world will think of us and of you. How we can hold our heads up in church. How we can even walk down the street.’

And daddy beats me with his words, goes on beating me, and his words are as hard as sticks, switch-willow or birch, hard as fists, and he said once before how he wouldn’t hit a woman or a girl, not ever, but he don’t give up with his hitting-words, not till he’s done and every part of me is bruised ‘neath the skin. Then he pulls mam inside with him and he shuts the front door heavy and hard against me and I am alone in the street, or nearly alone for the lace curtains on all the windows opposite twitch and I know we have been seen. Still, standing there with the door shut, it feels like being alone, more alone than being lost in the bluebell wood by myself and singing to birds and squirrels for company till my daddy came and found the six-year-old me, the clean to my soul me.

I take myself off to the end of the road and I keep on walking. Beyond the hill and into the wood like before. There’s a pool there, Rickett’s pool, and it’s easily found. I strip to my slip, folding my clothes neat and laying them in a dry pile, and I step down into the sullen cold dark of the water. It is sharp as glass when it is broken, sharp as paper-cuts or the edge of knives new-honed, but it is not sharp enough for me. I wade in, dropping to my knees, my arms thrown wide as though looking for an embrace, any embrace, and the cold takes my breath away. I lean back, letting the water cover me like a dark shroud. And I feel it scouring my skin, wanting it to make me clean again, clean enough for my daddy so he can have a daughter he can live with and so mam can have heartbeats again and she can stop touching ‘neath her breast and looking hurt. And I am spread-eagled like a star that is fallen out of the sky, and I’m dissolved then into tears and salt, dissolving in the water of Rickett’s pool so no-one will ever know – ‘cept somewhere the tinker sees me and I can feel his eyes on me and I know there’s no keeping a secret if the tinker knows.