

Mouse

Marigold lived with her mum until she was three, but she can't remember anything about her. She could kick herself for not remembering more. She thinks to herself 'You had three whole years to remember every little bit about your mother, hours and hours to make memories with her and you've got nothing'.

Marigold has one photo of her, that some long-ago foster carer pasted into her Life Story Book on the very first page. She has grown to despise that book. She knows that everyone in foster care has to have one, but she wishes it could be called something different. She's only thirteen. She doesn't feel like she's had enough life to have a 'Life Story Book'. When she was little, she loved looking through the thick pages, like a personalised pop-up book. She'd stroke the faces of the silky photos, run her fingers along the various tickets, scribbly paintings, birthday cards. She was seven she got moved from Terry and Mike's home, her foster parents for nearly two years. All the others had only been for a few months. She was starting to call them Mummy and Daddy. Their daughter, Anna, was her sister. And then she got moved and she hated them. She felt the bitter, sickly feeling of abandonment for the first time. They didn't love her. The photos of grinning faces were meaningless. The goodbye card, pasted in by her next carer. Nothing. And from then on, she couldn't bear to look at the Life Story Book. Of course, the carers kept adding to it. She'd flick through occasionally, sighing at the photos and snippets from her time there, knowing it was nothing. All these different carer's faces. Most of the early ones she'd forgotten. These were the people who toilet trained her, held her hand on the first day of school, and now she didn't know them at all. So, she tries to avoid the growing Life Story Book, except for the first page with the photo of her mum.

Its dog eared and ratty, but she adores it. She often wonders who took the photo, perhaps a kind nurse or a grandma. Marigold longs for a grandma. She wonders if her grandma helped her mum with her when she was young. She wishes she knew who printed the photo and gave it to her, or more likely, her carer. Had they known they would give it to Marigold when they gave it to her? Marigold is in the photo too, a tiny tomato faced baby. It was taken just after she was born. Her mum is young, only sixteen. It was taken in the hospital, minutes after Marigold had been born. Her mother was sitting in the hospital bed looking fierce. Marigold hopes it is fierce with love for her new daughter, not fierce with anger and hatred for this revolting, changeling child that has been ripped from her womb just moments ago. Her eyes were dark and flashing, with dark bags underneath them that gave her a haunted expression. Her eyebrows were knitted together in a frown, and her hair was scraped back behind her

ears. Marigold knows no one would ever put them together as mother and daughter. Her mum is tanned, with hair like jet black silk, and these big dark eyes, like black pools of tar. She is little and lithe but strong. Bold. Fierce. Marigold is scrawny and pale, although she still has flaming cheeks. And her hair certainly isn't glossy black, but wild mousey curls that can't be tamed. She would have liked her own hair a great deal more if her mother had the same. Marigold is a bit funny about hair. She sits for hours, going through every hair on her head, trimming the split ends off one at a time. Once, Cathy found her trimming it, and worried she was going to hack it off at the roots or something worse. Marigold assured her that she was only trimming the split ends, taking only the bare minimum off each strand, but now the scissors are padlocked in the kitchen drawer.

Cathy and her husband Jim are nice enough. They're also fostering two brothers, Sean and Eli. If she's honest, Marigold is frightened of them, especially after they tried to burn the kitchen table. Once they got into her room when she was in the toilet, and found her Sylvania Family collection. She's collected them ever since she was tiny, and lines them up on the long shelf above her bed, with the mother and father are on the outside and their children in the middle. She doesn't really play with them now, except in secret.

'Stop it, stop it!' she shrieked when she found them, ripping the clothes off the figurines. That stopped them in their tracks, because they'd never heard Marigold speak in much more than a whisper.

Cathy came running.

'Boys, you know you're not supposed to go into Marigold's room without asking,' she scolded. 'These are special.'

'They're just toys,' they grumbled.

At dinner, Cathy gets a call that they have a girl who needs an emergency carer. Cathy tells the social worker that she has a spare room, and is happy to take her in. Marigold knew she'd say that. Sean and Eli are jumping with questions. Marigold pushes her curry around her plate.

'Not hungry, love?' Jim asks.

She shrugs and asks to be excused.

She hears Cathy and Jim preparing the room for the new girl. She wishes she didn't have to be so worried about these things. She stands on her wooden bed head, pulling down her school dress and rearranges her Sylvania Families, so that each one is perfectly straight and strokes each one of their soft noses with her finger. She jumps down, straightens up the quilt and pulls all the clothes out of her drawers, refolding them with a quick preciseness, and lines them back up, neat as a pin. Normally, Cathy would be tucking the boys into bed right now, but instead, she's

answering the knock at the door. Marigold listens to them talking to the social worker as she pulls out her nail clippers and starts trimming the split ends, her new method now scissors are banned.

Soon, Cathy comes knocking on the door. She enters holding the hand of a startled, filthy little girl, matted, wispy white-blonde curls, perhaps five or six.

‘This is Polly. I’m giving her the tour,’ she explains. ‘This is Marigold. She lives here too, like Sean and Eli.’

Polly scrunches her nose.

‘Say hi, Marigold.’

Marigold gives a little wave.

‘Turn the light off soon, love.’

Marigold ignores her thumping heart, and gives her Sylvanians one last glance. Often, she is tempted to take one to bed and fall asleep with one in her hand, but she’s afraid she might scratch off some of that soft fur from the rubber when she sleeps: she often scrunches her fists at night and wakes with nail marks in her palm. She’d hate for those nail marks to be imprinted in her Sylvanians. So, she says goodnight to all of them, stroking the squirrel’s fluffy tails. She pushes the bunny family closer, so all the baby bunnies are touching their mother and father; she knows they’re afraid of the dark. With a last longing look, she crawls under her covers and tries to sleep.

A few hours later, she awakens to snuffly breathing below her. She freezes, adjusting her eyes to the dark. She’s never been keen on the uncertain, eeriness of night time, and she is petrified. With a quivering hand, she reaches out and switches on the lamp.

Polly is curled up on the floorboards, wearing a too-big nightie from Cathy’s spare clothes collection. Marigold’s body collapses in relief, although she’s still unnerved. She shoots a glance at the Sylvanian collection. Pristine.

Polly rubs her eyes, awakened by the light.

‘What are you doing?’ mumbles Marigold, and Polly starts to cry.

‘My room was too dark! I hate this house! I want my mummy!’ she wails.

‘Don’t cry,’ Marigold says, unsuccessfully trying to be comforting.

‘Can I sleep in your bed?’ Polly howls.

‘What? No!’

‘Please?’

‘Look. If you stop crying, I’ll show you something.’

Polly whimpers, and gulps, trying to stop.

Surprising herself, Marigold reaches up and takes down the whole rabbit family.

'Look here. The baby bunnies are scared of the dark too. But the mum tells them that there's nothing to be afraid of.

'Mummy says the baddies come out at night so I'm not allowed to get out of my bed.'

'Well, she's wrong.'

And against her better judgement, she takes the rest of them down and places them carefully on the bed.

'This is the daddy hedgehog,' she explains. 'He's the postman. And the mum owns a shoe shop. This girl is Abigail, he's Maxwell. The babies are Bilberry and Peaches.'

Polly reaches out a finger to stroke their prickles, and Marigold restrains from stopping her.

She goes through the rest of the figurines, explaining their personalities, like she's introducing a friend.

'I like the cats,' Polly eventually says, looking at the toys like Aladdin in his Cave of Wonders.

'Me too.'

'This baby mouse has a little scrape on its hand.'

'Yeah, I've had that one for the longest.'

'Who gave it to you?'

'My mum.'

Marigold blinks. Her mind starts whirring. Her mum? Why did she say that? And then she remembers.

The woman with the big, dark eyes stares at her, as she opens the parcel, wrapped in an old magazine.

'Mama! Miceys!'

'Yeah, it's little mice dollies.'

She can't quite hear the voice. It's a little husky, but not quite there.

'Look, Marigold. A mum and a dad and kids and babies.'

Marigold points to the mother mouse and a baby mouse

'Yeah, it's me and you, love.'

'What's this one called?' Polly asks.

'What?' Marigold stutters, shocked out of her memory.

'Its name!'

'Oh. Saffron. You should go to bed now.'

'Why are you smiling?'

'I'm not.'

'Can I sleep in your bed? I'll be really small.'

'Okay.'

'Really?'

Marigold puts the Sylvanians back on the shelf to watch over them, and gives Polly a pillow so she can sleep at the other end of the bed. She doesn't think she can sleep. She's too thrilled. She replays the memory over and over again. And when she's sure Polly is asleep, she reaches up

for the mother and baby mouse and falls asleep with her fists curled tightly around them.

by Lila Gould (Year 12)
Inspired by 'Gucci' by Georgina Davy

