

The Present

By Ros Roberts

Cooper won't come out from under the table. He hates birthdays. He hates the attention, the noise, the balloons, the singing, the candles. All of it.

I think he's hated all 13 of his but today is mine.

"We will just start," says Mum. She is staring outside as she says it, staring at Uncle Jimmy who arrived this morning. He's in the garden, his face tilted up to the sky, arms outstretched.

"He's always been like this," says Dad, shuffling the presents round to make space for the cake. "Free as a bird."

Cooper lets out a loud yell and bangs the bottom of the table.

"It's alright Coop," I say.

There are five presents and I'm hoping one of them is a new phone. There are so many reasons I want it.

Cooper shuffles out and lies on the floor. Jimmy comes back in.

"You Ok Cooper?" he says, tapping his knee but Cooper inches away. He hates being touched. Jimmy goes to his canvas rucksack and brings out a gift.

"I might have got this seriously wrong Dude," he says, ruffling my hair.

"Thanks," I say, laying it down.

Mum comes out with the cake, 11 candles lit. Cooper puts his hands over his ears and makes a noise. I make our little 'steady' signal that we use and he calms.

We tell Jimmy that we only sing gently and he nods and they all sing to me and I blow out the candles and I make the wish I always make, every year.

I start opening. A sports voucher from Gran. Money from my godmother who lives in Scotland. A Starwars t-shirt from Mum and Dad and a second box that I think is my phone. It's the right size.

"For your music," says Mum. I smile and rip off the paper. It's a speaker. A black speaker with a handle. I try so hard to look pleased, try so hard as I hug Mum to not show my disappointment, try so hard as I hug Dad to fight back the tear. I'm gutted but I know the tear isn't just about the speaker. Birthdays are just hard because Cooper finds them hard. Mum passes me his present.

"From Coop," she says. "He made it."

"Sit with me Coop," I say and he gets up and plonks himself in his chair, his arms wrapped round his chest.

I rip the paper off. It's a little wooden table with four legs. He has carved it himself.

"I love it Coop." And I really do.

"That's seriously cool," says Jimmy.

Mum passes round slices of cake. I reach for Jimmy's present and peel off the golden paper. There is a wooden box with a lid that slides open. Cooper leans closer to see. He likes things made of wood. I lift out the present. It is a puppet. A bird made of wood, real feathers attached, three strings on a wooden bar that makes the bird dance. We all watch as Jimmy shows us how it moves, how the strings work. Cooper smiles and rests his head on one hand as he watches, the other hand resting on my leg.

Jimmy uses the table Coop made as a stage, makes the bird dance on the wooden top. We all laugh and clap. Cooper picks up some cake and eats it.

I glance at Mum and smile.

I watch Cooper, happy on a birthday.

My wish at last, came true.