

The Sins of the Fathers

She always wanted to talk about the weather. She hated the rain, or perhaps that was only when it came down so hard and so long that roots were exposed as the rain washed away soil and dirt. She shivers under the eaves of the packing shed, water gushing over the drainpipe as if it wasn't there at all. But winter is almost over and I offer to start her a fire, to keep her warm. A nice little fire in her cottage, with its misfitting windows and a patterned sheet as curtain on one of the windows. I can see all that and more when I thin the fruit trees, high above in my cherry picker. She shakes her head, the musky scent of her damp hair making me catch my breath. I wonder what else I can do to keep her here.

“This rain's pretty good,” I tell her. “It'll fill the dams, don't you think?”

“Perhaps.” She shrugs. “I hate this rain. But I suppose it's worse in October.”

“It doesn't rain much in October,” I tell her. “I reckon its worse now.”

But she looks up at me, eyes piercing. “You wouldn't know,” she says. “You're too young.”

I watch her leave the packing shed then, dashing across the drive to duck into the doorway of her cottage and close it shut. I notice she has left the apples, the ones she asked for, on the splintered crate beside me. I pick them up, cradling them in a pouch I make from my jumper, and run across the drive, avoiding the biggest puddle and blinking as droplets hit my face, hard and fast. But the apples are safe and dry and I carefully put them on her front step, and back away. This time the rain soaks me as I make my way back to the packing shed and cold drips down my back as I finish layering the fruit between sheets of wax paper. A couple more tons and we'll be ready for market.

I think about the day her cat was hit by a car, swinging around the bend, and I buried it, limp and damp beside the old gum trees. She just stood there, watching. Behind her, the moon was a thick yellow ball hovering on the hill and the fruit trees were beginning to shadow. “Dig the hole deep” was all she said, then turned and went into her house. I remember looking at the closed door for a while, not sure. But then I dug and dug until the soil became grainy. I

dropped the cat in. It was blackness, and each shovel of dirt a heavy thud on the body, pinning it in the ground. The moon had approached by the time I was finished, huge and knowing. She came out then, wrapped in a leathery coat, her breath little billows of vapour hovering between us. "Thank you," she had said. "I'm no good at digging holes."

I wondered if she was sad and I asked, "Shall I find you another kitten? I think the Del Mateo's down the hill have a new litter." She just shook her head, her voice floating behind her as she walked away from me. "No, don't do that. Cats kill birds"

The grey skies darken even more and I know it is getting late. The rain has finally stopped. While I've been thinking I've swept the shed and pulled the big back doors shut but still I can see the apples on her porch, little orbs of red glowing there. My footsteps sound unnaturally loud as I make my way back across the drive way and I take a deep breath before I knock, gently on the door. It slits open and there she is, inquiring.

"Your apples," I stammer, pointing down. "You forgot them."

She opens her door wider and I reach down quickly, to gather the apples up and thrust them at her. "Here."

A warm sweet smell comes from inside. I can see a chopping board on her counter, grey green peels discarded on the side.

"I'm making pumpkin soup," she says, "Do you want some?"

I notice her hair again; loose now, but pulled over one shoulder, the thick rope of it heavy where it rests on her chest; a knitted brown cardigan covering her sharp collar bone and suddenly a memory comes to me, fierce and intrusive with its loud voices, pushing, shoving and a twisted piece of twine, hot and scratchy, pressing into my neck. I try to slow my breathing and remember where I am. She is still standing there, waiting. "Sure." I say and follow her in. The door slams shut behind us, a dull thud.

From where I sit on this checkered couch, I can see all of her space, her kitchen, her sitting area and the one door which must be where she sleeps. The walls are bare and little puffs of wind whistle up through the gaps of the floorboards every now and again. I relax my shoulders though, and sink further back into this chair, to wait for her to talk, to hear her

voice. She is by the stove in the small kitchen, pouring orange soup into stone mugs, licking her finger where a drop bled from the spoon.

“I hope you stay here for a long time,” I tell her, and the words have barely rested in the air between us before I know I’ve said too much. She sighs, pads over to me and sinks into the saggy armchair opposite, tucking her feet, red socks, beneath her.

“Just eat your soup,” she says. “Your Granddad will be wondering where you are. Actually, you’d better take some of this soup for him as well.”

It’s quiet and I can’t read her face but still I want more. “Tell me about where you were before,” I say. “Why did you leave Pinjarra?”

“My house got broken into,” she says. “Not meant to happen in such a small country town.” She stares straight at me and I drop my eyes, ashamed.

“I know you missed lots of school.” A speck of soup has dripped onto the arm of her chair now and she rubs at it, a dull spreading stain.

I shrug. “Who cares?”

She doesn’t respond at first but then she begins to speak slowly and carefully.

“There are too many bad memories for me in Pinjarra,” she says. “The little shits who broke into my house stole the only memory of my Nan, a whale tooth, engraved. A smooth, curved bone, with an amazing story about a time long before they began to kill whales and process them off Albany. Did you learn about any of that?”

I shrug, embarrassed. She smiles then and I keep scraping away at the bottom of the bowl, tiny mouthfuls to keep the story going.

“Now I have nothing left,” she tells me. “Only the horrible things she told me which I don’t even know is true.”

“I like stories,” I tell her. “And Granddad says there’s always truth, somewhere.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t even know why I’m telling you all this.”

There is silence for a while, and then; “My great-great grandfather was a settler down in Pinjarra, a very long time ago. He was a supporter of Thomas Peel.”

I know she can see the flat look on my face, I have no idea what she's on about, and I try to connect these different things in my head but still she keeps talking.

"It was a massacre." Her voice is soft. "In October. A horrific massacre. About eighty Nyungar people were hunted down. Murdered. Apparently, they stole some flour? Killed a man? I don't know. But I am sure now that my Great-great grandfather had a part in what happened. Nan kept on and on about it in the last years before she died. I think it was the dementia. The only thing to stop her was to ask her about the whale tooth, she called it her 'good bone'".

She pauses again and I ask, carefully, "But it was just the men, right?"

"Children, women, all the men. Defenceless."

I am tracing the pattern on her couch, blurred lines which criss and cross. I can't think about the children, I just can't. I follow the lines with my finger as she talks, down down across, down down across.

"It subdued them," she says quietly. All the people down the coast heard and gave in. They had to listen to the white man's rules or they would be killed too. The survivors tried to bury their dead. But it rained. So much that the river swelled and all the creeks overflowed and it was very hard to do proper burials. No one could record the full number of dead, write the truth down." She is holding her hair again, twisting it tightly in two hands so that it curls up quick, against her neck.

"That was so long ago," I hear myself saying. And then she is standing, fast, hair flying from its twist to fan behind her.

"But don't you see?" Her eyes are narrowed and she leans down to force me to look into her face. "It's in my blood," she says fiercely. "Things like that stay in your blood."

Unsure now, I get up, only aware of my feet as they scuff across her worn wooden floor, gently place my stone mug in the sink and then, still watching the ground, let myself out; back into the dark.

In the morning, the remnants of rain still hang around the shed and the trees, dripping and miserable. I watch her door as I work, as Granddad checks the books, as I weed the small garden by her back door. But the little house is quiet and its windows still. A few days later,

the sun begins to shine weakly on the hill again and that's when I notice she must have gone out, her emerald Rav4 is making its way back up the drive towards me. When she gets out, I see she's been shopping, shiny bags bunched under her arms and boxes of what looks like medical supplies crowding the back seat. "Can you help me?" She asks. "I need these put in the front room." My hands leave streaks of mud as I quickly wipe them down my shirt, stride over to her car and pile up the boxes which are surprisingly light. I try not to stand too close as she opens the door to the cottage. I've learnt a thing or two with what's happened to me and one of them is to treat people a lot more carefully. Like frightened birds, they're unused to sudden movements or erratic, contrary behaviour. Sometimes they think I'm a threat, and my appearance confuses them. *I'm really the same*, I tell myself over and over. *I'm really the same*.

It takes me a second or more to realise she has finished unpacking the car and I stand awkwardly, wanting to know more. "What's new?" I ask. She smiles distantly at me, hands resting on her hips. She's wearing a dress today, one I haven't seen before.

"Not much. Just collecting a bunch of stuff I'll need for my next job. I'm thinking about going to work up in Arrernte country. Alice Springs. Get back to nursing. Try and do something decent out there."

I push the edge of my boot into the dark, soft dirt of the garden bed, moist and well-watered. "I should have planted some flowers," I say. "Something to brighten things up a bit." I bang my boot against the edge of the garden bed, bits of dislodged rocks sprinkle down and I feel her sigh.

"I'm not sure yet," she says. "I'll think some more about it all. I'm not sure I know enough about Aboriginal people." I keep my head down, cough, and push at the dirt again.

"Didn't you learn that stuff at school?" I ask.

"Yes." She bends to sit on the step, her back against the weathered front door. She pats the spot next to her and that makes the sun gleam through a break in the cloud. We sit alongside, both facing the line of trees. The space between her arm and mine is warm and cushioned. Without looking, I can sense every rise and fall of her breath. Just as I was wishing she would speak, she begins, her voice soft and clear. "We learnt about Australia in school. About our

sunburned country, about hard-working men making a railway line in the dessert, about the blood of brown skinned women trickling into the river, spears sticking from their sides.”

And again, an image: joining us like a shadow, spiriting up from the trees. It is so vivid I'm sure she must be aware of it. I start to feel sweat prickle on my forehead and I take a deep breath like they taught me and on exhalation, I nod and she keeps on talking. “I had nightmares about that, but when I told my Dad, he convinced me it wasn't true. Maybe I just imagined it. And when I went back to school, we weren't learning about Australia anymore.” I can feel a heavy pulse in my thigh and I stretch out my legs so they take up all three steps on the way down. My jeans are worn and mud stained, I inch them away from the smooth softness of her patterned dress which she bunches up to wrap around her knees, and now she is huddled on the step and I wish, I so wish I understood what she was going on about, that I could make her keep talking like this forever, that I could be part of her story. But I see she is not thinking about me, her gaze is far away over the line of trees, where the moon is a heavy orb on the horizon, too impatient for the sun to set before marking its place.

“My Nan told me this other story. About when she was a young girl. She went walking on the banks of the river, early one October morning. She wasn't meant to be there alone, but you're never really alone, along that stretch of river, never. Along the way, she found some bones, washed up on the banks. Small and white, pushed up from the ground. She couldn't touch them, oh no. She made little furrows with her bare feet and pressed them back in, all of them. The next day there were more, and she got up earlier and earlier every day to put them back in before the rest of her family woke up.” She stops and then I turn to glance at her face. The light has almost faded but I can see the curved lines above her eyebrow, see the dark smudge below her lashes. She is looking intently at me, forces me to meet her eyes, dark dilated pupils. “Do you know whose bones they were?” She asks. I freeze, not sure I should know, not sure I want to know.

“I don't think you should go,” I say. “I can fix things here for you, make it more comfortable.”

But she is standing up now, pushing open her door. “You don't understand,” she says, and the step is now cold, the chill of night seeping up through the concrete.

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She is gone and I don't know when she is coming back. I do what I have to every day again and I try not to look at her little cottage, hunched behind the fruit trees. Winter is gone and it's supposed to be Spring. Maybe with summer will come more than nectarines, sharp in their sweetness. I got my licence a few months back and Granddad lets me deliver the fruit to Canning Vale and Joondalup. I'm doing a late night run this evening, so I can pick the granny smiths at dawn tomorrow. I take the freeway because no one else uses it at this time of night and I have it all to myself. So far from dense leaves and waxy apples, dark moist dirt. Just clean, clinical and mine. The lights on this long grey stretch glow down on me as I pass beneath, smooth and quick through the curving arcs and below the bridges that snatch at sound. I am alone and it is beginning to rain, little spats at first, filling my windscreen in a haze, until they are swished away. The rain comes down harder, suicide towards my headlights, battering itself on the road, a sheet before my truck. I feel powerful and strong, cutting through this attack, steering smooth, heading towards the hills.

And then it happens. Without warning, a dark shape on the side, beyond the reach of light, rises and staggers across the freeway, across my path and into the rain. The figure is looming, some sort of stick dragging from its body, becoming clearer as I slice through the deluge towards it, too fast to stop. The wind picks up this strange occurrence, whips at the rain, at the light and at me. I swerve, back wheels sliding, a hissing noise in the wet as it looms, this dark figure, into a face. And then I am braking, heart pounding, head swirling, unsure of this reality, then screaming, although not knowing whose voice I can hear, and then- blackness, a hollowed feeling, spreading out from the centre of my body and filling the space around. Silence.

The rain is a gentle pressure as I open my eyes. First, I see it is dark, the lights ineffectual hoverings high above. And then I feel a roughness, sharp flint beneath my cheek. My bones are weighted, not my own, pressing down on sinew and veins. Rain is slipping over the rest of my body as well, splatters of clear and cool mingling with a warmth oozing from my flesh. Without looking, I know a spear protrudes from my side; I am here on the ground and yet I am above, looking down. With my hand, I reach to try to pull it out but that just presses on the blackness, sharpens the heaviness of bone, scraping beneath my skin.

And so I am still. I do not wonder any more, or think or suppose. I just am, the elusive feeling caught, lit and suspended in the night.

I lie here, frozen; a broken cats eye glinting beside me and no apples to speak of.

Because I know. It is October and it is raining.