

Bad Bones

Two years after Callie's death, I threw a cake on the roof of the house because it slumped in the middle. I baked it for Mish's eleventh birthday. Then I went somewhere I knew I couldn't be found, grieving my usefulness, if indeed I'd ever had any. Jack said he wanted the terraced descent of our rear garden to be like a series of different rooms, punctuated at the top with the garden shed. He was obsessed with this concept. He wasn't sure why or at least he couldn't articulate its meaning, but it was a thing I found irritating. I always wanted explanations. Is this why I am here now, in the attic of the village shoe shop?

All these questions for which there are no answers, and now I think Jack was right not to know the meaning of *every damn thing*. He made a series of brick steps from the old demolished chimney. On the eastern side, the first of the terraces placed the roof below eye level, so it was effortless to vent my fury on the cake. It clung to the hot roof, further cooking to a hard brown lump. It stayed there until Mish angrily climbed on and removed it. Too much was expected of me. I never once indicated to anyone, I was a particularly good person. I wasn't trustworthy and I made mistakes all the time. Now I understand lovers and parents shouldn't keep making mistakes.

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I entered Betty's shop earlier in the day, when her back was turned. Tiff, her assistant, noticed but she was helping a customer. I was in the right place, my feet are naked in a shoe store, but that just looks strange and I had no wish to draw attention to myself. I faded into the back room unnoticed and climbed the narrow staircase. I know it well; years ago I worked

here, fitting kids into school shoes and men with serviceable summer sandals. No-one ever comes up here, a storeroom fashioned from the roof cavity.

Apart from shoeboxes, my eerie consists of unpainted plasterboard, furry chipboard on the floor and a mirror leaning against the wall, the silvering slowly decaying from its back. I felt better now, hidden from all the familiar torments aggregating my existence. There is a view of the forest from the window. The forest stops at the sea, but I can't tell from here. All I see is the deep cerulean sky of late afternoon, above a seemingly endless canopy of gum trees. It occurs to me, all the land that ever was, finishes at the sea. Being here I have an indolent vision of myself inside a balloon. It is filled with stranger's breath and unexplored regions. I am hovering defeated above an endless ocean, flopping around like a buoy rocking side to side, pulled up and then down towards the depths.

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I have never been overt with my affections, however, what remnants there were, had been nailed away within Callie's coffin. Jack said I must care for Mish, make the extra effort, as if it were an onerous task, set aside for only the brave. He could be right and I was simply failing to meet the challenge, a deficit of courage.

'Loving Mish twice as much could help you get past Callie,' he said illogically one day. He was quick to add, 'I mean not forget, none of us want that,' but I flinched from his reassuring embrace, as if from a menacing snake. We were having coffee in the sunroom; a breeze wafted in the open window. Jack sighed and was about to leave, his dismay mingling with the cool air circling between us. I looked into the valley below our house. I sat there waiting for something, feeling the pressure of the house. Jack called the structure its bones, as

if it was a living thing, in need of a surgeon to reset its old skeleton hidden beneath the surface.

‘Seven rooms,’ I said finally. Two parrots alighted on the veranda railing and started necking, preening each other.

‘Pardon?’ he said.

‘This house has seven rooms; I counted them. I’m not counting your terraced garden rooms.’

‘Oh, okay.’

‘You know when you said it had good bones when we bought it. I believed you,’ I said. The parrots stopped their preening, alert to some febrile pulse in the wild and then flew away. How I envied their secret knowledge. It seemed our every action defied logic; as if we were trying to outrun the immutable laws of the universe.

‘Claire. Please come back,’ Jack whispered that night. He reached for me in the dark. He wanted to have sex, wanting me to curl into his body. Before, I liked to bring my knees up to my chin when he came into me. He had this way of enfolding me, even when we were out walking somewhere. This was before, of course. He would put his arms all the way around me, linking his hands at my waist; it was peculiar and hard to walk, but I had always felt the closest to him in those moments.

‘Don’t...it’s just...I won’t,’ I said, ‘there isn’t anything left,’ he settled back into the bed, his breath subsiding into the familiar sound of his sleep. The ways he loved me were far greater than the sum of my own for him; in truth I never gave him what he needed so much, and for this I have regrets. The marriage had become a story abandoned half-way through, as was the narrative concerning my remaining child.

‘Mish’, Callie said.

‘Mish’, I replied and he responded with a tiny croak. A small white speck was visible on his gum as he mouthed the word ‘Mish’ again. I touched the beginning of teeth, a miracle of sorts; bone pushing through the gums, urgent and seeking the light of smiles. Again, his sister’s name half formed on his lips, elbow bent in supplication across his chest. Then his dark eyes faded and he left me, dying so quietly as to leave the fabric of the world without a single ripple.

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When I wake up, it seems as if I had never slept. The morning light causes my eyelids to open and I return to the storeroom, shadows loom above me. The mirror is propped horizontally against the wall and I am entirely reflected, my eyes like puddles of spilled milk, my body naked, a pale vessel of uncertain origin. Eventually I can hear movement below, a scrape, a tinkling bell, distant sound of voices. I try to think of a way to make me small, undiscoverable. I squat; ten fingers rest lightly on ten toes. I reach for the pencil I had brought with me and begin to flatten out the soft tissue paper. I look for direction amongst the creases. It’s a 4B Faber Castell, the familiar facets for a comforting grip; how clever of them to think of that. I begin drawing, as I have done since I was a small child. I draw seven parts of me, using the mirror to find the right ones. I make a list of the ways back to the time before, the time when the bones were good and strong.

The breast for the milk, for the one yet weaned,

The vulva, the entrance for the absent child’s return,

The cupped hand, for an offering to Mish,
The curving legs and arms, for Jack's embrace,
Callie's soft bent elbow, the sign of silent struggle,
The eye, for Argos lingering on the shore,
The stain of tears, for all I could no longer give.

This has kept me busy during the day and into another night. Standing, I look out the window, the faint glimmer of grey morning light again violates the storeroom. I gag, wanting to be sick, but I still look into the deep green forest below. A trail leads down under the umbrella of wild gums, among the winged creatures, the sounds of the creek, the lifting of bark from the pale eucalypts, the snap of brittle twigs, the secret passes among the grass trees. Down and down into the belly, the long dark world between the leaves and the dead. I know I cannot be me without the phantoms creeping into my dreams, caressing my belly, making phantom love to me and falling out of me like blood, finally free of the vacated spaces in me.

Why did I think that about the blood? I realize I'm having difficulty with the meaning of things. I will leave all the parts to tell them, to explain. I am Claire I say aloud, to hear it said one last time; the making of these pictures, my way of showing everything about me. I feel some of this falling out of me, is yet unshaped.

The night comes again, and descending to the shop floor, I let myself out into the warm night. With the big, high moon lighting the trail I roam in the forest, bathing in a valley stream. I return and drink a lot of water then sleep for hours. I find the toilet down the staircase and at the back, a ferociously narrow place to relieve myself. Unable to face the stairs again I sit for a while, more boxes climbing the walls. The purpose of the room above the staircase is consigned to memory. The light from it leeches into this cramped space, only the jagged silhouette of more shoeboxes, a naked light bulb, webbed from a long extinct

spider. I find a stale ham and cheese sandwich in a Tupperware container and eat slumped against the toilet door.

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When Callie died, I called no one, making no fuss, merely waiting. Eventually Jack came home with Mish but I failed to recognize them. I wondered who belonged to these urgent bodies, rushing, banging doors, yelling into the phone; what strange longing animated them. They screamed and cried and Jack kept saying no. We scattered around the house, so many dried up brittle bones, launching into this new world of wild despair, like frightened Cockatoos.

A man and a woman came to test Callie, to try to wake him up, but I knew he'd gone.

'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,' the woman crying for the dead child; tiny dark veins, marks of death written in blue ink on the body. The woman didn't say Callie was dead, just looked at me. Just say it, I thought, don't stare at me like that. The man, just a boy himself, stood holding some sort of apparatus. He was trying to be far away, looking down on us with terror in his eyes. Jack kept saying no until I screamed for him to stop, and then there was the singular relief of silence.

'I can give her something,' the woman whispered to Jack, she reached across to me but I recoiled. I thought her sky blue overalls were beautiful. I want them, wanting the woman to make a present of them to me. I believed she might, considering. Jack looked at me, misunderstanding. I did, I understood what would become of us.

'Stay away from me,' I heard my *angry* voice saying, not feeling my mouth, my legs. This is when I became the creature I am now, falling on the floor, finally giving in. Was I dying now too, falling like the black shape of night onto the brown boards of the floor,

spreading out and liquefying into the fissures between the them. I was no longer the rigid transmuted stone. Instead, I was a crumbling edifice, forming into a foetal carapace, an unfamiliar substance made up of all the wrong things.

Mish had left the house, I thought she would climb the steps to the rear garden and sit under the old apricot tree shading my studio. A tree so ancient, none of us, even my parents, had been born when it was planted. Mish was seven when we followed an arborist's instruction's, mixing concrete to pour into the hollowed out bowl of its trunk. It was to keep its sprawling mass from uprooting. At the end of every summer, we collected buckets of fruit and gave most of the apricots away to our neighbours. Jack built a seat around its circumference and Mish could be found there daydreaming on any given day.

She was there, or somewhere, she never told me, already mourning the world before her brother's departure. Mish often watched over him, just to see him sleep, his faint breath, one of her secret places in which to hide. I never drew attention to this shy and conflicted need. I wanted this special time for them to be endless, in variance of their parents, their friends and the multitude of future distractions.

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Years before the birth of Mish and Callie, Jack stacked all the tools, paint tins and mower parts into the narrow room he built on the side of the shed. I took up my paints and pencils, my collection of paper, mementoes of old lives, rubber stamps, brushes, sticks and twigs, leaves and feathers. I was a concentrated substance then, full of untethered thoughts. The shed became raw and unnerving, connecting to every part of my being. If only I could go there now, I could reassemble us all. Fix what they later called an undiagnosed case of Atrial something or other, a perfectly acceptable cause of death, even for an infant. I could have

fixed that, or Jack could, he was good at fixing things. Instead, I abandoned the studio in the garden forever.

I shouldn't have let Mish find me at the weir that time. I remember removing my clothes, sliding into the cool water, thinking I might sink and cohabit with the crayfish in their accidental caves. I don't know how I got there, wandered aimlessly after Callie was taken. I heard Mish crying in her room after she helped me dress and we clambered up from the weir, trudging back to the bones, the bad bones. She had lost Callie *and* now me. I was no longer a person, just a ghost slithering in and out of the house's carcass, so this, and the summary misdemeanours of vanishings and neglect hardly seemed to count. This time in this attic above the shoe shop, I have run away for good and have no intention of returning.

As I flee the village, daylight once again begins its variegated life on the forest floor. My naked carcass shivers with the bright early cold. Has autumn come already, I used to know the passing of the seasons, like threads of magic passing silently through the world.

Paperbark gums all about me, flayed ghosts, growing javelin straight into the deep sky above. I can smell the brackish dew on the carpet of leaves, somewhere my feet had slid into a shallow stream; my toes were caked with mud, picking up the leaves as I pass. My left hip ached from another night on the storeroom floor. Each step was an aeon, remembered only by the ancient and infrequent Tallowoods, soaring over the Paperbarks. Twigs and small leaves catch in my hair, sounds of men and women, the call of a girl, I first thought was birdsong.

'There's footprints over here,' she said. A muffled reply further away.

'This way,' a man's voice strangled by the filter of trees, 'Claire,' Jack yelled, distant plaintive love on his breath, the call of the Bowerbird for his tawny mate. These were indeed songs, laments between the trees faltering at the forests edge. I am hiding deep among grass

trees when I see the red flash of Mish's jacket. I hear the crack of old twigs as my child moves among them, a lithe spirit. I imagine her black curls, a frame for her ever serious face.

'Smile,' I said once, wondering at the scale of her concentrated frowns, it will never happen, kiddo.'

'It's not normal you know,' she said.

'What?'

'Smile! People don't walk around with *smiles* plastered all over their faces, you know mum,' she said resentfully, the hurt made visceral, drawing attention to a future of inarticulate concerns. How deep are the wounds we bequeath to our children? She was right, I did know, or at least I should have known. Mish turns on the forest path, as if she heard me keening my own last song. She looks briefly into the clump of grass trees and then rustles past, black curls bouncing on the collar of her red jacket, her serious, peerless face seeking the alchemic substance to repair us. Such an odd girl, a girl I have forgotten in all the grief, dwelling in the bones of the house.

A new scent comes, that of the sea, the oily sodium smell is delicious. Small birds flick among the grass trees, tiny yellow-bellied finches, so swift as to defy the corporeality of flight. Attempting to mimic them, I start to run, a startled creature of the forest. I hear the voices shriek my name and pay no heed. As the dawn breaks through the canopy, the forest vanishes. I emerge from a copse of squat bottlebrush, onto a vast dune. The fine white sand gusts low around my ankles, my pace slows as I sink into the great mound of the sand-blow. I am high above the sea, a witness to the orange sun creeping up beyond the sand. A thin streak of dirty grey cloud reached out to two high headlands supporting the dune. I fly with the shifting sands over the hump of the dune. I aim a path between the twin bastions of the cliff and the fire in the sky, seeking protection from the menace of another day.