

## Bad Bones

### Mish

Two weeks ago I turned fourteen and my mum forgot. My dad didn't, he gave me a gold locket when he got home from work. Mum stood beside him, not smiling, concentrating like I do sometimes, when I'm trying to understand. They call me Mish, but it's Michelle. In memory of my dead brother Callie, who called me Mish because that's all he could manage before he died. He was one, it was a heart attack. I know, but it happens even with a kid that small. I barely remember him. His hair was kind of kinky black like mine. It was hard to tell the colour of his eyes, sort of indeterminate – like him now. He wasn't even walking. Now it doesn't seem like he was a real person, like I dreamed him. I do dream about him still, he is dancing in my dreams, like Michael Jackson, just brilliant and beautiful.

We were all devastated but Mum took it the hardest; actually it was truly horrible, like she died too, inside. I sit outside in the sun a lot and that's where I am now. We have a big yard for the neighbourhood, they call it a battle axe, it's just the way they divided it. We got the big block – dad chose it right at the beginning, the house we are in is the original house, built a hundred years before. I was three when we moved in. It was rundown at first, until Dad and Mum did it up and added rooms, a verandah on three sides. Dad said, if it hadn't had good bones he would have built a new one. Not sure what he meant...something about Ironbark, from memory. This was before Callie, my dead brother.

Our house sits on top of a long driveway. Three other houses are on it, which can be a bloody pain. I don't like any of the other kids on our subdivision and they don't like me, I mind but I also don't. Dad says I keep my own counsel and I figure that makes me the mayor of me. Kids at school gave me a hard time until I punched Judy Swazinski in the mouth.

‘Hey Michelle, you’re as ugly as the day is long, you rotten skank,’ Judy said before I walked up to her and smacked her in the mouth.

‘Say that again, you fuckin fuck,’ I said, which was a bit lame I know but I was caught off guard; bloody ropeable, in fact. Anyway she didn’t reply on account of the fact she was screaming blue bloody murder, until Mr. Downes came over and took us to the principal. I was suspended for two weeks; Judy still hates my guts but keeps her distance. Her brother has started liking me and that’s kind of awkward.

So, there’s this big old Lilly Pilly up the back, near the garden shed. The land is terraced into three different levels and the back garden is at the top where the shed is, where Mum used to make her art. Dad built this wide seat right around the trunk of the tree. I take a cushion up there to think. You can’t sit under it when it’s the end of the fruiting time because it rains berries all day long for weeks. We can hear the pinging on the tin roof of the shed, even at night, driving us all bat-shit crazy. Once I ate so many of them I was sick all over the verandah. Dad said he’s going to cut it down, but he never does. Our cat was as old as the hills when died up there. We didn’t know where he’d got to until I climbed up and found him rotting in the crevice of the widest branch. I guess he thought it was the best place to go for the occasion. Apart from the smell it was kind of nice up there. If it was my time to cark it, I’d do the same I reckon.

When I’m sitting up there and not thinking about anything too complicated, I look down at the house. We painted it mustard yellow two years ago, or Dad and I did. Mum sat crying somewhere. Often we didn’t know where she was. Once we found her down the creek pool. There’s this old railway culvert you can walk through with a weir at the end. We found her there on the rocks nude; anybody could have found her there, lots of kids go there to swim. She looked serene, she is still so beautiful, my mum. Dad was really gentle with her,

helping her to get dressed and we held her hands walking back up the hill to our place. When we got back I went to my room and cried for so long my pillow was soaked through. My dad says to be patient but it's been three years.

The way Mum is now, it took a while. We felt Callie in the house for a long time. Two times I woke up and went into the nursery to look at him, the way I did before mum and dad got up; a secret time of loving him on my own. Sometimes now I feel guilty, it's not anything I could put my finger on; it was like, how come I'm alive and he's dead. It didn't seem possible. We all had a different kind of pain and none of us understood the others. People outside the family kept their distance, like we were unlucky or maybe they thought they'd get infected. Dad said we were in a club nobody else wanted to join and we just needed to pay our dues. We have to keep fixing things until there's nothing else to fix, he said.

I love being in the shade of the Lilly Pilly at this time of year, in the late spring and summer. The house is so nice. When I grow up and inherit it, I will never sell it; just live in it for the rest of my life. My dad is clever with his hands, he's a carpenter and people get him to renovate their houses, they want them to be like ours. Once I overheard someone say—*it was a good thing that fella is clever with his hands, because he's an enigma inside a conundrum, no mistake*. They thought they were being clever but I felt embarrassed for him.

The other day I sat with dad while he was drawing up some plans.

'Every set of bones presents a different solution,' he said. 'People are capable of incredible things Mish, there is no limit to what we can do. When you set your mind free to notice the essence of things, there is no telling what might come of it. The past and the future come together in the present Mish. When you know that, it's like resolving the thing you are, the whole notion of being human is tied to it. Find that peace and you're half way there love,' he said. Sometimes I almost get what he's saying.

‘I think and think Dad, so hard it hurts my brain, sometimes I think Mum is missing every single thing, the tiny things, like how beautiful all the Lilly Pilly berries look on the green of the grass and big things, when every inch of ground and all the trees became black stumps behind the Williams house when the fire came through last year. I think if she can know these things happen as well, it will make her mind feel better,’ I said. Dad just sat for a while, looking at me.

‘Thinking is good, Mish but when the thinking is over, it’s time for doing. You have to find another way to show your Mum these things,’ he said but he didn’t seem entirely sure. He looked back at the plans and sat there, not drawing, just looking as if he was trying to burn a hole in them with his eyes, which started to sparkle like diamonds.

We have a dull green metal roof I like to think of as an old felt hat. I can see over the top of it to the tall gums in front of the house. Sometimes, if you squint, the front of our house looks like a face. I’m sitting and imagining the house looking at the shapes in the clouds and watching the Cockatoo’s carry on in the branches. Sometimes the Currawongs come and upset them; they fly out of the trees like explosions, screaming mad as hell, like Judy Swazinski did in the playground when I smacked her one.

Today there are no clouds, the sun is lighting up the world. It seems as if it is sprinkling down on me through the tree, like gold dust. I wish it would shine forever. I wish mum could come up here with me and see it the way I do.

Jack

It's been at least six hours since Claire's disappearance. I had been working on the Milson's renovation when Mish rang to tell me Claire was missing. She said she had been daydreaming under that damn tree. I tried to calm her down, telling her to go out on her bike to the usual places while I checked the village shopping centre. I asked at the fruit and veg and Bob at the butcher's with no luck. Betty was closing up her shoe shop as I passed.

'I did see her...I'm sorry to say this, but she looked a bit strange Jack. She came in here, her hair looked funny, not combed; she had track pants on, they were dirty at the bottom and she didn't have any shoes on. It was strange because she usually looks so gorgeous.

'Did she say anything?' I said.

'No, in fact she didn't even look at me...I said hello but she just didn't respond.'

'So what happened, did she buy anything?' I said.

'No, I had been busy all morning; I didn't even have time to eat lunch. Millie was off sick, I was run off my feet,' she said.

'So did you see which direction she went when she left,' I said. For fucks sake tell me what happened Betty. I thought it but didn't say it.

'Got caught up with Glenda Swazinski and that dreadful girl of hers, little brat wouldn't keep still; can you believe it, she's a size nine and she's only thirteen. Seems everyone wants shoes all of a sudden, although mostly the cheap ones. They don't seem to understand quality...'

'Yes, but Claire, where did she go,' I said. I would have throttled her on the spot if I hadn't needed her answer.

'Didn't see her leave Jack.' She must have noticed my agitation because she looked at me a little worried. 'Jack I...'

'Got to run Betty, let me know if you see her, won't you,' I said. She'd talk the head off rabbits if they were passing by. I'd done a renovation on the shop last year. She wanted

more space and I turned her roof cavity into a storage loft, gave her heaps of room but boy could she talk. When I got back Mish was waiting in the driveway.

‘You checked the weir Mish, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, and asked Missus Frame down the bottom of the driveway and she hadn’t seen her.’

‘OK Mish,’ I said. I started making sandwiches. This had been the longest time she had been gone since...well since.

‘Dad, is Mum going to be alright,’ Mish said.

‘I’m sure she’ll be fine.’

‘Dad.’

‘Yes Mish?’

‘She must have left when I was up at the tree, I was daydreaming again Dad, I’m sorry.’ Mish started to cry and I just stood there looking at her. For a while I didn’t recognize her. Perhaps we had become strangers, all of us. Callie’s death had killed us all, even the cat. That’s all I could think of right then. That’s all any of us could ever think about since he died really. Callie, Callie, Callie...fuck! Callie had transformed us into a caravan of grief, attaching itself to each of us. We spent our lives pulling it around wherever we went, poisoning this house, even the lawn seemed to die, never fully recovering. I wish I’d cut down that bloody tree.

‘Come here chicken,’ I said. I held her and stoked her hair and her back. She liked that. Ever since she was a baby she loved having her back stroked; my beautiful, strange, clever daughter. She had become just as much a victim of Callie as Claire and I. Mish was lost to her mother. There was a time when I asked her to look at her daughter, to talk to her.

‘Claire, loving Mish twice as much could help you get past Callie. I mean not to forget, not that, none of us want that,’ I was quick to say it but she had already recoiled, as if frightened by a menacing snake.

‘Seven rooms,’ Claire said.

‘Pardon?’ I said.

‘This house has seven rooms; I counted them.’

‘Oh, OK.’

‘Callie is in every one of them, I’ve seen him.’

‘Claire. Please come back to us,’ I whispered. Reaching for her in the dark of a cold July night, as much for warmth than anything, to feel her body curl into mine, the way she used to bring her knees up to her chin. She loved for me to put both arms around her, enfold her. Even when we were out walking somewhere, she would say *put your arms around me, yes that’s it, all around me*. Always that particular way, kind of peculiar and it was awkward to walk, but I always felt the closest to her in those moments.

‘Don’t,’ she said. ‘Just don’t...I can’t.’

After Callie she no longer drew or made her beautiful, scary collages in the shed. The shed had been her place. Before Callie we stacked all the tools and mower parts into the narrow room I built on the side of the shed. She took up her paints and pencils, her vast collection of paper, little mementoes of old lives, rubber stamps, brushes, sticks and twigs, leaves and feathers all filled the many boxes, or those in progress, lay on her work-bench in various stages of development. She was so concentrated, full of thoughts, you could see the nascent reflections of her art everywhere in the house but in the shed it was a fury of creativity, raw and unnerving, connecting to every part of her being. It was a place I always approached with caution, perhaps that was just me.

She threw a cake on the roof of the house once. Two years ago she baked a cake for Mish's birthday, it slumped in the middle. I found Mish crying in her room when I came home and Claire was nowhere to be found. I wanted our garden to be like a series of different rooms, I wasn't quite sure why or at least then, I couldn't articulate the meaning of it. I built a series of steps from bricks to take us up to the next levels. From there the roof gutter was below eye level. I looked all over for Claire, it was her first disappearance. The cake clung to the hot roof, further cooking it to a hard brown lump, staying there until Mish herself, climbed on and removed it.

Police have organized a search party. Some of the shops closed so all who wished to participate were able to. Claire had been born there. I was a blow-in; not a local yet perhaps another 20 years, they joked. I know they would have done the same for me. Jovial Bob the butcher sent his two boys, Betty and Millie and others, some who I didn't know, came and we fanned out over the village, street by street, the laying fields, the skate park and the forest beyond.

'We will look again tomorrow Jack, it's late...we won't achieve anything now.'

Mish and I refused to stop. We drove around the streets, out to the old cemetery, the deserted road to the new light industrial area, the churches and the cement works on Jamison Lane. It was at least five in the morning when we gave up. Mish and I just looked at each other in the moonlight, it was a full moon and I could make out her sallow, stained cheeks and fearful eyes. Right then she could have been Claire looking back, the resemblance in that light was uncanny. We drove slowly through the main street one more time, taking a short-cut at the rear of the shops. The early dawn sun was beginning to lay its golden glint over the fringes of the forest.



‘Dad look up there, the roof window you built for the shoe shop,’ Mish said. ‘The shoe shop lady doesn’t live there, does she, the lights on?’

Betty let us in, still in her pyjama’s. For once she didn’t say much, probably all talked out roaming the streets all day with her neighbours.

‘Neither Millie or I have been up there for weeks and I definitely didn’t leave the light on,’ she said. The loft-ladder had been pulled down and I could see the window’s venetian blind had been opened as I ascended the ladder. Mish came up after me. All of the shoes had been removed from the boxes, and the tissue paper on the floor appeared to be a makeshift bed. To the left the discarded shoes and boxes were stacked against the wall. Claire’s clothes were in pile beside the trapdoor.

‘Look Dad,’ Mish said. I looked to where she was pointing and a group of seven shoe boxes were neatly lined up against the wall on the right. Each lid had been inscribed with Arabic lettering. Claire had studied some Arabic; she was entranced by the beauty of the lettering and then by the meaning of the words themselves. Before Callie died she translated some Syrian poems and read them to me, they were truly exquisite. I didn’t understand but I assumed it was one of the poems she so loved.

While I stood there, Mish knelt down and lifted each lid off the boxes, doing it carefully, as if she was afraid of what she’d find.

### Claire

She fashions a bed from tissue paper. She feels better there, no corners of memory, just unpainted plasterboard, dull, furry chipboard floor, a tall mirror against the wall. There is a view of the vast forest from the window in the roof. She thinks it stops at the sea but has no way of telling – it occurs to her all the land that ever was, stops at the sea eventually—she has

a very firm conviction about this. The world has become a balloon filled with strangers breath and unexpected knowledge. She see's herself sailing around, jiggling side to side, pulled up now and again and then down towards the earth.

'Mish', Callie said.

'Mish', Claire said and he laughed. 'Mish,' and he laughed one more time. A small white speck appeared on his gum. She touched the beginning of teeth. 'Mish,' he said and, then his dark eyes faded and left them.

When she woke up it seemed as if she had never slept before. Daylight had forced her eyelids open, wanting her to see, but all she wanted was the night. She could movement below, a scrape, a tinkling bell, small distant sounds of voices. She pushed the tissue closer to the edge of the room and finding a way to make her small. She has my pencil; she will make a drawing on the paper for seven boxes. The seven, all she needs to contain the only treasures she has. Knowing this at least, to be important work, she draws a part of her for each one, using the mirror to find the right ones. She makes a list of the seven ways back.

The breast for the milk, not 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 eight eyes, for the sight of the safe harbour,

The stain of tears, for all I could not give.

She's finish drawing and writes a poem from memory on the lids. Standing, she looks out the window, the glare of the sun disgusts her. She gags, wanting to be sick, but she still looks out into the deep green forest below. Down there under the canopy of wild gums, among the winged creatures, the sounds of the creek, the touch of lifting bark, the snap of twigs, the secret passes among the tall grass trees, down and down into the belly, the long dark world between the leaves of the dead. She knows she could not be me without awareness of the other, the phantoms creeping into mher dreams, making all the love for Jack and Mish fall out of her like menstrual blood. Free of the cruel loss. Why did she think that about the blood, it's wrong, reeking of death. It seems the only thing making sense now, are the boxes; She has to find the correct parts, the pieces making it all complete. I'm Claire she reminds herself, and these are the boxes into which I will place all the parts to tell them, to explain. I am Claire she says aloud, to hear it one last time.

The night comes again and descending to the floor she lets herself out. A warm night with a big, high moon lights the track. In the forest she finds all she is looking for; as she knew she would. Returning, she lifts each lid, placing the chosen within, seven different coloured leaves. She drinks a lot of water and sleeps for hours. She finds the toilet down the ladder and at the back, a ferociously narrow place to piss. This place is becoming mean and angry. Unable to face the ladder again she sits for a while, more boxes climbing the walls. Now the room above the ladder is a place of fear, finished with. The light from it leech's into this narrow place. She finds a ham and cheese sandwich in a Tupperware container and eats slumped against the toilet door.

When Callie died, she waited and waited. Eventually Jack came home with Mish but she failed to recognize them. She wondered who belonged to these urgent bodies, rushing, banging doors, yelling into the phone. They screamed and cried and he kept saying no; we

all scattered like already dried up dead leaves. We flew with the wind in different directions, like the frightened Cockatoos. A man and a woman came to test Callie, to try to wake him up, but Claire knew he'd gone.

'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,' the woman crying as well, looking up from him; tiny dark blue veins. The man, who was only a boy, stood holding some sort of apparatus; he seemed far away, looking down on us, terror in his eyes. Jack kept saying no until she screamed for him to stop and then there was silence. 'I can give her something,' she whispered to Jack, she reached across to Claire, looking beautiful in her sky blue overalls. Claire wants them, she wanted her to make a present of them to her; believing she might, considering. Jack looked at her not understanding. Claire did, she understood.

'Stay away from me,' she heard her voice saying it, but couldn't feel her mouth, her legs. This is when she became the creature she is now, falling on the floor, finally giving in. She was no longer the hard, glassy stone she thought she had become; instead she was crumbling, forming into a foetal carapace, an unfamiliar substance made up of all the wrong things. She thought, if only she could go to the shed and then she could reassemble them all. Fix what the doctor called an undiagnosed case of Atrial something or other, a perfectly acceptable cause of death. She could have fixed that, she was certain she could have, or Jack could, he was very good at fixing things.

The dawn light was filtering onto the forest floor. Paperbark gums everywhere, flayed ghosts, a myriad of sizes, growing straight into the gloaming above. She has walked what must be a long way. She can smell the brackish dew on the carpet of leaves, somewhere her feet had slid into a shallow stream; her toes were caked with mud and picked up the leaves as she passed, her left hip ached. She must have fallen at some point, but each step was an aeon, remembered only by ancient trees, the older and wiser Tallowoods, soaring over the spindly

Paperbarks. She found twigs and small leaves caught in her hair. Sounds of men, of a girl calling to them,

‘There are footprints over here,’ she says.

‘This way,’ a man’s voice strained through the filter of trees, ‘Claire,’ he yelled.

Hiding among grass trees, she sees the red of Mish’s jacket, hears the crack of old dry twigs as her child moves among them. A new scent comes, that of the sea, the oily flavour of sodium was delicious. Small birds flittered among the grass trees, tiny yellow-bellied creatures, so fast, barely seeing them in flight. She starts to run. Just as the dawn broke through the canopy, the forest disappears. She emerges from a copse of squat bottlebrush, onto a vast dune. The fine white sand gusts low around her ankles, her pace slows as she sinks into the great mound of the sand-blow. She is high above the sea but she witnesses the orange sun leap up beyond the sand. A long streak of dirty grey cloud reached out to two high headlands.

She runs with the sand over the hump of the dune to the fire in the sky, towards the tall bastions of sheer cliff protecting her from the menace of another new day.