

Swallow the Air



I remember the day I found out my mother was head sick. She wore worry on her wrists as she tied the remaining piece of elastic to the base of the old ice-cream container. Placing her soft hands under my jaw so as to get a better look at me, Mum's sad emerald eyes bled through her black canvas and tortured willow hair. She had a face that only smiled in photographs. She finished fixing my brother, Billy, also in an ice-cream tub helmet and sent us fishing. Puncturing the fear that magpies would swoop down and peck out the tops of our heads.

She shuffled us out like two jokers in her cards, reminding us to go to Aunty's house before dark, and telling us again that she loved us. The screen door swung back on its rusted, coastal hinges and slammed under the tension. When I looked back down the driveway she was gone.

Billy rode fast, his rod suspended in the distance like a radio antenna. My reel thread over my handlebars – attached with a small bag of bread mix, a flip knife and some extra hooks and sinkers that I'd got from school as a trade for Monopoly money. All was swaying with my slackened momentum.

The sand was stewing. I threw my bike with Billy's below the dunes of spinifex and headed for the point. From there I knew that I'd have the best view of the beach, deep into the surging breakers and practically standing on the locals' surfboards. Last summer I'd seen a turtle from the same spot; he immersed half his body – just to spit. Only a few moments he'd stayed, but it was long enough to remember his beauty.

Mungi was his name, the first turtle ever. They said he was a tribesman who was speared in the neck while protecting himself under a hollowed-out tree. But the ancestor spirit was watching and decided to let him live by reincarnation or something. 'Anyway, using the empty tree trunk as his shell, he was allowed to live peacefully forever as a turtle.' Or so Mum would say. She had some

pretty crazy ideas and some pretty strange stories about other worlds and the government and the ‘conspiracies’. But the story about Mungi was my favourite. It was what she’d really wanted to say, she wasn’t paranoid about a turtle.

I crept over the rock pools; the edges were sharp so you had to walk softly. Gazing down at every shale shape, contorting each footstep onto its smoothness. At the furthest rock pool, searching the ledge for my usual spot, I saw something strange. Draped over the verge was a silvery mould, like a plastic raincoat sleeping on the stone.

Sheltering over the eagled remains, I inhaled its salty flesh burning under the afternoon sky. The stingray’s overturned body looked more like a caricature of a ghost than a sleeping raincoat. I stepped back, imagining its tiny frowning mouth screaming in pain. It’d not long been dead and I wondered if it had suffocated in the air or if this was only its mortuary. Either way it had swallowed its struggle.

I pulled it onto the rock ledge by its wing; the leathery shields made a slapping sound at my feet. I wanted someone to see my prize but Billy was

way back on the shoreline, too far to hear a girlish call. There were three short cuts on either side of its body – where a rib cage would be. They were like fish gills, I guessed, for special breathing underwater. My forefinger slid down its stomach and stinging tail to the tip, tracing around the two thorns that stuck out at the end. In my mind I saw the tail whip across like a garden hose and poison me with a quick and fatal sweep. I sat further away, just to be safe, and thought for a long time about throwing it back in, though I decided it was best kept away from the living, best kept up here in the air.

Pain had boiled up under its swollen body; I could feel the stingray's fight in its last moments of life. It looked exhausted, like a fat man in a tight suit after a greedy meal. But I had pity for the ray; I saw only the release of the dead inside. Stabbing my flip blade through its thick skin, I drew a long gape down the underbelly. An orange sack split open, pierced in the cutting. Oozing paint like liquid, the colour of temple chimes, over its pale torso.

An angel fallen, lying on its back, was now opened to the sky. I was no longer intrigued by

cause of death, loss of life. It had died long before I had cut it open, but only blood made dying real. No longer whole and helpless, the stingray was spilling at the sides – it was free.

I took up my bag, blew a loving kiss to what remained and returned to my brother, taking care not to step on the sharp-edged stones.

I remember the beach that day, still scattered with people; the sand had cooled with the falling sun. Blankets with babies and families in those half-domed, tent things. It was that time of the afternoon where mums and dads were getting tired and bodies could get no more bronzed. The entire beach would be packed up in minutes. Billy hadn't caught anything; just a handful of pipis lay in his hat.

'How'd you go, sis?'

I showed him my empty palms. 'You?'

'Just the pipis, maybe we could get Aunty to fry em up, ask her if she got any fish fingers too! Jeez I'm starvin.'

We carried our bikes to the taps and washed our feet. Billy's feet were so much darker than mine; he'd sometimes tease me and call me a 'hal-fie' and 'coconut'. We'd be laughing and chasing

each other around the yard being racist and not even knowing it. I peered out past the bitou bush toward the point, following the pairs of surfers' legs disappearing over each wave. The sea was again a moving silver gull, mirroring sunset's embedded lilac. And I was again a child.

When we arrived at Aunty's house there was a police car parked out front, its wheels scraping against the gutter. There were no flashing lights, no siren. We tossed our bikes into the yard and Aunty leapt off the porch and shuffled us inside, just as Mum had earlier shuffled us out.

Her arms were sticky against my shoulders; she was shaking and sighing like sleeping through a bad dream. She sat us down at the kitchen table and opened the top cupboards, the ones with the barley sugar in them. Though she looked inside at the back walls only to gather her thoughts. She flung her head down, limp at the neck; still gripping the cupboard handles. Aunty cried a lot, it made Billy cry too. I thought she looked like Jesus, with her arms holding the rest of her up like that.

She sounded all broken up, like each word was important but foreign. 'Your mum – she gone.



She gone away for a long time, kids. Me sista, she had to leave us.'

Aunty wasn't sure of the words. They'd never crossed her lips before, not when Mum went to the TAB, not when she went to Woolies either. I knew she was dead.

I took off the ice-cream tub still crowning my head, and stared into its emptiness. Mungi and the stingray floated around in my beating mind. I thought about Mum's pain being freed from her wrists, leaving her body, or what was left. Her soft hands overturned and exhausted. Tears fell into the ice-cream container, dripping off my eyelashes and sliding over my cheeks. Salt water smeared her handwriting of black marker – *remember*.

And I knew it was all right not to forget.



Grab



Aunty never used to reckon she was lucky. She always just figured she was passed a raw deal, dealt a bad hand. I supposed she'd surrendered to being *that* kid, and then to being *that* woman in the same rotting suburb, born into a lifetime of ill fate. Her sister, the only stronghold out of loss, would follow suit in the sequence of lucklessness, and die. Everything, through Aunty's tired eyes, was bad luck. Bad luck until she won the Tip Top Bread Grocery Grab. After the win everything seemed to be a game, a gamble.

It started when Aunty would take the entry forms from the bread stand at Woolies. They never said you had to buy the bread and the checkout ladies never seemed to mind. Every pension day she set aside five dollars for stamps, and then she'd trace her name in thick memorised letters across the forms that still smelt of cooked flour. I don't

think she really believed she would actually win anything; maybe it had been her time to at least try.

I wasn't there when she went to Woolies that pension day. Aunty told us when she saw her name up on the big poster she had to pinch her arm to make sure she wasn't just dreaming. She came home and told us how great Christmas was going to be. *We're gunna have a bloody Christmas turkey this year, my loves.*

Billy and me stood behind the barricades of streamers with Tip Top Bread balloons strung from our hands, a crowd of the other contestants' families engulfed us at the front of the supermarket. Aunty had three minutes to fill her trolleys with anything from the aisles of labels. Her fingers wrapped tight over the trolley handle, light brown knuckles pushed over from the grip. The timer began to count down. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Go! She flung her wobbling hips down the first aisle whilst Billy and me chorused the names of all the chips and lollies that we had scabbed from the other kids at school, stopping mid scream to piss ourselves laughing.

Aunty was piling in arm-sized cans of beetroot

and pineapple slices. The one-minute timer was counting, 5, 4, 3 . . . We saw her start to panic and skip a bunch of aisles, targeting the trolley towards the frozen food section. You could see on her face the dread, thinking any second all time would be up. She got caught there in the frozen aisle, throwing in white plastic-wrapped turkeys and frozen chickens and pastry pies. The trolleys filled faster and faster, their hospital castors wobbling under each load. The presenter ran up to the far end of the supermarket where Aunty was and began flinging empty trolleys up the aisle with one hand, a microphone attached to a long black cord in the other. The trolleys sat stray and bloated, swollen like fresh driftwood. By the time the fire engine lights and the shrill siren flashed and shrieked through the supermarket she had three full trolleys, two of frozen food. Exhausted, she wheeled the last trolley, slower now, back to the checkouts for a quick interview, puffing and laughing.

Aunty leant over the barricades to Billy and me to give us a big hug, clapping her hands together and laughing. *We don't even own a bloody freezer!* She half whispered it at us and we looked at each

other laughing. Aunty asked Billy to count how much was in her purse: fifty dollars. We each took a trolley and craned their heavy baskets to the taxi rank outside.

‘Can you take us to the hockshop, please, driver? Take us to the best one and there’s a turkey with your name on it.’

He looked back at Aunty with night-shift eyes and a toothless, thin-lipped grin, as though a Stanley knife had just slit open the skin between his fat nose and the end of his chin. He sped the station wagon to a second-hand goods place just down the road and stopped right on the footpath. Aunty asked him to wait with us and she came out a minute later, the sun spiking the shine of the white rectangular freezer being wheeled out by the salesman. Big jolly smile still on her face.

I remember that smile, we mirrored it, and I reckon it was the happiest day of her life. She was at last lucky. From the front seat in the cab, she looked back at us and said it herself. *I think kids that I’d have to be one of the luckiest people around!*

She laughed at her luck then, and all that Christmas, right up until the food ran out and the vacant insides of the freezer iced over. It stuck to



## *Grab*

her though, that luck, like a scrounging leech.

It was the scratchies at first, four-dollar winners were pinned up against the fridge, while tens of the losing stubs lined the bins. Then it was lotto, then trifectas, pool comps and then that slapping death knell, the pokies. We rarely saw Aunty those days, when we did, she'd just lie about winning, or where she'd been. Aunty drowned out, she faded from our safety.

I try to imagine what she would've been thinking, perched up on a bar stool, tapping at the plastic, lit-up buttons. Raising the stakes. Hoping to light up another grocery grab or that fortnight's rent money or the electricity bill with Paid ink-stamped across it. I suppose that when those clinking dollars chimed in the shiny metal gutter, all those bills and red-letter promises disappeared. And it was just another bonus, another incentive, a quiet celebration for her luck.

Another drink.



# Cloud Busting



**W**e go cloud busting, Billy and me, down at the beach, belly up to the big sky. We make rainbows that pour out from our heads, squinting our eyes into the gathering. Fairy flossed pincushion clouds explode. We hold each other's hand; squeeze really hard to build up the biggest brightest rainbow and Bang! Shoot it up to the sky, bursting cloud suds that scatter, escaping into the air alive.

We toss our bodies off the eelgrass-covered dunes and race down to the shore where seaweed beads trace the waterline. Little bronze teardrops – we bust them too. Bubble-wrapped pennies.

We collect pipis, squirming our heels into the shallow water, digging deeper under the sandy foam. Reaching down for our prize, we find lantern shells, cockles, and sometimes periwinkles,

bleached white. We snatch them up, filling our pockets. We find shark egg capsules like dried out leather corkscrews and cuttlebones and sand snail skeletons, and branches, petrified to stone. We find sherbet-coloured coral clumps, sponge tentacles and sea mats, and bluebottles – we bust them with a stick. We find weed ringlet doll wigs and strings of brown pearls; I wear them as bracelets. We get drunk on the salt air and laughter. We dance, wiggling our bottoms from the dunes' height. We crash into the surf, we swim, we dive, and we tumble. We empty our lungs and weigh ourselves cross-legged to the seabed. There we have tea parties underwater. Quickly, before we swim up for mouthfuls of air.

I'm not scared of the ocean, that doesn't come until later. When we're kids we have no fear, it gets sucked out in the rips. We swim with the current, like breeding turtles and hidden jellyfish, as we drift out onto the shore.

We climb the dunes again, covered in sticky sand and sea gifts. We ride home and string up dry sea urchins at our window. We break open our pipis and Mum places each half under the grill or fries them in the saucepan, with onion

## *Cloud Busting*

and tomatoes. We empty our pockets and line the seashells along the windowsill. Mum starts on about the saucepans; she wants to tell us stories even though we know most of them off by heart, over and over, every detail. The saucepans, she says, the best bloody saucepans.

Billy and me sit at the window, watching Mum while she fries and begins. I'm still busting clouds through the kitchen pane, as they pass over the roof guttering and burst quietly in my rainbow.

'It was Goulburn, 1967,' Mum would begin.

'Where's that?' we'd say.

'Somewhere far away, a Goulburn that doesn't exist anymore,' she'd answer and carry on with her story.

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Anyway, Goulburn, '67. All my brothers and sisters had been put into missions by then, except Fred who went and lived with my mother's sister. And me, I was with my mother, probably cos my skin's real dark, see – but that's another story, you don't need to know that. So old Mum and me were sent to Goulburn from the river, to live in these little flats. Tiny things, flatettes or something.

Mum was working for a real nice family, at the house cooking and cleaning; they were so nice to Mum. I would go to work with her, used to sit outside and play and wait for her to finish.

When we came home Mum would throw her feet up on the balcony rail, roll off her stockings and smoke her cigarettes in the sun. Maybe chat with the other women, but most of them were messed up, climbing those walls, trying to forget. It wasn't a good time for the women, losing their children.

Anyway, all the women folk were sitting up there this hot afternoon when down on the path arrived this white man, all suited up. Mum called down to him, I don't know why, she didn't know him. I remember she said, 'Hey there, mister, what you got there?'

A box was tucked under his arm. He looked up at us all and smiled. He come dashing up the stairwell and out onto our balcony. I think he would've been the only white person to ever step up there. He was smooth. 'Good afternoon to you, ladies, I am carrying in this box, the best saucepans in the land.'

Mum drew back on her cigarette and stubbed it out in the tin. 'Give us a look then.'



The suit opened up the box and arranged the saucepans on the balcony, the sun making the steel shine and twinkle. They were magical. All the women whooped and whoooed. The saucepans really were perfect. Five different size pans and a Dutch oven, for cakes. Strong, black, grooved handles on the sides and the lids, the real deal.

‘How much?’ Mum said, getting straight to the point.

The suit started up then on his big speech: Rena Ware, 18/10, only the best, and this and that, lifetime guarantee, all that sort of stuff.

The women started laughing. They knew what the punch line was going to be, nothing that they could afford, ever. Their laughter cascaded over the balcony rails as they followed each other back into the shade of their rooms.

‘Steady on there, Alice, you got a little one to feed there too!’ they said, seeing Mum entranced, watching his mouth move and the sun bouncing off the pans.

He told her the price, something ridiculous, and Mum didn’t even flinch. She lit up another fag, puffed away. I think he was surprised, maybe relieved she didn’t throw him out. He rounded up

his speech and Mum just sat there as he packed up the saucepans.

‘You not gunna let me buy em then?’ Mum said, blowing smoke over our heads.

‘Would you like to, Miss?’

‘Of course I bloody do, wouldna sat here waiting for you to finish if I didn’t!’

Mum told him then that she couldn’t afford it, but she wanted them. So they made a deal. Samuel, the travelling salesman, would come by once a month, when money would come from the family, and take a payment each time.

Mum worked extra hours from then on, sometimes taking home the ironing, hoping to get a little more from the lady of the house. And she did, just enough. And Samuel would come round and chat with Mum and the other ladies and bring sweets for me. He and Mum would be chatting and drinking tea in the lounge until it got dark outside. They were friends after all that time.

Three years and seven months it took her. When Samuel came round on his last visit, with a box under his arm, just like the first time, Mum smiled big. He came into the flat and placed the box on the kitchen bench.

‘Open it,’ he said to Mum, and smiled down at me and winked.

Mum pressed her hands down the sides of her uniform then folded open the flaps and lifted out each saucepan, weighing it in her hands, squinting over at Samuel, puzzled. With each lid she pulled off, her tears gathered and fell.

‘What is it, what is it?’ I was saying as I pulled a chair up against the bench and could see then in one pan was a big leg of meat, under another lid potatoes and carrots, a shiny chopping knife, then a bunch of eggs, then bread. And in the Dutch oven, a wonky looking steamed pudding. Mum was crying too much to laugh at the cake.

‘I haven’t got a hand for baking yet. Hope you don’t mind I tested it out.’

Mum just shook her head; she couldn’t say a word and Samuel understood. He put on his smart hat, tilting the brim at Mum, and as he left the doorway, he said, ‘Good day to you, Alice. Good day, young lady.’

And when Mum passed, she gave the pots to me.

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*Swallow the Air*

When our mother finished her story she'd be crying too, tiny streams down her cheekbones. I knew she would hock everything we'd ever own, except the only thing that mattered, five size-ranged saucepans, with Dutch oven. Still in their hard case, only a few handles chipped.

I run my fingertips over fingerprints now, over years, generations. They haven't changed much; they still smell of friendship. I suppose that to my nanna, Samuel was much like a cloud buster. Letting in the sun, some hope, the rainbow had been their friendship. And I suppose that to Mum, Samuel was someone who she wanted to be around, like a blue sky. For Samuel, my mum and Nanna, I don't know, maybe the exchange *was* even, and maybe when those clouds burst open, he got to feel the rain. A cleansing rain, and maybe that was enough.