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Fledgling: On Kinship Between Writers and Readers of Trauma Testimony

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Fledgling

Before the hatching, she perched sturdy and glistening on a string of line on my nan's Hills Hoist, her metallic feathers reflecting light from the last of the winter sun. Mud was stuck to her beak like fresh mortar to newly lain bricks. I watched her from where I sat on the edge of the veranda in my lilac overalls, lilac like the tall lavender stalks in the large ceramic pot near the lattice fence. A freshly picked pink geranium decorated my loose strawberry hair. Strands of hair brushed across my flushed cheeks as I looked out at Nan's Garden, at the modest lines of varied little flowers, like a row of different coloured buttons sewn onto a much-loved cardigan. The sun warmed me and dried the mud stuck to the sides of my yellow gumboots. The same mud that had collected around 'her' beak and made from the soil that grew all the rows of little flowers in Nan's Garden.

I watched her flit from the line up into a small crevice in the veranda roof. She used her beak like a trowel to smooth the mud onto a patch of her nest, like a potter smoothing a clay pot. There was weaving too, dried lengths of grass and strings of green sweet pea vine stitched through deliberate holes in the dried humble mud. Short stalks of hay stuck out from the lip of the nest, testament of her venture to the bottom shed. The straw must have caught her eye through a glint of sunlight. She must have flown through an open louver in the shed window, popped in through the hessian curtain and dropped down onto the hay pile in the dark. Collecting straw pieces in her beak, she might have squinted with watery eyes at the bags upon bags laden with onions and drying garlic. Pop kept the straw as mulch for his veggie garden. He had said the straw kept the new veggies warm. She knew this too.

I sat on the veranda step most afternoons and she was always there. It was not her instinct that made me notice her. It wasn't the way the light fell onto her shiny black feathers. Although at first, I simply admired her. Such a sweet little swallow, such a pretty colour. It

was only when I truly observed her – mud stuck beak, scraping side to side, flitting up and back, smoothing, weaving, stitching her nest – I saw that she gave all she had, even before the hatching. I thought of my own mother: her nest patched with odds and ends, short cigarette stalks jutting out from her lip, musty smoke-soaked bedding for straw and hand-me-down clothes for feathers. I looked up at Mother-Swallow and shone my Hollywood smile at her. Nan called it that. She said that my smile was as big as the Hollywood letters on the hill in LA where all the famous people lived. That was in a far-off land in my Mallee child mind, but it sounded like a great place, like Nan's was, with all her little flowers.

*

The hatching happened without me watching. I skipped up to Nan's iron garden gate in my yellow gumboots and worked the metal latch free with my tiny fingers. The gate squeaked open, familiar to my touch. Nan had phoned Mum to tell me about the hatching.

'There's three of them, tell her. Little plump fellows with fledgling fluff and yellow beaks.'

I skipped through the gate and down the cement path. Then onto the veranda leaving dried mud-prints as I went. I stopped. I could hear them pipping, calling out to Mother-Swallow. I glanced over at Nan's line from the step. There she was in her metallic feathers, her head turned. Listening. Their pipping was like an echo of her own small trill. I glanced up at them, their little heads huddled together, nestled on the straw stalks, their bodies covered in fuzzy new feathers, yellow mouths gaping.

‘Don’t worry love, their mother will feed them,’ Nan’s voice echoed out from behind the screen door of the porch. ‘You come inside now; I’ve made us some tea and biscuits.’

I looked over at the line again as I removed my gumboots, gently tapping dried mud off them onto the wooden veranda. She was flitting now, up and back, up and back. The pipping quietened as she tended to them. I opened the flyscreen door and held it with my hand careful not to let it bang as I stepped inside.

Nan’s house was mostly dark, but it was always warm and softly decorated with things that Nan had collected or had been given over the years. There was the large blue vase on the hallway shelf next to the wall phone. Dusty wired plastic flowers bent out from inside it in different directions, except on the day that Jesus rose at Easter and when he was born at Christmas time. On those day’s Nan replaced the plastic flowers with a freshly picked posy from the garden. Jesus lived at Nan’s house too, even though I never saw him. She said he was always there taking care of us and watching over us. Sometimes, I worried about him watching me. I hoped he hadn’t seen me when I made my sister crawl under the house to get my ball. She didn’t want to, but I told her there were no spiders. There were spiders, and she cried. I hoped he hadn’t seen me in church, sitting next to Nan in the pew, not listening.

The carpet leading in from the porch entrance was a dull speckled brown, but the cabinet against the left wall was bright with glass doors. It held all of Nan’s teacups and saucers. I loved to look at them. Sometimes, I would slide one of the silent glass doors open and lift the cup with the violet rose from its saucer and cradle it in my little hand. The violet rose one was my favourite. Nan had set two rose patterned cups with matching saucers on the dining table, the centrepiece of the room, along with one of her floral teapots, complete with knitted cosy. The sound of her pouring the steaming tea into my cup comforted me as I sank into one of the cushioned wooden dining chairs. I picked a biscuit from the biscuit tin that

Nan had placed next to the teapot. As I dipped it softly into the milky tea, all thought of my own mother's nest dissolved. My nest was at Nan's, woven with stories about her trips to Japan and Fiji, stuck with milky tea and biscuits for mud and all the cushions from the couch laid out in a line as smoke free straw. Nan was my Mother-Swallow even if she didn't know it.

*

When the man arrived at Nan's the hatchlings were flexing their newly darkened feathers. Flitting up and back, up and back, Mother-Swallow had tended to their tiny pips, until the spring sun reflected off their fresh metallic wings. Fledglings ready to take flight. I watched from the veranda as they perched on the lip of the nest, arching upwards, frantically flapping their wings. Further away, beyond the lemon tree and the patch of green grass that carpeted the septic tank, out near the bottom shed, the man was standing next to Pop. Nan said that he was going to stay for a while to help Pop with some work outside on the house. He was going to stay in the back room. The back room once belonged to my mum and my aunty when they were little. It still had the same beds with the same pink bedspreads. I stayed in the sleepout: a small room that connected to the back room. The sleepout was my playroom. I played with Nan's bowls; I would take them down from the shelf that lent against the wall under the louver window. I would pluck open their leather case and pick one up in my little fingers, breathing in the waxy scent from the polish Nan used to clean them. I would kneel down and roll it towards where I had placed the small white ball, commentating, 'A glorious bowl there; you can see she has a lovely soft release: it's gliding along like a black swan on a lake.'

I would also sing along to the cassette player that Nan lent me. The *Pretty Woman* tape was my favourite. I would undo the straps of my lilac overalls and tie my t-shirt in a middle knot. I would undo my hair and let it fall loosely around my shoulders. I would pluck the geranium from my hair and grasp it firmly as a mic, and then I would press play. Beaming my Hollywood smile, standing tall I would sing every song word-for-word.

I realised while I sat on the step watching Pop and the man wander up towards the house that I had never actually slept in the sleepout. I felt it was too far from Nan and Pop's room, stuffy in summer and chilly at this time of year and I loved the way Nan laid out the couch cushions in the lounge for me, neat like the deck of cards we used to play Canasta with.

Pop stopped at the base of the step. 'Hi sweets; looks like your birds are about ready to take off. They're doing enough flapping up there.'

I smiled up at Pop, with my eyes firmly fixed on the man. He was thin with wiry arms and curly dark hair.

'You've grown a lot since last I saw ya,' he said.

*

Rain drizzled down the dusty glass of the dining room window. I rubbed a circle into the condensation and peered out of it. Mother-Swallow was perched proudly on the line. Droplets of rain beaded off her shiny feathers and dripped onto the sodden grass below. Two of her fledglings crouched in beside her. But where was the third? I rubbed the circle in the frosted pane larger and searched the yard. I couldn't see it on the lattice fence or near the rows of

little flowers. I darted to the kitchen, and pushed out through the screen door, accidentally letting it bang shut after me. The woven mud nest was empty. Pieces of the straw stalks were scattered across the cold veranda floorboards beneath it. The air chilled as I imagined the Mother-Swallow's little fellow cold and alone.

I sighed as I sat down on the damp veranda step. Even Mother-Swallow looked bleak, her head tucked beneath her raincoat wings, resembling a forgotten black sock left on the line. Across the yard towards the bottom shed, Nan was easing her way out of the chicken coup with a blue ice cream container carefully clutched under her arm, brimming with fresh *wet* eggs. She paused momentarily to close the catch on the wire gate. Her aging fingers slipped on the makeshift metal clasp that Pop had fixed with his own twisted hands—years of manual work had folded and fused his fingers to resemble in gesture, the gnarled legs of a dead spider. Nan clenched her trench-coat tightly. The rain beat rhythmically on the concrete path and her low-heeled yard shoes scraped along as she walked swiftly towards the house.

‘Oh, there you are love. You should come inside quickly. You’ll catch your death out here. I know what you are doing and it’s okay. Come and look inside. I’ve got something for you.’

Nan handed me the blue ice cream bucket while she removed her trench-coat and yard shoes and then I followed her inside.

I placed the egg bucket on the edge of the kitchen sink as Nan led me across the dark carpet to the back room and then into the sleepout. She picked up a small shoebox filled with newspaper and brought it over to me. There he was. The little fellow. The fledgling.

‘I heard his mother calling to him, over and over, while you were still in bed this morning, love. I went outside and I saw him huddled on the wood floor under the nest. He

must have tried to fly. His mother didn't leave. She watched me pick him up. I told her not to worry because we would look after him.'

Nan handed me the shoebox.

'So here you go love. Now, I've made him up some mincemeat in the fridge. He should be okay in a few days' time.'

I opened the flaps of the shoebox carefully, as Nan's silhouette disappeared out of view down the hallway. The fledgling looked up at me with his tiny eyes. I smiled at him as I stroked his metallic wing feathers with the tip of my finger. They were softly lined on the inside, like the warm lining inside Nan's trench coat. As I ran my finger down the edge of his small wing, his feathers darkened and tapered out thickly on his wing tip like Mother-Swallows. His bright little beak, edged in baby yellow opened widely as my finger glided over it. He huddled closely into my hand as I placed it down into the box next to him. He pressed his tiny body firmly into it and pipped quietly as he tucked his little head into his baby feathers.

'Don't worry,' I told him. 'I will bring you some new straw from Pop's shed.'

I woke up in my couch cushion nest to the sound of pipping. I felt that the fledgling was too big for that sound now, in his almost adult feathers. Somewhere underneath, it was like he was still a little fellow, and he was hungry. I cupped him in my small hands and carried him into the dining room. Pop was seated at the large folding table. Armed with a bone handled knife and fork, the man sat across from him. I could see the gap in his front teeth as he chewed with his mouth open.

'That's a pretty bird.'

He must have caught a glimpse of the fledgling's feathers extending out from my hands as I walked past. I nodded as I opened the door of Nan's green fridge, reached in and grabbed at the mincemeat from the plate Nan had prepared. I closed the fridge door and snuck behind Pop's chair, and back into the living room onto my couch cushion nest. With the pipping fledgling back into his shoebox, I rolled some mince between my finger and thumb, making tiny balls, and placing them along the edge of the brown carpet. Then, carefully, I held one on my flattened palm up to his open beak. He pipped as he ate. After, he trilled as he turned his head and preened himself clean. I closed over the flaps of the shoebox and carried it out towards the sleepout.

I wanted him to see the sleepout, my playroom, my child's play, because he was a child too: the fledgling. I placed the shoebox next to Nan's leather bowling case on the shelf that lent against the wall. I lifted back the flaps and placed the fledgling into my hand and onto Pop's green army bed. I plucked the fresh geranium from my ponytail and pressed play on my Nan's cassette player. I sang to him, with my middle-tied t-shirt and loose hair, and I bowled like a black swan. We played, Mother-Swallow's little fellow and I. Then I tired. I gathered the fledgling into my hands from the green army mattress and placed him gently onto the louver windowsill. I had never slept in the sleepout before. Today there wasn't a chill in the room and the army mattress felt soft as it folded around my tired child body. I held the geranium gently as I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

I stirred, as I felt a chill. I folded my arms around my stomach. I opened my eyes slowly as I remembered I must still have my t-shirt middle tied. I sat up on the green army mattress, my loose hair flying around my face. I realised I was still in the sleepout. I glanced over at the louver window. The fledgling sat on the sill in his metallic feathers. I looked over

at the grey wooden door, puzzled as to why it would be closed. I never closed it. Nan never closed it.

‘He’s still here, your little bird.’

I stood up. Surprised to see the man in my sleepout. He was sitting on the small stool that Nan used to get things down from the wardrobe in the back room. I didn’t know why the door was closed. It didn’t stop the cold from coming in and Nan told me I had to leave it open in case it locked and she couldn’t hear me. I told the man I had to go now. I walked towards the door.

‘Wait. Be nice and give me a hug before you go. I’ve been feeling a bit down today and if you gave me a hug it would cheer me up.’

He sat on Nan’s stool with his arms opened out towards me. It was true that his eyes looked sad, but there was something else. When I glanced up at him with my child eyes, I felt small, smaller than the fledgling. With the door closed, the room was suffocating and dark, like when the sunlight disappears behind a cloud.

I walked over and stood in front of the stool. I ran my fingers through my untied hair, feeling for the flower. The geranium was gone. I felt a chill run through me as the man pulled me into his embrace. His arms tightened around my middle-knotted shirt, like a snake constricting its prey. His arm hair rubbed across my exposed skin, making my skin prickle. I swallowed a bitter taste in the back of my throat as my face brushed his cheek and I smelled his tobacco breath and the sour sweat in his oily hair. I felt my tongue turn to stone as I tried to move it to say stop. My body froze as the man grabbed my hand and forced it down through the open zip in his pants. My hand went numb as it touched his flesh. I tried to pull away, but my body was still. the man held me in place. His eyes rolled back, snake-like, as

one of his hands slid down inside my overalls and pulled aside my undies. His fingers touched me. I stared at him, as he made sounds, I wish I never heard.

The sleepout door hung open, back in its usual position. I sat on the army mattress. Pop's old pillow smothered my tear-stained face. I sat there; my geranium crushed under the weight of me. I was just a child, but I was so heavy now. My top, tied in a middle knot, clung to my soiled skin. My hair stuck to my back, heavy with his unwanted scent. I sat there, small in my wounded child body. I sat up and moved Pop's pillow away from my face. Everything felt numb, especially my fingers. I looked down at them and flicked them slightly. They moved but didn't feel like they belonged to me. I didn't belong. Not anymore. Nan wouldn't want me. I could never go to church again. I was alone with all of my wounds, gaping wide in my child body. I glanced over at the louvre window, remembering the little fledgling. He stood there in his metallic feather armour watching me with his tiny eyes. He saw. He had witnessed the man. The closed door. His tobacco breath.

I stood and with heavy legs, walked over to the window ledge, cupped him in my hands and returned to the mattress. I placed him beside me.

'We can't tell Nan.'

The fledgling turned his head as he heard my voice. I placed him in the shoebox and held it to me and then, heavily, walked out of the room. I felt stinging in the place where the man had touched me and I breathed in deep and kept walking towards the bathroom. As I entered through the brown bathroom door, I heard Nan's voice.

'Oh, there you are love. I've just come up from the yard. I have been down picking almonds. I was going to have a wash, but seeing that you are in here, you can have a wash first. I'll come back later.'

‘Okay, Nan.’ I stood with my back to her, hoping that she couldn’t see the tears. I placed the shoebox on the wooden chair next to the sink. Then I closed the door and turned on the taps. Brown water gushed out into the pink enamel bath. I stepped forward, close to the sink and looked at my face in the cabinet mirror. My freckles seemed faded. My Hollywood smile, dulled, like the lights on that faraway sign had been switched off. I undid my lilac overall straps and slid them down to the floor. I ran my hand slowly across my belly, holding my breath as I remembered his snake-like arm, touching my skin, constricting me. I looked down at my crinkled t-shirt. I pulled it up over my head and dropped it onto the floor. I slid off my strawberry shortcake patterned undies. My skin reacted to the crisp air, but I couldn’t feel it. I could only feel the heaviness of my body and the stinging as I lifted my legs up one at a time and lowered them into the murky bath water, my reflection invisible. I sank down into the water and lay back, releasing my untied hair into the muddy tub, blonde ends trailing, then disappearing... under. I stared up at the white ceiling. First up at the mould spots that looked like spattered black stars, then my eyes glanced over at the dark wooden cross that hung above the bath. I quickly looked away, hoping he hadn’t seen me, even though I knew he had. Nan said God sees everything. She said he forgives you when you make a mistake. I held my hand up near my face as a tear dripped down my cheek and fell into the water. I knew he had seen me. Seen my filthy fingers, my stone-turned tongue. Overalls undone. He could never forgive me. I pulled my body forward and sat up in the water. I looked over at the shoebox sitting on the wooden chair. The fledgling. Tucked up into his metallic wings. I reached over the side of the bath with dripping hands and lifted the shoebox lid. The fledgling shifted his wing back and turned his head to the side, listening.

‘You are the one who knows Little Fellow.’

I placed the lid back on the shoebox. Then slid back down into the water.

The next morning, ensconced in my couch cushion nest, squinting at the sunlight piercing through cracks in the loungeroom blinds, I peeled back my crocheted covers and turned my head in the direction of his little pips, coming from inside the shoebox sitting near the window. Each pip got louder, sounding more like developing trills, like Mother-Swallow. The fledging was hungry. I felt at the fabric of my red jumpsuit, lifting it and pulling it away from my sweating skin. After my bath, Nan had wondered why I didn't want to wear my usual floral nightie. I had told her that I had been feeling cold in the middle of the night. I had tried to avoid her concerned face as I pulled on my red jumpsuit with the sewn in feet, covering my wounds. I couldn't tell her that I would never wear my floral nightie again. I couldn't tell her how afraid I was in my couch cushion nest now or that I had heard footsteps in the dining room last night. They weren't the heavy, deliberate clomp of Pop's work boots, so easily heard in the quiet lounge room, or the soft purposeful scuffs of Nan's house shoes. the man, he walked differently. His shoes shuffled...silently. I had heard him open the fridge in the night. He didn't flick the light on. I had imagined his shape, snaking in the dark like a serpent. Slithering through the dining room. Eyes rolling back. I had cowered under the crochet covers like a frozen mouse hiding from death, stilled by terror. I hoped he couldn't see me in my little nest in the darkened lounge room. I hoped the fledgling wouldn't make a sound. He hadn't.

I studied my lilac overalls piled on the floor next to the shoebox. I glimpsed myself playing in them in my mind, laughing in the garden. I picked them up in my hands and pushed them into my face. The scent of the man's tobacco was overwhelming. I dropped them swiftly back onto the floor. I would never wear them again. I felt my hair with my fingers, grasping at the long plait that I had tied it into, pulling it up to my nose. It smelt of rose soap. I breathed it in slowly and fully, absorbing it into my body like the cream Nan used

to draw out a thorn. The acrid smell of his oily hair was gone. Washed and pulled out from my child hair down into the bath drain to dwell with all the dirty things. My gaze caught the edge of the shoebox once more and I lifted myself out of the covers. I reached over towards the box and lifted off the lid. Little fellow flapped his wings and trilled loudly. I cupped my hand and pulled him out. He tilted his head to the side, listening and waiting. I walked over to the dining room door. I could hear him. the man. Laughing. Seated at my Nan's table. Eating off her plates. Opening his reticulated mouth. I held the fledgling with both hands and breathed in. I stared at the brown swirls in the fibres of the carpet as I opened the door into the dining room.

‘There you are sweets. You been out in the yard playing with that little bird of yours’?

My eyes fixed onto the swirling pattern as I walked in a swift pace, padding along in my sewn in feet towards the fridge. The fledgling trilled in my hand as I opened the green door. I felt the man's eyes on me as I reached into the fridge and grabbed a handful of mince. I did not look up. I closed the fridge door with my elbow and walked out into the kitchen, then out of the flyscreen door. I stuck one padded foot out to catch it before it banged shut behind me. I placed the fledgling down onto the wooden floor of the veranda. I slumped my child body down onto the veranda step, letting my breath out at the same time.

The air was cold but at least it was fresh. I shifted my neck up towards the sun. There was no warmth in its rays yet, but I was glad I could see it shining. I felt refreshed in the cool Spring breeze, after the suffocating stuffy air in the dining room. I wondered for how long the man would stay here. Living in my Nan's house. Sleeping in my mother's child bed. Walking around in Nan's Garden, through the rows of little flowers. I rolled the mince between my finger and thumb into little balls. The fledgling trilled as I placed each ball onto a flat hand and lifted it to his open yellow beak. I put him up onto the wooden railing near the step. His

metallic armour shone brightly as it glinted in the slight sunlight. I peered over towards the flyscreen door at my yellow gumboots. I leaned over and grabbed them one handed. They were still bright and cheery, edged with remnants of stuck mud. I stuffed my red padded foot into one and then the other and stood up from the step. I felt so old in them, like they were not my size. Like I was not the right size. Not child size. I pulled them off. I padded over to the garden and bent down. The fledgling trilled as he hopped up and back along the wooden railing. I scooped up a handful of soil from one of the little flower rows, filtering it through my little fingers down into one of the gumboots and then into the other, filling them full. My yellow gumboots: dormant in the dirt.

I sat in my couch cushion nest rummaging through my bag of smoke-filled clothes, until I pulled out my white skivvy and red frilly skirt because Nan had called me inside and asked me to change for morning tea. I ran my hand down the skirt, feeling for length. It was burgundy red. Mum's favourite colour. Not mine. It was covering, though, the fabric falling just below my knees. I unzipped my red jumpsuit and stepped out of the sewn in feet. I pulled my frilly skirt up over my heart patterned undies. I slid the skivvy on over my head and pulled my plait out over the rolled neck. Tucking the shoebox under my arm, I stood up slowly and walked over to the dining room door. I could hear the scrape of plates and the faint clunk of glassware on the tablecloth covered table. I pushed open the glass-paned door into the dining room.

'Hello love, did you want to come over here and help me set the table'?

I smiled over at Nan as I made my way to the dining table, placing the shoebox down on the sideboard. My fingers fixed firmly onto its cardboard sides. I closed my eyes and thought of the fledgling tucked up inside. How he knew about the man and me. My lilac

overalls. The crushed geranium. He knew the truth. My truth. I breathed in releasing my fingers from the shoebox and picked up a bundle of bone handled knives and forks. I turned around and stood next to Nan in her crocheted cardigan and woollen red skirt. She smelled of English rose and looked like one too. Her skin was pale with faded freckling, with old, kind, blue eyes, the same as how I imagined the magician Merlin's would have been. Her hair was set and blue rinsed. I attended to the table: fork on the left and knife on the right, the dessert spoon next to the knife. The cutlery tinkled as I plucked each piece out from my hand and placed it on the cloth with a soft clink. I tried not to think about which fork the man had pushed into his viper mouth while consuming his breakfast the day before.

‘Love, go and pick some flowers from the garden for the table before the people arrive.’

I nodded at Nan as I finished setting the last place on the dining table. I left the fledgling in his box on top of the sideboard and made my way out into the kitchen, then through the flyscreen door. I stepped out onto the wooden boards of the veranda, then sat down on the step and observed my yellow gumboots sticking out of the ground like dormant sunflowers: their colour curled to a faded brown. Nan had not asked me about the gumboots. She knew the broken nest I came from. The nest patched with odds and ends, short cigarette stalks jutting out from the lip, musty smoke-soaked bedding for straw and hand me down clothes for feathers. I walked barefoot into the garden. I gathered a posy of roses, taking in the white cabbage moths flapping around the rows of Nan's little flowers. Pansies, petunias, phlox...geraniums. The geraniums were potted at the end of the row, lining the fence. The whole garden smelled of them. I tiptoed over to a large pot, dancing around any three corner jack weeds. I pulled some flowers from a geranium plant. The petals scrunched like paper in my palm. Pink and white ink, the stink of them, stained onto my fingertips. The scent of my crushed little flower, on the army mattress... lingered. I littered the torn-up geranium petals

onto the grass as I made my way back to the veranda. I gripped the rose stems gently, feeling their thorns pressing against my skin as I opened the flyscreen door back into the house. I could hear the muffled sounds of people talking, cutlery clinking and the creak of the floorboards under the brown swirling patterned carpet next to Pop's chair. The people had arrived. My mouth curved up into my Hollywood smile as I twirled my skirt, circling towards the doorway of the dining room. I stopped in the doorway holding the posy of roses and scanned the room. The table was filled with cakes and scones, biscuits and club sandwiches and the strong aroma of freshly brewed tea. I studied the faces of the people seated at the table: mostly the ladies from church, and Pop belly laughing as he lifted a heavily buttered scone from his plate to his mouth.

‘There you are sweets! Give those roses to Nan and get yourself a plate love.’

Some of the ladies looked over at me and smiled after hearing Pop speak. I entered the room and walked over to Nan to hand her the posy of roses. She was bent over one of the dining room chairs with her back to me, pouring someone tea. She stood back and turned to face me, teapot in hand. My eyes widened and I almost dropped the posy as I saw the man seated in front of Nan. She had been pouring him tea. I turned my face away, hoping he had not noticed me as I handed the posy to Nan.

‘Don't be shy love, come and I'll find you a chair so you can sit with us and have some morning tea. These roses are lovely. I'll fetch a vase as well.’

‘That's okay, she can sit here with me.’

the man held his arms out towards me, coaxing me with his poisonous eyes. I could hardly breathe as he pulled me towards his chair and lifted me up onto his knee. My Hollywood smile beamed across my face as I struggled to steady my quivering lips. I glanced over at the shoebox on the sideboard wishing I was safely tucked into my wings inside it. the

man shuffled my body back deep into his lap and covered my legs with the white tablecloth. He flicked my hair aside from my ear and whispered, 'Don't say anything or I'll tell Nan.'

My Hollywood smile shone brightly as I felt the man's serpent hand snake up under my skirt and pull my undies across. He touched me and it stung. My tongue a stone.

'I'll make you a plate dear. Tell me what you would like.' Nan, now, sat across from me.

I stared at the tongs as they lifted each cake onto the plate.

'And, one of these'? Nan placed the tongs on a raspberry tart.

I nodded...unable to speak.

Nan placed the plate silently down next to the man's plate.

I did not eat. I stared out of the dining room window at the potted geraniums. I lifted my fingers to my nose and breathed in the strong floral scent, remembering my geranium. I imagined myself playing out in the garden, sitting amongst the rows of little flowers in my lilac overalls, with the sun highlighting my strawberry blonde hair. The stinging pain brought me back to the plate full of cake and tarts. I lifted the raspberry tart to my lips, taking large bites until it was gone. I chewed forcefully, as I tried to block out the burning pain. I could smell the oily stink of his hair as he continued to talk to the ladies at the table. I clenched my legs under the tablecloth as he touched me, the stinging so hard to bear. Then I felt his hand untuck and slither out from inside my undies, back down my leg and out from under the tablecloth. the man picked me up abruptly and put me down next to his chair.

'Go outside and play with that little bird.' His black eyes fixed on me, soulless, like the empty eyes of an alpha predator.

I turned towards the kitchen door and walked over to the Fledgling's shoebox. I lifted it up like my arms were part of the mechanism on a conveyer belt. I walked my numb child body into the kitchen, holding my breath to stop my lips from quivering. I walked past some of the church ladies washing up near the sink and then out of the back door. I let out my breath and ran with the fledgling shoebox tucked under my arm. I ran even though I couldn't feel my legs. I ran past the lemon tree and the front lawn, past the orange tree and the chook house. I ran right down to the bottom garden next to the shed. I stopped and stood behind the shed, gasping. I cried. My tears fell silent onto the ochre Mallee sand, like the first raindrops before a storm. For me, there could be no storm. Only the soundless release of tears that would dry up and leave no trace.

'Don't say anything or I'll tell Nan.' His voice repeated inside my head.

Why, did I wear my frilly skirt? Why had he done this to me in front of the church ladies and Nan and Pop? Why had he done this...to me? My cheeks felt hot from crying. I bent down in the sand next to the fledgling's shoebox. I trailed my finger through the light red grains. *God hates me.* I scrawled in my best writing. I searched the sky, remembering the priest from church. He had told us that Jesus said *Let the children come.* Not the child who kept secrets. Not the child with the stone turned tongue. Not the child with lilac overalls...undone.

I started scooping out handfuls of sand, staining my fingers red. I began to dig. Under the surface, the sand became mud and lodged underneath my fingernails. I hated the feel of it. But I needed to feel...something. I didn't want to be numb. I clawed at the deep red earth, muddying my small hands and arms. I lifted out large clumps of mud and dropped it onto my red frilly skirt. I gripped the material and rubbed it into the mud. I lifted my little feet into the hole where I had been digging, pushing a clump of mud into my hand and fashioning it like

soap. I washed my legs in the cold staining mud. The earth smoothing over my skin and the rich smell of the fresh soil took away some of the numbness. I breathed in the fetid earth as the smooth tinged mud dried on my skin. I remembered Mother-Swallow. How she had fashioned her little clay nest so intricately. I leaned over towards the fledgling shoebox and lifted the cardboard lid. I lifted out little fellow onto my clay covered hand. The fledgling did not pip. His little body sat still. His bright metallic feathers, dull. His head fell forward. I turned him over onto his back, his head slung side to side like a puppet on a string. I lifted him up to my face, looking into his eyes. But they were closed.

‘No, he can’t be.’

I dropped him from my hand heavily into the shoebox. I heard his little body land inside the deadbox. I slumped my child body down next to it. Now a cardboard coffin. I felt my stomach surge as I peered over through my tear stung eyes at the scrawled writing. God took him and he was the only one that knew.

‘What’s happened sweets? Why are you all the way down here and covered in mud?’

I startled at Pop who was standing next to the shed in his black boots and orange knitted beanie. I wiped my face onto my muddied white skivvy. I pushed the deadbox with my foot towards him. Pop bent down and lifted the lid with one of his gnarled spider-like fingers. The fledgling lay lifeless inside, his little body cradled in his half adult feathers.

‘Oh, I’m sorry Sweets, never mind. Come here. We will fix it all up.’

I lifted my legs out of the hole I had dug in the mud and stood, my child body tainted by the cold clay, sniffing. Pop kissed my head as he picked up the deadbox.

‘Go up to the house Sweets and get cleaned up. Then come down to the big shed.’

I nodded at him as he held the deadbox firm against his chest and made his way back up the path to the big shed at the back of the house.

My child body ached, and the dried mud made my skin prickle from the cold as I walked back to the house. The people were gone. the man was gone too. Nan ran me a warm bath and the mud melted away into the warm water. The rooms in the house had changed. The sleepout that had been my playroom where I always brightly played, was now a doorway where I held my breath as I walked past it down the hallway. The dining room that had been the room where I ate biscuits and drank tea, was now a place where I no longer wanted to sit on the cushioned chairs at dining table. Ever again. In the loungeroom, another changed room, I sat on my couch cushion nest and listened for the 'pip' and 'trill' from his little yellow mouth and glanced over at the patch of swirling brown carpet where his box had always lain. I felt my lip quiver and tremble but I breathed in, swallowing the rising storm back down into my stomach. Pop was waiting for me down at the big shed. I pulled myself up from the couch cushion nest, dressed in my red jumpsuit, I padded out of the loungeroom door and into the hallway. I looked down the hall at the large blue vase with the plastic flowers bending out from inside it. I tried not to think about God as I padded out through the front door towards the big shed.

The light was on in the big shed and Pop was hunched over one of his work benches as I entered through the open wooden door. The deadbox sat open on the side of the bench.

'Oh, you're here Sweets, good. Now come and stand over here and I'll show you what I'm doing.'

I walked over slowly and stood in between Pop and the deadbox. Pop held the fledgling's little body in one of his curled-up hands and a curved needle with a black thread in the other. Beneath his hands was a thin frosted cutting board that looked like a plastic altar.

Four small strangely shaped knives lined the top corner. A weaving of delicate white bones made the shape of a little bird, stuck with slight fragments of flesh in the centre of the board. A soft pile of innards laced around tiny glistening organs in a deliberate circle like silk from a spider's web. Faint droplets of red, spattered the board like paint from an artist's brush. One metallic wing feather fell from Pop's fingers, soundless onto the white board. It splayed out as it landed, and I remembered Little Fellow stretching his beautiful black wing in practice for flight. I picked it up and placed it inside the open deadbox.

I watched as Pop stitched. The needle pushing in with the force of Pop's thumb, deep into his child body, and then out, pulling the wounds together. Closing the gaping hole. Pop cut the last thread and propped the fledgling up. He picked up a tiny brush next to the board and flicked it through the fledgling's feathers. Then he pinched two black glass beads between metal tweezers and placed them one by one into the sockets that had housed Little Fellow's bright eyes. Pop ran his hand along the back of the bird and touched the yellow outline of the beak, then he gently placed the fledgling into the deadbox and closed the lid. He picked up it up with both of his hands and bent down to me.

'Here's your little bird, Sweets. He's a bit different now, but he's safe to play with. I found a bit of ribbon that you could maybe tie onto him; it'll make him look nice.' Pop handed me a thin piece of gold ribbon. My mouth curved up slightly at Pop as he took the deadbox down from the work bench and placed it into my hands.

'I want those too Pop.' I pointed with the ribbon tucked between my little fingers at the tiny bones fused together. I thought of them flexing and straightening, turning and tucking with each flap and flutter of the fledgling's small body. His bones belonged with him. Pop lifted his glasses off his face and wiped his brow onto his shirt arm.

'Well...okay, but I need to clean them up first, Sweets.'

Pop didn't really understand why I wanted to keep the bones, but I knew that he wanted me to be happy. I smiled up at him one last time before walking back to the house in the fading daylight.

Early morning sunlight filtered through the slits of the lounge room blinds. I sat in my red jumpsuit in my couch-cushion nest. I had placed the deadbox on the brown swirling patterned carpet overnight. I had listened for the sound of his pipping as I lay nestled inside the covers. It never came, but I pretended I could hear him and imagined myself padding out into the dining room to the fridge to gather mince in my fingers. I flattened my hand out, exposing my palm as I remembered feeding him the little balls of rolled up meat. I flicked my tied-up plait over my shoulder and ran my fingers over the gold ribbon Pop had given me. I had slept with it tied in my hair. I pulled it out and undid it, trailing it across my hand before threading it through my little fingers as my eyes stared vacantly over at the deadbox. I had not opened it. He had been the only one that knew and now he was gone. I breathed in as I twirled the ribbon in a circle over my palm. I turned my child body to face the deadbox.

I smoothed my hands over the lid, trailing the ribbon. I felt the cardboard edges before gently lifting the lid. I slowly peered inside. He was sitting in the middle of the box. His metallic feathers shone now just like his mother's. I avoided his eyes as I lowered my hand into the box. I ran a finger along the yellow of his little beak, then down his wire spine. I couldn't feel the thread, nor the wire that Pop had replaced his skeleton with. His feathers felt soft just like they always had. I picked him up and cradled him in my hand. I gathered up the ribbon and fed it under his small head with my other hand. I placed him down onto the cover of my couch-cushion nest. I pinched the ribbon between my fingers and tied it into a small bow. I sat him up in my hand. Pop had been right: he did look nice even though he was

different now. I felt my lips curve up slightly into a half smile as I remembered how he would tilt his little head when he was listening. I brought him up to my cheek and rubbed his feathers near my face, rocking him gently in my cupped child hand.

I knew that he could still hear me. 'Thank you,' I mouthed.

I thought of the day he had seen the man, the geranium hanging behind my ear, perfuming my loose hair as I sung to Nan's cassette player. I thought of it now, crushed somewhere in Pop's army mattress. I had never been back to the sleepout. I picked up Little Fellow in my hands and placed him in the deadbox. I closed the lid and tucked it under my arm as I stood up and padded over to the loungeroom door. I turned the brown handle with my little fingers until I heard a click opening the door outward and peered down the dark hallway. I took a breath in and stepped onto the plush hall carpet. The floorboards creaked under my feet as I crept along. I noticed the vase on the shelf and the silent wall phone as I came to stand in front of the back-room door. I took a deep breath in and scanned the room. The pink bedspreads had been stripped off and lay in a folded heap at the base of the first bed. The bags that Pop had helped the man carry up to the house were neatly arranged in the centre of the room. The sash window was open, and the blind drawn all the way up. Warm sunlight flooded the room. Then I saw the stool, the one the man had been sitting on that day in the sleepout. I gripped the deadbox and closed my eyes tightly before padding across the grey carpet of the back room. I squinted as I stepped down into the sleepout.

Standing in the centre of the room with Little Fellow tucked up under my child arm, I opened my eyes fully. Nan's bowling bag rested where I had left it on the shelf under the closed louvre window, and on the shelf beneath it, the cassette player sat unplugged. The army mattress had been rolled up and leaned against the back wall. I sat the deadbox on the louvre windowsill and pulled the mattress away from the wall and began unravelling it. The

geranium appeared, pressed, into the fibres of the mattress's green covering. I picked it up gently and lay it across four of my fingers and brought it up to my nose: its usual strong smell had been replaced by the dusty odour of the old mattress, but I could detect a slight memory of the strong smell it once had. I pinched it between my finger and thumb and pushed it behind my ear, its browning little petals drooping downwards, and closed my eyes and remembered how I would use it as mic to sing, in my lilac overalls and yellow gumboots, my loose baby hair, beaming my Hollywood smile. Then I pulled the deadbox down from the windowsill, sat on the floor of the sleepout, opened the lid and lay the bruised flower carefully next to the stitched remains of Little Fellow.

*

I had carried the deadbox out with me onto the veranda step and placed it down next to me as I kicked my padded heels against the step, remembering my yellow gumboots and how their rubber soles would squeak each time they hit the hard cement. Nan's little flowers were all in full bloom in the Summery air. I squinted through the sunlight over at Nan's Garden. My yellow gumboots sat there in the middle of a flower row like the leftover stump of a dead tree. They were lifeless next to the colourful phlox and daisies that lined the row. I felt my skin beading with sweat underneath my red jumpsuit, but I didn't care. I looked up at the Hills Hoist line full of washing. Nan had washed my frilly red skirt and it blew gently now on the line in the light warm breeze. The mud stains were gone. Still, I never wanted to wear it again. I looked up as I heard the porch screen door bang against the jamb. Nan stood next to the veranda step carrying a tray with a pitcher full of cordial and a cup.

‘Here love, I thought you might like a drink.’ She placed the tray onto the railing and poured me a cup. I turned towards her and took it out from her hand.

‘I have a little surprise for you love, I planted some seeds inside your old gumboots, but you will have to wait and see what they become when they start to grow.’

I smiled over at Nan momentarily before returning my gaze towards my yellow gumboots. I thought of the varied flowers in the rows in Nan’s Garden and wondered about the colour of the flowers she had planted in my gumboots and how bright they would look. I listened for the bang of the screen door as Nan disappeared back inside the house with the tray and pitcher. I circled the cup around in my hand as I finished my last sip of cordial. I heard Pop’s ute pull up in the driveway alongside the house, one of the doors opening and slamming and then the other. I leaned forward on the porch step and saw Pop and the man talking as they walked up towards the house. The ute engine hummed in the background which meant Pop must not be staying home long. I wanted to get up and leave, but I didn’t have a chance as they were almost at the veranda. I studied the cup closely in my fingers, acting like I was too busy to talk.

‘Hi Sweets,’ said Pop as he passed right by me, still talking to the man who said nothing to me as he walked by.

They both disappeared into the house. I had held my breath as he had approached the step. I let it out as I walked over and knelt down next to my gumboots in the garden. I didn’t want to go into the house when the man was at Nan’s. I tried to look busy. I took Nan’s little hand shovel and began flicking soil around near one of the little flower rows. I heard the bang of the screen door but kept digging in the dirt.

‘Come over here Sweets and say goodbye.’

the man was leaving. My eyes darted across different parts of the yard as I hesitated. I pushed the hand shovel into the ground next to one of my gumboots. I walked over slowly towards the man standing at the base of the step with his bags swung over his shoulder.

‘Well, I’m off now. It was nice to see ya, probably next time you’ll be grown up, give us a hug goodbye then.’

I studied the rust stains on the step as the man sidled in front of me and pulled me into him with his snake arm. My tiny hands trembled as he released me and made his way down towards Pop’s ute. Pop followed after him. the man was gone. I stood near the step, pushing down the swirling feeling in my stomach. I hoped he would never come back. I lifted the deadbox off the cement step and walked to beneath the spot where Mother-Swallow had fixed the fledgling’s nest. It still sat in the crevice in the roof, but a piece of it now lay on the veranda floor, along with some of the dried straw. I picked up the broken nest piece and some straw and placed it all inside the deadbox. I had become a gatherer. A gatherer of pieces just like Mother-Swallow. But I was not weaving a nest. I gathered pieces that could not be mended; they helped me keep the secret that I could never tell.

*

I sat on the veranda with the deadbox over my lap, watching the Mother-Swallow as she flitted up and back from the clothesline to the ground, searching for nest material.

Throughout the summer I had gathered pieces and placed them in the deadbox, including the fledgling’s delicate skeleton and the metallic feather that had fallen onto the plastic board in Pop’s shed. I removed Little Fellow and his skeleton and placed them on a piece of cloth on the step, before walking in my new purple gumboots to underneath the line and placing the

open deadbox on the ground. I retreated back to the step and waited. Mother-Swallow tilted her head to the side just like Little Fellow had done, and she flapped her wings and descended, landing on the corner of the cardboard box. She flitted from side to side, examining its contents. Then she grasped the metallic feather in her beak and flitted back up to the line.

I beamed my Hollywood smile at her and then I collected the deadbox, placed Little Fellow and his skeleton back inside and carried him to where my yellow gumboots were in the garden. I picked up the hand shovel and began digging. I dug a hole large enough to fit the deadbox, before pushing it inside. I smoothed the soil over the top, burying it. Glancing towards my yellow gumboots, I saw that the seeds had sprouted. Their leaves were patterned in a similar way to a plant I knew. I reached over and picked one of the baby leaves and brought it up to my nose. I breathed in its strong distinct scent: the scent of a geranium.
