

Pretty Bird

Death is like those large hooks Indian men use to hang themselves from. They put them through the flesh of their chest or back and hang, seeking higher ground, escape from this earthly world. Sometimes, when the person dead is not very close to you, say, a workmate's cousin, or an acquaintance from long ago, the hook sails past harmlessly. You hear it whistle through the air. Then it comes a little closer. A friend of your daughter's; a neighbour's father who waved to you each Sunday when he came for his roast dinner. The hook brushes against your skin, perhaps leaving a small scratch, but no lasting harm. Then there are those other times. The mother, the close friend, the lover, the child. And the hook, flung from some unseeing hand digs in, hard, and rips you wide open. The wound will never heal. The best that can be hoped for is that it will someday close over, a terrible disfigurement to be lived with, but no longer a terrible gaping wound.

Manu was a fussy baby, born early after a long, dark labour. We did many hours with her, Che and I, walking up and down the hall. She was sickly, always, with a runny nose, a rattly chest, a cough. Jed would crouch beside her in her bouncer, frantically jiggling her while I cooked dinner. His hands, too big on such a small child, would grip the bouncer more and more tightly and rock her. In his serious three-year-old voice he would say, "I don't think she's very happy, Mum," as she screamed, screamed like a bird shot out of the sky, surprised and angry at such a sudden and undignified end. Then he would try bringing her toys, things to look at, his treasures. She would bat them away with her tiny fists waving. He would sigh and start bouncing her again. Sometimes, just sometimes, he would be rewarded for his efforts, and she would stop, see him finally through her pain, and smile, her eyes lit with quick pleasure. He would laugh with delight and re-double his efforts, but in a few moments she would be gone again, back into her own private world where everything hurt.

At night when she screamed, Jed would sometimes come padding out in his PJs, his face red and soft from sleep. His eyes would look even larger than usual, huge dark marbles, glinting in the dimmed light.

"What's wrong with her, Mum?"

"She's just not very happy." The screaming like Papa at the first glint of cold sunlight as she's torn away from Rangi. "It's just what babies do."

"Did I cry like that?"

"Well, not really."

"So, how come she is?"

"I think something is probably hurting her in her tummy."

"Well, why don't you take her to the doctor?"

"Get back to bed, Jed." The tears just behind his eyes increase the gleam. The edge I can't keep out of my voice.

The hurt look as he skulks back to his room, pulling the covers over his head.

I can hear the click clack of the psychiatrist's shoes outside the door. She stops and enters the room. Here we are, the crazies, sitting in a circle, awaiting her arrival, like royal officials for the court jester. I keep my eyes down, staring at her patent leather heels and immaculate pantyhose, strangely out of place in this small, close room that smells faintly of dust, stale sick and the metallic tang of hopelessness. I begin to laugh at the contrast, those red patent shoes and us in our slippers. She looks up sharply, nervously, and glances back at the open door. Gladys starts laughing too, just for support, her bushy, untamed hair shaking, her mouth open wide so the wet insides can be seen. I stop laughing, not because I don't want to upset the psychiatrist, but because the laugh has stopped from my belly. Feelings come and go abruptly in this place. The psychiatrist begins to speak, but I can't hear what she's saying. So much babbling in my head, background noise that helps me in my forgetting project. I stare instead at the 'Quit Smoking' poster on the wall, and my project, worked on so studiously each day, falls away again. That's what he said did it, the smoking. In the weeks after she flew, the weeks I couldn't get out of bed, it all came out. He thought the one smoke a night I had, outside on the deck, was what did it. Or maybe the ones I had early on, before I knew I was pregnant. Or maybe it was going out mustering with Dad, just to help him out, in my 9th month. Or maybe it was that she didn't have a woolly singlet on, that she was too cold, or too hot, or had slept in our bed too often. Everything, it was all my fault. And then he left, holding Jed's hand tightly. Jed with his customary seriousness: "Goodbye, Mum." But tears and snot running down his face. That's when he called the crazy police, those who come and get us, those of us shattered by the dull blows of particular circumstances. So forceful their thuds are nearly audible.

The psychiatrist stops talking. I get up, relieved to be out of the room, away from the poster, realising that my memory games will never be successful. There will always be a poster, a comment, a child with large, dark eyes, a baby singlet hanging on a line.

The night I found her I woke suddenly, chilled on a warm night. I had slept too long, the longest since she was born, a whole 4 hours. Jed was calling me, and I guiltily sprang out of bed and ran to her room. He was holding her, awkwardly, clutching her to his tummy. "I was trying to stop her from crying, Mummy. I didn't want you to have to get up again."

"What did you do?" I screamed, the force of it making him rock back on his heels.

"I just rolled her over onto her tummy," he said in a voice so quiet it was like the butterfly's kiss we'd read about so

often, “and covered her up with her blankets, so she wouldn’t be cold. But then she stopped moving after that, so I got her out, but something’s wrong...” He trailed off.

I grabbed her from him, knowing already by the way she wasn’t struggling against his awkward grip that she was gone. Che came running in. “What is it?” hard and angry from sleep, and I said “She’s not breathing. I came in and found her like this...” and so the ambulance was called, the Police. I put Jed back to bed, and paced the house. Pacing, but no baby. That hook ripping me, gutting me like a sheep at the works. Family came and went. Manu was dressed and laid out in our front room. People started to arrive. After the tangi, I went to bed at 4pm and found I couldn’t get up the next day, or the next, not even for Jed.

I walk the stumbling gait of the drugged back to my room. They let me close the door now, a privilege allowed after two weeks of good behaviour. I get out the plastic knife I have up my sleeve from the kitchen, and re-double my efforts on the window lock that lets you open it just enough for a single, seeping slide of crisp air. I put my mouth to the gap at nights to stop myself from crying out, held in the thick water of air-conditioning and my own smell, desperate for a breath. Four small screws, and three are already gone. I told myself, during those three, that I just needed the air, but today I have no

such delusions. Forgetting will never come.

“Did I hurt Manu, Mum?” Jed asked me as I was putting him back to bed that night.

“No, sweetheart, sometimes babies just die for no reason. It’s called ‘cot death.’”

“Maybe it was the same thing that was always hurting her tummy.”

“I don’t think so, sweet-pea, but I’m sure she knew you were trying to help her.”

“I love you, Mum,” and a big, tight hug.

“I love you, too, very much. Try and sleep now.” And he did, his dark curls spread out on the pillow like seaweed washed up on the rock. We were all washed up that night. Che sat like stone in the lounge, his face blank. I put my hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it away. The old people were singing, crying in the front room with my baby. I went to tangi with them for all I was losing.

The fourth screw pops out quite easily. I swing the window wide, letting the air rush in, a flood coming to sweep me away. It’s all easy now. I get up on the window-sill, third storey up. I can hear her crying, crying for me and I fly to be with her. *Me he manu rere*. I fly to my own pretty bird. The wounds can never heal.