

Birds

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THERE ARE BIRDS sitting on top of the fridge. Janice stares at them and takes her hands out of her pockets. She doesn't like birds. Even if they are just porcelain ones.

Years ago, when Janice had been small, and her dad had been big, he had taken her to feed the pelicans. The trip down to Philip Island had been hot. Stuck in a stuffy car where he wouldn't let her wind the windows down. *The AC's on*, he kept saying. *It's getting cooler by the minute*. But it wasn't and Janice's skin stuck to the leather and sweat dripped all across her forehead, and anyway, she was hungry and she was tired because she'd been up all night watching cartoons. Later, when they'd finally arrived, she'd gotten out of the car and stomped over to the ice cream truck, and her dad had laughed as chocolate dripped down her chin and onto her t-shirt. *Come on squirt*, he had said, *keep yourself clean*. And then he had grabbed her hand and pulled her along the grass, and onto the dirty grey-yellow sand, and pointed to these huge birds, with huge bucket-like mouths, and Janice had stood very still, and stared and stared. She told her father she could smell fish and he had laughed, and then he had coughed, and when he had finished coughing, there was blood on his hands.

Janice remembers her dad's hands. They were big, and hairy, and crap at fixing things. She always thought he should be good at fixing cars, or mending leaky taps, or changing light bulbs, but he wasn't. There was a lot he wasn't good at. He used to stretch out his hands and stare

at them. Then he'd drum his fingers on the table, and drink tea out of tiny white cups. Janice and her dad had lived alone. In a big two story house that overlooked the sea. Janice can still remember the way it smelt. Her skin rich with sea salt. Her dad used to say there was nothing better than the ocean but he never went swimming. He'd just look at the sea gulls. The way they swooped round in the sky, bending and turning through white, puffy clouds. Sometimes, when it was late, and the night air was thick and hot, he'd mutter to himself about birds.

The news had come when she was at school. If Janice closes her eyes, she can still feel the day's bruise on her skin. She can remember every tiny, insignificant moment. The teachers in the schoolyard. Their voices wrapping around the basketball court. Janice can hear the crinkle of brown paper bags. She can taste sweaty pickles sticking to cheap white bread. She can even remember the maths questions on the white board. She was never any good at maths. She can remember scribbling in her exercise book, drawing love hearts around Bob Peter's name. What ever happened to Bob Peter? Did he marry? She had been so in love. He had never noticed her. Probably didn't even know her name. The door had swung open. Mrs Myrtle had stood there, black glasses pushed right up over her nose, shredding a tissue into tiny pieces. And Janice's name had been called, and Janice had stood, and walked. The walking seemed to go on for hours. There were magpies in the trees as she walked. Black and white birds, making black and white sounds, and then Janice was sitting in Mrs Myrtle's office. The room spun.

Janice doesn't often remember. She's a blocker. But today, she can't help remembering. She can see her dad's face. He looks hurt. His eyes are red. He wants to know why she didn't come to the hospital that day. She doesn't know how to answer. There are no answers.

Mrs Myrtle had coughed. Slid a pale hand across the desk.

'Janice,' she had said. Her voice had sounded scratchy. Like there was a bug stuck at the back of it. 'I'm sorry.'

Janice had looked up. Her hands were deep in her pockets.

'What?' she had said. Then Mrs Myrtle had cried. Strange tears that didn't seem real.

'Your dad's dead,' she said.

Janice had looked at Mrs Myrtle. Then she had looked outside, and there had been a cockatoo in the tree. Just one, by itself. And she had stared at its feathers. The plush white. The faded yellow. Mrs Myrtle cried, and said she was sorry, and Janice nodded, and pulled her hands out of her pockets and pushed them together. Then, she stood up, and lots of unfamiliar hands were placed on her shoulders, and she was pulled out of school, and into a dark black car. The car drove and Janice looked out the window and when she got home, her uncle was sitting at the kitchen table. He tried to hug her. Janice can still remember his scent. Vegemite toast. Burnt coffee. Cheap aftershave.

Of course, she had known her dad was dying. He said it often enough. Round the tea table, over breakfast, over lunch. He talked about dying as though he wasn't afraid. He said death was an adventure and Janice had always wondered if he'd read that in a book somewhere. One night, over poached eggs and salmon, he had told her not to be frightened. He had told her that he would always be with her in spirit. But she knew that wasn't true. As she looked out into the night sky, the stars dotting the black, she had realised there was no such place as Heaven or Hell. And she knew once her dad was dead, that would be it. He would be gone.

The morning of his death had been bright. Clear sky. Blue. And she had sat on the couch and watched the ambulance drive up the driveway. Her dad had cried. Reached out towards her. His hands had looked small that day. Everything about him had looked small.

'Please come,' he had said. 'I love you.'

She loved him too. She would always love him. But her love hurt. It stuck in the back of her throat and made her feel like choking. She couldn't look at him. The ambulance people raced into the house. And she had just sat there and watched and shook her head, and then her dad had disappeared on a stretcher, and that had been it. The last time she ever saw him. Blood on his face. Eyes deep red. Janice had picked up her school bag and lifted it on to her shoulders. She wondered if everyone would know what she had done. But nobody noticed the way her shoulders slumped. Nobody saw the way she kept her hands clenched together. Nobody noticed a thing, and she didn't blame them. She didn't want to be noticed.

Janice pulls down one of the bird statues. They had been her dad's. He had loved collecting anything to do with birds. He liked statues, and postcards, and stamps, and key rings, and teacups, and fancy dinner plates. She fingers the bird gently, sweeping the dust off it, and then holds it to her chest. She wonders what her dad would say now, if he were alive. She wishes she could hear his voice one more time. Hear him sing a silly song. Or feel his arms wrap around her chest. She wishes she could feel his prickly stubble on her cheek. But dead is dead. She knows that.

Most of the time Janice doesn't think about him. She doesn't let her chest heave with memories. But today her heart trembles. She takes the bird away from her body and puts it down on the counter. Maybe, in another life, her dad would have been a bird. He had dreamed about being able to fly. She had always called him silly. But today, it doesn't seem so silly. She stares at the bird. It was once bright blue but has faded now.

Janice's uncle had made cheese on toast.

'Eat up,' he had said. 'You'll feel better for it.'

'When is Dad coming home?' Janice had asked, and she couldn't really say why she had asked because she knew he was dead. She knew he wasn't coming home. But she still asked. Her uncle had stared. His face had turned red. He'd picked up the cheese knife and twirled it his hand.

'Janice,' he had said eventually. 'He's not coming home.'

And she knew that. She wasn't stupid. But she couldn't stop herself from asking. She couldn't keep the words inside her mouth.

'Will he be home soon?' she had said. 'We're gonna go swimming tomorrow.'

Her uncle had shaken his head and pulled on his hair and bitten into the cheese toast and then collapsed onto the couch. Janice had stood up and gone outside and the trees had swayed in the wind. She had watched them for a while and her arms filled with goose bumps and when she came back inside, her uncle was packing a bag.

'You'll stay with us tonight,' he had said. And so Janice had. And her aunt, the dentist, had been kind and given her chocolate squares even though they were bad for her teeth.

Janice picks up the bird statue again. She takes it outside and sits on the verandah. Her dad had always been sick. He was always going to die young. He'd always been frank about that.

'It's a rare disease,' he had told her. 'And most of the time I'm not in pain. I don't want you to worry.'

But how can you say that to a kid? How can you expect a kid not to worry? Janice hated him for a while. And she wanted to see her mother but her mother had died in a car accident, many years ago.

'But you're dying,' Janice had said. Her dad had narrowed his eyes.

'Yes,' he had replied. 'But I'm alive right now. That's what matters.'

Janice strokes the statue slowly. When she holds it, she feels like she's holding her dad's hand, and she's nine years old again, and he's laughing, and she's laughing, and they're at the zoo. They're at the zoo and it's a cloudy day, and the birds are in the sky, and the birds are in the trees, and there are emus behind a wooden fence, and there's nothing to be sad about. Her dad is eating from a paper bucket. Shovelling hot chips into his mouth. He's pointing at parrots, and she's looking, and she doesn't understand. But then one moves. And her dad smiles as it lifts off into the sky. And suddenly Janice is smiling too. The memory sits inside her. She puts the statue down.