

THE SILENCE OF LOSS

Elizabeth Smyth

SUZI SURGES FORWARD, HER THONGS IRONING LEAF LITTER, TOES clutching rubber like leeches. Her mouth hangs open. Brown curls threaten to bury a face devoid of circulation. Her vision narrows. I'm going for a walk, her son had said a few minutes ago. He can't have gone far.

A cluster of leaves sweeps across Suzi's face as she follows a path through the forest. A three-year-old had disappeared from his home last year. The child had been out of sight for only a few minutes. Abducted by a paedophile and murdered, they said. The police searched everywhere, but he was never found. Never found.

This was supposed to be a safe place, away from her ex-husband, death, and Covid-19. Suzi is aware of something rising inside her, gripping her throat and squeezing until she can hardly breathe. She tries to swallow, but it remains—abusive, violent, possibly strong enough to kill her on this remote forest path. Alert to every sound and movement, Suzi pulls at her hair and shouts, 'Leo! Where are you?!' How stupid she had been to let him go.

Further downhill, the constant rush of water grows louder. Leo can swim, but not well. Suzi hopes, nearly prays, for shallow water. Once, years ago, a weight of floodwater, milky brown and bitter tasting, had slammed her against a rock. 'Shit!' she whispers. Should have set a limit. Go no further than that big rock, something like that. But camping is about freedom. Not this. Suzi stops, rubs her closed eyes, feels skin moving over bone and listens. Maybe when she opens her eyes, he'll be there, playing with some rocks by the creek, doing what a boy his age

normally does. Leo's fine, Jane had said from a folding chair with a side table. But what would Jane know? Her kids hadn't moved from the soft interior of her camper trailer. I'll check anyway, Suzi had told her, pretending not to worry. Pretending.

As Suzi approaches the creek, the muscles in her face dissolve. She tries to swallow, but this time her throat is dry, and despite her world being close to ignition, she has to stop and pee. Crouched in tinder, she recalls a view from the road to the campsite. Six or seven layers of mountains, each layer a lighter blue than the one before. Made her think that if you lost your way, you'd have to climb one peak, only to find another, and another. Even the leaves of the eucalypts signalled death: hanging vertically, ready to drop and stab whoever walked beneath.

The ground around the dark soak of her pee is dry and lifeless. Davies Creek is not worth conserving without the presence of her boy. If anything happens to him ...

Suzi pulls up her jeans and shuffles forward, tugging at the zip as she goes.

The creek, when she arrives, is clear and innocent. Above the waterline, smooth rocks resemble tarnished silver. Below, olive and rust colours age the flow. Suzi searches for a body, while trying to remember the colour of her son's shirt. Mothers always know these things when a child goes missing. Missing.

Striding downstream, Suzi ducks away from a large fly with yellow stripes. Metallic eyes resemble spy technology. If only she had a drone! Trees hang lazy and wild over the creek, exposing roots that collect coarse sand. And there he is! Sitting in one of those trees, his red shirt a beacon in a grey-green nightmare.

'Mum, Mum,' Leo calls. 'Come and see this.'

Suzi slows her pace, breathes deeply and licks her lips, pulling herself together. A blue dragonfly rests on her son's hand.

'Can I keep it?' he asks. His beautiful face has fresh clear skin.

Suzi lowers her gaze to his hand, wondering how the brittle structure of the dragonfly could have ever been alive.

‘Sure,’ she says. ‘Bring it to the campsite.’

Beads of sweat, clear and pure, sit delicately under the boy’s nose. The uncut hair near his ears is wet too. Suzi can’t be angry with him. Not when *he* is collecting the dead instead of her. She sighs the way her husband had when she refused to give up her weekend with Leo. Everything is okay, she reminds herself.

‘Did you hear that bird?’ Leo asks.

‘Was it a kookaburra?’

‘I can’t believe you didn’t hear it,’ he says, frowning. ‘Stop daydreaming and listen.’

This is something she must have said to him in the past.

After rolling his eyes, Leo climbs down from the tree and heads upstream.

Suzi follows.

Light filters through the leaves and glitters on the bulging surface of the creek, and fish the colour of sand appear in the shallows. Suzi and Leo jump, one after the other, onto a flat rock and sit with their feet, pale and strange, in the cold water.

‘Look!’ Suzi almost shouts. ‘A frog!’

The frog climbs from the water onto a small rock. It appears thinner than a frog should be, mottled like the water-smoothed granite.

‘It’s a toad,’ Leo says as if he knows.

‘No,’ Suzi says, aware she is breaching the positive parenting code. ‘It’s not.’

Leo reaches for the frog, and Suzi is about to tell him not to touch it, when the frog leaps into the water and speeds towards the current. Swinging her feet backwards and forwards, Suzi says, ‘I never knew they only used their back legs to swim.’

Leo throws a stone at the frog, missing by a long shot.

‘I’m hungry,’ he adds.

Their wrinkled feet remind Suzi of her mother who said, I’m not hungry. And, I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.

‘Let’s go back to the campsite,’ Suzi suggests.

Partway along the forest path, she instinctively jumps backward, colliding with Leo who is right behind her.

‘What?’ he asks.

A black line sliding across the track becomes the tail of a loose-skinned goanna.

‘It’s okay,’ Suzi says. ‘I thought it was a snake.’

The reptile swaggers towards the campsite in lieu of a ranger. Suzi takes a photo at the exact moment the lizard lifts its belly and sprints.

‘Slow one minute, lightning fast the next,’ she says.

Flicking the image aside, her eyes fall on a photo of her mother in hospital. Suzi studies it, touches her face, returns the phone to her pocket.

‘You found him!’ Jane calls, still sitting in her chair.

Suzi smiles and walks to her tent, where Leo is shifting the lid of a large plastic box.

‘No marshmallows,’ she says in a stern voice. ‘They’re for tonight.’

The boy takes a packet of corn chips to the nearest chair.

After replacing the lid of the box, Suzi unzips the tent and crawls inside. The warm, stifling air reminds her of the hospital. Heaven’s foyer. Her mother had existed for eight days in that room, hidden by walls: a space away from visitors. A glass window separated those with lungs from those without. Can you hear me? Suzi had asked the glass. Her mother’s hand, visible above the sheet, resembled the claw of a dead bird. That dying woman was nothing like her mother.

The tent walls billow in a gust, and Suzi feels sweat rising through her hair. She and her mother had talked every night. Talked. Past tense. It still seems wrong. Leo had always been proud to have a grandmother. Some kids don’t, he once said. How will she tell him that now he doesn’t either?

Without the simple comfort of a box of tissues, Suzi grasps a crumpled mass of underwear and shoves it against her closed eyes. I can’t come again until Thursday, she had told her mother, trying to be frank and clear, but instantly regretting the cruelty of her words. Were

they cruel? Was she? Tragic frames of humans at the hospital door sucked on the cigarettes hanging from purple lips. In contrast, the flower Suzi carried was bright and oblivious and destined to die on a kitchen bench. What could she have done or said from outside the water, the glass, where her mother was drowning?

Beyond the tent, the air is cooler.

Jane looks up from the newspaper she's crushing between her hands.

'You look like you could do with a beer,' she says and dumps the paper on the ground, lifts the leg of her chair over it and sits again.

'True,' Suzi says.

Hugging two beers with one arm, Suzi drags a chair across hard dirt. She hands a beer to Jane, slumps into her chair and savours the cold liquid washing fear from her throat. She listens and laughs like she hasn't laughed in ages, and notices the wrinkles around Jane's eyes are more pronounced in this light.

'I've had a crazy week too,' she says, and is about to explain why when Leo appears by her side.

'I need to do a number two,' he whispers.

Suzi lays her empty bottle on the ground and follows him.

'We'll take some toilet paper,' she says, 'just in case.'

The composting toilet above the campsite is the same awful colour as the blinds ripped from Suzi's new house. Gravel crunches underfoot, and the facets of mica reflect pink light. A tree nearby is bleeding red sticky sap. A sign of danger perhaps. But there is none. Unless the stench of the toilet is lethal.

'Leave the door open,' Suzi says.

Turning her back to give Leo privacy, she studies the leaves in the trees. Her divorce will come through next week. What more must she endure? She steps forward, her nails scraping grit from her scalp.

When she turns, Leo is standing on the track. They walk in silence towards a whiff of smoke. He needs a haircut. This is another matter that will never be discussed with his father or grandmother. Suzi's

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things slip on the gravel, and she almost falls, but somehow manages to keep her balance. When she is steady, has caught her breath, she looks around. Leo has disappeared. He can't have gone far.