

## **Say the Things you Sea: A Story**

*Frankie Georges*

TELL STORIES IN WORDS AND NEVER OUT OF WATER. This is what the girl had read. It was painted on a water-tank, the letters jet-yellow, with what must've been a pretty high velocity spray-paint canister, her mother was realising, given the splatter of the thing. The letters waved a lot because they were about the size of the girl and they were written on corrugated tin. The girl thought, but had forgot to say it: 'Baked beans, mama. Baked. Beans.'

Never had the girl's mother given much consideration to the world she would inherit.

As they continued on their Autumn evening walk (which was hot – it was Australia) under an orange evening sun, they stopped at the corner of a four-way intersection. They waited for two large trucks – utes, really – one was black and the other white. Two tradies, a bricky and a chippy, sped along, and slowed. One stopped for the other at the give-way sign. Both were frustrated at this fact, even the one who had right of way and had not stopped completely.

It was not just the inconvenience of having been slowed, but to have started their drives in the wetness of a dark, untimely Adelaide morning, and to be returning now, in an arid – thoroughly exhaustive – loneliness, both vagrant and alone.

'Panda,' said the girl.

'Hmmm?' asked her mother.

'Panda.'

She had pointed when she repeated herself, using the hand which her mother didn't clasp. On the back of the black truck was a bumper sticker with a white bear and three big capital letters.

'How'd you know?' her mother asked.

'It's a panda.'

They crossed the street.

It was bin day: Monday.

The girl hated this phrase – 'bin day' – because her dad had always used it wrong. Her mum did too. Plus parents never knew when to just give it up and admit that they were wrong, which was pretty much the worst thing in all existence.

‘Cherry,’ her mother would say – a name she used for him and him alone. ‘It’s bin day.’  
‘Yellow or green?’ he would ask – always, every time, even when he knew the answer.  
‘Green.’

But this conversation, which was usually had as he was clearing the dinner table, wasn’t bin day *at all*. It was the weekend, the day *preceding bin day*, when they rehearsed this little chat. ‘Bin day’ was tomorrow. Furthermore, she’d think, it wasn’t even daytime many of the times this conversation would occur, it was dusk, night, or much darker, in the winter.

Sometimes, when it got really late – because her dad was always forgetting, or too tired from his job, watching TV, maybe, or waking from a nap – the girl was already in her bed. When she wasn’t asleep (and sometimes when she was) she could hear from her pillow the bins being pulled up the side of the house, past her curtained window, quiet at first and eventually louder than life itself, then quiet again, and out towards the driveway. She would try to guess which bin it was by the weight and by the wheels. The sounds had never scared her, even though, at times, coming from her room with crying-eyes, she’d be claiming that they had.

Her father loved to leave the bins on their little patch of grass, although she asked him not to. She told him her own hard truths: ‘It kills grass.’

‘But, darling,’ he would reply, in a soft and happy voice. ‘I have to use the driveway tomorrow.’

‘No.’

‘I do,’ he said, usually laughing. ‘I have to go to work.’

Here he would sometimes give her mother a subtle look, a look which said *you could put them out, in the driveway, afterwards, after I’ve left for work*. But he never said this look in words.

And last night, no such look had happened.

Continuing on their walk, the mother and daughter encountered an oddity.

One red-lidded bin, which had the number twenty-eight on it, indicating its owner, remained on the street (almost all the other bins had been pulled in by now, either near the doorstep, garage, or back behind the house). This bin was on its side and its number was as well. The lid was open and lying flat, horizontal on the ground. Its contents were exposed and its garbage had been sailing away in the wind across the footpath, grass, and road.

They stopped. They looked at it and at each other.

‘Gar-bage,’ the little one said.

In the window of house number twenty-five a woman was standing and watching them, and, although they’d felt the presence of some eyes or another, she was not noticed by them. The stranger-woman stood with her back straight, which pained her greatly. Her face was near against the glass; she tore tissues with her frail hands.

It had been this presence, this aura of a gaze of a kind or another, which had made walking away from the mess such an awkward thing. For the little one, this dread-feeling came not from human eyes at all, but grew implicit, arising in the overbearing size and brazenness of the street itself, the motionless bold of its great and empty countenance.

They were ashamed to turn their backs as they had on the garbage. But they had gone with no more words, stopped and crossed that street again, and walked a short way home.

The doorway opened, popped, and the little one came running first.

‘That was a shorty,’ said Cherry.

‘It *wasn’t*,’ snapped the girl and her mother, in eerily identic voice.

‘You’re home already,’ he replied.

‘We’re getting bags. There was trash here down the street. We’re cleaning it.’

‘Gloves,’ said the girl.

‘Yes,’ her mother said, now looking back at him. ‘We need some pickers too.’

A couple of minutes later, despite their pleadings, he had not joined them on their return. They stopped at the road, waited, looked, and plodded on.

The sight was graver the second time around. The girl and her mother got to work.

The mother used a plastic claw (whose irony was not lost to her). The child squatted on the grass. Their garbage bag blew open and tried to get away, until, at last, it held sufficient weight to maintain itself as planted there.

As they slowly coalesced this disorder into an ordinary cleanliness, the mother looked into yard. The garden was completely overgrown, trash was everywhere: three microwaves, at least.

The plants betrayed, battled, and allied themselves in their conjoined pursuits of sun, root, and water, and the insects, in unison, were acting to concoct them: consumed and commandeered.

As the mother looked over it all the woman in the glass was ashamed.

She beckoned the mother over, she tried to talk and couldn't.

The mother approached over specks of shattered bottles and fields of mostly plastic. 'Stay where you are please, sweetie,' she called out to her daughter. There were two rusted bikes of indiscriminate size which, by time and rain, became rooted to the ground. There were several broken buckets – children's – warped and pale by the light. There were molds and trucks, too, and a giant fractured clam. The mother looked inside of it. There wasn't any sand.

Finally, a small inflatable pool, which was wrinkled like a late slug. Its form mirrored the contortions of the tissues the woman in the glass had weaved.

'Thank you,' said this woman, making universal gestures with her hands.

'Oh we don't mind!' the girl's mother said, in a shout, pointing. 'She wanted to.'

'I can't... I've been waiting...' The woman trailed off, noticing that the girl's mother could hardly hear her. Her frail figure was unable to explain the absence of her ecclesiastic carer, who usually maintained her bins and post and groceries.

In this moment the small girl noticed that the wind was blowing further than before, and each of the scraps, packets, and papers – which in their mottled fragments so clearly defined the agoraphobe within – had moved, agitated as they were by the atmosphere of Earth, by its rotation, by a shift in the all-contested temperatures of its temporary breath.

So, in short, all the trash had moved at least a metre. Much went sprawling for the road. In impulse, the girl had followed.

The woman in the glass screeched first and the mother turned.

The steps were irreversible.

The small car, red and mostly noiseless, then too had screeched, crashing into an apparition of the girl. She recalls nothing of that which happened next (although, she remembers her *surety* that she would remember it).

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When the little girl was a good couple of dozen years older, she would come to see an episode of South Park in the basement of the house that her boyfriend owned, and in the episode her role as a person in the cycle of life was explained with a profound universality. The song she saw

exposed the expulsions of the self and of life, in the broadest, central sense; sort of like what happens when one starts to learn what Carbon is.

And from the episode all these things and memories aforementioned (her walks, the crash, and toddlerhood) came flooding back by that fountain of nostalgia. The TV, as with any particular sensation – such as novel, non-replicable smells – was a memory-spring upon which she had to have *stumbled*, and had. It was that trigger of a memory that one can never truly replicate.

And here it was.

She remembered waking in the hospital but only as a vague almost tumbleweed of a nightmare, and when she had momentarily conjured herself in the dead of night from the shock, sleep, and analgesic, her mother had been snoring lightly in the bed beside her.

A cartoon TV channel which her mother had assumed was for children was left playing, an episode of South Park was on the wall, inappropriately so, and not exactly quiet.

She wasn't really conscious but she somehow foresaw the trouble she'd be in if her mother had awoken. (Obviously, as an adult, she knew the truth: the opposite.)

And in the episode of South Park a piece of poo explains – by singing to his son, who is also a poo – that the poo of the animals makes the grass and the plants, and that the cattle graze on the grass to make food for the humans, and that the sewage of the millions in the cities spews into the oceans, feeding plankton feeding fish, and that this feeds fish to feed the fish to the feed the fiiish...

...and all these fish and other things which made the ocean made food for bears and trees, for giraffes, gazelles, and fleas; and in all, there was not a single unit of waste, water, or worth, of expectation or expenditure, which was not without its perfect equilibrium. Poo, not sewage, was both birthplace and beginnings.

It was all – then as well as now – bewildering.

And in triggering these memories she remembered how profoundly troubling toilet training long ago had been.

Her father had explained to her in a language she couldn't much understand that the pipes in the toilet weren't like the pipes in the kitchen because they shot always straight into the ocean. She didn't care much whether or not this fact was correct but the essence of the question troubled

her: she saw the stuff as rubbish – which it was, of sorts, or so they had explained – so it was a wonder why they'd shoot the stuff to a place so different and so beautiful.

Sometimes, before her mother became pregnant with the baby that was to be her little brother, she and her mother used to walk a little further on their walks, or drive somewhere, and turn down different streets, lose themselves towards the beach, the water and the rocks.

On these occasions they'd stay well above the sand, walking on the footpath and bike track, away from the road, a couple of metres higher than the shore, atop a kind of boulder-seawall. It would therefore be that their walk was parallel to the ocean, one way or the other.

But beyond this parallel her head was always turned, she was transfixed, looking for the thing that *daddy* surely spoke about: pipes below the ground. She had not known if they were to be fully submerged beneath the depths, these pipes. Whether they would shelter under flows and be naked to the ebbs. Or if, perhaps, they were high above the sea itself, and trickled sewage down, somewhere far beyond where boats and swimmers were. Or – and of course the worst of these possibilities – if the pipes composed the bottoms of the ocean. This made her toil most of all. Benthos-to-benthos, what's to stop a shark to take that path into the secret pocket of their home? To eat her up, if so.

And hence the girl was troubled greatly. She would stare off into the gazing water – tossed, yanked, or yanking on her mother's hand – which sometimes blazed refractions of an afternoon sunset, and sometimes was much quiet and much quieter, when it was later in the night. She walked without thinking about walking in the moments like these (moments which, in the course of her life, would be fewer, fewer, and forgotten). Full of this grim pervading wordlessness, the ocean pipes had wrecked her. Their length was too much, their labyrinthian structure so far from comprehensible. And besides, shouldn't these cars and heavy trucks, massive that they are, break the ground above them? How can pipes hold roads and buses?

On some days, or maybe only once, when her mother was particularly brave, they'd walk along the jetty, and not only on the path. It was here that the girl gazed markedly into the gaps between the planks. The surface of the sea seemed touchable, the jetty the road to bare facticity.

It was picturesque, a snapshot seen a million times. The girl looked up. Couples held each other's hands and took photos of each other and themselves. Men looked for crabs and waited with their wires. Girls egged each other on and leapt into their bravery, regretting never the jump, but always the climb, the grimy, slippery ladder, the shivering waiting in between.

But she herself saw none of this. She and her mother had stopped a while and she was fixed beyond the breeze. She saw an angled horizon, where the cove – the curvatures of South Australian land – intersected with the boundless sea. ‘Yes, the pipes,’ she thought, but was unable to articulate. Only a few years in age, she was staring at land and landlessness as though they were commensurate. ‘What’s vanishing can now be seen.’

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