

Love Hurts, Cave Hurts

There are dirt patches on my knees. I got them from Mum, from tying her shoelaces. (She can't reach. Not now.) I'm only nineteen but I have Mum's problems all over my body.

I'm always on ladders putting cans and packets up in cupboards. Our cupboards are dark and deep. Like caves. I stare into the darkness and imagine finger-painted bison and screeching warriors on horses, still bright and ochre-red. I push the cans and packets right to the back of the cupboard and my legs are hurting as I strain against the ladder. When I jump off I see red lines across my shins, taunting me.

Like I said: I've got Mum's problems all over my body.

I have red marks on my knuckles from reaching beneath the bed, because that's where Mum likes the cans of condensed milk. But the cans are tall and the bed is low. It doesn't matter how careful I am. My hands get wrecked every time. There are cows on the can labels, big eyes like black puddles, and they don't blink when they judge me. Because it's my fault too, how big Mum is getting. Mum is three times as big as she was last year. She says it's her path, to be big like that. She says some people are tall, some people are mean, and some people write: like me, they have eyes with an appetite, always eating words.

'All I can eat is cake,' says Mum, and she laughs. She says that kind of thing when she's on the stoop, when everyone is walking past with ears wide open. (She wants them to gossip about us. *My gift to small minds*, says Mum.) Our town is large but tiny – it stretches like a big coat on the floor, pockets of people here and there – and the houses are old but treasured, where tall chimneys meet low clouds. The poets talk of sweet air but they have left by winter, and by then it's only me, inhaling the wet of the creek and knowing the air really smells of mermaids who are dank, forgotten, but still plotting.

At night I hear Mum breathe as she sleeps and I'm worried that she'll stop.

Don't stop, I pray, *please don't stop*. Because if she stops breathing again we'll be a freak show on the news where men take a sledgehammer to a wall. Like every freak show, even if you want to turn away you can't: here comes that fat lady, that lady we made dark jokes about: elephant, whale, mammoth.

The problem is that Mum doesn't do fat like people expect. She's not a bubbly person. ('I don't care for bubbly,' she says. 'What am I, lemonade?') And she's not one of those finger-wagging fat women on the talk shows, forever interested in the lives of others.

No, Mum doesn't do fat like people expect. Mum is dainty and sly. She sits on the stoop and wiggles her toes at the postman, gives him a wink.

Mum has a lot of time for me. She makes me work on my wit. She tells me the world is a dark forest full of wily foxes slinking through the trees. 'You can wink back or fight back,' she says, and she braids my hair and reminds me that people can steal diamonds but they can't steal wit. At night she sings, and her voice is like porcelain. The people two paddocks across think there's a ghost, and they talk about the ladies who used to live in our house, only a century ago, who were corseted and refined. (Ghosts are everywhere in our town. Haunting is expected, like the weather.) *It must be an opera ghost*, they say. They can't imagine a voice like that coming from someone so fat. The singing is so beautiful that the town concludes the ghost is also wicked, and everyone stays away.

But Uncle Egg is always visiting. He's called Uncle Egg not because of the shape of his head but because his ear-lobes hang round and low, like tiny quail eggs. He sits by Mum's bed while she's singing. She has never left our town but she loves a tune about Hawaii, where the palms are green and the potatoes are purple. But Uncle Egg isn't listening. I can see his thoughts are elsewhere; in wrong places, in secret places. He leans back on his chair, making marks in the carpet the way Mum hates. And he knocks on the plaster with his knuckles, waiting. I guess he's thinking about the elephant jokes, too, and one afternoon he says it out aloud. 'You elephant,' he says to Mum.

'You revolting little egg,' she says right back. 'I hope one day someone cracks you open at the ears and all your secret thoughts come running out.' She laughs. I laugh. Even Uncle Egg starts to giggle, too. Uncle Egg is Mum's brother and they've been talking like that for years and the cruelty is refined, smooth, like a pebble you throw at a trout.

When she dies I cry for days and days. I drink so much water – in my mouth it goes, out my eyes it goes – that's how it is for a long time, a big blur on the calendar that will always be lost to me. Uncle Egg is there when they break the wall and get her out from her bedroom. People are nicer than I thought and they don't say *whale*, they don't say *mammoth*, although

I'm sure they say it at home. When I finally get out of bed, and get to the kettle, all I can hear is a stupid song on the radio about how love hurts and I don't understand one bit.

After Mum dies, Uncle Egg visits me every day, bending down in the yard and turning over bits of plaster in his hands. The wall is still broken but he's happy with that.

Finally, I say it.

'I know what you're looking for,' I say, 'and she got the last of it out years ago and spent it on dresses that didn't fit her.'

'They could be in another wall,' he says.

He doesn't pretend. He doesn't make up a story about antique beams or hidden photographs of great-grandmothers. I heard stories like that from other uncles and aunts who came by after Mum died, all of them looking for the jewels she plastered into the wall. Everyone else in town says it's an old family myth but my uncles and aunts talk about those jewels like other people talk about aliens. *I believe*, they say, and they say it with voices low and sharp, like cut grass.

'So the jewels, they're all gone?' asks Uncle Egg.

'All gone,' I say.

But I'm lying. I moved them. I moved them each month – up in the cupboard stuffed between biscuits and bison or in an empty can of condensed milk, hidden under the bed.

Uncle Egg puts his hands on his hips and I notice all his rings are gone. I guess he sold them. I guess he needs the money more than I do but I keep my face plain, I keep my face placid, and he gets in his car and drives away.

When Mum was nineteen she took a job cleaning gutters, the ladders high and the rungs like flat smiles beneath her feet. She learned a lot about buildings that way, a lot about walls. She learned how a house has to hold itself on a hill.

For many years, she was the cleaner at a very nice house, the kind of house where the lady who lives there is too unique and too rich for a white picket fence. This particular lady had a fence made from knotted cedar, and she called her place Carmel By The Sea, even though the house was nowhere near the ocean. One summer, the lady went away to ski, and Mum had to look after the place. Despite the heat, Mum climbed a ladder and began to clean the gutters, and a man crept from the chimney like a possum.

He put his feet on the tiles, expecting a hold that wasn't there, and a tiny yelp broke the quiet of the hot summer afternoon as he tumbled down, past Mum and off the roof, where he fell and cracked his head open on the ground. Mum was quiet for a while, her breaths solid and watchful, and she waited for him to die before climbing further up the tiles herself. Her feet were sure but even then, the tiles were uneven. But Mum reasoned that an emerald necklace, a ring with three square diamonds, and a ruby cuff as round as a clown mouth were worth the risk. He had dropped them. Out of his pockets and into hers. It wasn't technically stealing. She was just cleaning up, like she was meant to.

There were other jewels too, with a brilliance she'd only seen in fairytales: princess-hair yellow, Robin Hood green, castle-moat blue, villain-eye pink.

She kept them all a secret.

She didn't sell them. Every Saturday she meant to, but there was always next Saturday and besides, she was having too much fun trying them on at night. It was the dainty in her that made her hold on to them. And when you wear queenly jewels at night (even when you're nineteen, even when you're in your bedroom where nobody cares about a plump girl and her quiet, stupid hobbies) you start to walk like a queen and act like a queen. And so even without selling the jewels, even without showing the jewels, the bank manager gave Mum a loan for a little weatherboard house she spied on a quiet, lavender hill. She needed to move out because her parents were like beetles on skin – so surprising, so skittery – and because she was already pregnant with me.

It was unheard of to give a husband-less woman money for a house, especially a woman as young as Mum was then. When the bank manager was called into the boss's office and interrogated all he could think was: her posture made me do it. *She walked like a queen into that bank. I almost kissed her feet.* But he knew he couldn't say that. He sat without excuses, he sat as quiet as a sunk ship, and the bank fired him. But he wasn't the kind of man who stays down for long. He started his own stockbroking firm. He put deer heads on the wall

and gave them the names of all his old bosses, and once he'd done that he stopped thinking about the past. He began thinking about the future. He got very rich on his own. He became rich enough that he stopped saying *rich* and he began to say *comfortable*, the way truly rich people say it. But he hadn't forgotten her. He went walking through the big fields, over the creek and up the quiet, lavender hill to ask Mum what she was doing that Saturday night.

When they got married the town said it was a wasted opportunity, a man like that with a girl like her. He found out who was gossiping and put dead toads in their letterboxes so they knew what unkindness felt like, too.

He was a good stepfather. He gave me his surname and put me up on his shoulders and walked through the town square full of pride. He began to diversify, and he poured some money into the local dairy, and that's where things went wrong. Because one day he was up at the churn, looking at butter so pale, so dawn-like, and he was so mesmerized that he almost fell in. But he didn't. Yet the dreaming didn't leave him, and it willed him to money-thoughts that roamed his head like extravagant beasts, each one with dollar signs for eyes. One day he was careless. He shared the money-thoughts with someone he thought he could trust. He went walking down the creek way, where the moss grows green like princely frogs, and three pairs of hands held his head down for an everlasting drink.

The police came to the door and told Mum and we started crying, shrieking, started knowing that life was never fair. They said he'd thrown himself in the creek, but Mum knew better.

Mum didn't grieve like the girls in books do. The girls in books wear grey dresses and refuse dinner and get thin and their new slimness is noble, expected. But Mum ate everything she could. She had a beautiful new house with new walls (the weatherboard was long gone) and she made calls to the grocer and read out *chocolate, biscuits, condensed milk* like she was reciting hymns. I packed all the chocolate and biscuits and condensed milk away in the cupboards and under the bed. The marks on my hands were red; the marks on my shins were red. They got worse, scrape upon scrape. *Love hurts*, said the song, and finally I understood.

Now she's gone and all I have is Uncle Egg, knocking on the door again.

'Hello,' I say, walking down the hallway towards the door. I think about Mum on that hot summer afternoon, up on that roof with the emeralds and diamonds and rubies and the other thing she grabbed that day: a gun that fell from the man's pockets. She told me about it but never showed me, and after she died I found the gun beneath the floorboards. Sitting there like a waiting snake, coiled and ready and black.

And it's in my pocket now.

And Uncle Egg is still knocking at the door.

I open the door. I put my hand in my pocket and smile at Uncle Egg. Because *if you smile they stay stupid, they don't know what's coming*. That's another thing Mum used to say. I've stored all her words, all the funny and wise things she said. My mind is a cupboard, my mind is a cave, and I'm not forgetting her. Not ever.

'I never saw any new dresses,' says Uncle Egg. His voice is dangerous now, it rises like the water in a forgotten bath. 'She didn't buy anything new, unless it was food. That's why I know you've got those diamonds. They're still here, aren't they?'

I keep my hand in my pocket. The metal is cool, it understands me.

I grab the keys and hand them to Uncle Egg. His eyes light up.

'The house is yours,' I say, 'the house is yours to search. Or live in it. Or burn it. I don't care.' And I walk down the stairs and down the hill to where the creek is dark and two wells deep. I throw the gun away. I hope the ghost of my stepfather catches it. I hope he becomes a wily fox who nips at nightmares and ankles, forever haunting the men who did him in.

I turn away from the creek, and notice a jingle as I walk – emeralds and diamonds and rubies will do that even if you wear two pairs of socks, even if you stuff them deep into your boots. I think about where I'd like to go. I could buy a plane ticket every week and still have money left. I think of that song that Mum used to sing. I hear her porcelain voice in the dark sky and I have Mum's blood in my veins, I have her hope there too, and I'm already thinking of Hawaii where the islands rise up like green wishes.