

## Wake of Stones

by Sarah Hazelton

They set out together, so many years ago, into the dense forest. They took away the clothes they wore, a few pocketfuls of vividly grained river stones, a small loaf. They took an aversion to touch that was long in the breaking.

*A woman in sensible shoes knocks on his door. She says she's the District Nurse. He's looking better today. Has he taken his medication? How is his memory?*

They scattered memories behind them as they went, to mark the way back – although they didn't want to go back, not then. They had escaped their tiny precarious lives, much-too-beloved daughter, ignored son, and they needed to remember what was behind them so they could go forwards. They would not walk in circles in this shadowy aeon of gums and ferns, until the thirst and the hunger and the endless sameness drove them to ruin.

*He stands watching the photographs in the silver frames, over the mantelpiece, silent in the ticking silence of the front room. He turns them face down.*

They would not make the same mistakes as their parents.

*There is a picture of a castle on the refrigerator. He remembers how she used to tell him stories of her castle, on the bad nights, after the war.*

So, they rationed their stones. They lived as moderately as life permits. The grand passion faded after a while, survived by a quiet certitude. They knew where they were going - away from where they'd been, thirty, forty, fifty years ago.

*He sets things down and forgets where he puts them.*

Together, they fixed their eyes on a tree far ahead, just visible in the gathering dark. They aimed for that tree and walked on, dropping a stone or two on the way. Then they'd turn and see their path behind them, marked by the stones and the rapidly-unfolding furrow in the ferns. The trees were many and the verdant light was fading, yet they kept walking on and on.

*Where are his glasses?*

They scattered fragments of memory behind, steadily. Even when he'd been a prisoner in Korea: even after her father's death, when she was finally learning to talk. Then, they had wanted to clutch at these pebbles of memory, smooth from constant worrying fingers. They had wanted to sink to the forest floor with them and rend their faces and wail, to offer up the proof of their lives to the lofty storm-rent canopy of leaves.

*A woman in sensible shoes knocks on his door. She says she's the District Nurse. How is he feeling today? Won't he take his medication?*

And, separately, they did, for a time. Thousands of kilometres apart, or half a silent bed away.

*Someone has knocked over the photographs. He rights them, brushes a finger against her flawless sepia cheek.*

Then they rose, together. Left a couple of the stones in a small cairn, in a language only they knew, the language of their shared loss and gain. They walked on once more.

*A woman in sensible shoes knocks on his door. She says she's the District Nurse. How is he feeling today? Has he been forgetting to eat again?*

Except this time she didn't rise with him, and she had no more stones left to leave. He would have given his in a heartbeat, but his pockets were empty, too. Just a tiny, rock-hard morsel of the bread they'd taken away with them, such a long time ago...and by the time he found it, she was gone.

*The boy from next door comes in, mows the lawn. He tells him how she refused to do it after their second daughter was born.*

He marked her passing with some of those crumbs, piled up in a pathetic reminder of their cairns of private significance. The crumbs shifted with the rising breeze, until the tear-salt gravity of his loss weighed them to the ground. He rose, still weeping, and walked on.

*He tells the boy how she refused to mow after their second daughter was born.*

It wasn't the same.

*He tells the boy how she refused to mow after the birth of their second daughter.*

His legs were trembling. He tried to choke down some crumbs. They were dry as ash in his mouth now.

*A woman in sensible shoes knocks on his door.*

He scattered crumbs behind, all of them, eating none.

*There is a woman in sensible shoes at the door.*

He could feel his head growing lighter, and his steps more uncertain. He didn't aim for trees any more.

*Where are his glasses?*

An invisible cloud of black birds followed now, hopping forever on the edge of his vision. He could hear them crying, an endless stabbing-of-babies behind.

*Sensible woman at the door.*

He cast out the crumbs.

*Why is he in the kitchen?*

The birds ate the crumbs while he walked. When he turned there was no trail of memory behind him, and the ferns sprang back as he watched.

*The lawns are mown.*

He did not know where he had come from.

*Did he tell the boy?*

He no longer looked behind.

*She wouldn't mow after*

He faltered.

*Pain*

There were no crumbs left, not even at the bottom of his pockets.

*Chest*

The crumbs and the stones were all gone.

*sensible boy*

Where had they gone?

*mow*

Were they still in the forest?

*the mantelpiece*

Was she waiting for him?

*silver*

Was she?

*the castle*

She would tell him stories.

*yes*

They would all be true.