

Treasure

by Narelle Goulden

I struggle through the push-in door of the Hawker, a store where the windows almost obscure its wares from general view but the small simple script explains the situation: licensed pawnbroker and second hand dealer. One arm manages my handbag and several shopping bags while the other is almost twisted in front of me due to James's constant bouncing. He is now, at age eight, just as he was as a toddler, so much a puppy tugging at its leash. But I had refused to give in to the baby lasso craze, remembering my own indignant experience of the leash harness as a child. Perhaps it was my mother's response to her own trauma of dragging me, a kid in both senses of the word, around stores and then having me pull my own arm out of its socket. Regardless, the irony of having the positions now reversed and still facing the danger of dislocation isn't lost on me.

I execute a neat turn to let the door swing back into its frame without catching my hips, cutting the outside hum and drone with a puff as an elderly gentleman steps forward to assist, too late. He comes to a halt, as though I had slapped him.

'No, no, I'm fine. Thanks.'

'Should have let me get the door,' he says, almost reproachfully.

'Ah, well.' I'm somewhat apologetic, with a shrug and smile. He ambles back behind the glass counters, with grey trousers that are too long and fold under his shoes, frayed at the edges.

The air is thick with the musty scent of other people; their lives, over time, intertwining, passing through the store. Like cigarette smoke, it lingers in the carpet, the curtains, the clothes. People browsing through items, murmuring amongst the shelves, seem lost within it. An indelible imprint of history, of familiarity. You are careful not to disturb the sleeping memories, as though you are tiptoeing through your grandparents' house. With such dim light through the windows, it's easy to believe this is such a memory, shady with time.

A persistent pulling at the end of my arm has me bobbing up and down all of a sudden. I let myself lunge forward and tug back. 'Think I've got a big fish,' I laugh. Jamie grins and shrieks with laughter at a pitch that could shatter librarians. I wince slightly and put a finger to my lips.

'I'm going to look for treasure,' he tells me in a whisper.

'Put everything back where you find it.' I release his hand and he scampers off to the toys.

The elderly man smiles as his eyes follow Jamie's eager foraging. 'A lively little fellow.' He rubs the corner of an eye with a gnarled thumb.

'Keeps me on my toes,' I smile wearily.

'Wonderful at this age.' He squints into the distance and muted light reflects off his glasses, the silver wire frames concealed and barely noticeable. 'Curious about everything. It's all new, see. Even the old.' He chuckles.

'Better than my handbag, anyhow,' I say as I peer through its contents, checking for my wallet. For such a small bag, it can hide a lot – things disappear only to reappear at strange times. The brown leather surfaces, to my relief. My feet move on autopilot, steering me on a path past the counters to the shelves behind, laden with an odd assortment of books.

'I've a grandson his age,' he nods to Jamie, now using a red apron as a cape. 'Resourceful chap, too.'

I glance up to smile. 'See him often?'

'No,' he turns his gaze to the register beside him, his hand wavering just above the drawer. He gathers a column of silver coins resting on the counter and methodically counts them out, into the slots. The drawer shuts with a faint ring. 'Lives in another country. I've only seen him a handful of times.'

'That's hard.' My tone is sympathetic, but non-committal. He gazes at me keenly, something glinting in those small dark eyes, trapped behind the glasses. The expression stops just short of connecting with me, and for that I am glad, although I cannot ignore it. A shared knowledge etched into his face, a wistful smile. Embarrassed, I look down into the counter, at those items worthy of display, of protection.

A range of trinkets lie under the glass, each precisely arranged in its own place with a white tag the size of a fingernail attached. A string of blue rosary beads coil beside a gold Star of David. A pewter miniature of a naked goddess stands beside a statue of the Virgin Mary. A wooden carving of a wolf stalks close to the ground, while a sleeping porcelain child smiles, unaware. A samurai wields his sword at a wooden replica of the *La Paloma* sailing in a bottled sea.

It's what sits on the lowest shelf that draws my eye from Jamie's red cape flying towards the paintings stacked against a far wall. A plump, porcelain grandmother figure. She wears a rusty pink dress with a white apron, black-framed glasses and her grey hair is in a bun – all painted on. Her round face smiles gently, her eyes are creased closed. My mother owns a figure exactly like this.

A hand lifts her up suddenly, places her on the counter. The elderly man winks at me.

'She's an interesting one, looks like she has a lot of stories to tell,' he says. I reach out and brush a fingertip against the cool glazed paint, amazed.

'She has some secrets, too,' he adds, mischievously.

'My mum must own her twin,' I laugh as I pick her up carefully, examining her, 'except Mum's one could twist – ' my mouth drops as the grandmother's waist and upper body turns in my hand, ' – and open,' I finish, as I lift the lid away, revealing an empty white depth inside.

'Like a Russian doll,' I remark, softly, gazing at the halves in my hands. I could be a child again, making this discovery for the first time.

'I think she's meant to be a cookie jar,' the elderly man says, watching me with a faint smile.

'Oh, yes,' I start to recover, still half in my thoughts, 'except my mother used her as a money jar.' We both start to laugh.

'Not a bank, though,' I add, smiling at the memory. 'When I was little, Mum kept all sorts of odds and ends hidden away in her. Sometimes necklaces, or ribbons, little things we made her. But for some reason, I always remember the old paper money she put away in there, the orange one dollar and green two dollar notes bunched together, some purple five dollar notes as well. They were little works of art.'

He chuckles. 'Money always looks good to a kid.'

I shake my head, gazing at the figure. 'It was never about the money. I preferred to look at the notes; the colours and the people. I was a collector, not so much a spender.'

'A collector,' he nods approval. My eyes refocus to the counter below, smudged with my fingerprints. My reflection floats there, the years having worked over my features, the flesh looser, the brow slightly creased in an almost constant state of concentration, hazel eyes gathered in the beginnings of crow's feet. Not for the first time, I wonder who I'm looking at, how I could have changed in such a short time without noticing. I am not used to this image, despite the years of making it. I put red henna in my hair, turning it a warm brown, and conceal the shadows and veins of my forever translucent skin, but still there is something undisguisable there, defining this face. A trace of familiarity. When I look hard enough, I can almost see the twists of genealogy, fusing me to a family I had felt so out of place in. There is no escaping it, no matter how I blink.

'These days Mum keeps lollies and biscuits inside her,' I set the grandmother down on the counter, fondly. 'When we drop by, my sons look for her, wondering what Nan's put in her this time. She always thinks of something special.'

'That's what Nans do,' he chuckles to himself, kneeling shakily, placing the grandmother back down onto her shelf.

I'm sorry to see her go – I'm tempted to buy her. Mum would be tickled to see another one; certainly I had never seen anything quite like her. But then, nothing could be quite like Mum's little grandmother hoarding the biscuits and treasures of the house, for the simple reason that she is Mum's.

In an effort to distract myself, I wander towards the paintings; Jamie has already moved on, to the glass and silverware section, looking at the figurines. Some are not fashioned from either substance, but it's all relative here. I resist the urge to warn Jamie about taking care and instead watch him, his blond hair like honey in a patch of sunshine, examining a small silver figure. A knight, slaying a dragon. He turns it this way and that in his hands, and I can see that the dragon's eyes sparkle with green; some sort of gem is set in their place. When Jamie was two, he loved to play knights and dragons with Shawn. Shawn would always let Jamie be the knight, and roar after Jamie, who would dart away shrieking with laughter around the house as Shawn crawled awkwardly after him. At first he would only lay siege to Shawn-dragon if he was curled up underneath a table or sleeping noisily under his doona. Then the knight grew bolder, turned on his heels and gave chase. It always ended with Jamie riding the dragon triumphantly around the house, giggling as Shawn playfully shook and swayed in defeat. Neil would arrive home and shake his head, laughing, 'What is this, the crusades?'

And Shawn would roll his eyes. 'Dad, it's knights and dragons.'

Neil would wink at me. 'And you're the maiden in distress?'

I would laugh, and somehow Neil would take over the dragon role and get slaughtered by two knights. It took me a while to realise when it changed to just one knight.

But I doubt Jamie would remember; it was years ago, when the age gap between the two brothers made no difference. When their worlds were linked by more than chance meetings in the hall; it would become the case when Jamie left for school, Shawn stumbled in; when Jamie jumped through the door of an afternoon, Shawn stormed out.

Jamie becomes aware of me watching and bounces self consciously on the spot, then ducks his head and bounds over to me. 'Look! A knight and dragon!'

'Wow!' Up close the figure is more impressive in the way it's crafted, so small and yet so intricate. The dragon's tail winds around the lower body of the knight, almost crushing him, his fierce head reared over him. Yet the warrior is unconcerned; he faces the beast, sword directed at its neck.

'Can I get this?'

'We'll see.'

'Cool!' He bounces away. I can't help but smile as I return to the paintings. I turn through them, one by one, through paintings of boats, prints of polar bears, framed movie posters, new and old. *The Breakfast Club*. I chuckle to myself – was it really that long ago? It was the first movie I'd seen that I could identify with, in my teenage years. It's hard to go back to my mindset then, to remember the immediate urgency of everything. Every challenge was a tragedy waiting to happen and once it did it was set in stone, with the consequences irreversible. Life

was a black hole that had sucked me into a place I'd never been to and tore me apart. There seemed no end to it, other than the ends I could imagine and bring about for myself. If the bullets didn't get you, the fall certainly would.

But once high school was over, once that unimaginable future was around me, my life started and I began living as myself. And I wondered, bemusedly, what the fuss had been about, why everything had seemed so hard to me. It was the worst joke of them all at the time – that high school would be the best years of your life – but it didn't make it any less true.

I browse from Van Gogh reproductions to prints of innocent playful kittens. Then a painting of a lone tiger strolling through the forest. Blake comes to mind: *'Tyger, tyger, burning bright, in the forests of the night.'*

It is strange what images are burned into one's mind, what details one's mind clings to after all we see in our lives. For me, it wasn't the fight we had around the dinner table that night – I can't even remember what that one was about now, or the food on the table, the clothes we wore. It wasn't the vase thrown at my feet as I threw up my hands, the thousand fragments showering up towards my face – I can't see what it looked like, or remember who gave it to me. It wasn't the chair kicked towards me as Jamie jumped in front, crying as I pulled him behind me. It wasn't the slam as Neil heaved Shawn against the wall away from me, the sound of Shawn's fist connecting with Neil's skull, the thumps as Shawn ran to his room.

It is the face of that tiger, a black ink close up sketch of those wide eyes, the teeth just touching its lower lip, the ears erect, striped fur bristling. Such fearful symmetry. Shawn drew it when he was 13, the image staring at me that night as I pushed his bedroom door open to find the bed made just as I had done that morning, the wardrobe door just slightly ajar, the curtains and my voice trailing out the window. The room already cold as I frantically checked the drawers, the wardrobe, my voice climbing to a wail. The moon shivered in, washing the colour away to leave a ghost of myself waiting on the bed amidst a blur of panic. A model in marble, facing the moon but feeling the glare of that tiger tear me, haunt me. A mother, lost.

I gaze at this painting, this tiger prowling the woods, but it holds nothing for me. It has neither the intensity nor the depth of that creature in ink, which could pierce through the drawer I keep it in.

A hand grabs my arm. 'Mum!'

'What?' I jump, still half lost in the forest. Jamie smiles up at me, waving something silver.

'We'll go see what the price is,' I nod, remembering my promise.

'No, look at this. It's a little cup. It has writing on the bottom – see, it says Shawn!'

A dazzling gleam and I feel the immenseness of a new life – a light, breathing child in my arms, warm from my own body heat and my blood pulsing through his veins. The faint sound of his surprised cry as the cool water flowed over the crown of his head and his soft black hair and we bathed him in our blessings and wishes. His contented sigh and the wiggling of his arms and legs, settling down as I did what I hardly imagined I would ever do in my life, and named my child, my son, Shawn. This is what I keep with me, this is what I treasure.

‘It looks just like the one we had at home!’ Jamie says, amazed.

‘How about that?’ My voice shakes as he places the silver cup in my hands. Just as I had placed this cup in Shawn’s hands on his sixteenth birthday, only half a year ago. I had seen something in his eyes briefly, a reflection of silver, of that bright day. Almost as if he could remember.

‘Maybe, we could buy this one as a present for him. We can keep it til he comes back, so he knows we haven’t forgotten him. Hey, Mum?’

I smile and brush my hand over his hair. ‘Of course, sweetheart. Are you ready?’

Jamie puts his hand in mine. ‘Yeah, let’s go home.’

At the glass counters I set down the silver cup. Jamie pushes across his figurine and reaches up, tugging to untie the red apron. The elderly man waves his hand, winks at him.

‘Leave it on, son. Every superhero needs a cape.’

Jamie grins. I fiddle through my handbag until my fingers locate my wallet. ‘How much does it all come to?’

The elderly man gazes over the items, his eyes resting on the cup, it seems, a bit longer than expected. ‘Including the cape, we’ll call it ten all up.’

I pause in the midst of opening my wallet, a pain stabbing through my chest. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes,’ he looks at me intently, a gentle smile playing on his lips, ‘quite sure. Business has been doing well.’

As I pick out a ten dollar note from the numerous receipts, he adds:

‘Are you sure you don’t want to take this as well?’

I peer up to see the grandmother figure standing on the counter once more, and I hesitate. I shift my eyes from the grandmother to the silver cup and back again. It looks exactly like... but it couldn’t be. Mum would have said something.

‘Not today,’ I say softly and hand him the note.

He takes the money, releases the till and slots it away as I tuck the items into my handbag. I turn to go and he picks up the grandmother figure, preparing to kneel down to put it back in place. He waves a free hand at Jamie.

‘Maybe next time,’ he says, ‘I’ll put it aside for you. Just in case.’