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Opening Extract from...

HOW SAINTS DIE

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1.

Its eye – clear and reflective not dead and dull as you might expect – was willing her to touch it. Would it be hard like a marble? She pressed her fingertip into the jelly of the pupil and nothingness pushed back. Her father's warm rough hand enclosed her own.

– Bad luck to touch a fish's eye.

Ellie knew that. She retreated to her special stool, yellow paint crackling off onto her bare legs. It had been around as long as she could remember. This thought made her stomach jerk like being pushed too high on a swing. Down here Ellie could not see her father's quick hand or the blade as he cut along the seam of the fish, but she heard the familiar wet thud of the knife, knowing without looking that the head was now cut off. And then the metallic tickticktick of the knife's tip along the backbone. Gutting has a rhythm to it, like the old hymns at school that you just knew the words to – 'Fastened to the Rock which cannot move.'

Ellie holds on to these sounds and counts them off on her fingers with her prayers at bedtimes; these are hard sounds, not like the sounds on the other side of sleep which come in through the cracks and start with a shushshush like water. She keeps her prayers precise; they are not wishes. She prays for her and her mother and father to go back to the Before. When she sleeps she hears the sound of breaking glass. When she wakes to a new day in the Now she knows that prayer is not enough.

Shushshush, Ellie hears the sound now, louder than the thudtickticktick. Her dad is watching her, but the knife doesn't stop.

– Ellie.

She is off, legs too long for the smallness of the house, to the front window in the living room. She presses her hands to the pane – padpadpad. Her fingers follow the outline of the still-soft putty, looking for the tiny blue veins of cracks, looking and not looking for the break her mum went through. Padpadpad – but there are no cracks today.

Her dad watches her through the kitchen hatch and she circles back to him. It's not like Carol's kitchen, with lino and fitted matching cupboards and 'all mod cons', with hum of electric knife and ping of microwave. Carol's mum doesn't want Ellie round to play any more, not since Ellie's mum was taken away and Ellie went wild. No, Ellie's kitchen goes thudtickticktick and it rocks with the gentle muffled taptaptap that comes from the strange tin tub in the corner right next to where she always puts her stool. A small

tin bath holding dark water. When she hears the taptaptap, Ellie, gently, with one crooked finger, taps back. Peering in she sees her own face staring – her eyes grey-blue-green, her face pale with dark moons. 'Can you see your own people in your face?' her mother would ask, but she was too frightened to look. A large brick-red claw breaks her reflection with its black nipping tips, clickclick – it is one of her father's edible crabs. Ellie smiles and waves back.

- Dad.

He lays down another fish to gut.

- Dad? Are they sick?
- No, they're drowning.
- In water?
- Fresh water, it's like seawater so they don't know. Some would just boil them alive. Kinder this way.

She cannot take in the vastness of this thought. There they are, in their water, and they are drowning and they don't know their water is wrong. Ellie reaches up to the table salt on the shelf and tips it into the tub, the soft sloughing like sand.

- Ey, ey . . . not that salt.

Her father's hand once more encloses her own and his calluses grind into her skin as she struggles against his tightening grip.

– Why d'you tie up their claws?

Ellie is shaking because he won't answer.

– Why?
– For when their instinct takes over.
– What's that?
– It tells them summat's wrong.
– And then?
– They panic and break each other to bits.

She is silent now because she is ten and she learns five new words a day and puts them in a sentence, but she has not yet reached the words for this.

Taptaptap.

Ellie curls up on her stool, perches her whole body upon it, big then small, like Granny Lil before she died. Her father offers her the net needle, smooth and brown like the back of his hand.

– What will you make me?
– Nothing.

He thinks it is their joke.

The first time he showed her how to make a net he was mending a creel. Ellie watched his penknife as he cut anew the eye where the crab would crawl in for the bait and burned the ends of the twine. Then he gave her the needle,

his hand steering hers in a gentle wave, throwing a loop and catching it. He told her that the trick was to make holes, 'all day making nothing', and he would laugh dry and loud, the cigarettes echoing back from deep within his chest. As he showed her how to make the knots he told her how her great-grandfather James had pulled a sea-god up in the nets and cut it free and that was good luck. He told her how he had pulled her up in the nets like a porpoise.

- Am I good luck?
- We'll see.

Taptaptap.

★

No knock, just a voice breaking in through the kitchen door.

- Pete, Pete I have the paper for you.

Ellie hates Mrs Forster. Hates the way she talks as if Ellie's not there. Hates the way she totters on her bunions across her pristine lawn and sniffs at the air around the stacked lobster pots in Ellie's garden. It did stink though. At dusk Ellie would sneak onto Mrs Forster's neat green grass to hide stones in her flower beds. Cold grey stones that looked like skulls.

- Look at her there, Lady Muck.

Mrs Forster has a special sing-song voice just for Ellie, like a TV voice. Ellie and her dad don't have a TV any more.

She misses *Dogtanian and the Three Muskehounds*, but not *Grange Hill*. She likes her dad's crackly radio and the pips and Terry Wogan because they are part of the kitchen sounds, the marble hard sounds that guard her sleep – peeeep . . . peeeep . . . peeeep.

Mrs Forster waves the paper at her dad through the window, and Ellie sticks out her tongue.

– You sit down for a break with me Pete, what with everything-and-all right now.

Pete is not her dad's proper name. Her dad said they needed to keep Mrs Forster 'on side', which means no more sticking her tongue out at her through the window and maybe no more leaving death stones in her flower beds.

– I've brought us a snifter.

Mrs Forster always smells faintly sweet and acidic like old Christmas cake. Ellie follows her dad and Mrs Forster into the sitting room, knowing that Mrs Forster meant them to have a 'nice chat, just ourselves'. Mrs Forster peers at Ellie through her old-fashioned spectacles, clear and sparkling, cocking her head to one side like a bird, a starling though, not a gull.

– You helping your daddy?

Ellie looks down at the net needle in her hand and the slowly forming net.

– I'm busy making nothing.

Mrs Forster spurted her snifter.

– Go and do that in the kitchen Ellie, there's a good girl.

Traitor. Ellie left the net in the sitting room and stood listening for Mrs Forster's special voice for her dad.

– . . . Got you wrapped around her finger that one . . . The hospital rang, yesterday I think . . . The nurse said she's settling in . . . Oh I can't remember, some clean smalls, that sort of thing. Something sweet, marshmallows she said.

Ellie knew they were talking about her mum and she knew Mrs Forster was lying because her mum would never want marshmallows, she always wanted Fry's Chocolate Cream.

– Now about my lawn, you said Tuesday . . . Full of stones . . . No they didn't need to speak to you directly . . . Oooh crabs I couldn't.

The crabs beat out a weak signal, and Ellie finally taps back, 'She couldn't, but she will.'