

What is
left over,
after

Natasha Lester

Natasha Lester gave up her job as a marketing executive for Maybelline cosmetics to return to university and study creative writing. She then completed a Master of Creative Arts as well as her first novel, *What is Left Over, After*, which won the 2008 T.A.G. Hungerford Award. Her short stories and poems have been widely published in journals such as *Overland*, *indigo* and *Wet Ink*. Natasha has three children.

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prologue

It is nearly midnight and I have circled this room a hundred times. I stop. Rub my stomach. Nothing. Prod. Still nothing. I lift my shirt and watch the pearl of my belly in the mirror. It does not move. I sit, then stand.

I resort to the camera for company but when I pick it up and study the lens it does not soothe the worry I am unable to define. The photographs of my family, hung on the wall, attract my wandering eyes, my wandering fingers. I pass my hand over Pépé's and bring it to rest on Jason's heart. Then I know. The baby has been too still for too long. The camera cracks to the floor.

'Let's lie you down here.' The midwife helps me onto a bed and then asks, 'How many weeks?'

'Thirty-six,' I say.

'First-time mum?'

'Yes. Sorry to bother you. But she's normally so active. I thought I should check.'

The midwife nods and smiles as if indulging a child. I know she does not believe me, that she thinks I'm worrying over nothing. She leaves and I stare at the room. Stark fluorescents render everything flat, caricatured. Bleached walls and floors shimmer like glass.

The midwife returns and straps a band around my belly,

sticks two discs on my skin and connects the baby, through me, to a machine. A slow thud begins to sound and the machine disgorges a stream of paper, printed with lines and dots. I want to study the markings but I'm distracted by the sluggish thumping sound that is loud, so loud. Why are they monitoring my heartbeat? Where is the rapid series of eighth notes that make up my baby's heartbeat?

I see it then, a flicker of uncertainty that erases the midwife's habitual smile.

'What?' I ask.

'Just a minute.' She disappears.

I am left coupled to a machine, ears too full of that slow, slow throb, hand grasping at paper I cannot read, wondering how the shapes made by a robotic pencil can possibly signify my baby.

A doctor comes in; he moves like Jason, urgently but with assurance. He asks me the same questions that the midwife has already asked, as if trying to find a falsehood in my story. I give him the same answers but my voice does not sound the same.

He looks at the paper and listens, as if to the baby.

I wonder what she says. Does she cry out, *Help!*

'Where's your husband?' the doctor asks.

'At work. He's a surgeon.'

The doctor turns to the midwife. 'Get him.' Then he turns back to me. 'You need an emergency caesar.'

'No. She's not ready. I'm not ready. I don't have my bag. I left it at home. All the things I'm supposed to bring. I have nothing.'

'The baby is distressed,' the doctor says. 'Its heart rate is too low.'

Its heart rate. Not my heart rate then.

Wheeling away. Fast. Too fast.

part i

one

This story really begins at midnight one month after Aurora was born, the night of her due date, the night she couldn't wait for, such was her wish to rush headfirst into our lives.

I managed to arrive home just before Jason. I heard him come through the door and drop his keys on the walnut chiffonier, even though he knew I hated the way the metal scratched its polished surface. He almost fell into the sofa and then placed his hand on his right temple, pressing his pulse point as if the pain of blood pumping through his skull was too much to bear. In that gesture, I could see his failure. The heart he couldn't save. The heart that became flaccid in his surgeon's hands as a life passed through his operating theatre.

I shifted on the sofa opposite and his hand fell to his knee.

'Shit Gaele, what are you doing in the dark? I thought you were in bed.'

'I couldn't sleep.'

He closed his eyes and in the silence I could almost hear a tear form in the corner of his eye, hear the pop as the surface tension broke and it slipped over his face.

'You left early this morning,' I said.

'I went for a dive with Gus.'

'Where did you go?'

'Fairy Bower.'

'What did you see?'

‘Fish, Gaelle. Fish and coral.’

‘Did you take any photos?’

‘I didn’t take the camera. It gets in the way. You have this crazy idea that I’m into photography because I’ve kept my old photo albums. The albums were just somewhere to put stuff. They were storage.’

I stood up, shivering. Jason had left the front door open and the breeze was pushing in and all I was wearing was a dress of transparent chiffon. No cardigan. No shoes. No underwear.

I picked up the photograph of the three of us that sat on the dresser beside Aurora’s silver Tiffany rattle. ‘What about this, Jason? Is this storage too? Do you just put us in a frame and then go off to work and think about hearts?’

‘I dreamed about Aurora last night.’

I walked away.

But he followed and continued to talk, like a high school girl babbling about her latest crush. ‘She’d grown up. She was about six and she was running away from me and smiling. Her smile was beautiful.’

‘Was I in your dream too?’

He did not answer with his voice. The answer sat between his eyes and mine, which were locked together, seeing what there was left to see, of us. What Aurora had not taken for herself. What we had not given over to her. And that was why I found his hand, directed his body against the wall and searched his mouth with mine.

I had kissed another man earlier that night and I wondered if Jason could taste this, whether he could tell that my lips had travelled the length of another man’s back, whether sweat and sex were still there, corroding my tongue. I’d screwed the man whilst fully clothed; the clouds had curtained the stars and all I could see as I stood on his balcony were the stains left

by boat lights on the water at Rose Bay and then I could see only the dark because I closed my eyes as I felt the man step up behind me, slide his hands beneath my dress and circle my skin through the silk of my knickers. Then my knickers were pushed down and the man's penis was inside me and his fingers were not circling any more but pressing hard against my skin and I thought I could feel someone watching so I opened my eyes but before I could see whether the shadow on the balcony opposite was a person or a pot plant the man came and then I could see nothing because it was time to go home.

But the sex I needed to have now with my husband was the naked sort. I needed to take off my clothes, take off Jason's clothes. If I could place all my skin alongside all his skin then the chill would go away. If we could both be undone by one another in the way that we used to be before Aurora was born then I would stop.

So I opened Jason's shirt and tossed off my dress. Our arms curled around one another's backs and I could feel the warmth begin. But then I saw, in the slight light cast by the street, a blemish, like a scar, sitting next to his left nipple, resting between his ribs. As his fingers carved a line down my back, I wondered why I had never noticed the scar before. I traced its outline and Jason's hands moved to my buttocks, holding me close as if he was searching for something too. More flesh, perhaps. Or flesh speaking.

I wanted to taste the scar, wanted to roll it across my tongue and make it shine like silver. So I pulled him down to the floor, pressed his back along the cold marble, and lifted my hips over his. Then I lowered my lips towards his chest and paused—all I wanted was for us to stay like that, my mouth open, ready to taste the thick skin of a healed wound.

But then I saw his penis, resting against his groin, as flaccid

as the dead heart. He turned his body away from me, away from the light, so that I could not see his face at all when he said sorry.