

## **The Ugly Thing**

My axolotl is a nocturnal creature who avoids staring eyes at the side of her tank, preferring instead to hide in her hollowed out branch until nightfall. I watch her crawl out from her hidey-hole, pinballing across the tank, where she gobbles up the earthworms that I deposit into the tank. The axolotl is a salamander, not lizard, not fish, not amphibian, but a creature caught perennially in a larval stage that does not live with other creatures in its natural environment and does not make a good tank mate.

My mum died when I was eight and dad and me lived, just the two of us together, quite happily for six years. Until six months ago. Until Gloria. Until she came on the scene, there were still some things of mum's around the place, like the perfume in the bathroom cupboard, the shade of piss when you've been sick for a week. Then there were her pictures on the walls. Not photos, but paintings. They weren't landscapes or anything pretty, but big stark statements of colour splashed here and there. Violent outbursts of mauve or scarlet.

Not long after she died, I can remember one of my aunts, my dad's sister, taking my dad aside, when she caught me looking at one.

'Bill,' she said in this tone that made her sound like the policewoman who told dad about mum's suicide. 'You really should think about taking those pieces down now.' I know she wanted to add, 'now that Yvonne's dead', but she stopped herself.

'Why?' dad said, sounding confused.

'You know perfectly well why, Bill. It's not good for...anyone.' I reckoned that she'd forgotten my name so she added the 'anyone' to cover her tracks. She was the sort of aunt that rarely visited before mum's death and only came round after when she felt the need to do a good turn.

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‘But Gemma likes them. And so do I, actually.’

My aunt looked over at me, her face all pudgy with disgust. ‘They’re so dark, Bill.’

She pushed my dad into the kitchen and I heard her tell him that she thought I was in need of a psychiatrist just like my mum. At that stage, I didn’t know what she meant, but it didn’t sound nice, so I went outside to watch the tadpoles in the creek at the bottom of the yard. Mum and I used to watch the tadpoles, chart their progress and have a celebratory afternoon tea when they changed into frogs.

Tadpoles are like axolotls in a way, when their legs bud and their tail is still visible. But they metamorphose into frogs and toads, different creatures altogether. An axolotl cannot metamorphose, unless you treat it with hormones. What you get is a never-changing bottom-dweller; a guarded creature that knows it’s not pretty so won’t flaunt itself at you.

Dad met Gloria in the local hotel.

‘She’s a looker,’ he said to me that first night he came home.

‘Yeah?’ I asked in my most casual tone, but underneath I was squirming a bit. Nerves, you see. They’re always twisting my guts and getting in the way of things. That aunt, a regular here now that there’s another woman’s clothes to eye with distaste, or hair colour to smirk at, “*There’s just one shade between beauty and brass, Gemma.*”; well, that aunt had constantly made reference to me suffering “in the end”, or “finally succumbing to the grief”. Dad always flicked her off, telling her to mind her own beeswax. He knew how to handle my nerves, see. We’d sit in the living room, dim the lights, play some wacko music that my mum used to like, all

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didgeridoos and cicadas and waterfalls, and we'd just listen to our breathing. He didn't even need to ask me if I was all right, he'd just sort of know. But now, it's all changed.

'She's funny and she listens, you know?' His eyes clouded and he got this dumb look on his face. Just seeing him like that, made my stomach twang. I sat in the armchair, mum's chair, which still carried the scratch marks from her knitting needles in the burgundy velour of the arms and the very faint smell of her patchouli body lotion. Dad flopped down in his chair and grinned. He didn't turn off the light. He didn't play the music.

He began to stay longer at the hotel each night. I wondered if she was putting something in his beer. He just seemed to lift out of himself, like he was high or something. It unnerved me and I wanted to meet this woman whose hold over him was so strong.

I had built up this picture in my mind of a tall woman, with a kind face and a healthy laugh. Instead, she was short but wore ankle-breaking high heels, she was wide-hipped, wide-busted (they stuck out more to the side than they did the front) and wide-mouthed. She had on a fuchsia skirt suit that fishtailed out, flouncing around her wide knees every time she moved. She carried a small cerise velvet bag on her elbow and she wore a fabric stargazer lily above her ear. At that moment, I knew she wouldn't be a knitter or a painter. I doubted she would like tadpoles or axolotls either.

'Hiya, darl,' she sang at me. I thought she would chuck me under the chin or double kiss my cheeks, because she rushed forward at me. I stiffened and she stopped. There we stood, checking each other out. She retreated first, back to dad's arm. I went to look at my axolotl.

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‘She just needs a bit of time,’ he said in a soft voice.

She made tea, a three course affair involving unpronounceable pasta and out of season vegetables and an odd dessert that was somewhere between yogurt and ice-cream.

“*Panna cotta*”, she said twice, revealing her wonky teeth smudged with scarlet lippy.

‘So what do you like at school, Gemma?’

‘Biology.’

‘Oh, animals and stuff. Lovely.’

‘I like marine creatures, mainly.’

‘I saw the tank. I think I saw the little fish in it. Ugly little thing, isn’t it?’

She laughed, stopping when she saw my face.

‘It’s not a fish. It’s a salamander. Some people call it a Mexican walking fish, but that’s wrong.’

‘Oh right. Well, I like the brightly coloured ones, you know, with the floaty tails and that.’

That night I got up and sat in the living room, holding a small torch just under the tank so that I could see my axolotl darting from one side to the other. I dropped her a worm and watched her gobble it whole with her greedy mouth.

‘What do you reckon, Gemma?’ Dad asked, pointing to the hangers carrying short sleeved shirts in soft pastels, pleat-waisted chinos, black jeans.

‘They’re all right.’

He smiled wide. ‘Do you like the shoes? Look, I didn’t go for the slip-ons and went for the brown suede lace-ups instead. Cool?’

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I looked at how they made his feet seem larger and at odds with his skinny legs. He'd even bought a leather jacket.

'And my hair?'

'It's good,' I said, even though I reckon mum would have howled with laughter at the choppy, gelled up style he'd opted for. I think he'd even dyed it.

'I could get you some new clothes, Gemma. Get you out of that black stuff.'

'Is that what Gloria wants?'

He scratched his new hair. 'You've got to give her a chance. She's a good woman. She's kind and she wants to get to know you better. She's not your mum, I know, but she makes me feel whole again.'

Axolotls live in cold water and are cold-blooded, so if they get too warm, their metabolism increases. They become more active and eat more. It also stresses them out and warmer water can increase the risk of bacteria and parasites that can harm them. They do not mix well with other species. Other fish are attracted to their external gills and may nibble them, causing harm. In turn, as a carnivore, the axolotl will eat anything that comes close to them. If it will fit in their mouth, they'll eat it.

It wasn't long before Gloria moved in. I came home from school and was affronted by the nauseating aroma of a meadow-fresh plug-in. She beamed at me in a turquoise velour tracksuit and heeled slippers.

'Those old armchairs will go to the Salvos. Your mum would have liked that, wouldn't she?'

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I watched her play with a beige leather sofa suite out of which you could make all sorts of configurations. Eventually, she put the double recliner part on one side of the room and a small blocky chair on the other.

‘What do you think of these timber venetians?’ she said, pointing to the windows, but not waiting for my answer. ‘Brighten up the room. Better than those dreary old drapes.’

‘The ones my mum made, you mean?’

I ran to the bathroom, slamming the door. It didn’t creak like it used to and I smelled the WD40. I saw that she’d emptied the bathroom cupboard, replacing the Nivea and the patchouli body lotion with Olay Age Definition serums and Dr LeWinn’s rip-off eye gel. She knocked at the door, sickly sweet voice permeating the air. I sat on the loo and waited for her to go away.

Dad came home with flowers. I could hear her crooning to him about how beautiful they were. Then their voices shrunk. It was tell time.

‘Gemma, come out, please.’ Dad’s voice was stiff. ‘I’d like to talk to you. We’d like to talk to you. Together. Please.’

I squeezed the Dr LeWinn’s down the sink before unlocking the door and heading outside. I sat by the creek. But there were no tadpoles. There were earthworms though, and I collected a few for later. I got the axe from the woodshed and whacked the shit out of a pile of logs. I watched the dark, knobbed bark split open revealing the pale gold inside. I wondered what it would be like to split open a human head, watch the bone split and crack, watch the glistening crimson gore ooze out, wondered what it would feel like to pull the blonde hairs from the blade, to reveal the furrowed grey matter. To reduce a person to roadkill.

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When I got back in they were still talking about me.

‘She’s fine, Glo. She’s always been quiet, broody. She’s like her mum.’

‘She’s got cuts and scratches all down her arms. Haven’t you noticed?’

‘That’s just from cutting wood for the fire.’

‘Haven’t you heard about these kids who cut themselves? It’s supposed to be some kind of release for them. It’s drugs next. That’s the next step. You’ve got to get her some help.’

‘You sound just like my bloody sister,’ dad snapped. ‘Gemma is not doing drugs. She’s a good kid. She’s just reserved.’

When I got home from school yesterday, she’d taken down mum’s paintings. She’d hung in-your-face-blue Ken Duncan prints of dolphins and whales.

‘Brighter, isn’t it? Without those depressing pictures. And I know you like fish.’

‘They’re mammals,’ I said, walking past her and just catching the slump of her shoulders.

‘Well, look in the fish tank. I thought your little chap might want some company.’

I saw the gold and silver and black patterned shubunkin, floating dreamily in the water. There were frilly-tailed comets in assorted colours, even a lionhead in a vivid orange, with its missing dorsal fin and pot-bellied shape. I wanted to call that one Gloria.

‘They could hurt the axolotl. And it’s a she.’

‘I’m sure the man in the shop said they all go well together, at least that what I thought I heard. No, I’m certain of it. And he would know. He’s in the business,

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isn't he? And I read somewhere that watching fish is a great way to ease depression and stress.' She looked at me with a wonky grin.

'Are you depressed, then?' I asked.

She swallowed. 'The men are coming tomorrow to put the heating system in. That'll be nice, won't it? No more stoking the fire, no more splitting wood. Just flick the switch and the house will be warm.'

'I love the open fire. I like cutting wood.'

'Your hands are like a man's.' She took them and rubbed a thumb over my callouses.

'They're strong like my mum's,' I said, shoving them into her face and flicking my gaze over her cerise-painted acrylics. 'They show that I work, that I love the land. That I can do things.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'If you think you can worm your way between your father and I, you've got another thing coming. He is the best thing that's ever happened to me and I won't let you stand in the way.' Her breath was hot and sour on my face.

I squeezed her fists in mine, feeling the sinews protest and her knuckles creak. 'He doesn't love you like he loved my mum. He's blinded by your frills and flounces. Your novelty factor will soon wear off.'

She snatched her hands away and I saw half-moons of blood in the flaccid skin on the back of her hands. 'Your mother couldn't give him what he needs.'

Axolotls have the unique ability to regenerate, not just limbs and tail, but even heart and brain cells. Unfortunately, this has made them the subject of many laboratory experiments and possibly added to their decline, rather than helping to protect them.



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My dad upped the ante with the courtship and arranged a weekend away for him and Gloria. I spent the time alone talking to mum out at the creek. If I listened close enough, I could hear her telling me things. I found the tree she used. A beauty of a lemon-scented gum. I saw the outstretched branch that must have held her weight, must have given slightly under the crack of her neck as she let herself fall. It was a good spot, rich with rotted leaves. I found lots of earthworms. I had already decided that as the temperature in the room was getting so much warmer with the new heating, that I needed to find some more food for my axolotl but until then, the worms would do.

I was out the back when I heard the scrunch of tyres. I carried on heaving the axe up above my shoulder, swinging it down and feeling the satisfying give of the wood. I was aware of her musky scent behind me and her simpering giggle.

‘We’re back, Gemma and look, your dad proposed. He’s so romantic, he got down on one knee and everything.’

‘Gemma, love,’ he said, placing an arm around Gloria’s padded shoulders. ‘I’m happier than I’ve been in years. Try to be happy for me. For us. We can work it out, I know we can. We can’t live in the past forever, it’s not what your mum would have wanted.’

A sudden chill of wind ripped through the trees. In the shaking leaves, I heard my mum’s clear directive. I remember the axe being pulled round and up. I remember the glint of blade flash before my eyes. I remember a kind of muffled gagging noise, a fierce scream cut off mid flow, a splatter of warm liquid striking my face. Then another. The axe slipped from my grasp at some point, blood flowing like silken gloves over my hands, drying quickly in the rush of air. I slumped down and

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spent a while pulling both the blonde and darker hairs off the blade, before they got too stuck in the clumps of red. I was surprised that the bone splinters were so visible, like thick egg shells studded amongst the gore.

My axolotl enjoys the taste of her new diet. The other fish were gone in seconds, gulped down whole, floaty tails and all. The rest of the food, I've put in freezer bags and should last a while. As I've become quite accustomed to the warmer air in the room, I've decided to give up splitting wood for a while. I can't find the axe anyway.