

Prodigal

Prodigal by Suzi Mezei

Dough sticks to my fingers. I can't take the phone. He pushes it towards me, silently. But I am pre-occupied with the beads of flour that have collected under my fingernails. It's not until I look into his eyes that I realise there's trouble. My finger prints are embossed in white on the receiver. It's warm from when he laid his ear against it.

The news trickles black as tar through wires. *They chased him down.* The red numbers on the microwave flash rhythmically but I can no longer tell time. *There are pieces of him left on the road; out in the cold.* Please, gather him up and send him home. I want wholeness; the homely equilibrium we complain about. I want the prosaic machinations of a family home, the cool early darkness of June, my son's empty cereal bowl left where the dog can lick the dregs of milk. I want it the way it was before the phone rang.

My husband slumps pale against fridge. Winter is a bad time for accidents. The roads are slippery. The voice on the phone reminds me. *This is not an accident.* I glare at my husband. This is your fault. You filled his head, you who claimed to love him the most. You taught him ego and stained him with your ideas. He has been like you, too long. And now, we all pay.

I read that some Native Americans believe the body must be complete to enter the spirit world. *Forensic:* the word cuts like a razor. We are mute in the car. The radio crackles softly and I cannot make out the songs. My husband's eyes are fixed on the road but he can only see our son. Too late, this is your fault. I keep the words silent inside me.

You get a call and they offer you a lift but you go of your own volition to a compound constructed of tall glass and grey cement. That's where they keep the police these days, not in quaint stations. My pants are smeared with dough. I am still dressed for indoors. An unfinished meal clutters the kitchen.

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Police don't wear uniforms anymore. But they are surprisingly polite. We are offered coffee. "Where is he?" The detective looks apologetic. "They're not ready yet. Soon." Somewhere, there is lawyer scuttling through the building and he is looking for us. He is greedy for information. He must be fed. Don't come to me. I am just bones in disarray. I want to hold my son. "He's a good boy....." I have to voice it. The detective turns his face away.

There's the smell of detergent. The floor glints vicious white and a door is opened electronically. Here is my son; a broken collection of assorted ideologies, the stars of the Southern Cross fading cheap tattoo blue on his shoulder, the hard grazed knuckles of a young working man, surgical tape over his eyebrow. He is behind a glass screen. He stares loathingly through us. He is nineteen.

A man is dead. They chased him down. "Why?" But he avoids me. "Look at me when I speak." *He was tied to the back of the car.* My husband bought Tom a Holden Ute last birthday. That used to be a good Aussie car. Things change. The place is too crowded. Stop the boats. We decide who comes. Go back. My son says he's strong. He is a man of action. He says he's justified. He has no regrets. He says too much.

I am afraid for him. They will never let him go. No touching; his rule, not the police. The black tar trickles into the empty space between us.

I go home, clean the kitchen and wipe my white fingerprints off the phone. We sleep in separate rooms. I conjure blame. It is the heavy crown I lift from my son's head and place on my husband in the silence. But even far apart, we share one restless breath. We dream of Tom.