

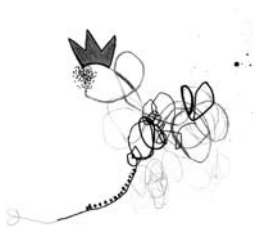
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One Foot Wrong

SOFIE LAGUNA

There is a lion in the way; a lion is in the streets.

Proverbs xxvi 13



I slept at the feet of Boot and Sack. My one small bed went longways across the end of their big one. If I turned my head in the night and the moon was shining through, I could see the hill of Boot's feet beside my face. Sack's feet I couldn't see but I knew they were there - no shoes, tipped-over and sleeping.

Every night Sack pulled my blankets tight around me, pressing me down. 'Lie still, Hester, not a peep from you, not a wriggle.' Every night I lay on my back looking up through the dark at the grey paint cloud, at its cracks in the shapes of wings, and the white curtain sometimes blowing.

Cat was there and together we'd wait for the bird

dream. Cat's bird dream was hiding in the long grass, a fast chase and a jump. In my bird dream everything was white without walls. Bird sang and flew and so did I. Then bird became many birds. Every part of me moved with the many birds - my fingers, hair and toes all swirled and twirled in bird circles. Which was me and which was bird?

A secret has no sound; it lives in your darkest corner where it sits and waits. Sometimes it gives a jump or a wriggle but mostly it waits like the spider waits for the fly. A secret grows thick like the ball of web the spider weaves around the fly when he makes the trap. Fly can't breathe or smell in there - his world sticks against his face, small as his own eyes.

I sat on the floor with Cat. Cat rolled on her back then she jumped for the yellow wool. I pulled it from her and she jumped again. She twisted her body in the air and spun herself around. She ran under the table then she ran back to me. Sack was sewing, her foot pumping the floor *pump pump pump*, the needle sticking the white cloth *stick stick stick*. A tickle grew in me.

Yellow wool wrapped itself around Cat's black paws; she rolled onto her back, wool curled around

her tum. It went round and around her until Cat was in a yellow tangle. Every way she moved she tangled more. Cat was playing like the children at Christ's feet when he made a visit to the marketplace in *The Abridged Picture Bible*.

The tickle in me grew bigger; it pushed at my nose and mouth wanting to escape. Cat jumped and twisted and fell against me. My mouth was shut tight; I was holding that tickling laugh back because I knew it was trouble. Cat jumped on my lap and then that laugh burst out of me, like a sneeze from my toes up.

I laughed at black Cat turning and turning her shining black-grey body caught in the net of yellow wool. I laughed and laughed. I couldn't stop. What went in through my eyes tickled the inside of me and made me laugh louder. I was shaking with it. Sack was up and out of her sewing seat, scissors fell from her knee, she held my chin in her hard sewing fingers and she shook my face from one side to the other, her two blue eyes looking into mine.

'You laugh like the devil. I swear there's a devil in you!' The laugh went out of me and wriggled its way into her fingers that were holding my chin. I couldn't hear it any more after that; it was hidden somewhere inside Sack. Laughing was the same as

crying; it left you empty as air.

A devil in me . . . Is his home in the bone down my back? Does the devil live in the same place in me that the laugh comes from? Somewhere down deep, a place you can't touch with a finger?

Sack said, 'When you're bigger you can move into the empty room where you will be by yourself.'

'When will that be?' I asked her.

'When I say,' she said. I walked into the empty room that would be mine when Sack said, and I sat on the floor. Cat was there too. The room wasn't empty anymore - it had Hester in it, and Cat. I wondered how many times the hands would go around the face of the kitchen clock above the stove before Sack said.

Boot found me sitting there. 'You know this is not allowed!'

Sack heard him and came running up the stairs hissing like Cat in a corner. 'Don't you push me, young lady, don't you do it!' She slapped my ear. It put a ringing bell in my head, the more I listened the louder it got until it was a whole song with words and the bell to

go with it. Not a song from Sack's radio box, not a song that Sack ever heard. It made me smile; it was a secret song just for me.

I sat and I sat and I ate what was put before me. Chicken legs, oats and milk, pork and corn, bread and oil. The chicken legs used to be a walking chicken. 'Why did it stop walking?' I asked Boot when he was carving. Sack hadn't come back from folding sheets in the laundry.

Boot patted my head. 'Unlucky,' he said. The oil made the bread heavy. I pushed it with my sharp fork.

Sack came back. 'Don't play with your food, Hester, eat it. John, the fire needs wood.' Boot left the kitchen. I put the bread in my mouth but I couldn't chew. Teeth and tongue said no. The heavy bread filled every space. I couldn't swallow. Sack was watching, waiting for the bread to go down into the deep of Hester, but it wouldn't. It stuck.

'Eat it.' There wasn't anywhere else to look but Sack's face. The bread took up all the other room. 'What are you doing, Hester? I told you to eat your dinner.' Sack had two blue eyes with a pink stain under one, the

shape of a small spider with three legs. The pink spider glowed pinker as Sack watched me with the stuck angry bread. Suddenly her hand was at my mouth and she was digging and pushing at the bread. 'Greedy, greedy you took so much from me!' Her fingers clawed at the insides of my cheeks like Cat clawed at the carpet.

Sack pushed down the angry bread with her fingers. I couldn't get the air past the bread and fingers. The angry bread filled the room with its shouting *no no no!* Boot came running back into the kitchen. He pulled Sack off and held her by her shoulders. The pink spider turned in tiny circles under her eye. Sack was shaking. Boot told her to have a lie-down upstairs. He gave me water. I drank the water. 'I'm afraid you'll have to stay there until you've eaten it all up,' Boot said. I tasted blood.



I lay on the hallway floor and ran my fingers down the dark cracks between the boards. Sack was in the laundry telling Boot he did it wrong. I couldn't hear the words of Boot's answer, only his soft sound. He wanted Sack to be quiet.

Sack's voice was a thin line; Boot's was wet as a bucket of leak-water.

'Hester, come here.' Someone was calling me. I got up and went into the kitchen.

The line of Sack's voice grew thinner and darker. 'How many times do I have to ask? It's the same every time!'

The round handle of the back door said, 'Turn me.' It was handle who'd been calling. 'Turn me, Hester,' he said again.

Sack's voice went on. 'What am I supposed to do now?'

Outside was *forbidden* because it had no walls or roof telling you when to stop. Boot could go there to chop wood, Sack could go there to hang clothes, but not Hester, an aberration who came too late. I had seen outside through the windows only. Whenever the day curtains were off for cleaning I climbed up on the arm of the couch, lay across it like Cat in the sun and looked at the outside while Sack washed the curtains in the laundry. Any time I ever looked at the outside I could hear the *slush slush slush* of the hard laundry brush against the curtains. Then I'd watch her carry them outside in the cane basket

and hang them. Cat watched too, blinking beside me. The curtains hung like thick brown walls on the line, moving back and forth in the wind. I wanted to see more of the outside so I climbed down from the couch and pressed my nose against the glass. I tried to see around the corner but the walls of One Cott Road stood in the way.

Sack wasn't in the laundry scrubbing curtains now; she had taken Boot into the living room. 'How many times, John? Why is it always like this?'

'Turn me, Hester,' handle said. I stepped closer. 'I am your friend, turn me.'

'What is a friend?' I asked him.

'A friend gives you pictures,' he said. I reached out and turned him. The back door swung open and I stepped out. I was looking at the forbidden world with a tree in it.

I stepped down into the long green grass. It scratched my legs where my socks finished. The tree was a different tree to the one in Jesus's paradise. This one had no leaves and it went every way just like the flames from the fire in the red wood stove. It was as if the flames had stopped moving and become tree. Tree reached

up like Hester reaching for the handle. She reached up with all her many flame fingers. I looked to where she reached, *up up* into the sky. What handle did tree want to turn? What door did tree want to open?

The sun burned hot in my face. The sky was the home of the sun. The sun was there when Jesus rose on the fifth day in his white dress. Two ladies saw when they walked past on their way to the shop. Jesus wanted to go to the same place as tree. Tree wanted to open the door to the home of the sun! I stood and looked until drips came from my burning eyes.

I walked to the other side; socks without feet inside and trousers empty of legs hung from the line. Boot's shirts hung upside down by their arms. No hands, body or neck of Boot inside. Boot's hands, body and neck were in the kitchen being shouted at by Sack. I could still hear the black line of her words. 'You didn't look, you never used your eyes!' The shirts waved their empty arms in the wind.

I walked down through the scratching grass to tree. I touched her trunk and pressed my ear close. 'Hester . . . pretty . . . beautiful Hester . . .'

Those were the words from the

wood of tree; she sent them straight down the tunnels of my ears and into the place where messages came. I put my lips to her thick body and kissed like Sack kissed Cat's head, *kiss kiss*.

The tree was full of little lines making shapes and bumps, like somebody drew into tree with Sack's sharp list-pencil. I saw pictures of mice and a bottle and a wing. Who had been living out here drawing secret pictures into the body of tree? Was it a *friend*?

I bent down so my knees came up close to my face and I patted the ground around tree. A line of ants moved across the stony ground one following the other. I put my finger in the line and the ants climbed over. A finger couldn't stop them. I lay on my tum with my face close to the moving line. I watched the ants quickly walking. I rolled over to look behind me. Would a line of Hesters be following? I watched the ants walk into a small dark hole. They followed each other down. Were they going home? What was down there? How did the ants know it was their home?

I looked at the stony dirt. Stones all shapes; every one different. I could have made a crown

of stones with string, and butter for glue. I could have put it on my head and done a prayer in a circle dance. I picked up two stones; I rolled them around in my hands. I felt the edges. Who made them? Who did they belong to?

I looked into the grass. I saw flowers. They were smaller than the ones in the Garden of Eden and there were more of them. The pink flowers were like tiny coloured hats in the grass. The orange flowers wore skirts and in the middle of the orange skirt was the seeing-eye. Through the seeing-eye the flower saw the way dirt moves, each piece up against another, always changing places. The orange flowers wore skirts for the dance of feet passing. The purple flowers were teacups full of tea that tasted like honey. I put my face up close and took a small sip. I closed my eyes. Blankets of purple, orange and pink came down over me.

I lay and listened to the sound of ants walking. I listened to the pencil making pictures in tree and I listened to tree reaching for the handle to the door of the home of the sun.

I heard another sound too, deep inside, in a part you couldn't put a finger on. It was Sack

shouting at Boot for all she was worth. Soon she would go looking for me in the bedroom where I should have been, on the floor reading *The Abridged Picture Bible*. Then there'd be trouble. Sack would be shouting for all she was worth at *me* then. I stood up and ran through the grass back to the steps and the door. I turned and I looked at the forbidden outside - no window with dust between me and the world - one last time. I was Lot's wife on the cliff looking back. Would the outside go away when I closed the door? I looked until I could see it with my eyes shut then I walked through the door and closed it behind me.

I was shut inside the house now. The walls and the ceiling and the floor told me when to stop, the way the spider's web tells the fly when to stop. Somewhere there was Boot and Sack but I didn't know where. One Cott Road was quiet, though Sack's words still bounced around the room; *John, times, God, why on earth? disappoint, you*. The only thing missing was her mouth with the dark tunnel leading down to where her messages came. I crept like Cat, past the words as they knocked against the walls and

floor, looking for an ear to reach. I climbed the stairs *one step two step three step four*, past the room that would be mine when Sack said, until I got to the master bedroom. I took *The Abridged Picture Bible* out from under my bed, opened it and touched Lot's wife with my fingers. She stood on the high cliff with her face turned back, the colour of ash. Her coat flew out behind like a hard wing. She was looking for the line of Lot's wives. They weren't there and that made Lot's wife sad. 'Lot,' I said, 'Lot, where are you? Have you eaten your dinner, Lot? You better eat it all up.'

'Hester, I'm coming in a moment to check on you,' Sack called from the toilet. I heard it flush. I turned the page so Lot's wife could go to sleep, and I waited for Sack to come and check on me.

It was night and I could hear the sleep-breathing of Boot and Sack *in out in out in out*. Boot breathed as if the air was heavy as a bag of flour. Sack only breathed on the way out. A small whistle. Every night my song sung itself to the tune of their breathing. I turned on my back and pulled my arms out from under the tight

covers. I closed my eyes and I saw the tree from outside. She was reaching up and then I reached up too, spreading my flame fingers as far as they could go - far enough to split - *up up up* to the home of the sun.



‘I wish you wouldn’t,’ Sack said to Boot when he tasted the soup that sat on the stove. When she was gone for a lie-down I asked him. ‘What is a wish?’ He turned to me, soup caught in the hairs under his mouth. ‘Why won’t you call me *daddy*, or *papa*, or *father*?’

‘What is a wish?’ I asked again.

‘What is a *what*?’

‘What is a wish?’

He looked down at me, then up again and into the faraway. ‘It is something you want very much.’

‘Why can’t you have it?’

‘Different reasons. Something stops you.’ I made my back hard and straight. *Something you want very much . . .* I wanted a pencil.

Cat was one of the Lord’s creeping creatures.

She slept on a thin pillow by the step. Sack fed her, Boot fed her and I did too. Cat was grey and black with a bit missing from her ear and a tail with a bend. I always knew where she was and she always knew where I was. She never came when I wanted to touch her head and look at where her missing bit was. She hissed at me when I put my face close. Sometimes Cat and me ate together, both of us under the table. Sack said, 'Until you learn you are no more than a dirty thing on all fours.' I looked into Cat's eyes while we shared the bones.

Cat caught mice. She brought them inside, put them between her paws and knocked them on the head. They tried to run away but they couldn't run fast enough with blood out the nose, and a torn ear. Cat let them get a little way, just far enough to think they could get home to the hole in the wall, and then she knocked them on the head again. The mice tried to walk but it was getting harder with blood on the side and an eye out. I lay on the floor and watched. Soon the mice couldn't walk at all. They lay still and quiet and that's when Cat walked away.

Cat had climbed up on the mantle piece and was playing with the list-pencil that Sack hung from the wall by a piece of string. Cat knocked it one way, then another, with her black paw. I sat under the chair and watched. She kept pulling. The pencil was coming loose from the string. Soon Cat knocked the list-pencil so hard it dropped to the floor. I jumped out from under the table, picked it up and hid it in my pants.

Different reasons weren't stopping me from having my wish anymore.

I went to the shelf of books. I reached back into the row behind the row, and I took a book from the very end. Nobody had touched the book for a long time. It had dust along the top. On the cover of the book was a king on a throne. Lot's wife was the queen standing beside him. Her hand was on his shoulder and she was smiling. She held a long stick and wore a crown of pointed stones. The stones were stuck together with butter from the cooling cupboard. Every page of the book was covered in little black marks with space round the sides as if the line of ants had walked in twisting circle paths, and then somebody closed the book with a snap and squashed them flat.

Boot asked, *should we teach her to read?* and Sack said, *she doesn't have the wherewithal. Wherewithal is what you need to read and go outside. I don't have it because I came late to my mother. She nearly lost her life to the birth of me. All those years of waiting and longing, and for what? For this?*

I flicked through the pages of the book, dust fell off the paper, the pages were brown at the corners. The book needed a friend. I hid it in my pants with the pencil then I walked up the stairs to the bedroom. Sack was out on a visit. Boot was in his study listening to the radio. I was locked inside with my wish. It was hard walking up the stairs with a book and a pencil hidden in my pants but I could do it. I was the Lord's mistake but I could do it.

I went into the bedroom and crawled under the bed with my head out the side for light. I took the book and the pencil from my pants. I opened the book and found a page without so many squashed ant marks. I put the pencil to the paper the way Sack did when she wrote a list. A list was a line of things that Sack wanted Boot to bring home from the shop. *We will need flour, and tea. And don't forget soap. I*

wrote my own list in secret writing. On my list I put *outside*, I put a *skirt*, I put a *crown of stones*. I tried to make my writing look like the words in the book but soon the pencil didn't want to write a list. It wanted to do other things. I watched my hand move across the paper. The pencil made the shape of the tree; the marks that were already there on the page became leaves and a nest. Then it made the shape of God the Bird flying through the branches of the tree. He had a sheep with him; the sheep had a wing. If my pencil was green the sheep would be too. My pencil made the home of the sun. It had circle doors but it didn't have walls or a floor. Through the circle doors you could see gardens full with orange and purple flowers. The gardens floated in the sky. Then my pencil made the pink spider under Sack's eye, then it drew her eye and then it drew the soup caught in the hairs under Boot's mouth, then the hairs turned into water, then it made Lot's wife but this time she was moving, she was flying from the cliff out over the grey seas, her coat spread like the wings of a bird, and then it made the seas parting, fish flew out, and then it ran out of pencil. The pencil was flat. I pushed the flat

pencil harder into the page of the book and it made a small hole.

There is no need to cry. You are not a baby anymore. I crawled further back under the bed and I put the pencil where the carpet meets the wall. The flat pencil was my secret. I put the book back in my pants and I crawled out from under the bed. I walked downstairs - Sack was not back from her visit - and I went to the shelf. I put the book back onto the very end of the row behind the row.

