



GHOST BIRD



LISA FULLER



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For Pop



Fire is the centre of our world. It's where everything happens: cooking, playing, laughing, family, story. Fire means so much more than just a bunch of burning carbon.

I sit and watch the embers escape, propelled by hot air swirling upwards. They dance into the sky, as the smoke moves steadily in one direction. My twin sister sits right in its way.

'What's wrong with you?' I shake my head as she coughs.

'Ay, smoke follows beauty, little sister.'

'Or, you know, the wind? Which in your case makes sense.'

'You wanna talk!'

'Are you sure we're related?' we say together.

Laughing with the same smile, same eyes, but a mirror image. A small freckle above the eyebrow on my right and her left is how most people tell us apart. Mirror twins are rare. Opposite sides of a whole, Mum says, even in our personalities. Laney is outgoing, sporty and popular. I am not.

'What are you two fightin bout now?'

Nan comes shuffling out of the dark, a big jewfish in one hand and a massive ceratodus in the other. I hop up to go help, but she shoos me away, tossing them to the ground. I stare in fascination at the ceratodus. 'Salmon' the old people call it, as old as we are in this country they reckon. Whitefullas said

they were prehistoric dinosaurs or something. Made sense to us. Sometimes people call them lung fish, cos that's what they had. Sitting by the river at night you'd hear them surface to gasp in air. Nan'd already whacked these ones on the head, otherwise that salmon'd be gasping now.

'You gonna just look at it or you wanna eat it?'

'Sorry, Nan.' I smile at her as she comes over with her cleaning gear. An old knife, some newspaper and alfoil.

I stay close, watching every move she makes, while Laney sits to the side acting like a big dainty thing with her 'ew' this and 'yuck' that. Nan looks at me and we both roll our eyes.

'Anyone would think you weren't black. Call yourself my granddaughter,' she mumbles in her rough smoker's voice. 'In my day you'd figure out how to clean it or you'd starve.'

Cleaning it is gross, I agree. But I'll take this over going into the shops and getting that boxed frozen fish rubbish any day.

I lean too close and Nan growls at me for getting in her light while she's working. She always smells like Imperial Leather soap, White Ox tobacco and talcum powder. Mum said the only thing that'd changed since she was a kid is the brands. It sounds like it should smell bad, but it never does. It smells like home.

'Nan, when ya gonna let me do that?'

'When I'm sure you can do it proper way.'

'But how will you know if you never let me?'

She snorts. 'I'll know before you.'

Fish wrapped, she takes a stick and digs out some coals, placing her parcels in and covering them. Stretching her back out, she lets out a big groan, then settles down onto one

of the blankets we'd laid out by the fire. Nan always keeps blankets in her car, those old scratchy hospital ones.

'Clean up them guts, granddaughters, and make your nan a cuppa.'

I go for the guts while Laney does the tea. We already had the billy on so it would be ready for Nan. When I get back to the fire Laney has hopped onto one blanket, wrapping a second one tight around her. She lifts one side for me and I climb in, cuddling close. We sit in silence watching the flames.

'Nights like this remind me of your great-grandmother's old humpy by the river,' Nan says, smiling into her tea.

She reaches into her massive bag that she dares call a purse, pulling out her rollies and getting a pre-prepared one that she dips into the embers till she has a nice cherry on it. She takes one deep drag, puffing smoke into the flames and watching it curl upward. Fear-tinged excitement rattles my heart to life. I know what is coming next. Laney and I cling closer, clasping each other's hands tight as we wait.

'He used to tell me the best stories, my old dad. Knew a lot of things.' Nan's gaze is lost in the fire and her memories. 'Couldn't teach us much, not language for sure, that old Protector fulla woulda taken us. But he told us what we needed to be safe.'

Sadness flows out of her then, mingling with the dirt and ash and painting the earth in pain. Another big draw, more smoke.

'Never say their names at night, daughters, or you'll call them to you. Don't whistle, don't draw in the dirt, don't sweep the ground neither. Not in the night or they'll come. These fullas ere, look.'

She holds her hand up, palm facing out and does that claw clenching move that we all know and are scared of, even adults.

Drag. Puff.

‘If you’re walking at night and you feel somethin behind you, don’t look back. Don’t run. Sing if you have ta.’

Drag. Puff.

‘Stay out of them caves at night. And if you go in em in the day, don’t never take nuthin from there. If you kick a stone loose, put it back.’

Drag. Puff.

‘Keep your feet covered at night. Or you might find somethin ticklin em. Them things like children best and they’ll wake ya if they can. Then they’ll take ya and we never see yas again. They never give back what they took.’

We knew these things because Nan made sure we knew them. She still told us every time we were out by the river like this. It was our way.

‘Have you ever seen one, Nan?’ Laney asks.

‘Well now,’ she says, turning to look at us. The firelight moves strangely on her crinkled skin, making her beloved face look spooky. ‘Sure you wanna hear them stories? Ya not sleepin with me tonight.’

Her warnings are always the same, but she lets us sleep with her anyway.

‘Yeah, please Nan,’ we say together.

‘Good,’ she says, nodding in approval and looking back into the fire. ‘Because you’ll need these stories one day, granddaughters.’

She looks lost for a minute while Laney and I sit, waiting to have the shit scared out of us. From somewhere behind

her I see a flicker in the dark, like when a wallaby jumps between trees, moving fast. A brief flash of red dances and I frown at it, trying to see. Probably light in the wallaby's eyes, but it looked too small for that. Turning to ask Laney, I have a second to register the glint of gold and a strange pendant around her neck before clawed, furred hands wrap around her throat.

We both gasp as it pulls her backwards out of the firelight.
'Laney!'

I spin to Nan, expecting her to move, but she's still looking into the flames.

'Nan!'

She finally turns to look at me with shining red pupils. Stumbling, I feel hands grab hold of my shoulders.

'Be ready, granddaughter,' she whispers as I'm ripped back, screaming into the dark.



The Day Of

Rolling out of bed is like getting a present, the morning chill a gift this time of year. Soon the world will be nothing but inescapable heat, so intense that the tar on the roads will bubble. I stretch, trying to shake off the weird unease in my heart, like I am forgetting something important. A heaviness sits in my gut that makes me fight to remember what I'd dreamt, but I give up when it refuses to come out. Stepping lightly over the worst of the creaking floorboards hidden under pancake-flat carpet, I drag my feet to the morning's most unpleasant duty.

I duck my head into Laney's room. I look over her piles of clothing, pick up the nearest, bulkiest shoe and peg it at the shapeless lump on the bed. Waiting long enough to hear the expected four-letter-filled response from under the covers, I go to the kitchen.

Finding the teapot half full and lukewarm is my first hint that Mum's already been up. The dishes in the sink say she's run a plate of food up to Pop; lately she's really worried about him getting too skinny. After rinsing out the pot and setting off the kettle, I make my way to the back steps. I sit and stare out over our neat little yard with its wonky clothesline and rusted tank stand. From here I can catch glimpses of the neighbours' places and the open paddock next door. Everything is a solid crackling brown. Trees flow over the

hills on all sides of our town, holding the sun back as long as they can. The occasional car passes with a council worker on their way in, or a big truck filled with cattle. Magpies are warbling and the family of willy-wagtails that live in our shed are out waving their moondees, chirruping happily. The last of the cool air brushes my skin, running from the sun that's fought its way to the top of the hills. It reminds me of the aching pit in my stomach that I'd woken with and the dream that wouldn't make itself known. The kettle clicks and like a starting signal I'm up and off to get ready for the day.

Once I'm showered and fed I can't put it off anymore. I resist the urge to turn on the TV for the millionth time and zone out. The port goes over one shoulder and I'm out the door. I'm not in a rush because I love school, but getting there late means arriving all sweaty and gross. And dawdling for me equals running late. I'm always late, one of the few ways me and my twin are alike. Mum says Laney's too obsessed with the mirror to notice the time and I'm too much on my own planet to see the real one. She's right but I'll never tell her that.

Besides, this is it, my big year of lasts. The last first day of school, the last year of school ever, and hopefully the last I'll spend in this hole of a town. Most people are freaking out about Y2K and the world ending, but I can't wait for the year 2000. My morning funk disappears under that exciting thought and I could skip, I'm that happy.

Jogging down the front steps of our little weatherboard, I can see other kids walking but they're all primary schoolers. There's more than double the number of them compared to the high schoolers and only five other kids in my grade, but

we'll be the biggest graduating class in a long time. If we all graduate.

At the mailbox I stop dead. A few houses down, right on the path that I always take to school, a hunched figure is pacing. Now that I'd noticed, I realised all of the littlies were crossing the road to go around. Stick-thin and clothed in one of those old-fashioned cream nighties that cover you from head to toe, Mad May Miller is doing her usual thing – bent forwards like she's searching the grass for something, muttering to invisible people and throwing her hands around like she's demanding they listen. Hopefully someone has rung her mob, God knows I can't. The hate our families have for each other is legend. One of those small-town things where no one knows how it started but every generation keeps it alive, me included. I've always thought most of the Millers are a waste of oxygen, but seeing May just makes me sad. Nan used to say she wasn't always that way; something bad happened to her so we should always be good to her, Miller or not. Then Nan would pinch her lips together and ignore my questions. She used to tell me a lot, but if she shut her mouth like that I knew not to push.

I hear the sound of a familiar engine turning into our street and I spot the white Corolla seconds later. Damn, should've left when I had the chance. The car barely stops in the dirt track that passes for our driveway before she's out and pointing at me in accusation.

'Stacey Claire Thomson, where dya think you're goin?'

'Umm, school?'

I think about running for it, but she'd probably chase me. Dad used to say it was like cornering a sand goanna – better

make sure there was something bigger around or you'd get cut up when it tried to climb you. The reminder of Dad hurts somewhere deep, and for a moment I can see him in the doorway telling Mum to 'Leave my namesake alone, woman!' She'd sigh or yell back, 'I should never have named her after you.' She'd turn on him then, ready for a fight. He'd drop me a sly wink, waving a hand behind his back for me to sneak off. Dad was my tallest tree.

Shoulders slumping, I brush the waves of memory aside and refocus on my glaring mother. A tall, skinny woman with skin shades darker than mine, the only thing I'd gotten from her was her caramel-coloured eyes and the psychotic curly hair she'd already forced into a tight bun. Dressed in her hospital uniform, car keys jingling in her hands, she is always in a rush.

'You were sposed to wake your sister up.'

'I did, but she told me to f—'

'Watch your mouth or I'll soap it!'

I roll my eyes and see her anger spike. Better to try for reasonable. I take a few slow steps towards her till I'm back at the fence.

'What do you want me to do, Mum? Drag er up by er hair? That's the only way she's comin with me.'

Her glare morphs into the crinkles of worry I've seen more and more of lately. 'Daughter please, just try, ay? For me?'

I hate it when she talks to me like an adult; it means I have to be freaking responsible. Heaving a sigh I do my best sulky walk back to the house. As I brush past I catch Mum's grin.

Cow knows exactly what she's doing.

Heading into my twin's bedroom again, I stand and contemplate my plan of attack. Her den is cluttered, starting with clothes, accessories and rubbish carpeting the floor, working its way up the walls, and ceilings that are plastered with every single celebrity poster she can get. The ones from *Smash Hits* magazine are her favourites, especially when they're of muscled, shirtless boy bands and rappers, like Boyz II Men and Nas. I pick my way over her junk and flop down sideways on the covers, landing straight across her thighs.

'Get off, I'm not goin!' Her voice is muffled.

'Come on, Laney, you know she's gonna boss ya till ya move, might as well get it over with.' I wriggle against her legs to annoy her. 'There's only this year left and then she'll get off your back.'

'I don't give a shit about school!'

It's a morning for epic eye rolls but I hold in the sarcastic comment because it definitely won't get me my way. Maybe reasonable will work for me again?

'Yeah, but she does. You can put up with it for this year and you're home free, or you can bail and hear er whinge about it for the rest of your life.'

I climb off her, making sure to dig my elbow into her stomach on the way. There's an *oomph* then silence as I stand and watch.

Alright then, stuff reasonable.

'You got five seconds, then I start smashing lumps with my port.'

'Holy hell, Tace, that thing's heavier than you!'

'That was last year; this year Mum got me them extra books memba?' I heave it off the floor with a noise like a

wheezing old dog and pretend to test it out. 'It's gotta be another few kilos at least. You might be the track queen but I'm the weightlifter, sista girl. Now move!' Grunting some more, mostly for show, I heft my port over my head. 'Five. Four. Three. Two ... two and a half.'

Nothing but a snort from under the covers. Oh she asked for it.

I drop the port to the ground and walk over to the largest poster in the room. The one of Tupac stuck front and centre on her wardrobe door. This one hadn't been folded in a magazine. Mum had given it to her for her birthday, ordered it pristine and new. Not a single crease on it.

'I've always loved this poster,' I say, fondling the corner.

'You wouldn't ...'

'Be a shame ta have ta mark it up, ay? What would happen if I—'

Laney bolts from under the covers and pushes past me to the bathroom. She's cursing me but she's up. I stick the corner back carefully and go into the kitchen to start the kettle before getting her towel from her room. I'm standing on the other side of the bathroom door when it cracks open and a soapy head pokes out.

'Tace! Get my—'

Spotting the towel she snatches it and slams the door. I didn't really expect a 'thank you'. Putting together some toast for her and tea for both of us, her breakfast goes on the left like always. Two sides of the mirror Mum says; it's supposed to be a play on being mirror twins, we just call it gammon. Speak of the devil, Satan herself was heading towards the door on a wave, her purse over one thin shoulder.

I poke my tongue out at her and she grins. What a way to start the year. The Thomson twins, late again, but no one would expect anything else.



Sitting in detention on the first day of school, I sigh and turn another page. Detention's always in the library, right next to the staff room. A large single room, it has shelves on all the walls up to waist height and two taller stacks that divide it into spaces. At one end is an open area with all the little kids' books, while the stacks are all young adult fiction, and the other open area is non-fiction. The far wall in the non-fiction area has two-metre high shelving filled with reference materials. Triangular brown laminate desks, each with five or six brown chairs, dot the space in front of the stacks.

The librarian, Mr Wells, is our keeper today, and he takes great delight in handing out a 'random' essay topic to each of us. The catch is we aren't allowed to touch a computer. Leafing through an ancient encyclopaedia with a brown cover and Bible-thin pages, I am looking for my topic: 'Newtonian time'. When I finally get to the definition I send the old fart a glare. What a smart arse.

A spit ball hits my hand. I ignore it and my annoying twin.

'Don't be mad, Tace,' she whispers.

Irritated, I flip a page I haven't read yet and tuck my hand back into my lap. We've been giving each other the cold shoulder all morning but she'd caved after lunch and

has been pestering me ever since. We both ignore the other person in detention with us.

Sam Miller had walked into the office not long after us. I couldn't help but feel bad for him. Mad May's great-nephew, he's the one who always goes to get her because he can keep her calm. The only boy left in year twelve, Sam has been in the same grade as us since preschool. Thirteen years of schooling and for most of that time we kept our distance. At school we can be civil, outside those gates he's a Miller and we're Thomsons. Sam never seemed that bad to me and Laney, but we'd never admit it to anyone else. As usual he picked the desk furthest away from us but I could see him, out of the corner of my eye, bent over his own book. It looked like he might've fallen asleep.

'It's your own fault, you know.' Another spit ball from Laney but this one hits my neck. I keep pretending to read.

'You'd have been on time if you hadn't dragged me in, Tatas.'

Right, that's it!

Whipping my hands out from under the desk, the rubber-band I've been carefully stretching goes flying. Bullseye! Direct hit fair on her forehead. Laney freezes in a second of shock and we both bust out laughing. Sam must've seen it because his shoulders are shaking.

'What's going on over there?'

Wells gives us the evil eye from his desk.

'Nothing, Sir.'

We put our heads down and try not to giggle. A few minutes of silence tick past before I feel her stare again. Looking up I cock an eyebrow and she smirks back.

‘Can you cover for me tonight?’ Laney asks.

‘Why, what are ya doin?’

She smiles. ‘Better you not know, liddle sista.’

I do my best impression of Mum’s disapproving tight-lipped look. All it does is make her giggle.

‘Nah nuthin, I just wanna see Troy.’

I roll my eyes. ‘Gorn then, go hang around with Dickhead and leave me to Mum.’

I’ve told her heaps of times exactly what I think of Troy but it didn’t stop her so I don’t bother anymore. Didn’t mean I was gonna be nice about it.

‘Leave ya to your books ya mean.’ Her lip curls in a sneer and all the fun drops out of the air. ‘I don’t know why you bother with the white man’s education, sista, what they gotta teach us in ere isn’t real life. We gotta fight the system, not take part in it.’

I turn my glare on her and there’s no play in this one either.

‘Don’t start that shit with me. Next thing you’ll be talkin native title. What’s that ever done but tear us mob apart?’

‘And what’s education ever done but lifted one of us above the others? You’ve never been that selfish, Tace.’ She hisses this at me and I can feel the four-letter words jumping up my throat.

We glare at each other, ready to go to war, but duck our heads down again as old Wells comes around from his desk to eyeball us. It’s an old argument and so familiar we can keep going using hand signals, mostly rude ones. She’ll never convince me she’s right, no matter how much she tries.

Laney had been talking like a reject from the Black Panther Party since she hooked up with Troy last year. It’d

started off subtle at first, but now there are times when I swear she hates white people. Mum never taught us to be like that. She always said we'd been through too much, had too much of that shit put on us and knew how bad it hurt to go dishing it out on someone else. Mum hasn't noticed Laney's new attitudes yet, but when she does Laney and Troy both better look out. It is a satisfying thought. Alana Thomson could send grown men running with that sharp tongue of hers.



Laney takes off straight after Wells releases us. Watching her climb into her man's car, that same bad feeling from this morning stirs my guts. A snippet of a dream flickers, something about Laney screaming. Goosebumps race over my flesh. Troy barely waits for her door to close before spitting gravel. Dickhead knows what I think of him, no way would I get in his car and no way he'd offer. Still, that feeling sits there. I almost whisper a request for Nan to keep Laney safe before I stop myself. Feeling depressed, I head home.

Walking up to the house I spot Troy's goonang-brown rusted bomb and frown. If word got out he was parked outside our place Mum'd be on the war path. What does Laney think she's doing?

I glare at the cocky moron, who has the balls to smile at me. Lip raised in a sneer I make it to the front door in time to bar Laney from leaving.

'Givin up on sneakin round?'

She rolls her eyes and shoves me. 'I forgot somethin. Now get out of the road before someone sees us.'

I stay where I am for a moment, trying to get her to look at me. She's out of her uniform in shorts and a t-shirt, but she won't meet my eyes. She just keeps right on shoving. In the end I have to back off. It isn't like I have a choice, I can't force her to tell me, especially on a gut feeling. Watching her run outside, something bothers me. It's only after she drives off that I realise she hadn't been carrying anything.

The churning inside worsens and for no reason I can explain I go and stare into Laney's room. Aside from the usual mess with her port and discarded uniform now resting on top, there isn't anything to see. But something feels wrong. Shaking my head at my imagination, I go to my room to change out of my sweaty clothes.



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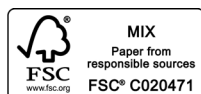
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