‘Gorgeous writing, authentic characters you want to both cwtch and cheer on, and, as usual, an amazing animal – Jonesy the dog – who could wish for more?’
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‘Oh my word, this book! Glorious! … I absolutely loved every page. Cracking characters, so funny and so full of heart too. I choked up more than once and openly wept at the end. A gorgeously joyful read. It snuck deep into my heart and will sneak into yours. Wonderful. Hugely uplifting, hopeful, and a real celebration of friendship and community. Love, loved, LOVED it.’
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‘An exquisite tale of love, grief, and the power of stories to heal, it sparkles like a perfect jewel.’
Matt Brown, author of the *Kevin the Vampire* series

‘*The Library of Lost Stories* is about how stories save us. How they save individuals and communities and places and memories. I’ve

loved all the books I've read by Eloise Williams actually, but this is the cream of the crop. It's funny and heartwarming… Noni will, I guarantee, steal your heart. She's just gorgeous. I loved her. Also did I mention that this is also really, really funny?! Which is so hard to do and makes everything else just soar.'
Nicola Penfold, author of *Where the World Turns Wild*

'Eloise always writes beautifully, and I feel like this book just perfectly demonstrates her skill and her love of storytelling.'
Jennifer Killick, author of *Crater Lake* and *The Dread Wood* series

THE LIBRARY OF LOST STORIES

Eloise Williams



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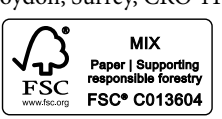
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For Mum and Dad and Jo.

For all the families.



1

Stopped Clocks

December 1976. Aberglas.
It's cold and I am up the river.

I lean over the railings of the bridge, hold on tight, so my knuckles go white and the cold of the metal cuts through to my bone. Forest-green water, silver-sky reflections, no sign of anything unusual floating its way to Cardiff.

A crow struts along the riverbank, tugging up bits of grass to see if he can eat what's underneath. I like the black fatness of him and the way his feathers turn oily purple, green, blue as they catch the winter light. I copy the way he walks. Hands clasped behind my back. Head bobbing. Stern expression, like an old person who knows everything about everything, except what it's like to be young.

The sky has blazed red in seconds and the edges of it have curled into night on the sly. I shouldn't be down here on my own when it's dark. I'll have to lie to Dad about where I was – if he notices I'm out. I feel a wash of guilt and shove it in my pocket with my marbles and a yellow ribbon my mam gave me. My belly rumbles like a coal train. I'm always hungry because I'm growing, and my stomach's the size of a pit.

Pulling my coat cuffs down I try to cover my wrists, but my sleeves are too short. My knees are blotchy with the cold and my socks are grey and grubby. My daps are good though. They've got almost no holes in the sole and if I wriggle my toes I can feel a tiny bit of room.

There's a loud crack in the trees and the jackdaws shriek up.

I only run because I'm good at it.

Back in town the streetlamps blink, blink on. The wind slices through everything then howls off over the hills. The town square is empty. I wave up to the big posh clock. It's frozen at thirteen past nine. I'll have to stop waving at it when I turn twelve because it's properly childish.

I go back to running again. Past the pub with

its yellow windows. Past the chippy with its smell of chips. My belly growls louder than last time. Past the miner's institute. Past the park. Past the phone box. Past the chapel. Up the hill to our terrace. Past the other houses on my road. I lean against the wall to catch my breath when I get to ours, then pull the key up through the letterbox on its string and unlock the door.

Dad is in the living room watching telly. The flickering light from the screen flashes on the wall as I hang my coat up, creep past and go into the kitchen. I put my mam's old pinny on quick. Smooth it down. Act all innocent. Sneak in to stand behind Dad. He doesn't even notice I'm there.

'Your eyes will go square if you watch too much,' I say, teasing him because someone once said it to me.

He sits in his armchair pulling the stuffing from a hole in the armrest absent-mindedly, so it looks like it has been snowing on the carpet. I pick it up and put it in my pinny pocket. I'll shove it all back when he's gone.

I tidy his parting, so a pink line runs across his scalp like a stretched-out worm. I did a better job

of his haircut than I did of my own. Mine is still in the shape of the bowl I balanced on my head to cut around. I try not to think of the kids in school laughing at it. I go to the fire, shovel some coal on, pretend that's why my cheeks flame.

'Do you want some soup, Dad?' I put the fireguard back in case the coals roll or spit.

'Noni! How long have you been there, love? I was miles away.' Dad shakes himself back to life.

'Not long, Dad. Don't worry. I'll bring you some food in now.'

'Well done, bach.' He rubs his eyes as if he's surprised to find himself here. His mouth makes a smile at me. I make one back even though my heart feels like a rock in my chest. We are always pretending to be happy nowadays.

I tidy up a bit to cover how sad I feel and how exhausted he looks. This is the worst he's been.

There's a cold cup of tea on the mantlepiece next to a photo of my mam. She's sitting by the river, where I was earlier, reading a book. It must have been a funny story because she's laughing with her head tipped back. The photo is black and white, but her hair has caught the sun so it looks like a halo of curls. It's the only picture we've got

where Dad hasn't chopped her head off by accident. He is no photographer.

She was so beautiful. I try hard to remember her, but she died years ago. I remember she smelled like summer and ironing and her laugh was like spinning coins. I remember her clothes in the wardrobe – sky blue, earth brown, daffodil yellow, and the way she warmed my slippers by the fire. I can't remember her face properly except from this picture. She's been gone since I was six. Dad used to tell me stories about her, but now it makes him upset, so I don't like to ask anymore.

I pick the tea up and knock a bit of broken clock onto the carpet. Dad used to fix things for a living. Now he's too sad and the place is a tip. I bet it wasn't in such a state when Mam was here. Now every space has broken things balanced all over it. Radios and bits of engines, toasters and clocks. Some of the clocks are determined to carry on ticking but most of them have stopped. There's an occasional bong from one of them and a pitiful groan from another. I blow dust off the photo of Mam.

'Won't be long,' I tell Dad as cheerfully as I can.

The kitchen is freezing this time of year and ice

feathers both sides of the window. I've shoved newspaper between the gaps in the frame so it's not as bad as it was, but I can still see my breath as I twti-down to get a tin of tomato soup from the cupboard. I light the gas under a pan and tip the gloopy soup in. We've got a bit of bread left, so I give Dad the thickest slice. Soon the kitchen smells warm, and I've burned my tongue twice because I'm too hungry to wait.

I carry Dad's bowl when it's ready and he balances it on his lap. I help him tuck a tea-towel into his collar as a bib. It saves me on washing if he spills. We eat noisily because there's no one to care. I tip a bit down my pinny then scrape it off when it dries. I promise Mam on the mantelpiece that it will be better next year. I'll get Dad out on the allotment again and help him grow some veg. There's no need to make a fuss or bring anyone nosey in. We can manage by ourselves.

We watch the start of *Wonder Woman*, but we don't want the electric to run out, so we switch it off before we get to the end. I fetch a candle – we've got lots because we are always having power cuts – and light one, putting it on the sideboard. We sit together with the tick-tock of cronky

clocks and the wind blowing sparks down the chimney.

I try to get Dad talking but I give up after a bit. I can't bear to watch how he is disappearing, like he's the shape of him to look at but with most of him gone inside. I do the washing up, then clank the bins out into the lane. I fetch my slippers and put them to warm on the grate with Dad's socks. I wish he'd wear slippers too, but he says that Welshmen don't. I boil the kettle for our hot-water bottles and try not to scald my hands as I pour the water in.

I go through the kitchen to the bathroom and clean my teeth with my finger because it's too cold in there to do a proper job and nobody will know. My face in the mirror looks like my mam's but my nose is all my dad's. I throw my head back and try to laugh like she did in her photo, but my haircut ruins it. I run the hot tap until the mirror steams up and I disappear.

I've seen other disappearing people in our town. Their bodies are still there but they are like shadows with skin. For a while after Mam died, Dad was all right. Then he started to get sad sometimes and the shadows took over him too.

I wipe the condensation from the glass and glare at my reflection. There's no point in moaning. It is what it is and there's others much worse off.

I go up the wooden hill to bed and count my lucky stars, which are glow-in-the-dark and stuck to my ceiling. Soon, I fall asleep.

2

Vultures

I wake with a shock. It's light outside and someone is hammering at our front door. I jump out of bed and race down the stairs as someone else starts thumping the window.

'Dad?' My voice is ragged with fear.

'Noni.' He is hiding behind the settee. He pulls me down with him so we can't be seen. My heart is pounding and I feel like I'm going to puke.

'It's okay. They'll go in a minute,' Dad whispers, then puts his finger to his lips. I do the same and we crouch there together.

I peek from my hiding place and see the man who is whacking the glass so hard I'm scared the window is going to shatter. I recognise him straight away, even with his Dai cap pulled down low and his face completely shadowed. He is one

of the bailiffs. Vultures who come and take people's stuff when they can't afford their bills. He is square and squat and mean and I know from seeing them around before that he is the boss and the one banging at the door is his henchman.

'You can't hide in there forever, Mr Jonesss,' the henchman says through the letterbox. His voice is the hiss of a snake.

'We know you're in there.' Thudding hard at the glass with fists. 'You have to pay your bills, Mr Jones, or we'll come and take all your stuff.'

'And that's just for startersss.' The snake of words slithers all the way down our hall and seeps into our carpet. 'You know what happens next, don't you? You'll be evicted. Thrown out on the street. Just in time for Christmas too. That what you want, is it?'

'No,' I blurt out.

'Ssh,' Dad urges me.

I close my eyes to fight off the need to scream. These men are vicious. They turned up at the Prices' across the road and took away the TV, the pressure cooker and the hoover. That's when Mr Price started robbing places to pay everything and the police carted him off to prison. Now, Mrs

Price works all the hours cleaning people's houses and mending people's clothes to make ends meet. I feel sad for her. She helped me quite a few times with my homework and my reading when I used to go to school. I've heard Sian the Siop talking about how sick she is with her nerves and how shame kills some people stone dead.

The banging starts again and I'm not sure if it's in my chest or if it's outside. It goes on for what feels like hours and then suddenly it stops.

The letterbox opens. 'Pay up, Mr Jonesss, or we'll be back very soon. Mark my wordsss.'

'Only we won't be so friendly next time,' the boss shouts through the window, loud enough for the town to hear.

There's one final thud at the glass.

We wait behind the settee for ages in case they are tricking us that they've gone.

And then we wait a bit more.

Eventually we come out of hiding and Dad creeps to the nets at the window. My legs ache as I stand, and I feel very dizzy.

'Don't worry, Noni.' Dad pulls me into a cwtch. 'I'll get to work on this lot, and we'll be sorted in no time.'

He sits down at our table that's covered with broken things and rolls his sleeves up to his elbows.

'Put the kettle on, love,' he says overly cheerily. 'I'll make a start on this lamp.'

I go into the kitchen and lean against the wall. When I take the tea back through, Dad is staring into space and the lamp is still in pieces.

'Well done,' I say as if I'm proud of him. 'You're doing a great job.'

Tears stinging my eyes, I go into the hall and sit on the bottom stair. This was my mam's house. It's full of stuff she chose. The carpet, red as mountain ash berries, is where she trod with bare feet. The settee with its green and brown triangle-pattern is where she sat. This house is where we all lived together. I can't let them take it away from us. I have to make a plan.