

Praise for Jane Godwin

‘Jane Godwin has a great voice; deft, light and rich’

The Age

‘Godwin zeroes in pitch perfectly on the adolescent voice’

Forward Reviews, USA

‘a first-rate thriller’

Magpies magazine on *Falling from Grace*

‘taut and richly atmospheric’

Sunday Age on *Falling from Grace*

‘A riveting story of disappearance and search told in alternating voices laced with insights about the journey from innocence to experience.’

Kirkus Reviews on *Falling from Grace*

as happy as here

JANE GODWIN

LOTHIAN



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The poem on page 207 is a verse from 'Kindness', reproduced by kind permission of the author, Naomi Shihab Nye, from *Words Under the Words*, Far Corner Books (Oregon, USA, 1995)

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For Sophie Mullins – good, strong, true

‘Everything is communicated’

In Treatment

Prologue

It was coming in slow motion.

The van flew across in a wide arc. Almost graceful, sideways skidding, performing a perfect circle that would leave a dark scar on the road. The back doors opened like stage curtains, the grand piano sashayed from deep inside and swirled as if it were dancing. It fell through the air, landed bouncing on its wheeled legs. The momentum of the van gave the piano speed so that it hurtled along, skimming wildly as it hit a stone, a little dip in the road, an uneven patch of tar.

Evie didn't see this. At first, she didn't even hear it. There was a sickening jolt, and a split-second thought came to Evie: Have I been shot? The piano had played a chord when it hit. A frightening, jarring, lurching chord

of all the wrong notes at once. Evie heard it delayed, like an echo. She didn't know then that she would hear this sound over and over, over time.

Evie's left leg was crushed between the piano and the traffic-light post at the entrance to the park. All sense of time left her, and for a moment there was no pain. Then she looked down and saw the buckled, shiny black lacquer of the piano, with sharp blond wood sticking up through it in shards. Evie had a strange thought; that the treacle-like material is only a thin surface – underneath it's plywood like any cheap furniture.

Then she saw bright blood, a gash on her thigh – her leggings torn through – and her own white bone at the base of it.

Evie felt her head roll back, the horizon tilt and sway.

She had a sense that she was on the road. Her bag, her laptop, her school shoes and phone were strewn across the warm tar. She heard coins rolling, tinkling into a gutter. A woman was gathering up Evie's things. The driver of the van was on his phone, crying. A man appeared, running to her, then leaning in and crouching down and telling her to stay still, that an ambulance was coming. Evie's head felt heavy, and the man moved so her head rested on his leg as he sat on the road with her. Was she sitting up or lying down? The man had a name tag, he wore a name tag. The letters swam in an inky mess.

Did she faint? Maybe only for a moment, maybe not at all.

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The hospital looked like a ship – one of those cruise liners you see in vintage travel posters. It had big curved verandahs that no one was allowed out on. Although it was anchored steadily to the earth, for those first few nights Evie would almost feel the huge building rock up and down, as if it really were a ship on the sea, as if everyone in the hospital was on this ship, separate and sailing away somewhere. As if she could almost dip her hand along as the ship travelled, trawling through a deep blue mass of water.

Evie stayed in the hospital for nearly four weeks, but time moved differently in there.

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Lucy was a pessimist. Evie came to understand that for pessimists, things can be doubly bad, because they are always expecting bad things to happen. So, there is the imagining bad things, then the happening. And then the thinking about it afterwards. For a pessimist, sometimes it's almost a relief when a bad thing happens, because they sensed it would all along.

Lucy was in hospital because she had pneumonia. But she also had leukaemia. If you get cancer, leukaemia is

one of the best ones to get, said Lucy's dad, who was an optimist. Yes, said Lucy, but it's still cancer.

As well as being a pessimist, Lucy was a percussionist. She could play all sorts of drums, as well as the woodblock, the guiro and the glockenspiel.

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Jemma's appendix burst one day after school. Her tummy had been sore for a week or so, and when she told Paulie she had a pain, Paulie had said don't worry, have a glass of water, go to the toilet, have something to eat. When Jemma kept reminding her, Paulie said shut up about your pain, just shut up. And then it got really sore walking home, and then she couldn't eat and she couldn't move and then there was an ambulance and lost time for Jemma, too. Then she was in hospital. That's what Jemma said happened, anyway.

CHAPTER 1

Saturday morning

Had someone come in during the night?

Evie was sure she'd heard whispering, people moving around the ward, a bed being rolled on its clickety wheels.

'Was there someone here?' she asked Sharon, one of the nurses.

Sharon nodded, taking Evie's arm to check her blood pressure. 'Down in recovery. She'll be back a bit later.'

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Evie was watching YouTube clips on her phone when the new patient was wheeled into the ward and placed in the bed beside Evie's. She looked about the same age as Evie. Sharon adjusted the bed so that the new patient

was propped up a bit, the white hospital gown falling loose around her shoulders.

‘Hi,’ said Evie, taking out her earphones. The girl sighed and opened her eyes as if it were a real effort. Evie understood that groggy, uneasy sensation when time and understanding have been numbed by an anaesthetic.

‘Hi,’ she said again after a moment. ‘I’m Evie, and that’s Lucy.’ She pointed to Lucy, sitting on the bed against the opposite wall.

The girl’s eyelids sank heavily. She raised one hand and gave a kind of weak wave. ‘What happened?’

‘You’re in the hospital.’ Evie pushed herself against her pillows so she could sit up straighter. ‘We’re in East Melbourne, you know?’

The girl looked dazed. She had long red hair and pale blue eyes, and a round, freckly face. ‘Yeah,’ she nodded. ‘Melbourne.’

Evie leant around so she could read the little whiteboard above the new patient’s bed.

‘Are you Jemma?’

The girl’s eyes opened wider. ‘How do you know that?’

‘It says so behind you.’ Evie manoeuvred herself to see the rest of the sign. ‘Jemma . . . McPherson?’

‘McPherson-Wild?’ said Lucy, who didn’t have to stay in a bed and had hopped up to get a closer look at the board.

‘Yeah,’ said the girl, and she lay her head back down.

‘We all have a sign,’ said Evie, and pointed. ‘Evie Woodfield. Lucy Sky. Jemma McPherson-Wild.’

Jemma McPherson-Wild turned away from Evie, her red hair falling over one hunched shoulder.

Okay, she wasn’t very friendly. Still, Evie remembered the feeling of first arriving in this place, with its long grey corridors, its shiny linoleum floors, its quiet voices and tall, clanking metal lifts. Its bland, chemical smell. Even though only a week had passed since she’d been rushed in here, already it felt as if she’d been in the hospital a long time.

Jemma grimaced. ‘What time is it?’

‘Quarter past eleven,’ said Lucy, now sitting on the end of Evie’s bed, tucking her small, neat legs underneath her. ‘On Saturday,’ she added, because Jemma looked as if she might have forgotten the day as well. ‘In the morning.’

‘What was your operation?’ Evie asked.

‘Appendix.’ Jemma half closed her eyes. ‘They burst, or exploded or something.’

‘There’s only one appendix,’ said Sharon, wheeling a trolley back into the ward. She took Jemma’s arm and wrapped the blood-pressure bandage around it. ‘But you’re right, Jemma, it did burst. You were lucky you got here when you did.’

‘How did I get here?’ Jemma was waking up a bit more now. ‘And what’s this thing?’ She held up a thin tube that seemed to be attached to her under the sheets.

‘Don’t touch that,’ said Sharon, ‘it’s draining the fluid from your tummy.’

The nurses on the ward were a bit like teachers at school – some you liked and some you didn’t, and some liked you and some didn’t seem to. Sharon seemed disapproving of everyone, sometimes even Lucy who was really sensible all the time, and no trouble for anyone as far as Evie could tell.

‘Get it off me!’ Jemma lifted the sheet as if the tube were a spider crawling across her bed. ‘I don’t like it!’

‘It’s essential,’ said Sharon. ‘You’ve got a couple of stitches there to hold it in place, so please don’t fiddle with it. It’ll only be for a day or so.’

Sharon said that everything was essential. It was essential that patients ate when they were supposed to, and drank when they were supposed to, and slept when they were supposed to, and that visitors left when they were supposed to. That everyone took their medication at the correct time. That Evie did her exercises every hour. Essential. Now, Sharon was frowning at a manila folder marked Confidential Medical Record. ‘Um, let’s see who brought you in . . . a relative, came up to the ward. Was it your mother? She’ll probably come and see you later today.’

Jemma nodded.

There was a pause.

‘When can I go home?’

‘Not for a while,’ said Sharon, sliding the folder back in a wire tray at the end of Jemma’s bed. ‘You’ve had quite a serious operation. You’ll be here for at least a week, I’d say.’

‘A week!’ Jemma looked worried. She glanced across at Evie, then Lucy, as if she’d only just noticed they were there. Lucy had gone back to her bed, put her earphones in and was listening to music on her iPad, her quick, slim fingers drumming out a beat on the edge of the bed’s steel frame.

‘My tummy hurts,’ Jemma said, her voice becoming higher. ‘I don’t like that thing coming out of it.’

‘You’ve already told me that,’ said Sharon, ‘and—’

‘What’s this?’ Jemma interrupted, lifting her hand that was attached to another tube.

‘That’s Patient Controlled—’ began Evie.

‘It’s essential that you let the qualified hospital staff answer Jemma’s questions, thank you, Evie.’

Sharon was such a boss! Evie was only trying to be helpful. She knew what it was because she’d had it too. Patient Controlled Analgesia. P.C.A. It had helped her to manage the worst pain during the first few days after her operation.

Sharon was explaining to Jemma how to use it. ‘When you push this button, a small amount of pain relief is released into your body intravenously. Through this vein in your hand.’

‘Is that a needle in my hand?’ said Jemma in a panicky voice. ‘I hate needles! It’s making me feel sick. I think I’m going to be sick.’

‘Jemma, it’s essential that you calm down and listen to me.’ Sharon smoothed the white cotton blanket on the bed. ‘Now, how old are you?’

Jemma paused, looked around, tilted her head to one side. ‘Thirteen.’

‘Children as young as seven are able to use this, so I’m sure you won’t have a problem. And it means we won’t need to give you pain-relief injections.’

Jemma went pale, and at last it looked as if she was starting to listen.

‘No one else should press this button except you.’

Jemma kept touching all the different things that had to be attached to her. ‘What’s this on my face? I don’t like the tube in my nose.’

‘It’s a nasal gastric tube. You can’t eat for a day or two, so this tube is feeding nutrients into your stomach.’

‘I don’t like the tape on my face. My face is itchy. It’s giving me a rash. I think I’m allergic.’

‘It’s essential that you leave the tape alone, Jemma. You need to keep the tube in for the next day or so. Now, I want you to explain to me in your own words how you operate the PCA.’

It would have been better if Marika had been rostered on. She would have been a lot nicer to Jemma.

When Sharon seemed satisfied that Jemma could use the PCA, she marched her trolley out of the ward.

‘But I haven’t got any stuff,’ Jemma called out.

‘What’s the problem now?’ Sharon turned around, glancing at her watch.

Jemma nodded towards Evie’s and Lucy’s beds. ‘They’ve got stuff.’

‘I’m sure your parents will bring in some pyjamas, and your toothbrush and anything you need. Now, you just get some rest. Sleep if you like.’ She paused for a minute, then went back to Jemma and pressed the hydraulic button to lower the bed a little. ‘I’ll be back a bit later to see how you’re going with the pain relief.’

Sharon left, and soon Jemma was lying quite still and staring up at the ceiling. Evie wondered if she was upset. Both Evie and Lucy had their doonas and pillows from home. Lucy’s doona was a creamy colour with tiny blue flowers all over it. Evie held her own pale yellow doona against her face each night as she tried to sleep. The hospital sheets had their own smell, like metal, but Evie’s doona reminded her of laundry drying on the line in the back garden. It smelt like the sun and the wind.

Sleeping in hospital was almost impossible. Evie was always uncomfortable. She’d never slept on her back

before, but she had to try that now, because if she lay on one side her broken leg hurt and on the other side her wrecked knee hurt. And she was never properly tired; she had almost forgotten that delicious, heavy feeling she would get after training, when her body was exhausted, welcoming sleep. Now, she felt a different kind of tired. Like in her muscles when she lifted one leg for about five seconds. And now, whenever Evie did sleep, she had the same dream – the worst of those jagged seconds in the accident, of the moment the piano hit her, crashing with its terrible chord, wiping out her legs, bringing her down.

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That night, the first night with Jemma in the ward, it was even harder for Evie to sleep. Jemma had slept for most of the afternoon, while Evie and Lucy had visitors and then watched a movie, Lucy sitting on the chair by Evie's bed. Late at night, Jemma kept buzzing for the nurses, telling them she wasn't tired and she wanted to get up and she wanted to call her brother but she didn't have her phone.

'You can use my phone if you like,' said Evie. 'Does your brother live nearby? He could come and visit you if you're here for a week.'

'No, he doesn't live nearby,' Jemma whispered crossly. 'He lives near me, up in Bendigo.'

‘Oh, right.’ Evie nodded in the semi-darkness. She couldn’t think of anything else to say to Jemma after that, and eventually she heard the rhythm of Jemma’s sleeping breaths in the bed beside her. She wished that Jemma had been put in the empty bed on the other side of the ward, next to Lucy. There were four beds in the ward. First it had only been Evie in here, then Lucy had arrived, and now Jemma.

Evie lay there. She felt the thick bandage around her knee. She felt her arms. She knew already that she was losing strength. Sometimes she listened to music to try to relax, or at least distract herself. Her brother Patrick had made her a playlist. Now, she listened to the whole thing – the stuff he knew she liked: Taylor Swift, Rihanna, Lorde, Adele, and then stuff Patrick wanted her to listen to: Kendrick Lamar, Gang of Youths, The Killers. Evie lay awake for hours, the beat of ‘When We Were Young’ still moving through her body. It was always twilight in the hospital: never completely dark, and never completely quiet.

Lucy was asleep, too. Probably Lucy had got used to sleeping in hospitals because she had spent so much time in them. She coughed now and then, the sort of cough that would wake you up, but she never seemed to lie awake like Evie did. But then, Lucy might not tell her even if she did have trouble sleeping.

Evie dozed, maybe she slept for a while, because soon she was half awake and the sun was rising and when she leant over and lifted the edge of the blind beside her bed, she could see streaks of chunky golden light falling across the tops of the trees.

She pulled herself up and looked out the big rectangular window that ran the length of the whole wall beside her bed, and Lucy's bed opposite. The world seemed crisp and clear out there. Spring was coming – there were tiny bright green buds on the elm trees outside. Two people were jogging through the park beyond the bluestone laneway. They ran in smooth, easy paces – like it was natural for them. One was slightly in front of the other, and it reminded Evie of the technique her dad had taught her. When you're running, he said, you need to find someone just ahead of you, a bit faster, and run in their footsteps. Match their pace.

Evie was thinking that running had been easy for her, too, when something caught her eye. Some movement down there, under one of the elms against the brick wall at the end of the laneway. A person was kneeling, bent over. At first Evie thought the person was being sick; she had seen someone vomit there a few nights earlier, and another day she'd seen two people having a fight. Sometimes people from the hospital had their lunch down there, sitting on milk crates. But this was a man, scrabbling in the dirt, pushing the tanbark aside. Evie leant further

over and peered down from their third floor window. What was he doing? Now there was a little pile of tanbark beside him where he'd pushed it away. He took a rolled-up newspaper from somewhere in his jacket, it looked like it was wrapped in clear plastic like the ones delivery people throw out of car windows onto the footpath. Then the man put the newspaper into the little hole he'd made. He covered the newspaper completely with tanbark, then stood and walked away.

Evie watched him until he moved out of the window frame and she couldn't see him anymore. Then she looked back to the spot where he had buried the newspaper. If someone walked past, they would never know anything was buried there. But Evie knew.

Just as the others were waking up, Evie fell asleep. She dreamt of buried treasure, of digging with her brothers in the sand. They had done this, when they were all younger.

Even though sleep is supposed to be so important for you, in hospital it felt as if just when you got to sleep, they woke you up again.

Arjun came in and placed a tray on her table. 'Breakfast!' he almost yelled, then went over to Lucy's bed.

Evie opened her eyes, caught in those seconds of waking before all your understanding comes flooding back in. Then it came to her, but she only half remembered what she'd seen, like recalling a dream that starts to slip away

as soon as you try to focus on it. Like trying to catch a fish with your hands.

Why would someone bury a newspaper down there at the end of the laneway?

Evie didn't tell the other girls. When she tried to picture the person she had watched, she couldn't quite bring an image to her mind. He was a man, quite a big man, not like the people running in the park each morning. What had he worn? Jeans? Trackpants? He had dark hair, and he wore a jacket. Yes, a slicker. Was it blue? Or black? It had something written in orange on the back, like a brand or design. Bright orange. Or Evie thought it was.

Had it even happened? Maybe it was part of a dream she'd had?