

## **Finalist**

### **Me and Her**

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She's tiny-tiny, mewling like a kitten in my tired arms as I rock her. We go home in a whirlwind and I'm not paying attention to anyone but her as she whimpers in my tight hold, exposed to a whole new world. The first days spent with her slide through my clutching grasp. We spend our days together, me and her, barely awake and moving slowly as if through warm treacle, dazed in the haze of the summer sun.

The days turn into weeks, then months, and the time is precious, heady and fulfilling. She is, it seems, life itself to me, and the summer break is languid as I watch and help her grow, as dependant as she is on me for everything.

We feel sympatico, me and her, perfectly synchronised. Day after day, we sit together amongst the soft, hardy grasses on the sand dunes, and we hold each other. Her body is snug in my cradling arms and my finger is clasped in her weak little grasp. We walk through the arches of the orchard and settle beneath the canopy of feijoa trees on the bright green grass. I hold her close and her deep eyes gaze into mine. They are a new shade of gorgeous every day. She is so different, so changeable, growing bigger, longer, fatter, stronger, but still so the same, so herself.

The first time it rains, it's Christmas day and the whole family are visiting. She grizzles in my aunt's practiced hold so I scoop her back to my chest and she knows me. She opens her damp eyes and looks at me, and she trusts me so wonderfully as she snuggles close and the grizzles fade out.

When the feijoas stop dropping and the leaves are falling instead, that's when she first mumbles it, fumbling and stumbling over the gummy sounds. In that moment, she is completely a part of me again, connected in that visceral way that only we can be. I can feel it, not in my head or my heart, but deep in my belly, deep where she began, that feeling of us, me and her.

It's me and her again in the chilly-warm autumn morning, indulging in breakfast in bed and a lie-in. She lies on my chest, my breaths lifting and lowering her body that rocks with its own little inhalations. The sun is filtering through the old glass window, casting multifaceted shimmers across the room.

I am enveloped in my book, one hand resting on her little back, gentle, her sweet breaths whispering over my clavicle. When they stop, those delicate breaths, I feel it deep in my very soul, in the very core of my being. The book bounces softly onto the bed and onto the wooden floor with a shocking thud.

My fingers are trembling as i press emergency call and yell into the phone for an ambulance.  
*Please God, send and ambulance!*

I don't know how long I kneel on the bed with her, tears dripping onto her autumn-coloured hair, doing the chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth exactly as we learnt to do in the classes but it's not working, *nothing's working*.

The wailing siren cuts off sharply and there are people in green running through the house. They take her from me, despite my screams and pleas and they surround her with a flurry of activity until, all of a sudden, all at once, they stop and step back with their faces in sombre masks that their muscles seem to know all too well. I know what they are going to say before they utter a sound.

An inhuman, or perhaps completely, innately human wail pours from my chest as i gather my baby close, wrapping myself around her as if I can be her life source, as I was three months ago. My salty tears drench her like the baptism she never had.

It's a week before we have permission to bury her, and she is taken away to 'be prepared'. Everyone talks in euphemisms now, and skirts around what they mean and it infuriates me. It's as if they think not acknowledging her death will mean it hasn't happened, or is less painful to me.

I am holding her in the orchard again, my family around me like ghosts as I kneel amongst the reddened leaves and rotten feijoas. The smell of them is sickly, tangy and sweet. I can feel my lover's hand on my shoulder, comforting to both of us, a channel through which floods out grief. I lay her gently in that unnatural little box next to the dog-sized hole in the ground. Beneath our favourite tree, and I feel like a balloon with its strings cut, floating away, borne off to God knows where on the wind. There is nothing that tethers me here anymore.

Everyone is completely silent, there's barely a breath to be heard, hardly a sound except for the whistle of the wind and the rustle of the leaves. She'll stay here forever, waiting, and one day I will join her, and it will be as it should be again, me and her.