

THE SEVEN DEADLY TRUTHS

By Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson

1. He That Shall Endure Unto the End, the Same Shall Be Saved

When I was four, my mother lost a child—a nameless, shapeless, almost-embryo whose breath of life was snuffed out when it had barely been granted. The smallness of this child-to-have-been to the largeness of my mother's loss was grossly disproportionate.

During the following years, I was brought up in the hollow of that loss: cradled in the graven image of Lost Baby who had tried but failed to make it all the way through the slippery tunnel between my mother's thighs to the world of air.

My mother's fingers craved the touch of two children. Me, a tangible ten toes and ten fingers—pink and porous; Lost Baby, an allegory of joys and latent moments in an unfinished, cyclical dream. But in her love of two children, she loved Lost Baby an ounce more—an ounce that weighed 128 pounds, which is exactly how much my beautiful, slender mother weighed. She began to sink like a glass marble in waters of stolen memory. Five years after Lost Baby, when the Drover Estate had turned into a pool of gilded autumn leaves, my mother gave up. Nobody, not even the Angel of Life, could save her from drowning in that red lake of Lost Baby's stolen memory. I call it the Place of the Deadly Truths.

2. Seek, and Ye Shall Find

Before my mother's death, in the year of All Things Sought, Found, and Taken Away, we lived in a house whose bones rattled constantly. Its façade was wrinkled and cracked at the lips. It was an old, tired house held together perhaps only by a skin of umber paint.

An oak tree towered over the old house, its arms embracing the fragile structure in layers of smooth, supple leaves. Its trunk was black and so swollen that it had burst through the brick wall built ten strides from the back door of the old house. The oak tree now stood with craggy, chipped feet planted on both sides of the wall, its long arms unfurled in exaggerated liberation. It had been delivered of—and united with—the wall.

I was an eight-year-old boy lured by the oak tree's sweet, ticklish branches that offered freshness and comfort—something the old house could not. That spring, when I climbed up into that colossal green sphere for the first time, my bony legs shook from the sheer thrill of being so close to the sky. God the Father himself felt approachable from the branches of the oak tree.

Below, the old house lay silent and dwarfed. Saffron and beige houses spread out east and west in both directions from the old house. Lupine Hill—a violent exhibition of lavender and blue—erupted in the north. The long brick wall, interrupted only by the oak tree, divided the saffron and beige houses from the immense Shangri-la of flowering trees and flowers that lay beyond. The Drover Estate.

There, suspended in the branches of the oak tree above the old house and the Drover property, I built my Tower of Babel—a wild, grotesque contraption of scrap wood and linoleum that grew in almost organic proportions. Rough ladders wound upward on the massive branches. Crude portals and flimsy trapdoors opened on cubicles. I filled the tree's arms with my treasures of empty Coke bottles, nails, a rusted, silent clock, and cassette tapes with tails of knotted ribbon.

The tree was my Tower of Babel and my Jacob's Ladder.

3. For Where Your Treasure Is, There Will Your Heart Be Also

My mother and I shared the same birthday at the beginning of July. Every year for our birthday, we roasted Vegelinks and feasted on sweet, sticky watermelon before opening our gifts. Father always surprised us. One year it was an inflatable pool for all of us.



Another time it was a silver-plated wristwatch for Mother and a telescope for me. We never knew what to expect. Still, what happened on our birthday the year of All Things Sought, Found, and Taken Away, was completely unforeseen.

I looked across the smoldering barbecue at Father and Mother who sat stretched out on two faded green lawn chairs. Father's face was creased with years of wrinkles, but I thought Mother looked as young and brand new as she did in their wedding photos. The sunlight sparkled on her skin. I remember her looking beautiful just then. Now I think that it was partly because of the sunlight outshining the sadness that often filtered through her eyes during those days. Summer light encircled us, and weightless words and laughter floated between us. I believed we were utterly and fundamentally happy—Mother and I imagining the

presents Father had planned for us, and Father who knew the secret about what awaited us in the living room.

One thought spiraled in my head when I saw the grand piano sitting in the living room: *A piano?—But*

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REMEMBER.

I'm a nine-year-old boy. The sleek, shiny piano looked absurd against the shabby backdrop of the old house.

I heard Mother inhale sharply.

“Frank, we can't afford this . . .”

“But Elsie . . . you used to love to play . . .”

He sounded so somber. I felt my throat tighten.

“Your mother used to play in an orchestra, you know,” he said to me.

I didn't know that.

“Frank, what is this? Some kind of ploy?”

“Elsie . . .”

“You think . . . Frank, you think I can just forget . . . ?”

“Good Heavens, Elsie, it's been almost five years. Five years! Don't you think it's about time you stop this madness?”

They had also never talked this openly about Lost Baby. All I knew about Lost Baby, I had gathered from snippets of conversations overheard.

Mother suddenly raised her hand to her white face and rushed from the room, her sundress flying wildly about her ankles. A pale, sweet fragrance lingered in the room, even after she was gone.

I stood there with Father, not knowing what to

say. He pointed at the piano.

“You know how to play, Billy?” I remember thinking what a preposterous question that was. There had never been a piano in the house as far as I could remember.

“No,” I said. I looked up at my father and had a distinct feeling that we were strangers to each other.

4. Children, Obey Your Parents

Late into that summer, Father took on extra landscaping jobs—while the grand piano sat like a giant, silent stone in our living room. He slipped out of the house before breakfast and didn't return until dinner, which he always ate in a hurry. Then he would be gone again until night had lulled the afternoon heat into a gentle warmth. When

Father stepped through the front door, the smell of vegetation trickled into the room. He looked very tired that whole summer.

Mother moved about the house like a ghost.

Meals—outlandish concoctions of vegetables and spice—appeared mysteriously on the table. The piano was a polished mirror casting back a likeness of gloom and misery. Sometimes Mother sat at the piano with petrified fingers. Never playing, just sitting.

Except for the trailing scent of grass and leaves and the freakish meals, it was as if I was the only person living in that old house. I climbed my Jacob's Ladder more often—my Jacob's Ladder that lifted me up into a sanctuary of leaves and wind, away from the tiredness and gloom that clung to the old house. My eyes rested on Drover Estate.

A woman named Cat lived at Drover Estate. Every afternoon at four, Cat emerged from the white Victorian mansion in the far corner of the property with two matching black poodles on her heels. She was a tall, dark woman with a thin, long neck and sharp corners on her body. Cat wore delicate hats and garments that flowed about her sharp corners like waterfalls of cloth—

Sabbath clothes for everyday. Each day, Cat and the two poodles strolled the grounds of the Estate. Cat smelled the flowers and inspected the trees. The poodles smelled each other.

That day, the air was thick and acrid. Acorns lay dry and brittle on the platform of my Tower. The door of the white mansion swung open, and Cat and the two black poodles flooded out into the garden. Cat wore a seafoam green sleeveless dress and a flimsy ivory hat.

As always, I watched from the oak tree as the trio wandered clockwise through the garden. Dog collars rattled. Leaves rustled. Cat shrilled, "Stay with Mummi, come along now!"

The poodles came along, their curly heads bouncing. Halfway around the Estate, they drifted beneath the oak tree. A poodle paused at the foot of the oak tree and lifted its hind leg.

My hand flew up to my mouth.

On my oak tree!

I froze for only a split second. Then I reached for a jagged, splintered strip of wood. A loose rung of my Jacob's Ladder. I gripped it until my fingers hurt and then hurled it downward. It was a silent, weighted arrow hurtling through the air. My David's stone. A (giant) poodle stood in its way, piddling.

A dog's squeal.

A Cat's shriek.

A rushing of seafoam and poodle toward the white mansion.

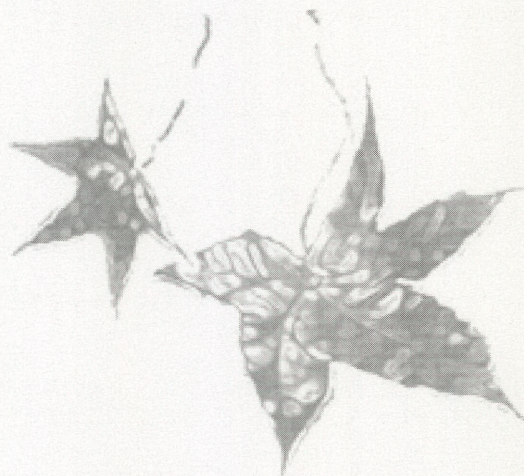
I stood in my Tower of Babel, unacknowledged.

I forgot to go home for dinner, terrified of myself, of the awful wailing of dogs and Cats. The sky was paling in the west. A hushed wind murmured in the leaves of the oak tree. A woman's voice floated up through the leaves, *Come in for dinner, Billy*, but I didn't move.

Later, the soft music of metal, soil, and grass woke me from my stupor. Dusk was beginning to shroud the earth in a shadowy mask. A man worked in the garden in front of the white mansion. His wide, shirted back was turned toward me. With gentle, rhythmic strokes of a metal rake, he shepherded leaves that had gone astray. The cadence of his movements was strangely

familiar. I waited for him to show his face, but he worked with his back toward me. He raked. Trimmed bushes. Deadheaded rosebushes. Watered potted plants. Every so often, he stooped down to pick up a poodle dropping.

Suddenly, a block of light fell over the man. The door of the mansion stood open, and Cat floated out onto the porch, her garments flowing about her sharp corners, a single black poodle on her heels.



The man looked up from amongst the leaves and cuttings and stood up. He walked toward Cat, and they stood together talking softly, their bodies very close. Then Cat fingered the man's cheek with a silky paw, and he moved forward and kissed her very slowly.

The Cat walk.

A door closing—a man inside, a poodle outside.

Darkness returned to Drover Estate. But even after I turned away, the image of the man kissing Cat lingered.

5. Judge Not That Ye Be Not Judged

That night I dreamed that I stood near the Valley of Hell, a massive popcorn bowl filled with flames, and the crackling sound of bad people's bones exploded into the air. I crept to the large windowpane in the living room. Beyond the trees, where the mountain fell away

into the valley, I saw a churning fire that rose and fell like the abdomen of a heaving giant. My eyelashes stung in the fierce heat.

There were people in the fire. Their faces, leathered and scarlet, were streaked with sweat. They

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shouted, but I couldn't hear anything. Their arms, outlined in golden flames, flailed in the air. Maybe I could hear if I went outside. I moved toward the door.

"Come away, don't look at the people," Mother said.

I came away.

But Father wanted to hear what the people were saying. Shrugging at Mother's words, he flung the front door open and was gone. I rushed to the windowpane and watched as Father walked/ran toward the people in hell. He didn't look back.

"Come back, Daddy! It's hot there!" I shouted, but he didn't seem to hear me.

"Come away from the window!" Mother said sharply.

"But Father!"

"Let him go."

"He'll burn up!"

"We can't make him come back," Mother said.

Father stood at the brink of hell. There was only a metal railing between him and the burning place. He waved to hell's captives and shouted to them.

"COME AWAY!" said Mother. She grabbed me by the wrists and dragged me from the window. Parts of me torn away from the window. Parts of me still there at the window watching Father play with hell.

I awoke, feeling hell's heat on my skin. But I was cold.

The next morning, I asked Father if he was going to hell. He looked startled.

"Hell? Only people who don't love and obey God go to hell," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"That's the way it is," he said.

I decided not to ask him if he loved and obeyed God.

6. The Seventh Day Is the Sabbath . . . And In It Thou Shalt Not Do Any Work

Autumn. On good days, I awoke to the smell of almost-burnt oatmeal and wheat toast.

On bad days, there was only a gnawing, all-absorbing silence, save the rattling of the old house's bones.

Mother looked like a glass doll that autumn. Brittle. Transparent. Shattered on the inside. Father stayed away a lot, as if absence sheltered that fragile thing from impact. But he was always home on Sabbath, and somehow we always made it to church, a triangle of a family held together by toothpicks of hope.

That final morning, I awoke to a strange feeling of emptiness in the old house, as if it had inhaled deeply and let out a long sigh. A white morning light filtered through the curtains. Scarlet maple leaves pirouetted in the breeze beyond the window.

Father found her that Sabbath morning. A pale riddle baptized in her own lifeblood. Five godforsaken years after Lost Baby, drowned in memory. I stood in the doorway of that Sacred Place as he knelt there at the altar of my mother's body, in that Place of the Deadly Truths where All Things Are Told.

It was Sabbath, and Mother rested.

7. Love Thy Neighbor/Love Thy Enemy

The day of my mother's funeral, figures shrouded in black wool and silk filed in and out of the old house,

BELOW, THE JAPANESE MAPLES AND BIRCH TREES OF DROVER ESTATE STRIP-DANCED A SLOW NUMBER IN THEIR LUMINOUS SCARLET COSTUMES. THE BREEZE WAS SOUR, DRY, AS IF SWEETNESS HAD VANISHED FROM THE EARTH ALONG WITH MY MOTHER'S SPIRIT.

like ghosts coming and going upon death's threshold. I climbed my Jacob's Ladder into the arms of the oak tree. It was a gentle day, and I was consumed with anger.

Below, the Japanese maples and birch trees of Drover Estate strip-danced a slow number in their luminous scarlet costumes. The breeze was sour, dry, as if sweetness had vanished from the earth along with my mother's spirit. I stood there staring at the garden's taunting beauty. Behind me, an unbearable sadness. Before me a Shangri-la that refused to grieve.

I was a nine-year-old boy lured by the desire to right the world—to make the beautiful and the sad collide from my cathedra atop the oak tree. I was not a bad boy, but the oak tree gave a cluster of dry leaves, and there was a book of matches in my pocket.

I made the torch and lit it. Fire gnawed at the oak leaves with a vivid, lucid mouth. I held the glittering

scepter, the Moses-staff, in my hand—Monarch of Justice for a wink—and then let go. The fiery branch spun gently in the parched wind. A glittering falling star.

The fireworks that followed when it crashed into

Drover Estate's autumn leaves were dazzling. I watched, as if in a dream, as the gold and crimson leaves melted into fluid flames that washed through the garden. It was a beautiful sight. All of autumn chained together in the spectacle of sorrow.

I didn't notice until then that the oak tree, too, had joined the rite, a radiant glow of flames encircling its trunk. The warmth encompassed me. Long arms of fire reached upward through the branches, a glory dance.

The frenzy of the dance was making me perspire. I felt dizzy. It reminded me of my dream of Father playing with hell. I wondered, as the glowing hands beckoned, if I was the one in hell.

Through the flames, I saw a vision of my father's face. Then a pair of hands, blistered and raw, reached through the flames and clutched me.

"Hang on!" I saw his lips move.

We were descending my Jacob's Ladder, my burning Tower of Babel. I looked up to see the oak tree garnished in fiery garb. The sky and earth fused in a livid crimson. I remember thinking that winter followed autumn—a wet, sunless winter—and if we could make it through that, spring might follow.

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