

ALL THE LITTLE THINGS THAT WE LOSE

Selected Stories

DEBORAH SHELDON

SAMPLER

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—Nicole Taylor, literary editor 'Sketch'

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'All The Little Things That We Lose : Selected Stories'

Deborah Sheldon

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Praise for Deborah Sheldon

‘All the little things that we lose’ is the sort of book that I dream of reading: clear, sharp writing, and telling portraits of people faced with loss, and change, and challenges as they try to make sense of their lives. The writing rewards considered re-reading, and it is an exemplary work from a rising and vital talent.

—Phillip A. Ellis, editor *‘Australian Reader’*

‘All the little things that we lose’ is short fiction told masterfully. Sheldon’s stories have that rare ability to speak volumes between each word. There are pieces of life’s puzzles the reader must complete, wonderfully unsettling strips of humanity that linger in the mind long after closing the book.

—Craig Bezzant, editor *‘Eclecticism E-zine’*

Deborah Sheldon’s stories brim and crackle with sensitivity to the fragile rhythms of ordinary suburban life where tragic situations and remarkable encounters may be only a few short steps away. This world, seen through the eyes of men, women and children and all ages, is compelling, gripping, and always honest. This collection of stories is sure to keep you coming back and reading over again and again.

—Mark Rickerby, editor *‘Prima Storia’*

In every story we meet a fascinating group of characters, each one reminding us of someone we’ve passed in the street, who lives in our neighbourhood or seems vaguely familiar ... Deborah brings each one to life and tells their stories, leaving us very pleasantly satisfied ... a wonderful collection of stories.

—Sandra James, editor *‘Positive Words’*

These well written stories tinged with humour and strong emotional tugs are a great read ... the stories develop quickly with intrigue, drama and a sense of mystery ensuring the reader’s continued interest. I highly recommend Deborah’s book and congratulate her and the production team responsible for its publication.

—Peter F. Pike, managing editor *‘FreeXpresSion’*

Deborah Sheldon writes the kind of short fiction people love to read, work that is exciting and concise. She's sharp, quick and always effortlessly clever with her words and plots.

—*Scott-Patrick Mitchell, editor 'Cottonmouth'*

An accomplished collection, 'All the little things that we lose' observes the intricacies of everyday life. Deborah Sheldon's writing is assured, vivid and revealing.

—*Nicole Taylor, literary editor 'Sketch'*

Deborah Sheldon is a keen observer of the everyday. She writes courageous stories of real people, like the ones we know and the ones we don't want to know, and deals with familiar issues other writers avoid. Her stories are insightful, with the kind of imagery that stays with the reader long after putting the book down.

—*Tiggy Johnson, editor 'page seventeen'*

These stories, mainly about domestic events, are appealing, even if sprinkled with some gruesome events. Each story is well rounded and a good read from an accomplished author, an expert in so many disciplines.

—*Trevor Reeves, editor 'Southern Ocean Review'*

Deborah Sheldon explores the rich vein of violence that runs through Australian society in this collection of short stories ... The merely disconcerting and the deadly are juxtaposed and those who don't know the difference, pay the price.

—*Antonia Hildebrand, editor 'Polestar Writers' Journal'*

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WAITING FOR THE HUNTSMAN

The horse didn't move its head, just rolled down its apple-sized eye until the whites showed all the way around and the dark iris had Natalie pinned. She took a step back. Her sandal caught on a tuft of capeweed and Kate laughed.

'What a baby,' Kate said. 'Go ahead and pat him, why don't you? Come on, I dare you.'

Natalie's hand shook. The horse's flank felt surprisingly hard, like the armchair Mum kept in the hall by the phone table.

'There, so what,' Natalie said, backing off.

From the other side of the agistment paddock ambled two girls, both fat and, like Kate, wearing jeans and gumboots. They sneered at Natalie, who suddenly felt ridiculous in her summer dress with its capped sleeves and lace trim.

One fat girl pointed at Natalie and said, 'Gawd, what is *that*?'

'Some relative from the city, I don't know,' Kate said. 'Her mum's in hospital and we're stuck with her.'

Natalie tried on a friendly smile. 'Dad's a salesman, he does a lot of travelling. He's in Tasmania at the moment.'

But the fat girls ignored her and spoke to Kate about the riding competition that Kate was entering the following day. The horse watched Natalie with its crazed eye and pulled back its lips to show her its blunt square teeth. Did horses bite? Were they prone to unpredictable attacks like elephants? She didn't know, but Mum would; Mum knew just about

everything.

‘Uh-oh,’ one of the girls said, ‘look out.’

‘Bye Kate,’ the other one said, ‘see you at the championships, okay?’

Both girls took off. Natalie turned. A squat man in overalls with a paunch as tight and round as a basketball was approaching from the car park.

‘Who’s that?’

‘My old man,’ Kate said.

‘What should I call him? Mister Wallace? Or is he my uncle?’

‘Call him whatever you want, dumb arse.’

Kate’s father walked straight under the horse’s chin, his gaze fixed on Natalie and his eyes sunk within dark circles. His face was sunburnt, chapped and whiskery. ‘You must be young Natasha. How was your ride in on the train?’

‘Good thank you, Uncle Henry, but my name’s Natalie.’

He put his leathery hands on his knees and laughed and kept laughing. Natalie didn’t know why. The sharp desire for home caught in her chest. This won’t be for long, Dad had promised as she had cried into his neck at Flinders Street Station, just a week or so and then everything would be back to normal.

At last, Henry stopped laughing and straightened up. Startled, he noticed the horse and slapped at its withers. The horse shied, apple eye revolving. Natalie braced, ready to run, but the horse steadied itself, stamping its hooves and curling its frothy lips while Henry gazed in open admiration.

‘Look at him, he’s just a big kid, that’s all he is, just a big kid,’ he said. ‘He’s just a big kid, that’s all he is, just a big kid.’

Natalie glanced at Kate who was playing statues, frozen and waiting.

‘He’s just a big kid,’ he said, and Natalie thought of her toy robot, unable to stop marching its little tin legs until the key in its back wound down.

‘Uncle Henry?’

Henry whirled and stared about at them blindly for a moment, then struck out across the paddock towards the car park, gesturing for the girls to follow. He flung open all the car doors, took a rifle from the back seat and put it in the front next to a blue and white esky.

Kate pointed at the esky and said to Natalie, ‘Have a look in there.’

‘Why? What’s in it?’

‘Open it and find out.’

Natalie felt her insides clench. She lifted a corner of the lid. On a bag of ice, curled up as if asleep, lay a rabbit with soft ginger fur, a dull eye and a coin of dried blood on its ribs.

‘That’s your dinner,’ Kate said, smirking.

The drive to Kate’s house was ten minutes along a ruler-straight road that divided paddocks and green hills, followed by turns through a town with roundabouts but no traffic lights. The weatherboard house had a pitched tin roof. Kate pointed through the carport – ‘Go out the back and give Mum a hand’ – and went inside the house with Henry and the esky.

Kate’s mother, Betsy, was thin and wore her grey hair chopped short. She was behind wire in the chicken coop, mucking out straw into a wheelbarrow while hens clucked at her feet.

Natalie wandered over. ‘Hello again.’

Betsy stopped and leant on her fork. ‘Right. Have fun with the horses?’
‘It was okay.’

‘I’d ask you to help put this straw on the garden beds but you’re not exactly dressed for it. Didn’t your dad pack any clothes you could use?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, go on inside, ask Kate to lend you some jeans.’

The house smelt of mothballs. Natalie walked through the kitchen past Henry, who was seated at the table drinking beer from a large bottle and didn’t appear to see her. The house looked to have been cobbled together in unrelated stages, with dead-end passageways, rooms opening into other rooms and wooden steps in doorways that led up or down depending on the slope of the floor. There were metal horse shoes hammered into walls, horse figurines on the mantle, a velour painting of a galloping horse on a beach with foaming rollers, a clock face that showed a stampeding mob, a brass rubbing of a horse’s head.

Natalie wandered into a narrow junk room with stacks of boxes and broken deck chairs. She was about to walk out when she noticed the bookcase. Lining the shelves were dozens of trophies engraved with Kate’s name and a stack of ribbons and pennants. Natalie picked up a framed photograph of Kate on a pony. The girl couldn’t have been more than five years old, her chubby face pinched in concentration.

‘What are you doing in here?’

Natalie turned. ‘You must be a fantastic rider.’

Kate hesitated, said, ‘Hey, let me show you something,’ and opened a

cupboard. She brought out on hangers white britches and a buttoned red jacket, and from the foot of the cupboard, two boxes that held a black riding hat and a pair of buffed knee-high boots. 'I'm in a couple of categories tomorrow, champion rider under thirteen years and champion local under seventeen years, and I'll win at least one title, maybe both.'

'That's so great. Your parents must be really proud of you.'

Kate's face closed up. She rammed the items of clothing back into the cupboard and slammed the door. 'Go on, get out,' she said.

Natalie retreated to her designated bedroom, a space in the roof accessed via a ladder at the rear of the kitchen. The rafters hunkered so low that she couldn't stand up, and there was only room within the chipboard walls for a double mattress. A window cut into the tin roof looked over the backyard. Outside, Betsy put the rake in the shed, approached the house and walked under Natalie's line of sight. Soon, Natalie could hear her moving about in the kitchen below, humming and clattering pans. Then silence.

Betsy must be skinning and gutting the rabbit, Natalie thought, and remembered the animal's glassy button eye. She grabbed her toy bunny, Violet, from her suitcase at the foot of the mattress and lay down. Her pillow smelt like home.

'Tea's ready.'

Natalie broke from her doze in alarm. Kate's scowling face peered through the hole in the floor and ducked away. Natalie hid Violet under the clothes in her suitcase then descended the ladder. Betsy, Henry and Kate were already at the kitchen table. Natalie took her seat. Henry didn't have a plate; he stared at nothing in particular and drank in slow, thoughtful draughts from a large beer bottle. Three empty bottles were lined up on the table in front of him.

'You must be starving, girl,' Betsy said. 'Tuck in.'

The red meat on her plate glistened in its gravy but Natalie picked at the beans and mashed potato instead. No one spoke for a time. Then Kate said, 'Hey little baby, what about your casserole?'

Natalie speared a chunk of rabbit with her fork and placed it in her mouth. As she chewed, she tried to think of sausages and chops but the meat stuck in her throat like chaff. She managed to swallow and said, 'Has my dad called?'

Betsy said, 'Why, did he say he was going to?'

'Maybe he's having so much fun he's forgot about her,' Kate said. She

grinned at Natalie and made a point of chomping with her mouth open to show off the rabbit meat gnashing between her teeth.

The attic room didn't have a nightlight. Natalie switched off the lamp and lay on her back, clutching Violet. She heard a noise and sat up. Kate climbed from the hole in the floor and crawled across the empty side of the mattress, pillow in hand.

'What do you want?' Natalie whispered.

'Shut up. Mum told me to keep you company.'

Kate threw herself onto the mattress and wrenched up the sheet.

Once Natalie's eyes adjusted to the gloom, she could see something in the rafters, a black shape like an open hand above her face. 'Kate, I think there's a spider up there.'

'Probably. We get huntsmen all the time.'

Natalie, gasping, flung herself into a corner. 'Kill it, please kill it.'

'What for? Huntsmen eat mozzies. Want to get bitten?'

'I don't care, you have to kill it.'

'Aw, shut up, will you? I've got to compete tomorrow.'

'It'll drop on me.'

'No it won't, go to sleep.'

Natalie clenched her teeth. Then she heard muted shouting, and scraping noises like furniture getting shoved around. 'What's that?' she said.

'Nothing. If Dad comes up here, pretend you're asleep.'

Natalie's heart kicked against her ribs. 'I want to go home.'

'Tough.'

Natalie thumbed at tears and stared into the rafters. The space in the roof had its own presence, thick with darkness. The huntsman was watching her, she knew, she could feel its eyes on her, it was waiting for her to drowse off so that it might begin its slow creep down the wall. The yelling and banging downstairs got louder and closer. *Please get me out of here.* Natalie pressed her face against her toy bunny and waited for a sign from the heavenly Father. None came. She wondered if He was moving in one of His mysterious ways or if she hadn't prayed correctly, but the only person who would know for sure was in a hospital somewhere, and Natalie had no clue how to find her.

This is just one of the stories included in Deborah Sheldon's new book, 'All the little things that we lose', available through [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) on 15 January 2010.

About the Author

DEBORAH SHELDON has been a professional writer for 24 years. Her television scriptwriting credits include *State Coroner*, *Australia's Most Wanted*, and *Neighbours*. She has written feature articles for national magazines such as *Australian Penthouse*, *Prevention* and *Australian Wellbeing*. Her non-fiction books are *Where to now? The practical adviser for Australian widows* (Reed Books), and *One night stand - true stories of casual sex* (Random House). Her medical writing includes the internationally award winning CDROM *SomaZone*, patient information for Australian and Australasian medical associations, and the award winning *Better Health Channel* web site. Her short stories have appeared in various literary journals including *Quadrant* and *Island*. Deborah lives in Melbourne Australia. Visit her at <http://deborahsheldon.wordpress.com>



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