

Glass Jars

When I was nine, my mother found me in the tall grass by the woodpile in the neighbour's yard. After breakfast I went outside to catch grasshoppers. It was almost lunch when I bent down close to the ground. I had followed a cricket, large and bronze, across our yard and into the neighbour's. It would be the first in my collection. But every time I got close, it spread its wings and flew away. It landed next to the woodpile. I knelt beside it, but not too close as even my shadow was enough to scare it. As I knelt down with my hands cupped, ready to pounce at the cricket, I heard a low rhythmic beat below the soil. It was like my own heartbeat but louder. I looked around me, but there was no one near. The neighbours had gone on holidays for the summer. So I figured it was the heartbeat of God. I wondered then if all the world was contained in the belly of God, and even darkness was somehow enfolded within him. I lay in the grass with my head turned to one side and my ear pressed into the soil, listening to the heartbeat knowing that I had found a great secret.

"Bridget, Bridget!" My Mom was calling in that distant far off way, as if the sound of her yelling had been a part of a dream, but not loud enough to wake me. I didn't hear her until she was standing over me.

"What are you doing?"

"Listening."

"Listening for what?"

"I can hear God's heartbeat in the ground."

“Don’t be silly. God doesn’t have a heartbeat.”

“But why couldn’t he have one?”

“Because it’s not like that.” I was always being told by grownups what it was and wasn’t like. Mom took my hand and pulled me up from the ground, she brushed dry dirt from my chestnut hair. I wanted to stay in the grass, never leaving the heartbeat that was mine alone to hear.

“Wait, my jar!” I had collected seventeen grasshoppers in an empty pickle jar. I created an environment just like the one I found them in. I placed twigs and blades of dry grass at the bottom of the jar. With my fingers I flicked small drops of water into their new home for them to drink. My older brother Toby hammered holes in the top of the lid for air holes. But it never mattered. The grasshoppers, ladybugs or stinkbugs always died just days after being caught.

Mom and I crossed the field back to our house; she was still clasping my hand tightly, as if she thought I might embarrass her by running back to the woodpile. She never liked when I spent hours outside barefoot and dirty—that was Toby’s job. She opened the whiny screen door and said,

“It’s lunch in 15 minutes, you know what to do.”

I did know what to do. I went to the bathroom and hopped on the pink laminate countertop. I filled the sink with warm soapy water and plunged my feet and hands in until they came out looking like wrinkled raisins. Then, I found the purple elephant from the drawer below the sink. The elephant had soft whiskery bristles and I scrubbed the dirt from my fingers and toes. It was like a daily baptism.

My family lived in Winfield, a small town in the interior of British Columbia. My Dad always bragged to guests that we lived in the only desert in Canada. In actual fact it was only a semi-arid desert but I never corrected him. If we walked on the gravel logging road that cut through the forest, we could be at Okanagan Lake in ten-minutes. Otherwise it was a twenty-five minute walk by road, or a five-minute drive. In the summers Toby and I walked to the lake early in the morning, before the tourists arrived. We baptized each other all morning long, taking turns being the pastor or the person being baptized. We made up our own vows.

“Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?”

“I do.”

“Then in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I now baptize you Bridget Glenn.”

We weren't strong enough to lower each other into the waters and back up in one graceful motion the way the pastor did at church when we went at Easter. We held each other around the shoulders then let go, dropping each other into the cold waters with a smack. The lake water ran into our mouth and noses and we emerged coughing but ready to repeat the vows again.

After we had finished our baptismal services, we raced each other to the wooden dock floating some meters out in lake, then back to the shore. Toby often kept swimming, or would go off with friends. I stayed at the beach. I would pull my towel around my shoulders and sit in the sun while drying off. Sometimes I watched the tadpoles swim below the surface of the lake. Other times I stretched out my

towel lying on top of it, hoping to hear the heartbeat below the rocks. Often I fell asleep while waiting for its sound. Toby usually wandered back to the beach, and we would start our baptismal game or our dock races all over again.

I would not have a church-sanctioned baptism until I was fifteen. And that was not until I had made a personal commitment to Jesus. It happened the following summer when I was 10. Mom dropped me off at a vacation bible school, held at the Pentecostal church down the road from our house. Toby went to a real camp in West Kelowna an hour away. He went river rafting and water skiing while I cut shapes out of construction paper and made collages. I didn't mind though, I hated leaving home.

The Pentecostal church smelled like the town library—like musty books and furniture polish. The floor was covered with a velvety blue carpet that ran up the centre aisle, up the stairs and ended at the pulpit. When no one was looking I pushed my feet along the carpet without picking up my feet; my shuffling left light blue tracks along the carpet.

I recall the week in snapshots. The first snapshot was the time I saw Ms. Erickson, the VBS teacher. She wore a long floral skirt that touched the floor and swayed around her as she walked. She said it was the perfect twirling skirt. She had a purple vest with pins and badges covering most of the front of her chest. Her hair framed her face with a trendy mushroom cut.

One morning when we entered the church, a single empty easel stood next to the pulpit. Ms. Erickson entered the sanctuary carrying a blue canvas under one arm and a wooden chest under the other. She set the canvas on the easel. It was a flannel

graph. Pulling out flat felted figures from the wooden box, she told the story of Jesus. The blue canvas was a cloudless sky under which the bible stories floated one into the other, from the miracle of fish and bread to a story of men catching fish until their nets overflowed. I knew which flannel character was Jesus because he always wore a white robe with a red sash around his shoulder falling at his waist. Mary, his mother, wore a blue dress and had a serene expression on her face. Each morning Ms. Erickson told us stories about Jesus, his miracles, and his twelve friends that followed him around.

On the second to last day, when it was time for our morning snack we went downstairs to the kitchen for juice and cookies. I asked Ms. Erickson if I could be excused to use the bathroom. She said yes. Instead of using the bathroom, I went back up to the sanctuary to look at the flannel graph. The church was empty. Coloured light filtered through the glass windows. Lowing hanging branches tapped against the glass, moved by a light breeze. I don't remember hearing the heartbeat, but I felt as if I heard the same soft thrumming below the soil. I stood at the end of the aisle watching the trees move behind the coloured glass windows. I believed that a great mystery lay just on the other side of what I could know or understand, all I could see was the silhouette of a mystery taking shape before me. I wanted to stay in that sanctuary forever, a place so still that even the smallest motion threatened to disturb. However, when I looked at the bible figures on the open sky of the canvas, I found my body was moving towards it. When I reached the flannel graph, I changed the picture moving the bible characters around to make my own story. There was Jim, who wore a white robe with a red sash. He was a local man who worked at the

grocery store. He had a beautiful girlfriend, Jennifer, who had a blue dress and a serene expression on her face. After months of secretly seeing each other, without their parent's permission, they met up under an olive tree and they kissed. And then . . . I heard Ms. Erikson's sing song voice saying, "Time to line up." I ran out of the sanctuary down the stairs and into the bathroom. The wooden chairs with the metal legs screeched across the linoleum floor. The other children had finished their snacks and slid their chairs neatly under the table as we had been taught to do. Then, walking single file, with Ms. Erickson leading the way, they walked quietly past the bathroom door and up the stairs. When I was sure Ms. Erickson had passed by, I opened the bathroom door just enough to see through. When the last of my friends had passed, I joined the back of the line. We filed into the first three pews, and sat waiting for the next story. Ms. Erickson said that she would tell us one more story about Jesus before playing games. A girl in the front row cupped her hand to her friend's ear, whispering a secret that made the other girl laugh. A boy in the back row was giggling. Ms. Erickson turned to look at her flannel graph canvas, and stopped.

"Who did this?" I realized then that I had left Jim and Jennifer kissing under the olive tree.

"Which one of you did this?" She walked up and down the front row looking intently at each of our faces. I couldn't hide the hotness that crept from my toes into my whole body and into my face. I could hear my own heartbeat drumming loudly in my ears.

“One last time, if you have done this, please confess.” I wanted to tell what I had done, and that I didn’t mean to cause harm, but my legs felt heavy, and my body was sinking lower in the pew. I wanted to melt into the pool of blue carpet.

We did not play games that afternoon. Instead Ms. Erickson continued telling stories using the flannel graph board. But where there had been blue dresses and leafy trees, fish and bread, she riffled through her wooden box and found other images. Her voice was lower, more serious, as she stuck flannel pink pigs to a cloudless sky emerging from a man wearing a dirty skirt. There were woolly white sheep separated from spotted goats for eternity. There were flames. And there was hell, a place of darkness, and fire, and eternal separation from everyone we knew and loved. There was a cross, and Jesus, who was no longer dressed in his white robe, hung on it bloody and disgusting. He would save us from hell.

It wasn’t the fire or the darkness that made me confess, it wasn’t even eternal separation from my family. I didn’t want Ms. Erickson to tell my Mom what I had done, and hoped that a confession might also mean secrecy. At the end of class when the others had left the sanctuary, I approached Ms. Erickson who was peeling felt characters off the board and categorizing them before placing them back into the box.

“It was me. I made Mary and Jesus kiss.”

“Bridget, you deliberately lied and said you were going to the bathroom but instead you played with the flannel graph without asking. I care more about you lying to me than the board of course, but it was wrong to have Jesus and Mary kissing.”

I couldn’t look at her. I couldn’t form a single word in reply.

“Bridget.” Her voice held a kindness. I looked up at her. She was smiling warmly back at me.

“Have you ever asked Jesus into your heart?”

“No. Not really.”

“If you accept Jesus, he will forgive you of all sins.”

I knew who Jesus was. My family had attended church a few times before. I knew that Jesus’ blood-stained messy body, dangling on the cross, somehow cancelled my sins. I hoped Ms. Erickson would also cancel my sins. So I said yes.

“Yes, I would like to ask Jesus into my heart.” Ms. Erickson clapped her hands and smiled. Together we sat in a pew. We bowed our heads and closed our eyes, she said,

“Its called The Sinner’s Prayer. I’ll pray and you say the words after me.”

After she had finished her prayer, and I had mumbled it along after her, she said

“All heaven celebrates when one of his lost sheep come home.”

I had never felt lost before and I didn’t feel like celebrating either. I wanted to go home and never see Ms. Erickson or her flannel graph canvas again. However, when she saw my Mom drive into the church parking lot then enter the front doors of the church, Ms. Erickson met her saying,

“Mrs. Glenn, can we have a word?” They stepped out of the church and into the afternoon sun. I stayed inside the foyer and watched them talk from behind the glass doors, trying not to cry. I had said that stupid prayer and still Ms. Erickson was telling my Mom.

On the short car ride home Mom said,

“Ms. Erickson tells me you asked Jesus into your heart?”

“Yes.”

“She asked if we want to attend church this Sunday so you can go to Sunday school.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“She talked about other weekly groups for adults and there’s a youth group for kids Toby’s age. So?”

“So?”

“Ms. Erickson said you’ve made friends with the other kids and most of them will be at church on Sunday. Would you like to see them?”

“I guess.”

We attended church for almost a year before Mom and Toby said the Sinner’s Prayer. They both made friends. Toby joined the youth group, and Mom joined a monthly women’s group. I made some new friends at Sunday School, apart from the ones I had met at VBS. Dad was against it. He thought that religion was for the weak, and men who attended church were sissies.

“Hen-pecked, everyone one of them,” he said, every Sunday, while we scurried around the house getting ready for church as he drank coffee in his pyjamas.

“Their wives drag them there by their neck ties. Not me.” It was just as well he didn’t go. Mom, Toby and I barely fit in as it was. Everyone else had gone to church their whole lives, and always knew the right things to say at the right time. They knew when to say “I’ll pray for you,” or when to keep their mouth shut and just offer condolences instead. They knew all the worship songs by heart, and had all the important bible verses memorized. It took me years to catch up.

After church one Sunday in spring, as I was finishing grade 7, I walked over to Mr. Klots' garage sale. During the school year he taught biology and earth science at the high school in town. I knew him because he also grew the best peaches in Winfield. He had an acre of fruit trees, 54 trees in total. He said he knew each one by name. Most summer afternoons he sat by the roadside in a plastic orange chair at the end of his driveway, selling peaches to tourists and locals. He had peaches lying in purple fruit cartons. If he ran out, he allowed his customers to pick more with him. He talked about pruning and thinning, about watering and natural pesticides. He taught his customers to find the perfect peach, and always said, "You don't squeeze it like these dimwits in the supermarket. Even the slightest pressure could leave finger marks that become bruises when the fruit matures."

He was sitting in the shade of his garage, reading a magazine in his orange chair. Wooden tables lined both sides of the garage. On most of the tables he had biology equipment and books. There were no other customers. He looked up from his magazine when I entered the garage.

"The wife says I have to downsize."

"Uh huh." I walked around one of the tables and found a book on the life cycles of fish.

"I'm what you might call a collector." He had a tarnished bronze microscope. I peered through the dusty lens, wondering what I might find in particles broken down to their smallest size.

"Are you interested in the microscope?"

"I'm interested in everything." He had an encyclopaedia collection of natural history in alphabetical order. He had magnifying glasses and dissection tools. He had books on clouds and fish and plants. I wanted it all. I wanted to know about the natural world. I was still hoping for an answer to a question. I was trying to locate God and believed I might find him in nature.

"You can have the whole lot for \$95."

"Oh. I'll just take this book." I had found a *Guide to Common Edible Plants of British Columbia*.

"What about \$75?"

"I'm twelve. I only have \$47 saved up from birthdays and allowance."

"Get that insurance broker Dad of yours to pitch in the rest."

"I don't think he would do that."

Mr. Klots stared at me. He sat and he stared. I tried not to notice as he watched me thumb through his books. He folded one arm across his chest and cradled his head with his other hand. He was moving his head from side to side almost imperceptibly, as if having two sides of an internal conversation. He frowned, he smiled, and then he got up from his chair and walked out of the garage. I continued to read his books. I was lost in the worn pages, gazing at pictures of fish scales. When he came back a few minutes later, he was pushing a wheelbarrow. He rummaged around in a cardboard box marked \$2 and found a floral print blanket. He laid it in the bottom of the dirty wheelbarrow. First he placed his encyclopaedia collection in the bottom. Followed by the microscope, which he wrapped in an embroidered pillowcase. He tucked the tools in the gap between the books and the sides of the wheelbarrow.

And on the top he balanced a large glass picture frame that held his butterfly collection.

“That will be \$47.”

At home I found a cardboard box, packed my clothes into it and pushed it under my bed. The school year was almost over and I needed only a few outfits for the summer. In the empty closet I hung Mr. Klots’ butterfly collection. I arranged the encyclopaedia collection on the floor pressed up against the closet wall. The tools and smaller books I placed on top of the encyclopaedias. I tested the closet doors, closing them making sure that nothing peaked out and gave me away.

The following day I packed a backpack full of books, a magnifying glass, and a thermos of water. I told my Mom I was walking to the lake for a swim.

“I have errands anyway, so you’re on your own for lunch.” I waited until she left the house and packed a lunch for myself. I climbed up the rocky hill behind our house and headed for the logging road. Once on the logging road I found a small path leading away from the main gravel road. I followed the path until I lost sight of the road, and then followed it further still. Eventually I found the right spot, a patch of grass where I could spread out my books and tools. I stretched Mr. Klots’s floral blanket on the dry forest floor. I unpacked the contents of my bag and started reading and then identifying everything I could see. Trees: *Lodgepole Pine – Pinus contorta*. Description: Leaves needle-like in bundles of 2, 1 to 3 inches long, yellow or dark green. Cones rather small, egg shaped. . . Grass: blue-bunched wheatgrass and sage. Birds: female and young California quail scuttling through grass, sound of ring-

necked pheasant in the distance. Cumulus and cirrocumulus clouds floated across the sky. Wind gently swept through the lodgepole and ponderosa pines; their needles rustling in the breeze passing a thousand secret whispers from tree to tree.

I lied everyday of that summer. Mom thought I should be with friends, Dad thought I should attend summer camp to learn how to fit in with other kids before high school started. To please them, I lied and said I was meeting friends at the lake, at the corner store, at their houses. I said I was walking to the library or the tennis court. Instead I learned the footprints of every wild animal in our region, and followed dry coyote tracks to their den. I found quail's eggs, and raven feathers. I found the skull of deer, brilliant ivory white lying in the underbrush of the forest. I learned the names of all the plants, and animals, the trees and the birds. I felt as if the whole world was my home, and I was at peace in it. I imagined my life as a wood dwelling hermit, or as a guide for hunters, or a tracker for search and rescue crews. I wanted to live there always. It was *my* place, and it demanded nothing of me that I could not give.

One afternoon, when I knew my Mom was gone, I brought home a sack of edible plants: wild rose hip, balsam root, shepherd's purse, and bark from the western jack pine. I boiled the bark in a saucepan on the stovetop. I cut the greens into Mom's crystal salad bowl. I sat down to eat at the dining room table. I had a few bites; it was ok, but needed salad dressing. I was eating salad and drinking tea when I heard a key turn the lock at the front door. Mom walked in. "Bridget?" She seemed surprised.

“Mom?” I was surprised. “What are you doing home so early?”

“There’s a storm forecast at the retreat centre, the other women wanted to leave early in case the road washes out.”

She went over to the fridge, and saw the bark simmering on the stove.

“What’s this?”

“Tea.”

“What’s floating in the tea?”

“Bark.”

“Bridget, please tell me you’re not going to drink this.

“I already have.”

“Bridget, why would you do that? Great, and to top it off, you’re using my crystal bowl. Why can’t you walk down to the corner store and buy yourself a pop and a hotdog like other kids? Why drink bark. People die doing this kind of thing. That philosopher died drinking hemlock.”

“Hemlock doesn’t grow in our area.”

“Bridget, I wanted to come home and just unwind. I didn’t want to spend the afternoon in a doctor’s office.”

“Great, because I don’t need a doctor.”

We spent the afternoon in the doctor’s office waiting for one of two doctors to become available for walk-in patients, Doctor Pendleton and Doctor Yan. I knew Doctor Pendleton’s daughter from church. She asked me over to her house a few times. But her older brother always looked at me in a way that gave me the creeps.

Against Mom's encouragement, I turned down every one of Alison's invitations. Eventually she stopped asking. I hoped Doctor Yan would be available first.

After an hour in the waiting room, the nurse called my name. Mom stood. "Mom, you don't have to come in. I can just go." She said nothing, but followed me into the doctor's office.

We were shown into Doctor Pendleton office. He asked me all sorts of embarrassing questions. Where did I get the bark from, had I bought it from someone? No I didn't buy it. Why was I in the forest? Silence. Did I know about the dangers of wood ticks and wild animals? Yes. Did I have friends at school? Did I experience extreme mood swings? Was everything ok at home? He was addressing Mom when he asked the final question.

The car ride home was quiet. Until Mom said, "Bridget, his wife is a leader of the women's group. You think they won't talk at about us when he gets home tonight?" I was too ashamed to say anything. All my secrets had been discovered. I felt like one of the grasshoppers I used to collect, plucked out of its home and placed in a jar for everyone to look at. "Let's not get into this kind of mess again." Mom said, and I knew what she meant. I needed to learn how to fit in.

High school began two weeks later. I put my clothes back into the closet, and packed the lab kit into a cardboard box, shoving it under the bed. I left Mr. Klots' dead butterflies hanging on the wall behind my clothes. I could see the top of the black frame above the clothes hangers, if I looked.

In high school biology class, I acted as if I was learning everything for the first time. I circled the wrong answers on tests because I didn't want to score too high. I didn't want to be the smartest in class as it was easy to have certain labels stick, and this was one I didn't want.

I also tried making friends at the church youth group. We met weekly, and played kick-the-can and capture the flag during the long September evenings. In the winter we played board games before watching a video series on the Christian faith. It took time, but soon I was one of them. I knew the worship songs by heart and I had memorized the important bible verses.

At fifteen I made a choice to get baptized at our pentecostal church, this time by a real pastor. Many of my friends at youth group made the same choice and during the baptismal service, we lined up on the stage for our turn. The pastor asked each us a series of questions.

"Do you believe in God the Father, in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit?"

When it was my turn, I entered the warm waters of the baptismal tank. The pastor asked, "And do you renounce the world and its sinful ways, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, and do you believe that God has forgiven your sins and given you a new heart?"

I scanned the audience of waiting faces. Even my Dad had come to church to watch me. I looked at the stained glass windows, remembering the week of VBS, the insincere conversion which led to a sincere baptism.

"Bridget?" The pastor asked again.

“I do.”

The pastor gracefully lowered me into the water. And I heard it, the heartbeat loud and rhythmic. But this time I knew what it was. Like hearing the ocean in a shell, I was hearing the corporeal sound my own heartbeat reflected back to me. What I had heard that day in the grass was not the heartbeat of God. I knew now that God did not have a heartbeat. He did not live under the ground waiting to be found. He was in heaven. I heard my own heart and nothing more.