Scaling Never

Carys Bray

There are so many kinds of never. There's the never that Jacob's Mum uses when she says, "Never talk to strangers; it's dangerous," and there's the never his Dad uses when he says, "Never play with your food; it's bad manners." But Mum talks to loads of people she doesn't know, and Dad breaks Oreos in half to lick the creamy bit. Issy used to say, "I'll never be friends with you again if you don't play with me." But she didn't mean it. And sometimes she said, "I'll never eat sprouts." She did mean this; and if Mum is right, and death is definitely the end of being alive, Issy will absolutely *never* eat sprouts. However, Jacob has noticed something. Never is a word that doesn't always mean not-on-your-nelly and absolutely no way. Sometimes never means not yet.

The house is full of sadness. It's packed into every crevice and corner like snow. There are bottomless drifts of it beside Issy's Cinderella beanbag in the lounge. The sadness gives Jacob the shivers, and he takes refuge in the garden. Like the house, it is higgledy and unkempt. The lawn is scuffed and threadbare in places like a grassy doormat that's felt too many feet, and it is speckled with fallen leaves. Overgrown flowerbeds stream along the length of each of the old, red-brick garden walls, all the way to the end wall, which is partially concealed by a hornbeam hedge. Randomly planted apple trees poke out of the lawn like twisted, witchy hands. Clusters of green fruit cling to bent branches, which are already almost bare of leaves. Windfalls pepper the grass, and Jacob kicks them as he makes his way to the end of the garden. Some of the fallen apples are rotten and they detonate, spraying pulp and larvae. Others are hard and thwack on contact like tennis balls.

Last year, Mum supervised an apple-picking operation before the trees dropped their fruit. There were bags and bags full. Mum took lots of the bags to church. Dad made an announcement in

sacrament meeting that anyone who wanted a bag of apples could come and get one from the car boot afterwards. Lots of people wanted free apples, and Mum smiled at them and said, "You're welcome" a lot. She wrapped the apples that she didn't give away in newspaper and put them in empty shoeboxes in the cupboard under the stairs. When she opened up the boxes, several months later, the apples were pink and yellow, and soft. "I had no idea this would happen," she kept saying, as if it was the most incredible thing she'd ever seen. She made everyone come and look. It *was* a surprise that the apples weren't Brussels sprout green and sour anymore, but Mum said it was miraculous.

This year, she hasn't bothered. No one has bothered. Even the trees themselves seem to be fed up with balancing fruit in their knobbly branches, and there are so many fallen apples to kick that it takes Jacob a long time to reach the end of the garden. When he gets there, he stares at the hedge, which is covered in crispy leaves that look like giant bran flakes. A few of them have fallen off, but he knows that most of them will cling on throughout the rest of the autumn and into the winter. He knows this because last winter he and Issy played unseen in the gap between the hedge and the wall, hidden from view by the screen of lingering leaves.

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It was Issy who found the dead bird. Most of it was under the hedge, but one wing lay on the lawn, spread out in a feathery fan. It had probably been killed by next door's cat. Issy picked the wing up. Jacob opened his mouth but then closed his lips over the words he had been about to say: "Put it down; it's unhygienic." It was a sentence that belonged to Dad. Besides, Jacob was suddenly keen to touch the wing himself. The feathers were shiny blue-black, and he had to know if they were both as sharp and as soft as they looked. Issy let him hold the wing, and he touched the feathers with his eyes closed. They were soft and fluffy at the tips and coarse and strong at the base where the shafts were thicker.

They buried the bird and its wing behind the hedge. They dug a hole with two plastic, seaside spades from the garden shed. Jacob placed the bird in the hole. One of its black eyes stared blankly at the sky.

'Don't put soil in the birdie's eye," Issy said.

"We have to do it properly," Jacob replied. Although it was the first burial he had ever attended, he was pretty certain that it wouldn't count if he left part of the bird peeping out from under the soil. "Why don't you say a prayer?" he suggested.

Issy prayed. She said the prayer that she said at every mealtime, saying "bird" instead of "food." She said it quickly, as they did when they were hungry and didn't want to wait any longer for their food.

"DearHeavenlyFather. Thank you for the bird. Please bless it. InthenameofJesusChrist. Amen."

Jacob covered the bird with soil and patted it down with the back of his spade. They stood in the gap between the wall and the hedge for a few moments, flanked by dark red brick and brittle, hornbeam leaves.

'I think we should sing a song," Issy said.

"Okay," he replied. "What song?"

"One about birdies."

"Okay." He tried to think of a song about birds. "I think 'In the Leafy Treetops' has some birds in it."

"No." Issy smoothed the soil of the bird's grave with the tip of her trainer. "Something good."

"I don't know." He shrugged. He'd had enough. He was ready to do something else.

Then Issy started to sing:

> We will find a little nest
> In the branches of a tree.
> Let us count the eggs inside;
> There are one, two, three.
> Mother bird sits on the nest
> To hatch the eggs all three.
> Father bird flies round and round
> To guard his family.

He gave her a brief round of applause.

"Do you think that it was a mummy birdie or a daddy birdie?" Issy asked as they pushed themselves out from behind the hedge and onto the lawn.

"Dunno," he said. "We could have checked for a willy, but it's too late now. Maybe it was a child bird."

"Oh." Issy looked surprised. "That *would* be sad."

Jacob thinks he can remember the spot where they buried the bird. At first, he isn't sure if he will do anything. He stands next to the hedge, daring himself. Then he dashes back to the shed, as if he is worried that something might stop him from fetching the spade.

Spade in hand, he pushes through the hard, scratchy criss-cross weave of branches and into the space between the wall and the hedge. He starts to dig. Nothing at first. He moves along a bit, his elbow grazing the wall. He disturbs more soil, and he can suddenly smell clay and damp. He stops digging for a moment as he remembers.

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He didn't want to go to the funeral. Mum was very upset when he said this. How could he not want to go to his sister's funeral. How *could* he? As he had expected, the funeral was just more church, different from Sundays only in that they had to sit on the front row, except for Dad who sat up on the stand as usual so that he could do the service. There was an opening and a closing prayer, there were some hymns, and Dad did a talk about not being sad while tears coursed down Mum's face and sprinkled into her lap, watering her hands.

Afterwards everyone drove to the cemetery. There was a very deep hole in the ground. When Jacob asked about it later, Dad said it had been dug by a digger. Someone had placed a fake grass carpet over the pile of earth that had been dug up, and Jacob stood on a corner of it, scratching the soles of his shoes along its prickles.

Dad and some of the funeral men carried the coffin from the car to the graveside. When they put it down on two planks of wood that had been placed over the hole, Mum started to make a noise. Dad moved away from the coffin and went to stand next to her. He put his arm around her shoulder, but the noise continued. It was a bit like a dog howling, and it sent a zigzag of fear from Jacob's heart to his willy. A squirt of wee leaked into his pants and spread in a warm circle. Dad shushed Mum, but she wouldn't stop,

so he fished in his suit pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. He put it in Mum's hand. She just stood there, so he lifted her hand and held it over her mouth for her. The handkerchief muffled the noise. Eventually Dad let go and Mum carried on, holding the handkerchief over her mouth, but the noise leaked past its edges.

Dad had to say a prayer to dedicate the grave. He said it loudly so that people could hear him over Mum. It went on for a while, and Jacob wished that he would hurry up. After Dad finally finished, the funeral men made the coffin go down. When someone walked up and threw a handful of soil into the hole, Mum stopped making the noise. She moved the handkerchief away from her mouth. "*Don't* do that," she said.

People left quickly. Dad said that Mum should say good-bye to everyone. Jacob heard her saying that she didn't see why she should, as she was going to see them all again in a few minutes for the food, back at the chapel. But she walked with Dad toward the parked cars anyway.

Jacob moved off the plastic grass and onto the real stuff. He edged toward the hole. Issy's coffin was a long way down and it was spattered with dirt. He knelt at the lip of the grave. The earth was damp, and he could feel the wet soaking into the knees of his best trousers. He had been hoping for a miracle. Sister Anderson was always going on about them in CTR lessons on Sundays. Some miracles happened a long time ago, like Noah's Ark. Not many people seem to have thought about it; but once when he couldn't sleep, Jacob had imagined how much poo the animals must have made, and how much trouble it must have been for Noah to stop them all from eating each other. It had made him realise that Noah's Ark was an ace miracle, right up there with Father Christmas's flying sleigh. There were other good miracles from the olden days, like the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Daniel in the Lion's Den, and Balaam and the Talking Ass—a miracle with a rude word in it.

Dad said that miracles happen all the time. Sister Anderson thought so, too. She said that Brother Anderson's cancer treatment was proving to be a modern-day miracle. Maybe she was right, but Brother Anderson's head looked like an enormous egg, and Jacob had been imagining a much bigger miracle than that for Issy, one that would see her alive and with hair. His tummy

hurt. His underpants and knees were wet and cold, and a damp, sticky smell was wafting out of the hole in the ground. It reminded him of the bag of modelling clay that Mrs Slade kept on the side, next to the sink, in the school classroom. He looked at the soil speckles on the coffin's little silver plaque. It read, Isabel Rachael Bradley. He couldn't understand why anyone would want to throw dirt on Issy.

Sister Anderson crouched down next to him. "It's very sad, isn't it?" she said.

"It was meningitis," he told her.

Mum had made him say the word again and again. "People will ask, so you must learn how to say it," she said. He practised it until it stopped sounding like a sticky eye infection—mengy-eyetus—and started to sound more like men-ingiantis—a band of giants who had magicked Issy into the celestial kingdom.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" Sister Anderson asked.

He wanted to say that he was fine. He wanted to tell her to go away. But his bottom lip began to wobble, and it wouldn't stop, even when he bit it quite hard. Sister Anderson helped him to his feet. She put her arms around him and pulled his face into her squashy tummy. Her dress was pink and velvety. His tears soaked into its softness. She patted his head gently and said, "It's such a shame."

When he had finished crying, he stepped away from her. A rope of snot stretched from his nose to the front of her dress, like a bridge.

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Jacob unearths a feather and knows that he is in the right spot. The feather is matted and patchy, which is disappointing, but he keeps digging. As he digs, he thinks about the apples, hiding in old shoeboxes in the cupboard under the stairs. He knows that, like the apples, the bird will look different when it is uncovered, and he hopes that the transformation will be a good one.

There are more feathers, though most of them are not very feathery anymore. He digs especially carefully now. He has seen an enormous book on Egypt in the school library. There is a section about digging stuff up. There are pictures of the tiny brushes people use so as not to damage anything. The corner of his spade

grazes something hard. Jacob puts it down and begins to move the soil away with his fingers. Here is the bird's back. He follows its knobbles, brushing the dirt away. The bird is mostly bones. This is not the transformation he has been hoping for. The bird's insides, and most of its outsides, have melted into the soil. Its skeleton is a browny-grey colour. It's hard, but brittle, like crisps. He wipes soil from the bird's wing-twigs which, stripped of feathers, look like dirty icicles. Lastly, he moves the soil away from the bird's skull. The eye has gone. In its place is a hole that seems far too big. His finger may even fit inside. It does.

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Mum used to read a fairy tale each night from the old, fat, book that she had been given as a present when she was a little girl. Afterwards, she would get the Bible and the Book of Mormon picture books out and read a story from one of them, too. Jacob's favourite fairy tale used to be The Wolf and the Seven Goats. The best bit was the part where the mother goat opened up the wolf and her kids tumbled out of his big furry belly. The Wolf and the Seven Goats is just made up. But the story of Jonah and the Whale actually happened in real life. Jonah got stuck in a whale and survived. In the Bible and the Book of Mormon, there are even better stories than Jonah's. There are stories about people who died and then came back to life, like the story of Lazarus. Jacob remembers it because there's a bit where Lazarus is *so* dead that Martha says, "He stinketh." After they read about Lazarus, Mum sometimes said, "Who stinketh?" when someone did a trump. There's the story of Jairus's daughter too. Everyone thought she was dead, and people were crying. But Jesus told Jairus to believe; and when they reached the house, the girl wasn't dead any more. She was just sleeping. With God all things are possible—that's what it says on the picture of a big bird with its wings spread wide in flight on the kitchen wall.

After the funeral, Jacob asked Dad why he hadn't resurrected Issy. Dad explained it to him in the special, extra-patient voice he uses when he's explaining something that people should already know. He said that priesthood holders can't just go around resurrecting everyone. He said that Heavenly Father decides if people live or die. Jacob replied that it wasn't always like that—sometimes

people *believe* and then miracles happen. Dad said it was true, but not in Issy's case. He said, "Ours is not to question why." He said that sometimes believing things will turn out all right in the end is a better kind of faith than the faith that raises people from the dead.

Jacob felt cross. "So it's *all right in the end* for Issy to be dead?" he asked. "Didn't you even try to make a miracle happen? What's the point of being in charge at church if you can't do miracles?"

Dad said that Jacob would understand it better when he got older. But Jacob understood something right then. If he wanted Issy back, he was going to have to make it happen himself.

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The bird's eye socket rings the tip of Jacob's finger. He has been praying for the bird to come back to life for a whole week. It seemed sensible to start with something little, with a small miracle, for practice.

Sister Anderson once said that faith can be as small as a seed. She brought some mustard seeds to Primary for everyone to see. They were tiny. Jacob knows that his faith is bigger than a mustard seed; it's at least as big as a toffee bonbon, maybe bigger.

He moves his finger out of the bird's eye socket and picks up the spade. Then he puts it down. If he reburies the bird, he will have to dig it up and, if nothing has happened yet, rebury it again. He will have to keep checking on it. As the autumn sets into winter, there will be days when it is raining and days when the ground is stiff with frost. It will be much easier if he can find a safe place to put the bird.

He pushes his fingers into the soil on either side of the bird's chest and lifts gently. The head is the first thing to fall off, followed by the wing that the cat didn't damage. He is left holding a little cage of ribs; and as he places a finger under the spindly, dangling legs, they break off, too. He thinks he might cry as a rush of salty prickles gather at the top of his nose, but he doesn't. He puts the ribs down and pulls the bottom of his T-shirt out with one hand. Then he picks the little pieces of bird up, one at a time, and drops them into his makeshift pocket. He bends to sniff the soily bones. They smell of earth. They definitely don't stinketh.

He doesn't kick any apples on his way back up the garden. If

he is lucky, he will get up to his room without being noticed. Dad is at a church meeting. It's Mum he needs to watch out for. On Saturdays she usually cleans. According to the song they sing in Primary, Saturday is the day we get ready for Sunday, and Mum always says that Sundays are easier to face with a clean house. But today she might just be sitting at the table in the kitchen, wet-faced and dribbly-nosed, staring at nothing.

The back door is half wood and half glass. Jacob approaches stealthily, ready to duck if necessary, but the kitchen is empty. He opens the door, then sneaks along the linoleum. He tiptoes down the hall and turns to climb the stairs. He is halfway up when he hears the toilet flush. He has to pass the bathroom door to reach his bedroom. He starts to run. The bird pieces jiggle in his T-shirt. He hears the rush of the taps and the clink of the towel ring as Mum dries her hands. He is quick. His door closes as the bathroom door opens, and he listens to Mum pad slowly down the stairs as he kneels on the carpet, behind the door, his heart jumping.

He isn't sure where to put the bird. Mum will be certain to find it if he puts it in the wardrobe. He could put it in the bottom of Issy's toy box, but he doesn't want to touch her stuff because it gives him tummy ache. He shuffles across the carpet on his knees until he reaches the bunk bed. He puts the bird pieces on the floor and then lies down on his tummy and commando-crawls under the bottom bunk. There is dust along the skirting boards like the grey fluff that collects in the tumble drier. Under the bed, he discovers a couple of plastic soldiers who have deserted and one of Issy's books which must have slipped down the side of her bunk. He moves the book and the soldiers out from under the bed, and then he carefully delivers the bird bits into the far corner underneath.

After he crawls out from under the bed, he kneels again. He folds his arms, bows his head, and says a prayer. "Dear Heavenly Father. I have faith that you can resurrect the bird. This is a real prayer. It's not like asking for a bike or something. It's very important. When you resurrect the bird, I will have even more faith. And then there can be even better miracles. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen."

As he gets to his feet, there's a tap at the door. Mum's head ap-

pears followed by her body and the hoover. "It's Saturday," she says as she moves one of the toy boxes with her foot, in search of the wall plug. "The day we get ready for Sunday," she sings part of the Primary song to him with a half smile, as if she is hoping that he will join in. He doesn't. He picks the soldiers and Issy's book off the floor, climbs the ladder to his bunk, and waits for the scream of the hoover.

But Mum pauses for a moment. "Would you . . . do you think we should . . . Are Issy's things *bothering* you?"

"Not really," he fibs, his tummy clenching as he stares down at the orphaned jumble of Duplo, dolls, and ponies with bright nylon hair. If he tells her the truth, she might throw them all away; and then Issy won't have anything to play with when she comes back.

Mum's voice jellies around her words as she says, "We could sort them out, if you like."

"Don't cry," he says quickly.

"I wasn't . . ." She wipes a hand over her face, as if to make sure.

"Good. Leave Issy's things. It's okay. She might want them back—"

"Jacob, I've told you that we won't see her again until—"

"After she's resurrected, she might want them back," he explains cunningly. "Everyone gets resurrected at the end of the world, Dad said so."

Mum lets out a big puff of air. "That's a long way off."

"You never know," he says in a grown-up voice.

She smiles at his imitation of her and switches the hoover on. He watches as she pushes it back and forth, mowing the carpet. She unclips the wiggler attachment and worms it into the gap between the toy boxes. It sucks along the skirting board, uncurling and stretching like an elephant's trunk.

Then she kneels down. And Jacob suddenly feels marooned on the top deck of the bunk, the captain of a vessel that is rapidly approaching Niagara Falls.

'Haven't you finished?" His question pierces the hoover's greedy moan like a rescue shout.

'I'm just going to do under the bed," she calls up to him. "Goodness knows when I last did it." She leans forward on her

knees and thrusts the wiggler about as if she is trying to capsize him.

'You don't have to do it today," he exclaims, his thoughts paddling against the current of her decision like frantic hands.

There's a sound like the clatter of homemade shakers filled with uncooked rice and pasta, and his stomach sways as the bird bones rattle up the wiggler. He wants to launch himself off the top bunk and bodyslam the hoover like a professional wrestler, but he sits still as it sucks up his hope.

'Have you got some Legos under here?" Mum starts to lie down on the floor to get a proper look under the bed.

"No," he shouts down to her. "I think it must be some . . . rubbish."

She gets up and switches the hoover off. "I'll check for Legos when I empty it later, just to make sure." She clips the wiggler back in place, unplugs the cord, and closes the door on her way out.

Jacob stays on his bunk for a bit, looking down at the room. Mum will probably forget to check the hoover, which means he's not likely to get into trouble. That's good; it's something to feel happy about. He tries to feel happy. He pushes his cheeks up with his fingers and lifts his face into a smile but his mouth pops open and a small sob spills out. He is disappointed to find himself so far from happy. He pulls back the duvet, lies down on his tummy, and buries his head in the pillow. A series of sobs shakes out of him and rattles into the pillow, grazing the back of his throat like tiny bones.

Eventually, he climbs down the ladder. With God all things are possible. God helps those who help themselves, and He loves a trier. If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again. Remembering all this about God makes Jacob feel ever-so-slightly better. He puts the stray soldiers in his toy box, but he keeps hold of the book that was under the bed. It's the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. He opens it to the middle page, which is a special, fold-out picture of the beanstalk; its tip is hidden by clouds. He knows that Jack and the Beanstalk is not a miracle. It's just a fairy tale. No one could get some magic beans. It could *never* happen: not-on-your-nelly and absolutely no way. Fairy-tale nevers are not the kind of nevers that Jacob is looking for. He is in search of nevers that can be slipped under, scaled, or tiptoed around. But even though he

knows that fairy-tale nevers are impossible to bend, he wishes that he had a beanstalk. He wishes that Sister Anderson would bring magic beans to Primary instead of mustard seeds. He wishes he could plant the magic beans at the bottom of the garden, behind the hedge, and watch an enormous stalk twist and stretch skyward. And even though Dad says that heaven is not actually in the sky, he wishes he could climb the stalk right up into the clouds and find Issy. That would be ace.