

Things Without a Name

JOANNE FEDLER

Faith isn't so different from most women her age; she's thirty-two, single, has the requisite dysfunctional family, an even more dysfunctional best friend, a busy and challenging job, and in her weaker moments dreams of perhaps some day meeting a man that will ignite her senses and take her away from all this.

The trouble is, while she aches to see the good in the world, Faith is constantly confronted by the bad. After having heard one too many love-gone-wrong stories and being left feeling helpless in the aftermath of yet another woman fleeing yet another violent man, Faith, a legal counsellor in a women's crisis centre, has just about given up. Not just on the big ideas like hope, love and trust, but even on the chance of getting a decent haircut or meeting an ordinary, non-psychotic, bloke.

One night a twist of fate finds Faith wringing out years of unshed tears in a suburban veterinary clinic. It is a night that will slowly change the way Faith sees herself and that will allow her

to finally understand what she has always needed to know: that before you can save others you have to save yourself.

A beautifully written, big-hearted love story that grabs you by the scruff of the neck and will not let you go, *Things Without a Name* will resonate with every woman who's ever thought about giving up, but choses not to.

About the author

Joanne Fedler is a full-time mother and writer, former law lecturer and advocate for women's rights. She is the author of six books, including *Secret Mothers' Business* and *Dreamcloth*, and the co-founder of Moonstone Media. She grew up in Johannesburg and now lives with her husband and two children in Sydney.

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1

Scissors

I should have stayed in bed this morning instead of dragging my skinny arse into work to face the music.

Not that it is my fault that Priscilla's sister was stabbed to death with a pair of scissors. But at the very least, though, I should have thought of something useful to say.

This, right here, with Priscilla in the chair across my desk, weeping into her sleeve, is the challenge of my work. I have to come up with something useful to say. The bereaved refuse to be comforted. Grief is like a crime scene and trespassers are not welcome. People in shock are not looking for meaning, so best to leave the philosophy out of it. I always go for *useful*. A name for what has happened. Something with a 'what-to-do-next' element. Facts stay where you bury them; you can find them long after the tsunami of disbelief has passed. That's when people are trawling for nuggets, broken shells, shards of glass. Anything they can cling to.

Unfortunately I am one of those things people tend to cling to: Faith Ava Roberts (no relation to Julia), legal counsellor at SISTAA, which stands for *Sisters in the Struggle Together to*

Joanne Fedler

Alleviate Abuse, a hell of a mouthful for someone with a split lip or a broken jaw.

My desk in this small room on the south side of SISTAA's premises does not inspire or console. It is second-hand, covered with large coffee stains, ballpoint pen scribbles and a few incomprehensible carvings (apart from the *YOU CAN'T MAKE ME* I recently discovered gouged on the underside when I was on all fours trying to coax a praying mantis into an empty tissue box). It could tell a few stories, this desk of mine. Funding for this work is rare, and astonishing, like a desert flower or a luminous beetle. When you come across it, it sort of takes your breath away because of all the things it makes you think are possible. New desks aren't top of the list while mattresses, sanitary pads and formula for babies in shelters are vying for priority. But I'm not complaining (Nonna says there's nothing more '*ondignified*')—it's a functional desk with a box of tissues and one of those squishy stress balls on the right-hand corner, and three drawers down on the left-hand side where I keep my spare asthma pump, my pens, a stapler and a pair of scissors I am trying to coax back into the 'stationery' and not 'lethal weapon' cubbyhole of my mind.

Scissors. Beats paper, beaten by rock. Libby and I used to play to decide who'd get the last piece of Turkish Delight. Best of three. I always let her win. That's what big sisters do.

My pair of nail scissors lies somewhere at the bottom of my bag for when I visit Nonna, to cut her toe- and fingernails because, being blind, she claims it's difficult to judge where nail ends and flesh begins. But two things: old people need to be touched, even if it's to have their nails cut, and there is seriously *no* point in arguing with Nonna.

You can go your whole life with your little quirky systems in place, like how you arrange your CDs alphabetically but your DVDs in genre, or how you smell everything before you eat it

Things Without a Name

without any idea of what it is you're sniffing for but you'll know it when you smell it. Or how you scrutinise ingredients on every packaged product so you don't end up carelessly eating parts of animals that really belong on the animal itself. Or always opt for 'scissors' in word association after 'paper'. And then someone fucks it all up. This is how things in your brain get scrambled. Instantly and unexpectedly, like a burst appendix and the 'I'm-sorry-to-have-to-inform-you's. And you are left, in the penitentiary of your thoughts, thieved of your ability to ever look at a pair of scissors in the same way again.

On the counsellor side of my desk is my swivel chair, which can do three full rotations if you give it a real push-off and sit cross-legged. On the client side are two plastic stackable chairs. Against the wall is an old sofa with a dark blue throw that covers its blemishes and worn-down armrests. There's a filing cabinet here next to where I sit where we store all documents and statements in alphabetical order. I warned you it was nothing to get excited about.

I think that maybe my desk—my office, for that matter—is depressing (and given my friend Carol's condition, I don't use that word lightly). Not that the women who walk in here aren't already up to their fractured eye sockets in misery. If you walk through our doors, depression is probably the least of your problems. You only have to look out the window to see the stretch of the sky, the ancient patience of tree trunks, the sizzle of ecosystems, nothing too small or insignificant. And then there's the sea . . . punk waves slapping you silly, laughing all the way back out. Outside you're in something bigger. The inside, with its walls, closed doors and waiting rooms has a way of stunting happiness. Thankfully we have Barbara, who sits at reception, a radiant human frangipani, who disrupts the straight-forward correlatives we're dealing with: shattered tibias. Shattered dreams. Broken ribs. Broken hearts. Joy doesn't creep in here by mistake.

Joanne Fedler

Unlike children's wards in hospitals which have illustrated storylines along the walls. Humpty Dumpty. The cow jumping over the moon. Little Red Riding Hood. To make you forget that you're hooked up to a dialysis machine or awaiting a heart transplant. Or dying of cystic fibrosis like Joshua, who made it to three months short of seventeen. Not that Josh noticed the walls. He was too fixated on my nonexistent bust. Carol says that my giving away my virginity to him as a sixteenth birthday present was 'the height of pathetic martyrdom, not to mention a cop-out on romance'. But I'm not sorry. Romance isn't everything. It's just an optical illusion. Ambience, at best.

I tell Priscilla that in the violence against women movement, we call what happened to her younger sister, Sanna, who had two kids (nine months, still breastfeeding, and four years, with all her milk teeth), *femicide*. Priscilla nods. I can tell this piece of information is not very useful to her. Right now. But maybe later. When Sanna fades in memory, as all people we lose do, and becomes a story Priscilla tells about her life, with a stray thread which if she follows, will lead her to other similar stories, and she realises her sister was one of thousands. The victim statistic, a cog in the machinery of gender violence. But you can't tell someone her sister is a cog. What you know to be true is sometimes the thing you need to keep most to yourself.

'Why?' she asks me. 'Why?'

I don't answer her. It's not like the question was directed to me specifically. In any event, the answer is so impersonal, it's brutal.

When you're seventeen and desperate for a date to take to the prom, your mother says something like, 'Where there's a will, there's a way,' dialling Ron Hadley's number. And Ron, who idiotically signed the Valentine's Day card he sent you three years ago *Your secret admirer, Ron Hadley*, for which you have punished him with your indifference ever since, says, 'I'd love to,'

Things Without a Name

with a breathless keenness you know is not asthmatically-related. And while you hope he won't try kiss you with his froggy lips (not that you have anything against amphibians, quite the contrary), at least you've found *a way*. Why should it be any different when you want to stop someone from walking out the door and scissors happens to be at hand?

People like me have filing systems for the fallout: deceased. Multiple Abuse. Trial pending.

'Why?' Priscilla asks again. That's grief for you. Highly repetitive. I could tell her that domestic violence is like smoking and drinking. I could, but I'm not going to because her sister has only been dead for thirty-seven hours. Bad habits. If the switch ever happens, it'll be gradual. Like global warming. Violence against women isn't going out of fashion any time soon. Unlike my boots, which 'don't do anything' for me, as my sister Liberty would say. They are noticeably scuffed and worn down at the heels which I have glued back several times already. Perhaps they are a little disgusting. Libby has emphasised that I won't get a date until I realise that first impressions actually *do* matter and that moccasins went out with Bucks Fizz. I think now about Sanna's shoes. They will stand there in her cupboard, worn into the exact indentations of her feet, collapsed arches and all, until they are given away to charity in a black garbage bag or scavenged by next of kin who have no aversion to the foot odour of deceased relatives.

Priscilla is wearing three-inch heels on dark brown Hush Puppies that have not come from a Big W or Kmart winter special. The kind Josh's mum, Mrs Miller, wore. I look up at Priscilla. I wonder whether she and Sanna are the same shoe size so she can wear her sister's shoes. I notice I am hoping this is the case. But it's really not my place to hope.

I give Priscilla a small sad smile. The kind you reserve for the likes of Mr Williams who sits outside Desai's Corner Café

Joanne Fedler

with his crutches to go with the \$2 coin you toss him, to distinguish yourself as the one dishing out the benevolence. It is a smile that I perfected sitting in a children's hospital ward. Lifting his oxygen mask to speak, Josh would say, 'Don't smile at me like that, Faith . . .' and I'd blush, a bright splash leaching up my neck to sabotage my freckled cheeks, because he'd caught me—mourning before he'd even died. But I need this smile because in my work there are no quick fixes, short cuts or magic tricks. Most of what I do is damage control. Sifting through the shards of what's already broken. A kind of archeology of intimacy gone wrong.

Here at SISTAA we're only supposed to offer support and advice. Theoretically our clients have to do the fixing and healing themselves.

Most of them, though, are looking to be saved. If you take the time to read the sign on my door, it says *Legal counsellor* not *Saviour*. 'Saving' is not in my bio as a special skill. Neither is 'psychic', by the way. It's not something you advertise. Besides, when people find out, they always ask retarded questions like *Should I leave my husband? Will I die young? Do you do lottery numbers?*

I'm Thirty-Four And Unmarried (which, despite the way my mother introduces me, is actually not my middle name). With a dead-end job. I can't help the thirty-four—everyone ages. I am unmarried *by choice*, but apparently by all civilized standards this makes me somewhat of a weirdo, probably a lesbian. Thankfully, the only person's opinion that counts is Nonna's and all she cares about is that I'm having '*attivita sessuale splendida*' (great sex) even if it is *sessuali pre-matrimoniali*. Which I'm not. As for the dead-end job, it didn't seem so dead-end eight years ago when I started here. The other option was to renew my contract at Bergeron-Turcotte Attorneys. 'You could be a partner, Ms Roberts,' Edward Turcotte drawled at me from behind his desk,

Things Without a Name

a blowfish in a pinstriped suit, with a faint moustache of sweat on his upper lip, 'If you play your cards right . . .' And I swear, he winked.

Nonna calls them God's whispers. These moments typically involve doctors, phone calls in the middle of the night, the occasional coffin. But a wink will do it. As I stood in my ironed pant suit facing Edward Turcotte, the fancy address, expensive décor, the memos about dress code and the quips about 'hysterical female clients' snapped into focus like those 3D images you look at forever, and just when you feel like either this is a hoax or you've got cancer of the eye-balls, the hologram pops up at you along with the entitlement you suddenly feel to call people stupid who can't make it out. I knew then that delivering horse manure has more dignity and worth than a career in a law firm, where 'I'm-going-to-bone-your-ass-for-every-cent-you've-got' smiles are all about generating long lunches and BMW convertibles.

Dad was 'a little alarmed' when I left BT Attorneys. After forty-two years at Golden Life Insurance, 'things go wrong' is the well-worn armchair of his psyche. I can't say what he was like before death sidled into our living room and settled down like a Persian cat indifferent to anyone's allergies, depositing its hairs on everything and everyone. 'I hate what I do,' I ventured. 'Besides your mother, who doesn't?' Dad reasoned. 'Work isn't supposed to be fun. Otherwise it would be called Fun, not Work.' *Job satisfaction isn't the Be All and End All in the BST. The Big Scheme of Things.*

A drop from a five figure to a four figure salary is 'irresponsible and foolhardy,' Dad said softly, which was just another way of him giving me his blessing.

I had this rogue thought that helping people might work for me. That was my first mistake. At SISTAA, I don't 'help' as much as 'facilitate people's unhappiness'. This place is a hospice for the human heart, and palliative care is about how you're going to

Joanne Fedler

die, rather than what's left of living. But it was an honest mistake. Besides, there's only so much money a single person who doesn't have a drug or gambling habit needs. So here I am.

I guess, given the alternatives, my job at SISTAA isn't that bad. I have my own office. My boss doesn't wink at me. And my stapler doesn't jam or do that half-hearted gig of only going through some but not all of your pages. Don't laugh—death and tragedy we can all handle. It's the small things that break us apart.

The hardest part of my job is getting women to understand: they've got to do it for themselves. Which is why I've got a stress ball on my desk and nails bitten down to the cuticles. My clients are a bloody helpless lot. They couldn't organise a love story with a happy ending if their lives depended on it.

I make a mental note to myself to get all Priscilla's contact details before she leaves today. I am hoping at the very least to score a personal history for our Survivor Speak-Outs. A sister telling her murdered sister's story is a coup no matter which way you look at it.

I repeat the word *femicide*. I offer it to Priscilla, like a small thing that needs to take her hand. She doesn't even acknowledge it, like a mother numb with postnatal depression. Her anguish thrashes around, a neglected, rejected infant itself. Maybe if I knew the word in her native language it would help. But I can't even say, 'I'm sorry for your loss,' in Somalian or whatever it is they speak in Somali. Learning Somali has, surprisingly, never made it onto my TO DO list.

My face feels tight. I can't remember if I toned this morning. The past twelve hours have been rather a blur. I touch my cheek and feel a flap of dry skin. I try to pick it off but I have no nails to speak of. So I just sort of rub it.

It is autumn outside and why I am telling you this is because the website said try to 'focus on something that makes you

happy' when I feel the urge to bite my fingernails again, and autumn, shedding its leaves like butterflies released from captivity, makes me happy the way it makes some people sad. Josh liked autumn. He said it communicated something real about life. The letting go. The beauty before winter. Josh lived in a kind of autumn his whole life.

I am looking out the window at the autumn branches when Priscilla lays her head on my desk.

I want to reach out and move the file she is crying on.

But experience has taught me a few things. And I don't.