

Staying Jessie Cole

A Memoir



TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

Praise for *Staying: A Memoir*

'A wounded, lovely, luminous book about grief, trauma and the strange healing potential of words.'

Tim Winton

'A work of shining brilliance.'

Romy Ash

'*Staying* aches and pulses with life...Cole is a writer of immense talent.'

Anna Krien

'*Staying* is a well-written, extremely moving memoir that steers resolutely clear of stereotypes and self-pity...For all the darkness, there is light too. Cole is a gifted writer with a sensual turn of phrase, and her exploration of the reverberating effects of suicide is both illuminating and absorbing. It will appeal to readers who loved her previous novels.'

Books + Publishing

'This touching memoir from Australian author Jessie Cole, whose childhood was irrevocably changed when her sister committed suicide, offers a rare personal take on unthinkable tragedy.'

Elle



For all those left behind

Two weeks after I started high school, a girl from down the road came over in the afternoon after school. Chatting, teasing and laughing, my friend and I played, until abruptly the girl grabbed my arm and came up close to my face, eyes serious and full.

‘Is there something wrong with your mum?’

‘No—what do you mean?’ I had barely noticed my mother’s slow wanderings about the house and garden.

‘She just seems really sad. Has something happened?’

The girl’s face was so close I could see the light speckling of freckles across her nose. Her long, straight hair swished over my arm.

‘She’s fine.’ I was confident. ‘She’s always like that.’

Later, the girl bragged at school that she was the first to know. ‘I even knew before *her*. My dad told me on the way home.’

When my friend had gone, our mother called us, Jake and me, into the lounge room. Afternoon light swung in through the long glass doors, reflecting off her face. The outside grass was lush and humming with crickets.

‘There’s something I have to tell you.’ Her face was stricken.

I peeked at Jake, saying nothing. Sitting down on the couches, we watched her with startled eyes.

‘Zoe’s dead. She died yesterday, in Holland.’ Her voice was pained, but she didn’t cry. She looked at us—ten and twelve—half-grown like awkward, eager puppies.

Jake breathed out in a crumpled, broken laugh.

‘She’s not *joking*, Jake.’ My words were stern, though I had just stifled the same sound, a kind of disbelieving titter, within my own throat.

My mother reached out an arm towards my brother. I could feel my heart banging in my chest. Jumping up, face set, I ran. Into the unbroken green of our land, I ran. I could not cry—could not breathe—and finally, when I felt I might burst, I stopped and my breaths came in sucking gasps. My sister Zoe. Brown-bodied, light-eyed, splint-legged. Songs like swelling rivers. Eyes hard and cold.

‘Yes, I’ll play, but only if you—Jessie—only if you say, *Zoe is the bestest, most beautiful, kindest, most generous, most amazing sister in the whole world and I love her more than anyone else.*’

But I wouldn’t. I just wouldn’t. Zoe. Taut-bellied, with a birthmark the shape of Australia on the back of her thigh. All those random moles and freckles. Her skin glimmering beneath my palms. The squeeze of her hand on my shoulder. Her sideways, slant-eyed smile.

‘Thanks, Jess—you’re a real star.’

I hid then, behind a steep hillock, in the raised roots of a

gigantic camphor tree, and waited for someone to come find me.

And my mother came, tentatively calling my name.

‘Jess, Jessie ...’

‘Mum,’ I whispered, my voice dry and scratchy.

‘Come on, Jess. You can’t stay here.’ My mother was still tearless, her skin stretched tight across her face like a drum.

‘How did you find out?’

‘The police in Holland rang the police in town, and they rang Dad at work.’

‘At work?’

‘Yeah. He thought it was one of you kids. A bus crash or something. You know there’s been those school bus crashes lately?’

‘Yeah, on the news ... Mum, what happened, a car accident? In Holland?’

My mother looked down at the grass. Her hair fell forward and she slowly reached up and tucked it behind her ear.

‘Mum?’

‘She killed herself.’

‘What?’

Tilting her face up, my mother’s gaze was unwavering. ‘Suicide. The police said suicide.’

‘No.’ It was impossible. ‘Why would she do that? Zoe?’

Shaking her head softly, my mother looked towards the house.

‘We’d better go back, Jess. Your dad’s coming home from work early and he won’t know where we are.’

My father met us in the garden. His skin was grey and he shuffled from foot to foot as though the ground was hot. He

wedged his hands roughly into his pockets and then pulled them out again, pushing off his glasses and pressing his fingers against his eyes, his mouth gaping open, a sagging dark hole. Unspeaking, he leaned towards us with outstretched arms, catching us against him in a fierce embrace. My father sobbed, with gasping, tight, dry breaths, and my mother and I stood unmoving in his arms. A wide space seemed to open up between us all and my father squeezed us tighter to try and fill the gap.

Finally my father let go and we drifted, wordless, back inside. In the lounge room we saw Jake was gone. With barely suppressed terror my parents called to him: 'Jake! Jake! Jakey! Where are you, Jakey?'

'Fuck, Janny, where is he? Jake!'

I could see my mother might cry, so deep grew the two lines between her brows.

'Jake! JAKE!'

Immobilised, I watched my parents search the house, all the island rooms. They ran out into the garden calling for him, their voices muffled, wet. 'Jake? Jakey?'

'He's scared, Janny. He's scared to come out.'

My mother found him hiding deep under his bed, tucked up in the corner with the spider webs and dust. Rolling Jake out, my parents brushed him off and scolded him softly through their tears.

'You scared us, darling.'

'Jake, mate, we didn't know where you were.'

As he tried to slip quietly from my parents' grasp, Jake's frightened eyes entreated me, but I could say nothing and do

nothing to keep the world at bay. Peering at the ground, away from my family's shock-filled faces, I watched as the heavy tears rolling down my cheeks dropped from my chin and bounced at my feet. My tears seemed to crack the secret roundness that had encircled us—Jake and me—leaving us broken like two halves that could not make a whole.



The day after Zoe died, Jake and I went to school.

'You don't have to go, kids—you can stay home,' my father had said the night before. 'It's just ...' His voice faltered. 'It's meant to be better if you try to do the things you'd normally do.' The psychiatrist in him speaking. 'I'm going back to work, but Mum will be here if you don't want to go to school.'

Keeping up the rituals of normality was decided upon as the best defence against grief, and we got up from bed and ate breakfast at the kitchen table, and then caught the bus from the end of the driveway as we had on every other school day of our lives. I'd left Jake behind at primary school, so it was the first year we weren't catching the same bus. For me, the day was a swimming carnival, and I dressed up in my house colour. In a bright yellow sundress I was a sad-eyed, drooping daffodil. On the bus I watched the faces of the kids around me, wondering if any of them *knew*. No one spoke to me, though they didn't look away either. Finally I turned to the girl behind me, an old acquaintance from primary school.

‘My sister died yesterday.’ My voice came out a strangled, husky whisper.

‘What?’ The girl could not decipher my words.

‘My sister is dead.’

‘Which one?’

‘Zoe.’

‘You’re kidding, right?’

‘No.’

My friend looked at me, stunned, uncertain. ‘She’s been overseas for a while, yeah?’

‘Yeah, almost a year.’

‘How’d she die?’

‘She killed herself. In Holland.’

Silence grew around us and I turned back and faced the front. Trees flicked past the bus window, skidding strips of green. My face felt numb and I reached up and pressed my fingers into my cheeks, hard, until the bones beneath my eyes began to hurt. Tears sprang up—I could taste them, wet and salty, in the back of my throat.

The swimming carnival was loud and echoing. Screaming kids lined the grandstands, pompoms and streamers springing furiously in their arms. I hung back in the very last row of benches, hoping to go undetected among all the cheers, a single thought on repeat in my mind.

This is the first day I will live when Zoe is dead.

A teacher approached me, her hair tied in two messy plaits and laced with yellow ribbon. Her face was set in lines of irritation.

‘You’re not swimming today?’ she asked. ‘That’s a pretty party dress. Bit much for a swimming carnival, though.’

My mother had made the daffodil dress when I was still a child at primary school, and though it hugged at me now with all my budding curves, I felt *myself* in it. Running my fingers through the pleats in my dress, fanning the yellow fabric out around me, I was comforted. The teacher looked me up and down with disapproving eyes.

‘Why aren’t you swimming? This isn’t a day for being lazy, for just hanging out.’

I said nothing.

‘What, you can’t talk either? Won’t swim, can’t talk.’

‘My sister’s dead.’

‘What?’

‘My sister died yesterday. She killed herself. In Holland.’

Stepping backwards, the woman looked away, her lips pressed together tightly.

I had transgressed, speaking those words, and as I stared at the part zigzagging down the back of the teacher’s hair, I wondered in what way I could possibly speak the words right.

My sister passed away.

My sister passed on.

She took her own life.

She breathed her last.

She departed this life.

I tested these phrases beneath my breath, shaping them with my mouth, trying them out.

Gave out. Expired.

Broke down. Perished.

Suicide. Crashed.

The cheers of the surrounding kids surged around me, and I lifted my hands to cover my ears.

When she turned back to face me, the teacher's mouth had not softened. 'Well, at least try to look as if you're having fun.'

I nodded in cautious reply, dropping my arms to my sides. I didn't know if I should stand or sit. I didn't know if I should speak or keep silent. The whole world was filled with uncertainty. Nothing was clear. I was lost in this new terrain, where Zoe was dead and there were no words to speak right.

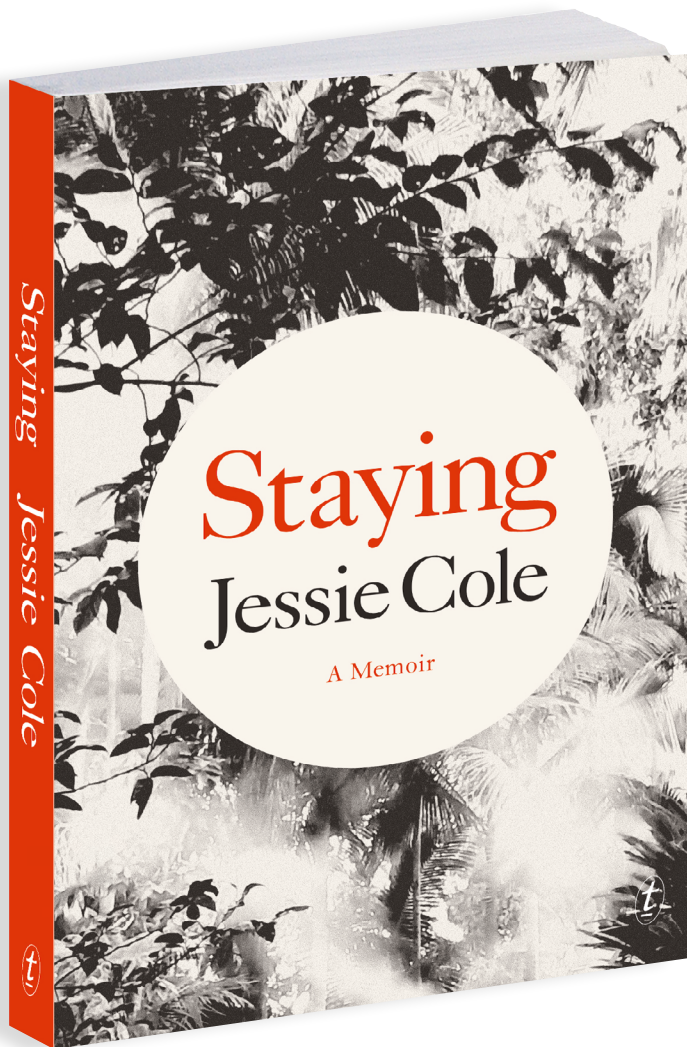
On the way home, I stared out the bus window and thought of my mother's face and how it might look. I remembered Jake's imploring eyes from the day before when they'd pulled him out from under the bed. On hearing Zoe was dead, I had run and my brother had hidden, as though the shock had physically propelled us. Animal instinct. I thought about the crease between my mother's brows—how hard it suddenly seemed, frightening instead of reassuring, as though her face was held in a tight mask to keep it from collapsing inwards.

Through the windows, the silhouetted mountains disappeared from sight as the bus neared my driveway. I imagined my father's slapping shoes on the bricks of the walkway as he arrived home from work to find the house so filled with our silence that we could all barely breathe for the sadness.

Again I lifted my hands and cupped them over my ears.

The bus door opened to let me out, a hissing, clanking slide, and I wandered slowly down the driveway, prolonging that awful moment when I would see the loss of my sister reflected back at me in the eyes of those who made up my family.

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