

this once
precious life
and other stories

jodi cleghorn



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For Christina,
if you'd let me go with you to the supermarket that day,
this might never have happened.

And Dave and Dylan,
for not begrudging me this writing life.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD (Marion Taffe)	1
VIGNETTES (tiny moments)	5
555	7
it could be	9
oksana	11
shipwrecked	13
MICRO & FLASH FICTION (brevity at its finest)	15
she would be grass	17
closure	19
no need to reply	23
taping lydia	27
the man who would	31
to the boy of my heart	35
SHORT STORIES (of the literary persuasion)	39
nothing new to begin	41
rapunzel is not here	47
first to a hundred	63

graceville	75
at arm's length	95
SHORT STORIES (of the speculative fiction bent)	105
if only you'd been nice	107
kissed by the sun	113
firefly epilogue	129
the meek shall inherit the earth	139
womb-of-mine	143
the leaves no longer fall	153
NOVELETTES & NOVELLAS (dark weird shit at its best)	171
elyora	173
the starling requiem	245
this once precious life	277
AFTERWORD (Lily Mulholland)	309
FROM THE AUTHOR	311
THANK YOU	319
ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS	323
(with a little help) FROM MY FRIENDS	325

It is by believing in roses that one brings them to bloom.

~ French Proverb

FOREWORD

marion taffe

Nineteen eighty-six: The Challenger space shuttle blew up, Chernobyl melted down, Mary Oliver's poetry collection *Dream Work* came out, big hair was in, and two shy, wide-eyed girls met on the Wendouree West bus on their way to school.

Jodi would get on a few stops after I did. I recognised something in her. In hindsight, I think it was a Molotov cocktail of pre-teen volatility that also broiled in me: excitement about the future, trepidation about our role in it, and a constant unease, an unfitting, like our bodies were strangers to us.

Over the school years and beyond we communicated sometimes daily, sometimes barely annually. We shared the stories of our lives and loves via giggle, phone, handwritten letter — so many letters — and more recently via social media. When I nervously messaged Jodi five years ago to say I was thinking of trying this fiction-writing thing, she was generous and warm. Come to the page every day, she said, advice that has kept me writing through these years.

This generosity underpins Jodi's community of creatives. Some of us are never far away, in a sort of planetary orbit, some of us swing close and then far away, like comets (or buses!). All are welcome. Be it through her annual Post-It Note Poetry, her once daily cut-up poetry, or her shared writing practice, the lived message is the same — bring your beauty, bring your scars, bring your

dread, bring your dreams, bring the mangled bloody wreckage of your broken heart, bring whatever it is you wish to bring. But always, come to the page.

In this collection, Jodi brings all this and she invites us as readers out of her margins, into her words, onto her page.

Fittingly for me, the collection begins on a bus. The vignette, *555* is an invitation to climb aboard, to sit with your apprehension and peer through the grimy window as the engine comes alive with the poetry of a moment in transit. What is left behind? What lies ahead? Leave your expectations at the depot. Forget all preconceived ideas about the route or the destination. Abandon all hope for a smooth ride.

This collection, written over decades, twists and turns through an impressive range of voices, themes and worlds. Its stories are provocative and transportive, diving deep into other minds and our own. There are vampires at schoolies, cricket on the beach, cassette tapes, mind control, space colonies, ghosts, there is even Santa — nice and naughty!

Here there be monsters, those we fear from our worst dreams and those that dwell in us. Here there is love and loss, the complexities of aloneness, the eye-roll choreography of the mother-daughter dance, the tightrope of control and manipulation that twists through generations. Here there is hope and resilience. But mostly, here there is humanity unfiltered, the beauty of what Mary Oliver called ‘this one wild and precious life’.

For those who trade or wade in story creation, Jodi’s tales about writing and writers cut to the bone. *Nothing New To Begin* lays bare all writers’ grief and devastation for their dead darlings. *Closure* snarls with a writer’s dry self-loathing, only to eventually be drawn ‘out past the offensive comments to myself in the side margin’. But perhaps most chilling is *The Starling Requiem*, which I read when it was first published in 2018. It haunted me then with its unreliable step-counting narrator, its sinister thought-police and the blurred borders of life, death, reality and imagination. Re-reading it today, however, with our literary tapestry facing threats from artificial intelligence and book-banning, *Requiem* has taken on a new dimension. For me this was

a stark reminder that the best stories are alive — ever-evolving entities that interact with the world in which they are told. And a reminder that dystopian writers are the prophets of our time.

Many of these stories call for a second reading, not as an indulgence, rather as continuation of the story. Jodi's skill in dropping the reader into a world — something few writers are brave enough to do. This is testament to the author's restraint and to her faith in us, her readers. We are held, yet never mollycoddled, never lectured to. And in this way, we can enter the story fully, deeply, bringing to it our own experiences and drawing from it our own perspectives. We are invited to catch the bus, to make these stories uniquely ours in the reading and to enjoy our own *Once Precious Life*.

Marion Taffe

Melbourne, Australia

December 2023

VIGNETTES

tiny moments

555

In your dreams the buses appear out of the rain with only headlights to announce their arrival. Interiors unlit. Destinations missing from the space above the windscreens. A bus stops where you stand. A door wheezes open. The smell of wet dog, camphor and Mercurochrome rushes out to fuel your indecision about alighting. You turn, worried you are holding up those wanting to board. The station is empty. For a moment you consider staying, then decide it prudent to get on rather than linger barefoot on the wet concrete.

Where is your ticket? Fingers touch nothing but the worn cotton lining of your pocket. The driver ignores his newest fare and you walk down the aisle, between passenger silhouettes melting into the seats beneath them.

You keep your eyes fixed ahead. Hope burns deep for a vacant double seat so you won't have to travel beside a stranger. And there... behind the rear doors. You slide across the carpet-covered cushion to take up residence by the window. The engine rumbles to life. An ozone blast of air has you reaching for your coat, only to find you left it behind, along with your bag and umbrella and someone you were meant to meet.

The doors close with a finality that says, *nothing can be done now*. You push both soles into the sticky floor; the metal indentations press back. The bus eases into the traffic and you know you shouldn't, but you do anyway: look back, through the oily streaks to the platform...

...where buses arrive in clusters, as they are wont to do, appearing one after another at the end of the bridge. Destinations blaze through the drizzling night. They slow and pull into the platform, queuing in warm carbon-monoxide clouds, until they are gone, as quickly as they arrived. The static of strangers' conversations, the hum of fluorescent tubes and the taste of rain fills the emptiness. Then another four buses pile in together. You almost miss the lone one, continuing down the road. Headlights on. Interior dark. Destination unknown.

In an illuminated gap between idling behemoths, behind the rain-slick window, you stare back at the platform. There, and a moment later, gone.

A friend tugs you in the opposite direction; warm fingers around your cold ones. For a moment you resist, then follow.

it could be

We look down into the disgusting mess.

‘It could be a maggot infestation or rabbit shit on white carpet?’

‘Who has *white* carpet?’

‘Idiots.’

‘That explains our mission brown carpet.’

‘For camouflage. I might buy you a rabbit for your birthday.’

‘For our undying commitment to retro.’

‘For undeniable proof of non-idiot status.’

‘For maggots and shit?’

Contemplation wells up in silence then slowly drains out.

‘Whoever was best friends first gets to clean it up.’

‘How is that possible?’

‘Well, someone reaches in and—’

‘I get the sink thing. How could either of us be best friends before the other. Best friends is like, a mutual thing.’

‘I knew I wanted you to be my best friend the first time we met.’

There’s silence. A proper silence this time. The kind that wraps you up and hugs you tight, even when you think you don’t need it.

It could be...

...we’re thinking of when we met in the bookshop. I followed your

voice because it sounded like someone I thought I remembered. You had my favourite book in hand, talking to yourself, trying to decide whether to buy it. I dared to tell you, a total stranger, it was my favourite and you listened. *Really listened*. Later, it didn't matter that you were ambivalent about the book.

It could be...

...we're both thinking: at some point we are going to have to stop believing the sink will magically clean itself. Someone will have to remove the rice and the tea leaves. Scoop handfuls of it into the bin, then remove the filter thingo and use it to scrape out what's left. And we're not seeing rice and tea. We're seeing maggots and shit.

It could be...

...we're considering the cascade of events and the responsibility implicit in them. You know I boiled the rice and made it stick to the bottom last night. I know you emptied the soaking pot and its bloated contents this morning. You know I emptied the teapot on top to make a cuppa for us earlier. And then there's the clincher: I know, you know, I would clean it out because you are the one who restored my faith in people again. I'd do this and so much more for you. You know, I know, you won't let me.

oksana

The curtains moved in and out of the window. Breathing in the sickly-sweet scent of jasmine. Breathing out the stink of fresh semen and stale sweat. Robert lay tangled in the soiled sheets, clinging to the feel of her. Keeping his eyes closed to hold onto her perfume and the way she said *I love you*.

Oksana, more a mirage than a memory, shimmering across his nightly desert. Abandoning him to an intoxicated disorientation that compelled him to get up and pull back the curtains to remember.

The intersection unfolded below in a bitumen cross, where his apartment rose above one corner. Oksana stood below on the opposite one.

The same corner where they'd waited for the lights to change, loaded with poppy-seed rolls or croissants for weekend lunchtimes. Cheap wine sheathed in brown paper on Friday nights. Laughing, arguing and dreaming a bigger life in the space of red to green. Crossing, giddy with possibility.

In the dirty pre-dawn, she leaned against the signal box emblazoned with post-modernist-meets-urban-graffiti artwork. A cigarette burned between her left fingers. Each inhalation lit the end stop-sign red; a tiny illuminated dot traveling the same arc from her thigh, over stomach and breasts to her mouth and back again, like an IKEA test station for wear and tear.

His cock hardened as the burning end flared again. Her pursed lips around filter still too much for him. And she knew it. Her suntanned face

turned upward, seeking him.

Oksana...

He closed his eyes and imagined striding across the cool hardwood boards to the apartment's front door, unlocking the dead bolt and stepping out onto the thinning corridor carpet. He'd take the stairs at break-neck speed, two at a time, racing as he always did to beat her to the intersection; to watch her wander down the road, cigarette in hand, cut-off shorts clinging to swinging hips, oblivious to the cavalcade of male stares.

At the intersection, he'd quickly check in each direction and run, against the lights and take her in his arms.

'I'm sorry,' he would say, 'for everything,' and she'd smile, jam the cigarette into the corner of her mouth and use both hands to smooth his crazy hair, before dropping the half-smoked cancer stick on the concrete. Satisfied with her efforts with his hair, she'd grind the butt out with the toe of a scuffed combat boot, then take his head in her hands and kiss him with reckless abandon, tobacco ripe on her lips.

'No public display of affection,' she'd joke, breathless, fighting him off when the kiss threatened to engulf them both.

How the yearning nearly overwhelmed him. The scenario so utterly believable he almost left his window vigil to go to her.

When he opened his eyes, reality hit harder than a car traveling 85 in a 50 zone. Almost as hard as knowing she'd stopped in the intersection to heckle him as he stood yelling apologies down to her from his apartment window.

Laughter up the street distracted him. He turned back and, like every morning, she was gone, along with the chance to tell her they were both equally trapped, unable to cross to the other side.

From bed he watched the curtains breathe in and out. In and out. He inhaled shame and carbon monoxide. Exhaled jasmine and cigarette smoke. Choking on the stink of newly-laid bitumen below.

shipwrecked

She is shipwrecked. She is shipwrecked with loss. She is shipwrecked with loss on a foreign shore. She is shipwrecked with loss on a foreign shore once home to her lovers. She is shipwrecked with loss on a foreign shore once home to her lovers, only toes left kissing. She is shipwrecked with loss on a foreign shore once home to her lovers, only toes left kissing the hungry water. Toes left kissing the hungry water as she once kissed them. Hungry. Impatient. Insatiable. Toes left kissing the hungry water now frigid with longing. Toes kissing the ocean that stole her lovers.

She is shipwrecked with loss, alone on the tiny, black stones of this beach. Tiny black stones like geological punctuation marks. The sentence ends here. And here. And here. And if she gathered them all up. If she placed them on top of each other, fitted them together, she could end here. And here. A cairn to who she was. Who she will never be again.

So many places for her to end. And none.

She does not end here. Nor here. Here. Or here.

She does not end, shipwrecked on this foreign shore of basalt full stops. On the beach they once stood skipping stones.

Stones black as grief. Cold as the bed in the house on the bluff she will never share with either of them again. Stones so plentiful it breaks her heart.

She reaches for a stone thinking she will skip it across the white wash.

Skip it over the waves. Out toward the deep. She will skip it across the deep.
Not a punctuation mark. Not an obsidian arc. Not an end. Not a beginning.

She will skip a stone as coda.

Return to the place where they are already playing and singing and loving.
Where they are full of life. And potential.

Return to where they are full of life. And potential.

Return to the point where they are loving.

And play not to the end but return to the coda. Repeat. Infinitum

Keep skipping the stone.

Skipping the stone across the ocean, and follow it.

She will walk on water.

She will be her own resurrection.

Skip the stone and walk until she finds them. Inhale a lifetime's oxygen
then dive deep. She will dive deep to where they languish at the bottom and
kiss their water-bound lips. Push air into their lungs; inflate them with love.

Push air into their lungs through water-bound lips and inflate them with
love so they will rise.

Rise with love and live again.

Rise with love and hand-in-hand they will walk the deep, jump the waves,
paddle through the white wash to the shore. They will cross the beach, climb
over the rocks and follow the path up the bluff to the house with the bed
where they made love. And she will no longer be alone.

She will no longer be alone, shipwrecked with their loss on a foreign
shore. On a beach with infinite ending, but no beginnings.

MICRO &
FLASH FICTION

brevity at its finest

she would be grass

Seven days straight it rained. Walls of water interspersed with the dark heaviness that hung from the sky. The dead lawn became a swamp laced with black lines from the postie's tyres.

On the eighth day the rain stopped. Light and heat returned. Judith's husband came downstairs, kissed her cheek, as if their tempest was nothing more than a cloud passing across the sun.

But they'd fought in squalls for years now: him wanting to leave, her demanding he stay. She could remember how her heart was before it dulled and fell apart. Before she forgot she had once been special. Been someone.

Before pride wrought a slow death of everything that ever mattered.

Before loyalty had washed her grey.

On the ninth day, green patches of turf appeared.

Grass was resilient, Judith thought. She would be grass.

On the tenth day she wiped the decades and dust from her suitcase. Set aside the memories of what might have been to pack only the necessities, leaving plenty of room for sunshine.

closure

You can find peace. You think so? I've looked. The supermarkets don't stock it. It's not listed on Amazon and Amazon has everything.

You can seek closure. I pull out my phone and type 'closure' into *seek.com*. There's 263 listings. I show the screen and comment I'm not qualified for any.

You think you're funny. Am I laughing?

You enjoy it, don't you? People feeling sorry for you. I'm not enjoying this. Who would fucking enjoy this? Would you enjoy this?

You need help. You need to mind your own fucking business.

You have to do something. Fuck off!

I'm just worried about you.

The counsellor sends me home with a brand-new note pad.

I'm told you write. Use it to help yourself. And do your job for you?

Some people find it useful, helpful even, to get their thoughts out of their head.

You can jam your note pad up your arse. I don't need to spend quality time with my thoughts; I'm with them all day and all night. Going round and round so loud they drown everything else out. I want to get away from my thoughts. A long, long fucking way from them.

It'll help you make progress. It's just a fucking tick box for your job security.

I'm just suggesting. Leave me the fuck alone. Okay?

A blank page. It's a metaphor, right? For a new start?

The blank page isn't empty. It's filled with bullshit, written over and over in invisible ink. Tiny, efficient script to get the greatest number of words per page.

Line after line: bullshit bullshit bullshit....

I've been thinking how the blank page is infinite in its nothingness.

A tundra sown with hopelessness.

A mockery of everything that will never be.

I've out-metaphored the counsellor. Pissed all over their positivity.

A dirty facsimile of myself

Scratch. Rewrite.

The moon, a dirty facsimile of myself

Fuck. That's bad.

Eclipsed, I hang in the sky;

And gets worse.

You know what, I'm gonna write bad. So bad the fucking paper will cringe and the pen will beg not to be guilty by association.

Tough shit.

Talentless, uninspired, bland, mediocre, boring shit. That's what I write.

Shit that looks wrong. Sounds wrong. Feels wrong in the very act of writing it down. Shit that makes no sense. Shit that fills page after page after page. The literary equivalent of an oxygen-thief.

Shit is as shit does. (Wish I knew Latin.)

I write bad. It feels good.

Words drip from ink-stained fingers. They soak so deep into the paper they disappear. Exit out the back door of the page.

No final look over the shoulder. Don't stop.

I hear them hailing a cab.

There's something. Not on the first or the second or even the third page. The 'something' appears on the page that lost count. A half-truth, a pretty lie I might believe, crawling out from the scratchings, scribbles and ink splotches. Slipping out past the offensive comments to myself in the side margin.

Escaping like a victim from a basement cell.

Blinking in the sunlight.

I leave the poem folded on the kitchen table.

Eclipsed

A dirty facsimile of the moon hangs in the sky;
my sister self.
Shrunken and discoloured.
Without lustre or illumination.
Hidden in plain sight.
A call without response.
Overshadowed and overwhelmed
by what's beyond Her control.

Only for now. For now only,
She whispers to me.

Tiny diamonds flare on the russet surface.
The return of my sister self.
A molten fracture in the sky,
audacious and expanding.
Bold and mercurial she rises
for all to see.
Pregnant in the night.
Beautiful and free.

As I will. As will I,
I whisper back.

no need to reply

Twenty-three mornings I've sat beyond the breakers at dawn knowing I have to come clean with Loz. It's not like last time, but a lie's a lie. *I'll ring her*, a pathetic promise swallowed by the on-shore whipping up white caps. *I'll paddle in and ring her*.

A set builds. I let each wave go by. Up on the cliff, the double-glazed eyes of the house stare at me in silent judgement.

I'll catch the next set.

It passes. As does the next. And the next.

In the end hunger forces me back to the shore.

Flat on my stomach, arms paddling hard to match the momentum, I'm almost on the wave, when I hesitate and it bests me. Caught in the madness of water and sand, air exploding from my lungs, seconds stretch endlessly. Finally, my face grates the ocean floor. I tuck and tumble. Bare feet find sand and push upward. I break the surface, salt searing my throat and nose and eyes. Before I recover, I'm slammed from behind, hard. I struggle free a second time, gasping, and stagger out of the water spitting sand.

It would be so much easier to stay behind the breakers and pretend everything is okay. But easy won't sate the gut-gnawing feeling I've had since Loz's last letter arrived.

No lie slips by without impact.

I've invested no effort in hiding the letters; a re-run of Virginia's divorce papers which also sat on the kitchen table next to the salt and pepper mills. I was never in denial of their existence, despite what Virginia spat when she confronted me because I still hadn't signed them. Unlike Loz's letters, I never lied and said they hadn't arrived. I was just afraid to open them and see how Virginia had got around the irreconcilable differences clause and cited my lie as the grounds for divorce.

There is lying to protect someone you love and lying to save your own skin. Virginia never understood the difference.

The deck overlooks the empty ocean; nothing for a thousand kilometres. It's what I thought I wanted.

I sit and force myself to remember Loz.

'It didn't start with a photo,' she said, the first time I rang. The night was so still I imagined her voice carrying across the water rather than through the mobile.

'Yes it did. I put that Kombi photo up, with me and Mick and whatshisname, his bloody mongrel of a dog, and you commented.'

'I'd commented before that.'

She probably had as a friend of a friend of a friend on Facebook. The comment about missing longboards caught my attention. And kept it.

Aftwards, an echo of her ran through everything. Gave life a new edge. The ocean new hues.

How many nights did I talk to her out here in the fading heat of the day, drinking beer while she drank tea watching the sun rise?

'One day,' she said. 'We'll be drinking beer together.'

So I swapped my day and night because I could. I slept during the day, surfed in the afternoon and coded at night. The ocean became a second home like I had always wanted it to. Why I'd moved here.

I imagined sharing it with her. She imagined sharing it with me.

A late-afternoon storm settles on the horizon. Loz will be awake now. I've spent the day rehearsing the story in my head—not because I deserve absolution, even forgiveness—but because Loz deserves to know everything. How holding that first letter in my hand, holding something she too had held, filled my heart in a way I never thought it would again. I hurried up the back stairs and sat at the kitchen table to read with the kind of excitement I hadn't felt in a decade. And the phone rang.

A security hack, emergency job.

I left the letter on the table.

Days later I surfaced.

The first thing she asked: 'Did you get my letter?'

'It hasn't arrived yet. I'll let you you know when it does.'

A lie is more than the sum of its parts.

Those place-holder words, intended to give me time, became a lead weight of guilt. The letter remained unopened. The second one arrived before I had a chance to move beyond the fears Virginia's anger had seeded years earlier.

Loz never asked about the second letter. Or any of the others.

Places torn open by Virginia bled again.

Stupid piece of shit.

And I was.

I watched Loz let me, let her go.

I turn my phone on. It chimes incoming texts and I flick through the list, buying time I still think I'm owed. I tap the unknown number first.

guess ur 2 busy 2 notice L missing online. she died Thurs. hit & run. they say it was instant. how do u lose some1 u love in an instant? no need 2 reply. u kno she ended her emails w/ that so she wuldnt have 2 wait 4 for the piece of shit reply u neva sent.

Water and sand and refracted light come together when you wipe out.
Terrifying seconds pass where you have no idea where you are. Your body
screams for oxygen and you have no idea where the surface is.

February 18th, 2014

Dear Joel,

I used to think there was an unexpected freedom in unread letters. To know at
the end of writing I'd be the only one to know of its contents. My secret, that
I loved you, would be safe for a few more weeks. Now I think it's the worst
kind of invisibility, that I'm dying slowly with each word...

taping lydia

I imagine what Lydia would look like on the back of a milk carton

‘Don’t diss it,’ I say, hoping she won’t reach over and touch what’s sitting on the table in front of me.

‘Don’t diss it,’ she mimics in the high-pitched voice she saves especially for me when Mum can’t hear.

Jake promised it would be simple, but this seems too easy.

Lydia puts one hand on her hip and pushes a massive purple bubble out between her lips. It pops with a loud *thwack*. She sucks the bits back in, chewing like a cow again. Gross.

‘What is it anyway?’

Like she cares what it actually is.

‘A technological artifact,’ I say, glad the words come out in the right order and sounding proper.

‘Looks like junk.’

But I can tell from the way she’s looking she’s just a little bit interested in the thing Jake found buried in his Pop’s garage.

‘It’s not junk.’

‘Bawr-ring!’

‘Is not boring, Lydia.’

‘Is!’

‘Isn’t!’

My fingers hover over the PLAY and RECORD buttons, just as Jake showed me. They’re big and clunky, not like an iPod.

‘It’s not even plugged in, you moron.’

Jake assured me we didn’t need a cord or batteries. I don’t understand how it can work without power. I’d watched, fascinated, as he’d pressed the EJECT button and the lid in the middle of the machine popped up. How he’d slid the plastic thing his Pop called ‘a tape’ or ‘cassette’ into the slot.

Jake told me the one he put in had Leo Sayer written on it. He said Leo sounded like a man who was intelligent and talked a lot. Probably a misunderstood genius. Jake thinks everyone is a misunderstood genius—even Miley Cyrus. I thought Leo sounded like something from Disney but didn’t say that.

The one I chose had AC/DC on it. It sounded like a code.

We were careful when Jake walked me through it. He took out the tape before he’d even point to the PLAY and RECORD buttons. Never ever EVER muck around pressing them, he warned me. Only press them down if you’re certain.

I’m not certain though. Mum always said everyone deserved a second chance. Even the baddest people. And Lydia definitely fits in *that* category, so I try especially hard with her second chance.

If Lydia fails the second chance—*when Lydia fails*—I’ll do it.

‘Say something nice, Lydia,’ I say. ‘Like, say you love me or you’re glad that I’m your little brother.’

‘You’re gay.’

Another bubble squeezes out.

I glare at her, remembering when I was little and Mum explained glaring meant staring meanly. I do it a lot at Lydia, behind Mum’s back. It doesn’t scare her though. Just makes her sneer—which means to meanly laugh.

The bubble explodes.

‘I am not a homo-sex-ual. And Mum says you’re not allowed to call me gay.’

‘So go dob then. Gay-bo. You so love Jake.’

'I do not love Jake.'

'Do so. You said you wanted to marry him.'

My cheeks get hot.

'I was at kindy and mad because you told me I couldn't marry Mum. I thought getting married was like being friends or something.'

'Whatever.'

'Why are you so mean to me?'

'Because I can.'

They are Lydia's last words.

Later, when I walk back to Jake's house with the cassette in my pocket and the recorder in my back pack, I replay it over and over in my head, unable to believe it happened—just like Jake promised it would.

My stomach churns and I try hard not to run.

I swear it was a reflex, to press the buttons down. Just like when your knee gets hit with a hammer and your leg kicks out. One minute she was standing there chomping gum being mean and the next she was gone, recorded onto the tape.

First her voice and then all of her, as the tiny wheels went round and round.

I stood there watching until the wheels stopped and the RECORD and PLAY buttons jumped back up. I pressed EJECT and took the tape out. Just as Jake told me to.

In the shed, Jake passes me the black texta stolen from the bottom drawer of his Pop's kitchen. My hand shakes as I scribble out AC/DC and write LYDIA below it. We do this so they don't get mixed up. We climb onto the workbench to reach the shelves higher up. Jake pushes aside a tin covered in orange contact, full of old door handles, and I put the tape up there in the corner, in its own cover. Beside Lydia is Jake's sister MICHELLE and another Jake isn't sure about.

I don't touch it. Jake says it looks really old and was covered in dust.

The name on the tape is MARGARET.

the man who would

Herman watched Jack pack his parachute, suit up and calibrate the oxygen mask which would keep him alive while the retrieval pod descended to Miranda's surface. Then, and only then, Herman broached the subject.

'Jack.'

A gloved hand went up. 'Herman, seriously man, you don't need to say anything.'

Herman, as Jack's best friend and legal representative, struggled with the possibility Jack might not make it. Jack on the other hand, accepted it was an occupational hazard when leaping from perfectly functional aircraft and spaceships. Jack also understood how he came to be on a low orbiting spaceship. Each record-breaking jump invited another and another, until all the possibilities on Earth were exhausted. Uranus's moon, Miranda, offered him a first. Not just a higher and longer jump, but the farthest ever attempted from Earth. With *FirstWorld's* contracts signed, nothing stood between him and the surface of Uranus's closest satellite. No atmosphere, no clouds. Just him and the newly activated gravitation field.

'I'm not worried about the jump. It's this.'

Herman pulled the contract and covering letter from his pocket, thrusting them into Jack's hand. Jack knew Herman defaulted from screen to paper when he needed to make a point.

‘Read.’

Jack shoved the papers back. ‘It’s all been said and done. Signed.’

‘*FirstWorld* found something. It’s not going to stop you jumping in the future. Just not today.’

‘Conditions are perfect. I’m not delaying.’

When *FirstWorld Corporation* acquired Miranda in a hostile takeover, Jack considered it an endnote for Herman to handle. But the new owners refused to give Jack permission to jump. The negotiations, protracted and nasty, should have forced Jack to find a new site. He wanted Miranda though. He’d been promised it.

Jack tore the legal documents, leaving them to float as an asteroid belt between them.

‘I guess you’re not concerned *FirstWorld* found a potential complainant.’

‘They can’t bribe ex-girlfriends. You shut that door.’

‘It’s more complicated.’

Herman retrieved a photo and more legal documents from his other pocket. Jack hesitated before taking them. He read the birth certificate, then stared at the photograph.

‘She never told me.’

‘You think Julianna wanted you to know?’

Jack shook his head. ‘She said she’d never stand in the way of what I had to do.’

He stared at the boy’s face. The gap-toothed smile. The intense green eyes.

His eyes.

‘I’m sorry.’ Herman put his hand on Jack’s shoulder. ‘I’ll let the crew know—’

‘Hold on. Because they found Julianna and the boy, the contract is voided?’

‘The contract is based on no potential complainants existing to sue for death by misadventure or negligence.’

‘So, they can’t sue for breach of contract?’

‘No.’

‘And can’t collect 30 percent of my media royalties?’

‘No, but—’

‘What can they legally throw at me?’

Herman sighed. ‘Trespass.’

Jack tucked the photograph inside his suit and picked up the mask.

‘Are you sure, Jack?’

‘I want my son to know me as the man who would.’

to the boy of my heart

To the boy of my heart,

Because you said the world would be an easier place if it could just be simplified to a list of dot points. Because words, more often than not, confused you in their random collisions and duplicitous nature. You read silence like I read Calvino.

Because we danced for hours beneath the sway of hundreds of delicate paper lanterns before you spoke to me. Because my heart beat in your chest as we sat side-by-side on the ancient breakwater and watched the sunrise. The briny dawn was more than a new day beginning.

Because what you lacked in books you made up for in music; a citadel of vinyl we adventured through with you as my guide, until I almost knew the byways and hidden alleyways as well as you. Almost spoke the same language so the right song at the right time became our greatest weapon.

Because the salt of your skin was the same salt in the sea air, heavy on my tongue. Because your absence tasted the same as your presence. It amplified an unquenchable thirst I carried half the time as longing, the other half as

ecstasy. I ignored warnings that too much salt was bad for the heart.

Because you forgot anniversaries and birthdays, never arrived on time and sometimes not at all. When you eventually appeared, it was always with oriental lilies, for no reason other than you liked to watch them open in my apartment. Over the years, I came to imagine you around the corner every time I caught a whisper of their perfume. But in the end, coffee is the great equaliser, olive branch, and space in silence, that does not require days to bloom 'I'm sorry'.

Because you pushed too hard and I pulled too hard and even though it should have been a symbiotic flow, we instead drowned in a disastrous *pas de deux* of dissatisfaction and disaffection. Yet in spite of it all, the boat we rocked, and almost capsized, eventually found a rhythm. We revelled in our disequilibrium. A current of dancing and music fuelling our love. Cocooning us from the worst tides we could inflict on each other.

Because it is impossible to tether the sun. Unlike the conformity and certainty others needed, we could not bind ourselves to each other. Because I already had a ring. And paper and ink burn. We believed love transcended all if we needed it to.

Because your 'hello' and 'good night' arrived without fail every day at the right time, no matter where you were in the world. Because all those times we said it was over, those words kept arriving. Now I send myself 'hello' and 'good night' from your phone pretending nothing has changed.

Because death is simple and you are not.

Because you hollowed to a husk in days, not over months or years. Your light faded like the sunset before me. The endless night is a pool of tears I bathe in alone and you sit through in the flesh of a doppelganger.

Because I believe if I write a thousand letters, fold words like cranes into missives of hope, there will be a moment when you can read and recognise me.

Because all I have are time capsule words and the memories they protect. If I can spark a single one—if for a moment you remember me—we will not have died.

Because I want to believe I will once again feel the rush of you through me.

Because I refuse to accept I have felt it for the last time.

Because you are not gone and I cannot leave.

Because I am forever,

the girl of your heart

xxx

SHORT STORIES

of the literary persuasion

nothing new to begin

The silence of the car trip followed them inside with the chill of night air. She paused in the doorway then backed away, staring at the queen-sized bed.

‘I’ll sleep in one of the other rooms.’

A single bed had less lonely space to fill.

‘I wasn’t suggesting,’ he said, and she forced a smile to stop him finishing the sentence.

‘Are you okay?’

The car trip haunted her.

How the conversation had petered out with the suburbs, becoming polite inquiries about the next CD and the best rest stops once they hit the highway. If she’d known it would be like this, the melancholy clinging to them like damp sea air, she’d have never suggested it.

‘We should eat,’ he said. ‘Something proper.’

She nodded and watched him put his bag down on the far side of the bed.

Thunder heaved and the first iron pings of rain began to fall. An overhanging tree branch clawed the guttering. The window lit up.

‘A storm?’ He looked surprised.

‘Of course a storm.’

She placed her bags carefully on the other side.

The muted television came to her through the lens of vodka-streaked tumblers on the coffee table. Music fed the room from an iPod dock in the kitchen. The alcohol burn washed through and melted the tension that had seized her the moment she'd seen him in Arrivals.

He moved and she went to lift her head from his lap.

'Don't.' He redistributed his weight beneath her. 'It's fine.'

He clicked off the television, the afterglow holding the darkness at bay for a moment. She felt him put the remote down on the couch arm and wondered if he would touch her.

'Did you think it would be like this?' she asked.

'Plotting murder?'

His attempt to lighten the mood only tightened the knot in her stomach.

'I knew from the start it would end this way.' The words were quiet, but filled the room. 'I wish it didn't.'

'You don't regret coming?'

'Do you?'

'I couldn't have done this alone.'

'Me either,' she said, and turned to face him, her hand tucked between her cheek and the warm velvet of the cushion resting in his lap.

'Thank you.'

She closed her eyes and let his breath's metronomic rhythm lull her to sleep.

The tea went cold beside the laptop. The flannelette collar, soaked by her damp hair, became ice-cold lips pressed to the nape of her neck. She tried to silence her finger's hollow tapping with earphones, but music didn't stop her feeling the rhythm of what she was rendering. Possessed by the notion it had to be done before he woke, she typed faster. Once the final sentence had been committed, she left it; she didn't fix the errors underlined in green and red, just turned the modem on and uploaded the document as the printer converted it to black and white.

The plumbing rattled and she squared the pages, left them beside the

laptop and went to the bedroom. It smelt stale. Almost dead. Naked, she climbed into the warm indent left by his body and tried not to think about what came next.

She woke to find him knelt beside the bed and knew it was over before he said, 'It's done.'

Despair poured in.

'Are you okay?' he whispered.

She buried her face in the pillow. The tears, caught for so long in her throat, moved upward and dissolved her.

'How long did you sit out there?'

He was red-eyed, still kneeling beside her.

She remembered waking on the couch, in the bleak dawn, with the crushing realisation of what day it was. She remembered how she forced herself to get up, shower, brew tea. How she made herself write, knowing each word brought her closer to the end. But closure fell to him and she ached, thinking of him sitting out there alone, having let her go.

He rested his back against the bed and stared at the window outlined in a golden halo.

'Did you know you sleep with your hand under your cheek?' he asked. 'Just like her.'

'She was little bits of me. And little bits of you too.'

He sighed and bowed his head.

Outside, the overhanging branch battered the guttering in defiance of the sunshine and its suggestion of a warm, untroubled day.

'We need to say goodbye,' he said and stood up.

She sat, wiping away her tears. 'Can you find a glass jar and some matches?'

Behind the sand dunes, the mountain ridgelines rose dark against the tangerine sky and the purple bruise of clouds. The late afternoon's honey-glow faded into twilight.

The wind tore at her, trying to pry the pages from her hands. The possibility of losing a single one made her frantic. Back to the gale, she gripped the manuscript to her chest while he dug the hole and broke firelighters into it before disappearing to find wood.

With him gone, she'd collapsed into a keening position. Hunched over, clutching the printed pages, knees buried in the frigid sand, she rocked. Her cheeks were icy when he returned with driftwood.

They watched the tiny orange flame dance and eat the fire lighters, growing into hungry tongues that devoured the driftwood.

'It's green,' she said.

'It's the salt,' he said.

They watched it burn, the manuscript heavy, like the night air, between them.

'You saved it, didn't you?' she asked, when the blustering gale shrank to a thin cutting wind and the fire burned hot.

'In three separate places. And burnt it onto a disc.'

She turned the ream over, flicked through the final pages, took three, and passed him the rest. His words, brave and beautiful, picked up where hers left off. The text blurred in the changeable firelight and the sting of tears. At the final line, her chest seized and sobs drowned out the crashing surf.

The character that had arrived in their lives eight months earlier was gone. The woman who brought them together, delighted and divided them, who they'd hated and loved in equal measures, was now dead by their hand.

The fire curled the corners of the first page, turning it sepia before eating through the middle. She offered it the second and then the third page, mouthing a silent goodbye. Together they fed the roaring flames, reducing the novel to hot ashes.

'I don't think they'll all fit in the jar,' he said, brushing the hair from her face and leaning in to her.

'The sea will take it eventually.'

She allowed herself to finally know the touch of his skin beneath her fingers.

'And us?' he asked.

Her hand pressed against his cold cheek, the salt and smoke between them.

‘We came for an ending. Isn’t that enough, for now?’

rapunzel is not here

In a year where I've struggled to choose life, the tipping point between the will to live and the desire to die might end up being the absurdity of local government bureaucracy.

'You need all of this?'

My face twists into a frown as I try to rotate the pain from my shoulder.

'Yes. I need all of this.'

Claire's face is earnest and eager. I'm appalled a ten-year-old needs a council permit, written proof of ten million dollar public liability coverage, written approval from the local traders association, shops and residents just to play Christmas carols on her flute to raise money for UNICEF.

I park her red-tape list beside the printed forms, admiring her thorough organisation. In this regard, she is Toby's daughter. Since I've hardly been able to scribble a simple shopping list in the last year, much less ensure I get everything on it, he should be helping her, not me. Unfortunately Christmas is his busiest time at work.

So, I owe this to Claire, to jump through these paper-trail hoops. To pull myself out of the molasses abyss I've been lost in. To put aside my guilt and panic to give her what she needs. To climb out of the tower.

'The problem is the public liability cover.'

She points to it, highlighted in yellow on the list.

'Are you intending on wrecking a yuletide swath of death and destruction through Bondi?'

The words are out and hanging between us before I realise what I've said.

Council bullshit has resurrected a bite that's been buried under guilt's strata.

'Honestly, Claire,' I say, choosing calm over exasperation with ludicrousness, 'why don't you just wander downstairs and play?'

'And break the law, Mum?' On any other child, the tone would be melodramatic. But Claire was already too serious before her world got turned upside down. 'Are you encouraging me to do something *illegal*?'

'I'm suggesting *this*...' I motion to all the forms, 'lacks common sense.' I throw my hands in the air and stand up. 'Last year...'

I catch myself this time and rather than finish the sentence, I walk into the kitchen. Claire deserves better from me. They all do. I just don't know what better is any more.

I stick my head in the fridge, suck in frigid air and give thanks it is not the gas oven. The unceasing internal rattle eases enough to stop my hands shaking. I need something to get me through. It is December 10th. The tree's not up. I haven't written or received any Christmas cards. The company Christmas picnic is tonight. Toby, ever the compassionate husband, doctored the invite so it just said 'Company Picnic'. The girls haven't made cut-and-paste wish lists from the Christmas bumf choking the mail box like lantana. Nor has the haggling for inappropriate gifts they'll never get started.

I have no idea what the something is, that will get me through, because it turns out it's not drinking. Valium is a lead weight, not a life buoy. And the anti-depressants screwed with me worse than I was already screwing with myself.

Maybe all I need is to know I can. To become the little red caboose of Christmas: I think I can... I think I can... I think I can. Say it enough times, maybe I'll believe it.

I think I can.

The fridge beeps at me. Claire stares accusingly from the stool she's pulled up at the kitchen bench. I'm forever at the girls to decide what they want before opening the door. I pretend I'm searching for something at the back.

'I forgot about the coleslaw. For tonight.'

My hands are full of carrots when I turn around

'What should I do about the insurance, Mum?'

I dump the carrots on the bench and go to the cupboard the grater was in our old house. Where the hell did I put it when we moved here? It can't be almost a year since I last grated something?

'Mum?'

‘Ring your father.’

‘Oh-gawd, ABBA, Mum?’

Grace, our eldest, picks up my phone and flicks through my Spotify playlists for something more palatable to her teenage sensibilities. Eddie Vedder’s tortured baritone fills the kitchen.

‘For someone with awesome musical taste, you really suck sometimes.’

It is the closest she has come to a compliment in months. If only I could enjoy it.

‘Don’t,’ I say, waving a carrot at her. ‘Or it’ll be ‘The Rivers of Babylon’ before you can say Bony-M.’

She rolls her eyes but loiters by the bench, watching me go from cupboard to cupboard, drawer to drawer, searching for the grater.

Eddie wails his *Once Upon A Times* and I want to scream mine aloud instead of bottling it all up inside.

Once upon a time I didn’t give a rat’s arse what anyone else thought about my taste in music. Once upon a time I didn’t give a shit about making coleslaw for a company picnic I didn’t want to go to. Once upon a time I knew where the fuck we kept the grater. Once upon a time I believed in second chances and new beginnings.

And once upon a time, not too long ago, Christmas meant something different.

I look at me through Grace’s eyes. I’m just a pathetic, middle-aged Mum as relevant as her outgrown ballet slippers and Barbie Dolls. Both donated to The Salvation Army when we moved. A sad excuse for a human who stores the grater with foil, baking paper and cling wrap. I sigh and half-thump it on the bench beside the carrots.

Since we moved to Bondi, Grace’s behaved as though she invented the sixteen-year-old complicated and misunderstood personae. As if I hadn’t been there, *and some*, as Toby likes to point out remembering our high school years, the ones he still remembers and I’ve taken great pains to forget.

I know the Queen of the Eye Roll has feelings more complex than she lets on, but she’s made it abundantly clear she doesn’t want to talk about it. To me. To Toby. To a psychologist. I’m not even sure she talks to the string of temporary friends.

I want to think Grace needs me; it’s me who needs her though.

Toby is not her father, so he gets a better perspective on our relationship. He says she is me at this age and I want to save her from my mistakes.

He says I am too tough. I disagree. He's too soft.

'Just thought I'd let you know, Cordelia is going to be here in five,' Grace says, staring at the walk-in pantry's door, shoulders drawn up anticipating my response.

I put the peeler down on the skins piled beside the chopping board and place the grater on the chopping board. I've half-grated a carrot before I respond.

'This thing you've got going with your friends where our apartment becomes a halfway house, I've talked to you about it. We are not having a repeat of the September holidays.'

Pain sears through my shoulder. The carrot disappears.

'You need to ask me before inviting your friends over. Okay?'

The carrot stub misses the grater. I skin two knuckles. Swearing under my breath, I wait for the blood to rush to the surface.

'We live in a penthouse right on Bondi Beach, Mum. Everyone wants to come here. I thought having my friends here would make you happy.' This is important enough to turn and say to my face. 'Besides. Cordelia is my new bestie.'

'So, Cordelia's flavour of the month.' I apply pressure to my knuckles to contain the bleeding. It makes them hurt more, distracting me from the pain exploding through my shoulder.

'You make it sound like ice cream.'

'These friendships last as long.'

I go into the pantry and her voice comes from the other side.

'You wanted me to make friends, so I did.'

I stick my head out of the pantry. 'I want you to make proper friendships, Grace. Not these fly-by-night acquaintances.'

'You want me to have real friends, like all your real friends here?'

I flinch and stay longer in the pantry with the band-aids than necessary. She knows where my tender edges are, going for them rather than the bleeding wound in the centre.

I was never so kind.

'And Mum, while Cordelia is here, don't call me Grace. I've changed my name to Anastasia. Stasia for short.'

'You've what?'

I shoot from the pantry, trying to get the band-aid to stick to my damp skin.

Grace pulls a document from the pocket of her too-short cut-offs. She unfolds it with dramatic flourish and slaps it on the marble bench.

‘I was holding off telling you because of the whole Christmas thing.’

I snatch up the paper and see my daughter has legally changed her name.

‘When the hell did this happen? You’re only sixteen. You can’t legally change your name.’

Grace squares her shoulder and juts her chin out. Just like me.

‘Dad signed the form.’

‘Toby did—’

‘*My* Dad. Not *Claire’s* Dad.’

The band-aid sticks to itself, not me. I rip it apart and flick it on the floor.

‘He asked what I wanted for Christmas and I told him I wanted to change my name.’

‘How could you not discuss this with me?’

Oliver, the sperm donor, I fucking understand. But Grace?

‘When have I ever had to discuss his Christmas presents with you. Besides, I didn’t even know if we were having Christmas this year.’

‘Of course we’re having Christmas.’ I slap my good hand on the bench.

‘You deliberately chose not to tell me because you knew I would say no.’

I want to shred this piece of paper; this betrayal.

‘Why would you do this to me, Grace?’

‘Stasia.’

‘You were christened Grace Louise.’

‘And I un-christened myself. *Officially.*’ Her face hardens. Hands planted on her hips. ‘Dad gets me. He wants me to be happy. You just want me to be fucking miserable, like you.’

She snatches the document from my hand, the top right-hand corner stays between my thumb and forefinger.

‘If he’s so generous and understanding, ask why he’s never paid child support for you.’

‘I’m not doing this,’ she screams and storms off to her bedroom.

‘And if he’s such a brilliant fucking father ask him where he was for the first ten years of your life.’

‘Fuck you!’

The door slams shut.

In the aftermath, in the emptiness before the self-hatred claims me, there’s vertigo like I’m standing on a cliff edge. Before I tumble, arms snake around

my rib cage, squeezing me tight. They anchor me as my chest caves. The tears sting worse than onion fumes.

‘I love you, Mum.’

I turn and bury my fingers in Claire’s hair. Her head rests against my sternum. When did she get so tall? And her hair so long. How did time move for everyone else but me?

‘Grace’s Dad’s a real bastard isn’t he?’

I nod, despising myself for sharing this with her.

‘I’m glad he’s not my dad.’

When I can breathe again, I wipe the escapee tears with the back of my carrot-stained hand, then hold her at arm’s length to look at her seriously.

‘What did I tell you about swearing, Claire?’

‘I’m right though?’

‘Yes Claire, you’re right.’

#ColeslawForCatharsis. Once I think it, I can’t unthink it.

It’s the sort of bullshit that would find traction on Instagram if influencers had spare brain cells for a vocabulary that large. I’ve hated coleslaw since I got stuck doing the washing up at school camp. Being elbow-deep in carrot and cabbage impregnated water, all the little bits clinging—it swore me off it forever.

Until today.

I pour expensive ranch dressing over the shredded carrot and cabbage, because ranch dressing makes everything better. Well, almost everything. My culinary cure-all can’t fix Oliver.

The past year, I needed him to quit playing Grace against me. Instead he took the war to a whole new level. Or maybe we both did? It’s easy to be angry with the living. To blame them.

Raging against Oliver is like putting on comfy, but toxic, slippers. It’s a familiar shape; something I find twisted satisfaction in, until it whips around and bites me. It’s like childbirth. You forget it until its devouring you again.

I thought him walking out on me when he was twenty-one, and I was barely nineteen, deciding it was all too difficult and he had his whole life ahead of him, was the most it could hurt.

It was just the start.

It turns out the one thing Oliver was good at, was hurting me, behaving

like *I* ruined *his* life.

He's a vector infecting my daughter with his special brand of reckless disregard for me. Teaching her how to press my buttons. Showing her how to undermine me.

He's given her every material thing she's asked for: a Switch, iPhone, Air Pods, laptop, independent internet connection. At Easter she returned with an Apple Watch and mermaid hair that had her sent home from school on the first day of term. He didn't take her hysterical phone calls. I dealt with the fall out. Then a week later he blamed me for sending her to a school that denied personal freedoms of expression.

She can't see he doesn't give her what she actually needs—what Toby gives her—the only things she will ever need: unconditional love, undivided attention and unquestioning support.

Oliver's taken her name.

And not even given her his.

The security buzzer startles me. I wait an inconveniently long time before letting Cordelia up. She waltzes past me, going straight to the kitchen to stand with the fridge beeping at her, before choosing two cans of my Diet Coke to take to Grace's room.

'Thanks Mrs. Connolly,' I snark after her.

'I don't think she heard you, Mum,' Claire says, sliding into the kitchen with a grin lighting her face. 'I hear blondes are dumb and deaf.'

I wrinkle my brow at Claire because if I don't, I will smile and I don't want to encourage her.

'Dad says he can register me as a volunteer and I'll come under his work indemnity policy. Cool huh? He's emailing the details now.' She is struggling to stand still. 'I need to go to the Town Hall to lodge the forms. You'll just need to sign them in black pen where I...'

I fixate on the family photos on the fridge, so Claire won't see the terror in my eyes. I've hidden my struggles to leave the house. How I can't drive. Even the thought sends me into a tailspin.

She talks a million miles an hour, oblivious of me, until she shoves the document bundle into my hand, followed by a pen.

When it goes quiet Claire's huge amber eyes swallow me.

'Please?'

Claire returns home triumphant and rushes to FaceTime Lizzy, her best friend. It leaves me space to slump, exhausted, against the front door. I don't have to pretend now. The overwhelm swamps me. The thump in my ears. My racing heart. The suffocating pressure of my body shrinking around me. The heat and sweat. Pain engulfing my right shoulder.

My Valium is in the walk-in pantry. I can drown in it now I don't have to drive or adult. It's been months since I resorted to it because the GP refused to keep writing me scripts. I didn't want the anti-depressants. I didn't want to feel better. I didn't want to be happy. Valium made me numb and that's what I wanted. And it's what I want now—the disassociated calm.

The kitchen is a mess of two-minute noodles and Diet Coke cans. The unmistakable smell of Bacardi comes off the closest one. Loud whooping and giggles come from the balcony, confirming they've been drinking.

For fucks sake.

The whiplash from panic to rage propels me to the sliding door. On the other side, they're sitting at the table, in bikinis, huddled over my Nikon's tiny screen.

'Oh yeah. Seven swans are a-swimmin' bay-bee, ah-huh,' chants Cordelia, channelling a trashy rapper's girlfriend. One slim, tanned arm waves in the air. Her body sways provocatively with it. She pauses long enough to take a long swig from the can in her other hand, then goes back to something that looks like a fucking reverse lap dance.

I wrench the door open and step onto the balcony.

'What the hell is going on, Grace?'

They turn to me: Grace mortified, knowing she's not meant to have my camera; Cordelia haughty. An expression I'd love to wipe off her sunburnt face.

'It's okay, Mrs. C, really. Stasia told me and we made sure we backed up all the photos before we went down to the beach.'

'You took my five-thousand-dollar camera to the beach.'

I tear it from Grace's hands and scroll through hundreds of shots featuring athletic men in board shorts. There's a series with all seven lined up at the surf break. I snap when I get to Grace riding on the muscle-bound shoulders of one; her long legs draped over his toned pecs.

'Who the hell are these men?'

Grace's voice is barely audible. 'They're Swans, Mum.'

'Who?'

'You're so basic, Mrs. C.'

I don't take kindly to being treated like a joke. I strangle my hand with the camera strap, instead of reaching out to throttle her.

'The Sydney Swans, Mum. The AFL team.'

'You were at the beach with football players?'

It explodes from me with so much force my mind editorialises a shock wave, except the only thing moving is Cordelia's self-important sneer.

'It's okay Mrs. C.' She flicks her hand. 'They're not *league* players.'

'Go. Home. Cordelia. I'll call your mother later on.'

'Whatever.' She shrugs her shoulders. 'Send a text. She might read it.'

She wobbles for a moment when she gets up. But she's solid when she passes me, all blonde hair and exaggerated sass. Her shoulder hits my good one and she doesn't stop to apologise.

I know her kind of mean girl. I faced off against plenty of her kind at high school; all mouth and passive aggressiveness. Slapping her won't help the situation, as satisfying as it would be. She's probably got an absent mother who is only interested in her daughter when it feeds her outrage and self-righteousness. They usually come hand in hand.

My attention returns to the camera screen, flicking through all the photos until I come to the last one I took: Christmas Eve last year. A moment frozen in eternity.

We were all smiling then.

'What were you intending to do with these photos, Grace?'

She says nothing.

'Grace?'

'What do you think I was going to do with them?'

'You can't put these on Instagram.'

Whatever guilt agitated at Grace's edge in Cordelia presence is disappearing. The rigid line is back in her jaw. The same fucking way Oliver's face sets itself against me.

'It's nothing.'

'Sixteen-year-old girls cavorting with men almost twice their age is not nothing. You have no idea who is viewing this stuff and—'

'What you really mean is *you're* not seeing it.'

The fight is back in her. She stands, head tilted, as if she's sized me up and found me wanting.

'You're still pissed because I won't give you my Insta account.'

‘This has nothing to do with Instagram; it has everything to do with you going through my stuff, taking my camera, hooking up with men who have reputation as bad as their league buddies.’

I brace myself against the sliding door.

‘Consider yourself grounded until you delete your Instagram account and you’ve shown me evidence it’s gone.’

‘You can’t make me.’

‘Try me, Grace. Just try me.’ My eyes narrow and I keep hold of the camera so I won’t hit her.

‘You can’t make me.’

‘Delete Instagram and you’re free to come and go.’

‘I won’t.’

‘Then enjoy the view from here, because that’s all you’re gonna see for the next six weeks.’

‘You can’t.’

‘I already have.’

‘I’ll go to Dad’s.’

‘No you won’t.’

She swipes an arm across the table and the cans scatter, pinging across the tiled balcony. ‘I hate you.’

‘You think I don’t hate you?’ And before I can catch words I will forever regret, I yell. ‘I wish you’d never been born.’

Angry tears lash her scarlet cheeks. ‘I wish you were dead.’

Cotton-wool dryness fills my mouth when I wake hours later. The Valium tide has receded and I feel where tightness holds me together. The apartment is dark and quiet. Even though the dirty, sepia twilight of daylight savings has long passed, the beach below is still busy. I hover in the balcony door and watch people pass below. With dogs. With best friends. With lovers. It’s almost Christmas and no one is out alone.

The kitchen is tidy: pots washed, rubbish binned and the Coke cans deposited in the recycling chute. I could almost pretend the afternoon was a bad dream if my reflection didn’t tell a different story. Two swollen, blood-shot eyes are my trophies for mother-of-the-year. They complement my daughter-of-the-year award—the ugly scar running across my forehead’s right side.

I gulp two tall glasses of water, using my left hand because my right

shoulder has seized. The water lubricates my dry throat but hits my empty stomach like a monsoon promising vomit instead of rain. I try to rotate my shoulder. The nausea amplifies.

Your shoulder is fully healed, the physio told me months ago. *Have you spoken to your psychologist about it? Trauma manifests in the body in unexpected ways. There's new treatments for PTSD.*

I wasn't interested in talking more about *my trauma*.

Tea lights, half burned, glow softly on the coffee table. My copy of *Love Actually* lies abandoned next to them. A vague memory of Claire surfaces, trying to lure me from my room with a promise to watch it with me.

I go to the girl's bedrooms and turn off air conditioners, bedside lamps and Spotify, replace AirPods on bedside tables, open windows to the sea air and pull up their sheets. I bend down, pushing apple-scented hair off their foreheads to kiss them.

I linger next to Grace, wishing I could wipe away the last year.

It is too easy to be angry with her because when I look at her, I see Oliver. And when I see Oliver I can't forget. The guilt is pythonic, strangling me from the inside out.

I blow out the tea-lights and walk onto the balcony. The heat of the day has retreated only so far and the promised sea breeze hasn't eventuated. I miss the humidity of home.

A group of teenagers walk by singing a fractured rendition of the *The 12 Days of Christmas*. A bottle smashes and someone cheers. Across the road surfers catch waves in the moonlight. Laughter erupts, further down the street, where late-night diners are putting away alcohol they'll regret tomorrow morning.

In this moment, I realise I am in a holding pattern up here, overlooking Bondi Beach, waiting for the control tower to contact me. I've been waiting an entire year, warning lights flashing. Running on empty. Waiting for a voice to announce it's safe to come down.

In this penthouse, owned by Toby's company, I have built my own prison from guilt. It mires me in the present, with no peace from the past or hope for the future. I'm Rapunzel in her tower being choked by what she thought would set her free.

I may as well be six feet under.

Toby's promotion was an easy excuse to leave Gordonvale and put the accident behind me. I thought if I was somewhere else I would move on.

People wouldn't know. I could start again. But I haven't made a life for myself here.

Down there, life goes on without me.

I grip the railing and yearn for the molasses-sweet plumes from the sugar mill instead of the foreign tang of salty air. This year the sugar crushing season happened where I wasn't. Someone other than me was excited when the neon star went up on the steam stack heralding the festive season's start.

I thought this was how I wanted it to be, but I'm homesick. I don't just want to go back, I need to.

And I want my Mum.

Cold glass on the back of my neck snaps me from my thoughts. Toby hands me a beer, kisses where the skin has chilled and sits down, putting his feet up on the railing. It is surreal. His crisp white business shirt is soft now, unbuttoned, untucked and he looks like he walked off the set of Blue Lagoon than the office after 16 hours.

I remember the last time Toby handed me a beer.

We were on our front veranda. Humidity thick like a hot, wet blanket wrapped around us. Sara Bareille's lyrics floated out from the lounge-room. Feet on the railing, we surveyed the neighbour's paddock, stubbled with month-old sugarcane. Toby urged me to quit with my mother's guilt trip. To stand my ground and not invite Oliver to Christmas lunch. It was our home. We'd invite who we wanted, not who Grace wanted. And not who my mother wanted.

He promised it was a storm in a tea cup. Grace would see Oliver Christmas Night. All would be well in the world again on Boxing Day.

'I'm sorry about the picnic,' I say without the slightest hint of regret. 'The kids rang you?'

'Grace did.'

I take a mouthful of beer, hold it in my mouth until it is warm and bitter, then swallow. My stomach churns. I take another mouthful, and another, trusting the Valium has left my system. Trusting it's only beer and I won't wipe myself out.

'She was upset,' Toby says, 'and worried.'

I turn my back on him and follow a line of waves into the beach. I don't want him to be Grace's champion. I also don't want him to back me against her.

He moves beside me and passes me a crumpled envelope.

‘Grace wrote this. She didn’t think you would read it if she pushed it under your door. So she asked me to give it to you.’

I hand it back. ‘I don’t want to read it.’

‘She’s hurting too, Lou... Give the girl a chance.’

He tries to put his arm around my waist. I stiffen at his touch and move away, hugging the beer close to my heart. He sighs and sits back down, resting his elbows on his thighs. I stay standing, hip kissing the railing. The stubby dangles from my fingertips.

‘Are you going to read it?’

I shake my head.

‘Then you leave me no choice.’

He blocks my way back inside and I don’t even try push past. The best I can muster is turning my back on him again. My left-hand fingers grip the railing, knuckles pearlescent.

‘When you were in your room Grace rang her father. She wanted to go to him and he said no. He got married in May, without telling Grace, without letting her be part of it. And they’re expecting a baby in February. He said he doesn’t know when she can visit again.’

My heart breaks for my beautiful daughter who I realise has also been subject to his reckless disregard, except he’s continually led her to believe he loves her, when the only person he’s ever given two shits about is himself.

‘He told her she could have his surname then changed it to mine at the last minute.’

I start to shake, remembering the screaming matches over Toby officially adopting Grace. How Oliver refused, insisting I change her name to recognise *his* paternity—ten years after he’d abandoned us. I refused and we dropped the adoption process without letting Grace know we’d ever tried. I said it didn’t matter. It was just a piece of paper. Toby was father in presence and action, if not in name.

‘Grace just wanted to be Stasia, so she said nothing when her new birth certificate came through. Now she thinks the only reason he let her change her name was to get rid of her.’

Rage unfurls the serpentine guilt, letting something new bloom.

‘I’ll kill the bastard!’

I hurl my beer bottle over the balcony. It smashes on the road and I become someone I truly detest. Toby catches my wrist as I try to storm into the apartment to get my mobile.

‘Stop it, Lou.’

‘No more!’ I fight against Toby. ‘It ends tonight.’ I hit him. ‘I hate Oliver. I hate him so fucking much. It’s all his fault.’

I lash out, pummelling Toby until the fight is gone and I slump to the tiles crying; grief’s levy bank breached. I cry so hard I can’t breathe. My chest constricts in bands that heat and tighten, torturing the truth from me.

Toby talks me through it, rubbing my back. He tells me he loves me. Tells me it is good I am letting it out. That I need to cry. That I haven’t grieved yet.

I shake my head. I don’t deserve grief. I can’t grieve.

I’m weak. I’m pathetic. And I’m guilty.

I sink my nails into my face. Any pain is better than the one shattering me from the shoulder out.

‘Lou!’

I crawl away from him, the tiles painful under my knees, and press my back into the railing, forcing air in and out of my lungs, cradling my punctured and bruised face.

There is nothing left. I give up. Battle over.

‘I need to tell you something.’

The surf crashes behind me. A car drives the length of the esplanade, horn blaring.

‘We were arguing on the way to the bottle shop,’ I say, when I trust myself to breathe and talk. I don’t recognise the rough, dry voice shaping the words and maybe that’s a good thing. ‘I didn’t tell the police.’

Mum and her fucking Bailey’s Irish Cream. Me, the daughter never good enough, who forgot to buy it. Mum insisting on coming with me to the bottle shop.

They say most car accidents happen just five kilometres from home. We were 4.7kms at the only set of traffic lights in the town.

‘She started on me as soon as we were down the driveway. I realised too late, she only wanted to come because she had me cornered. She accused me of being purposefully hateful to Grace, just to get back at Oliver. And I was furious. She said Oliver tried hard, he did his best and told me to stop being selfish. I reminded her I’d done it alone, with no Oliver, until we reconnected and then suddenly he wanted to be part of her life. I told her I was always compromising. I was the only one who ever did. She wouldn’t listen.

‘How could she make a saint out of Oliver when he walked out on me? Why didn’t she hate him for doing that to her daughter and her granddaughter?’

Why did she have to hate me?’

A breeze picks up and cools the sweat I’m lathered in.

‘We were yelling, the light turned green and I gunned it across the intersection. Had I looked...’

I close my eyes and feel the impact as the speeding Landcruiser hits us, obliterating the passenger side of our Pajero. Hitting hard enough to plough us through the intersection and into the culvert on the other side. Rolling twice.

And I’m upside down. Blood in my eyes. My mouth. A fire burning through my arm. The screech and whine of the jaws-of-life cutting Mum free. An ambulance officer pressing a pad against my head. A neck cuff supporting my neck. Lights flashing. People yelling.

And she was gone.

I walked away with twenty stitches in my forehead and a broken shoulder.

‘You were hit by a drunk driver, Lou. This isn’t your fault. Or Oliver’s. Neither of you killed your Mum. The coroner—’

I shake my head. ‘What if we hadn’t been arguing? What if I’d looked and seen the other four-wheel drive? Realised it wasn’t slowing down? What if I’d got the fucking Bailey’s, like I was meant to? What if I’d told her to stay home like I wanted her to? What if I’d invited Oliver to Christmas lunch? What if we’d left a minute earlier or a minute later?’

‘And what if you’d died?’ It is barely a whisper. I can’t look at him. I don’t want to see the pain he’s carrying. ‘What would I have done without you? What about the girls?’

How many times have I wished it was me instead of her? Believing I deserved it because I am an ungrateful, selfish, hateful person.

Because I’m never good enough and she was.

I choke up and Toby drops down next to me.

Will I ever admit to Toby I wanted to die, to be free of the guilt and the what ifs—knowing it meant leaving them all behind? That I knew they loved me and still wanted the relief of death.

‘She died thinking I hated her,’ I sob, burying my head in his chest. ‘I don’t know what to do. I’m afraid to feel anything other than guilt and anger.’

He puts his arms around me and kisses the scar that reminds me each morning I’m am alive and Mum is not.

‘What about love?’ he asks. He traces the scar line with his finger tip and kisses lips laced with salt. ‘You don’t have to do this alone.’

He said the same thing the morning of Mum's funeral. He'd arranged it all while I slept-walked lost and alone through the disorientation. I went through the motions, then went home to pack boxes, one-handed, my broken shoulder strapped. Packing myself away with everything we owned.

'I don't know where to start.'

I think of the overwhelm of all our possession boxed up in the empty penthouse. Of not knowing where to begin. Of the pain in my shoulder dictating what I could and couldn't do.

The tears fall and this time I let them flow. In the way I should have cried when we arrived here but was afraid I'd never stop.

'You can start with Grace,' he says when the gasping, hiccupping sobs quieten for a second time, wiping the tears from my cheeks. An unfamiliar calm settles over me. 'Don't shut her out. Don't let her think you hate her.'

It would be easy to put it off for the morning, but I don't wait. I go straight to her room and wake her because sometimes there is no tomorrow to tell someone you love that you're sorry and ask if they'll forgive you?

first to a hundred

There are worse places to be, I tell myself as I look down at the wet, sandy tennis ball in my hand. Like back up at the beach house with Laney and Lucy and their dozens of bottles of new nail polish and Sweet Valley High books and Duran Duran albums. Or on the yacht with Dad yelling at me to move now, pull this, don't touch that, leave the bloody life jacket be, lean further out, stop being chicken shit. Or ignored by Mum and her friends, fussing over hands of canasta and damp glasses of sweet wine spritzers before lunch.

'Carn, Dougie.'

'Flog it for six.'

'Go, Dougie.'

'Whack it.'

'You can do it, mate.'

Beach cricket is normally every kid for himself, no cheering, just a bloody-mindedness to get the kid with the bat out so you can have your turn. And stay at the crease as long as possible.

But this is no ordinary morning.

'Not just a century before lunch,' Gibbo explains, pushing his glasses up his zinc-creamed nose when I step up to bowl the last over. 'Dougie's gonna be the first kid ever to make a century at Point Roadknight. The before lunch bit is just icing on the cake.'

Gibbo doesn't play: the combination of the glasses, the zinc cream and the sweat on his nose and generally being unco. But he knows more about cricket than every other kid on the beach put together. So he's carved out his place down here as official scorer, umpire and general historian. He can tell you everyone's average, the number of days we've been rained out, how many wickets I took last year and the number of hours we spent playing on any given week.

There's five minutes left before we head back to our various temporary homes to eat white triangle sandwiches, drink cold green cordial and let our mothers smother more sunscreen on us as we chafe to get back to the beach. Well that's how I imagine it is. At our place I'll sneak in, grab whatever I can to eat and race back to the beach before Mum realises I'm not with Dad, or Laney and Lucy spot me.

Five minutes. Five runs. Six balls to bowl.

It's going to be over before lunch one way or the other. I look down the churned up pitch to Dougie, wondering how I came to be the one he's facing down. I look at the battered stumps and imagine putting the tennis ball through them, like I've already done three times today. I weigh up the pros and cons of a short bounce or a long bounce on the hard sand left by the retreating tide.

Or bugger it, I could just throw under arm and let him thump it out into the surf for six. Let Dougie claim his moment of glory. At the end of the day it doesn't really matter to me.

They only tolerate me because I can bowl as good as, if not better than, most of them.

'Amazing natural off-leg spin,' Gibbo commentated from the footpath, when he saw me throwing a ball against the garage door two years ago and invited me down to their summer-long game.

So each year my bowling action and the fact I can't hit to save my life, so I don't hog the batting order, gain me entrance to the game on the beach. Charlie says it's really only because the Connors, who had two sons, sold up at the summer before we arrived and they were short bodies in the field. Gibbo tells me Charlie is full of shit.

It's Jimmy who starts the chant: Dougie—*clap clap clap*—Dougie. It's infectious and one by one the others join in. I throw the ball up and down as I've seen the other boys do and wait for the chanting to die out.

I've no idea what the deal is, with throwing the ball up and down, see no point to it, but I do it anyway. I've learned in the last two summers you find your place blending in; everything else is, as Gibbo says, icing on the cake.

So I let Gibbo write my name in his battered 5th grade exercise book as Laurie Norris, not Lori Norris. Under Dad's cast-off blue cabbage hat, the zinc cream and the baggy Star Wars t-shirt I could be one of them.

I stop throwing the ball and look down the pitch.

Don't let me bowl like a girl, I pray, or a spastic. Don't let me embarrass myself.

Dougie's so bloody sure of himself: he expects to make his century. He remarks the crease, leans down, hunches confidently over the bat and beats it against the sand two or three times. Then he winks at me and grins. My cheeks flush, not that anyone is going to see it under the green war paint.

I turn away from the grin and count out the steps of my run up, but lose count after four because Dougie's wink burns through my temporary anger at his arrogance, replaced by my sisters' tittering about Doug Fearnley and how they want to kiss him this New Years Eve. Dougie this, Dougie that.

Dougie—*clap clap clap*.

Now is the wrong time to be thinking about kissing Dougie. Anytime is the wrong time to think about kissing Dougie. I don't want to kiss Dougie. I want to bowl him out.

When I turn, I realise I'm far too far back. It's a stupidly long run up, something Sam or Kenny would do to show off. They'll assume I'm trying to be just like them—*look at me, look how bloody good I am all the way back here*. I groan.

The chanting ends. The fielders reposition themselves: Lano as wicky and the rest spread between the cliffs and the water line. I take three slow steps and then run. The ball spins out of my hand, lands a metre from Dougie's feet, clips a foot-shaped mark in the sand and swings to shoot around between the bat and his legs to take out the middle stump.

There is dead silence. I drag the hat off my head, look down and wait for Gibbo to call it a no ball. When he doesn't I feel sick.

I just bowled Dougie, five short of his century.

The bravado of doing is replaced by the horror of having done.

'Clean bowl,' Gibbo says, and makes notes in his book, slapping it shut against his hand with an awful finality.

Dougie shakes his head and smiles. 'Early to lunch then,' he says and pulls up the remaining stumps, like nothing important happened.

The rest of the boys stand around stunned. Charlie and Sam glare at me. Kenny points at me and runs a finger across his throat.

'Seeya back here at one-thirty,' Gibbo says and Dougie lopes off, cricket bat and stumps under his arm. I wonder if there will be white triangles and green cordial waiting at his house; if there will be a parent there to care a girl stole his century.

It's three days before I see Dougie again, drifting in and out of the New Year's Eve crowd down at foreshore caravan park, where we've all congregated to see the fireworks. I'm standing next to Laney and Lucy who are giggling, pointing in Dougie's direction and turning away every time he glances in theirs. It's so pathetic that if we weren't in public I'd do the finger down the throat thing.

They take it in turns, daring each other to go up and talk to him. Neither of them will; what would Dad say? All show and no punch. What a waste all their preening in front of the mirror was. You'd think by now they'd realise nothing makes our dead straight hair curl. They'd have done better to just crimp it to fuzz. Or not bothered at all, like me.

When Dougie breaks away from the Roadknight gang and makes a bee-line for us, Laney and Lucy don't know what to do, so they giggle and then force themselves to stand up straight, stick their non-existent chests out and keep giggling behind their hands.

'Wanna go for a walk, Lori?' Dougie asks.

Laney and Lucy turn on me in disbelief, then hate when I go with Dougie, even though I don't want to. As soon as our backs are turned they start bad

mouthed me loud enough for everyone to hear. I imagine their words melting me like the Nazi guy in Indiana Jones until I realise it's nothing compared to what Douggie's gonna rip through me, for what I did to his century.

We don't say anything as we walk around the fringe of the crowd. And the longer neither of us says anything, the more I dread what will be said when Dougie opens his mouth.

He takes my hand when we reach one of the paths through the trees leading down to Main Beach. I hesitate, think of Kenny and his slicing finger, picture all the boys from Roadknight down there waiting.

'I told my folks I'd kinda stay around,' I say, the words barely audible.

'I don't hate you,' he says. 'If that's what you think. Kenny was a wanker for doing what he did. Jeez, he should have known better.'

'I didn't mean to—'

'You've got guts Lori, you know that. None of those other dickheads would've done what you did. They'd have fumbled a catch, let it go through for six, stuffed around getting the ball back to the wicky, gone easy one me. They'd have let me get the century because they'd have wanted the same. But I'm not them. I wanted to earn it.'

'I'm sorry I stole it from you.'

'It just wasn't my day. Hell, Bradman went out for a duck in his last match. The boys say I was robbed, but I wasn't. At ninety-five I still hold the record. The Book of Gibbo says as much.'

I try not to smile, but I can't help it. I love the idea of The Book of Gibbo. I imagine our sports teacher getting up to educate us from the Book of Gibbo like the nuns babbling from The Bible.

Now I know Dougie doesn't hate me, I'm glad my name is in the Book of Gibbo alongside his:

28/12/85 11:56am

Dougie 95 b. Laurie

'There's the rest of summer to chase those runs,' he says.

I'm so lost in silly thoughts of the Book of Gibbo, I only half hear him and I don't expect his lips to land on mine. He tastes of HubbaBubba Original and when he puts his arms around me, smells of salt and new cotton t-shirts.

Above us the fireworks go off. I don't stop kissing him to watch them. I can see them exploding behind my eyelids.

Someone tells Laney or Lucy they saw me kissing Dougie down in the trees. They tell Mum and Dad and I'm banned from going down to the beach for a week. A week's grounding would bother Laney and Lucy, it would eat into their precious social lives. I read, write in my diary, watch *The Goonies* and count down the days quietly.

Laney and Lucy, along with some of the other girls, take up residence on the beach in my absence. Sprawled on carpets of Hang Ten beach towels, soaked in Reef Oil, they show off their Rip Curl, high-cut one-piece togs. It's as far from The Hill at the MCG as you can get.

Dougie and the rest of the boys aren't interested, couldn't care less about them. They take it in turns to have pot shots at their new, adoring crowd. Sam hits Laney so hard a bruise comes up on her leg and the coconut-oiled fans retreat and regroup. Over their nail polish and Sweet Valley High book covers, in-between oohing and aahing over Duran Duran and the success of their new curling iron, they plot to go to Main Beach where the real men are: the surfers.

Even though Dougie is okay with what happened, I still find it hard to believe the other boys will be happy to see me back on the beach. At the end of the week, Gibbo turns up at our door and we walk down to Roadnight together. No one says a word. No welcome back, or piss off. And I'm okay with that. My name is added to the batting order again. I bowl my allotted overs.

But it's the mornings I really look forward to, when Dougie and I meet up before everyone else makes it down. He teaches me some batting skills, gives me a chance to actually get a feel for the bat and the rhythm of the oncoming ball. He watches my bowling action and the combined effort of watching and bowling for me, cleans up his technique. Before summer ends he's taking a dozen wickets a day and my run rate is climbing. But Dougie doesn't get close to the hallowed one hundred again.

The day he leaves, he comes by our place and we exchange addresses. I'm not sure if I want to kiss him again: my head says one thing, my heart says another. He looks confused too. It doesn't matter. Laney and Lucy are hovering in the background, watching, so we say good-bye and pledge the next summer will be even better.

'That century is mine for the taking.'

'Not if I get there first,' I say.

'And probably will.'

He winks and grins.

His bike rattles as it bumps through the gutter at the bottom of our driveway and he disappears down the road.

High school is a culture shock and the Norris triplets are something of a novelty. Laney and Lucy are in their element, lapping up the attention. They have star quality zing. I'm happy to linger in their shadows. It makes my day when I hear someone talking about the Norris *twins* in the toilets after Ash Wednesday Mass.

While Laney and Lucy play minor celebrities, I take up softball. The coach gushes about my hand-eye coordination and uncanny aptitude for the game. It reminds me of Gibbo in the driveway of the beach house when I was ten, saying I was a natural.

Just before Easter a letter arrives from Dougie. I'm the first one home, so Laney and Lucy don't see it among the bills. I sit on my bed, my heart pounding, imaging every word I want to be written in it.

I'm still on my bed crying when Laney and Lucy come home.

'Dougie has leukaemia,' I sob, his letter now wet and crumpled in my hand. They shrug and ask who's Dougie.

Later, when Laney and Lucy are asleep, I turn the light on and smooth his letter out, reading the same paragraph over and over again: *There's only one thing in this world that's ever beaten me and that's you Lori. After that, the Big L is gonna be a breeze.*

He invites me to his thirteenth birthday party and I take a succession of

buses and trains to get from Brighton to Altona. His smile is still the same, his eyes as blue and calm as the sea, but his skin is pale and shrunken around his head, or maybe it looks like that because all his hair is tucked under the black beanie. We've been writing every week, but he's never really told me what it's like, how the leukaemia's actually affecting him. And now's not the time to ask.

Dougie's the only one I know, but his friends don't make a big deal about it. They go out of their way to make me feel part of the crew. It's the sort of special treatment Laney and Lucy normally get and I find I'm not shy in the spotlight of their attention. I can talk to them, crack jokes, but I'm never far from Dougie.

We end up in the rumpus room, the lights dimmed and someone brings out the empty soft drink bottle. My stomach somersaults at the thought of having to kiss a strange boy: in front of all these almost-strangers, in front of Dougie. Perhaps he's been practising—I wouldn't put it past Dougie. He spins and it stops, pointing to me. There's something new in his kiss and it scares me. It tells me all the things unwritten in his letters.

Everyone else is gone by 10.00pm. We're sitting on the front lawn, wrapped in layers of coats and scarves, grateful it's not raining, waiting for my Dad who is late again. Dougie takes my hand in his and spends lots of time tracing around my fingernails.

'It's bad, isn't it?' I say finally, because I have to say something. Afraid nothing will be said, and Dad will arrive.

He lets go of my hand and pulls the beanie off, runs a hand over the baldness.

'I'm not going to make it to next Summer.'

'Don't say that.'

I snatch the beanie out of his hand and jam it over the incriminating nude nut. 'You're gonna be down on the beach at Christmas. You're gonna hit that century.'

He starts to cry, quietly, so it's only the heaving of his chest I hear. I put my arms around him and the two of us sit in the dew, rocking back and forth.

At 11:00pm we go inside. I ring home and get the answering machine. I'm used to being forgotten, being the invisible member of my family but this time I can't go home. It's not just around the corner. And Dad promised. I reminded him three times today. I even rang him at work.

'Stay,' Dougie's Mum says. 'And one of us will run you home in the morning. It's no trouble, really.'

It's a good lie: it's not convenient. We live almost an hour away. Two and a half if you do it by bus and train. She smiles and squeezes my hand and I flush fluorescent, embarrassed that Dougie's family see behind mine. That money and all the rest of it is just a nice veneer for a bunch of rotten, self-obsessed people.

I'm tossing and turning on the couch when Dougie taps me on the shoulder and then shushes me. He has a torch and motions for me to get dressed into something warm. We go back out to the rumpus room and he opens up his Dad's booze cabinet. We sniff at the various bottles until we've got something we think we can both drink.

The sliding door out onto the patio squeals and we freeze, waiting for movement elsewhere in the house, but there is nothing. We set ourselves up, side-by-side on an old couch, the Coke, glasses and the bourbon on the pavers at our feet. Dougie pulls a packet of Winnie Blues from his pocket and a box of matches.

'Dad bought them for me,' he says. 'You do the honours.'

He passes them to me and I unwrap them as he pours out the bourbon and coke. My hands shake when I pull the gold foil from the top to expose the ciggies, lined up like beige soldiers waiting to be incinerated. This world he and I inhabit is wrong: a world where his Dad buys him smokes, where he won't see his fourteenth birthday, graduate from high school, go to uni, get married or do any of the things that aren't even meant to be thought about, much less be important when you're thirteen.

When I can't get the ciggie lit he takes it from me and gets it going with one confident suck. And I think of when we stared each other down the length of a pitch, the way he hunched over the bat, the certainty he had. And how that seems a million years ago.

He passes me the ciggie and I suck too hard on it, double over coughing. Dougie laughs at me.

‘Always going just that little bit too far,’ he says and I start crying. The smoke stings my eyes.

He takes the ciggie from me and grinds it out.

‘You’re still the only one to have beaten me,’ he says softly and wraps a blanket around both of us. I rest my head on his shoulder and pray the night will stay, and tomorrow will never come.

Dougie’s tired and ready to go, but he accepts the doctor’s slim promises of a last ditch-effort to stop the now rampant cancer devouring him. I see him a handful of times before the summer arrives. I wag school to sit with him in the hospital. He talks about all the summers at Roadknight and I listen. He asks me about softball and I tell him half-truths and lies, so he doesn’t know I’m not going any more. What’s the point?

Just before he falls asleep—on the day school rings my parents to find out why I haven’t been there for a week—he murmurs about kissing me on New Years Eve, laughing sleepily that it set off fireworks. I know I’ll never be able to see fireworks and not think of how it felt to kiss him the first time.

The last time I see him, he’s at home and I spend the night, sometimes curled next to him on the bed, my hand on his chest feeling the weak rise and fall, other times in a chair beside the bed. And as the night darkens, I remember the other night I spent here, only this time there is no booze or cigarettes or shared blanket and I know the night can’t last forever.

By morning he’s gone.

When we arrive at Point Roadknight after Christmas, a year of high school has changed everything; the cricket bats and stumps and meandering walks to the beach in the morning replaced by skateboards and surfboards and begging rides with older siblings to Main Beach. Sam and Charlie come over the first night we’re there to ask Laney and Lucy to *La Bamba* at the Scout Hall. They

joke when the boys are gone it's not just jaffas they're going to roll down the aisle. I want to remind Laney that Sam thumped her with a cricket ball last year and she swore she'd hate him forever.

But what's the point? No one remembers last year except for me.

The world without Dougie makes no sense. I see things too clearly now: Dad's never home, Mum's only interested in her charity work and Laney and Lucy—the pretty daughters, the popular girls, the ones who attend school, do as they're told and sneak kisses with the right kinds of boys. Not boys who die in Altona.

They are the perfect daughters, the Norris Twins, who don't chop their hair off, dye it black and demand a room of their own. They don't yell, 'fuck you all.'

My family, so absorbed in themselves they don't realise someone I loved died.

I thought my heart was broken before I got here, but the crash of the waves and the wail of the seagulls, the laughter of kids splashing in the water and the rough touch of the sand, drive deeper rifts into it.

The morning of New Year's Eve Gibbo lands on my doorstep: a foot taller, wearing contact lenses, his voice cracking, recognisable only from the smattering of freckles across his nose and the same tattered Grade 5 exercise book in his hand.

'We're going down to play cricket,' he says and I see the black band around his arm. 'For Dougie.'

We stand there, my hand gripping tight to the door. The impulse to slam the door in his face is overwhelming until I see my sadness reflected in his eyes.

'Everyone's said yes, but no one knew how to come ask you.'

I think of all the entries from last summer in *The Book of Gibbo* and nod.

I gather up the remnants of the last three summers: the old blue cabbage hat and the almost empty pot of green zinc cream. The Star Wars t-shirt doesn't fit any more, so I pull out a brand new singlet and pull it over my swimmers, pull on a baggy white pair of jersey shorts. I don't bother with thongs. It's time my feet toughened up. Only sissies walk to the beach in thongs.

Gibbo takes a black band from his pocket and helps me tie it on.

The boys are clustered just off the boat ramp waiting for us, all with matching black armbands. Kenny has the bat, Sam the wickets and Charlie is throwing a brand new tennis ball up and down. Roddy, Jimmy and Balls are standing looking up the expanse of sand, discussing how far we'll have to go to have free rein without pissing off the sunbakers and families.

'Eh, Lori's here!' Kenny calls out, and jabs the bat in my direction. 'Good to see ya. Still putting Merv to shame?'

I blush beneath my green warrior strips.

Sam and Charlie nod hello.

I take a mental roll call: Danny's not here and neither is Lano. Jimmy explains their families opted for somewhere else along the coast.

This year there is no one to replace those that can't play.

Charlie tosses the ball in the air and I snatch it up.

'First to a hundred then,' I say and set off down the beach, the salt air and the smell of new cotton filling my chest.

graceville

7:09am

I drop to the bench under the Graceville sign and watch the 7:09 from Ipswich creak and shudder down the tracks toward Chelmer and the city, grateful I don't have an 8am exam. Maths A, my final one, is still another five hours away. Running for the train made no sense, but so much right now doesn't make any sense. All I do know, sitting here by myself on the train platform is tonight I will crawl into bed and it will be all over. I'll have done what I need to be free.

Blue flakes gather at my feet. Some parent must have turned a blind eye to their kid peeling paint from the Graceville sign above the benches. A fine crack in the concrete runs beneath the flakes. I follow it as far as I can across the platform. I remember sitting on Nan's toilet as a kid, tracing the worm-like embossing in the beige lino. I did the same with the chip we got in the windscreen driving back from Toowoomba one Christmas. It turned into a crack, running across the glass until Dad got a ticket months later. Then we got a new windscreen.

It's like that with Mum. Dad caused the first chip by saying he'd fallen in love with Liv. Everything else added heat, turning the chip into a crack running long and deep inside her. Then my half-sister arrived during SWOTVAC.

I shouldn't hate a baby, who had no say in coming into the world, much less when, but she's an easy target. Easy to blame her for Mum's crying in the night; she doesn't even try to do quietly it anymore. It's her fault Mum's fallen to pieces when I needed her the most. She's made it all about our replacements, missing the fact I am still here, floundering, no longer certain I can ace my exams. I've so worked hard. Gave up the fun everyone else was having to focus an OP 1. Only for it to turn shit right at the end.

So, I guess we're travelling with no windscreen. Hurling down the highway at a hundred, eyes shut to the air's velocity, knowing it's not if but when we crash. We just haven't creashed yet.

And please, not in the next five hours.

Not until I have done my final exam. I don't care then, because I will be free. I'll have my OP 1 and after Christmas I'll go to Auntie Bec's in Melbourne for a summer internship at her architectural firm before uni starts.

When the crash finally comes, I plan to be a long, long way away.

'Hey, Sarah-Jane.'

My heart skips a beat, when I realise the voice belongs to Julian. He's smiling at me, hotter than I imagined out of his uniform. All the tiny pacts made with the Universe in the past month have paid off; a chance to see him one last time before he becomes a high school memory. The only decent distraction from all exams and the Mum-Dad-Liv-Evie drama.

'Hi.'

I smile, trying to be casual even though casual is the last thing I do and definitely not well.

'You sitting for Economics this morning too?'

'Me, economics?'

I didn't mean to say it aloud, so I laugh to cover my awkwardness. Only it comes out sounding like I'm being strangled, stress tight in my chest and throat. I force a fake cough over the top of the *faux* laugh compounding the mess I'm making of talking to him.

My face flushes and then I start to cough for real.

He offers me his half-drunk bottle of Coke. I shake my head.

'Just Maths A at lunch,' I say, my voice husky in the worst possible way.

My face burns. 'I couldn't study at home.'

'My olds are on my case too. Just a few more hours, yeah?'

I nod. 'Glad I've only got one today.'

He sits next to me, smelling of Calvin Klein. Oh god, I might die. All the boys I know wear Lynx. I wonder if he's got matching underwear.

My face burns hotter.

He hands over his phone, a chunky old Nokia, and I fight against the second flush in my cheeks.

'Put your number in and maybe we can get together next week.'

Oh yes, thank you Universe. He really IS interested in me. I am going to see him again.

Ahh but not if I don't actually put my number in the phone. My hands tremble and performance anxiety threatens to destroy all that dedicated petitioning of invisible forces. I fight against my brain's need to forget my name and number. Once I'm saved in his phone, I breathe again. My fingers tingle when his brush mine passing the phone back.

'We're going to the Victory this afternoon, if you want to come along.'

'Sure.'

I twist my silver necklace around my finger and wish we could fast forward to then. Or maybe just hit pause. Sit here on the train platform for the rest of the day. No exams. No family drama. Just the two of us. At some point though, you have to hit play.

The 7:15 appears down the line, groaning as it slows to approach the platform. The next wave of commuters surges forward, bristling with peak-hour urgency. We stand and he leans across and kisses my cheek.

'Good luck, Sarah-Jane.'

My cheeks heat up, *again*. This one is worth it though.

I grin, not caring if it's cool or not. 'Good luck, Julian.'

I grab my backpack and midway across the platform we part; creatures of habit whose friends wait in different carriages. Except I'm alone, like every other morning. Today it doesn't bother me. I don't have to share Julian with anyone. I sit with my fingers pressed to where his lips touched, gazing dreamily out the window as the world rushes by in a gorgeous blur. Poinciana red studs

the jacaranda blue, ready to blaze across the suburbs as the next riot of colour. I take it all in, knowing this is my last train ride in. And next summer, I'll be watching a different landscape change.

Even though my reflection in the window is ghostly, it glows.

I promise the Universe I will hug Mum especially tight this afternoon when I get home. I'll tell her I love her. I'll apologise for blaming her for what's happened. We can go out and celebrate. And maybe, now I'm 18, we can share a wine over our margherita pizzas and I'll tell her about Julian. We can find a way to be different together. To have a life, a happy one, even though it now includes Evie.

Because if I hadn't been out here early, I'd have missed him. I'd be sitting here, stuffed between sweaty people, anticipating an ending instead of a beginning.

Just Maths A, then the Victory. Could there be a better place to end my school life?

I jam my earphones in, scroll through my iPod to Of Monsters and Men, and laugh, remembering the album is called My Head is an Animal. Choosing, Little Talks, I hum along loudly, totally unapologetic.

1:37pm

Her eyes skip nervously from object to object, searching for traces of him. She avoids the obvious ones: photographs with happy smiles of man, woman and child on walls and Ikea shelves. On a small, pre-loved table by the door lies his gym card, casually tossed there last night. He will need to charm his way in for his lunch-time laps. But oh, isn't he the master of the disarming smile. The key to his kingdom.

Her knee bumps a low table. A Scrabble board sits on it: just two words. The first is *quigybo*—the word that always starts it off. A nod to their love of The Simpsons. Built vertically through the 'i' is *conspnki*.

She had no idea what *conspnki* might mean. A conspiracy of key cutters?

Once upon a time she knew exactly what his faux words meant. Where

his head was at.

They'd laughed like teenagers at the made-up words in the New York Times, both agreeing they'd need an *innoculatte* every morning: coffee taken intravenously when running late for work. They were always running late. So busy, always. Both carving out careers. Type-A personalities slashing their way through endless billable hours, colliding briefly in the morning and maybe longer at night as they powered their way up the corporate ladder. Too busy to have a child, but Sarah-Jane came along to prove them wrong.

Just one, he said. No more. She agreed, discovering too late the ache for another had moth-eaten her ambition, leaving her with a heart warped from the ghosts of her career and the child everyone thought she'd lost.

Then he filled the baby-shaped absence with a woman almost half her age from the firm his name leads. The one they once dreamed of opening together: McGrath and McGeath.

The business letterhead is printed with 'McGrath and Associates'. Her name long forgotten.

Instead of kicking the board over, she places seven more letters on the board. An illegal move, building diagonally up from the 'p'; random letters masquerading as a word. He turned her into a pointless husk. Left her with strings of shapeless, meaningless days falling through a hole he punched through her life.

There's only one way to climb out. Only one thing can make this right.

The air-con's gentle hum, follows her through to the master bedroom. She opens the door and the room exhales frigid air, scented with baby powder and vomit. The curtains are drawn to the late spring sun. She waits for her eyes to adjust, one hand on the door frame to steady herself. The other over her heart holding in the cacophonous beat, loud enough to wake a sleeping baby.

A minute passes. And another.

The air con flicks off and it's just their breaths in sync.

Evie's hands squeeze into miniature fists on either side of her head; delicate, red-tinged arms thrown backwards in a sleeping Mexican Wave. The moro reflex she reminds herself, having never forgotten the lingo. All the newborn nuances lashed to her longing.

Cupid's bow lips suck. A life so new there's no surprises in what she dreams.

One long inhale, and an equally long exhale, and she's moving toward the bed. It all happens in a paradox of time. Moving in slow-motion her hand slips under the tiny sleeping form, head supported. Body braced against her chest.

Surely my heart will wake her now?

And then they are on the footpath in the heavy afternoon air. Evie nestled, still asleep, in the lime-green sling she found on a hook by the front door. So much more settled than Sarah-Jane.

How did they ever survive her first year?

She handed a week-old baby to a live-in nanny. She hid in the board room to pump because the toilet cubicles were too small. Then she gave it all away, bought formula, because she'd leaked in the middle of a client conference through a two-hundred-dollar blouse.

Did they really survive? Did she?

She cried at 2am, unable to reconcile love and resentment's intensity.

This time, she'll do better. There will only be love.

2:47pm

A let-down jolted you from a dead sleep; the painful contraction before the warm breastmilk leak. The room was cold and dark. You'd slept too long. But that's what they told you. Sleep when the baby sleeps because sure as shit you're up with her all night because she refuses to settle. You hauled the newly damp t-shirt up, freeing your breast, then swept a tired arm over the sheet to draw her to you. Your arm returned to your side without the baby. You reached wider.

Could she wiggle in her sleep? Or had she...

You bolted upright, dread filling you. The sheet between you and the bed edge was empty except for a tiny sock.

That's what you get for sleeping with the baby in the bed. How many times

did I tell you beds are for adults. You can't have her in the bed with us. Babies go in cots. I'm not discussing this further.

He didn't discuss anything. He made demands and you capitulated. You teased and seduced and he capitulated. You both knew how it worked. That's why you didn't tell him at first. You waited out those first 20 weeks, knowing how to hide it from him. Then you told him.

You scrambled off the bed, terrified you'd find her twisted and broken on the floor. The only thing beside the bed was your slippers kicked off earlier, when exhaustion triumphed. You read once about sleep deprivation and torture. In the dead of night, you argued with yourself what was worse: losing your body or losing your mind?

Days were like walking through molasses; fluid resistance everywhere. You were disconnected from both time and space, uncertain *you* existed anymore because you no longer felt where you started or ended. Or maybe you just don't have the capacity to feel anymore. The dead feel nothing. And you were definitely dead; a zombie no one has noticed.

But you noticed everything. All the things that were meant to be here but weren't. The promises he made. The promises you made.

Then what everyone told you. All the lies.

You are not happy. You are not fulfilled. You do not feel whole.

You are fractured and lost. Dead and somehow dying more each day.

In the room made into a nursery, you stood in the dark. Block-out curtains held the sun at bay during the day and the moon at night; a candy-pink prison dotted with butterflies and fairies.

Only you went into the cocoon a beautiful butterfly and came out a worthless grub.

You leaned into the cot, hands ready to touch the softness of a Bond's suit, appalled the cot was as empty as your bed.

Fear curled itself around your throat. Kicked your heart. Yet you couldn't move. Not at the speed you were meant to in an emergency. You stared from the end of the hallway at Sarah-Jane's baby quilt lying on the floor. A reluctant gift from a more reluctant new sister. And you remembered: Evie lying there this morning, yes, it was this morning. Arms flapping erratically like a baby

bird trying to gain control over flimsy wings. You tried to rest, breathe, focus and read a magazine for five minutes. And then she started to cry...again.

Colic they told you—a catch-all word for a constantly angry, unsettled baby who doesn't sleep and throws up after every feed. Who doesn't like being held and doesn't want to be left alone. Who cries and cries and cries.

And so do you.

You thought you were ready for motherhood; a baby to validate your love. They told you a baby would be the greatest joy ever. You'd love her. He'd love her. It would bring you closer together. He was meant to love you more because of her.

But you've changed. He's changed. Neither for the better.

Love won't conquer all. Love won't make him smile at you like he used to. Or touch you like he used to because you only let him have sex, let him plough into your body, after you recognised the smile he gave his new personal assistant, your replacement. You knew it's hidden meaning.

You weren't even meant to have intercourse. The whole six-week thing after birth. He hadn't even asked if it would be okay. He just wanted it done before Evie started crying. Then when she did, he slammed the door as you held your wailing daughter.

On the other side you knew he was putting earphones in, opening his lap top and going back to work in a bed stained with fresh cum and stale milk.

No, all the love in the world would not fix it, because love had abandoned you. And you were trapped, walking an endless corridor of resentment you couldn't find your way out of. Yet, you somehow found your way into a room, only to find the baby was gone.

Something has happened to Evie.

The air con flicked on. A whoosh cold air hit you. Goosebumps prickled your arms. A chill raced down your spine: What if *you* happened to Evie? Chased by your culpability, you ran from room to room, frantic: the kitchen, the bathroom, the laundry, the spare room with the bed piled high with nappies and baby clothes; your bedroom, the ensuite and the nursery again.

You knew babies didn't just disappear.

You opened the garbage bin, hand shaking. Lifted the toilet lid awash in

churning nausea. Checked the washing machine with growing dread, then the dryer. You walked with warring feelings to open the veggie crisper, freezer and finally the oven.

You pinched yourself brutally and watched the purple bruise rush to the surface. There should have been in tears, but you'd already cried yourself dry twice before lunch time.

You were in a waking nightmare where your worse fear and greatest hope had come to pass: the crying had stopped and you were alone.

You rocked, hugging knees to yourself underneath his over-sized t-shirt, wanting comfort from the agony that tore through your body. Your breasts throbbed, large and ugly and leaking, when once they'd been pert and sun-tanned. Cupped in hands that adored and worshipped them. Breasts that gave pleasure rather than pain. Breasts with cute, pink nipples instead of vile long teats.

Curled on the couch, in the shit-hole of an apartment you thought could be a home, you wailed. And when the noise ended, when the despair and fury emptied, the numbness returned. You were no longer fighting molasses. You fell through it. Dropping deeper, and deeper yet. Any will to return to the surface gone.

On the way to the kitchen, to find whatever would take the pain away, to save you from what you had done, you smashed your knee into table with his scrabble board on it. The letters were no longer perfectly aligned. You bent to straighten them—habit more than care—and saw three words.

This morning there were two words. You remembered because you swore at him after he left: he had fucking time with his stupid fucking words, but couldn't hold his daughter a moment so you could pee.

Two words before she had laid down. A third word when she got up.

A word had appeared. And a baby had disappeared.

You had not happened to your baby. But someone had.

You counted the rings until his phone picked up. The new personal assistant told you, in the same narky tone you once used with his wife, that Michael was unavailable.

You screamed at her, words running into each other, when all you wanted

say was it's urgent, please put me through. She told you he'd call you back. Phone in your lap, Sarah-Jane's quilt beside you, you waited. And waited. When you could wait no longer, you called and no one answered.

An hour later, the phone rang. Before a single word had been said, the tone of his breath let you know he was pissed. This time he wasn't having the first or last word though.

'Evie is gone,' you said, surprised at how calm you were, once you'd realised you hadn't done something terrible to her. 'Someone's taken her.'

4:06pm

On autopilot, I head for Central Station. Chin buried in the hollow where my collar bones meet, safe from the gaze of strangers passing in chaotic columns. Here, I am safe from the claustrophobic weight of soaring buildings I once considered my newest crush. The street names, I silently recite at each crossing, like the prayers I chanted, shifting the beads I bought in Byron through my fingers each afternoon. Wishes offered up to a different deity every day as I did the rounds, trying to find someone who would listen.

If only I'd asked for something useful.

Like passing my Maths A exam. Like ensuring I got a place at Melbourne Uni. Like shoring up an escape route out of the family shit. Because my name in Julian's phone isn't going to save me.

A massive crack divides the ramp to Central Station. I follow it, all thoughts of meeting him at the Victory and celebrating gone. There's nothing left to celebrate.

Just doors at home to slam so hard the windows rattle. *Rage Against the Machine* to play so loud the neighbours complain. Angry words to hurl at Mum with the intention to hurt and make her cry. And a bag to pack to piss off somewhere, anywhere, knowing no one will bother to come looking for me. They won't even realise I am gone.

'Hey, Sarah-Jane.'

I ignore his voice and walk faster toward the turnstiles, pulling my Go

Card from my pocket.

‘Sarah Jane. Hey, what’s wrong?’

His hand closes around mine. Moving slower than me, the grasp becomes the jerk of a pin pulled from a grenade and I explode, whipping around to glare at him, wanting to destroy the last thing I care about.

‘LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE.’

He doesn’t look away. He doesn’t ask what’s wrong. He doesn’t tell me whatever’s wrong it will be okay.

He just holds my hand.

I don’t turn away or try to hide everything that’s raging through me. Everything I’ve stuffed down to excel. To top the exams. To get the OP 1. To guarantee my life away from Brisbane and my family.

‘It’s all gone,’ I say, appalled at what I’ve confessed.

I grapple with the bubbling up of long-denied emotions. Afraid I’ll start bawling and won’t be able to stop.

Someone shoves into me and mutters something about moving out the way. Julian’s hand tightens around mine.

‘How are we meant to know what we want to do with the rest of our lives?’ I ask. ‘How do you know?’

Unsure whether I’m asking him outright, and caught in torrents of peeved commuters, he tows me carefully to the side of the concourse.

‘I have been an adult for exactly a month. Who trusts someone who forgets their text books half the time with deciding their future?’

It’s the gentlest touch, his thumb brushing mine.

‘I don’t know,’ he says. ‘Our parents. The school system?’

I believed them when they told me all I had to do was turn up every day, to every class. As though a perfect attendance rate was like some hallowed fucking portico into the future. I studied hard, turned everything in on time. I gave up everything—my friends, volleyball, the cello; anything that might have been a distraction from school—to secure an OP 1.

Because that was the only way I’d get into architecture.

I’ve failed Maths A. I won’t have the OP for Melbourne Uni. Or any other uni Dad considered worthy his daughter.

But, it wasn't me he was thinking about. It was him. His ego. His reputation. *His fucking reputation*, when he was the one who had an affair with his personal assistant and knocked her up. Then left us behind to start a new life with her.

'Come on,' I say, dragging Julian out of the station.

We cross Ann Street, against the traffic lights, dashing through the cars and delivery vans. On the other side I can view the historic sandstone building of Central Station, my first deep dive into the history of a building. The starting point of my love affair with architecture. But all I can see now is arched windows as surprised eyes. Arched ingresses as disappointed mouths.

'What happened in your exam?' he asks, after we've been staring at the station long enough for the town hall clock to chime five o'clock.

'I didn't answer a single question.'

'Did you have a panic attack?'

I shrug. 'I just went blank.'

'For three hours?'

I nod.

He lets go of my hands. Face stricken. 'Was it me? I mean this morning was a shit time. I've wanted to—'

'Was it you?' It's a hysterical kind of laugh that erupts from me. 'No, it was my dad. He stole my future.'

He narrowed my world down to his terms. And I let him because I didn't know any better.

'He said all there was, was medicine, law or architecture,' I explain.

'What did you choose?'

'I hurl at the sight of blood and I didn't want to be like him and Mum.'

I watch him look at the station through different eyes.

'No one ever said I could be a journalist or a social worker or drive a truck. Or that I could study economic or social justice or aeronautics.'

'But your career's counsellor?'

'I strode in on my first day of high school and told her I was going to be an architect, what did I have to do to get there?'

'Did you always want to do that?'

I shake my head. 'When I was little, I wanted to be a ballerina. We lived in Graceville. I misunderstood, thought it was Grace-ful. That it was the perfect place to grow up as a ballerina.'

'Do you still dance?'

'Only in my bedroom.'

He laughs.

'You should be at the Victory celebrating,' I say.

'I messaged and you didn't answer. And I rang. And then ... I knew you'd have to go home eventually. I was worried.'

We're doing this all the wrong way round. I grin at him. All my angst and awkwardness gone. Because I am free.

I failed. And I am free.

Free to yell at my father next time I see him. Free to sit at graduation on Friday and imagine a different future. Free to work out what I want, because I will have an OP that will get me into any degree, just not medicine, law or architecture.

'Are you going to schoolies this weekend?' I ask, realising I didn't even think it was something I'd want to go to.

'Not the Goldie. But my mates and I, a group of us, we're going to Byron Monday. There's a party tonight though.'

'Can I come?'

'Don't you have somewhere else you want to go?'

'I burned every bridge. Let go of all my friends, everything. Everything to get an OP1. For Dad. For his ego. His ambition.'

Then it hits me, what's really happened since Dad fell for Liv. Since he told me over lattes and a fancy pancake breakfast in his favourite café, how she made his heart sing. Didn't he deserve to be happy? Didn't he deserve to have what he wanted?

'Oh god, my poor Mum.'

I tug on his hand again and we race back across Ann Street and through the turnstiles. In another version of this, I'd sit lovely-dovey next to him on a bench, holding his hand, dreaming of him kissing me. But I have to get home. I stand, tapping my foot until the train arrives and we rush on, without

uniforms, we're entitled to seats.

I'm silent until the train trundles toward the Walter Taylor Bridge and the iconic white towers at each end; gridded windows studding the sides and the top.

I point out the window. 'Did you know it used to be a toll bridge and the toll collectors lived up there.'

'But it's an urban myth right, that they had to cut a guy free who lived there.'

'No, it's real. He was related to the first toll master.'

We speed across the city's brown-green artery. Boats bobbing at one end. The city waiting at the other.

'He was too big to be carried down two flights of steep stairs.' I say. 'So, they winched him out using a crane. Cut the window open to get him out.'

His family had lived there all their lives. He only found out how small his world was, when he needed to leave urgently.

I wasn't much different. Julian had arrived in time to winch me out. So maybe what I offered up over the pray beads wasn't so frivolous.

'Where do you live?' I ask two stops later, as we walk toward my house, faster than I wish we were.

'Oxley.'

I stop beneath a jacaranda tree, weeping the last of its purple confetti petals around us.

'But you catch the train here?'

The colour starts in his neck and climbs over his jaw, bleeding into his cheeks.

'I started so they'd think I lived here. And then I saw you.'

'Why would you want people to think you live here?'

'You're a full fee-paying student Sarah-Jane.'

And it's my turn to blush.

'Does that bother you?' he asks

'What your postcode is?'

'I mean—'

He gestures to the elegant, multi-million-dollar timber homes that line

my street.

‘No. And not just because it would piss my dad off.’

I step into him, slip my hands around his neck and press my lips against his. There’s a moment’s hesitation and his lips move against mine. This is not the fumbling, making-out with the boy I’d met on the last day of holidays. This is something all together different.

His hands settle on my hips, then move up my back and he’s pulling me tighter to him. His tongue eases between my lips, touching mine, and if fire could race through veins, it’s racing through mine.

A different quiet settles in my head.

There is nothing but his body and mine. His lips and hands. And my heart smashing against my chest.

My pocket vibrates and I pull away, breathless, to check who is ringing. All urgency to get home to Mum is gone, until I see I’ve missed a call from Dad. ‘I have to go.’

‘About to tonight—’

‘Text me the address.’

‘I’ve got a car. It’s nothing flash, but I can—’

‘There’s no way Mum’s going to let me get into a car with you tonight. I’ll get myself there.’

I kiss him one last time, quick and unsatisfying.

‘See you tonight,’ I call over my shoulder, then run down my street, heart light, just wanting this done so I can see Julian again.

I’m halfway through the house, on the way to my bedroom before I realise the crying is coming from our house, not next door. And not just a baby, but a woman too.

Mum’s bedroom door is ajar. I slowly push it open. The last of the afternoon sun slices through the horizontal wooden blinds painting the room in golden zebra stripes. She’s on the bed, back to me rocking. Two pink piggie feet kick out the side.

Dad loaned me the money to buy the outfit. He wanted me to look like an excited big sister. I knew it was all for show. Evie’s too young to know I exist. Liv though, she was watching everything.

The collective wail is desperate and primal. If I could have cried like this in the middle of the exam, I would have.

‘Mum?’

She doesn’t respond. I carefully climb onto the bed next to her. Evie is pressed into her chest.

‘Mum? Where is Dad and Liv?’

She’s been in bad places, the worst this last month, but I barely recognise her when she turns to me.

‘Not playing happy families now,’ she spits, and the crying starts again.

I wrap my arm around her shoulders, scared that I can feel her bones, and pull her to me.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say.

I know there was a miscarriage after me and Mum quit where she worked with Dad, gave up corporate law so there was never a McGrath and McGrath like they’d planned before I came along. Just a perpetual slide into deeper depression, first through a job at the uni, then at a women’s legal centre, later some sporadic advocacy work and for the last two years, conveyancing for a small local partnership.

Dad told me, over that breakfast when he’d finally come clean about Liv, that Mum doing conveyancing was like a vet working in an animal shelter hosing shit from cages. As if it was her fault he’d cheated.

‘I wanted another baby and your father said no.’

She lays my tiny half-sister in her lap. Evie howls like it’s an Olympic sport and she’s going for gold. Mum’s crying turns to hiccuping gulps and she reaches up for my hand, laying it in her lap next to the Evie’s writhing body.

‘You said it was a miscarriage.’

‘I let people think that’s what it was.’

She drops her head and starts to cry, again. ‘What have I done?’

‘Why are we always taking the blame for everything,’ I say. ‘We’re not taking the blame for it anymore.’

I pick up my sister—Evie—face a scarlet raisin. She has a voice that’s not going to be silenced. She’s going to need it in the future to survive Michael McGrath. The same father who swerves his silver Mercedes Kompressor into

the gutter, almost hitting the red Audi A3 he presented me with when I passed my driver's test. But only because I passed it the first time.

He strides up the driveway with his barrister face on. I'd believe the impassivity, if his tie wasn't yanked down and the top three shirt buttons open. Liv, scurries behind, in his ancient red Fourex t-shirt, her face unreadable. The chasm between them is obvious. Not like when they sat me down together, a united front, to let me know I was going to be a big sister.

'Michael said that's what you always wanted,' Liv said, a hopeful smile on her beautiful face.

She was talking about being a big sister. I ignored her, glaring at him and his cherry-picking of history, because I was six when I said that. The year after he told me I couldn't be a ballerina. McGraths didn't grow up to be in *the arts*.

I hope Evie takes those lungs and joins a feminist death metal band when she's older enough.

They come straight to us, under the poinciana and I'm glad Julian suggested I meet them out here. Away from Mum. Evie's in an old towel, damp bum now a dry one, though the red rash suggests that's one reason she's pissed off with the world. Her devilish mouth sucks on my finger.

I remind myself as Michael closes the gap between us, neither Evie nor I asked to be in the middle of this fight. To be *his* daughters.

Liv pushes Dad aside and lunges for Evie. I step back and clutch Evie to me, easier said than done when my little finger is still in her mouth.

'Let's be clear about what's going on here,' I say, knowing for the first time how much I am the product of two lawyers. 'Liv, you stole my mother's husband. And she in turn stole your baby. I'd say you were even.'

Liv's eyes are wide, wild, and then she starts sobbing.

'And for the record, I think you and Dad deserve each other for what you did.'

I hand Evie back to her Mum, and note Liv's manicured hands are bitten down to bloody stubs. Her naked face is grey where it's not red from crying, and puffy. Her feet are bare. I've never seen her without designer high heels.

Whatever Liv thought she was getting with Dad, it's not what she's got. She cradles Evie to her, shooting Dad a death stare before scurrying to the car.

‘Where’s your mother?’

‘She’s gone to stay with friends.’

‘She can’t—’

‘What, go gate crash your life and turn it upside down. Only *you* get to do that.’

‘She stole a baby.’

‘You denied her a baby then had one with a woman twenty years younger than you. You’re a fucking hypocrite, Michael McGrath.’

His face turns purple, all his courtroom calm gone.

‘And you can tell Auntie Bec I don’t need the internship over summer, I’m going to Byron Bay instead,’ I say to him. ‘You came this close to stealing my future and I almost let you. But you’re not having it. And you’re not having Evie’s either. I’m going to make fucking sure of that.’

My father, the man with the barrelling voice, who commands words and jurors, who is never without words, stares at me, speechless.

‘I hope I am a crushing disappointment to you. I really hope so.’

I don’t wait for him to walk away. I don’t need to ask permission to leave.

I watch him from the top of the stairs though, how he stalks away, slams his car door, and speeds down a street with a 40km/h speed limit.

Mum gave up and blamed Dad, when she could have made a life on her own terms. In doing so, in living her life the way she wanted it, she’d have inspired me to do the same. Saved me from the future he chose for me.

And Liv, well she gave in and blamed Mum, when she could have chosen something different than being with another’s woman’s husband. She might have waited and got to know him better and discovered he wasn’t a man who would love her like she wanted after she’d given him another daughter.

And Dad. He thought he owned all our futures. He thought we owed him that for his love and attention. For the money he showered on us. For the privilege of being his daughters, his wives...his women.

I shut the front door quietly and breathe out. Let myself soak in the light coming through the strained-glass roses edging the door frame. Maybe tomorrow I’ll see it all differently: Mum, Dad and Liv. But I won’t see myself differently. Or Evie for the matter. When I’m their age, maybe I’ll know it

different. Right now, all I really know is Mum has me and I'll never stop loving her. It will never be conditional. Liv has Evie. And Evie has me. She'll need me, with Michael McGrath as her father.

My phone rings and I run to the kitchen.

'Are they gone?' Julian asks, and I walk to my room.

'For now.'

'And your Mum?'

'I'm taking her up the coast.'

I pull clothes from my wardrobe one-handed, throwing them into a Country Road duffle bag as we talk.

'If you're not too hungover in the morning, maybe you can come up to Buderim. My grandparents have this cool house that's half in the bush, and there's a creek ...' There's silence down the line. 'Are you still there? Julian?'

I can hear him breathing.

'Yes?'

But it's all he says.

'If coming up to meet my grandparents and my Mum is too—'

'What if my first preference is law at UQ?'

It's my turn to breathe into the phone. Afraid of what I'll say next.

'Did you mess up your exams today?'

'No. I don't think so.'

'Then I hope you get in. And...I hope that maybe I'm there when your letter arrives.'

We're both quiet now. Outside the cicadas have started up and there's a rumble, way off toward Ipswich. A storm to end a day. Bad weather I need to get on the road ahead of.

'What do you think would have happened if I'd come and spoken to you months ago?' Julian asks.

'I don't care. The past is done,' I say, zipping my duffle bag. 'We've got our whole future ahead of us.'

at arm's length

Naked in front of the bathroom mirror, Georgie ran a tentative hand over her abbreviated torso. It was smooth and warm beneath her fingertips. No evidence of a traumatic amputation, just a fleshy curve without the definition of a collarbone or shoulder, as if she'd never had an arm at all.

'You'll have to pick the boys up from soccer,' Derek yawned, turning the shower on then releasing a loud stream of urine into the toilet bowl. 'I've got a late meeting.'

'I don't think I can,' Georgie said and waited for his reaction when he saw why. Tried to think of an explanation for how it happened.

'Then you tell them why they can't go.'

The mirror had begun to fog and cloak her reflection.

'Derek?'

He turned and stared at her. 'What?'

'Doesn't matter.'

When she looked back at the mirror she was gone.

Antony woke to light caresses on his face: fingertips traced his cheek, jaw and the contour of his lips. He lay and savoured Georgie's touch until he remembered he'd slept alone, as he had every night since he'd fallen for her.

He slowly opened his eyes, wanting to cling to the last shreds of whatever

dream brought her touch. A touch delivered by an amputated arm lying on the pillow beside him.

‘Fuck!’

He bolted upright. The fingers jerked away and curled into a tight ball.

Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.

As he sat there waiting to be pulled from the nightmare, he noticed the lack of blood on the pillowcase, or anywhere else. He saw the blue thumbnail. Not death blue. TARDIS blue. His breath slowed. His head and heart stilled.

TARDIS blue.

The colour she painted her nails for him.

‘Is it you?’ he asked, swallowing the tremor in his voice.

He reached a tentative hand forward, but he didn’t dare to make contact. He’d spent hours imagining what it would be like to wake up beside her, and he tried not to think of how he’d already ballsed it up.

‘Good morning,’ he said, starting over.

Her fist trembled. Goose bumps rose where his breath brushed her skin when he put his head on the pillow beside her arm. He stayed there, through the alarm and multiple snoozes, waiting for her arm to respond.

The fingers remained caged in a rigor mortis knot.

‘I’m late for work,’ he said eventually and wondered if the arm was homesick for her. Like he was.

Outside the bedroom, Georgie could hear the chaos of three children, a dog, and a husband trying to get ready for the day and doing little in the way of succeeding without her. She stayed in the bedroom and for a few moments pretended it was calm. Quiet. It gave her an opportunity to look through her wardrobe for something easy to wear—nothing with buttons or zippers. A t-shirt would do, though the short sleeve hung empty whichever angle she looked at it in the mirror and whatever she did to try to conceal it.

She should have felt something, but she didn’t. It was almost as though somewhere deep inside she half-expected this, having lost small parts of herself over the years to employers, marriage, family. In the past year, she had shared

with Antony all that was left of the woman she had once been. But was that enough to fill an entire limb?

She shrugged. It felt unbalanced because she expected two shoulders to move and only one did. It could have been much worse, she told herself, reaching for the door handle: it could have been her right arm.

The hand reached out for Antony, and he knew he couldn't just leave it there on the pillow. Cradled in one arm, he carried it into the kitchen to put the kettle on. He imagined her sitting on the counter, in the space occupied by her arm: smiling sleepily at him, hair dishevelled, long legs snaking from beneath one of his crumpled t-shirts that temporarily hid her nakedness.

The kettle clicked off and he was back in the kitchen with her arm.

'Tea, then?'

The kids didn't mention her arm at breakfast. The stir created by tuckshop on a Tuesday let her believe it was easy to overlook. Three children crouched over their brown paper bags, thrilled to be allowed to write their own orders. Paul wrote Lewie's. Kelly created a multi-coloured, floral masterpiece.

At the bottom each wrote *thank you* and she smiled at the mimicry.

'You can all go on the bus together this morning,' she said and struggled to empty the brimming change jar that usually sat on the bookshelf. Tuckshop had cleaned her purse of cash.

'Are you sick, Mummy?' Lewie asked and her stomach back-flipped. They'd see now, how she was different this morning.

'Does she look sick?' Paul asked.

'Hurry up!' Kelly snapped. 'I'm late for choir practice. I'm always late for choir and no one cares.'

They hustled out the front door without a backward glance, bags on backs and hands clutching coins for the bus..

Antony composed his first text message to her at 8.45am as he rode the elevator to his office, knowing she would be free of the children and able to talk.

- There was something unexpected in my bed this morning.
- I always said you'd end up with more of me than you bargained for.
- Meet me for lunch.
- I can't. I have to work out how to make a peanut butter sandwich one-handed.

- Do you want your arm back?
- I don't think so. Not if it's with you.
- Lunch tomorrow, then? My treat. No peanut butter sandwiches. Promise!
- Sure.

He waited for her to say more, but there was nothing. The thought of the arm, awaiting his homecoming, took the edge off missing her for lunch.

One-armed, Georgie lost her ability to drive a gear-shift but gained the solitude of the kitchen and her first cuppa an hour earlier than usual.

She forced herself to stop texting Antony at *sure*, even though she wanted to tell him how her morning was almost perfect. How she hadn't missed the much-hated morning school run: the battle for a car park within a block of the school gate; forced conversations with women who read trashy mags, relished reality TV and sent her invites to play Candy Crush; the delayed gratification of tea and toast and silence.

And there were a thousand other things she wanted to tell him—that never changed—but she held off, afraid to bombard him with more of her than he would want.

But how much was too much?

Was an arm too much?

He had, after all, offered to give it back.

Did that mean he didn't want it? Or did he understand how difficult it was going to be for her without it? Or was his reasoning something she'd never think of?

She almost called to ask for it back after lunch, when it took her the better part of five hours, three loaves of frozen emergency bread, and a large tub of crunchy, organic peanut butter to make sandwiches that would pass scrutiny for Wednesday's lunches.

Her arm lay on the kitchen bench, in a slightly different position to the morning, with a glass of wine beside it. Not that her arm could drink. It just somehow felt rude to not offer.

Antony talked as he cooked: how he hated his boss; felt stuck in his job; wished he hadn't taken out a mortgage on a flat because everyone said it was the sensible thing to do at his age and he'd be grateful for the decision in years to come.

He wasn't.

And once he started he couldn't stop: how he wished he'd travelled; dyed his hair some mad colour once; hadn't loved the wrong women in the past. More than anything he wanted to tell her how being with her, regardless of the obstacles, gave him hope. Made him feel alive again.

But he knew about the parameters of sharing, what was and wasn't appropriate. He'd shared too much in the past and watched women scurry back into the wainscoting of lives that didn't include him.

The monologue of wishes trailed out and in the silence that followed, he longed to hear her reply: how her day was; how hard was it to make peanut butter sandwiches one-handed; how she was going to cope.

Derek did everything to escape the final circuit of the kids' rooms before lights out, as he did every night. This time Georgie stood her ground. They were his kids too. He could make the effort since he'd cancelled soccer practice and she'd copped the aggro, as if it were her fault their father couldn't organise his diary better.

While he went from room to room, she locked herself in the bathroom. She'd long ago given up on an evening skin care ritual, ignoring the bottles

of expensive lotions and potions Derek had bought as an investment in a timeless, beautiful wife. She'd given up caring about his disappointment with the dividend. She squeezed a small amount of eye cream onto her finger and, as she lent into the mirror, felt a kiss in the hollow just below her left eye. Her finger, with the white smear on the end of it, hung between her face and the one in the mirror while she savoured the echoing tingle of warm lips.

Then another kiss on the corner of her jaw.

She touched it to try to keep it, like the first time Antony kissed her and laughed the most beautiful laugh as she pressed fingers to her buzzing lips.

And now her forehead.

The side of her nose.

She closed her eyes and soaked in the almost-kisses, while deeper down she ached for an actual goodnight kiss; for someone to do something other than grunt and fart and roll over with the doona while she lay staring at the ceiling wondering how it had all gone so wrong.

After dinner, Antony showered and got ready for bed. He placed her arm on the second pillow then considered it too far away and made a place for it beside him. He could feel the warmth coming from her skin. He pulled it close, kissed the tip of her little finger. Then feeling braver, bolder, kissed the rest of her fingers, finishing with a kiss in her palm.

Her fingers curled around the kiss and relaxed.

'Good night,' he said and turned off the bedside lamp. When the dark tucked itself around him he whispered, 'I love you.'

There was no arm to work out what to do with at bedtime. Her torso pressed unhindered into the mattress and she sighed. The sound filled and drained from her like an ebbing tide. Beneath the euphoria of the phantom kisses, something nagged.

On the edge of sleep it came to her: if she'd lost an arm to him after a year of contact, what would she lose if they continued on?

A leg? Her other arm? Then what?

Wednesday she didn't turn up for lunch and the texts he sent went unanswered. As did the ones on Thursday. Friday. And all weekend.

She didn't reply to the Facebook messages and the single email he summoned the courage to send. He stalked her across social media to allay his fears that something terrible had happened.

Nothing appeared untoward to the world at large.

Monday he called in sick, sat in his car across from her house and watched as her husband left for work then her kids for school. Her arm rested in his satchel on the passenger seat.

Finally, when he could bear it no longer he texted, *Can I come in?*

Georgie saw his car as she waved the kids off to the bus. She closed the door and pressed her head into the door, the gloss paint sticky against her skin; counted to twenty and waited to hear his footsteps on the other side.

Then to fifty.

And a hundred.

At two hundred she lifted her head from the door and walked down the long hallway to the kitchen to boil the kettle. Her phone buzzed as she sat staring at the pot of tea and two cups.

- Can I come in?

- The kettle's boiled.

And she waited. Waited for his knock on the front door.

Antony drove around the block and parked in the lane that ran behind her house. He told himself he'd driven all the way to see her, and having been invited in it was stupid to continue hiding in the car. He tried to tell himself it was just a house and it was just a cup of tea. Nothing more. But it was so much more, and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't motivate himself

with shame or logic to open the car door. Even thoughts of Georgie, sitting there alone, waiting for him, failed to compel himself to go and knock on the door.

Because she was in *his* house. Derek's.

And he couldn't sit and drink tea at *his* table with *his* wife. The wife *he* no longer saw, much less loved or appreciated or nurtured or wanted.

So Antony sat. And waited.

Waited for something to give.

Derek's mobile rang out three times. As it flipped to message bank again, Georgie reminded herself of the recurring dream and persisted. In it, Lewie hugged her tight and told her he was glad her arm came back. When Georgie looked up, it was Antony standing behind Lewie, not Derek.

On the fourth call Derek answered. 'It'll have to wait. I'm in the middle of something.'

'No it can't wait. I've got a doctor's appointment at four,' she said. 'You'll have to pick the kids up from school.'

'It's not possible today, Georgie. Maybe next week.'

'Well its kind of urgent.'

'You were okay this morning.'

'I haven't been right for more than a week. If you'd—'

She heard muffled noises in the background and realised he'd covered the mouthpiece to talk to someone else. After minutes of waiting for him to return, she hung up and called a cab. While it despatched, she packed as many clothes as she could fit into an overnight bag and called the school.

Antony held her on the steps of his building. He didn't care who might see or who they might tell and what might happen after that.

He looked at the bag abandoned on the footpath. 'Are you sure?'

'If you're not—'

'No, that's not what ... it's not what I meant at all.'

‘It’s just for the night.’

He reached down for the bag and didn’t say anything about how much it weighed. Fingers entwined, they walked up the stairs together without a word. Inside the apartment, he placed her bag on the floor of his bedroom. She slumped on the end of the bed and stared at the carpet.

‘About Monday,’ Antony began and she shook her head.

‘I don’t care about Monday. I came because ...’ Her heel raked through the shagpile. ‘I can’t keep worrying about what I’m going to lose next and how I’m going to cope.’ She looked up at him. ‘But if I give you up, I might as well give myself up too.’

‘I don’t want you to give up anything for me.’ He knelt before her, ran his hands over her shoulders and down her arms. Took her hands in his. ‘If you stay ... and if I ever treat you like you’re invisible—’

‘You won’t,’ she whispered.

But what she meant was *I won’t*. She wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

SHORT STORIES

of the speculative-fiction bent

if only you'd been nice

Christmas morning, Charlotte stood at the kitchen sink with the fountain pen, hands shaking, and tried to forget Hayley, the Christmas card, the ink bottle and the vodka-lime-and-soda lunch that started it all. Tried to forget the hurdy-gurdy of tinsel and carols, the cacophony of over-excited small children waiting to sit on Santa's knee and the boozy vomit churn in a gut clenched too tight.

Tried to forget the piercing looks delivered by adults afforded the moral high ground by procreation and a distinct lack of alcoholic lubrication. She tried to forget how she almost pulled off the role of aunt to a terminally ill niece until she wiped herself out on the bottom step of the platform to Santa.

She didn't know if it was the alcohol, the fact she'd already lost most of her dignity or lingering scraps of magical belief from her childhood that propelled her, crawling, up the steps, to the foot of the holly-decorated throne. To the highly-shined black boots.

Before Santa's helper could swoop, he reached over, extending a white-gloved hand to help her up and she sobbed into the acrylic tangle of white hair: 'Please, I need a Christmas miracle.'

'A Christmas miracle. Hmmmm.' The empathy that barrel-rolled through his contemplation unsettled her. And with nothing left to lose she said, 'Yes. I need to get rid of Hayley. My housemate. The housemate from

hell. Can you make her disappear?’

Santa adjusted his position on the Christmas throne to shield her from the mortified parents still queued behind. He pushed the wire glasses down his nose, shook his head ever so gently and whispered, ‘I am only responsible for the nice.’

‘I’m an idiot,’ she said as inky tears cut dark paths through the thick pancake foundation she’d been forced to use to hide the stress acne. ‘The vodka...’

She attempted to get to her feet and he stopped her, drew her closer and whispered in her ear. ‘But perhaps I can have a word with my brother, the one responsible for the not so nice.’

Hayley stared at the envelope with Charlotte’s name written on the front in bold, black capitals—it looked masculine—abandoned next to an uncapped bottle of Dark and Stormy. Either Charlotte had moved on from vodka, lime and soda or she’d bought someone home for a Christmas fuck and *he* drank rum and ginger beer.

And maybe wrote Christmas cards? Maybe it was dirty?

She turned it over to see if it had been opened. The flap was tucked in. It hadn’t been stuck down.

If she was quick she’d have it read before Charlotte appeared. What Charlotte didn’t know, wouldn’t hurt her. *If* she reappeared tonight.

Later, she’d hang out in the lounge room and see if someone actually was getting a leg over. Charlotte needed a good fuck. She’d been a miserable bitch since her boyfriend, Greg, broke up with her back in winter.

The card’s sharp corner nicked her as she pulled it free.

If this was some guy from her office, he obviously didn’t know her very well. The artwork even gave *her* the heebies: a horned Christmas beast with beady eyes, toasted a marshmallow-shaped child on a pitchfork.

She opened the card and sucked her bleeding thumb as she read.

Dear Hayley,

I would count this invasion as yet another of your transgressions, but as I set you up for this, I'll forgive you opening a card addressed to me. But only this one.

The words dissolved into ink and bled out of the card, staining Hayley's fingertips black. New words appeared to fill the vacated space.

I know you destroyed my limited-edition live U2 CDs. I also know it made me do something unthinkable to your Nickelback ones in return. I want you to know I've never destroyed anything. That you pushed me to do it.

I also know you still use my hairbrush and toothbrush even after I asked you not to. I know because you took my toothbrush to Stu's and never brought it back.

The black stain sunk into the delicate capillaries and veins, pulsing up Hayley's fingers into her hand. It forced itself further higher where words surfaced on her lower, then upper arm, tattooing her transgressions from the inside out.

I know you eat my Tim Tams, regardless of where I hide them. It's taken everything not to do to you what I had to do to the rats. And yes, Hayley, I know it was you who invited them in with months of unfinished Chinese takeaway shoved under the couch because you were too lazy to put it in the bin.

Hayley tried to put the card down, but each time it found its way back between her fingers. The desperation fed her panicked heart making the words appear faster on her skin.

I know you used my cold packs to cool your lady bits in the last heat wave. I'm not even going to contemplate the how or why of that. I also know you 'borrowed' my vibrator. That's why you couldn't find it the last time you wanted it. Shame it wasn't in the bin the week it went up in flames.

I know why the telephone bills went missing (it had nothing to do with the letter box burning down). I also know (and wish I didn't) that it's not only icky guys who consume creepy porn and get found out because they bill it to the internet account.

I know it was your 'creditors' who set our bin, letterbox, front fence – and eventually my rose bushes – on fire. I wish I'd realised then and invited them in for a drink to wait for you to get home. Maybe if I had, we wouldn't be where we are now. Well you, because you made it clear from the beginning, there was no we in this household (unless it's what goes down the bathroom sink when you can't be bothered to go to the outside loo at night. I can't believe it's the only thing you didn't lie about.)

Before I sign off, I'd like you to know one last thing. My relationship with Greg did not end because he was traumatised by you cooking breakfast naked. It was the maggots on the carpet that were not, upon closer inspection, a precision line of rice. We probably could have survived your naked breakfast. Just not the maggots.

So please know, you brought this all on yourself. If only you'd been nice.

Charlotte

Hayley frantically rubbed at Charlotte's name on her hand. The words started to lose their shape, melting into birthmark splotches that bled into a coalescing dark tide across her skin.

Her arm liquified and Hayley screamed.

The last thing she heard, before she exploded into a viscous Rorschach test across the kitchen was a man's voice from the hallway.

'Yes, Hayley. If only you'd been nice.'

Krampus wiped an ink spot from his cheek and stepped into the kitchen. He retrieved his card from the glutinous puddle on the chair, where moments earlier Hayley had sat with all her corporeal bonds still coupled

He shook it clean and slid it into the pocket of his well-worn Levi 501s.

The clock on the stove clicked over to midnight and everything he'd touched, including the half-drunk Dark and Stormy, disappeared.

The scarred kitchen lino bore no trace of Hayley. No sticky remains. No stain. Hayley was simply gone. Like the card, the ink and the offering. Nothing to indicate anyone had done anything wrong, except Charlotte knew. Knew what it had taken to get rid of the house-mate who refused to clean up. Refused to be a better human being. Who refused, when push came to shove, to leave.

Charlotte had meant it, the final line in the card: if only you'd been nice. Hayley could have just packed up and left. As it was she'd 'disappeared' owing a month's rent.

Charlotte opened a bottle of sparkling burgundy, telling herself it was defence against the sweltering day ahead (hadn't her mother drunk mimosas Christmas morning?) but she couldn't help toast Krampus, Santa's dark brother. Then she swore no matter how dire her financial situation (surely she'd get the promotion now she could function again?) she'd never share house again.

Lynette was a terrible mistake. Charlotte didn't realise each Christmas she'd be visited by the ghost of mistakes past. Santa, and most definitely Krampus, had failed to tell her the ink and card were forever gifts with a demonic hunger that required sating once a year. If she was honest, had there been fine print or

caveats the Year of Hayley, she would've been too drunk or desperate to care.

Poor Lynette's only transgression was to leave her deadbeat boyfriend the weekend before Christmas. She wasn't even technically a housemate. She was just crashing until the festive season ended and she could search for her own place.

Charlotte's only transgression had been to leave the card on the kitchen table hoping it would miraculously disappear (just like it had miraculously appeared that morning). Hoping she'd sleep it it wasn't in her room. She hadn't written in it and most definitely hadn't left an offering from Krampus. Christmas morning the only thing on the table was a half-drunk glass of warm water. The card and Lynette were both gone.

Carmella, Fiona and Katie were not mistakes. Neither were Frank, Trevor or her *coup de grace*, the Kirner brothers. After Lynette, she spent every October trawling the share house market for bottom dwellers. She decided two months with the next housemate-from-hell was penance enough. In the end, she was doing the world a favour, erasing morally corrupt individuals from the pool of cohabiters.

She moved every January. Always to a place with rose bushes in the front yard. No one had managed to beat Hayley though. She'd set the bar high. Charlotte hoped one day someone would take Hayley's crown by burning down the roses. Until Charlotte discovered she didn't need to relocate to keep ahead of questions about her missing housemates. Certain people, it turned out, the world just didn't miss.

This was her third year watching the roses bloom at Smith Street. The third year hanging tinsel decorations from the fancy wrought iron security grills in the windows. And if she was counting, which she most definitely wasn't, there were more than a dozen Krampus figurines hanging from the Christmas tree.

She opened the bottle of Dark and Stormy, and then the card—the same one of Krampus roasting the marshmallow child—writing at the top, in her fanciest handwriting: Dear Veronica.

kissed by the sun

Cajsa leant against the cistern, head resting on the divider wall, listening to the disjointed conversation of the women hunched over the sinks, peering at anaemic reflections in the filthy mirror. They were the visual equivalent of running your fingernails down a blackboard. Emaciated former beauties, expending life essence like body fat. The crop tops and low-slung jeans exposed sunken stomachs, protruding hip bones and gnarled muscles. Bodies cannibalising themselves in an orgy of drugs, sex and all-night dancing.

The first night in Fortitude Valley Isolda warned her never to drink from an amphetamine chick: the vacuum of life made them toxic.

Cajsa wondered how long Brian would wait. Isolda's bizarre behaviour should have scared him off: inhaling the air around him, telling how good he smelled. But the boys in this meat market were willing to ignore all sorts of social transgressions to score a girl who'd ride their cock all night with the vigor of a Duracell bunny.

The toilet door slammed open cutting off the inane chatter.

'What are you looking at?' one of the girls snarked.

'The door marked exit.'

Cajsa shuddered recognising her maker's voice.

'Really?'

'How about you avail yourself of it?'

‘Fuck you.’

‘L’abandon!’

A snarl punctuated the command, followed by the rapid shuffle of feet, swearing and the whine of the door hinge. The cubicle door Casja sheltered behind, flew open, shaking the entire row of partitioned walls and doors. Isolda grabbed her progeny by the shirt front, hauling her off the toilet.

‘He’s been drinking rum. I specifically told you no alcohol. The blood must be pure.’

‘I couldn’t stop him.’

The older vampire released the fabric and fixed her fingers around the tiny blonde’s slender neck lifting her off the ground, and walked backward out of the stall.

‘You made no such effort.’

‘I don’t want to bleed him.’

Isolda hurled her against the cubicle wall. The toilet exploded. Cajsja lay twisted in the foul-smelling water, surrounded by dismembered porcelain and plastic. She glared at her maker, fangs buried in her bottom lip,

‘I don’t care if you don’t want to,’ Isolda snarled, dragging Cajsja’s head up by the hair, death riding shotgun on every word. She leaned closer, lips curled back. Fangs bared. ‘Your days as a spoilt human are over. Dead and gone.’

She dragged the younger vampire to her feet.

‘Now you have me.’

‘And if I don’t want you?’

‘I’ll kill and replace you.’ Isolda shoved a black bag into Cajsja’s chest. ‘Three pints by dawn. Don’t disappoint again.’

The door opened and in poured pounding electronic beats and synthetic melodies. A rip tide that towed Isolda back into the throbbing, fetid depths of the dance club. Cajsja followed, head low and eyes downcast.

Brian sat on the threadbare corner couch, shoulders folded in, shifting an empty glass from hand to hand.

‘Come,’ Cajsja said, snatching the glass and dragging him off the seat. They plunged into the cigarette smoke, fake fog and the crush of bodies. Cajsja turned back and saw surprise and relief pass across Brian’s face.

‘Hey... you’re wet,’ he yelled into her ear, trying to slow her down. ‘Is everything okay? Your lip?’

‘It’s fine.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘Anywhere but here.’

‘I need to find Alan.’

‘He’s gone. Let’s go.’ She stopped and tugged at the bag on her shoulder, trying not to think about the contents. Brian hesitated and she said, ‘You want to stay?’

‘No.’ He squeezed her hand. ‘Let’s go.’

She slipped her hand free, aware of the difference in their body temperature, despite the overheated room, and headed for the front door.

‘Can we go to your place?’ she asked. ‘I don’t want to go home.’

‘Sure, it’s just up on St Paul’s Terrace.’

The Empire Hotel spat them onto Brunswick Street. Brian rubbed his raw eyes and took deep breaths of the cool night air. Cajska hurried towards the intersection of Ann and Brunswick, knowing lingering out the front of the pub was bad news. He broke into a jog to catch up with her.

‘Do you want to grab a taxi?’ he asked, meeting her at the traffic lights. ‘I don’t mind paying.’

‘I prefer to walk. Will we be alone?’

‘I think so. Hey, Cajska.’ He grabbed her arm as the lights changed and tried to stop her, but she eluded his grasp.

‘If you’re not into this, it’s fine.’

‘I’m into it.’

Drunks swerved in and out of their path as they crossed the road. A girl wailed, slumped down on the curb, black tears staining her cheeks as her friend tried to console her.

‘It’s just you seem—angry.’

‘I’m pissed with Isolda.’ Cajska stared at the crying girl, now lying on her back on the footpath.

‘Yeah, Evan shits me. He’s more Trent’s friend than mine. I was only there tonight because Trent couldn’t swap his shift.’

‘And my boyfriend dumped me.’

‘Oh shit, look –’

‘Isolda said something to him and he went back home to Switzerland.’

‘Oh, I thought you were French.’

‘Does it matter?’

‘No. Of course not. And no wonder you’re upset. Hey, look, it’s okay if you want to go home. I’ll walk you and maybe we can do lunch later this week.’

Cajsa turned and propelled him backward into a doorway set back from the street. She was closer to him than she knew was sensible in public, pressing her slight body into his larger one. The heady bouquet of his blood filled her nostrils. His heart’s odd beating made her gums itch; a strange syncopated rhythm running counter to the actual pumping of his heart. Silent phantom beats woven between the steady pulses. Her fangs ached to tear through the soft skin above his carotid pulse.

But she thought of Isolda and stepped back.

‘Alone is the last thing I want to be, unless you don’t want to be with me.’

‘No. No, God, I want to be with you.’ The half-pained expression finally left his face and he leaned down, brushing her lips with his. Trembling hands cupped her face. ‘I so want to be with you.’

‘Come,’ Cajsa said, pulling away from him, the itch morphing into tiny pain explosions in her gums. ‘Public displays of affection are dangerous.’

His warmth cooled on her naked body.

She sat back on her heels inside his eviscerated torso; chest yawning around her, broken open with her own hands. His blood congealed on her face, breasts and hands. Pooled in her navel. Only his head remained recognisable. Finger-width crimson streaks marked his cheek where she had stroked his face, trying to will him back to life, long after she’d taken it. His blue-green eyes stared up at her.

The dirty curtain in the window above the bed breathed in and out as dawn raced to greet her. The green digits on the clock radio changed. Vital

minutes slipped through her fingers.

It shouldn't have turned out like this.

She'd just needed three pints, taken from him as he slept in post-coital bliss. Isolda promised her it was easy. But she'd asked Brian to touch her in places she'd never dared ask Kiel. His nervousness and willingness tore open something inside her. She wanted more. At first, a warm body to snuggle up to, then the desire to remain after dawn, asleep in his arms. To be loved, wanted, cherished as she'd been before Kiel abandoned her.

But she belonged to the night; Isolda's bloody handmaiden. There was only ever going to be one night with Brian.

The yearning for a human life and the chaffing of Isolda's yoke made her brave. She'd decided to take a little of Brian home. Her secret from Isolda, to comfort her and dull the ache left behind by Kiel.

So, she straddled Brian and eased herself down on him. They moved slowly and she lent down intending to take just a little of his blood. But when she buried her face, then teeth, in his neck, and the blood flowed hot and sweet over her tongue, she could not stop.

Shaking, like her body still had the capacity to go into shock, she picked up the phone and dialled home. It rang out. The handset slipped through her bloody hand, falling among the unused medical equipment on the bedside table. She picked it up and hit redial. The line picked up after a minute.

'Isolda, help me.'

The humidity clung like an unwanted layer of clothing. Cajska hated Surfers at this time of year, but Isolda insisted on her companionship.

Thousands of teenagers milled on Cavill Avenue: couples kissing, boys mouthing off and groups laughing, crying, singing, arguing and screaming drunkenly. Car horns pierced the general din, sirens wailed and dance music seeped out of the air-conditioned nightclubs and bars onto the simmering street. The older vampire moved with the swell of people, tacking across the pavement toward the traffic lights and the wide expanse of moonlit beach beyond The Esplanade. Cajska struggled to keep up as every second male tried

to manhandle her. Even in life she'd struggled with crowds.

Jostled, shoved and groped, she washed up beside Isolda at the pedestrian crossing.

'It degrades with every passing year,' Isolda said, looking on with boredom at the endless procession of cars with boys hanging from the windows.

Behind them someone vomited with pyroclastic intensity.

'If you hate it so much, why come?'

'Because I can.'

Isolda thumped the large silver disc on the traffic light with the side of her fist.

'We should be back in the Valley. We've got a shipment due in three days.'

'I want the sun.'

The lights changed and Isolda strode ahead. At the beach's edge, they kicked off their shoes and stepped onto the warm sand with a reverence not shared by the teenage swarm streaming around them. For a few minutes they stood in peace, side by side, the moon large and on the rise. Platinum cirrus clouds caressed the sky.

A champagne cork shot into the air. A girl screamed out, 'Ow, my eye. I just hit my eye,' in between fits of hysterical laughter.

Isolda scowled and walked towards the water, moving around the drunken congregation. She stopped when her toes kissed the retreating tide, her eyes set on the silver swell of the surf, then to the horizon.

'We are returning home,' she said, finally. 'Tomorrow.'

'What?'

Cajsa twisted the dress hem around her finger, all too aware of Isolda's intolerance of questions and the mercurial moods which underpinned her sadistic nature. From past trips, she also knew her maker was most unpredictable and dangerous during Schoolies when she specifically hunted for youthful blood loaded with sun and recreational drugs.

'I won't become a day walker drinking sun-infused blood.'

'But it makes us feel good. You only have to look at our accounts to know that,' Cajsa argued. 'I remember the blood in Europe. It was different.'

She fought to find the correct words.

‘We’re so close to figuring out how to make it work. I know it’s not a quick fix.’

Isolda pointed her foot and drew circles in the wet sand with her big toe.

‘You speak from only a decade of drinking this blood and its failure. You would not be so swift to jump to conclusions if you counted your time in eons.’

‘Perhaps it’s volume rather than exposure. Maybe there’s differing volumes based on age. There are other possibilities. Transfusion? We can’t give up. This is what you brought me here for.’

The water swept up and wiped away the circles.

‘I have chartered a flight out of Coolangatta.’

‘And you never thought to consult me.’

‘What concern is it of yours? You go where I go.’

‘Not this time,’ Cajsa turned to walk away but her path was immediately blocked.

‘I do not forgive having what I generously provide thrown back in my face.’

‘What have you given me?’ Cajsa’s fingers tore through the hem, wishing it was Isolda’s throat.

‘Freedom from sickness, old age, an eternity of—’

‘Slavery. That’s not a gift. I’d rather be dead’

Isolda brushed a stray blonde strand behind Casja’s ear as though they were arguing over inconsequential details.

‘You seek the true death? Then go.’

Isolda stepped aside, her hand brushing the air.

Cajsa hesitated. ‘You’re letting me go?’

‘If death is what you resolve to embrace, then yes.’ Isolda turned back to the ocean. ‘I suggest you pack lightly tomorrow night.’

The final words snapped at Cajsa’s heels as she ran, navigating the human refuse littering her path and the drag of sand until her feet found sticky tar beneath them. Brakes screeched and she hurtled on, pushing aside teenagers who loomed in and out of her field of view. She fell, got up and stumbled on through the disorientation and cacophony of competing thoughts. Her entire

body buzzed with the sensory overload of survival instincts kicking in. Voices crowded in on her. Human flesh bombarded her. The smell of blood and sun crashed over her like a surf break during a storm. Heart beats pounded in every direction. For a moment her control faltered, then she recognised a rhythm she thought lost years earlier.

She separated from the crowd and stood near McDonald's steps not daring to believe what she heard. With eyes closed, she pulled her ragged self into a semblance of composure and pushed aside the distractions to focus her heightened senses on finding the ghost rhythm of Brian's heartbeat.

As she did, the conversation flooded back: *He's more Trent's friend than mine. I was only there tonight because Trent couldn't swap his shift.*

A twin brother? Hearts joined at conception, shadowing each other and beating in stereo beyond death.

She forced her way back into the crowd, looking back and forth, estimating Brian's face with ten years life experience added to it. Bodies hit like bumper cars. Someone swore. A hand went up her skirt. Girls giggled. Someone pinched her arse. Cajsá ignored it all, letting the world contract to a single heart beating redemption's rhythm.

And there he was, loitering on the steps of Baskin-Robbins: a white shirt buttoned over a sunburnt torso, red board shorts colour-coordinating with his face. Dizygotic, not monozygotic. But the same eyes, which locked with hers. The self-awareness of his age amidst the Schoolies fracas blew his sunburnt features brick red and he looked away, embarrassed. Before she could approach him, he stepped into the sea of teenagers and was swallowed in the debauchery's ebb and flow.

Cajsá followed him up the Esplanade and Cavill Avenue, hanging back when the merry-makers dispersed and just the two of them continued up a street lined with high-rise holiday apartments. He stopped and looked back. Hidden off the street in a visitor's carpark she listened to his heart speed up and then slow down. Like a radio being gradually turned down, his heart quietened as the distance between them stretched.

She waited until the very last minute and then ran, coming to a halt at the end of the block, before a small cluster of older-style, low-set holiday

apartments. From the courtyard, she went through a gate, around a pool lit aquamarine from below, opened a glass door, climbed a short flight of carpeted stairs and stopped at door number seven. She raised her fist to knock and caught herself midair.

I have information about your brother.

Your brother didn't die in a fire.

He was never a missing person.

Your brother was murdered.

I killed your brother.

She knocked and the final moments in Brian's bedroom played before her on the beige door. The phone, bloodied from her hand dropping on the empty blood bags. Brian's eyes staring up, blue-green and still; the billowing curtain and the green digits on the clock.

The door opened a few inches. Trent frowned, recognising her from their brief exchange on the street.

'I'm not the police,' Cajsá said, sticking her foot in the door to keep it open. 'Can I please come in? I need help.'

A breeze picked up, cool and salty. Trent walked beside the tiny blonde, their footsteps squeaking on the sand. From time to time he glanced sideways at Cajsá and she looked back but neither said anything.

Once they had passed the main section of the Esplanade, he took a deep breath and said, 'You appreciate I'm having a hard time comprehending what you told me back in the apartment. Ten years of not knowing and a total stranger knocks on my door with all the answers.'

'And you appreciate the night is almost over and you haven't said yet if you'll help.'

'It's the bit about being a vampire. See, I can believe you knew Brian and maybe who killed him. Perhaps the guilt is eating you up, so you believe it was you who actually killed him.'

Cajsá hissed and launched herself at Trent, knocking him back into the sand and landing on his chest, fangs out.

‘Shall I bite you? Make it real.’

‘Holy fuck!’

Cajsa felt his muscular body arch beneath hers, attempting to throw her off. Each movement to free himself dug the hole below him deeper. She glared down at him, enjoying his fear.

‘If you ate Brian, why should I trust you? What’s stopping you from killing me too? I mean, I should go to the police.’

‘And tell them what?’

‘That...’

The futility of the truth was obvious to both of them.

‘I need you.’ Cajsa stood up and offered a hand. ‘I promise I won’t bite.’ He ignored the hand and got himself to his feet.

‘This is fucked.’ He kicked at the sand, hands clenching and unclenching. ‘Fuck. Fuck. Fucked.’

‘You think your life is fucked? For the first time I have a say over what happens to me and the options I get are death or Isolda.’

Trent stopped kicking at the sand. Cajsa bit down hard on her lip. Blood dribbled down her chin. She wiped it with the back of her hand.

‘I argued with Isolda about using him. I didn’t want to.’ She stepped closer and laid her forehead against Trent’s chest, the familiar heart beat comforting. ‘If she’d let me choose someone else, he’d still be alive. I don’t want to go and know Brian’s death was for nothing. Help me.’

Trent’s arm wound around her, fingers caressing her hair and her chilly face’s outline. She sighed, surprised at his gentleness even though she wasn’t trying to seduce him. And his presence, despite everything she’d told him.

‘Promise me you will kill Isolda so she doesn’t do this to anyone else. Please?’

He held her for a long time finally dropping his hand from her head, and said, ‘Okay... but not for you, for Brian.’

‘That’s all that matters.’ Cajsa pulled away from him. ‘Come,’ she said and walked towards the surf, the outgoing tide leaving ever greater stretches of sand behind.

They passed unconscious teenagers and partially naked bodies entwined

beneath beach towels, and stepped over empty Cruiser bottles, beer cans and cigarette packets. The salt water crashed against their bare shins. Swirling around their ankles and sucking the sand from beneath their soles as it retreated.

‘Why did you come here? I need to understand before I decide.’

‘I came because Isolda came here. For the sun. She figured the country with the highest rate of skin cancer had to be the place to get healed.’

‘But you can’t go out in the sun.’

‘Isolda believed drinking sun-kissed blood would cure her. She’d become a day walker. Able to go out in the sun but never die.’

‘Does it work?’

‘Not so far. But, I’ll know in a few hours if anything has changed since the last time I tried to meet the sun.’

She stood on tip-toes and traced the tendon in Trent’s neck with her fingertip, pushing aside the collar of his shirt to expose the clavicle. Her face twitched in time with the gentle throb of the carotid pulse. His skin was intoxicating, leaching sun, salt and the freedom of day.

‘You remind me so much of Brian.’ She kissed his neck. The pulse in his neck sped up. ‘He was gentle. He was generous. He listened to me and didn’t ask dumb questions. He wanted to go up on the roof and watch the sun come up, then take me out for breakfast and to show me Southbank. I made plans for a future I couldn’t have. He made me want to do that.’

Cajsa’s slipped her arms around Trent and felt the unmistakable stirring within him. She didn’t care if it was real attraction or her unearthly magnetism.

‘Isolda’s punished me ever since she birthed me, blaming me because things haven’t turned out the way she thought. I didn’t choose this life. She turned me to use my boyfriend, Kiel. She promised him everlasting life once we made it to Brisbane but slaughtered him once World Expo finished and it was time to go home.’

Casja dragged her feet from their wet graves, rinsing the sand in the next surge of water. She watched the tiny bubbles left behind by the water; a moment of life before disappearing forever. Then faced stared up at him, her eyes imploring. ‘I lost someone I loved too.’

Trent pulled his feet free and back away from her. ‘But how many humans have you killed?’

‘I’ve never hunted to kill, only to secure a blood source. We extract three pints via cannula and sell it in small vial-sized shots to an established market in Europe.’

‘But before. Wherever you were before here?’

‘I never hunted in Switzerland. Isolda brought me blood while we waited for Kiel to organise our transfer to Brisbane.’

She reached for him and her fingers caressed the sunburnt skin in the V of his open shirt, coming to rest over his heart.

‘I swear there hasn’t been a day I haven’t thought about Brian and what I did.’

He put his hand over hers.

‘I felt him go that night. It’s a twin thing, so when the police said he was missing, because there was no evidence of a body in what was left of the house, I knew. He body might not have been there, but he was dead.’

Trent wiggled his feet free a second time and retreated to the dry sand, sitting with his legs bent up, wrists slung over knee caps. Cajsja knelt before him and pulled a slip of paper from her bra.

‘This is our address and the security code.’

He took it and looked for a long time at the blue biro figures. ‘Why don’t you kill her, if you’re so hell-bent on revenging Brian.’

‘Because she’s my maker. I can’t kill her no matter how much I want to. And if I am still alive this evening, I will have no choice but to go back to Europe with her on the charter flight.’

‘So, you’re really going to kill yourself?’

‘I thought I couldn’t do it, but with you here, I have the courage to see the sun one last time, knowing Isolda will get what is coming to her.’ Cajsja turned around and nestled between Trent’s legs, her back to his chest.

Light stained the horizon’s edge, giving soft definition to the divide between sky and sea. Trent’s heart thundered in the back of her skull and she wondered how painful the end would be, mentally multiplying the agony of past exposure experiments on her arms and legs to her entire body, then

extrapolating that out to complete combustion whilst fully conscious.

She closed her eyes.

Green numbers on a digital clock came to mind first, then Brian's blue-green eyes. Next the house she'd grown up in and her family who still lived there, with no idea what had happened to their eldest daughter.

She shuddered and Trent wrapped his arms around her.

'I'm a fire hazard.'

'I'll take my chances,' he said, nuzzling her neck, losing himself momentarily in the perfume of her skin. 'I believe if you want anything bad enough it will come to you.'

'It's too late to be wishing on falling stars. When the sun comes up, I'm going to burn.'

'Are you scared?'

'Not now.' She reached up to cover his hands with hers. 'Thank you.'

The pale smudge widened over the horizon. A meniscus of light appeared, followed by the dazzling sickle of sunlight. Trent turned to look at her. He half expected to see her skin smoking. Instead, a subtle peach glow spread across her ghostly skin. A smile he couldn't quite fathom fixed her face.

'Stand up.'

He pulled her to her feet and took a few steps toward the sun and the water, towing her with him, until they were knee deep in the surf.

The golden orb rose inch by inch. Cajsá closed her eyes. She couldn't bear to see her skin smoulder and bubble. But the pain came from within, a dull throb gathering intensity and radiating outwards. A slow burn rose in her throat. She hunched over. A thousand glass shards shattered in her unused veins as the first true rays hit her porcelain skin.

She gasped and fell to her knees, engulfed by a pain she couldn't comprehend. A rogue wave hit her, knocking her under the water. Trent scrambled to pull her up.

'My heart,' she spluttered, her head breaking the surface. 'Feel.' She pressed his hand over her breastbone, struggling to find her feet against the ocean's pull. 'It's beating again.'

Her chest rose and fell in agonising, atrophied, heaves but she smiled,

hanging onto Trent's arm. Life flowed back into her. The waves alternated between crashing into them and dragging them up the beach with the incoming tide.

'Oh my God, I'm breathing. It wasn't a lie. The kook who told Isolda about the blood. He was right.'

He pressed his ear close to her lips. 'So you are.' Then he covered her mouth with his lips.

They moved slowly in time with each other, her body warming beneath his hands. She pulled back, gasping, clinging to his wet shirt, the tide pulling away from them.

'Oh god, it hurts, but I'm alive. Breathing.'

He put his hands on her shoulders, caressing them. 'Kissed by the sun. See, I told you if you believed in something enough...'

She laughed, bouncing up and down in the water, splashing as the sun rose higher. The pink and tangerine highlights in the sky were mirrored in her face when she stopped to shake the water from her hair and push the skirt of her black dress below the water, where the air pushed up beneath it. She laughed.

And then the water closed over her head again

She was under, held down by hands. Fingers clamped around her throat. Water filled her mouth and nose. Her heartbeat exploded in her ears.

She thrashed beneath Trent.

Her now-human fingers clawed ineffectually at his.

He dragged her into shallower water to keep his balance, keeping her pinned below the surface. Her amber eyes bulged, beseeching him to let her go. Silent screams tore from her lips. Columns of bubbles boiled to the surface, slowing until the last one rose and disappeared and her body went limp.

The sun cleared the horizon and Trent let go.

The waves dragged her body into deeper water. Long blonde hair floated around her head in a golden halo that could have come straight from a Waterhouse painting. Trent staggered away, slumping down on hands and knees in the wet sand, breathing hard. He scanned the beach and saw he was alone, save the piles of unconscious bodies further up the beach.

As the waves crashed around him, he remembered the slip of paper she'd given him. Sodden and transparent, it still bore Isolda's death warrant.

He smiled and pushed himself to his feet.

Ten long years he'd waited, believing if he wanted it bad enough he'd get it. Now he'd started, he wasn't stopping until everyone got what they deserved.

Sunshine. Redemption. Revenge.

In whatever order they came.

firefly epilogue

Leah stood on the pontoon searching the twilight for the familiar blonde head among the multitude of ebony ones bobbing up and down on the sampans below. Tiny lanterns flickered to life on the bows and the banter of the Malay rivermen rose to greet her.

‘Excuse me,’ she called down to a wizened old man pulling his sampan alongside the pontoon. ‘I’m looking for Andy.’

‘Come, come. See fireflies. Very pretty,’ he said, beckoning her to step onto his boat. ‘Ling take you.’

She shook her head.

‘I’m looking for an Australian. Blonde hair. Tall.’

‘No blonde man here.’

‘But I went down the river with him last night. Andy told me to meet him back here tonight.’

Ling shook his head.

‘No Andy here. You no wait. Come with Ling.’

Leah shook her head and walked away, the pontoon shifting with each careful step. She walked up the jetty, through the covered waiting area and across the picnic area to an empty bench. She gazed across the river, to the ramshackle flotilla and wondered where Andy was.

‘I want to book your whole boat. One hundred and sixty *ringgits* for four people, right?’ Leah said. ‘I don’t want some dumb-arse stranger, who can’t shut up, spoiling it for me.’

Having said her bit, she looked down into the fast-flowing Selangor River tugging at the edge of the pontoon, putting it into an erratic *pas de deux* with the sampan. All she could think about was how she would step onto the tiny boat, in the fading light, without pitching herself into the muddy water.

‘Get on and we’ll discuss a fair price when you’ve stopped looking shit scared about falling in,’ the blonde-haired man said, reaching a hand up to help her on. ‘I’m Andy.’

‘Leah.’ She grasped his hand in her sticky, damp one and they shook. ‘That obvious, huh.’

He nodded and she laughed, stepping off the pontoon.

The sampan pitched beneath her weight and for a moment she hung over the latte-coloured river, her body tensing to hit the water. His hand tightened on her forearm, her second foot hit the boat and she half-fell, half-sat and the boat righted itself.

‘You always so graceful?’

‘Pretty much.’

He watched her trying to reach the money in her pocket without moving too much. ‘Don’t worry about payment until I have you safely back on dry land.’ He noted her bare arms and legs and said, ‘You know about the mozzies, right?’

‘I’ve got so much insect spray on there’s probably a new hole in the ozone layer above my hut.’ She ran a hand down her arm, nose wrinkling at the sticky residue. ‘I’m terrified it’s full of DDT. The girl in the pharmacy didn’t speak any English and the bottle’s in Malay.’

‘Be more terrified of malaria. I’ve had it twice. Thought I was going to die the first time. Saw Steam Boat Willy come chortling through the wall the second time. That Lariam is heavy shit. Help yourself,’ he said, pointing to an old checkered shirt and an orange life jacket in the bottom of the boat. ‘I can’t vouch for the last time the shirt was washed, but it’ll keep the mozzies out.’

She grabbed the shirt. It smelled of engine oil and sandalwood when she

pulled it over her head. The material stuck to her damp, tacky arms. It felt smothering in the heat and strapping the life jacket over the top only made it worse.

‘If I got malaria I’d probably be in a room full of Smurfs doing Beyonce covers.’

‘Sounds like a Gary Larson version of hell.’

‘We can always blame it on Wayne.’

‘Yeah, the world always needs a scapegoat.’ They laughed and Andy threw his weight behind the long pole to push them away from the pontoon and out into current. ‘You’re a bit of Larson fan then.’

‘Is there any other way to start the day ... well coffee maybe. It was a sad day when there were no new Larson cartoons. At least there’s still coffee.’

She ignored the discomfort of the shirt and the life jacket and watched the slow, fluid movements he made as the sampan moved into the centre of the river.

He pulled the pole out of the water and let the boat coast. ‘You’re travelling alone?’

She looked up from watching the detritus speed by: plastic bottles, palms fronds, tangled netting, islands of filthy froth.

‘Mid-life crisis,’ she said, and felt her cheeks burn, grateful the darkness hid them. ‘Oh shit, I can’t believe I just said that.’

‘People confess all kinds of stuff out here.’ He picked up the pole and started to guide the boat toward the opposite bank.

Leah reached out and let her fingers skim across the river, mirroring the clouds brushing the sickle moon overhead.

‘So no young lover or sports car then.’

Leah snorted. ‘I’d be happy to just have a lover.’ She lay back as best as she could in the life jacket and watched the stars pass overhead. ‘I leased my apartment and quit my job to be landless for a year. Everyone said I was mad, but they’d all already done the backpacker thing while I was busy studying and climbing the corporate ladder. Now they’re all busy having babies. Losing their freedom, not going back to reclaim it.’

‘Sounds like you’ve come to find yourself.’

‘God you’re making it sound like *Eat, Pray, Love* on a *Lonely Planet* budget.’

‘Eat. Pray. Love. Sounds good to me.’

‘It’s a book.’ When he didn’t say anything she continued. ‘Middle-class chick with a poor-me complex gets her publishing house to pay for her to travel through Italy, India and Indonesia to *find herself*. In the end she just *finds a guy*.’

‘Are you always this cynical?’

‘On good days.’

‘I just meant life is full of options and perhaps, excluding prayer, the other two are pretty reasonable ways to wind down the clock. Works for me.’

She tucked her arms under her head and asked, ‘So what do you do? Other than take tourists down the river and dispense gems of real-life philosophy. I didn’t expect to come to Kuala Selangor and be shown the fireflies by an Aussie.’

‘I was doing research and discovered the institution that head hunted me for my innovation only wanted me to innovate *their* way. Only push the boundaries they sanctioned to push. Publish only what they wanted published.’

‘What were you researching?’

‘Brain waves. I discovered new low-level cycles that I called omega waves. But no one liked the idea that people declared brain dead still had cerebral activity.’ His face hardened. ‘No one wanted *that* moral and ethical can of worms opened, so the university terminated my tenure and discredited my work.’

‘That’s a bit rough isn’t it?’

‘Let’s just say, I didn’t arrive here in a very robust state of mind.’

He threw his weight into the pole, his body relaxing into the familiar motion.

‘What brought you here?’ she asked.

‘It’s more what brought me back here.’

‘What brought you here the first time?’

‘The old man’s an entymologist. Mum taught English. I grew up just

down there, before they packed me off to boarding school in Sydney when I hit high school.'

He pointed into the darkness and Leah tried to pinpoint a building. All she could see was more jungle.

'That was when Kampung Kuantan was an even tinier village and fireflies were only interesting to people like Dad.'

The boat shifted, rocking side to side. She took her hand out of the water, dried it on the bottom of the borrowed shirt and lay on her side to watch him manoeuvre the sampan into the slow-moving water closest to the bank.

'Ever seen the fireflies?' he asked

'What do the locals call them?'

'*Kelip-kelip*. Means 'to twinkle'.'

'No. I've never seen *kelip-kelip*, but I saw glow-worms in a cave on school camp in Year Nine.'

'You're in for a treat then.'

They floated around a gentle bend and the river opened up before them.

'Oh my God,' Leah whispered, pulling herself up to stare down river in awe of the luminous green pinpoints, lighting up entire branches, blinking messages of love. 'They're like ... fairy lights. But more ... spectacular for being part of nature. More ... I can't describe it. It's like I've died and gone to the most beautiful place in all the universe.'

'I thought they were fairies until Dad let me look at one up close. Butt-ugly fairies let me tell you.'

They floated beneath overhanging branches, the limbs lighting up as they silently slid beneath.

After several minutes Leah asked, 'Why aren't all the trees lit up?'

'The fireflies only come down to the *pokok berembang* in the evening. They live in the long grass during the day.'

'But there are *berembangs* which don't light up. I can pick the shape.'

'The fireflies are disappearing. When I was a kid it was like a German street at Christmas every night in the dry season. So many trees lit up.'

'It must have been amazing.'

'It was.'

‘What’s killing them? Pollution?’

‘Take your pick: pollution, development, tourism, the palm oil plantations, the destruction of the surrounding ecosystem. The rivermen blame the dam up the river at Kuala Kubu Bahru, but it’s anyone’s guess. Even the old man’s not sure what it is, if it is just one thing or a combination. Makes it hard to conserve when you don’t know the root problem.’

‘But you said tourism and you bring tourists down here.’

‘We do it with the least impact on the environment—no motor, no fumes, no leaking oil, no noise. Just old fashioned hard yakka. I bring you down here, the fireflies make an impression on you, and now you care about something I love. Maybe when you leave you’ll want to help protect it. Tell others. Help raise awareness.’

‘Is that why your parents stayed? Because they loved the fireflies?’

‘I don’t know. But it’s why I came back.’

They passed two more illuminated trees before Leah spoke again. ‘If you had one wish Andy, what would it be?’

‘That no-one had to turn off life support for someone they loved.’

She looked up the river to the next *berembang* flashing a syncopated code of longing, the thousands of tiny iridescent lights all flashing together, looking for a mate.

‘I wish the Selangor went on forever. That we never had to stop.’

A cool breeze skimmed across the river and bought Leah shivering out of her memories. She ran her hands down her arms, her skin cool and smooth, not warm and tacky with insect repellent and sweat. She lifted her arm up and sniffed: soap and something else ... antiseptic? No trace of insect repellent. But she’d put it on before she’d left her hut. She remembered doing it.

Didn’t she?

Leah turned from the river to look at the road behind. Twilight had given way to evening and the parking bays sat empty: no taxis or tour buses, no bicycles or hire cars. No tourists streaming toward the river, filling the quiet with excited jabber in a kaleidoscope of languages. Looking at the empty

spaces along the dirt road she couldn't remember how she'd got from Kuala Selangor to Kampung Kuantan.

If only she could find Andy.

She stood and walked toward the river, the memory of his smile after she'd said she wanted the night to last forever momentarily settling the growing unease within. While her furious blush faded he had navigated further down the river, away from all the other boats. When they eventually made it back to the pontoon, they'd both ended up in the river when she over-balanced trying to get back onto the pontoon.

In the small shack he lived in, she'd stripped out of the wet, stinking clothes and rinsed off under a shower at the rear of the shack, beneath a 20 litre tin with a shower nozzle. In sarongs they'd sat on the dodgy deck drinking cold stubbies of Tiger beer and listening to the thrum of insects. Beneath his mosquito net they'd lain naked, talking until dawn softened the light in the windows and they'd fallen into an exhausted sleep. In the morning he'd thrown her bike into the back of a rusted ute and driven her into Kuala Selangor for a late breakfast at *Auntie Kopitiam*. The coffee was the best she'd had since leaving Kuala Lumpur and Andy had laughed at her struggling through a curry for brunch, though admitted he missed bacon too.

They'd walked through the nature park, climbed up to the lighthouse, and explored the old fort. Back at *Auntie Kopitiam* they'd had more coffee and Andy had laughed and joked in flawless Malay with the taxi drivers sitting smoking on the sidewalk. They'd slept the rest of the afternoon away under his mosquito net, his hand on the small of her back, and after an early seafood dinner in a shack by the river, they'd climbed Bukit Melwati and watched the sun set over the Malacca Straits.

In that moment, conjuring up the flare of yellow and tangerine above the Straits and the feel of Andy's hand cupping her knee, she knew he wasn't coming tonight. Or any other night. She looked up to the road and knew why the carpark lay empty. Why the tourists stayed away. It wasn't the Kampung Kuantan she knew. And it wasn't the night after she'd met Andy.

She hurried toward the river, through the undercover area, down the gangplank and onto the pontoon. Ling sat in his sampan waiting for her.

'You come back, Miss Leah.'

'I want to speak to Andy, Ling.'

'No can do, Miss Leah.'

'I need to speak to him.'

'This is a one way interface only, Miss Leah.'

'Goddamn you Andy ... stop with the Miss Leah thing and the quaint Malay accent. Whatever he programmed you with. Stop it.'

'Understood.'

'Why did he program you Ling? Why isn't he here to meet me? To say good-bye.'

'It is recommended Ferrymen are not representations of family or close friends. It makes it harder.'

'I know, I know,' Leah muttered. It had been her idea. It seemed a sane, compassionate choice when Andy had talked to her about the Ferrymen he planned to program ... but now she just wanted Andy.

'How sick am I?'

'You already know the answer to that question.'

She sat down on the pontoon, the reality of her situation sinking in.

'How old am I?'

'I am not programmed with that information.'

'How long have I been unconscious for?'

'I am not programmed with that information.'

Leah lay back and felt the motion of the pontoon. So realistic.

When Andy began programming the Omega Wave Interface Monitor he asked her where she would want her check-out point to be. Where she would make the decision to walk away from her life. At the time it was all hypothetical. Like taking out insurance.

She watched the cloud strands race across the moon and remembered how she'd trailed her hand in the water that first night. Remembered every nuance of movement as Andy navigated the boat up the river. How she wanted it to go on forever. Be with him forever.

And now...

She was nothing more than a cerebral echo in a piece of software.

‘How long have I been here?’

‘I don’t have that information.’

‘What happens if I don’t get in the boat? If I don’t go down the river?’

‘You leave your family in limbo. You put the inevitable on hold.’

‘What if there is a chance for recovery?’

‘This isn’t about recovery. The rest of your brain, for all intents and purposes, is dead. This is about saving your family the stress of ending your life. This is what you and Andy agreed to when you signed on for the OWIM Program.’

Leah remembered watching the first OWIM patient slip away when the Interface Monitor stopped the life support systems. The relief on the faces of the family who did not have to make that decision. The grief which swallowed them after. How Andy grasped her hand. How she felt they’d done something important. Something right.

She imagined Andy standing beside her bed, watching the lights flash intermittently on the monitor. The wheeze of a respirator and the pip of the CTG. She wondered who was with him. If anyone was there to hold his hand. To ease his pain. To witness her passing.

‘Do you remember what Andy wished the first night you were together?’

Leah whispered, ‘Yes.’

‘And do you remember what you wished for?’

Leah tried to answer and failed.

When she finally stood, tears marked her cheeks for the last time. She grasped Ling’s hand, stepped effortlessly onto the boat and sat down. The bottom of the sampan was clean and empty. No life jackets. No flannelette shirt. No Andy.

Further down the river, the *berembang* trees lit up both sides of the river like a German street in December. Calling to her with each wave of flashes. A final message from her beloved.

She turned to Ling, wiped the tears from her face and nodded. The boat lurched and rocked as Ling pushed away from the jetty. Leah didn’t look back.

the meek shall inherit the earth

Graffiti dripped down the side of an abandoned station wagon near the Go-Between Bridge, the same words sprayed on the pylons under the Riverside Expressway where I expected to find Solomon and the others: *The meek shall inherit the earth.*

It's what the man who knocked me up said the night he appeared fireside out the other side of Ipswich. 'Reapers hunt survivors who run away or try to hide,' he'd said, 'but leave the ones frozen with fear untouched.'

Next morning, the man was gone. Solomon said he was full of shit. Mad bastard who'd have us all fucked over a barrel if we took his advice.

'There go the meek,' he'd snorted, rolling up his sleeping bag. 'All harvested in one fucking go.'

He announced after lunch we were going back to Brisbane, where he reckoned the lack of open spaces would make it harder for the Reapers to steal us.

'We'll set up camp near the city,' he said. 'Under the Expressway. We'll be safe by the water.'

Solomon led us out of the city to escape the rotting bodies the Sickness left behind. No one mentioned that was only a fortnight ago. No one argued about going back. It was easier to let Solomon make the decisions.

That's why it fucking cut deep that final morning, months later, under

the Expressway when Solomon said: 'I'm sorry Anna-Rae. It's survival of the fittest. You have to go.'

By then they all had mountain bikes and I was too pregnant to keep up. No one wanted me because it was the man's baby. I could've slunk up some side street and made camp there, close enough to Solomon's to imagine I wasn't alone. But no, I took myself over the river, south side, right into the Reapers' territory. Sheltered in the fancy theatre near the milk factory.

Before I was too preggers to push a trolley up the hill from West End, I stripped the shelves at Coles. I ate stuff my parents couldn't afford, like Tim Tams and chicken flavoured Twisties, until the baby made me sick. It had more of an idea than I did on how to take care of us. So I tried to eat better. Hoarded water.

With nothing better to do at night, I stood on the stage and recited the lines I could remember from all the TV shows, and all the movies, I'd never see again. Other times, I just made shit up. I'd be Nina from 'Offspring' or Maddie from 'Home and Away' and I'd play out stories no one would ever write. Then there were the nights, I'd curl up in the corner of the stage and pretend I was back in my room singing along to Horror Show or Illy. I'd imagine my parents fighting and the homework I hadn't bothered to finish. All the things I used to wish would go away.

And now they had.

When the Reapers came it sounded like a swarm of helicopters dropping from the sky, and the theatre shook if they hovered close by. My body would tremble and want to run. The roller door at the side would shudder and groan. I'd huddle, afraid of the clank of Reapers landing and the scrape of metal boots as they prowled outside. And I'd think of Solomon and the others, safe on the north side of the river.

Other times, the Reapers passed overhead, flying toward the empty suburbs and I'd think of the man. Wonder if he was out there, still alive? If he ran when he heard the rotor-thump in the distance or if he believed his own bullshit?

And I would wish I'd told him to fuck off when he'd crawled into my sleeping bag saying he was cold. Wish I'd been more worried about doing it

safely than dying a virgin.

I cry thinking about him, wishing he hadn't pissed off the next morning and left me behind. Alone in the theatre, in the dark, I didn't care he was old and ugly and dressed like my dad.

The day the baby came, before the pain got too bad, I stood on the riverbank, under the Go-Between Bridge. If I squinted, I could make out Solomon's camp. Then I decided it was just the sun reflecting off the river. Soon it hurt too much and I didn't care what I saw, or where they were or what they'd done to me.

Inside the theatre, I closed the red curtains and squatted behind them on blankets and doonas stolen from dead people's apartments.

The world ripped apart; me with it.

At the end, her tiny mouth opened. She wailed. And I cried with her.

The words on the pylons near Solomon's camp were fluoro-yellow. The stains on the concrete rusty-brown.

You'd think I'd be glad they'd been taken. That Solomon's idea of the northside being safe was just as stupid as his ideas about who could survive. I wanted to believe in some kinda whacked-out justice, but there was nothing.

Too much death does that to you.

I trudged up the Inner City Bypass, hugging my baby. Not knowing where I was going. Not caring.

Fear found me up the stretch of road past Suncorp Stadium, toward Red Hill, where I looked away from the mummified corpses slumped in cars.

I wasn't afraid of the dead. Or Reapers.

I was afraid I'd never meet another living person.

No more gossiping or bitching or jokes or saying happy birthday or goodnight. No one to tell me, I'd live or die.

So I kept walking.

Loneliness found me in the unfinished road works. Peered down at me from half-built skyscrapers in the distance. It followed me toward Herston and down into the tunnel near the hospital.

In the dark I picked my way through the endless car crash. Gritted my teeth against the pain between my legs as I climbed over the wrecks.

I wished for the sound of Reapers on the other side.

The silence was almost worse than the loneliness.

As I emerged, squinting in the sunlight, I saw the graffiti again. This time bleeding from a concrete barrier by the road: *The meek shall inherit the Earth.*

And further on, the same words sprayed across the Airport Tunnel sign.

I followed the graffiti. Willed the leaking words to go on and for someone to be at the end of them. I needed to pretend the baby and me were not the meek, and this was not our inheritance.

womb-of-mine

From the top of the staircase the knock is so slight I delude myself it is mice dislodging small items below. Even so, I quickly button the waistcoat and take the stairs two at a time. I stop briefly at the landing to tie the cravat and curse when I see the red nail varnish. The knock comes again, louder, as the clock tower carillon chimes quarter past midnight. There is no doubt that in my tardiness to dress for the evening's trade, Murphy-the-Luckless has hastened a woman to my back door.

I open it a crack and peer out. She is wrapped anonymously in the night, where the building overhang meets the darkened fen beyond.

'Yes?'

'I—' she falters, keeps her head low and pulls the shawl tighter around her slender body. 'I have come to make trade with Master Sarazen.'

'Indeed you have, madam.'

I withdraw and look to the consulting room, tidy but not prepared to receive clients.

'A moment, madam,' I say and close the door.

The kerosene lamps, their stained-glass bowls nestled in intricate ironwork brackets, spring to life with a click of my fingers. With haste I prepare the room, ticking each item from a mental list until I am satisfied everything is in its place: bucket, contract, pen, ink, snuff and a calming draught. I give the

blanket on the chaise longue a quick shake and refold it. Plump the cushions.

‘My apologies, madam,’ I say, opening the door and ushering her inside. ‘Please take a seat.’

She perches birdlike on the edge of the chaise longue. In the half-light I note it’s not a cheap homespun shawl around her shoulders.

‘You wish to divest yourself of your womb?’

The nod is slight and her eyes remain fixed to the rug’s weave beneath her feet.

‘Before we begin, I must ask a few questions to ascertain your suitability.’

She startles, pulling back the shawl, her young face drawn. ‘But I thought you would just take it.’

‘I have a reputation to uphold. I cannot take old or diseased wombs.’

Her eyes blaze. ‘Mine is neither!’

I put my hand up to still the words threatening to disgorge from her lips and wonder what brings her to me as she is no poor woman looking for a few coins to feed her family: a vengeful wife in disguise perhaps, here to deny her husband an heir, or a rebellious maiden dispensing of her marriageability.

‘Just a few questions,’ I say, and turn my body so it is between the desk and her, an eye on both. I dip the pen in the ink well. ‘Your name, madam?’

‘Why do you want to know my name?’

Patience runs through me like the final grains in an hourglass. ‘Perhaps we are both wasting our time.’

I stand and she remains teetering on her velvet perch.

‘Hilde Burgheimer.’

I lower myself back to the chair. ‘Ms Burgheimer, thank you.’

‘Mrs,’ she corrects.

‘Ah.’ I sigh, adding her name to the contract. ‘Age?’

‘Nineteen.’

‘New or used?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Pregnancies. How many?’

A nervous cough is caught in her hand. ‘Two.’

‘Used, then,’ I say, and write quickly. ‘Both live births?’ She nods. ‘No

miscarriages?’ She shakes her head. ‘You have a guarantee of health?’

She reaches into the sleeve of her dress and retrieves a folded certificate.

After I’ve scrutinised the document, I ask, ‘Did you pay the *faverge*, Alastair Jägger, for this piece of paper or Dr Alyson as signed?’

Mrs Burgheimer blushes deep enough to match the curtains behind her.

‘I do not doubt your honesty, it is the honesty of others I do not trust. And therefore, I ask as a matter of routine.’

Her fingers twist in the fringe of her shawl. ‘There was an examination.’

‘Excellent. Now, Mrs Burgheimer, you understand that when you leave here, you will leave without your womb. This is an irreversible transaction. I do not partake in refunds or notes of credit. You cannot return tomorrow having changed your mind. When you sign this contract, you sign your womb over to me. You will be barren for the rest of your life.’

She nods and takes herself from the couch to stand beside me. I hand her the contract of sale. ‘Please read the fine detail.’

‘It is a sacrifice I am willing to make.’ She doesn’t bother to read the fine print—few do—and signs her name in rudimentary letters before sliding both the contract and pen to me.

‘Please, lie back on the couch and bare your abdomen.’ I remove my jacket and cufflinks, begin to roll up my right sleeve and again curse the scarlet nails.

‘Will it hurt?’ she asks, sinking down onto the couch.

‘It’s painless, but,’ I hand her the prepared glass of mandrake-infused mead from the table beside the chaise longue, ‘I suggest a little of this.’

‘I’m not sure.’ She hesitates, sniffing the contents, as I roll up my other sleeve.

‘Would you cook your porridge in the morning without a pinch of salt? It would be edible without, yes, but more pleasing to the palate with?’

‘But you said it would be painless.’

‘For your body, yes. Your heart and soul I can make no promises for.’

She takes a small sip, a second, and inhales deeply, then drains the glass and sighs. Without prompting, she pulls the blouse free of the waistband and relaxes back into the cushion. I catch the glass as it escapes her hand. Once she is breathing slowly and deeply, I put a cushion beneath her knees, tuck the

blanket over her upper torso and gently close her eyelids.

It begins with washing my hands in alcohol, a frigid kiss that evaporates as I cross the room and kneel beside the chaise longue. Her abdomen is dimpled. The priestesses who raised me called them the silver ribbons of motherhood. I move my hands over Hilde's warm skin, palpating to ascertain the size and position of her womb, observing the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest.

From here, I work quickly: gently rubbing and pulling the skin between her navel and the line of her pubic hair, psychically opening an incision that slices through the skin, the fat, the muscles and sinews to expose the womb within. My hands sink deep into the opening, fingers edging around the perimeter of the organ, releasing attachments, until finally it is cradled in my hands.

I lift, just an inch to test for resistance, and when there is none, withdraw the womb and place it in the bucket by my knees.

In reverse, I push and rub: the sinews and muscles, the fat and skin knit together until the abdomen is seamless. The surgery leaves no scarring.

I hide the bucket behind a curtain that conceals my alchemy bench at the end of the room and return to the desk to splash alcohol on my hands. There is no blood. There never is. No evidence her abdomen lay open with my hands buried within.

I unfold the blanket from her torso and cover her. Wait to hear the clocks chime the hour before I rouse her.

'Breathe deeply, Mrs Burgheimer,' I say in the softest of voices, wafting the snuff beneath her nose.

She does as instructed. Eyelids flick open. Pupils contract. A second later, her chest heaves. A shrill inhalation follows and colour blazes across her cheeks.

'It's done,' she says, and I stop her from sitting.

'Lie a few minutes,' I say, but I know as soon as I turn she will be up. None of them want to linger.

'Before we settle on a price, Mrs Burgheimer—'

'Oh, I'm not selling it,' she says. 'I'm giving it to my sister, Greta.'

After Mrs Burgheimer leaves, I sit distressed at the alchemy bench listening

to the amphibian chorus of the Hollow battle the claustrophobic silence. The womb sits untouched in the bucket by my feet. There was no point in explaining after the extraction why Hilde Burgheimer could not donate her womb. The last thing I needed was histrionics, so I sent her home without payment, complicit in the lie of a selfless act.

With a click of my fingers, a flame leaps from the top of the Bunsen burner and I set it low, position the tripod over it and rest the crucible on top. I set the bucket on the bench, pinch free four slivers of womb and drop them into the crucible to begin the process of brewing the amniotic brine. As I watch the flesh dehydrate I wonder what I will say to the sister. Will I be able to explain to her that a woman cannot purchase her fertility; that it is a gift beyond logical explanation? Will she believe me when I tell her a womb lights up, fecund and red, in psychic recognition of its true surrogate; that a womb chooses its woman? Will she understand when I tell her, that without that primal connection, without that synergy, the womb will slowly die, become septic and kill its unintended recipient?

Recriminations and threats hound me as I grind the dried tissue, infuse a salt solution with the womb powder then decant the completed brine slowly into a sterilised jar. When it's half-full I transfer the womb, watching it settle in the fluid that will nurture and protect it, as it once nurtured and protected babies.

The carillon in the clock tower chimes the coming of the hour, concluded by four unmistakable tolls. I look to the curtained window, wishing time beyond the shop would halt too. So dawn would be unable to find me.

When I turn back to screw the lid on the jar, I'm bathed in the carmine glow of the womb within.

The dawn blushes a palette of colours to rival the dresses hanging in the wardrobe in the private residence upstairs. Before the mercury-pitted mirror I unbind my breasts, knowing there will be a time, not too far away now, when I will no longer look at my stunted male genitalia and hate it for what it makes me. I will have a life not defined by a mother who left me out to die or

priestesses who raised me with a hope my body could never fulfil or the house where I am safe to be a woman even though my body says I am not.

For I am the only Sarazen to have been both male and female, in a shop that will not abide men. The only one to have truly empathised with the women who have visited every week in the hope a womb will light up and save them the curse of barrenness. Unlike them, I've had the mercy of time to wait for a jar to bloom.

I dress with a lightness I've never felt. The emerald shantung accentuates the swell of my small breasts and the slight curve of my hips. I line my eyes with black kohl; stain my lips crimson. When I am done I look at my stubbled head and yearn for my hair.

'*Tuisto*,' Sarazen said to me, when she was Sarazen and I was her apprentice. 'Forget your hair. You may choose the most expensive, the most elaborate of wigs. Dresses. Or suits. Whatever your heart desires. Here you will be whoever you wish to be.'

'I just want a womb,' I'd said to her all those years ago. Centuries, if I was given to counting.

And now I have one. I will do what nature and the Gods could not do. I will recreate myself as the woman I have always known I am and never again exist in the liminal space between male and female.

In the mirror I adjust the elaborate wig of obsidian locks, the closest I have to what I once had, and look at my reflection.

Yes. I'll finally be made in my own image.

Greta arrives at the exact moment I turn the sign from CLOSED to OPEN. I notice the way she looks up and down, and hesitates as though she fears someone is following her. The sun shifts from behind clouds that have threatened a storm since dawn and thick rays bathe the lane. I take it as a good omen and open the door. She steps inside with a limp.

'May we speak in private, Madam Sarazen?'

I nod, shut the door behind her and turn the sign back to CLOSED.

I show her through the curtains at the back of the vestibule and follow her down the long, narrow corridor of wombs with its floor-to-ceiling shelves, watching as she walks to see if a jar illuminates. None do.

When we come to the consulting room I draw back the curtain and sunlight spills in. ‘Please take a seat.’

She shakes her head. ‘I won’t keep you.’

‘There has been something of a misunderstanding,’ I begin, but the words I’ve rehearsed catch in the base of my throat.

‘I did not ask Hilde to give up her womb for me. I ...’ She sits on the chaise longue and for a moment hides her face in her hands. ‘Hilde’s always been kind-hearted, but ... I ... she ...’

‘Please, take your time.’ I sit in the chair by the desk, the earlier lightness of the day gaining weight.

‘She only saw the miscarriages.’ Greta shakes her head and a single tear falls. ‘She thought she could help me by giving me her womb, but it won’t make it better.’

She stares at a point on the ground and my eyes follow to the same place, where her shadow should have stretched across the spiral rug.

‘You’re anumbrate!’ I jolt forward, transfixed by the shadowless woman before me.

‘My husband took my shadow for my bride price and gave me his dying mother’s,’ she says. ‘But without my shadow, I cannot carry a baby more than—’

‘Forty days,’ I finish, and the last of my *joie de vivre* wilts.

She nods.

‘He blames me for being unable to provide an heir. Refuses to accept any responsibility for what he’s done to me.’ The words spit from her mouth. ‘Three weeks ago I woke with him standing over me, his mother’s shadow barely moving at the end of the nail in his hand. He said, ‘Death is cheaper than divorce.’”

I look back to the rug. Try to imagine the shape her shadow might have taken.

‘Hilde traded her womb without understanding. I want you to give it

back.'

'That's not possible,' I whisper.

'I can pay. I will steal from my husband. I will sell my body to the anatomists and bequest you the fee.'

I shake my head. 'Even if I wanted to—'

'You can just tear up the contract.' She's crying. 'Put it back in her. Please.'

I get up and sit next to her. 'It is not that simple.'

I note her long and delicate soft hands—the hands of a woman whose work is done by other women. In that moment I understand the true cost of her shadow: paid to satisfy a rich man's ego.

'What if I offered you a trade?' I say, shaking. 'Afraid she will say no.'

'I have nothing.'

'You have everything. You have your sister's womb. I'll exchange it for your life.'

Greta holds the womb-jar carefully and watches the light die as I move away from it.

'Even if I'd wanted my sister's womn, I couldn't have had it.'

I shake my head and she places the jar on the dressing table, then sits to stare deep into it. 'How does the womb choose? How does it know?'

'The third Sarazen was an avid empiricist who at the end of her proprietorship answered: *How does the lark know to sing at dawn on the first day of Spring?*'

'But what if the right woman never comes in?'

'Ah,' I say. 'The first Sarazen came out of the desert, where there had always been a trade in wombs, and built the shop from a small square of black cloth and laid the gift of timelessness beneath the threshold. For she knew Putrifaction is the Handmaiden of Time, and without time a womb, like a woman, may stay here for an eternity without aging a moment.'

Greta stands up and goes to the window. Her silhouette is the only shadow she will need here. Insistent knocking below startles her and she turns, fear taut in her face. I place a hand on her arm to still her.

‘Even with the strongest charm woven into his blood or the most persistent of wills, your husband will never cross the threshold here. This shop is the providence of women alone.’ I run my hands down the fabric of my dress, flattening imaginary creases. ‘Greta, eventually your husband will die, but here, inside this shop, as Sarazen, you will live on.’

Anger flares in her. ‘Why do you care where I will go. Or if I live, You have your womb.’

‘I cannot perform surgery on myself and a womb is pointless if I am to continue on as the proprietor. And you—’

The knocking comes again. I part the curtain momentarily to see Mrs Jebett pacing the threshold. She is not the only one living with unforeseen disruptions this morning.

‘This is a sanctuary, for however long you want it,’ I say, unsure what else I can say to persuade her to remain. What else I can offer. ‘In exchange you will learn how to provide for women what no other woman outside these walls can.’

‘Control?’ she hesitates, her hand hovering near the edge of the lace curtain.

‘No, power,’ I say, and hurry forth to unlock the front door.

the leaves no longer fall

‘Deciduous was once a word every one knew,’ I say, choosing a red paper leaf from the old pillowcase. ‘It was how trees that lost their leaves in autumn were described.’ The paper leaf dangles from my fingers, trembling as I brush it through the air.

Ty, chin slick with drool and seated in my lap, reaches up with chubby hands for it. Jamie, just two, kneels at my feet watching. I let the paper leaf go. It zigzags to the grassed floor, lacking the natural grace of leaf fibre.

‘First the leaves turned red. And yellow. Orange,’ I continue, finding leaves of the corresponding colours so Jamie can name them. ‘The leaves were beautiful and when they fell the ground turned into a colourful carpet. You could kick them and throw them. Jump in huge piles of them.’

‘Jump!’ Jamie says, scrambling to his feet and bouncing up and down. ‘Jump-jump.’

I prop Ty against the buttress roots of the Moreton Bay fig growing in the space my mother-in-law used as a second lounge room before she died, and shake the pretend leaves over Jamie’s head. He giggles and turns crazy circles trying to catch them. Once they settle, scattered about him on the grass, he bends to collect handfuls and throw them over himself, squealing. Ty mimics him.

‘Shhhh, honey,’ I say, trying not to cry, thinking of all the things lost to

my sons. Jamie should be outside where he can be as loud as he wants to be. Run as far as he wants to go. ‘We don’t want to wake anyone.’

My throat closes up and I lie back on the grass, force myself to think of good things. And breathe.

On the inside of my eyelids, Dan digs through the cracked foundations of this room when we first arrived in Central Victoria from Rookhurst. I remember how I spent the final months of my pregnancy with Max improving the soil, building sub-tropical humus. After Max was born, we planted the seedling with his placenta and the fig flourished, grew as our family did: first Max, then Jamie and Ty. And the unused rooms of the ridiculously large house became homes for refugees fleeing the North, waiting for a chance to buy a place on a boat to Tasmania. The desperate and hopeless, whom Dan gave a second chance at life.

Please, please Dan. Please find some other way to help. It’s too dangerous.

Useless words now. Useless words echoing in an emptiness that threatens to consume me.

Jamie sings ‘jump-jump’ and the paper leaves rustle at his feet. I squeeze my eyes shut so hard it hurts—one pain to temporarily mask another—and force myself back to the happy memories.

One morning... one morning, when Max was tiny, Dan arrived home with the coloured paper and I traced and cut leaves, wanting to give the tiny babe at my breast some sense of the world I’d come from. One he’d never have a chance to explore.

I open my eyes. Above, through the wash of unshed tears, the branches transform the room into a natural cathedral. A tiny skylight lets in enough sunlight for vitamin D and photosynthesis. Everything carefully measured and balanced to ensure the tree and the boys thrive. But the vulnerability of life—the impermanence of it—sits heavy on my chest.

‘Let’s collect the leaves,’ I say and wearily sit up, rubbing eyes longing to weep. ‘All the red ones first.’

‘No!’ Jamie folds his arms and thrusts his bottom lip out.

‘Then orange ones first.’

‘No.’ The way he stands with his legs slightly apart reminds me of Dan:

that stubborn stance, inside and out.

‘If you’re not going to clean up, you can go to back to bed.’ The words snap from my mouth.

‘No!’

I kneel in front of him and force a sing-song edge to my voice. Settle the fury boiling in me as much as the one in him. ‘The leaves need to go to bed. And so do we. It’ll be twilight soon and time to get Max ready for school.’

‘NO!’

Ty pitches forward from the buttress alcove and starts to cry, grass and dirt stuck to his mouth. I draw him to me, set him on my hip, and one-handed return the leaves to the old pillowcase, ignoring the small storm building in Jamie. If both our storms merge, a super cell will tear through the artificial calm that seals my grief in.

A knock on the lounge room window startles us all. Jamie stares at the glass so black the world outside is hidden. No one should be out there before twilight. A white handprint burns into the darkened glass. The bottom falls from my stomach and I take several tentative steps toward the window, clutching Ty to me, and trying to turn Jamie away before a face from the past appears.

Only madmen like Dan and Jackson made it their business to be outside when the sun was up. Jackson ambles down the hallway, stripping off his insulated coat and ice vest, as if nothing suddenly terminated our friendship seven years ago. As though Rookhurst is down the road and he’s just dropped in for a quick chat and cuppa.

Jamie gawks around the corner of the lounge room.

‘Who?’ he asks, his father’s brazen confidence in that single word.

Jackson drapes his protective gear over the back of a kitchen chair and goes over to Jamie. ‘Who would you like me to be?’

‘Supe’man!’ His small face lights up.

‘Don’t get too excited.’

I sweep into the kitchen to prepare tea; busy hands to still my mind.

‘He’d like everyone to be Superman. Gets it from his brother.’

‘And Dan.’

I hold the kettle in the void over the sink, the tap running, precious water wasting.

‘The news reached us a month ago. I’m sorry, Annabel. We’re all sorry.’

I thrust the kettle under the stream of water. ‘When heroic deeds in a humanitarian crisis are considered criminal acts ...’ I can’t finish the sentence; the rage and grief and futility seethe dangerously close to the surface. ‘They didn’t even have the decency to—’

I take a deep breath and jam the power cord into the socket.

‘You found out from the broadcast?’

Jackson looks stranded in the revelation. Unsure in the foreign landscape of my home. I slam two mugs down on the bench and I force myself to stay calm.

‘It’ll have to be black. We haven’t had sugar or milk since I was pregnant with Jamie.’

Jackson nods and bends down so he’s at Jamie’s height.

‘Go play in the other room, little mate,’ he says and my middle son actually does as he’s told, taking a battered board book over to ‘read’ to Ty.

My stomach clenches, waiting for the kick Jackson is about to deliver.

‘Morrison’s dead.’ The breath expels from him, like he was somehow simultaneously holding it in and talking, then he slumps onto the stool on the opposite side of the bench. ‘You can come back now.’

‘Back?’

The floor drops from under my feet and my hand clamps on the edge of the bench. The words pepper me like they did when I heard Dan had been shot dead by Immigration Police just the other side of the New South Wales border.

‘Back to Rookhurst?’

‘It’s your legacy.’

The ecstasy on Morrison’s face when he stumbled onto my heritage and realised how it influenced my research is still crystal clear in my memory: my mother the botanist, my grandmother the glass blower. How he wooed and

seduced me into thinking his science enclave in the mountains was the answer to the most immediate crisis facing us as a nation. He made me believe I could solve it if I could just make glass live.

‘We always knew, all of us, that Morrison was Edison to your Tesla.’

The kettle whistles and my hand shakes as I pour water into the mugs. The precious tea bag floats to the surface, inflated by hot air.

‘We knew the bacteria in his glass was yours. We knew Dan argued with Morrison because he stole your work. We know that’s why you left.’

I slide one mug across the bench. ‘It doesn’t matter any more. They’re both dead. And I’m...’

I take a sip of tea and burn myself. Suck my bottom lip in to relish the pain rather than quench it. After several uncomfortable minutes, I know there is no reason to hold back with Jackson.

‘We needed living glass ten years ago. Instead, we got Morrison’s hybrid glass. By the time Ty’s at school, we’ll be underground. Whatever I hypothesised at uni and modelled back at Rookhurst, whatever I wanted to achieve, it’s too late. It’s pointless now.’

‘It’s not, Annabel.’

Jackson unrolls a tablet from a cylinder in his satchel. He waits for the molecules to switch from flexible to fixed and then hands it to me. On screen, an epidermal breach spiderwebs through the hybrid glass I helped to create: triple-glazing embedded with photochromatic bacteria for block out. It began as the hope for the new Australia. Morrison rushed it through, dumbed it down to a stop-gap measure to keep the country habitable while communities built underground. It became his bargaining chip with the Government to keep our enclave off the official radar.

I zoom in trying to work out why the lighting in the intrusion looks wrong.

‘It’s cracking from the inside out,’ Jackson says as I zoom in as far as the program will let me. I also see the outside world; a dust bowl of red and black. ‘Morrison thought the bacteria in the middle or inside layer had become thermogenic.’

‘Generating heat?’ I zoom out. The photo is geo-stamped the Seven Hills

Internment Camp, The Sydney Basin, two months earlier.

‘How deep?’ I ask, handing the tablet back.

‘Morrison estimated a 50 per cent intrusion. He and Carmen left to test it but never made it there.’ Jackson turns and presses a palm against the kitchen window. The solar-darkening bacterium lightens at the touch. ‘You knew all along Morrison’s glass was substandard to what you could create.’

‘And with him gone, and the damage done, I’m expected to fix it.’ I pace the length of the kitchen. ‘I’m not some fucking messiah.’

There is not enough space in the kitchen to walk off my frustration. My rage. The impossible situation Jackson has thrown me into.

‘I’m needed here. Dan died for the people we are sheltering here. I can’t just leave.’

‘And help, what, ten, fifteen people.’ Jackson stands and I glare at him, but he doesn’t lower his gaze. ‘The heat creep Alice modelled when Morrison was setting up Rockhurst, it’s double what she projected. The Government knows. Dan was caught because they are reinforcing the New South Wales and Victorian border.’

‘They’re going to close it?’ As each word leaves my lips I know with absolute certainty it’s what they’re planning to do.

Jackson doesn’t need to say any more.

If I don’t find a way to make glass live, at best we’ll face an unprecedented movement of people south—a humanitarian crisis to blitz the others. At worst, we’ll all be dead before we make it underground.

‘Dan wouldn’t think twice, would he?’ I ask.

‘You’re not Dan.’

‘Mum?’ a sleepy voice calls from the hallway, interrupting us. ‘Is Daddy home?’

Dan wouldn’t think twice about a 1400km trip north, in Summer, because he did longer trips all the time. Even adding three small boys into the equation and nothing but dirt bikes to take us there, he wouldn’t have paused. Everything was possible in his mind. But I’m not Dan.

I only have one photo of him: the two of us out the front of the tiny Rookhurst Presbyterian Church, newly married by Caius Morrison: me in the only dress I owned, Dan in his Hard Yakka cargo pants and shirt. He'd at least bothered to take his hat off and comb his hair. Morrison had no legal authority to join us in holy matrimony—we could have just as easily traded vows on the riverbank as in the Church—but we were the first at Rookhurst to decide to be together. So, we made a big deal and Dan begrudgingly let Morrison preside over it.

I ease the photo from the wooden frame. It goes into the old satchel along with a dog-eared manila folder, a data stick and notebook. I fold my wedding dress and stuff it in before shoving the satchel into a pannier bag filled with clothes.

I'm not Dan. He'd take weeks, if possible, to plan a trip. Prepare multiple routes and contingencies for every eventuality. I can't do that. I'd freeze into inertia left with time to think. One night to prepare was almost one too many.

Every minute passing is one lost.

The families I'm leaving behind deserve better than a good-bye note left on the kitchen table. It's a cowardly act, leaving them to Dan's brother without an explanation of where I'm going and why I'm doing this. Nothing can hide the fact I'm abandoning them and I can't guarantee Dan's brother will take care of them. No amount of justification of a greater good can absolve me of the guilt twisting in my guts. Every word I don't write is a lie I'm left to live with.

Before I wake the boys and prepare them to leave, I carefully remove a new shoot from the fig tree and drop it into a seven-day incubation tube—the last I have. It's the most fragile of hopes it will survive the trip. I try not to think of us the same way.

My heart skips a beat when I see the warped Rookhurst sign in the bike's headlight, but exhaustion precludes any actual emotion. I follow Jackson off what's left of Thunderbolt's Way and through the gate of the former principal's house, now a common living space. The windows in the old school buildings are lit up: everyone's working. It's like I never left.

I kill the engine, kick down the stand and help Max slide to the ground. Only then do I stiffly climb off and loosen the bindings strapping Ty to my chest. Every part of my body aches and vibrates, and when I go to walk toward Brian and Alice who are standing at the stop of the steps, I stumble and almost fall.

Alice rushes down to me, steadies me. With her arm tightly around my shoulder my jelly legs strengthen enough to walk. Tears wash through me and down the shoulder of my oldest friend as we stop to hug before going upstairs.

‘I’m just exhausted,’ I blubber, but it’s more. So much more.

Two small girls follow Brian down the stairs and peer around him as Alice relieves me of Ty so I can remove my jacket and ice vest, then do the same for Max and Ty.

‘Do you like Superman?’ Max asks Alice and Brian’s eldest girl when he’s free of his coat and vest.

‘Who’s Superman?’ she asks.

Jackson opens his rucksack and retrieves a slab of Dan’s old Superman comics he must have found in the garage at home. ‘This is Superman!’

The four children run upstairs to find somewhere to read, even Jamie, who’s still unsteady on his feet from the sedatives Jackson gave him to keep him calm on the bike.

I follow, dragging myself up the stairs and slumping into the old leather lounge. Ty feeds lazily at my breast and I stop thinking about the trip. We made it and that’s all that matters.

Josephine and Alex join us as coffee is served. Josephine sits next to me and offers her breast to the tiny baby girl cradled in her arms. The contented slurps and murmurs smooth over the doubts I’ve had; for better or worse, Rookhurst is now our home.

Josephine smiles as her fingers slip between mine. She tips her head to me and whispers, ‘I’m glad you’re back.’

Jane and Keith are the last to arrive with their twin daughters, and at first the lounge room seems full: nine adults and a tumble of kids talking, laughing, crying, arguing. All my old friends are here: the people I committed to live the rest of my life with. Then an overwhelming emptiness descends. Those

who are missing become sinkholes in the floorboards: Morrison, Carmen and Dan. Memories crowd in, rushing up like the ocean in a blowhole, soaking me in the brine of regret. It tastes of Alex's greenhouse coffee beans. The guilt pulls like the outgoing tide, and I'm drowning.

'You need to sleep,' Alice says taking Ty out of my arms. 'C'mon. We prepared the room out the back for you and the boys.'

The following night I stand in the centre of Dan's workshop with the fig tree cylinder in my hand. Through the window, I watch the last brown smudge of twilight silhouette the skeletal outline of trunks, the lifeless remnants of the bush that once enclosed the tiny township of Rookhurst. Max is outside on the jungle gym, laughing and shouting with Alice's daughters. When we lived here, heat-resistant vegetable vines hung from the bars my little monkey now swings on.

This is a Rookhurst Dan could have loved.

I never understood why he resented it. He'd come of his own free will, though last to join the collective: a builder and an amateur storm chaser who wrote poetry in the margins of his blue prints. To me, he was a strange fit for Morrison's enclave of scientists. Whatever it was that lured Dan to say yes to Morrison's proposal, he never confided in me.

I switch on the light and everything is exactly as I imagine he left it. A mausoleum, sealed up, waiting for him to die. I pick up a hammer and some nails, try to remember what he was building the day he argued with Morrison for the last time.

Eyes closed, echoes of the heated discussion fall from the rafters.

'If we don't leave, I'll kill him and we won't be able to stay.'

'If we go now, we'll never be able to come back.'

'I can't live any more with what he's done.'

I didn't care that Morrison claimed my breakthroughs as his own. I was motivated by the hope of a new building material, strong and heat-resistant, to enable shattered communities to rebuild where they were. So no one else had to flee south. It didn't matter to me who put their name to the innovation.

Dan, though, couldn't move past it.

I scour the drawers, crates and other piles of Dan's hoarded junk. Always the excuse it was the end of the world and he wished he were just saving for a rainy day. I want to go slow, savour each of the little things of his but I'm afraid if I stay too long I will never leave. It's not until I have it in my hand that I know what I'm searching for: his old leather tool belt, the one with the busted strap, soft and stained with sweat. It goes in my satchel and as I close the lid on the suitcase, I see the corner of an old primary-school scrapbook, buried beneath a pile of even older manuals. Dan refused to talk about his childhood and I feel a certain betrayal lifting the book out.

It's brittle, stained with insect faeces and filled with yellowed newspaper clippings of a trial dating back three decades. I read without comprehension. The name featured in the headlines means nothing until I see the photo: Morrison, a much younger Morrison, going by the name of Caius Morgensten. I crouch in the dirt, turn back to the beginning and carefully read every article. It ends with an alleged paedophile released back into the community on a legal technicality.

In the dust I scrawl dates. Confirmation comes with the photo that falls out of the scrapbook when I stand up: a messy cluster of young boys in soccer uniforms. The middle one—with a face that could belong to an older Jamie—holds a trophy. Morrison stands to the side, leering at the camera.

The breeze blows away from the old school buildings and I'm grateful as I dig a small but deep fire pit behind the Church. I don't want to incite the fear of a bush fire in anyone that might smell smoke. Each page of the scrapbook comes away easily and nestles together in the bottom of the hole, like eggs that will never hatch their vile secret. Fire dances along the edge of one page, then another, and the entire book is consumed in half the time it took to dismember it. The photo melts and warps on top before it ignites. Smoke wheels around me and I'm drenched in the stink of lies and secrets. In it I find a belated empathy for Dan, an understanding of what drove him to risk everything for the most vulnerable.

When the fire is nothing but hot ash, I fill the hole and then dig a second one, a smaller one. I open the tube and slide the Moreton Bay fig cutting out. It now has a furry, inverted crown at the base, the tube accelerating the growth. The delicate roots are pale against the dark, dry dirt. In years to come, perhaps the boys and I will be able to sit in the buttress roots and pretend Dan's arms are holding us.

Back at the compound, I stand at the falling-down fence with my hands wrapped around the rusted top bar and remember how Dan said Rookhurst was too small. I never understood because I relished the isolation and the lack of distractions. I was relieved and grateful to have escaped the atrocities on the coast for a chance to do something to alleviate the suffering and dislocation of whole cities of people. I was so wrapped up in my research, so preoccupied with doing good I couldn't see the pain in the man I loved.

At the door of my lab, I know I'm no longer driven by altruism. In making living glass from the hybrid glass, I obliterate the last evidence of Morrison's existence.

I shift from mother to working mother to full-time scientist as the seasons once moved effortlessly from one to the other. The boys spend all their time with Josephine and Alice and while I don't see them it is easy to pretend I'm at peace with the arrangement. I fall into bed exhausted, well after dawn each day, and comfort myself with the knowledge they're young and adaptable and it's not forever. Until Josephine appears in the door of my lab, her daughter tied to her back and Max lingering at her side.

'Max was telling me about when he was helping you,' she says and I can tell from the look on Max's face she's lying. 'Can we come in?'

'Sure,' I say, playing the game. I turn to peer down the barrel of the microscope so she won't see how it bothers me that Max is with her.

They stop at the bench where the test plates are arrayed in three rows of twenty, waiting for the first three strains of the bacteria. Each glass square is compromised—ranging from a scratch to epidermal shattering of all three layers. Every one has a tiny number and letter in the right-hand corner,

carefully drawn by Max after hours of practising letters and numbers small enough on every piece of scrap paper he could find across the compound.

The weeks of asking him to wait, trying to explain things didn't happen quickly in science no matter how much you wanted them to, led him to wander off. Distracted by the urgency of my work, I'd let him go.

'Mum's going to smear gel stuff on the glass and the germs in the gel are going to get into the cracks and infect the glass,' he tells Josephine.

'What kind of germs?' she asks.

When Max doesn't answer I say, 'I've created new bacterium from the original, spliced it with *acacia peuce* and *cabbagei* genes.'

I don't look up, my attention fixed on the reaction of the final bacterial strain to temperature changes.

'The theory is the new bacteria will invade via the cracks and replace the old. The glass will heal as the colony grows and stay photochromatic like the hybrid version but also become photosynthetic and endothermic. The three layers will evolve into a self-supporting ecosystem that will use heat as part of its life cycle.'

'Do you mind if I take a look?'

I step away from the microscope and let her watch the bacteria multiply. Max looks anywhere but at me.

'I'm going to start the experiments in a few days,' I say. 'Can I count on you as my lab assistant, Max?'

He shrugs. 'I think I'd rather dig with Josephine and Alex or help Alice with Ty,' he says.

'Max—' I reach out to hug him and he slips through my arms and out of the lab.

Josephine straightens up but her shoulders stay hunched.

'It's not your fault,' I say, but blame lingers in the hollowness of the words.

Each test fails like the one before: the new bacterium multiplies but then merges with, rather than destroys, the existing colony. Within twenty-four hours each strain dies regardless of how much heat or light it receives and the

bastard bacterium left weakens the molecular structure of the glass.

I take the final sample from beneath the microscope and place it with all the other failed samples. At the end of the bench, I rest my cheek against the stainless steel and stare at the checkerboard of failure. There's a dull throb behind my eyes threatening to escalate to a full-blown migraine before the storm rumbling outside hits.

It takes me longer than it should to work out the noise I'm hearing isn't just thunder, but something being dragged across the floor. Jamie appears in my line of sight standing on the step Alex made for Max so he could work alongside me at the bench.

'Play, Mummy.'

When did he start speaking in two-word sentences?

While I've been buried in the lab, absent to children who have already lost a father. And for what?

My efforts are nothing more than a wasteland of good intentions and flawed theories. The pointlessness desiccates my vision. And into it a small hand reaches and takes the sample square closest to the microscope.

'Like ji'saw,' Jamie says and rotates it in one direction and then the other.

In the window behind, lightning flashes and wind drags at the roof iron, trying to prise it from the steel trusses. I close my eyes and imagine the dust outside becoming mud; puddles become a stream, and then a raging river that sweeps everything away.

'Ji'saw.' When I open my eyes he has a square in each hand, trying to fit them together in the space in front of his face.

'It's not a jigsaw.'

'Yes. Ji'saw.' He batters the two pieces together, trying to join them. In his mind sheer force of will can join them, just as I believed mine would animate glass.

I push myself up from the bench. The last of my motivation, belief and momentum bleeds through my feet and into the concrete floor.

'Can I have them, Jamie?'

He crosses his arms over his chest and plants his feet a hip width apart, the glass firmly gripped in each hand. In that moment I see how Jamie will

always echo Dan's defiance and his sense of justice. The fragile sutures that hold my heart together snap. 'Give them to me.'

'No!'

'Yes.'

I look down at the hand I've put out for Jamie to put the glass in and it's steady. There's no external evidence I'm being seismically undone from the inside. I need to leave Jamie with someone responsible because I'm not. I'm completely tapped out. Barely hanging on.

The howl of wind overhead intensifies and the lights in the lab flicker and drop out for a second.

'Where's Alice?'

'No Alice.'

'Yes Alice.'

'No, no. NO-NO-NO-NO.' He swipes his arm across the bench and half the failed samples shatter around my feet.

'You little shit!' I scream as the building rocks with the ferocity of the thunder.

I lunge for him but I'm slowed by fatigue; my anger only hot enough to ignite an impotent explosion. Jamie jumps from the step and runs with the speed only small children are blessed with, out of the coolness of the lab, down the corridor and into the vicious night.

'Jamie.' I chase him across the old playground, through eddies of dust rising in columns from the parched earth. 'Jamie, stop.'

My pelvis protests. The bones clash against each other and I slow down.

Jamie's never seen a dust storm much less been out in one.

He'll stop. He'll come back. He will.

I pull my t-shirt up over my mouth to keep the air breathable and try to follow his outline blurred in the opaque air. At the gate I lose sight of him for a moment. It becomes several moments, then a fragment of a minute where time stops and overhead the sky is torn open by lightning and night becomes day. In the x-ray after-burn there is no silhouette of a small boy running into the storm's maw.

'Jamie!'

His screamed name is obliterated by a series of deafening booms that shake the ground.

Dust scores my eyes and ears, fills my throat. My bare skin smarts and bleeds as though it's being rubbed with a thousand tiny pieces of sand paper. The wind strengthens and I lean into it. Push against it. Buffeted by gusts, I stagger out the schoolyard. Across the buckled bitumen and into the decimated bush. But I know I've lost him. I can't search by myself, blinded and barely able to breathe, yet I can't turn back for help and leave him out there alone.

In the nightmares that crowd my sleep his body is encased in glass and an electrical storm rages inside the box. He lies there, like Sleeping Beauty, waiting to be woken. Waiting for me to find a way to fix his broken body so he can live again. But I can't theorise and experiment to find the breakthrough because there is too much noise. A cacophony of his name shouted in hysterical desperation. I try to tell them to stop searching because I've found him. He's safe. He's with me. But when I look down at the glass box he is gone and I wake screaming his name.

Afterwards, I lie in the clammy shroud of sweat and fear and force myself to think of anything—the periodic table, the genus of all extinct plants, every clause in the '79 Immigration and Resettlement Act—anything to not think about Jackson carrying the limp body out of the graveyard of trees. Or the massive haemotoma on his forehead that my hand couldn't smooth away. And I won't wonder if the fall killed him, or if, face down, he suffocated in the dust.

I won't imagine how scared he might have been in those last seconds, disorientated and alone in the fury of the storm. I won't remember rocking and keening in the dirt with his lifeless body in my arms, wishing my tears were all that was needed to bring him back.

Outside I hear raining falling and I begin to recite to myself the atmospheric convection modelling for storm prediction they taught us in first year uni. I fill my thoughts with anything to keep me from thinking of all the ways I should have dealt with Jamie's defiance. How it was my responsibility

to keep him safe.

The click of the door as it shuts pulls me from a listless sleep. I roll over and my body aches from weeks of lying in a cocoon of grief and filthy sheets. On the pillow beside me is a dirty square of glass. I snatch it up to hurl it at the wall, *the fucking glass*, but as I touch it, I realise it's smooth. I rub dirt from the corners until I find the number and letter: L20. Through the fog of grief something shifts.

This is the last sample piece I put under the microscope.

Even though the lab belongs to a different lifetime, a past I want to forget, questions form like tenacious bubbles: is this one of the pieces Jamie took? Did he have it in his hand when he ran out into the storm?

I rub more dirt from it. The epidermal shattering is gone; all layers of the triple-glazing are unblemished, lightly shaded grey by the weak twilight.

My little boy died, while the glass lived.

The epiphany roils inside me and I know no matter how hard I try to hide from it, the knowledge will dog me.

I walk stiffly down the back stairs and across the playground to the old school building. Max is sitting on a stool, with Dan's old tool belt around his waist, waiting for me. The small-boy roundness is gone from his face, but the curious glint still lights his eyes.

'I found the first one out near the fence,' he says, sliding off the stool. 'Jackson and I found another one near—' he stumbles over a couple of words and finally says, 'out in the bush.'

I look down at my feet. Scientific discovery is often a consequence of accident and chance, but this ...

'It was the dirt and the rain,' Max continues, and the tone reminds of the talks he used to practise for school. 'You were trying to grow glass like plants, without any of the things plants need.'

I nod. My lack of common sense, my tunnel vision, the obsession with erasing Morrison, of wanting there to be some kind of legacy in Dan's pain. And all I ended up doing was losing Jamie.

No. He's not a set of keys. Not a book or a pair of glasses you misplace only to find later. He is gone.

'I tried it with the others. River water works better than tank water. The dirt out in the bush is better than the soil in the greenhouses.'

I nod again and look at the samples lined up on the bench. Smooth. Impervious. Flawless.

The pressure in my skull releases. The haze burns away.

'We could call it JTD glass,' he says and I finally look at him. 'Jamie can save the world like Superman.'

And in the space that clears in my head I see terminal glass healing. I see old buildings refitted, new ones constructed, borders reopened and people leaving internment camps, moving north to cross the Byron Line to reinhabit the homes they fled.

I see a different world. Not the world of the past I wanted so desperately for my boys. Instead, there's the possibility of a world where my boys have options for where and how they live. Leaves might once again fall, but from the trees they grow in their lounge rooms. Where the constructed world and the natural world are no longer clearly defined as one or the other.

Max's skinny arms wrap around me. On my knees I hug him tight, his body warm, his heart thumping against mine, his breath tickling my ear. Tears of hope, tears I thought I would never cry again, pour down my face.

In every cell of my body, I feel how easy it is to be defined by the brokenness of what's been taken and stay that way. It's harder to trust in living again and hope that in time, all fractures might heal.

NOVELETTES
& NOVELLAS

dark weird shit at its best

elyora

Jo watched Benny out the corner of her eye: hands strangling the steering wheel, eyes shifting between the endless stretch of highway on the GPS screen and the ELYORA 4KM sign on the opposite side of the road. A semi-trailer roared past, rocking the van and blasting hot, gritty air through the window.

‘I say we confer with the Gee-Sus,’ said Hal in his best evangelical voice as he reached between Jo and Benny to tap the spring-mounted dashboard messiah. ‘The question you seek, the Buddha knows. Choose not the Gee-Sus.’

‘I told you,’ Benny snapped, ‘it was on the dash when I bought the van.’

Jo started folding the strip map of the New England Highway. ‘Elyora’s not on here.’ Benny snatched at it, and it tore in two. ‘You destroy everything you touch,’ she spat and threw her piece at him.

‘Why don’t we just turn around?’ Hal suggested, pulling on his beanie, serious now. ‘This was obviously a bad idea.’

‘No!’ Benny and Jo whipped around to scorch him with matching death stares.

‘We vote then.’

Jo and Hal raised their hand in favour of keeping to the highway.

‘Two to one,’ Hal said.

Benny snorted and threw the torn map into the footwell. The Tarago’s tyres bit into the gravel and the van bumped onto the tarmac, stopping several metres up the highway.

Jo jerked around in her seat to face him and snarled, ‘What are you doing?’

We voted.

The metronomic ticking of the blinker ratcheted up the tension as they waited to see if the time bomb of band ethics exploded.

‘I need coffee. *Now.*’

He floored it and the van shot between two semis, across the highway and onto the road to Elyora.

It wasn't that Benny had ignored the most basic rules of band life. It wasn't even that he hadn't slept and was missing when it came time to leave. What really got to her, gutted the last of her tolerance for him, was the growing fear they would be late for their first interstate gig.

Fucking Benny.

It was 1.37pm. Sound check was at 7.00pm. They were more than five hours out of Brisbane with delays on the Cunningham Gap and peak hour traffic ahead.

Travelling away from the highway. And Brisbane.

The road narrowed from two lanes to one. Open paddocks gave way to scrappy bush that thickened the further they drove. The smell of eucalyptus and lemon myrtle replaced diesel fumes and summer crops. The occasional ghost gum towered above the tangle of bracken and smaller trees, marking distance in the absence of road signs. One-two-three-four. Ten. Twenty. Fifty.

‘How far did the sign say?’

‘Four clicks,’ Hal yawned.

‘We've gone more than that.’

‘You'd know,’ Benny muttered, tucking a wayward dreadlock behind his ear.

‘Basic maths, dickwad. We're doing eighty Ks an hour. Four Ks is one twentieth of that. One twentieth of sixty minutes is three minutes. We've been off the highway for more than three minutes.’

‘What are you blathering about?’

The clock on the dash displayed 1.38 in faded LED green. Her phone said 1.37.

Jo wrenched around in her seat. ‘Hal, what time does your mobile say?’

‘One thirty-six.’

‘We turned off the highway at 1.37. It can't *still* be 1.37.’

Static hissed in the speakers. Julia Stone's voice distorted to a squeal and

the volume went haywire. The engine seized and caught. The van bunny-hopped once, twice and then stalled. Benny struggled to steer, ploughing the passenger side into long grass before they came to a stop.

The hollow click of the ignition sounded like a cigarette lighter out of fluid.

Jo kicked the dash. 'You said you had it serviced!'

'I did.'

Benny yanked on the handbrake, turned the key a dozen times then stared out the windscreen.

'So you're just going to sit there and meditate it back into working order? Fucking brilliant!'

'Would you shut the fuck up?' He tugged on the bonnet release and got out, slamming the door behind him.

Hal climbed in behind the wheel. 'A word of advice, the whole *poor me* thing doesn't suit you.'

'I am not a poor me,' Jo yelled at Hal's back as he followed Benny out onto the bitumen.

'Go and turn it over again,' Hal said after they'd spent several minutes peering under the bonnet, debating what to do next.

In the end Hal suggested Benny try the engine again. He settled behind the wheel, ignoring Jo, and turned the key. A dozen more fruitless attempts and he thumped the heel of his hand on the steering wheel, sounding the horn.

'Jesus fucking Christ, Benny!' Hal's furious face appeared at the driver's window, rubbing his head. 'You really are a fuckwit.'

Benny shoved the door open, pushing Hal out of the way. 'The town's just down here, right? We'll walk.'

'Sounds like an awesome idea, *Benny*,' Jo said in her best faux-ho voice.

'Well, stay here.'

Hal slammed the bonnet shut. 'Let's calm down. Okay? And think about this. You got service on your phone, Jo?'

'Nope.'

'Benny?'

'Nada.'

'Me neither. So we lock up the van and go together to find the NRMA.'

Jo kicked the dash again and swore under her breath as she slid into the back to put on her boots. When she emerged she found Benny halfway down

the road and Hal brushing his teeth, rinsing with a vile fluoro-yellow liquid in an old Fanta bottle.

‘It’s not piss,’ he said, between spits. ‘It’s Berocca!’

‘Whatever,’ she shrugged.

By the time she’d locked the van and checked the trailer, Benny had already disappeared around the bend. Hal was crouched at the passenger mirror inspecting his teeth.

‘Stop stressing,’ he said, wrapping his arm around her as they walked away from the van.

‘What about the gig?’ she asked, resisting the urge to rest her head against his shoulder.

‘We’ll be back on the road ... *forthwith*. It’s an electrical issue. A cactus battery or spark plug. At worst an alternator.’

‘Since when did you know anything about cars?’

‘C’mon Marlowe, think? No *hiss* or *tick* or *clunk*, nothing dripping and that weird thing with the stereo.’

‘I confess,’ Jo said. ‘I prayed to Gee-sus for an end to the siblings Stone.’

They laughed and he squeezed her tight. ‘Think you need to be more specific with your request next time, sista. Now if it were the black ops sheep—’

She drove her hip into his. ‘Don’t start with the black ops sheep. Seriously, you gotta find new material, dude.’

‘And what better place to find new material,’ he said, letting go of her to fling his arms wide, ‘than the middle of frakin’ nowhere.’

Around the bend, the bush retreated from the bitumen. Benny sat against a tree, toking a joint. As they approached, he pointed to a pair of orphaned stone columns on the opposite side of the road. Two lines of cypress trees outlined what would have been a driveway; thick barley grass filled the space between.

‘You’d think there’d be some old mansion or something up on the hill,’ he commented, ‘but nada.’

Hal pointed farther down the road, to a path cut into the bush. ‘Perhaps your mansion’s at the end of that.’

Benny passed the joint to Hal and the three of them shared it as they walked along the track; the unspoken agreement to take the diversion voiced in the bets they made on what they’d find at the end.

The path terminated at the edge of a large clearing. An abomination of a

house stood two-and-a-bit storeys high in the centre. The elegant L-shaped ground floor of sandstone, gave way to a malformed second storey of weatherboard. Rusted scaffolding clung to the short end of the L in a partially constructed third storey of grey, warped uprights.

‘Whoa, I wished I’d bet on an ugly mother of a house,’ Benny whistled.

‘Why?’ Jo stared at the misshapen building. ‘Why would you bother?’

‘There’s probably as much to do here as there is in Nundle,’ Hal said, the stub of the joint jammed into the corner of his mouth.

‘Looks deserted, man.’

‘Someone mows the grass though.’

‘And some dude, waters it.’ Hal sniffed. ‘Betcha there’s a river or a creek nearby. No-one out here would waste tank water on a lawn.’

‘I could so go a swim,’ Benny said, wiping the sweat from his face.

‘Hell yeah.’

‘Hey!’ Jo grabbed Benny’s arm. ‘We’re trespassing. Hear that? Someone’s singing *Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree*.’

‘Huh?’ Hal screwed his face up, head cocked to one side.

She hummed a few lines.

‘Nada.’

‘I don’t hear anything, either.’

‘Jesus Christ, how stoned are you two?’ She snatched the butt from Hal’s mouth, ground it into the dirt and stomped back into the bush. ‘Well?’ she said, stopping, hands turned to the sky like the dashboard Jesus.

Hal paused at the plain wooden sign, yellowed with age, which welcomed them to Elyora. ‘Makes Nundle look like a metropolis.’

A ramshackle general store came into view first, the boards stripped of colour by time and weather; the front verandah sagged under the weight of a jasmine vine in full bloom. Auto corpses pock-marked the paddock between the general store and the servo. On the weed-riddled forecourt stood two towering, rusted bowsers shaped like coffins—the Golden Fleece branding bleached to amorphous blobs.

Ghosts of advertisements for fertiliser and seeds haunted the galvanised iron shingles of a large shed across the road. Stock and holding pens sprawled, choked with grass and scotch thistles, behind. The main street ended with a discoloured war memorial and an overgrown park. A paint-flecked swing set

and a huge corroded slide languished in the wild grass.

The only sign of life was a flock of squawking rainbow lorikeets in the canopy of a huge elm. Weathered picnic tables, splashed white with bird shit, huddled underneath.

‘There’s no church,’ Benny said.

‘Or pub. Nundle’s got a pub.’

‘No telephone,’ Jo said, an edginess creeping into her voice. ‘Even Woolomin has a phone box.’

‘Had,’ Hal corrected.

Benny turned a slow 360 degrees. ‘I fucked up.’

Hal kicked at the edge of a pothole. ‘No shit, Sherlock!’

‘Let’s go,’ Jo said and started back toward the highway. ‘We’ll flag a—’

A generator engine sputtering to life close by cut her off.

Hal pointed to a light in the servo’s office window. ‘*There’s life, Jim, but not as we know it.*’

‘Looks like no-one’s been here in decades,’ Jo said as they walked onto the broken forecourt apron, her attention fixed on the oxidised Golden Fleece sign jutting out over the office door.

‘Except the person who forgot to turn the light off.’

Benny went straight to the door, turned the handle and pushed. When it opened he shot Jo a cocky grin and walked in.

She grabbed Hal’s arm when he went to follow. ‘That light wasn’t on when we came into town.’

‘Well, it’s on now. You wanna get to Brisbane?’

A naked bulb hung from a long length of electrical cord in the centre of the room, wavering slightly—the air disturbed by their entrance. A counter ran the length of the shared wall with the workshop. Shelves lined with spark plugs, fuel filters and other small parts filled the back wall of the waiting room. Two large lockers sat behind the counter. A dusty calendar hung on the wall; a woman in a white string bikini sprawled across the bonnet of a red hot rod, dark hair falling in thick curls. Printed on the tear-off month below: *OCTOBER. Then, 1974.*

They stopped at the counter. On top: a simple metal cash box, a chewed yellow Bic pen, a blue invoice book with large oily fingerprints on the cover and a tarnished metal bell. Jo ran a finger across the counter and showed the clean tip to Hal, who shrugged.

When she reached to tap the bell, Benny hit her hand. ‘I hate those things.’

Calling out *hello?* he walked to the door stencilled *WORKSHOP—NO ENTRY* and tried the handle.

Typical, Jo thought, *thinks every door opens for him* and she hit the counter bell hard—twice. The dull metallic pings ricocheted around the unattended office. Benny scowled and Jo grinned in return.

‘What can I do you for?’

The three of them spun toward the voice, startled.

A man in blue overalls stood in the front door, wiping his hands on a filthy rag. His face bore no welcome, darkening as he looked from face to face, fixing to stone when he came to Benny.

‘Awesome to see you, man.’ Benny strode forward, extending his hand. ‘Our van’s shit itself up the road.’

‘Van, ay?’ the mechanic said, ignoring Benny’s proffered hand, dropping the rag on the bench and reaching for the packet of Drum in the breast pocket embroidered with ‘STANLEY’.

‘We’re looking for the NRMA, man.’

‘No NRMA ’round here, mate.’

Benny took a step back and tugged at the end of a dreadlock. An awkward silence fell as the mechanic rolled a durrie.

‘So you need a tow,’ he finally stated and dipped his head to a Zippo lighter.

‘Actually, we need to get to Brisbane.’ Jo came up next to Benny. ‘We’ve got a gig in—’ She pulled her mobile from her pocket and stared at the blank screen, then up to the clock on the wall.

The black hour hand pointed between the one and two. The minute hand hung, in an unhinged way, a little below the seven.

‘One thirty-seven,’ she whispered.

‘Clock’s been like that since them outtatowners built that bastard of a science compound over the river.’

‘What kind of experiments bugger up clocks?’ Hal asked.

‘The kind they do behind barbed wire, ay,’ the man replied, narrowing his eyes.

‘You real, man? I’ve never heard of Elyora.’

‘Cause you’re so the über peace activist,’ Jo hissed.

‘Maybe the electromagnetic field here is screwed—’

‘It’s not some fucking sci-fi movie,’ Benny snapped.

‘—Stellar spot to break down, Ben,’ Jo cut across them both.

'I wish you'd do us all a favour and shut your fucking mouth.'

'I won't stand for no bad mouthin' sheilas, ay.' The rollie moved with his bottom lip. 'You should apologise to the pretty lady, mate.'

Benny scowled, grunted a petulant apology and returned his attention to the mechanic.

'So, what's wrong widya car?'

'Van,' corrected Benny.

'Well, didya van just up and die on the Elyora Road?'

The three of them nodded.

'Yep,' he said, sucking on his durrie. 'S'pect it's a fried alternator, ay. That's the usual.'

'Told you it was electrical,' Hal whispered in Jo's ear, cringing away from the toxic glare she gave him.

'Well, onya bike. Night comes quick 'round 'ere.'

'But it's only, like, two. Three tops.'

'As I said,' the mechanic repeated, eyes boring into Jo. 'Night comes quick, darlin'.'

He ambled behind the counter and took a dirty set of keys from a row of hooks beneath the calendar.

'Gonna need one of you fellas to give me a hand with the hitch.'

They looked at each other and Hal eventually said, 'It's your heap of shit, Benny,' abdicating any responsibility.

The mechanic gave Benny a piercing look and mumbled under his breath as he stalked past him out the door. Hal took a seat and, as Jo joined him, the car keys jabbed through her short pocket into her thigh.

'Benny, stop,' she called, dashing out the door.

He turned, his eyes travelling over her body in an all too familiar way. 'Once we get the van back, how about me and you go find somewhere quiet to make up?'

He leaned in to give her a kiss and she snapped her head away.

'Not in this lifetime.' She slammed the keys into his hand. 'Enjoy your big boy ride in the tow truck.'

'C'mon, Jo, don't be like that.'

The truck roared to life inside the workshop and parrots exploded from the branches of the elm.

She crossed her arms over her chest. 'Your ride's leaving.'

He went to say something but shook his head and walked toward the

workshop. Once he was gone, she wished he'd never come back.

The tow truck thundered out of the workshop. Benny sat with his arm bent out the window, eyes dead ahead, like he couldn't see her. The truck lurched out onto the road and the sun glanced off the tow hook as it swung back and forth on the hitch.

It looks like one of the carcass hooks in the cool room at home, she thought and squinted down the road after the truck.

Hal sat beside Jo, reassembling his iPhone. 'I don't get it. The battery was fully charged.'

'The doors open the wrong way,' Jo said absently, staring at the calendar on the wall.

'Doors?'

'On the tow truck. They're arse about.'

'Suicide doors,' Hal said, shoving his phone in his pocket. 'I'm thinking it's less an electromagnetic occurrence and more of ...'

And he was up and out his seat before he could finish the sentence, and Jo found him standing between the pumps—only an inch or so taller than them.

'What if those scientists created a moebius, here in Eloyra.'

'The dude from *The Matrix*.'

'Not a *Morpheus*. Moebius: a theoretical loop in time and space. Named after a Mobius strip.' Jo looked at him blankly. 'Think the recycling sign.'

'Like the infinity symbol.'

'Kinda.' Hal ran his hand over the bowser face. 'These are late fifties I reckon. The old man would be creaming himself over this chrome bezel. Banging on about it being *the last of the Art Deco influence*.'

Jo shook her head. 'I can't believe you just said *Art Deco*.'

'Art Deco. Art Deco. Art Deco,' Hal chanted, brandishing the pump nozzle like a sword.

Petrol splashed over the concrete when he depressed the handle, shifting into the two handed hold of a light sabre.

'Jesus, Hal.'

'It's okay,' he said, jamming the nozzle back in the bowser. 'It didn't even register, look. Zero-zero-zero.'

'Thirteen cents a litre!' Jo wiped the grime off the glass. 'Maybe we time travelled.'

'In Benny's van?' Hal pulled a face and Jo laughed then crossed her legs.

'Argh. Stop it. I think I need the loo.'

'You don't know if you wanna take a slash?'

'I don't know if I want to go search the workshop by myself.'

'I'll come with you.'

'There'll be spiders.'

Hal flinched, then tried to relax into the nonchalant facade she'd seen him put on when girls knocked him back. 'Me? Scared of spiders?'

'You're the biggest arachnophobe ever. *Boris*.'

'Boris? I can't have black ops sheep but you can use obscure musical references as insults.'

'Fuck off,' she said and started off in the direction of the workshop.

'Hey.' He caught her around the waist and spun her to face him. 'You don't have to do it anymore—prove you're good enough to be with him.'

'And you never acted all alpha muso around him.'

'I wasn't doing it to get laid.'

'Yeah, well,' Jo said. 'That worked out real well for me, didn't it?'

Like a developing Polaroid the workshop emerged from the gloom as her eyes adjusted. Dust and old engine oil laced the cool air. Each footstep disappeared in a small cloud. Hal stopped suddenly, his eyes tracking a spider climbing a gossamer line.

'It's just a daddy long legs,' Jo said, tugging gently on his hand.

'Most poisonous spider. Ever'

'Yeah, but useless at piercing human skin.'

Hal let go of her hand and started to draw circles in the dirt with this right foot, then left.

'You are so not coming any further, are you?' Jo shoved him when he didn't reply. 'Go do something useful—like get us something to eat and drink. Damn.' She felt for her wallet. 'I'll owe you.'

'You're forever in my debt, Marlowe.'

'You wish, Boris. Behave yourself,' she called after him.

'Only if the black ops sheep don't get me. But, if they do.' He paused at the door and knocked one heel against the other. 'I've been practising my best *take me to your leader*.'

Four cars lay in various states of repair across the workshop bays: an

orange-red, two-door Ford Capri with the bonnet up and huge chunks of the engine missing; a boxy green Holden ute—engine cavity empty; a newer yellow station wagon with the interior stripped; and an old LandCruiser missing a back axle, hanging mid-air on a hoist.

At the back of the workshop a long bench ran beneath a tool wall, just like the one in her Grandfather's shed: a place for every tool and every tool in its place. A few empty spaces outlined missing tools, like a crime scene. Jo picked up a spanner from the bench and hung it on the wall, then removed it. The surly mechanic had struck her as someone who would lose his shit if someone touched his tools.

The toilet was completely feral—a poorly lit box attached to the back of the workshop with a door that wouldn't close. Attached high on the wall was the metal cistern, a corroded chain-pull hanging from it. A dirt halo swallowed the plumbing, and the toilet roll holder, bent and clinging by a single screw was, of course, empty.

She thought of squatting behind the shed but, experience told her, the moment she did the tow truck would thunder around the corner into full view.

It flushed—a definite bonus—dirty water pouring over the stained enamel. Shorts down, she was suddenly relieved she wasn't one of those prissy city girls who could only pee in a picture-perfect receptacle. Dusty *Playboys* lay to one side of the loo and she flicked through them, waiting to drip dry. They were dated 1973 and 1974; the women—in the pictures young and pert—were now old, wrinkled and sagging. Someone's Mum or Nan. The thought made her sick, more than the collusion to exhibit their bodies in such a way.

The workshop appeared lighter after the dark loo, but the *feel* had shifted. *Deliberate* and *desertion*. Those were the two words that sprung to mind. The workspace was devoid of oil trays, empty bottles of mechanical fluids, discarded parts; authentic signs of every-day use.

It's just for show, Jo thought as the first icy tendrils worked their way up her spine.

The coolness of the workshop bore down on her. The cars became cannibalised corpses as shafts of light coming through the window shifted and the shadows lengthened. The smell of rotting meat caught in the back of her throat; something crunched under foot.

Run!

She bolted for the strip of light between the workshop doors and burst

out, stumbling blindly across the concrete, only stopping when she came to the road. Chest heaving, she gulped down lungfuls of hot, dry air to quell the dread spiralling up from her bowels.

Under the harsh eye of the sun, sweat washed clean the workshop's clinging menace. Panic gradually subsided, reforming as frustration: *Where are you, Benny?*

The noise of the generator stopped and the town fell quiet.

The lack of noise was worse than the sentient malevolence within the workshop and she started to hum Andrew Sisters' melodies, looping them into each other. Humming was meant to relax her throat and, by extension, her body and mind, but the notes snagged on her throat. She forced her throat to work, and the melodic vibrations distorted into lyrical grunts.

Chattanooga Choo Choo...I wanna leave.

Get Your Kicks on Route 66...put as many Ks between Elyora and me.

The Freedom Train...never think of this place again.

Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree...Benny, where are you? Oh god oh god oh god.

The final song became a parasite, burrowing deep into her, dislodging everything else. The calm normally associated with humming became a seeping disembodiment. The humming mutated to singing, but the voice that swelled within was not hers. It rose in a clear, high pitch, impossibly beyond her range.

Stop. Stop it now.

Her fingers closed around her throat, as though it was someone else's. The squeeze, a second-hand experience felt from beyond.

You cannot have me!

And the singing ceased mid-lyric.

Alone in the middle of the road she stood panting. The waning heat sucked the last of the life from the day. Rushing to fill the void was the dread from the workshop. It stewed in the pit of her stomach like a bout of imminent diarrhoea. Like stage fright. But with stage fright you at least knew the cause of the anxiety. And you knew where to find the audience.

She couldn't shake the thought Elyora had assembled an audience for her.

Watching from a distance.

Biding its time.

A once-domesticated wisteria slowed her progress through the front yard

of the General Store. She expected, with each step up toward the verandah, the perished wood to give way. A locked door was reward for the precarious ascent. The rusted frame that once held the newspaper headlines crunched as she walked over it. At the front window, she expected to see eyes peering back out at her. The filthy glass protected any secrets within.

‘Coo-eee.’ The sound amplified through her cupped hands and she yelled, ‘Hal?’

She went back down the steps, moving along the side wall, from window to window, standing on tip-toe trying to see in. The sun-sharpened grass and weeds came to her waist, scratching her bare legs. If Hal could get in, he would. She’d never understood how he got off on the thrill of doing something just a little bit wrong—never anything too extreme or dangerous. Just enough to get them into a shit-load of trouble somewhere like Elyora.

It was like he’d been telling black ops sheep stories for so long he thought he was some human-merino hybrid ninja. In the final year of high school he’d broken into the shooters’ hut on the neighbour’s property and nicked as many cans of peaches and baked beans as he could carry, even though he didn’t like them—just ’cos he could.

‘Hal?’

Dozens of faded orange crates, full of empty soft drink bottles, stood stacked against the back wall of the store; the steps next to them, collapsed. She continued around the far side of the store and something charged her, sent her sprawling in the long grass.

‘Boo!’

‘Jesus fucking Christ, Hal!’ Jo pushed him off her, heart hammering fit to dismantle her rib cage.

He rolled onto his back, laughing. ‘The look on your face!’

She was back on her feet, fast, and kicking him.

‘You *dead shit*.’

‘Stop. Stop. Please,’ he begged as her kicks thumped into him.

He pulled himself up onto his knees and she stopped.

‘Fuck off,’ she snarled when he reached up for her.

‘It was just a joke.’

‘Well it wasn’t funny.’

‘This place needs some livening up.’

‘What this place *needs* is to be seen in the rear-fucking-vision mirror of our van.’

Jo stormed off through the grass towards the road. Hal limped after her, picking grass seeds from his beanie and calling for her to stop. At the road he caught up with her. She stood looking down the buckled tarmac, to the point where it disappeared into the bush.

‘It’s like the bush ate it,’ Hal observed, stroking her pinkie with his.

‘It’s like you go down there and fall off the end of the world,’ Jo said, shoving her hand in her pocket. ‘Like Benny went down there and is never coming back.’

‘And that would be a bad thing *how?*’

‘It was rhetorical, Hal.’

‘Is the band breaking up?’

‘What?’ Her flushed face contorted in a way Hal had never seen before.

‘Well, you know, with you and Benny—’

‘The band’s not breaking up just because Benny and I did.’

‘But I was just thinking—’

‘Fuck! Stop thinking, Hal.’

‘I can’t help it.’

Jo started back toward the servo.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To give you something useful to think about.’

Jo dragged him, protesting, through the workshop.

‘There’s something wrong in here,’ she said stopping next to the engine-less ute. ‘Can you feel it?’

‘Feel what?’

‘How it’s ... creepy? Look at it. It’s too perfect. Like a movie set.’

‘So the guy’s a bit of a neat freak. You can’t sneeze in my dad’s shed without him going postal—’

‘It’s not that. My Granddad’s shed-proud too.’ She pulled him through the workshop to the toilet in the back. ‘Look.’

‘Holy frakin’ hell. I thought the shitter at our place was bad!’

‘No, *these*.’ Jo collected up the *Playboys* and shoved them at him.

‘Aww-right! Retro porn.’

‘*Why* has he got a pile of *Playboys* from 1973 and 1974?’

‘I dunno, he forgot them. Maybe there’s another shitter inside the office—or he does it at home.’ He dropped the magazines on the workbench, picked the top one, flipped through it and moved onto the next. He opened the magazine to the middle, tipped it sideways. Jo snatched it out of his hand.

‘You’re not taking this seriously.’

‘Sure I am.’

‘Why *old* porn?’

‘I’m a bloke. *Why, not?*’

‘Riddle me this, Batman. The calendar on the wall in there is from October 1974. The same month the last of these were printed.’

Hal shrugged and Jo hurled the mags back in the toilet. ‘This town is bent.’

‘You’re just paranoid after all that—’

‘Don’t blame the weed. I am not paranoid.’ She wrung her hands, struggling to articulate herself. ‘It feels ... wrong. In-my-gut wrong.’

Hal shrugged again. ‘Just feels like the same-old-same-old arse-end town.’

Her fingers dug into his arm. ‘Promise if the van doesn’t start, or that weirdo mechanic can’t get it fixed *tonight*, we walk out and hitch a ride back home.’

Hal thought for a moment. ‘Sure, if it will calm you down, okay.’

Jo let go and marched back onto the driveway.

‘Stop with the stomping? I promise—Hey!’ Hal pointed to the park across the road. ‘The place isn’t deserted.’

A man sat on the swing, a baby in his lap. The squeak of the chain carried across to the servo, replaced a minute later with the dull roar of the tow truck.

Hal pulled Jo into a rough hug and said, ‘It’s all good,’ and kissed her on the forehead. ‘I see us, having beers and laughing about the Benny Arbor incident. *FaunaBate forever*, yeah?’

Maybe.

Jo wanted to feel Hal’s simplistic optimism but, bereft of it, nodded absently and turned back to the swings. And the neatly mown park she swore had been unkempt, and overrun with weeds, when they arrived.

Another durrie burned between the mechanic’s fingers while he kept an eye on the chain feeding back around the drum. Jo’s impatience won out over the need for diplomacy—or whatever Benny and Hal were waiting for.

‘What’s wrong with the van?’ she asked him.

‘Don’t know yet, ay. Need to put her over the pit, but reckon it’s probably the ’lectrics.’

‘Yesss!’ Hal punched the air. ‘Knew it.’

'You said earlier some kind of research facility in Elyora has screwed with the clocks. Is it more than that?'

'Outtatowners,' the mechanic said and spat on the concrete. 'Think you bloody know everythin'.'

'I think there's permanent electrical issues here and that's the problem with the van. I want you to tow us back out onto the highway.'

'But we just got the van here,' Benny said, his face reddening.

Jo scowled at Benny. 'Do you want to stay here?'

'Won't do no good, darlin',' the mechanic said, shutting off the winch, swaggering past them to detach the hitch. 'Alternator's cactus. Finito.'

'You said you didn't know what was wrong with it,' Hal said, joining Jo and Benny at the front of the van.

'It's kinda—whaddaya folks call it,' he mumbled, unhooking the winch hook. '*Phenomena* 'round 'ere. Dead alternators.'

He walked back to the winch beating the hook against his palm. The last of the chain fed back around the barrel and the engine shut off, the hook at face height.

'It's beer o'clock now. I'll be onto it first thing Mun-dee.'

Benny walked in front of him. 'Hey, man! I don't think you quite get it. We need to get back on the highway. Or at least get somewhere with phone service. We need to call the venue to let them know what's goin' on.'

'Mate, you need an attitude adjustment.' He dropped his durrie into the dust and ground it out with a rundown boot heel. 'Now get outta me way.'

'We can't be a no-show.' The pitch of Jo's voice fluctuated with panic, but she forced a smile. 'Would we be able to use your phone, *please*?'

'No dog-and-bone here, darlin'.'

'I'm no-one's fucking darlin',' she spat, furiously. She wrenched the side door of the van open. A minute later she climbed out with a backpack and her guitar in a soft gig bag. 'I'm hitching a ride and I don't give a shit what direction they're going.'

'We said we'd stay together,' Hal said, pulling the beanie off his head and jamming it in the back pocket of his shorts. 'It's just one night.'

'C'mon, babe,' Benny said, putting a hand on her arm. She shook it off.

'Don't *c'mon, babe* me. If you'd just stayed on the fucking road we wouldn't be here.' Right in his face, she hissed, 'If you'd kept your dick in your pants, like you should have, we'd be in Brisbane now.'

One angry footstep resounded after another, down the road, past the *Welcome to Elyora* sign and around the bend. What passed for a town disappeared from sight. Past the bend, resting in the shade of the gums was the man from the park. He turned at her approach, a child's sippy cup in hand, and smiled. 'Car trouble?'

'Something like that,' Jo barked, without stopping.

'Where you off to?' he persisted, passing the cup hand to hand and back again.

'The hell out of here.'

'It's going to be dark soon. You shouldn't go down the road alone.' He placed the sippy cup on the canopy of the stroller with exaggerated care and waited for her to stop. 'It's not safe for a woman to be out alone.'

'*In Elyora?* What a load-a shit.' She went to walk on but hesitated, pushed the wet fringe off her face. 'I'm sorry.' She turned back and tried to muster an apologetic smile. 'It's been a cluster-fuck of a day.'

The man rocked the stroller back and forth. 'Breaking down in the middle of nowhere doesn't really bring the best out in people,' the man said, his voice brightening.

He wheeled the stroller around to face her and a baby waved chubby arms with the same uncoordinated zeal she knew from playing with her nephews when they were little. She smiled her first genuine smile in twenty-four hours and waggled her fingers in a wave, inciting more excited arm jerks from the baby.

'He likes you,' the man said.

'Unlike your mechanic,' she muttered. 'So, if I take your advice and don't walk back to the highway to hitch a ride, where do you suggest I stay? Or at least get a drink?'

He shook his head. 'Teetotallers built Elyora, so there's no pub. And no-one really comes to visit who doesn't already have somewhere to stay, so no motel.'

She snorted. 'Well, I'm shit out of luck.'

The thought of spending the night in the back of the van was too much. Then she remembered the trailer full of expensive gear was unhitched on the side of the road. *Shit.*

'Excuse me,' she said, and headed back toward Elyora, hurrying her pace as the sun dipped below the tops of the trees.

‘Knew you’d be back,’ said Benny matter-of-factly, lounging against the side of the Tarago, blowing smoke rings. ‘All talk. No action.’

‘No action?’ she snapped, dumping bag and guitar against a bowser and flying at him.

The first punch connected with his jaw and the joint dropped from his mouth. The following left hook mashed his nose.

Hal caught her from behind, before she could swing again and tried to reason with her.

‘Shit, my nose!’ Benny moaned, blood seeping between his fingers.

‘You’re a fucking poser,’ she yelled, struggling against Hal. ‘That’s why you’ve got a fucking Jesus doll on the dash. Some stupid fucking in-joke from when you were at HillSong, belting out Christian rock and screwing virgins. And the Kiss snow dome was some 70s tribute band. And now you’re the next what ... Angus Stone? With those fucking dreadlocks and the beard!’

His fingers came away red and sticky, and his eyes widened. ‘You fucking bitch, you broke my nose!’

Jo fought free of Hal and stood, feet hip-width apart. The tremors started in her hands and quickly spread, but her voice remained eerily flat and emotionless. ‘You called me chicken.’

‘I never called you chicken,’ he blathered, trying to staunch the blood flow.

‘Then you deserve it for everything else.’

‘Hey.’ Hal stepped warily between her and Benny.

‘Someone needs to do something about the trailer,’ she said, talking to him and through him at the same time.

‘That guy’s picking it up. You don’t have to worry about it.’

‘Excuse me?’

They all turned. The man with the stroller stood to one side of the bowsers.

‘I was speaking to your friend down the road. She told me you’re in a tight spot with your van breaking down. There’s no accommodation in town, but you are all welcome to stay at my house. It’s nothing special but the little guy and I would be glad for the company.’

‘Thank you. That’d be great,’ Hal slipped one arm around Jo then reached out his other hand. ‘I’m Hal. This is Jo. And the bleeding dude is Benny. And together we’re *FaunaBate*.’

‘Oh, you’re a band.’ The man took Hal’s hand and shook enthusiastically.

‘Lazarus,’ he introduced. ‘Ethan Lazarus. And my wingman, Gus.’

Hal dragged their gear out of the van while Benny cleaned his face under the tap in the park. Jo stood awkwardly in the driveway with Lazarus, watching her knuckles bruise up.

‘It’s actually Josephine,’ Jo said off-handedly. ‘Josephine Belato.’

Ethan extended his hand and she offered her unbruised one. He hesitated, looking at it as if he’d forgotten he’d initiated the act. For a fleeting moment, with the glimmer of temptation in his eye, she expected him to press his lips to her hand. Then his large sweaty hand closed around hers and she swore his thumb caressed the side of hers.

Strangers don’t go around doing that kinda shit, she told herself.

‘Thank you, Mr Lazarus,’ she said swallowing hard, trying to break the uncomfortable silence growing between them. ‘For taking us in, I mean.’

‘Just Ethan. And it’s my pleasure.’ He glanced at their clasped hands and turned them so hers was on top. ‘You’re not married,’ he said, his brows drawing together, taking the softness out of his expression.

‘Not likely.’

‘But I thought—’

‘We’re just in a band. And I’m a girl with four older brothers and a short temper.’

He released her hand and smiled. ‘I’ll keep that in mind.’

She coughed, made a lame excuse about Hal needing her help and fled behind the van. Hidden, she rubbed her hand against her cut-offs and wished she could erase the memory of how he’d looked at her.

They left the servo behind, shadows clustering along the edge of the road, like a crowd gathered to watch a passing-out parade. Benny and Lazarus took the lead, Benny striking up conversation about an obscure folk band Jo had never heard of, using a clean sock to soak up the last of his bloody nose.

Jo leaned in to Hal and whispered, ‘Lazarus ...as in, *raised from the dead.*’

‘It’s just a name.’

‘Nothing’s ever just a name.’

Hal raised his eyebrows. ‘I’ll take a bed over the back seat any day.’

‘He asked me if I was married.’

‘Perhaps he didn’t want to offend by offering a double bed or something like that.’

‘You’ve got an answer for everything.’ He shrugged. ‘He shook my hand like he hadn’t touched a woman in years.’

‘The dude’s dilemma, I get,’ Hal said in his best Yoda voice.

‘I’m serious,’ Jo hissed.

‘So am I.’

In a staggered line, the four of them walked past the *Welcome to Elyora* sign. The further they walked, the more Jo worried Lazarus’s house would be the awful place they’d spied earlier. And the closer they moved toward the highway, the stronger the feeling became. She hummed the opening refrain of *Tom’s Diner* to calm herself, seguing into the lyrics when Hal began beat boxing, harmonising the refrains with her. Their voices wrapped around each other. A flash of anger flooded Jo’s voice when Benny joined on the next refrain. The intrusion! But the third voice amplified the harmony, no matter how much she wanted to counter it. The fourth voice, a rich baritone, was the real surprise when it began.

A capella, it rose through the warm, fragrant air, anchored by baby gurgles and blurts. The pressure in her chest relaxed and she soared along the thermals of the song. It ended as naturally as it began and the strung out line compressed at a familiar path into the bush. Jo slipped her hand into Hal’s, the lightness of singing draining away, a brooding uneasiness filling the vacuum.

‘You will have to forgive the mess the house is in,’ Lazarus said, catching his breath.

‘No need to apologise, man. We’re all just grateful for somewhere to doss.’

‘I reckon he was a stockbroker, or some kind of hipster exec before he came here,’ Hal whispered, as they wound their way through the bush. ‘His hair cut gives him away, as much as his DIY skills.’

‘Shhhh!’

A blood-red sun kissing the horizon greeted them on the other side of the bush. As they walked down the path, cutting through the unmown part of the clearing, the house’s shadow lengthened, stealing out across the lawn toward them. The sandstone appeared to glow for a minute, bathed in the last rays of sun and then faded. In the lingering amber twilight, the house looked as though it was emerging from the brightness of the day, to greet them in more modest sepia tones.

‘Do you have a phone?’ Benny asked, when they stopped on the perimeter

of the lawn. 'We need to ring Brisvegas. Explain what's happened.'

'No telephones here,' Lazarus said, shaking his head. 'The Government brought a line in while they were here but they dismantled it, along with everything else, when they left.'

'There was never a phone line here? Ever?'

Lazarus nodded. 'I believe there was a telegraph line once.'

Jo put her hand on his arm, stopping him from walking on. 'Stanley said there was some kind of facility over the river that messed with the clocks. But he didn't say it was a government thing.'

'Stanley's pretty cut up about what happened over there,' Lazarus looked at Jo's hand on his arm and smiled. 'The Government didn't treat the locals very well. And they're an insular lot, with long memories. They don't understand you can move on if you want to.'

Lazarus gave a little push on the handles of the stroller and looked regretful when Jo's hand dropped from his arm.

'Why'd you move here?' Hal asked. 'Jo and I grew up in the country. Couldn't wait to get away.'

'And Armidale's *so* the big smoke,' sniped Benny.

'Sometimes your options are limited, and you make the best of what you have.' The comment was for Hal, but he looked straight at Jo while he spoke. 'I inherited the place and Gus and I are doing the best we can with it.'

They congregated at the back steps to pull off their shoes.

'Just line them up there,' Lazarus said, pointing to a strip of concrete to the left of the steps.

'I can't,' said Hal, clutching his orange and lime green trainers to his chest.

'You should be right for creepy crawlies.'

At the mention of spiders Hal paled and looked under the house.

'Leave your shoes against the shower wall at the end of the verandah if that will set your mind at ease.'

'According to Jo I am a rampant arachnophobe,' Hal said, joining Jo on the bottom step.

'Off you go, Boris,' Jo teased.

'Stop calling me Boris.'

'Only song to survive all of the The Who's live gigs,' Lazarus commented, looking up from the stroller.

Jo's face lit up. 'Townsend said it was Hendrix's favourite Who song.'

'But it was only released on single in Japan.'

'As a B-side,' Jo added. 'So you know your music,' she said, walking up the steps beside him.

'Trivial stuff mostly,' he said, brushing past to open the warped wire door for her. 'How about I get you all sorted out for rooms, and we can talk more over dinner?'

The house was cool and welcoming.

Proper, welcoming, she thought. *Not like that workshop.*

She wandered down a short corridor and waited in the door of the kitchen for Lazarus to take the lead. They snaked through the house: left down a longer, darker hallway, doors shut on both sides; left again; right into a shorter one.

'I don't recommend you go exploring,' Lazarus advised over his shoulder. 'The house is a culmination of the grand ideas of those who came *before*—and it has a tendency to take you where it wants you to go.'

'Sounds like the TARDIS.' Hal's voice made it clear he didn't intend it as a joke.

'Bigger on the inside, you mean?' Benny said, oblivious to the nuance in Hal's tone.

'No, having a mind of its frakin' own,' Hal snarked and tried to move back away from the spiral staircase at the end.

Lazarus motioned for him to go up and she caught a glimpse of the worried look souring his face from the second loop of the staircase. Then Benny stepped between and blocked her view.

'A bit of a rabbit warren, eh?' Benny said quietly, lips close enough to brush against the lobe. 'Reckon we name our first album *The Elyora Rabbit Hole*.'

'Sounds like a concept album,' said Jo flatly, leaning away from him. 'And you said concept albums were musical wank.'

'In concept, yeah, but—'

'Full of *but*s,' she snapped. 'Everything comes with your brand of qualifier. So many butts, being with you is like being lost at a full moon festival.'

He took a step back from her, his hand moving up to his nose. Lazarus clapped him on the shoulders and turned him toward the stairs.

The backpack and the guitar made it a tight fit. The coil of the stairs carried an inward, rather than an upward, motion and she arrived at the top disorientated.

The hallway is running in the wrong direction to the one below?

No, I'm just a bit dizzy.

Hal, Benny and Lazarus waited halfway down, Benny chatting to Lazarus about his favourite concept albums. Hal stood slightly apart, perspiration beading on his forehead, backpack clasped to his chest.

'Looks like that corridor in *The Shining*,' he hissed in her ear when she stopped beside him.

'You're freaking yourself out. It looks nothing like the Overlook Hotel.'

'Not like the movie, but—'

'There's a room with bunks at the end,' said Lazarus, cutting Hal off. 'It's set up for kids, but you guys should be right.' He opened a door to his left. 'And for Jo.'

A four-poster bed dominated the room, a mosquito net draped over the wooden frame. A large bay window filled the wall, a lace curtain floating in and out.

'Thank you, Ethan,' Jo said and gave Hal's hand a quick squeeze.

Sprawled on her side, the expensive quilt pushed to the end, she lay on the cool, clean sheets relishing the feel of them against her bare arms and legs. Eyes closed, daydreams chased the nightmare day away: a stunning sunrise through the translucent curtains and the early morning air, fragrant with dew and jasmine; sitting in the bay window, Lazarus and baby Gus playing under the sprinkler below, a lazy breeze billowing through white sheets on the Hills Hoist, cooling the sweat on her arms; lying in a deck chair, the umbrella of the mulberry tree above, a Chandler ... no, an Agatha Christie paperback in hand, ice cubes shrinking in a long glass of homemade lemonade.

A knock at the door pulled her back and, taking a moment to feel the heaviness of the *present*, she dragged herself off the bed and unlocked the door. Hal shoved through, slammed the door and stormed across the room to the window, dragging the curtains aside.

'There were no windows like this on the second floor,' he said, looking down. 'Come to think of it, the entire second floor looked fucked. Yet—' He let go of the curtains and motioned to the room.

'There's nothing wrong. Calm down, Hal. Please.'

He stalked along the wall, pulling his beanie off his head and then jamming it back on. 'There's hundreds of shoes under the house, like those

old Holocaust photos.'

'Hal, c'mon. It's a farm, not a concentration camp.'

Hal seized her by the shoulders, shaking her hard. 'It's all wrong.'

'Your fingers are digging into me.'

'You felt it earlier in the workshop. I feel it here. Emptiness. Like there's stuff here but it's not really here.'

She put her hand on his chest and tried to push him away. 'Let go. You're hurting me.'

He propelled her toward the door. 'Back at the workshop, I promised I'd hitch a ride with you on the highway if the only other option was to stay. I'm ready. Let's go.'

'You're freaking me out.' She pulled free of his grasp, his fingerprints rising red on her skin. 'What the hell's got into you?'

'I can feel you slipping away.' Gossamer light, fingers caressed her cheek, then cupped the side of her face. He leaned in, his words barely audible. 'And it's getting stronger. Pulling you away from me.'

His lips pressed against hers. The audacity of it stunned her. The proximity of his body and his hands sliding down her side, across her back. How his body fused to hers. His lips lingered, waiting for her response.

The buzz in her head ate the echo of his words. And the urgency and fear carved in them. *It would be so much easier to kiss him than fight him.*

My best friend...

'No!' She shoved him hard and stumbled backward. 'You're my mate. We're just mates.'

'I don't feel that way. I never have,' he whispered.

'Shut up. Don't say anything else.'

She sat on the bed, head cradled in her hands. Hot tears slipped over her wrists and down the inside of her arms.

'You can't tell me you didn't know.'

Don't do this, Hal. Please, don't.

He dropped to his knees on the carpet. 'I've been in love with you since the first time I saw you on that school bus. The band was just an excuse to get close to you again.'

She cleared her throat and straightened her back. 'What about all those girls you screwed?'

'It was only meant to be a bit of flirting. When it didn't make any difference to you, I just—'

‘You’re fucking unbelievable. You’re no better than Benny.’

He caught her wrist when she tried to hit him, and sat beside her, holding her hand. ‘You have to listen to me.’

‘I’ve listened enough.’ His hand tightened around hers when she tried to pull it free.

‘I love you, Jo.’

‘I don’t love you, Hal.’ The words choked out, the conversation cut off by a knock at the door.

‘Let me go, Hal,’ she said, resisting his efforts to pull her back to the bed.

The door opened and Benny walked through. ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘didn’t realise you were both in here.’

‘Hal was just leaving,’ Jo said, making no effort to hide her wet face as she crossed the room.

Benny reached out to touch her tears and she shied away. Hal stood behind her, close enough for Benny to cock an eyebrow at him. ‘Lazarus suggested we go into town for a pub meal.’

‘There’s no pub,’ Jo said, trying to step away from Hal without getting any closer to Benny, who was blocking the doorway.

‘The pub’s in Cain Avenue, off the Elyora Road,’ said Lazarus, wandering up the hallway to join Benny at the door. ‘Most people think Elyora’s the old general store, and the servo, but you have to turn off Elyora Road to get to the main town.’

‘You told me there wasn’t a pub. That the town was built by tee-totallers. You said—’

‘Elyora’s an old homestead town.’ Lazarus jiggled Gus up and down. ‘Town probably pre-dates any do-gooder abstinence attitudes.’

‘But you said—’

‘There’s no motel, true, but a town with no beer?’

‘Perhaps you’ve had too much sun, babe.’

‘Don’t call me *babe*. He said it.’

‘I could murder a steak and a cold beer,’ Hal said, pushing past her, the space between them briefly swelling with the echo of her final words. Words she wanted to take back. ‘Let’s go, dude,’ and he slapped Benny on the shoulder.

‘Wait. Give me a minute, guys.’

‘Only if you want to sit alone in the Ladies Lounge,’ Lazarus said, stepping between her and the boys. ‘Women aren’t allowed to drink in the public bar.’

'It's not the 50's.'

'May as be in Elyora. Why don't I run you a bath?' A door closed down the hallway and she was alone with Lazarus. 'If you can hold Gus for a minute.'

Bloody hell, Jo thought. *He just circumvented*— and the baby caught a handful of her hair.

'Owww, Gus!'

Another door closed.

She untangled the sweaty fist and hoisted the baby up so they were face to face. 'So you and me, huh? Why don't we go look out the window,' she said. 'I think you'll like that.'

The twilight obscured the detail of the view below. *Like I ever saw anything clearly*, she thought and wished for a clean slate with Hal, or chance to take it back. And say the right thing. Do the right thing.

Whatever that is.

'Shit-shit-shit.'

The smile dropped from Gus's face and she realised she'd spoken aloud.

'Hey. How about a song? A song with... *Gus* in it.' At the mention of his name, his smile returned and a bouquet of spit blossomed between his cupid bow lips.

'It's not what you say,' her brother Derek had told her when she'd been preparing to babysit her nephew the first time. 'It's how you say it.'

So she sang Paul Simon's *Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover* in her best up-beat voice. Gus cooed and chirped; his hand batted against her chest.

'She said, 'Why don't we both sleep on it tonight.'" a man's voice sang, mirroring hers at the final verse. Lazarus blushed at her from the doorway. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to, I mean ... it's just ... I—' he stammered. 'The bath is running.'

'Paul Simon's biggest ever hit,' Jo offered, to take the edge off his embarrassment.

'Ironic in an American market: a mistress's advice on how to leave one's wife, though it's false advertising.'

Jo handed Gus over. '*Fifty ways* and he lists how many?'

'Jack. Stan. Gus. Roy. Lee,' Jo counted. 'Five.'

'So. Who left you?'

'Benny.' She stared at the carpet springing between her toes. 'He slept with a guy last night. And Hal...'

He said he loved me.

She shook her head. Couldn't bear to articulate it out loud.

'Hal loves you,' Lazarus said. The shock of insight burned through her face before she could contain it. 'You going to biff him too?'

A rabbit caught in the headlights had nothing on her and she blurted out, 'And your wife?' in an effort to deflect his attention.

'She died.'

Jo stumbled over an apology but he waved it away. 'Better to celebrate a life than mourn its passing. She liked to drink wine in the bath. I can get you one if you'd like?'

He was halfway down the stairs before she could think to say yes or no.

A seven-branch candelabrum illuminated a freestanding bath, long and deep enough to sink to your chin in. The gold embellishment on the claw feet glowed. Water charged from shining, brass taps and a lavender-scented towel, big enough to fit two of her in, sat folded on a chair next to the bath. A framed Pears Soap advertisement hung on the wall and a pedestal sink completed the minimal fixtures, free of dental and shaving clutter.

She stripped off her sweat-stained singlet and dusty cut-offs, unhooked her bra, rolled her socks off and flexed her toes on the checkerboard tiles, enjoying the feel of the smooth, clean tiles.

A squirt of body wash under the running water generated drifts of iceberg bubbles and she watched them detach and accumulate at the other end of the bath.

They always find their way back to the others, she thought.

When the bubbles cloaked the entire surface she shut off the taps, tested the water and rested her tattered copy of *The Big Sleep* on the edge before sliding in.

The hiss and crackle of the bubbles and the buoyancy of the warm water was soothing. Long hair entwined around her hand, she took a deep breath, closed her eyes and relaxed back into the water's embrace. She let herself fall, sinking with the slow outflow of breath, until she was completely underwater.

Cold fingers seized her ankle and yanked her deeper. Water roared in her ears and she writhed against her captor. Columns of bubbles materialised in the distance, knitting themselves into cords as they moved toward her in hypnotic undulations. They wrapped around her ankles and legs. Wound upward in increasingly tight loops over her hips and stomach. Frantic fingers

fought for purchase on the warm enamel. Screams dissolved in her mouth. The bath wall liquefied and her hand broke through into colder water. A shift in the current picked her up. Something moved through the water with her, singing. The vibrations filled her with peace.

Give yourself to me...

Under the apple tree...

The fight leached out of her and the water bore her away.

Male voices and the passage of heavy feet shattered the weightless surrender. She fought the crush of the water. Lungs exploding. Treading water, she turned around and around. Disoriented. Was the way to the surface up or down? Left or right?

In the end she propelled herself away from the singing. Icy fingers grappled to clamp hold of her ankle again. But she kicked this time. Hard. And felt bones shatter.

Kick. Kick harder.

She surfaced with such violence the water swept over the bath, picking her paperback up and dumping it on the tiles. Coughing and spluttering, and trying to suck in air, Jo sat shaking, eyes shut, fingers welded to the bath edge. Her heart beat too fast, then not fast enough. The panic persisted long after her breathing stabilised, and the pins and needles in her limbs receded.

When she finally opened her eyes and dared to look, the trickster image of a lolling blanket of bubbles greeted her. The water gently curled around her. But the throb of her ankle warned against discounting it as her imagination.

A knock at the door startled her.

'I have your wine,' Lazarus called through the door.

'Don't come in,' she called, half-climbing, half-falling out of the bath.

Cocooned in the towel, hair clinging to her face and fingers gripping the door to hide the shaking, she looked through the gap.

'I didn't mean to scare you,' he said, holding up the glass of wine.

'I'll take it downstairs.'

'Is everything okay?' His face looked kind and caring in the muted light and for a moment she was tempted to pour *everything* out. Invite him to chase away the demons with the soft movement of his hands sponging warm water over her back. Tracking the bump of her spine. Sweeping aside her wet hair.

Get back in that bath. With a strange dude? Come off it.

'I'll be down in a minute. Help you ... cook dinner,' she stammered and closed the door.

The Big Sleep laid spine-up more than a metre from the bath, bloating with bath water. She picked it up and shook it out.

It's just a bath, she told herself, taking tentative steps across the wet tiles, until she was close enough to peer in. In the wavering half-light of the candles, with the bubbles gone, it looked bottomless.

Hungry.

Waiting for me to reach in.

She gathered up her clothes and returned to her room, leaving Lazarus to pull the plug.

Ethan abandoned his attempts to wipe the orange mush from Gus's face. 'Give me thirty to bathe and settle Gus and I'll cook us up an omelette.'

'You're going to bathe him upstairs?' Her hand jerked at the mention of the bath and wine sloshed against the edge of her glass.

'It's like holding an oiled pig in the shower.' He lifted Gus from the highchair. 'Help yourself to more wine and make yourself at home in the sitting room. There's a bunch of old vinyl, a gramophone and heaps of books.'

Jo placed her glass on the table, away from the mess of mashed vegetables and took one of the candelabras into the hallway. She wandered down the hallway to the left and tried the first door. A rush of cold air bothered the flames and she shivered. The room smelled of wood polish and neglect. The muted light from the candles revealed nothing of interest: a ridiculously long dining table, a sideboard and china cabinet. The connecting door led through to a formal lounge room.

Memories of Chanel No.5 and tobacco, hung in the old air. Stiff-looking couches dominated the room accompanied by smatterings of ashtrays that looked more like ornate tables. A large mirror sat on the mantelpiece, broadcasting ghost-like images of the room. In the centre of the mantle piece was a large crystal decanter—the only object with any hint of permanence in the mirror. Memories of her Grandfather swept over her as she opened the decanter and sniffed: him sipping two fingers of neat scotch while revising the form guide, a transistor radio replaying the day's turf results in the background, her turning the pages of a book that got thicker the older she got.

Nostalgia died when she glanced into the mirror and saw her face obliterated in the reflection. Cracks made her flesh appear clawed, hanging in strips, small unblemished patches residing where the decay didn't eat in; all

framed by hair hanging in long twisted knots, water dripping from the ends. The disfiguration—so complete—she was beyond recognition.

The sound of the stopper bouncing on the hearth snapped her attention away from her horrific duplicate.

‘Shit!’

On hands and knees she searched, fingers, fuelled by panic, floundering in the dark. She finally found the stopper lying flush against the base of the fire grate. Relief whistled through pursed lips as she reached for the candelabrum. Cross-legged, she sat turning the crystal stopper over and over in disbelief it wasn’t even chipped. She put it aside and leaned over the small pyre of scrunched newspaper and kindling in the firebox to read the date on the newspaper: *Monday, 28th October 1963.*

The newspaper disintegrated as she tried to pull it free. She lifted one piece of wood, collapsing the entire structure. At the bottom of the rabble of dust and wood, the corner of a photograph protruded.

Jo excavated the photograph. Under the light of the candles, she wiped it clean against her t-shirt and a woman in a straw hat smiled up at her. A baby, resting on her narrow hip, twisted away from the photographer, a pudgy hand aloft, reaching for the leafy bough above. The woman looked tired, her lips curled into the caricature of a smile.

On the back, in looping cursive:

Eleanor & Gustav, Elyora homestead, July 1942.

Jo placed the candelabrum on the mantelpiece, noted with no surprise the 40s-style clock with hands frozen at 1.37, and flopped in the nearest armchair to examine the photo.

‘Who are you, Eleanor?’ Jo asked. ‘And why are you so unhappy?’

Unhappy?

It’s just under the smile. In her eyes.

‘Who wanted to burn you? And why?’

Devoid of answers, the Marlowe side of her brain suspiciously silent, she got up and flicked through the rack of albums beside the gramophone table.

Caught between the cover of two albums was a 78 of the Andrews Sisters’ *Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree*. She hesitated, reminded of the way the song possessed her out on the Elyora Road.

Possessed?

A touch of sunstroke, more like? Dehydration?

In the safety of the house, the wine melting her reservations, eroding the

collection of awful memories, she pulled the record from its cover and placed it on the turntable. Wound the crank.

How dangerous can one song be?

The needle dropped into the first groove and a looping crackle led into a slow, descending trombone baseline, followed by a blast of trumpets. Photo abandoned against the candelabrum, she began her search for a novel to read.

One entire shelf was devoted to Agatha Christie books, all hardbacks—more than 30 in all. Flicking to the imprint page of *The Moving Finger*, the last book on the row, she saw it was published in 1942.

A first edition!

The slow gait of the song's second verse ended and the candles flared. The double-time chorus blared through the speaker and a fire sprung to life in the fireplace. The sound of a glass falling onto floor boards. Female laughter. Then she saw the silhouette of a couple swing-dancing across the wall in front of her. Jo turned to see a woman in a long red dress spin out and then back into the arms of her dancing partner. Waistcoat unbuttoned, shirt sleeves rolled up; his bowtie hung unknotted beneath his collar.

'You're as beautiful as you were the first time we danced,' the man said, his face flushed.

'And you said you couldn't dance,' she teased, her German accent giving the words a hard edge.

'In the worst German you ever had the misfortune to hear, or so you told me later.' Her hand went up to his cheek.

'What do you do in Flensburg?' I asked you in English. The look of relief on your face, *leibling*.'

'Go to the Opera to be enchanted by beautiful women,' I said, knowing there was no point in lying to you.' He nuzzled her neck.

'And how they gossiped. They didn't understand the way the heart stretches. How who, not where, is the importance,' she said, her body straining against his. 'All they cared about was that you were an *ausländer*.'

'Eleanor,' he sighed, pushing the dress straps from her shoulder. 'My Eleanor.'

'Eleanor?' Jo breathed and took a step toward them.

The needle screeched across the vinyl, catching in the middle and playing flat, ticking loops.

'Jo?'

Lazarus lifted the needle from the final groove and rested the arm in the

cradle. 'Dinner's almost done—you a Christie fan, too?' he asked, tipping his head to read the title on the book spine.

'I prefer Chandler,' she mumbled as the fantastical version of the sitting room dissolved. 'I'll ... I'll be right with you.'

She pushed the book back into the space and looked along the shelves for Chandler, stopping at a worn, leather bound bible. Her father had one similar, handed down from eldest son to eldest son. Resting the bible on the mantle, she traced her finger down the handwritten entries stopping at the marriage of Eleanor and Ethan in 1938.

Ethan's grandparents?

A closer look revealed three things: they had only one child—Gustav, who died, aged six months, in October 1942.

Eleanor died a month later.

They were the final entries in the bible.

The kitchen looked festive: two candelabra, an embroidered tablecloth, slightly tarnished silverware and a vase of handcut flowers. He had appeared downstairs in a clean shirt and shorts, smelling faintly of aftershave.

Jo bothered the pieces of omelette with her fork, moving them from one side of the plate, rather than eating them.

'I'm sorry it's not much,' Lazarus broke the silence, watching her fork skitter around the outside of the plate. 'Forced simplicity. The ultimate downsize.'

'No, it's fine.' She skewered a piece of egg and chewed slowly on it. 'Doesn't it get lonely here, if it's just you and Gus?'

'More than you'd know,' Lazarus said topping up her wine glass. 'Gus is pretty decent company for someone whose conversational repertoire starts and ends at 'bah'. But it's ... hard.'

Jo took a long sip from the wine, trying to figure out how to swing the conversation the way she wanted it to go. Without seeming nosy. 'You inherited the house from your grandparents?'

The bottle hovered over the top of Lazarus's glass. 'It's complicated.'

'I'm not planning on going anywhere.' When he said nothing, just stared at the label on the bottle, she continued. 'If you're lonely why don't you just go back to the city? Mum always said you only make things as complicated as you want them to be. No-one's forcing you to stay, right?'

Lazarus tipped the bottle then changed his mind. Plate in hand, he dumped the rest of his dinner in the bin.

‘It’s not so much an inheritance as a legacy. And it comes with certain *obligations*.’ The sound of the tap running, and the wheeze and pop of the washing up liquid, filled the space she didn’t dare to. ‘Freedom is an illusion. When you realise that—life is easier.’

Jo scoffed the last of the omelette and joined him at the sink, trying to reframe the conversation so she could ask him about Eleanor and Gustav.

‘One cooks, one cleans. That’s the rule where I come from,’ Jo said, pushing him aside with her hip. ‘Go check on Gus? I’ll have these done by the time you come back, and we can finish the wine outside.’

By then I’ll have worked out how to ask my twenty questions.

‘Would you play for me? It’s been so long since I heard anything vaguely like live music.’

‘How long?’ she asked, dropping the plates through the bubbles—but he’d gone, taking half the light with him.

Sing ‘Eleanor Rigby’. That’d be a conversation starter.

Or ask him who Gus was named after.

She picked up the cutlery and dropped it in the sink, retrieving the cast-iron frying pan from the side of the combustion stove.

Why care about the woman in the old photo? Who is she to me?

Who do you want her to be?

I should mind my own business.

But you won’t! Will you, Marlowe?

One plate sat drip-drying in the rack and as she reached for the second the bottom of the sink fell away. The worn lino beneath her feet turned to sand and water lapped at her toes.

A naked couple lay entwined on a boulder in the middle of a river, their bodies yielding to each other along the contour of the granite. A sheath of dark hair obscured the woman’s face. She grunted with pleasure and arched her back, bare breasts thrust toward the full moon. Long, anchoring fingernails dug into her lover’s tattoo.

She recognised the kenji design. ‘Hal!’

He laid beneath the woman, cupping her breasts.

The woman brushed aside her hair—the same motion swept the clouds across the moon. The temperature plummeted and two slate-blue eyes burned into hers from across the dark expanse of water, the rest of her face hidden in

the shadows.

‘He is divine, Josephine.’ Her voice sounded like the movement of water against rocks. ‘Do you understand what you let go?’

The clouds shifted and the moonlight penetrated the water, illuminating the thousands of bones littering the river floor.

‘Come closer.’ Her eyes faded. Scarlet lips glowed. A skeletal finger beckoned her into the water. ‘Just one step.’

A scream caught in her throat. The moon came out from beneath the clouds. Blood, not lipstick, smeared the woman’s mouth and a sickening recognition filled her. The woman who cradled Hal’s flaccid body, who bit deep into his water-logged cheek, was the woman in the mirror.

Me!

A hand fell on Jo’s shoulder and the scream displaced in her throat. The sound of running water brought her back to the kitchen.

‘Oh, shit-shit-shit.’

The old taps resisted her effort to turn them off quickly and water cascaded over the edge of the sink.

She turned to Ethan, standing behind her. ‘I don’t know what it is with me and water. I’m sorry.’

She grabbed a tea towel from the bench and dropped it into the puddle, then squatted to soak up the water. Her hands shook as they herded the water across the lino, the effort doing little to hold the water or dislodge the image of staring at her gruesome self from across the river.

Ethan grabbed another tea towel and joined her on the floor. Their efforts collided; his fingers stopped on hers and she looked up, surprised at the touch.

‘You’re shaking!’

She pulled her hand from under his and stood up. ‘We need a mop.’

Lazarus caught her arm, stopping her from walking away. ‘It’ll dry in this heat. Leave it.’

His face flickered in and out of the light and Jo had the same feeling he was going to kiss her. But not on the hand this time. Taking her into him. Devouring her. Just like that woman...

...like I did to Hal.

‘You’re shaking,’ Lazarus repeated. His grip on her tightened a little. ‘If you’ve seen or felt something strange, you can tell me.’

His face hardened. Eyes filled with a mixture of dread and ... longing.

Longing?

Shadows consumed half of his face but rather than give him a menacing look it gave him an air of vulnerability. She wanted to reach out and place her fingers on his cheek. Trade her fear for his pain.

He's not real. If I touch him my fingers will pass right through him.

He'll pass right through me.

'My wife, she saw and heard things.'

She was here? Did she kill herself?

And she realised she'd thought it aloud. 'I mean—sorry. Fuck!' She tried to walk off. 'It's none of my business.'

His hand released her arm and she stopped, stared at the pool of water, wiggling her toes in it.

Benign. Just water.

'She drowned. In the river beyond the clearing.'

'Hal thought there was a river,' she said quietly, stepping onto a patch of dry lino.

'Yeah, there's a river,' he repeated, words shaped like razorblades, cutting into her. 'It starts and ends there.' Wine glass and the bottle in hand, he walked past her. 'I'm going outside. Don't feel obliged to join me.'

The heat of the day loitered in a perfect summer's evening, the sort that the New England Highlands enjoyed once—maybe twice—a year. The stars played peekaboo as an almost full moon rose above the tree line. Jo lurked on the bottom step with her guitar, watching Ethan.

Underfoot, the grass was warm and muffled her barefoot approach. The wooden frame of the deckchair creaked when she sunk into it, and creaked again when she relocated to sit cross-legged on the grass. Her hair fell in a curtain, hiding her face from Ethan's gaze.

How gauche I am. How insensitive.

Eyes closed, she imagined herself on the back step of her parent's house with her guitar, where she'd spent the years of her adolescence trying to figure out how she felt, what she wanted. Especially after her mother died.

Music, the conduit. The connection. Moving in and out like the tide, shifting her consciousness like a weather vane in a storm—pointing her in this direction and that. Discriminating between the choices, until the tempest passed and one path, one choice, remained.

She took the capo from her pocket, strapped it onto the neck of the guitar.

Her fingers moved lithely and the opening bars of *I Am A Rock* melded with the night air. She sang quietly. Hesitant. But her voice built and surged across the verses. And then faded. The final chord hung in the air and Ethan sighed.

Before he said anything, she pulled the capo off and sung a pared back version of *Who Are You* moving to the *Big Empty*, *Endless Summer* and *Hearts A Mess* ... losing herself in the music. The chaos of thoughts stilled.

Jo sensed his departure as the chair behind her groaned during the opening bars of *When Doves Cry*. She kept playing even after he walked off toward the house.

I tried. Short of being obvious ... Chicago's Hard to Say I'm Sorry

When Dove's Cry though ... what exactly were you trying to say?

At the end of the song the applause shocked her.

'*When Dove's Cry* kept *Dancing in the Dark* from a number one spot,' Ethan said from somewhere behind her and she swivelled to peer at him over the neck of the Maton.

He had a blanket folded over his arm, another bottle of wine and her glass.

'How do you know so much about music?'

He pulled the deck chair back and spread out the blanket with her help.

'Having you here opens things for me. Wine?' he offered.

She nodded and sat next to him, the guitar laid across her lap.

'Do you do requests?' he asked.

'I have a friend who plays piano, does gigs in fancy bars in Sydney,' she said. 'He says, if he had a dollar for every time someone requested *Piano Man* he could give up music and live like Hugh Heffner.'

Ethan lay on his side, propped up on his elbow. 'Do you sing how you feel? I always wanted to know that, but it felt like a stupid question to ask.'

She shook her head. 'Not for me. I feel what I sing. It's like a train of thought.'

'*When Dove's Cry*?'

'I was lost in the music. It has a way of, I guess, moving toward an end point. If you let it.'

Ethan's breathing sounded uneven. It reminded her of how she struggled to breathe normally the first time Benny crawled into her bed.

'Did your folks play?'

'No, but they loved music. Though Dad claimed nothing after Led Zeppelin's *In Through the Out Door* was worth listening to. Said music packed up and retired to the Bahamas after that.' She laid the guitar down and rolled

on her side to face him. 'Were you a music journo before you came here?'

'I'd have loved to see FaunaBate play.'

Jo sighed and rolled on her back, hands folded over her chest. 'I always believed we'd make it. That FaunaBate was the real thing. You know? And I thought our first interstate gig was the *big break*.

'I woke up this morning stupid, crazy excited. The big break just hours away. Not days or weeks or months or years.' She rolled back onto her side and laid her head on her outstretched arm. 'My granddad said you're only ever one step away from knowing nothing. Today feels like that. The Big Empty.'

He reached across to push a stray strand of hair behind her ear. 'This morning I woke up and thought it would be just another day of Gus and I. Then you appeared. Walking down the road.'

She closed her eyes, waited for him to seize the opportunity to kiss her. *There are worse ways to rebound.* She'd watched Hal do it enough times to know.

'I think we should go inside,' he said, the words struggling to find their way out of his throat.

The dark hid the blush burning her cheeks as she rolled onto her back.

How could I be so off the mark?

Clouds whipped across the sky. The stars disappeared one by one. Distant strains of *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree* rose up from the bottom of the clearing, riding on the freshening air.

Everything sounds like the Andrews Sisters here.

Ethan looked in the same direction she was gazing.

'Let's go,' he said, pulling her to her feet and passing her the guitar as lightning flickered in the distance. 'That storm's headed our way.'

With a hand on the small on her back, he cast a final glance in the direction of the river and gently propelled her toward the house, the rug and the wine left to the elements and ants.

The wire door slammed behind them and they stood in the hallway, the guitar between them.

Time it right and Benny'll walk in through the back door and find Ethan between my thighs. Caught in the act. Just like I did with him this morning.

And Benny's betrayal resurfaced. The way the morning sun sliced through the venetian blinds and made it look like she was seeing the entire thing

through bars. The way the guy had been clutching the bed head, grunting obscenities, while Benny pounded him from behind. The way Benny's muscles bulged as he held tight to the guy's hip on one side and his shoulder on the other. The way he hadn't even bothered to look surprised, or guilty, when he finally saw her standing in the doorway.

Like he wanted her to see.

If this is payback, you're only sinking to his level.

Ethan's hand curled around the guitar and eased it from her grasp. Placed it carefully against the wall. His hand slipped around her waist and he started to pull her closer, then stopped.

She reached behind, threaded her fingers in his and pulled herself to him.

I don't want to be alone.

'Not here,' he whispered, taking her by the hand into the kitchen, pressing her gently into the wall by the doorway. One hand settled on the wall above her shoulder and he leaned into her, his breath brushing her cheek. And she waited for him to kiss her. But he traced the line of her jaw and collarbone with his finger, followed the curve of her breasts, trickled down over her ribs, terminating beneath the waistband of her shorts, stopping to caress the point of her hipbone.

The waiting was too much.

Her lips were hard and demanding against his, her tongue flicking between their lips. She pulled his shirt away from his body and pushed it up. Chest smooth; a small thatch of hair in the centre. Chocolate coloured nipples swelled at the touch of her tongue. Stomach contracting under the butterflies she drew with her finger tips. She kissed and licked and nibbled at him, all the time moving lower.

Finally he reefed his shirt over his head. And she followed. T-shirt. Shorts. Stripping them from her body with no desire to tease him, to draw it out.

Ethan reached behind her and, with one clammy hand, freed the clasp on her bra. The straps fell from her shoulders and the lace bra held for a moment then dropped to the floor. She tugged at his belt buckle and a second pair of shorts joined the trail of discarded clothing.

'Not here,' Ethan pulled away breathless, trying to ignore the insistence of her hand stroking him through the thin cotton boxer shorts. The bench stopped him from moving back further. She hooked her fingers in the elastic, pulled the boxers down and knelt before him. He gasped when her mouth closed around his cock.

‘Not here,’ Ethan repeated with considerable effort and pulled himself free of her mouth. He kicked the boxers free and sunk to the floor in front of her.

‘This isn’t about *him*. Or her.’

His cock poked against her leg and all she could think of was the thin scrap of lace between them. She could push it aside, straddle him right there, back pressed into the kitchen cupboards, his face between her breasts.

‘This is just about you and me,’ he said, his voice strangled. ‘And whatever comes of that.’

Before she could wrap her fingers around him again and demolish the last of his resolve, he hauled her off the floor and led her upstairs.

Rain battered the iron roof. Lightning flickered in the window. Ethan dozed beside her. She ran her fingers over her breasts, nipples raw and tingling. The nerves deep within her abdomen still quivered. Ethan had kissed and caressed, licked and stroked her to orgasm. Taking as much pleasure outside of her as he had inside. He drew it out a second time until the delicious frustration forced her to finish it. Knowing how his body responded, what he liked best, she manoeuvred herself on top and straddled him. His mouth clamped around her nipple, her thighs gripping his hips, the momentum built until she finally she’d cried out, loud enough to wake the dead, as the heat exploded and consumed her.

Now his hand rested on her chest, her heart-beat rebounding against his cool palm.

But she had to pee. And the sticky mess between her thighs, cold and congealed, demanded attention. If she stayed and went to sleep it was guaranteed Hal or Benny would catch her, dishevelled and stinking of sex, as she dashed back to her room in the morning.

‘Don’t go.’

He caught her arm and she sat down on the side of the bed.

‘I’m just—’ His lips trailing across one shoulder stopped her protests. A hand glided over her hip and down her stomach. Fingers slipped between her legs and grazed her clitoris. She shuddered and her eyes slipped closed; total body surrender easier than justifications for leaving.

Downstairs the sound of the wire door slamming jolted the sensation of pleasure aside, making room for the guilt to bleed in.

‘I can’t.’ She pulled away and stood up. ‘If I stay, it’ll just make it more

awkward in the morning.’

Lightning flared in the window behind her and thunder followed in the distance. She remembered too late their clothes lay abandoned on the kitchen floor downstairs and she hurriedly pulled on a stray shirt hanging on the bedpost.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said. ‘I thought—’

‘It was good, don’t get me wrong. But,’ she struggled to find the right words. Words that ...

... *won’t demolish his ego.*

‘I thought there was something between us. Something ... more than just—’

‘Friends with benefits.’

The mattress squeaked and he stood behind her. She flinched as his arms slithered around her, reaching beneath the cotton for her warm skin. He kissed her neck. Rolled her nipple between his fingers. ‘It was more than that. You felt what I felt?’

‘I felt sorry for you. I felt sorry for *me.*’

‘A mercy fuck?’ He let go of her and lurched back like she had hit him.

The rain hammered on the roof and the curtain blew around him.

She pulled the shirt around her. ‘What did you think was going on?’

He pushed the curtain away and took a step closer to her. ‘That you’d stay.’

‘*Here?* With you?’

‘Would it be so bad?’

‘You even have to ask that?’

The claustrophobia of a future with him, trapped in the middle of nowhere, with just him and the baby, pressed in around her and she fled the room, slamming into Hal in the hallway.

He grabbed her by the forearms and stared. ‘So that’s how it is, is it?’ His face contorted in anger and he pushed her out of the way.

‘Hal?’

‘Shut the fuck up.’

‘It’s not what you think.’

‘Then what the fuck is it?’ he yelled, stomping away from her, slamming bedroom door.

In the dark of her room, crying so hard her whole body shook, she found the

torch in the side pocket of her backpack and wrapped the large pink towel around her. The stairs groaned under foot and the creaks of the cooling house sounded like whispers as she crept along the hallways, the torch cutting a tiny swathe of light through the darkness.

The rain lashed the back of the house and she ran across the verandah to the bathroom-cum-laundry enclosed at the end. She closed the door and locked it, then hung the towel on a hook, laid the torch on the floor and turned on the taps. Hot, earthy water—river water—spouted from the dual shower heads and she stood between them choking on hiccupping sobs, scrubbing at her body with a half-used cake of Sunlight soap. Beneath the dripping hood of her hair, she watched the water and the soap-suds disappear down the drain until the water ran clear.

The sound of singing came to her, not borne on the wind, but travelling through the plumbing. Words migrated through the sluice of water running over her body, their synesthetic touch gentle and soothing as a warm flannel. The movement was fantastical. Hypnotic.

The drain blocked and water pooled at her feet, the level rising quickly up the low tiled lip of the shower recess. The singing reverberated through the water, into her feet and up her legs. The voices sung her down to the river, promising to wash away the stain of her mistakes.

She ripped aside the shower curtain and ran, naked, for the door. Her wet fingers struggled with the lock and she punched the door in frustration. The lock seized and she pulled the knob, shook it, shoved against the door and finally collapsed, crying hysterically at its base, uselessly banging her fists against it.

The singing intensified. The fibro walls shook and the pipes shrieked. The water spilled over the shower lip and crept across the tiles. Fingers splayed against the wood, blood breaking through newly formed splits in her knuckles, she willed the door to give way.

Release me! Pllleeease!

The roar of the rain on the iron roof grew deafening. Lightning burned brightly below the door and thunder rocked the house. Cold air howled through the space between the door and the floor, chilling her as she raised herself up onto her knees to batter the door.

You let all the women who came before me down to the river. Let me go too.

The house pressed in around her and for a moment all was silent: the storm, the singing, her own beating fists, muted.

All the others were not you, Josephine.

My Eleanor.

The house promised to protect her and she crawled back into the shower. Crouched beneath the spray, the hot jets flailed against her shoulders. The blood on her knuckles rinsed away, dissolved into obscurity in the trapped water. She reached up and turned the taps off. The drain exhaled bubbles and after a watery gasp, began to suck the water from the shower recess, the voices syphoning away with it.

With nothing left to lose, she surrendered and accepted the house's vow to replace the turmoil with peace, and the bad memories with happy ones. The same promises poured into the house's foundations seven decades earlier and echoed ever since in the stone and mortar, in the nails and wood and panes of the house that Ethan Lazarus built.

A juvenile rooster, strangling the dawn cry, woke her. An unfamiliar room came into focus through slitted eyelids. A jackhammer pain drilled into the back of her eyes and she wailed—the sound reverberating with sickening intensity in her head.

Later, a candle flickered in the dark.

'Hey, Jo,' Hal whispered, gently placing a cool washcloth across her forehead.

'The house,' she croaked. 'It did something.'

'You're running a fever.'

'I said *yes* because the women in the river wanted me.'

He stroked her clammy cheek. 'Shhhh, you need to rest,' he said, and leaned forward to kiss her cracked lips as the darkness reformed around her.

Jo bolted upright and screamed, 'I'm burning.'

Hal, frightened out of sleep, sat blinking in a chair beside the bed. She started to climb out of bed and Hal scrambled to stop her.

'It's too hot. Too hot,' she screamed. 'Let me go.'

'It's the fever,' he said, letting all his weight fall on her wrists until the fight emptied out of her.

Tears fell on her fiery face, like the first raindrops of a summer afternoon thunderstorm. She tried to reach up to catch them, but the darkness kept her

arm pinned to the damp sheet.

The rain woke her. It was late—much later than she thought. Her lower abdomen pulsed and she put her hand over it. The spark of an urgent memory struggled for traction on the slippery edge of her fevered brain. The memory failed to take hold, and she closed her eyes. Her hand slipped to the mattress, and the mosquito net, pulled to the side, fell back into place.

The sound of running water echoed around the room, and she felt the giddy sensation of standing on linoleum as water pooled around her toes. *Hal*. The word flashed in neon swirls, as though squeezed from a giant techno-coloured tube of toothpaste. A beanie-wearing spider named Boris hid behind a fortress of peach tins. Crude and disturbing, two words in block letters shook free from the ground, rising like sky scrapers: Fauna Bate. A dog wound around her legs, long fur tangled and matted.

‘Benny you bad dog,’ she scolded and it ran from her and hid in a shed where the smell of road kill, rotting in the summer heat, made her gag.

She tried to call out for water, but the words evaporated on her lips.

Songs swirled, condensed and finally broke in the cloudburst of a single lyric, repeated: *falling farther from just what we are*.

Falling down. Never to get up again.

Shivering. A body quake. The sheet. Nothing. Cold. So cold. Curling up foetal. Exhausted. Voices head-butting. Skull throbbing.

...Do you sing what you feel?

...Nothing decent came after Led Zeppelin’s *In Through the Out Door*.

...I need coffee. NOW.

...There are hundreds of shoes under the house. Like the Holocaust.

...You are as beautiful as the first night I danced with you.

...They’re coming, Eleanor.

... Josephine. My Eleanor.

The slipstream of dreams caught and spun her into a kaleidoscope world she could taste just as much as she could feel, see and hear.

Germany: cold and salty. She stood on a rocky beach and made a wish to never be cold again and threw a shiny *pfennig* into the water.

Rough and warm—the feel of his hands on hers. He was in Flensburg to further his architecture degree. She fell in love first with the freedom in his accent, then the careless way he held himself. But it was the taste of tobacco, in their stolen kisses, she remembered at night.

...A telegram: a promoter inviting her to sing at Manchester Opera House. The small slip heavy in her pocket as Ethan knelt and proposed. Her Father said *nein*, to England. And to Ethan. The *Auslander!* So they eloped to Gretna Green. Married by the blacksmith's forge, the 'I dos' tasted of ash and iron and forever. He was first on his feet, from the private box, as the standing ovation spread through the audience on her opening night.

...One last telegram. This one indelible with his father's words: *Return home on next ship STOP war imminent STOP I forbid you to enlist STOP You are needed at home. STOP.*

'You'll love Australia,' he told her, his drawl peppered with something else. But she couldn't place it at the time. Didn't wish to. All she could think was that her wish to escape the cold had been granted.

She woke a final time, the thin sheet a sodden shroud, wrapped tight around her body. The heat haze distorted the shape of the bay window and a slight breeze sucked the lace curtains in and out of the gap between the window and the sill like an old man wheezing through the holes where his teeth used to be.

The heat: her own personal Hades. She yearned for the cold, for Flensburg and chill of her father's house. The *pfennig* ... she willed it returned to her hand from the depths of the Baltic; her wish revoked so she could go home—war or not.

Her parched mouth ached and when she tried to lick her lips. They were cracked and tasted of blood. She slowly untangled herself from the stinking cotton and sat up. With great care, she swung her feet over the edge of the bed and flexed her toes. One hand on the cot, she stood and wobbled. Using both the cot and bed as supports, she took one hesitant, shuffling step after another, until she came to the end of the bed and risked the distance to the bureau, and

the jug, unaided. The warm water stung her dehydrated mouth. Her throat resisted swallowing and the water spilled over her chin and down her naked chest. The room tilted and she replaced the jug, lest she drop it. Arms folded atop the bureau, she lowered her head and waited for the dizziness to pass.

Delicate women fainted.

If you listened to the gossip in town, Eleanor Lazarus was many things. No-one had ever accused her of fragility though. Even last summer, when she'd been heavily pregnant, she hadn't succumbed to the worst heatwave on record.

She pulled on a pale pink shift, wasted muscles protesting when she lifted her arms over her head. Dressed enough for the circumstances, she half-shuffled, half-walked to the door and opened it.

'It sounds like a threat to me,' a familiar voice snapped.

'I've no interest 'er nibs hidden upstairs.'

She took two cautious steps out into the long hallway, her hand on the wall.

'I'm not hiding anything. She's ill.'

'Sumthink's up. Hell. Last time it rained in this bloody town was October 1974. Then the new sheila arrives and, holy bloody Moses, storms and rain every night. I'm not the only one puttin' two and two together and waitin' for somethink to come up.'

'Droughts break eventually.'

She moved slowly so her footsteps wouldn't be heard below.

'Not here they don't, mate. I haven't seen that boy with the beanie around, ay.'

'And I haven't seen the dreadlocked one since *he* went into town.'

She found the top of the stairs and sat down to listen.

The voices paused for a moment, chewing over the words, then, 'We ain't havin' no pooftas here. I'm not spending the rest of eternity with one hand coverin' me arse.'

'I didn't kill the one with the beanie, if that's what you're alluding to. He's just adept at playing hidey.'

'You think this is a game, mate? You havin' fun yet? *Are ya?*' The sound of crockery shattering made her jump. 'There's more'an hundred blokes up there in the town who ain't been with a woman, some for more'an four decades. They're gonna come down here, to find out why you ain't moved up to town like you're meant to and when they do, they're gonna be damn pissed to find

the malarkey you got goin' here.'

'What makes you think they'll come this close to the river?'

There was silence.

'Let's get one thing straight, matey. This is where you rot for the mistakes you made in your other life.'

It ripped up the stairs as a snarl. She shivered and pressed into the wall.

'There's no startin' over here.'

'That's where you're wrong. Old man Lazarus built this house to honour her.'

'Honour her.' A dry laugh. 'Half the stinkin' town is gone because of her. She drowned me sister-in-law and me brother shot himself rather than live on without her. And she's gone and turned the tables on us all, bringin' all them outtatowners in. Don't talk to me about honourin' that bitch.'

'You said this was penance. We were meant to finish what he started after she died. He didn't build this house as punishment. He built this as a home for her, of good memories of their life together, so she wouldn't be alone.'

'Don't get more alone than face down in the river, mate.'

'The research station didn't just release her. It amplified his hope. We've all got a chance to be free. He's alive in these walls, waiting to be reunited with her.'

'I ain't heard a bigger load of bullshit in decades.' A chair scraped across the floor, followed by footsteps across floorboards. 'You can call yourself Ethan Lazarus if you want. And you can call 'er nibs upstairs Eleanor and pretend she's your missus. But you ain't him, ay. And she ain't her. You can't rewrite history. That storm brewin' every night, it ain't just a bit of bad weather, mate.'

The wire door slammed and silence returned to the house.

She sat for a long time trying to make sense of the conversation, shivering despite the heat. In the end she closed her eyes. Lay her hot cheek against the cool inner wall of the stairwell and slipped away.

'Jesus!' Someone said above her. She struggled to open her eyelids, heavy with sleep.

'Ethan?' she whispered, his face zooming in and out of focus. 'What happened?'

He reached out and helped her sit up. Beneath her feet, the stairs dropped away.

'When did you get out of bed?'

'I don't know.' Her head swarmed with ghosts of conversations and things she thought she remembered, but they disappeared when she tried to grasp them. 'I was dreaming there was an argument.'

'You could have fallen,' he said. 'Let me put you back in bed.'

'No, no more bed,' she cried. 'I'm too hot. Take me downstairs, to the cool.'

'You're sick,' he said, almost whining. 'You *need to be in bed*.'

'The heat is killing me.' She started to weep. 'I feel like I died.'

'It's the fever. I almost lost you.'

She buried her head in his shoulder and he stroked her knotted hair.

'I could put one of the canvas chairs under the mulberry tree for you?' he said. 'If you promise to try some soup.'

'But it will be hot. All I can think of is snow and ice and cold weather and a shiny pfennig and how ... how I'm cursed.'

'Shhhh,' he soothed and gently massaged her scalp. 'You're going to be okay. You remember who you are?'

She pulled her face out of his damp shoulder and stared at him. Of course she knew who she was. She was ... was ... *Eleanor*.

Eleanor Gertrude Lazarus nee Waitz.

She held her right hand up, felt the dip where her ring usually sat.

'I took it off,' he said, stroking her cheek. 'You lost so much weight I was afraid you'd lose it. I'll run a shower and get you some clean clothes. And when Gus wakes I'll set the sprinkler up under the mulberry.'

She remembered them talking about pumping water up from the river.

'Just like you promised? Before I got sick, *liebling*?'

He nodded and kissed her on the cheek, then swept her up in his arms to carry her down the stairs.

'Just as I promised, Eleanor.'

The breeze carried the promise of rain and took the edge off the sweltering heat. The mercury dropped twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit in ten minutes. Ethan shut off the sprinkler, dragged the hoses under the house and returned the tray with the soup bowl and teacup to the kitchen. Enlivened by the cooler temperature and the soup, she eased herself out of the canvas chair she'd half-sat, half-laid in, reading the new Miss Marple mystery, *The Moving Finger*, her sister had sent from the United States. Gus played in a large, muddy puddle,

his small hands splashing at the water in delight. She carefully picked him up and wrapped his naked body in a striped towel, pressed him against her and swayed from side-to-side humming a song she couldn't remember the name of. Gus squirmed to be free of the towel and her embrace, his arms reaching for the ground.

Ethan returned and collapsed the canvas chairs, stowed them on the verandah out of the wind and disappeared inside the house again. The trail of muddy water Gus had been playing in snaked up the hill to where she stood, and she watched it pool around her feet, turning the dirt to mud.

When the water had soaked into the ground, she looked across the tree line to the broiling air in the east and the enormous thunderhead looming above it. Thunder reverberated in the distance and lightning danced along the bruised underbelly of the storm. The wind picked up and she leant into it, letting it claw and drag her hair free from the loose bun. The skirt of her sundress snapped around her bare legs. Mulberry leaves tore from the branches above.

A sonorous boom shook the ground and a shower of purple-red berries fell like clotted blood, the riper ones exploding and staining the white and green floral fabric. Lightning ripped open the sky and lit the clearing in an x-ray brilliance that burnt an otherworldliness into it, stripping away the mock familiarity. She welcomed the transformation. The foreignness soothed her.

Gus wailed and she turned to stare at the baby in her arms: eyes squeezed so tight they disappeared in the flesh of his face, mouth wide-open and red in contrast. Staring into the gaping, angry hole she felt as though she would fall in and be lost forever within him if she didn't look away. She covered his head with the towel and pulled him into the comfort of her emaciated breasts, bouncing him up and down.

Tiny dust clouds popped and fizzed on the ground in the wake of large raindrops, a peppered staccato that built rapidly into sheets of horizontal rain slicing across the clearing.

'This is where you go to rot for the mistakes in your other life.' That was what the man in her dream had said.

The branches of the mulberry bobbed and shook and bent in the wind above her. She imagined sinking her fingers into the moist earth below, burrowing to find an anchor against the voices.

... On her knees she planted rows of lavender and rosemary alongside the house. Bright petunias watered in the newly turned garden beds at the front.

The townswomen laughed at her, their shrieks rising and falling in the wind.

This is not Germany. If you want bright, pretty flowers go home, Nazi bitch.

She pulled her hands free and madly wiped the filth down the front of her saturated dress. The wiping turned to slashing. She knelt on the black and white tiles, dragging Ethan's razor through the soft flesh of her wrists. A carmine flood welled up and seeped down her arms, collected and spread outward like the tide that had flowed from her each time her body rejected the life growing within.

The humiliation of her tormenters bled out through her wrists, along with the pain and betrayal, the grief and the loss.

Across the clearing white sheets and towels, bloomed with stains, billowing in the wind; she heard failure in each squeaking rotation of the shiny Hills Hoist. The wind caught it and turned it faster. And faster and faster and faster until it became swirling waters and within the vortex women's voices surged forth as the river broke its banks, roiling in the flash flood beyond the clearing.

'Eleanor? ELEANOR! Get out of the storm.'

Get out? I can't leave the one place I desperately want to escape, she thought.

Less a thought, more an echo, augmented across the decades, belonged to hundreds of faceless women entranced by the a carried on a cool breeze on a blistering summer afternoon. The song both a lure to the river and a promise of cool water on sweaty skin. The last the thought of the women, now nothing more than bones scattered along the river bed.

'ELEANOR! For Chrissakes we need to get inside!'

A scream tore from her throat and she dropped to her knees, abandoning the baby to the mud. Rain drove through the canopy of mulberry and she was buffeted back and forth by the gale. Strains of the Andrews Sisters howled in harmony with the wail of the wind and she jammed her hands over her ears.

Eleanor was singing her down to the river.

Eleanor—forever free from the threats and terror, and rough bandages binding her wrists.

Eleanor. Face down. Floating.

Eleanor. In the river. Exacting her revenge.

The slap brought her back to the present. Ethan lifted Gus out of the mud and yanked her to her feet, propelling them all toward the house, through the onslaught. His hand slipped on her wet, muddy arm and he grabbed hold of her dress to tug and drag her behind him as best he could. With each step she became heavier and Ethan struggled to pull her along.

‘No! Leave me.’

When they came to the Hills Hoist she leapt forward to push him away. ‘I’m dead. Let her have me.’

‘You are not dead,’ he screamed in her face and they struggled beneath the washing line, spinning like a whirly-gig. ‘You will not die this time.’

The wind whipped his words away before they reached her ears.

He grabbed the belt on her dress and hauled her along by it. His hold on the baby was slipping and he begged her to help him or he’d drop him. Their baby boy. At the house he shoved her up the back steps as a deafening crack tore through the yard, followed by the scream of wood. They both turned to see the mulberry tree, rent in half by a lightning strike, crash to the ground, the smell of charred wood and ozone singeing the air.

She collapsed on the cold, wooden steps and he left her there to take Gus inside. Her stomach threw itself against her gullet, until there was nothing left to purge. When he returned he found her passed out.

‘This is where you come to rot for the mistakes you made in your other life.’ That’s what he said,’ she whispered, her teeth chattering.

She let him lead her inside and they sat side-by-side in front of the combustion stove.

‘Life isn’t about mistakes. It’s about hope,’ he said.

‘There’s no hope,’ she said looking up through lucid eyes, ‘Not for Eleanor or Ethan. And not for us.’

The pre-dawn laughter of kookaburras stole through the open windows and woke her. She rolled away from Ethan’s warm body and eased out of bed. The first smudge of dawn lit the sky to the east as she stepped onto the back verandah, pulling her robe tighter around her. The twisted corpse of the mulberry tree sat beyond the Hills Hoist, a hulking silhouette against the new day. Dark prints marked her passage across the dewy lawn. She placed a hand on the tree’s trunk. Her fingers explored the blackened, scarred terrain and stroked the wilted leaves hanging from branches now touching the ground. Dead, and she had almost gone with it.

Beyond the clearing, the river was silent.

No voices raised in song to call her to its banks.

No visions of a tortured woman with bleeding wrists.

Thinking about it, as the coming heat of the day burnt away the moist

coolness, she believed Ethan. She had been too sick to be out of bed. Over stimulated. Overwrought.

But she was a sensible woman and sensible women ... packed their bags and went home to Germany if they were unhappy.

Why didn't you do just that, Eleanor? Why didn't you go?

She shook her head. *Brain fever*, she told herself. Whatever sickness she'd survived had cleaved her mind in half just as surely as the lightning had destroyed the mulberry tree.

Feeling faint again she rested against the trunk. If she sullied her mind any longer with these double thoughts and feelings, they would become real, and then she would be lost. Ethan would lock her in a room, away from the world, to spend the rest of her life imprisoned in madness.

Sensible women were practical women. A mind given to flights of fancy needed repetitive tasks to still it. Bring order to the chaos. She sucked in a lungful of crisp air to clear her head and returned to the house.

'Grubs up,' she said in her best Australian accent. The knife sawed through the warm loaf and her mouth watered despite her weak stomach. A thick slice with raspberry jam and she'd be, what did Ethan say, *right as rain*?

She stared at the butter dish on the top shelf of the Crosley, relishing the cool air on her face.

'What have you and your Papa been eating while I was upstairs, *bärlä*?'

With the exception of a couple of bottles of beer and a cold cut of meat wrapped in yellowed muslin the *kühlschrank* was empty.

The baby blurted and slapped his hands on the top of the highchair table.

'It's early still. Not too hot to walk into town.'

She lifted him out of his highchair and kissed him on the cheek.

Deck chairs lay abandoned on the bare boards, barring access to the hat hooks by the back door. Gus sat on the floor clapping his hand as she carried the chairs, one by one, to the other end of the verandah. Underneath the second chair she found a bizarre set of shoes: garish lime-green, orange, soft and shiny. Something within her, something deep, knew what they were. Turning them over, end-to-end, she tried to reconcile the parts of her at odds with each other. When she couldn't, she threw the shoes into the back of the old wardrobe where Ethan kept his hunting paraphernalia. She hummed a song she couldn't remember the name of as she closed and locked the door.

Hats on head, worn boots laced over her silk stockings, she drove the pushchair across the clearing. A line from a letter she'd written to her sister repeated again and again in her head: *no land for fancy shoes*. The best summation of Elyora she'd ever contrived to commit to paper.

The evening rain had barely settled the dust and the temperature climbed with the sun. By the time she arrived at the *Welcome to Elyora* sign, sweat soaked through her stockings and the cotton dress clung to her indecorously. In the shade of a tree, her straw hat fanning her face, she tried to calm her ragged breathing. Gus looked at her with wide eyes. He twisted in the pushchair and reached up for her. She marvelled at how strong he was, untroubled by the heat. Always happy. So like his Papa, her little *bärli*.

'Best get on then,' she said, re-pinning her hat and setting the pushchair on the road, humming as she forced herself to put one foot after another.

She parked Gus's chair at the steps of the general store and took him out. Beside the door, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* headline announced: CHURCHILL'S WARNING TO JAPAN.

From inside she could hear the wireless beep the hour, followed by the music that preceded the news. Gus grabbed for the brim of her hat.

'*Nein, bärli. Nein.* Not Mutter's hat,' she said, pausing two steps from the top to pry his hand away.

The wire door slammed against the weatherboard wall and a spindly woman in a black dress, a face pulled taunt by her severe hairline, stormed onto the verandah barring her way.

'Don't you be thinkin' I'm gonna sell you anythin', *frauline*. I've told your husband,' she spat, 'and I'll tell *you* now, I don't serve no Nazi-lovers.'

'Ma'am, I'm no Nazi-lover,' she said politely, understanding now why the fridge was empty.

The woman stepped closer and Gus began to cry. Citrine spittle sprayed them, followed by the woman's cursing.

'*Nazi bitch.*'

Eleanor tried to wipe the spit from her face and back away at the same time. A second glob hit her in the eye as the heel of her boot slipped off the edge of the step and she fell backwards. Her hand grabbed for the railing, finding it at the last moment, and she slammed onto a step, several down from where she'd stood. She sat fighting back tears, her lower back and hip throbbing in pain, echoing the wild thump of her heart. Gus clung to her, face ashen, tears spilling from his wide green eyes.

'I've got a right mind to get me gun and shoot you now,' the woman screeched. 'Just like you monsters shot me Harry.'

Eleanor stood, squared her shoulders and walked, trembling, down the remaining steps with what grace and decorum she could muster.

'Flamin' arrogant bitch. You're gonna burn for you sins,' the woman hollered. 'You and that yella husband of yours. Your judgement day is comin'. You hear me? It's comin'!'

Gus screamed when she jammed him in the pushchair—and set off for the road, reining in the need to run from the angry *slatterns* and *Nazi whores* slashing at her back. Tears blinded her and she had no idea which direction she was heading; distance from the *saumensch* her only motivation.

Ethan's father forced him to come back. Guilted him into returning home with the charge his duty was, as first born, to the farm. The mistakes of the Great War would not be repeated, where all the brothers enlisted.

He's not a coward, you pathetic, bitter saumensch. You don't understand Ethan's sacrifice. My sacrifice.

At The Great War memorial she broke down and stumbled into the adjacent park. She strapped Gus into the pushchair and left him in the shade of the elm by a newly-painted picnic table. At the tap on the far side of the picnic area, she knelt in the dirt and cupped the hot, coppery water in her hands and rinsed her face. Hunched over, to maintain what modesty the circumstance afforded her, she scrubbed the yellow flecks of spit from her sleeve with the dress hem. The viscosity of it turned her stomach. A searing eruption of vomit shot from her mouth and nose, and she hung her head. Wretched and sobbing, she let her stomach empty.

The water, foul and tepid, did little to rinse away the acerbic taste of bile and reconstituted tea.

Gus sat kicking his legs excitedly back and forth, staring at the tap. She left it running and dunked Gus, fully clothed under the water. Let him play until they were both soaked. They could walk home in damp clothes.

Propriety be damned.

With Gus returned to his pushchair and her damp hair pinned beneath her hat, she stared down the road. The thought of walking past Mrs Briggs sparked a new wave of nausea, but her stomach held. Back-and-forth, back-and-forth the pushchair rocked over the edge of the bitumen with the ebb and flow of her thoughts.

Report Mrs Briggs' threat. That is the job of the politzist.

Copper, she corrected.

But he too had lost a son in Europe and, like all the others who had lost someone to Hitler, he blamed her. Her sister had written of German ex-patriots being rounded up. Put in jail. Or worse.

No. Just go home.

Home? Elyora is not home.

The heat haze gave the garage, store and produce shed a buckled and decrepit look. She touched her fingers to her face. The skin was cool and slightly coppery.

It's not heatstroke, just a trick of the light.

The sun reflected off something shiny on the garage roof and she noticed for the first time the narrow lane running beside the garage, a ratty cypress hedge growing parallel to it.

A small detour will settle my nerves, she told herself and strolled toward the lane.

Two converging hedges almost met halfway down the lane, providing through access into the backyard of the garage. An eerie sense of abandonment settled over her when they emerged from the hedge to stand on the outer edge of a battalion of parked automobiles.

Half a dozen rows filled the space between where she stood and the back of the workshop, reaching right across the paddock, and another dozen rows filed down the slight incline to the dry creek bed at the bottom. Confusion and lucidity tugged at her as she walked between the rows mouthing the names and the number plates on the cars she passed: Falcon, Escort, Bluebird, Commodore, Corolla, Sportswagon, Victoria—the Garden State, Queensland—the Sunshine State, New South Wales—the Premier State, SA—the Festival State. At the end of the row she'd counted twelve automobiles.

A place for everything and everything in its place, her mother once said.

Another shiny surface blinked in the sun and she followed the intermittent flashing to a small, brown bus-van at the end of the bottom row. When she got close enough, she saw it was a familiar Volkswagen medallion, swinging slowly like a pendulum in slow-motion.

Five marks a week you must put aside, if you want your own car to ride, Hitler had said and sold the idea of a people's car to the masses.

In the shade between the brown van and its red neighbour, she left Gus

chewing on her hat while she tried the bus door. It opened and she climbed inside, the bottom buttons of her dress popping free of their eyelets. Her hand cupped the keys hanging from the steering column: *Give peace a chance*, the cheap metal key ring proclaimed.

A rap of the medallion sent it spinning.

First and only car I ever badged. That's what he got for stealing my girlfriend.

She tapped the Jesus doll and watched it jerk back and forth, bound to the dashboard by a coil.

You're a fucking Buddhist man, why you got Gee-Sus there? Trying to double dip on the good karma.

Her finger moved to the side and caressed the snow globe next to it.

Nothing like sticking a snow dome to a dash to make it obsolete.

It was stuck there when I bought the car, man. You really think I'd put a KISS snow dome in my car?

You really want me to answer that, dude?

She leant across and opened the glove compartment. An odd looking toothbrush and tube of toothpaste fell onto the floor.

Inside was a torn map ... *is there anything you don't destroy?* ... and a red purse. An amazing collection of shiny cards filled it. The raised letters and numbers on some of the cards reminded her of the Braille books her father brought home from Berlin for her blind aunt.

One card had a photograph on it. She pulled it free and held it up. Dark braids fell over the shoulders of the young woman in the photo. Intense green eyes stared from an impassive face. She tipped the mirror on the windscreen down. The woman who stared back was a thinner, wide-eyed, doppelgänger.

The narrow sundress caught around her shins as she scrambled from the van and she fell, hitting the ground hard with her shoulder. She lay hyperventilating, clutching the red purse to her chest. Curled into a ball, the returning memories felt like blunt force trauma.

The Brisbane gig—the Tarago breaking down—FaunaBate—Benny—Hal.

She couldn't breathe.

The ugly, misshapen house ...

Where she'd lived ... lived as the wife of ...

The man from the park.

A blurt from behind scared her and she slowly turned, chest heaving, to find herself gazing at a six-month-old baby strapped in an ancient stroller, kicking his feet and waving a straw hat.

She scuttled backward, buttons ripping free.

The baby strained against the straps, his arms reaching for her.

'Mumumumum.'

My wife died. She drowned in the river beyond the clearing.

'No. Fucking no! No-no-no.'

Knees to chest, shaking fingers locked around shins, she sat five feet from the stroller, staring at his hands opening and closing like the beak of a baby bird. She dropped her head and wrapped arms over the top to hide. Tears rained down on her thighs, soaking into the laddered silk ...

... of another woman's stockings.

My stockings.

Eleanor's stockings.

Yes, my stockings.

No! Eleanor-from-the-photo. Eleanor who tried to slash her wrist. Eleanor-dead-in-the-bible's stockings.

Trembling she felt the contours of her cheekbones, traced along to her ear over the empty piercing holes, and down to the rogue lump of a lymph gland on the left jawbone. She held her right hand up to her face and stared at the thin scar across the knuckles, where engine cogs had torn through when she was fourteen.

And Dad said 'suck it up' and 'hold down the screw driver'. But the blood ...

The rediscovery ended at the bump on her collarbone.

When I fell off the top of the hay bales chasing Derek when I was six.

A chill slithered down her back as the thought ended and she crawled slowly through the long grass to the stroller, staring into the cherub face. She stopped in front of him. Dirty hands stretched out to touch her as her eyes narrowed and she scowled at him.

... at Gus.

My son's name ... is Gus.

I don't fucking care what his name is. He's not my son.

One hand on the Tarago to steady herself, she scanned the sea of cars, taking in the subtle shifts in colour and shape from large boxy models, faded paintwork and grey tyres long deflated at the top to smaller shiny, round-bodied models with fully inflated tyres at the bottom. Everything from old fifties models down to the new Honda Civic beside her.

It wasn't the representations of all the decades that was fucking with her head, but the sheer number of cars in the paddock.

Where were all their owners?

She started with the red Honda Civic beside Benny's van.

The air inside smelled of vomit and rotten banana. Long blonde strands of hair clung to the headrest of the passenger seat. She unlatched the glove box. It took several pulls for it to open and, when it finally let go, it was jammed with stuff. She emptied it item by item: CDs, a service logbook—which she flicked through to find it was last stamped early December 2011—a tampon, half a roll of Quickeeze, a Centrelink letter addressed to Anna Gideon and a bunch of day care receipts in the same name, a Moleskine notebook filled with illegible writing and at the bottom, a black lace G-string.

A compartment beneath the stereo held a melted lipstick, faded parking metre tickets and a half-eaten packet of Throaties. In the centre console she hit pay dirt: a black wallet and a change purse. From the wallet she pulled out a Queensland license: Matthew Gideon, aged 32. An address in Ashgrove.

Ethan Lazarus.

No, Matthew Gideon.

She turned around, stomach roiling, and saw the baby capsule in the middle of the back seat.

Gus.

From the detritus in the foot well she found the day care receipts and opened them all up.

No, his name is Alex.

The newest receipt was dated last November. She slammed the door and walked around to the front of the car. The registration sticker: 02/2012.

Ten months out of rego.

She peered around the side of the car to the stroller. Alex writhed under the straps, eyes screwed shut, bawling, a vortex of misery trying to draw her in. From the backseat she retrieved a long, multi-coloured, toy caterpillar. It rattled when she held it up and shook it. Alex's crying faltered. His face split into wet-eyed concentration and he tried to launch himself forward.

The day care receipts suggested Alex hadn't been born in Elyora, but Alex should be ten, twelve, fourteen months. Or older? But he was only six months. Seven tops. Sitting independently when he should be crawling. Toddling.

She walked slowly toward the stroller. The grass whispered in her wake.

When she got close enough for him to reach the caterpillar, she held it out

and stifled a scream as his bloated fingers clawed at hers and wrenched the toy away. First he shook it and then thumped a pneumatic wheeze from it. Watching him she knew it had been his toy.

Alex. Anna. Matthew.

Gus. Eleanor. Ethan.

Fact, fiction and carefully crafted lies—they all crashed and laid waste to any understanding she had of what *was*. Her memories fragmented. The past violated. And the clues: scattered across a paddock of abandoned cars.

Or beyond?

Rather than crawl through hundreds of empty cars, she decided to confront Ethan. *Matthew*. With his driver's license as proof of his duplicity, she'd force the truth out of him.

In a plastic bag she scrounged from the back of the Civic, she shoved Matthew's wallet, the day care receipts, the service logbook, and tied the handles to her wrist. On the way back to the stroller she found her wallet lying in the long grass and put it in the bag too. The slam of the Tarago door echoed across the paddock like a gunshot and was answered in the distance by a deep roll of thunder.

The chill in the air promised more than just rain and, gripping tightly to the handles of the stroller, she stared dumbfounded at the looming storm: the thunderhead rising above the boiling, black clouds was an exact replica of yesterday's. At the back of the garage workshop, she threw herself at the rear door. Once. Twice. Three times. It refused to budge. Defeated, she grunted and kicked it. In the full blast of the wind, she ran around the corner looking for another way in. The front door was locked. A hurried search of the driveway turned up a hand-sized chunk of concrete. The wind swallowed the sound of the smashing glass and gave the disquieting impression the world was blunted and moving progressively slower.

Her hand hovered at the small hole she'd made in the window, the glint of glass fangs infecting her confidence. A bolt of lightning hit the roof of the produce shed and moments later a shattering detonation of thunder shook the ground. Cursing, fingers first and then knuckles, her hand and then wrist went through the hole. She groped the chunky lock beneath the keyhole. After long minutes of ineffectual attempts, as the storm bore down on them, the latch finally released and the door swung inward.

A willy-willy tore up the road, stripping leaves from the elm, consuming anything else not securely anchored along its erratic path. Then it slowed and appeared to choose a course: a direct line for the servo.

She shoved the stroller into the office. The door slammed against the inner wall and the window shattered and fell in a spray to the ground. A second gust of wind blasted debris into the office and Jo hunched over, protecting her face. The lightbulb, a former beacon of hope flickered above her, swinging wildly on its cord, then exploded, showering them in glass.

She was running for the counter and had crouched behind it, stroller shoved in the corner, before her head caught up. The baby played with the caterpillar, poking, squeezing and shaking the sounds from it, oblivious to everything else.

The calendar above her head tore from the wall and struck her.

Last time it rained in this bloody town was October 1974.

Then the new sheila arrives and holy bloody Moses.

She looked from the calendar in her lap up to the clean square on the wall and saw the keys to the tow truck hanging below it.

Her ticket out of town sat in the farthest bay, bleeding out of the gloom as her eyes adjusted. Something loitered near the truck. Or someone. She waited, Alex perched on her hip, for the next flare of lightning to better see what it was.

‘Hello?’ she called out, and kicked herself once the words were out of her mouth. Only one person would likely be in the workshop. And Stanley was the last person she wanted to see.

The wind tore at the roofing iron and rattled the windows in their frames. The shadow moved and she took a step back, the jangle of the keys and the rattle of the caterpillar an audible amplification of her nerves. She slowly walked around the orange-red two door, then the ute. Just before the station wagon she tripped on something.

At her foot lay Benny’s dusty sandal.

‘Benny?’ she called, moving toward the tow truck. ‘Is that you?’

The shadow moved slightly in the darkness.

‘This isn’t funny, Benny. Whatever went on between us before, whatever I said, whatever you did, it doesn’t matter now.’

Lightning flared and she recognised the coloured shirt.

'Benny?'

He sat awkwardly on the tray of the truck, his back to her.

'You fucking arrogant son-of-a-bitch,' she swore and marched over to him.

She tugged on his shoulder with her free hand and he whipped around. Lightning flared again and she screamed, stumbled away from the eyeless sockets staring out of Benny's face.

The hoist support punched between her shoulder blades bringing her to a jarring, gasping halt. More lightning strikes, like camera flashes, and she saw the mummified head swing back and forth on the tow hook. FLASH—skin pulled tight over the bone structure—FLASH—a toothless mouth gaped beneath the oversized beard—FLASH—the mass of dreadlocks sat like the amputated tentacles of a giant octopus.

Benny. Oh God, Benny.

She compulsively wiped her hand against the dress, but couldn't look away from the macabre display.

His withered body was lost inside the tie-dye shirt, the hem falling to his knees, withered exposed legs below. Shrunken feet swung above the brown fisherman's pants and his other sandal. FLASH. She saw the ring she'd given to him, lying in the dust on the floor and began to tremble.

She squeezed the baby tighter, fearing she'd drop him as the workshop contracted to a single pin point in which Benny's body swung around and around, like a needle on a thread.

Shivers became immobilising shakes. Legs threatened to fold. Choking, hyperventilating breaths punched into her lungs and her head filled with fog. Before it claimed her, a single word pierced through, stitching together the tattered remnants of any nerve she had.

Hal.

The wind slashed at the roofing iron. The pressure exploded the window, tearing Benny's body from the hook and dumping it a metre away, between her and the path to the cab of the truck.

She tried to take a step, but couldn't. Panic exploded and demolished her will to move closer.

There's enough room to walk around it, she told herself.

A sheet of iron peeled off the roof and she knew she was out of time. One tiny step after another she approached the back of the truck, and then with her back to the tray, side stepped around the crumpled heap. She didn't take her eyes off it for a minute, as though it would reanimate and attack her. One

hand groped behind, across the pitted paintwork looking for the door handle. A scream choked in the bottom of her throat when she found nothing. She kept sliding along the side of the truck, moving closer and closer to the front.

The wind liberated another sheet of roof iron directly above and her fingers found the door handle and they scrambled into the cab, slamming the heavy door shut.

The baby lay, screaming, on the seat next to her. She'd given up trying to console him. Her hands shook so hard it took three attempts to get the key in the ignition.

It took seven goes for the engine to show any signs of life. It caught on the eighth and idled roughly. The cab bounced with the throb of the engine. When she tried the accelerator, her foot pressed too hard and the engine roared, then too soft so it barely revved. The clutch was heavy and she had to sit right on the edge of the bench seat to get it all the way in. The gear-shift at least wasn't a problem, she'd been driving paddock bombs with 'three on the tree' for as long as she could remember.

She yanked at the handbrake, before she lost her nerve, and revved the engine, trying to get a proper feel for it through the churn of emotions.

Double pump the clutch.

She fought the gear stick and transmission to find first and when it finally ground into gear, she gave one last gentle press of the accelerator and hoped for the right timing. Clutch-out-accelerator-in and the truck moved forward. Foot planted on the accelerator she hit the workshop doors with as much speed as she could. The doors broke. But the engine coughed and stalled before she could save it.

'Fucking piece of shit!'

The truck was half-in, half-out the workshop, but she had a clear view of the road. Out of the wailing maelstrom walked Stanley, the mechanic, with a posse of men following close behind.

Ignore the men. Concentrate on the truck.

The engine lurched and stalled.

It's still in gear.

She yanked it out of gear and it roared to life when she turned the key. The men broke into a run. The engine whined as she rode the clutch. The truck shot free of the workshop doors, across the servo driveway and bounced onto

the tarmac just ahead of the men.

She crunched into second gear and it back-fired twice then bellowed past the ghost of Mrs Brigg's shaking a fist at her from the verandah of her store.

A sickening thought surfaced when she sped past the *Welcome to Elyora* sign. There was no *Farewell from Elyora* on the reverse side.

No-one is meant to leave here?

This is where you rot for the mistakes you made in your other life.

She'd made plenty of mistakes in her life, but she wasn't rotting the rest of her life away in Elyora for *them*. She was getting the fuck out. Just as soon as she found Hal.

A plan was forming, to take the old homestead driveway, cut across the hill and into the clearing, but she was driving too fast. She turned too late and then failed to break hard enough. The impact with the stone gatepost threw her against the wheel and Gus went flying into the footwell.

When she picked him up he was bleeding from a cut on his head.

'Shit!'

The metallic smell seized her stomach and she wound the window of the cab down, and took long jagged breaths to quell the need to vomit again. She waited for him to cry but he appeared stunned.

Not knowing what to do, and worried she'd hurt him further, she jammed him between her thighs and started the engine.

'Just a little longer,' she begged of the truck and twisted the key.

The engine turned over, but rattled in a terminal way.

Slowly accelerating forward, the truck demolished the rest of the gatepost and wheezed up the hill. The decline allowed them to coast into the clearing when the engine gave out, coming to a stop just inside the line where the wild grass met the lawn.

The wind howled around the eaves and the unfinished third storey of the house as she raced up the back steps, the air swampy and stinking of death.

'Hal?' she yelled from the top step, pulling the wire door open.

The door crashed into the frame behind her and a cold blast of wind whistled inside.

'HAL!?'

When there was no reply she sprinted through the hallways and up the corkscrew staircase to leave baby Alex in his cot, where she hoped he'd be safe, and she could continue her search for Hal. At the top landing, she ground

to a halt, her free hand going out to stop them both from pitching forward.

She wanted the view ahead to be of the safe, known hallway that greeted them on their first night there. Hell, she'd even go The Overlook Hotel's infamous hallway over the abomination before her: a ramshackle construction of mismatched and discoloured plasterboard and exposed framework. Doorless rooms gaped like eyeless sockets. The holes in the roof became viewfinders, in which to observe the seething vortex of clouds above.

She shuddered and moved back onto the staircase, going slowly despite the screaming urge to run—fast. On the ground floor she waited at the foot of the stairs for it to morph into something unrecognisable and when it didn't, tried to head back to the kitchen. But the hallways twisted and turned her inward, into a labyrinth that finally terminated in a T-intersection lined with doors.

The baby cried and her arm ached from the weight of him. Every door she tried was locked. The last knob turned and they found themselves in the formal lounge. She detected the faint scent of Chanel No. 5 and relief surged through her. The fireplace was reset. She broke it apart with the fire poker. Underneath, as she hoped, was the photo of Eleanor. She put it in the plastic bag still tied to her wrist, shifted the baby onto her other hip and tried both connecting doors. The drapes kept the room in perpetual darkness and she felt her way to the window, dragging aside the heavy material. The bible was in the same place and a clumsy flip through assured her she had not dreamed Eleanor and Gus up.

They were at the bottom of the list. Just as she remembered.

Both dead, seventy years ago.

When she finally found her way back to the kitchen, she deposited the baby in his highchair and sawed the plastic bag off her wrist with the bread knife. His crying faded to whimpers, then shuddering breaths and sleepy snuffles as she one by one placed each puzzle piece carefully on the tablecloth. She shifted them around, trying to work out how they all fitted together.

When it made less and less sense, she searched the drawers for a lead pencil and started again. A house, a river and a building denoting the servo appeared in scribbles on the tablecloth. In a frenzy she wrote notes, dates, diagrams—everything she knew for certain and anything else that came to mind. She withdrew into herself, feeling for places where there were echoes of Eleanor still, trying to find any shards of truth left behind.

A clock somewhere in the house chimed and she looked up at the clock on the wall above the combustion stove. The minute hand jerked and stationed itself pointing directly to the hour.

1.00pm.

The metronomic tick punctuated the silence and she sat, staring at the clock face, waiting for the minute hand to tick over again.

The hypnotic movement of the hand as it ticked past one notch then another, then another, kept her from thinking about Benny. Not the confounding cluster fuck that was Elyora. Or the storm outside.

Benny.

Infuriating, charming, self-centred, talented, chameleon, liar-liar-pants-on-fire, Benny.

One-Fourteen

Benny, the first night they met; meditating cross-legged in a creek at a bush doof; the moon high and full and the play of the light making him look as though he floated above the water.

One-Fifteen

Benny, who pressed his lips to the backs of her knees and made her want to lose herself in him.

One-Sixteen

Benny, who sang Frank Zappa to her, naked in bed, his dreads splayed like earthy sunrays on the pillow, a haze of ganja smoke obscuring his untidy room.

One-Seventeen

Benny, who'd said eternity would never be long enough to love her.

'Eleanor?'

Ethan stood in the kitchen doorway panting, drying blood spattered up his arms. The dislocation from the past to the present hurt: the agony of a heart breaking beneath a mountain of lies.

She looked up slowly. 'I'm not Eleanor.'

Ethan hesitated at the door, sticky fingers curling around the architrave. 'Where's Stanley?'

'Like I fucking know.' She stared at the blood on his arms and picked up the bread knife. 'I found Benny hanging from the tow hitch at the servo. I guess I didn't dream that argument, did I?'

When he didn't answer, she eased herself from the chair, the knife held

steady before her.

‘Eleanor. Put the knife down.’

‘I’m not Eleanor!’ she screeched, slicing at the air.

Ethan’s shoulders collapsed and his head dropped.

‘It was you and Stanley. Arguing about my friends.’

‘We were arguing about *you*.’

‘I know about me. And I know about Benny. Where. Is. Hal?’

A slick of gore remained on the wood when he let go. ‘It was an accident.’ He started toward her, bloody hands held out in supplication. ‘I tried to stop him from going down there. To the river.’

She could see it all then. A full moon, the river, the two of them fucking on a boulder. A rotting woman, red-mouthed, feeding ...

The knife clattered to the floor.

Jo shoved past Ethan and hurtled down the back steps. In a calm oasis, beneath the rusted Hills Hoist, stood a facsimile of Hal: beanie jammed on his head, orange board shorts sitting low on his bony hips, a towel thrown over his bare shoulder partially covering the kanji tattoo on his upper arm.

When Benny first saw the tattoo he’d wound him up about it. ‘Why the hell did you have *yak poo* tattooed on your arm?’

‘It says *hero*,’ Jo whispered under her breath.

The wind caught the Hills Hoist and a tortured squeal tore through the membrane of the past and present.

‘Hal,’ she yelled, running for him as fat rain drops fell on her.

He paused for a moment and looked up to the house.

‘Don’t go down to the river,’ she called.

He flicked the towel onto his other shoulder and ambled away from the house. She chased after him, yelling, ‘Don’t leave me!’

As the words left her mouth, she was broadsided, crashing to the ground.

‘You can’t follow him,’ Ethan said, straddling her, pinning her wrists to the ground.

‘Let me go. I can stop him.’

The rain poured down, carrying with it hundreds of ethereal voices raised in an all-too-familiar song.

‘I called to him ... but he was too far away ... you were too sick.’ Crimson rivers ran down across arms and hands. ‘You don’t know just ... how sick you were. I tried. I called to him.’

‘You *wanted* him dead,’ she screamed. ‘You wanted me all to yourself.’

She smashed her forehead into his mouth, pushed herself out from underneath him and ran.

Run, Eleanor. Run!

The rain turned the ground to mud, and she slid and fell, then slid again as her boots failed to get traction. At the corner of the house a horizontal fork of lightning split the sky in two, throwing the entire landscape into dazzling relief. Above the clearing, men filed through the bush, heads bowed in protection from the rain, Stanley at the head of the line. The slow pace they trod indicative not of the weather, but hunters who knew their quarry was cornered.

Jo stopped and stood, hands clenching and unclenching, turning from one side of the clearing to the other. And for a moment she remembered Benny looking from the GPS to the Elyora sign.

If only ...

She stared up toward the road and the men disgorging from the bush. Then down the clearing, to the river.

What makes you think they'll come this close to the river?

It was time she found out, just what the fuck was down there.

‘What’s in the river, Matthew?’ she asked, bursting into the kitchen.

He kept his back to her as though he didn’t hear. Stood at the sink, clean hands pressing a damp facewasher to his mouth.

‘How close is too close to the river?’ Matthew turned to look at her but remained mute. ‘The men are coming down here from the road. How close is too close?’

‘I knew I couldn’t trust Stanley,’ and something snapped in him. He threw the facewasher down, stormed out of the kitchen, through the connecting door to the dining room, and whipped the curtains back from the window. Outside, a dark line of stop-animation silhouettes formed an ever-lengthening perimeter beneath the strobe lighting of the storm.

‘What’s going on? It was just Stanley and a few men back in town.’

‘I broke the rules and now the men want what I’ve had.’

‘Had?’ Jo frowned, then realised exactly what he meant. It ran through her guts like a meat hook. ‘But there’s a hundred or more—’

‘—and they’re pissed off. Really pissed off.’

‘The cars behind Stanley’s workshop. Where did all the people go?’

Matthew looked out the window, back to her, and she understood.

‘And the women?’

Matthew dropped the curtain and shook his head, refused to look at her.

‘TELL ME!’ she screamed. He put his face in his hands and shook his head. She lunged at him, pulling his hands free. ‘You said your wife drowned in the river.’

‘My wife wasn’t in her right mind. She never recovered from our baby dying.’

‘Your baby is asleep in the high chair in the kitchen. Your son—*Alex*.’ He looked up her, confusion etched deep in his face. ‘I found your car. When did you come here, Matthew? When did they tow you in?’

The clock in the room next door chimed the half hour.

1:30.

Matthew began to sob quietly.

‘How long have I been here?’ she asked.

‘I have no idea.’ His voice quavered and sounded like he was talking from a long way away. ‘Time is not linear here. Days last for months, hours disappear in seconds. Night lingers.’ He reached for her hand and she snatched it away. ‘Ethan swore you were our salvation.’

‘Salvation, my arse!’ She ripped the curtains aside again. The last man filed down through the long grass and joined the perimeter line, stretching in a half-moon shape around the back and sides of the house. ‘Why are they stopping?’

‘They’re afraid of Eleanor.’ Then, ‘It’s happening all over again.’

His dull and disembodied eyes, flicked between her and the window.

She snapped the curtain closed. ‘What the fuck are you talking about?’

He started to cry. ‘Eleanor. The mob.’ His voice modulated, the annunciation morphed. ‘Oh, Eleanor. I’m sorry my love.’

‘I’m not fucking *Eleanor!*’ she yelled, and slapped him.

‘How could they have hated you, Eleanor? Beautiful. So strong.’ He blubbered, burying his face in his hands. ‘They only saw you as their enemy.’

So what did you do, Eleanor?

What did you do when their hatred rained down on you?

‘You can make it out along the river.’ Matthew looked up at her, his voice wavering between the two tones, though a streak of clarity cut through the flatness in his eyes.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘If you go along the river you can escape. The men won’t follow you down

there.'

The idea of going near the river terrified her more than the mob waiting beyond the clearing.

'What's in the river, Matthew? I need to know.'

'Take Alex. Please. Eleanor won't hurt you if you have him.'

'Eleanor's been dead seventy years.'

'She won't harm a baby. It's the only other thing she ever really wanted.'

Jo thought of the baby, smeared in its own blood, asleep in the highchair.

'He'll slow me down,' she said and stood up. 'I'll take my chances with Eleanor.'

One final question snagged her at the door and she turned back to Matthew. 'What were you and Anna doing before you turned off the highway?'

Lucidity coalesced in his features. 'Anna? She was ... we ... we were ... arguing. She ... she accused me ... of having an affair.'

'You're all fucking the same.'

'It wasn't like that,' he snapped, the cobalt blue striation in his irises flaring with the lightning. 'Anna had postnatal depression. I was taking her home, to her parents, to get help. I couldn't cope with her *and* Alex.'

'Why stay then? Why be part of this?'

'Because the women we love bind us here. I'm no freer to leave than any of the men out there.'

'*Loved*,' she corrected, standing just a little bit straighter, shoulders squared.

In the kitchen, lightning briefly illuminated the clock face on the wall.

1.37.

This is how it ends.

And she ran for her life toward the river.

The rain soaked Jo before she'd passed the mutilated mulberry tree. The swirling eddies of water in the air made it impossible to see more than a hand's span in front of her, so she didn't stop to see if anyone followed. Out of the clearing and under bush canopy, the rain was lighter. She struggled to make headway. The adrenalin kept her moving but the time she'd spent in bed was taking its toll. Debris torn from the trees, tangled around her ankles and she fell in the mud, over and over again. The wind picked up the deeper she ploughed into the bush, tearing at her hair, turning her muddy skin ice cold.

The river appeared unexpectedly and she skidded to a stop, arms wheeling

wildly to keep her from falling into its fast flowing depths.

When she regained her balance she called out across the water, in short, panting breaths, 'Eleanor! I know. What. Happened.'

Wet hair gouged her eyes as she bent over to catch her breath.

'Brought up by the Baltic Sea,' Jo yelled into the darkness, 'but never learned to swim. Did you drown trying to escape? Or did you throw yourself in, knowing you'd die?'

The wind screeched through the trees and the water below boiled.

'I feel the pain you feel, Eleanor. I saw the way they treated you. That Briggs woman spat on me, *just like she spat on you.*'

The river began to heave. Waves surged outward, crashing over the bank, thumping into Jo and slamming her against a tree. Then the water poured back into the river, dragging her with it. She caught hold of a small sapling and hung on, as the water hungrily sucked at her.

'You try my patience.'

Hovering above the water was Eleanor, feet skimming the surface.

Framed by dark twisted hair, water dripping from the ends, Jo realised it had been Eleanor's reflection, not hers, in the mirror the night she'd first found the photo in the fire grate.

The beautiful woman with the operatic voice and the luscious body, the devoted mother and loving wife, was nothing more than the shadow of a rotting corpse entombed in the river. Translucent strips of flesh hung not just from her face but her arms and legs too and where it still adhered to the bone, muscle and sinew, bite marks punctured it.

Jo let go of the sapling and struggled upright to face the horror. 'What the hell are you?'

Eleanor took a step closer to the bank. 'I am *Weiderganger.*'

The word struck with the speed and venom of a taipan.

'The strange men who constructed their building of barbed wire gave me a chance to walk again. Gave my voice the projection it needed to sing the town's women down to the river. To feast on their flesh as their cruelty and prejudice once feasted on me.'

She proffered a skeletal hand, a water-logged band of skin cushioning the bone where her wedding ring still sat. 'I've been waiting for you, Josephine.'

Jo clenched her fists. 'You can't have me. I've done nothing to you. And neither did any of those other people you've hurt. The ones who aren't even from here.'

‘Don’t fear me, Josephine. I am not *dämon*. I am *engel*.’ She stretched her hand further, cocking her head slightly to one side. ‘I am relief from pain. Eternal release.’

‘I don’t want relief. I want to leave.’ Jo glanced at the proffered hand, repulsed by the temptation she felt to grasp it. ‘Please, Eleanor,’ she begged. ‘Let me go.’

Eleanor crossed the water and stood on the riverbank in front of her, water dripping from the hem and sleeves of her faded sundress: a horrific washed-out mirror image.

She seized Jo’s hand then dropped it like she’d been stung. What was left of the flesh around her eyes tore wide.

‘You feel him in me. You feel Ethan, don’t you?’

She took a step closer towards the wreckage that was Eleanor, buoyed by the hope her body was more than just a conduit for Ethan’s memories.

‘I’ve been living in the house he built. And part of you—the loving, rebellious, happy Eleanor—is up there with him. In the boards, the nails, the mortar, the stone. She’s as much alive as he is. But he’s waiting for the rest of you.’ Jo reached out to touch Eleanor’s icy arm. ‘They denied you peace in life, but he offers it to you in death.’

A tiny hint of slate-blue burned in Eleanor’s faded irises and a smile slowly formed on her cadaverous face. The smile grew into a laugh that gushed with the sound of water forced between rocks and drained away to the merry trickle of a tiny creek.

She walked away from Jo, each step a sickening squelch that drew the mud and the rain to her, so they became part of an ever-shifting phizog of dread as she withdrew from the riverbank.

‘Josephine,’ she called, pausing on the edge of the bush. ‘Elyora always claims what rightfully belongs to it.’

Jo had no idea how far or how long she’d been half-walking, half-stumbling when she saw the first of the surveyor’s sun-bleached, pink tags on the trees. Ignoring the uneven and slippery ground, she ran for them and the freedom on the other side.

The first cramp caught her like a steel-capped boot to the lower abdomen; a vicious, internal tearing just above her pubic bone. Doubled over, she leaned a shaking shoulder against a tree and tried to breathe through it. When the

pain subsided she took several more steps before a second round of cramps dropped her to her knees in the mud. She stayed there for several minutes fighting the pain before she tried to stand again.

Clutching her stomach, she zigzagged back to the Elyora side of the surveyor's marks and the pain stopped dead, leaving the ghost of a dull ache similar to period pain.

She pulled up the dress's skirt and saw the thin, bloody trickle sliding down her thigh, soaking into the top of her silk stocking. About to berate her body's timing, she pulled the dress higher, above the garter belt to her waist. Her fingers slowly swept over the fecund mound between the jagged promontory of her hips and pelvis.

Something *inside* fluttered. The flutter tumble-turned above her pelvis when she put her hand over it.

The constant nausea.

'She won't harm a baby. It's the only other thing she ever really wanted.'

She cupped her hands over her abdomen and remembered the first night in the Lazarus house. With Ethan. Matthew, she corrected.

The brevity of Eleanor's warning became all too clear, compounding the shock of the discovery: a baby conceived in Elyora bound her there. The suddenness and intensity of the pain left her in no doubt about what would happen to her if she tried to leave.

The surveyor's tags flapped in the wind, a distinct, visible line between two worlds openly mocking her.

On one side, men poured into the clearing to hunt her down. A man caught between two realities, waited for them with his chubby abomination of a child while his counterpart held vigil over love, even beyond death.

And Benny swung from a tow hook, while Hal drowned in the river.

Elyora: gorging on lies, deceit, revenge—death—in a never-ending loop. She knew the side of the line she wanted to be on.

I've got five litres of blood, maybe six, she reminded herself. That's got to buy enough time to make it to the highway.

Gritting her teeth against the instant resurgence of pain, she ran past the markers, then stumbled to a walk, staggering from tree to tree until the agony forced her to her knees and the flow of blood held her there. She surrendered to the metallic smell of blood mixed with earthy loam, and relaxed into the

moist comfort of the viscous womb closing around her.

'What's the big sleep?' Hal asked, flipping through her ratty paperback, more impressed with the breeze the action created, than actually looking at any of the words.

'Death,' she said, taking the book from him and reading the last page.

'Are you afraid to die?' He stretched out on the old couch on the back verandah of her parent's house and folded his arms under his head. 'I don't think I am.'

'I'm not sure,' she answered. 'I just know I don't want to die any time soon.'

She jolted back to consciousness.

Away from Hal.

Back to the slick of mud chilling her cheek.

Back to the incessant drumming of the rain.

Back to the pain shredding her insides; to the betrayal of her body, hot and sticky between her thighs.

'Black ops sheep don't do extractions here,' she grunted and hauled herself out of the mud.

On hands and knees, she fought the ever-expanding wave of pain and nausea, and the agonising convulsions of her womb, to keep moving. A thick trail of blood marked her slow passage.

When she could no longer crawl, bereft of energy to keep her eyes open, she dragged herself blindly forward, hand over hand, toward the roar of the semi trailers on the New England highway.

the starling requiem

At the conclusion of the session, words are tallied and I'm escorted through the hospital-green corridor—one-hundred and sixteen steps—past the cleaners in their grey overalls, to the third room on the right. My escort is the same young female assistant with the intricate blonde braids who wired me earlier. She will also be my interviewer. Next week a different assistant will wire and interview me in an attempt to negate researcher bias; even for qualitative research it is excessive. The answers will be recorded, transcribed and analysed by the most objective of beasts: a computer.

She doesn't deviate from the list, they never do. Or add anything in the way of commentary or prompt to unearth a deeper or different answer. It takes an hour to complete her questions. By the end I've eaten all the biscuits on the beige plate with the cracked glazing and drunk an extra cup of coffee, my hunger managed in a way that doesn't let on it's my only meal for the day.

When I emerge from the side door of the Jákob Müller Building, the crowning glory of the Science Partition's research facility, the treacle-thick darkness tastes metallic. A bitter wind slices through my winter coat and I rewrap my scarf, pretending it will keep me warm on the way home. Thrust my ungloved hands deep into the pockets like anchors.

The streetlights are on somewhere else in the city tonight. I don't look too hard into the shadows or up into the blinking, red eyes of the surveillance cameras. Head down, I hurry along the street, holding my anxiety at bay,

counting each step until my key kisses the lock of my building.

Each session is timed. As though in any given period our narratives may be captured, quantified, and studied in a reliable, scientific fashion from which new data may be extrapolated to support or dismiss old hypotheses and spawn new statements about creativity to underwrite the next study. That's how little they understand the process—the inherent fickleness—of being at the mercy of something uncontrollable. I don't understand my process and won't understand it any better at the end of the study.

I imagine it's a joke the twelve of us in the study share at the expense of the researchers. We let them believe—when they sit us down to re-shave the small circles on our scalps so they can adhere wireless electrodes to capture an encephalographic map of our stories—we know what we are doing.

This is what I think every Tuesday afternoon when I sit myself down at the square configuration of desks, the only striking feature of the bleak lab. I watch the clock above the door count down.

In my head I hum the same melody lodged there since last week. The notes slip and slide, loop over and under, lulling my usually erratic, meandering thoughts. For a moment I think the fingers of the man opposite me tap in perfect synchronicity with the melody. He looks up and smiles. I smile back then glance down to his fingers, long and beautifully sculptured, resting on the bench top.

Maybe they were never tapping? Maybe I am editorialising the present before it happens. Weaving fiction into reality. Or perhaps like me, he's complicit in the happiness of free biscuits and coffee. Or maybe, just maybe, it is an acknowledgement of our existence in this study where our stories, the small pieces of our souls, are reduced to nothing but data.

'Subjects you have sixty seconds,' the researcher says and screens slide up from the bench tops. I turn to the researcher and nod. When I return to the man across from me he is lost behind his screen.

An alarm sounds and green pixels fill the static window before me.

'Subjects you have fifteen minutes perusal. Please note your tapboards will be locked for the duration of this time.'

I stare at the words I wrote last week. They pull away as I try to push myself into them. Paranoia nags at the edges of my awareness, the fear my story recognises and rejects me for the imposter I am. I peer over the top of my screen and wonder what stories fill the head of my dark-haired conspirator.

Security fails to respond to my intercom attempts to rouse them to open the door and let me retrieve my scarf.

‘Take mine,’ the dark-haired man says, startling me. He is standing several steps below me, unwinding the thick grey scarf from his neck. The tassels at the end are stained.

‘It’s fine. Someone will let me back in.’

‘Good luck with that then.’ He reties the scarf and walks off.

After several minutes of silent waiting, I turn my coat collar up and battle the dread building in me. At least the streetlights are on tonight.

I turn the corner, and he’s there, waiting. ‘Got time for a pint?’

The wind blasts my ears and freezes the top of my neck where the collar doesn’t reach. It’s a half-hour walk home and at the end, an apartment colder than outside. And empty. The warmth and comfort of company are tempting. But I have no credits for a beer.

‘Or whatever else it is you drink.’ When I don’t respond, and after a pause that is barely a pause, he walks off calling over his shoulder. ‘You can repay in triplicate when you sell the best-selling novel you are writing.’

‘I don’t even know your name.’ My words bloom in small white clouds.

‘E,’ he says and the Science Partition and the non-fraternisation waiver we both signed disappear behind us.

In the pub the usual happens: I drink too much, say too little and inhabit the potential future in my head so by the time we leave, he has filled all the conversation spaces I’ve left with an ease I’m jealous of and I’ve already kissed him, fucked him and slipped back to my broom-closet apartment to lie freezing beneath too few blankets with my guilt. His kiss on the footpath rips a separate beer-addled space between the actual past and the fictional future and suddenly I’m very present.

E pulls away and despite myself, I lean into him wanting more.

‘Come home with me.’

It’s not quite a statement nor is it a question. The slight quiver in his voice tells me he isn’t as confident as he appears to be.

My mouth fills with ‘no’.

His kisses cocoon me from the cold and are better than any I could conjure back in the pub and the safety of my imagination. Thieves of lips steal the words that will protect me and when he pulls away a second time, his hand slips into mine and I am hit by three seismic shocks: the feel of his chest pressed into mine as we dance slowly, his nipple in my mouth and heat rolling from the back of his neck. I feel the impossible warmth despite the gale-force wind cutting into us. I stop counting steps and let him lead me to the opposite side of the city.

The apartment walls are set to a sprawling, inner-city park. A molten sunset silhouettes a vintage roller coaster and Ferris wheel. Above the amusement park, a murmuration of starlings elegantly dips and tumbles. Memories of crushed grass and hot donuts lace the frigid air. The carousel music blends with the melody embedded in my head and for a moment I am caught in the liminal drift between what I know and what I think I know. The sense of *déjà vu* is overwhelming.

‘Sorry,’ he says and fumbles for the controller, snapping me from the momentary fugue. ‘I wasn’t expecting company.’

Whatever I thought I recognised in the mechanical turn of the Ferris wheel and the aerial acrobatics of the starlings is gone; nothing more than a dream upon waking. E points the controller at the projection unit in the ceiling and the walls bleed in and out of a series of AmbiScape dioramas that take us far from the misery of the city, slow-draining desire like an weeping wound.

I see the danger of AmbiScapes now, having lived without one like the cattle masses. Understand better why the Ministry carefully controls their ownership. This technology cannot be entrusted to those who have been sold lives of colourless drudgery. To question or want something better is high

treason. To incite dreams of a better life, away from the city is even more dangerous. I take the controller and contemplate rewinding back to the amusement park, but stop myself. Whatever it was, it was gone. Gone.

‘How can you afford this?’ It’s not what I’m really asking. My face stiffens into the uncompromising expression of an investigating Ministry Official. He shrugs, smiles crookedly and I know I’ve lost my small edge.

‘A gift from a patron,’ he says. I don’t believe him, unless the Ministry has turned into a benevolent agency.

‘Don’t we spend enough time in fictional worlds?’ I ask and turn it off.

He moves into the centre of the room, shoulders pulling in. The bleakness of the walls does not upset me nor the crowding claustrophobia after the optical illusion.

With the AmbiScope off two things are apparent: his apartment is barely bigger than mine but it’s homely. My apartment is somewhere someone lives. E’s apartment is personal. Comfortable. Even if I freely chose to burn away a life of presumed luxury to embrace the austerity of a writer, I cannot deny the intoxicating pull of it.

What are his sacrifices?

Drawn to the battered leather couch, I sit and a year of Sundays unravels wrapped in him and books, random conversations and indulgent dozing. But the book beneath my mattress will not be written on lazy Sundays. Two novels will not be raised in a year on love alone.

He looks at me with a hazy kind of wonderment I once yearned for. ‘Don’t tell me I’m beautiful,’ I say, moving across to make room for him beside me. ‘I’m going to sleep with you. You don’t need to seduce me.’

We’re lying side-by-side on the couch, mostly dressed, drawing heat from each other because his apartment, like mine, lacks proper heating.

‘Why did you join the study?’ he asks.

Versions of the truth weigh against each other: the money—but there’s a collection of un-cashed cheques in a drawer with my underwear, like the researchers know they’ll get their raw data for free because none of us will make the effort to go into the last remaining branch to deposit a cheque, no

matter how poor we are; the guilt of lying to get access to a grant year to write *The Evening Sun at Dawn*, the novel The Ministry doesn't know about; a misplaced sense of responsibility that compels me to do something additional in return for the money; an even greater misplaced sense of loyalty (once a Ministry official, always a Ministry official) that forces me to seize the chance to go inside the inner sanctum of the Science Partition; my innate curiosity to work out what they are actually studying under the misnomer of creativity; loneliness.

After several moments that are probably longer for him than for me, fumbling for the best answer, he assumes my silence is the answer and continues. 'I'm there to be part of the failure to find the answer.'

He slips his hand under my jumper, caresses my stomach. Goosebumps dimple my skin at his touch, rather than the sudden exposure to the cold.

'As if a similar, let alone identical, neural pathway can be found in us all. And that it could be mapped and then replicated.'

I can almost see the cynicism curled within his words, like the wire structure of a piñata.

Roughness grazes my neck. His words are felt as much as heard. 'Doesn't mean I don't still have nightmares about neurologically-enhanced monkeys spewing out Vonnegut and Marquez on networked Underwoods.'

A finger traces the bottom of my rib cage, draws a small embellishment over the softness of my diaphragm. 'Afterwards I lie bathed in sweat. Force myself to laugh in the face of the lingering terror as if it will prevent that from ever happening. I tell myself over and over there will be no monkeys and it becomes a mantra, some kind of warped insurance to keep the world I know from falling apart.'

Lips, on my neck, either side of my earlobe. A whisper: 'You must be talented to have received a grant.'

'Insider knowledge.' I cringe, lying there beside him, knowing just how inside I was, afraid he might somehow intuit it. 'I crunched the data,' I quickly say, 'and trends from the last twenty years of grants. Created an algorithm to predict what they would be looking for and based my application on that. You're only ever writing a book the Government wants.'

He brushes the hair out of my eyes and in the candlelight there is some-

thing so utterly innocent about him, and so fundamentally familiar, I feel my throat tighten.

‘So who is E?’

‘I don’t know.’ Silence pours in between us. ‘Yesterday, Josef Vince, today Gabriel Mester. Tomorrow ... perhaps tomorrow I shall be an afterthought of tonight. An echo of someone else?’

I kiss him and keep kissing him so his words that allude to the heart-break of waking alone in the morning cannot feed my guilt. And when we’re naked, the feel of his nipple between my lips, rolling over my tongue, is the exact same sensation from outside the pub, when his hand first enclosed mine.

‘Sometimes I imagine free will is an illusion we fall through,’ I whisper and let myself go.

The first time is never good, but if you know it’s the only time, you make an effort to try and navigate consciously toward something better. It means being present, too present, and sex is awkward and unfulfilling anyway. Afterwards neither of us talks about how we’re disappointed and unsatisfied or how when we’ve recovered we could do it again; do it better. It’s easier to move on, even if my clothes remain on the floor.

In his arms, words well up from a holding cell and briefly lift the silence heavy on us. ‘Maybe the researchers know something we don’t know.’

I take his hand and put it on my stomach, wanting to feel the goose-bump prickles from the couch, before the cold and desperation drove us to his bed.

‘If they can map and then replicate the narrative structure, would you be able to share my story? Could we coexist within it, in real time?’

My fantasy, observed and considered from every angle, so it’s absolutely real to me, sounds less tangible, less logical, less possible when shared aloud.

Silence holds us close for longer than I’m comfortable with. His finger traces circles around my navel, growing ever larger in the wordlessness.

He rises up on his elbow and looks down at me. ‘I think they want to know how we make stories so they can euthanise them, a preemptive broadcast attack to rewrite the stories we would write against them. Think about it.

‘We are always the first up against the wall. The thinkers. The next revolution, and don’t delude yourself it’s not going to be ours, will be clean. No guns pressed to the back of the skull. And we will have volunteered the solution; we will have facilitated our own creative executions. Stolen our own voices.’ After a time he whispers, ‘Perhaps they are already doing it?’

If I leave now, the fear I’ve undone myself will follow me and fill my freezing apartment. I can’t be alone with it. So I do the only thing I can think to do, even though I know it’s wrong. I stay.

Crystalised spider webs crunch beneath bare feet. The ever-so-slight metallic taste of cold creeps across her tongue, down the back of her throat and then into the nasal passages. All the signs indicate an unfeeleable cold. It isn’t numbness of body, just the failure to register any sensation. She looks up; eyes don’t see the steel-grey sky but her body feels the crushing weight of it, the asphyxiating compression of air driven out. As the haze cloaks her, moments before she falters and is absorbed into the frozen ground, eyes flick away, toward the horizon. Lungs inflate. The weight lifts. The terror remains as she struggles to assimilate her discordant relationship with the landscape.

It’s not unfamiliar. She doesn’t know how she knows this. Just that she does. Knows perhaps because of a gnawing feeling within the pit of her stomach, from which only the smallest details bleed through to guide her.

Ahead, the milling bodies of excited and over-stimulated people heat and press against her, the salty-sweet presence of kettle corn, crushed grass and hot donuts envelop her and bedeviled squeals rain down with the woosh and rumble of a cart on a track high above. She’s not in an amusement park, despite the incoming information. It is somewhere between the horizon and where she stands, where the visual disruption won’t allow her.

And so is the man.

In a small, public garden close by.

Memories linger just out of reach like the promise of water in a mirage.

This place, foreign and terrifying, is hers.

And his.

She walks, eyes closed because they are of no use, looking for the park bench,

following the faint smell of sandalwood—his aftershave, she thinks—fear building with each step, but she cannot stopn . . .

The after-burn of the dream clings to the dark corners of the room, unwilling to reveal itself as the drenching horror soaks into the sheets. Ignoring the heart-pounding warning, I reach back and try to follow the nightmare tendrils. No matter how much I focus or let myself go, clues evaporate as my mind grasps at them. All attempts to capture and catalogue fail and I'm stranded inside an unnerving, claustrophobic warmth. Feverish. Shivering in the heat, the weak light of pre-dawn leaks in and the last of the dream fog lifts along with the fear I'm sick.

It's not my room; it's his room. And it's not a fever, it's body heat: mine cradled within his; his curled around mine.

His sleeping face is carefree and so beautiful I want to trace the shadowed contours of his cheekbones, his jaw and commit them to memory, to be able to invoke not just the sight of them, but the way they feel. To touch the small shaved circles on this scalp. He is warm and solid, protection against the echo of unsettling things not quite forgotten, not quite remembered. Something in the back of my mind gnaws and I want to shake him, to hear his voice, to again have the feel of his body fused with mine, but I stop. Choke down the panic threatening to undo me.

On hands and knees, I reclaim each item of clothing. Dressed, I collect my satchel from the corner of the couch. The door closes firmly but quietly.

Dawn unfolds on the walk home, wave-like, so when I arrive at the midpoint—the Jakob Müller building—I'm fumbling to find sunglasses; expensive but years old now.

At home, in the tiny bathroom, I strip naked and turn the shower on. It's not the idea of the almost-lukewarm water that stops me, but the prospect of losing my last connection to him.

The unremembered dream stalks me from the perimeter of my consciousness: by night it destroys the refuge of sleep; by day it devours my focus—steals words and time I cannot afford to lose. I abandon the tiny kitchen table

and the manuscript I've barely added to all week. Journal against my knee, huddled into the tiny window alcove of my apartment, hording what little warmth the sun affords there, I scribble what I've been trying to deny since I snuck from E's apartment.

The dream has hallmarks of Ministry intervention.

Ice collects at the base of my spine and slowly travels upward until involuntary shudders rack my body. I tell myself writing it does not make it real. The Ministry of Moral Welfare has done nothing to me. I am simply documenting a concern, putting it beyond the tumble of irrational fear to allow a sensible assessment of it from multiple perspectives. I can apply logic.

Perhaps E was correct to fear we are selling ourselves out, ensuring our quiet devastation ahead of the next revolution.

For what? A handful of biscuits and bottomless coffee. How cheaply we have allowed ourselves to be bought. I stare at the page and try to remember what else he said. The hiss of static fills my head, like a migraine warning.

Time passes and I only realise I've been lost in thoughts that like the dream, evaporate under scrutiny, because the street below is wet. People disappear beneath black umbrellas. Cold radiates in through the pane, but I don't move. I rest my head against the pitted wood of the frame and review what I've written.

There was talk before I went on leave, of the possibilities of new, subtler torture techniques. Intrusive and invisible. A COI might be brought in for questioning and leave with something latent in their head. A slow ongoing torture where the COI turns on themselves and when the Ministry picks them up for a second round of questioning they will be 'malleable'. COIs will come apart in the comfort of their home, at no ongoing expense to the Ministry.

The proposal required technology the Ministry did not have, but the Science Partition undoubtedly did. Four decades on there was still no love between the Ministry, entrusted with the moral health and wellbeing of society, and the Partition, entrusted with rational thought and innovation. The Partition have an even longer memory than the Ministry because of the execution-style murder of Jákob Müller and his lover, Evelyn Starling, at the end of the last revolution. It ensured the Partition would never actively assist the work of the Ministry.

Who do the Partitioners think they are though? They were silent as other intellectuals went to the wall ahead of them, boots inches deep in the blood of others before Jákob and Evelyn. No one has the right to claim the moral high ground. No one wins a revolution.

The Ministry could have orchestrated the defection of several scientists or recruited others to work on their behalf within the Partition, but I had only been gone six months. Could so much have changed, so quickly?

I flip to the back of the journal and take a small photo from the paper pocket glued to the cover. Poul always saw the world different to me. That's why we were so effective together. I turn the dog-eared square over and over, look at the serious expression on his face from 90 degrees, 180, 270.

Why did I take this photo when all the rest were of him smiling?
360 degrees. And then around again.

How would Poul see the dreams? He wouldn't consider it subconscious paranoia bleeding into the daylight house. And the Ministry? What would he think of the possibility of their involvement?

Poul would look at it in reverse.

What if we are not being wired to transmit but to receive? What if the act of opening our thought processes allows something else to be laid down?

The dream started the night of the last trial. The fact I was with E is coincidence, not cause and effect. If I treat E and his apartment as extraneous variables, if I remove them...

Is E dreaming too? Does he have the lingering smell of cut grass upon waking? Of the press of hundreds of excited or scared bodies? What other memories does he...

Could the Partition create a viral dream? If they could, could E have infected me? If it's not coincidence, what is...

The central clock chimes quarter past the hour.

I could keep writing page after page of questions to which I have no answers. Not until tomorrow.

I put the photo back in the journal pocket. Six steps from the alcove to my bed. I push the journal beneath the lumpy, bug-infested mattress. My fingers brush the pages of *The Evening Sun at Dawn*. Telescopic eyes see all during the day and the Government isn't paying me to write this novel. Four steps from the bed to the table.

I ignore the growling hunger pains and begin the afternoon's writing by ordering the pages I scattered earlier in frustration. Misery and creative inertia can be fought. I will write by day what I am being paid to write. At night, I will write what they think they have banned. Obliterated. The dream can only destroy me if I let it. My mind is stronger than the paranoia E seeded there, and the doubts and fears I've added to it. I have proven before and I will prove again, I am better than my former employer.

Sometimes I imagine free will is an illusion we fall through, I said to E before I gave in.

I believe in my free will and it is not the Ministry's to take.

Tuesday's lab assistant is an older man whose shiny pate contrasts with the verdant goatee. He fusses over the scalp circles. It's difficult to contain the frustration of his ministrations. The effort to appear bored—to be whatever I was all the other times sitting waiting to join the experiment—is exhausting. Lies have always been difficult.

'Right to go, Miss Bodor,' he announces and escorts me one hundred and eighty-nine steps from the preparation room to the lab.

Twenty-eight steps from the door to my place. Across from me, the seat is empty.

I sink into the hard plastic chair and act nonchalant, model myself on the subjects as they wait for the session to begin. My body may be contained, but my head is a mess. Well-ordered thoughts unravel as minutes disappear from the clock and the seats fill. And the conversation I've already had in my head a hundred times with E starts to come apart.

There's an overwhelming sense of the ground rushing up to meet me.

We're in the pub together, my journal in E's hands—

Only one seat remains. The one across from me.

E takes the journal, flips to the last entry, the one about the Ministry, reads. In an instant I'm no longer alone with my fears ...

The lab door opens. Adrenalin punches every synaptic connection to attention. An older man with short, salt-and-pepper hair and a rash of acne scars takes E's seat.

'Subjects you have sixty seconds,' the researcher says, watching the man settle in.

The others nod.

Don't let them see the wild look, the lost look, the look that says I breached the non-fraternisation clause in my contract and now he's not here but I am here and I suspect the Ministry is involved, but I don't know how, but I know you do.

The screen rises out of the desk.

'Miss Bodor?'

The sensation of falling is amplified. I'm falling through the ground, instead of hitting it, picking up velocity, burning myself up on the way toward the core of the earth. Nausea swells in my gut.

The researcher stares at me. 'Miss Bodor?'

I nod. Barely.

An alarm sounds and the screen in front of me begins to fill with words. These are not my words. I do not recognise them. They slip through my head, tractionless. I am lost. Totally lost. I try to read, but can't comprehend. Fingers, rounded and poised on the tapboard remain inert. There is music and static vying for space that words should be filling.

Biscuits appear. Coffee congeals. Time happens separate from me.

‘And finish,’ the researcher calls and the screen retracts into the bench.

I trudge up the corridor with the goateed assistant. Fourth room on the left today. One hundred and ninety-seven steps this time; hesitation, dread, in every step. My post-experiment answers bounce off the shiny pate, tangle in the beard hairs of my questioner.

‘Am I out?’ I ask when the list is exhausted.

A word count of zero represents an extreme outlier. I’m a liability now: a skew in their data. Is this what happened to E?

The assistant hands me a cheque. ‘We’ll see you next week, Miss Bodor,’ he says, as always, never deviating from the script.

At the door, with nothing left to lose I ask a final stammered, choking question. ‘What happened to ...’ What do I call E? I have no idea what his real name is. ‘What happened to the man across from me? He wasn’t there today.’

The assistant’s oily scalp captures a distorted impression of me. He doesn’t look up, doesn’t answer.

‘It was a different man there. The man last week, he had dark hair—’

‘Thank you, Miss Bodor, you are excused.’

Halfway down the hallway he calls out to me. ‘You forgot your scarf last week.’

I go back up the hallway—twenty-eight steps. He doesn’t hand me the red scarf Poul’s mother knitted me three Christmases ago. In my hands he places a heavy grey scarf, chunky cables knitted into it. The tassels aren’t stained, but singed. There’s the faintest smell of E embedded in the wool.

Dizziness unsettles my stomach.

Free will. Free fall.

But my face remains inert, just, the years at the Ministry finally useful for something even though there is an unsteady impermanence flooding my body. ‘Thank you,’ I say, voice steady and nod.

Fifty-four steps to the side door. My hand trembles as I press the button to be let out. There are no streetlights again, but I see the figure standing in the courtyard facing the door, more shadow than man. I hurry away, knowing it is not E. Eighty-six steps to the road that forms one side of the block that houses the Jákob Müller building. Two hundred and four steps and I’m on the

next block and down an alley between a dry cleaners and a bakery.

Vomit sprays against the bakery wall and drips from the scarf tassels. Small dark holes appear in the flour dust coating the cobblestones. My stomach convulses again and again until there is more black than white underfoot.

The wall underhand is cool and solid.

I'm neither.

At the mouth of the alley, with the stink of fear splashed on my boots and E's scarf wrapped tight around my neck, I attempt to talk myself into going home. I lie—I will be safe there—but nowhere is safe once you become a Citizen of Interest with the Ministry. So half an hour later I'm standing across from E's apartment block, watching life within as though it is a wall of holographic options and all I have to do is press one square to become a part of it. On the seventh floor, a silhouetted person moves around the apartment I think is his.

I'll go up and he'll tell me he was unable to make the experiment because he was sick or there was a death in the family. And all my feverish, fertile imaginings of a bleak and dangerous future will be obsolete. He will thank me for returning the scarf. And we'll laugh and maybe he'll kiss me. And maybe, I'll stay because I know there are greater things to fear than random moments of intimacy.

It takes twelve steps to cross from footpath to footpath and another dozen to arrive in the apartment vestibule.

How many to climb to the top?

Head rested against the wall I try and remember what it was like to come here with him last week. Was his arm wrapped around my shoulders or was my thin hand still clasped in his larger, warmer one. Did we joke how our breath came in thick, dragon-like plumes as we climbed the seven flights of stairs?

Why can't I remember what it felt like for him to lead me up the stairs to his apartment?

Why did I not take the time to pay attention; stay in the present?

Why did I treat it like it meant nothing? Transient, so I had already

moved on before we arrived?

Was I trying to protect me or him?

At the seventh floor I slump, gasping, against the water-stained wall and wait to catch my breath. I look down at the torn mosaic of linoleum then up the corridor. Did he stop and smile at me halfway to his door, the one with the impression of 15A barely visible on the doorframe?

Twelve steps, like crossing the road, bring my knuckles to the flaking paint of E's door. A woman opens it; disheveled and lost within layers of jumpers. The faded skirt of a housedress wilts beneath the waistbands and a snotty toddler sits on her hip, arms clasped tight to her.

'I'm looking for E.'

'You're looking for what?' The sharpness of her voice is a mechanism of impact rather than a means of communication. Despite my feet firmly planted on the scarred linoleum, my vestibular system bounces back and forth like a bobo doll. I wait for my inner equilibrium to settle. Her eyes narrow and stare at my pale, shaking hands.

'Not what, who?' The words are authoritative but coming out of me, dressed as I am, they're farcical. 'Where is E?'

'Only us here. Me, the husband and babe.'

'Last week, he lived here. I was here with him. In there.'

My foot darts into the space disappearing between the door and the jamb, the heel of my hand pressed against the wood. She shoves as hard as she can against the door and my shoulder finds purchase against it. I think of Newton's laws of physics and before the next thought crowds in, the door gives and I'm inside.

Grey overalls hang on a makeshift clothesline with nappies. The place reeks of paprika, garlic and urine.

The couch is gone, his books. The walls are bare.

The walls ... I remember now.

They had the amusement park on them when we walked in. Beside the door there was an AmbiScape controller. Now there are four neat holes where the cradle was once screwed. My fingers travel from one hole to another, as though I might pluck E from the plaster and spin him back into reality. Plaster dust comes away on my finger—fine, flour-like.

‘How long have you lived here?’

‘If you don’t leave, I will call the *Rendőrség*.’

I point to the pairs of dark eyes in the plaster. ‘What happened to your AmbiScape?’

‘AmbiScape!’ she snorts. ‘Since when do the poor have such luxuries?’

‘Then what was screwed to the wall?’

The woman’s bravado seeps out of her like the green congestion oozing from her child’s nose. ‘I won’t call the *Rendőrség* ... if you just leave.’

‘And if I don’t?’

‘Please,’ she says, her voice solid but quiet. She is not begging. I know if I stay, she will. The toddler on her hip grizzles and she pulls it to her breast, swaying side-to-side to comfort it. ‘Just go. I don’t want trouble ... for any of us.’

I could make her tell me. The charisma and the authority, and the fear that undercut both, are still mine to wield. I have the skills to force her to part with the information I want, I just don’t have the will. Because I can’t help her when she does. I left all that behind.

Now I’m tired and scared. Lost. And so is E.

She does not need to open her eyes to know she is somewhere other than an amusement park. The Ferris wheel and rollercoaster, the popcorn and donuts and the screams of terror and excitement, the ebb and flow of a crowd are data spliced from a different place and time.

She is not to go to the amusement park. She is to find him.

He will be in a small, public garden close by. Sitting on a bench waiting for her.

The grass in the park will be damp and freshly cut, sticking to her soles and the tops of her feet when one foot accidentally brushes the other.

She has no idea how she knows this.

Data without meaning.

Memories poorly wired. Disconnected ...

... Dancing. They are dancing. The man’s chest pressed into her. The slow sway of movement. The gentle weep of a blues guitar.

She opens her eyes to situate herself but the sensory disruption steals everything except the feel and smell of him.

Sandalwood. Aftershave she thinks and sees a small cut-glass bottle. Light refracts a rainbow through the glass and onto the bathroom wall, dripping with condensation.

Her tongue rolls over and around his nipple.

Heat washes off the back of his neck, over her face.

He will be real.

The sweet, fresh smell of grass surrounds her again. Eyes closed she walks, feels the sticky coating of grass and fear and the frustration of never moving forward.

She will not give up, because no matter what they did, she will never believe he is lost.

Four words go in my journal.

He is not lost.

I lie in bed, curled around the book and decide the words refer to yesterday, and to the dream. Whatever issues I have in separating reality from fiction, in remaining in the present, I know the two are connected: the dream and E's disappearance.

I am not giving up.

I know where to find E.

My stomach aches from the violent vomiting the previous night. I force down stale bread then pull a box from beneath the bed. Camphor clings to the heavy, expensive woollen suit that marked me as a Ministry Official; the three stars on the shoulder designate my rapid ascension in rank. Looking in the mirror, I see a shrunken version of myself and it's not just the lack of body fat.

Stand straight. Shoulders back. Face firm.

I don't recognise myself. Despair pours in.

Did I ever recognise myself in this uniform though? In my heart I was only ever impersonating a member of the Ministry. It's what I told myself every day I pulled this suit on, polished the silver buttons and stars, pulled my hair into an elaborate French roll and went out into the world to protect the people who were least equipped to defend themselves against the Ministry. I can barely protect myself if the reflection in the mirror is anything to go by.

Out in the hallway, I keep my back to the woman who sits at the end knitting the same pair of socks over and over, lock the door and steel myself with the knowledge I cannot be charged for impersonating myself.

People step aside, eyes averted, to let me slowly climb the steps of the State Library. Thirty-six steps up. Two hundred and forty-nine to take me deep into the building and away from ears that might dare to listen. The automated face on the librarian screen tells me no works are listed under the names Josef Vince or Gabriel Mesters. Rather than argue with a holographic image, I go to the stacks, run my hand over shelves emptied of books. The suit gives me access, via a nervous librarian, to the catacombs of electronic records and digital books and historical archives of web pages. At the end, there is nothing. The only proof of E's existence, the scarf stuffed into my satchel.

I assumed he was published. I assumed he had found peace in the sacrifice of artistic freedom and intellectual integrity for publication. Or had kept both and managed to get his work off the Continent, to somewhere words were freely disseminated and consumed. It never occurred to ask me what he had written though and now I realise I have no idea what I'm actually looking for. The names, his other names, could be the names of anyone.

My intuition is never off though, regardless of the doubts trying to undermine it. I leave the archives and return upstairs. At the information desk I insist on speaking with the Head Librarian. Cautious eyes travel across the black double-breasted jacket and the silver buttons. My long overcoat hangs over my left arm.

'There are records that cannot be opened,' she tells me and I know I was

right not to give up.

The problem is, in my head I'm not dressed as a Ministry Official. I'm in my tattered jumper, shivering. And we're arguing that E exists. Our words rise on thermals of anger and then fall like dead starlings when security appears and escorts me—

'Is there anything else?' the Head Librarian. I catch myself and pull back into the present. Her grey eyes are flat but there is something in the crinkle of her right eye. I want to admire the bolsh in her words. She knows that despite her lower profession and rank she has access to information I am denied. And there is the hint of rebellion in the way she wields that information, knowing she is safe even though there is nothing inherently illegal in her actions.

'Your assistance has been noted,' I say.

Heavy steps, eighty-six of them, drag me out of the building and into lung-searing air. The Ministry uniform is warm, the overcoat makes it doubly so. Nothing can stop the ice forming inside me.

There are ten cheques in the drawer where my underwear is kept. Ten visits to the Jákob Müller Building. Two weeks left to complete the dozen trials I was contracted to complete when I volunteered. Without credits to spare on the extravagance of a private car, much less public transport, I walk. It takes all morning and part of the afternoon. Why I never bothered going to the bank, until now. The cashier takes the cheques from me, confers with her supervisor and tells me she is unable to transfer the value.

'The drawer account does not exist.'

'But I go there every week.'

She shakes her head. 'I suggest you contact the Ministry and report the discrepancy.'

My fingers curl into fists. Giving into my anger will not get me answers. Not when I'm dressed once again in the ragged clothes of a starving artist. I take a deep breath and ask, 'Have there been others, with this... *discrepancy*?' When she doesn't answer, I continue, 'There are others receiving these cheques and they can only cash them here.'

She looks hard at me, judging me based on the poverty of my appear-

ance. I know she finds me wanting and undeserving of her time and effort, but eventually she walks away to talk with her supervisor. When she comes back, she says quietly, 'Several weeks ago, a man came in with cheques like these.'

'Dark-haired, my height?'

'I'm not at leisure to divulge personal details.'

'Even if I told you he is missing now.'

Her face pales and eyes dart to where her supervisor is standing watching our exchange. 'Perhaps.'

'What name were the cheques made out to?'

The directness of the questions unsettles her and she shakes her head. 'I didn't look at the name. We couldn't cash them.'

Her hand sweeps over the cheques and I clamp my hand over hers. 'If they are worthless, you won't mind if I take them with me.'

'Of course.' Colour floods her cheeks. 'Is there anything else I can help you with today?'

'Your assistance has been noted,' I say automatically and her face pinches in recognition. She looks with terror at me, trying to reconcile the words with my lack of uniform. 'Thank you,' I say, trying to repair the *faux pas*. The smile is false and rigid despite my best efforts for it to appear warm. Normal.

I shove the cheques into my pocket and leave quickly. Forty-five long strides across the shiny marble foyer tiles, my face turned from the security cameras. I don't react, I don't think. I just walk. And keep walking.

At the first convenience booth I squander an entire week's food budget on a packet of cigarettes. I need something to occupy my hands and still my fear-mongered brain. This is what it truly feels like to be on the other side. To have had a loved one 'disappeared'.

I tear open the packet and shove a cigarette between my lips. My hands shake so hard, searching for a lighter or a box of matches in my satchel. There must be something left over, buried deep, from the time when cigarettes were an everyday consumable. In sheer frustration, I upend the satchel and shake the contents onto the footpath. E's scarf falls free first, followed by my pens and a notebook. My green tortoise-shell compact drops on top. Tissues float autumn-like to the ground and dissolve in the wet. Then a data stick

skips across the cracked concrete and into the gutter, coming to rest against an anemic dandelion sheltered in a tiny nook created by a chunk of broken concrete and the side of the gutter.

The stick is old tech, from when information could be moved freely from location to location, not locked down by the Ministry. Poul—my throat constricts at the thought of him—has a collection of these in his workshop. I bend down to pick it up. The initials KB are scratched into the side. I look over my shoulder as I stand and drop it in my pocket with the fraudulent cheques. The rest of the items are wet. I don't bother to dry them, just shove them in the satchel and walk away from the convenience booth.

I tried to leave the past in the past. I tried.

Now it's the only place left to go.

'Anikó!' A blast of hot hair accompanies Poul's surprise. He'd forgo food, alcohol, cigarettes, just about everything for heat. Said that there was no point in trying to do intricate work with fingers stiff with the rigor mortis of cold. To Poul, cold was death. Moments later he appears in the space between the door and the jamb. I take the data stick from my pocket and offer it to him between two fingers as if it's an exclamation mark of an unspoken apology. He takes the stick, rubs a thumb over the scratched initials and motions for me to come inside.

In the converted fireplace, a solar heater glows fiercely. Above is the elaborate gold-framed mirror—a gift from his sister—and I tell myself not to look, but it's like the siren song of an accident that you can't turn from. My stomach lurches. They're still there, jammed between the hideous frame and the mercury-spoiled glass: the only photo of us together and the approval letter from the Ministry for a marriage license that arrived the week before I left.

'Poul, I —'

'I'm sure it was for a good reason.'

He says it without emotion and my chest folds in on itself.

'Poul, please. ' I try to touch him but he shakes off my hand.

'Leave it be, Anikó. '

I expect him to turn and shepherd me out of the semi-detached we once called home, but he keeps on, through the kitchen, into the pantry and down into the his cellar workshop. He's refined the heating system since I've been gone. It's warm, not stifling.

He pulls a chair over to his desk for me. From a shelf of homemade gizmos he takes a thin metal box. He ports the data stick then attaches the cords to his processing unit. I sit down beside him.

'I can't promise anything,' he says.

Together, we once worked side-by-side into the early hours coding and embedding alerts into the Ministry mainframe to protect the COIs—Citizens of Interest—I came across at work. The Ministry likes acronyms; it depersonalises individuals. Ordinary people, like the head librarian and the woman who lives in E's apartment now.

Because of Poul's alarms, we kept one step ahead of the Ministry. With the aid of the Underground we assisted COIs in leaving before the Ministry disappeared them. And it hits me. When I left, I knew Poul could take care of himself, but those Citizens of Interest, the ones waiting to be found by other Ministry officials: I betrayed them; left them vulnerable with my selfishness—for wanting to disappear myself to write. To want to leave something of myself behind when I was gone.

I drop my head into my hands and try not to cry. It's no surprise, I realise now, how hard I have fought to keep myself dislocated in the future or embedded in fiction. How well I was doing until E came along. I blink back the tears and watch the screen rain columns of luminous green numbers.

'This is antiquated. I don't even know if I can access it.' His fingers hover above the tapboard, calm. If he's angry he's hiding it well. 'What's on it?'

'I don't know.'

'How did you come by this?'

'I didn't know where else to go. I ... I lost something.' I can't look him in the eye and after an awkward pause I try again. 'I think it has something to do with an experiment the Partition is running.'

Poul's head whips sideways. 'You were in the Partition all this time?'

'Poul, it's not what you think. I'm not a mole. I'm not.'

The anger he's been suppressing floods his pale cheeks. My grasp on

everything is slipping. Confidence pours out like sand through my fingers. Emotions I've buried deep push upward and threaten a tectonic demolition.

'Poul, I'm not a mole. You have to believe me. What I did ... why I disappeared ... I did for me. Not for the Ministry and not for 'The Partition.'

Silence ices the space between us and finally he asks, without looking at me, 'What did you lose?'

'A man. His name is E.'

'Are you going to give me something more to work with? Something straight up.'

The double meaning slams into me.

'It wasn't love ... it wasn't anything like that. We met in the experiment and ... and ...' I force myself to stop babbling before the truth pours out of me and we drown deeper in my betrayal. 'I have two names: Josef Vince and Gabriel Mester. And E. Plus the initials on the data stick.'

Poul types the names into a search string and we wait as his processor sifts through the stick's information. Finally a list of names appears on the screen.

'He is real,' I say, relief buoying me as my fingers touch the screen where green pixels form the name Josef Vince and further down the list, Gabriel Mester. The hooks of paranoia release a little. 'Are his books on here?'

Poul runs his fingers down the screen and the information scrolls. 'Hers, you mean?'

I shake my head. 'No *his*. These have to be copies of E's books. Before the Ministry deleted them.'

It's Poul's turn to shake his head. 'These look like,' he scrolls all the way to the bottom. His face pales. 'Those were all pseudonyms of ... Evelyn Starling. Anikó, how did you get this?'

He's flicking through screens with a shaking hand.

'Stop,' I say and flick back several screens to a list of books. My stomach drops as I read down. My body shakes hard despite the warmth.

'This can't be,' I say, the words compressing in my head. '*The Evening Sun at Dawn* ... that... that's my novel.'

Underfoot the grass in the park is damp and warm and freshly cut, sticking to her soles and the tops of her feet when one foot accidentally brushes the other. Clutched in her hand is a pair of red shoes, the leather creased and soft like elderly skin.

She walks even though her heart pounds and sweat seeps through her dress, sticking the thin material to her skin.

The skin on the back of her neck prickles. When she turns she is alone, but the sensation persists.

Bleeding into the scene before her is the image of a cut-glass bottle catching and converting sunlight into a rainbow on a wall glistening with condensation.

Footsteps pound the stairs and fists batter the front door. The shelf shakes and the glass bottle falls, smashes on the floor.

‘Jakob Müller!’

‘Run,’ Jakob says, pushing her toward the window. ‘Go. Now.’

And she’s falling ... down, down, down ...

... the amusement park glitches before her, phasing in and out of the alleyway beneath their flat.

‘Stop!’ Boots thump the ground behind her. ‘Stop her. Now!’

She does not stop. Does not turn. Does not acknowledge the terror pursuing her. Without acknowledgement it cannot follow her. She will evade it. Escape.

And she runs. Never looking back.

I bolt upright, desperately dragging in air as though I’ve been running for my life. The mattress shifts beside me. Poul pulls me back down next to him and wraps his arms around me. ‘It’s okay.’

‘My journal,’ I say, pushing him away, scrambling for the book on his bedside table. I need to write down the phantom snippets before they evaporate.

‘Stop,’ he says and pulls me back, holding me tight as I fight against him. It’s over before it starts. I’m too tired to even cry. ‘You wrote that you thought perhaps they were opening your minds to seed something, rather than harvest what was already there.’

‘Did I write that?’

‘You don’t remember?’

I shake my head. I'm no longer sure what's real. Part of me feels lost inside the dreams I can't remember. Disappearing incrementally, night-by-night, dream-by-dream.

'You need to come downstairs.'

I switch the light on beside the bed. His eyes are bloodshot and his face pulled in a way I've never seen it before.

'What have you found?'

'You had better come down and read it for yourself.'

One careful barefoot step after another takes me from the mezzanine to the kitchen below and then down into the cellar. I feel as though I have to concentrate hard on the place where my sole meets the warmth in the boards, as if my impermanence will be amplified if I don't. I sit in Poul's seat and stare at the screen.

'I hacked into the Partition's mainframe after I read your journal. It was ... Anikó, the experiment you've been part of, the information for it, it was...'

'Just say it.' My voice comes from somewhere beyond me.

Poul kneels down beside me. 'It is Ministry encryption.'

I put my hand to my head. Inside there's hissing and I bury my fingers into my hair, push at my scalp. Try to tune out the noise.

'No, no Anikó,' he says, trying to stop me tearing my hair out. 'Anikó, stop!'

'They broke my head. They did what I feared they would do.'

'It's not the Ministry. It's Partition. They are using someone with Ministry training.' He shakes me, gently at first and then hard. 'The Ministry did not scramble your brain. Anikó, stop this. Stop!'

The slap hurts. Burns. The static ceases. As I come back into the present, the sound at the periphery of my consciousness is Poul's crying. I put my hand to his cheek and wipe the tears away.

'I'm sorry, Anikó. I'm so sorry. But you need to read this.'

He leaves me and in the background I hear running water and him stoking the fire in the kitchen. Shortly after, I smell coffee and a small amount of tension leaves my body. I turn my attention back to the screen and try to focus.

Poul always had an intuitive knack for digital navigation and while I used

to be adept, he's saved me the time and brought me deep into the heart of the Partition's database. He's opened all the firewalls and left me free to wander the information catacombs of SM-101-D: the experiment's code name.

After an hour of frustration, I run upstairs for my journal. Writing notes always helped comprehension and now I need all the help I can get. My mind is unreliable and the further I read, the deeper I go: from Evelyn and Jákob's original lucid dreaming experiments and his early theories of neural mapping to their later combined experiments in joint dreaming, Jákob's forced repatriation and his secret experiments recording and transposing Evelyn's writing. I should stop.

Instead of going into the contents of Jákob's tapes, I go into the experiment's subject database, scanning the list for a subject with the initials K.B. It begins as quiet, stunned sobs, my eyes taking in the details of the photos. Fingers reach out to the screen but don't touch it. Can't touch his naked body prone on the floor in his apartment. Can't put myself back in that room, on that morning when I left at dawn, and stay. Can't stop him putting a gun in his mouth at lunch-time. The grief rolls out of me with the fury of a summer storm until there is nothing left. Nothing left to do but save myself because I cannot save him.

It used to take me an hour to write a basic algorithm, several for something more complex. It takes me all day to devise something to tally and analyse the subject data I've pulled out of the mainframe. Poul tops up the coffee beside the tapboard, empties the ashtray and brings food that goes untouched.

'They knew,' I say hoarsely as the ancient printer spits out the crunched data. Poul sits next to me and reads the printout. 'They are meant to be above this. They are meant to be our *logic compass*. They are meant to protect us. They are meant to be everything the Ministry isn't. But they treated us as ... disposable. They mindlessly *sacrificed subjects*.' Their data refers to it as 'attrition' and calculates it as a coefficient. But it's not. It's murder. Yet I can't bring myself to say it aloud.

'We need to go,' he says, folding the printout. 'They've already been to your apartment and it's only a matter of time before they come here.'

'We have to take this with us.'

'We need to travel light.'

'No. I can't leave. I need to know what was on those tapes.'

In the distance she sees the amusement park, the incumbent spin of the Ferris wheel and the twisting track of the rollercoaster but knows they are not really there. They do not belong to the dream.

'They are part of the overlay, a control of sorts,' his voice says to her, like a movie voiceover. 'They are part of everyone's 'scape.'

'Like a test pattern?' she says, and he laughs.

'Yes, Evelyn. For you, a test pattern. For me, an orientation plane.'

'Or your own brand of tattoo on everyone's psyche.'

He laughs louder at that.

A flock of birds spirals up into the dazzling cerulean sky.

'Starlings,' she says, laughing. She can almost see each individual bird. Only Jákob would think to add embellishments like her namesakes. Would take the time to do something like that.

'Are they just for me, or are they in everyone's 'scape?'

There is silence.

'Your acuity is improving,' he says. 'It takes time to adjust, to find your orientation here. Like trying to tune the wireless.'

'Where are you, Jákob?' she asks, turning around on the spot.

She knows he is close by, sitting in a garden, on a bench.

'Waiting for you. Like the first day.'

The grass in the park is hot and freshly cut, sticking to her soles and the tops of her feet when one foot accidentally brushes the other. In her hand is clutched a pair of red shoes, the leather creased and soft like elderly skin. The air is alive with the scents of dozens of blooming flowers.

In the distance he sits on a bench, waiting.

'Jákob,' she calls and walks toward him.

The starlings screech and in a single column, dive. She ducks and tries not to scream as hundreds of wings beat the air around her. As quickly as they are on her, they are gone, spiraling upward to recommence their aimless acrobatics overhead, as though nothing happened.

She walks on. Faster now. Words choke in the base of her throat. Numbers. She is counting off numbers. Her feet stumble and she tries to stop. She wants to turn back. Wants to stop what is happening. To stop the eyes boring into the back of her skull.

Four hundred and twenty-one steps bring her to the bench.

He sits rotating a green tortoise-shell compact in his hand.

'Jákob,' she says gently, not wanting to wrench him from his thoughts. She touches his shoulder to get his attention, but he continues to stare off toward the horizon where she can barely make out the amusement park.

'Jákob,' she says again, and slowly lowers herself to the bench, the boards warm beneath her thighs and she puts her hand on his thigh. 'We made it.'

He doesn't look at her, just turns the compact over and over in his hands.

'Why do you have my compact?' she asks, even though she does not recognise it.

'Leave it be, Evelyn,' he says, without looking at her.

She snatches it from him and flips it open. From the small mirrored window, a face she does not recognise screams.

'Anikó! Wake up.'

I come to, my throat raw and dry. It takes time to find my place again. To remember where we are now. A news slate lies abandoned in my lap, rocking gently with the sway of the train carriage. We're long gone from the city. It's weeks since we crossed the border and connected with contacts that put an ocean between us and the bloodbath drenching our home. I pick the slate up and tap to turn it on.

'Don't,' Poul says and takes it from me. 'The rest of the world doesn't care. You don't have to either.'

From a distance it would be easy to do that. Poul might want to deny the reality, try to protect me. It doesn't change what's happening though. It might be reported as a spill, as though indiscriminate slaying of people with a differing philosophical position is like knocking a bottle of milk over. It's a purge. And I started it.

'If I'd just left it alone—'

‘Then more people would have died before this started.’

I shake my head because people are dying now. Their blood is on my hands. He takes my hand, as if he knows what I am thinking and winds his fingers in mine. ‘Your job is to get well again. That’s all you need to worry about.’

‘And then we start again.’

Poul turns away from me and looks at the Land of the Free speeding past.

‘Poul?’ I squeeze his hand gently. ‘It has to be for something. If you can’t let it go, do you think I’m going to?’

He passes the book in his lap to me. ‘We have to think differently to the Partition researchers.’ I open to the most recent page and his mind map, breaking down all the information we stole into its composite parts.

He points to the left side of the page. ‘They started with Müller.’

‘Then we start with Starling.’ I point to the right hand side. ‘We start with what she wanted.’

Each session is timed. Not like they were in the Partition, back when I thought the researchers were capturing and quantifying our narratives to be studied in a reliable, scientific fashion from which new data might have been extrapolated to support or dismiss old hypotheses and spawn new statements about creativity that would underwrite the next study. Back then I knew enough about how experiments were conducted to know they were not studying what they told us they were studying.

I did not know Evelyn started it all with her theories of mutual integration. I did not know they wanted to find Evelyn’s manifesto and use us to tease apart the twelve different intellects Jákob Müller compressed into Evelyn’s neural pathways.

I did not know the Partition was priming us to be the intellectuals who would fuel the next revolution. Where rationality would replace morality and free society from the repressive subjectivity of good and bad. Of right and wrong. To become slaves of logic instead.

The researchers did not know Müller’s master tape contained the most

radical implementation of his theories: life beyond death. I'm only beginning to understand how it might be possible.

It is the theory Poul and I are exploring, testing, now that we agree the risk factor for the suicides was not transmission length or accumulated exposure to Müller's encephalographic blueprint. We have tentatively agreed the suicides were the result of Evelyn's presence interfering with the integrity of the subject's conception of self. E was the outlier, who began to call himself E as a way of identifying with her, in an attempt to create a sympathetic bridge between the two personalities to allow them to coexist.

Poul classifies it as an unconscious survival strategy. I don't agree.

I believe E was a better subject than I will ever be and all the data on the stick came from him. I believe he had the agency and ability to create an alternate reality to protect himself from fracturing irreparably, all the while presenting as a functioning member of society. I have suggested that he identified with both Evelyn and Jákob, and this created a sympathetic kind of equilibrium in him.

E agrees when I bring my latest theory to the dreamscape. He knows all about Müller and Starling's work and we talk for hours dissecting the strengths and weaknesses in both, conversations that pass into the waking hours and allow me to guide Poul in refining the transmission process, one more akin to sound engineering than neuroscience, and me in creating better ways to incorporate and transcribe what is downloaded each morning.

A week ago, Poul and I started exploring a deeper musical connection. That night I took the melody I had in my head, the one I thought I saw E tapping, down into the dream and we danced, red shoes following his polished black ones across the boards of a dance hall. His arms tight around me as though he was afraid if he loosened his hold I would slip away and disappear.

On the bench in the park, where we first met, he encouraged me to keep writing. He said I could write a manifesto to change our world if I surrendered categorised notions I had about myself: I could be both philosopher and scientist; they were not mutually exclusive in other societies. He encouraged my fledgling theories of mutual integration. He saw how it could ameliorate humanity's predisposition for fanaticism; a blueprint for freeing us from the extremes of morality and rationalism tearing apart our world. It could provide

a means of protection, keeping safe our loved ones, if I could find a way for diametrically opposed states of mind, of belief, to coexist harmoniously.

As dawn approached he pressed my hand between his and begged me not to leave him. He whispered death would not be the end for he and I, that we could transcend time if I would just stay. My heart broke as the day pulled me from him.

Each night the urge to stay is stronger and each morning I lie still next to Poul, the flattened feather pillow beneath me, damp with tears, watching the sun filter through the filthy window in the loft bedroom. I think about the pistol hidden beneath the bed, beneath the boards, and the ancient bullets loaded in the chamber.

Evelyn died knowing she could not stop revolution.

I will die knowing I should have.

this once precious life

The skin at the corner of Xavier's eyes crinkles when he smiles. It's the sort of nuance lost behind a tinted visa. A lot can be hidden behind the bulk of deep-space personal protective equipment, perhaps for good reason. His mercurial eyes have fascinated me since he walked into our first planning session on the SS Panchjanya, shifting from green to blue to grey depending on his mood. I linger a moment longer than I should on his shoulder's breadth and the muscle definition in his arm visible beneath the tight silicon-weave sleeves. Biceps on full display, because like me, he's carrying a portable cooling unit. I press my unit into the wall, using my torso to steady it, while I press my thumb into the security screen. A moment later, the door to my living quarters slides open, activating my programmed preferences: heat at a mild 21 degrees Celsius, lighting subdued, the susurrations of waves in the distance and the subtle, salty scent of water.

I hesitate before stepping in. I've never invited anyone into my private space. Until now, there's been no need. For a decade I've regarded men either as colleagues or enemies.

'It's not much ... but it's, you know, home,' I say, walking in and depositing the cooling unit on the bench.

As the Managing Director of the Eridani Research Facility, my two-room quarters are a palace compared to the honeycomb billets for transitional staff,

two to a room, with shared communal and ablution areas.

He steps across the threshold, inhales deeply and says, surprised, ‘The ocean? You’ve been to an ocean?’

‘No,’ I laugh. ‘I grew up on Miranda.’

It’s an unexpected disclosure. For both of us.

His face doesn’t jerk into the usual prejudiced expression that people then have to scramble to cover. Because out here, in this line of work, I am even more exceptional and unexpected than an ocean of warm, salty water, teeming with life.

He nods and my body relaxes.

‘I hope I’m not wasting credits on a bad experience.’

Because without a real comparison, I have to trust the sensory simulation. Hoping one day when I stand on a shoreline, I won’t be disappointed. Won’t feel duped by a company that assured me the ocean sounded and smelled like this.

‘One day I’ll get there,’ I say, feeling another emotional glacier slide into the warmth his company generates.

I’ve already told him more than I’ve told another living soul in the last decade. He should leave before I tell him something I will actually regret. Then I realise he’s standing there, between me and the door, still holding a cooling unit.

‘Shit, sorry.’

I move to let him offload the unit onto the bench. Our arms brush and my heart skips, followed by an irrational uptick in pace; every micro interaction amplified now we are alone.

‘You plan to go to New Brisbane?’ he asks, picking up the conversation’s thread.

‘Sooner or later some corporate asshole is going to subpoena me to testify in person,’ I say, leaning down to flip open the charging port. ‘But they’ll hope I won’t get there in time and it will void my report.’

There’s the slightest tremor in my hand when I extract the units’ power cords. Thank fuck I am doing nothing more intricate than accessing a socket. Because technically, I shouldn’t be storing samples in the Staff Hub. I told

Xavier it was easier than battling the security protocols again at the Research Hub. There were only two units left and everyone else had clocked off, heading for their first proper shower in six weeks. Xavier didn't look to be in a hurry to join them, so I suggested we bring them here. And now we're talking about the ocean.

'But you know, if they're paying and I get there in time,' I say, 'there's the ocean after. And if not, there's still the ocean.'

A real ocean on a planet not populated with rocks and ice and the descendants of criminals. One not being carved up and transported across the solar system to raise new civilisations, just like the old ones falling down.

I wonder where he calls home?

Out here we are all adrift; risking our lives on the periphery because there's nowhere else to go. Any self-preservation long gone. We pretend this is a voluntary choice, to be here on the edge. We all know we are escaping something though. Or someone.

What, or who, is he hiding from?

I key in the sequence to switch from solar cell to grid power, glad he's too busy surveying my living space to see how nervous he's making me. The questions he arouses unsettle me as much as his physical proximity.

'I didn't pick you as a reader or collector,' he comments, going to the shelves of ancient hardback books and yellowed plastic DVD cases.

He runs a long, elegant finger over the spines. A slow reverence as attractive as his shoulders and easy smile.

'I studied 20th Century Popular Space Culture and 21st Century Pop Poetry. And it's a life-long love affair. Not very scientific I know.'

'Does it have to be?'

I don't dare answer because I fear there's an echoing lag between versions of myself, and I don't know who is talking. It might be the same words but with meanings altogether different.

My attention goes back to the cooling units, waiting for the lights to come on and acknowledge connection to an external power source.

He tilts his head sideways to read the book titles and for a moment I'm back on Miranda, years ago. A different male—younger, darker, unpredict-

able—stands at my digital library, head slanted, flicking at the screen with a careless finger. Books rushed past in a blur, I mistaken for enthusiasm only to realise later, was derision.

It's the same feeling as then: hostage to intense but foreign feelings in my body; frustrated by my inability to string sentences together; giddy with the sensation of tumbling from a known life, out of a safe orbit.

What did I do back then?

It is suddenly crucial I remember my response to Kristof's introduction to my books.

'You read?' he'd asked and I shrugged.

Knowing reading and books probably didn't mean the same thing to him. Afraid he wouldn't understand my desire for a life beyond Miranda. The one my mother had sworn me to before she died. And how it began with being able to read. Properly.

And to ask questions. Then ask more.

Afraid he wouldn't like me for that larger view. For being the antithesis of everything Miranda was. Missing the obvious—without a shared vision of a bigger life, not just bigger than Miranda, but our solar system—Kristof and I actually had nothing in common. Nothing to base a relationship on.

I didn't know that at fourteen, as smart as I thought I was. He was sixteen and I just wanted him to want me. Loneliness has a way of fucking with you. Or compelling you to throw away things that truly mean something to you. Only to have to scramble to try and reclaim them later.

I tried to love him, as much as he said he loved me. Tried to love all sides of him, even as I hid mine because I knew he wouldn't love them. Knowing that passion and violence were different sides of the same coin. That if he was happy, I was safe.

I understand now, how the erosion started that afternoon when I didn't stand up for my love of books, my need for learning. The life I was going to live. When he erased my entire library then kissed me for the first time, I let him.

My books were backed up. You can't back up a life though.

It doesn't matter what I could have done differently. *Should* have done

differently. The past cannot be changed.

I am older. I am different. And this is Xavier, whose lived half a step behind me for six weeks, trusting me, supporting me, never questioning me. He had my back the whole way across a hostile virgin planet while a dozen other researchers tried to find my weakness. Like Planet Impact Studies were some kind of solo pissing match, rather than a cooperative enterprise.

I wasn't surprised. I never am. Men still come here, where I am the expert, to argue my method, my tactics, my intuition, my results. Men who assume they know better.

Not Xavier though, who spent the first week after we'd made camp asking each asshole at breakfast and dinner, how many light years they'd clocked, how far they'd been out, what new life forms they'd discovered and how many words they'd published each time they had a stab at me. His recalibration of their egos wasn't subtle. They ostracised him and he gave zero fucks about not belonging to their cabal. One night I overheard the bitching: *why doesn't he just fuck her and get over it.*

'It's easy to lose your humanity out here,' I say, coming back to the present and joining him at my books, unsure how long I've been lost in my thoughts and he's been standing there in the silence. 'These make sure I don't lose mine.'

He pulled out a red-leather bound book.

'Ever done bibliomancy?' I asked

'Is that a 21st Century Pop Poetry subject?'

'Why not Popular Science Culture?'

'Mancy means magic right?'

'Divination.' I gesture to the book. 'Close your eyes.'

I drink in his calm expression. The unquestioning faith he has in me.

'Open to a random page. Now run your finger down the page until the little voice inside you says stop?'

He does exactly as I say.

'Now open your eyes and read the lines beneath your finger. There's a message there for you.'

His voice is deep. Steady. The distance between us closes.

Gothic lines of dreaming of death undone. Of crows calling for boys. And

a body in a garden,

His breathing is shallow, faster. He closes the book, slides it back into the empty slot and pauses—or is it hesitation—his fingers still touching the book's spine.

A shiver races down mine hits my tail bone, whiplashes up and around my torso, stabbing me beneath my left ribcage. A pain so intense it steals my breath, for a moment, and passes as quickly as it hit.

It's not real. It's not.

I haven't had phantom pain since I was appointed to Eridani. After years of being dogged by pain that didn't exist, overnight it disappeared. 'You've found your purpose,' my last therapist said. 'You can let the ghosts go.' And so it seemed they left. Or did I leave them behind? Or have they just not found their way to me, all the way out here?

I know its not pain. Real or otherwise. I'm just tired and being alone with Xavier is picking at seams I trusted to be more robust.

'You don't have the books in a humidifier,' he says.

I don't have books in a humidifier. No, I don't.

Then I repeat it aloud, returning yet again to the present from the past's slipstream.

I hold his eye. Something I've got used to over the years because men think if they can't shout you down they can stare you down. There's uncertainty in his eyes for the first time. It's a gentle query in the blue depths though. Not a harsh interrogation. Or a presumption of incompetence. Missing the point incompetence kills you out here.

'I don't want a humidifier,' I say, getting my metaphoric feet under the conversation again. 'I'm selfish. I want to enjoy them the way they are. Where I can pick them up. Where I can look across and see them on display.'

I take a book from the shelf and bury my face inside it, breathing in the musty goodness of ink, old paper and lives I'll never know. I pass him the book and after a moment, he breathes in the page.

'You put them in a humidifier and they lose their personality.'

I put it back on the shelf and he says, 'You're favouring your left hand.'

'Brain gym for the mentally exhausted,' I lie.

‘Let me see.’

He has my right wrist cradled in his hand, before I can hide it in my pocket. A fresh line of blood is drying in the jagged cut that’s breached a healing caulk he sealed it with two days ago. It runs from my middle finger to the base of my hand. A stupid accident. Made all the more ridiculous because it was me who smashed the specimen jar.

Better at this end than the other, Xavier had joked and I appreciated his dark humour. A dumb accident like that would have destroyed what little goodwill I went into the expedition with.

Xavier runs his thumb parallel to the gash and a different shiver runs through me. This one doesn’t end in pain. Instead I’m crushed with longing.

‘Carrying the cooling unit reopened it,’ I say, the words catching in my throat as I try to pull my hand free.

I’m close enough for his earthy, sweaty smell to torture me, in a good way. For it to weave with the ocean currents into something vital. Insistent.

‘I’ll need to run a full scan on it in the morning and sign off on the WH&S report.’

‘I didn’t log an incident. There’s enough data for us all to upload and process without adding more pointless admin. I’ll be fine. Can’t say the same for the sample bottle though.’

He doesn’t let go of my hand though. ‘Come by tomorrow, before the debrief if you’re worried about it.’

‘Should I be worried?’

He doesn’t answer and lets my hand go after an extended silence, saying, ‘I’d better go.’

I’m glad he broke the silence. I’m not glad he let go of my hand.

He pulls a slim-line slate from his back pocket and I see all the admin queued.

‘Even if I wasn’t leaving in 48 hours, I never sleep the first night I’m in, so might as well get a jump on the admin while the system’s quiet.’

If neither of us plans on sleeping, why be alone at opposite ends of the compound? It’s time to stop regretting things I did and the things I didn’t, because there’s nowhere safe between those two kinds of regrets.

There's only now. This moment. And the next.

'See you tomorrow,' Xavier says.

If you're not going to sleep, we could catch the last of the meteor shower from the Space Port?

'See you at the debriefing,' I say instead.

Traitorous fucking mouth and whatever part of my body is in cahoots with it. Another shiver runs down my spine and I wait for my body and the past to synch and smash me.

He nods and says, '15:00 hours.'

I'm too busy anticipating pain to answer.

'Good night, Thaleia.'

The way the three syllables of my name slip from his lips sound nothing like good-bye.

If I don't ...

'Xavier—'

I touch his cheek. My thumb grazes the rough skin. He's real. And he's here. He sees me. Not the boss. Not some genderless, forgettable scientist or an activist with a death wish. To him I'm not some problematic woman who just won't shut up and go away. I'm a woman waking from a deep sleep. And he's not threatened by me. Not moving away. He wants me as much as I want him.

My heart thunders as I meet his eye, not daring to say anything.

'Perhaps good night was a bit premature,' he breathes, taking my hand and kissing the palm.

The last thing I see before I close my eyes, is his azure, blazing gaze devouring me. Lips touch mine. Barely a kiss. A promise of more that ignites an achingly familiar anticipation. His lips trace my jaw and trail down my neck, pulling me from the past and anchoring me in the moment.

I surrender into an intimacy that remakes my world. And me within it.

Each kiss, each caress, cracks the hard casing that's protected me from the world Kristof constructed. And all that happened after.

I lose orbit with a past I'll never reconcile and for the first time in years, I feel life surge through me. I don't want to hide any more. I want more than

the tiny existence I've condemned myself to at the arse-end of the world.

He fumbles with my filthy shirt's top fastening and a jack-knife jab thrusts into my lower back.

You're not real, I tell it. And the ones that follow.

They're not real because my body's humming and that's real.

He pushes the partially opened shirt over my right shoulder, pulling down the bra strap to give his lips unhindered access to the ridge of my shoulder. A finger follows my clavicle, finds the scar's top and travels south.

A supa nova explodes in my chest. I gasp and push him away. His finger catches on the shirt. The rest of the fastenings rip open as I stagger backward. When I look up he's staring at the purple keloid scarring criss-crossing my torso. I recognise the disassociated scrutiny I've come to expect from the medical fraternity. It's the same look I imagine a butcher considers a newly delivered carcass with.

I bend down, curl into myself, clutching at the material to cover up.

'Thaleia, God ... I'm a medic, you don't need to be ashamed—'

'I want you to go.'

For split second, it's Kristof standing over me, grinning; unhinged and ready to explode. I blink the image away and try to sweep the agony with it.

'You're in pain.'

I wrap an arm around my middle, brace the other hand against a knee cap. 'Go.'

'I know you think you can only trust yourself, but it doesn't have to be like that. Let me help.'

'Fuck off,' I snarl.

He hesitates. I bite down on my lip, force myself to straighten and walk to the door while pain tears apart my physical coherency.

I thump on the button to open the door.

'Good night, Dr Friedman.'

Experts say survivors will detachment from anything that will give them a chance to keep living after a traumatic event. But what if the traumatic event

is your body? Not just what was done to it, but your actual fucking body? The vehicle you move through the world in. Your home. Your shell. The place where your existence begins and ends?

Where you're meant to feel safe.

What if dying is more complicated than living, because the best *fuck you* in your arsenal is to keep living despite it all?

Until I met Xavier I thought survival was the best I could do. To wake each day and not choose death. Even though out here on the fringe every day is rolling dice with your mortality.

I chose to bring Xavier into my private quarters. What the fuck did I think would happen? That he wouldn't touch me, even if I've thought of nothing else for weeks and was certain it was mutual. What did I think he would touch? What did I think it would feel like? And exactly, what did I think he would see?

The point is, I wasn't thinking.

Alone in the tiny bedroom cubicle, stripped naked of clothes and lust, the pain fades as the thoughts gather intensity. They want to carve something new.

'Light.'

The nanocrystal LED above the mirror begins to glow.

What do I see? Do I still see the same things?

I will myself to stare at my body. This flesh machine I only feel revulsion for. Is there something else here in the spiderweb of scarring? The old ones and the ones that belong to a new story. Is there something that's not the snub-nosed purple indents of butted cigarettes studding my breasts or the thick blue veins that surfaced with breastfeeding and never went away. Or my concave stomach pitted with stretchmarks. For fucks sake, isn't there some evidence of the body I once loved. I once *was*. The body I considered beautiful and desirable; a body bursting with life.

Because all I can see, belonging to me, is sinew and muscle. The barren landscapes of outlying moons and planets carved into my own body as surely as the past.

I place my hand on the right side, where someone else's liver is, moving

both hands over slim hips to my lower back. There's shiny lines over kidneys that are not mine. Only then do I dare to raise my hands to my chest scar and place them over the heart. There's an elevated, but steady beat beneath the sternum, once cracked open to place a new heart inside.

The Gestalts of the 20th Century believed we were more than the sum of our parts. I'd like to believe that, but I can't shake the fact I am defined by the sum of my parts—those that are mine, those that belong to someone else.

I turn from my distorted reflection and step inside the shower tube, punch in the hot water code. Watery fingertips travel the length of my neck and collect in the hollows of my collarbones. A spilling caress over my breasts and ribs that cascades over my stomach and into the arroyo of my hip bones. Scalding water slides between my thighs and down my legs.

The water snaps off; the two-minute ration over. I punch in a special code and another two minutes begins. I put my head against the wall and let the water wash over me, pool at my feet and disappear into the reticulation system beneath the Staff Hub, where it's piped to the reverse-osmosis plant.

Sanitised and recycled. If only the past was so easily dealt with.

The utility kicks and shudders. The wheel spurs separate from the road and suspended in time, we ice plane at 45 degrees. Hit one bank. Spin and slam into the other. Gravity releases us and we tumble. Over and over ...

I'm against the bank. The utility crumpled facing me: passenger door open; driver's seat empty; passenger compartment behind crumpled; the tray gone.

A hole in the windscreen gapes at me. Narrows my world.

The argument hangs in the air with the pop and ping of the engine.

Pain presses in on me; a faltering heart fighting the frozen wasteland to the last beat.

The cold claims me faster than I can get the words out. I'll die knowing it though.

I'm not scared of you anymore.

I lay caught between this world and the other. My nervous system frozen in an emotional terror as threatening as Miranda's lethal cold. It takes time to realise I'm tangled in my sheets, not trapped in the car. I repeat that I'm in my bed at the Eridani Research Facility until I can breathe again. Then gently I take myself to the shoreline inside my imagination and let the calm wash through me. I came here every night before I came to Eridani, to escape the dreams. Only this shoreline has gulls calling in Kristof's voice, reciting words string from my Space Culture as Parody module.

'It's life Jim, but not as we know it. Not as we know it. Not as we know it.'

I spin around, incandescent with rage that he is here; the safest of safe spaces.

'Fuck you,' I scream, lashing out. 'Fuck off. This is my life. My life! Fuck you.'

The shivering is well established before I'm back in my room. In my body. On my feet, beside my bed, hands caught mid-air, body trapped in its convulsions.

The last therapist said it was healthy, the nervous system could shake trauma out. Like some long-dead animal on Earth that had outrun an equally long-dead predator. If they didn't shake the trauma free, they'd die.

I collapse beside the bed, lost in a somatic earthquake. Drowning in tears. Telling myself the agony pushing out from the donated liver is not real. None of it is real. When calm returns, when I've cried myself hoarse, I return to the mirror.

I'm not even real. This face isn't mine. Neither is my name. Masks over other masks; Doctor Halligan covers Thaleia, staring back at me, pushing away the name I was born and broken with. This body isn't mine. Internal organs from another, running a body that every other day I wished had died. Then Xavier joined me on the SS Panchjanya and my world flipped as surely as an all-terrain vehicle on Miranda.

These swollen eyes and mottling belong to some other woman who cannot hold herself together, displayed for all to see on *my* face. A face dozens of people will scrutinise while I deliver a debriefing session in less than two hours.

Men still searching for a crack, a weakness, to undermine me. To invalidate who I am and what I do.

Cold water does little to alleviate the distressed flesh. There's no hiding I've been crying. But as I stare, I find something more shocking than the after effects of losing control.

A yellowish tinge stains my skin—or is it the LED light and the contrast with the red splotches? Are the bruised cavities beneath my eyes accentuated because of the swollen lids? Or have they been there for weeks and I've missed them? All the nuances, all the transgressions, a tinted visor hides.

No one returns unscathed from deep-space fieldwork. I know that better than anyone else. But standing in the climate-controlled air, I'm hot then cold. My temperature a degree warmer than usual. The blood pressure machine is an old one, not linked into the system and it's higher too, which is to say it's higher than its usually elevated numbers. This time my hands run over the scars with diagnostic intention. There's an almost indistinguishable rise over the liver area. It's tender when I palpitate it.

What if I'm wrong. What if this is not phantom pain ... if this is something real?

I take ten deep breathes. Slowing the exhalation. Then I count backward from a hundred. Intent only on the digits in my head changing. And I am back, the duplicitous body under control again. My complicated relationship with it straight once more. And me, Thaleia, I'm back too. Head clear.

Field work is the aberration. I remember this until I forget.

In an earth day everything will return to normal. Endless lab hours followed by long, quiet nights with my books, music and movies. The easy company of the dozen or so long-haul researchers and aux staff who are halfway through their bi-yearly rotation. Once the transport leaves with the temporary field staff, I can relax. I *will* relax.

Xavier will be gone and all that he's stirred up will settle.

I breathe out then call the lab for porters to collect the cooling units and turn on the NewsCast from Earth while I wait.

Mia Hoffman's face fills the holographic screen. I turn on the sound wondering why she is news again. Looking at her young, grief-ravaged face I

understand how every year she gains more presence in her absence. Time heals wounds, eventually. People move on. Mia Hoffman, never does. Her face is frozen in time, snapped on the steps of The World Court after the final verdict was handed down. In her eyes you see the torment of having lost everything, and now the case against her doctors

‘The Terrestrial Government will table new legislation this morning giving doctor’s a raft of new powers,’ says the voiceover as the camera pans the Terrestrial Parliament building in New Brisbane and the throng of protestors gathered with old-fashioned placards. ‘Opponents of the Legislation say the bipartisan support for the Bill is a sham, brokered behind closed doors with secret trade offs voters may not see the consequences of for years.

‘Proponents of the Bill argue polls show the majority of the population support this decision. They say those who oppose the legislation wish to send humanity back into the dark ages.

‘It is expected The Lazarus Ruling, as the verdict in Hoffman case is know, will pass from legal precedent into statute by the end of the week.’

‘Screen off,’ I say, throat tight.

I can’t wait for the porters. I can’t stand here knowing the Medical Lobby have finally won; that in a few days they will have legal authority to bring any individual back from clinical death, without consent and by any means possible.

I leave my door open and take the long way to the Research Hub. Steady, measured steps turn into long, ungainly strides, that devolve into running. And I sprint like that’s all it takes to leave the past behind.

I’m out of breath, my right side cramping and my injured hand thumping when I reach the Research Hub’s side entrance. My hand shakes as the infra-red ray tries to scan my thumb. It takes three goes to steady it for recognition. Once in, I turn all the security cameras off for sixty minutes. At my door, a second infra-red beam scans my thumb, successful the first time. While the DNA sequencer boots, I open an encrypted space to log diagnostics.

I roll up my sleeve, grip the tourniquet between my teeth to tighten the

loop, and wait for a vein to plump.

If what I'm feeling is the onset of organ rejection then it will show up in a DNA sequence; the donor's DNA will exist in my blood at a rate higher than the usual one percent for transplant patients. They explained all of this to me in the hospital, when I was still meeting the terms of the discharge agreement: turning up for appointments, submitting to blood tests, attending weekly sessions with my assigned therapist.

I draw up a sample and deposit it in the sequencer. From a cache on the Head of Medical Science's server, I drop my DNA profile and that of my donor into 'Inga', our AI. I tell her what I am looking for and explain all results must go via the personal channel I coded the year I arrived, knowing sooner or later I'd need more privacy than I'd been assured I had.

Inga tells me she will send the results in 127 minutes.

'I'm sorry for the delay,' her almost-human voice says. 'There is much demand and I am stretched thin.'

There's a quiet irony, that Inga's computing power is not infinite much less immediate.

'I can prioritise—'

'Two hours is fine, Inga.' I don't want to walk into the debriefing knowing I am dying. 'Thank you.'

'And Doctor Halligan,' Inga says. 'Welcome back from another successful field trip.'

Success would be actually be finding something for once. Not just returning alive with bottles of lifeless soil and rock. I glance down at the wound in my hand. Success would be returning with everything still intact.

How many field trips and I've never once smashed a sample bottle. Never done anything that even minutely called my competence into question. And now.

'Yes, thank you, Inga. Another success trip. It is good to be back.'

'There was much merriment in the staff hub last night.'

'And there will be much celebration from us all when they are gone.'

As an after thought, I grab four agar-filled petri dishes and swab the cut in my hand (red and raised but no longer painful) and the blood dribbling

down my arm. I prepare each dish, replace the lid and scribble the date and time on it. Two dishes go into the incubator, on a twelve hour cycle. The other two go in the fridge. I don't instruct Inga to do anything with the incubator samples. With my arm taped up, benches and equipment clean, I pull a lab coat from a hook and leave the lab running dark to brave the Hub's central, communal labs.

My second-in-charge, Alan, on his third rotation on Eridani, is at my side the moment I enter. 'Welcome back, Doc.' He slides a slate into my hand. 'Your timing is impeccable as always.'

Xavier's name is in the subject line of the incoming com. I shove the device back to Alan. 'I'll deal with this after the debrief.'

My office is at the far end and I walk past the central lab, a hive of activity as technicians prepare plates from the samples we brought back from a planet in the Scorpius system, identifiable only by a string of numbers and letters in a terraforming application.

Alan jabs his foot into my door to stop it closing. 'I'm sorry, but this is time stamped by the Head of Medical Science. If you miss the appointment it will go straight to the Director as a breach of contract.'

Pain flares in my side and I think it should be in my arse.

'What's Hartcher doing time-stamping a health req for me on my first day back? Before we have even debriefed.'

'Dr Hartcher retired.'

'Hartcher did what?'

'I forwarded the information to you when you reboarded the Panchjanya. His last day was yesterday. I forged your signature on his Good Luck card.'

'But the transport doesn't leave until tomorrow.' I seize the slate. 'Why's Friedman signing off as Head of Medical Sciences, he's a frontier medic.'

'He was but he's our new HMS. The Director appointed him while you were coming home.'

'But he said last night—' and I stop before I incriminate myself.

He'd spoken like he was shipping out with everyone else.

'You'd know these things if you bothered to download and read the occasional com.'

That's what I have Alan for. Once I am off-planet, I don't care what the fuck they do here. As long as there is a research outpost to return to.

The door attempts to close a second time, bouncing off Alan's foot.

Pain flares again in my side and moves into my abdomen like invisible fingers probing beneath the skin. The pain strengthens and I lean my hand against the corridor wall. My lungs refuse to inflate to allow me to breathe through the crescendo. I fight the urge to put my hand inside my shirt and touch the skin to prove nothing's living there.

Rejection doesn't mean the organs get up and walk out—it's not like rejected lovers: the donor liver and host body fighting over who takes the t-shirt they both love and claim ownership of. There's no slamming doors or recriminations. No one actually gets to leave.

And suddenly its all clear.

I'm not dying. It's not organ rejection. This is cellular memory. The pain is a warning. I draw in a ragged breath and Alan's face contorts with concern.

'I'm fine,' I lie, handing back his slate. 'Pull up everything you can on Friedman. And I mean everything. I want to know why he's freelancing as a frontier medic. Tell the Tech Hub to hack whatever they have to and get Comms to retrieve his communications history: incomings, outgoings, uplinks to Earth, the colonies and space stations for the last twelve months.'

'I'm not sure any of that is legal,' Alan protests.

'Let's pretend out here it is.' I go into my office and retrieve my slate. Flick it on, relieved I remembered to power it up before I left. Or Alan did after I was gone. 'My gut says he's hiding something. He's not here by chance.'

Charming and supportive. And I almost fucking fell for it.

So much for not sleeping. For fucking doing paperwork. For heading home on tomorrow's transport. He stood in my quarters knowing he was here for the long haul.

I check my watch and wish I hadn't had to abandon my beautiful mechanical timepiece with the triple faces, keeping time in three different locations. This one tracks me. Tethers me to Inga. But at least the data it spews from my body doesn't go onto the Medical Services' server. Hartcher ensured that. Friedman knows nothing about me.

And he won't.

'You have 47 minutes,' I say, striding down the corridor, ignoring the pain.

Alan blanches, but keeps pace. 'You want this before the debrief?'

'The last time we had a beer you moaned about how tedious Eridani is.'

'I don't moan.'

'That's 46 minutes.'

'How much of Inga can I have?'

'You can have all of her,' I say pushing out through the Research Hub's main doors.

For the first time, my body is an ally. Perhaps this time I am the predator, not the prey.

The waiting room in the Medical Hub is empty. I've only ever been in Hartcher's private office: desk, two easy chairs, filing cabinet and an antique chesterfield beneath a glossy rubber plant. Digital concierge registers my arrival and invites me into an impersonal consultation room. Surrounded by more pieces of equipment than our lab accommodates memories surge. Ones I've worked hard to suppress. Medical science is reductionist by nature: I am only a collection of parts. Each piece of equipment in this room exists to fragment me further. There's no room for Gestaltism's warm fuzzies here.

I pace, tapping my watch every ten seconds, waiting for Comms' notification they've got Friedman's communication log.

As I move, I remember discovering the passage in a medical manual outlining the recommended time to leave a patient waiting for maximum compliancy; the 101 on patient creation; the depersonalisation and disempowering of the individual. I was never a compliant patient, no matter how long they left me waiting. The last doctor told me I should be grateful for the life they'd given me. I spat in his face. One of the few useful skills Kristof left me with.

The watch vibrates and I open my slate, flicking quickly through three batches of highlighted coms: the first a series of encrypted messages from

TerraCorps' office in New Brisbane to Friedman; the second Dr Hartcher's termination notice and the nail in the coffin, the remuneration for Friedman's services.

The consultation door opens with a gentle sigh. Xavier hurries in looking like he's been startled awake, pulling on a crumpled white coat and running a hand through dishevelled hair. He smiles an apology and there's a jolt of electricity, some stuttering echo from last night. I loathe myself for it, urging my anger to trample to death any lingering attraction to him.

'Thaleia? Is everything okay?'

'Not really.' I position myself near a holographic display of a thoracic x-ray in defiance of my body which wants to get closer to him.

'Why don't you take a seat?'

I ignore him and remain standing. The uplink from slate to the consultation room's screen is almost done.

'You didn't tell me you had been appointed the HMS?'

'I didn't get the notification until I got back to my room. I thought I was meeting Dr Hartcher here for hand over. Not you.'

'Really?'

Confusion fills his face. 'How's the hand?'

'Still attached to my arm.'

I hide the injured hand in my lab coat pocket.

'You look jaundiced? Are you experiencing any hypersensitivity—'

'Stop with the medical jargon. It's just a doctor's way around actually communicating with their patient, or fostering any type of genuine relationship, which actually suits me fine. Any chance you and I had—'

'Thaleia, I went through the files last night. You have no medical records and Dr Hartcher seemed to have a secret cache of information I can't get into.'

I shrug. 'Call Tech.'

He shakes his head. 'This isn't a tech issue. Every human registered with the Department has a medical record attached to their personnel file. Everyone but you.' I don't say anything. 'When was the last time you had a medical?'

I stay silent, fingers stroking the inside pocket seam to calm me.

'Is that why you didn't log the accident with your hand?' He rubs the back

of his neck when I refuse to answer. 'I can't log an accident report because you don't have an active medical file. And I can't seem to create one. Thaleia, don't you understand? If you don't report the accident, it is a contract breach and you'll be removed.'

'You're efficient. I'll give you that.' I flick the slate's screen and the thoracic x-ray is replaced by the first of TerraCorp's coms. 'Perhaps you can walk me through this file, doctor.'

I point to the screen. He stands mute, face bleaching as he reads. I flick to the next message, the one informing Dr Xavier Friedman that Dr Carlisle Hartcher has been removed and the path is clear for his immediate appointment. And the last, confirming the remuneration: half upon arrival on the SS Panchjanya and the other half with the successful termination of my contract.

'I thought you had my back. You made everyone out there think you had my back.'

He looks nauseous. Sweat beads his brow. 'I've never seen these before.'

'You came to Eridani to sell me out.'

'Thaleia, shit. I wouldn't do this to you. You have to believe me. I hate TerraCorps as much as you do.'

He goes to the screen and turns it off as if erasing his collusion is that easy.

'I lodged an Expression of Interest with the Department three years ago for a Head of Medical Sciences position. Anywhere they'd send me. They told me I wasn't qualified and gave me more contract work. Then I arrive back here and find I am the new HMS. They told me Hartcher was retiring.'

'Hartcher wasn't retiring. And this ... you, this is all bullshit.' I don't care if I sound irrational. *Emotional*. I am fucking furious. 'Where the fuck is Hartcher?'

'I don't know, but someone's set me up and you're behaving just like they want you to.'

'Someone's set *you* up!'

My laugh has a knife edge. There's fire in my veins.

My heart races. Pain ricochets and settles. Only to set itself off again.

I push it aside.

‘I am the only thing standing between the terraformers and unchecked development, and you’re the one with the persecution complex.’

I take a step closer to him, the pain feeding my fury.

‘Let me get you up to speed on a few things, to mull on while you’re enjoying TerraCorps’ credits. Assuming you live long enough to enjoy them. So many unexpected, *tragic*, things happen out here Dr Friedman. Malfunctions. Breaches. You know, we’re family here. We take care of our own.’

I stand close enough for him to feel each hot breath.

‘The Planet Impact Studies I oversee are the only things protecting whatever life is out here. One day the terraformers will successfully railroad the Development and Colonisation Act through Parliament, which will supersede the Planning and Environmental Act. That’s the law that gives the current Government authority to halt any development until a Planetary Impact Study provides irrefutable evidence a planet or moon is barren. Doctor Friedman, developers don’t care what is lost when they terraform the surface for human habitation. But I do.’

‘Is that how you got the scars?’ He swallows hard. ‘Did they try to kill you?’

My watch buzzes. Inga sends the results of the DNA sequencing.

‘No, I was dead long before they thought about assassination.’

He tries to touch me and I jerk out of his reach.

‘I can’t believe you were so easily bought,’ I say and wish there was a door to slam behind me.

The Space Port is deserted during our designated ‘day’, out here in the forever night. Not only do I wonder what it would be like to walk into an ocean, to have the water surround me, cocoon me, I wish I knew a sun’s warmth on my face. That constant natural shift of light between night and day.

Several windows are lit up on The Panchjanya. I wonder if its Hartcher, and if he’s free or under some kind of house arrest. Tomorrow the atmospheric shell protecting us, will open momentarily to allow The Panchjanya to leave, taking all the fucking deep-space cowboys with them and once again, Eridani

will be isolated from the rest of the seething cesspit of humanity.

I was on the first expedition here, when it was still called Epsilon Eridani beta, and returned to build a base, then a research facility, and finally a home. Lured by the prospect of finding life and then bound to discover and protect whatever existed out here from the terraforming boom, spreading like a virus across the solar systems. It's only as my life ends, I consider the personal irony of searching across the known Universe for evidence of life.

I lie on the utility's hood, eyes closed and try to conjure a summer day on Earth. When I fail I return to the shoreline. Here the pain ebbs and flows at a distance.

Lucidity falters as my organs start to shut down. My thoughts oscillate between logic (they never promised it was forever; organ rejection could happen at any time) to superstitious nonsense (this is revenge; murder). When the pain overwhelms the shoreline and Kristof's voice screeches on gulls' wings, I retreat. Stepping away from the ocean, to a waiting coldness.

I turn and see myself wrapped in thermals, lying on the hood of Kristof's Dad's utility. Fingers pick at the peeling ducco. The bare metal rash born from Miranda's harsh atmosphere, rough where my fingers brush it. We pass a spliff between us. Low-Atmos Transports soak us in the rush of take-off and landing.

In the quiet, I dream of rebellion; that I am on a transport heading for Earth. Leaving Miranda far behind. Reinventing myself beyond the brutality and hopelessness of generations of indentured manual labour, propped up by poor nutrition, scant medical care and limited education.

The company colonised Miranda with criminals bought from the terrestrial government. Win-win as it emptied the overcrowded Earth prisons and filled official coffers with much needed credits. A once-off investment the company must have congratulated itself on generation after generation.

From across the solar system they took and branded us. Binding our families in perpetuity to the company and Miranda's barren surface: the Hoffmans, Newmans and Thulmans. The Jackmans, Polmans and Couchmans. The Dartmans, Leishmans and Freshmans.

Bodies to sate development's endless, ravenous appetite. Men to hack ice

and haul rock. Women to bear the next generation of breeders and labourers. A violent, relentless legacy handed to each generation until it reaches Kristof. And me. Lying beside him, stinking of jet fumes and weed, I want the future my mother told me I could have. The one I promised I would make for myself, as far away from Miranda as I could get, as she lay dying.

So in the dead of night, after Kristof goes home, when I'm finally alone, I study—not just the subjects I need, but coding and hacking and encrypting. I get myself off Miranda virtually until a humanitarian scholarship liberates me. I marry Kristof so he can come with me, thinking Sirius and all the opportunities there will fill the hole in him that I can't seem to. I believe on Sirius we be happy.

But I'm young and naïve and Kristof is nothing more than a parasite, which I realise too late. On Sirius he becomes obsessive, controlling and jealous. He resents everything I do and we fight until I can't stand it any longer. I apply for a deep-space expedition in the lead up to graduation. I'm dreaming of going to places no one has ever been, my degree in Biology coalescing with my Space Culture studies. More than anything though, I want a life without Kristof.

In the medical they tell me I'm pregnant; my expedition place revoked. They let me graduate but with my scholarship terminated, there is nowhere else to go except home. My world contracts to the tiny life growing within me; the need to escape gnaws at her barely formed existence.

Kristof's jealousy pivots to his tiny daughter. The arguments escalate. I hide the first black eye behind sunglasses. I forgive him at first. Neither of are coping with parenthood. Without my mother, I flounder. Exhausted and angry that for all my hard work, all the promises, all the opportunities I am still my mother, my grandmother and all the other women who have lived, birthed the next generation and died twenty years earlier than their counterparts in other parts of the solar system.

Kristof loses another job on a planet where you don't lose jobs.

Maybe he could stay home with Ameliana? With my degree and experience, we could have a better life than cutting and hauling ice. Than mining and carting rock.

Elsewhere there are social services. Miranda is a company planet and no one gives two fucks about what happens here, especially the company, as long as the ice and rock arrive on schedule. As long as you birth your quota of babies. No one cares if you are happy. Or if you are safe.

Life is cheap on Miranda. Humanitarian envoys never make it this far, so the strong destroy the weak and everyone is practised at turning a blind eye. So after the first beating, they release me from hospital, bruised and limping, back to my husband, telling me I am in my fertile window, reminding me I still owe the company four more babies.

I hope Kristof pisses the wrong person off. I hope someone slaughters him in no-man's land between the mines and the settlement.

My nights fill with whispered promises to Ameliana as she suckles at my breast. I will bring no more babies into this world. She will not grow up here. I will take us somewhere she can play in the ocean. She will know the sun on her face and decide what she wants to do with her life. Her life is precious. She will not be a baby machine.

The first chance I have, we will escape Miranda.

But only her memory makes it off.

The utility kicks and shudders. The wheel spurs separate from the road and suspended in time, we ice plane at 45 degrees. Hit one bank. Spin and slam into the other. Gravity releases us and we tumble. Over and over ...

I'm against the bank. The utility crumpled facing me: passenger door open; driver's seat empty; passenger compartment behind crumpled; the tray gone.

Kristof gone. Ameliana gone.

A hole in the windscreen gapes at me. Narrows my world.

The argument hangs in the air with the pop and ping of the engine.

Pain presses in on me; a faltering heart fighting the frozen wasteland to the last beat. The cold claims me faster than I can get the words out.

I'll die knowing it though. *I'm not scared of you anymore.*

‘Thaleia.’ It takes time I do not have to locate myself again. ‘Thaleia.’

This is not Miranda and I am not Mia lying on the roadside taking my last breaths. I’m on a hood of an Eridani utility, sliding into oblivion. Beside me is a sonic stock prod, the only weapon I could find.

‘Thaleia?’

My heart races. The shudders are so intense I can barely get my hand around the prod. The pain which is nowhere and everywhere is somehow worse than that night with Ameliana crushed in the back and Kristof dead fifty metres down the frozen road.

I spy the red cross on the field pack in Xavier’s hand.

‘Don’t come near me,’ I slur, sliding off the hood, brandishing the prod, a glow at the end the only warning the device is activated.

‘I never thought I’d come all the way out here,’ he says, ‘to work with the famous Dr Halligan and discover she’s also Mia Hoffman.’ He comes closer but leaves the utility between us, placing the medi-pack where I was lying a minute earlier. ‘It’s not every day you find out your heroes are the same woman.’

‘Traitor!’ I spit. ‘What do you about Mia Hoffman?’

He squares the shoulders I once coveted. ‘I know they treated you like you were barely human. That because you belonged to the company you had no rights and didn’t deserve any. They spoke of the miracle of your husband being a donor match as the result of inbreeding, not good luck or impossible odds. And it disgusted me so I campaigned on your behalf during the trial and got tossed out of the Medical Association.’

His face flushes red.

‘They threatened deregistration. I was young and they thought they could scare me. When I refused to shut up, they deregistered me and the only place I could work was out here. A renegade medic for hire.

‘I know that’s why they planted the coms. If I chose not to follow protocol, because they must have realised Hartcher wasn’t being honest, they’d blackmail me with my past. And if that didn’t work they’d discredit me with their version of the truth.’

He reaches into his back pocket and places a gun on the hood next to the medi-pack.

‘And the back-up plan, knowing you’re all family here, that maybe someone would get bent out of shape with my betrayal of you, and shoot me. I mean this is the wild west, right?’

Lies and truth collide.

I lose my balance for a second and shift the cattle prod to my right hand, so I can grip the utility. The pain in my hand eclipses the other pain for a moment. Agony that cannot pattern match with the accident or what came after.

I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on the pain tearing through my palm, into my wrist and up my arm. I follow it, hoping it will return me to shoreline; to my beloved ocean. Instead of a blue sky and the gentle crash of waves, ash showers me. Blinds me. Clogs my ears. Suffocates me with each breath until I am undistinguishable from any of the others I have been. Death blurs all the edges.

‘You can’t access my files. You can’t know I’m Mia.’

‘Your voice, it’s bugged me since we were introduced on the SS Panchjanya,’ he says. Quiet. Confident. ‘The NewsCast this morning, they played an extract from your final interview. You can’t change your voice. And Alan confirmed my suspicions when I went looking for you. He suggested I’d find you here.’

Fucking Alan. He couldn’t keep a secret or let me die in peace. Micro-managing me to the last fucking breath.

Xavier removes a slim-line metal box from the pack and opens it, takes out an ampoule and an old-fashioned syringe. I drop the prod and put both hands on the utility; my grip on everything sliding I don’t have anything left in me to interrogate Xavier’s version of the truth. Or to dispute how he recognised *me*.

My vision fades in and out.

‘I’m tired of fighting,’ I say, forming each word in a flash lucidity. ‘I fought the company to exist on my own terms, my dad for an education, then Kristof to realise my potential. I fought the pull of maternal love. I fought Miranda.

I fought to be more.’

Xavier uncaps the syringe, stabs it into the ampoule, tips it upside down and pulls down the clear liquid.

‘Kristof and I were fighting the night of the accident. He punched me while he was driving and lost control. The utility hit the shoulder.’

My mouth is dry. So fucking dry. I fixate on the tiny jet of fluid he squirts from the needle, before recapping it and placing it on the hood between us.

‘I fought the medical profession for negligence for transplanting Kristof’s organs into me. And when there was nothing left to fight I changed my name, changed my face and tried to start over. Now I’m fighting all over again, for whatever life exists out here and for a life I didn’t want.’

I hit the ground. Feel nothing. Xavier is in front of me, hauling me into the sitting position, bracing me against the tyre.

‘I’m tired of fighting. And that ... sucks. I think maybe you might have been worth ... fighting for. Even if ... if I didn’t like you as much ... as I thought I did ... Kristof would have hated you ... he hates you ... and that’s enough to ...’

‘Thaleia, you don’t understand.’

‘You don’t understand.’ I wish I could hammer my fists against him. ‘After the surgery they were looking ... looking for signs my body ... that my body was rejecting ... his organs ... they had it all wrong.’

‘You’ve been infected with a parasitoid, Thaleia. Your hand—’

‘Kristof said he’d kill me before he’d ever let me go.’

‘The dish you put in the incubator exploded, set off alarms—’

‘—cellular memory. The pain, he was warning me off you.’

‘—must have got in through the cut in your hand, from the broken sample bottle.’

‘—punishing me for falling for you.’

‘—unprecedented growth through the primary parasite, then destroying the host parasite and invading your body. Alan says they’ve never seen anything like it.’

Xavier holds something up. A syringe? Yes, it’s a syringe.

Doesn’t he know, drugs can’t kill Kristof.

I out ran him, outlived him, and he's still going to take me down.

And I fucking hate that.

'You can't stop ... stop his organs rejecting ... me ... only my body ... my body from rejecting ... them.'

'Thaleia, listen to me. Focus.' He holds my chin in his hand and forces me to look at him. 'Your ex-husband is not trying to kill you. Your organs are all fine.'

The tremors begin again. An impossible cold consumes me. Pin pricks of light start disappearing from the sky. The stars are dying.

A new night is coming.

I thought it was pain, but it's pressure. Overwhelming. Killing me from the inside out. Wanting to split me like ripe fruit.

'Listen to me, Thaleia, you have a parasitoidic infestation. Do you understand me? Nod if you do.'

Fear holds the darkness at bay just long enough to hear the truth: a teeming mass of life within me? Is that what he's telling me?

'A doctor's not making the decision for you this time.'

He offers me the syringe. It strobos in and out of focus. My hand shakes too hard to hold it, it's only his patience that lands it in my erratic grasp.

'Do you want to stay or do you want to go?'

I can barely construct two thoughts, let alone decide which one I want. I close my eyes and as I'm slipping away, a voice inside whispers 'stop'. Beneath my fingers are letters in chaos. Line upon line of words unable to cohere. Then four letters draw themselves to each other: S – T – A ...

'Stay,' I rasp, unsure if he's heard until his fingers wrap around mine.

The needle bites and I surrender, compressed into catastrophic screaming, raining around myself like atomic fallout.

'So you found life, Dr Halligan,' the Director crows from the holo screen set up on the tray of the narrow Med Hub bed.

'It appears so,' I say, still hoarse despite drinking my weight in water since I came out of the induced coma 24 hours ago.

I pull at my hair, wishing someone had found a comb like I'd asked them to. I look rougher than I feel, and that's saying something after the last three days.

'TerraCorps is initiating an expedition of its own to, err ...'

He consults his notes, realises there is no easy name for the planet in question, and makes a planet shape with his hands to finish the sentence. 'They intend to table a report as soon as possible.'

'Disputing my findings. I'd expect nothing less. They are welcome to come on up and poke around, try an infestation on for size. We think it is possible *Hoffmonius Lazarusae*—'

'The parasite that rises from the dead?'

'It is a parasitoid, sir. Different, deadlier than a parasite. It's like Russian nesting dolls and yes I agree, the name's a little over the top. Started as a joke but we like it and have decided to keep it.'

The Director frowns. I don't expect him to get any of it: our sense of humour, the homage and definitely not the science.

'When will you finalise the details of the organism.'

'Alan's overseeing the profiling. The team's working to isolate the host parasite. I'm working on an introductory paper for Nature while I'm recovering. There's months, maybe years, of work here but we'll have something concrete in a fortnight, if not sooner. And the future, there's no telling what else we'll find.'

'And you, Dr Halligan, how are you? They tell me we almost lost you?'

'I'm harder to kill than that.'

I might have matted hair, a deathly pallor and be dressed in a medical gown with no underwear, but I am still here.

'The comms are jammed with chatter of your death.'

'Well, technically I died.'

More than once, I want to add.

'I'll issue a statement—'

'Let me stay dead a bit longer. There's some—'

Xavier sticks his head in the door and gesticulates wildly to end the call. I frown and turn back to the Director.

'I'm going to have to call you back, Sir. Something needs my immediate attention. Can you keep my status ambiguous, just for a few more days?'

Before the Director can protest, I disconnect the call and let Xavier help me to my feet. He leads me to a wheel chair.

'Are we going far?'

'Just into the waiting area.'

'Then I'll walk.'

I grab a dressing gown as I shuffle out. It's bad enough Xavier has seen my bare arse through the gown.

We arrive to find Alan fiddling with the remote for the holo screen. The rest of Eridani's year-long staff are grouped in twos and threes chatting. In the bottom of the screen Comms and Tech patch in and wave to us. Eventually, the screen shimmers and we're uplinked; New Brisbane Parliament, in session, appears in the space above the row of chairs against the wall.

'They're about to take the vote,' Xavier whispers in my ear and winks, slipping his arm around my waist.

How can he be so frivolous? And I've warned him about public displays of affection. Yet I don't move away. I let my body lean into the stability of his.

As the final Members take their seats, I utter a silent prayer to whichever deity will hear me, to manifest a miracle. The counter behind the House Speaker lights up and votes begin to register. Each Member presses their thumb into a voting panel on their chair arm. Everyone holds their breath. The counter displays an initial flurry of yes votes and then the no votes start to tally. In less than a minute, the Lazarus Ruling is finally laid to rest and Parliament is in an uproar.

'I don't believe it,' I say, looking at the landslide 'no' vote.

Alan turns the screen off. 'There's going to be some pretty pissed off number crunches and political envoys in New Brisbane tonight.'

'And I imagine the two parties are unlikely to form any kind of alliance in what remains of this political cycle,' Xavier says.

'Or future ones,' adds Alan.

'But I don't understand?'

'It's politics,' shrugs Xavier. 'Are we meant to understand?'

I raise my eyebrows. ‘You knew?’

‘I had an inkling.’

Contraband champagne appears, glasses clink. I take tiny sips and hold back tears. Mia can finally be laid to rest. I look up at Xavier and he squeezes my hand. He knows, I finally have my freedom.

The champagne runs dry, the waiting area clears and Xavier escorts me back to my room.

‘You sorted out the issue with my admin?’ I ask.

‘Thanks to three cartons of bourbon on the next transport, I’m new best mates with the Tech Hub, and you have an incident report for your hand.’

We pause at the door of my room.

‘They’ll never get you on a technical breach of contract, will they, Thaleia?’

I wink. ‘As long as there is bootleg bourben out here, TerraCorps will always be one step behind.’

He rubs his neck, suddenly lost for words. ‘You know ... you scared the shit out of me with those fake coms. Alan and the Tech Hub—’

‘Alan didn’t call your bluff, Xavier.’

His expression freezes and I wait to see if sweat beads again.

‘I’ve had your back from the start, Thaleia. What more can I say? What more can I do?’

‘Donate the credits they wired you to the Mia Hoffman foundation.’

‘They wired credits?’ he chokes.

‘Both instalments.’

He turns green. ‘What the fuck, I—’

‘Which one do you think it was? Which little fucker came all the way out here to set this up?’

The transports left after I’d been taken into ICU and Alan, in his infinite wisdom, sent the field staff home with the lie I’d died.

‘I don’t know but I am sure the fuck going to find out,’ he says.

‘For a few more cases of bourbon, and with the blessing of the Research Manager, I reckon the Tech Hub could find that person. All you have to do is follow the credits.’

‘I didn’t—’

‘Xavier, if you wanted me dead, if you really wanted those credits, you’d have watched those little bastards eat me alive at the Space Port.’ A wicked grin plays on my lips. ‘What would you have put on the death certificate? Death by infestation sounds like cockroaches killed me.’

For all the dark humour I can see he’s troubled.

‘Hey,’ I cup the side of his face. ‘I owe you my life.’

‘No you don’t.’ He places his hand over mine. ‘You don’t owe me, or anyone your life. It’s your one life, to live as you want to live it. And if—’

‘Xavier ... I’m glad you’re here, that you’ve chosen Eridani. That you’re staying.’

He closes his eyes and silence holds us.

‘I wasn’t sure you were going to make it.’ His voice is deep, threaded with trauma’s vibrato. ‘I thought you were going to die in my arms and I was going to have to let you.’

I smile, one that not so long ago would have been cynical, but with him, it’s sincere. ‘It was touch and go, but you made a persuasive case to a woman who has wanted to die for the last decade.’ I hit the button beside the door and it slides open. ‘How about you come in.’

‘There’s paperwork—’

‘It’s not much, but you know, it’s mine. For now.’

His face shifts with recognition, brows leaping, eyes transiting from grey to the brightest sky blue.

‘In there?’

‘The door locks doesn’t it?’

‘I’m not sure it’s a good idea?’

‘I think it’s a very good idea.’ I graze my lips over his. ‘Let’s see if we can get it right this time.’

He smiles and the skin at the corner of his eyes crinkles. The stutter in my heart is all mine, regardless of who it once belonged to.

AFTERWORD

lily mulholland

Jodi Cleghorn is magic. Not a magician but magic itself. Weaving words is only one of her talents and a talent she certainly is.

I'm so proud to be Jodi's friend. She is one of a kind. Full of ideas, love, and connexion. A soul sister, she is always supportive, deeply invested in me, my life and my creative pursuits. We have each been through hard and dark times since we first met as writing buddies more than a decade ago. Though we live in different cities and don't see each other often enough, when we do get together, it's like no time has passed.

But how did we meet? She in Brisbane, I in Canberra? Online, naturally. Although we are far from being naturally online. In the early, heady days of Twitter, the wonderful Jon Strother initiated the #FridayFlash movement. Writers from around the world were invited to write a piece of flash fiction (a story within one thousand words) and post it to their blogs. They would then tweet a link, along with the hashtag, enabling others to find the stories each week.

Jodi read my first story—the first I'd been courageous enough to put out into the world since I was published in my school magazine many, many years earlier—and left a comment that cheered and challenged. I was thrilled, but then humbled, when I read her story. I was a beginner, full of enthusiasm but with little idea what made a good story. She did. Her flash fiction and

short stories were weird, wonderful explorations of the psyche, the human condition. I marvelled at her ability to interlace the literary, the dark, the funny and the melancholic. That she was willing to invite me into her world as a reader, sister writer and friend, even though I was years behind her in my creative journey, told me everything I needed to know about her generous heart.

A creativity doula, her ability to see in others what she could not see in herself enabled her to support, encourage and publish new voices in Australian genre fiction. With a gentle touch, she connected Australian writers to like-minded creators the world over.

Jodi, wielder of the red pen, editor extraordinaire and founder of eMergent Publishing, invited me to contribute to the anthologies she dreamt up—manifested—as publisher, editor, writing mentor, ingenue. Not at all feeling the pressure, I sweated over my stories, determined to deliver to her standards. With her help, I turned them into pieces that I remain proud of all these years later.

As wonderful as she was in the role of literary entrepreneur, Jodi's commitment to directing other writers towards the light meant her own creative endeavours were often left in the dark.

This collection represents a bold step forward. Jodi is owning her creativity, putting herself 'out there', baring her writing soul in *This Once Precious Life*.

Through her anthologies, collaborative works and small press novellas and novels, she has gained the wisdom of middle age we wish for when we were young. Now, having navigated the twisty turns of life, her own writing can wait no longer.

She is now her own muse, and I cannot wait to see what magic she dreams up next.

Lily Mulholland

Heron Island, Australia

December 2023

FROM THE AUTHOR

I was about 60% finished with this project when a snarky thought surfaced: *who are you to release legacy work?* I could feel the evidence hurriedly organising for presentation. (I suspect a dedicated slow collecting alongside the stories). I knew if the evidence got tabled I would be unable to go ahead—because I was likely to agree with it all.

But what if I was the authority on my legacy? That if it wasn't the job of 'the world' or someone else to legitimise my legacy, but mine?

So, I didn't allow the evidence.

Instead, I kept doing what I was doing.

Editing old stories into a new brilliance. Collaborating with a younger version of myself, who had stellar ideas but lacked the depth, nuance and skill to fully flesh them out. I grok a little of what Jack White must have experienced when he used the plays and poetry he wrote in his senior year as inspiration for his second solo album *Lazaretto*. What a fucking blast!

This hadn't just been the assembling of old stories for a new audience though. This has been the opportunity to fully realise potential that may otherwise have been unfulfilled. It has also been a chance to consider publishing in a different way. Because when I decided to self publish, I created Inflorescence as a platform just for me. I wrote a list of discomforts and have been ticking them off ever since.

So who am I to release a legacy collection of work?

Well, I am a wee girl of ten in a small country town she's lived in less than a year, who is still considered a 'city slicker'. A wee girl teamed with the scariest girl in the school to hold the bullies at bay. A wee girl who in 1984 writes her first story about the winning exploits of Willy the Koala (the Australian Olympic mascot of the L.A. Olympics). A wee girl who changes the trajectory of her life with the knowledge she can write her own stories.

She becomes a disgruntled 12-year-old, in the summer break between primary and high school, who decides she can write something better than her cousin's Sweet Valley High books. Several months later she has written one hundred A4 pages and her first 'book'.

At 14, she is 'bent', writing fan fiction about the boys on the back seat of the Wendouree West bus (and further, if your boy didn't travel on our bus). These near-fantasy stories were consumed by my friends alongside the battered copy of Judy Blume's *Forever* (our introduction to losing your virginity) that passed hand to hand under the desks across our Catholic girls' school. Unfortunately, Bloom's fiction has greater reach than hers.

By 15-year-old she is lost, sitting on Clifton Beach, north of Cairns, revising and rewriting her original 'book' from the 1984/85 summer while the family dog, Oakey, is amused with a coconut husk. Her writing turns dark and disturbing. These pages circulate through her new friend group, two states away from the old group who once read them. It gives her an identity for the rest of her life: Jodi is a writer.

As a broken 16-year-old, she uses a different kind of fan fiction to process being sexually assaulted at a slumber party. She can't cry, but on the page the fictional version of her can. And there's a boy there who understands her. Holds her. Helps her find wholeness.

She is overly-ambitious at 17 and chooses to write a novel for her Year 12 English Communications Project. She writes despite having carpal tunnel damage (in the days before it actually has a proper name; in the days before computers). She contacts all kinds of people for research, with a boldness that astounds her looking back. Then at the end, she submits her 400-page handwritten manuscript to Random House. Editor Michael Kelly writes back

suggesting she start with short stories. It's a slap in the face: who writes *short stories*. He may as well have suggested she eat shit and enjoy it.

At uni, bright eyed and recently turned 18, she goes to a session run by the writer-in-residence, ready, finally, to be a writer. She submits a short story. He tells her the writing is naive and she needs to go live in the real world. Her spirit is crushed. Over the years, she lives wild, with little thought to the future. And with each passing year she lives more, writes less, until there's a year where she doesn't pick up the same first chapter of a novel about a female terrorist that she never gets past.

Then she doesn't write, yet everyone still knows her as a writer. A friend gifts her a mini Swarovski crystal and gold quill and ink pot for Christmas in 1995. (She still has it; carving intentions into candles with it now.)

I am in my mid-twenties. I fall in love with a former journalist. I tell him I chose not to go into journalism because I could never have towed someone else's editorial line. He's the first person in a long time to be interested in my writing. I find a short story about a boy I loved a few years earlier. He edits it for me and encourages me to submit it for publication. I am at a loss at how to do that so I do nothing. A few months later we break up.

I am in my late twenties and want to write, but don't understand my process. While everyone in my writing course has dozens and dozens of ideas, I turn up to class without a list. I meet another writer online. He writes fantasy. I have a crack at writing in his world, but fantasy is not my thing. I try a spin-off of the *Secret Life Of Us* but really it's just more wish fulfilment like being 14 again. In a tiny window of brilliance, I write the foundation story of my female terrorist. I submit it but nothing comes of it. I let Dave read it the first week we are together. It cements in his mind I am a writer. For a few short semesters I study psychology and it gives me a writing outlet. Then I fall pregnant, drop out of uni and move to Brisbane with Dave.

I am in my early thirties. I edit a grassroots magazine about homebirth and natural parenting. It is here, and in support groups, I am properly introduced to the power of story. It's my baptism into personal narrative that I return to almost two decades later in my coaching work. I tell myself I am a writer

because every quarter I sit and cobble together an editorial.

Then Dan Sinclair happens to me. We meet on the Mystic Medusa website in late 2007. She is my first writing mentor, introducing me to [fiction] Friday and *The Artist's Way*. Inspired by Dan's stories, and with a prompt to work from weekly, I start to unlock my writing process. Julia Cameron invites me out of my shadow artist space and the following year I resign from the magazine and all my volunteer birth-related work and commit to writing. In 2008, I submit my first ever short story to a relationship website. It's immediately picked up. They pay me \$50. (And no, *Demon Lover* is not in this collection. It wasn't redeemable!)

Then Paul Anderson happens to me. We meet on the *Write Anything* website, subbing weekly for [fiction] Friday. We talk late into the night about all kinds of things. I say to Paul: I have a crazy idea. (He says later, beware when I come to you saying that). What if we created an interconnected anthology of short stories? The idea spirals into another idea that is a decade ahead of its time. And when that idea comes to nothing, we return to the anthology. We create *eMergent Publishing* in 2009 and across the next four years we co-edit two *Chinese Whisperings* anthologies together. I edit another four solo under the *Literary Mix Tapes* imprint. I partner with three grassroots projects to produce their anthologies and in 2011 project manage *100 Stories for Queensland*, the charity anthology in aid of the devastating floods in my home state.

I am happy as a pig in shit. It is 2012—my halycon year. Around the massive load of editing and publishing work, I make time to work on *Elyora*, the dodgy first draft novella completed during the inaugural Rabbit Hole (30 hours, 30,000 words) event. It's picked up by Lesley Halm, on behalf of *Review of Australian Fiction*, for a special Rabbit Hole edition. The world pivots again. *Elyora* makes the Aurealis short-list for horror. Then *Endeavour Press* in the U.K. picks it up as a digital-first after Sean Wright implores me to do something more with it. I also start *Postmarked Piper's Reach* with Adam Byatt, writing fictional letters back and forth in real time then publishing them as a web-serial (and eventually many years later, a novel).

In the final year of my 30's, with the confidence of *Elyora* under me, and

Postmarked Piper's Reach two thirds written, I take a sabbatical from *eMergent* to gift myself a year of writing. It's a grand plan until my son is kicked out of school and I become a home school Mum against my will. Not for a few months, but on and off again for the rest of his school life which gratefully comes to an end in 2022.

I am in my early 40's when I create *The Magic Puppies* writing group, as I desperately cling to my creativity as overwhelm, chronic depression and eventually chronic pain drags me away from writing. In 2014, I can't give my stories away. I go nine months without an acceptance despite writing more, and submitting more, than I ever have. Then the story I do sell (*Womb-of-Mine*) never actually goes to print. By 2015, I can no longer read and I lose my ability to write.

Then Devin Watson happens to me. (But also, let me be clear, Devin and I had partnered years earlier on a script writing project—so I know the pivot energy he brings to my creativity). He sent me an article about erasure poetry and for the years where fiction is lost to me, I find cut-up poetry as a way to play with words. It keeps me creatively engaged (and is eventually, years later, what connects me to my anam cara, Christina Hira).

Then Adam Byatt and Rus VanWestervelt happen to me. Or more to the point, the energy I wake with on 18th of October 2018, happens to me. From 2018 until early 2023 we are 'The JAR Writers' Collective. With Rus's *Fossil Five* out in the world (my first experience of editing a novel) I commit to finishing my birthpunk. *Her First Reality, Darkness* comes out at the end of 2019 but I am too sick to do the marketing required. It's rapid disappearance breaks my heart, given it's taken a decade to finish. It's followed by a collection of poetry, *Shades of Paradox* at the end of 2020 (the only time I've sold two boxes of books!). When we decide, amicably, to dissolve the collective, I am not devastated. Instead, a new road opens before me.

Across 2022 and 2023 I write my first solo novel (six times over), a temptation story entitled *What I Left to Forget* that winds together a dark love story, grunge music and police corruption. I am back with Ella-Louise (from *Postmarked Piper's Reach*) and again she drags me out of the shit I've found myself in, to incite a rebirth. With the final (for now) draft done in June, I am

ready for something new. Something different.

I am in the final days of my 40's as I write this.

Looking forward, I am ready for a commercial book deal. I am ready for an agent. I am ready for a genre change. I am ready to write romance in its post-trauma sub-genre. I am ready to accept all the support and assistance that will get me there. I am also ready to return to my birthpunk world when its time.

In a nutshell, I am ready for something bigger. Something I thought I wasn't good enough for. I don't know if I am good enough or not. The only thing I have control over is showing up. I know I am good at that. You get nowhere if you don't show up.

So who was I to do legacy work?

I was someone ready to embark on the next leg of the journey, but with a desire to honour the path that got me here. I no longer consider myself a short story writer. I was though.

For now, I am a word witch, with novelist tendencies, a penchant for the dark and passionate and a desire for a summer house. But who can say what will happen in the future.

Upon reflection there is a sometimes tenuous, other times robust, thread between all these characters in this collection. They are searching for a bigger life. Two years ago, I claimed the right to have a bigger life—to let the dark years fall behind me. Over this winter, I sat with the discomfort that comes with considering success—in my case, the fear of it.

Publishing this collection is the beginning of showing up for myself, for my creativity, my words and stories. Here I stand in front of my work, on my own terms. This isn't just about success. It's about going bigger.

If you need a permission slip to do that, this is mine to you: *Go bigger.*

But don't confuse bigger with more though. Because it is not.

Bigger is allowing yourself to be visible. Bigger is accepting support and assistance. Bigger is dreaming and then working out the next tangible step to translate that dream into reality. Bigger is about going against the tide. Bigger

is about boldness. And craziness. Bigger is about vulnerability.

Going bigger is getting to know yourself better. Going bigger means quitting apologising to the world for who that is. For who you are.

Bigger is taking up space.

So go bigger with your words, your art and your music. Go bigger in the community you belong to. Go bigger in your business. With your clients. In your advocacy work. In the classrooms where you inspire the next generation. Go bigger with the way you parent. How you connect with others. How you love.

Go bigger, because we are all legacy in progress.

Jodi Cleghorn

Brisbane, Australia

December, 2023

THANK YOU

I have been writing for a long time—I'm going into my 5th decade. There are a lot of people to thank when I look back and this space (and my memory) is not big enough to do justice to everyone. Suffice to say, thank you to everyone who saw me as a writer, long before I could see myself as one. Who knew me as a writer before I ever had the confidence to introduce myself as one. Everyone from Sacred Heart College (1986) to eMergent Publishing (2018).

In terms of this collection, thank you to all the editors who first published these stories. With special thanks to Daniel Young (of *Tincture*) and Lesley Halm (who first published *Elyora*) and Jessica Bell (of *VineLeaves Publishing*) I am deeply grateful for the considerable investment each of you made in my early writing.

Thank you to Adam and Rus who cheered on the idea of a collection of stories (back when I thought I could cobble a few together for a freebie for anyone who signed up to my newsletter). Your support and encouragement for more than a decade made writing possible.

Thank you to Peter M. Ball for your *Brain Jar* newsletter which connected me to the art and business of writing across 2020/21 when I wasn't writing. The intention experiment of writing 1500 words a day, which came from your recommendation of *The Organised Writer*, was a game-changer. When I say, I am still writing because of you, I honestly mean it.

Thank you to Angela Slatter for seeing me, loving me (brunch-fasting with me) and cheering me on to my next greatest self. When we re-entered each others' orbit I was a fractured mess of an individual. The glorious stained-glass version of me today is in part because of your friendship. Thank you for giving me an epic panic attack that made me consider how I allow support and assistance into my life so I could choose something better. Prosperity Peacocks forever.

Thank you to my dog park friends: Ian, Brett, Karen, Wolfgang, Drago, Leanne, Paul, Claire and Fiona for letting me be my wild, weird, wonderful self. You let me to be a me I'd never experienced before outside my writing and spiritual communities. Being in the middle of your storytelling, in our beautiful park, as our hounds cavort, is a daily joy. In the year my body couldn't regulate, an hour in the park with you let my body remember what it meant to feel relaxed and connected.

To Emma, for our divine rambles, your future seeing and your ever patient ear when I'm talking about my characters and stories. For your enthusiasm in championing my book and everything I am passionate about. I always remember the mess I was in when we were first met. I am glad you chose me, when I honestly, wouldn't have chosen me.

To Kim, for not only seeing me as a fairy godmother in army boots but a writer in my own right. You have always encouraged me to go further than I thought I could. Thank you for more than ten years of shared postcards. And lastly, your ever-keen eye that ensures my book covers are always the best.

To my fire sisters, Cath and Jennifer, who spark my curiosity, feed my enthusiasm, and generally make my world a better place to be. You were the curve-ball awesome of 2023.

To Kate, for seeing more in me and letting this project unfurl alongside our pilot prosperity consciousness group. And for everyone in that group who made space for my shifts as I wrangled with issues around success, visibility, having a voice and standing on my own two feet. It was an honour to hold space for you all as you held space for me.

To Lily Mulholland, for seeking me out, for championing my place in the literary world, for long nights of deep conversation and inspiring me to go on

retreat with you. Who knows what I might have chosen to do professionally otherwise. And yes, for writing an afterword which made me sob my heart out. Because yes, you've always seen me. Thank you.

To Marion Taffe, for summarising teenage angst with such eloquence and for being my partner in crime all those years ago (all those mullets and rat tails and acid wash jeans!) I wish I could go back to those awkward young women and say one day we'll write darkly beautiful, powerful words that have the capacity to change the world. I wish we lived in walking distance like the old days (sadly, there probably wouldn't be many words written). I am so proud of the writer you've bloomed into. Thank you for giving me a different lens through which to see my work in your foreword.

To Christina, you have my heart, all of it, always. You are proof the universe works in mysterious ways. When you hopped on a plane in 2019 to meet me for the first time, I knew you were someone special (who saw something special in me) When I think we can't go deeper ... guess what? Have a year of uncertainty. As you understand and unearth more and more of yourself you inspire me to do the same. I wouldn't be here, doing this, as the person I am, without you. I am honoured to have your artwork on the cover. Thank you for supporting me in everything. I love you to Jupiter and back.

And finally to Dave and Dylan, who have to live with me. They have definitely won gold in the Olympics of that feat. That means, living without clean clothes, an empty fridge, not being picked up on time and all the other small and immense inconveniences which come with living with a writer. At least the majority of the inconveniences with this book were lavished on Christina while I was in New Zealand in August. When you were little Dylan, and I wasn't paying attention, you would ask me if I was thinking about a story. Now you ask me why I'm not in charge of the story. I wish I was. Perhaps it would be easier that way. Thank you, to both of you, for always encouraging and supporting my desire for words and stories. In lesser hearts, I'd be a lesser woman and writer, and that would be a tragedy.

ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

555

Tincture Journal, Issue 3 (Spring 2013), editor Daniel Young

It Could Be

From *No Need to Reply* (2014), self published.

Oksana

The Best of Vine Leaves Literary Journal (2012), editors Jessica Bell and Dawn Ius.

Shipwrecked

Vine Leaves Literary Journal: a collection of vignettes from across the globe (2017), editor Jessica Bell

Closure

From *No Need to Reply* (2014), self published.

No Need to Reply

From *No Need to Reply* (2014), self published.

Taping Lydia

Best of Friday Flash, Volume 1 (2010), editor J.M. Strother

The Man Who Would

50 Stories for Pakistan (2010), project coordinator Greg McQueen

Nothing New to Begin

Tincture Journal, Issue 5 (Autumn, 2014), editor Daniel Young

First to A Hundred

Tincture Journal, Issue 8 (Summer 2014), editor Daniel Young

Rapunzel Doesn't Live Here (Originally published as 'Bondi')

12 Days of Christmas (2009), ed. Jim Wisneski

At Arm's Length

Tincture Journal, Issue 8 (Spring 2015), editor Daniel Young

Kissed By The Sun

Dead Red Heart (2011), Ticonderoga Press, editor Russell B. Farr

Firefly Epilogue

One Small Step: an anthology of discoveries (2013), Fablecroft Publishing, editor Tehani Wessel

The Meek Shall Inherit The Earth

The Never Never Land (2016), Canberra Science Fiction Guild, editors Mitchell Akhurst, Phillip Berrie & Ian McHugh

The Leaves No Longer Fall

At The Edge (2016), Paper Road Press, editors Lee Murray & Dan Rabarts

Elyora

Review of Australian Fiction, Rabbit Hole Special Edition (2012), editor Lesley Halm (also published as *River of Bones*, Endeavour Press, 2013)

The Starling Requiem (2018) self published

This Once Precious Life (Originally published as the short story 'Blinded')

Hope: an Anthology of speculative fiction to help raise suicide awareness (2011), Kayelle Press, editor Sasha Beattie

NEW TO THIS COLLECTION

To The Boy of my Heart

Graceville

If Only You'd Been Nice

Womb-of-Mine

(with a little help) FROM MY FRIENDS

Marion Taffe studied Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT and has worked as a journalist and subeditor in Australia and the UK. Her debut novel is set in Tenth Century England and explores themes of rage, creativity and the gatekeeping of story. It will be published by HarperCollins. Marion was awarded a 2023 Varuna Residential Fellowship. She lives in Naarm/Melbourne with her family.

An Australian writer, singer-songwriter, actor and rascal, **Lily Mulholland**, enjoys exploring the role of women in society through multiple genres and art forms. Her stories are grounded in the everyday struggles we face in discovering who we are and what choices we make in a mixed-up world. You can connect with Lily via her website <https://lilymulholland.com.au> or on Instagram at @lm_mulholland.

Christina Hira is a poet, artist, and meaning maker. The creative containers she holds for herself and others allow space to sit with the wholehearted devastation of being human.

