

**NO NEED**  
*to reply*

a collection of flash fiction

**JODI CLEGHORN**

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Please email [author@jodicleghorn.com](mailto:author@jodicleghorn.com) for project information.

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Image alterations by Matthew Jensen  
Edited by Adam Byatt & Dan Powell  
Proofread by Stacey Lerner

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He who does not understand your silence will probably  
not understand your words.

*Elbert Hubbard*

# 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 and 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 betters me. Caught in the madness of water and sand, air exploding from my lungs, seconds stretch endlessly. Finally, my face grates the ocean floor. Intuitively, I tuck and tumble. Bare feet find sand and push upward. I break the surface, salt searing the back of 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 Virginia had got around the irreconcilable differences clause and cited my lie as the grounds for our 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, but it was that comment about how she missed longboards that caught my attention. And kept it.

An echo of her ran through everything afterwards. 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 intimate with 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 disappearing slowly with each word...

# IT COULD BE

We look down. It's disgusting. "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, and 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 the first time: 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.

# SQUEEZEBOX

The sound of the rain on his suit jacket bothered him, brought back memories of a war people only mentioned two days a year now. Once upon a time, it was all anyone wanted to talk about. Not him though.

He settled on the damp grass, and as he did, remembered the newspaper story of the dog that refused to leave its owner's grave. At the time he'd said to Daisy, 'Not much of a good news story for the dog.'

'Only you!' she admonished lightly, looking at him over her glasses. 'Some people need to know someone will miss them when they are gone, even if it's only a dog.'

So when they came the first time he used Daisy's line of reasoning.

'Bill, mate, she's dead,' they said. 'We understand you miss her—'

They didn't understand though. Death didn't stop someone needing you.

He'd promised Daisy that night in the ballroom, as he held her

close under the streamers and the electric chandeliers, him in his uniform and her in a dress she'd borrowed from a friend, how he would always be there for her. Always.

Her smile said: Well then, you had better come back, Bill Harker, or I'll have to come find you.

Her lips said: Don't bring me back perfume or stockings, just some sugar.

That was Daisy, practical to a fault. She took her tea with two sugars (always lumps, not teaspoons) and a dash of milk, cream after rationing. On her birthday she used a gold-plated cup and saucer, a wedding gift from her great aunt. He never understood how one cup and saucer was a wedding present.

'I only married one Bill Harker,' Daisy said.

In the early days, when he wanted the distraction of the gramophone, she'd drag out his squeeze box and ask if he took requests. At first he played for her, then for himself as the war only disappeared in the outside world. He let the instrument speak for him, each note a word unsullied by anger and frustration, until he didn't need to talk at all. Daisy said his music pulled her up by her bootstraps when she was short on smiles, but he imagined something gentler cradling her troubled soul.

Each time he packed it away she thanked him. Said his music was a gift; other wives were left with silence.

'Mr Harker!' yelled a man in a powder-blue tunic and trousers.

'Can I help you, son?' he asked when the man was closer.

'It's time to go home, Bill.'

Home? Yes, home, he'd been on his way there. He'd just stopped for... for... stopped for Daisy.

Yes, he'd been on his way to see his Daisy, and got....

He looked around and didn't know where he was. The drizzle pattered, like static in his head, like Daisy giving up on tuning the wireless.

'I prefer it when you play,' she said, somewhere off in the distance where he couldn't quite see her.

'Just gotta find me squeeze box, sweetheart.'

'Bill, we've talked to you about it. The other residents are upset by it. C'mon. Let's get you home. You need some dry clothes.'

Bill stared at the nancy-boy standing over him, anger throttling words out his mouth. 'I fought the Kaiser, son. Was wet and muddy for months. Lived in trenches with rats and mustard gas and a constant fear in my guts like the last of my nerve was going to squirt out me arse—'

'Bill, you'll get pneumonia—'

'I survived a bayonet in the stomach, son! Jerry'd blown up the ration train three days earlier. If I hadn't been starving I'd have been dead. The doc said. I promised Daisy I was coming back, and by God I kept my promise.'

The man-boy sighed. 'Please, Bill. Just come quietly.'

'Hey, Grampy,' a second man-boy yelled out, running toward them.

What kind of mischief was this? His brother Johnny calling him Grampy? Before he could up-end the little rotter and demand an apology for the sassing, the penny dropped. If Johnny had come searching for him at a run— 'It's bloody Frankie, isn't it?' The dog had bolted again. It would be the death of their Marm.

He struggled to his feet; legs and arms and hips popping and

straining with the effort. How long had he been sitting there, waiting for something to happen?

‘He coming too?’ Bill cocked his head toward his brother’s mate. Johnny shrugged and Bill drew up next to his brother. ‘Better talk to him. Can’t go ‘round in get-up like that,’ he whispered and walked off, whistling *Chattanooga Choo-Choo* with a squeeze box wheeze.



# HOLDING ON

Thousands of feet up, we circled Heathrow, awaiting permission to land: a metaphor of circumstance that didn't surprise me. Nothing did any more. I'd always been impatient on planes but this time there was no need. Once we landed, I needed a night or two to recover before I found you.

That's what made your presence in Arrivals unexpected. Unsettling.

Six months earlier, it would have been ecstasy: proof my feelings were reciprocated. Now, I was too exhausted to consider a meaning beyond *you are here and I am happy to see you*.

The expectation in your face washed through me and without a word you wrapped me in your arms, buried your face in the tangle of my hair. As you did, fear crept in. Did you somehow know the truth; what had made it impossible to delay this trip any longer?

In the hotel room, I said I was tired. You didn't argue and let me retreat to the bathroom. I didn't look at my reflection, just emptied the cornucopia of little plastic bottles onto the bench, filled my hand with pills and washed them down with tepid water

while you undressed on the other side of the door.

You kissed me for the first time as winter half-light bled out of the afternoon.

My finger tips. All ten. The inside of my wrist. Your cheek, rough with stubble, brushed my inner arm. In the dark, I let you undress me. Fingers, tongue, lips caressed the hard lines of my bones, and if you noticed, you said nothing.

I lost myself to a dream, became the woman I should have been for our first time. My wasted body strained against you, filling with the wholeness and life flowing from yours.

Afterwards, I relaxed in a cocoon of arms and sheets and blankets, your sweat cooling on me, and tried to surrender to sleep. But the need for honesty moved restlessly. It grew bolder and impatient once you were asleep. Yet the words I needed to speak caught in the bottom of my throat when I thought about them.

You rolled over and I followed, my arm snaking over your side, my hand resting in the hollow of your hip.

I'd planned to wait. I wanted the first few days together untroubled. To make memories before I shattered them. Now though, in the hotel, it was a naïve idea conceived in possibilities, not certainties.

I was here. You were here. *We* were here.

And the silence of my secret lay between us.

Wait.

Tell.

Wait.

Tell.

Wait!

Until we were in your flat.

Wait, so you could reconcile the news in a familiar place.

But in the dark, I saw the words fall from my lips and tangle in the fibers of the carpet your bare feet walked over, inhaled into the pores of the painted walls your arms brushed against. My words stained your sheets. Soaked into the mattress.

I saw you alone in bed remembering how I'd told you there.

Honesty is sexy, you said. Not this kind, I thought.

I brushed my lips against the warmth of your neck and broke you with two words.



# OLIVES

The symbolism was as mashed as my nerve: the table set with a chipped and stained antipasto bowl filled with pimento olives drowning in oily marinade. It looked like you were making an effort. This time I didn't care.

The sweat leached from my back and armpits, sucked at my t-shirt even though it was a cool March afternoon, a pretend taste of sub-tropical autumn before the city melted in a final hurrah to summer.

'You know Ally Lewis's son went to a kinesiologist,' you said, settling yourself opposite me, the olives between us. 'Had his body temperature tweaked half a degree. You should do that. You'd be more comfortable.'

I knew you meant *you* would be more comfortable. I'd never worked out why you found sweat so offensive.

*I'm fine most of the time, I wanted to say. It's only you who does this to me.*

But my tongue languished unresponsive in my mouth. I swore I felt it swell to fill the emptiness left by the unsaid words.

You read my t-shirt with brows sewn together. Anything you didn't understand you automatically labelled rubbish and I'd got the feeling in the last few years you'd slipped me into that category

too. And somehow I minded.

Your quizzical expression gave way to mild exasperation and in turn became mild disgust. You were infinite layers of wilting dissatisfaction. Being with you was like choking on insulation fibers.

I took an olive to occupy my nervous hands before you launched a monologue on the psychology of restless fingers. Rolled it between my fingers for a moment, an unintentional mimicry of you with grapes, before popping it into my mouth and chewing carefully.

‘You eat olives. That’s new.’

I hated olives but kept an impassive face. It gave tangible form to the sourness in my mouth and I wish I’d just left without saying good-bye.

‘Why not go to Sydney?’ you asked. ‘You love Sydney.’

*Loved.* When I was ten and the highlight was an Opera House snow dome and a Harbour Bridge ruler. Exotic souvenirs from travelling grandparents. Something shiny for show and tell on the first day of term.

‘We have friends and family there,’ you said.

*We?* Auntie Sue and Uncle Vic were hardly family. *My* friends who moved to Sydney had moved again. *You* didn’t know anyone else there. Ever. Besides, I wasn’t travelling for *us*. For you.

‘You’re going so far away!’

You said it as though I’d got hold of an atlas and string, worked out the furthest place from here and decided on that as my destination. Maybe you were right to think that.

This time I didn’t care what you thought. Or if you were right.

‘I just don’t understand. Why Morocco?’

Food. History. Architecture. Culture. Adventure.

Things you would never understand. Though you would’ve hit Google if I’d let you know yesterday what I was planning. I’d have spent this afternoon listening to you, the armchair expert on Morocco, tell me all about my destination. That’s how you worked. You who have never ventured beyond the state you were born in.

‘You can’t stomach chilli. It gives you the trots. Remember the time...’

And I tuned out. I imagined being there: the veiled women, the bearded men, the dusty marketplace, the smell of spiced meat cooking, the call to prayer, the bray of goats and camels, the hand of Fatima on the doors. I imagined myself in a dozen other places too. I imagined being so far away from you I could breathe. I saw the umbilical cord still lashed around my neck snap as the plane rose above the tarmac.

*You see, I’m not like you, I wanted so badly to say. I’m not afraid to be alone.*

‘Are you going to just sit there and say nothing? Tear your old Mum’s heart out and not even say sorry?’

What’s the point of talking? Or an empty apology? You haven’t listened to me once in twenty-five years and I don’t expect you to start now.

The best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour, you used to say, parroting Dr Phil.

I relish this moment, to be your anomaly.

‘I raised you better than this.’

You raised me to believe actions speak louder than words,

though you always just talked louder, at me. Like now.

So I stood and pushed the bowl of olives toward you. The squeal of the wire door igniting the pyre of your disappointment.



# SHUFFLING

It's midday, in the last hours of the dark moon, and he's late. He's always late when you read for him.

You're not a psychic (little 'p' or capital 'P'), and certainly not one of those late-night TV wackos with a kaftan and a 1-500 number selling fortunes by the minute. But you do read remotely for him. You say you're a curator of experiences (a title for a non-existent business card); a holder of stories (the ones he tells no one but you).

You explain the cards are a catalyst for a conversation that needs to happen and reiterate each time, you do not see into the future or the past. You barely have a handle on the present.

And if you *were* psychic you'd know exactly what time he'd call and avoid sitting mindlessly shuffling in front of the computer, waiting.

Sometimes you wish you could rely on some other kind of card to communicate: postcard (wish you were here); business card (let's do lunch); gift card (especially for you); placard (you've seen the Dylanesque street confession in *Love Actually*); a greeting card (good luck, happy birthday, I miss you, I love you). You'd even include a beer coaster (*Call Me* and a number made illegible with malty dregs).

A card tumbles from the pack.

After almost a year, The Princess of Swords has emerged: cascading ebony locks, a billowing indigo gown and a short sword held with grace and confidence. Your book describes her as a young woman with a sharpened intellect who keeps her feelings close; a little aloof, a little distant. She brings clarity, objectivity and good conversations. The dawn of a new viewpoint.

But you know who she really is. She is the herald of the Impossible Conversation. She is the one ready to be seen.

‘Hello,’ he says, the call auto-connecting. ‘Sorry I’m late.’

You shove the Princess into the pack.

‘How’s things?’ Your tone is light to disguise the uncomfortable tightness in your throat.

‘You tell me. Is the love of my life close?’

He says the same thing each time and it jabs deep into a place you keep hoping you share with him even though his actions say otherwise. And each time you force a smile while what grew since your last conversation starts to die and you ask yourself why you never learn.

‘You know I don’t tell fortunes.’

You’re grateful for the rote exchange and the fact he can’t see your shaking hands trying to shuffle the deck. ‘Shall we begin?’

‘Okay,’ he says and you detect a thin crack of disappointment that there will be no small talk today to counterbalance possible disclosures.

Without the usual preamble, you cut the deck and rotate the bottom half 180 degrees and shuffle. Back and forth, back and forth, until a card falls out: the Princess of Swords.

Her re-appearance confirms the Impossible Conversation's status has transmuted from probable to pending. After waiting for it, like you've waited for him, you aren't sure any more.

'What's that?' he asks, before you can stuff it back in and pretend it never happened.

'Just my cards.' He'll assume the delineation of whose energy is in the cards, not a specific identification with a card.

'You ready?' he asks and you nod, knowing words will betray you because the conversation that needs to happen has begun.

The ritual is the same each time: you close your eyes; he closes his and reaches out to connect with you. He says he feels it, you never do.

You shuffle, trying to free your mind with the familiar movement, and stop a microsecond before he tells you to. It's the closest to any proof you've ever had he's moving through you.

The deck divides into three smaller ones and you restack them with your left hand, take three cards from the top and lie them on the table: past, present and future.

Your stomach drops. The third card is the Princess of Swords.

'Tell me about her first,' he says.

And here lies the heart of the Impossible Conversation. What do you tell him? What the book describes? What you've learned? Or do you divulge her identity and the troubled territory of your heart?

'Do you recognise her?' You hold up the card so he can see. 'You know her.'

He stares through the computer screen at the card. After a moment he rattles off a list of women's names, asking if any trigger

something in you.

Anger sparks and you snatch a random card from the deck—Death—and cross the Princess with it.

‘Is it love doomed to fail, or... is she going to die?’ he asks, hesitating, then, ‘Am I going to die before I find her?’

In the sudden abbreviation of the conversation you carefully consider your answer and how you might refocus his perspective (because somehow he’s back believing in magic beans).

You know the caveat of card; you know its duality. ‘Death isn’t an actual death.’

‘Then what is it?’

You want to pull another card to be certain, before you say anything. To know what the Impossible Conversation ends.

The silence?

His ignorance?

Your patience?

# WISHING, HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Mummy drags me up the sand toward the car park.

*How you could not see it?*

*I only looked away for a second.*

*Don't lie. You were perverting.*

*My sandals, Mummy!*

She's gonna pull my arm off if she doesn't stop.

*I was gone for five minutes. FIVE MINUTES!*

*I got distracted.*

*How the hell can I trust you, Craig, if you can't keep an eye on your daughter for five minutes?*

*Daddy, my sandals.*

*You saw the topless chicks out in the surf, but missed the guy flashing his dick in front of Lilianna.*

My arm is stretcheded so far it hurts. The sand squeaks. It's burnie. I want someone to pick me up, but Mummy and Daddy are both carrying stuff. Behind us, I hear the crash of the Too-Big-For-Me Waves and laughing Happy Families. I want to go back and pull against Mummy.

*Stop it, Lilianna!*

*I said I'm sorry, Vicki. How many times do I have to say sorry to you?*

*This isn't working.*

*Mummy. Daddy. STOP! My sandals.*

*Shush, Lilianna. Sorry's not good enough, Craig. You promised you'd be responsible. You're a father, an adult, and you're not acting like either.*

*Please, Mummy. Daddy. Please.*

I don't know what I've done this time. We were happy: Mum pretty in her yellow kini, Dad in his crazy boardies making me laugh with cartwheels and handstands.

Me and Daddy were in The Shallows; Daddy making sure I didn't go near the Too-Big-For-Me Waves. I was filling my bucket up. Water came like magic in the bottom of the hole. The sand looked like glitter when I put my head on the side.

Then Mummy half-picked me up, half-dragged me from The Shallows, screaming at Daddy all the way to our umbrella. She stuffed all our things in bags.

*I don't want to go home.*

*Not now, Lilianna.*

She was hurrying like the other Mummies the day the storm came; only she stopped to shake the sand out that day.

*I'm sorry, Mummy and Daddy. I'm sorry.*

*Not NOW Lili-ahn-nah.*

She pulls me off the beach and into the car park. The ground bites badder than the sand. It's so hot I scream. People walking a dog stare at us.

*For Christ's sake Vicki, where are Lilianna's shoes? Here, baby.*

He drops the esky and picks me up. My kinis are up my bum. I'm crying and sandy and so is he.

*You hurt your feet, baby?*

*Like (hiccup) eggs (hiccup) in (hiccup) the (hiccup) frypan.*

*I'm so sorry, baby.* He looks sorry, not like when Mummy says she's sorry.

He sits me in the boot, wraps esky ice in a towel and pushes it against my feet.

*Better, baby?*

*Yes, Daddy, (hiccup) but I'm still sad because (hiccup) my sandals got forgotted. They've got (hiccup) daisies on them. That's what they are, aren't they Mummy? Nanna (hiccup) gave them to me so I'd be happy (hiccup) when you went away last time.*

*Lilianna, are you crying because of your sandals?* Mummy's voice is strange, sorta quiet. I'm confused because she still has her Angry Face on. *Honey?*

*Yes! And because my feet were (hiccup) burning and you weren't (hiccup) listening.*

*I'll go get your sandals, baby.*

He passes Mummy the icypole towel and when I tell her my feet feel betterer she slides me into the back seat and shakes out the ice. Folds the towel. She reaches in to do up my seatbelt and I don't stop her, even though I can do it myself.

*I'm sorry, Lilianna.* Her eyes are sorry this time. Her face is sad.

*It's okay, Mummy.* I put my arms around her neck and hug her.  
*I love you.*

*I love you too, honey.*

*To the moon and back?*

*Yes honey, to the moon and back.*

She smiles, so I don't ask what 'tits' and 'dicks' are and I say

thank you when Daddy puts my sandals on. He winks at me. I try and wink back.

*Close, baby.* He laughs and winks again, then gets in the front and puts on his seat belt. *I'm trying, Vicki. Can you give me that? If not for you, for Lilianna?*

She nods and rubs her eyes. I don't see her crying but she pulls tissues out of her bag.

Kate Miller-Heidke comes on the radio, Mummy's favourite. I sing very, very loud and I'm happy because no one shushes me. I wait until we stop at a red light, then fly up above the car, my fairy wings sparkling, and sprinkle Happily-Ever-After dust on us.



# 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; 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.

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. 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 my ink-stained fingers. 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 place the folded poem against the salt grinder and leave.

## 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.



# WITH THANKS

Most of this collection was written across ten days in April 2014. Many of the first drafts were tapped into my phone—something I'd never done. It was a mixture of limited access to my computer, the erratic 24-hour call of the characters as they slid into my consciousness bearing their struggles to articulate their hopes, fears and secrets, plus the brevity of the stories that made my mobile phone a perfect first-draft sandbox.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jodi Cleghorn (@jodicleghorn) is an Australian author, editor, small press owner, occasional poet and workshop facilitator with a penchant for the dark vein of humanity. Her stories run from the very small to the very large, crisscross genres and formats, and can be found in publications in Australia and abroad.

Jodi was the 2011 recipient of the Kris Hembury Encouragement Award for Emerging Artist and her debut Australian gothic horror novella, 'Elyora', was short listed in 2012 for an Aurealis Award and republished by Endeavour Press (UK) as 'River of Bones' in 2013. She is the co-author of the epistolary serial 'Post Marked: Piper's Reach' with Adam Byatt and the 24-hour collaborative story 'Twenty-Four' with Claire Jansen. In 2015 her transgender trader of wombs, Sarazen, will take up residence on Tiny Owl Workshop's 'Lane of Unusual Traders'.

Under the mantle of eMergent Publishing she has edited seven anthologies including the charity anthologies '100 Stories for Queensland' and 'Nothing But Flowers: tales of post-apocalyptic love', as well as publishing five other works including Emma Newman's debut collection 'From Dark Places' and the Pandora's Paradoxes series by Tom Dullemond and Mike McRae, beginning with 'The Machine Who Was Also A Boy'.

She is currently working on a clockpunk novel 'Dalhousie' and a birthpunk cycle of novellas, which will begin with 'Encursion'.

**[jodicleghorn.com](http://jodicleghorn.com)**

# MORE BOOKS AND STORIES

## As Author

*Elyora/River of Bones* (Endeavor Press)

*Twenty-Four* (self-published with Claire Jansen)

*Post Marked: Piper's Reach* (self-published with Adam Byatt)

'Womb-of-Mine' in *Lane of Unusual Traders* (Tiny Owl Workshops, out in 2015)

'Firefly Epilogue' in *One Small Step* (Fablecroft)

'First to a Hundred' in *Tincture #8* (out December '14)

'Nothing New to Begin' in *Tincture #5*

'555' in *Tincture #2*

'Intersected' in *Best of Vine Leaves Literary Journal* (Vine Leaves Press)

'Ambrosia' in *Vine Leaves Literary Journal #10* (Vine Leaves Press)

'Kissed by the Sun' in *Dead Red Heart* (Ticonderoga Publications)

'Saw Him Standing There' in *Sunday Snaps: the Stories* (Chuffed Buff Books)

'The Man Who Would' in *50 Stories for Pakistan* (Big Bad Media)

'Blinded' in *Hope* (Kayelle Press)

'Taping Lydia' in *Best of Friday Flash Volume 1* (Friday Flash)

'She-Hero' in *Best of Friday Flash Volume 2* (eMergent Publishing)

## **As Editor**

*From Stage Door Shadows* (Literary Mix Tapes)

*Eighty Nine* (Literary Mix Tapes)

*Deck the Halls: tales of festive fear and cheer* (Literary Mix Tapes)

*Nothing But Flowers: tales of post-apocalyptic love* (Literary Mix Tapes)

*100 Stories for Queensland* (eMergent Publishing)

*The Red Book*, with Paul Anderson (Chinese Whisperings)

*The Yin and Yang Book*, with Paul Anderson (Chinese Whisperings)

## **As Publisher**

*From Dark Places*, by Emma Newman (eMergent Publishing)

*In Fabula-divino*, edited Nicole R Murphy (eMergent Publishing)

*Best of Friday Flash Volume 2*, edited J.M. Strother, Tony Noland & Rachel Blackbirdsong (eMergent Publishing)

*The Best of Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, edited by Jessica Bell and Dawn Ius (eMergent Publishing)

*The Machine Who Was Also a Boy*, by Mike McRae and Tom Dullemond (eMergent Publishing)

