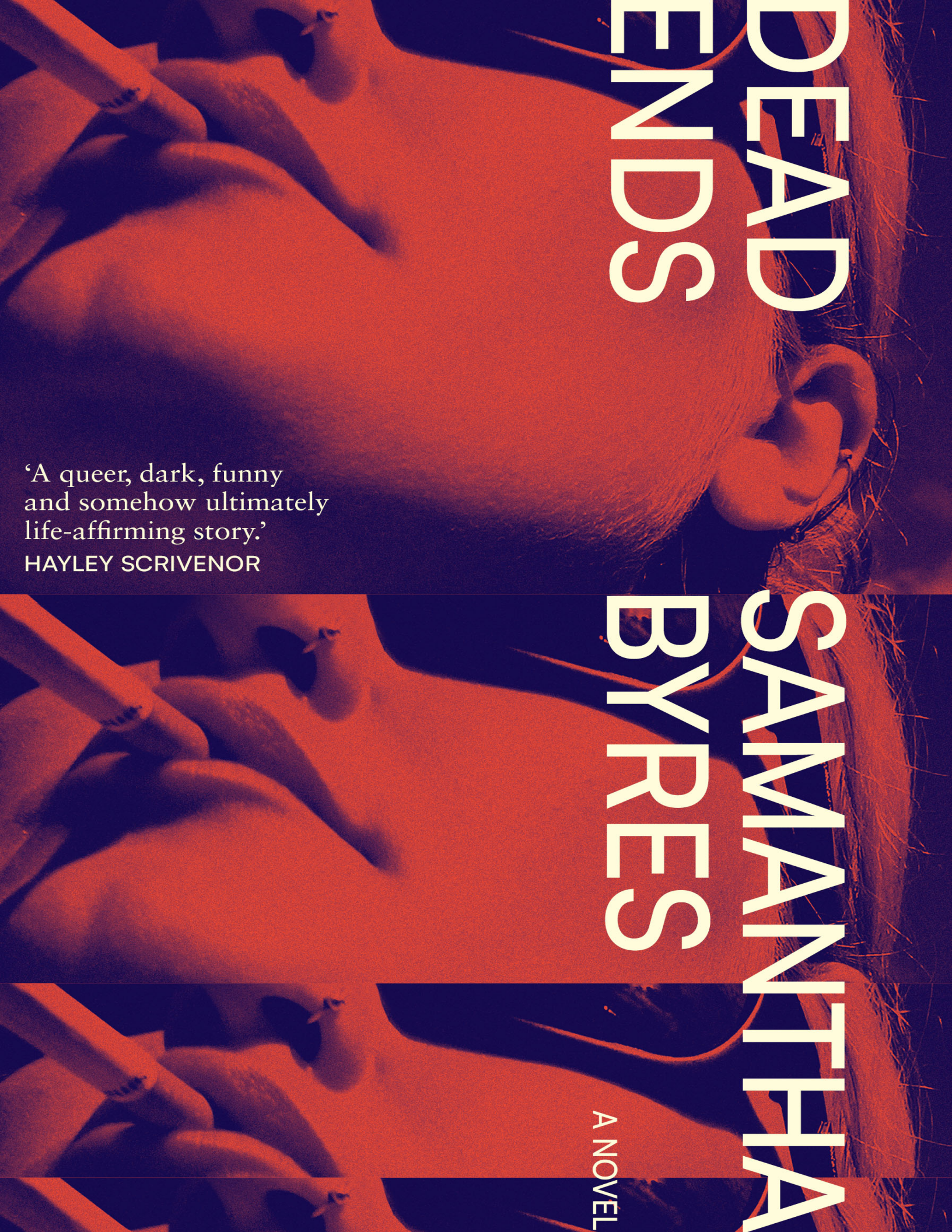




DEAD
ENDS

‘A queer, dark, funny
and somehow ultimately
life-affirming story.’

HAYLEY SCRIVENOR

SAMANTHA
BYRES

A NOVEL

Praise for DEAD ENDS

‘Samantha Byres’s *Dead Ends* is a perfectly imperfect story about all the ways the ones we love mess us up. This is a queer, dark, funny and somehow ultimately life-affirming story about what all those missing girls leave behind. I devoured it.’

HAYLEY SCRIVENOR

‘It’s mordant and wryly observed. Byres has an easy feel for the claustrophobia of family life and dusty friendships: she knows what it is to be dragged back to the past by your ankles. For all Nell’s horror of finding herself back where she started, *Dead Ends* is an enormously propulsive novel.’

JENNIFER DOWN

‘Byres is a red-hot new voice in contemporary noir. Her prowling prose is so muscular that every line takes a shot at the title. *Dead Ends* is a must for anyone who loves black wit, a dark, twisty tale, and a thrillingly flawed protagonist.’

JENNY VALENTISH

‘*Dead Ends* is immediately gripping: bold, moving and seductively dark. A scorching debut that I devoured.’

EMILY O’GRADY

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Samantha Byres is a writer from Whanganui, Aotearoa. She attended the International Institute of Modern Letters in Wellington and her work appears in *Turbine*, *JAAM*, *Sport* and *Out Here: An anthology of Takatāpui and LGBTQIA+ writers from Aotearoa*. She lives in Naarm/Melbourne.

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DEAD ENDS

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SAMANTHA
BYRES

A NOVEL

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PART ONE

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1

NIGHTS LIKE THIS I GET to thinking I'm at the last stop in a line of increasingly dire last stops. I could jump right out of my skin. Take a drive off the bridge.

I can't stand another night of going to bed at nine, waiting for my movie to buffer, hearing the click of Cal's mouse through the wall. My teenage-girl bedroom was stripped of most personal effects when I left, but it still retains an adolescent aura of humiliation and repression. I can't jerk off in there one more time. Not today.

I've got that heart-busting, skin-bursting feeling of needing to get out, if I stay inside I'll fly to pieces. Like when we were young and we got that restless feeling on a Saturday night: everyone we knew was at a great party, except for us.

I beg Cal to loan me his car, the 2001 Subaru Impreza that's his most prized possession and a fucking embarrassment. Bumpers so low you couldn't get a cat under them. Blue light under the doors. Leather seats. I'd be doing him a favour if I flipped it into the river.

'Take Mum's,' he says.

I push aside the net curtains and we glance at Leigh's car sitting patiently under the carport, in between the sheets I hung three days ago. It's a Flintstones car, a turtle on wheels. I need something with grunt, something to make me feel I could blow out of this place.

‘Leigh’s is on empty. Please, Cal,’ I say. ‘Look at my shitty life.’

I really lay it on him, listing all the great stuff I gave up to come back to our dog’s arse hometown, to do the care work our mother, Leigh, won’t let him do. Because it’s ‘not right for a man’. I tell him: ‘I was this close to being promoted, this close.’ I hold my thumb and finger right to the end of his long nose, watch those mournful baby blues go a little skew-whiff. I tell him my girlfriend’s left me because of this, and she’s taken the dog. I say: ‘You don’t understand the kind of homophobic bullshit I experienced in this town. In this family.’ I’m stretching the truth here, in a number of directions. I could cheat and bring up April, and how horrible it is to be back in the place where she was killed, but even I’m above using that to get a loan of my brother’s car. I don’t have to say it, anyway, because it’s been sitting there unspoken between me and Cal, and me and everyone, since I got home.

I do say: ‘Cal, I could die here without getting laid again.’ And that grosses him out enough to hand over his keys.

He does his baby-brother pleading: ‘Just be careful, Nell, because you know the exhaust will scrape on the speedbumps if you go down the main street.’

I go down the main street. Cal was still chewing on his Lego when I was spending Friday nights in the backs of cars like this one. Maybe even this one. Riding up and down the main street waiting for someone to text an address to a party. Sitting on some guy’s lap, sculling Vodka Cruisers. The boys used to drive diagonally across the speedbumps to avoid ripping up the underside. A car like this is a relic from my teenage years, not Cal’s. Where other boy-racer cars have ended up in junkyards, this one is stupidly pristine. Our father’s cop mates gave it to Cal after the funeral. They impounded it from some driver years back, but a processing error meant it wasn’t on the system. It’s a laugh, because my father wouldn’t have wanted Cal to have shit.

I haven't been out this late in the three weeks I've been back. Our usual after-dinner routine is a packet of Tim Tams and whatever crime procedural is on. It's a shock to see people on the streets. Doing nice things like going to the movies, getting dinner from what used to be the 'good place'. Not just evacuating the town centre at closing time. There's even a Japanese restaurant now, doing brisk trade. When I lived here the people in this town wouldn't have dreamt of eating seaweed.

The whole place has been rebranded as a charming little weekend getaway, full of pretty walks and naff homewares stores. Cutesy knick-knacks. The shops on the main street are doing a Western week, and there's still a few people wandering around in bonnets and cowboy hats. In other places this would be entry-level gentrification, but here it represents a major cultural shift. Walking upright.

Cal's right, though. The speedbumps are murder, so I turn off and take the river road.

The river is this town's saving grace, aesthetics-wise. It cuts the place in two, wide and slowly turning. It's temperamental, sometimes high and choppy, logs swept along it like sticks. Other times it's slow and greasy, kicking up sediment clouds. Right now, it's lit up from the setting sun, a blaze of orange too bright for me to look at as I cross the bridge.

The town might be putting a pretty face on things now, and the river showing its best colours, but this is a careless place. Just along the river are a string of sites that were briefly famous when we were young, and I'm not even counting where they found April's body. On the main bridge, two boys got knocked off their bikes by a drunk driver and drowned. He said he thought he hit a cow. Further up, a car of kids went off the road and got lost in the water, high that week from floods. Local iwi put a month-long rāhui on the river. No fishing, no swimming. A local ignored it, went whitebaiting, and dragged in half a torso with his net. Our father said that's what you get when you make a deal with the devil. Meaning: if you're

young and reckless, death is a lesson and not a tragedy.

Half the time, his job was waiting for bodies to be pulled out of the river. Further up, before the river bend, on the now rarely used railway bridge, bored kids would play chicken with the trains. That led to more than one tragedy. Then there were the car accidents, suicides, people who couldn't swim as well as they thought. Lost bridge jumpers.

The road running alongside the river is where Jacqui got hit by a car on her morning walk. She lay there for twenty minutes before anyone found her. Shattered hip. This was only a couple of years ago. Turned out to be a blessing because she could take medical retirement, but still.

And don't forget the history of this place, the battles fought over the stolen river and what it means to who. The shit poured raw and without apology into the water until a few decades ago.

April and I used to come down here and look for my aunt Heather. Like we might find her bones, stripped clean by the years, poking up out of the mud like an old shipwreck. It was the logical place for the missing to end up. Down there, that's where April and I threw an ugly doll her grandmother gave her and then were beside ourselves with guilt.

Excuse me if I'm not lapping up the tourist spiel. My mother likes to tell me that it's actually a lot better now, that 'what happened with April' soured me against this place (and everything else), but it's more than that. Maybe she doesn't have this map of death sites in her head. Leigh's got no imagination.

The whole line I gave Cal back there, about how having to come back and look after Leigh is the ruin of my life, career and relationship, that was a pick and mix of truth and lies.

The truth is I wouldn't have chosen to come back here, would never have volunteered to look after Leigh. But maybe it was a blessing in disguise. The truth is I left Australia to come back to New Zealand in just the nick of

time. There'd been a slew of reasons to leave for ages but I didn't have anywhere to go. Workwise, I was done. If I had to log another customer survey, I was going to slam my face through my computer screen. I'd started fabricating responses from phony customers, and you can only do that for so long. I had to go to the toilets and hyperventilate whenever Lucrece snuck out to get lunch with the new girl. Jade with the septum ring. Someone told upper management about them. Anonymous email account, it could have been anyone.

I know that I was tantalisingly close to getting fired, anyway. I was giving Lucrece all the reasons she needed if she could only erase the pesky year-and-a-half-long relationship we'd had. If she could find a way of forgetting all that in-office after-hours fucking. How I'd had my foot pressed against her cunt throughout my whole performance review, our faces fully visible to her staff above the frosted glass of her office. Things like that do make it hard to get rid of a person.

But Jacqui rang me one night when I was on my third rewatch of *The Nanny* and told me I had to come home. Her voice was like a hook through my cheek, dragging me backwards through the years. I thought she rang to tell me April was dead again. It's a funny thing, because I've got a thousand nice memories of Jacqui and she's more family than family, but I can't get out of my head that memory of her ringing me at work so many years ago, and saying, 'Oh, honey.' I was standing there, smelling fish from the kitchen (it was Friday night), and my pants were still wet from showering someone. I was standing there, but really I was gone, down the phone line, drowning in that 'Oh, honey,' and the world of shit it meant for me.

Anyway, Jacqui. Here we are again. Her voice, on the phone in the modern era. She said: 'Nell, babe, you've got to come home. Your mum's had a stroke.' On the TV, Nanny Fine's machine-gun laugh making me melt. I've always loved loud women.

I'm counting the days and I'm narrowing in on a full month, but there's no end date to this stint of looking after my mother. Just until she's 'back to normal'. Back in a town I haven't lived in for fifteen years, with a family I've barely seen. Little brother Cal, asking me if maybe I would consider calling Leigh 'Mum' again. I haven't called her that since I was eighteen. There's no animosity in me calling her 'Leigh'. That just happened. For the first half of my life, I needed a mother, and then I didn't. Since then, I've got my mothering from a nice selection of hot mummies who have a thing for strays. Women who like a project. The danger there is, just like real mothers, they get disappointed when you don't fix up nice.

I drive along the river until I reach the cemetery. The headlights catch the gates as I turn around. There's not enough fuel to make a getaway. I haven't seen April's grave since the day they put her in it. I could stop and visit now, then swing by my father and get my money's worth, but I'm not in the mood for any of the 'closure' Jacqui rattles on about.

Cal says that Leigh visited our father's grave every second Wednesday before her stroke and I know soon she'll want me to take her, but Cal can do it. I wasn't here for my father's long and gruesome death from bowel cancer. I didn't come back for the funeral either, something I've had to hear about from Leigh and Jacqui multiple times. They're both big on the belief that forgiveness is the way to healing. Well, for Leigh, eternal silence is the same as forgiveness. A thousand times I heard from her: 'Your father's mellowed.' But never: 'Your father's sorry.' Cal sent me a photo of his grave. Someone put a toy police car on the ledge of rough marble. Theoretically, he was disgraced, but cops love a dirty cop. Cal says they put their lights on for him, flashing red and blue down the main street. Beer flowed in place of tears at the Pigpen afterwards.

That I wasn't here then is the reason I've been strongarmed into being here now. Cal's done his duty, apparently. When Jacqui rang to tell me about Leigh, it wasn't a request but a command. Maybe I was sick of resisting the call of home. I was definitely sick of keeping my head above

water. Cal blames himself for Leigh's accident, for not hearing her fall. He was playing video games with his headset on. I said: 'Yeah, that was probably another twenty per cent of her brain function.' He took that pretty hard. Cal's so sensitive. I need to remember that. He never got the hard shell I did. I'm an M&M and Cal's a fucking marshmallow. I should go easy on him. But he should have left here. He's a twenty-six-year-old man living with his mother. It's a miracle he doesn't drink his own piss and immerse himself in a bath full of ice every day.

It's my true and honest intention to head home when I see that the Hangar is still open. It's still called the Hangar, still looks like a seedy, grimy dive. I only like drinking somewhere that's practically dark, and it's here or my teenage bedroom. This is the healthier choice, mentally.

Just the one, and then I'll get Cal's car home before he starts twitching at the curtains.

April worked here the year she died. I was working for my mother at St Marian's. It was exactly like April to nab the most fun job. Working at the Hangar was like being at a party. I'd come down after I finished my shift and she'd be absolutely slammed. People would buy shots and buy her one as well and she'd save a few for me. I spent a whole year of Thursdays hanging over the bar here. Once I passed out in the bathroom and got locked in overnight, which almost got April fired. That whole year is a haze of benders strung together.

Heat and noise slap me round the face when I walk in. This place always had more of a house party feel than an actual bar. A couple of fly-specked lights swing over the punters. It's so packed you could think it's the most popular place in town, but it's just tiny. Shiny red faces turn to look at me as I push through to the bar. Locals in this town can smell a newcomer the way a fly smells shit at 600 metres. I fight the urge to back out of here. I don't want anyone to think they've scared me off. The locals can also smell fear,

and they love to laugh about big-city types who can't handle a little roughhousing. I was born here, you slack-jawed fucks, I want to say.

When I see Mick Purdle standing at the bar, I wish I'd driven right past, wish I'd never got a hankering for a little evening outing. Part of my agreement with myself about being back here is that I won't seek out Mick, April's big brother. Jacqui, April and Mick's aunt, I can't avoid. I'm not here for closure, or to put the past to rest. That's what leaving was for. But Mick clocks me the second after I see him, and he's delighted. He's still got his looks, still got that blinding white smile. There wasn't a single girl in high school who didn't get her rocks off over Mick Purdle. Girls used to try to hang out with April just to get close to her brother.

He just about clears the bar to get to me. The last time I saw Mick was at April's funeral. I was eighteen and I guess he was twenty-four and his face was ruined with grief, a wild red streak across his eyes. He looked so angry that all day long people had their hands on him, on his arms and shoulders like they were ready to hold him back if he found a target. Now his hands are on my arms, and I'm feeling that special Mick Purdle warmth. Big hands. Has this clean, nasal-clearing cinnamon smell.

'Aren't we fucking blessed. Return of the prodigal!' He holds my arm above my head like I'm a winner and the whole bar roars, not for me but because he's a legend here. It feels good anyway. It's always been nice to bask in Mick's residual handsomeness, his cool. He's desperate to buy me a drink, and a little bell goes off in my head: Don't get messy, Nell.

Last words.

I always knew Mick, always knew April. Their mother, Glenys, worked night shifts at the hospital and kept having exhaustion-induced breakdowns. If there was a worry going around, Glenys would get it, so Mick and April spent a lot of time with their aunt Jacqui. Jacqui and Leigh would set up at our kitchen table, smoking and drinking cup after cup of Bushells, watching us all in the backyard. They trusted Mick to look after us the way they

would trust me and April to watch Cal years later. As long as no-one was bleeding it was good enough for them.

My mother and Jacqui are lifelong best friends: they went to school together and then worked at the Griffin's biscuit factory before Leigh married my dad. Later Leigh hired Jacqui as a carer when she started running St Marian's, keeping her on through at least three ensuing scandals. Jacqui's been the one constant link I've had with my family since I left. The details of my life are something she figures she has a right to.

It's hard now to say what keeps Leigh and Jacqui intertwined in their advancing years. They've been storing up their differences since before I was born. They've reached an age where mostly what they do is complain about each other, but this daily gripe is outweighed by long history. They're of that generation that sticks with a thing. Jacqui's never made a decision Leigh's agreed with, and Jacqui thinks Leigh's habitual pessimism is killing her. I watch them hold a mirror to each other, neither of them liking what they see.

We don't buy any drinks but they keep coming. Everyone I ever knew before I was eighteen is here and thrilled to see me. That's the thing about returning home to a place like this. You're a hero, even if all you've done is hold down a couple of office jobs in Australia. I haven't thought about these people in fifteen years and I'll never have to think about them again but their names come to me like dead fish floating to the top of a tank. Adam Fitzpatrick (absolute prick to me in Year 10, made a braying horse noise every time I opened my mouth) brings me a shot of vodka and tells me how much he likes *Grand Designs*. He's got the idea that I'm an architect. Tom Sutlin (used to follow girls into the bathrooms and watch them do their hair) buys me a beer and tells me about the diving accident that almost killed him. Another shot from Jason Sanders (fingered me in his parents' bedroom on the night of our seventh-form awards), who tells me his cousin is gay, actually. Only black looks from Jacinta, Jason's girlfriend (sewed right through her finger in home ec, Year 8; they had to carry the sewing machine

to the hospital with her). People I don't even remember are buying me drinks and when I say it's my round Mick pushes me back down in my seat.

'I met her when she was born!' he yells at people who come to talk to us. Everyone is as delighted as he is about it, clapping him on the back and laughing with him like there's been some miracle. They love him here. I switch to gin and tonics and it's like drinking handfuls of sweaty coins.

By the time I get up to go to the toilet, nothing's nailed down.

I can't find the toilets. They're not where they used to be. I go to the back of the bar but all I get is people turning to stare at me. I'm about to give up and go piss in the alley when a girl grabs my arm. She yanks open a sliding door that I thought was just the wall and we're in a disabled toilet. It didn't use to be the only toilet in the place, which it is now, judging by all the spilt piss on the floor.

'The lock's broken,' she says. 'We'll watch the door for each other.'

She pulls her skirt up and I'm staring right at her tanned pussy before I sharpen up and turn away.

She doesn't wash her hands but leans against the door and watches me while I take the longest piss ever.

'Beer,' I say.

When I say she watches, I mean it's like she wants to take my skin off. I've always found green eyes spooky and she's not changing my mind.

'You're really special,' she tells me when the river finally runs dry. 'I can tell. There's something about you, you're on the edge of something big. Take care, okay? Don't forget to flush.'

She hauls the door open and is gone while I'm still fumbling with my jeans. I splash my face with water, like I could sober up now.

I look around for her when I get back into the bar, but she's melted into the walls. Mick's pulling me towards the door. 'They're about to switch on the lights,' he says.

I remember the hellish way they kicked us out. The lights going on mid-life-changing conversation, everyone ducking and yelling. Sometimes April would let me flick the switch. I got a cruel kick out of that.

Outside I look for bathroom girl in the groups gathered on the pavement. Straight blonde hair. Skinny. Tattoos? But Mick's in a hurry. Someone calls his name and I go to turn around but he grabs my arm. 'I'm sick of these messy cunts. Come down to the river with me.'

Come down to the river. Down by the river. Subject of a thousand murder ballads. But I've got this warm feeling of trusting Mick, loving Mick. It doesn't matter how long it's been, that I left here without even saying goodbye. No-one knows what we know, I think. It's a savage thought. Us against everyone else. No-one feels how we feel. Those clueless fucks.

Mick's struggling to light the joint. There's a cool wind coming right off the water, the loud slap of the river against the jetty every few seconds.

'Hurry up,' I say.

'You do it, then.'

Under the cover of my hand I flick at the lighter. Little sparks glow and fade but finally it's lit.

'I knew you were back,' he says, taking a drag after me. 'Jacqui said. I wanted to come and see you. I knew, but when you walked in it was like I'd gone back fifteen years.'

'I've aged well.'

'No,' he says. 'It was like she was going to walk in behind you. My heart stopped.'

I want to cut this conversation off at the knees. No-one else feels how we feel but we don't have to talk about it. I grab his belt, his shirt, his face, bring him close to me. Kiss him like I want the breath out of his lungs.

People walk across the bridge above us. Shouts and laughter bounce harshly off the water and around our little bubble.

‘Nell,’ he breathes into my mouth, malty and sweet. ‘Fuck. Are we really doing this?’

He stops kissing me a second, puts his hands under my shirt. With distance between us, we can see each other’s faces in the hazy yellow light. A weird second of knowing each other in a completely new way, before things click into place. Fucking Mick was a fantasy I always turned away from. Too close. I undo my jeans, arch my hips into him, grab his hand. ‘What do you want?’

‘Whatever you want,’ he says.

He’s always been a good boy, always taken direction well.

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2

‘HE’S A MARRIED MAN!’ LEIGH yells.

I’m death warmed up. My body’s a sack of flesh, oozing liquor fumes. I lean against the bathroom door, waiting for Leigh to finish, wondering if I can heave her off the toilet without losing my guts. Leigh’s dog, a dreadlocked little mutt named Trixie, sits crying at the door like she always does when Leigh’s taking a shit.

This town is a maze of trip-wires. Clip one and they all go off. I hadn’t forgotten that, but I definitely wasn’t thinking about it last night. Nicky Marrin, who was in my badminton team when we went to regionals, saw me and Mick head down to the river. He told his wife, who told Mick’s wife, Faith. Apparently, they had their first babies at the same time. Shit hit the fan, which I gather is not uncommon in the Purdle household. Then, of course, Faith got on the phone and bleated to Jacqui, and first thing this morning Jacqui rang my mother. The whole chain took less than six hours, while I was in a dry-mouthed blackout. Now I have to listen to this tirade of ‘Mick Purdle’s just like his father and you’re just like yours with a drink in you’ and ‘It makes me sick to my stomach, that boy was like a brother to you’ through the toilet door.

I go in there and lift her off the seat and, while she’s hanging off my neck, she goes on about how Cal had to walk to work. ‘I said for him to go and wake you, but he’s too soft. He loves that car and if anything’s happened to

it he'll be devastated. It was a gift from your father.'

Which is obviously just bullshit but I can't be bothered getting into it because she's really on one. Leigh has a wilfully loose interpretation of the family history and sometimes you have to just let her roll with it. I feel my stomach hiccup into my throat and I'm extremely focused on not throwing up down her back while I wipe for her. I'm trying to pretend I'm anywhere but this bathroom, performing these tasks while my hangover breathes down my neck. I swing her around and into her chair. Her left leg is fine but the right one is weak, especially in the morning, and her right hand is useless. Otherwise she'd be wiping her own arse, thank you. The yoga teacher I went to with Lucrece said that you should practise wiping with each hand as preparation for things like this and now I believe her.

There's a swampy smell coming from the toilet even after flushing that's not exactly calming to my stomach. Cal is the kind of guy who thinks things get cleaned by osmosis. He's not lazy, just unaware. Maybe Jacqui will clean today. She comes over most days to watch *EastEnders* and 'give me a break', which is more like fetching the two of them cups of tea and listening to her unhinged life advice.

Jacqui, that flap-faced cow. Sometimes she's on my side because of April and because Jacqui and I worked together on the ground at St Marian's, when Leigh was telling us what to do from on high. Jacqui loves me like a daughter, she'd be the first to tell you. But first and foremost, she's on Leigh's side, because Leigh has saved her arse so many times. The thing about Jacqui is that she was a good worker, very caring, not lazy like a lot of the girls. Residents liked her. She made them feel special, joking round with them. Everyone was 'my love' or 'little ducky', which drove me mental but they thought she was an angel. St Marian's was a decent place. They were still trying to make a profit but no-one was tying granny to the bed or leaving her on the toilet for hours. Leigh took over the management contract when I was fourteen and I worked weekends and after school, then

started full-time when I left high school. April and I decided to take a year off and make money before we went to uni but neither of us ever made it. On paper, I worked with Jacqui so I could have the benefit of her vast experience, but really it was so I could keep an eye on her and report back to Leigh.

Jacqui would say it was all innocent, but she had a habit of insinuating herself with married men, these old guys who were coming to visit their sick or demented wives. At first it'd just be a chat, then it'd be a bit of comfort in the hallway: 'Oh yes, it's a terrible thing, to see your wife forget you.' Next thing, she's spotted on some poor codger's porch sipping shandies while he puts her quiche in the oven. The family would complain to Leigh, and she'd have to warn Jacqui off. But not before Jacqui had gotten a cheque to get her kitchen counters done, or her car's transmission fixed. She never managed to get the holy grail of getting written into a will, but she didn't do too badly.

I'd admire her hustle more if she didn't roar into our kitchen just after breakfast, being a filthy hypocrite.

'He's married!'

'I said that!' Leigh yells from the lounge where she's set up with the remote, cell phone, landline, thermos of tea, snacks and the racing section of the paper. She goes silent after that, lets Jacqui deliver the lecture, the way she left it up to Jacqui to give me an excruciatingly supportive sex talk when I was fourteen. The other day I found the box of condoms she gave me in the bottom of my teenage wardrobe, twelve years past their expiry.

'He's got children!' says Jacqui. 'Those poor babies. I swear he's exactly like his father and he hates hearing that. If you're going to sleep with a man, why him? That poor girl.'

'Piss off, Jacqui,' I say. 'It's his marriage. Go and yell at him about it.'

'I have,' she says. 'Don't you worry. He's beside himself. Faith has kicked him out, he's in my spare room. She told him that's it. He's had his last

chance.'

I roll my eyes. He'll be on his last chance until he drops dead.

She's gearing up, I can tell. She stops pouring her coffee and she turns to look at me. Here come the big guns. 'Just what do you think April would say about all this?'

I start heading for the front door. 'She'd say: "Good job, I'd ride him myself if he wasn't my brother."' I close the door on her.

I can it down the hill into town. Everything's glassy and too bright, scenes coming into focus a second too late. Trees streak neon in my peripheral. Maybe physical activity will blast away my hangover. Cal fixed up my old bike for me when I first got back. It's useful but adds to the feeling of being thirteen again, riding around doing jobs for Leigh and Jacqui. At the bottom of the hill someone leans on their horn, maybe someone I know, but more likely I've narrowly avoided wiping out over someone's hood.

How is anyone supposed to know what a dead person would think? April died when she was nineteen. Maybe she'd be a journalist like she wanted. Maybe she'd have kids now. Maybe she'd be counting her macros and trying to find the right retinol and necking a dry white four nights out of five like the rest of us. I don't know. Probably she'd think it was gross that I got fingerfucked under a bridge by her big brother. I think it's gross and he probably does too. But if she was alive it never would have happened so I don't need to wonder what she'd think.

It's a ten-minute cruise into town and once I come off the hill I barely need to pedal for the rest of it. I get a good run today and sail through the lights. But by the time I lock my bike outside the Hangar, my heart's racing, pumping excess booze sugar into my blood. It's hard to do the mental arithmetic to plan what I need to do. Lock up my bike. Check on Cal's car. Leigh's errands: prescriptions, lotto ticket, library books. TAB, put on her bets. Drive Cal's car to his work. Walk back to my bike. Pick something up for dinner. Get enough for Jacqui, but it has to be gluten free. Every

receptor in my brain is wrapped in cotton wool and thudding a dull beat against my skull.

A strange phenomenon dogs me as I go through Leigh's list of jobs. At the lotto shop, Gail tells me that a red-haired woman has just been in and sympathised with her 'big loss'. 'And how could she have known,' Gail asks me, 'that I'd just had my hysterectomy?'

I didn't see why she shouldn't know. There probably wasn't a person in town who didn't. Gail told everyone about her clots and prolapses in such excruciating detail that I'd done a month's worth of involuntary sympathy Kegels while I was waiting for her to run my mother's numbers.

Next up, Ngaire at the pharmacy tells me that a woman had been in ten minutes before me and told her she had a 'glinting light, like a vein of silver' running right through her. That it was a sign of her ability to weather future sorrows.

'Do you think I should be worried? About my future sorrows?' She's wearing a fringed shirt that shivers as she bags my mother's pills. Western week continues.

'I don't think so. She's doing the rounds. Gail just had her at the lotto shop. Some nutter.'

'It felt very real. She seemed trustworthy. Left me her card and everything,' Ngaire says. 'I've been worried about my daughter. She's stopped eating meat. And chicken.'

It's nothing, but my hangover spikes into paranoia and I get a spooked feeling as I head to Cal's car.

The cool air inside Cal's work is a balm to my swollen, dry skin. He works in a hybrid homewares and home entertainment warehouse, desperately wants to be promoted to selling computers instead of futons and microwaves. I spot him earnestly talking up a king-size mattress to a couple

so old they'll only get a couple of years out of it. I pop the leg rest on a huge brown leather armchair and wait for him.

Cal isn't bad-looking. If I squint, turn around three times and click my heels together, I can see how someone would find him attractive. The girls in this town aren't exactly spoilt for choice, so he must have his own reasons for keeping to himself. Looks-wise, he got a better deal than me – the tall, lean genes from our mother's side. Leigh's cheekbones. Big eyes, brown hair with a slight curl. But something's off. He's timid. He hovers, radiates worry. He rubs his forearms anxiously as the old couple lay themselves out on the bed. Twin corpses. He's not easy with people, especially men. None of that Mick Purdle charm.

Maybe our father was right. Maybe April and I messed him up, dragging him round like a little doll, a pet. Sweet baby Cal.

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3

CAL LEANS AGAINST APRIL AND wraps a hunk of her hair around his fist, puts it to his nose. Huffs. He'll sit like that for an hour if she lets him. He never smells my hair, even though I use the same shampoo as April. Pantene Smooth & Sleek.

'Go and run to the back fence, Cal. We'll time you.'

He shakes his head. We've done this three times already, and even Cal wises up to these ploys after a while. We're always trying to escape him. He used to be our sweet baby to dress up and haul around but he's a drag now. He's turned from our little accomplice into someone who Mum can bribe to nark on us. Not even bribe; he'll do it for nothing. Just to momentarily betray us, get one up on us. Because he loves being the favourite. We try not to hang out at my place because we always get lumped with him. Sure enough, today there was a disaster at Mum's work, some old woman fell out of bed or something and she got called in and now Cal's our responsibility.

We can hear the dull thump of Dad pounding away at his boxing bag, the vibration it makes in the garage roof as it travels right through the house and ends up here, in the lounge, in the slight rattle of Mum's shepherdess figurines.

'You know,' says April, 'that apparently Amos Knight got his girlfriend pregnant? Fallie said she saw them in the city by the hospital when she went to visit her nan. She was getting it, like, *sucked out of her*.' She raises

her eyebrows and widens her eyes over Cal's head.

'Who, her nan?'

'Don't be so thick, Nell,' she says. 'Amos's girlfriend.'

'Getting what sucked out of her?' asks Cal.

This is the whole reason we don't want him around anymore. He's too sharp. He's only six, but he understands how easy it is to get us in trouble. It used to be easy to talk over his head; he was a little lump playing on the floor, smeared with our glittery Lip Smackers. This is what got us in shit last time, when he asked what a blow job was at dinner. Dad lost it. He was like, 'I'll show you what happens to girls who do that kind of thing,' and Cal got the humiliating slap on his bare arse that I've grown out of.

Dad's always bringing up stories of girls who meet a bad end: pregnant at fourteen or beaten up by their gang-member boyfriends. He says that if April and I keep going the way we are, that'll be us. Dead-end girls, he calls them. 'I see a lot of things that the average Joe Public would be appalled by,' he's always saying. It's not like we were giving out blow jobs down behind the bike sheds. We were just talking about them. About how gross they sound, actually. Mick says that if you ever don't want to have sex with a guy you can just give him a blow job and he'll stop hassling you, but April and I think that sounds like more work for the girl.

'Stop touching my hair, Cal,' April says. 'You're getting it greasy.'

We watch the Top 20 for the weekend. 'Her stomach is so flat,' moans April, like one of us does every time Britney is on. We spend half the video speculating if she's had implants. Ever since Mick pointed out that she has a disproportionately thick neck I keep trying to spot it, but it's hidden behind her hair. The sun's heavy through the window, illuminating a whole square of dust motes. It looks like a portal to a parallel universe, but I know it's mostly dead skin.

'She's here,' says April. She sits up out of her slump, eyes wide, pointing towards the shimmery patch of sunlight. 'Heather's here.'

I let out a long shuddery breath. 'I can feel her. Hello, Auntie Heather.'

'She's the White Lady,' April says. 'She wants to tell us where her body is.'

'Stop it,' says Cal. 'You're not allowed to do that.'

'She can't stop,' I say. 'She can't stop until she finds rest.'

I can almost see her moving towards us, her white dress as pale as her skin, brown hair to her waist, dull and broken with age. 'She wants my body ... she wants to be alive again. I can feel her cold fingers ... she wants us to help her.' I reach my hand out to April like I'm drowning.

Cal rips out of the room, screaming for Dad.

'She's gone,' says April.

'Nell!' We look at each other when we hear the garage door open, whiny strains of Bob Dylan escaping. 'This fucking shit again. Get up,' he yells at Cal, who's lying in the hallway, acting like he's afraid.

'We were just joking,' says April.

It feels like a betrayal, though, because Heather is real. She trusts us. We're the only ones who still care about finding her.

'This morbid shit. If I catch you doing this when your mother's home, you'll get a hiding you won't forget,' says Dad. 'Grow up. You want to be children, go play with your dolls. You,' he says to Cal, 'get in the shed. You can do some drills, act like a man. Stop hanging around these silly girls.'

He tells us to get out of his sight. Don't come back until Mum's home. Like that's a punishment. Cal cries again as we leave.

'Shouldn't have been such a baby, then,' I tell him.

'We love you, baby Cal, but you can't come with us,' April adds.

The sun hurts our eyes when we head out. I feel disoriented and exposed. Like I've walked out onto a stage.

'That was so freaky. I could totally feel her. It's like she wants to tell us something,' says April. 'God, your dad is so mental. She'll be back when we're alone.'

But I know she's not going to come back, that neither of us will bring her back. We'll give up believing in the ghost of Auntie Heather the same as when we stopped playing with Barbies. We didn't talk about it, we just did it. No more silly visions: we're eleven now, too old for making things up.

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4

I ALMOST LEAVE MY BODY when Cal says my name. ‘Fuck!’

‘Jesus, Nell. What are you doing?’

‘I was waiting for you,’ I say. ‘I fell asleep while you were showing some old people a bed.’

His hands hover in the air above me, like he’s trying to raise souls. ‘I went to lunch,’ Cal says. ‘I’ve been off the floor half an hour.’

I can’t tell if he thinks it’s funny or if he’s upset.

He turns to the man behind him, a ruddy little guy with a sandy fringe and the foul reek of middle management. ‘Just my sister. Nothing to worry about, she just dozed off.’

‘A testament to the comfort of your chairs,’ I say. ‘The ambience of these places always puts me right out.’

‘Right,’ he says. ‘I’ll need you to pack up that display fridge in a minute, Cal.’ He walks away but lurks behind a stand of popcorn makers, watching from a distance.

‘Who’s that nark? He looks like Elmer Fudd.’

‘My boss. He’s already got it in for me. Where the fuck have you been? I heard you walk into the side of the house at 3 am.’

‘Mistakes were made.’ I hand him his keys. ‘Sorry I didn’t call first, my phone’s dead. She’s fine, by the way. Waiting patiently, not a scratch, no family of possums in the back seat. Just missing your sweet touch.’

‘I don’t love the car, Nell. It’s just the most valuable thing I’ll probably ever own.’

‘Until you inherit the house.’

He rolls his eyes. ‘Where did you even go last night?’

‘The Hangar. I ran into Mick.’

‘Mum mentioned him this morning, among other things. After the frantic phone call from Jacqui.’

‘Of course she did. Mama’s little confidante.’

‘That guy,’ he says. ‘I know he’s like your big brother or something but he’s such a prick.’

‘He’s okay.’

‘He almost killed that guy in Thailand, Nell.’

It’s easy for me to edit that out of the official narrative. I was headfirst in my own escape then, treating news from home like dispatches from another world. Nothing to do with me.

Cal never knew Mick properly, anyway. Not in his best years. He was too young. Just got to hear about him going off the rails and then marrying Faith, a nice girl with family money who thought she could keep him straight.

‘I’ve got to go. I’ll see you later.’

‘If you can stay awake,’ he says.

On the way back to my bike I pass Mick’s work but I don’t see him.

Chunky silver necklaces line the windows and throw off deadly reflections.

Faith’s uncle, who owns the store, is standing at the entrance eyeing everyone who walks past. Mick told me last night the guy’s a creep. He does a little trick of circling women’s wrists with his finger and thumb to size them for bracelets, showing them what big hands he’s got.

If I wanted to avoid Mick I’m out of luck because he’s sitting down the road on a bench smoking, looking like a man whose wife has kicked him

out.

‘You look like how I feel,’ he says.

‘I heard you slept at Jacqui’s.’

‘News travels fast.’

‘Jacqui travels fast,’ I say. ‘She’s already been at our house having a go, asking me what April would think.’

‘Ah, that old chestnut. My whole life is about what April would think.’

I know that’s probably true. Even though it’s a pointless question, sometimes I ask myself the same thing. But it clearly hasn’t led either of us to making better decisions, decisions that lead to good and wholesome lives.

He looks tired, but not emptied of all vital fluids like I do. Even when Mick was fighting, sweating and bleeding, mouth puffed up with a guard, he always looked hot. Historically, I’m suspicious of hot people, but it’s the ease of it that’s impressive. I don’t think Mick’s ever had to worry that his hair is wrong, or he’s got a booger on his face.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘I probably should have had a bit more restraint last night. Protected your honour and all that.’

‘None of this is your fault,’ he says. ‘This is all on me. It usually is. I should have put a stop to things.’ He stubs his smoke out on the seat and throws it in the bin. ‘I have to get back to work. I’m being watched.’

‘Gotta sell those engagement rings,’ I say.

‘Yeah, it’s my penance.’ He squints up at me. ‘You going to fuck off on me again, Nell?’

‘You just said you had to get back.’

‘I mean, am I going to see you, or are you going to do your disappearing act?’

‘I’ll be around,’ I say. ‘Until Leigh’s able to dress herself, anyway.’

He won’t care whether I’m here or not once he’s been allowed to creep back into the family home. He’s a family man at heart, even if he is a dirty

dog. I wasn't his first little fuck-up, won't be his last. Faith knew what she was getting into. He loves his kids. I can't remember their names or ages, but there's three of them. Girl, boy, girl? The whole time I've been away from here, Mick's been getting his wife pregnant every few years. Her father paid for a helicopter to fly them into their wedding. He's fucked, really. No way out.

My legs go to jelly in the driveway. I don't want to go in there and do the rest of the day. Listen to Leigh and Jacqui bicker through the rest of the afternoon. Cook a family dinner and sit under their judgement. I don't want to hear stories about so-and-so's daughter. You remember her, she's done well for herself. Beautiful children, lovely husband. I'm exhausted and I want to have a cold shower and collapse in bed. I want Lucrece to come and lie beside me and let me play with her hair. I want to watch *The Nanny* with a box of fried chicken balanced on my gut.

I have that fucking dream again. The one where it's a bright, bright day and April calls me up on the old cordless phone. She wants to come over. This mounting dread. I know I shouldn't let her come here.

'You're dead,' I remember.

She laughs and laughs and laughs and I know she's just outside the door. She hates me, she wants to switch places.

She's dead and I'm not.

She's April, she's Heather.

April.

Heather.

April.

I wake up praising god that I feel better than the day before, but Leigh and I descend into petty narkiness by lunchtime, arguing over whether Cal should

help with the laundry.

‘He works!’

‘He sells couches,’ I say. ‘He’s not in the coalmines.’

There’s nothing to do but get on each other’s nerves. Any sense of selfless altruism I arrived with went out the window after the first week. Life is going on for everyone else, going backwards for me. The days here would drive anyone up the wall: waking up with the sun, dragging Trixie the Insane around the block. Trashing my back while I haul Leigh out of bed. Reporting Trixie’s bowel movements to her while she does her own. We’ve become unreasonably preoccupied with shit, our days punctuated by it. How often is everyone doing it and is it too much or not enough? Trying to ignore Leigh going on while she watches the breakfast show (‘This crazy bitch again’, ‘Can you believe some people?’, ‘They want something for nothing, this lot. I wasn’t handed my life on a plate’, ‘We speak English in this bloody country’ – et cetera, et cetera) and scrolling through socials, mainly looking at Lucrece’s accounts and trying to figure out if she’s still fucking Jade with the septum ring or if she’s taken an interest in rock climbing off her own bat. Running round to the shop when Leigh has a hankering for something. Long chats with Vin, our mournful dairy owner, while I try to kill time before I trundle home with a sad loaf of bread and a six pack of the world’s cheapest beer. Eating half a pack of fun-size Milky Ways. Hassling Leigh to do her exercises. Watching the *Home and Away* rerun with her over lunch. God, it’s only lunchtime. Time rolls uphill like a boulder. I think about lifting Cal’s weights. I give the dog a bath, but she does a dribbly liquid stress shit in the water. I’ve read every crime procedural on Leigh’s shelf and I’m eyeing up the romance. I should be using this time to plan my next moves, but it feels like there aren’t any. I’ve got \$284.60 in my bank account and no sign of a payout from work. If I think about it too long I get the heaves. I feel the same kind of trapped I did when I was seventeen, and Leigh and I are grating on each other the exact

same way we did then.

In the late afternoon I take her for a drive. She resists the idea of leaving the house at first ('What for?') but soon enough she's enjoying herself, sitting there with the dog on her lap, pointing out the sights like I didn't spend half my life here.

'It's a forty zone here,' she says.

'I'm going forty.'

'It doesn't feel like it.'

'That's because you haven't been in a car since you got out of hospital. You've hardly moved in weeks.'

'Watch out for that bike!'

'Jesus, I can see! This isn't my first time driving a car.'

'I know you don't drive very often,' she says.

She's right. Mostly I like being driven around, but I can drive. Mick taught both me and April. She got her licence first. She was the one who was supposed to drive us out of here. I had to take the bus when I left.

I didn't get my licence until I was twenty-six, for a road trip across America with my girlfriend at the time. I broke up with her a month out from the trip. I couldn't get the cash together. She said I was afraid of the commitment. She ended up going anyway, met her future wife in Florida. Nell does another good deed.

'Leigh,' I say. 'I need money.'

'What for?'

'Stuff. Things. I'll eventually have to leave here, set up my life. I've got no savings.'

'Well, you'll have to figure something out when it comes to that,' she says. 'You get your room and board. You're in your thirties, Nell. You've always been bad with money. It just burns a hole right through your pocket.'

'Well, if you remember correctly, I had a job and a flat before I came back

here to look after you. I'm going to need money at some point, if I'm ever going to get out of here. I know Dad's life insurance paid out.'

'You just got here.'

'I can't stay forever.'

'I'll think about it,' she says. 'Now, I want to show you something. Go across the bridge.'

She directs me to a quiet residential street, lined with huge leafy trees. It's like driving into a cave.

'Stop here,' she says.

I pull up in front of a nice house with a wraparound verandah. Roses in bloom.

'A very sad thing happened here,' she says. 'A man took his three children into the garage and gassed them in the family van. Tiny girls, the youngest was just a baby.'

I close my eyes. Another one of the town's grim backstories.

'I know, Leigh. I went to school with one of those girls. Annabelle.'

'No, you didn't.'

'I did. We had jazz ballet together all that year. You used to talk to her mother outside while you were waiting.'

'Oh, you were terrible. I couldn't watch you. You could never get the steps right. You never had my coordination. Looked terrible in a leotard. You developed so early.'

'Nevertheless, I knew her.'

They called an assembly on Monday morning to tell us what happened. Our principal, Mrs Yates, giving us the bare facts of it. April and I trying to assign reason to it out of our eight-year-old brains. Why would anyone do that? They told us the truth so we wouldn't make things up, but it didn't matter. He did it because the mother was having an affair. She was going to leave him and take the girls away. He'd been abusing the kids and she was going to the police. He was crazy. She was a bitch. We heard things from

our parents and went wild with stories.

Afterwards, I looked at my own father afresh, wondering if he would ever lay me and Cal down in the back of the family station wagon with the exhaust plugged.

‘I don’t remember any of that,’ says Leigh. ‘That you knew her.’

‘Well, I did.’

I turn the car around harder than I mean to, and Leigh slides into the door. Her good hand grips the dog. Like I’m going to drive us off the road or something.

‘A lot of people have tragedies in their life,’ she says after a bit. ‘Those girls’ mother? She remarried, had another two children. She’s one of the town’s best real estate agents.’

‘What’s your point, Leigh? I should start selling houses? In this economy?’

‘I’m just saying.’ She’s picking at Trixie’s coat, pinching what looks suspiciously like fleas between finger and thumb. ‘Look at Glenys. She started fresh after April died. New baby, moved to the Gold Coast. Terrible things happen to a lot of people. And they move on. Me, for instance.’

‘You?’

‘It wasn’t easy for me when Heather went missing,’ she says. ‘But I had to carry on. I couldn’t just decide not to live my life. I had you to think of, and your father.’

‘What are you trying to say?’ I ask again.

She’s silent for another half block. I know this counts as a caring talk from Leigh but I’ve had enough. I know what she’s trying to get at.

‘You don’t have to live like you’re on the run,’ she says eventually. ‘What happened with April, it messed you up. It became a trust thing for you. That’s what put you off men, all that stuff with her and Ryan.’

‘I think you’re swimming in waters out of your depth here.’

‘Well, I’m your mother,’ she says. ‘I know. That’s what turned you gay.’

‘I was gay before that.’

‘You like to think you were. But clearly, it’s not what you really are. It’s not natural to you. If you’re coming back here and sleeping with Mick.’

‘I didn’t sleep with him.’

‘Well, whatever. Mucking about, then. You’ve got an unhealthy relationship with love. And sex.’

‘Yeah, where do you think I got that from?’ She’s been watching too much reality TV, picking up this bullshit psychology.

‘That’s what I’m saying. From April dying.’

‘Leigh. If you shut up, I’ll buy you an apple pie at the McDonald’s drive through.’

‘I think it’d do you good to talk about it,’ she says.

‘What would you know? You never talked about Heather when we were growing up. It was worse than swearing.’

‘That’s what I mean,’ she says. ‘I was wrong about that. It would have been better for everyone if I had.’

‘Do you want an apple pie or not?’

She looks out the window, nods. The river is low and sluggish, dirty foam licking at the banks. I see a couple of kids leaning over the bridge railing as we drive back over, the woman with them hovering a hand over each of their necks.

5

IT'S COLD ON THE RAILWAY bridge. The wind whips around us, dredging April's and my hair through our mouths. Gritty skin, the dirty feeling you get when you haven't slept. Upriver, cars cross the main bridge, and I wonder if the drivers can see us, if anyone could recognise us from there.

I can see the bumpy lace edge of April's underwear through her pants. Mum says twelve's too young for lingerie. April's mum Glenys doesn't care what April does. Her only rule is that she has to know about everything. Whatever happens in April's life, like the first time she kissed a boy, when she started shaving her legs, where she's going, all of that. She only gets in trouble for lying. April's aunt Jacqui says she's going to let April tell the truth right into a teenage pregnancy. If April gets pregnant I'm going to move in with her and help her raise the baby, and she'd do the same for me except I haven't even kissed someone yet. There's only four girls in our class who haven't hooked up with someone and I need to be before Toni Clancey. April's kissed four different guys but they're all kind of losers.

April's shrieking, 'Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,' on a loop so the rhythm almost relaxes me.

Mick and Ryan are balanced on the railing, still as stone apart from the hard wind melding their clothes to their bodies. Both of them are skinnier than us. Lean boy look. They told us in sex ed it's natural for boys to be skinny. It's natural, but it's not fair. Ryan holds onto a bollard, but Mick is

hands-free. He's just dropped out of school. He only cares about kickboxing. Glenys and Jacqui are upset about it, but Leigh says they should get realistic: 'It's not like he was going to be a doctor or something. He might as well give it a go. Mind you, if you leave school when you're sixteen I'll bloody kill you.'

We're not supposed to be up here. People have died on the railway bridge. The trains only run twice a day now, but we don't know when. My neck prickles. A train could appear behind us at any second. We'd have to throw ourselves off the bridge. It's happened before, to other kids. Dad said he'd kill me if he ever caught me up here. I feel dull and slow because April and I were sneaking Glenys's cask last night. At first, she said we could have half a glass each and then we went back for more when she fell asleep. Glenys says it's good for us to experiment with that kind of thing when we're supervised. Otherwise we won't know how to handle ourselves. April still likes the thrill of tricking her, no matter how cool Glenys tries to be. Tonight, she'll just think the cask is a little light, that she must have had a couple of extra glasses. Poor old Glenys.

The boys only brought us because Jacqui told Mick he had to spend time with his little sister, and Ryan is always with Mick. We're too young, they say. Babies. They like to shock us. We know they won't jump but we act like we think they will. A couple of years ago they would throw themselves out of the huge macrocarpas in the park behind Jacqui's house and pretend to be dead. The only way we could make them open their eyes was when we kissed their smooth hot faces. Mick's got warm blood, forever tanned. Dad says that's why Mick can fight: he's probably got native blood. But then why's April so pasty? Dad used to train Mick, until Mick switched to Muay Thai. Mick was getting too good for him, anyway. Ryan is pale and bloodless like a worm.

April says Ryan is cute now, but I don't get it. He keeps his hair shaved because he's a ginger, and because he always used to get nits. My dad says

we should feel sorry for Ryan because his mother is a selfish bitch who left him. But I can't feel that sorry for him. Once I watched him pick his nose and wipe it on the underside of Jacqui's couch when we were watching a movie. When I reminded April about this, she was just like, yeah, duh, men are gross. He's too old for her anyway, sixteen, but April says a lot of guys like younger girls, you'd be surprised. I don't know when she started knowing so much about men. It's not like her dad's around.

April's yelling so loud that I can't really hear myself saying: 'You're a bloody idiot, Mick Purdle!' I usually like telling him off, like he might ever listen to anything I have to say. He might think: That Nell is a good sensible girl. Different from the pretty girls he's always with, who surely can't be both pretty and nice and sensible. But right now I feel stupid, yelling on a bridge.

Mick goes, 'Girls, girls,' and brings his finger to his lips, like shhhh. He says, 'It's okay.' He's not going to jump. He's just getting us worked up. Like Jacqui says, 'Don't react! That's what he wants.'

Mick crouches to jump back down to the tracks. Then, just before he does, he turns his head and winks right at me. It's a magic trick how fast he disappears over the side. April screams for real as he drops, legs curled to his chest, into the brown foamy river. He disappears into the water.

Ryan jumps down from the railing and goes: 'Fuuuuuuuuck ...' I know he was never going to jump, was always just screwing around.

Seconds of pure panic as we wait for Mick to pop up. People die in the river. They get dragged by logs or they hit the struts. None of us know what to do. I try to remember what we learnt in health class. Two breaths, fifteen chest pumps. We run to the other side of the bridge and look down.

'There,' I say. 'He's there.' We watch him swim against the current to the bank for ages. Longer than is comfortable. Everyone says the river is deceptive. Looks placid and slow, but it's full of rolling swells, carries the same suck and pull as the sea it flows into. Cold with the ice of the

mountain. For the first time ever I think Mick might be scared. I can see it on his face, even from here. The line of his dark brows. It's still so cold. We're quiet as we watch him struggle. When he finally hits the bank and starts heaving himself out, the grip of the river mud taking away all his grace, we run down to the road.

When we get there, he's lying on the verge. 'I'm dead,' he says.

April's crying. 'You stupid jerk, I thought you were actually dead. Never ever do that again!'

'Okay,' he says, grabbing her in a big hug and covering her in river stink and mud. 'I will never ever do that again.'

When we leave, he looks at me, winks again, and says, 'How did you like that?' And I can't even say anything. I just smile.

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6

AFTER DINNER, I LEAVE LEIGH and Cal watching *The Block*, Leigh dozing on and off. I cycle aimlessly for a bit. Maybe I'll call in on Jacqui. It must be bad if I'm looking to her for advice. I'll get a crystal and some vague quotes from *The Prophet*. There's still something comforting about Jacqui. A hangover from childhood when we went to her with all our hurts and secrets. Leigh was about as comforting as a cactus. Glenys pretended to be cool, one of us, but it was Jacqui who truly understood us. Jacqui only ever wanted us to be safe and happy. 'I'm happy when you're happy,' she used to say.

I know how Leigh sees things between us. That we're carrying these twin griefs. Both our lives ripped in half and sewn back together before we even got started. April's death hangs over everything I do, and Leigh's little sister Heather went missing when Leigh was pregnant with me. She's always said it ruined her first years of motherhood. Like she hasn't had another thirty-something years to make up for it. It was always easier to say that's what kicked everything off, that we never had our own issues. That there were never any poor judgements in mine and Cal's childhood. Today's the first time she's ever alluded to anything like that. She's gone soft since her stroke. When I used to ask about Heather, she would go off her rocker. When she caught April and me trying to summon her with a ouija board she broke it in half and I wasn't allowed to see April for a month. We used to

meet up at Jacqui's for a stolen hour after school.

The thought of trying to have an honest talk with her about my sexuality, or anything else, makes my skin crawl. I just told Jacqui one day I had a girlfriend and let it trickle back to Leigh that way. I bet she never told our father.

Jacqui's car isn't in her driveway, but Mick's sitting on her deck drinking a beer.

'She's at mahjong,' he says. 'Nice wheels.'

'We can't all get around in your wank-mobile,' I say. No guy with three kids should own a car like Mick's. It sits out on the lawn, practically as big as Jacqui's unit, a masculinity-affirming beast with custom mags and tinted windows.

'Speaking of, I do need to go for a little spin, I have to do something at the shop. Do you want to come?'

'Nothing better to do,' I say.

'Don't flatter me.'

In the car he lights a cigarette, hands me his beer. We don't say much. There's a bit of awkwardness, maybe because I'm realising that I came looking for him, not Jacqui. And maybe he's realising that as well.

It's quiet in town. Last bright golden hour before the sun begins to fade. I can hear the murmur of the trackside channel from the sports bar across the street.

Inside the shop he disarms the security and we walk in past all the cases of ugly jewellery. He grabs a couple more beers from the staff fridge.

'How much does this place make a day?'

'More than you'd think,' he says. 'Thankfully.'

'You're on commission?'

'A pretty decent one.' I follow him up the stairs to the rooftop. 'Although, that might change. Uncle Graham isn't exactly overjoyed with me right

now.'

'What are we doing up here?' The building's taller than it looks from the street. There's an entire second floor that's unused. I can see glimpses of the river between the buildings in one direction, and the smudgy haze of the sea in the other.

'Checking my plants.'

He's got a full little weed plot going on the roof, healthy plants pushing up against plastic. 'Does Uncle Graham know about this?'

'Uncle Graham doesn't climb stairs. You can't see this from the street. The only reason I'd get found out is if someone narked on me.' He fiddles around with some stakes, checks the irrigation spikes, adjusts the plastic.

It's hot up here, heat caught in the concrete bunker of the roof. I hold my beer to my forehead. Since I arrived back I've felt out of my body, displaced. Half in the past. Everything familiar but weirdly changed, like meeting a dead person in a dream. Mick comes and stands beside me, looks down at the street.

'I've been thinking about you,' he says.

'What have you been thinking about me?' I don't want to be this way with him but I can't help it.

'Wondering if I'm allowed to call you. Realising I don't have your number.'

'You can have my number.'

'You left without saying goodbye,' he says.

'Extenuating circumstances,' I say. I know he's not talking about a few nights ago.

'Only you could have understood what I was feeling, and you just took off.'

'I had other things going on, Mick.'

'I know,' he says. 'I'm not trying to guilt you. I'm just saying. It means something to me, being around you. And it freaks me out, that you might

just leave again.'

Our arms are touching, side by side, hot enough to feel like we're sticking together.

I move around slightly so I can see his face. 'This is just a friends thing, though, right?'

'I don't know what kind of thing this is,' he says.

He brushes my hair back from my face and leans down to kiss me. It's a very practised, very teen-movie kind of move. It makes me laugh that he's probably been doing the same thing since he was twelve. No updates needed. But it works, because once that barrier is broken it just feels slightly weird in a way that turns me on.

None of this should be happening. I shouldn't be tugging at the belt of the man I once called my brother and pulling him into the middle of a sun-baked roof. I shouldn't strip him down to his underwear, shouldn't admire his lean kickboxer body, just a slight give beneath his ribs. Seeing Mick Purdle's cock for the first time, pointing straight up at the sky as he lies on his back for me. Taking a second to thank god for skinny guys with big dicks. We both grunt when I straddle him. He's about to say something but I cut him off, slide him into me. His hands grip my hips hard enough to hurt and keep me pinned on him.

'Wait a fucking second,' he says.

He leans his head back, breathes out hard. A plane goes over, we watch it cross the whole high dome of the sky. Then he pulls my singlet off, yanks my silly little crop up over my tits. My shadow moves back and forth over him. The concrete's rough on the knees so I tell him not to be a hero, don't fuck around, and he bucks me off at the last second. I feel him cum against my thigh. Sputter and die.

The blare of a car alarm below pops the bubble of silence between us.

'Sorry,' he says. 'Bit quick.'

'Why do men always apologise the first time you fuck?'

‘How do you know what men do after they fuck? I thought you only fucked women?’

I sit up and turn away from him to put my top back on, shuffle into my jeans. ‘Oh, sure. You think you’re the first guy I’ve ever deemed fit to fuck? You’re just that special, that hot, I *had* to have you.’

He pulls his own underwear over his concrete-roughened arse. ‘Well, I don’t know, do I? I know you’d never slept with any guys when you left here, then Jacqui says you’re lesbian, so I didn’t know.’

‘You’re an idiot. Why’s everyone here obsessed with who I’m fucking, anyway?’

‘Who’s obsessed? I’m just saying. Look, I’m sorry I offended you.’

He does his belt up with an exasperated yank that’s strangely familiar to me. How many times have I argued with men after sex? One minute you’re fuckstruck, the next you’re reminded you just mixed body fluids with an absolute muppet.

He drives me back to Jacqui’s, to my bike. I don’t know what he’s feeling, can’t figure out what I’m feeling. Hooking up once is a mistake but twice is a choice.

When we pull up to the house Jacqui appears in the doorway in her bathrobe, hair up in a towel, cigarette in hand.

‘That’s your bike, then,’ she says.

‘I came to see you.’

‘Did you? You’re very flushed.’

She’s not exactly thrilled to see me, so I say my goodbyes and hop on my bike. Mick gives a feeble wave but Jacqui just stands there, like some Greek statue. I cycle off on wobbly legs.

I’m unsettled by Jacqui’s coldness, because it’s so unexpected. How could I, her remaining favourite, be the focus of her anger? Don’t I get a free pass just for being alive?

I'm two blocks away when Mick roars up beside me.

'I'm sorry, Nell. I'm an idiot. I'm a small-town hick. Just wait a minute. Give me your fucking number, would you?'

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7

I ESCAPE THE HOUSE ON my bike, a habit that's becoming too frequent. Setting Leigh up in her chair and leaving her stranded while I get a couple of hours' breathing space. I'd feel guilty, but today it was her who told me to piss off and get out of the house because I won't make her 'famous family meatloaf' for dinner. I remember that cursed sweaty fart slab from childhood. I don't really have anywhere to go (to Leigh: 'How am I supposed to go anywhere if I don't have any money?'), but I head to the gym because I'm trying to get some muscle back. When Lucrece dumped me I lost access to her fancy gym membership and the pool in her apartment building.

Leigh has this list of things in her head I owe her for: unpaid rent, absence from a string of family Christmases and funerals, every forkful of food she had to put in my mouth. Probably she'd hand me a bill for my birth if she could. She's from the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps school of hard knocks. So she sees this, me being here, as payment owed.

I've reached peak memory capacity. Everything in the house, Leigh's every turn of phrase yanking at some chain and setting me off.

The time I had Chrissy Burns over for dinner and my dad wouldn't let her leave the table until she'd finished her meatloaf, and by the time her parents arrived to pick her up she was hyperventilating over her plate. That was the

last time we mashed our Barbies together in a frenzied imitation of sex, and now she's married to Leigh's dentist. ('Very nice man.')

The rusted basketball hoop hanging from the garage. The summer April and I spent shooting hoops every day, listening to music we were too young for when it was actually cool.

A stack of nonsense notes from Miri that I found wedged in a copy of *Potiki*. She used to leave them in my locker between classes. Dumb stuff, like 'Mr Carls is a virgin' and references to last night's episode of *Friends*. Sometimes there would be heart and flower doodles in the margins and I'd make that mean something. Once a stick-figure sketch of us playing badminton, with the caption: 'Nell loves (shuttle) COCK.' I felt shame for my younger self – the careful preservation of those letters, which were meaningless crumbs. I hate thinking of myself back then, my blundering desire, greedily gobbling up attention from someone who thought of me as an awkward kid sister, at best.

The ride to the gym lulls me into a semi-calm. By the time I lock up my bike, the acrid rage that shot me out of the house and down the hill has subsided into mere unease. I'm still having thoughts about the ruin of my life, but they bother me less than they do when I'm lying awake in the early hours.

Towards the end of our relationship, when I was pretending I wouldn't have to look for somewhere else to live soon, Lucrece took up cycling. Each weekend she would pick up her bike from a friend's and go on these long, gruelling rides. Long enough for me to soak in the bath and plod through a few chapters of *Infinite Jest*. Long enough to cleanse with a couple of episodes of *The Nanny*. Long enough to eat my lunch and start thinking about my dinner and have a wank in between.

Then we went for a weekend winery tour for some friends who got engaged. It ended up being a cycling tour. She could barely stay on the

thing. I've seen dogs ride bikes with more skill. She tried to say she wasn't used to the heavy frame, but the jig was up. She'd been spending Sundays with a doula who liked to wrap her lovers up in silk sheets after she'd fucked them. 'Very different style to you,' Lucrece said, like getting a new lover was like swapping yoga teachers. She gave me a week to move out, so we could 'start the healing process'.

Cycling would be good for her. I'd text her to make a recommendation, but I've been told not to contact her until my complaint has moved through the proper channels.

This place still has the same sweat and rubber smell it had when Mick and Ryan, and briefly April, trained here. It was a fighting gym then, run by Mick's coach, and for about five years our town was known for pumping out young kickboxers to watch. Now it's just a regular gym.

I avoid the mirrors. I don't need a reminder of my bad dye job and squat body, my ragtag collection of body parts: *your father's ankles, your grandmother's glassy eyes, where'd you even get that dull skin from, no-one in this family's ever had freckles.*

The weights room is empty apart from one old guy doing cable rows. I don't bother easing into things – I just get right into a series of squats and lunges. Surely my body remembers what to do. I worked out every day in Sydney. I don't get lean and muscular, more like a built-up little bulldog. Slab on slab. Lucrece said she liked the stocky look. I guess she stopped liking it, though.

The affair with the doula lasted about six weeks after we broke up, but she didn't come crawling back. I knew she was single again because she started spending more time on the office floor, started shouting Friday night drinks and wearing the jeans I said made her arse look great. I knew she had her eye on Jade. I knew her type. Girls who are disillusioned, who act like they're made to sit at their desks under duress. That way Lucrece can be the

cool boss, like, ‘Yeah, work sucks, it’s just a job, work to live, right?’ Like she’s not the one cutting contracts every July. B-Comms gave the impression of a cool, hip workplace with bowls of free fruit dotted round the office, four kinds of milk in the fridge and table tennis in the break room, but if you went for a piss once too often you’d hear about it. Lucrece fit the vibe perfectly, your best-friend boss who would hold your hand right up to your third and final warning.

Lucrece and Jade started to follow the same pattern Lucrece and I had a year before. Arriving ten minutes apart, leaving ten minutes apart. Being sprung at the bar across the road and acting like they just ran into each other. One day I saw Jade forking her salad straight out of one of Lucrece’s metal bento containers. Maybe Jade shared Lucrece’s love of true crime. Maybe they lay in bed and watched grisly documentaries after they fucked. Maybe they watched them while they fucked. By this time, I was getting called into Lucrece’s office regularly to have chats about my performance, my ailing call stats. Everyone was concerned for me. Maybe there were some personal problems? Would I like to try the office-subsidised mindfulness sessions? She would slide a piece of paper across the table and say: ‘I’d like you to have a look at your call numbers from last week.’ And I’d slide it back and say: ‘I’d like to know how many of your lays come from the office pool.’ After that she always had someone else sit in with us. She always trusted that I wouldn’t cross the line, wouldn’t blow her cover, and then I did. The anonymous email, followed up by my own complaint. Enough to spark an internal HR investigation. *A member of your management team has been abusing her position ...*

The old guy finishes his cable rows, gets up and walks over to the window. A street over is the rooftop Mick and I fucked on a couple of nights ago. The guy stretches large, scratches his gut and sighs loud enough to make me turn my head, if I was inclined to do so.

I start my chest presses, think about whether I’m upset that Mick hasn’t

called. Whether that feeling I get when I think about him is guilt or want. Ambiguity and horniness, the most intoxicating blend of all. The old guy sighs again. He's going to come over here, I just know it, because that's what an old man at the gym at 11 am will do. He's probably here three hours a day, avoiding his wife. Of course, he'll come over now, while I'm on my back and vulnerable, struggling with weights that never used to be a problem.

‘Nell?’

I try to sit up with the dumbbells and the old guy grabs them and puts them on the floor. Not just any old man. Ken Ripkin, cop-turned-butcher who worked with my dad for a long time. I've sat on this man's shoulders. I feel bad that I didn't recognise him, but he's lost some hair and packed on some muscle in the intervening years.

‘I thought it was you,’ he says. ‘Back from the dead, eh?’ He looks away. Last time I saw him was April's funeral.

‘I'm here to help Leigh out,’ I tell him. ‘She had a stroke. Nothing major but enough to keep her from getting down to the TAB for a few months.’

‘I heard about that. Keep meaning to go and see the old girl. It's terrible, the things you don't get round to.’

We shoot the shit for a bit. He's about to give up the butcher's, can't compete with the chains. If people want to eat that floor slop shit, he can't stop them. He's here every day for his back and his sanity, otherwise the wife would have him up a ladder most of the time. His eldest grandson, Tommy, is gay, had a rainbow cake for his seventeenth. ‘The wife wanted to wait and see if he was sure about it, but live and let live, I always say.’

Ken Ripkin, greatest friend to the gays. Who'd have thought.

‘Got yourself a bit of ink,’ he says, gesturing to my arms. ‘Your old man would be spewing.’

‘He usually was, about something.’ His grave should be overflowing by now.

Ken launches right in then, the whole reason he came over, really, the whole thing I've been trying to avoid. 'It was a bad business,' he says. 'What happened to April. Worse, almost, what happened after. I know your father would have gone to his grave with that weighing on him.'

'I don't know that he ever thought about it, beyond what it cost him.' I pick up my weights again, set them on my knees.

'Nell,' he says, 'I know.' Then he does something really weird. He rests his hand on my forehead for a second, like he's a mother taking her baby's temperature. Then he wanders off towards reception, leaving me floored. Leaving me wondering, again, if you can ever catch a break in this fucking place, or if there's a jumpscare from the past around every other corner.

I wait long enough for him to be gone, half-heartedly do some stretches. I'm creaking like an old warhorse, muscles I haven't thought about in months already kicking up a fuss. Maybe the slow approach would have been best. Always with the famous last words.

I'm about to give it up when the yoga class gets out, streams of women start making their way through the weights room. It's the mummy class, full of women who drop their kids at school then spend a few hours at the gym. I'm not invisible to these types, who view me with half interest, half alarm. And then she walks past. The girl from the bar. She's definitely not a mummy, but she's hot. Dirty hot, scary hot. No bra, eyes still gunked with last night's liner. She looks like a cosplay of Paris Hilton circa *The Simple Life*. Like the girl in high school who was a super-sweet super-bitch: *You're really pretty for a dyke*. Girls like that can see what you are a mile off. She's walking with two other women, who are nodding intently. She hands one of them a business card.

'Hey!' I say. 'It's you.'

She looks at me blankly.

'Sorry,' I say. 'We met at the bar last week. In the bathroom.'

‘Oh, right,’ she says. ‘Strong-flow girl.’ She doesn’t seem that jazzed to see me. She turns to the other women and says: ‘Just ring anytime. She likes to schedule stuff before four, mostly. And there’s a discount for your first session.’

The women go and we’re left standing there and I’m in the cold sweat pit of knowing I’ve got nothing to say to her. ‘Selling Avon?’ I try.

She narrows her eyes. ‘Something like that. You’re very sweaty.’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘I went pretty hard on the weights. I’m Nell. I don’t think we really did introductions the other night.’

‘Weird name. Katya.’

She’s definitely giving off cool vibes but she’s also still standing here. I can’t tell if this is the kind of straight girl who will call the cops if she thinks a dyke is trying to hit on her, or if she’s just icy.

‘Does your boyfriend like you to be all muscly?’ she says.

‘My boyfriend?’

‘The guy you were with at the bar.’

‘Oh no, he’s not my boyfriend. I don’t really ... he’s like my brother. I was best friends with his sister.’

‘Right,’ she says, nodding. ‘Cool.’ Does she thaw a little or is it just my horny imagination?

‘Want to get a coffee or something?’

‘No,’ she says. ‘My bellybutton ring came out last night and I can’t get it in. I need to find a piercing shop.’

‘There’s one on the main street.’

‘But you should meet me on Wednesday night, maybe,’ she says, like I haven’t spoken. ‘Yeah. That could be fun. Give me your number.’

I leave the gym, praising Leigh. She’s so right. Getting out is great. I’m full of goodwill towards her, maybe for the first time in my life. I will make her the meatloaf. She can stuff herself to the gunnels with it.

8

CAL WAKES ME IN PURE panic.

‘Jesus, Jesus, fuck, fuck. Mum fell, she hit her head. There’s blood everywhere.’

‘Hang on.’

‘Nell, there’s fucking blood all over the place.’

‘Fuck off, Cal! I’m naked.’

I hear him run back down the hall to Leigh. Maybe this is it, I think as I pull on a t-shirt and shorts. Maybe it’s the big dramatic moment and this time I’ve got the misfortune to be here for it. When my father died it was Jacqui who rang to tell me, voice all soft and serious, trying to weigh the heft of the moment with the fact I hated my father. That’s three times that Jacqui’s had to be the one to break the bad news.

But when I get there Leigh’s very much alive, moaning and bleeding all over the place and stinking to high heaven.

‘Jesus,’ I say. Pinching my nose feels cruel, but my god.

‘I think she needed to go to the toilet,’ says Cal.

He calls an ambulance and I do my best to clean her up. There’s a lot of blood but the wound is shallow. She seems confused, angry about the blazing light above her face. The ambos put her on the trolley and just before they load her on the truck she grabs my shirt and drags me close.

‘Look after Cal,’ she says. I barely hold off my eye roll.

‘What did she say?’ Cal asks as we watch the ambulance drive off. Lights, no siren.

‘She said: “I’ve always loved you best, Nell.”’

‘No, she didn’t,’ but his face wavers a little bit and I remember again that he takes this whole ‘mother’s best friend’ thing very seriously.

‘No, she didn’t. She said: “Your disgusting meatloaf almost killed me.” You better get down there,’ I say. ‘I’ll clean up.’

I clean up but I can’t sleep. Trixie’s in a state with all the drama, following me from room to room, so I take her for a walk. Orange creeps up around the hills that rim the town, a peachy haze lighting up each suburb. She refuses to step on the dewy grass at the park so I drag her home again. Cal calls after breakfast and tells me that they’re sending Leigh to St Marian’s for respite.

‘They want to run tests,’ he says. ‘To figure out why she fell. She’ll be in the hospital for a day or two then they’ll send her to St Marian’s.’

‘How does she feel about that?’

‘She doesn’t want to go,’ he says. ‘She says they’ll ignore her call bell and lose her laundry because she used to be the boss.’

‘She doesn’t really have a choice,’ I say. God, Leigh. Ever suspicious of the worker.

‘She told the nurses she was dizzy a lot. They reckon that’s not normal.’

‘Why didn’t she tell us she’s dizzy?’

‘Dunno,’ he says. ‘You know what she’s like. Stoic and all that.’

I go back to bed after we hang up. I know why she didn’t mention being dizzy. Because I’m a grumpy bitch acting like everything is this huge inconvenience, and she didn’t want to add trouble to trouble.

I had one job and I absolutely fucked it. There goes my pay cheque.

St Marian's looks pretty much the same as it did when I worked here. Nice garden, birdsong from dawn until dusk. It's one of the better places in town, where oldies can live out their days once the family home upkeep gets too much, and there's a few beds for respite and short stays. They put in a new reception desk but the receptionist is the same. She recognises me. 'Be careful,' she says, 'or we might put you to work.'

'Probably easier than working for my mother,' I say. The two days that Leigh's been in hospital have been guilty pleasures. I've slept in. Both nights Cal and I ordered takeaway, drank beer and played Mario Kart. It's been comforting to find that Cal's just as much of a slob as me when left to his own devices.

'I forgot you worked here,' Cal says as we walk through the corridors to Leigh's room.

'Only the first in a long line of illustrious employment opportunities,' I tell him.

He was thirteen the year I worked full-time at St Marian's, the last year I was at home. He was peripheral to everything, a walk-on part. We'd had some overlapping years, when April and I were eleven, twelve, and he was old enough to sometimes get a kick out of. But it was easy to forget he existed that year after we finished school. We were finally free. A time was approaching when family would just be people to visit. I remember his choking sobs at April's funeral from the row behind me. Our father's hand on the back of his neck. Not 'It's okay, son,' but 'Stop blubbing, son.' But he couldn't. Gasping for air like someone had punched him in the solar plexus.

Cal's grief was more visible than mine, more pure than Mick's. It's a cleaner wound, when you can just be sad, without the guilt or rage.

Leigh's in one of the good rooms. This place is built above a valley, thick with pine. In the distance you can see soft green hills dotted with sheep.

Sunset views. Blaze of pink and orange. Jacqui and I used to take breaks on shift and watch.

‘Close the curtains,’ Leigh says. ‘Sun’s in my eyes.’

‘We’ve had a party,’ Jacqui says. ‘Everyone’s been in to visit, haven’t they, love? They all remember Leigh. You’ll get the special treatment.’

‘Or they’ll drop me in the shower,’ says Leigh.

‘You weren’t that bad,’ I tell her. And it’s true. She was always the hard woman, never the boss you’d go to with your troubles, but she wasn’t trying to starve anyone or cut shifts or skim off the top. She did have management’s view that her employees were trying to rip her off, though. She was always getting me to keep an eye on the legacy staff, anyone she suspected of slacking.

‘How are you feeling?’ I ask.

‘Good as gold,’ she says. ‘I really think I’ll be fine at home.’

‘It’s just for a week, Mum,’ says Cal. ‘While they sort out your blood pressure.’

That was the cause of the dizzy spells, apparently. Luckily the director at St Marian’s got her in here for respite, so someone else can nag her to do her exercises and make sure she takes her new meds.

‘It’s who you know, isn’t it?’ says Jacqui. ‘You’re better off here than one of those hell-houses across the river.’

I put her things away. Clothes, books, inhaler. They’ve got her in some communal nightie and I guess she can stay in that for now. She looks like shit. Big puffy bandage stuck to her forehead. Iodine blooms around her hairline.

Cal sits by the bed. His hands kind of flutter around Leigh, like he wants to hold her hand. She doesn’t offer him a paw. We’re not a touching family. It strikes me that he really loves Leigh. Not in the ‘I love you because you’re my mother and that’s normal’ way, but he really loves her. Jacqui and Leigh and Cal, they all know each other in a real, day-to-day way. I’m

the supporting cast now, a returning guest. I watch them chat for a bit, Jacqui reminiscing about the days of old. Running bedpans to the sluice sink. A fire alarm going off when she had someone up, bare arsed, in the hoist. The creepiness of the place between midnight and dawn.

I've run out of things to do in this room.

'We should let you rest,' I say.

'I'll stay,' says Cal.

'No,' says Leigh. 'You go. See you tomorrow.'

'They'll bring you dinner in your room,' Jacqui says. 'That'll be nice, won't it?' She fluffs with the bedcovers. She's gone full la-la Jacqui mode. Leigh will kill her if she has to put up with too much of this.

'We'll tell them to make sure you get an egg sandwich,' I say.

'Ah,' says Leigh. 'Nice.' She's starting to lose her words, mouth drooping a bit.

'Beautiful afternoon,' Jacqui sings to an old man on our way out.

'Just lovely,' he returns.

Always an eye on the main chance.

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9

‘AS BIG AS THE ROOM,’ says Mick. ‘That’s what she said.’

I’m barely listening, thinking about my date with Katya tonight, whether it’s actually a date or if it’s just ‘making friends’. She’s being very mysterious in her text messages. ‘There’s someone I want you to meet,’ she said. Like who, her mother?

Mick and I fuck in the house now that Leigh’s at St Marian’s. Cal works all day, so the coast is clear. And I appreciate the break in my day, but I’ve been hearing about this since it happened. The kook who’s been running a trail through town went into Mick’s work, tried on some ugly rings and told him he had a baby-blue aura that touched the ceiling. ‘You’ve got a new life ahead of you,’ she told him. ‘You’re in a time of great change.’

I run my fingers through the silvery cum he’s left on my belly.

‘I have to make big changes.’ He pulls on his socks. ‘I’ve been treading water. It’s time to make choices, not just let life happen to me. Don’t you feel the same?’

I trace an hourglass onto his back, my fingers drying out before I finish. ‘You’ve got cum on your back.’

‘Nell, that’s fucking disgusting.’

‘You didn’t seem to think so a minute ago.’ I scrape my fingers through it again, reach around, try to shove my fingers in his mouth.

He grabs my arm, twists it over my head and stands up over me. ‘Are you

trying to make me late?’ He’s on an extended lunch break for the third day in a row. He’s told his colleagues that he’s got physio for his back.

I kick out at him, trying to leave a bruise on that nice flat thigh muscle, but he’s too quick. Switches his leg back and I’m left with my weight pulling on the arm he’s holding.

‘Ow, fuck, ow.’

‘Say you’re sorry, Nell.’ He lets go of my arm, pushes me back onto the bed, nudges my legs apart with his knee.

I move my hips with him as he slips his fingers inside me, back and forth. ‘Or what?’

‘Say sorry.’

I laugh through gasps. ‘I don’t think so.’

He takes his hand back and whispers in my ear, ‘Then I’m going to leave you here, and I’m going to think about you all afternoon, wanting me.’

I watch him put his shirt on, cover the bites on his back from yesterday.

‘See you tomorrow?’

‘Not tomorrow,’ I say. ‘I have to go see Leigh tomorrow, take her some more stuff.’

‘Okay. Well, let me know if you ... need anything.’

When he’s gone I finish myself off to a Pornhub compilation. Need anything, indeed.

I check myself in the mirror before I go to meet Katya. I don’t do anything to my hair and I wear the same thing I usually do, but I take my rings off my right hand and put them on my left.

It’ll have to do, whatever look I’ve got going on. The blonde in my hair is finally growing out. My brief peroxide era was Lucrece’s idea, because she was hot for some soccer player. She made an appointment at her swanky salon and paid more than I made in a week to indulge her fantasy when what I really needed was a root canal. It got to the point where I was scared

she'd have me in the park running drills with a soccer ball.

Be wary of this feeling, I tell myself, but already my heart is flinging itself off a cliff. It's always like this. I never looked at Lucrece until she made a pass at me at Christmas drinks, but after that I was gone. I felt like I would forget my own name when I was fucking her. Words weren't enough, we wanted to wear each other's skin et cetera, et cetera. The usual honeymoon shit. By the time she'd promoted me to supervisor with a slightly less dismal pay grade, I could see hints of storm on the horizon but, hey, that's love. 'Love's no fairytale,' Jacqui used to tell me and April. 'It's hard work and it's compromise.' She was always giving us cryptic relationship advice from the long list of lovers she'd had in some shadowy past. We've never known her to have a serious squeeze. 'No-one you'd want to bring to dinner' is how Leigh puts it.

My first date with Lucrece lasted five days, stretching from the Christmas party into sick days for the both of us. A frenzied fuckfest and drinking wine in bed, broken just long enough for me to tell my housemates I was moving out and pack up my room. She took me to some nice restaurant that night and was a little miffed that I already knew how to eat an oyster and crack a lobster leg. She liked the idea that she could introduce me to things that were out of my reach. Nice things are nice, I told her, you didn't have to make \$140,000 a year to get that. There were plenty of other ways she could refine me.

It's embarrassing but I still want that big love, the one you give it all up for. I'll make fifty fresh starts just to get that feeling again, each beginning different from the last, each ending bitterly similar.

It's a weird place Katya wants to meet. She was insistent on this particular location, though there's better places to have a date, even in this town. It's the kind of joint where they drop their members home in a courtesy drunk bus. There's a dress code, so leave your jandals and your singlet at home

but feel free to pour your dole into the pokies. The last time I came here was for Mick's going-away dinner, before he went to Thailand, and I'm happy to leave that night in the dim reaches of the past.

In the city you can avoid things. Get absolutely rendered and throw up outside the negroni bar on Fitzgerald? There's about 300 other bars with a negroni on their cocktail list. Catch your girlfriend sharing a plate of oysters with the new girl at Dispensary? Never go there again, avoid oysters, and ignore the new girl in the bathroom at work. Storm out of the theatre during the first bars of a concert after seeing the same girlfriend, now ex, two rows ahead? You can live without the arts, if you have to. But in this town there's a memory waiting on every street, ready to rub your nose in the past.

Katya's at a table in the bar. I've gone back in time. This girl has walked through a wormhole from 2004 and she's got the tiny pleated miniskirt and hoop earrings to prove it. Her hair is poker straight, hair April and I would have killed for when we were fourteen. She's the hot bitchy bully of my teen memories, the one I'd like to bully back a little.

She wants a Midori and lemonade. She's a little hungry, so can she have a bag of chips? Not salt and vinegar.

'And a bottle of pinot gris for my friend,' she calls after me. 'She'll be here soon.'

Cheeky, and she knows it. This is starting to have the whiff of a set-up. I hope to hell she's not actually trying to set me up, palm me off to some friend. I borrowed fifty dollars from Cal for this. It's shades of the time a guy drove over an hour to see me and tried to sell me Amway. Not interested in fucking, and not interested in sticking around when it became clear I didn't have any cash to purchase a box of Amway-brand special sauce. I don't think Katya's trying to sign me up to a pyramid scheme, but I'm smelling bullshit from somewhere. I get the drinks and a glass for myself because whoever this friend is, she's not hogging an entire bottle of wine.

On the way back to the table I hear the waterfall clatter of someone hitting the jackpot.

She's got her back to me, but it feels like I know before I see her face. Not who she is, because I haven't thought about her in over a decade. But later it will feel like, in the second before Katya says her name, the second before she turns her head to me, my life got split down the middle again. Before and after.

'Nell, this is my boss, Petronella Bush. Pet, this is Nell.'

I haven't seen her since the early 2000s, when April and I used to watch *Psychic Rest*. Her hair's different now: she replaced the long red curls with a fuzzy blonde buzz cut. But she's still infinitely recognisable as the woman who used to talk with the dead. The woman we dreamt could find Heather. She reaches to shake my hand and for a second I think she's going to unzip my skin and read my entrails. Call her a hack, call her a charlatan, but she's fucking electric.

'Nell,' she says, in that deep rumble. 'I've heard such thrilling things about you.'

10

‘DIG IN, GIRLS,’ SAYS JACQUI. She puts a roasting tray full of chicken nuggets and oven fries on the coffee table. April and I add salt and tomato sauce and eat straight from the pan. Jacqui hates dishes. She pours a fresh glass of wine for herself and Cokes for us.

Every Thursday night we stay at Jacqui’s because April’s mum, Glenys, works the late shift at the hospital and my mum can’t see the harm in having me ‘sulk at the dinner table’ one less night. Plus, my dad can’t stand *Psychic Rest*, can’t stand Petronella Bush, ‘that scamming bull dyke’. He swears black and blue any information Petronella Bush gets, she gets straight from the police. ‘It’s a cop show, idiot,’ he says. ‘She’s just bait. Thirteen’s too old for you to be sucked in by this shit.’ So I never get to watch it at home. But April and I know Petronella’s the real deal.

Every week Petronella tells people stuff they didn’t know about their missing family members. Even better, she tells them stuff they did know. Like their loved one’s favourite colour. That Katie loved animals, wanted to be a vet. She loved a party, loved a drink, but she was a good girl. A tomboy, always in jeans. But she fell in with a bad crowd, trusted too easily. And the family says: ‘There’s no way she could have known that. It’s incredible.’ That’s what my dad doesn’t get: one thing proves the other. It’s like having a control, in science. The shell you soak in Coke and don’t brush with Colgate is the proof that the toothpaste works.

‘God,’ says Jacqui. ‘I’d kill myself if I had a behind like hers. She just doesn’t seem to care.’

‘She’s got more important things to think about than her butt,’ says April. ‘Like saving lives.’

‘I’ve saved lives,’ says Jacqui. ‘I’m a nurse.’

‘Shhhhh,’ hisses April. ‘You never even properly graduated, Jacqui. You’re an aide.’ She flicks me a look. This isn’t just an average episode. We’ve made it our secret mission to find my aunt Heather, who went missing before I was born. No-one else seems to care. What’s the point of my dad being a cop if he can’t even have his own wife’s sister’s disappearance reopened? It’s so obvious they screwed it up the first time round.

A month ago, we wrote to Petronella, to the address they put in the credits at the end of the show, and told her about Heather. Told her that she’d left town in 1987 and never been seen again. It’s the perfect case for *Psychic Rest*. Most of the cases on the show are young women who went off alone and were never seen again.

‘Silly girl,’ Jacqui says when we’re watching. ‘Don’t let me catch you girls acting like that.’

‘A,’ says Petronella. ‘Her name starts with A ... or maybe a nickname she had. Amber? Anna? No. I’m getting Angela, Angie, quite strongly. An angel.’

‘Amazing,’ says Jacqui. ‘She never misses.’

I can’t see how Petronella would say no to our letter. April and I drafted it using a lot of ‘emotive phrases’ about how Heather’s disappearance has ‘haunted the family’, that we’re ‘unable to rest without answers’. At the end of the show, she’s going to turn to the camera and say, ‘Coming up: the psychic trail takes us to a small town in the north, to explore a thirteen-year-old mystery that’s left a family in limbo.’ Mum will be mad at first. But then she’ll think about it, and she’ll be overwhelmed: I haven’t forgotten,

I'm the only one still trying to find out what happened to Heather.

We watch Petronella trudge through bushland in a huge purple jacket. She holds her hands to her temples. Her long earrings swing back and forth. 'I'm getting something,' she says, her face creased with pain. 'Something terrible happened here. She's saying to me: "He hurt me. I'm afraid ... I can't get away."' Yeah. I think this is where it happened. I don't know if she was buried here, but she was killed here. She's too afraid to tell me what happened next.'

'Christ, that's not very comforting for the family, is it?' says Jacqui. 'I'd probably prefer her to lie a bit, if it was my daughter.'

The ads come on and Jacqui clears away our tray and greasy glasses, brings out three bowls of banana chocolate-chip ice cream.

'Jacqui,' says April, giving the chocolate sauce bottle a smack. 'What do you think happened to Nell's Auntie Heather?'

'Oh, loves, you know Leigh hates for anyone to talk about it.'

'I know,' says April. 'But we think about it heaps. It's really sad.'

Jacqui settles back in her chair. 'Well, I knew Heather as well. It was very upsetting for me too. I'd known her for as long as I'd known Leigh. She was a very pretty girl.'

This is the one thing I know for sure about Heather. That she was beautiful. I've seen photos of her in a bikini. She had that eighties skinniness, long brown hair. I guess when you disappear at twenty, that's what people know about you: how you looked.

'Look, loves, I think she met a man. I think she met a man and he was the wrong one and we'll never know what happened. It's very sad, but sometimes life is like that. She was always a bit of a wild one.'

'But they haven't done everything they can, have they?' says April. 'What if Petronella looked into it?'

I try to catch April's eye, but she won't look at me. She's such a blabbermouth.

‘I don’t think Leigh would like that. She’s not open to this kind of thing, like us. And it’s her decision. You know how private she is.’ She picks up her bowl of ice cream. ‘I should cut my tongue out, the way I can’t stop eating. It’s back on.’

For the rest of the show, as Petronella describes what the girl was wearing when she died (‘I can see a scrap of something blue, heavy. Denim.’) and relays a message to her family (‘She misses pancakes for breakfast, sunny days at the farm. Parties. But her dog’s with her now and she’s happy. She says she’s got some peace, now she knows she hasn’t been forgotten.’)

I feel a growing sense of dread. The ice cream sits weirdly on top of the chips and nuggets. We’ve done the wrong thing. A month ago, it felt so right but now I can only think of how angry my parents will be, how Mum will say: ‘This is MY BUSINESS.’ And how Dad will probably ban me from seeing April for life, again. Everything I do wrong, he blames April for, like I don’t have any ideas of my own. Actually, this was April’s idea, originally.

But when the quiet music starts, and Petronella stands by the sea and announces she’ll be back next season, travelling from the country’s largest city to its smallest, from northern beaches to southern plains, I still feel disappointed. We wait for the credits to finish with the Crime Stoppers number to call if you have any information related to this case. We say, like we always do, that if the police just followed up on some of Petronella’s leads, they might actually solve some cases.

‘I suppose it’s a big area,’ says Jacqui.

‘If it was my family, I’d dig it up myself,’ says April.

‘Right, loves. I’m going to watch *Ally McBeal* and you’re going to get ready for bed. Have you done your homework?’

I have science homework and April has French, but we don’t open our books. We lie on Jacqui’s big spare bed. I put my feet on the wall and raise

my pelvis into the air. Miri says I need stronger abs. She showed me all these exercises she does.

‘I just don’t get it,’ says April. ‘I thought for sure she would mention us.’

‘She probably gets so many letters,’ I say. ‘Maybe she doesn’t even read half of them. Maybe it got thrown out by some assistant.’

‘True,’ she says. ‘Maybe we should have emailed. Mick has an email we could use.’

‘Maybe Jacqui’s right. We should forget about it for a bit.’

‘You always flake out when things are hard,’ she says. ‘We have to keep going, we’re the only ones who give a shit. “You have to be a bit tougher than that, my girl,”’ she says in an imitation of Jacqui.

It starts to rain, adding to the cosy feeling in Jacqui’s tiny house. We get *The Book of Answers* out, and we do that before we fall asleep. Asking questions and flipping through the pages with our eyes closed until we get the feeling of the right answer.

‘Will Peter Korin ask me out?’

You should start feathering your nest.

‘Will I lose my virginity to Carl Snare?’

Not in this lifetime.

‘Will I lose my virginity to Carl Snare?’

You must work hard for it.

‘Will we find out what happened to Nell’s Auntie Heather?’

It is possible.

11

WE DRINK OUR FILTHY BOTTLE of pinot gris. We order another. Cal's cash is long gone and Petronella stands a round of ill-advised vodka lemonades. She eats a ham steak, Katya deconstructs a burger and I get schnitzel. I can't believe that the psychic hack doing the rounds of town is Petronella Bush, focus of mine and April's teenage obsession. Katya doesn't talk much, goes out to smoke a couple of times, but it's the vein of heat running between the two of us that keeps me in my chair, spilling my guts to her boss.

'So we used to watch your show, my friend and I,' I tell Petronella, 'and think: "She'd be able to find out what happened to Heather."'

I don't know why I tell her about Heather. Even though I know all this stuff is bullshit, something I can finally agree with my father on, it's like part of me hopes she'll go: 'Ah, Heather Boyd, yes, I got a message from her once.' It just comes out. I tell her about how we tried to find Heather, about the séances, the fake possessions, growing into our teenage investigations. About coming home to take care of Leigh, about her being stuck in St Marian's until further notice. It's that weird thing, wanting to prove some coincidence, some link, with someone famous. Filling the silence. Later, I'll know that Petronella stays quiet so that other people will fill the air with secrets, unaware that they're doing it. She maintains this disinterest so people forget they've told her everything she needs to know.

Like now, she says: 'Girls, I think I'll go have a wee flutter. Come and join me in five, Katya.'

'Fucking wow,' I say as she walks away. Petronella Bush is a hefty woman but she glides across the carpet like a barge through smooth waters. 'How the fuck did you get mixed up with her?'

'Long story. I did her make-up and things went from there. I'm going to have to go in there with her in a minute. I have to go to the bathroom first, though.'

'You have to go into the pokies room with her? What, is she teaching you how to predict the jackpot?'

'Are you coming to the bathroom with me or not?'

'Which one?' Three toilets stand before us, porcelain scrubbed to patchy grey, bowls stained with streaks of blue. There's a fierce smell of disinfectant that's blending weirdly with my desire and I wonder if the scent of Pine O Cleen will turn me on after this.

'The cleanest one,' she says.

'You've got a habit of leading me to bathrooms.'

'You've got a habit of following me.'

I pull her into the least scuzzy of the bathrooms and lock the door behind us. She breathes into my mouth. She tastes like watermelon vape. My mouth comes away with the bitter taste of perfume after I kiss her neck. I wind her hair around my hand and hold it in a tight fist at the base of her skull and she moans again. 'Be quiet,' I tell her, and she moans louder. I stop kissing her and put my fingers into her mouth, not too deep. There's no toilet lid so she puts her foot on the seat and hooks one heel precariously in the lip of the bowl. She's grinding against my thigh and making an annoyed little grunting sound. In a bathroom stall, you've got limited options for what comes next.

'I'm going to fuck you now.'

‘Yes,’ she says, when I take my fingers out of her mouth. My fingers are inside her, and her cunt and my hand feel like one thing working on their own. I don’t know how long we’ve been there when we hear the bathroom door swing open and shut. ‘Don’t stop,’ she says into my ear. Her heel spike is skittering around inside the toilet bowl. She cums in a rush, her arse smashing against the divider before the woman in the next stall has finished taking a scandalised piss.

After, I go to wash my hands at the row of sinks and she says: ‘Don’t you dare.’

I open the door to the restaurant for her and she goes ahead of me, her hair swished to one side. I remember the voiceover line that used to close out every *Psychic Rest* episode, as the picture faded into credits: *I carry their stories so that they might find rest.*

‘Just sit right here and wait,’ she says. ‘I have to do some stuff with Pet but I’ll be back.’

‘I feel like I’m about to see a show,’ I say. My fingers on my right hand are still warm from her, still have that slightly puckered feeling like when you’ve been in the bath too long.

‘Baby, you are about to see a show. Just wait.’

I figure they’ve got some weird racket going. Like moving to a machine when it’s about to pay out or something. Maybe Petronella uses her psychic powers to predict which one’s about to blow. I don’t care. I’ll sit here and wait like some husband dumped outside the changing rooms if it means I get to hang out more with Katya. Briefly, I think about Cal, probably sitting at home by himself, eating leftover Thai and missing Mum. But then I think of myself, stuck here, with a future as murky as a pint of Guinness. I need this more than he needs a buddy to watch TV with.

I'm not drunk but it's like I'm stuck in a dream where someone you haven't thought about in years shows up. Chris Denton appears like that, materialising at the bar. I can feel his glance, but I keep looking into the gaming room where Katya disappeared behind one of the machines. Eventually he walks by, doing a rehearsed double-take so I have no choice but to mime the same surprise.

'Jesus, Nell Jenkins.'

Chris Denton, slick boy. If Tom Cruise took a shit, Chris Denton would be what hit the bowl. He was a boy god, one of those guys a girl like April knew she couldn't get but she dreamt anyway. Stupid handsome and smart. Now, fifteen years later, he's perky and sincere, with an intensity that borders on creepy. 'Well, I never,' he says. 'You living back here?'

'No,' I say. 'Just visiting.'

He's still got those golden-boy looks, just starting to fray at the edges. A greying front tooth, some of that wide-eyed teen-boy enthusiasm crumpled into the sly squint of an unhappy man, but definitely still fuckable and I don't want to think about the catalogue of changes he can see in me.

He works in his father's accountancy, he tells me. Not an accountant per se, but that's just a piece of paper. Two kids, still with the same girl, if you can believe it. Time flies. He's here for his father's birthday. 'I wanted to take him somewhere decent,' he says, 'but the old man likes a punt.' I remember his girlfriend, Anna, a perfect golden teen just like him.

He doesn't ask what I'm doing here, nursing a shitty drink on a Tuesday night.

'This town,' he says. 'It gets you in the end.'

'I'm just here for a couple of months,' I say. 'To look after my mum.'

'Great place to raise kids,' he says. 'I couldn't be anywhere else. I did the London thing, but I couldn't live there.'

I've had a variation of this conversation a hundred times since I've been back, like I've walked in and demanded everyone's reasons for being here. The only reasons I care about are my own, but they all still have to tell me.

He puts his hand on my arm and gives me a look so immediately tender I feel my nipples retract. 'What happened to April,' he says, 'was so sad. So wrong. She was a beautiful girl, so spirited.'

'She was.'

'Christ, we had some wild times, didn't we? Little bastards.'

He takes his beer and clinks it against my glass, never looking away from my eyes. He thinks we've shared a special moment, but I feel like I've been worked on by a slipshod hypnotist. It's a night for quacks.

I watch him walk away, duty done. He still walks tall and with a hint of jauntiness, like he's striding out onto the cricket pitch, swinging his bat, instead of across the RSA's crimson carpet. Great arse, still.

I don't know about this show Katya promised because from where I'm sitting all I can see is Katya and Petronella Bush playing the pokies, yukking it up with a couple of desperadoes. Unless they've found a way to bamboozle the gaming corporations, there's no miracle here. When I see Chris Denton back at the bar, I follow him up there.

'You fucking clown,' I say, giving him a hard poke in the back.

'Excuse me?' He turns around and before he pulls his nice-guy skin on, I see a flash of mean shit, the face his wife probably sees.

'Dirty hypocrite,' I say. 'Giving me a whole story about how sad it all was. April told me about you.'

'What are you talking about?' He looks so confused and injured I would almost believe him, if I didn't know.

'That night down at the beach. Getting all pushy with her, making her feel like shit. She was sad about it because she actually liked you.'

'I was never at the beach with you guys,' he says. 'Come on, Nell, you've had a few. Let me get you a taxi or something.'

'Fuck off, you prick.'

'I never touched her. God, you're still a mental bitch, aren't you?'

He walks away and I know he probably believes it. He's pushed it so far out of sight he can honestly believe he never did anything like that. Spare me the good guy pantomime.

'I hate these fucking family men,' I say to the woman behind the bar. She won't serve me any more drinks after that. She just shakes her head and presses her lips into a thin line. They'll carry you out of here on rum legs, but they won't let you make a scene.

An old grizzly guy holding up the other end of the bar says, 'I'll buy you a drink, love,' but she's not having it.

'I'll cut you off next, Gary, if you're not careful,' she says

Fuck this. I leave without saying goodbye to Katya, without even checking if she and Petronella are still in the pokies room.

Outside is cool and quiet. I've always been right about this place. April and I were right when we were teenagers and we saw it as only good for leaving, and I'm right now. Fuck this place, I think with every stomp I take up the hill. Fuck Chris Denton. Fuck Katya, fuck Petronella Bush.

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12

IT'S THE PERFECT TIME TO arrive at a party, just when it needs fresh blood, and everyone's drunk enough to be excited about newcomers. We're late because Chelsea, our ride, took the wrong turn going out of town and we drove for twenty minutes in the wrong direction, getting further and further from the sea and the party.

Chris comes up to give us all bear hugs. His smooth cheek rubs against mine, that spicy smell that rich boys have, because their fathers have a nicer cologne than Old Spice. It's his post-break-up party. April's convinced this is her chance, because he invited her specifically. He could have any girl he wants so I doubt it, but she goes off with him to look for some beers and I don't follow. His parents live on the ridge above the paddock where the party is, I can see the glass frontage glowing with warm light. They've got a view straight out over the dark sea.

Miri's over the other side of the bonfire, sitting with a few of the league girls. Her cheeks are flushed and she's seen me, but she's acting like she hasn't so I sit on top of someone's hood with Pete the German exchange student and Adam and Petra, and Adam passes a joint. I fumble and drop it. Everyone yells, but Pete finds the burning end in the grass and we keep smoking. I'm feeling that secret feeling of doing something you've never done, but no-one else knows and you have to pretend that it's not a big deal. I lean up against Adam's chest. He smells like smoke and salami. When I

look at Miri again she's just staring at me, like, you fucking idiot. I haven't seen her properly since she quit badminton a month ago. Only in passing, in that square of time when I have English and she's leaving D Block to go to history, or when I have Spanish and she has PE, and I can pick her out of the scrum on the field. I quit badminton the week after her. It's too much, with all the shifts Mum puts me on, anyway. It's a miracle I've got tonight off. She swears she's not intentionally trying to ruin all my weekends by rostering me on constantly, it just works out that way.

April's trying to convince people to walk down the cliff path to the beach and go for a swim. She always does this, acts wild when she's drunk. Like, let's climb this, let's steal that, and she knows someone will be sober enough to stop it.

'Come on,' she says to Chris. 'Don't be chicken.'

'Come on, then,' he says.

Adam and I follow. I don't really know him. He used to be a really grotty, naughty kid and then he went away for a couple of years and came back dumb and hot. He mostly dates older girls who can drive. There was this rumour that when he was away he lost his virginity to a twenty-nine-year-old.

We go down the beach track, sending streams of gravel down before us. It's so cold away from the fire and the sheltered field. It cuts right through my drunk-stoned protective heat, through my fake-leather jacket and April's filmy singlet that I borrowed.

'This is fucking dumb,' Adam says, but he doesn't turn back. The waves catch the silver of the moon as they rear up before breaking. Chris rips his shirt off and goes, 'Your turn,' to me and April, and I know he's bluffing. He'll never get in. Mick would get in, but Chris won't. He doesn't wait, starts walking towards the sea and April jumps on his back and shrieks, 'No, no, no, you'll die,' and it's like watching her get hysterical with Mick and Ryan on the bridge that time, except Chris grabs her and swings her

round to face him and they tumble around, not kissing but you can tell they will.

‘Uh, I think we’re not wanted,’ Adam says, so we head back. I can’t believe she’s actually got him. It makes me feel weird, like all along I thought April and I were the same kind of girl, but we’re not.

Halfway back up the path Adam kisses me, almost knocking me off the cliff. He tastes like garlic, and it’s crazy that my first kiss is with this guy I hardly know. Then he says he has to go and pick up his girlfriend from work and peels off before we even get back to the fire, so I go back alone.

I sit by Miri, sick of pretending like we’ve never spoken. We’re allowed to know each other.

‘Having fun?’ she asks me.

‘Yeah, it’s great.’

‘Baby’s first party.’

‘Fuck off,’ I say. ‘I’ve been to parties.’

She looks so good, so sure of herself. I’ve never seen Miri uncertain, even though she told me once she never really feels like she belongs. ‘You try being the only brown girl in advanced biology,’ she said. Her mates give her shit for being a nerd, and pakehas (‘Like you, Nell’) act scared of her.

‘Anna’s having a fit about April going off with Chris,’ she says. ‘She’s going to kill her.’

I shrug. ‘She can try.’

‘He’s just trying to make Anna jealous.’ I’m keeping my eyes on the pathway, waiting for them to come back.

‘He might actually like April,’ I say.

‘He likes that she’s a total slut.’

She’s always hated April, always thought she was a bad influence or something. Miri’s just very serious about things April doesn’t care about.

‘God, you’re such a bitch sometimes,’ I say. ‘She’s not that bad. She’s liked him for ages.’

‘Yeah, well, he’ll never like her again.’

They’ve been away a long time and eventually I realise that Chelsea’s gone home without telling us. Miri says she’ll give us a lift back to town, but April better not be too long. We go wait in her car and listen to music.

‘I heard you quit badminton,’ she says. ‘You missed me that much?’

I don’t answer. I don’t want to play her teasing games. She acts so wise because she’s a year older, like she’s lived a lifetime in that year from fourteen to fifteen.

‘If you could travel to the future or go back in time, which would you choose?’ I ask.

‘Back,’ she says. ‘I’d see my aunt and uncle again. Would you rather always need to sneeze or need to piss?’

‘Sneeze. Would you rather always be crying or never be able to stop laughing?’

We used to play this sometimes when we were away for a tournament. It was the easiest way to get information out of Miri, to ask her all the stupid shit I wanted to know.

‘Crying,’ she says. ‘Would you rather always be cold or always be too hot?’

‘Cold,’ I say. I’m always hot, always flushed, always giving something away.

‘You’re crazy,’ she says. ‘You’ve got cold blood.’ She picks up my hand and shivers. ‘See? Block of ice.’ She brings it to her mouth and blows, then puts it under her hoodie, on her stomach which is radiating heat. ‘Check out how hot I am. I hate being cold.’

I’m dying and she’s looking at me and anyone who’s left at the party is quiet by the bonfire, couples lying down and making out and a few people sitting on chilly bins. I don’t know what will happen.

She rolls her eyes, pushes my hand away. ‘Here’s your mate.’

Sure enough, April is back and I see her looking around the fire for me as a few people do a kind of friendly jeer. I call out to her from the car and Miri's already got the engine going. April gets in the back and says: 'You left me down there, you stupid bitch.'

'You looked like you didn't want anyone around.'

'It's disloyal,' she says. 'I would never just leave you without saying anything.'

We drive back to town in silence, the sea black and dark beside us. A sheared velvet edge we could drive right off.

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13

IT'S A FACT UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED that the morning after you've had your hand inside another girl, and you go to sleep with that hand throbbing with phantom heat, your ex-girlfriend will send you a text message at the earliest hour possible. My phone makes an ugly little sound before my alarm goes off and I reach for it, hoping it's Katya, but it's Lucrece and she's not happy: *You fucking ungrateful bitch I did everything for you. You would have absolutely nothing if it wasn't for me Nell and you know it. My life is fucking ruined because you're jealous because you can't have anything REAL.*

It's pretty funny because looking around I'm pretty sure I still have nothing. I'm living in my mother's house and riding a bike everywhere and I spent my last \$50 on a date that I probably sank. I wonder if her girlfriend's dumped her, or if my complaint is making it hard for them to be gross, loved-up little pigs. It's not personal. I walked out of that relationship with nothing. I had to find a new place to live, basically got hounded out of my job. No more nice dinners out, no more winery tours. I'll never see Lucrece's dog, Reba, again. The dog liked me more anyway, on account of all the time we spent together while Lucrece was out slagging around. Lucrece was barely touched by our relationship. She gets to do what she wants. Why shouldn't I get mine?

Before she hooked up with Chris, April would spend hours on my bed talking about how she could get him, decoding the things he said and the glance he gave her when they had PE at the same time and she was wearing her non-regulation Puma polo that showed off her tits.

These conversations were part fun and part prodding at the torture of our unrequited loves. When we talked like that, I would hold Miri's name in the back of my mouth like a piece of hard candy, offer forth Ronaldo Powhai or someone else unattainable. Some guy I liked the look of but was way out of my league. But April remembered the time that Chris had opened the door for her in maths class, the hour they'd spent in the library doing research for a shared assignment on the Land Wars. She knew his timetable the same way I knew Miri's and would be late to her classes just so she could cross his path.

After they got together that night at the beach, she stopped talking about him. It was the one time she was with a guy and didn't talk up how great it had been and how they'd come 'this close' to actually doing it. It was shit, he's a shit, she told me. Eventually she told me that he'd been rough when he fingered her, tried all this 'bitch, suck it', and 'just give me five minutes down there, you'll love it' and eventually she let him go down on her. She said it was awful, her arse on the cold sand and him getting tangled up in her pants, and eventually he just spat on the ground next to her and said, 'Well, that was shit. Try shaving,' and she walked up the cliff path alone.

'Is Miri your best friend now or something?' she said. 'You two are always acting so fucking secretive. Like anyone cares what you talk about, you goody-goodies.'

Less than a year later she'd get with Ryan. In my reasonable moments I know there's no point throwing blame, that things happened how they happened. Chris was just a kid, there's every chance he grew up and changed. That he's one of those guys who thinks about his daughters before they do something shitty. But I wonder, if he had been different with April, whether she wouldn't have turned to Ryan with such greed. Whether she

might have expected something more for herself.

I can't even get a brush through my hair today. That's another thing I've got to be angry at Lucrece about, apart from my ruined bank account. Fried bleached hair. I'm so broke Jacqui had to pay for my plane tickets back here, under the pretence I'd pay her back. I borrowed money from Mick the other day too. I'll have to leave here under the cover of darkness.

I'm about to bundle Trixie into my bike basket and visit Leigh, an event that will surely lead to our demise, when I get a text from Katya: *Where did you go last night?*

'Are you missing your mama?' Leigh sings to Trixie. 'Are you a good girl?' I'd lay down good money that she never crooned to me and Cal like that. When Leigh was in charge, she wouldn't have let a dog across the threshold. St Marian's has a 'whole human' approach now. Pets can visit if they're well behaved. I'm on high alert.

Our whole lives we weren't allowed a dog because our father didn't like them (they can smell a pig a mile off) and then the second he dies Leigh goes out and gets this ratty thing. I thought Leigh didn't really have a lot of excess affection to go around and it turns out she had a walled-up chasm behind her heart exactly the size of a Pomeranian-cross-gerbil. Trixie has the perpetually bug-eyed look of a dog pulling on a choke chain. What little brain she has is pushing against her glassy little teddy-bear eyes. She's absolutely not in the same universe as Reba. Reba was a retriever with a proper personality instead of a collection of anxious tics. Reba would raise the alarm if you were lying unconscious on your bedroom floor. Trixie would piss on the carpet and tear strips off your face while you were still breathing.

'Does she sleep on my pillow?' Leigh asks.

'No, on Cal's bed.'

‘You traitor,’ she says to the dog.

She’s such a stinky little rat. Greasy clumpy coat. Can’t shit properly and gets backed up for days. Leigh says you have to massage her anal glands and manually poop her but I’m not doing that and Cal’s not keen either. Leigh starts feeding her remnants of her toast from breakfast. I remember the menu well: porridge or cornflakes with tinned pears or peaches, toast with jam or Vegemite. We spent the night shift preparing the trays.

‘They had a death this morning,’ Leigh says. ‘Woman in the east hall. She was perfectly fine yesterday, the girls said.’

Big excitement. Leigh is surprisingly happy here, in this little terrarium of depressing end-of-life drama. Some of ‘the girls’ remember her, give her the inside word about who hates who, who’s losing their faculties and whatever’s happening in their own lives. Yesterday she told me that one of the carers’ granddaughters just ‘came out as gay’. I’m always pointedly told stuff like this, like I’m going to do a little cheer for the new recruits.

We watch the morning show on the little TV in Leigh’s room. ‘Your father liked her,’ she says of the host. ‘He liked blondes. I always thought she was a fake.’

I don’t answer. This is an ingrained pattern since I got back: Leigh offering some tidbit about my father, me refusing to engage. My childhood revolved around being sensitive to what the man liked and didn’t, why would I give a shit about it now.

I’m almost dozing after the weather report when Petronella Bush pops up, her massive head taking up half the screen. She’s wearing a wig today, dark-red flowing curls tipped in black. Horrorshow.

‘Oh, look,’ says Leigh. ‘Haven’t seen her in a while. You girls loved that program.’

‘She’s here,’ I say. ‘In town. I met her.’

‘What?’

‘Shhhhhh,’ I say, and we watch Petronella say that she’s doing a

comeback tour in small towns, and that our town, where she has ‘strong connections’ and spent a lot of time in as a child, is the perfect place to begin. ‘This is a powerful place, spiritually,’ she says. ‘The river, the sea, the people. It’s a place of old energies, holding on to some deep griefs.’ She reckons people need guidance more than ever, that they’re turning back to spirituality after the disappointments of modern life: ‘The dead never stop waiting for us.’

‘I’d fire the make-up girl,’ says Leigh. The make-up girl is almost definitely Katya but I have to agree that Petronella looks like hell, looks like she can speak to the dead because she’s one of them. They finish by saying Petronella will be doing some live shows right here in town, and there’s a return of her popular TV show, *Psychic Rest*, on the horizon too.

‘How the hell did you meet her?’ Leigh asks when the segment ends.

‘At the club. She was there for dinner with a friend.’

‘What did she order?’

‘Pinot gris and a ham steak.’ Leigh loves a ham steak.

‘Oooh, I haven’t had a ham steak in years. Wait,’ she says, like I knew she would. ‘What were you doing at the club? Not really your scene, is it?’

I don’t have to answer because two girls show up to take Leigh for a shower. They moon over Trixie for thirty seconds, the maximum time they can afford for any niceties not related to stripping someone down and aiming the showerhead at them.

Trixie scratches around in Leigh’s warm spot and curls up. I check out the one-hundred-and-fifty-dollar-a-day view. Jacqui and I would stand at the window on quiet nights and look out at the night sky. Looking at the moon, Jacqui said, was a good way to make you feel your place in the world. I learnt a lot about Jacqui when we worked together. More than her just being April and Mick’s frazzled aunt, more than her being a soft touch who you could always hit up for money. More than being a crazy creeper who wanted to snag a near-death husband. She treated me like an adult, kept up a

running monologue of her worries while we were working. Like what she would do when she couldn't work anymore. She'd worked in factories and places like St Marian's all her life. Her body was packing it in. If we were lifting someone, I had to bear the brunt, because Jacqui's back was fucked. She started wearing pants instead of skirts because her ankles were swollen to bricks. The veins on the back of her legs stood out like trainlines on a map.

That year she was working more than she should, trying to get cash together to send Mick to Thailand. An opportunity he would fuck up monumentally. She was worried about April, she told me, like we all were, but those worries were secondary. Young women were supposed to be put through the wringer. That was life and you'd look back on those years and be glad you had them. 'That boy really loves you, honey. It makes him a bit crazy sometimes,' she'd say to April, when what she meant was: be careful, because you can't win with a man like that. This was before Jacqui got into her crystal phase, but god knows she could have used them.

Thinking about Jacqui back then makes me feel softer towards her when she blusters into the room, clouds of Anais Anais, cigarette smoke and a bright streak of orange lipstick dashed across her thin lips. She never gives up.

'I talked to the manager,' she says. 'They're happy to let Leigh stay for a few weeks. They've had a string of deaths. I'm sure they didn't die like that when we worked here. I don't know what they're doing. Anyway, she can have the room until there's more demand.'

It's a relief, even if paying for it is taking chunks out of my inheritance.

'I got these flowers on special,' she says. 'Don't tell Leigh that.'

'You want me to get a vase?'

'Yes, please. But first, I just want to say that I'm sorry I was harsh with you about what happened with Mick. It never ends with that boy and his

bad decisions, but I know it was grief talking. You never grieved and he just turns his inward. And that's the only way you can communicate with each other.'

'Okay,' I say. 'It's fine, Jacqui.' Once she starts she doesn't stop, and I can't hear her jumbled analysis when I've been seeing Mick every other day. She thinks it was just a blip, getting a weird Freudian desire out of our systems.

'Sex, I mean. Sex is how you communicate. And I expect this from Mick, but you ... well, we just didn't think you liked men.'

'I like them sometimes, Jacqui.' Every so often, when the stars align, I will in fact throw a man a bone.

'Okay, honey. You remember where the vases are, right?'

And that's as close to acknowledgement and acceptance of my sexuality that I'm going to get in this place and that's fine by me.

By the time Leigh's returned and is propped up in her chair with a cup of tea, I'm done with daughterly duties. Jacqui can drop the dog home. I told Katya I'd help her assemble her new bed at Petronella's house. Asking for help with physical tasks is a femme love language. She was apologetic about ditching me at the club. I didn't tell her I basically got kicked out.

'I want tickets to that show, Nell,' Leigh says as I'm about to leave. 'The psychic.'

'What psychic?' Jacqui's head spins round so fast from flower arranging that I get a brief *Exorcist* flashback.

'Petronella Bush,' I say. 'She's staying in town for a bit. You're not well enough,' I tell Leigh.

'I'll be fine,' she says. 'It's not for a few weeks.'

She does seem better. Her face is less bloated. No slurring, walking all the way back from the showers with her walker. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel with her being in here. A time when I can get back to my regular

life, whatever that is. It's not living with my mother and fucking my dead friend's brother while I wait for a brighter future to arrive.

'Get the tickets, Nell,' she says. 'We'll do a family outing. I can't remember the last time I got you a proper birthday present.'

Lucky me.

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THE HILL FLOWING FROM ST Marian's to the city is so steep and so twisted it's a feat of concentration to get down in one piece. Breathless. Our dad used to scrape the bodies of drunk drivers off these hills when he was a baby cop.

On the face of it, Petronella's show is definitely not Leigh's thing. She's generally suspicious of frills, thrills and bullshit. But Heather's disappearance is a deep seam running through her life. I can only think that her near-death experience and Jacqui flinging crystals and homespun spiritualism around has softened her a bit. Made the curtain in between worlds seem flimsier.

A car pulls up beside me when I'm at the lights. I'm still on a high from the flight down the hill. The woman driving is giving me greasy looks, next thing the window goes down and she's yelling: 'You fucking slut!'

Mick's wife, Faith. His three kids are in the back, and they're crowded around the side window with their middle fingers up, pressed white knuckled against the glass. Even the tiny one who's, what, two years old? This fucking place. Rip my fingernails out but spare me the hell of a small town.

As they roar off, I flip my fingers back at them: 'Fuck you!' Give her something to squeal to her dipshit friends about.

Faith's a mega babe. A proper girl next door who's only ever wanted

things that a guy like Mick can't give her. Put me and Faith next to each other and you'd think Mick is crazy for fucking me. Maybe he is a bit crazed. I'm no beauty queen, no fashion plate, in Jacqui's words. April said I had childbearing hips. Leigh says I got my father's build: a tendency towards slabbiness and chunky ankles. I don't know what it is. I must just have a great personality. Or sex comes off me like hot garbage juice.

Petronella's house is on the other side of town, up the opposite hill. Leigh used to call this suburb Snobs' Rock and Petronella's place fits the bill. I'm streaming sweat from the ride up.

The house is massive. It's one of those stucco jobs, a nineties dream. So white and bright you can't behold it directly without scalding your eyeballs.

'You look like you just got out of the shower,' Katya says when she appears on the other side of the gate.

'I never biked up here before,' I say. 'That hill.'

The house is wall-to-wall grey carpets. Not nice carpet but a scratchy industrial kind. The furniture is all black and high gloss, and the walls are stacked with speakers and AV gear. There's a slight burning smell, like dusty lightbulbs.

'Her dad's house. He died a few months ago. That's why we came here,' says Katya. 'She'll redecorate.'

'She lived here?'

Not for long,' Katya says. 'She mainly visited on holidays. Her dad never knew what to do with her. He sent her to boarding school down south.'

'She must be loaded now.'

'No,' she says. 'No money. He lost a lot. He loved the horses. Just left her this house. She never owned a house before now.'

'But on her own, she must have cash. From the show.'

Katya snorts. 'Hardly. Trust me. I do the banking. The kitty is dry. There's not a heap of money in what she does, you know. She does it for the love of

it.'

Sure, she's basically a charity.

We go out back past a small rectangular pool, glinting like cheap aquamarine. There's a little bungalow back there, combined kitchenette and bedroom with a tiny bathroom.

'Nice set-up.'

'It feels like luxury. The first six months I was with Pet we shared hotel rooms all around the north. She was doing an RSA tour.'

'Yeah, she seems to like a good RSA.'

I note the mattress on the floor, the little stack of books and tarot cards next to it. A bunch of bananas and a bottle of Diet Pepsi on the bench. An overflowing make-up bag, brown-tipped brushes poking out.

I get it. I've moved around enough to appreciate a room of my own.

She flops down on the mattress, pats the space next to her. I sit on the edge. I feel like I'm climbing a rock face when I'm with her. Scrambling for footholds that might not be there.

'I'm sorry,' she says. 'I know it was weird at the club. I wanted you to see what I see, but it takes time.'

'See what?'

'I'll tell you later. Come on,' she says. 'Make me cum again.'

Later we lie out by Petronella's glaringly blue pool and she tells me about the Petronella Bush special, how she's been reeling in lines and making money since her show ended.

'First off,' she says, 'you need to understand these women.'

These are women who never used to have a taste for playing the pokies, hanging out in places like this. At one time maybe even shunned the idea of it. These women are of a certain age. They're still working, in jobs where they're beginning to be phased out, bewildered by technology. Waiting for a

redundancy package. Their kids have left home, or maybe they've returned home after marital or mental breakdowns. Their husbands have left, either physically or emotionally. Whatever it is, you can guarantee that a woman sitting by herself at a pokies machine, handbag clutched to her lap and a glass of wine condensing beside her, is not a happy woman. She's not rushing home to get dinner on for a grateful family, not on her way out with friends who are equally fulfilled by their solo lives. She's prolonging the time she's around people, using the circular *chk chk chk* of the machine to put a buffer between this day and the next.

This is where Petronella comes in. Petronella, lurking like a shark behind her own machine (where, more often than not, she does have a little win, a modest outpouring that covers her costs at the club). She appears to be one of them, a nicely dressed older woman intent on a little harmless obliteration. But she's figured out her prey. She's ignoring the old woman in the corner who looks like she's crusted into the place, the young guy still in his workboots and the middle-aged man whose scalp shines pink and wet through his thinning hair. You're the one, she thinks as she moves towards the door but really towards this woman perched dumpily on her stool.

Gently she touches the elbow of the woman, who turns, frown pasted on.
Yes?

I'm so sorry, Pet says. This is going to sound very strange. But I couldn't leave without asking you ... I just had this feeling. Has something happened to you recently? Have you lost someone? I'm just getting the feeling that someone is trying to contact you, or there's a message for you. Something's missing, she says. Something's gone wrong.

The woman turns further, eyes hooded with suspicion.

I'll leave you alone, says Pet. Sometimes these things happen, urgent messages come through.

I lost my sister, says the woman, through gritted teeth. My mum, my best friend, my daughter.

It's always someone.

Yes, says Pet. She's going now, but she has something to tell you. She's upset about something in your life. I can't hold on to the messages here, love, it's too noisy. They don't want to stick around. It's about you, though. Your life. She's not happy. She can feel you slumping.

Maybe, says the woman. I've taken a few knocks.

Look, love, I've got to go, but if you want to properly explore this, here's my number.

It's just a plain card, nothing flashy. She doesn't look like some charlatan. Petronella plays the straight lady now.

The woman pockets the card, goes back to the machine. But she's uneasy. She'll pack up early tonight, go home and think about the places where her life went wrong. All the dead people she knows who might be watching her, unhappy with her choices.

'You can get four or five women booking sessions on a good night,' Katya says. That's \$200 for a session, first-timers get a 15 per cent discount. If they want something cheaper, they can always get a tarot reading with Katya. She's sharpening her skills. Petronella says she has immense potential.

'It's all real,' Katya says. The dead are banging on the walls between worlds, screaming out to their loved ones. Watch out. Ninety-nine per cent of people wander through life with their eyes and ears closed. Not Petronella. She's wide open.

By the time I've put her bed frame together I've scratched the painted metal in a couple of places and hit my thumb with the stupid plastic hammer they give you, but it'll hold. It's a two-person job but Katya's lying out in the sun, studying her tarot cards. She could be poring over a biology textbook out there is how serious she is. I give the whole thing a shake to make sure it's weight bearing.

Katya's certain Petronella's on the level, that the women shelling out money to hear her messages are helped immeasurably and they can afford it. But I know these aren't wealthy women. These are women who'll work until retirement, who'll scrimp and save to blow it all when one of their kids comes calling. It's not hard to imagine Jacqui being one of them. Everything about Petronella screams con artist.

'Done,' I tell Katya. She's got a book on 'creative' tarot open and is marking pages with those little Post-it flags.

'How can I ever repay you?' She turns over and stretches, pushing her rib cage upwards. 'Do you want to swim?'

I strip down to my underwear. April and I used to do those stupid *Cosmo* quizzes, like 'What fruit is your body type?' I always got apple because I've got wide hips and a belly, no tits, flat arse, and April would get banana because she didn't really have a discernible waist. A fucking banana. We took it really seriously and did a lot of crunches. It's hard not to feel self-conscious around Katya, whose body doesn't resemble any fruit.

The water is shockingly cold. 'It's salt water,' says Katya when I gasp. 'It never really warms up.'

We swim around for a bit, half playing and pushing each other under the water. It's deep. I can't touch the bottom at either end. Katya touches the tattoos on my arms and back. 'What do they mean?'

'Nothing, they're just stuff I liked,' I say, even though one of them is a stupid youthful tribute to April, a circlet of daisies beginning to bleed and blur into illegibility.

She goes under, swims away and pops up again in front of me. We kiss then, legs pedalling. It's too hard to do anything real in the pool so she sits on the side and I pull her bikini bottoms off. My mouth and her cunt slowly warm up together. It feels like we're both thawing, then melting. My hands are gripping her calves and I have to keep up a slow kick to stay afloat. It reminds me of swimming lessons, holding on to the bar and kicking. She

arches her hips up and I pull back for a second to stay with her, and I catch a glimpse of someone in the upper windows of the house.

‘Shit.’ I drag her back into the pool, and she comes up streaming and swearing.

‘What the fuck, Nell?’

‘Petronella was watching,’ I say. ‘From the window.’

We look up but the window is empty.

‘Fuck,’ she says. ‘I was close.’

‘Sorry,’ I say. ‘It’s just not that sexy to be perved on by your boss.’

‘She wouldn’t have meant to look, we weren’t exactly being private. It’s her house.’

Her bikini bottoms have floated away to the other end of the pool and she swims over to get them, awkwardly putting them on in the water.

‘Your shoulders are getting burnt,’ she says. ‘You should get out.’

I haul myself out of the water. She hasn’t brought out any towels so I just stand there and try to air-dry for a few minutes while she does slow lengths of the pool. She won’t look at me. I put my clothes on and immediately there are twin circles of damp on my arse cheeks and over my tits. The ride home is going to be one long chafe and I can’t even get out of here with my dignity intact.

I don’t ask her when I’ll see her again and I don’t offer to help haul her mattress back on. She’s still bobbing back and forth in the water when I leave.

I have to go through the house and of course Petronella’s there, sitting on a lazy boy with the footrest popped, glass of wine in hand. Getting an early start while she watches *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*.

It was her perving on us in the pool but she’s cool as a cucumber. It didn’t look like an accidental glance out the window, it looked like she was standing there making a memory. She lifts her glass, takes a dainty little sip.

‘Nell,’ she says. ‘Hello, again. I must have known. I wanted to ask you something. Get my bag, will you. It’s on the counter.’

I bring her a bag so heavy it’s like shouldering a dead body. Everyone in this house wants my physical labour.

‘You’re burnt,’ she says when I hand it to her. ‘You have to be careful. You’re like me, five minutes in the sun and you look like a side of rare beef. Katya’s lucky, she tans up nicely.’

‘Cool place,’ I say, just to say something as she clanks about in her bag. Her fingers are stacked with rings and I hear them catching on everything with an edge. I can almost smell the cheap sweaty metal from here.

‘Not my preferred kind of abode, but it’s nice to be back. I spent a fair bit of time visiting this place. You know my father owned the first CD store in town. Here, love.’ She hands me an envelope. There’s two hundred dollars inside. ‘I’ve got a show coming up. We’ll need a bit of help, general lifting and carrying, grunt work. Bit of muscle. Someone to work the books table on the night. I need Katya to be distraction free. She grounds my powers. She’s a powerful conduit, but she’s very humble.’

‘I don’t have the time.’

‘Really? Your mum’s in care, you said. You haven’t got much else on. I’m sure you need the cash.’

She’s a pushy bitch. I can see how she gets people to tell her their secrets.

‘My mum wants to go to the show,’ I say.

‘I’ll throw in a few tickets,’ she says. ‘That’s just to start, that money. A retainer. Katya will sort you out for any hours you do. I’ve got to rest now. I’ve got a session in an hour.’

I slip the money into my wet back pocket. I’ll take the cash and the tickets, and I’ll just tell Katya later I’ve got too much on. It’s not wrong to scam a scammer.

She picks up her wine again and I see that I’m dismissed. Just before I reach the door she says: ‘I know you don’t want to hear it, but you’ll never

be happy if you don't deal with what happened to you.'

'What happened?'

'You know,' she says.

'Yeah, but do you?'

'I don't engage in tests, Nell. I don't even need to be psychic to tell you that you won't be happy until you forgive yourself for what you've done. Or haven't done.'

'Forgive and forget,' I say. 'Sure. Nice and neat.'

I take the long way home, around the town instead of through it. That's the kind of shit that proves the dodgy feeling I get about Petronella. All that 'I can see your inner pain' stuff. Who doesn't feel guilty about something? It's like throwing a dart into a ball pit, you're bound to pierce a ball. Katya told me she met Petronella when she came into the pharmacy she worked in and asked for a girl who could do her make-up. Katya gave it a go and by the time she was done Petronella had told her own life back to her and asked Katya to join the rest of the tour. Pet hates to be alone, Katya said. And anyway, Katya had been looking for a way to leave the tiny town she lived in with her grandma for a long time. Pet always sees what people want most, she said. They've been together ever since. A story so practised I immediately felt suspicious.

I pedal so hard in my wet shorts it feels like I've taken a layer of skin off by the time I get home. The evening sky is gutshot, bleeding pink along the horizon.

Some memories get returned to me whole. Others have pieces magpied out of them. From the year that April died, they're almost mauled to bits. Whole faces chopped out of my recollections, like a vengeful ex-girlfriend's photo album. I remember April having red hair that year, that awful burgundy we loved. Then Jacqui sent me some photos: April at Mick's leaving party, only weeks before she died, with black hair. I remembered a bunch of other stuff then, like the day I put that dye on in April's backyard and Glenys yelling

out the window: 'Women with black hair look like witches! Witches are bitches!' Total lunatic.

After April showered, we sat out in the sun and watched it dry to high gloss. I know from the timeline that I would have been always walking the tightrope of waiting for Miri to text me, that I couldn't enjoy anything that year. I would look at the clock and challenge myself not to think about her for five minutes. She made me a mix CD and I tried to hear a message in it, from her to me, but I couldn't. Ryan and April were always on the brink, both of them picking and jerking at whatever held them together.

But here's one memory that comes back to me complete. (Though when I fish it up April's hair stays red, so how can I be sure?) April and me sitting in her car up by the water tower. Ryan's found us up here before. He'll drive around looking for her if she doesn't answer her phone. She's crying so hard I'm afraid. I don't know what I'm afraid of. The depth of whatever she's feeling, I guess. Her certainty that no-one can help her: not me, not Jacqui, not even Mick. 'I can't,' she keeps saying whenever I suggest something. 'I can't, I can't.'

'Just leave him,' I tell her. 'It's no big deal, people break up all the time. He'll get over it.'

'You don't understand, Nell. How could you understand? You've never even had a fucking boyfriend. Or whatever.'

She keeps crying, tiring out, winding down. 'Let's just leave, then,' I say. 'We can just go, you know. Other people leave.'

We sit there a while, watching lights come on in patches across town, turning over the idea like it's a relic, something we unearthed from long ago.

I'm sorry, Katya messages. This is all really new for me. I'm back there the next day, packing up Petronella's father's stuff and helping Katya set up ticketing for the show. Gainfully employed once again.

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‘DID YOU FLIP MY KIDS and Faith off at the lights on Jackson and Main?’ Mick asks. He looks pissed off, dark eyebrows drawn together, but his hands are already on his belt so I feel like either way this could work out well for me.

‘She did it first,’ I say. ‘She almost ran my bike off the road.’

‘Come on, Nell,’ he says. ‘I want things to be civil. I don’t want to give Faith any reason to stop me seeing the kids.’

‘She’ll take you back,’ I say. ‘Didn’t you say it’s usually a month? Must be getting on around that time.’ I wonder if anyone’s ever pointed out to Faith the self-fulfilling prophecy of her own name.

‘I’m not going back this time, Nell,’ he whispers into my ear. ‘Lie on me.’

I lie on him, press my full weight on him.

‘Nell,’ he says again. I can feel his cock pushing against me and he moves me just slightly so he’s between my legs and either of us can move just a little and start things off. But he doesn’t, and neither do I, just shifting slightly so I’m catching the very tip of him in my cunt. I know it feels good to have someone’s whole weight on you like this, I used to do it to Lucrece when she was stressed. I softly bite his earlobe with my teeth, then pull it enough to hurt. He keeps whispering my name and eventually I rise up a bit and start fucking him and he grips his hands hard into the flesh on my hips and it’s all very lovely but I don’t exactly get the hot angry pounding I was

looking for.

‘I’m going to call that Petronella woman,’ he says. This is afterwards, during his post-fuck reverse striptease. Matter-of-fact snapping of jock elastic, pulling of zips and adjusting of tie. He grabs my comb and runs it quickly through his hair.

‘Don’t do that,’ I say.

‘I don’t have cooties.’

‘You know what I mean. Call Petronella. She’s a hack.’

‘I need it,’ he says. ‘I need a bit of guidance. I’m on the edge of something, I can feel it. She’s right.’

I roll into the pillow. He’s not on the edge of anything. He’s walked right off it.

I help Katya move boxes of Petronella’s books out of storage. *A Psychic’s Life: Finding the Path*. We stack the boxes by the pool and I check them for mould and shake silverfish out of the pages and hand them to Katya. She signs each one ‘Petronella Bush’ in a bold and loose scrawl on the inside cover: ‘She gets a bad wrist if she does it herself.’

The book is seventeen years old, written just as the wheels were falling off the psychic bandwagon. Petronella thinks the time is ripe for a comeback. People always turn back to spiritualism when the economy crashes. In times of war and in times of impoverishment, Petronella flourishes.

‘My friend Mick wants to do a session with Pet,’ I say. ‘She’s been drumming up business all over town.’

‘Mick? He’s that steamy babe I saw you with at the pub that first night?’

‘If you’re into that kind of thing,’ I say. ‘But yeah.’

She tosses a book back at me. ‘That cover’s torn. He’s the brother of your friend that died, right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ she says. ‘She’s busy. She shouldn’t do too much before show week.’

That’s fine by me. I can tell Mick I asked but really I’d like to keep him away from all this. He’s impressionable.

We go for a bit longer in silence, a breeze skimming the pages of loose books, denting the surface of the pool. There’s a storm massing out by the sea. Katya better sign quick or Petronella’s life’s work is going to get soaked.

I’m just about to tell her to hurry when she says: ‘Do you have many friends?’

‘Not here. Not anymore.’ It’s like when a lover sees a bruise on your arm and gives it a poke. Going straight to where it hurts.

‘Back in Sydney, then?’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘Some. I’ve moved around a lot.’

I’d had people, people to go for drinks with, at B-Comms. I’d merged into the pool of Lucrece’s friends and slipped away just as easily. Years of moving and upheaval left me with fragments of friends, loose strings where people had been. Wondering what it was that kept me from other people. The constant comparison to how easy and how connected April and I had been. The slow realisation that no-one really has adult friendships like that. It was shameful to admit: I had no friends.

She laughs. ‘Yeah, me neither. I’ll be your friend, if you want.’

After we finish the books and drop them at the show venue, an old theatre that’s mostly used for local performances of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, we get burgers and drive up to the lookout. This could be considered our first proper date.

‘Hands are great,’ she says, ‘mouths are great, but don’t you have a fake dick somewhere?’

‘Not here.’

‘I thought all you lesbians carried one in a little travelling sex kit.’

‘You’ve seen how I travel. With my hands and what god gave me.’

I think of the high-end sex gear I left at Lucrece’s, I guess because she paid for it all. The beautiful matte dildos, top-of-the-line harnesses, lube for every hole. Leather handcuffs, the little wedge to raise her hips on. A riding crop that sat mostly unused in the wardrobe. Lucrece had it all. She liked to cultivate a little edge. Like everything else in her life, she thought it could be bought. The young girlfriend, the workplace affair. It helped her feel interesting. At Friday night drinks she would always allude to how wild her life was, actually, but nothing she could talk safely about at work.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ I say. ‘Does the lady have complaints?’

‘No complaints,’ she says, climbing on top of me. ‘But an ever-growing hunger.’

The rain hits. Outside the car windows the town streaks and melts.

In my memory, this town has had three sex stores, each dying a quiet dusty death and being replaced by a waxing studio, a pita sandwich shop and a bridal boutique. A place like that can’t survive long in a town like this, where everyone knows everyone else’s business and someone’s always watching. April and I once sat outside one of the shops all day, to see what kind of sickos went in there. I was afraid we’d see my father go in. Instead the woman who owned the place came out and said she knew who we were and if we didn’t piss off she’d tell my father about it. ‘We’re just trying to run a business,’ she said. ‘Would you creep around the newsagents, spying on their customers?’

But we knew it was different, and this was proved when each store closed down in succession. You’d have to be a special kind of freak to want a plastic dick inside of you. I didn’t set foot in one until I was twenty-two, when I bought a DVD called *Girls on Girls: Graduation Day Orgy*, which I watched over and over again before I got a broadband connection, and a jumbo bottle of mango-flavoured lube that made my room smell sweetly

rotten.

Spending fresh new money from Petronella on a dick to fuck her protégé with almost makes up for the distasteful way I made it.

‘You’re never here,’ says Cal. ‘Every morning I have to get up and walk this dog. Every night I have to eat a pie in front of the TV. What’s the point of cooking,’ he says, ‘if you’re eating alone?’

‘You can’t cook, anyway.’

‘I would if I had someone to cook for.’

‘Get a girlfriend,’ I say. ‘Or a boyfriend.’ I keep an eye on him, see what his face does. Nothing that tells me anything.

‘I can’t,’ he says. ‘You’re fucking anyone who’s eligible.’

He ducks the pillow I chuck at him and it takes out one of Leigh’s shepherdess figurines. He picks it up, shows me the jagged hole in the head.

‘Lucky you’re already the least favourite.’

I search for the broken piece while he fidgets like a child, jiggling his legs and sighing.

‘I went to see Mum today,’ he says. ‘Something weird happened.’

‘What?’

‘Petronella Bush was there.’

‘With Leigh?’

He nods. ‘She, like, had her hand on top of Mum’s. I walked in and I could tell Mum didn’t want me there. Jacqui was there too, she sent me out to get them a cup of tea and then I got lost looking for the kitchen. By the time I came back, Petronella was gone and they didn’t want to say a thing about it. Just dropped by, Mum said.’

I’ve got a rising sick feeling, like when you wake up with a hangover and know you’ve done something terrible the night before.

‘Jacqui said Petronella’s been visiting St Marian’s,’ Cal says. ‘Talking to the widows, drumming up a following.’

‘Might be nothing,’ I say. ‘Coincidence. She might just be doing the rounds.’

‘Maybe,’ he says. ‘It’s Mum’s business anyway, I guess.’

Maybe it is nothing. Maybe nothing I said encouraged Petronella to make a beeline for Leigh. But I’ve got a bad feeling, all the neat lines of my life bleeding together.

I don’t want to talk to Lucrece when she rings in the middle of *Married at First Sight*.

‘You’re not supposed to call me,’ I say. ‘Seline said we can’t be in contact.’

‘I could lose everything,’ she says. ‘My whole life is that job. Why are you doing this? I never fucking harassed you. You came at me just as hard. And I know you sent that fucking email.’

‘You were my boss,’ I say. ‘You should have known better. It was impossible for me to keep that job once you dumped me.’

‘It was impossible for you to keep that job because you were fucking useless,’ she says.

It gives me no pleasure to hear her plead, to hear her recite the list of all the things she bought me: the expensive bronze-cast rings I’m wearing right now, the gold leather boots, the expensive dinners. ‘If I was a man,’ she says, ‘they just would’ve paid you off already.’

I want to say: It’s business, Lucrece. It’s not personal, the harm I feel, but the way to get what I want is through you. But I don’t say anything, and all I can hear is her crying, so I hang up and cycle through the dark to Katya’s. She’s surprised to see me, and I can’t remember if we were fighting about something. Neither of us can remember.

‘Hold me down,’ she says. So it feels like we have been fighting, and I’ve won, restraining the thrash of her underneath me.

Early morning, I'm up with the jits. This happens sometimes, no discernible cause. Rorschach images: April clinging to Ryan, smiling adoringly at him. Mick bundling his bloody fist in his shirt. Petronella's hand on top of Leigh's. Katya underneath me, eyes rolled back, a moment of pleasure freeze-framed into exasperation.

I sit out by the pool, watch the sun get higher as the town stirs to life. It's not really that early. At St Marian's, Leigh will have had her porridge and prunes, ready to start the day whether she wants to or not. Cal will be on his way to work. A time zone away, Lucrece will be waking up to go to yoga, or else she'll stay curled up in bed next to Jade, or whoever. It's only me who's lurking without purpose around other people's lives.

I hear the side door to the house open, the low rough rumble of Petronella's voice. Like Katya, she's never usually up before eleven. I creep up to the house, look around the corner. Cal does that goosy high step of his down the driveway, swinging his arms like he hasn't got a care in the world as he walks back to his car.

'What the fuck were you doing there?'

'Curious,' he says. He puts a red liquorice twist between his teeth, pulls it until it snaps.

'Oh, just curious? So curious you paid two hundred bucks and took a morning off work?'

He lolls around on the couch, grinning. He's being so fucking annoying and he loves it. 'Just wanted to see what the fuss was about after I saw her with Mum. I thought, if Mum's letting her hold her hand there must be something to this bird.'

'What did she say to you?'

'What did she tell you she said?'

'Don't fuck around, Cal. She said: "I can't talk about my clients with you, Nell. That would be unethical."''

‘Well, there you go. Legit.’

‘Tell me what she said or I’ll break your stupid face.’

He laughs. ‘You’re fucking mental. Why do you care so much? She said: you’ve got a big change coming. You’ve got a warm heart, there’ll be a lot of love in your life, but you need to be wary of being taken advantage of. Then something about gardening.’

‘Gardening?’

‘Yeah, like planting trees. She reckons I should get a hobby. I’m quite looking forward to her show now, actually.’

He wants to wind me up. Your anger is someone else’s power over you, Lucrece used to tell me. But what I feel about Petronella getting too close to things is like a fingernail scraping down my insides. I walk over to the curtains, peer out of them like our father used to, keeping an eye out for any trouble. Neighbours’ lawns too long, neighbours mowing lawns too late in the day, a car he hadn’t seen before, a loose dog. Trouble like that.

‘She did say one other thing.’

‘What?’

‘Towards the end of the session. It was kind of weird. She closed her eyes like she was getting a headache, hand over her face and she was like: “Cal ... there’s a spirit here. It’s asking you to ... take your pants off.”’

‘You’re disgusting. That’s not funny.’

‘Come on,’ he calls after me. ‘That’s funny. When do I get my money back, now you have a job?’

‘I quit.’

But I don’t quit.

‘Please,’ Katya says. ‘I’ll die if I do all this by myself. I know you think Pet’s a nosy bitch, but she’s just a soft touch, can’t say no.’

‘I just want her to keep her shit away from me. I don’t want any of this

“your tragic past this, your trauma that,” around me. What does she want with Leigh, anyway?’

‘Her dad was in St Marian’s before he died,’ Katya says. ‘She was just up there thanking the nurses, doing the rounds. She barely knew who Leigh was.’

‘I want her to keep away from my family.’

‘I promise,’ she says. ‘Just help me lift things, help me stay sane. Just until the show’s over. I’m just one woman. Take me out to dinner or something.’

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‘HE’S A MĀORI BUT HE’S alright,’ my dad says.

He’s talking about Miri’s dad, who works with him. Joseph Nuku has a colder gaze than any cop I know, but out of uniform, when he’s on the league field or dropping Miri off for badminton practice, he seems like the nicest guy. It’s weird that Miri is actually close to her dad, wants to be around him. It makes me feel weird to think of being buddies with my dad.

‘We were out in the boonies, the real slums, out Tukaki Street behind the meatworks. I said to him, “This is your fullas’ patch, isn’t it? We about to bust your WHA-NAU, bro?”’

The other men laugh. There’s a slight boredom to it, these same jokes told over and over again.

I hear the metallic echo as he sips from his beer can. ‘We came across these two little sluts painting “white power” on the street signs. Silver paint,’ he says, ‘sparkling in the streetlight. Fucking swastikas.’

‘Did you take them in?’ asks one of the men.

‘Nah. Told them to move on. “I sympathise with you,” I said to them. All this shit. What does it mean for them? What are these kids supposed to think? The whole lot of them at that park should be thrown in jail.’

That ‘whole lot’ is a group of local Māori who have been camping in the big park in the middle of town for the past month. Dad says if they get their way none of us will be able to use the park or swim in the sea. We’ll have to

pay to fish in the river. The tribes want all the land back, he says, the land they willingly signed over. One morning we woke up and they'd cut the head off a bronze statue of some guy in the park. Monique Bramble in my form class cried about it. It was a statue of her granddad or something. Any conversation my dad has, he brings it around to this. He's obsessed.

April and I are lingering in the hallway, trying to figure out how to get past my dad and his friends so we can go out like we're supposed to. Mum's at work so Dad's taking care of Cal, which means we're looking after Cal. It was a mistake to get ready here. Now we're trapped. There's a test match on and Dad has people over, so he'll be playing the stern man extra hard. 'Joe agrees with me,' Dad says. 'Thinks it's gone too far. We have a laugh. He takes it. Nell, get in here.'

Sometimes the most cop thing about my dad is his ability to sense an escape. Or maybe we just stepped on a creaky board in the hall.

'Jesus, kid, you've grown,' says Ken Ripkin, a former cop who now owns the butcher's on the corner of Busby and Pahia streets. Dad tells Mum not to shop there, that Ken takes all the old meat and slaps it with marinade and sells it for another week, but I like him. He gives Cal a free saveloy whenever we go in. Ken became a butcher after he was in a chase with some kids and their car went into the river. They all drowned. Dad says that's part of the job and you need to be able to take it.

I stand there knowing I don't match up to the ideas these men have the way April does. She's hanging back in the doorway, but they're eyeing her up too, the way she's wearing a low-plunge top under her jacket, how her jeans are skin-tight over her wide hips, a little pout of white belly showing. Her hair is freshly dyed and throwing off a sheen, curling down past her shoulder blades. She knows they're looking, too. You always know. I know what these men think about women who don't wear make-up, or wear too much, who don't wear skirts or wear them too short. 'Ugly bull dykes' or 'stupid sluts' are Dad's two categories for most women. Some exceptions:

his mother was a saint and Mum is his old lady. I'm in a hazy area between his two categories and every day he's trying to pin me in one so he knows the right way to deal with me. I wish he could make up his mind so I know how to deal with myself.

Someone gets bowled out, or something, and Dad puts his hand up and keeps me and April waiting as the men watch.

'Christ, you're the spitting image of your father,' says Tim Brown (aka Browneye), a baby cop who Dad's taken under his wing. 'Built like a barrel, same red cheeks. You're just a bit darker, Craig. Are you sure you don't have a bit of native running through you? Don't you think, Ken? Look at the tan on him. Maybe you should get in on a bit of this land action, Craig.'

'I'd watch it, mate, or I'll put you through the fuckin' wall.'

All of us glance towards the wall he gestures at, hung with our family photos and a big bronze and wood cast of a bull and bull fighter that used to hang on my grandparents' wall until my granddad died last year.

'Where are you going?' Dad asks. I can see a glint in his eye that wasn't there before. He was posturing, playing at being strict Dad, but he didn't really give a shit. Tim's pushed his buttons and the colour in his cheeks is high, a warning.

'Auntie Jacqui's.' April runs her finger down the doorjamb, staring in there like there's a movie playing.

'Yeah? If you're going to Auntie Jacqui's why are you dressed like a couple of slappers?'

Browneye giggles, but Ken looks struck. I know his daughters, they're a form above us.

We don't answer. There's no good answer when he gets like this. We're wearing jeans and halter tops you can see our bra straps in, our new leather-look jackets. Mine is black and April's is burgundy.

'Take Cal with you,' he says. 'I can't have him whining all night. There's

league after this.'

'Okay,' I say. There's nothing else for it. Someone else gets bowled out, or caught out, or whatever the bullshit is that they do in cricket, and the attention drains from us.

The night is clear and biting, the stars a bright volley above the town. Cal sprints ahead of us, boosting off fences and tree trunks. We make long streams out of our breath, pretend we're smoking, like children do.

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17

‘I KNOW THERE’S MONEY,’ I say to Leigh.

‘Yes, but it’s not yours,’ she says. I’m wearing her out. She keeps rolling her eyes towards the door, like she’s hoping someone will interrupt us.

‘But it should be. It will be. That’s what I’m saying, I want my inheritance now. I’ll take less. So you know you’ll have enough to last you. Cal shouldn’t get everything.’

‘You’re unbelievable,’ she says. ‘Get a job, like everyone else has to.’

‘Leigh,’ I say. ‘I’ve had jobs. I’ve had so many I can’t count them all. I just can’t get ahead. It’s not fair. Cal stayed here. He got a break. Cheap rent, lower costs.’

‘You could have stayed,’ she said. ‘No-one made you leave.’

I can feel hot tears, not because I’m upset, because I’m angry, because she’s refusing to acknowledge anything. I could never have stayed. She knows that but she’s pretending, like always, that nothing truly terrible happened. Or that it was no-one’s fault it did. What I can’t say: I’m owed. Owed for emotional damages.

‘You don’t get a payout just for doing it tough,’ she says. Canny bitch, she does that sometimes, reads my mind, even though she plays at being so obtuse. ‘Cal did it tough, I did it tough. So did your father. Look at Jacqui. Hardly a pot to piss in.’

‘If I remember rightly, you got a nice little payout when Granddad died.

And you didn't have to share it then, either.'

'Piss off, Nell,' she says. 'Before you make me say something I don't want to. The money's mine. You'll get it when I'm ready and not before and if it's all gone, tough titty. I've got plans and they're none of your business.'

'You're not giving money to Petronella for any of her bullshit sessions, are you?'

'Not. Your. Business.' She's like a child, arms folded, lip drooping. So stubborn she makes my hands itch to give her a slap.

'Is it Dad you're trying to talk to?' I ask her. 'You didn't hear enough from him while he was alive? Jonesing for just one more rant?'

'Get out or I'll call the bloody cops.'

I open her door and run into one of the nurses, a cute girl from Indonesia who told me she was a teacher over there.

'You're lucky,' I hear her tell Leigh. 'Two nice children always visiting.'

'You can have them,' says Leigh, 'if you like them so much.'

As I pedal away from St Marian's I feel about as dirty as Leigh said I was. It's not attractive, to see myself as someone whingeing for money, but my soul is already imperilled. Didn't I already sell out? Don't I owe money to everyone I know? Aren't I trying to shake down my ex-girlfriend, who I once swore I'd love forever? Didn't I already take cash from the phoniest bitch in town? Might as well be hung for a ewe as a lamb, as Jacqui would say.

Mick's buzzing. There's hardly any customers and he's making me try on ring after ring for the sole purpose of seeing how ugly they are. 'It was amazing, Nell,' he says. 'It's like she fucking knew me. She said exactly: "There was a huge tragedy that blew your life apart."' She's really doing that one to death.

Everyone wants to believe there's been a huge tragedy in their lives. We all want to believe we've never fully recovered, that there's a reason for the

mess we've made of things. Nursing a lifelong broken wing. Handsome boy, she said to him. Undaunted by tragedy. She's never seen anything like it. He'll be dining out on this for weeks. I can't even be bothered pointing out that she already knew about April. What a dope.

'Where's Uncle Graham?'

'Day off,' he says. 'Getting the bathroom done in his mansion or something. Thank fuck. It's been awkward.'

'I'm surprised he hasn't fired you.'

'He wants to, believe me. But he's not going to starve my kids, is he? Anyway, I'm in charge here today, so you better behave yourself.'

A woman comes in with a broken clasp. 'It's brand new,' she keeps saying. I hold my hand up, decked with the ugly rings.

There's a big change coming for you, Petronella told Mick. You've been stuck, but soon you're going to get a second chance. Who wouldn't take a do-over? I wonder which of all Mick's chances he'd like a second go at. Before April died he was getting ready to take up a training offer in Thailand. By the time he got to Bangkok he was a different man from the one they'd placed a bet on, the handsome kid in the ring with the lightning-fast switch kicks. No discipline anymore, no drive, just rage. He got into a fight with a British backpacker in a bar and almost killed him. Jacqui got him a lawyer and got him home, but it was pretty much the end of everything. He was only there six weeks.

But it wouldn't be that. Of course he'd go back to age six, never make friends with Ryan, never let him into our lives. Maybe then he could have it all back, his sister and his Thailand shot. But those aren't the kind of do-overs Petronella offers.

She told Cal something big is coming for him as well. A huge white wave suspended above us, ready to crash.

Meanwhile, her show is selling steadily. The first one, tonight, is three-quarters full. Everyone who does a session with her has gone and told

another ten people of the miracles they've witnessed. Mick was so charmed he's coming with us tonight, which should make for an excruciatingly awkward outing. I want to keep him and Katya apart, can't think about them in the same room. I haven't discussed seeing other people with either of them so, as far as I'm concerned, I've done nothing wrong, but I still don't want to introduce them. I'd been spending most days with Katya, helping her with anything related to the show, but the last few days she's disappeared deep into preparation with Petronella, secret psychic things I'm not privy to. Readyng the ground, Katya called it.

Mick's still wrangling with the woman over a repair (him) versus a refund (her) when Uncle Graham walks in, dressed in his casual clothes but with an unmistakable air of ownership. I'm standing there with eight of his ugliest rings stacked on my hand.

'Having fun?'

'Just helping Mick with some sizing.' I can feel myself flushing under his stare. I take off one of the rings and set it on the counter. He takes my wrist and starts pulling off the rest, one by one.

'You try on other people's rings the way you try on husbands?'

I laugh, I can't help it. His fusty breath feels too intimate, like getting a whiff of a lover in the morning. The last ring is stuck on my knuckle and won't come off. He leans close and now I'm pulling back, almost bent backward over the display case.

'You sloppy fucking cunt,' he says. 'I should rip your tits off for setting foot in here.' And it happens so fast I almost believe it's not happening, but the woman lets out a little shriek as Mick vaults over the counter. The punch sends Uncle Graham crashing into the display cabinets, which shudder but don't break. The rings he took off me scatter all over the floor.

We're two shops away before we hear him yelling: 'I'll call the cops! If you set foot in here, I'll fucking kill you, boy.' I guess that's it for Mick's job. I get one terrible look at the blood pissing from Uncle Graham's nose

and I've still got the last ring, tiny chips of emerald and diamond, stuck on the middle finger of my right hand.

We drive to the sea, hearts racing. Mick parks by the old wharf, where jagged rocks form a fence for the choppy waves. I smell salt as I take off my jeans and straddle him. We've committed a crime together. Assault, robbery. His belt buckle digs into my thigh as we fuck and my knee's hitting the gearstick but his dick feels so good. This is the fuck I wanted from him. I lean back against the steering wheel and accidentally hit the horn in two short blasts. We laugh and he grabs the middle of my bra and pulls me towards him again.

'I love you, Nell. I fucking love you. Don't leave me.'

'I would be devastated if someone bought me a ring like this.' We're still parked up, smoking a joint from the glove box. 'It's expensive but it looks cheap as shit. Did you get Faith stuff from there?'

'Yeah,' he says. 'Every Christmas. She's got the white gold hoops, the charm bracelet, the eternity ring.'

'She should have kicked you out sooner.'

He smiles slightly, looks out at the sea, muddy and swollen before the break. 'Ryan and I used to cut school and come out here. We'd paddle over the bar and out to the surf. It was fucking dangerous. Once, we were out stupidly far and I saw this fin circling us, and I was like, shit, this is it, we're going to get ripped apart by this shark. And then it surfaces and it's a dolphin. And we surfed all afternoon with these dolphins.'

He takes the joint back from me.

'You know, sometimes, before I would remember, I'd find myself missing him. Not consciously. I'd just be sparring or watching TV and I'd feel weird, like restless. It should have been about April, but I wasn't thinking about her. How can I miss him? Sometimes I still catch myself wanting to tell someone something, looking round to crack a joke and there's no-one

there.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'I'm familiar with the feeling.'

'I know you always thought he was an asshole, but I grew up with him. I thought I knew him.'

Nothing's like how we thought it was, I think. We watch the sea a while longer.

I make him look away while I struggle back into my jeans. As I pull them up over the hump of my hips, I feel the ring slip a little. I pull it off my knuckle and hand it to Mick. He steps out of the truck and huffs it hard into the air. It spins and glints before it disappears into the water.

'You just chucked eight thousand dollars to the fish,' I say. I don't believe it. Surely he's going to pull the ring out of his pocket. This is the old Mick, the Mick who jumped off bridges.

We drive back through the seaside suburb, packed dense with old state housing, orange slate roofs for miles. Past the street Miri lived on but I never visited, the sea disappearing to a grey smudge in the rear-view. Past the Pigpen (officially called the Royal Public), where all the cops, including my father and Miri's, used to drink in the reek from the meatworks. It was a place of détente, cops mixing with the civilians they tangled with outside. Then the streets get wider and the houses start getting further apart, morphing into dinky little suburbans with fringes of gladioli. We skirt the golf course, where April and I spent a summer when we were eleven, scouting on the sides of the fairways, filling buckets with lost balls. Mick and Ryan sold them on to the pro-shop for fifty cents a ball. We kept them in movie rentals, Mountain Dew and burgers all summer and didn't get a cut. Above the golf course, the forest where groups of us searched for Fern Dempsey one night, but the next day her brother found her dead in her wardrobe.

'See you tonight,' I say when I get out, but I can tell he's far away, stuck again in the mess he's made of his life. He's lost that immediate freedom

high and I guess now he's thinking about the bills and his kids and his angry ex, maybe the cops turning up at Jacqui's.

It's Mick and me who have the twin griefs, not me and Leigh. A whole chunk of our pasts, sliced off and separated from the rest. No-one to say: I remember that. I never had anyone to share things with again. I would find something out and it would be like there was a little pebble rolling around my mouth that wouldn't go away until I told April. At that age, having things to tell is like having a gift to give and we would get hours out of it. Turning a thing over and over until we'd exhausted all the angles, all the possible meanings. There's no-one more forensic than teenage girls.

The time our classics teacher, Ms Michaels, had yesterday's stockings trailing from her pant leg and April called her over and let her know, in a whisper, the way one woman lets another know about something embarrassing. When we saw April's ugly cousin Ginnifer at the Video Ezy with this muscle-bound babe, and we decided he must be gay. Going to Ginnifer's hen's night when we were sixteen, drinking in her garage with a bunch of women twice our age, and our childhood dentist turned up as the stripper, waving his paunch and his goofy limbs around. Dying about it, why would anyone pay to see that. The endless mystery of Aunt Heather. Bigger than big, binding us together. Disappointing fathers. When we were thirteen, getting Rachel haircuts the same day. Bad fashion: butterfly clips and flares and space boots. What's the point of it all, why are we here, who will we be. Teenage-girl shit.

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I'M CHIPPING AWAY AT A beer when Cal, Leigh and Jacqui arrive for Petronella's show. Opening night. I've earnt my cash. I helped Katya set up, hauled boxes of booze, and now I'm sitting behind a pile of Petronella's books. A woman with lipstick bleeding into her foundation asks me where the bathroom is and I hope she's going to fix her make-up. A few people have bought Petronella's autobiography, but I'm not exactly run off my feet. She also has a quick guide to nourishing your own psychic abilities (which encourages you to book one-on-one sessions with her to harness your true powers).

It's a room full of cautionary tales and I include myself in that description. Mostly, they're the kind of women who Petronella trawls in pubs and stores, women radiating frustration. These are the kind of women who will tear strips off a waitress and then go home and cry themselves to sleep. Women who have been on a diet for forty years, starting with cabbage soup in the eighties, Mediterranean, South Beach and Atkins, now feverish with 500-calorie fasts. They're in the fifty to seventy age range. They've left a trail of decades burnt by rage and disappointment behind them. Petronella knows her mark. A few have brought uncomfortable-looking husbands, but mostly they run in hopeful little packs.

Jacqui and Leigh sail past, Jacqui pushing Leigh's wheelchair with the grim focus of a Formula 1 driver. I can tell by the set of her jaw and her

refusal to look at me that she's heard about Mick getting fired. They head for the crowded bar. They'll run the town dry of prosecco tonight.

Cal comes over to talk to me. 'You've done it now,' he says. He's beaming. 'Jacqui's filthy about Mick. It's all she talked about on the ride over. I quote: "I can't even bear to look at the two of them."'

'Cal, he hated that job. He hates his boss.'

He shrugs. 'Everybody does. Still got to have one. What's he going to do, go back to the meatworks?'

'I don't know. I was just there. I didn't hit anyone in the face. He's a grown man, he can handle himself.' I leave out that I've been crawling with guilt all afternoon, that I'm starting to get the creeping feeling that I owe Mick somehow, that I bear some responsibility towards him. Now I know how Jacqui feels about us all. 'I love you,' Mick said this afternoon. Was that just mid-fuck enthusiasm, or a man begging for rescue?

'Is he coming?'

'Supposed to be. He's been all about it since he had his session with Petronella, more charmed than you, even. But maybe not if Jacqui's been in his ear.'

'She never stays angry.'

'You've never really tested that theory, though, have you, golden boy?'

He grins and picks up a copy of Petronella's book. 'Do you think Mum would like this?'

I go in last. Jacqui won't sit beside me, and she doesn't want me and Mick next to each other, so she's made Cal sit in between us, and I'm on the aisle by Leigh in her chair. Cal's been used as a buffer most of his life so I'm sure he barely notices. Leigh's watching the shabby red curtains twitch like the lottery numbers are doing the cancan across them.

'Leigh,' I say, 'do you want a Malteser?'

She shakes her head without looking at me, which is good because I'm

starving. It's hard to tell if she's not talking to me or just deep in thought. We've said horrible things to each other before, let the sting of them fade away without ever trying to talk about it. You think saying the most hurtful thing, the truest thing, is going to bring you relief, and then you find yourself saying it again, and again, and again. Bleat, bleat.

Across Cal, I see Mick swipe a message off his home screen. His screensaver is a shot of Faith and his kids. She's still a pretty girl, Faith. She was a year below April and me in school. I don't know how she got tangled up with Mick, only that everyone thought a nice girl like her was exactly what he needed. That's a whole chapter of Mick's life that I missed. She probably doesn't deserve any of this.

The lights go down and he puts his phone away. Leigh's hand comes down on mine. I don't know if it's intentional, but it stays there, heavy flesh weight, until intermission.

First half, Petronella mainly talks about her life. She discovered she was psychic when she had a vision of a schoolmate's death. The next day, the friend was side-swiped by a truck when she was riding her bike to school, dragged underneath it for metres while half the school watched. No-one believed her when she said she'd known it would happen, accused her of trying to get attention. She learnt to keep it to herself.

She talks about knowing her first husband was having an affair, and who he was having it with. 'Although,' she jokes, 'that could have just been women's intuition.'

She's good. She's out here with nothing but a glass of water and she's bending them to her. I'm like you, she's saying. Shitty things happened to me, too. Her mother died when she was four. She's never been able to channel her. 'But I feel her with me sometimes when I'm about to go to sleep, that little pocket, a space where a mother will watch over her child.' She lets them know she was working class, she stayed true to her roots even

if her father made money out of his store. 'Not a lot of money in this business, believe it or not.' She's funny, she's straight-talking, she's the underdog. It's hard not being believed, by the cops, by people she could help. 'I know where the bodies are,' she says. 'But they don't want to know, or they don't want to know from me. There's girls out there begging to be put to rest, and I have to hold that in my head as I go about my day.'

She talks about reinvention after menopause, how her powers deepened after 'the change'. This is a woman who knows her audience.

At intermission they're five deep at the book table, a glinting scrum of heavy jewellery, musk and shrill laughter. I have to open the extra boxes stacked underneath the table, shove one of Petronella's cards in the front cover of each book. I don't even get to see Katya. She touches up Petronella's make-up at intermission because she sweats it off in the first act. I get back to my seat just before the curtains are due to go up. Mick's seat is empty.

'Where's Mick?' I whisper to Cal.

'He had to go, Vera's sick,' Jacqui answers for him, talking to me for the first time tonight.

'Who's Vera?' I ask, and her eyes just about pop out of her head.

'His daughter,' she hisses. 'His little girl.' She sits back in her seat. Cal's pissing himself.

'I thought it was his nana or something,' I say to him. Leigh shushes me and I take a handful of Cal's lollies.

When Petronella reappears, I can see Katya's done her work because there's an inch-wide tide line around Petronella's face where she hasn't blended the fresh application. She looks ghoulish but it lends a spooky weight to what happens next. We've reached the meaty part of the evening, where Petronella presses her fingers to her temples and receives messages from the dead. This is what the people paid their money for.

She's quiet for a long time. An uncomfortable shudder goes through the

audience as they wonder if something's wrong. Then silence. I'm filled with a sick air of anticipation. It'll be terrible, an embarrassment.

One hand shoots out towards the audience, salute like. There's a gasp.

Beside me, Cal lets out a little laugh. 'Jesus.'

She says: 'I've got a young man. Good bloke. Loves his cars, misses his girlfriend. Beers with the boys. He's worried about his car. He was working on it a lot before he died. It was unexpected, he left a lot of things undone.'

'That's my son.' A woman's voice from behind us. 'Our son, Ricky.' We turn to look and there's a woman in her sixties dragging a reluctant man to his feet.

'He says: "Hello Mum, hello Dad."' Petronella laughs. 'He's a cheeky fellow, isn't he? Says he's not sure about my haircut.'

Katya's got a microphone to the woman. She's absolutely aglow with hope, really sure that something is happening.

'Can you ask,' she says, 'what we could have done differently? If there was something we did? We would have helped him if we'd known.'

'My love,' says Petronella. She pauses for a time, head cocked. The woman's breathing is audible through the microphone. 'He's so sorry about that. It was just a moment of helplessness. Things got so messed up, he's saying. There was a woman in there. A girlfriend, maybe. A fight. He didn't mean it. He knows you love him, he's always known that, even if he wasn't always easy. He's so sorry for the trouble. He sees things so much clearer now.'

The father grabs the mic. 'Tell him his brother finished the car. Tell him it's a beauty. Tell him we think about him all the time.' His voice cracks on the last sentence and I feel like I might die.

The whole room swells with some blossoming feeling.

'That makes him so happy. He says: "Take her out for a spin, I'll be watching.'" He's got to go now, but he's so glad he got to talk to you.'

Katya takes the mic back from them and Petronella tells us that the spirits

get very tired from communicating with the earthly world, and so does she. She can hold them for longer but only if she has a quiet space, a connection to that soul only. 'Right now, they're clamouring. A lot of you have people who want to get messages to you. I can't get to them all.'

Someone comes through who wants to talk to their old golfing partner about his handicap. 'I don't know what this means,' says Petronella, 'but he's saying to work on your short game.'

We get someone's university roommate who's sorry for the mess she made, and the bad dreams.

Someone's grandma tells them to take more joy in life. 'Dance more, swim more, sing more.'

'I can't swim,' the woman says through tears.

'It's a metaphor, love,' says Petronella. 'You're never too old to learn.'

She mixes it up. Heavy hits that leave the recipients in tears, then a little bit of humour.

Ngaire from the pharmacy stands up at the mention of a very religious man who died in the last five years. Her father is sorry for being so strict with her, tells her to 'get out there' and have a shot at love.

Things wind down. Messages conveniently stop coming through on the hour. Petronella flogs her book, her private sessions. The crowd is shifting in their seats, picking up coats and bags, when she says: 'Wait.' Everyone goes still. 'I've got a girl. Young. Dark hair. Gone a long time now. I've kind of got her. Slippery one. She's saying: "I'm lost, I'm lost." I don't think she's ever been found.' Beside me, Leigh's doing a slow rise out of her wheelchair, hands gripping the sides. 'She's gone,' Petronella says. 'She wouldn't stay.'

The curtain falls. 'That's Heather,' says Leigh, falling back to her chair. 'That was her.'

Outside, there's the metal smell of cooling dirt, the acrid piss scent of the agapanthus. I push Katya against the rock wall. I found her smoking down from the theatre, can taste tobacco on her breath. Her cigarette drops to the ground as we kiss, sends up a thin white curl of smoke. My hand slides up her skirt.

'Where's your family?' she says. 'Do I get to meet them?'

'Leigh was tired, Jacqui took her home. Was that supposed to be Heather, at the end? That really threw Leigh. I told Petronella to stay away from her.'

'I don't know,' she says. 'Maybe it was Heather. Have a little bit of faith, Nell. Look at how many people she helped tonight. Look at how happy they were. She's just the messenger. People come through and she speaks for them.'

I was the one who told Petronella about Heather. I gave her that ammunition. I don't want to fight with Katya. I want to go home with her but she's busy. 'Petronella needs me,' she says. 'She wants to go over the show before tomorrow. I'll see you properly after the shows are finished.'

I kiss her again, a twinge of regret flashing in my gut.

I walk back to Cal's car and see a flash of lights from across the street. A tight, hard screech of tyres. I recognise the deep rumble of Mick's stupid V8 engine as he speeds away.

'Fucking spectacular,' Cal says. 'Did I just watch the collapse of your grotty little love triangle?'

I guess it's all out in the open now.

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THE HOUSE IS SMALL AND set on a stark yard. No garage, no garden or driveway. It looks like it was just plonked there by a tornado or something. But light spills from the windows and we can hear the party ringing out into the cold. You can smell the sea from here, muddled with the heavy layer of sweet offal from the meatworks.

Inside, Scott Nicholson puts an arm around each of us. 'The sisters are here!'

'We're not sisters,' April yells.

'Come and get a drink, not sisters.'

April and I actually don't look anything alike, but people mistake us for sisters because we're always together and we talk the same and share a wardrobe. Scott steers us towards the kitchen. I can smell that tangy, sharp sweat smell that boys have coming from his pits, feel the heat prickling off him. There's a pack of macaroni spilt across the countertop.

'Someone's been doing arts and crafts,' I say, but no-one's listening.

We can't find glasses so we just pass the gin between us. My mouth feels puckery and watery at the same time. The stereo is in the living room and it's packed in there. Everyone's standing close and I keep brushing against Mallory Chin's arm as she tells me that she thinks April and I are 'really cool, actually'. This happens a lot. At any party we go to someone will promote us to the inner circle, but by Monday we're nobodies again.

I already know that Miri isn't here. I can tell that she's not in any of the rooms.

Someone starts up the ice game, people across the room pass the cube from mouth to mouth. I hope it's gone before it gets to us, but by the time Jess Wake tongues it to Scott, it's hardly melted. I can see April's desperate not to take it from Scott, who's usually kind of goofy hot but has a weird white crust forming at the corners of his mouth. Scott passes to April who passes to Amos who distractedly delivers it into my mouth as he's passing through. He's looking for Genesis, who's skinny and strange and the only guy in the whole school I think I could bear to hook up with. But he doesn't seem to care much about dating, even though the school's most beautiful, thin and wild girls hang around him. He seems like a poet, even though he's in all the dumb classes.

The ice is only half gone, but I can't see anyone to pass it to. No-one's looking at me except April, who's frantically making gestures towards Tim Lombardi, but I can't touch Tim Lombardi, no way, who I saw covering a cold sore with his hand for a whole period of English only last week. It melts on my tongue and I'm freaking out about all the germs I'm swallowing, everyone's tiny invisible bacteria crawling around my mouth. Someone swaps our gin for half a bottle of warm Asti spumante so we're happy. The ice game starts fresh and when it gets to April again, Scott's like, 'Yeah, sisters!' but I could never take it from April, because we're closer than sisters and it would be weird. She gives it to Claudia instead and I know she's thinking about how they say Claudia's done so many blow jobs. I walk away before anyone can pass to me.

Outside the wind comes full and strong off the sea, laced with salt and ice. I can hear the waves even though the beach is a few streets away. There's a bunch of kids I don't know around a bonfire, Kieran's friends. Their faces look soft and waxy in the firelight. Someone calls out, 'Little piggy,' and I

hear them all laughing when I go back into the house. No-one would ever call Miri a little piggy, even though her dad is a cop too.

There's no toilet paper in the bathroom, just empty rolls, one stuffed with a used pad. I sit there and drip dry. In the muffled den of the bathroom I can feel that I'm a little drunk, that I could pull back here or keep drinking and fall off the edge. April and I call it 'riding the wave'. It's when you get that perfect level of drunk. Everything's nice and fun and you love everyone. Once you fall off the wave, you can't get back on it. You'll keep drinking and get unhappy or throw up or something.

I wash my hands for ages and hold my wrists under the cold tap, then hold my hands to my cheeks while they're still cool. I hate how blotchy I get. There's yelling and cheering from the lounge. I'm missing out on something, but I stay in front of the mirror. I look strange. Short and washed out and weird. Like I'm wearing a mask of my own face. I can't imagine what I'll look like in five, ten, fifteen years. Jacqui says I'll 'grow into myself', whatever that means. April's not the prettiest girl in school, but she looks like an adult and she has since she was twelve and started wearing make-up.

'Hurry up, girl, what the fuck are you doing in there?'

I open the door and some angry-looking girl from outside is standing there. 'I'm going to piss myself in a second,' she says.

'Sorry,' I say. 'I didn't know you were waiting.'

She clicks her tongue. 'It's disgusting in here,' she says, like I've done it myself, like I've been in here squeezing wrinkled toothpaste tubes and globbing shaving cream on the vanity, letting razor blades rust in musty puddles of water and hair.

Genesis passes me in the hallway, trailing a skipping rope.

'Hey,' I say. 'Great party.' He swerves to the side a little like I've frightened him and smiles his little startled smile but doesn't say anything. He looks like he never brushes his hair. He probably doesn't know who I

am, even though we have maths together. Leigh went mental when I failed maths. I didn't want to retake it, but she said I'd never get anywhere without it.

In the living room Miri is leaning against the wall, chatting to Kieran. She's wearing jeans and a tight white t-shirt. I can see her bra shining an even brighter white through her shirt. She's got a jacket slung over her arm, our team jacket in the school colours. She looks exactly as good as she always does, and I look like shit.

But before I can go and drown myself in the bath, April yells my name. She's sitting in the corner, sitting on Ryan's knee, which is so fucking weird. It's like my brain is producing crazy dream images. It's as weird as if Cal walked through the door, rolling a keg.

'You looked like such a dope, standing there.'

'I'm over it,' I say. 'I'm tired.'

'You're such a baby, Nell. Isn't she, Ryan?'

Ryan doesn't answer, just gives me his ratty smile.

'What are you doing here?' I ask him. 'This is a party for fourth form.'

'It's not,' says April. 'Anyone can come. Miri's here, she's in fifth.'

'Where's Mick?'

He laughs. 'Mick's busy. With his *girlfriend*.'

Me, Claudia and Jess play a game of how to get April away from Ryan, but it's like she's glued to his lap. She drinks from his bottle of beer, some spilling down her chin and then laughs her head off as he wipes it away with his thumb. That's the worst that happens. They don't leave the room together or anything, but it's still revolting.

'It's embarrassing for her,' says Jess, and then yells: 'April, get over here!'

She ignores us, even ignores Scott when he goes over there.

Eventually Miri comes and stands with us. She's been leaning against that

wall, talking to Kieran this whole time, listening like he's murmuring the answers to her end-of-term chemistry exam.

'Don't worry about her,' she says. 'Let her do what she wants and in the morning her brother will kill them both.'

There's a long silence and then Jess says, 'I'm going to find Amos,' and Claudia goes too. A lot of people don't really like Miri. People say she's mean and rude, but I know her better than most people.

April's basically whispering into Ryan's mouth now, like he's got an ear for a tongue and I feel like if we can just stop them from kissing it'll be okay. She's just having fun acting like she's a slut, showing everyone that she can get an older guy.

'That guy is so foul,' says Miri. 'He looks like a fucking Nazi.'

'I should do something.'

'Forget her. She's just wants attention. Come with me a sec.'

We go into the hallway and she tries a door but it's locked, so we go into the room at the end. 'I'm over here all the time,' she says. 'These boys don't care if I go in their rooms. I wanted to show you Genesis's fish but he's locked his door. Smart. People will fuck anywhere.'

'Whose room is this?'

'Kieran's. See those gloves in the corner? Those are the gloves he's going to beat your little fag friend Mick with.'

'Are you his biggest fan or something?'

'No,' she says. 'He's mine.'

There's no sheets on the bed, just blankets. The hollow at the base of Miri's throat is so smooth and bright. I have a flicker of a thought, of what it would be like to touch her again, not her messing around, a stupid joke, not by accident like when we smashed into each other on the court, but proper, like if I could place my finger in that little hollow. If I could control things, instead of always her being in charge and knowing what to do.

'You're so shy,' she says. 'Why do you have to be so shy for?'

‘I’m not. You’re not saying anything either.’

Big sigh. She looks around like she’s getting ready to leave.

‘Someone called me “little piggy” before.’

‘You are a little piggy,’ she says.

‘If I am, so are you.’

‘No,’ she says. ‘Your dad is the true pig.’

You don’t argue with Miri. Plus, we’re sitting on a bed, alone at a party. This is so like something I dreamt up for myself that I can’t relax.

She gets up and for a second I burn with disappointment, but she doesn’t leave. She goes through Kieran’s top drawer. I see a jumble of his colourful underwear. He’s always stretching and pulling his shirt up slightly so you can see his boxers and his abs. ‘Look at this,’ she says, handing me a magazine.

I’ve seen pornos before. One time we found one ripped to shreds on the field at school, bits of flesh strewn across the grass. It took the caretaker all afternoon to pick up the pieces. When we were younger, April and I used to go through my dad’s stash until Mum caught us at it. The magazines disappeared to another hiding spot.

Miri turns the pages slowly. ‘Who would you want to look like?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say. I can’t look at her. Heat’s radiating out from my chest, swelling my tongue. ‘None of them.’

‘Come on,’ she says. ‘Don’t be a baby. If you could be any of them.’

I fling my hand at the page she’s on. A two-page spread of a woman with a choppy blonde bob. She’s wearing a tool belt hooked with a hammer and a pair of safety goggles are balanced on her head. She’s crouched in a squat over a blade saw, her vagina perilously close to the blade’s jagged teeth.

‘Ugh, sick,’ Miri says, tossing the magazine on the floor. ‘I can’t believe you’re into that.’

‘You’re the one who’s into it. You’re the one who got it out.’ I don’t know why she’s acting like this.

‘Give me your hand, little piggy. Your trotter.’

I give her my hand and she turns it palm up.

‘My auntie showed me how to do this. She used to be famous on King Street, up north. All the pakehas used to go see her on a Friday night.’ She traces the lines on my hand. I’m using all my mental willpower to stop my hands from sweating. ‘Yeah,’ she says. ‘It’s not all roses. Your life is going to be pretty tough for a bit. That’s all these little lines. You need to choose a path. After that the line gets strong and whole again.’

She’s pressing her fingers into my palm, I couldn’t get away even if I wanted to. I pull back the tiniest bit, just to see, and she holds my hand even tighter.

‘This here, this is your lifeline, and it’s long and deep, which means you’ll have good health.’ She presses into the fleshy part of my hand, where it joins the thumb. Hard enough to hurt. ‘This is like, material stuff. Possessions. Once you’re on the right path, you’ll get the rewards that come with that, and you’ll be pretty comfortable. Holidays in Disneyland. Nice house.’ She frowns, leans closer to my hand, struggling to see in the dim light. ‘And maybe ... yeah. I see a swimming pool in your future.’ And she does this big phlegmy pull back in her throat and spits into my hand.

She’s laughing so hard she almost falls off the bed, and I’m sitting there with a palm of foamy spit.

‘Fuck you, Miri, that’s disgusting.’

‘I can’t believe you haven’t heard that one before. You were like: yes, yes, tell me more.’

‘I’ve got to wash my hands.’

‘Don’t be a baby,’ she says. ‘God. Here.’ She grabs one of Kieran’s shirts from the floor and wipes my hand. ‘Come to think of it, that’s probably his cum rag.’

I jerk my hand back. ‘God, Miri, you’re so funny. You’re such a joker. They should give you a prize or something: “Big fucking clown.”’

‘Calm down,’ she says. ‘You white girls can’t take a joke.’

‘Shut up,’ I say. ‘Don’t call me white.’

She laughs, but her face has got that hard, mean look it had when she was on the court, sending shuttlecocks over the net so viciously they were like giant bee stings. She would aim right for bare skin. ‘You are, though,’ she says. ‘A little pink-and-white pig.’

‘I’m going to find April.’

‘*I’m going to find April,*’ she mimics, in a whiny baby voice. ‘Fine. Go find your girlfriend.’

I shut the door on her, leave her alone in Kieran’s room. She seems to know her way around it. Everything I do when I’m with her is the wrong thing. I wish I could just be done with her, forget about her forever.

I walk into the lounge and there’s a scream and yelling so loud I think for a second that I did something terrible when I walked in. But then Amos busts past me yelling, ‘Call an ambulance, someone call an ambulance.’ A bunch of kids run to the room that was locked when Miri tried it earlier.

April and Ryan appear beside me. April’s mouth looks puffy and clownish and I know they’ve been kissing. ‘Where were you? What’s happening?’ she asks

Ryan pushes through the kids around the doorway and comes straight back. He grabs us both by the arm and says, ‘We’re going.’

The cold is a slap to the face. All those bodies had been heating the little house up. I shake Ryan’s hand off my arm, turn to go back inside. ‘Don’t drag us around, Ryan.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, Nell. Maybe you’d like to be here in ten minutes when the ambulance and all the cops show up so they can all tell your dad you were at a party where some kid slit his wrists.’

‘What kid?’ says April. ‘Oh my god.’

If this gets back to my dad, I’m dead, I’ll never leave the house again.

We start running down the street but we have to slow down because April

can't run in her boots. 'Is Genesis dead?' she says to Ryan.

I hadn't even thought about it being Genesis.

'He'll be fine,' says Ryan. He puts his arm around her. 'He's just fucked up. Who tries to kill themselves at a party? He just wants attention. He didn't even cut right.'

I look back to see what's happening at the house. The place is ablaze with light and boys' shouts ring out. Ryan makes us duck down behind a fence when we hear the ambulance, then the cop cars close behind. They go right by us.

April's doing these little shuddery hiccups and shivering and I realise I'm freezing as well. 'Did you see him?' she whispers.

I shake my head. He was probably in there when Miri and I were outside the room. He probably watched the doorknob turn. After the cop car arrives at the house, the street is suddenly full of kids, caught in the streetlights like scurrying rats. I hear barks and shouts along the street and behind us somewhere, the rise and fall of a girl's sobs.

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‘MEN NEED JOBS,’ SAYS JACQUI. ‘It’s a part of their psychological make-up. Mick’s lost his motivation.’

‘His motivation was to sell engagement rings?’ says Cal.

‘His motivation,’ says Jacqui, ‘is to provide for his family. Or was. Now he’s rudderless.’

I’m not taking the bait, though Jacqui clearly wants me to. Mick’s not my responsibility, and he’s also not taking my calls. Which is good, probably. It simplifies my life enormously when I don’t have to worry about double-booking him and Katya.

‘The fact that you spurned him for another woman doesn’t help, either. It’s a manhood thing. That Katya doesn’t really seem the type, to be honest.’

I close my eyes against the sun. I hate a man who thinks you’ve insulted his masculinity. If that’s his problem I’m happy we’re not talking.

‘What do I do with the dirt, Jacqui?’ asks Cal.

‘Just put it in a pile, love.’

Because of his stupid reading with Petronella, Cal’s decided he wants to plant a garden, and Jacqui’s come over to give him advice. Which means Cal is digging around in a patch of dirt land-mined with dog shit, and Jacqui’s yakking. I have never in my life known Jacqui to grow and nurture a living thing. She’s a rock woman.

‘I’ve got a feeling about all this,’ says Jacqui. ‘I’ve always had feelings about things. It’s not going to end well. I pulled the Tower the other night, and you know what that means. I was thinking about doing another session with Petronella, get some guidance from her. Really deepen my experience.’

‘Jacqui,’ Cal says. ‘Can you go get me those seedlings?’

‘Get them yourself, love,’ she says, blowing a cloud of smoke that slowly wafts over to where I’m lying. ‘I’m not censoring myself because your sister’s got her knickers in a twist.’

‘I think there’s enough Petronella fans in this family,’ I say. ‘I’m sick of hearing about the bloody woman.’

‘You’re working for her,’ says Jacqui. ‘The show’s just gotten better and better. I can’t wait for tonight.’

Tonight is the last show. This will be Jacqui’s fourth outing in the four-night run. She’s Petronella’s biggest fan. If Petronella told her that her knickers were on fire, Jacqui would jump in the river. Her discipleship hasn’t required any major lifestyle changes. Some new crystals. A deck of tarot cards. Ordering some books on communicating with the dead. Because, oh, of course, thanks to Petronella, Jacqui’s discovered her own latent psychic abilities. And, of course, she’s going to need Petronella’s guidance to really ‘bring them out’.

‘Have you talked to your mother this week?’ she says.

‘Too busy.’ Not really true. Petronella’s got Katya under lock and key, ‘grounding’ her powers, and Mick’s not talking to me, so that means I’m short on sex and sunbathing spots, which is why I have to lie here and listen to this.

‘You should go see her before tonight,’ Jacqui says.

Cal leans on his shovel for a minute. It’s irritating, how pleased with himself he looks. Cal Self-Improvement Jenkins. ‘So you really haven’t been impressed by anything Petronella’s done this week?’ he asks. ‘All that

stuff about the woman and her son, the whole favourite song bit?’

‘Katya sets it up before the show,’ I say. ‘She researches. People put their whole lives on social media.’

‘Did she tell you that?’

‘I just know.’

‘But how do you know? She seems pretty impressive to me. There are things in this world, Eleanor, that we just can’t explain,’ he says, turning back to his dirt and sending a shower of it over his shoulder. He’s being so fucking annoying. This is why we used to tell him to piss off as a kid. But why, Nell? But don’t you think, April? How do you know, though?

‘What are you doing, anyway, *Calvin*?’ I ask him, getting up to leave. ‘Laying in crops for the winter? Planting some apocalypse potatoes?’

‘I’m planting a garden,’ he yells at my back, ‘for the purposes of relaxation. You might want to fucking try it sometime.’

I’ve seen her do this four nights straight and there’s still a reluctant part of me that’s pumped up by it. The audience is rapt, held in a suspension of amber light. Dust motes softly gleam in the spotlight thrown on Petronella. This final night is a sellout. They’ve come from upriver, from the farms, from two towns over.

She tells it like this: there’s dead girls dotted all over this country. From the sun-buffed tip of the north, right through the widening middle country, down to the icy tail in the south. Decades upon decades of dead girls. The ones who went in her lifetime, she can hear them loudest of all. They’re a roar and not a whisper when she’s driving back from the country to the city, a roar that comes in with the crashing surf on one side, from the stretches of dark pine on the other. They’re in the dunes, she says, growing into hard, flaxen grasses. They’re stuck fast at the bottom of the sea, tiny fish darting in and out of the hulls of their ribs. They’re in the woods, she says, in shallow graves and deep graves, places that people never walk and places

that people tread daily. They're in abandoned houses and stuffed in old water tanks. The light follows her into the middle of the stage while she pauses to take a sip from her glass. In another town, she can hear them from the riverbanks, from under purpose-poured concrete, in back gardens and laundry walls. They're everywhere and she hears them all.

'Why not find them all, then?' she asks before anyone in the audience can voice the same frustrated question.

If only she could. But it's impossible to follow just one voice, she says. It's a jungle out there. She can't just pick up one strand and pull. That's why she needs a mandate. Someone else has to want to find these girls, to give her the impetus. Like a dog sniffing at a piece of clothing, she needs the scent. The psychic lead. So she can draw that one girl out, and bring her home.

'Can you hear any now?' someone calls faintly.

'They're everywhere,' she says. 'But yes, there's one in the ground, under this building. A long time ago, I can only just hear her.'

It's the image of Petronella assailed on all sides as she makes her way down the country. It's the tug on the heartstrings, the tragedy and faded nostalgia of it, that gets people thinking: maybe there's some truth to all this. It's this image that gets them out of their seats in the intermission, lining up to hand me forty dollars and receive a fat book with Petronella's card tucked in the first page: *The country's most respected psychic medium. Show Special: First session 15% off. Give your loved ones the rest they deserve.*

They think: this woman knows a lot of uncanny things, why not this?

Truth: there are, in fact, dead girls everywhere.

This network of dead girls, a crisscrossing electrical current, network of pain and loss and no more chances, underneath us all. The ground crackles with it. On the last night of her show, Petronella leaves her audience with the dead girls. This is her life's work. She can't give them justice, but she can bring them peace. And that's why, she says, that's why, the reboot of her

famed TV show *Psychic Rest*, a two-part special, will be focused on the case of a local woman, missing for over thirty years: Heather Boyd.

‘I hope you’ll keep her and her family in your hearts,’ she says, ‘as we embark together on this quest for answers, and for rest.’

She stands under the spotlight, soaking up the heat like a big old lizard, accepting applause from the wizened hands of the audience. I’m sure she blinks in my direction. I’m sure she can feel me, leaning against the emergency exit, sending rage her way. The curtain falls while she’s still in place.

I stand behind the book table and wait for the audience to leave. She’s really given it to them tonight and they’ve taken it.

‘Very moving,’ I hear a woman say as she departs with the stream exiting in the lobby.

‘I didn’t think I’d enjoy that as much as I did,’ one old coot says to his anxious-looking wife.

I’m on fire. Why the fuck didn’t anyone warn me?

‘Brilliant,’ says Jacqui, appearing in a haze of red. She doesn’t mind talking to me now that Mick’s not. ‘She gets better every time I see her. I can’t wait to see what she does for your Auntie Heather.’ She sees my face. ‘Oh no, love. Bloody Leigh didn’t tell you, did she. I said to her: “You’ve got to let Nell know.” You should have gone to see her.’

‘This is fucked,’ I say. ‘I won’t let this happen, Jacqui.’

‘She’s doing it for you, you know, you silly bitch,’ Jacqui continues. ‘My god, once upon a time this is all you and April could talk about. *Psychic Rest* this, Petronella that. She would have loved this.’

I feel the same burn of rage I get whenever anyone invokes April’s name as a reason to do something. ‘We were fourteen, Jacqui. I hope I know a bit better now. I know a grifter when I see one.’

‘Give it a chance, love. This could be good for all of you. Pet’s been very

good to your mum. I was up at St Marian's the other day and she was visiting with Leigh. She thinks very highly of you, you know. She's given Leigh a very special deal on all this.'

She sails off again. Her bright hair bobs through the crowd like a little tugboat.

Katya appears beside me. 'I didn't know,' she says. 'Nell, I didn't know that she was going to announce it tonight.'

'So you didn't know, or you didn't know she was going to announce it?'

'She's been to see Leigh, you know that.'

'Yeah, and I told her to stay away.'

'Leigh's probably afraid to talk to you about it,' she says. 'You're so negative.'

'Because it's a scam, Katya. Because Petronella's just out to rip people off. Sad people.'

'That's not fair,' she says. 'Leigh wants this. Everybody wants this, except you.'

I'm tired. Everyone around me is losing their mind, and it's all the fault of this one woman, who's somehow grown roots around my life.

'Get fucked,' I say to Katya, taking dumb satisfaction in seeing her shock, then her hurt.

'No, you get fucked, Nell,' she yells after me. 'You psycho cunt! Go fuck your brother!'

For a second I think she means Cal, but she means Mick. She's probably known all along that I've been doing them both.

It's a long walk home. Fat, spacey drops of rain start to fall when I'm on the hill. There's no-one around, I guess, apart from the dead girls lining the roads.

PART TWO

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WHEN JACQUI AND I WORK nights at St Marian's, it's a different world. We arrive just before eleven at the half-dark home, Jacqui still shaking off the bottle she had with dinner. Whoever's on shift before us is already waiting, jackets on, keys ready. Tonight it's Patty and Megan. Like us: one old and one young. Leigh balances the rosters in this way, according to some moral judgement of her own. Experience with strength, staid with flirty.

Megan's almost gleeful as she hands me Annie's file. Staff found Annie in a seizure three mornings ago. The body can take a long time to die, leaking liquid day by day.

'I wrote her notes up,' says Megan.

'Not much else to report,' says Patty. 'I think she'll hang on until morning.'

She'd better. Since Jacqui and I have been banished to nights, we've had three deaths. It's not called the graveyard shift for nothing.

I hate Jacqui on a death night. She gets all spiritual and opens windows 'for the soul to fly free'.

'The rest of them are sleeping like lambs,' Megan says as they leave.

'Like lambs,' Jacqui snorts. 'Like that silly bitch would know.'

Anyone who works nights has a superiority complex. We've got the toughest job, but everyone thinks we're shit. If they find anything left undone, the day girls roll their eyes and say: 'Bloody night shift. Lazy

bitches.' I know, and Jacqui knows, because that used to be us. Day shift is hard. It's showers and lifting, and it's eight hours of rushing back and forth with a cup of tea or a bedpan in your hands.

But night shift is eight hours of preparing breakfast trays and folding laundry and hoping someone doesn't die while you feel like you're on another planet. If someone's going to have a stroke, it'll be on night shift. If someone's going to get up and demand breakfast, it'll be when you're at your lowest ebb, hanging out to see the first flickers of dawn creep over the valley. After midnight, things come alive. These people get put to bed while the sun's shining. In their soft, drugged witching-hour state, they pad the halls wandering through all sorts of delusions. Looking for their babies. Looking for dead spouses. Looking to report for duty, sir. Looking for lunch that, if you wouldn't mind, I ordered hours ago. Looking for the exit, because I'd like to get the fuck out of here.

On the other hand, when all that's not going on, it's mind-numbingly boring. First thing we do is make a cup of tea. Then we stuff the washing machines with clothes and sheets and towels and set them to a hot wash.

We're both here under duress. Jacqui, because she's on her last warning, so Mum can appease the families of Jacqui's poor duped love victims and tell them she's not around anymore. Me, because I'm Jacqui's minder, though she likes to think she's mine. I do what Mum tells me to do. This is leaving money, freedom cash. It's harder to save money than we thought. April bought that car and now I'm constantly bleeding money for petrol. She says a car is essential for leaving here and, in the meantime, we can't die of boredom. Sometimes she talks like Ryan's coming with us, or like he's going to visit wherever we end up. Like the whole fucking point isn't to leave him behind. I know that's where her money goes. Keeping Ryan, feeding Ryan. Poor Ryan, he's so depressed. When she's not crying to me about what an arsehole he is, it's all: Ryan didn't get into police training, the system's rigged.

Ryan's so fucking googly-eyed he looks like a goldfish out of water. Who doesn't get into police training? They'll take anyone. It surprises me sometimes, the streak of hatred I have for this boy of my childhood. As long as April and I can remember, he's been Mick's sidekick. In another life, it could have been me who looked at him and saw someone to love. This scabby kid whose mother went and left him. I can dig up every gross, shitty, mean thing Ryan has ever done. Mick's skinny, snot-nosed little shadow. We used to gag over the yellow yeasty flakes that showed up through his close bristled hair.

Now April runs her fingers over that scalp. He's had a hard life, she says. You don't get him. Like getting him, feeling compassion for him, is a special skill that she has. He's sensitive, she says, when he's in tears after she doesn't text him for a few hours. He looks for her, sniffs her out. Once he found us down by the river, another time on the steps of the old water tower. He gets people to spy on us. He knows when April's talked to some guy, when she wore Corey Adam's jacket at a party.

Ryan worries, April says. He knows that other men are dogs. I know she likes it sometimes, this weird badge of pride at having such an insane boyfriend who can't live without her. How it's a little bit of power she has, reducing him and making him show his need.

From the dryers we pull still-warm ropes of sheets and shirts and old lady skirts and plain white undergarments. I can smell the fizzing static.

'It's kind of sad how all these people's favourite clothes just get ruined by the dryers,' I say.

'Everything makes you sad,' says Jacqui. 'Little Miss Doom-and-Gloom.'

She's not wrong. Everything does make me sad this year. My whole life is a million miles from where I thought it would be. I don't know why April and I didn't go to university like everyone else. They've all started their lives and left us behind. We were supposed to be gone already. I think she's

stalling, that she'll never actually be able to leave Ryan. They've been together for over three years, longer than any other couple from school. Then she tells me she can't wait to leave, to start her real life.

We put another load in the dryers. We do a round, walking the halls and checking in on known wanderers, bed rollers, anyone who might need a pad change, and Annie. I pat her lips with a lollipop sponge because she can't take water. It seems like torture to me, to die thirsty. The room is softly lit and warm. The whole place is kept on the edge of tropical rainforest temperature. I lose moisture by the second while I'm here. It makes things even more surreal, like how in dreams you always feel like you're moving through thick soup.

'That's a good girl, sweetheart,' Jacqui croons as we change Annie, rolling her back and forth between us. Jacqui will rattle on to people who can't talk back, which is good because talking like that makes me feel like a fool. She tells them what's happening, which must be nice if they can hear her.

We swap out the rags she's gripping to stop her from digging into her palms. The body curls in on itself. Toes curve backwards, people twist up like gargoyles. I was surprised by these practical details of death. Before this, I thought people should be in hospital where something could be done for them. Now I know that death is a long-haul flight, just a matter of getting comfortable.

Jacqui brings us bowls full of un-iced chocolate cake, heaped with cream, custard and stewed prunes. It's disgusting, but at this time of night you need an injection of sugar to keep you going. I don't get used to it, can't flip to sleeping eight hours during the day. It's patchy, and I dream of being here: call bells going off from every wing. Jacqui reckons she has two shots of Pernod neat when she gets home and doesn't wake up until her alarm goes off at 6 pm.

'Did you talk to Leigh about letting us back on days?' Jacqui scrapes the bowl clean.

My whole life she's been on one crazy diet after another and it always seemed completely normal to me. 'She's only doing it for your sake,' I say. 'She reckons she'll have to fire you if it happens again.' 'It' is her habit making a play for a resident's husband.

'I get bored,' she says. 'I get lonely.'

'Don't tell Leigh that. Why these old codgers, anyway? There's heaps of guys down at the club who'd be lucky to go out with you.' I don't even get why she wants a guy so bad. I always thought Jacqui's life was okay.

'One thing you're old enough to know is that a man's always going to want a woman to be a cut above him, looks-wise. If he's in his seventies, he'll want a trim sixty-year-old. If he's sixty, you have to be fifty. And a woman wants someone who can provide her a bit of security. I don't want some bludger who's waiting on his dole payment every Thursday so he can piss it away at the club. Say what you like about your father, Nell, he's always been a good provider.'

'Well, how do you explain April and Ryan, then? She spends most of her money on him and she's better looking.'

'It's different when you're young. April wants someone to love. He's a lost soul,' she says.

'He's a loser.'

'You'll understand one day. It's very consuming, your first love. Alright you, get folding, I'm nipping out for a quick smoke.'

She's strangely blank on the subject of April and Ryan. It's always, 'they're young', 'love is compromise', 'he'll grow out of it'. There's always the slight suspicion that I'm just jealous, feeling shut out. Like I'm somehow still a child because I'm not crying myself to sleep over some ugly guy. I know less, understand less. Like how I got my period a year after everyone else: 'You'll get it one day.'

We're folding the now-cool laundry when the call bell goes.

'Auden Wing,' says Jacqui. 'My money's on Bernard.'

She makes no move to go anywhere. It's the unspoken rule that I'll take it, even though we're supposed to do everything together. If someone's fallen out of bed, I'll have to run back and get her, leaving them stuck on the floor.

'Go on,' she says. 'Your legs are younger than mine.'

Jacqui will swear black and blue that Auden Wing is haunted. That the night Jenny Carr died she saw a young girl walk past the room in a nightgown. But the true worry is that St Marian's has been robbed five times. Once they convinced the night staff that they had a dying relative inside, another time they said they'd had a crash up on the main road. The rest just walked in through the unlocked side door.

People are under the impression that this place is swimming in morphine so they must be gutted to find themselves with a swag bag of antidepressants and pills to make you shit. It's never happened to me and Jacqui, but it's that thought, and the idea of old paper-thin ghosts appearing from the curtains, that prickles the back of my neck as I walk the halls.

It's Gerry, and I have to pull back the curtains and show him how dark it is before he believes me it's not breakfast time.

'I'll get you a sandwich and a cup of tea,' I tell him.

In the dining room, Jacqui's slumped on the couch with her shoes off, watching infomercials. 'I'll get back to the folding in a sec,' she says. She'd die if she had to do a day shift now.

When I give Gerry his snack he pats my hand and says, 'You're a good girl, you're the only one who's kind to me.' He has no idea which one I am, won't remember this in the morning.'

I check on Annie on the way back to the laundry. She's the same as we left her, wet gargling breaths. That's drowning, Jacqui says. The lungs slowly filling up. For the thousandth time I tell myself I'll kill myself before I get here. I straighten some things on her nice oak dresser, put a pair of shoes back in a box. It's funny how people who are bedridden, who haven't talked in years, might linger on forever but Annie was up and cracking jokes and walking a week ago and now she'll be gone before my next shift.

I'm just about to leave when there's a crack so hard at the window I'm sure someone's shot at me. A hideous, unhuman face appears, a skinned creature from nightmares. I hear it howling through the glass, which is still whole. My scream is weak, a warm-up. Human hands press against the glass. The howls turn into laughter. I'm left staring at my own reflection in the black glass. I'm shocked at how afraid I look. I bring my hands back to my sides, pull at the bottom of my shirt. Whoever's there will be able to see me, framed by the lamplight.

'It's okay,' I say to Annie. 'I'm sorry.' Even though she hasn't stirred, maybe hasn't even felt the ricochet of my terror.

Jacqui's asleep, ghoulish in the blue light from the TV. 'The vibrating stomach band works to engage your stomach muscles wherever you are, whatever you're doing!' a woman excitedly tells me. Jacqui does a wet death rattle in her sleep and she'd kill me for thinking this but it's not unimaginable that she'll be in a place like this. Not in the next twenty years, but soon enough. I go and fold the rest of the laundry. There's no sound in the room except for the click of the cooling dryers.

Years later I'll dream of standing in the rising heat of that room, seeing that face pressed up against the window. Later my brain could put it together, images and sounds that had been muddled by terror in the moment: Ryan, with a beige stocking pulled over his face. April shrieking behind him. Maybe Mick was there too. None of them ever said anything and I never confronted April. Lines were being drawn all that year. April versus Ryan.

April and me against Ryan and Mick. Me against Ryan. All of us railing against our families. You never knew what you'd wake up to. Never talking about the fact that throughout it all it was me against April, for the first time.

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I TRY TO NOT THINK too deeply about the ethical implications of my decisions. For my immortal soul, or whatever. My ability to sleep at night. But maybe when you do one dirty thing, like rat out your ex-girlfriend as an office predator so you can get a payout, you're marked. Maybe someone like Petronella will be able to smell it on you, that dirty-bitch quality pouring off you like a bad gas, and she'll wonder how she might set a match to it, use it for her own ends.

Or it's just money, and everyone has their grubby little price.

At any rate, Petronella knew the exact number that would get me in her pocket. She rang a few days after her final show, in that vacuum of silence when Mick wasn't talking to me and I wasn't talking to Katya. Long days of checking my bank balance and watching my mood get narkier by the hour.

'You already paid me,' I told Petronella. 'I already did your work.'

'This is something more delicate,' she said. 'Something Katya can't help with.' The amount she's offering is the exact amount I'm seeking from B-Comms. It's like having two irons in the fire, a bet on both horses in a two-horse race. 'Help me out, Nell. Get your mother on side, play along and get what you need,' she said, and I could hear nothing in the background, like she'd gone to the quietest room in the house to call me.

What could it hurt? Everyone already wanted this, why not make it easier.

I was sick of whingeing all the time.

That's why I'm here now, as Petronella, Leigh and Jacqui sit around my grandparents' ancient picnic table, hands joined, faces strained with the constipation of trying to deliver Heather from the spirit realm. I could tell them not to waste their fucking time, that the last place you'll find Heather is in the family home she so desperately wanted to jettison herself from.

But no-one's listening to me anyway. I'm a witness here, a reluctant chaperone to the silliness of these over-the-hill mediums.

The hills beyond my grandparents' house are blurred and soft. Little puff clouds suspended above them, exhaled breaths in mid-air. It's a blinder of a day, and we're doing a séance.

Every so often, Petronella murmurs something like, 'Hold it, hold the energy,' like she's trying to steady a bucking horse, or 'I can feel something now.' April and I did this better when we were eleven. Looking at Leigh's face, thin-lipped and weathered, taut with unaccustomed focus, makes me feel protective and then pissed off, so I get up and walk to the tree line, kick a few pinecones.

The last time I was here was the summer my grandfather was dying, the last summer April and I had to be looked after. We lay on the porch, talking and talking against the thing happening in the house. When we went inside for the toilet or snacks, the dark was immediately sobering, the low rumble of the trackside channel the only appropriate noise. But outside we were free to gossip, to muse on the mysteries of our future, to discuss April's crushes at length. Ryan was still just Mick's friend then, a guy April could have a safe and distant crush on, practise her flirting. When we went back to school, we both had a million new freckles.

Leigh's tenant let us in today. I recognised her, remember putting her in the shower when she was blackout drunk at some party up the hill. If she knew me, she didn't let on. She wasn't happy to have us there, even less

impressed when Leigh introduced Petronella and told her the place was going to be on TV. Probably it violates some renter's law. A magpie swoops down, kicks up a stink. I move back towards the picnic table.

'Fire,' I hear Jacqui say as I cross the lawn. 'I see a big fire. The heat.'

'No,' says Petronella. 'I see ice, cold. Dark night. I can hear a girl laughing.'

'Well, I don't see a bloody thing,' says Leigh, taking her hands back and breaking the sacred circle. 'It's not working.' She's sulky in that way old people get, angry to be embarrassed.

'No, it's not really working,' says Petronella. 'The energy's not right today. Maybe this isn't the place.'

For Petronella, Leigh remembers cold mornings, wading through dew-heavy grass. Warm buckets of stinky mash to the chooks. She and Heather each had a special hen. Debbie and Cissy. They made Valentines. Leigh's were prettier, but Heather always received more. It was the days when you'd give your girlfriends cards. It just meant friendship. Heather was popular, but it was Leigh who had the really close friends: Jacqui and a group of other girls she went around with. They would holiday with Jacqui's family at the beach, just out of town, every summer. Heather and Glenys won prizes at the Holiday Park beauty competition each summer while Leigh and Jacqui sat on the sidelines and cheered for their sisters.

'I thank god all that kind of thing was over by the time you were born,' Leigh tells me. I've been lucky not to experience the old humiliations, just the brand-new ones.

She's blithely giving Petronella all the answers, all the things she'll turn up later as miracles, after she uses Heather as grist for the 'lovely girl, a bit wild' *Psychic Rest* mill. Dozens of dead girls flattened into the same dead girl. The sun climbs overhead as Leigh talks. Petronella's top lip develops a precarious wet fur as she takes notes. Usually this would be Katya's job, Petronella kept at a mysterious remove. But Katya's not here. Maybe

because Petronella wants to keep us apart so I don't spill about the offer she made me.

'Heather just didn't want the same things that I did,' says Leigh. But I wonder if that's true. Maybe Leigh got what she got by not choosing, by getting kicked along by life until she got here.

'Is this for April?' the vomit girl says to me as we leave. 'The psychic and the TV show, is it about April?'

'No,' I say. 'It's about another dead girl.'

'I saw her slap Ryan's face once,' she says. 'Right in the Hangar. I saw her hit him.'

Screaming erupts from the house behind her, her kid donked his head on some sharp corner. She shuts the door on me. A few different choices, all this could have been mine.

'Something's coming,' Petronella told us this morning. 'Nothing will be the same after this. Get your affairs in order and gather your loved ones.' Leigh and Jacqui wide-eyed and nodding. Prophet bullshit.

We had our own methods for finding Heather. This was after we'd quietly put away the White Lady, without admitting that we'd both been playing. Scouring old photographs, looking for clues, taking note of ominous-looking men. Finding out that they were uncles or cousins. That only strengthened our theories. For a while our roving suspicion landed on Heather and Leigh's cousin Harry, who killed himself the year after Heather went missing. Without evidence or any hope of validation, our theories faded and bloomed according to our obsessions at the time. We went through a supernatural phase. Wasn't that a creepy glow behind Heather's head in her school picture? During our séance, April's hand had an involuntary spasm, a moment when she was certain she hadn't been in control of her body. Heather entered her and knocked over a glass of water,

her way of telling us her death had something to do with water. We said Bloody Mary in the mirror thirteen times at the stroke of midnight. We looked into alien abductions; we were obsessed with real abductions. Wasn't that creep in the headlines twenty-five when Heather went missing? He could have been kidnapping women since the late eighties. Didn't his latest victim look a little bit like her? Long dark hair, blue eyes? Every so often, in the middle of the night, I'd have the cold piercing certainty that my own father had killed her. Wouldn't a cop know where to hide a body? Hadn't he always disliked her, always been against any attempt to find out what happened to her? In the light of day, I'd know that it was emotionally possible, technically improbable.

Our greatest hope was Petronella Bush. She went where all others had given up, and we held hope in her for much longer than any of our other fads. By the time her show was cancelled we were too old for make-believe, but it still felt like the end of something. Heather had been the thread running through our childhood, the thing we returned to over and over that pulled everything together. *Psychic Rest* was cancelled the year April got with Ryan, and it was fitting that it happened at the same time. Everything between us was sidelined in the drama of their relationship, and we put our theories away for good.

I cycle back from the post office. The dildo and harness I ordered finally arrived, just in time to be absolutely useless.

I haven't done anything in the past week, not go to the gym, not ride, not cook, not fuck. I got an email from Seline, head of HR at B-Comms, to tell me my complaint was still going through 'the process'. No word from Lucrece. I rewatch the first four seasons of *The Nanny*. I send Cal out for packets of mini Milky Ways. I masturbate to wake up, and again to fall asleep.

The sun is setting, burning a bright track up the river. I cycle away from it and try to put a finger on the slippery feeling I've got about what Leigh is trying to do. It's the silliness of it, the exposure of it, the feeling of getting

one-upped by Petronella. When I was a kid we were always told to let things be. If Dad came home in a rage and said awful things, we had to put it out of our minds. Shut the door on the past even if it meant shutting an arm in there. 'I don't want to stir all that up,' Leigh would say when I asked about Heather. Now she wants to toss the whole fucking pot off the stove.

I know Leigh wants an answer before she dies. But I also know there are no answers, none that will bring you peace. Even if you know the whole timeline, all the hours between A and B, it doesn't help. You've just got more points to wonder if things could have happened differently. I know what happened with April, from the moment I last saw her to the moment they found her body. I know every moment we could have done something and didn't, each of us with a different stupid reason.

I turn for home because the sun's almost down, and the sky has that pre-dark softening. Headlights cut through the velvety blue dusk. I ride as close to the gutter as I can. There are too many cyclist horror stories in this town.

I'm thinking about whether I should stop and get something real to cook for dinner when the car on the other side of the road lets out a long beep and makes a hard swerve towards me. I jerk the bike towards the kerb and try to jump it. My wheel catches on the gutter and sends me smack onto the ground, bike on top of me. There's a gravelly rip in my hands and knees as I struggle to my feet. The immediate hot-cold burn of skin leaving skin.

Petronella's car sits in the middle of the road with the lights on. That stupid bitch tried to kill me. I feel a flare of victory. Finally, proof that she's the true psycho I knew her to be. But it's Katya who comes bolting from the car.

'Fuck, Nell, are you okay? Fuck, fuck, fuck, I'm sorry,' she says as I try rub my hands and knees free of the tiny rocks. Fresh rivulets of blood pour from some of the rips in my skin.

'Don't do that,' she says. 'Come with me, I'll wash them out.' People drive around us, beeping at the abandoned car.

‘I’m not going anywhere with you, you fucking crazy bitch.’

‘Please,’ she says. ‘You can’t bike home like this.’

She tries to lift my bike into the boot but she’s not strong enough so I have to do it. We drive up the hill and I see I’ve left a drop of blood on Petronella’s caramel interiors.

Katya cleans my knees and palms in silence. I sit on the edge of the bath and wince at the sting of the antiseptic and warm water.

Petronella’s downstairs bathroom is a disaster. There’s a tangle of wigs soaking in the bath, puffed up like sea creatures. A smell of ammonia and scalp. A soft layer of mica covers the vanity, crushed bronzer and blush shimmering under the light. The shower is full of old shells and swollen driftwood. I’d live in fear of a fungal infection.

Katya rifles through the cabinet for something. An uncapped lipstick tumbles out and leaves a coral smear on the tile.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ she says.

‘It’s rank in here, Katya.’

‘I know,’ she says. ‘Last time I cleaned that shower the shells were full of this musty piss water. But she won’t let me throw them out. She says she likes to live in a bit of the natural world.’

‘She makes you clean her bathroom?’

‘Part of my contract. But, as you can see, not exactly binding.’

‘What else is in your contract?’

‘Hmm,’ she says. ‘Let’s see. Chauffeur, cook, procurer of goods, general lackey and sex slave.’

‘Don’t be gross. God, that makes me sick.’

‘Calm down,’ she says.

‘I’ll probably get sepsis.’

‘I’m so sorry, Nell. How many times can I say it? I saw you just fucking pedalling away and I was so pissed off. Like, la la la, look at you enjoying a

nice ride while you're not picking up my calls. I just wanted to talk to you, to explain.'

'I'm sorry I didn't call you,' I say.

'There's nothing going on,' she says. 'I didn't even know that your mum agreed to do the show before Pet announced it.'

'But you knew it was a possibility.'

'So did you.' She smooths a huge plaster over my knee. 'You knew she was visiting Leigh. That's all I thought it was, just Pet doing her thing with Leigh.'

'I should've had her fucking banned,' I say.

'Shhh.' She puts a finger to my lips. 'She'll be waking up. She's been a nightmare since the show ended. Keeps me busy morning and night, has barely paid me.'

We look at each other. I don't know what to do. It's not over between us, and I don't want it to be, but I'm old enough to recognise a losing hand when I see one.

'Things just got fucked up,' she whispers. 'You and Mick, the show. I knew you'd be angry about the Heather thing.'

'I'm still angry. I had to sit in on their bullshit séance.'

'How can I make it up to you?' she says, looking up at me.

'Don't be cute,' I say. 'I'm not that easy.'

'Please, Nell.'

'I don't feel like it.'

But a slow pulse of blood starts up in my chest. She lays her head on my thigh and I put my hand in her hair. '

I feel like I'm getting sucked into something I can't control. This stupid TV show. Heather. It makes me feel so ... exposed. Like I'm walking around with my tits out.'

'Shhh. Just shut up a second. Stop thinking. Push me in the bath,' she says, pointing to the swampy tangle of wigs. 'Push my face under.'

‘In there? No way. That’s putrid.’

‘Come on, Nell. Punish me. Make me cum.’

‘Those are two different things,’ I say. But how can I stay angry when I’ve already struck a deal with Petronella? It just feels good to have Katya beg me, to need this from me.

I stand up and pull her up slowly by her hair. Open her shirt, pull her crop up over her breasts. Her tits look pale in the harsh light, her tan almost bruise yellow. I take one of Petronella’s ancient lipsticks, a fuchsia worn to a point. Each of Katya’s nipples turns slick and coloured under my hand. I paint her lips. Thick and bright armour. I turn her round to the mirror. ‘Look at yourself,’ I tell her. I cover her mouth and pull roughly at her nipples. I keep her mouth covered as I fuck her, feeling the tight grazed pain in both hands. She strains against me and I feel her mouth open and moan damply into my palm, which must have the sharp cloy of antiseptic. Just before she cums I take my hand out of her and wipe it on her shirt. ‘There,’ I say. ‘You’re punished.’

‘You’re a bitch,’ she says. The vanity is a mess of clawed handprints. The lower half of her face is smeared with lipstick. I wash it off my ripped-up hand. She’s still cleaning herself up when I leave the bathroom.

‘You’ve been in the wars,’ Petronella says from her chair.

‘I fell off my bike.’

She doesn’t wear herself out with sympathy, goes back to her gameshow.

I linger, still not sure if I’m staying or going. Are we made up or still angry?

‘Thank you for making things easy today, Nell. That was a very helpful conversation with your mum, my connection to Heather has really been strengthened.’ She gestures to the sweaty bottle of wine beside her. ‘Go get a couple of glasses.’

I should call the cops on the woman for, I don't know, elder exploitation or something. Unlawful manipulation. But I go get the glasses so I can partake of her shitty wine. There's something about her refusal to be bothered by my rudeness that makes it seem childish and hysterical. The layer of grease on the wine glasses is so thick you could peel it off like old skin.

'I hope you two will play nice. Katya's been lost without you. I told her: "True love's path never runs smooth,"' Petronella says when I hand her the glasses. She pours wine for us both. 'Just remember, our phone call, that's not to be whispered about between lovers.'

A moment passes between us, a look on her face I wish I could record for Leigh, for Katya. I've got you, it says. A glimpse under the mask, where the crocodile sits, smiling.

Katya comes in and perches on the edge of Petronella's chair, takes a sip from her glass. I can see a pink graze of lipstick seeping through her t-shirt.

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HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE to fuck? We're stuck out here until they finish. Dylan plays me random songs from ripped CDs, sleeves filled with silver discs, marked with his insane handwriting. Fuzzy stuff, like it's far away, coming through on a twisted wire. Ryan's cousin is even grottier than Ryan is, if that's possible.

I tap the dreamcatcher hanging from the rear-view mirror. It sways back and forth.

'My mum's into all that Indian shit,' he says.

'Yeah, but if you fall asleep in your car you're already in trouble, having a nightmare's probably not the biggest of your worries.'

He looks at me blankly. I feel the pressure of trying to entertain him, keep him amused until Ryan reappears. I hope they don't take ages in there. Dylan has to drive Ryan home and I'm supposed to stay at April's. Usually Ryan would stay as well but Glenys has banned him from sleeping over for two weeks because of the fight they had when April ran out of credit and didn't text him for a night. Glenys says she needs them to prove they are 'mature enough for an adult relationship'. But that doesn't stop April sneaking him in. They don't like going to Ryan's place because Ryan feels weird about Mick being in the next room.

If I go home now, it'll be twenty levels of security before I can get through the door. My dad hasn't chilled out since the whole Shannon

McClusky stomach-pump incident. Which is shit because April and I weren't even that drunk. We were the ones who had to put her in the shower and call the ambulance.

So I'm stuck here with this Gollum. April kept whispering to me all night, 'My precioussssss,' while we looked for some mystical party that Ryan heard about. We drove round the streets for hours. We saw Miri on the main street, but Ryan wouldn't stop because she was with Carlos Maniapoto and he hates him because Carlos kicked Ryan's arse back when. I think Miri saw me. We looked at each other for a second. Then Ryan drove to the river, the lookout, a house on the hill where he was sure the party was. But it was all dark.

On the way back to April's we ran over a white-and-ginger cat. April screamed. 'It was already hit,' Ryan said, but it was still horrible. She's just happy to spend all night driving around with him, who cares if it's boring for the rest of us. When we got here, she was like, we just need half an hour, blah blah, we haven't been alone in a week. Since they started fucking she acts like she'll die without it, like she needs his dick or something. It's repulsive. We can't even go inside because April's mum, Glenys, sleeps right next to the lounge room.

'There's nothing happening,' says Dylan. 'I used a whole tank of gas getting up here. I guess at least Ryan's getting some.' His bum-fluff moustache catches the streetlight coming in the window. He's like, twenty years old or something and works on a dairy farm two hours away, out near the big marae where Miri's family goes. He has to get up at 4 am to milk some cows.

'Yeah,' I say. 'I'm sorry. There's usually at least one party.' I feel like it's my fault for living in a shit town with no good parties, for not being old enough to go to the pub. 'I feel bad that you came all the way out here.'

'It's okay,' he says. 'Not a total loss.'

He leans over and brushes my hair back and kisses me, like I knew he

would, and my back brain is like, no, this is really gross, but the rest of me is like, at least it's something to do.

'Do you want to jump in the back?'

'We're not having sex,' I say as I clamber over to the back seat.

'Calm down,' he says. 'I don't want to fuck you.'

Up close I can imagine he's better looking than he is, just a flash of thin lip, sandy eyebrow, pale-blue eye. As opposed to the gremlin-looking guy he actually is. That moustache, though. Fuck. I close my eyes and try to feel something about his hand rubbing the hard seam of my jeans. My hands run up his back like I'm having a good time, but I skim over a pimple so I just hang onto his hips.

Our shoes keep skidding across the door and he's worried about scuffing the interiors, especially with my boots. He opens the door so our feet stick out. I don't know where all this spit is coming from. He doesn't really open his mouth or move his lips, just presses his mouth hard against mine. I guess his saliva is just seeping through.

In third form Megan James told me and April about this trick where if the kisses are too wet, you kind of suck the guys mouth and swallow all his spit with your own. Like one of those suction straws at the dentist. But the thought of swallowing his spit makes me gag and I'm scared that maybe he thinks I'm the shitty kisser, so I say: 'I want to go down on you.'

He sits up, less excited than he should be, jiggles his pants and shiny boxers down over his skinny butt. I know the reason he hasn't taken his hat off is because he's a ginger, like Ryan, like April. His dick kind of unfurls from this nest of red curls, thick and white.

'You're so hot,' I say, because I need to say something, to explain to him why I'm doing this.

It's is my first-ever blow job and everything I've been told is wrong. I thought guys were supposed to immediately cum when you lick the tip. I'm using the technique I read about in *Cosmo*, lots of tongue, like you're

licking ‘a rapidly melting ice cream’, but it’s not really working. He shifts around, like he’s impatient. It’s like I’m having a minus effect.

‘Can we try a little less tongue and a little more mouth action?’ he says.

It’s a light going on, he gets properly hard and starts breathing heavy and kind of jerking upwards into my mouth, and I get it, I understand what I’m supposed to do.

How is this hick fuck teaching me how to give a blow job? It’s embarrassing. Mick told us that girls didn’t have to be good at sex, because the absolute worst sex with a girl was still better than wanking, but it seems better to know what you’re doing.

I’m keeping time with the Cat Stevens track playing, my jaw is getting sore and I can’t figure out how to get things wrapped up.

The slam on the car roof scares the shit out of both of us, I sit up so fast I hit my head.

‘Fuck, fuck, fuck,’ he says as he jerks his pants up.

‘Step out of the car.’

I can barely see the two cops standing outside, one of them is shining a flashlight right at us.

‘Are you okay, miss?’ the woman asks.

‘I’m fine.’

‘What are you two doing out here?’

‘Waiting for a friend,’ I say. Dylan’s gone completely silent, looking at the ground, still trying to do his belt up.

‘Take your hat off,’ the guy cop says to him.

Dylan pulls his beanie off and there’s this beat of silence where no-one knows what to say. Even the cops are stunned. Dylan’s transformed from an ugly twenty-year-old to this deformed old man with a hairline receding back over a huge prominent skull. Gollum was more right than we knew. He gives me a sheepish look and the cop makes a noise of disgust.

‘Christ, son, put it back on.’

‘Have you two seen anyone run through this yard?’ the woman says. She’s trying not to laugh, trying to keep her voice stern.

I don’t know these cops, thank god.

‘Just out for a romantic time, are you?’ says the guy. ‘Don’t let us ruin the mood, lovers.’

They stroll off again, we can hear them laughing, then the soft hiss of their car pulling away.

‘Fucking pigs,’ he says.

I feel bad for him, he’s been shamed, so when he starts kissing me against the car, I let him, let him undo my pants, put his hand in my underwear. I’m half turned on, marshy between my legs.

Maybe it’s better because he’s kind of angry, he opens his mouth and kisses me properly.

I steady one foot against Glenys’s fence and move myself in his hand until I feel something. A burn, or a catching, like a match snicking on a match strip. I didn’t know I could do that, control it.

He starts to say something, but I snap, ‘Shut up!’ and lean my head back on the car.

Flickering through my head: the first time I saw a naked woman on TV, Brooke Shields in *Blue Lagoon*, the woman straddling a power saw in that magazine, watching the boys pass around porno magazines at school, tearing the pages up to make the perfect woman. Mick spitting out his mouthguard after a fight. Cathy Low doing a lap dance on Amos Knight at a party. Miri spitting in my hand.

When I cum, everything merges together like a dream rushing down the drain. My cry fires a shot across the dark. A bird wakes up in a nearby tree, squawks a couple of times.

We’re both quiet for a second, then he takes his hand back and wipes it on his pants.

‘Jesus, you loved that. You almost took my hand off.’

I can't look at him, can't believe I've done all this with him. It's like going to sleep while someone else is driving and waking up amazed you covered all this ground.

The lights go on in April's room and I hear a few thumps. Ryan and April come out and she's in her pyjamas and I know she's been asleep, that bitch.

'Sounded like a good time out here,' says Ryan. 'I hope you kids used protection.'

'Shut up, Ryan,' April says. Dylan and I watch them kiss goodbye, and we kind of shrug awkwardly at each other.

When we're in bed April whispers: 'Please tell me you didn't hook up with him.'

'I had to, you guys were gone for hours.'

'We fell asleep,' she says.

'You shouldn't have just left me with him. It's bullshit. These past few months you've been totally gone, it's like I don't even know you. He's always with us.'

She doesn't even get defensive, talks like she's in a dream. 'This is just love,' she says. 'I wouldn't expect you to understand. You'll get it when it happens to you.'

'Just don't leave me with any of Ryan's deformed cousins again.'

She rolls over and underneath the smoke and sex and perfume I get a whiff of Pantene, the smell that Cal used to bury his face in.

'Your hair smells like jizz,' I tell her.

'Your breath smells like jizz, you Gollum-dick-sucking slut.'

I'm still awake when the streetlight turns into day. It throws a line across April's poster-covered ceiling. I keep getting flashbacks of Dylan, his hollow eyes, the look he shot me when took off his hat, like he understood the deception of it, that he'd tricked me into hooking up. But I let him touch me after I'd seen him.

I feel the lift of being a woman of the world. Knowing how to give a blow job, getting felt up against a car. Knowing something's gross and doing it anyway.

For the first time I get what April maybe feels for Ryan, what any girl feels for a guy, the opposing tides of disgust and desire rolling you back and forth like a shark in the surf.

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I WAKE EARLY IN KATYA'S light-filled sleepout. She'll sleep for ages yet. My gut feels like a blood-filled sack. Heavy, black-bruised pain.

I'm relieved to be back here with her, but I feel a predictable doom. Like when you're watching a movie and you already know the boat is going to sink. Again and again I tell myself that what we have is more than the chemical hammer of first fucks smashing my common sense to bits. I tell myself I've never felt like this before. I tell myself I'm still in control. It's like there's a string between us, connecting us cunt to cunt, and a vengeful, horny god keeps plucking at it. She knows when I want her and I know when she wants to be wanted. Is that love?

I root around in her bathroom cupboards, but she hasn't got a single tampon. It's nerve-racking, going through her stuff, even with a legitimate cover. Because I want to go through her things. I want to find something. Our lady of the hidden secrets. I finally find a tampon in the lining of my backpack, sliding around with coins and hair ties and a bunch of other crud. I'll go out and get some supplies and maybe a coffee, otherwise I'll just be lying here ruminating until Katya wakes up.

It hits me like a brick halfway down the hill that this is April's death day. It was the end of summer, I was at work. I was going to meet her at the Hangar later. Jacqui rang me in the middle of my shift. She'd done her back and was on leave. I had to keep working because there was no-one else. The

sun set and when I walked out, Leigh and Jacqui and Cal were waiting in the car. Cal had been bawling for hours, but I was still back at that phone call with Jacqui, trying to feel what it meant.

I've never been home for one of April's anniversaries. Jacqui did a big thing for the tenth a few years back and wanted me to come home, but I went to Vietnam with my girlfriend.

I turn at the bottom of the hill, follow the river up.

I sit across from where they found her. It's the wrong bank, but as far as gestures go it'll have to do. It's almost an intellectual exercise, waiting to see if I'll feel anything, if the pressure valve inside me will release a little. Isn't that what's supposed to happen? The emotional breakthrough everyone's rooting for me to have. Process your feelings, get some closure. Move on. If I can just yell and gnash my teeth already, if I can throw myself on the muddy riverbank and immerse myself in the brown, gassy river. If I can have the moment, I'll get the reward. I won't have to go around feeling the guilt and this awful nothingness, this gap where I'm supposed to want things and move my life towards them.

It's still early but I can hear traffic rising from the road behind me. I spin through the merry-go-round of memories in my head, trying to find one that encapsulates our friendship, how nice and good and comforting it was. I remember the crack of twelve kids diving into a freezing pool, April and me waiting our turn in matching black togs, arms crossed over our chests. The smell of chlorine mixed with musty wet wood of changing rooms. Going to *The Lion King*, our first outing without parents, Mick and Ryan sitting three rows behind to keep an eye on us. Walking across the frosty white sports fields on winter days, leaving a trail of footprints behind us. Dyeing our hair burgundy from matching box dyes the night before our first day of high school.

But what I remember most, the memories that stutter and reappear no matter how often I shove them away, is how I was turning from her, that last

year. Hearing again about how jealous Ryan is, like it's a badge of pride, how often he wants to fuck. How they might go live in Surfers actually, because the scene is so great, and Ryan can make money over there. How all the boys at the bar hit on her but they won't do anything real because they're scared of Ryan. How Miri's just playing with you, Nell, she won't even acknowledge you in the street, she'll never be what you want. How she knows what she's talking about, she knows about love.

Until I got this pit of anxiety in my stomach when I saw her, or the pure rage I would feel when she'd dump out her huge handbag and strips of condoms would fall out and I'd know that's what she wanted me to see. *I'm a grown-up and you're a baby.* She got tangled up in the same physical loathing I had for Ryan, and I wanted to be free of them. Before, it had been us against everyone. I could see she'd been sucked in. Miri was right: she was a fucking loser and she wasn't going anywhere. I would have left her behind, no problem.

If she'd died a year or so earlier I would have been able to have this raw grief, sap pouring from torn bark. But what I felt for her right then had this black streak running through it that's festered and mouldered over the years. I tell myself there's only one person to blame for what happened but it's not true. We all walked away with a serve of responsibility.

It's only when I get up to leave that I see Mick. He's on the other side of the river, watching me. I guess he saw me ages ago. I guess he comes down here every year. I wonder what memories he's flicking through, if I'm in any of them. Ages six through twenty-three he knew Ryan. Too many memories to edit around. I wonder if you stacked our blame portions side by side, whose would be bigger.

I wave, he waves back.

I haven't seen him in weeks and I haven't heard from him either, apart from a couple of sulky texts ripping into me about Katya, about betrayal, about everything he gave up for me, after he saw us outside of the theatre.

No mention of: 'I love you, Nell.'

But as we stand there, the river between us, I know that the thing we have is love, tugging as deep and hard as the current. Not hot, chemical, drug-fucked love, but love like when part of you is mixed in with someone else. Love that you can't do anything with because you don't belong in each other's lives but it's always going to be there. I don't know what he's thinking about as he watches me, but that's what I'm thinking. And when I get home later that afternoon, he's waiting on the back steps for me.

The thing about Mick is he's got a body like a nineties Calvin Klein model and a dick like a heat gun. Sometimes god's gifts are an embarrassment.

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WE SKIM THE CITY LIMITS looking for Heather, but we never breach them. We never take the fateful road she did, heading north out of town. The day we try, a milk tanker overturns and floods the highway. Instead, we follow the river out to the sea, drive to her old house, looking for potential shoot locations and places where Petronella can get vibes.

Cal comes with Katya and me to the beach, to where Heather lived with some friends before she disappeared. We walk up the silvery grass-spiked dunes and look back at the houses. A big wind blows salt and sand. Fine, gritty dust settles on my skin.

‘It’s gone,’ says Cal. The house where Heather lived has been knocked down and replaced with a glassy little beach house.

‘It’s been thirty-something years,’ I say. ‘This is prime real estate now.’

When Heather lived here, the suburbs out here were state housing. Black iron sand glittering in the gutters. Even when I was growing up, it was still considered undesirable. Like everything else here, it’s been re-evaluated and reimagined. The shabby old houses nestle between new builds. A poodle rabidly scratches and yelps at the window of the house. A far cry from the abandoned dive Heather and her friends turned into a squat.

‘This won’t work,’ says Katya. ‘We’ll just use some footage of the sea when we talk about this period.’

All this chat about establishing shots, rummaging through the places of

the past – it feels like play to me. Like we’re all just kidding ourselves. Katya hardly knows anything about this stuff, she’s just muddling through Petronella’s garbled instructions. It’s impossible to imagine Leigh actually on the show, talking about Heather, the thin line of her mouth and stern brow blown up oversize. How will the hard woman play on screen? Can Petronella make her sympathetic, crack that shell? I can’t imagine it, and I don’t think it’ll really happen. Leigh will get cold feet, suddenly see Petronella for the con artist she is. She’s had too much time to dwell, up there in St Marian’s. But once she’s back in the real world, she’ll come to her senses.

We get fish and chips and sit at a table overlooking the water. Within minutes we’re swamped by seagulls and sand is in every bite, but Cal and Katya seem to be having a good time. She’s telling him things I haven’t heard, how her brothers would race four wheelers in the dunes up north, how she would be clutching onto someone’s back. She did her Year 11 photography project on the sea. She helped her grandmother plant a garden like the one she’d had back in Hungary, rows of cucumbers, cabbages and tomatoes.

Katya does a reading for Cal, pinioning the cards with her long nails to keep them from flying away in the wind. She tells him he’s very sensitive, needs to get out more, needs to step outside other people’s idea of him. I already told him that. It feels like I’m some grumpy aunt, trailing a couple of lively teens for the day.

‘It’s weird how much you got out of Katya when I’ve been asking her about her life for ages.’ We’re back home, folding three weeks’ worth of laundry.

‘Is it?’ he rolls up a pair of my socks. ‘No offence, Nell, but you’ve got two modes: wrapped up in your own shit or trying to bust people open with a crowbar.’

‘That’s such a shitty thing to say.’

He shrugs. 'It's not a big deal. Everyone's got a thing. It's not the worst. Jacqui says I'm good with people. I'm an empath.'

I'm going through a thousand scenarios that prove him wrong. Didn't I come back here to look after Leigh? Haven't I sacrificed my personal beliefs and wellbeing to be involved in this stupid show, just to make my family happy? How not wrapped up in my own shit is that?

'Today was fun,' he says, swiftly moving on from destroying my personality. 'It was kind of like old times. Like being with April.'

'Katya's nothing like April.'

'She kind of is. Sarcastic. Fun.'

'You're just saying that,' I say, 'because she was charmed by your whole sensitive dreamy boy act.'

'I'm just saying: she reminds me of her.'

Bring Petronella your dead girls. Bring her your scraps of memory, the favourite t-shirt, the empty bottles of Ruskov lining the dresser like trophies, propping up curling pictures of girls in long gowns, faces blasted with flash and too much too-pale foundation. Bring her the last words dashed off before she went to the shops, the pub, the loo. The dog who returns home trailing its lead, shamed and scared. Bring her an old stuffed toy, a picture of a girl who smiles almost like she knows she'll grow up to be a mystery. Bring her your best and sharpest memories already beginning to fade to stock images, your clichéd adjectives, your suspicions, your regret. Bring her how no-one else really seems to care, how you're starting to lose hope. Bring it and she'll weave it all together into something with a beginning, middle and end, something that can be tied off neatly, instead of winding its threads through the rest of your days.

When I visit Leigh, I take her a stack of thrillers. Books about forensic scientists, about plucky medical examiners, hard-nosed detectives, private investigators who don't know when to quit. She loves a good serial killer,

can't seem to make the link between these gory fantasies and the banal tragedy of real life.

'I'm sick of dead girls,' I said to Lucrece, near the end. Truly, I was sick of her grisly podcasts playing while we were making dinner, the self-important narrator voice dimming to a respectful hush in all the right places (sick, as well, of the implication that this was something we did together, since it was blasting out of the speaker and not in earbuds shoved into Lucrece's little seashell ears). I was sick of speculation and bloody detail, of killers who are more interesting than their victims, because they move like ghosts through walls, stupefying pets, and leaving neighbours and boyfriends undisturbed.

I was sick of them being used as fodder for bad TV and worse novels, some heavy-handed page-turner with a blazing sun setting through pines on the cover, or a woman with her face turned away – never show her face, it's part of the mystery. Let her remain faceless, clueless, gormless, blameless.

'You know most women don't get killed like that,' I said to Lucrece. 'You know most girls don't get the elevation of being a mystery, a case, a talking point. They get to be cautionary tales, at best. You know that most of us still blame dead girls, just a bit, time hasn't moved on that much, most people are still going to wonder: why'd she stay with him, why'd she go back, do this, do that, she wasn't exactly an angel.'

'You're so self-righteous,' said Lucrece. 'Don't be boring.'

'I'm just sick of this dead girl obsession.'

'Maybe they should stop killing us, then,' she said.

She kept consuming her grisly little stories, gleefully playing them when I was around. It was too close to the bone for me.

'Leigh,' I say now. 'Do you remember Mick's leaving party?'

'How could I forget?' she says. 'You and April were mullocked.'

'We weren't, though. I just don't understand why no-one did anything after that. Everyone acted like we were the problem and we were just kids.'

‘Not all this again,’ she says. ‘We’ve talked about this. Those were different times. April was always pushing things. You always want to blame people.’

‘Well, there are people to blame.’ But not Leigh, never Leigh. Not Jacqui either. My father only had a hand in things after April was dead. So then who? Who’s to blame?

‘They dropped Edith Crowley in the shower this morning.’ Swift direction change, faint and slip. She grips my hand. Everything with her has the air of a death-bed confession these days, despite her obvious recovery. ‘That’ll be the end of her. Get me out of here, Nell,’ she says. ‘I’m ready to come home.’

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‘YOU HAVE A FUNDAMENTAL LACK of imagination,’ Katya tells me. ‘Petronella could lead you to a pot of gold and you’d still call her a fraud. What if she actually found something about Heather? Would you believe her then, or would you still be too proud?’

‘Katya. No episode of *Psychic Rest* ever led to an arrest, or a body, or anything real. There’s nothing to believe.’

She lets out a huge sigh. ‘You have no fucking idea how condescending you sound.’

I do, actually. I know it and I hate it but I can’t stop poking at her. Because I want her to see that I’m right, that I’m better for her than Petronella – Petronella who, coincidentally, hasn’t paid Katya’s wages in over a month, so now I’m keeping Katya in cigarettes with Cal’s money.

‘Tell me, then. Tell me why I’m wrong.’

That sigh again. ‘One,’ she says. ‘I’ve seen what Petronella can do. Not the uncanny little things. Real, powerful stuff.’ She rolls over, pins me with those spooky green eyes. ‘Two. Petronella saved my life.’

She was almost one of Petronella’s girls.

This is the long version of their origin story. Two days after she met Petronella and handed over her make-up bag (‘I just need to do a little touch-up during intermission, I’ll get it right back to you.’), including the

highlighter to end all highlighters and the most expensive thing she had to her name, Katya's expecting never to see the woman again. She's considering which of her kit she can replace cheaply, which things she has to fork out for again. She's angry about it but mainly because it's another example of her impulsiveness. She'll have to restock before school formal season. She can do ten girls in one afternoon, having inherited at least some of her grandmother's efficiency. Petronella's show finished a day ago and a whole shift went by without Petronella dropping in, as she'd promised. 'You fool,' said her workmate, Clare. 'I can't believe you trusted her. She makes a living out of ripping people off.' As though Clare hadn't been totally taken in by Petronella and her assessment of her love life. ('Someone's going to come into your life soon, darling, a big, muscly bloke, and you'll see that it's all been worth it. All your lonely nights.')

Katya's sure she's never getting out of this town. Her brother got out: he went to prison. He's probably seen more of the country than she has. This is what she's thinking about on this muggy afternoon, mosquitoes skimming the bathwater. Nan's at cards and Katya's boyfriend, Barron, is moving through Nan's tiny house in that way he has, like a shark, thrashing every time he meets a wall or door. Barron's her brother's best friend and 'business partner'. He's a hangover from her teenage years. He made her feel good and special and wanted at an age when you can't tell you're being pulled into something that will be impossible to get yourself out of later on. How many times has she tried to leave Barron? Countless. Leave him to go where? Eight years they've been together and she's sometimes startled by the levels of disdain and disgust he raises in her. Wasn't this the man she stayed here for? Hadn't she promised, if things went badly at his upcoming court date (as they had for her brother), that she'd wait for him? Promised and promised after all his meltdowns about her leaving him, about her opening her legs for somebody else?

'Your fucking brother,' he yells through the door now, 'is the only one

who knew about it.'

Not true, Katya thinks. She knew. Half the town knew, that when a slapdash and mid-level crime was done nearby, that her brother and Barron probably had their fingers in it. The cops always came calling after a dairy or chip shop got ripped off. They'd done a job on a petrol station, came home with a handful of tens but mostly chocolate bars and cigarettes. It's not the amount of the haul that means anything, Katya figured. It's the action, it's making a name. Katya's brother went down already, and now Barron's convinced he's narked. Katya doesn't give a shit about her brother, it's been a long time since they've been on the same level, but she feels exposed now he's not around to be Barron's sidekick, to distract him with fantasies of getting famous, getting rich, just one more job, bro, this is the perfect one, I swear. Her nan has stopped noticing things, by choice or by slow deterioration, Katya can't tell. Nan goes about her days like she's hardly registered Barron's moved in. When she was younger and hadn't been worn down by the constant disappointments of family, she would warn Katya and her brother: 'That boy will come to a bad end.'

Or he'll bring you to one. Barron bursts into the bathroom where Katya's shaving her legs, sits his big arse down on the side of her bath.

You never know, with Barron, what you're going to get. Kiss or kick. He thumbs a tiny trickle of blood from Katya's shin, sucks it clean. He runs his hands up her legs, pushes the bubbles aside so he can see her body.

'Someone told about the petrol station,' he says.

'Yeah,' says Katya. 'I think so too.' The water's getting cold. She raises her foot to the hot tap, turns it with her toes. One thing Nan does notice is the gas bill. 'But who, do you think?'

'There's not many options,' says Barron. 'Your fucking brother. You.'

She's underwater, too quick to even shut her mouth and nose. Perfumed water claws at the back of her throat. She thrashes, feels the scald of the hot running water across her leg, the hardness of the bath against her shoulder

blades and skull. They've done this before, in a different context. Hands around her throat or holding her underwater. How long can you last, Katya? How long can you not take a breath for me? Weird how she continues to be turned on, not by him but by her continual sacrifice to him. But this is not like those times, no matter how she tries to superimpose a feeling of sex over it. This is for real so she starts struggling for real, hands and feet smashing on the side of the bath. Barron's face ripples, comes apart and back together. Behind him is a light growing brighter as the room darkens, the bare bulb about to explode. A dull thud in her ears. Then suddenly she's up, in the light and the air, thrashing and gasping like a newborn, dragged up, shins smacking against the edge of the bath, leaving a bruise she'll touch for days after when she's long gone and wondering if that was ever her life, back there, with Barron.

'The fucking door,' says Barron. 'Someone's about to knock the fucking door down.'

And when she finally gets out there, robe soaked through and feeling like her eyes are about to pop out of her head, it's Petronella Bush, standing there with Katya's High Lights Super Bright Illuminator and an offer she can't refuse. 'An offer,' she says, 'that literally saved my life.'

'When did you come out to your parents?' Katya asks. She's typing up notes from some secret conversation she had with Leigh, trying to distract me from reading over her shoulder. I'm trying not to think about her horrific ex. Everything she told me explains so much but makes me feel like the bond between her and Petronella is impenetrable, that she'll always be in her thrall.

'Never.'

'You never sat them down and said: "Hey, guys, I like girls"?''

'If you'd known my father,' I say, 'you'd get it. I just left town. Jacqui told Leigh at some point, but I'd swear on my life she never told my father.'

I don't really think of myself as bi, though.'

'Could have fooled me,' she says.

'No,' I say. 'It makes sense to me. It's different with Mick. We're drawn to each other. We're trying to work something out about ourselves. Women are really where it's at for me. I'll end up with a woman.'

She saves her document and closes the laptop with a crack. 'God, stop trying to elevate it,' she says. 'It's not some spiritual thing. It's hot gross sex with some guy you had a crush on when you were thirteen. You've been here the last four nights, you hardly see the guy.'

'That's what I'm saying. It's meaningful, but it's not serious.'

'I guess I get it,' she says, stretching a leg up towards the ceiling. 'I'm fucking you, but I don't really feel gay. Like, this is great, but I wouldn't go to a rally or anything.'

I hold my breath for about ten seconds. 'A rally?'

'Like a march. All the flags and drag queens. I don't really need to do all that.'

'Jesus Christ,' I say. 'You know it's not just a march, right? It's not just a fun day out with some flags, it's symbolic of this whole movement. It's political. It's—'

'Shhhhh,' she says. 'God, you get going quickly. I get it. Blah, blah, *The L Word*. I'm messing with you. Fuck me now, please.'

'Maybe I won't. If that's all this is to you. Maybe you can just go fuck yourself.'

'Come on. It's a joke. I love it when you're mad at me,' she says. 'Just go put it on. Let me see it on you.'

I go into her little bathroom to put the harness on. There's nothing worse than struggling to get a dick on while someone's watching. She's been wanting me to fuck her with the dildo since we got back together. I haven't really felt like it since Mick and I started fucking again, even though it's all

out in the open and theoretically we're all doing the ethical thing. The way Mick and I fuck is different now, simmered down to a kind of normalcy. There's a doggedness to it, trying to finish your meal just because you ordered it. Maybe Katya's right, maybe it's stopped being as fun with Mick now we've lost our hot taboo incest bubble. Her voice is bouncing around in my head: 'I don't really feel gay. I'm fucking you, but.' I'm leaving, anyway. Soon. Why not ride this out. What was I going to do, put Katya on the back of my bike and roll on out of here?

I leave my singlet on, walk out with the dildo hanging thick off my pelvis.

'Oh god,' she says. She's laughing. 'I'm sorry, I can't help it.'

She's going to roll off the bed, she's laughing so much. I've seen this before, this hysterical mirth, this weird embarrassment straight girls get when faced with a silicon dick.

I kneel between her legs, the dildo heavy and cool against her thigh, hold her wrists, hold her still.

'Shut up,' I say. 'Or I won't fuck you, and I mean it this time.'

'Okay,' she says. 'I'm good. I've got it together. Fuck me like you're a rugby player, like one of the famous ones who don't care if the girl cums. Fuck me like you're angry, Nell.'

'You've got a grey hair,' says Katya, running her hands through my damp hair, afterwards. 'Oh, fuck. You've got a fucking nest of them.'

'I do not. Fuck off.'

'You do, Nell. I'm serious. Where the blonde is growing out it's growing in grey. My girlfriend's a proper old lady. Pervert.'

I thought I could finally have my natural colour again. But apparently not.

'It's kind of unbelievable that you haven't noticed it before,' Katya's saying. 'It's a full thatch of grey.'

'I've got to go,' I say, unclipping the harness, tossing it next to her bed.

'Don't be shitty,' she says. 'I thought we were going to watch *But I'm a Cheerleader*. Continue my education.'

‘I’m fine,’ I say. ‘I just want to go home. Watch it by yourself, if you want. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

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‘I’M TAKING A BREAK,’ I tell Jenny Crown. I always hated this bitch, with the beetle brows and the superior attitude. We had Spanish together and she was one of the nerds who would speak *Español* the whole lesson. *Por favor* this, *de nada, señora* that.

‘A break from what?’ she asks. ‘Trust me, your life won’t really start until you get out of here.’

It’s uni holidays and everyone’s back, and everyone’s asking us what the fuck we’ve been doing here for the last year. Why didn’t we move away straight after school like everyone else? It’s easy to see they think we’ve fucked up. We’re making money, I say, but my skimpy bank account makes a liar out of me. We bought the car, I think. The car is something.

I roll my eyes at April behind the bar, but she’s swamped. She and Nicola Tweed are flat out. Nicola snaps the neck clean off a beer when she tries to open it against the bar.

I know Miri’s in town, but it’s after midnight and she’s not here and she hasn’t replied to my texts. She’s dropping social work at the end of the year and she’s going to police training college. In the months she’s been gone, I’ve had eight messages from her, total. Maybe that’s not many, but they can’t be ignored. They come straight from the centre of her loneliness right to the heart of mine. Even that night with Dylan taught me something. If I can just touch her, and she can touch me, something will happen. I just need

one more chance with her, to show her I'm ready. I've been turning towards the door so much tonight I've probably got an extra inch of movement in my neck. I'll be able to do a full 180 soon.

'Let's do shots,' I say to Jenny.

She raises her eyebrows. 'Shots are expensive.'

'I'll pay,' I tell her.

I get Nicola to pour us out shots of tequila, and we do the salt and lemon thing. Jenny wants to leave after, but I make her do one more. 'I really shouldn't,' she says. 'I've got a family brunch thing tomorrow.'

'You've gone soft,' I say. 'They don't know how to drink in the big city, huh?'

I can't get her to stick around. She says she has to go, but she doesn't leave. She goes to sit with a group of people from our year. People I used to know but who haven't said two words to me tonight. The whole table's laughing.

Anyone who comes up to the bar who knows my name, I buy a drink. 'Put your wallet away,' I say. 'I work. I'm earning that money.' When April serves me I get a discount, but Nicola stands down my end of the bar like a security guard and makes me pay full price. Like the shitty discount will be taken out of her end.

'Nicola,' I say. 'Nikki, Nikki, you've got a lemon up your arse. I can tell because your face is like this.' I make a scrunched-up face at her, like the prissy bitch she's being.

She goes down to the end of the bar and says something to April.

'You're pissing Nicola off,' April says. 'Why are you buying everyone drinks? You've dropped about a hundred bucks on these jerks. That's our leaving money.'

'They all think they're so great,' I say. 'Like going to university is such an original thing to do.'

'You're being fucking weird about it. Every time someone talks to you,

you're all like: "Don't worry, I'm not staying here, like some loser." No-one cares, Nell. Everyone's wrapped up in their own shit.'

'People care,' I say. 'People think if you don't leave straight away you'll never leave.'

'Who cares what people think? Go splash some water on your face,' she says. 'You're really red.'

On the way to the bathroom I walk past the table Jenny was at. She's gone home now, but I hear someone say, 'Lezzer dyke.'

'What'd you say?' I put my hands on their table. The drinks are slopping from side to side.

'What?' says a girl, Aimee. Little pig face. Had an abortion in fourth form.

'What'd you call me?'

'Nothing. Jesus, I wasn't even talking to you. Don't be so paranoid.'

One of the guys steadies the drinks which are for some reason still moving. 'You all good, Nell?' he asks. 'You're looking a little messy.'

'I'm fine.' The words come off my tongue with weights attached. 'Just thought you said something.'

When a bender like that hits, it hits all at once. Moving from the stool to the bathroom did me in. I was fine before. I've got my head over the sink when it levels me out. If I don't stay absolutely still, I'll blow chunks everywhere. The room tilts and lists and my face hits the mat. The spikes in the rubber hurt my cheek, but I can't move. I concentrate hard on not throwing up. Better out than in, Jacqui always says, but I don't want to vomit. That's just handing myself over to ridicule. Just a lezzer dyke drunk with no future spewing up in the bathroom of the Hangar on a Friday night. No-one fucking loves you, Nell, I think. No-one cares if you live or die. Each breath I take is accompanied by this watery melt in my mouth.

Miri wears boots now. She used to always be in Chucks, but now she's got these pointy-toed slouchy boots that she wears over her jeans. The boots reach me through my haze at the same time her voice does.

‘You dumb fucking baby,’ she says into my ear. ‘Look at you, crying on the floor.’ She’s kneeling down, one knee on my ribs, pressing hard.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ I say.

It’s the feeling of her voice in my ear that registers, not the words, even though I try to hold on to them. She’s telling me everything I ever wanted to hear from her, in a warm murmur that dissolves as soon as it hits my brain. There’s explanation, and apology and want in the words that she says to me, and I’m trying desperately to hang on to the threads when the door opens.

‘Oh my god, Miri, do you need help?’

I know it’s the little blonde social worker without seeing her. She’s wearing a pair of gold sandals, toes painted creamy pink.

‘She’s fine.’ The warm voice moves away from my ear. ‘She’s just fucked.’ The toe of her boot against my back, hard enough to hurt. She pushes me onto my stomach. ‘There. If she vomits, she won’t choke, stupid bitch.’

When April finds me, it’s Miri calling me ‘stupid bitch’ I’ve got rattling around in my head, and I say it over and over while April props me up over the toilet. ‘No, you’re not,’ she croons. ‘You’re the best. She’s the stupid fucking bitch. She’s the fool.’

‘April,’ I say. ‘I’ve ruined everything.’

‘No,’ she says. ‘You just got drunk. You’re perfect.’

She gets Ryan to sit with me while I throw up and cry and she finishes closing the bar.

‘You should forget about Miri,’ he says. ‘She plays with you. She’s a bitch. She thinks she’s better than everyone else.’

‘What the fuck would you know?’ I say, vomit boiling up and down in my throat. ‘She’s definitely better than you.’

‘You’re not for real, anyway. I know about you. Dylan told me all about you.’

‘You don’t know shit,’ I say. ‘All this time we’ve been talking about leaving. She doesn’t want to be with you, you fucking loser. Soon we’ll be gone and you’ll be nothing without her.’

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I NEVER FOUND OUT WHAT Miri said to me that night at the Hangar. As I push the door open to the place now, the yeasty acrid smell hits me, and I wonder for the thousandth time if maybe she said nothing at all. But I remember the feeling of calm that spread through me, even though I was crying on the floor. I remember being sure that all the time I'd waited for her had been worth it. Even April telling me that she and the blonde had left together, and the girl was wearing Miri's jacket, hadn't blunted the feeling. I don't know why it still matters to me now.

I do remember what I said to Ryan. Later I told myself I couldn't have known what would happen. But I did know there would be trouble. Deep under the immediate disaster of being so drunk, my embarrassment at losing face in front of him, I remember that doomish knowledge in the pit of my gut. Betrayal is betrayal. And I wanted revenge too, on Ryan for taking April down to his level, on April for changing into someone who could love him. And so, there was trouble.

There are a few familiar faces in the bar, guys I drank with the first night I was here. They're leaning against the tall tables, nursing pints and talking softly in small groups. No warm welcome for me tonight, just a few nods. I need something, after being with Katya. Something to take my mind off her, the niggling feeling that she doesn't take me seriously and it matters. I'm just a distraction to her on her weird journey.

Mick's at the bar, like I hoped he would be. When I walked in I knew I didn't just want a beer to take my mind off my grey hair. I wanted him to lick my wounds and fuck me in the back of his stupid car, tell me he couldn't see them, not really, not in this light.

He's leaning on the bar, forearms smooth and tanned against his white t-shirt. He's smiling at the girl next to him, and when I see that smile I decide to hang back for a moment. It's that crooked half-smile he does when he wants to look like he's doing something against his better judgement. Like, whoa, I should not be doing this, but you are just so hot, lol. It's the smile that wore down half the girls in his year, and the years below, at school. It hasn't changed in twenty years. I watch as he runs his thumb down her arm, says: 'I don't know, you look like you're in pretty good shape already.'

I enter his periphery while he's still touching her, and he takes me in so gracefully it's like he knew I was there all along. It's just the frozen smile on his face that tells on him, and the girl sees it too.

'Nell, hey. Have a beer.'

'Wouldn't want to intrude.' My heart and my guts feel like they're fighting for space inside me, rage and anxiety battling it out. Get a grip. But I'm done already. There's no way I can come out of this looking good.

'Don't be silly,' he says. 'I was just talking to Amelia here about training her up. I'm going to start coaching again.' Amelia here looks about twenty, beautiful in that new Instagram-star way that seems to surpass all the clumsiness of our generation. She looks like the kind of girl who's used to being the cause of trouble.

'We were just talking,' she says. 'Don't be mad at him.' And it's this, delivered with the tiniest of smirks, that does it.

'*We were just talking*,' I mimic, in a high-pitched baby voice.

'What the fuck?' says Amelia.

'Jesus, Nell. Calm down. I thought you were with your girlfriend tonight.'

'Looks like you're with yours,' I say. It's an effort not to shower them

with spit when I speak.

‘Wow,’ she says. ‘Really? He’s not allowed to talk to someone else? Mick, your wife is a fucking psycho.’

‘She’s not my wife,’ he says. ‘Nell, you’re being crazy. I can do what I want, with who I want, just like you do.’

‘Katya’s not some insipid little cunt just out of high school.’

‘Fuck this,’ I hear her say as I walk away. ‘Crazy, jealous bitch ...’

I deserve everything she has to throw at me.

A few whoops from the assorted men who’ve been watching.

‘Put your dog on a fucking leash, mate,’ James Spicer yells, and I make a mental note to rip his tongue out if I ever see him again.

It’s too bright out, still early evening. I feel clobbered by the rush of light, the endless birdsong from the trees that line the main street. I walk down to the river, following the steps Mick and I took the first night we hooked up. It’s cold down here, the river a glossy deep green like moving moss.

I’ve spent years getting over feeling inferior to pretty femme girls, real girls, and now I want to tear some poor kid’s eyes out because Mick touched her arm. There’s no scenario in which Mick Purdle is worth it. The world we have together lets Mick be the person he could have been, but at the end of the day he is who he is. I should have warned her, should have walked right by. I know what I should have done, but when I hear Mick walking down the steps behind me, I feel a predictable relief.

‘That was embarrassing,’ he says. ‘I didn’t think you were like that, Nell. Jealous and shit.’

‘It’s embarrassing watching you chat up some eighteen-year-old.’

‘She’s twenty-three,’ he says. ‘She’s been to uni. Which is beside the point. You’re with someone else. You don’t get to tell me what I can and can’t do, or to be angry about it. Only Faith gets that right, and you weren’t thinking about her when I was feeling you up in this exact spot.’

‘No,’ I say. ‘Because you were supposed to be the one thinking about Faith.’

We’re both right, we’re both wrong. I can’t describe to him the feeling of inevitable disappointment I have. Disappointment at the reveal that we’ve both been ourselves all along. It’s worse because everyone with half a brain could see it coming. Everyone knew how this would end. We were only ever fooling ourselves.

‘Grow up, Mick,’ I say. ‘You’re almost forty. Your days of being boy-most-wanted are over.’

‘You’re jealous because you never had those days.’

We’re both quiet for a while, letting the sting of that last one sink in. I look at the water moving on steadily below us, how dark and thick it is, like you could walk on it. Like it would bear you up, resist you, jelly-like. April and I used to dangle our feet over the edge and talk about what we would do if the other fell in. How quickly we would perform our heroic acts.

When he talks again he’s quieter, calmer. ‘When we started this I was like, great, someone gets it. Someone else has made the same mess of their life that I have. We both missed all our chances. And it was good, this summer has meant a lot to me. But seriously, Nell. What can you give me? What can you do for me and my life when you’re just as fucked? You need motivation just as much as I do.’

He pauses. ‘Think about it: what can we do for each other?’

‘Nothing,’ I say, and then I jump off the pier, folding my legs up under me before I hit the water. I open my eyes to the cold amber, flecky murk. Push myself down deeper, bark and assorted trash pelting me with the rushing current. I could go forever like this, I think. I could reach the sea.

It takes us about ten minutes to walk back to where Mick threw his keys and phone.

‘We floated far,’ he says. He was in the water before I even surfaced.

Mick Purdle, number-one hero. 'What the fuck were you thinking, anyway?' He spits again, trying to get rid of the silt the river's left in our mouths. The current was thick and fast and carried us away with greater speed than I could have imagined. Past a woman out dog-walking, who ran along the bank beside us, shouting advice.

'A reference to our shared past,' I say to Mick.

'Yeah, can I remind you that I was sixteen. All I did was dumb shit. You're thirty-three, trying to get out of a conversation you don't like.'

My clothes are chafing wet, loaded with river stink. My phone is fucked.

Mick picks up his stuff, checks the money in his wallet. 'What do you want to do, Nell?'

'Do you think we could have saved April?'

He lights a cigarette. He must have emptied everything out of his pockets in the half-second before he jumped in after me. Cool head. That's what my dad used to say about him: moves like a snake. But still a fucking idiot.

'Yeah,' he says. 'We probably could have saved her. We would have done anything, if we'd known what would happen. People say, "Oh, it's not your fault," and that's true. But when they say, "There's nothing you could have done," that's bullshit. I could have killed him. You could have left with her.'

'But we didn't know what would happen.'

'No, we didn't know.' His cigarette smoke curls between us, like steam. The breeze is coming through my wet clothes, chopping me into bits. 'You never tried to talk to me about what was happening,' he says.

'I know. But you never talked to me, either. That night at your leaving party, it was like, okay, we all know this is bad. But it felt like ... it was me and April against the two of you. Like we were the silliest girls and you two knew it. Like you couldn't stand being around us, listening to us go on. Everything we said was hysterical, an overreaction. Sometimes when I think about who we were, even I hate us. Stupid teenage girls. Too stupid to save ourselves.'

‘You were kids,’ he says. ‘We all were.’

‘I’ve spent my whole life trying to get away from those girls. Who I was then and who I am now. I can barely recognise her.’

‘Not so different,’ he says. ‘I still see you, Nell.’

We’re both shivering. I need to see if I can salvage my phone.

‘We should go,’ I say.

‘Yeah, let’s get you out of those wet clothes.’

When he drops me home there’s a moment when things could go either way. A throb of heat that’s heavy enough to feel through my sadness. But it’s no good. I’ve been here before. We can end it now or it’ll end itself later, bitterly.

‘Take care,’ I say through the tightness in my throat. ‘Be good. I promise I won’t ruin any more of your conquests.’ I can’t articulate what I want for him. All the things he could have had.

‘No more conquests,’ he says. ‘I’m done with that. Don’t leave town without saying goodbye.’

‘Jesus,’ Cal says when I walk in. ‘What the fuck happened to you?’

‘Went swimming. Cal, do me a favour?’

‘What?’

‘Cut my hair for me.’

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JACQUI'S HEADLIGHTS CATCH RYAN AND Mick smoking against the back wall of the restaurant. Mick's stone-faced while Jacqui takes the smoke out of his hand and takes a drag. 'You'll have to give these up soon, my boy.' Blank while April hugs him, while I shake his hand. It's hard to get a smile out of Mick these days, even though he's getting everything he ever wanted. He receives us like he receives everything, coldly neutral, like he's already in his Thailand dojo, playing tough.

'Smile, love,' says Jacqui. 'We're so proud of you.'

'See you inside,' he says.

April goes on tiptoes to kiss Ryan. He's playing the same as Mick, too cool to be bothered. But he's not cool, he's always bothered by something, stupid prick. He stands straight and stares off into the carpark while she kisses him, but he can't hold it. 'I thought you weren't going to wear that?' I hear him hiss as Jacqui and I walk away. It's true that April's outfit tonight is a lot, a lot for her brother's farewell dinner at the RSA. Tiny denim skirt, red halter top. Her legs look freckly and white.

Our whole thing tonight is just to have fun. Pre-load at dinner then head out to the Hangar. With or without Mick and Ryan. Soon Mick's going to be kicking people to shit in Bangkok and never thinking about us. Even when he comes back. We'll be gone.

'It's Jacqui and her clown sidekicks!' my dad booms, attracting the

attention of some old people three tables away. 'I've got some paint thinner you can get that off with later.' He's excited to be in company. My parents never go out because he's got no friends and he hates all of Mum's.

Mum gets up to greet us. 'Bit heavy on the foundation,' she says, dragging a thumb across my cheek, too hard.

'Leave them alone, Leigh,' says Jacqui. 'They're experimenting.'

'You know what he's like,' says Mum, nodding her head at my dad, who's right in the ear of Mick's coach. 'He'll hit the roof.'

We sit at the young end of the table, as far away from them as possible. Down the other end: Mum and Dad, who are here on account of Dad being Mick's original boxing coach. Grant, who took over and trained Mick to be a proper kickboxer. Glenys and her boyfriend, who's wearing a singlet, against dress code. Then it's us, and Mick and Ryan.

Mick sits at the head of the table and everyone cheers him and raises their glasses.

'Where's your girlfriend, eh, Mick?' shouts Dad.

'I told her you were coming, Craig, and she decided to stay home.'

Everyone laughs, including Dad, and it's just lucky he's at the point where he thinks everything's a joke, completely missing the snark. It's not going to work out with Mick and Tania. He's going to Thailand. She wants to study nursing.

'We're going to play pool,' says April.

'Are the little kiddies sick of the adults table already?' says Mick.

'Go on, love, we'll come and get you when dinner arrives,' says Jacqui.

Mick mutters something about us skipping out on paying, and Jacqui says she's paying for everyone, thank you very much, so it's fine, and we leave as everyone starts arguing about who's paying for who.

'What the fuck is going on with him?' I can feel people watching us as we cross the dark-red carpet to the pool tables and I concentrate on walking well. Jacqui says there's nothing worse than a woman who can't walk in

heels.

‘They’re both arseholes,’ says April. ‘I don’t want to talk about it. All I hear from Ryan is how no-one ever trained him, no-one gave him a free trip to Thailand.’

‘But people did train him,’ I say. ‘My dad trained him and then Grant. He dropped out because he said Grant was too much of a hardarse.’

‘Well,’ she says, ‘People love Mick. It’s harder for Ryan, he doesn’t have the confidence.’

She always does this, complains about Ryan and then gets all defensive when anyone joins in.

We’re not bad at pool when there’s heaps of balls on the table, but we can push the black around for half an hour. Two guys come up as we’re finishing and say they’ll play the next game with us.

‘We’re not that good,’ I say.

‘All the more reason,’ says the better-looking one. ‘We’ll go easy on you girls.’ He says his name is Julius.

I don’t know him, but I recognise the pakeha guy with him. He was a couple of years ahead of us in school and there was a story that he and his friends got a stripper for his eighteenth and he ate a chocolate bar out of her pussy. Mars-bar Boden, they called him. April and I were sickly fascinated by it. If there was one thing we knew from *Cosmo*, it was that you shouldn’t put food up there. ‘Was it a fun-size or a whole-size Mars?’ April would muse. Did he eat it bite by bite as it appeared out of her like a snake? Did she have to push it out, or did he pull it out, like a tampon? The whole thing was fucking gross.

I watch him lean over April, help her line up a shot. She’s being super flirty and loud, acting like she doesn’t know how to play. I wonder if she recognises him. I can tell I’m pissing her off already. Why won’t I play up to these guys when we spent three hours getting ready just for this? She wants me to hook up. She thinks it’ll make me happy if I can be more

normal. 'Forget about Miri, that's not real. That whole thing with Dylan proved it.' She's always acting like the little mother, like I know nothing and she has to hold my hand as I enter the world.

April knocks the white ball off the table, and it clatters across the floor so the whole restaurant turns to look. She shrieks with laughter, pretends to hide behind Boden. 'That's okay, try again,' he says, putting his hand on her hip. It's like I've got a direct line into the feelings of everyone at our table: Mum and Jacqui's anxiety, Ryan and Mick's rage.

Julius and I take our shots. I can tell he's pissed off. If he thought we were cute, he doesn't anymore. I watch him belt ball after ball into the pockets.

'Do you know Miri?' I ask. 'Miriamama Nuku?'

'What?' he says. 'You think us Māoris all know each other?'

'No,' I say. 'God, of course not. I just wondered.'

'Yeah, I know her,' he says. 'And what.'

We watch April bend over to take her shot. She keeps pretending she's laughing too hard to take it.

'Your friend's fucked,' he says.

'She's only had two drinks.' I don't know why she's acting this way, like she can hardly breathe. She's practically shrieking, not laughing.

'You have to take my next shot,' she says to me. 'I'm so fucked up.'

'You need to chill out. Everyone's looking over here.'

She winks at me, doing that annoying thing where she pretends we're both joking, that I'm in on the joke.

She sits off to the side with Boden, he's rubbing her back like she's unwell or something. She leans over, trying to breathe. I can see right down her top. I go shot for shot with Julius, both of us watching the two of them.

I hit the black into the pocket, in the nicest shot I've ever taken. We still have four coloured balls on the table. 'Let's go, April. We lost.'

'Let's go for a smoke,' says Boden.

'I want a smoke!' says April, even though she's never smoked.

‘Nah,’ says Julius. ‘I’m over it.’

‘Come on,’ says Boden. ‘What else are we doing?’

Every time I look at him I think about the Mars bar. He’s exactly the kind of guy who would do that, I can’t explain why. I can see the comb marks in his gelled hair.

They get up, April’s hanging onto Boden.

‘I’m not coming,’ I say. I want her to know she’s gone too far, but she doesn’t care.

‘I don’t have all night to look after babies,’ says Julius.

‘Fuck you,’ April says. ‘You came over here.’ Boden’s hand is still on her back.

‘She’s got a boyfriend,’ I tell him. It’s too late, I can already see Ryan making his way over here, moving awkwardly between tables, hands in the pockets of his hoodie, chest puffed out.

‘You’re such a nark, Nell,’ says April. I know she sees Ryan too, but she makes no move away from Boden.

He takes his hand off her when Ryan arrives, but she still doesn’t move, just sits there, cosy. Her eyebrows are arched, like: Yes? Swinging her legs back and forth.

‘Get back to the table,’ Ryan says. He’s not allowed to wear his hat in here and his hair looks ablaze under the fluorescent lights.

‘Don’t tell me what to do,’ April says. ‘You don’t own me.’ Immediately over the top.

‘We’re just playing with the girls,’ says Boden. ‘Chill, man, it’s fine. Just a bit of fun.’

‘Keep your hands to yourself, then,’ says Ryan.

Boden raises his hands in mock surrender. ‘Hands-free,’ he says. ‘No touching.’

‘You’re making a fool of yourself,’ says Ryan to April. ‘In front of your family. It’s embarrassing.’

‘Let’s just go back,’ I say. ‘I’m hungry.’

‘You go back,’ she says.

Julius snorts. ‘Control your bitches, gingerbread man,’ he says. ‘We don’t want these little girls.’

‘What did you say?’

‘You heard me,’ he says.

‘What’s happening?’ Mick lays his hand on Ryan’s arm. He catches my eye for a second and he’s just blank. I can’t tell what he’s thinking.

‘We’re going to smash these arseholes,’ says Ryan. ‘He’s a kickboxer. He’ll kill you.’

Julius takes a step forward, pool cue in hand. ‘Fuckin’ try it.’

‘I’m not fighting anyone,’ says Mick. ‘We’re just going back to the table.’

‘We don’t need you, pretty boy,’ says Julius. ‘We’re just going to deal with this faggot.’

‘Let’s go,’ says Mick. ‘April, we’re going.’

‘You can’t fucking let that go,’ says Ryan.

But Mick’s pulling him away and now my dad’s here too and he looks at me and April and says, ‘Get back to that table,’ in a voice that’s like scraping a trowel over concrete and I know we’re both afraid, we’ve done this, caused this trouble.

We walk back across the red carpet, twice as wide as it was before. My mum’s mouth is like a pulled purse, white etchings at the side telling me how much she’s holding back and how much I’m going to get it later.

Jacqui pats April’s arm and says: ‘Bit silly to carry on like that, love. You know how he gets.’

We somehow lost the boys on our way back, they peeled off into the bathroom. Our food gets called and we all go up to collect the plates. April and I try to go to the bar, but my mum says: ‘No you bloody well won’t.’ We sit down and pick at our burgers.

Glenys is holding back tears as her boyfriend hisses into her ear. Then

April gets up and bolts for the bathroom.

I follow her down the corridor into the ladies, and she's crying, but she also needs to pee, and 'can you please wait outside, Nell,' and 'can you tell everyone else to fuck off, just give me a second, please, I'm going to piss my pants otherwise.'

I lean against the wall in the corridor and I can just see Ryan and Mick and Dad standing in a huddle in the men's through the propped-open door.

Dad's pulled them both into a kind of headlock, acting the big coach. 'Not worth it, boys. Can't let a silly girl come between you. You don't lose your mind for pussy. You've got to keep her on her toes,' he says to Ryan. 'Not the other way round.'

'Alright, Craig,' says Mick. 'Just give us a minute. We'll see you out there.'

Once upon a time Mick would have ripped his jaw off for speaking about April like that. We're all alone now. When did it get decided that we didn't need protecting, could look after ourselves?

Dad struts back out to the club, doesn't even see me in the corridor. He always walks like he just got off a horse. Or, as April says, like he's got something up his arse. He'll go out there and act like he saved the day.

'You should have backed me,' says Ryan.

'Don't throw me in it like that,' Mick says. There's a note of pleading in his voice I've never heard. 'How can I fight, in front of my family, my coach. If I fuck up now, that's it. No Thailand.'

'Thailand, Thailand, Thailand. Perfect fucking Mick. You should have backed me. I would have backed you.'

'Yeah, and where would that have gotten me?'

'Fuck you,' says Ryan. 'You saw what was happening. April trying to get a rise out of me, acting like a slut.'

'Watch your mouth,' says Mick. 'She's my sister. I just need to know that when I leave here, things will be okay.'

‘You know what she does,’ says Ryan. He’s whining. ‘You know she tries to fuck with my head.’

‘Get out,’ says Mick. ‘Just get away from me.’

‘Fuck you, traitor. What happened to mates first?’ He leaves, his face pulled into an ugly little boy’s scowl.

I walk into the bathroom in time to see Mick throw his fist at the mirror. He holds his knuckles in the centre of the cracked web, grinds the glass long enough to smear it with red.

‘You’re not supposed to be in here,’ he says.

‘You’re not supposed to punch walls.’

He holds his hand over the sink, knuckles dripping in spots and thin rivulets. ‘It feels better. Do you know about that? How after sex, or violence, you feel instantly calm?’

‘No.’ I roll toilet paper around his hand. The first layers soak and tear immediately, so I just keep going.

‘No? You wouldn’t, I suppose. Little gay Nell.’

‘I’m not gay.’

‘Because you had a tumble with Ryan’s deformed cousin? That’d make you gayer.’

‘I’m not gay.’

‘You’re something,’ he says. ‘Don’t get ruined, Nell.’

‘No-one’s ruined.’

‘Everything’s fucking ruined.’ He comes so close I can smell the beer on his breath, see the red webbing his eyes. He’s been working night shifts at the abattoir to save money for Thailand, and now his hand’s bleeding. He shakes off the soaked toilet paper, takes off his white shirt, wraps it around his hand. He’s just wearing a singlet underneath. I smell Deep Heat and deodorant and sweat.

April calls my name from the corridor. She’s crouched down against the carpeted wall, her face raw where her make-up’s come off. ‘What happened

to your hand?’ she asks Mick.

‘You,’ he says, pointing a finger at her, ‘are a fucking troublemaker.’ He walks past us and turns towards the main doors.

‘My stomach’s really sore,’ says April.

‘I’ll go to reception and I’ll get us a taxi. We’ll just get out of here.’

She nods, but she doesn’t get up. ‘I just want to die, Nell.’

‘Don’t fucking say that.’

‘I do, though. Everything’s so fucked up. I can’t make it better.’

‘It just feels like that,’ I say. ‘Once we’re gone, it’ll feel different.’

‘Like we’re actually going anywhere.’

‘What do you mean?’ I kneel down beside her and that’s where Mum finds us.

‘For god’s sake,’ she says. ‘I’m taking you two home. Jacqui’s had to take Glenys, she’s so upset by all this. Mick and Ryan are god knows where. I couldn’t even enjoy my ham steak. This family. Can’t even have one nice night out.’ She looks at April. ‘You should be happy for your brother. What an opportunity.’

‘Yeah,’ says April. ‘I am.’ Then she starts crying again.

‘Jesus,’ says Mum. ‘Get her in the bloody car, will you? I’ll get your father.’

We’re in the back seat, April bundled up in Mum’s coat like she’s some kind of invalid. I see Mick and Ryan, leaning against Mick’s car, passing a beer between them. Mick’s wrapped hand is hanging by his side. I don’t know what’s happened, but I know it’s them against us again. I see the hardness in their faces when they see us being carted away. It’s like their intimacy is made out of hating us, they need this contempt to stay close.

‘Good boys,’ says Dad.

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‘WHOEVER DID THAT TO YOUR hair,’ Jacqui says, ‘needs to be shot.’

‘It was Cal,’ I say.

‘He needs his bloody head read.’

For two days I’ve been dodging calls. Katya, Leigh, Jacqui. Even Petronella’s been calling. I’ve been in bed, crying and playing games on the phone Cal got for me. This grief for Mick kneecapped me, hit me harder than even my break-up with Lucrece. Got me thinking that maybe, after all, we shouldn’t have been so hasty. Maybe we could have had something real. Then I think about him some more, his relentless drive for the normal life, his three kids, and I know we did the right thing.

I haven’t been renewed by my dip in the river, if anything I’m dithering more than ever. I’m back and forth so often, it’s making me feel ill. I begged sickness for the latest psychic outing: Leigh, Jacqui and Katya went to the high school to do a little more rummaging in the spirit realm. Heather, Leigh, Jacqui and her sisters had all gone there, then Mick and Ryan, finally me and April. They were going to talk about Heather, but I couldn’t stand it, knew there would be a memory of April round every corner.

‘Come on, love,’ says Jacqui now. ‘Let me fix your hair.’

‘Look,’ Jacqui says, when we’re sitting outside and she’s running the clippers over my head. ‘I don’t want to lecture you. I don’t want to know why you’ve been bawling or why you and the baby psychic are fighting again. I don’t care why Mick came home two nights ago looking like he’d buried a body and proceeded to drink all my Baileys. I don’t want to talk to you about Mick.’

And then she proceeds to talk to me about him, at length, repeating all the advice she’s ever given him, totalling all the money he owes her, all the wrong turns he’s taken. Writing-off Jacqui’s car gets a mention, and Thailand, the guy he put in a coma over there. And of course, long-suffering Faith and those poor kids. And the girl he got pregnant. Tania.

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘We kept it quiet. That girl was smart, too smart for him. I said to her: you’d be a fool to stay here and just have a baby.’

The sun beats down on us. Jacqui starts to give me a head massage, digging her fingers into my skull, something I’d usually hate but I feel weak and washed out. The feeling of being cared for brings more tears to my eyes.

‘I wish to god he’d never got married,’ she says. ‘I thought it’d settle him down but it’s just a disgrace. You know her father hired them a helicopter for the wedding? Poor Faith, she doesn’t deserve any of this.’

‘She knew what she was getting when she married him,’ I say. ‘Everyone knew what he was like.’

‘Well, I’m sure you know what it’s like when someone tells you they’ve changed, just for you.’

I remember Lucrece telling me her days of plucking lovers from the call centre was over, that I’d changed everything for her. How chosen I felt, how special. Like I’d been walking around with a superpower I never knew about.

‘We had some nice chats about Heather today,’ she says. ‘But mainly I was thinking about April. How bright she was, how stropky. How none of

us knew what to do that year. I thought it would all blow over.’ I hear the catch in her voice. She’s crying behind her big sunglasses.

‘We all did.’

‘There,’ she says. ‘I’ve fixed you up a bit. It’s awful, but it’s presentable.’

I walk her out to her car, watch her fold herself in with a new carefulness. ‘I’m glad you came back,’ she says. ‘You needed to, for yourself and for Leigh. But, my god, it’s dragging me back down memory lane.’ She starts the car running. ‘You don’t need to feel guilty about any of this, Nell,’ she says. ‘I was an adult. I should have seen what was there to see.’

‘You did everything you could, Jacqui.’

‘I’d do it all different, if I could do it again.’

She guns the car, rolls off the kerb and shoots into the middle of the road. Talk about Mick writing-off cars. Jacqui once took out a whole line of trolleys at the supermarket, just missing the trolley boy. In the article Cal sent me from the local paper, the boy said his life ‘flashed before his eyes’ and that he was ‘a bit scared to go back to work, to be honest’. She straightens up, her granny-mobile straining against the clutch and puttering out of sight.

I sweep up the hair that we left scattered around, then gather up some of my and Cal’s beer bottles and takeaway trash. Feel virtuous. Kiss Trixie on her mossy little head, get a whiff of that hot-garbage dog breath. We settle down to watch some mid-afternoon soaps. *Emmerdale*, *Days of Our Lives*, *The Young and the Restless* – all in a row like three tranquilliser bolts. We eat a bag of chips. ‘Is it too early for a beer?’ I ask Trixie. She doesn’t answer so I figure it’s okay. Cal will be home soon. He can cook for once.

I think about Leigh, snoozing away up at the home and how she’s not old. Late fifties. Too young for what’s happened to her. She’ll be home soon, and what then? I go back to Australia where there’s also nothing for me? I think about what Jacqui said, that me being here was dragging her down memory lane. I see myself, brute-like, yanking Leigh and Jacqui backwards

into gold-streaked flashbacks. I'd thought being back here was imposing memories on me, that other people were forcing me to eat the share of the past I'd avoided by leaving. But I've been the witness, the midwife to all these outpourings and confessions. Me being here was the upheaval, bringing down a landslide of memory. Mick setting his life on fire, Leigh searching for answers, Jacqui admitting guilt. It's not Petronella who's doing it, it's me. She's a coincidence and a convenience.

I go get a map Katya drew, of all the places we would visit in our quest to remake Heather. Another beer on the way back. The old house, the school, the squat by the beach. We've done what we can, we've drawn on all the resources we have, but she refuses to be whole. The dead are like that. Stubborn in their refusal to knit back together so that we can say, definitively, once and for all, what they really were like.

'We need food,' Cal says. 'The cupboards are dire. This is rice bubbles and water I'm eating here.'

'What happened to your garden? Can't you dig us some spuds?'

'I planted flowers, actually. And if you'd take a look you'd see that they're coming up.'

'Can't eat flowers.'

He flicks on the TV. Game shows. 'Lord Kitchener,' he says, answering some question. 'Guns N' Roses.'

'Did you ever think about leaving? You're such a smarty pants.'

'There you go again, trying to drag information out of me. I've never thought so much about myself before.'

'Yeah, well, join the club. I've figured out I'm the common factor here in everyone's emotional spillage. I am witnessing everyone's breakdowns.'

'Yeah, we got along absolutely fine before you showed up.' He looks at me, waggles his dark eyebrows. 'I thought about it. It wasn't a dream, living here with Dad. I couldn't walk into a room without him lambasting

the shit out of me for something. Living here, eating them out of house and home. Not “making something of myself”. One morning he cracked it because my shorts were too loose, so the next day I came down in a pair of your old bike shorts. He didn’t like that I would go do the groceries with Leigh, didn’t like that I’d go to the movies with her and Jacqui. Everything I did was evidence to him.’

‘Of being gay?’

‘Not even that. Just of being not like him. Not a real man. Remember he used to say: “Your sister’s more of a man than you.”’

I do remember. He’d say it a lot. I did sport, even if it was just badminton for a couple of years. Cal took piano lessons, incomprehensible to Dad. I hung around the boxing gym, half-heartedly doing a few lessons. Cal hated blood. I got into trouble, went out, came home drunk and fell down in the driveway. Cal stayed in his room playing video games. I ‘shovelled shit’ to make money, and Cal was too shy to turn up to work when Dad got him a job at the chicken factory.

‘Your sister’s more of a man than you’ was supposed to be a stab at us both, but it also carried a weird amount of pride for me. I did things that our father understood. Cal didn’t. Cal was an alien to our father, a creepy little freak.

‘It’s weird,’ I say. ‘I always wanted his validation, even when I fucking hated him. Until the stuff with April. Then I was done.’

‘Me too,’ he says. ‘It got to a point I didn’t give a shit what he said, I thought it was funny. The old man was a prick, but as the years wore on I could see that half the time it was like he’d taken a bat to the head. “Where am I? Why’d I lose my job? What the kids need is a good war.” He never got it. It was always: “That silly bitch cost me my job.” Not: “I fucked up.”’

It was the water we swam in. It was no big thing. When we left, we weren’t fleeing. Nothing you could put a finger on. No major trauma you needed to

disclose to future lovers. It was just how our father always made sure Cal heard these words: pussy, fag, homo, fairy, fudge-packer, poof, cocksucker. Don't drop the soap, he'd say, when Cal headed to the shower. Slut, he'd say about the weather woman. Bull-dyke, about the prime minister. Look at that ugly muff-licker, no man'd touch her. Enough to make your dick shrivel up. Before we understood what these things were, we knew not to become them.

We all got it. Michelle Shipman and Rhys Benz got beaten by their fathers. Niki Pointon's mum left her father because he'd been touching her and her sisters. Annabelle's father killed her. Cal and I got casual childhood smacks, nothing worse. You're lucky, Leigh would say. You wouldn't believe the hidings your father used to get when he was young.

Those words could only hurt you if they found a soft spot, an entry point. And if they found a soft spot, they were meant for you.

Dyke. Slut. Pansy.

It was prosaic.

Cal's got music up on the TV, creating a playlist of some of the most horrendous songs I've forgotten I ever knew. I see Shania Twain go on there, something from the *Evita* soundtrack. The Corrs. Chumbawamba. Hanson. Songs we used to do karaoke to in my room while Dad was out.

'What are you doing?'

'Gonna cheer you up. Look at your fucking face. With that haircut, you look like a sad thumb. Shit,' he says, 'you kind of look like Petronella.'

'Wait,' I say. 'Why didn't you leave?'

'He got sick, didn't he? Leigh needed me, he needed me.'

'What about now?'

'Now you need me.' He's doing some weird shudder thing to the opening bars of C+C Music Factory's 'Gonna Make You Sweat (Everybody Dance Now)'.
'Be serious.'

But he turns up the music so loud that it's stupid to yell over it. He looks like a fool, dancing alone in his singlet and stubbies. Pale limbs flailing like he's a puppet being jiggled around by a chaotic master. Trixie flees to Leigh's room.

It's during our rendition of 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody' that Mick's name lights up my phone. I ignore it. He rings again, and Cal turns the music down.

'You going to get that?'

'I don't know. Mick and I, we're not— We aren't—'

'Ah, okay. Maybe we don't need to talk about it. Still, though,' he says, as my phone lights up for a third time. 'Maybe you'll want to get that.'

'No,' I say. 'It's no good for me.'

But he rings again while we're deciding what to get for dinner and I can't help it. What's one more time? Why not grind each other into dust? Why make good choices when you can make this one?

'Don't do it,' Cal says, but I've already picked up.

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I WANT 2 CU. I can pick u up.

Only the text from Miri I've dreamt about for years, and of course I'm stuck at work. The last time I saw her she was literally stepping on me. I haven't heard from her since then, silence after I sent her an apology message. She's switching to police training. Stepping straight into daddy's footsteps, despite all her shit about not being a little piggy.

I try to temper my expectations, tamp down the rising fever in my body, but I know she's come to say all the things to me again, all the things I blacked out last time. Why else would she be so insistent? Wouldn't she have let me go by now, otherwise?

I text April that I'm sick, that I won't make it out tonight. She won't care, she'll be six drinks deep by now. She and Ryan will be fighting, or they'll have made up. Mick probably won't be there because he's saving money now that Thailand is so close. It doesn't matter, what I miss tonight I'll catch on replay tomorrow.

At 11:05 pm I'm in the cool air of the carpark, my work shirt stuffed into my bag, my pants stiff from getting wet when I was on showers earlier and then drying on my body. I've taken my hair out of its ponytail, trying to flatten it between my hands.

Why now? Why does she have to come tonight? This shift is the sweatiest shift. Miri's headlights turn up the long drive and I'm finally with her.

Miri sniffs the air when I get in the car, pinches her nose. 'Ugh, you smell like a bedpan.'

'Piss off, I do not.'

She drives, one hand on the bottom of the wheel, the other flipping through her CD sleeves. She looks fit but tired.

'Are you excited to start training?'

She shrugs. She's not talking, so I won't either. She takes us to the lookout, where all you can see is the rising bowl of the other side of town. Her hand scrambles for the handbrake when we keep rolling towards the lookout fence and I wonder if she's been drinking but I can't smell anything. She fucks around for a bit, goofing, turning the stereo right up, then way down, pointing out constellations that aren't there.

After a bit she clears her throat. 'I want to say sorry to you. For last time at the Hangar.'

I look at her but she's looking at her hands.

'You know, in the bathroom. I was a bitch.'

I nod, look out at the town. I can see the bright line of the main street stretching towards the blur of the river.

'I was so sick of this place. Everyone here. Getting stuck. And then you, on the floor. You were the cherry on top. Did you know Kieran got kicked out of uni? Some stupid drunk girl said he raped her. I just heard about that and there you were, another fuck-up from this place. And I know you're better than that. It just got to me. So I'm sorry.'

I still don't say anything. If I do, my disappointment might tell on me.

She clears her throat. She's gone over all this in her head, I realise. She's been thinking about it, this big apology that's actually shit, that she must know is worse than nothing. I was 'better than that'. Jesus Christ. Blow my brains out. Like she's never been wasted.

'We've known each other a long time,' she says. 'And you know I think of you, like, as someone I have to protect. You had stuff you wanted to do.'

You've got to get out of here, leave this place. I didn't know, before I left, how different I would be. So, yeah.'

'You haven't been gone that long.'

'Yeah. And it's changed everything. You can be whoever you want to be in the city, Little Nelly.'

'Like what?' I ask.

'Like anything.'

'Well, thanks for all your advice, O wise one. But I'm already leaving. We're moving down soon. I'll start uni next year.'

'You're really going?'

I can see she's had the wind taken out of her sails, like she was trying to inspire me to something, and I've stolen her idea. God, everyone who leaves here acts like they've had their head cracked open and all the insights of the world poured in there.

'Me and April,' I say. 'We're going to get an apartment right in Central.'

The look of surprise on her face fades. She laughs. 'She'll never go, Nell. Never. She's a loser. Trust me. She'll be pregnant in another year, just like Camille, just like Aroha, like Jacqueline Harding. You heard about her? Dropped out of vet school because some dipshit knocked her up. Don't let April drag you down.'

'You don't know her. You only ever see the bad side of her.'

'I know her. I've been seeing her for years, getting worse and worse. Her and Ryan were in the Hangar tonight, tearing each other's faces off. They were screaming the place down when I left. But they're probably fucking now. She won't go. Girls like her don't go.'

'You're being so judgemental.'

Everything she's saying is plucking at my own fears, which are well alive under the cool cover of our plans and our savings and our dreams of coming home to our own little apartment. Under all that there's the fear that April just won't go.

‘What did you say to me that night?’ I ask Miri. ‘At the Hangar.’

‘Nothing,’ she says. ‘Just like, “Get up, you silly bitch.” You were wasted.’

‘No, I remember, though. You said a bunch of stuff to me before your friend came in. You were whispering in my ear.’

She looks at me, face closed. ‘I didn’t, though.’

Fuck it, I might as well say it. I can feel her slipping away. This is as close as we’re ever going to get.

‘Was this ever anything?’

‘What?’

‘All this,’ I say. ‘You and me.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ she says. ‘We’re mates.’

‘Don’t mess with me, Miri. You know it’s different.’

She sighs. ‘I don’t know how to talk to you about this. I don’t think you really know what you’re asking.’

‘I do know,’ I say. ‘I’m not some stupid kid.’

‘Maybe there was something,’ she says. ‘For a week maybe I thought about you. But I just can’t with you, Nell. You’re so young.’

I get out of the car, cold air prickling at my armpits. She doesn’t follow me and I don’t hear the car start. I guess she’s just sitting there thinking about how great she is. How everyone should give her a little prize, for doing what almost everyone we know has already done. Life’s not on a timer. But then why do I have this feeling that there is a timer, inside of me, relentlessly counting down? How long have I got? Before it’s too late for the city, for uni, for sex, for love. I swipe someone’s garden ornament, a fairy preening upward, offering flowers to the sky. I chuck it into the centre of the street. Love is shit, I think as it smashes.

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MICK'S OUTSIDE PETRONELLA'S, SMOKING IN his car. 'You owe me,' he said on the phone. 'I saved your life, remember.'

Petronella's finally agreed to do a medium session for April, and Mick needs me here. Had to be tonight, so I abandoned Cal to the empty cupboard and his nostalgia playlist. I can think of a thousand things I'd rather do than sit with two of my (ex?) lovers and listen to an old hack fail to call forth my dead best friend, but I figure this is something I can do for Mick before I leave town for good. He believes, or needs to believe, just like Leigh believes. Who's being hurt here, except me?

'Jesus Christ,' he says as I lock up my bike. 'Your fucking hair. You look like a Hare Krishna.'

'Shut up,' I say. 'I've worn shit from literally everyone about it.'

'I can see why. Probably better that we broke up, otherwise I'd have to dump you anyway.'

Touching that he describes us as having a 'break-up' as opposed to 'we stopped fucking'. And a nice reminder as well that it's all for the best, that Mick's supposed to fuck women with long hair and long legs, and I'm supposed to fuck women with long hair and long legs, and we should both basically be puzzled by each other.

'Shut up,' I say, 'or I won't go in there with you.'

'Really,' he says. 'It's not so bad. You make it work.'

We look up at the house. It's the best hour, the orange blaze of the late afternoon sun softening the edges with a peachy glow.

'What a fucking place,' says Mick.

'Are you ready?'

'Not really,' he says. 'Are you?'

'Nothing to do with me,' I say. 'I'm just here to make sure Petronella doesn't turn you into a sex slave. I'm just here for the ride.'

He tosses his cigarette into the gutter. 'Let's go.'

'Gird your loins.'

'You,' he says, 'don't get to think about my loins anymore.'

Petronella is surprisingly sober. The hand she puts in mine is dry and steady, unlike other nights I've been here. Both her eyebrows are on straight, but maybe that just means that Katya's also sober.

'We don't have to do it this way,' says Petronella, 'but it helps the energy.' She carefully sinks to the floor. This must be murder on her hips. She's got about five pillows wedged underneath her.

Mick's on her other side, and Katya's between me and Mick. His face looks the way it used to before a fight: drained of feeling, all hard angles. It's weird to see him and Katya hold hands. They look very right next to each other. Mick closes his eyes when Petronella tells us to but I keep mine open until Katya gives my hand a hard, quick squeeze.

There's a long silence. Someone's stomach makes a noise. I don't know how long I'm going to be able to sit like this.

'I want you to think about April,' Petronella says. 'Bring up the memories you have of her, and let them play out in your mind. See where they lead you. With each thought, each remembrance, concentrate on her. On who she was, not who you wanted her to be.'

At first, nothing comes. It's like being asked to piss into a jar for the doctor.

What comes to me instead is Ryan. I was afraid it would be him who showed up. We were hardly ever alone together, apart from a few times April had him pick me up from work. She was always trying to get us to like each other, always trying to sell me on his hidden qualities. Like a secret panel existed somewhere and behind there would stand a man I liked. But I could never find the opening.

I couldn't tell her my fears about him because I couldn't risk her laughter or dismissal. 'That's just how men are, Nell. What do you know?' I couldn't know she was protecting him to protect herself, that if she acknowledged the worst things about him she would have backed herself into a corner. It was better to pretend. It's fine, fine, fine. Regular young love. Teenage-girl shit.

Only much later would I understand what she was going through. Wanting to see the good in someone so badly that it was dangerous.

From the deep space of that remembering, that anger, into the warm silence of the room start to come proper memories. Worn memories at first, like the summer April got really good at boogie boarding. We were fifteen and got a ride to the beach every day, and she practised hard. By the beginning of the school year she'd forgotten about it, had taken up guitar instead. We were going to have a girl band. Things that probably aren't real memories but taken from pictures I've seen of us: in a bath together when we were very tiny, making foam beards, a cone of bubbles on her red hair. Riding our bikes together at the school gala. Shards of memory. April at a party, leaning against a kitchen bench and laughing, the winter she had that dark purple rinse through her hair. April with her hair in plaits, furiously hitting pads that Mick's holding, during the year she got really serious about kickboxing. Sweat flying off her, me thinking she was so tough. Inventing dances in the mirror. Her face covered with flour during a game at a birthday party. The black cheongsam she made for our formal, when the rest of us were in halters and strapless dresses. When she pushed me off a rock

at a school camp because I said she had cankles. The séance we did to try to contact Heather, her knees moving underneath the table. Both of us crying the day Princess Diana died. The afternoon we sheltered from a downpour under a tree with Ryan, and I spent the whole time trying to figure out what it was she saw in him, when she was so beautiful and funny and mean that she could have had anything and anyone.

‘Oh,’ says Petronella. ‘She’s here.’

She knows her moments, because the second she says it a breeze snaps at the curtains. Katya’s hand jumps a little in mine, bringing me back to the room. My eyes are shut but I can feel that it’s gotten darker, night pressing in on my eyes like a blindfold.

‘Hello, my love,’ says Petronella. Then, in a murmur: ‘Keep your eyes closed. Hold your energy. She’s unsure. She’s just staying near the edge, by the curtains, in the bright light. I can’t see her very clearly.’

A pause. I can hear Mick’s breath coming short and ragged, like it’s the first bell and he’s been hit harder than he expected.

‘We’ve been waiting for you,’ says Petronella. ‘Some of us have been waiting a very long time.’

I can’t help it, my whole body is straining towards hope and wanting. The air in the room is cooler, which, of course it is. The sun is setting, the day is over! But I want it so badly to be April. More than I want to disavow all this, more than I want to believe Petronella is a fake, I want it to be her. Bringing with her the cool air of the banished, the light dusty smell of wherever she’s been.

‘Why, thank you, dear,’ says Petronella. ‘She says she loved the show. She says she can’t believe how old you all look. She’s laughing. She’s laughing at your hair, Nell, but she says it suits you. She’s a fiery one. Her spirit, and I think ... her hair. Bright goldy red, catching the sunset.’

Easy to know. What happened to April was in the newspapers nationwide, along with her picture.

‘She covers her mouth when she laughs,’ says Petronella. ‘Doesn’t like her teeth. You’re beautiful, my love.’

I can feel the jolt that goes right through me and Mick. She did hate her teeth. Too many crammed in, crossing over each other slightly. She was too vain to get braces, and Glenys didn’t want to pay for them anyway, but she was always aware of them. They weren’t terrible, just enough to take her face down a few notches.

‘She doesn’t want to stay long,’ Petronella says. ‘She says that being here makes her sad, makes her remember her life. She can smell the river.’

My heart’s beating like it wants out of my body, and I’m leaning forward into the circle as if I’ll hear her better there.

‘Ask her to stay, please, just for a bit.’ Mick’s voice is wet and scary. Another silence.

‘I can’t hold her for very long,’ says Petronella. ‘What do you want to ask her, love? She’s moving around the circle,’ she says to us in that murmur, meant for April not to hear. ‘But she wants to stay in the dark.’

There’s a dark patch moving on the inside of my eyelids, I can’t tell if it’s the curtain blowing or the power of Petronella’s suggestion.

‘Ask her,’ says Mick. ‘Ask her if she blames me. Tell her I’m sorry, for not doing what I should have. Tell her I didn’t know what to do.’

‘She can hear you,’ Petronella says. ‘It’s okay.’

Katya’s hand is so cool and still in mine I’m beginning to wonder if she’s still attached to it. I feel like a hole is being drilled through my lower spine. There comes a time in life when you can’t sit on the floor for lengths of time, even if your dead best friend is visiting.

‘She says of course it wasn’t your fault. I’ve made peace with my life, she’s saying. She’s happy where she is now, but she’s sad she missed out. Everyone did what they could, including me. I’m sad, she says, that everyone is so stuck. That the two of you are so stuck. You pretend you’re not, but you are. Move on, she says. Everything’s waiting. Get a bloody

life.'

'What should I do?' Mick says, and this time his voice breaks, bent over backwards and cracked down the middle. 'Tell me what to do now. I've fucked everything up.'

'She's gone, love,' says Petronella.

Katya's hand disengages from mine. The energy, or whatever's been holding us here, flows from the room. It feels like the lights at the cinema coming on in the middle of a movie.

'She was overwhelmingly at peace,' Petronella says to Mick. 'But she didn't want to stay here. It's too sad for her. The life she didn't get to live. People she loves. I felt very strongly that she wants you to have strong, good lives. She wants you to let go.'

Mick gets up and stands out by the pool. I think he's crying, but I can't go to him.

Katya and I heave Petronella off the floor. 'Bastard for the hips,' she says. 'Go and open a bottle, Katya.'

I follow Katya into the kitchen and Petronella says: 'Don't leave without talking to me, Nell. We've got business. You've been ignoring my calls.'

'So it's not just me you've been ghosting. Petronella too, maybe I shouldn't feel so bad then,' Katya says as she pours the wine. A glass for Pet, one for her. She looks tired, drawn. Hard edges. She hasn't directed any energy towards me since I got here. Not a word, or a look. Just that hand squeeze.

'Are we talking?' I ask.

'I haven't heard from you,' she says. 'Again.'

'I'm never sure if you want to or not.'

'Neither am I, to be honest. Look, maybe this is all a bit too much trouble for me. Fun and done. That's what I wanted. But it's dragged on and it's not doing either of us any favours.'

My hands are numb, my blood rushing to my heart. I can hear Mick's

voice in the living room, thanking Petronella.

‘Can we just talk for a bit?’ I ask.

She shrugs. ‘We can talk.’

‘I’ve just got to say goodbye to Mick.’

When I go back to the living room, Petronella says, ‘One more thing. April said: “Your dad is a fucking arsehole.”’

Mick and I look at each other.

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘He was.’

I walk him out. The street is quiet, the city sprinkled with smoky lights just visible against the setting sun.

‘Was it what you wanted?’

‘It’s what I needed,’ he says. ‘She charged me half. Friends’ discount.’

‘Must be that Mick Purdle charm at work again.’

He smiles. ‘No. She said on account of you. As a gesture of goodwill. Since you’re always such a snarky bitch. I saw April,’ he says. ‘She was standing there, smiling at me.’

‘Wow,’ I say. ‘That’s really ... wow.’

‘It’s okay,’ he says. ‘I know it’s pretty wild. You don’t have to believe me.’

‘I believe you,’ I say. I believe he saw what he needed to see, anyway.

‘Thanks, Nell. I wouldn’t have wanted to do this without you.’

There’s a heaviness to the sky like it might rain and I hope it does. I have no idea where I’ll be sleeping tonight. With Katya, or in my own bed with Trixie scratching and farting all night long.

‘What are you going to do?’ I ask Mick.

‘I think it’s pretty clear what she meant.’

‘April?’

‘Yeah. I have to make a go of my life with Faith and the kids. That’s the good life, right? Family. I never really committed to Faith how I should

have. Heart and soul, you know? But it's what April's saying. Grow up. Be a man.'

Sure. A thousand things he could have taken from that message, but he heard that. Back to the good life. 'Makes sense.'

'I'll see you, kiddo,' he says, and raps my arm with his knuckles how he used to.

I watch him drive away. What a beautiful boy, what a fucking fool. What I didn't tell him is that I would have asked the same question. The same pathetic question to a dead nineteen-year-old who couldn't decide on a hair colour: 'What should I do?'

'You need to get out of here,' says Katya. 'You've been saying it for months. Leigh's in good hands, she's had a nice holiday. Jacqui will pick up the slack. She won't need your brute strength heaving her in and out of bed when she gets out. You're making excuses to be here.'

'The show,' I say.

'We don't need you anymore. We only put you on payroll so you could keep Leigh from bolting, you know that. Anyway, at this rate there won't be a show. Petronella's being so fucking loose about it.'

'Has she paid you yet?'

'I don't want to talk about this with you.'

Maybe she's not just tired. She's frustrated, over it. For the first time being critical of Petronella. Her room's a mess. Petronella-level grot. Clothes everywhere. Loose tarot cards on the bedside table, sticky with spilt Pepsi. Half-empty glasses balanced around the room. The harness and dildo on the floor where I dropped them.

'Katya,' I say. 'Just come with me. Let's leave tomorrow. Or tonight, now.'

'Leave with you? You can't go a day without breaking your heart over dreamboy. You're so fucking sensitive, I can't even mention your hair

without you going off the rails. I can't trust you, Nell.'

'Mick and I ended things. I want to be with you.'

She sweeps a mess of clothes off her bed onto the floor.

'God, shut up, Nell. Just let it go.'

'You pursued me!' I yell. 'You came on to me so fucking heavy it was like being hit with a brick!'

'Because I was bored!' she screams back. 'I thought it would be fun to fuck a woman. But it's not fucking fun anymore.'

I pick up the dildo, wave it around like evidence. 'You're saying this wasn't fun? Because you certainly seemed like you were having fun at the time.'

'Yeah, sure. You're a great fuck, Nell. Is that what you want to hear? But you're a mess. Everyone's the bad guy, except for you. Everyone's fucked, except for you.'

'No,' I say. 'Everyone's fucked except for you. I'm in love with you, Katya. I love you.'

She gives me the blank stare of a stranger on the bus. 'You say you want me, but you don't really. You don't even know me, Nell.'

'Because you won't tell me anything! Impossible to know you while you're playing psychic Power Rangers with Petronella.' I fling the dildo and it hits the wall with a thick thud, flops onto the floor.

'You're too much,' she says. 'This is all too much drama and I don't need it. Can you just go?'

'Please, Katya.'

'This isn't the first time you've found yourself in this situation. No. You're a thirty-three-year-old woman who can't hold down a job or a girlfriend. You can barely pay for your own drinks, let alone mine. You ride a bike. What's attractive here?'

'You're being so horrible,' I say. 'I don't know where this is coming from.'

‘I asked you to leave,’ she says. ‘But you’re still here.’

She opens her laptop and stares at it like it’s a portal to another world, instead of Petronella’s Facebook page. I feel sick, ruined in that way where you know something is finished but your mind and your body aren’t in sync. One of them still thinks this can be saved. I’m not sure which. Somewhere, the hammer hasn’t dropped.

I lie outside on the pool lounge. Leaving means it’s over. A part of me knows this is crazy, bordering on scary, but I can’t leave. For what, to who? I came here with nothing and now I have less. I didn’t even get some guardian angel message from April that I could misread.

It’s cold out here, the wind chopping up the surface of the pool. I’ve been here a season. When I left this town the first time it felt like I could go anywhere, now it feels like I’ve got nowhere to go. How could I have lived all these years and only burnt bridges behind me? I think about Lucrece begging me to withdraw my HR complaint. I think about the long list of women I’ve promised ‘a future’ that I was never going to be able to deliver on. The terrible things I’ve always known about myself, that I’m a user and a grifter. A drifter. A down-and-out country song. Lucrece was using me, and I was using her right back.

‘I love you,’ I said to Katya. ‘I love you,’ Mick said to me. Are we the same? Is it just what you say to someone when you want to keep fucking them? Am I just trying to anchor myself to something, Katya the closest point of safety?

After about half an hour it occurs to me that Katya might actually think I’ve gone. That if she wanted to come and make up, she might not even know I’m here. So I cough and drag the lounge away from the pool. Still nothing. She might have headphones in, might be watching a movie. My joints get stiff and sore. Discomfort means the gesture is good enough, that it’s worthy of forgiveness.

I wake up to a toe pressed into my ribs. My dreams flee, along with a memory I don't have time to catch. I turn towards what is surely Katya's toe. But the figure looms over me, terrifying and misshapen. Petronella. I think she's about to tell me to get off her lawn furniture, but she presses a finger to my lips. 'Come inside.'

She's been on a fierce streak of drinking. A silvery cask-wine bag, without its box, sits sweating and half deflated on the table. 'Have one,' she says. 'Actually, no. You'd better not.'

I didn't want one anyway. I make a cup of tea. I feel like a shock victim, cold and aching and empty of feeling. I keep an eye on the bungalow but it stays dark.

'Were you happy?' she asks. 'With April's visit?'

'Mick was. That's the main thing. You made it seem very real.'

She smiles. 'Katya's in a bad mood,' Petronella says. 'You'll have to forgive her. Although it seems like for the two of you, fighting's half the point. Fighting and fucking. I was like that with my first husband. And my third. After him I had a hysterectomy and fell in love with a woman. Then I thought I was done with love. Women are worse than men. But lately I've been thinking that I've got one last grand affair left in me. One last great love.'

My neck goes cold. She's about to proposition me. But she keeps rumbling away about great loves while I drink my tea. Hot and sweet, like Jacqui makes it. Like we're all life's perpetual invalids.

'It's time,' she says, when I sit down. 'I need what I need from you now.'

'Which is?'

'You're going to take my car. Drive for about three and a half hours.' She names a small town in the centre of the island. 'You'll meet a man there. Go where he takes you. Take the coordinates. Come back, give them to me.'

'That's it?'

'That's it.'

‘Can I go tomorrow?’

‘No,’ she says. ‘This is where you make your money, if you want it. Think of this as a little adventure. Give me your phone.’

I give it to her.

She punches something into the Maps app with the doddering conscientiousness of someone who can’t see straight. I’ll be lucky if she doesn’t send me straight into the sea.

‘Go here,’ she says. ‘Someone will meet you.’

‘Who?’

She grins. ‘Give it up. Trust me. Stop trying to control everything.’

Fine, I think. For what she said she’d give me? You don’t get that kind of cash for moving books. I’ll do whatever she wants. I’m sick of putting defences up against this crazy bitch. I take my hands off the wheel.

It’s dark when I leave Petronella’s place in her Glade-scented hatchback, a bottle of water rolling around in the passenger footwell and nothing but a Rod Stewart CD to see me through the ride.

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PART THREE

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WHEN I HIT THE EDGE of town it feels almost like breaking a spell. Like I'm busting through the invisible cling wrap of the protective bubble stretched over this place. Petronella is sending me near ski country, where I worked in a hotel for one horny season. Rich girl skiers are feral sex fiends. It's the only mountain place I ever lived. I couldn't get the hang of skiing. It's a rich-kid pastime.

But where Petronella has me going skews slightly west of the mountain towns. It's a nothing place, more nothing than the place I come from. It's a truck stop, basically.

Petronella made her name in places like the ones I'm driving through. Small towns where people close ranks against the dead to protect the living. Places where girls 'go to the city' or 'take off with a boyfriend' and no-one lifts a finger.

I think about how Miri came to me that night and told me I had to get out. How she wasn't just being self-important, that maybe it was a message just for me. That my life couldn't be truly real until I left. Just like hers. Every queer from a small town I've ever met has had an extra layer of defensiveness, an extended adolescence, while they grow into themselves, into the people they couldn't be back where they were from.

I yawn hard enough to crack my jaw. The roads are empty for long stretches, only the occasional truck thundering past. Rod Stewart gets

louder and the air gets colder as the mountain gets closer. I sing along to 'Maggie May'. Once, twice, three times the album replays.

No-one's making me do this, I tell myself. I could just keep going, if I wanted. But the truth is, apart from the money that Petronella is dangling, this is the first time in months someone's pointed me in a direction and said: 'Go.' The time before that, it was Jacqui telling me I had to come back and take care of Leigh. Before that, Lucrece telling me to get out of her house. Rewind again, Lucrece setting me up with a promotion and a haircut. Even further back, the centrifugal force of April's death moving me from one dead end to the next. I'm a simp for guidance. A slut for someone else making my decisions. I'll call the shots in the bedroom if you tell me how to live my life. I can't think about what I'll do after this, once I have the money. If I get the money.

What would I be doing if April hadn't died? Am I kidding myself to think that my life would be vastly different, that I'd be happy and well adjusted and not carrying around a brimming gutful of anger all the time? Would I really be an English teacher or a nurse or an architect? All those careers we threw around like it was going to be so easy. Maybe I'd be in the exact same place, shitty at the world for another reason. Miri never did her police training. I know that. I don't know what she did do. I've never been able to find out. Her dad had a heart attack a couple of years after I left. Before that, he got a hard time for making trouble when April died. No-one got away unscathed. What happened changed Miri's life too.

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FOR THE SECOND TIME IN three nights, I meet Miri in a dark parking lot. The gulf between those three days is huge. She's still standing on the same side, but I'm miles away. Ever since Jacqui called me at work on Friday to tell me April was dead, I've been gone. 'It's okay to cry,' Leigh told me, but I've got nothing. Cal hasn't stopped crying. His nostrils are so chapped he leaves little smears of red on his hankies.

Miri called saying she needed to see me, and I didn't even care. I tried to put her off. 'Don't you know April's dead?' I said. Yeah, she knew, but she still had to see me.

She's parked in the darkest corner of the supermarket carpark, little red Mazda like a drop of blood.

She eyes me up for a second when I get in her car. 'How are you?' Her eyes roam over my face, slide right off and she looks towards the supermarket instead. Break my heart over this girl? Love her? Everything I felt for her is so far away it's like looking at it on a map. Lines that show you something's there, but you'll never know how it feels to be on the ground.

'What do you want?' I had to walk here. She refused to pick me up.

'No-one can know about this, okay? I could get in deep shit, and so could my dad. So you can never tell anyone. Not Mick, not your family.'

'What?' I don't have the energy for this intrigue. I'm so far past it.

‘They took Ryan in for questioning. Your dad released him.’

I stare at her. ‘But we know they took him in,’ I say. ‘They let him go because he had an alibi.’ The feeling I had when I heard April was found in the river, beaten, bruised and bloodless, was absolute certainty. Of course. This couldn’t be some random act. It had to be him. He’d said, a million different ways, that he would do this. But they let him go. I’d been at April’s mum’s, with Jacqui and Mick, for most of the weekend, and we hadn’t seen Ryan since the police questioned him.

‘His dad was his alibi,’ she spits at me, ‘which is no fucking alibi at all. Nell, he’s gone. He skipped town this morning. It was him.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Night before last, they brought him in. Your dad, Brown, and my dad too. They questioned him for a bit and then they let him go. And now he’s gone.’

I watch two girls come out of the supermarket with armfuls of snacks. Chips, lollies, bottles of Coke. One of them hip-bumps the other and they get into the car, laughing.

‘But why did he leave, if they already cleared him?’ My mind’s struggling, like a needle stuttering over a record, to grasp the essentials of what’s being said. Ryan’s guilty, he always was and I always knew. Except he wasn’t, and there was a little relief in that. If Ryan’s not guilty, then neither are we.

‘Because he was never really cleared. My dad reckons he left last night. Straight away. After they let him go. He’s had a night and a day. Things only got straightened out a couple of hours ago. They put out an alert then.’

‘So he’s gone.’

‘If he’s smart, he’ll be gone.’

Jacqui and Leigh have been keeping up the charade of not knowing. Of ‘innocent until proven guilty’ and ‘we have to trust justice to take its course’. But Mick and I know. Mick, who’s still got the bandage on his

hand to prove what he knew and when.

‘There’s something else,’ says Miri.

‘What?’ What else could there possibly be? Ryan killed April and my dad let him go. My dad, who’s always had this soft spot for the mongrel Ryan, even though he was a shitty fighter. Who’s always seen a bit of himself in ‘that poor kid’. April’s dead and Jacqui’s helping Glenys decide what she should be buried in. What else?

‘My dad says, my dad thinks, you know, that they let him go. That they knew he’d done it and that they gave him a little head start. He says that there’s some stuff being said, like, sympathetic towards Ryan. That it’d be easy to lose your temper with a girl like that. That she practically drove him to it. That she fucked around on him. Not exactly that she had it coming, but ...’

‘That she had it coming.’ I look at her, but she’s looking out the window. Part of me, even now, is aware of how beautiful she is. Nothing will ever be how it was. We will never be the same as we were three nights ago, above the city, not talking about the thing between us.

‘Your dad said that April wasn’t worth ruining someone’s life over. He said it was just something that got out of hand, some roughhousing that went too far.’ She jolts her head back into the headrest. ‘Like beating someone to death and throwing them in the river is just “roughhousing”. Fuck.’

I close my eyes. I don’t feel disbelief. It’s as real as if he’s said it to my face. Because he’s been singing variations on this theme my whole life, about April and every other woman.

‘Nell,’ she says. ‘I’m sorry about what I said the other night.’

There’s an old man making his way across the carpark, one creaky step at a time.

‘What I said, about April being trash, I didn’t mean that. It’s all I’ve thought about since I heard she was dead. There’s just things I want for you,

and I wasn't thinking about anything else. How it might sound.'

I can hear her crying a bit, turn my head and catch some tears glinting on her cheeks. Tough Miri, who once threatened to shove her badminton racquet down a ref's throat.

'I have to go,' she says. 'I'm not supposed to be here. My dad'll lose his fucking mind. He's going to report it, Nell. He's going to make a complaint against your dad and Brown.'

'Good.'

'I can't drive you home.'

Outside, the night is a pulled breath, warm and still.

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THE LANDSCAPE HAS TURNED FROM bright-green valleys to pine forests and rock. The mountain looms like it's right on top of me, black slabs ready to fall. On the other side, dark trees front a sweep of frozen desert.

After I left Miri that night I went home, packed a bag, and went to Jacqui's. I never came back until Leigh got sick. After the funeral, Jacqui dropped me at the bus station. I was still in my funeral clothes. I took the stockings off in the bathroom and left them in the trash. I got my wish, rolling over the river, leaving the city behind for good. There was no rush of excitement, no feeling of my old identity cracking off and being left behind. It was too late.

Leigh always says it's better things worked out like they did. That maybe there was method in my father's madness. The day after I saw Miri, Ryan was trying to get up north, where he planned to get on a ship to Argentina. His father's friend worked on it, said he could disappear in South America, no problem. Ryan drove through the roadblock, and then tried to run over a policewoman who approached the car. They shot him, got him in the neck, and he bled out three kilometres from the scene. Leigh reckons that's justice, a life for a life. But Leigh's cooked from a lifetime of listening to cops. It didn't matter what happened to Ryan, what mattered was that he'd already been chosen over April from the start.

Even by Leigh. Especially Leigh. With her 'you get what you sign up for'

bullshit. Her ‘sometimes these men are just pushed too far’.

I park in the oasis glow of the petrol station, check the map on my phone. According to all my dubious instructions, this is where I’m supposed to be. And I’m just supposed to wait. Outside the car, there’s bone ice in the air that raises my hackles. My hands prickle with it almost immediately. All I have is some water and my card. A thin shirt and a pair of shorts. Petronella hasn’t prepared me for any of this. She’ll be tucked up in bed with a wine glow. I’ve got the strains of ‘Maggie May’ still rattling around my skull but it’s not enough to warm my blood.

In the boot of the car I find a poncho of Petronella’s. Bright red, threaded with gold fibres. Probably authentic yak wool from some pilgrimage she went on. Smells terrible. I put it on and go into the petrol station. The skinny guy behind the counter watches me as I fill a coffee cup and pick out a chocolate bar. Everyone looks suspicious under these fluoros. But I don’t think he’s the person I’m here to meet. He looks like he’s about nineteen. There’s a copy of *The Satanic Verses* halfway read on the chair behind him. We complete the exchange without a word until he rolls a wrapped muffin across the counter to me.

‘Free with the coffee.’ He shrugs. ‘Don’t worry if you’re not hungry. You can keep it in your car for a week and it’ll be fine.’

‘Thanks,’ I say. I linger a little by the magazines. I want him to remember my face should I come to harm on this adventure. But he goes back to his book, feet on the counter, biting his nails like it’s a real thriller. I read it in the bath one summer when I had no job and was living in a share house with no AC. Good luck to him.

There’s a big burly guy leaning against Petronella’s car when I come out. Like he just materialised out of the mountain. Thick beanie, jersey, steel-toe boots. His legs are huge and hairy. He’s a big boy, stacked and fat at the same time. He’s here to kill me. I’m about to back into the petrol station, to the protection of my magical realist friend, but the guy lifts his arm. ‘Nell?’

‘Yeah,’ I say.

‘Not sure how you’re going to get on in that get-up.’

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‘I WASN’T PREPARED FOR THIS,’ I tell him.

We make our way through thin forest on the other side of the national park. The army used to train out here. There’s still a skull and crossbones warning of danger, glowing white on red signs. I dated a girl in the army for a bit, who did training camps out here and she almost got shot by a fellow cadet when she was taking a piss one morning. There’s that to worry about too, that some idiot with a taste for midnight target practice might put a bullet in us. But when I mention it, Nick says the army hasn’t used it in years.

‘Spooky feeling, though,’ he says.

It’s like walking on the moon. Crunchy, icy sand under our feet. The cold seeps through my thin canvas shoes, through the cocoon I’ve made from Petronella’s poncho. I’ve tucked it around my hands then folded my arms across my stomach, and I follow Nick like that, a walking swaddled baby.

‘She rang me earlier tonight,’ he says. ‘Said it was all go. I’d begun to think it was off, hadn’t heard from her in a few weeks. She said she had to wait until the time was right. You’re not related, are you?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘My girlfriend works for her.’

‘Bit of a pushy old bitch,’ he says. ‘I was just about to turn in for the night. She said it had to be now. I said we didn’t need the cover of darkness, but she wasn’t having it.’

Nick's drive was as long as mine, from the other direction. He's Leigh's age, maybe a bit younger, definitely in better shape. Rough but ripped, like he carries logs on his back all day. I can see long years of manual labour in his thick calves. I feel like I've never known anyone's legs so well, in the two hours we trek across this desert.

'How much longer?' I say to his heavy back. He's not carrying anything except water, so I figure we're not camping. No shovel to bury me with.

'Not much longer,' he says. 'If we're going the right way.'

It seems like there's no discernible way. It feels like you could walk in any direction and come to nowhere. I wonder if Nick's navigating by the stars, which blink and come into slow focus whenever I can be bothered raising my head.

'You're not so fit, huh?' he says after a long time of me puffing and grunting along behind him.

'No endurance,' I say. I guess all that riding around town hasn't done shit to prepare me for walking across rough terrain under the stars. The ground is uneven now so most of my concentration goes towards not losing my foot down a rabbit hole. I have to trust that if I break an ankle Nick will carry me out of here on his big strong back.

I need to piss and he stands far enough away so that I can't see him. He turns his torch off and the dark is something I can almost feel, like a cat brushing itself against my face. I basically leave my brain back there in a puddle of piss. Only my body carries along behind him.

It's after that he starts talking, softly. It takes me a long time to realise he's talking to me, and that there's a story in what he's saying.

He starts off like he's reading from a guidebook. 'In the sixties and seventies the government was giving away parcels of land to groups of people who wanted to live communally, and who would develop land that had been abandoned to scrub and possums and rabbits. Groups of young people, influenced by the social change that had been rumbling since the

sixties, established communities around the country. Some lasted for a while, some never really got going. The issue was that the land wasn't fit. It was rocky, or flood- or slip-prone. The government hadn't really considered that it would be impossible to develop without major intervention. Couldn't do it with a shovel and an idea. Most of the communities foundered, breaking under the weight of fruitless labour, or a mixed bag of personality, drugs and clashing philosophies. By the eighties,' he says, 'only a few still survived.'

He pauses while I kneel to re-tie my shoelace.

'We set off,' he says, 'a few days after New Year's. We had a tent, a chilly bin full of beers, cans of food, a shovel and some seedlings we'd been nourishing. We were going to revive the dream. We crossed the bridge before midday. There was six of us, and we left town in my brother's ute.'

In the deep valley of my exhaustion, the understanding comes to me slowly, like a man shouting to another from the other side of a ravine. There's something in this story for me.

They left on the kind of day when the sky was a high dome, like you were in a stadium of blue, like you'd eventually drive to its brilliant edge. Nick and his girl were in the front, his brother and three others in the tray. His brother was sweet on one of the girls. She was young, had only been out of school a couple of years. They were all young, but she was the youngest. Nick could see the hair of the people in the back whipping around wildly every time he checked his rear-view, which was often because he was keeping an eye out for cops. They were always smiling and their teeth gleamed in the sun.

They stopped by an old stable for lunch and lay in its shade while they ate and smoked, only a couple of hours away from home but it didn't matter. They were on their way. Tricia read a book while the rest of them drifted off with the puffy clouds skidding overhead. The rest of them: Nate, Nick's brother, who owned the ute. Carly, who had some money. Phil, a Māori boy

from up the road, hot on the revolution to come. And Heather.

No-one really understood how Heather came to be part of things. Heather, who was beautiful. And quiet. They couldn't work out if she really wanted to be with them or she just wanted to get someplace. She'd been working in the supermarket when they met her, smoking Benson & Hedges out the back, her hair twisted into a French roll. She watched them dig around in the dumpster. No more waste. They were into, you know, living free. As much as they could. She'd shrugged whenever they spoke to her but then she set aside a whole tray of runny custard squares. She'd ring Tricia at the polytech whenever it was a good dumpster day. She joined the gang.

Phil had said of Heather: She looks like an angel but she's a wild one, trust me. He'd seen her at a party long before any of them had met her, some place out of town. Phil was more cautious of Heather than the rest of them. He said he liked her style but he was wary. They all started living together in the Porirua Street house six months ago, a place out by the beach that was slated for demolition. Practice run. The main aim was to save money for this trip. Some of them had been better at that than others.

They set off again, the group in the back quieter but still smiling. He kept an eye on his brother. Nate was a late addition to the group, mainly brought in on account of his ute. But he was very enthusiastic. He read all the books they gave him, recited them at dinner, at the pub, down at the shops. He was a bit keen on Heather. Googly eyed. Nick'd have a word with him. People could get together, there was no issue there. But it was better if they didn't get hung up, if the feelings were nice but light. He and Tricia were different because they pre-dated everything. They were at a deeper, more mature place in their relationship.

In the late afternoon they stopped somewhere and hiked and saw a waterfall. Some of them had barely left the town they grew up in. The north would be another country. They pitched the tent and made a bed in the ute. Built a fire. They could do that. Ate a quiche one of the girls had made.

Beers. They sang a few classics around the campfire and then Phil sang a waiata and that's how they ended the night. Soon every night would be like this.

He remembers looking into the fire, his arm around Tricia, her head on his shoulder, thinking: What a perfect fucking day.

The second day dawned just as cathedral-domed as the last. They had breakfast at a truck stop, joking about how this might be their last civilised meal.

Heather told them she'd taken typing and French at school, felt herself to be full of pointless knowledge. Entering this new phase of her life with empty hands. You can make bread, Carly said. You can sew and knit and plant seeds. You can learn anything you need to learn. Your hands aren't empty.

By the time they finished breakfast the sky was low and grey. After fifteen minutes on the road, those in the back were cold and quiet. Nick pulled over and they conferred. Phil knew some people who had a camp near the army base. It was an uneasy truce between the squatters and the soldiers. He thought they could stay out there a night. They were in the shadow of the mountain. It was amazing to be this close to the harsh, jagged black of it, when it was usually a dreamy etching on the horizon. But they weren't dressed for the ice that came off the rock.

They had trouble finding the camp, which was off the main road in a gully, behind trees. They pulled up at midday. Not exactly welcome. It was mostly staunch Māori kids, anti-government. Nick held Tricia's hand while Phil spoke to them. They could stay the night. Cash would be good if they didn't have food or weed to contribute. There was a big iron-sheet building with extra mattresses for guests. A party later.

They sat in a tight circle all afternoon. It rained hard, the shed a four-way echo chamber. Carly, who was comfortable anywhere, napped. Tricia peeled

potatoes until a woman marched up and took the half-finished bowl from her. Nick wanted to go. They hadn't planned for rain. He was afraid Tricia would want to go home.

Things started to get a bit more social in the early evening. It stopped raining and some boys turned up from the army base. It turned into the kind of scene they recognised. Phil's friend made sure they ate. Someone got the fire going. Nick could see Heather through the flames, eating food off a plate with her fingers. She had a way of being at ease that put other people at ease. It wasn't just that she was beautiful, because sometimes that could work the other way. She asked questions. It was a bit of a gift. Maybe the trick was that she was genuinely interested. She'd told him once that she always wanted to be around people. Couldn't imagine a life where it was her and just a few others, day after day. 'You reckon you'll get sick of us that quick, Heather?' he'd said. She'd laughed, blushed, said she was talking about family, boyfriends she'd had. She said there was always something new to discover in a group like theirs.

He knew what she meant. The thought of spending another twenty years in the same house he grew up in, eventually running the farm with his brother, maybe each adding a wife to the mix, made him sweat cold. A creeping fear on the back of his neck as if it had already happened. Their parents growing twisted with age, already ingrained habits calcifying into ritual. He watched his brother through the fire. Nate was like a new person out here. Had thrown off some of that shy farm-boy grunting, some of that growing bitterness. So that was new. Maybe Heather was right. Maybe they'd get newer every day.

Tricia went to bed at some point. The thing is, he lost his grip on the night. He remembers going in and finding Tricia in the long room, curled up in the centre of some mattresses. Nuzzling her blonde hair, which still smelt like the shampoo she used at home. Someone told him to rack off, get outside if you're going to go on and on. They were singing outside, joints

going round. Good feelings. The suspicion and the hostility directed at them earlier were washed away.

He was on the home brews now, yeasty and malty, turn your piss to amber. They'd have to get something like this going. Stop buying beers. They could learn a lot from this lot.

The army boys brought out the hard stuff. Homebake. He wouldn't get into any of that for a few years. That's when he'd get into bad trouble. But right now he wasn't interested. Just wanted to ride the wave of his thoughts. This deep philosophy. Back to the land, the real religion. He was in someone's ear about it. Bye, Heather. Bye, brother. He watched them go. Heather looked shy as she left the circle with these boys, his brother bright and excited like it was all a big joke. Good. It would be good for him to get some experience. Heather didn't want anyone to see her shoot up, he got that. It was intimate. She'd done it before, no worries. She said it was great, that she wanted to do everything once. So this would be twice, then.

He watched his brother go with a pang of worry. He was a big boy. Knock some of the farm out of him. But he, Nick, just wasn't interested. He was fine where he was. They'd have rules at their own place. You couldn't get in too deep with heavy stuff like this. But right now was fine. They were celebrating their freedom.

He saw Carly sneak away with one of the boys. Not to shoot up, but to be what – shot into. He laughed at his grotty little joke. There was no friend close by to share it with. He took the joint, passed it. This was it, this was the life. He thought of his father, breaking his fucking back twice a day until he was eighty or dead. The party flowed on and he could have sworn he saw Heather again but the thing was the whole night was a jumble of images, out of order, like someone had taken the books off the shelves at the library and tossed them about. At some point it started raining again and that was it. Hard rain. The fire smoked and fizzed. He found his way inside. His brother was passed out on the mattresses. Shoes on. That was poor

form. Definitely disrespectful, maybe even bad luck. Tapu. He knew about that. He pulled his brother's shoes off, like he was small again. The whole place smelt like wood smoke, feet and beer. He curled around Tricia.

Seconds later, it felt like, waking up to grey dawn. Phil's hand on his shoulder. 'It's real bad, bro.'

Nick had thought they were all equal partners, but no, when it went wrong, he found himself the leader.

She'd been out in the rain all night, body bleached colourless. Clothes wet through. Jeans, plaid shirt and a sheepskin jacket. He'd remember for the rest of his life because those clothes were so fucking heavy. Cold vomit stopped up in her mouth. She'd slipped away, is how he'd always thought of it. Slid sideways off the map, the official timeline. She wouldn't have felt anything, the guy told him, the unofficial leader of this place.

The hostility was back, up like a fence. You have to get this gone. You were never here. We can't have this happen here. If you were here, it's over. If you were here and this happened, those army boys will find you and kill you so you weren't here.

He and another guy and Phil helped put Heather in the back of the ute. Tarp over it. Everything quiet except one woman crying and cursing as she watched. Weep, weep, weep. Fuck you. Everyone else still sleeping.

The guy saw the gear, the tray of seedlings. 'Youse aren't even packed for a fuckin' picnic. Go home.'

He and Phil drove out, as far as they could. They were trespassing, but it didn't matter. They thought the body would be found in a couple of months. They went as deep as they could, but it was hard work. The guys back at the camp lent them an extra shovel. By the time they put her in the ground it felt like business. They couldn't even cry for her. It was too big, too exhausting. They told the others she'd got a ride down south, had a better

offer. She wanted to see the other island. She left with some men, didn't you see them? They'd buried her stuff with her. No-one believed them, but they had to. His brother hadn't even shot up, had only understood what was going down when Heather and the boys sat down under some eaves. He left, went to bed. When they drove out of there the sun hadn't even breached the mountains. They drove like they were being chased.

'So it's around here,' Nick says.

'What is?' I'm still stumbling, legs and mind tripping over each other.

'The grave, I guess.'

He came back here one time with Tricia, Nick tells me, as I take down the coordinates on my phone, drop a pin on my map and send it to Petronella. She'll get it when I'm back in range. 'You can probably guess,' he says, 'that things didn't last so long, with the group.'

I'm probably standing in the place where my aunt is buried, heir to the solution of this thirty-something-year-old mystery, and I'm fiddling with my phone as dully as I would check the time. It's momentous, I tell myself. Huge if true. I could bring truth and healing to my family in one fell swoop. But I just can't feel it, through the haze of my exhaustion, the flop of a story I've just heard. A vague sadness for the six dumb kids who set off on a bright morning all those years ago.

'If you've got what you need,' he says, 'we'll start back.'

I almost cry. I can't imagine walking back. If I let my mind reach forward to arriving at the car, turning the heat on, getting some water, I come undone. I just can't do it.

'Just focus on the next step,' says Nick. I drink from his water bottle.

'So what happened?' I ask. 'After that? What happened to you all?' I want the end of the story, but most of all I want his voice to distract me from how tired I am, how stiff and sore and cold I am. It never occurs to me to be afraid of him, this big guy who's spilt his guts to me. But he takes a long

time to answer and I know he's wondering if I'm going to grass him up. The horizon is peaking orange by the time he speaks again, light enough for him to turn the torch off.

'Well, we weren't ready,' he says. 'Phil's mate was right about that. Carly left us as soon as we reached the city. She got a job on a cruise ship, I think, probably saw more of the world than the rest of us. Phil ended up in one of the big communes up north. It lasted a fair while. He got stuck into all sorts. He's the only one who really went the distance. He went off my radar for a bit and next thing I know, he's one of the high-ups in the church. You know the one.'

I nod, even though he's in front of me.

'My brother stayed with us for a bit. Me and Tricia and him worked the orchards. He went to Australia eventually and got married. We never talked about it, but I think he knew.'

The story they told didn't hold together long, but the exact truth never came out. Just parts of it, so each of them went out into the world thinking they were keeping a different secret. That Heather had left with the guys, and she'd died months later with them. What happened to her took on a level of conspiracy, even among the people who should have known better. That she was killed in retribution for a drug deal gone sour between the two groups. That the army did it to scare the commune away from the land.

'We stuck to the story,' he says. 'Even when it was coming apart.'

I can hear birds now, flying low over the land, looking for food. We hear something scream across the ground, maybe something caught in an owl's claws.

'What about you?' I say. 'What happened to you?'

He laughs for the first time, a harsh bark of mirth that I can see the shape of, white and quickly dissolving in the cold air. 'We got into some bad scenes, me and Tricia. Barely made it through the nineties.'

'Did you ever tell anyone else?'

‘Only Tricia. Eventually, I brought her here. She thought it would be good for us to come full circle. But coming full circle really means coming clean. It was her that found the psychic. We knew Petronella at school. Knew her by another name but Tricia recognised her right off when she met her at some retreat Petronella was operating in Bali. One night Tricia reels off the whole story to her, and then we’re in it.’

‘She does have that way about her.’

The road and the petrol station come into view a long time before we’re close. I sense the fear in him as soon as we can see the big trucks rumbling across the highway.

‘She was my aunt,’ I say. ‘Heather.’

‘Fuck,’ he says. Breathes out long and slow. ‘She should have told me. Why the fuck would she send you?’

It’s the question that’s been playing on my mind too, but only Petronella can make that clear. ‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘She likes to play with people.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he says. ‘It might not seem like enough to you, but I feel like I’ve paid for it. I’ve done my time, and in my head it was for this. And now I just want a new life, fresh start. Healthy relationships. I’m going away. I just had to do this first.’

In the true dawn light I can see the time on his face, the red in his eyes. ‘I’m trying to go straight,’ he says.

‘I know,’ I say. ‘I don’t care about any of that.’

We part before the road. ‘You’ll be alright from here?’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘I already feel like I’ve been hit by a truck.’ As he turns to leave, I say: ‘Don’t you care? That it’s going to come out like this? That she’ll make money and manipulate people with a lie?’

‘That’s not my problem,’ he says. ‘The truth will be in there somewhere. You know. It’s kind of magic, this way. That’s enough for me.’

It's a different kid I buy my coffee from at the petrol station. I make a note of his name. Zach. Just in case I ever need to blow this thing up. I'm keeping my receipts.

I stop three times on the way home, highway catnaps with trucks screaming past.

At the edge of town I feel like it might resist my re-entry, bounce me back out of the fairytale of home. Once you know the truth, you can't go back. But I cross the river before midday. I'm headed for Petronella's, sleep chasing me up the hill like a dog. It doesn't make any sense for Petronella to reveal this to me, of all people. The first thing I'll do is go to Leigh, tell her what I know. She doesn't have to do some ridiculous TV show, make a spectacle of herself. I could go to the papers, make twice what Petronella's promised me. I pull up to Petronella's feeling flush with power, like she's just handed me her gun.

My crow dies in my throat. Dies hard like a match flicked into a puddle. They're gone. The house is dark and locked. An envelope nailed to the door like a dead animal, my money inside. A vicious hole right through the centre of the notes. Katya's work. I can feel her delicious bitchiness coming right off it. Her sense of righteousness at having exposed me for a hypocrite. I count it. It's half what Petronella owed me, and a note: *Enjoy your dirty money and I'll enjoy the rest*. I hold the envelope to my nose, try to get a whiff of that dead lily perfume Katya wears. Nothing but palmed old money smell.

I drive home on muscle memory, in delirium. I know it hurts but it's like taking a punch drunk: I can't feel anything yet. The only thing I can feel is how much I love having cash. Even if it's less than promised, it's more than I believed I'd get. I love having an envelope of it, secured in my underwear band. I love the slight hysteria that comes with having it, the immediate fear of losing it. I love thinking about how careful I'll be with it, I love having

something to hide. I love it the whole way home, where Cal runs me a bath, and as I ease into it, a joyless little thought creeps into my head: money's the same as knowledge, it solves some of your problems but not all of them.

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‘THAT,’ SAYS CAL, ‘IS SOME fucking story.’

I’ve been talking for an hour, long enough for the bath to run cool twice. Long enough for me to start feeling the full scale of my aching legs and back.

His hand appears around the door. ‘Here’s a towel.’

‘Don’t fucking look!’

‘I’m not looking, you psycho.’

He’s been sitting in the hall outside, listening and blindly handing me cups of tea, then beer, as the story got weirder. He was less than expressive during my recounting of the night with Nick, and I started to wonder if he didn’t believe me, if he thought I’d gone mad, even though I’d showed him my mosquito bites and the scratches from the grasses. I even had him go and get my receipt from the petrol station.

‘Do you think it’s true? That whole line he gave you?’

‘You don’t believe me.’

‘Nell,’ he says, ‘I believe you. But do you believe Petronella? There’s been so much set-up here. This guy could be some actor, someone Petronella fed a line to. It’s so convenient, this story where no-one’s really to blame.’

I hadn’t considered that it wasn’t true. Maybe it was just a result of being sleep deprived and exhausted, but the whole time Nick was talking I could

see his story unfolding, as sharp as the mountain behind us.

‘But why would she pay me? Why would she show me behind the curtain? Why would she want me to have anything to do with it? I could end her.’

‘Because you’re implicated,’ he says. ‘You sold out.’

‘Jeez, tell me what you really think.’

‘I don’t really think that,’ he says. ‘But others might.’

‘I don’t have to play along,’ I say. ‘I could go to the *Women’s Weekly*, make a splash.’

‘Yeah, but there’s something even worse about that,’ he says. ‘Being a nark.’

‘Mmmmm. Maybe.’

‘Maybe there’s something neat about this way,’ he says. ‘Everyone gets what they want. Answers, mystery, money. I like it, even if it is morally dubious.’

‘What if it is a lie?’ I ask.

‘I guess you’ll never know.’

‘I hate not knowing things.’

‘No,’ he says. ‘You just hate not being right.’

But I was right about Petronella, even if no-one knows. I think about what Nick said about it being magic, how he didn’t care if Petronella got false credit. He just wanted the truth to come out. I want to believe that more than I want to believe he was just some washed-up theatre actor making a buck.

‘Anyway,’ I say, ‘this probably isn’t the worst thing I’ve done.’

I ring Katya. I almost drop the phone into the bath when she answers. There’s a rush of cars from her end and the slop of water from mine.

She says: ‘Petronella says can you return the car to the rental place?’

I don’t say anything. My legs are covered in mosquito bites. I think about

Katya in her bath only months ago, about to get rescued by Petronella. How a rescue is a rescue, no matter if it's intentional or not.

'My brother got out of prison. My grandmother is sick. I have to go home.'

'Katya,' I say. 'Why'd you take my money?'

'I know what you've both done. I made Petronella tell me,' she says. 'All this time you were accusing me of lying and being secretive, and it was you. Fucking your boyfriend and cutting secret deals with Petronella so you could keep on being high and mighty. You're the worst. Both of you. Scum.'

Maybe she says something else but she's inaudible to me, rushing through a tunnel. The call ends and after that I get a disconnected message.

I make it to bed and sleep until the morning. I wake up to Cal standing over me, a concerned look on his face, a flashback to three months ago, waking me up at his work. Like my mind won't stop repeating on itself, dredging up memories and soaking them with meaning, and it's getting closer and closer to the present, snagging on things that only happened a few weeks ago, until everything feels like nostalgia. I'll never feel normal again. Everything will be glazed with this tiredness and yearning.

Now I have the money (or half of the money, thanks to Katya), I'm less concerned with the ethics of it than you might think. You worry about where money comes from when you don't have it, and when you do, all sins are suddenly relative. It's not fucking oil money, it's not child labour, it's not chaining people to their sewing machines.

'You still look young,' Jacqui told me when I got off the flight from Sydney that she paid for. Yeah, I've been drinking from the fountain of perpetual youth. Which is the fountain of a lifetime of rentals, of missing teeth and thirty-five jobs before you're thirty-five. The fountain of no retirement fund and twenty grand of credit card debt.

But in case anyone's keeping count of my sins, two days after I get my

family treason money, I email B-Comms and withdraw my complaint about Lucrece. They pay me my holiday and a small severance package anyway, so I figure the weights are balanced. Lucrece sends me one last angry email, and then she disappears forever, and I can relegate her to the list of magnanimous ex-girlfriends, nice women I used to know.

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I NEVER CLAIMED TO BE a poster girl for good decisions, but my wallet's thick with cash when I say goodbye to Leigh.

'I guess you're pissing off, then.'

'I guess so.'

'You've been more heartache than help,' she says. 'Always leaving, never seeing things through.'

'I came, though,' I say. 'Didn't I?'

'You give yourself too much credit.'

I think of the answers I could give her now, and how much more they'll mean if I don't. She's sulky because her holiday at St Marian's has ended. Jacqui's moved in for a week or so to settle her in, an arrangement I can see lasting forever. It's freed me, though. There's no more excuse for me to be stalling my life.

Leigh closes her eyes, doing her deathbed schtick again, but she opens them when I get up to go. 'You could call every now and then,' she says. 'At least make a bloody show at having a family you care about, even if you are ruining your life.'

I guess my life's my own to fuck up.

When I go, I go with a screech of rubber and black smoke, doing a burnout that leaves twin ribbons on the road outside Leigh's place. Jacqui blowing

kisses and Cal waving Trixie's paw in the rear-view. Smoke makes its way back into the car and into my eyes, but I'm gone, I'm free, and it clears by the time I'm halfway across the river.

My body splits in two, veins following two different paths. This time, a phantom rider. Right down the highway I keep from looking at the passenger seat. Not to scare her. It's like a magic-eye trick. The trip out of here we never got to make. But somewhere before I hit the district limits, I feel her go. Like a scarf getting whipped out the window.

I go the length of this quiet island. Somewhere on my travels, between one oversized novelty vegetable statue and another, the world falls apart with a pandemic. Didn't Petronella say something like this would happen? Didn't she say nothing's going to be like it was before?

Stay where you are, the government tells us, but I can't. I can't stop moving, zigzagging deserted highways and pulling in at de-peopled tourist spots, enjoying one breathtakingly empty display of nature after another. I get lucky, because I guess my mission is blessed. I take the back roads. One checkpoint I roll right through, the cop on duty roused at the last minute by the deep throb of Cal's car. A stretch of coastal highway at night, nothing but black to my left, catching the light and drowning it. I turn my headlights off, just to prove how truly alone I am. A ghostly spume rises up and sputters across the car; Petronella's dead girls running their fingertips over the hood. I hit tourist towns. I tell the desperate caretakers of shitty motels that I'm a nurse heading north to shore up staffing. When that doesn't work, I sleep in the car.

I don't linger with these dead girls any longer. People say you have to make peace with the past but actually you can just let it be. The way things with Leigh and me aren't broken but not healed. I have to wear the classic mantle of the child who leaves: selfish, always looking for something better. How I'll never stop being angry at my father. How I have to sit with all the shitty things I felt about April before she died. I have to know that what I

told Ryan maybe pushed him closer to the edge, the place where he would kill April. That it's nice to have my little brother track my progress up the country, root for me by distance. Doubly nice that he gave me his car. The way I'll never really know about Petronella, this gift she's given me through dishonesty and cheating. That I can't truly know if what Nick told me that night was the truth. How it's best to just love some people from afar. None of us are going to be much different than how we are now.

Except me, child of endless chances, fresh starts and do-overs.

One night I sit by the great lake that craters the island and eat fish and chips. One by one, tiny dents of light appear on the embankment, little creatures slither up into the light, and I'm surrounded by cats. I feed them into a frenzy with tiny pieces of fish, swarming in my headlights, a velvety tangle. I try to coax a white-and-ginger short hair into my car but he escapes with his pals. Further north, I see dolphins rolling in the waves, flashing their pink bellies at the sun. It's like she described, up here. Hot and dusty quiet, plants that look like they might eat you. Winter comes but as I get further up the island the temperature evens out into a still warmth.

Somewhere along the way I take a cleaning job at a motel, because you have to be careful if you want to live for a while on the kind of money I have. I want to prolong this extended tour of the country I've never really seen. In the early hours of the morning, truckies pull up at the pavilion across from my window and leave their lights and radios going while they get goodbye blow jobs. Low rumble of engines bleeding into my dreams. It's from here that I watch the *Psychic Rest* episode on TV, connected to my family by screen. I can see Leigh, Cal and Jacqui on my laptop, bottle of sparkling wine on their coffee table.

Petronella's timed it perfectly with the end of the world, everyone looking for a prophet they can believe in. The only trouble is there's too many imitators, too many people buying into phony Instagram soothsayers. She has the virtue of being an original, and after tonight she'll have the

additional clout of being the country's only psychic medium to actually find the possibility of a body.

Cal's skinny legs blur the screen every time he gets up to fetch them something. Smokes, glasses, dog.

'Oh Christ,' says Jacqui, 'I look absolutely dreadful.'

Maybe they were lucky to miss Katya's lavish hand, but Jacqui still looks like she's been bleached.

We watch through Petronella piecing the story together, getting images of a beautiful day, a mountain, a group of people singing, Petronella calling them 'very young, very hopeful', then a party.

'She's saying: "It's so cold, I wish I'd said no. I wish I hadn't left my family,"' says Petronella, crunching over the same brittle ground I'd walked with Nick.

They know how it ends. This discovery of what might be Heather, might be anybody. If you watch the show it looks like Petronella dug up the ground with her bare hands.

How she even found anything in that huge landscape is a mystery to me. Maybe she is actually psychic. There's been some hold-up with the identification. The remains are old, the tarpaulin they were wrapped in degraded to shreds. There's no real confirmation that it is Heather yet, but Leigh's convinced. It's enough for her.

Leigh and Jacqui were surprised that Petronella had a new assistant, that Katya was nowhere to be seen. But I knew she'd already gone, done with Petronella and love.

Cal's laptop must run out of battery, because they disappear suddenly, and I watch the last ten minutes of the show by myself. Leigh crying in frame, being comforted by Cal's arm. Jacqui singing Petronella's praises, wiping away a tear and saying how this will bring healing to the family. Then a long drone shot of Petronella walking across the plain, with her traditional voiceover: *I carry their stories so that they might find rest.*

Closure's not real. Even after you think you've had it, you'll still get memories nipping at your arse. I tell myself it's good to wrap things up with Katya, that I don't want there to be bad feelings between us, but it's not peace I want from her.

I drive into her town on my last thousand, a day late because of an overheated radiator. Maybe we were doomed from that first piss: pre-packaged inevitability. It's the *Titanic* of love stories, this twisted thing we have. It's a plane set alight before it even leaves the ground. But I've heard stories of miracle survivals, beautiful rescues. I don't have to be a cynic my whole life.

The streets are quiet and the sea is flat, a warm, buzzy haze sitting on top of it. The main street is lined with succulents, and she's sitting between two giant aloe vera, smoking and not looking at my ridiculous, deafening car.

She tosses her cigarette when I get out, gets up and walks towards me. In the afternoon hush of her small town, we stand and look at each other and wonder exactly how far we can take this thing.

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