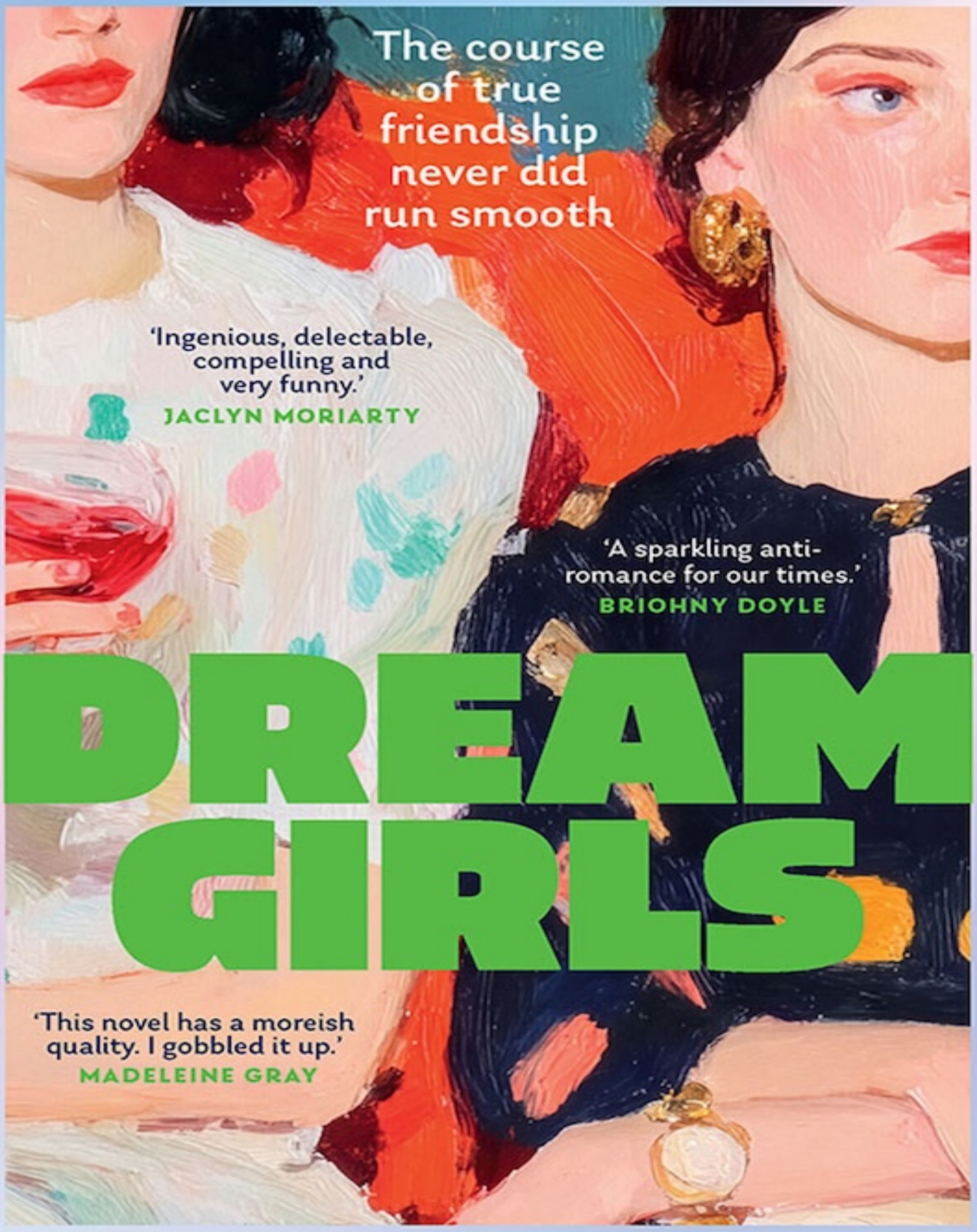


HANNAH GOLDSTEIN

Praise for
DREAM GIRLS

'*Dream Girls* is a compelling and deep exploration of intense female friendship. Goldstein writes with intelligence and verve, and with a forensically nuanced understanding of the sometimes-thin line between resentment and love.' **Madeleine Gray**

'Jane Austen hits suburbia—*Dream Girls* is a sparkling anti-romance for our times.' **Briohny Doyle**

'This is such a gorgeous, special book … It captures how it feels to question all the things we were so adamant we were right about as we grow up, but also what's so fantastic about loving a friend with the intensity teenagers feel.' **Bridie Jabour**

'*Dream Girls* completely charmed me … How wonderful to read a novel that is unapologetically for and about women and the fierceness of our friendships.' **Emma Darragh**

'The broken and (almost) unbearably flawed characters are like the perfect antidote to the slick young twenty-somethings of Sally Rooney … Shakespeare and Taylor Swift provide a perfect framework.' **Jaclyn Moriarty**

'*Dream Girls* is a novel about love and limerence, friendship and fantasy, and what happens when we mistake donkeys for angels. Hannah Goldstein spins a shimmering and timeless story firmly anchored in the present day.' **Eleanor Limprecht**

'Some friends are toxic narcissists, but we love them anyway. Some friends are bad feminists, some friends love Taylor Swift and don't have the guts to admit it … Hannah Goldstein shows us why long friendships—warts and all—are worth the heartbreak, the joys and the effort.' **Pip Smith**

‘A keenly observed story that understands the performance and simmering horror in even the truest friendships.’ **Brodie Lancaster**

Hannah Goldstein is a writer and teacher from Sydney. Her fiction has appeared in *The Big Issue* and the *UTS Writers' Anthology* and been shortlisted for the Richell Prize. *Dream Girls* is her debut novel.

DREAM GIRLS

HANNAH GOLDSTEIN

ALLEN&UNWIN

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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‘This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard.’

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

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Acknowledgements

ACT ONE

To die upon the hand I love so well

IT IS UNFORGIVABLE TO CAUSE a scene at someone else's wedding, to insert yourself into the action when you were only ever meant to be a background character—more of a prop, really—a silent smiling face in a pastel dress. I discovered this in the weeks after Phoebe's wedding—that ill-fated summer night in Byron Bay—when people I knew from high school and people I didn't know at all started sending me messages, asking if I was all right and calling Ruthie a sociopath and a criminal and a crazy fucking bitch—which was nice of them. You see, the night of the wedding, Ruthie tried to kill me.

I can still feel the cold dark water swallowing me whole, the lake so much deeper than I imagined. My dress weighed me down, the pale blue silk clinging to my body, the hem caught in my sandal. An undignified way to die. The taste of algae and mud in my mouth. But what I remember most was the look on Ruthie's face just before she pushed me into the lake, when we were standing together on the little bridge decorated with peonies and fairy lights, the Tranquillity Eco Resort glowing in the distance, the forest at our backs, the moon bearing down on us. A rage I didn't think she was capable of. Like she truly hated me.

Of course, I am glad to have everyone's sympathy now. But in their condemnation of Ruthie, they seem to have forgotten that she was also the only one who tried to save me. They didn't hear her shout my name or see her plunge into the lake after me. They don't know how I fought and kicked my way through the water until I could stand, or that Ruthie—who never learned to swim and is so much shorter than me—really did start to drown,

her dark hair covering her face, her body low in the water, or how I hesitated—just for a moment or two—before reaching out a hand towards her.

By the time the rest of the wedding party noticed us—Phoebe apoplectic in her bespoke ivory gown with its lace sleeves and pearl buttons, her blue-eyed groom at her side—Ruthie and I were crawling up the muddy bank on all fours. And in that moment, I felt a strange kind of exhilaration. Here we were, Ruthie and I, disgraced and filthy, looking up at all the beautiful people, so bright and lovely, like they'd just stepped out of a dream.

And here the maiden, sleeping sound on the dank and dirty ground

I LIE ON THE SOFT grass beside the swimming pool. The morning sun warms my face. The water shines a chlorinated luminous blue. Will walks towards me, his towel slung over his shoulder, that sardonic grin on his face, his hands in an open gesture, as if to say: *Fancy seeing you here*—our little joke. As he lays his towel down beside me, I clock the cool scent of his cologne. A thin pale scar is visible on his right knee—an old acting injury from his stint as Hamlet.

He catches me looking. I gaze down at my book. He knows what I'm thinking but doesn't want to get his hopes up. Not again. Not about something so important. His desire for me is so intense, he's a little afraid of it. If he had to describe the feeling, he'd say it's like carrying flat-pack furniture, something heavy and unwieldy—you have to move carefully, pay attention.

The thin cotton of his T-shirt brushes against my bare arm as he lies down beside me. His skin radiates heat. I pretend not to notice.

'What are you reading?' he asks.

What am I reading? Again, I look down at the book. It's something classic and dark and sexy. Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Yes, that's it. But before I can answer he snatches the book from my hand and begins reading the blurb as though it were a dramatic monologue: '*Our shy heroine falls in love …*'

I reach for the book, and our bodies collide. He takes me by the wrists and falls backwards so that I am above him. We are both laughing but as he looks up at me, silhouetted against the perfect blue sky, his expression turns serious. How can he help it? His feelings for me spill over. A sudden rush of love that sweeps him off his feet. He swallows, Adam's apple bobbing up and down. 'It's good to see you,' he says. 'I've missed you.'

Slowly, I rise to my feet, accentuating each of my movements. 'Let's go for a swim,' I say. 'Someone needs to cool off.'

He peels off his T-shirt. His chest is pale and smooth. His heart beating very quickly now. There is a groove down the middle of his stomach. His lovely linea alba. My favourite part of his body. How many times have I run my tongue down the length of it?

This time, I don't let him catch me looking. I turn my back to him and walk away, confident in the knowledge that he is following me.



A wet panting sound wakes me from my slumber. I lift my head off the couch cushion to find Chippy, my mother's Cavalier King Charles spaniel, glaring up at me. The living room is littered with pizza boxes and damp frozen yoghurt tubs. Leaning against the wall, beside the television and the pile of boxes containing the remains of my life, is the painting that Will gave me—a print of Sir John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* that he picked up from the gift shop at the Tate, that year we lived in London. I had it framed in gold. The only piece of art anyone ever bought me.

'I don't know why you're so fucking sad,' I tell Ophelia. 'You're not the only one around here who knows what it's like to drown.'

I imagine Will observing this exchange and experience a frisson of pleasure. He always enjoyed my sense of humour.



When I got home from the wedding, I dumped my bags by the door and lay down on the couch. That was five days ago. I haven't left the house since. I'm wearing bike shorts in lieu of clean underwear. Such is my depravity. No matter. It's not as if I'm going cycling any time soon, although I am possibly in danger of a yeast infection. One thing I have learned is that there is always further to fall.

Every morning, I wake up with the intention of going out. The weather is getting warmer, the days a little longer, thick slices of sunlight patterning the floor. I remind myself with growing dread that the summer holidays will soon be over and I will be back in the classroom amid a throng of rowdy schoolboys. Soon my parents will return from their trip to Vietnam and we must all begin the sorry process of adjustment that occurs when an adult child moves home in the wake of a crisis. I should make the most of my freedom while I have it. I could go to the pool, or catch a train into the city, or see a film, et cetera, et cetera. If only I wasn't so tired.

Chippy follows me into the kitchen. I pour kibble into her bowl and layer it with the mashed sweet potato my mother has left in Tupperware containers in the fridge. Chippy sniffs the food and growls at me, baring her sharp little teeth, before deigning to eat.

I make myself a cup of tea and return to the couch. On the television, the panellists are discussing the British royal family and comparing the number of bathrooms in Frogmore Cottage (four) to the Montecito mansion (sixteen) and discussing the state of the republican movement here in Australia (floundering). I get up to make myself another cup of tea and the pleasure I felt at the thought of Will dissipates. All that remains is a small but sharp pain in my chest. I look at Ophelia's vacant stare, her open mouth and empty hands.

'Crazy fucking bitch,' I say out loud to the room.

Any minute now, I will find the energy to get moving properly, to go out.

I drink the last of the tea and lie back on the couch as though I was injured, which, psychically, I am.

To die, to sleep—

To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub.

I engage in a brief fantasy in which I am suffering from some debilitating illness and Will is caring for me, brushing my hair back from my face, weeping at my side, telling me to hold on. 'Won't you eat a little something?' he pleads. 'You're nothing but skin and bone.'

'Just leave me,' I say, my voice husky, barely a whisper.

He places his hand on my cheek. 'Oh God, you're burning up.'

I smile weakly and stare at the ceiling, imagining myself flushed and lovely with fever, which is easy to do, because the heat of the day is already insinuating itself into the house. My thighs are sweating in my bike shorts. The couch cushions are damp.

Must get up, must go out.

I turn the cushion over to the cool side.

The dream of me and Will at the pool is underbaked but not without potential. I make a mental note to come back to it when I have the energy to flesh it out properly. Again, I consider really going to the pool. But it is almost midday. How time flies. Besides, the beautiful local pool probably closed down years ago. It's likely to have been replaced by some privatised indoor monstrosity full of screaming children. So what if I stay home one more day? It's my holiday, I can spend it how I please. Anyway, isn't the guilt I feel merely an internalisation of capitalist logic that insists we optimise every facet of our lives, even holidays, for productivity and self-improvement?

I adjust my position on the couch and begin mentally sifting through my library of regular fantasies. There is the fantasy of Will undressing me slowly in his grandmother's rose garden in Lancashire. I am wearing a floral dress with buttons that go all the way down the front, so it takes him a long, long time to undo me. There is the fantasy of losing my virginity (not in the tedious way it actually happened: me manoeuvring the semi-flaccid cock of a philosophy major into myself as quickly as possible to spare us both any further humiliation) but with Will. It is gentle and slow, and we are both excruciatingly beautiful.

Let it be known that Will does not feature in all of my dreams. I am not some kind of fanatic. In my more basely sexual fantasies, like the one in which I am small and supple enough to be fucked in a toilet cubicle, I prefer an anonymous lover—blank and beautiful as Michelangelo's *David*. Other dreams come to me more like still pictures, snippets I've pieced together from books and television and film. A smooth back against crisp white sheets. The sharp line of a shoulder blade, graceful as a wing.



It is not as if I am incapable of telling the difference between real life and fantasy—no, not at all. For a long time, I limited my dreaming to a single hour each night, even setting an alarm to keep myself accountable. It was like eating one square of dark chocolate after dinner each evening; the kind of thing people with self-restraint do. Just a little sweetness to keep the cravings at bay. It was only after Will left and Ruthie tried to kill me that

the dreams began to leak out into the daylight hours, filling up more and more of my time. After such an upset, surely it's permissible to let myself go just a little? Perhaps the rest is even good for me. A radical anti-capitalist act of self-care. Tomorrow I will rein in the dreams. For now, I settle on the Lancashire fantasy. It is of the more romantic and playful variety rather than explicitly sexual, which seems more appropriate for the morning. I am just settling into it, conjuring the lush grass of the rose garden and the sweet scent of the flowers, when my phone vibrates aggressively on the glass coffee table. It's a message from Phoebe; the first I've heard from her since the wedding.

Hope you're doing okay H! xx

I stare at the message. There is something thrilling about the way Phoebe has reduced my name, Helena, to a single letter—so intimate and familiar; a feeling intensified by the knowledge that Phoebe has taken time out of her honeymoon to check on me. I imagine her reclined on a banana chair looking out over the Mediterranean Sea, or standing at the edge of the Acropolis, typing this message, her acrylic nails tapping against the glass surface of the phone. Before I can formulate a reply, a slew of photographs arrive on my screen. It takes a moment for the pictures to load. When they do appear, they are dark and there are smudges of bright light, like camera flashes. At first, I cannot comprehend what I am looking at. Then I see that the pictures are of me in the aftermath of my near drowning. I am standing on the muddy bank of the lake, hunched over and scrunching the hem of my soaking dress in both fists. My hair is plastered to my face and my mouth is twisted in an ugly grimace. Phoebe's blue-eyed groom is gallantly holding a hand out towards me, his face a mixture of disgust and fear.

It is only when the laugh cry emojis begin to flood my phone that I realise Phoebe has not messaged me personally but posted to the wedding group chat. Before I have time to process this development and decide whether or not to add my own laugh cry emoji (to show that I too have a sense of humour) or respond earnestly to Phoebe's inquiry into my wellbeing (as a subtle reminder to everyone that I am a victim of violence and thus worthy of continued sympathy) or leave the group altogether (as in: *What the fuck is wrong with you, Phoebe?*), another text arrives: *Seriously, what a night! I love each and every one of you, my messy beautiful friends!*

Perhaps Phoebe is in the benevolent stage of drunkenness and truly can look back on the night with humour. But I cannot believe that she has forgiven me for drawing attention away from her on her special day, even though it clearly wasn't my fault. More likely, this is a calculated position. She wants to wrest back control of the narrative of her wedding by turning me and Ruthie into a funny anecdote, evidence of her wild and uproarious group of friends that speaks to her interesting personality. Now a flurry of little hearts. After staring at the screen for several minutes, I heart the message too.

I love each and every one of you, my messy beautiful friends!

No, you don't! You despise me and I despise you. And Ruthie, my dearest oldest friend, would drown us both in a second. I scroll through the string of hearts on the screen. None of them belong to Ruthie. As if thinking about her has summoned her, a notification appears: Ruthie Marcadé has left the chat. It's a statement, but of what? Genuine embarrassment and remorse? Solidarity to me? A final fuck you to us all? Whatever it is, her decisiveness is impressive. Much more so than my puny red heart. I bury my phone beneath the couch cushions and close my eyes. The sun goes on throwing itself against the house and the television drones on. I am dreaming myself sick. I am dreaming myself into oblivion. The thought is so lovely it almost makes me cry.

Two lovely berries moulded on one stem

ALTHOUGH WE ATTENDED THE SAME suburban primary school with the demountables and the dustbowl oval and the Holden Commodores that snaked down the street at the end of each school day, Ruthie and I were not friends. She was beautiful but never popular. Her uniform always smelled of cigarette smoke, and she knew swear words that made the boys laugh. Even now, I can picture her, standing beneath the monkey bars, being goaded into saying fuck and dick and cunt, oblivious to the knowledge that we were all laughing at her, that we were disgusted by her dirty mouth and clothes. 'Say it again!' the boys would shout. And Ruthie would look at them with her pretty eyes—so obliging, so eager to please—and tell them to suck her dick.

I was on the netball team. This is the only advantage my ungainly height ever gave me. Though I possessed little by way of ball skills, I was a natural goalkeeper. All I had to do was jump around, arms flailing. It was ungratifying but gave me purpose, made me indispensable. The girls on the team never became my friends exactly, but they did provide me with cover from the loneliness of school. No one could ever accuse me of being friendless when I moved in a pack of girls with matching pleated skirts and scungies.

The greatest triumph of my primary school career was making it onto the aerobics team in my final year. I can still recall the tryouts in the stifling heat of the school hall, the routine we had to learn—high kicks and running man and split push-ups. Ruthie was at the tryouts too. She was good—

naturally athletic and supple—though unpolished. Most of the netball girls were also on the aerobics team, and from their conversations I knew to keep my legs and back unnaturally straight, to arrange my face into a deranged smile. Ruthie's movements were unpredictable, and she grimaced with the effort. Still, there was something about her that made you want to watch. Perhaps it was her prettiness—her dark curly hair and big blue-grey eyes—or how nakedly she wanted to be chosen. Eventually, the teacher—an intimidating woman with a severe bob who was always yelling at everyone—narrowed it down to six of us for the last three positions on the team.

The final tryout was held before school the next day. I made my mum drop me off half an hour early just to be on the safe side. Four other hopeful girls turned up minutes later. We waited for the teacher to arrive, stretching our limbs in the warm morning air as we took turns lamenting how hopeless we were and how we'd never make the team. Ruthie never showed.

After the tryout, I saw her running across the oval towards us, her enormous backpack bouncing up and down. The teacher told us that the names of the successful candidates would be posted on the noticeboard at recess. 'Any questions?'

I looked over at Ruthie and said nothing.

At recess, my name was on the noticeboard at the bottom of the list, below the name of the wing defence from my netball team. Had I ever felt such happiness? I thought of the sequined leotard and shimmering nude stockings that would be mine and marvelled at the speed with which my life had transformed. Already, I could picture myself on the stage moving in perfect synchronicity with the smiling girls in their beautiful costumes. I had been chosen. I had a role.

When I turned around, Ruthie was standing behind me, her lips green from the lime fruit tube she was sucking. I saw how hungrily her eyes scanned the names even as she explained that she couldn't be bothered to make it to the final tryout that morning. If she was disappointed, she didn't show it. But I have come to understand that that is how it is with Ruthie. She is skilled in the art of concealment.



In high school, I was dismayed to discover that the alliances forged in primary school—on the netball and aerobics teams—fell apart. We went to

different schools, were absorbed into established cliques, or cultivated entirely new personalities. I went to one of the few public girls' schools in the area. On my first day, I saw Ruthie standing outside the hall with all the other Year 7s. She wore a new uniform—a tartan skirt and white blouse—but the same scuffed shoes from primary school. Although hers was one of the first faces I recognised, I did not approach. And when she looked in my direction, I pretended to get something out of my bag.

For a while, Wing Defence and I sat together on the silver seats in the vast quadrangle. She had an older sister who occasionally dispensed useful advice, such as the school shirt was not to be tucked in, that it was only to be expected that the boys from the private school down the road would spit at us, and that it was high time we went to Kmart and bought ourselves bras, Venus razors and Impulse deodorant. When my mum, Mary, saw these items on my bedroom floor she frowned and said that it was not necessary to shave my legs because she didn't. Besides, wasn't it just a great waste of time and money? No one was looking at my legs. It was then that I realised I had outgrown my mum. It wasn't her fault; she just didn't understand the world in which I lived. Wing Defence's older sister was all that I had.

In those first few months of high school, my greatest dream was to befriend Phoebe who, even at age twelve, was a model who did ads on television for chocolate bars and cleaning products—gigs she got on account of her unassailable confidence, pronounced dimples and television presenter mother. As the Year 7 students lined up outside classrooms, Phoebe would say things like she was bored of Sydney because it was small and nothing ever happened, and that she would move to London or New York as soon as she was old enough. I knew that people could be interesting and cool or boring and inconsequential, but it had never occurred to me that whole cities could be. I looked around at my sweaty peers and the poster our homeroom teacher had taped to the wall—*You don't have to be great to start but you have to start to be great!*—and wondered whether my whole life would only ever be small and dull and ugly. I might forever be just as I was now: plain old Helen Wood.

Phoebe hardly ever spoke to me in those early years of high school, but I did have specific and detailed fantasies in which we were friends. I imagined the two of us standing in line at the Vietnamese bakery before school buying finger buns with sticky pink icing and eating them at the bus stop. I imagined us sitting in the quadrangle and speculating about the

personal life of our maths teacher who was young and had a tattoo of an aquatic plant on his forearm. I imagined Phoebe crying to me about how much she hated her life even though it looked perfect from the outside and that she had never wanted to become a model. She just wanted to be normal. It would be up to me to comfort her. She would tell me that I was her one true friend. If I'd known then that I'd one day be invited to her wedding, I might have died of joy.

In the second semester of Year 7, Wing Defence moved to Western Australia because her dad got a job in the mines. In the weeks after she left, I spent lunchtimes walking with feigned purpose between the canteen and the toilet and the library. Then I gave up totally and remained in the library every lunchtime doing my homework. In my mind, I invented excuses for this just in case anyone asked. I would tell them that I had dance class after school or that I was hanging out with my netball friends and therefore had to get all my homework done at lunch. The ruse was unnecessary; nobody ever asked. After a while, my classmates began to borrow my homework. Once, I even sat in awed silence on the cold silver seats with my geography book splayed open so that Phoebe could copy out my notes. Heart in my throat, I watched as she drew little bubbles on the tops of her i's.

Over time, I gained a reputation for cleverness. It didn't sit easily with me, but like any decent fraud, I committed to the lie. Fortunately, my meek and awkward personality, when framed through such a reputation, took on an air of mystery (still waters run deep, that kind of thing) and I'd often stare out the library window wondering how I might appear to anyone who was watching. Perhaps my quiet solitude would not be read as pathetic but as concealing an inner life that was beautiful and complex and sad. This, of course, was a lie too. I knew my insides to be a cramped and uncomfortable place, and if I was sad, it was only in all the ordinary ways.

For the most part, the library at lunchtime was a peaceful place. There were those times when Phoebe and her group would huddle around a single computer to check MSN then fall about laughing and gasping at whatever piece of gossip they discovered there. Eventually, the librarian banned them. Every now and then I would look up from my books and see Ruthie. She was even prettier than she had been in primary school—her skin just as soft and clear, her body curvaceous and alluring, a new piercing at the top of her left ear. One lunchtime, I heard her pleading with the librarian to be allowed to print her history assignment. The librarian—a real tyrant—kept

saying that Ruthie should have printed it at home and that the library printer was only available to students in the mornings because it needed to be kept free in the afternoons for staff. Ruthie said that she didn't have a printer at home and there didn't appear to be any staff currently printing anything. The librarian said that that wasn't the point; there were rules, and they ought to be followed. Ruthie made a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob and, at that moment, caught my eye. I looked away, embarrassed by her desperation.

The two of us went back to pretending not to know each other for another few years.

This charade came to an end in our Year 9 English class. Back then, we were all a little bit in love with our teacher, who only ever dressed in black silk and lace. Even her fingernails were painted black. She was like a beautiful witch. You could hear her coming down the corridor—her high heels scraping against the linoleum—long before you caught sight of her. She projected an air of boredom and annoyance towards everything except literature, which she would discuss with gusto, questioning us with such intensity—*But why does Holden think we're all phonies? Why is it that Slessor is drawn to the nothingness between the stars?*—it was as though she really expected the sweating pubescent masses before her to be in possession of these answers. Even now, when I wonder about my life and try to assess whether or not I am cool, I think of her.

It was in that class that I first read *Wuthering Heights*. Not read, devoured. My copy had yellowing pages and the names of former students written in different coloured ink on the front page. On the cover was an illustration of the wild moors, a gnarled tree, a windswept sky. I must have read it half-a-dozen times before the school year was done. Up until then, I had always thought of reading as a purely intellectual exercise, a way of hitching my mind to ideas and people and places. But I felt that book in my body. It excited me in a way I hadn't experienced since childhood when there was always something to look forward to. It made me feel as though pleasure was still possible, that it was right there in my hands. Till this day, whenever anyone asks why I majored in English literature, I think of Catherine wandering the moors and Heathcliff digging up her grave and my English teacher's black fingernails drumming against the desk while she read, stopping every now and then to adjust her lacy blouse.

Towards the end of the school term, our Year 9 class was assigned a group project on *Wuthering Heights*. This annoyed me. I didn't want to sully my private experience of the book by sharing it with my peers. At the very least, I hoped to be partnered with Phoebe or one of her disciples so that I had some chance of improving my social standing, but, with a single sweep of her manicured hand, my English teacher brought me and Ruthie together. We looked at each other from across the room. Ruthie twisted a silver stud in her ear, the gleaming metal digging into her cartilage. After a few moments, she got up and came to sit beside me. I doodled in the margins of my notebook—my usual pattern of flowers and vines—and tried to make it clear that I was happy to do the work myself, but by the time the bell rang Ruthie had somehow managed to invite herself over to my place.



My mum served Iced VoVos and sliced apples the afternoon that Ruthie came around. Mary was not used to me bringing friends home. My younger brother, James, was always bringing people over to listen to punk music and play an obnoxiously loud skateboarding game on the Xbox. I couldn't help but notice the way my mother hovered in the kitchen, twisting a serviette between her fingers as she served the biscuits and fruit. Is there anything more mortifying than being a teenager whose mum is nervous for you to make friends? At school, I would often hear my peers complain about their parents, how narrow-minded and out of touch they were. Their authority was a thing to be worked around and chipped away at. My parents were soft people who padded about the house in second-hand clothes and faded denim listening to Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen. Mary was a nurse at the children's hospital and spent all her spare time in the garden tending to her native plants, compost bin and rain barrel. My dad, Tom, worked for the teachers' union and read history books about Karl Marx and Red Vienna. All they ever asked of me and James was that we followed our dreams and expressed ourselves.

When Mary asked if Ruthie wanted anything to drink, Ruthie requested coffee. I'd never drunk coffee. Whenever I went to Gloria Jeans with my parents, I ordered juice. As I watched Ruthie stir milk and sugar into her coffee, it occurred to me that she was more sophisticated than I'd given her credit for. The thought was unsettling. I made myself a coffee too. My mum

raised her eyebrow but said nothing. And perhaps it was the caffeine or Mary's nervousness, but my heart began to race as I beheld Ruthie sitting at the table, devouring biscuits, her uniform covered in desiccated coconut, talking to Mary about native bees. *Did you know they don't even sting?*

After coffee, I invited Ruthie into my bedroom to get working on the project. She walked around the room in her stockinged feet and touched everything—my bookcase, the jewellery box with my name engraved on it, the clothes piled onto a chair—as though committing it all to memory. She took a packet of gum out of her pocket, slipped a piece in her mouth and offered one to me. The peppermint taste was cool on my tongue. It made me uneasy, the way Ruthie was going through my things. A photograph of me on the aerobics team was still taped to the mirror, all of us posing in our sequined leotards. Ruthie's eyes passed over it, revealing nothing.

'You have a nice house,' she said finally. 'A nice mum. And you're smart. Why don't you have any friends?'

I laughed, as though she were joking, but she continued to look at me coolly with those big blue-grey eyes, like an overcast day, a storm about to break. Heat gathered in my armpits. 'I'm not really that smart,' I said, feeling the need to confess something. 'I just study a lot. And read too. I don't mind it, I guess.'

'Maybe it's because you're kind of weird.' Ruthie picked up the old copy of *The Left Hand of Darkness* that my dad had given me. The cover featured a castle rising out of the snow, and a pair of sad eyes suspended in the sky.

I laughed again and tried to match her boldness. 'Why don't you have friends? Maybe you're weird too.'

'No,' she said. 'I'm just poor.'

There was nothing I could say to this. Later, I would learn that this was a trick of Ruthie's. She would whip out provocations just to throw you off balance. Perhaps it was the central source of her charisma—apart from her prettiness—this ability to disarm. I had not ever considered that she was poor, though of course it was obvious now she said it. The unclean uniform and the way the girls ostracised her and the school librarian never wanted to help her. All these small humiliations I saw now were not the result of some dark mysterious wrongness at the heart of Ruthie but simply the product of circumstance. For some reason, this disappointed me. But at the same time, I was impressed by her self-awareness, the casual tone with which she

announced herself. Whenever I thought about myself and how others might perceive me, there was only a queasy feeling, a hot tangle of thoughts that never led anywhere.

I very much wanted Ruthie out of my room, yet I knew I'd be disappointed when she left. Once she was done touching everything, she sat down on my bed and ran her palms across my purple bedspread. I watched her black stockinged feet tap lightly against the pale pink carpet and told her again that I didn't mind doing the *Wuthering Heights* presentation by myself.

'Actually,' said Ruthie, looking down at her feet, 'I really like the book. I'm sort of in love with Heathcliff. The way he loves Catherine, it's, like, so intense.'

Her confession surprised me. I had not expected her to have finished the book let alone have an opinion about Heathcliff and Catherine. What a strange thrill it was to hear their names on her tongue. 'Have you seen the film?' I asked.

Ruthie looked at me. 'Do you have it?'

Sitting side by side on the couch in the living room, we watched the 1992 film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* starring Juliette Binoche and Ralph Fiennes. At some point, my brother emerged from his bedroom and plonked himself down on the end of the couch, but as Cathy declared her love—I am Heathcliff!—he farted in my direction and left. I rolled my eyes at Ruthie and she laughed, a silent understanding passing between us that the boys who skulked and slouched around our suburb were a different species entirely from the romantic heroes on the screen and in the pages of our books.

Afterwards, we went into the study and looked up photos of all the different film versions of Heathcliff. Ruthie rated them from least to most sexy. I, who had only ever heard words like 'sexy' and 'beautiful' applied to the bodies of girls and women (and was always left feeling humiliated as if the words themselves drew attention to all that I lacked), liked the way that Ruthie described the male actors, how she analysed the shape of their shoulders and the size of their chests and the colour of their hair. It was exciting, leaning over Ruthie as she scrolled through pictures, happily casting judgement on our collection of Heathcliffs.

Later, when Ruthie was lying on the floor with my copy of the novel in front of her and reading out quotes for me to type up, Mary came into the

study and asked what time Ruthie was expected home.

'Whenever,' said Ruthie, sitting up and smiling.

'We're not done yet,' I said, annoyed at this interruption.

'Your parents won't be worried?'

'Just my mum,' said Ruthie. 'And she won't be worried.'

Mary looked from Ruthie to me. 'Well, all right then. I'll put some dinner on. You eat sausages?'

'Oh my god, Mum, can't we at least order pizza?'

'What, and let the food in the fridge go bad?'

I looked at Ruthie, silently apologising for my mum's stinginess and hoping to impress her with my snarky tone, but Ruthie only smiled up at Mary and said, 'Sausages would be great. Thank you.'

We all sat at the kitchen table for dinner. Ruthie and I on one side, my parents opposite us. Fortunately, James was away at tennis practice. My mother served plates of sausages, peas and mashed sweet potato. It felt oddly formal, and I wondered if this was how Phoebe conducted herself when her friends came over or whether I was making a fool of myself by making Ruthie sit with my family like this. Ruthie and my dad got to talking about her part-time job at Video Ezy and the manager who was cutting shifts. Tom got up from the table to write down the name of a union on a piece of paper and handed it to her. Until that moment, I didn't know that Ruthie had a job. It bothered me that she hadn't revealed this information before sharing it with my parents, though I don't know why, it wasn't as if we were friends. Really, I knew very little about her life. Perhaps I was only bothered that Ruthie had the language of paid work with which to communicate with my parents. She could talk about rosters and managers and penalty rates, all of which seemed very adult to me. I suspected my parents still thought of me as a child. Ruthie, for her part, appeared to enjoy talking to Tom and Mary. She asked them about their jobs —what Mary did to get through night shifts and whether Tom missed teaching since going to work for the union—and about their lives too, how they met in a youth hostel in New Zealand when they were students. I could tell that my parents liked talking to Ruthie too because they went on sitting at the table even after they'd finished eating, laughing at their own stories and leaning back in their chairs. This bothered me too. Even though Ruthie and I weren't yet friends, I had the strong sense of not wanting to share her with anyone else.

After dinner, Ruthie had the idea of decorating our *Wuthering Heights* poster with a border of lipstick kisses. I didn't own any makeup on account of the fact that my mum 'didn't believe in it' but when Ruthie asked her, she disappeared into her bedroom and returned with a stick of lipstick in a small gold tube.

'Forever Curious,' I said, reading the label aloud. I raised my eyebrows at my mum.

'Just an old thing,' she said.

'It's perfect,' said Ruthie, taking the lipstick.

I dismissed my mum with a wave of my hand.

When she was gone, Ruthie sat cross-legged in front of my mirror, her nose close to the glass, and opened the lipstick. Forever Curious was a vibrant crimson. A deep blue red. Vivid as arterial blood. She smiled into the glass as she began to paint her lips. I watched her watching herself and when our eyes caught in the mirror, I turned away, heat rushing to my face.

'You're kind of mean to your mum,' she said.

I looked down at my purple bedspread, traced a lilac flower with my finger.

'She's cool,' said Ruthie, smacking her lips together, running her tongue over her teeth. How she knew to smile and pout in that way was beyond me. Her mouth was blood red and perfect as a doll's. My heart hammered at the sight of it.

'How do I look?' she asked.

'Good. Yeah. Cool.'

'Your turn.'

I sat before her on the pink carpet and she gripped my face in her small hand. A feeling of disgust crept over me as I thought about how the lipstick had passed from my mother to Ruthie to me, all our spit and dried skin congealed in the paste. Ruthie instructed me to press my lips together. She made the gesture herself, the two of us staring at each other with identical expressions. It was so intense I burst out laughing and, to my relief, so did she. 'We look like clowns,' I said, examining our crimson smiles in the mirror.

'We look like twins.'

Ruthie and I took turns kissing all four borders of the white cardboard we used for our *Wuthering Heights* poster. Her kisses were smaller and plumper than mine, but she was nice enough not to mention this fact. Once

the kisses were complete, we cut out tiny paper hearts to fill in any remaining white space. I had the idea of tearing some of the hearts in two to represent the pain and heartbreak of the novel. Ruthie said that I was one of the cleverest people she had ever met. Still to this day, I think about that moment: the warm golden feeling that filled me up as we sat on the floor tearing our little hearts apart.

It was after ten when Mary finally succeeded in driving Ruthie home. I went along for the ride, not wanting my mum and Ruthie to talk without me. But there was not much conversation in the car. Ruthie sat in the front giving Mary directions. I was curious to see where she lived and how far it was from my own house. It seemed strange to me, all of a sudden, that we had been living these parallel lives in such close proximity to each other.

'You can just stop here,' said Ruthie, as we turned down another suburban street. I looked out the window but there were few streetlights, and I couldn't make out much of anything—a low fence, a dark hedge, the glow of a television in the house next door. No light came from Ruthie's place. Before Mary had even turned off the engine, Ruthie was opening the door. 'Thanks for the lift and for dinner and for having me over!'

'Do you want—' Mary started.

But Ruthie was already gone.

My mum and I sat there in silence.

'Should you check she got in all right?' asked Mary.

The thought of approaching Ruthie's house made me nervous. It was as though we'd both receded back to our respective lives. 'She obviously got in all right,' I said. 'I mean, she's not here, is she?'

We drove home. I was desperate to talk about the evening, but too nervous. It felt as if talking about it might ruin it, the way a dream dissolves on waking.



Our English teacher was appalled by our presentation. She said that we didn't seem to understand the difference between love and abuse. Did we really want a boyfriend who hanged dogs? Or, god forbid, entrapped our sister-in-law in an abusive marriage as a twisted act of revenge? Couldn't we at least take a more literary standpoint—explore the influence of the gothic genre on Brontë's representation of obsessive love, or consider what

the novel reveals about racial prejudice and patriarchal and class power? ‘Please girls,’ she said, adjusting the sleeve of her black silk blouse, ‘don’t romanticise male violence.’

It was the first time I had failed at anything. I felt a bit ashamed but not as much as I thought I would. In the cold light of the classroom, I could see how ridiculous the presentation was with its kisses and hearts. But then Ruthie invited me to Michel’s Patisserie after school, and for the first time in my high school life I had somewhere to be after the bell went. She waited for me by the toilet block. I suggested we walk the long way to the bus stop, across the oval and through a patch of forest that opened out onto the main road. It wasn’t that I was embarrassed to be seen with Ruthie, just that I didn’t want people to talk when everything was still so new. Even though the afternoon was hot, Ruthie didn’t complain about the longer walk. She carried our cardboard poster rolled beneath her arm. Every now and then a little paper heart floated down onto the dead grass.

At Michel’s Patisserie, Ruthie ordered a coffee, and I got a strawberry milkshake. I liked the way the staff squirted the pink syrup into the glass before pouring the milk. It gleamed thick and sweet. Ruthie asked if I’d ever seen Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*. I was ashamed to tell her that I hadn’t. We weren’t studying Shakespeare until the following term. Ruthie pulled the DVD out of her backpack. The cover featured Juliet as an angel and Romeo as a knight in shining armour, his face partly concealed by a Video Ezy sticker.

‘We have to watch it,’ Ruthie said. ‘You’re going to love it.’

‘Sure.’ I tried to act casual; tried not to let on how that ‘we’ filled me with excitement. ‘Whenever you’re free.’

Ruthie tore open a packet of sugar and stirred it into her coffee. ‘What are you doing after this?’



Now, when I think back on this time, I wonder if my whole life has been an attempt to recreate that feeling of being with Ruthie in those first few weeks of budding friendship—the two of us pressing kisses to Heathcliff or watching Romeo curse the stars. It was a feeling of pure goodness, as inevitable and uncomplicated as sunlight. It was how I imagined it would feel to fall in love.

Love's wound

WHEN RUTHIE ARRIVED HOME FROM school the next day, her belongings were strewn across the front yard. She stood there for a moment, fear wrapping around her guts, pinning her to the footpath in the baking sun. Sweat trickled down the backs of her legs. It wasn't as though this hadn't happened before. Surely, if something happened regularly enough, a person ought to become less afraid. Surely, they'd get used to it. It annoyed Ruthie that she never seemed to learn.

The elderly woman next door, Rima, came out into the yard. This spurred Ruthie to action. She smiled at her to show that nothing was wrong and started towards the house.

Rima paused on her way to the letterbox and surveyed the mess—Ruthie's clothes and school things, an old copy of *Girlfriend* magazine splayed on the dried grass. 'What happened?'

None of your fucking business, thought Ruthie. She smiled at the old woman again. Really, she liked Rima, who often brought them biscuits filled with dates and nuts, and once even gave Ruthie a bike that her granddaughter had outgrown. But in recent years, Ruthie's mum, Angela, had taken it into her head that Rima was not to be trusted, that she was a meddler and a gossip. Angela would be upset if she saw Ruthie talking to Rima. More upset than she clearly already was.

'Just going through some old things,' said Ruthie, bending to pick up the magazine. *Ten signs he's into you. How to be your best self*. 'Sorry for the mess. We'll clean it up.'

Rima eyed her.

Ruthie smiled hard and walked past her into the house.

It was dark and cool in the hallway. ‘Mum?’

Angela was in the kitchen, on her knees, half inside the cupboard under the sink. Scattered on the floor were sponges and dishcloths, an empty bottle of Pine O Cleen.

‘Where is it?’ asked Angela, sitting back on her knees. Her pale skin was coated in a sheen of sweat, her dark hair knotted on her head.

‘Where’s what?’ Ruthie tried to keep her voice calm.

Angela pointed a finger at her. ‘You stole my money.’

‘No, I didn’t.’ This wasn’t strictly true. Clare, Ruthie’s grandmother, had given her three hundred dollars when the fridge broke. When Angela discovered this, she said that Clare was interfering in their lives for no reason and that they didn’t need a new fridge. Using an old shoelace and an elastic band, Ruthie had built a contraption that kept the freezer door closed so that water stopped leaking onto the floor. She was quite proud of it. So, Angela could have the money. Fine. No problem. But two days ago, they’d run out of groceries, and Ruthie had taken a single fifty-dollar note from her mother’s drawer. She meant to replace it, only she hadn’t had the chance yet —her pay from Video Ezy wouldn’t come in until Thursday. It was a stupid thing to do. She should have just asked Clare for the money, but a part of her didn’t want to embarrass her mother. Ruthie had already told her grandmother how great the new fridge was.

‘Why don’t we just sit down for a minute?’ she said. ‘I’ll make us coffee.’

Angela threw a sponge in Ruthie’s direction. It dropped uselessly onto the floor between them. Still, Ruthie flinched.

‘Get out!’ said Angela.

‘Mum—’

‘Get out!’

Ruthie went out into the yard where it was bright and hot. She could catch a bus to her grandmother’s house. But if Angela found out she’d gone running to Clare behind her back, she’d be suspicious. She was always accusing Clare of trying to control her. Once, when Ruthie was in primary school, they’d fought so badly that Angela had cut ties with Clare for—how long? A year? Two? Things were a little better now, at least most of the time, and Ruthie didn’t want to ruin it. She began to pick up her clothes, her pink Supré hoodie and denim shorts, and folded them neatly in a pile on the grass. It was better just to kill time, wait and see if her mum calmed down.

Though Ruthie knew that the only thing that would calm Angela was the very thing that was ruining their lives.

In health class at school, Ruthie had sat in lesson after lesson on the dangers of illicit drugs. Most of her peers treated these classes as a huge joke, pretending to inject themselves with pens and asking their young teacher if she'd ever tried molly, while she screamed at them to take it seriously. Ruthie had stared at the PowerPoint presentation of hollow-eyed kids sitting in gutters and wondered about them. Did they get help? Who were their families? What had happened to them? But there was no information. The kids seemed to exist purely as a warning to others. It was possible that they weren't even real. Did anyone actually hold their head in their hands like that? Probably the young teacher had done an internet search for pictures of troubled youths. Still, Ruthie was careful not to say anything during these lessons. She arranged her face into a blank expression as she read the statistics on overdoses, disease, death.

Ruthie bent down to pick up her favourite dress. It was black with little red flowers and had once belonged to her mother. Angela lent it to her when they celebrated her fourteenth birthday at the Chinese restaurant they both liked. It fit her so perfectly; Angela said she could have it. For some reason, that had made Ruthie proud. She held up the dress and brushed away the dried grass that clung to it. Carefully, she folded it and placed it on the top of the pile.

Her school copy of *Wuthering Heights* was on the low brick wall that separated their yard from Rima's. Ruthie suspected that the old woman had placed it there, along with Ruthie's maths textbook and a pair of scissors that must have fallen out of her pencil case. It was embarrassing to think of Rima gathering her possessions. Ruthie traced her hand over the front cover of the novel and thought guiltily of the afternoon she'd spent at Michel's Patisserie with Helen. She'd used her mother's money then—only a little, enough for a coffee—but she couldn't bring herself to regret it. She didn't want to taint the precious feeling of that afternoon. For the first time in her life, it was possible she had a friend.

Ruthie placed the last of her school things in a pile beside her clothes and took her novel to the side of the house where there was a narrow passage. It was shady there, and she was well hidden from anyone in the house or on the street. The thought of Helen had loosened the dark feelings that gripped her. She lay down on the cool stone path. Helen Wood. Who would have

thought the tall blonde girl with glasses who spent every lunchtime in the library was destined to become her friend? But the more Ruthie thought about it, the more it made a kind of sense. She remembered Helen's copy of *Wuthering Heights*, dog-eared and annotated. The odd thing about her notes was how she wrote about the characters like they were real people.

The memory made Ruthie smile. She flipped through the yellowing pages of the book. There was something about Helen—a weirdness, a desperation maybe, an intensity at the heart of her, that showed no matter how hard she tried to fit in. The other kids must have sensed it—Ruthie knew from experience that they had a sharp instinct for rooting out difference—because even though Helen was on the netball and aerobics teams and lived in a nice house, she was friendless. Just like Ruthie.

The only difference between them, as far as Ruthie could see, was that Helen hadn't yet learned that there was nothing she could do to make the others like her. Indeed, the more she tried, the more they'd reject her. Ruthie should know; she'd spent her entire childhood being laughed at, teased, ignored. It was only when she entered high school that she decided she was done with them. She no longer sought their approval. Often, when she was sitting in the quadrangle or at the back of a classroom, she imagined herself floating high above the school, not really there, just passing through. Helen would learn to do the same soon enough. Ruthie would help her.

She came to her favourite passage in the book, where Catherine talks of her love for Heathcliff and her dream of being flung out of heaven: *He's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same*. Carefully, Ruthie folded the edge of the page. She would show it to Helen when next they met.

Thou art translated!

ALL THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL, RUTHIE had part-time jobs, first at Video Ezy and then Donut King. I was jealous that, through these jobs, there was a whole cast of characters in her life—managers and customers and colleagues—that I knew nothing about. Her employment also drew her away from me, not just in terms of time, but in a more fundamental way: our lives split down the seam of childhood and adulthood. Of course, I could have got a job. In fact, for a short while I worked at Donut King with Ruthie, the two of us standing side by side in our pink and purple uniforms under the bright lights, the smell of cinnamon clinging to our skin. In our breaks, we would make each other elaborate drinks—strawberry milkshakes with marshmallows and sprinkles, or spiders made from creaming soda and enormous scoops of vanilla ice-cream.

'Isn't this fun?' Ruthie kept saying.

I agreed that it was but mostly I thought about how boredom and terror—two emotions I had up until that moment considered opposing forces and therefore impossible to experience at the same time—could actually exist simultaneously. I'd nervously greet a customer and wait on aching feet as they gazed down at the display. They'd fire questions at me—*How much for a mini mixed box? When were they made? What is included?* I'd explain that the mini mixed box was a mix of mini chocolate, caramel and strawberry donuts. They'd say, *Well, what about the pineapple?* I'd explain that the pineapple was not included, and they'd have to buy it separately. They'd argue with me—point out the arbitrariness of including strawberry but not pineapple. Weren't they both, after all, summer fruits? Had I the audacity to refer to the mini mixed box as 'mixed' when it wasn't truly so?

I'd apologise as meekly as possible, hoping my slouched form and obsequiousness would remind them that I was but a cog in the corporate machine, unable to stray from store policy, no matter how absurd. They'd frown then, sensing defeat, and say that they'd get the mixed box after all but make it large, and add a cappuccino too, and they'd glance at their watches to imply that all of this was to be done urgently. I'd run up the items on the till, hand over the donuts and coffee, then look at the clock on the other side of the food court to discover that the whole exchange had only taken up four and a half minutes of my eight-hour shift. The remaining time stretched out before me like a silent scream. I'd fantasise about having an asthma attack so that I could be rushed to hospital.

Ruthie told me that the trick was not to look at the clock too often. She made up games to keep herself occupied—Can you rank the day's customers from best to worst? How many mini donuts can you fit into a cup? How can you get from the counter to the coffee machine touching the floor as little as possible? She also advised me to appear busy, even if there was nothing to do—run a cloth idly along the counter, pace up and down our five metres of floor space with a broom in hand, fold and refold the serviettes. This way, if the manager suddenly appeared, as he was prone to do, he was less likely to demand things of you and get you to do worse tasks, like handing out flyers in the food court. It seemed to me that I had to play a whole range of complex psychological games just to get through a shift. Was this adult life? Subduing and distracting your mind merely to get through the tedium and stress of each day? I learned to relish tasks like taking out the garbage because it took me outside of the tiny shop and away from the customers and their incessant demands. I would slowly roll the stinking trolley filled with old eggshells and vegetable shortening to the bins and think about how this was the highlight of my day.

When I retired from Donut King, a month after starting, I told Ruthie and my parents that I would have loved to stay, but unfortunately the air-conditioning in Westfield was making my asthma play up. At dinner that night, my father suggested I stick it out a little longer, and my mother claimed that my asthma was well controlled. 'Don't let it hold you back,' she said, as though my greatest desire in life was to shovel mini donuts into huge cups.

'Don't you like the feeling of having your own money?' asked my dad.

My mother agreed. ‘Independence,’ she said, ‘is important for young women.’

Independence? I, a mere child! Their child, no less! The conversation stressed me out to such a degree that I retreated to the living room and lay on the carpet, fantasising about how terrible my parents would feel when a doctor informed them that my asthma attack was caused by the terrible pressure they were putting me under. My parents tried to coax me back to the table with the promise of dessert, and James accused me of being dramatic—which was easy for him to say; he, who had been blessed with perfect lungs. Eventually, my father brought me a bowl of vanilla ice-cream and set it on the floor beside me.

Still, a part of me felt terrible for abandoning Ruthie. I felt this most keenly on the afternoons we caught the same bus and she’d get off at the shopping centre while I’d continue to the library. Sometimes I would watch Ruthie make her solitary journey towards the glass doors of Westfield, feeling that I should be with her and intense relief that I wasn’t.

Because I felt guilty, I made a point of always helping Ruthie with her homework. She worked so many after school and weekend shifts that she didn’t have a lot of time to complete her schoolwork. Whenever I suggested she cut back on her shifts, she’d say something like, ‘But I get time and a half on Saturdays. I can’t turn down that kind of money,’ and I would nod along, thinking: *Of course you can! What is money compared to time!*

Ruthie was not a confident student. It was one of the few areas of her life where she expressed uncertainty. I took my role as her tutor very seriously. Often, when she was despairing or stressed, I would take her by both hands and tell her how smart she was. It was true, she really was smart—could even be brilliant—but she was inconsistent. She could, for example, solve mathematical problems very quickly in her head—sometimes I’d pull out my calculator under the pretence of ‘checking’ our answer when in truth I hadn’t even begun to process the question. But she would hardly ever turn her homework in on time. She was a voracious reader too, and read much more widely than me—fiction, history, anything she could get her hands on. Once, when we were studying *Hamlet*, she asked me whether I thought Shakespeare might have been a secret Catholic living in fear of the Protestant queen because didn’t the ghost of Hamlet’s father sound as though he were describing purgatory? Surely, Ruthie said, it was a risky move to put this on the stage. Shakespeare would have seen the severed

heads on London Bridge. I told Ruthie that this line of questioning was not relevant to our assignment, which was to analyse Hamlet's speech—*To be or not to be*, et cetera, et cetera—but I was alarmed that she knew things that I didn't. It upset the nature of our dynamic. Thankfully, she merely shrugged and asked me what 'consummation' meant. The essay was due in the morning, and she'd barely started.

The truth is that Ruthie's thirst for knowledge scared me because it seemed to spring from deep within her. She was never reading the books that aligned with the school curriculum, she really was curious about religious tensions in Renaissance Europe. On the contrary, I suspected that, were I not tested at regular intervals, I might have very little inclination to learn anything at all.

Her best subject was design and technology where our class was rotated through various technical arts like woodwork and textiles and cooking. Her interest in this baffled me. It seemed a lowly subject on the same level as PE—too practical to be romantic. Give me Shakespeare and Brontë and the Russian Revolution, not bandsaws and chocolate crackles. One adventurous teacher taught us how to blow glass. We all made misshapen baubles except for Ruthie who somehow, miraculously, managed a little purple flower on a green stem. The teacher passed it around for all of us to admire.

It wasn't until Ruthie and I were in Year 10 that she got her first really cool job—one I was truly envious of. She worked the front desk at the Goddess Grove Day Spa and Bathhouse. It was located on a narrow street in Paddington, where there were grand old fig trees, three-storey terrace houses tastefully renovated, a quaint little park and a string of shops that included a cafe, deli, Italian restaurant and newsagency. The Goddess Grove was between the cafe and deli. From the street you could see the crystals and gemstones displayed in the window—amethyst and rose quartz and aquamarine and jade and obsidian. A wreath of dried flowers hung from the door. Inside, there were all sorts of lotions and potions in little glass bottles, the colour of dark honey. If you walked through the shop, you came to a waiting room where customers would sit in fluffy white robes drinking herbal tea. When it was time for their treatment, they'd be led up a narrow staircase to the private rooms, or downstairs to the basement where there was a sauna, steam room and showers.

I didn't know any of this when Ruthie first started. Before I ever laid eyes on the Goddess Grove, I saw the changes it wrought on my friend. She

began showing up to school smelling of lavender and sage. The skin on her legs was oiled and hairless. Her eyelashes, already so long and thick, so doll-like, were now tinted a darker more dramatic shade of black, drawing attention to her eyes. I, on the other hand, wore glasses and had at least another year on my braces. I'd also developed a habit of hunching to obscure my height. All of which is to say, I hated myself, and Ruthie's transformation terrified me.

The owner of the Goddess Grove was Tiger. Ruthie had a terrible crush on her right from the start. All our conversations were Tiger this and Tiger that. One night, I looked up the website for the day spa and bathhouse. There was a black-and-white photograph of Tiger, a beautiful woman in a loose linen shirt. I thought from the picture that her long hair might be white or blonde but I later learned that it was silver. The website advertised a range of treatments: massages, facials, waxing, sugaring, tinting. You could buy essential oils in lavender, gardenia, honey myrtle and blue lotus. Some of the products were categorised not by ingredient but by effect—potions and elixirs for muscle aches, insomnia, period pain, anxiety.

It was many months into Ruthie's employment, and a few days before Christmas, when I finally met Tiger in the flesh. I had, at this point, stepped foot into the Goddess Grove a handful of times, meeting Ruthie at the end of her shift to catch a bus into the city or eat pizza in the park. On this day, Ruthie was downstairs packing away her things. I was waiting on the shop floor admiring the tasteful decorations—no tinsel nor trees, just little stars made from coloured glass, and tiny gold fairy lights in mason jars. A chalkboard advertised a yin yoga class and sound bath in honour of the summer solstice.

Beside the chalkboard was a cabinet of crystals, and in the glass, I saw Tiger's reflection. She was looking at something beneath the cash register. I hadn't heard her come in and I'd thought I was alone in the shop. It was the end of the day, and Ruthie had asked me to keep an eye on things, just for a minute, while she got her bag from downstairs. Here I was, a stranger, loitering in the woman's store. Would I have to pretend to be a customer and buy something? 'Sorry I'm here,' I said. 'I'm a friend of Ruthie's. I'm just waiting for her.'

Tiger looked up and gasped. There was a terrible moment where she stared at me blankly and I thought I might have scared her so much that she hadn't heard what I'd said, but then she smiled. 'A friend of Ruthie's?' she

replied. ‘Ah, isn’t she an excellent little worker bee? A good eye for detail. And so pretty too. You know, for a minute there, I thought you were her.’

This was patently absurd as Ruthie and I looked nothing alike. I was at least a head taller than her, and had an entirely different complexion. Still, the compliment thrilled me. Tiger came around the counter then. She was barefoot and wearing a shapeless knee-length linen dress that looked like a man’s shirt.

‘I’m Tiger,’ she said. She was even taller than me. Her voice was low and contained the edge of a foreign accent I couldn’t determine. Like my mother, she wore no makeup. Yet she wasn’t like my mother at all. Her silver hair came almost down to her waist.

‘You have a nice shop,’ I said.

She laughed, as though I had said something funny. ‘Thanks.’

‘Ruthie’s just grabbing her things.’

She shrugged and then, to my horror, began to undress, right there in the middle of the shop floor. She undid the three little buttons at the top of her dress and pulled the whole thing over her head. Underneath, she was wearing a black crop top and shorts. The muscles on her stomach were visible. A long groove down the middle of her. Many years later, when Will and I were lying in bed, I would run my finger down his stomach and tell him that that groove right there was my favourite part of his body. He would tell me its name: the linea alba, a fibrous line of tissue at the centre of the abdomen, and I would remember Tiger. There was a jewel, like a diamond, in her belly button. This surprised me, given her age. ‘No hurry,’ she said, folding up her dress. ‘Tonight is a special night. I’m taking a class. We’ll be open late.’

‘The summer solstice,’ I said.

She smiled again, clasped her hands behind her back and bent over, stretching her arms over her head in a way that didn’t look natural. ‘You’re welcome to stay for it.’

‘Oh, thanks, but Ruthie and I have, um, plans tonight. Besides, I’ve never done yoga, I wouldn’t know what I was doing.’

She shook her arms out and sat on the floor, her feet together, thighs splayed. ‘When I was young,’ she said, pressing her forehead to her toes, ‘probably not much older than you, my mother died. Cancer. Then I got sick too. I went to a very dark place for a while, you know how it is, sex and drugs.’

I nodded as if I did know how it was.

She sank into the splits. ‘One day, I woke up with this very strong feeling that I had to change my life. It was just there, in my bones. I booked a flight to India and stayed a year. Studied yoga and meditation in Rishikesh.’

It was unclear to me how I was expected to respond to this information. I made a sound, something between a *wow* and an *ah* that I hope conveyed an appropriate sense of awe.

‘India saved me,’ she said, changing position again. ‘My health improved. I understood true joy for the first time.’

‘And now you teach yoga?’ I asked, pleased with myself for having remembered to speak.

She laughed and shook her head. ‘Only a little hobby. When I have the time. Mostly, I run this place.’

At that moment, Ruthie appeared. After having waited so long for her to arrive, I found myself oddly disappointed now that she was here and I had no further reason to linger. Ruthie looked stricken when she saw Tiger and began to apologise for abandoning her post.

Tiger stood up in a single fluid movement. ‘Don’t fret,’ she said. ‘I’ll take over. You girls go out and have fun. I hear you have exciting plans.’ She winked at us and turned away. She placed both her palms against the wall and arched her back.

When Ruthie and I were outside on the street, she turned on me. ‘Why didn’t you come and get me?’

‘Why did you take so long? I thought you were just getting your bag.’

‘My mum called.’ Ruthie didn’t elaborate. After more than a year of friendship, I’d learned not to press her on the topic of her mother, whom I’d never met. All I knew was that Ruthie’s mother had immense and unusual power over her. Whenever she called, Ruthie grew nervous and walked away from whomever she was with—including me, her best friend—to answer it. She would always return from these conversations either palpably relieved or else moody and quiet.

‘Now she’s pissed at me,’ said Ruthie.

‘Your mum?’

‘Tiger.’

‘She said not to fret.’

Ruthie rolled her eyes, implying that I didn’t understand because I didn’t have a job or any real responsibilities and was a mere child compared to

her.

‘Is her name really Tiger?’ I asked. Two women carrying yoga mats passed us on the street. Ruthie appeared to be weighing up whether to forgive me. Eventually, she sighed and told me that Tiger named herself after the tiger’s eye gemstone. ‘It’s supposed to represent strength and courage. Protection against evil. Roman warriors used to wear them into battle.’

I glanced back at the Goddess Grove. The women who’d passed us were hovering outside the store admiring the crystals. When Tiger opened the door, they nodded their heads, as though bowing to her. I imagined Tiger as a warrior queen, riding out into battle, her silver hair encased in a bronze helmet, her gemstone concealed beneath her armour.

‘She’s really into this whole idea of transformation,’ said Ruthie. ‘It’s sort of … I don’t know, inspiring. She just decided who she wanted to be and then became that person.’

This impressed me too. I fantasised about becoming a different person almost constantly. I loved the idea that you could simply invent yourself anew and demand that everyone else go along with it. Who knew who she was before she was Tiger? Who cared?

It wasn’t until I finished school that I transformed myself from Helen to Helena. I thought that the *a*, that additional syllable, a final flick of the tongue, better reflected my sharp and complex interior. Helen was too plain, too common. Our neighbour’s elderly sister was called Helen. When she came to visit, I’d watch the two old ladies shuffle down the street to the supermarket. The name was too far removed from its origins—that beautiful Helen of Troy, goddess and saint. I had not, at seventeen, encountered my eponym’s rich beauty in Pre-Raphaelite art. Mostly, I just wanted to be someone other than myself. When I informed my parents of my new name, my mother told me that they’d named me after the writer, Hélène Cixous in the hope that I would have the courage to write myself into existence.

‘Well,’ I replied, ‘isn’t that what I’m doing?’

Nay, faith, let me not play a woman

IN OUR YOUTH, THERE WERE two topics of conversation that Ruthie and I never tired of: falling in love and the house we would live in once we left school. Although it is inconceivable to me now, at the time, I really believed that these two things—great passionate love affairs, and an eternal sleepover with Ruthie—could exist simultaneously. I can still conjure the specifics of my favourite fantasy from that time: the one where Ruthie and I are preparing for a party at our house. She is wearing sheer black tights with little silver flecks and admiring herself in the mirror. I am slicing lemons and tipping ice into a pitcher of water, all the while telling her about my lover who will arrive any minute now. The dream ends before any of the guests, including my handsome lover, arrive. There is just me and Ruthie, high on anticipation, perpetually getting ready for the party to begin.

Sometimes, when Ruthie slept over, she would ask me to describe particular details of our future home—like how we'd get copies of our house keys made and give them to all of our friends (because we would have an abundance of friends), and how we'd have an enormous library, and share everything.

Our talk of love, like our talk of our future home, was mostly hypothetical. We pined after celebrities or characters in books or figments of our own imaginations. There was Heathcliff and Romeo and the entire cast of teenage dramas set in California. In history class, Ruthie printed out a photograph of Joseph Stalin when he was young and hot and probably hadn't even thought of the Gulags and stuck it to the inside of her exercise

book. For a while we became obsessed with *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. I even made my mother buy me a long white nightgown from the maternity section of Kmart so that I could swan about the house like the beautiful mysterious Miranda. Whenever we perceived anyone desirable, whether on the screen or in reality, we would sing-whisper the lyrics of 'Pretty Piece of Flesh' in the drawn-out style of the industrial rock band, One Inch Punch, which we first encountered on the soundtrack to Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. While singing, we would dance in a sexually suggestive manner, grinding our hips and rolling our bodies, to whatever degree was possible in our immediate environment—bus stop, classroom, my bedroom.

My childhood bedroom was the closest Ruthie and I ever got to a house of our own. It was a place where the secrets of the world were cracked open like the sealed section of *Dolly* magazine. In that room, Ruthie and I first studied the instructional pamphlet from a packet of condoms. It was there that Ruthie informed me that if I wasn't sure whether I'd successfully given myself an orgasm, then I definitely hadn't because when I did there wouldn't be any doubt about it. Together, we unpicked the experience of having seen our history teacher naked in the change room of the local pool. (Our instinct was to laugh at her and all the other naked old women with their sagging breasts and mottled skin, but they seemed so at ease in their own nakedness, carefully towelling themselves dry or moisturising their ankles as though they had all the time in the world, that we sensed they were beyond our mockery.)

It was in my bedroom that Ruthie and I planned our lives, poring over the university admissions guide. Sydney Uni was at the top of my list. I loved the old sandstone buildings and the jacaranda trees that dripped their flowers onto the perfect green lawns. Ruthie took some convincing. She said she didn't want to get her hopes up by assuming she'd get into university. I pointed out that Phoebe, who'd famously asked our history teacher why Australia wasn't part of the European Union, had her sights set on tertiary education. If she could aspire to university, why not Ruthie? I made a deal with her: between finishing school and starting our degrees, we'd take a trip to Fiji. Neither of us had ever been overseas. We scrolled through pictures of white sand and turquoise water and researched how to get a passport.

As we grew older, Ruthie began to have casual sex with a kind of calculatedness that belied the term 'casual'. I found it off-putting. She told

me she wanted to become skilled in the act of sex, so that by the time she met the love of her life, she would be prepared. She had sex with a cricket player from the private boys' school who always had a sunburnt face. She had sex with a Donut King co-worker. She even had something with a waitress at the Italian restaurant near the Goddess Grove, though she was vague about the details. (When I asked her if she was a lesbian and that it was totally cool if she was, she accused me of being bourgeois which was a word we'd just learned in history class.)

Despite having grown up with soft baby boomer parents, that free-loving generation, I had absorbed the idea that my sexual inexperience, what I thought of as my purity, was a valuable asset that would pay off if deployed at the right moment. 'I want to,' I would tell my future lover, looking demurely at the white bedsheets. 'It's just that I've never done this before.' I'd lock eyes with him then, watch him tremble with desire. So I listened in fascination and disgust to Ruthie's stories about sex in cars or in strange bedrooms with parents watching television in the next room, and for once was relieved to be myself and not her.

In my later years of high school, I took to studying at the university library almost every afternoon. In between *Othello* and Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, I watched the students, only a few years older than me but already living their lives out there on the other side … of what? School? Adolescence? Their parents' homes? It seemed to me that they were cool and unreachable and I dreamed of being noticed by one of them. Perhaps an English major with long sleeves beneath his T-shirt and a paperback Jack Kerouac under his arm. Perhaps the girl who came in with coffees and boys who seemed to be her friends. As I stared at my books and tried to read, I'd find that I was watching myself as an observer would. How a tilt of my head might signal the weight of my intellect. And if I put the tip of my pen between my teeth, what of that? Would anyone notice?

Years later, when the dreaming got really bad, a counsellor at university would ask me when it first started and I'd think back to this time, and how I was always staring out the window, waiting for something to arrive.

I am as ugly as a bear, for beasts that meet me run away for fear

THE FIRST MAJOR FIGHT THAT Ruthie and I ever had was—predictably, pathetically—about a boy. Nick was my first boyfriend. I met him in Year 11 when my school partnered with a boys' school—not the private one, but a public one like ours in a nearby suburb—to put on the musical *Beauty and the Beast*. The distance between our schools lent the boys a certain air of mystery. After all, we hadn't grown up with them spitting on us at bus stops. The night I first saw Nick, he was dressed as a beast, a mask of ginger hair covering his face, fake fangs in his mouth.

As a special treat, the top students from both schools were excused from class to watch a preview performance. I took my seat in the front row. The show was a disaster. Many of the actors forgot their lines. One of the dancers fell and hurt her ankle and had to be helped off the stage by the drama teacher. Nick's mask and fangs made it impossible to hear what he was saying. But there was one scene towards the end, when the beast, saved by Belle's love, transformed into his true self. It moved me. Nick writhed on the stage. He screamed. He tore at his hair and at his shirt. The lights flashed. Off came his mask and the ridiculous fangs and his face—his real face—contorted in such a look of beautiful agony, that I imagined running onto the stage, taking his head into my lap and soothing him. I had to settle for gently grinding my hips into the plastic chair and silently singing 'Pretty Piece of Flesh'.

I went to see the musical five times in total. Ruthie came with me once. She admitted that Nick was handsome but said she was too vicariously

embarrassed to think about him in that way. I found that the musical grew on me each time I saw it. It wasn't just that the actors and crew got better with practice, but the whole spectacle excited me. One night, when I stayed back to help the drama teacher pack away the chairs, I saw the crew backstage. They were wiping off makeup and changing their clothes and giving each other hugs and high fives—*You were amazing! Did you see me fall? But you kept going*. They looked tired and happy and proud of themselves. The obvious occurred to me then, the way sometimes some ordinary piece of knowledge suddenly strikes you anew: they were just kids and the story I'd seen up there on the stage was made from nothing but this. A whole world created out of thin air.

I pursued Nick by developing an elaborate plan in which I wrote a review of the musical for the school newsletter and, like any good journalist, interviewed him on his creative process. This eventually (and after a great deal of hard work on my part) led to some awkward kissing and groping in his parents' garage. On one such occasion, as I was pressed up against his father's kayak, he put his knee between my thighs and his hands up my school shirt, and I panicked, deploying the line I'd prepared for years: 'I want to. It's just that I've never done this before.'

He looked confused and somewhat alarmed. 'What? You've never kissed anyone?'

'No, I mean … Well …' Did kissing the crook of my elbow count? Being a virgin was one thing, but having never been kissed? I wondered if this was seductive or simply pathetic. God, why didn't they teach you how to handle these situations at school? How was it that I knew how the ancient Egyptians mummified the organs of the dead, and not this?

'That's cool,' he said, dropping his hands. 'We don't have to do anything if you're, like, not comfortable.'

Fuck. Now I had to backtrack. In truth I was extremely comfortable with his hands up my shirt and his knee between my thighs. More than comfortable. 'Maybe we can just take it slow?' I suggested, dropping another line I'd heard on television.

'Yeah,' he said, still not touching me. 'I'm like, not really looking for anything serious anyway, so maybe it's better if we stop. Keep it casual.'

'Yeah. That makes sense.'



As it turned out, by casual, Nick meant there was no need to tell anyone about our relationship. He was a very private person and generally hated the way people carried on, teasing each other and gossiping. I completely agreed. We were mature like that. He said the reason he liked me so much was that I was a serious person who was smart and above all the nonsense of other girls, who were obsessed with reality TV and the Jonas Brothers.

Because we lived in different suburbs and went to different schools and could only meet up in secret, it was difficult for us to find the time to be together. When we did, it was mostly in his garage. We never made plans very far in advance. This was an important part of keeping it casual. He'd text me when he was free, and I'd catch two buses to his garage door. Waiting around for Nick to text sometimes felt like busting to wee on a long car trip; it was painful and impossible to think about anything else. But when the text finally arrived the relief was such that all pain was forgotten. *Wanna hang?* I would savour the words for a few sweet moments before running for the bus.

We never went the whole way, mostly because he never raised the topic of sex and it was therefore impossible for me to do so. Whenever we were together, I'd wish that he would want it so I could want it too. I remembered how he'd appeared to me that first night on the stage, an agonised beast yearning to be loved. It was painful how my own desire felt so much larger than his. I had to be very careful not to let it show.

One afternoon, when Ruthie and I were in my bedroom working on an English essay, Nick texted. *Wanna hang?* Oh, those sacred words that unlocked my heart! I was so happy I actually laughed out loud. It'd been a particularly long dry spell, and I'd only just been telling Ruthie how much I missed him. In fact, my whole body ached with it. It scared me, that insatiable desire, clawing to get out.

'You're not leaving, are you?' Ruthie asked as I slipped off the bed.

'Stay as long as you like.' I began to lace my shoes.

'But you said you'd help me.'

'You're basically finished. You just need some quotes.'

'So he calls and you come running?'

I turned to look at her. She was sitting upright on the bed, her hands folded neatly in her lap.

'We don't get to see each other that much,' I said. 'We have to make the most of the time we have.'

She laughed and I felt my face grow hot. It was a knowing kind of laugh, like she could see right through me. ‘He never comes to you.’

‘Yes, he does,’ I lied.

‘How come I’ve never met him?’

‘You have … at the show.’

‘When he was dressed as the Gruffalo.’

‘The Beast.’

‘That story is a promotion of misogyny and bestiality. It’s disturbing that you’re into it.’

‘Yeah, well, you’re literally obsessed with Stalin.’

‘At least he’s human.’

‘Tell that to the millions he slaughtered!’

‘I’ve read *Animal Farm* too, you know. I bet that turned you on.’

I glanced at the time on my phone. ‘Look,’ I said, assuming the role of the mature one, ‘it’s not my job to do your homework for you.’ I could tell that she was surprised by this turn in the conversation; I had, after all, been such an enthusiastic tutor, and she had taken that for granted all this time. Here she was, sitting in my bedroom, eating my food and using my notes, telling me that I couldn’t see my boyfriend. ‘I’m allowed to have a life outside of you,’ I said. ‘You can be, like, a lot. You basically live here.’

Ruthie was silent for a moment, her eyes boring into me, then she got off the bed and started shoving books into her schoolbag. ‘Fine. Go ahead and live your whole fucking life without me.’

My anger waned. A moment ago, we’d been lying together on the bed and now this. I thought of the fire drill we’d been subjected to at school that morning, our PE teacher (doubling as the warden) telling us how quickly a fire spreads—*Everyone thinks they’re fine and then they’re dead and their relatives are identifying them by their molars*. ‘Don’t be such a drama queen,’ I said.

Ruthie stopped at the door and laughed. ‘The way you chase after him,’ she said, ‘it’s so pathetic. When will you learn to stop obsessing over people who don’t give a shit about you? You’re like his dog. His fucking bitch.’



A few weeks after this fight, Nick would stop texting me altogether. I sent him a few messages carefully designed to hide my desperation:

Hey, wanna hang?

There's a bruise on my thigh from your dad's kayak. LOL.

Is your class studying As You Like It*? Any notes?*

I only ask because drama is your thing and my notes are so bad.

Anyway, no worries if not.

The messages went unanswered and because we lived in different suburbs and went to different schools and no one apart from Ruthie knew we were ever together, the days passed as normal, and we never saw each other again. At least not until years later.

I am amazed and know not what to say

ALONE, RUTHIE WALKED THROUGH THE patch of blue gum forest behind the school. It was a protected area, which always seemed like a sad joke to her because it was so small and bordered on three sides by major roads. Even when you stood in the very centre of it, there was no escaping the sound of the traffic. What would it have been like, she wondered, before the land was cleared for the roads and school? How good would it feel to lie down in the quiet forest and not see or hear anyone at all?

It was cooler in the shade of the trees. She ran her hand over the smooth trunk of a gum. Helen was still not speaking to her. It had been nearly two weeks since their fight. The longest they'd ever gone without talking. Up until now, Ruthie's friendship with Helen had made her feel as though she was a part of the world that other people belonged to. Ordinary things, like eating dinner with Helen and her family, and doing homework in her room, and talking about their life after school, made Ruthie feel as though she were one of those teenagers on TV whose troubles were only ever about falling in love and getting into college.

She studied Helen closely when they were at her house. She watched the way Helen argued with her mum and dad and teased her brother. She listened to the way Helen asked them for things—*What's for dinner? Can you drive us here? Can you help me with this?* She noted the way Helen kicked off her shoes when she got home and dropped her schoolbag wherever she happened to be standing and never made any effort to be quiet. Sometimes, Ruthie imagined a life in which she did these things. That

always made her feel sad because they were such small things. Helen didn't even notice them. *I'm allowed to have a life outside of you. You can be, like, a lot. You basically live here*. Ruthie had thought these were gifts freely given, but she'd been wrong. Helen saw her as a burden. But how could she understand Ruthie's life? Last weekend, Ruthie's mum had 'gone to visit a friend' and still hadn't returned. Whenever Ruthie called, it went through to voicemail, and she'd worry until Angela finally texted—sometimes hours or a whole day later—saying she was just taking a little break. It was exhausting.

A rustling sound came from somewhere behind Ruthie. She turned and looked back at the narrow dirt track. There was nothing but her own footprints and dead leaves. Immediately, she thought of snakes. She'd seen one once, just a little further up the track. A red-bellied black snake lying serenely across the track, blocking her path. It had glossy scales. The word obsidian came to mind. Though she knew the snake was deadly, that its venom contained neurotoxins and myotoxins, a part of her had longed to touch those beautiful scales. It was a relief when the snake—possibly tasting her scent with its flicking tongue—had slithered away. *It's more afraid of you than you are of it*. Someone had told her that once, though she couldn't remember if it was about snakes specifically or some other menacing creature.

Ruthie saw the man out of the corner of her eye just before he stepped onto the path. She gasped. The man swore and drew backwards, almost tripping on a fallen branch. 'Scared the shit out of me,' he said.

Ruthie let out a small laugh, her heart racing. The man removed his earphones. She saw now that he was wearing the uniform of the local council rangers, khaki shirt and shorts, a high-vis vest. Funny that she hadn't seen him coming.

'I've seen you before,' he said.

'What?'

He took off his straw Bunnings hat and wiped his brow which was damp with sweat. At his feet, Ruthie noticed a small sign that read: *Bush Regeneration Area. Keep to the Track*.

'You walk through here most days,' he said. 'Where's your friend?'

Ruthie hadn't spoken to anyone about her fight with Helen because there wasn't anyone to tell. It was as if she'd been cleaved in two and no one had

noticed. But somebody had noticed. This man, this stranger in the forest. ‘Who are you?’ she asked.

‘Corey,’ he said, holding his hand out. ‘Corey Glover. I’m with the council boys.’

He gestured behind himself to the forest, and between the trees, Ruthie saw two other men in identical uniforms pulling up weeds and planting shrubs. She shook Corey’s hand. It was rough and damp. She told him her name. He was quite young, probably only a few years older than her.

One of the council workers whistled, a high two-tone whistle. Ruthie turned to find him leaning against his shovel. He blew a kiss and laughed.

‘Fuck off!’ Corey gave them the finger, though he was grinning.

There was more laughter. ‘Don’t stand around like a stunned mullet. Make a move or get back here.’

‘I’m on my break.’ Corey turned to Ruthie. ‘Don’t worry about them. They’re just joking.’

‘I know,’ said Ruthie. ‘But I think I might be the joke?’

‘They just know I like you, that’s all.’

‘You don’t even know me.’

‘I told you, I’ve seen you around.’

Corey walked Ruthie through the forest. She was old enough to register the implicit danger of this situation, but she was also in a dangerous sort of mood. Helen thought she was so cool, running off to her ridiculous boyfriend, the two of them hiding out in his parents’ house. It was pathetic. Well, here was Corey. A man, not a boy, and he had noticed her. She smiled at him, so that he could see her face properly. She knew she was pretty. People had told her that ever since she was little: Helen always complaining about it as though it was some great injustice and her grandmother acting as if it was a loaded weapon—*Careful not to shoot yourself in the foot*. But Ruthie knew what she was doing. Unlike Helen, she was not a child.

Corey told her the names of the plants—bottlebrush, lilly pilly, native violet—and about his work with the council. He was a landscape gardener by trade and one day he was going to open his own business. ‘What about you?’ he asked.

‘What about me?’

‘What are your plans when you finish school?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe uni. If I get in.’

‘A waste of time if you ask me.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘Fair enough.’ He stopped on the path. ‘I mean I’m sure you’ll get in. I just don’t see what you’ll learn in there that you can’t learn out here.’

‘In the forest?’

‘In the world.’

She adjusted her backpack on her shoulder and thought about the afternoon she and Helen had visited Sydney University. They’d strolled through the quadrangle and seen the sandstone clock tower and the perfect green lawn that you weren’t allowed to walk on. Helen talked about their time after school as though it would be the best part of their lives. Ruthie had started to believe that anything was possible.

‘Look,’ said Corey, reaching his hand out towards her.

Her muscles tensed. God, when they found her body, wouldn’t everyone think she had it coming, going off with a strange man like that?

But he only reached for something above her head and when he drew back, she saw two berries resting in his palm.

‘Lilly pilly berries,’ he said. ‘Try one, they’re good.’

‘They’re not poisonous?’ The fruit was an alarming pink. She was sure she’d read somewhere that brightly coloured plants and animals were often poisonous, like nature was warning you to stay away. No, she hadn’t read it; Helen had told her, the day that Ruthie had seen the red-bellied black snake.

Corey put a berry in his mouth. ‘Bush tucker,’ he said, ‘Aboriginal people have been eating them for thousands of years. Promise you, they’re good.’

She put the berry in her mouth. It was sour and crisp, like a tiny apple. ‘How long is your break?’ she asked.

‘Half an hour,’ he said. ‘Why?’

She put her hand on the waistband of his shorts.

He smelled of sweat and insect repellent. He sat on the forest floor, leaning against the bare trunk of a gum tree while she straddled him. She watched a little trail of ants make their way across the bark and felt him grow hard beneath her. He swore into her hair, and she smiled, sliding herself off him so that she could unzip his shorts, but he grabbed her hand. ‘Hey,’ he said, a little breathless. ‘Can I have your number or something?’

She sat back on her heels. ‘What?’

‘Like, this is really nice but maybe we could go on a date?’

‘A date?’

He reached out and stroked her hair. ‘You’re a really cool girl. I want it to be special.’

She had to stop herself from laughing. ‘A date. Sure. I’d totally love that.’



Due to this impromptu tryst in the forest, Ruthie didn’t have time to go home before her shift at the Goddess Grove. On the bus, she called her mother but there was no answer. She left a message asking if Angela needed anything and when she might be coming home. There was no text from Helen either. Okay then. Whatever. Ruthie was more angry with herself than either of them. She’d allowed herself to become comfortable. To think of Helen’s home as her home. But it wasn’t. Of course it wasn’t. As her grandmother always said: no such thing as a free lunch.

When Ruthie arrived at the Goddess Grove, she saw that there was dirt on her knees. She probably smelled too; there hadn’t been any air-conditioning on the bus and her armpits were sticky. The stink of sweat and insect repellent flashed into her mind. She laughed out loud, the events of the afternoon hitting her. Had she very nearly fucked a stranger in the forest? What would her grandmother say about that? She was both in awe of herself and a little disgusted. In the gleaming shop, her dishevelled state was conspicuous. She’d have to shower in the bathhouse (which wasn’t strictly allowed, but other staff did) then change into her uniform. Her uniform! Fuck, she hadn’t brought it because she’d planned on going home first.

To make matters worse, Tiger came through the door carrying a large cardboard box. She was hardly ever there in the afternoons. Ruthie imagined narrating this moment to Helen from the safety of a distant point in the future—*So there I am, looking like some kind of swamp creature, and who should walk through the door?!*

Tiger placed the box on the counter and began to cut it open with a pair of scissors. Her eyes swept over Ruthie, taking her in. ‘It’s hot out there.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ruthie. She felt exposed, as if Tiger could sense the dirt and sweat on her.

‘A real stinker, as you say here,’ said Tiger.

Ruthie didn't know where Tiger was from nor how long she'd lived in Australia. Whenever the topic arose, Tiger would say that she was a citizen of the world.

'Um,' said Ruthie, 'I actually made a mistake.'

'Oh?'

'I forgot to pack my uniform. I'm so sorry. I laid it out this morning, I must have just—'

'Don't fret,' said Tiger. 'You can borrow something of mine.' She walked to the back of the shop and returned clutching a soft cream sweater.

Ruthie began to protest.

'There's nothing we can do about the skirt,' said Tiger. 'But I can't have you in that sweaty school shirt.' She laughed as though the very thought was absurd. 'But make sure you shower,' she added. 'That's real cashmere.'

Ruthie scrubbed herself hard in the shower and tried to imagine what it would be like to be a guest—*I'll have ginger tea with honey. Take your time, I'm not in any rush*. The bodywashes and lotions all had scents like parsley seed and Damascus rose. She squeezed her eyes shut and let the water run down her face. There was an insect bite on her neck. The skin itchy and inflamed. She rubbed it with the pad of her thumb, turned off the water and towelled herself dry. The sweater Tiger lent her was the softest thing she'd ever felt.

When Ruthie went back upstairs, Tiger was taking little glass bottles out of the cardboard box and lining them up on the counter. She turned to Ruthie, brushing her hand across Ruthie's shoulders. 'That suits you, you know.' It was a comforting touch. Ruthie felt clean and light and wondered if this was how Tiger always felt.

'Are you all right?'

The question caught Ruthie off guard. Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked them away. 'What are those?'

'Perfume,' said Tiger. 'A little love potion, of sorts.'

Ruthie picked up a bottle. It was no bigger than the palm of her hand. She'd thought Tiger had been joking but it really was called *Love Potion*. Beneath the label was a string of ingredients—patchouli, musk rose, honeysuckle and other plants Ruthie had never heard of before.

When Tiger went into the back room, Ruthie put the little bottle in the pocket of her school skirt.



It was late by the time Ruthie got home, and she was thinking about whether or not she could be bothered to make herself dinner. Maybe she'd just collapse into bed. But when she opened the door, there was light and music coming from the kitchen. Sinead O'Connor.

Angela was singing quietly to herself and putting oranges into a bowl. For days now, Ruthie had pictured the moment of her mother's return. She'd told herself she'd stay calm while expressing to Angela how shitty it was to run away like that, and how she must never do it again. Angela held out an orange and smiled. 'Have you ever seen one as good as this, Ruthie girl? Are you hungry?'

Ruthie burst into tears.

Angela rubbed her back while she cried. She told Ruthie that she need not have worried, she'd gone to the mountains to see a friend and was feeling much better now. The clean air and fresh food and rest had worked a charm. Everything, she promised, would be better now.

They ate a meal of oranges, pickles and cheese toast. The oranges, cut into wedges, were golden and sweet. For dessert, Ruthie made coffee and Angela brought out a Sara Lee chocolate cake. It had been Ruthie's favourite since she was little. She ate it slowly, saving the icing until last. Angela reached into her pocket and pulled out a handful of sugar sachets. She was in the habit of collecting them wherever she went.

'I'm glad you're back,' said Ruthie.

Angela tore open three sachets of sugar and stirred them into her coffee. 'Why don't we get our nails done tomorrow? A little treat for the two of us.'

Ruthie had school the next day, but she could miss it. With Helen still not talking to her, there wasn't much point in going anyway. It was like the old days when she was friendless.

'What's wrong?' Angela reached for Ruthie's hand.

'Nothing. A stupid fight with a friend.'

'Helen?'

Ruthie told Angela what had happened, and even though it was painful, it felt good to talk to her mother this way, like they were a normal family talking about normal things.

‘You’ll work it out,’ said Angela. ‘Your love for each other is greater than some boy.’

It was the word *love* that reminded Ruthie of the potion in her pocket. Her fingers closed around it.

O, I am out of breath in this fond chase

ABOUT A MONTH AFTER RUTHIE and I stopped speaking to each other, a rumour spread throughout the school that I was some kind of stalker. It had something to do with Nick and how—apparently—I was obsessed with him. One day, I overheard Phoebe explaining to her disciples that she knew all about it because her boyfriend was best friends with Nick's older brother. 'Poor girl,' she said, referring to me as though I was an overly anxious golden retriever about to be put down. 'She just liked him too much, you know? It's actually really sad.'

I drafted and redrafted Nick a long message explaining that I had not betrayed his trust in revealing our relationship and that the spreading of the rumour was most likely the doing of my former best friend turned enemy. Though I was obviously mortified—is there anything worse than being accused of wanting too much?—a part of me hoped that the drama would bring me and Nick together.

But when he did finally reply it was brief and unsatisfying: *No worries. All good*. He signed off with a smiley face. No kisses. No heart.

The spreading of this rumour, I supposed, was Ruthie's revenge. When I confronted her at the bus stop before school one morning, she swore to god she had nothing to do with it.

'It had to be you,' I said. 'You're the only one who knew Nick and I were together.'

'How do you know it wasn't him?' she asked.

'Who did you tell?'

‘As if anyone would be interested in your love-life. Get over yourself.’

‘Everyone thinks I’m crazy.’

‘Well.’

‘I hate you.’ I said it so violently that a woman walking her beagle looked up, alarmed.

‘I know,’ said Ruthie. She spoke with a kind of resignation that seemed specifically designed to highlight my unreasonableness. How was it that no one was willing to fight me? First Nick with his *No worries. All good*, and now Ruthie with her ‘I know.’ Everyone was prepared to betray and abandon me, but god forbid I confront them about it. We had to all go on pretending that nothing had happened. Not only was I without my best friend and boyfriend, but I was denied the drama of a good fight.

I was about to march off to the other side of the bus stop when a musky rose scent erupted in the air between us. The sleeve of my jumper was suddenly wet. What the fuck?

‘Sorry.’ Ruthie held a small glass bottle in her fist. ‘It’s my perfume. I didn’t mean to—’

At that moment, the bus arrived. I wiped my sleeve and boarded the bus without looking back. I was determined to be the one to walk away first.

The bus was so packed I found myself standing in the aisle. Ahead of me, Ruthie’s dark ponytail swayed at every turn. She gazed out the window. Her serenity made my skin feel tight. Someone’s backpack smacked me in the boob. A girl in my drama class got on at the next stop and a few of us shuffled down to make room for her. When she smiled at me, it was snarly, and I couldn’t work out if it was her usual smile or whether she’d heard the rumours too. A group of younger girls behind me were laughing in a feral sort of way and I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was the subject of their laughter. I gripped the railing. My hands were sweaty. There was no air-conditioning. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. What if life was a slow-moving nightmare that just kept going? The floral smell of Ruthie’s perfume radiated off my uniform. No doubt something she’d picked up at the Goddess Grove. It was syrupy sweet.

The bus jolted to a stop and more people boarded. I found myself pressed against a pole. I closed my eyes and took another deep breath. The air was warm and thick. I fumbled through my backpack for my Ventolin puffer. My fingers closed around my lip balm and pencil case and sunscreen but not the little grey tube I always kept in the front pocket. My throat

tightened. Don't panic. The key was not to panic. When I was little there were times when I wheezed and rattled so badly my parents took me to hospital. Once, when we were on holiday, they even called an ambulance. I never quite lost my fear of that breathlessness. It was there whenever I had a cold or was coerced into participating in physical activity.

'I have to get off,' I said to the girl next to me.

She looked over my shoulder, determined to avoid eye contact the way people do when thrust together in a confined space. I could hear the music from her earphones. The rapid beating of a drum.

I pressed the red stop button. Nothing happened. I tried to make myself breathe slowly and deeply. Don't panic. I tried to imagine my mum's voice —*In for two, out for two, in for two, out for two*—but there simply wasn't enough air. 'Help!' I croaked. 'Help!' The strangled sound of my own voice scared me. It sounded dramatic, like I was bunging it on, only I wasn't. The people around me began to notice. My neighbour took one earphone out and asked if I was choking. I tried to indicate that I needed to get off the bus. She half-heartedly tapped me on the back and then looked around to see if anyone had any better ideas. Then I heard a familiar voice, loud and clear. 'Stop the bus! Emergency! Stop the bus! She's having an asthma attack!'

Ruthie did not let up until the driver pulled over on a suburban street. The doors gasped open. I collapsed onto the nature strip, sat there with my head between my knees. The air was cooler outside but still there was not enough of it. 'Where's your puffer?' Ruthie was beside me now, tipping the contents of my backpack onto the grass. I shook my head. The bus driver announced that he was calling an ambulance. I began to tell him that I needed my parents but I didn't have the breath to spare.

'Here, use mine.' When I looked up Phoebe was standing before me with a puffer in her hand. 'It's been in my mouth but, whatever.'

I sucked in the sweet, sweet Ventolin, inhaling deep and slow. The cool clean chemical taste of it. My lungs expanding. I was going to be okay. The thought made me weak with relief.

'You should really work on your fitness,' said Phoebe. 'My asthma got heaps better once I started swimming competitively.'

I nodded, bowing to her wisdom, and felt the rise and fall of my breathing like the miracle it was.

‘So the ambos should be here any minute,’ said the bus driver. It seemed to be dawning on him that he was the only adult in a sea of adolescent girls.

Ruthie sat beside me rubbing my back. I could still detect the floral scent of her perfume, that musky sweetness that had nearly killed me. When I told her that it was probably what set me off, she pulled it out of her backpack and threw it on the grass like it was poison.

‘Love potion?’ asked Phoebe, picking up the bottle. She looked down at me and smiled. ‘Who were you planning to use this on?’

‘It isn’t mine,’ I said.

At the same time, Ruthie said, ‘It isn’t real.’

Phoebe just smiled and set the little glass bottle on the gutter. ‘Took your breath away, huh? You two are so funny. I love it.’



The paramedic questioned me about what had happened and whether anything like it had ever happened before. The bus driver, having discharged his duty of care, got back on the bus and shouted at all the girls to do the same. There was a frantic rush. People waved at me or complained to their friends about how they were going to be late, and then they were gone.

‘It’s my fault,’ said Ruthie. ‘That bloody perfume.’ I’d never seen her look so worried. Even the paramedic must have noticed because she said that asthma attacks could be triggered by all sorts of things—pollen, dust, stress.

‘I’m really sorry,’ said Ruthie.

Her distress was not as satisfying as it should have been.

My dad arrived as the paramedic was taking my blood pressure. Apparently, Ruthie had called the house. A part of me was hoping I’d be taken to the hospital by ambulance. The drama of that appealed to me. But the paramedic only told my dad to take me to the GP to get me checked out, and to make sure I carried my puffer with me.

Ruthie ended up spending the entire day with me. When it became clear she wasn’t going to school, my dad allowed her to accompany us to the doctors and then to the chemist to get a new puffer and then home. In my bedroom, we discovered my old puffer in the space between my desk and

bed. It must have fallen there when I last unpacked my schoolbag. We wondered at the fragility of life. ‘I’m really glad you’re okay,’ she said.

‘What was in that perfume?’

Ruthie pressed her hands into her thighs. ‘Rose. Patchouli. Tiger gave it to me.’

‘I guess I’m allergic,’ I said. ‘Why is it called a love potion?’

‘It isn’t real.’

‘Obviously.’

‘I mean, it’s just perfume,’ she said. ‘I’m really sorry.’



We were friends again after that. In the days that followed, Phoebe took pleasure in telling everyone how she’d saved me, and I enjoyed this connection between us. The rumours about me and Nick dissipated. It came to be known that I’d almost died, and so people took pity on me. Sometimes in class, I’d press a hand to my chest and close my eyes, and someone nearby would prod me with a pencil and ask if I was all right. But after a while, people stopped noticing, and I sank back into obscurity.

Methought a serpent ate my heart away

I WAS LINING UP FOR my Year 12 English Trial Exam when I learned that Ruthie's mother had died. Ruthie had been absent the previous day and had missed our first exam. I hadn't been able to get hold of her, so my mother had called the school. Now my principal was whispering to my English teacher, asking if I could be excused. My English teacher closed her eyes and pressed her hands to her heart as the principal led me away.

Although by this point, I'd been friends with Ruthie for years, I'd still never met her mother. Now I never would. The funeral was the first time I saw a picture of her. A young pretty woman with long hair that shielded part of her face. I told my mum that she looked just like Ruthie and my mum said I had it backwards: that Ruthie looked just like her. People said that she died in her sleep and that Ruthie was the one who found her. Later, I came to understand that it was a heroin overdose, and it happened on a Friday afternoon. The proximity of this gave me nightmares so badly that I slept in my parents' bed. How could an afternoon hold the death of a person? I calculated that I'd probably been eating cereal and watching *The Bold and the Beautiful* while Ruthie was discovering her mother's corpse. I'd never known anyone who had died. My life suddenly appeared strange to me, like a veil had been placed over the world, or perhaps lifted, I didn't know which.

Ruthie disappeared into herself. At the funeral, she followed her grandmother around, handing her mints and tissues and a maroon shawl. Ruthie's grandmother, Clare—another person I hadn't met—called

everyone ‘pet’ and ‘love’ and kept asking if we found the place all right, and what the parking was like and whether there was much traffic. The only other people in attendance, besides me and my parents, were my English teacher, funeral-ready in her black dress and heels; Corey who insisted on introducing himself as Ruthie’s boyfriend even though I’d never heard her refer to him as such; and some of Clare’s friends, who stood very close to each other and sighed loudly about how sad it all was.

The chapel was ugly—a stuffy room with grey carpet and a pile of abandoned audio-visual equipment pushed into one corner. The lights were on, even though it was a bright afternoon, and everything appeared greasy, like it was coated in Vaseline. I couldn’t help but think that if God really could be anywhere, why would he be here? Ruthie gave a strange speech about a time her mum took her to get her nails done. We all fidgeted on the hard plastic chairs as she described in excruciating detail their matching nail patterns and how they’d gone out for pancakes afterwards. She squeezed her eyes closed as she spoke, as if she were afraid she’d get something wrong.

At the reception, Ruthie carried around an enormous tray of ribbon sandwiches while her grandmother presided over the mini quiches. It appeared to me that everyone was indecently hungry. Corey piled his plate high and gravitated towards my dad, the only other male in the room. Clare’s friends gobbled down quiches, brushing crumbs from their blouses. I thought about my own death and wondered if my loved ones would stand around saying things like, ‘Isn’t the pastry flaky?’ The whole thing was depressing.

Eventually, Ruthie put down the sandwiches and the two of us stood together. For the first time in my life, I felt awkward around her. Perhaps it would have been easier if she’d cried. I could have put my arm around her and brought her tissues. But she only rubbed her hands over her thighs like she didn’t know what to do with them. I didn’t know what to say so I pointed out a photograph of her mum with a man and asked if that was her dad.

‘Yeah,’ said Ruthie. ‘I guess.’

She guessed? Was she not sure, or was it inconsequential? Either way, she didn’t elaborate. I looked at the man in the picture. He was handsome with curly hair and blue eyes. Was it weird that I thought Ruthie’s dad was good-looking? The photo was taken when he was young, so it was probably

fine. Ruthie never talked about her father, other than to say she couldn't really remember him and that he lived in Paris now, which was where he was originally from. As far as I knew, she'd never made any attempt to contact him. If anything, the subject of him appeared to bore her. This, I found shocking. If I had a mysterious father or a familial connection to Paris it would have been all I ever talked about. I looked across at my own dad who was, at that moment, making Ruthie's grandma a cup of tea and asking whether she took milk.

One of Clare's friends approached us and began telling Ruthie what a difficult person Angela had always been. 'Always so flighty,' the woman said, biting into an egg and lettuce sandwich. 'Half the time no one knew where she was or who she was with. It was very upsetting for Clare.'

Ruthie smiled politely. Her passivity frightened me. I wanted her to shout at the woman, burst into tears, knock the plate from her hand.

'I tried to get my Emily to talk some sense into her,' the woman said, taking another bite of her sandwich. 'They were a similar age, you know? But Angela never would listen to anyone. And look how it all—'

'Sorry to interrupt,' I said, 'I just remembered. Clare asked us to hand around another tray of sandwiches. Someone's been gobbling them all up. We better go.' I grabbed Ruthie's hand and pulled her away.

Outside, it was a cool sunny day that was at odds with mourning. Two ibises perched on a garbage bin and pecked at a popcorn packet. Who the hell brought popcorn to a funeral?

'I don't think there are any sandwiches left,' said Ruthie, looking out across the cemetery.

'That woman was a massive bitch.'

'I think she's, like, eighty.'

'So? You can be a massive bitch when you're eighty.'

'Thanks for saving me.' She turned and smiled at me.

There was something about the way she looked in that moment that made me want to cry. Maybe it was because she was normally so fierce, so large in my eyes. It'd never occurred to me that she needed saving from anything. Was I up to the task? I put my arm around her and pressed her to me. 'Always,' I said. 'Always.'

We found our English teacher in the carpark smoking a cigarette. It was strange and a little bit thrilling to see her outside of school, not to mention

doing something illicit. When we approached, she waved the smoke away with one hand but didn't put out the cigarette.

'How are you?' she asked, looking at Ruthie. 'Don't answer that. It's a ridiculous question.'

'I'm fine,' said Ruthie. 'Thanks for coming. I hope you had a good time. I mean … I don't know what I mean.'

'I remember your mum,' said our teacher. 'She came to the parent–teacher night when you first started high school. I bummed a smoke off her.'

'Oh yeah?'

'I was so exhausted from fielding all these bloody questions about advanced classes and exam results, but she just wanted to know whether the kids were nice. She wanted you to have friends, I guess. To be happy.'

Ruthie smiled and looked at me.

Our English teacher stubbed out her cigarette and put a hand on each of our shoulders. 'You two are golden,' she said, staring at us intently, as though there was some hidden message beneath her words. 'You're golden.'

Even on the car ride home, I felt the place where her hand had touched me. Like she had marked me somehow.



In the months following her mother's death, Ruthie appeared to lose all interest in our dream of going to Sydney University and renting our own place in Newtown or Glebe. She never said anything—she never said much of anything at all—but I could feel her slipping away. People kept saying how well she was handling it all. She went through the motions of coming to class and sitting her exams, but I knew that she was not really there. Whenever I talked about our future she just smiled and said things like, 'That sounds good,' and 'I'd like that.' The only element of our plan she actively abandoned was our trip to Fiji. She said that her grandmother needed her at home.

Ruthie had moved into her grandmother's house in the days following her mother's death. Unlike her former home, she allowed me to visit this one. It was a small white and blue house with a lawn so severely neat it appeared fake. Inside, every inch of space was covered with little ornaments and figurines—a frog on a lily pad, a ballet dancer, a tiny sailing ship, a cat

made of glass. Her grandmother fed us the same little quiches that she'd made for the funeral and insisted on ironing my school jacket while we ate. All around the house were pictures of Ruthie's mum when she was young—a laughing child, a schoolgirl with ribbons in her hair, a young woman standing beside Ruthie's father with a baby in her arms. It wasn't at all what I expected, and I wondered where this grandmother had been when Ruthie was showing up to primary school with a dirty uniform and no food for recess.

On the day I completed my final exam, Ruthie met me after school, and we celebrated by buying a six-pack of Blackberry Crush Bacardi Breezers to drink in the privacy of the forest. Ruthie, who had already turned eighteen, had to purchase the drinks while I waited outside the store. As we carried them into the forest I complained about the fact that my birthday wasn't until April and that this would limit my ability to participate in the full richness of student life. 'You'll be off clubbing with all your cool new friends,' I said.

'Yeah,' said Ruthie. 'That sounds good.'

'I'll have to get a fake ID,' I said. 'Do we know anyone who has one?'

'Remember when I saw that snake here?'

'What?'

'Forget it.'

We found a relatively clear patch of earth beneath a gum tree to sit and drink. I had little experience with alcohol. The drink was sweet and even after the first one I felt deliciously woozy. I looked at Ruthie, whose tongue was stained a deep purple, and told her of my great fear that my parents were actually cooler than me. I'd seen pictures of them at university with their long hair and flared pants and radical politics and wondered if everything became cooler over time or whether ours was just a dud generation, our imaginations thwarted by technology, the housing crisis and looming environmental catastrophe.

'I don't think you would have been cool in any generation,' said Ruthie. 'You care too much about what people think of you. No offence.'

'As if you don't.'

'Not as much as you,' she said. 'That's why we weren't friends for ages even though we were in all the same classes. You were too embarrassed.'

Many times, Ruthie and I had mused over the fact that we'd lived in such close proximity without really knowing each other, but we always spoke of

this as though it were some bizarre and unlikely coincidence, like those stories you read of long-lost siblings discovering they were actually neighbours. ‘Well, you never talked to me either,’ I said.

‘That isn’t true.’

‘Anyway. Who cares? We did it. We fucking finished school.’ I’d started on my second bottle and was feeling quite drunk, like the band of anxiety that usually gripped my organs had been loosened. I became briefly concerned that I was already on my way to becoming an alcoholic but then I brushed a leaf off my school skirt and realised that I would never wear this uniform again. My throat tightened and I felt full of some emotion that wasn’t joy or sadness or relief, but more a sense of the startling speed with which life unfolds. ‘We’re not children anymore,’ I said.

‘You are,’ said Ruthie. ‘Like legally speaking.’

‘What’s up with you today?’ I felt shitty then because I knew very well what was up with her: her mum was dead.

Ruthie pulled at a clump of grass and looked away.

I knew that we should talk about it. She was clearly hurting. Of course she was hurting. But I couldn’t think of anything useful to say. Besides, a part of me couldn’t help being irrationally annoyed at her. This was the moment we’d been waiting for—the beginning of our lives—and here we were, dragged down by tragedy. It was a terrible thought, and yet there it was. In the end, I said nothing, and we just went on drinking until it started to get dark.

We’d never stayed this late in the forest before and though we could hear the soft hum of the road, I started to think about how all the people reading news articles about two girls being raped and murdered at night in a forest would think they were foolish for being there in the first place. The occasional rustle of leaves or snapping of twigs freaked me out. I could only just make out Ruthie’s shape in the dark. ‘Come on,’ I said. ‘We should get home.’ Clumsily, I began to pick up the empty bottles, tucking them under my arms, until I remembered that I had my schoolbag with me. Had I really sat my final exam that very day? The thought of school calmed me a little; it was so close by. We were not really in a forest. In ten minutes, we would be on a bus with people coming home from work. I started shoving the empty bottles into my backpack. The clinking of the glass seemed to ring out through the dark. When I looked up at Ruthie, she still hadn’t moved.

‘Let’s go home,’ I said again.

‘I think it’s my fault.’

‘What?’

‘I killed her.’ Her voice was unhurried and distant, as though she wasn’t speaking to anyone in particular. I had the feeling that I could have walked away, and she wouldn’t have even noticed, just gone on sitting there addressing the trees.

‘What are you talking about?’ I was crouched on the ground, a bottle clenched in my fist.

‘I killed her.’

The warmth of the alcohol drained out of me. I felt suddenly, painfully sober. What was it exactly that Ruthie was confessing to? I had visions of her poisoning her mother, smothering her with a pillow.

‘I killed her. I killed her. I killed her. I killed her. I killed—’

‘Stop it,’ I said, standing up abruptly. ‘Stop it. You’re freaking me out.’

To my relief, she did stop. She pressed her head against her knees and let out a long low moan.

I wished my mum was here. She would know what to do. Whenever my asthma was bad, she would sit beside me and rub my back and tell me that even though I felt like I was dying I wasn’t and that soon everything would be all right. Did the same apply to grief? I sat beside Ruthie and put my hand on her back. ‘Listen,’ I said, ‘your mum overdosed. It isn’t your fault.’

Ruthie shook her head. ‘You don’t understand. There were times I wished for it. Like really wished for it. I’d close my eyes and pray that she’d die because I hated her so much.’ Ruthie wiped her eyes. ‘Like I loved her … I did … but I hated her so much.’

‘I know,’ I said, though really, I didn’t. Even in the dark, I could feel that she was looking at me very hard, as if it was up to me to cast judgement on her. I started talking very quickly: ‘Remember when we were in primary school and there were those scripture classes every Tuesday?’ Ruthie didn’t say anything, so I continued. ‘My parents signed me up for non-scripture, so I just sat in the hall with all the other little heathens watching cartoons and colouring in pictures of teddy bears. Of course, this suited me pretty much fine until I heard from one of the netball girls that the Catholics got Easter eggs and that their teacher had a pencil case full of those metallic liquid pens that she lent freely.’

Still, Ruthie remained silent, but I had the sense that she was listening to me.

'So naturally,' I said, 'I converted to Catholicism, and when we learned about praying, I assumed it worked the same way as writing a letter to Santa. Every time we prayed, I'd just write a list in my head of everything I wanted and mentally post it to God or Jesus or whoever handled that sort of thing.'

Ruthie made a little sound that could have been a laugh.

'And you know what? I really believed I'd get everything I wanted. I was like—oh, this is how the world works. I'm going to be very good and pray for a pet horse and a bigger house and curly hair and then God will give me these things because he will look into my soul and know that I am very good and that I deserve to be happy. And obviously it's total bullshit. It doesn't matter what you want or what you wish for.' I put my arms out, gesturing towards the sky. 'Like, there's no one out there listening. The universe doesn't care about us.' By this stage, I'd really worked myself up. Possibly I wasn't quite as sober as I'd imagined. I took a breath. 'So my point is … it's not your fault. The worst thing happened to you and nothing you said or thought or wished for would have made any difference.'

She blew her nose on her sleeve and looked at me. Her eyes were wet. Tears ran down her cheeks. 'But, Helen, it did.'

'No, it didn't.'

'Yes, it did.'

What Ruthie said next was totally batshit. I knew it and surely, on some level, she did too. But still. We were drunk teenagers in a forest at night. She was deep in grief, and I was utterly unprepared for it. Ruthie told me that she'd stolen a healing elixir from the Goddess Grove and slipped it in her mother's morning coffee. When she got home from school that afternoon, her mother was dead.

'Don't you see?' said Ruthie. 'I just wanted to heal Mum. But I think the elixir healed her by killing her.'

At school, I'd been subjected to CPR training. I knew DRSABCD. I even knew, in theory, how to perform a water rescue. What I didn't know was what to do when your best friend had a complete mental breakdown before your eyes. 'Okay,' I said slowly. 'You know the "elixirs" aren't real, right? They're like lemon juice and smooshed up rose petals. Right?'

‘Remember that asthma attack you had? On the bus?’ she said. ‘We were having that fight, so I wore this love potion to try and get you to be my friend again and then it nearly killed you, but we did become friends again, so it worked. I think it’s, like, evil.’

I thought about the perfume Ruthie had worn that day, sweet and heavy. It was flattering to think that she’d gone so far as to dabble in the dark arts to restore our friendship. I squeezed her shoulder. ‘Ruthie, this isn’t real. None of this is your fault.’

She stood up and walked away from me then, and for a moment I feared I’d be left alone in the dark, but then she turned around and cried. ‘I’m cursed, Helen. Don’t you see? I wished so hard for people to love me, but I only ended up hurting them. You should stay away from me, I’m a monster, a witch.’

A cool wind blew through the trees. I thought about the first time I saw Tiger at the Goddess Grove, that night of the summer solstice. Her long silver hair and supple limbs, her body arching and folding on the floor. I shivered. Ruthie was sobbing so intensely she was doubled over, like she might collapse under the weight of her own grief at any moment. To my horror, she started hitting herself on the head. ‘I killed her, I killed her, I killed her—’

‘Ruthie!’ I jumped up and grabbed her hands. We struggled—me grasping her wrists, she pulling away. If anyone came across us, they’d think I was attacking her, or that we really were a couple of witches performing some secret act of evil in the forest. I gripped her wrists harder and shook her. ‘Ruthie, you are not a witch. Do you know how I know this? Because you are the least powerful person I’ve ever met. You are literally an orphan like Oliver fucking Twist. You’re destitute. If we were living in Victorian England, you’d be contracting a lung disease in a cotton mill. Okay? None of this is your fault because you don’t have any power to change anything and you never did. Sadly, for you, no so-called potion or elixir changes that. You know as well as I do, they’re scams for rich women who have time to kill in between their facials and yoga classes. None of this is your fault, not my asthma attack and certainly not your mum’s death. So calm the fuck down.’

I was pretty sure this wasn’t how my mum would have handled a distressed patient, but Ruthie’s sobbing slowed to a whimper. She stopped hitting herself. Her whole body seemed to droop, and I held her to stop her

from falling. ‘You make me sound pathetic,’ she said, her head against my shoulder.

‘You are. You completely are. But you’re my best friend.’ I rubbed her back.

We stayed like that for a while. I listened to her breathing, her long shaking breaths. ‘Let’s go home, Ruthie.’

‘I’m too tired. I’m going to sleep here.’

‘We’re in the middle of nowhere.’

‘Just let me lie down.’

‘Ruthie.’ I took her face in my hands. ‘You can’t stay here. I’m taking you home.’

She nodded very slowly, and I kissed her forehead. I had never kissed Ruthie before and normally such an outlandish gesture would have made me feel awkward, but it seemed very natural right then because she looked so empty and it was all I had to revive her.

We started walking. I kept my arm wrapped around her the whole way. When the gleam of headlights came into view, relief washed through me. Now that we were surrounded by solid familiar things—houses, cars, the bus stop we’d sat at every afternoon for years, my fear receded. We were returned to the world. It was, perhaps, my first lesson in the thinness of that barrier between regular life and unmitigated chaos. We were once more on safe ground, but now I knew just how close the edge was—just there behind the trees.

And there the snake throws her enamelled skin

ON THE LAST DA OF 2008, Ruthie sat at her grandmother's table and thought about how the new year would be the first without her mother. She picked an apricot out of the fruit bowl and bit into it. The sour taste made her wince. Her grandmother, Clare, was sitting at the other end of the table with a stack of photo albums in front of her. Last night, as they'd been watching a baking show, she'd announced she was going to get rid of every photograph of her daughter taken during the bad times. She didn't want to remember Angela that way.

Ruthie and Clare never talked about the addiction that killed Angela. They referred to it vaguely as *the bad times*. Even when Angela was alive, they'd only talked in general terms of her health and mood, as though she were recovering from a bout of flu or a particularly stressful period at work. Ruthie was always careful about conveying any information that might get her mother in trouble. In retrospect, it was absurd, dangerously naive, all this dancing around. Who did they think they were kidding?

Clare removed a photograph from beneath the plastic film of the album and dropped it into the recycling bin. In the picture, Angela was sitting in this very kitchen, smiling at the camera. She looked pale and thin, her cheekbones sharp, her brown eyes large. She'd probably been about twenty-two or twenty-three. If the bad times had begun then, it meant Ruthie had only had two good years of her mother's life. She did not think that was true. Surely there had been more goodness than that? Ruthie recalled times when her mother did ordinary things, like listen to Sinead O'Connor and

watch *Neighbours*. Also, they went to Wonderland on more than one occasion. They ate fairy floss and dropped balls into the laughing mouths of clowns. A few years ago, Angela and Ruthie caught the train down to Kiama and rented a cabin. They spent the week sunbathing and drinking lemonade and Ruthie had only been a little anxious about missing so much school. What were these, if not good times?

Ruthie finished the apricot and left the dark seed on the table.

'Doesn't your father look handsome?' said Clare, taking out another photograph and showing Ruthie. This one was taken by the side of a red dirt road. Angela was looking away from the camera. She had her arms crossed around her middle and was holding a cigarette between her fingers. She looked fragile. Behind her was a paddock, empty except for a rusting shed and a couple of horses. Ruthie and her father, Oliver, were in the picture too. Ruthie was probably about three years old. She was looking at a brown and white horse that had come up to the fence. Oliver crouched beside her, pointing up at the horse's bowed head.

'Where was this?' asked Ruthie. 'Who took it?'

Clare shrugged. 'They were always moving around. Your father worked on an orchard for a while. Around Orange somewhere.'

Ruthie had known this in some vague way, but she'd never seen the picture before. She racked her mind for any memory, but there was nothing.

'It's a shame they never married,' said Clare. 'I can't help but think we might have all had very different lives. But then your mother could never do things the way other people did.'

Ruthie said nothing. She'd learned from a young age to stay silent when Clare criticised her daughter. There were times when Angela accused Ruthie of siding with Clare, and Ruthie had to work hard to prove her loyalty to her mother. Sometimes Ruthie could only achieve this by saying dreadful things about Clare, which made her feel guilty. But now Angela was dead, and there were no more alliances to uphold, so what did it matter? Still, it seemed unnecessarily cruel of Clare to speak of the life they might have had.

'Of course, when I was young, there was no question of travel,' said Clare. She picked up the scissors. 'We couldn't afford anything like that. I didn't even have a car until your mother was in school. I'd walk everywhere with the baby. Didn't think twice about it.'

Ruthie tensed. These kinds of comments had always enraged Angela.

‘It’s such a nice picture of you and your father,’ said Clare. ‘Perhaps I can save you.’ Very carefully, she cut Angela out of the photograph and dropped her into the bin where she lay among the long-life milk cartons and old copies of *The Daily Telegraph*. Ruthie pressed her hands against her thighs. ‘You can’t put photographs in the recycling bin.’

‘They’re paper,’ said Clare. ‘You can recycle paper.’

‘They have a plastic coating.’

Clare frowned. ‘Bring me that booklet the council sent. I’m sure you’re wrong.’

Ruthie went to the fridge where the magnetic booklet hung, along with her Year 3 school photo, a certificate for design and technology she’d been awarded in high school, and the details for a local pest exterminator.

‘What does it say?’ asked Clare.

Ruthie flipped through the pages, savouring her grandmother’s irritation. ‘There’s nothing in here about photos,’ said Ruthie. ‘I don’t think people throw them out very often.’

Clare put the scissors down and sighed dramatically. She made a great show of getting down on her knees, rummaging through the old newspapers and milk cartons, and placing the photographs into the correct bin. Every now and then, she stopped to rub her back or complain about her knees.

‘I’ll do it,’ said Ruthie, unable to take the theatrics any longer.

‘No, no. My mistake.’

‘It’s fine.’ Ruthie sat beside Clare on the cold tiles. Her grandmother’s hands were shaking. Clare opened and closed her fists. Her arthritis had flared up again, her knuckles swollen.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Ruthie, her anger slipping away.

Clare pressed her hands together. ‘A bit sore.’

The pain was everywhere. It didn’t matter what they tried to do with it, whether they threw it away or not. It was with them now. Angela was gone.

Ruthie found the last pieces of her mother and buried them beneath the chicken carcass and gravy of last night’s dinner.

Afterwards, she went into the kitchen to wash her hands. She flicked on the kettle and looked out at the garden, the paper daisies and camellias and the herbs in little pots.

‘Remember to refill the kettle when you’re done,’ called Clare. ‘But only halfway. The other day you filled it all the way to the top and I couldn’t lift it—Oh, look at this one.’

Ruthie turned to see Clare holding up a picture of Ruthie's father with long hair and an enormous backpack on his shoulders.

'This must have been when he first arrived. We have to get it framed. I wonder if I have something …' Clare disappeared into the spare room that was now Ruthie's room but was still full of Clare's cookbooks and aquarobics gear.

What Ruthie knew of Oliver was this: he was a Frenchman who'd met Angela in Sydney, which was only ever meant to be a stopover as he travelled through the country and on to New Zealand and up to Asia. But he'd stayed for a while, long enough to meet Angela and become Ruthie's dad, but not long enough for her to have any real memories of him.

Ruthie carried two cups of coffee to the table. One of the photographs that Clare had saved was of Angela and Oliver. They looked impossibly young, standing together in the front garden. To Ruthie, her parents appeared as beautiful strangers—remote and unconnected to her own life. Sadness coursed through her. That other life, the one they could have had, was so close she could almost feel it. She touched their faces with her fingertips and told them she was sorry—for what, she wasn't sure; perhaps just that life had failed them, or that she wasn't enough to make them stay, or just that they were stuck there behind the plastic film while the world turned over into a new year.

'This will do,' said Clare, coming back into the kitchen waving an empty photo frame. 'Did you refill the kettle?'

Ruthie handed her a coffee and took a jar full of sugar sachets out of the pantry. There were the little white sachets from McCafé and the brown Vittoria ones used at coffee shops. Angela had collected them.

'I hope you're watching your figure,' said Clare, nodding at the sugar and putting the photo of Oliver into the frame. 'Where's that nice boy of yours?'

'Corey?'

'He's very handsome.'

Ruthie wasn't sure whether her grandmother was talking about Corey or the picture of her father. She seemed to think all men were handsome and good and that all lives were improved by association with them. Clare herself had been married to an optometrist who was almost twenty years older than her. He'd died when Angela was still in high school. She'd never told Ruthie much about him, other than that he was quiet, and that he had

hundreds of books. Perhaps his death was the great undoing of Angela's life. Or, as Clare seemed to believe, perhaps it all would have turned out differently if Oliver had stayed. Did his leaving break something in Angela or did he see a brokenness already there that made him want to flee? Ruthie sipped her coffee. Perhaps the coming and going of all these men was irrelevant. Perhaps Clare and Angela and Ruthie were always going to be just who they were, and no other life was ever possible.

'I broke up with him,' said Ruthie. It was true enough though she hadn't informed Corey of this, only stopped replying to texts and letting his calls go to voicemail. She wasn't sure if she was using her grief as an excuse to stop seeing him, or whether her grief really did cause her to lose interest in him. She couldn't be bothered to sort it out in her own mind; she was having a hard time taking anything seriously. When she was small, Clare and Angela had taken her to an old-fashioned puppet show—more evidence of the good times—and Ruthie had loved it right up until the moment the puppeteers came out from behind the curtain and showed the children how they made the puppets move. Ruthie felt the same kind of disappointment now. Like she'd seen behind the scenes and had to pretend she didn't know life was just an illusion. Now she had to go on sitting politely through the whole show, waiting for it to end.

Clare gave Ruthie a look she knew well. It said something to the effect of —*Be careful now, don't turn out like your mother*.

Well, Ruthie thought, there was no arguing about that. She filled the kettle all the way to the brim.



After breakfast, Ruthie took out the garbage and walked to the grocery store, her grandmother's shopping list in the pocket of her shorts. She didn't have her driver's licence. Unlike Helen, whose parents taught her to drive in their Camry, she didn't have anyone to teach her. Clare had given up driving years ago on account of her back problems. Ruthie wondered, briefly, whether Corey might teach her. It was a hot and shadeless walk to the shops. Some of the neighbours still had their Christmas decorations out, snowmen and reindeer grinning maniacally in the heat. Rage rose up in Ruthie, as sudden and visceral as vomit, and she imagined tearing them down.

At the store, she lingered in the dairy aisle to cool off. She read through her grandmother's list: toothpaste, skim milk, bran cereal, minced beef, instant coffee. The store was crowded. People were dressed as though they were heading to the beach or to picnics or getting ready for New Year's Eve parties. They hurried about, grabbing pre-cut watermelon slices and enormous bags of chips. Ruthie had nowhere to be.

As she was comparing the price of skim milk, her phone vibrated with a call. She took it out of her pocket. Helen. Ruthie watched it vibrate until it went still. She knew that Helen—or Helena as she was now insisting on being called—would pester her about university offers and potential share houses. These conversations had become increasingly tense, especially since Ruthie had pulled out of Fiji. They should have been there now, drinking brightly coloured cocktails by swimming pools. Ruthie could have gone to Fiji, her grandmother had even encouraged her, but she couldn't bear the thought of trying to appear happy—or at least not desperately sad—for any extended period of time. Helena would not understand this, just as she would not understand that Ruthie could not do things such as go online to accept her offer into Sydney University or apply for a government loan, without feeling as though she would die of exhaustion.

When Ruthie had first told Helena that she was considering going to TAFE to study interior design, Helena said why not a university degree in visual arts? Why not architecture? Ruthie thought of neat clean lines upon a page, beautiful rooms arranged just as she wanted, the world shaped by her hands. But now that her mother was dead, and she'd seen behind the curtain, it seemed a great waste of energy to begin anything new. She remembered something Corey once said about no one learning anything at university they couldn't learn out in the real world. At the time it had seemed defensive but now she saw the truth of it—all parts of life were the same as any other. What she had now was all she would ever have, and the rest of her life would be a slow process of losing even that. She already had a job and her grandmother to take care of. Why should she spend the rest of her time studying when she could be reading and sleeping and walking in loops around the park? All of this was enough, more than enough. It was exhausting. She checked the list again and walked to the cereal aisle.

As she was putting bran flakes into her basket, Helena texted: *EMERGENCY. Call me*.

Ruthie's heart hammered as she pressed call. Helena answered after a single ring.

'What's wrong?'

'Have you accepted your offer yet?'

'You said it was an emergency. I thought something serious—'

'Are our lives not serious? Ruthie, we got into uni. We did it! This is everything we wanted. All you have to do is accept.'

Ruthie closed her eyes and leaned against a wall of Coco Pops. How could she explain? 'Things are different now.'

For a moment, Helena said nothing. In the background, Ruthie thought she heard the sound of the television, or maybe it was Mary and Tom talking. She pictured them drinking coffee in the garden or sitting around the table.

'Your mum would want you to live your life, Ruthie. She'd want you to be happy.'

A woman perused the muesli bars. Her toddler, a little girl, sat in the trolley, playing with a doll and talking to herself. Ruthie picked up her basket and continued down the aisle. Helena knew nothing of her mother. Why did she presume to know what Angela would have wanted?

'Do you want to talk—'

'Actually, Clare and I are about to head out. I'll call you later.'

'Just don't give up, Ruthie. Okay?'

'I have to go.'



When Ruthie returned home, Corey was mowing her grandmother's lawn. Ruthie stood by the front gate and watched him. His forearms were pink and glistening, the colour of raw salmon. He pushed the mower in steady straight lines. Silently, she walked past him and into the house.

Clare was in a flap, tearing open packets of chocolate digestive biscuits and setting plates out on a tray. She'd brought out the good plates, Ruthie noticed, the ones she never used when it was just the two of them. 'Here, take this to the table,' said Clare, thrusting the tray at Ruthie before she even had a chance to put the grocery bags down.

'What's he doing here?' asked Ruthie, putting the bags on the floor and taking the tray.

‘He came to see you, of course! And, well, we got to talking. I mentioned the lawn, and he said he had a mower in the ute. How about that!’

Ruthie set the plates and biscuits on the table and began to put the groceries away. Clare took trays of ice out of the freezer and smacked them against the sink.

When Corey knocked on the screen door, Ruthie opened it. He brought with him the smell of sweat and fresh grass. He smiled hopefully at her and brushed his boots against the welcome mat. His presence in her grandmother’s kitchen seemed slightly absurd. He was too large, too masculine, for the small frilly kitchen, with its doilies and serviette holders painted with flowers. ‘You’re all sorted now,’ he announced.

‘Sit down,’ said Clare, bringing a jug of iced water to the table. ‘You must be hot.’

‘I’m a bit grubby.’

‘Nonsense!’

He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and sat down, looking foolishly large in the dainty chair. ‘I’m happy to help out,’ he said. ‘Any time you need me.’

‘You’re too good!’ Clare handed him a glass of water. ‘It’s so nice to have a man about the house! Our family was cursed with too many women.’ She laughed, as though this was a great joke. How the presence of men excited her. Ruthie wanted to knock her backwards off the chair. Instead, she sat down and took a biscuit.

Clare showed Corey the pictures she’d saved from the album and told him stories from Ruthie’s childhood. The stories were more or less true, but they were selected to paint a picture that was entirely unreal. Clare told him of the time she’d taken Ruthie to the zoo and Ruthie had cried because she was scared of the reptiles. What Clare didn’t tell him was that Ruthie was actually crying because Angela had been sent away to a hospital where there was a serenity garden full of cigarette butts. Clare told him about the time she took Ruthie to a friend’s birthday party where all the children dressed up as fairies. She didn’t say that the birthday girl’s mum soon banned her daughter from playing with Ruthie because Angela had turned up at the school in a bad way and all the other mothers had seen it. Ruthie nibbled on her biscuit in silence. A part of her felt relieved by this rewriting of history. It was a gift to be rendered ordinary. But another part of her felt that something was being taken from her. Still, what did it matter? What did

any of it matter? Ruthie smiled and nodded and politely waited for the show to end.

Corey changed the batteries in the television remote and moved a pot plant to a sunnier position in the living room. Clare behaved as though these were Herculean tasks that neither Ruthie nor her could have managed without him. He beamed with his own usefulness and asked Ruthie if she'd like to go for a walk. Clare seemed momentarily put out by the prospect of losing this man-about-the-house but rallied by securing a promise that he would return soon.

Ruthie and Corey walked to the park and rested a moment beneath the shade of a camphor laurel tree. Corey took off his ridiculous straw Bunnings hat and told her that he missed her, that he knew she was going through a lot but that he wanted to help. She told him that he was sunburnt. He pressed a hand to his cheek. Ruthie looked at the dorky broad-brimmed hat with its adjustable string and put it back on his head. The phrase 'falling in love' came into her mind. It felt very true, this idea of falling, like it required little effort at all.



A few days later, Corey drove Ruthie to her shift at the Goddess Grove. It felt strange to kiss him goodbye in the ute, like they were playing at being a married couple. She arrived early enough to shower and change into her uniform before beginning her shift. She could have done these things at her grandmother's house but the Goddess Grove showers were forceful, and the hot water never ran out.

Ruthie made the shower as hot as she could bear and let the water pummel her back, the cubicle filling up with steam, before turning the hot water off and forcing herself to stand still beneath the cold stream until the tips of her ears went numb. She towelled herself dry, wiped the steam that had gathered on the mirror, and looked at herself. Her skin was pink, and the whites of her eyes seemed very bright. Friends of her grandmother always said Ruthie was the spitting image of Angela. She got dressed quickly. She'd learned not to use any of the products, not the shampoos nor body lotions, just in case Tiger turned up and smelled it on her and knew that she'd been using the guest facilities.



Later that afternoon, part way through Ruthie's shift, Tiger came into the store in a long flowing dress and sandals, like she'd just stepped off a cruise ship. Perhaps she had. She was the kind of person who would casually drop into conversation that she was flying to Sardinia on Saturday or visiting a friend in Istanbul. Ruthie glanced around the store. Everything was in order. She had restocked the shelves and decorated the new honey body butter display with beeswax candles and dried lavender. It was her favourite part of the job, the organising and decorating. There was something calming about it.

Tiger held out her arms and said Ruthie's name in a singsong voice, the second syllable stretching out languorously. It was not clear to Ruthie whether Tiger meant to hug her. The counter was between them. Unsure what to do, she stayed still and allowed Tiger to come to her. In the end, Tiger only took her hand. Her skin was cool and as soft as a child's.

'My favourite girl,' said Tiger. 'How are you holding up?'

'All right,' said Ruthie. 'Just getting through each day. I'm happy to be back here. Work is a good distraction, you know?' The words made her cringe. What a fool. Better to say nothing.

Tiger smiled and stroked her hand, an intimate gesture that Ruthie found awkward.

'So what brings you in?' asked Ruthie, again regretting her words. It wasn't as if Tiger, owner of the Goddess Grove, had to explain her presence in the place.

'Have a cup of tea with me,' said Tiger, finally releasing Ruthie's hand.

'What about the desk?' asked Ruthie, as Tiger began to walk to her small office in between the shop floor and the customer waiting area.

'We'll only be a minute. And we'll hear if anyone comes in.'

Ruthie had never been inside Tiger's office before. It was small and neat. On the shelf was a black-and-white photograph of Tiger on a beach with a man, both of them dressed head to toe in linen. Below the photo, a pot of devil's ivy, green leaves cascading down the wall. Tiger opened a small ceramic jar and scooped three teaspoons of its contents into a teapot. She told Ruthie to sit down while she went into the waiting room to get boiling water from the urn.

There were two chairs in Tiger's office—a white leather chair with gold wheels, and a small green velvet couch pressed up against the far wall. Ruthie brushed her pants and sat down on the couch. On Tiger's desk, beside the jar of tea, was a bonsai tree. Ruthie stared at its small, gnarled trunk and branches, its perfect tiny leaves. It reminded her of the Polly Pockets she'd loved as a child; a particular fascination and pleasure derived from viewing life in miniature—a dinner table no bigger than her fingernail, set with tiny plates and cutlery, a clock the size of an ant. She longed to go over to the desk and examine the bonsai up close, but she didn't want Tiger to return to find her hovering over her desk.

When Tiger came back into the office, she carried a tray upon which sat two earthenware cups and a steaming teapot. She placed the tray on the desk and turned the teapot three times. This, she said, laughing, was an old wives' tale she'd picked up on one of her trips abroad, but still she was in the habit of doing it. 'I like the ritual of it,' she said. 'The sense of ceremony.' She poured the tea. It smelled of peppermint and fennel. Ruthie burned her lip and smiled. It was still unclear to her why she was in the room.

'Last year was hard,' said Tiger, sitting back in the white chair. 'But it's a new year.'

'Yes,' said Ruthie.

'I care for you. We're a family here. A sisterhood.'

'Yes. Thank you.'

'When I opened the Goddess Grove, part of what I wanted to do was empower young women like yourself. I have a vision, and I want to share it.'

Ruthie nodded. Was Tiger going to offer her a promotion? Or was this her idea of a heart-to-heart? Did she want Ruthie to burst into tears over the death of her mother so that she could display her impressive empathy? Ruthie knew from experience with certain teachers and school chaplains and police officers that some people wanted pain divulged to them, that it fed a belief of themselves as knowing and wise and kind. But Tiger was her boss. Ruthie did not want her to think she was not coping. The teacup did not have a handle, and it was burning her fingers, but she had nowhere to put it down. 'I'm grateful,' Ruthie said.

'And I'm grateful for you.' Tiger leaned forward so that her silver hair brushed against her bare arms. 'But with the high cost of living, business

has been tough. People stop investing in their health. It's short-sighted but that's the way it is.'

It took Ruthie a moment to work out what Tiger was saying. 'You aren't closing the store, are you?'

Tiger smiled. 'No, but we must adapt. As of next week, I can only offer you weekends.'

Horribly, Ruthie felt herself begin to cry. Her throat closed and her eyes filled with tears. It came on so suddenly it frightened her, like she wasn't in control of her own body. Did Tiger know about her illicit use of staff facilities and the occasional stickiness of her fingers? 'Sorry,' said Ruthie, her breaths coming in great shudders. 'I'm so sorry.'

Tiger took the tea from Ruthie and placed it on the desk. She leaned forward and gripped both of Ruthie's hands. 'Tell me, what are you afraid of?'

'It's not that,' Ruthie said. 'I guess I just, like, need this job. Sorry.'

'What are you afraid of?'

Ruthie wanted to wipe her eyes, but she couldn't, not with Tiger holding her hands.

'What are you afraid of?'

'I don't know, everything is just very hard right now.'

'You are afraid of change.'

Ruthie nodded.

Tiger launched into a story about how change was nothing to fear. She told Ruthie again of how she travelled to India to heal and find herself after her mother's death. 'It was the best thing that ever happened to me,' she said. 'If it hadn't been for that, I wouldn't have all this. I know that you're hurting now, but you will get through it. You will be stronger for it.'

Ruthie didn't want to be stronger. The idea sickened her. She thought of that night in the forest with Helena. The feeling, deep in her bones, that she'd killed her mother, that she'd willed it into being. The panic she felt that night was still there, simmering beneath the surface of her skin. She tried to imagine that Tiger's hands were Helena's, leading her out of the forest—*You can't stay here. I'm taking you home*.

'There were times when I couldn't see anything outside of my own fear,' said Tiger. 'Times when it all but ate me up. So I would imagine that I was a different person. A fearless fearsome person. That's why I named myself Tiger.' She opened her desk drawer and placed something small and hard in

Ruthie's hand. It was a tiger's eye gemstone, smooth and cool. On the back of it, a price tag, that had mostly been removed.

'Thank you,' said Ruthie.

'Everything happens for a reason,' said Tiger. 'Everything is just as it was meant to be. You are right where you are supposed to be.'



In the months that followed, Ruthie got a second job at a bakery. She sliced bread and told customers about specials and placed finger buns and pies into paper bags. She did not accept her offer into university and Helena eventually stopped bothering her about it. The summer was very hot. Clare sat by the fan and complained about her swollen joints and the flies. Sometimes, Ruthie walked to the grocery store just to stand in the cool aisles without buying anything. Corey taught her to drive. On one of their drives, she asked him how bonsais work, and he explained that the trees are confined to pots so that they never have the chance to grow. The roots and crown are regularly pruned and sometimes wire is used to twist the branches into particular shapes. He promised to buy her one and said that he loved her. Ruthie kept the tiger's eye gemstone on her dresser and got into the habit of brushing her fingers over it every time she passed by. She didn't really believe it would do anything but once she started, she couldn't stop. Whenever the panic rose up inside her—usually at night, when she was trying to sleep—she remembered what Tiger said about becoming a different person and she imagined climbing out of bed and shedding herself, as painlessly and completely as a snake shed its skin. She would watch this new version of herself, naked and wet and glistening, pause at the bedroom door, looking back just once at the unmade bed and her old crumpled self, before turning and walking silently out into the night.

ACT TWO

What angel wakes me from my flow'ry bed?

AT SYDNEY UNIVERSITY I WAS alone and acutely aware of my aloneness. Ruthie had abandoned me to her grief. It angered me and the fact that it was unfair to feel this way only angered me further. Still, whenever I saw her, it was pity I felt. Her life was closing in around her, whereas mine was opening up—or at least it would be just as soon as it got started. The friendships I made at university were fleeting and light, connections forged through group assignments and the seating arrangements of tutorial rooms. Occasionally, I was invited out to trivia nights or to guest lectures by travelling academics, but the stress of socialising with people I didn't know very well and wanted badly to impress was so great that I'd return home to my parents' house and lie on my bedroom floor in a fugue state for hours before dragging myself to bed. It seemed to me that my peers had emerged from high school as fully-fledged human beings with set opinions and tastes and a solid understanding of how to be, whereas I felt less certain than ever, my personality a black hole collapsing in on itself—how did I take my coffee? What was my perspective on postmodern literature? Would I describe myself as a social democrat or a democratic socialist? I did not know, and I hated myself for not knowing.

I spent a great deal of my first few months at university walking alone through the grounds listening to Taylor Swift's *Fearless* album and Phillip Adams's radio programs and thinking about the things my peers had said in class and the things that I had failed to say. If someone had said something particularly intelligent or funny, I would imagine that I had said it,

replaying the whole scene in my mind, only with me as the star. In these daydreams, I would wear my charisma and intelligence so casually, so effortlessly, leaning back in my chair and saying things like: *Maybe the appeal of Tom Ripley is that he works so hard to become a different person and, unlike the rest of us, he actually pulls it off. I mean, good on him. Right?* This was such a pleasurable activity that on a number of occasions I realised too late that I was actually saying my lines out loud, and if anyone was observing me, they might think that I was strange, and not in the cool way we all coveted.

I worked diligently on my essays and mostly got distinctions and sometimes high distinctions—a few mortifying credits. When I heard my peers talk about how they had completed their work in between shifts at the bar or hungover at their friend's place, I felt deeply ashamed. When I was studying, my mum brought me cups of tea, and my dad still read over my essays before I handed them in. If I had a presentation, I'd rehearse it in front of them in the living room and they'd applaud when I finished.

My father had attended the same university. He told me stories of jumping the fence at the rugby game between the Wallabies and the Springboks to protest apartheid, and the anti-Vietnam War rallies on the front lawn of the university. Meanwhile, I sat alone on the very same lawn eating a sandwich I'd packed the night before, furious at myself for letting another class pass without working up the nerve to speak to anyone.

My greatest shame was that I missed high school. I missed Ruthie and my teachers. I missed being thought of as smart. I missed being thought of at all. In an attempt to propel myself forward into adulthood, I got a part-time job at a newsagency on campus. It was my first job since that failed stint at Donut King. Again, I experienced the dread of staring down the barrel of an eight-hour shift. I thought that it would be cool working at the university, but it only tainted my experience of the place. In my mind, it became hard to separate *The Odyssey* and *The Faerie Queene* from the price of Mars bars. All of it was coated in a thick layer of unease. Once, my English tutor came in to buy a newspaper and we performed the whole transaction without him recognising me at all.

On my breaks, I'd sit in the food court by myself and eat chocolate and hope that no one would notice me and hope that they would. What was I missing? For years Ruthie and I had dreamed about life after school and I couldn't believe that this was it: going to class, going to work, returning

home to sleep in my childhood bed. I developed a list of things I was already too old for. I was too old to be living with my parents, too old to be a virgin, too old not to have read anything by Virginia Woolf, and too old to be so painfully, debilitatingly shy. It was a new and particular kind of shame. How had this happened? At what point had I gone from dreaming of the future to it passing me by? It was like I'd missed the turnoff to my own life. I could only see it in the rear-vision mirror, slipping further and further behind me.

It was around this time that my dreaming first became a problem, according to my parents. I'd spend whole weekends lying in bed letting fantasies flow through me. There were the usual dreams about sex and love and being admired by my peers, and some more obscure ones, for example: an affair with my poetry professor (predictable enough) only I was an older woman telling the story decades after it had ended. In the dream, I was Tiger, sitting in my kitchen surrounded by glamorous friends, we were drinking, smoking, sucking oysters straight from the shell, all the while telling stories from our outrageous youth. At the end of my story, I would take a small book off my vast bookcase and tell everyone how the professor had written these poems just for me, and then we would all laugh and sigh knowingly, because wasn't I just the kind of woman poets would write about, wasn't that just so me?

My mum asked if I was depressed. I started placing my laptop on the bed so that if my parents happened to pass my room and found me dreaming, I could claim to have fallen asleep while studying. My dad bought me iron tablets from the chemist. My brother was cajoled into inviting me out with his friends, which would have been mortifying if I'd agreed because they were still in high school. I couldn't explain my dreaming to my family because I barely understood it myself. Having no insight into the workings of other people's minds, how did I know it wasn't normal to plan on the train ride home which of my fantasies I'd dip into later that evening? All right, so I suspected it wasn't normal, but without my fantasies I had nothing to look forward to, no relief from the drudgery of my newly formed adult life. The version of me in my dreams, though she took many forms—sometimes appearing as Tiger or Ruthie or me but with clearer skin and shinier hair—felt more real to me than my waking self. It was as if this true self was trapped so deep inside me, she had no way of breaking out into the

real world. It was only in my dreams that I could inhabit her, at least for a while.

Needless to say, I didn't explain any of this to the university counsellor I agreed to see as a way of placating my parents (and because I thought that having a story about going to therapy would make me appear interesting and complicated). She would have thought I was mad. I told the counsellor that I slept a lot because my life made me tired. She asked me when I first noticed this pattern, and I thought back to those times in high school when I visited the university library in the hope that someone older and cooler would pluck me out of obscurity and set me down in my beautiful true life. Now I was older but no cooler and no one had arrived. I told her that I didn't remember. She suggested that I write my dreams down as a way to get them out of my head. I started a diary and filled up two exercise books in one weekend, but when I read them over, I was so disgusted with myself I vowed never to do it again. Eventually, she suggested that I limit my dreaming to one hour each night, and that I get into the habit of exercising.

I happened to mention this last part to my mum. Thus began our weekly ritual of playing tennis on Thursday nights down at the local courts. My mum and brother, who were very good players, took to coaching my dad and me, fixing our grips and serves, telling us where to stand. At first, all of this occurred very much against my will, but after a while I came to enjoy these games. I liked the cold brightness of the courts at night, and the *thwack* of the ball against the racquet when you hit it just right.

Eventually, James got the shits with these family tennis tournaments and went off to play with his friends. I invited Ruthie to take his place. My mum gave her an old racquet. Ruthie had never played, but as with most athletic endeavours, she took to it irritatingly quickly. Before long, she and I were a competitive match-up: I had the advantage of height and, thanks to my mother, a well-honed serve, while Ruthie was fast and aggressive with a ferocious volley. Sometimes my parents would claim tiredness and retire to the edge of the court so we could play by ourselves. Occasionally, James would saunter over from another court and offer us advice. The better players we became, the more fun it was, and the more I found myself thinking of ways to defeat her. After our allotted hour on the court, the five of us would sit at the nearby picnic tables drinking from our water bottles and watching the other games. My mum would tell us how good we were getting. Ruthie would hand around cake from the bakery where she worked,

and my dad would say that this was his favourite part of tennis. I think it pleased Ruthie to be around my family, to be able to offer them something.



It wasn't until second semester that I met Will. It is a cliché to say that he changed my life, just as it is a cliché to say that any one person made your dreams come true, but both these things happened, because for the first time in my life I felt my real self—the one trapped so deeply and completely inside me—take her first breath in the real world.

Will was not obviously handsome. If I'd seen a photograph of him in a crowd, I would have been vaguely disappointed to learn that the man with thinning hair and pale forearms and small blunt hands would become the great love of my life. But in the flesh, he was something else. His confidence—the sheer force of his charisma—was unsettling. It made you doubt your own powers of perception: was this not in fact Adonis before you? Were you simply too dense to comprehend true perfection when it graced you with its earthly presence in your Tuesday afternoon English tutorial? Also, he had an accent. It was a posh British accent that he would simultaneously play up and lightly mock, adding 'golly' and 'bugger' and 'terribly', whenever he spoke in class—which was often—then smile apologetically, as though he couldn't help such foppish turns of phrase despite knowing how ridiculous they (and the entire British class system of which he was a beneficiary) were. *By golly, I love a post-structuralist critique as much as anyone, but her writing is so terribly dull. It really is a bugger of a thing to get through*.

Our Tuesday afternoon class on feminism and fairy tales took place in one of the nicer rooms in the Woolley Building. There were large windows and views of pine trees. Will was one of only three men. The whole class loved him. It was well known that he worked part-time at the British Consulate in Sydney (which was far more glamorous than our jobs at newsagencies and call centres) and he was always telling funny stories about the lost passports and sham marriages of his countrymen. During class discussions, he was the first to point out the dark and violent malevolence of the male characters—Bluebeard's secret chamber, the beast's kidnapping of Belle, the prince's rape of the comatose princess—as

though he couldn't believe such things went on. His outrage was endearing, wholesome.

I sat beside the tutor and saw Will's name in all its glory on her roll. William Kingston-Weaver. What's in a name? A king, apparently. Didn't he share his name with the future king of England? William Kingston-Weaver: what double-barrelled gravitas, what trochaic power—the syllables sharp in my mouth before slipping easily down my throat, melting into me. When I walked around campus, I said his name under my breath like a chant.

It wasn't as if I was obsessed with him. But because he featured so heavily in my dreams, I'd experience a surge of adrenaline whenever I saw him on campus. I had to remind myself that he was a real person and had not sprung forth from me. In fact, I doubted very much that he was aware of my existence.

Then one day, he arrived late to class and sat beside me. It was the only free chair in the room. I had a plastic water bottle on the table and, as the tutor waxed lyrical about AS Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, he unscrewed the little blue plastic lid and took a great gulp. Well! What was I to make of this? I went on staring hard at the tutor as she discussed the power dynamics at play in a love affair between two fictional Victorian poets and contemplated this unexpected development—this explosive new intimacy that had just taken place without warning in the quiet dullness of the classroom. He had drunk from my water bottle. My saliva was now in his mouth. Of course, the obvious thing to do was nothing. Quietly cede the water bottle to him, pretend it was never mine in the first place. But in my terror, I made the perplexing decision to pick up the water bottle, drink from it as casually as possible, and place it on the other side of the desk where he couldn't get to it. It was his mistake after all; he was the one who had transgressed my boundaries. Perhaps it was a move. Perhaps I was expected to play along.

He looked at me—frowning, puzzled—then down into his backpack that was unzipped and gaping on the floor between us. He bowed before me so that I had a view of his dark hair and the pale skin of his bald spot as he pulled out an identical bottle.

'Oh golly,' he whispered. 'I'm terribly sorry. I thought it was mine.' He ran his hand through his hair. 'It's been a rough morning.'

I laughed in the soft maniacal way I do when I'm nervous and gave a slight wave of my hand to suggest that I was unbothered by the casual

sharing of bodily fluids between strangers. He looked at my drink bottle and made a kind of grimace, his teeth straight and very white. We both went back to listening to the tutor. I nodded every now and then to show that I agreed with what she was saying about Byatt's allusions to Rapunzel highlighting themes of sexual repression—as if rehashing an old story was interesting or clever—but my sense of shame grew heavier with each moment, pinning me to the hard plastic chair. William Kingston-Weaver had looked upon me with disgust. I thought about how I might die. Simply collapse onto the floor—through the floor—and ever so quietly cease to exist. And why had I laughed at him when he mentioned his rough morning? What kind of monster was I?

The class ended without us exchanging any further words or fluids.

The actors are at hand

WHEN I DISCOVERED THAT WILL was to star in a production of *Hamlet* in the small theatre on campus, I immediately bought two tickets and cajoled Ruthie into accompanying me. I hoped that she would glimpse university life. Not the friendless purgatory of my experience, but the true life—the one we had dreamed of in high school. If I could prove to her that it was still possible, she might enrol the following year. She might come back to me.

The Cellar Theatre was underground and offered very little oxygen to the audience. Rows of chairs faced a small blank stage. Two pedestal fans on either side of the chairs churned up the hot air. When Ruthie and I entered, Joy Division was playing quietly through the speakers, Ian Curtis's melancholic baritone filling the small space. We were the first to arrive. Earlier, I'd taken Ruthie to dinner at a Thai place in Glebe, and the whole time I'd been nervous about being late. I now saw that this was a mistake; it was far worse to be the first here. One of Will's friends—a gawky guy who habitually dressed as a beat poet—checked our tickets and informed us in a hurried voice that the play wouldn't start for another twenty minutes.

Ruthie took it all in but said nothing. We chose our seats and I tried to look relaxed, to show Ruthie that unpretentious but quality art on a weeknight was the kind of thing she could expect if she joined me in the student life. She wiped her brow. We were both sweating badly. Eventually, other people began to arrive. A few of them I recognised from classes. I smiled briefly in their direction, mostly to display for Ruthie the sense of community on offer at university. There were older people too, clearly relatives of the actors. One woman pulled a Japanese hand fan from her

purse. A student theatre veteran, obviously. I found the presence of parents both endearing and baffling. I had thought that my peers were beyond the need for parental support and recognition. It was exhausting, this constant calculating and recalculating of how to be. ‘Isn’t this great?’ I said to Ruthie.

‘Do you have any water?’ she asked.

I checked my handbag even though I knew I didn’t have any. I don’t know why I performed this futile action, except that I was conscious of how I was perceived by the people sitting near us. It was possible that they were Will’s friends. The woman with the fan could be his mother, visiting from the UK. I smiled in her direction, just in case.

While we waited for the show to begin, I told Ruthie that in the writing of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare invented more words and phrases than he had done in any of his other plays. ‘It’s almost like he had to create an entirely new language to tell his story,’ I said, pleased with the way this sounded.

‘Are you looking for someone?’ she asked.

‘What?’

‘Oh, I just thought … You keep looking around.’

We went back to sitting quietly.

Then the house lights went dark, the curtains parted, and the play began.

The first thing I noticed was that Will was wearing black eyeliner. It made him look punk, poetic, secure in his masculinity, perhaps a little dangerous. I loved it. The next thing I noticed—and this came to me slowly, growing keener with each scene, like an image coming into focus—was that the play was good. Although I hadn’t realised it until now, I’d been anxious that it would be amateurish, that the actors would overperform, that we, the audience, would steal glances at our watches and endure the excruciating silence of someone forgetting their lines. But I settled back in my seat the way you can when you are in the hands of professionals. Gertrude was played by a woman in my philosophy class. I had always thought her rather dull, showing up to tutorials chewing gum and wearing exercise clothes. She took neat notes but never said much. The only question she ever asked was, *Is this going to be in the exam?* Now, transformed into the Queen of Denmark, she was calculated, sensuous, outwardly charming but with a hint of desperation, morally weak. Ophelia wasn’t even an arts student. I had seen her in biology lectures drawing diagrams of mitochondria while I was waiting for my history class to begin. How was it then that she had the

depth of imagination to express despair so exquisitely? And Will. The great appeal of seeing this play was that I could stare at him for a prolonged period of time in the socially acceptable context of the theatre. But the man I'd fantasised about disappeared, and from him emerged the poor tortured Prince of Denmark, half-wild with rage and grief, at war with himself, desperate to be a man of action, at times comically—tragically—self-aware. Even the beat poet—the director, it turns out—made for a sensible Horatio, his quiet steadiness and gentle bewilderment the perfect foil for Hamlet's dissent. I was glad at their success. But also, in my chest, a hard knot of jealousy. Again, I had the feeling of having missed a crucial stage in my development. When and where had my peers learned to make art—to put it out into the world—and why hadn't I? Wasn't that the question?

By the time everyone lay dead on the stage, stabbed or poisoned, and poor Horatio and Fortinbras were left to clean up the mess, the air in the small theatre had shifted. We all sat there, transfixed in the silence, and even though we could see the actors breathing beneath gouts of fake blood and hear the distant hum of the vacuum cleaner on the floor above us, we felt it—the cool cathartic release of the play. This was the potent art—the rough magic—this vast feeling that lifted us out of ourselves. We clapped and cheered, and the actors took their bows. Out of nothing, they had created this. In the strange blue light of the stage, they appeared angelic, holy.

Ruthie didn't say much as we left the theatre. Her eyes were bloodshot, and I suspected she'd been crying. It was a good sign. She'd been moved by the play.

'Shall we go for a drink?' I asked.

She looked at the time. 'When do the buses stop running?'

'I'll pay for a taxi.' I took her arm and moved her towards the small footbridge that extended over Parramatta Road. We'd just witnessed the greatest play in the English language—a profound exploration of the depths of the human psyche—deftly handled by our peers—our peers! And here was Ruthie, worried about the bus timetable.

The actors always celebrated their performances at a pub on St Johns Road. I knew this because I'd stalked Will on Facebook often enough.

Ruthie and I found a table outside, beneath the green umbrellas and fairy lights. The pub was relatively quiet given it was late on a week night. The

only other people sitting outside were two young men—students, probably—silently devouring giant chicken schnitzels.

As I stood in the queue to order a bottle of wine, I watched Ruthie sitting at our table. She was staring vacantly into the distance, like she'd sunk very deeply into her own mind. It had been just over a year since her mother died. For the most part, Ruthie seemed to have returned to her old self, but there were moments like this, when she appeared so distant, that I was seized by the fear that I might lose her, that I'd wake up one day and find her gone from my life.

When I set the wine down on the table, she smiled and became herself again. I relaxed. I poured her a glass, and she sniffed it suspiciously. She still only drank Bacardi Breezers and other brightly coloured drinks that usually came with pieces of fruit floating in them. The wine truly did taste terrible, but I couldn't bear the thought of the actors seeing me with a garish drink.

'So,' I said, 'it's nice to be out.'

'Yeah.' She looked around at the wide road and the terrace houses.

No sign of the actors just yet. I took another sip of wine, trying not to grimace at the vinegary taste. 'What are your plans?'

'My plans?'

'You know, what are you up to this week?'

Ruthie shrugged. 'I'm working a fair bit.'

'The bakery?'

'And the Goddess Grove.'

'How's Tiger?'

Ruthie made a face I couldn't decipher. 'She invited me to lunch last weekend. You should see her place. It's massive. With views of the harbour.'

I was taken aback by this. Here I was, worried about Ruthie cooped up in her grandmother's house when she was off lunching with the glamorous Tiger. I pictured the two of them lounging together on Tiger's balcony, the harbour shimmering below them. 'That's so nice,' I said. 'I didn't know you two were friends. Outside of work, that is.'

Again Ruthie shrugged. 'We've been through some … similar experiences.'

'Like what?'

'Just … hardships.'

Hardships? I didn't like the way she said this, as though it wasn't worth explaining the concept to someone as shrouded in good fortune as me. Hadn't I known suffering? I considered telling her that I was in therapy, which wasn't strictly true, because I'd used up my six sessions with the university counsellor some months earlier.

'Tiger lost her mother too,' said Ruthie.

'Oh nice. I mean, not nice, obviously. But good you two can connect.'

'Yeah,' said Ruthie. 'She's actually really smart about that stuff.'

I thought about Ruthie's vacant stare that disturbed me so much. I leaned towards her. 'You know you can talk to me …'

The actors arrived. I sensed them as an onslaught of energy before I saw them. They walked past us and congregated around a large table inside the pub. I could see them through the window. Claudius and Laertes dragged over more chairs. There were shouts about ordering jugs of beer and chips. They seemed to know the staff. A great deal of hugging and back-slapping occurred. Will slumped into a chair. He talked quietly but intently to Rosencrantz and Gertrude. He was still wearing the black eyeliner though it looked as though he'd showered. His dark hair was combed back, and he was dressed in a white T-shirt and jeans. He was so perfect, I wanted to cry.

'Do you want to go over there?' asked Ruthie, following my gaze.

I frowned, trying to give the impression that I was thinking it over, as though it were a real possibility. 'No,' I said. 'I want to catch up with you.'

She smiled. 'So how are you? How's uni?'

I told her about my classes. I did not tell her about the hours I spent alone in my bedroom with my fantasies. 'I'm thinking of moving out soon,' I said.

'Really?'

I had not been thinking about this. There was no way my shifts at the newsagency would cover rent in the inner city, and I didn't know anybody who would offer me a room in their share house. Besides, there was the humiliating fact that I would miss my parents too much. I'd just felt the need to say something dramatic, to rhetorically shake Ruthie out of her stagnation, to propel her into action. 'You still thinking of enrolling in uni next year?' I asked. 'We'd be in different classes of course, but we could hang out in between.'

Ruthie smiled vaguely. 'I'm getting pretty good training at the bakery. I'm doing a fair bit of the actual baking now. My lemon drizzle cake sold

out last week.'

Her lemon drizzle cake? Was she really going to abandon our dream—me—for a citrus dessert? Again, the fear of losing her gripped me.

'But you're so smart. And there's all this!' I gestured around at the students cradling their beers. 'We could do this together.'

'We *are* here together.'

'We could read under the jacaranda trees and have parties and see art! We could get a place of our own. Do you really want to be waking up at four in the morning to bake cakes? It's literally the kind of miserable existence women have been fighting against for generations.'

Ruthie pushed her glass away. 'Corey and I are thinking of doing a trip soon, actually. Once he's finished his apprenticeship, he'll be earning a bit more. Maybe Europe. You could come but … I guess you'll have classes.'

Corey.

God help me.

I'd rather lose her to a lemon drizzle cake than that man.

By this point, I'd met Corey on a number of occasions and found him to be so profoundly dull his presence was almost calming, like the white noise of a fan when you're trying to send yourself to sleep. The closest we'd ever come to an argument was in comparing the merits of city and suburban life. I, of course, argued in favour of the city as a place of culture and diversity. It was a position I took up uneasily, for I was only too aware of the relentless march of gentrification, the ugly luxury apartments and chain stores that were constantly springing up in Newtown and Surry Hills, like fungus after the rain. Still, I had the desperate feeling of having arrived at a buffet within half an hour of closing time. There wasn't much left and I was hungry. I'd take what I could get. Corey, on the other hand, couldn't understand what the city had that the suburbs didn't except for cockroaches, crime and exorbitant rent. He pointed out that he could drive ten minutes to either Coles or Woolworths, that there was a football oval behind his house (by which he meant his mother's house), and a strip of shops down the road with a chicken joint, a Subway and a petrol station. What more could anyone possibly want out of life?

I kept waiting for him to reveal his secret—some hidden talent or charm, a sense of humour—whatever it was that Ruthie saw in him that I didn't. Sometimes, I'd look around to see if anyone else noticed the incongruence

of their relationship. Surely other people wondered why my beautiful friend had chosen this man? But if they did, they never let on.

'Mind if I smoke?'

I looked up to find Will standing before me.

My mind was so used to conjuring him that it took me a beat to work out whether he was real or not. He slid a cigarette out of the box. Dangled it between his fingers. The box was decorated with a picture of a diseased eye being wrenched open with metal claws. *Smoking causes blindness*. The eye seemed to glare at me. An accusation? A warning? The unblinking eye of God? Will placed the box in his pocket and put the cigarette between his lips. His perfect parted lips. My sweet prince, here in the flesh!

'Actually, she's asthmatic,' said Ruthie, looking at me intently. 'Could you smoke somewhere else?'

'No!' I shrieked, rising out of my chair. 'It's totally fine. I love the smell of smoke.'

'No bother,' said Will, ignoring me completely and putting the cigarette behind his ear. 'I suppose I don't really need it.'

'You just do it to look cool?' asked Ruthie.

'It helps me relax. And, yes, I do think it makes me look cool.'

'It's all right,' said Ruthie. 'We're drinking this terrible wine for the same reason.'

Will laughed. Ruthie made Will laugh. Meanwhile, I was silent and half standing as though I'd been turned to stone midway through a set of squats.

'Your accent,' said Ruthie. 'It wasn't just for the play?'

'I'm from London, originally. On a student visa. I'm studying English.'

'They don't teach that in England?'

He laughed again. 'Sure, they do. But I wanted to travel, see the world, you know? I hate doing what's expected of me.'

'And so you're here.'

'And so I'm here.'

Ruthie had learned more about him in a few minutes than I had in several weeks. It was completely unbearable. Do something! Say something! Fucking anything!

'I have to go to the bathroom,' I announced.

My face grew hot, and I knew that I was blushing. Will probably thought I'd wet my pants. I felt him move aside to let me pass.

In the bathroom, I splashed water on my face. If only my blushing were confined to my cheeks, it might look attractive, enlivening, the blush of youth. Instead, it came out as angry blotches on my chest, neck and forehead. The skin around my lips looked pale. I sniffed my armpits. Fear gave me a distinctive scent—sharp and pungent. I pressed my wet hands into the back of my neck and breathed deeply. How was it that Ruthie found her spark in the presence of Will? I had not told her about my little crush on him, so it was not possible—was it?—that she was doing this to spite me. Perhaps the universe merely conspired to mock me.

The black-and-white walls of the bathroom were covered in so much graffiti that I could only imagine it was condoned, nay, encouraged by management to create an edgy vibe (is nothing, not even the defacement of public spaces, sacred anymore?). On the wall above me, scrawled in silver pen: *To thine own self be true*. No doubt the handy work of one of the actors. Beneath this, someone had written *toxic individualism* and a sad face with crosses for eyes. I looked at myself in the grubby mirror. The redness had begun to recede. I was wearing my best outfit: a purple tie-dyed dress that had once belonged to my mother, and my brown Jesus sandals with the three buckles around each ankle. I dragged my fingers through my hair and dried my face. The dim lighting of the bathroom was almost flattering. All was not lost. So what if Ruthie had exchanged a few words with him? She already had a boyfriend. The dazzling effervescent Corey. It was ludicrous that I was in here while they were out there. What the fuck was I doing? I glanced once more at the silver words shining down on me like fate itself and rushed out of the bathroom. Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more.

Will was sitting at the table talking to Ruthie. She had her hands folded in front of her and was nodding at whatever he was saying. I did not stop to consider my approach. Sheer momentum carried me outside.

‘I was just telling Will how much we enjoyed the play,’ said Ruthie.

‘Thanks for coming,’ said Will. ‘It was our first night so don’t think too poorly of us. We’ll get better—’

‘I thought it was brilliant,’ I said, perhaps a little breathlessly.

‘Oh, thanks,’ said Will. ‘Hey, don’t we have a class together?’

He clearly did not remember the water bottle incident. Not to worry, I’d only thought about it seven thousand times a day since it occurred. I tilted my head and looked at him. ‘Umm, I think so. Maybe English?’

‘Cool,’ said Will. Then, turning to Ruthie: ‘And what about you? Are you an English student too?’

‘I’m not a student of anything,’ said Ruthie. ‘She’s the smart one.’

‘That’s not—’ I began.

‘She was the smartest girl in our whole school,’ said Ruthie.

‘Is that so?’

‘What were you saying about *Hamlet*?’ asked Ruthie, looking at me. ‘About the made-up words.’

I repeated for Will my theory that Shakespeare had to basically create a new language to write *Hamlet*.

‘That’s cool,’ said Will. ‘I like that.’

How I adored Ruthie. So what if she was going to abandon me to go gallivanting around Europe with Corey—*Corey*, who didn’t even like art, who openly described himself as ‘outdoorsy’, and who wouldn’t even try an Italian BMT from Subway because he was worried that the salami would be too spicy? Right now, when I needed her, Ruthie was a true friend.

Will talked about the play—his preparations and worries and hopes. Ruthie and I chimed in every now and then with a question, but he was an easy talker and required very little prompting. Every now and then he took the cigarette out from behind his ear and twirled it through his fingers. I was afraid that he would remember his reason for coming outside and get up to leave. But he went on sitting there talking. I remembered something my high school English teacher told me about praise meaning more when it was specific. In this vein, I told him that my favourite part of the play was his speech—*O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!*—because he captured so powerfully the moment Hamlet’s self-disgust and indecision gave way to action, and isn’t that the whole crux of the play? ‘You were just so desperate for something real,’ I said. ‘A way out of your own head. I really felt that.’

‘Wow. Thanks.’ He leaned closer. ‘That’s just … Wow.’

‘She loves theatre,’ said Ruthie.

‘Why don’t you join the dramatic society?’ Will asked.

‘Oh, I’m no actor.’

‘It’s not just acting. There’s stage-managing and set design and writing. We always need smart people.’

I sipped my wine, chuffed that he thought of me as smart. He was looking at me with wide, slightly bloodshot eyes, resting his face in his

hands.

‘Yeah, maybe,’ I said. ‘I’ll think about it.’

He smiled, and my stomach flipped.

‘What’s your name again?’

‘Helena.’

‘Like the dream?’

‘What?’ I felt my face grow hot again. How could he know of my dreams? Was it possible we both dreamed each other into existence?

‘You know,’ he said, ‘*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.’



As I lay in bed that night, I turned the evening over in my mind. It felt like trying on a new dress, silky and soft to the touch. I examined it from every angle. This was the first time my real life inspired my dreams. These two parts of me, my dream self and I, folding in on each other. I was beautiful and whole.

We will meet, and there we may rehearse most obscenely and courageously

OBVIOUSLY, I JOINED THE DRAMATIC SOCIETY, where I quickly gained a reputation for being helpful and perpetually available for whatever behind-the-scenes work needed doing. I painted sets, stacked chairs, worked front of house, and searched op shops for costumes and props. The few times I allowed myself to be coaxed onto the stage—as a minor conspirator in *Julius Caesar* and an anonymous member of an angry mob in a dystopian drama written by a third-year student—I became so nervous in the weeks leading up to opening night that I could barely sleep. I was far more comfortable zipping up other people's costumes in the dressing room or sweeping the stage at the end of a performance. People always said how reliable I was.

The society, much like my primary school netball team, gave me something to belong to. No one could accuse me of being friendless when I spent my days in a basement with a dozen students discussing theatre of the absurd. The fact that William Kingston-Weaver was one of these students—well, wasn't that such stuff as dreams are made on? And though I now had more fodder for my fantasies than ever before, I found myself dreaming less. It became easy to limit myself to an hour each day. I was so busy with rehearsals and meetings that I barely had time for it. There was only one problem—not even a problem really, a slight irritation, a niggle in the soul: I was surrounded by artists and yet I was not one myself. I was helpful and reliable and hardworking and generous. But I was not an artist. Whenever

we drank at the pub after a show, I felt the joy of the actors—the euphoric buzz of creation. I tried to absorb it by simply existing in their orbit.

I did, however, understand certain artistic temperaments. Like clockwork, Will would be supremely confident in the show until two days beforehand, at which point, everything he loved about it would suddenly appear ludicrous to him. He'd fly into a panic and imagine himself the laughing-stock of the university. I became the person he'd call at these moments simply because I was always around. We'd meet at a cafe on campus or at his share house in Glebe, and he would tell me why none of it was going to work and how he couldn't believe he was only realising it now when it was too late. I listened and soothed. I bought him beer and chips. *Everything is going to be all right*, I would tell him. *This is the process. Trust in the process*. He wondered aloud what he would do without me.



In April, in my second year at university, Felix, the beat poet director of *Hamlet* and Will's housemate, tried his hand at writing a play. The result was a three-act meditation on existentialism set in a psychiatric hospital. The whole gist of it was that the patients were suicidal for a range of understandable reasons, such as the climate catastrophe and the endless drudgery of late capitalism, and there was nothing the doctors could do to convince them that there was any good reason to go on living. Felix was a philosophy student, and the play was packed full of interesting conversations about happiness and purpose and the human condition. The only problem was that nothing happened, and I felt sure that by act two the audience would also feel that there was no good reason to go on living. When I said this to Will as we were walking across campus one evening, he laughed and said I was funny. The compliment had barely registered before he stopped and turned to me, his lovely forehead creased. 'That's what the play needs,' he said. 'Some humour. Why don't you take a look at the script?'

'You think Felix will mind?'

Will was already unzipping his backpack and handing me the script.

The white pages stirred in the breeze.

For the next week, the script was all that I thought about. I drafted and redrafted it. I made my parents listen to it. I put more effort into it than any

of my actual work for my actual classes. I dreamed about it. I had nightmares about it.

By the time I was done, I'd not only added jokes but an entirely new plotline. In my version, a young doctor becomes so convinced of the doomed nature of humankind after talking to his patients that he becomes homicidal, and the rest of the play unfolds like a thriller. I also added a little romance between a nurse and a patient.

The night I emailed it to Will, I thought I might be sick. I sat at my desk for ages refreshing my emails to see if he had responded and checking Facebook to see why he hadn't. It was all quiet on both fronts. Eventually, I went for a walk around the block and thought about how, if I was hit by a car at that moment, it would be both an immense relief and a great tragedy. I might die not knowing that I was a good writer. Alternatively, I might be spared the shame of having the love of my life realise that I was a talentless loser. It really could go either way.

For days he made me wait. I'd begun to think that my script was so dreadful he was feigning amnesia, and we'd both live out the rest of our lives pretending I'd never sent it. Was it too late to pretend I'd written it as a joke?

It wasn't until the next meeting of the dramatic society that Will announced his support for my script. I was so stunned I was barely aware of the turmoil this caused. Felix stalked off. People made speeches about democratic processes. Will had his supporters too. If the society was to have a future, they argued, we couldn't be boring audiences to death.

Will liked the script.

My script.

For some weeks, the dramatic society remained ruptured. There was even a small article about it in the student paper. No names were mentioned but it was sympathetic to me. My writing was described as lively. I cut it out and pasted it in an old diary. Even now, when I'm sad, I look back at the yellowing paper, and it makes me feel better.

Eventually, Felix came around. He sent me a long email one night saying that although I'd gone about it all wrong, he could see that my version of the play had some merits and that he was prepared to move forward for the sake of the society.

Felix and I began working on the script together. We'd communicate over email or else meet up in the library. Despite my awkwardness and his

lingering resentment, writing together became an enjoyable experience. I found I liked Felix. He was smart and neurotic and we'd read a lot of the same books. He, too, had been unpopular at high school but unlike me he wore this as a badge of honour, proof of his intelligence and sophistication.

We finished the final script in the library one night. In the end, we kept the existential dread and the homicidal young doctor. We condensed some of the lengthier conversations and cut the romance between the nurse and the patient as it could be read as condoning an exploitative relationship. It was philosophical but fun. I printed it out on clean white paper in the student copy centre, the pages warm in my hands.

'We have to celebrate,' said Felix, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his T-shirt.

I agreed even though I felt pleasurably tired, like I could sleep for a very long time.

We went to the pub on St Johns Road. It was strange to be there, just the two of us. Felix ordered us schooners (I had by this point learned that it was cooler to drink beer than wine, though I still didn't really like the taste of either) and we sat outside beneath the green umbrellas. I thought about the night I saw Will as Hamlet. Back then he'd been a stranger. Now we were an indisputable part of each other's lives. I sipped my beer and marvelled at how generous life could be. The evening darkened and the fairy lights came on. Everything around me looked soft and lovely in the honeyed glow.

Felix kissed me. It came as a surprise. One minute I was looking at the lights and the next he was closing in. The perfect ease I'd been feeling a moment ago—that sense of harmony and goodness—leaked away. My body stiffened. I smelled the beer on his breath; felt the tickle of the moustache he was attempting to grow. I closed my eyes.

In the dramatic society, people were always hooking up with each other. It was the source of many jokes and the occasional fight. All of which is to say that Felix kissing me was no big deal. Not really. I liked him well enough and was glad that the rift between us was healed. It didn't seem right to embarrass him again. I placed my hand on his knee. Obviously, I thought of Will. I imagined him standing in the doorway of the pub, watching us. Would the sight of me in the hands of a friend make him realise how much I meant to him? Would he become sick with jealousy? At the very least, surely Felix's interest would signal my desirability.

By the time we were sitting on his bed in the house he shared with Will, I'd let things go so far that I didn't see any conceivable means of stopping them. I was moving towards a fixed destiny, like poor old Romeo and Juliet, doomed from the start—only my tragic end involved copious amounts of vegan lube. My high school belief in the value of my virginity had subsided the year before upon my eighteenth birthday. I had begun to regard my virginity as an embarrassing secret that grew in size each day like a cyst that refused to burst.

Whenever I imagined sex—which, let me tell you, was often—I knew I'd be out of my depth, but I always presumed the other person would know what they were doing. Surely, all I'd have to do was lie there like a glorious buffet, waiting to be enjoyed. No such luck. When Felix whacked his too soft penis against my thigh for the third time, I knew I had to take matters into my own hands. I manoeuvred myself on top of him and closed my eyes in what I hoped looked like an expression of intense pleasure. The sex, when we finally managed it, was sweaty but mercifully short. Neither of us bothered to fake an orgasm. We just sort of came apart and pretended the whole thing had gone according to plan.

O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!

WHEN I SAW FELIX ON campus the next day, he told me that the night we'd shared was very special but that he wanted to keep things casual, especially since auditions would be starting soon. He told me that he cared for me and respected me but that he couldn't commit to anything more serious right now. It was an effort to hide my relief, though this was marred by my fear that his disinterest in being my boyfriend had something to do with the quality of my sexual performance. Losing my virginity was an odd and confusing experience. Much like passing my driving test, I was glad to have it over and done with (though, if I was honest, I'd felt more pleasure walking out of the Roads and Traffic Authority with my new licence than I had in Felix's bedroom). I felt disappointed too. Perhaps it was the memory of that post-coital sadness, or the fact that I'd been dreaming of the moment for so long and now it was over.

'I don't understand,' said Ruthie, on the phone one night. 'I thought you liked the other one. What's his name? Will?'

'I do,' I said. 'But everyone sleeps with everyone at uni. It's not a big deal.'

'Right,' she said. 'So you're sleeping with Will too?'

'No. I just mean that what happened with Felix and me won't have any bearing on my relationship with Will. Not that we have a relationship in that sense. We're just friends. But if we did, it wouldn't matter.'

'Right,' said Ruthie again. 'Well, it sounds like you know what you're doing.'

I was annoyed at her lack of interest in my sexual exploits. It seemed deliberate, like she was denying me my rightful place among the ranks of the sexually active. How many times had I sat in our school quadrangle listening silently to her escapades? Now it was finally my turn, and she was practically dozing off.

'How's Corey?' I asked.

'Good. Working a lot. We both are.'

I said nothing. Let her wallow in the mundanity of her own existence.

'I know you don't like him,' she said.

'That's not—'

'But he's always there for me.'

I felt the accusation of this, and, despite my anger, a seed of jealousy sprouted inside me. The only reason Corey was *there for her* was because she'd broken her promise to me. If she'd come to university, there wouldn't be this distance between us.

'That's wonderful,' I said. 'I'm so happy for you.'

'You know what no one ever tells you about sex?' asked Ruthie. Her voice was a whisper, and I imagined her sitting in her bedroom in her grandmother's house. 'It's that it gets better. Everyone goes on about how your first time is so special, and then it's over and you've lost something that you can't have back again. But that's such a lie. Your seventh time is better than your first. Your twentieth is better than your seventh. There's still a lot to look forward to.'

Her words must have been some comfort to me. Why else would I remember them all these years later?



Will got the role as the homicidal doctor. What a thrill to hear him say lines I'd written! I went to every rehearsal. Because the play had come from me, I felt an intense desire for it to succeed. It was an exhausting time. Every spare moment between class and shifts at the newsagency was spent scouring op shops for costumes, painting sets, printing leaflets. But it was a happy, satisfied exhaustion. I was finally an artist among artists. At night, I fell asleep easily. I've always suspected that it was my preoccupation with the play that allowed Will to sneak up on me. Or perhaps it was what drew him to me.

Two days before opening night, I walked out of my modernist poetry class and discovered that I had three missed calls from Will and a message telling me to call him back because it was an emergency. The emergency was that the play was going to be a disaster. The homicidal doctor, who we'd characterised as an eco-fascist with a tendency towards addictive behaviour, was going to be misinterpreted by everyone as an attack on the climate activists on campus who would brand Will as a right-wing reactive. How had he not seen this before?

I bought a six-pack of Tooheys and a packet of salt and vinegar chips and caught the bus to his house. When Will answered the door, he looked panicked, his movements twitchy. I coaxed him up the stairs and we sat on his bed. He brought his knees to his chest and held his beer with both hands, picking at the label. He looked very sweet, like a young, lost boy. I opened the chips and placed them between us. He ate ravenously, salt and vinegar crumbs clinging to his grey cardigan.

'William Kingston-Weaver,' I said, invoking the full power of his name, 'everything is going to be okay.'

He sighed and licked his fingers. 'People are going to say that I'm a climate denier.'

'No, they aren't.'

'I always recycle.'

'You're amazing.'

'And when I saw *An Inconvenient Truth*, I actually cried. Truly.'

'Al Gore is a really powerful communicator. Maybe not to Obama's level, but still—'

'It's just all so unfair.' He lay back against the headboard.

'Look,' I said, 'I know that the impending ecological collapse of the planet is—'

'No, Helena, I mean the play! People are going to accuse me of being on the wrong side of history.'

I took a breath, looked at his pale hands, the salt and saliva on his fingers. I longed to wrap myself around him, entwine our limbs, and squeeze him until I'd wrung out all that anguish. 'Listen,' I said, 'the play asks the audience to think about power and truth and hope in the face of overwhelming sadness. How can that be wrong?'

He was silent for a moment. Then, in a small voice, his hand still covering his face: 'But what if they don't get it?'

‘They’ll get it.’ I took the empty bottle from him and placed it at my feet. ‘You’ll bring it to life for them like you always do. You’re an incredible actor, Will.’

‘Do you really think so?’

‘Are you kidding?’

I told him how moved I was after seeing him in *Hamlet* last year (leaving out the details of how I was in love with him). I told him that his Hamlet had not only helped me understand the play but grief itself. At the time, my friend was grieving the loss of her mother. I didn’t really understand what she was going through until I saw him—Hamlet—raging and impotent in the wake of his father’s death.

It was a story I’d told Will many times. He loved to hear it. And I always finished the same way: *This is the power of art—your power as an artist; it shows us who we are*.

‘I suppose my character does embody certain ethical and philosophical conundrums,’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘And good theatre should challenge people.’

‘Totally.’

He sat up and brushed the crumbs from his cardigan. ‘Who cares if they don’t like it?’

‘That’s right.’

‘You don’t think they’ll like it?’

‘No, no. I do.’

‘Even Judi Dench got bad reviews,’ he said, ‘occasionally.’

‘Even Judi.’

He squeezed my hand. ‘What would I do without you?’

I focused very hard on the details of his face as he said this: how his hair had an oily sheen, like he hadn’t washed it in a while; and how the three moles on his neck would form perfect points on a triangle if you were to trace your finger along them. All of this was excellent material for my dreams. I almost longed to be alone so that I could indulge in them.

This is what I was thinking about when we heard the door open and the sound of footsteps on the stairs. There was no reason that Felix’s arrival should alarm me. Everyone slept with everyone at university. It wasn’t a big deal. Only I was suddenly queasy in my stomach. Will must have read it on

my face because he leaned towards me. ‘Is there something between you and Felix?’

Many times, I’d imagined him asking this question. I always thought I’d shrug in a mysterious sort of way and say it wasn’t serious, thereby signalling my desirability and sexual competence. Unfortunately, this preparation didn’t pay off. I giggled like a child and denied it with such vehemence, he actually flinched. I felt a little bad about this. After all, Felix was my friend.

‘Good,’ said Will. ‘That’s bloody good.’ He was still holding my hand. I let my fingers go limp to make sure I hadn’t accidentally latched on to him like a crab and he was too polite to say anything. But no, it was him who was holding on to me.

His thumb grazed my knuckles. ‘Do you have anywhere to be tonight? Any hot dates?’

When I looked up, he was smiling, his face very close to mine. My mind, usually so adept at mining significant moments for details from which to construct my dreams, went entirely blank. ‘If by hot date you mean playing tennis with my parents and proofreading my essay on Eliot, then yes.’

He laughed and it dawned on me that it might be possible to shoehorn my pathetic existence into a charming personality quirk. Didn’t every sensitive boy dream of discovering the odd girl who no one noticed until she was transformed beneath his gaze into a thing of beauty? ‘You know, I had no friends at uni until I met you,’ I said.

He frowned. ‘So what did you do?’

‘I don’t know, just read in the library. Like high school all over again.’

‘That’s why you’re so smart.’

‘I’m not.’

He took off my glasses. ‘And beautiful.’

I could think of nothing but the blood coursing through my body. I was sure he could hear it—see and feel and smell it in the heat of my reddening face. It was as if I was coming apart: my insides leaking out of my skin, my dreams spilling into the room.

His lips tasted of salt and vinegar.

He kissed me very slowly.

He did not put his hands on my face and in my hair and all over my body the way that Felix had. He just went on holding my hand. This lack of physical contact was almost painful. I wanted him everywhere but there

was only his tongue in my mouth, his thumb tracing the back of my hand. A great wanting opened up inside me.

After a while, he leaned back against the headboard. I saw that his face was flushed too. ‘I’ve been wanting to do that for so long,’ he said.

My first thought was that this was a lie. I’d watched him closely—forensically—for months. I was so attuned to him that I knew all of his expressions and where he was in any crowded room. Was it possible that his desire had bloomed in secret? That I’d been so busy with the play I’d failed to notice? This was the kind of thing that happened to women in films—those manic pixie dream girls skipping obliviously into the waiting arms of the men who’d loved them all along. It was the stuff of dreams. And yet here he was, smiling back at me like that. For real.



The first time I slept with Will was a momentous affair, not only because he was just the second person I’d ever slept with, but because the act bore the weight of so much dreaming.

The consummation of our love occurred two days after our first kiss, on opening night. The play went well enough—a small but supportive audience turned up, no one accused Will of being a climate denier, and in the afterglow of our success, we found each other.

Will was oddly quiet during sex. In every other aspect of his life, he was so expressive, talking his way through every thought, every experience. It was his little speeches in my English class that had first beguiled me. I learned to love him by listening to him talk. Perhaps that was why his quietness in bed unnerved me so much. I’ve always felt the need to fill in silences, and so, during sex, I performed my pleasure so vocally, so dramatically, that any real pleasure was impossible, not least because I worried his housemates, including Felix, would hear me.

My behaviour embarrassed me—and surely Will too?—and yet I couldn’t help it, the silence was too terrible. Wasn’t Will the actor? Why had he left this role to me? I tried to conjure my fantasies but was too distracted by my own ridiculous noises. If only I could have shown him the script for my dreams. But even then, real life was weighed down by tedious, unrehearsed action—the taking off of shoes, the rearrangement of pillows, the putting on of the condom. I missed the slick editing of my imagination. I remembered

that Ruthie once told me that sex (like tennis and reverse parallel parking) got better with practice. I hoped she was right.

Lying in bed afterwards, our limbs entwined, I began to feel better. Will talked about the play and an infuriating phone call he'd had with his parents in which they'd displayed a general lack of support for his creative endeavours. I was lulled to calmness by the sound of his voice. My dreams had come true. Here I was lying naked beside Will, his arm around me, his voice in my ear, my head on his shoulder. I ran my finger down the vertical groove of his stomach and told him that it was my favourite part of his body. If my happiness was tinged with sadness, it was only because it was difficult to inhabit a fantasy when it was unfolding in real life.

I steered the conversation to the night we first met. Was there any greater pleasure than poring over the story of us, to find all the moments of tension and irony? I told Will that when he'd approached me in the pub asking if he could smoke, I'd felt so nervous I hadn't been able to think of anything to say. 'I'd just seen you on stage,' I said. 'I was starstruck.'

He laughed and squeezed my shoulder. 'It's so strange to think that we didn't even know each other then.'

'Why is it strange?' I hoped he'd say that it was hard to imagine a time when we were strangers. That it felt as if he'd known me his whole life.

'I don't know,' he said. 'It's just weird how you never know how any given moment is going to take you to the next. Like, take this'—and here, he turned to face me—'that night we met, it was your friend I was interested in.'

'What?'

'What's her name?'

'Ruthie?'

'Ruthie.'

My stomach churned. Will went on smiling at me as though this were a funny anecdote about the twists and turns of life and not devastating proof of my long-held fear that Ruthie was superior to me in every way. He told me how bewitching she was, sitting among the fairy lights, turning up her nose at the wine. 'Like I didn't even notice you,' he said. 'We could have sat in the same class dozens of times, but if it weren't for your friend and the fact that we were all at the pub that night, we'd never have spoken. And now here we are.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Amazing.'

But why unkindly didst thou leave me so?

ON THE SECOND ANNIVERSARY OF her mother's death, Ruthie woke early for her shift at the spa. She stood barefoot in her grandmother's kitchen and looked out across the neat garden while she waited for the kettle to boil. Steam fogged the window. She scooped three heaped tablespoons of coffee into the French press and poured in the boiling water, breathing in the scent.

Angela had always been a mercurial presence in Ruthie's life, shifting with the days and the junk and the dark moods that gripped her tightly or loosely but never completely let her go. There were times when Angela would clean the house at three in the morning and other times she'd lie on the couch for so long, her dark hair fanned out on the cushions, that Ruthie would pause in the doorway to check she was breathing. There were times when Angela wanted to sit up all night talking and other times when she left for weeks on end. One of the only constants in Angela's life was her love of coffee. The French press. Nescafé Blend 43. McCafé. It didn't matter. She loved it all. Ruthie loved it too. The steady calm of stirring and pouring, of holding something warm in your hands. There were always half-drunk mugs of coffee about the house, crystallised sugar or the skin of milk stuck to the inside. Angela used to joke that she'd get her coffee order engraved on her tombstone: *Double shot long black three sugars*. In the end, she didn't have a tombstone, just a nondescript plaque in a wall of plaques. At the funeral, Helen had said that the wall looked like the IKEA wardrobe she had at home, except it was black and instead of containing underwear and socks, it held the remains of the dead. Ruthie thought about this every time

she visited the cemetery. Her mother, contained forever in an underwear drawer.

The winter sun spilled over the neighbours' roof and bled through the trees, a warm honeyed light. The grass shimmered with dew. It could be beautiful here. A quiet stillness that Ruthie was only just learning to trust. Not the calm before the storm. Just calm. Each day beginning as every other had. Helena thought it was boring. She hated it here or at least was determined to give the impression of hating it here. Every time she came over, which wasn't that often anymore, she made a point of looking around at the dinner sets and the doilies and Clare's crossword puzzles as though she were in a dusty museum looking at the bleak and meagre lives of people stuck in the past.

Ruthie poured her coffee, added sugar and milk. She unwrapped the loaf of dark rye bread she'd brought home from the bakery the other day, cut a thick slice and spread it with butter and cherry jam. Minh, her boss at the bakery, had been to culinary school and was teaching her how to eat. Once, she thought of bread as Wonder White, now she knew the chewy texture of sourdough and the liquorice taste of caraway seeds and had even grown to appreciate raisins when combined with cinnamon and nutmeg. She could never go back to margarine now that she'd tried whipped butter. At work, Minh would frequently take something out of the oven—a scone or a bun or a pastry—cut it in half, butter it and offer her a slice. He would ask her what she thought of it. At first, she had no idea what to tell him other than that it was good. Over time, she learned to be more discerning. To consider how a pinch of salt or a sprinkling of pumpkin seeds or a different ratio of custard to stewed apricots could change everything.

After breakfast, Ruthie tiptoed down the hall to the pink bathroom, stopping only briefly at the photograph of her parents standing young and barefoot in the front garden, their lives still ahead of them. She showered and put on her uniform. Today was Sunday and she was working at the Goddess Grove, not the bakery. At the bakery she could wear whatever she wanted so long as it was black, and her hair was pulled back, and her shoes were closed. At the Goddess Grove her uniform consisted of a white linen shirt and camel pants. The white canvas shoes she wore remained in her locker at work, so they weren't soiled by the outside. She did her makeup the way Tiger had shown her—wafer thin, natural looking, a light blush on

her cheekbones, as if she'd just been out for a run. The face of the business. That's what Tiger called her.

When Ruthie unlocked the doors of the Goddess Grove, pungent floral scents—lavender, rose, jasmine—hit her. The shop was always stuffy first thing in the morning after having been shut up all night. The perfume of essential oils and beeswax candles hung thick in the air. Ruthie laid out fresh towels and teacups in the waiting room, watered the peace lilies and devil's ivy, opened her computer and checked the bookings for the day. The weekly delivery of flowers arrived—pink chrysanthemums, purple carnations, sprigs of white baby's breath.

The morning passed in a series of small and satisfying tasks. She brought a jug of mint tea into the waiting room, answered questions about the mandarin and jojoba oil body butter, placed items into hessian bags that she sprayed with yuzu and basil perfume, showed customers to the change room, and unboxed new stock.

One of the boxes contained potions and elixirs for peace, love, healing. Ruthie stared down at the little glass bottles nestled among the ice packs. When she'd slipped the healing elixir into her mother's coffee two years ago, she'd only wanted her mother to get better. It'd been a particularly bad time. Ruthie picked up a healing elixir. Turned the cool glass in her hand. She imagined shoving the entire box off the counter, letting all the bottles crack open and bleed out onto the floor where they couldn't hurt anyone. But that was madness. She read the string of ingredients on the back—*cold-pressed organic orange and lemon juice, fresh turmeric, ginger root, black pepper, extra virgin olive oil, pink Himalayan salt flakes*. It was innocent. She had not killed her mother.

Ruthie knew the dangers of magical thinking. How it followed its own logic, gathered force under its own momentum, untroubled by reality. That's how it had been for Angela. Not always. But so often that Ruthie knew its pull, felt it tugging at her. There were days when she'd come home from school to find Angela pacing in the dark hallway, her whole body tensed, the muscles in her jaw quivering, her toes curling into the carpet. In those moments, Ruthie knew that although her mother was right there, she was actually very far away. *Where have you been?* Angela would demand to know. If Ruthie explained that she'd been at school, Angela would grit her teeth and say, *But where have you really been?* If Clare or teachers or even telemarketers called, Angela would want to know what Ruthie had told

them. No matter how loyal Ruthie was, no matter how hard she tried to prove herself, Angela always suspected treachery. *Just you wait*, she would say. *Just you wait*.

But wait for what?

Now Angela was dead, and Ruthie woke up each morning in her grandmother's quiet house and ate breakfast looking out at the garden. Perhaps that was the terrible truth of it: that Angela had been right. Ruthie was a traitor. Because wasn't it all, in some way, a relief?

Her phone vibrated in her pocket.

A message from Helena. *You working today? I'm coming to yoga. See you there?*

Ruthie blinked.

The force of her magical thinking weakened. She was in the real world. The world of folded towels and emails. She had not murdered her mother. The potions and elixirs weren't real and they definitely weren't malevolent. What was it that Helena had said that night Ruthie briefly lost her mind in the forest?—*Scams for rich women who have time to kill in between their facials and yoga classes*.

Now Helena was the one taking yoga classes at the Goddess Grove.



Tiger's yoga classes took place every Sunday afternoon. Once, they'd been occasional events, in honour of solstices or the changing of seasons, but they were by far one of the most popular services offered at the spa. Tiger claimed that the introduction of regular classes was a result of her passion for sharing knowledge, but Ruthie also knew the Goddess Grove wasn't doing so well. There were whole afternoons when almost no one came inside.

Tiger arrived a little before three. She gazed around the store, no doubt inspecting Ruthie's work, smiled, then disappeared into her office.

When she emerged a few minutes later, she was wearing dark green tights and a matching crop top. Ruthie could tell that the clothes were expensive from the thickness of the material and the way they sculpted Tiger's body. The jewel in her belly button gleamed. 'Braid my hair for me?' Tiger asked, coming up beside her.

In a bid to make friends in primary school, Ruthie had taught herself to braid hair. A single French braid, then a reverse braid, a fishtail and finally a crown. *Girlfriend* magazine had been her first guide and later YouTube. She'd practised on her mother's hair. At recess, a few girls had approached Ruthie with requests for hairstyles but when they'd been teased for letting Ruthie touch them they had not returned.

Tiger sat before Ruthie, her thick silver hair cascading down her back. Ruthie divided it into sections and wove them together. Over and under, over and under.

'How does that feel?' she asked, tying an elastic around the bottom of the braid.

Tiger smiled and turned around. Her eyes were especially blue today. She put her hand on Ruthie's arm. 'How are you?' she asked. 'I know today must be painful.'

Ruthie swallowed. At that moment, the door opened, and the first attendees of the yoga class arrived, carrying mats under their arms. Among them was Phoebe.

When Phoebe had first walked into the Goddess Grove some weeks back and inquired about healing crystals and yoga classes, she'd failed to recognise Ruthie. This suited Ruthie just fine. They'd never talked much in school. Except for that occasion on the bus when Phoebe had probably saved Helena's life. Ruthie was grateful to Phoebe for that, which was irritating. Of course, Helena started showing up to yoga classes the moment Ruthie mentioned that Phoebe was there. Apparently, she hadn't outgrown her adolescent dream of befriending her.

Ruthie smiled her face-of-the-business smile as Phoebe walked up to the counter with her arms spread wide. 'Hey, babe.'

Ruthie suspected this performance of friendship was due to her proximity to Tiger. Phoebe appeared to enjoy showing other women that she had an inside connection to the Goddess Grove.

'My god, you smell amazing,' said Phoebe. 'What is that?'

'Oh, I was restocking the body butters. Mandarin, I think.'

'This place is so gorgeous. You're so lucky to work here.'

You're so lucky you don't work at all. Phoebe was studying media and communications at Sydney University while living in her parents' investment property in Paddington. She was frequently booking massages to help her deal with the stress of it all.

Helena arrived. She and Phoebe embraced like long-lost lovers. It was bizarre, the way they carried on as though Phoebe hadn't ignored Helena for the best part of six years. Whenever Ruthie reminded Helena of this, she brushed it aside and said that they were kids back then—as if she was talking about the distant past and not two years ago.



The yoga class took place right there on the shop floor amid the crystals and potions and body butters. Even though it was a relatively large space, it wasn't designed for such a thing, and the women had to lay their mats uncomfortably close to one another. There was always the danger that a three-legged dog would result in a kick to the face or a smashed display cabinet. It was quite stressful to watch.

Tiger asked the class to think of affirmations to guide them through their practice: *You are in the right place at the right time. There is nowhere else you need to be. This moment is a gift. You are loved just as you are. Everything happens for a reason*. It always amused Ruthie, the way the women seemed to think that the universe was concerned with their specific lives. As if their brunches and dermatologist appointments would leave a dent in the space–time continuum. Sometimes, she and Corey would laugh about it when he picked her up from work in his ute. What would your affirmation be, Ruthie? *At least you're getting paid. Your shift is almost over. You did not murder your mother*.

The yoga class put Ruthie in an awkward position. Because the Goddess Grove was primarily a spa and not a yoga studio, she had to go on answering the phone and directing women to their facials and massages as quietly as possible so as not to interfere with the affirmations and breathwork.

At some point, the class began to chant, their voices fusing into one menacing sound. Ruthie tried to tune them out, but she could not tune out Tiger's voice instructing the women to let their eyeballs drip into their sockets and to release the emotions in their hips or to heal their liver chakras. It was gratifying to see that Helena's movements were clumsy and stilted. She did not have the self-assuredness of the more practised women. Phoebe was a little better, though her core was weak. She worked so hard to hold poses that her body shook. It was pathetic how badly they vied for

Tiger's approval. Surely Tiger would see through it. She wandered about, adjusting shoulders and feet. The women arched their backs. Cobra pose. Snakes, all of them.

'Tie this back,' said Tiger, sweeping her hand through Helena's hair.

'I forgot my elastic.' Helena laughed the way she did when she was nervous.

Tiger turned to Ruthie. 'There are some in my office.'

The office was neat and white. Bonsais lined up in their perfect smallness. Ruthie reached for the nearest bonsai, a tiny oak in a polished blue pot, and tore off a single leaf, pierced it with her fingernails and dropped it onto the floor. This act of violence was so satisfying she did it again. And once more. Tiger's Birkenstocks, which were beside her desk, were imprinted with the outlines of her toes. This ghostly presence brought Ruthie to her senses. She took an organic bamboo hair elastic off Tiger's desk and returned to the class.

It was with an ironically bowed head that Ruthie handed it to Helena. She even adopted the soft obliging smile spa employees used with customers. She hoped that Helena would register the joking way she performed these gestures of subservience, but Helena hardly looked at her. Just tied up her hair and plunged into downward dog. Ruthie returned to her position behind the counter. She picked up a green opal palm stone and squeezed it until her hand hurt.

One of the more difficult moves in Tiger's yoga class was crow pose. It required upper body strength, balance and flexibility. You had to press your hands into the mat, lean your weight forward, rest your knees on your elbows and lift your feet into the air. If you were really good, you could progress into a handstand. No one in the class could do it. Phoebe complained of delicate wrists. Helena fell face first onto her mat, nearly snapping her glasses.

'Ruthie,' said Tiger, 'demonstrate.'

Ruthie made sure she stood right in front of Helena as she performed her crow pose. Even in her uniform and without proper classes, she could do it. Her arms shook slightly, but she breathed steadily, fixed her gaze, just as Tiger had shown her, and relaxed her face. When she stood up everyone clapped. She'd always been strong. In primary school she'd very nearly made the aerobics team, only her mum hadn't been well enough to drive her to school on the morning of the final tryout. Ruthie had basically run the

whole way, but still she'd missed it. Now Tiger put her arm around Ruthie. 'Perfect,' she said. 'My perfect little crow.'

After class, Helena and Phoebe lingered, no doubt trying to bask in Tiger's attention. Helena gushed loudly about an immersive theatre experience she'd attended with Will the night before. It was obvious that the point of the story was not the theatre but the fact that she had a boyfriend who was interested in theatre. She was desperate for everyone to know it. Especially Phoebe. Especially Tiger.

'It was a theatrical adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's tales,' said Helena. 'It was so dark and macabre. There were these dancing ravens.'

'You could have performed your crow pose,' said Ruthie. 'You're so good at it.'

'You two are so funny,' said Phoebe. 'I love it.'

Throughout this exchange, Phoebe and Helena were looking around at the women rolling up their mats and putting on their linen shirts, as though hoping to be noticed.

'So how are you, babe?' Helena asked Ruthie.

Babe? Since when had Helena ever called her that? *Oh, I'm so great, babe. Just musing on the death of my mother and the fact that my best friend appears to have forgotten about it*. It was almost pleasant, the way Ruthie's anger took on a clear and justifiable form. But the feeling of vindication soon burned away. It was frightening how quickly Angela was disappearing from the world. How long would it be before even she and Clare forgot?

'Fine,' said Ruthie. 'Just working.' She escaped to the waiting room to lay out fresh towels even though there weren't any customers back there.

When she returned to the front desk, Tiger was with Phoebe and Helena. Tiger was wearing a cream cashmere sweater over her crop top. She was holding a steaming teapot. The three women had their heads bent over it, as though inhaling the steam.

'What's this?' asked Ruthie.

'A little experiment,' said Tiger.

'An experiment?' Phoebe could barely contain her excitement.

Tiger placed the teapot on the counter. 'Healing tea. Something new I'm trying.'

'What's in it?' Ruthie's stomach tightened. She thought of the elixirs and potions in their little dark bottles.

‘Chamomile, lemon balm, ginger, honey, psilocybin.’

‘Psilocybin?’ asked Helena.

‘Magic mushrooms,’ said Tiger.

‘Cool,’ said Phoebe.

‘What about the customers?’ Ruthie glanced at the door. The neighbouring cafe was closing for the afternoon, waiters moving tables, closing umbrellas. The tea emitted a sweet earthy scent.

‘We’ll close a little early,’ said Tiger. She changed the sign on the door, loosening her braid as she went, her long silver hair falling down her back. ‘This is for research purposes. I’m developing women’s healing ceremonies. There’s so much pain around us. So much suffering. I feel compelled to help.’ She let down the blind. The room darkened.

‘You’re so amazing,’ said Helena.

‘Society is making people sick,’ said Tiger. ‘We’re poisoning ourselves. Forgetting the lessons of our mothers and grandmothers. Of nature herself. And our Ruthie needs some healing today.’

‘Why?’ asked Phoebe.

Ruthie felt the blood rise to her face. She wished a customer would fling open the door and disrupt whatever it was that was happening. Still, she couldn’t help but feel proud at the way Tiger claimed ownership of her. *Our Ruthie. My perfect little crow*.

‘Oh, babe,’ said Phoebe, when Tiger told them about Angela. ‘You are so strong. Like my mum and I are so close, I’d literally die without her. I don’t know how you do it.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Shit,’ said Helena. ‘Sorry.’

Tiger brushed Ruthie’s shoulder. If there was one thing that bound the two of them together, it was the deaths of their mothers. Neither Helena nor Phoebe could compete with the scale of such tragedy. Tiger had not forgotten.



They sat in a circle on the floor, their legs splayed in butterfly pose, and sipped the tea out of earthenware mugs. Tiger put on music that was made up of bird calls and the sound of rain. She told them again how her mother had died when she was young and how she healed herself on a trip to India.

She talked of her pain in not having a child of her own. No one had ever spoken to Ruthie in this way. Not her mother. Certainly not her grandmother. Tiger's openness—her acid blue gaze—was almost too much. Like trying to stare at the sun.

'For so long,' said Tiger, her eyes glistening with tears, 'I tried everything these so-called doctors told me. I even had surgery to reshape my womb. None of it worked. And I put my body through hell.' She touched her stomach then, traced her fingers over her abdomen, as though remembering its suffering. 'Women were once the great healers. We were the midwives and apothecaries. The wise women and witches. Of course, men resented this power of ours. They barred us from the libraries and the universities. They burned us at the stake. Drowned us.'

Ruthie pictured Tiger tied to a wooden post, flames singeing her beautiful hair, her blue eyes burning. Was the tea starting to work? Her skin prickled.

'And why? So they could control us,' said Tiger. 'Make money off our suffering. Tell us we're mad. Dismiss our pain. Torture our bodies.'

'That's so true,' said Helena, shaking her head. 'Capitalism.'

Ruthie stroked the underside of her arm where the flesh was pale. It felt good, like there was magic in her fingertips.

'Oh no,' said Phoebe, a little sadly. 'I like capitalism.'

'I'm on a journey,' said Tiger, 'to rediscover the ancient knowledge of women. That's why I opened this place. I want to heal others the way I've healed myself.'

Yes, thought Ruthie. That sounded good. She wanted to be healed too. There was pain inside her. She could feel it. A heavy weight in her stomach. She imagined Tiger reaching into her mouth and dragging it out of her throat. The thought made her a little afraid. She looked around at the crystals and gemstones. They shined brightly. Amethyst and rose quartz and blue agate. Their colours bleeding, sharp and wet.

'Your mother,' said Tiger, taking Ruthie's hand, 'should not have died. She was in pain. So what did she do? Pumped her veins full of poison. We could help women like her.'

Ruthie looked away. The mention of her mother made her chest tighten. There was that other life again—the one that they could have had. No, no, no. She didn't want to think about that. What was it Helena was always saying? *That way madness lies*.

'That way,' said Helena, 'madness lies.'

‘Where?’ asked Phoebe, looking around her.

Could Helena read Ruthie’s mind? The thought dropped into Ruthie’s head suddenly, a stone thrown into a lake. No. It was the tea. That magical thinking. She mustn’t let her mind get away from her. Not like Angela. The only problem was that Angela had taught Ruthie how to see the world so that even though she knew that she wasn’t evil or treacherous—just a normal kid coming home from school—it was hard to believe. Life without Angela simply wasn’t as real as the one with her in it.

Ruthie lay down. Her head was hot and woozy, like she was melting into the floor or perhaps the floor itself was melting. If she kept sinking like this —beneath the floorboards, below the foundations, into the earth—how long would it take to disappear? She tried to get up but couldn’t—not with that weight in her stomach and her skull turned to liquid. It would be dark underground, and cold. Is that what it had been like for Angela? Pulled under—suffocated, drowned—by all that pain.

A hand gripped Ruthie. Pulled her upright. Helena. Glasses askew, face much too close. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Disappearing,’ said Ruthie.

‘Don’t,’ said Helena. ‘You mustn’t.’

‘Babes,’ said Phoebe. She was now lying on the ground rubbing her limbs over the floorboards as though she were swimming. ‘Remember that day Helena nearly died? In high school. You had that asthma attack.’

‘Asthma,’ said Tiger, ‘used not to exist. It’s a modern invention. Like anxiety.’

‘I saved your life,’ said Phoebe, as though this were dawning on her for the first time. ‘If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t be here. And I didn’t even like you that much. Isn’t that crazy? We’re like connected now. Forever.’

‘Connected,’ said Tiger. ‘Yes. Yes. The whole universe.’

A hushed quiet descended over the room. Ruthie tried to hold the universe and the connections between all things in her mind. Helena pointed at a bonsai on the counter. A little Japanese maple Tiger usually kept in her office. ‘Why is that tree so small?’

Ruthie remembered her act of violence earlier in Tiger’s office and covered her mouth to stop herself from laughing.

Tiger placed the tree on the floor in front of them. ‘I’m taking her home to repot her.’

‘Maybe we’re giants,’ said Helena. ‘Like Alice when she eats that cake. Or Gulliver in Lilliput. When we go outside, all the buildings will be tiny too and we’ll stomp all over them.’

‘I’m actually super petite,’ said Phoebe. ‘Like I have such a small waist, it’s actually a problem buying clothes.’

Helena began to stomp on the floor like a giant. The floor wasn’t melting anymore. Ruthie couldn’t help herself. She burst out laughing. It bubbled painfully out of her mouth. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her mother had been dead for two years. *How dare you*, she thought. *How dare you leave me like this*.

Here come the lovers, full of joy and mirth

I WAS NOT ONE OF those university students who hungered for the world beyond. Unlike high school where I was surrounded by girls who mostly failed to notice my existence, at university I had Will and the dramatic society. I got to spend my days writing drama scripts and reading literary theory on the green lawns. Life, I suspected, would not get any better. It was this thinking, as well as the fact that Will still needed to complete a few subjects, that led me to enrol in the honours program for English at the end of my third year. My thesis was on gender and performance in Shakespeare's comedies. I explored the subversive humour in plays like *As You Like It* where male actors played female characters who disguised themselves as males only to impersonate females. Performance upon performance upon performance. But what role was I to perform in the world outside the university gates? How was I, with my knowledge of Shakespeare and gender theory, to play a productive part in the workforce? My younger brother had started a degree in computer science and already had a part-time job in IT support for a law firm. Although I found his lack of artistic sensibility depressing, it was irritating that he earned more money than me and had moved out of home. The fact that he lived in a share house with three other boys who were always in board shorts covered in Dorito dust was some comfort. His foray into adulthood was not without its limits.

To procrastinate on my thesis, I got an Instagram account. Tiger was my favourite account to follow. There were pictures of her lounging on yachts in dresses that came in colours like amethyst morning, guava paradise and

blue agate. There were pictures of her at the Goddess Grove dressed in white linen or sleek black yoga clothes. In one of the photos, Ruthie and Tiger were hanging Christmas decorations made of coloured glass. They were both laughing, their faces softened, almost blurred, as though they couldn't keep still. I felt jealous of their closeness, that Ruthie should have a place in Tiger's grid. Perhaps it was an idea that I'd absorbed from my father, but I always thought extreme wealth diminished a person in some way—made them less interesting or morally ugly. But Tiger made wealth look unequivocally splendid. She'd run the Boston Marathon and gone night-diving in Bali. She'd lived in Argentina and India. She knew how to ski, speak Spanish, meditate, lift dead weights, make a martini, throw clay, sail and drive a manual. In every photo, she was surrounded by friends—smiling women in dark glasses, men with perfectly groomed facial hair. Followers flocked to her.



Towards the end of my honours year, Will began talking about returning to London. His student visa would soon expire, and it was time, he said, to take his art seriously. Sydney was simply too small a stage for his ambition and talent. Was he going to stay forever in the Antipodes? He'd only come here to expand his horizons and experience a different part of the world without going to the extreme length of learning another language. Now, he needed the cultural centre. He needed London. How I figured into his plans was never quite clear, and I was too afraid to ask. We were, by this point, a bona fide item. But I worried that his need for London was greater than his need for me. Was it possible to be jealous of a city?

It was Phoebe who suggested I simply go with him. We were walking to the Goddess Grove one afternoon, our yoga mats under our arms.

'What would I do there?' I asked.

She shrugged. 'Study. Work. It's London. Do whatever the fuck you want.'

It was just the kind of big thinking I needed. I applied to do a Master's in Shakespeare Studies at King's College. A whole year of study in the heart of London!



My acceptance email arrived in January 2013. I was overcome, not only with joy but with relief. Will and I would be together! A scholar and artist abroad! Will wanted to leave right away, but I convinced him to delay our departure until the end of March, so that I could save some money. The huge cost of being an international student only made me feel slightly queasy. My parents told me that if it was what I really wanted, I should follow my dreams. We went out for a celebratory dinner, but afterwards I heard them talking about selling the Camry.

I continued working at the newsagency on campus in the months before I left for London. It was strange to be there without having any classes to go to. The thought of my new life with Will was all that got me through.

A few days before we left, I visited Ruthie. When I arrived, baked goods were laid out on the kitchen table like she was preparing for a tea party—a three-layer sponge cake with strawberries and cream, lamingtons, date scones, Florentines. The kitchen was warm and smelled of brown sugar and butter. 'What's all this?' I asked.

Ruthie shrugged. 'For you.'

I looked down at the store-bought rice crackers and hommus in my hands.

'I'm just practising,' said Ruthie. 'Minh, my boss at the bakery, he's given me a lot more responsibility.'

'When did you get this good?'

Ruthie laughed. 'It's not that hard. Not like writing a thesis.'

I wasn't sure if I detected a note of sarcasm in her voice. She wasn't looking at me, just wiping the already clean bench and staring at the wall, where a picture of her father hung.

Clare came in from the garden. She dropped her secateurs so aggressively they slid off the table and clattered to the floor. Her sneakers squeaked on the kitchen tiles. 'Helena,' she said, 'perhaps you can talk some sense into her.' She looked livid.

I made a move to pick up the secateurs, but Clare waved me away. Ruthie sat down at the table and hugged her knees to her chest. I could see that the soles of her feet were dirty. 'Leave her out of it,' she said.

'You're going to be alone,' said Clare. 'And why? Because you're too proud? Or you have to be different?'

Ruthie said nothing, just rested her head on her knees.

‘It’s just the kind of thing your mother did. And look how it ended up for her.’ Clare’s sneakers squeaked again as she leaned down to reach the secateurs, one hand on the small of her back. I looked to Ruthie. It was then that I noticed a small chocolate plaque on the top of the sponge cake. In loopy white writing were two words: *Marry me*

Dread crept over me. ‘Is this yours?’

‘No,’ said Ruthie. ‘I didn’t make that one.’

‘Shouldn’t it have a question mark?’

‘You pay per character,’ said Ruthie. ‘Corey didn’t see the point in paying extra for a piece of punctuation.’

‘Wait, what—’

‘I’m late for aquarobics,’ said Clare. ‘We’re working on strength. Heaven knows I’ll need it.’

Again, Ruthie said nothing. I couldn’t work out whether her silence was a form of passive resistance against her grandmother or a sign of defeat. Either way, it made me nervous.

‘Talk some sense into her.’ Clare squeaked out of the room.

When she was gone, I sat down at the table. ‘Congratulations?’

‘Fuck off.’

‘He proposed to you? When did this happen?’

‘This morning.’

Ruthie sighed. There were dark circles under her eyes. ‘The worst thing is that he ordered it from my bakery. Minh made the cake himself. Everyone knows. I think Corey wanted to get them all on his side.’

‘You make it sound like a war, not a marriage proposal.’

‘I wish this never happened.’

‘So, I’m guessing you said no?’

‘I’m twenty-two,’ said Ruthie. ‘Who the hell gets married at twenty-two?’

‘Religious fundamentalists and former child actors.’ I retrieved two forks from the top drawer. My hands wouldn’t stop shaking.

‘We can’t eat it,’ said Ruthie. ‘I said no.’

I picked off the plaque and bit into it. The chocolate was sweet and cold. I took pleasure in consuming it. I wanted it gone. ‘There. Now it’s just an ordinary cake.’

We ate in silence. It was a vanilla sponge with strawberry jam and cream spread thickly between each layer. It was soft and creamy and tart and when

I finished my piece, I cut myself another. I couldn't get my head around how close Ruthie had come to marriage. How narrowly we'd avoided catastrophe. I wondered if she felt it too.

'I'm going to miss you,' she said.

Suddenly, I was afraid. How could I leave her? I thought of those afternoons at school, when I'd watch her walk into Westfield for another lonely shift, while I retreated to the library. And those months after her mother died, when she nearly disappeared on me. Now I was moving away from her to the other side of the world.

ACT THREE

And certain stars shot madly from their spheres

MY PARENTS CLAIMED TO BE pleased that I was striking out into the world, however, just before I left for London, my mum adopted a Cavalier King Charles spaniel with breathing problems and a bad attitude that I couldn't help but see as my replacement. Her name was Chippy.

On the plane, I became extremely nervous about meeting Will's parents. All I knew of them was that Will's father, Richard, worked in risk management and his mother, Jillian, had had a career in human resources before retiring to focus on her charitable endeavours, most of which revolved around the environment. It wasn't ideal that our first meeting would be when I moved into their house.

Jillian and Richard lived in a townhouse in South Kensington. All of the homes in the building had the same white facade and a neat black fence separating them from the footpath. Will told me his parents downsized when the children moved out, so I was surprised to discover that the townhouse had three levels and five bedrooms. There was a library with a ladder like that scene in *Beauty and the Beast*. Unfortunately, I made this observation out loud to Jillian when she gave me a tour of the house, and I worried she'd think I was one of those adults who was still obsessed with Disney. The only feature of the house I didn't like was the television set behind an enormous oil painting titled *The Hunt* in which four men in red coats rode on horseback through the countryside, a beagle at their heels, presumably in pursuit of a fox. If you wanted to watch television, you had to point a remote control at the painting, and it would glide upwards to

reveal the black screen. Low art hidden behind high art. There was something perverse about this unsheathing—the sudden shudder, the slow ascent of the painting peeling away from the glistening naked screen.

When we first arrived, we had tea with Jillian and Richard in the living room. My eyes were red and itchy from the flight, and I was acutely aware of how I smelled. We chatted about the place names that Britain and Australia shared—*Oh yes, we have a Kensington, though not as nice as this. And a Newcastle and Brighton too*—as though the whole history of British imperialism were an amusing coincidence.

'You have some funny names,' said Richard, shaking his head. 'Woolloomooloo, Parramatta.'

'I think they're English approximations of Aboriginal—'

'An unnecessary number of letters if you ask me.'

He told me that he'd visited Australia a few times, but the heat didn't suit him, and it was 'just so bloody far away from everything'.

'I liked the Botanic Gardens,' said Jillian, leaping to my nation's defence. 'The roses were very pretty.'

'Yes,' said Richard. 'You can thank us for that.'

Jillian pointed out a photograph on the wall of the rose garden at her mother's house in Lancashire. 'You'll have to visit one day,' she said. 'A lovely part of the country.'



My life in London took on a certain unreal quality. Jillian helped me get a job at a little independent bookstore run by one of her friends. I was paid to talk to people about novels! Well, mostly I sold adult colouring books and birthday cards with highly specific pop cultural references. But still, I was surrounded by novels! Sometimes, if the shop was quiet, I'd video call my parents. On one such occasion, when my mother was waxing lyrical about how Chippy was the cleverest dog who ever existed, I gazed at myself in the corner of the screen, a wall of books behind me, the streets of London framed in the window. It was easy to imagine myself as the star of a film about a whimsically bookish heroine living out a life of great romance.

In September, classes began. I'd wake up in Richard and Jillian's beautiful townhouse, kiss Will goodbye, catch the Tube from South Kensington to Temple, and walk past the Thames to King's College.

As an old hand at formal education, I expected to be friendless at university. For the first few weeks, I kept to myself. But I found that people approached me, mainly because of my accent—those friendly flat vowels—and because we were all far from home. The first friend I made was a woman from New York named Ella who, like me, did not reside on campus. Her parents had rented her a furnished apartment in Hampstead which she decorated with postcards from museums and trinkets she picked up from Camden Market. If, in our conversations, I happened to mention any Australian institution, Ella would repeat the name back to me in apparent disbelief—*The Australian National Ballet? God bless 'em! The Sydney Symphony Orchestra? God bless 'em! The Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation? God bless 'em!*—as though the idea of Australians engaged in high art or international espionage had never occurred to her before.

The great benefit of being abroad is that fewer people have the specific cultural and geographical knowledge required to determine whether you are cool. I was alarmed then, when River, who hailed from Nowra, began hanging out with me and Ella. River really played up his Australianness. A veritable Crocodile Dundee cum Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. A jarring mix of salt-of-the-earth masculinity and droll campness. Everyone adored him. At first, I was wary of him, worried that he'd expose me as being uncool, or that our shared nationality would diminish my value in the eyes of our cohort. But one day, River revealed that he too had lived with his mother before moving to London. This rendered him less intimidating. He might be popular, but at heart, we were both middle-class kids from a middle-power nation. Mediocrity was in our blood.



While I spent my days between university and the bookstore, Will auditioned for plays and even a few TV shows. In the evenings, we'd meet for dinner at the pub or visit the Tate or go for long walks through the streets and he'd tell me about his latest audition, or some encouraging thing his agent had said, or the respected theatre director his mother met through her work at the butterfly sanctuary. One night, we visited the Tate and Will bought me a print of Sir John Everett Millais's *Ophelia*. In Camden Market, I bought a gold frame. How I relished telling the man at the stall that it was

for an artwork my boyfriend had bought me! Who was this glamorous person I'd become? It was the happiest time of my life. A part of me wished Ruthie could have been there to witness it.

A few weeks after my classes started, something extraordinary occurred. Will was cast in a play on the West End. He was to be Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*. What's more, Viola was to be played by a genuine celebrity—an American actress who'd just starred in a teen dystopian film franchise. This was true fame. Both Will and I felt that we were on the brink of something vast and wonderful. Everything we did—eating together in a restaurant or lying in bed—was infused with a feeling of anticipation I'd never felt before. If I was waiting for the Tube or queuing up at a cafe, I'd practise thrusting my shoulders forward to accentuate my collarbone, the way women on the red carpet did. At night, Will and I read lines together:

'*What relish is in this? How runs the stream?*

'Or I am mad, or else this is a dream.

'Let fancy still my sense in Lethe steep; If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep!'

There were times when we were so overcome with joy that we tore off each other's clothes and made love on our bedroom floor before we'd even got through the scene.

One morning, around about this time, I woke early to a message from Ruthie saying she was planning a visit to London, probably early next year. I immediately woke Will and asked if she could stay in his parents' spare room—what's one more Australian? He always looked most handsome in the mornings, his hair tousled, his features soft. I planted kisses all over his face. 'Please can she come? Please?'

He groaned into his pillow.

'Please?'

'Of course she can come. But only if you get off me. I'm sleeping.'

I texted her right away and then fell back to sleep too.

When I woke again, the morning had hardened, the softness of dawn dissipating. There was a new kernel of fear in my chest. My life in London with Will felt fragile, and I was afraid that the arrival of Ruthie might shatter it. Where this fear came from, I had no idea.

A problem arose on the opening night of the play. Just a slight thing. It occurred in the final act when Sebastian and Viola, those long-lost twins, are finally reunited. There was a moment when Olivia (who was played by

a relatively unknown actress) looked from Viola to Sebastian and made a fleeting expression of disappointment, as though she regretted marrying Sebastian, as though he was nothing compared to his sister. This provoked laughter from the audience. The next night, Olivia played up her disappointment. And then again the night after that.

Will was furious. He argued that it wasn't true to the play. For the comedy to work—for the happy ending that the audience expected—Olivia had to be satisfied with Sebastian. It made no sense for her to go on pining for Viola once it was revealed she was a woman. He said that it was a cheap trick. A way for Olivia to draw attention to herself.

To make matters worse, the reviews were bad and there were plenty of them. The director, who had a penchant for minimalism, was criticised for being stingy and pretentious. The famous American actress who played Viola was described as flat and disoriented. Did she even understand the lines she was delivering? Weren't we tired of movie stars using Shakespeare to bolster their credibility? The arts section of one newspaper ran a long piece about how, in this precarious economic environment, theatres increasingly relied on celebrities to fill seats, but that this practice was short-sighted and risked speeding up the death of theatre. The death of theatre! The only praise was directed at Olivia who was described as playful and sly.

Will fell into despair. When the show closed in February, he stopped going to auditions. He stopped going out much at all. This became a great point of tension between him and his parents. Richard proclaimed on numerous occasions that Will ought to get a job and quit moping about the house. Will said that he was an actor and that Richard ought to be more supportive of his own son. Richard said that he was quite literally supporting him and that for someone with all the time in the world he wasn't doing much acting. *I wouldn't call myself a Chief Risk Officer*, Richard pointed out, *if I didn't wake up each day, put on a suit and manage some bloody risk, now would I?* As all of this was going on, Jillian wove between them, trying her best to soothe and hush. Her actual voice, I noticed, the one she used on the phone with her friends or in online meetings for the butterfly sanctuary, was crisp and commanding, nothing like the wispy tones she used with her husband and son. But who was to say which was the real her?

Will began to spend a great deal of time lying on our bedroom floor in front of the mirror, drinking himself into oblivion while listening to Vampire Weekend. He said that his family had never understood him, that his parents preferred his older siblings—that they gave money to his sister for a deposit on her apartment and forked out tens of thousands for his brother's wedding, but begrudged him the bloody air he breathed because they didn't approve of his creative life. I felt torn between loyalty to Will and to his parents who had, after all, taken me in. Meekly, I defended them, pointing out that they'd come to see the play on opening night, and that they were allowing us to stay in the house.

'That's the problem,' said Will, peeling the label off an empty bottle of Johnnie Walker. 'This house is oppressive. It sucks the creativity right out of me.'

He was right about the house. It did begin to feel oppressive. My friends were always going out after class. Invariably, there was a show or a book launch or a poetry reading. They'd ask me to come but then messages from Will would roll in. He'd want to know what time I'd be home and whether I could stop by the bottle shop. I tried to tempt him to the Tate, or even to the pub, but he was never in the mood anymore. On phone calls home, my dad was always suggesting this museum or that festival, and I'd have to pretend that I was too busy with my studies to attend. 'Just make the most of your time there,' he'd say. 'And if you need money, just ask. Mum and I can figure something out.' I'd hang up the phone feeling guilty.

But it wasn't as though I was unhappy. I had friends and a boyfriend and was living abroad. Sadness—the brooding, artistic kind—could be romantic. And wasn't real love forged in pain? Weren't these the kinds of experiences that bonded couples together forever? Perhaps in years to come, Will would tell everyone how I saved him during that dark lonely time in London, how I was all that stood between him and despair.

Welcome, wanderer

RUTHIE ARRIVED IN MARCH 2014. It had been a whole year since I'd last seen her. I went to Heathrow to meet her, hoping that I'd see her come through the gate, that we'd rush towards each other and hug like people in a film. But we somehow missed each other. After a while, once she'd sorted out her digital sim card, she messaged me and we met at a coffee shop near arrivals. I asked about her flight and whether she was tired. We were oddly shy around each other.

When we arrived at the house, Ruthie ran her fingers along the black fence and white columns. I'd arranged her visit to coincide with Richard and Jillian's trip to Spain. Will had a rare meeting with his agent, so the house was empty. I showed Ruthie each level—the library with the ladder and the wall of books, the living room with its hidden television, her very own bedroom with the chandelier and lace curtains. She didn't say much, just looked around open-mouthed and touched everything—the crystal vases and gold-framed mirrors and velvet cushions. My excitement grew, or perhaps it was her excitement rubbing off on me. I was reminded of our youth when sometimes it was hard to tell where I ended and she started. Together we generated our own electric charge. I opened the French doors to the balcony and the cool air rushed in. The house felt different to me then, freed of Will's sadness and Richard's disapproval. Ruthie and I stood on the balcony, the air turning our noses and the tips of our ears pink. We started laughing about everything—the confusion at the airport, how tired she looked, the fact that we were here, so far away from the dustbowl oval and demountable classrooms of our youth. The shyness between us was gone. We were ourselves again.

‘Wait,’ she said, unzipping her suitcase. ‘I have something for you. Actually, it’s from Tom and Mary.’

The parcel from my parents contained a packet of Iced VoVos, a pair of thick woollen socks, a bottle of Tasmanian wine for Jillian and Richard, and two hundred pounds paperclipped to a little card that said: *Take Ruthie somewhere nice. Love, Mum and Dad*.

Ruthie and I ate the biscuits on the balcony, even though it was freezing. We were too excited to mind much about the cold.

Over the next week, we explored London. I showed her around the university, we ate lunch on Primrose Hill, caught the bus out to Wimbledon, took photos in the red phone booths and visited Madame Tussauds where we posed with Emma Watson and Princess Diana. When I had a class, Ruthie would set off to the museums and art galleries alone.

One of the best parts of my master’s program was that some of the classes were taught at the Globe Theatre. The first time I stepped foot in that sacred icosagon, I felt its grand history wheel around me. The great Globe itself. Of course, I knew it was a reconstruction. But still.

After one such class, Ruthie came to the theatre to meet me and my friends. For the first time in my life, I had a whole group of them: Ella, River and Hana. Hana was the only one of us who lived on campus, and we often found ourselves hanging out in her room between classes. Our conversations usually circled around the question of what the fuck we were doing, spending all our (parents’) money and the (purportedly) best years of our lives studying a writer who’d been dead for almost four hundred years. Ella took the position that art was a noble cause, a societal good on the level of universal healthcare and public parks. She only ever had vague notions of what she wanted to do after completing her master’s, maybe a PhD in literature or a job in publishing. But she was passionate about visual arts too, so maybe a second master’s in art history? Or a job at a gallery? She viewed the world as an endlessly abundant place. Whether this was an effect of her wealth or her Americanness, I never knew. Hana, on the other hand, felt guilty about borrowing money from her parents to study the writing of a dead white man. Her older sister worked in the intensive care unit of a major hospital in Tokyo. How could you compete with that? Sometimes, River would fantasise out loud about a life in which he felt no compulsion towards the arts—a life that was organised neatly into paid work and hobbies and required no external validation or explanation, a life

in which the things that he wanted made sense. Ella said that what he was describing was death.

A part of me was worried what Ruthie would do to our established dynamic. We met in the gift shop of the Globe where she was buying a mug that exclaimed: *Lord, what fools these mortals be!* She wanted to know where the classroom was and I said that our lessons took place in the theatre as we were learning about how the architecture of the playhouses shaped dramatic texts in the early modern period.

'What, they let you in the actual theatre?' asked Ruthie. 'Like where they do the plays?'

'Come on,' I said. 'I'll show you.'

I took her by the hand and led her into the theatre where my teacher (a fiercely intelligent but reassuringly awkward academic with a micro fringe) was packing away her books. Ruthie and I stood in the yard facing the stage. Above us, a halo of perfect blue sky. Again, I took Ruthie by the hand and led her up the stairs onto the stage itself. She kept glancing at me and my teacher like she wasn't sure that we were allowed to be here, like someone was about to stop us. I took great pleasure in watching her wander around. She looked out at the yard and the galleries of empty seats, and up at the heavens—the twelve signs of the zodiac painted on the roof above us. I wondered if, like me, she imagined herself raised high above an adoring audience. The centre point of a perfect circle of love. In the quiet of the theatre, her footsteps reverberated. '*O Romeo, Romeo*,' she said, gesturing towards the absent crowd, '*wherefore art thou Romeo?*'

I walked over to stand beside her. '*O, speak again, bright angel*.'

'*I have of late—*' said Ruthie, '*but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth*.'

'*Good heart, at what?*'

'*If you prick us, do we not bleed?*'

'*Courage, man*,' I said. '*The hurt cannot be much*.'

'What the fuck are you doing, you absolute fucking losers?' said River, who appeared in the yard below us. He and the others had been waiting for us out the front of the theatre, and they were hungry and keen to meet Ruthie.

We ate lunch at a nearby restaurant that specialised in selling gigantic pizzas to tourists. We had a view of the Thames and Tower Bridge. Ruthie smiled a lot and said very little as she picked at her garlic bread. I was

worried that my friends wouldn't like her, that they would think her basic and uncool, and that this opinion would taint me too. But I found myself more aligned with Ruthie, imagining how we all appeared through her eyes —River devouring pizza and intermittently telling everyone how tired he was, Hana and Ella discussing the ethics of teaching the Western literary canon in schools when so many marginalised writers were excluded (was it, for instance, elitist to expect working-class kids from diverse backgrounds to connect with Shakespeare, or was it elitist to assume they couldn't?). What did Ruthie make of us? What did she make of me and this life I'd created for myself on the other side of the planet?



Later, as Ruthie and I walked across Southwark Bridge, I asked her about the Corey situation, which was how we described it when we spoke on the phone. They broke up last year after his failed proposal, but he'd continued to mow her grandmother's lawn fortnightly. He'd often leave flowers, and even once a bonsai, on the doorstep for Ruthie to discover when she came home from work. Eventually (and against my advice), they got back together. Every few weeks, Corey and Ruthie had a fight about marriage. She didn't understand why they couldn't just keep going on as they were. Corey said that that was exactly the point: they were happy together, so why not get married? It was what people did.

'I know it makes no sense,' she said. 'But he's just so sure about everything. I want to live as myself, at least for a little longer.'

'It absolutely makes sense,' I said, gripping her hand. 'I wish you'd leave him. He's so boring and you're so—'

She laughed. 'There are worse things than being boring. He's a good person.'

We descended the stairs to Cannon Street station. The warm air swallowed us, made us sweat in our coats. A good person? It was a comment I'd think about in the days after she left. Would she ever think of me this way?

'You're going to stay here, aren't you?' she asked, turning to me.

'In London?'

'I don't blame you. You have it good.'

‘You could move here too,’ I said, wrapping my arms around her. ‘You can do anything you want.’ I don’t know what prompted me to say this. Was I afraid of leaving her behind, or of being left behind? Perhaps it was only the strangeness of inhabiting a life in which she was merely a visitor.



That night, we ordered sushi and ate dinner at home with Will. He’d been a little better since Ruthie’s arrival—going out more, meeting with his agent and talking about acting again.

Over dinner, I told Ruthie I’d have to spend the next day finishing an essay I’d been neglecting. She said she’d ride the London Eye and meet me when I was done.

Will scoffed. ‘That thing is so overrated. It’s for tourists.’

‘Well,’ said Ruthie, ‘I’m a tourist.’

‘Not that sort,’ he said, dipping a salmon sushi roll into soy sauce.

‘What sort?’ asked Ruthie.

‘You know, you’re not’—he chewed, searching for a word—‘gauche.’

Ruthie, I knew from experience, harboured a certain fierceness beneath her general mask of passivity—a mask that had become more fixed since her mother’s death. I never really knew what it took to coax that fierceness out of her, only that it was happening now. Will was blithely unaware of it. He went on eating innocently. It was like watching footage of a person in the moments before something terrible befell them—an earthquake, or some random act of violence.

‘Gauche?’ said Ruthie. ‘How do you know I’m not gauche?’

‘Well, for one thing, you aren’t lining up with the hordes of tourists at Buckingham Palace to get a thousand photos of the Queen’s Guard.’

‘I was part of the horde when I visited the Globe and the British Museum.’

‘That’s different,’ said Will, opening another beer. ‘That’s culture. History.’

‘What about Madame Tussauds?’ asked Ruthie.

At this, I inwardly cringed. I had not told Will about this little excursion.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Will. ‘Do you want me to tell you that you’re gauche?’

‘I’m just curious about your definition,’ said Ruthie. ‘In the British Museum I saw a Gweagal shield, the Parthenon marbles and the Benin Bronzes. All stolen. You don’t think that’s sort of gauche?’

‘You’re talking about something entirely different,’ said Will. ‘Anyway, what’s the museum supposed to do? Hand over all those artefacts just to let them be destroyed in places where they can’t be properly cared for? It isn’t as simple as you think it is.’

‘Maybe it’s not the tourists standing outside Buckingham Palace that are gauche,’ said Ruthie. ‘Maybe it’s the palace itself.’ She looked at me then, as though I might support her. I picked some grains of rice off my lap.

‘Look,’ said Will, placing his hands flat against the table, ‘the point is that the London Eye is a huge waste of time and money. But if you want to line up for an hour to sit in a dingy cabin and turn circles in the sky, then be my guest.’

‘I will,’ said Ruthie. ‘Come with me.’

‘No.’

‘Please? Like you said, I’m your guest.’

Again, Will declined, but I could tell that his mood was shifting from annoyance to—what?—charmed? He leaned back in his chair and appraised her. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘I’ll take you to the bloody London Eye and be a gauche fucking tourist for the day. Happy?’

‘Thrilled.’

I thought about cutting class to join them. But how could I backtrack without looking paranoid, desperate? I dabbed my avocado sushi roll into a puddle of soy sauce and smiled at them both. It was only one day. How much trouble could they possibly get up to in one day?

I am sick when I do look on thee

THE NEXT DAY, I WENT to class and spent the afternoon in the library working on my essay. It was a pleasantly productive day. I found a useful article about the Renaissance understanding of the mind–body connection and how it influenced representations of the self in dramatic texts of the period. I enjoyed the quiet solidarity of the other students tapping away at their laptops. If I thought about Ruthie and Will riding the London Eye, it was only fleetingly.

When I arrived home in the evening, Will was sitting alone at the dining table. It was an odd place for him to be. Usually, if he was home, he was lying on the couch or sitting on our bedroom floor in front of the mirror drinking. Two of Jillian's crystal glasses sat empty on the table.

'Where's Ruthie?' I asked.

'Ruthie?' he replied, as though he'd never heard the name in his life. 'I don't know. I think she went for a walk or something.' He came around the table and took my bags, which was something he never did.

'Are you two drinking?'

'What?'

I nodded at the old-fashioned glasses on the table.

'Just killing time until you came back. It was a tedious afternoon, actually. We don't have much in common, Ruthie and I. If she wasn't your friend, I wouldn't have gone to so much—'

My phone rang. 'Speak of the devil.'

'Listen,' said Will, moving as though to take my phone but grabbing my hand instead. 'Just leave it for a minute, won't you? I want to talk to you.'

'She might be lost.'

‘Call her back. In a minute.’

We stared at each other. Ruthie’s name glowing on the screen, the phone vibrating in my hand. After a while, it went quiet.

‘Sit down,’ he said, pulling a chair out for me. He ran his hand through his hair and picked at his nails, and I was reminded of those days back in Sydney where he would call me in a state about an upcoming show and I’d soothe him. I felt the urge to soothe him now. I took his hand in both of mine. ‘What is it?’

‘Listen,’ he said again, even though he clearly had my attention. ‘It’s not a big deal but I’m afraid Ruthie and I had a bit of a misunderstanding. I was just being funny—you know how I am—but I think she took it the wrong way. It’s possible she’s a tad upset with me.’

‘Okay,’ I said slowly, unease rising in my guts. ‘Why?’

‘I told you. It was a misunderstanding. Just my sense of humour. Not a big deal, I’m only mentioning it in case she says something to you.’

‘But what happened?’

‘Nothing. We went to the bloody London Eye, lined up for decades, then came back here to wait for you.’ Again, he picked at his nails. ‘I might have made a stupid joke.’

‘About what?’

‘God, I don’t remember. Just something about the night the three of us met. Honestly, I was just trying to make conversation.’

I let go of his hand. ‘Did you tell her that you were attracted to her?’

‘What?’

‘You told me that once.’

He laughed and shook his head in a weary sort of way. ‘Helena, it was a stupid joke. I really don’t want to make a big deal out of it.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘It’s just that you’re not actually telling me anything. Like you keep saying that it was a joke and a misunderstanding, but I still don’t know what the “it” in that sentence refers to. So if you could just clear that up, I think it would be really helpful. Help me help you, as they say.’

He stood up, shaking his head again. ‘This is exactly what I was worried about. I knew you’d be like this. The two of you are just the same.’

‘Will, what happened?’

He paused in the doorway of the dining room, pressed his hands together and held them in front of his face as though he were praying. When he spoke again, it was very slowly, as though I were being deliberately dense.

‘Nothing happened, Helena. It was a small misunderstanding. I apologised. I’m just letting you know out of respect for you. Okay?’

Before I could answer (*Um, actually not okay. In fact, very fucking far from okay. You’d better start talking before I waterboard you in your mother’s stone bathtub to get some fucking answers*) Ruthie called again. ‘Where are you?’ I asked, by way of greeting.

‘Come and meet me,’ she said. ‘I’m at that pub you like. The one near your place.’

Will went into the kitchen and opened the fridge.

‘Are you still at uni?’ she asked.

‘I’m home. So is Will.’

Ruthie went silent. In the kitchen, Will paused whatever it was he was doing. A wedge of light from the fridge cut across the floor.

‘Did he tell you?’ she asked.

‘Sort of. What—’

‘Come right away,’ she said. ‘And Helena—I’m so sorry.’

As I put on my coat, Will came back into the dining room, wanting to know what I was doing and where I was going. Though of course I was disturbed by his non-confession, I must admit, it was gratifying to have his full attention. It had been a while since he’d looked at me so intently, not since before the play and the bad reviews. I’d almost forgotten what it was to be beheld by him.

‘The pub?’ he said, when I told him my plans. ‘Great, I’m starving. There’s nothing in the fridge.’

‘You’re not invited.’

Outside, the air was biting. My breath formed a little cloud. I shoved my hands into my pockets and set off down the street.

‘Wait!’ Will appeared by my side, hastily buttoning his coat. His sleeve brushed against mine. ‘I’m sorry, okay? I don’t want us to fight over a stupid joke. Forgive me? Please? We’ll have a good night. Okay? Forget this whole thing.’

I walked silently, my head down. It was almost enjoyable, the feeling of him trying to keep up with me. Had he ever chased after me before?

‘Please, Helena? Please? Can we have a good night?’

Again, I asked him what had happened and again he told me that it was all a misunderstanding and that he was sorry. *Couldn’t that be the end of it? Please?*

The yearning way he looked at me. My god, I stored it away for my dreams.

By the time the green roof of the pub came into view, I gathered that he'd joked about being attracted to Ruthie the first time he met her, and that she'd taken it badly. I was torn between being furious with him for humiliating me and not wanting him to know that I cared.

'I knew you'd understand,' he said, putting his arm around my shoulder. 'That's what I love about you. You just get me. We have such a similar sense of humour. I think it's one of the reasons we're so good together.'

Analysing our relationship was a favourite pastime of mine—what do you love most about me? Why do you think we fell in love? Are we sexually adventurous enough? Will rarely indulged me, so this line of conversation felt like a special treat. Of course, I knew he was flattering me. But what can I say? I loved to be flattered.

'God, you're freezing.' He took my left hand in both of his and kissed my knuckles.

The smell of fried food wafted towards us. My stomach grumbled. I hadn't eaten anything since the cappuccino and muffin I'd bought outside the library. In moments of conflict, I like to think that I'll forget such earthly concerns as hunger, but it never works out that way. I was famished. 'Just apologise,' I said to Will as we went inside.

'I already did.' He squeezed my hand. 'But I'll apologise again. It's nothing. Really.'

The pub was crowded with sports fans, families eating baked dinners, and a sixtieth birthday. We spotted Ruthie at a table at the back of the pub. Above her a row of televisions showed the rugby. She'd torn open a sachet of sugar and was dipping her finger in it and putting it in her mouth. Will and I took our seats. He did not apologise. Instead, he handed out menus and kept saying how good everything looked and how hungry he was. Ruthie turned the pages of her menu slowly.

'What's everyone having?' asked Will, in an oddly bright tone. 'It's on me tonight so eat up.'

'I'm not hungry,' said Ruthie.

'The fish and chips look good,' said Will. 'Or how about the flat iron steak?'

I wished Will would just apologise already or at least acknowledge Ruthie's anger. Instead, he seemed determined to overcome it by pretending

it didn't exist. The tension made my stomach churn. He didn't know Ruthie like I did. He didn't know that nothing about her could be overcome.

'I'll have a chicken burger,' I said.

'Good choice, good choice,' said Will, as though he'd raised the fowl himself. 'I'll get the same for you, Ruthie. How about that? Otherwise, you'll be jealous when Helena's comes out. Haha! You might not be hungry now, but you will be when you're face-to-face with a burger and fries. Haha! I think I'll get the steak.' He pulled out his wallet. 'It's on me tonight,' he said again. 'I'll get us a jug of beer too, hey? Or a cocktail? Would you ladies like a cocktail?'

Ruthie slammed her menu shut.

'Just the beers then. And the burgers. I'll be back in a jiffy. Helena, help me with the drinks?'

I looked at Ruthie. She stared back at me. A slight tilt of her head. I knew that she was asking me to stay. Such a simple thing. For months afterwards, I would think about this moment—how Will took my hand and how I allowed him to lead me away.

Even as we waited in the queue at the bar, Will persisted with this manic cheerfulness, pointing out recent refurbishments and commenting on the rugby even though neither of us had any interest in it. 'You're going to have to say something,' I said. 'She's not going to let it go.'

He laughed briefly as though I'd made an amusing comment about the captain of the English rugby team (whoever that was) and ordered the food.

I carried the jug of beer and three glasses back to the table.

Ruthie was gone.

She still had not returned by the time the food was ready. Will jumped at the sound of the buzzer vibrating on the table. He collected our meals but forgot the cutlery, then had to go back a third time for serviettes after he spilled Ruthie's untouched beer on the table. All the while, he kept up his flurry of conversation—*What do you think of the new cafe next door? How about* The Sun *and their topless models? Fuck, the world is such a misogynistic hellscape. Should we share a brownie for dessert?*

'We should wait for her,' I said, as Will tucked into his steak.

'She knows where we are.'

I called her but she didn't pick up. Her backpack was gone. Meanwhile, Will went on eating and talking, chiding me for my middle-class manners—those uptight and hypocritical rules—and reaching across the table every

now and then to squeeze my hand to show that he was only joking. I picked at my shoestring fries and looked at every dark-haired woman who passed our table. My stomach grumbled. I found myself sweating. Wasn't that the problem with London—outside was too cold and inside too hot?

After I'd finished my chips, I wiped my greasy fingers on a serviette, and went to the bathroom, mostly to escape Will's stream of consciousness.

Ruthie was standing at the sink, looking at herself in the mirror and washing her face.

'There you are. I thought you'd gone for good.'

She turned to face me. 'What did he tell you?'

'I know he's acting weird, but he's sorry. He just doesn't know how—'

'For what?'

A group of women from the sixtieth birthday party burst into the bathroom, laughing wildly. Two of them stumbled into cubicles. The other inspected her makeup in the mirror and smiled at us through the glass. Ruthie ran her hands under the water, no doubt waiting for the women to leave before continuing our conversation. Once, during a heatwave in primary school, our teacher told us that the wrists were a cooling point for the body. I thought about that now as Ruthie offered her wrists to the tap. The skin was paler there, her fine blue veins visible.

'All right, love?' asked the woman, baring her teeth at the mirror.

Ruthie smiled.

The women left as they'd come, as a single raucous mass.

'What's up with you?' I asked, looking at Ruthie through the glass.

'He tried to …'

'What?'

'After the London Eye, Will kept going on about needing a drink and I was like, fine, let's go to a pub, even though I really just wanted to keep walking around, but then he said that his parents have this amazing liquor cabinet and a wine cellar and we'd be mad not to take advantage of it.' She gave a small bewildered laugh and rubbed at her wrists again. 'And then he sort of jumped on me. I basically had to hit him to get him to leave me alone.'

The bathroom door swung open and more women came in, this time a mother, her young daughter in tow, and two women teetering in heels. I squirted some soap into my hands and began to wash them just for something to do—Out, damned spot, out, I say!

‘Helena,’ said Ruthie, ‘I’m really sorry.’

How I despised that look of pity.

I needed to use the bathroom. Urgently. The muffin and cappuccino I’d had for lunch, along with the large pile of chips, gurgled in my guts. All three toilets were now occupied. I clenched my sphincter. Heat radiated off my skin.

‘Are you listening to me?’ asked Ruthie.

‘I need to pee.’

‘Fine, I’ll wait for you.’

‘Wait outside.’

‘Why?’

Because, Ruthie, everyone, including my deceitful boyfriend desires you more than me, and I don’t relish the thought of having you witness me shit myself in public. So please find it within your heart to spare me this final indignity. ‘I want to be alone,’ I said.

‘Well, I can’t go out there. Not with him. Why did you bring him?’

A toilet flushed—is there a more glorious sound?—and one of the women in heels teetered out of the cubicle. I tried to act casual, smiling slightly as I passed her, not wanting to reveal my desperation. But as soon as the door was safely bolted, I pulled down my jeans and reefed off my underwear. On the floor between my feet lay the wrapper of a sanitary pad. The fun fact read: *Snails can sleep for up to three years*.

‘Poopy,’ announced the little girl from the neighbouring cubicle.

Her mother shushed her.

‘Poopy,’ came the voice again.

If I had to have my heart shattered by the love of my life and my best friend, could it not involve me weeping beautifully somewhere on a plush velvet couch? Must I be condemned to sudden and explosive bouts of diarrhoea in a public bathroom? How I wished that I were a snail so that I could curl into myself and sleep for three years.

Will wanted Ruthie.

When I emerged from the cubicle, she was sitting on the sink with her back against the mirror and her eyes closed. She looked like a fallen angel. Beside her, I felt filthy, laid low by the sweaty weakness that comes with the sudden violent evacuation of the bowels. Where, in the body, does humiliation reside? Not in the blushing cheek or the lowered head, but in

the roiling guts. The most unfortunate of organs. Destined for a life of shame.

I washed my hands, hoping that the goopy sweetness of the soap would cover the stench that everyone, including Ruthie, was politely pretending not to notice. My heart raced. My glasses slipped down my nose. I was sweating. I wanted to know in minute detail what had happened between her and Will, yet I feared asking. Did he unbutton her jeans? Put his hands up her blouse? Stick his tongue down her throat? I washed my hands again. Let the cool water soothe me. 'What did he say?' It was all I dared to ask.

'I … he seemed to think I'd be into it. Like we'd already agreed upon it.' She glanced at me. 'He kept saying it was okay, and I was like—what part of this is okay?'

I looked down at my hands. 'Did he say anything about me?' It was a humiliating question. But really, how much lower could I sink?

'What do you mean?'

'Like, when he … Did he tell you not to tell me?'

'He didn't mention you,' said Ruthie. 'I left as soon as I could … get him … to stop. I wanted to tell you right away, but you had a class and that essay you've been worried about. I'm so sorry.'

My face, in the mirror, looked tired and waxy. My hair damp with sweat. A small scattering of pimples had broken out across my chin. For the first time since moving to London, I felt truly homesick. The thought of my bedroom back in Sydney with my purple bedspread and my parents across the hall made me want to cry. I'd hoped Ruthie would be impressed with the life I'd made here in London. I'd wanted her to see that I, Helena Wood, had done it, that I was living the big beautiful life we'd dreamed of in school. Instead, here I was, homesick and humiliated in the toilet of a pub.

'Are you all right?' asked Ruthie. She made a sweeping gesture that seemed to encompass Will, herself, me, and the cubicle I'd just defiled.

How could I reconcile Will—my love, my sensitive actor, the man who'd just bought me dinner and was waiting outside—with this person—this traitor—she was describing?

'What are we going to do?'

'Huh?'

'Where should we go?' She pulled her phone out of her backpack. 'I know it's late notice but there are loads of hostels around here. We should be able to get something.'

Again, I wanted to cry. Richard and Jillian's beautiful townhouse with its chandeliers and library and stone bathtub was waiting for me around the corner. I had the key in my handbag. This morning I'd woken up in the soft double bed on the top floor, Will asleep beside me. Was I to wake up tomorrow in a bunk bed in some dingy hostel with eleven strangers packed in around me? Perhaps the homesickness I felt was not for my Sydney life but for my London life that was, with every swipe of Ruthie's thumb across her phone, disappearing before my eyes. Everything that I'd dreamed of, worked for, gone in an instant. 'Come on,' I said, wiping my hands on my jeans. 'We can't stay here all night.'

'Where are we going?'

'The food's getting cold.'

Ruthie stared at me. 'You're not staying with him.'

'I'm tired. I might be sick, actually. And it's getting late. I don't want to traipse through the streets looking for a hostel.'

'What about me?' she asked.

'Let's just go home. We can figure it out in the morning.'

'What about your friends? We could stay with them?'

I pictured myself standing outside Ella's apartment with my worldly belongings at my feet. She'd want an explanation. Was this the British boyfriend that I was always raving about? The one who loved me so much he'd brought me halfway across the world to be with him? The one who my friends were always envious of? *Oh, Helena, you're so lucky to have found your person. Oh, Helena, do you have any idea what a nightmare the apps are? You're so lucky to be on the other side of all that*. Was I to be that cliché of a woman—cheated and wronged, standing on her friend's doorstep? If only I could go back in time to last night when Ruthie, Will and I were eating sushi and discussing the London Eye. I would not go to my stupid class or work on my pointless essay that no one was ever going to read. I'd go with them and the thing that had happened would never have happened.

'Let's just go home,' I said. 'We can work this out tomorrow.'

'His house is not our home.'

'It's my home.'

She shook her head. 'Do you even care about me?'

'Are you sure it wasn't … like a …?'

'A joke? Is that what he told you?'

‘He’s … let’s just get some sleep. I’m so tired.’ It was true; I felt hollowed out, like I might sink to the floor at any moment. ‘We can talk about it tomorrow. Please?’

‘We can’t go back there.’

‘Ruthie, I have a life here. You can’t expect me to blow it all up just because …’

She closed her eyes again, like I’d hit her.

‘Please,’ I said, again, ‘please, let’s just go home. We’ll figure this out in the morning.’

I dried my hands on a paper towel and threw it in the bin. I held open the door, but Ruthie made no move to follow me. A jaunty pop song I didn’t recognise was playing in the pub. The TVs flashed an advertisement for Ladbrokes. I feared that Ruthie would leave me hanging, force me to close the door on her. But then she slid off the counter and walked past me.

Back at the table, Will was waiting for us. He told us that he’d been guarding our chicken burgers and that he was very tempted to eat them but had restrained himself. Haha! Lucky you! All the while, he glanced between me and Ruthie as though he feared one of us might say or do something that would cause his absurd farce of normality to collapse. I found that I shared his fear. As I pressed my hand to my stomach and complained of food poisoning, I worried that Ruthie would do something dramatic—shout at him or me, flip the table over, storm out—that would be impossible to ignore. How was it that Will and I had become aligned against her in this way? But Ruthie didn’t say or do anything. Instead, she was very quiet. Will got takeaway containers for the burgers. We put on our coats and walked home.



The next morning, Ruthie was gone. Although a part of me expected this, the sight of her empty room—the linen folded neatly on the bed, the wardrobe emptied of everything except for Jillian’s skiing clothes—undid something in me. The emptiness was absolute, as though she’d never been there. I leaned against the doorframe. She was gone. All I’d asked of her was time—one night—to figure this out. I should’ve known she’d refuse me. Although her flight back to Sydney wasn’t for a few days, I already knew that I wouldn’t see her again.

I didn’t speak to Will, but he didn’t seem to mind. He spent the day caring for me. He said that the food poisoning was probably a result of the university kiosk. Had I seen the way they left the milk sitting on the countertop for hours? He brought me lemonade and toast and blankets as I curled up on the couch and tried to sleep. I really did feel sick. The weakness that I’d felt last night settled into my bones. He pressed his hand to my forehead and caressed my hair. He cleaned the house in preparation for his parents’ return. He was so gentle, so sweet, how could I believe the images in my own mind—his tongue down her throat, his hands down her jeans, up her blouse? But she hadn’t said that, had she? That was my imagination working against me. If only Ruthie had given me a chance to work this all out. If only I hadn’t left them alone. Again, I thought wistfully of the snail, of its years of slumber.

How now, spirit? Whither wander you?

USING THE LAST OF HER money, including the emergency funds Clare had given her, Ruthie got on the next available flight to Paris. The idea of Paris had come to her late at night as she'd been lying in bed trying not to think of Helena and Will together in the next room. She'd chosen him. Of course she had. There were still a few days before Ruthie's flight back to Sydney. She might as well make the most of being in Europe. There was no knowing when or if she'd ever be back. Also, her father was in Paris.

When Ruthie was younger, she had, like most children of an estranged parent, wondered what it would be like if her father was part of her life. She'd pictured him embracing her at Charles de Gaulle and buying her a croissant at a cafe by the Seine. He would tear his croissant into little pieces and dip each piece into his coffee before eating it. This was something she'd seen on the television show *Madeline* where all the little French girls wore matching dresses and lived together at boarding school. Sometimes she imagined she was one of those girls and one day her father would pick her up and tell her how sorry he was that he'd been away, but he was back now for good. It wasn't as if she took these daydreams particularly seriously. In all of them, her father was far too young—her only reference being the photographs that Clare kept, forever frozen at the age he was when he left.

It therefore came as a surprise that, amid the onslaught of the Paris crowds and the metro and the French language she'd never learned, Ruthie felt disappointed. Of course, she'd not really believed she'd find her father.

She had no address, no phone number, no one to ask. It was herself she was disappointed in. In coming here, she'd allowed herself to be taken in by the ridiculous dream of him. What a fool to go crying to a daddy who didn't exist.

She sat in a McDonald's on Champs-Élysées and halfheartedly googled him. As expected, she found nothing much. An old Twitter account with a cartoon wolfhound as the profile picture that could have been his. If she made her own account, she could contact him. But what would she say? She'd have to frame her message casually, keep it light, no pressure. It seemed like a lot of work. It probably wasn't even him. What were the chances he'd want to hear from her anyway? Not once had he made any effort to contact her. She'd known this and yet still she'd come here. She chewed the edge of her coffee cup. It was pathetic. Here she was, a lonely orphan girl in a fast-food restaurant.

An American couple in matching baseball caps sat down beside her and began poring over photos on their phones and pointing out the unfamiliar items on the menu. *Macarons and parfait!* A group doing a rollerblading tour sailed past the entrance. Ruthie decided that she'd never tell anyone about her spontaneous trip to Paris. Already, she was scrubbing it clean from her mind. She opened Instagram and Facebook, blocked Helena, closed her father's Twitter account, and put down her phone.

A family with a pram and several shopping bags wandered about the tables, the father carrying a tray of Happy Meals, looking for somewhere to sit. Ruthie relinquished her table though she would have liked to sit there a little longer, and the father smiled at her as he sat down. She crushed her coffee cup in her hand and threw it in the bin. Why was it that no one ever chose her? Not her father, not Helena. Was she expected to go on trying forever, twisting herself into knots?

On her phone, a new message appeared. Helena begging for forgiveness? No. Clare. Ruthie typed out a message saying that she and Helena were having a wonderful time in London and were just on their way to the British Museum. The lie came easily enough. She sometimes wondered if her propensity for lying made her a bad person. But it had been a necessary part of life with her mother. She put her phone in the front pouch of her backpack. On the way out, she grabbed a handful of sugar sachets and slipped them into her coat pocket.

It was too early to go back to the hostel. Perhaps she'd visit a museum or get a photo beneath the Arc de Triomphe. She started walking. It was a cold sunny day, the trees mostly bare, the sky a hard blue. There were worse things than being sad and lonely in a beautiful place. The vast majesty of the avenue seemed to deepen her feelings, concentrating them in her chest as a piercing ache that was almost pleasant. It was the anger that was harder to get a hold of. She felt it could explode in any direction at any moment—at the memory of her own passivity when Will cajoled her into going back to the house; or his hands burrowing under her blouse, his breath hot on her neck; or the humiliation of having to pretend to cry just to get him to stop, not to mention the fear—the real fear—jammed up with all that. Then Helena, acting as though it was nothing. Helena following him into their bedroom and shutting the door.

Ruthie should never have picked a fight with him. It was that stupid argument about the word 'gauche' that had started the whole thing. She'd only been annoyed by his sense of superiority, sitting in his parents' posh house, wolfing down the sushi she'd bought and thinking he was better than everyone. And then she'd made the additional mistake of feeling bad for him. Worried that she'd really offended him. Who was she, after all—a guest in his house—showing him up like that? And so she'd backtracked into flirtation. *Come with me. Please? I'm your guest*. She hadn't wanted to drink with him at the house. It would've been so easy to blow him off in the city, wander around on her own and meet Helena at the library. Only she hadn't wanted to offend him. Perhaps it wasn't even that—merely that she couldn't be bothered to refuse him; that at some point, it simply became easier to do as he wanted. It made her sick. Okay, so she wasn't blameless. But why did she have to be so careful all the time—watching what she said and how she said it and how it might be interpreted—while people like him got to go around doing whatever they wanted, laughing at people and calling them gauche and sticking their tongues and hands wherever they wanted.

On a whim, she called Corey. She didn't even look at the time in Sydney and was about to hang up, when he answered.

'Is it too late to talk?' she asked.

'No. Of course not. Never.'

'What … where are you?'

‘Just driving home. I’m building a vegetable patch for Mum, and this guy was giving away fertiliser and garden tunnels. Literally giving them away. Can you believe it? Had to drive a bit, but definitely worth it.’

‘That’s so nice.’

‘Anyway, here I am talking about myself. How are you? How’s London?’

‘Good,’ she said. ‘I went to the London Eye.’

‘That huge Ferris wheel? Man, that’s so cool. I’ve seen pictures of it.’

Ruthie couldn’t help but smile. ‘It is cool, isn’t it?’

‘So, you’re having a good time?’

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘But I miss home. I think I’ll be relieved to get back.’

He was quiet for a moment. She listened to the low thrum of the ute, pictured him driving around the wide flat streets of their suburb. ‘I miss you too, Ruthie.’

When she arrived at the Arc de Triomphe, she walked through the underground passageway and joined the long queue to stand beneath the arch. Will would probably think it gauche, all the tourists in their bright jackets with their phones out. She hated that he was in her head. What was it about her that made him think she’d go behind Helena’s back? That he could get away with it? ‘It’s okay,’ he’d said, smiling down at her and brushing her cheek. ‘It’s okay.’

Her feet ached as she waited in the queue. It was better when she was walking. All this standing around made her mind race. She leaned against the wall, her backpack pulling on her shoulders.

When she finally ascended the stairs to the monument, she found she felt very small, crushed beneath all that imposing stone, the battling statues with their swords and angels. A Scandinavian family with two teenage children asked her to take a photo of them. *Smile! Smile!* They stood close together, their arms wrapped around each other’s backs. When the mother asked if Ruthie wanted her own photo taken, she declined. What she really wanted was to leave this heavy crowded place. She longed for the smallness of her grandmother’s house; its pink bathroom and neat lawn.

Here she comes, curst and sad

BY THE END OF SUMMER, Will decided that it was time to go back to Australia. I was about to submit my dissertation: *Witches and Widows: Gender in Jacobean England*, and my classes had finished. Will hadn't had any work since *Twelfth Night* except for a small and unsatisfying gig teaching Shakespeare at a community centre, and he was tired of the London crowds, their judgement and snobbery. He wanted clean air and wide-open spaces. The famous actress who'd played Viola was doing the press tour for the second instalment of her teen dystopian franchise which had done well at the box office. She appeared to have put Shakespeare behind her. That time in our lives—rehearsals in West End and late nights of running lines—seemed far away now, almost unbelievable. Will applied for a working holiday visa. A fresh start was what he needed. To get away from the oppression of his parents' house. To begin again.

The prospect of leaving London saddened me. I'd miss the excitement and promise of being a student abroad. I'd miss living in a beautiful townhouse. I'd miss university and, most of all (or at least on the same level as the townhouse), I'd miss my friends. We were all drifting back to our various countries, except for River who was going to stay with friends in Iceland for a while. I was unprepared for the grief of knowing that the bond we'd forged over the last year could never be recreated. Part of our lives was ending.

When I told my parents of my imminent return over video call, I thought they'd be happy. Instead, they suggested I pick up some extra shifts at the bookshop and go travelling around Europe.

'Don't you want me to come home?' I asked.

It was evening in Sydney, and my parents were sitting on the couch in the living room, the TV paused.

‘Of course we do,’ said Tom. ‘But you’re in London! You could take a train to Edinburgh or Brussels. Fly to Italy.’

I pictured me and Will lying on a beach in Positano, but I knew he wouldn’t go for it. He seemed determined to get as far away from his parents as possible. All he talked about was Australia. It’d been months since I’d seen him so excited. ‘We’re ready to come home,’ I said. ‘Actually, we can’t wait.’

‘So Will’s coming too?’ asked Mary. She glanced at Tom and I felt sure that some secret message passed between them. ‘That’s … well, isn’t that wonderful?’

‘You know your mother and I backpacked around Europe when we were young,’ said Tom. ‘Best time of my life—apart from you kids, of course. There was this time in Thessaly when we gorged ourselves on feta and ouzo and then had to get an early flight to—’

‘I don’t see what this has to do with me coming home.’

‘I just don’t want you to miss out,’ said Tom. ‘But of course, it’s your life.’

‘Yeah. Thanks. I’m well aware.’

The question of what to do with the Rest of My Life felt more insistent than ever. I was now a Master of Shakespeare. But where did that leave me?

One day, when my friends and I were eating olives in Borough Market, Hana announced her plans to study teaching once she returned to Tokyo. It was one of the last days we’d spend together, and I had the sense that we were all trying to distract ourselves from the gravity of the moment with free samples and overly optimistic talk of the future.

‘I want a life where I actually help people,’ said Hana. ‘Change lives. Make a difference. Is that corny to say?’

‘Dreadfully,’ said River, stuffing an olive into his mouth.

‘Artists help people,’ said Ella. ‘We need art to live.’

‘Artists,’ said River, ‘are as bloody useless as they come.’

I thought of my high school English teacher with her black heels and piercing questions. How I adored her.

The next day, I looked up teaching degrees in Sydney. The prospect of returning home without some sort of plan worried me. If I ran into people

from school and they asked me what I was doing, I wanted to have an answer.

My nervousness about heading home was also due to Ruthie. We hadn't spoken since she'd left London earlier in the year. I'd expected a fight. A long phone call in which she laid out the ways in which I'd failed her. Surely our years of friendship at least warranted this? But when I called, she didn't answer. It was the longest we'd ever gone without speaking. At least in London, her absence wasn't so obvious. In Sydney, it would be everywhere.

If I was under any illusion that her anger would wane with time, it was dispelled one night when I was scrolling through Instagram. Tiger had posted a photograph of Ruthie and Corey. Ruthie resting her head on Corey's shoulder, her hand held high to the camera to show off a ring—and not a gaudy engagement ring but a simple wedding band. *So happy for these kids*, the caption read. I got out of bed, where Will was lying beside me, watching a YouTube video about a man who lived off-grid on a farm in Texas, and locked myself in the bathroom.

Ruthie, married? For a long time, I sat on the edge of the bath, the tiles cold beneath my feet. I tried to cry to make myself feel better, but nothing came. Ruthie, married?

More photographs appeared on Tiger's grid: Ruthie and Tiger wearing sarongs and drinking from coconuts; Ruthie and Corey standing in the turquoise shallows of a white sand beach; Ruthie walking alone along a pier, her back to the camera, the vast blue of the ocean ahead of her. Malolo Island, Fiji.

So she'd gone ahead and married Corey. Taken him on the trip she'd promised to take with me. Had Tiger honeymooned with them? What sort of person took their boss on their honeymoon? I had no doubt that Ruthie had orchestrated all of this to spite me—to show me how completely and unequivocally she could shut me out of her life; how little I meant to her. In the photos, she wore dark glasses that made her look glamorous, Corey's sunburnt arm wrapped around her shoulders. How I hated her.

When I went back into the bedroom, Will was scrolling through his phone, his face bathed in blue light. I told him about Ruthie and, although he didn't look up from his screen, I sensed his body tighten. We rarely spoke about her.

'Good for her,' he said.

‘Do you think we’ll ever get married?’

He smirked, still not looking up from his phone. ‘We don’t need a piece of paper to validate our relationship.’

He was right of course. What was marriage but an antiquated institution designed to oppress women? But when I closed my eyes, I dreamed I was in a white dress in his grandmother’s rose garden, Ruthie adjusting my veil, smiling, telling me how perfect I was.



We left London in autumn. The streets were slick with rain. Everything, a wet grey. I spent our last few weeks giving away my belongings to charity shops and friends. It amazed me how much I’d accumulated. All the trappings of a life. Richard and Jillian drove us to the airport. They could barely contain their relief at finally having the house back to themselves.

As we boarded the plane, I checked the time difference between Sydney and London. We would lose nine hours.

‘We’re travelling to the future,’ said Will.

I smiled, though I had the distinct feeling of being pulled back into the past.



Time in Sydney moved quickly. Will and I rented a tiny apartment in Surry Hills. It was one of those newish places where everything is made from plastic but designed to look like something else—vinyl flooring made to look like timber, the wall panels in the bathroom made to look like brushed graphite. Even the plants in the small communal courtyard on the ground level were fake. A canopy of plastic leaves fading in the sun.

To pay for our tiny apartment with its paper-thin walls, I got a job as an English tutor. The company I worked for was on the second level of a building in the city, sandwiched between a real estate business and a laser skin clinic. Written across the glass doors of the tutoring company was a quote the owner attributed to Albert Einstein (though a cursory search on the internet rendered this claim dubious at best)—‘Intellectual growth should commence at birth and cease only at death.’ It was supposed to be inspirational, but it always sounded threatening to me. Certainly, my students—primary school kids with untied laces and sticky shirts, or

monosyllabic teens coerced by parents into additional hours of study—had the appearance of being delivered to their deaths as they arrived each afternoon for our lessons.

Every weekend, my parents would pick me up from my apartment and we would get breakfast at one of the nearby cafes where the baristas were tattooed and the crockery was eclectic. Afterwards, they'd drive me back to their place with Will's and my dirty laundry on the back seat so that I could make use of their washing machine. Half-heartedly, I'd tell them that I could use a laundromat next time, and they'd insist that it was a nice outing for them. I think they felt sorry for me.

I must admit that I enjoyed those hours I spent in their home waiting for the washing to dry. To be able to read on the couch without hearing the neighbours' toilet flush and to feel natural light upon my skin, were things I no longer took for granted. The only downside was that Chippy, my mother's Cavalier King Charles spaniel and usurper of her heart, seemed to resent the return of the prodigal daughter. She'd follow me about the house as though suspicious I'd make off with the silverware. If I had the audacity to take a nap in my old bedroom, I'd wake to find her glaring at me like she was about to murder me in my sleep.

I never visited Ruthie, though I thought about her often. From what I could tell (based on Corey's Instagram) they were living in Clare's house. The fact that I was living outside of the parental home with a partner who didn't refer to himself online as 'a happy hubby' made me feel better about our estrangement. Any objective observer would consider my life to be more impressive. If only there was one. What a comfort that would be.

Still, I found myself missing her. Whenever I played tennis with my parents, I felt her absence in the empty square of the blue court. Whenever Corey posted a picture of her proudly displaying a cake she'd made, I couldn't help but think of those afternoons we spent together at her grandmother's house. Why did she have to be such an intense person? When other friends fought, they ignored each other for a few weeks then exploded into a fight, at the end of which they either made up or broke up. Ruthie would not allow me the catharsis of a cataclysmic ending. If you'd have told me that a friendship spanning years could have ended so quietly, so unceremoniously, I wouldn't have believed it. But this is the way we ended.

Once, around Christmas, I was at the supermarket with my mother and I saw Clare perusing the tinned fruit aisle. My immediate reaction was to scurry away like a fugitive and take refuge in the pet supplies aisle. Why did I behave as though I had something to hide?



The next year, I began my Master's of Teaching at the same university where I'd done my arts degree. The sandstone buildings and green lawns were the same, only my place within it had disappeared. This time around, I was one of the older students. My friends from the dramatic society had graduated. Those who were there seemed indecently young. The newsagency where I'd worked had become a frozen yoghurt shop. I was twenty-three and already reminiscing about how things were back in my day. I didn't linger on campus in between classes. As a result, I made no friends and for the first time in my life I didn't mind. I was tired of being a student, tired of feeling like I'd stuck around too long.

Will regained his passion for acting (for a while) by writing, directing and starring in a production of *Hamlet* in which he played every part. Without other actors, nor the unnecessary distraction of sets, props and costumes, he explained, the play was boiled down to its core. Shakespeare's language was given the space to breathe. The psychological themes of the play were made all the more potent. To prepare for this role, he began working out at the local gym every morning. As an actor, he said, his body was his tool. The vessel through which the gift of his imagination reached the world. He came home glistening with sweat and creative fervour before I'd even had a chance to drink my morning coffee.

The play opened at a small theatre in Newtown during a festival for emerging artists. The community was supportive. People praised Will for his ambition and for his mastery of iambic pentameter, but there was something overly kind in their compliments, the way a parent or teacher might show extra care towards the most struggling child. One reviewer had no such qualms. He simply titled his review: *Why? That is the question*.

On the final night, as Hamlet dropped to his knees in despair, Will injured himself on a nail. He bled right onto the stage, and the show ended in act three. Will limped around the audience apologising to everyone, but no one seemed to mind much.

Later, as we waited at the medical centre for a tetanus shot, he raged against the small-mindedness of Sydney. The lack of appetite for any true creative experimentation. I soothed him as best I could, graciously not mentioning the fact that it had been his idea to leave London, and quietly hoping that he'd use the opportunity to pick up more shifts at the bar so that I could spend less time at the tutoring centre boring innocent children and myself to death.

For a while, I wished for him to be happy. Then I wished that he would allow me into his sadness. But he did neither. He simply replaced his passion for acting with that old habit of sitting in front of the mirror and drinking as though he were starring in a Johnnie Walker advertisement. I suggested he apply for a job at the British Consulate where he'd worked in our undergraduate days—just until his acting took off—but he said that his father had organised that for him and he didn't want to ask Richard for any favours. They weren't on good terms.

It was my mother who eventually pulled Will out of it. Through her work at the children's hospital, she found him a job as a clown. To my surprise, he liked it. Clowning, he explained, had a long and fascinating history. Think of Shakespeare's wise and honest fools. Think of the mischievous Zanni in commedia dell'arte. Wasn't it better—nobler, purer—to use his creative talents for the benefit of children rather than in the pursuit of fame and status?

I began to dream again. I dreamed of those nights Will and I read lines from *Twelfth Night* and made love on the floor. I dreamed the play was a success. I dreamed he proposed to me in his grandmother's garden. I dreamed his mother wept as she welcomed me into the family. I dreamed of calling Ruthie and asking her to be my maid of honour. She would say yes —of course she would—we were best friends. Every night I added to my dreams—little details and embellishments, like the cut of my dress or the way Will fumbled his words, or the loving brush of his thumb across my cheek—so that they became real. Masterpieces, if I do say so myself. They were so satisfying they buoyed me through the days and weeks.



Just after Easter, Corey posted a picture on Instagram. There, nestled in that grid of buck's parties and surfing trips, was a pink baby swaddled in a

blanket. *My boy*, the caption read. Corey had tagged Ruthie. I flicked through the photos. The child's eyes were squeezed shut, his tiny fists clenched. I zoomed in on the little fingers, the feathery tufts of dark hair. The sight appalled me. Ruthie had a baby? How could this be?

We hadn't spoken since London. Often, I imagined our conversations. I'd tell her how insane it was that my brother had bought an apartment and was now living with a girlfriend who seemed to think he was a comic genius. We'd talk about the 'Blank Space' music video and why pop music was never taken as seriously as rock and how it was probably sexist.

All of this is to say that I'd believed Ruthie's life was chugging alongside mine this whole time. That when we inevitably reunited, we'd be just as we'd always been. But there she was, spinning off in an entirely new direction. Leaving me behind. I realised then that she would never relent, that the rift between us would only grow deeper and wider with time. If we were ever going to see each other again, it would be up to me.

I drafted and redrafted messages to her. It was strange to see our text history, frozen in time. My last message was a benign '*where are you? xx*' from just over a year ago. The sight of those two casual kisses sliced open the pain of our estrangement all over again. What should I say to her? *What's new with you?* Or, *A fucking baby? How could you do this to me?* In the end, it was my mother who convinced me to go with: *Congratulations! I'd love to see you sometime*. Ruthie didn't reply. I waited almost a full thirty minutes before texting Corey. He returned a thumbs-up emoji and dropped a pin to the hospital. Ever the wordsmith. It occurred to me that he may not have noticed my disappearance from Ruthie's life. Had she not deigned our breakup worthy enough to cry over? Had she not talked about me every single day?



When I arrived at the hospital, Ruthie burst into tears. Not the response I was hoping for. I was carrying an enormous bunch of pink helium balloons, a plush elephant carrying a flag that read *Welcome little one*, and a tray of assorted Easter themed donuts which I'd panic-bought at the service station. Ruthie was sitting up in bed, and a nurse was taking her blood pressure, the cuff squeezing her arm. Numbers flashed on the small screen. Ruthie's dark hair was pulled on top of her head and her eyes appeared large and glossy,

like she was either tired out of her mind or more awake than ever. Corey stood by the window cradling the baby, the child's feathery hair poking out of the blanket.

'Don't mind me,' said Ruthie, wiping her eyes. 'I'm like this all the time now. A Qantas ad brought me to tears this morning. I think it's the drugs. Or the baby. Or the fact my whole body is swollen.' She wiped her face again and grinned. 'It's good to see you.'

'You have a baby,' I said.

She laughed. 'It appears so.'

I felt slightly ridiculous standing there with my balloons and elephant and donuts. The nurse released Ruthie from the blood pressure monitor and tried to wheel the machine past me, but I was taking up so much room we did an awkward little dance.

The room seemed quiet without the nurse. There was a large armchair beside Ruthie's bed, but it was covered with magazines, a box of nappies and an enormous hamper of essential oils and bath salts. Tiger, probably. It was hideously tasteful. Of course, she'd beaten me here.

'It's a boy,' said Corey. 'Why the pink balloons?'

I looked at Ruthie and she smiled. *Because, Corey, we must free ourselves from the shackles of gender stereotypes and live full lives as complex individuals*. 'They're for Ruthie,' I said, putting the donuts and elephant on the little table by her bed and tying the balloons to the back of a chair.

Corey offered me the baby. 'Want a cuddle?'

'Oh, no thank you.'

Corey laughed but made no move to withdraw the child, who squirmed and shook his tiny fists. 'You serious?'

'I don't know how,' I said. 'And I'm not really a baby person.'

'I thought everyone was a baby person.' Corey brought the child close to his chest and turned away as though protecting his progeny from the Wicked Witch of the West.

'It took me some time too,' said Ruthie. 'But you'll get the hang of it.'

The notion that she might keep me around long enough to get the hang of it made my heart swell with hope. She reached for Corey, and he placed the baby in her arms. The child made a soft gurgling noise and Ruthie brought her nose to his forehead and sniffed deeply. Corey smiled down on them both. I looked at the white bedsheets. This intimate scene unnerved me.

Who was I but an interloper into their familial bliss? I'll admit I was jealous of the child, and of Corey, for the claim they had on her.

'So, Helena,' asked Corey, 'what are you doing with yourself these days? Still studying?'

'Teaching. Well, studying to be a teacher.'

'And Will? He still acting?'

Where had this sudden inquisitiveness come from? Had fatherhood cracked open Corey's long dormant interest in the outside world? 'He's a clown,' I said. 'For the children's hospital. Very rewarding. He'll go back to acting eventually. He just, you know, wants to give back.'

It was obvious to me that I was vastly cooler than Corey and yet the facts of my life didn't currently support this. An irritating predicament.

The baby made another gurgling sound that could almost have been a laugh. He was a few days old and already thought I was a joke. I glanced at Ruthie, worried that the mention of Will's name would dredge up that night in London.

'Hey, love,' said Ruthie, looking up at Corey. 'Do you think you could get me one of those yoghurts from the cafeteria?'

When we were alone—as much as we could be with the child between us—Ruthie told me again that it was good to see me. She asked after my family, and I told her about my parents' horrible dog and James's girlfriend who was always shrieking in laughter at every inane thing he said. By the end, I was a little breathless.

'Sounds like love,' said Ruthie.

'Yeah. Or delusion. What about you? Where's Clare?'

At the mention of her grandmother's name, Ruthie wept again. Because she was holding the baby, she made no effort to wipe away the tears. 'She's sick. Cancer.'

I picked up a tissue and awkwardly dabbed at her face. Clare? Cancer? How had Ruthie's life changed so much without me? I pictured the old woman perusing tinned fruit in the grocery store, and pruning the camellias, and packing her bag for aquarobics.

I squeezed Ruthie's hand. 'I'm so sorry—'

She pulled me to her, so close that our noses touched. 'I don't know if I can do this.'

'What?'

‘This.’ She glanced down at the baby, speaking quietly as though worried he’d hear her.

‘Of course, you can,’ I said. ‘You’re already doing it.’

She shook her head, tears streaming down her cheeks.

I wiped her face with my wet tissue. ‘It’s those stupid fucking Qantas ads, Ruthie. They get you every time. You’ll be the best mum. And look, you have a cool baby. He’s already laughing at everything. Not like the other boring babies around here. Just crying and shitting themselves. Useless, the lot of them.’

She laughed. ‘Leo.’

‘What?’

‘His name’s Leo. Corey wouldn’t allow Heathcliff or Romeo.’

‘No appreciation for literature.’ I stroked the baby’s chubby fist. ‘I can live with Leo.’

‘Hold him,’ said Ruthie. ‘Don’t be scared.’

I was terrified, not just because I’d never held a baby and it was possible that I’d drop him if he started crying, but because he’d really be here—an undeniable weight in my arms, proof that Ruthie and I would never be the same again, that our lives had diverged for good. But I was trying to make her believe that everything would turn out all right, so what choice did I have but to pretend I believed it too?

I looked down at the baby. Leo. I tried to make out which of his features he’d inherited from Ruthie, but he was mostly just pink and squishy. Very slowly, and under Ruthie’s guidance, I picked him up. He made a slight grumble of protest and kicked my boob but otherwise tolerated me. He smelled of milk and Vaseline and gazed up at the white ceiling as though it were the Sistine Chapel. ‘Hi, Leo,’ I said. ‘I’m your godmother, Helena.’

‘What?’ asked Ruthie. ‘Since when?’

‘Just think about it.’

‘I wish my mum was here. How am I supposed to …’

‘You’re not her, Ruthie,’ I said. ‘And you’re not alone. You have Clare. And Corey who has some pretty dated views about gender and really should read more, but is, you know, otherwise fine. And you have me.’

She wiped her eyes and smiled. ‘I miss her so much.’

‘I miss you.’

Leo burped magnificently and vomited a small puddle of milk onto my dress. It trickled down my chest, thick as cottage cheese.

‘Oh, fuck off,’ I said.

Ruthie laughed. ‘Look, he’s chosen you.’



Once Ruthie came home from the hospital, we began to see each other again, meeting at Clare’s house where she and Corey and now the baby all lived. We went for long walks around the neighbourhood, me pushing Clare in her wheelchair, Ruthie with the pram, Corey telling us the names of plants. It was strange to walk the streets of our childhood as adults, to pass the bus stop where girls still waited in their white blouses and tartan skirts. They were always touching each other, I noticed. Draping their arms over their friends’ shoulders, sitting on each other’s laps, sharing earphones and gum and lip balm.

Sometimes, we went to the local pool. I sat with Leo on a blanket on the grass while Corey bought hot chips and Ruthie and Clare walked in the shallow pool. Clare had given up aquarobics now that it hurt too much to move, but the water soothed her. She kept telling Ruthie that she would teach her to swim, as though they had all the time in the world. Occasionally, an old classmate stopped by for a chat. Leo gazed at their silicone hats, and the goggle rings around their eyes, as though he’d never seen anything as wonderous.

At home, when Clare and Leo were sleeping, Corey would bring in camellias from the garden, and Ruthie and I would bake. She made honey tarts with preserved figs and almonds, burnt Basque cheesecakes, lemon meringue pies, flourless chocolate cakes with mascarpone and raspberries. We never really talked about Will. It was our silent agreement. Whenever we discussed my life, I referred to him vaguely and as little as possible, and Ruthie never asked any questions. We would eat the baked goods when they were hot from the oven, the two of us moving quietly so as not to wake Clare and Leo. I’d tell her that she should open her own bakery. I even came up with potential names—*Let Them Eat Cake* or *I Can’t Eat Muffins in an Agitated Manner*. She said these were sentences, not names, and sent me away with Tupperware containers full of food that I’d mostly finish off on the drive home. Sometimes, I’d think of our school days, those afternoons in my bedroom, the sleepovers where I’d wake to find Ruthie’s

foot in my face. I missed our closeness. But what could I do? At least she was back in my life.



When Clare died that winter, Ruthie redecorated the house. She took down most of the photographs of her father and replaced them with pictures of Angela, Clare, Corey, Leo and me. Her family, she said. One photo I'd never seen before—Ruthie would have been about nine or ten years old. She was sitting at a picnic table with Angela and Clare. Between them was a pink birthday cake decorated with Smarties. Only one photo of Ruthie's father remained, carefully taped together where it had once been torn—he, Ruthie and Angela were on a dirt road somewhere, and had stopped to look at a horse that had come up to the fence.

I helped Ruthie and Corey repaint the kitchen a lemon yellow because she wanted something warm and happy. She had some of Clare's doilies framed and placed a tiger's eye gemstone on the sideboard in the living room beside the bonsai Corey had given her. We listened to Taylor Swift's *1989* while she cried on the floor, and I sang along loudly to make her laugh. It was almost like we were children again, except for all the sadness.

The course of true love never did run smooth

AS MY TWENTY-SIXTH BIRTHDAY APPROACHED, I found myself in grave need of a career to talk about at social gatherings. I'd graduated from my teaching degree the year before and had been working as a casual teacher at local schools and at the tutoring centre ever since. Will had applied for a partner visa, and while I'd commented on more than one occasion that we might as well get married, no proposal was forthcoming. By this point, Leo was a two-year-old with a penchant for elephants, the word 'no', and oversized vehicles. His rate of growth highlighted my stagnation.

It was a great relief then, when I secured my first proper full-time job. Now, I'd be able to tell dental receptionists and second cousins everywhere that I was an English teacher at a prestigious boys' private school in Sydney. What a victory!

On the school website, there were photographs of boys rowing, shaking hands and tackling each other. The pictures of the school grounds reminded me of the university I'd just graduated from. Sandstone buildings and green lawns were in abundance. Only this school, I read, had fifteen ovals, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a three-hundred-seat theatre, and a rifle range. Also, there was a hedge maze. A literal labyrinth leading up to the grand entrance of the school.

I am not above admitting that the prestige of the school, its alluring symbols of wealth, worked its magic on me. If I had to labour under capitalism, I wanted to do it in a sandstone building constructed in the style of a medieval castle. I wanted to arrive at vast green lawns and swimming

pools. Could you blame me? When I showed Will the photos, he didn't share my awe. He'd gone to a similar school in the UK—one that claimed Winston Churchill as alumni and had a speech room modelled on Shakespeare's Globe.

On my first day at the school, the headmaster, Dr Andrew Reagan, told me that I'd been selected because of my interest in Shakespeare. He loved the canon and couldn't abide the new age garbage they were pumping out these days. By 'new age garbage' he appeared to mean anything that had been published outside of England in the last seventy years. He also loved the fact that I'd studied at King's College. 'It's no Cambridge,' he said, 'but better than nothing.'

In time, I'd learn that it was impossible to get through a single conversation without him alluding to his time as a student at Cambridge.

He made a point of having tea in his office with every new member of staff. His office was adorned with so many paintings of ships—of men setting off for adventure and conquest, of epic storms, of determined eyes locked on the horizon—that you could have been forgiven for thinking that you were in a maritime museum.

The only painting in his office that wasn't of a ship was of Dr Andrew Reagan himself, wearing a black academic gown and fur cape. I noticed him noticing me notice it, so I had to say something, but what? It wasn't exactly flattering. The artist had employed a strange mottling technique that made Dr Andrew Reagan look like he had a skin condition. And then there was the very act of hanging an enormous portrait of yourself in your own office—it was too embarrassing to bring up in conversation. I need not have worried. He told me his wife had painted it. I gushed over her skill. Later, I'd discover that a digital version of the painting appeared below his email signature. A sign, among many, that I should have got the hell out of there.



My students were boys from some of the wealthiest families in Sydney. Because I was a young novice teacher, I was given the junior high school classes. Even though the boys were mere tweens they conducted themselves with a self-assuredness that intimidated me. On my first week, I asked a Year 7 boy to put his lunch rubbish in the bin, and he told me that I ought to

do it because I was staff and he was not. It wasn't as if he was paid to be here.

When I announced that we'd be studying *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the groan that reverberated around my Year 7 class was deafening. A cherubic blond boy slammed his pudgy fist on the desk. 'Fairies?' he said. 'Fucking kill me now. Like I actually don't want to go on.'

I told them that they were wrong, that in times gone by, fairies were not pretty little Tinkerbells but powerful and dangerous creatures who would steal children or lure men to their deaths. In the play, I said, the king of the fairies makes the queen fall in love with a donkey.

'Why would he want his wife to fall in love with a donkey?'

'He's punishing her.'

'Why?'

'We'll have to read the play.'

'Can't we at least watch the movie.'

'Does she fuck the donkey?'

'All right, settle down.'

'She fucks the donkey! Gross, Miss. Are you even allowed to show us that?'

Oh, to be surrounded by curious young minds.

The boys tore out of the room at the first ring of the bell. As I was straightening desks and collecting abandoned worksheets, I came across an exercise book someone had left behind. On the first page, in neat, cramped writing was the date, the title of the play and a single note—*fairies: dangerous, powerful, perverse?* I couldn't help but feel gratified that someone was taking me seriously.

'Miss Wood?'

I turned to find a pale bespectacled boy standing in the doorway. Lucas.

'Sorry to disturb you, Miss, but I think I forgot my book. Sorry.' He had such a quiet voice, a rushed whisper, as though he had to get it out in one go before he lost his nerve.

I handed him the exercise book. 'Good job today.'

He turned to go but then hovered in the doorway, adjusted his glasses and spoke in that same rushed whisper, 'When I was in Year Five, I played a witch in *Macbeth*, do you want to hear it?'

I'd barely nodded when he began.

'Double, double toil and trouble;

Fire burn and cauldron bubble.
Fillet of a fenny snake,
n the cauldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.
Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.
Cool it with a baboon's blood,
Then the charm is firm and good.'

His voice was high and clear. It grew louder and more confident with each line. There was something unsettling about his performance, or perhaps just the oddness of the whole scene—him hovering in the doorway, me alone in the classroom, the foreboding words between us. As soon as he was finished, he shrivelled back into himself, perhaps embarrassed by the audacity of what he had done.

I clapped my hands together. 'Well, wasn't that wonderful!'

He smiled into his collar, his cheeks pink.

It did not come as a surprise to me that poor sweet Lucas was bullied mercilessly by the other boys. Not only for his nervousness, or the air of strangeness about him, but because of his father. I learned by way of the school rumour mill that his father had been a big-shot financial adviser to half the school community when he was imprisoned for fraud. It was reported that some families lost millions. I don't know what Lucas was like before his father's crimes were revealed. Perhaps he moved with the same easy confidence as the other boys. Now, he had the look of a hunted animal. According to the hospitality teacher, it was only because of the generosity of his grandparents that he remained at the school, though why they subjected the poor boy to such torture was beyond me. Often, I gave him jobs to do in the classroom to spare him the tyranny of the playground. When I watched him carefully placing books on the shelves, I was reminded of my lonely high school days in the years before Ruthie and I became friends.



I'd been at the school for a few months when tragedy struck my household. It came in the form of an old friend achieving sudden and undeniable success in the arts. Felix—that old philosophy major, beat poet lover, student director, taker of my virginity—had published a novel. Will and I discovered this as we were lying in bed one night scrolling on our phones and discussing Taylor Swift. Will said that while he wasn't a fan of her music, he didn't agree with the hordes of men online who refused to acknowledge her talent. While I agreed that her music was too poppy and commercial for my taste, the way she stood up to the creep who assaulted her was inspirational.

'Are you fucking serious?' said Will.

'I know, right? Imagine groping someone while you're posing for a photo. Men are so fucking stupid it's amazing the patriarchy has held up this long.'

I thought of that night in London with Ruthie and wished I could take the words back. Will and I never talked of that night. But sometimes, in moments like this, I felt its presence between us. I wondered if he did too.

'No, Helena. Look.' He turned the screen towards me. And there was Felix, dressed as ever as a wannabe Allen Ginsberg, holding up a copy of his novel. The cover featured an endorsement from a well-regarded author.

Naturally, Will was devastated. For days, he moped about the apartment trying to figure out how this had happened. I must confess, the news shifted my perception of Felix. Before this, the memory of him had made me squeamish. I began to fantasise about the two of us bumping into each other on the street or at the supermarket or even at the book launch. He would catch sight of me across a crowded room and stumble over his words. Two old flames flickering to life. It was a great relief then that Will decided not to go to the book launch, though this did not stop either of us from looking at the photographs on Instagram.

We had, I saw now, become content with our life back in Sydney—waking up each morning in the apartment, Will packing his red nose and suspenders and catching the bus to the hospital, me driving to school with a pile of marking on the back seat, sleeping in on Saturdays because we were both so tired, eating breakfast with my parents, doing laundry at their house, watching Netflix on our phones on Sunday nights and marvelling at how

another weekend had disappeared. We could have gone on forever this way, happily enough, were it not for Felix.

The book came out in June. And thus began the winter of our discontent.

At first, Will was simply more irritable than usual. He complained about his job, which, up until now, he'd loved.

'Am I going to make fart jokes for the rest of my life, Helena?' he asked, slumping onto the couch one night, his forehead tinged green from where his face paint had been. There were flecks of glitter in his eyebrows.

'You're making sick kids happy,' I said. 'What could be more noble than that?'

'I was doing Shakespeare on West End. How did this happen?'

'You're still acting.' I took his hand in mine. 'You're so creative.'

He brushed me away. 'We should never have come back here.'

I looked around at the apartment. The clothes horse with our underwear and socks lined up in rows; our backpacks and shoes by the door; our dinner plates in the sink.

After almost a week of moping, Will hit the gym with a fervour I hadn't seen since his *Hamlet* days. One night, he went on a long run and didn't return until I was already in bed. His limbs were so sore he could hardly peel back the covers.

'You don't think you're overdoing it?' I asked.

'I just want to be good at something,' he said. 'I want to make myself better.'

'You're going to be way hotter than me. That isn't fair.' I wanted to make him laugh but he was already drifting off to sleep. Later, I'd wonder why I didn't wake him up, make him talk to me. If I had, things might have turned out differently.

Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me, neglect me, lose me

EVERY YEAR, THE SCHOOL HELD Wellbeing Week. The Head of PE, who always had an enormous set of keys jangling around her neck like a jailer, ran a seminar on the importance of failure. Apparently, the boys were so shrouded from the slings and arrows of everyday life that they required a seminar to teach them about it. They were tourists in the land of disappointment. The rest of us only had our lives.

Sadly, staff were not spared from Wellbeing Week. While the boys were in a motivational lecture called 'Pioneers of Tomorrow' the teaching staff sat in a circle in the staffroom while a man named Darren, who may or may not have been a trained psychologist, asked us questions about our greatest fears and regrets. He had one of those ageless faces. He was either my age or thirty years older. Whenever anyone said anything, he would nod his head in a knowing manner and tell them how powerful their contribution was.

After we'd filled in a worksheet and connected our value system to our childhood, Darren laid out an array of photographs on the floor. Our task was to walk around the room, select one that resonated with us and explain our selection to the rest of the group. The maths teacher chose a picture of an old umbrella and cried about the death of her grandfather. The rugby coach held up a photograph of a mountain and announced that he'd been in a skiing accident when he was a kid and had feared he'd never play rugby

again. The mountain, you'd be shocked to discover, symbolised triumph over adversity (as well as the literal mountain he'd attempted to ski).

'Wow,' said Darren. 'Powerful.'

I chose a picture of two little girls reading a book.

Once we'd had our minds cracked open by Darren in front of the people in charge of our livelihoods, we gathered in the hall with the students for a talk from an old boy who'd made good. I came to understand that the boy genius on the stage had created an advertising agency that generated memes encouraging baby boomers in Australia and abroad to vote for conservative governments. The key to success, he told the captivated crowd, was not to make anything good. Just make so much of it, it was impossible to ignore. The talk was so depressing I felt my soul wither in the dark hall. Was this success? The endpoint of all that privilege? Using sad dog memes to make old people scared of tax reform and immigrants? My one hope was that, at some point in his life, the boy genius would wake up and, for one perfect moment, perceive what an enormous fucking loser he was.

A small breathless sound came from somewhere nearby. Lucas, sitting three seats away, was crying softly into his lap. At first, I thought that he too was overcome with despair upon listening to the boy genius extol the virtues of internet virality and emotional manipulation. But at the end of the assembly, when we filed out into the cool afternoon air, I caught up with him, and he told me that the other boys were being mean to him online.

'What are they saying?' I asked.

He shrugged. His eyes were red, and he made no effort to hide the fact that he'd been crying. It alarmed me, this lack of instinct for self-preservation. How could I explain to him that the openness with which he accepted his fate as victim would not make the boys hate him less? He could not afford to be seen crying or reciting poetry to teachers; he had to arm himself against them. I searched my coat pockets for a tissue, but I had nothing to offer.

'You wouldn't want to know,' he said.

Although I hated to admit it, he was right. Allying oneself to Lucas came at a cost. Even in the staffroom, he had few defenders. Any concern expressed about him was nothing more than a thinly veiled excuse to gossip about his father's frozen assets. 'You should tell someone,' I said, though clearly he was doing just that. *I* was the someone he was telling. I wished I wasn't.

He seemed to sense my reluctance because he smiled and wiped his face with his sleeve. ‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘Just having a bad day, you know?’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘keep your chin up.’

He smiled again. ‘Yeah, you too.’

You too? What did he mean by that? Before I had a chance to ask, he tugged on the straps of his backpack and flitted away, his shadow thin and elongated in the cold afternoon sun.



Wellbeing Week culminated in a game of hide-and-seek in the hedge maze at the front of the school. Students and staff were assigned teams. I was on the hiding team, alongside the Head of PE, who seemed to take it very seriously. She even wore a camouflage jacket. I pointed out that while it may offer an advantage in jungle warfare, it didn’t blend in with the lush green of the hedge. She slapped me on the back and laughed.

Inside the maze, it was cool and dark. Much more so than I thought it would be. My team immediately dispersed, the Head of PE crouching low and pulling up the hood of her jacket to hide her face. So much for team spirit. It was every man for himself. I turned right, then left, then right again. I caught a glimpse of someone disappearing behind a hedge, heard footsteps on the dirt track. Somewhere in the distance, a starting pistol sounded. It wasn’t as if I was scared, but I didn’t like the feeling of being pursued.

The further I walked, the less sense I had of where I was. I wanted to give up. To be done with the ridiculous game. But the only way out was through. I ventured deeper into the maze. How many bloody hedges were there? Was it built by Daedalus himself? I rubbed my arms. There were goosebumps on my skin. Surely, any minute now, the hedges would part, and I’d find myself standing in the sun. I turned left. Another dark narrow path lay before me.

Somewhere up ahead, the cracking of a twig. A flash of movement. Then a smack on my bottom. A sharp pinch. A shriek of laughter. I spun around to see a group of boys—maybe three—running away. My heart hammered. Should I chase after them? Apprehend them? I stood frozen to the spot. Had they really pinched my bum? A dare, no doubt. Someone would win fifty bucks. I looked around. Alone again. Thank god. No witnesses to my

humiliation. But I'd have to tell someone, wouldn't I? Students weren't permitted to go around pinching their teachers' bottoms. And what if the boys said something? What if they laughed about it with their friends? God, what if one of them filmed it? Wasn't that every teacher's worst fear—to end up on YouTube. I turned down another path, then another. Hedges loomed high above me. My chest felt tight. What if I had an asthma attack? *Promising young teacher asphyxiates during team-building activity*. Relax. No need to run. I wasn't really trapped. It was only a game, for god's sake.

'Got you.' A boy stepped into my path as I took the next turn. He was young, probably in Year 7 or 8, and not in any of my classes. Could he have been one of my attackers?

'So what happens now?' I asked, realising too late that I was ceding my authority to him.

He shrugged. 'You're dead. But I have to keep looking for people. This game is actually really boring.'

'You don't know the way out of here, do you?'

He gave me a withering look. 'That way.'

'All right. Thanks. Happy hunting.'

It took me another ten minutes to find my way out. When I finally emerged into the sunshine, I made my way directly to the headmaster's office before I lost my nerve.

I had to wait outside Dr Andrew Reagan's office like a naughty schoolgirl because he was on a phone call when I arrived. From what I overheard, he seemed to be extracting money from a parent for the funding of an excursion to Cambridge University. Every now and then his conversation was punctuated by a booming laugh that made me jump in my seat.

'Miss Wood,' he finally said, not bothering to come out into the foyer but simply shouting my name from his office, 'you'd better come in.'

I found him reclined in his chair, legs outstretched. As always, the enormous portrait of him distracted me. It was so imposing, so much larger than the man himself. I wondered if he ever felt mocked by it. Like his wife was taking the piss.

'I trust you're enjoying Wellbeing Week,' he said.

'Oh, it's amazing.' I wasn't sure whether I should sit down or wait to be asked. 'We had such a great session with Darren the other day. So … powerful.'

He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. ‘All this namby-pamby wellbeing stuff has gone a bit far if you ask me. You know what’s good for you? Exercise. Fresh air. I’d choose an early morning hike over lying around and talking about my problems any day of the week. Don’t just stand there.’ He leaned further back in his chair. I swear the man was almost horizontal. ‘But we live in the great age of victimhood. Have to keep up with the times, eh?’

‘Totally.’

‘So what can I do for you?’

I felt my face grow hot as I began my story. I fumbled my words. Should I say bottom? Behind? Buttocks? Or keep it casual and go with bum? I ended up landing on ‘rear’ which only confused him and forced me to repeat myself. At one point he coughed, and I’m sure he was covering a laugh.

‘Let me get this right,’ he said. ‘You’re accusing a student of slapping and pinching your … rear.’

‘Well, slapping is a bit strong. Maybe like a light smack? Definitely pinching.’

‘And do you have any idea who it was?’

‘I didn’t get a look. But it was someone on the opposing team.’

‘Aha!’ He sat upright and shouted for his secretary to print off a list of the teams. When she came in with her stack of paper, she looked from me to him with barely concealed joy, and I had the feeling she’d been listening to our conversation.

After locating his reading glasses (on his head) and spending several minutes sifting through papers, Dr Andrew Reagan held up a list of suspects. There were twelve boys in the opposing team, ranging from Year 7 to 12. I looked at the small black-and-white photos. To think of their schoolboy fingers squeezing my flesh. The laughter as they ran away.

‘Can you identify the boy?’ asked Dr Andrew Reagan.

‘Umm … I can’t be sure.’

‘Of course it could have been someone from your own team too,’ he said. ‘Or really anyone who wandered into the maze.’

‘Yes, I see the difficulty.’

‘I could talk to all the boys. Raise it at assembly. See if anyone comes forward.’

‘Oh no—please don’t. Thank you. But I don’t think that’s necessary.’ The idea of a public announcement made my skin burn.

He leaned back in his chair again. ‘You know the boys are young. They act impulsively. I’m sure whoever it was will feel guilty once he knows he’s upset you.’

‘Oh, I’m not upset. Honestly. I just thought …’

‘There are challenges being a young and—dare I say—rather pretty woman working with teenage boys. They have their crushes and, unfortunately, some of them pull stunts like these. You know when I was a young teacher, some of the girls would leave little love notes and posies on my desk. It’s bound to happen.’

‘Yes. Right.’ I was reassured by his words. It wasn’t personal what the boys had done. It wasn’t even a big deal. Simply a natural part of their adolescence. And I was young and pretty. It was nice to hear this put so objectively. A mere fact of the world. I looked down at the pages of black-and-white photographs laid out on the desk. It was foolish to take it all so seriously.

‘Are you sure you don’t want me to raise it with the boys?’

‘No, it’s not a big deal,’ I said, ‘I just thought you should know.’

‘You did the right thing in coming to see me.’ He stood up and performed a back stretch that resulted in him thrusting his pelvis forward. ‘We’ve got to stay on top of these boys. Now, is there anything else I can do for you?’

‘No,’ I said, keeping my gaze firmly on his desk. ‘Thank you for your help.’

When I got home and undressed, I noticed a small bruise on my left bum cheek. God, I’d been assaulted by children. I turned the shower on so hot it burned.



It was such a small incident, really. There was no point in telling Will. Besides, he was always at the gym. I had to join just so we could spend some time together. My cardiovascular health improved, but my heart ached. I watched every episode of *Married at First Sight* on the treadmill. How I longed for the days when we read plays together and stayed up late talking about art.

He was a star at the gym, just like at university. He could barely get through a set without someone coming over and talking to him about ice baths or biohacking. Meanwhile, I walked and walked on my treadmill, going nowhere.

Will's social media, once full of theatre content and aesthetic photos of art and bookstores, was now entirely subsumed by fitness videos and high protein recipes and men going for solitary runs at three in the morning while talking about sacrifice. I started to feel as though I was losing him. Not even his newly defined muscles—his lovely linea alba, now frighteningly pronounced—were mine to enjoy. He was so exhausted from the gym that we stopped having sex altogether.

I tried to enliven things. One night, I stood in front of the television, where he was watching a YouTube video about a Californian doctor who only ate fermented vegetables and red meat, and asked him to tell me what to do.

'What do you mean?'

'Just tell me what to do.'

'Well, move, for one thing.'

'Where?'

'You're blocking the TV.'

'Tell me where to move.'

'I don't care. Lie down. I can't see.'

I lay down on the fake timber flooring.

'What are you doing?'

'Whatever you tell me to do.'

'Helena, get up.'

I sat up and looked at him. 'Tell me how.'

'Are you serious?'

'Come on. Just try.'

'Fine. I don't know. Crawl.'

I made my way towards him on all fours trying to arch my back like a sexy cat.

For a while, this game seemed to work. I didn't mind being told what to do, made to wait, even tied to the bed once or twice when we were feeling particularly inspired. I actually found it quite relaxing. Sure, it wasn't the sweet lovemaking of my fantasies—which I still took to when I was alone

—but we had more sex than we'd had in a long time. I walked a little taller. Bought myself a pair of red Lululemon tights for the gym.

But this period of sexual reawakening was short-lived. Will's interest waned. Increasingly, his commands were for me to stop talking or to leave him alone. One night, he told me to go to the bedroom and then started roasting a turkey. I thought that this might be some elaborate sexual roleplay, but after half an hour of sitting alone on the bed, I confronted him, and he admitted to having forgotten about me.

'So you really are just cooking a turkey?'

'It's good protein. Do you want some?'

'Do you want me?'

He sighed. 'I'm sorry, Helena, but I'm so tired. And it's leg day tomorrow.'



At the gym there was a whiteboard on which someone had written: *You're closer than you were yesterday*. To what? I wondered. To death? I looked around at the other sweaty breathless people struggling on the treadmills. Where were we going, and what was it we were trying so hard to achieve?

Tie up my lover's tongue

RUTHIE WATCHED THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR and Spider-Man crash in a vicious head-on collision. Their nineteenth, for the evening. Leo righted the bus, drove it around the perimeter of the room then returned to collect his unfortunate passengers. 'Look, Mummy, look.'

Ruthie put a bowl of peas in the microwave. 'Be careful. Don't crash.'

News of listeria-contaminated rockmelons flashed on the television screen. Jesus, what had she fed Leo this week? For the first time, she was grateful that his main food groups were chicken nuggets and cheese singles. She turned up the volume.

Corey came in carrying a measuring tape. 'So we have to decide,' he said, 'do we want to get a new washing machine that's also a dryer. More expensive. But then we could get rid of the old dryer. Or do we want to try and fix the current washing machine, though honestly, I don't know how much she has left in her.'

'Are you seeing this?' Ruthie pointed at the television.

'Mummy, look.' Leo drove his bus into the arm of the couch.

'Wow. That's so good.' She took two plates out of the cupboard and found Leo's favourite elephant plate in the dishwasher. 'People have died. Just from eating rockmelon.'

'Turn it off if it upsets you,' said Corey, opening the fridge.

Briefly, she fantasised about smashing the plates on the floor. What kind of logic was that? Close your eyes to anything frightening or sad. Besides, she wasn't upset, merely trying to have a conversation about something that was happening in the country. 'Don't eat,' she said. 'Dinner's almost ready.'

He unwrapped a cheese single, folded it in half and put the whole thing in his mouth. The sight of it made her feel sick.

'So what do you think about the washing machine?' he asked, chewing.

She didn't give a fuck about the washing machine. No, that wasn't true. When she'd walked into the bathroom this morning to find water pooling on the floor, she'd actually cried. That had been upsetting in itself. When had she become the kind of person who cried over white goods? 'Let's get a new one,' she said, taking the chicken out of its plastic bag. 'That machine is older than I am.'

When Ruthie was a child, she liked helping Clare with the laundry, dividing the whites from the colours, hanging the clothes out in neat rows. There was a satisfying sense of order to the process. It was a memory she hadn't thought about until now. The prospect of parting with the old machine even made her a little sad. She carried the plates to the table. Leo looked at his plate and crinkled his nose. 'Cheese,' he said.

'We have chicken. And veggies.'

'Cheese.'

'We have to eat our dinner first.'

'No.'

'I'll grab it for him.' Corey went to the fridge.

'That isn't …'

If Tiger were here, she'd be horrified by the cheese singles. And the supermarket chicken. She carried on as though processed food was poison, which was a bit rich given that she got Botox every few months. Even if she didn't admit to it, Ruthie had seen the bruising. Still, whenever Ruthie saw Tiger, she packed fruit and organic yoghurt in Leo's lunchbox, even dressed him in the little linen lounge set that Tiger had bought him. A nice idea if you weren't the one madly ironing it beforehand. The whole performance depressed Ruthie. Why could she only play at being that kind of mother?

She'd stopped working at the Goddess Grove when Leo was born. On her final shift, Tiger had popped a bottle of champagne and made a toast in which she described Ruthie as the little sister she never had. Now Ruthie looked down at her barbecued chicken and microwaved vegetables and felt ashamed.

'We should go into Bing Lee tomorrow,' said Corey, handing Leo a cheese single and slapping another down on his own plate. 'We could look at a new vacuum cleaner too.'

‘The shops will be busy on a Saturday,’ said Ruthie. Was it possible to die of boredom mid-conversation with your husband? When had they become this way? There were times when she’d loved their life—when they’d built the vegetable garden, and gone for evening walks around the park, and taken Leo to the library. Yes, she loved their life, the quiet steady thrum of it.

‘It’s the only time we have.’ Corey wrapped a chicken drumstick in his cheese single and bit into it. Ruthie looked away.



Later, when Ruthie discovered they were out of dishwashing tablets, she sensed an opportunity. A quiet drive. Time to herself. She practically trembled with excitement. ‘I’m just going to run to the shops,’ she said, moving quickly to put on her shoes in case Leo kicked up a fuss or Corey suggested they all go together.

‘Why?’ Corey didn’t look away from the television where a highlights reel of a football game was playing.

‘We’re out of dishwashing tablets.’

‘Don’t worry about it. I’ll pick some up in the morning.’

‘I don’t mind. I’ll be back in a minute.’

Leo was sitting at Corey’s feet, deep in conversation with the Very Hungry Caterpillar. Ruthie picked up the keys, carefully, so that they made no sound, and crept down the hall.

Woolworths at nine on a Friday night was a magical place. Ruthie strolled down the aisles entirely unencumbered by a pram or trolley or even a basket. ‘The Time of My Life’, that old love song from *Dirty Dancing*, played through the speakers. The place was almost empty—only some employees restocking shelves, people picking up last-minute items. Two women in tall heels and tiny dresses walked arm in arm down the drinks aisle, laughing their heads off. Ruthie stopped by the herbs in the fresh produce section and smelled the thyme and rosemary. In the health food aisle, she perused packets of dates and sugared ginger, jars of manuka honey. She picked up a sleeve of digestive biscuits in the next aisle, tore open the packet, ate one, and went in search of the magazines.

‘Ruthie?’

It took a beat for her to recognise the woman standing before her in gold sandals and an embroidered dress. ‘Phoebe?’

‘Oh my god, I thought it was you. How funny.’

Ruthie brushed biscuit crumbs from her top. It was actually a pyjama top. In her hurry to leave, she hadn’t changed.

‘You know I still go to the Goddess Grove? Tiger is like my hero.’

‘Yeah, me too.’

‘Oh, you still see her? Even though you don’t work there anymore?’

‘We’re friends.’

‘Oh, wow, she’s never mentioned that.’ Phoebe brushed her long silky hair off her shoulders. ‘I just got in from Byron Bay. I’m staying with my parents for a bit.’

Ruthie smiled. Phoebe certainly looked like she’d been somewhere full of sun and sea and acai bowls. Her skin glowed under the fluorescent lights.

‘And what about you?’ asked Phoebe. ‘What are you up to?’

‘We’re out of dishwashing tablets.’

‘No, I mean, like, with your life.’

‘Oh.’ Ruthie told her about Corey and Leo and the bakery where she still worked on the days Corey’s mum took Leo. Even to her own ears, her life sounded small. She stared at the contents of Phoebe’s basket. Unsalted butter, plain flour, rice flour, caster sugar. ‘Shortbread?’

‘What? Oh yeah. I’m going to a baby shower tomorrow. I should just buy something, but I think homemade is that extra bit special.’

‘You should add a little rosemary and sea salt,’ said Ruthie.

Phoebe cocked her head. ‘Really?’

‘Some pink grapefruit zest, if you really want to go all out.’

‘Send me the recipe?’

Ruthie typed out the instructions onto Phoebe’s phone. It was a mixture of a few recipes and Ruthie’s own experimentation at the bakery. As much as she hated to admit it, it felt good to have something Phoebe wanted.

When she was gone, Ruthie retreated into the personal care aisle. She ate another biscuit, tried on some moisturiser and found herself gazing at the pregnancy tests. She picked up a packet. Put it back on the shelf. It would be nice for Leo to have a sibling. She’d always dreamed of that for herself. A sister, perhaps. Sometimes, when she was with Helena, she had a sense of what that would be like. But could she do it all over again? Sometimes, she was so tired, she sat down in the shower cubicle and let the water pummel

her back. The sight of the leaking washing machine had reduced her to tears. And hadn't she just snuck out of her house like a fugitive to escape her own family? She picked up a three-pack of Clearblue for thirteen dollars.

'Is that all?' asked the teenager at the checkout.

It wasn't until Ruthie got home that she remembered the bloody fucking dishwashing tablets. For the second time that day, she burst into tears.

ACT FOUR

Methought I was enamoured of an ass

YEARS AND YEARS OF TEACHING *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Each time I would pose the same question to the boys: Would the story have been a tragedy if it had just gone on longer? What if the magic wore off and Demetrius remembered that he hated Helena? What if Helena was haunted by the idea that happiness was a mere illusion? Fairy dust. Maybe that's what Shakespeare was trying to tell us: that all love is an illusion. Is that funny or sad? A most lamentable comedy? Was there even any difference between tragedy and comedy? Wasn't Hermia, in love with the wrong man and under the thumb of her father, almost poor Juliet? Wasn't Helena, rejected and scorned, basically Ophelia? The only difference, as far as I could see, was whether or not anyone took your pain seriously.



Will broke up with me. It was the spring of 2021. October, my favourite time of year. The weather was getting warmer, sunlight lingering a little longer each day, the promise of summer before the reality of heatstroke and mosquitoes set in. The city was coming out of the longest lockdown it had known. Kids went back to school. Gyms reopened. People got haircuts.

I'd been teaching at the school for almost five years by this point. A veritable veteran. Taylor Swift had reinvented herself as an indie folk singer. Leo, Ruthie's baby, was now six years old. A lover of elephants and the colour red. He even had a little sister, Susie, now nearly three years old.

When she was born, Ruthie told me that she was happy her children had each other, that they'd never be alone. Huh! Haven't you heard, Ruthie? We all end up alone.

So there you have it—pandemics raged, children were born, people changed, I entered my thirties, and through it all, Will and I went on loving each other.

And then it ended.

It sounds absurd to say that I didn't see the breakup coming, but that is the truth of it. It is hard, after all, to picture your own death. Sure, Will lost his job. At the height of the pandemic, there was no place for clowns. He hardly minded. He was tired of playing the fool. His mother quietly increased her monthly payments.

Once the gyms reopened, I hardly saw him. Sometimes, at night, I'd wake up to find him bathed in the ethereal light of his phone. On the screen, people with shiny eyes and hair espoused the benefits of infrared light and methylene blue and raw milk. In hindsight, I should have seen this for what it was—the beginning of the end. But half the white upper classes the world over were transfixed by this promise of perfection. How was I to know that he was on a downward spiral, or that he'd drag me down too?



It began, as so many tragic episodes between lovers do, with a conversation about what to eat. I wanted to order sushi. He wanted to make turkey bone broth. I laughed and said that sounded like something a serial killer would say. He said that white rice was toxic. I observed how interesting it was that billions of people around the world were consuming white rice—probably as we spoke—and yet the Associated Press was not reporting news of any mass casualty events. He said my sarcasm was nothing but a pathetic attempt to cover my ignorance.

'Of what?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'The truth, obviously. You just believe whatever they tell you.'

Before I could even ask what 'truth' he was referring to or who 'they' were, he said, 'You don't even try to understand me. I don't know what we're still doing here.'

And there it was.

Like the spreading of a virus, or the proliferation of a conspiracy theory on the internet, the end of our relationship moved with frightening speed. Within weeks, Will—the man of my dreams, the love of my life—was sick to death of me.



Another lesson for the boys: in Shakespeare's time, actors were not given the whole script, only their own part and the cue that came before it. That is where the word 'role' came from—the roll of paper on which an actor's lines were written. Were the boys interested in this fascinating morsel of cultural history? No. But I encouraged them to think—really think—about it. Wouldn't it be maddening to know your role but not the story? How were you to know if you were in a comedy or tragedy? How were you to make sense of anything? It was Lucas, now a lanky senior still hovering in doorways like a frightened ghost, who pointed out that life was also like this. You knew your bit, but never the whole picture. You played your part, but there was no telling whether other people would laugh at you or kiss you or stab you in the back. What a bunch of fools we were, waiting for a happy ending that probably wouldn't come.



The breakup itself wasn't the worst part. When Will said he wanted space, I moved back in with my parents. The shocking emptiness of the apartment, after I'd packed my belongings into boxes, was gratifying. A part of me wanted to be there when he returned to find my side of the wardrobe cleaned out, the bookshelf picked bare, the walls empty. My absence would surely scare him into action. I placed my painting of drowning Ophelia in my parents' living room and waited for him to change his mind. The tension was almost pleasurable. Like those first few pangs of love. I felt everything keenly. Any love song, even the cheesiest, would make me cry. In the grocery store, I watched couples fill a single trolley and wrote poetry in my mind about mandarins and how they were made to be shared.

Will and I talked on the phone for hours in those first few weeks of the breakup. The scope of our conversations ranged from who would take the blender to how we'd changed as people. We talked more than we had in years. Surely this was a good sign. Any day now, we'd be back together.

My desire for him grew with each day we were apart. It became a constant ache in my body. My mother even suggested I get my asthma checked out. I began to dream of him again, just like when we were students. Somehow, breaking up felt a lot like falling in love. Perhaps it was just what we needed.

But at some point, Will stopped calling. If I called him, he was always about to head out. Eventually he told me that there was nothing left to say—that I could keep the blender because he'd ordered a new one. The days rolled on, and I didn't hear from him. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Without love, what was there? A boredom too terrifying to speak of. Nothing to look forward to. No flutter in the stomach. No obsession. No story. Nothing. To the last syllable of recorded time.

My only solace was my dreams. I sank into them deeply. Whole afternoons, evenings, poured into my imagination. I'd often wake to find that hours had passed—my mouth dry, a queasy feeling in my stomach, like I'd gorged myself on too much sugar. But I couldn't get enough of my sweet dreams. They were loathsome in their own deliciousness.

After finding me reclined on the couch on yet another Saturday night, my father suggested I get my iron levels tested or see a psychologist. But I knew what was wrong with me and I didn't want to look at it, so I closed my eyes and went on dreaming my life away.

Then the nightmares arrived. I'd wake in the morning with a thick sense of unease. The nightmares were not particularly harrowing—I dreamed the boys locked me in a storeroom at school. I dreamed that I was running late to tea with Will's grandmother and kept losing my way. I dreamed of looking in my childhood mirror and finding myself suddenly old, my skin sagging and mottled. But their banality increased my terror. Was my life so small? O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!

Hell is empty, and all the devils are here.

Hell. Hell. Hell. Hellish Helena.

I am such stuff as nightmares are made on.



When I wasn't dreaming, I was scrolling. For a while, I became obsessed with a Taylor Swift tribute singer who performed at dinner theatres in Wisconsin and at children's birthday parties. She was so convincing—her sequined leotards so beautifully made, her singing voice so sweet, her dancing and even her facial expressions so like the real Taylor, it was uncanny. In all the videos, she looked happy, frolicking around backyards with children chasing after her. But was it possible to be happy when you were only a shadow of something real? Did she cry alone in the bathroom afterwards, wondering what it was that set her and Taylor apart? Wasn't she just as lovely? Just as special?



One night, I discovered that Will had started following Tiger on Instagram. There was something witchy about the way they'd been brought together by the dark magic of the algorithm. My lover had reviewed her apple cider vinegar recipe. She'd left a little red heart on his comment. In the vast web, they'd found each other. Eye of newt and toe of frog, indeed.

Throughout the pandemic, I'd watched from afar as Tiger—that queen of self-transformation—reinvented herself yet again. Her posts changed from innocent pictures of yoga poses to videos about raw milk and watermelon as sunscreen then to the dangers of authoritarian governments in cahoots with pharmaceutical companies and finally to how sick and old people were on the way out anyway, so wasn't it natural that they died? Wasn't death a part of life anyway? All of it, perfect and pure.

One day, she posted a video of herself holding up a photograph of her mother. Illness, she said, was a drug. A man-made substance designed to keep us weak and helpless. Now doctors were unleashing vaccinated people out into the world to shed their poison on everyone else. What about the women who would become infertile? Perhaps that was the government's aim. To take away our power? In the video, she started to cry. I thought of that afternoon, years ago, when she'd served healing tea and talked of witches, and how she'd always wanted a child of her own. In the comments, people called her everything from fascist to goddess.



A woman being fucked by a donkey. This was the image that greeted me one afternoon as I sat in my empty classroom trying to muster the energy to walk to the carpark. It was the handiwork of one of my students, scrawled on the corner of my whiteboard. The woman on all fours; the donkey taking her from behind. Well, I thought, at least the boys were paying attention. Engaging with Shakespeare in a creative way. But it rattled me. Who had done this? And how had I not noticed in the lesson? Perhaps my preoccupation with the breakup had distracted me more than I thought. As I approached the drawing, I noticed a speech bubble spewing from the woman's mouth: *Is love an illusion?* These were my words. The woman was me. I rubbed at the drawing with my hand, but the black ink remained, bright and clear. I picked up the eraser, but it made no difference. The little fucker had done it in permanent marker.

'We're having a staff wellbeing session in the common room.' The Head of PE appeared in the doorway of my classroom, her keys jangling. 'Our meditation starts in ten minutes.'

I pressed my body up against the whiteboard. For the love of god, I'd climb out the window and scale the building like Dracula himself if it meant getting out of her fucking meditation sessions. 'Great,' I said. 'I'll be there in a minute.'

'You look like you need it.' She came into my classroom and sat on a table in the front row, making herself comfortable. 'I've been worried about you, Helena. You haven't seemed yourself lately.'

'Oh.' I laughed. 'Just busy.'

'You know I'm not just Head of PE, I'm also Head Teacher of School Spirit.' She announced this made-up self-appointed title as though introducing herself as the prime minister. 'It's my job to check in with staff. See how you're getting on.'

'Great,' I said. 'Just great.'

It was then that she noticed the drawing. She gasped. Even covered her mouth with her hand. 'It's you,' she said. 'I can tell by the glasses.'

Before I knew what was happening, she whipped out her phone and started photographing the drawing.

'What are you doing?' I attempted to cover the picture with my hands.

'Evidence,' she said. 'This is inappropriate. It's obscene. It's … misogynistic.' She said this last word with an almost reverent tone.

As all teachers know, the best way to remove permanent marker is to trace over it with a whiteboard marker. So there we were, the Head of PE and me, carefully tracing over the whole miserable scene. She meticulously traced the donkey's unusually large phallus at least three times. Which was two times more than necessary if you asked me.



Another lesson on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, another question for the boys: Why doesn't anyone take Helena seriously? They don't analyse her the way they do Romeo or Macbeth or Juliet or Rosalind or even foolish Bottom. Helena is simply one of the lovers and the most pathetic one at that because her love is desperate and unrequited. But she never gives in. By sheer force of will she gets what she wants. Isn't there something in that? Why does Hamlet get to stand in for the whole of the human condition? Who is he, after all, but a useless little pervert a bit too interested in his mother's sex life? Helena is a hero for the ages. No amount of humiliation or rejection is too much for her. She spins it into gold.



Before Will and I broke up, an invitation arrived on thick creamy paper. Phoebe was getting married to a blue-eyed real estate heir, and the wedding was to be held at a luxury rainforest resort in Byron Bay. When I called Ruthie, she went out to her letterbox and found an invitation waiting for her too. I screamed down the phone in delight. Would our high school selves have dared to believe this life? We booked a cabin in a holiday park. I bought a pale blue silk dress that I couldn't afford.

But months later, when it became apparent that Will was done with me, I stuffed the invitation into my bedside drawer, only bringing it out when I was in a masochistic mood.

It was on one such occasion that an idea came to me. I was lying on my bed, the invitation before me, thinking about how all my friends were married, and I was eating a family-sized packet of Jatz biscuits that had already gone stale on the bedspread my mother had bought me when I was twelve. I sat up and wiped my hands on my thighs. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it earlier.

My argument to Will was simple: I'd already RSVP'd for the both of us. It would be rude to show up on my own and it was too late to give Phoebe notice of his absence. She would have paid for the meals and arranged the seating. There was nothing for him to do but accompany me as planned. Surely, we possessed the emotional maturity to attend. As friends, of course. And hadn't he always wanted to go to Byron Bay? Think of the acai bowls! The organic juices! I would pay for the flights, the cabin, everything. All he had to do was turn up. One weekend. Surely, he owed me that. I put all of this into an email and when he didn't respond, I turned on No Caller ID and phoned him.

When Will finally agreed, I lay on my bed and wept. For a whole weekend, we would be together. I looked at the countdown clock on Phoebe's wedding website, and my heart—alive at last—beat against my ribs.

In retrospect, I should have told Ruthie that Will would be at the wedding. Truly, I didn't mean to conceal it. Only the thought of him—the hope of our reconciliation in the forest; me, soft and resplendent in my blue silk dress; everyone woozy on wine and music and love—felt too precious, too fragile. I didn't dare to say it out loud.



At work, a new nervousness came over me. When I stood before my classes, I thought about the donkey-fucking and wondered which of the boys had drawn it. There was a new danger lurking in their slouched forms and unlaced shoes, their hands drumming on the desks. It was ridiculous, of course. They were schoolboys—mere children—and I, a grown woman, an experienced educator. But still, I found myself fumbling my words, or worse, blushing.

One morning, I opened the door of my classroom to find the Head of PE, the librarian and a science teacher I didn't know the name of huddled around my desk, whispering to each other like a coven of witches.

'We want to talk to you,' said the Head of PE, gesturing for me to close the door.

Double, double toil and trouble.

I hadn't even finished my morning coffee. I closed the door and began to unpack my bag, placing my laptop and an enormous pile of unmarked

essays onto the desk, hoping to remind them that they were trespassing on my time and space. No such luck.

'This school has a sexist culture,' said the Head of PE. 'We have a list.'

'Of sexists?'

'Of incidents.'

The science teacher, a woman around my age who I'd only ever seen gliding through corridors carrying mugs of herbal tea, pushed a piece of paper in front of me. The list:

Sexist language—cunt, slut, whore, bitch, stupid bitch, stupid fucking cunt-faced bitch, etc.
Pornographic drawings (e.g. staff member penetrated by horse).
Manosphere, Tate, etc.
Boys simulating orgasms and masturbation in presence of female staff.
Inappropriate questions—(e.g. female staff asked about romantic partners, sexual history, underwear).
Concerns raised about student behaviour not addressed by leadership—boys will be boys attitude—treated as joke/inevitability. Protect reputation of school at all costs.
No women in senior leadership.
No breastfeeding facilities.
Patronising comments from male staff. Examples:

- *Smile more in class. Look like you're happy to be there.*
- *I don't buy all that namby-pamby mental health stuff.*
- *Women's sport just isn't interesting. If I'm going to watch someone run around a field, I want them to at least be the fastest in the world.*
- *You have to earn their respect.*
- *If you wanted more female scientists in the curriculum, you girls should have got off your arses and split the fucking atom.*

When I finished reading, I looked up to find the three women looking at me, almost eagerly. 'It's quite the list,' I said. 'Who got called a stupid fucking cunt-faced bitch?'

'Marie Curie,' said the science teacher.

‘Reagan knows about all of this,’ said the librarian, shaking her head. ‘As headmaster he should be doing something. But he just feeds into it.’ She was a British woman around my mother’s age. From the little I knew of her, she was one of those adventurous types, always going to places like Antarctica or the Galapagos Islands.

‘When the boys posted that stuff about me online, Reagan told *me* to limit my internet time,’ said the science teacher.

‘And I told him about what happened to you, Helena,’ said the Head of PE. ‘With the horse-fucking. I even showed him the pictures.’

‘Thanks for that.’ I cringed at the idea of Dr Andrew Reagan’s small grey eyes poring over the image. ‘And it was a donkey, by the way.’

The science teacher took a red pen out of her pocket and corrected this mistake on the list. I looked at the clock on the wall. There was ten minutes until class started.

‘He just laughed it off,’ said the Head of PE. ‘Told me that graffiti was as old as ancient Rome. It’s there on the Colosseum. God, why are all those guys obsessed with ancient Rome? It’s all they ever bang on about.’

‘What did the boys post about you?’ I asked the science teacher.

‘It was a poll. Fuck, marry or kill.’

A part of me wanted to know the verdict—which would be the worst?—but that obviously wasn’t the point. Did such a poll exist for me? I shuddered. ‘So what are you going to do?’ I asked, wanting to bring the meeting to a close. If they left now, I’d still have a few minutes to myself before class started. Perhaps I’d even get a little micro dream in. The three women glanced at each other. Then the Head of PE leaned forward, her keys jangling. If she was going to lead an underground resistance, she should probably invest in pants with pockets. She was far too noisy for guerrilla warfare. ‘We’re going public.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘And what exactly does that mean?’

‘I have a journalist friend,’ said the librarian. ‘We’re going to meet with her as soon as she’s back from a UNESCO conference.’

They looked so earnest I had to stifle a laugh. Injustices were occurring all around the world. Techno-fascism was on the rise. There was mass bleaching of coral reefs. Did they really think anyone would care about us? ‘That’s awesome.’ I stood up to indicate that the meeting was over. ‘Good luck.’

‘We want you to join us,’ said the Head of PE.

‘We’re stronger together,’ said the librarian.

‘I just don’t think it’s my sort of thing,’ I said.

‘Respect?’ asked the librarian. ‘Equality?’

Fortunately, the bell rang. The science teacher folded up the list and put it into her pocket. Boys streamed through the corridors.

‘For whom the bell tolls,’ I said, laughing as I opened the door.



I counted down the days until Phoebe’s wedding as though I was the bride herself. It would be the great scene of my reunion with Will. Every night, I devoured her socials. There were posts and videos of the proposal, engagement party, dress shopping, cake tasting, kitchen tea, hen and bucks parties. How I gorged on them. Pictures of pink cocktails topped with fairy floss, gauzy bridesmaid dresses in lavender and periwinkle and apricot, daisy crowns, white *bride to be* sashes, sparkling silver heels, pearlescent fingernails, flower arches, finger sandwiches, eyelash extensions, bottles of champagne, fluffy dressing gowns, bouquets of red roses, pale pink sunrises, a Kitchen Aid stand mixer in pistachio, and a glistening diamond ring. Everything, perfect. I couldn’t wait for it to begin.

Never so weary, never so in woe

RUTHIE SAT ON THE LIVING room floor with her hands over her eyes counting backwards from ten. Susie giggled and ran off to hide. Through the crack between her fingers, Ruthie watched her daughter roll herself up in a rug. Susie had never done this before, not in their thirty-five thousand games of hide-and-seek, and Ruthie delighted in her daughter's cleverness. Every day of her three years, Susie surprised her.

'Ready or not, here I come.' Ruthie looked behind the couch and under the coffee table. Her neck ached. Susie had woken her several times in the night with her kicking and rolling around. And then there was Corey with his snoring. And Leo rising at the crack of dawn. 'Where are you?' Ruthie looked behind the television. The pain from her neck was spreading to her head. She needed a Panadol before the headache set in.

Before Susie, she would have waited it out, gone for a walk or done a few sun salutes. Tiger had taught her that pain needed to be felt. She'd even talked Ruthie into a drug-free birth—a plan that had gone to shit after a thirty-hour labour, in which the doctor diagnosed her as too exhausted to continue and ordered an emergency C-section. Still, Tiger had lectured her about the medicalisation of childbirth before Ruthie even had the staples removed from her stomach. Ruthie had fantasised about lifting up her hospital gown and holding her phone close to the thin pink wound, the flaking skin and metal staples biting into her flesh, so that Tiger could see. *What would you know about pain?* she would say. *You who are not even a mother*. But of course, she didn't. It was not the kind of thing a person said. She'd read books about the importance of skin-to-skin contact straight after birth, and she'd missed her chance. Corey and even Leo had held Susie

while Ruthie was under a general. All those times she'd come home to find her own mother passed out on the couch; it seemed foreboding that her daughter's life should begin that way. Even now, three years later, she worried that the damage would reveal itself in some way, that Susie would be sadder or angrier or less trusting than other children. And all because Ruthie had been too tired to go on.

'Oh, what's in here?' She stood over the rolled-up rug. 'Gosh, this looks like a nice place to sit.' Susie squealed as Ruthie pretended to sit on the rug.

'More,' said Susie, jumping to her feet.

'Is it my turn to hide?'

'No, me.'

'Just wait a minute, Mummy needs to take some medicine for her head.'

'I no want to wait,' said Susie. 'More. More.'

'Wait.'

'No. More.' Her voice rose into a wail and she pulled at Ruthie's dress. Had Leo ever been so demanding? He was a quieter child. Susie threw herself into the centre of everything. She was bold and fearless. It scared Ruthie and made her proud.

She didn't know why she was more nervous with her second-born. Was it the frightening birth, or the frightening times? Or the fact that she now had two little ones? Perhaps even the fact of Susie being a girl. Raising a daughter seemed so much more fraught.

At every stage of her children's lives, Ruthie borrowed books from the library. *Nourishing Newborns. The Mindful Baby. Toddler Rules*. Corey teased her—said there were some things you couldn't learn from reading. He'd make a game of throwing the kids high into the air and catching them. They'd laugh in delight and Ruthie would have to bite her tongue to stop herself screaming.

'All right, one more.' Ruthie resumed her position on the living room floor and covered her eyes, letting her head rest against the arm of the couch. She counted slowly, relishing this moment of peace. This time next week, she'd be on a plane to Byron for Phoebe's wedding. For one hour and fifteen minutes she'd be alone and unreachable. Someone would ask *her* if she wanted a drink or a snack! Then there was the wedding itself. It'd been a long time since she and Helena had spent the weekend together. She looked forward to the late night debrief as much as the party itself; the two of them in their pyjamas, drinking wine in the cabin, talking all night.

‘Ready or not, here I come!’ She stood up. This time she really didn’t know where her daughter was hiding. She checked behind the couch. The television. The door. Nothing. Shit. ‘Susie?’ The rug was askew. She tripped on it as she checked the cabinet. It was empty. Plates and teacups that had belonged to her grandmother.

‘Susie, Mummy gives up. Where are you?’ No giggle, no patter of feet. Had the house ever been so quiet? She could hear her blood pulsing through her body, thick and slow. ‘Susie, this isn’t funny. Where are you?’ She checked the kitchen cupboards. The bedroom. Susie’s room. How far away could she be? She’d only counted to ten. Had she only counted to ten? Why hadn’t she been watching?

She checked the bathroom, the washing machine. Looked out the window to the backyard. Leo’s dinosaur helmet. Susie’s trike. They’d taken it to the park that morning. She had to call an ambulance—and Corey—god, he was going to kill her. Their daughter. Their baby. ‘Susie!’ She opened the front door, preparing—to do what? Scream for help? Lie down on the road? And there was Susie, laughing on the welcome mat.

Ruthie dropped to the ground and pulled her into a hug. ‘Don’t do that. You mustn’t do that to Mummy. Do you understand?’ She found herself gripping Susie’s shoulders, shouting into her face. For a moment, the little girl stood there stunned. Her eyes, so much like Ruthie’s, were wide with fear. Then she started to cry and hit Ruthie in the face. ‘Bad Mummy!’

Ruthie let her daughter hit her but didn’t let go. The anger that had risen up in her. The look of fear on her daughter’s face. Where had it come from? ‘I know,’ she said, ‘I’m sorry. You’re right. It’s Mummy’s fault.’



Later, when Susie went down for her nap, Ruthie lay beside her and watched her sleep. The rise and fall of her daughter’s chest was soothing. Sometimes, she made little sounds or her mouth quirked, and Ruthie wondered where she went when she closed his eyes. The hours in which her children slept were her favourite part of the day. No, not her favourite. Just that she looked forward to the break. But Susie’s naps were getting shorter each week. How would Ruthie cope without them? The thought of leaving her children for a whole weekend made her sick with fear and excitement.

When Ruthie was sure that Susie was sleeping soundly, she got to work in the kitchen. She'd been booked to create a birthday cake for a woman who was turning one hundred. When the granddaughter had contacted Ruthie over Instagram, she'd sent a photo of her grandmother surrounded by children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The scale of the family was hard to comprehend. Four generations, all there together. Leo had briefly known Clare. The tired weak version of Clare who could only stomach tinned spaghetti, not the fierce woman brandishing secateurs in the garden. Still, it was something. Susie would never know her. Neither of the children would ever know Angela. Sometimes, Ruthie thought they might have saved her if they'd been born in time.

The Instagram cake business was an idea that had come to Ruthie in the weeks after Susie was born. It had grown slowly for a while and then rapidly during lockdown. The posts that amassed the most likes were of Ruthie herself, smiling in an apron, one of the children on her hip, a plate of sugar cream roses or a bowl of fresh lemon curd in front of them, and cupcakes cooling on the rack.

She placed the first layer of sponge cake onto a cake stand, spread raspberry jam and piped the vanilla buttercream she'd made last night. The making of the buttercream had caused a minor argument because she'd been stressed about getting the cake done and Corey had kept telling her not to worry about it—that she didn't have to do it if it made her unhappy. When she'd pointed out how unhelpful this was, he'd shrugged and said he didn't know what she wanted from him. What she wanted from him was to take her seriously. What she wanted was for him to make dinner and unload the dishwasher so that she wouldn't have to do her work so late in the night. But she couldn't tell him that, because he had a proper job, and she was at home making cakes and playing hide-and-seek.

When the final layer of the sponge was in place, she covered the whole cake in pink buttercream and scraped it smooth. It was soothing, satisfying work. On the top, she arranged pink roses and fresh raspberries and the little sugar pearls she'd made last night.

A small sound came from the children's bedroom. Ruthie washed her hands in the sink and went to check on Susie who had rolled over but was still asleep. Ruthie touched her hand to her daughter's cheek and brushed back a lock of curly dark hair, so much like Angela's, so much like her own.

When Ruthie returned to the kitchen, she was struck anew by the sight of the cake. It was beautiful. The icing soft and pink, the sugar pearls shining. She took photographs of it, climbing onto the chair to get a view from above. It was possibly one of her best yet.

In the bathroom, she applied blush and lip balm and brushed her hair. She leaned forward and practised smiling. There were dark circles under her eyes, and she didn't have time to do her makeup properly, but all of that could be improved by a filter. She went back out into the kitchen and put on the beautiful linen apron that Tiger had bought her. She photographed herself standing beside the cake. It took several goes to get her smile right.

She hadn't seen Tiger in some time. They'd stayed close for a while, but her former boss became increasingly disapproving of her—was she really going to feed people sugar and artificial dyes and white flour? Was she really going to allow her children to drink orange juice and watch TV and get vaccinated? All of this was offered as caring advice. It wasn't Ruthie's fault; she had no mother of her own and society had taught her not to trust her own instincts. There was no arguing with Tiger. Ruthie didn't even try. She silenced the voice inside her that wanted to scream: *What would you know, you stupid bitch, you can't even have children*. But it was no use. Eventually, Tiger stopped calling. For a whole month, Ruthie dressed the children in linen overalls that came in oatmeal and moss and uploaded photographs of them picking vegetables from the garden, as though they were living a blissful agrarian life. But Tiger liked none of her posts. And although Ruthie knew her friend had changed, deep down Tiger's disapproval rang true. Of course, Ruthie was doing it all wrong.

She was weighing up the risk of waking Susie by boiling the kettle, when Corey arrived with Leo in tow. Corey's heavy boots were loud on the floorboards. When he saw the cake, he smiled and smacked his hand to his chest. 'For me? You shouldn't have.' It was the same joke he made every time she finished a cake.

'Susie's asleep,' she whispered.

'I'll get her up,' said Corey, disappearing into the bedroom. 'If she sleeps too late, she'll be up all night.'

Ruthie looked at the time on her phone. It was only four. Susie had been asleep for an hour. Ruthie felt an urge to defend herself against the insinuation that she didn't understand her own daughter's sleep patterns, but

he was already gone. She couldn't help but notice the faint trail of mud he'd walked into the house.

'So good, Mummy.' Leo gazed up at the cake, his little fingers clinging to the counter. Corey came back into the kitchen carrying Susie who was rubbing her eyes.

'We have to remember to lock the front door,' said Ruthie. 'Someone's learned how to open it.'

'Clever girl.'

'Did you?'

'What?'

'Lock the front door?'

'She's right here,' said Corey. 'You're not going anywhere, are you, princess?' He started to tickle Susie who squirmed and laughed. 'Daddy, no! Daddy, no!'

When Corey finally put her down, the two started a chasing game around the house. Leo joined in too, only he wanted to walk like an elephant and Susie ran straight into the back of him, fell and started to cry.

Ruthie went to the front door and locked it. The sounds of her family's footsteps and shouting and crying filled the house. 'Watch the cake.' She imagined it smashed on the floor and tried to remember how many hours it had been since she'd taken the Panadol. Was it too soon for another?

'I have a surprise for you,' said Corey as she came back into the kitchen.

'Oh?'

'I'm coming to Byron with you.' He picked up Susie. She started to hit him. Leo wrapped his body around Ruthie's leg. Corey lifted Susie high above his head. 'Mum said she can take care of these two.'

Ruthie looked down at her perfect cake. She gripped the counter. Susie had never been away from them for more than a night.

'But I didn't RSVP for you,' said Ruthie. 'For Phoebe's wedding.'

'One extra won't matter. It'll be a party. I'll just have a bite of whatever you're having.' He threw Susie into the air and caught her. She laughed and squealed.

Ruthie picked at a stain of dried buttercream on her dress. What if she didn't want to share whatever she was having? What if she wanted it all to herself?

Corey put his arm around her. 'What you said last night was true. We need a break.'

Leo tugged on Ruthie's dress. 'Mummy, I'm an elephant. Look! Look!'

Ruthie smiled and shook herself free. 'I better get this cake away before it's ruined.'

In the evening, the kids watched a movie about zoo animals while she unpacked the dishwasher and uploaded her photographs to Instagram. Corey scrolled Domain.com which had become a habit of his even though they had no plans nor money to move. Apparently, it relaxed him. He'd kicked his boots off on the rug. They lay among the children's toys. Everywhere, mess and none of it her own. At least the photographs had come out well. She scrolled through her grid, those glossy photographs of cakes and batters and smiling faces. All so perfect.



A few days later, Helena came over for brunch. They'd planned to go to the park, but it was raining. Helena had suggested a trendy new cafe, but on the website, it looked small and cramped. There'd be nowhere for Leo and Susie to run around. In the end, it was easier just to stay home. Ruthie made a frittata and fried up some bacon. She put the kids in their raincoats, and they went out into the garden to pick tomatoes and butterhead lettuce for a salad. She'd been looking forward to getting out of the house. When was the last time she'd gone somewhere that wasn't to drop off kids or pick up groceries? She photographed Leo and Susie in the vegetable patch and uploaded the pictures to Instagram. The woman who'd purchased the cake had tagged Ruthie in a photo. It was of the woman's grandmother on her hundredth birthday, smiling regally beside the cake that Ruthie had made. The sugar pearls shone on the buttercream. The table was strewn with dozens of pink and red roses. *We love you, Grandma*, the caption read. Minh, Ruthie's old boss at the bakery, had also liked a picture of her cake. *This*, he said, *is a work of art*.

Over brunch, Helena told Ruthie about her long and arduous week, and how painful it was living with her parents, and the nightmares that had been keeping her up at night. Susie sat on Ruthie's lap and picked the vegetables out of her frittata. Ruthie was used to listening to Helena complain. It had been a core feature of their friendship ever since they were kids. Normally, she didn't mind. There was even something reassuring about the way Helena laid it all on the table. With other people she put on airs, but with

Ruthie she didn't bother. It usually made Ruthie feel close to her. So it came as a surprise that she found herself wondering when the brunch would be over.

'I'm just so tired,' said Helena. 'And I'm not eating properly.'

Ruthie couldn't help but notice Helena had devoured her slice of frittata and at least three rashers of bacon and was now pouring herself another cup of coffee. When they'd decided to meet at Ruthie's house, Helena had asked what she should bring and Ruthie had said nothing. It was unfair then for Ruthie to be annoyed that Helena had shown up empty-handed. Perhaps it was not so much that but the sense that Helena felt entitled to take things from her—her food, time, energy. It was always about what she needed.

'Did I tell you what's going on at work?' asked Helena. 'These women who are hellbent on bringing down the patriarchy? I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm all for that in the general sense, but the way they're carrying on it's like they're expecting to go to The Hague. And now they want to involve me.'

'Well,' said Ruthie, moving her coffee cup away from Leo who was reaching dangerously across the table for a strawberry. 'It's good they're doing something, right? I mean, what happened to you was … gross.'

'I'm just not in a place to deal with it,' said Helena. 'Like, psychologically speaking. Not after the breakup and everything.'

Helena's breakup with Will was the tragedy that preceded all others. The original source of all her pain. At least that was the story Ruthie had tacitly agreed to in order to keep the peace of their friendship. But she was delighted that Will was no longer a part of Helena's life. She looked forward to the day they could stop speaking about him altogether.

'Besides,' said Helena, 'you'd hate these women if you met them. They're only interested in feminism when it involves them personally.'

'I don't know,' said Ruthie. 'Not being called a stupid fucking cunt-faced bitch in the workplace seems pretty reasonable to me. And you were upset when the boys drew you being fucked by a horse.' Ruthie would be lying if she said she didn't derive some pleasure from reminding Helena of this.

'Horsie?' asked Leo.

'Donkey,' said Helena. 'Has no one read the play? And anyway, I'm not saying I disagree that the school is a putrid cesspool of sexism. I'm just saying that the way they're going about it is too intense. I'm not in the

space—psychologically, financially—to be making myself vulnerable like that. I just need some boundaries right now.'

Susie headbutted Ruthie in the stomach, and she winced. 'Go to Aunty Helena for a minute.'

'Oh, it's okay,' said Helena, holding up her hand as though declining another serving of frittata. 'I love to see your smile from over here.' Susie dug her nails into Ruthie's thigh and pulled on her dress. If there was one thing Helena was good at, it was taking care of herself. How happy she was to sit here and complain about work and her parents and the nightmares that kept her up at night. Never mind that Ruthie had no parents, that she was trying to get a business going, that she had actual children—not nightmares—who kept her up at night.

They moved into the living room so that the children could play with their toys. Ruthie sat on the rug and tried to think of something to say that would remind Helena that she too was a person with an interesting and complex life and not a mere receptacle for Helena's sadness. 'Susie's getting so smart,' she said. 'The other day she opened the front door all by herself.'

'Nice one, Susie.'

'For a second, I thought I'd lost her.'

'Yeah?'

'It really scared me. There was like five whole minutes where I didn't know what to do. There's so much mums are supposed to know how to do but there isn't any time to learn it. I don't understand how everyone does it. It's like I've missed a class or something …'

'Well, you're doing a great job,' said Helena, getting up from the couch. 'Is there any more bacon? I've been too stressed to eat properly lately. I probably have a protein deficiency.'

As Helena disappeared into the kitchen, Ruthie watched the children build towers out of blocks only to knock them down and thought of her weekend away in Byron. She'd have to tell Helena that Corey was coming. Fuck. She'd almost been enjoying her anger, looking forward to the evening when she could lie in bed and think of all the selfish ways Helena had behaved. Sometimes it was so easy to dislike her. But once Ruthie announced that Corey was coming, she'd be the one apologising. It wouldn't be the same with him there. Fuck. She snapped a photo of the children playing with their blocks, applied a warm filter and posted it to

Instagram with the caption: *Making the most of rainy days*. Minh's words floated back to her. *A work of art*. As she scrolled through her photos, she started to feel a little better.

I'll follow thee and make a heaven of hell

THE FOUR OF US TOOK a shuttle bus to Phoebe's wedding. Ruthie, Will, Corey and me all packed in with the other guests. My left ear was slightly blocked from the plane and if I turned my head suddenly a wave of vertigo rolled through me. Never mind. If I had to grasp Will's arm every now and then to steady myself, if I had to rest my head against his chest as we danced, if he had to help me to my chair like a character in a Jane Austen novel, then so be it. In fact, it was perfect. Everything would be perfect.

In the seat in front of me, Corey sang along in an obnoxiously loud voice to Billy Idol's 'White Wedding', which was playing through the bus speakers. Was I annoyed that he'd weaselled his way into what was destined to be the most romantic weekend of my life? Of course, I was. But I could tolerate him. I could tolerate anything now that Will and I were together again. Ruthie leaned across the aisle to show her Instagram to a woman we went to school with, one of Phoebe's disciples, who'd made the bold choice of wearing a tiara to someone else's wedding. Ruthie wore a deep green dress that made me sick with envy, though of course it wasn't her dress I was envious of, it was her radiant undeniable beauty. Didn't she know how unnecessary it was to show off photos of her cakes and kids? Her beauty was triumph enough.

When Will and I had arrived at the airport together, I'd registered the shock on her face. She went very quiet, her blue-grey eyes darting between me and Will as we waited in line to get through security. I half expected her to bail me up and so I mentally prepared my defence, the most persuasive

argument being that Corey was here. Corey! And hadn't I been gracious about that? But as I emerged from the body scanner, I saw that Ruthie and Will were chatting amicably. She asked if he was still acting and how his parents were getting on. He said he'd changed a lot since he'd last seen her and that he'd been on a journey of personal growth. Corey announced that he was going to buy a hat with a kangaroo and the words 'Yeah. Nah.' printed on it. What a wit! As we waited for Corey to make his purchase, I allowed myself to believe Ruthie had finally got over the London incident. After all, it was so long ago, and we were so very young.

The bus turned onto a highway. The holiday houses and organic cafes disappeared. Thick clumps of trees and dry flat paddocks lined the road. In the window, I gazed at my reflection. Will sat beside me. The miracle of this fact—the simple closeness of our bodies—stilled my mind. He was here. What else mattered? For months, I had dreamed of this very moment and now it was real. He was talking to one of Phoebe's cousins about the benefits of microdosing and I had a view of his lovely head and dark hair. Even his bald spot filled me with a tender feeling—that soft patch of milky skin, vulnerable, fallible—perfect in its imperfection. In the glass, our bodies were imprinted on each other. My eyes in his head. His shoulder in my chest. If I hovered my hand just so, it was resting in his.



The wedding was at the Tranquillity Eco Resort in a rainforest that was famous for its palms, figs and ancient nightcap oaks. I'd read there were caves full of glow-worms, and rivers where the water was so crystal clear, you could see all the way to the bottom. The resort itself was in a clearing of sorts. It was a beautiful, modern building made of timber and glass. The bride and groom were staying there, along with any guests who could afford it. I'd seen on the website that the rooms were over a thousand a night. It was a far cry from our cabin at the holiday park with its framed stock photos of seashells and lighthouses.

The bus pulled into a small carpark behind the resort, and it was here that the true beauty of the place revealed itself to us—a small lake, the shape of a teardrop, burned gold in the late afternoon sun. People began taking photos even though we were informed on the invitation that no unofficial photography was permitted. Where the lake narrowed was a little bridge,

like something out of a fairytale. It was decorated with pink and white peonies. Strings of fairy lights wound through the railings. If I felt any jealousy, it was assuaged by the knowledge that this was the stage upon which Will and I would rekindle our great love.

It was a pleasantly cool afternoon for the middle of summer. Rows of white chairs were arranged on the grass before the lake. A flower arch stood at the end of the aisle and beside it a band of three men with guitars and a double bass. Waiters walked around with trays of champagne. As we waited for the ceremony to begin, the thought of conversing with my former classmates after all these years both thrilled and terrified me. Surely, I'd done better than some. I had two master's degrees and had lived overseas. I worked in a building that was modelled off a medieval castle and I had a handsome British man by my side. I was not addicted to cocaine nor Pilates. I did not post earnestly about my feelings on social media. The woman wearing the tiara smiled at me and I braced myself for her approach, but she merely sailed by. I took two glasses, but Will wasn't drinking as he was recovering from a bacterial infection he'd got from drinking raw milk. I noticed that his skin was paler than usual and that his suit hung loose on him. This afforded him a haunted gothic look that was new and sexy. I placed my hand on his shoulder and gave him my most soothing look.

'I'll take it off your hands,' said Corey, grabbing Will's drink and downing it in a few mouthfuls. 'I'm an off-duty dad tonight. Partay.'

The photographer came around. We got a picture of the four of us and I used the opportunity to put my hand around Will's waist. The scent of him —something cool laced with sweetness—made me swoon. I hoped the photographer might take a picture of just the two of us, but he seemed most interested in Ruthie. He even asked her to pose alone beneath the flower arch.

'How nice is this?' I said, when Ruthie returned from her photo shoot. 'All of us together.' I looked around for a waiter to see if I might pinch another glass.

'How much do you reckon something like this would cost?' asked Corey. 'Seems like a waste if you ask me. Blowing all that cash on one night.'

Why did the man have to announce his opinions so loudly?

'That's what was so great about our wedding,' he said, putting his arm around Ruthie's shoulders. 'Did the paperwork in our living room. Then off to Fiji. Just the two of us. Cheap as anything and heaps more fun.'

Ruthie cut a glance towards me. Her wedding was something we rarely spoke of. Perhaps because it marked that period in which we weren't friends. I knew her decision to keep it secret from me was a form of punishment. It was possible that her entire marriage to Corey had been orchestrated to punish me.

'Not just the two of us,' Corey corrected himself. 'Ruthie's boss—what's-her-name? Tiger. She was staying in Fiji at the time. Got us a great deal on this luxury suite. There was a pool with a floating bar and everything. I think she knew management.'

'Have you seen Tiger lately?' I asked Ruthie.

'I think she's in Nepal.'

'Great girl,' said Corey. He spent the next five minutes scrolling through his phone to find a picture of the floating bar. When he finally turned his screen towards me, I saw Ruthie and Corey standing in a pool holding cocktails topped with pineapple and strawberries. Beside them was Tiger in a black cut-out swimsuit.

'Hey, I know her,' said Will, zooming in on the image.

It took him a moment to work out why she was familiar. I had to pretend not to know that he followed her on Instagram and Facebook and liked all her videos.

'This is her, right?' He held out his phone and showed me a picture of Tiger atop a mountain, her hair blowing across her face. Behind her, snowy peaks pierced a hard blue sky.

'She was my boss for years,' said Ruthie.

'Really?' asked Will. 'What's she like as a person?'

Ruthie and I looked at each other. How to describe Tiger?

'I love her,' said Will. 'Don't get me wrong, I do think some of her ideas about vegetarianism are a bit dated. Prehistoric man would never have evolved without eating meat. But I do like her elixirs.'

'Wow,' said Ruthie. 'Even men are getting into witchcraft.'

'What?'

'When we were kids, Ruthie thought she was a witch,' I said.

'Not seriously. It was a joke.'

I was about to remind her of that night in the forest but thought better of it. I wanted to get off the topic of Tiger. It was wounding to hear Will so easily declare his love for another woman. And even the mere thought of

Tiger always produced a desperate feeling in me. I never quite knew what I would do or say.

'You were probably picking up on her power,' said Will. 'She strikes me as an unusually powerful woman.'

'You're right.' Ruthie smiled at Will. 'That's the perfect way to describe her.'

Will brought out a little silver flask.

'Nice,' said Corey, reaching for it.

'It isn't alcohol. It's Tiger's healing elixir. It really works, I'm feeling so much better.'

Corey took a sip and spat it out. 'Sorry, man. That tastes like mulch.'

Ruthie backed away from it. I saw that old fear in her eyes.

When it was offered to me, I accepted. How could I not? The elixir was woody, earthy, with a darkly sweet undertone. I remembered that university class years ago, when Will inadvertently drank from my water bottle. My mouth on the lip of the little silver flask, where his had been only a moment ago.



Phoebe walked down the aisle just before sunset. The sky smouldered in pink and gold. She looked angelic in her bespoke ivory gown with its lace sleeves and pearl buttons, her dimpled smile partially concealed beneath a gauzy veil. The band played an acoustic version of a pop song I couldn't quite recall the name of. Phoebe's father, dressed in a beige suit, a peony pinned to his lapel, deposited her at the flower arch where her blue-eyed groom was waiting. Behind them, the lake gleamed like a gemstone.

The couple had written their own vows, full of promises and inside jokes. The groom recited an original love poem in which he rhymed 'devoted my life' to 'promoted to wife'. Some of the guests cried loudly and honked into tissues. I looked at Will to see if he was moved by this display of love—I was prepared to take my lead from him, either roll my eyes or shed an earnest tear—but in the gathering dark it was hard to make out his expression. His hands rested in his lap and I longed to hold them. But it was only early. We had the whole night to find our way back to one another. As the groom kissed his bride, a white moon, clear and round as an eye, peered out from behind the trees.



Dinner was held in a large dining room in the resort. Guests sat around three long oak tables laden with beeswax candles and flowers. The ‘chairs’ were polished tree stumps upon which little velvet cushions were placed. Only Corey, who hadn’t RSVP’d, had a regular chair, which had to be dragged in from reception. As a result, he towered over the rest of us. Anyone else would have found this situation mortifying but of course he thought it was endlessly funny and kept telling anyone who would listen how he felt like a king.

Waiters brought around platters of cured meats and hot bread and woodfired eggplant and marinated zucchini and feta-stuffed olives and vine leaves and sprouting cauliflower in brown butter and lemon. They served dishes of wagyu beef with fermented turnip vinaigrette, charcoal onions and wild greens. There was chicken roasted in thyme honey with garlic potatoes and purple carrots.

I tried to remind Will of our former closeness—*Remember those days at uni and those nights in Glebe? Remember we ate something similar at that restaurant in London—the one your dad likes?*—but he seemed uneasy and kept sipping from his flask and getting up to go to the bathroom. All I could think about was being alone with him. Perhaps we would slow dance with our foreheads pressed together. Or better yet, he would slip outside for some fresh air and find me standing by the lake, his kindred spirit, alone and beautiful in my blue dress—*Fancy seeing you here*. I would shiver and he would wrap his jacket around my shoulders, and we would watch the moon swim through the dark lake. It was all possible and yet, as the hours slipped by, I was stricken with fear that it wouldn’t eventuate, that I would fail to propel us to the crucial moment.

After the main course had been cleared, the waiters came around with thick slices of black forest cake with crème fraîche and cherry compote. Ruthie and Corey got into a minor argument when he tried to take an extra spoonful of her cake. Our wineglasses were refilled every time we took a sip. Ruthie’s cheeks were flushed. I gave her the rest of my cake. I was too nervous to eat.

Because of my nervousness, my conversation flitted around—I made a sly joke about being rich enough to force guests to squat on tree stumps, then, in case that sounded shallow, I discussed an article I’d read about the

Arctic resources race and the unprecedented melting of the ice, and when no one seemed particularly gripped by that, I just began pointing to things around the room, saying, *Look at that enormous candle* and *I love that woman's dress* or *Do you think that's real timber?*—and other such scintillating things.

'Are you all right?' asked Ruthie, when Will excused himself yet again for the bathroom.

I laughed and told her what a splendid time I was having.

She leaned forward, her wineglass in hand, the edges of her mouth stained with cherry compote. 'Are you worried about Will?'

It was as if she'd picked up her steak knife and plunged it into my heart. Was I so obvious?

'About the elixir?' she said.

'What?'

'Tiger.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Tiger's healing elixir.' Ruthie looked around as though she was afraid Tiger might magically appear. 'He doesn't look well.'

'That's because of the raw—' I shook my head. 'It doesn't have anything to do with Tiger. You don't still believe that stuff, do you?'

She took another sip of wine but said nothing.



When the dinner and speeches were over, but only the very brave or very drunk were yet dancing, I stole Will away on the pretence of introducing him to the happy couple. Up close, Phoebe was even more dazzling. The blush on her cheeks shimmered when it caught the light. Her eyelids were heavy with thick feathery lashes. The frothy skirt of her dress cascaded around her. 'Honestly,' said Phoebe, putting her arm around me and looking at Will, 'this girl was so smart in school. And so funny. I love it.'

I laughed and tried to think of something to say about Phoebe that wouldn't sound too sycophantic. 'And Phoebe was so popular. Like an actual celebrity.'

'Oh nice,' said Will. 'I went to school in London, so it was very different.'

I could have kissed Will right then. Oh, his beautiful accent, his casual reference to London! I could tell it impressed Phoebe—perhaps even perturbed her. She was used to being the most impressive person in the room.

'Will's an actor,' I said. 'He performed in a play that opened on the West End.'

Even after everything that happened, I relish the memory of telling Phoebe this, watching her face fall. She'd underestimated me. I could see her mind recalibrating, trying to reconcile the girl I'd been with the woman I was now.

'What play?' she asked.

'Oh, um, *Twelfth Night*,' said Will. 'Shakespeare.'

Phoebe laughed. 'I know who wrote *Twelfth Night*. I actually designed my wedding off that play we studied in school. You know, the one with the fairies.'

Phoebe's literary inspiration surprised me—if memory served me correctly, she spent most of our English classes sticking gum to the underside of desks and drawing penises on her friends' exercise books—but I did my best to conceal it. I gushed over the wedding.

'Hey,' she said, interrupting my profuse praise of the enormous candles. 'Nick is here somewhere. Remember Nick? That guy you were obsessed with in school?'

My heart dived to the pit of my stomach. 'I don't know that *obsessed* is the right word.'

'Oh my god,' Phoebe said to Will, as though confiding in a bosom buddy. 'Helena literally stalked him at school. Like she made a love potion and everything. We actually had to intervene. She was so funny.'

I laughed, hoping to convey that this was a joke between us—one that had been exaggerated for comic effect over time. 'We had a casual thing,' I said. 'I didn't make a potion. Or stalk him.'

'Oh my god, you did,' said Phoebe. 'He was in this musical and she literally went to see it like five thousand times.'

'No, I didn't.'

'You so did. Ruthie told me. Oh my god, where is she?'

Even after all these years, vindication burned bright in my chest. I'd been right. Ruthie had started that rumour about me stalking Nick. Et tu, Brutè?

'That's how we met,' said Will. 'I was in a play. *Hamlet*.'

‘Wow! You really do have a type, don’t you, Helena? My husband and I met at a pump class.’

I was about to object when, out of a sea of dancing bodies, swathed in black like an evil portent, emerged my high school English teacher.

‘Miss?’

Phoebe followed my gaze. ‘Oh yeah, she’s a friend of my family. I used to think she was really beautiful. But she never got married or had kids or anything. And she’s still teaching at our school even though she’s, like, old. And I get that she’s sad, but did she really have to wear black to my wedding?’ All of this was whispered in the hushed tone of a seasoned gossip, which Phoebe had perfected in Year 7. ‘It’s so good to see you,’ said Phoebe, throwing her arms around our old teacher. ‘Honestly, you look just the same. Do you remember Helena?’

My English teacher turned to look at me. She was wearing a full-length black dress with long flouncy sleeves made of lace. Her fingernails were a glossy black. Her lips, dark plum. ‘Of course,’ she said. ‘How could I forget Helen Wood? And who is this?’ She arched a thin eyebrow at Will.

‘I’ll leave you to catch up.’ Phoebe backed away from us.

I assume that I told my English teacher all about Will’s acting and the play on the West End and my Master’s in Shakespeare Studies, but I cannot be sure because I was so nervous my mouth moved of its own accord. ‘And I became a teacher,’ I said, breathless with the wild cadence of my own speech. ‘Just like you.’

‘Huh,’ she said. ‘I’d hoped better for you.’

I laughed but it wasn’t clear if she was joking.

‘My dream is to open a lingerie bookstore.’

‘Lingerie and books?’ I asked. ‘In the one store?’

She looked at me like I was being deliberately slow. ‘My two great loves. I’m saving up.’

I wondered how old she was. There were deep grooves around her mouth and crow’s feet crinkling the edges of her eyes. ‘Did I tell you that Will is a Shakespearean actor?’

‘Twice,’ she said, appraising him. ‘Well, go on. Give us something.’

‘What?’

‘Some Shakespeare.’

‘Now?’

‘I’m an old woman. Don’t wait until I’m dead.’

Will looked at me. I nodded encouragingly as though this were an entirely normal request. My old fear of disappointing my teacher resurfaced. I wanted Will to give her some Hamlet, to show her the tortured prince of Denmark I'd fallen in love with all those years ago, but it was old Prospero he chose:

'*Now my charms are all o'erthrown*,
And what strength I have's mine own,
Which is most faint.'

How strange it was to hear him utter this speech in the hurly-burly of a party. But the air surrounding Will and my teacher felt quiet and still, like the rhythm of the language held us in its thrall. Then something happened that had never happened before. Will forgot his lines. In all the time I'd known him, he only ever had to read a speech a few times before he had it committed to memory. And then he could pull it out, months, years later. It was one of his gifts, a key part of his charm. But tonight, close to the end, he forgot his lines. There was nothing for me to do but prompt him—'*As you from crimes would pardoned be* …' He glanced my way but remained silent. Did he know how to continue? I'd never seen him look so uncertain before. But when he spoke again the end of the speech flowed easily:

'*As you from crimes would pardoned be*,
Let your indulgence set me free.'

My teacher was silent for a moment, her face inscrutable. Will looked down at the ground. She put her hand on his shoulder. 'It's okay,' she said. He nodded once. What to make of this? Was she declaring his performance merely okay? Or reassuring him that everyone forgets sometimes. Why then did I feel she was imparting some larger message, that everything would be okay? 'I need a cigarette,' she said. She moved towards the glass doors so suddenly her dress swept dramatically through the air.

'Jesus,' I said, leaning into Will. 'I think she's really lost it. I mean, who wears black to a wedding?'

But Will said that he needed to go to the bathroom again and hurried away.



The night was slipping out of my grasp. I could feel it. Almost everyone was drunk now. Shoes were left in corners. Top buttons undone. Cheeks

flushed pink. I spotted Ruthie swaying on the dance floor, a glass in her hand, her eyes closed. If she was embarrassed to be dancing alone in a crowd, she didn't show it. For some reason, this bothered me. Perhaps it was the knowledge that I couldn't do it, or the complete way with which she could withdraw from the world, let it all pass her by as though it didn't concern her in the slightest.

I couldn't find Will anywhere.

'Leave him,' said Ruthie, when I asked if she'd seen him. 'Dance with me.'

'I'll be back soon.'

A crashing noise, like breaking glass, tore through the speakers. Then a pulsing beat and grungy industrial music I hadn't heard in years. Ruthie squeezed my hand. 'Pretty Piece of Flesh'. People fled the dance floor.

'Is this your doing?' I asked. 'It isn't exactly wedding music.'

'Dance with me.' She rolled her hips the way we did in high school.

'Later.'

'You'll miss it.'

I glanced around, hoping neither Will nor Phoebe would associate me with Ruthie's appalling musical request. 'I have to find Will.' I slipped away from her. By the time I reached the edge of the dance floor, it was practically empty. She danced alone, her glass raised in the air and her eyes closed. I turned and fled into the night.

My nails can reach unto thine eyes

THE AIR OUTSIDE WAS COOL for January, as though summer had softened just for us. I looked up and vertigo washed through me. The moon was high and bright. A scattering of stars across a dark sky. And there, on the little bridge at the narrow end of the lake, like a brooding romantic hero, a beautiful figment drawn from the depths of my imagination, was Will.

I moved towards him like someone in a dream. There was a cosmic feeling—the earth spinning on its axis, the gravitational pull of the moon, Will and I in the same place at the same time. As I neared him, I was afraid to break the silence. The moment was so perfect, so full of promise, I didn't wish to crack it open, and yet I was desperate to do so—to take the first sweet sip of my new life.

'Fancy seeing you here,' I said, when I reached the bridge.

Will, who was leaning against the railing, jumped backwards. 'Fuck. You scared me.'

'What are you doing out here?'

'Getting some air.'

I stood beside him. My bare arm brushed his sleeve. The cool sweet smell of him. Moonlight rippled on the lake. I shivered, hoping he might offer me his jacket, but he was staring steadfast into the water. I crossed my arms around my body, my dress silky and smooth beneath my palms. 'It's chilly.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'You should probably go inside.'

'I'm all right. I actually like it.'

‘Cool.’ He drank from the little silver flask.

‘Sorry about Phoebe and that stuff she said about Nick.’

‘Huh?’

‘He was my first boyfriend, but I haven’t seen him since school. Like, I wouldn’t even recognise him if I saw him now. Anyway, I had no idea he’d be here.’ I tucked my hair behind my ear and smoothed it with my hand.

‘Why would I care if your high school boyfriend was here?’

‘Right? Just the way Phoebe said it. You know how she exaggerates.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t tell everyone I was an actor.’

I laughed, genuinely surprised. If I had to put a number on it, I’d say at least seventy-five per cent of our relationship had been spent discussing his acting. ‘I’m just so proud of you.’

‘I’ve given it up. I’m not doing it anymore.’

‘But you’re an amazing actor,’ I said. ‘It’s your passion. Your calling.’

He turned away from me, pressed his hands over his eyes. ‘Do you have any idea how embarrassing it is for me when you talk like that?’

‘You’ll get back to it. All artists go through—’

‘I don’t want it,’ he said, walking across the bridge towards the forest. ‘I realised tonight. I don’t have to do this thing that makes me miserable anymore. All the rejection and criticism. It’s humiliating. I’m done with it.’

It frightened me, this talk of giving up on things he loved. ‘Was it my teacher? What she said to you back there? Don’t listen to her. I think she’s lost it. She’s really old and—’

‘I’m going back to London.’

‘What? Now?’

We were standing on the edge of the forest, the dark bodies of trees looming over us.

‘Not now obviously. In a few weeks. My parents are no longer “funding my life here”.’ He used air quotes, and I could imagine Richard’s deep voice edged with disdain.

‘I’ll help you out,’ I said immediately. The thought of losing him was so palpable I almost reached out and grabbed his wrist, but I stopped myself just in time, my hand falling limply by my side.

He frowned. ‘Actually, I think it will be a relief to go home.’

‘But what about us?’

He looked at me like I was crazy. ‘Helena, we broke up months ago.’

Oh, the sound of my name on his lips! If I could just keep him talking, I knew I could change his mind. All was not lost. We were here, weren't we? Together at last! 'I love you,' I said, taking a step towards him. 'I know things have been difficult with your parents and now this gut infection—not to mention the pandemic and losing your job and the general lack of appreciation for the arts in this country. And I'm sorry I wasn't always easy to live with, but I do love you, Will, and I can support you in whatever you want to do. I'll literally never eat white rice again. Bone broth every night, I promise. Just don't leave. Please.'

He was silent. He looked a little stunned, his mouth opening and closing. Was he too overcome with emotion to speak? Would he kiss me? Drop to his knees? He rubbed his stomach and winced.

'We were made for each other,' I said, daring to put my hands on his chest. 'Like spiritually, psychologically, physically made for each other.'

He backed away. 'What the fuck are you talking about? Like, do you even believe what you're saying?'

I gripped his shirt tighter. 'Will. Please. I love you.'

'Stop saying that.' He stepped backwards again, stumbling on a fallen branch.

I slid to the ground, grasping his trousers. Pain bit into my knees, but I didn't give in. 'I'm begging you. Quite literally.'

'Jesus Christ, Helena. Let go. This isn't very … feminist.'

He tried to unwind my fingers, but I gripped tighter. Oh, the feel of his skin! How much rejection and humiliation could a person take? I'd show him! My bounty is as boundless as the sea!

'Helena!'

He managed to free himself and darted out of my reach. I fell onto all fours. Pain in my hands now. But what did it matter? My whole body was made of pain.

'Why did you come?' I asked.

'To the wedding? You invited me. As a … friend.'

'I thought you loved me.'

'I … wanted to see Byron Bay. You know, before I leave Australia. Thought I might do the lighthouse walk tomorrow. If I feel better …'

The lighthouse walk? I started to cry. Thick heaving sobs I didn't try to stop. Pain in my throat, tears streaming down my face, a gasping breathlessness—how I welcomed this outward proof of my inner pain. I'd

held on to it for so long. Bravely—heroically—suffering in silence. No more. Time to wear my heart upon my sleeve. ‘No one loves me,’ I cried in between shuddering breaths. ‘No one. Loves. Me.’

I felt Will move towards me. ‘Helena, please stop. This isn’t good for you.’

‘You leaving isn’t good for me!’ I said, smacking my fists into the ground. ‘You have no job, no money, your guts are infected and you still won’t have me. Why? What is wrong with me?’ I was as stunned by this outburst as he was. Again, I clung to his trousers. ‘Will, I’m so sorry, please —’

‘You know this obsession you have with me is unhealthy, right?’ He unhooked my fingers and stepped away. ‘You need to get a hobby. Take up gardening. Get back into writing. Do something with your life. Have some fucking self-respect.’

‘What’s so wrong with being obsessed with love?’ I replied. ‘People are obsessed with cross-training and real estate and cocaine and Pilates. Why can’t I be obsessed with love? Maybe if more people were—if men went around listening to stupid love songs and watching romantic comedies and … reading romantasy, the world wouldn’t be such a fucking disaster.’

‘Helena, you’re being unreasonable.’ His voice was suddenly calm. He hiccupped loudly and the faint rotten smell of sulphur wafted over me. ‘I’m going inside. Okay? You need to take a minute and get it together.’

He tried to move past me, pressing himself against the far side of the bridge as though I were a wild animal that might suddenly lunge at his throat. But I would not be defeated by this appeal to reason. No! What was rationality after all but a sexist concept designed by men to justify the emotional violence they wrought upon the world? I read somewhere that if you are confronted by a wild animal, you ought to play dead—was it brown bears in Canada? I don’t remember. Having not foreseen a situation in which I would be fighting for my life in a forest, I did not retain the details. But it was what I was thinking about as I lay down on the bridge before him.

‘Helena, what are you doing?’

I closed my eyes. In the yoga classes I’d done with Tiger, she encouraged us to visualise our bodies in tiny pieces—our eyelids and livers, our toes, the discs of our spines. That is what I did as I lay on my back. My body in tiny pieces, scattered before him like petals. *You are in the right place at the*

right time. There is nowhere else you need to be. You are loved just as you are.

'Helena?' His hand on my shoulder. For the last time? No, it was unthinkable, like trying to imagine what it's like to be dead. 'Helena, you're freaking me out.'

Was that fear in his voice? So he did care about me! The wooden planks of the bridge were hard against my spine. A nail pressed into my thigh. I'd prove my love to him if it killed me.

'You can't stay out here,' he said. 'It's getting cold.'

Wrap your jacket around me! Take me into your arms!

'Look, Helena. You don't need me, okay? The truth is I'm pretty fucked up right now. Don't do this. Please?' He hiccupped again and rubbed his stomach. There was a new tiredness in his voice. Was I wearing him down? Would he discover that now, at the crucial moment, he couldn't bear to leave me?

'Okay, well, I have to go so … I'll see you around.'

He stepped over me. His footsteps disappeared into the dark. I stared up at the unblinking moon, sole witness to my defeat. He was going to leave me here.

He was really going to leave me.

He was gone.

Play dead. Play dead. Play dead. How long did it take a person to die of exposure? For the night air to sap your warmth, for insects to nibble your flesh, for the elements to reclaim your bones? I gazed up at the vast sky with its perfect moon and thought of that Slessor poem we'd studied at school—the one where he couldn't delight in the friendly stars for fear of the eternal darkness that beckoned beyond. To die of exposure. There was something poetic in that. Hadn't I exposed my heart—offered it to Will, hot and bleeding and ripe—only for him to cast it aside? I held my breath and imagined him finding my cold lovely body here beneath the fairy lights and trees. He'd be sorry then. He'd stroke my hair and curse the stars. O my love, my wife, death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath, hath had no power yet upon thy beauty. Thou art not conquered.

Little moths flitted around the fairy lights that hung from the bridge. Those poor lost fools, turning in circles, beating their wings frantically to get to the light, only to discover it was no celestial paradise, merely a glass orb tied together with plastic string. A sad parody of the moon. A cruel joke. But perhaps they'd never realise their mistake. Perhaps they'd die thinking they were about to touch the cool cheek of the moon and not their own burning demise.

Footsteps approached. Will? Returned?

'Helena?'

Ruthie.

'What are you doing out here?'

'Waiting to die.'

'Of course you are.' She sat down beside me and placed her cardigan over my body.

'Will broke up with me.' The words were heavy and strange in my mouth.

'Okay, but didn't that happen like months ago?'

'It wasn't real. It was just like … a little break. A reset. But I'm never going to see him again.'

'We're all taking the same shuttle bus back to the cabin, so you probably will see him again.'

'It isn't a joke, Ruthie. He's leaving the country.'

'Let's go inside. You still haven't danced with me.'

'He was supposed to love me.'

'I wish you hadn't brought him.'

'I can't believe this is happening. He's the love of my life.'

'And an arsehole.'

'My best friend.'

'*I'm* your best friend.'

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. 'No one loves me.'

'*I* love you. Even though you're a huge fucking drama queen.' Ruthie took my hand and pulled on my arm, but I didn't budge. She fell backwards and laughed. 'Come on. You can't stay here.'

'Just leave me.'

'What was that?' Ruthie's voice was suddenly serious. 'Did you hear that?'

I would not be tricked so easily. I closed my eyes and concentrated on oblivion.

'I'm not playing,' said Ruthie, scrambling to her feet. 'It's coming from the forest.'

I heard it then too. A rustling of leaves, a loud crunching of sticks that could only come from the movement of a large animal. Some kind of beast. I sat up. There it was again, closer this time. Fuck. Had my lifeless form attracted a predator? 'Are there bears here?'

'In Byron Bay?'

'Crocodiles then?'

'In a forest?'

'Should we play dead?' I got to my feet, gripped the railing to steady myself.

A dark three-headed form emerged from the trees. A pinprick of red light and a weedy grassy smell. What monster was this? I put my arm across Ruthie. She gripped my hand.

'The thing about crypto,' the monster said, 'you've got to get in and out quickly. Make your money and go home. Don't push your luck.'

'Corey?'

'Oh, hey, hon. What are you doing out here?' Corey, flanked by Phoebe's nephew and another man in a tan suit, stepped out of the forest. Corey stumbled on a tree root and almost dropped the joint he was carrying. His two companions exploded into laughter.

As the trio approached the bridge, two things became clear. First, they were stoned out of their minds. And second, there was something familiar about the man in the tan suit. I stared at him, doubled over, his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth stretched with laughter. An image came to me of a beast on a stage, writhing in agony. 'Nick?' Was this an enchanted forest? How many boyfriends of Christmas past would it spit out?

He looked up at the sound of his name and frowned. 'Have we met?'

I wiped my face with my hand, smoothed down my hair. The boy who'd felt me up against his father's kayak all those years ago was still there in his eyes and in the shape of his mouth. His hair was cut shorter and the ring he'd worn in one ear was gone. He was tall. Handsome. The kind of man I'd notice if we passed in the street.

'It's me. Helena. Helen Wood.'

He looked at me blankly.

‘We … umm … went out for a while. Well, not “out” but … When you were in that musical in school?’

‘A musical,’ said Phoebe’s nephew. ‘That’s so funny.’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Nick. ‘We went to the Year Twelve formal together?’

‘Ahh, no. We mostly hung out at your parents’ place. In the garage, specifically. By the kayak.’

‘Oh shit.’ He staggered towards me and pulled me into a hug. ‘Helen. It’s so good to see you. God, you look gorgeous.’ His body was warm. He smelled of beer and sweat and weed. I liked the way he towered over me, how my head fit snugly in his armpit. What a good story this would be if we got married and people asked how we’d met—*The first or the second time? Only took us about fifteen years to find each other. And in a forest, of all places. On the night my callous former boyfriend left me for dead*. It would be enough to make Will die of jealousy.

‘I’ve got more shrooms in my jacket,’ said Phoebe’s nephew. ‘But my jacket’s inside.’

‘Lead the way,’ said Nick, releasing me.

I wondered if this invitation included me. What strange trajectory was this night on? Moments ago, I had thought my life over. But now? What a twist! A delicious deus ex machina plucked fresh from the forest! I went to follow but Ruthie and Corey were blocking my path, standing together at the end of the bridge. It took me a moment to realise they were arguing.

‘I had this epiphany,’ Corey was telling her. ‘I think our life is killing me. Like we just work and eat dinner and watch TV and go to the same park every weekend.’

‘I don’t watch TV,’ said Ruthie. ‘I’m the one cleaning up after dinner.’

‘It’s no way to live,’ he said.

‘What are you saying?’

‘I want to go surfing in Indonesia.’

‘You have children,’ said Ruthie. ‘And you’re high.’

‘I just need a break.’

‘From what? From me? From our kids?’

‘From our life.’

Ruthie started to laugh. A bitter, wild sort of laugh. I tried to find my way past them. Nick and Phoebe’s nephew were already walking across the grass towards the resort. They had their arms wrapped around each other

and were singing ‘White Wedding’. I wanted to chase after them, but Ruthie was still blocking my way, her fists clenched by her side.

‘I’m so exhausted all the time,’ said Corey.

She grabbed his shirt. For a moment, she appeared so furious I thought she might throw him into the lake.

‘*I’m* exhausted,’ she said through gritted teeth. ‘Do you understand? *I’m* the one who needs a break. *I’m* the one who should be surfing in Indonesia.’

‘I’m just telling you my truth,’ said Corey. ‘Don’t be mad.’

She stared at him, that murderous look still in her eyes. Then she released him. ‘Just leave me alone.’

‘Hon—’

‘Go away!’

He started towards the resort, gazing at the glistening lake and up at the sky as though it was his first time seeing them. ‘You should really try the shrooms,’ he called over his shoulder. ‘You see everything from a whole new perspective. Fungi. Fucking amazing.’

When he was gone, Ruthie sat down on the bridge. At first, I thought she was laughing but it soon turned into shuddering sobs. She rested her head in her hands. Her shoulders shook. I glanced at the resort, glowing in the distance. Nick was somewhere inside. The sight of him and me dancing together might remind Will of all he stood to lose. They might fight over me. Did I want them to? No. Maybe. Of course!

‘Maybe Corey’s right,’ I said, coming to sit beside her. ‘We should try the shrooms.’ I imagined the night spinning around me in psychedelic colour, Nick’s handsome face at the centre, his arms wrapped tightly around me, Will watching on with a murderous look in his eye.

‘I fucking hate him.’

‘Nick?’

Ruthie looked up, her face wet with tears. ‘My husband.’

‘Oh, right. Yes, I hate him too. Let’s go inside.’

‘No.’

‘Come on.’ I offered her my hand. ‘Please.’

‘I thought you were dying.’

‘I actually feel a lot better.’ In the distance, people had started to spill outside the resort. They gathered in groups on the verandah and stairs,

looking out over the lake. I was too far away to see if Nick or Will were among them.

'Helena.' I turned to find Ruthie studying me. 'You'd better not be serious.'

'What?'

'You are not chasing after Nick.'

I laughed and stood up to show her how preposterous I found this. But what were the chances of me and him reuniting like this—at a wedding, in a forest, on a moonlit night? I gripped the railing for balance.

'Just sit here with me,' said Ruthie.

'I really think we should go in.'

'Please?'

'I'm cold.' I stepped off the bridge and onto the grass.

'Helena?'

'It's not good for my asthma—'

'Helen!' She stood up, her eyes red from crying. 'Don't you dare leave me. Not for him! Not again!'

'What are you talking about?' I held my hand out towards her. 'Come on. You'll feel better inside.'

'A minute ago, you were going to die for Will. Now you're after Nick? What's wrong with you?'

'You're being crazy.' I dropped my hand and turned away. There was no time for this. It was getting late.

'I swear to god, if you leave now, I will never speak to you again.'

I knew her well enough to know that this was no idle threat. The heels of my sandals sank into the soft grass. Beside me, the lake shone darkly. 'Are you jealous?' I asked. 'Is that what this is?'

'Oh my god, you're delusional.'

'You never liked Nick. Or Will.'

'You hate Corey.'

'So do you! You said it yourself. The only reason you married him was to get back at me.' The skin on my chest and cheeks flushed with a sudden heat. Was it the wine? The emotional turmoil of the night? The blooming promise of new love? How had this accusation, long buried, slipped so carelessly from my lips? I breathed in the cool clean forest air.

Ruthie laughed. 'Oh, of course. Because the whole world revolves around you. You're so selfish. You never even ask me about my life.'

‘You shut me out of your life,’ I said, willing my voice to steady. ‘You got married without telling me. You had a baby.’

‘You’re such a liar,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘And the saddest thing is you believe your own shit.’

‘I’m a liar? What about you? You spread that rumour about me stalking Nick. Don’t try to deny it. Phoebe told me.’

‘That was in high school!’

‘And you’ve lied about it all this time!’

‘You only chase men who treat you like shit. It’s sick.’

I turned back towards the resort. Momentarily, the world swam. Dark trees and fairy lights floating vertiginously in and out of my vision. I did not have time for this.

‘There’s a reason I shut you out of my life,’ said Ruthie. ‘And you know it. Your boyfriend, the so-called love of your life, tried to … force himself on me.’

I flinched. It wasn’t true. Was it true?

‘And you chose him over me. You’re a coward.’

‘I did *not* choose him. You left without giving me a chance.’

‘See? You actually believe your own lies. He hurt us. And you still chose him.’

We were both breathing heavily. Ruthie standing on the highest point of the bridge, me on the grass looking up at her. She was like an actor on a stage, the moon her spotlight. She leaned over the railing. When she spoke next, her voice was quiet, like she was talking to herself or an unseen audience in the dark water. ‘You treat me like shit. It’s how it’s always been. I don’t know why I put up with it. Maybe when we were kids I really believed you were better than me because you had a nice house and nice parents and were on the aerobics team and I was just lucky to know you.’

‘I knew you were jealous of me making the aerobics team.’

‘But I don’t think you’re better than me anymore. I’ve never met anyone who is as egotistical and insecure as you. It’s actually quite an achievement.’

She hit her mark. I was pierced—wounded—but I’d be damned if I’d let her have the last word. ‘Look, I get that you hate your life. You’re stuck in your grandmother’s house with two kids and a husband who scrolls Domain dot com with the same vigour most people watch porn. But that isn’t—’

‘This is exactly what I’m talking about! You think you’re better than me! So cool and interesting but no one cares about your Shakespeare degree or the fact that your ex-boyfriend was in a play on the West End. I read the reviews! It was a disaster!’

‘It was modern!’ My nails dug into my palms. What did I care? The pain felt good. My whole body tensed with rage. ‘And you know nothing about art.’

‘You’re such a snob!’

‘You could have come to uni with me. You chose Corey instead.’

‘My mother died!’

‘It was our dream! We were supposed to live together and read under the jacaranda trees and have parties with our friends. You abandoned me.’

‘You and your dreams,’ she said. ‘When are you going to wake up to the real world?’

‘At least I tried. You just gave up.’

‘You try way too hard. You live like there’s someone watching you. No one is watching you, Helen! God, you couldn’t even publicly admit that you like Taylor Swift until she was assaulted by a DJ and had her music stolen from her because now you can frame your liking of her as a feminist act, which is actually super sexist because she has to become a victim for you to take her seriously.’

‘I have always said that she is a world-class lyricist. And a mesmerising performer. Fucking mesmerising!’ My head throbbed. My throat was dry from yelling. This argument was spinning out of control. It was absurd. Why was I still out here when Will was inside? If only I could get the upper hand once and for all. Deliver the fatal blow and be done with it. Be done with her.

‘I’m not the one who posts a million photos of myself online,’ I said. ‘Baking and babies and sunshine. Your Instagram is like an advertisement for sexism from nineteen fifty-one.’

‘Oh, and what a great feminist you are. You can’t even support your colleagues against your sexist boss. Even though you were assaulted by twelve-year-olds and he did nothing.’

By the time I knew what I was doing, the cool wet mud was dripping through my fingers, scraped from the bank of the lake. I threw it at Ruthie. It splattered over her chest like a gunshot. She gasped. Held her arms out wide. Looked down at her ruined dress.

‘And by the way,’ I said, walking towards her, adrenaline coursing through my veins, ‘everyone knows you’re miserable. Your stupid photos don’t fool anyone. You have a miserable life.’

‘I am happy,’ said Ruthie through gritted teeth. She attempted to wipe the mud off her dress but only succeeded in smearing it down her front. ‘I am so happy I could die.’

We were both standing on the bridge now, face to face. She flicked her muddy hand at me, and I flinched, flecks of mud on my chest and face.

‘But you know what’s really sad?’ she continued. ‘You’re so obsessed with being loved. But you don’t know how to love anyone. You don’t know anything about love at all. You could never be a mother.’

Many a time Ruthie and I had discussed my disinterest in being a mother. Why would I cede the role of protagonist in my own life? But here she was, weaponising my own choice against me, wielding motherhood like a sword. ‘Oh, that’s right. I forgot that *as a mother* you expect everyone to behave as though you’re the patron saint of selflessness. Our Lady of Endless Fucking Glorious Love. No one asked you to have a baby. It’s not like you’re performing some great act of national service. It’s actually really bad for the environment—’

‘You’re at a luxury resort in an endangered forest! Why the fuck is there a luxury resort in an endangered fucking forest?’

‘You’re here too,’ I said, sweeping my arms through the air. ‘You chose all of this. Your whole life.’

She looked at the fairy lights and peonies hanging from the bridge. I thought I saw a tear slip down her cheek, but it might have been a trick of the light. When she looked back at me, I could see her mind calculating her next move.

I braced myself.

A light breeze blew across the lake. The forest stirred.

She fell to her knees so suddenly that I grabbed her hands out of instinct. ‘What’s wrong with you?’ I asked.

‘Nothing. My legs just slipped out from under me.’

Her skin was hot, sticky with mud and sweat. If anyone had been watching from afar they would’ve thought I’d struck her. I saw the shock register in her blue-grey eyes. This was no trick. She was as surprised as me to find herself on her knees.

I turned away, but in the lake, I saw the whole scene reflected back at me: Ruthie on the ground, clinging to me, just as I had done to Will only moments—hours?—before. Vertigo rolled through me, and if it weren't for Ruthie gripping my hands I would have fallen too. 'Come on, get up,' I said. I couldn't bear to look at her. Why couldn't I look at her? There was something so unguarded, so naked in her tear-streaked face. I wanted to get back to fighting, to anger, not this.

'All I've ever done is love you,' Ruthie said. 'From that first day I came to your house and found your stupid pretentious notes on *Wuthering Heights*. Even before that, when you sat alone in the library every lunchtime—'

'I had to get my homework done early because I hung out with the netball girls after school—'

'You had no friends. You tried to be like everyone else. But I knew, deep down, you were like me.'

I fought to get away from her, but she was clinging to me tightly. Whatever she had to say now, I didn't want to hear. Gone was the calculation in her eyes, the anger in her voice. She sounded small and broken and pleading and I don't know why but it was worse than any barb. I had to get her off me, get away—away from those big sad eyes—deep enough to fall into.

'But I can't love you anymore, Helena.'

'Stop it.'

'It's over.'

'Your love,' I said, 'is poison. You hate your husband. Your father didn't want you. And you killed your mother. Now I'm done with you too.'

She looked at me with a rage I didn't think she was capable of—like she truly hated me—and that's when she pushed me into the lake.

If I wasn't so tall I might have slammed into the railing and gone no further. But because the railing only came to my hips, and because Ruthie—on her knees—pushed upwards against my stomach, gravity was not on my side.

I hit the lake hard. Black water swallowed me. Cold closing in. The taste of algae in my mouth. An undignified way to die. I thrashed about. My silk dress clung to my body; my sandals weighed me down. Nothing beneath me. No rocks to crack and tear my body. Nothing to hold me either. I was drowning. I was going to die.

‘Helena!’

I opened my mouth to—what? Cry for help or decry my murderer? I coughed and spluttered. At least my head was above water. Yes. Good. The breeze on my face. I had to float. Tread water. I had to get these fucking shoes off my feet so that I could swim. Bizarrely, I thought of that scene in the 1995 BBC series of *Pride and Prejudice* where Colin Firth emerges from the lake. Would Will rescue me? Was he wearing a white shirt? Then a great crash. A weight upon me. I was forced under again. God, I was going to die.

What I remember next did not happen. And yet here it is in my mind: Ruthie and I, face to face beneath the water. Her dark hair dancing about her, a trail of bubbles escaping her mouth, like a string of pearls. I watched her die before me. Her eyes fade to black, her skin ghostly pale. I screamed and a terrible emptiness tore open. Ruthie—gone from my life, gone from the world.

I kicked down hard. My head broke the surface.

‘Helena!’

Ruthie flailing beside me. Not dead then. But drowning.

The resort, illuminated by lights. I could see it. I just had to swim that way and I would reach the bank. I tried once again to remove my sandals, but they were wedged on my feet. Aren’t all women’s shoes deathtraps? Nothing to do but swim anyway. I breaststroked as best I could. Yes, that was it. Keep going. Keep going.

‘Helena!’

Shouts in the distance. Had people seen us? Were they coming? My knee hit something hard. I screamed and took in water. Help! The heel of my sandal moved through something thick. Mud. Soft but solid enough to hold me. I could stand. ‘Ruthie?’

She was silent now, her body low in the water, her dark hair covering her face. I did not want to venture back into the deep water, but then the image of Ruthie—ghostly and black-eyed on the bottom of the lake—flooded my mind.

‘Ruthie!’ I moved towards her, away from the safety of the bank, stretched my arm out towards her. I could only just stand. The water at my nose. Nothing at my fingertips but cold darkness.

‘Ruthie!’

Nothing.

Then something soft and slippery. The hem of her dress. I reeled her in. She was coughing and breathing hard. I found her hand. She clung to me. Together, we waded through the shallows and, at last, fell upon the muddy bank.

The earth was cool and wet beneath me. I shivered and tried to get up but it was too slippery and I was too exhausted. I turned to look at Ruthie who was on her hands and knees and spitting up water. The entire front of her body was covered in mud.

A bright light suddenly appeared above us. Then another. And another.

'Is there someone down there?'

'Oh my god, are you filming this?'

'Are they swimming?'

'She pushed her! I saw it.'

'This party is awesome.'

There were people above us now, holding up their phones for light.

'Let me see.' Phoebe pushed her way to the front of the crowd. She still looked terrifyingly perfect in her dress with its little pearl buttons. Perversely, I imagined raking my muddy hands down it. The thought almost made me laugh. 'Oh, you two,' she said, as though we'd planned this all along.

Ruthie coughed again and spat into the grass. She wiped her hair from her eyes and smeared mud across her forehead. I looked up at the beautiful people—Phoebe, apoplectic in her ivory gown, her blue-eyed groom gallantly offering me his hand, his face a mixture of terror and disgust—and a strange feeling bubbled up in me. It was almost like joy. I had to bite my lip to stop myself laughing.

'She pushed her! Off the bridge. I saw it!' A damning finger pointed at Ruthie.

I took the groom's hand, and he helped me onto the grass. People surrounded me, careful not to touch me, filthy as I was.

'Let's get her inside.'

'We'll have to hose her down first. Don't want mud everywhere.'

'We'll be charged a cleaning fee.'

The last I saw of Ruthie, before being led away, she was sitting alone on the muddy bank, her arms wrapped around her body. She wasn't looking at me but facing the lake. No, not alone. One other person remained with her.

Our old teacher, her long black dress billowing in the breeze. She bent down beside Ruthie and whispered something into her ear.

I have had a most rare vision

RUTHIE SAT ON A PARK bench watching Corey and Leo play. Susie rested her head on Ruthie's lap and sang 'Incy Wincy Spider' to herself. She was recovering from a cold and was quieter than usual. Ruthie brushed her fingers through her daughter's hair and looked around at the playground and the picnic tables and the grass drying out in the summer heat. It was the same park Ruthie had played in as a child whenever she visited her grandmother. And when she was pregnant, she'd walked circles around it late into the night to ease her aching back. When the kids were born, it became one of their favourite outings—playing on the swings or riding their bikes or buying an ice-cream from the kiosk. Corey and Leo chased each other around the playground. Every few steps, Corey fell dramatically and rolled in the soft mulch. Leo laughed and mimicked him. Yes, she'd spent thousands of hours in this park. Some of the trees would have been the same ones that stood when she was a child herself. Today, the park looked different for no reason she could describe. Perhaps it was only a feeling. Yes, a feeling that she might be looking at her life as it was now for the last time.

It had been a week since the wedding. A number of people from high school had unfollowed her on Instagram and Facebook. That was fine. She deserved it. Phoebe hadn't unfollowed her. Ruthie didn't regard this as an act of enduring friendship so much as a means of keeping eyes on her. The photos that had appeared on Ruthie's phone two days ago were like a bad dream. There, in the wedding group chat, was Helena crawling up the muddy bank of the lake. Her hair dripping down her face, her mouth twisted into a painful grimace.

The first thing Ruthie did when she got home from the wedding was remove Helena from her social media. It was the first step in removing her from her life. The rest was simple enough. All she had to do now was go on existing without her.

'Mummy, look!' Leo ran towards her and handed her a dandelion. 'Look, Mummy!'

She showed him how to blow on it and make a wish. He took a deep breath and blew hard, then ran off to find one for Susie. Ruthie wondered what her children wished for. Her chest hurt at the idea that they should want for anything.

While Corey and Leo played on the slide, Ruthie and Susie went around to the tennis courts, Susie on her trike, Ruthie walking beside her. Two older women rallied a ball back and forth. They were good, hitting the ball hard and clean, chasing it down. One of them had both knees strapped. It was a sunny day and there were lots of families in the park, bikes laid on the grass, a queue forming at the kiosk.

When Ruthie was a child there had been no kiosk nor tennis courts. Her grandmother and mother brought her here for a birthday one year. Perhaps her ninth or tenth. It had rained and they'd eaten McDonald's beneath the shelter. Ruthie had got a toy in her Happy Meal. A Barbie doll figurine in a pink plastic dress—not a real Barbie, but she loved it nevertheless. She recalled tracing her fingers over the blonde hair and painted blue eyes. Normally her grandmother would criticise Angela for giving Ruthie McDonald's. But because it was her birthday there was no argument. Clare made a cake covered in Smarties. She even added raspberry jelly crystals to the batter, so when Ruthie cut into it, it was pink inside. Even Angela, who usually disliked the gifts Clare gave Ruthie, smiled at the sight of the pink cake. It was one of those days that made Ruthie feel wonderfully ordinary.

Susie stopped on the path and said that she was too tired to keep riding. Ruthie pressed her hand to her daughter's forehead. Her fever had passed, but she was pale. 'Stay there,' said Ruthie. 'I'll push you.'

All four of them had been sick with a cold for the last week. The moment Ruthie came home from the wedding she'd felt the soreness in her throat. Today was their first day out of the house. She took a moment to breathe in the clean warm air, feel the sun on her skin. Then she turned the trike around and they headed back the way they'd come. Susie would go down for a nap soon. Leo would need his sunscreen reapplied. It was the kind of

thing that Corey would forget. Not that he was a bad father. He was actually a very good one. Playful and funny and confident.

She stopped on the path again, a little breathless. The women playing tennis were taking a water break, sitting side by side on the bench that faced the court. A tiredness came over Ruthie as she watched them. She thought of Tiger changing her name, her home, her life. How many times could a person start over, shed an old skin, become someone else? She breathed deeply, until her breath steadied, and started up the hill.

Every day since the wedding, Corey had wanted to talk, but Ruthie had told him that she needed time to think. This wasn't exactly true; her thoughts were very clear.

What she knew was this: Helena was a narcissist. A coward. A liar. She was so deeply insecure that she circled back around to arrogant. She was obsessive, jealous, disloyal, hypocritical and delusional. Her intelligence was only ever put to use in the service of her ego. She lived in a perpetual fantasy in which she was the protagonist of a love story written by an absolute creep. And all of this made her staggeringly cruel. She had ignored and belittled and betrayed Ruthie, used her, competed against her, and taken her for granted ever since they were children.

If Ruthie felt any sadness at the loss of their friendship it was only the pangs of nostalgia—memories of sleepovers in Helena's bedroom, and playing tennis in the evenings, and pining over Heathcliff and Romeo, and Iced VoVos and Forever Curious lipstick and little paper hearts strewn on the carpet. It had something to do with the way Helena had once folded Ruthie into her dreams—believed they could get a place of their own and go to university and fall in love and travel the world and live big outlandish lives. But that had all been a lie, or perhaps Ruthie's delusion.

God, she'd very nearly killed her.

The rage that had been inside Ruthie ever since she could remember had evaporated the moment she'd pushed Helena to her death.

All that black water.

And Helena disappearing from view.

There had been a moment under the water, when Ruthie thought she'd gazed into Helena's eyes and watched the life drain out of them. Her lips turned a deathly blue. Ruthie thrashed and fought against the water, until she could breathe again. It was an impossible memory, and yet there it was.

But Helena was dead to her now. Good riddance.

What was it her old teacher had said, when she was sitting, exhausted and filthy by the side of the lake? *I thought you'd be good for each other*. Ruthie knew she was talking about that fateful Year 9 English class when she and Helena were partnered for that presentation on *Wuthering Heights*. Had they ever been good for each other? Or were they just two friendless weirdos who clung to each other out of necessity? She tried to imagine her life without Helena, but it was impossible, they were twisted together like the gnarled roots of a tree.

Not anymore. All of that uprooted. Ruthie was free.

She was out of breath again by the time she pushed the trike to the top of the hill. Corey and Leo were looking at plants. She knew Corey would be telling Leo their names, showing him how the leaves smelled if you crushed them in your hand. She waved to them, but they didn't see her.

It wasn't true that she'd married Corey to punish Helena. At least it wasn't that simple. In the days since Phoebe's wedding, Ruthie found herself mentally unwinding her life in search of an exit point. Sometimes she dreamed they never met, never married, never had children and she woke with a giddy fear, like she was standing on a precipice, looking down at everything from a great height. Was it regret? Or relief? She couldn't tell. Only that it was an expansive feeling. It didn't seem to fit anywhere.



They walked home from the park in silence. Leo, a little way ahead, jumping over the cracks; Susie asleep in Corey's arms. It was time to tell Corey. She should have told him sooner but the sickness that had settled over them since returning from the wedding was so much like peace that she was afraid to disturb it. If she didn't do it now, they would reach the house and Corey would carry Susie to bed and then potter in the garden and she would go into the kitchen and make a list of ingredients for dinner, and they would just go on like that forever. She gave herself to the end of the street to break the silence.

Then the next street.

The next driveway.

The letterbox where they posted their mail.

The tree where they once found that nest.

'Ruthie?'

Ruthie wiped her eyes and looked at Corey.

'Just say it,' he said. 'Whatever you're thinking.'

'I don't want to.'

'I know.'

'You know what I'm going to say? Or you know I don't want to say it?'

He shrugged.

Ruthie looked down the street, at the neighbour's Holden parked in the driveway and the lavender Corey had planted. They were almost home. 'You aren't happy,' she said. 'I think we should separate.'

'No—'

'You know it's true.'

'Ruthie, I was high—'

'It isn't—'

'Those shrooms were intense—'

'I'm not happy either.'

They stood there for a moment looking at each other. From a distance, they would appear to be a happy family out for a stroll.

'I'm sorry,' said Ruthie.

As they walked the rest of the way home, Ruthie looked at Susie, her head resting on Corey's shoulder, and had a strange thought; her marriage had begun and ended in a forest. She had met Corey in that little patch of forest behind the school, and they had broken up in the forest at Phoebe's wedding. It was easy to imagine that their whole relationship had been a dream, that she had walked into a forest and fallen asleep and dreamed up a boy who knew the names of all the plants, and now she had woken up, and it was over. It was an odd little thought—at once funny and sad. The kind of thing she could only tell Helena. If they were still friends.

Be as thou wast wont to be. See as thou wast want to see.

THE FIRST DAY OF THE new school year. Brilliant. You'd think that weeks of lying on the couch daydreaming about my former lover would be invigorating. A balm for the soul. But I don't feel rested.

In the car, I blast the air-conditioning just to check I'm alive. Only forty-six school days to the next holiday, but who's counting? At a red light, I look in the rear-vision mirror and practise smiling. *Good morning, class. How was your holiday? Me? Oh well, the love of my life broke up with me, I'm living in my parents' house and my best friend tried to kill me. So all up, pretty quiet*.

The rage on Ruthie's face as she pushed me to my death returns, unbidden. *You're so obsessed with being loved. But you don't know how to love anyone*. It isn't true, is it? Haven't I loved her? And Will? No one has loved harder than me. It isn't my fault they all abandoned me, fled from me like I was poison. My ruthless Ruthie. The image of her on her knees before me, her tear-streaked face, and her broken voice. Here, in my mind, maddening as Banquo's bloody ghost. *All I've ever done is love you. But I can't love you anymore*.

I park in my usual spot at the back of the carpark, the furthest away from the school. Given the length of my employment, I probably could claim a better spot, but I don't have the energy to challenge the established hierarchy. With a profound sense of dread and exhaustion, I walk across the vast green lawns, past the hedge maze and into the school.

‘Morning, Helena.’ The Head of PE comes charging up beside me carrying three huge bags. ‘Beautiful day.’

‘Is it?’

‘What?’

‘How was your holiday?’

‘I’ve been planning.’ She looks around, as if to check no one is near. ‘The journalist is back. We’ve got a meeting with her this afternoon. You know, about the misogyny.’

So early in the day for conspiracy. ‘That’s great. Good luck.’

‘Will you join us?’

I look into her eager eyes, the huge bags on her shoulders. ‘Unfortunately, I have plans this afternoon.’ It’s true. I plan to lie on the couch and dream of my lost love. Ruthie is wrong about me. I can love harder than anyone.



In the quadrangle, I spot Lucas performing a magic card trick for the other boys. Apparently, it isn’t enough for him to have a fraudster father and a bookish personality, he has to throw amateur magician into the mix. As always, his lack of self-protection makes me nervous. But he’s survived five years at the school. What’s one more? Perhaps the world won’t eat him alive. One of the boys watching Lucas suddenly grabs the cards and throws them into his face. Another boy films it. The pack run away, laughing. Lucas wipes his glasses and quietly sets about picking up the cards. A part of me wants to walk past him, pretend I haven’t seen, but I find myself stopping. ‘Forty-six, Lucas.’

‘What?’

‘The number of school days to the next holiday.’

‘Oh, right.’ He laughs. ‘Want to see a magic trick, Miss? Pick a card.’

I do as he asks. It’s the red queen of hearts. ‘You know I used to have a friend at school who would swear to make everyone laugh.’

He shuffles the deck, closes his eyes, waves his hand over them. ‘Really? Like what?’

‘Nice try. The point is: the people laughing at her weren’t really her friends. They were awful to her.’ I picture Ruthie standing beneath the

monkey bars saying fuck and dick and cunt. How we hated her dirty uniform and mouth.

'I know they're laughing at me,' says Lucas.

'Then why do you show them your magic?'

He shrugs. 'At least they talk to me. Is this your card?' From beneath his foot, he picks up the black joker and holds it towards me triumphantly.

'That's it,' I say. 'The very one.'

'It's nice that she has a friend now,' says Lucas, shuffling the cards. 'That you're her friend.'

Again, the image of Ruthie on her knees before me. Why does it appal me so? Because I know how it feels, don't I? To be laid low by love? To offer up your heart only for it to be discarded. The stupid pointless terrible waste of it. The hard ground biting into your flesh. Your bloody knees, your bloody soul.

'Miss? Are you all right?'

'Never better, Lucas. Just so happy to be back.'

I walk to the staffroom, dodging a group of boys playing an intense game of handball. Perhaps I did always care too much about what others thought of me to defend Ruthie, I'll grant her that. But my own position in the social hierarchy was too precarious to help anyone else. It was like the airline attendants were always telling you—*Fix your own oxygen mask before helping anyone else*. Perhaps if I'd been like Phoebe, I could have helped Ruthie. But I was barely holding on myself. *I can't love you anymore*. The handball hits me hard in the back of the head. The boy who threw it—a Year 7 kid in a blazer that comes down to his knees—freezes, waiting for my reaction. His friends scurry away, abandoning him to his fate. I want to fall onto the ground and cry. I want to go home. I want to be back on my couch, locked safely inside my dreams. The boy begins his frightened apologies. I wave my hand, smile, and race off to the staffroom before I burst into tears. Forty-six days. Forty-six days. Forty-six days. All that stands between me and endless hours in which to dream.



Mercifully, my second class for the day is cancelled. There is to be an emergency meeting with the senior boys in the library. The meeting, we are told, is to address recent media reports that may reflect negatively on the

school—unfairly of course. I wonder if the Head of PE and her fellow conspirators have already been successful in overthrowing the patriarchy. But when everyone is seated in the library, Dr Andrew Reagan informs us that the police are investigating an alleged incident that may or may not have occurred at a wilderness adventure camp that took place over the holidays where some boys may or may not have murdered a pelican.

'The most important thing,' says Dr Andrew Reagan, 'is that we support each other through this difficult time.'

The school is awash with gossip about the bird. It's alleged that the eldest son of a senior member of parliament was involved. It's suggested the pelican was decapitated. It's said that journalists are circling the school, that those predatory socialists who spend all their time tearing down the pillars of society while contributing nothing but whingeing tweets and self-indulgent opinion pieces smell blood in the water. In the staffroom at lunchtime, Dr Andrew Reagan descends the stairs of his office to join us, ostensibly to 'check up on everyone during this difficult time', but mostly to remind us that we are not permitted to speak to the media about anything we may or may not know. 'It's important that any information is filtered through the proper channels,' he informs us, though what those channels are, we are never told.

The Head of History suggests that the slaughtering of animals is good for boys. He waxes lyrical about his youthful and formative experiences stalking deer near the Macdonald River. 'It set me straight,' he tells everyone. 'Taught me discipline. Respect.'

Everyone nods in agreement. 'The problem with boys these days,' says Dr Andrew Reagan, 'is that they have no outlet for their aggression. They should be out in the wilderness not stuck at home playing video games or binge-watching TV with their mothers fussing over them.' Ah yes. The mothers! We agree that it's their fault. They basically decapitated the pelican themselves with all their fussing.

I try to leave, preferring to spend my lunchbreak crying in the car, but the Head of PE corners me in the corridor. 'Now is our chance to strike.'

'What?'

'This only adds to our credibility.'

'But are we sure the pelican's murder was a gender-based hate crime?'

'What?'

'Was it even a female pelican?'

‘The school will be in the news. We’re newsworthy. Now is our time.’

‘I’m just trying to get to three o’clock.’

I see her shake her head as I flee down the stairs.

I spend the rest of my lunchbreak in the car with the front seat reclined, crying and looking up options for dinner. It’s my last night alone before my parents return from their holiday. My debaucherous bachelorette pad is about to become a family home once more. Will we commemorate with a kebab or pizza? Or both? A crazy part of my brain suggests we invite Ruthie over, but then I remember we aren’t friends and never will be again. *I can’t love you anymore, Helena*.

It’s as I’m mentally preparing myself to return to school that I see Lucas. He is alone and out of bounds and carrying two large buckets which he sets outside the Headmaster’s Lodge—a grand old house with a wraparound verandah, rose garden and marble fountain, all hemmed in by a white picket fence. He shouldn’t be here. Neither should I. The place is quiet, deserted. Is it possible for me to walk past him without being noticed?

I get out of the car as quietly as I can. Lucas kneels down and opens one of the buckets. I see now that it contains red paint. Slowly, calmly, and without even looking around to see if anyone is watching, Lucas begins to paint the fence red—great dripping letters, like blood. *C. O*. Where is he going with this? *Cock? Corrupt? Complicit?* Is this about the pelican? Or the years of relentless bullying? I don’t want to be here. To witness it is to be involved. I want to slide back into the car and disappear. But then he turns and sees me.

‘Miss Wood?’

Shit. I walk towards him, trying to remind myself that I am an authority figure—a seasoned teacher who has apprehended a student out of bounds and committing a crime. I try to muster my outrage, my disappointment, but there’s nothing. ‘What are you writing?’ I ask.

He looks down at the dripping red letters. ‘Coward,’ he says. ‘And it’s true.’

We stare at each other a moment.

‘You’re almost done with this place,’ I say. ‘One more year. Why make trouble for yourself now?’

‘He knows what goes on and he never does anything,’ says Lucas, pushing his glasses onto his face and leaving a smudge of red paint in his

pale hair. ‘They killed that pelican for no reason. For fun. It wasn’t hurting anyone. Just existing.’

‘Someone will see you.’

We go on staring at each other, an obvious truth passing silently between us—I have seen him.

‘Are you going to tell on me?’

‘I’m a teacher,’ I say apologetically, almost pleadingly. ‘It’s my job.’

He nods, resigned to his fate as always. ‘You were my favourite.’

I want to offer him some advice or at least leave him with some comforting words about what a nightmare high school is and how it gets better. But does it? Here I am, a thirty-year-old crying alone in a high school carpark, counting down the days of my life. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘I have to get going. It’ll take me five minutes to get back to school, so you probably have time to finish your … artwork.’

He looks back at the fence with its bleeding letters and smiles. ‘I just wanted to do something,’ he says, ‘so they know they can’t treat people like they don’t matter. Nor pelicans.’

I nod. Tears prick my eyes. ‘You were my favourite too, Lucas.’ It feels wrong leaving him there, knowing that he’ll be punished. I’m about to leave but then I turn back, put my hand on his shoulder, and say the words that were once said to me. ‘You’re golden,’ I tell him, hoping that he will remember it, that this message will come back to him when he’s free from this place. ‘You’re golden, Lucas.’

Slowly, I walk back to school. *Coward*. Ruthie’s word for me. Was it true? That night in London, I should have gone with her. I should have believed her. But we were so young. And now it’s too late. *I can’t love you anymore*. Too late. Too late. Too late. *They can’t treat people like they don’t matter*. Again, I see Ruthie on her knees. Again, I see her dead on the bottom of the lake, dark eyes, pale skin. Again, that gaping emptiness. *It’s over. It’s over. It’s over*.



‘He’s very busy,’ says Dr Andrew Reagan’s secretary when I arrive at his office. ‘There’s a lot going on with the police investigation and everything.’ She shakes her head as though the investigation was an unnecessary burden upon his precious time.

‘It’s urgent,’ I say. ‘I have something to report.’

She looks up from her computer and frowns at me. I get the sense that she’s wrestling with two conflicting emotions—the desire to exert power by denying my request, and her curiosity at the potentially scandalous information I might divulge—another murdered animal? A fight? Some personal tragedy? I offer her a tight worried smile and thankfully her curiosity wins out. She calls Dr Andrew Reagan and tells him in a low grave voice that he’s needed by that English teacher—yes, the tall one with the glasses.

‘Miss Helena Wood,’ says Dr Andrew Reagan. He’s halfway through a custard Danish. There’s a serviette tucked in his shirt. He brushes crumbs from his pants and leans back in his chair. ‘What can I do for you?’

As always, I try not to look at the enormous portrait of him leering over us. ‘I just wanted to let you know that I’m grateful for this job—’

‘Ah, very good. A trying day for us but we’ll soldier on. No rest for the wicked. A big year ahead of us. You know my PhD was in leadership in educational—’

‘Andrew, I’m leaving.’

He sits up. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Please consider this my notice,’ I say. ‘Actually, I’m not giving any notice. I’m leaving now.’ I stare down at the remains of his Danish, my heart racing. ‘I’m sorry, but I’m done.’

He leans forward. ‘Is it the pelican? Have you been contacted by the media?’ He goes to the window and looks out across the grounds, as though a journalist with a camera might jump out from behind a tree. ‘Don’t worry about those good-for-nothing laptop warriors. At this school, we protect our own. Don’t let them get—’

‘It’s not that,’ I say. ‘I just can’t do it anymore. Maybe I’m having some kind of breakdown, I don’t know. But I’m done.’

He looks at me in alarm then, as though he expects my head to explode. ‘You know we have a very robust staff wellbeing program here.’

‘Thank you—’

‘And it’s important to me as leader to invest in my young staff—’

‘Andrew, I don’t really believe in that namby-pamby wellbeing stuff.’ I stand; my nerves alight with fear and my own daring. In the next room, I hear the squeak of the secretary’s chair. ‘Also,’ I say, ‘I vandalised your house.’

‘Excuse me?’

I hope that Lucas is long gone. I hope that his words are shining bright on the white picket fence. ‘Couldn’t help myself. Like I said, I think I’m having some kind of mental breakdown. I don’t know what came over me.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Goodbye, Andrew.’

By the time I get to the car, my hands are trembling. Would that Ruthie could see me now! No coward am I! Zero days left! I collapse against the steering wheel. Fuck. Zero days left. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I look up at the great sandstone buildings and the rich green lawns and the hedge maze. The bell rings, high and clear through the air. I send the Head of PE a message —*I’m free this afternoon after all*—and drive out of the gates for the last time.



It’s late by the time I arrive home. I have spent the last three hours in the librarian’s living room telling her journalist friend about the sexist culture of the school. The science teacher sipped lemon and ginger tea beside me, holding her list which she’d typed up in bullet point form. The Head of PE got up to close the blinds, which I am certain is something she’d seen in a crime drama on television.

‘So the boys drew you being sexually penetrated by a horse?’ the journalist asked.

‘A donkey.’

‘I have photos,’ said the Head of PE, holding up her phone.

As the journalist asked us questions and wrote down notes, it occurred to me that this could be a real story that real people would read and that I might be a part of it. The thought made me feel quite ill.

‘And how would you say this has affected you?’ asked the journalist.

The science teacher burst into tears. The librarian went into the kitchen to retrieve a box of tissues.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I’ve quit my job. So there’s that.’



At home in the dark empty house the reality hits me. I have no career. No Will. No Ruthie. *But you know what’s really sad? You’re so obsessed with*

being loved. But you don't know how to love anyone. You don't know anything about love at all. Is that true? Surely, it isn't true. All I want is to lie on the couch and listen to Taylor Swift's saddest songs, the ones where she sings of dying of heartbreak. And yet, perhaps my greatest fear is not that I will die unloved and alone but that I will go on living—my life small, diminished, ordinary. Ruthie, gone for good this time.

Chippy barks in irritation and taps against the back door.

'So you're leaving me too?' I put down my bags.

She cocks her head to one side and taps the door again, slower this time, like she's dealing with an incompetent. I open the door, and she saunters past me to the middle of the garden.

'No one loves me,' I say, sitting on the back step.

She stares at me with her big dark eyes and does an enormous shit.

But Ruthie loved me, didn't she? Up there on the bridge, the pale moon above us, the dark water below, didn't I see it all? The enduring unconditional love I've always dreamed of, there before me—deep enough to fall into. Too late. Too late. Too late.

When I've cleaned up Chippy's mess, I order dinner (pepperoni pizza), dessert (salted caramel frozen yoghurt) and a late-night snack just in case I'm haunted by the endless abyss of the Rest of My Life staring back at me in the dark and require additional nourishment to get through the night (a chicken kebab with extra garlic sauce).

I turn on the television and try to cuddle up to Chippy but she growls, leaps off the couch and retires to my bedroom, no doubt to sleep on my bed. If I wasn't feeling so miserable, I might even admire her unrelenting bitchiness. On the TV, a British architecture show comes on. The episode follows a young man who converted a skip bin into a house to save money. Sir John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* gazes at me from beside the TV.

'What are you looking at?' I ask.

But she just goes on staring, vacant-eyed and open-mouthed.

Isn't doing the right thing supposed to make you feel good? Where is my inner peace? As far as I can see, the only upside to my newfound unemployment is that I'll have boundless time to dream. I mentally scroll through my fantasies—there's that one in Will's grandmother's rose garden, or the two of us at the pool, or making love for the first time.

The pizza arrives. The British architecture show finishes and the news comes on. I curl up on the couch. I decide on the swimming pool fantasy—

Will walking across the grass towards me, his towel slung over his shoulder, his bare chest on display—that lovely linea alba. *Fancy seeing you here*. Our little joke. I'm just settling into it when the television catches my attention and I sit up. At first, I'm unsure whether what I'm seeing is real or whether I have finally broken my brain with so much dreaming. The news anchor is talking about a police investigation into an incident that occurred at a women's healing ceremony in which a number of participants became ill. The picture in the top right-hand corner of the screen is of the Goddess Grove. I recognise the crystals and gemstones in the window, the wreath of dried flowers artfully pinned to the door, the cafe and deli on either side. I haven't set foot in there for years though it looks exactly the same.

Without thinking, I reach for my phone. There are no new messages. Of course there aren't. When I search for Tiger on Instagram nothing comes up. Her account has vanished into the ether. But there she is on the television! My breath catches. She's wearing large dark glasses that give her an insect-like appearance and a white blazer. Her long silver hair partly obscures her face. Someone pushes a camera towards her, but she ignores it. She climbs into her red Tesla and drives away. I turn up the television. The screen cuts to the anchor, who says that mushrooms were ground into a powder and added to a tea promising vitality. A tea. I picture Ruthie, Tiger, Phoebe and me sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by gemstones and little glass bottles. Three of the participants are now in hospital, the anchor explains.

Could one of them be Will? Fuck. Wasn't he sick at the wedding? But no, he wouldn't be at a women's healing ceremony and, besides, he's already back in London. I know this from scouring his Instagram daily. Still, I check. His last photograph is of a glass of whiskey resting on a paperback copy of George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*. It was posted a few minutes ago. Obviously not dead then. Only I'm dead to him. And Phoebe safe in Athens. And what of Tiger? Would she go to prison? I remember the first time I saw her, in the Goddess Grove, standing in front of the crystals, stretching her long limbs and arching her back. The news program displays a promotion for the women's healing ceremony—*Reconnect with your feminine consciousness. Embrace your innate power and creative energy. You were not made to suffer. Your body and mind are sacred. Release your pain and be whole. $240 per individual session. Corporate sessions available*.

I call Ruthie. The phone rings and rings and rings. On the TV, the news has moved on to the next story—an environmental group has lost a court case and will have to pay eight million dollars to an oil and gas multinational.

'Hello?'

O, speak again, bright angel!

'Helena? What do you want?'

You, Ruthie, you.

'We're not friends anymore,' she says. 'I'm going to hang up—'

'Wait, Ruthie. Are you watching the news?'

How came these things to pass?

THE NEXT MORNING, THE SOUND of the vacuum cleaner wakes me from a nightmare in which I'm trying to get to Sydney airport to pick up Will, only I keep losing my way. It takes me a moment to realise that the noise is not the roaring of engines on the motorway. And that Will is not waiting for me.

I open my eyes to a clean house. The pizza boxes and frozen yoghurt tubs magically gone. Sunlight streams through the open windows. A light breeze washes over me. For a moment I wonder whether the last several months—the breakup, the wedding, Dr Andrew Reagan's office—have been nothing but a nightmare.

'Oh good, you're awake,' says my brother. 'Get up, I need to vacuum under you.'

'What are you doing here?' I sit up and rub my face. My mouth feels dry, my teeth unclean. It's as if I haven't slept at all.

'Came to see Mum and Dad,' he says. 'And you.' He presses the nozzle of the vacuum cleaner to the couch cushions.

'You cleaned up.'

'Their flight gets in around eleven.'

As I stand, crumbs fall from my T-shirt and onto the floor. 'I was going to do it. You should have woken me.'

'You looked like you needed the rest.' He turns off the vacuum cleaner. 'You okay?'

I throw my arms around him and burst into tears. Unaccustomed to such theatrical displays of sibling love, he pats me on the back awkwardly and reminds me that our parents will be home soon. 'I know you've had a hard time of it,' he says. 'But you're going to be all right.'

‘You really think so?’

‘Absolutely. But now, you need to shower. You stink worse than Chippy.’

In the shower, I scrub myself clean and stand under the water until it goes cold.

When I return to the living room, James is sitting on the couch—in the groove that my body has made—playing a post-apocalyptic video game, Chippy at his feet. He asks if I want to play, even suggests we watch a movie—my choice—which is how I know he’s worried for me.

In the end, I leave him to his game (haven’t I had my fill of apocalyptic drama, anyway?) and sit in the backyard rereading Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*. I find myself moved by Anne’s loneliness—her dignified silent suffering—that is broken only at the end by Wentworth’s letter. *You pierce my soul. I am half agony*, *half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone for ever*. Would that such a letter was to arrive for me! I check my phone but there are no new notifications, so I look up Virginia Woolf’s essay on Austen—did poor Jane really die at forty-one? What more did she have to teach us about love and life?—and then scroll through images of the various film adaptations of *Persuasion* to see which of the Wentworths is the most handsome.

My parents arrive home around midday, sunburnt and happy and surprised to see us.

‘I thought you’d be at work,’ says Mum.

‘Working from home,’ says James.

‘Yes, me too,’ I say. ‘I mean, I’m not feeling well.’ And isn’t that the truth?

Over lunch, our parents show us photos of mountains in Sapa and the Cu Chi tunnels. Mary presents me, James and Chippy with matching silk scarves she bought by the river in Hoi An and demands that we try them on and parade around the kitchen so she can take photos and send them to her friends. Tom shows off his new skills in making Vietnamese coffee. Their excitement feels foreign to me; I’m so used to being sad.

After lunch, my parents take a nap, and my brother resumes his post-apocalyptic game. I lie on my bed and listen to Taylor Swift’s *Evermore* on loop until my mother comes in and says that if I’m going to feel sorry for myself all day, I might as well listen to better heartbreak music. She puts on Janis Joplin, which is actually good, but I feel the need to defend Taylor who my mother describes as insipid and squeaky clean as a Barbie doll—a

commercialised cut-out of a woman. I remind my mother that her generation's revolutionary zeal turned out to be nothing but a fart in the hurricane of societal, environmental and economic collapse, and if Taylor is squeaky clean it's only because she is skating precariously across the thin ice of the online late capitalist sexist dystopia in which we find ourselves. It might have been cool for Janis to ironically dream about owning a Mercedes Benz but women of my generation were earnestly dreaming of one-bedroom apartments without too much mould, jobs that won't be sent off-shore or given to robots, and men who haven't been radicalised into fascist toddlers by the internet. My dad appears in the doorway and observes that I look awfully relaxed for someone trapped in a dystopia, and I remind him that I never asked to be born. They pat me on the head and say they're only joking—they're actually stoked to have me. Behind them, Chippy growls her displeasure. James's shooting reverberates down the hall. Ah, to be living at home again.

After a nap in which I dream of Will penning me a letter—*You pierce my soul*—I shower again and change out of my pyjamas. In the bottom of my wardrobe, I find a collection of my old study things—my reader on feminism and fairy tales from my first year at university, an old copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a pile of my old diaries, my school English notebook covered with magazine cut-outs of Juliette Binoche and Ralph Fiennes, Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio. I open one of my diaries and find myself looking at a yellowing newspaper clipping. It's an article about the first play I ever worked on. My writing is described as lively. Even now, after all these years, it thrills me. I tear out a clean page of my notebook and sit at my desk to write.



The Goddess Grove is closed when I arrive later that afternoon, the blinds pulled down, the wreath gone from the door. Though this is to be expected, the sight of the blank facade and dark windows shocks me. Someone has spray-painted a dick on the wall, whether this is in response to the poisonings or simply an opportunistic attack, is anyone's guess. People swan in and out of the cafe and deli on either side of the Goddess Grove as though it doesn't exist. Only I linger in its quiet, empty presence. Chippy

growls at the people and pulls at her leash. She appears as disturbed as I am to be out in public, just the two of us.

I see Ruthie and the children on the other side of the road. Ruthie is wearing a black dress with little red flowers. Susie and Leo are playing with the pedestrian button. 'All right,' I say to Chippy. 'Get ready.'

She bites her leash and growls again.

'It's strange to see the place like this, isn't it?' I say to Ruthie as she walks towards me.

We look up at the Goddess Grove, stripped bare. Ruthie peers through the narrow gap between the blind and window. There's nothing there, I've already checked.

'I wonder what's going to happen to Tiger,' I try.

'The last I heard, she's going to be charged with supplying magic mushrooms,' says Ruthie. 'Though there's probably more charges to come.'

'Shrooms?'

'She was always telling me how she picked, dried and ground them herself. Even invited me along once. Seems like she picked the wrong sort this time. At least that's what I read.'

I picture Tiger, linen-clad and barefoot, foraging for mushrooms in a forest somewhere. Would she go to prison? It's impossible to imagine her contained or diminished. A part of me wonders why she never invited me to forage with her, though that obviously isn't the point. I place my hand on the window and have the strange sense of time folding in on itself. I half expect to see Tiger in warrior pose or arranging her crystals on the other side of the glass. 'Have you spoken to her?' I ask.

Ruthie shakes her head. 'The number's disconnected.'

'Her Instagram's gone.'

Susie and Leo pat Chippy who cocks her head adorably and lies down at their feet—an act she has never once performed for me.

'So what do you want?' asks Ruthie. 'You said there was something you needed to tell me.'

'Let's get a coffee.'

'I don't really have much time.'

'Mummy, I want to stay with the puppy,' says Leo.

Chippy rests her head in his lap. Susie giggles and strokes Chippy's ears.

I take a deep breath. *All right, Chippy, you're doing your bit, now I'll do mine*. I pull my letter out of my back pocket and get down on one knee like

I'm about to propose—which, in a way, I am.

'Helena, what are you doing?'

Chippy growls in my direction. A couple in matching running shoes smile encouragingly at me as they pass by. I get the feeling that if Ruthie's children weren't attached to my dog she might turn and flee. I take a breath and begin to read. 'Dear Ruthie, I know you hate me, as evidenced by your recent attempt on my life, but I want you to know that you're my best friend and I still love—'

'Helena, don't—'

'And what you said to me that night was true—not that stuff about Taylor Swift, obviously—but about me treating you badly. I see that now. I've been a terrible friend.' I adjust my position on the ground. My knee hurts and there's a piece of chewing gum, pale pink and wet, by my foot. 'I should have listened to you that night in London. I should have gone with you. I … I should have left Will.'

I look up from my letter. Is it just me or does Ruthie look a little teary? Have I moved her with the power of my words? 'Ruthie, I'm so terribly sorry.'

'This is so embarrassing.' She presses her hand to her face.

'But I can be better. And I know I don't deserve it, I know what I did was unforgivable, but I also know you believe in the power of transformation so please—'

'Helena, enough. I told you. We're over.' Definitely a tear this time. She quickly wipes it away. The couple in matching sneakers emerge from the cafe carrying coffees, take one look at us, and cross to the other side of the street.

'For example,' I say, 'I've cared for Chippy these past few weeks. Fed her, walked her, talked to her. What is that if not personal growth?'

Chippy turns her back to me and curls up again in Leo's lap. The children laugh in delight.

'Are you serious?' says Ruthie. 'You think the fact that you fed some kibble to a dog shows that you've suddenly transformed into an empathetic person?'

'She's a really awful dog.'

We both look down at Chippy sleeping peacefully in Leo's lap while Susie continues caressing her ears.

'I love her,' says Leo. 'I want to keep her.'

‘We have to go.’ Ruthie reaches for Susie’s hand. ‘Say goodbye.’

Shit. I look at my piece of paper. Where am I up to? The letter isn’t half as good as I remember. ‘The point is, you’re my best friend and I love you and I really really really want you to give me a second chance. Please? I promise to be better, Ruthie, I do.’

‘Helena, stop.’ Tears run freely down Ruthie’s face as she bends to pick up her daughter. Susie, finding herself separated from Chippy, begins to cry.

‘Please?’ I scrunch up the useless letter in my hands. My knee aches. My heart aches. I should have rehearsed this more. How many apology videos are there on the internet? All those celebrities begging for forgiveness for racist slurs and sex crimes. I could have learned from them! ‘Tell me not that I am too late,’ I say, panic rising in my throat, ‘that such precious feelings are gone for ever. I offer myself to you again with a heart—’

‘You can’t use that. You stole that from Austen.’

‘You’re my best friend, Ruthie. You always have been. You make me want to be better. I even told that journalist about the sexist school and the donkey fucking because of you—’

An elderly couple coming out of the deli glance at me as they pass. Susie kicks and screams until Ruthie relents and sets her down on the footpath again.

‘I promise I’ll be better, Ruthie. Please give me one more chance. If I mess up again you can kill me for good this time—I’ll even save you the trouble and throw myself off a—’

Ruthie says something then that I don’t hear. She glances down at the children who are now mimicking Chippy’s laboured panting with their tongues out. I stand—an act that is difficult because I’ve spent so much time on one knee that my right leg has gone to sleep.

‘Corey and I are separating,’ says Ruthie, speaking quietly so the kids don’t hear.

‘What? Why?’

‘I just want you to know that’s why I’m crying. Not because of your stupid speech.’

‘Is this because of what I said at the wedding? Oh god, don’t listen to me, Ruthie. You were right, I know nothing about love.’

She shakes her head. ‘You know, when I fell in love with him it was just after my mum died. I needed him. But I’m different now.’

I swallow. Will she decide that she doesn’t need me either?

‘Mummy,’ asks Leo, ‘can Chippy come to our house?’

‘No. She lives with Helena.’

Susie looks up at me and then at Ruthie. ‘Helly come too?’

Out of the mouths of babes!

Ruthie rolls her eyes. ‘Fucking hell. Fine. This doesn’t mean you’re forgiven.’

Oh Chippy, you heavenly hound! You perfect angel! When I reach down to pat her, she bares her teeth.



At Ruthie’s house, I make coffee. She sits at the kitchen table, watching the kids follow Chippy around. I find the jar of sugar sachets and empty two into Ruthie’s mug—the one she got from the gift shop at the Globe Theatre. *Lord, what fools these mortals be!* What a fool I have been.

‘I’m sorry for what I said about your mum,’ I say, as I set the coffee mug down before her. ‘At Phoebe’s wedding. It’s obviously not true.’

‘That I killed her?’

‘I was so angry.’

She sips her coffee. ‘Have you heard from Will?’

‘No. I just dream about him a lot.’

She nods, understanding that this is no frivolous turn of phrase, no fanciful notion. My dreams are real, and they’re killing me.

‘You should write them down,’ says Ruthie. ‘Get them out of your head.’

‘Yeah. A counsellor told me that once. But I gave it up.’

‘Why?’

‘Writing,’ I say. ‘It’s so embarrassing.’

She gives me a look then that I understand to mean—*Helena, you’ve already embarrassed yourself beyond measure. What more do you really have to lose?* Touché.

‘What would I write, anyway?’

‘Romance?’

‘Because I’m such an expert.’

‘Or you could write about your own life.’

‘How riveting.’

She laughs. It’s the first time I’ve heard her laugh since we met up outside the Goddess Grove earlier. How I have missed it!

‘You know, you’ve always gone crazy for these artists, and they’ve always turned out to be arseholes. Why not make the art yourself? It seems like it would be a lot more satisfying. And a lot less trouble.’

‘Well, I suppose I have the time now that I’m unemployed.’

‘What?’

‘I told you—the journalist, the donkey fucking. Oh, and I confessed to an act of vandalism I didn’t commit. I did it all because of you, Ruthie. I want to be better.’

‘So you exploded your life as a gesture of friendship? That’s intense.’

‘But, like, in a good way, right?’

‘I’m not sure.’

We open our news apps on our phones and, sure enough, when we scroll down far enough, beneath a recipe for an Italian tomato salad and an article about an American serial killer’s house being sold at auction—we find what we’re looking for: *Sexism at Elite Private School—Staff Speak Out*.

‘You want to read it?’ asks Ruthie.

‘Maybe later.’ In truth, even reading the headline makes me feel light-headed. God, I really have exploded my life, haven’t I? Here I am unemployed and single and living with my parents. A real triple threat. Not exactly the life I’d dreamed for myself when I was young. My hand shakes as I put down my coffee. What fools these mortals be, indeed!

‘What’s so funny?’ asks Ruthie.

Because now I’m laughing. I cannot stop. It rattles my bones.

‘What?’ asks Ruthie, smiling too.

‘The wedding. The looks on their faces!’

‘We really caused a scene, eh?’

And we laugh and laugh. I mean, if you didn’t, you’d have to cry.

ACT FIVE

Give me your hands if we be friends

THREE MONTHS LATER, RUTHIE AND I are sitting at the kitchen table in my parents' house eating Iced VoVos. I'm showing her the various actors who have played Wentworth in *Persuasion*, and she's rating them out of ten. Leo and Susie are in the backyard with my parents who are on a mission to socialise Chippy. She's been expelled from dog school, and the last time my mum took her to the park she launched an attack on a German shepherd. My parents have resorted to pretending to be dogs themselves to help her socialise. Ruthie and I watch as my mum holds Chippy's lead in one hand and Susie's hand in the other while my dad crawls past them, wagging his imaginary tail.

'I think I need to move out,' I say.

'Yeah? Where are you going to go?'

'God, I don't know. I suppose I could go anywhere.'

It's true, there's nothing holding me down. I've been working as a casual teacher at my old high school while I think about what to do with the Rest of My Life—that old chestnut.

Most parents would be distraught if their child left a permanent job at a prestigious institution to work casually at their old school, but, of course, when I announced my career change to Tom and Mary, they were nothing but supportive.

'A change of scene will be good for you,' said Mary.

'That boys' school,' said Tom. 'Nothing but an elitist institution that actively undermines our democracy. Also, didn't they murder a pelican?'

It's hard to say whether teenage girls are any less terrifying than teenage boys, but the principal is a smiling young woman who wears brooches of strawberries and owls and takes zero shit from anyone. The first time I met her, she was dressed as a fairy for book week and single-handedly captured a redback spider that had been discovered in the girls' toilets. My old English teacher is gone. The principal said she retired at the end of last term —went off to pursue her dreams. Something about lingerie and books.

Last week, I filled in for the new English teacher. It was strange to be in my old classroom. I half expected to look up from my desk and see Ruthie sitting across from me, chewing her gum and twisting the silver stud in her ear. The class I covered was studying *Wuthering Heights*. I opened the book on the top of the pile and looked through the names of students who had borrowed it over the years. Though I did not recognise any of the girls, I felt a great affinity towards them.

'You know,' says Ruthie, 'there's a spare room at my place.'

I look at her for a moment, unsure if she is serious.

'It's yours if you want it.'

'What? Us living together?'

She shrugs. 'What's the worst that could happen?'

Well, we might kill each other.



By the end of the month, I'm hanging my clothes in the spare room of Ruthie's house. She has redecorated since Corey moved out. There are velvet cushions on the couch and an artwork of a woman floating naked in a swimming pool surrounded by ferns. It reminds me of my *Ophelia* (which I have left in my parents' garage) only this woman is resting not drowning and there is a smile upon her lips. The purple glass flower Ruthie made in high school has found a home on the sideboard. The tiger's eye gemstone and bonsai that used to sit there are gone. As I hang up the last of my dresses, I vow to use this moment—this change of scene—to start anew. I have been spending too much time in my dreams and online—two forms of unreality in which it's too easy to lose myself. Time to return to the world.

But surely one last hurrah couldn't hurt? The first night in my new bedroom, I indulge in a final scroll through Instagram. I begin, as always, with Will. He hasn't posted in a while. His last post was about a fundraiser

for the butterfly sanctuary his mother is involved with. I donated to the cause in the hope that he might notice and remember what a kind and giving person I am, but the only messages I've received are updates about the plight of the Adonis blue butterfly. I move on to Nick. There are photos of him at an electronic music festival where everyone is camping. I recall that momentary madness in the forest when I pictured Will fighting him for my love. The memory frightens me.

When I look up Phoebe's account, I see that she is still intermittently blasting everyone with photos of her honeymoon with predictable captions about how much she adores being married to her best friend. Next, I look up my old London friends. Ella appears to be living in a European city I don't recognise. There are aesthetic pictures of her standing in front of statues and sampling stone fruit at markets. Hana does trivia with her teacher colleagues every Friday and is six months pregnant. Only River is still involved in theatre. From what I can gather from his Instagram and Facebook accounts, he's working at a bowling club in Nowra and starring in a community production of *As You Like It*. I can't decide whether I'm happy or sad for him. My eyes itch from staring at the screen for so long. I need to sleep and yet I am propelled forward—or is it backwards?—through the people of my life. My body feels full—tight to the point of sickness—and yet I'm hollow, desperate for more. Last, I look up Ruthie. She has posted a photo of the fairy garden funfetti cake she made for a child's birthday yesterday. It has received over three thousand hearts to which I add my own.

I wonder what it would feel like to be famous—properly famous, like Taylor Swift. It must be comforting to know that people are watching. Even when it's awful—even when they criticise your work and spread lies and call you fat—it must be nice to know they notice, that at any given time, people around the world are thinking about you, that when you die it will be reported on the news and you will never sink quietly into oblivion like you never existed. Staring up at the ceiling, I practise my famous smile—the one I'd deploy for the cameras if ever they turned my way. It's a little shy, a little knowing. Chin down, eyes up. Perfect.

A knock at the door. Ruthie appears in her nightie. 'Are you all right?'

I hide my phone like I've been caught masturbating. Which I suppose, in a way, I have.

'I just saw that your light was on and … is there anything you need?'

‘Oh, I’m fine. Totally fine.’

When she’s gone, I run the Lancashire dream in the hope it will lull me to sleep. Me and Will in the full bloom of love in his grandmother’s rose garden. He never did take me there. Not in real life. Every petal and blade of grass I’ve dreamed up is inspired by the photo of the garden in his parents’ townhouse. I passed it every day on my way out the door. Settling into the dream proves difficult tonight. My mind keeps snagging, getting distracted by fragments of other dreams—some of them disturbing. There is one in which I’m drowning and another in which Will is telling me that he hates me and another where there’s a party full of people but I cannot find my way inside and I’m terrified that someone will see me standing out in the cold not knowing how to do this very simple thing of opening the door and they will laugh.

I wake late the next morning feeling tired. The scent of butter and cinnamon fills the air. For a moment, I can’t remember where I am. Oh yes, my new home. My new life. Here, with Ruthie and Susie and Leo. They are playing outside in the garden.

‘We thought you were dead,’ says Leo as I step outside.

‘No. Still here.’

Time to cleanse myself of dreaming, take the apps off my phone. But what to do with all the extra time?

When we go for a walk, I stop at the newsagency to buy a notebook.



Life, as they say, goes on. And on. And on. I keep working as a substitute teacher at my old high school, and sometimes on my way home I pick Susie up from pre-school. One day she introduces me to her teachers and friends as her fairy godmother.

In the evenings, I help Ruthie feed and bathe the kids. When they are asleep, she bakes and I write. At first, the writing was difficult but then I realise it’s basically the same as dreaming. I like the feeling of putting words on the page. When I close the book, I am a little lighter. One of Ruthie’s cakes goes viral. It is a magical forest complete with a blue jelly lake and fairy floss trees. The orders come in.

On Thursday nights we play tennis with my parents. Sometimes, my parents take Leo and Susie to the playground, and it’s just the two of us.

We're fairly well matched—Ruthie is faster, but I have my height. On the court, her aggression comes out, the ball flying at me so fast it sometimes takes the racquet right out of my hands. Perhaps—in certain moments—there is even that old flash of rage in her eyes and in her gritted teeth. But I do not flinch. I take it, hit after hit. I chase the ball down like my life depends on it.

On Saturday mornings we all go to the pool. I watch the children while Ruthie has her swimming lesson. Her movements are getting stronger, more confident, each week. She always returns to me bright-eyed and laughing.

Every second week, Corey comes by to pick up the kids. Sometimes he stays for lunch. When he tells us about his upcoming surfing trip to Indonesia, Ruthie and I start thinking about a trip of our own. Somewhere neither of us have been before.

One Friday afternoon, I try to persuade Ruthie to expand her bakery. With the money I've saved by living here, I could help her rent a place. When Corey comes over to pick up the kids, I enlist his support. He takes out his phone. The Domain.com app displays a store that is up for lease. It's in Paddington, nestled between a deli and cafe. The Goddess Grove. 'It's up for rent,' he says.

Ruthie looks at me.

'You could do it,' I say. 'If it's what you want.'

When Corey and the kids leave, Ruthie starts on one of her cakes. I go to my bedroom and spend the afternoon writing my fantasy of Will meeting me at the pool. He asks me what I'm reading but before I can tell him he snatches the book out of my hand and begins reading the blurb aloud like a dramatic monologue: *Our shy heroine falls in love …* I reach for the book, and our bodies collide. He takes me by the wrists and falls backwards so that I am above him. We are both laughing but as he gazes up at me, silhouetted against the perfect blue sky, his expression turns serious. How can he help it? His feelings for me spill over. A sudden rush of love that sweeps him off his feet.

By the time it is written, the sky has turned dark, and my reflection appears in the window. We sit across from each other, my reflection and I, our laptops open, as though we're opposing lawyers in a divorce settlement.

'Well,' I ask her, 'what should we write now? A play? A novel? Romance? Fantasy?

She stares back at me with a look that says—*So you really want to try to be a writer? Haven't you had your fill of rejection? Haven't you embarrassed yourself enough?*

I fold my arms across my chest. But don't you see? No amount is enough. It's like what Shakespeare said about the lunatic, the lover and the poet. They're all the same, really. God knows I've played the lunatic lover. Why not the poet?

My other self shakes her head, unconvinced, so I close the blind. What I want to write now will not be written while she is watching me.

On a clean page in a fresh notebook, I write about the night my best friend tried to kill me. I describe the cold dark water swallowing me whole. And the look on Ruthie's face just before she pushed me into the lake, when we were standing together on the little bridge decorated with peonies and fairy lights. A rage I didn't think she was capable of. And then Ruthie drowning, her dark hair covering her face, her body low in the water, and how I hesitated—just for a moment or two—before reaching out a hand towards her. And last of all, I write about how we saved each other—how she dove into the water after me, and how I pulled her to the shallows. Because surely that counts for something—that, in the end, we saved each other. What kind of story it will be, I don't yet know. A comedy, a tragedy, a love story.

When I emerge from my bedroom, Ruthie offers me a slice of orange, cardamom and olive oil cake hot from the oven—a new recipe she's been experimenting with. As we eat, we watch the 2020 film adaptation of *Emma* starring Anya Taylor-Joy and Johnny Flynn. Poor misguided Emma—she who thinks she knows about love, and who hurts her friends and fails to recognise love when it's standing before her. It's a comfort to me that Austen offers her salvation. That in the end, even this unlikeable heroine is forgiven.

We pause the film at George Knightley's heart-wrenching speech so we can get more cake and wine. The whole weekend stretches out before us. We discuss going to the city after the pool tomorrow morning. There's a new bakery Ruthie wants to try and a bookstore I'm hoping to visit.

'Do you really think I could do it?' asks Ruthie, cutting herself another slice of cake and licking the knife clean. 'Open a bakery.'

'Why not?'

'Are you kidding?'

‘I tell you what. You open the bakery, and I’ll write my novel.’

She considers this for a moment then reaches her hand out towards me. ‘Pinky promise.’

I hook my little finger around hers. We settle ourselves on the couch. It reminds me of the sleepovers we had in my bedroom when we were kids.

By the time Emma has seen the error of her ways and redeemed herself, Ruthie has fallen asleep. So much for staying up all night. I put a blanket over her and am about to go to bed when I see a notification on my phone—a message from Will.

You pierce my soul!

Well, no, not exactly.

Hey Helena, it’s a beautiful day in London, the weather is getting warmer and I’m wandering around the Tate thinking of you. The last time I saw you I was in a pretty bad way, but I want you to know I’m doing better now. When I think back on that time, I see that I was grieving the loss of my first great love: theatre. It broke my heart, and I was trying to find nourishment in all the wrong places. I’ve done a lot of healing since then. I’m even thinking of creating a podcast with my therapist. It’s going to be this raw and vulnerable exploration of what it’s like to be a man today, and it feels like important work. Anyway, I just wanted to reach out and let you know that I’ll be in Sydney for Felix’s wedding next month (we’ve reconnected, which has been healing too. He’s even offered to talk to his agent about my podcast). I’d love to see you while I’m there. Could we meet up? I miss you and think of you often. Will Xx

Fuck me.

I put my phone down and pick it up again just to check it’s real.

Here it is—the moment I’ve been dreaming of for months. My Knightley! My Wentworth! My Romeo! My Heathcliff! Words from Will’s fingertips to my eyes, crossing oceans and continents. *I’d love to see you … Could we meet up? … Xx*

Why then, this sinking feeling?

This sickness in my stomach? Like I’ve been jerked violently backwards.

On the television, Emma’s smiling face stares at me like she’s trying to tell me something. What is it, Emma? I look around the dark house that smells of oranges and spice—Ruthie asleep on the couch; the cake, still warm on the kitchen bench; my notebooks down the hall in my bedroom. Someday, she will open her bakery, and I’ll write my novel. Or perhaps not.

It’s only a pinky promise. A dream. But there is something—here, tonight—in the quiet dark of the house. Maybe it’s the opposite of dreaming. Maybe it’s the knowledge that I am happy and loved. Just as I am now.

I read Will’s message again. Oh god! My love! A damnèd saint, an honourable villain! Fiend angelical!

I press my thumb to the screen, hold my breath, and delete the message.

Panic surges through me. What have I done? Come back! Come back!

But what’s done is done.

For a long time, I lie beside Ruthie in the dark living room listening to her slow breathing. How I envy her slumber. Oh, sleep, that sometimes shuts up sorrow’s eye, steal me awhile from mine own company.

When sleep does finally come, it is deep and dreamless, and when I wake, I am refreshed—my mind clear and bright as a moonlit lake.

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