MICHAEL MOHAMMED AHMAD

BUGGER

brutal, beautiful, heart breaking

The new novel from the Miles Franklin shortlisted author of *THE LEBS* and *THE OTHER HALF OF YOU*

Michael Mohammed Ahmad is the founding director of Sweatshop Literacy Movement and editor of the critically acclaimed anthology *After Australia* (Affirm Press, 2020). Mohammed's debut novel, *The Tribe* (Giramondo, 2014), won the 2015 *Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Novelists Award. His second novel, *The Lebs* (Hachette, 2018), won the 2019 NSW Premier's Multicultural Literary Award and was shortlisted for the 2019 Miles Franklin Award. His third novel, *The Other Half of You* (Hachette, 2021), won the Queensland Literary Award for Fiction Book of the Year, and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award and the Voss Literary Prize. Mohammed received his Doctorate of Creative Arts from Western Sydney University in 2017.

MICHAEL
MOHAMMED
AHMAD

BUGGER

hachette
AUSTRALIA

Also by Michael Mohammed Ahmad

The Tribe
The Lebs
The Other Half of You

Contents

For my siblings
Zainab and Mariam and Gloria and Hamida and Ali.

Without justice there can be no love.

bell hooks

Um. Wait. Stop. No. Wiping my bum. Look up. A bark-skinned kid with his eyes bulging out of their sockets. ‘Jeez, that’s the biggest s-word I’ve ever seen!’ he shouts, but he actually says the s-word. Up next to him appears a paper-skinned kid. Eyes bulging. Out of their sockets. Cackling; teeth snipping my flesh as he sniffs the air and scoffs, ‘God, that s-word stinks.’ And he, too, actually uses the s-word.

Both boys slip their heads down from the cubicle, their laughter echoing off the concrete slabs of restroom walls. I’m squatting, heart thudding and hands scrambling to finish wiping myself before they return. I place the tissue in the toilet bowl and, too ashamed to suss out my own waste, which may or may not be any bigger than any other ten-year-old’s waste, turn my head and flush quick; finger tapping down again and again and again and again on the flush handle. It loses all its weight once the water tank is empty, and then it’s just metal on metal and my mouth swallowing my lips.

The water sounds like a stomach-ache as it sucks down the stuff in the bowl — a mixture of gunk and rag and whatever came from the person before me — and then it’s clean again, except for this ring of yellow where the water ends, like pee, but it can’t be my pee, because I didn’t pee. It’s like old pee, like someone else’s pee, like *everyone* else’s pee. Which reminds me, my dad always said I did a big wee when I was a new baby and the doctor had to cut the skin off my thing. I asked him why, why did you let the doctor cut me, and he said, ‘We don’t call it *cut* in the mother-tongue, we call it *purify*.’

I slowly turn the lock on the cubicle door and open it an inch; the bark-skinned boy and paper-skinned boy are gone, but their bulging eyeballs are still in here, taking what’s mine: that secret deal we make with the toilet every day: ‘Hey, toilet, just between you and me, on the inside, we humans are disgusting.’ I am un-purified.

Has it been twenty seconds yet? Maybe eleven seconds? Or ten? Or two? My face between the space between the door and the wall between the other cubicles, and all I see are the metal taps, and the metal tubs beneath the taps that catch the water. Then the grey wall behind the taps, and on the grey wall, words that have been written in six-buck-fifty black texta; the kind of texta that never rubs out: *f-word mr brown*. Only it actually says the f-word.

Count one more second and I creep out quietly and walk towards the exit, which is an open space in the middle of yet another grey concrete wall. Wait. Stop. Mum says do not forget to wash: 'No, they don't rinse their back-sides here, but at least rinse your hand-sides.' Turn towards the tap, pump the soap pump; and out squirts the sticky white goo that comes in ten-kilo buckets from the No Frills factories that my mother says are cheaper than Woolworths, which is already pretty cheap. I scrub my hands hard, and before me, my flesh turns pink and my nails turn clear, and the dirt between them slowly disappears.

Anyway, I'm washing and staring up at *f-word mr brown*, and wondering: when they say 'f-word so-n-so', does it mean *you* want to f-word *them*, or does it mean you want *them* to f-word *someone else*, or does it mean you want *them* to f-word *them-self*?

F-word so-n-so means this, f-word so-n-so means that, but Mr Brown shouldn't be f-worded ever. Back when he was my year two teacher, before he became vice principal, he was kind enough to teach me the meaning of the word 'condom'. It was raining outside so we were all stuck having lunch in the classroom, and Mr Brown was supervising. For the very last time since we got here, I was eating a Nutella sandwich wrapped in the flat circle bread of my mother-land, and my best friend, Thomas Smith, was eating a peanut butter sandwich in the fat square bread of his mother-land while picking at this red pimple on the tip of his nose. 'The Green Ranger smashes the Red Ranger,' he slobbered at me, mouth full of brown mulchy goo. 'He has a gold shield.' I would never do this, but I swear I swear I swear I wanted to punch him in his freckled face. Green Ranger started off as the evil creation of Rita Repulsa; he'd never ever even have been a real Power Ranger if the Red Ranger hadn't saved him. 'You only like Green Ranger because his name is Tommy,' I spat, bits of chocolate flinging from my mouth. This argument went back and forth for the next twenty minutes; two of us weighing up the Green Ranger dagger versus the Red Ranger sword, the Green Ranger Dragonzord versus the Red Ranger Tyrannosaurus Zord. Thomas finally screamed, 'Red Ranger is a con!' and having recently heard the word on an episode of *Melrose Place*, but not knowing what it meant, I shot back at him, 'Well, you're a con-*dom*!'

In my anger, the words came out way louder than I meant them to, and straightaway, all twenty necks in the classroom spun in my direction. Mr Brown said, 'Hamoodi, go to the corridor now.' I stood up and walked

outside, waiting for sir. I must have said a bad word, but I honestly had no idea what it could mean, and kept thinking through all the words I knew that started with ‘con’: con-*dor*, pretty sure that was a bird; con-*cord*, pretty sure that was a plane; con-*flict*, pretty sure that’s where my dad went; con-*fused*, knew for sure that was me.

When Mr Brown finally appeared, he had a half-ish smile on his face, like this situation was funnier than I could ever have imagined.

‘Do you know what a condom is, son?’ Mr Brown asked; pinching the plastic tip in the centre of his glasses; holding back a laugh.

‘Is it some kind of scam?’

Without correcting me, sir just straight-up said, ‘Condom is a small balloon that Daddy puts on his penis when he doesn’t want to get Mummy’s vagina pregnant.’

Everyone knows teachers aren’t allowed to curse. Mr Brown would not have put a sentence like that together if ‘condom’ and ‘penis’ and ‘vagina’ were filthy for the sake of filthy — that was the difference between ‘adult words’, which could not help being what they were; and ‘swear words’, which chose to be the worst version of themselves. But the image Mr Brown had just imprinted on me left my skin feeling icky and gross and slimy and gooey and ekh bro. Even ‘adult words’ became too much for me, too much to say out loud, too much to think inside my head. Returning to my desk, rubbernecking the raindrops outside the classroom window as the other kids played thumb wars, I corrected the language: from now on, down there, women and girls would have a ‘v-word’, because it was shaped like a v; men would have a ‘p-word’, because pee came out of it; and we boys would just have a ‘thing’, because what else was it, what else could it be, what else could it become?

Anyway, going back to the bathroom wall, where someone has written *f-word mr brown*, I remember the hundred-and-four times I’d spotted Mr Brown in the corridor with some other snotty kid; pinching his glasses, explaining the true meaning of some horrific word to them. How ungrateful of us …

By the time I finish washing my hands, there’s all this noise coming from outside the boys’ bathroom, like hyena laughter. I check my hands one more time, inspecting all the spaces under my nails: all the dirt has disappeared and my hands are now red in the flesh space and white in the nail space that’s crooked at every tip. My mum used to be like, ‘stop biting

your fingernails', but not anymore. Now she always inspects my nibbled hands before I go to bed, smiles a sad smile, and says, 'Your dad's biting his fingernails right now.' My toenails, on the other hand, are a no-go: I can't bend over far enough to bite them, and I've heard that piercing scream from my baby sister when Mum cuts the nail too deep and draws blood. No way, just let those claws dig into my shoes!

I walk towards the boys' bathroom exit — grey stone doorway without a door — staring at the floor — yellow rings of old pee in the concrete — staring at my No Frills black left shoe, which has a tear at the tip where the fabric meets the rubber. My mum has promised she's gonna buy me a brand-name pair if I can just hang in there until the end of the year. It's hard to believe her. A month ago, just before her doctor's appointment, she tried on a woolly blue jumper at Kmart, and decided to buy it. Keeping the jumper on, with the twenty-buck price tag hanging loose at the back, she wandered around the store searching for the counter. Raising her eyebrows and separating her mouth wide open in surprise, Mum suddenly realised that she'd accidentally led both of us at least ten metres beyond the store exit. At this point I expected her to turn back, but instead, she grabbed me by the shoulder and began running, her soft compact body joggling as she scurried with me and all her shopping bags to the other end of the mall, to the first public toilet we could find. 'Wait here,' she said, going in then coming out five minutes later, wearing the original old baggy grey jumper she had on. 'I threw it out,' she mumbled at me in the mother-tongue, her entire face droopy like a melted pie; so regretful that I genuinely believed it was an accident, and that she'd rather throw out a stolen jumper than keep it. But half an hour later, while we were sitting in the overheated doctor's waiting room, drops of sweat started appearing on my mum's forehead. She could take it no more and removed her old grey jumper, revealing the blue jumper she had accidentally stolen underneath, twenty-buck price tag still hanging from the collar. Mum never said anything to me about it, and I never said anything to her; we just stared at each other awkwardly, like I was saying, *but you stole that*, and she was saying, *in pain did your mother bear you, and in pain did she give you birth.*

Now, stepping out into the quadrangle, sunlight hits my face, squint. The hyena laughter is loud. Stings my ears. Open my eyes. The bark-skinned boy and the paper-skinned boy are in front of me, looking down at me —

they’re a stack of ten chicken nuggets taller than me. They’re pointing, and saying, ‘This kid. This kid.’

Behind the two boys are four other pupils, three more paper-skinned boys, two I don’t know because they’re in the bigger years, and one I do because he’s my best friend, Thomas, whose nose is sun burned. Wait, I mean, sunburnt. The fourth kid is this girl from my class named Martina who everyone calls Miss Piggy, because she’s chubby and always wears pink hairclips. At the beginning of the year, she spent a full lunchtime trying to teach me to fold my tongue so I could whistle. ‘Like this, like this, like this,’ she kept on saying, but all I did was make spit-sounds at her, until finally she said, ‘I don’t think your kind of people can do it.’

So all six of these kids are cracking up really hard at me, showing me the gaps between their old baby teeth and their new grown-up teeth, and Thomas bellows, ‘Huh-ha. Skid-mark!’ Then Martina jumps in, her hands folding over her basketball belly, as she squeals, ‘Skid-mark!’ The paper-skinned boys from the older years, and the bark-skinned boy, begin chanting, ‘Skid-mark! Skid-mark! Skid-mark!’

It’s like pins, like they’re poking pins in my skin, and it hurts, it hurts a lot, it hurts outside like pins, and it hurts inside like my blood is being sizzled, and suddenly I’m screaming, ‘But why? Why are you calling me Skid-mark?’ It doesn’t even make sense; I thought ‘skid-mark’ is what you name someone when there’s poo left on their undies, but they haven’t seen my undies, and if they had, they’d know I wiped really well; we even wipe with water at home, and the only reason I don’t wash in school is ’cause my mum says, ‘I don’t think their kind of people can do it.’

The six ain’t stopping, they just keep shouting; actually, singing, ‘Skid-mark!’ I start to breathe in these Big Bad Wolf kind of snuffles — the kind that get louder and louder as my chest beats harder and harder. The six kids turn into a swarm of cracked lips and rotten teeth and thirsty tongues, hot breaths in my face, hot dogs for lunch, which my mum says are forbidden because we don’t eat pork. My legs start to judder and my lungs are pounding loose as one of those fingers between the thumb and the rude one lands straight in front of my nose. The paper-skinned kid who started all this is pointing at me, a mound of solid black dirt under his fingernail. In a Chief Wiggum voice, he snorts, ‘Skid-marks for breakfast, no bacon for you, don’t eat pig ’cause your god’s a pig.’

Heart drumming so hard it's gonna burst from my rib cage, legs jittering so much I'm gonna launch up into that thousand-year-old gum tree. Out beyond the playground. I'm clenching my fists tight, and I'm screaming 'eeekkkh', whacking the finger from my face. They keep laughing and chanting 'skid … mark … skid … mark', as I start chasing them. Spread out like marbles. First paper-skinned kid turns and chants 'Skid-mark', and I run in his direction. Second paper-skinned kid turns and chants 'Skid-mark', and I run in his direction. Third paper-skinned kid turns and chants 'Skid-mark', and I run in his direction. Bark-skinned kid turns and chants 'Skid-mark', and I run in his direction. Miss Piggy turns and sings 'Skid-mark', and I run in her direction. Thomas turns and chants 'Skid-mark', and I run in his direction. And even though I can now hear 'Skid-mark' from every corner of the quadrangle, pricking me like acid falling from the sky, I stay on Thomas, chasing him as fast and as hard as possible. My sharp toenails are stabbing into the front of my ragged tattered shoes, pinching me, stinging me. Thomas barrels like a Discovery Channel baboon, arms and legs all over the place, as he zips through students playing handball and hopscotch all around us. He has these really baggy navy green school pants, which he starts pulling up as he tumbles. The pants have black and blue pen marks all over them, and the green is different colours in different places because they're fading (in the washing machine). I know they're his older brother's from last year; I know because he told me, but told me don't tell anyone because best friends don't dog.

Toenails. Stabbing, pinching, searing. I feel my legs aching and stretching as I stay focused on Thomas's navy green pants. He is an inch taller than me, but a lot skinnier, and a lot slower, because he doesn't practise running to the maple tree on my street; that's where we first met, under the maple tree. I was running back and forth from the front yard of our apartment block to that tree, which I'd counted was a total of two hundred steps. Imagining myself as the Red Ranger charging at Rita Repulsa's hundred-eyed monster, and there he appeared, this burnt nose, freckle-faced kid with sunshine-yellow hair sitting with his back against the trunk … crying.

Now I'm chasing him as though he's that hundred-eyed monster, and I catch him, catch him easy at the entrance to the school oval, where he halts under that thousand-year-old gum tree. Thomas twists towards me out of breath and dopey smiling. I haven't thought far enough to know what to do

beyond this point, so I just stop, right there, in front of my best friend. Both of us shrink and expand as we spit and swallow the air. Thomas is staring at me with his eyes wide open, like he's feeling sorry for himself — like the coyote just before he realises his own rocket is about to explode in his face — and he says, 'What?'

Why are people so opposite? No one owes you nice, but why do they always act so surprised when the person they're hurting doesn't like it? I don't even know what to say to a 'what', what do you mean 'what', why are you calling me skid-mark is 'what', we're supposed to be best friends is 'what'.

'Just, just,' I stutter, and by the time the question finally comes to me, tears have formed in my eyeballs. 'Just why?'

Thomas shakes his sunshine-yellow hair at me, and his cheesy breath hits my face. 'What?' he says again, grunting this time, like the answer is common sense. 'It's fun.'

Walking past, back in the direction from which we came, Thomas leaves me where the fruit falls, these furry green oval-shaped things that ooze of sap and pink puff on the inside. The echoes of 'skid-mark' are gone for now, and all that's left is me staring at the dirt, as though I am nothing, less than nothing; the stink you flush down the toilet as quickly as possible. Ants swarm one of the pieces of fruit, a half-open kind; black faceless dots with no purpose beyond this millimetre and that centimetre, except for one particular ant that I spot all alone on a browning leaf. I take the ant and his leaf out into the sunlight, and plop myself onto the grass, resting them both in the diamond-shaped space between my crossed legs. The heat burns the back of my neck as I watch the black faceless dot scramble to the end of the leaf, and then tickle the frond's earthly edge. I mean, I think I mean 'tickle' — not sure how else to describe it; but even though the ant is no bigger than a drop of soil, I can see, or at least sense, its mouth parts moving, testing, examining, questioning — as though ants can actually ask questions! And then, for a second, it seems as though the ant might walk off the leaf and into the grass, but instead it turns and scrambles to the other end of the blade. It stops, and tickles the edge once again, asking questions once again, *thinking*. And then black faceless dot turns, and stops in the middle of the leaf, as though the gum lines are roads and rivers and human veins guiding its path. It moves its mouth parts, and then its legs, and then its mouth parts, and then its legs, and I'm like: *black faceless dot — are you something*

really stupid, or something really smart? I lie down before black faceless dot and its endless leaf, feeling the sun on my closed eyelids, which turns everything bright red. The wind ruffles my earlobes, and all I hear are the sounds of flushing toilets. Not sure how much time has passed by the time the teachers start screaming ‘lunch time is over!’ and ‘back to class time!’ I spring up quick. The leaf is still here, but black faceless dot is long gone. Maybe it has returned to the army swarming the sap and pink puff of fallen fruit, or maybe it has fallen from the leaf. Fallen through the grass, down into the soil, sinking. Sinking forever and forever sinking into the dirt and dust of the earth. The earth; earth that gave birth, gave birth; birth to us.

You know what I'm thinking about in class? The last lesson my dad taught me before he returned to the mother-country: 'Consider the tongue,' he said. 'Simultaneously the cleanest part of the human body and the dirtiest.' I remember his eyes when he spoke, which curved like they were smiling even when his mouth was a straight line. But I didn't get it, shrugged my shoulders. 'Always keep your tongue pure,' he explained. 'Never say a bad word, never eat pig.'

Thomas's Lego-shaped head is nodding at the teacher, whose neck skin is jiggling as she sucks on her own lips, and I start wondering: Okay, I don't eat pig because my god's a pig, but all the kids in this class — actually, all the kids in this school — don't eat this salty red squishy paste my mum makes, which translates to 'raw lamb', so does that mean their god is raw lamb? And one time, Mr Brown held up an apple at assembly and said 'you are what you eat', so if you eat pig, does that mean you *are* a pig? And later that day, on the quadrangle, while he was on duty, looking bored as bread as the pupils played tips around him, I walked up to Mr Brown and asked straight-up, 'Sir, if you are what you eat, then shouldn't the only thing we ever eat be other humans?' He grinned and replied, 'Not unless you're a Uruguayan football team that's crash-landed in the Andes.' And I replied, 'I don't get it.' And he replied, 'Do you know irony?' And because he already knew that I didn't, he told me before I could guess: 'It means the opposite of what you mean.'

Ironically, at the time, I did not understand what he meant.

There is a smoker's voice in the way of my thoughts; my teacher rasping at all the freckled kids in class, something about a fox that outsmarts a lion, but I'd rather remember my father — he outsmarted the super-sized manager at McDonald's: Dad had four vouchers for a free cheeseburger with every meal, and he tried to order two McChicken Meals & two Happy Meals + the four free cheeseburgers for him, my mum, my baby sister and me. The super-sized manager said, 'Sorry, one voucher per person,' and my dad pleaded, 'But I'm buying for each of these persons', and the manager replied, 'No, you're one person, so you can only use one.' Thinking it through for a second, my dad put me, my mum and my baby sister (who was in Mum's arms) in line behind him with a voucher and five-buck note

in each of our hands, instructing us to order our own meal. You should have seen the super-sized manager's scrunched-up face when he had to accept a voucher and cash note from a six-month-old!

Speaking of 'old', my year four teacher is old, like really old, like so old the students call her 'Lizard Lady'. Not just 'cause she has thousands of dry wrinkles, but also 'cause she wears this algae-coloured make-up that gives her Godzilla skin. Whenever Lizard Lady hears a kid get frustrated and say 'Jesus Christ', she shouts, 'Do not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.' But once all the boys in my class realised how much this offended her, they started doing it more than ever. Waiting to catch her back turned, on the playground and in the school corridors, they'd scream out 'Jesus Christ' and run off before she could catch them — all the boys in my class except me. I came to understand that 'Jesus' and 'Christ' weren't rude words just as they were, but they had become rude words — perhaps the rudest of all — in the way the boys were using them …

So anyway, Lizard Lady stops talking, and her eyes glue straight onto mine, and she holds them there for so long it's like she's sucking the sweat out of me. Finally, she says, 'I know you're not listening.' I shrug my shoulders at her, and she says again, 'You're not listening. Where are you, boy?'

I consider telling her, telling her that I'm somewhere between the mother-land and the toilet bowl, but Dad said snitching is the worst kind of sin — like eating your brother's flesh — so I just say … Actually wait, before explaining what happens next, you should be warned that I need to use the b-word here. Not the female dog b-word; the other b-word. The much much much much worser b-word. But here's the problem: I can't explain how I've learned this lesson unless I use the word just once, so if my dad ever comes back, and you ever find yourself in his presence, please don't tell him that I used it just this once … So anyway, Lizard Lady says, 'Where are you, boy?' and I reply, 'Bugger off.'

My teacher's eyes burst longways like her brains have blown out. And then all the kids, each playing their own version of thumb wars, snap their heads in my direction. And then I'm like, 'What? What?' And Lizard Lady's like, 'Don't you ever use such a vile word in my class.' And I'm like, 'What word, b-word?' but I actually say the b-word again.

'Up on your feet,' Lizard Lady commands. Up I get. 'Now head to the vice principal's office and tell him what you've done.' To the vice

principal's office I head. That's Mr Brown — the one who taught me the difference between adult words and swear words, between con-dom me and f-word him.

He's writing on a notepad when I knock on his half-open door; greeted by his bald head from the top and white hair around the sides. 'Oh, Hamoodi,' he says in his usual deep but kind voice. 'Please don't tell me you're in trouble, you're supposed to be a good boy.'

'Mrs Lothian sent me here,' I explain, kinda confident that I've done nothing wrong. 'Because I said the b-word,' and I actually use the b-word one more time, the third time this day, and perhaps the final time of my life.

Mr Brown stares at me for a moment, puzzled, his thin eyebrows shrinking, and then he releases a breathy laugh, and tells me to sit down. He points to this overweight dictionary with gold lettering on his desk, and says, 'You know how alphabetical order works, yes?'

I kinda do. The words in a dictionary run from A to Z, but I get confused when it's the same letters followed by the same letters with additional letters creating new words down the page. I mean, don't get me wrong; I understand how it works, I just can't believe there are so many words in the English language that could be different even after starting with the same first three letters: hop, hope, hopeful, hopefully.

I flick past dictionary pages that are so thin you can see the words on the next page bleeding straight through, until I reach the b-section. Scrolling by lots of b-words followed by the letter o, but virtually none followed by the letters p, q, r, s, t. I can feel Mr Brown's lenses on me, tracing my finger as it passes each new word. 'Keep going, son,' he says. Scrolling, scrolling, down that row of b-words until they're followed by a bunch of u's, still kinda confident, but not as much as before, that I haven't done anything wrong. Now scrolling my pinkie down the list of b-u words: bubba, bucks, bucky, budge, buffs, buffy. And there it is, sticking out like an unbrushed tongue: the b-word. The much much much much worser b-word than the female dog b-word.

'Read out the definition, son,' Mr Brown says. I stare hard at each of the tiny letters that create each tiny word that create 'meaning' in the definition, then stare up at the vice principal's thick glasses. Shake my head, frightened, embarrassed, jumbled.

'It's okay, son,' Mr Brown insists. 'You can tell your dad I made you do it.'

I feel the tears swelling up in my eyes as my lips tremble, not sure if he knows my dad is gone, but Mr Brown beats me to it, and adds, ‘When he comes back, son, when he comes back.’

Focusing on the words, I stutter and stumble through the definition: ‘The un-ortho-dox inter-course be-tween man and beast.’ Then I return my gaze to Mr Brown. He’s staring at me really serious and sincere now, octopus eyes locking on me through endless windows, and at the same time, looking like he’s about to blow up laughing, the corners of his white lips twitching.

How is this word even allowed? I hear people say it at Woolworths when there’s no CC’s left on the shelves. I hear people say it on the street when it suddenly starts raining and they’ve realised they’ve left the washing out. There’s even that tv commercial that plays every day where people say it after discovering the power of the new Toyota HiLux, which I’ve seen so many times while watching *Flintstones* and *Jetsons* that it comes to me by heart:

It starts with a farmer in a bush hat slowly driving his ute into a mile-long half-collapsed fence, trying to straighten it out. By accident, the ute pushes the fence entirely the other way, knocking it over. The farmer grumbles to himself, ‘b-word’, but he actually says the b-word. Then the commercial cuts to another scene of the farmer driving his ute, only this time he wears a beanie. He’s attached the ute to the front of a broken-down red tractor, which he’s trying to tow away. The farmer accelerates, but instead of tugging the tractor, the ute rips off its front bumper and two front wheels. The farmer sticks his head out the window, stares back at the destroyed tractor, and grumbles, ‘Oh b-word me,’ and, once again, he actually uses the b-word. Then the commercial cuts to the farmer tying a rope from the ute to the stump of a tree. The farmer gets in and accelerates, and the tree stump shoots from the ground, soars right over the vehicle, and crashes into an old shed. Once again, the farmer stares at the destruction he’s caused, and says out loud, ‘b-word’, and yes, he actually repeats the b-word. Next, there’s a teenager behind the wheel of the ute, who has a rope attached from its bull bar to a cow stuck in mud. The farmer stands next to the cow, and says out loud, ‘Easy now, son,’ but the teenager reverses too hard, strangling the cow to death. The farmer places his hand on the top of his bush hat, scrunches up his face, and says, ‘Oooh b-word’, and yes yes, he actually says the b-word. Next, we cut to the farmer getting into his ute while his farm wife hangs out the washing. The farmer calls to the family

dog, a German Shepherd that comes sprinting up from the side gate, and leaps through the air, attempting to land in the back of the ute. Unfortunately, the overpowered ute takes off too fast. The wheels splatter mud all over the fresh white bedsheets on the clothesline, while the dog misses its landing and hits the ground. Covered in mud, the farm wife stares at the ute as it takes off down the road, and she spits, 'b-word', and, of course, she too actually says the b-word. Then the commercial cuts to the poor dog whose legs, belly and snout have all face-planted in the mud. And staring up at the ute, the dog, yes the dog, grunts, 'b-word', and of course, the dog actually uses the b-word. Then the ute disappears over some green hills and you hear it crash, and the farmer's voice grunts one last time: 'b-word'.

Replaying each scene in my mind's eye, I conclude that this commercial is the very best excuse I can put forward to Mr Brown. 'Sir, by any chance, do you own a HiLux?'

After several moments of squinting at me, examining me, the vice principal smirks. 'Words evolve faster than your teacher; she is a lizard after all,' he replies with a wink.

Biting the insides of my cheeks, there's this image of Mrs Lothian that comes to mind: World War I just ended and she's this harmless girl in a blue chequered dress with Snow White skin. She's attending some woodshed school out near Blue Gum Farm, where every classroom has a 4-by-2 firewood cross above the chalkboard and the children are whipped if they ever let slip a dirty word — a dirty word from so long ago that everyone who knew it was dirty was dead now, everyone except the lizard lady who stalked Grade 4 in Classroom 44 at 2 minutes to 2pm, or 2 to 2 for short.

'Go on back to your teacher,' Mr Brown finally says to me, and then a second later, he adds, 'son.'

Sir's doorknob is round and bright silver. I turn it gently, feeling his gaze on the back of my curly head. 'Hamoodi,' he mutters, clearing his throat. 'Out of interest, what caused you to even say this word in class?'

I'm too afraid to turn to him as I consider his question, focusing instead on the deep lines in the wood of the door, lines that Lizard Lady taught us grow as rings inside the centre of a tree trunk — each ring representing another year in the tree's life. And suddenly it occurs to me that this door isn't a door at all, it's the insides of a dead body, and my body is dead inside

too. Um, they were watching me on the toilet. Um, watching me wipe. Um, listening to me flush. Um, what? It's fun.

'Hamoodi?' Mr Brown presses.

Staring straight ahead, I twist the doorknob, step into the corridor, into the bright angel lights above, and say, 'Dobbers wear nappies.'

Taking my time, I stroll back to class, counting the dots that dot the dot paintings on the walls of the kindergarten, counting the backpacks on the railing hooks outside each room, and peeking through the classroom windows at the children. All of them are glaring at me with beady blue and green eyes, all of them are grinning at me through wobbling baby teeth, all of them are murmuring at me on dry crusty lips.

Skid. Mark.

And three and two and one and that bell gets gone. ‘Don’t forget Sunday is the Lord’s Day,’ Lizard Lady coughs up, wrinkled neck skin sagging like a moist leather jacket. I pounce from my desk, hoping to be the first one out, leaving behind Thomas, who usually walks home with me. But dear Jesus, Lizard Lady says my name right before my legs can break into a sprint. ‘Hamoodi, quick word, please.’ I watch all my classmates, including Thomas, exit the classroom.

‘I just want to know why you had to use that word?’ she asks, her apricotty chest perfume making me woozy and wheezy.

‘I didn’t know it was rude,’ I snap; snap because I’m desperate to escape the school before anyone else can tease me today, and because I’m still nothing more than the victim of a silly old woman who overreacted to a word that no longer means what it means.

‘Okay,’ she says, in a voice that is croaky and gentle and full of bits of spit, ‘but now that you do know, what would you have said instead to express yourself?’

I want to answer with another snappy response, but thinking it through for three quarters of a second, I just shrug my shoulders instead: ‘Fine, I’m dumb, okay, is that what you wanna prove — that my mum’s too poor to buy me a dictionary?’

‘Oh no, no, Hamoodi.’ Lizard Lady nods to herself, long pearly white earrings chiming on her shoulder pads. ‘You know what a woman learns after teaching for fifty-three years? Children are the most wonderful creatures: full of the deepest w-for-wise-words and the clumsiest b-for-bad-words.’ Half closing her left eye, she pauses to catch her breath, so ancient that speaking a complete sentence is like running the first Olympic marathon, and then she continues: ‘I want you to try something, okay: from now on, whenever you’re lost for thoughts, just join all the words you know together until they make sense.’

I tell Mrs Lothian, ‘If I get-got-get-it, will you let me get-got?’ which makes her smile, cracking apart her dry red lipstick. She dismisses me with a chin nudge, and before she can blink another slow-slimy-lizard-like-blink, I sprint for the door — Door of Classroom 44.

When I get to the corridor, Thomas is standing next to one of those fire tube things I always forget the name of — let's just call it a 'fire-putter-outer' — like he's been waiting for me the whole time. To my surprise, his Lego-shaped head has melted into an innocent expression: slim flapping eyelashes and soft drooping cheeks and a teeny smile like the resting-face of a llama. I want to forgive him — rejection is an ugly hand-me-down — but I can't find the Papa Smurf in me to smile back, can't un-hear his 'don't-care-bout-ya' laughter, can't un-see his 'my-fun-matters-more-than-your-feelings' grin. I stare at him with a frown, crossing my eyebrows so tight together that they actually hurt my eyes and start giving me a brain-ache-attack.

'Hamoodi, wait,' Thomas's snotty voice calls after me as I shove past his sunburnt nose; can hear his spaghetti legs shuffling behind me, but refuse to turn and face his freckly-foreheaded face. 'Doodi,' he calls. 'Dooo-diii!'

I unhook my Batman backpack from the railing, and run as fast as … actually wait — it's not exactly a Batman backpack. I mean, it says 'Batman' inside the Bat symbol, but the whole bag is purple, and on the front pouch is a picture of the Joker's white face and red lips and white teeth and red tongue and 'ha ha ha ha ha ha' bursting from his mouth. So I guess that makes it a Joker backpack. Anyway, I'm sprinting towards the exit, Joker backpack clapping against my spine, sidestepping the hundreds of children chatting and slow-normal-annoying-walking in their 'just-between-us' gangs.

Olive skin soaking in the sunlight, shuffle my legs up the walkway to the front gates of the school, divided by bush shrubs with dead brown petals down each side. Parents are spread all over the street, waiting for their kids, but not mine. One fairy-floss-pink-skied morning, Mum dropped me off at the gum tree, explaining that this'll be the last time she'd ever walk me to school. I could make the journey on my own from now on, just like she walked home all alone back in the mother-country: 'If I could avoid the tanks, then you can avoid the tank tops,' she sad-laughed; lips curling and tennis ball eyes running with tears. Standing under the tree, she said, 'Understand?' I asked, 'Understand what?' And looking up towards the sun, closing her glassy-wet pupils, my mother told me that the day-after-day quiet-emptiness of the sky in this country filled her with un-ease. 'Isn't it better than the sound of the bombs?' I argued, and she replied, 'We laughed

at the bombs — “I am become death” we’d sing, “destroyer of nothing but bricks”. Understand?’

No, I didn’t understand. Not then. And not now, walking home alone, wishing she was here to collect me, just once more, just today.

Sidestepping the short father with a flat nose, and the tall grandmother with a hairy chin, I hope to make a clean break across the street, and then sprint straight on home through the park, but suddenly I plough into the big belly of a big boy in a big blue bomber jacket.

‘Alooshi!’ I gasp, caught in a combo of so-outta-breath, thank-god-for-a-familiar-face, and quick-run-before-anyone-spots-ya. ‘But how, cuz?’ And by ‘cuz’, I don’t mean the random friends we sometimes call ‘cuz’, I actually mean cuz, as in my cousin — my dad’s older brother’s son to be exact. Oh, and what I mean by ‘but how’ is, how is he here? My cousin Alooshi is seven years older than me, in his final year of high school, and lives like thirty-minutes-car-ride away, so how?

‘I jigged after recess, went movies,’ Alooshi explains in his Double-Whopper-With-Cheese-mouthful of a voice, bright-pink cheeks swollen like a jellyfish. ‘Told ya mum ah come get ya.’

I’m not sure it counts as ‘jigging school’ if your parents help you do it, but Alooshi ‘jigs’ all the time. Whenever there’s a new movie, like *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Beverly Hills Cop 2* and *Beverly Hills Cop 3*, my uncle drops him off at the Grace Brothers Shopping Centre in Broadway, gives him a twenty-buck note for the movie ticket, popcorn and soft drink, and then tells him to come spend the night at our place when it’s finished. Shortly after my dad left for the mother-country, Alooshi even jigged me with him. Following a weekend sleepover, he insisted we skip school one Monday morning, promising to have me back from the cinema by 3pm. Asked Mum: ‘What ya reckon, Aunty?’ But actually, he asked in the mother-language, which translated to something more like this: ‘What are your thoughts on the matter, wife of my father’s brother?’

My mother, on the couch, staring out the living room window in a forever-dream, just flopped her shoulders at him, which was as ‘yes’ a ‘yes’ could be at the time.

Later that morning, sitting in that dark empty theatre, I saw my father in every scene with Mufasa; his deep voice, his strong frown, his epic laugh, his godlike strength, and godlike wisdom. And then he was falling, falling to his death, and lying, lying still and lifeless in the dust of the gorge. And I

knew; knew for the first time in my tiny life that my dad, too, would die one day. My teeth began to judder and sap began swelling in my throat. But just before it poured out of my face, Alooshi leaned all his weight onto my shoulder and heavy-breathed into my ear, 'Don't worry, little cuz, they're just animals.'

Now, at the school entrance, Alooshi begins recounting the movie he just watched to me, something about an ill-behaved mask that makes your face green and transforms you into a love-crazy-wild-man, but I'm only half-listening. The other students from school have begun to fill the street: kindergartners and year ones and twos running into their mums' arms; and year threes and fours walking towards their dads' parked panel vans; and year fives and sixes walking with their friends towards the park, to make their own way home.

Suddenly, hidden among the hundreds of children and parents scattered throughout the school gates and street and road, appear the bark-skinned boy and paper-skinned boy who were perving on me in the toilet. They're carrying their black backpacks with only one of the straps over their shoulders, as though they're Bart Simpsons, and they're walking so slug-ily, like there's no favourite show waiting for them at home — no *Power Rangers* at 4pm! They're chatting and grinning to each other about something, something pathetic, and I know that something is me: the size and stink and skid of the 'me' you flush down the drain. My eyes lock on the two boys as I heave, waiting for them to notice me. They'll point at me. Start over with the name-calling. Start under with the hyena-laughing. I'll chase them. I'll plead for them to stop. But they won't. Because I'm their 'it's fun', and 'it's fun' makes me their 'number one'. I wait for their attack to come at me like a boot in the face, but instead, something even worse happens; they don't notice me at all. They just walk straight past my head, which feels like a hundred-kilo sack of blood; and straight past my enormous cousin in the enormous blue bomber jacket. Stepping off the kerb and onto the road before the lights say 'walk'. Dodging the bull bars on the white vans with the white-overalled workers inside. The two boys stroll towards the park, looking like they have no-care-to-care-for, like I'm nothing, and it reminds me …

You know that sharp tooth on the left side of your bottom row of teeth? Yeah, well, that one was really loose last year. I kept wriggling it with my fingers — stinging myself each time it went this way and that — while my

father watched the news. Finally, Dad turned and glued his gaze straight onto my tooth. ‘Want me to remove it for you?’ he offered.

I tried to reply, ‘You’re not a dentist,’ but stressed at the sudden thought of my dad bare-handed-ly ripping out my tooth, I accidentally said, ‘You’re nothing.’

‘Oh,’ Dad mumbled, dark eyes and sharp nose fixing back onto our television screen: images of rocket fire in the night sky, men in dark-green uniforms yielding machine guns, hunkering behind grey buildings covered in bullet holes. Then without moving his head, or even blinking, Dad said, ‘You know, I think you’re *everything* …’

Staring at the bark-skinned boy and paper-skinned boy, I find my tongue pressing hard into the gap where that sharp baby tooth fell out, feeling the tip of the piercing adult tooth coming in. And all at once, I begin to sob, snot and snuffs filling up my face and pouring out as my heart pounds and ‘heh-eh-heh-eh-heh’ blubbers from my mouth.

‘What’s happened?’ Alooshi says; my cousin’s bear-like hands clamping over my shoulders, holding me still. ‘Tell me now.’

Taking in a deep whimper, I raise my pointy finger at the two boys who have just entered the park. ‘Th-they were perving on me in th-the toilet,’ I force through my slobbering breath. ‘An-an-and then they told everyone about my underwear.’

Not even a second’s thought; my cousin’s like, ‘Come with me.’

And before I can drop even one more tear, Alooshi is pulling me across the street, ignoring the lights and sidestepping us between each of the moving cars like a game of *Frogger*. Scanning the park, he clocks schoolkids spread out every which way, each going in their own direction towards their homes. The paper-skinned kid and bark-skinned kid are straight ahead of us, walking up a hill which disappears into the other side of the park. Taking in three loud lung-fulls, Alooshi says, ‘Stay behind,’ and bursts off towards the two boys. He looks like a rhinoceros from the rear, large mass of ringed hair and bulging jacket and grey tracksuit pants tumbling through the weeds and up the hill in an eye-blink.

Smudging off my sob-mucus with the sleeve of my short-sleeve, I sprint after my cousin as fast as I can, which is nowhere near as fast as he can, mumble-thinking to myself, *oh idiot me, oh idiot me!* Seven Saturdays ago, Alooshi and I attended a (beef) sausage sizzle in this very park. Hot sausages in white bread rolls with tomato sauce and onions in our hands, we

headed home. Right on the corner of my street is a flaky desperately-needs-a-paint-job house. And inside that house lives a single man, who's always drinking and leaving beer bottles on his windowsills, and a pointy-eared German Shepherd, who's always in the front yard keeping guard. But on that particular day, the front gate had been left open. As Alooshi and I turned onto my street, the dog pounced at us, holding its ground, barking its brains out. We both jumped in shock; but my immediate reaction was to clench my hand tightly around the (beef) sausage in the bread roll, whereas my cousin's reaction was to fling his arms back, sending the (beef) sausage in the bread roll up into the air and down onto the pavement. The German Shepherd quickly went in for the warm meat, and I turned with a quarter-of-the-way-smile towards my cousin, thinking this was something we could laugh off, only to discover hot fumes shrieking from the holes in his face. All at once, Alooshi expanded three times his size, chest and arms spreading open as his cheeks and eyes went red, lasering in on the dog. He charged, booting the creature with all his might, mustard steel cap boot lifting into the dog's underbelly — that empty naked space between its front legs and back legs — sending the German Shepherd flying back over its front yard fence, where it squealed like a piglet and scampered into the bushes.

'How could you?' I screamed: at first, horrified by my cousin's random burst of rage, and at second, astounded by his sheer strength. 'Who cares?' Alooshi slobbered at me, shoving what was left of the meatless bread roll into his mouth. 'It's just an animal.'

Was this the fate of the paper-skinned boy and bark-skinned boy? Or were my cousin's words a code? Perhaps he lived by a different set of rules for boys and beasts — even boys who perved on a boy in the boys' bathroom?

Thrusting my skin-and-bone legs up the hill, I hear Alooshi's thunderous voice scream out the f-word seven times and the two boys screaming out for help. Over the dirt heap, I spot the paper-skinned boy first, curled up like a baby inside his mother, holding his tattering jaw, which is running in a pool of blood, in both his hands, which are also pooling in blood. A few metres down, my cousin has pinned the second boy to the grass with a clenched left hand around his neck. Alooshi swings his right fist one, two, three, four, five, six times into the boy, letting the punches land wherever they desire; into the boy's forehead, and into the boy's thigh, and into the boy's chest,

and into the side of the boy's throat. And when the boy uses his bark-skinned arms to shield his bark-skinned face, Alooshi swings his fist into the arms; cracking them open. And when the boy turns his head so he won't get punched directly in his bark-skinned nose, Alooshi swings his fist into the boy's bark-skinned ear, bursting its drum — at least that's what it sounds like, the punch making a 'puck' noise, which electrocutes my entire body.

'Please, cuz!' the bark-skinned boy groans. 'Pleeee—'

Alooshi lets go of his collar and the boy flops onto the grass, where, like the other kid, he curls up into a baby ball and begins to tremble and sob.

'You're not my *cuz*,' Alooshi spits as he gives the boy one last kick; of all places, a kick up the bottom; the bottom of all places.

Walking down the hill to my cousin, I can't help but notice the bark-skinned boy's backpack, which has been torn open, its contents scattered all around his shivering body. There is a Power Rangers lunchbox, a half-eaten sandwich in plastic wrap, an exercise book, a red pencil case, two rulers, and even a white teddy holding a love heart. I wonder if his mother gave it to him; the teddy bear. And I see his mother; making sure her boy's uniform is clean and laid out the night before school, waking up early to get her boy dressed, pouring his milk over his bowl of honey oats, packing his books and childhood toys and peanut butter sandwich and fruit juice popper into his backpack, kissing his cheek goodbye and watching him stroll off from their unit balcony, all the way until he turns the corner, at which point she prays for him — that he does not harm anyone today, and that no one harms him.

Both boys are watching me from the ground, their blown-out eyeballs melting my gaze, like they're saying 'sorry'. And standing there, looking down at the bark-skinned boy and paper-skinned boy, who are too afraid to get back up on their feet, I too am 'sorry', not for them, but for their mothers, who will bleed their bruises this evening.

Frozen by the sight of the paper-and-bark-skinned boys, I feel my cousin's blood-knuckled hand grip on to my shoulder, squeezing me awake. Alooshi tugs us to the other end of the park, towards the swings and the slippery dips and the duck pond. And before I can say even a single word — share a single thought to him about boys and their mums — my cousin leans all his weight into my neck, and heavy-breathes into my ear, 'Don't worry, little cuz, they're just animals.'

Rainbow Paddle Pop for me and Banana Paddle Pop for him. My uncle gives his son twenty dollars every day. The money used to be made of paper, until Alooshi started pulling out these notes that were totally shiny and totally made-'ah-plastic.

The shopkeeper has dark-yellow skin and a dark-yellow necklace with a golden boxing glove sitting in the middle of his chest. 'Is that the new twenty-dollar bill?' he asks Alooshi, taking the money for our ice-cream and holding it up towards the sunrays in his store window. 'Smaller than the old one, aye,' he mumbles to himself. 'And why's the number two bigger than the zero? And why's John Travolta's mum on there? Pretty sure this lady's a convict.'

The shopkeeper continues examining the note, while Alooshi and I remain silent, waiting patiently to receive our change so we can open our Paddle Pops. Now that I think about it — I wonder when is the exact moment a shop product becomes yours. Like, sometimes my mum is shopping at Woolworths, and has filled half her trolley with groceries, and then she sneezes and needs a tissue, so she opens the box of Kleenex she's put in the trolley, takes out one of the tissues, wipes her nose, and just pays for the opened box when she gets to the counter. Mmmmm. Okay, whatever. I rip the purple ice-cream wrapper from the top and slide it down, revealing the Paddle Pop. Sucking, licking, my eyes glaze over the store: in front of me, wall of cigarettes and cigars; behind me, wall of chips and biscuits; left of me, see-through fridge full of soft drinks; in the centre, rows of video game guides and crossword puzzle books and newspapers and naked-lady-on-the-cover magazines in plastic sleeves for grown-ups-only. I've taken three bites by the time the shopkeeper has opened his cash register and given Alooshi a (paper) ten-dollar bill, three two-dollar coins, two one-dollar coins, and one twenty-cent coin. Alooshi takes the change and shoves it into his jacket pocket as his eyes begin to blister; unlike me, he's hung-on to receive his change before opening the Paddle Pop, but looks like he wants to slit open the shopkeeper's heart.

Sweetening my tongue on swirls of purple and pink and blue and yellow flavoured ice-cream, I'm out-of-nowhere thinking about the bark-skinned kid and the paper-skinned kid, arriving home with their heads throbbing

right about now. I wonder if they'll tell their mums what happened. 'A blob bashed me,' they might say. 'Why?' their mums might ask. 'Because I was perving on a child doing a poo,' they might tell her … actually wait, no way, they'd never admit that. 'Nothin',' they'd say, 'we were just being ourselves.'

Spreading his mouth high-and-low open, Alooshi devours half his Banana Paddle Pop in one bite. 'Ah brain freeze!' he seethes, squinting his swollen tomato face. We turn onto my street, passing the flaky desperate-for-a-paint-job house with the German Shepherd that stole my cousin's sausage. Most days, the dog hangs out in the front yard, jump-barking at everyone walking past, but lately, it's nowhere to be seen whenever my cousin is about — as though it can smell him approaching and makes a pigletrun for the bushes.

After the flaky desperate-for-a-paint-job house, my street becomes an endless row of red-brick flats and at-least-a-hundred-year-old maple trees on both sides of the road, where dozens of cars are parked and dozen-hundreds of cars drive past every day. Our apartment is in the middle of the street, and I only ever walk up and down the half that leads to school; not the other half, the other end, at least not since my father got gone. Over on that side is the sacred ground he left behind; which frightens me: over there, the soil eats the soul …

Swarms of helicopter seeds crack beneath our feet as Alooshi and I suck on our ice-creams; melted purple-n-pink milk juice slipping from the Paddle Pop stick and down my thumb. The third maple tree we pass has these slouching paintbrush-like orange flowers hanging from its twigs. This tree is the target when I'm running from our unit; imagining myself as the Red Ranger, calling upon my tyrannosaur, charging into battle. It was under this very tree, a year-and-a-bit ago, that I met the new kid on the neighbourhood knock, Thomas. The Lego-block-shaped-headed boy who wandered off from his own unit one street over. He was snivelling, sticky stretchy snot pouring from his eyes and nose. I asked him what was wrong, and he slabbered at me: 'Ma dad bashed mi.'

We shared secrets about our dads that day — he wished his would disappear and I wished mine would reappear. 'My name's Hamoodi,' I told him, and he replied, 'Doodi?' which made me laugh, because this is how we say 'worm' in the mother-language. 'Well, my name's easy,' he added. 'Tommy.' My eyes shot wide-open-apart, up-ways and down-ways: Zordon

himself had brought us together! We agreed to be Power Rangers then and there: Red Ranger and Green Ranger battling Putties and monsters made of molten gold and eyeballs and moustaches at the school — where I had been since kindergarten and Thomas had been since just then.

Floating past the tree, I've gone quiet for a bit too long, and my cousin has grown impatient: 'Stop thinkin' about that back-stabber,' he coughs at me. Every time we've ever passed this spot, I've told Alooshi about my best friend Thomas: describing each new big-nosed big-toothed monster we'd battled (and defeated) during recess and lunch that day. Alooshi would often nod without saying anything, as though he was bored, or jealous, or some chicken-salt-mixture of both. But today, I have nothing to share with my cousin, so he knows, somehow he knows, that my best friend has finally become my x-best friend.

'Forget that dog, cuz,' Alooshi says. 'Ye really think you were cartoon characters?'

'The Power Rangers aren't a cartoon,' I reply quickly, defences up, ready for morphin' time. 'They're real people.'

Now it's my cousin who goes silent, sucking in his puffy red cheeks like he's holding back a massive secret. 'Okay, listen,' he finally lets out, 'you know it's a guy in the Yellow Ranger costume, don't you?' Short pause to breathe some booger back up his nose and then he adds, 'That's why the Pink Ranger wears a skirt but the Yellow one doesn't.'

'No,' I choke at him, licking up the final drops of ice-cream from my finger, which has oozed into a single lump of purple-ish goo. If the Yellow Ranger isn't a girl, then how come she's so skinny in her yellow uniform? How come she has the same voice inside her helmet as the one she has outside her helmet? 'Trini is a girl. She doesn't have a skirt because that's just for the colour pink.'

'No yourself, cuz,' Alooshi teases. 'They get American actors to do the people part, but all the scenes in the costumes come from the original Japan show, and over there, the Yellow Ranger has no v-word' — but he actually says the v-word. 'Haven't you ever noticed how flat her chest is?'

This is exactly like the time Alooshi claimed the WWF is fake; even though there was blood, actual blood, coming out of Hulk Hogan's eyes in last Saturday's three-hour episode.

'Trini is in the costume!' I snap at Alooshi, surprising myself — I'm usually too better-raised-than-that and secretly-kinda-scared-of-that to ever

speak at my mountain-of-a-cousin in such a way. ‘She’s just really skinny, like Bruce Lee.’

Here’s what my cousin missed: Dad was taking a call in the kitchen as I was banging my hands on this hollow red drum my parents brought with them from the mother-country. Duk-duk-duk tuk-tuk until my father stuck his head through the curtain doorway and said in the mother-language, ‘Son, I need you to keep it down, I’m on a very important call, watch the television if you like.’ I couldn’t believe it — my father never invited me to watch tv; I always had to beg him. He said it was only good for the news, especially the ones that weren’t in English, and everything else was junk food for my brain. Our television was a small screen inside a wooden box, and I sat close enough to watch and turn the knobs at the same time. Into the phone, my dad was asking where exactly did they take *her,* how long had *she* been missing, as thunderbolts began to flash in my eyes: images of teenagers doing karate flips, a witch on the moon, a wizard-head inside a time warp and an ‘ai-ya-ya-ya-yai’ robot. The teenagers were morphing into red, yellow, blue, black and pink, battling an army of goobers made of clay and a monster made of pumpkin flesh. My dad started shouting from the kitchen, ‘Then I’m coming, I’m coming!’ as the witch threw her wand towards the earth and screamed, ‘Make my monster grow!’ The teenagers called on their Zords for help; a t-rex, sabre-toothed tiger, triceratops, mastodon and pterodactyl, who shapeshifted and clicked together to become the Megazord, who had the power to summon the Mega Sword. Just as the Power Rangers sliced the giant pumpkin-head in half, my father came into the living room and sat next to me cross-legged. His chin went down into his neck and his thighs folded over as his kneecap pressed against mine. Dad began to caress his long gentle hands through my curly hair, upside-down-smiling at me. ‘I have to leave for a brief while,’ he said. ‘But you can watch this show as much as you like while I’m away, okay.’ Next second, he was gone, get-got-gone.

My cousin has demolished his Paddle Pop, and flings the wrapper over his head; like he always does: always just tosses his chocolate wrappers and empty chip packets and empty cola bottles and out-of-fuel cigarette lighters and empty popcorn bags wherever he be — the sidewalk, or the park, or the cinema floor, or the middle of the road while we’re crossing sides, or down the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles sewer drain on the street kerb, or into the front yard of the dog he kicked, or inside the racoon holes in the maple trees

all over our neighbourhood. Meanwhile, I sing-whisper to myself (so quietly he can't hear me), the song they taught us at school about littering: 'litterbugs come in all sizes … all sizes … all sizes …'

'Don't worry, little cuz,' Alooshi says affectionately, grabbing me over the shoulder and pulling me in close. 'The Yellow Ranger is definitely a skinny Bruce Lee chick. I'm just messing with ya.' I feel the soggy rolls of his side-stomach as he squishes me between a flabby bicep and a bullhorn-thick ribcage. Finding myself directly beneath my cousin's armpit, I am entangled in the smell of his sweat, which oozes through his large jacket; a fusion of onion and mouldy tea and fried chicken oil.

Unlike my cousin, I'm still holding on to my plastic Paddle Pop wrapper and wooden Paddle Pop stick as we approach the front yard of our flat. The concrete walkway which leads to the building is surrounded by a narrow red-brick fence on the left, which has a row of white-numbered mailboxes inside the bricks, and a broad red-brick fence on the right, which has a row of plastic garbage bins popping up from the inside. The two-wheeled bins are exactly my height, black down the bottom with red swinging lids. Next to each bin, there's these black plastic boxes with no lids, which are supposed to be for recycling. But they're always empty because the only person in our building that recycles is the brown-moustached man on the top level who looks and sounds and dresses like Ned Flanders, only without the glasses and the okily-dokilys. And the only thing he recycles is one-litre bottles of ginger beer, which Alooshi sometimes likes to steal and melt in my bedroom with the cigarette lighter he usually keeps in his chest-area-inside-jacket-pocket. I like the smell of melted bottle — a combo of acid and McDonald's cheeseburgers. It's exactly what I imagine the Power Rangers Command Centre would smell like, full of gears and black grease and robots and an oval-shaped talking head in a blue time warp.

We're meant to use the bin that is linked to our unit number, but no one follows this rule; everyone in the building just sticks their rubbish in whatever bin is emptiest, or closest. I lift the lid of the first bin beside the entrance, my sticky ice-cream hand gluing itself to the warm red plastic. There's a dark-yellow slug around the same size as my rude finger stuck on the inside of the lid. 'Gross,' I screech, pouncing back into Alooshi's bulging stomach, expecting my cousin to shield me. Instead, Alooshi shoves me aside with his right hand, which is bright-red-bruised from the

punches he threw half-an-hour earlier, and says, ‘Nah, cuz, this is hectic, give me your rubbish.’

Alooshi discards the wrapper and uses my still-moist ice-cream stick to slowly peel the slug from the bin lid. He looks like he’s done this before, sliding the sugary stick under the slug slow enough so that it detaches from the lid and grips on without being injured. Next, Alooshi carries the sugar-sucking slug on the stick into our front yard, which has long bits of grass in some parts (because no one ever mows the lawn) and round patches of soil in other parts (because no one ever waters the lawn). My cousin eases the slug onto a copper-coloured stone — actually no, it’s just a clump of clay — and watches the creature squirm off the stick and onto the hard earthy surface. ‘Watch this,’ Alooshi says with a joker-card-grin, the space between his two front teeth appearing before me. My cousin unzips the left pocket of his bomber jacket and takes out two sachets of salt. What kind of person carries random salt packets from Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pizza Hut in their pocket? Cousin Alooshi — that’s who. Take, for example, this one time my dad tried to teach him a verse in the mother-tongue from our holy book. Alooshi mispronounced every word, got frustrated with himself, and slammed his fist into my concrete bedroom wall. A *Power Rangers* episode-length later, Dad said sorry and asked his nephew how ‘we’ could make it up to him (‘we’ because according to the rules of the mother-country, it was the responsibility of our entire household to comfort our guest). Plopped on my bed next to me, frowning grumpily at the orange-carpet-floor, Alooshi grumbled, ‘A Zinger Meal.’ Another *Power Rangers* episode-length later, we were standing in line at Kentucky Fried Chicken, waiting for our Zinger burgers (which truth be said were always too spicy for me) to come. Meanwhile, Alooshi was stuffing his pockets with all the free stuff at the counter: napkins, straws, and packets of sugar, pepper and salt. ‘Why you stuffing, cuz?’ I asked, and Alooshi replied with his black-space-in-the-centre-of-his-two-teeth grin, ‘Eat stuff, burn stuff, melt stuff.’

So anyway, Alooshi takes these two packets of salt from his pocket and tears them open at the same time in one swipe. ‘You watching?’ he double-checks with the excited-ment of a starving kid waving around a free Mars Bar voucher. He pours the salt all over the slug, and the slug rapidly curls up like a newborn baby, twitching and squirming. And I swear, swear on our holy book, it’s screaming, I can hear it screaming. The sound pierces

my ear — no, my brain — like being skinned alive. ‘What’s happening to it, cuz?’ I gasp, stress-clenching onto the straps of my schoolbag.

‘Can’t you see?’ my cuz explains, eyes alight. ‘It’s melting, it’s melting.’

Horrified-ly staring at the bubble-gooing creature, I’m suddenly reminded that Alooshi is named ‘Alooshi’ because Alooshi is a naughty boy. His real name is Ali, just like my father, but in the mother-country, they give kids ‘cute’ versions of these names. Ali = Alooshi. Hasan = Hasooni. I = Hamoodi. The elders warn that our real names are too sacred to burden upon a child — we cheeky hood-rats who pick our noses and lick the ice-cream from our sticky fingers and suck the mud from under our fingernails and don’t know how to wash our bums clean after a number two. We cheeky hood-rats who speak the f-word, and the f-word followed by the c-word, which my dad used to tell me was extra extra extra bad, because it was disrespectful to my mum and my baby sister, and my mum’s mother, who died young back in the mother-country, and my dad’s mother, who died old shortly after we arrived here. The screaming in my ears — no, my brain, in my brain — becomes a distant weep as the slug dissolves into a puddle of slime across the clay. My cousin is watching with cowboy-intensity, his glare superglued onto every twitch and flick the creature makes. I am become slug — the dead sea sucking every drop of water from my skin, until my entire body is a shrivelled sundried tomato. ‘Don’t worry, little cuz,’ Alooshi mumbles, eyes still concentrating on the last breaths (or at least what look like breaths) of the slug. ‘It’s just a bug. They don’t feel anything.’ Shrink. Expand. Shrink. Expand … Shrink … Expand … No more.

I am become.

Below the chipped white double doors, between the cracked red bricks, up the stained concrete stairs, to level three of apartment block thirty-three, there's a dead cockroach in front of my doorstep. I accidentally crushed it this morning on my way down, expecting my mum to clean it up when she stepped outside, but she hasn't, which means she probably hasn't left the unit today. Straightaway Alooshi scrapes up the flattened roach with the edge of his mustard-coloured boot, and flings it down the stairwell. 'Hasta la vista, baby,' he says in his best Schwarzenegger accent — which sounds more like a talking hamburger than a used-to-be-bad-but-now-good cyborg — and then he adds: 'I'm The Ex-Terminator.'

My cousin and me, standing in the corridor, struck by the smell of pork fumes from the under-space in the door next-door to our door, filling up my lungs with the stink of old pee and burning flesh.

Alooshi is about to twist the metal doorknob and enter our unit, when suddenly my mum's voice rises from inside. I plug-squeeze my nose with one hand to block out the pig smell, and pull Alooshi's bruised pudgy fist away from the doorknob with the other. 'Whoa, wait up cuz,' I whisper, squinting my eyes tight, listening real-serious, puckering my lips, pressing my tongue against that hard-top-section of my mouth, making a shhhhhhhhhhhhh sound.

Through the door, my mum begins to sing in the mother-tongue: a white moon, a valley, a call to humanity … Then her soft tender voice creaks and it sounds like she's crying. My mum is weeping all the time right now, just then, and soon after: One night, late at night, while she crooned my baby sister to sleep, I crept from my shadow-filled bedroom to her shadow-filled bedroom, and found her sitting in the dark on a kitchen chair, whispering, 'Ali, oh Ali.' There was Annabel fast asleep on our mum's 'breast' — a word she says is always okay to speak out loud because no woman is a plastic doll. And there was me, nestling onto the edge of her bed. 'Where's my dad?' I asked, and Mum stuttered back in a shallow breath, 'Sorry, Hamoodi. They took him.'

'Who?' I whispered, and she answered, 'We don't know: maybe the people who say "peace" with an "s" or maybe the people who say "peace" with a "sh".' So I thought for a second and replied, 'Peace sounds the same

in both tongues.' My mum nodded at me, her tears thick-thick-thickening until they were dripping off her chin and landing on Annabel's milky forehead. 'God knows,' she said. 'Only God knows.'

It's hard to know how she knows, but somehow the doorhandle twists open from the other side of the unit, and my mum appears before Alooshi and me; eyes red and glassy. She brushes back her dark-red fringe and says, 'Mum, don't do that again, okay Mum, just come in next time.' She steps aside, letting us pass, and then — as Alooshi and I squeeze through the doorway at the same time — she adds, 'Mum, keep it quiet, and keep out of my room, your sister just went down.'

Yeah. Sometimes Mum calls me 'Mum'. I ask her why and she says, 'The mother-tongue.' And then I ask, 'Where does the mother-tongue come from?' and she says, 'The mother-land.' And then I ask, 'Where is the motherland?' and she says, 'Inside your mother.'

Our living room has two single couches and one three-seater couch which are out-of-date-old and rainbow-colourful and swirly-patterned. My cousin plops himself onto the big couch, and then throws his size thirteen mustard boots onto our honey-brown coffee table. My parents once told me that, back in the mother-country, a person would be slapped sideways for this kind of disrespect, but in this country, we should act like the fair-skinned people as much as possible. Every other day, my dad warned me to never name the mother-country or speak the mother-language. If anyone ever asked where we were from, I needed to say, 'Here.' Example, my x-best friend Thomas would say, 'But before here?' and I'd say, 'There,' and he'd say, 'Where's there?' and I'd say, 'Here.'

Along with Alooshi's overgrown boots, the honey-brown coffee table has two ashtrays full of fresh cigarette butts and a small coffeepot and an extra extra small coffee cup with eye-shaped patterns painted blue and black. The cup is empty, but all around its insides are the remains of my mum's fortune — her future looks like a melted star; sinking and spinning and stretching into the deep-deaf-depths of the universe.

'Oi, wanna go buy a new lighter and go find some plastic bottles and go melt 'em?' Alooshi hisses; hisses, because he knows my mum will say no if she hears him.

'*Power Rangers* is starting soon,' I respond quick, pockets of oxy-gen striking into my side-rib.

‘You always get your way,’ Alooshi snaps, and then, before I can ask what he’s even talking about, he adds, ‘Remember *Home Alone*?’

Yes, I do, I do remember *Home Alone*, he’ll never let me forget *Home Alone*, and I don’t wanna debate it all over again with him, and I know I owe him one for standing up for me today, so I’m about to say okay, let’s go melt plastic bottles, but before I can say it, Alooshi grins at me. ‘Look, I’ll make a deal with ya,’ he whispers, but it’s one of those breathy whispers that still comes out loud. ‘Grab me some chocolate from the kitchen, and I’ll watch *Powers Rangers* with ya instead.’

I scan the apartment to pinpoint my mum’s location; spotting the back of her dark-redded curly-headed head through her half-opened bedroom door. There’s twenty seconds tops for me to sprint into the kitchen and smuggle a treat before she catches me. I begin rummaging through the drawers and cupboards, which are made from chipped wood with peeling bark-patterned plastic and peeling silver handles. Mum doesn’t like me eating junk food, but occasionally she buys treats for our visitors and hides them behind the plates or the knives, forks and spoons, or the pots and pans, or the mugs and extra extra small coffee cups. Sometimes she even hides them on the top shelf of the laundry, a room inside the kitchen with a curtain-fora-door doorway, which is the size of a car toll booth — you know, those things we throw coins in to get onto the freeway. But today it’s nothing. Nothing, nothing and nothing except a pile of unopened envelopes on top of our white dinner bowls, from Sydney Water and Energy Australia, which all say ‘Final Reminder’. This doesn’t worry me anymore; Uncle Musa — Alooshi’s dad, my dad’s older brother — always pays them whenever we run out of money.

Long-shot, but my last guess is under the sink, where Mum keeps her lemon-smelling dishwashing liquid and brand-new sponges and a spanner because the pipes are always leaking, and yes yes yes, there’s a bag of Cadbury Marble Chocolates! Alooshi’s gonna be cheering; he’s been searching for these since the first commercial aired: milk chocolate and white chocolate dripping from the air, whirling into one another like rain clouds, until suddenly there’s this whole new chocolate bar that looks like a brown-and-cream-coloured piece of marble rock. As soon as the commercial ended, Alooshi made me walk with him through our neighbourhood, visiting every corner shop and tobacco shop and fruit shop and Franklins and Flemings and Coles and Woolworths, asking if their

latest chocolates had arrived. Every employee would say ‘no, not yet’, and my cousin would get more annoyed each time, cursing them in the mother-tongue: ‘Eat s-word.’ The sun was setting by the time we’d reached the next suburb, and Alooshi still hadn’t found his chocolates, so he bought a carton of eggs from the last store we visited. Suddenly I was running as fast as I could behind him, watching him peg an egg at the window of each shop that rejected us until we finally returned to my street.

‘It’s not their fault,’ I argued with my cousin, catching my breath, heart rate slowing down, as we walked back up the stairs of my unit.

‘The commercial said “out now”!’ Alooshi spat at me. ‘Have you ever heard of false advertising?’ Then he started going on about putting in a complaint to ‘Consumer Affairs’, which he told me was a company that sued businesses who ripped off their customers. ‘Do you know how rich we’d be if we took the chocolate factory to jail?’

Back in the living room, I toss the bag of marble chocolates into Alooshi’s lap and then do a Red Ranger-style forward roll across the carpet, landing right in front of the television. Cross-legged, eyes sticky-taped to the screen, I fiddle with the knobs until we’re on Channel Seven. The volume is just enough for me to hear without waking up my sister. It’s Morphin’ Time.

The sound of Alooshi sucking hard on chocolate cube after chocolate cube makes my eye twitch but, whatever cuz; my thighs and knees begin to tremble with excited-ment. An electric guitar sizzles through the tv speakers and Rita Repulsa escapes from her moon prison: ‘Ahh, after ten thousand years, I’m free. It’s time to conquer earth!’ Cut to Zordon in the Command Centre: ‘Alpha, Rita’s escaped. Recruit a team of teenagers with attitude!’ Alpha 5 presses a red button, and five teenagers hanging out in the Angel Grove Youth Centre are suddenly teleported into a round room filled with buttons and gadgets and screens. The electric guitar builds as the words ‘Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers’ appear on the screen; a thunderbolt comes crashing down and ‘Go Go Power Rangers’ muffles through our old television. Each of the Rangers is introduced in white text: Austin St. John as Jason, Thuy Trang as Trini, Walter Jones as Zack, Amy Jo Johnson as Kimberly, David Yost as Billy. They’re morphing and their Zords are charging and the two school bullies (one really fat, one really skinny) are eating cotton candy, and ‘Go Go Power Rangers — You Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers’ is surging through my bones.

The name of the episode appears at the bottom of the screen: ‘A Pig Surprise’. Jason, Kimberly, Trini and Billy are at Angel Grove Park, finding families to adopt homeless animals — cats, dogs and rabbits. Billy is answering every question with ‘Affirmative’ because he’s the genius in the group, which is obvious because he wears glasses.

An old lady walking a balloon-shaped pig on a leash asks the Rangers to find a nice family to adopt ‘Poor Norman’. Kimberly ewws, Jason promises.

On the other side of the park, Zack is running, saying to himself, ‘Oh man, I’m so late.’ His sunrise-brown face spreads open: surprised to spot the old woman who just gave away the pig walking between the trees. She stretches out her arms, kicks her legs, and transforms into a Putty Patroller — Rita’s grey-clay-foot-soldiers. Suddenly four more Putties flip onto the television screen and surround Zack.

‘How are they all magically appearing?’ Alooshi scoffs, his fake-whispering voice hitting me in the back of the head. Second later, my mum sticks her nose between the small crack in her door, and goes ‘shhhhhh’. I

turn the knob on the television box, but only just a notch — this is my usual trick when an adult shooshes the tv: As Billy would say, ‘tech-ni-cally’ the volume has been lowered, but ‘in-reality’ no one can un-hear the difference.

Back on the screen, Rita is watching Zack from her lunar palace, hooting in her fingernails-on-a-chalkboard voice. ‘Pfff,’ Alooshi scoffs into the back of my head again. ‘How’s she seeing all this from the moon with those tiny human eyes?’

He’s wrong — Rita doesn’t have human eyes, she has evil magic witch’s eyes, but everything is unfolding so quickly in the episode that I don’t have time to explain the difference to him.

Rita turns to her lead henchman, this dog-like creature covered in gold armour named Goldar. ‘A brilliant plan, my queen,’ he growls. ‘The Rangers are doomed!’

The television screen fades to black and then the commercials begin. I usually like to watch them — because they always advertise new Power Ranger toys — but I take this opportunity to use the bathroom instead. I’d rather go while the feeling down there is still just a tingle, instead of waiting for that stinging-burning-bursting feeling to build inside me while the rest of the episode is playing.

Our bathroom is small and broken: cracked yellow tiles on the ground, cracked white tiles on the walls, a light-grey sink with rusted tap handles, and a light-grey bathtub wedged right next to a white toilet. I pee around the edges of the toilet bowl, trying to avoid hitting the water, in order to keep the noise down. There’s this piece of poo that I’m aiming for, but it’s been there since yesterday, and my warm bright yellow pee isn’t strong enough to chip it away. Eyes bulging, I find myself thinking: *Jeez, that’s the toughest s-word I’ve ever seen!* And then thinking: *God, that s-word stinks.* And then thinking: *I am become paper-bark-skin.* And then, just before thinking my next thought, snap my head away from the toilet and shove my pants and underpants over my p-word in a single motion; terrified of who, or what, I had just become …

Counting down each commercial-second that passes, I skip the flush, but my dad always used to say, ‘clean is holy’, so hands must be washed. I turn the tap and rinse quick, feeling the cold water wear off my sticky sweat, before the pipes have time to turn hot, and as I twist the tap back tight, the whole bathroom rumbles like the hit-hit-hammering of a hammer. My mum

told me a plumber can fix this ‘hammer’ problem pretty quickly, but I just need to go easy on the taps until she can afford to hire someone.

I sink onto the carpet, crossing my legs as my bum smacks the floor right in front of the television. Zack is back on the screen, ducking and flipping and fly-kicking his way through the Putties; flinging his thin muscly body over the branches and hurling them into the trees, every hit making a metal-smashing sound.

Cut back to the animal-give-away-thingy. Bulk, the fat school bully, and Skull, the skinny school bully, are running from stall to stall, screaming: ‘Hold it, hold it.’ They want a pet: ‘Something cool, something different, like ourselves.’

Oh boy, they’re gonna get given the pig! Yep, I’m so right. Out he oinks from under the blue picnic table. Billy says, ‘Here you go fellas, meet Norman.’

Cut to Angel Grove High School. Bulk is showing off his new pig to the other kids in his class. He wants it to perform tricks, but all the pig does is eat some popcorn from the ground. ‘Norman, just stand there and ignore me,’ Bulk says out-loud and out-proud. Then he looks around at his classmates with a fat grin. ‘Pretty smart, uh?’

Back on the lunar palace, the blueberry-coloured warthog, Squatt, is popping like popped popcorn: ‘Those kids have taken the bacon bait.’

‘Yuck,’ Alooshi says. ‘That’s gross, cuz.’

I wish my cousin would just let the episode be, but he’s not the first person in our family to be disgusted by bacon. One time I asked my dad if we could eat hot dogs like they do at baseball games, and he told me pig meat is forbidden. ‘During wartime, when soldiers were starving to death, they’d eat each other,’ my father explained while we ate his homemade cheeseburgers. ‘They’d call the dead humans they ate “Long Pork”. You wanna know why — because pig’s meat is exactly the same as ours.’ I liked my dad’s cheeseburgers, which always had lots of tomato sauce and mustard, but never understood why he’d make them with brown bread buns instead of normal ones?

Cut to the high school science lab. Trini asks Zack, ‘Didn’t you say the Putty you saw yesterday was dressed like an old lady?’ Moment later, at the same time, Trini and Billy scream out: ‘Norman!’

Wheezing heavy, prickling the rears of my ears, Alooshi grunts, ‘So Billy’s supposed to be the dweeb Ranger aye?’ And keeping my eyes on the

screen, I answer, ‘Affirmative …’

The Rangers find the pig at Angel Grove Youth Centre; dressed with a red bandana around his neck, eating from a pink dog bowl. Bulk and Skull are beaming down at him while they chew from both ends of a bacon-filled foot-long sandwich. Cut back to the moon; Rita is casting her spell: she spins her hands, lightning sparks, thunder thwacks, and my cousin strikes: ‘Really, thunder on the moon, cuz?’

Whatever, cuz. Alooshi cannot — will not — ruin this episode. My kneecaps are vibrating, my fingers are quivering, my bottom teeth are tattering up into my top teeth, my heart is cartwheeling from one scene to the next: chaos is about to engulf Angel Grove!

Back at the Youth Centre, Norman explodes onto two legs. He’s become a man-sized pig-head with a gar — um, what’s that word we just learned at school: gar, gar-gan, gar-gan-tu, ah got it — with a gargantuan grey helmet and long human arms, only it has hooves instead of hands.

‘It’s just some guy in a cheap pig costume,’ Alooshi mocks, slap-clapping his palms together.

Ignore. Ig-snore. Ig-snort.

The pig is chasing Bulk and Skull, trying to steal the remainder of their foot-long. ‘Gimme, gimme, gimme,’ he squeals.

‘Cannibalism,’ Alooshi blurts. I think because the pig is trying to eat bacon, but aren’t ‘cannibals’ people who eat other people, like that soccer team whose plane crashed in the ice mountains? Mr Brown said they nearly starved to death, so they ate the bodies that died first. I stared at him silent and horrified, until finally he added, ‘Just think of it as long pork, son.’ And, my father coming to mind, I replied, ‘But I don’t eat pork, either.’

Cut to the Command Centre. The Power Rangers teleport inside. Zordon — that wise blue head inside a giant blue tube who always knows what his children need to know by the time they arrive — explains in his deep blue voice: ‘Power Rangers, it is apparent that once again we face Rita’s Evil Pudgy Pig. You must stop this overweight menace and do away with him once and for all.’

Alooshi chuckles to himself. ‘Oft, look at this head, bro.’

My cousin doesn’t get it: Zordon is always in the same place whenever his children need him, always watching over them, always on the side of the righteous in a world full of witches and pork rolls, always holding the answers to the questions in a vast and unforgiving and frightening universe:

Is anyone out there, right here, just around that corner? I can hear him, my dad, telling me to just hang tight, he'll be back real soon. Cut:

Jason takes his position in the middle of the Command Centre and the other four Rangers fall in behind him, revealing their morphers. One by one they call out their dinosaur power. Zack: 'Mastodon!' Kimberly: 'Pterodactyl!' Billy: 'Triceratops!' Trini: 'Sabre-toothed Tiger!' And Jason: 'Tyrannosaurus!' The Rangers snap to a city rooftop in their black, pink, blue, yellow and red uniforms — skin-tight tights and hard armoured helmets. Pudgy Pig is staring down at them beside a cheap roof antenna. 'It's gonna be all we can stomach, guys,' Red Ranger says, aaaand … ahhh bruh; the episode goes to commercial; just as the battle is about to begin. Hate when that happens.

First ad is the one advertising the new Toyota HiLux. Alooshi jumps up from the couch and belches, 'Huh, love this one, cuz.' B-word this, b-word that, b-word, b-word, b-word, b-word spits at me from the television screen as well as the back of my head. Does Alooshi even know what it means, and if not, would he still say it after he found out? Or what if he knew what it meant, but also knew that everyone else didn't know what it meant, would he say it then? Most kids would probably enjoy getting away with naughtiness in front of their strict dads, but for me, getting away with naughtiness is a reminder that there's no strict dad to tell me I'm naughty. I'm doing my best to be a good boy, at least until my dad comes back. Any second now he's going to appear around the corner, and when he does, I'll curse at him for leaving me.

My cousin needs to know what hides among the dictionary pages: the unorthodox intercourse between man and beast. I twist my neck in his direction, but he's already moved on, pointing at the screen with his onion-ring-shaped eye rolling back into his brain: 'Look cuz, new Power Ranger toys,' he bellows, licking the last smudge of marble chocolate from the corner of his lip.

Holy-Moly-Me. These plastic Power Rangers have a button on their gadget belts. You press it and their heads flip over like they're morphing. One second it's Jason's white-skinned gelled-black-haired head, next it's the Red Ranger's helmet! The commercial ends with a deep Zordon-ish voice saying, 'Get your favourite Rangers for only $19.95 each', followed by a very quick, 'Available now in all good toy stores. Accessories not included.' And this beggar-can't-be-chooser inside me screams: *How's it my*

fault that there's no Power Ranger to call my own? All Mum could afford was a five-buck Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle from Paddy's Markets. It was second-old, so one of its hands is holding a fork, and the other hand is missing two of its three turtle fingers.

As the next commercial begins, something about a new rainbow-flavoured/coloured cornflake cereal, I start thinking about my x-best friend, Thomas. Few months back, he came to school wearing new Power Rangers shoes, which were bright green and had razored Dragonzord teeth across the sides and the words 'Green Ranger' on the top-front. At lunchtime, Miss Piggy took notice of the sneakers, and belched out loud, 'Wow, you must really love *Power Rangers* if you've even got the shoes.' It wasn't fair. I loved *Power Rangers* just as much as Thomas — actually, even more because I loved them from the first episode, whereas Thomas only loved them when Tommy arrived, and Tommy isn't even in the show anymore, and even when Tommy was in the show, he started off evil, wasn't even a clean spirit — but I couldn't prove any of that because my parents couldn't afford to buy brand-names for me. Like as if. As if I'd have chosen Kmart or Dunlop or even Adidas or even-even Nike over Power Rangers if I had the choice —

Anyways, whatevs; Pudgy Pig is back on the screen. He jumps down from the rooftop and charges at the Rangers, knocking each of them to the concrete with swings from his hoove-hand arms. Then he vanishes. Now that I think about it, characters appear and disappear so easy in this show — imagine how different my day would have turned out if this was possible: snap into the school bathroom, do my business, and snap back out again before anyone caught me. Heck, I could even snap from the school playground to my own bathroom at home, do my business here, and then snap myself back to the quadrangle before any teacher ever noticed I was gone. But where would you get this kind of teleporting power with only two-bucks-fifty in your Commonwealth Piggy Bank Account?

Cut to the moon. Rita screeches: 'Everything is ready for the next phase of my ghastedly plan.' Goldar barks: 'While the Power Rangers are busy with the Pudgy Pig, I will destroy Angel Grove.' Alooshi grunts: 'Who the hell openly admits their plan is ghastedly?'

Not too sure if saying 'hell' like that is a swear word. Perhaps it should be the 'h-word' from now on. No time to decide. Maybe later. Right now, the Power Rangers have teleported into a hillbilly farm. Red Ranger says,

‘Sausage-head’s got to be around here somewhere,’ and Alooshi sizzles, ‘Ha, sausage-head.’

Yes! At last, my cousin is laughing *with* the show, instead of *at* the show. I’ve made up my mind. Definitely not a swear-word — hell yes!

Rita chucks her spear-sized magic wand down towards earth, transforming Goldar into a building-sized giant. ‘Don’t worry, our side’s got Zords,’ I say to the loud-mouth-breathing cousin behind me, nose inching towards the television screen. ‘Goldar gonna get-got when we get-to-get-together.’

Back at the farm, the Rangers find Pudgy Pig dancing inside a pen. They’re giggling as he crouches down beside an actual pig and says to her: ‘Come with me to the pigsty, we’ll make such beautiful bacon.’

‘Oh, how sweet, he’s in love,’ whispers the Yellow Ranger. ‘This proves our hypothesis that underneath the facade, this is indeed Norman,’ explains the Blue Ranger. In comes an audio message from Zordon: ‘Pudgy Pig was just a diversion. Goldar is attacking Angel Grove. There is not a moment to lose.’

The Rangers teleport into Angel Grove City as Building-Size-Goldar zaps the skyscrapers with laser beams from his plastic-red eyeballs and side-way laser blasts from his double-edged jewel-handled sword.

‘Jee, people like fully crushed to death,’ I mumble to myself, but Alooshi picks up my words and shoots back quick, ‘You know that’s just a dude in a gold suit and those buildings are just made of cardboard, right?’

Keeping my eyes locked on the destruction before me, I take in a deep ‘khhhh’ and seethe out through my teeth, ‘Then I’m stupid!’

‘But the show doesn’t make sense,’ Alooshi continues, his voice rising over the sound of the explosions and crumbling towers of Angel Grove — so loud that any moment now, my mum will stick her head through the bedroom door again and shoosh him up. ‘Why is that moon witch constantly describing herself as the villain? Even the Wicked Witch of the West believed she was in the right.’

First I’m like, *Gosh, stop being so annoy—*, but then I’m like, *Hang on, maybe my cousin has a point.* Watching on as the evil witch does evil-witch-stuff for the sake of doing evil-witch-stuff, I find myself asking: *Does wrong ever wrong knowing it’s wrong, or does wrong only wrong believing it’s right?* The closest answer that comes to mind belongs to the bloodline: My mother’s father followed a man named Abu Bakr and my father’s father

followed a man named Ali, which is why so many of my relatives are named Ali (including Dad and Alooshi). But whenever I asked them, ‘So which side of our family was right?’ my parents would always laugh and reply at the same time, ‘They were both right.’

I can imagine having a Zordon-level-wise conversation with my cousin about this matter, but there’s no time — Goldar is continuing his assault on Angel Grove as the sorceress in scorpion-shaped gold plates appears on another random rooftop, zapping at the Power Rangers with the laser guns in her helmet. ‘You’re through, Rangers,’ Scorpina shouts, throwing her sword at Red, Black, Blue, Pink and Yellow like a boomerang; knocking each of them to the ground before it returns to her. Then comes down a two-toed golden foot. Goldar growls, ‘I’ll crush you like bugs.’ All five Rangers karate-flip and cartwheel out of the way. At last, and finally, and thank god, Jason shouts, ‘Alright, we need dinosaur power now!’ A robot tyrannosaurus rex rises from a volcano out in the distance. Zack and Billy and Kimberly and Trini also call on their Zords — ‘Mastodon’, ‘Triceratops’, ‘Pterodactyl’, ‘Sabre-toothed Tiger’.

Red Ranger instructs, ‘Initiating Megazord sequence now.’ The Zords begin to shift gears, change shape, merge together: Triceratops and Sabre-toothed Tiger become a pair of legs, Mastodon becomes a set of arms, Pterodactyl becomes the body and Tyrannosaurus becomes the head — a cockpit-head where all five Rangers steer the machine.

Straightaway, Goldar swings his sword into the Megazord’s chest. The Power Rangers find their balance and throw two metal fists back into his gold-plated armour. Then the Megazord does something I’ve never seen in all forty-one other episodes of the show so far: it stomps on the monster’s foot. Goldar screams out in pain and I scream out in joy and snapping over to the moon, Rita’s drenched-in-make-up face is crumpling in certain defeat. ‘We need the Mega Sword now,’ announces Red Ranger. An aeroplane-sized sword comes soaring down to earth. ‘Go Go Power Rangers’ rumbles from the tv speakers. Megazord’s eyes flash yellow and Mega Sword’s blade glows bright red and lightning bolts power up the weapon. *Yes!* I’m think-screaming. Just before the Rangers strike their final blow, Goldar has vanished, reappearing a second later on the moon. *No!* I’m think-screaming. There’s that two-legged yellow dog, squirming before his queen, pleading for forgiveness, as the television screen fades to black. *Akh!* I’m think-screaming.

During the final round of commercials, which always air before the two-minute all-good-until-next-episode scene, I twist to my cousin, nostrils flare-upping: ‘Why ya ruining this for me?’

Alooshi puffs his bright red cheeks, sticky-tape-sealing his lips together. Slides off the couch and crawls towards me on flat kneecaps. Expanding his body like a walrus, he blurts out: ‘So here’s the thing, if that b-word witch can make her monsters giants, then why not just do that at the beginning and destroy Angel Groove in like the first thirty seconds of the episode? But if you’re the Power Rangers, why wait for something like that to happen, why not just bring those Zordy robot thingies in straightaway and squash all the baddies before they can cause any harm? And when the giant gold guy was destroying Angel Groove, wouldn’t it be all over the news and they’d call the army to drop an atomic bomb on him? And why does everything always go back to normal after the giant monster is defeated in every episode; don’t these creatures kill like millions of people and cause like a billion dollars of destruction every time they attack the city? Shouldn’t the city be cleaning up the mess from last episode’s giant monster, before having to deal with today’s giant monster? And weren’t the Power Rangers fighting that scorpion girl? Where’d she end up going? And since the Rangers can teleport wherever they wanna go, why not just teleport to the moon already and kill that b-word witch so she can’t attack Angel Groove again? And while we’re on the subject, why is that b-word witch even bothering to attack Angel Groove — the only place in the universe that has the superheroes who can stop her? Why not just conquer the pyramids or steal all the water in the Pacific Ocean or invade the Leaning Tower of Pizza Hut or open a Hungry Jacks in Antarctica instead?’

By the time my cousin is done, his voice has risen so high that it’s woken up my sister. ‘E-heh, e-heh, e-heeeeeeh,’ she stirs; magpie-shriek bouncing off the apartment walls. Mum slam-closes their bedroom door — hard; hard enough to make it clear she’s annoyed with us.

My bottom teeth, which are left-ways and right-ways and wrong-ways, begin to tatatata into my top teeth, which are this-ways and that-ways and side-ways. Low lip wobbles with white bubbly spit. ‘It’s called Angel *Grove*,’ I correct Alooshi, feeling my cheeks swell and burn like they need a fire-putter-outer. I scramble from the carpet, so fast my knees forget to rise off the ground, and reverse-floor-kick my bedroom door shut behind me.

If only there was a blue-tacked Megazord poster hanging somewhere in here — something I loved enough to destroy — but this is the worthless space of a child who already knows the earth don't spin for him: patchwork-white concrete walls from corner to corner, a chip-wood-inside/plastic-peeling-outside wardrobe to hang all my shirts and jumpers with drawers beneath to put all my pants and socks and undies, and lastly, a double bed alongside a large window to the outside world — outside to the parked cars and algae-slimed telephone poles and the sun when it sets and the moon when it rises and the tops of red-bricked apartment blocks, and then, there, hiding between them, the soil … the soil that eats the soul. I always sleep directly under the window, waiting, slow-breath-waiting, for my father's olive tree to call for me: roots stretch-aching, branches creak-cracking, leaves scrap-ruffling.

When Alooshi spends the night, he takes the open end of the bed. Wedged between the air of flapping bird-wings on my windowsill and a size-thirteen-footed cousin, I am a snail snuggled safely in its shell, but the thought of sharing this bed with Alooshi tonight makes me feel like another one of his slugs; naked and exposed and trapped in salty sweat.

Throwing myself beneath the tiger-skin-patterned bedsheet, I pound a fist into the side of my head, whisper-screaming, 'Stupid, you're so stupid.'

Lord, how I've tried to be smart. And not just any kind of smart. Billy-the-Blue-Ranger-smart. From the passenger seat of our station wagon, I pointed out street signs and billboards to my dad and deliberately mispronounced their words: 'Parramatta Road', which I read as 'Barranatta Boad', and 'It's Mac Time', which I read as 'It's Nac Tim'. And then, staying up late with my dad while he watched the late-night news with the volume turned all the way down (so as not to wake my mum and sister), I deliberately misread words on the screen: 'Late Night Bulletin', which I read as 'Lafe Might Pulletim'.

A half-blind glasses-wearing man himself, Dad immediately picked up the signs, and soon took me to *see* (winky face) the eye doctor. She, too, wore glasses, but they were an inch thicker than my dad's — like she was showing off. The optometrist sat me on a brown leather chair next to a poster of an inside-out-eyeball; instructing me to stare through two dozen blurry lenses and call out each of the black letters appearing on the white-lit background before me. She'd definitely know if I deliberately muddled every letter she showed me, so I read most of them exactly as they were, but

every so often, I'd intentionally say 'Um … F?' even though I could clearly see it was an 'E', and 'Um … P?' even though I could clearly see it was a 'B', and 'Um … little k?' even though I could clearly see it was a big 'R'.

However, in spite of my best efforts, the eye doctor still peered at me curiously after the test, and then peered at my dad with a reassuring-slash-comforting smile. And in what I finally recognised as that opposite-of-what-you-mean word, she said to him, 'I'm sorry to inform your son, but unfortunately, he has perfect vision, and won't need glasses.'

Dad said nothing to me the whole car trip home; just stared ahead at the oncoming traffic and deliberately misread out loud all the numberplate numbers and letters on the cars that went past, giggling to himself. Finally, he parked the station wagon outside the front of our apartment, and turned to me with that Windex-clean pair of lenses he wore; those glasses that made him look Billy-Blue-Ranger-smart and Zordon-wise. In the mother-language, he said: 'Hamoodi, why did you lie about your sight?'

This ice-cold shame swelled within me — an inside-out eyeball, a rotten tree branch, hard green olives, a praying mantis, and a stick of pink bubble gum. 'Am I smart or dumb?'

For what felt like a time-warp-amount-of-time, my father just sat there, staring at me, thinking at me, through those Billy-Blue-Ranger-smart and Zordon-wise round lenses in a thin silver frame. And then, finally, his lips curled into a smile, and his smile turned into laughter, and that was the only answer he ever gave me …

Cut to reality, to my bedroom, to under my bedsheet, remembering my dad's laugh, which rattles my bone-dust, there's nothing but a small corner of light to see through; through the window to the outside world where crows peck at the fur of a cat lying stiff dead on the roof of a rusty white van in our apartment yard. Bright-red cat guts. Charcoal-black crow beak. The flames of my organs bleeding. Bleeding inside out. Inside-out-bleeding.

Old hinges swinging, squealing open and shut. Mum's all 'er um ere', Alooshi's all 'nah nuffin', and Annabel's all 'e-hek e-hek custard'. Next minute, two squirrelly noses poke through the shadowy line between my bedroom door and the doorframe; four round brown eyes lock onto my head, peeking out from the bedsheet. Annabel's arms are around our mum's neck like a koala clamped to a tree, lips tugging on her 'pacifist' — that's what our dad used to call the sucker because it made 'peace'. Annabel is bare except for a fat nappy, which is wrapped in our mum's arms. Veiny copper arms which remind me of falling asleep on the couch, feeling her red-as-burnt-coal hair from wrist to elbow brushing against me like ocean salt. 'You upset your cousin?' Mum asks. Uh-dang-no: the swinging hinges must have been the sound of Alooshi leaving the apartment! I quickly spring from my bedsheet and rest the back of my neck against the wooden headboard. 'Is it stupid to like stupid stuff?' I grumble, eyes on the dead cat on top of the van outside; plasma-goo seeping through a ginger coat.

Mum's earthly waist sinks into my mattress. Holding Annabel tight in one hand, she begins to caress my charcoal curls with the other. 'Stupid is a stupid word,' she says, pressing Annabel's naked sunflower skin closer to her breast. 'Annabel, what colour are your eyes?' Mum asks in my direction, and my baby sister replies, 'Rachel, Rachel.' Then Annabel starts to kick and squirm, her just-woke-up eyelids spreading sideways-open. 'She thinks "Rachel" is how you say "hazel",' Mum says to me with a glint, setting my baby sister free on the carpet, where the infant crawl-scurries to the living room on flat palms and nude kneecaps. Annabel will now settle in front of the blank television screen: entertained by the reflection of a nappy-wearing rachel-eyed pacifist smudging lines into the black glass. 'Do you understand?' says my mother, using both her hands to pull me close to her chest. No, I don't, but it's peaceful here all the same. There's a heartbeat that goes schee-pukh, schee-pukh, schee-pukh in one ear, through my brain, and then out the other ear. This is because my mum has a tiny hole in one of the tubes that send blood from here to there and back again. 'It bleeds for our people,' she whispers, wrapping her arms around my ribs and pressing me hard into her breast. Inside-out, my mother sounds like the roaring

ocean, an endless gush of night-black and baby-blue waves folding all over each other.

Rust-coloured toes follow baby palm prints in the orange carpet as my mum leaves the room and closes the door behind her. The hinges creak and the handle clacks and the chipped wood seals me inside. I sink down into my pillow and stare up at the ceiling. The searing afternoon sun is starting to drop, sending a beam of dust mites through the glass of the window, lighting the spiderwebs in the cracks in the white concrete walls. The long legs of a daddy-long-legs spring free, scraping at the old white paint as the arachnid crawls down the wall. (I learned the word 'arachnid' from Lizard Lady, who taught our class about phobias: homophobia, fear of the bugs in the closet; mysophobia, fear of the bugs you can't see; arachnophobia, fear of the eight eyes that can see you.)

Staring at the spider's noodle-thin limbs, untangling themselves across an arctic-ice-sheet, I get the whole 'long legs' thing, but what's with the 'daddy' thing? Fathers have wise-guy jaws and eagle-sharp eyebrows and wizard-deep wrinkles, which become knife wounds when they smile at us. But the 'daddy' in the daddy-long-legs looks like a shrivelled apple seed — both dead and alive at the same time.

The spider is halfway down the wall, fingering the grooves and bumps and chipped paint with the tips of its feet. At last, it stops, stares straight back at me. Like the first spark that ignited the sun, daddy-long-legs and me have become one: what are we but a black seed in the middle of an endlessly frozen white ocean? It is here that my father comes to me —

The skin around his eyes is soft and tired. The cigarette between his lips is moist and withered, finding its last drag, before it's nothing but a butt. Choking the words into my mouth, I assure him that there's nothing to worry about over on this side of the sea: 'Daddy, I know.'

Rolling his eyes from one end of our endless white plain to the other, he lets the cigarette butt drop from his yellowing teeth, and says in the mother-tongue, 'Know what?'

I'm sucking in the mucus, sucking back my tears, sucking up my saliva. 'I have no right to cry. It's so much worse everywhere else.'

Daddy re-rolls his eyes towards the cobwebs in the corner of the ceiling. 'Sometimes you sound so silly. And sometimes so smart,' he says. 'Such is the nature of a child.' Hand to his heart, my father shrinks; olive flesh withering to ash as he returns to the cracks in the concrete. A hand on the

heart is not just hello, it’s also goodbye — on our way into the endless white abyss, on our way out.

A men clenches in my throat. The daddy-long-legs reaches the bottom of the wall, rusted-nail limbs detaching one-atta-time from the white paint, and clapping onto the carpet. Stretching, crawling, creeping towards that narrow black air beneath the closed bedroom door. The gold-plated doorknob twists, and the black nothing swoops in, and the spider panics, and before it can scamper the other way, my cousin's Giant-Goldar-sized left foot comes crashing down, flattening the daddy-long-legs into the goo that forms a chicken nugget. Alooshi glares at me like the evil snake staff in *Aladdin*, electric red lines shooting from the centre of his eyeballs. Closing the door behind him, he says: 'You always get your way, remember *Home Alone*?'

'This again,' I snap-scrape-shout. 'Get over it.'

'Come make me,' Alooshi snap-squawk-shouts back.

I charge at him; a lollipop-stick body ramming into my cousin's feather-fluff-filled bomber jacket, ploughing into his Augustus-Gloop-shaped belly, pounding him against the door. 'Eeeer,' I groan, clamping my palms into Alooshi's rolls of tummy fat and shoving him once, twice, three times as he chuckles. Suddenly, my undies and navy green tracksuit pants wedge hard up my bottom. Alooshi flings his André-the-Giant arms sideways, tossing me back onto the bed. I bounce across the mattress, as my cousin leaps at the ceiling like Hulk Hogan and comes crashing down on top of me. Squashed between squeaking bed springs and a wall of stomach chunk, kicking my legs and punching my arms and thrusting my backside, I muffle-scream, 'Ghet got, ghet got.'

'Ya give up?' Alooshi mocks, still chuckling, pressing his body even deeper into the mattress; so deep that I can no longer move and no longer breathe. It's warm, and then it's hot, and then it's sweaty, and then it's nice, because somehow, it's safe. I've quit squirming now, absorbing the weight with my eyes closed, scanning for pockets of air, feeling my cousin's heartbeat pounding into my back. Alooshi is spongy-soft and pancake-wide, but there's also something jaw-breaker-hard and trolley-pole-long poking into the bottom of my spine.

I muster every ounce of strength and air I can find to scream out, 'What's that!? What's that!?' Alooshi laugh-mumbles, 'Buss-ted.' I re-inflate like a space bag as my cousin rolls off me. Sitting up on the edge of the bed, he

slowly unzips his bomber jacket — from the bottom of his neck down to the top of his waist. There, jammed between his canvas belt and tucked-in chess-board-patterned t-shirt, is a Power Ranger.

'But how? But why? But really?' A Red Ranger. *For me.*

I am become disbelief.

'Youse okay?' my mum asks from behind the bedroom door as my thumbs hover over Jason's plastic pelvis.

'Yeah, Aunty, we were just wrestling,' Alooshi calls out.

I press into Jason's belt buckle, and his plastic human head flips into his chest, and from the other side, up comes his red helmet — he's morphed, fast as a thunderbolt. Just staring now, staring at the wide upper body section of the toy (wide enough to store the head/helmet that disappears whenever you press the belt buckle), I am suddenly overcome by visions of cotton candy and inward-smiling — love.

Not for Jason, but for Alooshi.

Ekh. What's wrong with me?

'Love' isn't a word that we boys use for other boys; love is nudging my bedroom door closed, crawling into my sheets, closing my eyes tight, holding onto my pillow, pressing my lips against the fabric. Trini kisses sweet and cute and rosy. Mouth curled, teeth shimmering white, power coin ready. Morphin' time. A yellow helmet materialises around her head. Down there, I am hard and throbbing and thrusting into my mattress until my thing spasms. Lizard Lady taught us all about it: pencils and sharpeners, trains and tunnels, snakes and bushes. Then she said, 'If anyone touches any of you in any of these places, you scream, "No!"' Danielle, the tallest girl in our class, who has bright-orange hair and a garden-gnome-nose, responded, 'But what if, um, like, your uncle says he'll let you play Nintendo?' Straightaway Mrs Lothian's head flipped — green scaly face turning to white stone. Instructing the rest of her twenty-two students (twenty-three including me) to colour-in for a few minutes, she rushed Danielle to the principal's office. And that was the last anyone in class ever spoke of the matter …

Clenching tightly on to my Red Ranger, I stare at Alooshi, who's now lying beside me on the mattress, glaring at the empty white ceiling. 'Why do you spoil me?' I ask him.

Alooshi keeps his gaze locked on the light bulb. 'Listen cuz, you gotta make me a promise—' he starts, but before I can agree to 'promise', he

goes ahead and says, ‘Never ask me that question again, okay.’ He reaches his hand out, and digs his fingers through my black curls, like he’s patting a puppy dog. ‘I have sins to pay.’

Down on the floor, in front of my bedroom door, Red Ranger and Red Ninja Turtle do battle for Supreme Ruler of Alpha Centauri.

'What's this place you keep mentioning,' Alooshi asks, 'Alpha Century?' His elephant-stump legs are up against the window, socks smudging the clean glass, head tilted over the edge of the bed, staring upside-down at me, forehead wrinkled like scrunched paper. 'It's a triple star system,' I explain, colliding Raphael's single-fingered hand into Jason's face. Lizard Lady is full of these fun facts about the universe — she told us that Ganymede is the largest moon in our solar system, the asteroid belt is an ancient planet that exploded into smithereens, and Mercury is the closest planet to the sun, but Venus is hotter, because of the 'greenhouse effect'. My x-best friend Thomas says Mrs Lothian knows all about the planets because she's from another planet, which explains why her skin is green(ish) and blue(ish) and scaly(ish).

Raphael bends over and whacks Jason's stomach with his other hand; the one that holds the fork, and uh-oh, big mistake bro, big mistake. Belt buckle activated. Head flips. Red Ranger time. 'No fork is a match for morphin' power,' Red Ranger shouts, jumping over Raphael with a quadruple somersault and fly-kicking him in the back of the head. Raphael is face-down on the carpet, and my cousin's upside-down smile scoffs: 'You know, it's actually called a sai, not a fork; a sai.' Then he sighs, so long it turns into a yawn, sliding his legs off the window and his head onto my pillow in one motion. Curls up into the tiger-skin sheet like a caterpillar inside a leaf.

Red Ranger is stomping on the fork — *a fork!* — as some commotion begins from outside my bedroom door. It's just two women greeting each other, but two mother-land women, so basically a riot. The second my mum lets our neighbour inside the unit, they're already asking the same questions over one another: 'How are you?' 'How are *you*?' 'What did you cook today?' 'What did *you* cook today?' And then onto business: 'Why did Amanda ask him to move in with her?' 'Why did Billy say yes?' I shouldn't know what they're on about, but I do: sitting by the crack of my bedroom door late at night, peeking at the television screen — breathing as quietly as don't-get-caught possible — while Mum breastfeeds Annabel and watches her show: *Melrose Place*. Amanda Woodward, who's concrete-white and

wrapped in a towel like that statue with no arms, and Billy Campbell, who looks like her Ken-doll brother, are pressing their lips into each other. Their mouths are open, and the saxophone is playing, and their tongues are twirling, and their slurping saliva sounds like that last sip from a slimy water bottle.

Then the excited-ment in my mum and the neighbour's voices drops, as they switch to some serious-speak: 'Have you heard anything?' 'No, nothing.' 'May God cover him in a warm blanket.'

Alooshi's stomach rises and falls beneath the bedsheet bounce, and Red Ranger is cartwheeling his way up the ice-sheet wall, and Red Ninja Turtle is playing dead next to the dis, um, dis-re-membered, I mean, the dismembered leg of a dead daddy-long-legs, as tin cans tinker in the background. This is an activity my mum created for Annabel — she lays out empty pots and pans in our kitchen and gives her two spoons to drum on them. My baby sister is frail, even for a two-year-old girl, so at worst-est, her drumming sounds like a brand-new xylophone, and at best-est, a broken pot-plant-pot.

The neighbour holds on to her serious-sounding-voice, which is husky and full of snot, as she says, 'This one grey, and look, this one grey, and oft, this one grey.' I see this crazy wiry woman named Zayb through the corn-flake wood of my door, stroking my mother's hair, which has been changing colour one strand after another ever since she stole that Kmart jumper. 'Let me tint your eye,' our neighbour whispers as though it's some kind of secret. 'Beautiful sad eye, I make darker, look sadder, more beautiful.'

Red Ninja Turtle flexes his arms into the carpet and raises himself in a push-up, which is all the more difficult with a fork in one hand and two of his three turtle fingers missing from the other. On his feet, he triple-backflips and sticks a three-fat-toed-foot into Red Ranger's helmet, which flings back and forces the human head to flip out of the chest. I didn't realise you could force the head to release that way; oh man, has the kick broken him? Quickly, I press Jason's power belt buckle and watch the Red Ranger helmet fling back the way it came. Whew. Fine.

'Ka-pah!' Red Ranger yelps, power-punching Red Ninja Turtle, sending him flying into the wall — revenge, brah. And beneath the sound of a tinkering xylophone and plastic muscles against a plastic fork, two mother-

land women discuss the old village; together remembering … together-membering … a girl named Salwa.

My mum, sounding like she's smiling (for the first time in god-knows-how-long a time), says: 'Remember when Salwa used to put her finger in her nose, and quickly lick it before she thought anyone would see her?'

Our neighbour, sounding like she's returned the smile, says: 'Remember when Salwa dug a hole in the dirt and planted her Bubble Dinger because she wanted to grow a lollipop tree?'

My mum, sounding like she's burst into laughter, says: 'Remember when Salwa promised one day she'd grow up and become a doctor and cure us from the humanity?' ('Sounding like' because laughter and tears are so similar when there's a wall between you and that sound.)

And then my mum goes completely quiet, and the xylophone drops dead, and Zayb murmurs: 'Remember when the white phosphorus burned off her skin?'

Few children on this side of the world could ever even imagine that men are capable of such creations, but then again, few had a father who knew what mine knew. When I first heard the words, I asked: 'What's white phosphorus?' And Dad answered: 'Bug spray for humans.'

I turn around, and there's Alooshi, wide awake now, eating a Mars Bar. That's my cousin — always got some bag of chips and packet of Skittles hidden in his pockets. 'You shouldn't eavesdrop on women's business,' he says, his chewing growing louder and stickier.

Toss Red Ninja Turtle behind my closet with one hand, and Red Ranger up-n-over my cousin with the other, where he bounce-lands on the far end of our bed. 'Please hide him under my pillow,' I ask of Alooshi, going down on all fours. I crawl under the mattress frame, which is pizza-oven-hot and sinking beneath Alooshi's gi-nor-mous thighs and rolls of back fat and cave-man-sized head. My schoolbag, which I ditched at the front door as soon as we got home, has managed to make its way from my mother's hands to under-here. Under-here, where the white Joker-face gives me his 'ha-ha-ha-ha' Joker-laugh through the murk. Up-above, my cousin's voice rumbles, 'You safe, cuz?'

Maybe. Like maybe this is the kind of burn and balm that is my mother's womb before my birth, before my breath, before my thoughts. 'Think so.'

'Then stay down there,' Alooshi's voice booms, 'and listen to the dust.'

Whenever my parents tell me a story from the motherland, they start with the phrase: there was, and there was not. Sweat oozing through the black pin-pricks in my skin, feeling the darkness shrink and expand with each sneeze my cousin draws from the mattress above, there's these young girls running free on hills of dirt and gravel and rocks, soil seeping through their toenails, lollipop sticks hanging from their mouths like loose teeth. There was, and there was not: my mother, our neighbour, and the child who picked her nose and ate it quick, absorbing the sprinkling rain, which tickled them, and did not hsssss when it landed on the skin beneath their bright yellow singlets. It was under this rain, when the dirt thickened and became mud, that the girl who picked her nose and ate it quick decided to give up the final moments with her strawberry cream soda pop, spat it from her mouth, dug a small hole in the mud, and planted a lollipop tree. By and by, the tree grew a slender white trunk, and elongated white branches, and thousands of white twigs, each of which held a bundle of lolly heads, sweetening the lips of the village children. The girl who picked her nose and ate it quick had cured the humanity, and now we're just waiting for the spring. The dust has spoken to me. There was, and there was not.

A bear trap clamps over my ankle, snapping me awake, making me knife-stab screech, dragging me out from under the bed. Alooshi releases his grip on my leg and bull-wheezes through his wide nostrils. The warm white light of the bulb up-high stings as my cousin bulges above me. His curly hair is clumped together, shining wet and dangling over his forehead and ears. His cheeks are pancake-round and tomato-bright-red. His bare pit-bull-thick shoulders look sunburnt and bruised, black curly hairs sprouting from them like the few strands on Homer Simpson's head. Also naked is my cousin's mountain-range chest, pudgy flesh buds sinking towards his belly, flat fifty-cent-coin-shaped nipples peering down at me. From the top of his stomach to his pale feet with perfectly nibbled toenails, my cousin is wrapped tightly in an extra extra extra large cloud-patterned towel. I'm kinda embarrassed to admit this, but it's difficult not to drop my eyes towards his private area, expecting to see the camel hump of his … p-word.

There are many words for the most private of undie parts — some rude, some just science. 'P-word' is still my choice-of-word for men. 'Thing' is still my choice-of-word for boys. And it's also the choice-of-word for the girls in my class, who find our 'thing' disgusting, mysterious and hilarious all at once. Martina — that muppet-shaped kid we nicknamed Miss Piggy — is always on the lookout for an open pee-zipper. 'Ewwwwww,' she'll scream whenever she spots one, 'I can see your thing. I can see your thing. Look, his thing, his thing.' And then, all the other muppet-shaped girls around her will crackle and clap and squirm in their seats. Returning to class from a quick bathroom visit, very few boys have not been caught-out by Miss Piggy at one time or another: 'Ewwwwww, your thing, your thing.' But I thought I was in the clear, having only ever worn tracksuit pants to school since kindergarten. Next minute, last year happened: I woke up to discover my navy green pants were an inch too short, and I had to wear a pair of op-shop navy green jeans until my mum received her next Department of Social Something payment. I kept a close eye on that pee-zipper after each visit to the toilet, ever aware of Miss Piggy's eyeballs. But then, while I was sitting on a rock, eating a beef potato pie covered in tomato sauce, Miss Piggy finally pointed at my crotch, and squealed to her usual gang of three muppet-shaped friends, 'Ewwwwww, it's sticking out,

ew his thing.' As the girls around me giggled, I stared at my crotch, realising that my pee-zipper had folded together and popped up when I had sat down. My cheeks began to burn, and my hands began to tremble, tomato sauce dripping into my fingernails. Suddenly my x-best-friend-now but best-friend-friend-at-the-time, who had copped it from Miss Piggy only a few days earlier, rested his hand on my shoulder. 'They're not grossed out,' he whispered, 'they're just curious.'

Back in my bedroom, staring at my cousin's crotch, I am relieved to discover that there is no camel hump at all. His belly is so large that it pushes the towel as far around his waist as it'll go, leaving too much open space between the towel and his crotch for me to notice anything.

Grinning — as though he can see the godlike sight of himself from my pathetic point of view — Alooshi says: 'Ya mum wants ya to have a shower.'

My cousin sleeps over so frequently that there is always a pair of his pyjamas in the bottom drawer of my cupboard. I'm happy to share my space with him, so long as he never rummages through the top drawer, which is home to my undies and a small pile of coins I've been saving (some of it pocket money, some of it found on the floors of school corridors and classrooms). I'm saving to buy a teleporting machine (coming soon), or an aeroplane ticket to the mother-country (out now), or a box of more Rainbow Paddle Pops (out then).

Alooshi waits with his naked bread-roll-fold-back to me; waiting for the sound of me opening and closing my bedroom door, so he can change. There are certain parts of himself that he still won't let me see — at least not with my eyes; at least not in the daylight. And I'm not even talking about his p-word. His 'thing' is his thing — that stuff's 'keep out' — but I've never even seen Alooshi's bare stomach, which, behind towels and bulky jackets, has always been his 11 Secret Herbs & Spices.

Way back when, Alooshi chucked a tantrum because my mum had cooked her special dish from the motherland; a mixture of tomato juice and pieces of lamb and this prickly vegetable called okra. My dad arrived home to discover his nephew stuffed into the couch, froze-frowning at the tv screen, refusing to eat the food laid out on the coffee table for us. Dad flung his eyebrows up at me, and I shrugged; flung his eyebrows up at Mum, and she shrugged. Finally, my father sat down next to his nephew and enquired: 'What you feel like, buddy?' And, still staring angry-tomato-faced

at the tv, my cousin grumbled, ‘2 Piece Feed.’ Rising back to his feet, Dad jingled the station wagon keys, signalling to us that he was stepping out again to grab Alooshi some Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Standing in the living room while my cousin is getting dressed, I think to myself: *That stomach. God that stomach. Throws me out of my own bedroom. Rips me out from under my own bed. Steals what few seconds I had with my own father. Curse you stomach. No curse words. But curse you.*

Annabel. Annabel. Nestled between our mother's breasts; her bum and legs spread across our mother's thighs; our mother, whose head is arched, whose feet are stretched out on the coffee table. Open in our mother's hands is a picture book with tree-trunk-brown pages, which she brought with her from the mother-country. Mum re-reads the book to Annabel every night, her voice fat and full as a puffed-up pufferfish. Annabel chuckles and claps and wriggles every time she hears the words 'donkey' and 'horse' and 'prison', even though my little sister makes little sense of this little story that we have heard little over a hundred times:

A donkey and a horse find themselves in a debate — donkey argues that '2 + 2 = 3', and horse corrects him, 'No, 2 + 2 = 4.' Immediately agitated, donkey attacks horse, and they bite and kick each other until they're both on the ground, squabbling in the mud. At last, the other animals tear donkey and horse apart, and take them to the lion, a wise old king who will no doubt resolve their dispute. Upon hearing each side of the story, the lion king ponders for a few seconds. Then he tells the donkey to go free, and instructs his guards to arrest the horse and place him in prison. As horse is taken away, he stares at his king, frustrated and confused. 'But your majesty,' horse pleads, 'how can this be?' And the wise old lion replies, 'You are not going to prison because you're bad with numbers, nor are you going to prison because you defended yourself against the attack.'

'Then why?' screeches the horse.

'You're going to prison,' the lion explains, 'because you argued with a donkey.'

Halfway to the bathroom, I crouch down behind the couch and place my chin on Mum's shoulder — feeling her warm peppermint-tea breath as she reads, and inhaling the top of my sister's pan-caked head-hair, which smells like strawberry-soap and crusty dandruff and fresh dairy milk. Before all six of our eyes is a hand-drawn horse; doughnut-bronze skin, white buckteeth gritting tight, charcoal-black pupils blazing in grief and wonder and acceptance. Clamping onto the book with her thumb on the centre of the double-page-spread and her fingers on the spine, Mum releases her spare hand and pulls my cheek hard against the side of her mouth. Kisses me with

one half of her lips, and mumbles with the other half, ‘Mum, make sure you wash under your toenails.’

Public bathrooms are wretched spaces — urine sticks the soles of my sneakers to the depressed grey tiles like cheap glue. Standing at the urinal, there is no place to hide my thing from the boys and men who don’t hide theirs, and when the water runs, it splashes on my hairy spaghetti legs; spittles of leftover pee tickling my shins. Inside the cubicle, there’s stupid space at the bottom of the door, and stupid space at the bottom of the left side, and stupid space at the bottom of the right side, and stupid spaces between the joints that hold the door in place. The cubicle walls are never high enough, so there’s always some paper-skinned kid and bark-skinned kid who can stand on the toilet lid in the next cubicle and watch you poo, poo inside a bowl full of a thousand leftover stains from a thousand other poos, stranger poos. But —

— at home, bathrooms are sacred spaces. Spaces where a young boy can be alone with himself, his entire self, naked and vulnerable and safe all at once, to know himself. Peeing, I stare into the crystal clean toilet bowl that had an un-pee-off-able poo chunk stuck to the porcelain just a few hours ago — Mum must have scrubbed it down. And also scrubbed down, is the porcelain beneath me. My bare feet are cool against the cracked yellow tiles that Mum mops with lavender every morning. In the corner, there are baby-blue towels on a wooden drying rack — one for Hamoodi, one for Annabel, one for Mamma, and one for one-day; for Babba. And also in the corner, is a laundry hamper which looks like a picnic basket, where half a pair of triple-extra-large underpants with a red strap is hanging over the edge — my cousin’s all kinds of extra extra extra large on the outside, but who is he inside this bathroom, when it’s just him, soaping under the rolls and folds and grooves of his skin? Stepping into the dripping wet bathtub, where Alooshi has just stood, I feel a sudden relief: in here, my cousin had finally rinsed off the blood that had melted into the lines of his knuckles, and in here, I can finally cleanse myself of see-through-thin toilet paper; my first memories of *here*, way back when my dad was potty-training me. Dad’d laugh to himself and say, ‘They think they’re so civilised over *here*, wiping kaka all over their bottoms with these tree leaves.’

Twisting both the hot water tap and cold water tap to their halfway point, I feel the running fountain hit the back of my skull, back of my neck, down my spine, and between my backside, which I spread open with soap-

scudded hands and wash clean. In this bathroom, I wash clean those beady blown-out eyes staring down at me in disgust, wash clean the sight of their blood and sound of their screams as my cousin pummelled them, wash clean the sound of kids pointing and laughing and calling me skid-mark.

Hot water clapping against the back of my scalp, I find myself crossed-legged and slouched over on the shower floor, twitching each of my toes, rinsing themselves through a rush of spume … yes, spume, almost-kinda-certain that's a real word. My toenails are long and blackened with dirt, because my teeth are too far away and Mum's nail clippers are too sharp, but she taught me an easy trick to clean them: dig the entire soap bar into my toes and slide it back and forth like you're scrubbing a dirty dish.

Once all ten of my toenails are shining white, I raise my head and let the water trickle off my clotted curls and land in the centre of my crossed legs. There's my 'thing', which has a smooth brown line in the middle that Dad called the scar of our puri-fi-cation. In the cold, my thing shrivels and shrinks like a ripe date, and in the heat, it leaks like warm pineapple cordial inside a rubbery water balloon, and at night, in bed, holding my pillow and thinking about the Pink Ranger, it grows and hardens like a bone has sprung inside, and it throbs, and it screams. No surprise the girls in my class are so curious — there's a 'me' that's curious too.

A year earlier, Martina was on the edge of the quadrangle, calling out: 'Hey Hamoodi, how do you say "His Thingy" in your mother-tongue?' and I replied, 'My dad says we should never soil our souls with our words.' Martina frowned at me, as though I had embarrassed her, even though no one was watching us (except us), and quickly shot back, 'I bet you can't do this with your mother-tongue!' And before I could even make sense of what was happening, the girl we all called Miss Piggy stuck her bright-pink tongue out at me, folded it into a U-shape, and whistled so loud that it launched off the pigeons wandering between us. Then Martina spun and ran, as though she knew she had done something really naughty, and I began chasing her, even though I wasn't sure what exactly was so wrong with what she had done. I could hear her crack-up-laughing as her swollen ankles in flowery socks scampered across the school oval, and now I was crack-up-laughing too, trying to catch her — no plan for what would happen if I actually did. Suddenly Martina froze, her apple-round frame shrinking and stretching as she caught her breath, and by the time I caught up to her, she turned to face me with silent tears streaming down her face.

‘What, what’s wrong?’ I asked.

‘You have no idea what it’s like to be a girl,’ she said, lower lip wobbling.

Taking that out-of-breath girl’s hand right then, I sat her down in the grass, surrounded by daisies and bees and bindies and three-leaf clovers. I listened. Martina hated us calling her Miss Piggy, and hated her uncles calling her Porky Pig. She hated her mum stuffing a soap bar down her mouth because she’d binged all the Coco Pops straight out of the box, but most of all, she hated the tummy-needle she took every day because of this high-sugar blood thing the doctors found inside her. ‘Sorry, I won’t call you that name anymore,’ I said. ‘Nah, you can,’ she replied, poking her tongue out at me once again. ‘At least it’s not as weird as Hamoodi.’

Knees in the mud, Miss Piggy and I spent the remainder of lunch searching for four-leaf clovers. Every kid in school knew the prophecy: two-leaf was jinx, three-leaf was ordinary-o-life, but the very rare four-leaf would grant you a genie’s wish. Though I was kinda relieved we didn’t find one before the end-of-lunch bell went off — unable to decide which wish was more important: a cure for a little girl or a father for a little boy.

One straight-after-school afternoon. Sitting on two milk crates out the front of our apartment. Watching the street cars run ruler-straight from each side of the road. My father shared his memories of the mother-land: Blue domes and crescent moons and half-blown-up government houses. The store lights that dropped dead, the power generators that rumbled alive, the diesel fuel that swallowed the air. The sound of scooter engines and window-less door-less minibus horns. The buildings of concrete and chipped paint and bullet holes and the oil-smudged clothes of the man asleep under the bookshop awning. Dad remembered there was 'no sidewalk' and 'no street corner' and 'no edge that someone did not fill with a vehicle'. He remembered a p-word drawn with a finger in the grime on the window of the abandoned cigarette store; broken side mirrors of parked vans, and newborn babies in their dads' laps on the motorcycles, which they rode with no helmets. The kids rampaging through the bins at night, searching for the rotten fruit-store-fruits that no one else wanted; the half-empty garlic sauce containers in the gutter and the spit chicken on the street kerb and the posters on top of old posters on top of older posters all over the city walls, which said, 'Peace is slavery, war is freedom'. Dad remembered the pot plants on every balcony and windowsill and a plastic half-filled water bottle hanging from a wire off a telephone pole. And then my dad slapped his palm into his head, remembering the girl on the coastline road who sold flowers and blinked her camel-eyed eyelashes at him. He gave her one dollar and headed on his way home with a rose in his hand for his fiancé — the young woman from the north who read fables to him about horses and donkeys as they did laps around their college oval. But not even twenty steps later, the flower girl had chased my dad up the street, dabbing her camel-eyelash eyelashes at him once more. 'What do you want now?' my dad asked, 'I already gave you everything in my hands.' And the flower girl replied, 'Not everything.' And my dad replied, 'Well, what else is there?' And she replied, 'That rose.' And slapping his palm into his head, my dad asked, 'This rose you just sold to me?' And flapping her eyelashes back at him, the flower girl answered: 'Yes, I just sold it to you, and now I'm asking you for a gift.'

A doorhandle twist and an eyebrow twitch to realise my bedroom is locked. From the inside, I can hear Alooshi laugh-screaming, ‘And one, and two, and three, and weeeee,’ and my baby sister giggling her lungs to death as she stomps and claps and pleads like she’s being tickled. Nothing but a towel around my waist, goosebumps begin to appear across my chest; these dark-brown nipples going Mega Sword hard and pointy.

‘Open the door, cuz,’ I yell — yell not only over the laughter in my bedroom, but also over my mum, who’s gone into the shower straight after me and begun singing some song from the mother-land that’s full of stretched-out ‘a’ sounds. ‘Cuz,’ I call again, growing tired of this again-again-and-again habit: my cousin always locking the door when he’s inside with my sister. Like last month, I could hear Annabel in there screaming, ‘S-top! T-top!’ I banged on the door for over a minute before Alooshi finally unlocked it, and there was my sister bundled up in his arms, laugh-slapping his bright-pink cheeks. ‘Why was she telling you to stop?’ I asked, and our cousin replied, ‘She was saying “top”, she wanted me to hold her up top.’ Then he added, ‘Like this,’ and yelled out ‘weee-aarggh’, raising my sister above his head and squeezing both sides of her ribs, making her squirm-chuckle.

Still waiting outside the door in my towel, I yell again, ‘Alooshi, open this!’

At last, the knob clicks and out runs my sister, her reddish-blonde curls bouncing as she bellows back at our cousin, ‘No more tickle, no more.’ Alooshi is standing in the doorway, Spider-Man pyjamas thwip-thwip-thwiping in the bedroom window’s breeze, as I shove in past him.

Rummaging through my wardrobe, I feel my cousin’s eyes on the wet curls on the back of my head and, without turning to face him, I ask: ‘Why do you always lock the door when you play with my sister, cuz?’

‘The door locks on its own sometimes,’ Alooshi explains. ‘Slam it hard when I leave and see for yourself.’ Then, breaking out into a cackle, he adds, ‘Unless you want me to see you naked.’ Before the word ‘gross’ can explode from my lips, Alooshi has already leaped out of the bedroom. I slam the door hard behind him, just as he suggested, and to my surprise, the notch on the handle twists and locks all on its own.

‘Aaanaabell,’ Alooshi calls from the living room. ‘I’m gonna gonna gonna get ya.’ My cousin’s flat-footed strides rumble through the flat as he pursues my baby sister’s scurrying footsteps.

Taking joy in the sound of Annabel’s innocent laughter — which knows nothing but this exact moment — I smile through the dance of dress-time. Tonight, it’s red undies with tractor patterns, blue trackies with dino patterns, a white singlet the kids at school call a ‘wife-beater’, and a vomit-n-popcorn-smelling short-sleeved shirt. (Yeah, my clothes always smell like a mixture of vomit and popcorn whenever it has been raining the week before and Mum has to hang the washing on a drying rack in the middle of the living room.) The smelly-ish shirt says ‘Island Life’ in the centre; came from my mum’s mother, who sent it from the mother-country before she died; before I ever remember-met her. Dad opened the parcel, revealing each letter on the shirt to me one by one, luring me to read it out loud as ‘is-land’ before realising that I had pronounced the silent ‘s’ in the word ‘island’. The error moistened my father’s chuckle with tears, forcing him to remove his Billy-Blue-Ranger-smart glasses and wipe the corners of his eyes. ‘English is so dumb,’ I spat at my dad, a strange mixture of embarrassment and frustration washing over me. ‘Wanna know why “dumb” is spelled with a silent “b” on the end?’ my dad asked, cackling. Shrugging my shoulders at him with a grunt, he said, ‘Because it’s dumb.’ All at once that feeling of shame inside me, the thought that my dad was mocking me, disappeared. My dad was mocking everything but *me* — teasing out the world one letter at a time.

So, we're having dinner and watching the evening-o'clock news. There's a report about an air-balloon-shaped man who got stuck in his roof today and needed a crane to airlift him out.

Alooshi's like: 'Oft, look at this Hindenburg cuz.'

And I'm like: 'Why would you make fun of someone just cause they're over-bese?'

Like seriously: you're almost same-weight as blimp-man.

My cousin sniggers at me; tongue tonguing a golden fish crumb from his front teeth. 'I dunno, sucked in, I guess.'

I dig. I do. See, there used to be this kid in my class, who had a big nose and corkscrew black hair like a Super Mario Brother. One lunchtime, the two of us climbed through a classroom window and had the entire space to ourselves for the next forty-five minutes. As soon as we got inside, the big nose kid jumped up on a desk that was about half a metre away from the chalkboard and sang out, 'Woo-hoo, I feel goo—' but all at once the desk had flipped over, and the big nose kid folded in on himself, and his head hit the chalkboard, and his legs pancaked towards his face, and his bottom hit the chess-board-tiled floor. 'Ahh f-word!' he screamed out. I bolted over and helped him sit up, coiling-in next to him as his arms and spine trembled and his teeth tattered. There was a part of me that genuinely felt sorry for the kid, because he was groaning in pain, but another part of me spent the remaining forty-three minutes holding back a grin. Sucked in, I guess.

Anyway, back in our living room, Alooshi turns away from the tv news and faceplants his face into his dinner plate, shovelling down three more fish sticks in a single bite. 'And by the way,' he mouthfuls at me, 'it's not over-bese, it's o-bese.'

Mum's dinners need to be from 'this place' — so no one can smell where we're from. The night before last it was defrosted potato pies. Last night it was defrosted sausage rolls. Tonight it's defrosted fish fingers and defrosted hot chips with tartar sauce and lemon squeeze and green leaves supposed to be salad but really it's just grass, which my mum includes as 'at-least-one-thingy-that's-healthier-than-a-fried-thingy'.

While Alooshi and I eat in front of the tv, Mum picks at her food over the open kitchen sink — fish finger in one hand, soaped-up baking tray in the

other. And while she eats and cleans, she watches my sister with her ears — a cherry-faced girl sitting behind her in a Mighty Mouse baby highchair. Annabel has four fish fingers stuffed in her mouth at once. Catching this image from the side of my eye, I try to warn our mother: Call out 'Mu—', but before the entire word has come out of my mouth, Mum has already slid the rinsed baking tray into the rusted drying rack, pulled her hand back towards the highchair without turning around, yanked half the fish fingers out of my sister's mouth with her pointy finger, and gone straight back to washing the next dish. With a mouthful of my own crunchy-on-the-outside-gooey-on-the-inside fish guts, I watch as Annabel (re)collects the pieces of fish finger that have plopped onto her food-tray.

Jerking my head back and forth from my plate to the television to the kitchen, I keep expecting to *see* my father's wiry outline manoeuvring through the apartment; *feel* his shadow looming over the walls; *hear* his hands jangle-clanking over the stove. When my mother was pregnant with Annabel, Dad was up every morning before the rest of us, preparing dark coffee in fortune-telling coffee cups and boiled eggs and stringy white salty cheese and nine different shades of olive, from black to dark green to light green and everything-in-between. We'd wake up and breakfast was ready, laid out across the living room carpet. Mum and I ate, Dad did the dishes. Then at night, straight after he spent seven hours sweeping the bathroom floors at the railway station, Dad was back over that stove, filling the apartment with the smell of crisp (beef) sausages and sizzled onions and toasted bread rolls. Me, Dad and Pregnant Mum would eat on the couch during the tv news, followed by an episode of the only cartoon that ever played for grown-ups: *The Simpsons*. Homer would be sitting at his work station, snoring, arms crossed behind his bald head, feet up on the nuclear powerplant control deck, while Marge would be at home, scrubbing dishes and baking pork chops in the oven. We'd finish dinner and Mum would lay back on our couch, closing her eyes and resting her hands on her belly, while Dad and I collected the dishes. And I whispered to him, 'Aren't mums supposed to do the cleaning?' And it might have been the angriest response my father ever gave me: 'The television is not your role model for manhood,' he said, digging his finger hard into his chest. '*I am.*'

Feeling a cold gush of air sweep through the kitchen window and hit my bare arms, I find myself trembling. Inch across the couch towards my fish-finger-fed cousin, who shoulder-nudges me and spits, 'What, what's what?'

Breaking News on the television — flashes of missiles and rockets from one gulf to another gulf. Straightaway, Alooshi pounces off the couch like a startled warthog and twists the channel knob, landing on an episode of *Rugrats*. ‘Don’t need none of that in here, cuzzy cuz,’ he says. Earlier this week, Lizard Lady taught us about double negatives, but Alooshi is trying to look after me, so I don’t mention that the ‘don’t’ crosses out the ‘none’ in ‘don’t need none’, meaning we *do* need it, and instead focus on the four babies climbing in their nappies to the peak of a mountain. At least they’re imagining themselves climbing a mountain; in reality, Tommy, Chuckie, Phil and Lil are climbing a mound of broken couches which have been left on the garden porch. Oh to be a rugrat once more; three years old, nestled between my mum and dad, somewhere between sunset and sunlight; sailing across the ocean; a parchment of paper in the middle of a titanic bowl of ink, our story blotched in eternity.

Blinking back into the living room, I see Alooshi licking the leftover tartar sauce from his plate as Mum pulls it away from him. And in her other hand is my empty plate — which she must have collected when my eyelids flapped; as well as four ashtrays filled with burnt-to-the-tip cigarette butts and dried-out teabags — which she juggles on her fingers like a waitress, like a clown.

‘Oi Aunty, I’m not finished,’ Alooshi barks, and Mum giggles to herself in the mother-language, ‘You finished last century.’ And then Alooshi says, ‘Sorry Aunty.’ And Mum replies, ‘Sorry for what?’ Me quietly listening, thinking, *hmmm, sons-of-husband’s-brothers + wives-of-dad’s-brothers sure equal an odd one.*

Heading back into the kitchen, back to my sister, whose dead-pink lips are now covered in vanilla-in-a-tub ice-cream from the freezer, Mum nudges her neck in our direction: ‘In the drawer, then brush your teeth.’

Yeees! I sprint into my mum’s bedroom, swoop over her bouncy mattress and swipe open the top drawer of her side cabinet. Inside, there’s three tins of Kopiko coffee lollies — rectangular-shaped cappuccino candy. Since Dad left, she’s let me have one every night. I’d jump on her bed while sucking the very-mother-land combo of sugar and coffee beads down to the size of an ant. But it wasn’t always this way; I wasn’t always allowed into my parents’ drawer: First time, I discovered a bright orange box that said ‘condoms’ on the packaging. Peeked inside and found bright orange wrappers with a squishy ring in the centre. Peeked inside and found a flat

slimy rubber balloon, which stretched outwardly when I poked my fingers through it. I'd never actually seen a condom before, but I remembered Mr Brown's words: 'It's something Daddy puts on his p-word when he doesn't want to get Mummy's v-word pregnant.' But he actually said the p-and-v-words.

Ekh. Yukh. Okay sir.

I resisted my parents' side cabinet after that, until one day, Mum told me she'd left a surprise in there for me. I hesitating-ly … umm or is it hesitant-ly? … opened the drawer to discover hundreds of cappuccino lollies, but no longer any balloons for p-words. And I knew then, knew as certainly as blood-bleeds-red, that my dad was gone.

Jumping on my mum's bed; my mum and baby sister's bed; my mum and dad's used-to-be-bed, sucking on my roasty-smoky-sweet coffee cube, I can still feel my father's presence. His cupboard contains all his clothes, perfectly-ironed button-up shirts and perfectly-ironed black and grey and yellow-skin-tan trousers — and on the top shelf, his writings. Mum says he was a 'journalist', which means nothing to a boy who dreams of growing up to become a ranger in red tights. Every night my dad would write in a gold-paged book that said 'journal' on the leather cover, so for me, 'journalist' was simply a man who owned a journal.

And then one day, many weeks since my dad had last written an entry, and my mum was out buying fish fingers and washing powder and up-to-five-kilogram nappies, I pulled the journal down from the top cupboard shelf. Untied its leather lace and opened the gold-edge book to a random page. Dad's handwriting was difficult to understand — written in the letters of here but intertwined like the letters of the mother-tongue. I recognised the names Mariam, Hamoodi and Annabel, and the words 'surrender' and 'slaughter' and 'our people' and 'love' and 'forgive' and 'forgave' and 'forgiven', and all of a sudden, his voice rose from the ink, deep and wise and joyful: 'We died, and came back to life, and died again, so our children could live.'

Flumping onto the mattress, eyes closed, feet hanging edge-off the bed, my father's handwriting unwinding before me; there's a sudden pinch, followed by a snap at my left toe: Mum has grabbed on to my foot and is quickly clipping my toenails. 'Don't cut me!' I scream, surprise-swallowing what's left of the coffee cube in my mouth. Five-seconds and Mum's let go of my left foot and grabbed on to my right one. Four clips later, she

squeezes my pinkie toe and sings out, ‘and this little piggy had roast beef’, cutting the final nail. My mother stands upright with a white-toothed-grin, dangles the silver-shining pair of clippers between her thumb and finger, and says, ‘Sucked in.’

Big cuz is sitting on the floor next to lil sis — plane parked alongside a car; dinosaur sleeping beside a chimp; blimp floating above a jet. Out in the living room, flicking her lower lip with his piggy finger. ‘Saay “Alooshi”, say it.’

‘Aloos-hy,’ Annabel answers.

‘Say it properly,’ our cousin insists, breaking down each sound for her. ‘Say A-loo-shhiii prop-er-ly.’

Annabel nose-puff-stares at him like she’s confused, like she can’t understand what she got wrong the first time, and replies, ‘Aloos-hy properly.’

I hold back a laugh, which comes out as a cough, followed by some words like, ‘Mum wants me sister’, and ‘Mum wants us teeth brushed.’

Returning to the bathroom, Alooshi and I stand side by side in front of a squashy sink. There’s no rush back to *Power Rangers* this time, so this time, there’s time to stare: a stained yellow ring around the silver sink hole, which looks exactly like the yellow on the tips of my teeth. The bathroom mirror divides in two, opening down the middle to reveal a medicine cabinet with No Frills brand Panadol and a stack of toothbrushes and a half-empty tube of teeth-whitening Colgate that never actually whitens your teeth. There’s also an old razor on one of the shelves, with rusted-orange blades, and a wooden-handled shaving brush with crusty hardened tips. Once there was, and once there was not, a man who used to shave in here …

Alooshi hands the red toothbrush with the mini brush-head to me, takes the blue one with the extra-large brush-head for himself, collects the half-empty toothpaste tube and closes the cabinet doors; leaving us to gaze at ourselves. On one side, out in front, is my face and neck; not even halfway up the mirror. On the other side, just behind me, is my cousin; chest, shoulders, neck, head and half his curly hair eating up his entire section of the mirror.

Examining myself, there is a smooth shiny chin, smooth shiny lower lip, smooth shiny upper lip, smooth shiny cheeks, and a smooth shiny flat forehead. Examining my cousin, there is an olive-oily chin with tiny ringlets of hair, an olive-oily top lip with a baby-fluff moustache, and olive-

oily cheeks with thick black ringlets connecting his sideburns to his curly-haired skull. And then there's Alooshi's neck, which has an apple-wedge-shaped thorn in the centre, which reminds me of a sound: the sound of the shaving brush clomping into a wet ice-cream tub of soap; the sound of the brush scraping across my father's white-foamed throat; the sound of the razor splashing and clapping against the base of the plastic soapy-water-filled tub.

'My dad taught me to shave last year,' Alooshi says, squeezing a strip of toothpaste across my toothbrush, 'and when you're older, I'll teach you.'

'When's that?' I ask.

'About five years from now,' my cousin replies, and then — before I can calculate the months, weeks, days, hours, seconds, stings, that my own father won't be here to teach me himself — he adds, 'Actually, I'll probably need to teach ya this year, ya porch monkey, look at your eyebrows, cuz.'

I do look; while brushing the front-top, front-bottom, back-top-left, back-bottom-left, back-top-right, back-bottom-right of my mouth, I stare at my eyebrows, which are bushy-black and joined-together like Bert's, glued to a head shaped like Ernie's.

'Don forget to brushh on the inside of yo mouthh tooo,' Alooshi grumbles at me as he scrubs, lips dripping with white foam.

I place the toothbrush on the inside of my teeth and scrape each side quickly, afraid to brush too hard/too long — last time I ended up spitting out a blotch of pink froth. At first, I thought my mum had bought some kind of new candy-flavoured toothpaste, which magically turns pink once you start brushing, but rinsing out my mouth, I spotted lines of red goo seeping from the edges of my gums. Blood.

The memory — the thought — freezes my brushing, and I spit into the sink. Large clumps of white foam surround the yellow ring around the drain-hole — thank god. 'Nah-gh, nah,' Alooshi same-time brushes and froth-shouts, 'Ya not finished yet.'

'I am, my mouth's clean,' I reply.

'Let me smell,' he says, laying down his toothbrush and spitting a whipped-cream-can-amount of toothpaste into the sink. He bends over, lining his face up with mine, and takes in a deep snort. Frowning, he hisses at me, 'Breathe out,' and as he says it, I get a whiff of his own breath, which is minty-clean, but still gross; sucking in another creature's fumes like that. I take in a hollow breath and blow air as hard as I can in Alooshi's

face, hoping it'll get him to back off. Instead, he comes in closer — like he's gonna kiss me! — and breathes me whole. 'Alright, not bad,' he says, pulling out. 'But next time, you brush 'em till they bleed.'

Straightening himself back up, Alooshi instructs me and my sad mint-breath to go stand in the corner of the shower, and not turn around until he says so. Focusing hard at a section of four white cracked tiles, I hear my cousin's spider-web-patterned pyjama pants slide down, followed by the sound of his pee hitting the water inside the toilet bowl for what feels like a full forty-five-minute-without-the-commercials episode of *Melrose Place*. The peeing sound has stopped and the toilet has been flushed, but Alooshi still hasn't given me permission to leave this corner, so I turn my head (just a little) to see what he's doing. To my surprise, Alooshi is standing in front of the sink again, running the tap and splashing water towards his private area.

'I said don't look until I say so!' he snaps, and I too snap (my head back, that is). Re-staring at the cracked tiled wall, I ask, 'What are you doing?'

'Washing my d-word,' my cousin answers, but actually says the d-word. 'Don't you ever notice there's always a few drops hanging around after you finish peeing?'

As a matter of fact, I have noticed, and those drops always leave wet pee spots on the front of my undies after I've pulled them up.

Ummm. Hmmm. So: back when my dad was here, and we stayed up late, we'd sometimes catch the middle of a movie, which he'd let me finish while waiting for the late-night news. And at any random moment during these movies, the two main characters, always a boy and a girl, would start-up with the feeling-up and the open-mouth-to-mouthing. And one time, it was even *two* boys and a girl; one rich boy who offers one poor boy one million dollars for one night with his one wife. Immediately my dad would warn, 'Naughty scene — shut eye, shut eye.' I'd put my hands over my face but, curious as I was, would always sneak a peek between the spaces in my fingers; catching glimpses of two adults undressing one another, squeezing one another, entangling their naked bodies in one another, moving back and forth against one another. My father would have been so disappointed if he knew I'd peeked, but tonight I have discovered the true nature of childhood: sneaking a peek is how we learn. And as my cousin forcefully swivels the sink tap shut, making the entire bathroom 'hammer', I wonder: what did the bark-skinned boy and the paper-skinned boy learn from me in the school

toilets at lunchtime today? And as my cousin slides his undies and pyjama pants up over his backside, I wonder: what more is there to learn from this cousin of mine, this cousin who stuffs me into a wet corner to rinse off his ‘d-word’?

In the kitchen, Annabel has opened the fridge door, pulled a chair up to the second shelf, and begun drinking milk straight out of the cardboard carton, while our mum lies semi-asleep on the living room couch. My baby sister has borrowed our dad. His Adam's apple convulse-ing as he'd drink milk from the carton too; late late late at night, when I'd catch him on my way to a late-night pee. Then he'd screw the lid back on, stick the bottle back in the fridge, and wink at me through the darkness, white fridge light lighting up his olive face. Wink at me as in, 'just between us, don't tell your mum'.

Entering the kitchen, I pick up my sister in one hand, and with the other, take the half-size cardboard milk carton off her and stick it back in the fridge. 'Just between us,' I whisper, 'won't tell your mum.' Clamping her arms and legs around the top-quarter-of-me, my sister loud-growls, 'Mi-mi-milk.' I drop Annabel onto the couch, and our mum's eyes pop open when the plop of the nappy hits the cushion. Mum takes in a stretched-out-whimper, half-asleep and half-awake, and mi-mi-murmurs, 'Okay, bed, now.' Like a zombie … ummmm actually, like a mummy … my mum picks up my sister and sleep-walks from the couch towards the bedroom, stops, looks over-the-shoulder-back-at-me, and sleep-talks, 'There should be some kind of cousin somewhere.'

'Went to bed,' I reply.

'Okay Mum, straight to bed you too,' she says, taking another step to her room, then stops again, and adds, 'Wait Mum, come give me a kiss goodnight.'

Running up close, I rise onto my tippy-toes and pucker my lips on Mum's droopy cheek. Just as I'm doing it, she takes my hand in hers, and strokes her fingers along the edges of my nails, which have not been nibbled even once today. 'Your dad's biting his right now,' she mumbles as I pull my lips away from her and onto my sister's droopy cheek — those same-as-mum cheeks. 'S-top,' Annabel quiet-growls. 'Top'. Does she want to be thrown in the air, or does she not want to be kissed?

I lower my heels back onto the carpet and watch the two sets of droop-cheeks float through the bedroom shadows. Biting into the edge of my pinkie finger fingernail until my mum pulls down the sheets, dumping

herself and her clinging cub onto the mattress. Too asleep to pull the covers back the way they came; over the both of them.

Biting into the edge of my rude finger fingernail until the night is still; I sneak quietly into the bedroom and tug at the honeycomb-yellow bedsheet, which has been caught under one of my mum's legs; losing my balance like winning a tug-o-war when the other side lets go. Mum takes in a lungful, rolls onto her side, and pulls the baby into her breasts. Slowly, I spread the sheet as wide as my arm span can span, and ease it over my mum — from her toes, to her knees, to her hips, to her tummy, at which point, the bottoms of my sister's feet also start getting covered, and then all the way up until both Mum and Annabel are snug to their shoulders. Mum takes in another murmuring lungful, and just as I'm about to turn and leave the room, she whispers, 'Ali?'

I am become manhood.

One just-before-school morning. Sitting on two milk crates out the front of our apartment. Watching the street cars run ruler-straight from each side of the road. My mother shared her memories of the mother-land: The car rides throughout the north, where the drivers invented their own parking spots and own lanes and own traffic lights and own give-way signs and own cliff-side fences. The endless chains of ten-year-old-boy-sized olive trees. The bright red setting sun that would flicker and shimmer and disappear and reappear in and out of the hundreds-of-thousands of spaces between the olive leaves and the olive branches. Mum remembered the roads-of-no-rules that led to the one-thousand-eight-hundred-year-old dwellings hiding inside the mountains, clay-brown walls weeping for The Messiah who died not-too-far-from-here, and came back to life, here. And then she began to cry, remembering the five dirt-covered children outside her flat, fighting over a piece of soggy bread; and then she began to laugh, remembering the kalamata-skinned woman outside her dad's cousin's hairdressing salon. Kalamata-skinned woman who was rocking her baby in its baby rocker with one foot, smoking the hookah with one hand, brushing her son's knotted hair with the other hand, and shout-talking at everyone who walked past: 'We need a leader like Hitler here for a few weeks — to sort out the traffic.'

There's this thing that looks like a garbage heap — a mound of guts beneath a crumpled bedsheet — in my bed. The moonlight has crept in through the window and turned my cousin into a shadow of himself, eerie black lines rising and falling, like he's fast asleep. I put my feet on the edge of the bedframe, grab on to Alooshi's stomach, and pull myself right over him, landing squarely between his body and the windowsill. Here, I'll be wedged safely for the remainder of the night. Lying on my back, back of my head against a bloated pillow which cushions the Power Ranger hidden underneath, staring up and out through the window, I am absorbed by the bright white moonlight — a moonlight that beams through the black wires of telephone poles and the black leaves on the black twigs of black tree trunks, staring back at me like a spirit, like a ghost, like a soul. All at once I am fifteen-hundred-years-ago, standing among the stone-worshippers in the middle of an ice-white starlit desert. The Messenger, whose whole face is covered in a shining white cloth, is directing us towards the moon with two of his fingers. Before our very eyes, the moon is silently tearing in half, and surely this has turned all of us into believers. But the stone-worshippers — made of paper-bark skin and needle-thread-thin beards — have turned away. The hour draws near and the moon is split, and they grunt, 'Same old magic.'

'Oft.'

I twist to find my cousin lying on his side, his eyes super-fat-open, glaring at me.

'Oft what?' I respond bluntly, startled he has been awake this whole time.

'Oft the smell.'

'Oft the smell what?'

'Your clothes, they smell like wet leafs,' Alooshi grumbles, his hot still-minty breath in my face. Hehe; even I know it's pronounced 'leaves'. Nudging my shoulder into my chin, I grumble back, 'It's vomit and popcorn smell.'

My cousin pulls his hand out from the bedsheet and latches on to the bottom of my Island Life t-shirt. 'You're wearing a singlet, right?' he asks, and before I can answer, he's pulling up the shirt. I don't resist, grabbing on

to the fabric with him, and together we tug it over my head. Then my cousin places the shirt to his nose and takes a whiff, flaring his nostrils like he's disgusted and intrigued at the same time, and pegs it onto the floor behind him. 'Yeah, it stinks,' he grunt-whispers with a cheek-smile.

What's left is my singlet — these cheap white threads worn by the broke drunk dads of the neighbourhood. Alooshi notices my skin goosebumping to life, and he opens the bedsheet, inviting me inside. I nestle up, my head before his double-camel-humped chest, and my chest pressing into his stomach, sucking in and blowing out like a vacuum. Actually, hang on, not super-sure if a vacuum blows, but you get the idea. So anyway: 'I remember sleeping like this next to our grandmother,' I soft-speak to Alooshi. 'She used to—' and before I can finish the thought, my cousin starts brushing his fingers through my hair, and says, '—brush her fingers through our hair.'

Alooshi's breath, which is starting to lose its mintyness, fills the black space inside the tiger-skinned sheet with warm mist, and the goosebumps on my skin stop tingling. His hands on me remind me of all the ways I know a person. My mum's hands, when I'm lying on her lap, and she strokes my head with her left fingers and magically flips the pages of her books with nothing but her right fingers, reading quotes to me like, 'To sleep, perchance to dream … there's the respect that makes calamity of so long life.' Miss Piggy's hands, in class next to me, her short stubby fingers creeping up my neck and plucking one of my ringed strands; 'Ouch, why?' I yelp, and she laugh-replies, 'Because I'm three-dimensional,' and I ask, 'Does that mean you're half-alien?' and she laugh-laugh-replies, 'It means I'm full-human.' My sister's hands, with dimples for knuckles and tissues for fingernails, tugging on my fringe as I tickle her armpits on an open-wide wide-open living room floor, and she says, 'Again, again, don't top, don't top.' My dad's hands, soaping my hair with nit poison and massaging my scalp until I'm a foaming bush, and I have no idea how I got nits, and Dad's like, 'It's not how we get them, it's how we get rid of them, that makes us human …'

And Alooshi's hands, gently tracing the white trails between-beneath my hair roots, with this finger, and that finger, making me giggle and squirm and hunch my shoulders into my neck. Just a few hours earlier, I watched my cousin use these very same hands to cave in the heads of the bark-skinned boy and the paper-skinned boy; just a few hours earlier, I watched

these hands covered in blood and flesh-clots. How is it possible that a person can shift from ‘ain’t-your-cuz’ to ‘love-ya-cuz’ so easily? And as though he can once again hear what I’m thinking, Alooshi says, ‘The more you love your family, the more you’ll hate for them …’ I can’t tell if this is Rita-wisdom or Zordon-wisdom, but it makes sense to me, in the same way peanut-butter-is-better-than-broccoli makes sense to me. ‘Were you scared?’ I ask. ‘When you were bashin’ ’em, I mean.’

‘Nah,’ my cousin hisses, humid air escaping from the back of his mouth, fingers tightening over the back of my head hair. ‘I just let the beast take over — that’s why they call me “o-beast” at school.’

‘I wish I was as tough as you,’ I say, pushing my head deeper into his chest, ‘then no one would ever bully me.’

‘Huh!’ Alooshi blurts, loudly this time, like we’re at a Friday-night footy-match. ‘I get bullied all the days, cuz.’ And before I can reply with something like, *But look how big you are*, my cousin adds, ‘Look how big I am.’

But how; how could anyone as Godzilla as my cousin ever get Godzilla’ed? Who would dare? Going back over my memories, all I see is the ‘o-beast’ on top of everyone: everyone as in Hasan, who the grown-ups naughty-named Hasooni —

Our dads’ cousin’s thirteen-year-old son (so my second cousin, I think, or maybe, my third cousin) was sleeping over for a few nights from that state above us, which he referred to as ‘the queen land’. Anyway, whenever my parents weren’t looking — clinkering in the kitchen, page-flipping in the bedroom — Hasooni would call Alooshi ‘Mr Fatso’. But this second or third or whatever cousin of ours did not see what I saw: Mr Fatso’s eye twitching. Mr Fatso’s hands clenching. Mr Fatso, waiting. Then, at last, my parents and brand-new baby sister went grocery shopping, leaving the three of us boys alone. Legs spread out on the couch, second-third-whatever cousin smirking-ly observed Alooshi unwrap a Mars Bar, ready to take that first bite. Hasooni said, ‘Hey Mr Fat—’ but before he could add ‘so’, Alooshi pounced on him, crushing the chocolate in his fingers as he formed a tight fist and swung wild baboon swings into our second-third-whatever cousin’s left thigh — one, two, three, four times — each new blow building speed and power as caramel and nougat oozed and cracked through flesh and bone. And then, once he was done, with no emotion on his face whatsoever, Alooshi hop-scotch-turned and walked casually to the kitchen.

Watching Hasooni clasping on to his thigh and squirming in pain, sobbing like a wimp and wuss and whatnot, I discovered yet another example of the word ‘irony’: our second-third-whatever cousin had the fatso-est thighs I’d ever seen! Next second, Alooshi was back from the kitchen with his hand washed clean of the squashed Mars Bar, holding a bunch of ice cubes wrapped in a tablecloth. He sat down next to Hasooni and pressed the ice against the boy’s leg; bringing to mind that mother-tongue saying my mother’s always saying: *he hit me and wept, then he was the first to protest*.

Second-third-whatever cousin frowny-face-flinched and electric-shock-jolted, but realising he had no power in the situation, and never did, he stopped crying and let ‘Mr Fatso’ have his way. Sitting there, pressing the ice bag hard on the swollen thigh, Alooshi seethed, ‘Open your mouth about this, and there’s a whole other thigh for me to f-up,’ but this time, he didn’t swear, actually saying ‘fup’. Then he turned to me, standing silently against the television the whole time; turned to me, stunned and confused and even kinda impressed by my first cousin’s calculated response, and he winked, as though he was saying, ‘don’t say nothin little cuz’, and as if he chose, in that moment, not to swear for my sake, like some kind of peace offering.

This is the image I’ve always had of Alooshi — a dangerous combination of ‘might’ and ‘callousness’ (words my father used to describe the intruders in our motherland), but tonight, Mr Fatso, Mr O-Beast, shows me a new image. There are no boys in this image for him to swing and pound his baboon arms into, there is only a girl: lying in bed, under the warmth of the bedsheet and the heat between the creases in my cousin’s muscle rolls, he tells me about Juliet. Her hair is straight and long and gold, and her skin is fair as a snow-flake, except for her cheeks, which are rosy-soaked-red. Alooshi describes her nose, which he calls ‘marshmallow’, and her voice, which he calls ‘syrup’, and her eyes, which he calls ‘ocean and sky’, and her body, which he calls ‘Kitty Kat’. Every lunchtime, Alooshi would push through the canteen line and buy packets of chips and cans of soft drink for Juliet, and he took the fall for her when she had stolen another girl’s diary, photocopied it, and hung it up all over the school, exposing her deepest secrets: the class-boys she thinks are ‘cute’ and the class-girls she thinks are ‘cows’. Alooshi told the principal he was the one who had photocopied the diary and sticky-taped it to all the classroom doors.

Suspended, he spent the next two weeks locked in his bedroom writing letters to Juliet. Finally, he returned to school, found his girl in the quadrangle among a group of friends, handed her the letters and headed straight off to class without a word.

Listening carefully, I am overcome by jealousies. Yes 'ies' — different forms of jealousy all at once: jealous that my cousin loved someone more than he loved me; jealous that he had someone else to love, his very own Pink Ranger, which I didn't have; and jealous that there might actually be someone out there, a Pink Ranger, that might actually love him back, which I also didn't have, unless I counted Martina, who was more Pudgy Pig than Pink Ranger. And then I remember my Red Ranger, which Alooshi bought for me earlier today, and I pull it from where it has been left, under my pillow. Clutching the toy tightly, I'm thinking that my cousin does have a heart underneath all that o-beast, and the jealousy is suddenly replaced with this feeling of joy; joy that my fatso-heart cousin has found some kind of girlfriend in some kind of thing that looks like some kind of love.

'What'd you tell her in the letters?' I ask; whispering.

'Told her my dreams, cuz — two of us holding hands, walking on the sand, waves splashing our bare feet, pickin'ah up and twirling her in the water …' Alooshi's eyes begin to dart, two black crystals spasming in the fading moonlight. 'Told her my reality, cuz — yeah, like I'm fat, but I'd treat'ah like a princess, like I'm Super Mario and she's Toadstool.'

I've never seen this side of my cousin before, completely naked and exposed — don't know if it's okay to keep asking questions, letting the silence build between us until finally, in the darkness, Alooshi raise-drops his eyebrows at me, as if to say, *just ask brah.*

So I ask, 'Well, how did she respond?'

And even though it felt like the most obvious question to ask, and even though it felt like my cousin really wanted me to ask it; he takes ages to answer, breathing in the deepest breaths I've ever heard, like some Free Willy fish screaming through its blowhole. At last, Alooshi locks eyes on me, exhaling with a sad smile, and says, 'She photocopied the letters, cuz, hung 'em all over the school.' Then Alooshi turns on his back, staring up at the cobwebs in the corner of the white ceiling, and mumbles to himself, 'Yeah, it was f'd-up.' But this time, he actually says the f-word.

The things you remember before you slip into that deep empty emptiness. The last days of my grandmother's life: Dad sitting at her hospital bed, she shooing her hands and begging him, 'What are they doing here, tell them to leave, I want them to leave.' But there was no one in her room except us, and later, my dad would say, 'The angels came to take her.' The space between thought and dream, of this, of that and of that, and that, and of that, and of that, until we're standing at the green grave of my grandfather. Buried January 1989. My dad's hands out in front of the tombstone, reciting words from The Holy Book and The Holy Land, and a single cloud in the pink sky above us, weeping …

Then there's this sharp pinch in my right shoulder, Dr Senior injecting me with the measles vaccine a week before my very first day of school. The sting makes me wanna scream out the f-word — scream inside the silence of noisy dreams — but even in this slumber, my father's shadow dances in the darkness. I'm screaming every other f-word-that-isn't-the-f-word I know, and even some I didn't know I know:

fat / fresh / free / from / frat / freak / for / firm / flop / frisbee / flimsy / fall / falling / fume / fry / flesh / fluke / flake / flick / fake / foment / foresee / foresaw / familiar / family / few / facts / fax / finger / fingernail / frack / felon / felony / flab / flabbergasted / flatulence / fragrance / feel / fashion / fascist / facade / force / face / faceless / facelessness.

Second pinch in my right trap, and this time my eyes flicker open, flicker into reality, or at least the dream I know as reality, and the air smells like seafood and cold wind: Alooshi has his fingernails clenched into the skin on my shoulder.

'Eekh,' I squeal.

'Ayhe, can't sleep,' he whispers, still staring up at the ceiling, just like I left him. I'm rubbing my eyes and absorbing the faint white streetlight lights peering through the window, and I hear it — the echo of the soil that eats the soul — howling at me, calling to me, roots tugging, leaves ruffling, like the sound of a thousand magpies flapping up from the ground at the same time, or a hand scrunching up a single piece of newspaper.

My cousin goes on, 'Can't stop thinking about girls, cuz.'

'Juliet?'

‘Nah, f-word that b-word,’ he hiss-spits in my direction. ‘I mean girls, like all girls, can’t stop thinking ’bout ’em, know what I mean?’

Umm, actually no, not too sure what he means: maybe he’s talking about the girls that call him o-beast, and this reminds me of the girl who called me ew-gross. Grumbling, finding my voice, I sleepy-tell my cousin: ‘Back in kindergarten, didn’t know how to drink from bubbler, always putting my mouth on metal tip, slurping up water, kid in class, had the most annoying voice, caught me, screamed out, ewwwwwwwwww, groooooss, so embarrassed, didn’t drink water at school for rest of the year, even on thirty-seven-degrees-days.’

Alooshi turns to his side, facing me, and says: ‘Not talkin’ about little b-words, cuz, I’m talking ’bout the nice ones. Got any you like?’

Creases in my face wide awake now, flat on my back, eyes sideways towards the window, where the street lights start to flicker and the street cats purr, I feel my cousin’s heavy breath on my naked neck and naked shoulders and bare cheek, waiting. ‘There was a girl,’ I tell him. ‘She was one of the kids who teased me today, but we used to make wishes for each other — I’d wish she swim in an ocean of sugar water, and she’d wish my family whole.’

Another long pause from my cousin, like some fly festering on a doughnut, and then he whispers: ‘Is she sexy, cuz?’

Eugh! The question catches me like a punch-in-the-throat; don’t even consider if the s-word he uses counts as a rude word before snap-replying: ‘What, a’umm, no, a’umm, maybe, umm, don’t know, she’s only my age, they call her Miss Piggy.’

My cousin sighs, taking in a massive guuuh, so bottomless it feels like the entire mattress is sinking and sucking me into its depths, and then he breathes out, and the mattress re-rises. It’s that kind of breath people make when you’re annoying them, when they think you’re an idiot. ‘I’m not asking about Pudgy Pigs; I’m asking about Power Rangers, cuz, know what I mean, like Pink Rangers.’

Let me think. Okay, one particular *Power Rangers* episode comes to me, called ‘Calamity Kimberly’. It opens with Kimberly curled up asleep in her bed, surrounded by flowery pink sheets and flowery pink pillows and hot-pink plush toys and bright-pink jewellery. She makes groaning sounds — ‘mmhh’ and ‘eehg’ and ‘mmehm’ — as she wakes, baby-sulking, ‘Is it morning already?’ Kimberly reaches out to tap off the alarm clock and

accidentally knocks over the pink vase on her bedside table, and again she groans, ‘eeerkhh’. Then she rolls off her bed, hits the floor and squeals, ‘ooow’. Popping up, she feels her hair, realising it’s all knotted and messy, and groans again, ‘ow-ee’. She crawls back onto her bed like a cat in a pink nightgown, raises her pink-framed hand-held mirror, and grunts yet again as she fixes her scrunched-up hair. Then she throws the mirror onto the ground, accidentally breaking it, and tosses herself back onto the mattress, arms and legs spread open as she goes ‘erkh!’ One minute into the episode, I realised that ‘calamity’ must have meant something like ‘bad luck’. And for the remaining twenty-two minutes, Kimberly would have to overcome a series of blunders, including an epic battle with an overweight long-moustached long-bearded creature named the Fanman, who traps her inside the pink insides of his magic jar.

‘I like it when she’s in bed,’ I whisper to Alooshi. ‘All safe and warm in her pink blankets, holding tightly on to her pink teddy bear.’

‘You wanna be that teddy bear, don’t ya?’ Alooshi lip-licks, and before I can answer, he adds, ‘Don’t ya, admit it, I won’t tell anybody, you like the sounds she makes when she sleeps, don’t ya?’

‘Umm,’ I reply. Um, because he’s right, and um, because these feelings I’m feeling feel wrong, dirty, naughty, private …

‘Tell me,’ my cousin presses, ‘it’ll be our secret, our night game; what do you like about her voice?’

‘Well,’ I begin, fully-turning to face him, but unable to lock my eyes on his, darting this way into the bedsheet shadows and that way into the white ceiling corner where the spiderwebs sit. ‘Ah, well, I like the sounds she makes when she’s waking up, she’s all *eh* and *egk* and *mmm-h*, and, um, the sounds she makes when she’s fighting the Putties, she’s all like, *yah, yah, eyuh*.’

‘Mmmm,’ Alooshi murmurs, as though he’s pushing me to go on. And so I go on, because I like this game, this night game, where for a brief moment in my life, I’m no longer in bed with my cousin, but in bed with the Pink Ranger:

‘Her lips, when she’s in morph, wearing her power helmet, grey and shiny and clean.’ My cousin continues to ‘mmmm’ faintly into the low light and the night shadows as the pink head of the Pink Ranger gleams before me: leaning in with her perfect-frozen metal lips and her bugeyed black helmet visor which protects her from Rita’s monsters. My heart is

pounding, and we're kissing, my soft flesh pressing against her hard shell — no tongue, no spit, no breath, no open mouths, just our lips. And her white-gloved hands, which protect her knuckles from Goldar's sword, hold the back of my head, and pull me close, which makes me feel Command-Centre-safe.

'Keep going,' my cousin … *sissles* … pretty sure that's a word, the right-sounding word for this moment. 'What else you like about her, cuz?'

A'umm, not sure what he means, like her shape, perhaps? And I start describing her in full morph: slender arms and shoulders covered in pink spandex, woman-ly chest with a shiny white diamond in the centre, white power belt hanging off her earthy hips, gold power coin shining from her womb, short pink skirt covering her v-word, and pink tights underneath, running all the way from her bottom to her white boots.

'Unzip her costume,' Alooshi instructs.

I don't understand. 'You can't unzip it, it's not a costume, it's her morph, it's part of her.' The thought of another person's bare body against mine — even a Power Ranger's bare body — grosses me, frightens me: all the private and sacred and dirty things that ooze out of us each day should be flushed down the toilet, rinsed down the sink, washed off in the shower.

'It's okay, go on, cuz,' Alooshi whispers, his wheeze up my nose like cigar smoke.

I see myself intertwined with the Pink Ranger as though I'm a piece of clay and she's a piece of plastic: crawling my childlike fingers up her shiny curves and across her shiny thighs. 'I like her, um, her …' It suddenly occurs to me that my next words are going to be naughty — but my mum and my sister are just a few metres away, what if they hear?

'It'ssss okhay,' Alooshi wheezes at me again, 'no one's gonna hear ya, this is a night game, just for boys.'

Taking in a gush of fish-filled-window-sill air, I stare directly into my cousin's glass-shattered eyes and say, 'I like, ah, her lumps.'

My cousin is breathing more intensely now, and even though it feels wrong, feels rude and slimy and unholy, I begin to describe my deepest darkest dirtiest desires, because truth, I'm exactly where I want to be; in this bed, in this dream; slowly exploring the Pink Ranger's body with my rust-dot-bronze hands, sliding my fingers off the tip of her pink helmet and onto her glossy white neck and down her glossy pink spine, holding on to both sides of her white belt hanging off her round hips, placing my face into the

diamond in the middle of her chest, kissing her gently here and there as she runs her white-gloved-fingers through my curled-coaled-hair.

‘Keep gh-going,’ Alooshi gasps, lying on his back now, eyes closed, swaying in-n-out into the tiger-skin sheet. ‘Don’t worry, we’re all just lumps.’

My heart is d-d-d-drubbing (pretty sure that’s a word) from the left side of my rib, imagining myself in that stockings-space beneath the Pink Ranger’s skirt; fingers and palms squeezing into her tights. Suddenly, my thing is getting hard, all on its own, slowly at first, like being pinched and woken up, but then my hands are feeling their way from the back of those tights to the front, and my insides ignite, electrocuting my thing to life, jolting and screaming for attention.

My eyelids close tight (in *this* reality), focusing on Kimberly’s bug-eyed black visor (in *that* reality). I see my reflection: this four-foot-ten boy gazing up at the Pink Ranger’s cricket-ball-tough head, making sounds like *yeh* and *yeh* and *eyeh* as she kisses me with those spotless metallic lips. My thing pumps like a beating heart as the Pink Ranger rubs and slides her perfectly polished uniform against this lean and wiry body, and when my eyelids open, I’m thrusting into red undies with tractor patterns and blue trackies with dino patterns, thrusting into the bedsheet, into the air, into nothing.

Please don't worry about me. Every day now, I wake up hard. Half-out-of-it, holding tight on to my pillow and thrusting into the bed until my thing settles down. Then there are the times it won't settle down; pulsing and convulse-ing and raw-aching. Out of bed, I'll pull my thing up towards my stomach, pinning it against my underpants and pyjama pants. Limp-walk through to the living room. Mum and sister sitting on the floor in front of the tv, having oregano and white cheese and cucumber pieces for breakfast. I'll hurtle towards the bathroom like there's some kind of drunk donkey in my pants — knowing full well you never argue with a donkey! Inside, I'll stand over the toilet bowl and stare at this mysterious part of myself; this piece of wood coating a river field of blue and red veins. Force myself to pee; watching as the stinging fluids shoot in every direction except the direction of the toilet water below. Gradually, my thing goes down, shrinking back to sleep.

Then there are those moments when I'd be watching *Power Rangers*: here comes the Yellow Ranger, who's still 'female' in my mind, and the Pink Ranger, who never stopped being 'female'. Watching their cat-like bodies flip and spin and their legs spread open as they grunt and heave inside their helmets, my entire body begins to bubble-boil, until suddenly there's this agony inside my pants, my thing leaping to life, yearning to be touched and squeezed and relieved. I slip my hand into my pocket, to grab on to my thing without anyone catching me — my sister playing with her multi-coloured xylophone behind the couch, my mum unpacking the groceries in the kitchen — holding it down between my legs. Rub me. Tug me. For godsakes, whack me, crush me! The very sound of my mum chopping cucumbers in the kitchen brings me some kind of sick pleasure: for I can imagine my thing on one of those head-slicing things, I think it's called a 'gelatine', and for that brief second before it's completely head-capitated, and the horrific sting kicks in, and blood sprays everywhere, there's some kind of contact, some kind of slake, some kind of fire-putter-outer.

As soon as the *Power Rangers* episode is over, I fumble to my bedroom, hand still clutching on to my thing from inside my pocket, and throw myself onto the bed. Under the sheets, I remove my pants and underpants,

grab on with both hands, squeeze tight, the pressure providing me with relief. Relief, because when my thing is this hard, it's misery — a mash-potato-mash-up of pain and desire and sunburn. The tighter I squeeze, the greater the relief, and the greater the relief, the harder it is to say wait, stop, no. This unbearable plea for attention — down-there — which thinks of nothing but thrusting deep and hard inside another human being. And that's the word 'sex'. Not a bad word. Not a good word. Just a word. A word that describes what I'm thinking. What I'm doing. What I'm think-doing. Think-doing like the men at the milk bar near my school; the men who buy those magazines in the sealed plastic sleeves with skinny women in large bras and string-thin underpants on the covers. Think-doing like the freckled-teenagers in *Home and Away*, which I catch for a few seconds after my mum has finished watching the news: they're open-mouth kissing and rocking in-nout like two magnets embracing-n-resisting that urge to clamp together.

My hands open wide and firm on each side of my thing; rubbing them back and forth as fast as possible, as though I'm starting a fire with a stick between my palms. I am become caveman. Higher and higher and higher the misery builds, feeling better and better the longer it goes on; heart racing to keep up with my hands. Longer. Longer. I promise just a little longer. And then, suddenly, my thing is spasming uncontrollably, pulsating like the core of the earth.

I have pieced together enough information from the older boys at school — the year sixers — to have some sense of what is happening, but it's different when it's happening to *me*. The boys would say to each other, 'Pull, don't rub, or you'll get blisters.' But I don't even know how to pull it — pull it towards where? — and find myself rubbing as though it's the common-sense-thing-to-do. And surely enough, I do get blisters; bright-red bruises on the sides of my thing because I've torn at the skin. And the boys would always talk about that maddest-feeling-inda-world right at the end, where your thing spits this thick sticky fluid like white lava from a cranky volcano. But that doesn't happen to me either — my thing just twitches, as though it's trying to spit, but has nothing inside. Lying in my bed, staring up at the cobwebs, my heart rate slowing down, my fast breaths easing up, and my thing shrivelling to sleep, I wonder if I've started this relationship with my body sooner than the other boys in my school, sooner than I was meant

to, sooner than natural. And if so, why? What has happened to me to bring on this misery, this gelatine, so early on in life?

First time it happened, I took the five one-dollar coins I'd been saving from my underwear drawer and shamefully handed them to my mum. 'Please, send them to the mother-land to kids less lucky than me,' I begged her. But week after week, no matter how much I resisted, I found myself rubbing that donkey in my pants raw, knowing full well I had no money left to pay for my please-god-forgive-me sins.

‘Oi,’ Alooshi whispers, poking his thumb into my rib bone. ‘You got some *thing* for me?’ Have I plummeted into my memories, forgotten to dream, fantasised out loud? It may have been several seconds or several minutes since I’ve said a single word, but my thing is still hard, and my body-insides are still heart-rate-racing-hot, and I can even feel a few drops of sweat trickling down my forehead.

‘What *thing*?’ I ask.

‘Don’t play dumb, cuz,’ Alooshi hisses. ‘I know.’

‘Know what?’ Is he actually talking about my thing; that it’s grave-stone-solid, that it’s grave-yard-aching, that deep-down it’s deep inside a Power Ranger?

‘Know you’re hiding a hard long little thing from me,’ he chuckles. Reaching over my chest, Mr Fatso snatches the plastic Red Ranger, who has been chilling and watching and listening, from the wedge, between the edge, of the bed, and the wall, beneath the window, this whole time.

‘Give it back!’

Quiet-giggling; I attempt to wrestle the toy off of my cousin, child hands grasping onto his screw-driver-strong wrists. We squirm and twist as Alooshi pins me, squashes me, presses me, pushes me. ‘Give iiit,’ I beg, both of us shoosh-giggling as we jingle and bounce on the mattress. Clutching tightly on to the toy, my cousin comes for my stomach, shoving the Red Ranger into my gut and poking me with the ends of his fingers. Whisper-giggling, I cover my entire lower half with my arms and hands. Again and again Alooshi comes at me through the shadows and the ‘whoosh’ of the fluffy sheet, and each time, his stomach flab, or his elbow bone, or the hand that grips the Power Ranger, misses my belly and nicks my thing instead, which remains hard and curious and eager and desperate.

I know I’m supposed to scream ‘No!’ when something like this happens, just as they taught us in school, but every time it does happen, it seems like an accident — like my thing is some nosy neighbour who is getting what he deserves for butting into the night game — so maybe in this case, ‘No!’ is not required, maybe in this case, Alooshi and Hamoodi can keep pretending it’s not happening.

Finally, my cousin lets go of the Power Ranger, and I reach out to grab it with both hands, leaving my entire lower half open. Alooshi comes at me with everything he's got, pudgy palms and fingers swooping fast through the sheets towards my stomach, and my hips, and my thighs, and — because I'm squirming — only because I'm squirming — surely because only because I'm squirming — my thing. He whacks and flicks and backhands my thing, more times than I'm able to count.

What on god's unholy earth are you doing to my son? Mum would scream if she woke up and caught us, but if only she could understand the unbearable agony in my pants. It *wants* to be touched, *wants* to be handled, *wants* to be beaten, beaten back to sleep. And so, I allow the night game to carry on, excuse after excuse for my cousin to keep 'accidentally' coming into contact with this nosy neighbour.

At last, Alooshi gives up, huffing and puffing like some wolf in a granny's nightgown. I clutch on to the Red Ranger, holding him to my chest, turning the other way; towards that fish-smell flowing from the window, which I know is coming from the neighbour who's always cooking seafood on the balcony. I see her — the neighbour — whenever I lean my head and neck and shoulders and chest out over the window, sitting silently on a milk crate with a long pair of tongs, waiting patiently to flip her deep-fried fish every other second, as though the heart of the ocean spins inside that frypan. In the mother-tongue, my mum calls this neighbour a 'rice person', but all the dishes we left behind from the mother-land use rice too. So tell me what's the difference between *them* rice people and *we* rice people? The fish that stinks-up their bedrooms and the fish that stinks-up mine?

Lying quietly on my mattress, which is finally still and calm but for my cousin's blowhole-breathing, there passes a second, or maybe a minute, or maybe an hour; or maybe somewhere between second-minute-hour. Hard to know when all you have is the shadows of the trees and the clotheslines and the telephone lines outside your window to guide you — just thinking, thinking about words. Pretty sure 'drubbing' is a word. Feels like a word, like something that matches the experience I was trying to describe. My thing's going down, down-there, going down like a thirsty four-leaf clover, and I'm thinking about the words we left behind: from mother-tongue to other-tongue. My second-earliest memories are of Mum and Dad rehearsing this new language with each other, which they would say made no sense:

Is it 'lie' or 'lay' or 'laid' or 'lied' on the ground? If it's 'blonde' for girls, and 'blond' for boys, then is it 'blonde' or 'blond' when referring to a group of girls and boys who all have 'blonde'/'blond' hair? How are we supposed to know if we're reading the word 'live', which actually sounds like 'liv', or 'live', which uses a long vowel 'i' because there's an 'e' on the end? Are these meant to be one word or two words or hyphen words: 'backseat' and 'back seat' and 'back-seat'; 'lawnmower' and 'lawn mower' and 'lawn-mower'? And why are there so many words that should rhyme, but don't rhyme, like 'four' and 'hour'?

Suddenly, a voice, faint and distant, seeps into my slumber: 'Ayh, cuz.' I don't reply; too far gone from here; other end of the galaxy, which Lizard Lady calls the Milky Way, and Miss Piggy replies, 'That's a chocolate bar.' The voice comes at me again, and I hear it clear-as-cough: 'Cuzzzz.'

I know it's him, my cousin, and this time my silence is a choice — I am here but let's pretend I'm not. For I'm still thinking about words: beast, o-beast. And every millimetre of skin across my entire body, from the edges of my heels to the pink flesh under my fingernails to the sweaty tip of my nose to the white patch swirling from the peak of my scalp, is tingling in pizza-vomit. Pizza-vomit at myself. Pizza-vomit at my cousin. I am a boy and he is a beast, and together, we have become the b-word: caught in the unorthodox intercourse between boy and beast.

'Cuz,' Alooshi whispers again, 'you awake?'

The answer is yes, I am awake, but I keep my eyes closed, and my huff steady, and my heart calm, hoping he will leave me alone. Soggy lips on my ear, hot breath on my lobe: ‘Cuzzz, are, youu, ah-waayke?’

I can feel him waiting for me to react, but I’m focusing on the stage in my school hall, where there sits a man on a skateboard with no legs. Finally, Alooshi pulls away from me; his weight shifting sideways and the mattress rising beneath me, as though its springs have released an infinite gush of coca cola.

That legless man who came riding into our school on a skateboard was a ‘motivational speaker’. Mr Brown believed he would inspire ‘us’. And by ‘us’, he meant the public-housing-public-school kids who filled the four hundred plastic chairs in our school hall. Legless Man, who called himself ‘The Giant’, told us his story: he was born with dead legs, spent his childhood in a wheelchair, went to a school in the country-bush, where his classmates thought it would be funny to tie him to a fan and turn it on, letting him and his dead legs spin in circles until he spewed his guts out. At twelve, he told us, the doctors decided to remove both his legs for good, which were nothing but dead weight, holding him back. ‘Don’t ever let anyone or anything hold you back,’ he sang out across the school hall. ‘I was born with nothing, and now I run a foundation worth fifty million dollars! Any questions?’ First hand up was a year six boy named Victor Jackson, who swore he was related to Michael Jackson, even though one got his white skin from God and the other got his white skin from a plastic surgeon. ‘Can you do any tricks on your skateboard?’ Victor asked, to which the legless man outward-snorted and replied, ‘If you wanna see a sideshow, go look in the mirror.’

All the students were terrified to ask another question after that, including the two blonde-headed-heads in front of me, who lowered their hands at the same time that I raised mine. Legless Man nudged his chin at me, and I asked, ‘Do you believe in God?’ This so-called giant smiled, spreading his hands open onto the wooden stage floor beneath him and performing a legless handstand, lifting his entire body (or is it his ‘torso’?) into the air until his nose was touching the ground, and then lowering himself back down onto his skateboard. ‘Sometimes I believe in God and sometimes I don’t,’ he answered, scary-dead-straight into my eyes. ‘But existing in a body like this has taught me the greatest lesson in life: to always believe in myself …’

Back in bed, as the sheets begin to stir, I focus on the image of the legless man, screaming at me to rise, to tell my cousin that I am awake, that I am present, that I know, that I say no. But I am paralysed, and The Giant is skateboarding off that stage, and my cousin's fingers are rattle-creaking under the tiger-skin sheet like cockroaches crawling in a bread tin. Alooshi's hand starts on my chest, on my heart, which is pounding so hard that surely he can feel it; can feel my drub. Hand continues, gliding over my stomach, which rises and dips too fast for the sleeping and the dead; and *still* his hand continues, gliding towards my crotch, that v-shaped section on a boy which looks no different from the v-shaped section on a girl. Alooshi digs into the waistband of my dino pants, and then digs deeper into the waistband of my tractor undies. His bee-stung-bloated hand pinches the top of my thing, waiting for it to respond, to wake up, to go hard. It doesn't. I am become lifeless. I am become legless. Skittle mix of mixed-up feelings. Relieved: Me and my cousin, we're just animals. Ashamed: I have nothing for him, nothing to offer him, nothing to repay him for protecting me from the paper-skinned and bark-skinned boys; for the Power Ranger lying red-dead-still next to me; there's nothing I have for Alooshi to envy, to desire; nothing but shrivelled ungrateful boyhood cocooned in his hand.

Stay calm, Hamoodi, stay calm.

Begging myself, clutching on to those side-ways-thoughts: God please, stop this heart from pounding harder; for he'll know we're wide awake! Oh Hamoodi, remember the last time our father took us to the fish 'n chips tucker store? The 'beer' part in the beer-battered fish was a sin, so he just bought us the hot chips, covered in tomato sauce and wrapped up in butcher's paper. And we tore through the paper to dig 'em out, licking the sauce off our fingers and asking, 'Dad, does everyone really die?' and our dad replied, 'Eventually, but then we'll meet each other again in heav—' Suddenly we noticed the *Street Fighter 2: Champion Edition* arcade machine in the corner of the store, right beside the see-through soft drink fridge, and interrupt-asked, '—Dad, can we play a video game?' And laughing, our dad re-replied, 'Sure.'

Right this second, Alooshi has begun to hard-squeeze my thing between his thumb and pointy finger, like he's squiggling a squish crayon. I hear my dad's voice, finishing his thought at the fish 'n chips shop: 'We'll meet each other again in heaven.' I can feel my thing growing bigger and firmer, blood rushing from my brain to my tractor undies, filling my cousin's palm, all

against its will. And as my thing springs to life, every other ‘thing’ inside my body — my air-sponges and butter-tubes, my gut-goos and bone-glues — have become soggy-tomato-sauced-hot-chips in butcher’s paper; all that’s left of me, all the rest-of-me, is shrinking. I’m screaming; screaming inside-out outside-in side-in-out and side-out-in. Screaming: ‘Dad! Dad!’ And I can hear my father calling back to me, as though we’re watching a dirty movie, and he’s saying: ‘Naughty scene — shut eye, shut eye.’

Two eyelids clench together-tight as my cousin moves on, working his way to the inside-centre of my underpants, where those things under my thing are completely absorbed by his palm. Holding them, holding *me*, in him. I’m screaming, ‘B-word! B-word! B-word!’ Because my dad taught me never to sully my tongue. And now Alooshi is stroking them things beneath my thing gently, careful-curious and slow-exploring; as though he really does think I’m asleep and doesn’t want to wake me up. My heart starts to thud again, harder and harder again, and I’m screaming again, screaming a word I should never scream again, the worst word I have ever heard, ever learned, ever said:

‘Bugger! Bugger! Bugger!’

Don’t ever sully your tongue, your body, your soul, my father made me promise; promise before he left, but then, it was real late at night, and we were watching the late-night world news: and it was death; death for people with olive-oil-skin and dagger-hooked-noses and stitch-headed-curls and kh-kh-names and cracked-lip-smiles, like ours. I asked, but what is it all for, what is the purpose of all this death? And my dad reached out to switch off the television and then turned to me, placing his mouth on my forehead in some strange combination of pride (that I had asked such a deep question so innocently) and despair (that I had asked such a deep question so young). ‘People die for their right to speak,’ he explained. ‘But what if their speak is wrong?’ I pressed, pleading-like, pleading-ly. My dad placed his open palms and fingers together like he was praying, the kneeling-type-of-praying, and said, ‘Only gods and monsters are never wrong — everyone else is just working s-word out.’ But he actually said the s-word, and then, half-winking his left eye, he added, ‘Don’t ever say that s-word, okay?’

Heart, pounding through the entire apartment, a birth-defect the size of a pin-prick, blood squirting like a fiery comet in the midnight sky as it pumps through my veins, scurrying quicker than a six-legged-insect. Does my cousin know I’m awake? How can he not feel this? My nerves? My fear?

My shame? Or perhaps he thinks I'm having a nightmare. Somewhere out in the country-bush, I am tied to a classroom fan and spinning in circles; my lifeless legless lower half: numb.

Children cry when it hurts inside: They perved on me in the bathroom and poked their fingers at me in the playground and called me names, and I cried because the pus bubbling in my lungs wanted it to stop.

Children cry when it hurts outside: I tripped on the front stairs to our apartment, hit my head against the sharp edge of the railing, cut open my scalp, and cried at the stinging pain as Mum held a bandage to my blood-oozing skull.

Children cry when things don't come our way: I asked Mum if she'd buy me a Nintendo Entertainment System, and she said we couldn't afford it, and I slammed the homemade-hot-chip-sandwich she'd made me into the living room window, ran off to my bedroom, and sobbed into my pillow — not because we were poor or because I felt sorry for myself, but because I really just wanted to hold a joystick in my hand, and that joy was never gonna stick.

Children cry when things don't go our way: My sixth birthday, Dad said he'd take us to the cinema. I wanted to watch *Home Alone*, a kids' film about a kid who tortured grown-ups; and Alooshi wanted to watch *Child's Play 2*, a horror film about a kids' doll who tortured grown-ups. Dad said his nephew gets to choose because he was our guest, and I cried. Cried because it was my birthday, not his nephew's. Cried because *Child's Play 2* was Part 2, and I hadn't even seen Part 1. Cried because it was a horror movie, and horror movies kept me up all night, all week, all month, all year. And so, pleading my case, my dad quickly changed his mind, informing our 'guest' that it had to be *Home Alone*. And as quickly as the tears arrived, they were gone …

But tonight, this child has discovered the purest form of crying: Not because it hurts inside, or because it hurts outside, or because there's something we want (but can't have); it's just because … because we're sad … sad that this is how it is …

Lying flat on my back, closed eyes butterfly-flicking, as my cousin's hand slowly slides out of my tractor undies and dino pants and slithers back through the sheet onto his own body. Tears swell and seep through my eyelids, soaking my eyelashes. My cousin goes quiet, his hand losing interest in the secret and sacred places under my underpants. I'm asleep on

the outside; wide awake on the inside, telling myself it's no big deal, it's no big deal, it's no big deal, it's no big deal, right, right? I mean, this isn't the first time someone has known my thing, it's not even the second time.

The first time was Thomas.

During class hours, no student is allowed to go to the bathroom without being accompanied by another student. But as it so happened, one particular fraction-filled afternoon, my best-friend-at-the-time got that bursting feeling at the exact same moment as me. We raised our hands and said out loud: 'Ms, I gotta go toilet.' Lizard Lady's lips raspberried — she came from an era where you just held it till lunchtime or till your bottom exploded. 'Urinal or cubicle?' she asked. And believe it or not, this was the first time I actually ever heard the word 'urinal', which I quickly figured was the correct name of the 'urine' fountains in the boys' toilet. Thomas must have worked this out as well, because we both turned to each other for a second, then turned back to Lizard Lady and together answered: 'Urinal.'

Next minute, we were peeing side by side, both staring straight ahead. I could hear the wee piercing from Thomas's thing and tinkling against the metal sinkhole of his urinal. And Thomas could definitely hear the wee piercing from my thing and tinkling against the metal sinkhole of my urinal. And for a half-ish-minute, that was the only sound that could be heard inside those empty toilets, awkwardly and uncomfortably echoing out towards the empty school playground. Finally, Thomas twisted his neck in my direction and said: 'Hey, I'll show you my d-word if you show me yours.'

Neither of us spoke another word — we both just stopped peeing, placed our hands on our hips, let our things hang loose, and turned to face each other. I examined Thomas, and he examined me. 'About the same size,' my best-friend-at-the-time observed. 'But yours looks like a helmet and mine looks like a beanie. And yours is browner, even browner than the rest of you, and mine is pink, even pinker than the rest of me.'

The second time was Dr Senior.

A plastic skeleton the size of a fully grown man in one corner, and a photo of his twin brother, also a doctor, with their wives, also doctors, in the other corner; that was Dr Senior, the man who'd been caring for our family ever since we arrived from the mother-land.

Epic rings of skin sagged around Dr Senior's eyes as he peered at me, and instructed: 'Very well, jump up on that bed and drop your pants.'

Lying on my back, chin pinned to my chest, staring down at myself, my thing looked embarrassingly small. ‘Sorry,’ I grumbled, ‘I’m just nervous.’ Slipping on a pair of tight-rubber-white gloves, the doctor rose his silver eyebrows at me like he couldn’t care less — a reaction that brought me this relief-comfort-something-in-between-feeling — and replied, ‘Just hold still, I’ll be done in a second.’ He felt around a bit, squeezing and pulling and pinching, and I counted four seconds by the time it was over.

Inviting my mum back into the surgery, Dr Senior informed her that I had a tiny cyst on the left thing of the things under my thing: ‘Spermatoceles, a fluid sac that forms on the epididymis, completely harmless, it should go away on its own.’ My mum gasped: ‘Oh thank god, thank god, thank god.’ Because if you ever tell your mum there’s a lump down there, stupid me, of course, she hears *cancer*.

Then, with a gentle smile, Dr Senior instructed me to step into the waiting room so he could talk privately to my mum, and on my way out of his office, I caught a snippet of their conversation: ‘Still no word from your husband?’ and ‘The consulate received my letter,’ and ‘We just need to be patien—’ and the door snapping shut …

And when that door re-opens, I’m in my bed, in the dark, voice inside my head offering that relief-comfort-something-in-between-feeling: *See, boys have seen it, men have touched it, no biggie.*

There is more coming, I know there is more, somehow, I know, know it in my veins, in my flesh, which remembers, remembers a touch the way a heart remembers a dream; my cousin isn’t finished with me; I know he isn’t, but I have become the moonlight, soulless and see-through; bricks can have their way with me; nothing-but-bricks.

The bedsheet ruffles, and the mattress bounces, as my cousin tugs down on his pants, releasing them from his monster-truck-tyre waist. Alooshi’s hand reaches out towards me again, searching. He nicks my elbow, nudges my rib, finds my wrist; wraps his hand around it, moves it through the bedsheet towards him.

This hand of mine, made up of brittle breakable fingers and an un-blemished un-spoiled un-spoken palm, is wrapped around the warm hard skin of my cousin’s p-word; and this, so far as I am aware, is the first time I have spoken of my hand as separate from myself, for right now, it is no more than a rock, a stick, a coffee cup, a spoon, a sock, a pocket watch, a

tablecloth, a toenail, a con-dom, a donkey — and you never argue with a donkey!

This hand is somewhere in the middle of my cousin's p-word; cannot feel the body from where it begins, and the knob from where it ends. Palm and fingers curl around one side, and thumb curls around the other, encircling the full um … what's that word we learned in maths … cir … um … cir-cum … um … cir-cum-f-erence … of this thing beneath this bed-bugged bedsheet. Alooshi begins to whale-blowhole-loud breathe as he thrusts his pelvis and bottom upward. He's attempting to create friction between himself and this hand — but I refuse to lend-a-hand. So no, all he has is this hand, this lifeless hand, fumbling loose against my cousin's p-word, which I know from the agony in my own pants every morning, is throbbing and screaming to be clutched, clasped, crushed.

With each thrust, I can feel my cousin's thirst growing stronger, more desperate, until finally he engulfs all of this hand in his own hand, squeezing tightly, moaning in pleasure. And then he begins whispering, as though he suspects my ears can hear, or because he's just saying it to himself: 'If our parents find out, they'll think you like boys, oh you'll be in so so much trouble, so so much trouble.' But he's wrong — oh so so wrong. My parents aren't like that. One time, they were talking about men who kiss other men. Mum said, 'The Holy Book is very clear on this,' and Dad replied, 'The Holy Book is never clear on anything. That's why our people are killing each other. There's no reason to add another group for us to hate.'

And as though Alooshi can hear my thoughts, as though it may have finally occurred to him that all this is all him — nothing but a horse arguing with a donkey — he stops. What's left are his loud frustrated heaves and this hand that he tosses back to me. This hand, my hand, hidden under the sheet, where no witnesses have ever been, lands against my rib. Jerking some fingers ever so gently, they become mine again. I am become all-of-me-again.

Counting two mississippis, three mississippis, four mississippis, I fake one of those sleepy breathe-in breaths — 'heeee' — and roll to my side, away from my cousin. Finally open my eyes. Open my eyes to the open window before me, before the last sighting of the moon, who watches but says nothing, and the moonlight, which outlines the shadows of the maple leaves of the trees on the bricks of the neighbouring walls. And right there,

right before me, silent, still, dead and invisible, on my pillow, is the Red Ranger. I want to know why he did not protect me. Why his head did not flip from Jason's face to a Ranger's helmet? Oh Red Ranger: was it not you who morphed into battle whenever the witch who spies on us from the moon sent her o-beast to harm the children in your presence? I want to swear again, swear in my head, but all that comes to my mind are the angry words of Rita Repulsa: You egg-sucking-purple-pin-head; you slug-infested-jelly-doughnut!

Oh Red Ranger, if only you could see how the o-beast uses his spells to corrupt the children. Only last week, while you were inside the television karate-chopping your way through some Putty Patrollers, the o-beast wrote these letters down on a sheet of paper and told me to read them out loud:

'E. D. B. T. Z.'

And as soon as the sounds popped from my lips, I realised I was speaking in the language my father forbid me to ever speak — the mother-tongue. Just letters in *this* language, but 'my hand in my bum' in *that* language. And the o-beast cracked up to himself as I pulled my hands to my mouth, which tasted like metal and mucus and gooseberries. Was that not your chance, Red Ranger; your chance to emerge from the screen and reveal yourself; was that not your chance to vanquish the word-trick-monster that the witch sent down from her lunar palace?

And I'm staring, staring still, at this plastic toy, taking calm breaths in, calmer breaths out, when the bed begins vibrating like a dying refrigerator, like a spasming washing machine. I know this, I remember this, I am this. Don't need to see it, or touch it, or smell it, or inhale it, to understand: my cousin's hands are stretched out-and-open on each side of his p-word, and he's rubbing them back and forth like a caveman attempting to start a fire. Groans grow louder, hands move faster, memory of blisters makes my skin shiver. The mattress recoils as Alooshi thrusts his backside hard up into the tiger-skin sheet, rubbing and rubbing and rubbing until finally there's a gasp. All at once, the earthquaking bed legs and bed frame and mattress springs come to a complete halt. Nothing now but the sound of my cousin's breath, shrinking from 'haaar' to 'haaa' to 'haa' to 'ha' to 'h' — and the sudden smell of armpit sweat, and in-between-your-legs sweat, and brown milk, and white bleach.

'Hamoodi,' he whispers. 'My Hamood.'

And his words remind me of my mother-tongue and my mother. My mother-tongue because ‘i’ on the ends of these cuddle-cute names the adults give us mean ‘My’: My Aloosh, My Hamood, My Hasoon. And my mother because when I’ve got the flu, and she’s sitting on the edge of this very bed with a cold towel over my forehead, halfway between humming and singing, she says, ‘Hamoodi. My Hamood.’

I am staring at this lifeless-soulless-useless-worthless Red Ranger on my pillow, asking, pleading, begging, ‘Why?’ and Alooshi rolls in my direction, his hot snorts fanning the back of my neck as he curls up like a melting slug and quickly drifts off into a peaceful slumber. And it is here, at last, that my childhood has come to an end. Here, at last, nibbling on my fingernails waiting for my cousin to start snoring, that the answer comes to me like a definition in the school dictionary: Alooshi bloodied his knuckles for me this afternoon, and I bled his p-word for him this evening. He blistered himself for me while my body slept, and I blistered myself for him while my mind slept. And now he is the one fast asleep, and I am the one wide awake, with no father and no Power Ranger to watch over me. And I will never sleep again — never again, in a world where there are no men; a world where there are only boys and beasts.

Once there was or once there was not, as we say in the mother-language, my father's mother, in a hospital bed, longing for the mother-land: 'Tell them to leave, please, tell them to leave.' And once there was or once there was not, as we say in the mother-tongue, my father's mother, buried in the ground, mother-land-longing no more. My father stands before her grave, face skin creasing like crinkle-cut chips, tears tumble-weeding over his cheekbones as the cold raindrops of winter clap onto my poncho. Down on his knees, Dad weeps: 'Oh Mother, your grandson wants to know you.'

Sitting in the middle of my father's crossed legs, rain dap-dip-dapping onto my three-dollar-plastic-skin-coat, we stare silently at this mysterious old lady's clay-cladded tomb until a single beam of sun appears through the clouds. At last, Dad tells me her story:

My grandmother had memorised every word of The Holy Book by the time she was ten; my grandmother had graduated first in her final year of high school back before girls even went to school; and my grandmother taught her second-born son — *Her Aloosh* — to read and write before teaching him to walk; so one day, he could dob on those that turned the rain into bug spray.

Cockroach tentacles are feeling-out the outside of my windowsill and my cousin is snort-snoring and this collage of memories comes to an end — somewhere between my dad sitting in his mother's lap as she read him the rights of man, and me sitting on his lap as he wept at the sight of her tombstone.

I roll from my left side onto my back, and stare up at the ceiling, which has turned redback-spider-black since the moon disappeared. Wait. One mississippi, two mississippi, three mississippi. My cousin is dead-still, except for his nostril tips and lip-lines trebling like a subwoofer. I turn again, this time onto my right side, staring at Alooshi's balloon-blown blood-busted face, bulging white eyelids and butterfly-wing eyelashes. Watching his mouth clutch at the air, choking on his own throat and spit and tongue, I hold in my breath — for he can smell the crumbs of my innocence:

That time he gave me a dollar to visit the milk bar and buy him some matches so he could burn alive the grasshopper he was holding captive under an empty olive jar. As it turned out, the matches only cost ninety cents, leaving ten cents for me to buy a mini Easter egg, which I ate on my way back to our apartment. And lighting a fire, tilting the jar, pinning the small flame onto the squirming grasshopper's useless wings, Alooshi said come closer, inhaled my exhale, and screamed: 'Ya ate chocolate!'

'So?' I asked.

'Bug spray,' he screeched, or maybe it was, 'Bugs pray'.

'What on earth?' I wondered, scrubbing my hands into my sweaty forehead as the grasshopper bounce-burned to death.

'Next time you steal my money,' Alooshi spat, 'it'll be you under this jar.'

This was his warning, his threat, his 'you'll-never-get-anything-past-me', but tonight, that's exactly what I'm doing: sucking in my lips and biting down hard on my teeth, stretching my right arm as far over his ribs as I can reach, and then, sliding over his stomach and hips and thighs in one motion. I land on the edge of the mattress, slip out of the damp bedsheet and plomp-kh onto the carpeted floor — right on the vomit-and-popcorn-smelling t-shirt my cousin removed from my body a second-minute-hour-eternity ago.

I stare up at the bed, where my cousin's body towers above me like a wall, a walrus, a wall-rus … Alooshi grumbles and rolls flat onto his stomach, curling up into a ball and swallowing the tiger-skinned sheet and pillow in his mass. Says, 'Sorry cuz.' Maybe. Me thinks …

Tooth-paste-mint escapes through the gaps in my teeth as I scramble for the bedroom door. Stop, turn, check; one mississippi, two mississippi, three mississippi — bulging white eyelids remain shut. Get up, slow. I am become rising flower in the oven. Stop, turn, check; one mississippi, two mississippi, three mississippi — bulging white eyelids still shut, butterfly-wing eyelashes twitching. Thank god hearts don't drum on the outside the way they drum on the inside — only the fleas on my cousin's scalp can feel my vibrations. Quickly, I twist the doorknob, which creaks open, but this time, I don't turn to check those bulging white eyelids. I'm out, and anything that happens now, happens before my mother.

My mother, who single-handedly man-handled our broken washing machine down the stairwell to the front yard, where three hairy-shouldered second-hand-store men swapped it for a slightly-less-broken washing machine, and worthless-as-they-were, watched her man-handle it back up the stairs all on her own.

My mother, who once chased off the drunk man in the wife-beater out the front of our building, yelling at us: 'All you golf f-worders are replacing the neighbourhood!' Chased him off with a leather sandal in one hand and a gold-plated curtain rod in the other. And when we returned upstairs, I said, 'But we don't even play golf,' and she laugh-replied, 'He wasn't saying *golf*, he was saying *gulf*.'

My mother, whose motherly curves currently appear across the living room as a black outline beyond the open door of her bedroom. And curled into her outline, the outline of my baby sister, cocoon-wrapped into her tummy:

There was, there was not, one time, or two, or two-and-a-half times, when my mum's older sister's husband, who was also their second cousin, came to visit us. Introducing himself as 'Mr Roache', he put his hand out for me to kiss, as was normal in the mother-country. Then he picked up Annabel, who'd only just started walking, and only just learned 'yes' and 'no' and what sounded like 'stop'. As Annabel attempted to squirm out from our mother's sister's husband's hands, he puckered his lips and instructed her, 'Kiss me here, kiss me here and I'll set you free.' Then he

pressed his dry-white-rims with sharp-pointy-moustache onto my worm-squiggling sister's mouth, which she turned this way and that way, screaming, 'Top, s-top, s-top!'

Instan … um … instan-tane … instane-i-ously … actually … let's go with 'instantly' — so, instantly, my mum snatched the child from her brother-in-law's hands, while her similar-but-wrinklier-looking sister awkwardly looked on. 'Just kidding,' said my uncle-in-law, 'it's a night game.' Minute-thirty later, our guests getted-got, and our rachel-eyes fell-herself to sleep on the single sofa, and all that remained was me and my mother on the couch watching an episode of *The Outer Limits*. 'Your dad isn't here,' Mum finally spoke-out-loud, turning to face me, 'so you need to promise to always protect your baby sister, yeah? Promise me.'

'What could I have done?' I asked, half my sights on Annabel's wheezing body, half on the tv screen, where a colony of super-smart-ant-like insects were mauling the human who created them to death. And this washing-machine-wrestling, leather-sandal-and-curtain-rod-swinging woman answered: 'Whatever means necessary.'

Whatever that means.

Staring at my sister now, sleeping peacefully, blissfully, unknowingly, stupidly, I wonder if I've betrayed her again, failed her a second time, already a second time in her short xylophone-sounding life.

There is a word-trick-monster in this home, whose presence sways from shadow to shadow; whose smell swims in the cigarette butts on the ashtray on the coffee table in front of the television where we have dinner each night; whose fingers tingle and pluck at the stiff hairs running up my spine. Gasping, I feel a large pudgy palm on my shoulder, squeezing my neck and tugging me back into the bedroom — I twist in fright, but there's no one behind me. Peering through my open bedroom door, Alooshi is exactly where I left him, curled into the sheet and pillow, choking on his own airways. Choking the means out of me. Whatever that means.

One way-after-school evening. Sitting on a lone milk crate out the front of our apartment. Watching the street cars run ruler-straight from each side of the road. Baby sister in my lap. I shared my one memory of the mother-land: Air. The evening winds brushing against the fine white hairs on my two-and-a-half-year-old skin; breathing in the ocean salt which swept through the cave in the pigeon's rock. The warm orange light dancing across the hills of seawater and easing onto my eyelids. The sun sinking slowly into the ocean, painting the sky with red mist and pink doves and rusted aeroplanes, calling out to me as tears formed along the outlines in my eyelashes: 'Don't be scared; I am the maker of tomorrow.'

A walk through the shadows, from the front door, down the white-tiled steps of the white-walled, white-metal-railing stairwell; each barefooted tip-toe echo-clapping on the still cold surface; that's me; breaking the rules.

For the first time in whatever time is the total time of my life, I'm outside between the sunset and the sunrise; alone. The cool air washes my face as soon as my naked feet hit the red-brick pavement. Drink it in like a gush of ocean, soaring through me, swallowing me, suffocating me, and yet, somehow, freeing me, washing me clean and spitting me up.

Down on my kneecaps, which scrape and sting against the rock, my breaths become a sobbing fit; nothing but the cockroaches to comfort me: a long-as-my-thumb cockroach with long-as-my-pinkie wings right in front of me, just sitting there, antenna feeling-out or feeling-in or feeling-through the creaks and cracks in the bricks beneath. A cockroach scurrying between the red-brick contour of the rows of mailboxes. A cockroach on top of another cockroach on the red plastic lid of a black plastic garbage bin. A cockroach on the nozzle of a recently ditched ginger beer bottle inside a black plastic recycling tub. A cockroach inside a wrapper that the wind stole from the dumpster, and the shrubs stole from the wind: the wrapper of a Rainbow Paddle Pop.

And staring from roach to roach to roach to back-again, I remember my mum's sister's husband's words the second-last time he visited: sitting on the single sofa with a coffee cup in one hand and a cigar in the other, one of those short-nasty-type-of-smiles on the edges of his rims, calling my dad a fool for ever returning to the motherland: 'Our people are cockroaches. They wanna fly like birds. Cockroaches fly. But they aren't birds.'

To my new buddy, Mr Roach-e, right in front of me, just sitting there on the pavement, as though he's casually sipping a coffee and smoking a ciggie, I whisper, 'Maybe that's why they smothered us in bug spray.' Rising back onto my bare feet, Mr Roach-e seems to finally catch sight of me — or at least sense of me — and scampers across the pavement into the long blades of the un-lawn-mowered grass.

The warm air flutters through my singlet and hits my skin, prickling a row of fine black arm hairs to life. Slow steps down the front yard, onto the sidewalk, where the maple trees line the nature strip, and dead maple leaves

cover the car windshields along the kerb. Tar across the empty night road. Tar across the empty night sky. Tar against the flickering white streetlights. Tar inside my mum's sister's husband's lungs. Tar inside my dad's brother's son's thighs; he who sleeps peacefully with my pillow locked in-between them.

Inching my way down the street, in the opposite direction I walk to school every morning, my heels feel like they're licking the pavement, collecting bits of dirt and dust and tiny rocks and remnants of bark and snail shells. There are slugs glued to the earth all around me, some white and some grey and some a blend of white and grey; long slimy trails glittering behind them.

Three apartment buildings away from my home, I find myself in front of the front yard of the three cauliflower-faced brothers who have a burnt-to-charcoal panel van in their apartment block driveway. Time-to-time-to-time-again, I'd stray up this side of the street without my parents and quit right here, catching sight of the three boys wrestling on their lawn. 'Come play,' the smallest would say. 'Yeah, come play,' the middle-est would say. 'Yeah, come play,' the biggest would say.

I'd watch, but never would I go past their front fence, for I saw what they meant by 'play': crawling all over each other, pinning each other, sitting on each other. And then, that last time, last month — the middle-est brother holding down the youngest brother while the oldest brother dropped his pants and stuck his bare bottom in the face of the child, who kicked and squirmed and squealed and finally ran off past me. Ran off in wet sniffs and wet snuffs and all those gross kinda wet stuffs.

M–um. Please remember, come find me. When we first arrived in this country, in this city, on this street, your husband took me for a walk from one end to the other, and when he reached the other, we discovered a garden patch between the last block of units and the florist, hairdresser, pub. The garden was nothing special to this ordinary pair of eyes — just a rusted-yellow spring rider in the shape of a horse and a tree which had lost all its leaves and all its bark. But peering through those Billy-Blue-Ranger-smart and Zordon-wise round lenses in the thin silver frame, my father saw something else: the soil that eats the soul. Every sunrise for the remainder of the year, he would wake up, conduct his morning prayer, and head out the door towards that tree, carrying his watering can and collapsible trench shovel, which he'd owned since the mother-land's civil war.

At last, and finally, and by and by, and there was and there was not, one sunrise, when my dad woke me up to join him in prayer on the living room floor — knees and forehead and open palms submitting to the carpet. Then he took me outside, walking us well beyond the freshly-burnt-to-charcoal panel van in the front yard three apartment blocks down, to visit the tree. From the base of its trunk, there was now a healthy and fresh mound of soil doing a full circle around the plant, and large rocks encircling the soil, creating a barrier between tree and grass and decay. Its thin layers of bark shone red against the rising sun, and small sharp leaves filled every branch and twig and twigs-of-twigs from the far end of the trunk.

'Dadda,' I yelped. 'I can see olives; green ones, dark-green ones, black-dark-green ones.'

We sat beneath the tree then, breathing in the morning dew; those drops of water which backwards-fall from the grass below. Resting my head on my father's lap, I asked him, 'Why did you save it?' and he replied, 'Because words have memories.' His voice was soft and peaceful and sad. 'I don't understand,' I murmured, half-awake, half-back-to-sleep.

My father laughed (to himself) and said, 'Do you know the origins of the word "understand"?' Shook my head into his thigh and he explained, 'People together; standing under a tree.'

And six years to the day, this day, this morning, this now, I return. The rusty coils of the horse-shaped spring rider creak in the breeze; the moist

morning grass welcomes my feet, and the soil beyond the circle of rocks swallows my toes. I sink to the ground, dino pyjama pants and white wife-beater singlet and the entire left side of my face face-planting into the dirt. One half of me sees nothing but dark-brown clots of soil, and the other half is a twitching eyeball, staring up at my father's olive tree. Sharp green leaves and shiny green buds, thin twigs sprouting from thick branches. And there, between the corner of the largest branch in sight and the trunk, a very-red-backed redback spider in the centre of a spiderweb, asleep.

Closing my eyes, I see him, my father, somewhere far off in the mother-land, whistling the songs of his mother-tongue, laughing to himself, digging his collapsible trench shovel into the earth, scraping away the bug spray for humans which poisoned the olive trees in the valleys of our before-fathers. I see him, surrounding each tree with fresh soil and winding circles of rocks, watering their roots with his rusty watering can. And he stares out towards the sunrise, across mountains and oceans and flushing toilets and flickering streetlights and wet bedsheets; stares straight at me, and he says, 'Failing your eye test because you think glasses will make you look smart is very smart, and very dumb, and such is the nature of children.'

One day, standing under this tree, I may finally understand. But right now, right here and now, how do I un-derstand all the 'uns' that un-do the memories of words? How do I un-see the bulging eyes that poked themselves over the cubicle; how do I un-know the fists that bloodied their knuckles on paper and bark skin; un-sense the locked doors that created a wailing wall between my cousin and my baby sister on one side, my mother and me on the other; un-feel the pudgy thumb on my shamefully un-ashamed thing; un-earth the unearthly p-word in my lifeless hand under the bedsheets; un-clove the wish of a four-leaf-clover; un-curse the curse words that curse my tongue?

Dadda, please see me, right here, right now, your child, who is blind with or without the glasses; come find me. The left side of my cheeks and left side of my lips and left side of my ribs; my left eyelashes and left arm and left fingers and left ankle and left toes, quiver; melting my body into the soil beneath me, down towards the roots of the olive tree; down, down, down towards the depths of innocence found, innocence lost. Do you understand? Um. Wait. Stop. No.

UN-ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

How cruel of me to ask any decent person to take credit for such a book?
How selfish of me to ask any dignified creature to share its burden?

If you would like to find out more about Hachette Australia, our authors, upcoming events and new releases you can visit our website or our social media channels:

hachette.com.au
HachetteAustralia
HachetteAus

Publisher's Note

This is a work of fiction, which explores harrowing themes of childhood abuse. There are a number of services that are available to anyone who needs help. Lifeline on 13 11 14 is available 24 hours a day and can direct you to services as needed. Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800 is also available 24 hours a day.

ALL THAT WAS

ONE

RUST IS MY BLOOD. Stardust is my soul. And you are the blood of my soul. Kah-lil: the back of the tongue taking a trip to the front of the palate to ululate, at one, on the teeth. You come tearing through your mother and into this universe like zamzam water, which sprung from the desert of your ancestors. Kah. Lil. You are thrown into your mother's frail and freckled and fair arms. Aajin against aajin – dough against dough. Kahlil. I have seen you emerge from her with my face on your face, and in this way, we three are connected for eternity. But do you know, my aajin, my zamzam, my blood soul, my rust and stardust, that you may have never been sent forth as a living arrow, at least not through the bow of your mother and me, looking like the little White Wog that you are, were it not for the Brown girl who wore a cross. You brought me here. Now let me take you back.

Back when the internet was foreign to our third-world parents, I met her on a dial-up chat site. This was the only way that Lebs like me, who grew up in the western suburbs of Sydney and went to Punchbowl Boys High School, knew how to find girls. My online name was Leb-Prince. Hers was Desert-Girl. She sent me a message that said, *Can I be your princess?* I gave her my mobile number and for three months she called me every morning as soon as she woke up. She told me her real name was Sahara and that she had spent her childhood at a women's refuge in Glebe and that she used to suck on old chicken bones. She had a bubbly voice that bounced like argileh every time she giggled. I told her I had a big broken nose. She said she didn't care about looks, so I asked her to meet me in person. 'I'm not pretty either,' she warned. That was the first time I wanted to hold her. I did not expect a woman to be thin and fair and blonde and blue-eyed and button-nosed.

She agreed to have a coffee with me in Newtown on 1 February, my nineteenth birthday, even though neither of us drank coffee. 'I can meet you at that cafe near the cinema, Sin-Key,' I told her. Sahara chuckled and said it was pronounced, 'Chin-Kway'. She was wiser than any Leb girl I had

ever met in Bankstown, those girls who said ‘Macdanas’ instead of ‘McDonald’s’.

Sahara was sitting at a table in the cafe, dressed in a wife-beater and reading *A Woman of No Importance* when I arrived. I knew I loved her the moment she raised her tomato-shaped head and looked at me. Her eyes were big and brown and bright and sad. I could see her entire childhood at the centre of her pupils – her father beating her mother in front of her, and the chicken bones she hid under her bed. Maybe love comes in pieces; and I loved the pieces I’d gathered from her over the phone, and now I loved the sight of her. Or maybe love is just one piece; and I was already in love with all of her, and she was going to be beautiful to me no matter what.

Sahara smiled like a child and said in the bubbling voice I had come to know so well, ‘Heya Bani.’ She was broad-shouldered and solid for a Leb chick, who were often busty but thin everywhere else, and she was dark-skinned for a Lebanese Christian, the tanned complexion of a sand-girl, a copper coating that glowed golden in the daylight. Her hair was dark brown and bushy and her eyebrows were thick, her nose pudgy and cheeks puffy. Sahara’s gaze on me was like the sun, too powerful for my eyes to bear. As though it were against my will, I found my glare dropping down past our table and onto her denim shorts. Her legs, much like her shoulders and arms, were thick, and she’d shaved them only to the point where you could still see the black dots of her stubble. She wore black flip-flops and her second toes were longer than her big toes. They reminded me of Uma Thurman’s toes in *Kill Bill*, when The Bride stares at them inside the yellow car and tries to make them twitch. Fine black hairs covered Sahara’s big toes and ran all the way up towards her ankles. Again, I thought about the chicks in Bankstown. Those girls straightened their hair and dyed it blonde and wore skimpy singlets and skinny jeans; they were always drenched in make-up like clowns and waxed every part of their bodies – legs, arms, armpits, eyebrows and whiskers. Sahara was something else: too much Glebe in her to be a Leb, too much Lebanon in her to be a hippie.

Staring back into her eyes, my heart roared inside my chest as though it were trying to break free from my rib cage. You see, Kahlil, I already knew that I was not allowed to be with a girl who was not an Arab Muslim Alawite. It did not matter that Sahara was Lebanese, that our parents and grandparents had come from the same village and had the same complexions. She was Christian. And it wouldn’t have mattered if she

converted to Muslim, because she could never convert to Alawite, a branch of Shi'ism that could only be passed on through our bloodline. I heard my father's voice inside my head. Ten Ramadans ago, while breaking our fast on halal cheeseburgers at Lakemba McDonald's, he said to me, 'You can drink, you can gamble, you don't need to pray, I will throw you the biggest wedding, I will buy you the biggest house, on one condition: you don't ever marry an outsider.' That's what we called a person who wasn't Arab Muslim Alawite – *outsider*. My father had told me stories of Alawites foolish enough to take one, that they had been disowned and banished and then struck down by a thunderbolt from Allah for having contaminated our divine origin. In contrast, he reassured me how much easier it would be with a girl from our tribe: 'You will be free, rich, protected, safe, included, *loved*.'

For the next twenty-four months Sahara and I dated in secret, spending most of our time at her housing commission unit. On her bed, which was just a mattress on the floor, she shared her story with me. Her mother, Lola, was a triplet who had twenty-one siblings. She came to Australia alone and against her father's blessing to be with the man she loved, a taxi driver from Jabal Mohsen named Antoun, who whipped her with his belt for nine years. Sahara's earliest memory was fleeing to the refuge with her mother late one night while her father was out doing his taxi route. By the time she and Lola had been offered a home by the housing commission, her parents were divorced and she never saw her father again. Nor did she ever meet any of her father's relatives, who called her mother a whore for leaving him, or her mother's relatives, who blamed Lola and disowned her for choosing the wrong man against their wishes. Over the years, Sahara's mother met a handful of other migrant women in those housing commission units in a similar situation to her own, and they all got jobs at the only kebab shop on Glebe Point Road, where they worked and gossiped during the daytime. Meanwhile, Sahara attended Glebe High School, failing all her subjects until she dropped out in Year 9 and got an evening job at Ultimo McDonald's. This set-up meant that I almost never saw my girlfriend's mother – while she was out during the day, Sahara would be at home, and just as her mother was returning, Sahara would leave for work and I left with her. All except for this one time when I had fallen asleep on the couch and Sahara left for work without waking me up. Her mother covered me in a blanket and watched television on mute until I stirred. I shook the sleep

from my face as the petite olive-skinned woman took in a deep sigh, her hand to her chest, and said in Arabic, ‘This home belongs to children whose fathers do not want them. If your father doesn’t want you, you can stay here with us.’

‘Ba’ed al-shar,’ I mumbled, half-asleep. ‘May such a fate be prolonged.’ Her daughter had not finished school, but she was a girl who understood the importance of being earnest – so I spent the next morning on Sahara’s mattress explaining why the comma needed to be put in, and the next afternoon in her kitchen explaining why the comma needed to be taken out. Sahara made spaghetti bolognaise for me, which she couldn’t eat herself because she was a vegetarian; and I used the sheet of Lebanese bread in her freezer and whatever vegetables she had in the fridge to bake her a homemade pizza, which I cooked for too long and burned to charcoal. Sahara cracked up at me and said, ‘Next time leave the comma in and take the pizza out.’

Being the first in my family to go to university, I could exaggerate to my parents about how much time a student was required to spend on campus, and when I wasn’t at lectures and tutorials, which absorbed only two days of my week, I was hiding out in Glebe with Sahara. She rubbed my back with her bare masculine hands while I wrote uni essays about Madam Bovary and Anna Karenina and Romeo and Juliet and Layla and Majnun. We too were doomed like these tragic figures of literature; one day my people would tear us from one another. Already the rumours were spreading like scabies. Aunt Yasmine spotted me at Broadway Shopping Centre holding hands with a girl who wore a cross around her neck. Aunt Yasmine told Aunt Amina and Aunt Amina told Aunt Mariam and Aunt Mariam told Uncle Ibrahim and Uncle Ibrahim told Uncle Osama and Uncle Osama told my godfather and my godfather told his daughter to pass a message onto me via my sister Yocheved, who attended the same hair salon as her. Yocheved came home with blonde streaks through her black hair and a sunken frown through her teeth, delivering my godfather’s memo on trembling lips: *We will never allow you to disgrace us with that whore.* Hearing those words was like having a fork jammed into my neck. Yocheved, who was only a year younger than me and had the same big crooked nose, took my hand gently in hers. At only five foot four, which was average for a Leb girl, she looked up at me and said, ‘I’d rather be a whore than a slave.’ I knew then that I could turn to my siblings for support: my gym-junkie older brother,

Bilal, who said to me, ‘Sahara’s a top chick, bro,’ and my sixteen-year-old emo sister, Lulu, who said, ‘I heard she doesn’t shave her legs – that’s so cool,’ and my twelve-year-old introverted sister, Abira, who said, ‘Sahara sounds like the name of a restaurant,’ and my chubby three-year-old sister, Amani, who said, ‘Do you have some salt and vinegar chips?’

On my twenty-first birthday, Sahara bought me a toothbrush. It was light purple with hard bristles. I waited until I arrived at her place every morning to brush my teeth and I would brush them again every evening before I went back home, back to my parents and my five siblings in Lakemba, who thought I had spent my day on campus. I loved that toothbrush. I loved knowing that inside Sahara’s bathroom was a toothbrush that belonged to me sitting beside the one that belonged to her. I loved that toothbrush and the bathroom where that toothbrush slept, the bathroom that was tight and tiled blue and lined with candles on the windowsill. We spent a lot of time together in that bathroom. I kept a lighter in the back pocket of my bumbag so I could always light the wicks for Sahara. She would undress me down to my boxer shorts, and I would undress her down to her underpants and bra – you see, we had promised to keep our bodies from one another until we were married. I would stand half-naked in her shower, warm water running through my thick black curly hair and down my slender arms and flat chest, and Sahara would wash me with her hands, soapy brown hands like the clay of Mecca. Then she would step under the water and I would stand behind her and wash her hair, her dark-brown hair – dark brown until the setting sun peered through the bathroom window and illuminated the flames of the candles before the light hit us, and then her hair was like honey. I remember the smell of her conditioner. Butter and sugar and milk. Her smell.

Sahara’s cheeks were high and round and shiny when she smiled. I pressed mine against them until they warped and flattened into one another. And when our cheeks were apart, I called her every two hours. I needed to know she was safe.

‘Hey Sahara.’

‘Hey Bani.’

‘Bye Sahara.’

‘Bye Bani.’

If she didn’t answer I’d panic. My heart would thud. My hands would sweat. My thoughts would spiral into madness – something’s happened to her, she’s been hit by a car, she’s been mugged, she’s been raped, she’s hurt,

she's dead, she's gone. I would crawl into bed and keep calling her while my parents and siblings clattered in the living room. I knew how many times Sahara's phone would ring before it went to voicemail. Twelve. Each time I counted and listened to her notification: 'Calm down, Bani. Everyone else, leave a message.' I would hang up and call again. When she finally answered, my agony vanished and my sanity returned, my heart rate eased and my thoughts became clear. She was safe. She had twenty-six missed calls because she was at the movies and there was no reception in the cinema, but she was safe. I sat up on my bed and held my phone tightly to my ear.

'Hey Sahara.'

'Hey Bani.'

'Bye Sahara.'

'Bye Bani.'

Then we would hang up at the same time and everything would be still and quiet in my room; every time we hung up except this one time. As I stared at my reflection in the wardrobe mirror, wondering how Sahara could ever love a boy whose nose looked like a boomerang, my bedroom door exploded open. My father stood in the doorway, his face like a shard of brick, the veins in his neck palpitating, his shredded arms seething. 'People are talking!' he screamed.

I sprung to my feet; they spasmed as soon as I hit the floor. From the moment I had set my eyes on Sahara I knew this day was coming and no amount of toothbrushes could have prepared me for it. My father had taught me long ago that he was the source of all my strength and all my weakness – I was only six and playing with my marbles outside our first house in Alexandria, which we shared with my grandmother; my uncle Osama; his wife and their three daughters; my uncle Ibrahim, a divorced drug addict who lived in the backyard garage; his two daughters, who were with us three nights a week; and my youngest uncle, Ali. From the alleyway that joined our street, a large drunken man with an M-shaped moustache approached me, grunting, 'Get ye dad's fucking ute out me driveway!' But my dad didn't own a ute and there were no driveways on our street. Just as the man leaned in to touch my face, Dad swept out of the house and threw an over-the-top jab, knocking him onto the kerb. Picking me up with one hand, as if I were a piece of bread, my father carried me inside and said, 'If that man touched you, I'd have killed him.' From then on I feared my dad,

not like I feared barking dogs and child molesters, but like I feared the sun, which gave me life, and could just as easily incinerate me.

Back in my bedroom, my mother and five siblings piled up in the corridor behind Dad, their faces white, as though they were the Brady Bunch. Maybe they were sad that I would be forced to give up the woman I loved, or maybe they were terrified to see what Dad would do if I refused to give her up – banish me, disown me, stand aside and watch as God struck me down. Mum held Dad by the arm, trying to ease him out of the room, as he pummelled his open palm into the doorframe. She would not have wanted me to marry an outsider either, but if my father accepted Sahara, she would follow his will. When my dad asked for her hand twenty-two years ago she looked at his biceps, which were like potatoes, and responded, 'Mashallah, if you slap me, you'll send me flying, I will be your wife.' This was how my mother measured the strength of a man: against her own. They were married three weeks later. Bilal was born nine months after that. I was born twelve months after him. And Yocheved was born twelve months after me.

'What? What's going on?' I said to my father, teeth clattering. I had to play dumb to find out how much he knew – maybe he had just found the lighter in my bumbag and thought I was smoking cigarettes. 'I do not accept this girl,' he said firmly, his voice as precise and certain as the Wahhabis of Lakemba Mosque.

I fell to my bedroom tiles, which were large and white like all the tiles in all the houses that belonged to all the Lebs of the west. My knees clapped against the porcelain as I wailed, 'Please let me go, let me go to her, let me go.'

'You will bring shame to the House of Adam,' my father said. This was the only truth our people feared, not Allah or the Prophet Muhammad, nothing except the Arab tongue. Dad's frown withered and a look of despair fell upon his sandstone face, his eyes a swirl of black and his nose protruding like a spear. 'I only ever asked you for one thing,' he said, a quiver in his voice. 'Just this one thing.' It was as though I had smashed the Ten Commandments.

'Oh father,' I cried, grovelling at his ankles while my mother and siblings looked on. 'The one thing you asked of me – is everything.'

Copyright

Published in Australia and New Zealand in 2026
by Hachette Australia
(an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited)
Gadigal Country, Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney, NSW 2000
www.hachette.com.au

Hachette Australia acknowledges and pays our respects to the past and present Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and recognises the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our head office is located on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

The authorised representative in the EEA is Hachette Ireland, 8 Castlecourt Centre, Dublin 15, D15 XTP3, Ireland (email: info@hbgi.ie)

978 0 7336 5166 3
978 0 7336 5167 0 (ebook edition)

Cover design and illustration by Alex Ross Creative

Cover background image (brick wall) courtesy of Unsplash/joe-woods
Edited by Camha Pham, Lee Moir and Vanessa Radnidge
Author photograph by Juan Guillermo Robayo Gomez