

Piping Shrike

checkmate



short stories and poetry
from emerging writers

checkmate

A collection of short fiction and
poetry by students of the University
of South Australia

Editors:

Andrew Bobola
Madeleine Cronin
Liam Freeman
Natalie Jones
Millie O'Grady
Patrick Smith
Tess Sobol

Piping Shrike

2010

Piping Shrike	checkmate copyright 2010
Published by	Piping Shrike
	Bachelor of Arts—Writing and Creative Communication University of South Australia St Bernards Road Magill SA 5072
	© Copyright remains with the individual authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the authors' written permission.
ISBN	978-0-646-54164-8
Publication Coordinators	Dr Ioana Petrescu and Sue Page
Editing Team	Patrick Smith Tess Sobol Natalie Jones Madeleine Cronin Liam Freeman Millie O'Grady Andrew Bobola
Cover Art	Millie O'Grady Tess Sobol
Printed by	Document Services 1 Wilford Avenue Underdale SA 5032



The views expressed in the poems and stories in this collection are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the University of South Australia.

Foreword

Life is like a game of chess. It's a game of manipulation and skill, attack and defence, loss and hope, black and white. Chess was an elegant analogy to make when trying to encapsulate the themes of the stories included in this, the eighth edition of *Piping Shrike* and therefore became the chosen leitmotif.

Drawing together eclectic texts from a disparate group of authors and creating a cohesive whole is no mean feat. It is a great challenge but one which the *Piping Shrike* team feels confident it has risen to in producing *checkmate*, the latest addition to the highly acclaimed series.

checkmate showcases the best emerging writing talent from the University of South Australia.

The smattering of poetry included is intended to act as a palate cleanser between the short stories, allowing the reader time to catch their breath and plunge headlong into the next selections.

The *Piping Shrike* editors feel there really is something for every reader's tastes in *checkmate* with stories ranging from the humorous to the suspenseful and the tragic to the uplifting.

Enjoy the game.

The editing team

Contents

Part one

The Secrets Women Keep	6
Caroline McNulty	
The Prefect	18
Jo Kitto	
Just Louise	25
Andrew Natale	
Five Stories about Love	31
Nick Milde	
The Date	37
Adrian Field	
When the Night Is Slow	44
Marija Poljak	
Her Photos	49
Liam Freeman	
<u>Poems</u>	
Chase	56
Elyse Elgar	
Beat	58
Amelia Walker	
Shadow	59
Jessica Eyles	
It Takes a Lifetime	60
Megan Dempsey	
Non-pejorative	61
Liam Freeman	

Part two

Milk Tooth	62
Courtney-Anne Craft	
Never Trust a Rat	66
Millie O'Grady	
Problem Solving	69
Patrick Smith	
No Oasis	83
Carly Smith	
The Exchangers	91
Emily Kilsby	
The Supermarket	102
Adrian Mazzachi	
<u>Biographical notes</u>	111

The Secrets Women Keep

Caroline McNulty

The sun streamed in through the windows. The room faced west and so was always a little too hot and little too bright in summer. For all of that, it had always been and still remained Faith's favourite room in her grandmother's house. She stood in the doorway and smelt the musty air.

'We should open the windows,' she said staring at the millions of tiny specks of dust floating in the sunbeams.

Her sister walked purposefully past her and started banging on the window frames.

'They always did stick,' she said wrestling with them. 'I used to tell her to get a handyman in to plane some of the wood off, but she never did. Ooof! I don't think these have been opened for a couple of years.'

'No... she didn't come down after she'd had the stroke and I didn't feel like coming here alone. She never asked to be brought down either.'

'I never thought Granny would end up in a nursing home,' said Joy.

'She lost a lot of confidence. She wasn't stable on her legs.'

And then, just in case her older sister thought she had abandoned her to an institution too easily, Faith added, 'It was a nice place you know. She had company her own age and they had activities and day trips. She was well looked after there.'

But inwardly, Faith cringed. She could not say Granny had been happy exactly, but she had wanted to stay there, close to Faith who visited her twice a week and took her out to lunch in Glenelg sometimes.

'She didn't want to be too far from a hospital,' Faith explained.

They worked all day sifting through Granny's papers, discarding the rubbish, setting aside anything they thought might be needed and reminiscing over the photos. Progress was slow. There were too many memories, too many unexpected surprises in the drawers to ignore.

'Honestly, Granny must have hoarded simply everything,' said Faith, sitting back on her heels and opening an album filled with old postcards. 'These are all from you, Joy. Hawaii, Canada, London, Paris.'

Joy glanced over at them, 'Mostly work trips. Fly in, fly out, two-day turnaround. Believe me, I saw just as much of Paris as you're looking at now. Fashion only looks glamorous. It's really just slavery.'

Faith continued to stare at the cards. She could remember them arriving. She used to tell her friends about her big sister's exciting jet set lifestyle—mostly they were made up stories because Joy didn't come home to Adelaide very often.

'Joy?' said Faith later, seeking her out in the garage. 'Come and see what I've found.'

They walked into the bedroom where Faith had pulled all the boxes from the bottom of the wardrobe onto the bed and opened them. 'I think I've found her,' she said, pointing to a collection of photos.

'She looks like you,' whispered Faith as they both gazed at the unknown skinny fair-haired girl. 'This one was taken in the back garden here.' Joy's face didn't show any emotion and Faith rattled on, filling the awkward silence. She opened an old envelope. 'There's something in here. Look.'

The 'something' turned out to be a lock of wispy fair hair and a faded baby photo with the name 'Hope' on the back. The sisters stared at it in silence, each knowing what the mementoes represented.

'Good Lord!' murmured Joy suddenly, turning away from the items in Faith's hand.

'I haven't stopped thinking about her since I found out the other day,' said Faith softly.

'I never think about it,' said Joy. 'I never imagined Granny had kept such things. She never mentioned it to me.'

'She'd be around thirty by now, I think.'

Joy shrugged her distaste for the subject and let her eyes wander. She'd walked away from that particular memory a long time ago. If Granny had chosen to hide away some sentimental keepsakes—well let her. It made no difference to Joy. Except that it had made a difference. Granny hadn't walked away. She'd kept in touch with that baby—her baby—all these years. And Granny hadn't said a word to either of them. And now that baby was going to live in Granny's house. It was already her house.

They had packed all of the personal things they wanted to keep in plastic bags stacked in the hall ready to load into their cars in the morning, when Faith announced it was time for dinner. 'It's only tinned soup and some bread I'm afraid,' she said, rummaging in the kitchen drawer for a wooden spoon. 'I can't find any light globes Joy. Have a look in the sideboard for a candle, will you?'

Joy returned with an old candlestick and mismatched Christmas candles of various lengths. She held it aloft casting unhelpful shadows across the pan and Faith's hands.

'I have the feeling this is the cue for me to tell my little sister some ghost stories. What do you think?'

Faith smiled at her. 'Do you know any?'

'Not one. How 'bout you?'

Faith shook her head. 'Although I think maybe we're living one right now, don't you?'

She spoke gently, not wanting to overstep the barriers her sister was adept at erecting, but keen to open a door that she felt needed opening.

Joy sighed. 'Who'd have thought Granny would have kept in touch with her all these years? That's what I find amazing. And she never said anything to you? Nothing at all?'

'Granny always said family came first, you know that,' said Faith. 'Family's what matters—family's what lasts. But no, she never mentioned her to me. All those years...' and she paused for a moment as her mind replayed all the times she'd cried on her grandmother's shoulder about the miscarriages, the divorces and the secret stash of baby clothes she'd hidden away "just in case". 'And not a single word.'

They sat on the old sofa in the living room to eat the soup, staring out of the large windows at what should have been the mighty River Murray, but was now an empty, sandy horror story.

'I can remember a time when this whole area was filled with yachts lying at anchor,' mused Joy. 'The pub was full to bursting with hearty young swashbucklers and girls with precious few clothes and even fewer morals.'

'That's Granny talking now,' Faith joked.

'Hmm... I always wanted to be one of those girls. They seemed to be having such a fine old time with the boys.'

'And did you? Ever get to be one of those girls, having a good time?' asked Faith hesitantly.

Joy burst out laughing. 'Oh God yes, several times.' Faith caught her sister's eye and they both laughed.

'It's all changed now,' said Faith sadly. 'Joey's Bar's closed down. The boat shop moved to where the posh money is and all the shacks are getting run down and still just as empty most of the year. Even the developers are getting cautious.'

'Oh I dunno,' mused Joy. 'This place would have sold okay. We'd have inherited a tidy little sum if she'd left it to us. Property values are on the rise.'

'Are you disappointed? Angry? I think I am. I think I feel betrayed,' said Faith.

She regretted the comment as soon as she'd made it. Never had she mentioned to her busy sister that her own shortcomings in the maternity stakes had caused her such deep and persistent grief. And now it was all too late. Another man had walked out and her eggs weren't getting any younger.

She wondered what Joy would say if she knew. Joy had never married. Joy had a career instead. Joy was the sister who had given up her only baby and waltzed out of their lives and built herself a wonderful new life in America where everyone was rich.

The sky outside was completely black now except for the regular flashing of the buoys marking the channel. A tear fell into the empty soup bowl and Faith stared at it in surprise. She hadn't meant to cry, hadn't expected to cry. Granny's death hadn't been unexpected. Failing health and increasing frailty coupled with a bad cold all winter. It was almost inevitable. She felt Joy take her hand and they sat in silence watching the darkness, their Christmas candles flickering merrily.

'I lied when I said I never thought about her,' said Joy quietly. 'I did think about her. Every Christmas I'd wonder if she was happy and did she have a lot of toys. That was it. I can't even remember her exact birthday. I know it was around Easter. I didn't want to remember it, you see? I needed to bury it, move on. I was sixteen for crying out loud. I wasn't ready.'

Faith squeezed her hand. She still didn't know how it had been allowed to happen; that she'd lost first her parents and then her big sister, but she could hear the plea for understanding in her sister's voice. Joy's hand squeezed back.

'About ten years ago, if Granny had mentioned that she'd kept in touch with her, I'd have been willing to meet her. I came over for her 70th, remember? Then would have been a good time to tell me about her.'

But ten years ago thought Faith, I was struggling to get over yet another miscarriage. Granny knew such a revelation wouldn't have been helpful. Of course Joy wasn't to know that and Faith didn't feel up to explaining it all. For now, it was comforting to know that Granny had, in her own way, been protecting all of them, all this time.

It was close to midnight when they settled into the back bedroom. Neither of them wanted to sleep in Granny's bed for reasons they found hard to express, so for the first time in many years, they bunked in together.

'Are you asleep?' asked Faith.

'No. Are you?'

'I just wanted to say I'm sorry. You know, for what I said in the lawyer's office when he read the will. It was just a shock, that's all.'

'Nah, don't worry about it. I was shocked that Granny had kept in touch with her all these years. I didn't know you could do that. I guess private adoptions are different.'

Faith thought she could hear the shrug in her sister's voice and tried to imagine what it had been like for her; suddenly having to confront something she'd thought was over long ago, only to find it wasn't. She couldn't help thinking how nice it would have been if she'd acquired a little sister to grow up with instead of losing a big sister to an overseas career.

'I didn't mean what I said about you being a bad mother.'

'It's okay. I probably would've been. I wasn't up to it. I was too needy myself only I couldn't see it back then. I was jealous of you, I suppose.' There, she'd said it.

'I adored you! You were my wonderful big sis.'

'Yeah, well' snorted Joy. 'You were a pain in my ass. It wasn't your fault. You were a cute kid—everyone said so and everyone was right. I didn't understand why I reacted the way I did, but I'd had Mum and Dad to myself for a long time and then suddenly you came along. And it wasn't all about me then – it was all about how cute the baby was, look at the baby, be nice to the baby. I dunno. I sort of got into a giant sulk and couldn't get out of it. Just a selfish brat I guess.'

'Is that why you left home—to get away from me?' Faith asked.

'God no! I left home because Granny spat the dummy when I got knocked up. She didn't want you to be teased at school because of me.'

'I would have liked to have a baby sister, I think.'

'You'd make a good mum, Fay. It's a shame you never got to keep a man long enough.'

'It wasn't the men,' said Faith quietly. 'I had so many miscarriages, I stopped counting at eight.'

'Jeez, I'm sorry Fay. I had no idea. You never said. Granny never said.'

'Do you know why men keep leaving me?'

Faith was suddenly unable to stop, suddenly in desperate need to have her pain acknowledged. And out it all came, the obsession about getting pregnant, the routine about only having sex if conception was possible, the prayers and all the candles she'd lit at mass, the tears and constant sense of failure.

'It ruins sex you know. They see you marking the calendar and they feel used. And they can't stand being made to feel like failures. And I do that. It's my fault. I do it to them and I do it to myself.'

Huge sobs escaped her and Faith found herself bawling like a child with a broken toy. Joy climbed into the bed with her and hugged her sister tight. 'It's not too late. IVF. You don't even need a man nowadays.'

'You don't get it, Joy. I wanted the whole thing, Mum and Dad, happy families, like I never had.'

For the first time Joy allowed herself to wonder what Faith's life had been like, living all alone with Granny after the crash; no parents, no sister, mass every Sunday, and she realised with surprise that Faith had missed her. She hadn't missed Faith. She hadn't missed anyone for a long time. But a therapist had shown her that she had really been missing her dad, had been looking for him in every man she'd ever met, in fact.

'You must think I'm soppy,' said Faith. 'I mean, you've probably never wanted that.'

The silence waited. Finally Joy decided to knock down the last remaining wall between them.

'I wanted that too,' she said. 'And I thought I was going to have it. I had a man. Oh I know—Granny never told you.'

Faith knew better now than to say with surprise 'Granny knew?' Of course Granny knew. She waited.

'He was married, you see. Naturally, Granny disapproved.'

So did Faith. 'So you were his mistress?'

'I was his lover. He was mine. I was his next wife. The 'wife-in-waiting,' so to speak. And I was good at it too. The waiting, I mean. I waited and waited and waited for his kids to grow up to be old enough for him to leave them.'

'What happened?'

'I suddenly got to your age and realised that my eggs were getting old. We used to see each other all the time at work, weekend conferences, trade trips interstate, overseas shows, that sort of thing. I wasn't pining or lonely you understand. All the pieces in my life fitted together nicely, until suddenly I heard that clock ticking. Then one day I panicked and went to his house. I don't know what I thought I was going to do. I knew I just wanted to have a kid before I got too old, you know. That's when I saw them. Talk about happy families – they even had a dog. I sat in the car and watched him playing ball with his kids on the lawn and I realised that he had everything he needed right there. He didn't need me – he only had me because he was greedy. I was an extra in his life, a little bit on the side. And I realised that even if I broke up his family and had his baby, my kid would always be the one who'd ruined his other kids' life and nobody would be really happy, ever.'

'What did you do?'

'Nothing. I came out here for Granny's 70th and told her all about it. When I saw him again he knew things had changed and so did I. It was over. Just like that. She waited me out. His wife won.'

Faith couldn't help herself. No matter how much sympathy she felt for her sister she knew what Granny would have had to say about it. Granny wasn't there anymore so Faith said it instead. 'She deserved to win him, Joy.'

In the dark, Joy nodded. 'I know. I was just waiting for a bus that was never going to come, that's all.'

* * *

Early next day, the two women surveyed the little house. The fridge was stocked with the essentials and the hot water service was turned on. The fire in the lounge had taken the chill off the air and the winter sun shone in through the large windows, as it always had.

'I dunno Faith. Three kids you said she had, all squashed into this little house.' Joy shook her head.

'She's got no money and no man. Trust me; she thinks this is the best thing to ever happen to her.'

'Place needs pulling down,' said Joy.

'She's been here before. She knows what's she's in for. Please stay to meet her.'

'Oh Faith. It's gonna be awkward. What will she call me? She already has a mother.'

Faith looked away from her sister's anxious face, out at the wide sandy expanse of the empty river with its abandoned jetties standing forlornly on their own and knew that she was treading on eggshells here.

'When I spoke to her on the phone, I asked about her adoptive parents. She said they'd divorced and both remarried years ago. She never sees him. He's moved up to Noosa and she doesn't get on with her mum's new partner. She didn't want to talk about the kids' father—said he was gone for good and good riddance, so I didn't ask. This really is a fresh start for her.'

The street was deserted. Most of the other houses were holiday shacks and they were still shuttered but Joy stared at them intently, trying to appear casual, as if she was weighing things up. She could hear the underlying plea in her sister's voice, but it wasn't needed. She had decided last night that she would stay and meet the girl. She just needed reassurance, that was all.

'Hmm... okay. I suppose. Plenty of time, I guess.'

Faith beamed. Joy had been given a second chance at family life. They had all been given a second chance—thanks to Granny.

Joy set off to the bakery to get some cake 'for the kids' and when she returned there was an ancient blue Ford wagon in the drive. It was piled high inside with bags and pillows and a trail of assorted toys already littered the front grass. Unexpected tears welled in her eyes. This was it then—the make or break moment.

Carrying the cakes like a shield she walked around to the back where she could hear voices. Faith was pointing out the peach trees in the corner.

'But of course, you probably know all about that,' she could hear her saying to the newcomer. They turned at her greeting and Joy came face to face with herself. Younger, less lined, still naturally blonde but it was the same angular face, same confident blue eyes and the same firm handshake. Yes, that was appropriate; they were strangers after all, eyeing each other up, trying to guess which way things were going to go.

She couldn't remember later what platitudes she'd uttered, but she did remember the screen door banging as small people burst out of the house at ferocious speeds. Small people, shrieking and chasing and falling over ... and being picked up and cuddled and presented to her.

'This is... say hello to ...er ... what shall they call you?' asked the given-away daughter.

And suddenly, Joy heard herself say in a firm and friendly voice to the shy little face in his mother's arms.

'I'm your Granny. Why don't you all just call me Granny?'

The Prefect

Jo Kitto

Jonathan Lindell had not seen many customers that day. The weather was lousy, the kind of weather for indoor activities, reading, testing out a cake recipe, or Scrabble. Not the weather for window shopping. The rain pelted noisily on the tin roof and the wind unremittently lifted leaves from the pavement and pressed them against the shop window. Jonathan walked down one side of the second hand trader, straightened the black and white photographs that lined the wall and looked over the images of women, families, cars and caravans, all circa 1950. Absent minded Jonathan tapped the floral wallpaper. On top of the counter perched an old radio muttering something about a telephone line that had fallen on a car in the storm. The disembodied voice of a bereaved car owner sounded out of place in the almost empty store. Jonathan slowly turned his head to listen to the story but just then two loud noises yanked him from his reverie. The telephone let out a short sharp bleat, and at the same time an elderly woman stepped through the door. She let it shut with a 'clang' behind her.

Jonathan clambered past the stripped pine furniture, Bentwood chairs and shelves of crockery to answer the phone. 'Street Vintage,' he said, watching as the old woman pushed the hood of her raincoat off her head and shook her umbrella dry before setting it down near the door. 'Cream, yeah, we've got several copies.' The woman stepped onto the carpet, fiddling with her greying hair and replacing a hairpin that had come loose under her hood.

'At four, okay, if you don't get swept away out there. Mmm hmm... cats and dogs, for sure.'

As she browsed his collection of sixties cookbooks Jonathan considered her. The face was sweet though the skin was lined with liver spots on her temples. She wore a smart navy knit-wool suit and silk scarf. She was in her late seventies, maybe early eighties, and it was clear she had once been very attractive. Jonathan's eyes went back to the face; he had a vague feeling that he knew the old gal from somewhere. Her walk, her manner, it was all so familiar.

Saying a quick goodbye, he replaced the receiver on the telephone, and rose hesitantly.

'Rowie?' he said her name with hesitation as he approached her. 'Rowena?'

The woman looked up, startled, at the middle-aged shopkeeper who knew both her name and nickname. She looked over his thinning, although still dark head of hair, khaki army shirt, and thick-rimmed glasses. Handsome, she thought, while vague recognition vexed her too.

Jonathan looked into Rowena's red-rimmed eyes which held his. They looked a little watery, as though wet with tears, but he knew this to be a characteristic of women her age.

'Rowena, it's you isn't it?' Jonathan extended an arm and placed it gently on her shoulder, 'Jonathan, Jonathan Lindell. I knew you years ago, Rowie.'

Rowena's face melted into a smile. She raised a frail hand and patted his. 'Jonathan dear.'

'Rowie! How've you been? Jeez, it's sure been a long while.'

She nodded, and smiled. 'You own this antique shop? That makes sense. You always were a hoarder.'

'Yeah, now I can share my treasury of junk with the world!' Jonathan laughed, 'although the world doesn't seem so interested today.'

The pair turned and looked at each other for a moment. The gale continued to blow outside. 'You've become a handsome man Jonathan.' Rowena was facing him again. 'Still a handsome man, should I say. You always were tall.'

As he straightened to his full height, Jonathan realised that the woman he had once stood eye to eye against had shrunk. Maybe inches.

'Nah let myself go. Only young once, I guess.'

Rowena shook her head. 'Jonathan, dear, do you realise when we knew each other, I was the age you are now?'

'S'pose you were, weren't you. Well, what an odd thought.' Jonathan reached out and took Rowena's soft but wrinkled hand in his. 'Come and have a seat Rowie, out back. I'll make us a hot cup.'

She nodded and turned the sign on the door so the word open faced them. Jonathan led her to the den behind the shop. She sat on an old couch as he began to fix a pot of tea.

'Do you sleep here, Jonathan?' she asked, noticing the pillows and blankets thrown by the side of the couch, and the pair of socks in the corner.

'Mmm, sometimes. I'm married, but there are times I need my alone time.' Jonathan handed her a cup of tea and sat beside her. 'How is Joe?'

'He died, Jon. Years ago.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear it.'

'It's okay, he was an old man.'

They sipped their tea in silence for a moment, both looking at the carpet. 'Jon, I want to ask you something. It might be a bit personal, do you mind?'

Shifting slightly in his seat, he replied, 'Course not. Hit me.'

Rowena paused to swallow another sip before saying, 'I didn't expect to see you again. There were always things I wanted to know about you, about us, but I never dared ask. I didn't know how you'd take it back then, you know, when....'

'Probably not so well,' Jonathan grinned, 'I was so naïve. I was what, twenty-three? A baby!'

'You were older than your age, Jon, much older. An old soul! I knew it from the moment I met you, when Joe brought you over to look at his Prefect. He'd leave, and you and I would talk, do you remember?'

'Of course!'

'For hours we'd sit out there in the garage while you tinkered away. When it was cold I'd have all those dirty blankets wrapped around me, but I refused to go inside. Not when you were there. You were more than a baby, Jon.'

'You weren't so bad yourself. You were very glamorous, even in those old blankets,' Jonathan laughed.

'I see you still like cars,' she nodded towards the black and white photos of 1950s and 60s cars on the wall of the den. 'But I don't want to ask you about your cars.'

Rowena looked Jonathan directly in the eye, 'Jon, was I your first?'

'Oh. There it is hey,' Jonathan shuffled his feet, surprised that after all these years; she could still make him nervous, 'Is that what you wanted to ask me? If you were the first woman I was with? I would have thought that was fairly obvious Rowena.'

'Is that a yes?' she asked in a whisper, leaning in towards him.

Jonathan paused and looked through the doorway to the empty shop front.

'You were number one, Rowie. My first lover.' He placed his mug of tea on the ground to avoid eye contact with the old woman. 'You could say my first love,' he said under his breath.

Rowena sat back in her chair and smiled a look of total satisfaction on her wrinkled face. 'That means a lot to me.' He looked up at her, and past the smile, he saw an old woman remembering something long lost.

'We never spoke about our secret in those days. It was as though putting it in words risked spoiling it. I always hoped that you understood why we were so secretive, and more than that, I hoped you understood that as beautiful and exhilarating and downright thrilling our time was, it had an expiry date.'

Jonathan winced slightly as he remembered how he'd felt the day she stopped coming out to the garage. How much colder the days seemed when he worked on the Prefect alone.

He sighed. 'Yeah, I was aware of all that. You had your life. You had Joe, the kids. They really weren't much younger than I was.'

Rowena put her hand on Jonathan's thigh and let out a warm laugh. 'If they only knew...'

Jonathan couldn't help but laugh too. The two old friends chuckled as they entertained the thought of teenage boys learning of their mother's infatuation with their father's mechanic.

'It's lovely to see you again, Jon.'

'You too, old gal.'

Rowena took another sip of her tea. Jonathan took a swig from his mug and looked at his watch.

'Rowie, it's getting late. I don't want to kick you out, but it'll be dark soon. How are you getting home?'

'Oh, the bus stop is just down the road, dear. I'll catch it right to my street.'

'Hmm,' Jonathan narrowed his eyes in thought, 'still, it's mighty cold. How about I give you a lift? My EJ is out the back, she's a beauty.'

Rowena nodded. 'Well, if you're offering Jon, I'd like that.'

'No problem.'

Jonathan helped Rowena out of her chair and led her through the back door of the den. There, parked in the laneway, was his pride and joy, his 1963 EJ Holden.

'She's lovely,' grinned Rowena as she opened the door and sat herself in the passenger seat.

'You bet! Runs like a dream. I've spent the past few weekends on her, she's practically new again.'

Jonathan hopped into the driver seat and started up the car, 'Now, Rowie, where to?'

It was Saturday morning before Jonathan thought of Rowie again. Opening the door of Street Vintage, he stood on the porch and stretched his arms above his head. Jonathan had slept on the fold out couch again, after spending the night sipping whisky and listening to talk-back radio. His back ached from the thin mattress. The morning air was crisp and soothing. The grass on the median strip looked particularly green after a good week's worth of rain. Jonathan bent down and retrieved the morning paper from the damp bitumen. Stepping back inside, he flipped the sign to open and sat at his desk, skimming the black and white pages of the newspaper. He read for a while about the community's fight to save a local cinema. Then, as he always did, he turned to the classifieds to search for treasures being given away or sold by someone who no longer needed them. Jonathan rubbed his neck as he reached for a mug of cold coffee. That's when he saw it. Just before the sports pages, and just past the births, sat that sad column of names. Jonathan sat staring at hers in eight-point Times New Roman. Rowena Gent: 1936-2009.

Just Louise

Andrew Natale

My shrink said I needed to write it all down, as part of the healing process. I have never really journalised before but he said:

'Telling your story can help you get over her.'

'Even if no one reads it?' I asked.

'Even if no one reads it. Putting it on paper will help you see in a different light. You need a different light,' he said in his typically magnanimous tone.

So here I am, writing all this down to see it in a different light and hopefully be free of her memory once and for all.

It was her scent that was hard to forget. Among other things; her laugh, the way her hair did as it pleased, her ridiculous rhetorical arguments and her silent treatments, mixed with her deep brown eyes and complemented by her devastating smile. This all came together in a beautiful harmony. They made me fall in love with her helplessly and boy, did I fall in love.

What made it worse, upon reflection, was that she had been a good friend to me for such a long time. I guess if I'm honest with myself I had always harboured some illicit feelings for her. It was only a matter of time before I would fall in love with her, I suppose. A one night stand or casual fling could be over within weeks but a love affair with your best friend, who was engaged to another man, is something entirely different. I had always thought her to be pretty but after that one night she had become simply beautiful to me.

Irony isn't it, how according to stereotypes men are typically emotionally stunted and it's women who love deeply. Well, I wish that were the case for me.

There were many things I loved about Louise but it was how she could disarm me with a simple look that I loved the most. She was so confident and full of life, effervescent, charming, audacious and completely gregarious.

That's what made her so appealing. I used to call her Louie, and she hated it, but secretly I'm sure she liked that there was a name that existed just for her that only I used. I know I loved it. I said that she was confident and full of life, because I haven't seen her in five long years.

It is almost five years to the day actually, now that I really think about it. It was the night of the opening ceremony of the 2004 Olympic games. It was after Australia had marched into the stadium but certainly before Greece, when she first kissed me. I remember because by that stage we had already drunk a lot of wine and really wanted to see the Australian uniforms.

I could tell she was different that night as she was somewhat quieter than normal. So I asked her as I usually did and she responded as she normally would.

'Everything ok?'

'It's Michael. We just had a fight about the wedding.'

I had never really liked Michael that much. I mean he was nice and all, but he just wasn't as sophisticated, or intelligent as what I thought Louie deserved. She had a razor sharp wit and blunt humour.

'Money?'

'Money,' she said, giving a slight familiar nod.

After about fifteen minutes of talking about Michael and her usual doubts about him, she convinced me to turn off the Olympics and put on some music. Naturally I obliged, put on some Hendrix, poured another glass of wine... then another and another. We stood on my couch singing into the empty wine bottles. We laughed until we cried and she fell to the floor knocking over my lamp. I took her hand as I helped her up and we danced.

That's when it happened. She leant in to kiss me and I hesitated at first. She smiled, thinking I was playing some sort of game, and leant in to kiss me again. This time I didn't move. I wanted to move, I really did. But it was Louie; I had always wanted her to be my Louie.

Slow at first then faster, we kissed until we both sank into it. It seemed our natural chemistry didn't stop at the end of our platonic friendship. She held me close as I ran my fingers through her hair, pulling her head back quickly but gently. Her untamed brown hair bounced off her face as I kissed her neck. Hendrix finished but we kept going. The next morning I awoke to find my bed cold and empty. The pillow revealed where her head had rested next to mine. That night was the last time I saw my Louie for five long years.

Until about three months ago.

In the weeks and months after that night I tried calling and emailing her but she never replied. After three months her number changed and her email address bounced back. I once even tried going to her house, stupid I know, but I had to see her. I nervously knocked on the door and was confronted by an old lady in her dressing gown. Funny how I hadn't noticed a different car in the driveway.

I genuinely did try to move on after that night. There was Grace who had Louie's wavy brunette hair but lacked her smile. There was Christina who had Louie's brown eyes, her hair and similar mannerisms but she just couldn't make me laugh. And then there was Natalie who came closest. She had the hair, the brown eyes, a great smile and really made me laugh. But after about six months I realised what I had always known right from the beginning. She just wasn't my Louie.

And then on one clear innocuous day, while I was waiting to pay for five tomatoes and a cabbage, I saw her again. I had been going to that same shopping centre on the same night of the week for roughly the last five years. But on this day she was there. I must have stood there for about five minutes before I realised it was her. It was her scent that awoke my memory.

I froze not really knowing what to do. She was right there. The fluorescent lights of the supermarket made her seem more real, a stark contrast from the warm yellow light that blanketed her in my memories. She was slightly larger, but still small. After five long years, countless sleepless nights, many dreams and many, many therapy sessions there was my Louie standing not one metre in front of me in the supermarket line, completely unaware that I was behind her. She placed erratic strands of hair behind her ear as she always did. I glanced down at her left hand and studied it intently to see if she had married Michael. That same diamond ring which had scraped my back five years earlier lay there on her finger mocking me, however its shine had waned.

She never looked behind, but I knew without seeing her face it was her. The way she stood, her hair; oh God her hair. It was her. I had to see her face; I had to talk to her. I paid for my things keeping an eye on her at all times. I followed some paces behind, keeping my distance.

On the escalator I kept her in my sight so that I wouldn't lose her again. She reached the top of the escalator and kept walking. I followed carefully. She stopped so I stopped, hiding behind a stand that sold mobile phones.

As I watched she greeted Michael with a habitual kiss, forced and clumsy. Then, as I moved the stand to get a better view, I saw him. He was small, standing in the shopping trolley, his brown curly hair almost touching his eyes. He smiled up at his mum as she bent over to kiss him.

When he turned his face up to kiss her she turned away at the last minute, teasing him. Laughing, he grabbed his mother's cheeks, squeezing them, forcing a kiss from her. This young boy looked about four years old, his big brown eyes and unkempt hair lit up his mother's face. She smiled until she turned to see Michael, then the smile dissipated.

She talked to Michael but it was a far from pleasant conversation. She kept shaking her head as she listened to him, occasionally running her fingers through her hair as she did when she was angry, moving it from one side to another. After a few moments Michael and the boy walked off through the shopping centre, past me as I hid from them, still trying to look at the boy. I looked to where Louie had been and she was gone. I walked in her direction looking frantically in each store but I couldn't find her anywhere. I reached the food court and looked around, bouncing my eyes off every brunette I could find.

Standing in the middle of the food court, tables and chairs around me, I circled to see if she was there. It was when the cleaner moved the rubbish trolley that my Louie, after five long years, saw me. I just stood there staring, not knowing what to do. She was too far away to talk to, but close enough for me to see her face. I was motionless, wanting to walk towards her, but my legs were adamant in their disobedience.

She placed some strands of hair behind her ear and gave a small wave, a half smile across her face as the corners of her mouth raised ever so slightly. I lifted my hand and smiled back at her.

After a few more moments of just looking at each other I took a pace towards her, slowly. She took a pace backwards. I took another pace forward and again she took another pace backwards. She then shook her head slightly mouthing the word 'sorry' to me. I nodded in understanding.

She reached into her handbag trying to find something, as the cleaner with her oversized rubbish trolley obstructed my view. When I moved to see her properly she had taken out a piece of paper and a pen. Holding them up she smiled as I acknowledged what she was saying. She wrote for a few moments then placed the paper on the table she was standing next to. She put her hand up to her face making a phone symbol with her fingers.

I nodded enthusiastically. She pointed at the piece of paper on the table and gave the smile I had missed, the smile I had remembered. Even though I wasn't close enough to really tell, her eyes seemed glazed over like she was fighting back approaching tears.

Again the cleaner and her trolley obstructed my sight as I moved again, giving a wave and reciprocating smile. She then turned and walked away and I watched her blend into the crowd of shoppers. I started walking towards her table to get that piece of paper but my legs couldn't move fast enough. I just couldn't believe that my Louie was back in my life, kind of.

As I moved closer to the table, the cleaner moved slowly in front of me wiping down Louie's table. She gathered the note in her cloth, throwing both the cloth and the note into her large trolley filled with the rubbish of fast food wrappers and discarded food trays.

'Stop, hang on, stop!' I yelled, the sound and volume of my voice surprising myself. 'That piece of paper I need that piece of paper... wait.'

The cleaner stopped as I pushed her aside and delved into the rubbish looking for her cloth and Louie's note. There it was on top of a pile of other cloths. I took it out and unwrapped it slowly. There was her note but the paper was ruined, wet and crumbling in my hands, falling to pieces. I must have stood there for about ten minutes trying to read that wet piece of paper but it was pointless.

I quickly walked in the direction of where my Louie had gone but I couldn't find her anywhere. Again she had vanished, just like that. I listened to Hendrix as I drove home, the pain familiar almost to the point of comforting and my melancholy overbearing.

So there is my story in every detail. It's funny, my shrink was right up to a point: it did help a little. Needless to say I still miss my Louie and think about her often but as the months pass her memory fades a little and I find it easier.

I go to that same supermarket at the same time on the same day every week. I even buy the same things; it's superstition I guess. I walk the same path and wait in the food court hoping that maybe I will see her standing there again. I haven't seen my Louie again yet, but I still hope. Each day she doesn't show is a day she changes from being my Louie to being just Louise.

Five Stories about Love

Nick Milde

'So two people walk into a bar: a beautiful young girl and a skinny old man, yeah? So the young girl... no, the man, he... anyway, basically it just ends up with someone being pretty embarrassed and things aren't really too great.'

The guy's forty-something and stuck to his stool, I think. I leave him to his whiskey. Jesus, I'm a tough crowd (and is this thing on?). It's cold and it's probably raining, and I think someone stole my jacket back at that other place I was at with Jack and Carrie before they started what they were doing and I left to go to that other place over on Rosemont but saw someone I thought I knew and thought they'd be coming here but they didn't, to cut a long story short.

It's only water, huh?

Three in the morning and it's four degrees and wet. There's a river of skipping lights flowing off downhill reflected on the road, and I course along the banks. I sing something by Nick Cave to myself and one drunk woman who grabs my arm before floating all away again when her friends yell and tell her to catch up.

I shrug into my cardigan and think mainly about catching a bus and making a phone call to you. You're asleep, but I still kind of want to wake you up and sing a bit, you know?

'Hey, Dave... Jesus, I'm asleep, you know? People *do* sleep?'

'Ha-ha, you know that's just an urban myth, hon.'

'Ugh... ha! 'Course, maybe I'm not even real.'

'Ha-ha-ha! Do you even know what you're *talking* about?'

'I'm asleep, you know?'

Something like that; that is how we talk.

I can't find Jack and it's like three degrees and raining and I'm wearing somebody's coat that I found on a barstool back in the Hunter or maybe Fountain, I think. Dave's gone as well (oh hey, maybe it's his jacket?); I definitely remember him saying something about going somewhere at some stage, saying he'd seen Fletcher or Johnny B or whoever, one of those guys from his film course I met a few weekends back. Sparrow. His name was probably Sparrow; "indie" names are part of their criteria, apparently. Jack does law.

I can't see him yet. God, I mean... Jack? Me and Jack? Clarifying so you (and I) do not get confused: Carrie and Jack? Jesus, this is surreal. I feel serene and frenzied at the same time, you know? It's like a little girl's dream coming true, her giggling as she goes through her maths book and writes "C plus J" in the corner of every page with her favourite red pen then wraps the flowery letters up in a big gross heart, sickly sweet. Not that I'd do that: can't buy stationary at three a.m.

Some song is stuck in my head; some poppy whatever by whatever fifteen-year-old is popular at the moment. I was sitting and saying just how terrible I find it when the crowd bowed down and faded, and Jack emanated from the depths like a dolphin in leather, yelling 'let's go, yeah?'

'But... outside? Jack, it's like three degrees and fucking raining!'

'Yeah, but this song is terrible.'

So I grabbed someone's coat and we went outside. It *is* like three degrees and fucking raining, but I didn't notice when Jack's hand was on my arm, so here I am. I hope Dave doesn't want his jacket back; he's definitely not going to get it.

Where is Jack?

I couldn't find her at Fountain; she wasn't there. I think I saw Dave but I just do not want to have to deal with that right now. That he was there was a good sign that she was, but no. I went to that place near Dino's but she wasn't there, so neither was I for long, just long enough to tell some dunce from the course that the film projects are due next Monday and not this coming one. Have a great old week, jerk. Sincerely, Johnny O.

It's raining and, Jesus, if it hasn't just put my smoke out before it even skipped my lips, I go back into Jazz but I can't find the guy who I bummed it off. Despite God's apparent suggestions, I do not want to quit, okay? Some freak is leant halfway across the bar and he's slowly growing his fingers like ivy towards a pale ale, and I bum a packet and lighter from his back pocket and hit the street again. I was sure she'd be at Jazz.

Town is dead. Cold, wet, empty of people as far as I'm concerned now. I'm on the bus and some old prick with a beard that twitches because it's filled with live cockroaches sits across the aisle from me and just stares, so I throw him the cigarettes and move down a few rows. I hear a papery clatter as he spills the box and watch smokes go rolling down the aisle like logs, and down slides this guy after them with a yell and I can't really help but laugh. Next stop he's kicked off the bus but I hear him singing some happy old song as the doors hiss closed behind his swaying arse.

When I get home Dad is watching TV in the lounge with the dog, so I sneak past and go up to my room and, although I'm hoping, she is not hiding in my cupboard.

I sing as I fall into bed. There is always next weekend.

He looks like Newman from Seinfeld: That is the first thing I'm thinking. He shrugs bulkily past me and I can't really help but at least mutter it to myself.

'Hello, Newman.'

Newman doesn't hear which kind of disappoints me, so I watch him stumble out of the door and then just make it into the cubicle before some yuppie with a balloon and a credit card tries to jump the line.

When I slip the latch closed and I'm slipping into that private little world of suddenly escaping a hundred people I notice I'm still not alone; some creep is crouched in the corner with mascara down his face and he's slipping a fifty into his breast pocket.

God damn, you have to love Spider Club.

I kick the little shit out on his sore ass and swear by the scummy toilet rim that this is the last time I'll ever come here. I only came over to find Dave, but he's definitely not around.

I told Carrie to wait for me outside the Hunter across the street, and I think I meant it. I mean, I think I intend to actually go back. Huh.

'Jack and Carrie'. Not as in 'Jack and Carrie did something on the weekend, did you hear,' just 'Jack and Carrie, full stop'. I was not ready for this, Julie-who-will-get-me-heaven-call-this-number, no way. I should be leaving right now; I should be going to Jazz or back to Fountain to find someone and maybe not see her for a few weeks, but... I know I'm not doing that tonight. I'm going back to the Hunter.

The door thunders and yuppie swears to high heaven through the wood, and he's unintentionally quoting a few of the pen scribbles on it which makes me laugh and decide he deserves his time alone for that. I'm done with the cubicle.

'So two people walk into a bar: a beautiful young girl and a skinny old man, yeah? So the young girl... no, the man, he... anyway, basically it just ends up with someone being pretty embarrassed and things aren't really too great.'

This kid does not quite get it but is decent enough to smile. With a pretence so thin I laugh and nearly lose my awkward perch on the stool (that it's too damn warm in here). The kid is gone I'm alone with my whiskey and the conundrum of just how that joke actually went.

In a moment of clarity, I realise I'm very tired.

Rain hisses furtively down the windows at my back, like a serpent's waiting impatiently for me to drink up, getting cold and mad and hungry, but I decide I should leave anyway. I apologise to the bartender for not having finished my drink and, like always, he laughs and tells me he will save it for me until next week. I should ask him his name, some night. Working graveyard shift doesn't find you many friends.

On the bus I watch as the nightlife stumbles off and hides itself away in the cracks, and the city's hundreds of shining eyes begin to flicker open ahead of the sun. I've never stopped loving how night ebbs and flows; how it affects people and how picturesque not being able to see can make things. I asked someone a question one night fourteen years ago, and no other memory I have is as tangible and clear.

I fall like a feather onto the sheets at home and wrap her up in my arms, pulling her close and just lying there. She stirs a little but doesn't wake up, and just like I have every weekend for fourteen years, I watch her sleep.

The sun peeks up over our porcelain cat on the windowsill, and I remember how that joke went after all.

The Date

Adrian Field

Jason was clock watching. It had become a routine for him lately, but it was getting out of hand. He found himself constantly staring at the clock with his internal gauge of time, his body's natural clock somehow following suit.

He found his actions were becoming more and more time-oriented. He needed to know exactly how long he would take to complete just about any given task, regardless of its importance. In most cases it was a good thing; his punctuality was impeccable, he had the most efficient work rate in the office and held several records across the track and running disciplines in his athletics club.

It could also be a bad thing. Case in point: right now. He had just watched the last fifteen minutes of his work shift crawl painfully by. It was now in the last minute of that agonising quarter of an hour and Jason was willing the second hand to speed up. It hit the twelve at the top of the clock for the last time. It was three o'clock on the dot and Jason was away.

Running from the building that housed his office to the multi-storey car park across the courtyard, nimbly picking his way through the darkened levels of parked cars, sliding and shuffling his feet in the manner of a professionally trained dancer, whipping and turning his mid-section and torso like an extreme skateboarder. Then running on the most direct route to his scooter—it saved time in traffic.

Once outside the car park he felt as though he was flying his scooter home, becoming Valentino Rossi navigating through the heavy Tuesday afternoon traffic. Time was of the essence, he could not spare a second.

Jason arrived home exactly seventeen minutes after his shift ended, noting this was not his quickest time making the trip but not bad for the afternoon school rush. He opened the mailbox and grabbed a small bundle

from inside before heading into the house, leaving the mailbox hanging open. Upon entering the house he threw the mail on the table without even looking at it. His thoughts were now completely focused on the task at hand. Jason had allowed for an hour and a half to prepare, which would leave him with just thirty minutes to shower, select his clothes and make himself presentable.

He headed for the kitchen, a small offshoot of his main front room. He removed the cutting board and a sharp knife from the cupboard and placed them on the counter top. He then collected potatoes, onions and a chicken from the fridge, and a packet of diced carrots and a packet of baby peas from the freezer. Moving to the cupboard under the stove and rifling through the saucepans he located the steamer, the flat grill and the fryer and placed them on the stove top. Then he took off his watch, washed his hands, glanced quickly at the kitchen clock and set to work.

Jason had recently returned to work from a very uneventful four weeks of forced unplanned annual leave. This type of disruption to his life made him very uncomfortable. Jason was the kind of man who when left with little to do would worry over nothing. He had decided to make the best of a bad situation and spent much of his imposed "free" time learning to cook from the afternoon cooking shows. Now he was attempting a recipe he'd tried before but hadn't been satisfied with the result, so he had modified it slightly. He knew it was a little risky; all the same he was confident he could pull it off—after all, the TV chef said it was all in the timing.

The reason for this daring venture was the lovely Sue-Jane Taylor, his co-worker and rival contender for the new managerial position. Jason had been working up the courage to ask her out and although they were competitors, they had also become good friends and were spending a lot of time together outside of work.

Not entirely sure what direction the evening would take, Jason was actually beginning to doubt the wisdom in asking Sue-Jane over. He thought he knew his own mind but now as the moment of her arrival was fast approaching he was unsure of what his true intentions were. Sure Sue-Jane was beautiful. She was a part time model and the most attractive girl in the office. But maybe that was part of his decision to make a move on her now. Deciding that this type of thinking was counterproductive Jason refocused on the task at hand, the meal, by filling the steamer with water and setting it to boil, cutting and boning the chicken, preparing it for the grill. As the water came to boil Jason placed the potatoes inside. Letting out a slow breath and wiping sweat from his brow with a cloth Jason glanced at the clock. He was right on the money, so he had a short break.

In the idle minutes spent waiting for the potatoes to soften his thoughts came back to his primary motivation. Of course both Jason and Sue-Jane were in line for the same job, but that was where the similarity ended. Jason was a company man. The last nine years of his life had been spent climbing the corporate ladder. The first few years as a lackey in distribution, followed by an ambitious three year push into the offices and finally his own team. The work had been hard, the hours long but Jason had proven time and again that he was up for the challenge. He was a valuable asset to the company.

Sue-Jane on the other hand had joined the company two years ago with a position at the administration level. Fresh out of high school she was singled out to do the management training program. To anyone who didn't know her, life would have appeared to be easy, but Jason knew her background. She had an unmarried older sister with five kids to four different fathers. She was the only member of her family who had a job or even worked in the last five years and she had absolutely no intention of turning out like any of them. Jason admired that about her, the way she had a purpose. It gave her a power and a drive that other girls her age lacked. But Jason also had no doubt that her looks had played a strong part in her rapid advancement. It was all part of the grooming process the company was famous for, and although he would never admit it Jason begrudged her that fact.

At last, with Jason's patience wearing a little thin, the potatoes were ready to be removed from the steamer and mashed to a pulp. Clumped into perfect spherical balls the potatoes were readied, the fryer was put on, filled with oil and slowly brought to the boil. The grill was heated and the chicken left to cook, the rest of the vegetables washed and put into the steamer to quickly soften, all the while one eye was kept on the clock. He left the last of the meal to cook, headed to the bedroom and picked out a shirt and pants, laid them on his bed, undressed and jumped into the shower.

He was just dressing when the doorbell rang. She was early! He still had to fry the potato balls. The one thing that caused more frustration in life than anything else was people's ability to disregard their own sense of timing. Jason felt a wave of anxiety wash over him. Going to the door he strained a smile as he opened it. Their eyes met and they both blushed and looked away.

'Good evening,' he said as calmly as he could manage.

'Hi,' she replied, bubbly and bright.

'What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?' he said, cringing at his lack of originality.

Sue-Jane looked awkward, an endearing trait on a girl so fine and self-assured. 'I've come about the cleaning job, heard there was a male in distress in the kitchen,' she looked past him into the flat, 'could you use a woman's touch?'

Her attempt to sound witty grated on his sensibilities and for the third time that evening he questioned his judgment and intentions toward her. Stop thinking, he reminded himself, just go with it, so many guys at the office would kill to be you right now! He left her comment hanging without speaking and responded by waving his arm, motioning for her to enter.

She scanned and scrutinised the layout of the small but well-organised little place. Eyes tracking across his belongings, internal meters weighing his sense of style possession and arrangement. A genuine smile of approval rose on her face like the first rays of sun on a spring morning, the effect made Jason glow.

'Have a seat.' His eyes slid sideways toward the couch. 'Would you like a drink? I've got wine.' He spoke rapidly; he knew the speed betrayed his nerves. 'I've still got a bit left to do, do you mind waiting a minute or two before we eat?' He turned as he spoke and walked into the kitchen.

'I thought you might need a woman's touch,' she said again, and again Jason felt a knot twist inside him.

'I just need to fry these, but the rest is basically done.'

'I'll supervise then.'

'Sure.'

Jason put the potato balls in a wire basket and lowered them into the boiling oil. As Sue-Jane watched, Jason looked on in horror as the balls broke up and turned into a soggy brown pulp within seconds of hitting the oil. He looked at Sue-Jane. She didn't smile but he could see through her eyes that a part of her was laughing hysterically. He knew his mistake would endear him to her. But he couldn't run with it. Instead the idea of gaining affection for poorly timed, ill-prepared buffoonery was the last thing he could have wanted.

'Did you use flour?' she asked tight-lipped.

'Uh... no.'

'Do you want to just have what's ready and leave this bit?'

'I was actually looking forward to doing the whole thing right, but I suppose the chicken and veg will do.'

Dinner went just like the many others they had shared either during or after work. They made small talk about their co-workers, families and their favourite TV shows, they both became very relaxed, in fact Jason thought it didn't feel much like a date at all.

When dinner was over they sat on the couch with the lights down low and the stereo playing softly. The mood had changed, this definitely felt like a date, but not like any other Jason had been on. If things went badly from here there would be ramifications. He had come this far and Sue-Jane looked incredible and she really was a lovely girl and yet something dug in right at the back of his mind. He tried to push through it.

'Want to play a game?' he said, almost flatly.

She looked him dead in the eye. 'Yes!'

'Ok, hold out your hand palm up and close your eyes.'

Sue-Jane held out her left hand, Jason cupped it in his right. With his left index finger he traced the letters 'I-L-I-K-E-U' across her open palm.

She sounded them out. 'I like you too.' she giggled, eyes still closed. 'So what are you going to do about it?'

Again he traced on her palm. 'K-I-S-S-U'.

'Go on then.' She leaned forward expectantly, eyes tightly shut.

It was the moment of truth and Jason knew it. She liked him, wanted him; to have her all he had to do was lean forward and join his lips with hers.

Still holding her hand Jason leaned in; their noses were almost touching. In that split second before he let instinct take over a torrent of thoughts rushed in, like a dam bursting with overflow. This is a bad move, think about the promotion, if she gets it could you live with that? If you get it could you be her boss? This is not the right time, it only seems that way while you're on equal ground but that ground is about to shift! Then and only then did he realise what he'd done. He couldn't follow through, he couldn't go with it. It would only make matters worse. How could Jason—the master of time—screw up the timing so badly?

Before she could move he released her hand, letting it fall like a dead weight as her eyes sprung open startled by the sudden act of coldness, Jason leapt from the couch and headed to the kitchen.

'Man I'm tired, do you feel like a coffee?' he weakly tried to cover.

She just stared at him. He knew what she was thinking: Did I do something wrong? Was this just a trick to make me look or feel stupid? The worst part was Jason's own pride and ego would never let him tell her what

had just happened for fear that she would think him crazy, or worse yet, convince him to get involved in what could only turn out to be a messy relationship. Or maybe not. He would never know.

'Sorry, I'm really tired; coffee would just keep me up,' she said. Then she picked herself up with all the dignity she could muster, retrieved her keys from a pocket and went to the door. 'Seeya,' she said and left.

From then on they did their best to avoid each other at work. When Sue-Jane did eventually get the promotion Jason tried to be happy for her, but in truth he had stopped caring about the job, the company. Ten years on both had travelled truly different and distinct paths, Jason rarely thought of his days with the company at all anymore, but when he did the memory somehow always included Sue-Jane Taylor and the love that might have been. The kiss that never was...

When the Night Is Slow

Marija Poljak

Ordinarily, she would be asleep by now. Maki is not one to wait up, or to muse and ponder into the night. It is her stubbornness that saves her and ensures her independence. Maki waits for nobody—somebodies wait for her, but tonight was different. Despite every morsel of her body pleading her for rest, despite the heaviness of her eyelids adding what felt like kilograms of extra weight to her shoulders and despite all the rationality of her mind she did not give in to sleep; but rather to a pathetic sense of hope. It was a constant waiting and wondering, watching as the minutes ticked by; half an hour late, one hour late—the unfair yet indissoluble thought, 'Maybe I didn't get the time right. Was it eleven, not ten?' It was definitely ten.

There sat Maki, finally succumbing to the game she never played. What had changed? It was the unknown desire for... acceptance. It was well past the agreed-upon time, and by this point the excuses had turned into borderline fantasies, impossible scenarios and lies cleverly spun in the hope that they will become truth. 'Maybe there was an accident or a robbery or an ambush,' she thought. 'He has no doubt fallen into a deep crevice, or the cave-like home of a monstrous creature that has forever trapped and enslaved him... surely.' What frustrated—no—*disappointed* Maki the most, was not her own weakness and frailty, not her giving out undeserving forgiveness and empathy, not even her knowingly giving up her self-reliance and assuredness in one's own sustainable happiness—no. It was simply that this was not the first time her father had not shown up. It was another part of the lengthy series of being let down by her dad and it was to be another night of restless sleep overcoming her, as her dreams sought unimaginable answers to the one question occupying her mind: why?

She would never forget his blue eyes; they held the world. Sheltered beneath his heavy brow, her father's eyes glittered with certain wisdom that only he possessed. His eyes were as warm as his giant arms, which felt like blankets when wrapped around her. In his arms was where Maki felt safest. Standing next to him was where Maki felt proudest; beside the man that was larger than life, watching all those around him—incomparable. The men would stare and shake his hand in adoration, and they would always use two hands, as though attempting to fully grasp the enormity of the man and whatever it was that made him so great. Her father

would use only his right hand, fully outstretched to ensure some distance as though to make clear the void which distinguished him from others.

The women, however, would shamelessly flirt, falling for his charms like dominoes. They would look down at Maki who was considerably shorter and smaller than her father in every sense. 'So *you're* his daughter,' they would say with eyes wide open, astonished almost, at the sight of her. Was she not what they expected? Maki would smile nonetheless, flattered to be associated with such a man, to be recognised as his daughter. It was his blood that flowed through her veins. Her eyes, dark as night, did not reflect his starlit jewels of the ocean. Her meek, golden brown hair was nothing in comparison to his starkly rich, dark hair. He was tall, she was short. He was handsome, she plain.

At times, they could not appear to be more opposite of each other. Maki knew all she had inherited from him was *bloodline*; a biological connection. Nonetheless, it was a connection, and a concrete one at that. By her standards, it was something and everything to be proud of. Later though, her pride would swell into a burden; he was unbelievable and loved by everyone. She just happened to be his daughter, and would never live up to him. Not ever.

Maki awoke unusually early; there was still a trace of darkness outside. She'd had one of those 'falling' dreams, but woke up right before impact. Maki always wondered what happened when one hit the bottom. Still feeling the fall in the pit of her stomach, she tossed and turned before deciding to get out of bed. She washed her face in the bathroom and went outside, where the warmth was already noticeable. The sun was now beginning to rise, illuminating the sea beneath it.

It was a curiously red dawn. The sun appeared a fierce scarlet colour and the sky around it a fiery orange. Maki thought nothing of it, only hoping for a day warm enough for swimming. The silence was interrupted by the movements of birds in the sky and in the trees. Maki stood momentarily surveying her surroundings, feeling like the only person on Earth. Šibuljina had that affect on people; the isolation could not be ignored. It was unforgiving at times. Even the houses looked empty, like they happened to be there by accident. Maki looked back at her house, which faced out towards her and the expanding Adriatic behind her. It looked almost out of place there, so disconnected from the neighbouring properties. Her family had retained much of the land in the village, yet the vastness seemed like a waste of space to Maki.

Not long after, the space would be occupied by new condensed houses lining the shores and hillsides, serving as holiday retreats for wealthy Germans and migrants. By then the space would be missed; the vastness diminished into communal property, government land, private residences, and the isolation would not be the expected consequence of a small village, but the result of a mass exodus. During the summer months the silence would be broken up by the voices of those who did not belong there.

The orchards had already disappeared; they did so a little while ago, after the newer generations moved onto larger towns and cities. Maki's grandfather, as stubborn as her, refused to leave. Naturally, it was the passive force of her father, his son, her granddad's pride and joy, who pleaded with him and eventually succeeded in convincing Dida to leave the village. 'It's too much maintenance for an elderly man,' her father would remark, never sounding condescending. His tone of voice was always accurate; he spoke with perfect precision and execution of words. From time to time the family would return, of course, albeit sporadically. To Maki, Šibuljina was the sleepy seaside village of her ancestors and her youth, being of no consequence to her life today whatsoever. Once again, later—too late—it would serve only as a refuge in the banks of her memory, a place she longingly remembered, cherished and hoped for. It would haunt her.

There was a comfortable stillness about Šibuljina, especially during such early hours of the morning. What was most unusual on this day was that the common occurrence of humble fishermen scanning the floor of the Adriatic was not visible. Not simply invisible, but non-existent. This struck Maki as peculiar; fishermen to Šibuljina were like night was to day. They went hand in hand, a product of each other, almost the natural order of things, one of the laws of nature—it was not known who or what came first, they were simply always there.

Retreating from her thoughts, Maki wandered back into the house. She thought to go see if her father was awake yet, in the hope that the two of them could sail out and be fishermen for the day. It was quite rare for her mother to ever come and join them in Šibuljina; she preferred to stay in the city, even throughout most of summer. But Maki was used to this. Sometimes she was glad her mother was so distant, as it gave Maki more time to be alone with her father. Summers alone with her dad in Šibuljina were her favourite. They were the only time she felt sure that she was truly her father's daughter.

Full of anticipation, Maki bounded up the stairs, slowly opening the door to what was usually her parent's room. It revealed an empty room, the only movement being the soft billowing of white curtains against the partially open window. The bed looked like it had barely been slept in, almost as though it had never been

slept in at all. Her father was nowhere to be seen. This time, Maki did not wait. Deep down, she knew her deepest fears would be recognised. She knew where they had taken him, and what they had done to him.

* * *

'Ekatarina!' she heard him call. Maki looked up, briefly forgetting where she was and who had called her name. She promised herself long ago that she would break this habit and quit daydreaming, but her mind could not help itself from drifting back to that day, the day where everything changed forever. She was not used to hearing her real name. In fact, she hated it. It was so long, and *traditional* and really quite unnecessary. Ever since she was a child everyone had called her Maki—*little one*. It suited her far better than the extravagance of Ekatarina. Maki sounded small and unassuming, perfectly representing what Ekatarina really was, but of course, her father had insisted. 'Ekatarina,' he said. 'That is a real name, the name a strong woman deserves'. Naturally, it never stuck.

Maki looked towards her grandfather, who was ushering her towards the doorway. It was early morning on another summer's day in Zadar, and time to go to the piazza for groceries. For a short while, Maki allowed herself to forget her father and let her memories sink back into the depths of her mind. For a short while, she allowed herself to forget how she had found him, to forget the blood, to forget the war. The end had practically arrived, appearing in the form of a peace treaty to be signed by the feuding Balkan nations. Soon, it would be time to pick up all the pieces and restore them. This would however prove to be futile—the pieces no longer fit, and what did get put back together was left scarred and wounded.

Maki, having lost almost everything, had consequently returned to the place responsible for her losses: her home. Nothing was the same. All that remained was a stubborn grandfather, a house in a village some two hours away and an apartment full of memories but with no one left to occupy it. Maki had long since removed the emotional thinking aspect of her brain; all thoughts were now processed practically. What to do with her ailing grandfather, with the empty house, with the soon to be vacant apartment. She knew she would not stay, that she could not stay. But there was still a whole inheritance, even a whole history, waiting to be dealt with. It all came down to the acts of one person, and that was Maki.

Faced with the unbearable prospect of salvaging what was left of her family and their past, Maki opted to do nothing at all. The aftermath had left her alone and shaken up in every sense of the term. Throughout it all she

did not dream of returning home, for it felt wrong to even call it a home, but something—whatever it was—had called her back to her roots. It was the feeling of unfinished business. Maki was waiting once again for an unforgiving someone or something to reach out to her. It was not her father anymore, for he had disappeared altogether, just as she had feared all those times when he was late, that one day when he would not show up at all. It was not her mother either, causing her to put her life on standby and accept her newfound responsibility. She too had disappeared long ago, before Maki was even born; when she gave up her youth for a life she had not bargained for. Now she was but an empty shell, a mother by name but not by actions.

This time, Maki was falling for the hometown that deceived her, the blue seas that offered a false sense of security and the mountains of Velebit that projected imagery of boundless opportunities and high hopes. Now though, those mountains looked more like a barrier, trapping Maki in the town that was once her sanctuary, but now her mental and physical prison. Everything about Dalmatia was deceiving to her now, yet she came back to face it. Years of waiting did not seem so bad anymore, waiting, in fact, was something Maki had become unconsciously accustomed to. In hindsight, it was as though her whole life was spent waiting—and what for? She was merely back where she started, at square one.

Naively, she allowed herself to believe that coming back was worthwhile. It was what her father would have wanted. Even in his death she still found herself trying to please him, to make him proud, even if it meant returning to the place responsible for his death and having to be reminded of it constantly. This was her penance; her punishment for surviving. Yet it was all over now after all, so she would wait, as she did so well, for everything to be restored. She would restore it herself if she had to, although she did not know how. These thoughts merely entertained her mind, and Maki knew there was no going back to the way things were. Her memories were already fading, each character of her past now taking the form of a legend in her mind.

Her feet walked her through the echoing hallways and down the stairs, out into the open courtyard below her apartment. Dida was a few paces ahead of her, and as he walked she remembered all the times she followed her father to town, tracing the exact same steps. It wasn't so unbearable; somehow, her body still managed to move. Her mind still allowed space for hope and thoughts of the future. Her senses still took in that familiar smell of summer, the soft touch of the sun on her skin, the sound of crackling pine trees in the heat. Somewhere in her soul, Maki could feel the voice of her city, begging her for forgiveness, and she knew one day she would be ready to offer it.

Her Photos

Liam Freeman

Semen on a pub toilet seat is normally a pretty good indication of the class of clientele who patronize the establishment. Thom stared in disbelief for a long time. So many unanswerable questions. Whose was it? How did it get there, and why? He decided that, as this was the only stall currently available, his intended activities could probably be delayed until a more attractive opportunity presented itself.

Thom returned to the bar, pushing his way through the throng of people, past the keen but drunken pool players who monopolised the tables and all but impaled him with their cues as he squeezed past.

It was a quarter past eleven and she still wasn't there yet. You'd think someone desperate enough to post their photo and personal details on a dating website would at least be punctual, he said to himself.

The bell for happy hour sounded and a loud cheer arose from the crowded room. Thom was torn. He'd promised himself that he would try to at least start his next relationship soberly. All of his past girlfriends had been won over in a haze and he could barely remember the moment when unspoken sexual tension turned to demonstrative unbridled lust.

What was it he'd said, what was it he'd done which had, at that moment, attracted them? Doubtless, he had been more than they were. He'd looked awful and smelt even worse, with blood-shot eyes, slurred speech and sweat. And yet he'd managed to convince these women to succumb to his drunken lecherous charms.

This time around, he wanted things to be different. He wanted to recall in vivid, glorious, technicoloured detail the moment when they really connected. All the subtle strokes of the arm, all the surreptitious stolen glances.

The coquettish flicks of her hair, the witty repartee from him. That being said, \$2.70 was a very reasonable price for a pint...

They'd never spoken, only communicated through email and Thom was yet to even see her. The photograph she had posted on australiancupid.com was, at best blurry and indistinct, at worst probably totally misleading. The photo was of a woman in her mid to late twenties, standing on a beach and squinting into the sun, which was shining directly behind the camera. Her face was contorted and her hand half obscured her features as she protected her eyes from the glare. At least his photo had been candid. Hers could have been a photo of any woman; the details were so out of focus. For all he knew, Thom could have been waiting for the Elephant Woman to show.

Glancing out the pub window Thom could make out the glaring headlights of the 130, the last bus of the night. Realising that if he didn't catch this it would mean he'd have to take an expensive taxi ride home, he raced in the direction of the bus.

It was stopped at the bus shelter and quite some distance away. Above the sound of his heavy running footsteps and gasps for air, Thom thought he could hear a voice crying out his name. He stopped in his tracks and turned, peering back towards the pub along the dark street.

It was a woman and she was gesticulating wildly in his direction. She could have been any woman. But she wasn't. She was the contorted woman in the photograph. She was squinting Susan.

'I am so, so sorry. Can you forgive me?' Thom considered this question as the bus sped past him and away into the night. So long as her company warranted the thirty dollars plus he would now be compelled to lavish on getting home, he supposed he could. She didn't give him time to answer. 'See, I would have called only my mobile's broken and I couldn't find your number anywhere.'

'That's okay,' Thom lied.

'Would you like to go somewhere and talk? Maybe get a drink?'

'Sure, okay.'

He was trying to muster some level of enthusiasm but it was all he could do to stifle a yawn. He had expected that by now the pseudo-date would be over and he'd be hurtling homewards, feeling yet again validated in his ever growing and supported belief that internet dating was a lost cause.

And so it was that thirty minutes later Thom found himself in an overpriced wine bar, in the poseur part of town, conversing stiltedly with his tardy date.

They made all the usual small talk and skirted around bigger issues, like the photo Thom had noticed when Susan had her wallet open to buy the wine. It was a picture of her, much younger, and a small girl who clung to her leg and smiled at the camera. It could, of course, have been her niece or friend's child, but there was something in the way they appeared to be relating to each other that suggested a more maternal bond existed.

The idea of Susan as a mother was a startling new development as there had been no mention of children in the profile she'd posted on australiancupid. Thom of course knew people left out certain details in their profiles but this was a pretty big omission. He wanted to ask her all about it, her life as an apparently covert mother, but he thought it less than polite to just blurt it out. Much better that she broach the topic in her own time.

As they talked about the weather, house prices and other tedious subjects of discussion anyone not on a first date would avoid, Thom examined Susan very closely.

She appeared to be a confident sort of person but the shake in her hands and the way she spoke a million miles a minute betrayed a nervous edge. She smoked endless cigarettes and was chugging back the wine with a disconcerting constancy.

Under the harsh fluorescent lights, which Thom supposed must be the height of novae chic but which simply hurt his eyes and made him feel exposed, he realized that he was not talking to a twenty-five year old single and unencumbered woman, but probably a mother of indeterminate age, perhaps mid to late thirties. If he felt somewhat misled, she certainly wouldn't have been able to tell as he kept a smile frozen on his face, painted on there like a china doll and perhaps only a little less creepy. The piercing strains of "I Will Survive" cut through the air.

'Oh, excuse me,' Susan said as she reached into her bag and pulled out her mobile. Broken phone, hey? Thom thought. He suddenly felt very tired and very impatient.

'What? What?! Oh, hey. Yeah. Yeah. Nah. Hey? Yeah, I don't know. Yeah. What? Well, what did he say?' Thom stared at Susan as she held this riveting conversation with the voice on the other end of the line. She deposited a handful of complimentary peanuts into her mouth and continued to mumble.

She might have been dishonest about the reason for her lateness and he might have found her slightly grating company, but there was no doubt that there was something about Susan that intrigued him.

Certainly she was striking in her appearance. Her eyes, hidden behind the lenses of her black-rimmed glasses were a brilliant velvety green. Her skin, aside from the odd wrinkle was flawless and almost luminescent. Her neck was gracefully thin and adorned with a Victorian-era black velvet choker, a fashion accoutrement Thom had always found particularly alluring.

She was dressed in a white t-shirt, red cardigan and green skirt, which complimented her eyes perfectly. She was svelte without being too skinny, refined without being precious.

Her conversation with the mystery caller drew to a close and she returned the phone to her handbag. 'Sorry about that. My friend Jane. She's having problems, you know, at home.' Susan had apparently totally forgotten about the reason she'd given as to why she'd not called him to say she'd be late, or maybe she hadn't forgotten, and simply didn't care.

'Should we get another bottle of wine?' she asked peering conspiratorially over the rims of her glasses. She got up and wandered over to the counter to order. Half a minute later she returned empty-handed. 'They're very busy at the moment. He said a waiter would bring it over.' She scooped another handful of peanuts into her mouth and chewed noisily. They sat in silence for a long time. The conversation had hit a lull.

Suddenly Susan shouted, 'Oh Christ! It's Tony!' spraying the table with peanuts as she did so, a fleck landing in Thom's half-full wine glass. Thom whipped around in his chair, supposing that Tony must be some aggrieved and muscle-bound ex-lover, perhaps father to the mystery child in the photograph, who was sneaking up behind him with a crowbar, ready to take revenge on the man who'd stolen his "bitch".

What Thom saw however when he finally located Tony was not a hulking Adonis / Schwarzenegger type, but a scrawny middle-aged waiter with thinning hair and greying moustache who approached their table with a bottle of wine.

'Hi Susan,' said Tony uncertainly. 'How are you?'

'Good thanks,' came the reply, 'and you?'

'Oh very well thank you. Can't complain.' There was an awkward silence. 'You never responded to my messages,' he said pathetically, placing the bottle and two glasses on the table.

'Oh well, I don't think I ever got them you see. My phone's been broken for about a month now.' She shot Thom a look that seemed to say, 'please don't say anything. I'll explain about the phone later.'

'Oh, okay,' said Tony. Another awkward pause. Obviously flustered, Susan said 'oh Tony this ah, this is, um...'. She went red in the face.

'Thom,' he said bitterly.

'Oh sorry. Yes. Tony this is Thom. Thom this is Tony.' They shook hands.

More silence. Thom watched Tony as he struggled to find something, anything to extricate himself from this woeful predicament. He looked so sad, so defeated. Thom thought to himself that at that point, he'd have been happy to be in Tony's position, to have his date with Susan be just a distant memory. He could even have put up with the grey moustache and encroaching baldness.

In the end, Tony made some kind of "Well, I'm terribly busy" gesture and was gone. 'Sorry about that. I had no idea he worked here.'

'An online date?'

'Mmmm.' Suddenly Thom felt a strange kinship with Tony and a desire to defend his honour. But he said nothing. That was the thing about being in the presence of someone as overbearing as Susan; they dominate the conversation.

'So, I really like you, really think you're nice and really think we've got a lot in common.' How could she possibly think that, Thom wondered. He'd hardly been able to get a word in edgeways all evening.

'Yeah, so you're really nice, but you know you can't come home with me tonight.'

This was such an unexpected turn of events that Thom was almost shocked into silence. He could only manage a stammered 'Ah, I, I...'

'Yeah, it's just I have someone... living with me at the moment and she's at a very impressionable age and I, well, you know, I don't want to send her the wrong message.'

Thom managed to regain his composure, along with the power of speech.

'No. No. Of course. I understand.' Thom thought he could now reasonably assume Susan was an incognito mother.

'But I would really like to see you again anyway.'

'Sure. Yeah. That'd be good,' Thom said, as surely as he could. Why did he always do that? Why could he never seem to say no?

They finished up most of the wine, he in silence, she in a state of unstoppable garrulousness.

He walked her to her car, which she thought was an act of supreme chivalry and gallantry but which really came about as a result of having very little else to do at 2:30 on a Tuesday morning. She kissed him lightly on the cheek and promised to get in touch with him within the next few days to arrange another meeting. She drove away and he sighed, beginning the long search for a taxi.

As the cab pulled up outside his spartan unit, Thom looked despairingly at the meter. Forty-eight dollars twenty. Had it been worth it? Hmm, Thom thought possibly not.

Chase

Elyse Elgar

Sunlight; the miracle of morning,
Splashes across my face,
It is annoying; I awaken unimpressed
While it prances about unfazed

I watch as it plays amongst shadows,
Dodging every silhouette,
Like a game, it skips from my sluggish reach;
I feel the urge to trap it

The cheeky light teases in defence,
Childlike; it knows no bounds,
I follow each movement intently now,
Waiting for the moment to pounce

Trying to hide against a bare wall
It panics, slowing its dance,

Suddenly my adrenalin kicks in;

I know it has no chance

After a heated, static pause,

I begin to give chase!

The mischievous beauty darts about,

Causing havoc throughout the place

Finally, it is trapped in a corner,

Innocence failing to mislead,

But as I'm about to catch the beam,

It is eclipsed by my own shade

... Perhaps the sunlight didn't want to play, after all.

Beat

Amelia Walker

She is watching her husband's heart thrashing black
and green zig zags inside a square grey fishbowl.
The doctors can read its jagged dance
like a newspaper headline, like music –

he never did learn to read music –

but that never mattered on stage, behind his drum kit,
the night they met, the first night they touched
and sensed the rhythms of their skins
were riding the same wave, a salty jazz riff

playing on, stronger than ever, in the press of sweaty palms.

Shadow

Jessica Eyles

The splash of the water echoed throughout the forest

As a small, circular stone sunk down to the sand.

The shadow stood, watching the cast stone fall into the dark depths

To experience a loneliness as formidable as death that only she could understand.

The trees whispered their warning of a wastrel,

Flinching as the stunning bright light came into sight.

The light was a sculpture – perfectly proportioned and picturesque,

The shadow knew that in a contest of beauty it would be a futile fight.

With hushed hesitation she hid herself in the trees,

Watching the light dim as it wept from its troubles,

Only to reveal the grotesque truth which hid beneath:

The light was a demon, the true meaning of diabolical in a bubble.

After moments of pondering a realisation was made:

The shadow and light were diametrically opposite like sea to sky.

She had had it wrong all along and finally knew

The idea that beauty is perfection is a monumental lie.

It Takes a Lifetime

Megan Dempsey

It takes a lifetime to say,

We wait forever to touch,

And then realisation dawns,

Why did we want this so much?

It takes a lifetime to live,

One day comes but in a dream.

Living our lives in the shadows,

Nothing is as true as it seems.

But it takes a moment to care,

A fleeting smile or glance.

Don't waste a lifetime in waiting,

Let us go, take our chance.

Non-pejorative

Liam Freeman

Wrap monotony like a blanket,

Comfort in the humdrum

The moment in every love,

Blind ecstasy gives way to routine,

Not grinding, but solaceful

Puppy affections to safe companionship

They know each other but never too well

Familiars but no contempt bred,

Her heart is full and his watches on, content.

Milk Tooth

Courtney-Anne Craft

Cynthia has one eye. From it she can sense the neon bubble buzz of the fish tank to her left, though she can't see it in her periphery. The eye that's there, her right eye, scans the waiting room: magazines show off places she's never been, three young mums sit tucked in a row like hens. Their bored eyes watch the four tots who rummage around on the carpet. Cynthia's mum, who is not young, plans to do the groceries for the duration of Cynthia's appointment.

'About an hour, Mrs. Tate,' Nurse Cat Hair smacks her chops at Cynthia's mother as she leaves to pick up a hot chicken and coleslaw and to peruse the cosmetics aisle.

Nurse Cat Hair, named for the thousand white hairs statically clinging to her scrubs, and the mess of curls on the top of her head that remind Cynthia of the time she had put rollers on Aunt Fergie's Persian, gives Cynthia a smile that looks more like a snarl and returns to her typing.

It has been about seven years since Cynthia was robbed and she still can't trust them. She doesn't even believe them. Sometimes she ransacks her mother's pantry and her father's toolshed looking for her eye. She sees it on streets, only to realise it is black bubble gum. She reaches into puddles but pulls out stones. Sometimes she's sure there's an eyeball behind her eyelid, but it's sewn flat shut, so she feels like they really took it.

Cynthia's hard gaze is directed right at the babies on the floor who suck on wooden blocks, bewildered. Trying to catch their honey pot eyes, she wishes to impart her experiences to them to exchange secret advice; the things they must know in order to survive whole. They talk like dolphins and shake their heads which seems to reset any of Cynthia's telepathy that may have seeped in. Her severe stare obviously upsets the young mums who cluck and breathe and lift their children to their chests. One tall, one fat, one not so pretty, all filling the bald heads of their wee ones with 'goos' and 'gahs,' completely whitewashing Cynthia's writings on the wall.

Cynthia holds her breath and sends a last urgent message along. Her face grows red, and her right eye, the working one, pops out a little. The mothers soothe their babies who seem to understand.

'Cynthia Tate... Doctor Montgomery will see you now.' Lumpy Nurse rolls up to the doorway like a tractor. She leads Cynthia past four small private dentist rooms with large chairs looking like terrible hugs—the kind of hugs you get from whiskery uncles in leather jackets. Cynthia is horrified, eye wide open, room after room until the nurse stops. With a lumpy hand outstretched, she directs Cynthia into the fifth private room and up onto the chair.

Cynthia likens the space to a torture chamber, odd silver tools meant for prodding the truth out of children. She takes pity on Lumpy Nurse, even Nurse Cat Hair, it's not their fault, they're probably kept here against their will, trapped as servants to the sandman of nightmares. Regarding the prize winning smile mashed between her loose jaws, Cynthia thinks they probably took out all of Lumpy Nurse's real teeth and stuck in falsies like they did to Gramma Tate.

The nurse leaves the room for a moment and returns with a tartar coloured file, more torture tools and a bib to sop up the mess when it's all over. She clips the crunchy bib around Cynthia's neck and guides her head back toward the chair. A slow 'zzzzz' the chair rises and reclines. Locked vertical in the terrible hug, Cynthia lies at the peril of Lumpy Nurse.

'Open wide.' Pink gloves tasting like powder-covered Barbies slide around Cynthia's mouth. For good measure, Cynthia gives a slight chomp with her molars as Lumpy Nurse's fingers glide between them. It surprises her but she is unhurt. After the nurse finds that she has sufficiently invaded Cynthia's mouth, she turns on her rolling stool, mostly hidden under her lumpy bum, to write in the tartar coloured file. How curious Cynthia is about this file.

Over casserole the night before, Cynthia's parents had explained something about rotten milk in her teeth, and that Doctor Montgomery was to excavate the tooth. She pictured a moon cavern being scraped by a large spoon and all the sparkly rocks falling into a black bag.

Doctor Montgomery doesn't look as damned when he enters the room, but Cynthia knows it's a trick. He walks in with a warm smile, a white coat and socks and sandals. Before beginning the torture, he regards the tartar coloured file with Lumpy Nurse, who speaks quietly, close to his face. Cynthia can make out only a few words; 'eye... canine... deciduous... tooth... remove...'

They fed my eye to a dog in the woods and now they are going to take out my teeth! Cynthia's world unravels, the terrible hug tightens and the blaring light above sears her skin. Hairs stand on edge as she suddenly understands. The tartar coloured file is where they document it all; every procedure, every stolen good, every spot to stow it away. It's the Devil's diary that explains what is happening to Cynthia's milk tooth, how they will dig it out and put it into a canister marked "Highly Valuable Material" and send it to some pharmacy.

That is where they grind milk teeth to make anti-aging serums that mums and dads rub all over their faces. Cynthia pictures her mother with a crackling white mask on. 'What's that?' she asks her mum. 'It's the secret to looking young forever... ever... ever...' the voice booms inside Cynthia's head.

'Now lean back, Cynthia, and open wide,' Doctor Montgomery's grin becomes Cheshire. His hands are icicles on Cynthia's cheeks. *This can't be happening.* Cynthia squeezes her eye tight and a twitch sets in her left brow.

An alarming prick in her upper gum causes all the cotton balls in the room to scream. The syringe is pulled from her gum. *Has the damage been done?* Doctor Montgomery, who is now masked wearing spectacles no doubt to distort Cynthia's ideas of reality, nods to Lumpy Nurse, who blinks and turns away.

Cynthia opens her eye to find the room has become clear, silent and crisp like sheets on the line. She realises what she must do and she knows she must do it now. She rises from the terrible hugging chair, bumping Doctor Montgomery in the forehead with her own. No bother, her veins are filled with adrenaline soda. With a kick-whip of her feet, she jumps to the floor. In one fluent motion she lunges for the tartar coloured file, twists on her heel and pushes through Lumpy Nurse who absorbs much of the blow but is nonetheless flabbergasted.

Doctor Montgomery's glasses lurch off his face as he watches Cynthia dart for the exit past Nurse Cat Hair, who looks up from her typing, mouth in an 'open wide' ah. Before flinging the door ajar, Cynthia turns to the

three young mums with their babies perched on their knees. She waves the tartar coloured folder in the air and lets a wild holler escape her throat. The babies respond in large red wails.

The bells above the door clang violently like uncontrollable applause. Cynthia heads for the middle of the street, tartar yellow folder in hand, drool streaming from her loose, frozen cheeks and her bib flapping like a flag of freedom. Trying to smile, saliva whips her chin. Car horns sound the rebel yell. Cynthia runs for the horizon.

Never Trust a Rat

Millie O'Grady

In memory of Billy O'Grady (E.W)

15-06-1948 ~ 02-11-2009

He didn't have a name—though people often referred to him as Piper. He was the guy in the background; the one everyone knew and no one knew how. I'd see him around town always drawing attention through his mystery, unintentionally of course. I had seen him so many times but if you asked me to describe his face, I swear I couldn't. I had never seen his eyes; not directly. Maybe they would show too much of what he was thinking. Maybe they would speak of his twisted lining, his intricate inner workings. He had a role and it wasn't until Jon was forced to cross his path that this role became clear.

Jon—I suppose the title 'friend' would be the most appropriate to use in this instance; I use the term very loosely. He worked for an internet service provider and although this wasn't the future he had envisioned when lying in the grass with just a school bag to his name, his job empowered him. He was given a large desk and forty-five hours a week to sit behind it. He found himself with money exceeding what he needed. Jon, being his restless and typically boyish self set out to find the most fun way to blow his weekly earnings. I remember the day he told me about making a few new friends and at the time I didn't think the names he had dropped would hold such relevance. Jon told me of the things his new friends would do, and I quote, 'to get the most of a night out' and looking back now, I recognise my own poor judgement at play. I should have acknowledged his pending addiction.

'I only take the blue ones; the blue ones do nothing,' Jon would say, in a feeble attempt to reassure himself and others around him that he could in fact control his intake if he had wished to do so—he simply didn't wish to do so. I saw the change in his face—the half vacant expressions. Regretfully I had often searched for an underlying hint of self-loathing. I wanted a reason to believe that the old Jon was there somewhere, being tormented at the thought of being completely drowned out; as tormented as those around him. I wanted him to have an empathetic wound somewhere.

My mother told me a long time ago about the effects of drugs. 'They're like those dead animals after taxidermy—shells; identical to what once filled them,' she would say. She often overused analogies; I think she got a kick whenever she found one that worked in context to what she was talking about. This was one of those. Though mildly gruesome, this analogy has always proven itself to be astonishingly accurate. The person you once loved can be gone for good; with nothing but a shell left; a reflection of what they were. No inner lining. No complexity.

Jon changed; and so quickly. Losing his job was inevitable. I don't think there was a single person who didn't see that coming. He was barely able to string together a coherent sentence at that stage. He spoke in a universally undeveloped language—and only to Rats and people who wanted to purchase. Through his distorted vision, Jon saw the Rats as an adopted family but it's a well known fact you can't mix family and business—there's simply too much to lose. After all, there was a reason they were called Rats. Although often camouflaged in Italian leather shoes, thin legged jeans, clean cut shirts and designer tinted sunglasses, they were undeniably a breed of vermin. They lived off vulnerability and addiction, though not directly. They didn't want their hands dirty. Jon, however, wasn't too fussed. He didn't see any problem in getting into the mechanics of it all—meeting his customers; knowing them properly—after all he had so much in common with them. The same chemicals filled his veins. Illusionary: they shared a paradise; however fabricated it may have been. He was much like them—it's why they trusted him so intently. Jon relied heavily on his ability to gain that trust—it's the only way he could live week by week. The profits from the Rats paid for everything; his rent, his car, his clothes and most importantly it fed his addiction.

One thing everyone should know about Rats; they would literally feed on the flesh of their family—if the opportunity would happen to arise. It's an important thing to keep in mind when considering a life of wheeling and dealing—trust me, write it down if you must. Jon couldn't fathom such a concept. The Rats were his friends; they would never wish ill of him—once again, I can only blame distortion for Jon's poor judgement and ignorant view. No clean person would trust a Rat—not entirely—I'm sure even their own mothers keep them at an arm's length.

Jon got lazy; but casually. He worked at setting his parameters and finding just how far he could stretch the brotherly bond he had developed with the Rats of his sect: though not far at all, Jon was oblivious. It started off small. Jon missed a couple of payments to the Rats—it gave him the opportunity to pay off some debts and sort through a few tangled issues. The Rats didn't mind. They saw opportunity in Jon's vulnerable moments—they waited for opportunities like that—it was the easiest way to get people 'dealt with'. They always had jobs that no one wanted to do which they saved for people who owed an amount that they couldn't pay back.

The Rats approached Jon and offered him a deal—he needed to pay them nothing and after a few favours his debts would be cleared. ‘Favours’ was a fluid concept. The Rats were brief with details and avoided explanation prior to Jon’s confirmation. I remember Jon telling me exactly what these favours entailed, with little to no expression from his upper brow—the mild and vacant expression on his face hinted a disconnection between his mind and any form of operating conscience. The list of favours didn’t seem to end. As soon as one was finished, the Rats would give him another. Each time the favours would be more brutal; more dramatically horrifying; more twisted and grotesque. It became too much, even for absent-minded Jon. That’s when someone—to this day I’m unsure who—put him on to Piper.

Piper was known only by the people who needed him. He was the only one of his kind. No one knew what he did; no one knew how he did it. Piper had the power to make do with the Rats and his high rate was his incentive. He refused the formation of relationships with his clients; relationships were weaknesses—especially in relation to the type of people he was commissioned by: dealers, addicts and underprivileged families. Jon promised what he couldn’t afford, as any junkie in their right mind would. Piper sent the Rats away from the city—with a lack of struggle. He refused to explain what he did and without much delay Jon lost interest.

I remember the last time I spoke to Jon. He told me that he was planning on moving out of the city and as soon as I asked the reasoning I realised it was a question I didn’t want to know the answer to. Before I could retract my question he proved another point made by my mother—‘trusting an addict is like trusting winter to last all year’—this was one of those analogies that didn’t work too well, but the point was clear. Relationship was weakness—Piper meant business.

Problem Solving

Patrick Smith

Chapter one

Harm didn’t like the look of the jacket.

It was too baggy, and he was only wearing it so Stel wouldn’t nag him. She had bought it as a welcome home present although he wished she hadn’t. He liked the look of Nix’s jacket, and he was looking forward to seeing Nix and Jet tonight. He hadn’t seen either for six months. He had one last look in the mirror, no, the jacket was still baggy. He walked out of his bedroom and his mother, a full eight inches shorter than him, was firmly planted in the middle of the hallway, just short of the front door.

‘And where do you think you’re going?’

‘Out,’ said Harm as he brushed past her and kept walking.

She turned to him and spoke with a sharp, clear voice. ‘Who? Where? When are you coming back?’

Harm stopped, but kept his back turned to her. ‘Er, um, Nix and Jet, Jet’s place, and don’t know.’

Her tone of voice sharpened even more. ‘Look young man, I have a right to know these things.’

‘Yeah, yeah I know,’ he said as he waved his arms in exasperation, his back still turned. ‘I’ve told you everything, right?’

As he opened the front door, with one foot out, he turned to her. 'See you later Mum.'

She said nothing, but he heard her sigh as he closed the door.

His dirty sneakers crunched heavily on the gravel driveway as he approached the front gate, and looked to see if Jet was parked. He was, around twenty metres down the road, car humming quietly, head down in a magazine. Jet didn't see Harm and before Harm could walk over to Jet's car he heard the gravel crunching quickly behind him. He groaned, knowing who it was, but refusing to turn around until her presence could no longer be ignored. He met her eyes. Stel was no more than a few feet behind him, grinning and ready to annoy. Harm planted his hands in his jeans pockets and started scuffing gravel around his feet, making sure Stel kept her distance while also keeping him moving.

Stel put herself just outside gravel-scuffing range and waved her head in Jet's direction. 'Ah, Jet, I see he's working his charm again.'

'Sure, he's working his charm. You walked down here just to talk about him.'

'Pfft, no, he's a layabout.'

'A layabout who has a car, remember. Now move, you're in my way.' Harm kicked gravel into Stel's shoes, which lead to her shrieking and him laughing, and then he was bored again.

'I'm bored.'

'Harm, you're always bored.'

'Yeah, well, when I'm not doing something fun, I'm bored. That's how it is with most people.'

'A lot of people enjoy their quiet time.'

'A lot of people are stupid.'

'Well, is Jet stupid?'

'Sure Jet is stupid but he's got a car so it's, y'know, negated.'

There was a moment of silence. Stel found her chance to work the issue of concern into the conversation as she lowered her voice, leaning in closer. 'You've spent six months living with our cousins. You're back for one day and already you're going out driving with Jet. Didn't the past six months teach you anything?'

Harm looked genuinely puzzled. 'Teach me anything, what? I just went to live with them while I was at that school, and it's finished now.'

'Well, you should have learned something.'

Jet, who by now had figured out that Harm was in sight, revved his car and called out for Harm to get a move on. 'Yeah, I learned something; I learned how much I missed the noise of Jet's car.' He turned from his sister and walked over to the passenger door of Jet's car, pulled open the door and got in. As the car moved off into the early evening sunset Stel waved to them.

Jet and Harm didn't have much to say to each other, they never did, even after Harm had spent six months away. Harm really hated this car; it was cramped and smelled like mould. The fake fur seat covers moulted, the

air-conditioning didn't work, and worst of all it came with Jet in the driver's seat. Still, it was a car, which meant independence, which meant fun. Harm thought he'd better break the ice and start talking.

'So what's happening tonight?'

'Well, we're going to my place to drink.'

Harm could tell that Jet didn't want to talk, even less than usual.

'So what have you been doing with yourself lately?'

'Stacking shelves, toking.' He gave Harm a pained look. 'Why all the questions, man?'

'Because I haven't seen you for six months old boy!' Harm replied in the brightest voice he could muster as he leered at Jet. Jet ignored him.

Harm had his sister, Jet had his dope, but Nix only had Nix. Harm and Jet saw him waiting outside the filthy Brokenwood Towers complex where he called room 32 his home. Although he'd never admit it, Nix was the one mate of his he truly liked and envied, as if he were Harm 2.0.

'Harmy man, loved ya text message!' Nix got out his phone and read out the message: *"Jet's place Sat nite, piss up."* It's always beautiful to read something like that.' He tapped Harm on the shoulder after he was settled in the back seat. 'So what you been up to mate? Haven't seen you in six months!'

'Went to that school in town, you already knew that, but nothing much happened, basically been on ice until I could get back here.'

Nix nodded in acknowledgement.

All set for tonight, Harm thought. He looked at the passenger side mirror, and saw his jacket. No, he still didn't like it.

Chapter two

Harm was sprawled over Jet's dirty sofa in the living room. He noticed first the stink of dirty clothes, weed and alcohol, making the room smell like a ripe compost heap. He got up and gingerly walked over to the nearest window and opened it, trying to alleviate the smell, but now his hungover brain had to deal with the bright morning sunlight. Turning quickly away, he got to the kitchen by tiptoeing his way past Jet and Nix, who were passed out on either side of a ripped beanbag. A few of Jet's mates, who had arrived late last night, were lying nearby.

Rifling through Jet's fridge in the kitchen he found things edible only to Jet, like expired mayonnaise and mustard pickles. He needed some good food to soak up the alcohol and the only place he could get that was home. He walked slowly back past those sleeping and out the front door of Jet's red brick maisonette. He was a bit wary at the thought of all that walking but it was the only way he could get home, what with Jet out of action and therefore not driving anywhere.

A car was parked on the front lawn. Stel's car. Hell, he thought, what's she doing here? The driver's window was wound down; Harm walked over and leaned on the door, his face only inches from Stel's.

'Hell, what are you doing here?'

'Giving you a lift home,' she said, wrinkling her nose up at the compost heap smell Harm was emanating.

'Oh ok, hey, that sounds good.' He got in the passenger side and put on his seatbelt.

Stel drove off Jet's lawn and over a small bush, the only decent vegetation on the property, and the car moved down the street. They didn't speak for a little while, Harm having nothing to say to his closest blood relative who drove across town to save him a long walk home. Stel broke the silence.

'Were you surprised to see my car out here?'

'Ah, not really, no. But now that I think about it, why *are* you here?'

'To pick you up, of course.'

'Well, thanks for that. How long were you waiting for?'

'About half an hour.'

There was a moment of silence as Harm took this in. 'Hmm... why didn't you just come inside the house and get me instead of waiting?'

Harm turned to Stel to see her face turned up in revulsion. 'And see your drunk mates? No thanks.'

'Ha, true.'

Harm wanted that to be the end of the conversation, but he knew she'd be talking soon enough. Three ... two ... one ...

'So, how was the party?'

'Uh, I can't remember much' said Harm as he rubbed his temple, adding emphasis to his words. He really did have a headache. 'I reckon it was pretty good. We drank a lot and Jet's mates had a joint.'

'Yes, I can smell it.' Stel's window was still down as far as it could go. 'Hey, you didn't have anything did you?'

'Nah, I didn't.'

Stel smelled a lie 'Harm, seriously, did you smoke anything?'

Harm turned to her and she turned to him, momentarily, and he spoke in a low clear voice. 'No, I had nothing, ok?'

'Ok, ok, just checking.'

They sat in silence for a little while, the trip not taking as long as expected thanks to the unusual run of successive green lights.

'Hey, this is going to sound odd, but could you drop me off at Nix's place?'

'That's not odd. Me agreeing to it, *that* would be odd.'

'Well, would you?'

'Oh fine, Harm. You know, Mum's still pissed off at you about you leaving last night without saying when you'd be back or anything like that.'

'She'd just ask questions.'

'She cares about you Harm.' She sighed. 'Really, she does.'

'And I care about Harm as well, but I let him have his fun on occasion.'

'Right, hmm, yeah.'

'Anyway, what do you have planned for today?'

'Mum and I are going to an antiques fair that's in town,' she said, happy that her brother had shown some interest in someone other than himself.

'Oh, right.' Harm's bored reply ended the conversation.

They were at Brokenwood Towers. Stel pulled over to the side of the road outside the property. Harm got out without the two of them exchanging words, and Stel sped off home.

Nix always left his door unlocked because he lost the key ages ago. Harm loved this room on the third floor, overlooking the car park where every now and then there was parked a beautiful car, a '76 Holden Monaro owned by the landlord. He could only afford the Monaro because he cut corners everywhere with building maintenance, such as here at the window with the loose aluminium frame. Today was a bummer—a dodgy window frame and no Monaro in the car park to show for it. Still needing a good feed to help with his hangover, Harm hit pay dirt hiding in Nix's fridge behind a carton of expired milk—three microwavable cheeseburgers. Once microwaved, the three burgers looked pathetic, leaking sauce and having shrunk by a third in the process of softening up, but Harm crammed them down without a second thought as he stood over the sink, sauce dripping onto Nix's only tea towel. The time having just passed noon, Harm ripped off his

jacket, threw it on the couch and launched himself on Nix's armchair, picked up his remote and went channel surfing, lulling himself into a dazed state hypnotised by the flickering images.

A while must have passed, an hour or two, when Harm heard Nix's voice out the door. He didn't pay much attention until a louder voice, certainly not Nix's, replied in an angry tone. Harm turned to the closed door and muted the television. The voices were muffled but the tone was obvious, Nix and the other guy were both mad at each other. A little more commotion which ended with Nix swearing loudly and throwing open the door, more than a little surprised to see Harm sitting on his armchair.

'Uh, hey man, make yourself comfortable.'

'Oh yeah, well I thought I'd drop in and see you. And anyway what was all that yelling about?'

Nix moved into the room and over to a table, putting down his stuff. 'I have to move out. Behind in my rent, room's a mess, I didn't send the landlord a Christmas card, that sort of shit.'

'So where are you going to go?'

'Where am I going to go?' He grinned at Harm. 'What are mates for?'

Chapter three

At least Jet was here to help. Not that he had much else to do; the manager of the local Best Purchase told him he wouldn't be getting any more hours after he rocked up to work mellow and hungover. He'd started delivery of Nix's essentials such as CDs and weed, weed which Nix was now hiding under Harm's mattress. Harm stood in the doorway of his room, nervously rubbing his sweating neck and looking at a man four years his senior, the only man in the world he respected.

'Y'know man, it's great having you here and such, Nix, but I just gotta think of something to say when my old lady gets home.'

'Look, Harm, your old lady won't mind. I'll be as quiet as you can imagine, I'll brush my teeth, I won't piss on the potted plants in the hallway. I'll be a good guest.' He swivelled his body so he was now prostrate on Harm's bed.

'You don't mind if a fella has a kip, do ya?'

'Nah man, I just gotta think of what to say to Mum.' He turned and left the room, closing the door to give him some distance between his greatest example and his greatest problem.

Nix was content with the whole situation. For Harm this was different. His mother knew about Nix but hadn't entered the bedroom to confront him, in fact, she was staying put on the other side of the house. The two of them were sitting at the kitchen table, locked in negotiations, while Stel stood off to the side, expressionless, with her arms folded like some makeshift security guard.

'If your father was here, he'd kick that piece of trouble out into the gutter. Then he'd apologise to the gutter for littering.'

'Look, Mum, it's just until he finds his own place...'

'What's wrong with the rubbish dump?'

'He can't go anywhere else.'

'There's no one around who'll take him in? It doesn't surprise me, and it's not my problem. He's leaving.' Harm sighed. He'd go and have a talk to Nix.

Nix didn't care much for talking. He lay on the bed, feeling his kipping time being interrupted. Harm couldn't bear to get within six feet of him and so he kept a good distance. Just self preservation, keeping clear of dangerous creatures.

'Seriously, just tell that bitch of a mother of yours to let me stay.'

'Look Nix, can you leave, please? It'd help me, really.'

'I'm not going anywhere, and I'm not saying anymore. Close the door when you leave.'

Harm stayed for a moment, silently willing Nix to move before he turned, walking slowly back through the doorway. Looking up as he walked, Stel had a hand awkwardly on their mother's shoulder, saying something. Their mother at the table, her head in her hands, her resolve gone. Why was she crying, crying over a failure of a situation, and a failure of a son? Harm had brought Nix upon the household, and now Harm had to remove him.

Determined, he turned and stood back in the door frame to his bedroom, looking at Nix on his bed. Ten feet of carpet separated them. There was nothing to admire about Nix, except for the god-like status he had in his own mind, Nix's own ability to fool everyone – including himself. Everywhere he went he leached; always asking, taking, and stealing. Harm had always seen this as self-sufficiency, but it was the opposite. He knew it now. He saw it now. The evidence had always been in plain sight, but only now could Harm see it. After his father died a few years previously, he'd looked for a role model, a mentor, or at least someone older who seemed ok. Harm had been bobbing in the ocean, alone; looking for something to grab hold of and Nix was the first thing that floated past. He couldn't understand why he was only thinking of this *now*, but now was better than never.

He took two full steps in, bracing himself. Inhaling, exhaling, thinking. The landlord evicted him not because he liked evicting people, but because Nix deserved to be evicted. Jet, even with his mind clouded with dope, had sensed something about Nix. He'd never been comfortable around him, he'd seemed too smooth. Stel had never liked Nix and neither had their mother. They thought that by sending Harm away to live with his cousins and going to the local school there, the problem would be fixed. It was, but when Harm returned, the problem returned. Harm had needed Nix, but never as much as Nix had needed Harm. Harm sensed it, and it felt good. Confident now, he walked over to the sleeping pile on his bed and hovered over him. Harm would only need him one more time, for every unwanted transaction that Nix had conducted, Harm was about to repay double.

'Nix! Nix!' Harm yelled, one hand clamped on Nix's shoulder, the other thumbing at the door. 'You, out, now!'

No response from Nix.

'Didya hear me? Out!'

Still no response.

A third time. 'Oi Nix, stop playing funny buggers. You heard...'

Harm wasn't expecting it, but the half asleep Nix had rolled over in bed and got a clean punch on Harm's stomach. Harm's torso lurched forward and he was momentarily unaware, the pain from the punch taking his full attention. Nix pushed off the bed and sprang to his feet. Harm had regained himself and in a frozen second he met eyes with Nix and saw genuine malice in his eyes. A look he'd never seen in anyone, let alone here, three feet away. But it was also tinged with a slight grin, it was almost as if Nix wanted this fight, to prove his superiority against this upstart, whose familiarity had bred contempt. Those eyes taunted Harm. *You reckon you're a man? Reckon you can bring me down?* Harm knew that Nix was on foreign territory, but the fight itself was in Nix's territory. If he were to win, he'd have to defeat Nix's mind, with its primal hunger for a win at all costs.

It'd only lasted a few seconds, the standing, the eye contact, but it felt longer for Harm. Nix broke the stalemate, slipping off his jacket and throwing it onto the bed while speaking. 'Wouldn't want to get this beauty all messed up, would I?'

Harm swore to himself when Nix had finished; he'd been handed a perfect chance to get the first punch on Nix and had been so preoccupied with Nix making the first move that he'd forgotten his own movements. Not that Nix took much longer to start the fight.

He swung his right fist at the side of Harm's head, Harm ducked awkwardly under Nix's fist, who followed up his right hook with a left jab that connected with Harm's face. Although it didn't have much force, it distracted Harm, who again had to figure out what was going on. He saw a fast movement in his left peripheral vision. Nix had raised his right arm above his head, his forearm almost vertical, and Harm knew in an instant that if Nix got a flush hit on his skull it'd be over, his head right through his neck. Nix shifted his weight, twisting his torso right and pivoting on his left foot. Nix's swing was too steep, and Harm had rolled out of the way of the fist, ending up a few feet away. For a moment Nix was unbalanced, his wasted energy hitting nothing. He struck out his left foot to get his balance back and looked at Harm, his eyes speaking again. *Don't you know a knock out punch when you see one?* With Harm on the ground, legs sprawled awkwardly, propped up with his arms to his sides, elbows on the ground, Nix saw his next chance and dived, attempting to body slam Harm. Harm saw it coming and loosened his arms, which dropped his body flush to the floor. Nix landed on Harm as he'd expected, almost butting heads, but the force of the slam went through Harm and Nix took the force of hitting the floor, giving an oomph as the air escaped his lungs. Harm knew that an *oomph* from the other guy is a good sign in any fight and swung his right arm around while turning his body to the left, rolling Nix off and onto the floor. Before Nix figured out where he was, Harm jumped on him, his left arm on Nix's right shoulder, his knees in his ribs. Nix's eyes hadn't changed much, but they were acknowledging the shift in momentum. *This won't last long! You're still gonna lose!* Harm raised his right arm and brought it down fast, his palm aiming for Nix's larynx. Just before contact, he twisted his palm vertical and flicked it for that extra bit of force. He felt the hard muscle and felt some satisfaction from hearing the grunt Nix made, even better than the *oomph*. Nix's arms reached for Harm's head, but it was a long shot, they swung wildly and connected with nothing. Harm saw Nix's eyes and saw another change in them had occurred. They were wild, but defeatist. *You haven't won yet! I'm still here!* At an insultingly slow pace Harm reached back his right arm and torso, as if he were swinging a hatchet. With his eyes still focused on Nix's, and his knees in his ribs, he brought down his right arm, made a fist, and again connected perfectly with his larynx, but with far more force this time. Before he could respond Harm repeated this twice, and finished with a punch to his chin. Harm paused, and realised Nix wasn't fighting back.

Carly Smith

She hummed to distract herself from the voice in her head, the rhythm matching the cadence of her steps. Her humming faltered and died out as the tune bled from her memory in the same way her name and all her other memories had slipped from her. Cresting the small rocky rise, red dust settled around her boots. She paused, a sense of disquiet causing her to peer intently past the brim of her black cowboy hat. She scanned the landscape for the source of her uneasiness. The hairs on her neck prickled and despite the heat goose bumps ran the length of her arms. The voice in her head whispered, 'I'm coming...'

Inhaling sharply, she lurched forward. Her blue eyes widened and darted across the horizon. She moved along the base of the rise and aimed for the range of small hills that could act as cover and relative shade.

She was panting when she reached the leeward side of the hills. The paranoia that drove her had partially subsided. Unhooking the canteen from her belt loop, she drained its dregs and ruefully cast aside the empty container. Unbidden, the weathered face of the shopkeeper appeared in her mind. The dark eyes thoughtful; calculating and concerned as he examined the hastily gathered supplies. 'If you're headin' out past Boot Hill, you'll be wanting more than that one little canteen o' water to...'

Scooping the supplies off the counter, she cut off the well meaning shopkeeper. 'I won't be gone long... so...' she trailed off and failed to meet the shopkeeper's quizzical look, she realised she didn't know how long she would be gone for. She pushed through the shop door and didn't hear the bell marking her exit as she walked across the gravel to her rented car. She frowned and tossed the gear into the back seat of the station wagon and momentarily sat in the driver's seat—bewildered as she tried to gather her thoughts. Why didn't she know how long she was going for? Where exactly was she going? For that matter, where did she come from? A man's voice whispered and quietly chuckled from her cloudy memories—it chilled her. She gunned the car into action as though she could outrun her unanswered questions.

Three days later she had dumped the overheated car and continued on foot. Her few provisions slung in a bag over her shoulder. Some part of her knew it was madness to go into the desert so under-prepared, but she was

Nix was genuinely stunned. There was nothing in his eyes. Harm wasn't sure of the situation. Had he won? Had he given Nix the message? For a few seconds they were stationary, and nothing could be heard except Nix's quick shallow gasps. Slowly Harm got off Nix and stood looking down at him. Nix still wasn't quite with the program, but he got up after several seconds, looked vacantly at Harm, and ambled off to the doorway. Harm followed his movement and saw his mother and sister standing at the doorway, staring at Nix. They moved to the side to let him pass. Harm walked to the doorframe to stand by the two of them and watch Nix as he walked up to the front door, slowly opened the deadlock, opened the screen door and walked outside, closing both doors behind him. Still not speaking, the three of them walked over to Harm's bedroom window. They watched Nix walk down the driveway, turn left at the gate, and walk out of view, blocked by a neighbour's fence.

They kept the silence for a few more seconds until Stel turned around and saw Nix's jacket on Harm's bed.

'Hmm, he left his jacket behind.'

Harm looked behind himself and saw it. He picked it up, put it on and walked to the mirror. It fit perfectly.

driven by an unnamed fear that gripped her waking hours. This fear fed her restless sleep with nightmares of a dark haired man in snakeskin boots who stalked her relentlessly.

She made a small fire that night with sticks she gathered and the matches she'd bought. After heating a tin of stew in her one small pot, she ate, staring into the black night sky, pin-pricked by millions of twinkling white stars.

'No answers there,' she muttered, scouring out her pot with sand before wrapping herself in the reflective thermal camping blanket she'd packed in her bag. She lay down and stared with wide eyes into the firelight until exhaustion took her. He found her that night. He stepped into her dream state, onto the road where she had left the broken-down car. She couldn't see his face, but she saw that he was tall and lean. His movements sinuous and sure. His hair brushed the collar of his black shirt as he searched the abandoned car, the sun glinting off the silver skull ring on his left hand—twin rubies blazing in the eye sockets. He withdrew from the car with her discarded neck kerchief in his fist. She shuddered in horror as he raised it to his face and inhaled her scent. He paused, cocked his head to the side and slowly turned in her direction, grinning. She woke up with a scream. She was sure he'd looked right at her.

She cleared camp quickly as the sun warmed the horizon with a pink glow. She stuffed her few belongings back into the knapsack and kicked sand on the fire. As she walked away she wondered where she had learned her camping skills.

As it did the day before, distance eased her panic. Mid-morning she slowed her rushed walk to a standstill. Panting and dehydrated, she reached for her canteen, and her fingers caught air.

'Shit,' she said. She tilted the brim of her hat up and took in her surroundings. Low lying hills stretched into the sandy brown and red desert, dotted here and there with small, straggly shrubs. Rocky outcrops climbed to the pale blue sky, only to be beaten down by the heat. She hadn't seen any animals—there were no waterholes nearby. Her only option was to keep walking. She peeled her shirt off her sweaty back as she inhaled and exhaled deeply before putting one blistered, booted foot in front of the other. She pulled the last piece of jerky out of her pocket and chewed it methodically to get some saliva into her parched mouth.

She started to turn over the events of the last few days in her mind in an effort to distract herself from the growing physical discomfort.

'Don't remember much—check.' She stared at her shadow as it paced ahead.

'Someone's after me,' she shuddered.

'Are they?' whispered the voice.

She spun on her heel with wide eyes, and an open mouth. Her head snapping from left to right, as if she would find the speaker right behind her.

'Who are you?!' she screamed through cracked lips with her fists clenched and her head thrown back to the sky. She heard him chuckle.

Sobbing, she broke into a ragged lope, ignoring the bursting blisters on her feet. She ran until she fell. Then walked until she fell. When the panic, confusion, exhaustion and dehydration took full control of her mind—she crawled. Day inched its way to night.

Darkness soothed the blisters on her neck and slowly, her foggy mind registered a crackling sound. She raised her head and didn't feel the blisters on her sunburnt neck split. Her vision swam, and before she passed out a dusty pair of snakeskin boots stepped in front of her.

She woke when she felt a cool, wet cloth press against her face and neck, bringing relief to her hot, dry skin. With consciousness came clarity, and her eyes widened and flicked to the hand holding the cloth. She whimpered when she recognised the black shirt cuff covering the wrist. An image flashed through her head and she remembered seeing the same black shirt cuffs at another time and place, the hands choking her. She stiffened and her breathing whistled in her throat. He stood, turned and strode to the other side of the fire.

She wanted to run, but exhaustion kept her muscles slack. He returned, carrying a water flask. She pushed her misgivings about him aside and as he held the flask to her lips she gulped mouthfuls of the precious water. He pulled it away after a few swallows. She couldn't help but hold her hands out for the flask.

'You'll vomit if you have too much, Marisa. Give your body some time to adjust.' He spoke quietly as he regarded her dust-streaked face and wild eyes.

She froze, staring, as stars wheeled silently overhead. As he wet the cloth anew, he continued speaking softly.

'You gave us quite a scare, honey, when you ran off like that after you smacked your head. There are people looking for you all over.'

'What... did you call... me?' she croaked.

He looked up sharply from the water flask and cloth, his eyes narrowing. He swallowed, and for the first time she saw doubt flicker across his features.

'Marisa.'

He reached up to press the cloth to her face again, but she recoiled.

'Don't touch me,' she said.

His eyes widened in surprise and he stared off to one side.

'We wondered what had gotten into you when you bolted. I mean I know I...'

'You've been hunting me for days—who are you?!' she interrupted.

He shook his head as he knelt in front of her. He ran his fingers through his hair and she watched the firelight glint off his skull ring. 'Marisa, I'm your husband.'

She twitched in surprise, as her jaw dropped.

'But, you... I heard...'

Her eyes rolled back in her head and she was gone again.

When she opened her eyes the sky was lightening. She was under a blanket with the water flask within her reach. She couldn't see him but as she drank from the flask she heard his footsteps. He circled her and squatted as he fed twigs into the fire.

'No decent firewood out here,' he grunted to himself. He turned to see her watching him. 'Good. You're awake.'

She drew her knees up and held the flask tightly as she stared defiantly at him.

'You look better than you did last night,' he continued. 'At least you drank more water, and that cream I rubbed into your sunburn should help a lot.'

'You WHAT?!' she spluttered, dropping the flask. Her hands fluttered to her shirt to find her top buttons undone. He arched an eyebrow at her reaction.

'You don't remember? I suppose you were pretty out of it last night.'

He went to his pack and retrieved a tube of cream. He took off the lid and eyed her open shirt. 'I think it's time for more sunburn cream,' he said.

He reached for her and she grabbed his arm, pulling on it hard. At the same time she kicked her left foot up until it contacted with his groin, flipping him over her head. He landed hard, knocking the air out of him as a dust cloud spread from his prostrate form. She got up and swayed on her feet, hunched defensively while he grabbed his groin and writhed in pain.

'You bitch!' he roared, spittle flying from his lips.

She looked around for a weapon and picked up a small sharp rock from behind her. He had gotten to his feet but stood bent over, still cursing. She spread her feet shoulder width apart to brace herself and hefted the rock in one hand, ready for him. He slowly straightened and began to laugh.

'You haven't lost your fire, that's for sure!' he said, brushing as much dust from the back of his jeans and shirt as he could. As he began to move toward her again she raised the rock and glared at him. He stopped, putting both his hands palm up, facing her.

'Truce,' he said.

'Stay where you are,' she said. 'I don't know who you are, or where you come from or what you were doing chasing me, but you damn well keep away from me.'

He tilted his head to one side as he looked at her. 'Hold up there a minute, honey. One, you don't remember who you are, but I do. Two, you don't remember where you come from, and I do. Three, I was chasing you because you damn well ran off from your family into the goddamn desert with no supplies!'

She regarded him coldly.

'You aren't my husband.'

His face dropped. 'Wait,' he said, moving toward his pack. He rummaged through it and put something on her blanket before moving off a short distance.

'If I'm not your husband, then how do I have a photo of the two of us on holiday last summer?'

She walked to the blanket and looked at the photo without picking it up. A woman and a man both wearing sunglasses held each other and smiled at her from a rainforest. 'That could be anyone,' she said stubbornly.

He sighed. 'Ok, how about the tattoo of a swallow on your right hip you got for your thirtieth birthday?'

She blanched. 'Stay there,' she ordered, before turning around and unzipping her jeans and pushing them down a few inches to expose her hip. 'Damn it,' she breathed. There was a swallow tattooed on her hip in blues and reds. Still unwilling to believe anything he said, she zipped up and turned to face him again. 'You could have looked while I was unconscious last night,' she said.

'Oh for the love of... !' he exclaimed. 'I know you have a tattoo because I sat there with you when you got it done! And then you sat with me when I got mine done!' He unzipped his jeans and shoved them down far enough to show his left hip, which had a swallow tattooed in reds and blues. He pulled his jeans up and stomped off to his pack again, leaving her to think about the significance of the tattoos.

'Here,' he said as he walked over to her, handing her a plastic card. 'Here's your driver's license.'

She turned it over and read her name. 'Marisa Ginger Thompson,' she read to herself. She had no mirror for comparison, but there she was: her hair brushed, a white t-shirt on, unsmiling, looking back at herself. Her green eyes looked sad.

'Ginger was your grandmother's name,' he said quietly.

Marisa's shoulders slumped. 'I just... I just don't know anything anymore...' she trailed off.

They stood there silently as the sun climbed higher in the sky.

'Marisa, honey, I know you're having a tough time right now but we need to get out of this desert. I'm almost out of water and everyone needs to know you're ok.' He gathered his pack and kicked sand on the fire's dying embers.

Marisa stood, desolate and conflicted. There were no answers in the sand and no answers in the cloudless skies. She put one foot in front of the other and moved to stand beside him. He grinned conspiratorially at her, slinging an arm across her shoulders. His hand tightened its grip on her shoulder, leaving no room to run as she heard the dry chuckle from her nightmares.

The Exchangers

Emily Kilsby

Chapter one - Jack

Hi Jack,

Mum writing here. How are you? Hope you've arrived safely. Haven't got much time to write, going out to coffee with Fran, she is having another crisis nothing has changed since you left. Please reply soon and let us know you're safe. Use protection and stay away from drugs.

Love you, Mum xxoo

Montreal was a pretty cool city. The people there though spoke funny French and I had no freaking idea what they were trying to say to me. I just smiled and nodded. I had been sitting in the hostel for most of the day not knowing what to do with myself. I overheard some people talk about a drum circle at Mont Royal. That was just a big hill that overlooked the city, so I thought I might as well check it out. They said it's just a whole heap of people playing the bongos.

I got my backpack organised and started walking up a side street in the direction of the hill. The gradual slope was puffing me out but I got there eventually. There were hippies everywhere: crazy women with hairy armpits dancing around. Gross. This was a little bit weird for me, on the other hand though the drumming wasn't so bad. I parked myself next to a group who looked like they were travelling too. I felt like a loser sitting by myself but I didn't have the guts to go and introduce myself. I couldn't help but watch them. They probably thought I was weird. I looked over to where another group were playing the drums and laughed to myself at the funny dancing grown men and women were doing around them. I swung around to notice the travellers laughing at the same thing; I gave a nod of recognition to one of them who spoke back to me.

'Hello there. Would you like to come and sit with us, you look lonely,' the guy smiled weirdly at me, he had a funny accent I couldn't pick.

'Ah yeah that would be great thanks,' I said hesitantly picking up my bag and moving over, not sure if I was getting cracked onto by this bloke, who could very well be gay.

They made room for me and I sat down. They were smoking a joint. It wasn't long before I was chatting away with a couple of them, they were all from Finland. They spoke excellent English. I wished I could speak another language. I was offered the weed pretty soon after I sat down. I decided what the heck. I'm overseas now. No one is going to know any different. 'I can hardly smoke,' I mumbled in an effort to save my dignity.

The joint reached me too quickly, I was still fighting with myself whether to have a drag or not. I took it into my fingers trying to mimic how the others had held it. I breathed in, too much, way too much, coughing my guts up everywhere. Straightaway my head felt so heavy. The joint went around and got back to me again, I had another go. This time was a little less embarrassing.

It didn't take long and I could feel the effects kicking in. Shit, what was happening? Surely a bit of pot wouldn't do this to me? I tried to reason with myself. You're alright Jack, you're okay. I looked up, staring into the bush in front of me. I swear I heard it whisper my name. I crawled over to it looking under and around. I stuck my head into it and took a deep breath in, smelling the air. I retreated feeling puzzled and sat down next to the straggly bush. I looked over to my new friends lying there on the grass making shapes with their arms. A hand brushed across my face. Getting agitated, I flicked it away like a fly. I pulled my head upwards and saw a beautiful stranger looking down at me. She was magnificent, an angel face staring down at me.

'Are you okay there?' the beautiful creature said. She was Aussie of course.

'Nah, I don't think I am,' I started to laugh, slightly like an insane person.

'Too much pot for you?' she asked.

I looked up at her and smiled a drawn-out smile. 'You're amazing. I've never seen anyone as beautiful as you.'

The next morning came too quickly. I woke up to the horrible screeching of my bunk bed. I can't understand why so many hostels have metal beds. Guess they're cheaper. The stupid dick above me wasn't exactly trying to be quiet and neither had the lightest frame. I moved onto my side and my head thumped. Shit, this was going to be a long day. I tried to remember the night before. Lots of important information missing. How the hell did I get home? Who was I with? Guess that'll be one night I'll never get back again. It felt kinda good to be doing something a little crazy.

I decided I should check the time; I had to be on a bus for Ottawa at 9 am. I searched around my backpack for my mobile. I grabbed it out with one hand while rubbing my blurry eyes with the other, focusing on the screen. It was 10 am. 'Christ!' I yelled. I got out of bed and walked down to the computer room. Weary travellers were everywhere, looks like I wasn't the only one who had a big Saturday night. The computers were full, all I wanted to do was check the Greyhound site and find out when the next bus was. I decided to go to the front desk and ask. This hostel was pretty hopeless so I wasn't holding my breath.

The bloke at the counter was reading a French magazine and sipping on a coffee. He completely ignored me. 'Excuse me, do you have a Greyhound bus schedule for Ottawa?' No movement. 'Um excuse me mate, sorry to bother you but ...' He looked up at me with a glare and opened a drawer in the desk, his eyes remaining fixed on me. He looked down and pulled out a sheet of paper and slid it over the desk. What a narky bastard I thought, maybe I should have attempted to speak in French. Oh well, I picked the sheet up. It was the Greyhound schedule. I scanned down the lines of times and routes. I found my route, Sunday 9 am, next trip, Sunday 7 pm. Bugger. I sighed and knocked on the desk to get the attendant's attention away from his clearly enthralling magazine. 'Hey, can I extend my checkout time please?'

Chapter Two - Karla

Hi Karlz

It's your favourite brother! Remember me? Hope you made it to Ottawa okay. Good luck for the start of your exchange – sure you'll blitz it. Mum and Dad are still the same: they think you're gonna end up dead in a gutter somewhere! Don't worry, I attempt to put their minds at ease. Please send them an email every now and again so I don't have them on my back! Gotta run, luv ya,

Shit what a night that was. My head was ruined and I was supposed to be officially starting my university exchange today. The Greyhound bus I was bouncing on sucked and the overweight guy next to me had some definite body odour issues. He must have missed his daily shower for the last week.

I watched tree after tree go past. The colour of the leaves was starting to turn; Autumn was on the way. I wished summer would stick around for longer. I couldn't stop myself from thinking about last night. I had gone to this drum circle at Mont Royal in Montreal and it was really cool. I met this guy there called Jack; he was seriously strange, but so cute at the same time. Shame we'd never see each other again. I wrote him a note and left him my email, though I wasn't sure if he'd find it. I thought at the time it was a good idea to put the note in his shoe but I think he would probably miss it and it'll get scrunched down the end of his dirty Dunlop Volley. I guess he was just another guy that I would never see again. Maybe he wasn't though. We did have a really strong connection, one I'd never experienced before.

The man next to me started to snore. Bloody hell. He was leaning on me, actually putting all his body weight onto me. He was fast asleep. This guy was seriously gross, I hoped he wouldn't be on for the whole trip.

Luckily the snoring stopped and I managed to drift off to sleep myself, still thinking of Jack. I woke abruptly as the bus arrived into Canada's capital, slamming breaks off and on. My head still ruined. This bus driver was easily the worst encountered to date. We came to a halt at the central bus station and I took a deep breath of relief. I dragged myself out of the seat, waiting patiently for the weirdo next to me to get off. I collected my bag and stood in the morning sun waiting for the next cab. Here I was in Ottawa and with butterflies in my stomach.

The taxi pulled up next to my building. This was going to be home for the next four months. I paid the driver, plus a tip, still wasn't used to the concept of tipping. With my backpack on I trudged to the front desk of the building to figure out what the hell I was supposed to be doing next. The middle-aged lady at the counter was helpful. She handed over the keys to my room and gave me a name tag that I reluctantly put on. It read: Karla Stormont, Australia. That was handy. I headed up three flights of stairs then down a long hallway to find my room, 161 B. I unlocked the door, the flat was deserted. No one had arrived yet. Four rooms opened onto the living area with a bathroom at each end. I went to the door marked 'B' and unlocked it. The room was cold and

drab; a piece of old chewing gum stuck to the wall right at my eye level. Shit, I thought, was this it? 'Welcome to Rideau University, Karla,' I said out loud.

I heard a group of people outside my door so I went and introduced myself. I could hear different accents so I was hoping they were international students too. I poked my head into the hallway.

'Hi guys. How's it going? I'm Karla.'

'An Aussie, great! There's a few of you around,' a blonde girl answered back. She sounded liked she was from the UK.

'Cool. I haven't met any others yet, sure I will soon though. Are there many Brits?'

'There's meant to be a few more of us around somewhere. I'm Zoe.'

'Nice to meet you,' we shook hands a little awkwardly.

'We've been invited to a kegger tonight by some Canadians I'm sharing my apartment with. You should come along too.'

I assumed a kegger meant kegs of beer. 'Yeah that sounds good, I'd be keen.'

'Well, come to my room, 213 C at six and we can drink and get ready.'

'Alright sounds like a plan, see you then.'

I was jealous of Zoe's confidence already and hoped that once I had finished my travels I might be the same. I went back to my room and unpacked my belongings into broken drawers under my bed.

The kegger was in full swing by the time we got there. It was so exciting being over here, finally after all this time and planning. We had a group of about ten of us, Berta from Spain, Venla from Finland, Jano from France: people from everywhere. It was a typical student house, jam-packed with people. Posters of girls and movies were stuck to the walls and stolen road signs were placed proudly in random corners.

It was easy making friends here; all I had to do was talk and people would hear my accent and become instantly curious. I was quickly learning that being an Aussie was definitely a benefit. The party was just like the American movie, *College Kids Gone Wild*. I was really enjoying myself though, and the swigs of Captain Morgan's Spiced Rum we'd had before we left were definitely kicking in. A guy with long hair dressed up in a Mexican outfit ran past, smashing me into the wall, yelling 'tequila shots, hey yah yah!' He turned the corner and ran down some stairs to the basement. Zoe and I followed suit.

They had a large table for drinking games. There were teams playing all sorts of crazy games and 'chugging' competitions. Beer pong was popular and some of us decided to give it a go. This was easily the worst decision I had made on my trip so far, I was crap, seriously crap. The objective was to bounce a ping pong ball into a cup at the other end of the table. If you missed, you drank, if someone got the ball in your cup, you drank. Consequently, I started to get very drunk, very quickly. I wasn't even a beer drinker and trust me, what was squelching around in my bloated stomach was not feeling good. I decided to leave the beer pong competition in order to save myself from extreme embarrassment and make my way outside for some fresh air.

I sat in the backyard on an old beer crate, head in hands, feeling very sorry for myself. Then up it came out of nowhere, my pasta dinner landed on the grass at my feet, then more again, and unfortunately some more again. I rolled my drunken head around to see if anyone had seen this disgusting act, luckily no one was in sight. I sat still and attempted to sober up. Head spinning, stomach lurching. This was not good. I had to go home and fast. I stood up feeling very wobbly on my legs and started to slowly walk back through the house telling myself not to look anyone in the eye, focus straight ahead and stand up tall. I made it to the front door successfully. One step outside though and I was spotted. It was Jano, the French guy who'd come to the party with us.

'Hey, are you alright?' he asked concerned.

'Um... Hi there. Not so good. I'm going back to campus. I think I've drunk a little too much tonight,' I slurred.

'Ha ha. You are looking okay,' he said sarcastically.

'I've got class at eight in the morning.'

'That is not good. I will walk you back.'

'No don't do that, you'll miss out on the fun.'

'I do not mind, honestly.'

I wasn't really sure what to do, I'd only just met the guy and I was very drunk. He could be dodgy, but on the other hand company on the way home would be nice. Jano walked back to campus with me while I struggled to string sentences together, hold back vomit and walk straight. Luckily though I arrived at my destination in one piece and passed out as soon as my head hit the pillow.

Chapter Three - Zoe

Dear Zo,

Are you enjoying yourself over there? Hope you're not playing up too much! Ha ha. Sure you are though! I've been good; feeling a bit sick lately though, doctor's appointment coming up, nothing to worry about. Sure they'll just tell me I'm not looking after myself properly! You know how it is. Can't wait to hear all the stories from your exchange. You must be partying hard. Hope to hear back from you soon! Look after yourself bumble bee!

What the hell was that noise? I awoke to some vibrating rumbling sound. Monday morning had arrived and I felt like a hairy badger's arse. I reached my hand out of bed for my glass of water that I responsibly set down the night before. Bugger. It wasn't there, my mouth was so dry, I opened my eyes and looked to my left. Lying next to me was a loudly snoring man and I was clearly not in my own room. Crap. What went down last night? That kegger was insane. I took a long look at this guy. He was very cute: short brown hair and a five o'clock shadow, nice clear skin, symmetrical peaceful looking face. Lucky for me I must have still had some good judgement left last night.

My admiration was swiftly broken by a very loud incessant knocking on the door. Oh crap, I did not want anyone seeing me here, no thank you. I must have still been intoxicated because I decided that my best option was to hide in the cupboard before this guy woke up to answer the door. I jumped out of bed to find I didn't have any trousers on. Holy shit, I spotted a pair on the ground and picked them up shoving them under my arm. The knocking was getting more persistent and the guy was waking up. I opened the cupboard door and hopped inside rattling the empty coat hangers.

'Alright alright, hang on,' he groaned. I detected an Australian accent. Oh no, I thought, I've gone home with one of the crass Aussie blokes. I stood still and tried to breathe quietly. 'Just let me put some pants on already,' he called out.

I peeked through the key hole. He was naked alright and heading straight for the cupboard. Christ! I opened the door in a flash, threw the trousers I was holding at him and closed it again. The bedroom door opened.

'Mate! So I see you scored yourself a chick last night. Job well done. So who was the lucky lady?'

I couldn't hear an answer.

'Did your one-eyed snake come out to play? Ha, just kidding mate, but no, seriously?'

'Piss off Jordan or I'll spew on you,' he grunted.

'So where has she gone to then, huh? You mustn't have impressed her much, it's only 9 am and she's pissed off already. Nice one.'

The situation was actually ridiculous. I was stuck in a cupboard listening to two guys, well two boys by the sounds, discussing whether or not I'd been playing with the one-eyed snake! This Jordan guy was disgusting and my neck was starting to kill. I had to bend at the most uncomfortable angle. It was seriously starting to hurt.

'Well anyway hurry up mate. Class is starting in ten and we don't know where the fuck we're going remember,' Jordan said.

'Ah shit. Alright just wait for me outside and I'll get my stuff together.'

'Yeah yeah, just get a move on alright.'

The bedroom door closed.

I opened the cupboard and stumbled out in my underwear, rubbing my neck as I stood upright again. He was standing there staring at me with a grin.

'Why did you hide in the cupboard?' he laughed.

'Um... well I didn't want that other guy to see me.' I couldn't think of a decent excuse.

'Oh, Jordan, Yeah I met him yesterday. Um, I'm sorry about him. He's bit rude. You still didn't need to hide in the cupboard,' he laughed some more. I suppose it was funny. 'I'm so sorry Zoe I've gotta go to this class. It's my first one and Jordan's waiting outside.' He put on a green t-shirt avoiding my eye contact.

'I heard. That's fine,' I said feeling a little deflated.

'You can stay here and sleep more if you want. I'll be back in a couple of hours.'

'I think I'll go back to my room and recover. Thanks though.'

'You might want these then.' He bent over and picked up my trousers, passing them to me with a coy smile.

'Thanks,' I said embarrassed.

He grabbed a few more things, put them in his backpack, said goodbye and ran out the door. And with that it was all over quicker than I could say, 'sorry what was your name again?'

I slumped back onto the bed and couldn't help but laugh out loud at the stupidity of it all. I glanced around the room. It was tidy but we did only arrive yesterday so that wasn't a surprise. I looked on his desk and saw a scrunched up note that had to be written by a girl, it was much too neat for a boy. I had to read it of course; curiosity did always get the better of me. If he had left it out then it was obviously not private, right?

Hi Jack,

Sorry I didn't say goodbye, I didn't want to wake you up. I had an amazing time with you last night. Don't think I'll be forgetting it for a long time! It was really nice to meet you, you are an amazing person. Maybe our paths will cross again one day. The world isn't such a big place after all! My email is karla.stormont@hotmail.com if you want to keep in touch.

Karla xxoo

Ah ha, Jack, that was his name! Karla... Karla Stormont at hotmail. My brain was putting two and two together and was taking its darn time to join the dots. I knew that name but from where? Then it clicked, it was written on her name tag: Karla Stormont, Australia. Oh shit.

The Supermarket

Adrian Mazzachi

February 22

I've been trapped in here almost a week now and I'm pretty sure there's no way out of this place. Hell, I even tried to dig my way out through the front doors. The blasted things wouldn't budge so I smashed the glass with a stool to get at that impenetrable wall of dirt. I couldn't find a shovel in back dock (Fuck I hate it back there—hardly any light at all and it creeps the hell outta me) so I set about digging myself some sort of tunnel upwards with my hands. No dice. The dirt and ash just slips down to replace any I dig out. All I got for my effort was a huge pile of dirt seeping out of the hole onto the floor and some cracked and bleeding nails.

At least I've got plenty to eat.

My name is Stanley Pines. You, dear reader, who will be reading my innermost thoughts, can call me Stan. Everybody does. This is my diary. Now before you go getting the wrong impression about me, I want to clear something up. I'm not the kind of guy who'll write a diary (leave that to chicks like Sarah—"Dear Diary, today Stan smiled at me, he's sooooo handsome" Ha! Ha! I bet she really has written just that) but I found all this paper and I've got not much else to do really.

When they find me, this can even help me write my memoirs. I can smell the Pulitzer Prize now—Stanley Pines, heroic survivor of the Pacific Volcano disaster tells all in his gripping recount of danger, adventure and romance.

Maybe not romance, I'm the only damn person in this whole fucking supermarket.

Just think of the TV interviews, I'll make a killing! The product endorsements! (Farmer Brown's canned corn! The only brand of creamed corn to eat if you're trapped in a supermarket! Buy Farmer Brown's today! Stan flashes winning smile) Boy, I really crack me up sometimes.

So I will write. It will pass the time anyway.

February 23

All the fresh food that's not refrigerated is starting to turn, so I had pretty much the last of the fruit today. I've had so much fresh fruit and vegetables recently, I've never been so regular. 11 am on the dot, every day for four days now. 11 am is a shitty time of the day. Ha! Ha!

Kinda funny that my arse got me in this trouble to begin with. If I hadn't been in the toilet for so long maybe I would have been evacuated with everyone else. This place was packed when I came in. Maybe I should have gone out to investigate when I heard all that shouting. But I hadn't had such a decent shit in days. I still can't believe no one thought to check the toilets. Pricks.

So there I was on the can, thinking all the commotion was about some dipstick that got caught stealing frozen peas or something, when the ground started to shake. Then buck. Bucked so hard I pissed all over my Julius Marlows. Then I could hear stuff landing on the roof, heavy stuff. Covering the roof. I stumbled out the toilets still buckling my pants to witness a huge tidal wave of dirt literally flow across the front of Crazy Joe's Discount Supermarket. I saw all the goddam dirt packing against the glass.

So basically, inside the supermarket is almost untouched. No dirt has got in (except where I tried to dig out) and you wouldn't know the place was twelve feet under unless you looked out the windows, or saw the produce all over the floor from where it's fallen off the shelves during the seismic activity.

I figure the supermarket's big enough. There should be enough air down here to last me a very, very long time. Still, I'm trapped in here, buried alive under God knows how much dirt and soot and rubble and ash.

They warned us Mt. Justice was experiencing some unusual geothermal activity—they didn't say it was about to blow its top.

At least the roof hasn't caved in.

Fuck I'm scared, and I don't know what I'm gonna do.

February 27

Haven't written an entry for a few days now, but I've been really busy sussing out the whole deal here. Turns out the power is coming from a noisy old generator out in the back dock. The overhead lights started flickering and went out sometime yesterday. Or was it the day before? I've got a watch, but time hardly seems relevant when all your life is spent awash in bright fluorescent light. I had to use the stupid little lamp on the thing to find a proper flashlight in the dark. Bumped my head pretty hard there too. Aisle 5: stationery and miscellaneous.

I plucked up the courage to look around the back dock and found the generator and plenty of diesel to keep it running for ages. The thing just needed a refill.

Plucked up the courage? Yeah, I guess I'm a bit of a wuss, but the dim orange lighting back there and the shadows just creep me out.

Anyhow, with the flouros back on once again there's not much to do around here. Basically I just sit around, eat and drink long life juice straight from the carton. In the beginning it was fun picking out my meals with a whole supermarket to choose from, but now the novelty seems to have worn off.

They should (will) come and dig me out soon; it's been over a week.

Unless they don't know anyone is down here. They probably thought the piace was evacuated.

Maybe I'll write up a shopping list and pretend I'm just going shopping today like a normal person. That could be fun.

March 7

The plumbing gave up the ghost today. To be honest, I'm surprised it lasted so long. The pipes must have been disconnected sometime by the last earthquake. Yeah, there was another one. The ground just shook a bit and some cans fell off the shelves. Scared the shit outta me though considering I was trying to sleep. Now nothing comes out of the tap except a bit of dirt and the toilets won't flush properly. I swear I felt more earth piling on top of the supermarket. I hope the roof holds.

Why haven't they come to find me yet?

March 9

Nothing appeals to me anymore. I'm sick to death of canned food, and all the bread and cake is going rock hard. I've lost weight. Considering I'm stuck in a place with enough food to last me a lifetime, and eating is the most interesting thing to do in here, it's almost funny. No, I take that back. It is funny.

I've been thinking, and if I get out of here, I'm going to get a divorce and ask Sarah to marry me. She deserves it. I don't want to spend any more time sneaking around worried we'll get caught. I've had a lot of time to think and I've decided Monica is a domineering bitch and she's cramping my style. Stanley Pines is a big up-and-comer, a go-getter, they all say, "he's gonna do big things". Advertising as a business will never be the same. Yeah. All I can think of is Sarah's sweet little butt.

That neon sign of Crazy Joe is really starting to piss me off. I swear he keeps staring at me with those stupid cartoon eyes.

March 10

Ingredients:

- 1 loaf of bread, white
- 1 jar of jam, strawberry
- 1L milk, long life

Cooking directions:

1. Slice bread to desired thickness. Toasting of bread is preferable, but you ain't got no toaster, champ.
2. Apply jam (strawberry) liberally. Jam should only be applied to one side of the bread to prevent stickiness of fingers while consuming. Cleanliness and good manners is a must at this breakfast table.
3. Pour milk into disposable cup. Take care not to overfill.
4. Enjoy!

March 13

There was another minor tremor this morning. I realise now why no one has come looking for me yet. There have been so many earthquakes (or could it be eruptions?) since I got trapped in here. It must be too dangerous for any rescue teams, and they wouldn't suspect anyone would still be alive after all this time. But hey, that's Stan the Man for ya. Of course I'm still alive. I've always been tough.

I've got that... what did Nick Campbell used to say?... that killer instinct. The edge, he used to call it. How else would a man like me, the penniless son of a no-good drunk, wind up being the best thing to hit advertising since television?

Hell, Nick would say anything as long as I kept landing the big accounts.

\$10m Stevens account? You bet. The old man almost creamed his pants.

\$15m Nelson account? No sweat.

Too bad the stubborn old coot wouldn't see reason and hand over his percentage of the company. He really was starting to hold me back. Hell! Campbell was over the hill the day I met him. If it hadn't been for me, Sterling Campbell Advertising Agency would still be sending fucking telegrams.

Since I'm to tell the whole truth—and why not? No-one's ever gonna find me down here! I may as well come clean with you, dear reader. Campbell's little hunting accident—not so much of an accident. I want you to know he cried and soiled himself before he went. He begged for his life. The man had no dignity. He was weak.

I can't really say I enjoyed doing it but the ends justified the means.

I've made more with his share of the company in two years than he made in twenty.

March 19

Faithful reader, do I have good news for you today!

I could be imagining it, but I swear I can hear some activity above me, and I don't think it's just more earthquakes. I always knew they'd come and save me!

The first thing I'm gonna do when I get out of here is sue the pants off someone, I think I'll start with whichever numbskull was supposed to evacuate this damn supermarket.

March 20

No doubt about it. That's the sound of digging above me. Sounds like they've got some kind of real heavy duty machinery up there, which doesn't surprise me. No expense would have been spared in the rescue effort of Stanley Pines!

Some bad news, however. Dear reader, it has been fun sharing my thoughts with you but I have decided to burn this diary before I am found. It's the pathetic scratching of a coward and a weakling. I'll hire a ghost writer and make up the whole thing, maybe something like how I had to fight off hordes of ravenous rats while trapped under some fallen shelving down here. Something exciting and dramatic. A good idea? No doubt. It's called the killer instinct, baby.

(later)

Maybe I'll hold off destroying this till a little later on. It might be a few days before they get to me.

March 21

This is BAD. Really, really bad! Last night, half of the supermarket roof caved in. I don't know what they're thinking up there, but something is putting too much pressure on the roof. The whole front of the store is filled in with dirt.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

The roof above me has started creaking and dirt is leaking in a few places. Oh shit!

March 22

Just a quick entry now, I want to conserve the battery of my flashlight. The rest of the roof gave way just a few hours ago, but I was prepared. Of course I was. I've got the edge.

Guess where I am? When I realised those idiots above me (I know it's the rescue team, I can hear their voices) were screwing up something and the roof wasn't gonna hold, I cleared out one of those long stout freezers (which haven't been cold since day one, don't worry dear reader, I won't freeze) and stocked it up on water and tinned food. I'd just crawled inside and was closing the freezer door when there was this terrible sound of rending metal and the beams holding the roof just folded in on themselves. I'm now buried alive, completely surrounded by solid earth, safe in my freezer.

So I'm stuck in here until they rescue me.

I wonder how much air is in here.

March 23(?)

It's getting hard to breathe. It's really hot and muggy in here, the air's so thick you could almost drink it.

(later)

Struggling to concentrate now. Thought I heard my useless father calling for a beer. Can't be him, he died five years ago. Cancer got him. Of the liver. I was glad.

I love you Sarah.

Biographical Notes

Contributors

Courtney-Anne Craft

Courtney-Anne Craft is a Human Rights and English student at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. She spent a semester on exchange at UniSA. During this time she enjoyed two writing workshops, in which this story was created. Now back in Canada with the snow on its way, she's missing her Aussie friends and wishes to thank them for sharing the sunshine with her!

Adrian Field

'The Date' is Adrian Field's first story based on his own personal experiences. He has written poetry and scripts in the past.

Liam Freeman

Liam Freeman has enjoyed a passion for language ever since his first word, 'Juice' met with a considerable amount of acclaim. Buoyed by this initial success, his follow-up partial sentence 'More juice' was less well received by the critics, who suggested Liam was mining the same once-fertile ground and creating derivative, pallid imitations of his once brilliantly incisive social commentary. Wounded by the scathing attack, Liam stoically refused to utter or write another word until the June of 2007 when he needed to call someone to fix the hot water heater. Liam enjoys editing, writing and talking at great length on subjects which could hold no conceivable interest for any audience. He lives in Adelaide and is survived by his wife and two dogs.

Emily Kilsby

Emily Kilsby is a beginner writer; this is her first published piece. She has studied creative writing at UniSA and is majoring in Professional and Creative Communication. She thoroughly enjoys writing fiction that stems from real life experiences.

Joanna Kitto

Joanna completed her journalism degree at UniSA in 2008. During her studies she freelanced for such magazines as the locally produced *Colourblind*, and the nationwide publication *Frankie*. She is currently living in New York, writing for a local zine and working on creative short stories in her spare time.

Adrian Mazzachi

Adrian Mazzachi has had a love of reading and writing from a young age, coming top of the state in both the 2001 and 2003 Australian Schools Writing Competitions. He currently puts his writing skills to a more nefarious use, studying Public Relations and Marketing at UniSA.

Caroline McNulty

Caroline stopped writing fan fiction on the internet to study Creative Writing at UniSA. She is passionate about history, science fiction, computer adventure games, sandy beaches and has a box full of unfinished manuscripts that she hopes to get back to soon.

Nick Milde

Nick Milde was first reported to authorities by local fishermen in 1928, and sightings continue to this day. Some say he has been studying writing and film, others, that he roams the shores of the lake at night, calling to the moon.

Andrew Natale

Andrew Natale is a first year student at UniSA studying Writing and Creative Communication and majoring in Creative Writing. He came close to studying Law, but decided that his creative side should be explored with an unbridled passion. This is his first creative writing of note and he is currently working towards his first novel.

Millie O'Grady;

Millie O'Grady began writing when she was too young to know what she was doing. She was told by her father about his dream that never became a reality and decided to become a homage in his honour. Sadly, her father, best friend and hero passed away just before her first printed publication, so she wishes to publish her writing as a dedication to the man that was.

Billy O'Grady

(Edward William O'Grady)

15-06-1948 ~ 02-11-2009

Vulneratus Non Victus.

Marija Poljak

Marija Poljak is a graduate of writing and sociology who enjoys dividing her time between her home in former Yugoslavia and her home in Adelaide (at the expense of her wallet). She hopes to continue travelling and writing whilst pursuing her other interests, which also provide no financial gain.

Carly Smith

Carly Smith is dipping her toe into writing and is pleased to discover that the water isn't too hot or too cold; it is just right. She hopes the pirahna will not gnaw her foot off.

Patrick Smith

Patrick Smith disliked writing until the day in high school when he received a high mark for a story where he insulted three of his teachers. Encouraged by this early success he now writes occasionally, usually when he has no access to a computer or TV.

Editors

Andrew Bobola

Andrew Bobola is a student at the University of South Australia, studying a sub-major in Editing and Publishing. He is an emerging editor, continually striving to improve the skills necessary to become a proficient editor. *The Piping Shrike* is his first major editing project.

Madeline Cronin

Madeleine Cronin will complete her degree in Media Management and Communications at the University of South Australia. Through studying Editing and Publishing as a sub-major, she was able to edit *checkmate*. As a recent graduate, she hopes to work in the arts, but more importantly, travel first.

Liam Freeman

Always having been arrogant about his flair for correct grammar, spelling and punctuation and being fond of pouring scorn on those who have no such aptitude, Liam Freeman thought he'd turn professional pedant and move into the (hopefully?) lucrative career path that is editing. He'd been giving away his sage council for free for years so why not get paid for it? He is yet to tame the semicolon but hopes that in time he will be able to employ it correctly; in time, mark you...

Natalie Jones

Natalie Jones has now completed her degree in Writing and Creative Communication. With her new-found free time, she plans to kick back with a few Jodi Picoult novels. Natalie currently works as a medical receptionist and rowing coach.

Millie O'Grady

Millie O'Grady decided she wanted to be an editor half-way through her writing degree when she realised that making words of others flow was almost as rewarding as reaching audiences with her own creative writing.

Patrick Smith

Patrick Smith entered uni not quite sure what he wanted to do. He soon realised that the two skills he'd learned in high school—doodling on pages and nitpicking at details—were perfect for editing. He spends his free time avoiding printed material where possible.

Tess Sobol

Tess Sobol completed a BA in Journalism with a sub-major in Writing and Creative Communication in 2010 at UniSA. Editing first struck Tess when she learnt how naturally it came to her. She has always loved reading and

still owns the first novel she purchased herself at age eight. Tess has big dreams for the future and hopes to one day become a fashion magazine editor. Watch out Anna Wintour!

checkmate; *complete victory*

