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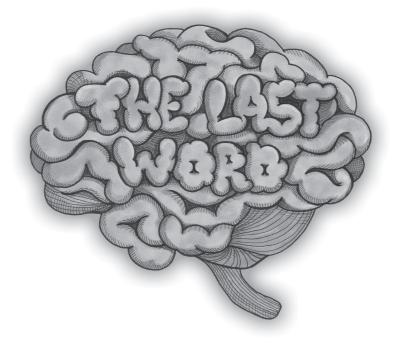


Illustration by Olga Conil



Illustration by Inkling John

Foreword

Foreword

Adam Casey

When you hear an age-old dictum repeated, it's always worth remembering that most adages originate from a writer's mind, just like those publishing in this literary anthology, 'The Last Word'. In 1374, Geoffrey Chaucer penned, 'Everything comes to an end', and over time, the consensus shifted this phrase to 'All good things must come to an end', a statement of inevitability and a lyrical attempt at acceptance. But can we accept 'the end' with a cursory phrase? It seems those in power even know this is not possible; the chilling call for 'last words' is even offered to our most fearsome killers. But what do we do with them? Is it our hope that this final utterance will make some kind of difference? Fittingly, Karl Marx's famous last words were shouted: 'Go on, get out! Last words are for fools who haven't said enough!' So, if we abandon the hope that our last words can change anything, perhaps we can redirect our focus on what our last words do, in fact, achieve.

As a self-proclaimed 'aesthete', Oscar Wilde's famous last words speak volumes of the man, the character: 'Either this wallpaper goes, or I do.' He was reported to have uttered this phrase several

times, then asked for a glass of champagne. Struggling to sip it, he finally uttered, 'I am dying as I lived: beyond my means.'

Apple founder, Steve Jobs, slipped into death's door uttering, 'Wow, oh wow, oh wow', almost a prelude to his next adventure to the other side, a testament to a man who was constantly seeking the new, the next adventure.

Humphrey Bogart lived up to his image of effortless cool and deadpan humour with the final proclamation: 'I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis.'

But sometimes, the last word is neither a proclamation or an expression of the human. As Marie Antoinette, queen of France in the 17th century, climbed the scaffolding to the guillotine, she accidentally stepped on the executioner's foot, and apologised: 'Pardon me. I didn't do it on purpose.'

The last word, at its most fortuitous, speaks volumes of the human, at its most disastrous, showcases the ordinary, the everyday, that we'd rather not know.

I haven't said it yet, so I will now: all this talk of final words, is, in fact, fitting. 'The Last Word' literary anthology is a celebration of our final years as the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing—lovingly referred to as the BWAP—at Melbourne Polytechnic's Fairfield campus, as it comes to a close. We've had so many bright sparks fly through our program, and we couldn't be prouder of what we've achieved in our eight years as a unique and pioneering program. This anthology is a testament to that. It is also a farewell memento for our graduating students of 2017, their last word as BWAP graduates, but certainly, this curtain call won't be their last. We will watch, with anticipation, as their achievements unfurl before them, the BWAP a cornerstone to their emerging voices.



Illustration by Anthony Stevens

Short Fiction

A LETTER STAINED RED

TO THE LAST

FOR THE LIVING, NOT THE DEAD

LAND SHAPER

HOME

THE OUT

LOSING SELF

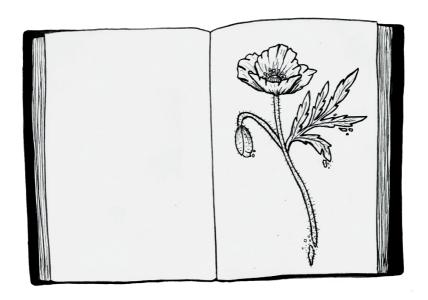


Illustration by Evalina Anastasi

A LETTER STAINED RED

Steven Cini

I was waiting for something special to happen. Something significant. Something dramatic. Instead, all I got was a claustrophobic room surrounded by white walls that were stained with age and disease. It made me sick to stay, sitting on the uncomfortable, cracked wooden stool. I wanted to get up, leave and never turn back. But I didn't.

Not that I couldn't or that I wouldn't. I just didn't. I stayed for my mother.

She didn't need me; she didn't even know that I was there. I didn't know why I was there. I had so much to say and so much to atone for that the thought of losing her like this left me broken. I wasn't the confident man that everyone saw when I patrolled the cubicles at work and delivered those carefully thought out speeches. I was Poppy.

Our hands were linked for days, hers and mine. She hadn't even opened her eyes. She just lay still in the dreary hospital bed. I couldn't believe that I looked stronger than her. I needed to say things to her. I knew that I had plenty of time to work up the courage I needed.

My hand, warm for a change, rubbed across hers. It was smaller than mine, cracked and wrinkled, yet her hands were... more.

It didn't seem real. This wasn't the time. This isn't the end.

* * *

The child squeezed his mother's hand as they were battered by the oncoming traffic of tall men in light-absorbing midnight suits, all pushing past each other, each one in more of a hurry than the last. It seemed to have no end. His mother sensed her child's worry and, like every other day, held him close to her leg, absorbing the brunt of the force. His face was pressed up against her glistening red dress. The boy loved the warmth she gave off and ignored all else, focusing just on the red in the sea of black and white that stormed the footpath.

After a while, he noticed he was no longer being bombarded and peeled his face from his mother's leg. The air, which had been thick and claustrophobic, was now filled with the scent of lilies and freshly cut grass. Whistling birds and chirping crickets had now replaced the grunts and pants of the hurried men and the boy's limited sight was extended to the faded orange backdrop of the setting sun preceded by rolling green hills.

'We're nearly there. Ok, Poppy?' said the boy's mother, lifting him onto her shoulders as she always did with little effort.

'I don't like going outside, mummy.'

'Why is that, Poppy?'

'Those men on the road always hurt me, I don't like them.'

'I know they scare you, Poppy, but those men are just in a hurry to get back to their own houses.'

'But they don't look happy like you do, and they don't wear happy colours like you either,' he said.

She laughed, which agitated the boy who failed to see the humour. 'That's because they aren't anything like you and I, Poppy.'

* * *

I kept my hand on hers for the longest time. It still held the warmth it once had. That's one thing that hadn't changed since we last met.

I couldn't stand the state of the room, unfitting for the magnificence of this woman. There was blinding, migraine inducing white bouncing off every wall. Tabletops were smeared with food stains,

walls splattered with unidentifiable brown spots and the sheets oozed grease and sweat. And in the middle was this amazing woman. And me. In my suit.

If she could see me now...

I had a moment of clarity; I needed to move her, fast. My hand jolted toward the button on the side of the bed. I waited a few moments then pressed it again. No light to confirm that it had worked, no click to signal the button was pressed. I didn't want to leave the uncomfortable chair but I felt so agitated that I turned to the door. As I did, a small book no bigger than my hand fell off the bed and onto the floor. I turned it over and saw the remnants of a sticker that had fallen off with time.

* * *

The boy kicked up grass as he stormed over the green hill. The blinding sun opposed him, beating him down with further heat and exhaustion. After walking for what felt like hours, he finally reached the house. As he walked closer, the bricks sheltered him from the menacing heat and light extruding from the sun. He reached the freshly painted white door and pushed it open with as much force as his small arms could manage. He could have closed the door gently but instead he chose to get the small satisfaction of slamming it, announcing to the world his frustrations.

'Something wrong?' his mother asked, standing in the kitchen wiping a glass, seeming unfazed by his disruptive entrance. The boy could have answered, but again chose the small enjoyment of storming off to his bedroom, slamming every door and throwing anything he could along the way.

He slumped on the bed, buried his face into his pillow and screamed as hard he could.

He looked out the window and saw the sun was the same placid orange mirage peeking over the valley as it was before. A shuffle outside his closed door broke his trance. He waited a few minutes, staring at the door with a blank expression before investigating. He found a black book next to a glass of water. Looking out into

the hallway and seeing no one, he gathered them in his arms and retreated back to his room to examine the book. The black book, twice the size of his hand, had a sticker of a fully armoured knight mounted and ready for combat stuck to the cover. The otherwise blank diary had a page already written in his mother's handwriting.

Poppy,

I don't know what's wrong and I know better than to disturb a young man when he is angry. When you calm down, write everything that happened to you in this book. Then write one good thing that happened to you today and, if you like, leave the book outside your door and I will write everything bad that happened to me today as well.

After a few hours, the boy's mother walked past the door to find an empty glass and a black book on the floor.

* * *

I stared at the book on the floor, thousands of feelings washing over me from nostalgia to guilt. My hands and jaw clenched in unison. I fell back onto the chair and all my muscles began to tremble. I didn't know what was wrong with me.

I hadn't thought about this book in years. All of the things I could put in it. All the bad things would flood the pages and roll onto the floor like an unfurled parchment. The problem is I would struggle to find many good things. Yet I knew that good things had happened, so why couldn't I think of any? I was disgusted that my mother even let me turn out this way at all. How could this woman neglect me so much that I turned into everything she hated in the world?

'Is everything ok in here?' a woman asked, standing in the doorway. It was a nurse.

'Thank God someone came, I need you to move my mother.'

'Where would you like us to move her?'

'Somewhere better than here.'

'This is one of our nicer rooms. And all private rooms are full at the moment.'

'There's a private room option? Why was I not told?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'Get her in a private room.'

'I'm sorry, I can't do that. All private rooms are full.'

She caused my stomach to churn. This wasn't what needed to happen; I needed to get her out of here.

My voice picked up speed and urgency. 'Please, I need to move her somewhere else, somewhere better.'

'I assure you, your mother is very comfortable where she is and, like I said, there are no other rooms available.'

This woman was an idiot! What the hell was she talking about?

'Fine, I'll take her home then.'

'I'm sorry, you can't do that. She needs to stay here so we can monitor her. Nothing else can be done,' she said walking toward a doctor who had called her, causing me to contort with haplessness.

* * *

It was dark and everything smelled of fresh fruit and vegetables despite the stalls being empty. His mother smiled as she always did, aggravating him further. His adolescent mind focused on the piles of work that waited for him when he got home. He bounced around the small street, surrounded by market stalls closed for the night.

Thrusting his hands in his pockets he called out, 'Come on, Ma, I need to get home and finish my assignment!'

She hadn't payed his complaining much attention all day. She meandered down the street, scanning it at a painstakingly slow pace until his voice rose in frustration.

She stared at a stand, not looking at him. 'Calm down, you've been doing that all week. You're in high school, not university. I hardly see you anymore. You're always in your room when you should be enjoying yourself, Poppy.'

'Ma!' he said, his face turning red. 'I told you not to call me that anymore.' He quickly scanned the dully lit street. He wanted to move

faster, but he knew getting into an argument with her was pointless; she would smile, nod and continue to do whatever she was doing.

She stood by his side but didn't look at him, instead staring over his shoulder. Her face morphed from indifferent to panicked in an instant. Mouth agape, she lurched forward at the same time that he felt something wrap around his neck. Confused, he instinctively tried to escape to his mother's arms but every movement made the thing constrict tighter like a snake, causing him to sputter.

Panic struck him as he realised that he was in serious danger. He squirmed and wriggled and flailed his arms, but every bit of resistance was met with a tighter squeeze.

'Don't. Fucking. Move,' a voice behind him insisted with an unsettlingly calm tone.

He couldn't see much as his head was angled toward the darkening sky. His mother was shrieking and howling between pleas, arms outstretched, ready to catch her son. The problem was he wasn't falling.

'Please,' she shouted through her tears. 'Don't hurt him! I'll give you anything! Please!'

He felt unease as the calm voice behind him slipped its way past his neck. His meagre strength returned in bursts and every so often he would pointlessly flail his arms, only to be met with a vice like grip crushing everything inside his neck. Soon it became a struggle to breath and his vision slowly left him, his eyes rolling back into his head. All he saw was his mother bawling. He heard something drop next to him then felt himself being dragged further from his mother into the darkness.

'POPPY!' she screamed as she became smaller and smaller.

They turned into an unlit alleyway. The young man was thrown to the floor. He hit it with a thud and something in him cracked, causing him to cry out in agony. He couldn't see anything and his ears were ringing, but he felt everything that happened afterward. A fist pounded into his skull. The pain made his eyes water. He futilely pleaded for it to cease. It was as if a tonne of bricks had dropped on to his head, and another, and another. And when he thought that it

had stopped, he was pummelled again. He tried to lift his arms to protect himself but they failed to soften a single blow. He wished it would stop, begged, but it continued.

He couldn't see anything when it finally did, and it wasn't clear whether it was the darkness or the massive bruises that quickly formed on his head. He knew he ached but he couldn't pin point where exactly. He was shaking uncontrollably. He slowly pulled himself up a wall. He ran his hand over his body feeling every scrape and bruise. His nose poured blood like a tap. He felt bare skin instead of a shirt, his feet were bare, only his cheap track-pants where still attached to his battered body.

He stepped forward but collapsed, his knees refusing to hold the weight of his body. He winced, ready to hit the floor, but instead his fall was broken.

She had caught him.

For a moment he was delighted, shaking in her arms. Shaking from the pain, the cold and the shock. Her tears dropped onto his broken face. She had stopped him from falling.

But where was she when I was breaking?

* * *

My hand found my mother's again. I felt drained, unable to smile or laugh or cry. Frowning seemed to take the least effort so I continued to look miserable. The book was still on the floor; I didn't dare touch it. I knew it would trigger something long dormant in my mind and make me bawl uncontrollably. I needed to say things to her. I didn't know what, but I needed to say it. I closed my eyes.

I forfeit.

My hand moved involuntarily. At first I ignored it until my brain kicked into gear and I realised. She was awake! My eyes shot open. I looked at my mother and saw a smile I hadn't seen for far too long. She mimed a word and although she was too weak to let sound flow with it, I recognised it as a word I had heard thousands of times before.

Poppy.

My eyes stung. It was hard to see through the tears that welled and

dragged themselves onto the stubble of my usually clean face. This was my chance to say what I needed to... but I didn't know what to say. What could I say?

My mother must have picked up on my distress because she lifted my hand and held it tight. She began clumsily turning the blankets as if looking for something and when she couldn't find it her eyes widened in panic. Knowing what she was searching for, I held both her hands tightly and placed them gently on her stomach before reaching for the book that had fallen to the floor. I placed it in her hands, but as I did, a page fell to the floor followed by a red flower. I picked the page up and handed it to my mother but she refused making hand gestures for me to open it.

Рорру,

I love you so much.

What happened to us? When you were a boy, we were inseparable. You used to look at me with the biggest eyes that sparkled in the sun. It seemed that we both got further away from each other. I used to kid myself into believing you would be the same forever.

I'm glad you're here now though, Poppy. I knew you would be.

This diary holds all our pains. I have this one memory of you stuck in my mind that hurts every time I think about it. I don't know why.

It was sunset and we always used to play in the meadow outside our house. You were still small enough to carry when I saw you running over the hill with grass sprinkling off your feet with every step. You giggled the way only a child can as you ran awkwardly foot over foot. You stretched out your arms and jumped into mine, pushing me to the floor. My heart lit up and I couldn't stop myself from laughing. Neither of us has ever been so happy. In that moment there was nothing else in the world besides you and I. That night when I tucked you in, I found a bright red poppy in your hair.

This flower used to give me joy but now I think of what I lost when we grew apart. Take the poppy. I want you to remember the times we had, not the times we didn't.

I was void of emotion as the shock of the letter slammed into me. I couldn't understand why it was so powerful. But it was. I was paralysed. I looked at my mother but her eyes were closed again.

I studied the words. I admired the lack of mistake on the page, no moment of indecision in the ink. I thought about how many times she must have rehearsed it. How long she had thought about it. How her heart must have broken every time she thought about me. At the bottom of the letter was a red stain left by the poppy that had fallen to the floor.

My mouth was open. I knew what to say. It took too long to figure it out. I was being ridiculous. Three words would have sufficed, as long as I said them right. It was never what I said; it was always how-

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

The long tone shocked me into action. Had the heart monitor been there the whole time? My mind snapped into focus as feeling returned. My heart slammed against my ribs. My head became completely numb and everything tingled like pins and needles as doctors and nurses rushed into the room frantically moving me out of the way.

Stepping back, I lost my balance and slipped. I looked down and saw a red stain smeared across the floor that the Poppy had left behind.



Illustration by Jessie Meinken

To THE LAST

Erin McWhinney

'Now that Lyn is dead,' Frank began, his voice wavering with age, 'you should get more money from your sister's estate.'

Jean stopped folding pyjamas and threw her hands in the air. 'Lyn isn't dead, Frank!' she exclaimed, loud enough for his deaf ears. 'How many times do I have to tell you, for God's sake? She's never been close to dead!'

Jean had a low tolerance for her husband's demented tripe at the best of times, but this was the third time this week he'd accused her niece of being dead, and she'd had enough. It was the infection, they told her, muddling his brain – not the Alzheimer's. The infernal decay had stabilised for now. But these infections had been forming an orderly queue over several months, creeping in one after the other in constant succession. Her visits to the nursing home were becoming increasingly wearing.

'You'd be owed quite a bit of money,' Frank persisted, a shrunken figure in his easy chair, wagging a liver-spotted finger. 'About fifty grand, I'd say. Dot had—'

'Stop it, Frank!' Jean snapped, glancing at the open door. 'Lyn isn't dead! You saw her two months ago at Dot's funeral! She's very much alive and in Brisbane. I spoke to her last week.'

Frank kept that same look of dumb civility that he now always wore, benignly watching life happen around him.

'And even if she *was* dead,' Jean continued, crossing the tiny room to put the pyjamas in the wardrobe, 'why on earth would I get Dot's money? It goes to her grandchildren, Frank. Lyn's children. You need to stop all this.'

Frank sank back in his chair and hummed a little to console himself. He would let it go for today, if only to stop her getting so worked up. But he'd soon find a way to get her what she was owed.

He looked out the window at the grey day. 'Did you get rained on coming over here?'



Illustration by Joseph Estorninho

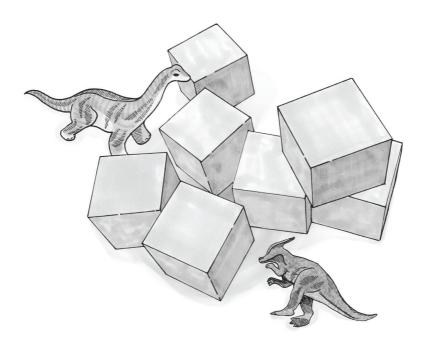


Illustration by Olga Conil

FOR THE LIVING, NOT THE DEAD

Cheyenne Berandi

Eulogies are bullshit. No one says what they want to say. They say what they're expected to say. They say what will help everyone else feel like it's okay to move on. That's what I'm doing now, and not a word of what I'm saying comes from the heart. I want to say how I would trade places with him in a heartbeat. How I don't want to live another day without him. How the four years I got to spend with him were the best of my life. How I don't know how to survive another day without him. But instead, I hold most of my tears at bay and stand in front of my family and friends, speaking about how I'll live every day for him, because he doesn't get to, and that isn't fair. I want the things I'm saying to be true, but they aren't.

I say, 'I'll never forget your smile.' But I know I will. I know that years from now when I picture his face I won't really remember it. I'll know what he looked like, from photos and descriptions I've repeated to myself, but all the real memories with him will fade until I can't see them clearly anymore, and even though I'll think I remember them, I won't; not really. I'll only remember that I love him, but I don't want that. I don't want to forget.

Tears I'm helpless to stop run down my face, but my expression is cold. My voice cracks and strains as I fight hard to say the words

I prepared to say goodbye, but what I'm saying isn't for him. If my words were for him they would be different; softer, and more meaningful. They would be whispered in his ear instead of projected to a crowd. I want to beg for this to have never happened. Or maybe I want to beg to be taken the way he had been. But there's no one to beg. I know now without a doubt that there is no God. What kind of God could take the life of a child?

'Seven months ago, my son, Riley, was diagnosed with Neuroblastoma.' My voice trembles with tears. 'It was terminal, and despite the doctor's best efforts, nothing could be done.'

It was less than a week ago when I looked into his bright blue eyes, the only feature left unaffected by the cancer, and said goodbye to him.

At his bedside I had held his hand and told him how much I loved him. 'Don't be afraid to let go,' I said.

Don't go, I prayed.

'You've fought so hard, like a superhero.' The only response I got came from the machines around him, assaulting my ears. As I was ushered aside by men and women whose faces had become a blur in my mind, I threw myself head first into agony and I didn't stop crying for days.

'Riley was only four years old. This isn't what I meant when I told you not to grow up...' I couldn't speak anymore through the pain. My face was wet with tears, and cold from the light breeze.

My mum, her cheeks stained with tears of her own, stands up and comes towards me. She grips my hand and squeezes until I look up at her. Her blue eyes, so similar to Riley's, shine with her sorrow. Slowly, she pulls me towards the small mahogany box; half the size of a regular coffin and still not full.

Sinking to my knees, I lean over to where my boy lies, hidden in his enclosure, his last ever hiding place, and pull a small superhero figurine from my coat pocket. I tucked it in among the flowers that sit neatly on top of dark wood.

'I love you,' I whisper, quietly enough for only myself and the dead to hear.

I stand and brush the dirt from my dress, facing the others with as much composure as I can manage; holding myself together, if only until I was alone, where breaking down would be a less public affair.

No one says as much, but I know they expect me to be a mess. I should be unable to speak through tears, or yelling at a cruel God for daring take my child from me. They think I am not dealing with my grief, but I simply refuse to give them the satisfaction of seeing it. I won't let them console me and feel like they've played their part well and done all they could do. I will not let them make today about them, and I refuse to make today about me.

Today is about him.

* * *

The floral scent affronts me as soon as I open the front door of my house. I had never liked flowers, but I didn't have the heart to throw them out. Each time a bouquet appeared on my door step with a card expressing 'deepest sympathies' I brought them in and sat them in the small front room. The flowers filling the room now ranged from dying to some floral equivalent of decomposed.

I shake my head to stop a harsh thought before it begins.

I throw my car keys down on the small table at the side of the room, kick my shoes off, and drop my coat to the floor.

I walk with purpose until I reached Riley's room, the door stands open, the way I had left it. I walk to his cupboard and open it. The smell of him hits me and I almost smile.

'I miss you so much baby boy. I wish you were here; I'd give anything for you to be here.' Tears well in my eyes, and I momentarily wonder if there will be a point when I can't cry any more.

Riley had been buried a week ago, and I spent every day since in his bedroom, talking to him, or more accurately, talking aloud to myself.

Toys lay abandoned at the foot of his bed from the last time he'd played with them. I couldn't clean them, even before he left me, unable to give up the hope that he would come back to them. I reach for one of his unwashed jackets and clutch it tightly to my chest as

I step towards the centre of the room, over the plastic dinosaurs and toppled blocks.

The tears brimming in my eyes fall silently, and I can feel the sobs in my heavy chest.

'Lacy?' I hear my ex-husband calling, the thud of a door being closed behind him. He isn't the first to come around and check on me since Riley's funeral, but he's one of the least expected. Before Riley was diagnosed we had hardly been on speaking terms, and though we spent a lot of time together during his treatment, I had expected to return to our silences since his death.

I don't go to greet him, and I don't make a sound, but he knows where to find me. When he walks in I'm sitting on the floor near Riley's bed; it is a full sized single bed we had bought him at the beginning of the year that he would never grow into. I look up at Derek and see what Riley might have looked like had he lived for another thirty years. His cropped brown hair and slightly crooked nose identical to his sons. I cradle the jacket like a baby, like my baby who is lost to me, and cry openly.

Without speaking, Derek sinks down beside me and wraps me in his arms. It's the acknowledgment of a feeling only we share. We sit like that for a long while before I break the silence with more than my sobs.

'Sometimes I talk to him.' It's an admission I didn't think I would make.

'I never really stop,' Derek says with a distant, watery look in his eyes. I'm a little bit shocked, but very relieved.

'What do you say to him?' I sit up now, feeling I have the strength to hold myself together in a way I couldn't have done before.

'I tell him everything. How much I miss his every day. How sorry I am for not being there. I tell him things I wish I'd said when he was still here. That I'm sorry for leaving the way I did. That what happened between us had nothing to do with him. I tell him about how fast his baby sister's growing. About how I wish he could meet her when she comes.' He begins to sob too, and for the first time since our marriage fell apart I feel like he's truly acting like a man.

Someone Riley could have aspired to be like, if only he'd been given the chance.

'I never really know what to say,' I confess. 'But I stand in here every day and try to talk to him. I know he can't hear me...'

'You don't know that for sure. You need to have faith.' He looks so sure of himself that my next confession almost hurts to say aloud.

'How can I have faith anymore?' I sink back into his arms. 'They stole my son from me.'

* * *

I hold the small box tightly as I step out of the car. The shiny blue paper and orange ribbon crinkle when I move. The damp ground squishes beneath the heels of my boots as I trudge towards Riley's gravestone.

The water drops clinging to the fresh flowers that adorn his grave make the entire plot look serene. Riley's flowers never had time to wither, since my mum replaced them every day. It was the way she coped. She was lucky to have found a way.

I force a smile onto my face as I sink to my knees beside the headstone. Reaching out, I trace each letter of the inscription. I pause on the second line.

'Happy birthday, baby.' I bite my lip to stop it from trembling. 'I got you something.' I pull the small present from where it had fallen when I sank down. 'I wanted to get you more, but I couldn't do it. It hurt-' I pause.

I pull the ribbon undone and let it fall to my knees.

'It hurt to think of how much you would have loved to be here. But when I saw this.' I shrug and genuinely smile. 'I knew it was perfect for you.'

I pull the tape from the joins in the wrapping paper, and unwrap the small box.

'It's not exactly for playing with, but I think it's better.'

Opening the box, I pull the small, sterling silver figure out and hold it tightly for a moment. It was cold in my hand, the harsh edges digging pain into my palm.

'Just like you,' I say. My smile is forced again, but I still give

it to him. I'll always smile for him whenever I can. I want to be okay for him.

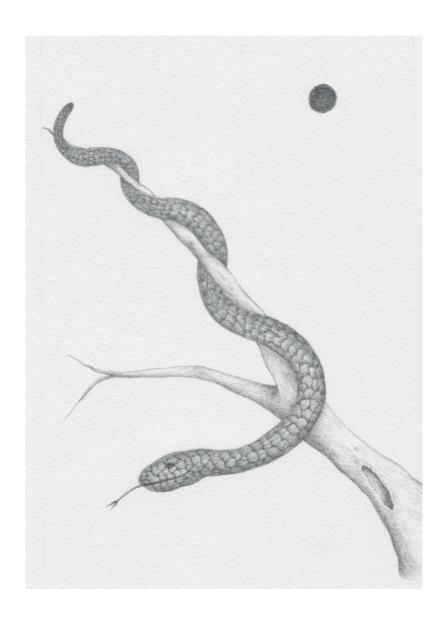
I place the ornament of the boy who never grew up into the grass at the base of Riley's gravestone, and push it into the ground. Not enough to be buried, but enough that it won't leave its place.

'Now you won't be alone,' I tell Riley.

And even though I had told myself I wouldn't be able to, when I close my eyes, I can remember Riley's smiling face. Two tears fall softly to the ground as I smile.



Illustration by Caitlin Chilton



Illistration by Basak Savcigil

LAND SHAPER

Cat McLean

When I first saw the stranger the air was brisk and my blood flowed slowly. All day, I watched her hack at the banksia and acacia. As they fell, the screams of seedpods severed from their life force vibrated into my belly. When only stumps remained, the stranger wrenched the gnarly roots from the soil's vice-like grip. Sometimes the unmoving earth held onto the root tangle so tightly that she was knocked backwards. *Thud*. I smiled a secret smile when I saw her, laying flat on her back, dirt-faced and legs splayed. The stranger fought with the earth, and the earth fought back.

By sunset, the trees and their denuded roots lay sideways and forlorn. Like me, they watched narrow-eyed as the stranger, bruised and scratched, planted rosemary cuttings and peach saplings in their disturbed clay place.

'They're all from my grandmother's garden.'

From underneath the house, I listened to the stranger speak to the other voice on the balcony. The last of the light sunk into the horizon while parrots bickered over grass seeds in the nearby clearings.

'Still, you didn't need to rip them *all* out,' said the other voice. 'They meant a lot to my family, is all.'

'Well, now we're family, and this is our home. You've brought me out here, you should let me put my mark on it too.'

'There's just so many memories here, Polly. It's hard to see things change.'

A clayish, jasmine scent swept across my tongue. The other voice was Julia! Oh, how could I forget that aroma? Julia had returned and I *knew* it was because, after all these years, she had finally felt the absence of my watchful eye. And yet her return was sullied by the sanguineous stench of this stranger, this *Polly*.

Polly swept a thin layer of red dust off the edge of the balcony.

'This place can't be a shrine forever, Jules. Anyway, I'm going in to light a fire.'

This was a project of erasure. With rosemary, nectar and the warmth of flame, Polly would make this place her own, but it would not be without struggle.

I had seen this before; I was there when the ancient eucalypts fell, and acanthus-crowned Corinthian pillars sprung up in their place. *Behold us, for we have been here for eternity,* they whispered to ruddy and muddy-hemmed passers-by as they fanned away the January furnace. It was collective amnesia. Even now, Levi-ed and smart-phoned as they are, they still forget; the columns are liars.

That night, Julia and Polly sat by the fire, sharing a glass of wine.

'See, it's nice to slow down isn't it?' Julia warmed her hands by the fire, jumping back startled by stray sparks.

'Hmmm.' Polly tipped her head back and poured the wine down her throat.

With pots and pans and mowers and turntables and bits of old bike trailing behind them, *it will be nice to slow down* had been the old brag of the Hume, northbound. 'I just hate being so very... *inland*.'

They had left Melbourne two days earlier. In the rear vision mirror, Julia had watched the human trees of glass and luxury sparkle in the afternoon sun then melt into the suburbs.

'God, this is all so aggressively right-angled,' said Julia as they

drove through the vast sprawl, where suburbanites clung onto the promise of a low-density dream with cheap bricks and *If you lived here, you'd be home by now* billboards. It was all built over 1960s landfill and ants nests.

Julia pressed her toe firmly onto the accelerator until house and land packages faded again into tree-flecked open space, rich with animal odour.

'There's always the dam,' said Julia as she topped up the drained glass with cheap Shiraz. Red-tinged streams of alcohol ran thick down the sides of the glass. 'I'll take you down there tomorrow.'

As a child, Julia spent her long summer days at the dam - a stagnant remnant of when the river got lost. I remember watching her squelch her tiny toes into the soft bottom and squealing, afraid of lurking bunyips.

'When the time is just right,' said her grandmother, 'they rise to the surface, and eat the warm bellies of babies.'

'It's just not the same as the coast,' said Polly, toeing at the clay bank the next morning. The dam sat at the bottom of the yard, snaking between river red gum and wattle. Dappled light danced through the leaves and warmed the rocks where I lay.

'Well, it's not like Port Phillip is "the coast", Pol. It's mostly just plastic particles and diluted excrement.'

'Maybe so, but at least it has this sense of openness that this place just doesn't have. Billabongs like this are cut off from their source, and whatever happens to be swimming there at the time gets trapped. I find that unsettling. It's disturbing.' Polly looked at the ground and chuckled. 'You know, this dam of yours is probably full of yabby shit. That gets trapped, too.'

'You're a yabby.' I watched Julia smile and slide her hand into Polly's.

'Hey, look over there. It's a snake!' Polly pointed towards my sunbathed rock. 'Bit early for it, isn't it?'

'She must be baking the winter out of her bones,' Julia said.

'What if we get bitten?'

'Then you die.' Julia opened a beer and offered Polly a sip. 'There aren't as many here these days. I remember when this place was an absolute snake pit.'

'How did you get rid of them?'

'Once, I sat on the shed and watched Dad set nearly the whole property alight, you know, to smoke 'em out.'

I remembered that well. A five year old Julia begged her father not to start the fire.

'What about the animals?' she cried from the roof of the shed as he threw a burning rag to the grass. 'What did the snakes ever do to you?'

He told her that some would burn, it was true, but that was the natural way of things. That the lucky ones would return in a few months to find lush land and a bounty of food. That in its death, the bush springs forth with life. That sacrifice sometimes reaps great reward.

And yet, as the flames flickered their way up the trees and wattles burst, my Julia still cried for the animals. That's when I knew that she was of this earth. She had a lot to learn, but she belonged here. She belonged to me.

'...It didn't get rid of them all though, so after Dad died, Nan used to just go out in the morning and shoot them point blank with a rifle. Even when she was like ninety.'

'Isn't that illegal?'

'Nan's outlook on life was very much "it's not wrong if you don't get caught".'

'Sort of like when my grandmother fed me raw meat,' said Polly. 'What?'

'When I was a kid I spent a lot of time at my grandma's house over the summers. Mum went up north every January to some ashram, you see. One summer, I developed this insatiable taste for raw meat. I remember I would go down to the kitchen at midnight and raid the fridge. Bite straight into a raw lamb roast.'

Polly rolled a clump of clay into a palm-sized ball and pressed her thumb into the centre. This would be the first of many pinch pots.

'Nan was puzzled for weeks. She couldn't figure out who was taking huge bite marks out of all the meat. That is, until she caught my eight year old self face down, asleep in a raw rump steak.'

She used her thumb and middle finger to pinch out the sides of the clay vessel, speckled with bits of decaying gum leaf.

'I think Nan thought I was iron deficient, so she made me a roast every day that summer. It was my job to run down to the backyard as fast as I could to get the rosemary garnish. Nan used to time me, and if I was extra quick, she would slice me off a bit of raw meat to chew on. I remember enjoying it so much that the animal blood would run all down my face and drip onto this white cotton dress I used to have.

'When Mum finally came to pick me up, she found me gnawing on a piece of raw beef cheek in the front yard. She was *so* horrified by the sight. She shoved her whole hand in my mouth, pulled out the half masticated pieces of flesh, flung them across the yard and locked me in the car.'

Polly set aside her first pinch pot and got started on a new one. Julia drew mud maps with a stick.

'I guess I was like a yabby, trapped by the lure of the meat,' said Polly as she squished the second pinch pot back together to start the shaping again. 'I remember peering through the window, watching Mum lay into my grandma. She was a strict vegan and all, as you know. That was the last time I saw Nan, actually.'

Oh, how I hated that Polly and how she touched this land, breaking it down to make it fit. How I hated the spell she cast over my lovely Julia, how she made Julia helpless to preserve this land. I had a plan, but before anything else, it had to get warmer; I had to thaw.

As the frosty mornings began to lift, Polly, the gluttonous landshaper, spent more and more time at the dam collecting clay. Each day, a new shelf in the house would fill up with more little pots and fertility figures with soft bellies and pinched faces. Sometimes Polly even made little, square, clay homes for them to live in. Shaping my earth into something manageable, something recognisable ... something right-angled.

When spring chill morphed into a fierce and dry summer, and industrious spring days of pulling back cobwebs from door frames turned into lazy days of beer-drinking and floating in the dam, I knew it was time.

It was a phosphorescent January day when I went through with my plan. Only the occasional tick of a cicada dared to break the stillness of an afternoon bush siesta.

'You want to come for a swim?' asked Polly with an inner tube under arm.

'Nah,' said Julia, half-asleep in front of a battling fan.

I watched Polly get into the dam and climb up onto the inner tube. Under the early afternoon sun, Polly floated, sprawled out across the tube and dozed. I watched her ankle bobbing limply at the surface of the water. I watched it, and I waited. When the sleeping Polly drifted close to the bank of the dam, I slithered silently, taking care to not disturb a pebble or rustle a blade of grass. And then, with all of the sunshine and boiling hate I had stored in my body, I leapt forth, and sunk my fangs deep into Polly's ankle. I heard her wake with a yelp as I dove stealthily into the depths of the dam, without so much as a splash.

When the ambulance left with its lights flashing blue and red, I got out of the dam. I had watched Polly loaded into the back of the vehicle and a brow-furrowed Julia followed her in the car. As I slid my heavy body back to my burrow, the dropped gum leaves scratched at my scales, but I did not mind. My plan had worked. In the warmth of my nest, I curled up, closed my eyes and waited for my sad-eyed Julia to return.

I dreamt of curling around her soft thighs. I dreamt of dozing in the hearth of her lap.

I woke when the rumble of tyres rattled my body and the sound of one pair of nearby feet shook the walls of my burrow. I peeped out of my hole and saw Julia retrieve a green tin canister. The sun was bearing down on Julia, bringing sweat to her brow. From the canister, she poured the clear liquid across Polly's rosemary and sweet summer peaches. It coated my tongue with a heady vapour.

When Julia dropped the match over Polly's garden, my heart skipped a beat. Polly was gone! I ignored her distant scent still sticking to my tongue. She was gone, I was sure of it. Julia would make this home her own again. It was a tinderbox summer and the flames spread with abandon. They licked their way up the spindly ghost gums, crackling and sputtering and spreading their hellish tendrils through the thirsty tussock. Soon, flames encircled my burrow and the smoke made me fuzzy and my eyes felt heavy. I felt the radiation split my skin and I oozed a black, viscous goo. I melted and spread myself deep under the earth, where the roots and buried seeds found me and ate me. I would become the trees and I would drop my leaves on Julia's sunkissed hair.

After the smoulder had settled, and time had looped from summer to spring, I sprouted with the seeds straight from the blackened earth. The first thing I saw when I sprouted was Polly, still there, sitting on the balcony with a morning coffee. I was tousled about by the angry wind and the trees around me creaked in unison.

'Sorry about your garden, Pol. I know you put a lot of work into it ... but I think Dad and Grandma were right. We needed to burn those snakes out.'

'It's okay.' Polly looked out across at the new lushness and rubbed her ankle. 'I think it's better as it is now anyway.' On the far side of the yard, a wallaby nibbled at some new grass. Polly's nostrils filled with dewy eucalyptus.

'It smells like life here. Beats memories of roast lamb and Port Phillip any old day.'



Illustration by Inkling John

Home

Alicia K Randall

'A month can feel like a year when your house is for sale,' is what the realtor said to me

I wasn't inclined to believe her at first. The house I had lived in for ten years was on the market and I expected I would be saying goodbye to it sooner than I wanted.

But the realtor was right. A month can feel like a year.

My wife and I had cleaned the place up as much as we could, with my wife buying extra bits and pieces to give the rooms that feel you get when you walk into a furniture store. She had a grin on her face as she placed a pineapple in the fruit bowl.

'You hate pineapple,' I said.

'Mm,' she replied as she arranged the apples and bananas around it.

She was ridiculous at times. I came up behind her and pinched her sides, an act that usually made her squeal. She seemed prepared for it this time and swiped at me, giving me a firm 'don't' before turning back to her art.

I was at work when the photos of the house were taken and during the first inspection. Things were speeding along so far. No bumps unless you counted the fear of some random snatching up one of my Star Wars figurines.

The second week, the house was a mess. My wife and I had freed ourselves from responsibility the previous weekend and hadn't had the time to properly clean the place up again.

My back had been killing me so I decided to take a sickie. No inspections had been arranged until the open on Saturday. So there I was, lounging around on the couch, laughing at some kids' show, when I got a call from my wife.

'Hey, sweetie, how's your back?' she said, her tone seemed hurried though. Concern for my health was not the reason for the call.

'Neh.' I shrugged even though she couldn't see me. 'It's better.'

'Oh good, good...' She paused. 'So, the realtor called me just before and said that someone wanted to come through the house at three.'

I glanced at the clock.

'That's in an hour,' I said. 'You do remember what the house looked like when you left this morning, right?'

'Oh I know, I know,' she said. 'But I didn't think to say no and I can't call back and tell them they can't come when I've already told them to come.'

'Yeah you can.'

'No, I can't.'

'Well, crap!'

'Please, please, clean up what you can. Please?'

I didn't respond.

'It doesn't need to be perfect, just make sure the kitchen and bathroom are spotless, clean up some rubbish... Oh, maybe do a quick vacuum of—'

'Got it.'

I hung up.

I spent the next hour rushing from room to room, clearing dishes, making the bed – and I ended up doing my back again while opening a curtain. A curtain for crying out loud.

And this kept happening, not my back – thank God – but the surprise inspections when the house was a mess.

Oh, it was a long month all right.

It sure didn't help that I had to disappear whenever an inspection was on. Every time, I would drive into town, think to have a coffee, but knew if I did I would get a stomach ache; go to the bookstore only to get chatted to by the sixty-something year old lady who had the most annoying voice, and eventually end up circling my block ten times before I saw the realtor leaving.

One time after coming back home, I collapsed onto the couch and let myself sink into it. I gazed around the room and to the floating shelf that my wife and I had struggled to install ourselves. It was slightly crooked. We often teased each other about whose fault that was.

I paused. Something wasn't right. And it wasn't the crooked shelf. On this shelf I had my Star Wars figurines displayed proudly. And Han Solo, usually front and centre, had been moved.

I didn't even pause to think about it. I put them all in a box and hid them away.

'Has anyone showed any interest at all? Has that realtor said anything?' I asked my wife at dinner that night.

'Oh, she has said people like it. One old couple have come in twice now.'

I paused. 'Why?'

She looked up at me. 'What do you mean why? People like to be sure before they buy something.' She smiled. 'Don't you remember when we kept going back to that place with the really ugly fireplace?'

'Yeah, but we decided no in the end.'

My eye caught onto a dent in the wall. It had been caused when we'd first moved in. Mucking around, we'd knocked over a chair and fallen down with it laughing. We hardly cared for the dent; we kissed and exchanged 'I love you' for the first time.

My wife placed her hand on the table in front of me, 'What's wrong?'

I picked at the peas on my plate.

'Nothing, nothing, I'm good.' I gave her hand a quick pat.

She raised an eyebrow at me. 'I noticed you put away your toys.'

'Not toys.' I stabbed a pea. 'Someone touched Han Solo.'

'How do you even know that?'

'Because he wasn't where I left him.'

'Where was he?'

'A little to the right.'

My wife placed her cutlery on either side of her plate. 'Okay,' she breathed. She stood up and hugged me around the neck. She placed a kiss on my cheek.

'I know this is hard for you... Will you talk to me?'

When we first agreed to sell the house I hadn't thought much of it. We were approaching the next stage in our life together, and I was excited. But it's as they say – we take for granted what we have. And we don't realise how good things are until we've lost them. Even though we hadn't moved out yet, I was grieving for the first house I'd ever owned. The house where my wife and I created so many little memories. Even if a lot of them were memories of us screwing up and learning how to be adults. Part of me wanted it over and done with, but another part wanted this whole process to keep going so I could stay here as long as I could.

I brushed my lips over my wife's. 'I am fine, really. Don't worry, I just don't like the idea of people touching our stuff.'

'Hmmm...' She wrapped her arms around my neck. 'Talk to me.' She nuzzled into the crook between my shoulder and neck and planted a kiss there. It sent a shiver down my spine.

'I said I'm fine.'

She let out a light laugh. 'I know you better than anyone. And *you* know I'll get you to talk, and that you'll feel much better afterwards.'

She pulled back, hands on my shoulders, and smiled with a raised brow.

I sighed. 'Yes, that's how it usually goes.'

She lifted a finger. 'That's how it always goes.'

I stood and wrapped my arms around her. I sighed, my breath ruffling her hair.

'I'm going to miss this place,' I said. 'It's home.'

Alicia K Randall

She looked up at me, a sad smile on her face. 'I'm going to miss it too.' Her face scrunched. 'Though I'm not going to miss that tiny shower.' She glanced to the kitchen. 'Or that old oven. Or the carpet that—'

I laughed. 'Or the carpet that *still* smells like cat piss from the previous owners.'

She laughed with me.

'The new house is going to be so much better,' I said.

'It will be,' she said, wiping at her eye, her smile still lingering.

I looked down to her stomach, large from our child growing inside. I placed my hand there, smiling.

'The three of us just need to make it home. Create some memories there.'

She placed her hand over mine. 'Piece of cake.'



Illustration by Greg Harriden

THE OUT

Anna Bilbrough

I'd always wondered: what if the first people on the moon got stuck up there? What if, for some reason, they were unable to make it back home? They didn't have enough oxygen, their power failed, something unforeseen went wrong. What would they have done?

I remember the crunch of the gravel before anything else. I think of the day—not always willingly—I was chosen, and the steady, practised footfall of the man beside me. Like the others, he wore a thin soft paper mask that disguised the lower half of his face. On the inside, we were good at recognising eyes.

They taught us about the moon landing when we were eleven. We learnt of time and the past out of sequence. The pyramids, the moon landing, the dinosaurs, World War I. World War II was combined with the lesson on The Bombings of the New Millennium. Long name for something that happened so swiftly.

I was the first to leave, out of Macy and me. The note had been delivered after communal dinner, three days before my seventeenth birthday. *You have been chosen*. I suspected it; I watched the kinds

of kids that were taken out early and they were just like me. Quiet, studious, heads down to the desk most of the day. *Good little worker bees*. Of course, they'd taught us about bees when we were eight, when we didn't yet have the concept of what humans were capable of out of negligence. I'd only seen bees in pictures.

The gravel comes first, the grip on my arm second. I was more shaken by the force rather than the pain. I didn't have a choice; that much I knew from the way I was held down that day, as the masked man clamped my mouth open and cut out one of my back molars. I could feel the force of his tugging, his foot propped against the metal base of the chair for leverage. The nurses, masked too, held me by the shoulders, the ankles and the head. I could stare at nothing but the ceiling and the grime that had gathered in the places where the panels met. I thought of the first men on the moon, as I did when I needed to leave the space of my own head. What was it like up there? What fascinated us so much?

Macy was my only friend inside. One day, she'd called us 'sisters'. I looked at her, the edges of her face blurring from how close she'd leaned in to whisper.

'We don't have sisters in here,' I said back, reciting it in the same way the instructors did.

'But we can be if we want to. Didn't you see the picture in the textbook? Page 354?'

The textbook. Anything not worth the instructor's time was in the textbook, thick and heavy, that they'd given us on our collective 5th birthday. It was our weekly reading, and the pages seemed neverending. Page 354 was somewhere before the middle. Macy had it inconspicuously earmarked. The picture was small, grainy and in black and white, with a one-line caption underneath: 'Abigail and Sarah Wood. Born 5th March 1893. Caesarean delivery.'

'1893?'

'We can't be like that, like they are, but they must be sisters, right? We could tape our hands together, or maybe at the wrist ...'

Macy looked at me, eyes wide and searching mine, blonde eyelashes almost meeting her eyebrows.

The two girls in the picture were joined at the hip, both bodies angling away from that central point, as if trying to slowly tear away from each other.

'Why are they like that?' I asked.

'I don't know. I kinda like it,' Macy whispered.

I remember every minute of the lesson on the moon landing. The instructor had taped a blown-up picture of Neil Armstrong standing next to the old American flag on the front wall of the room. The helmet shield reflected everything that he could see. He looked so small, completely swamped by his suit, by what was behind him. I couldn't believe how *small* he was.

We weren't allowed to ask questions in the planned lessons so I never found out what could have happened if they'd been stranded on the moon. The instructor told us that 600 million people watched the landing and it took three days for the astronauts to arrive.

'Times have changed exponentially since 1969. When you're chosen to leave, you'll help people, like Neil Armstrong, everyday.'

I wanted to ask how I could *be* Neil Armstrong, but there were no questions in planned lessons.

'Your out has been installed. Recite the reasons why you may choose to use your out.'

When the masked man finished with me, he nodded at the nurses who loosened their grip to help me stand. I touched my jaw but my fingertips felt distant, like they were reaching for my skin through layers of cloth.

I sat behind a desk, a glass of water and bowl containing what looked like porridge in front of me. I had a straw for both. A masked nurse sat on the other side, watching me drink. Her voice was muffled by the mask.

'If I encounter a rogue, identifiable by the initiation scar on their left earlobe, I am to use my out. If I bring harm to another individual

in a way that isn't justified by self-defense, I am to use my out. If I feel I have jeopardised my role or position beyond repair through ill behaviour or degradation of reputation, I am to use my out. If another individual approaches me seeking counsel on their ultimate choice, I am to use my out.'

'Your out is your sole responsibility. When are you not permitted to exercise your right to the ultimate choice?'

'I must not use my out if I am corrected, reprimanded or punished by my supervisors. I must not use my out in times of personal confusion or instability. I must not use my out if approached for questioning by a uniformed official.'

The nurse sat still. No reaction meant a pass.

'Recite the steps you must take when you finally use your out.'

'When I exercise my right to the ultimate choice I must try to find a secluded place. My out is located at the back of my mouth, on the left side of my lower jaw. The rubber seal must be lifted off and discarded outside of the mouth, to avoid the risk of impeding the performance of the out. The glass casing of the out will be exposed. I must break the glass casing by using the force of my teeth. Once the glass casing is broken, I must ingest the contents of the capsule.'

The nurse stared hard. A swift, almost imperceptible nod. A door opened. I was out.

I don't know when Macy was chosen to leave. I thought about it sometimes on the outside, but most of my headspace was consumed with thoughts of the first men on the moon. I tried to imagine what life was like in 1969. What *my* life would have been like in 1969. Would I have gathered around a television set to watch the landing? Would I have had a nuclear family? Nuclear meant something so different where I was taught. I couldn't talk to anyone about this, couldn't learn any more than what I was taught. I imagined it instead. Imagined what my life would have been like in the past, then imagined what it would have been like had I been born anywhere but Earth, or if I'd been one of the lucky ones whisked away in the Great Exploration. I could've been Neil Armstrong.

Macy contacted me. I assumed she found me through the agency, the only way she would've been able to without resorting to contacting the rogues first.

'The agency exists for your purposes and protection.' I was given a card with an address handwritten on one side before I left. I kept it in my pack for the first three years, thinking one day might call for the use of it. I was attacked on the street once and my pack was taken. My ribs had been cracked and I had bruises from where they'd kicked me on my back. They weren't rogues, so I couldn't use my out, despite the pain, despite the desire, the fear. My solace in that moment, I'd been taught, was that when they were caught, they'd be forced to use their own outs, as they'd broken conduct by attacking another individual. *If* they were caught.

The card didn't matter after that. As I lay on the street, bleeding from my nose and mouth, reaching out to grab the feet of the uniformed officers walking past, I realised there was no purpose and protection.

'This place is kinda nice.' Macy looked older. I know I did, too, I could feel it. Her red hair was cropped short by her ears and I could see every detail of her face. Could see how the lines had formed and where they would spread next. Her faint eyelashes had always unnerved me.

I nodded, feigning interest in the room around us, in the fake plants hanging from the roof, in the plain, white brick walls. This was my place. I had made it mine when I realised in my first year out that people preferred the eatery three doors up. This place was quiet. I didn't tell Macy any of this.

Our drinks were delivered. I sipped on my water as Macy stirred her thick tomato juice. It was a popular drink and it contained no real tomatoes; I knew that for a fact. Real tomatoes were a rarity.

'Do you remember the—'

'I don't want to talk about memories.' I dwelled enough on my own. I didn't need a partner.

Macy raised her eyebrows, sipped her juice. 'Fine.'

'I only have twenty minutes until I have to go back.'

'So do I.'

A few people filtered in and out of the eatery. Macy finished her juice and ordered another.

It was a hot day, but most were. The dusty fans in the corners of the eatery did nothing to stop the sweat swimming down my back. Macy's upper lip and hairline were shining, sweat catching in the fine hairs on her face. The silence between us seemed heavier than the gentle silence of the eatery. Occasionally, a fork would clatter against a plate or the bell on the top of the door would jangle. My mind drifted to the first men on the moon. What *would* they have done if they couldn't have made it back home? How would they have died? Did they have their own out?

'I got rid of it.' She was mid-sip. Her breath bubbled against the juice as she spoke. She was watching my reaction through her glass. I imagined my warped face looking back at her, pulled back to earth, to the eatery, washed in mild confusion.

She placed the glass on the table between us. A drop of juice slid from the rim, down the side and pooled at the base of the glass. It seeped into the wood of the table. A red stain remained as Macy lifted the glass to her mouth again.

'My out. The ultimate choice. I got rid of it.'

I'd heard rumours. Something about the rogues and if you knew the right one. I only heard whispers when I was in the right place on the right night. But the right place could very quickly transform into the wrong place and talking about our outs was prohibited.

'I can't tell you how, not here, not right now. Maybe not ever, unless you want to know. If you want to know, I can help.' She was talking low and fast and I tried not to show my rising panic on my face.

I'd thought about it before. But not like this. And how could she know that? I'd thought about crunching down on that glass capsule as I lay on the street in pain after they had taken my pack and kicked me as I clenched my head in between my arms. I thought about spitting out the rubber cap, right into the face of my supervisor as he grabbed my jaw and snarled in my face when I'd missed an item on the outbound line and had to stop production for a minute.

I thought about using my out more than I liked, more than I had been taught to. But I had the ultimate choice right in between my teeth. I couldn't avoid it.

'How are you still here? Why haven't you gone?'

'There's nowhere to go. The rogues just remove it; they don't let you in. They don't let *anyone* in. But I ... I might ha—I can't talk about it here. I need to know first.'

I'd finished my water. My mouth was dry. I ran my tongue across my bottom teeth, stretching it to reach the base of the rubber cap at the back of my mouth. I would have to use my fingers to twist the rubber seal off, I knew that.

'I need to know no—'

A nod. Imperceptible but Macy was staring hard. She nodded back.

I met Macy at the right place on the right night. I wore my uniform so that as I walked through the streets it would look like I was on my way to a night shift. The streets around my base were bare, empty of buildings and people. The sky was mostly clear, and I watched the moon as I walked. I wanted to know what would have happened if they'd died up there. Would their bodies still be there now? The more I thought about the first men on the moon, the more I realised it didn't matter what they would have done. Their fate was sealed. The more important question: what would the people on Earth have done? Did they have a plan in place? What would have happened to the bodies of the dead astronauts? Would they have stopped travelling into space?

I walked towards the main stretch of buildings, the one street that had shape. A tightness formed in my chest but I didn't know if it was because of what I was about to do or if it was because I was scared for the people of 1969, scared for the possibility of the astronauts not making it home.

I had instructions. I walked into the late night store, walked straight to the refrigerated drinks by the register. Macy told me it was important not to hesitate. As I opened the fridge and reached for a plastic bottle of tomato juice, I made eye contact with the cashier.

The tightness constricted. An imperceptible nod. I placed the juice on the counter, tapped the lid twice. My index finger shook as I moved my hand back by my side. The cashier motioned for me to enter the office that allowed access to the cashier's desk. I turned, my rubber work shoes squeaking against the linoleum floor. I felt the cashier's eyes boring into the back of my head and my breathing quickened. I thought of the moon, the first men on it, the people there now and how I wanted to be with them. The doorknob to the office slipped in my palm and I ran my tongue across my bottom teeth. My tongue stretched and I felt the cool glass case of my out. The rubber cap was in the bin beside my bed. Macy hadn't told me to do that. But I had to make sure the choice was still there. Right between my teeth.

I remembered the crunch of the gravel from when I was led out on my leaving day. I thought of the crunch of new earth, new land under my feet. One crunch of my teeth, a swallow. Imperceptible.



Illustration by Bek Rogers



Illustration by Anthony Stevens

Losing Self

Alexandra Mavridis

When I was fifteen and repressed, life felt slow. Each weekend, I sat at the end of my best friend's single bed and we listened to Jim Croce. Listening like mourners to the lyrics of his song. 'If I could save time in a bottle the first thing that I'd like to do, is to save everyday like a treasure and then ...' Our mood was heavy as we spent another afternoon trapped inside a regime of good Greek girl modesty.

Following from that came our favourite track 'Photographs and Memories'; we played him over and over again. Jim was singing to us. It was the first time I'd heard such a raspy voice, accompanied by a guitar. This was a man who had lived and lost. We had lost and not lived, or so it seemed.

Emotional deprivation has made me hungry for memories and left me with a desire to create a space that tells my story. As an artist and a gardener, the urge to respond, to act and create; to observe, to hear and to see the human condition, is strong.

At fifty-seven, I am experiencing a most uncomfortable epiphany that none of it matters. The memories we hold are just our perceptions and the objects that surround us are irrelevant.

Experiences, too, are transient and what we are left with is the changes in cells. Whether it is in the regeneration of the brain that grows new synapses, or the cancer that develops in our breast due to grief and loss of those whom we nurture.



Illustration by Greg Harriden



Illustration by Evalina Anastasi

Non-Fiction

HI, MY NAME IS SARAH, LIKE SEROTONIN
INFECTIOUS FEVERISH IMAGININGS
POLICE BUSINESS
PROTEST
TEA ROSE
THE NIFOULA
THE RED SHOES
WHY TABLETOP GAMING?
PATCHWORK
THE LIGHT

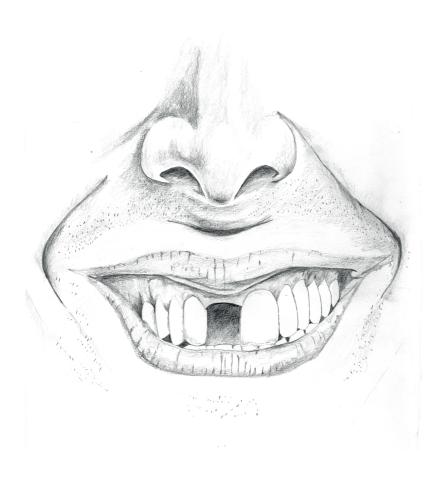


Illustration by Greg Harriden

HI, MY NAME IS SARAH, LIKE SEROTONIN Sarah Irene Robinson

I had mushrooms on the weekend. It wasn't like when I was younger and I used to take any drug that was popped into my mouth. I haven't had anything in years. I got past the point of needing anything and then I worked out how to talk to people all on my own, and then I started working a little, and then a bit more, and then I started studying and then I looked back and drugs seemed like another life time ago. But they weren't. I used to take them all the time without thinking, until my body fell apart and my brains spilled out. I remained sixteen much longer than I probably should have.

Anyway, all the elements fell into place, the stars and the planets and all that lot, and my friend Ronnie had a whole heap of mushrooms. Ronnie is kind and interesting, and we are trying to be better friends. Both of us pushing from either side of the void to get a little closer. He gave all of us a party bag for attending, which was a paper bag full of mushrooms. And we all wrote our names on them, just like a real party bag, like when we were little kids. Or like a lunch order with your name on it, that you would send off in primary school for a meat pie and a Sunnyboy. A paper bag with your name on it is a treat!

And then Ronnie got a text message saying, 'These mushrooms are fucking wonderful,' and there was a photograph of Johnny having a party on his own, smiling as wide as the photo would let him. And we all at once decided to eat our party bags together right then. Because I had no thoughts on the matter, it all worked out smoothly. If I had a moment to properly think out my thoughts, they would have dragged me straight outta there.

And it took some time, but not too much time. Like, it kicked in for some, and I was gonna have some more, and Kayla was gonna have some more.

'When I am on mushrooms I have never regretted taking more mushrooms,' I said.

'That was very convincing.,' replied Kayla.

And we went to eat some more, but Jeremiah stops us. Jeremiah has one of his front teeth missing, I can't remember how he lost it but he says it wasn't in a fight and it wasn't from taking drugs. He says this to everyone who comments on his tooth. And because he has a tooth missing this makes Jeremiah a little more convincing in his arguments, it gives a little more weight behind him and everything he says, 'cause even if I don't agree with what he's saying, the missing tooth makes you think he's had some kind of rich life experience. So you listen up.

And he says, 'why don't you wait another twenty minutes for the mushrooms you've already taken to kick in?'

And we stare at the black gap where his front tooth used to be and we know he is right. And we place our uneaten mushrooms back in their party bags. And sure enough, he was right because my brain starts tingling, and smaller and smaller things become more and more interesting. And everything is chaos and everything is connected. And how can the two be true at the same time?

I woke up in the morning and Kayla was gone, we had been on either prong of an L-shaped couch, with our heads in the middle. We fell asleep chatting. I must have woken the exact same time as Jeremiah because he was staring right into my eyes from the floor. I said 'hey,' and groaned. I felt a disconnect from my body.

I had stomach pains, my anxiety was kicking in. I managed to get a sausage roll and get myself back to the city and to bed for a calm down. But I kept experiencing waves of chaos without the euphoria, because I used it all up last night. It took me the whole hour drive to eat that one sausage roll, but I did it, and it was terribly precious to me by the end. I felt like an open wound a child had prodded with a stick from the ground.

During the week previous I had a therapy session about Mum. It reached in deep and into some stuff I wanted to keep forever, some sadness. But it wasn't doing me any good, it wasn't healthy. And now it was raw and prodded by the ground stick. I couldn't sleep for days; I had too much heart pumping. Do mushrooms release serotonin? Which is a precursor for melatonin, which is the brain chemical that makes you fall asleep. Maybe my brain squeezed out all its serotonin and now there is none left for me to fall asleep.

Kayla told me to remember my rebellion, so that I wouldn't take every word my mother said as an unchangeable scribe to base my life on. The earliest memory I had of disagreeing with Mum was when lived at Grandad's when I was three.

It had been about a week since I showered. Mum let us all off the hook, for as long as we wanted. There was no point. The general dirtiness to my skin felt right. The dirt was baked on with the hot sunshine, and you don't burn if you're covered in dirt.

I chased my brother into one of the many broken down cars on my grandfather's land. There's was a rusty squeak to the over used door, and we forced it open together with our two pairs of grubby hands. We both dived for the driver's seat, but I was bigger and I won, but never without consequence, always getting an expert kick from my brother to the exact same spot on my shin. The same as last time and the time before, adding a bigger bruise to the one that had started to change colour.

I'd put the car into gear by grinding the stick up and down again and again; until I was satisfied we were ready. The old leather sinking into our nostrils, melding to our bare thighs. I grabbed the sharply hot rubber wheel and moved it quickly side to side.

My sister jumped on the bonnet and I slammed on the peddles, both at once. We jumped out and chased her to another car. I' dropped my doll and had to go back. She was naked with three tuffs of hair sticking out in three directions and she was dirty too. But I think she was dirty when I found her, before we moved into the caravan and became wild.

Grandad was angry with Mum, she'd spent her day scrubbing the yellow stain of the cigarette smoke from the windows. They were clear and the light shone through them without hindrance. Grandad liked his filtered haven and couldn't see the gratitude Mum had put into her elbow grease. The tension from this scene pushed Mum outside, and we ran around her with joy.

After three months we had to move out of the caravan and into a house. I was devastated. It was the happiest I can remember being as a child, so close to the ground and dirt. In a house, we had to play on freshly vacuumed carpet with the smell of cold dust sitting in our mouths. My parents were wrong.

And now it's Tuesday. I finally slept last night. I have to leave Mum behind and it is incredibly, physically painful. I cannot stop crying. But I also want to be able to create, be fresh and fit, and try new things. It's hard to be all these things at once. I keep telling myself that I won't love her any less if I let her go.

She said a year. 'You can be sad for a year after I die and then you move on.'

It's been a year and a half. I am not sad much. But I am today, it hurts. It's coming from my core, from everything I have ever known since I was born.

I saw my sister yesterday and my six week old niece, I felt elated as I walked back to my car to go home. But as soon as I started driving, my whole body heated up and tried to eject something. Maybe my body just found some more mushrooms in the corner of my teeth. I had to drive the whole hour with my windows down in my singlet, even though it was only six degrees outside. I was so bloody hot,

I was shaking the whole trip, shaking and completely stiff. I had to keep reminding myself to breathe 'cause the other part of my brain had forgotten to tell my body to do that, though it usually does that just fine and dandy, so that's something.

I managed to get home, even through the messy lights of peak hour. Too bad I couldn't choose when this transformation would occur, or maybe think to pull over somewhere nice. That didn't even cross my mind. I had to drive through it, cross the threshold. Today I am left holding these pieces and letting go of my mother. She feels so far away now, and letting go seems counterproductive to holding her tight. And I've held her tight since I was born.

All this is going on in my head and my body and my spirit. I wish she was still here. I wish we could have a cuppa and a chat. I wish I wasn't such a shit growing up. But I guess we all do our best and my best growing up was being a shit.



Illustration by Ashley Robinson

Infectious Feverish Imaginings

Jan Robinson

I am wandering the groomed grounds of NMIT (Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE) Fairfield, killing time while I wait for my fiction writing class. It is 2011, and I am a woman of a certain age. I gaze up at the stately Edwardian terracotta roof of the nearest building and walk past the beds of native plants, inhaling the red-gum mulch. The crematorium chimney rises to my left, a sentinel reminder that these grounds once harboured the sick, the infectious, the feverish and the dying. In the early 1900s, these same grounds housed the 'Fever Hospital' as it was known until 1918. Later it became the 'Queen's Memorial Infectious Diseases Hospital' (1919-1947) and finally 'Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital' (1970-1996).

The sweet tones of a jazz band cascade from the nearby music department and bring me back to the present, as I stroll past beds of new plantings that the horticulture students are nurturing. Clusters of young girls huddle outside the jewellery department near the back of the library, sharing cigarettes gossip, fashion and bravado.

I walk through the back of the library, up a few flights of stairs and into the large space where the computers for the Bachelor students are hidden. It has a quiet and secretive air to it. Most people don't realise that once this space was a ward for patients

with highly infectious diseases. The current offices of some of the staff used to be isolation rooms. The old china sinks are still there. I feel a frisson of recognition and memory. I look around and was transported back in time.

It is 1975 and I am twenty four years old and have finished my training in Sydney as a psychiatric nurse. I have lived away from Melbourne and my family for six years now. I receive a call telling me that my beloved father is very ill with unremitting high fever, pain and exhaustion. He is in the Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital. Dad is being tested for every rare and tropical disease known to medicine as he has just returned from a business trip to many parts of Asia. My mother is exhausted and stressed; my three younger siblings are all upset. I am called to Melbourne.

All patients at Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital who are suspected of being infectious (most of them) are placed in large, white, eerily silent isolation rooms. Built in the 1900s, this hospital is old and seriously imposing. Each room has a glass box that juts out to give the bedridden patients a view of the grounds.

I walk in to Dad's room and all I can see is the white austerity of the iron bed, the rise of his body under the sheets and the grey linoleum. The light is brackish, I feel as if we are underwater. I can smell the disinfectant and the starch of the nurses' stiff aprons. I sit down on the metal chair next to his bed and reach out to hold his hot, familiar hand. He opens his bloodshot eyes, just a little, and sees me, whispers my name softly and manages a weak smile, squeezes my hand gently, drifts off. I weep silently as I think of how many times I have missed him over the years. We have always had a special bond and I adore him. He looks dried up, tired and older. He is only forty nine.

He is too tired to talk, so I just sit with him, willing him to recover. I leave after an hour. I love him but I feel so powerless and the hospital seems to have enveloped him within its shroud-like walls. As I walk out of his room I glimpse others trapped in their isolation. I hurry away, past the polio ward where some of the patients are encased in iron lungs, while others are scooting around the grounds on their motorised beds. I turn away from this bizarre

world, longing to escape. I am reminded of the institutions I trained in as a psychiatric nurse – the huge, sprawling nineteenth century buildings, the smell of cabbage and mince, the metal furniture, the dormitories and the pervasive gloom.

My father stays in the hospital for many weeks, undiagnosed and still very ill. I see him as much as I can before I must return to my job in Sydney. He is eventually discharged – his fever has abated, but he remains weak, exhausted and in pain. He resigns from his executive position with a major plastic company. Finally some of his strength returns and he visits numerous specialists over the years. He is one of the first people in Australia to be diagnosed with ME/CFS (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/ Chronic Fatigue Syndrome). He lives with this condition for another forty years, always in pain, rarely complaining. Yes, this place reminds me of you darling Dad.

I am back now, in the present, once more outside in the beautifully manicured grounds of our campus, strolling from the library to the café near the plant nursery. I pass a low bank of buildings on my left and recall that this once housed the children's ward. I know this because my youngest son, Sacha, was a patient here when he was sixteen months old. In the 1980s there was debate around immunisation, much as there is today. I had researched this and decided not to give my children the whooping cough (pertussis) immunisation. They received the rest. How I came to rue that decision! Unfortunately my elder son, who was four at the time, was hospitalised for a hernia operation and contracted whooping cough from the ward. Tarn had a mild dose but Sacha, younger and more vulnerable, soon had a severe case of whooping cough, bad enough to warrant hospitalisation.

At the time we lived just around the corner from the Hospital and my husband or I would stay by Sacha's side most of the day. I recall his pale, sweet little face, with blue tinged eyelids, as he struggled through each bout of 'whooping', a sound never forgotten, once heard. All I could do was hold his soft, little body in my arms and weep quietly, asking him, silently, for forgiveness. There is no cure, just symptom monitoring.

We battled on for two weeks in that ward. The nurses were very kind and thoughtful; we were exhausted and fearful, guilty and stressed. Sacha came home; the whooping cough went on for months and he would not go to sleep unless one of us was in the room until he drifted off.

I look away from this building now, thankful that Sacha has grown up to be a fit and healthy young man who remembers nothing of this episode. It is only the parents who remember.

These buildings hold whispers of past family suffering, but perhaps my choice to study here now will allow more positive, newer memories to sit beside the older ones and open the door to lighter times.



Illustration by Basak Savcigil

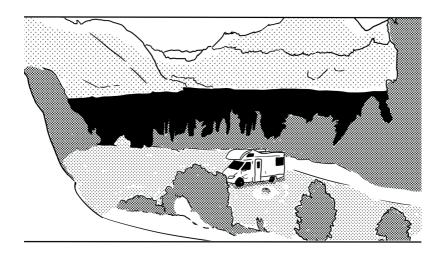


Illustration by Chris Baker

POLICE BUSINESS

Monika Andrews

It's the summer of 1976. Small town Queensland, sixty kilometers inland from the coast, amid hot afternoons that threatened to take your breath away. A place with persistent insects that want to crawl up your nose and sleep in the corner of your eyes, the nights are balmy and noisy with crickets chatting. The tar is too hot to walk barefoot, and just out of town the snakes lie resting on the bitumen road. Fruit bats hang out in the trees. Lying on the bench at night looking up, I can see their eyes in the dark looking back. A town inviting the mist to roll into the park in the early hours. It makes for an eerie atmosphere when the church bell tolls at 5am.

At seventeen years old I have edges of innocence still. I'm a long way from home and that's not a bad thing. This is home now, living with other young wanderers on the fringes of life. There are six of us in a caravan at a tourist caravan park. We found each other six months ago from across the states of Australia; all of us outcast. We are teenagers living in a police state with nowhere to go and nowhere to be. We roll our own cigarettes and smoke a bit of marijuana. We hitch out to the happy farm and pick mushroom for lunch. Occasionally I work at the ginger farm, or I pick beans to pay the rent.

Six of us and three fat police makes the caravan a tight experience. Three men in uniform emptying the cupboards and throwing our contents onto the floor. They squeeze toothpaste, spill washing powder and make a mess everywhere. They've been doing this for the past four months, it is a routine annoyance, making life miserable so that we will move on. In a police state they don't need a search warrant any time, day or night. Blue uniforms march across the road toward us, shoulders back, chest out, walking with legs spread like they've shat themselves. They smirk at us and we smirk back. They threatened us with their eyes, like they could just reach in and snatch our soul, and they sneer. They get up close, chewing gum and look down at me. Always chewing gum.

They tell my girlfriend that a few sexual favours could stop these routine visits. She tells them to fuck off; she is tougher than I. They often take my dark-skinned boyfriend back with them while he struggles in their grip and wants to know why. We all want to know why. But they don't need a reason. We worry for his safety because we know their attitude. We witness the way they slap him on the back of the head, grab him and push him around, and we feel shame that one of us is treated like that, and helpless that we cannot make it stop. They dump him on our doorstep hours later. Often, he can't walk because he is so badly beaten, or can't see through his swollen eyes. Sometimes it takes him a while to recover.

At first I felt scared and intimidated by them; I didn't know what to do. Now I feel angry. They are such bullies, so big and strong and in control. Inside, I am a storm cloud wanting to explode over grown up abusive men. I am a king tide wanting to rush up and grab these thugs in uniform and drown them before they can walk away laughing. I am so fed up that there is no one to complain to, and I hate the world. We have no one watching our backs and, in truth, we are lost and no one cares.

In my quiet moments, I feel humiliated. In other times, like now, I walk with my friend up the long main street, all the way up the hill.

Monika Andrews

We are holding up the traffic at this busy time of day and we don't care. We sing Me and my Bobby Magee in our loudest voices all the way to the police station, we'll just hang out and sing on their steps for a while. Can't be a law against singing.

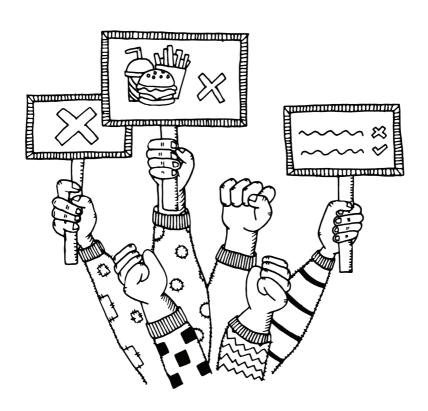


Illustration by Jessica Carfora

PROTEST

Monika Andrews

We were all there in the dark hours of morning. Dressed in the woolen layers of winter, gathered around the site of our heritage dairy. The old, young, professionals and unemployed. Mothers, fathers and mixed aged students from all walks of life. Community endeavours had been protecting this site for two years, from the first initial group to large scale roster systems and cook-ups across a hundred people. Vegans and meat-eaters, Channel Number Fives rubbing shoulders with Patchouli. We were there together, united by the cause. Bed-hair and beanies amassed bleary eyed in the dark, to be met by over fifty police in riot squad attire.

The Multi-National Fast Food company had bought the old dairy on the main street and were proposing to pull it down, along with the Saffron Cottage next door. They were planning to replace it with a modern building of their own, to harvest the tourists who herded up the mountain. It was a prime location; a gateway to the Ranges and across the road from a primary school. The old dairy was an iconic monument housing a long-time music cafe, a retro clothes shop and an Indian restaurant next door. Concerns ranged from increased litter, to a jarring visual obstruction against a National Forest, and the fast food influence on local children.

A small action group raised the alarm and 1000 protest letters were sent to the council along with 4000 names on a local petition. A survey of every house in the town proved that nine out of ten households were against it. Hundreds of people attended the council meeting, and those from a small group with professional knowledge in key areas, represented community's case. The company presented their case too, but before the meeting's end, the council supported the people. Victory placards held high were only in the air for a minute before the company took its case to VCAT.

With no place left for local people to be heard, a campaign was launched to take the community's voice to the streets. Local members of the Occupy Movement claimed the vacant lot next door to the dairy, attracting interest from the permaculture group, and in no time a garden wove its way through the grassy allotment. Colourful signage and sculptures, and a wood fire arena took shape. This then became the central place for meetings and workshops, and from there working groups were formed. It was alive with people from all stages of life. People who brought knowledge, skills, talents and other resources with them.

Thousands of people attended the first March on the mountain, and amid busy tourist traffic the protest made it to television news. Major newspapers, talk back radio and television talk shows, gave us enough exposure to extend our reach into world news. The court cases continued, pressure mounted and outrage went viral. In one month 80,000 signatures from around the country supported the change.org petition. Local known singers and musicians wrote songs and ballads giving voice to the outcry, releasing a compilation CD to support the campaign. Flash-mobs collecting many a local singer (including opera and choirs) gracefully converged upon food courts of busy shopping complexes. Mingling amongst the shoppers, one by one they broke into the protest song, spreading the message with collective exuberance; attracting over 65,000 views on a YouTube video.

The March went to Melbourne and took to the streets. This was no longer about french fries and burgers. This was about

a fast food company bullying its way into a small town. The health of our democracy was at stake. We collected our 80,000 signatures into boxes and took them to America, where, as the world watched on they were delivered to the head office of the fast food company. Back in Australia the company responded by erecting a large mesh-wire fence around the neighbouring land to lock us out, and stationed security guards to add an air of threat. We were all recovering from shock and outrage when the first pieces of art were woven into the fence. It soon became a vertical colourful protest gallery.

Next door, community artists rented the newly vacated DVD store where exhibitions of contentious protes art were held with guest speakers, cheese and wine. Thus, extending the platform for community's voice. All night vigils were held along the path with soup and nourishment being provided. Then, large solid panels replaced the wire fence to obscure any view into the garden, or the buildings in question. The very next day they became the community's message boards with chalk donations arriving in surplus. The steady stream of tourists slowed their cars to take it all in on their way up the scenic mountain.

However, one fated morning at 4am we got the call to come; something was up. The public order response police (acting on behalf of the company) claimed the length of the back entry fence. Not a word did they speak, no eye contact made, they stood like zombies looking into thin air. As the light of day emerged, the demolition trucks turned up. The special police linked arms and with practiced force pushed the crowd aside, clearing a path for the trucks to go through. All future possibilities came to a sudden end.

We felt sick and helpless as we looked at those police, standing there like some futuristic military force in a sci-fi movie, in the dark hours of morning in our small town. I felt weighted with the realisation that companies hire police to work against the people. It wasn't long before the sounds of splintered wood and the smashing of concrete into rubble became the backdrop for our disbelief. For some, the tears flowed quietly and for others, there was no need for discretion. From behind the barricade the buildings crumbled, blocking out the sound of a community in grief.

After two years of effort, we failed to save what we thought was possible. It had been such a long battle, and for some much longer. For many, the length of commitment came with a toll. The mental health cost of a community fighting a corporation whilst maintaining other life responsibilities was measurable. And though it activated a sense of connection and belonging, filling lives with meaning, it also brought tension, bullying and burnout among the people. We were shown the loop holes in democracy, the control of Multi-National's and the absence of a forum for community issues and needs.

When the tears had all been shed and we were done with licking our wounds, the protest continued. People gathered with signage and placards, thermoses and knitting needles while the new building was constructed. We were there on mass for opening day, with a continual stream of cars tooting in support. The fast food company may have won that war but in the years since, the restaurant has stood largely empty, showing us that in day to day life, the voice of the people can still be heard. I look back at that time now, acknowledging the courage and tenacity of a few local heroes who blew life into a campaign that made history.

The intelligent, humourous and creative ideas that provoked action for that protest exposed the resources to be found behind the letterboxes of our neighbourhoods. It demonstrated what was possible when a few hundred strangers co mingled with a sense of determination and purpose. The protest gave us a platform from which to share conversations, ideas, knowledge, skills, talents, abilities and dreams. An opportunity for strangers to become friends. It brought us together out of the ordinary, and catapulted us into the extraordinary.



Illustration by Caitlin Chilton



Illustration by Jessica Carfora

TEA ROSE

Akay Kennedy

I can still see it now – a large, proper, china teacup sitting on its saucer, ever so gently shaking in her grasp. Her thin, spindly fingers are absent-mindedly caressing the flowers that encircle the cup. Interlaced folds of delicate petals surround the tight bud, blossoming, spilling outwards to unravel in an ordered chaos. Slightly shiny, crepe-like skin, so sheer I can see her veins. There is a small side table nestled up against the armchair but she is so focused on her tale that I think she has forgotten she is even holding the teacup.

It is a day like any other in our house. My two young daughters are running around the garden, picking flowers, chasing butterflies or something equally bucolic. I am pottering around my kitchen, baking biscuits for school lunches and getting a head start on the week's meals. The sun is streaming in the long windows, filtered through the over-hanging trees, making it a place I'm very content to be.

It is through the kitchen door at the side of the house that people entered. In fact, when new people came to the house and approached the front door, they were stranded there for some minutes before we knew anyone was there. The wires to the front doorbell didn't

lead anywhere useful so it never rang even if someone managed to find the button.

The house had been extended multiple times over its almost one hundred year history, more than fifty of those with one couple, so that its direction and focus had changed. With almost more hallways than rooms, the concept of good design had been bypassed as rooms were added one by one to accommodate the many guests.

It is her firm, rasping knock on the window by the back door that draws my attention. I hadn't been expecting any visitors. Drying my hands on my apron, I shuffle to the back door. It is the weekend and I'm wearing weekend-at-home appropriate clothing. She isn't.

'Hello?' I say upon forcibly sliding the reluctant door along its tracks.

'Hello there.'

I'm sure she introduced herself, but now more than ten years later I have no recollection of her name. For the purposes of neat storytelling I could have called her Rose but there's no indication that was her name. I do, however, still remember being slightly mesmerised by her appearance.

Multiple strands of pearls hang down her neck, nestling into her rich velvet scarf. Layers of clothing in dark, gemstone tones jar at the bright sun in which she stands, leaning heavily on a walking cane. For a few moments we watch each other. I am wondering where, or rather when, she has come from. No doubt she is sorting through her memory files trying to reconcile the many times she has stood at this door to be ushered in by her dear friend of many years, Nina. Not today though.

Although she knows the house has been sold, my strange face is still a disappointment. I don't even have a chance to invite her inside. However, I can see her now, stepping past me and into the kitchen as she explains how many years she has been visiting here. Not pausing in either the kitchen or the dining room, she steps her ninety-year-plus body onwards, deliberately and determinedly, so I have nothing else to do but follow.

As we arrive in the lounge room she looks up and, after a few moments, smiles.

I can only imagine this room hasn't really changed too much. The cherry wood panels that line its walls and the large fireplace and mantle taking up an entire corner have not changed, only the furniture and its arrangement. Standing beside her, I can only wonder what she sees. I take the opportunity to offer her the armchair, its commanding position ideal to survey her domain.

Like a lady in waiting, I offer her some tea. She nods her approval and I disappear back into the kitchen to fossick for the supplies required – teapot, creamer, leaf tea, tea cup and saucer, a small plate of biscuits luckily still warm from the oven. As the electric kettle slowly boils, I wonder who is this woman seated in my lounge room.

Returning triumphant with my tray of tea supplies, I'm unsure where to start. It turns out that doesn't matter as I'm not the one directing things.

'I have been coming here for many, many years, you know.'

I didn't know, but had figured out already in my role as silent, adoring audience.

'Yes, I've known Nina and Clem since the early days. Stanhope was always such an exciting place. The Russian Ballet would always visit when they were in town. The parties they would have,' she pauses and then points out through the west window, 'out there, under the cherry trees looking over Eltham. Tables laden with all sorts of food, they would play music and have outrageous arguments. So much life, so much laughter. I never saw Nina smile so much as she did then.' Her own smile slowly fades.

I hand her the cup of tea, filled so that she won't spill it with her trembling hands. I don't want to interrupt her, but I want to know who she is and what is she doing here in my house. Hopefully, we will get to that at some point.

'How did you come to know Nina?' I ask, trying to steer the conversation somewhat.

'My first husband and I moved in to the street behind ten years or so after the war. We knew everyone in the street back then. Stanhope used to be quite a large estate. It stretched all the way down the hill to the railway line. Being academics, Nina and Clem never really had any money so they would sell off a block here and there when they needed to. I can still picture them running down the hill to the station to catch the train into Melbourne University where they both worked. The driver would blow the horn giving them time to race down. Nina was head of Russian studies and Clem edited the literary journal Meanjin.'

She looks down at her left hand as if noticing for the first time that she is holding a cup of tea. I offer her a biscuit, but she declines with a slight wave of her right hand. I feel obliged to take one as though that is the reason I presented them in the first place. Squealing, the girls are a blur as they run past the windows.

'Nina couldn't have any children of her own but she would host birthday parties for the neighbours' children. She loved having children around. She would be very happy to know that there is a family living here now.'

'We've only been here a few weeks but we really like it here,' I say, trying to assuage any concerns she has. I bring the side table closer to her to make it easy for her to place her tea down. She pays it no heed.

We both sit in silence and I think of how to explain to this woman what I already know. I have met Nina in my own way. I can feel her over my shoulder, keeping an eye on me. 'Just watching, darlink. Just watching.'

Nina is short with her long hair pulled back tightly in a bun. Always smartly dressed, she enjoys the company of my daughters and me. At times, she sits in the corner of the kitchen on the low wooden bench next to the girls as they attack their afternoon snacks. In fact, Nina and Clem both love the life and energy we brought to the house.

Nina became ill and with her strength ebbing day by day, she soon never left her bed. Clem would sit near her bedside reading as Nina dozed. She was grateful for the exciting lives full of love and laughter that she and Clem had shared. Sadly, too soon, she passed

away. Clem couldn't cope with the great weight of sadness he felt at this enormous loss. He drank more and more whiskey from his favourite crystal low ball to help blur reality, but upon waking each morning, the house was still cold and empty without her. Not too long after, Clem moved out and died months later. His colour had been gradually draining out of him without his Nina around.

I understand that our family moving in, with all the noise and light a family with two young girls brings, stirred Clem and Nina. It is only a few seconds between the sound of the back door slamming and my six- and eight-year-old daughters bounding into the room, puffing and laughing. The spell is broken. My guest straightens up, places her teacup roughly on the table and starts her ascent out of the chair. I go to assist and get stuck not knowing how to help, so stand beside her, watching.

Picking up the teapot, cups and tray, I resume my role and follow her to the back door. She knows the way. I say goodbye as she disappears down the path and around the corner. I look down and see her cup of cold tea, untouched.



Illustration by Joseph Estorninho

THE NIFOULA

Mandi Kontos

Long drives, open roads and old school Greek beats are prized possessions in the memories of my childhood. The purring of the V8 engine of Dad's cherished '71 Holden Brougham, lovingly nicknamed The *Nifi*, because he adored the car like a wife, vibrating through my brain like a song I can't seem to forget, nor do I want to. After the death of my dad, these memories are worshipped above all else. The tune of *Mikri Mou Melissa*, a song that always recalls images of tapping on the slim steering wheel, while singing loudly off tune, is a melody that encores rose coloured memories in my life.

Most would bemoan a three-hour car ride to Berri to visit their god sister, or the eight-hour drive to Melbourne from my old suburb of Edwardstown in Adelaide, but not me. Instead of enjoying the luxury of having an entire backseat to myself as a child, I pestered my parents with cries of 'are we there yet?' and a never ending supply of bounding energy that had me leaning forward to annoy them. Memories of relishing the bucket seat all to myself while my brother, Peter, was too young to sit at the back without a seatbelt are lost on me. Before you start to panic, cars manufactured before 1975 without a seatbelt legally didn't need one. Dad fitted a middle seat belt at the front as a safeguard for us while we were too rambunctious

to be trusted without one. My brother soon grew up and joined me in the back seat, where I lost my freedom to move.

As I discovered my love of books, car rides became a chance to read those gloriously penned works of art, mostly without disruption. We would stop to stretch our legs half way and eat ham and cheese rolls, hot chips and drink coke. The public toilets carried the fear of finding spiders, because this naïve city girl had no trust in country towns.

Just the mention of a car ride caused excitement for the chance to get the car ready for what was to come. You see, there were different materials needed depending on the season, because preparation for long trips would make or break the journey.

In summer, it involved strategically threading a sheet through a small crack in the wound down window, and closing it fast enough so that it would catch a neat row of fabric in one go. There was a skill in getting the timing just right, and my brother and I never thought to ask each other for help.

In winter, it required blankets. Lots of them. Because The Nifi was Dad's pride and joy, we had to lay a barrier down as a preventative measure. The blanket, a single blue polyester blend, was expertly tucked into the join between the seat to protect the beige floral fabric from prospective coke spillage, possible vomit, food dropage and pen marks. It didn't work to stop the pen marks. Sorry, Dad.

And, just as with any good car trip, it always needed pillows. Peter and I would push our pillows against the doors, our Discman's resting on our bellies and limbs strategically stretched out. One set of legs against the side of the bucket seat and the other on the outside. After some time we would switch to regain mobility in our limbs.

As various birthdays, weddings and christenings cropped up, our team of four would sometimes extend to a team of ten. My two cousins, uncle and auntie, and grandparents joining our ranks.

Squishing ten people into two cars was always a bit challenging. The lack of wriggle space to move for such prolonged periods of time was enough to make anyone crazy, a fact we tempered by dividing my grandparents between the two cars. My cousins got Yiayia while we got Pappou. He always added his jokes to the car

and would join in on the singing; I always thought that we got the better grandparent out of the two, but I'll never admit it to Yiayia.

With a fifth person in the car, it meant that Mum was squished at the back with Peter and I. Stretching out became an impossible game.

We would crane our neck to see where our cousins were, their red car a staple in our life. Waving and pulling faces from our car would entertain us for three quarters of the trip – the other quarter was spent nursing the sore necks it caused.

We grew up on the road and it's no surprise that when a stress or situation crops up, the first thing my brother and I crave is a car trip.

Maybe it's the purring of the engine, the loud tunes or the way the wind whips around the car as we put the pedal to the metal that soothes us, but there's a magic in being able to settle a busy mind.

One of the last trips I made with Dad was when he helped me move from Adelaide to Melbourne to start my new life. I was only half familiar with the big city; another story for another day, but I will say that the *Nifi* broke down in Tintinara and added two and a half hours to our trip. It was almost a solo journey, because I spent the first two hours mad at him for what now seems pointless, but the open road and the witty banter with the mechanic that fixed the car was enough to switch the gears up. *Mikri Mou Melissaki* was played after we resumed talking and laughing.

The hole that Dad's death leaves in my heart is like an unfinished symphony that leaves me longing for the open road and craving the mix tape that defined my childhood. And as the maestro is no longer around to sit behind the wheel of his cherished possession, it seems fitting that there is a hint of fear and absolute joy in being able to slip behind the wheel. To adjust the bucket seats and turn the key in the ignition and hear the engine purr. To take his place and carry on his legacy. Making the open road our meditative playground once again.



Illustration by Inkling John

THE RED SHOES

Akay Kennedy

They had only made it halfway to the front door. I'd remembered to bring them down from my bedroom but left them on the half-height wall in the lounge. It was a habit we had gotten into – leaving things by the stairs to be taken up or down. Our cats had other plans for things left on the walls. Like brave hunters protecting their masters, they would bat items off the wall and onto the floor, forcing the object to submit to their feline dominance.

So, I had moved the shoes in case they should suffer the same fate, the heavy wood heels marking the wood floor. Our landlords were cautious and had forced us to sign extra documents in our rental contract. We would not allow anyone to wear stiletto heels on the timber floor. Do I even know anyone who wears stilettos? We would not have any dogs or cats. Whoops.

The red leather shoes were placed on top of a crate in my painting area. I don't have a studio but a small area lined with a tarp and drop-sheet to protect the beloved floorboards. Plastic crates held my paints, rags and jars with brushes in varying stages of utility. Balanced upon a bar stool, an old tile served as my palette.

One evening alone and half a bottle of pink wine later, the urge struck. I didn't have an image in mind like I often do. I looked around saw the shoes and thought, *Why not*? Loosely sketching the image onto the canvas, I got to thinking about such an everyday object in my life. I've never been a woman who owns loads of shoes. I only wear shoes that are absolutely comfortable. I prefer flats over heels. Barefoot most of the time, any heels I do own I must be able to be run in if the need arose. Zombie apocalypse and all that.

There was a well-dressed man who I briefly dated. He was a gentleman, sending a car to pick me up for our second date, whereupon I met his best friend and wife. It was a well-reviewed, bayside restaurant with an indulgent wine list and meal usually beyond my modest budget. I talked comfortably with the driver on the way to dinner. Working in a service industry myself, I've always chatted easily with waiters, bar staff and customer service assistants. They often know the best places for a drink or meal.

Over a few weeks, he wined and dined me. One afternoon, he turned up at my work to surprise me with a fancy dinner reservation for that night. We walked along the street after I finished up, me giving him the tour of the small country town in which I worked. Holding hands, we looked in the shop windows, finally stopping at a popular bar for a glass of cold white wine – a welcome perk of working in a fabulous wine region.

In the window of one store that I rarely entered due to my tight budget, we stopped and admired a pair of red heels. He asked if I liked them; I responded that I did. The store was closed so I knew he wasn't going to buy them for me. I assumed he was just trying to learn more about what I liked and didn't like. The seed had been sown, though. I liked the shoes but I knew I didn't need them. I did, however, envision myself wearing them with jeans, with dresses, floral skirts – anything.

After we broke up, I decided to buy them. It wasn't retail therapy to cheer myself up, as I wasn't really upset that we'd broken up. There had been something about the relationship that had felt a bit off. Maybe it was that he owned more beauty products and shoes than I did.

It was around this time that I began to reflect on what I had learned from the men that I had dated since my marriage dissolved. From one, I learned that I didn't like being organised by others. From another, I learned that it is important for me to hear the words 'I love you'. From the aforementioned gentleman, I learned that I could treat myself to some of the finer things in life.

So, I went and spent more money on a pair of shoes than I ever had in my life. I slipped my feet inside and they were perfect – no pinching, no rubbing. And I did wear them with dresses, floral skirts and jeans. I loved wearing them. I felt special. Occasionally, people noticed them and I would bend my knee, raise my hem and look down to admire them also. I smiled and said, 'Thank you, I love them, too'.

I remember one night at a gypsy music bar in the inner north – you probably know it, it only serves crepes, two savoury and two sweet options. Red-checked tablecloths, velvet-clad chairs and only one wine glass. If you are early enough you'll get the wine glass, otherwise it's a tumbler for you. I'm one of those early type people and while that doesn't help with my social anxiety that the event won't even happen, it did mean that the wine glass was generally mine.

I found the bar via a piano accordion player I briefly tried dating, though things never quite worked out. We seemed to continually miss each other somehow. I did, however, fall in love with the whole bohemian music scene. The swirling cacophony of notes, plaintive vocals and impassioned dancing hypnotised me. I was hooked and kept schlepping from middle suburbia into this exotic other world. My shoes brought me there. They belonged there.

One sultry summer evening, I didn't feel like going out but had read in a well-meaning friend's book on dating rules that the first step is just showing up. So, I climbed into the low-cut black dress that celebrated my curves and my comfortable, reliable, red shoes. I did get compliments on my shoes. Small positive words buoyed me. The glass full of wine didn't hurt either.

Then there was the Italian chef I dated. Again, it had been a relationship that didn't pan out for any apparent reason. I wasn't hung up on it. We'd both been invited to a party up country by the chef who had originally set us up on our first date. Not exactly a blind date – we had known each other through mutual friends.

Now, country parties don't normally seem like a heels kind of occasion but they had hired a function space and bungalows for the event. And I wanted to impress. I wanted to be the one who was in control. I wanted to be the one to choose to sleep with him or not.

It was going to be a great weekend. I'd taken the time off work, which was rare for me. Parties thrown by chefs are always good. Hospitality people like to drink and I'm not talking casks of Jacobs Creek. Platters groaned with piles of antipasto, cheese, seafood and more. Each surface offered up something delightful to eat or drink.

It was late summer and the drive north was through some dry land indeed. Different shades of brown stretched from one side of the horizon to the other. Bushfires had raged across the hills only a year or two prior and many of the guests were somewhat twitchy. The firestorm was still a very real memory for most.

I'm not a country girl though I worked out that way for many years and had grown to have an understanding of why people chose to live in such an area, even though it was remote from the city with the very real threat of bushfire each summer. For me, I was always happy to return to my middle-suburban life.

So, I brought my shoes along with me. My red wrap dress and the heels worked their magic. I loved that evening. They were an entertaining group of people – I was with my tribe. I belonged even though I'd only met a handful of them before. I ate and drank with vigour, even danced to delightfully daggy 1980s music. We did spend the night together, though nothing further eventuated between us. I was fine with that.

Ten years on, the shoes have seen better days – chunks out of the wooden heel, paint rubbed off the rear piece of leather, straps

loose and soles very thin. Can they be rehabilitated? Should they be rehabilitated? Are they still relevant in my life? Am I painting a souvenir of times gone by or immortalising a beloved item in my life?

A few days later, I find myself at the cobbler. She is a short, spunky woman about my age who I slightly want to be. She seems to have found a trade she believes in and loves that tires her, but makes her feel useful. Her calloused, stained hands turn the shoes over and over, evaluating them while I try and explain what I hope for them. I'm not sure if what I'm asking is possible. How can I explain to her in just a few minutes what these mean to me, why I can't seem to accept that they may have reached the end of their life? She finally looks up and smiles. I think things are going to be okay.



Illustration by Bek Rogers

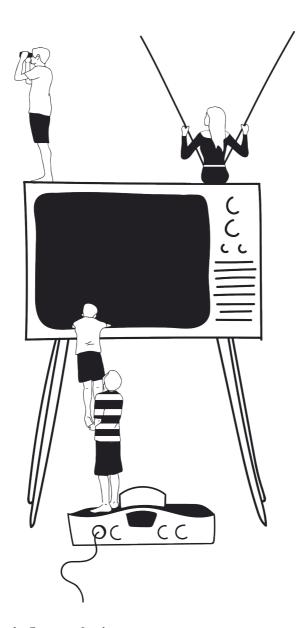


Illustration by Genevieve Lamb

WHY TABLETOP GAMING?

Torben Jones

In the age of virtual reality, HD 4k resolution, mobile touchscreens and *Pokémon GO!* people who still choose to roll dice or deal cards have all been faced with the question, 'why do you play tabletop games?'

I mean, the question makes sense. Why do we want to spend hours adding and subtracting statistics in our mind? Any video game would have a perfectly good calculator that does it in a fraction of a second. What motivates us to draw our warrior knights and explain their back stories that all come out clichéd and illogical? After all, there are countless perfectly good video games and movies that can tell a far better story than any of us.

I'm going to tell you the answer but first I want to tell you a story.

When I was a kid, I was bad at video games, but I liked them. I remember my best times with video games involved crowding around the big box TV with my friends to play the Nintendo 64 or PlayStation 1. It didn't matter whether the game was multiplayer or single player, we would inevitably get stuck. A boss would stump us, or one of the players in multiplayer would be on a winning streak. All that we needed was an underdog and something for them to overcome.

Then it would become a mess of our young voices, shouting and cheering over each other. We would throw out suggestions, secret strategies, and new ideas to overcome the challenge. We were comrades in the trenches, pioneers exploring worlds we'd never seen before, tacticians calculating every crucial move.

There was confusion, laughter, and no Internet at our fingertips. We couldn't just google the best strategy or find a walkthrough.

Now when I play video games with my friends it's online. We sit alone, at our own machines, in different rooms and almost always in different towns or cities.

I don't want to make this out as an inherently bad thing. Thanks to the easy access of online games I've made friends in America, Japan, and all over Europe. I get to talk to my brother who lives out of state without having to worry about the cost of long distance phone calls. And when we do face a problem we can't solve, the Internet can be a great tool in finding the answer, rather than going back to our own lives feeling frustrated at our lack of progress.

But the mystery and sense of close knit community is gone. I don't need my friends for multiplayer, there are always others online who que in the public access groups. I may be experiencing something for the first time in a game but I always know there are thousands who have already done it online. No matter how smart or tactical I am, the Internet has a better plan.

So when my friends come around and we assemble at the biggest table we can find; when someone begins an overly complicated explanation of who their character is, and what they hope to find in their epic quest; when the Game Master begins to guide us through their world full of plot holes and spelling errors; I can't help but feel that same rush from my childhood. No one has done what my character has done because no one outside of this room knows our world exists. There is no 'leet strats' or walkthroughs online with all the answers. There is just us, the game, and whatever insanity we rope together as a solution. Together we shout and

cheer through the magic realms or distant planets. As a team we take on the dragons, monsters and aliens. But the most important of all we do it side by side.



Illustration by Evalina Anastasi

PATCHWORK

Lucia Valeria Alfieri

It's raining. I lay down on bed, the light-blue patchwork quilt has tiny flowers stitched across its surface. Ginger announces she wants my company with a meow, and then hops up beside me and lies against my side. I am kept company by Axl Rose who sings, *feels like I'm knockin' on heaven's door...* and I am taken away.

The patchwork quilt is pink this time. From the window, I no longer see the roofs crammed one on the other, nor the Australian eucalypts, but the green of our lawn, on which we have walked many times. A little further away, I see the woods, the familiar European trees. The walls of this room, narrow and naked, extend, giving space to the wooden wardrobe and the chest of drawers, more than a hundred years old. There is no carpet on the floor, but parquet. Ginger is not Ginger anymore, but Romy; her red tabby fur fades to white, now a short coat on a male cat—my cat who will accompany me for almost eighteen years.

This is Mum's bedroom in Friuli, given to us for the summer. And the music doesn't come anymore from my phone, but it's you who play yours Guns N' Roses CDs on your big stereo that covers the top of the chest of drawers.

Years delete themselves, and your voice resonates while you dance and sing with Axl; and then, you let him continue alone when something takes you to the previous night and you start talking.

It's raining, but the balcony door is open, and I feel a bit cool in this late summer weather, but inside, I am warm, sprawled on the bed and I'm listening to you asking my advice.

How beautiful is youth! How beautiful is being young, when you feel alive, in the present, when—even if life has already revealed to be slightly bitter—you still retain your dreams, when you believe that these dreams will survive the rain and you will have more moments like these in your future. Sure, time will cover our face in wrinkles and will make our conversations more serious or—who knows—maybe we become only more resigned, but it won't sweep away our understanding.

Instead, Axl Rose's rock comes to its end, your voice fades and also the rain calms down. The illusion bumps into the present; it loses and lets the winner take me back here, where the red tabby cat sleeps on the light-blue patchwork, the walls are bare and you are not here. Instead of you, on the bedside table, your face, sketched by pen, teases me with a scrunched up nose and poking tongue.



Illustration by Ashley Robinson



Illustration by Dawn Dangkomen

THE LIGHT

Alexandra Mayridis

The light is often my best friend after a long night of restless pain. Signalling relief, I can move around, turn off the TV, and the side lamps and put out the cat that has been scratching at the couch to tell me she is ready to go outside. No more mind-numbing infomercials or tedious episodes of competitive cooking shows on the SBS Food Network. (I always choose programs that won't pull me in.)

It's back to being able to forget; to disregard the emotional turmoil that night can sometimes bring. I can disguise the anguish and torment that my body brings each night. That of course depends on how many drugs I've taken, which is always a dilemma. How much do I take? My favourite drug of choice is Lyrica at the moment or Pregabalin, it works on the nervous system. Originally created for treating epilepsy it helps to block pain signals to the brain.

So that brings me to pain. What a phenomenon, the darkness of the human condition! Maybe that's why the light of day is so wonderful, it's literally lighter.

Night has become my nemesis; it starts in the late afternoon and by twilight I begin to feel twitchy, uneasy and as darkness descends, the dread starts to wash over me. 'Oh God, here we go again, how long can this go on?' I ask myself.

They say, that at night your body's defences are down, as important maintenance functions are performed. Hormonal secretions work on our organs and our brain starts a conversation with our sub conscious. And in the middle of all this I am left abandoned on an island of perpetual pain. How did this happen to me? And why did this happen to me? Did I make this happen to me? What will it take for me to overcome?

The questions whirl around inside my head, almost all day, every day. The message is loud and clear. 'There must be something wrong with you.'

'It can't be that bad.'

'What? Morphine patches!'

'You know you'll get addicted.'

'Yes I know,' I say. 'Let's just say I'll become dependent...'

'Would you prefer me to kill myself?'

(Experts lament that true data on suicide rates amongst chronic pain suffers is not available, but accept the association.) And then there's the silence, I can feel the tension rising up. I start to feel angry, very angry, as the realisation washes over me; they think I'm lying. It's a burden, either way, it's a burden. My world gets smaller as I retreat into myself.

Still, it becomes like the spot on Lady Macbeth's hands as she tries to wash away the blood from her hands. She continues to wash, but the blood won't shift. In her case, it's a matter of conscience, for me it is a metaphor for something that I want to be rid of and that just won't go away.

In the end, just like Lady Macbeth, it becomes a neurosis and a part of my identity. Not one I would have chosen for myself, I say, but then a small, nasty piece of myself tells me that maybe it is my fault. If only I could just get it together, lose weight, do CBT, meditate, alter my self-talk, exercise, and remove all the negative people and environments, and finally change who I am.

So, I have to ask myself: who am I? Now 57 and a half, I have to reflect. There's no escaping it, I'm at the point of no return. Dependent on a cocktail of drugs and assured there's still a way to

go before I reach the pinnacle. I must make amends.

'You have to accept the pain,' says one of my many hydrotherapy pool buddies. Meryem has Fibromyalgia; she had to give up her job in the family business. Crippled with pain, she stayed home, lay on her couch and cried for a few years. Judged by her community (Lebanese), she grappled with the grief. No longer able to support her husband in their successful mixed business, the business went under. Now they are both at home, unemployed and purposeless.

For a creative person, the hardest part of the pain-body life, is this loss of purpose. You get two choices, either you give in (or give up) or you coax yourself into pretending that it's not really there, it's not happening, it's all in your mind. But it really is there and I continue to swallow those pills, as do 20% of the Australian population.

Accept the pain resonates in the dark small hours. Why do I fight it so?

As a relatively young woman, I was stoic. Even when period pain was debilitating to the point that I was rolling on the ground, rocking and clutching at my stomach, it never even crossed my mind to take an Aspirin. It was the early 70s when I 'grew up' and Paracetemol wasn't that well known. Maybe it didn't even exist? If it did, it didn't exist in my world. The only time I saw anybody take medication for pain relief it was a big deal, it was a serious situation, an act of absolute desperation. My father would take Bex, a soluble form of aspirin and he would take it regularly. Daily, in fact, when he was hung over; he was an alcoholic who would go on three-week binges.

Mum of course, was beside herself. She had a useless husband who could not provide, and sympathy was the last thing on her mind. We were brought up to endure. Mum would tell me stories about life in the village and the one that stuck in my mind was the one about the van that arrived one day in her village, Lefkona. She was a little girl and the purpose of the van's visit was to perform tonsillectomies. It was a one-stop shop. One by one they were lined up, upright, they had an instrument inserted down their throat and 'craack, craack' said my mother and they were removed, just like that. Once finished, they packed up and went to the next village.

Having a very active imagination, I could almost feel the procedure every time she told the story.

Chronic pain is a life sentence. My immediate family 'gets it', sometimes. Siblings, my parents and extended family seem unable to. My pain brings up feelings of fear, guilt and insecurity. My personal history has marked me.

As a little girl I was always sick, having chronic tonsillitis, bronchitis, an uncontrollable runny nose (allergies) and severe astigmatism. What a failure was I, and it cost the family money, when money was really hard to come by. Acutely conscious of this, I accepted the guilt. I was the weak one and I had to pay.

To top off the whole thing, I was badly burnt, twice. First, as a four-year-old, when the skin at the back of my right hand literally dissolved off, after a mishap with a cup of hot Greek style coffee. I had reached over for a piece of cake and collided with the cup. The intensity of the pain, now only a memory, remains as a marker. In my mind's eye I can still envision the nurse cutting off the burnt skin, horrible as it was; the emotional damage is what I now carry. The worst part was, that I was told that it happened because I was greedy.

'Why did you reach out for the cake?' I remember hearing someone say. Inside, I felt the sting of the words and the shame of my desire.

The situation worsened a few years later. Mum and Dad were at work, at the shoe factory, the place where they did their time. My two sisters were home, Tina ten years older than me, and Mary six. Not too interested in what I was up to and wanting a sweet, (seems to be the curse) I went to the kitchen cabinet to get a teddy bear biscuit. Unaware that my dress had caught fire from the kerosene heater in the kitchen and surrounded in flames, I began to scream and run through the house. My sister Mary, physically closest to me, put out the flames with her bare hands. I have somehow blanked out the whole sensation, but again I felt the shame (and still do). It was those bloody sweets.

My favourite dress was ruined (I only had three); it was white cotton and had small brown giraffes printed in a staggered pattern all over. Mum was really mad. I can't remember where dad was, probably across the road at the Curry Family Hotel.

For days I was kept at home, until the wound began to weep blood. The mood in the house was heavy. Finances were a real problem, doctors cost money, but common sense prevailed; well, sort of.

The next morning, my sister Tina told me she was taking me to the museum. She knew I loved the museum; it was something our family did from time to time. It was free. I was so happy, but then suddenly we were in a dark brown-bricked building on a very wide noisy road. We went into a dark room with lots of wood panelling. There was a lot of talking. Something really bad was about to happen, I sensed pending danger, but what could I do? I was seven. I knew that Tina had been too nice to me!

I was taken away, or my sister left, I can't quite recall. But I do recall the sense of abandonment that I felt, and the gutting of being tricked; I made a note to myself, never trust her again.

Time passed slowly and I remember many nights of aloneness. Sleeping in a large dormitory-style children's ward, I felt like an orphan. At night, shadows cast on the walls from streetlights and I would worry about what might happen next.

It was hard to feel soothed, as my bottom half was naked, the skin was raw and a half-tunnel shaped crate was placed over me with a blanket draped over the top. Healing was a slow process.

In my mind, I felt that I had lost my family. I was a naughty girl. My parents' absence confirmed this.

My bum had started to heal and with that I felt some hope that I would be able to go home again. I really missed Mary. She and I would talk to each other before we fell asleep at night. I would say 'Mary, my legs hurt' and she would reply, 'It's just growing pains, Sandra'

Just when I thought I might be going home, a decision was made that my tonsils had to come out, no more nonsense (they had been an on-going issue). The government would pay for it, it was an opportunity for a solution; Mum was sick of taking me to the doctor and apparently, I was too skinny then. I was promised lots of ice cream. They lied.

It should be no surprise to me really; bad things always seem to happen at night, especially when you're sick. Just as morning provides hope, the night injects ones phobias and sins. My sin was that I was a sickly child (and now a sickly adult?). In the middle of the night I woke up to a sea of large, red-kidney shaped blood clots spurting out of my mouth. I had been discharged out of hospital, post-tonsillectomy and I was haemorrhaging. I had been sleeping between my parents that night on the fold-out couch in the lounge room, and no doubt the trauma for them was as bad as it was for me. A blood transfusion was in order and from then on I was known as a bleeder and nowadays a bruiser.

I grew up and had to take care of myself (and my parents). Suffering had become a way of life. Dad's alcoholism worsened and mum's anxiety grew. Luckily, I had a purple patch, for a while anyway.

At twenty-four I got my first permanent teaching position, Head of Ceramics and Textiles. The work was hard, Ceramics especially so. There was a lot of manual handling. Lifting heavy pottery into a floor kiln, setting up the kiln furniture, recycling and working the clay and carrying, repetition over several years, pregnant belly or not, I had to perform.

Without realising, it crept up on me. I had constant pain in the neck, shoulders and back, with swollen and numb hands. At night, I wore splints on my hands and when the pain got too much I would get up and walk around the house with my arms elevated in the air. My legs would go numb and at times I couldn't lift myself off the toilet seat, as my back would lock up. Many mornings I became trapped in bed, cramped, unable to move until my husband came and gave me aid. My family had become my personal hygienists, lifting device and walking frame. My body was giving me the signals, but fear kept me going. I had to work, I was the daughter of immigrant parents, I was the only university graduate, I had a family that I was responsible for and I was tough. Until the day my back snapped.

But that wasn't enough of a warning, it seems, for I kept going to work. Dragging my legs, propping myself up with a walking stick and leaning against furniture when I addressed my class.

Consuming large doses of analgesics and bi-weekly treatments did not deter me. I could endure. I was a good slave; I had my reputation as a hard worker to think about. My students' and colleagues needed me and nobody could replace me.

I made a work cover claim, the first of many, for each time my condition exacerbated I was required to put in a new claim, or else I did not qualify for medical treatment and the like. Performing like a true martyr, I only took fifteen days off work initially. I was in denial; it would pass, would it not?

Slowly but surely, I had one surgery after another. Instead of getting better I was getting worse. As my life unravelled before me, I became hysterical, following on from which I developed clinical depression. Crippled with pain and unable to sleep most nights, my internal conflict wore me down. I grew fatter and angrier. Life was hard for my family, as I had become a burden. They had lost their mother and my husband his spouse. Unable to perform my work to the same capacity, I eventually lost my job. The school that I had given thirty years of service to could not 'maintain' me any longer.

I had become a liability.

Everything that I thought I knew for sure now had no meaning. Trapped, I wanted to end it all. Lying down and drugging myself was the only thing that gave me relief, but it didn't take long before that caused me to feel even more irrelevant and meaningless. Hating myself, feeling isolated and helpless, I retracted from those around me. I could not enjoy most normal things, sitting in a car or a plane was limited, as soon enough my legs would go numb and then sharp burning pain would lick my lower back. Dinner, movies or sex was out of the question.

Overwhelmingly, I have so much regret. My sub-conscious was trying so hard to communicate with me. The messenger was working, and I was ignoring it. I know that now I cannot go back in time; but I can use the experience to take better care of myself. Maybe my friend Meryem is right; perhaps you do have to accept the pain, for the pain becomes the expression of the situation.

Soldiers of pain I see the on the front line of the Reservoir Leisure

Centre hydrotherapy pool. Marching up and down along the water, we share our feelings. Sometimes, we swap notes on current drugs that we are using, or a new treatment that we've heard of, but mostly we express our grief and sometimes our wisdom. Loss of self, rates number one, next loss of purpose and then after that is society's perceptions of us.

Fortunately for me, I came across a kind physiotherapist who told me that he didn't think I was managing my pain very well. Curious and surprised, I asked him what he meant. He then exposed me to the world of pain management specialists. (Statistically only 10% of people suffering with chronic pain receive the correct treatment.) I'd heard of pain clinics, but didn't know much about them. One time, I was growled at when I'd innocently asked my Orthopaedic surgeon about a referral to one.

'Just lose weight,' he said, 'you'll end up addicted to drugs, that's all that will happen to you.'

In some ways he was right, but at least now I can smile again, for constant pain turns you into an animal and I guess that is the thing we least like about pain, we can't control it. The body takes over just when we think we should be able to control it, but really it controls us. That's something I learnt during childbirth.

There is a school of thought that our body carries pain metaphysically, depending on what is going on inside of us emotionally and psychologically. For example, pain in the back means that you feel unsupported, pain in the foot/leg means you are reluctant to move forward. (Heal Your Body: The Mental Causes for Physical Illness and the Metaphysical Way to Overcome Them, Louise Hay, Hay House 1987). It does sound like quackery, but when I read more about it, I feel there may be some wisdom, even if it's non-scientific.

My journey with pain is not over. But I am now ready to accept that it's not my fault, I did not choose it. It was something there, within me, from a young age. I am a product of my environment and I am who I am. I am not sure what it will take me to heal.

I do have injuries in my body and my mind, and I do struggle to

accept the status quo. But I also see that there are people living with far worse conditions than me and then I feel very lucky. But, I live inside my body and it's the animal inside of me.

These days I am trying a new therapy, one that has given me hope and that is the concept of neuroplasticity; the training of the brain to make new synapses and heal the body. I am still in the process of learning how to execute the thinking and making the changes, but I feel confident that I will make it.

Light of day is a reprieve from the darkness that still grasps me, but I am stoic and I will endure.

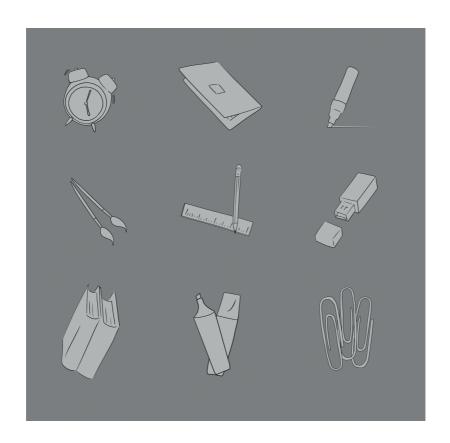


Illustration by Anthony Stevens

Poetry/Lyrics

TRAUMA THERE WAS A TIME WHEN WE HAD FUN WILD FREESIAS IDENTITY I HAD TO TAKE THE BUS



Illustration by Basak Savcigil

TRAUMA

Monika Andrews

The solo raft upon which I traveled survived the torrid storms of time.

The great internal ocean.

Distant memories of my frail craft tossed across the waves, catching snippets of the horizon; an endless expanse of the same. Without dreams of ever finding myself alive, I hung on.

Blinded by my own fear and mute to the presence of my own internal support,
I had closed the door on the spirit of myself.

One distant morning I heard birds for the first time, saw the sparkle of a fish leap into the early light, and felt the breeze caress my cheek.

Images, small as they were, inspired a new thought, promoting just enough stamina

I fashioned a mast from small courage.

One hand holding the thread of life, the other found a cloth from fragments of hope and worked giving shape to a sail.

Little bits of internal calm returned.

The breath of wind caught my cloth,
I hung on drawing strength,
courage found, from navigating my own past.

Beaching my raft and the memories of my tumultuous voyage, welcoming the embrace of my internal Creator.

Warm with gratitude, for all the breaths that led me there, and humbled by the creation of my own story, with jelly legs I walked into my own unknown future; my bundle of courage packed lightly within my heart.



Illustration by Caitlin Chilton



Illustration by Joey Klarenbeek

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN WE HAD FUN

Lucia Valeria Alfieri

There was a time when we had fun
Where we hid from our troubles
In a place away from the city hum-drum
With a bottle of beer
That soon became two
And two became a few
We'd forgot who we were
And found freedom in the blur.

We drove around in an old French car
Up and down the hills, in the middle of the green.
We explored new locations
And lived new sensations.
We explored our youth,
Which left a tender impression on our souls.

Red wine stained our summer clothes That in days ahead was hard to wash out. Red wine stained our memories, Which in days ahead were hard to recompose.

Unaware of the future
With alcohol in our veins,
Unaware of awaiting pain
We unlocked our inhibitions.
We believed our future was ahead,
The world nestled in our hands.

But time is over now, The bottle empty.

We woke up one day And the world had slipped away, Emptied our hands Emptied our veins Captured us in its hurricanes.

Who decided what we wouldn't want? Taking away our understanding? Changing our fate? Who are we to blame For this absurd game?

Numbers come and go But only add to my age.

Lucia Valeria Alfieri

I said goodbye to our youth
It found a quiet corner in my heart.
Now it lives in my memory,
Where the old French car still runs
Up and down the hills, in the middle of the green.



Illustration by Jessie Meinken

WILD FREESIAS

Jeff Herd

Past green and white fibros with couch grass lawns Wild freesias gather round trees Sunny river picnics at Barwon Heads Mum and Dad, my two sisters and me

Toes looking for worms in the shallows Popping seaweed on the shore On the drive home, a sleepy nap My head nestled in my mum's lap

Wild freesias fill my dreams Cream and mauve and gold Drifting down the river to the sea Never growing old

Past the Heads, the wild ocean beckons I'm tall enough to ride the dumpers Will we go out, what d'ya reckon? There's an undertow that could pull you under Let's go, let's go, let's go! Against the winter's ocean wind Trees stand in long defence Time is ebbing like the tide But I remember my innocence

Wild freesias fill my dreams Cream and mauve and gold Drifting down the river to the sea I'm never gonna get old



Illustration by Jessie Meinken



Illustration by Genevieve Lamb

IDENTITY

Miriam Pultro

I spent the last few years Struggling with identity Wondering if I got it wrong Wishing I had done more Work on this stuff before Instead of just writing a song

I spent the last few years
Wrestling with who I am
Dipping in fingers and toes
Learning how to bleed my fears
Learning how to love again
Listening to how it all goes

All that matters is here All that matters is now And I wasted three long years Hoping you'd love me somehow There is a part of me I can't seem to exorcise That doesn't know how to forget There is a part of me Old enough to recognize The beauty in cause and effect

And I don't remember the feeling But I carry with me the pain And I wouldn't love him if You hadn't pushed me away

There is too much life for me to Not live it without you If you can't decide, then I'm so glad I lost when

There was that one Christmas I confessed my love again Hoping it'd be how it was Fast-forward one year, you were Trying to repair the damage And I'd finally given you up

Thank you for making this easy Thank you for making me choose You were the part of me I thought that I'd never lose.



Illustration by Joseph Estorninho



Illustration by Joey Klarenbeek

I HAD TO TAKE THE BUS

Neslihan Sahinkaya

I took the bus, one rainy day in Melbourne, Something I'd rather not do.
I don't like strangers so much,
No offence to those who do.
I don't like to sit next to them,
Or inhale their personal space,
I don't want to make acquaintances,
Or have them shoved up in my face.
So I took a seat by the window,
Pretending to be busy on my phone.
I ignored everyone that passed me,
Hoping they'd just leave me alone.

A woman climbed on, a child gripping one hand.

The bus driver had helped, lift her baby and the pram.

Pacifier in mouth, the child looked a scruff,

She glanced at me tenderly; the corners of her lips went up.

She placed her dummy in my hand,

And some drool had looked for a place to land.

A bit of snot too, hung from her nose,

It had wiggled and jiggled with each bump on the road.

Till it finally departed, this mush of green grot,

And landed on the floor, with a great big plop!

Her mother passed me a Wet One, with a look of dismay,

And I looked back at her politely, as to say 'It's ok.'

The child then jumped up, followed her mother's cue,

She left me with a wave and a smile, mixed with 'Achoo!'

Then walked in a man reeking of gin,
Egg on his petrified hair, eyes wide to the brim.
And just like my luck for that sort of thing,
He sat right in front of the seat I sat in.
He began to rant, with a common slur,
'I'm gunna fucken kill 'em!' and 'I'm gunna make it hurt!'
And as fate would have it, he turned round to me,
'I'm gunna fucken kill 'em!' he yelled,
And his breath almost killed me.
I was shitting my dacks, I didn't want to look up,
My eyes glued to the ground;
Thank goodness he turned back around.
Hissing and cursing, he stumbled right off the bus.
I waved at him cheekily as we began to take off.

Another stop and I was done, I really couldn't say that it had been much fun. I made a vow not to take another bus, Till that God forsaken day when I really must.

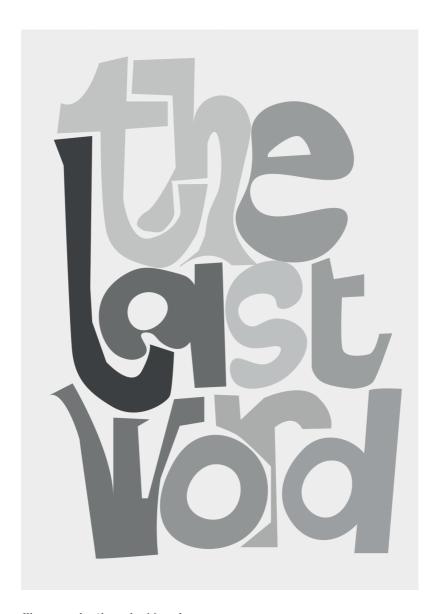


Illustration by Alexandra Mavridis

Novel Excerpts

DISINTEGRATION

FRANKIE

HEART OF MAGIC: THE GIRL WITH AMNESIA

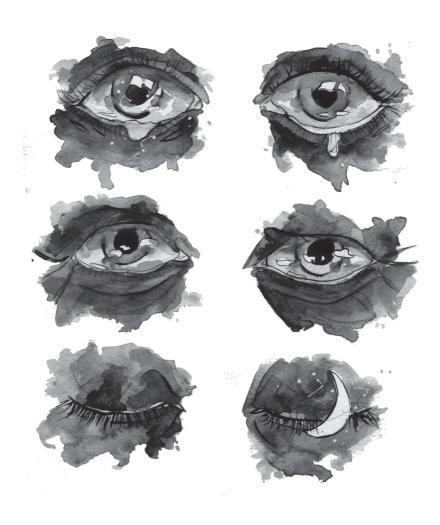


Illustration by Caitlin Chitlon

DISINTEGRATION

Nicola Miller

It had been a Saturday. A day I should have been spending with friends. A day down the street, drinking coffee we didn't really enjoy or need, and sneaking cigarettes in secret places. And afterwards, when the sky grew dark, we would cover ourselves with cheap perfume to mask the obvious and overwhelming stench of tobacco that both my parents would have noticed anyway.

I'd missed more days of school this past month than I'd attended. The teachers knew my story though, and all assumed a sort of awkward, pained expression while talking to me. The pity in their voices when they all said their rehearsed lines of, 'it's okay, take it easy, don't stress too much about the assignments. We're all here for you,' was overwhelmingly nauseating. I'd learned to block the sound from my ears.

I was at the Royal Melbourne Hospital with Dad. It was a bleak, grey day. One of those especially cold days for winter, where the thermometer didn't budge over ten degrees Celsius, and with a serious low of two degrees. I was rugged up in layers of polyester, cotton and wool but my toes and fingers still couldn't move with warm ease.

I hadn't heard Dad utter more than a common phrase all morning. I'd driven the hour and a half from our home in order to get my

hours up to go for my license once I turned eighteen. He had stared listlessly out the window, unresponsive to the music I'd played that we used to sing along to.

We sat in a small room, on opposite ends of a small oval shaped table just outside of the Intensive Care Unit. Fluorescent lighting bore down over me, making my skin look yellow and highlighting the red spots taking over my oily cheeks. I knew this because I noticed every time I saw myself in the reflection of windows or bathroom mirrors.

The ICU was a large room, accommodating forty-two beds for patients on the verge of death. The unit itself resembled any other area of a hospital, white walls, the artificial scent of sanitiser in the air, and grey faces hovering through the hallways. To enter we had to be buzzed in by the receptionist, state who we were visiting, and we had to thoroughly wash and sanitise our hands before we could see Mum.

Every weekend, and most week days, we sat by her side, waiting patiently. Waiting for something to change. The best case scenario was that her sunken eyes would flutter open and her cracked lips would smile in recognition of our smiling faces. On a subconscious level I knew this wouldn't happen. She'd been in a coma for too long now.

While we'd resumed the space near her fighting body, we spoke to her in small bursts of useless sentences. The doctors heavily encouraged conversation, saying that she could still hear us. The weekend before, I'd put headphones in her ear and played Debussy's *Clair de Lune*; one of her old favourites to play on the piano. The sound of my childhood.

The doctors always encouraged us to take breaks while they checked her vitals. But Dad insisted we wait just outside, just in case. I always brought a book to read. I couldn't stare at her for more than five minutes without wanting to cry. Dad was the opposite. Every time we came, his eyes found nothing else to look at but her.

Because she wasn't really Mum anymore. Her bald head shone

under the lights, her skin retained a texture of freshly waxed leather. Her eyes were so far sunken into her face that I wondered if I touched them, would they crumble in their sockets? The thought sent pangs of despair through my body and deep into my stomach.

So we waited around the oval table outside of ICU while the doctors checked something. I knew whatever they told us next regarding the cancer wasn't going to be positive. Dad was looking down at his hands, fiddling with his wedding ring. I'd often wished I could crack open his skull, only for all of his repressed thoughts to melt down the sides so that I could really see them.

I mirrored Dad's actions and fiddled with a water bottle in front of me, slowly picking away the plastic wrapper. He looked up with his red, red eyes that were so puffy they looked sore to touch. The icy blue of his iris remained, and reminded me of his own mother's.

'Imagine that,' he said softly.

I paused before saying anything, unsure if he was talking to me or to himself. 'What's that?' I finally responded.

'Paying for water in a plastic bottle, what a load of bullshit,' he answered.

He shook his head and looked back down at his wedding ring. I said nothing; what could I say? There are certain things Father and Daughter should never discuss. We knew we'd be hopeless without her. The house itself gave morbid premonitions of life to come, without her warm presence to fill it.

Dad and I sat waiting, always. I'd felt as though I'd done too much waiting for my seventeen years of life, already. This waiting went on and on, and so relentlessly that as I watched the second hand tick on the wall clock opposite me, I felt each second to be a blow of physical pain. It mocked me up there on its pedestal of control. Control of everything we did. Control of life.

I watched the doctors and nurses coming in and out of the heavy security door. It was just another day for them; another day of sickness to treat, or another person on the brink of death, or to stablise and return to rehab. I thought of a list I'd seen on the Internet not too long ago about depression rates in

certain professions; number one was dentistry. Whether that was supported by facts and research or not, I wasn't sure, but I believed it anyway. I wondered how far down the list a doctor or nurse would be.

I picked up my book and read, but fumbled over each sentence, I couldn't grasp the meaning of anything. Dad began to nod off, with his head slightly rolling, his fingers laced and his legs crossed.

Eventually the doctors came back out and told us that she was stable, and would be okay. It was time for us to practice some self care and head home for some rest.

We plonked down the stairs and stood out the front for a cigarette. He'd given up on chastising the bad habit I'd picked up long ago soon after he began again out of pure necessity. My throat was sore and I didn't want to smoke anymore but there was nothing else to do. It was very efficient at filling the empty spaces. Patients in wheelchairs and hospital gown puffed away with us. A woman with messy hair in a dressing gown sat slumped against the wall, sobbing.

'I guess we'd better meander on, mate,' Dad said, squinting his eyes from the smoke.

'Sure. She'll be alright won't she, Dad?'

'She'll pull through. She's a bloody fighter and I won't let her go.' He messed up my hair, which was tied loosely into a greasy ponytail. His face gave him away with a grimace, an expression he thought I mustn't have noticed.

'Off we go then,' he muttered.

Once more I noticed the cold, which would only increase the further along we drove toward home. I yearned for sun on my skin, to feel healthy and happy again.

Dad took control of the steering wheel for our journey home and we head toward the Western Ring Road. I put headphones in, repeating *Clair de Lune* and watching the elm trees of Flemington Road flicker by.

We were just beating peak hour traffic as the car eased its way onto the heavy concrete of the toll way. I listened to the notes of mine and Mum's music rise and fall, wishing the song would last longer. I remembered being a small child and it was the first beautiful melody I'd ever heard. Mum gave many attempts at teaching me how to play, but I was stubborn, always resisting being told what to do. Bitter regret welled inside me and was quickly replaced with anger towards myself. I wished I could hear her play the melody again.



Illustration by Dawn Dangkomen

FRANKIE

Sarah Cahalan

At two years old, Frankie and Ophelia were completely identical. It wasn't just that they were twins born with the same genetic bodies; it was also that they seemed to occupy the same mind. Their mother made them sit opposite each other at the kitchen table. If they sat together they would gabble to each other in half-formed sentences that no one else could understand and it infuriated their parents – their mother especially.

One day, the phone rang and she had to leave them alone at the table for lunch. Ophelia and Frankie immediately got to work. They used their fingers to smear their mashed potato into incomprehensible shapes. Frankie chuckled and clapped her chubby hands together before taking her forefinger and adding a swirl to her plate. Ophelia never looked up, her cherub face puckered in concentration as she carefully traced a finger through her food. They both reached simultaneously for the bottle in the middle of the table. Ophelia had seized it first, while Frankie had the barest grip of it. She ceded to her sister, happy to wait. She used the blood-red tomato sauce to add a final flourish. Ophelia leant back in her chair and sighed in satisfaction. She looked at Frankie with her fist in her mouth, sucking the mash off her

fingers noisily. Frankie slouched against her highchair and rubbed her round belly. Their mother came back in to find their mess. She shrieked and slammed plates and bibs in the sink. She barely noticed their works of art, the mini surrealist paintings they had painstakingly created.

Frankie remembers her mum saying to her friend on the phone, in later years, 'It feels like they are in on it together, they watch me sometimes and it's like they know it drives me mad when they don't speak. They have their own language!'

It was unsettling, what she and Ophelia could do, but it was also pretty special. It wasn't long, maybe ten years or so, before their mother instigated the Split.

They were walking home after the last day of school in year five, Frankie tripping happily up the path with Ophelia, arms slung around each other. It was one of the last, special moments where Frankie showed physical affection. Ophelia was telling her a joke.

'What did one twin say to the other?'

The air was warm and the sun was still high in the sky. They paused together at a train turnstile, the bells clanging so that neither could talk for a moment. The train hooted as it passed. The gates opened and the girls crossed.

'I don't know, what?'

'There's not enough womb in here for the two of us!'

Ophelia and Frankie burst into giggles, slightly hysterical and drunk from the bag of lollies they had bought from the corner store. The joke wasn't that funny, Frankie thought later, not funny at all.

As Ophelia opened the gate to their front yard, Frankie checked the mailbox. She carefully collected all the pamphlets and fliers, coupons and vouchers to bring in for her mother to sort through. Ophelia stooped to pick a few yellow daisies that had suddenly started to sprout in the cracks in the paving. Their mother came to the door and held it open for them. She told them to go to the living room and sit down, for she had news.

As Frankie listened, her hands clutched the junk mail, twisting and crumpling it as she tried to absorb what her mother was telling them.

'Ophelia, you will be going to the co-ed school down the road. Frankie, darling, you remember how you wanted to study English literature and classical studies? Well, there's only one school that offers both and it's an all-girls school across town. You'll have to catch the bus but I think you'll be old enough to do that on your own next year.'

On my own? Frankie thought. It was a foreign concept to her, as strange and alien as the concept of a baby growing from a fertilised egg. She risked a glance at her sister. Her head was bowed, hands cupped loosely in her lap. Hope flared in Frankie. They could fight this together! There was no way their mother would separate them if they both campaigned against it. They could spend all summer strategising, they could picket out in the front lawn like the bus workers who went on strike the year before, they could refuse to eat, they could—

Frankie's thoughts were interrupted. Ophelia was hugging their mother. She was whispering to her, something Frankie couldn't quite hear. When Ophelia turned her head, Frankie heard it.

'Thank you,' she was saying, over and over.

After all this time, that memory still pierces as if the knife has been honed daily, ensuring the tip is sharp enough to part her flesh and prise open her ribcage; sharp enough to tickle her beating heart before being thrust in.

When the sun sets each day, Frankie sits in her room with a calendar on her lap. She draws a cross from each corner of the box, marking off one more day. *One hundred and nine*, she thinks. She hears the soft thuds of Dan creeping through the house as it settles, wood shrinking as the temperature drops. Frankie holds her hair flat against her forehead, contemplating words like *statutory* and *indictment*. The floorboard outside her bedroom door creaks. She holds her breath, willing the shadow at the door away. A sigh and the floorboard creaks goodbye, leaving her alone with the cavity in her head.

The grey storm cloud was conceived the day the two police officers came to their door. Frankie had been upstairs, studying for her year twelve biology exam, when she heard her mother's shriek. Frankie paused for a moment and observed Ophelia's empty bedroom before racing downstairs. Her mother, crying. Her father, mute. The two men in their clean uniforms looking appropriately sympathetic. At first, Frankie only felt the icy tendrils of fear caressing her stomach. Then, as if a door had briefly opened on an angry swarm of feelings and then swiftly closed again, she felt completely numb. She felt nothing, not even later, as she listened to the first of the accused give his statement.

'We didn't expect things to get out of hand.'

If she knew how, Frankie would have been appalled at herself. If it were Ophelia finding out Frankie were gone forever, she would have been keening, screaming, tearing her hair out and wailing, grasping and clutching at their parents. Perhaps worst of all, Frankie didn't feel guilty. She had this huge white blank space in her head that occasionally crackled with static. Nothing else penetrated that space. She could do nothing but watch, wait and listen. Gradually her head began to throb and ache. And that was the extent of the symptoms of loss and grief.

She doesn't remember the precise moment it happened, but sometime after Ophelia's death Frankie's vocal chords seized up. It wasn't as if she never spoke, but more that when she did speak it was as if the words were being pulled like teeth from her mouth. She became stingy with language, the Scrooge of communication. And it was entirely against her will. At school, her classical studies teacher would ask, 'Why does Antigone try so desperately to ensure Polynices receives a respectable burial?'

She knew the answer, raised her hand, and yet when the teacher called on her and all the other students turned to stare at her as she spoke, an alternate part of her brain told her to shut up. She felt all the energy whoosh out of her when she sighed and closed her mouth. It's easier this way, the other part said. The less energy you spend speaking out loud, the more energy you have to remember her. She

adapted to this new lifestyle quickly, as if she had been waiting her whole life to simply disappear into silence.

The week before she moved out, sixty-two days after Ophelia's death, Frankie stepped into a quiet house. Instead of dumping her bag by the front door like usual, she held onto it tighter.

Something's wrong, Ophelia whispered in the back of her brain.

She padded through the hallway, towards the lounge room. Usually, her mother would be in the kitchen making dinner with the cautiousness of someone trying very hard to be 'fully present' in the moment. After Ophelia's death, their mother had taken to meditation. Frankie once heard her father on his phone in the backyard, pacing from the lavender bushes on one side to the roses on the other, saying, 'If you ask me, it's just another escape mechanism.'

And Frankie agreed. By reducing her world down to each individual second, their mother cheated Ophelia her death rites. She ought to be reliving each moment of her daughter's life, recounting the ways in which she could have tried harder, done something different. Instead, she insisted on presiding in the living room like some new age spiritual convert with Nag Champa incense clouding the air with spice and two cushions supporting her arse while she sat meditating, eyes closed, palms on knees.

It was five-thirty, and the house creaked gently as Frankie moved through it. She found them both in the living room, sitting together on the couch, holding hands. They smiled as she walked in, as if they had been waiting for her.

'Franks, sit down.' Her father gestured to the worn brown armchair next to them. The formality felt jarring, so instead of questioning them Frankie obeyed meekly.

Her mother leaned forward, jamming her hands between her knees, and said, 'We're worried about you.'

Frankie was silent. As her parents spoke, her mind drifted. She felt her body grow numb suddenly, all at once, and she watched this simulacrum of herself endure her parents' lecture. She smiled in her mind, glad to have this ability to disconnect, because some

part in the back of her brain registered her parents' voices and was uncomfortable with the content.

'We just wondered *why*?' The crack in her mother's voice sent her plummeting down into her body. The sudden change jolted her brain, so for a second she felt like a deer caught in headlights.

'Why what?' she stuttered.

Her mother cried and her father's eyes hardened with both pity and anger.

She moved out the next week.

Frankie wakes and sees the numbers on the clock briefly before she shoulders her blanket and shuts out the light. *One hundred and eleven*. The thought appears from outside of her conscious. Next, someone's hand shaking her awake. She tries to grasp the tendrils of a sweet dream, the feeling of a warm fire and the smell of musky perfume, but it dissipates in the light of day.

She gives Dan a bleary smile before she rubs her eyes and yawns. She steps out of bed and stretches onto her tiptoes, arms held up to the sky. She mentally wishes Ophelia good morning before following Dan to the kitchen where the air is infused with the smell of fried fat.

'Ready for breakfast?' Dan grins at her.

He flips a crepe with an expert flick of his wrist. Frankie watches as it somersaults in the air, splattering them with oily butter before he catches it again, perfectly. Frankie watches and, for this moment, is suffused with warm content. He is the only one in her life who is okay with her muted style. *He understands*, she thinks. They have known each other for over half their lives, and can communicate with gestures and facial movements and a minimum of words.

Frankie has been living with Dan for three months now. They share a two-bedroom home in the suburbs, a short bus ride from the city. When Frankie had finally been granted government benefits, after waiting longer than the six weeks expected, she had contacted Dan. *I'm coming*.

She arrived at the house that night with one suitcase, a yoga mat and a sleeping bag. Her best friend-cum-housemate cut a lonely figure, sitting on the porch with a bottle of whiskey. He gave her an ironic smile as he snapped the elastic band of a party hat under her chin. It was her homecoming. She joined him, leaning her back against the gravelly wall and pulling her knees to her chest. They took it in turns taking swigs from the bottle. She felt the liquid sizzle in her throat before slowly burning through her stomach. They watched the sunset together, listening to the crickets and occasional car rumble past. She saw the sparse, thorny, rose bush and pointed at it. Dan explained how they were going to maintain the roses, how he had looked up all the tips and tricks online as soon as he moved in.

'We are going to have the most *beautiful* flowers, all for you, Franks!'

He toasted her.

There was another time, with roses and whiskey. Their parents had gone away for the weekend, one summer when they were both fourteen

'You're not going to just sit and read are you, Franks?' Ophelia whined from the doorway to her bedroom. 'Come down, hang out with us!'

But what she really meant was be with me.

Ophelia had invited all her friends over from school. Nine boys and five girls. The odds were against them. Where Ophelia had accepted puberty with welcoming arms, swaying her hips and wearing makeup, Frankie had remained stuck in her head.

Ophelia lay on her own bed with her own friends, flicking through magazines and laughing at text messages from the boys in their classes. Ophelia was comfortable with both genders. She wasn't shy about throwing an arm around Craig, the popular guy in their year, nor was she stingy about kissing her best friends on the cheek, while Frankie sometimes felt a horrible dread surge through her body when all the girls left at the end of the school day, hugging and

kissing. She would quickstep ahead of her friends, look back and wave goodbye before heading home, terrified of being caught up in the mass of bodies. Sometimes, she even left class four minutes early just to avoid the ceremony. She always felt her body was an unruly thing that could be made into a weapon against her at any moment. Later, when she was seventeen, Dan and Ophelia (at a time of brief peace between the two) pinned Frankie down on the couch and hugged her till she stopped struggling. They broke her in, like a horse, and she had embarked on a tumultuous relationship with affection ever since.

The thought of going downstairs, where all that testosterone filled the air, made her throat feel tight. She knew Dan was down there, probably as freaked out as she was with all those bodies and noise. She felt pulled, duty-bound to be Dan's ally. But more than that, she could feel the magnetic current, the one that had existed from the day Ophelia and Frankie were born, tugging her towards the stairs. Frankie paused at the staircase, one foot mid-air. She listened to the giggles, the deep throated honks of laughter and looked back at her room. It was dark, private, a haven. She could go back. But like a puppet, she could only go where the puppeteer manoeuvred. Ophelia wanted her – she would go.

They were playing spin the bottle. There was an empty glass coke bottle on the floor. Frankie sat, cross-legged, between two girls. The boys were on the other side, already an unspoken barrier distinguished between the two sexes. One of them, a boy with acne scars and a wavering voice, spun the bottle. They all watched it spin, round and round, as Ophelia passed a bottle of cheap whiskey around. The girl to her left passed it to Frankie and she studied the label before passing it on. It was one of their parents' anniversary bottles for the next year. Frankie raised one eyebrow at her sister but Ophelia just grinned and shrugged: girls will be girls.

The bottle landed on Ophelia. She quirked an eyebrow, smirking, before crawling on all fours across the circle, towards the boy. Frankie watched her back arch up and down. She could see the tip of Ophelia's underwear peeking out from her jeans, could just

make out the pattern of red roses on them and she felt a horrible and perverse sense of wrongness. She glanced at Dan who was watching her, not Ophelia like all the other boys were, his eyes wide and she felt his concern. For one second she swore Ophelia could feel it.

Her sister glanced over her shoulder and met Frankie's eyes, transmuted: everything will be okay.

But it wasn't, was it, Ophelia? Frankie thinks when she remembers. It never was.

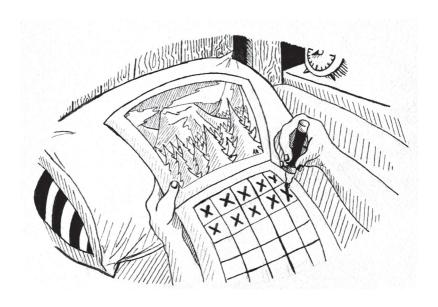


Illustration by Ashley Robinson

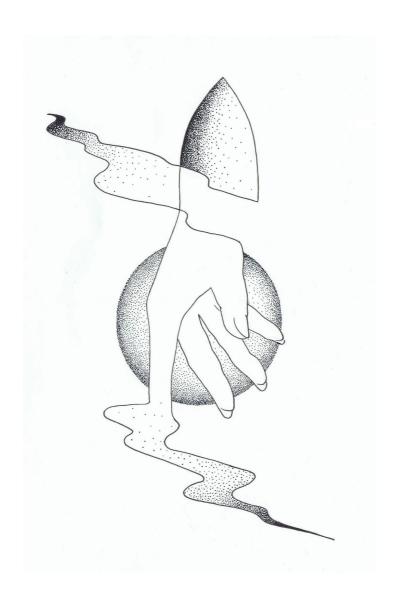


Illustration by Joseph Estorninho

HEART OF MAGIC: THE GIRL WITH AMNESIA

Alicia K Randall

I hated my field magic class. Lately, every lesson had us heading outside to the sanded duelling arena where we would be forced to stand up in front of the whole class and expose just how much we sucked at casting.

Well, at least that's what it felt like to me.

To other students – the ones who were actually good at casting – this class was the best thing that could've ever happened to them. Dressed up in their sport uniform, they bounced down to the arena, smiles on their faces and already placing bets on who would beat who.

I slumped down on a metal bench next to Elissa and tried to keep my eyes open. Her frizzy waves fell over her shoulder as she turned to me.

'Wow, you really are tired today,' she said as she studied the bags under my eyes.

I looked at her. 'Did you not see me dozing off in maths?'

Elissa smiled at this. 'You always doze off in maths, you goose.'

I knocked her shoulder. She laughed.

'No, but seriously,' she continued to grin. 'Was I snoring last night or something?'

'No! You don't snore, El.' And thank the gods for that. I couldn't

bear it if I had to share a dorm room with someone who did.

A bag was passed to us. Inside were red bands – constricting enchantments that protected students from getting hurt by any magical casts. We took one each, passed the bag on and pulled the bands onto our wrists.

'I kept getting woken up by visions,' I said.

Elissa perked up at his. 'All night?'

'Pretty much,' I said.

All magi were born gifted with one of the eight Talents. I was a Diviner, a mage who could see into the future. We were meant to be one of the most important magi, but there were few of us and it was even rarer to witness a Diviner who was *truly* talented. Most of us had no control over when we had visions or what they were of.

'What did you see?' Elissa asked.

'Not sure. A pool light or something?'

Mr Barrington called for our attention. 'All right, we're going to be working with elemental magic today. No funny business from Conjurers or Illusionists, or any Talent, got it?'

'Yes,' the class droned.

Mr Barrington clapped his hands together. 'Let's warm up. Everyone standing.'

Stood in a clumped group, the teacher instructed us to pull at our auras, our magical essence, and bring them to the surface of our skin. It was something everyone had already learned as it was crucial to conjuring the elements. But even in Year 10, teachers still seemed to think we needed to go over it. Well, I might have needed to, but no one else did.

I closed my eyes and focussed inwards to where I imagined my heart was – and my soul, if you were someone who believed in that. From there, I let my magic flow through my auric streams, down my legs and up my arms. I felt more awake now and had no problem opening my eyes again.

Oh Gods, what a mistake. The air was too bright, alive with a kaleidoscope of everyone's auras. My blue one struggled to stand out among the reds, purples and greens. Everyone was born with

a random coloured aura, but some studies argued that the colour was significant to who we were as a person. I guess it could be significant that my aura was blue to match my eyes, but I don't think that's what they meant. Beside me, Elissa glowed orange. You could definitely tell she was one of the strongest magi in class. Her aura shone the brightest and she made it look effortless. I couldn't help the wave of jealousy that washed over me.

I flung it away. I didn't need magic. This was my last year of compulsory magic lessons, and I couldn't wait to be done with them.

Once we had all stopped warming up, Mr Barrington took a moment to look over the role.

'First up: Dita and Jess.'

Internally, I began to scream. Never had I ever succeeded at one on one duelling. Especially not in front of everyone in my class. I glanced over at Jess. She looked relieved; after all, she was going against the worst in class. She stood up and made her way to one end of the sanded arena.

Elissa nudged me. 'Cast water, it's the element you're best at.'

I nodded and made my way to the starting point. My shoes crunched against the light layer of sand, the floor of the arena – and a sorry excuse for cushioning any falls. I stopped behind a thin layer of wood which was embedded into the ground. It marked my starting spot. Jess stood at a duplicate of this, five metres away from me.

I could already hear people snickering about my fated loss from the stair-like benches.

'Stances,' Mr Barrington said, walking from Jess to me.

I placed my left foot in front of my right and raised my hands, loose and ready.

Mr Barrington pointed to my legs. 'Wider.'

He nodded at Jess.

'On the whistle, you begin.'

Why was duelling even necessary? There were no wars to be fought. This was a sport. A sport only magi who were good at casting should participate in.

'Three...'

I shook those thoughts away. I just needed to make sure I didn't look like a complete idiot. If I just did one decent defensive move, I would be happy.

'Two...'

A tingle started behind my eyes. Oh *crap*.

'One!'

My senses stopped working and the tingling intensified. I lost all control of my body as I was thrown into a vision. The feeling was similar to sneezing – with that awful wait before everything came out in one single moment.

A dark cave. A pool of crystal clear water. The smell of dampness and dirt. The feeling of cool water against my hand. Excitement, curiosity, caution, fear, something glowing in the water...

The tingle that started between my eyes ran down my arms and legs and shocked them out of my temporary paralysis. I took in a large gulp of air and threw my arms up to cover my eyes from the bright sun. I had fallen on my back. Laughs broke out around me.

'Bloody Diviners.'

'Sir said not to use Talents!'

More laughter.

Jess ran up to me. 'I'm so sorry! I had no idea you were about to have a vision.'

'Neither did I,' I said a bit too bitterly.

I let her help me up onto my feet.

Mr Barrington, ignoring the rowdy class, came up to us.

'You all right?' he asked me. 'Didn't see anything bad, did you?' I shook my head.

He nodded towards the benches, and we went back to our seats without another word.

I was surprised I felt so numb. I didn't even feel like I was about to cry.

Elissa didn't have a chance to console me as the students around us continued to laugh.

'Diviners are so helpless, aren't they?' one girl put in.

'No control at all,' said a boy.

Then one, very loud female voice yelled out above all the others. 'Oh, shut up. All of you.' It was Ardea Sears, who was known for being a bit of a bitch. She wore her uniform a size too small, her makeup was always on point and her thick black hair was pinned back with bobby pins. 'Diviners can't help that they're Diviners.'

I was a little surprised. She'd never stood up for me before.

She smirked at me. 'Isn't that right, *Amnesia*?'

Well, never mind then. Ardea was only interested in defending Diviners, being one herself.

I kept my eyes forward, away from Ardea.

Elissa, on the other hand, stood up and spun around to face her.

Unmoving, I said, 'El, d—'

'Why in Luna's hell would you call her that?'

Ardea's friend, Noah, let out a laugh. 'Yeah, don't you know she blows up every time someone mentions *her loss of memories*.'

I was no longer numb. I was far, *far* from it. I didn't know whether I was about to blow up or start crying.

'That is enough,' Mr Barrington's voice boomed. His eyes locked onto Ardea and Noah. 'You two are up.'

Once Ardea and Noah began to duel, Mr Barrington looked away to give me a bathroom pass. He must have felt guilty. I took it without any hesitation and left for the nearest restroom.

I had no idea who I was. I had chosen the name Dita for myself after I saw a photograph of a beautiful woman, the deceased mother of my guardian, Blain Hakeem. Blain was the one who had found me six years ago on the outskirts of the town, Ofelia, where I now lived. I had been hurt, lying unconscious on the dry earth with broken ribs on my right side and a large bump on my head. Blain had heard me screaming from his house nearby, and ran out to help me. I was admitted to the Ofelia Hospital and word was sent out about me through the news, asking my family to come and identify me.

No one came.

I moved in with Blain, insistent that he would be the one to adopt

me. Every day, after he had finished work at Ofelia Boarding School he visited me in hospital to see how I was doing. He never asked me questions I couldn't answer like the doctors did, and seemed to be the only person who really cared what happened to me. He had been thirty-four when he took me in, and while I sometimes still worried I was a burden, he always assured me that I wasn't.

My memories seemed intent on staying hidden. Healing magic and medicine could fix my ribs, but they couldn't do anything to my mind. I had tried to remember by myself, looking up pictures of different cities and towns online in case any looked familiar. None did. While I sometimes did feel some sort of familiarity with little things, and they triggered a flash of a memory – sliding down a slide or looking up at tall city buildings – it was never enough to recall who I was.

I became a marvel around town. People always asked me stupid questions about my amnesia. What's it like? So you can't recall anything?

It got worse once I started at Ofelia Boarding School. I took an instant dislike to anyone who brought up my amnesia, so wound up without many friends. Elissa was stuck sharing a dorm with me and while I had been bitter to her when we first met, somehow we had become best friends.

It had been six years since I first arrived in Ofelia. I was done with trying to figure out who I had been before. I had my new life now — with Elissa, who was like a sister, and Blain, who was a better father than the one who never cared to come find me. It didn't matter that I didn't know anything about my ancestors or family, why I had blue eyes and brown hair, why I was such a pathetic mage. I was fine. I was absolutely fine just being Dita... the girl with amnesia.



Illustration by Greg Harriden

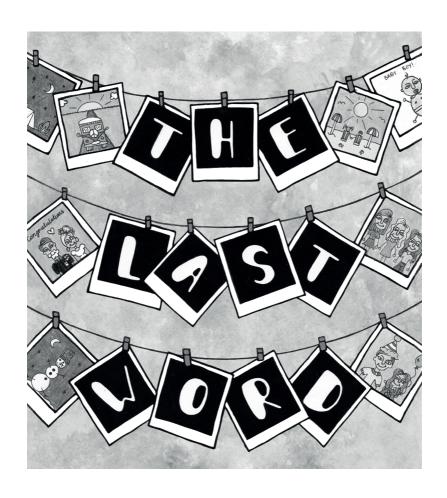


Illustration by Jess Carfora

In Memoriam

DEDICATION BEADS THE JOURNEY OF NO RETURN



Carlien Patricia Woodcroft-Lee

1937 - 2017

The Last Word is dedicated to Carlien Patricia
Woodcroft-Lee, a much-loved student of
Melbourne Polytechnic, who sadly passed
away. We will cherish the memories we shared
with her in the classroom, as well as her quick
wit and dedication to writing.

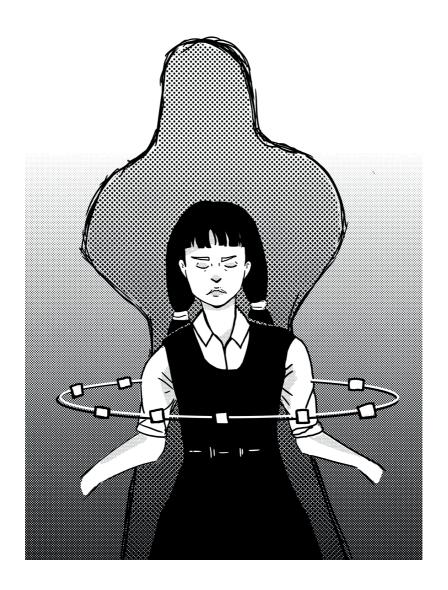


Illustration by Chris Baker

BEADS

Carlien Patricia Woodcroft-Lee

'I have solved the problem of Sarah's school,' Mother announced, one morning at breakfast. 'There is a school in Carlton which has a special class for handicapped children, I have checked it out and she can start next week.'

'Isn't it a bit far away for a little girl?' Father asked. 'She will need to take two trams to get there. Perhaps we could wait till she is a little older?'

'No, she should have been in school last year. Matthew is four and he is already in pre-school. Early childhood learning is most important,' Mother said firmly.

Nobody thought to ask Sarah. People rarely asked her opinion on anything. She was very quiet and they seemed to forget about her.

'You can walk Matt to preschool on your way to work. I will escort Sarah to school and bring her home in the afternoon. It will be an extra burden for me of course, but Sarah's eyesight has always been a problem for us.' Mother finished.

Having arranged the family's activities, Mother started gathering up the breakfast dishes and no more was said on the subject. Sarah had albinism. She was a small, thin child with two stiff, yellow pigtails and a pair of thick glasses that made her eyes look like saucers. Mother always made it clear that she considered Sarah's eyesight a huge problem for the family.

On the following Monday, after a seemingly endless tram ride, Sarah found herself in front of a rather run down pre-war brick building, from which a huge amount of noise emanated. The teacher who met them seemed pleasant enough, and said she hoped Sarah would soon settle in.

'The children are very noisy,' Mother observed. 'Are they always like that?'

'Oh the bell hasn't gone yet,' the teacher answered. 'But even in class the children tend to make more noise than the regular classes. One part of our program is designed to socialise them, so they can take their place in regular classes.'

Mother looked slightly disapproving, but having come thus far she felt she would have to at least trial the school.

Sarah found that the class was noisy most of the time, despite the efforts of a couple of very dedicated teachers. The year was 1946 and the school system was just emerging from wartime austerity. The classroom was shabby and two full time and one part time teacher tried valiantly to quieten down a group of about thirty children with varying levels of disability, so that their learning 'program' could proceed.

In the first lesson, children were assembled and given certain tasks to do, such as building with large wooden blocks, to improve their spatial and tactile skills. Sarah quite liked the blocks, you could make all sorts of things out of them, but she hated the way that some children would get up, run around the room and knock over other students work. Story time was good too, except that it was hard to hear the teacher because of the continual shouting and screaming at the back of the group.

At first some of the other children asked Sarah innumerable questions, but after a while they apparently decided she was rather boring and went back to their screaming games.

This was the general routine of the class. Sarah soon got used to the noise and found some activities she liked, she particularly enjoyed drawing with crayons, it helped her block out the noise. Lunchtime was a trial though. The students had to go outside unless it was raining, and the classroom door would be locked. There was not much to do in the playground and lunch usually ended up in a food fight.

Afternoons included a nap. It was supposed to calm the children down, but many of them still got up and ran around or wandered outside. Sarah loved the afternoon. After a glass of milk and a biscuit, there was an attempt at teaching some craft skills; that was when the beads came out. Tins and jars of many coloured beads, some plain some shiny, some large and made of wood, some small and transparent, blue green, yellow, red, black white and variegated. Wonderful beads. They must have been donated to the school, because there were so many of them and the school did not have a great variety of teaching aids generally.

Each child was given an allocation of beads. Many of them had no use for the beads, so they gave their quota to Sarah, who had a huge collection by day's end. She made necklaces of all the different colours, she made stars and cubes and flower patterns. The teachers were always amazed at her choice of colours and the imaginative designs she created.

At home, Mother was becoming uneasy. When she tried to find out what Sarah had learned that day, all she seemed to hear of was blocks, crayons and beads. When she dropped Sarah off one morning, she asked the teacher about the children's reading.

'Oh most of them can't read, we are introducing them to the alphabet and how to put letters together to make words. And we read to them to give an idea of what the words sound like and how you can put them together to make a story,' the teacher told her.

'But Sarah can read!' Mother protested.

'Well most of our students can't and we don't have the time and

personnel to stream them at present. But Sarah has wonderful tactile and colour coordination skills. She will do well when she goes into a school that works with older children. She is a very intelligent little girl,' the teacher assured her.

'I am going to get to the bottom of this. Tomorrow I am going to arrive early to collect her, and see what they are doing. I am not happy with this situation,' Mother declared.

The following day, when Sarah was engrossed in her beads, she was startled to see her mother walking purposefully into the classroom, accompanied by a worried looking teacher.

'Here she is, over in this corner with the beads, she loves this activity,' one of the teachers explained.

'Sarah,' Mother said, taking in the scene at a glance. 'Stop what you are doing and go and get your coat and bag, we are leaving'.

'Can't I just finish this bit of star?' Sarah asked.

'No you can't,' Mother said. Sarah drew her head down, looking upset.

'You can finish it tomorrow, Sarah,' the teacher assured her.

'No she won't,' Mother said. 'Because she is not coming back! Get your things Sarah; you have wasted enough time here.' And she stormed out dragging Sarah by the hand.

'I intend Sarah to get a proper education,' Mother told Father that night. 'I will teach her myself, until I find a suitable school for her.'

She did exactly that. Sarah learned reading, writing, and spelling and some maths (maths were not Mother's strong point), for the next three years, until Mother persuaded a rather expensive private school to accept her, with some support from a local blindness organisation.

In later years, Sarah was extremely grateful to her mother for her strength of will in ensuring she got a reasonable education like the rest of the community. She enjoyed learning and did well in all her subjects. But irrationally, the memory of those ecstatic afternoons with the beads never left her. Sometimes they would glow in her dreams and she would feel the excitement of putting her hand in

the tin and pulling out a new shape or colour of bead.

Even now, after more than half a century, she still thinks of them and happily threads broken necklaces for her friends and family. The activity that her mother thought so demeaning, and from which she had to remove her daughter, proved to be one of the happiest memories of a childhood where such memories of sheer felicity were comparatively rare.



Illustration by Caitlin Chitlon



Illustration by Olga Conil

THE JOURNEY OF NO RETURN

Carlien Patricia Woodcroft-Lee

Towards the end of the winter of 2015, I noticed that everyone at the shop seemed to be constantly on edge. They appeared to be excessively concerned with security and unwilling to discuss anything by email, even on our encrypted list. Aminah would come to the bus stop or wait at the back gate to mouth what she considered important messages to me. One day, she told me that Samad would be leaving soon. They had to bring forward his departure date, and mine, because it was harder to arrange for people to leave. We could possibly be the last ones from their group. I was filled with dread. Suppose we were caught?

'We should be all right if we move soon.' Aminah told me. 'I think they are looking elsewhere at the moment. We should be able to keep one step ahead of them.'

That explained why, after our last meeting, I had heard nothing from Samad for about two weeks, even though we had a half finished article for the web site, which needed to be completed within the next week. I felt nervous. Were there any more surveillance scares? I worried constantly that something might go wrong that would interfere with our plans for leaving.

To have something positive to do, I began downsizing my

possessions, not that I had many – mainly books, which I sorted into piles. Some to sell at the uni bookshop as they were set texts for courses, some to try to sell to secondhand bookshops, although I realised it was difficult to sell them these days as there were large dealers who sold everything at very low prices to the shops, some I thought Aminah might be able to give to her students, if she still had any, which was doubtful. There was too much interest these days in what Islamic schools and centres were teaching. One was already closed.

I did not like the tone of some of the websites that were emerging on the Internet, but I found this atmosphere of constant surveillance of local communities disturbing; it fostered distrust and fueled the conspiracy theories of people like Laylah on the one hand and Aminah on the other. To make things worse, the strident voices warning against the imminent threat of terror that would soon envelop our society were coming from the highest echelons of government. I was thoroughly bored with the whole web of secrecy and suspicion that seemed to dominate all our lives. I longed to be away from it all and felt that wherever we went could not be much worse than this.

After our last night at my place, when we were having an early morning cup of coffee before he left, I asked Samad about the potential terror threats, tales of beheadings and car bombs targeting innocent people that seemed to be everywhere in the media. He said he thought that it was a ploy by infidel governments to discredit those who fought for the rights of all Muslims and the establishment of a righteous Caliphate that would challenge their domination. He said he personally thought that Australia was fairly low on possible targets for jihad. It was far away and simply not around in the days of the prophecies. It was unlikely that we would be one of the '80 banners' that would confront the true remnant in the final battle of Dabiq. Our major crime was support for the chief infidels, the US and the European powers. But it was probably not a high priority on the Caliphate hit list.

I was not greatly convinced by this line of reasoning; these were personal views of someone who was by nature optimistic, and I did not know how many of his people thought like this. I was also bored with the worldview based on nothing more than the invocation of some very dodgy prophecies. But I realised that Samad had made himself something of an expert on deciphering prophecies and arcane texts that dealt with the end times and I did not want to affect our blossoming relationship by calling them into question. So I dropped the subject and hoped that things would eventually calm down.

Samad was warming to the subject of his beloved texts. His view was that the time of peace would not come until the believers mended their ways and stopped flouting the laws of Islam. He believed that the origins of violence and corruption had come about because of the infiltration of Western, capitalist values into the Muslim communities. I listened with half an ear. I had heard it all before, but his voice was pleasant and its tone reassuring.

Then he made a statement that shocked me, to the extent that I dropped my cup of coffee into my lap. Fortunately, it was not hot, as I had been holding it for some time while I listened to his explanation of why we were probably pretty safe in the antipodes.

'Although our people are all still committed to defending Our State and fostering the conditions which will bring the time of the Mahdi and the final hour closer, there is a group of us who understand the texts and who believe that our leaders have allowed many bad things to flourish and have relied totally on violence to achieve our ends. We have alienated people who could have been our allies and allowed these greatly exaggerated stories to proliferate. We intend to find a way to convince our leadership to change some of its policies. For example, all this slavery business must stop. The Mahdi will not come while there is violence and injustice among those who fight for the State. The jihad must be waged with a pure heart or it will not succeed.'

I sat there with waves of fear washing over me. Trying to influence the policies of the top echelons of ISIS by theological argument seemed the world's riskiest career move. 'How would you d-do this?' I stammered.

'One member of our group has friends on the Shura Council,' Samad replied. 'They have known each other for many years. They fought together against the Shia menace when they were Al-Qaeda in Iraq. They will listen to us. We will ask them if they can arrange a private interview with some of the top people and lay out our plans for a different approach to the defence of the State. Things are not going as well as we had hoped at present. We are surrounded by threats on all sides. They may well listen. We can at least try.'

Or they may not, I thought. And then you will be regarded as traitors and what will happen then?

I got up and started cleaning up my spilt coffee.

Samad stood up to go. 'Do not worry too much,' he said. 'We may only be able to change some small things, but if it is God's will, we will succeed. No one else knows of these plans. I am telling you because we are about to be married. We cannot have secrets from each other.'

He added, 'We are not supposed to reveal our departure arrangements to anyone, but I will try to get word to you when I leave.' He kissed me goodbye and hurried out in case Lola heard footsteps and came to investigate.

I stood on the veranda and watched till he turned the corner. That was the last time we saw each other.

About a fortnight later I received a tweet.

Almost home. Will not be long till you join me. Then Insha'Allah we will have a long and happy life together. If not, I'll see you in Paradise.

I was furious. How could you send me such a stupid message? I stomped around the room. I threw a saucer at the wall. I sat on the couch and burst into tears. When I calmed down, I realised that he probably had to stick to the formula of the mujahid. He couldn't say anything more personal in case someone else might read it, though who that might be I had no idea. It could be just

part of the general paranoia.

On the other hand, it could be meant to reassure. They all believed that they and perhaps their families would end up in this marvelous place and live happily forever. This fueled the obsession with martyrdom that the organisation relied on for its seemingly endless supply of recruits. I remembered that Samad had said that he did not particularly want to be a martyr but if one was killed in fighting the righteous war that was probably the best way to die as entry into paradise was assured.

I prowled restlessly around the flat. I did finish the article and send it off, but my happy days had come to an end.

I had no more communication of any kind for almost a month. Then around the end of August 2015, I received an encrypted email from Iyad.

We have made contact with Samad. Come to the shop tonight and bring your passport.

I was in a high state of excitement as I stumbled along the lane amongst the bins that evening. I pressed the button on the recently installed intercom and Aminah's voice called me to come up. She greeted me effusively, which was not like her, but I imagined she now looked on me as her adoptive daughter in law.

'I know the wait must have been hard for you,' she said. 'But we had trouble contacting Samad. He's been away fighting in the North and we have only just made contact.'

'Fighting!' I exclaimed. 'Why is he fighting? He said he had an IT job in Raqqa.'

'He probably does,' Aminah said. 'But Our State is under attack from all sides. All our young men have to fight in its defense.'

Iyad explained. 'There was an incursion in the North, near the border. Assad's minions had infiltrated our defenses. Thankfully, Samad's patrol managed to rout them. They are on their way back to Raqqa. I spoke to Shishani last night and he said they should be there by tomorrow night.'

I sighed with relief. Iyad took the passport and started typing into Webjet. He said, 'We will find the next most convenient flight. When we get the tickets you can check in online; that way you will not have to stand in a queue. Take whatever size bag the carry on regulations will allow. That way you won't have to wait around at baggage carrousels if you can't book luggage straight through.'

Aminah said, 'We are looking at a flight in about three days' time. That way Samad can organise a vehicle to drive out to our nearest town and wait for you. There are some other people to be picked up. Can you be ready in three days?'

'Oh, yes,' I said. I would have left at a minute's notice; I was so fed up with the stifling atmosphere around me.

Iyad said, 'Come over tomorrow night and we will give you the tickets and final instructions. Ensure you are not followed. Oh, and take the Skybus, don't take taxis.'

That is how I arrived at Tullamarine, sitting with my tickets and boarding pass, waiting for my flight that has been delayed.

I look at my passport with my name on it – Rosalie Watts – part of the life I will soon leave forever. I think of my parents. We have been estranged for some time now, but it is sad to think that I will never see them again. However, this is something that can't be helped. I cannot take the risk of contacting them, as I know they would in all probability tell someone in authority what had happened, perhaps with the aim of stopping me leaving. When I am safely out of the clutches of Australian security,

I will write to them. (I will send Sandra a tweet once I cross the border, seeing she has tried to reconcile us. I posted her wedding present yesterday, as she was kind enough to tell me I would get a wedding invitation.)

Strangely, now that it is almost over, scenes from my former life flash into my mind as I wait. My childhood home. My parents walking their latest dog in the summer dusk, stopping at neighbours' drive ways to comment on their latest DIY improvements. Myself as a young child tagging after them around building supplies shops,

annoying them with my constant complaints of boredom. Sandra and her fiancé, Matt, inviting me one boring Sunday afternoon to drive around looking at the latest display homes in the newest ring of outer suburbs, an activity that my parents probably partook in, nearly thirty years before, eventually settling in the boring suburb in which Sandra and I grew up and from which I had been desperate to escape.

I force my thoughts back to the present. To calm my nerves I take out my iPad and flick through favourite sites, Facebook pages and tweets with names such as @dawnofgladtidings. Then I become aware that the PA is announcing that my plane will land in fifteen minutes. I take a last look at the iPad and then notice a post on dawnofgladtidings. Suddenly, I freeze. The tidings are not glad. They are an announcement of the deaths of two of our mujahidin, in a skirmish with the enemy whom Aminah would refer to as 'Asad's dogs' who had infiltrated our State near the northern border. There were photos of the fallen and a statement about their deaths. I look at them, not registering what I am seeing at first. One photo is of a small man with a little pointed black beard. The name under it is Khaled Ibrahim At-Tikriti – Zehra's husband! The second is entitled Samad Abd-al-Malik al Ambari. I am sure there must be a mistake. But the photo is of Samad, still looking unbelievably attractive, in the classic pose of the mujahid, cradling his machine gun and gazing out over the desert. He had started to grow a beard, I noted irrelevantly. Underneath is the phrase Martyrs for the Caliphate.

I sit there transfixed. I still believe that it must be a mistake. The PA is announcing my plane will land in ten minutes. I suddenly spring into action. If the news is true I can't go on with this; I must get out of here. I grab my bag and start walking. I have not gone more than a few steps in the direction of the exit when my phone rings. I had forgotten to turn it off as instructed. I am about to do so when I notice the number that has come up – the shop! I press the talk button. The voice is Aminah's. That is unusual. Aminah rarely used phones. She was too distrustful of calls being traced.

'Raziah!' she cried 'I wanted to reach you before you got the news from the web.'

'I have just seen it! What happened? Tell me it isn't true!'

'An ambush. They were on their way home after fending off the enemy. They believed that most of Assad's dogs had been killed or fled. But some must have escaped and concealed themselves in sand hills at the side of the road. Shishani told Iyad that those two held them off while the others escaped. He said they were true shuhada and would have the highest honour in Paradise.'

I don't care what Shishani said, whoever he might be. Nor do a care greatly about honours in Paradise. All I know is that it is true – Samad has gone.

Aminah continues. 'We are devastated and we are so sorry for you, Aziza. You are part of our family and you share our grief. At least we can be comforted that they died as shuhada for the cause and are safe in Paradise. And our people will look after you. There will be someone to meet you. You will have the same honour as a widow of a shahid—'

I cut her off. 'I am not going,' I tell her.

There is silence at the end of the phone. When she speaks again her voice rises a few decibels.

'But you must go! You cannot stay here. And it is your duty to Our State to continue Samad's work to bring about the end times and save the righteous of this world.'

'I am not going,' I tell her again. 'It's over, Aminah. If Samad is not there I have no desire to be there alone.' I almost add, 'I don't care about your State or the End Times,' but I desist. After all, she is grieving, too; I do not want to sound too uncaring.

Aminah's voice is strained and harsh. 'But you can't stay here! You are in danger, you can be traced.'

'Well, I will take a chance. If your ASIO dogs or whatever you call them catch up with me, how much can they do? They might put me in jail for a while, but eventually they will have to let me go. I haven't done anything, gone anywhere. I will try to rebuild my life, to reconnect with my family.'

'But your family have disowned you, they won't help you.'

'No, but my sister might. She has tried to reconcile the family

before. Perhaps I can stay with her for a few days, till I find somewhere to live.'

It occurs to me that perhaps I should not be telling her all this, but I still believe she sees me as family and has my welfare at heart. She probably does but not the way I think.

Aminah's voice is even more shrill and urgent. 'But you can be traced,' she repeats. 'You are in great danger, and anyone who helps you will also be in danger. You took the pledge of allegiance to Our State. We all heard you. Leaving now could be seen as treason. We may not be able to help you.'

The import of her words hit me like a thunderbolt. She is not warning me about the 'dogs', whoever they might be. She is talking about her own people. She is warning me that I might be targeted in some way if I leave. I had heard many tales about would be defectors coming to unfortunate ends, but I never really believed them. Neither did Samad, who told me many times the 'infidels' continuously slander those who fight the just war.

Understanding dawns for the first time. I know now what the Apocalypse narrative really is – a monstrous deception that has brought about the deaths of countless people snared by its false promises. I have no feelings of loyalty to it. But I cannot risk my decision to stay putting the lives of others in danger, as Aminah's threats seem to indicate it might well do. I can argue no further.

The loudspeaker comes to life again.

'Very well, Aminah, I will go. That is the last boarding call for my plane.' Aminah's voice returns to its honeyed tones. 'Oh, you have made the right decision, my dear, may Allah—'

I interrupt her. 'Goodbye, Aminah.'

I cut off the call, and close down my phone. I grab my bag and boarding pass and hurry towards the departure gate. I walk briskly through it and into the void.

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The Last Word anthology is a collection of writing from past and present members of Melbourne Polytechnic. The theme of the anthology is memory, which was chosen by the BWAP Editing Committee in reaction to the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing course coming to a sad end.

Within the contents of *The Last*Word is a wide range of genres,
which include novel excerpt, short
story, flash fiction, memoir, creative
essay, poetry, and song lyrics. Each
of these pieces touch on various
concepts, every one of which is
unique. These talented writers have
been fostered by the university and
have demonstrated incredible
writing skills. *The Last Word*anthology is our gift to you.











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