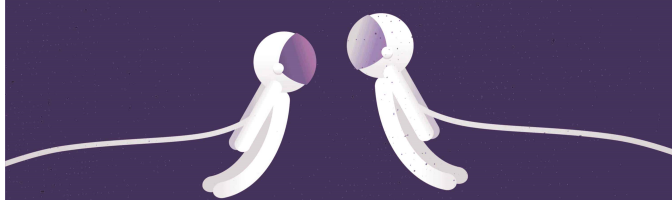


THE  
SPACE  
ACE  
of MANGLEBY  
FLAT BY LARRE  
BILDESTON



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for all the rare birds who thought  
they had to be  
common starlings



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An asexual person does not experience sexual attraction. They are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way. Unlike celibacy, which is a choice to abstain from sexual activity, asexuality is an intrinsic part of who we are, just like other sexual orientations.

— Asexual Visibility and Education Network

\* \* \*

The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.

— Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power"

\* \* \*

Love is a combination of six ingredients: care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust.

— bell hooks

*The stories in this work of fiction are not categorically representative.*



**Part One:**

**SAMMY**



# THE SEARING DARKNESS

MANGLEBY FLAT

WESTERN VICTORIA, WERGAIA COUNTRY

AUSTRALIA

1985

LITTLE SAMMY DENNON OF Mangleby Flat knows for sure he'll be kidnapped one day. At night, with one ear pressed to his pillow, Sam hears the throbbing whoosh of his own pulse, or the terror of footsteps pacing on gravel. The Gravel Man is coming.

Gravel Man will drive a government car, turning off the A8 at Mangleby Road, arriving at the Dennon farmhouse around midnight. He'll boot-crunch his way to the back yard. Flyscreens dislodge easily. Mum's asleep on the couch, and won't have bothered to lock up, as per usual.

Gravel Man will find him tucked up in bed. Those heavy boots pace along wooden floors, headed directly for the front bedroom — the only tidy room of the house — where Sam lies flat to the mattress, hoping to be mistaken for a completely natural lump in the bunched-up fabric of bedclothes.

*Scream all you want, kid. Those cows outside won't help you.*

Gravel Man binds Sam from neck to toe in thick sisal rope.

With Della still snoring in front of the TV, the gaunt but stalwart kidnapper throws Sam over one shoulder then bundles him into the

boot of his long, black car, somehow still shiny despite the dirt roads, despite the lack of moonlight.

Sam tries to kick and thrash and yell to his mum, but he can't.

He has never told Mum this story. Nothing Della could say would help. Also, saying it aloud might bring the kidnapping on for real.

Before school, Sam delivers his mother's instant coffee in bed. "You make sure to cut yourself some lunch," Della warns, "or else that sticky-beak teacher of yours will have the child protection onto me."

If teachers think Della doesn't feed him, Gravel Man will definitely come to take him away. Well, probably not 'Gravel Man'. Probably a middle-aged woman with a broad smile who calls him 'honeybunch' or 'sweetheart' or something. She's unlikely to arrive at night. Social workers prefer day shift. Passing cars are few and far between, but Sam examines unfamiliar vehicles from his window, wondering which make and model would be favoured by kidnappers.

To ward off child protection, Sam assembles not two, not four, but six Vegemite sandwiches for his lunches. At school he eats every last crust of his dry, salty amulets where a duty teacher can bear witness.

Last winter, Sam's classroom teacher noticed Sam tearfully forcing "an unreasonable amount of bread" down his throat. Mrs Kirby also discovered the sheet of aspirins tucked inside his lunch bag. Sam needs aspirins for his headaches. He gets headaches because he needs glasses, and Della Dennon refuses to drive her son all the way in to town for an eye test. Della gets aspirins in bulk to treat her gammy hip, her wonky shoulder and her shonky left wrist. However, kids aren't

meant to cart medications around with them at school. Sam's mother should've known a thing like that, except Della Dennon does not care for rules.

"Those teachers make a song and dance over nothing," Della often says, "and aspirins are good for thinning the blood, actually." She read that once in a Reader's Digest. Sam adds 'thick blood' to a private list of things wrong with himself.

The Area School principal says something to Della on the phone.

To which Della replies, "Well sir, you're not a bloody doctor," because Della gets uppity when speaking to sticky-beaks from the comfort of her own home. "And there's nothing wrong with my boy."

Della's always saying that. Sam assumes she's covering for an essential wrongness deep inside him; something unspoken which emerges despite his best efforts at keeping quiet, fitting in. Somehow, still, he generates fear and disgust in his classmates.

To prove her latest point, regarding Sammy's vision deficiencies, Della sits on the front veranda and asks Sam, fresh off the bus from school, if he can see what she holds in her hand. Even from the distance of the front fence-post, any fool knows from the wrapper that Della dangles a chocolate bar. It's purple. Sam doesn't need to decipher the tiny writing.

"Dairy Milk."

"Nothing wrong with your peepers," Della says. "Oi. Listen. You get first in class again, this big choccie is yours."

Sam tries his hardest at school, because coming anything other than first would mean forcible removal by the Gravel-Man-social-worker, deeming his mother unfit. He continues to squint at the

blackboard, so Mrs Kirby drives Sam to see the optometrist her own self. Sam suspects his mum let Mrs Kirby pay for his new glasses out of her own pocket.

Whoever paid for them, Sam wears the cheapest frames off the rack. He's seen little old men wear the very same ones. This is all right because Sam feels like a little old man on the inside. Now his exterior matches.

Also, these old-man glasses blow his mind. The first night he wore them, he looked up and saw the universe. He'd assumed people speak in metaphor when they talk of stars in the sky. But Sam Dennon is "no numpty". (Della's said that plenty of times.) He does know stars exist. In fact, Sam Dennon could tell you every planet in our solar system in order from the Sun. He can even name most of their moons. He just never realised everyone else could *see* what he only knew to exist. Earth's Moon had occupied all his celestial attention.

"How big's the Moon?" he asked his mother once.

Della squinted with her usual sagacity. "Oh, about as big as a bucket."

As for stars, Sam had only seen those in books. This new, spectacle-corrected darkness is an explosion of glitter and cancels out some of the night-terror, when he worries about leaving Mangleby Flat, kicking and screaming and yelling for his mum.

Della refuses to set foot inside the Area School gate, save for one annual exception: End-of-year prize-giving, a.k.a. Della's Vindication. This year's ceremony is extra special because it is Sam's last. At the end of summer he'll be leaving Mangleby Flat to attend a fancy high school in Melbourne. Those nightmares weren't prophetic after all. He

won't go kicking and screaming. He won't be yelling for his mum. Instead he'll be driven away quietly in a red Ford Falcon sedan. With air-conditioning, no less, and electric windows.

For now, Sam would rather Della wasn't in the prize-giving audience. She's been fanning herself with the program. When his name is called he scurries across the stage. Sam senses Della's eyes on him as he shakes the principal's hand. Mrs Kirby has reminded him to keep his head up and smile. Sam stands awkwardly with his certificate facing outwards until everyone feels they've done the requisite amount of clapping.

"That's my boy," he hears his mum say, because Della has misjudged when the clapping stops. Her embarrassing voice fills the entire assembly hall.

Afterwards, Mrs Kirby gives Sam a hug goodbye. It's strange to see a teacher cry.

Della drives their rusted-up Morris Minor ute too fast along the dirt road, back towards Mangleby, glad to leave "that blasted Area School" in the dusty distance. Sam grips the side of his seat.

Della's still irritated about the aspirin debacle, followed by the glasses debacle, and a few other debacles involving Sammy's so-called neglect. "Stuff em," Della says. "You can be anything you want now, son. Who knows, maybe aspirins are good for brains as well as for thinning the blood. That's why you got that award, maybe."

"Please slow down?"

"Glory be, I'm pleased as punch with that stiff ticket. Don't you bend that, I'm having it framed. First in year six. Now I can breathe a sigh of relief. That flash grammar school will see you right."

Sam isn't sure what his mother means by "relief". Maybe she's glad to be getting rid of him. Maybe he's been a nuisance to her all along.

Della does slow down, but not because Sam asked her to. She's peering into a field. Next she slams on the brakes. "There it is," she says. "A perfectly good bit of corrugated iron. Keep meaning to rescue that."

"We don't need it. It's not ours."

"Well? Get a wriggle on."

Maybe it's because he just won a prize, maybe it's because he's twelve now. For the first time, Sam refuses to do as he's told. Della regards her only son as if he's transmogrified into someone different, a townie who's just done her dirty.

"I'll get it myself," she declares. "Better get used to that."

Outside in the heat, Della struggles to propel herself over the barbed-wire fence.

Sam can't stand it. He drops out of the ute, slips between the wire barbs, wide-steps over hot tussock and drags the larger-than-expected triangle of scrap metal a hundred metres to the ute. Della helps him heft it onto the tray.

Back inside the cab, Sam hopes to return to normalcy after his uncharacteristic refusal to help. "Did you know all iron on Earth was made in a supernova explosion?"

"As I live and breathe. What'll I do without you, clever clogs?"

Sam is forgiven, but Della's words are clipped, her interest in astronomy feigned.

Every day that summer, Sam rides his BMX to a favourite boulder, which resembles a wombat in evening light. He discovered this local beauty inside a fairy ring of black box. He eats many Vegemite sandwiches, but not because anyone is watching his nutritional intake. Sam is always a little bit hungry. He does all the household laundry using one level teaspoon of powder per load, and never once forgets to hang it outside on the line. He reads books the school librarian gave him to keep; “castoffs”, she said, though Sam can’t imagine throwing anything so precious away — books about insects and marsupials, and a world atlas from the 1970s with landforms splayed out as if sliced down the middle, like a small, skinned animal, pink parts exposed to represent the British Empire.

Come mid-December, an exciting item arrives via post. Sam has been waiting for it: His Christmas gift from Uncle Mick and Auntie Jan. Sam places it under a tinsel tree in the living area, which has been up since last Christmas, or maybe the one before that. The tree displays every crappy decoration he’s ever brought home from school.

Every local knows it: Della throws nothing away.

“That’s Della Dennon, her on Mangleby Road.”

A much younger Sam overheard a woman say that to a man at the servo in town. Della had been paying for petrol inside. Sam waited for his mum in the front seat, window cranked down to release the late-summer heat. The woman spoke far too loudly, back when people assumed Sam was too young and too stupid to understand words.

“One of them ‘problem hoarders’, by all accounts,” the woman had said.

The man looked straight at Sam, affronted by the sight of him.

“That the Dennon kid?”

“That’s him. Poor wee soul.”

Sam remains short for his age but not so “wee” any more. He’s still poor, but not all the time. Not at Christmas.

On the Christmas morning of his final Mangleby summer, Sam peeks inside his Santa sock. Della has given him a banana and an orange.

He eats the fruit for breakfast, next to Della on the veranda, who is up unusually early smoking her Christmas cigar. She watches him enjoy his treats.

Every year, Sam has asked for a dog for Christmas. Not a toy one, not a stuffed one. A real dog. He never got his wish. But now he’s leaving anyhow, that was probably for the best.

Della had a medium-sized dog herself, once. By the time Sam was old enough to remember things, the real dog was gone. Well, almost. Della had Bandit taxidermied. Now she stands motionless in Della’s bedroom, guarding the door with plastic blue eyeballs, smooth and cold to the touch. Della’s taxidermied dog is a part of Sam’s home, as inherent to Mangleby Flat as the ochre plains and brilliant sunsets.

Sam is allowed to stroke Della’s dog but he is not allowed to ride it. The dog is “not a rocking horse”. At times he has wedged himself underneath her, stroking the fur on her belly. His finger found a thread once, which led to a criss-cross of stitches which unravelled when pulled.

“Bandit’s got a hole in.”

Sometimes Della flies off the handle for no good reason.

Two winters ago, Della told Sam to answer a terrible knock at the door. It was Mr Gallagher, who farms the surrounding land. Sam recognised his figure from a distance, but here he was up close, darkening their doorway in the middle of a wintry afternoon. He seemed taller up close; skeletal and wrinkled. He wore a long, dark oilskin coat.

“Listen boy, I’ve laid fox traps,” he told Sam, pointing vaguely across the plain with his Grim Reaper forefinger. “Steer clear. Not careful, they’ll sever your foot off, bleed to death.”

Sam put two and two together. The Gravel Man of his nightmares must have been inspired by this man standing before him, speaking of terrible things. Someone must’ve stormed in through this very door, one long-ago night, shotgun cocked. This fellow does seem grumpy about fox traps. He probably hates dogs, too, who murder his poddy lambs. All this time, Sam assumed Gravel Man had come for himself, when he had probably come for his mum’s wayward dog instead.

After eating his Christmas fruit, Sam unwraps the parcel from his aunt and uncle. Della warns him against ripping the paper. It’s got shiny bits, and she’s got ideas for crafting that’ll never eventuate.

The gift is wonderful: A fact-filled Australian Sky Atlas.

Darkness will never be the same.

Apparently the Moon is wide as Australia. Sam learns which stars make the Southern Cross, those spiked orbs on the Australian flag. Each night, for the remainder of Sam’s Mangleby summer, he waits for the chooks to roost. Then he locks them up safe in the coop and

lies on his back in the middle of the empty road. At times he could swear he feels the Earth rotating. This far south of the equator, he lies completely still but also hurtles in a circle, at approximately 1100 kilometres per hour. Not only that, Earth zooms around the Sun at a speed of 940 million kilometres per year. Twelve-year-old Sam has rarely left Mangleby Flat. But by astronomical measurement, he has already travelled so far.

Like a professional astronomer, Sam saved a crinkly wrapper from his auntie's Easter basket last year. He has folded and rubber-banded this red cellophane across the bulb, turning light red, preserving his night-vision. Switching off the flashlight where possible, meaning to preserve batteries, he gazes up at the Magellanic Clouds through his old-man specs, cross-referencing constellations against the almanac. He waits for a shooting star before slamming the book shut, satisfied. Meteors are so frequent, so commonplace, he no longer bothers running to tell Della each time he sees one. He can't understand why his mother doesn't stay up all night to admire the sky with him.

The more he reads about space, the more darkness intrigues him. He learns of mysterious space matter. Though Mangleby Flat feels like a closed system, presently suffocating in its own heat, in fact there is nothing between here and the stars to keep the invisible mystery out. One night that summer he understands a terrifying truth: The universe lives right here, penetrating Earth's invisible atmosphere. Whatever constitutes 'dark matter', he can't escape it.

Sam slams shut his Sky Atlas and scampers back into the house, terrified by his own shadow, and by the elusive darkness following him

all the way into bed.

Though he is now twelve years old, and almost a high schooler, he wakes up in the small hours, screaming and trembling for the first time in ages. He's startled his mother off the couch.

"Do us a favour, darl," Della says from his doorway. "Give them space books a rest, eh? Aliens are giving you nightmares."

Sam has not been reading about aliens. He's read everything he can about space, always *hoping* there will be something about aliens. There never is.

"I'm all right now."

"Worried about high school, I bet. That'll do it."

Della doesn't sleep much at night herself. All summer long, she watches TV and listens to the radio, stirring each day when the sun's at its zenith. Once a fortnight she drives Sam to the general store to pick up necessities. Della instructs Sam to tally prices in his head so she knows what to expect at checkout.

"Don't know what I'll do without you, darl."

Sam has been worrying about this himself. If they lived in town he might've secured himself a summer job. He'd like enough money to buy his mum a pocket calculator.

As summer holidays draw to a close, Della remembers to give Sam the bar of chocolate promised as reward for coming first at school. The chocolate has melted and re-set numerous times. By the time Sam opens the packet, meaning to share half with his mum, it is white-bloomed and gritty and almost too awful to eat.

As Sam makes his way slowly through the chocolate, it seems to him that his last childhood summer might last forever.

The Space Ace of Mangleby Flat

But according to his astronomy books, everything must end.  
Even the entire universe.

Now he really will be taken away.

# TAKEN

END OF JANUARY 1986

Three billion kilometres away, NASA's Voyager 2 approaches the cloudtops of Uranus.

Much closer, on the other side of planet Earth, Space Shuttle Challenger bursts into flame. Sammy commandeers the television, transfixed all morning by the confidence of seven astronauts, suited-up in beautiful sky blue, waving to cameras. All seven astronauts died overnight. Footage of the explosion, and its ominously tentacled contrail, plays again and again. The American disaster hits Sam squarely in the gut. He wanted to be an astronaut. He doesn't anymore. He doesn't even want to leave Mangleby.

"I'm calling it," says Della, who can't be dealing with Sam's quiet tears. "No more news for you. Bury your nose in a storybook while you wait."

Sam retreats to the relative cool of his bedroom but he can't focus on reading. He needs a snapshot of home for his head. Sam's window looks out onto a gothic oil painting of ochre plains, gum trees, and one tapering dirt road.

A shimmering road-cloud in the middle distance reminds him of the shuttle explosion. But this is just a sedan. The contrail is plain old bulldust.

Sam's most precious toy has been keeping him company. "Is that them, Ragdog?"

Ragdog nods, aided by Sam's finger at the scruff of her flannel neck. She has lost her stuffing and these days folds like a hanky with a head on. Sam rubs a gentle circle onto the glass. He feels bad about it, but sometimes Ragdog comes in handy like that.

The cloud of dust draws nearer still.

"Sammy!" That's Della, hollering from the kitchen. "You want a baked bean jaffle, darl?"

Baked beans, of all things. His stomach is churning. Since he started wearing glasses he no longer suffers from headaches, but his stomach still pains him whenever he's nervous. He's about to spend five hours in the car with his uncle and auntie, who he's not on farting terms with, yet.

"No beans! They're almost here!"

Sam wishes his heart wouldn't pound like the devil. Now Sam can make out the shapes of two passengers — the shadow cast by Uncle Mick's cap, and Auntie Jan's curly blonde up-do that looks like a wig but isn't.

The red sedan stops in the front yard. Sam's body tenses as his uncle wrenches the handbrake outside. Sam slides to the floor, invisible. Car doors open then shut.

Ragdog drops her gruff little voice to a whisper. "Wanna hide under the bed?"

But Della startles them, this time from the proximity of Sam's bedroom doorway.

"Well? What you want in your jaffle? If you won't eat beans it's

cheesy or plain. You gotta eat, darl. I'm not sending you off to make your fortune with a gaping great hole in your gut. That Jan'll complain I don't feed you."

"They just got out of their car."

"Oh, well. Go on then. Haul yourself outside, say your giddays."

Sam folds Ragdog in half then tucks her into the waistband of his shorts.

Auntie Jan also carries a dog around with her. Quivering Ossie has come for the round trip. Ossie is a Chihuahua, named after the Ostrich on *Hey Hey It's Saturday*. Even on this fan-oven January afternoon, nestled safely under the crook of Auntie Jan's arm, Ossie quivers and shivers.

"Sammy!" Auntie Jan flings out her Chihuahua-free arm, threatening an awkward embrace. "You're still the cutest little guy!"

"Give him a break, love. We only saw the man a few months back." Uncle Mick knows not to bother Sam with hugs, so busies himself by the car, stretching a crick in his neck.

Auntie Jan hasn't finished admiring her nephew. "Sammy, I swear, you look more like Cary Grant each time I see you."

Uncle Mick lowers his voice. "Call him 'Sam', love. For crying out loud, kid's starting high school next week."

Della emerges from the house. She makes her way off the veranda, careful on the wooden step. She tugs at the waist of her dress like she always does around company. Her hip is playing up again.

"Your boy's turning into a stunner, Della," says Jan.

"Janice. Michael. Didn't think you'd make it in time for a hot lunch, but here we all are. I'm about to stick some jaffles in the wotsit."

“We won’t put you to any trouble, Della love. It’s a long drive both ways in a day, isn’t it Mick?”

“You could always stay overnight,” says Della. “Weren’t waiting for a formal invite, were you? The place is half Mick’s.”

“Like I keep saying, this old place is all yours, sis.”

Della and Mick give each other a back-slappy kind of side-hug. Then Uncle Mick extends a hairy hand in Sam’s direction. This is new. Sam shakes it.

“Come on in, out of this terrible heat,” says Della. “She’s not much cooler inside, but.”

“We won’t stop, Della. We’re very spoilt. The new Ford’s fitted with air conditioning. Motor’s still running, so...”

“Can’t stand them cold air machines myself. They spread germs.”

“We’ll keep our distance!” Auntie Jan gives a humourless laugh.

“The boy hasn’t had his lunch yet,” Della tells them.

“I’m not hungry.” This isn’t true, but Sam’s stomach churns with anxiety as much as it rumbles with hunger. And if he ate, it’d only churn worse.

“We’ll feed him up good, Della. I’ve packed him a picnic to eat in the car.” Then Jan whispers to Sam: “I made your favourite lemon poppyseed cake, to celebrate this big day.”

Sam nods.

Sam would like to give Quivering Ossie a pat, but Ossie glares back with black and bulgy eyes. Sam’s got Ragdog stuffed secretly into the waistband of his shorts, so he strokes his baby-toy with one finger instead.

“Where’s your suitcase, Sam-boy?” Uncle Mick is in a hurry.

“It’s heavy as all get out,” Della replies. “He’s packed all his worldly possessions.”

“Oh, he won’t need much.” Auntie Jan shows off to Della about how you can get a hold of anything at all in Melbourne. “We’ll look after the scholar, don’t you worry.”

“He likes to have his own things though, Janice.”

“Like mother, like son.” Uncle Mick rubs his palms together as if preparing for some hazardous mission. “Lead me to the goods, young man. I’ll heft your treasures out to the car for you.”

As soon as he steps inside, Uncle Mick whistles through his teeth. “Nothing changes in here, does it, eh?”

In Sam’s opinion lots has changed. The piles have grown taller.

“Is there a carton of rotten cabbages somewhere, do you reckon?”

Sam shrugs. “There might be.”

“Never mind. A waft won’t kill us. Lead me to this suitcase of yours. Safest route, please.”

Sam always closes the door to his own bedroom. Now he opens it to let Uncle Mick admire the Habitable Zone from the doorway.

Every morning, Sam smooths out his bedspread. He keeps his dresser-top clear, closes all his drawers, sweeps his floor and maintains a bug-free windowsill.

“Credit where credit’s due,” says his uncle. “Della’s raised an immaculate kid. Hey, have you packed your LEGO sets?”

“Yes.”

“And your Rubik’s cube?”

“Yes.”

Uncle Mick knows all about Sam’s favourite things because they

have all been chosen and wrapped by Auntie Jan, who loves to buy expensive gifts for Sam's birthdays and Christmases.

"What's this over here? Have you made yourself a doll house?"

"There's no dolls."

Uncle Mick is referring to Sam's model home, mostly made of cardboard. Sam had been hoping his uncle would admire it, and all the work he'd put in. The stainless steel benches are covered in carefully smoothed-out chocolate bar foil. He has also managed to separate the corrugated layer from cardboard boxes to glue onto the exterior of the model. This emulates weatherboard. No one has seen this beauty except Della, who thinks it's fantastic, but then Della's opinion doesn't count. Della says everything Sam does is fantastic. Then she returns to her bowl of instant noodles and her episode of *Flying Doctors*.

Like Della, Uncle Mick turns quickly away from Sam's model house. Perhaps he thinks his nephew has constructed a doll house, and doll houses are for girls.

"What about your Sky Atlas? Did you get some use out of that?" Mick asks.

"It's in my bag."

"Goodo. Just quietly, there's something special waiting for you in Melbourne. I'll give you a clue: You can admire stars through them."

Sam doesn't want to guess, for fear of sounding presumptuous.

"Binoculars! Jan asked you which ones are good. Didn't you catch on?"

"The 10x50s?" Sam learned about binoculars for amateur astronomers in a book borrowed from the Area School library.

"You'll get to see Halley's Comet through them."

Sam's heart leaps.

"Hey. You deserve nice things." Uncle Mick pats Sam between the shoulder blades. "A little birdie tells me you aced year six. We're all very proud of you, kiddo."

Warmth blooms across Sam's chest.

"Now, say a proper goodbye to this room. Take it from me, once you've been away for a spell Mangleby Flat'll never feel quite the same."

Sam already knows his mum will be repurposing this bedroom. She can't help how she is. Her things will creep in, eventually lining his walls. Sam will have to shift Della's things before he can sleep in this bed again.

"Tell me, does this carry bag hold together?"

"So far."

"Good. Meanwhile, you do me a favour." Uncle Mick reaches into the back pocket of his Stubbies and retrieves a brown envelope, even thicker than usual. "Put this somewhere she'll definitely find it."

Sam knows what it is. He's done the brown envelope thing before, at the end of Mick's visits.

"You don't have to worry about your mum, Sam-boy. Even from Melbourne, we're all looking out for Della."

Three minutes later the envelope of cash rests on Della's pillow, guarded by the taxidermied pet. Sam's bag is locked inside the boot. He waits for an invitation into the back seat. Apart from the fresh country dusting, this car looks like a showroom model, too nice to plonk his bum in.

Once he's seated and belted up, Della knocks on the window.

Sam can't look at her.

"Hoo roo then, my lovely big boy," she says loudly through the glass. "Got everything you need?"

This feels different. Della never uses words like 'lovely'. Suddenly the air feels prickly cool.

Has he forgotten anything?

Then Sam knows who his mum is talking about. He checks the waistband of his shorts. He does have Ragdog, and with Ragdog nearby he'll be okay.

"Naw, aren't you gonna give your poor old mum a kiss goodbye?" chides Auntie Jan, sitting in front.

Sam looks down at his knees. Della doesn't need that sort of carry on, and nor does he. As Uncle Mick sometimes says, like mother, like son.

"Don't be stingy, Sam!" Auntie Jan swivels in her seat and tries to swat his leg.

Uncle Mick gets into the car and adjusts a knob on the dashboard. "Leave him alone, love. High school boys are like that with their mothers. It's natural."

"At least bloody wave, Sam. Bye, Della! You'll come and visit us, won't you! Plenty of room in Surrey Hills!"

Uncle Mick backs slowly out from behind Della's ute, and into the dirt road out front.

Sam doesn't want to look back at his mum. He knows she'll be smiling but with sad eyes, and he can't be dealing with that right now.

"Mind out for that chook!" Auntie Jan cautions.

Uncle Mick plants his foot on the brake, but not just to avoid the

chicken. He's looking in the rear view mirror at Della.

Auntie Jan gives running commentary. "Oop, seems you've forgotten something, Sammy. Your mum's waving for us to wait. Is that what she's doing, Mick?"

"Alls I know is, she's heading back into the house."

"What's she up to in there? Mick?"

Sam is embarrassed for his mother. They've already said their goodbyes and now they'll all have to do it again. Everything takes so long with Della, who has hobbled back up the steps and struggled to dislodge the flyscreen door.

"I wish she'd get that hip seen to. Does it give her much bother, Sammy? Seems even worse this time."

"Leave it, love. We all know how she is about cities and doctors and 'sticky-beaks'."

Then the three of them wait in silence, except for the sound of the motor and a low, cold hiss of air.

Mum'll be sidling up the hallway right now, past the cardboard boxes bursting with newspapers and pamphlets. She'll be stepping over the pile of carpet shapes they rescued from landfill. She'll straddle the triangle of corrugated iron, hurrying and scurrying as fast as she can, searching through jars and pots on the shelf, or hauling bits and pieces out of a cupboard. She'll be "back in a tick" with something for Sam. Whatever it is, he is dreading the shame of receiving it.

Here she is, returned at last, loping towards the Ford Falcon, elbow pumping. Her other hand holds something high.

Uncle Mick buzzes Sam's window down using a button in front. The glass disappears to leave no barrier between Sam and the

hippopotamus in Della's hand. It's a small pottery hippo, or maybe a rhino, with a goofy grin and protruding big teeth. Normal people have piggy banks but Della has an ugly hippo. It's heavy with coins.

"Take this." She passes the hippo to Sam through the open window. "Have a treat."

"Oh, Della. For goodness' sake, he won't be needing that!"

"Just a treat," Della repeats. "Get yourself something nice in the big smoke, you hear?"

"Thanks, Mum."

Sam knows exactly how much money is inside the hippo. He's taken the rubber stopper out of the bottom and counted these coins many times. Most of the weight comes from one and two cent pieces. He likes to tip them out, stack them, add them up, then slot them all back in. The hippo contains \$11.83, not enough to buy his mum a pocket calculator.

At last the Ford Falcon is off.

Sam's eyes water a bit. But he cries in front of no one these days. The last time he cried in public was when he wet his pants on the slippery dip. That was his first day of kindergarten. He will definitely not cry now, not sharing a car with Auntie Jan and Uncle Mick.

Instead he blinks hard and dislodges Ragdog from his waistband. He wipes her missing eyes with one finger.

Sam doesn't need to look back for his mum. He knows she'll be growing smaller in the distance. She'll be waving from the middle of the road, both arms big, like someone stuck on an island, attracting the search and rescue.

**Part Two: SAM  
AND REINA**



# **DARK & MYSTERIOUS**

**28 YEARS LATER**

**ACROSS THE TASMAN SEA**

**TE WHANGANUI-A-TARA, AOTEAROA**

**(WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND)**

**EARLY NOVEMBER 2014**

Sam Dennon is about to turn forty-one. His dark hair is flecked with gray. He recently purchased a tiny electric razor for trimming ear and nasal hair. He wonders about the evolutionary reason for middle-aged ear and nasal hair each time he uses it. He takes glucosamine for his jogger's knees, but he's not convinced it does a single thing. He wears fashionable specs. People refer to him as "the guy over there, with the glasses".

"A little too arty," Sam said when Lisa made him try the frames on in the shop.

"Like an arty farty architect," Lisa confirmed.

On this particular Thursday afternoon, Sam and Lisa are in their carefully designed office kitchen. Willis & Dennon Architects are preparing to interview another candidate to replace their office manager. Trusty Pam, who has been with the small practice since Sam and Lisa opened their city office seven years ago, is about to leave

them. She'll be retiring from Wellington down to Nelson.

Interviewees must traipse past the kitchen on their way to the conference room. Except when it's messy, this kitchen is a work of art. The curve of the counter-top makes for a talking point. Sam is actually sick of talking about the unusual granite. He's also sick of policing the cleaning spray. He regrets the granite.

Sam stands as if framed in front of the floor-to-ceiling tinted window. The window offers a view down to the inner city street, to a café and gym across the road, then skyward, beyond the taller office blocks and up further to a tower of cumulonimbus. For reasons unrelated to the impending storm, Sam's a little jumpy. Anyone watching Sam sip silently from his herbal tea would never guess his roiling excitement. He stands with his head down, elbows tucked in. He never slurps. He's got a thing about mouth and throat noises.

"Don't forget," Sam says after swallowing, "the new Pam must like office dogs."

"Ah, yes. What time do you pick up your new pup, by the way?" Lisa is on a cleaning bender and wipes out the microwave.

"Any time after seven, guy said."

"Seven this evening? Is this a private sale?"

"A family in Johnsonville."

"I always thought that when you finally got yourself a dog, you'd be rescuing a three-legged mutt from the shelter."

"See? I can still surprise you."

Something Lisa doesn't know: Sam has made numerous visits to the shelter in search of a rescue dog. But he stopped foisting himself on busy staff once they learned his face. Dog shelters probably have a

phrase to describe visitors like Sam: Serial Pet Patters or some such. But really, since he couldn't take all the dogs, he couldn't take any. The shelter hurts his heart.

"So why is this Johnsonville crowd getting rid of a poodle cross?" Lisa asks, newly suspicious. "Doesn't yap, I hope?"

"She's a carefully-bred one-year-old who belonged to an elderly lady. The lady died."

"Oh. Shit."

"Apparently this pup is super chill and beautifully trained."

"Apparently? I thought it was a done deal. Have you not met this dog in person?"

"Hey, Lise? I'll choose my own dog."

Lisa's face softens. "Sometimes I forget, Sammy."

"You said to remind you."

"This is me, officially butting out of your private life. Let me just say this. Speaking as your business partner, not as your ex-wife, I insist you take next week entirely off. Don't crack open your laptop. Not even for a quick looksee. You're on paternity leave, remember? The dog equivalent."

"Might leave you to it," Sam says. "Pop over to the South Coast build before this compulsory week off."

"Oh, no you won't," Lisa says, grunting with the exertion of wiping. "The new Pam won't live up to your expectations. I'm not shouldering the blame. That's why you're conducting these interviews with me. Also, candidates deserve to know who they'll be working for."

"What does that mean?"

“It means what it means. How does an oven get like this?” Lisa’s jewellery jangles as she wipes. She still wears the bracelets and necklaces Sam gave her over the years. He expected these gifts to gradually disappear from her body, replaced by new items, chosen by Graham. She’s added some new pieces lately, but not as replacements; Lisa’s new jewels complement long-ago gifts from Sam.

With the jangle of jewellery as soundtrack, Sam enjoys the rare spectacle of Lisa trying to clean, though her commentary is somewhat unsettling. “You’re not the easiest person to work for,” she says into the open microwave, which illuminates her face. Especially with that signature block of red aglow in her black hair, the microwave light lends Lisa a witchy, soothsayer look.

“How am I not easy to work with?” Sam craves Lisa’s feedback. Always has.

“Why can’t people use the splatter guard? Fuck sake.”

“Lise? How? How am I not easy to work with?”

Maybe Sam is a masochist. That’d explain a lot. He’s wearing a necktie for interviewing purposes because the shirt and tie came in a matching ensemble, even though the tightness around his neck never lets him forget he’s wearing a noose. One loafer pinches his left pinky toe, but he’d rather wear them out than cast otherwise decent footwear into the bin or attempt a refund at the store. After all, one of the loafers is perfectly good.

“Eh? Well, you’re a challenging boss for precious-petal types. You don’t convey what you want. You don’t seem to know your own mind, until you’ve had time and space to reflect.”

“A damning assessment, as usual.”

“Don’t overthink it. A white man in his prime can get away with brusque. People find you dark and mysterious.”

“Which people?”

“Just... people.”

Lisa places the grimed-up cloth gently onto the counter, modelling the delicacy she says she wants from Sam. “The new Pam requires emotional maturity. Aside from computer skills, yadda yadda.”

“Whereas you, on the other hand, are the perfect boss.”

“Can’t be faulted. Calm, efficient, clean and tidy. Never accidentally deletes something, never complains, and is never, ever foul-mouthed.”

“Sounds like you don’t require the returned favour of a performance review this afternoon, Lise.”

“Not while I’m cleaning, hey? Gah. Let’s get a new one. This crud is fully baked on.”

“Zap a quarter cup of white vinegar for four minutes. Vinegar lives under the sink.”

“Oh okay, green boy. Fine. Someone’s phone keeps buzzing. Is that coming from you, Sammy?”

Sam reflexively palms his pocket. “Oh, that’ll be no one.” He should’ve turned his phone off. The incoming calls are from a dickhead in Melbourne who goes by the unlikely name of ‘Rolex’.

Then again, it might not be Rolex. Better check.

Shit a brick, this time it’s Pete the foreman, who’ll require another urgent carpentry clarification. Ping. And now Pete’s left a voice message.

“I really can’t do this interview with you, Lise. Gotta check the South Coast build.”

“With this oncoming storm, though? Is that the building crew calling you?”

Sam nods. “I’d better make a move.”

“Fine. Though sometimes I think you enjoy the sensory pleasure of being soaked, cold and wind-whipped. Just don’t be a lightning rod, you hear?”

Sam loosens his tie and slips it off.

Proving Lisa right, a flash of lightning illuminates the office kitchen. Sam braces for the rumble of thunder.

“Woo-hoo,” shouts Brad in that predictably annoying voice of his, from his desk on the farthest edge of the office, where Sam thoughtfully positioned it.

Lisa yells back: “This kitchen mess better not be yours, Bradley! We’re conducting more interviews this afternoon, you know!” She turns to Sam. “And when I say ‘we’, guess it’s just ‘me’.”

Sam places his mug in the top rack of the dishwasher, adjusting someone else’s poorly positioned attempt at stacking. He can’t let it be, though he would very much like to avoid crossing paths with this afternoon’s short-listed candidate, due any moment. He doesn’t enjoy vacuous small-talk.

He doesn’t quite manage a clean escape. On his way out the front entrance, he is plunging his left arm into the sleeve of a Gore-Tex jacket when a tall blonde woman, dressed to the nines for her interview, steps aside to let Sam pass.

Sam nods by way of a thank-you and continues on his way.

“Sam?”

Now he must stop and say hello to the candidate. She'll have learned his name and face from the company website. Good sign. She's done her homework.

“It is Sam, isn't it?” the woman says with a theatrical grimace.

“Afternoon.” And now that he's had to stop, it'd be rude not to shake her hand. Sam is never sure whether to extend his hand to a woman. Women don't seem to feel the urge to constantly swap skin bacteria with each other. But in the workplace, if he's going to treat everyone equally, he needs to shake everyone's hand, or else no one's.

The woman shakes back without hesitation. She really is very tall. Her hand is large and warm, and a little clammy. Probably from nerves. Sam would like to push off now. But he can't, because she hasn't finished with him.

“I look a little different outside tennis,” she says.

Sam is drawing a blank.

“I'm Reina,” she says. “We've played a few times.”

Sam does know a Reiner from the tennis club, but this isn't him.

“It's Reina with an 'a' now. She, her pronouns.”

“Ah.” Sam can't think of an appropriate response.

Reina waits for more with widened eyes.

“Congratulations. That's... great.”

Oh, god. Congratulations. That probably sounded facetious. Sam is not a sarcastic person, but sometimes people assume caustic irony where honesty was always the intention.

Now Sam limns the familiar tennis acquaintance behind her carefully contoured make-up. He also recognises the soft voice and the

British accent — and that warm, clammy handshake — previously experienced from the other side of a tennis net. Sam had misread Reina as a flamboyantly confident gay man with a penchant for purple shirts, man-buns, hoop earrings and rainbow shoelaces.

“Well, you know, everyone looks different outside tennis.” Sam sometimes runs into tennis club people, each en route to their city jobs, not in t-shirts and sunglasses and hat hair, but in dry-cleaned suits and fresh, ironed shirts.

Mercifully, Reina changes the subject. “You work in this building?”

“I do, yes.”

“Small world. I’m here for a job interview.”

“Good, good. And I’m hoping to beat this storm. I’ll leave you to it. Up the stairs and to the left.”

Sam strides along the footpath, towards the parking building.

He can’t understand it. Then again, Sam doesn’t pretend to understand what makes people tick. Everyone is someone else’s unfathomable mystery. And Sam himself is hardly exempt from that.

The drive to the South Coast building site would be short and meditative, except for intermittent phone buzzing which interrupts his classical music.

Sam has been driving the same Toyota Corolla since immigrating to New Zealand thirteen years ago. Lisa bought herself a Benz last year and keeps singing its praises, but Sam’s old wagon feels like an extension of himself. He appreciates its tight turning circle. He parks with ease on a patch of dirt near the choppy sea. His steel-capped

boots are within easy reach, on the back seat. Sam knows how to bend himself around the steering wheel when changing out of loafers.

He cranes his neck to check activity on a precipice stretching into the rain clouds, where framing is starting to take shape. The project owners came to Willis & Dennon looking for a highly-engineered build.

“This’ll be our next award winner,” Lisa had observed when she first clapped eyes on the unlikely jut of rock.

Tradies scurry around up there, fluorescing like glow-worms under the darkening sky.

Sam shoulders his equipment bag. He takes long, careful strides up the access track.

Pete is glad to see him. He hasn’t got time before the storm to interrogate Sam over four ignored calls. Rain is minutes away. He seeks clarification regarding plans for the sea-facing cubic windows. Where budget allows, non-standard windows are a Sam Dennon trademark, and a massive nuisance for everyone involved in the execution.

Hoping to make amends for being off-radar, Sam pitches in with the strapping down of poly sheeting. Then the rain properly sets in. Everyone clears off. Wind whips up and blows the rain sideways.

It feels good to get back into his car, though there’s something wrong with the heater. Needs fixing.

On touch, his phone lights up with notification of another call from Melbourne. These frequent calls from Rolex are messing with his head. Until a year ago, all calls from Melbourne were from his Uncle Mick. After today, thanks to Rolex, World’s Most Irritating Real Estate Agent, Uncle Mick’s house will belong to strangers.

Sam takes a deep breath, then calls Rolex back.

The guy sounds aggrieved. “Where’ve you been, mate?” Breezing past Sam’s reticence, he soon switches gears, explaining to Sam his latest wheeling and dealing.

“Sounds fine,” Sam says after listening carefully.

“Fine?” Rolex is incredulous.

Sam hadn’t “forgotten” about the auction. He’s done with the whole thing, is all. This is the eleventh house sale inside a year. He’s keeping his mind busy today, fixating on grimy microwaves and dogs and window framing.

“Mate. How good does that feel?” Rolex hams up the ocker for manipulative, camaraderie purposes, or maybe he always sounds like this. Sam wouldn’t know.

“How good does what feel?” Sam’s words, in contrast, are clipped.

Sam knows exactly what the guy’s asking. How good does it feel to be sole heir to eleven central Melbourne properties? How good does it feel to sell those freehold properties in an overheated market, to feel the weight of those extra digits decorating your bank balance?

Due to this stochastic lottery of life, Sam’s uncle and auntie made a motza by starting on the equity growth route in the mid-1970s. And now, for no reason, Sam is ridiculously, unfathomably, stinking bloody rich all of a sudden.

“I’d rather have my aunt and uncle alive,” Sam says into the phone. “That’s how it feels. Mate.”

Rolex tones down his excitement. “I just got you three-seven-seven above reserve. Sam, my man, not sure you fully realise, this is crack-out-the-bubbly type stuff.”

“Yep. We done here? I know the drill. You send the paperwork, I’ll volley it back.”

Rolex gives Sam a final serve: “I wouldn’t have sold those properties, mate. Shoulda kept them as investments.”

Sam ends the call. His limbs are floppy. That’s Uncle Mick and Auntie Jan’s place gone now, forever. He’ll never see the inside of their Surrey Hills home again. He imagines driving slowly past in a rental car during a nostalgic trip back to Melbourne, only to feel deep disappointment at whatever the hell new owners will have done to Jan’s beloved front garden.

Sam’s phone rings again.

“Oh, what now,” he mutters.

But it’s Lisa.

“Are you still making one of your famous cakes for tomorrow’s send-off?” she asks, “because if you’re tied up with dog business this evening I’d better hurry up and order one in.”

“All in hand, Lise.”

“Phew. Hey, how’s everything over there?”

“Framing looks great. And how was the interview?”

“Interesting. Apparently you two know each other.”

“I’ve seen her round at tennis, is all.”

“I figure you would’ve mentioned if you knew someone like that.”

“Someone like what?”

“Well, she’s an engaging raconteur, for starters. We only just finished up. I recognised her myself, actually, from Wednesday aerobics. That’s Wellington for you. Everyone knows everyone’s dog’s monkey’s uncle round here.”

Three more hours before Sam can meet his very own dog. He could do anything he wants with his evening in town. Again it hits him: He really could do anything.

He should upgrade his car. Out with the old, in with the new. Sam is rarely in a purging frame of mind so he must ride this wavelet of regeneration while it lasts. He stops in at the car dealership and swaps his Corolla for a Lexus. The car dealer isn't called Rolex, but a similar name would fit.

He drives the Lexus to buy groceries. Inside, the supermarket is busy, typical of a late Thursday afternoon. Everyone seems unnaturally buoyed. It's probably that storm.

Chocolate fingers and wafers are required to finish decorating Pam's send-off cake. He detours through the pet aisle and selects a few extra dog treats.

He'll select ingredients for a simple dinner and eat in peace at his desk. Ravioli. That's what he wants. In front of the chilled shelves, he is startled once more by someone who knows his name.

"I'm not actually stalking you." It's Reina, again. "I had no idea you were the 'Dennon' of Willis & Dennon."

"Oh. Why would you?"

"Just wanted to say, I'm not expecting to get the job. My love of home and garden TV is hardly qualification for office manager at an architectural firm."

As usual, Sam draws a blank when faced with an abrupt change in situation. He was about to reach for fresh pasta; now he must turn his attention to small talk. For the second time with Reina that day, he must think of something to say, then coax the words out of his mouth.

“Mm-hm.”

“So don’t feel awkward at tennis when I don’t get the job.”

“No, of course. My wife’s in charge of the hiring anyway.”

“Ah. So Lisa’s your wife.”

“Ex-wife.” He should get used to that.

“Lisa’s lovely, even though I was embarrassingly ill-prepared for that interview. And I would never have applied if I knew it was your company. I’m a little mortified.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Hey, are you down for the club tournament?” Reina asks, though Sam is wanting to scarper.

Sure, Sam can chat for a moment. “I haven’t set foot on a tennis court in weeks. Would probably tear a tendon. I’ve been down in Christchurch, opening a new office.”

“Exciting!”

“Not really.”

“Oh no, does that mean you’re moving down there?”

“The opposite. I mean to spend more time at home. Unless Christchurch endures another major earthquake.”

“Gotcha. Touch wood. Hey, come for a gentle hit. I live near the courts. I’m, ah, between jobs. So if you want to get your eye in, sing out.”

“Sure thing.” Sam doubts Reina would give him a ‘gentle hit’. She’s one of the best in the club. Also, they’ve never exchanged phone numbers. People sometimes say nice things and don’t mean them at all. If Reina still dressed like a man he might ask to swap contact details, but he isn’t about to press a lady for them.

Fortunately Reina offers to ping him. They each pull out their phones.

A woman with a toddler in the trolley seat approaches in a frustrated hurry. She barrels along, pausing behind Reina, requiring access to the chilled shelves.

“Excuse me, sir.” She draws out the final word. Sam looks up to see the woman’s eyes, travelling the length of Reina’s body, taking in her earrings, her long skirt, calling her ‘sir’ regardless.

“Sorry.” Reina reflexively steps out of the mother’s way.

In a coordinated dance, Sam also moves towards the centre of the aisle.

But the mother does not want anything from the chilled section at all. She wants to make a point. So she rams her heavy trolley between Reina and the chilled shelves. The trolley bumps Reina’s thigh as she storms through. Reina gathers her skirt to keep it from catching. That bump will leave a bruise.

Once past, the mother casts a glare back at them both. A glance can wallop you in the gut. Sam has felt this before, though not since leaving Mangleby.

The woman with the toddler has rendered them both silent. Job done, she disappears.

Sam searches for something to say, for something reassuring and kind. But it will probably come out as ‘brusque’. Also, he does not want to extend this awful moment by commenting on it. If he pretends it never happened the nastiness might evaporate, leaving no memory at all. So he searches for something unrelated, something normal and neutral, to remind Reina that the opinion of some random

stranger doesn't matter, doesn't matter at all, so who the hell cares about her.

“Hey, I'm getting a new dog.” Once out of his mouth, the announcement sounds bizarrely childlike.

Reina smiles, but wanly. “Sorry. It's the little kid in her trolley, you know? Watching. Listening.” When she looks up from her basket she fixes her gaze above Sam's head, perhaps to keep tears from spilling. But then she wipes her eyes with her fingers, not even pretending that didn't hurt bad. “Wonderful news about the dog,” she manages, barely audible above an unintelligible announcement on the PA.

Sam hears rain, beating hard on the supermarket roof. “Need a ride anywhere?” he asks.

Sam and Reina each finish their grocery shopping, make their way separately through the self-serve checkouts, then reunite on the other side. They dash across the road together, towards Sam's parking building. When they reach his spot, for one awful moment Sam thinks his Toyota Corolla has been stolen. Then he remembers the Lexus is his.

“New car?”

“Fairly new, yes.”

Reina wasn't exaggerating when she told Sam she lives near the tennis courts. She lives across the road. Sam is careful not to scratch his alloy rims, stopping next to the curb.

Reina's house is one of those large, draughty weatherboard numbers, popular with investors for generating a high rental income. In Sam's opinion, they all need tearing down. He fantasises frequently

about this part of town. In his head, he waves a wand and replaces central Wellington's most dilapidated housing stock with well-insulated, double-glazed, three-storey apartment blocks. Everybody's cosy. No draughts, no mould.

Reina's place makes him cough and shiver to look at it. She thanks him for the ride, but still sounds sad. Sam's offer of a ride home has failed to cancel out supermarket-woman.

Three young adults walk towards Sam's car, ambling along the footpath, sharing a joke. One has blue hair, another has long, rainbow-coloured locks. The third is dressed entirely in black. Reina waves. They tentatively wave back.

"My beautiful young housemates," she tells Sam.

"Wellington born and bred? They don't seem bothered by weather."

"Ha. The young do not believe in jackets."

"Oh, jackets exist. I've seen em."

Reina laughs. Such a satisfying laugh it is, too.

"I'd better go inside," she says, "put the tea on, reveal how I scored a lift home from my job interview in the boss's Lexus."

Sam feels like wincing. He has made a bad purchase. This vehicle is ostentatious, and not like him at all. "Just a thought," he says, changing the topic. "There's a tennis court at my new house. It hasn't had any use yet, so perhaps you'd come round, have a hit. Help me self-justify the outlay."

God, this is worse. He sounds awful. So far he's mentioned his new dog, his new Christchurch branch of Willis & Dennon, his new house, his new car, and now his new tennis court.

“I’d love that,” Reina says.

“Could you make it to Upper Hutt? Say, tomorrow afternoon?” If this is happening, Sam would like to get it out of the way. But now he sounds a little too keen. “Or next week, even? I have a whole week off.” Oh, and now he’s inadvertently showing off about how he doesn’t even need to work for his money.

Reina hesitates. “Do you need to run this past anyone first?”

“Sorry?”

“Your family? A partner...?”

“Oh. No, Lisa has her own place here in town. It’s just me out there. And soon my dog, of course. This rain may endure but you’re welcome to come for dinner regardless.”

Sam has surprised himself, babbling on like this. He’s not good at invitations. He wouldn’t want to put someone on the spot, make them struggle for a plausible excuse to turn him down. Social stuff is Lisa’s domain. But now, in this awkward attempt to shift the emotional valence after an unpleasant moment, Sam’s dinner invitation has taken on a life of its own. He meant to suggest a casual game of tennis. Next it morphed into a meal.

“You’re on,” Reina says. “Tomorrow it is.”

Just like that, he’s done it: Renowned hermit, Sam Dennon, is hosting some kind of dinner party.

Night is setting in when Sam gets back to the office. The wet streets sparkle, reflecting lamps and headlights. Cars and buses swoosh past as he enters the mostly dark building.

Upstairs, over the noise of the back-pack vacuum cleaner, Sam

waves a quick hello to Tom, hoovering the treads. Sam has fantasised lately about dropping everything and working as a contract cleaner. He enjoys the sound of grit as it travels up a pipe.

While ravioli bubbles on the stove, Sam cleans the microwave to his own satisfaction. He returns to Tom in the foyer, who switches off the vacuum cleaner.

“There’s stuffed little pasta things, if you’re interested. Beef and tomato. Sorry to interrupt.”

He takes his own portion to his office, shuts himself inside and puts on noise cancelling headphones. The desktop screensaver flicks to an infrared image of the Milky Way, throwing a warm, lambent glow across the room.

He eats and wonders what he’s just done. He’s invited a stranger for dinner.

To Lisa’s chagrin, he hasn’t even invited the office staff round for a house-warming party. Once the concreting outfit was done with the driveway, Sam breathed a sigh of relief. Now the house was entirely his own. Aside from the odd delivery and visits from the meter reader, no one needs bother him out there. And he had meant to keep it that way.

Sam doubts he has much in common with Reina apart from tennis, and he’s the host, so he’ll have to think of topics to fill any awkward gaps. He checks the weather app on his phone. As he suspected. Enduring showers. They won’t be playing tennis.

Awkward silences are not his main concern. He’s not sure what Reina’s expecting. Would grown adults who don’t know each other well expect more than food when invited home to ‘dinner’, when the weather forecast clearly says rain for a week? Sam meant dinner in its

most literal sense, but is that what most people hear? If only Reina were a bloke. Sam would fry up some onions, throw a six pack of snags on the barbie, assemble sangas, bung them onto a paper plate. He'd crack open some beers. They'd sit splay-legged on deckchairs and swig out of bottles.

However, Sam doesn't want to do anything that might suggest to Reina that Sam still thinks she's a bloke. Added to that, Sam barely qualifies as a 'bloke' himself. He's never called sandwiches 'sangas', not once in his life. He never volunteers to take charge of BBQ meats. And if he ever drinks beer, he prefers it out of a pilsner glass.

God. Has Sam inadvertently set himself up on a date? The possibility makes his heart race. Not a heart event, he reminds himself. Just his body, doing its thing. Reina can easily whip Sam at tennis, and would beat him in a sprint. Sam has noticed Reina's biceps, bulging from under her tennis t-shirts. She'd have a weight advantage if it came to a scuffle. Not that it would. She hardly seems the violent type. Sam recognises his brain running off on him again.

He flicks a mental switch. Fact is, Reina's been tricked into accepting Sam's invitation, no doubt charmed by Lisa during the job interview. Lisa will have made Reina a frothy coffee, sat close at the table, leaning in. They'll have complimented each other's fashion choices. Sam can see them now, chatting easily, expressing genuine interest in each other. Lisa is gifted in that way. The equally gifted Reina may assume from Sam's proximity to Lisa that Sam, by extension, makes for equally engrossing company. Well, she's coasting for disappointment, if that's what she thinks.

Yes. He should cancel this now. Sam stares at his phone in

preparation for the bullshit text. He's yet to think of the exact bit of bullshit. The excuse needs to sound plausible. Maybe this: He's been called on urgent business down to the new Christchurch branch. Why is he overthinking this? He owes Reina nothing. If he doesn't want a guest, he doesn't have to go through with it. That said, the social contract changed the moment he blurted an invitation. He owes her an easy let-down. But he's typed her number in one digit short. She might've dropped that deliberately. More likely, on reflection, Sam was flustered and barely listening, perturbed by the woman with the toddler in the trolley.

He logs on to his computer and navigates to the shared folder labelled 'jobApps'.

Reina... Reina. Last name Vandekus. An unusual name, and he happens to know a Vandekus already. He's known Mia Vandekus for years. Mia and Sam serve together on the committee of WellyBiz, a small, socially active group of local business owners.

Of course Mia and Reina Vandekus must be related. The same straight nose, the blond hair, the height.

He closes Reina's file and eats his last few leaves of salad before texting. As he munches on spinach, he fits together what he knows about Reina. If Reina is related to Mia Vandekus, Reina is part of an established web of Wellington people.

Unlike Sam Dennon himself. Even after thirteen years in this close-knit capital, its social network mostly eludes Sam. He knows many faces, but clings tenuously to the city edges. If anyone's the dangerous stranger here, it's him.

He finishes reading Reina's file. She must be in her early forties,

same as himself. Grew up here in Wellington, emigrated to Worcestershire, England, around the age of nineteen. That explains the acquired accent. Drove lorries for a while. Finished an undergraduate degree by distance education. Peripatetic teacher of piano and violin. Postgraduate diploma in education. High school music teacher. Later, Head of Performance Faculty. Enjoys cooking and gardening in her spare time. And tennis, of course.

Please see attached references. “Compassionate... engaging manner... great sense of humour... popular with staff and students... Best wishes for the return to New Zealand... Will be sorely missed.” The he, him, pre-transition pronouns of the written reference freshly grate. Now that Sam has met Reina dressed as a woman, it was obvious all along: her sentence inflection, her tendency to linger on vowels. More telling, other women at tennis club accept Reina into their fold. Oblivious and out-of-the-loop, Sam is probably the last in the club to learn of Reina’s transition.

Still, this is not for lack of thinking. Sam did fudge reality to Lisa when he said, “I’ve seen her round at tennis.” More honestly, Sam has already made a close study of Reina. Close study is his thing.

When he joined tennis club, Sam understood that as a freshly divorced man who has always leaned heavily on his wife he needed to get out there, do something for himself. So he picked a low-contribution way to socialise.

The first night was harrowing. Fortunately he wasn’t expected to say much. And his tennis skills hadn’t eroded as much as he feared. After a few games he realised the main issue was knees. He could no longer duck and dive like a sixteen-year-old. He’d have to master

sharp angled volleys instead.

After a few evenings of no injuries but sore everything, Sam found himself trying to impress one formidable but friendly opponent: Here was a fast, left-handed server with a powerful backhand return and a wicked tendency to pop drop shots after sending opponents all the way to the back fence.

The glow from Sam's monitor starts to sting his eyes. He removes his glasses and gently presses his eyeballs. He'd like to give them a rub, only he might detach a retina.

"Stop being an utter fucking fuckwit, you utter fucking Nigel-nomates, shitty little weirdo," he groans, then alarmingly, terribly, he senses company nearby, emanating heat, filling his doorway where the door should be closed. He flings off the noise cancelling headphones.

Cleaner Tom's giant fist hovers in the air, poised for a king hit. Or else he recently knocked. "Cheers for the kai," Tom mutters, then slowly turns away.

## MEET CUTE

Embarrassed to be caught in a private moment, Sam scuttles down the stairs past Tom, ashamed to stay for a moment longer in his own office.

He drives to collect his new dog. Commuter traffic has thinned out.

At the Johnsonville house, Sam meets a young, cheek-studded woman named Mere with Rastafarian locks and follows her down a dark hallway to a small bedroom. A zipped-up canvas dog crate awaits.

The contained pup whips her tail against its insides. Mere talks Sam through the contents of a plastic bag: leash, car harness, food dish, half a box of wormers and a selection of squeaky toys in various states of disrepair. Inside the crate, the pup continues to waggle and whine.

“Naw, let’s get you out of there, meet your new man!”

Mere unzips the crate. “I wrote Nan’s commands down for you. You sound a bit Aussie?”

“Well picked.”

“Well, you’re about to learn some Reo. Taihoa, pup! You waited this long, you can wait a few seconds more!”

When the puppy emerges in all her wriggling, fluffy glory, Sam

feels like a new father. He's never seen a more beautiful creature in all his life.

“E noho.”

The dog sits.

Like a midwife, Mere scoops up the small dog and places her in Sam's arms. The warm bundle snuggles into his chest. The pup looks up into his eyes and licks her own lips — if dogs have lips — and then licks under Sam's chin.

“She's had her dinner and bath. By the way, her paperwork says ‘Whina,’” Mere explains, “but honestly, she answers to ‘Loafie’.”

No explanation needed. Sam has gazed at the photos already, and marvelled for himself how this pup resembles a rye loaf on legs.

Mere produces paperwork and a pen. Sam has already transferred a few thousand dollars into someone's bank account. “What do I owe you for these accessories?” he asks, even though he has already accumulated an excessive amount of dog paraphernalia himself, and doesn't need to buy more.

“All included. But can you do me a favour? Let me know how she's settling in?”

“I promise.”

With Loafie strapped safely into the back seat, it is finally time to go home to Upper Hutt. Sam drives forty minutes up the dark highway.

Perhaps Loafie whines like that because new-car off-gassing irritates her sensitive nose. Or perhaps she's scared of what's in store. Sam can't tell her in human words that he'll always look after her properly, that everything's going to be okay. She must be missing her

nan. It's possible she'll never like Sam as much as she loved Nan.

At last he turns into his own cul-de-sac.

"Your new home," he tells Loafie.

Black iron gates are barely discernible beneath overhanging trees. As the gate opens, Sam resists the urge to peer into the dark hiding-spots on each side of the road.

He's always had an overactive imagination. Today in Sam's conjectural elseworld, cops hacked his security system. They could be watching him now, via his own camera. Lisa was correct. That is one creepy-ass piece of equipment.

"Why?" Lisa had asked when she saw it.

"Security."

Lisa laughed, but has caught Sam since, checking footage of his house from work via an app on his phone. Lisa stopped laughing after that. "I don't think modern technology is good for your mental well-being, Sammy."

Sam removed the security app from his phone but continues to check his home cameras from a permanently open tab on his desktop at work.

Now that his eye has been trained to scan security footage, in which nothing ever happens, Sam can envisage himself from above as a stealthy criminal. A druglord, perhaps. A small, wiry Tony Soprano. If Sam were an actor, he'd fill the role of 'nondescript guy in a tailored suit and — joltingly — steel-capped boots.' This ironically run-of-the-mill fellow returns to his secluded mansion by luxury car. Today he got himself a guard dog. A poodle, of all things, which no one would ever suspect. This pup may look like bread on legs but can be very ferocious,

you know.

If this were a movie it'd be about gangsters and heists. Probably a comedy. Sam doesn't feel like he's in a comedy. His heart is pounding. Nothing new there.

Once inside the gate, he steps out of the car to collect the mail. He places a small package on the front seat.

Sam frequently feels like an actor in his own life. He has never shucked off his childhood self, that weird little kid from Mangleby Flat; Della's boy, her with the problematic hoarding. Little Sammy Dennon only ever dreamed of a house such as this. He half expects the authorities to dash out from behind those dark trees lining the fence, to push him against his unlikely car, to cuff his skinny, desk-worker wrists behind his back.

"You're an impostor," the detective would hiss in his ear. "A common, run-of-the-mill fraud. And a wannabe druglord, too."

Sam has watched far too many shit movies.

The smooth horseshoe driveway squeaks under his tyres as he heads into the garage. One of life's sensory pleasures. He parks next to his campervan and briefly pines for his old Corolla.

With Loafie on the leash, Sam walks around the yard. He points out a good spot for a dog to conduct business. He unfolds Mere's instructions from his trouser pocket and instructs her to pee in Māori. Loafie obeys. She might have been going to anyway.

Sam shows Loafie all the way down the back, beyond the outdoor living areas, beyond the newly laid tennis court. Sam planted trees eleven years ago when he and Lisa first purchased this land. The trees now form a windbreak. To the left and right, yellow squares of light

offer the reassurance of neighbours, but at a comfortable distance.

Something moves in the tall grass. Sam startles. Loafie stretches forward on her leash. She could easily disappear in there.

After inspecting the perimeter of his house, Sam is confident that no one lies in wait. The place is not under siege.

Inside the entrance hall, he disarms the security alarm.

With Loafie pressed tight against his racing heart, Sam points out all the dog beds dotted around the rooms. There's little else to suggest habitation. The house still smells new — of treated wood and faintly of paint.

Upstairs is a box full of happy things. The box shames Sam a little. He worries this is the first step towards becoming a problematic hoarder like his mum. It could be in his genes.

Loafie sniffs around the perimeter of the bedroom while Sam sits cross-legged on the carpet and riffles through the box.

“Loafie, meet Ragdog,” Sam says. “But this one's not a toy.” He places Ragdog back inside the box, nestled comfortably among tiny costumes.

He soon lays his hand on the tuxedo bandanna designed to make a small dog look, at least from the front, as if dressed for a black tie occasion. Some months ago, Sam thought he'd be getting a different dog — a boy. That fell through, but not until after he'd made a number of frivolous purchases online.

“I don't have any girl clothes,” he says to Loafie, who moves her ears, then, not hearing a command, sniffs the tiny tuxedo dangling from Sam's hand.

“Doesn't matter, does it,” Sam whispers. “E noho.” Loafie sits

obediently. “Ka pai.”

The tuxedo fits perfectly. “You and I will be attending Pam’s party tomorrow,” he explains in a calming voice. “Just so you know, you look absolutely gorgeous in that.”

His dog may look gorgeous, but Sam feels stupid. Brad will rib him mercilessly for this. Others will join in. It’s bad enough that he’s got himself a poodle-y little thing. He can’t be dressing his fur-baby in clothes.

He gently removes the tuxedo. “We’ll keep this for round the house.”

Back downstairs, Sam plays Debussy. Sam paid a sound specialist to “make music come from everywhere but also from nowhere”. The audio guy knew what he meant.

He sets up the canvas dog crate, zips Loafie inside and lets her watch as he puts the finishing touches on Pam’s cake. He baked it yesterday and decorated most of it early this morning, startled awake in the small hours by one of his recurring Mangleby nightmares, which are back with a vengeance lately. ‘Gravel Man’ long since bugged off, but in this adult sequel to that early-childhood invention, the farmer still comes with his rifle and shoots his mother’s dog. These nightmares are seriously, ridiculously harrowing and leave him with an emotional hangover. Nothing Sam does before bedtime gets rid of the damn things. Not calming music, not light reading, not even his enduring hobby of star-gazing. Not even a long, hot bath. The Internet experts can go to hell.

So there he was this morning, wide awake at five a.m., staring into the damn dark.

He could've lain in bed for another few hours and fretted about everything and nothing, but now he's glad he didn't. The cake is mostly done, except for running out of wafers, and five chocolate fingers short.

So he retrieves his groceries from the car and gets cracking in the kitchen. He also retrieves the letterbox delivery from the front seat. That box. He's tried to forget about it. In truth he has been anxious all day, after receiving an email from New Zealand Post telling him it was on board for delivery. Another tortuous email followed, to say it had been delivered. He'll have to open it at some point. But not yet.

The cake. He's outdone himself this time. Chocolate fingers finish the perimeter fence of a Hansel and Gretel cottage. Wafers serve as roof tiles. Forget his new poodle, everyone'll give him heaps for his baking effort. Sam is well-known for his perfectionist streak, which can run to the ridiculous.

Maybe Pam will think this too much. Sam wants her to have a magnificent cake but also doesn't want to be around when everyone goes and gahs over it. If only he'd thought to take 'paternity leave' from tomorrow. Dammit, he's the boss. He can. Except Lisa would accuse him of piking out.

The mail. That box on the counter, the size of a cartoon bomb. So far he has dressed up his dog, listened to calming music, decorated a cake. Sam's as calm as he gets.

He slices open the tape, expecting to find a dark vial containing potion invented by Lewis Carroll. Instead, he finds a run-of-the-mill bottle, like any from a pharmacy. Nothing alarming about it. The lid is properly sealed. No spelling mistakes on the label.

“I’m so sorry,” he says to Loafie, whining softly in her crate. “Awful timing. I never meant to receive this stuff on the very same day I welcomed you.”

Sam has tried before, to illegally import a class-C controlled drug. After many weeks of worry, the last purchase of Nembutal never arrived. This time he conducted even deeper Internet research, using yet another ancient laptop from work, disposed of immediately after ordering, along with incriminating search history. He paid a small fortune for this bottle, from an outfit who professed to package goods which pass problem-free through New Zealand customs. They didn’t say on their website what ‘passing packaging’ meant, but this crowd must know what they’re doing. Because here it is.

Nembutal is ordinarily used by vets to euthanase animals. Perhaps poor Loafie smells danger through the bottle.

“This isn’t for you,” Sam tells her. “It’s not even for me. It’s for no one.”

The poison has a short expiration date on it. Sam may have to go through this risky rigmarole again. Or perhaps he will learn to wrangle anxiety before then. Grim though it is, Sam got himself a pet dog for the very same reason he imported the contraband die-quiri: Coping mechanisms. One more maladaptive than the other.

He does not intend to live until he is an old man. Ageing terrifies him. But for now, with a young dog to care for, he’s obliged to stick around. Now that Sam has the means to end things painlessly, on any day of his own choosing, he might learn to enjoy this magnificent life.

On top of anxiety, now he suffers cognitive dissonance. Sam acquired two opposite things on the same day: The means of his own

Meet Cute

demise and a fluffy reason not to use it.



## NESTED

Sam Dennon, architect-engineer, cake-decorator extraordinaire, is now a drug smuggler. Come to think of it, he should get this cursed poison out of the kitchen. Nembutal has no business anywhere near cakes.

“Wait in the crate.” If there’s one place Loafie should not follow, it’s upstairs to the Nembutal hidey-hole.

Having designed every inch of the house himself, Sam knows exactly where to store ill-gotten goods.

Using his phone torch, Sam goes to the darkest recess of his walk-in-robe, beyond the reach of the automatic light. He stretches high and fumbles around until he feels a tiny door in the wall. Inside the tiny cupboard is a metal box. The box opens with a five digit code. Sam places the poison inside.

Also inside the lock-box: One A4 manilla envelope, folded in half. The big envelope contains three smaller ones, the first already opened and memorised by Sam. Envelopes #2 and #3 remain sealed. Three letters total, Mick’s final words.

Today has been quite the trip. It hits Sam again like a wallop that Mick’s house belongs to strangers now. He steadies himself against the wardrobe wall then slides to the carpeted floor, where he sits hugging his legs. The essence of Mick feels gone from the world, along with the

sale of Mick and Jan's house. Until today, Sam could pretend Mick was alive and well in Melbourne, storing up news for their Friday night phone-calls: Weather, sport and politics, though Mick's conservative views never did line up with Sam's.

Sam unfolds the first letter. This one contained no surprises, and he reads it again, despite having committed it to memory. The words don't sound like his uncle. Mick had a separate, written register — a different persona from his jokey, larrikin, conversational self.

## LETTER #1

Dearest Samuel,

Circumstances conspired to send me a nephew instead of a son and then I got the best.

These words serve as a belated apology. Through no fault of your own you were born into a family heavy with shame.

I considered sharing your origin story when you turned 21. But you were a very young 21-year-old, happy in your own world of study and star-gazing. I decided to wait until you had a few more years of adulthood behind you.

I tried again the night before your wedding but I didn't want to ruin your big day.

A good time never did reveal itself. As a consequence, there exists information regarding yourself that's in danger of leaving the planet with me because I'm certain Della will never tell you.

You'll have found another two sealed envelopes inside this larger one. The envelope marked #2 may come in useful as you get older. You might still have children, for instance, and children

deserve to know their genetic history wherever possible, especially as medical technology advances. Don't feel obliged to open envelope #2 if you don't feel ready but please do keep it safe.

I mean you to read envelope #3 only after Della joins me here on the far side.

For now let me close with this. Your Auntie Jan did all the expressive stuff but I've always loved you as much as Jan did.

Della loves you too, Sam. Sure, she has a funny way of showing it. You'll continue to look after your mum.

No matter what you do about this information, you're a good man. You'll be fine.

Mick.

Sam places the first letter back in its envelope, then inside the lock box. He considers opening number two.

But not today. He's spent all day anxious about the delivery.

So he locks up the Nembutal, returns to the ground level and lets Loafie out of her crate, to hold close to his chest. Sam has read various dog-training manuals, so expects Loafie to whine at night as she settles in. He could leave her here in the kitchen, zipped safely inside. He wouldn't hear her pitiful cries. He might even get a good night's sleep.

But then he'd only fret, wondering how she's faring. So Loafie watches on as he brushes his teeth. Then he carries her out to the garage. She'll go to bed with him. Sam slept inside the campervan while site-managing the build. He still hasn't shifted out of it. He invites Loafie onto the foam sofa to sleep on a fluffy rug decorated with cartoon paw-prints.

“I sleep up there.” Sam points to the bed above the driver’s cabin. “Need anything, let me know.”

He puts on flannel pyjamas and climbs the ladder. He curls up under a weighted blanket then checks his phone. It’s only half past nine.

Australian Eastern Standard Time is two hours behind New Zealand, and he did mean to give his mother a call. Normally there’s nothing to report, but today is different.

“So you finally got your pup,” Della says. “Now you can stop banging on about it.”

Sometimes Sam’s mother experiences a time slip. Thirty years have passed since Little Sammy Dennon petitioned for a puppy.

“I’ve always wondered,” Sam says. “Whatever happened to your dog, Bandit?”

“You know what happened. I had her mounted.”

“No, I mean, tell me about her. Where did she come from?”

“Bloke in town was getting rid. Why you asking?”

“Always wondered if she was part dingo. Reckon I remember her licking my hand. My earliest memory.”

“Nah, Sammy. You wouldn’t remember Bandit. She died when you were a tot.”

“How old was she, at the end there?”

“How old when she passed?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, I dunno. She was white around the eyes, though. She’d started to limp. I suppose it was time.”

Sam is relieved to hear that his mother’s dog died of old age. “I

always thought the farmer got her. That hole I found in her fur one time. I thought that came from a bullet.”

“What farmer?”

“The grumpy old bloke who leased our land for a while there, back in the 80s. He was never shy about shooting dogs, was he. And you always said we couldn’t get another pet because our perimeter fencing was in a state of disrepair. Someone stormed into our house one night. Might’ve had a gun.”

Della says nothing. Sam can’t be sure if she’s zoned out or else got distracted by the telly.

“Mum? I have this dream sometimes. It’s a silly thing. A scary man storms in through the Mangleby front door. I can’t tell what he’s holding and I don’t know what he’s raving about, but I used to think he’d come to take me away.”

“Ah, yeah. The Gravel Man. May he rest in peace.”

Sam is shocked that his mother remembers Gravel Man.

But the man of Sam’s dreams is not Gravel Man, wholly invented by his child self, influenced by Wee Willy Winky from a Nursery Rhyme book, and also by Santa. Young Sam understood Santa to be trapped in their Mangleby chimney. The terror was really a possum, squealing and scrambling in the flu, falling into the fireplace, filling the farmhouse with the harrowing stench of smoking, necrotic flesh.

He’ll try one more time. “Mum?”

“What, darl?”

“Was Gravel Man just a dream, then?”

“Wossat?”

“Because he feels more like a memory. This man in my nightmare,

he sometimes comes for me, and other times comes to shoot Bandit. Am I remembering something? Did the farmer who leased our land shoot your little Bandit, Mum?"

"He would've shot foxes and maybe a few wild dogs," Della says. "Farmers have a right to protect their livestock, darl."

"He didn't shoot your dog, though?"

"That's not what happened to my little bitser. I never ever let her loose, no way. She was very precious to me. You've made that up in your head."

"Okay."

"Got it?"

"Wish I'd known before. Maybe that nightmare will go away now."

"Yeah. That'd be good. You tucked up safe in bed, Sammy?"

"I am."

"Raining there, is it?"

"A storm, earlier. Oh, that's the other thing. Mick and Jan's house sold today."

"Now there's the end of an era. You were dragging your feet over that one, weren't you Sammy."

"You let me know if you need something trucked out to Mangleby. Anything you want. I can arrange it."

"We're sitting pretty out here."

"Need any money?"

"Still haven't got through that last lot. Not sure what you expect me to do with it."

"Will you fly over, meet this little pup? Help care for her?"

“Oh, you don’t need help. Dogs have simple needs, same as you and me.”

“I’d like you nearby.”

“Too damn windy.”

“Like it doesn’t get windy out there, next to the desert!”

“I don’t know folk in New Zealand.”

“You know me.”

“Figure you won’t be flying home to see us, now.” Della refers to herself in the plural. “You’re all finished up in Melbourne, and now with this dog to look after.”

“I can ship your things over here for you, Mum. I built us a beautiful house. There’s a whole wing, all to yourself. We won’t be in each other’s pocket or anything. Come visit. I’m quite proud of this place, actually.”

“I’ve got my chooks, darl.”

The conversation is turning into a carbon copy of last night’s call, and the night before’s. Sam decides to play his last good card. “I went ahead and ordered that chook pen. It’s a dinky thing. The chooks peck the grass and keep it short, so you have to keep moving their pen every few days, like a chook mower. We’ll get you some Rhode Island reds, put them down the back paddock. That’ll keep you busy over here.”

“Yeah, New Zealand chooks wouldn’t be my chooks, though.”

Sam always wants to start yelling at this point. Your precious chooks are on heavy rotation! You boil one up each Sunday for dinner!

“How’s Lisa?” Della dips intonation on the first syllable of Lisa’s name; a rote enquiry.

“Lisa’s fine.”

“Give her my love, darl.”

This is the part where Della hangs up.

Sam has read in one of his animal behaviour books that dogs can sense how people are feeling. Loafie has jumped off the campervan sofa and thudded onto the floor. Now she's trying to scramble up the ladder. She may wish to comfort him in bed.

“Loafie, back on the sofa.” Sam lacks conviction. He doesn't know the Māori version and Loafie doesn't understand.

A minute later, Loafie is fast asleep. Her warm, firm body presses against Sam's. One fluffy ear flops onto his cheek.

## DINNER AT THE HERMITAGE

Even without the cute but attention-seeking tuxedo, Sam's new pup is a hit at Pam's send-off party.

Pam threatens to dognap her. "I could use a fluffy wee friend as I head into my dotage." She's uploaded Sam's magnificent Hansel and Gretel cake onto her Facebook. Within half an hour the photo garnered seventy-six likes, apparently. Pam takes the last of the cake home for her husband, and now that she's leaving town, she really is asking for all of Sam's recipes.

As a kid, Sam took people too literally. As an adult, he understands this tendency in himself, so overcompensates. All this time Sam believed Pam was asking for recipes as a way of expressing compliments about his cakes. Now he learns she really wants them, zipped into a folder and sent by email.

"I know you don't do hugs, Mr Dennon," Pam says tearfully before heading out the door, "but I'm stealing one anyway."

Exhausted by the exertion of socialising, Sam drives home in peace, ready for an entire week of holiday. He's almost home when Loafie sicks up on the back seat of the new Lexus. Sam winds down all the windows. He's a terrible sympathy-vomiter.

He does make it home with his own lunch intact, but now he has to clean the upholstery. He uses foamy spray and a damp cloth, all the

while dry-retching.

Then he feels nauseated for a secondary reason. Loafie might need rushing to the vet. He stupidly checks the Internet on his phone, which tells him she's on her last legs. He's gone and killed her. She hasn't lasted twenty-four hours in his care.

Loafie doesn't look particularly dead. In the driveway, she bows playfully to a squeaky bone. When the toy doesn't spring to life and chase her back, she sprints around the yard regardless. He should look up the base rates for poisoning and apply Bayes' Theorem.

Now he's done it. He's been on the web. Before the vets head off for their weekend, Sam phones the local clinic. Sensing panic in his voice, the receptionist puts him through to a nurse, who asks for a list of ingested items.

"Let's see." Sam paces the driveway, palm pressed to forehead. "Two fresh oysters, a sliver of cheesecake. She stole a spicy potato wedge with tomato sauce on it and licked remnants of mayonnaise off a leaf of... ah... mixed kale salad. Correction. That may have been baby spinach, with tartare sauce."

Sam hopes like hell he's catalogued everything.

"Was anything artificially sweetened?"

"No."

"Hasn't got into any chocolate?"

"Definitely no chocolate."

Sam knows about dogs and their inability to process theobromine. He spent a fruitless workday whisking dark-crumbed, cast-aside plates into the dishwasher before Loafie could get to them. This was exhausting.

“Pups tend to vomit with a change of diet,” cautions the vet nurse on the phone. “Keep her away from rich food.”

“I certainly will. Thank you very much.”

“No fresh oysters,” the nurse adds wryly, because who in their right mind wastes expensive seafood on dogs.

Rich fuckers, that’s who. And also guys like Brad, who will describe to a roomful of party-goers the exact ways in which oysters disgust him before snaffling a few regardless, then feeding them casually to someone else’s dog.

Sam hasn’t got any proper work done today, but one small blessing after all that social busyness: He hasn’t had time to stress about eight years of jail time for importing a C-class drug or, more pressingly, about this evening’s visitor.

Reina texted Sam around lunchtime, prompted by another shower of rain.

Hey Sam. If we’re still on for dinner I’ll bring potato salad, she wrote.

If Sam hadn’t been busy stacking chocolate-crumbed plates into the dishwasher he might’ve seen the text as it came in. Then he might’ve rescheduled, or cancelled. He’s all socialised-out. But by the time he read Reina’s text, it was too late to stand her up. He had to reply with a ‘sure thing’, so here she is, right on time. Sam waits under the portico, cuddling Loafie. A light mist under crepuscular light turns his front gate into a gothic painting.

A red Subaru Impreza appears behind the ironwork. Probably not something a police officer would drive, not even under cover. This is definitely Reina, and not the police come to arrest him.

He buzzes his tennis friend in.

Reina turns off her engine and steps out of her Subaru, surprising him once again with her height. Sam has prepared something welcoming to say, but Reina speaks first. “Crikey dick, bud. Glad you gave me detailed instructions. A cul-de-sac off a cul-de-sac. I’d never have found you. What a great spot! Feels like a separate universe out here.”

“That’s the idea.” Sam presses the button to shut the front gate before he loses grip on his dog. Now Loafie’s not dead, she could run into the Upper Hutt wilderness and get herself lost. Loafie squirms in his arms, fascinated by the visitor.

“And this is your new pride and joy.” Reina claps one palm to her chest. “Aren’t you the cutest lil thing. And he’s wearing a tiny tuxedo, my goodness!”

“Her name is Loafie.”

“Oh, sorry. Sorry, lil Loafie. A seldom acknowledged fact: Even trans folk mess pronouns up.” Reina steps closer to Sam, whose instinct is to step backwards by the same amount.

Sam lets Loafie sniff the back of Reina’s hand. Then Loafie licks at her knuckles and rings. “This pup does look edible, like a loaf of rye,” Reina observes. “Perfect name.”

“Wish I’d thought of it myself. Sorry about the licking.”

“Not at all. I miss my old Border collie. These days I enjoy the odd bit of loving from other people’s pups.”

Reina’s attention turns next to Sam’s house. Council approval took years to come through, and it shows. The roof flares up into a pair of arcs, evoking the Remutaka and Akatarawa ranges. Dark timber

cladding lends an ominous air to ‘Sam’s Hermitage’, as Lisa calls it.

Reina steps backwards into the driveway, taking it all in. “Now I know you’re an architect, this work of art makes sense.”

“Speaking of design work, I should tell you we designed Mia’s Art Deco living extension. Your big sister contracted us, what, five years back? I’ve known Mia for years, via WellyBiz.”

Reina is poised to retrieve a bowl of potato salad from her back seat. “You know Mia?”

“Sure do.”

“Well, that all makes sense. Mia’s reno is another work of beauty. She’s very proud of that.”

Sam had been reluctant to take on the job, so handed it off to an associate who was due to leave the country for a position in Singapore. Sam added his own signature flair, but remained behind the scenes, avoiding catching flak if Mia happened not to like it. He considers telling Reina that although he ‘knows’ Mia, Mia doesn’t really know him. For ages, after many WellyBiz dinners, Mia got his name wrong. When Sam eventually corrected her, Mia flipped the insult: “Well why the hell didn’t you tell me three years ago? Now I’ve got you pegged as a ‘Dan’.”

I swear Mia knows half of Wellington,” Reina says, joining Sam under the portico. “My twin, she knows the other half.”

“That’d be Sophie.”

“Let me guess. Sophie’s your dentist.”

“She fitted a splint once. Mostly I see her husband. Your brother-in-law.”

“Funny, I reckon Sophie and Steve live about two blocks

thataway.” Reina gestures in the direction of Sam’s back paddock. “You’re almost neighbours, as the crow flies.”

“I had no idea.”

“Tell me about it. I pop out this way frequently. Thought I knew the area. But here you are, living in this parallel universe. Who knew there was a castle nestled beyond the shelterbelt of alders?”

Sam invites Reina inside.

She comments favourably on the custom-made front door. Her eyes travel around the interior, which Sam designed with unexpected angles and curves. She expresses delight at the cactus terrarium, at the lamps suspended from the high ceiling, the herringbone accent wall.

“I could give you the full tour,” Sam offers. “You said you watch home and garden TV?”

“I would love a tour of your house.”

“Stop me when I ramble.”

Reina notices the small things. With the curiosity of an artist, she explores with all of her senses. She notices the warmth rising up from the floor. She deduces without prompting that the tall windows have been positioned to receive optimal sunlight across all seasons. As Sam guides her through each room of the ground level, he dives more deeply into detail than he’d planned.

Eventually he leads Reina up the first flight of stairs. He hopes she will notice the design work that went into the staircase. She does, after complimenting the contemporary chandelier.

If only Sam’s place were furnished he could show off this build in its full glory. As it is, he can only guide Reina around empty, echoey rooms. In the bedrooms, carpet is so new their feet leave indentations.

Night falls completely. Sam voice activates the lights. The effect impresses Reina. Sam takes no credit; this ambience was achieved by lighting designers.

Reina admires the view from the bedroom window and expresses regret about rain on the tennis court. She can almost see her sister's roof from here, but not quite. "This may be a personal question," she says, then cruelly hesitates. "Where on earth are you sleeping, Sam? Surely not in one of these tiny dog beds?"

"Oh, no." Sam attempts a laugh, but for Sam, this really is a personal question. He feels his face redden, because he is painfully aware that sleeping in a campervan inside your garage is a peculiar thing to keep doing after you've built a magnificent house like this.

"I was joking, Sam. I didn't think you could literally curl up in a dog bed."

"I'm waiting on my favourite interior designer to free up his schedule," Sam explains. "I'll be lucky to get him, actually. He's in demand. I won't buy furniture without professional go-ahead."

"I see. How long's the wait for a bed, then?"

"Not sure. He's in Melbourne. I may be skipping the queue because he wants an excuse to holiday in New Zealand. His aesthetic is big and flamboyant, but if any house can take it, I figure this one can."

"Absolutely. Is this designer a friend of yours?"

"No, no. We've not met. I've seen his work, is all. He employs a large, talented crew. I sent photos through, didn't expect to hear from the guy himself. He wants to see this place in person."

Reina waits for more.

Conversation has flowed easily. But now it's stalled at a horribly familiar impasse; the part where someone tries to 'work Sam out'. Sam recognises the moment. He normally feels it coming on, but this time he's been focused on providing an interesting guided tour. It's hit him without warning: That look, that line of questioning, the perplexed quirk of brow.

*Where do you sleep? (And who with?)*

People are obsessed by it.

Sam has been carrying the tuxedo-wearing Loafie this whole time. He strokes the soft curls on her head.

"I hope you'll give me another tour once it's furnished," Reina says gently, bearing witness to Sam's shrink and furl. "Will we see it in a magazine, or on TV or something?"

"That was the idea," Sam admits. "This is our flagship energy efficient home. But then I sort of fell in love with the place. I'm a private person," he adds, redundantly.

Reina nods. "I get that. I wouldn't want my digs broadcast for public entertainment. "This may look like peeling paint, but is in fact a work of art! Behold Mr Leaking Sink Pipe, the genius artist behind this softening canvas of chipboard!"

"I'd watch that." Granted, Sam would watch a rotting-home show over 'home improvement' TV, which only serves to mask painfully bad architectural design using impractical staging and styling.

"Thank you for showing me your beautiful house, Sam. I'm among the fortunate few."

Sam has not shown Reina all of his house, not at all. He's been in

two minds about taking her up to the third level. By design, part of the roof is invisible from the outside. He needn't even mention it. He already feels like a massive show-off, and also a total bore.

So he ends this intense moment of eye-contact by asking if his guest is hungry. Reina returns an enthusiastic "yes".

While waiting on the interior designer, Sam has been using outdoor furniture inside the house. He and Reina sit inside and eat at a wooden slat table.

Reina compliments dinner. Sam says, without too much fibbing, that he expended no effort on dinner at all; Reina is simply helping to clear leftovers after a work thing.

"I have a confession," Reina says over cheesecake.

She doesn't look like a joke is to follow.

"When I applied for the job at your firm, I never meant to get it. I was having trouble leaving the house. I thought, if I can dress as myself and do the scariest thing of all, I'll be fine after that. So I did do the scariest thing. I attended a stressful interview, for a job I'm not qualified to do. Lisa was wonderful. Everyone in your office was welcoming. So! That did the trick. Now I can conquer the world."

Sam nods.

Reina continues. "Please understand, I would have accepted the job. I would learn the accounting software, and how to manage a website. I don't mean to waste anyone's time."

Still Sam says nothing.

"Sam? Are you... mad?"

"God, no." Sam's slow processing speed can unnerve people. Reina is yet to learn this about him. "Not at all. I'm glad you had a

positive experience. I agree, Lisa's great like that. But what happens now? What will you do for work?"

"Oh, I don't know." Reina sounds exhausted. "I'll probably go back to uni next year."

Sam nods. "Not to make it weird, but I did scan your résumé and references. Surely you'd have no trouble getting back into teaching."

Reina nods and shakes her head in a single, unsure movement.

"What about private tutoring?"

"Oh, I've been doing a bit of that, too. But I could do without the hassle of chasing unpaid invoices. I'm no hustler."

"Me neither," Sam says, though Lisa tells him he is very good at getting clients to cough up. She says this so she doesn't have to do it herself, of course.

Sam's attempt at invoice-camaraderie rings hollow. The economic disparity between himself and — pretty much everyone else these days — is vast. He should watch what he says. He decides once and for all against showing Reina any more of his house, or any more of anything.

Reina tells Sam she plans to spend a few months back in England when Wellington winter sinks its jaws in, to see her kids. She opens her phone to show him photos of a son and daughter. Sam is surprised at their height. They're adults.

"These two came along when I was still a baby myself," Reina explains. "And here's the latest addition." She shows Sam a photo of an actual baby, held by the baby's mother. Or maybe you call this size kid a 'toddler'. Sam has no children in his life. He's lost touch with the sizes they come in.

“Anya’s also a Kiwi but she and I worked together in Worcestershire,” Reina says. “Then we became friends. Anya wanted a bub. She asked me for the favour, we both moved back to Wellington. We’re living apart but co-parenting, working things out between us as we go along.”

Sam struggles in conversations about relationships and offspring. He’s especially struggling now, to offer a response.

“Have kids yourself?” Reina asks him.

“Oh, god no.” This makes Sam sound like a child-hater.

But Reina laughs politely.

Sam considers how he might convey that he does not, in fact, eat babies for breakfast. Draws a blank. Says nothing.

They drink tea and eat leftover cheesecake. Reina says she’d better make tracks.

Setting off the sensor lights, Sam and Loafie walk Reina outside to her car. Sam has realised how much it calms him to hold his pup close to his chest. But this time he holds her as brise-soleil, to guard against physical contact. He doesn’t want the awkwardness of a goodbye hug, or worse, a kiss on each cheek. Reina seems the type to end a perfectly nice evening with something like that.

She doesn’t, though. Reina reads him correctly.

But not wanting a hug is just that. It doesn’t mean more. Now Sam must say something to dispel any misconception that the evening was a flop. He suggests a second meeting.

“I hope you’ll come again,” he says, “when the court is playable.”

“Well, your house and grounds are truly magnificent.”

“Thanks.”

Okay, maybe that was a veiled no.

“But, Sam? That woman with the toddler in the supermarket trolley? That was a rare display of aggression. Most people are fine, out and about.”

Sam isn't sure why Reina is even mentioning that.

“Most people would leave us alone, I think.”

“Oh. I see.” His heart sinks. Reina must think Sam just invited her again to his private, secluded abode for a fair-weather rerun of tonight because he's afraid to be seen with her in public. Hurriedly, he adds, “I enjoy nature walks, if you'd like to join me sometime. Figure I'll be doing a lot of walking, now I have a dog.”

“Ah! Well, if you're free next Sunday, join us on a family hike. Ever walked The Escarpment Track?”

“With you and your family?”

“With Mia and two of my nieces. Not sure if dogs are allowed, though.”

Sam wonders if the invitation is genuine. He's not confident he'd be truly welcome, intruding as the only man into a group of women. Then again, Reina may have reason not to worry about things like that.

“Think about it,” she says. “I'll text you the details.” Then Reina gets into her Subaru and disappears into the night, double-tooting cutely at the end of Sam's driveway.

Sam watches until the iron gates close behind her. Once inside, he locks up his house, double-checking each door.

With any luck, continuing inclement weather will prevent him from attending next weekend's hike with the Vandekus family.

He needs to decompress. So he carries Loafie upstairs, then walks along the hallway until he reaches the secret door in the wall. The edges of the door are camouflaged as panelling detail. The door opens to reveal an open-tread spiral staircase. The staircase opens into a vast, round room. The roof is a double-glazed geodesic dome.

This extravagant space is so far the only part of Sam's hermitage which requires no extra furnishing. It's perfect as is, with a telescope and a curved bookshelf of astronomy books, arranged alphabetically by title. In the centre is a perfectly round sofa bed, large enough to accommodate a human body spread-eagled any which way. This is Loafie's first time up here. Sam shows her the dog bed he prepared earlier — a red one to match the large one for himself.

Loafie gives the dog bed a sniff then curls up inside it, emitting a relaxed sigh.

Sam lies flat on his back. No stars tonight, only raindrops, twinkling on glass. He removes his arty-farty spectacles and places them on the floor tucked next to the sofa bed, where he can't stand on them later. He plans to stagger to his feet, pleasantly tired, relaxed and ready for dream-free sleep in the campervan.

Thank goodness his full day of entertaining is over. As feared, he and Reina share little in common. Himself: guarded, awkward, intensely private. Suspiciously alone. Reina: warm, engaging, at ease in conversation. Reina has a rich interpersonal life with her own vast family, plus a heliosphere of deep friendships dotted across both hemispheres. Sam had been surprised to learn of her children. He should not have been surprised. Moreover, Reina's private life holds space for more than one significant woman; she is close to the mothers

of her children. Sam had been a fool to think Reina might have mistaken this dinner invitation for a romantic sort of thing with him. It would seem Sam isn't even Reina's type.

"You really have tickets on yourself, doncha." He has a tendency to blurt out words when recalling something deeply embarrassing. The habit has gotten worse since living alone.

Now it's time for an excruciating replay of the evening just been. Sam realises how little he learned about his dinner guest. He occupied the airtime himself, filling every silence by yakking on about his precious house. Sam's desire not to pry resulted in an unintended consequence: The few things he learned about Reina were offered by Reina herself. He hadn't the courtesy to enquire.

Oh Jesus suffering fuck, he even offered advice on Reina's job situation, though he knows precisely nothing about teaching, or tutoring. She wasn't asking him for career advice.

Sam continues to ruminate. Conclusion: He is not, in fact, a fascinating tour guide. Instead, Reina is a polite guest. She wasn't feigning interest per se, but was definitely performing the emotional labour of helping Sam feel like a wonderful human being. Briefly, it worked. He did feel wonderful this evening, while she was here.

He rolls onto his stomach and groans into the mattress.

I know you don't like hugs, Pam had said this afternoon, as Sam stiffly accepted her goodbye embrace. Pam wasn't entirely correct. He could use a hug right now, for instance. Firm against his chest and stomach, the mattress accepts him as he is. Pam's capacious, post-menopausal body left its imprint on his own. As much as Sam disliked Pam's hug in real time, the memory of it isn't shabby at all, especially

if he does not attach the sensation-of-hug to a real-life-person, who happens, in this case, to be Pam. If only the mattress were a bit softer, sensations would align.

He could easily fall asleep here, except his groans and self-chastisement have disturbed Loafie, who jumps onto Sam's sofa bed. She straddles his shoulder blades and licks at his ear. The sensation is unpleasant, if well-meant. Sam rolls over to lie on his back, this time as meat in a sandwich, with a dog on his chest and the mattress beneath. Loafie's head smells like Reina's perfume. The firm mattress is probably more akin to the younger, muscular, taller Reina. This is the comforting sensation he might feel if she were to press against him from behind and stand perfectly still, holding him tight. The mattress is Reina's body; Loafie's weight equals the pressure of her strong arms.

Without a blanket, it's slightly too cold up here.

"You're too small, Loafie."

Sam goes through his anti-nightmare rigmarole of a hot shower, deep breathing to Debussy, etc., then returns with Loafie to the tight, dark, perfectly ordered womb of the campervan, his nightly reprieve from the intractable world.

Here he is surrounded by every basic tool necessary for survival, ready to go at a moment's notice. That's why he sleeps here, really. It has nothing to do with waiting on the interior designer. Sam has spent most of his adult life saddled with debt, a gigantic debt which never bothered Lisa: first their Karori villa, then a mortgage on this Upper Hutt section. Sure, it turned out to be a good investment, but he wasn't so certain at time of purchase. Most of all, the grinding monthly rent of their inner city office.

It's fine, relax, everything's ticking over nicely, Lisa has always told him, this is how it works. And it *is* fine; it *is* ticking over nicely; Lisa's high tolerance for risk paid off. Now they have a branch of Willis & Dennon on each island. He owns this house outright, as well as the Christchurch office. No debt. Only buffer.

Money worries have added to Sam's sleeping issues. Everything could still come crashing down, and Sam has counted the ways.

But so long as Sam has his campervan, with its cheap foam mattress, its fold-down table, its tiny fridge and unbreakable set of enamel plates, so long as he has just that, and now this cuddly little dog nestled beside him, everything will be okay.

## HOW TO MAKE FRIENDS AS A HERMIT

Sam was snowed under at work last November and stubbornly refused to do a thing for his fortieth birthday. He promised Lisa he'd do something for his forty-first. Now he is doing something. He's having a week off work, enjoying his new home. Lisa calls to enquire after Sam's new dog and hears a loving, detailed account by phone. She also wants to know how he celebrated his birthday on Friday evening since, at his own request, the day had been all about Pam.

“Thanks for the card. You didn't have to post it.”

“Felt more formal with a stamp on. Sorry you didn't get your cake. The bakery was out of poppyseeds. People buy them in bulk, apparently. They make tea and get high.”

“Sounds fake but okay.”

“I'll get you your lemon poppyseed cake when you're back in the office.”

After half a week with his new dog — the most wonderful birthday present to himself — he feels something in him relax a fraction. He's gotten away with his illegal importation and no longer assumes every rattle and bump must be police, pounding down his door. Moreover, once again he's gotten away with a birthday unmarked by enforced celebration. Pam's send-off allowed Sam to feel the pleasant bustle of an event without attention on himself.

On the Thursday he captures an adorable photo of Loafie curled up in one of her beds, brown curls lit by sunbeams slicing through one

of the tall windows. He cracks open his laptop but avoids reading work emails. Instead he composes a Loafie update to the loc-haired, cheek-studded Mere.

He doesn't mention to Mere that Loafie sleeps snuggled into him each night. She dozes with her head on his pillow, legs in the air like a dead fly. He doesn't mention his own new tendency to speak in a high-pitched voice, telling Loafie how delicious she'd be between two slices of bread, covered in cheese and sauce, and possibly a pickle. "Big stretch! Big yawn!" he finds himself saying, narrating Loafie's every move. He cradles Loafie in front of the bathroom mirror waiting for her to glance at their reflection, at which point he exclaims, "Look! That's us!"

Even without all this private information, Sam's email to a stranger called Mere has run to a thousand words. What on earth is a person meant to do with such drivel? A thousand words suggests Sam expects to start an ongoing correspondence. Mere may even interpret Sam's update as some inappropriate attempt at a relationship between the two of them. He hits delete on all of it, then sends a single sentence to caption the photo: "Kia ora, Mere. Loafie's doing great! Photo attached. Kind regards, Sam."

He overthinks the exclamation mark and never hears back.

By the Friday, rain has cleared. Sam practises his tennis serve on his new court while Loafie chews on spent balls. Unfortunately for Sam, Loafie doesn't know the difference between fresh balls and spent ones. He is trying to teach her to drop on command when Lisa interrupts with another phone call, this time pulling Sam back into work mode,

expecting him to make the final decision regarding their new Pam.

“Lise, you decide. I cleaned the microwave.”

“Did you? Because it’s filthy again. You did interview Emma with me. The young one? And you’ve played tennis with Reina. Oh, I didn’t tell you. Reina is Mia’s sister. Mia Vandekus? From WellyBiz?”

“Mm-hm.”

“It’s obvious when you know it, right? A strong resemblance. I’m surprised Mia didn’t introduce her own sister if her sister wanted a job.”

“What’s wrong with Emma? You loved Emma.”

“Emma’s great. She’s got the tech skills locked and loaded. She’s just a bit timid, is all.”

“I shall be very gentle and circuitous in my dealings with her.”

“Not you, fool. Well, you too. But I’m thinking of our boys. They need some handling. You know who I’m talking about. I’ve been the young pretty girl in the workplace, I know what that’s like. But I sense Reina can handle that sort of thing. Clients would love her, too.”

“And the ones who don’t?”

“Can git stuffed.”

“To paraphrase, you don’t want to hire Emma, who is more directly qualified, because she is ‘young and pretty’. I hope your office door is closed, because I wouldn’t repeat this out loud if I were you.”

“That’s... not what I’m saying. And I would only say it to you. Speaking of employment discrimination, it can’t be easy finding work when you’re trans. So there’s that.”

“Also this: Maybe we, meaning you, shouldn’t be hiring dudebros who ‘need handling’.”

Lisa drops her voice to a whisper. “Look, I know you blame me for a certain person who, by the way, interviewed very well and is actually a good architect despite your one-sided personality conflict, or whatever.”

“Brad never covers his stew. That explains your dirty microwave.”

“See? You hold a grudge. This is why I’m bothering you on your week off.”

Sam’s dislike of Brad is, granted, partly irrational. The guy reminds Sam of Lisa’s horrible university boyfriend, not so much to look at, but in his body language and in the sorts of things he finds funny.

“Sammy, for what it’s worth, my pick is Reina. Despite your surface differences, she’d know how to work you, I bet.”

“Work me?”

“I’m not sure how to word that, but yeah.”

“My pick is Emma.”

“Now you’re being contrarian.”

“Why not Emma?”

“Apart from all of the above, we could use more diversity. And I don’t just mean that as a tick-box thing. Reina would be a hoot.”

Sam feels strongly that Reina doesn’t need cossetting when it comes to finding a job. Also, he may have found a friend. Reina has already texted him the details of next Sunday’s Escarpment walk with her sister and nieces. Sam has been reflecting on Friday night’s dinner party, and it may not have been so bad after all. There’s a less-than-zero chance that Reina might like to become his friend. She likes food, she likes walks. She definitely likes dogs. Importantly, she didn’t

take the piss when Sam dressed his dog in little clothes, which would suggest she is a safe person for Sam to be himself with. She'd make good company for occasional social outings. She can't be that person to Sam as well as his employee. Selfishly, petulantly, he wants her for himself.

"Let's go with Emma," he says.

Lisa doesn't reply for a long moment. Then she sighs. "You're probably right."

"That all?"

"Mm. I wasn't discriminating against pretty young Emma, by the way. Reina's equally good-looking. I bet she makes a smokin-hot bloke."

"And there's another thing to keep inside your head."

"Easy for you to be neutral. You won't have noticed, since you notice no one, ever."

"I noticed you, didn't I? Back in the day."

Lisa half laughs, half raspberries into the phone. Lisa has never felt noticed by Sam. This comprised ninety per cent of their marriage problems. "Gotta go. Need to call Emma, I guess."

Sam dresses in water repellent outerwear for Sunday's Escarpment walk. He's nervous about the rain forecast, and also about seeing Reina again, having set himself a goal: To shut up about his own boring self and instead ask non-invasive questions, hoping to know Reina better. Sam has left Loafie with Lisa, who was curious to know what he's up to. Sam remained deliberately vague.

The slim chance of drizzle never eventuates. His thighs create an

ostentatious swish as he walks with the Vandekus women along the set route. Sam would rather avoid Mia entirely, who has always unnerved him.

“Were you expecting a downpour, Samuel?” Mia asks. “You serve as our amulet, eh? That magnificent reflective ensemble of yours has scared the weather away.”

“If it does piss down,” says Reina who, like everyone else on the track, is dressed lightly for clement weather, “Sam here will have the last laugh.”

“Nah. I’ll be scrapping him for those waterproofs. You can have his hat.”

Mia Vandekus is a decade older and far more sardonic than Reina. And she wouldn’t fit into Sam’s clothing, anyhow. Although Mia is several inches shorter than her trans sister, you wouldn’t pick a difference unless you measured them back-to-back. Mia makes use of her immense height.

They have started at the Paekākāriki end and reach Pukerua Bay in time for lunch. Sam expected to buy food at a café, but Reina has packed coleslaw and scotch eggs for them all. She retrieves a picnic basket from her car and brings it to Mia and Sam on the beach. Reina’s nieces have spotted other young women they know and are fifty metres along the sand. The sun is blinding.

Mia reapplies sunscreen to her face. “All rubbed in?” she asks Reina.

“Nowhere near.”

“Come on, where?”

“Clumped in your left nasolabial fold.”

“My what, now?”

Reina is laughing, so Mia asks Sam what on earth Reina means by ‘nasolabial fold’. Sam offers an explanation but Mia doesn’t really want a definition.

“God Reina, just fix it for me.” Mia leans forward so Reina can rub in the white.

“Scottish Annie would approve of these,” Reina says, pushing a scotch egg onto Mia, who is frequently mistaken by strangers for Scottish singer Annie Lennox.

“Scottish Annie probably would. Kiwi Annie is supposed to be watching her cholesterol.”

Sam cannot sit with wrong information. Gently, he says: “Want to know a fact you’ll never use once in your life?”

“Always, yes.” Reina gently throws him a tin-foiled egg.

Mia pipes up. “Hell’s bells. Another fact-fiend. I should’ve introduced the pair of you years ago. So glad you found each other off your own bat.”

Swapping interesting facts is Sam’s comfort zone. He has learned over the years to pull back, after realising people’s eyes glaze over long before he has exhausted his knowledge of esoteric topics. So he checks Reina’s face for a clue. Even with sunglasses on, she looks genuinely interested, for now.

Reina tells her sister to shut up. “I need to hear this.”

“Well, scotch eggs aren’t from Scotland. They’re English.” Sam wishes he had something better than that. He’s been having trouble contributing to conversation between family members who’ve known each other forever. “They were originally covered in fish paste,” he

adds, quietly.

Mia regards him with that trademark sceptical expression of hers. “Well well well. You learn something every day. Nay, every minute, sandwiched here between the two of you.”

“I should’ve known that,” Reina says, “after living in England for twenty years. I’ll tuck it away for trivia night.”

Mia throws her hands in the air. “Remind me to never, ever let you two play on the same team.” Then Mia shifts the thrust of the conversation. “In case you were wondering, Sam, Reina’s always been like this.” Mia is pointing to the picnic laid out before them.

“Like what?” Reina intervenes, suspicious.

“Camp mother.”

Reina nods, fine with this description. She pulls out her phone and uses it to call one of the nieces, inviting them both back along the beach for lunch.

“I could’ve whistled for them.” Mia stretches out on the rug. “You didn’t have to waste your anytime minutes for that.”

The two teenage cousins stride back along the beach to grab food before returning to their friends.

Mia reaches over to nudge Sam, who is easily startled. “Speaking of eggs and other reproductive material, did you notice the strong family resemblance? Between Rory and Reina?”

“Sorry?”

“My daughter Rory looks very much like her Auntie Reina, don’t you think? Here’s a fact for you. Reina was Rory’s sperm donor. Neither Bec nor myself had all the equipment, sadly.”

“Oh, please. We’re eating.” Reina, who has unfoiled a scotch egg

for herself, does not look impressed at picnic-time mention of ‘sperm’.

“What do you want me to call it? This has not turned into a taboo subject too now, has it?”

This interaction encapsulates why Sam prefers to stay quiet in social situations, and explains why he offers safe facts about scotch eggs and so on rather than delving into other people’s business. He doesn’t know what he may say and what he must not.

Mia continues schooling Sam on Vandekus family history. “Reina was only eighteen when Bec and I asked for that big favour, which in hindsight is too young. We should never have asked an 18-year-old to make a massive decision like that. Still, we’ll always be grateful for the S.P.E.R.M. Rory especially, no doubt.”

“Rory’s turned out great,” Sam says, after understanding that Reina provided genetic material for her own niece. “You all did very well.”

“I agree,” says Mia.

Reina has been waiting to swallow a mouthful. “That story isn’t as incestuous as it sounds,” she says.

“Of course it’s not ‘incestuous’.” Mia waves away a native bee. “It’s called familial gamete donation. It’s a thing.”

“Incest gets a bad rap.”

Shit, damn and hell. Sam did not mean to say that out loud.

Reina and Mia look at him, probably staring, their boggled eyes obscured by sunglasses.

Sam will have to qualify that. “I mean, children of incest can’t help it. They simply are, same as queer kids.”

Oh, double hell. Sam isn’t even sure if he’s allowed to say ‘queer’

in the presence of two queer people. Apparently the term's been reclaimed, but he's old enough to remember when the q-word was always an insult. Even if the word has been reclaimed, can anyone use it? Even himself?

Reina saves him. "I shouldn't make light of that. Thank you for pointing it out."

Sam sits quietly finishing Reina's scotch egg.

Mia's long exhalation suggests she's had enough of Sam's oversensitivity. She stands up, brushes rug-fluff off her backside and wanders along the sand to say hello to the parents of Rory's friend.

Sam senses Reina regarding him from behind her big sunglasses. Conversation has stalled completely.

"You okay?" Reina asks, as if to avoid gravitational wobble in proximity to Sam's outsized freakishness.

Reina must be the hypervigilant type. If Reina is asking that question, Sam has failed to adequately play his part as fun-guy at a picnic, or even as the butt of their light-hearted jokes. He has retreated into himself after pulling Reina up on something unnecessary. If he doesn't feel included, that's on him.

"I'm fine. Sorry." Sam offers to buy everyone gelato.

Reina wanders with Sam to the gelato truck, parked near the beach. Sam, by himself, can glide past anyone unseen. But strangers rubberneck for Reina. He will soon learn this happens everywhere, and will privately call it 'doing the meerkat'.

Public invisibility is one of Sam's privileges. But Sam feels invisible in private, too. No one ever sees him. Even Lisa finds part of him a mystery. While they were married, Sam thought he preferred it

that way. But these days, increasingly, Sam would like one carefully chosen person to see him deeply, and to accept him regardless. Reina and Mia seem to have that going on. Sam has never felt a sibling-shaped hole in his life, but he feels a pang of something today.

Despite moments of intense awkwardness, in hindsight Sam enjoyed his day trip with the Vandekus family. Two weekends later, he invites Reina by carefully-crafted SMS on another hike, just the two of them, walking the Te Whiti Riser.

Reina texts back. Emoticons suggest unrestrained delight.

Sam breathes a sigh of relief. He wasn't sure if he was making another invitation too soon, drawing too much on her time.

On Friday evening, his excitement comes to a grinding halt. Sam is in his wardrobe, changing out of his work suit, anticipating the fun weekend outing. His trousers start buzzing. A phone call from Reina. She can no longer join him.

"I'm a stinker for cancelling," she says after lengthy explanation.

"It's fine," Sam says lightly, though he is thinking of the bacon and egg pie he baked for their shared picnic lunch. "Things happen. December is a busy time of year."

"No, I've rudely ditched you for another friend. I blame Andy. He's a last-minute louse."

Reina's friend Andy lives up in King Country and rarely makes it down to Wellington, apparently. He has surprised her with a weekend visit.

"Sam... can we reschedule for next weekend instead? Would that be okay?"

“We can pencil it in.”

Sam is reluctant to ink firm plans. Reina’s life is packed with family, friends and commitments. He must manage his own expectations.

Loafie would love a walk and maybe a bit of homemade pie. But Sam isn't in the mood. He works at home all weekend instead. Despite beautiful weather, he barely leaves his home office. Loafie sighs deeply and rests her head on his feet.

Reina wasn't blowing him off when she asked to shift their arrangement forward rather than cancel. She calls him the following Thursday, to confirm they're still on for the postponed walk.

“See you Saturday,” he tells Reina, though he won't bother making another bacon and egg pie.

Downsides to living alone as a singleton: No one will inform you before leaving the house that you failed to remove the large cardboard tag on the back pocket of your new trousers. No one tells you when you need a breath mint. No one ever puts their hands under your clothing, exploring your body. No one would find a suspicious lump.

Dogs can sniff out cancer, or so Sam has read, but untrained pets can't communicate that information to you once you get it, which renders Loafie useless. Sam must be proactive when it comes to his own health. Ergo, every morning in the shower, Sam checks his testicles. His desire to stay alive coexists with morbid thoughts of ending it swiftly, if ever he found that lump.

Knowing he's all alone, Sam avoids using a ladder in his own home. If he fell, no one would hear his moans for help. He considers

numerous icky scenarios in which he dies alone: choking on a cherry tomato, slipping on wet concrete, electrocution.

One means of death which cunningly evades the worry-chamber of Sam's brain: A perforated appendix. So when he feels the twinge of pain in his torso, he assumes he's eaten something which disagrees with his guts. Probably dairy, as usual.

Sitting on the toilet doesn't fix it. When the pain gets worse, part of him would love to get onto the Internet, but the Internet will only tell him he's dying and the Internet has so far been wrong about that. Receptionists at the doctor know him by name, yet he never has a single thing wrong with him. He clogs up the system, and for what? Reassurance.

"You're not bothering me at all," his GP has said numerous times. "I'm always happy to see you." He can't really mean it.

Despite sharp stabs in a strange part of his abdomen, Sam takes paracetamol with ibuprofen and retreats to his campervan, meaning to call his GP on Monday if the bug hasn't passed. He calls Lisa and asks her to attend a Friday meeting on his behalf.

"This is not like you, Sammy. Sure you're okay, all alone out there?"

"I just need a yes."

"Of course I'll go. Take care of yourself, promise?"

He hasn't the strength to hoist himself up the ladder and onto the campervan bed so he lies on the narrow sofa below.

He gets up around midnight meaning to top up Loafie's kibble and let her outside to pee. But he doesn't make it out of his garage.

He comes to on the concrete floor. Now his face hurts, too.

When agony prevents him from strapping Loafie safely into the back seat of his car, Sam admits to himself that he's in no shape to drive to the hospital.

On the phone, Lisa's faraway voice says something about an ambulance... Something about Loafie... something about Graham.

"Graham?"

"I'm in Christchurch, remember? You asked me to run the meeting down here."

Sam has no recollection.

Later, he will vaguely remember arriving at the hospital by ambulance: the blurry, nauseating view from a gurney, the corridor ceilings, fluorescent tubes of lighting. He may be about to die. He could die without ever needing to open Uncle Mick's envelopes. Everything is fine, actually. He needn't read further. Not every damn thing must come to light.

His world fades to black.

A nurse in scrubs. Overhead lights. Distant hospital beeping. Next, a doctor leans in close. Surgery went well. He's down one perforated appendix.

Recovering on Endone later that day, the surgeon reappears. This time Sam gets a bewildered telling-off. Sam took his sweet time calling for help. He is lucky, very lucky, because his insides were riddled with pus. Just as Sam suspected, something is terribly wrong with him, deep inside. And now he must remain in hospital for at least five nights, hooked up to a drip. This doesn't feel lucky at all. He only wants to see Loafie, to know she's okay. She can last a few days

without kibble but may have kicked over her water.

A nurse tells him later that afternoon, in a much gentler tone, that she's read his notes. She asks why he left it so long before seeking medical assistance.

"Didn't you feel in your body that something was terribly wrong?"

"If I didn't ignore the health anxiety I'd get nothing done."

"Ignoring pain isn't a great coping strategy, though. Have you discussed health anxiety with your GP?"

Sam snorts. Oh boy, snorting hurts. "Can I have another Endone yet?"

As well as dulling the abdominal pain, post-surgery medication calms Sam down. His anxiety lifts for the first time in years. Nurses enquire constantly about Sam's hypothetical bowel movements. He longs to return to his own house, to hug Loafie, to wear clean track pants — or anything other than a hospital gown — and to push out a poo in peace. Instead, he must endure noisy chatter from a tiny TV broadcasting infotainment, watched by an elderly room-mate in the bed by the window who invites a steady stream of visitors. A granddaughter brings Christmas lilies, which might smell pleasant at one fifth the potency.

Then Sam gets a visitor of his own. Graham Purdy, for crying out loud.

"Giddyay," Graham says, barging on in. "Some blokes'll do anything for attention, eh?"

Graham used to be Lisa and Sam's business lawyer, until Lisa and Graham went and created a conflict of interest between the two of them. But that all happened years ago. Graham has since proven his

mettle as an enduring presence in Lisa's life.

"Funny thing, coming in here," Graham says, looking around. "This must be the very same room, that time I had my hernia done."

"The very same bed, I bet."

"You know, I think you might be right." Graham marvels at the coincidence before understanding the unfortunate symbolism. "Gah. These hospital rooms all look the same. And I was pretty dopey on drugs at the time. Are they keeping you comfortable, at least?"

"Yes."

"Don't you worry. The pain will kick in later."

"Know what I like about you, Graham Purdy?"

Graham chuckles. "Absolutely nothing! I know, I know."

In fact, Sam would rather see Graham Purdy than anyone important, whose opinion of Sam might actually matter. Graham will never accrue enough brownie points to compensate for snaffling Lisa, so Sam won't feel guilty about how the man's just gone to a bunch of trouble on his behalf. This is good, actually. Let him wait in line at a supermarket checkout. Graham has brought Sam a Santa sack of supplies. Actually it's a supermarket green bag, and now Graham catalogues the contents.

"Lactose free milk." He pulls out a one litre box. "This the brand?"

"No." Sam is intolerant to the proteins, not to the lactose, as everyone assumes.

"Darn it. Lisa wasn't confident they'd cater to your intolerances. I'll whip back. So which is it?"

"No need. There's a hospital dietitian."

"Of course. Only, Lisa didn't get the impression you were

coherent enough to let staff know.”

Graham has also purchased for Sam a medium-bristle toothbrush (Sam uses soft), toothpaste (Sam only uses sensitive), and roll-on deodorant which smells unpleasantly like Graham himself.

The horrors keep coming, culminating in a three-pack of small men’s trunks. Sam can imagine how that conversation went. “Don’t buy budgie smugglers,” Lisa would’ve told Graham on the phone from Christchurch. “He only wears the undies with the little legs on.” But Lisa hasn’t noticed how Sam has filled out since they were newlyweds. Sam wears medium these days. Despite the reality that he still has no clean undies, Sam is glad Graham purchased the wrong size. He will keep one precious fragment of personal information all to himself.

“Need anything else?” Graham asks. “I am at your service.”

Sam is interested in one thing only. “Did you manage to pick up Loafie?”

“Thought you’d never ask.” Graham whips out his phone to show Sam a photo.

There she is, curled up in a washing basket, using a pink folded towel for a mattress.

“Happy as a lark,” Graham says. “Looks like I’ll be taking her to work with me. They keeping you in long?”

“Five nights too long.”

“Oof. Well, you don’t need to worry about your pup. I’ve been feeding her fresh lamb mince. She scarfs it down. So cute. You may not get her back!”

When Sam doesn’t laugh with him, Graham says, “I might petition Lisa for a pup just like her.”

“She’ll likely vomit,” Sam says, “with a change of diet. And did you leave the receipt in that bag?”

Graham tells Sam not to be silly, none of this is any trouble at all, and get well soon, eh?

Sam’s second visitor is Emma, the new office manager. Lisa was right; Emma is the timid type. Sam likes her a lot. She apologises for disturbing him but has brought an arrangement of flowers to the hospital, along with a get-well card. It has a cartoon dog on the front. Only Emma has signed it. Sam realises, with horror, that no one else is at work because it is the weekend. It is Saturday.

“Anything else you need?” Emma asks. “Your laptop, anything?”

Sam does need something. He hates to ask, especially since Emma has sacrificed a weekend to run around after him, but he does need a phone charger. A terrible thought has hit him: he lost a full day while writhing in pain. As a consequence, he was a no-show for this morning’s nature walk with Reina. Sam would rather be two hours early than five minutes late. He’s never been a no-show in his life, until now. Unlike Reina, who at least called him to cancel, apologising effusively the entire time, Sam has simply stood her up.

Reluctantly, he asks Emma to bring him the phone charger from his desk at the office. He makes a mental note to pay her for miles later, and also for double time in lieu after running around after him on a weekend. He will also buy her a thick book of cryptic crosswords, because he’s noticed she likes to do those on breaks.

When Emma leaves after the second drop-off he must ask a nurse to rummage around through the plastic bag on the shelf above him, labelled with his name and containing the clothes he came in

with. His phone has been removed from the pocket of his pants and stored where all the expensive things go. He shudders to think how the clothes all came off, and how many staff it took to manipulate his body, completely starkers. His body is unremarkable by any standard. Medical professionals see bodies all the time. This logic doesn't help. He still feels horribly vulnerable at the thought.

"You're alive." Reina breathes a sigh of relief when Sam calls her from his hospital bed.

Sam gives a synopsis. "I'm glad to be rid of it," he says. "That particular organ won't be bothering me again."

"I knew something was wrong. I drove to your house, bud. You weren't answering your intercom. I considered climbing over the big gate but thought I might get myself impaled."

Reina visits Sam in hospital later that afternoon, with the gift of reading material: a biography of American astronomer Henrietta Swan Leavitt.

"This looked like you. No idea what it's like but maybe it'll keep your mind busy."

Sam wonders when Reina bought the hardback. "You didn't have to go to this trouble."

"Hey, I'll bring you a proper coffee tomorrow." She has deduced from the full cup on Sam's bed tray that the standard hospital concoction fell short.

Sam would love a good coffee, but Reina's already spent enough of her funds on him. He has no idea where she gets her money from. Personal savings, intermittent work. He hopes Reina's big sister helps her out. As CEO of her own clothing company, Mia Vandekus is one

of the few people Sam knows socially whose personal wealth probably approaches his own.

“Do you mind me showing up here like this?” Reina whispers.

“Of course not.” Sam is delighted to see her. Pain pills were working a little for Emma’s visit and, coinciding with Reina’s arrival, they must now be working at full capacity. Drugs amplify his gratitude for kind and funny company.

Meanwhile, Sam’s elderly room-mate snatched many furtive glances at Sam’s tall, broad-shouldered visitor in the floral print shift dress, probably out of naïve curiosity.

Reina recounts in detail her introductory yoga session, and why she won’t ever be showing her face there again. Sam winces as his stomach muscles work.

“Don’t make me laugh,” he says.

“Sorry. I’ll leave you in peace now.”

“I would like to see you again tomorrow,” Sam says, “if you won’t be too busy farting at yoga.”

“I swear, it was the mat!”

The following day Reina does bring Sam his mid-morning coffee. She also brings a paper bag of cookies, freshly baked by herself. The cookies are too much, the gesture too perfect. Sam can’t shake the notion that Reina is showing him the most generous, capable side of herself, as if she’s playing some long-game for the next admin opening at his firm.

As well as the cookies, Reina also brings her big sister Mia, whose interrogation of the cookies obviously began earlier in the car.

“Because of course womanhood is all about the cookies,” Mia

says.

“I don’t bake cookies because I’m a woman,” Reina tells her. “This is about men, and what men aren’t permitted to do.”

Sam feels Reina has a solid point, but Mia isn’t one for retractions. Mia seems far more comfortable dishing insults.

“Don’t think you’re special,” Mia tells Sam. “We didn’t make a trip out this way solely because you almost karked it. Happen we’re on our way to Sophie’s for our family lunch. Hate hospitals, me. Felt obliged to pop in, though.”

In truth, Sam is more comfortable with Mia’s twinkle-eyed insults than with Reina’s earnest generosity. When Reina laughs too exuberantly and spills a little chai on her sleeve, she excuses herself to clean up in the adjoining bathroom. The heavy door clicks shut behind her, leaving Sam alone with Mia.

Sam says quietly: “Do me a favour? Tell Reina not to buy things for me. It’s embarrassing.”

“Chill, my dude. It’s coffee. Makes you feel better, I paid for these myself.”

“Okay but not really. She gave me this yesterday.” Sam motions to the hardback.

“I’m the exact same. Hate people doing things for me. Remind me to never get sick. This situation would drive me mad.”

“I’m serious, Mia. Can you have a quiet word? She needs to let me pay for things, in general.”

“Trust me, I’ve had a word. Not about you, specifically. Those young flatmates of hers. I get it, they’ve been kicked out of their own homes. That was Reina once. Our father expelled her from the house

when she came out as gay at the Christmas dinner table. A petulant mistake. Fortunately I had my own digs by then, so sixteen-year-old Reina came to live with Bec and myself on the other side of town. I never did come out to the old man myself. But Reina confused the hell out of everyone when he, sorry — she — got an English girl pregnant at the age of eighteen and moved to the other side of the world.” Mia waves the whole thing away. “Long story short, I understand Reina’s need to give back, I really do, but those kids don’t reliably turn up when she’s cooked them a nutritionally balanced meal. Reina covers their utility bills, yet I rock up unannounced and catch them chowing down on an extra large bucket of KFC. And they don’t tidy up after themselves. I’ve had a word to Reina, mate, many a time. She isn’t taking advice from me. She misses her own kids on the other side of the world, needs to take care of someone. You’ll understand that, of course.”

“Sorry?”

“You’re the caregiver type.”

“What makes you say that?”

“No reason. Hey, tell me about your adorable new poodle.”

“Poodle cross. She’s, uh, small and brown.”

Conversation stalls as Reina flushes the loo.

“Anyway, this connection pleases me.” Mia waggles one finger between Sam and the bathroom. “My sister could do with someone like you.”

Before he is discharged, the doctor asks Sam if there’s someone at home to take care of him. He says yes, his wife, because he’s afraid they

won't set him free otherwise.

It is indeed Lisa who drives him home from the hospital with Loafie strapped into the back seat of her Benz. She's back from Christchurch and full of questions. She tries to persuade Sam to be a recovering out-patient at her house in Karori.

"You can sleep in the campervan," Lisa offers. "In the driveway, just like old times. I'll make chicken soup?"

Lisa doesn't do soup. Sam refuses. He also decides not to fill his just-in-case prescription for opiates. He liked those a little too much.

In the new year, Sam attempts spontaneity. He makes spur-of-the-moment plans for a beach walk, then sends a last minute SMS in case Reina is free to join him.

Regrettably, Reina's tied up. But if Sam's flexible, Reina, Anya and their young daughter Beth will meet him at a beach-front café for lunch.

Sam is not 'flexible'. However he has no Plan B which would serve to prevent this lunch from happening.

Sure, he replies.

Anya is friendly and laughs often. She wears a head scarf to tame thick, dark, curly hair. Her cotton dress is a cheerful print in citrus colours. Her chunky jewellery appears to be made of polymer clay. Reina wears similar beads, which Sam now understands must be Anya's influence.

Anya asks Sam after his dog, who he's had to leave at home. Sam is The Dog Person now.

Next, Anya asks after his appendectomy.

“Oh. Scar’s healing. Thanks.”

Beth sits in Anya’s lap, sucking on a hot chip. Sam is not sure what he’s meant to do when little Bethany extends a chubby hand, with dimples where knuckles should be, appearing to offer Sam her soggy morsel.

“Should I... take that?” he asks.

Reina laughs. “I wouldn’t.”

Anya asks Sam about astronomy.

“Ah...” Sam looks to Reina, digging delicately into a quiche. Reina’s told her everything.

“I’m just a hobbyist.”

“Good, because this is a hobbyist question.”

Sam girds his loins to talk about black holes or dark matter. Instead, Anya would like to ask Sam about aliens. “Do you reckon they’re out there? Say, if you had to put money on it?”

“I don’t know a lot about aliens,” Sam says.

“Wait.” Reina puts down her fork. Sam recognises a twinkle in her eye, which he’s seen many times in her sister, Mia. “That implies the existence of people who do know a lot about aliens. That, in turn, implies the existence of aliens.”

“Astrobiologists speculate,” Sam says. “I’ve read a few books, is all.”

“Then you know more than me,” Anya grabs a serviette because Bethany has painted the table with tomato sauce. “No one’s keeping anything hush-hush are they, X-Files style?” Like Reina, she suppresses a mischievous smile. Perhaps she is vetting Reina’s new

friend. Is Sam Dennon ‘a little bit into astronomy’ or ‘one wacko conspiracy theorist’?

“If we find extraterrestrial life, it’ll probably be goop. For the vast majority of Earth’s history, the only life here was microbial slime.”

“Got it. And what’s your hunch regarding intelligence?”

“We’re unlikely to find it. Our planet is too far-flung. Also, there may be some natural law whereby life exterminates itself soon after discovering nuclear power. Maybe we’re about as smart as life gets.”

“Dark.”

“Sorry.”

“No, this fascinates me.”

“I’m predisposed to darkness. Listen to nothing I say.”

Conversation shifts to the Fermi paradox. Sam conveys the current estimate of Earthlike planets in the observable universe. Reina has thoughts on the depiction of aliens in pop culture.

Eventually Anya says, “I rarely look up at night. I should do that more often, after a wicked hard day at work.”

Anya is a high school guidance counsellor. Sam can imagine a job such as that comprises nothing but hard days.

“I’ve wondered if astronomers are better equipped to keep earthly concerns in perspective,” Anya says. “What do you think of that, Sam? Does gazing at distant galaxies have a calming effect on you?”

No one has asked Sam this question. He could fib and simply say yes, or he could reveal more of his darkness by telling the truth: That he finds the universe lonely. All those solar systems, no sign of life. No advice, no solidarity, nothing. We’re alone on the pale blue dot, with our climate change and our sixth mass extinction and our precious

nuclear weaponry. Whenever Sam looks up at the stars, he means to remind himself he is not alone in his loneliness. We are all lonely here, every single last one of us, stuck on this far-flung, precarious planet. We are nothing more than blips in time, and nothing we contribute will ever endure.

Sam has somehow managed to sneak small bites of chicken burger between Anya's barrage of questions. Finally he's finished with his serviette. He doesn't want to impose, take up their entire afternoon.

But he's not getting away yet.

"Would you mind?" Anya asks Sam to hold the baby in his lap. Sam, of all people.

"If she fusses I'll relieve you. It's just, I wouldn't mind finishing this pasta before it gets cold."

"Uh... sure."

Anya confidently transfers Bethany from her own lap onto Sam's. For the first time, Sam considers the danger of the concrete below. He might drop her. He embraces her tiny body, pressing one palm against her soft-barrelled belly. Although he has never held a baby before, she smells unmistakably babylike. She's about the size of Loafie, but not at all the same. Sam had assumed babies and dogs pulled at the same heartstring, but this human on his lap makes his nose tingle in a startling new way. Aside from the odd socially driven intrusion into his personal space, he hasn't hugged a human in months — years — and now he embraces one, who leans into his chest, trusting him completely with her tiny, precious life.

Bethany can see her parents from this angle. That's probably why

she's not wailing.

But when Sam looks up, Reina is gone from the table. Anya tells him she's settling the bill. Sam had meant to pay, and now this baby has pinned him to the seat. "I wish she wouldn't do that," he says.

"I know, right."

Sam carries enough cash to cover himself if he loses his cards, or in case of situations like these. "Hand this to Reina later. Please?"

Anya nods and slips it away. "She won't want it, though. Reina's a very generous person. I wish she knew she doesn't need to be."

Sam already knows the extent of Reina's generosity. Apart from its material reality, anyone interested in friendship with Sam must be the generous type, because Sam is the founding member of his own Dull Men's Club, failing to contribute well-timed one-liners, failing to find the rhythm of reciprocal conversation, except when asked politely about an area of personal interest. Then he takes off, almost in spite of himself.

Perhaps the Ben Franklin effect is at play — that cognitive bias in which doing a favour for someone else makes you like them more. By visiting Sam in hospital, bringing him things as gifts, Reina must have convinced her own self that Sam is likeable.

Bethany leans forward in Sam's lap, grabbing another chip from the basket. Sam firms his grip. She burps adorably. Too adorably.

Finally Reina is back at the table. Sam stands up, arms out-thrust, returning Bethany to Reina for safe collection. Sam urgently requires the bathroom.

He doesn't need to empty his bladder. He only needs to collect himself.

Sam re-emerges from the men's into a café bustling with children; kids of all ages, from tots who can barely walk, to louder ones who argue with siblings, and older ones again, retreating into themselves, gazing into parallel lives on their phones. Not one of these children is his, but holding Beth has reminded Sam that possibilities for his life remain technically open. He could look for a woman who'll have a baby with him. If only he were the regular, baby-making type. Regular men make babies by accident. That happens all the time. Too many fathers hardly know their luck.

If only he could drive to a dark, rainy house in Johnsonville to collect a small child from a woman with cheek-studs named Mere. A child to keep for himself. He'd minimise responsibilities at work and become a stay-at-home dad.

“It was lovely to finally meet you, Sam,” Anya tells Sam as the family unit of three prepares to depart. “You’ve inspired me to look at the night sky.”

Reina and Anya walk away from the café in the opposite direction from Sam. Reina carries Bethany in a back-pack. Reina and Anya walk close enough to brush hands. Sam observes them for a lonely moment, warmed a smidge by Anya’s generous compliment, not because he feels it to be true, but because he knows it to be issued in kindness.

That night, as Sam washes his face, Reina buzzes him on the phone. She'd normally text. A call is unusual. Sam hurriedly towel-dries his face, preparing to ask if everything’s okay.

This is the very question Reina has for him. “You seemed a little

sad earlier."

"Sorry — no — I'm fine. Didn't mean to worry you. I enjoyed meeting Anya, and Beth."

"Anya feels the same. Guess I mention you frequently."

"Hope I wasn't a let down for her."

"You baffle me, bud, coming out with something like that."

Sam has baffled Reina? That's funny, because Sam Dennon, renowned hermit, is starting to feel seen. This terrifies Sam as much as it pleases him. Paying for lunch, calling later to check in. Reina can't possibly be genuine.



## MOVIE NIGHT

While Sam continues to recover from abdominal surgery he is unable to play tennis, so Reina suggests they watch a film at one of Wellington's arthouse theatres.

Sam hesitates. He never accepts a social invitation without psyching himself first. Besides, he only saw Reina last weekend.

More ominously, he does not enjoy theatres. Speakers are generally too loud. He must sit on shared fabric, ignore crinkled chip packets from ten rows back and, if anyone happens to be whispering, sibilants grate on his nerves. However, Reina has suggested a small, upmarket cinema with calming ambience, mature audiences and cleanish seats. Sam knows far too much about the structural integrity of this particular building. One of these days it'll be Wellington's turn for a devastating earthquake.

Really, though, the chances of calamity killing them during the exact one hour forty it takes to watch a French film is, logically, statistically, ridiculously negligible. Sam says yes to the film.

The cosy theatre is mostly empty. Sam counts six patrons, silhouetted under low light as Erik Satie's "Gymnopédie" plays softly.

Speaking of negligible chances: Brad Wilson from work is one of the six heads. Sam would know that oblong noggin anywhere, and considers immediate escape. Instead, he braces himself for dim-

witty and follows Reina as she navigates to good seats.

Sitting just two rows behind, Brad looks down at his phone. Brad's wife is another high-school teacher. It is Reina who speaks to Sonia first. Can she see the screen? If not, six foot four Reina offers to scooch over.

"Oh, I can see fine. Thank you, though. Wait... Sam?"

"Hi Sonia, how are you."

Brad looks up from his tiny screen. He takes a long moment to recognise Sam. Then he takes in Sam's companion. "Bloody hell, boss!" he finally says. "Fancy meeting you here!"

"We'd normally be playing tennis," Sam says, "except I'm on hiatus."

"Of course." Sonia asks politely after Sam's appendectomy.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" Brad chides Sam for his negligence.

Sam obliges. "Brad is one of our talented associates," he tells Reina.

"CAD monkey, more like."

Sam always dislikes this joke. Lisa, especially, goes out of her way to ensure all staff enjoy their fair share of stimulating work. So Sam deflects. "My friend Reina here is very good at tennis."

Again with the tennis. Sam needs everyone to know that he and Reina met at *tennis*. Reina is a *friend*. A *tennis* friend.

Lights go down, the movie begins. Until now, Sam has been mostly *en plein air* with Reina. Sam maintains a large personal space, and it would be rude to leave a seat between them, so now they must sit very close. At times Sam has wondered why people choose film

theatres for their romantic dates, not that this is a romantic date. It makes no logical sense, to sit in silence, each person enjoying their own movie experience. To spend time without speaking hardly affords opportunity to know a person better. But now Sam thinks he gets it. He feels Reina's presence. She sits with her elbows tucked in but Sam is in range of her perfume. He feels the warmth of her body. Theatres are all about the bodily proximity. That must be it. A movie forbids chit-chat. A theatre is functionally identical to a night-club, where chit-chat is equally impossible. This theatre is the middle-aged equivalent of that.

Sam is equally aware of Brad, slouching two rows behind, munching on popcorn. At this moment, bloody Brad will be putting two and two together, making five.

Sam does not enjoy the movie.

He's not the only one. "Jeez, that was a deadset punish," Brad says aloud, barely waiting for credits to start rolling.

"Hun, let others enjoy it."

Sonia must put up with a lot. Brad apologises and offers to buy Sam and Reina coffee at the adjoining bar, unless they're rushing off somewhere, that is.

Sam would rather stay up late recreating a door hardware schedule on unstable software than let Brad shout him coffee. Hell, he'd rather argue with an indecisive client about bathroom detail or chase unpaid invoices than let Brad shout him coffee.

But Reina seems amenable to the idea. She looks to Sam, who does not wish Reina to view him as an insufferable dullard.

So Sam gets the beverages in. He orders himself chamomile tea.

Reina and Sonia enjoyed the film and embark upon analysis of theme, symbolism, characterisation. As they speak, Sam realises the film was in fact very good. He failed to watch it in a generous frame of mind.

That said, Sam feels zero inclination to talk shop with Brad. The men sit awkwardly while the high school teachers do a close-reading.

Eventually the bubble convexes to include all four in conversation. Brad is clearly keen to engage with Reina. He has been observing her closely.

Over the few months since Sam has gotten to know Reina himself, Sam has forgotten what it was like at first, to notice the juxtapositions. Sam has since quit this habit, but Brad reminds him of his own erstwhile tendency to inventorise ‘feminine’ versus ‘masculine’ things about his friend: Her height (masculine), her speaking voice (ambiguous), the size of her hands (masculine), her many chunky rings (feminine)... For Sam, the novelty of gender juxtaposition has worn off and was never the most interesting thing about Reina anyway. Now it’s Brad’s turn to disaggregate Reina’s parts as if compiling a hardware schedule. He observes Reina too carefully, eyes darting between hands and face, then frequently over to Sam, who sips on his tea, hoping Brad will clock his dark look and remain silent.

Brad must think he has sussed the situation out. He decides to do his boss a solid by bigging him up to his ‘date’. “Samuel here is a gifted architect,” he tells Reina, apropos of nothing. “People wait years for this guy to design their homes.”

Only Sam knows the truth behind his reputation: That Lisa deserves full credit for interpreting what clients really want. Sam, on his own, has never understood the quirks of desire.

“I’ve seen Sam’s house,” Reina tells Brad. “Impressive talent.”

Shit. Brad finds this a little too interesting. “You’re one of the fortunate few. None of us at work has seen it yet. He’s cagey, this one. Full of surprises.”

Sam is pretty sure Sonia slaps Brad’s leg under the table, because Brad looks startled at his wife then takes a loud sip of froth.

Afterwards, Sam walks Reina back to her car.

“It was nice to meet your friends,” Reina says.

Sam thinks she might even mean it. “Brad’s a workmate.”

“Oh. Sorry, Sam. Should I have—”

“No, no. It’s fine. He’s a decent architect.” That’s the one thing Sam appreciates about the guy.

Reina has parked her Subaru under a streetlight.

“Thank you for escorting me, sir.”

“If push came to shove, you’d be kicking butts for us both.”

Reina drops her voice, a party trick Sam attributes to vocal training, and many years as a music teacher. “Come on mate, hop in.”

Then she drives Sam round the corner, where he is safely dispatched next to his own car.

For the rest of the week Sam works from home, avoiding interrogation from Brad Wilson.

But on the following Monday Brad coincides with Sam in the staff kitchen. Sam eats lunches late, mostly to avoid chat. Today he’s lost track of time. His lunch overlaps with Brad’s mid-afternoon coffee. Really, he has only himself to blame for this grinding, steaming racket behind him. It was his own idea to get a bean machine,

meaning to avoid the landfill waste of pods.

Brad decides to drink his frothy coffee at the table with Sam when he should be taking the damn thing back to his own desk, or literally anywhere else. “It was great to meet Reina on Tuesday night,” the guy says.

“Mm.” Sam fills his entire mouth with quinoa.

Brad takes one of his long, annoying sucks of froth, then does that thing with his lips. “Ah. That’s the ticket.”

When Sam fails to offer further information about Reina, Brad decides to shove off. “Better get back to it, then.”

If only Brad had asked him straight, “So, you’re seeing someone? Let’s double date again sometime!”

If Brad had said something like that, he’d have gifted Sam the opportunity to counter with, “No, it’s not like that at all. We’re friends. **JUST FRIENDS.**”

What happens in reality is this: Sam becomes aware of a tacit misunderstanding, shared across the office and surely beyond. Sam Dennon is quietly dating a lovely tall blonde woman now. They’ve been spotted together all around Wellington.

By the time another associate invites the entire office to his fiftieth birthday party and encourages Sam to bring his new partner, Sam doesn’t bother to correct him.

Sam would rather spend an evening on invoices than go to Colin’s fiftieth, which is exactly what he does. It’s only one of those obligatory invites anyway, the kind you extend to your boss. But if he *were* to attend a shindig like that, he *might* take Reina, actually. She would shine. But Sam would have to confess to Reina beforehand that

everyone thinks they're dating now, and sorry about that, but he hasn't seen fit to issue a memo of correction. That is a conversation he's not prepared to have.

Which is why Sam spends Saturday night in his home office, with Loafie warming his feet.

Lisa texts to ask where he is.

Christ Almighty MYOB, he texts back.

Lisa returns the most annoying emoji ever invented: the winking face.

## JANUARY 2016

Earth travels 940 million kilometres; another lap around the Sun. Sam is known to work consecutive seventy hour weeks, even over Christmas and New Year. Then he goes off-radar for days.

One morning in January, Loafie paw-waves good morning to everyone as the dog-man-duo make their way past Emma at reception, then past everyone else's work station. Loafie doesn't seem to mind Sam manipulating her front leg like this. This little rigmarole saves Sam having to ask after everyone's family.

Lisa lets Sam make himself a cup of tea before joining him in his office. She shuts the door behind her and launches into their briefing.

Eventually Lisa yawns, signalling a mental shift from workplace to private. "So. Caltech researchers have found evidence of a ninth planet," she says.

Sam nods.

"You know this already, of course."

“Mm-hm. But I didn’t know you were keeping up with astronomy news.”

“I subscribe to a feed. Apparently this thing is ten times bigger than Earth but astronomers can’t see it yet. They only know it’s there because of gravity, or something?”

“That’s my understanding.”

“How beautifully symbolic. Must be a metaphor.”

“Huh?”

Lisa shifts in her seat and shoots Sam some kind of look. “I was chatting to Reina after aerobics yesterday. Noticed the paperback in her gym bag, almost invited her to book club. Then I thought, better check with Sam first.”

Sam returns a minuscule shrug.

“Maybe you’d prefer a friend all to yourself. Not everything needs to intersect now, does it. I wouldn’t want to barrel in.”

“Invite whoever you want to book club, I don’t care.”

Lisa dips her chin, regarding him suspiciously. “Reina mentioned she’s been spending time on your tennis court. She helped plant out your garden, you’ve been going on regular bush walks. You two have been seen, Mr Dennon, gadding about town, frequenting movie theatres, strolling through the Botanical Gardens, licking ice-creams on The Esplanade—”

“No one is ‘gadding’.”

“Sammy. Come on.”

“What?”

“A year ago you tried to crack on you barely knew each other. Then you were strongly against hiring her. What was that about?”

“What are you asking me, exactly?”

“Look, I understand your need for privacy. I just didn’t expect you to be so very private with me, of all people. It hurts a bit, to be honest. For all my past sins, I’ve always been up front with *you*.”

“You’re offended because I don’t tell you every single thing I do outside work?”

“Ah, nope. I’m not asking for details. But if someone important were to enter your life, I’d expect you to at least mention it. I’d want to share in your joy. I prefer to know you’re being looked after.”

Lisa snaps her laptop shut and stands up.

It’s not like that, he could say. Except no one believes the truth, not even Lisa, of all people. *The gentleman doth protest too much*, she might reply.

Unimaginative people are irritating. They can’t fathom a simple friendship might exist between someone like himself and someone like Reina, consistently the object of everyone’s gaze simply for leaving the house as herself. Perhaps this is Sam’s own well-muscled anxiety-imagination working overtime again, but lately people seem different in Sam’s presence. His lengthy stretch as the ambiguously divorced singleton weirdo has come to an end. He feels invited back into the comfortable folds of *The Common Man*, where he is partnered and happy, or at least decipherable. Staff and long-time colleagues appear to relax around him these days. They ask about his weekend, tell him about theirs, confident, perhaps, that Sam Dennon is no longer pining after his ex-wife, the gorgeous Lisa Willis, who everyone knows left Sam for their business lawyer, Graham Purdy, all those years ago. After taking in the vision that is Reina, people assume they bear witness to

Sam's secret self.

But only Lisa has had a glimpse of Sam's secret self. And Lisa wasn't having it. Now she thinks she's uncovered the mystery of Sam — Sam's Planet 9 is Reina, or some crap like that.

Not counting Lisa, Reina is Sam's first genuine friendship since high school. Now that he's had a reminder of easy company, and how much nicer bush walks can be when you have someone to chat with, those empty intervening years seem more desolate than before. But when Reina isn't giving Sam heart-squeeze, she's giving him anxiety. Sometimes he'd prefer an entire month of weekends to himself, but doesn't want to suggest he's not interested in friendship. Friendship has a cadence to it, and Sam's natural rhythm cannot serve as reliable guide for forging a new connection. He might normally last months on his own, content in the knowledge that he has a friend in the wings if he should suddenly require one. But now, when he doesn't get a text for a week he starts to worry for Reina's health and well-being. Or perhaps it's himself who's been insufficiently communicative and she's dropped him off her list. Friendship is a series of exhausting trade-offs.

And here's Lisa, Queen of Exhausting People, still in his office. She's smiling in some new and indecipherable way.

"Leaving already?" Sam motions to the door.

"Relax. I won't invite anyone to book club."

# **SAM & REINA'S ROADTRIP**

**WELLINGTON-TAUPŌ**

**EARLY NOVEMBER 2016**

Sam will be driving to Taupō for an on-site consultation with new clients. He has three good reasons for inviting Reina along.

One, he's barely seen her lately. She's busy at uni, retraining as a music therapist. Reina will be great, leading community singing groups, working with Autistic kids, or demonstrating gentle dance movements at retirement homes.

Two, Sam won't be seeing Reina over summer, either. She's sacrificing her New Zealand summer for a winter with family in the UK.

Three, Sam remembers Reina has a friend up near Taupō, somewhere in King Country. Reina ditched Sam for a guy called Andy that one time.

That's why he asked, at the last minute, if Reina might like to come to Taupō for the ride, to meet up with her friend, if she likes.

"I would love that."

Reina's straight-forward enthusiasm is always a relief. Sam has become less suspicious of it over time, no longer considering it a performance. If she didn't like him, she surely wouldn't come.

Sam asks more about this Andy fellow, meaning to deduce where Reina would like to stay. Perhaps he could drop her off somewhere.

“My King Country King is a large personality in a tiny town,” Reina explains. “He may be able to meet us in the relative obscurity of Taupō. Whether he can or not, I’ll join you at the motel.”

Sam doesn’t ask further details.

They reach the motel around mid afternoon. Sam offers to check them both in at reception while Reina waits in the car. His reasoning: Sam can quietly put both rooms on his card and hear no more about it. But once at the counter he worries Reina may mistake his motives, assuming he’d prefer to avoid the semi-public spectacle of checking in overnight with her.

Back in the car, Sam hands Reina a keycard to her room. Reina tries to hand Sam a bunch of fifties.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Let me pay for my own room, bud.” Then Reina tries to stuff the cash into his breast pocket. She fails. “Fine, I’ll leave it in your glove box.”

This car would already be a burglar’s dream. Sam’s packed his drone, his distance meter, his camera and various other equipment for his site visit. After moving in to their respective rooms he leaves Reina on her own. He gets back into the overly-familiar warm car and lets GPS navigate him to the building site. His clients have chosen a magnificent spot. He’ll be meeting them face-to-face here tomorrow. Alone with his thoughts, he will spend the afternoon doing a recce: exploring at leisure, taking photos, making sketches.

Sam returns to the motel around six. The light is on in Reina’s room.

He considers knocking, to ask if she'd like to eat dinner with him. Then he hears voices and laughter coming from inside. The friend must be with her. That must be Andy's golden Ford Ranger occupying the parking spot outside Reina's suite. He'll leave them alone.

Sam retreats to his own room, opens his laptop and transfers photos from his SLR to view on the screen. He has learned over the years that gazing into embiggened photos is an important part of his design process. Digital photos can be blown up, flipped around, cropped into new dimensions. Each time he revisits a photo, he finds — or imagines — something new. He's been into photography since high school, and still can't believe the generosity of Mick and Jan, always enthusiastic about his hobby, paying to develop rolls and rolls of film, shot after shot of architectural detail, listening to his descriptions, which must have bored them to tears. Except when prompted by Jan on special occasions, Sam never thought to snap photos of people. Clearing Mick's house after the funeral three years ago, Sam huffed out many precious shots of doorways cast in shadow, which no longer seemed arty at all. He felt embarrassed for his younger self, and his own unbridled passions which must have annoyed his friends, as well. The friends had not been immortalised in any of Sam's photos.

Earlier, on the Desert Road, Reina told Sam about Andy.

“We were friends in high school. Andy was two years ahead but we knew each other through orchestra.”

Sam is not even sure if he would recognise the faces of his own high school friends. Sam, Crispin and Hoyt. The trio were introduced by a lunch-duty teacher who found Sam hiding up a tree, out of

bounds, then shepherded the tiny year seven to the relative safety of maths club.

Sam could look up his school friends using motel Wi-Fi, except Sam is an excellent compartmentaliser. Once they all finished high school, that part of his life really did end. Why fold time and puncture it? The pleating sensation almost hurts.

Still, he'd half like to know how they're doing. His fingers hover at the keyboard.

**1986-91**

**BOYS' GRAMMAR**

**MELBOURNE**

Hoyt Fleming is the only kid shorter than Sam in the whole school, but unlike Sam, Hoyt seems to have a medical condition which caused that. He has trouble turning his head quickly. His arms are disproportionately long. Hoyt brings hummus sandwiches every day for lunch, and if he can't swap them for something better he throws them from the maths club classroom window where they land on the adjoining first floor roof. He flings them cling wrap and all. This bothers Sam, who eventually persuades Hoyt to at least take the plastic off so birds can safely clean up the bread.

Crispin Saunders is as tall and skinny as Hoyt is stocky and short. When Sam thinks of Crispin he thinks of a crisp biscuit, though

Crispin's mother named him after the dog in her favourite children's book, not after biscuits.

Sam is surprised to learn that Crispin is no good at maths. He is only good at flute. He hides out at maths club to avoid the playground. Sadly for Crispin, he doesn't even enjoy the flute. He'd love to cast it aside, except participation in orchestra justifies his scholarship. Crispin's mother can't afford this school without it. Crispin lives with his mother in a two-bedroom flat. His mum often works evening-shift as a supermarket check-out supervisor.

Sam, Hoyt and Crispin become a friendship trio, thrust together due to their shared outcast status. Sam couldn't say how, even outside Mangleby, everyone understands he is one of life's outcasts, though he recognises fellow outcasts himself. Crispin is considered a 'homo' for reasons he can't seem to help. Hoyt's medical condition marks him out as different, but Hoyt is an outcast mainly for being mean. He has an unpleasant competitive streak and complains about every last thing. He deserves his moniker, 'Hoik Phlegm', because instead of using a tissue, the guy blocks one nostril with a forefinger and blows giant globs of snot onto the stairs, hoping someone he hates will slip and fall to their death. Hoyt hates most people.

Sam types into his laptop. "Hoyt Fleming", image search.

A headshot. Hoyt hasn't changed, except to look more dapper in his middle age. Sam would've guessed 'programmer'. Not far off. The guy's a data analyst. He moved from Melbourne to Sydney. That's all Sam learns from a LinkedIn profile, and is all he wants to know about Hoyt.

“Crispin Saunders”. Another easily searchable name.

Sam types the letters but can't press enter. He can't bear to learn what happened to Crispin.

The following day in Taupō, Sam meets with his clients on site before returning to the motel late afternoon.

Someone knocks with playful rhythm on his door. Reina's back from her day of tourist-ing. “Mind if I come in?”

Sam has just showered. He glances around his motel room for anything he doesn't want seen: Folded underpants on full display, that sort of thing. One good thing about motel rooms, though, they reveal virtually nothing of the self. This room is a duplicate of Reina's room two doors down. “Sure. Come on in.”

She flops onto a sofa, makes herself at home. “Productive day?”

Sam sits on the chair opposite. “Great site, adventurous clients. I'm excited about this one.”

Reina asks various questions about that. Sam doesn't tell Reina he only spent the morning there, and that he later called in at an art gallery, where he purchased three wall-sized paintings for his own house: expensive oil artworks he's been admiring on the Internet for months. Inspired by the blues and greens of the lake, these abstract beauties feel Earth-bound and otherworldly at once. And now they're his, arriving in Upper Hutt by light truck next week.

“And what did you get up to?” he asks Reina instead.

Lots of walking, she explains in some detail. Lakeside tracks. Magnificent views. She met some German tourists.

“You walked all day?”

"I stopped at a bakery, had a salad roll for lunch. A beautiful, relaxing day."

"I'm glad you're relaxed because, as it happens, I have an idea."

"Oh?"

Sam draws a deep breath. He rehearsed the wording in the shower. In fact, he's been preparing for this proposition since stopping in at the visitor information centre around lunchtime. It would be easy to mess it up, to strike the wrong note.

"Not sure if you have prior commitments this Monday," he begins, "but I was wondering if you'd like to stay an extra day here in Taupō?"

"Okaay..."

"I checked the forecast, weather's looking great tomorrow. It'd be a shame to waste such a fine day inside the car. Just a thought," he says, as if his brain hasn't been looping on this, "but I wondered if you'd like to see some geothermal attractions with me. There's a boat. They do day-trips."

He pauses to hand Reina a glossy brochure.

Reina accepts it, flips it open, sees the price.

This is where Sam says the next part. "Obviously, this weekend is an unplanned expense, on your part, not on mine. So my shout, obviously, if this is something you'd like to do. And the extra night's accommodation and everything, if you'll let me just stick everything on my card."

There. He's floated it, exactly as rehearsed, with pauses in the pre-planned places.

"Sam, I can't let you pay for something like this."

“Of course you can. The question is, would you like to come with me? That’s the only thing to consider. Don’t think about anything else.”

Reina looks for a moment longer at the pamphlet, then leans forward and places it gently on the coffee table between them. “That’s an incredibly generous offer. You know, it’s funny. If this were a romantic getaway I’d probably let you. Reluctantly, but I’d let you.”

“Think of it like that, then.” Sam has gone off script now, because he had not anticipated Reina’s reply.

She looks at him with renewed interest.

“Oh, no, I never meant this trip as a romantic thing.” On a dime, Sam hates this conversation to its core. “That was unclear. Sorry. Just trying to make a point about arbitrary relationship distinctions.”

“Romance is subjective.” Reina doesn’t go further with that. “I do have piano tutoring on Mondays starting at three thirty. But I could resched—”

“Oh, well, there you go. Consider that a spur-of-the-moment mind fart on my part. Doesn’t matter.”

“I was about to say, I could stay another day with you. I’m up for something fun together. I’d love that. I’ll pay my own way, but could we maybe do a bush walk or something instead? Alternatively, I could stay somewhere a little less fancy than here tomorrow night.”

Sam knows how to fill days on a shoestring budget but, for him, the desire to extend the weekend has gone. He hates the idea of Reina dipping into funds which were never intended for tourist frivolities. Also, despite his best efforts to appear spontaneous and exciting, Sam is not a spur-of-the-moment person. He has not prepared mentally

for the labour of negotiation. He doesn't want a conversation about tourist activities and cheaper accommodation, not when he and his travelling companion are on vastly different budgets.

"Sam?"

"I didn't mean to spring a last minute change of plan on you. Keep your Monday appointment. We can do this some other time."

This is bullshit, of course. When Sam was young he genuinely believed that opportunities for re-dos and revisits stretched endlessly before him. He's past that age now. There will only be the one beautiful November weekend here in Taupō with Reina. And still, he cannot bring himself to re-negotiate the terms of their extra day. He'd rather cancel it. This is precisely the sort of self-defeating crap that pisses Lisa off.

"It's okay," Sam says, "forget I mentioned it."

Sam feels Reina's gaze boring into him, trying to figure him out.

"I don't expect anything in return." That just pops out of him.

"I've never thought you did, Sam."

"Sorry."

If only Reina would laugh at him, or do something to lighten the mood, like she normally does. Sam tries laughing at himself. It doesn't sound convincing.

Sensibly, Reina changes the subject. "Hungry for dinner?"

"Ah, sure. Do you have plans with anyone?"

"With Andy, you mean?"

"With Andy, yes."

"He's tied up all day. But! Speaking of him, he'd like to pop in again tomorrow before we head off, to say goodbye if we're not leaving

too early. I told him I'd ask you about that.”

“We can leave any time tomorrow.”

Reina suggests fish and chips for dinner, at a picturesque spot she found near the lake. She is keen for Sam to experience the view. Sam is relieved to avoid further discussion regarding shared plans.

“Shall we mosey on down, then?” Reina has left her walking sandals on the doormat. She's wearing her polar fleece top for the evening breeze, and her cross-body bag.

“I need a few minutes,” Sam says.

“No rush.”

Reina admires flowers in the planted boxes outside while Sam makes a private phone call. He cancels the dinner reservation for two, booked earlier at one of Taupō's finest restaurants.

What was he thinking. Those romantic restaurants, with their mood lighting and erotically charged atmospheres, are not for people like him.

The following morning, Sam gets up early for a jog. Away from his usual route, he must decide where to turn at every intersection. The small burden of decision-making interrupts his usual meditative lope. He misses the company of Loafie padding along beside him.

Lisa should activate the Don't Disturb functionality on her phone if she doesn't want to be awoken by a ping from Sam just after six, stretching his quads and asking how Loafie slept. Lisa was awake anyway.

“I gave up,” she tells Sam in her croaky morning-voice. “I tried shutting her in the laundry and she sooked like a baby. Long story

short, your rotten little dog-daughter slept in bed with me. Graham's in the spare bedroom."

"Tell Graham I'm very sorry about that."

"Sure you are. You spoil this dog rotten, Sam. How the hell do you get any sleep? I woke up on the edge of the bed, with one smelly paw pushing into my face."

"Her feet do smell," Sam agrees, "but in a good, doggy kind of way."

"You are irredeemably smitten."

Sam chuckles and hangs up.

Now for a 'shit, shower and shave', as Uncle Mick would've put it. After his bathroom routine, Sam packs his suitcase for departure, checks under the motel bed for forgotten items, and by 7:20 he's ready to hit the road. He didn't worry about waking Lisa, but wonders now if he dare disturb Reina. Upon the return from his jog, he noticed the golden Ford Ranger parked outside Reina's room.

He sits on the edge of the bed.

Reina calls Sam at eight on the dot. She invites him to her room for breakfast. Sam doesn't want to be rude. But he also doesn't want to intrude.

"Come over! Meet Andy."

Sam doesn't feel the need to meet Andy but two minutes later the guy is welcoming Sam into Reina's room. Reina introduces Sam to the only person in the whole of New Zealand taller than Reina, and three times the girth. He's shaved his entire head to a shiny nub, probably as a sensible but high-maintenance response to male pattern baldness. This isn't who Sam was imagining, though Sam couldn't tell you who,

exactly, he was imagining. Andy looks like a manly man, a retired boxer perhaps, until he opens his mouth.

“Breakfast is served!” Andy extends the word ‘served’ into at least three syllables, ending the sentence as one might end Rigoletto.

As instructed, Sam sits at the small circular table in front of a full English. Reina and Andy have cooked in the kitchenette — a half dozen eggs, short cut bacon, a bottle of orange juice split into three glasses. Fried tomatoes, mushrooms, sliced avocado. Sam has barely digested last night’s greasy takeaway followed by poppyseed cake from the supermarket. This little lot will sit heavy in his gut for the car ride home.

“Hope you’re famished.” Reina hands Sam a knife and fork.

Across from Reina and Andy, Sam feels tiny. If he were to pull his chair comfortably in to the table, all six of their knees would be knocking together.

“Reina’s told me many nice things about you.” Andy has already shaken hands with Sam at the door, so this is belabouring the introduction. He must be one of those people who goes out of his way to make others feel important. Andy is big on eye-contact. Sam finds people like this unsettling. Not in a bad way; he simply doesn’t know how to be with them.

Andy turns to Reina, mock affronted. “You did not prepare me for how handsome he is.”

Reina smiles as if chastising a toddler.

“Those deep blue eyes. Debonair. Cary Grant! That’s it!”

Sam has heard the Cary Grant comparison before, but only from his adoring Auntie Jan.

Reina says, “Sam won’t be loving your aesthetic admiration, Andrew. Dial it down to maybe, ten per cent of... this?”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” There’s nothing sarcastic in Andy’s dramatised apology. He really does seem to think he’s made some giant faux pas. “Sam, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. Oh no, I see it in your face. I have clearly overstepped.”

Reina ignores Andy and addresses Sam instead. “I must now apologise for Andy’s over-the-top apology. Ignore him. He means well.”

“I do. I really *do*.” Then Andy drops the pitch of his voice, mimicking a farming lout, or perhaps this is simply his public-facing, mask-on self: “When you’re built like a brick shithouse, with the face of a dropped pie, you tend to notice the pretty blokes.”

This makes Reina splutter with laughter into a serviette.

Sam decides to crack a joke of his own. “I’ve always worried I look like Stalin.”

“Stalin? The dictator? What? Noo.” Andy regards Sam for a moment then puts down his knife and fork. “Excuse my phone at the table. Siri, give me some photos of Stalin.”

*Here are some images of Stalin from the Web.*

“You don’t look like him at all.”

“I mean before Stalin was Stalin.”

“Siri, what did Stalin look like young?”

*Here’s what I found.*

“Oh. Oh yes. Oh dear, wow. I’m having a complicated and uncomfortable reaction to this photo of young Stalin, and also to the young Stalin sitting across the table.”

“Show me that.” Reina tilts Andy’s phone. She sees the Internet photo and laughs. “Just don’t grow a beard, Sam.”

Andy is fanning his face with one hand. “This is very wrong. Very wrong of me.”

Reina tries to shift the conversation towards something more comfortable for Sam. “Apparently Joseph Stalin was big into movies,” she says. “But he couldn’t abide kissing on screen. So he made film-makers edit it out.”

“Unforgivable,” Andy exclaims. “That guy really was a sociopath.”

“That’s the line?” Reina asks. “Not the genocide, etcetera?”

“Can’t abide kissing? That’s all the evidence we need!”

Sam feels that familiar furling. He decides to stay quiet.

Banter continues. Andy and Reina play with the impressive range of their voices, revelling in mimicry. They could have saved some cooking effort and met in a café for breakfast, but here they are in a private motel room, preparing their own food because here they are free to be totally themselves. Sam feels the privilege of proximity, invited into their inner sanctum where they each feel seen, connected and cherished. But he also feels ill-equipped to join in. He does not begrudge Reina’s time spent with Andy one bit. He may lack the jealousy gene. But it is starkly painful to realise, once again, how he longs to be a part of something like this. He would love to find his person, whoever that might be.

He wouldn’t know how to begin the search. Sam’s immense powers of spatial imagination are feeding him specific, tantalising details of this house he’s been contracted to design. And when it comes to catastrophising Sam’s imagination gets a different kind of

workout. But when it comes to a future re-partnering for himself, imagination fails. With that task, he experiences a perplexing offshoot of aphantasia. Who is Sam's person? Who would be content to hold him close but also allow distance?

Sam would like to offer something light and friendly to demonstrate no hard feelings regarding Andy's attempts to joke with him. He might ordinarily ask a new acquaintance what he does for a living, but that is none of his business. Andy is wearing a gold wedding ring. Sam might ask about family. Folk do love to yak on about their families. But that could be a no-go as well. He draws a blank, understanding that this is one of those conversations in which participants tacitly agree to make surface level contributions: compliments, jibes, jokes. Back in high school, conversations were nothing but this. Teenage Sam remained a silent, baffled observer. As an adult, Sam has managed to avoid such ribbing altogether. Sam is a serious type and people intuit this about him. He's probably been the downer in many an otherwise light-hearted conversation.

Unfortunately for Sam, he's not about to understand most of Reina and Andy's in-jokes, despite their efforts to include him. As the comfortable pair talk and laugh, Sam reviews his distorted take on the high school years. Shit-talking plays an important social function. Those boys in school, they weren't just jostling for their place on the social hierarchy. They were genuinely enjoying themselves. Conversational play was never meant to be left behind in adolescence. There's a kinder, gentler, grown-up version, and this is what it looks like.

"Impressive breakfast, compliments to the chefs," Sam manages

eventually, interrupting their flow.

Andy playfully bows. “It is a great honour to finally cook for my silverscreen idol, the debonair Mr Cary Stalin.”

“Oh, is this a mid-century breakfast?” Reina asks. “I should have dressed as Holly Golightly.”

Sam remains stuck on ‘debonair’, whose etymology he happens to know; useless information probably gleaned from a word history book Della kept for years next to the toilet. The word comes from Anglo-French *deboneire*, literally ‘of good family or nature’, from a time when heredity meant everything.

Of good family. That’s not how he’d describe himself at all.

Sam keeps this etymological tidbit to himself. In half an hour he and Reina will be leaving Taupō, leaving Reina’s King Country friend to wave goodbye from his own car as he stops beside them at an intersection, then heads in the opposite direction. For half an hour of his life, Sam can be ‘debonair’.

## THE DESERT ROAD

### SOUTHBOUND

"I can relieve you of the driving, bud. If you trust me with your Lexus."

Sam agrees to Reina taking the wheel. He pulls to a gentle stop on a safe strip of verge. They get out and stretch, then swap seats. Sam explains how to readjust the seat for longer legs.

Reina is a calm and confident driver. They settle into a companionable silence. The weather really is beautiful today. If Sam hadn't been such a lamentable turd they could be enjoying a boat trip.

A black ute overtakes them at speed. Round a slight bend, blue and red lights flash on the verge. A cop has pulled the speedster over.

Reina says nothing, so Sam keeps his schadenfreude trap shut. If he'd been alone in the car he'd have said, aloud, "Serves you right." But Reina is here, and she is a kinder person.

Or perhaps she's simply immersed in her own thoughts. "Andy saved my life once," she says.

"Oh?"

"Even in high school, Andy saw the real me. We've always kept in touch. His nana gave him money for his twenty-first. He was meant to put it towards a car or something, but he blew it on an expensive hotel room. I didn't want him to waste his money on me. But he spent every cent. He bought me clothing and make-up. He strode into the ladies' section at DEKA, gathered an armload of make-up and nail varnish and clothes like it was the most ordinary thing in the world, I bet. Then he took that feminine haul back to the hotel room and dressed me up. He admired the heck out of me until I truly felt beautiful."

Sam wonders if Reina will continue. Then he understands. This is all the story he's getting. "Gosh. You had me there for a sec. I thought you meant Andy literally saved your life."

“I do mean that literally, Sam.”

Sam closes his eyes, against the glare of the sun. He wishes desperately for a time jump, a body swap. He wishes to be that person for Reina, to tell her those things, to buy her those things. He would do that for Reina; he knows this to his core, if that’s all he had to do.

## REINA’S HOUSE

### WELLINGTON

#### LATER THAT AFTERNOON

Sam drops Reina off in her driveway. He chivalrously lifts her luggage from his boot.

“Thank you for inviting me,” she says.

“Sorry it wasn’t better.”

Reina looks puzzled.

“We could’ve enjoyed an extra day, if I were a flexible person.”

“We’ll make other times,” Reina says. “We won’t be seeing each other for a few months though, you know.”

“Have fun in England, with your family.”

“Hey, you were a little quiet in the car.”

“Tired, I guess.”

With Reina driving along the highway Sam had cranked his seat back, finally relaxed, almost asleep. At which point Reina asked:

“What were you like in high school?”

“High school? I was shorter, skinnier. Better knees, a deep 1980s tan and nothing much to say, I guess.”

“Did you have a high school girlfriend?”

“My school was single-sex.” This means nothing. Many of Sam’s classmates managed to find girlfriends somehow.

“Sam? Did you like any of the boys?”

“I married a woman, obviously. You’ve met Lisa.”

“Yeah, well. For me it’s about the person.” There’s a shrug in Reina’s voice.

“It’s the poodle, isn’t it. If I ever do come out as gay, a swathe of interested parties will be collecting big on long-standing bets.”

This had amused Reina. “I’m only trying to work you out, bud. You hold your cards so close to your chest.”

After that, Sam had stayed quiet, pretending to sleep, mulling over his personal deficiencies in the relationship department. Unlike Reina, Sam has failed to maintain a single long-term friendship. Reina seems to have kept all of hers.

If Sam’s friendship history predicts the future, this doesn’t bode well for himself and his newish friend, who stands before Sam in her driveway, clearly baffled by his folded arms, his impatient glance down the street, by his hurried getaway.

## The Space Ace of Mangleby Flat

**Part Three:**

**SAM AS A**

**YOUNG FOGY**



# CARD GAMES

MELBOURNE/NAARM

EARLY DECEMBER 1990

Seventeen-year-old Sam spends intervals at high school on a form bench between the caretaker's house and a mysterious locked room. Hoyt and Crispin insist the room is a torture chamber. Sam tells them it's the boiler. High school is intimidating enough without the gory stories.

This morning, Sam and Hoyt try to finish hot apple pies before the next class. Crispin rarely eats. He is especially maudlin this morning, owing to a mandatory social event. "You scoundrels are coming to Amelia's with me," he says. "These gatherings are positively demonic."

Sam blows onto his pastry. "I wouldn't recommend a future in sales, Crispy."

Hoyt declares a prior engagement, which surprises Sam and Crispin both. Where there are girls, there is Hoyt. But Hoyt's parents are driving him to Woollongong for a family thing this weekend, departing straight after school.

Crispin turns to Sam. "Amelia's house has an attic."

This is an obvious appeal to Sam's fascination for houses which stretch up and down beyond the usual bounds. Sam has only ever seen attics in movies, and although he's explored his aunt and uncle's

ceiling cavity by climbing up a ladder and through the man-hole, there's nothing up there but insulation, wooden beams, an empty box of rat poison, and sporting items from Mick's youth which Jan doesn't appreciate cluttering up the house. Sam would like to see a proper attic. He imagines a sloped ceiling, sunbeams filtering through cracks and mysterious objects draped in sheets.

Crispin's mother drops Sam and Crispin on the grass verge in front of Amelia's — whoever Amelia is. The house is a new build in Toorak, Georgian style.

As usual, Crispin ignores Sam's architectural commentary. "Brace yourself," he warns, pressing the door bell.

"Did you boys not bring your swimmers?" Amelia's mother looks them up and down in the entrance hall. Aside from the plate of handmade party pies Sam has brought from his Auntie Jan, they've come empty handed, without swimming gear. Sam stands there looking awkward and preppy, whereas Crispin is a recently-converted Goth.

"We're both allergic to chlorine," Crispin explains. This hasn't worked for him in P.E., but for some reason works now.

"Oh, that's too bad! You poor things. Fancy that, born in Australia and allergic to swimming pools!"

Sam is uncomfortable with Crispin's terrible lie. He should at least stick to 'skin sensitivity'. 'Allergy' is overdoing it. But Crispin won't take his shirt off. Other boys call him 'Ribsy' at school, among other names. Crispin fibs frequently these days. He doesn't flinch. Case in point: The lie by omission. He never told Sam this was a pool

party.

Five teenage girls populate the back garden, three wrapped in towels and reclining on deck chairs. Another two splash about in the pool. Sam would've liked a dip in that sparkling blue water.

"Make yourselves at home," instructs Amelia's mother, "and help yourselves to the nibblies."

Crispin never eats when he's out, but Sam is extra hungry these days. He's having a growth spurt. Sam won't disturb the symmetry of perfectly arranged food: tiny ham sandwiches, chocolate-dipped strawberries, and tiny sausages in pastry. Auntie Jan calls those things 'pigs in blankets'. To Sam they are horribly reminiscent of dismembered body parts. So he and Crispin simply sit down, by coincidence in unison, onto the flat portion of a single outdoor lounge.

The girls find this hilarious.

"Who's your friend, Crisp-o?"

"Sam, Amelia. Amelia, Sam."

"Hi, Sam," the girls say, as if rehearsed at choir practice.

Amelia recites the names of her friends. In one ear, out Sam's other. The girls talk a lot, about people Sam doesn't know. They keep up with TV soaps like *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*. They have opinions on the Triple J Top 100. Sam has no opinion on anything popular.

As chit-chat continues, Sam doubts he'll be treated to a guided tour of this interesting house. He glances at his Casio watch. Auntie Jan will be doing the pick-up in... three hours and twenty-five minutes. That's the length of an end-of-year concert and prize-giving,

recently endured. He can do this.

After a very boring hour near the pool, the party moves inside. Amelia's mother suggests charades. Sam is decent at guessing book titles and movies but hopelessly self-conscious at miming. Crispin is good at neither.

"Sam wants to see your attic," Crispin tells Amelia.

"Why?"

"He's a psychic and would like to check for ghosts."

"Ooh. What happens if he finds one?"

"He'll excommunicate it, of course."

"The word you're after is 'exorcise'," says Sam, accidentally verifying his supposed skillset.

"Let us know what you find," Amelia replies.

"I hope they find Patrick Swayze," says someone else. "Does your friend do pottery, Crispin?"

Crispin leads Sam upstairs to the attic, which isn't an attic at all but a cosy nook next to the master bedroom. Easy mistake: The room has a marvellous vaulted ceiling. Sam would love a space like this for himself one day. Triangular windows afford a wonderful view down to a darkening street, then up and across a blanket of suburban roofs, bordered by a mist of light, up and up to an ombre of grey into endless, fascinating black.

Crispin plonks himself onto one low sofa and takes the pack of playing cards from a small table. Anyone'd think Crispin lived here. Also on the table: an empty tumbler, a packet of cigarettes and a Tiffany lamp. Crispin taps a cigarette out of its packet and places it between his lips. He leaves it unlit, attached to his lip with the

adhesive of saliva.

“Shouldn’t we return downstairs?” Sam asks. “I detect no ghosts up here.”

“Let’s play Hearts.” Crispin starts dealing.

Sam reluctantly takes a seat across from Crispin on the other sofa. This eyrie feels like it belongs to the adults of the house. The smell of tobacco and liquor linger. But he would love to see how the Tiffany lamp lights up the walls. “Do you think they’d mind if we turn that on?” he says in an undertone.

Crispin switches on the lamp. Sam was hoping for a more colourful effect, but this is still a nicely lit room.

“You’re not allowed to memorise the cards,” Crispin warns, drawing on the unlit cigarette. “Otherwise we’re playing Snap.”

“If no one keeps track, where’s the skill?”

“I didn’t say ‘no one’. I only meant ‘you’. Your brain is wired differently. You have an unfair advantage.”

They play cards for a while, until Crispin gets mildly shitty about losing and accuses Sam of ‘card counting’ despite instructions not to.

Crispin starts dealing for Snap.

“Forget Snap. Your fingernails.”

Crispin wears his nails long and lacquered black. “Katie likes you, you know.”

“Who?”

“Mousey hair, striped top? Has obviously seen the movie *Ghost*?”

“Shit stirrer.”

“You didn’t even notice. See, this is what I’m talking about.” Crispin flops horizontally onto the sofa. “I’m so fucking bored.”

“One more hour and nineteen minutes.” Sam’s Casio has a timer function.

Crispin blows imaginary smoke rings into the air, pursing his lips, casting the cigarette behind his head where it drops back onto the side table. “Mum made me come because she wants me to meet girls. Dunno why she sent me to a boys only high school.”

This bugs Sam, too. “I get sick of hearing about girls, especially since a certain mutual acquaintance never shuts up about them. Hoyt can wax on for weeks about a girl he glimpsed from a bus. That guy goes on and on about girls’ bums.”

Crispin chuckles. “True, that.”

“What’s with bums anyway?”

“I dunno.”

“I mean, I sort of understand boobs. But bums are like boobs, only with a hole for poo to come out. Big ones, small ones, they’re all basically the same. If he likes tight butts, why wouldn’t Hoyt like boys’ bums just as much?”

Crispin laughs louder.

Sam lowers his voice. “I mean it, though. I don’t get it.”

Crispin’s chuckling subsides. “Hey, does your auntie push you into socialising with girls?”

“Not sure. She was enthusiastic about me coming here tonight. She made me wear this button-down shirt. Gave it a second iron.”

“Your auntie means you to find a girlfriend, Dennon.”

“Darn. I’m not interested in girls.”

Crispin says nothing to that.

“Do you think the guys at school are bluffing?”

“They’re always bluffing.”

“About girls, though. They can’t be that obsessed. Must be a macho, show-off thing.”

“Yeah, but they really do like girls though.”

“Why?”

“Come on, why do you think?”

If Sam could come up with an answer on his own, he wouldn’t be asking the unlikely sage of Crispin Saunders.

There’s something else Sam’s been wondering as well, especially since the reproduction unit in science class. The teacher never specified how babies are made. Students learned the names for the genitalia, for the organs, about ‘secondary sex characteristics’. They learned how sperm swims heroically up the vaginal canal. They learned about STDs. Despite all their education, their teacher skipped the part that happens between meeting a girl at a pool party and fitting genitalia together like the coupling unit of a Meccano set.

Perhaps this bothers everyone, deep down. It may bother Crispin. “How do people know what to do?” Sam asks, aiming for a casual tone, finally daring to ask such a stupid question now that he and Crispin are alone, without supercilious Hoyt.

“How to do what?”

“You know. Make babies.”

“So smart yet so stupid. One side of your brain protrudes. The other side is one massive indentation.” At his own joke, Crispin emits another distinctive guffaw.

“Be serious, Crispy.”

“Okay, fine. Instinct. Same as other animals.”

“Humans aren’t like other animals, though. We’ve lost our keen sense of smell, for example. I can’t smell as well as a dog can, and I really don’t think I have an animal instinct to do... that.”

“If you saw farm animals you would.”

“Gross.”

“I don’t mean farm animals are a turn on,” Crispin clarifies. “I mean, if you really didn’t have the instinct, you’d work it out from watching.”

But Sam has seen plenty. Unlike Crispin, who has spent his entire seventeen years in a two-bedroom Preston flat with his mum, Sam knows the disturbing moans which issue from Mangleby livestock. As a kid he witnessed the mounting, the intromission, the lordosis, the ear-wriggling. He learned those words from dusty cattle-raising books at Della’s house.

How to make calves: Let the bulls near cows in heat. Keep out of the bulls’ way. That’s all there is to it. Lately, the boys at school remind Sam of horny bulls. Only himself and Crispin seem different from the other boys. If Crispin is equally baffled about girl stuff, Sam would like to know. He needs Crispin to drop the pretence of understanding what is happening all around them.

Sam says: “Every single one of our ancestors worked out how to make babies. Isn’t that mind-blowing?”

“Your idea of ‘mind-blowing’ is different from mine.” Crispin does not reveal to Sam what he considers legitimately mind-blowing.

Sam tries again for honesty out of his friend. “Alongside all the modern homo sapiens who breed, there must be some with no sexual instinct.”

Sam and Crispin have read public library books on evolution. Crispin had hoped to argue his way out of church, and also out of church-adjacent social events such as these.

Crispin sighs. "Evolution doesn't have a design. It throws duds."

Duds. Surely this can't be the answer.

"Evolution favours reproduction," Crispin reminds him. "Sex equals life."

This makes logical sense but doesn't feel right, not in the deepest part of Sam's self.

"Wouldn't matter anyway," Crispin continues. "If evolution threw the odd human with no sexual instinct, those numpties would still work it out. Humans are sexual creatures, unless you've experienced trauma or had it beaten out of you or something. Sex is simple. Like picking your nose."

"But I wouldn't ever want to pick someone else's nose! So how do people everywhere, in every culture, know to keep putting penises into vaginas? And how do people know to keep pumping until semen splurts out?"

Terrible giggling makes Sam blanch. Amelia and her friends have heard them. Overlapping footsteps patter back down to the ground floor where uninhibited hilarity continues.

"Ignore them." Crispin starts dealing for a game of something else, not Snap and definitely not Hearts.

But before they've finished their first game of Crazy Eights, heavier footsteps ascend the stairs. Amelia's father appears.

"I've called your aunt," he says gruffly, addressing Sam. "You will both wait for her out front. We don't abide disgusting talk in this

house. And no one gave you boys permission to be up here alone with yourselves anyway. Out. Now.”

Sam is already leaving. Crispin decides not to bother packing up the cards after all.

Standing outside on the grass verge, Sam’s chest is tight with shame. “I don’t want to be a dud,” he says, quietly.

“What? Who cares anyway, what anyone thinks. Maybe duds have all the fun.”

Sam doubts Crispin means that, but wishes he could be so cavalier.

“Way to score an early mark out of a shithouse party,” Crispin adds, cheerfully. “You’re a decent wingman, Dennon. Doubt I’ll be invited back.”

If only Crispin felt as ashamed as himself, they might commiserate. Instead, they stand alone together under the streetlamp.

When Jan pulls up to the curb she’s going off like a cut snake. She orders Sam and Crispin to get in the back, then lurches out into the street without indicating.

But Auntie Jan’s not crook at Sam. By coincidence, Jan and Amelia’s mother went to high school together. “I could never bloody stand that woman. Condescending, uppity, frigid bloody cow. I’ll treat you boys to a soft serve.”

“I can explain,” Sam says.

“No need. Utter bullshit, she’s spouting. Chinese-whispered crap. That’s what you get, listening round corners. Host a party for teens, you let teens be teens! Like she never talked tripe in high school. Hooley dooley.”

If only Auntie Jan had asked Sam to recount the conversation word for word, he would have. Then Auntie Jan would know that her beloved, sweet nephew does have a secret, disgusting side after all, and that he isn't the Sammy she thinks he is, not in the deepest, darkest parts of his mind which were never meant to be shared with anyone other than his best friend in the lamp-lit semi-darkness of that deceptively womb-like room. If Jan learned the truth about him, she may eventually forgive Sam his trespasses, and then he might forgive himself.

Neither Sam nor Crispin express interest in a soft serve so Auntie Jan buys the more expensive thickshakes for them both. Sam and Crispin suck slowly on straws in the back seat of Jan's sedan while Jan continues to rant and smoke. Sam is yet to learn of his own dairy intolerance. He attributes his sore stomach to his body's retribution, for airing despicable thoughts.



# **SEX TALK**

## **SAM'S BEDROOM**

### **SURREY HILLS**

### **MELBOURNE**

**1990**

Sam's bedroom on the second-storey of Mick and Jan's Surrey Hills home is a combination of Sam's and Auntie Jan's taste. The baby blue valence around the bed, the pinch-pleat curtains with an abstract, pastel design and the framed movie posters of 1980s blockbusters are Jan's idea of a teenage boy's bedroom. Up on a step-ladder, risking her manicure, Auntie Jan had adhered glow-in-the-dark plastic stars to the ceiling, hoping twelve-year-old Sam would feel more at home in Melbourne when he first arrived. He did. They'd worked.

At seventeen he's grown out of the plastic stars but the binoculars, the desk globe and tidy study area make the space Sam's.

The globe is positioned so that Florida faces outwards. Months earlier, in April, Space Shuttle Discovery launched successfully from the Kennedy Space Centre. Sam still thinks of the 1986 shuttle explosion. Sam prepared himself emotionally for another possible disaster. As the year wears on, nerves morph into excitement. Startling data reaches Earth from the Large Space Telescope. He tells his aunt

and uncle all about it each evening over dinner.

Half a world away, here in Australia, it is winter. Sam happens to be tucked up in his Melbourne bed one afternoon when he hears Mick's distinctive knock on his closed door. The ratta-tatta-tat-tat is less vigorous than usual. Something's up. Mick enters timidly, as if stuck momentarily in the jaws of Sam's doorway. Someone must've died. Della, probably. If ever his mum died, Mick's face might look exactly like this.

"What's wrong?" Sam asks, not wanting to know.

But Mick only speaks lightly of death. "That ruddy dog's gonna murder me."

Sam exhales. This isn't a dead-mother vibe.

Sam had been keeping his auntie's Chihuahua captive, for his own company. Ossie took the opportunity to escape between Mick's legs. Auntie Jan is making delicious noises and smells in the kitchen, and Ossie means to investigate.

Mick pinches his work trousers at the knees and sits on the end of Sam's bed, depressing the mattress, hemming Sam in under the bedclothes. "Jan sent me up for a chat."

This sounds serious, even if no one died. Perhaps Sam has been using too much of the body wash and sandwich meat. Auntie Jan has never reprimanded Sam for using too much of anything, but Sam constantly feels like he's wasting his aunt and uncle's supplies.

Mick only now examines Sam, tucked up in bed. "Jan told me you were busy studying."

"I am."

"Flat out like a lizard drinking?"

“Like a lizard thinking. I was visualising a probability problem.”  
If Sam didn’t get top marks, no one would believe him.

Mick clears his throat. “I’ll get straight to it, then. Birds and bees. No need to embarrass ourselves, here. Far as I’m concerned, you’ll learn more from watching late-night foreign films on the SBS than listening to me.”

Sam knows where this is coming from. Last summer, Sam had returned from Della’s early to spend the second half of January in air-conditioned comfort. Jan had spent Friday night with girlfriends. Uncle Mick went to the RSL. Sam enjoyed an evening all to himself, with cheese jaffles in front of the TV.

Mick had arrived home after drinking, dropped off noiselessly by taxi. Sam had expected to hear him coming.

With only a dim, fleshy glow to illuminate the front room, Sam scabbled around for the remote. But he couldn’t change channels in time. Mick darkened the door as one hirsute Frenchman brought a middle-aged woman to orgasm. Such films served no pornographic function for Sam, who was no more aroused by this than by animal mating scenes in a David Attenborough documentary.

Sam froze. So did Mick, holding an extra large meat tray across both forearms.

In the moment, Mick had pretended not to see. “Won this in the raffle. Got any hollow-legged mates? I’ll throw this little lot on the barbie tomorrow.”

Then Mick left Sam to finish his private moment with arthouse cinema.

Sam didn’t have hollow-legged mates to invite round. Crispin

had recently turned vegetarian. Hoyt was annoying enough at school without inviting him round to the house.

After ‘walking in on’ his nephew, Uncle Mick began a long-running series of jokes about Sam’s interest in “SBS films”, always with the air quotes.

Sam thereby understood that he’d done nothing wrong by watching soft porn alone in his aunt and uncle’s living room. He was a teenage boy after all, and by extension, horny. He was *supposed* to be watching that stuff, recording the VHS for multiple rewinds, pausing it until the sexy bits wore thin. That would make him normal. Uncle Mick had seemed relieved, as if he’d been wondering about his nephew all along.

What could he possibly want now?

“Those SBS films. You’ll learn a lot, except for one important omission: You must wear a franger, kiddo. Actors leave that bit out. But frangers are very, very important.”

Sam says nothing. He pulls the bedclothes over his head. He’s barely breathing against the sheet.

“You know the thing I’m talking about?”

“Yes.”

Kids at school assume the likes of Sam understand nothing sex related. Sam is unfamiliar with the old-fashioned word ‘franger’, but is perfectly capable of deducing the meaning, thanks very much.

“And you know where to buy ‘em?”

“The pharmacy.”

“Good lad. I believe they sell them at the supermarket, too, behind the counter with the smokes and the Lotto.”

If Sam is ever required to buy condoms from a supermarket kiosk, requesting them by name from a motherly-looking woman — or worse, from a sister-school girl at her part-time job — the cursed things may as well live on the Moon.

Uncle Mick isn't finished, unfortunately. "You ever need ten bucks for frangers, you come to me. No questions asked. Nudge nudge, wink wink."

"I'll be right." Sam realises with horror that he will be needing to cadge ten bucks for this coming Saturday. He plans to take a tram into the city and watch a movie with Crispin — ten bucks exactly, including student discount. Now would not be an opportune time to ask for that precise amount. Henceforth, Sam will be asking his uncle for twelve bucks fifty, and enjoying popcorn or a Violet Crumble.

"You might need lube as well," says Uncle Mick. "Wish I'd known that thirty-odd years back."

Sam would rather not know about his uncle's experiences without lube. But he tucks the information away. He will never, ever forget it.

"Here's the thing, Sam-boy. Know what AIDs is?"

"Yes." Sam knows all the diseases and infections from sex education at school. He's considered the risk model and will be having none of it, ever. He doesn't need a repeat scare-story from his uncle.

"Bet they go on about girls and marriage at that school of yours, and how not to get anyone knocked up. Bet no one mentions how boys sometimes muck around with other boys. That's okay, it happens. But you need to wear a franger when mucking around with boys as well. Because of AIDs and HIV and all that jazz. You hear me?"

"Yes."

“I’m talking both ends. Both ends need protection. All the orifices. If it needs a hole, it needs a fra—”

“Got it.”

“Good lad, good lad. Any questions, come to me. For now I’ll let you get back to your, ah, visualisation.”

But Sam doesn’t hear the bedroom door click shut behind him. Mick hovers near the doorway, considering a further, excruciating point. “There’s this bloke down the RSL. A good pool player. Well, I say ‘bloke’, but that’s not the word. An older gentleman, light-footed. Wears a stud in one ear. Anyhow, if you do have specific questions, reckon I could introduce you to him.”

Suddenly Sam understands. “I’m not into boys,” he says, with his face under the covers.

“All right.”

“I’m not, though.”

“Thought that friend of yours might be, though. The skinny fellow who won’t eat meat. Maybe he could do with the intro.”

Mick departs. Sam flips down his bedclothes and stares at the ceiling. So that’s why he got the sex talk. For Crispin’s benefit.

As for himself, Sam can’t imagine having anything to do with ‘orifices’ and ‘frangers’. Things may change, after he grows older and becomes someone else entirely. He pulls the bedclothes back up over his head and curls into his own warmth, which smells only of himself and freshly laundered sheets.

Mick and Jan have underestimated how much he already knew. But was the safety announcement about how to muck around with boys entirely for Crispin’s benefit?

In some dark beforetimes, before the beginning of memory, Sam may have done a deal with the devil, gaining book smarts in exchange for self-knowledge. Everyone else seems to know something about Sam which Sam himself cannot feel. He knows himself to be different, over and above the stench that follows him as a dirty, hoarded-up Mangleby Dennon.

Could he be gay? That might explain why he always feels different, even in the Big Smoke of Melbourne, where no one knows where he came from. Gay is the worst thing a man could possibly be, according to the boys at school. The possibility terrifies.

He decides not to think about it.



# SAM, CRISPIN & HOYT

MELBOURNE

1991

No one in Sam's orbit seems to care that The Large Space Telescope has accurately determined the distance of the Large Magellanic Cloud.

"What's that again?" Mick asks over dinner.

"A satellite galaxy of the Milky Way."

"Ah. Gotcha." Mick cuts into his beef rissole.

Auntie Jan nods with enthusiasm. "That's exciting, Sammy! I'd never know this stuff if you weren't here."

Despite initial problems with deployment, astronomers underestimated the Hubble's contributions to our understanding of the universe. Even Sam's favourite science teacher cannot be coaxed into extended astronomical discussion. Year twelve is nexus in a young man's life. Exam preparation gets priority over unearthly delights.

Hoyt Fleming used to enjoy testing his own astronomy knowledge against Sam's, but as graduation nears, Hoyt has grown quiet. Sam and Hoyt's timetables rarely overlap, except for a single shared class. Advanced calculus. Sam took a seat next to Hoyt on the first day back in January, and because Mr Fothergill is hopeless at names, a permanent seating plan was made.

Hoyt talks to Sam only during calc, and only about calc. Even

then, Hoyt requests Sam's input only when he's truly stumped. Four hours per week sharing the same air space masks the reality that Hoyt is freezing Sam out. As far as Sam knows, they're still friends: The Three Musketeers, as Auntie Jan calls Sam, Crispin and Hoyt.

On the first Thursday of November, Hoyt dashes out the classroom door without so much as a "See you later". Sam rushes to catch up. Hoyt is faster than he looks. In year seven, Hoyt and Sam were equally short. Shortness bound them together, but then Sam grew. These days, in comparison to Hoyt, Sam is tall, tanned and athletically built.

"Hoyty! Wait!"

"Jesus fuck," says Hoyt as Sam catches up. "Don't call me that stupid name."

"Oh, sorry. Hey, this'll cheer you up," Sam says, tagging along beside him. "I'm having a party this weekend."

"You? A party? During exam season?" Hoyt sounds skeptical.

"Yeah I know, right."

As a little kid, Sam looked forward to his birthdays. But these days his birthday coincides with exam season. Stakes are high this year. Sam means to get into engineering.

Auntie Jan says early November is perfect timing for a knees-up because it forces a refreshing little break. But Auntie Jan doesn't understand the extent of Sam's exam anxiety. He can't relax until exams are done and dusted. He doesn't have a name for 'anxiety' because no one uses that word. Following instinct, he keeps such weirdness to himself. No one else at school shows concern for his marks, except for a group of Asian boys, each with firm plans to get

into medicine or dentistry. If only Sam could speak Mandarin or Korean, or play badminton, he'd have a wide and ready circle of like-minded friends to invite to a birthday party. But here he is, a socially disconnected white boy occasionally rotated into a semi-competitive tennis team, trying to connect with Hoyt because they were friends by proximity back in year seven.

"You know how it's my birthday today?" Sam is pretty sure Hoyt does not remember this fact, but he won't embarrass his friend by assuming forgetfulness. "My auntie said she'd shout us a night out at the weekend. Ten pin bowling and ice cream. You available?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Who else is going."

"Well, Crispy, of course. Mick and Jan said they'd play too, and I was thinking of inviting Mark Brunner. That'll even out the teams."

Mark Brunner is a super quiet kid in Sam's physics class. The guy's so laconic people assume he's non-speaking, but Sam figures if they're all doing something with their hands, like trying to knock over skittles with a heavy ball, Mark Brunner won't be pressured into making chit-chat. Also, Mark probably never gets invited to birthday parties or anything. Sam has never realised until now that Mark Brunner would've made a decent friend to see him through high school, and now high school is all but over.

"I'm busy," Hoyt says curtly.

"All weekend? Doing what?"

"Cramming, of course."

"Yeah, but Jan said we could all use a break."

“What does your auntie understand about exams? Bet she never finished high school.”

“Oh, she attended secretarial—”

“Jaysus Christ, what’s with the yap yap yap? Don’t you normally walk in the opposite direction after calc? I’m headed to the computer lab. Alone.”

Finally Sam clocks an aberration in his sphere. His heart sinks. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Dunno. Did ya?”

“Will you tell me what I did?”

“Okay, dumbshit.” Hoyt keeps walking fast, dodging groups of taller boys who never move for anyone. “You know he’s a homo.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think?”

“You mean Crispy?”

“Click!”

“No he’s not.”

Hoyt laughs, cruelly.

“Not in the way you mean it,” Sam clarifies.

“How do you think I mean it?” Hoyt says. “A homo’s a homo’s a homo.”

“How would you even know something like that about Crispin?”

“Because I asked him and he said ‘yes’.”

“Pfft. When?”

They’ve reached Hoyt’s computer lab now.

“Far as I know, you’re one, too.” Hoyt’s dark eyes are darting all around. His voice is low. “Everyone thinks you two are a couple.”

“Why would anyone think that?” Sam does nothing to warrant such a label. He doesn’t walk or talk like Crispy. “By the way, we’re not.”

“I’ll believe you. Thousands wouldn’t.”

Hoyt looks set to stop talking, but Sam’s relief is short-lived.

“Fact is, you don’t know your own self yet. Look me up when you’re twenty-five, thirty. Guaranteed, you’ll be rocking arse-less chaps, twirling a rainbow scarf, sharing a flat with Lispy Crispy. That’s if you’re both still alive.”

With that, Hoyt disappears into the lab, the only room in the school where Hoyt is truly at home. All this time, Sam thought Hoyt had a shit-tin of computer science homework to catch up on, and that’s why he never ate lunch with Sam and Crispin anymore.

Now Sam is alone and bereft. Mainly angry. He hurries to physics at a back-pack bumping clip, because everyone’s disappearing into classrooms again now, and it bothers Sam to be late.

Hoyt must think he can pick and choose his friends. But no one else would invite Hoyt to a bowling party. Hoyt probably mistakes the computer lab guys for his new mates, but Sam knows for certain they all think Hoyt is up himself. He’s overheard them complain in chemistry when Hoyt’s not there. The computer guys call him ‘Hoity-Toity’. Hoyt believes he’s the most advanced coder, when in fact he steals code from others by creeping past and peeping over their shoulder. Hoyt doesn’t know shit about gay stuff, either. As if Crispin would admit to something like that. Crispy probably just said ‘yes’ to wind Hoyt up, or to get him off his back.

Sam reaches physics in a red-faced lather, but calmly places books

on his desk. Their teacher takes a break from tedious exam revision to talk about Fraunhofer lines in the Sun's spectrum, which would be fascinating if Sam weren't so rattled. During pair-testing, Sam whispers to Mark Brunner about his birthday party, extending the bowling invitation despite the confirmed absence of Hoyt, which will lead to uneven teams. Mark's eyes light up, then deaden again. He writes Sam a tiny-lettered note. He's away this weekend at his grandmother's enjoying quiet study time away from his large cohort of younger siblings, but wishes Sam a very happy birthday.

At morning break, Sam planned to invite Crispin to his bowling party, but now he's not so sure. He can't face a third rejection. No matter. Crispin will probably raise the topic of Sam's birthday himself. Crispin is sure to wish him a happy birthday and ask what he's doing for it. Sam will say, 'Nothing, yet,' then he'll pick Crispin's brains for a fun idea. Maybe ten pin bowling with your aunt and uncle is too juvenile for eighteen-year-old men. 'Men'. Sam has grown in height but feels like a tiny kid. Everyone else in year twelve seems so sure of himself. Sam can't understand where everyone's confidence came from.

Crispin is one of the few other year twelve Grammar boys who missed out on the confidence potion. Sitting together beside the boiler, Sam waits for Crispin to wish him a happy birthday. But Crispin seems lost in his own thoughts. When the bell goes for next revision session, Sam realises Crispy is preoccupied with exams.

In contrast, Sam remembered Crispy's birthday back in June. Sam gifted Crispin a black novelty tea cup with white calligraphy letters around the rim to resemble a ouija board, carefully chosen in a

witchy sort of shop which fair ponged. The cup matches Crispin's goth aesthetic. Sam filled it with chocolates before wrapping it up, choosing the most masculine of Jan's papers from her messy room where the craft table is never clear.

Crispin had seemed to like the cup, but returned the chocolates to Sam. "You know I can't eat these."

Chocolates. Like Valentine's Day. It's true, Sam sometimes does gay stuff like this, but he made sure no one saw him give Crispin that gift. They keep that stuff private, so Sam can't understand why anyone would mistake them for a gay couple. Until Hoyt's little lecture, Sam thought everyone called Sam and Crispin 'homos' as a catch-all insult. He didn't think they meant it literally.

Worse, his auntie and uncle must have thought that about Sam and Crispin, too. Hence the oddly specific nature of the sex talk he got from his Uncle Mick.

Maybe even Crispin thinks Sam is gay for him. That would ruin their entire friendship.

After period three, Sam decides to spend lunchtime in the library. He can't face more of Crispin today, not if Crispin hasn't even remembered his birthday.

Sam spends all weekend studying and sits an exam on the Monday morning. He knows Crispin has one in the afternoon, and finds him in their rainy spot.

On rainy days they have always sheltered under an eave without getting too wet, so long as it's not windy as well. The caretaker's wife must cook a hot dinner because the aroma of roast meat makes this dingy corner of the otherwise manicured campus feel a tiny bit like

home.

Crispin clearly enjoys torturing himself by smelling the roast lunch without eating any food of his own. He looks small and sad sitting alone on that form bench, sleeves stretched down to cover his hands. It is a bit windy today. Crispin's legs are wet. And because he's so skinny, he is shivering a lot, despite imminent summer. With Crispin alone and wet and small, Sam's guilt fills his whole heart. If he feels like this on seeing his friend Crispin, he might be a little bit gay. Maybe this is precisely what gay feels like. Then again, Sam might feel like this only more so, if he knew girls his own age. Since he doesn't know any girls, he cannot compare how he'd feel about them against how he feels about Crispin. For now Sam doesn't know. Until recently he'd been okay with that.

"Crispy!" Sam says, as brightly as he can manage.

Crispin doesn't ask Sam where he's been, or about his birthday.

Sam stands on the form next to Crispin, reluctant to dampen the seat of his shorts by sitting. "We should find a study room."

"Too damn noisy everywhere."

"I know."

"I hate this school."

"Yeah, I know."

"No you don't."

Sam decides to sit down next to his friend after all. A cold wetness immediately seeps through two layers of fabric. "Did something bad happen?"

"You know what happens, whenever I'm on my own."

The two boys who smack and kick Crispin lately are in year

eleven. It's humiliating to be beaten up by anyone, let alone by kids in the year below, let alone outside the corner shop, which is where they targeted Crispin. At school they track him down. They get him in the ribs and back and groin, all the places hidden by school uniform. Crispin has never shown Sam his injuries, but Sam can't understand how no one else notices: Crispin hunches over and winces and clearly isn't fit to participate in sport, even though teachers insist he is.

Sam's instinct is to apologise for the abandonment. He is so, very sorry for leaving Crispin alone, and every atom of his body wants to cry with the shame of what he's allowed. But that'd be a gay thing to do. It's also probably gay to say 'sorry', so he doesn't say what he feels. Crispy is his best friend. And now, without Hoyt, Crispy is his *only* friend. So much is at stake.

"Crispy?"

"What."

"Those kids are cowards. They're scared of two against two, even if it's only me keeping you company. Let's stick together. We're almost free of high school anyway. Things will get better for us soon."

"Yeah, okay."

"I'm not gay, you know. That's not how I meant it."

Crispin looks at Sam for the first time in days. Disgust. Or maybe it's disappointment. Sam regrets saying it, because friends shouldn't have to clarify an awkward, unspoken thing like that. He will never speak of it again.



# SAM & CRISPIN IN CANBERRA

JANUARY 1992

Year twelve exams are over. High school is over. Celebrations and Schoolies Week and parties happened, elsewhere.

Sam and Crispin have plans of their own, but refuse to celebrate in December. Crispin has medical appointments and Sam needs Christmas to recuperate after the exhaustion of exam season. So they wait until the New Year, when roads empty out. They're going to Canberra, of all places.

Auntie Jan was surprised to hear it. "Doesn't everyone go to the coast? The beach? A place with a little life in it?" Then she made an effort to sound enthusiastic. "You'll have no trouble finding parking spots in Canberra. The pollies and the public servants will all be on holiday."

"The fuck's in Canberra?" said Mick before laughing his head off. "I mean, I can see *you* on holiday in Canberra, Samuel. Canberra's right up your alley, you young fogley, you. I'm only gobsmacked you found a kindred spirit who's prepared to join you there."

"Actually, Canberra was Crispin's idea," Sam returned, feeling smug.

"Strange boy, that," said Auntie Jan. "I cannot work him out."

A number of things baffle Jan. She didn't know boys could be anorexic, for one. She'd only seen it in Karen Carpenter. "Tragic story, that."

Computers are another bafflement. Sam tried explaining to Jan

how there's this thing called the Internet, with virtual chat rooms where you talk via keyboard to people from all over the world. She'd be bewildered to learn that Crispin has been 'chatting' with a new friend online. Despite professing to know this person intimately, Crispin and his new friend have only ever typed to each other. Jan wouldn't call that proper friendship.

Sam isn't comfortable with it himself. There's something clandestine about Crispin whenever Sam asks about this chat-room friend. Sam knows nothing about the guy, except he lives in Canberra.

"How do you know they are who they say they are?" Sam had asked.

"Trust me. He checks out."

"Do you have photos, at least?"

"Sent some by post. Not the kind you'd want to see."

At this point Sam should've told Crispin to go by himself, Sam would have nothing to do with it. Except Sam would enjoy a trip to Canberra, as it happens. Sam loved the mandatory high school excursion to Parliament House. He'd like to revisit the Australian War Memorial.

Sam is still four years away from realising his life's work will be in architecture, but if he'd listened to his intuition at the age of eighteen he'd have chosen to double major in architecture from the get go. Sam has been reading a fascinating biography of the Burley Griffins, who designed Australia's capital city in 1911.

If Crispin hears one more fact about fucking Canberra and the Mahoney fucking Burley fucking Griffins, he'll scream.

"Well you're the one who suggested Canberra," Sam says.

“Thought you’d have some historical interest in—”

Then Crispin does scream. He cranks down the window of Sam’s 1984 Toyota hatch, sticks his head and shoulders out and screams at the highway.

“Are you okay?” Sam asks from the driver’s seat.

“We are free! Free! No more school!”

“Can you maybe pull your appendages back inside the window though? What if a truck overtakes us?”

Sam is regularly overtaken because Sam never speeds. There’s no point hoofing it anyhow. Jan has forbidden him to conquer the nine hour road trip in a single day, and she knows Crispin isn’t licensed to share the driving.

So they stay the night near Albury Wodonga, in a ‘three star’ motel which makes a mockery of the rating system. Sam booked a room in advance, but this suite’s got one double bed in it, not two singles.

“Should we complain at reception?” Sam hopes Crispin has the guts to do it. He is new to the adult world and didn’t understand the difference between ‘double’ and ‘twin’.

“Oh, what’s the fucking point.”

Sam suggests they find a supermarket to buy noodles or something for dinner. At the supermarket, Crispin picks up a stick of strawberry ChapStick, because dry lips is what you get for sticking your head out of car windows. He refuses to buy food.

This won’t do. When Sam picked Crispin up from his flat in Melbourne, Crispin’s mother made Sam promise to keep an eye on her son’s eating habits and to call her if he got “concerned”. Sam should’ve

asked for more specific instructions regarding “concern”. What does it mean? Skipping a single meal? Taking too long inside a locked bathroom? But Sam didn’t have time to ask, because Crispin had emerged from the house at that point with his packed bag, flinging it with sullen gusto across the back seat. Now Sam is concerned about Crispin’s food intake, on top of general, out-of-routine anxiety.

“I’m not hungry,” Crispin insists, using the ChapStick before he’s even paid for it.

“You have to eat something. Can I get you a drink? Say, strawberry milk?”

“News flash. We don’t have to do everything we’re told.”

“I don’t do everything I’m told.”

Crispin laughs. “Your lack of self-awareness is astounding. I don’t have to eat if I don’t want to. And you don’t need to be stirring peas into your instant noodles just to make them ‘healthy’. You can eat — or not eat — whatever you want. We’re free now. We’re adults. Hear me?”

“But I like peas in noodles.”

“I’m making a wider point. Like, we could’ve driven this trip in a single day. You didn’t have to listen to your auntie, but now we’re stuck overnight in a grotty motel.”

“We? *We* could have driven in a single day? Speak from driving experience, do you?”

Sam and Crispin sleep together in the same double bed that night, because no one is there to hassle them about it. Crispin is an annoying sleeper. He makes a weird chop-smacking sound with his mouth when he’s in his REM phase.

The following day they continue north along the M31. Crispin has brought a stack of cassette tapes and refuses to let Sam play his own selection “because it’s commercial radio bougie crap” even though Sam has already endured many hours of Crispin’s jittery night-club beats. Those tapes are enough to induce driving anxiety, even on a wide federal highway in light traffic.

“Ideally you’re high to appreciate this genre,” Crispin explains, though not high himself and, as far as Sam knows, not speaking from experience on that point, either.

They reach the outskirts of Canberra in the mid-afternoon. Sam asks Crispin to navigate to this friend’s house, where Sam and Crispin will be pitching Uncle Mick’s fishing tent in the back yard. Crispin is a rubbish map reader so Sam pulls over multiple times to deal with the navigation as well as the driving.

“Where is everyone?” Crispin says of the uncrowded streets. “And what’s with all these gangs of cockatoos? Every corner looks the same.”

Normally Sam appreciates the chance to linger over a map, or to observe interesting birds, but not with Crispin finally attempting chit-chat as he’s trying to navigate them both to this so-called sharehouse to meet his so-called friend.

The house is a large place in need of maintenance and garden work.

“I don’t like this,” Sam says. “Let’s find somewhere to stay nearby.”

“News flash. I can’t afford a second night in a motel.”

“I can cover it.”

Crispin ignores Sam. He reaches for his bag in the back seat and gets out of the car. Sam lets Crispin knock on the front door alone. He's not confident they're at the correct address yet.

But someone does answer the door, sucking Crispin into the dark interior. Sam waits with the engine still running for Crispin to come back and invite him in, but after fifteen minutes it's clear that's not going to happen.

Sam starts to think about murder. The World Wide Web must be a brilliant tool for psychos. Perhaps Crispin has been lured to Canberra by a serial killer.

When Sam finally summons courage to knock on the front door himself, it is Crispin who answers, as if he owns the joint.

"Thought you must've gone to find another negative-twelve-star motel," Crispin says.

At this point, Sam should've done just that. Annoying prick.

Inside, the house is untidy, dark and stale, made for parties. One of the ceiling lights doubles as an actual disco ball. Like a glimpse behind theatrical scenery, these rooms were never meant to be viewed during daylight hours. To Sam the place smells strange. He easily identifies the masculine stench of B.O. but not the stale bong water.

Crispin's friend is called Troy. He appears to be the only one home, and reclines on a grubby couch in one of the living areas. Like Crispin, Troy's aesthetic is Goth. Also like Crispin, he's too thin. Sam is skinny as well, but in a healthy, lithe way, thanks to Jan constantly forcing food upon him. Troy could pass for a vampire. He might even be wearing white make-up to that effect. He offers Sam a can of diet coke. Sam is thirsty and accepts.

“So, what’s your deal?” Troy asks Sam after a while.

“My deal? I don’t even know what that means.”

“He truly doesn’t know,” Crispin confirms. “No point going there.”

“He looks kinda interesting,” says Troy, ominously. “We’ll work this one out, just see if we don’t.”

Late afternoon sun means the yard is far too hot for pitching a tent, which is why Crispin refuses to help. But Sam needs to escape this house, especially since two of Troy’s housemates have arrived home. They’re fine, everything’s fine, except this is not Sam’s house and these are not his people. Crispin is meeting these men for the first time himself, and is unable to help Sam feel comfortable, even if he were an accommodating sort of person, which he is not.

So Sam pitches Uncle Mick’s fishing tent all alone in the back yard, flattening himself a mattress of long, dead grass. If only there were a tree for shade. Lying down inside the pitched tent, he is in danger of nodding off. It would be stupid to fall asleep in this heat. He has no choice but to go back inside the house, which means he must socialise. Also, he needs to drink water. He’s in an unfamiliar city, unsure if the outside taps are potable.

As the inhabitants of this rambling, shambling house dribble back home after finishing their day jobs, Sam counts six men altogether, though he can’t tell which of them live here permanently. From a seat in the corner of the main living room, Sam watches their comings and goings as they change out of their suits into very short shorts, reminiscent of the 1980s, but without the walking socks and sandals. They remove their shirts to bear the evening heat. They pour

themselves drinks. Sam says no. He wouldn't want anyone else to pay for his drinks. These men have probably also removed their body hair, which makes their ages difficult to decipher. By the set of their eyes, only one of the housemates looks younger than twenty-five. As for Crispin's vampiric friend Troy, his age cannot be guessed. Sam feels strongly that he should not be here with these older strangers. Nor should Crispin.

He ventures into the untidy kitchen, hoping to wash a glass and down a gulp of tap water unnoticed.

Someone's at the stove — the oldest guy of the house, stirring a large pot of elbow macaroni.

"Hey cutey," says macaroni guy, who looks at least forty. "What's your name?"

Sam wishes the guy would wear an apron, at least. His bare belly is dangerously close to the steaming pot.

"Samuel," says Sam. He never calls himself 'Samuel' and has no idea why he's doing so now.

"Samuel, Samuel," the guy sings, before breaking into a whistle, possibly to the tune of Bicycle Built For Two. "Would you mind grating cheese for me, babe?"

Sam does not want to grate any cheese. He does not want to clear a spot in this horrible kitchen. This kitchen is almost as bad as his mum's, except at least with Della it's only her own filth. The mess of strangers is worse. Also, he doesn't want to be called 'cutey' or 'babe', and he doesn't want to hang around to find out what else is coming.

With thirst quenched, at least, Sam retreats again to the backyard tent. That mention of cheese and the smell of the pasta has reminded

him of his hunger.

At dusk, Sam is sitting cross-legged on flat dead grass under the canopy of the tent, reading a library book about Australian war history, swatting intermittently at mozzies. When Crispin finally appears, Sam hopes Crispin has come to tell him something about dinner plans. Maybe, in the company of new friends, Crispin will eat a proper meal, if only to fit in.

“We’re going out,” Crispin informs him. “To some night club. You up for it?”

“I’d rather get dinner somewhere quiet,” Sam says.

“You’ve never even been to a night club. And you’ve never been to a night club in Canberra. How do you know it’ll be noisy?”

Sam has been of age for two months already but has yet to utilise his I.D. card to try something adult and new. Of course the place will be noisy. He has seen enough TV. Characters are always shouting into each other’s faces at close range.

“You don’t have to join us,” Crispin says, “but can you give us a ride?” He pulls a cigarette and lighter from his back pocket. Sam had no idea he smoked. By the look of Crispin’s fumbling, and by the sound of his cough, he very recently started.

“Can’t the others drive you?”

“No one else has a car. Except for Frank. And he wants to drink.”

“How will I know when to pick you up?”

“We’ll arrange a time. Say, midnight.”

“I don’t want to hang around til midnight.”

“Okay, grandma.”

Sam has been driving all day. Crispin doesn’t appreciate that. “I

could maybe drop you all off. You could take a taxi back here.”

“Fine. Hey, I might need to borrow some cash.”

Sam locates his wallet inside the tent and pulls out a ten dollar note.

“This a joke?”

“How much do you need?”

“Enough for a taxi fare. Also, I’ll need to shout drinks. We’re dossing here for free after all.”

Sam’s holiday money won’t last long at this rate. He hesitates.

“Money doesn’t matter to you,” Crispin points out. “Your aunt and uncle keep slipping you cash. They’re paying your uni fees, I bet. And you won’t even need a student loan because you’ll keep sponging off them, living for free in one of their rental properties, safe in your bedroom with your expensive telescope and all the LEGO sets you want.”

“LEGO sets?” Sam had no idea Crispin had been envious of his building blocks. Since Crispin professes to be an adult, it’s laughable that he’s bringing it up now.

Except Sam can’t laugh at Crispin. Nothing is funny. Everything is awful. Also, Crispin must have given Sam’s financial situation plenty of thought, correctly surmising the generosity of Mick and Jan. Even if Sam’s holiday funds run dry, Mick has linked him to an emergency credit card. Though Sam would hate to use it, his own economic ‘precarity’ is nothing like Crispin’s. When Crispin runs out of money, he’s really out of money. Sam slowly edges another four twenties out of his wallet. “That’s ninety. Make it last.”

Crispin stuffs the notes into a pocket. He doesn’t seem to own a

wallet.

Sam checks to see they're alone in the echoey yard, then lowers his voice. "Does Troy properly live here? I mean, is this his house?"

"What?"

"Does he pay rent? Is this his permanent address, or is he just bunking down?"

"Why does it matter?"

"Because if your friend doesn't live here, he probably shouldn't have invited us. It's not his place to invite people, right?"

"Chill out, man."

"You're a friend of a friend. But I'm a friend of a friend of a friend. That's worse. I don't feel very... welcome."

"What do you expect? The red carpet? A fluffy towel and a tiny soap at the end of the bed? Someone's Auntie Jan serving up a roast—"

"Of course I don't."

"You don't even know them. That's on you. Too chicken shit to hang out inside."

It takes an aeon for the men to dress for their night out, especially when Sam is so hungry. Eventually, after it is properly dark, Crispin returns to the tent and tells Sam it's time to leave. Crispin takes the front passenger seat, and Sam is mortified to see four others squish into the back, with seat belts for three only. This is against the law. But Sam chauffeurs them anyway, trying his best to follow instructions yelled over top of Crispin's electronica, which he's turned up extra loud to show off.

In the central part of Canberra, Sam is relieved when his passengers pile out of his car. He gets a few thank yous from the footpath, and kisses blown his way.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” asks Frank, the old macaroni guy.

“Leave him, he’s a loner,” Crispin says, as if Sam can’t hear him perfectly well with the car door hanging wide open like that.

Alone at last, Sam stops at the first fast food joint he sees, scarfs down a large Sweet and Sour Chicken on the shores of a deserted Lake Burley Griffin, retrieves his SLR camera and tripod from the boot then walks around Canberra taking long-exposure photos of buildings, alleyways and anything which looks interesting under lamplight. The camera is brand new. He hasn’t told Crispin about his expensive graduation gift from Mick and Jan. At Grammar, Sam tied for runner-up to dux. To Sam’s chagrin, Jan keeps shortening it to ‘Sam got dux’. She justifies this by declaring the guy who really got dux a certifiable genius, and no one can compete with a certifiable genius, so that boy doesn’t count.

A few hours later, Sam makes his way back to the odd, unwelcoming house, but doesn’t go inside. He retreats to the backyard, to Mick’s familiar tent, and sleeps through the night.

The following morning, Sam wakes early, needing to use a bathroom. He tiptoes into the house via the unlocked back door. Crispin is asleep on a grubby living-room couch. Troy is on another one.

Sam cannot bring himself to sit down on the sharehouse toilet, which is feral. He eventually realises it’s futile waiting for Crispin to rouse himself so decides to spend the entire day alone.

He drives to the War Memorial museum and waits for it to open. The bathroom there is sparkling clean. He should have brought his toothbrush here. He joins the first guided tour of the day, with visitors from all over Australia and overseas. He feels less alone as part of this sombre but friendly group. The buildings are dark and quiet, designed for contemplation. By the time the tour is over, Sam is on the verge of tears. Young men his own age, sent off to die. One young man in a black and white photo could pass for a 1940s version of himself, staring back at the camera with huge, terrified eyes.

In the War Memorial café he drinks tea and eats sandwiches, surrounded by retirees at nearby tables. One old married couple from his tour catch his attention.

“Join us,” says the grey-haired woman, touching his forearm.

The husband is a WW2 veteran from Queensland, and a fount of historical knowledge. They think it’s corker, this nice young man with a healthy interest in history about to study engineering. With the confidence of people who have lived expansively, they know for certain that Sam is on the precipice of a beautiful, rich, fulfilling life. They seem excited for him.

Sam enjoys their brief company, and afterwards feels there must be something wrong with him. He prefers the company of people significantly older than himself. This is a disadvantage, he understands, considering how many of his days are spent in the compulsory company of same-aged peers. What is it he prefers about older folk, anyway? Has he become addicted to Auntie Jan’s praise? Sam’s preferred variety of praise is of the hopeful, unmitigated variety which, by its nature, can only come from people who are beyond peer-to-peer

competition, instead focused wholly on ushering-in a new generation. In any case, Sam is starting to feel the glow of respect he will have earned by the time he has qualified as an actual engineer. For now, though, he is all hope and no substance. All afternoon he floats around Canberra like a wraith, itself deserted and ghost-like at this time of year.

In the evening, Sam returns to the same Chinese Takeaway and orders a repeat of yesterday's dinner. He doesn't need culinary novelty when everything else in this town is strange to him. By eight p.m. he has exhausted all interest in central Canberra and his feet are sore from walking.

He wants to go home to Melbourne. He could drive the entire way tonight, pulling over for a cat-nap near Albury Wodonga. Now to persuade Crispin.

Back at the unwelcoming sharehouse, loud, unpleasant music is audible from the street. Sam takes a deep breath before re-entering. Crispin is in the living room. Maybe he's been here all day. Unusually for Crispin, who likes his personal space, he sits squished between Troy and also Frank the macaroni guy, who drapes one arm across Crispin's narrow shoulders.

Crispin is smiling, but when he sees Sam he looks like he was caught doing something he shouldn't, as if Sam will judge him for this. If Sam was going to judge, he would have done it years ago. It's been clear since year seven that Crispin was gay, yet Sam was about the only boy in school who paid Crispin's gayness no mind.

Angry at Crispin's lack of insight, but not at all angry about

Crispin doing something overtly, unambiguously gay, Sam motions towards the back yard. Crispin follows him out there.

“Where did you fuck off to all day?” Crispin asks.

“Let’s drive home.”

“Wait, what? Like, now? Tonight?”

Sam is pulling items out of the tent, preparing to dismantle it. “I’ll get coffee at a McDonalds. That’ll keep me alert.”

“What the hell? No.”

Sam expected this. He is suddenly exhausted. If he’s too tired to persuade Crispin, he’s certainly too tired to be driving all night. “Fine. Tomorrow morning, then. Crack of dawn.”

“What’s the matter with you? We planned to stay a week!”

“I’m sorry. You like it here. They’re not my people, but I’m glad you found each other. I’ll get some sleep and leave on my own, early tomorrow. You can take a coach home, whenever you’re ready.”

“How much does a coach cost from Canberra to Melbourne?”

“Jeez, I don’t know.”

This is Crispin all over, expecting Sam to know an esoteric detail like that. This is how Crispin treated Sam all through high school: mentally checking out then asking Sam for answers. Until now, Sam has been glad to have had all the answers. But now he feels vulnerable, and ill-equipped for the parental duty of seeing Crispin safely home. He feels young and naïve, and very far from home himself. Even Della’s house feels warm and welcoming compared to this.

He reaches for his wallet and hands Crispin another hundred dollars. “The coach won’t be more than that.”

Sam prefers not to use Uncle Mick’s credit card on holiday, even

though Mick told him to. He planned to use the rest of his cash for petrol. But the tank is mostly full, so he does have enough. All he ever needs is enough. Just one good friend would be enough.

Sam intends to leave as soon as he awakes, maybe even four a.m. He falls asleep early, with the tent flaps up. Through the mesh, he smells tobacco smoke. Menthols, same as Jan's. With his eyes closed, Sam imagines he's lying on Mick and Jan's back lawn, safe and sound.

He awakes later to a car engine racing down the suburban street. He's been sweating. He presses the light-up button on his Casio watch. Two a.m. He's wide awake and could leave now. He quietly inches open the zipper on the door and walks across dead grass to the outside tap. He splashes his face with cold, refreshing water, readying himself for the long drive home. He keeps a bar of soap and a flannel in his glove box. He retrieves those from the car and continues to give himself a wash. He lowers his shorts and lathers his groin, facing a brick wall of the house.

Then he hears something which makes him freeze. A match striking. Still covered in soap, he yanks his shorts back up and turns around. He sees no one at first, but then a man steps out from the shadow of the fence, revealing his silhouette in the moonlit yard.

It's Frank the macaroni guy. He's up late, or very early.

This doesn't feel good, the way he's just standing there like that. The glow of his cigarette looks like one staring eye.

"Better turn that tap off," Frank tells him.

Sam obeys. Somewhere from the pipes comes an eerie groan.

Frank says nothing more but steps towards Sam, obliquely,

tentatively, as if approaching a baby roo in the bush, assessing it for injury. Sam's heart might pound right out of his chest.

Sam doesn't do well with invasions of personal space at the best of times, and Frankly surely knows it. He presses his revolting bare belly against Sam's own soapy skin. Then the older man dips his head, blowing smoke against Sam's chest.

"You're quite the little tease, aren't you?"

Sam doesn't dare cough at the smoke and the general stench of the guy. With bated breath, every sensation is heightened. Every sense tunnels onto a terrible rogue hand, sliding into his shorts, grabbing at his bum. This is no playful squeeze on the cheek. This hand knows exactly where to startle Sam the most, fingernails pressing up into him.

Sam stumbles backwards, onto the plastic tray of a dead pot plant. He doesn't feel the pain of a twisted ankle. He feels only the awful aftershock of that grab, into the most private area of himself. He doesn't feel the splinters needling into both hands as he grabs the wooden boundary fence and hoists himself onto the other side, landing into the back yard of unknown neighbours. He doesn't feel scratches when he falls into a bare and spiky bush.

He's breathing hard but two lungs aren't enough. He curls into a ball, making himself tiny, making himself invisible between fence and foliage. He listens carefully, expecting a smoker's cackle, expecting Frank to follow him casually over the fence.

That's not what happens. Seconds later Sam hears the fly screen of the back door click shut. But Frank might be fooling Sam into thinking he's gone inside.

So Sam doesn't move for a very long time. He doesn't flick a wrist to check his watch. But when he is stiff from keeping still, starting to shiver because of the cold soapy water, still slimy on his skin, and because of fresh clarity granted by the first light of dawn, he starts to worry more about trespassing in someone else's yard than facing another encounter with Frank. These neighbours might let out a dog.

But he could outrun the old guy. He could punch him in the face. He could push him hard and topple him over. Frank looks unfit. Sam is young. Sam is in his prime, which is exactly why Frank did that thing to him. If he climbs back over the fence and sees Frank waiting to pounce, Frank will get a reminder, all right. Sam will show him exactly what it means to be young and strong and angry and lithe.

Even without his glasses on, Sam is confident no one lurks in early morning shadows. But he approaches his tent cautiously. He peeks through the mesh windows. No one lies in wait. Sam yanks out all the pegs, carries the gear in three heavy bundles out to his car and stuffs everything haphazardly into the back seat and boot. He brushes soil off his body, puts on yesterday's sweaty t-shirt and does the hardest thing yet: He goes back inside that house.

Fortunately, he doesn't have to search upstairs or anything. Crispin is sleeping in the living area, curled up with Troy. They are both so skinny they can sleep on a couch together, a spectroscopic binary star system.

Sam shakes Crispin by the shoulder. Crispin is slow to wake up. When he does, he is groggy as heck. Amazingly, Troy remains asleep, even as Sam extracts Crispin from his dead-armed embrace. Sam grabs Crispin's bag by the door and pulls him by the hand out to the

driveway.

“Get in the car. I mean it, Crispy.”

Sam trusts his own senses now. He sees a complicated web of interdependencies among occupants of this house, with transactional sex at the centre. Crispin could wind up in this situation as one of the hangers-on, with no real friends and no hope of earning a steady income, instead beholden to users who may not appreciate Crispin as an individual with his own hopes and dreams.

Crispin is sleepy and confused, which is how Sam persuaded him into the car.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m taking you home.” Sam would like to speed down this street. Instead he’s sticking to the limit. “Sorry for waking you up like that. It’s just, there’s something I need to tell you, and I’m not sure how.”

“You better spit it out, man.”

“These people are bad. Especially the old fucker. I hate him.”

Crispin’s face changes, from stoic to knowing.

“You already understand this,” Sam says. “I can tell. Last night—”

“Why? What did he do?”

“I’ll spare you the details. But... he... sort of came onto me.”

“Sort of came onto you? He made a move?”

“I got away. But it was horrible.”

“First time for everything, I guess. No one’s made a move on you til now.”

Sam says nothing. Crispin doesn’t get it at all.

“You know what, Dennon? I should’ve known you’re a homophobe.”

“I’m absolutely not. I don’t like them, those people, specifically.”

“What do you even know about ‘those people’?”

“For one thing, they’re older than us.”

“Troy’s only twenty-three.”

“They have one topic of conversation. It’s crass.”

“Oh, you mean sex jokes. You think sex is crass. And disgusting, I bet, and you think gays are disgusting. Do me a favour, own your biases.”

“I’m not biased, for fuck sake. There’s no hierarchy of sex or whatever. Truth is, it’s all equally weird to me.”

“Got it.”

“Good.”

“No, you think sex in general is gross. That explains you.”

“I don’t think it’s gross, per se, not when other people do it. People can do what they want with whoever they want, I don’t care.”

“Well, aren’t you an enlightened lil trooper. Ah, how nice to be the neutral one, to sit in judgement from above as if you yourself had no nether regions. You float above us all, up in that ethereal realm, where there is no sin. Well. Ain’t no air up there.”

Crispin’s grogginess must have lifted. This speech contains more words than Crispin has strung together for Sam this entire trip. With talk of an ethereal realm, Crispin may have been more affected by his mother’s religious teachings than Crispin’s prepared to admit. Or maybe he’s taking the piss out of church. Or perhaps Crispin is taking the piss out of Sam.

Crispin is supposed to be Sam’s best friend. Sam doesn’t have extra friends up his sleeve. Without Crispin, he has no one. He hasn’t

put in the effort. All through high school he's been happily engrossed in his own interests, reading or star-gazing or taking photos, completing homework when he should've focused on accumulating other friendships. He should not have placed all his eggs in one Crispin-sized basket.

But it's Crispin who's starting to snuffle.

Sam starts to panic. "Say goodbye to Troy via the Internet. He needs to get out of there, too."

Crispin starts to cry for real.

Sam decides to stay quiet. He can't talk anyway. There's a lump in his throat.

As they leave the outskirts of Canberra, Crispin stops crying. After a half hour of silence, Crispin says, "I don't know what happened to mess you up, but you need to talk to somebody."

"Me?"

"You're sex repressed. And jealous of my new friends."

All this time, Sam thought Crispin was short with him due to battling his own demons. Disordered eating. Being gay. A single mum who can barely make rent. Now he realises Crispin does not like him, specifically. Crispin has not liked him for a long time. Sam was simply somebody to hang out with in school, to avoid being alone.

Sam should've seen this coming, especially after losing Hoyt. It was one thing to lose Hoyt, who Sam never liked in the first place. It's something else to lose Crispy, who happily played LEGO with him in year seven, as they giggled at re-runs of *Mr Bean*.

Ten minutes later, Crispin makes a half-arsed apology. "Okay, fine, maybe you're not jealous. Maybe you're not a homophobe, I don't

know. Jury's out on that one. But one thing's for sure. You're boring as fuck."

Sam can't win. He has no place at all, with anyone. He is a little envious of Crispin, not because of those particular friends, who are not Sam's type, but because Crispin has found comrades with a united commonality: their gayness. Each year, when the Mardi Gras happens, Sam catches sight of the magnificently strutting groups of men. Those men make him heartsick. It's not their gayness. Sam has no wish to be gay. But he is drawn to them without knowing why, exactly. Perhaps it's because they all know what it's like to be an outsider. Except Sam is a pretend outsider, an outsider of his own making. Queer folk band together, interrogating the gender hierarchy and dominant social mechanisms. Sam has no one. Worse, he has only himself to impute for his outsider status. His auntie and uncle have given him every opportunity to become one of life's insiders.

"Have you still got the cash I gave you for the coach?" Sam asks Crispin after a long, angry silence.

"What? No. I needed it."

"For what? How did you spend it already?"

"You wouldn't approve. You don't need it anyway."

"You took another hundred without asking, didn't you."

"Why do I gotta beg for every last dollar, like you're my dad or something? You said you'd cover us both. Also, why do you think I invited you along? Because your aunt and uncle bought you a car and paid for driving lessons, that's why. I needed a chauffeur."

There's a tiny township somewhere between Gundagai and Holbrook. Sam doesn't remember what it's called. He has been

seething mad at Crispin for a tiring hour already. In a rare example of reckless driving, he makes a last second decision to turn off the highway.

It's not a town, as such: A dirt road, a couple of farm houses; reminiscent of Mangleby Flat.

Sam plants his foot on the brake. Crispin lurches forward against his seatbelt. Tyres skid across gravel.

"What the hell!" Crispin yells.

"If I'm such a tiresome rich boy, get the fuck out of my hatchback." Sam doesn't feel as cool and calculated as he sounds.

"What? No! We're in the middle of actual nowhere!"

Crispin isn't about to get out of Sam's car, so Sam gets out instead. He flings open a back door, pulls Crispin's bag from the seat and, with a strength that comes out of nowhere, he heaves it in a high arc. It lands in yellow grass, beyond the gravel road.

He immediately feels guilty. Something precious of Crispin's may have broken. And now that tiny bag, full of Crispin's life, looks so small, so helpless.

But he can't take his outburst back. He can't apologise. Not right now.

Bewildered, Crispin does rise slowly from Sam's car.

"Fuck you," Sam says, before Crispin can see his own tears.

For all Sam knows, Crispin never did make it out of that place.



# **Part Four: SAM AT UNIVERSITY**



# **SAM & MIRIAM**

**MELBOURNE**

**UNDERGRAD ARCHITECTURE**

**1996**

There's this goth girl called Miriam, super-smart but scattered, tall and broad-shouldered with long, black diffraction spikes drawn around her eyes. Sam noticed her five years earlier in introductory engineering lectures. She disappeared for an entire semester, reappeared briefly, then left permanently. Sam never noticed her gone until he saw her last week, back on campus, this time doing architecture.

Even Sam Dennon, disinclined to judge by appearance, is distracted by Miriam's bucked teeth.

His first thought on seeing her: This girl must have been teased her whole life. His second thought: If Miriam were from a privileged background she'd have been fitted with braces.

When Miriam reappeared in Sam's architectural courses, this time she did wear braces. A prudent decision. She might struggle to land a professional job with those original choppers, even if she were to graduate with top marks. But anyone could see, Miriam's marks are average at best.

Since she re-materialised, Sam has wanted to say something to Miriam, to welcome her back to student life. Now he has thought of something. One day he takes a seat in the row behind. After their

lecture he says, “Hey, Miriam.”

Miriam pretends not to hear him at first.

“Miriam?”

She turns, slowly, looking annoyed, until she sees it is only Sam Dennon.

“Nice to see you back,” Sam says, exactly as planned in his head.

“Oh. Cheers.”

After that, if Miriam says anything to anyone, she speaks only to Sam Dennon. “Can I bum some of your note paper?” or, “Can I take a squiz at your notes?” Despite being enrolled as an equivalent full-timer, Miriam works twenty hours per week in a paid job. Sam doesn’t know how she manages. Their architecture course is a job and a half in itself. Sam takes care with his handwriting, knowing Miriam will later be reading his notes.

One day, while waiting for an Applied Tech teacher to turn up, Miriam rushes in to class late, though not as late as their teacher. Miriam plonks herself in the empty seat next to Sam Dennon and asks to borrow a pen. Sam has brought an extra, anticipating Miriam’s request.

“Hey, Dennon,” comes a derpy male voice from the other side of the classroom.

The voice belongs to Sam Parrish, who thinks he’s all that and a bag of chips. This other Sam loves the sound of his own voice and uses it frequently. Sam Dennon decides to ignore it, at first.

“Dennon!” Sam Parrish tries again, and now he’s commanding the entire room. “You gonna ask her out?”

Sam Dennon refuses to respond.

So the other Sam says, “Can I borrow your card, buddy?”

Stupidly, Sam Dennon falls into the trap. “What card?”

“Ya V-card, mate.”

Because this is university and not high school, no one really laughs, but there are a few amused groans.

“Shut up, Parrish,” someone says. The someone is Lisa Willis. Lisa is the inverse of Miriam, the designated hot girl of architecture with long, dark, shiny hair and remarkable natural eyelashes.

“Know what the V stands for?” Parrish presses, through a perfect grin of straight, white rich-boy teeth.

If only Sam could’ve thought of something on the spot. Afterwards he thought of numerous comebacks: The vacuum which describes the inside of your skull; the vacation you take when assigned to a group project; vacuous, like everything else you grunt across a room. God, why couldn’t he have come up with that last one? That was a gift.

Sam Dennon is many things, but his transmission speed is hardly phenomenal. Instead he says, stupidly, “What would you even do with my V-card?”

Sam Parrish shrieks and slaps his thigh in an outlandish, cartoon-like fashion.

Lisa Willis is far quicker than Sam Dennon with comebacks. Sam learns much later that Lisa honed her shit-talking with her two older brothers, and in a male-dominated course she has perfected the art of dealing with jackasses. “What Parrish needs is a VD card,” she says. “Parrish should have to prove he’s free of venereal disease before they let him out of his cage each morning.”

This earns widespread laughter. Mercifully, their teacher arrives, smiles naïvely and assumes he's missed the most wonderful whole-class joke.

After class, Sam Dennon is first out the door. Miriam catches him up near the bike stands and tugs hard on a strap dangling off his backpack.

"Ignore those fuckers," she says. "That's what I do."

"I know."

"You don't owe anyone private info about yourself, either, just because they demand it."

It is only after Miriam's attempt at solidarity that Sam understands how he's accidentally confirmed to his entire class that he is, indeed, a virgin. He'd assumed that since 'V-card' is a hypothetical item, his comeback would've been taken as hypothetical, too.

Sam has never understood everyone's prurient interest in what other people are doing with their genitalia. Back in high school, he thought boys were faking enthusiasm for sex to appear cool. But university life has taught him that boys in high school really were thinking frequently about sex, because even the least sex-obsessed boys he knew back then have quietly paired off by now, suggesting they were at least a little bit interested all along.

Here's a mystery Sam still cannot understand: How do people know, just by looking at him, that he's never 'done it'?

That night he brushes his teeth and studies his face in the mirror. There is nothing in his features, nor in the set of his body, which screams virgin. So how do people know?

In bed he tries to read an architectural magazine but flips

through, distracted. No, he concludes, it's nothing to do with his looks, nor in anything he does. The answer lies in the things he does not do, the things he does not say, the jokes he does not find funny, and in the private information he does not offer in exchange for masculine camaraderie.

Sam Dennon makes a conscious decision, lying in bed at his share house, to take Miriam's advice. He'll ignore them. He'll even go one better. From now on, Sam Parrish doesn't exist. That tool can say what he likes; Sam Dennon will pretend the guy is dead.

Unsurprisingly, Sam Parrish was highly rewarded that day, and has decided to make further mischief with Sam Dennon the Virgin. Two birds, one stone, Parrish can target Miriam as well, by making it look like he's trying to set them up as a couple, out of the goodness of his heart.

Sam Dennon's genuine indifference to Parrish's match-making services saves him from daily humiliation, but one late Friday afternoon, Miriam locates Sam eating salad and salami sandwich in the quad. Sam is never sure how many times in a single day he's required to say hello to his classmates, but figures another nod will do, and she's lucky to get that. To his surprise, Miriam plonks herself down next to him on the lawn.

"You going to that thing tonight?" She means the party at the Parrish house.

Sam shrugs. Parrish has asked Sam three times if he's coming, which is weird, but Sam is one hundred per cent sure no one expects him there.

He's wrong this time, because Miriam says, "They're organising

all these dumbass drinking games. They're planning on getting us two drunk, mostly you though."

"What? Why?"

Miriam's face betrays her strongly-held opinion that everyone in the world is very, very stupid, including Sam, but Sam is used to this look. "They're trying to set us up, ya nuff-nuff. Lisa Dennon warned me about it. Not like I was gonna go anyway. I've got work. And since I'm not going, they'll try and set you up with some other chick, so consider yourself warned, mate."

"Thanks for the heads up. Wasn't going anyway."

"I don't understand Lisa Dennon," Miriam adds. "Do you know she's going out with Parrish now? A pretty girl like that. With that doofus. I don't understand people, what they see in each other."

Sam shakes his head. He can't keep up, either. He wonders if Miriam would like the other half of his sandwich. She takes it gladly.

"Meant to ask," Miriam says, speaking through a gob full of food. "You going to the ball? Go with me if you want. I don't want to either, but it's what you do."

Sam hasn't given a single thought to the ball, except when his Auntie Jan asked about it. Sam has wondered how Auntie Jan even knows about such things. It's not like she micromanages his life these days. As for Uncle Mick, he keeps telling Sam, "It's not what you know, it's who you know." This is causing Sam anxiety. If Mick is correct, Sam will never find work after graduation, unless he starts going to things. Also, he needs to practise being someone different, someone better; less introverted, more interesting, and more interested in people if he hopes to make it in life.

“Okay. I’ll go.”

This is how Sam Parrish, pulling nefarious strings, indirectly secures Sam Dennon a date to the ball.

“What colour will she wear?” asks Auntie Jan when Sam retracts his earlier statement about never going to a ball. He does have a ‘date’, “but not really a date”.

“‘Date’ is not a swear word, Sammy.”

Sam can’t begin to explain. Jan has not met Miriam.

Jan is delighted about Sam’s date, recalling balls she attended herself in her youth. “Ask what colour frock she’s wearing. We’ll get her a corsage.”

“What’s a corsage?”

“Flowers!”

“She’s not that kind of person. She only wears black.”

“Not to a ball, surely.”

Jan meets Miriam briefly when Miriam picks Sam up in her bomb of a car. This is a gender reversal which prompts Jan to ask Sam, the following day, if Miriam is a lesbian. She mouths the ‘lesbian’ part, adding, “She was wearing Doc Martens. To a ball.”

“Miriam’s not anything.”

“Oh Sammy, everybody’s something.”

The ball itself is a non-event. Sam and Miriam sit listlessly for an hour at a table, watching everyone else getting jiggy with it.

Sam glances around, at the terrifying dance floor, at the gaggles of classmates who he technically knows but who look like different people in their black tie attire. He wonders how he might mingle, and

how everyone else seems to know how it's done. He might try talking to Miriam, who looks equally bored, sitting across from him in her black velvet dress and her usual, heavy-handed eye-makeup.

Sam clears his throat and leans forward. "Did you manage to catch sight of Comet Hyakutake?"

"Comet what?"

"The Great Comet of 1996. Passed Earth in March. A great naked eye experience. I drove with my uncle into the middle of nowhere so we could see it properly."

Mick had enjoyed the drive to Mangleby Flat and made the right noises regarding Sam's passion for dots in the sky. He and Della relaxed in a canvas chair in Della's front yard. Mick cracked open the beers without Jan requiring him to whipper-snip the edges or finish resealing the deck.

"Was it mind-blowing?" Miriam asks.

"It was pretty good."

"So when's it coming back?"

Sam checks his wristwatch. "In about seventy-two thousand years."

"Fark. I'm always late for everything, dude."

"You can still see Hale-Bopp, passing by next year."

Miriam has never heard of Hale-Bopp. They sit in silence, sipping soft-drinks.

"Let's get outta here," Miriam says after Sam drains his lemonade.

In the carpark, she squints up at the Melbourne sky. "Where's the bright one? The Evening Star."

“We’d have to stay up all night to see Venus. She’s in the inferior conjunction phase right now, meaning Earth and Venus are both on the same side of the Sun. The glow of Venus is a thick cloud of reflective sulphuric acid.”

“Someone farted bad up there, eh?”

Sam always laughs at Miriam’s fart jokes. Other classmates have grown out of such childishness, replacing toilet humour with a constant stream of sexual innuendo. The number of phallus-shaped objects in architecture is startling and tedious. Steel erection, pipe penetration, exposed beam, butt glazing, seven inch riser, furring strips... their lecturers keep giving and giving. Anything that fits inside another thing is enough to trigger sniggers.

In the car, Miriam says: “Look at us, gazing at stars, getting romantic.”

Sam buckles himself firmly in. “I’m not the romantic type.”

“Neither.”

“Aren’t Goths meant to be romantic?”

“I’m no Goth. I dress all in black to avoid the hassle of separating my washing.”

“And the eye make-up?”

“My Don’t-Fuck-With-Me face. You ought to foster some kind of mask. Our type needs to.”

Together they’re a type? Sam is about to ask for clarification when Miriam starts the engine. “The night is young, space boy. Where to now?”

Sam suggests soft serve ice-creams because that’s what his auntie does whenever they’re out together and at a loose end.

Miriam drives her panel-beaten car with no hub caps and a hole in the floor to the nearest McDonalds.

Drive-thrus stress Sam out. He never drives through them, because you have to enunciate your order several times clearly into a box. In contrast, Miriam has no problems yelling for two soft serve ice-creams, the cheap ones, which are ‘loss-leaders’, according to Miriam.

“Machine’s broken,” replies the box.

Sam says, “I’ll buy sundaes. You’ve already paid for petrol.”

“Don’t waste more of your money,” Miriam tells him, because she must think Sam — rather than Auntie Jan — paid for their ball tickets. “There’s a massive mark-up on every other food item. I bet that machine’s not even broken. You order a burger, then the cheap ice-creams. Next, cancel the burger. Otherwise they tell you the soft serve machine’s on the blink. Man. I really messed that one up.”

Surely the box can still hear Miriam’s theory. Two cars have lined up behind them.

Now they’re not buying anything, but they’re stuck in the drive-thru queue regardless. And because it’s a Saturday night, they’re stuck for aeons, at least seven minutes.

“What’s that lot doing, takes so long for a burger? Killing the fucken cow?” Miriam drums her thick fingers against the steering wheel. She colours her nails with black polish, but most of it’s chipped off. Those fingers look like she’s been whacked with a hammer, in a terrible act of torture.

“We aren’t getting anything,” Miriam says more gently to the high school girl at the payment window, which would embarrass Sam

if he were having to say it. “We’re just here for shits and giggles.”

“Want to listen to the radio?” Sam hopes to calm Miriam down.

“Radio’s cactus.”

The vehicles in front appear to have stalled.

“Fuck this shit.”

At this point Miriam attempts to drive her hatchback over the concrete ridge specifically designed to stop customers from doing exactly that. The front wheels make it, the back wheels don’t. And now they’re suspended, see-sawing dangerously in mid-air, half a foot off the ground. Sam jumps out in a panic, and is mortified to be sworn at by strangers, because now the cars behind are trapped, owing to Miriam’s tailgate blocking their path.

The cops are called to assist, accepting help from customers. Sam stands clear while six blokes, all bigger than Sam, lift Miriam’s hatchback safely off the traffic barrier. Police check with the McDonald’s manager that Miriam and Sam weren’t trying to cause trouble. Miriam looks like trouble but Sam doesn’t. Jan made sure; he’s dressed in a stupid bow-tie and cummerbund. Sam’s clean-cut appearance may be the only thing keeping Miriam out of further trouble tonight.

They don’t stay up to see Venus. Miriam drives Sam back to Mick and Jan’s house.

“See ya mate,” she says, then zooms off into the night.

When they next meet on campus, neither one says anything more about it. Sam suspects that sort of thing happens to Miriam all the time.

At least Sam can say he’s been to a ball now. He learned for sure

that he never missed anything by skipping his high school balls, and then the engineering ones.

He and Miriam did become easier in each other's company after getting stuck in that drive-thru and, of all the people Sam has encountered in his life, he senses, despite their surface differences, that Miriam is the female, non-anxious version of himself. A bit of anxiety isn't such a bad thing if it prevents you from doing rash crap like getting your hatchback stuck on traffic barriers. Sam and Miriam are either too similar or too different to be friends outside class; probably a bit of both.

On similarity, there's also this: Miriam's teeth keep her locked in adolescence. Someone should have paid to have them fixed in high school. Despite her recent fitting of self-funded braces, buck teeth prevent her from assimilating into the adult world. Sam's V-card is working the same way. He should have at least tried to hold a girl's hand. Now he's left it too long and he's nervous about all of it. Sam's naïvety marks him out as strange. Lack of sexual experience is messing with his temporality, keeping him locked in perpetual teenage-hood, same as Miriam, with the teeth.

Miriam disappears not long after that, ditching yet another degree. She never told Sam herself, but he heard she was asked to leave, failing to turn in yet another assignment on time.

Sam understands why she wouldn't say goodbye. Sam is a rags-to-riches special case. His own teeth were fixed with expensive orthodontic procedures. Jan also insisted he be sent off for secondary surgery to improve the scar left by surgery he had as a baby, fixing a cleft palate. By the time Sam turned eighteen, he really did resemble

one of life's winners. But only on the surface. Despite his surgical patch-ups, he still feels deeply wrong.

"That ball date of yours." Auntie Jan is wiping dishes in the kitchen, pressing the matter long past its use-by date. "Guess who I saw at Bunnings today, working in frame and truss? I really do think that Miriam character might truly be a lesbian, love. Be careful with your heart, darling boy."

Jan assumes Sam is too naïve to recognise gayness for himself. In turn, Sam thinks Jan too naïve to consider less obvious possibilities. Miriam could be into no one at all, same as himself: undefined, unrepresentable; NaN, not a number.

Strangely, Jan thinks Sam is in danger of getting his heart broken by a lesbian girl. Jan doesn't know her very own nephew.

"I'm not into anyone," Sam dares tell her as he washes a saucepan, deeply ashamed, hoping this much will suffice. "I never have been, and possibly never will be."

Jan is wiping a precious heirloom plate, but throws her head back, chuckling with abandon. "Every Jack has his Jill," she tells him. "You're a late bloomer. No shame in that. Everyone's different."

Jan is so close, yet so far from getting it.

"Give it time," she adds before turning on the InSinkErator.

This only proves Sam's theory: No one can ever know anyone. Not really.



# THE HOUSEGUEST

MELBOURNE

ONE FRIDAY NIGHT IN DECEMBER

SUMMER HOLIDAYS 1997

Sam has moved out of Mick and Jan's in the suburb of Surrey Hills. He lives in one of their rental properties nearby, where Sam is the reluctant house leader of two undergrads, both slobs. In better news, he has the place to himself over summer.

On the Friday night before Christmas, he is reclined on the couch perusing a photography magazine when the phone rings ominously from the wall.

No one calls Sam at half past ten. Something terrible must have happened.

Sure enough, the woman on the line is talking through tears.

But Sam doesn't recognise the voice. "I'm really sorry. You have the wrong number."

"It's me, Lisa! Lisa Willis?"

The Kiwi accent makes sense now. But a call from Lisa Willis makes no sense at all. Despite swapping phone numbers for a group project last semester, Sam and Lisa barely know each other.

"Where are you calling from?"

"Mornington Peninsula."

"You're not in New Zealand for Christmas?"

“Can you come and get me? Please?”

Sam has never received a call to adventure. He drives his Toyota hatch an hour and a half along the highway towards the coast, wondering what on earth is going on.

He doesn't know Mornington at all, and now he must find a particular phone booth. Lisa's directions were terrible.

Eventually he pulls in to a servo, fails to find Lisa, so buys a better map from the rack. He is starting to feel like a very reluctant cast member in a murder mystery. How many servos can there be around here?

But as he makes his way back to his car, defeated, Lisa appears from the shadows. She lunges in for a hug, the instinctive kind. Sam stiffly hugs her back. He has never hugged a girl in his life. He's never even imagined himself hugging a girl.

When Lisa finally pulls her head back from his shirt, the cotton sticks to her face a little. The stickiness is blood. Her face is swollen and cut.

“Lisa?”

This does sound like her, thanking him profusely, repeating his name. “Please take me home with you, Sam.”

“Home? How about hospital?”

Lisa is vehemently opposed. “Take me back to your flat,” she pleads.

They briefly argue in the car.

“You know what'll happen if you take me into a hospital?” she sobs. “They'll think it was you.”

“Me?”

“Who did this.”

Sam had not considered assault. He'd assumed some kind of accident. His stomach drops.

“Was it... your boyfriend? Sam Parrish?”

Lisa says nothing.

“Shouldn't we tell the police?”

“No.”

All the way back to Melbourne, Lisa weeps quietly and shivers in the passenger seat. Sam turns on the heater. Lisa is wearing checked cotton shorts and a singlet top, both a little blood-stained. She's got nothing else with her, not even a hair tie. Her long hair is straggled and damp. She hangs her head so hair obscures her face.

“I had to beg change for that phone call.” That's all she says for the rest of the trip.

Lisa must have known that Sam Dennon was alone for summer. The convenience of solitude is why she chose her erstwhile project partner to pick her up. Obviously, Sam Dennon has no close friends. And his flatmates have gone home to Wagga and Mildura for Christmas. She can hide at his house and no one will learn of this incident.

Sam has never been solely responsible for welcoming a guest but he's seen his Auntie Jan do it. First, Jan cleans everything from top to bottom. Sam happened to spend his day doing a pre-Christmas clean and catching up on his washing. He is therefore able to hand his unexpected guest a clean folded towel and a facecloth. He opens a new bar of soap and shows Lisa the contents of the bathroom cupboard, pointing out the paracetamol and ibuprofen. The Dettol might have

passed its expiration date, but it still smells of Dettol so may do the trick.

“I don’t have cotton balls,” he says, “but here’s a box of tissues.”

Lisa spends a long time under the stream of water while Sam waits nervously in the living area.

His guest can’t be expected to put blood-stained clothing back on. Sam searches through his dresser drawers for his least worn cotton t-shirt and a pair of light trackie-daks. He can’t possibly lend a girl his own pyjama bottoms. They have a slot in the front for starters.

He leaves the clothes on the floor in front of the closed bathroom door. When the stream of water cuts off he knocks softly and tells Lisa they’re there. Then he makes himself scarce so she can open the door without exposing herself to him.

Minutes later Lisa locates Sam in his own bedroom, trying to read something in bed even though it’s now the small hours and blurry walls of text bounce off his tired brain. On Lisa, Sam’s clothes bag loose in places, stretching tight in others.

Sam has been wondering which of his absent flatmates would mind least that a random girl with a bloodied face borrow his bed for a night. Tony wouldn’t notice if an elephant stampeded through his room, so Sam had planned to offer Tony’s term-time bed to Lisa.

But Lisa has already decided: She isn’t sleeping alone tonight. She joins him in his. He’s still sitting up against the bed-head, so she lies down and drapes one arm across his waist.

“This okay?” she mumbles.

“Okay.”

“Turn out the light?”

Sam obediently replaces his bookmark and switches off his bedside lamp. Already he'd do anything for her, anything in the world.

Sam wouldn't have said that a king single is wide enough for two, but Lisa barely takes up space, snuggled into him like this. Even while he sleeps, Sam never forgets he has company. He is wholly unused to anyone touching him. It's not bad, he doesn't mind it, and he's glad to be of comfort. He doesn't know what to say, and he doesn't know how to fix things, but at least like this she can cling onto him and that seems enough, for now.

He awakes several times in the night to Lisa's quiet crying.

Before long, sunlight streams through that annoying crack between curtains, waking Sam but not Lisa, who is finally asleep.

He would like to cook bacon and eggs and bring it to Lisa on a tray, along with a glass of pulpy orange juice. Auntie Jan does that for Sam whenever he's sick. But he only has Weet-bix and milk.

While she's still asleep, Sam considers ringing Uncle Mick to ask his advice. Mick is Sam's go-to advice man for: How to unblock a toilet, how to change a washer, what to do about the lawnmower, and how to remedy a cockroach situation. However, Mick has not been tested on what to do with an injured girl after rescuing her from a servo at night by the coast. Do you take her to the hospital even against her wishes, or do you stow her away in your bedroom and look after her, as best you possibly can?

He doesn't ring Mick. He doesn't ask Jan either, since Jan would barrel in and take over.

But Jan happens to ring Sam, to ask if he's still coming round this

afternoon. Jan means for Sam to clear the gutters. She figures this will hasten a welcome drop of rain to freshen the lawn before Christmas Day. After clearing their guttering, Sam is expected to stay for a dinner of lamb roast. Should he go anyway and invite Lisa? Looking like this? Mick and Jan won't have seen this sort of thing. Against Lisa's wishes, they may insist on police involvement.

That's why Sam lies about having gastro.

He goes to the supermarket, buys his own leg of lamb and cooks what Jan will have cooked. He also buys electrolytes, which means he wasn't lying about having some already in the house when Jan offered to bring some round.

Lisa eats Sam's lamb roast hungrily and with gratitude. She's a little more talkative now, and might say more if it weren't for the pain of a split lip.

Afterwards she confesses a troubling issue. "I left all my stuff at the coast. I don't even have my wallet."

"I have enough money. You can stay here with me til we get it back."

Lisa freezes. "I'm never going back there."

"Don't worry. You won't have to."

Sam has been mulling this over. He is so mad with Parrish.

Lisa had been staying at the Parrish holiday home on Mornington Peninsula, where she and Parrish both scored summer jobs: him at a sports store, Lisa at a clothing store in the same mall. The rest of Sam Parrish's family were scheduled to join the pair of them on the night of Christmas Eve, until Sam Parrish changed Lisa's mind about sticking around.

Sam wants to drive straight to the Parrish family holiday home, pound on the door and demand Lisa's things back. Wouldn't Sam Parrish be surprised to see Sam Dennon standing on his veranda.

But Lisa forbids him. She doesn't need her stuff. After their roast, Sam makes them a cup of tea, arranges gingernuts on a decorative plate.

Lisa comments on the plate and on Sam's general quaintness. Then: "You can't tell anyone about this. I mean it."

"I know. I won't."

Lisa leaves most of her tea in the cup, retreats to the sofa, curls into a ball, and buries her fingers in her hair. "I can't go back to uni. I can't. He'll spin his own version, you know?"

Sam has been thinking the same thing. The lewd yet louche Sam Parrish has somehow attracted a string of good-looking girlfriends. He called the last one a 'gutter slut'.

"One more year though, Lise. And a good chunk of that will be industry placement."

Lisa starts crying again, though she never properly stopped.

"Hey, don't think about that now," Sam says, crouching next to the sofa. "Come on a road trip. Tomorrow I'm driving to Mangleby Flat and back. I have to pick up Mum for Christmas Day at my aunt and uncle's. It'll be good to get out of the house, don't you reckon? Out of Melbourne."

"Mangleby Flat? Where's that?"

"Out west. Near the South Australian border."

"Do you come from a farming family?"

"Mum lives on a two acre block, mostly dust and chooks. She's

surrounded by farmland, but it's not hers."

Until a few generations ago, Della's surrounding farmland used to belong to the Dennons, but not anymore. Sam isn't sure how or when the land was lost. He could ask his uncle, but Mick isn't exactly forthcoming on Mangleby matters.

"I've never explored Western Victoria," Lisa says.

"Then come. I'll point out the spinifex. You'll see the odd feedlot, a few impressive silos."

"But I can't leave your house. Not with my face looking like this."

"Mum won't even notice."

"Don't placate me, Sam. I'm scary-lookin."

But Sam really means it. How to explain Della to someone who's never met her? His mother defies description.

"Even if she noticed, she wouldn't judge," Sam says. "Mum's a vague sort." Next, he shares with Lisa something he's only ever suspected, an idea he's kept to himself until now. "I'm pretty sure Mum's got some kind of brain injury."

"Oh no. From an accident?"

Sam shrugs. He doesn't have access to this information. He doesn't even want it. Sam suspects Della's injuries, like Lisa's, might have been inflicted by someone on purpose. If he were to share this suspicion with Lisa, she'd fully empathise. She'd empathise too much, even, and start crying again. Sam has never asked Uncle Mick for his opinion on Della's vagueness, because he doesn't want to learn that his own biological father was a criminally violent type. For this reason, and also because it's fruitless, Sam has wasted little time wondering who sired him. He can't imagine Della ever having been with anyone

for fun. Then again, she must've been a different person once, before baby Sam came along, and doesn't everyone feel that way about their own mothers?

Sam retrieves his sunglasses and passes them to Lisa, still curled up on the couch.

"Here, put these on."

Lisa sits up and obeys.

"With sunnies you can hardly tell."

Lisa stands up then checks her face in the bathroom mirror. "But I can't keep these on all day," she says through the open door.

"You probably can," Sam calls back. "We won't be going inside Mum's house or anything. That's not even possible."

Lisa returns to the living room, still wearing Sam's sunglasses. "What do you mean?"

"Ever seen one of those hoarders shows?"

"That exploitative reality TV? Yeah, briefly."

"Imagine that. That's my mum's house."

Sam has never told anyone this. But this girl in his flat is a temporary presence in his life. Her bruises will heal and she'll hot-foot out of here. Sam's inherent boringness won't hold the interest of someone like Lisa Willis. The reasons she came to Sam now, at this terrible juncture in her life, are the very reasons she won't stick around. So it doesn't matter if Lisa Willis learns personal information about Sam Dennon and his mum.

Sam is mainly telling Lisa these things to correct the asymmetry. He has information which shames Lisa so much she won't speak of it. But if she knows the shameful origin story of Sam, the part of himself

he prefers to keep private, that makes them almost even.

Before their trip, Sam dashes out to the shops. He will buy supplies for his guest. The chain-store is crowded with pre-Christmas shoppers. No one gives him a second glance when he chooses a few outfits from the women's clothing section. In the cosmetics section he finds concealer. There are so many to choose from. He buys a medium tone.

Back at the flat, he hands the goods to Lisa.

"You bought all this for me?"

"I'll take them back if I got the wrong stuff."

"No, I mean... Wow. You even got me knickers."

"I figure you need some."

Sam has chosen the most generic white underpants he could find. He has no idea about such things. "Wrong kind?"

"Nope, perfect. Thank you."

Lisa covers her bruises with the concealer. She cuts her own hair using kitchen scissors. Her new fringe hides the gash across her forehead. The swelling still puffs up her jawline, but you wouldn't look twice unless you knew Lisa already. Her other bruises remain hidden by a long-sleeved tee and ankle-length tights, which Sam chose for their coverage.

She slept in Sam's bed again last night. Sam relaxed a little more, though he continued to wake every time he needed to turn over. Then when he did turn over, he felt obliged to do so as gently as possible to avoid disturbing his self-invited bed-mate.

Now they're in the car on the way to Mangleby. They left Melbourne

at dawn. Sam drives through Melbourne with his seat at right angles, but when the traffic thins out, he cranks it back a bit. With the city behind them, Lisa also unwinds.

“Your mum can’t drive herself to Melbourne?” she asks.

“She only drives on local roads. Her truck can’t be trusted to make the five hours to Surrey Hills.”

“Your mother drives a truck?”

“A ute, really. A temperamental double clutch thing from the 1970s.”

“Your mum sounds fly.”

Sam may have raised Lisa’s expectations.

“Does she smoke two cigars at once? Drink scotch neat? Is she the butch type?”

Unkempt is a better word, Sam thinks. “She smokes a cigar at Christmas.”

Lisa mulls this over. Out of nowhere she says, “All the girls agree you’re the cutest boy in our class.”

Sam can’t decipher why she’d bust out with something like that. It’s manifestly untrue.

“Not sure I want the girls thinking about me like that,” he says, hoping Lisa doesn’t look sideways to notice his reddening cheeks.

“No? Would you prefer the boys thought that?”

“Why does everyone think I’m gay?”

Lisa has a ready answer. “You’re pretty, and notably clean and tidy is why.”

“Oh.”

This gay-tidy correlation feels bullshit to Sam, but explains a few

things. Sam's straight male flatmates must have worked out yonks ago that pulling their weight around the share-house would negatively impact their love lives.

"No problem either way," Lisa says. "Pays not to assume, these days. Sorry for calling you 'pretty', though. Straight guys hate that."

"I've been called worse."

Lisa doesn't need to ask what. Apart from 'The Virgin', Parrish and his buddies refer to Sam Dennon as 'Mute Boy'. This started after his nerves got the better of him during a class presentation one time, rendering him unable to finish.

The lecturer observed Sam's shaking hands, the darkening armpits of his shirt, and knew Sam's performance did not match his subject knowledge and effort. She took a cursory look over Sam's sweaty but extensive notes to make sure he'd actually done the work, then extended a grace period. He could retry the following day. Standing in front of his classmates again, after that level of humiliation, remains one of the hardest things Sam has ever done.

"People are so mean," Lisa says quietly, who worked with Sam on their next group assignment and saved that from happening again. "Do you have a preferred nickname? I'm not a big fan of the name 'Sam' anymore, for reasons entirely unrelated to yourself. Also, you look more like a Florian or a Benedict. Something with three syllables, for sure. I love how you lay cutlery out for dinner, how you fold your clothes neatly into your drawers, hang your shirts in order from light to dark."

Sam wishes she'd stop.

"I assumed you were a Christian boy," Lisa continues, "except

you've shelved your Bible between an astronomy book and an atheist manifesto. What does that even mean?"

Has this girl been riffling through everything he owns? If she searched his bedside cabinet she'll have found the remnants of Rag-dog, and that would be embarrassing.

"So... you're not Christian?"

"I appreciate the role religion plays in other people's lives. But I've no desire to practise it myself."

Lisa's interest in Sam's spirituality ends there. "You even own an oven mitt," she says.

"My auntie brought that back from a holiday with girlfriends in Bali."

"Hey, I'm not taking the piss. It's nice how you cook your own roasts. You're a lovely host."

"I might as well warn you now," Sam says, while they're still on the topic of his quaintness: "My mum still calls me 'Sammy'".

Maybe if he'd grown into one of those hulking great blokes like Sam Parrish he would've grown out of his baby name. He'll only accept 'Sammy' from Della, and also from Auntie Jan, but now considers whether he might also accept it from Lisa. He decides he can probably put up with one other person saying it so long as she's not making fun.

"Sammy." Lisa tries it out. "Yeah, that suits. It could be short for Samson or Samurai."

"Or sam-wich."

This makes Lisa laugh. The joke is hardly stellar, but it feels good to make her laugh, even though she's touching her bottom lip now,

where Parrish split it.

Eventually the sealed road ends, which means they're twenty minutes from Della's, at least with Sam's careful driving. This stretch is bad for cracking windscreens. Lisa seems excited to meet his mother, and is back to her usual chatty self.

"I can't see why they call this place Mangleby Flat," she says. "Everything's flat as a shit-carter's hat out this way. Mangleby seems no flatter than the rest of it."

"Aussie irony." Sam has met a linguistic soulmate. Sam also thinks about such things.

By the time they pull into Della's front yard, Lisa Willis has learned everything worth knowing about Sam Dennon, except for the reality of his childhood home.

Sam waits for Lisa's reaction to Della's house and yard. He's dreading it.

Even to Sam these days, Della's house is shocking. It would be hard for any normal newcomer to believe, let alone a student of architecture, how anyone could live in this shack, in this heat. Occasional dust devils whirling through Mangleby clean up the smaller litter, but even they don't mess with Della's collection of broken whitegoods and car parts. As for the old farmhouse, Sam intends to fill the ceiling with insulation batts, but whenever he has time to do it, it's hot as hell and there's no way he's crawling around in stifling cavities over summer. For cheap double-glazing, Della has taped bubble wrap all over the windows. Green shade cloth droops in loops from the eaves. The fascia is rotting and the decking has lifted along part of the north-facing side, not that you'd know this from a

cursory glance, as the entire deck is cluttered with cast-off oddments, none serviceable: A lawnmower engine, a cracked Grecian urn, off-cuts of jib board, dented petrol cans, ceramic tiles, a dried up paint roller. It pays not to examine each item. The overwhelming urge to sweep all of this rubbish onto the back of Della's ute and drive it straight to the dump wallops Sam more strongly than ever. This time he observes Della's shack through the eyes of a stranger.

But Lisa does not pass judgement on Della's shack. She comments instead on the bigness of the midday sky. "I bet it's pretty here at night. I can totally see why you got into astronomy as a kid."

That's what she says out loud, anyway, pretending not to notice the state of Della's cluttered and dusty paddock. But now she's seen this house, it probably took all of one second to downgrade her assessment of Sam as a reputable member of mainstream society.

The thing is, Sam isn't poor at all. With his auntie and uncle as benefactors, he is one of Melbourne's most privileged. Thanks to his relatives, and their borderline obsessive interest in Melbourne real estate, he doesn't even carry a student loan. He is funded by wealthy family, just like Lisa.

"Feel free to stretch your legs while you wait," Sam tells her. "The chooks don't bite and the current rooster's relatively friendly. I'll be quick as I can."

Sam enters via the back door, startling his mum on the couch.

"Sammy! I didn't hear you pull in, darl."

Della's plonked in her usual spot, in front of the daytime telly. Sam can't stand these chat shows, peppered with ads for death insurance and prepaid funerals, tempting viewers towards the grave.

Everyone on the TV chat panel wears a Christmas decoration. But nothing else feels festive out here.

“I’ve brought a friend,” Sam says. “She’s waiting outside, so.”

Sam waits for Della’s reaction to the pronoun. He’s never brought a friend out here, let alone a girl.

“Have you just? Well, invite her in for a meet and greet!”

“You’ll meet in the car. Packed and ready to go?” Sam is keen to get cracking.

“You should’ve warned me you were bringing someone, darl. I’d have cut us some lunch.”

“We ate at the servo.” The pie he and Lisa ate for lunch was unevenly heated and over-salted. Combined with the rank odour of Della’s house, he worries he might meet it again.

“Do you need to use the toot, then? She’s a long drive back to the big smoke.”

“I’m good.” Sam would rather hold on forever than brave Della’s bathroom.

“What about this girl you’ve left outside in the heat? Doesn’t she need to go? And does she have a name?”

It takes the expected half hour to coax Della into Sam’s car, with her goodbyes to the chooks, and her too-many bags stuffed into the boot.

Also as expected, Della says nothing about Lisa’s puffy face. “Hullo, darl. It’s good to meet one of Sammy’s friends.”

“You two sit in the front,” Lisa says. “I’m fine with the back.”

“Stay where you are. I like to spread out. Maybe take a nap, even. You never know your luck.”

“Don’t lie down back there, Mum. It’s unsafe.”

“Haven’t started driving like a hoon, have you?”

“If you lie down, you’re not wearing a seatbelt.”

“He’s a real worry wart, this one. Won’t let the old girl catch forty winks.”

That’s rich, Sam thinks. Here he is, driving all the way out to Mangleby and back, and all because Della’s too hopeless to haul her own ungrateful self into the metropolis of Melbourne for festive dinner at Mick and Jan’s. But he doesn’t want their usual ridiculous banter to become a sideshow for Lisa’s entertainment.

Finally they’re back on the sealed road heading east.

“Feel free to put your music on,” Della yells from the back seat. She’s yelling because Sam has cranked the windows down. Della has an odour about her.

“You wouldn’t like it.”

“I don’t mind whatever.”

This is Della being accommodating. If Lisa weren’t here, she’d require from Sam “a bit of peace and quiet” and the windows back up. Sam has never seen Della bend for one of his friends before. Then again, he wouldn’t have, would he. He’s never brought anyone home.

Later, Della thrusts one hand between the front seats. She’s offering an overly crumpled paper bag of sweets. She’ll have been saving these stale specimens.

Lisa looks startled, even behind those dark glasses.

Della rustles the bag. “Don’t like lollies?”

“Oh. Don’t mind if I do.” Lisa chooses a gummy mint leaf, Sam’s least favourite kind. But with their overwhelming flavour, it’s probably

the best choice. Those sweets will have picked up a strange taste after languishing for years inside Della's giant shoulder bag, waiting for a special occasion.

They're almost in Melbourne now. Lisa asks to stop for a bathroom break. Della's already peed on the side of a country road, which embarrassed Sam immensely. Now they're stopped at some actual flushing toilets, Della stays in the back seat, fanning her face with the TV Guide, which she won't leave behind because she's got things circled.

Sam phones Jan from the booth next to the servo and asks if he can bring a friend for dinner this evening. Della's had a non-reaction to Lisa's face, so Sam figures Mick and Jan may also take Lisa's facial injuries in their stride.

"Course you can, love. Not a vegetarian I hope."

"No."

"Good because you do attract vegoes and goths. I've got a lamb roast on."

Sam cut ties with both Crispin and Miriam. But Jan still mentions them frequently.

"Her name's Lisa."

"Ooh."

There it is. Exactly the titillated reaction Sam expected from Jan.

"Can't talk long," Sam says, "but I need to forewarn you of something. She's got something going on with her face. Don't be shocked."

"What do you mean, 'going on with her face'? Like that Miriam

girl with the teeth?”

“Just, can you warn Mick not to comment?”

Back in the car, Sam extends the dinner invitation to Lisa.

Della chimes in. “Haven’t you met them yet, darl? Jan’s an overbearing pain in the neck, but she’s a good cook. Does her best, bless her, makes you feel at home.”

In the late afternoon, Sam, Lisa and Della arrive in Mick and Jan’s Surrey Hills driveway. The front door opens immediately, for Jan has anticipated their arrival with gleeful curiosity. She’s probably spent the last half hour twitching the net curtain.

For reasons Sam can’t fathom, Lisa grabs hold of his hand.



## A CHRISTMAS GIRLFRIEND

As per Sam's instructions, neither Mick nor Jan says a thing about Lisa's face. They greet Lisa with warmth and slightly confused delight. They also welcome Della, who sighs and grunts like Christmas in Melbourne is one massive imposition on her otherwise busy life.

But on their way through the house, to the BBQ area out back, Jan shoots Sam a private look which says everything: "What the hell is going on here?"

After some minutes of chatter and nibbles on the patio, Auntie Jan requests Sam's help in the kitchen. There, he gets a 'quiet' talking to.

"What in God's name happened to that poor girl's face?" Jan hisses. "I expected acne scarring, a port wine stain or something. That's swelling, Sammy. That's recent! Bet I can guess why she's not taken those dark glasses off, either. Black eyes, is it?"

Maybe introducing Lisa to Mick and Jan had been a miscalculation on Sam's part.

"Well? What's the story?"

"Her boyfriend did it."

"Her boyfriend?"

"Ex-boyfriend, I guess."

"Who's this 'boyfriend'? Do you know this fellow?"

"Can we not get into it now, please?"

“Jesus Sammy, this worries the soulcase out of me. Has she seen a doctor?”

“No.”

“Police?”

“She doesn’t want any of that. Please—”

“Tell me, how have you gone and got yourself caught up in all of this?”

“She’s hiding out at the flat for a while is all.”

“Hiding out’?” Auntie Jan raises her voice from its former stage whisper. “Who are you both in hiding from, eh? Some violent nut job, clearly. Lordy, this loose criminal hasn’t got a gun has he?”

Sam regrets his alarmist choice of words. “We’re not ‘hiding’ as such.” What Sam means is, he’s not worried Sam Parrish will come to his house and bash the door in. He’d be plenty scared of Sam Parrish if they were alone in a room and Parrish was drunk and pissed off, but Sam is safe. He and Lisa have damning intelligence on the guy. “I’m not scared of him,” Sam tells his auntie.

Jan mistakes Sam’s reply for bravado. “Oh, and what have you got up your sleeve for when danger turns up at your door? You wouldn’t harm a fly, Sammy, and I won’t have my boy beaten to a pulp, caught in someone else’s fray.” Jan is getting flustered now and she’s made a decision. “I like this Lisa girl a lot. She’s gorgeous. So you’re both bunking down here tonight. No ifs, no buts. Mick’ll keep coaxing home brews into you anyway. You won’t be fit to drive.”

“I appreciate that, I really do, but Lisa won’t stay here for Christmas Day. Not with a house full of people she doesn’t know. She didn’t even want to come here this evening, looking like that.”

Jan can understand this. She nods. “Here’s what. You’ll take her back to your flat tomorrow morning before the mob descends. You can enjoy a quiet Christmas Day just the two of you. Don’t you worry. I’ll sneak some dinners over to the flat somehow.”

Sam wonders how to break this plan to Lisa. In the end he doesn’t have to because after dinner Jan takes Lisa somewhere else in the house. They stay away for over an hour, leaving Sam with Mick and Della to play Scrabble. Della is surprisingly good at Scrabble, which is why Jan brings out the box. Della springs to life, rubs her rough palms together and gets ridiculously competitive about it.

Jan has pinned their four decorative stockings to the mantelpiece over the ornamental fire nook, the ones with their full names embroidered on: Janice, Michael, Adella and Samuel, suggesting an unusually formal arrangement between themselves and that sanctified chimney demon. If Lisa catches sight of the stockings she’ll know precisely how cute the Dennons are, and she may even feel she’s intruding on an age-old Christmas Eve tradition in which there’s only room for four.

Fortunately Lisa never gets the chance to join them in the good room for Scrabble. Jan comes down alone, smelling like ciggies. She flops on the sofa next to Mick, utters an exhausted sigh and says, “Well well well.” Then she says the same again. “Sammy, I’ve put her to bed in my messy room. You might want to go upstairs and say goodnight. She’s a bit upset.”

Sam would indeed like to extract himself from this fifth game of Scrabble. Mick mentally checked out two games ago. Sam happens to

have arranged a seven-letter word ready to go out on the board, so Auntie Jan agrees to take his place.

Upstairs, Sam asks quietly at the craft room door: “Can I come in?”

Jan’s ‘messy room’ smells of calico and tinsel. Jan’s been crafting homemade Christmas crackers at the desk, which overlooks Auntie Jan’s front rose bed and a lamp-lit, tree-lined suburban street.

The trundle bed is out and fills most of the floor space. Lisa enjoys the dusky view down below from the regal perch of Jan’s antique chair, which Jan reupholstered herself during a semester of night classes. Lisa wears one of Jan’s short, satin nighties.

“Like my new look?” Lisa asks. “She’s brilliant, your auntie. I really like Jan. And Mick. He’s a hoot.”

“Don’t give him positive feedback or you’ll never hear the end of his dad-jokes.”

“And your mum’s a character.”

Now there’s a non-judgemental word for Della. Sam tucks that one away.

Lisa has washed off her make-up. The bruises don’t look nearly so ‘gone’ as they did before.

Sam doesn’t know where to stand, or what to do with his hands. “Jan told you what’s happening tomorrow, then?”

“You don’t have to spend Christmas Day looking after me, Sammy.”

“I’m glad for the excuse to stay away. My cousins, or whatever you call Jan’s sisters’ kids, they’re pretty full on. When we were young they’d eat too much sugar and start pushing each other into the pool.

These days they get drunk and debate politics.”

“Sounds like my family.”

Sam and Lisa stare out the window for a bit. Lisa may be wishing she were home in Auckland, but down on the dusky Melbourne street, couples walk dogs and stop to chat with neighbours. The heads of two children bob in and out of view, propelled by the joyous thrust of a trampoline.

“You know what Jan said to me?” Whatever it is, Lisa seems amused by it. “She goes, ‘I’m pulling out the trundle bed, but no one’s checking to see if you stay in it.’”

“Where does she expect you to sleep?”

Lisa raises one eyebrow. “Where do you sleep?”

“Oh.”

Sam’s childhood bedroom is a five metre dash from here, across the gallery landing. That room hasn’t changed since he moved out.

“Sorry about my auntie.” Sam isn’t surprised to learn Jan implied something to Sam’s guest of a sexual nature.

“I’m sorry more. I’m gate-crashing at Christmas, so naturally everyone concludes I’m your latest girlfriend.”

“Latest. Hm.”

“You might want to set them straight. I dunno. I don’t mind either way. I can be your pretend Christmas girlfriend.”

Sam doesn’t like this descriptor. “No one’s ‘pretending’.”

Lisa searches for better phrasing. “What I mean is, I wouldn’t mind at all, being your girlfriend. You’re lovely.”

She says this without embarrassment, and Sam understands after a long, silent moment that she’s not even about to take it back, trying

again for something less revealing, more apt. There it hangs.

“And I love the way you smell,” she adds.

“That’ll be the antiperspirant. It was on special.”

“Not that. You should wear less of that, by the way. It’s the smell of you that I like. Pheromones or something.”

It is inconceivable to Sam that someone would like his own personal smell. Sam smells good? Sammy Dennon, whose nickname was ‘Stinky’ in primary school and who, as an adolescent, received a mortifying lesson on personal hygiene from his auntie the evening he arrived in Melbourne to start his new life?

“I like the smell of you, too,” he says to Lisa, who smiles shyly back. This is a ridiculous thing to swap notes on, after all.

Sam doesn’t know anything much about pheromones, but if he and Lisa like the smell of each other, this must mean they are sexually compatible. He’s seen something on TV about t-shirt sniffing experiments. Maybe something is happening here. This terrifies Sam, but also makes his heart sing.

“You’re a good, kind person, Sammy Dennon.”

Warmth starts in his belly, extending down into his pants region. Genuine compliments have always done that to Sam, no matter who they come from. He has long found this disturbing, thinking he might be a ‘compliment-o-sexual’. However, he very much likes the idea that he might have found a girl he likes in that way. He’s twenty-five, after all. Now he thinks about it, he does appreciate the way this young woman smells. Must be a sign.

Later that night, when the house and the streets have gone quiet, Sam

hears Lisa open Jan's craft room door. Next she's opening his. She's crawling into bed with him.

He's been expecting her. Now she's finally lying beside him, he can maybe fall asleep.

"Quick question," Lisa whispers. "Do you still get Santa?"

"Sorry?"

"No one's about to disturb us, right?"

"Huh?"

"You know. Christmas stockings? Big guy in red down the chimney, leaving pressies, maybe at the end of your bed?"

"Oh."

"Because I, for one, don't want to be disturbed." Lisa lifts the front of Sam's t-shirt and runs her hand across the fur on his lower belly.

"It's silly, but I do still get Santa."

The truth is, Jan fills the embroidered stockings and leaves them on the carpet by the mantelpiece downstairs.

Lisa rolls Sam flat onto his back so she can lie properly on top of him. She examines his face through what counts in the suburbs for dark. "You still get Santa? Really?"

"It's Jan's thing. You know what she's like. Actually, you probably don't know what she's like. Don't know why I said that."

"You're a grown man and you get 'Santa' creeping into your bedroom on Christmas Eve?"

"I do still get Santa. Yep. We all do, the whole house."

"I was kind of joking."

Sam laughs awkwardly. "It's always an orange, a candy cane and a

scratchie. And something else to make a surprise.” Sam might add that last year he won two dollars with the scratchie, and the surprise was a model aeroplane kit. If he told Lisa he spent Christmas day building the balsa wood aeroplane then carefully painting it up while everyone else argued politics around the outside table, she’d probably say that was ‘cute’.

But she’s busy kissing his neck. “I really don’t think anyone will disturb us, Sammy... Your auntie gave us the go-ahead... and I’m guessing Jan’s the Santa round here.”

Sam is painfully aware through the tickling, this neck-nuzzling is exactly the sort of thing he’s supposed to enjoy.

“I like the feel of this guy,” Lisa whispers, referring to his crotch.

Sam would like to say, “That’s because of the friction,” but this is not what you say to a beautiful girl lying on top of you and offering her whole self. Any boner is meant to be caused by the girl you’re in bed with, not tenting your pants in spite of her. But maybe it’s not ‘the friction’. Sam thinks it’s what he privately calls ‘a scared semi’. No one has ever talked about this, at least not out loud, not to him, but Sam sometimes feels an unwelcome nether-stirring when he’s afraid.

Right now, he can’t say what he’s afraid of. Lisa is bolshy but tiny. She’s a girl, but she’s easy to talk to. Wherever this fear comes from, his body’s current response is a shameful thing.

“This is my childhood bedroom,” he tells Lisa. “It’s a bit... weird.” Sam wriggles a little, hopefully not enough to offend. Aside from his own traitorous body, he doesn’t need to be thinking about his Auntie in her Santa hat, either, not with Lisa doing this, especially not when Lisa’s wearing his auntie’s sexy satin nightie to boot.

Lisa retreats by moving further down his body. She presses her nose into his sternum. "I know. I look hideous."

"No. Not at all. Don't you dare think that."

Lisa looks like a really pretty girl, but with significant bruising and swelling. Sam isn't sure how to phrase this, so he doesn't try.

"I don't blame you," she whispers.

Lisa lies on top of him for an uncomfortably long time, making his t-shirt wet again. He doesn't mind this part. Sam enjoys the sensation of her long, shiny hair running slowly through his fingers. But inside himself, he feels a terrible, terrible guilt, for failing to let himself enjoy the moment.

"Sammy?" Lisa whispers, as he's finally drifting to sleep.

"Mm."

"Why is your mum missing both pinkies?"

Sam hates this question. No one's asked him in a very long time, not since he was in primary school. He's given no one the chance.

"I really don't know," he murmurs, and it doesn't even matter if Lisa Willis believes his ignorance or not. Little Sammy Dennon of Mangleby Flat won't intrigue her for long. She won't be hanging around.

Lisa and Sam spend the following week as an old married couple on the brink of a sad and amicable but abstractly necessary divorce. Waiting for her flight out, Lisa continues to sleep in Sam's bed, snuggled into him. Apart from the snuggling in, she leaves his body alone. Sam makes sure to get out of bed while she's still asleep in the early mornings. He brings her breakfast in bed. They now have bacon

and eggs and juice in the house.

Eventually it is time for Lisa to leave Australia. After a long, tearful phone call in Sam's living room, Lisa's parents requested her back in New Zealand. She'll be finishing her studies while living at home in Auckland.

Sam offers to drive Lisa to the airport. Lisa declines.

The taxi's waiting but she's clinging onto Sam like she won't ever let him go. "Promise you'll visit me in New Zealand."

During their final week together Lisa spoke frequently about setting Sam up for an industry placement in Auckland. With the confidence of one of life's winners, she's certain she can make this happen. After all, her own father is one of New Zealand's top architects.

Sam doubts he will ever visit, and he's unable to lie about such things. Other people make false promises like that, and they probably even mean what they say in the moment. But Lisa will forget him as soon as her plane touches down, along with other awful memories of Australian boys named Sam.

Lisa keeps waving through the rear window of the taxi, all the way down the street.

**Part Five:**  
**HUSBAND**  
**MATERIAL**



# **HOLIDAY**

**TONGARIRO**

**AOTEAROA**

**TWO YEARS LATER**

**DECEMBER 2000**

For the last few years, Lisa and Sam have swapped fortnightly letters. This has suited Sam well. Lisa's enthusiastic replies suggest he makes for a loyal and entertaining penpal. On paper, he can seem almost as witty as Lisa, composing jokes at his own slow pace, detailing the daily interactions which cause him to ruminate, putting a funny spin on harrowing moments for Lisa's amusement. Sam has never attempted self-deprecating humour before. He's honing the craft.

Sam's final year industry placement in Melbourne led to a job offer. And now, with a year's worth of engineering salary behind him, Lisa has made Sam promise to visit her in New Zealand for summer. Sam has been hesitant. Despite the frequent letters, two years is a long time apart. He's far more witty on paper than in person. Then again, he's twenty-seven years old and has never been overseas, except for Tasmania. He doesn't especially want to go anywhere. He rarely leaves Victoria, except when he has to, for work. His only worry: youth is passing him by. So he agrees to the holiday, but doesn't expect to enjoy it in real time. Like many things in Sam's life, there's a good chance

he'll enjoy the memories of it in hindsight.

Lisa's parents approve heartily of Sam. For starters, it was Sam Dennon who took care of their daughter after that unspeakable incident on Mornington Peninsula. They sent him a gift basket of gourmet food which made Auntie Jan ooh and aah. Neither Sam nor Jan knew what to do with fig and olive crispbread. Not even Mick would eat the sundried tomatoes. Mick and Jan are a different stratum of wealthy. Their idea of excellent food can be found at the local pub. The Willis family sent money, too, far more than Sam had spent on Lisa's chain-store outfits and one week's worth of groceries.

Apart from that, it's not difficult to impress men like Merrill Willis and Lisa's two older brothers, cut from similar cloth. Laugh at their jokes, compliment their expensive toys and appear to agree with their opinions.

This six berth campervan belongs to Lisa's parents and is fitted out with everything a person could possibly need for survival.

For all his hesitation, this holiday with Lisa has been the most enjoyable three weeks of Sam's life. He enjoys climbing up into the overcab bed each night, then talking with Lisa until one of them drifts off.

Lisa sleeps on a separate foam mattress along the rear window. Sam expected her to join him up top, but she's been name-dropping someone called Jasper. Sam takes the hint and deduces that Jasper is her boyfriend now. "Jasper wears the same dumb cap as that guy...", "Jasper eats green bananas" and finally the unambiguous give-away: "Jasper snores like a puppy".

Lisa has inserted these namedrops with such gentle gradation,

there is no single moment in which Sam feels his heart sink at the impending loss of his penpal and best friend. After all, he's here with Lisa right now. He is making the most of it. Sam avoids asking why Lisa is with himself this holiday season and not with Jasper. He may not like the answer. Probably this: "Next year Jasper and I will be engaged. The year after that we'll be caring for our firstborn. But let's you and I have fun this Christmas. Jasper doesn't consider you a threat, Sam. I told him all about you, how you're basically like a girlfriend to me."

But Lisa says none of this. Sam can invent entire conversations in his head.

Their holiday is drawing to a close. Tomorrow Sam and Lisa will share the driving from Tongariro back to Auckland, where Sam flies out the day after that. From his bed above the driver's cabin, Sam checks the time. Eleven p.m.

Lisa seems quiet this evening. They've spent their day hiking a challenging volcanic trail, their tender, office-worker feet rubbing against stiff boots.

Lisa's sleeping bag rustles. "Sammy? Why don't you join me in bed?"

Sam is comfortable up here in his own warm sleeping bag, is why. He loves that Lisa is close enough to talk to, but not so close he loses bodily autonomy. With Lisa he'd be cautious about rolling over and pushing her over the edge. He'd wonder what's about to happen next, and if it would be offensive to extricate his dead arm and face the other direction now, because Lisa's exhale doesn't contain enough oxygen for him. If he could exist like this alongside Lisa forever, together but each

in separate beds, even if they never moved out of this very campervan and into a proper house, he'd spend his life content.

"Sammy?" she asks again. "You still awake?"

"Mm. But what would Jasper think about me joining you in bed?"

"Jasper? Pfft. He doesn't run my life."

"I bet he's bigger than me."

"Oh everyone's bigger than you."

Sam had a late teenage growth spurt which propelled him into the privileged range of 'average height'. Still, he seems small to others. Maybe he slouches.

"I like that you're compact," Lisa adds, in case she's offended him. "We fit together nicely."

Lisa herself is five foot two. She's had her hair cut into a short bob, hoping she'll be treated like the architect and not like the receptionist, which wouldn't bother her, she maintains, "if I were the receptionist. Receptionists are important."

Lisa refuses to work for her recognisable father. She'd consider that a cheat. Instead she's working as an architect at another Auckland firm, in a job which wasn't arranged by Merrill Willis.

"Dad thinks you're good for me," Lisa has told Sam.

Here's how Sam parses that: Merrill Willis admires Sam's work ethic, which has led the man to wrongly assume that Sam would be a good life partner for his daughter. In that, Sam would only disappoint. Merrill Willis mainly wants Sam for the family business, and Lisa is Merrill's way of coaxing a good architect engineer across the Tasman for lower pay, even before factoring in the exchange rate. Sam can't understand how Lisa doesn't see through her own father's plans. She's

normally so astute. Well, perhaps not always, when it comes to significant men.

“Dad says you’re sensible and mature,” Lisa has also said.

This again. Sure, Sam has always felt less prone to the vicissitudes of emotion which afflicted his peers during high school and university. He was glad to miss out on their lows, but wonders what it’s like to experience their highs; specifically, the high of falling deeply and passionately in love. Sam was born with some kind of inoculation against all of that, and the flipside of ‘sensible’ is that he makes decisions out of cold, hard logic. Compared to his peers, and almost everyone he knows, Sam is cold and hard. Of course, this is how a man is meant to be. He can almost see how these are desirable traits. But he’s not like that, really. He’s in a constant state of emotional melt, on the inside.

And the descriptor of ‘mature’ is plain wrong. Sam is a walking oxymoron of ‘mature’ and ‘naïve’. If you take him to a supermarket and ask him to buy a week’s worth of groceries he’ll fill the trolley with vegetables, fruit and wholemeal bread. He’ll stay within the allocated budget and he’ll wipe the fridge clean before packing fresh items away.

But take him to a lively social gathering and tell him to find someone to talk to. He’ll sweat profusely and flee from the scene. If anyone extends eye-contact in that unambiguously interested manner, he’ll avert his gaze forever. Touch him gently on the shoulder and Sam will cross his arms and take a step backwards. He’s in his late twenties. He should be past this.

So far, Lisa is the only person who has ever broken through some

of Sam's intimacy avoidance. Even after giving what he can, Sam's meagre offerings will never be enough. He knows this. He knows he's not normal. He does not qualify as a fully-fledged man.

"What about you, then?" Lisa asks from the other campervan bed.

Sam has forgotten what she was talking about. "Me?"

"Yeah, you. Got a girl back in Melbourne?"

"Of course not. I'd have said."

"Why not, though?"

"I don't know."

"You say that a lot."

"You ask things I can't answer."

"I can't figure you out. Why don't you need anyone?"

"That's not true. I do."

If this holiday is a snapshot of 'having someone', Sam is all for it. But Lisa wants to know what's wrong with him. No one ever asks why people have decided to romantically partner, yet singletons are obliged to account for their choices.

"I do things sequentially," he says instead. This is true of Sam, but then he says something baffling: "Guess I'm waiting for marriage."

"For what now?"

He never intended to say that, and until the second it came out of his mouth, he never knew he thought it. By rights, he should take it back immediately. He should explain, "I don't know why I said that. I don't mean it at all." But if he does that, Lisa may not take him seriously ever again. He doesn't want to be the sort of joker who says stupid things and then takes them back.

“So. You are quietly religious,” Lisa says.

“Not really.”

Sam hasn't been to church since he lived with Della and even then, he never absorbed a thing. However, he did attend a Christian-ethos high school. Maybe he picked ideas up there. He doesn't remember a single instance of, “Boys, you must wait until marriage”. It wasn't that kind of school. In all honesty, Sam has no idea where he's got the sex-after-marriage idea from. But now he's said it, surprising even himself, it may even be true. Maybe this is his subconscious revealing itself. Conservative Christianity may have influenced him more than he realises.

“I do feel safe with you, Sammy,” Lisa says.

Then her sleeping bag rustles as she settles in for sleep. Eventually her breathing slows.

Sam lies awake for a long while after, and continues to wonder why people consider him a man one minute, a boy the next.

Now that Lisa's breathing has slowed, Sam wonders if the invitation to join her remains open. They could share the same mattress all night, each in their own sleeping bags. They could wake side-by-side in the morning and she'd know he hadn't rejected her outright. As silently as possible, he takes his sleeping bag and pillow with him down the ladder, then creeps across the carpet to lie beside her.



# PROPOSED

MELBOURNE

2001

## A WINTER EVENING

Six months later, Earth is on the opposite side of the Sun. Lisa is on the opposite side of the Tasman Sea. At least, that's where Sam thought she was. One Friday evening she turns up on Sam's doorstep, uninvited and unannounced, wheelie-suitcase in tow. Sam opens his front door to a girl dressed in tailored winter gear. Sam doesn't like surprises even when they're good.

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

Sam was in the middle of making meatloaf and now Lisa has surprised him. The oven's preheating but the mixture is not prepared. "Come in."

Sam lives on his own these days. He has purchased his university sharehouse from Mick and Jan and is now servicing a mortgage. He'd like to get a dog soon.

"I really need a hug," Lisa tells him, once inside.

"Oh, sure. Come here."

Lisa should know him better by now. For Sam, there's Letter Lisa and Live Action Lisa. Sam needs a moment to recover from the surprise of seeing her. He can't swap letters for months on end then meet her in person as if they've never been apart.

“Have a seat.” He turns off the oven. “I’ll finish the meatloaf later.”

Lisa hangs up her woollen coat and sits opposite Sam at the table. Sam has already put his own place mat and fork out. This is embarrassing. This is exactly the sort of fastidiousness that elicits a chuckle from Lisa. Lisa’s in no chuckling mood, though. She looks forlorn.

“Did something bad happen?”

“Oh, shit fuck hell. I’ve only gone and ruined my life again.”

Sam waits for more.

“You’ll hate me.”

“Surely not. I mean, did you murder someone?” As soon as he says that, Sam really hopes she hasn’t accidentally run someone over in her car, or something terrible like that.

“Worse.”

“What’s worse than murder?”

“People forgive repentant killers. They never forgive sluts.”

Lisa blurts everything out. The Jasper guy Lisa kept name-dropping over summer is an associate at Lisa’s firm. He’s married. Worse, he and his wife have two young kids together. Colleagues are starting to suspect something’s been going on between Lisa and Jasper, and of course they’d be right.

“You’d never do something stupid like that, would you, Sammy.”

It’s true, Sam has never been prone to that particular mistake. He’s never understood the pull of attraction which leads otherwise sensible people to choose completely inappropriate partners. Likewise, he’s never understood how so many couples fall pregnant by accident.

Despite never having used contraceptives himself, Sam does live in the world. He knows the approximate effectiveness of hormonal interventions, barrier methods and so on. If you're going to have sex with someone wouldn't you plan ahead? Pregnancy is a big thing to mess up.

"So, are you... pregnant?"

"What? No! Good lord, this is bad enough."

According to Lisa, her professional reputation will be in tatters if gossip spreads further. Sufficiently unnerved, she confessed to her own father.

"What did he say?"

"Said he was ashamed of me."

Lisa has acted against her own moral code. She never thought she could do such a thing to another woman's husband. She's not like this, really she's not.

"Why did you do it though, Lise?"

"Because! I was horny and lonely and he was there."

"Not because you like him?"

"Like him? Hell, that never came into it. He's a fuckwit, actually. You'd hate him."

"What if you two just... stop?" Even as he says it, Sam knows this is probably naïve. "Maybe things will simmer down and blow over."

"We've already stopped. But things are weird now and I can't leave my job. All my instincts are screaming to get out but I have to stick it out at that place. I need registration first. Here's hoping I get mistaken for a 'fit and proper person'."

Finally Sam can offer reassurance. "Registration as an architect

has nothing to do with people's intimate lives. Also, Jasper's the one who should leave. He's the one who broke his marriage vows, not you."

Lisa looks grateful. But then she waves a dismissive hand. "What universe do you live in?"

Sam has no further comments. He'd only be scoffed at. Romantic entanglements are hardly his area of expertise.

"Why are you here?" he asks quietly.

"Well I'll leave if you want. You're the only person in the world I wanted to see this weekend. I miss you. I miss you constantly."

Sam takes this in. He knows what he's meant to say. "Then I'm glad you're here."

But Sam suspects he doesn't miss Lisa in quite the same way as she misses him. They still swap long letters, plus their two hour Friday night phone calls. He'd miss those terribly if they stopped. He'd normally be looking forward to one of their phone calls later this evening actually, which is why he's trying to cook meatloaf early.

Lisa has a proposition for him. "Soon as I'm registered, I'm starting my own boutique studio. I'm moving down to Wellington. You liked Wellington, didn't you?"

"As a tourist, sure."

"Wellington could be great for us. You have a special interest in earthquake building. I'm a creative and I need to run my own business. No one takes me seriously. I'll make them. Wellington's smack bang in the middle of the country. We could buy a campervan, travel up and down each island, take on small projects that interest us."

"You're asking me to move to Wellington?"

"I need you to do this with me."

“But how? We’re too young. Neither of us has experience in initiation, or in pre-design, or business tax—”

“I have a double degree in business, remember. I’ve always known I’d run my own show eventually, possibly taking over from Dad. You’re forgetting our massive advantage. Merrill Willis. Dad is already my mentor. He’s run his own studio for decades. He’ll guide us through everything.”

“I have a house and a good job here, Lise. Not enough savings for a risky start-up.”

Sam has only ever wanted his own home, his own dog and to work at a steady, quiet job as a low-level cog at a large firm.

“That’s the other thing,” Lisa says. “Dad gave each of my brothers two hundred grand when they married. He’ll do the same for us. So how about we do this properly? I want you for my business partner, and I also want you for my life partner. My husband.”

“Wait.” Sam can’t believe what he’s hearing. “You want me to marry you... because you need your father to hand over two hundred grand for a start-up?”

“No!” Lisa reaches across the table and grabs Sam’s forearms, hoping to shake the misunderstanding out of him. “No no no! That’s not how that was meant to go! I love you, and I want to marry you, Sam. Maybe you hate this business idea, but you could still move to Wellington with me, get a job with an established firm if you want. Dad will give me the money regardless. Waiting for his daughter to marry is old-fashioned and arbitrary.”

Sam looks down at his hands. A slimy piece of sausage meat nestles between two of his fingers. He’s normally more careful with

hand-washing than this. He imagines the slime as a wedding ring.

“I’ve never thought how I might propose to a man,” Lisa says, “because I thought a man would be proposing to me instead. I’m sorry, I completely messed that up. God, I’m messing everything up.”

So Lisa *did* mean to propose marriage. If that’s what’s happening here, Sam’s not convinced it comes from a sound state of mind.

“Lise? I’ll finish making meatloaf. You’d better get some food into you.”

They spend the rest of the weekend together in Sam’s flat. Arguing, mostly. Sam even raises his voice. This is the most intense conversation he’s ever endured. He can’t exactly leave; he lives here after all. At times he wishes Lisa would fuck off back to New Zealand and never speak to him again. This feeling is counterbalanced with the terror of losing her forever.

Lisa thinks Sam needs to grow up. A grown-up must build a family, connect to people, commit to a wider community. It’s not enough to be good at your job, to go home each evening to your own little flat, cook exactly whatever cheap food you feel like for dinner and enjoy your peace and quiet.

Sam has developed deep sensitivity over this particular accusation, and has given the matter of adulthood considerable thought already.

“What does it mean to be an adult?” He feels the entire concept of ‘adulthood’ needs a cultural overhaul. Must he hurry into marriage to be considered a proper man? What about other possible markers of adulthood? He rattles off numerous possibilities:

An adult balances risk against reward.

An adult thinks things through.

An adult understands that good decisions cannot be made with incomplete or faulty information.

An adult can discuss an issue without throwing a wet dishcloth at the wall.

Lisa calls Sam cold and distant. Sam already knows this, and refuses to apologise for who he is. She calls him a commitment phobe. Sam agrees, and asks why she'd want to marry a loner like him.

Sam calls Lisa mercenary, a privileged rich kid who thinks she's more worldly than she really is. Her confidence is wholly unearned, inherited second-hand from her famous architect father. If people don't respect her in her current workplace, what makes her think they'll respect her as a partner at her own studio? And what the hell is 'boutique'?

They say these terrible things to each other, but still Lisa joins him in bed. Sam is so mad he can't stand the pressure of her body against his. But it was even worse lying here alone, thinking Lisa hates his cold, hard guts.

Sam's bad thoughts run deep. Lisa has been traumatised by terrible men, namely Sam Parrish. She's only asking Sam Dennon to marry her to cancel out the other Sam.

He keeps this thought to himself. He is used to keeping quiet about Sam Parrish, because he had to spend another full year sharing airspace with the prick. Sam struggles with injustice sensitivity, and Sam Parrish remains an unpunished offender. As he wrote letters to Lisa that final year, he worked through some of these feelings,

comforted that Lisa was doing okay. They never mentioned Parrish at all. By writing, Sam was able to process his sadness about the general overwhelming unfairness of the world, and quell his instinct to grab Parrish by his thickset neck and slam his face into a desk.

On Sunday evening Lisa does leave him in peace. Inside Sam's front door they hug for a long time, because after telling him he needs to stop living like a bachelor hermit, Lisa now tells him how much she loves him; that he's the kindest, most gentle and thoughtful person she's ever known.

Before getting into the taxi she says, "You can't keep stringing me along, Sammy. I need all of you now, or much, much less."

Sam is expected at Mick and Jan's for their usual Sunday night roast and now he's very late.

When he arrives, Jan reheats his plate and sets it before him. "You do look peaky, love. What's going on?"

Sam gives Mick and Jan a summary. He needs an outside perspective. He's spent his weekend vacillating between cutting ties with Lisa altogether and moving to New Zealand as her husband, of all things.

"I yelled," he confesses.

Neither Mick nor Jan seem concerned about that. Sam has been privy to many stand-up slanging matches between his aunt and uncle, in which resolutions always happen privately. Sam is starting to worry about his shortcomings in the bedroom department. A stand-up argument might not feel so bad if he had the means to make up, using his entire physicality. Words of apology don't cut it.

Mick and Jan aren't about to provide clarity for Sam on the topic

of Lisa. Instead of telling him what to do, they're asking the same questions Lisa did.

"Do you love this girl?" says Mick. "Lisa's a cutey, but is she your type?" And, "What do you *want* your life to look like?"

"It's not like you'd be moving to the other side of the world," Jan points out. "It's, what, three hours on the plane? You can pop back and forth between breakfast and dinner! And even if it doesn't work out with Lisa, Melbourne will have you back with open arms."

Sam had expected more hesitation from Jan. She'd be seeing far less of him if he went. He wouldn't be popping round twice weekly like this. Would she not miss him terribly?

Mick says, "Don't put your life on hold for us, Sam-boy." Then he leaves the dinner table and retreats outside, as if he still smoked.

Sam finishes most of his roast, then tells Jan to stay where she is. He'll do the washing up.

"You get yourself set up over in Wellington," Jan says from her seat at the table, "I'll visit all the time. You'll be sick of the sight of me."

This is hard to hear, because Jan has lung cancer. She's lost a third of her body weight and this month she's wearing a wig.

"I would love to see you married, Sammy. Nothing would make me happier."

Then Jan starts sniffing a bit. While scrubbing out the roasting dish, Sam decides he'll say yes.



# STAG NIGHT

TĀMAKI MAKAURAU, AOTEAROA

(AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND)

JANUARY 2002

Lisa and her girlfriends have departed for Auckland Central dressed in high heels, short skirts and bunny ears, for some reason. Lisa insisted Jan join in on Hens' Night, though Jan is worried she won't last and will have to be chaperoned early back to the motel. But Lisa has applied her excellent planning skills and hired Jan a wheelchair. Della was also invited into town but, surprising no one, will be staying in her motel room watching New Zealand TV. She's not looking forward to parading this oversized bloody great hat Jan bought her as mother-of-the-groom. Says she feels fraudulent in her two-tone taffeta dress, likewise chosen by Jan.

Sam might join Della in front of the telly tonight.

"Go and do your stag thing," Della tells him when he checks in on her. "The shandy's made me sleepy."

Uncle Mick, Merrill Willis and Lisa's two older brothers escort Sam to the nearest pub. Best man Craig is roped in, too. Craig is Jan's sister's boy, a speech and language therapist from Geelong. Sam didn't want a best man. He doesn't have a close friend. Jan set the whole thing up.

At the bar, a televised game of cricket captures the attention of

regular patrons. Locals soon notice Australian accents in their midst. The usual Aussie-Kiwi jokes get an airing; the exact same ones you hear across the ditch, with a reversal of subject and object.

Lisa's father Merrill and Sam's Uncle Mick haven't exactly hit it off. Sam detects animosity beneath a veneer of civility.

Sam can't say why. When he ran his observations past Lisa in private, she told Sam not to worry. Her father's an irreconcilable snob. Merrill Willis doesn't respect blokes who build their fortune by playing Monopoly with real estate. Merrill has built his own reputation with skill and determination, winning many awards. His self-assessment is inflated, Lisa informed Sam, since it was Lisa's mother who entered the marriage with immense wealth behind her. This gave Merrill the financial backstop to pursue his creative career. Besides, Lisa told him, she loves Mick, and she's the one who counts. Mick and Lisa's relationship involves trading perfectly calibrated insults. Sam has never been good at this, but Lisa and Mick fell in step with each other the moment they met. Sam would never in a million years risk a misjudged insult with Merrill. He is content for Merrill to respect him for his talent as an up-and-coming architect, and as a good, solid, sensible lad.

"Big day tomorrow," Merrill announces after two beers. "I shall leave you boys to it."

Lisa's brothers leave with their father.

Best-man Craig also heads back to the motel, because the locals don't look set to improve their Aussie jokes after further beers.

"I might hit the sack, too," Sam says.

"Wait up, you." Mick lets Craig get away, but he's keeping Sam

for a while longer. “Let’s get a couple of those hokey-pokey ice-creams and amble along the jetty.”

Wind has died down. The jetty looks out over a bay of sparkling, moonlit New Zealand water. Sam smells a serious talk coming on.

“The thing about women,” Mick begins, “there’s two main kinds.”

Sam listens carefully.

“See, some women, they’re proactive. They like to take the reins. Jan’s more like that. Suits me fine, except when it doesn’t. Then there’s the other kind. They like the man to take the reins. The trick is to work out which kind you’ve got, and then roll with it.”

Lisa might be both, depending on the situation. Perhaps Mick is talking specifically about the bedroom. Sam imagines his Auntie Jan on the bed holding reins, and immediately wishes he hadn’t.

Sam wouldn’t mind more specific birds-and-bees information from Mick. If his uncle could offer advice in a very generalised way, without inserting details about himself and Auntie Jan, Sam would appreciate the info. There is no one else he can ask, and his wedding-night nerves are kicking in big time. After a measly twenty-four hours, he’ll be leaving for his honeymoon. Even the word ‘honeymoon’ makes him queasy.

“Have you and Lisa talked about kids?” Uncle Mick says next, skipping the bit about how to properly make them.

But of course Mick won’t volunteer the in-between part. The only person in the world who knows Sam and Lisa aren’t having sex yet is Lisa. Mick would be astounded and alarmed if he knew that Sam hadn’t been ‘rolling with’ Lisa’s desires at all. In the two months since he and Lisa have been living together in their newly purchased Karori

villa, Sam has been searching for ever more inventive ways of extricating himself from lengthy make-out sessions without being rude. Lisa tells him he's an excellent kisser. Sam does not consider kissing a high-level skill. He mirrors Lisa's lip movements, but not too closely. He does not enjoy it himself, but the enjoyment Lisa gets from it compensates for the slight ick, a feeling he's sure will shove off once he learns to get out of his own damn head. Now, sinking into the moment, that's a higher level skill. Lisa asked some time ago if Sam avoids kissing because of the tiny scar above his lip. Lisa's not even sure she's allowed to mention that, but wonders if it still hurts.

"It's not a taboo subject," Sam told her. "I no longer feel self-conscious about it. Not since the lip revision surgery."

"Good because I love this little scar. Makes you look bad-ass."

Lisa's question doesn't die in the moment. She may have hit on something. Perhaps as a child Sam never considered himself kissable due to the facial difference he was born with. Perhaps this caused him to miss some psychological 'developmental kissing window' or something like that.

Mick finishes his ice-cream, except for the final thimble of cone, which he tosses into the sea. "I don't mean you should start making babies immediately," he clarifies. "I'm not trying to rush you. But I hope you've had that discussion, have you?"

"Even if we hadn't, wedding's tomorrow, Mick."

"Yep. You have then, I take it?"

Sam would normally keep Lisa's private health information to himself, but he decides to summarise for Mick, and only for Mick. At the age of twenty-six, Lisa had an operation. She'd been diagnosed

with endometriosis, adenomyosis plus three fibroids. She confided possible infertility to Sam in a heartbreaking letter, convinced that Sam would call off the engagement. Surgery had thrown her into a state of turmoil, she wrote, partly because diagnosis had finally confirmed what she, alone, knew to be true: That her pain was not normal, that something was wrong, and her monthly inability to function was not her own fault after all.

Sam read all this and was mostly concerned to learn the extent of pain caused by Lisa's private lunar cycle. Sam sometimes imagines himself as a father, with dark-haired children at a beach or a playground, frolicking with the family dog. Although Sam has fantasised, he has never thought he could have everything. He feels lucky to have found someone who'll marry him.

He'd be okay with a dog, he wrote back, and only after they settle down. Not a cat. Sam, too, must confess a deal-breaking health issue: Cat-loving Lisa would have to settle for one of those wrinkly, bald ones. Dander sets off his asthma.

Apparently this was the response Lisa had hoped for.

"Lisa maybe can't have kids," Sam tells his uncle on the jetty. "Health issues."

"Fair dinkum. I'm mighty sorry to hear it."

Sam has wondered if his Auntie Jan suffers Lisa's problems. Until menopause, Jan would spend days in bed with *The Women's Weekly* and a hot water bottle, catching up on a month's worth of *Neighbours* and hollering for hot drinks. Sam asks his uncle about that.

"The baby-making problem was me," Mick says. "Had the snip young, long before I met Janice."

“Wait, why?” This makes no sense to Sam.

“Long story.” Mick pulls a slim pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket. He buys them in tens when he’s trying to give up. “I didn’t want to send more Dennon seed out into the world.”

Sam decides not to probe further. He’s full-up with anxiety and would rather focus on the remainder of his hokey-pokey ice-cream before it runs down his wrist.

Mick doesn’t look set to elaborate, anyhow. He flicks his lighter, cups his hands and speaks through one side of his mouth. “Might want to stand down wind of me, Sam-boy.” He allows himself five draws before snubbing it out on the sole of his shoe. “What do I know about anything, eh? You’re a Dennon man and you turned out fine.” He runs a hand over his face. “Look at you. Top marks in two degrees. Excellent work ethic, a beautiful, intelligent bride. You’re home and hosed, son.”

“All thanks to you and Jan.”

“I really should quit the fags. This darn smoke is getting in my eyes.”

## A MARRIED MAN

Everyone agrees “the wedding is magnificent”, with magnificent company, magnificent weather, and magnificent scenery.

After the photos, Sam needs a break from it all. He disappears. Lisa finds him alone, across the road from the beach and behind a row of trees. She guessed exactly where he'd be.

Lisa holds him around the waist and looks up at his face. “You okay?”

Sam nods. “I will be.”

“You're anxious, eh.”

“Yeah.”

“About tonight's speech?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

No one expects a lucid and funny speech from Sam this evening, so it's not like he's about to disappoint. Besides, he's already run his script past Jan, who wrote most of it, so of course she approved, saying it was “absolutely lovely”. Then she'd started crying.

“It's not just your speech, I think.”

“Mm.”

“You're nervous about our first night.”

Sam nods. He can't look at Lisa — his brand new wife — directly in the eye. How wonderful it feels to have a ‘wife’. But this beautiful

woman pressed against him is supposed to be his ‘other half’. He’s supposed to meld into her somehow, to become one but also to keep separate in a healthy, non- co-dependent way. They’re about to begin a new business together. They’re already living together in a new house, though in separate bedrooms. Sam had assumed that after the vows, something primal would kick in. He’d no longer feel like a separate entity.

Lisa looks around, checking they’re still alone. “I know you hated kissing me in front of everyone like that. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t hate it.”

When Lisa had kissed him on cue, she’d pressed her lips firmly onto Sam’s and lingered for longer than Sam would have liked. She held Sam’s face in her hands and pressed her groin lightly against his. She was performing kissing for the benefit of their audience. Sam already feels like an impostor alone with Lisa on the living-room couch. Kissing like that in front of their family and friends magnified the artifice.

“You tensed up,” she says. “I know you hated it.”

“I’m glad you did it, though.” Sam knows exactly why she lingered like that.

“Glad? Really?”

“Sure.” Just like Lisa, Sam wants their friends and family to know exactly how deeply he feels for his life partner. “I love you,” he adds.

“Soon we’ll be alone.” Lisa clings onto him tight.

For Sam, impending aloneness with his wife hardly takes the pressure off. In fact, when Lisa touches him in public, in front of their friends, or holds his hand in the street, he’s okay with it because he

knows it will only go so far. It's the alone part that terrifies.

Perhaps because Sam remains quiet, Lisa whispers, "Let's not have sex tonight."

"You don't want to?"

"Absolutely I want to. But you know what I want even more? I want my husband to relax, to enjoy our big day together."

It feels so good to hear the word 'husband'. Sam does manage to relax that evening over dinner and speeches and dancing, for back-to-back minutes at a time.

After the dancing, though, Sam and Lisa depart in the dark to the sound of whoops in the receding distance. They will spend their first married night at a more expensive hotel, north of Whangārei. The honeymoon accommodation is upmarket enough to be called a 'lodge'. Although Sam drives the Mercedes, borrowed from Lisa's father, Lisa directs the route. Sam recalls Mick's talk and wonders whether Lisa would prefer her new husband to 'take the reins' tonight, or whether she'd rather stay in charge.

Despite Lisa's earlier reassurance, erotic charge is compulsory for newlyweds. Now they're alone, just the two of them, and the car is tense with something.

After Sam settles into the rhythm of the northbound highway, Lisa places her right hand on the inside of Sam's thigh.

"Do you mind me doing this?"

"Oh. No, that's okay." He doesn't mind too much. On the scale of human touches, it's only a little irritating.

"I'll stop if you're distracted."

“You are distracting,” Sam says. “I couldn’t keep my eyes off you today.”

“So you did like the dress? It wasn’t too much?”

“You looked great in your wedding dress. You look great in this one, too.”

Lisa has changed from the big white outfit into a more manageable red one. Lisa normally wears boat necks or covers herself with a scarf, but this dress is entirely for Sam’s benefit, dipping deep in front. Something pushes her large breasts northward into mostly-exposed mounds. This is achieved with no visible straps. Hidden engineering must be involved. Despite Lisa reassuring Sam how they won’t be having sex tonight, she might not really mean it. And even if she does mean it, she may just be talking about the pants-off, mortise-and-tenon kind. He’ll have to do something tonight, and that will involve fumbling with Lisa’s complicated underwear. Maybe once he sees her undress, the mechanics will become obvious.

It doesn’t cross Sam’s mind that he could share these anxieties, or flirtatiously ask. The ideal scenario for Sam, and also for Lisa, who has seen the same romantic films as him, is an intuitive melding of minds. Each partner in this tiny Hollywood film knows, via telepathy, exactly how to please the other.

Around eleven p.m. they arrive at the lodge.

“Nice room,” Sam says, opening the door. “Am I meant to carry you over the threshold?”

“Um... do you want to?”

Sam picks Lisa up, careful not to knock her elbows and feet as he manoeuvres them both through the door frame. He sets her like a

China doll on the bed.

“You’re way stronger than you look,” she says.

“Thanks, I think?”

Sam meant the gesture as a joke. Now they’re both too nervous to laugh.

The king size hotel bed is sprinkled all over with rose petals. A great many lovers must have previously utilised the mattress. Super horny ones probably have sex on top of the duvet, and how often is that washed? Whoever services the room must get mighty sick of vacuuming up petals. Heart shaped chocolates in red foil garnish the pillows.

Lisa says, “I’ll use the bathroom, unless you need to first.”

“Go ahead, ladies first.”

It’s like they only just met. Except the stakes could not be higher. Sam cannot mess this up. He regrets failing to seek out sex with someone unimportant. He should have got this over with years ago, preferably with someone he’d never have to see again.

While Lisa uses the bathroom, Sam sits on the bed and eats a red heart. It’s pretty average. Sam is only eating as deflection. Now he’ll taste to Lisa like cheap chocolate. It is annoying and bizarre to Sam that he must these days consider how his own food choices affect someone else, the person he’ll be kissing.

Lisa asked a month ago if abstinence might be part of Sam’s kink. He said it wasn’t, and Lisa probed further.

“So what are you into?”

“Just the usual, so far as I know.”

Having nothing to offer, Sam agreed the excitement of

abstinence might be a kink after all. He does enjoy period dramas such as *Pride & Prejudice*, in which romance undergirds the main plot but never leads to sex. The story cuts off before sex happens. Perhaps it is the erotics of abstinence that draws him in, rather than what he'd assumed: That he can watch human drama unfold without yawning through the mundane sex scenes. Yes, Lisa may have hit on something about his psychology. She is far more experienced about sex stuff than he is.

But then Lisa asked if he might lose interest in her, once they finally started doing it. Wouldn't he get sick of her, and her constant availability?

Sam denied this vehemently. He remains confident of one thing: He loves Lisa more than anything, and everything will kick into gear. He expects sex to take time and practice, but Sam has mastered a number of difficult things in his life. He can master sex, too.

Case in point: Sex can't be more difficult than soufflé. Sam makes excellent cheese soufflé. If only he could impress his brand new wife with soufflé instead of sex. He'd happily switch this honeymoon suite for a night with Lisa in an industrial kitchen.

The toilet flushes on the other side of the bathroom door. Sam does not appreciate the short distance between hotel en suite and honeymoon bed. If — when — he needs to take a dump, Lisa will hear every parp and splash. Until now he's managed to get that out of the way without Lisa ever knowing he's doing it. At least, that's the intent. She probably knows exactly what he's up to whenever he takes longer than a minute or two inside the bathroom at their shared house. Now they'll be sharing a bedroom as well, so he'll have to get over himself

quick smart. They are officially joined in matrimony, and he must let his wife in on the secret workings of his body, because his body belongs partly to Lisa now. She'll learn of the good workings, the gross workings and everything in between.

He can't think of a single 'good working'. Sam has already removed his shoes, which are brand new and stiff, and anyway, he doesn't wear shoes on carpet. He hurriedly peels off his socks. His feet probably stink even worse than he can smell them himself. He searches around for a place to stuff the socks, and settles on the side pocket of his wheelee suitcase. When Lisa's done in there he'll need to take a shower himself. He's been sweating badly, despite wearing sports strength deodorant and despite changing into a fresh shirt after his speech.

But when Lisa emerges from the bathroom he understands he's not getting his shower. She's posed like he needs to take notice. Ah, yes. Makes sense now. She achieved that lift with a corset type thing.

Lisa twirls coquettishly, but then her confidence dissipates. Sam remains seated on the bed, thinking about corsetry, then about those fishbone diagrams he learned to use at uni as a structured brainstorming tool. This leads to even less welcome thoughts of Uncle Mick gutting that big snapper on deck when he, Mick and best man Craig — and also, unexpectedly, Della — went on that tourist fishing cruise two days ago.

Lisa stands flat-footed before him now, shoulders slightly slumped. "I thought you might like to unlace me," she says.

Sam swallows the remnants of chocolate in his mouth. "I would. I would like that very much."

Lisa stands with her back to him. Unlacing gives Sam something to do with his hands, and will occupy at least a few minutes by the look of that excessively long ribbon and all those eyelets.

“Slower,” she says.

“Sorry.”

“And don’t apologise.”

The corset falls away and Lisa turns to face him. Sam hasn’t seen her naked before, but now he has a close-up view of her breasts.

“You didn’t know you were getting these, did you?”

“I had an idea.”

Over the years, Sam has heard men talk about Lisa’s breasts, but it has always seemed crass to give them much thought himself. He’s never been in the same room as a woman with her clothing off, but he’s seen plenty of naked breasts in the media — in mainstream movies, mostly, but also sometimes in pop-ups when he’s searching for something entirely unrelated on the Internet. Even including all the Hollywood breasts, Lisa’s are the most impressive he’s seen.

She takes his hands and places them high on her waist.

“Sorry, I’m clammy. Sorry.” Now Sam is apologising for apologising.

“Shh.” She kisses his face lightly all over.

God, that tickles. It tickles so bad. The slight stirring he felt in his pants, which he was so glad to feel, forsakes him now. It’s not about to come back, either.

“Can we get into bed?” he asks. This will put an end to the face tickling, which he understands is meant to arouse him.

“Gladly.”

There's no suave way to get between the sheets, but they manage it, giggling a little.

"I'll take off your clothes," Lisa whispers. "First I'll unbutton your shirt. We'll leave your underdaks on, if you still want."

Sam appreciates Lisa telling him what's happening in advance, but she doesn't keep it up. Once most of his clothes are off she starts tickling him with kisses again, but this time all over his body.

"Kiss me a little harder?" he says at one point, and she obeys, except she thinks he means on his lips. Lisa has applied some kind of gloss, which makes them slimy. Even without that goop, for Sam kissing will not coincide with a boner. Lisa can have either or. She can't have both kissing and boner at once.

But this isn't a connection Sam has made regarding himself, and he won't for a very long time. If only he could apply that fishbone problem-solving analysis to sex, turning his analytical, problem-solving mind on himself. But Sam isn't attuned to what he wants for himself. He doesn't want anything, other than to make his bride happy.

How it happens is, Sam awakes in the morning with his usual stiffie. He predicted this might happen, then worried it might not, now that he must share a bed and be anxious about it. But there it is. He'd better not waste it.

Lisa is sleeping soundly beside him. She seemed to enjoy Sam's face between her breasts last night. She said she didn't mind that Sam kept his daks on, and Sam believed her. She even said it was better, more sexy this way, like she can't have him or something.

But he scrambles out of his underdaks now, and applies his lips to the part of Lisa's shoulder exposed above the sheet.

If either of them were to talk, his equipment could let him down. So when she rolls over towards him, sleepy and warm and receptive, he gets it over and done with. His mind leaves the room, but his body is young and firm and fit. Also, he hasn't wanked all week.

"Was that okay?" he asks afterwards.

"More than okay, Sammy."

He's a proper married man now. He's normal as normal gets. It is such a relief to no longer be himself.

**Part Six: THE  
UNCOUPLING**



# DISHES

ONE YEAR MARRIED, ALMOST

JANUARY 2003

Sam's married life changes forever one night while washing dishes.

"You know you're an adult when you're forever washing dishes," he quips.

"Hurry up," Lisa says beside him. "That fry-pan is clean enough."

Lisa is less particular about things that don't matter, and has already finished wiping Sam's fastidiously washed dishes in the rack.

Lisa has been tired lately. Their first year of marriage is also their first year of Willis & Dennon Architects. The business is going well, which necessitates long hours.

Their first wedding anniversary approaches. Sam isn't sure if he should arrange something romantic and surprise Lisa with it on the day, or ask her for ideas in advance. If he tries to surprise her with a weekend getaway, she may have gone and organised something on the sly herself. So he decides to enquire as they bond over dishes.

"I was thinking. Would you like to take the campervan somewhere quiet this weekend?" he asks. "No work talk? Just you and me?"

Lisa is immediately dismissive. "That campervan is starting to feel like work. We just spent a week in it, working."

"Would you prefer to stay in a nice hotel? The bank balance looks better this quarter."

Lisa may not realise it's even their wedding anniversary, that's how busy they've been. Sam gently reminds her.

"Give me strength. I know that, Sam. I know, I know!"

Sam is washing their best paring knife by hand. He drops it into the water, stunned at the ferocity of Lisa's response.

"Sorry," Lisa says, quietly this time. "Don't make any grand gestures or anything. It's just a day."

A night away in their campervan is hardly a 'grand gesture'. If Lisa would only tell him what she wants, he'd go ahead and organise it, or leave her in peace. He dare not say anything more.

They finish washing the cutlery in silence.

"Is it your auntie?" Lisa asks.

"My auntie?"

"Are you still grieving hard over Jan? Is that our problem here?"

Jan died in Melbourne, three months after Sam and Lisa's wedding. This major blow had upended his life, but also afforded Sam a reprieve from sex. Terrible though it was, during grief he felt like his former, freer self. His sob-wracked body belonged to himself once more.

The desire to resume sex never returned, so the break made everything worse. Sam had hoped marriage itself would flick a switch in him. Now he realised there was no magic marriage switch.

Lisa throws the tea towel onto the draining board and sits at the kitchen table. Something terrible is definitely going on. Sam waits for it.

"I found your sex books," she says. "I wasn't snooping. I was looking for the Trivial Pursuit."

Sam is aware of his heart, somersaulting horribly. Games night with Lisa's couple-friends was four months ago. She's been sitting on this complaint for four months. Also, those books were in a plastic bag inside a box at the back of the spare bedroom wardrobe, under another box. Blood rises to his face.

Sam had visited the bookstore after Lisa admitted she didn't actually like morning sex. On weekday mornings her mind was already occupied with getting out of bed for work. Yet Sam only ever offered in the mornings, and he never wished to ruin his weekends with it, and it was always a quickie, a 'poke-and-run', as she put it.

'Poke-and run' had been a damning assessment. Until then, Sam had believed he'd stumbled upon a nifty system that suited them both: Make full use of morning boners.

Without other tricks up his sleeve, he decided to find educational materials. There must be some trick, an entire toolbox of tricks, and if he only studied up he could master a goodly few.

He avoided his usual bookstore, instead driving to a distant suburb where staff did not recognise him. He made a beeline for the Sexual Health section and grabbed six books from the shelf without cracking their spines. The guy behind the counter probably thought he was a sex maniac, which would be better than the truth: that he is a know-nothing sexual ignoramus who can't satisfy his own wife.

For a while he stashed those books in their car, under the driver's seat where Lisa never looked, because it is always Sam who details the interior each month. Out on other business, he would stop in a random place, often by the sea. He'd slide his seat back, pull out one of the books and before long he'd made his way sequentially through

all six of them.

He'd picked a motley assortment. Two were by Christian authors. Both volumes emphasised the importance of waiting until marriage before sex, the very thing that had gotten Sam into this mess in the first place. They assumed 'every man' had a problem abstaining. Sam felt even more alienated from humanity than before.

The next book was mostly about sexually transmitted diseases. Sam could probably have skimmed that one. That's how his 1990s high school sex education had begun and ended. He already knew about gonorrhoea, Chlamydia, genital warts and HIV. When he'd first heard about these diseases in year nine, he decided not to bother with the enormous hassle of sex. If he didn't ever have sex, he'd never have to add 'possible STI' to his lengthy list of health anxieties. He couldn't understand why anyone would risk sex. Some days, he still can't.

Another book exceeded Sam's rudimentary knowledge of biology. No stranger to mind work, he looked up words such as 'vasoconstriction' and 'myotonia' in the glossary. None of this helped his sex life. For a while, the overthinking even made it worse.

A feminist book taught Sam about the clitoris. He had no idea the organ was so large and so powerful. He understood he would be needing to use his mouth, because the penis is not a magic sex wand. He was supposed to practise on fruit. He obediently tried cunnilingus on a halved kiwi, alone in the kitchen. He felt so stupid, and so helpless, he cut his practice session short. He would wait for Lisa to put in a request if she needed him to expand his repertoire. She didn't ask.

The final book was a little more useful: A photographic album,

page after page of the same man and woman simulating sex in various positions. Sam couldn't imagine signing himself up for a photo shoot like that.

This is the book which upset Lisa the most.

"Are you disgusted?" Sam asks quietly.

"What?" Lisa looks at him incredulously. "No, I'm not 'disgusted'. I mean, that is one bizarre collection. But you know what else I found in your cupboard?"

Sam scans his memory. He can't think of anything else mortifying.

"I found your collection of engineering textbooks. They were in the very same bag as the sex manuals."

"I only hid them away because I was embarrassed."

"Sam, you don't have to be embarrassed about sex. Not around your wife, of all people. Why wouldn't you let me join you in your sexual awakening?"

That's easy for Lisa to say, but Sam knows for a fact she doesn't accept his awkward fumbblings in real time.

This isn't even Lisa's main issue. "You've been studying up on sex, same as you study up on calculus, or astronomy, or any of your other academic interests. Sex isn't like that, Sammy."

"You said you needed more spontaneity."

Lisa laughs, but not happily. "Exactly! Did you think you'd get there by studying? With chartreuse markers and Post-it notes?"

"I'm not a spontaneous person, Lise. But I figured you need the illusion of spontaneity more than spontaneity itself. Isn't that what spontaneity is, really? Like we were taught in architecture, an

‘effortless, minimalist’ design takes a truckload of foresight, and is only achieved after years of deliberate practice. I thought sex would be like that.”

Lisa sighs deeply. “You know, it’s almost adorable, wanting so badly to please me. I feel so bad! You’ve been working us through the positions. Sequentially! We got up to, what, the third one, before you gave up?”

Sam is so embarrassed and stunned he can’t work out if Lisa is mad that he had to study positions, or mad that he quit after only three.

“I know you’re not spontaneous.” Lisa’s anger has dissipated. She looks only sad. “I wouldn’t want to change that about you. I shouldn’t have even used that word. ‘Spontaneous’ is not it.” She searches for language more accurate. “Natural. That’s the word I’m after. I need you to be more natural with me. Go with your instincts. Stop trying so hard to please me. Sink into the moment and enjoy the experience.”

Sink into the moment. This is the precise solution Sam has been looking for. That’s why he read every page of every single one of those stupid books, including the footnotes. He even scanned the indices for something he may have missed. Not one of those stinking books offered a single useful hint on how to get your head from ‘wanting so much to want sex’ to ‘happily in the throes of passion’. Not a single damn one. The Christian books suggested that ‘happily in the throes of passion’ is man’s unadulterated state. Man must be held back from erotic passion if he’s to respect women and other men’s wives. Man must extricate himself from his natural sex-obsession to get on with the daily toil demanded of him by society, family and church.

There's not a single word anywhere, in any of those pages, about what to do if your wife is touching you and you lose your boner because everything fucking tickles. Sam has worked out that 'tickling' is not the problem; anyone can be irritated by touch when they're not turned on. He only tickles because he's not turned on. Likewise, sex is inherently goopy and sticky. You wouldn't want to find sex fluids on a doorhandle, for example. Almost anyone would be put-off by that. But people feel differently during arousal. So Sam's disgust around kissing and sex is not the problem. The problem is, he's not properly turned on.

No one and nothing in the real world turns him on. This is Sam's self-diagnosis, the problem no one names. If no one writes about it in books, this problem must be his alone.

Lisa has come to a different conclusion. "Sit down with me," she says, because Sam is still standing stunned near the sink.

He peels off the rubber gloves and lays them side by side, like a pair of deflated rubber chickens.

Having previously asked for 'spontaneity' when she in fact meant 'naturalness', Lisa is choosing her words with care this time. "I need to ask you something. Tell me the truth, however hard it is for me to hear."

"I've never lied to you, Lise."

"You're the most dependable person in the world. But there's a chance you haven't been honest with yourself, either, you know?"

Sam already knows what she's asking.

"Everything is so great between us," she begins.

Sam recognises a shit-sandwich critique.

“I love working with you, I love sharing a house with you. You’re so clean and tidy and organised and polite. And by god, you’re considerate. But I also know you’ve never been with anyone else, and, well, maybe I’m not your type. For whatever reason, even if we look great together on paper, some things are outside our control, Sammy. Know what I mean? I truly believe there’s someone for everybody, it’s just a matter of finding that person who does it for you.”

“I didn’t think you were into that one-true-love, soulmate stuff.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about at all. I’m not even talking about love. You love me just fine. I’m talking about sex, specifically, sex. That horny, wanna-rip-your-clothes-off feeling.”

“Is that how you feel about me? You want to rip my clothes off?”

Lisa looks crestfallen. “Hell yes, I feel that about you! I feel that all the time! There are days when I want you so much I want to dig my fingertips into your back and squeeze the life out of you and inhale you right into me.”

“Oh.”

“You don’t feel that do you, though? You don’t ever feel it. And when I’m feeling like that, and you want to talk about work, or the recycling bin or the news or whatever, I’m alone with that feeling, and it’s the loneliest feeling in the world.”

“I make you lonely.”

“No one makes anyone anything. Some things simply are, due to how people are.”

“Then what are you asking me, Lise? What do you need me to do, and to say?”

Lisa sighs. “I’m trying to have a discussion with you. Is it

something I'm doing, or not doing? Is it me, Sammy?"

"Of course not."

"Please tell me the truth. I'll stand by you, I promise. Our business partnership is solid. We balance each other perfectly in our work. But I need to know the truth about our marriage, so we know where to go from here." Lisa is articulate, even as tears drip off her chin.

"I only wanted to plan something fun for our wedding anniversary. Instead I get an annual performance review of my husbanding. We agreed not to talk about work after dinner."

"This is the problem, isn't it. I'm talking about our marriage, and for you, our marriage equals work. Work all day, cook dinner, eat, wash up, take out the rubbish, shower, sleep, have maintenance sex to please your wife. We're newlyweds, Sam! This is not going to get better."

"The answer is 'no'." Sam stands up from the table. "I'm still not gay."

"Are you sure, Sammy? It takes some people longer to realise. I would never blame you for marrying me, you know?"

"I'm doing my best! We're both overworked, it's only sliding downhill from here. I'm going to bed. Goodnight."

Sam leaves the house.

Immediately guilty, he returns to the kitchen doorway. "I have no answers. Maybe I never will. But I do love you, Lisa."

"You have a funny way of showing it."

Lisa is right. He does have an unusual way of showing it. He was also slow to feel it, but he's slow to feel everything. He's slow to realise he's hot and should take off his jumper. He's slow to realise he doesn't

want to leave his house because of a terror dream two nights before. Other times, he thinks he's got anxiety-belly when he only needs a sandwich.

Sam was slow to realise how much he loves Lisa, but when he realised, he realised. These days he can't imagine living without her.

He sleeps outside in the campervan. Alone on the foam mattress, Sam decides to make a careful study of his wife. He will pay attention to what she likes. He will study her body language, which doesn't always line up with her words. He must rely on patterns instead.

Before long, Sam can predict with freakish accuracy whether Lisa will like a certain dish, or wine, or clothing item. He learns her taste in music and movies and TV. He knows when she prefers silence in the house, and when to turn on the dance music.

Sam notices so keenly, it can be actively painful. He is losing something of himself. So he hones a tandem skill, in nascent development. He masters the art of turning away.

# THE COUNSELLOR

THIRTEEN MONTHS MARRIED

FEBRUARY 2003

On February first, at the end of its final flight, Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrates on re-entry into Earth's atmosphere, killing its seven-member crew.

“You seem sad,” Lisa says over dinner.

Sam has returned all day to memories of the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster of 1986. He's not sad; just inexplicably down, in the way he often is after reading world news.

“I found a counsellor,” Lisa says over rissoles, broccoli and carrots. “She specialises in relationship issues. You know, bedroom issues.”

Sam takes a long gulp of water. A woman may side with Lisa.

“What's with the face? Would you rather we see a man?”

“Not really.”

A man might show him up. Lisa is the sort of person who always has a crush on someone. What if she developed feelings for the man, talking about sex with him from the other side of the room?

Sam lets Lisa drive him to see the woman, anticipating humiliation. He would like a paper bag over his head.

The counsellor is in her fifties.

“We're newlyweds,” Lisa tells her, “but we already sleep apart. Sam has moved out to the campervan.”

Sam is expected to offer an explanation.

“I have nightmares,” he says. “I don’t want to disturb you.”

The counsellor doesn’t buy this, and nor does Lisa, who puts her face in her hands.

“It can sometimes be difficult to decipher our own motivations,” says the counsellor.

“But that’s the reason. I have nightmares.”

“Nightmares, Sammy? What about?”

Sam has kept this from Lisa. He never wanted to tell her about them. His Mangleby home-intrusion nightmares take him back to his boyhood. Nightmares are infantile.

The counsellor leans forward. “Are the nightmares trauma related?”

“No.”

Lisa turns to face him. “How would your nightmares wake me up? And why wouldn’t you want my comfort? I’m your wife.”

Lisa must imagine him moaning in his sleep, instantly relieved after waking. But Sam’s nightmares are way more than that. He kicks and thrashes. He has previously broken a bedside lamp. He has come to in the cupboard, cowering in the corner. Unlike the benign kind, Sam’s terrors don’t leave him as soon as he wakes up. They follow him round, return during quiet moments of the day.

So far, he has kept this humiliating spectacle from Lisa. But the Mangleby terrors always cycle back. When an uphill run won’t still his mind; when a long, hot shower won’t still his heart, Sam knows they’re due to return.

After the session, Lisa hands the car keys to Sam. She recognises

Sam's need to drive them home, not just to reclaim his manhood by taking the wheel, but also because his anxiety is elevated. He's a nervous passenger.

While driving down Khandallah Road, Sam starts sniffing. Lisa passes him a tissue but one isn't enough.

"I can't want more," he sobs, "but I can't ask you to want less!"

"Pull over," Lisa tells him.

Sam drives too quickly onto a curbed verge and nudges the wheels out of alignment. A mechanic will fix that later.

For once Sam doesn't care about the car. In broad daylight, hugged by Lisa on the verge, he is breaking down.

"We won't go back to that woman," Lisa says.

The sex counsellor had looked at Sam over her glasses. "Zoning out during sex is very damaging."

Lisa drives the rest of the way home.

Nothing more is said about sex. The stakes for Lisa and Sam are too high. A big job just came in, a challenging design which combines Sam's engineering skills with Lisa's talent for negotiation with exacting clients.

The project buoys their spirits. They shop for groceries together, choosing favourite foods. They visit the beach on Sundays. They rent movies and watch them together on the couch.

At bedtime they each return to their own separate spheres; Lisa inside, Sam in the campervan.

But sometimes, when Sam creeps back into the house for a glass of water or a late-night snack, he hears Lisa crying.



# DOCTOR'S ORDERS

FOURTEEN MONTHS MARRIED

MARCH 2003

“Samuel?” At last Doctor Malone comes for him, an avuncular man with a soft voice and a calming manner.

Sam follows his GP to the consulting room.

“Have a seat. Back for your results, I expect.”

Sam confirms. Last week he endured a full medical.

Doctor Malone reads from his computer screen. “Stellar. Whatever you’re doing, keep it up. Blood pressure optimal. Cholesterol good.”

“Could be better?”

“This is as good as it gets. Liver function excellent, blood sugar, best I’ve seen all week. You’re young. Enjoy it.”

Sam remains sombre.

“There’s no bad news! What else have you got for me today?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“I see you’ve booked a double appointment.”

Sam books double appointments because he’s been told to. He arrives each time with a list.

This year so far: A sandfly bite (suspected skin cancer); a newly acquired food allergy (cabbage induced wind); blood in his stool (beetroot). No one understands the depths of Sam’s neuroses better than Doctor Malone. But married life brings fresh issues; new,

unspeakable embarrassment.

Doctor Malone is a patient but busy man. “Which part of the anatomy are we concerned about?”

Sam can barely shrug. He looks down.

“The pants area?”

“I may have erectile dysfunction.” Sam has seen the yellow billboards.

“Oh?”

Sam can hardly breathe. He anticipates an invasive physical examination. He has worn his newest underpants and showered in case. But he hopes to walk away with a pill prescription.

Doctor Malone does not ask Sam to lower his daks. Instead he turns away slightly and continues speaking in light, casual tones. “Do you experience erections at all? Waking in the morning, for instance?”

Sam nods. “The plumbing works fine, just not when I need it to.”

“You describe a common experience, which is not to downplay its impact. You’re a newlywed, aren’t you.”

“Yes.”

“And you started a new business with your wife, is that correct?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Well, your cortisol levels were a little raised, but I’d put that down to white coat syndrome. How would you describe your stress levels, generally?”

As a permanently anxious person, Sam can’t answer this. “Normal, I think. But what about other hormones? Maybe I should be tested for low testosterone or something.”

“What makes you think you’re low in testosterone?”

“Basically, I don’t think about sex as much as I should.”

“And what’s the correct amount? Everybody’s different.”

“I’m a little too different.”

“I’m not worried about your testosterone. Nothing suggests we need to go further with that.”

“Could there be another reason?”

“For?”

“Why I can’t satisfy my wife?”

Sam’s doctor has been keeping his face neutral, but looks saddened by this. “Disregard everything you’ve heard in locker-rooms. Men exaggerate. Go to the book store. Have a browse. Find some literature that appeals. Satisfying sex takes time and practice, same as anything else.”

Sam’s heart sinks. Practice hasn’t helped. Books definitely didn’t help.

“Have you discussed these concerns with your wife?”

Sam nods. “She said to stop trying so hard.”

Doctor Malone smiles, as if the problem of Sam has been solved. He leans back in his chair. “Listen to your wife. She knows you better than anyone.”

Doctor Malone has failed to grasp the nature of Sam’s problem. Sam can’t explain it. He doesn’t have the words.

Later, Sam thinks of things he could’ve said. For instance, he has never once experienced an erection caused by attraction to his wife, or to any other person, for that matter. But the doctor didn’t ask that. Doctor Malone asked only about the other kind of wood, divvying boners into two broad categories not at all helpful to Sam: the

nocturnal and spontaneous kind.

Sam goes out of his way to clear the pipes whenever he notices the build-up. Months of nothing, then his body demands attention. During those times he rubs one out every day. If he doesn't take care of the horny build-ups he'll experience concentration difficulties. Why does no one talk about what a nuisance this can be?

At least the build-up problem responds to home remedy. In the shower alone he imagines naked bodies. These bodies writhe and pump and do all the things Sam would never want to do in real life. He never inserts himself into these scenes. The scenes rarely come from personal experience and he's never been drawn to porn. Without the Vaseline-lens of pure imagination, images don't work. Photographed bodies repel him. Strangely, these writhing, amorphous bodies of his imagination may have come from filmic sources, from a lifetime of watching movies, which often include a sex scene or two. But they appear to him in shadowy, faceless form.

This is important. To conjure a friend or acquaintance, or even a celebrity, would send him cold. The horn would be gone, only to bother him again, hours later, when he's trying to get something done.

Sam likes to be organised, so he sometimes gets ahead of the build-up and attempts an anticipatory toss off. This doesn't reliably work. The procedure takes longer. Sometimes he runs out of hot water in the shower. To save on utility bills he imagines gigantic bodies, larger than buildings, towering over a city, straddling the Earth. His own perspective shrinks to that of a mouse, an insect, an atom. Such tricks of defamiliarisation take Sam's mind away from reality, because reality does him no good.

He thinks he might have ruined himself for sex with such outsized debasement. Lisa cannot be anything more than the real, five foot two human that she is. Sam practises, while alone in the shower, inserting Lisa into his fantasies. If he can map her face onto these oversized naked nobodies he may be able to train his mind. It doesn't work. He cannot do it. His mind runs the show; the body goes limp.

Perhaps his brain is mistaking arousal for anxiety. Sam is so very familiar with anxiety, he may be slipping into anxiety whenever his heart rate elevates. On paper, arousal looks like anxiety.

Sam is also hopeless at multi-tasking. His monotropic tendencies are highly adaptive at work. When a task needs doing, nothing will derail Sam's focus. But to every advantage, a downside. He wonders if his tunnel-vision approach to life prevents him from the multi-tasking required of sex: Specifically, the requirement during partnered sex to be both excited and calm at once. How do others achieve this? He has no idea.

Or perhaps society broke him. Sam has heard Lisa talk about the misogynistic wife-whore dichotomy which has held women back for centuries. It's possible Sam has absorbed this narrative unwittingly. Perhaps he fails to experience his own wife as arousing precisely because she's his wife. Maybe if she were a stranger, faceless and nameless like the characters of his wank material, maybe then he could manage it, not that he ever craved a one-night stand with a stranger back when he was single anyway. The prospect of getting naked with a stranger terrifies him. It's bad enough stripping naked in front of Lisa.

On more optimistic days, Sam can imagine he's not broken at all.

Perhaps he is simply too good at wanking.

Before they were married, Sam and Lisa talked frequently about sex. Back then, Lisa had a spark in her eye, anticipating a wonderful sex life as just reward for waiting. Light-hearted conversations about sex are rare these days, but in the before-times Sam asked Lisa about orgasms.

They were in their brand new Karori living room, sharing a bowl of salt and vinegar crinkle cut chips. Lisa sat in Sam's lap, enduring the mysterious monthly pain which Sam now finds bittersweet. Lisa's endometriosis affords time off from sex. For one week per month he can be the devoted, loving partner he has always wanted to be. On this particular day, Lisa had sent him to the supermarket for pain medication and super absorbent pads with wings. She thanked him profusely for the favour, as if it were too much to ask. But Sam didn't mind one bit.

Once Lisa's pain medication kicked in a little, she found it diverting to grab Sam's wrist and reroute chips meant for Sam into her own mouth. If only his wife were pain free, this would have looked like a scene from an ideal engagement.

They'd been watching a documentary about bonobos, surprisingly hornbag creatures. Sex comes so naturally to bonobos. Any casual observer would likely conclude that bonobo sex is far better than the human kind.

Sam said: "Do you think bonobo orgasms are better? I mean, is there a hierarchy to orgasms?"

"You want to transmogrify into a bonobo and find out?"

"Wouldn't mind knowing. There could be natural variation in

humans, too.”

“Of course.”

“Of course?”

“Yeah. Sometimes it’s mindblowing. Sometimes it’s a mechanical meh. Right?”

“Well, if I don’t ejaculate for a while, it’s more intense—”

Lisa had laughed at him. “You use such clinical terms!”

“What do you want me to call it?”

“Never mind, go on.”

Sam regathered his thoughts. “Society tells us that orgasms are better with a partner, but is that really true?”

Lisa can’t believe what she’s hearing. “Orgasms without connection are nothing more than pleasant contractions, Sam. You are being facetious, right? Right?”

“Guess I wouldn’t know.”

“Once we’re married you’ll know, if you ever give it up! Oh my god.”

After that, Lisa took full control of the bowl of chips. Sam encouraged elaboration. Lisa refused to explain the inexplicable. “You’ll just have to wait and find out. I’m actually kinda glad you’re a virgin. I’ll be giving you the best orgasm ever.”

Now that Sam has been married for fourteen months, he should understand the hierarchy of orgasms. But he can’t. If anything, partnered orgasms are worse. The best sex is solo: no mismatched libido, no miscommunication, no performance anxiety, no risk of getting everything entirely wrong. Moreover, solo sex is the purest form of sex you can get. There’s literally nothing but sex in a wanking

session — no romance, no distraction. All these years wanking, he's been having sex, all right. Except wanking doesn't count as sex.

## EIGHTEEN MONTHS MARRIED

Lisa and Sam watch TV together on the couch but rarely touch. Tonight's documentary features baboons, and reminds Sam of the time they watched bonobos. Lisa probably remembers it too. Unlike bonobos, baboons are disturbing in their aptitude for violence.

"I'm glad I don't have boy parts. With men everything's a damn race," Lisa had said after mulling over baboons.

Sam feels the charge personally. But on reflection, does this mean Lisa's previous boyfriends have the exact same problems as himself? Is this one of those things every man experiences but no one talks about? He won't ask for further clarification. He'd rather not know anything about Lisa's previous boyfriends.

Maybe Sam's particular problem has a simple solution: He sees too much of his wife. They're a brilliant architect duo, but a working partnership is terrible for their sex life.

As an experiment, Sam decides to leave Lisa alone as much as possible during the day. Sometimes, on the way home from a building site, Sam stops in at a walking track or a beach. There, he hopes for epiphany. Revelations require solitude. He looks at the clouds, at the rise and fall of the waves, at seagulls swooping and squawking. Every single one of those fucking birds must be succeeding in plentiful, noisy

sex. Look at them all, the shit-squirting, squawky little fuckers.

One warm, summer's day he decides to examine human beachgoers, instead. People are wearing lighter clothes in the heat. Which of these women would arouse him, if not his own, objectively beautiful wife? He decides to do a count-up as they pass. From behind his sunglasses, sitting inside his car, he hopes no one notices his scrutiny. He feels like a dirty voyeur.

Timing thirty minutes on his watch he counts three beautiful women, each about as good-looking as Lisa.

Another, more sombre thought crosses his mind. He must also consider the possibility that Lisa knows him better than he knows himself. So he decides to count the attractive men.

In the next thirty minutes he counts two attractive, toned and tanned men, each with full heads of hair. Possibly another, but that guy would have to take his shirt off for Sam to know for sure.

He'll round up to three. Let's say three attractive women and three attractive men. This can't be good news. He's bisexual.

Sam overheard teenagers on a train recently. He wasn't meaning to hear their conversation, and he doubts teenagers understand the world better than himself, but one snippet of their shit-talking followed him all the way home: "If you think you might be gay, that totally means you are."

Sam closes his eyes and forces his brain to revisit his regular wank material, but only through the hard, cold lens of analysis.

Oh god, yes, he must be bisexual. To hurry along a wank Sam imagines all types of bodies, switching them in and out of a scenario for variety's sake. He imagines women with men, women with women,

and sometimes, for reasons he cannot fathom, he imagines sex acts from the viewpoint of a woman, watching men with men. He's not even sure the bodies he conjures have distinguishable sex parts.

It doesn't cross Sam's mind that what's really turning him on is the emotion behind the sex, and that the combination of genders means nothing to him. What he likes is this: People really into each other. The spectacle of sexual attraction is what's turning him on. Ironically, this is the one thing he cannot achieve in his workaday, non-fantasy life. Try as he might, he cannot utilise his own wife's beautiful, buxom body to ready himself for sex. He must conjure shadowy nobodies. The shame pains him. If he doesn't care what gender these people are, let alone who they are, he must be the epitome of an unthinking, uncaring person. He could be a sociopath, a sack of stones where his heart should be.

Bisexual is definitely a better option. Perhaps this is what bisexual looks like. If Sam is bisexual, he must be a latent one. His bisexuality is so very latent, in fact, that he's never even noticed this about himself, not until delving deep, applying his analytical skills to his own psychology.

Bisexuality is the best case scenario here, since he's gone and married a woman. Except, Sam has no idea how to turn this startling conclusion into something he can use. Bisexuality sounds like a major hassle; at least double the hassle of marrying a straight woman, who is astonishingly horny three weeks out of four. No one warned Sam women could be so horny.

He's probably repressed. He is so very repressed he doesn't even know what he's repressing.

Unfortunately, Sam drives home to Lisa without finishing his thought experiment. The question he does not ask: Under perfect conditions, which of those six beautiful beachgoers would he welcome naked into his bed?

None of them. Not a single one, is the answer.

He does not realise there's a broadly shared kind of attraction, beyond the aesthetic, beyond the emotional. When people describe others as 'hot', Sam does not understand that 'hot' is not metaphorical; others really do feel heat when experiencing sexual attraction. No one describes this to Sam. Not his high school science teacher, not Uncle Mick, not Lisa, not the relationship counsellor, and not his GP. Because why describe the colour of air?

"I may have ruined myself with sex fantasies," he confides to Lisa one evening, after they watch a vaguely erotic movie together, this time cuddling for warmth and companionship on the couch.

Lisa is not shocked. She's intrigued. She presses Sam until he tells her more. He has to; that's what married couples do.

"Am I in your fantasies?" she asks, shyly.

"Yes," Sam says eventually, since he has tried to insert her. He really tried. Also, he does know the correct answer.

"What am I doing, in this fantasy?"

"Just... sex."

"What am I wearing?"

"Nothing at all. Maybe shoes. Heels. Your red ones."

"Mm. So you like those, huh? And where are we, when we're having sex in your head?"

Lisa has simply assumed Sam is a cast member in his own sex

fantasies. Already she's way off base. These fantasies only work if Sam is a spectator, but that feels creepy to admit, like he's some perv or something.

“Just... nowhere, really? Suspended in space, I think.”

Lisa perks up. “Hey, maybe you're into hanging toys.”

Sam doesn't know what this even means. “That sounds... lethal.”

Lisa describes the art of sex suspension. Sam wonders briefly how she knows this stuff. Everyone else somehow knows about sex. He tells her, regretfully, that he doesn't want to waste money at a sex shop. He's probably not into it. Rigging sounds quite the learning curve. He doesn't want to take a course.

The suspension play never happens, but Sam has allowed Lisa a glimpse inside his head. She seems grateful for the crumbs, as if Sam's fantasy-life might provide insight into what her husband is 'really' about, as if sex is so central that to understand someone sexually is to understand everything else, via extrapolation.

Sam takes his doctor's advice. When it comes to sex, he stops 'trying so hard'.

He stops trying at all.

# QUIETLY OPEN

## THREE YEARS MARRIED

LATE 2004

At about four p.m. Lisa bursts out of the home office, runs up the driveway and knocks with alarming rapidity on the door of Sam's campervan. They call it 'Sam's Campervan' now.

She has come with life-changing news.

Sam had been taking a nap. Lisa sits at the fold-down Formica table, always on a slight lean.

"We did it, Sammy. We won." She's whispering like her voice might crack. "The award. The big one."

"We what?" Sam sits up in the overcab bed, careful as usual not to bump his head on the ceiling.

"They phoned just now. I knew it. I knew we were good together."

"Wait, what? Are you kidding?" Sam and Lisa are so young. There's no way they won an architectural award.

After climbing down the ladder, Sam accepts the first non-awkward hug they've shared in months.

"We needed this, Sammy."

For three years, Sam and Lisa have lived side-by-side as very good friends and ultra-efficient co-workers.

Lisa sits on the foam sofa and manages to emulate a happy dance even while seated. There's no room for proper flailing in here.

Sam sits opposite. "Did your dad have something to do with

this?”

“This is all us!” Lisa is sensitive about her influential connections.

“We do make a good team.” Sam pours himself a plastic mug of tap water from a jug.

If Lisa hadn't insisted, Sam would never have taken the job which has won this award. In fact, Sam was annoyed with Lisa for conveying overconfidence to a potential client. As for awards, the best design work happens quietly. Awards are Lisa's thing. She believes clients like to see them decorating an office.

In any case, Lisa had been right about the build. Sam overcame every engineering problem encountered on that difficult site. Meanwhile, Lisa worked with Sam on design, dealt with tradies and sweet talked council. Numerous times, Sam would have slammed the phone down and retreated to his own bed in a frothy rage.

“Oh god, we're going to have to make an acceptance speech.”

“Typical, Sam. Enjoy this! Don't you see what this means? Our business is solid now.”

Of course Sam understands. This win is good; very, very good.

“It's just a speech. And everyone's drunk by that point. You worry about the wrong things.”

Sam rests his head in his hands.

Lisa reaches across the table and grabs one of his hands. “I know how much you worry. That's why we've won this award. I can't have my excellent architect-engineer partner without all the attendant worry-warting.”

Lisa is calling him her 'partner' these days. She avoids the word 'husband'.

“Let’s go out for dinner,” she says. “Let’s do something fun!”

Does Lisa really think a dinner for two would be fun? Sitting across from each other in public at a romantically decorated table, possibly candle-lit, surrounded by besotted couples who’ll go home and enjoy excellent sex? Sam’s idea of hell.

“What do you say? Should I make a booking?”

Sam shakes his head.

Lisa releases a long, heavy sigh. “One night. Please. Let’s forget about our ‘issues’. We deserve to.”

“I can’t. Maybe you can, but I can’t.”

They sit in silence for some time. This isn’t what winning was supposed to feel like. If Sam can’t feel joy in this moment, he can’t imagine ever feeling joy. Perhaps he’s constitutionally incapable of it. Maybe that’s what his entire problem is, and now, because of his anxiety spraying its viral load into the air, Lisa’s starting to feel as shitty as he does. Maybe he has a serotonin problem. He means to ask his doctor about that.

“You deserve a more upbeat guy,” Sam says, quietly. “I’m not a fun person. I’m just not.”

“I don’t think that’s accurate,” Lisa says after some thought. “Your idea of ‘fun’ is different. Your fun happens to be work. I’ve never known anyone so into their work. I mean, you’re genuinely into it. You’re not a workaholic, you’re genuinely having fun. And even when you’re not working, you’re really into your astronomy. For me that’s boring as shit. I think you’re kind of lucky, you know? Most people have a terrible work week and eke what little joy they can from weekends and holidays. But you? You’re in this happy state of flow the vast majority

of the time. I kind of envy that, to be honest.”

No one has ever summed Sam up like this, painting his strong, solitary interests in such flattering light. Lisa does understand him after all.

“I need to find that joy for myself,” Lisa says. “Outside us. Outside our relationship. Know what I mean?”

Sam almost choke-sobs. He’s sure Lisa is about to leave him.

“I love you to bits,” she says, “and there’s no one in the world I’d rather spend days with than you. I want to work with you, watch movies with you, share finances with you. You’re the most solid, reliable, loyal guy. I want to go on holidays with you. You’re considerate and self-contained. In so many ways, you’re exactly the man I need.”

The ‘but’ is taking its sweet time.

“But we’re not sexually compatible, or something. I’m horny all of the damn time. It will never stop hurting like hell that you don’t need me like that.”

“I’m not that sort of person, Lise.”

“I know. So... I’d like some time away, maybe with... you know. Someone else who wants that.”

“Like, a tennis partner, but for sex?”

Lisa thinks about this. “I... I guess.”

“Okay.”

“What?”

“That’s fine.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes.”

Sam feels sure another revelation is locked and loaded, and it surely involves a man they both know.

“How much will you want to know?” Lisa asks Sam later that night as they wash and dry the dishes. They haven’t gone out for dinner. They ordered Chinese, which Sam transfers from plastic boxes to ceramic plates.

“Nothing. I don’t need to know.”

“That’s not healthy. I want transparency. I want you to find your person, too, by the way.”

So Lisa doesn’t know him at all. There is no person for Sam. Lisa is the closest he’s ever come to ‘his person’.

“I’ll need to tell you where I am,” Lisa says. “And the name of the person I’m with. I refuse to keep a silence around that. I mean, I’d tell a friend? And you are my best friend.”

Sam nods. He can deal with that. “Just, no one from work,” he says. “Is that okay?”

Oh, god. From the look on Lisa’s face, he’s hit on something without knowing it.

“When you say ‘from work’, you mean tradies, clients...?”

“Well, who else?”

Lisa waits.

Then Sam gets it. Lisa went out to lunch with their lawyer last week, or last month, or both, ostensibly because Graham Purdy’s high school-aged son is thinking of going into architecture next year and Graham wants career advice to pass on. He asked Lisa, not Sam, to lunch, which made sense at the time because Lisa is personable.

“Graham Purdy,” Sam says.

Lisa nods.

“Isn’t he married?”

“Divorced.”

“Isn’t he old, though?”

“He’s ten years older than us.”

“But, why him?” Sam had imagined a younger, fitter man; more of a gym-junkie doofus.

Lisa shrugs. “I don’t pretend to know how these things happen. I only know there’s a spark.”

“Ah, the spark. The mysterious spark.”

Lisa seems to realise something. “You’ve never once felt it, have you?”

“No.”

“God. Not even with me.”

“I thought I did.”

Lisa looks utterly deflated.

“I really thought I did, Lise. And I still do, in my own way. I’m impressed by your mind, your way with people. I truly think you’re beautiful.”

Lisa is immune to being told she’s beautiful. Lisa is one of life’s beautiful people. “That’s not it, Sammy. That’s not what ‘spark’ is.”

“I don’t see how we can compare sparks.”

Lisa laughs, but she’s also crying a little, returning dried plates to the cupboard. “My spark for you is entirely one-sided. God! No wonder I felt so lonely.”

“I’m sorry, Lise.”

Lisa reaches for an aloe vera infused tissue. There’s a full box of

the damn things on the window-sill. Sam is always trying to wipe his glasses with them, only smearing them worse.

Lisa blows her nose. “How about this. I’ll spend time with Graham. And while I’m gone, you do whatever sparks you. Let’s order that fancy telescope, for starters.”

“What telescope?”

“I saw your search history. Entirely by accident,” Lisa hastens to add. “You should get that astronomer’s tent, too. Go out into the woods, the mountains, watch your meteor showers. I’ll pack you a picnic basket before I leave, full of your favourites.”

This sounds good, but in the way of a horror film, moments before the terrible inciting incident kicks in. Also, Lisa’s not into food prep. He’ll pack his own basket.

“Take some good books,” Lisa continues. “Kit yourself out with high-end camping equipment. I can’t enjoy myself with someone else if I sense my wonderful, talented, loyal husband is unhappy, you know? Do you think we can both be happy with this arrangement?”

Sam has been let off the sex-hook, yet he still has his best-friend, business-partner and someone who is starting to call him ‘husband’ again. He never believed that possible.

“Do we have to announce this to people?” Sam asks. “I love being your husband.”

“This is no one else’s business, Sam. I’m still your wife.”

“I want to keep wearing this ring.” The gold wedding band connects Sam to the regular world, where people trust him, assuming good things about him: He is trustworthy, regular. A good woman thought him worth taking.

“Keep wearing it,” Lisa says, quietly.

The weight of anxiety lifts. “I’m still your husband.”

**Part Seven:**

**REINA'S**

**RETURN**



# CHASED

AUTUMN 2017

Reina answers her front door in full drag: a form-fitting charcoal dress with large segments of fabric cut out of it. Her hair is a black and red wig, arranged into a beehive. Platform boots add further to her height.

“Christ on a bike, you scared me,” Sam says when she answers the door. “How long did that transformation take you?”

“I’ve got it down to two hours, twenty minutes,” Reina tells him, inside.

Reina’s housemate Mo is watching TV. Their pink and yellow hair pops up from prone position on the sofa. “Hey Auntie,” they say, noticing Sam’s posy, “you got you a boy who brings flowers. Ka pai!”

Sam has brought flowers for good luck. He was hoping to quietly put them somewhere. “Break a leg, I guess.”

“These are gorgeous.”

“You planted them. I’m simply returning the produce of your labour.”

“Sam? Can we pretend you gave me flowers?”

Audience participation LGBTQ community theatre is not Sam’s usual thing, but Sam has barely seen Reina lately. Since returning from England, student friends roped her into providing onstage live music.

Including himself, Sam counts twenty-three people in the audience. He sits in the back row in the seat nearest the wall, in case someone in the cast decides to ignore Reina’s strict instruction to leave

him well alone.

The lights go down.

Sam can't follow the plot. There is no plot. It's a mood piece, or a showcase for spectacular costumes and singing, full of community in-jokes which Sam only knows to be jokes due to audience hilarity.

Reina plays an electric keyboard and at times an ironic violin. For Sam, the only point of interest this evening is Reina. He's known her for two and a half years, but has never heard her play. Tonight he finally appreciates her musical skills for himself.

The second act fails to convert Sam into a fan of experimental theatre, though.

Eventually the troupe holds hands to bow.

Sam waits afterwards in the foyer. Reina soon appears. She hasn't changed out of her costume and startles him once again with her height.

"Want to stay for drinks? Meet my theatre friends?"

Sam has been considering how he might make an escape. Nearby, someone must be smoking. The smell of cigarettes once reminded Sam of happy times, of Mick and Jan's house. That changed after Jan died.

Before he can make an excuse, Reina understands he's eager to leave.

It is just after midnight when they walk out of the theatre. A brisk trot from the theatre to Sam's carpark should take five minutes, but that calculation requires sensible footwear. Reina wears a long, synthetic fur coat over her costume for warmth, but has not changed out of her platform boots. Reina's boots click-clack along the footpath. The wind is cold against their cheeks.

“I should’ve parked closer,” Sam says.

Reina says nothing in reply. She seems preoccupied by someone following. Sam has paid these footsteps no mind, though now he hears what Reina hears: The footsteps suggest an uneven gait, gaining on them. The footfalls sound masculine. Whereas Reina resists the urge to glance behind, Sam needs to know who is gaining on them.

The stranger could be almost anyone. Their follower is dressed in black, cloaked doubly by the night. He has noticed Sam’s furtive glance, and now decides to make verbal contact.

Sam has not felt the brunt of the f-word since high school. The slur takes him back to the desolate spot near the caretaker’s house where he and Crispin waited between lessons, hoping to be left alone.

The man keeps yakking, loudly. The volume of his voice is unexpectedly reassuring. At least he’s had a skinful. If push comes to shove, Sam and Reina can outrun him.

Sam barely notices, but Reina has linked arms with Sam. Normally coded as a romantic gesture, this is purely for safety. Reina’s platform boots are a liability. They slow her down. If shoved from behind she could fall.

The stranger shouts further insults. Sam had forgotten how awful this feels. The stranger despises them both; Reina for daring to exist, and Sam for daring to ignore him.

Then the guy starts singing.

“Dude looks like a lady!” He sings the chorus over and over, following them around the corner as Reina pulls Sam in the wrong direction. Reina has decided to seek refuge in the nearest open bar.

The bar is mostly empty but, as usual, patrons do the meerkat

thing, and not just because Reina is seven foot tall in her wig and boots; they have not so much entered this bar as burst in.

A woman in her twenties with a short, heavy, 1950s fringe is serving tonight. She's midway through wiping a table, but approaches Reina and Sam to greet them near the door.

"You two okay?" she asks.

Sam nods. "There's a drunk guy."

"Fuck. That'll be Jerry I bet." The barmaid opens the door, looks both ways down the street, spots him peeing against a shop window. "Yep. Tried here earlier, was already pissed as a fart. Sorry about him. What can I get you both to drink? On the house, of course."

Reina looks at Sam, with kohl-rimmed eyes that have just seen the Grim Reaper.

"Mind if we just take a seat?" Sam asks the barmaid.

"Sure thing. Long as you like. Need me to call someone?"

Reina sits down heavily, shakes her head.

The barmaid brings two glasses of water. "Sure I can't get you two anything? A basket of hot chips?"

Reina is normally gracious. Right now she can only shake her head.

Sam says, "I'll fetch the car. You okay to wait here?"

"But then you'll be on your own."

"I've always been fine on my own. Besides, I can out-sprint a drunkard."

Reina nods.

Sure enough, Sam dashes through the dark streets as if invisible.

He is so keen to get into his car he almost misses the damage.

Someone has coined his paintwork. This is no simple scrape along one side; this is a crazed scribble of graffiti, the full circumference. He steps back, surveys the parking building as if the offender may be lurking. Darkness and silence, all around. He bends to examine the damage. Perhaps the scrawl forms letters to say something. He searches for a slur. But it doesn't form words. Just one angry mess. Doesn't matter anyway. No one was harmed.

He hopes Reina won't notice the frenzied scratches when he stops in front of the bar to pick her up.

She notices immediately. Sam sees it on her face when she hesitates before the passenger door.

Reina opens the door. "Oh, no. Your paintwork."

"Don't worry about it."

"You saw this side?"

"An excuse to get a new paint job. What colour should I get this time? Purple? Rainbow?"

Reina straps herself into the front passenger seat. She doesn't reply.

"Comes with the territory, a car like this."

"Has it happened before, then?"

"First time for everything." Sam drives in the direction of Reina's house.

"I feel terrible," she says.

"About the coining? Don't feel bad about that."

"You know we were seen, getting out of your car?"

"Oh, I don't think so."

"You don't notice but I always do. Passengers in the parking

building two cars down, watching me get out. I saw them clearly, read their faces.”

Reina doesn't speak again until Sam pulls into her driveway.

“I wish you'd believe me,” Reina says quietly. “I notice things. I have to.”

“Okay.”

“I shouldn't walk through the city dressed like this, especially not after dark. I thought, well, it's only a Tuesday. I'm wearing a big, black coat. As if bigots take holidays. I put you in danger as well.”

“We weren't in real danger. Old mate was tanked.”

“That prick happened to be. Could've been much worse.”

Sam sighs heavily. “Come on. I'll see you safely inside.”

He has parked barely six metres from her front door. Sam's gesture is ridiculously chivalrous.

“Would you like to come in?” Reina asks on the stoop.

“It's a school night. Long drive home. I only wanted to say, thank you for inviting me to your concert. Your impromptu performances were amazing.”

“It's more rehearsed than it looks.”

“Doesn't lessen my awe.”

“This night did not go to plan.” Reina pulls her big coat tighter around her body.

“We knew dunderheads exist. This evening has hardly shattered our world view, has it?”

Reina raises one painted-on eyebrow. “That is somehow both optimistic and pessimistic at once.”

“That Aerosmith song is ruined now, though.”

Reina shrugs and shivers. “That song ruins itself. Still, if he’d remembered the rest of the lyrics, he might’ve thought twice about approaching me.”

“Reina? That prick is disgusting, and I’m not making excuses for the guy, but I’m pretty sure he was showing interest, in his own fucked up way.”

“No shit.”

“I’m stating the obvious, aren’t I.”

By stating the obvious Sam has revealed his naïvety, for only just realising how certain men approach women, especially trans women, feeling somehow disgusted and attracted at once.

Reina’s stoop is barely sheltered from the cold night wind.

“Better go,” Sam says. “Loafie’s at Lisa’s.”

“Lisa waiting up for you?”

“Nah, I have a key to her laundry.”

In fact, Loafie rarely sleeps in the laundry. She’ll be snuggled in bed with Lisa, in which case Sam must creep into Lisa’s bedroom like a maniac and seize his curled-up bundle of fluff before Lisa is rudely awoken by a whack to the face with a tail.

“Please stay a little while, Sam. Come inside. Have a cup of tea.”

If only he’d left at this juncture.



## CHASTE?

The fact is, Sam quaffed a soda water during interval and wouldn't mind using Reina's toilet. And if he's going to pee, he might as well stay for a quick cup of tea.

The sharehouse bathroom is covered in a thick dusting of talcum powder. Damp towels have been left on the floor. When he emerges, Reina is preparing mugs. She apologises for the kitchen mess. "It wasn't like this earlier."

Sam remembers. "I don't know how you endure housemates."

"Yeah, well. We all need people to clean up after us sometimes."

They take their tea to the living room. Reina turns on a lamp. Startled by a lump on the sofa, her tea almost spills.

"Sorry," she says to the couch-surfer.

The croaky-voiced person, hair tousled, sits up. "Okay if I doss here?"

"That's a-okay with me," Reina says. "Sleep tight bub, nuh-night."

Then Reina takes Sam's hand — for the second time that night — and leads him silently to her own quarters. She clicks her bedroom door shut behind them.

Sam has never previously imagined what Reina's bedroom might look like. Still, this room surprises with its plainness. Reina herself is, well, eye-catching. Sam expected bright colours and patterned wallpaper; antique chairs, a chandelier, that sort of thing. What he sees instead are cream walls and a brownish carpet, worn in high-use areas; a cotton duvet with green and ochre stripes; a washing basket of

folded clothing; and two bedside cabinets, each holding stacks of half-read reading material judging by the bookmarks poking out.

“Have a seat.” Reina gestures to the bed. “Sorry to bring you in here. I didn’t know we had an extra on the sofa tonight.”

“Who was that?”

“One of Mo’s friends, I think.” Up-lit by the reading lamp, Reina stands beside her bed, removing bangles and earrings.

Sam stands against the wall, warming his hands around his mug of tea. He doesn’t wish to sit on anyone’s bed.

Next, Reina disappears into her en suite bathroom. “The kids sleep over when they need to,” she continues through the open door. “I can’t keep track. Mo’s emo friends, they’re forever changing their hair.”

Not that Reina can talk. Emerging from the bathroom, she has removed her wig, also the eyelashes. She turns down the bed covers looking more like herself, then props herself against a European pillow and settles in. Sam remains plastered against the far wall.

Sam would never sleep easy, not without knowing exactly who was on his couch.

Once again, Reina invites Sam to make himself at home, but Sam’s attention turns to an irritating, repetitive background noise. “What is that fapping sound?”

This tickles Reina’s funny bone. It’s nice to see her laugh tonight, but at some point in their friendship Reina must have decided to stop disguising her amusement at Sam’s regular failure to anticipate innuendo before it tumbles out of his mouth. Sam thinks about sex far less than most people. This makes him a sitting duck. Though he

understands his own faux pas as soon as Reina smiles, he is well-practised at breezing past whatever he's stupidly said.

He pulls back Reina's closed curtain and finds a square of damp cardboard taped insecurely to a dinner-plate sized hole in the glass.

"Yes, that," Reina says wearily. "The mower kicked up a stone. Then the wind slammed my door. Boosh."

"When did that happen?"

"Crack or hole?"

Sam recognises the extended gag and, as ever, ignores it. "Well, that explains the breeze," he says. "Feels like a fridge in here."

"Come on, Sam. Get under the covers. I'll warm you up."

Sam returns an awkward laugh. He prefers when Reina treats him seriously. "I'm fine."

But Sam didn't mean to sound brusque. He'd better sit down as requested. He perches on the far edge of Reina's bed, catching the cold breeze blowing in through the window. One socked foot remains safely on the carpet.

"Have you called your property manager about this broken glass? Or the landlord?"

"I am the property manager, Sam. This is my house."

"Oh. Sorry, I didn't..."

"I owned a house in England, sold up, bought this one. I mean to renovate at some point."

"Oh." Sam feels bad for assuming Reina's financial situation. "It's just, investment properties proliferate in this area, and—"

"It's okay," Reina says gently. "I can see why you thought that."

"What have you been reading?" Redirecting, Sam picks up the

top volume off Reina's stack of books and turns it over in his hand. "Looks interesting."

It doesn't look interesting. It opens with a run-down of the discovery of the cosmic microwave background radiation, which he's read fifty different times across various pop astronomy books.

"Take it home with you," Reina says. "I haven't the bandwidth for heavy material of late."

"You're halfway through it." Sam flicks the top of the bookmark with his finger. 'Halfway through' is generous. Reina is ten pages in.

"I'll be honest. I mostly wanted to impress you. I was trying to be interesting."

If Reina was hoping to help Sam feel at ease, she's failing miserably, saying something like that.

"What makes you think you even need to try?"

Reina is looking directly at Sam and Sam feels very uncomfortable about it. She's doing nothing to cause this level of discomfort, exactly, just propped up over there against that pillow, cradling her own mug of tea.

Sam sits with the astronomy book, needing something to do with his non-cup-holding hand. He skims its table of contents. "Maybe you'll finish it later."

"I may have time soon. Anya's taking Beth down south. She's scored a long-term relieving position at a high school in Christchurch. Starts term three."

"Christchurch?" Suddenly Sam imagines Reina might be following Anya. It punches him in the gut. "Will you be going too?"

Reina laughs, but not happily. "That would defeat the purpose."

“What purpose?”

“Anya’s done with The Reina Show. She didn’t sign on for... this. I’m synopsising now, but she loves me deeply, yadda yadda, needs to get her head right, needs to decide what she wants, blah-di-blah-di-blah. Says she’ll be back in a year.”

“Won’t you miss Bethany?”

“I’ll miss them both.”

“Of course.”

“I keep telling myself it’s only the South Island. It’s not like the other side of the world.” Reina laughs cynically. “But the South Island may as well be England, you know? If they’re not here, they’re not here.”

“I get it.” Sam does get it. That brief vision of Reina, all the way across the Cook Strait, has helped him immensely in the ‘getting it’ department. “I’m sorry.”

Right now he would like to offer something useful. He could offer to get that window fixed. Sam knows the guy for the job. But now is not the time for talking about windows. “If you ever need someone to hang out with,” he says, “you know where I am.”

“I do. But you’re busy.”

“I don’t have to be busy.” Sam wonders if there have been times Reina meant to call him but didn’t, assuming he’d be working. A dispiriting thought. “I’ll be less busy.”

Reina sighs. Sam has trouble interpreting it. Maybe she’s just tired. He should leave. He takes a long swallow of tea. It’s slightly too hot for his oesophagus.

“I’ve never asked you this,” Reina says, then stops.

Sam probably doesn't want to hear what's coming.

"And you've never volunteered the information," Reina continues, "but are you seeing anyone?"

Sam is glad he finished his swallow. He may have spluttered. "You know I'm not."

"Would you even tell me?"

"It would've come up, surely."

"Would it, though?"

Sam feels an old wound crick open. Sam has only ever been in the Group B of friendship circles. He's too odd, too different, too closed-off for entry into anyone's inner circle.

"There's nothing to work out about me," Sam says. "Really. There's no one else and nothing to tell." He might also add, "You're it, Reina. You're my inner circle." But he does not say this because who wants to heap such pressure on another person? Also, she might laugh at him. He couldn't bear that.

Perched on the edge of Reina's bed, next to the fapping window, Sam feels increasingly uncomfortable. He would like to defenestrate via that jagged hole in the glass. But he's stuck here for now. He can't even indulge in a diversionary sip of tea. He's cradling an empty mug.

"Sam? Could you do me a favour?" Reina pauses for the longest, most excruciating three seconds. "Could you come over here and give me a cuddle, do you think? I could use one right now."

Sam's anxiety response does all its usual things. Heart. Sweat. That inexplicable draining of self. If he speaks, his voice may belie his fear. In any case, he doesn't have the foggiest how to reply.

"I'd need a lot to drink before that happened." Then he laughs,

terribly.

At first he thinks Reina laughed, too, but then Sam understands that wasn't a snort of mirth. He has made her cry.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he says, but it's too late, too late. "I just heard myself. That was a despicable thing to say."

Reina throws off the bedclothes and disappears into the en suite. She's left the door ajar behind her, so Sam hears her fill the sink, tap on full blast.

Sam also gets up off the bed and stands by the en suite door, not looking in, gifting his friend a little privacy. When the tap stops gushing he speaks from the doorway.

"Have I failed to pick up on some signal, Reina? I live in constant fear of missing things. There's this channel of communication which flies over my head. Now and then I'm taken by surprise."

"You haven't missed a signal," Reina says, to the sound of product squirted out of a bottle. "I've been super careful to keep these big feelings all to myself. I didn't want to scare you away."

"I'm so sorry about the drunk comment," he says. "I didn't mean it."

"Oh... you did mean it, though. You didn't mean to hurt me, is all."

Reina isn't wrong.

She hasn't turned on the bathroom light, but Sam dares look in on her, silhouetted by dim rays cast from the faraway bedroom lamp. He sees her bent at the sink, rubbing product vigorously into her face.

"Need me to leave?" Sam asks.

Reina rinses her face. Then says quietly, "I'm not asking you to

stay.”

A long pause. “I don’t know what that means. I don’t know what to do.”

“I told you exactly what to do, and you can’t. That’s fine, I get it. I don’t want you to do something you can’t. But I’m going to be sad about it, you know? Some things are just sad, and no one in the world gets everything they want.”

Sam steps into the en suite, onto ceramic tiles. The cold seeps through his socks and numbs his legs. He’s become accustomed to his own comfortable, modern house with its warm floors.

The en suite door closes a little behind him, as if pushed by a ghost. Now there’s just streetlight, entering through a small, west-facing window beside the bathroom mirror. Sam stands behind Reina, each facing their dim reflection. Reina is too tall for Sam to see anything of her freshly-washed face. He observes her from behind: wide shoulders, narrow waist; familiar to him by now. He wonders if he could provide what she needs. He has the power to cheer her up. If he could only step forward and press his face between her shoulder blades, wrap his arms tightly around her body. That’s all he’d need to do. He could turn this awful moment around.

Reina reaches for toothpaste and a toothbrush. “You find me scary, I think.”

Sam scoffs. “I do not.” Then he remembers what he said earlier this evening when Reina opened her front door to greet him. He saw her in full costume, didn’t recognise her, must have looked shocked.

“Of course I don’t find you ‘scary’.”

“But being with me is scary. The world makes it so.”

“That’s the world, though. That’s nothing to do with us.”

“Do you worry, maybe, that being with me would make you no better than the flapping bin lid who yelled lewd things at us tonight?”

“I’m nothing at all like that creep.”

Reina pauses. “I know. But if you are a little wary around me, I get it. It might be worth us bringing that deep-sea creature up for air, if only to kill it.”

Then she starts brushing her teeth, tearfully.

Sam knows he shouldn’t be offended, but when Reina put himself and that creep in the same sentence she left an acrid after-taste. That ‘flapping bin lid’ doesn’t know Reina as Sam knows Reina. The bin-lid treats a stranger’s humanity as his sexual plaything. Sam is the inverse of that person. Sam sees Reina’s full humanity, yet still does not desire the sexual acts. If only Sam could steal the bin-lid’s capacity for that other kind of desire. He would take it. He’d knock that fucker over and thief it, if he could.

If he ever let Reina into his head, she’d be shocked and disappointed. Sam may be the inverse of that guy, but by another metric, Sam is also very much like him. The bin-lid doesn’t know Reina as a person. Likewise, the naked bodies of Sam’s fantasies don’t have faces, let alone personhood. There’s no room for knowing someone in Sam’s erotic private life.

Reina has patted her face dry with a small towel. Now that Sam’s eyes have adjusted to the minimal light, Reina’s bathroom looks far more ‘Reina’ than her Spartan bedroom on the other side of the door. The en suite is ornamented with lotions and potions, with a faceless white bust on the vanity unit, wearing Reina’s performance wig.

Reina sits down on the toilet. For a horrifying second Sam thinks this is his cue to have left minutes ago, but the lid is down. She's using it as a seat, not a toilet. And now she's unwinding paper to blow her nose.

Sam had been thinking about kissing her, but now he can't, not through snot and tears. Sam is at his least likely to kiss someone with an abundance of bodily fluids issuing forth, yet this is precisely when people need kissing the most.

"Come to bed," he says instead, in the softest tone he can muster. "You can't sit on the bog all night."

"That's what you think," she says, and this time she snort-laughes a little, into a strip of toilet paper, before dropping it into a bathroom tidy on the other side of the toot.

Sam extends both hands. "Come on. Come to bed with me."

He didn't mean to say that, exactly, not with that come-hither wording. But his words do the trick.

Reina accepts Sam's hand in hers. He leads her to the bed. She perches on the edge of it, like it's not her own mattress.

Sam stands before her. He sees Reina's de-nuded face clearly, by light of the bedside lamp. Her eyes remain dark where make-up won't budge.

"Now what?" she whispers. "Keep telling me what to do."

A ridiculous request. Like Sam knows what comes next. But standing here like this, his crotch is uncomfortably close to her face. So he slumps onto the bed beside her, elbows on knees, head dropped into his hands.

"I'm bad at this," he says. "Very, very bad. I have no idea what to

do.”

Reina inches closer and drapes one arm around his waist, pulling him close. “Oh, Sam. If you were good at this as well, you’d be insufferable.”

Just like that, their moods have flipped. Now it’s Sam’s turn for vulnerability. Hands are shaking, heart keeps racing.

“I love that you’re approaching this with humility,” Reina whispers. “I’m learning you too, you know. We’re both newbies to each other.”

“I don’t mean learning someone new,” Sam says. “I’ve always been terrible. I’ve never satisfied anyone, not once in my life.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“No, I need you to take me at my word. This isn’t hyperbole. I’m trying to tell you something about myself. You need to understand this, how it’s not about you, or who you are, or how the world treats us together.”

Reina takes Sam’s left hand and weaves her fingers through his. She must feel him trembling.

“Perhaps,” she says, tentatively, “you haven’t found what does it for you yet.”

“Already thought of that.”

There’s nothing Reina can offer that Sam hasn’t considered himself, over many years of soul-searching.

“I can’t imagine what that could be,” he says.

“Maybe it’s *galactically* esoteric.”

“That’s one sanitised word for ‘proper kinky’, if ever I heard it.”

Reina chuckles. “Tooting my own horn, I’m not a bad person to

explore with. I'm not a judgemental type. I can hardly afford to be, can I, when a chunk of the population considers me an abomination. And I'm not surprised by much."

"I know. I do know that about you."

Still, Sam holds the card that might shock even the most kink-friendly person. To have no kink at all, is that not the most shocking thing?

Sam disentangles his hand from Reina's. He rubs moisture from his eyes. "I'd do anything for you, Reina, if I could."

"Then, will you get into bed with me? I'd like to warm you up."

"It's not the cold. This shaking is nerves."

"Then, maybe just lie back?"

"That won't help."

"It might, though?"

Reina lies back first, not in the bed but on top of it. Sam can't imagine leaving her house at this juncture. He's still trying to convey something big. So after a long minute, he does the same. He lies back.

The bedroom ceiling is a mural of amorphous shadows thrown by the bedside lamp. Those shapes seem to move and mesh. He's feeling a bit sick. He closes his eyes.

Blessedly, Reina doesn't touch him at all. "Remember when we first met?" she asks.

"Mm. Outside my work, then at the supermarket, in front of the fresh pasta."

"I guess that was it, wasn't it. But I was thinking of tennis club."

Sam couldn't say for sure the exact session he first met Reina.

"We played against each other in a round robin." Reina rolls onto

her side, her body pressing against the length of Sam's arm. "You were so serious, and clearly getting frustrated with yourself."

"You didn't go easy on me, I hope."

"I wanted to see how far I could push you. Half expected you to throw your racket. You didn't, of course. Afterwards you shook my hand and apologised for failing to play a better game, and I thought to myself, 'Here's a guy who could do with some kindness, if only to compensate for his own ridiculously high standards.'"

"You felt sorry for me?"

"That's your takeaway point? No, not at all, but I did start coming down to Tuesday sessions more often after that. I had you in mind for a friend."

"And here we are. We are friends, aren't we?"

"Yeah. But then I had a moment. At your house. You'd dressed your pup in a tux. I loved that. You have no idea how my stomach flipped. You showed me your amazing house, but I kept thinking how handsome you are."

The Moment. Oh how Sam wishes he had a stomach-flip moment to share. If he could say to Reina, "This, this was the Moment I knew you were my person," Reina would surely love to hear it. But Sam has nothing like that, only a series of tiny, insignificant occasions, building gradually, despite his own gloompot pessimism, over months and now years. He's not convinced such Moments are even real. Reina might be describing a kind of nostalgic pareidolia, constructed in hindsight by the romantically inclined.

Sam could do the next best thing and relay to Reina the physical parts of her he finds most appealing. She keeps fit for mental health

reasons, in common with Sam. As a result, her biceps are noteworthy. Sam has also noticed Reina's beautifully manicured hands, and especially admires their strength. She can pop off a lid of Homebrand pasta sauce no problem. Tonight he admired how those large, beautiful hands dance across a keyboard and play a violin.

Sam suspects Reina doesn't want Sam to remind her of the beautiful body she gained partly by means of male puberty. In reality, Sam doesn't know if Reina experiences gender related body dysphoria or not. He's never asked. After at least two misfires already tonight, he's not about to ask now.

He needs to say something, though. Or rather, Reina needs to hear something nice from Sam. Anything.

He does think of something. "I was sitting near three young women in the audience tonight," he says. "Students. I overheard their conversation at intermission. They see you round campus, and all agreed you're 'super hot'. Also 'lovely'."

Reina, unexpectedly, offers no reaction to this.

"I thought you'd like to hear that," Sam adds, "how your reputation precedes you."

"I have to be nice," she says. "Everyone remembers meeting the six foot four trans woman."

Once again Sam has said the wrong thing. Damn, he should've kept that overheard conversation to himself.

"Sorry," he says.

Reina places one palm on Sam's chest. "No, I'm ridiculously sensitive right now. That was a compliment. I'll take it."

Then she drops her face into his neck. In a way, this is less intense.

Like this, Sam is not expected to make eye-contact at close range.

“Can I put my hand under your shirt?” she whispers.

Sam doesn't hear her due to the auditory exclusion of anxiety, and the panic rising in his chest.

“Huh?”

So Reina asks gently again.

He can do this, he can. He can lie here and it will be fine.

“Okay.”

Perhaps he can even close his eyes and turn himself on, somehow. He might imagine himself alone and conjure up images of naked, faceless bodies, doing their thing. But he only recalls that faceless bust in Reina's bathroom, wearing Reina's drag queen hair. There's no way he can slip into an aroused state with a real, solid, person next to him like this, and not when he cares so much for this person, who he sees so fully as rounded and human.

“Sam?”

“Mm.”

“Are you okay?”

Sam nods, reflexively. Reina has untucked his shirt and also his thermal singlet to rest her soft forearm directly against his stomach and chest.

“You're still shaking.”

“Anxiety response, I guess.”

Reina had gently caressed his chest. She stills her hand. Surely she feels his shallowing breath, his clammy skin. “How long's it been for you? Is that okay to ask?”

“Oh... I don't know. Ten years.” Sam keeps his eyes shut so he

doesn't have to see the shock on Reina's face.

Her voice belies nothing like that. "No wonder you're a bit tense, eh."

It's more like sixteen years, Sam realises when he does the arithmetic. He should correct that now, or forever hold his peace. "Fifteen. Fifteen or sixteen years."

"And how long since you had sex?" Reina asks.

"Huh?"

What was Reina asking, if not that?

Reina must think Sam answered a different question: 'How long since you were with someone new?' Sam's answer of sixteen years without partnered sex is unfathomable to a normal, regular, loving person such as Reina.

"That's what I meant," he whispers, and this time he opens his eyes. He needs to see the pity cross Reina's face.

But Reina cannot be read because, once again, she's buried her face in his neck.

"That's the saddest thing you heard, I bet."

"No," she says, unconvincingly. Then, "I'm honoured, actually. You're here with me now. This close. That's huge."

"Yeah."

Then Reina's nose is very close to Sam's armpit. 'Armpit' is such a terrible word. And no doubt a terrible experience.

"I wouldn't do that. Haven't showered since this morning."

"Oh, Sam." Reina draws out the vowel of his name, but she does lift her face away from his sweaty armpit. "You really don't get it, do you. I like it."

Sam would prefer to imagine he has no smell at all, like a marble statue. And now he does have to look at Reina at close range, because she straddles him, gazing down into his face.

“Want to know why I was thinking about tennis?” she asks. “I suspect you approach everything as you approach sport. With tennis there’s a winner and a loser, with rules to follow, and techniques which work, techniques which don’t. But sex isn’t like that, right? There is literally only one reason for you and me to do this thing. Pleasure is the only reason.”

“I’ve never found it pleasurable.”

“But Sam? You haven’t given it much of a go, I think.”

Sam can see where Reina’s logic comes from, but a parallel logic is at play. If pleasure is the only reason to do something, and pleasure is absent, there is literally no reason left. Ergo, he has never ‘given it much of a go’.

There is another reason for doing this, though. To make someone else happy. If this could be neutral for Sam and wonderful for Reina, one could argue a net gain.

“Is sex something you want?” she asks.

“It’s not that I don’t want it. It’s just, I can’t seem to get out of my own head.”

“I need to clarify something,” Reina says, pinning Sam’s hips to the bed with a straddle. “I don’t want to have sex like a man. I won’t be a man with you. Please don’t be thinking that.”

Sam has not thought that far ahead. And in deciphering her meaning, he understands he cannot feel neutrally about this, not about the inevitable pants-off portion everyone else on Earth seems to

obsess over.

“Is that what’s worrying you?” Reina asks.

“No. I wasn’t thinking that.”

“You’re still a bit anxious. I feel you.”

“Mm.”

“Hey, Sam? It’s only me. No one else in the room. No one else’s business. No one else knows.”

“Only you?” Sam laughs because this is the most ridiculous thing Reina could say. “Reina? You don’t fully appreciate this, but you’re the closest friend I have. I don’t make friends easily. I can’t afford to lose one.”

“Hey. Consider this for a moment. This might be good.” Reina smiles down at him. “It might actually be good,” she says again, slowly so he gets it. “Something deeper, closer and maybe even... great? Come with me, let’s swandive into it.”

Sam shakes his head. This pesky pessimism doesn’t come from nowhere. “There’s every chance I’ll mess this up,” he says. “And when I mess this up, I mess up our friendship.”

“Mess it up how? We don’t have to frame this as a linear progression from friendship to something higher, no returns. I know that’s how society frames it, but we don’t have to.”

“I hear you,” he says, “but I’m not up to dismantling cultural norms this evening. I’m not that powerful, not that big.”

“Hey. Listen to me. You can’t mess this up, because this is not a tennis serve, okay? What if we take the performance pressure off you? Lie still. Close your eyes and let someone take care of you for a change. How does that sound?”

“Good, in theory. It’s the praxis that worries me.”

Reina smiles at his incongruously formal register. “Stop with the thinking, Sam. Stop it immediately.” She presses her body against the length of him, pinning his arms to the bed, meaning it playfully.

“Do you like firm pressure?” she asks.

Sam thinks about this. He much prefers firm pressure over unbearably ticklish flutter touches. “I do prefer that, I guess.”

“Then I’ll drop all of my weight onto you. Let me know if I’m squashing you to death.”

“You’re not that big.”

“Oh, yes I am. I dismantle cultural norms, all on my own. I’m that huge.”

Now he feels it. Reina can make herself wonderfully heavy. Sam knows the weight of five-foot-two Lisa lying on top of him. Now he knows another level of firm heaviness. Reina is the ultimate weighted blanket. If she lies like this, if this is all she wants, this is good, actually.

She does lie like this, perfectly still, for a very long time, her head tucked down so that one ear presses against Sam’s chest.

Eventually Sam understands she was waiting for his heart rate to slow. Because as soon as the worst of his anxiety subsides, she asks permission to kiss him.

Sam says no.

Despite the idealised notion that there can be no such thing as ‘failing at sex’, Sam has sputtered at the starting line. “I’m not a natural kisser,” he admits on a heavy exhale. “I’m sorry.”

“No, this is good. Honesty is good. Kissing is nothing more than a culturally sanctioned kink, when you think about it.”

Reina lifts all three layers of Sam's top clothing and pushes it all the way up, exposing all of his belly.

"Mind if I touch you here?" She gently touches his belly.

Sam nods, meaning he does mind, a little, but Reina takes it as permission, and he doesn't mind much.

Reina kisses firmly. Sam is thankful for that. None of that tickly torture. She finds the diagonal scar, where his appendix came out. "Is this area sensitive?" she asks.

Can she not tell that every inch of him is sensitive? Can she not see him flinch at every unexpected little brush of her hair, or knuckle, at every warm breath against him?

"Not especially," he says.

Hoping to anticipate whatever's happening next, Sam has kept his eyes open. Reina comes back up, leans forward and looks back at him. Sam recognises this look. He saw it long ago in Lisa. It's both loving and horny — conspiratorial, almost; a form of communication in its own right, incompatible with words.

Without speaking, Reina grips the end of Sam's belt. She simply holds it, waiting for his reaction, for seconds on end. Sam is frozen in place. Reina weaves the belt back out of its loop, very slowly, all the while looking at his face.

Not this. No.

Afterwards, Sam can't remember for sure whether he actually exclaimed "No". He thinks all protestation may have happened in his head. He only knows that, for a moment, he lay paralysed.

Freeze turns into flight. Sam sits bolt upright. Like a doctor's hammer to the knee, the reaction surprises himself. He wishes to

please, but his body's having none of it. He has moved with such force, Reina falls backwards, off the bed and onto carpet. Sam is deceptively strong. His own arms have pushed her. He must have pushed her, because he is left with the after-touch of her chest against his palms.

"Sorry," he says, pathetically, though no heartfelt verbiage could compensate for pushing someone like he did, at a tenderly-meant moment. "I'm so sorry, Reina."

He dashes through the living area, past the sleeping lump on the couch. At the entrance, he pushes his feet back into loafers and hurries into the car. He forgets to retrieve his best coat.

"Please don't go." Reina follows behind, but Sam shuts his car door on her. "Please, Sam," she mouths through his window.

Sam checks his rear view mirror. Reina has run to the middle of her cul-de-sac. She's in bare feet. Cold wind plasters that flimsy dress against her body.

She recedes in the dark distance, palms against forehead.

Safe at last in his own bed, and with Loafie snuggled into his chest, Sam crafts then deletes, crafts then deletes a single text to Reina.

Sorry about before. Hope you're okay. I will send someone round to fix your window. Smiley face.

"I'm a creep," he whispers.

He deletes the draft. Reina can text him instead, after she sees that her window has been fixed.

The following day, Sam sends a glazier round to Reina's. He pays the glazier's bill.

Days go by, still no text from Reina. Sending a glazier to fix her

bedroom window was probably a creepy-ass thing to do, even though Sam had examined Reina's casing and knew the tradesman could fix it from the outside. He wouldn't require internal access.

A fortnight passes. Sam decides he won't be hearing from Reina again. He was right and she was wrong, about his uncanny capacity to fuck relationships up.

**Part Eight:**  
**THIS IS WHAT**  
**LONELINESS**  
**FEELS LIKE**



# REINA'S LETTER

LATE AUTUMN 2017

Sam is glad to be home from a sorry-ass trip to Taupō and back. He's been driving solo all afternoon, and is glad to reach his own front gate. Without Reina to join him in Taupō this time, he slept in his campervan instead of in a motel. This trip was nothing at all like the last. Last time, his clients were excited to meet him, in awe of his reputation, excited to see plans for their dream home.

This time he was there to make amends. Samuel Dennon, award-winning architect, made a basic, dim-witted mathematical error. He'd prefer to call it a 'typo' but this was all him, and his traitorous, fallible brain.

Lisa had been no help after Sam received the phone call on Tuesday afternoon. He'd stumbled into her office and sat with his head almost between his knees.

"Oh god, Lise. I've made a massive error and now the concrete's been poured."

Lisa had been holding a quarter-eaten tangerine. "Calm down and explain from the beginning."

Sam was loathe to tell her. He didn't want Lisa to choke to death on a citrus segment. He did confess, but delicately. "What's wrong with me, Lise? Not even a first year would make an error like that."

Lisa had disagreed. "Sounds exactly like an undergrad mistake to me."

"Oh god, oh god."

“Sam, we’re insured. This isn’t as big of a deal as you think. No one’s dead.”

“Sure, we could all be dead!” Sam was in need of chastisement. Anything less would fall short.

“Everyone makes mistakes, even you. All these years I’ve been leaning on your perfectionism. I haven’t been checking your work. We’ll drive up tomorrow.”

“Don’t rearrange your schedule on my account.” Sam will brave Taupō on his own, fix his own mess like a grown-up, without Lisa’s expert people-handling. He’ll take Loafie.

Now he is home at last. There had been no yelling, just problem-solving, paperwork and apologies with platitudes to the tune of “it is what it is” and “it happens”. Sam retrieves a wad of circulars from his letterbox and takes Loafie straight to bed.

He doesn’t examine his mail until the following day, hiffing most of it into the recycling receptacle.

Oddly, he finds an envelope with big, generous, loopy handwriting.

He gently slices it open. The canvas-textured stationery asks to be treated with care. Inside, a handwritten letter. Sam flips to the bottom of the second page. Of course it’s from Reina.

He doesn’t want to read it. He can’t bear not to.

Dread competes with intense curiosity. Eventually he takes the letter outside to read in the midday sun.

## Reina's Letter

Dear Sam,

A therapist once recommended letters as a way of speaking from the heart. It's been years since I took his advice, but if there were ever a time to open the secretaire and refill the old fountain pen, that would be now.

Without opening my curtains for a month, yesterday I remembered my broken window and called a glazier. Imagine my surprise — and his — when I drew back the curtain to reveal an unblemished, unbroken, perfectly intact pane of glass. He must have thought I was coming down off something mighty potent.

My housemates confirmed it was you who fixed it. They never thought to tell me you sent a tradie to the house. Apparently you've also popped round a few times yourself.

You needn't have replaced that glass for me, Sam. At first I was a little perplexed by the gesture. Then I thought, that is exactly the sort of practical kindness Sam Dennon would extend. So. A big, belated thank you.

About that night. If I know you at all by now, you won't want to rake over any coals. Please bear with me, though. I'm in a bit of a bind because my wish to give you time and space rubs up against my wish to apologise... for not giving you time and space. I hope this measly letter won't feel like a back page correction to a front page mistake, on my part.

Confession time. This is a deeply awful admission which should send me plummeting in anyone's estimation.

At first I was angry. With you, of all people, and not just for running out like that, without the bravery to face me and talk things through. I got to wondering what your endgame had been all along. What did you think would happen, spending long, leisurely days in the woods together like that, going out for nice meals, inviting me on a road trip? What kind of jiggery-pokery is this? How did you think I'd get to feeling, with you being so reliably good and wholesome and kind all the damn time?

## The Space Ace of Mangleby Flat

I felt tricked. I'm deeply ashamed of myself for falling into that hackneyed, despicable mindtrap. Of all people, I should understand how it feels to be considered a deception, a ruse, simply for expressing my full self.

My mind has been on loop, trying to process what went wrong. At first I didn't get it. But as I replayed the evening, I finally understood something. I was a little high-key that night, hearing only what I wanted to hear. I wanted your company, your enthusiasm, and your consent. I wanted you to want me back. I wanted connection, and I could only think to get it via touch. At the time I believed you felt all of that too, but were anxious about getting it wrong somehow. I thought if you could relax into the moment you'd enjoy everything I wanted to give.

Caught up trying to reassure you, I didn't hear what you were saying. You didn't want any of it. You weren't into it at all. You gave me clear signals. I can see now that you would have left the room sooner, only you wanted to avoid hurting me after the other crap things that happened earlier that night.

These are shameful things to admit because I tell myself the story that I am a Very Considerate Person. I've been a bit too in love with that story, and it needs interrogation. I got it wrong with you, Sam, and I am so, so, very sorry.

I hope with my whole heart that I haven't caused you — or us — any long-term damage.

I made it pretty clear how I've been feeling about you, though I did not intend to blurt everything out that night. I attempted a big sexually charged conversation after inviting you onto my bed. Never the most neutral place to test the waters.

You've probably worked out already, those big feelings I shared weren't a spur-of-the-moment thing. I've been feeling those for a long time. But you know what? I'd far rather have Sam Dennon in my life as a friend than no Sam Dennon at all. Could we resume what we had before, only with a little more clarity around our respective hopes and dreams?

## Reina's Letter

Here's what I love most about your friendship, Sam. You have always been your full self with me. If you were the sort of person who could love me exactly how I want(ed) you to love me, you'd be someone different. But I don't want someone different. Not even a little bit. Bring your full self right back to me?

You've been on my mind. I haven't seen you at tennis club or anything. Please give me a call, whenever you're ready. I'd love to go out for one of our daytrips again, or for coffee or tennis at the club or something like that. I'd love to see how your garden is doing.

Give Loafie an extra hug.

Wishing you gentleness,

Your friend Reina

Sam reads this letter many times.

The following week he pulls a sheet of A4 paper from his home printer and a Biro from his office drawer. He has been told a number of times in his life that he has the clean, highly-legible handwriting of an architect. People express surprise at this, even though Sam is, indeed, an architect. They assume an architect wouldn't write like one, because that'd be too obvious, like when serial killers look exactly like serial killers.

However, by the time Sam has written five drafts of reply to Reina, his normally neat printing appears one smidge closer to the scrawl of that hypothetical serial killer. Sam has never killed anyone, per se, but he's a serial killer of friendships, mostly before they ever take off.

## The Space Ace of Mangleby Flat

Dear Reina,

Please don't feel bad. No damage has been sustained.

Loafie got an extra hug. Also a scratch, though she seems to prefer scratches from you.

As for the garden, so far so good, but I've failed to drum up genuine passion for it, even after all that help you gave me planting it out.

Your summary sounds right. One amendment. I did decide at some point to go with the flow that night. I thought I could be someone different for you.

But even with someone wonderful, i.e. you, I remain the same disappointing person, who flips out, runs off and then feels bad about it.

I didn't know what to do next, and I didn't want to talk about it either, because then I'd have to stop pretending it never happened at all. So I arranged for a glazier to fix your window, hoping you'd take that as an apology of sorts, and never mention it again. I did pop round a few times, yes. Mo kept telling me you were at Mia's. I thought maybe you didn't want to talk.

Like yourself, my thoughts have been stuck unpleasantly on loop. Here's hoping your letter cuts me loose from the worst of it. Thank you for that.

Work is busy. This extreme busyness is of my own doing. Namely, I messed up a basic measurement on a modification clients requested for that house up in Taupō. I'm talking about a humiliating, reputation-wrecking mistake. It became expensive when it wasn't caught early. I'm angry at myself and worried for my own sanity, frankly.

I'm doing the finishing touches on a complicated build for a new client who needs me to pin their house safely to a near-vertical slope. The challenge is doing me good, but my head needs time alone. Perhaps solitude is my natural state anyway. I know this is the socially disfavoured view, but perhaps some

## Reina's Letter

people really are happier, and more useful to society, as a free-floating planet.

I wish all the good things for you, Reina. You deserve someone who is fully there for you, expanding most generously in every dimension. I absolutely loved 99.99 (repeating) per cent of our time spent together.

Always,

Sam.

Some things are worse than a nightmare. Stars shine bright because they are big or because they are close. Sam mistook Reina's big friendship for closeness.

Through the dark of early morn, a tiny voice whispers: If you can't extend love to your beautiful friend Reina, there's no one out there for you. Not a soul.



# KNOWING

## DOCTOR'S OFFICE

WINTER 2017

Sam Dennon's core-collapse event started where Sam always thought it would start, in the white-blue confines of a GP's office.

Doctor Malone is waiting for Sam to speak. Sam is more flustered than usual. He's jiggling one knee, holding something in his hand, flapping it a little.

"Is that a letter?" asks the doctor.

Sam nods. "I was wondering if you'd read it for me."

Dr Malone accepts the envelope. "This is sealed. May I ask who it's from?"

"My uncle wrote it before he died. It contains genetic information, apparently."

"Samuel, I'm not comfortable opening a sealed letter from your uncle."

"I can't open it myself. I may need medical guidance regarding next steps, which is why I've brought it to you, for level-headed interpretation."

"All right. If you're sure. I'll read silently."

Sam would like to gaze out the consulting room window, only a semi-translucent roller blind obscures any view of the road.

Eventually Dr Malone clears his throat and places the letter delicately next to his keyboard. "Do you have any sense, at all, of the

information contained in this letter?”

“I think so. Yes.”

“Your uncle is saying that you have consanguineous parentage. Perhaps you know that term. Samuel, your uncle thinks your parents are blood relatives.”

“Incest. Let’s just call it how it is.”

“Is that what you expected to learn?”

“Yep. So. Now what? My genes are messed up, right?”

“If I may. How many years have I seen you as my patient? Genetically speaking, you’ve received a lucky roll.”

“Well, perhaps my luck is about to run out. I might’ve inherited both copies of something terrible, something which lurks silently until middle age before rearing its ugly head.”

“Are you thinking of something in particular? A family illness, perhaps?”

“No, but if I’ve inherited two copies of some horrible recessive gene, it could manifest for the first time in me. Isn’t that how it works?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t always happen, not unless consanguinity spans multiple generations.”

“Incest explains my cleft palate.”

“The risk would have been elevated, yes. But you were born in a wealthy country. Surgical intervention fixed you up beautifully.”

Sam’s doctor makes this seem like nothing. Tiny Sam had constant glue ear, didn’t speak until the age of four, needed extensive dental work as an adolescent, followed by secondary cosmetic surgery. Until that final lip surgery, and even sometimes now, decades later,

Sam has parsed every mention of his 'handsome' face as well-meant compensatory tosh.

Sam has a raft of other health issues: The dairy intolerance, the anxiety, asthma, dander allergy, the child onset myopia, bad knees, bruxism, a rash on his neck, exacerbated by chlorine. Ambidexterity; weird, though not a health complaint. All these things are manageable in isolation, but may add up to some grand unifying theory of Sam. "I need to know what's wrong with me," he says, "and if there's a fix."

"Listen. First of all, regarding the cleft palate, most babies requiring palatoplasty do not have parents who are close relatives." Sam's doctor is performing backflips to avoid the word 'incest'.

Sam sighs heavily, meaning to control his breathing. "I sense something else... something undiagnosed in me."

"Such as?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't need you to tell me. Some kind of mental emotional thing. A psychological problem, aside from anxiety, I mean."

"How are the nightmares lately?"

"Oh, I don't mean them."

"Samuel?"

"I don't know. Once a week. They'll die down again soon."

"We've discussed a trial of medication. Still feel the same?"

"I don't want to become dependant on a substance."

"Those prescriptive lenses you're wearing. One could argue you're dependant on those."

Bothered by a scratchy tag on the inside of his shirt, Sam shrugs and shakes his head.

“Enduring night terrors are serious. You worry me, Sam. Once again I’m referring you to a psychologist. Follow it up this time, please.”

“Sir.”

“May I ask, did you know your... grandfather?”

“Barely remember the old fucker.”

The doctor nods. He types a referral. From his nearby chair, Sam can’t read much on the monitor, but makes out the words ‘intergenerational trauma’.

Doctor Malone finishes at the keyboard and turns back to Sam. “Today has gifted me some insight into your long-term health anxieties. Genetic testing may be useful for you at some stage, but not without targeted genetic counselling. Are you, by any chance, here today because you’re thinking of starting a family?”

Sam laughs — a little maniacally, he thinks, hearing himself. “Ah, no.”

Doctor Malone hands Sam the referral, warm from the printer.

Sam folds it in half and looks at the wall clock. “May I ask something else?”

“Fire away.”

“Can I grab a script for oral anti-emetics while I’m here?”

Doctor Malone seems taken aback at the lack of segue. Damn. Sam should not have asked directly. He should have said he’d been feeling nauseated lately, then let the doctor do his job.

“Anti-emetics? What for?”

“Nausea.”

“Anti-emetics are prescribed in a very targeted fashion.

Chemotherapy, surgery, that sort of thing. I wouldn't prescribe them for, say, anxiety related upset stomach."

"Migraines? What about for migraines?"

"This is the first I'm hearing of migraines. When did this start?"

Sam takes a deep breath. He can do this. He has prepped himself to lie to his own doctor. "I may have had a little head pain."

"With vomiting?"

Sam can't do it. He has never been able to lie to anyone, let alone the man he trusts with his darkest medical secrets. "Probably just dehydration headaches," he mutters. "Doesn't matter."

"Does paracetamol offer relief?"

Sam nods.

"Let's revisit the head pain at your next appointment. Would you like me to book that in now?"

"No need."

Sam pays his bill at reception.

He meant to leave the surgery with a prescription in hand, not another psychology referral. Doesn't matter. He can probably pay a bit more and buy something for nausea over the counter. He should not have tried to cheat his GP. Sam feels like a terrible person. Ineffectual, too. He can't even see a lie through to its conclusion.

God, he can't do anything right.

He slumps into the driver's seat. Full of anger, and with nowhere to put it, Sam must calm his nerves before returning to the office. He white-knuckles his steering wheel, clench and release.

As he waits, a fashionably-attired older lady approaches the surgery entrance on foot. She wears her bleach-blonde hair in a wispy

bun. Before entering the building, she enjoys a few drags on her cigarette before stubbing it out.

The sight of this woman stirs emotion in Sam. He has never stopped missing his Auntie Jan.

He folds the latest psychology referral into the glove box, between the car manual and insurance paperwork.

Though he didn't want that cursed letter back, he's also holding the opened envelope from Uncle Mick.

## LETTER #2

Dear Samuel,

Hello again, from beyond the grave. I'd like to say I'm having a grand old time on this Heavenly golf course, but I write from my Earth-bed, with no bloody idea what's in store. Dying slowly is a strange business.

I've had no professional advice on how to write this part of your story. Am regretting that now. Here goes.

Not sure if you remember anything at all of your grandfather. He was a 'complicated' man. That's the kindest word I can muster up.

John Dennon was a sadistic abuser. He wasn't a punch-the-wall-when-drunk sort. In fact, he was a sanctimonious tee-totaller. So he didn't even have addiction as an excuse. (This reality hasn't helped me to forgive the old bastard, not even after this many years.) He was a controlling and domineering husband to our mother Rose. You never knew your grandmother, of course.

## Knowing

Now here's the difficult thing. After Rose died in 1969, John started using Della for a wife. I believe it started before then, but I've never got the full story out of Della. I respect her wish not to speak of it.

Eventually, this abuse led to pregnancy. Then another one, then another one. Each one ended for various reasons. Finally, one of those pregnancies was you. I suspect Della got to the point where she wanted a child of her own. You were very much wanted by Della.

Now I must try to anticipate your questions. This is fraught, knowing I won't be around to answer them.

Why didn't Della leave?

She almost made it out of there. She left Mangleby at the age of seventeen to attend technical college here in Melbourne. She graduated just fine, then started working in an office. But she chucked in her decent city job to return to the boondocks, where her adult life was fully controlled by our father. Della's return to Mangleby is very difficult to understand from the outside. Lord knows, I've had trouble figuring it out myself. The best I can come up with is this: love and hate are sometimes the exact same thing. I'm more fortunate than Della, having escaped the sexual part of the abuse. I only carry hatred. Even as a boy I could never stand the old prick. Each time he hit me, I only hated him more.

Further information regarding the life and character of your biological grand/father would not be useful. Added to that, I don't want to keep that abuser alive in anyone's memory. You were barely walking when he died, and for that I've always been thankful. Once Della goes, all memory of that old bastard goes, too.

There's clearly nothing wrong with you, boy. I admit I was worried for a while there. First I worried you might be a girl, growing up with that sexual abuser ruling the roost. I watched you very carefully as a lad, as best as I could from afar. Your

## The Space Ace of Mangleby Flat

success has made me wonder if there were some good genes in the Dennon mix after all, and if the very best of our genetic inheritance happened to amplify in you.

I've struggled with how to tell you these facts — or even if I should. I wasn't planning to. But lately I've seen how science is progressing, and the popularity of those consumer DNA kits. I wouldn't want you to get the results back from one of those damn things and suffer some existential crisis. More selfishly, I don't want you to get any DNA results back and wonder for even a second if I am the closely related male party who could do that to Della. I've often called you my son. That's what you mean to me, but of course you're not my son. You're my nephew and my brother. As you've grown into a man, I've considered you more of a brother and a friend.

As for myself, I eventually came to believe that I also turned out fine, despite being the direct descendant of a coercively controlling sexual abuser. It took far too long to come to terms with all that crap, and I did deprive Jan of motherhood by refusing to continue the line.

But Jan was in her motherly element when we took the opportunity to parent you through your high school years. I hope we did a good enough job, and I hope you'll forgive me for the decisions I've made around (not) conveying your own family information to you until it's too late to answer any questions.

Consider this letter a big, tight fatherly/brotherly/friendly hug.

From your very proud  
Uncle Mick

Sam is already late for a meeting. For once tardiness doesn't seem so dire to Sam, but Lisa will worry. For now he must sit in his car and

look around the carpark, reminding himself the carpark is still real. The carpark is real and the same as before. He has not slipped into some alternative reality where his personal history took a different track entirely, where every memory is a potential lie.

He has memorised Mick's letter after a single reading, so rips it into tiny pieces. And to think there's another letter full of secrets in the lock box at his house! After this, what the hell else could Mick have left to say? Sam can't begin to imagine.

But he always knew the incest part, deep down.

It is possible to half know something. Brains can do that. But in half-knowing, vigilance is necessary. Embryonic knowledge creates obstruction. The body demands to know more.

## **LATE AFTERNOON 1992**

### **MELBOURNE**

#### **MICK AND JAN'S DINING ROOM**

"Tell me that's my last trip up those stairs." Jan's having one of her coughing fits. She takes a seat next to Sam at the Surrey Hills dining table. "Don't tell me we need your vaccination certificate, or is that just for kiddies?"

Seventeen-year-old Sam is filling out university enrolment forms. Jan licks her thumb and hands Sam his birth certificate, retrieved from the cabinet in her messy room. This is all very exciting for Jan, who never had the privilege of university education herself.

The automatic garage door judders and creaks. Mick's home from work. Moments later, the internal door slams. Mick strides past the pair of them, opens the fridge and grabs a cold VB.

"Well hello to you too, Mr Grumpy Pants," says Jan from the table.

"Bugger of a day. Give me a break, love."

Sam dare not speak when his uncle's in a strop. Jan is much braver.

"Next question," says Jan to Sam, taking a long, ostentatious drag on her menthol.

Sam reads, robotically: "Am I of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent."

"Ugh, don't be so bloody stupid." Mick departs through the sliding glass door, out onto the patio.

Jan calls after him: "He's only filling out his application, grumble-bum! For his uni-VER-sity! Bloody nora. This is why I'm not giving up my fags." Jan taps ash into the clam shell. "Never mind him, lovey. But don't you be taking up the smokes. Once you're hooked, you're either on them or cranky for life."

"Wasn't planning to."

"No, well, you'll be offered all sorts of pills and potions on campus, what with those wild engineering parties I've heard all about."

Sam can see he's expected to become someone entirely different next year. Maybe he *should* be someone else. He's always sticking his foot in it. By reading a question out loud he's angered his Uncle Mick. He must have waded into something that goes far beyond Mick being

ordered by his GP to give up the tobacco, even though his wife continues to puff away, brazenly in front of him.

Sam decides to ask Jan on the quiet, now that Mick's left the dining room. "Am I Aboriginal, though?"

If Sam were Aboriginal this would explain why his blithely racist relations don't ever mention Sam's non-existent father.

Now he's rattled his auntie, as well. "Are you what? Aboriginal? No! Where does that notion come from?"

"It's just, I turn pretty dark in summer."

"Only in summer, love. Come on, next question."

"But I haven't ticked the ethnicity box yet."

"Tick white."

"There's no box for 'white'."

"European, then. The Dennons would've used to be English."

Sam's pen hovers above the paper. His hand has frozen in place.

Jan draws again on her ciggie, holds it in, walks to the open window, then deliberately blows smoke through the crack. Mick catches the full cloud of it from his patio chair.

Mick's bad moods never last long with Jan around. He chuckles. "You'll pay for that later," he warns.

Jan cackles in response and slams the window shut. She returns to the table, sits back down and leans forward. "I'll say this much, Sammy. You get your summer tan from your grandfather, and a double dose down through your mother. Catch my drift?"

"Got it. Not Aboriginal."

But Sam hadn't 'got it' at all, not in that moment, when his sole mission was to complete that wad of forms without upsetting anyone

further.

There are other things, terrible things, which Sam has suppressed. For instance, he half-knows he's an accessory to manslaughter.

Alone that evening in his city office, he waits for software to update. "Crispin Saunders" he types into the search bar. His thumb hovers over the Enter. The thumb wins out with a twitch.

Sam scans the results. Expecting to find a death notice from the 1990s, Sam instead finds the About page of a Melbourne law firm. That headshot is unmistakably Crispin Saunders, executive version. Human rights lawyer.

Sam left his best friend to the elements when he dropped him on the side of a highway that time, in harsh Australian heat with nothing to drink or eat. But he didn't kill dear old Crispin at all. Kid made it home.

Thankgod thankgod thankgod thankgod.

Not an actual murderer remains a pretty low bar, though. Sam can't shake the thought: He comes from despicable stock.

# NOTHING FISHY

WELLINGTON

2017

DEEPER WINTER

Lately, Sam is having trouble driving on the highway. He'd like to take the train in to work, but dogs aren't allowed on the train. He'd worry about Loafie at home. So he waits until rush hour clears the roads. The night terrors don't let him sleep in. He spends long mornings at home lying down, sitting up, pacing around the house. He moves as if living on a massive planet with quadruple the gravity, which is a paradox, because when you can't leave your house due to crushing anxiety, your blueshifted world is very much smaller. When Sam catches his face in a window at night, he resembles a man about to cry. During the day, invisible plexiglass separates Sam from humanity.

He finds even Loafie irritating lately, the way she craves his attention. Her entire body pulsates when sniffing something interesting on his clothes. She sometimes gets the hiccups and Sam warns her not to throw up or he doesn't know what he will do.

Sam drives in to the city around noon. In the car he listens to Debussy's "Clair de Lune" because it's supposed to calm the nerves, but piano pieces remind him of Reina these days. He switches to a news station with yet more talk of the upcoming national election.

After parking in his usual spot he scoops Loafie into his arms and

strides down the street towards Willis & Dennon. The footpath bustles, as is typical of an inner-city lunch hour. A woman in a pea green winter coat and click-clacking heels notices Sam's dog. She smiles first at the dog, next at Sam, before slowly averting her gaze. Ahead, a man gently shoulder-nudges his friend, or perhaps his partner. The other man tugs gently at his lover's sleeve. The men join hands.

It could be these small observed acts of connection, or it could have come out of nowhere, but Sam is suddenly aware of his libido. Great. All dressed up and nowhere to go. That describes Sam's sex drive which, come to think of it, he hasn't taken care of in a while. Now he'll be antsy all afternoon, distracted every half hour at his desk with intrusive thoughts comprising scraps of shadowy silhouettes enjoying themselves against the wall of his office or wherever he happens to be resting his gaze.

Pressing his eyes doesn't help. How could he have forgotten to clear the pipes? Does he have to set a regular alarm on his phone, now? Is this yet another damn thing for the to-do list?

First job of the day: a calming mug of chamomile. He has always hated the taste of chamomile. And now someone has left an empty tuna can in the office sink. He picks it up. Too late. A rusty ring. Unbelievable negligence.

He storms into the centre of the office, where everyone beavers quietly at their desks.

“Who had lemon pepper tuna for lunch?”

No one has heard such volume, such anger, from Sam Dennon. No one replies.

“Once more for the slow pokes. Who... left... a can in the kitchen... sink? Which one of you absolute numpties doesn’t understand how oxidisation works? Which one of you dimwitted fools should be in a completely different line of fucking work?”

Lisa emerges startled from her office. She’s grabbed a hold of Loafie who must have scampered for cover. “Sam,” she says, gently. “Enough.”

Then Lisa points with her chin to the visitor behind the glass wall of her office. In his rage, Sam had forgotten about their meeting with a potential client.

Shame descends. He retreats to his own office. But he can’t stand it in here, either. The glass wall and glass door is insufficient distance between himself and the rest of humanity. So he grabs his recently shucked off coat, scoops up his dog, who Lisa has sent to calm him, and returns to the open plan part of the office in time to hear Brad mutter: “Someone needs to get laid.”

Brad has not seen Sam re-emerge from his office because he faces the opposite direction. Brad may be great on the AutoCAD but he doesn’t have a handle on basic acoustics. Sam overhears a large proportion of the guy’s muttering. But until this moment, Sam has ignored it all, so Brad does not expect Sam to palm the back of his ergonomic chair. He does not expect to be swung a rapid one eighty while seated, to find Sam and Sam’s dog all up in his face.

Sam: “Say that again.”

Brad’s face falls, but this is no display of regret. There’s no fear in it, either. This is the face of irritation. An annoying little fly has blown back into the house. “Didn’t mean you to hear that, boss,” he says

lightly, too lightly.

“Think a lot about my sex life do you, Brad?”

A flicker of disgust crosses Brad’s face. Good.

“I’ll see to that rust ring,” Brad mutters.

Sam takes his dog, his laptop, his mood and he leaves.

That evening, Sam is sipping flat ginger beer on the sofa when Lisa calls on the phone. He doesn’t pick up. She calls again. On the third call, Sam means to turn off the phone but accidentally answers it.

“Hello? Are you there? Sam?”

“Shoot.” Sam puts the phone to his ear. “I’m actually in the middle of something.”

“Too bad because I’m at your front gate. If you don’t buzz me in, I’m hoisting myself over. It is dark and I’m wearing a skirt. You do not want to rescue me from up there.”

When Lisa enters Sam’s living area she ignores Loafie’s second enthusiastic greeting of the day. She explores the ground floor slowly, taking in the teal tufted sofas, the rug, the urns, the various mirrors. She keeps saying “Wow” and “Oh my god” over and over.

Eventually she returns to Sam on the sofa.

“So you had that guy here? The designer from Melbourne?”

The world looks low chroma to Sam. Hoping to cheer himself out of his slump, Sam has filled his home with an assemblage of items he personally likes. For the first time since childhood, Sam has given no thought to how his creation might look to others. Perhaps through Lisa’s eyes, Sam’s interior décor is too much, too boldly flamboyant, not him at all. Yet this was Sam, all Sam, a death-gift to himself.

When the professional designer called from Melbourne Sam turned him down. The fact is, Sam cannot bear to admit a stranger into his own space. Even via the phone, the designer was far too enthusiastic. Sam couldn't stomach him. In this disconsolate frame of mind, he'd never muster the energy to balance someone else's taste against his own.

Besides, Sam has run out of time.

"The colour palette was taken from the wall art," he tells Lisa, "which I sourced from a gallery near Taupō."

Lisa stands back from the wall-sized paintings to experience them properly. "When were you planning on showing me this... magnificence?"

"I'm still waiting on a few items. Wanted you to see it finished, I guess." This isn't technically a fib. Four cushion covers are yet to arrive from Italy.

Lisa's awe morphs into concern. "Are both these sofas for sitting on?"

"What do you take me for?"

"Sam, you're precisely the sort of nut job who would purchase furniture as art installations."

Lisa sits intimately close to Sam. She takes a deep breath and speaks on the exhale: "That wasn't Brad's tuna can before."

"Bullshit it wasn't."

"It was Emma's. On this one day, our conscientious but timid young office manager simply forgot."

Sam recalls, with great horror, Emma's proximity to his meltdown. From the reception desk she would've borne witness to it

all.

“There were tears,” Lisa adds.

“Oh jeez. Oh no.”

“Yep.”

“Also, I’m deeply sorry for disturbing your meeting like that.”

Lisa says: “I had just told that woman about your exacting standards. I wasn’t contradicted, though I also had to tell her she would not be dealing directly with you.”

“Did she sign?”

“As it happens, she doesn’t need a design professional. I recommended our draughts person.”

“In that case, you’re welcome.”

“Sammy? Tell me what’s going on with you.”

“And here we are.”

Sam and Lisa side-stare each other down.

Lisa breaks the silence. “That a beer in your hand?”

“Yes. Well, no.”

“You’re allowed to drink alone. I won’t tell.” Lisa prizes two of Sam’s fingers off the label of the bottle. “Ginger beer. Okay. Hey, you still got the good savvy B they gave you for doing that seminar?”

“Crack it open.”

“Have one with me?”

“I won’t, Lise. My stomach lately.”

“Is it Loafie?”

“Huh?”

“Is Loafie okay? I mean, she looks perky to me. But is there something you’re not telling me?”

Loafie, from one of her beds, looks up at Lisa then starts gnawing frantically — healthily — at an imaginary flea on her hind leg.

“Loafie’s fine.”

“Is it your mum? You haven’t mentioned Della lately.”

“No change there.”

Lisa stands up, wanders towards the kitchen. Spotting Sam’s new spa pool, she suggests they have a soak outside while they talk.”

“It’s empty.”

“Bummer.” Lisa spends time in the pantry with Sam’s wine rack. “Sam? Why is your pantry bare?”

“The wine rack’s full.”

“Yeah, but are you eating properly?”

Sam hears his fridge open. “Keep out of my business, Lise.”

“You usually have the most wonderfully well-stocked fridge. I was hoping for carrot and hummus, at least.”

“Need to do a big shop.”

Satisfied with that, Lisa pours herself a glass of white and returns to the sofa. She takes Sam’s right arm and drapes it across her shoulders.

“How’s Reina?” she asks out of nowhere.

“Wouldn’t know. Haven’t seen her.”

“She hasn’t been at the gym, either.”

Sam is hungry for any knowledge of Reina. If only Lisa could report that Reina is living life to the max, enthusiastically doing butt kicks and squat jacks each week at the back of Lisa’s aerobics class, this would please him greatly. It concerns him that Reina hasn’t been seen at aerobics.

“Thought she might’ve gone back to England,” Lisa says.

“That’s probably it.” Sam has worried the same thing. He worries she’s returned to England forever, to be with her older kids.

“I thought if anyone’d know, you would, Sam.”

“Mia Vandekus would know, being her sister and all.”

“Haven’t seen Mia, either.”

“Probably busy.”

“Yep. Everybody’s busy.”

Sam waits for Lisa to see deep into his psyche. Surely she’s sussed him out. With her head resting against his heart, she must feel it race at mention of Reina.

“Now what, Sammy?” she asks after a while. “You’ve got your beautiful house, your landscaped yard, your healthy little pup, your beautiful car, the South Island office, a wall of awards, a wait-list of clients, coin to spare. What now, eh?”

“I don’t know. Pretty sure Mick and Jan meant me to do something amazing with that inheritance. Yet here I am, turning my own nest into House of Frou-frou with all this gimcrackery. I fear I’m turning into my mother, cashed-up edition.”

“Oh, rubbish. You don’t like what the designer’s done here?”

“No, yeah, but for what? I’m fine in my campervan. You know that.”

“You have moved out of that thing, I hope?”

“I’ll show you upstairs later. Bedroom’s got a bed in it and everything.”

“Big talk.”

“Guess I’m still sad about Mick.”

“Still in grieving mode, huh.”

“Yeah.”

“Mm. You need someone to share this beautiful house with, Sammy.”

“I’m hardly partner material. Of all people, you should know that.”

“Know what you should do? Become a regular at a dog park. You’re a great partner, for someone. Your soulmate probably has ten dogs and twenty-seven cats.”

“I’m allergic to cats, remember?”

“Just as well, too. You’d be a crazy cat gentleman.”

“I can’t see me re-partnering, Lise. I’ve only got about three things going for me.”

“What are you on? You’re smart, handsome, financially stable.”

“Those are the three things.”

Lisa tries to stifle a laugh and sprays a mouthful of wine onto Sam’s new sofa. “Sorry. This is why I’m drinking white. Hey, I was thinking,” she says, wiping tiny droplets from the squab with her sleeve. “You know Melanie from WellyBiz? She met that new man of hers through an agency. Person-to-person interviews, no algorithms. Maybe they’d find you a companion, since your requirements would be kind of specific, you know?”

“I’m not in the market for a companion.”

“What about a gender-swapped Boston marriage, whatever you’d call that.”

“Why are you so keen for me to partner up?”

“I think about you often, rattling round in this massive house. You

know what else I've been thinking? Just a suggestion, not an interference. If you don't schedule a proper break your health will take one regardless. So let's start clearing your schedule. Take a world trip. Pack your camera, a portable telescope. Get inspired. Chase a solar eclipse."

"Trying to get rid of me, huh?"

"That's it. Yeah."

"Travel stresses me out."

"But what else will you do with your inheritance? Live it up, moneybags. You make one terrible rich person."

"I seem to be spending it okay. But you're right. I have everything I could want. Thought it'd feel better than this. The more I have, the more I have to worry about."

"You may have a unique capacity for worry-warting."

Sam has never felt more ungrateful, more entitled, more greedy. He hates himself for bonding with Lisa in this particular way — as two middle-aged rich kids. He and Lisa were both given every advantage.

Lisa must think she's figured Sam out. Despite her perpetually untidy work desk, Lisa enjoys the tidiness of linear challenges with specific goals. She likes timelines and to-do lists with check marks next to them. How's this for nice and tidy: Sam is despondent because he has everything money can buy, and now he's packing a sad because nothing inside him has improved in concert. She's got him all figured out.

Something makes Lisa wedge one palm between Sam's thighs. She rests it there, not far from his crotch. Whatever she's feeling, it's

not because of him, exactly. She hasn't touched him like this in years. Seven years, Sam calculates. She and Graham had been arguing, over Lisa's refusal to give up her own house and move in with him full-time. Lisa's Karori house had been Sam and Lisa's, together. They did a lot of work to it. Sam had been glad to hear Lisa wouldn't be giving it up so easily.

Now and then, Sam will accept a modicum of physical intimacy from Lisa. This much is okay, precisely because Graham exists. Because of Graham, Sam can count on a boundary, a boundary that was unspoken, shameful to admit and frequently breached when Sam and Lisa were still trying to make their marriage work.

"I don't know how to comfort you, Sammy. That was our problem, wasn't it. I only ever wanted to take you to bed. I'm a one-trick pony."

"And I'm a no-trick pony."

Lisa laughs into his t-shirt. They have rarely spoken lightly about this before. It hurts too much.



## EXPIRATION DATE

Lisa drives away. Sam feels another weight lift. For the last few months he's been counting down for finals: Final doctor's visit, final lamb roast, final tube of toothpaste, final car service.

Before winking out, Sam has been making his way through a to-do list: Clean the house, pay every bill a quarter in advance, use the food from his pantry, clear out the fridge. He has watched his last movie, read his final novel. None of those stories were made for him, anyway. He has rarely seen himself in fiction, except, perhaps, for the weird little guy no one gets. He has now heard his final song. Radio songs were written for people who can feel something, anything, even if that something happens to be heartbreak.

He calls Della one last time.

At least Lisa will be left with a pleasant final memory. They sat together on the sofa and spoke openly for the first time in ages. She touched him like that for the first time in years. He even kissed her goodbye.

"Hey. Where did that come from?" she'd asked, gently. Sam had pulled back, in danger of revealing his final intentions.

Distracted by interior décor, Lisa never noticed the documents on Sam's kitchen counter. If she knew that pile contained his last will and testament she would've spiralled into a frantic panic. Sam doesn't want to cause Lisa any more heartache than absolutely necessary, which is

why he has left all of his personal paperwork right there on the kitchen counter, with detailed instructions for every last thing. At work, his office is ordered as ordered gets. Fortunately for Sam he has always been the tidy type, so no one suspected a thing when he spearheaded an off-season spring-clean of the filing cabinets and shared drives.

Sam will now be taking ‘a long weekend for himself’.

“Take the Interislander to Marlborough Sounds,” Lisa told him, finishing her last sip of savvy B. “Graham and I love it down there.” She gave Sam the name of an excellent hotel, which Sam forgot immediately.

Then Lisa left with Loafie’s overnight bag, meaning to give her back to Sam after Sam’s hypothetical return from his hypothetical weekend away. Sam had to restrain himself before giving Lisa very specific details about Loafie’s long-term welfare.

“For pity’s sake, I won’t be needing to trim her claws. I won’t kill her, Sammy, I promise.”

That was the last thing Lisa said to him.

It’s true, Lisa is already bonded to Loafie. If Loafie could talk, chances are his pup would prefer Lisa over him, anyway. Sam has been too anxious to take her on jogs lately. He can barely muster energy to throw a ball. Lisa’s more fun.

With Loafie taken care of, now Sam is free to go.

He has wondered what this juncture would feel like, if he’d know, for absolute certain, when it was time. He’s heard a calmness is supposed to descend, once the decision is made. Makes sense. The future no longer exists. There’s nothing left to worry about.

Shadows lengthen then fizzle across the living room floor as Earth continues to turn. The Earth will be just fine without him.

“Change is constant and all things must pass.”

Sam repeats his mantra as he prepares for the end. He would not describe himself as ‘calm’, exactly. Then again, Sam has never experienced calm; not once in his life. He wouldn’t know calm if it slapped him upside the head.

He has decided to do it in the observatory, but not for any poetic reason. He does not plan to gaze into space before turning back into ‘star stuff’, becoming one with the universe or whatever. His decision is purely pragmatic. Wherever he ends it, that room will be ruined for the person who finds him there. That person will be Lisa. He has left his portion of the business to Lisa, of course. Also the house. The rest goes to various animal charities. If, for some reason, Lisa decides to keep this house, the observatory is set apart from the rest of the living space behind an invisible door. Lisa can avoid the death room forever.

Alongside other documents, Sam has left Lisa a handwritten note in the kitchen. Not three separate letters, like Uncle Mick. Just four sentiments, all on the same bit of paper:

Dearest Lisa,

Thank you for staying the course with me.

There’s nothing you could have done differently.

I’m so sorry. Please call the police.

Love, Sam.

Also in the kitchen, he swallows the anti-emetic, purchased from

the pharmacy. Swallowing the anti-throw-up concoction wasn't so hard. He can do this.

He showers and shaves. He disposes of his razor then decides to bin the rest of his bathroom products and his unwashed clothing as well. He stuffs every last thing into the outside wheelie bin.

Sam is wearing his award-night suit. Earlier this year he bought a bow-tie to match the beautiful purple shirt but he chickened out of wearing the bow-tie, and then chickened out of wearing such an ostentatious shirt. He wore a simple white shirt to accept their award for the South Coast build.

He walks as if floating to the secret nook of the walk-in-robe. With clammy hands, he opens the secret box. He considers reading Uncle Mick's final letter, the one he was only meant to read after Della died.

Della. He never meant to die before his mother.

But Sam has tried his best. Della will never leave Mangleby Flat. Her final days will pass exactly as they have for the last half century. There's not a single damn thing Sam can do to help her. She doesn't need her son a.k.a. brother. The familial overlap makes him shudder. No one should be required to mother her own brother. It all makes sense in hindsight, that Della has never mothered him in the way others are mothered. Sam never had the right.

She will be sad, of course. And then she will forget that he's dead. Della's deficiency of memory doubles as her superpower. If Della doesn't want to believe something, she doesn't. Della forgets Sam ever divorced Lisa. After reminding her five times, he gave up. Likewise, Della still speaks of Mick and Jan in the present tense. For Sam's

mother, time has no before and after; she lives in the moment, or in whatever hazy memory she needs to conjure up to see her through another day.

To open this third envelope might satisfy Sam's curiosity. But whatever it contains may also weaken his resolve. He has no idea what this one says, but if it contains information about his mother, he may start to feel worse for leaving her. If he plans to be dead inside the next hour, what's the point of closure, anyway? He's about to do 'closure' for real; the only kind that really works.

Sam returns Mick's final envelope to the box and places it back inside the tiny cupboard high in the wall. No one he knows will ever read it. Someone may find it, in the distant future, when no one's alive to remember who he was.

He cranks open his front gate and leaves the front door unlocked. He turns off the water, then the electricity. Using light from a battery-powered lantern, he pours himself a final tumbler of flat ginger beer. He takes that and the Nembutal with him through the invisible door, up the whorling spiral staircase and into the observatory. He understands ginger beer is probably a strange choice for a Nembutal mixer, but he means to calm his stomach. The entire world moves; Sam feels sick.

He sits on the red sofa bed and tries out various positions. He does not wish to ragdoll onto the floor. His limbs would splay at odd angles. He needs to be sitting up to drink the stuff, but if this happens as intended, it happens quickly. He means to flop backwards rather than forwards, to resemble a calm and collected man who knew how to get things done.

Sam thought he'd be feeling calmer than this. His hands tremble. The bottle of Nembutal glints ominously under lantern-light. Someone will have to crack the seal of the lid. That someone will have to be him.

He turns the lid until it cracks.

But it can't be time yet, because anxiety is working on all cylinders, and he has rarely felt closer to throwing up than he does right now. He must wait for the anti-emetic to kick in. Sadly, Sam was unable to buy the one he wanted. The pharmacist gave him something for travel sickness. He does feel as if he is lurching on board a ship, as if traversing the Cook Strait by storm-wracked ferry.

Will he manage to keep the poison down? If he were to throw it up, but only some of it, this could send him into a coma but not kill him. He could lie here dying but not quite dead for days on end. And if he fails to keep the entire dose down, there's every chance he would end up life support, dead in the brain but not in the body. Or worse, the other way round. Sam doesn't know how this works. Medical information has come from the Internet. He has never felt so ill-prepared.

He does know this, though: Sam does not have a good record with vomiting. Even the word 'vomit' is enough to set him off. He dry retches. He hasn't even sniffed the Nembutal, yet his body, as per fucking usual, is already letting him down.

This is Sam's entire problem: A body that lets him down. A perfectly good body, some would say. A jogger's body, a fit, masculine, muscular body; a compact, tidy physique. But this is also a traitorous body, an exhausting body, driven as if by motor by non-stop

doomerism, hopeless nihilism, toxic individualism; a body that freezes at the slightest human touch; a body he has kept to himself, with a warmth that no one will miss from their bed.

This body of Sam's, with a mind of its own, emits a long, guttural howl. He has just read the expiry date on the Nembutal. The fucking thing expired last year. January. For eighteen months the stuff has been losing potency. If he's drinking half-strength poison, then throws some of it up, it surely won't work as intended. There are other ways to end things, if only he were brave.

The very same brain which led him to this has screwed him over from both directions; anxiety won't let Sam take such terrible risk. He'll need to order a new batch. He'll need the proper anti-emetics. The irony isn't lost on Sam: The means of his own expiry has up and expired before him. He must also apologise to timid young Emma for yelling at her. His text won't cut it, especially not if he dies. He should do that in person.

Defeated, and not the least bit relieved, Sam lies down, curls into foetal position and howls at the dark like a two-year-old.

### ONE DAY LATER

If Sam were into woo-woo, he might parse the call from a psychologist as divine intervention. He might think it were Uncle Mick, looking out for him from beyond the grave.

But his logistically-inclined brain is starting to kick in again, after one full night's sleep and a big, replenishing grocery shop to restock his pantry and fridge. Though he'd entirely forgotten he called the

psychologist, it was Sam himself who put his name on the mental health waiting list, and someone else just so happened to cancel.

**Part Nine:**  
**CAUTIOUS**  
**UNFURLINGS**



# SAM & MIA

WEDNESDAY 31 OCTOBER

2017

Reasons to stay alive:

On July 5 1995, one of the longest-running mysteries in physics was solved. The Higgs Boson provided the missing piece in understanding why particles have mass. Sam hopes for a similar breakthrough regarding dark matter and dark energy. If he dies today it might happen tomorrow. That'd be his tough luck.

What will happen with the James Webb Space Telescope?

Maybe someone will finish figuring out gravity? That'd be good to know.

Extraterrestrial life. Perhaps life in the salty sea of Europa. Sam has always wondered.

NASA will eventually launch another probe. Per chance the next one will reveal information as exciting as the one named after Galileo, arriving round the back side of Jupiter in July 1994, coincidentally timed to capture huge chunks of a disintegrating Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 ploughing into the planet's surface. He'll have to stick around if he wants to experience another coincidence like that.

In more mundane matters, today Sam is obliged to attend a WellyBiz afternoon tea. Lisa and Sam decided long ago to take it in turns

attending WellyBiz events. For Lisa they feel like an extension of work. Sam attends mainly as a statement to Lisa: He is not one hundred percent hermit. Also, if he surrounds himself with people he technically 'does something' for his birthday, and tomorrow happens to be his forty-forth. He won't tell anyone at this restaurant, of course. Birthdays are private business, however happy he is to celebrate the birthdays of others. Even at Willis & Dennon, only Lisa knows Sam's birthday. She slips him a lemon poppyseed cake on the sly, because it's too late now to let her know at this stage of his life that lemon poppyseed is not an especial favourite. His auntie started the tradition after he too-hungrily scarfed a slice down as a kid.

"It's in your top drawer," Lisa told him this morning. "A bought one, this year."

"Thank you."

"Don't let the rats get it."

Later, at the restaurant counter, Sam orders himself a lemonade. He joins Mia Vandekus and seven others at their reserved table.

From his seat at the end, Sam observes Mia mostly in profile. From this angle she looks most like Reina. All the Vandekus women have that distinctively straight nose. Over spicy wedges and pizza, Sam half-listens to everyone's chatter. His attention returns to Mia's face.

Today Sam is no more quiet than he usually is at these things. He talks to the person beside him but can't be bothered contributing to discussions taking place further along the table.

Later, the restaurant starts to fill with dinner patrons. The WellyBiz friends bid each other farewell. Sam is about to head off

when Mia Vandekus grips his elbow, ignoring his trademark jumpiness. “Stay. Have dinner with me. They do a good salmon here.”

Mia secures them a smaller table for two. She orders meals at the bar then returns with drinks and a number on a metal stick.

Sam hopes Mia won't torture him with further smalltalk. He's had his daily quota.

Fortunately, Mia gets straight to it. “Clearly something happened between you two. Reina won't tell me what.”

This is actually worse than small talk.

“Samuel? It irks me that I'm about to stick my oar in. I really don't want to, okay? Intervention is not my jam, but I can't stand by and let the pair of you royally fuck up a perfectly good friendship. So. Correct me if I'm wrong. There was some kind of misunderstanding, followed by embarrassment. Neither one of you has the courage to contact the other for fear of rejection.”

“Did you run this theory by your own sister?”

“I was told to mind my own beeswax. Obviously, I'm fully respecting those wishes.”

“Hm.”

“Reina knows where I am, that I'll be seeing you this evening. You've been glancing at me all afternoon, wishing I was Reina. You're so transparent.”

Sam's guts clench. It hurts to be so seen.

Mia takes a sip of wine. “I had a go at her, actually. Which is why she clammed up. Apparently you got followed, walking the streets after that weird, absurdist panto wotsit she persuaded you to attend. I said, no one can be walking round the city at night in full drag.

Wellington might feel like a village, where everyone knows everyone and everyone's looking out for each other, but that's just not something you can do, not anywhere. I said, "What do you think Sam Dennon's gonna do? Kick bigots in the shins for you?"

"The guy was drunk as a skunk. We weren't in any real danger."

"That time. Thing is, Reina's been wearing her shit-tinted glasses all winter. She's got it into her head that you don't want to see her anymore. I said, that can't be right. Sam Dennon's a bit of a cold fish, but he's soft as a puppy's belly underneath. Offence fully intended."

The salmon arrives, plus an extra big bowl of steamed vegetables. Mia has surmised that Sam is 'a health nut'. Sam insists on divvying half onto Mia's plate.

They eat without talking for a while. Mia has a utilitarian attitude towards food, as towards most things. She may look like Reina, but Reina would be audibly enjoying her meal, marvelling at the colourful vegetables, commenting on the beautiful pink salmon, the smooth white sauce.

Sam resents having to explain things to Mia. "Reina and I sorted things out by letter. But she's been avoiding tennis club, perhaps because of me. I wouldn't want her to mistake me for a stalker. I respect her wish to be left alone, and switched days at tennis."

"No one'd mistake you for a 'stalker', you standoffish bloody drongo. Also, Reina hasn't been to tennis at all. She hasn't been anywhere much. It's been a massive drama coaxing her off my couch to shower, in fact."

"She's still staying at yours?"

Mia nods. "You've been a good friend to her, mate. Now, I know

I'm biased. We're talking about my dear little sis. But I've known Reina my whole life and she's the most excellent person I know. If she chose for you to be in her life, that's a lucky thing for you. Don't shrug it off."

"Shrug? Just, like, shrug? Like I don't care?"

"I think you care a lot. But one of you has to call the other, you pair of big babies."

Sam has long feared the stigma of childishness. So he is surprised to find it feels good to be called a 'big baby'. Babies receive care, after all. It mostly feels good to be called a 'pair', in the same sentence as Reina.

"What sort of friendship-ending crime are we talking about here?" Mia asks. "Betrayal? Dishonesty? Lying? Theft? A cutting insult? A poorly chosen joke? Someone borrowed a favourite t-shirt and got a stain on it?"

"None of the above."

"Whatever happened, is it worth ending a friendship over?"

"Nothing happened. That's the problem. When nothing happens there's nothing to fix. If there were, I'd fix it. But I can't. You don't know the extent of it, Mia, so kindly butt out."

Sam wonders how much silence can hang between them before he's justified in pushing out his chair and running at top speed from the restaurant.

Eventually Mia breaks a long silence. "Allow me a stab in the dark. Reina made a move and you weren't having it. I'm not after details but am I getting warmer?"

Though Sam is fixing his gaze on his plate, where a half fillet of

luke-warm salmon languishes, he senses Mia's eyes boring into him. She'd better not reach out and touch his arm or something. She'd better bloody not.

"I can't give Reina what she needs," he blurts, thinking it, but not quite meaning to say it aloud. His brain has betrayed him, as per usual, and this time so does his voice, cracking the sentence in two.

"Shit. I knew it. Hey, mate, I've been on both sides of that situation. I feel for you both. That's always hard for both parties."

The way Mia says 'always' suggests it happens to everyone. She's right. He's a massive crybaby. And he really is transparent when he thought he was unreadable, opaque and aloof.

Since Sam last saw Reina, something in Sam's basic molecular structure has altered. He is now an amorphous solid. Sure, the atoms and molecules of his corporeal self lock into place, conveying solidity, but there's no predictable order any more. These tiny parts arrange themselves like haphazard shards. Strike him from the wrong angle, this new glass version of Sam might shatter in an instant.

"It does feel very terrible," he whispers, in case his voice cracks twice.

"You look terrible as well, mate."

"Cheers."

"Scrawny in the body, hangdog round the face."

"Okay, that's enough Queer Eye from you, thanks."

"I take it back. You're no more scrawny than usual."

"Mia? I really hope I didn't cause Reina's... I hope I didn't cause that."

"That's not how depression works, my dude. Get over yourself."

This is a long-term challenge for Reina. That said, the last few years have been good. I've never seen her so happy since transitioning. But then it sort of catches up a bit. The unwanted attention, the run-of-the-mill numpties who just don't get it, the occasional irredeemable bigot. That constant hyper-vigilance can wear you down. Everything's just a wee bit harder when you're not a run-of-the-mill person."

"Yeah." Sam understands this last part to his core. "I should've persisted. I didn't realise Reina was at your place this whole time. I left messages with her housemates."

"Don't leave messages with those lodgers of hers. Might as well piss them against a wall in the rain."

"I wish I'd been there for Reina this winter. I'm not a good friend. I can't even manage friendship, let alone anything else she wants."

"Well. You'll do til a better Sam Dennon shows up. She's driving me round the bend, to be honest. Do me a solid and give her a call, will you? Now would be as good a time as any. She's back at her own place today, giving it a deep clean. Those layabout lodgers who hardly pay rent have got it in a state. You'd think they'd be more grateful to Reina for keeping them off the streets, but that's not how generosity works, is it."

The complexities of giving and receiving could fill a book.

"Sam?" Mia's gentle tone suggests she's done, for now, with the brusque act, adopted for Sam's benefit to make the conversation less awkward. "None of this is your fault, mate. None of it, you hear?"

Sam preferred the brusque act. Softness from Mia kills.

"Attraction's a funny thing," she says. "We don't get to choose that part of ourselves."

He wants Mia to keep talking. Mia must have put significant thought into such matters, and perhaps into the matter of him, Sam, specifically. However difficult to hear, he wants Mia's rundown. But if Mia's x-ray vision really is able to penetrate Sam's psyche, she's keeping her assessment to herself.

"I'm gonna head." Mia unstraps the giant handbag from the back of her chair. "Not you, though. You're staying put til you get on the blower to my sister. Invite her to play tennis, or garden at midnight under a meteor shower, or whatever mischief you two get up to."

Alone inside the busy restaurant, Sam clenches and unclenches his hands, trying to stave off the tremble. He waits for Reina to answer her phone.

But Reina does not answer.

Sam's heart sinks. Mia could be wrong about her own sister. Reina may never wish to speak to him again. Sam's not staying here any longer, that's for sure, in this godforsaken restaurant, surrounded by happy strangers.

Outside, head bowed against the wind, he walks from the restaurant towards his office. The buzz of an incoming text interrupts his stride. It's Reina:

Pocket dial??

Sam calls Reina back. "This is me," he says, "deliberately calling you, on purpose. Third time lucky. Sorry. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

Now he's stuck. Normally Sam might continue with, "How are you?" but he doesn't want to risk the possibility of a pat, dishonest

reply, not right now, not as he's standing alone, back to a shop window, feeling almost as brittle as he's ever been.

Reina breaks the silence. "Feels like you just talked to Mia."

"We had dinner together."

"And she told you to call me, I bet."

"She did, but I wanted to call you anyway."

"Did you really? Because that letter you sent, it sounded so final."

"Yeah. Did it? Guess I was in a final frame of mind."

"Sam, what does that mean?"

"I'm not that way anymore."

"Promise?"

"I'm sorry. I miss you. And I'd like to catch up, if that's what you'd like, too."

After all Sam's careful crafting, of a speech far more detailed and complex in his head, that last part was ridiculously easy to say.

Except Reina is yet to reply.

"Can we pretend it never happened?" Sam asks.

"I wouldn't want to do that," Reina says, slowly. "But we might build something new."



# THE SPACE ACE

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 7

2017

A cold downpour hits Sam's roof in horizontal sheets then runs off in rivulets, bypassing the guttering, testing the ground drainage solutions.

Reina will be driving during the worst of it. Sam worries her all the way along the highway. He feels a bowling ball in the pit of his gut.

Finally, she is at his gate. Relieved and nervous in equal measure, Sam buzzes her in, holding Loafie tight. "Who's that? Who's that, then? Only your favourite person, is who."

When Reina joins him under the portico, Sam thinks his heart might overflow. There she stands, clutching her bags to her belly, looking taller and thinner and clearly more gaunt than she did six months ago.

"Come in, come in, out of this wet."

Reina steps inside and out of her shoes. Loafie wriggles like a squirmy little fucker, resisting Sam's hold on her.

"Can I take your coat?" Sam asks, then realises he can't, really, without his dog lick-thrashing their guest. "Sorry. You're capable of removing your own outerwear."

But that look on Reina's face. Surprise? Hope? Replaced by disappointment.

"No one's offered before," Reina says quietly, then hangs her own

coat on the hook. Next she unfolds Sam's coat out of her bag, the one he left at her house on the before-side of winter. She says nothing about it, just hangs it up beside her own.

Sam understands that to take Reina's coat would have been gender affirming. What's wrong with him, can't even take a person's coat?

Reina follows Sam further into the house. Loafie needs zipping into her crate because Sam would like to prepare drinks.

"Can I give pupper a cuddle first?"

"Oh, sure. I just thought, you won't want dog hair all over your beautiful clothes. New dress?" Sam hopes this counts instead, as gender affirming.

"New since you saw me," Reina says. "Spent my whole winter sewing. This bold print is Mia's influence. Go big or go home, she says."

Loafie has not forgotten their guest one bit, and tries her darnedest to bury her face into Reina's neck. How nice to be a dog and greet someone exactly the way you want to greet them, just because you feel it.

"Reina, I know you avoid alcohol, but can I offer you wine if I mull it?"

"Well, it is November already. With weather like this we can almost pretend we're enjoying a hygge Northern Hemisphere winter."

Sam has prepared the ingredients, and lined them up next to the stove.

"That's a very good wine," Reina observes, standing nearby as Sam adds ingredients to a saucepan. "Have you got nothing cheaper?"

“You know your booze, for a tee-totaller.”

“I’m surrounded by wine snobs.” Reina refers to big sister Mia, probably. Or perhaps she actually means Sam. Yes, Sam almost certainly does come across as a wine snob, but in truth he’d happily drink whatever comes in a goonbag. He has made a deliberate study of wine, but only to avoid embarrassing himself in company. “This rosé is from a client,” he explains. “A winery reno. Everyone in the office was gifted a crate of the stuff.”

Also: The bottle’s been collecting dust on his rack for at least two years. Sam has worried that if he starts drinking alone at home, he won’t know how to stop. Tonight is different. He cracked open a bottle of wine earlier and has already downed two full burgundy glasses.

Five minutes later he’s asking Reina if she saw him add cinnamon sticks to the saucepan already. He can’t remember.

“You seem flushed and forgetful,” Reina observes, not unkindly.

“It’s been months since I touched liquor,” Sam admits, “and now I’ve had too much. Is it called ‘preloading’ when you’re middle-aged and you’re staying in, not going out?”

“Sam, are you anxious right now, because of me?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. I hate that.”

“Sorry, no, not because of you. I’m delighted to see you. It’s just, I need to talk to you this evening, about personal stuff, about me. You deserve an explanation, at least. I’m trying to loosen up.”

“It’s doing the job. Here, let me pour from that saucepan.” Reina pours without spillage into two goblets. “Where are we taking these? I don’t want to sit with stained drinks on that beautiful teal sofa over

there. I've been keeping my trap shut because I know you hate gushing but your interior looks amazing."

Sam waves one hand, dismissive and beckoning at once. "Follow me."

Reina takes both goblets. Sam carries Loafie and leads Reina up the first flight of stairs. She follows him silently through the secret door in the wall, then up the hidden staircase.

When Reina emerges into the observatory, still she says nothing. Finally, "Is this a new extension?"

"It's been here from the start. I never showed you."

"Okay. Wow."

"My favourite place. I should have shown you before."

"I don't even know what to say anymore." Reina stands under dappled, twinkling light. Although dusk is falling, automatic lights illuminate raindrops on the domed glass roof.

"I'd demonstrate this telescope," Sam says, "if conditions were better." He collapse-sits onto the mattress. Reina sets Sam's wine down on the floor for him.

"Shoot." Now he's moved his own foot and nudged the goblet, which almost spills. Reina keeps Loafie from lapping at it.

"I shall perch here next to you and enjoy this mulled wine. Before you're completely addled, please say your piece."

Where to begin? Sam imagines a temporary body swap. If he could let Reina into his mind and body, that'd save much explanatory bother. Instead, he must use his words. He must tell Reina how much he wants her in his life, but never, ever, in a million years will they ever be having sex.

But he can't lead with the no-sex-ever part. That is possibly the most awful thing you can say to a person. I love you, I need you, but I reject the most intimate gift you could possibly offer.

"I need you to understand how I work," he begins. "And I can't think of any other way of getting there, other than by boring you with my life history."

Reina nods. "We have all night."

Sam starts from adolescence, when his Uncle and Auntie picked him up from Della's and enrolled him at high school in Melbourne. He tells Reina what a weird kid he was at Grammar, about his gay best friend, Crispin, their strained friendship, and how he did the most awful thing by leaving Crispin in the middle of nowhere after a disastrous graduation holiday in Canberra. He even tells Reina about the old guy who grabbed him there, forever old in Sam's mind even though Sam is now around that age himself. Sam has never told anyone this. Next he tells Reina about Lisa, how they wound up together, and how they fell apart.

Reina remains quiet, except to urge Sam on. "No such thing as 'too much information'."

Sam stops short before telling Reina about the winter he just had, and about the Nembutal, no longer in his possession. That much he'll keep to himself. He can't bear to think of it. Besides, he already confided in a qualified therapist, who wrenched that information out of him via intense, invasive questioning.

Reina sets her empty goblet on the floor. She and Sam both attend to Loafie, who stretches between them, receiving a chest and belly rub.

When Reina is sure that Sam has finished, Reina clears her throat and says, “If I’m hearing you correctly, you’re telling me you’re asexual. Is that a label that resonates?”

Sam waves it away. “Oh, not that, exactly. I’m not completely without sexual interest. It’s more like, no matter how much I like someone I never develop the burning desire to take them to bed.”

“Okay?”

“I like the feelings, just don’t need anyone else involved. And I have a strong libido. Even more so when I was younger,” Sam clarifies. “Sometimes it’s annoying.”

“Like you’d rather be getting on with other things, and now you have to take care of that first?”

“Zactly. And I do notice people. Thought I was bisexual for a while. Or pansexual.”

“Because you’re equally attracted to everyone?”

“Pretty much.”

“Or... equally un-attracted to everyone?”

Sam has to think about this back-to-front sentence because the pre-loading is no longer helping.

“Sam, I’m not convinced we’re on the same page about the meaning of ‘asexual’.”

“Isn’t it obvious? From the word itself?”

“Asexuality refers specifically to orientation, at least in queer spaces. It doesn’t describe libido or aesthetic attraction or anything else.”

“Can you say that last bit again?”

“As I’m using it, asexuality describes orientation. It means your

orientation does not point to anyone in particular.”

“Wait...”

Whenever Sam generates a CAD rendering of a design, then walks through the real-world version many months later, he experiences a kind of reverse-vertigo. Until now, Sam has never experienced the euphoria of illumination by any other means.

“Maybe that’s it,” Sam whispers. “Maybe that’s my word. That need, that carnal wild part, which takes someone from the couch to the bedroom. I’ve never managed that part.”

“Well, it’s harder to get there when you’re not feeling sexual attraction. Your experience isn’t wholly unrelatable. I mean, many people have had sex without feeling attraction for a partner. I bet everyone experiences attraction in their own way.”

“That’s it, then.” The bowling ball in Sam’s gut transforms into a rocket ship to the moon. But the rocket fizzles. “So that’s what’s wrong with me.”

“Oh, Sam. I want to slap you sometimes. People come in all varieties, dotted all over the gender and sexuality spectrum. If pansexual people exist, asexual people exist.”

“Aren’t you pan? We couldn’t be more different, Reina. Shit luck. Here we are, at different ends of the spectrum.”

“I’m hardly the science guru in this observatory.” Reina nods in the direction of Sam’s bookshelf, “but that’s not how spectrums work. They tend to wrap back round on themselves, for starters.”

Sam’s mind is working at, maybe, thirty per cent capacity, but he replaces the linear graph in his head with a multifaceted prism. “I’ll be alone forever.”

“Listen. Asexuality does not mean inevitable solitude. Perhaps you’ve learned to prefer solitude because of a rational and legitimate fear of being misunderstood, by people who neglect your needs or judge you for your differences.”

Sam thinks about this. “I don’t expect you to get this. Queer communities have pride. You find each other. Looks kinda fun. I never asked for the shit label.”

Reina, half lying down, sweeps an arm across her body. Now Sam understands why she’s wearing those big, dramatic sleeves. “Well buddy, I never ordered this little lot either, yet here we both are.”

Next Sam asks Reina something he has only ever dared to gloss over, even in his own mind. “Do you think I might not be asexual if my first experience of sex had been halfway good?”

“‘First experience’ meaning that butt-grabber in Canberra?”

Sam nods.

“I think,” Reina says, tentatively, “if you weren’t asexual, your first experience would’ve happened earlier. Also, that scarifying experience wasn’t ‘sex’, bud. That was some problematic guy in a back yard invading a young man’s body without permission. But even if trauma were the reason for your absence of attraction, you’d still be asexual and that would still be okay.”

They lie quietly for a while on the mattress. Raindrops against glass provide a calming soundtrack.

Reina yawns. “I can’t guarantee I’d like you if you weren’t ace. With those white-boy looks of yours, and those smarts, you’d probably be an insufferable jerk. Do you really want ‘normal’?”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re the most normal person I

know.”

Reina laughs. She really, really laughs, like she’s never heard anything so funny.

“Sure, you’re trans,” Sam says. And if he weren’t so drunk he’d articulate his thoughts better. He tries his best to say this: *You understand your identity in an existential way and that makes you authentic, even in a world which doesn’t support authenticity. You love people back in the way they need to be loved.*

“That makes my heart happy.”

“Also, trans is something,” Sam says, “and I am nothing. The ‘a’ of asexual literally means ‘without’.”

“Asexuality is a queer identity in its own right. Hey, you know, I’ve been reading about The Milky Way in that astronomy book I eventually finished.”

Sam’s the drunk one, yet this is quite the leap.

Reina embarks upon an analogy. “People used to think parts of our universe were nothing but void. Now we know those parts to be full of stars. Right?”

“Mm-hm.”

“But we couldn’t see those stars from Earth, because of massive dust clouds? Which astronomers considered a massive nuisance?”

“Mm.”

“But then infrared radiation penetrated the space dust to reveal all those magnificent planets, and we realised the dust clouds themselves were as integral to the universe as anything else. Absence does not equal ‘nothing’. Just because something wasn’t visible before, doesn’t mean it wasn’t always there.”

Sam considers this. Aided by liquor, he even finds the analogy funny. But his amusement is short-lived. “Sex looks fun. It must be good, because people upend their lives to get it. They mess around with the wrong lovers, leave their families and spouses, and all for what? Good god. Sex must be grand.”

Reina props herself on one elbow to face him. “Sex can be a way into connection, but you’re plenty capable of forging connections in other ways. Birds of a feather flock together and, for my whole life, I’ve found myself surrounded by my favourite kind of people. Queers are my favourite. If you’re near, you’re queer. Basic physics.”

Sam, who is lying down, looks up at Reina and is surprised to see a smile.

“What’s funny? Lady, this was me coming out to you.”

“Poetic alignment. We’re in your home observatory. You think you’re one of a kind, but you’re part of an entire subcategory. You’re the archetypal Space Ace, TM.”

“A what, now?”

“Have you never once searched for this stuff online, fool?” Reina shablams back onto the sofa mattress. Or maybe she’d call it a ‘death drop’. Sam has only ever seen a few episodes of *Drag Race*.

“My GP told me to keep off Doctor Google,” he says, a touch defensive.

“Listen. I mean ‘space ace’ as a term of endearment. Aces are inclined to find great pleasure in non-sexual things, like astronomy, for instance. But whatever the passion, it tends to be expansive and unconfined, like space. Or maybe it’s just a rhyming thing. I’ll ask around.”

“You know people to ask?”

“Aces are pretty well repped in the trans community so yeah, I know a few. Hell, I’m probably on the ace spectrum myself. I’ve freebased a bunch of queer support networks, gone all the way down that rabbit hole. I only feel deep attraction after I’ve gotten to know someone. I don’t initially want anyone, but eventually I fall in love with my friends and this can get me into drama. Telling people I’m a ‘demi pansexual polyaffectionate fempresenting trans non-binary queer’ is too much, so let’s just call me Reina.”

This is big, complicated news to Sam, who assumed Reina’s experience of attraction to be the exact inverse to his own. Not only has he somehow attracted his own kind, he’s actually a... cliché? There’s even a cute little phrase to describe people like him. People, plural. Space Ace.

“So I’m an archetypal asexual.” He butchers the word ‘archetypal.’

Sam’s common-ness tracks. Perhaps Reina isn’t so off-base with the space analogy. Whenever astronomers discover something new, they’ve never found ‘one’ instance of it. There’s always, always more of the same out there, waiting to be discovered by those who know what to look for. It’s basically a rule.

“Obviously, no label describes a monolith,” Reina continues. “Take my young flatmate, Mo, an out-and-proud non-binary ace, with zero interest in astronomy, as far as I know—”

“Mo is asexual?” Sam never thought he shared anything in common with Mo, the pizza-loving kid camped permanently on Reina’s couch.

“You’re not such a rare birdie.”

Sam wonders where all the other aces are perched, especially all these ‘Space Aces’, and why hasn’t he met any? Then again, perhaps he crosses paths with aces every week. He won’t ever know for sure. It’s impossible to see what you don’t know to look for, especially as asexuals — aces — can look like anyone, apparently.

His mind continues to fuzz. He’s jumbling his sentences. Reina has been asking Sam to repeat himself for a while now. So he says his main piece in a nutshell:

“I can’t change this thing about me, Reina.”

“Oh, I get that,” she says, surprisingly blithe. “Orientation tends to track across a lifetime. Hashtag, not always.”

“No, but I hate this. If I could order the perfect person for me, that would be you.”

Reina sighs deeply, obviously, so that Sam can feel the brunt of it. “I sort of realised already. The enigma of Sam Dennon has been living rent-free in my head these last four years.”

“I am sorry. You wanted more from me.”

“Oh, well. I have been a little sad. I would gladly do everything with you. But I’m not into coercion. Reciprocity’s my jam.”

“I won’t be enough for you, not long term.”

“Listen here. Sex isn’t something I need from you personally, okay?”

“You say that now.”

“What do you need to hear?”

“I don’t know. But if you don’t need sex, what can I give you?”

“Your full self, Sam. Time, honesty, attention. Dog memes. Puns. Tennis. Bushwalks. Facts about stuff I never knew I wanted to know.”

Sam wakes at daybreak with a banging headache. He is still in the observatory. The duvet keeping him warm is from his bed.

Sitting up, his head hurts more. Reina's not here, but she has left a glass of water and a sheet of pain killers in easy reach.

The last thing he remembers: Himself babbling, something about Fraunhofer lines. He had believed himself to be experiencing a series of startling epiphanies last night. With his head resting in Reina's lap, he went on and on about how Fraunhofer's spectral absorption lines could represent the Space Aces on a rainbow pride flag. In this terrible recollection, Reina is gently stroking his hair, telling him that's a wonderful, spectacular, genius idea. Ah, yeah. Now he recalls Reina handing him Lisa's cake from downstairs after he forgot to serve dinner.

He's pointing out the poppyseeds, comparing them to the black bits on a solar spectrum.

### THE FOLLOWING FRIDAY

Sam is working from home when the intercom alerts him to a visitor at the gate.

"I'm not expecting a delivery," he says to the baseball-capped driver, who stands on the other side of the ironwork, holding a small white box. "You're probably after the folk next door."

The woman repeats Sam's address.

At the gate, Sam reads the side of the van. "Is this a cake?"

"Congrats." (Genius.)

A minute later, Sam places the box on the kitchen counter to better observe it. Loafie's nostrils twitch. Her tail slaps his legs. Lisa already gave him his annual birthday cake, and no one else but his mother knows it's his birthday. Cakes aren't Della's style. Calling two days early to warble "Happy Birthday" is Della's style.

A card from the cake shop hopes he will enjoy this triple layered chocolate, berry and vanilla gateau. It comes with a handwritten note.

Sam recognises the loopy, extravagantly proportioned letters.

To my favourite Space Ace,

I asked Mo, my out-and-proud housemate, what they would've appreciated most in the world when coming out as asexual.

A cake it is, Sammy, in the colours of your pride flag. Enjoy!

Your friend,

Reina

Xx

# **SUI GENEROUS**

**ROSENEATH, WELLINGTON**

**SATURDAY 1 DECEMBER**

**2017**

Four weeks later, Sam meets Reina's older children, Jonny and Ree, at Reina's own forty-fourth birthday party. He also meets Sylvia, Ree's mother. They are over from England as Reina's birthday surprise. Mia hosts at her Roseneath house. Reina's son Jonny is newly engaged and soon to become a father. His fiancée keeps smiling and rubbing her own belly.

Sylvia is a large woman with the authoritative voice typical of a high school principal. She pats the sofa and insists Sam sit beside her to chat. One on one, Sam does fine.

Sam recognises a kindred spirit in teenager Ree, who is slow to find confidence in new situations but who is also comically plain-speaking and quick with balletic comebacks. Perhaps she learned that last part from her Auntie Mia.

After dinner, Sam sought Ree's company in Mia's art deco conservatory, with its familiar details designed by himself. Sam asked Ree how she's enjoying her telescope. Reina had asked Sam's advice before ordering a present last Christmas. After Ree opened up to Sam about astronomy, the evening passed quickly.

Now it's time to leave. Reina has walked him out. At the bottom

of Mia's driveway, with its backdrop of a moonlit Shelly bay, they are briefly alone. They will be seeing each other again tomorrow. Everyone at the party will descend upon 'Sam's Castle' around ten a.m. for a guided architectural tour, arriving in a hired people mover en route to the thermal attractions up north.

Sam says, "Your kids are fantastic. You've done a magnificent job."

Sam couldn't have delivered a nicer compliment, by the look on Reina's face. "A communal effort."

"I bet you miss them to bits."

"Terribly and always. In England I miss Aotearoa, in Aotearoa I miss England."

Now would be a good time to give Reina the birthday present he chose for her. Sam himself hates surprises, even good ones. "Um, so, I got you a little something for your birthday."

"Oh no! But... you did?"

When he pulls it out of his pocket the silver wrapping sparkles. The ribbon flower has squashed a bit.

"So you've got me a gift," Reina says, looking at it, "yet I have no idea when your birthday even is."

"I'd rather give fuss than receive it."

"I have, in fact, noticed that about you."

Sam takes Reina's left hand and places the gift in her palm. "Open it later. There's a fair-to-middling chance you won't like it. We can exchange."

"Why do you worry I won't like it?"

"It's something to wear. I may have misjudged."

Sam chose a tanzanite diamond necklace after hovering at length

near the glass case, drawn immediately to it. But would Reina feel claimed and constricted if he gave her such a thing? She might consider it over the top.

“If you chose it, I’ll wear it.”

Sam hopes so because he bought her the matching earrings for Christmas. In the same shopping expedition he also purchased himself a Christmas tree and a number of decorations, all of which remind him of Auntie Jan. He’s never bothered with Christmas before.

“Sure I can’t open this now?”

“Open it later, before falling asleep. Then send me a text.”

Reina does as she’s told. She sends Sam a photo and follows up with an effusive phone call.

Right now, Reina takes out her phone for a different purpose. “So. Your birthday. Tell me when it is. That’s only fair.”

“I don’t do birthdays.”

“I’m setting an alert. If you’re very unlucky you may get another awkward cake.”

“Seriously.”

“Come on, get your orders in. I can’t give you an ace cake every year.”

“Oh, you can. I like my routine. Every year, the same lemon poppysee—”

Reina’s worked him out. Sam sees it in her face.

“I was at your house, wasn’t I, for your birthday. Up in the observatory. And you never let on, you sneaky little rotter.”

“November seven,” Sam confirms.

“Wait a sec. I remember last year’s poppyseed cake as well. We ate that on Boulder Hill.”

Sam is busted. “I’ve contrived to enjoy your company for four birthdays running.”

“We ate poppyseed cake the first time I visited. And at the lake in Taupō. Every year, those tiny seeds get stuck in my teeth.”

“Turns out I’m a month older than you, so I get to be the boss of everything. Including what cake.”

Reina types into her phone. “I wish you’d tell me things, bud.”

“I do. I do tell you things!” Sam can’t believe what he’s hearing.

“I’m sorry. Always pushing for more, aren’t I.”

“Don’t we have a nice time regardless?” Sam has turned slightly away. He runs both hands through his hair, stiff with product because the barber recently talked him into a high maintenance cut.

“I’m not just talking about birthdays, though. Let me make all the fuss. Let me look after you.”

On the drive home, Sam wonders what the inverse of jealousy would be called. Gratitude, perhaps. He feels so fortunate, invited to Reina’s family event.

The next celebration will be Christmas. Sam won’t be alone this year. Concrete plans have been made: Reina will enjoy Christmas Day dinner with Sam after their big family lunch at Sophie’s. Sam was invited to that but declined. Weather permitting, the pair of them will play tennis at Sam’s Castle, otherwise table tennis, then perhaps watch a movie. Sam will finally fill the spa pool. He spends the following week decorating his home with sparkly bits and bobs.

But then one evening after work he is helping Loafie into a tiny Christmas shirt, checking for comfortable fit, when he receives a phone call which sends shivers down his spine. Somehow, he knows.

The Australian accent belongs to a country nurse. She's calling from Mangleby Flat's nearest hospital.



**Part Ten:**  
**HOMECOMING**



# ORPHANED

SUNDAY 23 DECEMBER 2017

5:24 P.M.

Sam emerges from the rural Australian hospital in the late afternoon. The difference between air-conditioning and harsh summer heat thrusts him through a portal as if he, himself, has crossed to the other side.

There's only one person he wants to call.

Reina is at home in Wellington, eating her dinner perhaps, or clearing up after.

"Mum died," Sam tells her. "About an hour ago. I just did the paperwork."

Reina pauses. "I'm coming over."

Oh god, how Sam needed to hear that. "Don't come over," he says.

"I'll help with the funeral."

"No funeral. Della didn't want one."

"Then I'll help you get her house in order."

Sam lists all the reasons why Reina cannot come: She's heading off to England in a few days for her son's wedding. Mangleby Flat is a shit place to spend New Year, or any time of year, really. He's not alone, anyway. The neighbouring farmer lady has been plying him with casseroles. There's nothing to do out here, unless you're shooting an Australian horror film.

“Like *Wolf Creek*?”

“More like *Wake In Fright*.”

“Sam? Are you telling me you don’t want me there? I have trouble reading you in person, let alone over the phone.”

“No, yes, okay, if you don’t mind camping.” Sam has been sleeping outside in Della’s front yard. He can pitch the other swag, the one he originally bought for Lisa, which Lisa never used. Reina will have a proper Outback experience, that’s for sure.

“I would love to see you,” he says into the phone.

Reina sighs. “Samuel Michael Dennon, you’re a hard lemon to squeeze.”

Next, Lisa. Sam leaves the parallelogram of shade cast by the hospital building, walks to the Holden Colorado rental and turns on its engine. If he doesn’t let heat escape, the seatbelt will serve as a branding iron.

Sam’s conversation with Lisa is a near-repeat of the one he just had.

“Don’t fly over. I need you to look after Loafie. Also, Reina’s coming.”

“You’re in touch with Reina again?”

“We’ve got truckloads of crap to heft from the house to the dump. Reina’s fit and strong.”

“Pay someone to do that, Sammy. For heaven’s sake.”

“Need to do it myself. Catharsis.”

Lisa says consoling things about Della. Finally, “I’m glad you’ve got a friend who’ll troop all the way to Mangleby for you.”

Sam drives the forty minutes from the hospital back to Della’s.

On Mangleby Road he takes it slow and sees no other vehicles. Nothing in the landscape has changed. Della's departure left no ripple in the universe.

When he arrives at Della's house he sits in the Holden for another long while. He's forgotten to buy something for dinner in town. Despite this heterotopic, disbelieving grief, he's worked up something of an appetite. He eats a can of baked beans and makes billy tea on the camping stove. The mug he chooses is stained but not chipped.

Sam recalls Lisa sitting in one of these camp chairs on her last trip to Mangleby. Della's not in the remembered scene. She might be inside, having retreated to the television. Sam and Lisa had driven back to Mangleby Flat after Mick's funeral, delivering Sam's mum safely home.

On top of sad, Sam had been cranky that week. Two days earlier, at the Surrey Hills house, Mick's lawyer mate from the golf club had hand-delivered Mick's will, along with a large envelope containing smaller ones. Lisa had made herself scarce for the visit, driving Della to the mall to buy her a fresh change of wardrobe.

Later that night, with Della asleep downstairs, Lisa joined Sam in his single childhood bed, which brought back mixed memories.

"I'm the sole beneficiary," Sam told her, assuming the reason for her bedroom visit was to learn the contents of Mick's will. "Let's open a South Island office."

"This is your own inheritance," Lisa had said, gently. "You and I should split finances. It's time."

Sam had failed to extrapolate further implications in real time.

Because why would Lisa, who said she loved him still, request a divorce when Sam had just lost his uncle?

Lisa had taken his left hand and touched his wedding ring. “I don’t mind that you still wear this.”

Sam often twisted his wedding ring as a self-stimulation. “My ring? Where is this coming from?”

“It may be a little weird after all this time, but I don’t mind you wearing it.”

“Do you mind, or don’t you?”

“It’s just, Sam? People read things into that.”

Sam decided then and there to remove it. Dammit. He couldn’t yank it off. He had never once removed this ring past his knuckle, not since Lisa put it on him.

“Buy me out of the Upper Hutt build,” Lisa had whispered next, lying down beside him. “I know you’ve fallen in love with the place. You’ve been camped out there for, what, eighteen months already?”

“That house is too big for one person.”

He did remove his wedding ring, later that night in the upstairs bathroom, with warm water and liquid soap. Then, for lack of better ideas, he buried it by moonlight in Auntie Jan’s rose garden, digging a shallow hole with his hands, griming his fingernails.

Days later, sitting on Mangleby deck-chairs, Lisa had nodded towards Della’s house. “Think you could coax her over to Wellington? That house is big enough for the two of you.”

Sam would be returning to New Zealand one uncle down, and now he’d be officially single to boot. He might as well have his dream house. Maybe Della *will* join him eventually.

In the following months, he and Lisa entombed their marriage via documentation. Sam was no longer a partnered man, not even on paper. He felt like a tent in the wind, with nothing to pin his four corners.

Sam finishes his cup of billy tea, goes back inside Della's house and carts bag loads of miscellaneous rubbish from the hallway out to the tray of the ute. This ute previously belonged to Sam's grandfather, John, the man who Sam barely remembers. The vehicle has an ick factor to it and may not be roadworthy, but he'll risk it for trips back and forth to the dump. The dump is closed for Christmas, but Sam received special permission from council to offload as much as he likes. Della Dennon is a special case around here.

Reina will arrive in a few days. He can make the kitchen and toilet usable before then. The shower drain is hopelessly blocked so they'll have to perform some ablutions outside.

All Christmas Eve, Sam lifts and drags and swats mozzies, stopping only for long swigs of water. Even after dark, he heaves box after head-lit box into the council pit. Some thwump, others smash.

What to do with Della's taxidermied dog? He'll have to dig a damn hole, give it a proper burial. Della would want that. He wastefully leaves the hose on, softens some dirt, depleting the tank. Buries it two feet deep at 3 a.m. on Christmas morning.

With aching muscles, he zips himself back into a swag. Through the mesh, he gazes skyward. He knows there to be a waxing crescent moon. But he's removed his glasses and folded them safely away. Mangleby darkness is truly dark. He falls asleep immediately.

He awakes at sparrow's fart. Della would've dragged him along to the Christmas morning service, but Sam doesn't need to face strangers who think they know him, conveying empty sentiments.

Instead, Sam spends the day with steel wool and cream cleanser. By evening Della's kitchen is passably sanitised. Sam is ready for Reina's arrival.

# BOXES

DECEMBER 27

2017

After heat has baked the pavements and post-Christmas lethargy emptied the streets, Reina's coach rolls into town. From his climate-controlled rental car Sam is relieved to see her emerge from the bus.

Reina's reaction to Sam is uncharacteristically reserved. She's dressed as a bloke, and now she acts like one. She resembles any number of man-scaped, man-bunned blokes you might fully expect fresh off a coach from Melbourne. She gives Sam a gentle shoulder bump.

"See what I mean about the heat?" Sam says.

Sam lets Reina carry her heaviest bag to the Holden. She hasn't packed light. En route from Australia to England, Reina requires a double-up of clothes for two diametric seasons. Packing for different gender expressions quadruples the normal amount of gear.

"There's not much to show you round town." Sam feels responsible for Reina's experience, as if he planned, founded and funded Main Street himself.

Earlier, he called the local motel and booked Reina a room, just in case. Reina might clap eyes on Della's front yard, refuse to enter the premises and, well, she might 'do a Lisa' and ditch him for nicer digs, meaning a room above the pub.

"Peckish yet? There's pretty good fish and chips, or a roast at the

RSL, if you want to venture in there.” Sam is unusually verbose, like a man who hasn’t said boo to a goose in days.

“Just take me home,” Reina says gently.

With Sam at the wheel, they drive the dirt road back to Mangleby Flat. Plains of wheat-coloured fields extend in every direction. No beauty, only parched earth.

Sam resists the urge to fill the silence with chatter. There is one question Sam had better ask, though, before he disgraces himself.

“He, him pronouns?”

“In company, yeah. I’m not sure who to expect out here.”

“Me neither, honestly. But I shouldn’t need to refer to you in the third person. We won’t see a living soul.”

They pull into Della’s front yard. Sam waits for Reina’s assessment.

“As you described,” she says.

Sam shows Reina their swags, the outside cooker, the camping shower which hangs from the lowest bough of the gum tree out back. “Be careful with the timing of that,” he cautions. “The water can scald. These chooks follow you round. They’ve made dust baths near that junk heap over there. Careful not to twist an ankle.”

Sam must now show Reina inside. He wants to apologise for the odour that won’t dissipate, but Reina has told him to stop apologising.

They eat sausages cooked outside.

Reina says, “I wouldn’t mind stretching my limbs.” So they work after dark, transporting junk to the dump. After midnight, Sam busies himself washing dishes in Della’s kitchen while Reina showers by torchlight under the tree.

Sam has given much thought to the positioning of the swags. Given the vastness of the landscape around them, five metres apart may feel too close.

Sam zips himself inside his own swag and soon hears Reina manoeuvring herself into hers. He hears every rustle, though she's trying to zip the door quietly. It does feel good to have someone nearby.

He wakes around three a.m. to one of his Mangleby nightmares. The farmer, or "Gravel Man", is long since dead. Still, it is harrowing to awaken surrounded by the very terror setting of his dreams.

Reina may have said something to rouse him from it.

She speaks again.

"You okay, bud?"

"Mm. Sorry." He mumbles, embarrassed, pretending to be half asleep when he is hyper-alert with pure terror.

## 28-30 DECEMBER

Sam and Reina spend three full days tripping back and forth to the dump. Sam unblocks the shower drain. Reina clears Della's shed to the point where it can be swept out. Reina has linked her phone to Della's Bluetooth speakers — an unwelcome installation from Sam that Della never used. Reina has playlists called things like 'Queer AF' and 'Psyched Out Funk Fusion'. She makes a new one called 'Dancing at Della's'. Without neighbours nearby, they crank it up loud.

Occasionally Reina's Bluetooth connection is interrupted by an incoming call, sometimes from New Zealand and, at the darker ends

of the day, from England.

This morning, Reina's singing radiated out of the bathroom as she re-grouted Della's tiles. "Tell me when to shut up," she told him, though Sam prefers music over gaping, Mangleby silence.

By the following afternoon, Della's house has been emptied to the point where they are able to wash entire rooms down in sugar soap: walls and ceilings, floors and doors. The house is starting to smell of cleaning products rather than, well, whatever the hell that other stench was. This is the clean-up job Sam has longed to do forever. Entire unopened boxes of Della's treasures have been chucked unchecked onto the tray of the ute. Don't open them. These were Sam's orders.

But Reina hasn't followed them.

Around two p.m. they sit down to eat a sandwich, defeated by the heat. Today they utilise Della's freshly-cleaned living room. Reina pours two glasses of chilled water in the kitchen while Sam sits on the couch. Reina disinfected the couch with foaming cleanser even though Sam told her it, too, would be going to the dump. For now he is trying to pay bills on his phone. While he waits for the bank website to load, Reina reveals that she has kept one of the boxes to one side.

"I know you didn't want me to look inside them," she says tentatively, placing Sam's water on the coffee table for him, "but a box collapsed and, swear to god, photos fell out."

"Hiff them." Sam keeps squinting at his phone.

Reina sits on the couch beside him. From the corner of his eye, Sam sees she's nursing the box of photos.

"Sam?"

“Just doing my banking.”

Reina doesn't get it, the extent to which Sam needs to leave memories of this place behind.

“Do that later,” she says gently. “You get better reception near the road anyway.”

This irritates Sam no end. He is exhausted and bereft and he doesn't want to switch tasks and look at photos. Those are the bad feelings he can admit to. Below that, though, lies something darker. Reina's presence in Mangleby is highlighting his utter aloneness.

Though her tall, rangy body and immense strength mean Reina is of significant help in the clean-up effort, Sam has found himself irritated by the many phone calls which Reina takes outside. The music stops and she retreats from Sam entirely, standing even taller than usual, balanced on the bottom railing of what once was a fence. Despite having lived here himself, Sam had never realised that mobile reception is improved by standing on that railing. Unlike Reina, he's never received friendly calls here. He has never had a circle of people in his life who call him just because. Sam's social interactions back here in Mangleby have all been of a transactional nature: doctors and nurses at the hospital; the bloke at the dump; births, deaths and marriages; the woman who manages the graveyard; the guy who cuts gravestones. Even the neighbour who appeared with the cheesy casserole on a 'social visit' had brought it over as a pre-sale real estate sweetener, wanting to know his asking price.

Cathy O'Doyle had tried to sound casual, as if the land sale wasn't the entire reason for her visit. “It's just my older boy, he's got a wife now and they're expecting their first. For the right price Jared could

take this place off your hands for you.”

Sam is fine with selling up cheap. He doesn't need the money. Hell, if it weren't peak fire season, he'd ask local firms to raze this ghost house to the ground. But now someone wants to buy it, so he must give it a scrub from top to bottom. He doesn't want Cathy O'Doyle gossiping about all the rubbish Jared found in Della Dennon's shack... and what was she stuffing down the drain to block it like that? I mean, we all knew it was bad, didn't we, but confronting it was something else entirely...

“Sam?” Sitting right beside him, even on this hot afternoon, Reina won't drop the issue of the photographs. “There must be snapshots of you in here. I bet you were an adorable little kid.”

There must be a word for 'fear of photos'. Sam used to think his dislike of photos came from the harrowing reality that no point in history can ever be revisited. Moments gone are gone forever.

But that can be a good thing, actually. These days Sam has started to revise the aetiology of his avoidance: There's no moment in the history of Mangleby Flat that Sam would choose to revisit. He sees more than enough of Mangleby in his nightmares. Photographs would only serve to flesh out details of events he barely remembers, and which he would prefer to keep wrapped in their inchoate, skeletal form, visiting upon him only at night.

But crikey, Reina will not let this go. “I'm interested to know what your mum looked like.”

A reasonable request, perhaps. “Take a squiz if you must.”

Photos hardly capture the reality of Sam's mother. Photos depict a skinny old lady with a halo of unkempt hair and missing fingers on

both hands. But photos don't convey the way she dragged one leg when she walked. Without a full set of teeth, Della's lips were in constant movement, pursing, un-pursing. She licked her lips to keep them moist, which only dried them out more. That's why the skin on Della's moustache was permanently reddened. She had a smell about her — the smell of this house. Her clothing rarely fit and she never wore supportive underwear.

Reina keeps digging until she finds a photo of tiny Sam. "Aww. This must be you."

Sam refuses to look at the picture Reina holds up.

"Here's little Sam in a push-chair with a toy dog. Was this your favourite?"

"Ragdog. Yep, still got it somewhere."

Sam's banking page finally loads. He glances up from his screen to catch Reina looking through the photos without comment, handling them as if they were great treasures.

"How much did it cost to change your plane ticket?" Sam asks.

"Oh, don't you worry about that."

"An approximate figure will do."

"Who's this handsome rogue in front of the vintage truck? Your granddad, I bet. The resemblance is uncanny."

"Reina, how much?"

"Come on, leave it. I'm happy to be here with you."

"*Me* leave it?"

Reina's the one who should leave things the hell alone.



# WATERFIGHT

## LATER THAT AFTERNOON

Sam's mood doesn't improve. He wears an uncomfortable mask and sprays the outside shed for redbacks. He sugar-soaps the concrete floor. At the peak of afternoon heat he's emerging from the shed when he's startled by a jet of cold water to his neck and chest. He yelps.

Reina chuckles from the other side of the tin wall.

Sam refuses to offer himself up as an easy target, so stays where he is. Soon the mouth of the hose reappears, snaking its way inside, halfway up the frame of the garage door. Reina removes her thumb and squirts Sam again in the neck.

He would like to tell her to lightly fuck off. But he does not want to be a robotic asexual cliché, who doesn't know how to have fun.

So he chases Reina around the yard. Reina is barefoot, dodging sharp, tussocky weeds. Easy prey. Perhaps she means him to catch her. Sam tries to wrestle the hose from her grip but has never been one for contact sports. He's insufficiently aggressive. Reina expends her energy on manipulating the stream to saturate Sam entirely. Too late, he realises he could have prevented the flow of water by standing on the hose.

Reina wraps her strong arms around Sam's narrow waist and lifts him clean off the ground.

"Put me down, it's emasculating!"

Reina obeys at once. "My turn now?"

Sam chuckles. Reina's plan has worked. Sam is no longer mired

in his downer. He seriously considers lifting her off the ground in return, if that's what she wants.

But Reina turns him down when he offers. "I'm joking! No! Sam, seriously! You'll injure your back."

Soaked to the bone, and shivering in a refreshing way, they lie on their stomachs on the gritty concrete pad at Della's back door, absorbing its heat. Sam has blasted the chicken poo off, since that's where the feathered critters like to sit.

Reina says, "I've been thinking. About your photos. I overstepped. I have trans friends who would never be happy about me riffling through their old pics, yet I did to you what I would never do to them."

"Oh. I don't think we're talking about the same thing."

"Whatever your reasons, I had no right."

An ant makes its way towards Sam's hand. It's not the biting kind, but it'll stink if he accidentally squashes it. "I'm curious about something," Sam says tentatively, "but I'm not sure if it's okay to ask."

Reina stretches as if warming down after exercise, knee to chest, braced by both hands. "I can't imagine there's much I wouldn't tell you, bud."

"I'm asking in good faith. Just wondering, how do you know you're trans? I'm supposed to be a man but can't say I identify with it much."

"Then you're at an imaginative advantage. Extend that small dissonance further along the gender spectrum. Imagine you're unbearably trapped in a masculine role, where no one ever truly knows who you are, even those closest to you. I've always thought about

gender. It's always weighed heavy, even before I knew the word 'gender', because body and mind are in stark misalignment for me. Tell you what, though. Now you've started delving into your orientation, you'll spend the next decade delving into your gender identity as well. For me it happened the other way round, but gird your loins, bud. Self-examination will lead you deep down that rabbit-hole."

"Hm." Sam rolls onto his back. Even through sunglasses, the bright sky is blinding. He closes his eyes. "That does make sense."

"Guess it would, huh? You and I share a few things in common."

Instinct tells Sam to spare Reina the weight of his full self, but instinct is inclined to lead him astray. He needs to let her in some more. His head is hot and spinny. The front of his t-shirt is gritty and warm and unpleasantly wet. He scoots over to the step, where he can sit under shade.

Reina says, "You don't look so good. Everything okay?"

"That photo of my grandfather before?"

Reina also sits up, to better observe Sam on his perch. "Yeah?"

"That piece of shit is also my father."

Reina says nothing.

"That's exactly as incestuous as it sounds."

"Oh. Wow, Sam."

"Yeah. My mother is also my sister. I'm an inbred."

"Now there's a word and a half." Reina brushes grit off her elbows.

"Now you know me better than anyone in the world."

"I'm starting to think maybe that's true."

"Lisa knows me differently. I've always wanted to be the big man for her."

“I understand that manly imperative. Glad to be shot of it. About the family trauma, have you always known this?”

“I understood something was up with the Mangleby Dennons, and with me in particular. Auntie Jan hinted at it when I was a teenager but expected me to join the dots. I didn’t want to join those dots. The whole thing was taboo. I didn’t have the words to ask about it anyway.”

“Some things are like that.”

“And when Uncle Mick died, that’s when I really knew. He left me some... light reading.”

“So you’ve *known* known for just a short while.”

“Yep. Finally! A solid reason for my utter weirdness.”

“Before you knew about the family crap I bet you put your weirdness down to something else. We all play these mind games. It’s bullshit. You’re fine, Sam. You’re perfect.”

“I’m pretty far from perfect. Don’t tell me I’m exactly the person I’m meant to be, by some divine order or anything. Spiritual stuff doesn’t work on me. It never has.”

“I know you better than to placate you with that. But I don’t hear the cishets perseverate endlessly about why they are cis and straight.”

“Touché.”

“Oh, and also? I saw your baby pics. You were a beautiful little munchkin. We all were, once.”

Sam’s gaze settles upon the dampness of Reina’s t-shirt, and the way it dips into her belly button. ‘Belly button’. Such a cute word and such a cute scar; a permanent reminder that every single person was a tiny, vulnerable creature once.

“You can’t retrofit reasons for your architectural talent,” Reina continues, “or for your serious astronomy hobby. So you can’t retrofit reasons for your orientation, either. It’ll drive you out of your gourd because there’s no A to B connection. Orientation and gender don’t work like that. Nothing ever does. But even if you could name a reason, whatever that reason, you’d still be you and you are just fine as you are. I’ve given this plenty of thought, not just because I’m trans, because I’m Autistic.”

“You are?”

Reina now looks away.

“I had no idea. Is there anything I should do differently?”

“You instinctively get me, I think.”

“I just thought, sensory needs or... What does autism mean for you?”

“Mostly it means I spend far too much time reflecting on what I’ve said or done wrong.”

Sam is quiet for a long moment. “Hell, if you’re Autistic then I must be, too.”

“I hear that. Had the same reaction myself after my daughter Ree was assessed at the age of eight.”

Sam exhales deeply. “This is all too much at once. Turns out I missed out on some owner manual named Sam Dennon. I can tell you how incest works, though. I’m stuck in this no-win regret cycle. I wish this repugnant thing had never been inflicted on my mother. But without that repugnant thing, I would never exist.”

“That’s one helluva mindfuck.”

“Even more so for Mum.”

Overhead, cockatoos are starting to jockey for their evening position in Della's giant gum tree.

"Sam? How old were you when the old man died?"

"Toddler. He did nothing bad to me, I swear. Not that I remember."

Reina is quiet for a moment. Then she wipes under her sunglasses with her finger.

"This is a lot," Sam admits. "Sorry."

Reina sniffs and smiles. "Thank you for sharing that with me. Now I understand your reaction to the photos."

Sam stands up from the concrete step. He would like to take a lukewarm shower making use of the freshly unblocked drain inside. He has no intention of telling Reina the rest of his family history. Already he feels lighter, because she's still here. She hasn't called a cab to come get her from town.

She's still here!

While lathering himself in soap under the water-saving rose, Sam wonders if there exists an even higher level of interpersonal validation, one which he cannot even imagine without experiencing it. It's possible, truly possible, that Sam could tell Reina the awful contents of Mick's third envelope and he'd feel even more accepted and validated than he does in this moment.

Then again, he might not. Even Reina might draw a line.

# THE THIRD LETTER

Dearest Samuel,

You were always an obedient sort of kid so there's a chance you've followed the advice in my previous letter, meaning you've waited until Della has passed before opening this last envelope.

But I wouldn't blame you for not waiting. Once you learn the first part of your family history, you may feel a burning need to understand the rest.

Here goes.

Della can exasperate, that's for sure. It's tempting to ask, "Why didn't she keep clear of Mangleby when she had the opportunity to leave? Why can't she organise herself out of a paper bag?"

You said to me once, "Mum's never done anything, ever. She lives her life through her stories on the telly." I understand that frustration. She did live a passive, cloistered and ghostly life.

Except this one time.

Della had a little dog. I don't know if you remember the dog before she had it stuffed and mounted. She loved that gentle old mutt to bits. Of course, John used this beloved pet to control Della. He threatened to shoot her dog on numerous occasions and then one night he did.

Della used the second bullet on John.

Around midnight she got on the blower to me, told me point blank what she'd done. I got in the car and was out there by dawn.

I worried all the way about you, and what you saw. You were two and a half years old. The thinking back then was, if we didn't mention it ever again, you'd eventually forget.

By the time I reached Mangleby Della was calm and collected.

## The Space Ace of Mangleby Flat

That surprised me. You were grizzly and unsettled, clinging to her legs in the kitchen. My bet is you saw it happen. Della was making herself busy by cooking you a bowl of rice pudding, refusing to talk about any of it.

Anyhow the abusive prick lies splayed in a rathole somewhere between Black Stump and Bourke. We only had a mattock and shovel, but I've never put so much grunt into digging a damn hole. Della helped. We got it pretty deep. You played nearby in a spinney of gumtrees. You made a little castle out of dirt. I remember that.

We reported John missing. And because he was a renowned local fuckhead, the investigation wasn't exactly pursued aggressively. Story went, he had dementia and walked out into the desert of his own accord. He did have a bit of dementia. It wasn't advanced, but the doctor's record helped that bit of fiction along.

I believe everyone at the time had their suspicions about what we did to the old goat. The police turned a blind eye. Except one bloke. A nasty prick, nearing retirement. That cop had been through three wives, had three lots of kids to support and was wanting cash. He sort of cottoned on. He believed I'd done it myself. Guess he didn't think Della had it in her.

Putting it bluntly, I sold the family farm to pay off a crooked cop. I was able to keep some of the proceeds. Jan and I bought our first investment property with that. I've worked hard ever since to leave you a compensatory inheritance here in Melbourne. We left a bit of a paper trail by handing over such a large sum of cash to the cop. For years this gave me the yips. Thankfully paperwork was loosey goosey in those days. I wouldn't want to try it today.

I've spent much of my life waiting for the law to come knocking. That's weighed heavy at times. Yet here I still am. Looks like cancer has come knocking first. John Dennon is a cold case. For your own peace of mind, that old copper is long gone,

## The Third Letter

too.

You'll find a newspaper article in an archive if you need further details. I kept the clipping until it yellowed but after Australian papers were digitally archived I saw no reason to hang onto grim memorabilia such as that.

Jan never knew this story, by the way. I didn't feel the need to burden her with it. They say you should tell your spouse every damn thing otherwise the marriage will eventually come a cropper. I'm not convinced. Jan and I did fine.

I don't regret keeping all this from Jan, and I don't regret what we did to John Dennon, either. He copped his right whack in the end.

But why am I telling you then, eh? I'm not telling you for my own sake. I could've easily taken this one with me. After hemming and hawing, I'm telling you now because I want you to understand something important about your mother. With that beloved dog of hers gone, Della finally understood the danger you were in. If John could kill her dog, he could do the same to you. She could take his crap if it fell only on herself, but she wasn't having it for you.

I want to leave you with a positive take on your mother, Samuel. It's been my experience of life that we love better when we understand. Understanding can sometimes help with forgiveness.

Hell, I'm sounding like a church bloke now. A terminal diagnosis can do that to you.

I've never seen a shrink in my life but I hear they can be useful at times. You've got a good woman in Lisa as well. I wish you both long, unburdened, healthy lives.

Well. It's time. If I get to the pearly gates and find there's an opening for guardian angels, with harps and strap-on wings and the like, I'll take up the gig. One way or another, I'll continue to keep an eye out for you, Samuel.

Love always, Mick

Later that evening, Sam is brushing his teeth in the freshly grouted bathroom and finds himself muttering.

“It’s not mine, it’s not mine, it’s not mine.” His mouth is full of foaming bristles. He garble-whispers the words.

But Reina happens to hear him while passing down the hallway. “Did you say something, buddy?”

Sam spits into the sink. “Just talking to myself.”

“No worries.”

He could tell Reina the rest of the story, except Della and Mick already dealt with John. All three are gone now, the details gone with them.

There is no ‘Sam’ in that story. He is neither subject, object nor verb. He was so very young, not there for any of it, neither psychologically nor symbolically, not there for it, not in any meaningful way.

Silence equals death, and some things need to die. The story of John’s murder is not Sam’s to tell.

Nor is it Sam’s burden.

Sam rinses his toothbrush then washes foam down the plughole.

“There’s something you should know about me,” Sam says to Reina, emerging from the bathroom into the living area, towel-drying his hair. “I sometimes talk to myself.”

Reina laughs. “Oh, I noticed. All good.”

With that, Sam feels sufficiently known.

# THE ARGUMENT

## THREE IN THE DAMN MORNING

TECHNICALLY DECEMBER 31

That night in his swag, Sam has a grief attack and stifles his sniffles. But there's no way to camouflage his ragged breathing. He must stop crying before Reina hears. So he reaches for his t-shirt and presses the balled-up fabric to his eyeballs until stars appear.

"Sam? Would you like a cup of tea?"

Darn it. He's woken her up. He didn't even hear her approach and now she's crouching right outside his swag. With Sam's canvas flaps open, she must see through the mesh how he's curled up like a blubbering baby.

"I'll put the jug on," she whispers. "It's almost cool enough for a brew, don't you think?"

"Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you. I'm fine."

"You didn't wake me. I probably woke you, accepting a call from Jonny. Are you thinking about your mum?"

"Everything just hit me now, I guess."

"Good memories?"

"Not really."

"Then tell me a good one instead."

Reina must have comforted her own children after bad dreams. She is practised at this.

“I don’t know.” Sam can’t conjure something from nothing. “Mum never did anything or went anywhere. She drove to church on Sundays, to the shops on Thursdays and spent the rest of her life watching telly on the couch.”

But Reina isn’t about to accept Sam’s assessment of a life wasted. “She had you. We can’t ask more of a person than that, can we? Any mother would call Sam Dennon an outstanding lifetime achievement.”

Sam splutters into his t-shirt. “But I left her alone here. And I feel so bad for thinking this, but I grew up despite Della, not because of her.”

“There’s nothing out here for you, though. No one can blame you for leaving.”

He knows, he knows, he knows all of this. To remain in Mangleby Flat, for Sam, would have meant death. Still, it’s nice to hear it from someone else.

Sometimes you meet a person and you wish you’d known them your whole life. Reina is far kinder to Sam than Sam is to himself. Not for the first time, Sam wishes he’d had a parent like her. Sam and Reina are the same age, but Sam sometimes adds an adult Reina to old memories. In these re-imagined childhood scenes, adult Reina extends a large, warm hand. She’s smiling down at him. She’s wearing one of her long, flowing tops. Even in Sam’s imagination, she smells like she does in real life: Clean like shampoo, or some other bathroom product. He can smell it now through the mesh.

Sam has kept the details of his grandfather’s death to himself, but he has also refused to burden Reina with the details of Della’s demise.

Perhaps he should tell Reina after all. This much he can share.

“Mum had her fall in the kitchen. Broke her hip after collapsing from a bad case of summer pneumonia. She lay there for over a day, dehydrated, in pain. By the time they found her she was blue, oxygen level at fifty. If she hadn’t been expected for a thing at church she would’ve died right there on the kitchen floor. The minister happened to pop round. It was him who called the ambo.”

“Oh, no. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m kicking myself. I hooked her up with Internet so she could watch her shows on demand, but I’ve checked her bills and she never touched the data allowance. Then I got her that iPad so we could FaceTime but she left that in its box. I should have got her one of those medical bracelets instead, you know, with the emergency button.”

“Would she have agreed to wear one?”

“I’ll never know for sure, but it might’ve saved her life.”

“Coulda shoulda woulda. Don’t go there, buddy, especially not at three in the morning.”

“Okay.”

“Sure you don’t want that cup of tea? I’ll bring you one.”

“It’s still a bit hot for that.”

“What about a hug? Would that be too hot? If the answer’s no, that’s okay. I’ll make myself a brew and leave you alone.”

“Oh. I doubt we’d both fit in here.”

“So, no?”

“A hug would be okay, I think.”

Once inside Sam’s swag, Reina presses her front against Sam’s

back and wraps her legs around his. She presses one palm to Sam's chest. Despite tensing up, and despite her immense heat, Sam remembers he likes this. He likes certain aspects: the pressure, her rhythmic breathing, and the feel of breath on the back of his head. If she were shorter than him, her breath would be tickling his neck instead, but her height works to Sam's advantage.

Sam is almost asleep when Reina says, "Want to know the Vandekus family secret? It's a doozy."

Sam isn't sure if she's about to reveal something serious, so isn't sure which tone to strike.

Reina tells him regardless. "Our father had affairs with other women. We suspected that part, but after Mum died we learned something else. He'd had another couple of children with one of the other women."

"Half-siblings. Wow."

"Yeah. Our father made a lot of money but he cut me out of his will decades ago. My sisters cut me back in."

"Your sisters are good people."

"Yeah. Our father also hadn't left anything to this other family. Our half-siblings naturally wanted a share in the inheritance. So we split it again with them, partly to assuage our own guilt, and also, I like to think, to do the right thing."

"Not every family would've done that."

"I never expected anything from him, but I have great sisters. So suddenly I had enough to cover my expenses for a few years. I decided to transition in peace, to focus on family and retrain. I'm a very fortunate person. I'm telling you this because I want you to know that

I also have a complicated relationship with money and inheritance and what to ethically do with it.”

“Generosity is fraught,” Sam mumbles, about to doze off. “By the way? I’m so glad you’re here.”

**6:20 A.M.**

Sam awakes groggily to the sound of chooks, celebrating the laying of cackleberries. By the time he wakes fully, the birds are out of their pen, clucking around for pellets in dust.

Reina’s also up. She’s inside cooking scrambled eggs.

After breakfast they spend the cool of the morning companionably working their way around the walls of Della’s freshly decluttered house, filling fissures and holes with creamy white Spackle. Sam bought two massive tubs of the stuff in town because once Della’s junk disappeared to the dump, the walls revealed their ancient patterns.

Sam would like to paint the rooms, but only because perfectionism dies hard. There will be no time for that, because today is the final day of December and Reina is leaving tomorrow. She flies out of Melbourne tomorrow evening and will join the rest of her family for the wedding celebration in Warwickshire, England.

“Will you have trouble selling this place?” Reina asks, dipping into the spackling paste.

“The farmers who own the surrounding land expect to take it off my hands for a song.” Sam gestures southeast, towards the O’Doyle

homestead. "I must return that casserole dish, come to think of it."

They spackle the walls in silence for a bit, then Reina lays down her trowel. "There's something I need to ask, except you have a lot on your mind."

"Go ahead."

"So, Anya's down in Christchurch, right? And she's having trouble with childcare arrangements. She had someone lined up for this year, that's fallen through. Long story short, she's asked if I could join them down in Christchurch to properly co-parent Beth, just until the end of her teaching contract."

"Anya's asked you to move down to Christchurch?"

"Just for a year."

"For the whole of next year?"

"Turns out they need Anya for an extra semester."

Sam has also put down his trowel. He knew this would happen. He just knew it. Man, it hurts to be right. "When did she ask you this?"

"The day before I left to come here. It's all very short notice. She needs an answer ASAP, because of course she does."

"Sounds like you two have everything sorted." Sam's voice is flat. He pushes the tub of Spackle away, lurches stiffly to his feet and leaves the house via the back door.

But once outside in the sun there's nowhere further to go, except to the shed. The shed cracks and creaks under the rising heat of the day. Sam picks up a hand brush. He already cleaned the shed, but now he brushes every nook and cranny. Next, he's down on his hands and knees, working bristles into the corners. Before long he's sweated

through his t-shirt. He guzzles warm pipe-water from the outside tap.

So Reina will be leaving him after all. Despite couching her plans as a question, a decision has already been made. Due to their child, Anya will always have the greater claim on Reina. Their more traditional-looking, cosy little family unit takes precedence.

And what skin does Sam have in the game, anyhow? Nothing. He should have been more careful with his heart. He shouldn't have bothered giving Reina that call at the restaurant on Mia's bossy instruction. If they hadn't reunited, he might be completely over the Reina business by now.

Eventually the shed grows too hot to bear. He might keel over. Also, if he stays out here any longer, it officially counts as sulking.

He prepares his face to look neutral in preparation for his re-entry into the house. Knowing her, Reina will want to discuss the matter at length. But Reina is nowhere to be seen. She's cut two plates of sandwiches and left them on the bench. Beside them, two glasses of lemon water, which sit in rings of condensation.

He plonks himself on one of the barstools and slumps with his back against the wall. He can't hear her in the house but she can't have gone far. There's nowhere to go until tomorrow.

Eventually Reina emerges from the bathroom. She cautiously enters the kitchen, as if to gauge Sam's mood. She sits on the stool next to his.

She's arranged her hair into a French bun and expended effort on make-up. Until now, Reina has been wearing Sam's birthday pendant on a long chain under her boy clothes. Now she has transferred the pendant back onto the shorter chain, framed by her clavicle,

displaying it proudly while dressed in her girl clothes. The tanzanite diamond matches the blues of her dress.

Reina wearing his gift should reassure Sam, but only refreshes his panic. “Are you off somewhere?”

“Me? No, I just... I couldn’t do the bloke thing any longer. Dressing up calms me down.”

Sam understands this already. Sometimes when Reina looks extra beautiful he wonders if he should worry. Sam sees from his phone on the kitchen bench how very long he spent in the shed. By way of an apology he says, “You look very nice.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you hoping to do something for New Year? I should’ve planned something. You’ve been busting a boiler this entire week. The least I could do is take you out, especially now you’re dressed for it.”

But Reina doesn’t want to talk about that. “Don’t you walk out on me, Sam.”

She has never chided him like this.

“I was only in the shed.”

“I know where you were but I can’t handle that. You can’t walk out when I need you to stay.”

Lisa has aired the exact same complaint.

“Got it,” he says, feeling ganged-up on. “Your own sense of urgency outweighs my processing needs.”

Judging by her body language, Reina acquiesces. “So long as I know that.”

Perhaps Sam can try to explain himself to Reina, to hasten their understanding of each other. “You need to know how I feel,” he says

slowly, “but I don’t even know it myself, not until I go away and think first. I am sorry. I should have told you I work like that, before I skulked off.”

“Are you ready to share your thoughts?”

Sam chooses his words carefully. He imagines leaving his meat-body, viewing himself from above. This cuts emotion right out of it. “I’m having two conflicting reactions. I know why Anya needs you. I also understand you wanting to spend time with Bethany while you can, because they’re only little once. I get that.”

“And the conflicting reaction?”

“I hate it. I had plans for us this year. Next year, rather.” Sam has entered that liminal mindset specific to December 31st, when he’s pre-emptively flipped over into January. “I was hoping next year would be better. Last winter was desolate without you.”

“I’ll call every night, if you’ll let me. And I’ll be back in Wellington every ten weeks for the school holidays, maybe even for long weekends. You’ll see more of me than ever. Plus I won’t be as busy with coursework.”

Sam already knows that Reina was granted a mental health extension on that.

Like Sam, Reina appears to be measuring her words. “I thought you might like this idea.”

“Like you living in Christchurch? I might like you living on a different island when I already have to share you with everyone else, including your England crew?”

“It’s just, I’ve been a bit clingy. I thought you could use the physical distance while we’re getting to know each other in this deeper

way. I thought you could use a year's buffer from my intensity — a buffer of screens and phone calls.”

“Jesus, Reina. No.”

“No?”

“I may be a Space Ace, but I am still human, you know. I still want you round, in my physical orbit.”

“I got that very wrong, then.”

“You did.”

“And here's something you might have got wrong about me. I'm not leaving you. Not at all. This is me trying to do right by everyone.”

“I'm scared you won't be coming back. What if Anya's offered a permanent position down there?”

“That's been offered already. She's good at her job. But she promised me before leaving for Christchurch that she and Beth would be back in the Wellington region to settle. And even if — if — something else happens with Anya's work situation, I'll be back. It's hard enough when half my family's on the other side of the world. I don't want to leave my Wellington crew.” Reina sips from one of the lemon waters. “P.S., you are my Wellington crew.”

Sam is feeling calmer now. Calm enough to drink his own glass of lemon water. Once he takes a sip he realises how thirsty he is. He gulps down the rest.

Reina notices him looking at the sandwich and pushes the plate in his direction. “Tuna, cucumber, cheese and tomato.”

They eat in silence for a while.

“I was wondering,” Reina says between mouthfuls, “since you'd like me in your physical orbit, I could maybe stay at your place

sometimes, when I'm back for school holidays. Only if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind. I have plenty of space." Sam would have offered, only he assumed Reina would prefer a base in the city.

"I'm officially moving out of my own house," she continues. "One of Mo's couch surfing mates is already renting my bedroom. Mia doesn't mind me using her spare room while I'm in Welly, but she's had about a gutsful of me this year."

"I doubt that." Sam can't imagine anyone wanting to see less of Reina.

Reina returns a withering look. "I can be hard to live with."

"Use me as your base. And my garage for storage, if you need it."

Reina considers the offer. "Might take you up on that. Thank you."

Meanwhile, Sam finishes his sandwich and imagines new life for his underutilised home. A music room, perhaps, for Reina's keyboard and various other instruments. He could soundproof that room if she wanted. Hell, his tennis court will finally get regular use, and he can move the ping pong table off the garage wall and set it up permanently for partnered play. Reina can have her own bathroom, using the bedroom Sam decorated while thinking mainly of her. Reina could grow a vegetable garden. They could finally get chooks for Della's chook pen that's been sitting empty. Reina would love that. This time next summer they could eat sandwiches together on the deck with homegrown tomatoes and, after getting sick of tomatoes, they could make chutney with the rest.

Next summer wasn't so far away, was it? Next summer, Reina

would be back in Wellington for good.

Reina has heard something outside. “Expecting visitors?”

Sam hears it, too. The crunch of tyres, the creak of a handbrake.

A car door slams, then twice again.

Reina looks alarmed.

## NEW YEAR'S EVE

"I'll see who this is and get rid of them." Sam returns his last crust of sandwich to the plate and opens the front door.

It's the O'Doyles who farm the surrounding land. Not Cathy this time with another casserole, but her husband Barry with their two grown sons, Jared and Brogan. Sam hasn't seen these boys since they were kids. They tower over him now.

"You remember these blokes, don't you Samuel?" Barry tips his Akubra and lurches forward for an unnecessarily firm handshake. "Thought we'd pop round, see how you're faring. Sorry to hear about poor old Della. Terrible shock, that was."

"Thanks." Sam shakes all three hands. He knows why they're here. They want to buy Della's house. But he'll have to suffer through small talk first.

So they commiserate about the heat. A few sheep jokes are fired at Sam for moving to New Zealand. Sam thinks this is a bit rich, given as how the O'Doyles are Australian sheep farmers themselves who only switched to cattle after moving out this way.

Sam changes the subject. "Do you have a use for these chooks?" He's starting to worry what might happen to them when it's time for himself to fly out. He doesn't have the wherewithal to wring their necks himself. He doesn't want to abandon them to foxes, either, though a fox would make a quicker, less painful job of the kill.

"They good layers?" Barry asks.

"Daily fresh eggs for breakfast."

“We’ll take ‘em. I’m not in the mood for chasing chooks around the yard, but. We’ll come back when they’re roosting, if that’s okay with you.”

“Sounds sensible.”

“This place is looking different,” Barry observes, hands on belt, gazing around the front yard. “Jared here’s interested in taking this place off your hands, if the price is right. His missus is due to pop any day.”

Jared nods. He’s leaning against their double cab ute, arms folded, looking at the dirt. He’s still shy. Sam has sympathy for that. Sam would have the same trouble talking to strangers if he’d never left Mangleby.

“I’m not finished sprucing the place up,” Sam explains. “Come back in the new year, check it out once I’ve cleaned, pick up the chooks once they’re roosted?”

“When it’s dark? What are you trying to hide, eh?” Barry winks. “What’s the endgame here, anyhow? Buckingham Palace?”

“Now’s not an ideal time—”

“You due somewhere, mate?”

Afterwards, Sam regrets not saying, “Yes, actually.” He could’ve said he was due at the lawyer’s in town, or at the headstone place, or on his way to the emergency department to see about something horribly contagious. But once again Sam can’t lie.

That’s how he ends up standing uselessly on the front veranda as Barry leads his two massive sons through Della’s front door.

Following behind, Sam hopes Reina has made herself scarce out back. His hope is short lived.

“Nice to meet you,” Sam hears her say. “I’m Reina.”

Sam enters the kitchen in time to witness Reina extending her hand in Barry’s direction.

Barry’s not having a bar of it. It takes a long moment for Barry O’Doyle to find his words. First he clears his throat. Then he takes two steps backwards and assesses Reina, arranging his expression into one of unabashed disgust. “Oh. I see, I see,” he mutters. Then he turns to his sons. “Come on. Reckon we’ll leave Arthur and Martha to— to finish whatever the hell they’re playing at.”

That’s when Sam loses it. This is Della’s house, his own childhood home, and he doesn’t have to put up with that disgust, that dismissal, sprayed all over the place. He’s used to that look. He remembers it directed at his childhood self. He won’t have it anymore, and certainly not aimed at Reina.

“Go on, fuck off then, you old bigot!” he yells from the veranda. The doors are already slammed shut on the O’Doyle’s double cab ute but Sam keeps yelling after them anyway. “What’s wrong with you people?”

The ute’s making dust clouds.

“Can’t even shake a person’s hand?” Sam yells. “Good riddance to bad rubbish! Damn you to hell!” Sam slips back into his childhood vernacular. “And don’t think you’re getting these chooks, neither!”

The poultry remain oblivious to Sam’s outburst. Sam has no idea what to do with them now. Maybe they can be re-wilded after all, and enjoy a day or two of complete freedom before meeting with a fox.

More significantly, Sam has ruined his one chance at an easy real estate handover. But he doesn’t care about that now. He’ll leave the

place empty to tumble down slowly, if only to annoy those bigoted O'Doyles.

But Reina. Now he must face Reina.

She's filling the kitchen sink with hot water and suds.

"I'm sorry." Sam can't apologise on behalf of the O'Doyles but he's already sorry for yelling, because Sam has stepped in without Reina's go-ahead. "I did try to get rid of them. They barged on in regardless."

"I know. I heard."

"Sorry. It's been a shit day, and a shit year, and I lost my rag. I know you don't need me to wade in," Sam adds.

He asked Reina once — a couple of years ago now: "If someone misgenders you, do you want me to correct them?"

Sam had been reluctant to ask. He never wants to bring up the topic of Reina's trans gender. He doesn't want Reina to think he considers her trans-ness an issue at all, because, to him, it isn't.

Reina told him he didn't need to do anything on her behalf, but that Sam had been wonderfully thoughtful to ask. Now she shrugs and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. Her careful eye makeup has smudged a little. "You sure gave them what for."

"Let's not worry about what those guys think. They're irrelevant to us. They're gone."

"I can disregard what people think," Reina says. "It's what they might do."

Later that afternoon, Reina requests a trip to Della's grave.

There's nothing to see of Della but a coffin-sized mound of dirt.

The gravestone bloke is on holiday. Sam doesn't see the point of hanging about in graveyards. This spot has nothing to do with his mum. Della is gone. Graveyards are a comfort to the spiritually inclined, a fantasy, and sometimes, a cover and a ruse.

"I would've liked to meet Della," Reina says, looking at the dirt. "But at least I know where she lies now."

"Yep. Now you know."

"And this is your grandmother?" Reina has deciphered the gravestone to the left of Della's, though the engraving has not been maintained and is barely legible.

"I'm getting that fixed up," Sam says.

"Your gran died young. Long before you were born."

"She did."

Predictably, Reina turns attention to the slightly less weathered gravestone on the other side of Sam's grandmother. She starts reading aloud but cuts herself off when she realises she's reciting boilerplate niceties about John Dennon.

"It angers me," Sam says. "Fucker doesn't deserve a head stone."

Sam steadies himself for further questioning, but Reina asks nothing more. She steps a little closer to Sam and gives his back a rub.

If Sam were ever going to tell Reina the rest of the story, this would've been the time. He might assure her that John Dennon's grave is just a head stone, for the sake of appearance. That terrible corpse is nowhere near Della, and nowhere near Sam's grandmother, who he also abused. If Hell exists he's rotting in it.

For dinner, Sam and Reina eat lamb stir-fry at Della's table. The table

smells sweetly of furniture polish, because of Reina, and Reina's appreciation of the nice wood. Sam wouldn't have bothered going that far with it.

Sam has found a full deck of cards. He hasn't huffed it out yet, and wonders if it would be naff to suggest card games to pass the time until New Year ticks over at midnight. Then again, Reina probably won't want to stay up late. She's leaving tomorrow for Melbourne, then for Heathrow.

"How you feeling?" Sam asks. He means about tomorrow. The anxiety of the flight. Reina's an anxious flyer.

But Reina's concerns are more pressing. "Let's sleep inside the house tonight, with locked windows and doors."

"Why?"

"We might get a late night visit."

Sam scoffs. "The O'Doyles are ignorant boofheads but they're not the criminal type. Is that what you're talking about? You think they'll be back to, what, inflict some kind of violence?"

"Not them, necessarily. But it is New Year. They'll have gone down the pub, or to the RSL or wherever. You think they'll keep today's encounter to themselves? That's quite a story. A real laugh. The freak in a dress with the gay son at Della Dennon's? We don't know who's in town, Sam. And there's no one else within cooe. Everyone knows we're on our own."

Sam had managed to skip this train of thought. "But we can't shut the windows. The house needs to cool overnight. We wouldn't sleep without airflow."

"Then let's take the swags and pitch them elsewhere. Doesn't have

to be far away. Just down the road a bit, where no one will find us. We can drive back at dawn for a shower and coffee.”

Sam immediately thinks of a spot: a fairy ring of scrub north west of here, with a rock in the shape of a wombat. Turn left, another left, then drive across a paddock. Sam used to ride his BMX out there when he was a kid, with long days to fill. No one would find them there.

So after dinner Sam locks up the chooks. Next he rolls up the swags and heaves them into the back of the rental car, knowing they'll be pitched again in ten minutes. His heart feels heavy because, inside the house, Reina is packing her bags. When he drives her out of Mangleby tomorrow, in time to catch the ten o'clock coach to Melbourne, she'll never be coming back. In days from now, he'll be doing the same.

Sam doesn't bother locking the house behind them. Their passports and wallets are in the glove box of the car. If robbers were to strip Della's place of its remaining signs of life, they'd only be saving Sam an annoying last trip to the dump.

Fortunately the fairy ring of bushes is still there, exactly as Sam remembered. He parks the Holden behind scrub, close to where they'll be pitching their swags. He tries not to scratch paintwork on rentals, but he's past caring about this one.

“So this is the wombat?” Reina has found it.

But this rock looks nothing at all like a wombat now. Sam expects Reina to laugh at his boyish imagination.

“I can see where the eye sockets would be,” she says instead. “And here are the back legs.”

“I was short on entertainment as a kid.”

The wombat rock illusion requires a certain slant of daylight, and the sun is about to set. They pitch their swags mainly by headlight. Both agree that forcing themselves to lie awake until 12 a.m. only to exchange New Year’s greetings would be anticlimactic.

Light wind dies completely. The land would be deathly silent if not for the occasional insect scuttling through leaf litter around them.

Sam falls asleep inside his swag and doesn’t hear the eerie chuckle of possum. But he does startle at the sound of an engine, travelling slowly by, and surprisingly close. He props himself up on one elbow.

# WOMBAT ROCK

A NEW YEAR

2018

Reina's already awake.

"Sam. Hey, Sam. You hear that?"

Perhaps it was Reina's voice that woke him.

"Yeah." His voice is croaky with sleep. Through the netting of his swag he sees headlights to accompany the noise of an engine. The vehicle is travelling towards them. Its sluggish pace suggests a driver on the hunt for something. Either that or they're too drunk to drive but trying regardless, taking things slow.

"Where might they be headed?" Reina whispers back.

"Could be freedom campers. Grey nomads, heading back to their spot after New Year's in town."

"Are *we* in their spot?"

"I seriously doubt that."

Squinting, Sam tracks the vehicle until it changes direction. Those are tail lights now, fading into the distance. Once the vehicle is out of sight, Sam notices the drop in temperature.

"Reckon I'll zip up my canvas," he says. "Want me to do yours while I'm at it?"

Reina hesitates and Sam thinks she might have dozed back to sleep already. Then she says, "I'm okay."

Sam noisily encloses the sides of his swag. Now he'll probably be

too hot, dammit.

“Happy New Year,” Reina says quietly as he’s about to return to his mattress.

“Oh, yeah.”

There’s something in Reina’s voice which makes him hesitate. After Sam’s night terror they had curled up together. It would be nice if Reina joined him again. But if Sam wants that to happen, he’ll have to suggest it himself. He stands beside his swag for another moment, hoping Reina will say something like, “Come and warm me up, Sammy,” but she doesn’t.

“Do you want... May I join you in there?”

“Hell, I was hoping you’d offer.”

This is very un-Samlike, requesting closeness. He slaps his shoulders before unzipping Reina’s door. “I’ll try not to bring mozzies.”

Now he’s inside, Sam doesn’t know how to be and how to lie down. He is made entirely of elbows and knees. So he lies flat on his back, looking up through the mesh into dark. Reina and Sam lie together like this for some time, shoulder to shoulder.

“Want me to put on a shirt?” Reina asks.

“No, why?”

“Thought you might feel more comfortable if there were a layer of fabric between us.”

Sam himself is wearing a t-shirt. “I don’t need you to put on a shirt,” he says. “Unless you’re cold.”

“Okay.”

“I was thinking,” Sam says after another long while, “there may

be rare occasions when I'd really like to do something with you."

"Yeah?"

"Mm. I thought we might make a nice memory. Something to hold onto, maybe forever."

"What kind of thing?"

"You could maybe guide me. If I could be sure you'd like it, I'd want to do it."

"I don't need you to do anything like that for me. I would never want someone to do a favour as major as sex, however generously given. If that's what you mean."

"That is what I mean. But I want you to understand something. It wouldn't be a favour. It would be mutual, because I do experience attraction. I'm not sure what to call it, because it's not sexual in nature. Maybe 'sensual' is the word for it. It's impossible to know how other people experience the world in a sensory way, but I wouldn't be surprised if my sensory experience fills any gap left by lack of sexual attraction."

"You've been thinking about this. I can tell."

"I'm not suggesting we do much, in the scheme of things."

"Whatever you feel, Sammy. I'm here for it."

"Also, I need you to understand something else about me. I don't feel this way often. I don't even know why I feel this way now. Lots of big emotions, probably. Today's been quite the day. In any case, this might be a one-time thing. But right now? I would really like to do something with you."

"Oh. I needed to hear you say that last part."

"Okay?"

“It has to come from you, you know? I need to learn your boundaries.”

This isn't the precise guidance Sam was hoping for. He was hoping Reina might take his hand and place it somewhere on her body then tell him how to move it, or something like that. He's good at taking instruction, generally. He listens carefully to Lisa, who interprets instructions from clients. Sam expands on this in private, fulfilling architectural desires clients never realised they harboured. He's very good at that. He should be good at this, too. He should.

“What do you fantasise about?” Reina whispers. “Don't share specifics if you don't want, but maybe there's something we could emulate, metaphorically or whatever.”

Sam isn't sure what this even means.

“Did you like it when I held you tight?”

“I did. After I relaxed into it.”

“And when you relax, is that because you've stopped worrying what might happen next?”

“I guess. Yeah, I guess that's it.”

If Sam could be sure nothing unexpected might occur, the thought of a tight hold into another warm, firm body is marvellous. The thought is always marvellous. The reality is stressful, but there is always the theoretical possibility of marvellousness.

“This will sound weird,” Sam whispers, “but maybe you could lie perfectly still, not move at all while I work on you a little bit.”

“Like, imagine I'm tied down?”

“Yeah.” Sam half sits up. If it weren't dark, he wouldn't be able to look Reina in the eye while having this conversation but now he does

want to see something of her face.

“Well sure. That’s not even a little bit weird, by the way.”

“That’s like run-of-the-mill beginner’s BDSM, I suppose.”

“Do we have anything with us?” Reina asks. “A rope or a tie or something?”

Sam chuckles. “Sure. But then we’d be wearing this tent for a hat.”

Reina also laughs. “Okay. Consider me bound. I’m all yours.”

“I know it’s dark, but close your eyes as well.”

“Any other requests?”

“No further requests.”

Sam remembers the way Reina lifted his shirt that time and pressed kisses into his stomach. If she did that to him, that’s probably the sort of thing she likes to receive herself. So Sam does that, starting below her belly button.

“Sorry,” he says, immediately drawing back. “You flinched.”

“Not a flinch. A frisson.”

He keeps going, and her skin feels surprisingly, impossibly soft, like one of those chamois cloths you get in the case when you update your glasses at the optometrist’s. Sam has always loved the feel of those cloths, to the point where he doesn’t even use them for cleaning his specs. He uses disposable tissues instead, keeping those tiny cloths nice.

“Your skin is beautiful,” Sam tells her, because he’s pretty sure Reina would like to hear that. “Like silk.” ‘Silk’ sounds more complimentary than ‘chamois’. Reina has removed every last bit of her body hair. Sam himself would never achieve this level of hairlessness,

not unless he gave up his day job.

Reina keeps her arms pinned to her side, hands wedged under her bum. As Sam moves his mouth up her torso, her breathing slows. He's aware of her chest and stomach, the rise and fall, rise and fall. It's startling to be so close to someone that you understand the workings of their lungs. Sam can even hear the gurgle of her stomach, another intimate process keeping her so wonderfully alive. He feels this closeness so keenly he almost wants to cry.

He kisses in slow circles around her strong, and beautifully firm chest, muscled like the rest of her. She could roll them both over and pin Sam down if she wanted to, but of course she doesn't.

Sam straddles her perfectly still body and kisses her left nipple.

"I like that," she whispers. "I like that a whole lot."

Sam pulls Reina's hands out from under her bum and pins her arms against the mattress behind her head. He weaves his fingers through hers. He hovers above her like that for a long time, neither of them moving, except for that rise and fall of their chests.

"Am I still bound and blindfolded?" Reina finally asks.

"Yes."

"Are you teasing me, Sam?" she asks playfully, squirming under him a little.

"Mm-hm." He hadn't meant to tease, but this sounds like a decent unintended result.

Sam kisses her neck. She turns her head to allow full access. Sam has never enjoyed mouth kissing. He doesn't like sharing drink bottles or using communal drinking fountains for the same reason. But he's more than happy to kiss Reina's neck and elicit this moan of pleasure.

All he has to do is move his lips in a particular way. It's not rocket science. She is remarkably easy to please. Deep pleasure comes from making someone else so happy, and Reina's pleasure is palpable. It's enough for the both of them. Sam imagines a miasma of it, enveloping them both like a summer fog.

He kisses along her collar bone, then moves up to her jawline, which he loves. He has always loved Reina's wide, open face.

But the miasma of pleasure has evaporated a little, Sam is cognisant of it, and when Reina lowers her chin, he is certain.

"This okay?" he asks.

"My face isn't quite so silky," she says. "You will have noticed."

Sam had noticed, but only because he's never kissed anyone with patches of evening roughness. He's used to the same stubble all over his own face, only he has much more of it. He's only ever kissed a very small number of people in his life. Christmas cheek-pecks aside, the only person who he's kissed properly is, of course, Lisa. Lisa's face is soft.

"Does it bother you?" Reina whispers.

"No, it doesn't bother me."

"What about this?" Reina presses her crotch a little more firmly into Sam's, letting him know what she means.

"Nothing about your body bothers me at all. Mine is doing the exact same thing down there."

But the mood is changed. He must have done something wrong. Typical. No matter how he tries, he can never get this right. Whatever he's doing, however he's enjoying this, it's not enough. He's not enjoying it in the correct way. And if this pleasurable experience is not

enough, nothing will ever be enough.

He releases Reina's arms from his grip.

"Sorry," she says. "I'm so sorry. This is wonderful, I didn't expect to be hit with this."

"Hey." Sam attempts a commanding voice. "A riddle for you. Why doesn't the moon have a beard?"

"I... don't know."

"Because she waxes every month."

"Oh, you're terrible, Muriel."

"You're laughing, though."

Reina's body convulses a little beneath him. "You have the humour of a goofy dad. I'm here for it."

Sam examines Reina's face as best he can through the dark. Laughing or crying, he can't tell which it is. "Did I do something wrong just now?"

"You did nothing wrong. You're wonderful at this. Fantastic. It's just been one of those days, hasn't it. I have them occasionally. And I'm stressed about the flight. This time tomorrow I'll be on that stupid plane. And I know I'm supposed to be looking forward to Jonny's wedding, but I'll be meeting folk I haven't seen since I transitioned, and I'll be wearing a dress that I altered myself, and I'm afraid everyone's too polite to tell me I look ghastly in it."

"Jesus, Reina."

"I'm so vain. I want you to be kissing my perfectly smooth face. I want to pretend I don't normally shave twice per day, because I'm only halfway through a round of laser sessions, which takes for freaking ever. Who am I trying to kid, eh? You've seen how much time I waste

in the bathroom. I'm very much enjoying what we're doing here, and suddenly I'm all up in my head, wishing I'd shaved before we left the house."

"I get it."

"Do you, though?"

"Oh, I really do."

Sam knows exactly what it's like to be up in your head when you really, really don't want to be there. This describes Sam's permanent state. Other people transcend it via arousal, but Sam has never managed that with a partner, not once in his life. He hadn't expected Reina to share an overlapping experience. Sam had assumed Reina was one of those people for whom sex works like breathing. He's seen her dance, for example. He's seen her meditative mindset as she plays piano. He's seen how people appear to experience an erotic or an erotic-adjacent reaction to Reina. She can return a glance which gives even Sam a small stomach flip. He's seen how naturally she hugs family and friends.

If only Sam could convey how very much he accepts every single thing about Reina's body. "Are you mistaking me for a straight guy?" he asks. "Because I'm not, you know. You won't provoke a crisis of masculinity in me, no matter what you've got packed and sprouted."

This is the first time Sam has said this out loud. But it's true. He's "not a straight guy". He is asexual. He is ace.

Sam loves the softness of Reina, the way she nurtures and listens. But no partner of Sam's is required to perform gender to align with Sam's orientation, because it doesn't point anywhere anyway. With non-specific orientation, he's free to love anyone worth loving. To

Sam, no combination of body parts stands out as more arousing than any other. He's forty-four years old and he's given this plenty of thought, dammit. He's wondered if he's gay. He's wondered if he's bi. To understand his asexuality is the most freeing epiphany of all. He sees that now. Reina is the most beautiful person Sam has ever met. But she could literally look like anyone, and so long as she was still Reina, he would love everything about her. He would want to care for her, to provide pleasure, to be close, to spend time. He feels the same about Reina whether she's dressed or undressed, showing up as herself or larping as a man. Sam genuinely doesn't mind, and for the first time in his life, he thinks that maybe his lack of orientation is not a lack at all. His ace-ness is a broadening, in which he and Reina are two separate commas inside a Japanese tomoe, never needing to intersect, yet forming a complete circle.

"That's not rain, is it?"

Reina isn't joking, but Sam can't help but laugh. "You serious? In this drought?"

"Oh. I'm a doofus. I felt that droplet on my chest. Are you okay, Sam?"

"I'm very much more than okay."

"Why you crying?"

"This isn't sad crying. I never cry in front of anyone, by the way. Only ever with you, and now I do it all the time, apparently."

"I'll take it."

"You know I love you, right?"

"I do! I do know that. You told me when you were pissed as a fart and rambling about Isaac Newton."

“Bloody hell.”

“But I’m delighted to hear you say it sober.”

“That’s why I’m never drinking again.”

“Please do, though.”

“I’m glad I said it. I did mean to tell you that night. That’s why I got a bit drunk.”

“Well, that you did.”

“I need to say it more often, don’t I.”

Reina thinks about this. “I’ve been learning how you work. Now I know what to look for, you express it all the time, actually. You choose to spend your time with me. You’re interested in what I’ve been up to, you care about my opinions. What’s that, if not love?”

“I hope you feel it even when I don’t say it, because I don’t have much to offer you, sex-wise.”

“I get it, Sammy. Love does not equal sex. I get it.”

This makes Sam want to cry harder. His chest shudders on the inside.

Reina’s arms are free now, so she holds him by the biceps. “I love you too, by the way. You were probably too drunk to remember me saying it back.”

Sam laughs but his nose is a little on the snotty side now. “Damn, I need tissues. They’re in the car.”

“I’ll fetch them for you. I need to get up anyway. When I come back do you want me to zip up the sides of this tent?”

“I’d rather you keep me warm with a hug for now, if that’s okay.”

“Sounds excellent to me. You’re officially into hugs then, sometimes, with prior permission?”

“I was always into hugs. It’s just, I don’t like them when they come at me unexpected, with possible unspoken promises attached.”

“And hugs mean hugs. Got it.”

“You do great tight hugs.”

“I am good at hugs. Remember that.”

Reina carefully manoeuvres her long limbs to origami herself out of the tent without kicking Sam in the head.

Sam lies on the thick swag mattress and thinks he might have a vague recollection of Reina saying something like that to him the night he got plastered. It means far more now, now that he’s shown his entire self and is loved back anyway.

Reina understands this. Of all the people in the world who wouldn’t, he has found someone who understands.

# LATE-NIGHT VISITORS

1 JAN 2018

Sam drops Reina off at the bus stop in town.

Together in the car, out of view, Reina squeezes Sam's hand. "I'll text you heaps," she says. "You'll get sick of my pings, that's how often I'll text you."

"I'll want pics of the wedding."

"Wish you were coming with me."

Sam wishes this, too.

Reina pats her pockets. "Wallet. Passport. If I've forgotten anything I don't need it, so hiff it out."

"Got it."

Sam watches Reina get onto the coach. She texts him from her window seat and urges him to get on outta here.

With Reina gone, Della's house is more sombre than ever. Somehow Mangleby Flat is even quieter than it was last week, when Della was alive and in hospital. The house seemed nothing without Della. Della and the house were one and the same. She wouldn't recognise it now. She'd be traumatised by the sight of it.

"Sorry, Mum."

Sam hangs out his finished load of washing and finds one of Reina's t-shirts. He pegs it up to dry, next to one of his own.

Without Reina's playlist blasting through Della's TV speakers, all Sam hears is the intermittent chattering of chooks. He's almost done here. He can't be bothered painting any walls. He's no longer ashamed

of this house. Any buyers can take it as is.

But there's nothing much can be done about real estate on New Year's Day. Even agents have a few days off per year.

He turns on Della's TV and lies on the couch. He's never taken an interest in cricket, except as something to nap through. He sleeps all afternoon and into the evening. A week of hard labour and interrupted sleeping has caught up with him. It's been years since he slept during the day, and now he's slept seven hours straight. He can hardly believe the time when he wakes up, horribly thirsty and slightly cramped.

Then he remembers he's alone in the house, and immediately wants to fall back to sleep. With an upset circadian rhythm, he's in for a long, lonely night.

He checks his phone while standing on the bottom rung of the front fence. Reina has texted him three times since leaving Mangleby. He chides himself for failing to respond before she boarded her plane. He sends an apologetic text in reply but Reina won't get it for hours yet.

He makes himself a hot cheese jaffle for dinner, one last Della Dennon special. This old jaffle maker is getting a final run before he adds it to the dump pile.

Reina has also left her novel behind.

"In case you get some time to relax," she'd said. "It's good."

Sam rarely reads fiction these days. After a film-buff, fiction-reading boon in his twenties, when the interiority of character-driven stories allowed him educational insight into other people's brains, eventually fiction only served to underscore his essential difference.

Even when stories are about espionage and war, they so often include a tandem plot revolving around love and sex. Characters muse endlessly about pairing up. They think about each other's bodies in ways he assumed must be pure fiction, which was fine until he realised the romantic plots illuminated the main truth of fiction.

Perhaps he can recoup his original enthusiasm for fiction. He returns to the couch and opens to page one.

But soon he is startled to his feet by someone's fist pounding against the front door. He never heard anyone drive in.

It's very dark outside.

"Keep safe out there on your own, Sam," Reina had instructed. "Promise me."

And now he's let his guard down. He intended to drive back to last night's camping spot, where the swags are still pitched. But whoever's here now has beaten him to it, and now they pound powerfully on his front door. He can't pretend he's not home. Hallway lights are on.

So he creeps towards the front door, avoiding the creakiest floorboards. He manages a furtive peek through a freshly cleaned window, which he now wishes he'd left grimy.

It's the O'Doyles again. He recognises their double cab ute, then the silhouettes of their mullet hair styles. It's just the two sons this time, unless old Barry is out of view. Looks like Jared is the one who knocked. The guy seems twitchy and restless, pacing around in the front yard. Brogan has lit a cigarette and leans on their car like his brother did on that last visit.

"Sam!" Jared calls out. "You home, mate?"

He doesn't sound angry, but maybe that's how the O'Doyle brothers are hoping to lure him out.

"Can't have pissed off far," Brogan says, clearly audible to Sam through the flyscreen. "That rental's still here, plus Della's ute."

"Reckon he'll sell that, too?"

"Don't want it."

"What about for parts?"

"Sam!" Jared yells a second time. Then to his brother, "Do you reckon he'd mind if we just grab 'em?"

Suddenly Sam understands why they're here. They haven't returned to give him the bash; they're here to collect the roosting chooks.

"I'm checking round the back," Brogan announces.

Sam greets the brothers at Della's back door without revealing he's spent any time at all wrapped in the front curtain.

"There you are," Jared says. "Thought you might be dead."

"Fuck sake." Brogan disapproves.

"Aw, that was a shit thing to say. Sorry about your mum and that."

Sam escorts the O'Doyles to the hen house where Della's chooks are sleepy and easy to seize. Their plump, feathery bodies are soon encaged on the tray of the O'Doyles' ute, along with half a sack of layer pallets.

"What's the damage?" Jared reaches into his back pocket.

"Forget it. You're doing these birds a favour."

"Hey Jared," says Brogan. "The Pyrex."

"Oh yeah. Mum said to get her dish back."

Sam retrieves Cathy's empty casserole dish from the kitchen.

“Tell her it was delicious.”

“Bet it wasn’t.” This is the first time Brogan has said something that might be mistaken for a direct address to Sam.

Sam decides not to argue. These young men are the experts on Cathy O’Doyle’s garlicky casseroles.

Sam hands the dish back to Jared.

“This the same one? Looks brand new.”

Reina had spent a long time on that with hot soapy water and steel wire.

“This is embarrassing,” Jared says, scratching the back of his head, “but I wanted to say to you both, sorry about Dad the other day. He’s old school. I’m not making excuses but, like, I’ve tried to have a word in his ear, but he’s insulated, you know? There’s no schooling him.”

Sam nods.

“Thing is, I’m a bit that way myself. Mucked around with boys at boarding school and that. Nothing wrong with it. Whatever makes you happy. That’s what I truly believe in my heart, eh.”

Sam glances at Brogan, who has clearly heard this information before. Either that or he’s incapable of registering surprise.

“I’ll never forget one school camp at Lake Wendouree,” Jared continues.

Is this what happens when strangers discover you’re queer? The unlikeliest of blokes start informing you of stuff you never asked to hear?

“Let’s talk business,” Sam deflects. “Still interested in this place?”

“Hell yeah. I mean, the missus and me are living with the olds and it’s getting a bit much. We don’t have much to spend, but.”

“Let’s work something out. Give me your mobile number.”

By this point, Sam would happily donate the place. He might be doing that yet. It can’t be easy farming in this drought.

Minutes later, Sam stands under the front veranda and watches the O’Doyle tail lights disappear into the dark with Della’s chooks.

Even out here, times might be changing for the better.

He follows Reina’s instructions and returns to the hidden swag spot. He straps a head torch to his forehead and continues reading the novel. He can enjoy the characterisation now, free from obligation to play a fictional role in real life: pretending to be a sexy romantic someone when he simply doesn’t roll that way.

**Part Eleven:**

**THE HOME**

**QUEER**



# **SAM & MO**

**REINA'S HOUSE**

**LATE JANUARY**

**2018**

Evening tennis at the club isn't the same without Reina, who is still in England. She's been sending regular photos to Sam. She did look fabulous in her parent-of-the-groom hat.

On the Thursday before her return, Sam leaves the tennis courts and notices the dim, flickering light of TV emanating from Reina's ground floor across the cul-de-sac. He knocks on the front door.

Mo opens the door dressed in a cow onesie, holding a bowl of Weet-bix to their chest. "Reina's still in England," they say.

"Yeah, I know. I came to see you."

Mo raises one silver-studded eyebrow. "Okaaay."

Sam follows Mo inside. Without Reina, this joint really does get feral. Mo sets their late-night cereal on the coffee table, then clears a portion of sofa. After Mo's numerous apologies for the mess, Sam and Mo sit down, side-by-side.

Even in profile, Mo looks set to receive bad news, or at least a stern telling-off.

Sam should put Mo out of their misery. "Hey, thanks for the cake, kiddo."

“The cake?”

“For giving Reina the idea. The cake, last year.”

“What the... That coming-out cake was for you?”

“Sure was.”

“Tu meke, bro. That cake was the gods, eh? Auntie ordered a second one and gave it to me. Better late than never.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t get a cake when you first needed one.”

Mo says nothing to that.

“Hey, I admire you for knowing yourself so young. It’s taken me way too long.” Sam has been feeling melancholy since finding the asexual label for himself. On behalf of his younger self, he feels robbed.

Mo shrugs. “Part of me thinks I should’ve stealthed it til I got on my feet. At least you got to do that.”

“What do you mean?”

“My old man kicked me out of the house when I was fifteen.”

“For coming out as asexual?”

“Yeah, and for being queer in general. He doesn’t get what asexual means, and he won’t fucken learn. He thinks it’s what perverts and pedoes call themselves for cover, or some shit.”

“What’s the logic there?”

“Ain’t no logic to bigotry, bro. Irony is, Dad always warned me against pregnancy. Turns out there was actually an obligation to have sex, at some undisclosed date and time, with a person of his own vetting.”

Sam laughs. “Sorry. That was a snigger of recognition.”

“If you don’t laugh you’ll cry though, eh.”

“So what’s it like more generally, being out and proud as ace?”

“Well, I’m out.” Mo holds up their hand to display a black ace ring on their right middle finger. “Still working on the ‘proud’ part. Anyway, you can probably guess people’s reactions. You get everything, eh. First you got the people who don’t believe asexuality is real.”

“To be fair, I thought *they* were all lying — about experiencing sexual attraction.”

“For real. Still reckon the allosexuals must be bullshitting.”

Sam and Mo both chuckle.

“Some people think they know what asexuality means,” Mo continues, “and they think they must know what it means for me, but they don’t. The worst of that lot tell me to get my hormones checked because they don’t know the difference between attraction and libido. Baffles me how sexually active people can’t figure out that basic distinction, but whatever. Then you’ve got your armchair shrinks. They assume I’m ace because, well, trauma.”

“I hear you there.”

“Yeah? And then you get the people assume all aces are disgusted by sex. They don’t realise how many allos operate around the entire concept of disgust. Those fuckers shut you down for daring to mention the a-word. Some of them, even our fellow queers, have worked hard to claim their own sexuality and assume we want to yank it away. I don’t care if people have sex! Have at it, mofoes!”

“I hear that, too.”

“People are invasive. They ask if I masturbate, if I have sex fantasies, if I watch porn. At least if you’re gay these days you can say you’re gay and people leave it there, mostly. Being gay is all about who you love. That’s been the marketing slant anyhow, to legitimise gayness

for the straights. But for us aces, questions focus on our private sex thoughts and acts. No other group gets asked all the time, by complete fucken strangers, about jacking off and porn, with the endgame of them going, 'Aha! So you're not asexual after all! Now I can legit treat you as a fellow human!'"

"That sounds... bloody awful."

"Tautoko! People think in binaries, and they sexist as hell. If they read me as a boy, they assume I'm an incel. If they read me as a girl they say girls don't experience sexual attraction anyway, so I'm normal, actually, hahaha."

"Sounds like those people are telling on themselves."

"Right? Then they say I'm too young to know who I am. They say I'm immature."

"Ah, yep." Sam used to be sensitive around the accusation of immaturity. He is starting to recast his childlike joy as a strength. Sam's inability to follow the heteronormative cultural script may have freed him up somewhat, to pursue deep passions he might otherwise have left in childhood for fear of appearing unattractive to others.

"They tell me I haven't met the right person yet," Mo continues, "how I can't have had good sex. Some offer to show me how it's done. Anyway, that's what you get for being out as ace. Basic crap from basic people, forever and ever, amen."

"But did your friends take it okay?"

"You have to re-curate your friends because some of them don't want to tell you the relationship and sex things they always told you before. Others treat you like you're some little kid who doesn't know a thing about sex and relationships, even though I've been living in the

world as long as they have, marinating in the dominant culture like they have. I get their stupid sex jokes. Some of them are even funny. Meanwhile, they assume if they know nothing about my experience of the world, I know nothing of theirs. But that's not how it goes when you're a drastic minority. Minorities always understand the dominant culture better than the other way around. That's how it goes."

"Sounds lonely being out. About as lonely as being in."

Mo considers this carefully. "Not as lonely. Way more annoying though."

"Exhausting. How do you counter the youth and naïvety argument? No winning that one, I bet."

Mo has an answer locked and loaded. They have clearly been sitting on this very couch for years, waiting for someone like Sam to come along and ask these exact questions.

"I say, bitch, I might be young, but how old were you when you first experienced sexual attraction? Turns out the average age is eleven. So I tell them. I say, 'I'm fully twice that age. You doubting Thomases will be at this gas-lighty shit when I'm at death's door. Fuck the fuck off. Mind your own mahi.' That's what I say to that."

It is relatable but disturbing, watching Mo get animated like this. At first Sam wonders if Mo really has responded with such force and articulation in the face of real-time ignorance. Perhaps Mo's recollection is wishful *l'esprit d'escalier*, or *Treppenwitz* as the Germans call it. Sam himself is frequently thinking of great comebacks as soon as the moment has passed. Then again, Mo is perfectly articulate in this moment. It's admirable.

Sam says: "You're twenty-two, I'm forty-four. Would people say

I'm too young to know?"

"For sure. You'll get it when you're eighty-eight."

Sam sits with this for a while. "If I were to come out more widely, I'd be signing myself up as an everyday activist, sounds like."

"But unless you come out you never find your rainbow whānau."

"So I've realised."

Mo says, "I always hung out with the queer kids at school, even before I knew I was queer myself."

Sam nods. "That's true of me, too."

Sam hasn't made many friends in his life, but he thinks of Crispin at school; the short, strange friendship between himself and Miriam at uni, with her inexplicable queerness; then a long dry-spell in which Lisa made cishet couple-friends on behalf of them both. Then, of course, most wonderfully, there was Reina, ready and waiting for Sam to emerge from his chrysalis.

"Speaking of family," Sam says, "mind me asking about your family of origin? Do you have whānau looking out for you?"

"My cousins are cool with it. They're mostly up in Auckland though."

"What about your mum?"

"She's under the old man's thumb. It's mostly just me on my own."

"And what were you planning for your future, before you came out?"

"I only want a quiet life. I want a house with a veranda, a place to hang with friends. I don't want to change the world. I want to just be."

"I hear that."

“But I’ll never afford a home of my own. You need two big-ass double incomes for a semi-comfortable life these days and I’m not the partnering-up kind of ace.”

“Real estate really is a problem for younger generations. You might find like-minded housemates to buy property with, non-romantically, with legal docs all drawn up. That might be the safest route to home ownership for everyone, in fact.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

Sam should stop this. It feels cruel, to put the dream of home ownership into the head of a kid without inherited wealth.

“If it was feasible, I’d work in a café. Make coffees for people. Or maybe a commercial kitchen. I wouldn’t mind learning how to make really good cakes. But for what you end up earning, I don’t reckon the student debt is worth it. Most days I don’t see the point of anything, really.”

“Mo, I have a proposition for you. I’m serious about this. If you’d like to get your tickets in cookery, or in anything at all, I’ll take care of the fees. Aim high. I can see you’re thoughtful and insightful. You have a lot to offer. So let’s get you schooled-up and launched. I’ll discuss with Reina when she gets back to Wellington how we can both take care of your basic living needs for the duration of your study.”

Mo stares and blinks. “For real?”

“Dead set. You don’t need student debt on top of everything else.”

“But why would you do that for me?”

“Let’s see. My own economic good fortune is largely generational. I inherited wealth, and I also came of age when home ownership wasn’t a pipe dream. I mean, there are downsides to being a Gen Xer.

I've spent half my adult life believing I was broken. I never had the words to come out as ace to myself. So my own family never truly knew me, either. I'll never know how my auntie and uncle would have felt about getting to know the real me. Maybe their reaction also wouldn't have been good."

"Would they have kicked you out?"

"I prefer the version where they don't. They assumed I was gay for a while and seemed okay with that. But asexual? That might've been a bridge too far. Regardless, my aunt and uncle got me to where I am today. They expected great things from me, including grandbabies. I'll never be a parent, but let's not attach excessive significance to genetics. Humans connect in various ways. I wanted to sit next to you for a moment and say, you're the first young person that I've met and known to be ace. So you feel like family to me."

"I don't even know what to say." Mo gets up from the couch and starts pacing. Their cow tail swings to and fro.

Finally: "That's so awesome. Holy shit, Sam. Yes. Yassss! I'm gonna make you so many cakes and frothy coffees. I'll pork you right up, you'll be so full of ace cakes!"

Then Mo jumps onto Sam for a hug. Sam doesn't mind it too much, though he could do without the joyous pummelling.

# **SAM & LISA**

## **SAM'S CARPARK**

**END OF JANUARY 2018**

Reminiscent of years past, today Lisa and Sam leave the office together and get into the same vehicle. Sam's Lexus.

"Where are we off to?" Lisa asks.

"Nowhere. I just need a private chat."

"In a car parking building?"

"I could drive us to a beach?"

"In this weather? What's going on with you?" Lisa looks set to cry already. "You're not sick, are you? Are you sick?"

"Healthy as an ox." That's a direct quote from Sam's doctor.

Lisa's shoulders relax. "You don't look sick, by the way. You're looking relaxed lately."

That may be true, but Sam isn't feeling relaxed in this moment. It's one thing to have a label for yourself, another to share it. And even if he shares with Lisa this newly discovered label for himself, she won't necessarily get anything useful from it. Awareness without acceptance is worse than awareness alone.

Lisa is desperate for Sam to spit it out. "Is this work related or personal?"

"Maybe just listen?"

Lisa pinches two fingers across her mouth, as if to zip her lip.

“First, an update on Reina. You asked me once if we were more than friends. We weren’t, but we are now. Things changed in Mangleby Flat.”

Lisa presses the back of her head against the headrest. An unreadable look. “Oh, Sam. I’m so glad.”

Sam has been gripping the steering wheel. He unfurls his fingers. “I didn’t know how you’d react.”

“How could I be less than delighted?”

“Thought you might find it confronting.”

“Confronting?”

“You’ve wondered if I’m gay in times past.”

“Oh. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“No, I’m still not gay.”

“I don’t pretend to understand how that all works, with sexual orientation and gender identity and what have you. It’s not my world. I can’t keep up.”

“Labels can be tricky, but I want to tell you something else. I’m asexual. That’s the word I’ve been needing all this time. I’m still not comfortable voicing it. But that’s the word.”

Lisa says, “Yeah, I wondered that too.”

“You did? Well, share that one with the class, why don’t you?”

“I didn’t have the word for it, either! Though I suppose we could’ve guessed.”

“It’s one of those words, people think they know what it means, but every asexual person is different.”

“You’d better explain to me, then.”

“You know me pretty well, how I’ve never been able to imagine myself as a sexual person. I do enjoy sex as a concept. I like the idea of others enjoying sex. But not me. As soon as I insert myself into the scenario, I’m out.”

“That’s actually quite sweet, when you think about it.”

“I am attracted to you, Lise, in many ways. I’ve always needed your validation, your company, your smarts, your sense of humour. Guess I mistook those attractions for the sexual kind most people feel.”

“You’re right—” she swallows, “this is hard to hear.”

“I’m so sorry. I wanted to be there, specifically with you, in bed. It’s just, I kept imagining you with someone different, someone better. And you saw right through it. You sensed my mind had left the room.”

“A ‘better’ man? Cripes, Sammy.”

Sam reaches past Lisa’s knees and retrieves tissues from the glove compartment.

Lisa accepts the whole box. “So we were alone but together in the same bed, each trying our best.”

This display of emotion is why he hasn’t taken Lisa out to a restaurant, or even to the beach.

“Asexual’, huh.” Lisa turns the word over in her mouth, trying it out. “Without the word we never had a fighting chance. And you’re with someone new now. How’s that working out?” She immediately retracts the question. “Sorry. I don’t mean to pry.”

“Honestly? We’re working things out as we go.”

“Tell me... how does it work? If you’re not having sex, how are you and Reina more than good friends?”

Sam predicted this question. If only he had a ready answer. Across his entire adult life, Sam has been expected to intuit what sexual people mean when they speak of attraction and desire. Now, for the first time in her life, Lisa is required to simply accept a way-of-being in the world that she, in turn, may never fully understand: That love can run deep, as deep as anything, even without the glue of sexual attraction.

“We’re more than good friends,” Sam says, simply. “Please accept that.”

Lisa is biting her bottom lip. She does this when measuring her words. “Is Reina good with all this? You’ve discussed it?”

“Yes and yes.”

But Lisa resumes with the lip biting. Sam considers ending their conversation here. He’s never queried Lisa’s relationship with Graham. Sam accepted its legitimacy without question. In fact, the auto-granted legitimacy of Lisa-and-Graham was the very thing that stung like a bitch when Sam first learned of their interest in each other.

“I don’t want to see you hurt,” Lisa whispers.

“Yeah, well, there’s every chance we won’t work out. Reina and I have had our ups and downs. We’re early days in this more committed phase. To be honest, I considered not telling you yet, but then I realised Reina and myself don’t owe anyone a display of happiness to justify being together, for as long as we can make it. And also? If this doesn’t work out, I’d want you to support me in my grief. That’s partly why I’m telling you. Truthfully, I worry constantly that I’m not enough for Reina, because I wasn’t enough for you.”

Lisa pulls another four tissues from the box. "I've never thought you're not enough," she manages. "You and I share magnificent memories. We built this little business into something amazing. We're great together in so many ways. I have no regrets, you hear me? None."

Sam nods. He has wanted to hear that for so long.

"Anyway, tell me about Reina. I barely know the basics."

Sam jumps at the chance to talk about Reina. The floodgates open. He tells Lisa how she and Reina read the same novels. They have similar opinions on films. Unlike Lisa, Reina likes to cook and garden. She's an excellent musician. She has grown-up children in England, and another preschooler in Christchurch.

"Bethany is four," Sam says. "In fact, Reina will be living with Anya this year, little Bethany's mum, who has a teaching contract down there."

Lisa returns a quizzical look.

"Please don't, Lise. Don't ask how on earth Reina and I can consider ourselves together when this is our situation."

Lisa had opened her mouth but changes her mind. She tries again. "Is this a polyamorous set up?"

"Guess it is."

"So, Reina has another lover."

"What's your point?"

"Sammy, you're the loyal, monogamous type. If I know you at all, I know that much."

"Reina is equally loyal. These are all long-term relationships of hers."

"Other relationships plural?"

“Aside from Anya there’s someone else up in King Country. Then there’s the mother of Reina’s older daughter in England. I met Sylvia in December at Reina’s birthday party. She’s lovely as well.”

Lisa looks exactly as concerned as Sam had dreaded. Perhaps he’s conveying too much of Reina’s private business to Lisa. If Lisa looked neutral he’d happily keep talking about Reina, but now he senses judgement.

Lisa continues to measure her words. “In sum, Reina has a partner up north, another down south, and that’s just the Southern Hemisphere.”

“You make it sound like she’s got a lover in every port.”

“No, hold on. Geographically speaking, that puts you conveniently in the middle of the country, smack bang between the King Country person and the woman down in Christchurch. She isn’t using your home address, is she?”

“Reina’s in England right now, attending her son’s wedding. I’ll be storing some of her stuff at my house while she’s in the South Island though.”

“Wait. Okay. You’ll hate me saying this. I’m saying it anyway, because I know your financial situation. Have you drawn up a property agreement? Graham can recommend someone.”

“You’re right. I do hate you saying that.”

“Even if things seem rosy now—”

“Believe it or not, Reina doesn’t want me for my money.”

“God, I’m not suggesting that. I knew you’d take it like that. I’ve always worried you might fall prey to one of those online scammers or something. You have this deep-seated desire to take care of someone.”

Sam says nothing to this. He's too angry. Lisa knows how to chuck a backhanded compliment.

"Maybe if I met her properly," Lisa says, quietly. "For me Reina's this intriguing enigma I sometimes cross paths with."

"You'd like her."

"Go on, tell me more. I'm genuinely fascinated."

"I'm too shitty."

Lisa laughs, which is even more annoying. "I can already see she's good for you. To recognise you're angry, and to let me know, instead of stalking off and pretending you're fine. I believe Reina's taught you that."

"I've been seeing a psychologist, fyi."

"Oh! You have?"

"But yes, you're correct about Reina. She doesn't let me away with my usual hermiting. She's a 'communicator'."

"We were never good at that, you and me."

"We were young. Also, the culture has changed around us. I never had a word to describe my experience of attraction before. If I'd known, I'd have told you."

"It must be a relief, to have a word."

"It is."

"I remember the relief after finally getting my endometriosis named. I wasn't imagining the pain, after all. A word made all the difference." Lisa sniffs, then blows into another tissue. "You know she's hot, right? That girlfriend of yours?"

"So you've said. Meaning, my girlfriend makes you hot."

Lisa raspberries. "You make that sound weird."

“I may be asexual but I appreciate beauty, Lise.”

“She’s not wasted on you, then.”

Sam makes a conscious decision not to be offended by Lisa’s notions of ‘waste’. A possible counter-factual, according to Lisa-logic: legitimate loving relationships must be based on sexual attraction. Every other form of attraction is lesser, and therefore ‘a waste’.

That’s not what Lisa meant, though. She is asking for reassurance.

“I’ve always loved looking at you, too, Lise. I could look at you all day. In fact I do, when my blinds are open, through those glass walls at the office.”

Lisa’s smile is uncharacteristically shy. “You also look at Loafie like that.”

“Don’t you make it weird.”

“Sorry. I’m unused to compliments from you.”

“Just don’t imagine some damaging asymmetry between Reina and myself. Sure, Reina has other people. But I’ve got you. Like it or not, you’re a part of this constellation. You’ll always be a part of me.”

# QUEERPLATONIC

RĀHUI (LOCKDOWN)

MARCH 2020

Sam has never liked video chats but he'd better get used to it. No one knows how long this pandemic will last. From his home office, he calls Brad Wilson for a check-in.

"We're fine at ours, except for bog roll," Brad tells him. "Who would've thunk the apocalypse would start with panic buying, eh? The zombie flicks got that wrong."

Brad is interrupted by one of his kids, asking for a snack. "Excuse this," he says to Sam. "I've got four rugrats here. Nice and quiet at the hermitage though, I bet."

"Not at all. I have a full house, too."

"A full house? Filling that massive mansion of yours?"

"Reina's here, as it happens."

Reina had previously been splitting her time between Sam's house and her own.

Brad nods.

"We also have Reina's older daughter, Ree."

Ree moved from England to Wellington to study at Vic, after tuition fees in England shot up. Ree has been sleeping upstairs in the

observatory, making her way through Sam's astronomy books when she ought to be studying chemistry. Sam has correctly surmised that Ree will soon be switching degrees.

"Then there's Anya," Sam continues. "That's Reina's other partner."

Brad raises his eyebrows but says nothing.

Anya moved back from Christchurch last year, but had no luck securing warm, affordable accommodation in Wellington. So Anya has been living in Sam's other wing for three months already. She was last week pinged as a close contact, and is currently self-isolating on the other side of the house.

"Anya and Reina have a five-year-old together," Sam adds. "So Bethany's with us, of course."

Brad nods again.

Bethany has been sleeping upstairs with her big sister Ree on the observatory bed. Every night is a sisterly adventure up there. During the day, Reina entertains Bethany. Even from his home office, Sam hears Reina's comical voices as she teaches Beth to read. In the afternoons they bake, then hop around to music, at which point Sam dons noise-cancelling headphones. Sam has bought a trampoline. Bethany likes to show Sam how high she can jump. She uses the empty chook pen Sam purchased for Della as a playhouse. Sam has furnished it with a child-size chair, and given her his picnic set from the campervan. Bethany serves mud pies garnished with grass. Not even Loafie will eat them.

"And Loafie," Sam says to Brad. "That makes six in our bubble."

"You're well outnumbered, mate. No other blokes at your place."

The gender breakdown of Sam's lockdown family had not crossed Sam's mind. It feels strange, lately, whenever someone reminds him of his manliness. Unrestricted by gender, Sam only knows he is with his own people these days.

Unlike Brad, Sam's house-companions let him close the door of his well-appointed home office for hours at a time. By sinking into his work, Sam keeps away from world news. No one across the country has left their house in weeks. Sam is built for lockdown. It is obscenely cosy here.

With musicians in the house, Sam's evenings end with live music. Everyone crams into the spa pool to drink kombucha until fingers wrinkle.

Yesterday Sam snapped a pic of Reina, Ree and Beth on the sofa, stacked against each other on his teal sofa in order from big to small. The fabric has several stains on it now, which imbue the furniture with its own history. For the photo, Bethany tried to hold Loafie in her lap, but Loafie came out as a squirmy blur.

This must be what happiness looks like, pandemic version.

Now Reina prepares to join Sam in his bed for the night. They both sleep in Sam's king-size bed lately, with Anya currently occupying Reina's sometimes-other-wing.

A work of art hangs on the wall above Sam's bed, based on a photograph of Della which Reina rescued from Mangleby Flat. A backdrop designer from Reina's theatre troupe turned the laughing portrait of Della into a giant, colourful painting. This was Reina's Christmas present to Sam last year. A young Della relaxes in a deck

chair lit from behind by a brilliant Mangleby sunset. Bandit must have just jumped up into her lap because Della throws her head back as the dog licks under her chin. This image of Della with her dog persuades Sam that his mother was happy too, once. Our mothers live twice in our imaginations: The first life ends the moment we are born.

Sam, too, feels he has lived twice. He is becoming an important figure in the life of young people. But his second life really began when he became acquainted with himself.

“I’m so happy I feel guilty,” Sam confides to Reina, who is inclined to fuff around before getting into bed each night.

“Because Aotearoa is sealed off and for now we’re safe from the virus?” Reina stands before the dresser, carefully removing her birthday necklace. In the two years since Sam gave it to her, Reina has worn it every day, even during lockdown.

Sam nods. “The world is in chaos, yet I’m so happy here.”

“Me too. There must be a word to describe that feeling.”

This exemplifies the sort of thing Reina is inclined to ask before sleep, leading them both into deep dive discussions.

“We could look it up,” Sam says, “but then we’d also see news.”

Reina joins Sam under the covers and cuddles in close, turning Sam into the little spoon. “Tell me not to check my phone,” she says into the nape of his neck. She does have her England crew to worry about.

“Nothing will have happened. England is barely waking up.”

For Sam, health anxiety brought on by the pandemic is no worse than his regular base level. With therapy he’s learned to wrangle it somewhat. Now it seems the rest of the world has joined him in his

health anxiety.

Reina eventually rolls away and reaches for her novel. Sam reaches for his.

Anya has shared her observation that Sam and Reina are lucky to have found each. Neither complains about the other because they both read until two in the morning. Last one awake turns off the bedside lamp and straps on a head torch.

### THE FOLLOWING DAY

Anya's two weeks of self-isolation come to an end. Emerging from the other wing, Anya requests tight hugs all round. Sam gets caught up in all of this. These days he doesn't mind. Reina has desensitised him, just a little, to the shock of bodily contact.

Later that night, Sam showers, puts on pyjamas and settles into bed alone.

Reina knocks on his bedroom door, freshly showered herself.

"Hey, you." Sam puts down his book. "Aren't you expected elsewhere?"

"I came to say goodnight."

Reina sits against the curve of Sam's body.

"And are you one hundred per cent fine with this plan?" Reina asks. "Night about, under your own roof?"

"I'm not the patriarch of the roof. Go on, off you trot. Anya's waiting for you. Loafie and I are good as gold in here."

"Hey, I'll bring you a coffee tomorrow morning, since Beth is sure to wake us early."

“Sounds good to me.”

Reina leaves for the night.

With the bedroom door clicked gently shut in her wake, Sam starfishes across the width of his mattress. Loafie downward-dogs out of her own bed and joins Sam on his. She places one paw on his belly, asking to lie across him, sharing his warmth. She emits one of her squeaky yawns and settles comfortably, as invited.

Sam returns to his book about hyperspace and time warps. He’s read most of it. These days when Sam contemplates the universe he feels held by something bigger than himself.

But he doesn’t feel up to astronomical reading tonight. He’s expended brainpower all day, working from home on a design for new clients. So he reaches for a different book, this one gifted from Reina. A strange choice, Reina forewarned: A compilation of early readers, all concerning the low-key adventures of a frog and a toad who are very close friends.

“I hope you won’t find this offensively childish,” Reina had said when she handed it to him gift-wrapped on his birthday. “It’s a gag gift.”

But Sam is no longer sensitive to the binary delineation between ‘adult’ and ‘child’. His unambiguously adult self can embrace childlike joys.

Sam reaches for the cosy amphibian stories because he feels a tinge of sadness, knowing that Reina is joining Anya in bed on the other side of the house.

Not jealousy; he wouldn’t call it that. This variety of hurt probably doesn’t even have a word, though he knows a bit of young-person

lingo these days, and they might call it FOMO. But it's not even fear of missing out, because Sam doesn't want what most people have. He wants to want it, but he never will. Moreover, he'll never know the extent of what he's missing. The German word 'Fernweh' might work: A longing for distant places, never seen. Fernweh, yes, but for sex.

Whatever it is, this pang will never leave him completely. So he reads a few stories about the frog and the toad who accept each other, warts and all. He can see why Reina chose it for him. She's the Frog and Sam is the Toad.

In another wing of the house, Reina and Anya get what they need from each other.

As for Sam, space has always been the greatest gift. If there exists a deeper joy than Reina's gift of loving solitude, he simply cannot imagine.

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