

*'A beautifully written memoir that powerfully delivers
the wisdom each of us will need at some point about how a human
life is spacious enough to accommodate both grief and joy.'*

SARAH KRASNOSTEIN

Found,



Wanting

a memoir

Natasha Sholl

FOUND, WANTING

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NATASHA SHOLL

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press

Dedicated to those who have had to say goodbye too soon.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Found, Wanting is a work of narrative non-fiction based on my experience of loss. In some cases, people, places and events have been purposely altered to maintain some level of anonymity. In other cases, people, places and events have been forever altered by the lens of grief. Trauma distorts the present moment and twists our memories of the past. As a grief memoir, it is accurate only insofar as it captures the madness of grief.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

ON THE DAY HE DIED

THE BUSINESS OF DEATH had already started. The more people moved and talked, the further I was taken from the last time I had seen Rob alive. As if the milliseconds, seconds, minutes were propelled by movement. I tried my best to keep time anchored. Tried to keep still. It was making me seasick, the flurry of activity. The sound and the noise. *JUST STOP*, I wanted to shout. But the effort to speak would have been too much. Would have pushed us further still.

I found out later that the morning he died was when my friend Romy had called, while my brother guarded my phone to stem the flow. She had called to tell me she was engaged. Her fiancé, Jez, had proposed on Valentine's Day because this was the kind of thing that happens on Valentine's Day. She was the first in our group of friends, all in our early twenties. My brother Andrew had picked up the phone and told her Rob had died. I was the first in our group of friends too, it seemed.

'Don't let Natasha find out,' my brother was told. His duty was to make sure no one started talking about wedding plans in the midst of funeral plans. As if acknowledging good news would somehow make Rob more dead. Or worse, as if his death would somehow taint her joy. The loss like a shadow, darkening everything in its path.

It wasn't until a week later, after the funeral, that Romy came over to tell me that Jez had proposed. A loud, cackling burst of laughter followed by tears. The awkward clunk of our heads as we leaned in close. Her blonde strands clinging tight to the strands of my dark brown hair. The way even our follicles knew. *Sorry*, we whispered over and over. To each other. To ourselves.

I bought her an Italian cookbook as an engagement present to show that I was happy for her even though I was absolutely not. That I thought about her and Jez fucking to celebrate their engagement as I performed CPR. That

I wished it was Jez who had died even though this was not something I was allowed to think about. I bought an Italian cookbook for the newly engaged couple to hide this fact. I hoped that every time she made Bucatini all'Amatriciana on page 257 she would know that Rob loved me more than Jez loved her and that the world was a place of unbridled horror.

No one had ever felt like us before. We thought we were the only ones. We were smug with our love. Maybe this is where it all went wrong.

Rob and I met at a party, although we didn't technically meet. My school friend Elise was dating one of his friends. At the kitchen island in a seventies-style Californian bungalow with a swell of people, there he was. Someone was pouring drinks into plastic cups. Flat Coke. Cranberry juice. The smell of gin made me gag a little after drinking too much of it the weekend before. Dark skin, long brown hair, unnervingly blue-green eyes and enormous arms and shoulders hugged tight by his clothing. The kind of tight t-shirt that wouldn't have been tight on anyone else.

We didn't say a word. It was a night that was otherwise completely forgettable. Bookended by forgettable moments. The stickiness of the benches, the background noise of overlapping conversations. The loud drunk-volume laughter. Hipster jeans and excessive bronzer. The crunch underfoot of dirt brought in from the garden. These are things I know to be true but not things I remember. I make up these details to flesh out the night. To give meat to it. The night we met. The split second of eye contact.

It was months later that my phone rang. As if it was a completely ordinary ring. As if it wasn't the phone call that would change everything.

'Hi, it's Rob,' said the voice. 'I got your number from Elise.'

'Sorry, who?' I asked. We had never been introduced.

The party. The overlapping friendship circles. He fumbled an explanation.

'Oh,' I said. 'Are you the one with the big arms?' *Oh my god. Shut up.*

I found out later that he had seen me in a photo. He'd had a girlfriend at that party. At the kitchen bench. Another detail I didn't notice. Elise had been showing him photos from that night and he had asked who I was. Had asked for my number. He didn't have a girlfriend when he asked.

We arranged to meet for a drink and he said he would pick me up. I told him my address, still living with my parents. He laughed. 'I live in Connor Street!' he exclaimed.

‘Oh!’ I said, pretending to understand. I had never heard of the street. I didn’t understand why he was telling me this.

The next night I paced near the front doorway in anticipation of the doorbell ringing, as much because I was excited to see him as to prevent Mum getting there before me. The awkward kiss on the cheek. The way my body knew. My chest thumping. A zap in the air.

‘There’s my house!’ he said, as we walked to his car.

The back of his house and the front of my house were essentially next door. There was a tiny laneway connecting us. We had lived as neighbours for most of our lives, without ever knowing each other. Our paths had never crossed, despite there being a literal path leading from my house to his. It would have taken him longer to drive to pick me up than if he had just stepped out his parents’ back gate.

‘Oh!’ I said, now understanding why he laughed when I told him my address on the phone. I climbed into his car awkwardly, the low-to-the-ground Toyota Celica. Grey. The smell of worn leather seats. Other people’s cars always made me carsick. The strangeness of it. The not-mine-ness of it. Their lives that had sunk into the interiors. He drove a manual and I think that’s what made me fall in love with him. A detail that before that moment had been completely unimportant to me. The way he shifted gears. The subtle muscle twitch as his arm moved.

Milestones gushed from us, landing everywhere. The first kiss. The first time meeting the parents. The first *I love you*. That we lived so close and moved in similar circles and yet had never met before seemed impossible. It felt more likely that I had conjured him. Created him from need, from lust, from longing.

Within months we planned our first trip away together to New Zealand. A tour guide convinced us to go canoeing in Marlborough Sounds. The water was completely flat. Not a single wave.

‘I get really seasick,’ I said.

‘It’s impossible to feel sick here,’ he said. ‘There is no movement at all.’

At the halfway point I was lime-green, my head spinning. ‘I can’t,’ I begged, as our tiny canoe bobbed. Rob rowed us to shore through the bathtub-like stillness of the water. After I finished violently throwing up in the bushes we walked to the drop-off point, the canoe over Rob’s shoulder.

There is a photo of Rob on this trip holding a bottle of milk, standing on a jetty. He is pointing to the milk and frowning. I know there was a reason

for this. I know there is a meaning behind it, some personal joke. I don't know what it is.

That was the trip I jumped out of an aeroplane in a tandem skydive. Rob cheered on from below, preferring the safety of the ground. He didn't want to tempt fate 12,000 feet above Queenstown. He didn't know the die had been cast. That it was the safety of his bed that would get him in the end. We went whitewater rafting. We hiked on glaciers. We jumped off cliffs and into the choppy water below. I was brave with him. I was brave because of him. Drunk with love. I could do adrenaline. I could do wildness. But my body had a reaction to the safety of the flat water. I should have known. I should have seen the warning signs.

I still have the photo. The one of me and Elise at the party. The one Rob saw and asked for my number. Sometimes I look at it, at nineteen-year-old Natasha, just to see myself through Rob's eyes. To get inside his skin. To inhabit as much of him as possible. I don't remember our first kiss and yet I can feel the imprint of his lips. Can feel his hands pulling my hair. The skin on skin of us. The smell of spring and car leather, of clean hair and large hands and fresh cotton. Because surely no one had ever felt this way before. No one had ever asked: *do you have something?* No one had ever fumbled with the bedside drawer. Had ever gasped. Or ever breathed in the smell of another human for sustenance alone. Had ever fallen asleep in the crook of an arm, or ever clumsily put on last night's clothes and walked home in heels through an alleyway designed just for them. An alleyway that didn't exist until the *Are you the one with the big arms?* phone call. A magic alleyway to a magic house in a magic life.

Motion sickness. Not from the smell of worn leather seats. The nausea was now coming from the strangeness of it. The not-mine-ness of it. Life seeping in. 'I can't,' I had begged Rob in the canoe. But now there was no one to row me to shore. *I can't*. The invisible swells. Somewhere in the distance, someone said my name.

The walls were white. The smell of paint still fresh in the new apartment we had spent weeks searching for together. The inspections. The direct debit rent payments and the home and contents insurance. The signing of the lease which stipulated no large parties, no smoking, no pets. I wondered

then if we had broken the lease. If the sudden death would damage the paintwork in the same way. Whether it would mark the walls, be noticeable to the next tenants. I wondered if the landlord would have to disclose what happened as part of the condition report: paint damage near doorway, oil stain on kitchen ceiling, sudden death in main bedroom, missing tile near bathtub. And now there were people in our apartment. Family members. Strangers. Paramedics in uniforms and firemen, even though there was no fire. Police. The emergency services gathered to confirm that this was in fact an emergency, though the emergency had passed.

Andrew's wife, Dina, was on her way from the country, my brother told me. She was working hours away and had jumped on the first V/Line train when she found out. 'Thank you,' I said, though I was not sure why. She was doing her rural medical rotation. She was a doctor too. As were both my brothers, Andrew and Matthew. And my dad. And Rob. It seemed almost funny. All this medical knowledge, useless in the face of a medical emergency. I felt sad for her, sitting on the train by herself, hours of track ahead of her, knowing what was waiting for her at the other end. Stop the train, I wanted to say. Stop all the trains.

'Would you like a moment to say goodbye?' someone asked. Someone official whose face has become pixelated with time. I looked around for an answer. What was the correct response? 'Just so you know, you may hear a breathing sound. Or moaning. Or his body may twitch. It's a reflex of the dying brain. It's normal. That doesn't mean ...' the voice trailed off.

I walked into our bedroom, where we had gone to sleep the night before. 'He's not here,' I wanted to say. But the door had closed behind me. Left alone with the body of the man I loved. Just the two of us. Though it was clear there was just one of us then. I had assumed the goodbye would be reciprocal, until that moment.

I lay down beside him on the floor, closed my eyes. I was conscious of the sound of him not breathing. I held his hand. His body was hard and cold. My body became hard and cold. The feeling leached from me. It disappeared from my fingertips. 'He's not here,' I wanted to say again. I disappeared into the carpet like liquid. A stain. My senses diluted. I waited. For a sign. For a feeling. For a message. For anything. His absence had a physical weight to it. It filled up the room.

And so they would say: *He's watching over you.*

And I would smile reassuringly.
And I would think: *No, he's fucking not.*

CHAPTER 2

REFLEX

THE REFLEX OF THE dying brain, I had been warned. The words stuck with me. At what point does dying become death? What is the moment we stop living? What was the exact moment, the moment within a moment, that there could have been a different outcome?

I was bundled. I was carried. I was taken from our apartment to my parents' house. I didn't fight it, I succumbed. I was given a yellow blanket and placed on the couch. It was a childhood blanket, a hand-me-down from my older brothers. Yellow with pictures of Raggedy Ann and Andy. Raggedy Ann and Andy weren't a part of my childhood but this blanket was, the way both memories and objects can be handed down. It was used on sick days, home from school watching daytime TV and eating dry toast. This was a sick day, I suppose. Though I was twenty-two.

Like Rob, my body knew before my brain did. My body switched off. My brain was still trying to think a way out of this. There was an obvious solution. I just had to come up with it.

My parents had a brown leather couch, the kind with footrests that flipped out and a back that reclined when pushed. I lay there, covered in the yellow blanket while people hovered over me, watching. Occasionally people would come and check on me or lean in to give me a hug but when they did the back of the recliner would take their weight and fall back, forcing them to land awkwardly on top of me. The sudden movement. The surprise. An out of place laugh in a house of death.

I lay there, drifting in and out of sleep until some old school friends appeared, mobilised by the news. The same friends I had been with the night I met Rob. Elise and her boyfriend had broken up now. One, possibly two others, had dated Rob's friends at some stage. The incestuousness of groups of friends in their twenties, that awkward in-between time when

you're still bound by school bells, sleepovers and shared secrets of teen angst. But nothing much else.

They looked shiny and new. Put together. I was still wearing Rob's grey t-shirt. It had a splotch of brown in the lower corner. Blood? Bile? I pulled the Raggedy Ann and Andy doona up higher. Embarrassed, but not for the right reasons. Silence. 'How are you?' I asked, to break it. Their eyes darted across the room. Grievers' etiquette. Be polite. Be hospitable. Offer snacks. Show emotion, but not too much. Don't make anyone feel uncomfortable. I already had it wrong, their darting eyes betrayed. The grief performance.

Skye walked through the door and my heart broke, maybe for the first time, maybe for real now. I looked at her expression and it sunk in. What had happened. Her shock transferred to me somehow. Skye was one of those people who embed themselves in your life and you wonder how you ever managed without them. We sat next to each other in a Linguistics lecture as strangers, and we walked out as family. One of those fast and heavy romances that happen between friends rather than lovers. I willed her not to speak and she read my mind and didn't and she wrapped her arms around me, her face blotchy and red from tears that had fallen before she entered the room. My school friends took this as a sign to leave and their relief was palpable.

'Is she carrying a ... vanilla slice?' the first words from Skye's lips.

My aunt Eva walked through our door – a look of panic on her face – holding a gigantic vanilla slice. At that exact moment, Rob's body was on its way to the Chevra Kadisha, literally translated as 'holy society', where his body would be taken care of by *Shomrim* – watchers – who would guard him until burial. They would sit and read psalms to comfort his spirit which was in transition. But also to bring comfort to those left behind, knowing the person they loved was not alone. Though I could feel his loneliness still. Felt tethered to him, the pull to be by his side.

I wanted to be a *Shomeret*. I didn't want to be at home, among the looks of panic and awkward silences. I belonged with the dead. My spirit in transition.

When my aunt received the phone call about what happened, one of her first thoughts must have been: dessert? She must have hightailed to the local bakery and chosen the biggest thing she could find. She placed it in my arms. It wasn't weird to me that she chose sweet baked goods at a time

like this. Seeing your own world through the eyes of someone who is a stranger to it makes you realise that what you consider to be normal might just ... not be. I looked at Skye, visibly horrified at the glug of thick custard, flaky pastry and sweet icing. I looked at my aunt, desperate to be called to action, to be able to do *something*.

‘Yep. It’s a vanilla slice,’ I whispered back.

I will never be able to eat vanilla slice. It has the texture of the dying and is sweet with desperation. No one warns you about the weird and wonderful ways that people will try to help.

None of us really knew what we were doing. The grief turned us insane. There is an assumption that the grieving process is a natural one. It’s not. People would look to me for advice, to follow my lead, to follow orders, ready to serve. I was not a dependable captain of this grief ship. I was taking us all down.

Later that day we relocated to Rob’s parents’ house. We walked the laneway from my parents’ front door to his parents’ back gate. I entered the code to the mechanical touchpad to allow us entry. Someone’s birthday. The codes of the world all celebrate life. Alarms. Phone screens. Gates. Doors. The dates people enter the world, not exit it. I felt like a trespasser already. From then on I came through the front. Rang the doorbell.

I was taken by the elbow to the Good Living Room. The one barely used except for special occasions. The one with no television. With a coffee table that was rarely used and glass vases. An alleyway away sat my parents’ house, with its own Good Living Room with a completely different yet identical coffee table and a completely different yet identical set of couches reserved for nondescript and rarely occurring special occasions. This was one of those occasions, apparently. A rabbi – black-suited, with a long black beard and curly black *payos* coming out from a black hat – stood up. He was surrounded by at least two similar looking men in identical hats with identical beards in identical suits, with identical smells. The smell of well-worn books, wet wool and mothballs.

‘This is Natasha,’ someone said to him, as I entered the room, ‘Rob’s partner.’ This, I could tell, would change everything. Structure. Answers. Something to believe in. I needed prayers to repeat and something to do with my body and a place to call home in this strange world I had found

myself in. Bring it on, Rabbi. I'm yours. From here on in, I shall immerse myself in the Jewish teachings.

But I had forgotten the basic rules. Were rabbis allowed to touch unmarried women? Or was it the married ones they weren't allowed to touch? Or could they just touch no women? Do we shake hands? Is he going to reach out and hug me? I stood awkwardly, hoping the touching question would sort itself out and awaited his words of wisdom. I waited to be welcomed into the fold. Let's do this. What have you got for me, Rabbi?

I stood. He stood. His religious posse stood. Silence. And then the moment passed. Nothing was exchanged. I wasn't taken into the fold. I wasn't led onto the path of the righteous. Untouchable. So it is written in the scriptures. *Negiah*: do not touch the forbidden woman. They turned to each other and continued to talk in hushed voices.

Years later I will not be able to identify which synagogue this rabbi came from or what his connection was to any of the mourners. I won't remember whether we had even been introduced. I will wonder if he was instead a rogue religious Jew and not a rabbi at all. Or just a man in a suit. And then I will wonder if he existed at all. But I will still be able to smell him. Wet wool and knowledge.

The doorbell rang and it was a middle-aged couple I had never seen before. They were holding a white box from Aviv, the local bakery. Armed with quiche, as if someone had sent out a memo that this was the done thing. From this moment onwards, the quiches seemed to multiply and reproduce. The kitchen counter became a breeding ground. Caramelised onion quiche sat proudly with mushroom quiche, thick and creamy with their asparagus quiche babies. I imagined bakers, lined in a row, tasked with making death quiches. The bench in my parents' house would begin to take on the same look. Quiches took over our kitchen and freezer. The number of quiches outnumbered the mouths they could feed. Now, if I see someone purchase one, I immediately feel sad, believing it is being taken to the home of someone grieving.

'Honestly,' Skye said to me. She had attached herself to me, seen the desperation in my eyes that begged her not to leave my side. 'What is even happening?'

'It's a Jewish thing, I think.' Though I hadn't realised this until her confusion registered.

Rob's parents' house became the central hub. Part of this was instinct, a search for comfort. To be together. Part was tradition. Rob's family was sitting *shiva*, the week-long mourning period in Judaism for first-degree relatives. I was not technically part of this process because we were not married. Another reminder of what I had lost: the future. The purpose of shiva is to allow mourners to express their sorrow before they re-enter society. There was a timeline already. I wondered if the cat who I was allergic to was aware Rob was dead. I wondered if he still curled up on Rob's old bed. I wondered if, at shin height, he was confused by all the bodies he was rubbing up against. The house was filled with marble-style pillars and benchtops, sleek and cold, made warm by the people who inhabited it.

I once almost knocked myself out on one of these pillars. Rob and I were hosting a barbecue for our friends, sausages among the summer mosquitoes and sunburnt shoulders. I had made my mum's pasta salad, which involved boiled eggs and mayonnaise, and only after I brought it did I realise perhaps it was one of those weird recipes that should be kept in the family. The contrasting and seemingly disparate tastes only worked together with a backdrop of shared familial memories and love.

I was annoyed because Rob had spent most of the night talking to his friends. He was a natural extrovert, always happy to play host, to work the room. Once everyone arrived I felt like a fraud. I didn't want to schmooze and mingle. I wanted to curl up with Rob in a corner of the room, to interlink our hands and have him all to myself. To watch from the sidelines. And so I made excuses to rush to the kitchen, to go to the bathroom, to check on something, all while Rob jumped from group to group, turning the chops and pouring drinks. I walked briskly, my arms swaying, to show him I was annoyed. I walked full pelt into a pillar, rebounding cartoon-style with an audible smack.

Rob apologised for not paying enough attention to me. He didn't tell me I was being ridiculous. Which pretty much says everything about everything. And which was why I was still waiting for him to apologise now.

The house became filled with people again but there was no barbecue and I was not the host but I felt out of my depth, still, not knowing how to speak to groups of people and looking for places to hide again. The bathroom. The kitchen. To check on things. All mirrors in the house were covered by cloth.

Jewish mysticism holds that when a soul leaves this world, it also leaves an emptiness that can be filled by darkness that cannot be seen by the naked eye. But when looking in a mirror you may catch a glimpse of evil reflecting in the background. They covered the mirrors in this house of mourning, the house of Rob's parents. I had forgotten the custom of covering the mirror that morning. I had brushed my teeth, looking at the darkness. My own reflection.

Now we were gathered, family members and friends. Sipping tea and laughing and comforting each other, filling the rooms with his name, repeating it over and over in stories and anecdotes. The unspoken agreement was clear early on. Rob. We said it, over and over. As if the repetition itself was a spell we were scared to break.

In Greek mythology, Echo was a wood nymph. She was cursed by Hera, losing the beauty of her voice. For eternity, all she could do was repeat the last few words she heard. Like Echo, we filled Rob's childhood home with his name, his stories. They rebounded off the walls and we repeated them back to each other. His presence ricocheted around us. Like all Greek myths, Echo was doomed. Bound by the last sounds she heard, she was unable to profess her love to Narcissus, fated to watch him die, as he stared at his reflection in the water, so in love with what he saw, unable to leave. The lure of the mirror. The darkness. Echo was ripped to shreds by panicked shepherds, and pieces of her were carried by the wind across the world. And so we continued to repeat his name, passing the baton back and forth, the responsibility weighing heavily. One day, we knew, the last words of a sentence may not include him, and like Echo, pieces of him would be carried by the wind. But for now, he was in this room. Echo, repeat, echo. Don't stare into your own reflection.

I had just come in through Rob's parents' front door when the bell rang. I turned to open it, expecting to be the recipient of another Aviv box.

It was my aunt again, beside her my teenage cousin, who was dressed in a clown suit. Rainbow wig. Red nose.

'What the fuck are you doing?' I hissed through gritted teeth.

'I thought it would make you feel better,' she said. It's so absurd it can't have actually happened. I wonder if I've mixed up two memories. Perhaps it's the red clown nose of my childhood that somehow came to remind me that I'd always known this was a possibility. We wore them on Red Nose

Day at school, \$2 for a plastic nose and \$5 for a badge. We'd raise money for children who died suddenly in their sleep. We knew about SIDS in primary school. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome; that some babies died in their sleep without warning. And we'd have to wear a red nose because there was no cure. SADS. That is what I was told Rob died from. Sudden Arrhythmic Death Syndrome, the acronym not even meant to be ironic. Still someone's child who died in the middle of the night without warning. Someone's baby, even at the age of twenty-seven. Put to bed and found with blue lips.

'Did you come over in a clown suit when Rob died?' I begin to write in a text message to my cousin. But then I delete it, each letter disappearing from my screen one by one. I don't want to know. Because it's all connected now. The yellow blanket. The vanilla slice. The rabbi. The clown suit. The quiche. They all lead me back to him.

CHAPTER 3

THE DINNER

ROB'S TWO SISTERS HAD a tradition of Sunday night dinner with their group of tight-knit friends. Their sisterly relationship intimidated me. Their sharing of clothes and friends and stories. They even shared a laugh. I never knew who I was speaking to if I called the house and one of them picked up the phone. A kind of melding of bodies. I had grown up with two brothers and felt like an intruder when I was around. They had inside jokes that made themselves known through facial expressions and eye-rolls and half-finished sentences that would trail off because the endings were redundant. The kind of bond that let me know from very early on that there was a part of Rob that belonged to them alone.

'Bye,' they would yell as they ran out the front door, a beep from outside, one of their friends waiting in the driveway with the engine still running.

'Hi!' they would yell a few hours later as they tumbled into the house, the smell of red wine and garlic, the cold night air emanating from their clothes. The remnants of an inside joke still visible in the corner of their mouths.

This specific Sunday, just weeks after Rob had died, I was asked to join the sisters and their friends for dinner at their local Japanese. I felt honoured to be invited, even if my ticket to join was a dead boyfriend. We sat, snapping our chopsticks and rubbing them together to smooth out the splinters. We were sharing thick udon noodles, the sauce flicking from the ends. Picking out the onion. Making jokes. Laughing. Anyone who walked in would have thought we were a normal group of friends in their twenties, enjoying each other's company, bonded by years of friendship. We looked shiny. We looked new. Enough to strike envy into anyone who saw us.

If you had asked me what two sisters who were now brotherless and a girl who watched her boyfriend die would look like out for dinner, it would not be ... this. We shared stories about Rob. We spoke about things that had

nothing to do with him. We gossiped. Talked about other people. About TV shows. We quoted *Will & Grace* lines. We could do what we wanted; we were the carriers of the grief, the ones calling the shots. As we sat in the centre of the restaurant, customers arrived to pick up their takeaway dinners. Some people we knew. Friends of friends. They stumbled over their words. They panicked. I looked proud. Flying the flag. Eating sushi. We were powerful.

Someone made a joke about their last date. Said how badly it had ended. I said, 'Seriously, if we're playing this game, I win.' And we all laughed. We drove home, giddy from each other's company. We turned into Rob's parents' street to drop his sisters home, the magic starting to lift.

'I just don't understand,' said his sister, '*exactly* what happened. He was fine. He was healthy. I don't understand.'

'I can tell you,' I said. 'If you want to know, I can tell you.'

'I need to know,' she said.

And the carload of friends was silent.

I told them how we had gone out for dinner for Valentine's Day to Cicciolina in St Kilda. Rob had been on night shift so had spent part of the day sleeping. It was amazing, watching how he adapted to night shifts. How I had to potter quietly, not to wake him during the days. How much I'd miss him when the bed was empty at night, and how much I loved the presence of his body behind closed doors, asleep, as I went about my day. That there were no tables, so we waited in the bar area. That we had a glass of wine and we talked about his sister's upcoming wedding. That we'd wait until after that to get engaged ourselves, not to take the attention away. That he was almost at breaking point at work. That the demands of the neurosurgeon he was working under were getting too much. That he wasn't sure he wanted to be a surgeon anymore if that's what he had to deal with. And then we ate dinner. We almost ordered steak but decided on the salmon pasta. And then we drove home. And went to bed. And then in the middle of the night Rob had flipped on top of me. I thought he was mucking around, being affectionate. But his body was heavy and hurting me. I struggled to push him off. 'What are you doing?' I laughed. Then, 'It's not funny, seriously, stop it.'

Grunting noises. Eyes flickering.

'Seriously, it's not funny, stop it. Wake up.'

But I didn't say I called my dad. In the middle of the night I called my dad and said, 'I don't know what to do, I can't wake Rob up,' and he had said, 'I'm sure he's fine, call an ambulance, I'm on my way.' And then I had called the ambulance. But the 000 operator didn't say, 'I'm sure he's fine.' She said, 'Is he breathing?' And I said, 'I don't know,' because I didn't know.

I told them about doing CPR. But I didn't say I had tried to lay his body flat on the floor like I had been told to and I didn't say how clumsily he fell on the way down. I didn't say how I had willed them to come faster because I desperately wanted to stop doing CPR, that my hands felt useless, my breathing jumbled and staggered. I didn't say I had fumbled with the door trying to let emergency services in. And I didn't say that he was naked. And that when the paramedics came they put the paddles on him like in the movies and his body jolted and suddenly I wished I had covered him up before they came. That what kind of girlfriend would leave her boyfriend like that for others to see, his stomach giant and swollen and everything else blue. That they asked if he had taken any drugs and I said no he's a doctor which didn't answer the question but I thought did. I had said take him to hospital and they said there was nothing else they could do. And I was worried that maybe they didn't believe me about the drugs. That maybe I didn't explain properly.

And they covered him with a blanket and I noticed that someone had broken our bed. The feet of our bed had cracked and the mattress was sideways. Suddenly my dad was there and he had called Rob's parents on his way. And I was so sorry that I had woken him in the middle of the night. That he had told me everything was going to be okay, but it wasn't. Now look. And then Rob's parents were there. And Rob's mum ran to the bathroom. And the paramedics said maybe I should put something on because I was only wearing Rob's t-shirt and some underwear. And then my mum was there. And Rob's dad had grabbed her by the arms and said, 'Take her away. Take her on a holiday.' And I didn't understand if these were two separate instructions or part of the same one. And then my oldest brother Andrew was there and as Rob's parents sobbed he took me onto the balcony. And outside people in suits were starting to leave for work and inside there was howling and so I howled to match the chorus and my brother said, 'Shhhhhh you don't have to,' and the people on the street just stood there and looked at the ambulance and then looked up at me and I

howled again and Andrew flicked his hand to shoo away the crowd below. And then Rob's sisters had arrived. So the rest they knew, because they were there. And so I could stop talking.

The car, parked outside Rob's parents' house, was silent. Then suddenly I realised maybe she never asked what had happened. Maybe I misheard the question.

CHAPTER 4

GRASPING

I TRY TO GET a grasp on him now, but I can't.

The way death takes more than just a physical body. Sixteen years later, I no longer remember Rob's favourite foods or whether he liked beer or his favourite TV show. These facts disappeared the instant his heart stopped beating. I remember his giant smile and his huge arms and his warmth. I remember how much he loved his cat and my extreme allergic reactions. And that sometimes even when I asked him not to touch his fat ginger cat if he knew we were seeing each other he couldn't help himself. I'd break out in a giant rash wherever his fingers touched my skin. His love for his cat showed up in red welts on my body. I remember that he introduced me to olive bread. I did not like olives and so I told him I would not like olive bread. But he insisted. And he ripped a sourdough baguette in two and I took a bite, the crust sharp and hard against my teeth and the soft inside, dotted with black olives, salty on my tongue. And he was right. Every Sunday I would wake in his bed, itchy from the cat, and we would share an olive baguette from Il Fornaio, ripping chunks with our hands.

I remember driving to meet him. A rural medical rotation in Sale. I remember thinking two months without him by my side was too much. And I remember the three-hour drive to visit him in the small brown house he shared with two other junior doctors and I remember him teaching me to steam broccoli in the microwave, thinking how very grown up he was for knowing this. It was the broccoli trick that made me think this, and not the fact that he was a doctor treating patients in a rural hospital. I remember all these things and yet I do not remember his funeral. Most of it. I remember I did not know what to wear and I remember sitting in my parents' house in the Good Living Room. And I remember my friend Carli was sitting there with the adults (because we were not adults, we were still kids, even in our twenties) and she left our house and she was back a moment later with

black boots and funeral-appropriate attire. A black Metalicus skirt and top. *Kriah*, the Hebrew word for tearing. The act of tearing one's clothes as an expression of grief and anger at the loss of a loved one. It is done by the child, parent, spouse or sibling. I don't remember if I was wearing Carli's top and if I ripped it. I don't remember if that was when I realised I was meant to tear myself to shreds in other ways.

Carli's dad had died when she was a toddler. At school, I knew nothing about what happened other than she didn't have a dad and I shouldn't talk about it. Was I told not to talk about it, or did I take this on myself? Now, as she presented me with her clothes to wear at a funeral, with our similarly slight bodies and the same shoe size, I realised I should have talked about it. I should have asked his name. And how old she was when he died. And if she was okay. As a child, I had thought about it all the time: Carli and the dad she did not have. And the more I had tried not to think about it the more the thoughts kept me up at night. And I remember now, years later, that I had gone to play at Carli's house in the week before Father's Day and we had made Father's Day presents. We made bookmarks. For my dad and for her grandfather. Was it my idea? This is something else I don't remember. But I know the amount I tried not to talk about it, not to think about it, that it wouldn't surprise me if I suggested making fucking Father's Day presents with my friend who had no father. And now she was offering me up her clothes that for ever after, even once returned, would be the clothes I wore to my boyfriend's funeral. Even once they were back in her wardrobe, the tread of the boots would carry clumps of dirt from the cemetery, bits of caked-on mud.

I do not know if it was rainy or sunny on the day of the funeral. I do not know if it occurred in the morning or the afternoon. I do not remember which friends came and which friends didn't. I remember my mum, holding my hand, sitting in the front row with the Official Mourners. The siblings and the parents. Where the spouse would sit. And she claimed my space for me, brave in the face of Jewish tradition. And I do not know what was said by the rabbi who officiated or by Rob's cousin who gave his eulogy. But I do remember that the eulogy spoke about our love. And I remember getting angry that it wasn't quite right. That he hadn't quite described the Rob I knew. I was angry that he hadn't quite managed to use the right words in the right order that would explain to people what I'd lost.

And yet here I am. Unable to even remember, let alone match words to the memories. To the feeling. To us.

‘There are no words ...’ people would say, by way of condolence. There were no words. It was true.

I was given his obituary to look at before it went to print, to add my touches. I do not remember what it said but I remember staring at the computer screen, knowing it was not right. Knowing there were gaps that I could not fill. There were things I wanted to say but I wasn’t sure what they were. Lethologica, the phenomenon of failing to retrieve a word from memory but the feeling that retrieval is imminent. He was on the tip of my tongue. He was at the edges of my memory, skirting around. The mild anguish that occurs when you’re searching for a word and the sense of relief when the word is found. But he remains there. Without relief. Always on the edges. Stored with his favourite colour and favourite pasta and his favourite thing about me. Does the inability to put a name to an object or feeling or memory mean it doesn’t exist?

And as I sat alone in the swivel chair in my dad’s study, staring at the obituary, there was a knock at the door. My friend Jason, who had jumped on a plane in South America when he had heard the news. The logistics and the tickets and the adjoining flights and the being halfway across the world meaning he had missed the funeral.

Jason was my first proper boyfriend in high school. We would hold hands at recess and lock ourselves in his bedroom and kiss until our lips ached. After years of this on and off and on and off we realised we should probably not hold hands or kiss but that we would be in each other’s life, one way or another. Those first clumsy, heady years that prepare you for the real world. For real relationships. The training-wheels boyfriend. And it gave me pride to say one of my best friends was my high school boyfriend because that seemed mature and grown up and right. And there he was, in my dad’s study. The boy who knew me second-best, holding my sobbing body as my snot rubbed into his shoulder.

But I was embarrassed, because I had not washed my hair in days and my boyfriend had died. And when I craned my neck sideways for this embrace a sharp pain went through my neck and down my arm. I had pulled a muscle when I had tried to move Rob’s body off our bed on the night he died. Or perhaps it had been from the CPR, leaning my whole body into his.

Either way, I was left with neck pain that I could tell no one about. It seemed like a trivial thing to complain about in the grand scheme of things, given the outcome. It also felt like I was implicating myself somehow, a physical trace connecting me to the scene of a crime. I knew that once I could receive a hug without a sharp intake of breath or needing to shift position because the sudden pain took me by surprise, that would mean time had passed. My body would have healed. And Rob would still be dead. Here was Jason, whose girlfriend was still alive, and I felt awkward. Not because there was any real love left between us but because there wasn't. I was relieved he was there because I wanted to stop reading and rereading the obituary but then I was embarrassed that I was relieved. And so I asked him to leave, because I had work to do. But actually I just wanted him gone. Because in the swivel chair in my dad's study with my unwashed hair and blinking computer screen I realised how pathetic I must look. How relieved he would be to get out of there.

I had lost the memories of Rob and the words needed to describe them. I was left only with broccoli and olive bread and a love of cats and the feel of his biceps and the smell of his shoulder and the flutter that his smile gave me. A kind of grief dementia leaving odd, unmatching objects behind for me to make sense of. And I wonder if the lack of words and a lack of memory means I loved him too much or not enough.

CHAPTER 5

SO IT IS WRITTEN, SO IT SHALL BE DONE

THE YEAR BEFORE ROB died, I handed in my final assignment for a creative writing class at uni.

Today. It could easily be tomorrow or yesterday, or even a week and four days ago, and of course the facts would be different, but it would be the same thing, really. Today, or to be more specific, at the time when the night just started to disappear against the morning and the sky began to fuse, Max Bay clutched his chest.

These were the opening lines of my 3000-word assignment. We were being graded on a work of fiction. The beginnings of a novel. It was written one year, three months and one week before Rob clutched his chest in the middle of the night.

It felt like it was collapsing and exploding at the same time. He thought he was screaming, making noise, but as he looked at his wife asleep next to him, he guessed he wasn't.

After Rob died I made lists, over and over in my head, of all the ways I thought I was to blame.

1. I should have seen the warning signs.
2. I should have started CPR earlier.
3. I should have buzzed in the paramedics faster (as it was, they used an axe – or does an axe have some other fancy name when it's used by emergency services? – to open the apartment door when my buzz, buzz, buzzing fingers were landing on the wrong combination to allow access).
4. I should have said no to red wine with our dinner.
5. We should not have ordered the salmon pasta. It must have been that.

6. In fact we should not have gone out for dinner. It was Valentine's Day, but Rob was exhausted from night shifts. Did he feel pressure to take me out? To be romantic? Did I actually pressure him for a romantic gesture?
7. I should have just known.
8. I should have done more.
9. And, repeat.

Recently, I heard author Anna Spargo-Ryan talk at an event about her job as a university writing tutor. She spoke about the darkness of the work she would read. The Holocaust. Death. Disease. 'First-years always write about the worst thing they can think of,' she was warned by a more experienced writing teacher. She laughed as she retold this story.

In November 2003 I was in my third year of a combined Arts/Law degree. My English Writing major was my sanctuary from the stress of Tort Law, Constitutional Law and Corporations Law. When I sat in my law lectures I'd look from person to person as they scribbled notes, nodding knowingly. My panicked expression surely gave away how little made sense to me. I continued my streak of Distinctions and High Distinctions throughout my law studies, though, wondering each time how it was possible to sound so much like I knew what I was talking about when I was clearly missing something. *One day they'll realise I'm a fraud*, I'd think. I never had this feeling in my English classes. I could breathe. I felt powerful. I should have known.

*The phone kept ringing,
I'm-so-sorry-to-hear-about-Max.
It's-so-terrible-I-just-can't-believe-it.
It's-just-so-unfair.
Tell-me-what-I-can-do-to-help.
She wondered if Max would call. Send his condolences.
Sorry-I-died.
She realised at once it was an odd thought, but it seemed appropriate, given the circumstances.*

Tick, tick, my tutor's blue pen in the side column.

*She put the answering machine on.
'Hi, you've called Max and Sasha. We're not here right now but leave a message and we'll get back to you.'* It was Max's voice. *She pressed delete and the tape ran backwards and beeped. She pressed record.*

'Ummm ... Max is dead. We're accepting baked goods and casseroles.' She laughed, but stopped suddenly.

No. Shit. Max. She pressed play.

'Ummm ... Max is dead. We're accepting baked goods and casseroles.'

Tick.

'You should really lie down. Just on the couch or whatever if you don't want to be where ...' Vanessa stopped.

'No, I'm fine. I'll sleep tomorrow or the day after or something.'

'Go on. Just for a bit.' Vanessa smiled, pity and sorrow radiating from where her lips pressed together.

Sasha was eight years older than Vanessa, but it always seemed like more.

'I just ...' she took a deep breath, *'don't want to have to wake up and remember that he's gone. I can't keep going through it again and again. I just have to sit here and think about it, so I don't have to remember again.'*

The morning after Rob died, after I'd spent the night in my childhood bed and taken a Valium and whatever else was handed to me, was the first time I had to remember what had happened. A millisecond of blank space before reality closed in on me. A howl from somewhere deep inside. A guttural noise that didn't belong to me, that brought my mother rushing to my room where she found me on the floor, clutching at Rob's grey t-shirt that I had put on the night before. The same position I stayed in for hours, as visitors came and patted my back and stroked my hair and made polite conversation to each other over me, sprawled out and scared. Even now, it is this moment of the first remembering that is the hardest to bear. Like a reverse nightmare, the terror upon waking.

Vanessa was visibly searching for the right thing to say and it annoyed Sasha.

'It's okay, you'll get used to it eventually.'

'I don't want to get used to it.'

'But you said that ...'

'I know what I said. I don't want this to be what my life is. I don't want to remember or forget or get used to it ... I just want ...'

The silence radiated off the walls. They were too white. The walls. And Sasha wanted to paint them. Now. In blue. Big fat strokes of blue to cover up the silence and her life and the marks of grey a quarter of the way up the wall where Max's chair would scrape when he leant back during dinner.

'I'm sorry, you're right ... I need sleep or I'm going to end up painting the walls all day.'

'What?'

'Don't worry. Just take phone messages, would you? The machine is ... broken.'

She walked up the stairs, skipping the second and fifth steps, which creaked, and the seventh step where their labrador Karma had urinated that day. A feelingsuddenly overcame her that she may never reach the top. She thought of Sisyphus. And then she thought of syphilis. And she wondered if

she was the only person to ever make a connection between mythology and sexually transmitted diseases.

TICK.

She reached the door of her bedroom. As she looked at her bed her mind went blank. Vanessa had tried to clean her bed linen but Sasha had refused to let her.

'Leave it. Just for a bit.'

'I don't know if it's healthy, Sha.'

When Vanessa was just learning to talk, she couldn't manage the name Sasha. The swirling sounds were too much to handle for her tiny mouth. Sha. That's all that would come out, and it stuck. Even now. Sasha hated it. It sounded like it should be the beginning of a name. Sharon. Or the end of a name. Natasha. Not a name in its own right. It frustrated her, like she had missed the beginning or the end of a sentence and was stuck perpetually in the middle.

I had put myself in the story. I had made a conscious choice. Sasha. Natasha. Max. Rob. 'First-years always write about the worst thing they can think of,' Anna had been warned before she taught her first writing class.

On her bedside table was a book. When Bad Things Happen to Good People. It had to be Vanessa who had put it there. She managed to find a self-help book for every occasion. She flipped the pages. Chapter Seven. 'God Can't Do Everything'.

It hadn't even occurred to her. God. Of course. She hadn't even thought of blaming God yet. This whole time she had somehow been blaming Max. For leaving without telling her. Even when he would just dash off quickly to buy milk he would shout upstairs: 'Just going down the street. Back in a minute.' And she would hear the door click shut. Or if he left for work before she had woken up he would kiss her lightly on the forehead and tell her that he loved her, and she would open one eye and watch him choose his tie. But this time he had just gone. Without even leaving a note. No light kisses. No click of the door.

Her anger towards Max lifted, replaced with a hot anger rising in her chest towards God. She threw herself onto the doona. It was cold against her skin and she wrapped herself into it, gripping it between her legs. She breathed in. Washing powder. Aftershave. Sweat. Sleep. She closed her eyes and the doona lost its coldness and the smell became indistinguishable from herself. She bolted upright and then nestled her face into another patch. Washing powder. Aftershave. Sweat. Sleep. I'll do this, she thought, until I've smelled it all. Inhaled him completely. Absorbed all the leftover bits he let linger for me. Although she tried to fight it, her eyes closed, heavy with days of crying and sleeplessness. She drifted off to thoughts of Max. By the time she would wake, the sheets would smell only of her.

The first morning after Rob died I had to wake up and remember. I had gone to sleep wearing Rob's grey, oversized t-shirt and I woke up smelling only of fear. He was now a finite resource. His smell, like his body, could not be saved.

Sasha. The delightful eccentric. Sisyphus. Tell me the worst thing you can think of. I will write it until it's true.

I didn't even remember I had written the assignment until weeks later. The liminal space as I frantically sorted through piles of old assignments. Law and Society in Southeast Asia. Linguistics 101. Philosophy for Beginners. Until I could hold it in my hands. The proof I needed to confirm that I was to blame somehow.

But this is getting off track. This is about a phone call. Or maybe it's just about today. Or less than today. The fractions of seconds that span back so far to a time when we barely noticed that they passed us by. Causation. It's a funny thing.

Tick.

Tick.

CHAPTER 6

WHERE I LIVE NOW

I WAS TO BE moved back to my parents' house. It wasn't just that I couldn't pay the full rent on the apartment Rob and I had signed the lease on, but that I couldn't live alone, though no one said this. I could not take care of myself.

A week after the funeral I was brought back to the apartment, flanked by family and friends. Both his and mine. Our stuff was divided up. As if it were a separation. And it was, I suppose. The things Rob contributed to our shared living arrangement were to be given to his parents. Our future in boxes. Stored away. My contributions were boxed up to take back to my childhood home. The new crockery. The teacups. The serving spoons. The joint purchases were to be decided. The new Japanese knife set that came with a 14 cm vegetable knife and a 9 cm paring knife and a 15 cm utility knife that had perfectly balanced handles calibrated to offset the weight of the blade and a lifetime warranty against manufacturing defects. The kind of purchase you make when you don't realise by whose lifetime and whose defects you are measuring time. The kettle. The toaster. The wineglasses. The pots. 'I don't care,' I had said, every time I was asked what to do with different items. What use was the toaster to me now?

I had bought the giant pot myself. It came with a special straining basket that fit underneath the lid. I had used it to make our first dinner together in our new place. I had gone to Prahran Market and visited The Mushroom Man and bought four varieties of mushrooms to lightly sauté in burnt butter and garlic. The portobello and enoki and Swiss brown and king oyster mushrooms were reserved for people like me. People with a plan. People in love. Their misshapen caps and gills, the smell of earth. I had put the water in the pot to boil but it would not bubble. It sat motionless, unresponsive. The stainless steel 12-litre pot was not designed to boil spaghetti for two. The stove was no match for its size, though I didn't realise this at the time. I

looked into the water like I was reading tea leaves. The water whispered back, *You have no idea what you're doing, this is all an illusion*. My eyes began to well, my frustrations bubbling to the surface faster than the lukewarm pot. I wanted to show just how capable I was. Instead, we ate dinner an hour later than planned, which Rob thought was hilarious. He didn't even care that he'd just come off night shift and was technically eating spaghetti for breakfast.

Our apartment was packed up by various family members. Rob's cousins. My brothers. I kept the giant pot as a reminder. The knives, too. The rest went to his family. His shirts. His belts. His CDs. His used toothbrush. Beneath the hive of activity – the sound of packing tape coming out of the dispenser, the rip and tear of it, the smell of cardboard – I could feel it: the strum of life as it should be. In the bedrooms and the bathrooms and the kitchen. Rob still in the shower, condensation gathering on the tiles. Me making breakfast – muesli with linseeds and nuts and a scoop of yoghurt, scattered with blueberries because my mum would periodically send me text messages about the antioxidant properties of blueberries and I'd roll my eyes but then eat extra blueberries just in case.

Somewhere too, nearby, Rob was also lying in a hospital bed. And I was holding his hand and I hadn't slept in days. Machines beeping and tubes everywhere. And the doctor said: *It's lucky you called the ambulance when you did. Lucky you started CPR so quickly. A minute later and who knows what would have happened*. Somewhere in another life we were lucky.

I hadn't felt Rob after he died, his presence. Because maybe ghosts aren't the dead returned. Maybe ghosts are just the hint of possibility. Haunting us always.

We had moved into our apartment in January. A few weeks earlier, on Boxing Day in 2004, a 1200-kilometre section of the earth's crust shifted beneath the Indian Ocean, releasing stored energy equivalent to more than 23,000 Hiroshima bombs. Tsunamis radiated through the ocean. The footage dominated the news as we watched on.

'If something happened to you, I would never survive it,' I told him. I knew this to be true, heat rising in my chest, though I wasn't sure why I felt the need to verbalise it; a perfectly healthy couple, in the safety of our new lounge room, far from the threat of natural disaster. Or so it seemed.

‘You wouldn’t want to,’ he said calmly. ‘But you would. You’d have no choice.’

I didn’t know then what I know now: that tsunamis come for us all, in one way or another, leaving shattered debris in their wake.

I had added our new apartment key to my keychain. A silver ring, intermingled with another stack of keys. A garage remote. The keys to my parents’ house. A solo gold key that opened no door that I knew of but which I was too scared to throw away just in case I needed it someday. On this chain of old and new keys I had a charm: a *hamsa*. The shape of a hand, with an evil eye symbol in the centre. The evil eye is a curse, believed to be cast by a malevolent glare. A secret look that brings harm upon the innocent. The unsuspecting lucky. The giddy and the happy. The content and the fortunate. It is a symbol across all cultures and times, from Classic Greek and Ancient Rome, from Islam and Judaism, from India and South America. Each culture, each religion, all wary of jealousy, of expressing too much happiness, too much good fortune. Protection is necessary.

Whenever I said anything positive, my mother and my aunt were known to dramatically spit ‘toi toi toi’ to defend against the evil eye. The mystical number three, the luck of the odd number. A precautionary measure to prevent tragedy and ward off spirits. In Islamic culture, after any word of praise, one is meant to say *Maa sha’Allah*, meaning ‘God has willed’, or you risk endangering the recipient. Ashkenazi Jews believe excessive praise will also bring about vulnerability. ‘*Keyn aynhoreh!*’ grandmothers will be heard to exclaim in Yiddish – *no evil eye!* – in order to protect their young.

Just days after moving in to our apartment, I waited at the bottom of the elevator with shopping bags cutting into my hand. The building smelled of paint and grease and metal and all things new and fresh and hopeful. That’s when I dropped my keys. They crashed to the ground in a heap. When I scooped them up I realised the hamsa, the protector from the evil eye, had fallen off. I thought nothing of it. I didn’t panic. I didn’t look around for an ominous glare. I continued on, half a trinket in my pocket, my keys in my hand. I entered the elevator up, up, up to my too happy life. Unaware. Lucky. Exposed.

‘Seriously, if something happened to you I would never survive it,’ I had said.

‘You wouldn’t want to,’ Rob had said. ‘But you would.’

Maa sha'Allah, the phrase and versions of it reverberated around the world. But not in my building. Not in my home. Clumsy, careless, girl.

As the last of our pots and pans and knives and clothes were packed into boxes, I handed back the key.

CHAPTER 7

THE FITTING

‘I FEEL LIKE SAM Beckett,’ I said to my brother Matt, a few months after Rob died.

We had watched *Quantum Leap* together as a family when I was younger. One of the benefits of being a third child – the youngest after a large age gap – was access to the television shows of my older siblings. Part of the appeal was as much about seeing adults kiss or hearing swearwords as it was settling onto the couch, knees tucked under my chin with my brothers and parents.

In *Quantum Leap*, Dr Samuel Beckett had to travel through time. His mission was to correct the past, to put things right that once went wrong. Particles of his body would float away at the end of each episode, temporarily landing in the body of another person at the beginning of the next one. He’d wake up confused, in somebody else’s life. He had to relearn friendships and accents and jobs and major life events, without letting on that he was not who anybody thought he was.

I had accidentally found myself in someone else’s life and I was not sure how to fix what had gone wrong. I was not sure how to get home.

I didn’t have to explain myself to Matt. He knew. ‘God I loved that show,’ he said.

From the outset, it was clear I was being watched. People hovered. Waiting. And so I had no choice but to act out what I thought grieving looked like. That I would have no appetite was a given. People turned up on my doorstep with homemade pumpkin soup, chicken soup, vegetable and barley soup. Broths and liquids.

At mealtimes I smiled and shook my head politely and they nodded sympathetically. I mean, what kind of a girlfriend would eat a steak after they just let their boyfriend die? How selfish. So I opted out. I headed to my

room to lie down. Or just left the table. It seemed like yes, this part at least, I was getting right. People knew what to do with me. I made sense. Every now and then, to stop the looks, to stop the chatter, to stop the pleading, I'd eat spoonfuls. I would hold up my fork, awaiting applause. To appease the masses. To get the balance just right.

The first time I stuck my fingers down my throat and threw up I shocked myself. The transition happened so easily. Two fingers inside me, the pressure just right. My body spasmed in response. I watched it flow out of me, perfectly formed bits of vegetables and rice and chicken. Their colour and texture preserved. A force so strong the relief of it brought tears to my eyes. The acidity on the way up. The way it burned. The pleasure of it. A climax. An achievement, amongst the growing list of things I was failing at.

I went days without eating. I made plans. I had a purpose. Twenty-four hours with only water. My stomach ached, but I felt *something*. I felt. The hunger of it, the deprivation a kind of need that satiated me. I would allow myself a meal after the period of starvation finished but then the marker would arrive and the thought of food repulsed me. It was the hunger that I hungered for. So I would extend my deadline by another twenty-four hours. And then the feeling of food in my stomach just felt so wrong, so heavy. *Can Rob eat? Does Rob get breakfast, you selfish, selfish girl?* And so it would have to come up. In the toilet. In the shower. Water gushing and flowing. My new version of tears.

Days after his death, Rob's sister asked me to be a bridesmaid for her wedding. 'We would have been sisters,' she said. 'It's what he would have wanted.'

'What else would he have wanted?' I wanted to say. But never did. Tell me everything. Please.

In the Jewish religion *simchas*, important celebrations, are not to continue during the *shiva*, the seven days of mourning after the loss of a direct family member, or during the *shloshim*, the thirty days of mourning. After that, however, the rabbis believe that the world should keep turning. A parent who has lost a child has to abide by certain rules for twelve months (no dancing, no listening to music). A wedding date, however, shouldn't be

changed. After thirty days, it is business as usual. And so the wedding plans continued.

In the months leading up to the wedding, I attended dress fitting after dress fitting. We were all to be matching, the bridesmaids. A moth-coloured purple-brown. Embroidery across the waistline which pulled me in tight. Fitting after fitting, my bridesmaid's dress was taken in more and more. As the wedding date came closer my chest bones jutted out further, my shoulder blades sharp like an instrument.

'No good,' the Russian dressmaker said, her accent thick and round as she put her hands around my waist and squeezed. *Good*, I wanted to say in reply. *I will swallow you whole. I will gorge on your flesh like pillowy pierogi and shovel you in handful by handful. Я сожру твоё cepдце. I will expel you in a violent spray of purple borscht, blood-like. You will drip from the walls. That is how powerful I am.* But instead I smiled, and she tutted under her breath.

I refused to come to family meals. The sitting together. The show.

Friday nights, the Shabbat, were our family dinner nights. As a couple, we used to alternate weeks: one week at Rob's parents' house with his sisters, one week at my parents' house with my brothers and their partners. I would always bring flowers for Rob's mum. Large lilies. She would always tell me it was unnecessary. We would light the Shabbat candles, eat the challah, make a prayer over the wine, talk about our week. I loved the contrast between our two families' rituals. The white tablecloth at Rob's parents' house, the repertoire of specialties being rolled out week after week: meringue roulade with berries, roast chicken, soups, crispy potatoes. The outward formality intermingled with swearing and hilarity. Their ease with each other. Their joy.

My family's love for each other was shown in other ways, no swearing, no crudeness. 'Could you pass the brisket, please?' 'How is work going?' My mother never felt joy in cooking. Her joy was in the finished product, the way a meal brought us all together. The meat was usually overcooked. Apologies were always made. Her timing was off, the wait between starters and mains always too short or too long. I loved having this secret window into different lives, different dynamics, the different ways that people give and receive love. Neither family ritual was better or worse. Both were

chaotic and messy and filled with the intensity of connection. Both were mine.

The first Friday night after Rob died, his mother had a Shabbat. She invited Rob's closest friend to fill his seat. I wasn't asked to come. My flowers weren't welcome. My large lilies, their stamens that would wither and drop pollen, staining her tablecloth a dark orange.

And so Friday nights from then on were with my family alone. At first I sat at the table, pushing food around. And then I retreated to the couch. And soon I spent dinners in my room, the flickering candles and prayers downstairs, abandoned.

We worked out a compromise. We could do family dinners together, but no prayers, no candles, no wine, no challah.

'I don't understand the point,' I overheard someone say. 'If this is how it's going to be, there's no point in us being here.'

Play the part, I heard, but don't let it ruin dinner. Observe the rituals. Don't make a scene. The tricky balance of public grief and private pain. It was hard to get the balance right, between what I needed to survive, to pass the time, and participation.

Growing up, we would get weevils in our pantry maybe once a year. I would hear my mother scream after opening a packet of rice or cereal. Tiny crawling specks. And then the laborious steps would begin. Step one, throw out all packaged foods. Sealed and unsealed. Rice, flour, pasta, cereal. Weevils can survive in cardboard. Clear the shelves. Gut them. Every crevice. Vacuum. Disinfect.

I was infected with weevils now. Crawling inside of me. Larvae waiting to hatch, to contaminate everything. Rolling, wriggling, feasting on me from the inside out. I needed to purge. To start again.

My feet pounded the treadmill, thump, thump, thump, ignoring the thump, thump, thumping of the feelings threatening to drown me. I could outpace them. I could starve them. I could push them down. Keep running. Keep moving. Keep focusing. I could be good. See. Just look. The paradox of wanting to be seen and unseen. To disappear in plain sight. If I was careful enough, I would just disappear without anyone noticing. I would slowly absent myself from dinner, and then my tiny frame would be so imperceptible that when I did just finally slip away, it would be like I never

happened. There, and then not. I would be so light that a gust of wind could just carry me away. A whiff of a memory. Like dust.

‘Did you hear something?’ someone would ask.

‘Nope,’ someone would reply.

And they would look around. I’d be gone. Vanished. I would cease to exist, not from here on in but from the beginning of time.

I would receive regular text messages from Amanda, the wife of one of Rob’s best friends. I had been away when Amanda and Ronnie got married the year before. Rob had emailed me about the wedding. He had written a detailed rundown of how overwhelmed he was by the celebration. How the boys all carried their friend on their shoulders. How they threw him in the air and caught him on the way down, sweat turning their white shirts transparent. Amanda’s messages always began: ‘No need to reply to this message, just thought you might like to know ...’ and she would add another detail from the night. How Rob’s smile made them feel. The way he beamed. How his joy multiplied their own. His way of dancing with his whole body. ‘No need to reply, just thought you might like to know ...’ she would say again and again, giving me bits of him, crumbs when I thought I had run out.

There are seven relatives for whom a Jew is required to observe shiva: father, mother, brother or sister, son, daughter or spouse. By Jewish law, I was none of these when Rob died. I was on the periphery of shiva. The seven days of mourning for the seven types of mourners. The thirty days which followed, the gradual re-entry into the world of the living, were not for me.

At Rob’s sister’s wedding, I stood under the chuppah, the wedding canopy, for a ceremony that was not for me, either. Rob’s parents walked down the aisle, clasping their daughter. Smash. The now-husband stepped on the glass under the chuppah, among an outcry of mazel tov. A tradition built into an otherwise joyous occasion to allow for a moment of reflection. A ritual designed to temper happiness, a reminder of destruction. As if we needed reminding. His foot stomped onto the glass and as the glass broke into shards I imagined bones breaking. I imagined ribs cracking. I imagined the thumping of a chest. Smash. *Mazel tov!*

We danced the hora, and we spun and whirled in a haze of twirling bodies. Rob's friends stood in for him as they threw his new brother-in-law on a tablecloth, high, high up into the air, as others carried his sister on a chair.

*Siman tov u'mazal tov
V'mazal tov u'siman tov
Y'hey lanu.
Good sign, and good luck
And good luck and good sign
Will come to us.*

Among the signs, the luck and the well wishes and the spinning and spinning and spinning, we started to disperse. Rob's friends and family said goodnight and goodbye. 'So, I guess that's it then,' someone said. And as I spun and spun, I knew I had been dismissed. I had become invisible. I had disappeared.

*Siman tov u'mazal tov
V'mazal tov, u'siman tov
Y'hey lanu.*

CHAPTER 8

SHIT-YOUR-PANTS GRIEF

THE UNIVERSITY YEAR STARTED again. Semester one of the fourth year of my combined Arts/Law degree. I had taken the previous year off to work and to travel. A year off before Rob and I moved in together, to get married, to settle down. A gap year before life got really serious. Which it did, but not the way I had planned.

I considered not going back. I considered how I would otherwise spend my days. My alternate plan was to stay in bed and not move. Not even breathe. Not make a sound. It was a good plan. But then, as if by reflex, I bought my books and worked out my timetable online. And got dressed in the morning. And packed my laptop. And got in my car. Rob had graduated from Monash University and I went to Melbourne Uni. There should be no landmines. No suddenly walking past a place we used to kiss. Or being caught off guard by people or places that would bring back a flood of memories. This was my territory. I was reclaiming it.

I drove slowly, carefully, aware that nights without sleep and a body with limited nutrients was a liability on the road. I listened to the radio, cautious of songs that might trigger my undoing. But I found my way there. The hardest part was done. The decision to keep going (both to university and in a general sense) had been made.

I pulled into a side street to look for a parking spot. I felt a familiar panic rising but breathed through it. And then. A flutter. And then. A pang of pain in my stomach. And then. A warmth. My jeans were filled with my own shit. Without intent. Without me having any say in the matter. The smell in the car hiding nothing. Fuck. Fucking fuck shit. Laughter came from me with the same lack of control. And then the tears. Noise and fluid expelling itself from me without my consent.

I sat in the car deciding my next move (still laughing, still crying, still sitting in shit). The more I squirmed, the more everything moved around,

lodging itself in new places, spreading further, outward, threatening to leak through my pants. I turned the car around, and drove home, wet from the waist down, wet from the shoulders up, no longer laughing. I pulled into my parents' house. The garage opened and Mum, who would have been hovering by the door, waiting for my anticipated return from my first day back at uni (which was not until hours later), heard the noise and came out.

'Oh, darling,' she said, seeing the despair on my face.

'So I've shat myself,' I said. No more explanation required.

She held my elbow so I could get out of the car, hunched over, taking small steps to prevent anything further running down my leg. She brought me to the bathroom, my body resigned. She slowly took off my top and undid my pants with the expert care of someone who had dressed and undressed three small children for the better part of a decade. Her hands moved instinctively. Gently. Not making matters worse. She put my naked body under the warmth of the showerhead, scooping up my soiled clothes in an instant, barely perceptible. I sat on the shower floor, watching the water carry my insides down, down, down the shower drain. My mother was putting my clothes in the laundry sink. The humiliation soaked into my skin while my clothes soaked in Vanish NapiSan OxiAction. She came up again and turned off the taps in one swift movement, the water disappearing but for a small drip, drip, drip of cold water that landed on my back. She gently took me out of the shower, scruffing my hair with a towel, moving it over my naked body, leading me upstairs where clean cotton pyjamas were waiting for me under a made bed. Under the white sheets I went. To a dreamless sleep. She kissed my forehead. And wordlessly said, we can try again another day.

CHAPTER 9

HELP

I NEEDED HELP. To exist.

The first therapist I saw was a woman whose practice was in her house. I sat in her lounge room among the photos of her children and grandchildren. A green curtain valance and everything else wooden; tables and floorboards and shelves with old books. She had been recommended and I went obligingly, desperate for a solution. Somewhere deep down I believed someone had the power to fix this ridiculous mistake.

‘Oh I’m so sorry,’ they’d say. ‘This was never meant to happen. I’ll speak to my manager and get this sorted out. As you were.’ And Rob would be returned to me, good as new (‘Phew!’ he’d say. ‘That was a close call!’ and later we’d laugh about this whole silly business).

It became clear that she wasn’t going to fix me by turning back time. Which was unfortunate, because that seemed like the only plausible way forward. She listened, with sympathetic eyes, as I explained what had happened. ‘I want him back,’ I repeated in a variety of different ways. A symphony of pleas.

That must have been awful.

Yes I understand why you would feel that way.

Yes you are too young to have to be dealing with that.

Yes this all does seem terribly unfair.

I felt no closer to being fixed. And Rob hadn’t appeared at the door on my way out. I hated her kindness. I hated her green valance. I didn’t want to be in her house. I hated her grandchildren.

Next I visited a male therapist who also came highly recommended, in the same way that people recommend a mechanic to fix a car or a tiler for a leaking roof. (‘I’ve got a guy ...’) His Dutch accent. The very particular smell of his waiting room. The smell of years of desperation, of loneliness, of sadness, all left behind. A waiting room for Despair to sit back and flick

through magazines, endlessly rereading Donna Hay recipes for easy weeknight meals. Where Hopelessness finished the half-completed sudokus at the back of the *New Idea*.

The first time I came, he didn't say anything. I noted the tissues close to me. The glass of water. This was the pattern that would continue. Waiting for me to make the first move. On some days, I would feel playful, and see how long I could sit in silence before he'd cave and speak first. Other days his perseverance would annoy me 'Well?' I'd say. 'I'm not sure what you want from me?' as if I'd been forced there against my will.

It didn't take long for him to diagnose me. PTSD.

'Like ... soldiers?' I had asked.

'Yes.'

I had gone to war, conscripted to fight for a country I knew nothing about, and I had come back shell-shocked. Self-destructive behaviour, agitation, hostility, flashbacks, fear, loss of pleasure, guilt, insomnia, nightmares, emotional detachment, unwanted thoughts, severe anxiety. I was a textbook case. The sound of sirens triggered breathlessness and flashbacks so severe I'd need hours to recover. Social settings with too many people caused me to shake, and panic attacks set in multiple times a day. I'd curl up in the foetal position, I'd rock in the corner, I'd hyperventilate. I'd go through three packs of gum, chewing one piece after another after another, just to give my body something to do, somewhere for the dread to go. I'd vomit. I'd binge. I'd starve. I'd stay up all night, replaying what had happened. Play, pause, rewind, repeat. My mind a worn-out VHS tape.

In the lead-up to the appointment I wrote lists of all the things to cover. All the ways in which I was angry. All the things that had brought me to my knees. How much I missed Rob. And how I was not coping. I could be an active participant in my recovery. I could be helpful. But then I arrived, and all the feeling drained out of me. I could think of nothing to say. I was just so tired. So. Tired. The mental output of trying to stay alive.

And so instead of talking about all the ways in which I was struggling, all I could say was: I'm. Just. So. Tired. And the session would end: *I'm afraid that's all we've got time for today.*

There were the things I had previously taken for granted. That there was a natural ebb and flow for each day. A normal weather pattern; a change in

the atmosphere. Now there was just a constant. The air always thick with grief, unrelenting.

I missed the way my body used to float through the day, with me completely unaware of how it was functioning. Now I had to remember to breathe. I yawned constantly. Not just because I was tired but because I could not satiate my body's need for oxygen. Air hunger.

'I can't breathe up enough,' I told my dad. He was a chest physician. 'Up enough,' I said again, using my fluttering hands to indicate that I couldn't get the air to go where it needed to go. 'Dyspnoea,' he said, as he explained the body and its physiology. His voice changed slightly as he spoke and I knew this would be the tone he used with his patients. Calm and reassuring.

The Dutch therapist had kind eyes. He cried when I spoke. 'Transference,' he said, as he grabbed a tissue, explaining the phenomenon of transferring our own feelings onto others. The way I was numb. The way he felt all that I could not. The invisible bond between us.

'I don't remember the details,' I told him. 'The time I woke and found Rob. The time I called the ambulance. How long they took to arrive. What he died from.'

'It's because it's not important,' the therapist said.

'These all seem like really quite important facts.'

'They don't change the outcome. They're not important. You can keep reminding yourself and your brain will keep forgetting. It's made a choice that that's how it's going to process the information.'

'My brain? Made a choice? Not to remember basic facts about a traumatic life event?'

'Yes.'

Dyspnoea or shortness of breath has also been linked to the following heart problems:

- cardiomyopathy, a range of diseases affecting the heart muscle*
- heart rhythm problems*
- heart failure*
- pericarditis, when the tissue that surrounds the heart becomes inflamed.*

Cardiomyopathy. What killed Rob. The condition I forget on repeat. I displayed the physical symptoms for the condition that killed him, even though he had no symptoms himself.

My aunt told me years earlier that her therapist had broken up with her. That's what she had said. That he had simply had enough and told her that there was no more he could do for her. She was proud when she said this. She laughed. She found a new therapist and started from the beginning. I wondered what you had to say or do for a therapist to realise you were beyond help. I was conscious of being liked by my therapist. Of being a good patient. A model student. Though I was also conscious of my lack of progress. I was waiting for him to tell me there was no more he could do for me. That I would feel like this forever.

I was bored of thinking about food. Of obsessing about not thinking about food. Of the rules I'd made up but had to stick to. Or who knows what might happen? Of the guidelines that I would repeat over and over in my head. Starve-binge-purge-starve-binge-purge. I was bored of avoiding my reflection and bored of staring into my reflection. I was bored of the physical reaction I had to seeing myself. Disgust and hatred and pity and fear. The pleasure of my ribs jutting out. The sameness of day after day. I was bored of Rob being dead.

'I've had enough of it,' I told my therapist as I actively tried to breathe.

I wondered if it was possible to die from boredom. I wondered if he understood the urgency of it. The grief plateau.

I knew I had to prove myself to him. And so I said it all. I said that when I was younger I imagined my parents dying every time they left the house without me. A car crash. Always. I thought I had the power to control traffic lights because my dad told me to click and I did and they changed from red to green. Click. I said I had things crawling under my skin. Not just since Rob died but always. I said I had written that he had died and then he had. I said I had asked him not to die and then he did.

My therapist said it was normal. All of it. He said that all children have those thoughts. And all people who love people. And I could tell he didn't understand. I didn't want to be normal. I didn't want it to be conceivable that something like this could happen. Even though it did. He had an answer for everything. Or a question. *Why do you feel that way, do you think? What*

makes you think that? Shut up. Shut up and just tell me that this couldn't happen. Can't. Didn't. Won't.

But he didn't.

I fooled my body. I played tricks on it. I drank litres and litres of water at once. Filled my stomach with liquid until it juttred out, round and pregnant with fluid so it would think it was full. So it wouldn't catch on that it was hungry. That it needed food. I schemed against my body, the enemy. You can drown from the inside. You can poison your body with an excess of things that are good for it. Even water which is harmless on its own can become too much. The body can't tolerate it. Can't process it. Like pain. Like sadness. Too much and the body can't cope. *I'm drowning*, I wanted to say. *Help*.

People only saw the fragments. They focused on the jagged bits, on whatever they thought they could glue together. I told my therapist about the vomiting. About the bingeing. About the anger. And he asked me questions about other things.

'Why did your mother drive you in today?'

I tried to explain to my oldest brother Andrew how much pain I was in. How I couldn't sleep. I asked him to explain the medical details of what happened to Rob over and over again. Why didn't the ambulance take him to hospital? Why had his body kept making noises? At what time *exactly* had he died?

'You need to eat,' he said, 'or it will impact your fertility.'

I told my GP that I couldn't breathe properly. My chest was tight. She told me to get a blood test. The blood test told me to eat more red meat.

I told my mum, 'I can't do this anymore,' and she brought me pots of tea and cleaned my sheets and expected nothing from me. I had a physical reaction to her empathy. It disgusted me. 'Leave me alone,' I said.

I was told to eat a burger. I was told it could have been worse. I was told at least I was young. I was told to be grateful for the time we had. I was told it was lucky we never had a child. The cracked bits of me were seen only in isolation: the shards. Smash. *Mazel tov*. A reminder of destruction, of tempered happiness.

Someone passed on a phone number. Sagit was a young widow who had lost her husband years before. It was like some kind of underground widow set-up. An invitation to an exclusive club.

Sagit and her husband had been on their honeymoon in Africa on a safari. A hippopotamus rammed their canoe and bit him, severing his femoral artery. He bled out quickly and died. I remembered hearing about it when it happened, the way bad news can travel from a river in Africa to a school bus in East Hawthorn. A friend of a friend of a friend was friends with Sagit's younger brother. I was riding on the school bus, sitting in the back row (prime position, back-middle) as we dissected the shockingness of it. The very act of talking about it marking it as something other. Something that could never happen to us.

Now, years later, Sagit was offering to meet me for coffee near her work. She had dark skin and wild hair, her voice husky and kind. I felt her pain, underneath the warmth and smiles and hands covered in printer ink.

When she spoke of her late husband she called him 'my Rob' to differentiate between hers and mine. The young men who had died unexpectedly both with a shared name. 'My Rob ...' she would begin, 'and my Rob' I would respond. Our Robs.

'What did you do?' I asked. 'To cope.' I was ready to take notes.

'I partied,' she said. 'A lot.' She talked about the rebellion and the destruction. How she let loose. It wasn't something she recommended, she laughed. But it got her through. To the other side. Another thing I was doing wrong. I couldn't even have a breakdown properly. I was so placid in my grief. So lacking in fight.

'Call me any time,' she said and I knew I wouldn't. I missed her Rob even though I never met him.

I got home and threw up. The food was laced with milky coffee. Half a muffin came out almost whole. Soft and expanded and bigger than before. I ran my tongue along my teeth and took a breath and panicked that I had left something inside me. A piano accordion. A small house. I felt my organs compress. I put two fingers down my throat again just in case but only a thick stream of yellow bile came up. It no longer tasted like coffee, just sour and acidic. I googled hippopotamus attacks. They are aggressive and frequently attack boats or charge on land, killing about 500 people per year in Africa. I added hippos to my list of things to fear.

CHAPTER 10

SAY YES

‘SAY YES,’ said a friend of Mum’s when she came over. She had been widowed a decade before, in her forties. I always thought her husband had a heart attack while they were having sex. I asked Mum how her husband had died and she said it was cancer. I’m not sure where I got the sex thing from. Perhaps I had her confused with someone else.

‘If you don’t say yes now, people will stop asking,’ she added.

People had been vague with their advice to me. Different versions of: *make friends with time*. And so when she offered me this practical piece of wisdom I clutched on to it like gospel.

One of Rob’s friends asked if I wanted to go out for coffee. So I said yes.

We sat in the cafe and realised that we had nothing in common except for Rob. People had started to avoid talking about him as if it would upset me. As if perhaps I had forgotten and that by mentioning him I would suddenly remember he had died. It became clear as we sat in the silence that maybe I was right. Maybe he was the best thing about me. Maybe without him – without being loved by him – I had lost who I was as well.

A friend from uni called and asked if I wanted to go out for tea. Yes, I said now, as instructed. Throughout my first year of law school he’d asked me out without being dissuaded by constant rejection. ‘I am not attracted to you! Your skin is too milky! And you repulse me a bit!’ I had yelled at him after his six-month campaign for a date had proved fruitless. Even after my cruelty, he had only accepted that we would be nothing more than friends once I had started dating Rob.

We sat and he talked about the process for graduate positions and what area of law he might like to specialise in. The whole time I wondered whether, with the benefit of hindsight, he was thankful for my rebuffs of his affection. Had he just escaped a death sentence? *Phew, close call*, I

imagined him thinking as he listed the top corporate law practices in Melbourne. His skin was still too milky. I probably repulsed him a bit. Tainted. The stench of death coming off me.

I accepted a breakfast invitation from an old school friend. Yes, I said. And then she said perhaps she'd invite a few more people along and I realised she had expected me to say no. When we arrived I ordered the fruit platter with yoghurt and asked for no honey please but the waitress didn't write my order down. No honey, I said again, just before she left the table.

'She had to perform CPR,' someone at a neighbouring table said.

'Yes I heard about that, so sad.'

That's awful, I thought to myself, before realising. I wondered how my story would change over time. I thought of Sagit and the hippopotamus and my mum's friend whose husband had died from cancer and not while having sex.

My meal arrived without honey. The fruit was arranged like a small sculpture, the sliced apples sat upright, overlapping angles; the kiwi cut into a zigzag. My school friends ate their eggs and bagels and porridge and corn fritters. They shovelled it in bite after bite. They expertly balanced their spoons with the perfect ratio of cooked oats to stewed fruits to brown sugar, scraped on the side of the bowl to prevent drips, down, down, down, straight in their mouths. They kept talking while dregs of porridge remained on their tongue. They cut their grilled tomatoes and picked up strings of wilted spinach on the way up to their lips. I ran my tongue along the inside of my teeth. The oil residue from their spinach left a yellow-green film inside my mouth. Transferred somehow. I wanted to study them. I wondered if it was an act. If their stomachs actually felt swollen and uncomfortable. If they felt they needed to lie down. If their skin prickled with sweat. I rearranged my fruit for twenty-six minutes. Someone said something I didn't understand about someone I didn't know and someone else threw their head back and laughed, opened-mouthed; a glob of egg white flew across the table and landed near the salt and pepper shakers. No one else seemed to notice.

'It was so good to see you, let's do it again soon!' they said in unison. The intonation going up in the *so*, drawn out in the *soon*.

I said yes to poached eggs for breakfast.

I said yes to walks.

I said yes. To coffee. To tea. Pick up the phone. Be receptive. Show appreciation.

But most people stopped asking anyway.

Skye invited me to go to the movies with her and her boyfriend, Simon. A year before, I had set them up on a blind date and they had been together ever since.

They picked me up, leaving the front seat free for me, with Skye in the back. The logistics of trying to include me without drawing attention to the fact that I was now solo. And so I took up the passenger seat, tiny and mouse-like, next to Skye's boyfriend in the driver's seat. An almost six-foot Skye sat hunched in the back, looking like Alice when she had taken nibble after nibble of the cake that said *Eat Me*, her head touching the roof of the car. Curiouser and curiouser, this rabbit hole we'd all fallen down. I would grow more and more sullen. The greater their kindness, the more I resented their need for it.

'I can't do this anymore,' Skye eventually said. 'It's exhausting. Everything is revolving around you and your life. I'm trying my best. But I also have work. And uni. And Simon. And every spare minute of my day is spent trying to make you okay. I don't know what else to do.'

The gut punch of truth.

'I'm sorry. I know,' I said.

But what I wanted to say was: *I can't do this anymore either. Please don't leave me.* And she didn't leave me. Even without my pleas. Because sometimes love is trying and trying again, even with nothing to show for it.

CHAPTER 11

SKIN HUNGER

I BRISTLED WHEN PEOPLE tried to comfort me. Pity was intermingled with intimacy and it repulsed me. A light touch on the shoulder. Too light. An all-encompassing embrace. Too tight. My head shoved in someone's armpit, their perfume scratching my eyes. I stiffened. I jumped. I repelled.

For most, there was a cautious distance. I was too fragile. They stared from afar. They read my body language and stayed back. Or perhaps I read their body language. It was unclear who made the first move.

I was a reminder that perfectly healthy people go to bed and never wake up. I was an omen. I was a plague. *And the Lord said, I will go throughout Egypt and every firstborn will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill.* And they marked their doors with lambs' blood so that Yahweh would pass over them.

People crossed the street to avoid me. The panic, the moment of indecision. And then the rush to put as much physical distance between us as possible. 'Come back,' I wanted to yell. 'Don't be scared of me,' I wanted to say. 'It's not contagious!' I wanted to scream. But I would have been lying. Hide your firstborns. Be afraid. Mark your doors with lambs' blood. Cross the street.

What this isolation meant was that, by choice or not, I was lacking in touch. I was starved of it. I had gone from an excess of touch – from hand-holding, cuddling, grabbing, sniffing, fucking, kissing, licking, stroking – to nothing. My skin tingled from the memory of it. Flu-like muscle aches. Agitation. My body remembered. Skin hunger. I was ravenous.

I rang up the yoga studio I had gone to when Rob was alive. When I would wake up late on Saturday mornings, take a 1.5-hour Iyengar class and then

meet my friend Carla for brunch around the corner at The Galleon. We had talked about books, we organised theatre tickets, we ate sourdough with avocado and ordered strong lattes and Bloody Marys. I'd come home tipsy from day-drinking and friendship, muscles aching from long yoga holds and full belly laughter.

I called to ask if James, the yoga teacher, was available to take a private class. I needed to avoid a room filled with the bodies of men and women that stretched and bended and sighed. Without hot breath and lanky limbs and hairy underarms and sweaty backs. And touch. My untouched body now feared the very thing it longed for. I had started to become aware of my limits. Of what it meant to live within them.

James didn't ask any questions. 'Sure,' he said. He didn't pry. 'Walk,' he said, just after I arrived, my shoes placed neatly in a locker.

I walked across the grey floors in the second floor of St Kilda Iyengar Studio, on the same street where Rob and I had gone out for dinner on the night he died. Not even aware if this was why I had brought myself here, or if there was just no escape from what had happened. As if every street in Melbourne somehow connected back to him. I walked across the room and kept glancing back, as if maybe I had misheard the instruction. As if maybe he had asked me to get into Downward Dog or Warrior Two or stand on my head or perform brain surgery rather than simply put one foot in front of the other.

'The problem,' he said, 'is that you're not walking properly. Instead of dropping your foot on the ground with each step, let the floor push you up.'

People focus so much on straight backs, he said, on posture, that they forget it all comes from the feet up, not from the head down. And so I tried again while he watched me walk from one side of the room to the other.

'Better,' he said. 'But this time really focus on heel down, then arch, then toe. Let every part of your foot touch the ground in order. And let the ground push you up. Let the ground carry you.'

And then I felt it. I had been dropping down with a thump and expecting the hard floor to withstand my weight, only to stomp down again. Instead I had to 'talk' to the ground, have a conversation, a reciprocal relationship. I could push down gently and the ground would push me up. 'Again,' he said, over and over, as I paced across the room.

At the end of class, James propped up some soft bolsters on the floor, covered in itchy, woollen blankets. I wondered when they had last been

washed. I lay on the floor as he moved my disappearing body with ease. Back and forward. Over the bolster, a twist and a turn. Underneath his hands, always a blanket, a barrier between our bodies. He expertly moved the blanket every time my body turned, up and down, over and around, a choreographed dance. Heat radiated from his hands, from his skin. The weight of him pressed against my muscles, my limbs. The heaviness of his body. Tears ran down my face. Learning to walk brought me upright, learning to yield brought me to the floor. I was anchored.

CHAPTER 12

THE AUM

THE EXPERIENCE AT THE yoga studio with James had taught me that if I wanted to be ‘fixed’ the responsibility was on me. The feelings of abandonment continued to throb. I had to find my own way.

I understood the appeal of the Prosperity Gospel. Take my money. Take my prayers. Take my faith. Promise some relief, some reward, I will go all in. I waited for the religious heads to line up by my door, one by one, to offer me solace. To show me their wares. Travelling salesmen, spruiking their goods. The Jehovah’s Witness business model started to make more sense to me. Turn up to the doors of the lost at just the right moment, with just enough answers to just enough questions. But they never showed up, either. My doorbell was never rung by men holding Bibles, with suitcases full of pamphlets printed with *The Watchtower* or *Awake!*

Take me, I’m yours. I will pray to your gods and make sacrifices to your deities and kneel at your altars. A lapsed Jew, angry at a God she didn’t believe in.

My aunt – the one who turned up at the door with a giant vanilla slice and a daughter dressed as a clown – found a meditation studio around the corner from my house. She offered to pick me up in her car every Tuesday night for crystal healing and chanting. On the drive home we laughed about the strange women who attended, with their desperate features and curly hair and thick glasses, which they placed next to their crossed legs as they closed their eyes and followed along with the cues. My aunt had thick glasses in crazy shapes and colours, pointed up like cat eyes in each corner. Bright purples and blues. One pair clung by an arm over the front of her top and another pair on her face. *Oh shit, I left my glasses*, she would say on our way out. *You’re wearing them*, I would say. This happened each week. Our

hair was straight, hers spiky and short and mine long and flowing. We were not them. We were not these lost women looking for answers among the incense and essential oils.

We did a women's circle and chanted along as the meditation teacher talked about our wombs and our power. I cried tears as we left. I had just started my first period since Rob died, I explained in the car. Just before she picked me up I noticed the familiar red stain on my underwear. It had been six months since my reproductive system had done what it was meant to do. In the months after Rob died I let myself believe there was a possibility I was pregnant. Maybe contraceptives had failed in the weeks before he died. Or maybe it was immaculate. Maybe he had just found another way to come back to me. But I was not pregnant. My belly didn't grow with signs of new life. Instead it shrunk and shrivelled. Failed. But now I had a sign. The meditation teacher was right, I thought. My womb was sending me a message to hang on. Telling me how powerful I was.

My aunt dropped me home again and I floated, still high from spirituality and ylang ylang. That's when I realised. I was bleeding from everywhere. It was not my period. The cramps, the red spots. A side effect from excessive laxative use. The tablets I never bought from the same pharmacy twice. The tablets I pocketed and hoarded so my parents didn't see. When the starvation wasn't enough, when the vomiting felt unfulfilling. My uterus was still grieving. My colon was angry. I wiped up the blood, I clutched my stomach again, wrapped myself up in the foetal position. I texted my aunt that I decided I wouldn't go back to her meditation class. It wasn't for me.

I kept searching. My friend Skye called. The yoga teacher, James, was running a meditation workshop and she had booked us in. The AUM. It stood for Awareness, Understanding and Meditation.

'Really?' I said, when she explained.

'It can't hurt!' she laughed.

It was a half-day movement meditation in a tiny church hall near Caulfield Park, among all the markers of my everyday life – the dog park, the Jewish women in Lululemon leggings walking laps as they gossiped. The AUM originated in the eighties, created by meditation facilitator Veeresh and now taught across the world. The purpose was to guide us through the fourteen aspects of the human experience: hatred, forgiveness,

love, stamina, energy, chaos, dance, sadness, laughter, sensuality, chanting, silence, respect and sharing. I wondered who decided there were fourteen.

I felt animal. Perhaps this would make me human again. We gathered. A room of strangers, except for my friend Skye and the facilitator, James. We introduced ourselves and everyone seemed to have different levels of awareness about what was about to happen. Some had completed the AUM several times before. I didn't know if this meant it was effective or ineffective. Men and women, some couples, some groups of friends, some alone. A middle-aged woman with a shaved head, a few men in singlets with muscly arms and soft bellies. There was chunky jewellery and grey hair and Birkenstocks and someone with BO and someone else with too much perfume, although in hindsight this could have been the same person. There were many doing this for the first time too, like me and like Skye.

We were told that the first stage was called Return to Hell. My eyes darted across the room to Skye. *What the fuck*, I mouthed but she pretended to ignore me. James explained the natural reaction is to run. As if on cue, I felt my body bursting to leave but demanded it stay put. We were told to stand with our feet shoulder-width apart, our knees bent. We were to stand in front of a stranger and look into their eyes. We made fists. We shouted continuously and without stopping: *No, No, No*. On repeat. And then: *I hate you*. We walked around the room. A loop of anger on replay. Our legs bent. Our fists clenched. *No*, we shouted. We were angry.

'Express your No to create a space for Yes,' James said as he walked around and surveyed the room. 'Experience being in your power.'

I could no longer smell the BO or the perfume. When you are immersed in something for long enough you lose the sense of it.

'Next it is time to make way for healing,' James said.

We moved towards someone and put our hand on each other's shoulders. *Sorry*, we said. We moved around the room. No clenched fists. No bent knees.

'Be open,' James said. 'Be loving.'

I went from person to person. Their sorries hurt my ears and my sorries lacked conviction. But I began to melt into it. To listen to their sorry and to believe them. Some embraces were longer than others. Some people held on tighter, their arms wrapped for extra seconds or minutes before moving to their next apology.

Next we were to turn the energy around. We were to stand in front of someone, hold their hands, look into their eyes and say: *I love you*. We were told to go towards the people we shouted at most during the first anger stage. I said the words but I did not mean them. I avoided my friend Skye because it was easier to express my fake love to a complete stranger. I really loved her, which meant the words were harder to say. Especially since I knew what loving leads to. A man came to express his love for me more than others. He had also shouted *NO* at me with his clenched fists more regularly than anyone else. I wondered who I reminded him of. His mother or his sister or his wife or his ex or someone who rejected him or his dead girlfriend or his old teacher or his boss? Whoever I was being as the recipient of his anger I was now the recipient of his love.

I was unable to match anyone's gaze. They stared into my eyes and within seconds my eyes darted this way and that. I tried to focus on their pupils but then I felt sleepy and wanted to shut my eyes. It felt like one of those 3D Magic Eye posters we used to have as kids. I could never see the shapes. My friends would stare and stare and then gasp with delight as the Taj Mahal or a giant lion would appear. 'Oh yeah!' I'd say. 'I see it now.' But I never did.

We were told to feel nourished by this eye-gazing. We were to feel loveable. I was uncomfortable but pretended not to be. Because I was spiritual. I was human. I was a goddess.

Every now and then I crossed paths with Skye who offered me a friendly smile but I avoided her direct gaze. Tried not to break the spell.

Next we were to push our limits. To jump into the unknown. We did this by running on the spot with our arms up. We lifted our knees high and made contact with the earth. We stayed connected to each other through sound. Through energy. We were maniacs. We were escapees from an asylum. We were madmen. We shook. Shook with our feet grounded and our whole body convulsed. Starting from our knees and hips, our body followed.

'Heads and jaws loose,' James reminded us. 'Transform your madness into ease. Spread the subtle energies.'

We vibrated with power. When you express your madness consciously, you remain sane, we were told. We were to move now with breath and sound. To scream. To throw a tantrum.

'Act like a crazy person,' James said. Cry. Jump.

For the past few months this was what I had been afraid to do. I had been terrified of expressing my madness, worried that it would be unending. A heaving mass, screaming as I walked through the streets of Melbourne, throwing tantrums in the grocery line, twirling in aisle four, heaving my body up and down and up and down during a university lecture and slamming my fists against the hard ground in the bookstore. This is what I was worried about. A tap that could not be switched off. A gushing madness without end.

‘It is a cleanse,’ James explained. ‘A conscious madness that leads to sanity, not to more madness.’

Here I found my stride – tongue wagging, mouth open, huffing, legs and arms akimbo. *Get this out of me*, I prayed to no one. *Please*.

And then we moved to dance. We moved our bodies. We kept time. These strange ballerinas. Interpretive dancers who spoke each other’s language. I found my peaks, I swayed.

‘Time to shift gears,’ James instructed.

We were meant to sit with someone, to hold hands and to cry. We were all puffed from our ecstatic dancing and as we brought the energy down there was an audible panting. We tried to catch our breath. A film of sweat gathered above my lip and I licked it off, tasted the salt.

‘As you let go, think of all the painful situations in your lives and embrace them.’ James’s voice filled up the room with little effort. We were to embrace them literally by holding ourselves as we rocked our bodies. I wrapped my arms around myself and I cried. I allowed myself a moment. But only that. It was enough. My eyes were wet from tears but I would not let this room of strangers have any more than that. Off, like a switch.

‘With connection to our grief we move from pain to joy,’ James said, his arms open and his eyes closed.

The pain was my friend. Familiar. I didn’t want to let go of it. I was rooted in it.

‘Now LAUGH!’

Big, fat *Ha ha ha*-s reverberated across the room. I floated outside of myself for just a moment. Long enough to see this room of maniacal laughing and I couldn’t help but laugh for real. To feel love for this group of insane people who were sharing space with me. The intensity ramped up and we were to sashay and sway. To touch hands as we passed and smiled and flowed and breathed and panted and held hands and walked and moved.

‘Feel the vibration of the space you have created. Compliment each other!’

As we walked around the room we traded compliments as we passed. I like your smile. You have a beautiful face. I can feel your strength. You are kind. You are wanted.

And I knew in that moment that if we weren’t in a church hall next to Caulfield Park, our clothes would be off. We would be licking behind ears and feeling the heat of our bodies and rubbing up against each other. There would be eyes closed and legs raised and hands grabbing and hips and groins rubbing up against each other and penetration of fingers and the climax of these stages from anger to dance to love would end in an epic orgasm and release.

But we were not in a commune. We were fully clothed. And instead, we awkwardly swayed our hips. The unspoken communication that we were not having an orgy. We were not climaxing.

We stood in a circle with our knees bent. We looked at the light of a candle and chanted a long, drawn-out *Aaaa-uuuummmmmmm*. The sound of the universe. We reached an empty space of communion with existence, or so we were told.

We looked into each other’s eyes, we put our hands together and we said, *namaste*. We bowed our heads. A shared feeling that we didn’t really know what just happened but it happened. Maybe? The smell of each other’s bodies became noticeable again. The films of sweat. Clothes. Hair. Breath.

We were exhausted and elated as we left together and our eyes adjusted to the afternoon light. The fresh air outside felt invasive. Skye and I walked to the car, the crunch of gravel beneath our shoes.

CHAPTER 13

THE DENTIST

IT WOULD TAKE ME days to arrange appointments. I became terrified of phone calls. Of calling people or receiving calls. Any sort of general life admin or small talk. There was a note in my calendar, a little asterisk and the word *dentist* in blue ink, placed there in a previous life. A reminder to book in my yearly check-up. It seemed unfair somehow that I still had to maintain this level of upkeep. As if I should get a free pass, in the circumstances. The call to the dentist had taken mental preparation. In case the receptionist might ask 'How are you?' or 'What's new with you?' and I'd have to work out the correct response. What would a normal, well-adjusted human say in this kind of situation? Everything became hard work.

'Did you burn yourself?' the dentist asked, instead.

I've always thought it strange when dentists ask questions during an exam. My mouth was wide open, neck aching, my head angled backwards. Her mirror shoved in my mouth. I was desperate to swallow. I muffled a noise. She moved her stick with its round mirror out of the way long enough for me to awkwardly guzzle a pool of saliva that had formed at the back of my throat, and then answer.

'I don't think so, why?'

Back in goes the mirror. The probing fingers.

'The top of your mouth is inflamed. Irritated. It looks like a burn. That's all.'

I shrugged dramatically. I could not answer because of the mouth full of gloved fingers and dental equipment.

'Weird,' she said again.

'Maybe from tea. I drink a lot of hot tea,' I said. Although the words were muffled again and all the consonants were missing. I don't think she understood what I'd said. A mouthful of vowels only. I tried to swallow unsuccessfully.

She kept examining, giving me a running commentary as she went. She asked if I floss. I nodded, which was daring given the sharp instrument scraping where my tooth met my gum. She told me there was enamel damage. Fuck, I thought. I've been found out. I wondered if she'd call my mum. I wondered how old you have to be for someone not to call your mum when you're in trouble. Instead, she asked if I eat a lot of vinegary foods.

'Uh-uh,' I said, instead of no. I learned quickly to answer in vowel sounds only.

'Lots of acidic foods?' she asked as she scrape, scrape, scraped away. I did a tiny shake of my head. I felt the scraper press against the inside of one of my teeth. 'It's soft here,' she said. 'Can you feel that?'

'Uh-huh,' I said. The subtle intonation change indicating a yes rather than a no. She must be used to this. She must be fluent in dentist-chair speak.

She pressed on the soft spot with her dental pick again.

Keep going, I thought. Stick your anti-fog mirror all the way down, down, down. Take a good peek. I imagined her gloved hand reaching in without stopping. Feeling inside and giving my vital organs a good squeeze. 'Can you feel that?' she'd ask. 'It's rotten to the core. The damage is irreparable.' I imagined my beating heart in the palm of her hand, soft and wet. She would hold it gently, studying the rhythms. She would keep asking questions, her arm shoulder-deep inside my jaw. 'Have you suffered a tragedy?' I wanted her to ask. But even in my fantasy she doesn't ask the question. She just removes her gloved hand slowly, careful not to dislodge my liver, my lungs, my guts, the sound of my heartbeat filling up the room. 'Hmm,' she said. 'Weird.'

She slowly raised my chair and up, up, up I went. 'You can rinse and spit now,' she said. 'I've done a thorough clean.'

I took the plastic cup which crinkled slightly as I grabbed it. I hunched over and spat into a tiny sink. It dribbled down my chin. I could taste the chalkiness in my mouth. I took another sip, swished audibly and spat again. How many rinses is too many, I wondered? Do I go again? I looked up. The dental assistant was putting things away, the dentist was writing up notes. I could go again, I thought. Three spits isn't excessive. Is it? I wished they would just tell me. Rinse three times. What if six is the norm? What if I was totally under-rinsing? What if I was just meant to do it once? Was I wasting

their time? Drawing attention to myself? I rinsed again. The cup was almost empty. I swished, swished, swished and spat. The chalkiness was still there. I used the weird pegged-on bib and wiped my mouth. The material wasn't even absorbent. I'd made it worse. White stuff and saliva covered my face. I felt my cheek and I realised I was still wearing the oversized sunglasses that were placed on me when I first lay down in the chair. Do I leave them? The dentist started talking to me but I wasn't concentrating. I moved my hand up to take off the glasses but I second-guessed my decision and left them on, weighing awkwardly on my nose. I wasn't sure where to put my hand.

'... so it's the enamel damage we need to keep an eye on,' she said. She asked me again about vinegary or acidic foods.

'No,' I said. 'I don't eat much of those.'

'Like oranges,' she said, believing I didn't quite understand.

'No,' I said. 'I don't eat oranges.'

'Or vinegar,' she said. As if maybe I didn't realise that vinegar was an example of a vinegary food.

'Nope,' I said, with a hard 'p' sound, happy to have my consonants back.

'Even in salad dressing?' she said. 'I know, I know. I don't want to be the fun police, but these are the things that can cause that kind of extreme enamel damage.'

I thought of telling her that I have warm water with a squeeze of lemon. I'd read about this in magazines. It's a thing. To start the day. I thought it would make her feel better. I thought of telling her that I'd cut this out now. Citric acid be gone. Thank you, fun police.

But instead I stayed silent. Dared her to join the dots.

What about stomach acid? I thought of asking. What about bingeing and purging? Is that corrosive? What about sticking your fingers down the back of your throat? What about repeated vomiting after every meal? What about throwing up so violently that it burns the inside of your nose and makes your eyes water, swollen and red? What about brushing so hard your gums bleed to delete the evidence. What about that? Would that do the trick? Does that solve the mystery?

But I said nothing. She continued to write notes. 'We'll keep a watch on it.'

She took a photo of the inside of my mouth. I saw where the roof had been peeling. I could see the blood in my gum line. She showed me a tiny black dot. It will need a filling, she explained. Book in at reception. She

asked if I would need an anaesthetic. She asked if I had a high pain threshold. We've just met, she explained, so she can't tell. I wondered what signs a person gives to show they can tolerate pain or not. We decided she'd try without anaesthetic. I could change my mind if it got too much. It's getting too much, I wanted to say. Help.

Instead, we talked toothbrushes. I used a medium bristle. I should not use a medium bristle. She playfully slapped my arm.

'Soft bristle only,' she said. She continued to explain how damaging medium-bristle toothbrushes can be. 'Have you not been told this before?' she asked.

'Maybe?' I said. 'But, why would they even *sell* medium brushes if they're bad for you?'

'Don't get me started,' she said, with an eye-roll.

I was pleased to have given her this. We had a problem with a solution, now. I would stop using medium-bristle brushes.

'And you grind your teeth, yes?' she asked.

'I don't know,' I said. I realised I was clenching my jaw the whole time she was speaking. 'Actually, probably yes,' I said.

'Yes, you seem like you'd be ...' her voice trailed off. 'Try not to grind,' she added. She showed me techniques to clench my jaw and release. It's easier to release once you purposely clench even harder, apparently. I promised I would try to stop grinding. She explained that at the rate my teeth were wearing down, they wouldn't last. She showed me the photos again: the front of my teeth where I had worn them down. A few millimetres, apparently. This wasn't normal for someone my age. This was normal wear for someone in their sixties. I was in my twenties. My teeth didn't match my age. Nothing did.

I wasn't sure if I was relieved she didn't mention the reason for my extreme enamel decay or not. I wasn't sure if she realised, if it was plainly obvious and she was doing me a kindness by not making a big issue of it, or whether she genuinely thought it may be too many oranges.

We made an appointment for the next month, to put a filling in my molar. Without anaesthetic. We would test my pain threshold. She handed me a small bag with a travel-size Colgate and a toothbrush. A soft-bristle one.

'See you in a few weeks,' she said.

I took my kid-size carry bag with me. A party favour.

‘Throw out your toothbrush,’ she said. She laughed. As if I was in on the joke.

CHAPTER 14

THE HOLOCAUST TRUMPS ALL

LOOK, IT HAS TO be said, having Holocaust-surviving grandparents kind of puts a dampener on everything. Because ... perspective. So yes, my partner died on me suddenly. But was he shot in front of me by Nazis while my children were sent off to death camps? Well, no.

So yes, I had moved back into my parents' house. Was I living in occupied Poland in a labour camp? No.

The Holocaust is, in that sense, kind of a buzzkill. Like a reverse killjoy. A killpity? A voice in my head that taunted me: 'Doesn't compare to the Holocaust,' it would snark.

My grandparents had escaped circumstances I cannot even fathom. Their families had been tortured and murdered in front of them. They were brutalised and dehumanised and watched their parents and siblings and children and wives and husbands taken from them. When they survived the atrocities of the war they married whoever was in their vicinity and started a new life. In a new country. With a new language. They just ... got on with it. They had more children and established new friendships and became bakers and dressmakers. They watched their children have children. They rarely spoke of what they saw, of the nightmares they had, of what they lost.

I was ... not getting on with it. I was in this new land of widowhood and I was not adjusting. I was not learning the language. I was not laying down roots and starting a life for myself. I was floundering. I was clinging to what I had and refusing to comprehend that this was my future.

I would wake up in the middle of the night, tortured by the memory of Rob gasping for breath as I remembered the basics of CPR. My mind flashed back to my Grade Six teacher, Mr V. I often wanted to call him, to

thank him for those first aid lessons in PE, because I knew what to do in a crisis. And yet I feared the follow-up question: 'So how did it all work out?'

'Well, like, not well. He died. But I remembered the ratio of compressions to rescue breaths, so ...'

I replayed the night over and over. The 000 operator who demanded I place him on the floor as I tried to explain that he was twice my body weight and size and it was proving near impossible. (It's only in hindsight I realise the true meaning of the word 'dead weight'.) The way his body clumsily fell, the way his head hit the bedside table on the way down. I worried I had hurt him, only finding out later from the paramedics that he had in fact died by that point.

'But he was making breathing sounds,' I had said.

A reflex of the dying brain.

It was both terrifying and a comfort to find out he had died before any of my attempts to resuscitate him. Because even though there was nothing more I could have done for him (Had I called 000 fast enough? Did I start compressions in time?) it also meant that he had died without realising how hard I had tried to save him. He died without hearing me beg him to hang on. He died without me desperately telling him how much I loved him. He died before I even realised something was wrong. Did he know he was dying? Was he scared? Did he know I had tried my best?

And yet. Still. Not. The. Holocaust.

CHAPTER 15

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

FRIENDS AND FAMILY PLEADED with me to eat. I laughed off their concerns. I was just stressed. I just couldn't keep things down. It was just because I wasn't sleeping. I appreciated and resented their worry. Leave me the fuck alone. Help me please.

Seven months after Rob's death, it was Yom Kippur. And on Yom Kippur, we atoned. *And this shall be to you a law for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practise self-denial ... For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins.* Game day. No eating or drinking. No wearing leather. No bathing or washing. No sex. A day of fasting. We asked forgiveness for our sins. We repented. We were forgiven.

Everyone joined in. The ones who pleaded with me to eat and the ones who got angry with me for not eating and the ones who threw up their hands in the air and said, 'Well, I don't know what else I can do,' as if they had been specifically tasked with doing something. On Yom Kippur they followed God's word and starved.

And so it is written in the Talmud, we make our bodies uncomfortable, but we survive. We were to feel pain, to know how others feel when they are in pain. From sundown to nightfall, we were to do nothing but sit in the discomfort. We prayed for forgiveness, for on this day He will forgive you, to purify you, that you be cleansed from all your sins before God. God who judges all creatures during the Ten Days of Awe between Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. He inscribes the names of the righteous in the book of life. And those who are judged have until this day to perform *teshuvah*, or repentance, to prove themselves worthy. They pray, they do good deeds, they reflect and they make amends.

The *Amitz Koach* is recited on this day. It is a poem that describes the creation of Adam. From dust, from His likeness, Adam was created. God breathed a pure soul from Heaven into his body. And from his body God created Eve. God told him not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge but he disobeyed. I wondered if I was Eve or if I was the serpent.

And so the Jews filled the synagogues and crowded the shuls, and although they would never keep another tradition for the whole year, on this day they fasted. And they made amends and asked forgiveness as they gossiped in the aisles and talked over the rabbi's speech and looked each other up and down to see who was wearing the latest Scanlan Theodore jacket and who still hadn't lost the baby weight. They spoke with hot breath that was sour and milky. Moth-wing tongues, disintegrating. Their bodies unused to the hunger or the acknowledgement of fault. The deprivation and the apologies slowly rotting them from the inside out.

But after twenty-five hours, the fast was broken. They ate. They were pious. They were pure. And they said I was the crazy one.

My dad and brothers always kept a chocolate bar under their seats at synagogue. To break the fast, as men in hats passed around shots of scotch. Part of me wished to gain entry back into that world. Where tradition brought comfort. To feel relief.

But I knew my fate had been decided, so I continued to ask for forgiveness. My body and my soul in discomfort. So that I would feel his pain. But the sacrifice only works when you give up something you want or need. When you resist temptation. And as I lay on the tiles of the shower one night, the heat of the water burning at my skin, making it red, I realised it was all a lie. In the act of wanting only for Rob, I had made myself want for nothing else. No desires. No need for sustenance. Perhaps not even for air. And if I wanted nothing, maybe I would just disappear. I had accidentally tricked myself. I had no needs, so there could be no deprivation. There was nothing to abstain from. And if the heat of the burning water hadn't turned my skin red I wouldn't have believed that I still existed.

CHAPTER 16

MEDICATED

‘SHE NEEDS TO BE hospitalised.’ This is what my brothers had told Mum.

It had been about ten months since Rob’s death. The acute shock of it had worn off for others and my inability to properly integrate back into the world seemed a source of both fear and frustration. There was a difference between the people who were scared for me and the people who were scared of me. I wasn’t sure which group my family were in. I wasn’t sure which group I was in.

‘We can look after her,’ Mum said. ‘We just need to wait.’

How much of grief was normal and how much was not? It was normal that I didn’t want to live in a world without my person. It was not normal that I didn’t want to live in the world. Though my person was no longer in it.

‘I could never ...’ I heard over and over again. It was spoken as a compliment. That others could never withstand what I’d been through.

‘I’m not,’ I wanted to say. I cannot.

The double standard of those telling me they couldn’t go on, encouraging my bravery for existing, but then seeming affronted when it turned out I was doing the very thing they said they would do had the circumstances been reversed.

The compromise was a psychiatrist. Months of talking therapy had given me something, markers for the weeks and days. But it was clear that if I kept going the way I was going I would not keep going for much longer. It wasn’t that my body was starved and my bones protruded. It wasn’t that I spent my nights lying awake, the walls closing in. It was that there was a darkness in me that was going to swallow me whole. It followed me, it

sucked the air from rooms, it threatened to drown whoever was in my presence.

The psychiatrist explained the difference between grief and depression. He talked about panic attacks, and about the brain and hormones and body chemistry. He talked about serotonin reuptake inhibitors and restoring balance in the brain. *I don't want to stop missing Rob*, I said.

'That's not what SSRIs do,' he explained. 'You will still feel. Your feelings will just be manageable.'

He showed me a diagram. A coloured list. Handouts about normal feelings and feelings that were not normal.

'I can't keep doing this,' I said. And he nodded. Though I wasn't sure exactly what I meant. He took it as submission. As agreement. An acknowledgement that rock bottom had been reached and it was time to go up, up, up.

The medication I went on so that I wouldn't kill myself made me want to die in a way I never thought possible. The nausea hit me with such violence that all I could do was cling to the floor, trying to flatten my body. Tiny breaths through my nose, as little movement as possible. My nails ached. My cells. Snakes crawling just under my skin, creatures gnawing me from the inside. Grinding my teeth. The side effects came on with such force that I felt betrayed. They were worse than the symptoms they were meant to cure.

'Please make it stop,' I cried out, facedown on the carpet in my bedroom. Mum sat rubbing my back. The room was a rocking boat. The world was a storm. I had found my new rock bottom. If ever there was proof that things could always get worse, this was it.

I couldn't stop clenching my jaw. I compulsively chewed gum. Chewed, chewed, chewed. Needed somewhere for the energy to go. To do something productive with my body. The laws of physics seemed not to apply. The weightlessness of space. My gravitational field was zero, a body in freefall.

The psych had explained that it was a slow process to allow my body time to adapt. I had been warned about nausea, dizziness, drowsiness, dry mouth, loss of appetite, increased sweating, diarrhoea, upset stomach, and trouble sleeping. An eighth of a tablet and my body had been taken over. My heart pounded. I had never paid much attention to the side effects listed on the back of medication. I didn't operate heavy machinery, so there never

seemed a need to worry. I didn't realise I was the heavy machinery, in this instance.

Please make it stop, I cried out again and again. My friend Carla came over and held my hair back as I vomited in the toilet. I remembered all the times we had done this for each other during drunk nights out in our teens. Vomiting in the front of someone's garden bed. Laughter as we tripped over ourselves, arms linked. All the nights we swore we would never drink again. All the nights we drank again. This was not one of those nights. This was not memory making and stories we would laugh about the next day.

This was not a rite of passage. There was no food left in me and so all that came up was yellow bile, sticky and thick. Eggy and acidic.

Please make it stop, I cried out as my brother Matt came over to distract me with stories. To share his medical knowledge and explain all the facts. I listened to his voice with closed eyes, no longer able to tolerate the light. My breath slowed as he talked. He explained what my body was doing. How it would end. Soon. He was right. A fog came over me. The nausea replaced with a kind of haze. I could float through the world.

My grief transformed. From a wild thing with talons to a domesticated animal. A feathered, flying beast that scratched and clawed, to a placid, trained thing.

Please make it stop, I cried internally, but I couldn't hear my voice anymore. It was muffled and quiet. It sat meekly in the pit of my stomach. I had returned to uni and only now was able to make it through whole lectures without breaking down. I started to take small bites of food. I became too tired to exercise, stopped filling my days with running and walking and sweaty gyms. I stopped caring at all. I had made it all stop, just not in the way I had hoped.

I stopped living at rock bottom, with its sharp edges that cut and bled and tore shreds off me. Instead rock bottom lived within me. A threat: lurking at the base of my spine, in my gut, in my chest.

As my face took on more shape, became a flesh-filled thing, I saw relief all around me. I had become recognisable again, a puffy, fluid-filled version of myself. It felt like deception. Walking around in a body that looked like mine, in a life that looked like mine, but wasn't.

CHAPTER 17

HUGO

‘LET’S GO,’ MATT SAID. ‘Get in my car.’

We had just been out for lunch with the family. He had seen the look in my eyes. He recognised it because it was a look he’d had himself. We recognised this dark thing in each other.

We told each other secrets. At some stage we went from siblings to friends. Growing up we would walk to 7-Eleven for Slurpees and Twix bars. He would help me fight for later curfews and the right to use public transport at night. As we got older he would tell me about his girlfriends and friendships and uni troubles and give me a sneak peek into a future that would soon be mine.

And now, he said, Let’s go. And so we went. We drove for hours, just to visit the breeder where Matt had adopted his small puppy the year before. Just to look, he said. It would be a good idea just to have something else to focus on, he said. It felt good to be getting in the car. To be driven somewhere. To be told what to do. For someone else to have a good idea. I was bored of my own ideas. I was running out of them. My childhood dog, my Cavalier King Charles, Charlie, was nearing the end.

Charlie came to live with us when I was in Grade Five, a year when my worries about the world went from normal childhood anxiety to full-body awareness. Worry crept into my sleep and was there to meet me when I woke. It lurked inside me at weekend birthday parties and sports lessons and art classes. It sat like a heavy rock. It was suggested that a pet may help. I wrote persuasive speeches about why we needed a family dog. About how I would shoulder the responsibility of walking and picking up shit. I made spreadsheets and researched breeds and presented proposal after proposal until a tiny Cavalier King Charles became mine. A lesson, I thought at the time, that simply by wanting something enough, it comes into

being. The sheer force of will. My anxieties lessened, I never picked up his shit.

We had taken him to the vet three times in the last year and each time Dr Rickett had warned us it would be the last. Next time we would have to consider 'next steps'. His laboured breathing. His peeing everywhere in the night. His struggle to walk. It might be good for Charlie, might give him a new lease on life, if there were a younger dog around.

We arrived and there was a sweet puppy smell, the smell of hay. The whining and whinnying of tiny creatures, sniffing and snorting. There were not many puppies. They had all been picked up by families who had been waiting for their arrival for months. These were families with young children and plans. They were not lost adults who just jumped in the car one day after lunch.

In the back there was one lone runt of the litter. A mish-mash of breeds. The mum part this and part that, the dad a purebred Cavalier, like Charlie. Fat and pudgy and cartoonish. He was all belly. I picked him up one-handed and he fit perfectly. I rubbed my nose against the top of his head and breathed him in.

'Oh my god,' I said.

'I know,' Matt said.

And we left together with this tiny dog and a new bed and leash and bowl and squeaky toys for a puppy I would name Hugo. Matt drove me home to my parents' house and I introduced Hugo to my childhood dog, Charlie. And for the first time in six months, Charlie was able to work up to a little trot. He bounded and leaped as this little creature nipped at his ear. And my parents smiled and shrugged and said, 'Whatever makes you happy!' At the beginning of the year they lived alone, just the two of them, and now they had two dogs and a grown daughter who sulked and moped and took up all the space in the house. And the next time we visited the vet, Dr Rickett, who first saw Charlie as a puppy when I was only twelve, and last saw him as a struggling old dog when I was twenty-three, would listen to his heart with a stethoscope and say: 'Amazing. It's like a brand-new dog.' Growing up I had a crush on this vet. He had a kind voice and gentle manner, was handsome in his uniform. But when he gave my childhood dog a clean bill of health, I loved him even more.

I nuzzled my nose into Hugo and breathed in the new puppy smell. I thanked this tiny puppy for adding time to Charlie's life but who I was really thanking was Matt, for giving me time too.

'I've got you, you're safe,' I had said to Hugo as we drove home that day in the car. 'You're safe now,' I had whispered softly to him, into his velvety ears, as Matt drove and took us home to this new life.

CHAPTER 18

PARALLEL UNIVERSES

I SAW ROB DRIVING. Months after he had died.

I was driving down Orrong Road and he was driving in the other direction towards me. I knew it was him because he had personalised numberplates. RRT 063. But his numberplates weren't on his grey Toyota Celica. They were on an Audi. We had been test-driving new cars before he died so it made sense that he was now driving a new car. This was the thing that stuck out to me. Not that I was watching Rob drive towards me, but that he had a new car.

Relief. He was okay. He existed, somewhere in the world, even if it was without me.

My head flicked to the right to get just a glimpse, a hit of Rob. I recognised the familiar shape. His father. The same nose, the same outline, but a wider jaw, a thicker neck, a shorter build, with grey wisps of hair.

Rob's dad had kept his personalised numberplates and put them on his car, to keep his son's memory alive. A fact I was unaware of when I saw Rob driving towards me just months after his funeral.

I pulled over to the side of the road, dry-retched until my eyes bulged, my face red from broken blood vessels, and let my body expel whatever it had been holding on to. Hope, I suppose.

I continued to see versions of him. Not his ghost. Him. Rob would walk into the coffee shop. The supermarket aisles. He would walk into the bakery to buy multigrain buns. Rob would be the age he was when he died. Rob would appropriately age to that day's date. He would be taller. He would be shorter. He would have the same walk. He would have the same aqua blue eyes that would look through me. He would be transformed. His t-shirts would fit in the same way, tight over his large biceps, showing off his wide shoulders. He would be a familiar stranger. He would look nothing and

everything like himself. He would walk around the world like it was no big deal, like he didn't even know himself.

It would continue to surprise me. Not that I had seen him. But that I hadn't.

If someone offered to take me out for a coffee or lunch, I'd purposely suggest one of the regular places Rob and I used to go to together. I was waiting to bump into him. To confront him. Or at least bump into my former life, our former selves.

Our local was The Pound Cafe, off a tiny side street in South Yarra. It was a few streets away from the apartment we'd just moved into and a few blocks from the hospital where Rob worked. That we had a local seemed to be a milestone in itself.

Dean, the owner of the cafe, had asked me out when I was just eighteen and he was twenty-seven. Rob loved the cafe and he loved the story of Dean asking me out. Every time we went there I would pretend not to recognise Dean and sit at the table with Rob like I had won some sort of prize. Rob would make conversation with him, asking him questions about his lease and how he got into hospitality and what was the right temperature for milk when making lattes.

Dean had asked me out years before at a wedding. He was the MC, a kind of unofficial best man. The bride was Matt's sister-in-law, his wife Fiona's sister. Our whole family had been invited and I had gone shopping for an outfit with Mum. A white skin-tight t-shirt that clung to my body, slightly see-through depending on how close you looked. When I first tried the top on in the store my mother had said: 'If we get that you'll have to stand up very straight. You'll have to pull your shoulders back.' My posture seemed like it was at the heart of every conversation we'd ever had since the beginning of time. 'And maybe a different bra,' the shop assistant had said, the white top stretched tight over my small breasts, the shape and colour of my nipples showing through.

I bought a new bra, a skin colour one that made my breasts look bigger than they were and disappeared any imprint of my hardened nipples. A floral skirt sat at my waist, coming out just slightly.

The couple were first married in a field in the Italian countryside with the groom's family and then in St Kilda, Melbourne, with the bride's friends and family. I wanted the floral skirt because it reminded me of Liv Tyler in the movie *Stealing Beauty*. The movie first came out when I was fourteen,

but I must have watched it years later, borrowed from my local Blockbuster. Even today I remember the moment that Liv Tyler's character Lucy loses her virginity to Osvaldo under the shade of a tree in an Italian field. Mazzy Star's 'Rhymes of an Hour'. The dress Lucy wore, Osvaldo's jeans, pulled down just enough, Lucy's eyes at the moment of penetration. White cotton underwear. The outline of flesh. Her slight gasp. A scene that was rewound and replayed so many times I was worried the tape would wear out. And this is the look I was channelling for the faux-Italian wedding. Nineteen-year-old Lucy being fucked for the first time in a Tuscan field. The look in her eyes. The fingers inside her. Her breathing. The dress.

Dean had sat next to me at the wedding. Had asked me my name. Had asked me to come out with him after the wedding with the rest of the wedding party. 'It'll be fun,' he'd said. I pictured Lucy under the field. I pictured Osvaldo's black jeans. Fumbling with his belt. 'I'm here with my parents,' I'd said, the age gap becoming more apparent. 'It's my first day of uni tomorrow. So, I don't think I can.' He had said maybe another time and I had said that sounded nice and that's all there was.

I went home with my parents and attended my first uni lecture the next day and spent weeks waiting for Dean to call, even though he'd never actually asked for my number. I would go to sleep thinking about my tight white top and the skirt with the same pattern as Lucy's dress in *Stealing Beauty* and fingers inside me and the way Dean would look with black jeans just low enough to press himself against me. And what my eyes would look like at that moment. And Tuscan fields and olive branches. He never called.

And so Rob and I would go to this cafe, years after Dean didn't call. He would be behind the coffee machine and on the floor serving bircher muesli to the South Yarra crew who ordered their eggs firm but not too firm and their coffees extra hot but not burnt. Rob thought the whole thing was hilarious. My lust. My age. My stupidity. He loved the cafe and he loved that it was our local and he loved getting takeaways on the way to work at the hospital. He loved hearing the story about the wedding and my first day of uni. When he was particularly miserable at work (which was often, in his neurosurgery rotation) he'd say that he was going to quit and get into hospitality and start a cafe like The Pound.

I sat at Dean's cafe and waited for my friend Carla, but I was actually waiting for Rob. I ordered the beef carpaccio salad. Hold the dressing. No avo. No toast on the side. The waitress looked confused. The meds had worked but my habits had remained. The fear of everything transforming into a fear of food. As if someone would turn around and point a finger and say, *Ha! I KNEW you were okay.*

'If you order it like that, there will be nothing left,' she said.

'It's fine,' I said.

From behind the coffee machine, Dean approached me.

'I'm really sorry,' he said. It was the first thing he'd said to me since Rob had died and the first thing he had properly said to me since asking me out half a decade before.

'I only just found out what happened. I'm really sorry. Can I sit down?'

'Thanks,' I said, unable to stop the flow of tears. I thought, This is why people cross the road when they see you. This is why they say nothing. They're scared of the tears. Of the reaction. They don't realise that avoiding the situation stings far more. It was a brave few who sat down with me, said what they wanted to say, unafraid of the response.

'I've just had to come over because the chef is really confused,' Dean followed up. 'The way you ordered the salad it will literally be a plate of cold cuts.'

I laughed. He laughed. The baggy clothes I was wearing did nothing to hide my skeletal frame.

'Just do whatever you have to do to get through each day,' Dean said then. 'You're smart,' he added, before getting up. 'You'll work it out.'

I smiled. He brought me my lunch, no judgement. Carla arrived and ordered. I don't remember what we spoke about. Just that I was conscious of Dean's presence. I kept looking in my side vision to keep track of him.

At the cafe around the corner from our old apartment, over a year after his death, I sat and waited for Rob. He didn't come. Again.

'If something happened to you I would never survive it,' I had said to Rob the month before he died.

'You wouldn't want to,' he had said in the lounge room of our new apartment. 'But you would. You'd have no choice.'

'Just do whatever you have to do to get through each day,' Dean had said.

I paid for a lunch I didn't eat. I moved to leave and then stopped. Turned and made eye contact with Dean. 'Are you going to the housewarming thing tonight?' I asked. It had been years since the wedding. The bride and groom were no longer newlyweds but new homeowners, pregnant with their first child and throwing a party. It had been years since Dean was MC and I was about to start my first day of uni. Years since he had asked me out. A lifetime.

'I'm not sure,' Dean said. 'I'll go if you go.'

'Okay,' I said.

I wonder now if I was actually waiting for Dean. Maybe I conjured him too.

CHAPTER 19

THE HOUSEWARMING

‘DO YOU WANT TO catch a movie or get a coffee sometime?’ Dean asked. We were at the housewarming party in St Kilda East and had been chatting for only a few minutes. I was by the front door. Still hovering. I was still unused to large gatherings of people and struggled to hear above the sound of blood whooshing through my ears.

‘I’m not dating,’ I said. ‘Now. Or ever. But we can hang out. If you want.’

My friendship group had dwindled considerably. The second wave of loss. The people who asked if there was anything they could do to help and then bailed when they realised there was nothing they could do to help. I get it, though; I would have bailed on me, too. I mean, I actively tried to.

‘That’s fine,’ he said. ‘We can just hang out.’

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘But it’s not a date. And I’m not going to sleep with you.’

I could see how he would find me irresistible.

I left the house without telling my parents where I was going. I didn’t tell my friends, petrified of what they would think of me. Cheating, fickle, calculating, witch.

I arrived at Dean’s building, a 1960s brick apartment complex that would be described as ‘solid’ in real estate advertising copy – in other words, lacking the heart and character of the earlier art deco period, and anything that came after. It was the kind of building that you knew upon entering housed a young Indian family with a small child, an elderly woman with a white yapping dog, a stoner with a guitar and two fat women in floral aprons (one widowed, one never married). There was someone Greek too. Possibly an elderly man whose family visited every Sunday.

The carpet on the stairwell exuded the smell of curry, alcohol and dust. There were pot plants outside some of the apartments and it was unclear

whether they were plastic or not and this made me sad, though I wasn't sure why.

'I'm not going to sleep with you,' I said again, as Dean opened the door.

'Cool, glad we got that out of the way,' he said. 'Come in.'

He was wearing a green woollen jumper. Rob had never owned a green woollen jumper. Dean had a receding hairline that suited him and seemed to suggest he would become more and more settled in his looks the older he got. Rob had struggled to come to terms with his thinning hair. He needn't have worried.

We sat on his brown leather couch and I pushed myself as far into the corner as possible, the backs of my sweaty legs stuck to the fabric. Dean didn't own teacups so we took shots of chamomile from tiny espresso glasses. The tea tasted of trapped air and unopened cupboards, bits of chamomile flower got caught in my throat. I fiddled with the silver bangle Rob had bought for me two birthdays ago. The last birthday we'd spent together. My fingers traced over the engraving inside, his love for me spelled out in the divots and bumps.

Dean asked me about Rob. He asked what happened on the day he died. He asked how we met and what made me fall in love with him and what Rob loved about me most. He asked about his parents and his siblings. He told me about his friend Mike who died in Japan suddenly. How he'd never really got over it. He stared me straight in the eye and he told me why he no longer drank, and about his partying and how destructive things had got. I cried. How he was clean and sober but that he would understand if I wanted to leave and I told him I didn't, and it was true.

'Favourite movie?' he asked. I realised I had nothing to say. Did I even like movies? Books? Theatre? I was no longer sure.

'I have no words ...' people would say to me in the days and weeks and months after Rob's death. I heard it over and over, and wondered now if it was some kind of curse.

Had I been shown inkblot Rorschach tests after Rob died, my answers would have been textbook. I would have seen blood where others saw butterflies. I would have seen an open wound where others saw a flower. I would have seen death because that was how I interpreted the world.

Ultimately, trauma and shame are silencing. No one wants to hear about blood when there is the possibility of seeing birds in flight. And it is exhausting, seeing imminent disaster everywhere you look.

So I stopped seeing death and started seeing nothing instead. An inkblot is an inkblot is an inkblot.

When I couldn't provide Dean with an answer, he pressed me. Had I seen *The Godfather*? I said no. He said we couldn't continue to be friends unless I committed to watching it. The word 'friend' hung in the air like a burst of light.

I continued to turn up to Dean's apartment. I continued to sit in the corner of his couch, the backs of my legs turning red as they stuck to the fake brown leather.

One night, I didn't show up, despite a plan that I would come over at 8 pm.

I ignored my phone when he called and called and called.

'You okay?' he texted. 'I'm worried.'

'Sorry, headache,' I replied two days later.

He tried not to let his anger show. Or his hurt. Tried to remain patient and understanding and kind. Though I saw the cracks of it. The way it stung.

I only ever agreed to see him after dark. Sometimes, instead of showing up at his apartment I would go to Rob's parents' house. I would sit outside, crouching in the gutter, and chain-smoke, the cigarette butts collecting in a neat pile. I'd look for signs of life in the window. Lights being turned on and off. The sound of dishes being placed in the sink.

I would turn up to Dean's house hours later. He'd ask if I'd been smoking because it triggered his asthma and I'd say no. I never sprayed perfume or chewed gum; I just walked in with the smell of cigarettes caked into my clothes. I didn't even enjoy smoking; I was waiting for a reaction. Waiting for him to say: *Enough*. To show me I didn't deserve his understanding or his kindness. I was waiting for it to sting. To wield the only power I thought I had.

'Have you told anyone we're hanging out?' he asked me one night.

'No,' I said.

'Are you ashamed of me?' he laughed.

'Yes,' I said. Not laughing.

If he was hurt, he didn't let it show. Compassion radiating from his centre.

'I'm not going to sleep with you,' I said, to fill the silence. Rob was the person I had learnt about sex with, what I liked. With Rob I had learnt the

things I could do and not do with my body to make him respond and react. I didn't want to think about whether I should or shouldn't be doing these things with somebody else.

The not-Rob-ness of Dean continued to show up in the way he laughed and the size of his biceps and when he said he needed to go to bed because he had an early start. The way he smelled of shaving cream and aftershave and toothpaste and coffee, and the way I began to recognise his smell. The way my body reacted to the sense of him.

Synaesthesia is derived from the Greek word *syn*, meaning together, and *esthesia*, meaning perception. Loosely translated, it means perceiving together, a condition whereby a sensory experience is perceived as if by one or more additional senses. The number four might be perceived as aqua, the sound of traffic might have a sweet smell, something warm to touch might feel dark red, the name of a loved one may have a citrusy taste. Even those without the condition can have a sense of being overwhelmed by the senses. Of experiencing the world in feelings and flavours, emotions colouring the way we interpret our surroundings.

But what happens when our senses are dulled to the point of disappearing altogether? When happiness lacks yellow hues and the touch of a loved one fails to bring warmth, when oranges stop tasting like citrus and lemons aren't sour?

The opposite of synaesthesia is anaesthesia, meaning no perception. Loss is itself a kind of anaesthetic. A drug that shuts off our senses.

I could feel myself slowly waking up, the shock wearing off. Groggy and disoriented, unsure how to make sense of my new surroundings. My body was responding, eyes adjusting to the light. I was trying to adapt to this new world where there were shades of colour and actions had consequences and people felt things. A kind of thirst on waking.

I would see Dean's name flash up on my phone screen and my heart rate would go up just slightly. I let myself acknowledge that Dean smelled amazing. That my fingertips tingled when he was close. At some point, the green jumper became a green jumper. It wasn't a jumper that Dean owned and Rob didn't.

I wanted things. I wanted to feel wanted.

Dean pulled me in close and I let him. 'I won't play games,' he said.

I felt the heat of his body and his words tasted metallic on my tongue.

CHAPTER 20

THE BIRTHDAY WISH

A FEW WEEKS AFTER I started hanging out with Dean, it was my birthday. I was turning twenty-four. Gemini baby. The twins, Castor and Pollux; the dual nature of life. The lower self and higher self, bilaterally symmetrical. I still measured time by reference to Rob's death. This was the second birthday I had had without him.

Dean asked me what I wanted for my birthday and I was adamant that I wanted nothing. Please don't make a fuss. It seemed disrespectful, somehow.

'No fuss,' I reiterated. 'No drama. Just no drama.'

So we went out for dinner the night before my birthday. We had only just started leaving his apartment to spend time together. Though I had mentioned his name, I hadn't really told my friends about him.

We went to a French restaurant, still navigating the landscape of places I had not been with Rob, places in Melbourne that were neutral terrain. It was not openly said: *Does this place remind you of your dead boyfriend?* But it was implied. *Would you like to go to France-Soir? Sure, I've never been.*

I was still learning how to eat properly. I was hungry to feel normal, to play the part, but I had forgotten how. A year of deprivation. Now, I was eating with abandon, unable to be satiated, but also to prove a point. I was fine, see. But my body didn't play along. My jeans button sat tight across my stomach, digging in. Everything fit differently, even my older clothes. My body had grown outwards again but hadn't come back to me in the way I had last left it. The proportions were all wrong. When I sat, I could feel flesh spilling over in places where there was once bone. I wore an oversized aqua poncho to cover my body. I initially bought it to hide my shrinking frame but now it served the opposite purpose. I was still hiding, but in a different way. My skin reacted with an explosion of painful acne around my

jawline. When I talked, I used hand movements to distract from my breakouts. I casually rested my hand on my chin, covering as much of my face as possible. I was a stranger. Again.

After dinner we went to see Lior, live in concert. 'This Old Love' was being played on every mainstream radio station on repeat. We sat at The Corner Hotel in Richmond. I pretended to be the type of person who saw live music at The Corner Hotel and Dean pretended he was the type of person who listened to Lior. The way people try to get to know each other by being someone else.

Yes, yeah we're movin' on

Looking for direction

Mmm mm we've covered much ground

Dean listened to Nick Cave. He listened to The Smiths. To Bob Dylan. He collected vinyl. He did not listen to the radio, let alone to mainstream stations that were playing Lior on repeat. I did not know this at the time. I also did not know that Dean was not the type of person to do things to please others. But he was trying to make sure I was okay. That I had a good night. He didn't know then that I didn't know how to enjoy myself. I had forgotten how.

Thinking back to innocence

I can no longer connect

I don't have a heart left to throw around

We arrived back home late to his apartment. I said thank you for the night out. We were still awkward in each other's company. We were still on guard. He was trying too hard and I was not trying hard enough.

Oh, and time moves on like a train

That disappears into the night sky

Yeah, I still get a sad feeling inside to see the red tail lights wave goodbye

I told him, again, that I would not be coming in. Wouldn't be spending the night. I would not be falling asleep with anyone next to me. Tonight. Or ever. I would not take the risk. I reminded him again that I would love Rob forever. I reminded him again that he should know.

We'll grow old together

We'll grow old together

And this love will never

This old love will never die

We said goodnight. He praised himself for a drama-free night. 'Job well done,' I said.

I was softening.

My head hit the pillow on my bed and I fought sleep. I was woozy from the energy of the night. The room with hordes of people. The rich French food. Drunk with possibilities. The unfolding of time. Uneasy in the ease of it all.

My phone rang. It was 6 am. I jolted upright. I was used to being woken from slumber and I knew this could only mean bad news. No one calls at 6 am just to say hi. A number I didn't recognise.

'Hello?'

'Hello, Natasha. This is Leon.'

It was Dean's dad. We had not yet been introduced. I was not ready to meet his friends or family members. That would have made it too real. But here we were.

'Ummm ... hi?'

I imagined a car accident. Or a heart attack in the middle of the night. Or an intruder who stabbed him in his sleep. *I had warned him. He should have listened.*

'Happy birthday,' he said. Voice flat. Unchanging. Fuck. I had forgotten.

'Thank you?' I replied. My voice trailed upwards. 'Is ... Dean okay?'

'He's in Emergency. There's been an accident ...' I could hear the pumping of blood through my ears. Felt winded as I tried to get my bearings again. Tried to breathe.

'He's okay. He's fine,' he continued. *Maybe lead with that next time*, I thought. Though my body hadn't yet registered the change in pace. The room was still spinning, my breath still staggered. I couldn't even ask what had happened. The words unable to form as heat ran up my cheeks and gripped my jaw. He let the silences fall for a short moment and then filled them each time I didn't respond.

'He got up in the middle of the night. He fell and bumped his head on a corner somewhere. He's fine, just don't go into his apartment. There's blood everywhere.'

I thanked Dean's dad. He gave me his address. They would take Dean home to their house later, when he was discharged. He was getting stitches soon, once they finished with the MRI.

My phone beeped with a text message. It was from my friend Romy. The one who'd called to tell me she was engaged on the day that Rob died. She was a newlywed now, working as a radiographer at the hospital around the corner from our old apartment. The same hospital where Rob had worked.

'I met Dean!!' she wrote. 'He will be FINE. Don't stress.' When Dean arrived by ambulance, an ambulance he didn't remember calling, it was Romy who assisted with the scanning. To make sure there were no brain bleeds.

Romy had the kind of look that always prompted people to ask how old she was. Her shoulder-length blonde hair, her blue eyes, her pale skin, her shorter than average height. All of it formed the look of a twelve-year-old girl. In fact, she did look the same at twelve. She still smiled with the glee of a small child. All in. Eager to please. In her scrubs at work it must have looked as if she was playing dress-ups.

Romy and Dean had not met before then. And yet they had somehow joined the dots, played the game of Jewish geography and connected each other back to me. And now I was getting updates from the emergency room, where Dean was hanging out with one of my closest friends.

'He's lovely!!' she added. 'He has been talking about you the WHOLE time. He is very worried. He wants to make sure you're ok. P.S. HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!'

They decided it was probably low blood pressure or dehydration or fatigue. The combination of all that plus getting up too quickly in the middle of the night led to a sudden black-out fall. The head bleeds a lot, I was told. *Don't go into the apartment. There's blood everywhere.*

They stitched Dean up. He would be left with a permanent scar on the back of his head, a gap in his hairline that would never regrow. Every now and then he would run his hand over his shaved hair and he would be reminded of the scar's existence. The scars in plain sight, the scars that aren't seen.

I arrived at his parents' house in the late morning. His mum had bought me a lemon tart for my birthday and a bouquet of flowers. We introduced ourselves awkwardly at the door. She knew my parents, in the way that all middle-aged Jews know each other. Their friendship circles overlapped. They were at Melbourne Uni together and would hang out on the quad, laying on the grass between lectures. Dean's parents attended both of my

brothers' weddings. They were family friends on the bride's side both times. After the second wedding, Dean's mum, Betty, came to say goodbye to my parents. 'Well, that's two for two!' she said. 'We expect an invitation to your daughter's wedding too, regardless of who she marries. It's only fair.' *The universe, etc. etc.*

Dean's mum was under five foot and I wasn't sure whether I was meant to bend down to talk to her or if she was meant to look up at me. She directed me to the spare room where Dean was resting.

'It's a sign,' I said to Dean as I entered the room. My first words. He was sitting up awkwardly in a double bed with fresh sheets.

'Happy birthday!' he said. 'I'm so sorry!' He had a giant length of gauze wrapped around his head multiple times. I thought of Romy in her scrubs and Dean's wonky bandage and I wondered if we were all just playing dress-ups.

'Yeah ...' I said. 'I really hope you're okay. But this is a sign. This is not good.'

'It's the best sign! This is great!' he said. 'I'm still here! Look at me!' He was beaming. I wondered if they gave him pain relief. I wondered if he was on Oxis.

'No ... it's pretty much the opposite of that. I warned you. I didn't want to get too close, and now you're hurt. So ...?'

'But don't you see? I didn't die!'

His benchmark for a good time had clearly been brought down to my level. The threshold for a successful relationship was now just to not drop dead in the middle of the night.

'Seriously,' he added. 'Don't you see, we can't always control everything. There's always going to be a bit of drama and a few knocks to the head. But I'm still here. This is the best sign!'

'That's a really extreme way to illustrate a point,' I said. Blood had started to show through the bandage. Dried red-brown spots on the pillow behind him.

CHAPTER 21

THE MARKS ON OUR BODIES

A YEAR AFTER ROB died I got a tattoo on my lower back. Tibetan Sanskrit. *Om Maṇi Padme Hūṃ*.

I decided to get the tattoo to mark making it through the first year without him. To mark the loss. To mark the movement of time. A reminder that I existed. Rob never liked tattoos, although I like to think he would have changed his mind when it was on my body. Or not. He wasn't there to give his opinion and I suppose this was the point too. And so I got a Tibetan mantra tattooed on my body. But it could have been anything: a shopping list or a maths equation. It was the fact that it was permanent that mattered. That I felt the pain of it, needle on skin. The way it doesn't matter how a person died. Not really. Just that it happened.

Dean had a tattoo of Icarus on his thigh. Bright blues and greens. A sun filled with orange hues. I ran my finger along it. The softness of his skin. The rough patches of hair contrasting with the strokes of coloured fire. Of feathered wings. He rolled his eyes. 'The things we do when we're young and stupid,' he laughed. He got the tattoo decades before. Young and stupid.

Dean and I traded these stories of our bodies. We ran our fingers over hips and thighs. I trembled.

That's the thing about getting to know somebody. About seeing them for the first time in the flesh. There is nowhere to hide when someone stares into your eyes, fingers inside you and breath hot on your neck. The way I bit his shoulder and he said that no one had ever done that before and I said that I'd never done that before either. The animal urge to bite, to claim, to mark.

I knew he tried out things that others had taught him about what women's bodies do and do not like. And I realised that I could not do this. I had to learn from scratch, to read his body anew. Because I couldn't evolve or

adapt or bring my history to his bedsheets. I was two separate selves, two separate bodies, and the betrayal felt caustic on my skin.

Our bodies talked when we no longer knew what to say. We moved and floated and grabbed and bit and scratched, clawing to escape. To crawl into each other's skin. To escape our own. I thought about the way we can feel like strangers in our own bodies and so we must vanquish ourselves. The way grief tears at the connective tissue, the muscle memory of it all stretching ligaments, turning us into something else. We pricked at skin, inked our backs and legs and arms. Needles in veins and fingers down throats. We bent and flexed and shapeshifted. Until we couldn't. Until we collapsed into ourselves, exhausted from the fight. We rested our tired limbs. Our tired hearts. We breathed.

We were here, these marked people. These people who pulsed and trembled and came. Who felt pleasure. Despite ourselves.

And though we know that Icarus was warned not to fly too high, that the heat of the sun would cause his wings to melt, we forget that Icarus was also warned not to fly too low, or the sea water would ruin the lift in his wings.

We are all these half-animal, half-human creatures, with fables and myths and stories on our skin. We know it's not tenable to continue to fly this close to the pain, because our wings will melt and we will fall. But if we fly beneath it all we experience nothing. The lusting. The desire. The pleasure. We remember the warning: don't fly too high. But we forget: there is a risk in flying too low as well.

CHAPTER 22

THE SCUFF MARKS

I WAS IN THE passenger seat of Dean's car. We were driving into the city for dinner. He always drove too fast and I tried not to notice. Tried not to grip the seats. It wasn't that he was over the speed limit – he was always just on it, or under it – but that he didn't account for the mistakes of others. For the way they braked suddenly. Or merged without looking.

'For fuck's sake,' he said under his breath to a driver that had failed to indicate. I was curled up in the front seat, still not totally comfortable with the new smells. The leather and the aftershave.

'Can you not do that?' he asked.

'Sorry, what?'

He jutted his chin out, and looked quickly at my shoes. I had tucked myself in and was resting my boots on his dashboard. They were boots I bought when I was backpacking. Before Rob had died. It was still how I measured time. Before and After. Though I wasn't sure in which realm I belonged.

I removed my boots quickly, my face turning bright red, heat rising. 'Sorry,' I said again.

'All good.'

There was a tiny scuff mark where my boots had been resting. I tried to wipe it with my hand while he wasn't looking, the dash rough against my fingertips. The white mark remained.

Rob had never asked me to remove my shoes from his dash. I wasn't sure if this was because it didn't bother him or because I had never thought to place my shoes on the hard, black surface of his car.

I became aware of my body again. The way it took up space. Dented and scraped against the world. I was quiet and sullen for the rest of the night. I wasn't sure if the flush of red I felt was embarrassment or anger.

Within a few weeks I started to introduce Dean to my friends. They were kind and welcoming and thrilled by his existence. By his willingness to launch himself into my life. To take responsibility for me. I was both relieved and annoyed. How dare they forget about Rob so quickly? How dare they assume he could come close to filling the gaping hole left behind? Their happiness that I had found someone who found me attractive confirmed my belief that I was not. I was damaged goods.

My family was less kind. Less welcoming. They had heard about Dean's reputation. His years of partying. They made lists of what they'd been told. None of it was untrue. All of it had been told to me directly by Dean. How dare you forget so quickly? I heard from them. How dare you assume he could come close to filling the gaping hole? Their suspicion of him, that he found me attractive, confirmed my belief that he could not. He was damaged goods.

'Do you think you have purposely chosen someone who seems like a risk?' my therapist asked.

'I haven't chosen any of this.'

He let my words hang in the space between us. Like he always did. He let my defensiveness speak for him. The sun through the windows hit the off-white blinds, hitting the plastic backing, the metal brackets. I felt the sweat on the back of my neck and the smell of melting plastic.

I told Rob's sister that I had started seeing someone, but that it was probably nothing. And probably also something. I told her, either way, it was something she should know. She told me that it's what they wanted for me. His family. I felt her arms wrap around the grief, grabbing it and keeping it from me. Head hunched and protective, as if hiding answers on a school quiz. I felt her relief, as she claimed something that was hers alone. As if I had proven her right.

I waited for Rob's feedback. I waited to hear what he wanted and what he thought and what I should do. And what I should feel. I waited to melt into it. I spent hours sitting outside our old apartment. I checked periodically to see if new tenants had moved in. But the curtains remained closed. The rooms remained dark. I saw no signs. I heard nothing from Rob. I didn't

even hear silence; the way a lack of sound has meaning. I heard the absence of it.

There's an ingrained belief that the dead are omniscient somehow. Even among non-believers. Even among those who believe that the dead turn to dust. Their names remain, even when their bodies don't. Their names remain all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful. It wasn't a question of whether I had given up on Rob. It was whether he had given up on me.

Dean asked me to stay the night. It was not the first time he had asked, but it was the first time I said yes. We were wrapped up in his sheets, the doona cover half unbuttoned, spilling its white insides onto the bed. I had spent the last few weeks leaving in a rush. As if I had to escape before I realised what I had done. As if spending the night was the betrayal and not another man inside me. Inside my skin.

I didn't say Dean's name out loud. When we talked I danced around his name. I was worried if I moved to open my lips the wrong name would come out.

He put his arms around me. The heat from our bodies merged. I placed my head on the flesh of his arm. He breathed softly in my ear and the pace of his breathing changed as sleep came over him. Became stretched and drawn out. Deeper. Softer. I removed myself from his grip.

Somewhere in the distance a neighbour was having a party. Unidentifiable music, the notes splayed in all directions across the night sky. A cackle of laughter. A screech. Drunk people shouting over each other to be heard. Glasses clinked, and beer bottles were thrown into the recycling. Dean didn't stir.

And so it continued for the night. Me, listening to Dean's breathing. The clink of glasses. The distorted music. A cackle. A breath. A crackle. A clink. The breaking of glass. I was glad to have the company of these strangers at their house party.

At 2 am the music stopped. The voices continued, but began to fade. Cackle. Clink. Breath. I was alone now, with only Dean's breathing. His back was to me and I studied his shoulders. Studied the scar on the back of his head from his fall, the rise and fall of his chest. I waited out the night. At some point my eyes closed. At some point they opened again, Dean's face close to mine. His eyes open, his hand on my cheek.

CHAPTER 23

MOVING IN

‘THAT’S NOT A REAL dog,’ Dean said the first time he saw Hugo. ‘A labrador is a real dog. A golden retriever.’ Hugo was spinning in circles trying to bite his curly tail. He yapped and spun and fell to the ground in a heap, popped up again, spun in the other direction.

I took Hugo with me everywhere I went. I carried him and tickled his fat belly. I took him to the park to tire him out and he ran and ran and ran, snorting and skidding through the grass. He never tired out.

He was my conversation starter. I was able to talk to people through my dog. They asked questions about his age. His breed. His name. They smiled and I smiled back. And I meant it. He was still a puppy when Dean and I started seeing each other.

I took him to dog training but he failed, unable to sit on command. He couldn’t walk attached to the leash without pulling, either. Or stop at roads. He was unable to resist the temptation to jump whenever the opportunity arose. We were told to get a water spray and to say ‘bah’ whenever he jumped or nipped. To spray him once on the nose. Hugo ended up soaked, as we repeated ‘bah’ over and over again.

‘He’s nuts,’ Dean said, not offering the same smiles I got from strangers on the street. He didn’t leap to hold him or cuddle him. He didn’t pat him behind the ear. Instead he greeted him like a work colleague would, passing by the communal kitchen. Gave him a quick nod, kept the distance between them. But he also said: ‘Leave him with me, when you go to uni ...’

So I started to leave him with Dean at his apartment when there were patches of time I would be away. I left him with his leash, his dog bowl and his bed. And I left my childhood dog Charlie asleep at my parents’ house to enjoy some moments without the yap, yap, yapping.

‘How was he?’ I would ask when I picked him up after my Constitutional Law tute.

‘Fine,’ Dean would say. ‘Nuts.’

One afternoon, my phone beeped in the middle of a lecture. It was a message from Dean. A video of Hugo walking by Dean’s ankles. I noticed Dean’s tattoo as he walked, a blur of black. Hugo trotted close to him. As they approached a kerb, Dean said: ‘Sit’ in a voice that was firm. Hugo sat. ‘Stay,’ Dean said. Dean took a few steps and Hugo did not follow. ‘Okay!’ Dean said, his voice going up a few octaves. Hugo proudly walked on. The video was jumbled, capturing the sky and the ground and the trees. ‘Good boy! Good boy!’ I heard Dean say, his voice high-pitched and excited.

‘Why don’t you leave him?’ Dean said one day. ‘Leave him overnight. You were just going to drop him in the morning anyway. You may as well leave him here.’

And so I placed Hugo’s small brown bed in the living room. We placed his water bowl near the balcony, next to a tiny aloe vera plant. And his leash by the door. Hugo stayed the night. And so did I. And then I never left, really. A toothbrush appeared in the cabinet. A section of the wardrobe was cleared for my clothes. The muesli I liked in the pantry. And Dean continued to take Hugo to the dog park before he started work and I continued to go to uni and to my part-time job answering phones at a beauty salon and we found our rhythm. The rhythm of Dean listening to music, to his record collection, with Hugo snuggled on his chest. Of the across-the-hall neighbour stopping me on the stairs on my way out, to whisper conspiratorially about the woman in Apartment 2B. The way I had been swallowed up into apartment complex politics and how normal that felt. As if that was the official initiation into this new life. As if it had just suddenly happened to me. In Criminal Law we were learning about *mens rea* offences. Offences which, to be proven, must demonstrate that the accused both committed the physical act (*actus reus*) and also had a guilty mind – the intent to commit an offence. I wiped my mind clean. I felt guilty all the time.

Hugo no longer yapped or nipped. Dean walked him without a leash. He followed behind him. Strangers smiled at him wherever he went. They asked questions about his name and his age and breed. And Dean smiled back proudly. The park tired him out now. He ran and ran and ran and then

slept soundly, tiny flickers of his eyelids and the occasional noise. Our sleep-talking dog.

‘Remember when Hugo was nuts!’ Dean said, as he grabbed the excess skin where the top of his head met his back. Hugo responded by nuzzling his head into Dean’s leg.

‘Yeah, I remember,’ I said. And I went to the kitchen to make tea before bed.

I threatened Dean’s life less often. We made it through entire days and sometimes weeks without me mentioning that his decision to be with me was risking his life. Though when I did start conversations by suggesting that getting close to me could be dangerous, that maybe he should rethink our living arrangements, his response was to become more detailed about his funeral demands.

‘I want a party,’ he said. ‘I want everyone to have fun.’

I smiled and nodded at this person who I had really only just met but was somehow living with and who talked to me about his funeral playlist over breakfast.

‘Also I want people to know that I helped people,’ he said, seriously now. ‘I know I’m not for everyone, but I want people to know that helping others was more important to me than anything.’

‘So kind of like a big reveal? Like a funeral surprise? You guys thought he was a bit of a dick ... and he was! *But* he was also charitable and giving above all else.’

‘Yeah!’ he said. ‘Like that. True charity is quiet. I hate when people do good deeds and then feel they need to tell everyone.’

‘But it’s fine to do that when you’re dead?’

‘Oh yeah, totally.’

I told him it was dangerous to be with me and he told me it was a risk he was willing to take and to add detergent to the shopping list. I told him he would never get Valentine’s Day. It was off the table. And he said that was okay but that it was time I committed to *The Godfather* and so we went away for a long weekend and spent the entire time in bed, breaking off rows of hazelnut chocolate, watching all three. And one day it just became normal. That he was there.

CHAPTER 24

WITHDRAWAL

I WAS AT UNIVERSITY. I was applying for first-year jobs at big law firms. I was living with someone who cared about me. I was back on track. Which meant I could go off the antidepressants I had been prescribed, because they were no longer necessary. According to the diagnostic criteria I was suffering from complex grief. I was mentally ill because the person who loved me died but now there was a person who loved me so I must not need the meds.

Coming off medication was the perfect way to prove my love to Dean. To prove how well I was. Even though I couldn't say the word love. Could not yet say his name without taking a quick moment to make sure the right name would come out.

It was meant to be a slow process, coming off the meds. I was meant to wean myself off carefully, under the supervision of a medical professional. But I didn't want to see a medical professional because I didn't want to be found out. I didn't want to tell them I was okay and find out that I wasn't. So I decided cold turkey was the way to go. To prove just how okay I was.

Within thirty-six hours I was vomiting with my whole body. My hair was expelling liquid. I was shitting out bile and I couldn't lie down and I couldn't move and everything hurt. My heart ached and my eyelashes ached and my chest ached from the pressure of dry-retching over and over again, hurling myself over the toilet bowl. Over the sink. The air was rocking. Thick with movement. A swimming, thronging mess of movement.

'What do you need?' Dean asked. 'What can I get you?'

My chance to impress him hadn't turned out quite as I had hoped.

That's when I asked for Heinz tomato soup and white toast, because when I was little my dad made canned tomato soup and that's what made

me feel better. Either the heat or the liquid or just the repetition of the act. The routine of care.

But Dean came back with Campbell's. And it was watery and red and came out again blood-like, litres of it, splashing in the toilet bowl.

After weeks of my being sick in Dean's apartment, he returned from work one day and said, 'Could you maybe clean up your dishes?' There were plates and plates of toast crust throughout the house, breeding, the crumbs scattered underfoot. Each individual toast crumb was imperceptible to the eye, but together they filled up the apartment, threatening to drown us.

I thought the Campbell's was a sign that Dean wasn't cut out for this. Could never be enough for me. But maybe it was my body, my dependence on the grief, the expelling of it completely unmanageable. And maybe it was Dean who should have realised I could never be enough for him.

CHAPTER 25

THE BREAK-UP

‘I’M DOING THIS FOR you,’ Dean said when he broke up with me. We’d been seeing each other for six months.

I had told him about the coke, in an off hand way. I was showing off, really. Brought it up as a sidenote to a conversation about something unrelated. We were driving in the car and as the words came out I immediately wanted to take them back. *The Smiths* playing in the car’s CD player. The sound of the CD whirring for a split second before each new song. The feeling of setting something in motion.

‘What are you talking about?’ he’d said.

So I’d explained that on a whim I’d bought whatever was going around at work. Hadn’t even gone out, had just done some in the bathrooms on my break because the bathrooms seemed to be where people did coke but probably not at their part-time job where they worked as a receptionist at a beauty salon booking Brazilian and underarm waxes. I loved the taste of it in my throat. I was excited to just be tasting something. Feeling something. It was not because I was regressing, I reasoned. I was moving forward. I was fun. I was making up for lost time. That I’d started throwing up again, skipping meals, was also nothing to worry about. It was just my body regulating. Levelling out. That I was in a relationship was all the proof I needed that I was well adjusted. Dean was evidence of my health. But Dean was breaking up with me.

‘When?’ he asked and I knew this was a trick question.

‘The other day?’

Fuck. I’d answered incorrectly.

‘It’s the lying that’s the issue. And the using drugs in secret. By yourself. These are not good signs. The not eating and the throwing up. It’s all lying. And I can handle everything but the dishonesty. You need space to work out your stuff.’

Liar, I thought. You can't handle everything. You are the liar.

Do whatever you have to do to get through each day, he had said. But the rules had changed. The expectations were different now.

Dean was driving when we had this conversation. I was desperate for him to look me in the eye. If he was looking at me he wouldn't be as hard and as cold as he was. But he had to look at the road.

'You wanted this,' he said. 'You're pushing me away. You wouldn't have done what you did otherwise. You can't use me or drugs or whatever you are doing as a distraction.'

And it was like everyone was telling me what I wanted and what I felt and what I thought but all I wanted and felt and thought was nothing.

'Please,' I begged. But I wasn't sure who I was begging.

I didn't miss Dean so much as I missed the possibility of him. I missed the normality of seeing a movie or choosing where to eat dinner. The regular phone calls. I didn't think about why I was still throwing up and why, when he touched my body and I came, it felt just as good and just as bad as when I starved and when I cried.

Back in my childhood bedroom I finished the coke that was left in the tiny ziplock bag. I rubbed it on my gums, felt it sink in, and I wondered how I knew to do this but then I fell into the dizziness. I kept falling and reaching.

In Dean's apartment there was always music. Always a record playing that he would have to shout above to be heard. But now, without his constant background music, I could hear even less. Everything sounded like half-finished sentences, like walking into conversations that had started without me. The quiet wasn't as quiet as I thought it would be.

Being with Dean didn't make me miss Rob any more. Missing Dean didn't make me miss Rob any less. I had become a missing person. It wasn't Dean's fault, as it turned out, that I felt the way I felt. That the guilt crept into every crevice. As if I was cheating on Rob because I was with Dean. As if I was cheating on Dean because I still loved Rob. Whatever I did, this constant sense of somehow doing the wrong thing. The unease.

I refused to sit still. Someone asked me on a date and we sat in a small wine bar and made polite conversation and he didn't ask me any questions

about Rob and I came home and cried.

My neck and shoulders ached, my body so tightly coiled. So I made an appointment with an osteopath and when he gave me exercises to do at home I nodded, though I knew I would never ever do them. I wondered if anyone in the history of being given exercises to do at home by a health professional had ever actually done them. He mentioned a friend's party, and I wondered if I'd made the appointment just to be touched and whether I knew this would happen.

That weekend I arrived at his apartment and he offered me carrot juice. He had a juicer. He kept the pulp to make vegetable burgers, he said. I drank the juice and the consistency of it was strange and we headed to the party where I spoke to almost no one and I wished I was with Dean. One of those house parties that sends music up to the sky and I wished I was in bed, under the covers, listening to it from somewhere else. From Dean's bed.

We went back to his apartment and he took my hand and led me to his bedroom. He slipped off my dress and my body suddenly seemed enormous, as if it had grown since that morning.

He was slow and gentle. When I tried to move my body, to let go, he found a specific rhythm and I realised I was meant to match it. So then I was counting and thinking instead of feeling and fucking. Like some kind of trigonometry assignment. Like we were playing Twister now, left leg yellow, right hand red and he spun and spun and spun. And I realised neither of us was making the other one feel good. And the disappointment tasted like lukewarm carrot juice as we knocked clumsily into each other, teeth on teeth. And the not Dean-ness and the not Rob-ness of him made me want to weep and I wanted to turn back time but I wasn't sure when to. To Dean. To before him. To the millisecond of a millisecond of an irregular heartbeat.

'Can we talk?' I texted Dean, two months after he asked me not to contact him. We arranged to meet at Chinta Ria on Acland Street, our local Malaysian.

'I just have one thing to say,' I started. 'If you don't love me, then that's fine. But if you love me and you don't want to be with me then you're a coward.'

‘You’re right,’ he said.

There was no room between tables. My elbows were touching the bowl of laksa on the table next to us. A waitress took a plate of sizzling vegetables to them and I could feel the spray of hot oil. The steam of the rice hitting my nostrils.

‘Wait, what? I have more. I have a whole speech.’

‘You can stop,’ he said. ‘I love you and that’s all that matters.’

‘But I worked hard on my speech. I memorised it. There is a crescendo. I haven’t even started properly.’ Somewhere at the back of the restaurant a large group broke into song: *Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you.*

‘It’s really all that matters,’ he said. ‘You’re right. I love you. The rest will work itself out. We can get through anything.’

The waitress approached and asked if we were ready to order.

‘Let’s do this,’ Dean said as he ordered kung pao beef.

‘It was a really good speech, though,’ I said.

CHAPTER 26

PHOTOBOOTHS

IT FELT DIFFERENT THIS time. The way we floated through each other's days. Slept in and read papers in bed and went out for brunch and fought about things that weren't important because we were overtired and then made up because we wanted to. But still, I always felt like I was running late. Just a few minutes behind. I could not shake the feeling that there was somewhere I was meant to be. Even when I checked and double-checked my diary, I was permanently flustered, knocking over glasses because of the hurry I was in. Then the clean-up would cause me to run later, still. I'd knock my shin on the open dishwasher door, tears in my eyes.

I started arriving ten minutes early to work and fifteen minutes early to appointments. I'd sit and wait for friends who'd arrive confused, and say: *Sorry, were you waiting long?* And I would say, *No, I just got here.*

Even then, always early, there was no relief. It sat in the pit of my stomach, this pull to something just a few steps ahead. I was trying to catch up to the life that had continued without me. I was late. There was somewhere else I was meant to be.

I graduated from uni and started a job in a corporate law firm. I wore suits and heels and fought the feeling that I was playing a role. Mid-twenties junior lawyer, racking up billable hours. Everyone else seemed to want this thing, seemed so driven, that I assumed I must want it too. I had no feelings, one way or another, so I invented them.

I was asked where I went to school. Where I went to uni. If I had a boyfriend. There was no question that accounted for Rob. No one asked if I had had a major life trauma. If I ever missed someone so much that my muscles ached from the exhaustion of it.

At Friday night drinks the first-year lawyers would gather at the bar downstairs from our office. We'd drink house wine by the glass which

tasted like vinegar and be offered that day's unsold paninis for free. Day-old prosciutto and sundried tomato and pesto on crusty bread.

'Just so you know, we know,' said one of the male first-years. We'd done our banking and finance litigation rotation together. Had spent the months making fun of all the senior lawyers to pass time.

The room was starting to get tipsy, as if the air itself was making everyone slightly drunk.

'Know what?' I asked. I didn't want him to say it.

'About your partner. The one who died. I'm sorry. That's really sad.'

I tried to think of the word I was feeling but it didn't come. Shame, maybe. Or embarrassment. That I would dare to act like I was a mid-twenties lawyer racking up billable hours, drinking shitty house red, talking about my boyfriend. This was not my life. This was not who I was. I had been found out.

Death travels across continents and school buses and cafes. Across soulless buildings in the CBD.

And now our friendship was forever changed but I wasn't sure if that made it better or worse. If I became more myself with him or less.

I took the train to work. Watched other people changing lines and listening to music and finishing their make-up as the carriage rocked. They always seemed so purposeful.

One night I waited at the train station. Research waited for me on my desk. The next morning's anxiety was already creeping in, even before the day had finished. Platform 2 from Southern Cross. I looked up at the screen. 6.31 pm. The train was arriving in two minutes, the screen told me. But my station wasn't listed. I needed to get to Caulfield station and this train seemed to head through without stopping. Straight from South Yarra to Mentone.

I waited for the next one. And the next. And the next. Dean called to find out where I was. When I would be home for dinner. If he should wait. Trains kept speeding past me, the wind taking my hair.

'I'm trying to get home,' I said. 'But I can't.'

'What do you mean?'

'There are no trains. Nothing is going where I need to go.'

'Just jump on the next train and change over at Richmond or something.'

The 7.20 pm arrived. I had let six trains pass me. I'd stood unmoving as hordes of people pushed and pulled and vied for space. As the doors opened I looked up at the screen, which still did not display my stop. But as I turned again I saw another screen further up. My station in lights. The original screen had a glitch. The bottom section was blank because of a malfunction in the display. I could have jumped on any of the last six trains and they would have taken me exactly where I needed to go.

I arrived home to Dean's apartment after 8 pm. The dog greeted me, wagging his tail which wagged his whole body. When I told Dean what happened he thought it was hilarious. I burst into tears. I couldn't work out why it bothered me so much. Perhaps it was that I hadn't thought to shift my perspective, or the fact that everyone else seemed to know what they were doing, while I could barely get myself home from work. Part of me felt like I was still standing on Platform 2, even though I was safe in Dean's apartment, dinner on the stove. Part of me was still waiting.

We disagree about it, still. It's Dean's favourite story. I told him I didn't mind if we never got married, but it was something important. And he saw in my eyes that I did mind. And even though he thought he was the kind of person who would never marry, who thought being able to commit forever was enough, he also realised he was the kind of person who would do anything in his power to make me happy. That's what it was about. And that's when he decided to propose.

I've stopped disagreeing with him now. Because he likes to tell the story. Even though I remember saying that I never really wanted to get married. That I was happy to commit or do something to mark the occasion but that marriage wasn't for me. At one time, I was going to get married. It used to be something I wanted, until it was something taken away.

Skye and Simon had just got engaged and I was feeling proud, remembering that I had suggested their first date. Dean asked if Simon had proposed with a ring. I said of course not. How old-fashioned. How would Simon know what kind of ring Skye wanted? Nobody proposed with rings. I couldn't even design a ring for myself, how would he know what to design?

I didn't notice Dean's face drop. I didn't know he'd spent the past few months designing a ring. I didn't know he'd gone to my parents' place, not so much to ask for my hand in marriage, but to end their invisible feud.

They had still refused to get to know him. *I can't replace Rob*, he'd said. As if it was his existence that was the affront. *And I'm not trying to. But I make her happy*, he'd said. Their anger at the loss misdirected at Dean. And they had embraced. And something had lifted. But I didn't know this then.

We went out for dinner and when we came home the lights in our apartment were out. I turned them on and went straight to the shower. Ready for bed. I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. (*Because you chose not to?* my therapist would have said. *Didn't see, or didn't want to?*)

Dean asked me to get something from the kitchen. I walked back and that's when I saw the photos. Lines and lines of photobooth photos covering the floor. In each box, Dean's head. Holding up words. Each photo line, a sentence. Declaring all the things he liked about me. My laugh. My weird sleeping positions. That I was his best friend. Photos and photos and photos that led to one last one. Will. You. Marry. Me. The last photo on the last strip, he was holding a ring.

I turned to Dean who was holding that same ring. It fitted me perfectly and I wasn't sure how. It was understated and detailed and I realised maybe he knew me better than I knew myself. I could never have designed something so perfect.

And then he showed me all the outtakes. All the photos that didn't work. The wonky signs and the eyes half-closed and the words held up in the wrong order and the blurry heads. And I think maybe it was the bloopers reel that made me realise we were right for each other. The mistakes.

We called the parents and we called the siblings and I knew there was another call to be made. I knew that for every milestone, for every life event, for everything that mattered: there was always another call. That every time something good happened in my life, it was a reminder of what was missing in another life.

CHAPTER 27

THE BEDEKEN

A WEEK BEFORE THE wedding, I tried on my dress; it no longer fit me. Strapless and off-white, the sides that were meant to sit tight against my skin were loose, the entire dress threatening to fall if I breathed in just slightly. When I called the wedding dress shop to say that maybe they got the sizing wrong, they said, 'It's from Spain,' as if that was the end of the matter. As if maybe it would fit properly there. 'Perhaps you've changed,' the woman on the phone said. Then she added, 'It's not the fault of the dress that it doesn't fit.' It was true: I couldn't blame the dress.

On the day of the wedding, Mum's friend Lilly came and sewed me in. She wasn't a dressmaker, but one of those people who knew how to fix and create and thread. 'It might not last more than a day,' she said of her emergency handiwork, as her cold hands crept up my thigh, grabbing at layers, the needlepoint sharp against my skin, 'but I suppose it just needs to last the day.' Lilly's husband had died a few years earlier at the age of fifty-three, which seemed old at the time but now suddenly didn't.

I looked down at her, working on her knees, the bottom of my dress resting on her shoulder, her back hunched as she concentrated with a spare needle between pursed lips and her glasses resting on her head. She fought with the fabric, explained it would be difficult to get the silk to sit tight across my stomach without damaging it. She popped up to admire her work, putting one hand across my waist, smoothing a tiny bubble of fabric. 'No one will notice,' she said, smoothing it down again.

I wanted to ask if I could keep her, clinging to my leg like a small child, her arms wrapped around me. I wanted to walk around limping with one straight leg to account for her koala grip on me and to make space for the shape of her body. And if people looked down and queried why there was a small, middle-aged woman attached to my leg I would simply say: 'Oh, that's Lilly. She sews me up.'

In every photo of the wedding all I can see is the tiny bubble of fabric across my waist. It makes me think of Lilly and her needle and her curly hair and her late husband.

On the morning of the wedding I got up and looked out the window. Or, more accurately, I played the part of a bride who, on her wedding day, gets up and looks out the window. The sky was undecided. I waited for the weather to make me feel something, but it didn't. A weird October limbo. We had chosen October for spring. For new beginnings. I searched for new beginnings in the sky but found none. Just indifferent clouds of no clear origin, half-drizzling.

I hadn't seen Dean for seven days. It is Jewish custom for a bride and groom to remain apart in the lead-up to the wedding. I had moved back to my parents' house. I couldn't actually remember moving in with Dean in the first place. It had been as if Dean and I both woke up one day and I was there, my toothbrush by his basin, my long brown hairs forever in his shower plug and the brand of soy milk I drank in the side of his fridge before I read that soy contains isoflavones that may or may not cause cancer. I wondered if the reverse was also true. If my parents had woken up one day and I no longer belonged there. The way people can appear and disappear into different lives.

I would take Dean's calls sitting in my childhood bed, propped up on pillows, my mum bringing pots of peppermint tea. 'It's unbearable,' Dean would say each night, 'I need you next to me. I can't wait to be your husband.'

Boiled water tastes different in different houses. It shouldn't, by nature. But it does. The pot of tea tasted different in my childhood bed in Caulfield than it did a few suburbs away where I now apparently lived with the man I was about to marry. But perhaps it was in the preparation, the way my mum's perfume had somehow combined with the steam rising from the teapot. I clasped the cup of tea between two hands and breathed in the steam, the phone wedged between my ear and shoulder. I closed my eyes and could taste the smell of my mother. It burned my chest on the way down.

Separation heightens the love between two people – so it is written in the Talmud. This is what we were told about the traditional separation before our wedding day. We know the impact of time and space and yet no one

says in the face of death: the separation will heighten your love. The separation, in fact, is unbearable.

In the mornings, Dean would call to tell me about the fantasies he'd had on waking, what he was going to do to me the first time we were alone together. We'd trade details about what we were wearing and where we would touch ourselves next, and next, and next. Though I don't think that's what the Talmud intended when it talked about the separation of bride and groom.

In the months before the wedding, Dean had been growing a light stubble. He kept his head shaved but with enough length to give a hint of the salt-and-pepper hairs that were growing across his scalp. The shadow of stubble on his face would scrape against me when he pulled me in close, leaving marks across my cheeks, my thighs, my chest. Tingling marks of red giving clues to where he had been, my body a map.

On the day of our wedding I borrowed my mother's perfume. The first three months I dated Dean I wore a fig perfume. Eventually he confessed it gave him a migraine. After seeing me he'd have to shower and take two Panadols just to clear his head and be able to breathe properly. It took him three months to tell me this and now I can't smell fig perfume without getting a headache – as if we were messing with each other's senses.

I sprayed my mother's perfume on my wrist, veins pulsing, and brought it to my nose to breathe it in. Peppermint tea and heat and fresh linen and soft pillows and fabric softener. I sprayed another mist of perfume into the air and walked into it, letting droplets touch my eyelids.

Ours was a daytime wedding. A lunch. No dancing. No fuss. 'Because ...' I never needed to finish the sentence.

The Bedeken is the ritualised veiling of the bride. Before we were married, Dean had to first check that it was indeed me under the veil, lest he be accidentally married to the wrong woman. The practice comes from the Bible, when Jacob married Leah by accident because her face was veiled. He actually wanted to marry her sister Rachel.

I was sitting in a small room, in a wicker chair, my veil off, conscious that every moment I was wearing my dress was a moment off its life span. I smoothed the bump of fabric across my waist. Our family surrounded me. His parents, my parents, his sister, my brothers, their kids. They looked from me, to him, to me, to him as he approached.

Dean had shaved his head entirely, and his face was completely smooth. No salt-and-pepper greys. No light stubble. As he approached me, he leaned in close. 'You look so beautiful.' I could feel his hot breath in my ear, his too-soft cheek brushing against mine. After a week of not seeing him I wondered if I had misremembered him. A kind of face-blindness. Maybe it was the fresh shave. Or maybe he just wasn't who I expected to walk through the door.

'Is this your bride?' the rabbi asked and we laughed. '*Ti'h'yu asher ti'h'yu v'ti'h'yu b'rukhim b'khol asher ti'h'yu,*' the rabbi said, as Dean looked at my face before lowering the veil. '*Be who you are, and may you be blessed in all that you will be. Is this your bride?*' Dean was asked.

But no one asked me if I was marrying the right man.

CHAPTER 28

UNDER THE CHUPPAH

UNDER THE WEDDING CANOPY, after we were blessed (*May God bless you and protect you / May God show you favour and be gracious to you / May God show you kindness and grant you peace*) Dean stamped his foot down to break the glass like all Jewish grooms before him. The sound of glass fracturing a split second before the communal ‘mazel tov!’ to remember tragic events in history. A ritual to temper happiness. We hear the cracking underfoot and we are told to take it down a notch. To remember. We walk on shards of glass, we cut our feet on them, we shove our fingers down our throats and we stick needles in our flesh to remind ourselves: Do not be too much. Do not be too happy. As if emotion is a finite resource that we must carefully measure out. As if what’s added to one side of the scales must be removed from the other.

After the ceremony, I stood up in front of our friends and family and gave a speech. This was not a speech to Dean. This was not a speech to my friends who knew and loved Rob and who then knew and loved Dean. This was not even a speech to my family. This was a speech to past-Natasha. All the things I wanted to tell her.

‘Planning this wedding has made me think a lot about the last few years, and the events that have led up to this day,’ I said. I was nervously pulling up my strapless dress, two contrasting materials flowing straight down. It now hung loose around my bust and I kept trying to flatten the bubble of fabric around my waist.

‘When I think back to the pre-Dean Natasha, I start to feel a little sad. She didn’t know how great things were about to be. I feel sad for her, Dean, because she didn’t know you. And a life without knowing you feels half lived.’

‘And when I think of that Natasha,’ I continued, ‘the Natasha without Dean in her life, I just want to say, Hang in there, everything is going to be

okay. Everything is going to be brilliant.'

This is what I said to our guests, between entrees and mains. And then I continued, because not everyone was crying yet: 'I guess the enormity of truly having hope can only be felt after it has been lost and then found again. I never really appreciated the role that hope had in my life until I had none. Hope can be all-consuming. Hope fills up your heart. Hope carries you. Dean, this is the gift you have given me. From the tips of my fingers to the tips of my toes, I feel hopeful.'

Newly wed–Natasha spoke to past-Natasha, but no one thought to speak to future-me. Everyone assumed she would be okay. That it was in the past where the heartache lived.

On that first night in my bathroom after Rob died, I looked and saw my face refracted in the mirror behind me and the mirror in front of me infinitely. All these versions of me continuously reflecting from the beginning of history into eternity. And although these images rebounded endlessly, all it would take is for one of these two mirrors to be removed for the illusion to be gone. A shift of the angle just slightly and instead of endless versions of myself I was just me. Now. A present version.

Looking back, I want to reach in and grab all of them and say: there is so much you do not know. You do not know that you (all of you) will love with so much force that your heart will crack wide open. But that the all-encompassing, obliterating power of love is not enough to combat grief. You will think it should be. And you will think that you are doing it all wrong again and again, neither being obliterated by loss nor made pure by love. You will wait for it to wipe your heart clean like a slate. And you will think you are failing again.

But the strength of your love will be so great that you will be able to hold these two things side by side. Grief will come for you still, even though you thought you were done with it. But it will not have the power to wipe you out. You will make space for it, the way that losing a person makes more of us. By necessity it stretches us until we can hold it all.

And you will grow a second heart that beats so loudly you are sure people can hear it in the supermarket checkout line and in the movie theatres and on the train even over the flanging of wheels on tracks. You will birth it with your children until you love with it so wildly and with an intensity that is beyond human. This heart that thumps blood so dark it's

almost black. Viscous love, sticky and wet. And you will think that if you were ever cut open, they would find love spreading through you like a reverse disease. Arteries thick from loving. If they dissected you, they would see the marks it leaves. The sadness that is part of your being. The love, the love, the love. Ever-thumping.

‘Sometimes, I catch myself staring at you when you don’t realise it,’ I said to Dean, the end of the speech scribbled in handwritten notes, finished in the early hours of that morning. ‘I catch myself staring at you because it’s difficult to believe you exist. Sometimes, I feel like I just wished so hard for you and everything you embody that I just made you up. Sometimes you catch me staring at you, and you look back at me. And you know.’

I laid my speech down like a challenge. A last chance to escape. This is who I am. In my art deco earrings and my perfect hair and my professional make-up and my olive tan and my lace underwear. This is who I am beneath it all. I am dark and messy. Do you want me still? This bride steeped in death and trauma?

Then Dean took the microphone. ‘Our marriage today is a testament to you and to me. It is a validation of the last five years of our lives.’

And I realised then that Dean was braver than me. I had started our wedding talking about ‘the last few years’ but he had gone all in. He mentioned the number five when we had only been sharing our lives for two. I wondered how many people would notice this. But other people were irrelevant. He was talking to me.

‘It is the strength and conviction of our love that brings us here to this very moment. And today shouts out to everyone in this room that we were there together through all the pain, the trauma and the tears, through the daily fight and those sleepless nights. We were there together through the major battles and the small victories. Through the quiet triumphs and those tender moments. We were there together when joy returned and with it the sound of laughter. And from that place came hope and sleep-filled nights and dreams. And dreams like this day and the countless dreams ahead. One day, looking back, smiling, reminiscing, that we were there together.’

In the DVD of our wedding, the videographer pans across our guests. The background hum of people talking (conversations laid upon conversations) and clank of cutlery is silenced. Mazzy Star’s ‘Fade into You’ comes on, a song from the playlist Dean chose for our DVD. A song that makes me cry

and I never know if it's because it makes me happy or sad. The way music reaches into you and jumbles your insides.

Amongst the shots of our guests, some wiping tears, some laughing, some starting mains, the videographer has captured my brother Matt. And he is smiling.

CHAPTER 29

HYSTERIA

HYSTERIA ORIGINATES FROM THE Greek word for uterus, *hystera*. Historically, hysteria, as a medical term, was thought to manifest in women. Symptoms included anxiety, shortness of breath, insomnia, loss of appetite.

In the second century, Galen believed those most susceptible to hysteria were widows, 'eager to have intercourse, but were now deprived of all this'. Hysteria was referred to as the 'widow's disease'. A lack of release caused women to go insane.

I remember the sleepless nights, the nights of going mad with grief. The delusions. Feeling that I was not in my body. Floating. Somewhere else.

It's my uterus, they would have told me, had I been living in the second century.

I became pregnant eighteen months after our wedding. Despite days of contractions, my cervix would not dilate. Not one centimetre. My uterus contracted and contracted but we did not progress.

I had done the breathing. I had done prenatal yoga every Saturday morning for months. I had visualised my body opening gently like a flower, or a circle, depending on which book you read. I was not afraid.

Then, the days of contractions, the mucus plug bloody and thick. I moaned on all fours, rocking and swaying, a body possessed. I whimpered through gritted teeth: 'I'm just so tired.'

'You are not dilating. This baby has nowhere to go,' the midwives said.

A baby in distress. The rush to a C-section. The tugging on my body. That first cry. A flood of relief. A pink and blue and yellow striped hospital wrap, a soft flannel rite of passage, the design unchanged since the beginning of time. His little face swollen and bruised from days of pushing against my cervix. He looked unfamiliar, which came as a shock. As if I should have recognised him somehow.

‘Do you think,’ my therapist asked months later, ‘that your body refused to give birth? That your cervix didn’t dilate because it wasn’t ready?’

‘I just ... don’t think so?’ I said. A question. A baby I was desperate for. Desperate to create and desperate to hold and desperate to love.

‘Do you think your cervix didn’t dilate because you didn’t want it to?’ he went on.

And I wondered about my cervix, my uterus, my womb. I wondered about my hysterical body with all its power.

‘You have the cervix of a teenager!’ my obstetrician declared at a follow-up appointment, his gloved fingers still inside me.

My cervix trapped shut. All these men, making declarations about my body and my parts, what it can and cannot do.

The second Rob died he disappeared. That’s what I told you. That’s what I wrote. I lied.

Two nights after Rob died, I had a very explicit dream. It was the last time I felt Rob’s presence. Properly. It was only a half-lie, I suppose.

In my dream we touched. We were together. He kissed the nape of my neck. I felt the heat of his body. His flesh. His very alive and very moving fingers touched my back. We were intertwined. We moved together in unison. We grabbed at each other in desperation. His cheek pushed against mine and I felt the familiar scratch of his stubble, his breath, hot and heavy in my ear, leaving a layer of condensation, sending shivers through me.

I woke up with a gasp, flustered. Confused. I rolled over to tell Rob about my dream but he was not there. I was in my childhood bed, having just had a sex dream about my dead boyfriend. No one had warned me this would happen.

I read *The Year of Magical Thinking*. I read Joyce Carol Oates. No one mentioned sex dreams. No one mentioned sexual bereavement. I read Freud. I read Janet. I read of the hysterical widows who were institutionalised. The message was clear: keep quiet. There are things that should not be said. They will lock you up. They will put you away. They will intervene.

But at some stage, the body remembers. The body betrays.

CHAPTER 30

FIRST AID

IN THE MONTHS AFTER we had our first son, Ezra, the playgroup I joined organised a first-aid course for parents. What to do if your toddler is choking. Burns. How to respond in an emergency. We sat in the living room as the woman emptied her bags of props – lifelike mannequin babies with folds in their plastic flesh and puckered mouths.

We went around the room and introduced ourselves, passed around tea and biscuits.

‘So,’ she said. ‘First up, has anyone performed CPR before?’ The room became airless. I wondered if anyone could hear the blood rushing through my body. I wondered if anyone could hear sirens. I imagined what would happen if I put my hand up. If I said proudly that yes, I had indeed performed CPR. If she would ask what happened and I could say that I did not, in fact, save anyone’s life. Maybe she could go through all the things I did wrong. How you weren’t meant to panic. How chest compressions were meant to be assured. Firm. Dean squeezed my hand. We looked straight ahead, our sleeping baby in his capsule.

She explained the differences between performing CPR on an infant and on an adult. Use two fingers, not two hands. Use your mouth to create a seal over their mouth and nose. Rescue breaths should be gentle. Don’t expel your whole lungs.

Everyone listened and took notes, believing that the two-hour session, where we learned about two-finger compressions, would divert tragedy.

My breasts ached and my nipples began to leak, wet circles darkening my t-shirt. As if on cue, Ezra began to stir. I picked him up one-handed and he seamlessly latched on. My body released. It was a body that produced exactly what was needed. It filled a need. *What would you have to say about that, Freud?* I wanted to say to my therapist. I wanted to send him a photo of my engorged breasts, my darkened nipples, dripping with

colostrum and milk. If my cervix refused to dilate in childbirth because I wasn't ready, what did my tits say now?

As Ezra latched on, I guessed which parents would have it in them to remain calm if they found themselves in this situation. I wondered if they'd remember to cover the mouth and nose. To gently tap, tap with two fingers. To puff out air slowly. To not just scream and scream and scream. *None of you*, I thought, perhaps unfairly. But I wondered what was worse – imagining that none of them had the ability to prevent disaster, or that maybe some of them actually did?

Two years later, almost to the day, we had our second son. I changed obstetricians and found one who said I could have a natural birth after my C-section but told me if my waters broke I had to come straight to hospital.

The contractions came on slowly. I knew it was sleep I needed. I knew not to panic. At midnight I kissed Dean lightly on the cheek and we prepared for the days ahead. My head hit the pillow and as I closed my eyes I felt a loud pop.

'Fuck,' I said. 'I think my waters broke.' This hadn't happened last time. My waters were forced open by a hand reaching inside me while I lay on a hospital bed.

'Maybe it's not that?' Dean said.

I stood up and clear fluid began to leak out of me, pooling on the carpeted floor below.

'I think it's that,' I said.

The labour progressed in exactly the same way. Lying in the hospital bed, the contractions got stronger and stronger. My cervix didn't budge. Not even a centimetre. The epidural came and the way it flooded my body with unfeeling was euphoric. Sleep came and I sent Dean home from the hospital to rest. He arrived with bagels and coffee a few hours later.

'She's not allowed to eat,' the nurses told him.

When they left the room he fed me mouthfuls of fresh bagels and stroked my head. 'Sometimes you need to break the rules,' he said.

'I know where this is heading,' I said, my cervix unmoving.

'It's heading to a baby,' Dean said. And they wheeled me out for a C-section, technically considered an emergency, but nothing emergency-feeling about it. Dean joked with the anaesthetist. They'd played footy

together as kids. Someone asked about names and we realised we'd never actually decided. And then a sticky baby boy was placed on my chest, wide-eyed and round. And it felt like a first, of sorts. Levi, we named him. Hebrew for 'joined in harmony'.

Dean stood in the doorway to our bedroom amongst the mess of our daily life. The laundry and the nappy bags and the toy cars. 'We'll come back to each other again,' Dean said.

The pregnancies. The breastfeeding. The exhaustion. Our bodies no longer belonged to us. Or each other.

It felt shifting and tide-like. Our moods. Our anger. Our love. But always this understanding. That nothing was permanent.

We had started our relationship from a place of intensity and trauma. It meant we knew ourselves here. We were comfortable in the mess. We knew we would always find our way out of it.

'We work backwards,' Dean said often. 'We're working towards the honeymoon phase.'

We never had the opportunity to exist with a future that looked light-filled and perfect. To make idealistic plans or promises formed from naivety. We came together in imperfection. We laughed at other couples who started out in relationships full of hope and high expectations. A kind of smug knowing. That we had risen from the ashes.

'I don't know how I was lucky enough to find you,' Dean had said once. 'Why did you choose me?'

'Low expectations,' I said instantly. He laughed so hard he woke a sleeping baby.

CHAPTER 31

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

WE WERE SITTING AT the traffic lights.

‘Aaaaand ...’ Dean clicked. The lights turned green. The kids laughed hysterically, their high-pitched toddler squeals turned breathless and started to morph into hiccups. I turned to Dean. He was staring straight ahead, the corners of his mouth pursed in a way reserved for fathers who have made their kids laugh in the back seat.

I remembered being a kid in the back seat, my dad stopping at red lights and saying: ‘And ... NOW!’ and the lights magically turning green. The wonder and amazement, staring at this human who could somehow sense the exact millisecond of the lights changing. Who could predict the future. Or control it.

I don’t remember when I got old enough to catch a glimmer of the lights directing traffic in the opposite direction. The sideways hint of orange and then red, betraying my father’s magical powers.

I sat in the front seat as our children laughed behind me and realised that I had assumed it was my dad alone who performed this trick. Our overlapping childhood memories surfaced, turned into the memories of our children.

At what age will our kids spot an orange light change to their left? At what age will they realise that their parents were fallible? That they didn’t really know what they were doing.

‘NOW!’ Dean said, as we stopped at another set of lights. The kids clicked their fingers, following Dean’s actions from moments before. The lights changed. We drove on.

We were at our favourite family restaurant, the kind with tablecloths that made us feel like adults, but also served early-bird kids’ meals and wanted us out by 7 pm. Ezra and Levi turned their paper menus over, revealing an

activities page designed to give parents enough space to start a conversation or enjoy a glass of wine or just take a deep breath. The boys were given two glass jars with crayons. Most were broken in half, the waxed paper casings discarded at the bottom. They fought over the crayons, and we negotiated who got which colour first and for how long. The one who desperately needed the red was reluctantly given it by the brother who just finished his maze.

‘I don’t want it anymore,’ he said. The blue one that would not do one minute ago was suddenly all he wanted. The once fought-over red was put back in the jar.

There was a ‘Spot the Difference’ game on the menu. Thirteen differences to find. Levi started circling. A butterfly in one picture had only a single wing, whereas its mirror image had two. The girl in one image had her shoelace undone. Both shoes were tied in the neighbouring picture. He found five differences instantly (the caterpillar’s legs, the flower petal, the sun’s rays). We worked together to find more. The stripes on the girls’ top increased in number on the left and her pigtails decreased in the second picture. The cloud puffs, the tufts of grass. We made it to twelve. I felt a sudden empathy for the girl in the picture, the one on the left with her shoelaces tied up and two neat pigtails. With her one-winged butterfly and pet caterpillar. ‘Who can spot what’s out of place?’ she pleaded behind her cartoon smile. The answers were written upside down at the bottom of the picture. Levi moved on to the crossword. I didn’t look at the answers. I let her have this one thing. This one difference. Maybe it wasn’t visible to the eye anyway.

The waitress came to clear our plates. The kids’ menus and activity pages were flecked with bolognese. One was a casualty of a spilled mineral water. The crayon drawings blurred like watercolours. At the beginning of the meal, when their pages were pristine and white, they said they wanted to take them home. Now they sat abandoned on the table as we left.

‘No one taking these?’ I said, as I bundled them in jackets and wiped sticky fingers coated in ice-cream residue.

They shrugged. As we walked out the door I realised Levi had grabbed his at the last minute. It was creased and he had circled all the Ls in the crossword. He didn’t know how to read or write yet. But he recognised the Ls so he changed the rules of the game.

We bundled in the car. The girl with her differences, the before and after, next to a completed maze and a crossword with new rules.

‘Straight in the shower when we’re home,’ I said to the back seat. And they groaned.

‘We’re doing okay, Norm,’ we said to each other. This was our line. From the last scene of *Fargo*. We said it in a Canadian accent. Our private show of support. In between the muck and the heaviness, we always had that. We always had Margie and Norm. But years later I’ll check and realise we had it all wrong. It’s actually: ‘Heck Norm, you know we’re doing pretty good.’ And even once we know we still say it the old way. Because it’s ours.

CHAPTER 32

FAMILY PHOTOS

WHEN I GOT THE call that Matt was dead, or dying, I was on my lunch break at the counter of the Kodak store getting a photo developed for Ezra's kindergarten class. It was the first week of term and the children were going to decorate the walls with family photos. A source of comfort. We are taught from an early age to ignore the feelings of anxiety that occur when we're not physically close to the people we love.

The printing would only take a few minutes, the man behind the counter told me. My phone rang. It was a silent number. I let it ring out; I didn't have long before I had to get back to the office. The phone rang again. It was Dad. He told me Matt had been found unconscious at work. He told me the ambulance was there. He told me he was on his way. He told me he could pick me up. He told me it did not look good. It. Did. Not. Look. Good. I told him to drive. Just go. Just go straight there. I would meet him. Matt was a GP. His medical practice was less than a suburb away from my work. I concentrated on breathing. *No*, I thought. *No, no, no, no, no.*

As I hung up, the man at the counter motioned that my photo was ready and, rather than abandon my smiling 2D family, I riffled through my bag for change and gave the man 50 cents. *Thank you*, I said, as I headed out the door. Not wanting to make him uncomfortable. Not wanting to make a scene.

I fumbled with my car door, my hands not working properly. My fingers numb. Breath wheezed through me. Short and sharp. *Fuck. Mum. Fuck.* She was all I was thinking about, as my hands shook. *Please*, I pleaded. To Matt, maybe.

I forgot how to drive to my brother's work. *Think.* Just wheezing. Seconds wasted. Minutes. I started to google his GP clinic so I could put the address in my GPS but I forgot its name. The South East Medical Practice? South East Family Medical Centre? Instead I wrote Matt's full name into

the search bar. I added DR at the front. His smiling face popped up. His curly hair. It was the 'About' page of his clinic's website. I took this as a good sign. He was smiling. I had the address now.

As I started to drive, my GPS barking orders, my phone rang. It was Dean. He knew. I didn't think to call to let him know and I wasn't sure if it was because I was trying to move as fast as possible or because I was trying to prolong Matt's life. *Turn right onto Boulder Road*, the GPS told me. Dean said it wasn't safe to drive. He told me to pull over. He told me he would come and get me. My breaths became shorter and sharper and a dizziness came over me. As if to prove his point. *In 800 metres, turn left onto Watson Road*. No, I am okay, I said. Please come. Quick. It will be okay, he said. Whatever happens. No, I said. I don't think it will. *Turn left onto Watson Road*. We hung up.

There was a police car up ahead. I assumed it was for me. They were there to take me to Matt. But a traffic light was out. There was an accident. They were directing traffic. They were not there for me. They didn't know about Matt. Another good sign.

I considered having an accident. Driving into a pole. To get their attention. To flag them down. To explain. To catch a ride and drive there faster, sirens on. They waved me on, past the traffic light flashing red. I did not drive into a pole. *In 700 metres, turn left onto Mitchell Street*. No, I thought. I don't want to. *Turn left onto Mitchell Street. Your destination is ahead on your right*.

An ambulance out the front. *You have arrived at your destination*. I knew what it meant. I knew what it meant that the ambulance had not moved. Had not taken him to hospital. It-Does-Not-Look-Good. 'Take him,' I had said to the paramedics when they had told me that Rob had died. 'Take him to the hospital.'

'I'm sorry,' they had said, 'there's nothing more we can do.'

The ambulance was parked, unmoving. I knew what I was walking into.

Weeks later, I will receive a parking ticket in the mail. I had parked in a No Standing Zone, on the kerb, on an angle, across a driveway. I did not register this at the time. I believed I had parked in a parking spot. I will have to write a letter to the council to contest the fine. They will request a death certificate. I will wonder if people actually lie about dead or dying siblings to get out of parking fines.

Time is elastic. The moments after I arrived at Matt's GP practice meld and morph. The look on the paramedics' faces. The stationary ambulance out the front. I felt time speed up but also its deceleration as I stood in the waiting area of his medical practice, the chairs lined neatly in rows. Waiting for the inevitable. I saw the back of his wife Fiona's head sitting in the front with her dad. *Don't turn around*, I thought, desperate to remain in liminal space. It was silent. I did not rush to them. I did not rush to find Matt. I did not scream. I sat. Two rows behind. I waited, as the chairs intended me to. The moment between knowing and not knowing.

Fiona turned. Saw me. Her eyes met mine. And now I knew. The moment of purgatory had ended. The moment when maybe there could have been a different outcome. She leapt over the chairs and held me tight.

Everything accelerated from that moment. The receptionist told me how sorry she was. The paramedics came out of the room. I felt bad for them, that they didn't have better news to share.

Still, all I was thinking about was Mum. Do not let her come here. Do not let her find out. I was thinking of ways to prevent her knowing. We must keep it from her.

When we were young, if Matt and I did the wrong thing, our first response would be: 'Don't tell Mum!' If we had accidentally-on-purpose kicked each other while watching TV, our legs vying for space on the couch. If we had broken something. If I had pinched him so hard I left welts, or if he grabbed my wrist and twisted leaving a burn, our first response was not *sorry*, it was *don't tell Mum*. As if that was the worst thing that could happen. Not the pain from kicking or twisting or hurt feelings, but being found out.

How many people knew? Could we stop the spread? Do not let her son be dead.

There is blank space. I do not remember when others came. I do not remember when my brother Andrew arrived. Or my dad. Or anyone else. I do not remember the order of events. I remember being in a small room out the back, with the sterilised containers for stool samples and the fridge with vaccines. I remember a howl. The sound of my mother's heart breaking.

CHAPTER 33

RED RIDING HOOD

I WAS AN ANXIOUS child, so my mother came up with a saying that she'd repeat over and over in order to calm me: 'It's not as bad as being eaten by a wolf.' When I had an exam at school and my nerves threatened to turn me inside out, she'd say it, or when I was taken to the doctor for vaccinations, which I was petrified of.

Feeling the pressure of the swimming carnival? The anxiety of ribbons not won and splashing bodies and uncomfortable bathers and water up noses and chlorine in eyes from ill-fitting goggles? Not as bad as being eaten by a wolf.

In the car, I'd do one final look behind me as I'd head off to school camp, overthinking sleeping arrangements and shared showers: 'It's not as bad as being eaten by a wolf! I'll see you in two nights,' she'd say.

And I'd return from swimming sports with blue ribbons and from exams with an A⁺ and from vaccinations with a brave face and from camp with so many stories to share. And she'd say, 'See! Wasn't as bad as being eaten by a wolf then, was it?'

Two decades later, we sat in the car park of Lynbrook Cemetery, Dean in the driver's seat of my dad's car, Dad in the passenger seat and Mum in the back with me. Silence. I waited. But nothing. This was it. I thought. We're being eaten by wolves.

CHAPTER 34

CAN I SPEAK TO A MANAGER?

THIS TIME, I WAS prepared. I had clothes I could wear to a funeral. A black silk Country Road dress and black boots. I ripped it, an audible tear, near my heart. The kriaah. I was allowed to participate because it was my brother who was dead and the rituals were there for me.

I spoke at the funeral side by side with our oldest brother, Andrew. We mourned our missing middle. Our centre. We were funny, because Matt was funny. And because everyone was so sad. So we were funny and people laughed. And somehow this made the whole thing sadder. We told the crowd how Matt would be relishing the opportunity to complain. A family tradition. To speak to the manager, to demand a refund. 'Excuse me, I did not order this.' This death. We joked that the only reason he ever joined Facebook was so that he could publicly demand apologies and retribution from businesses who had wronged him. The banks. The restaurants. He would post and pester until justice was done. But what now? Who was there to write to?

I wrote a letter of complaint when Rob died. To QANTAS. The year before, Rob and I had travelled through South America. We danced the tango in Buenos Aires and we posed in front of Christ the Redeemer and we drank cocktails in Florianopolis. A holiday to mark the beginning of things, without knowing it was really an ending. Rob came home two weeks before me for work and I met my friend Carla in Cuba. We smoked cigars and posed in front of coloured walls in old Havana. I came home solo to Australia via LA, desperate for my bed and to wash my filthy clothes. And desperate for Rob. But my first flight was delayed and I missed the connecting flight back to Australia.

I cried on the phone to Rob as I told him I was stuck in the airport hotel.

‘Don’t joke with me!’ he had said. He thought I was waiting outside his door. He thought I was going to surprise him. He thought I had come home early and was ready to pounce. The feeling of thinking one thing when the opposite is true.

‘I’m not joking,’ I said.

I spent the entire night sobbing into my pillow. And then I boarded my flight home, to Rob, where I ran into his arms, as if the two weeks apart and a 24-hour delay was the worst thing that would ever happen to us. Less than two months later, Rob was dead.

And so I got busy writing my complaint letter to the airline. I wanted a refund on my time with Rob. I wanted my twenty-four hours back. I wanted to come home on the scheduled day. I wanted my money back on my five-minute phone call from the airport hotel in LA to Rob’s house in Melbourne when I told him I would not be coming home as planned. When I told him not to go to the airport. The five-minute phone call which I thought would be covered by my US\$20 voucher I was given by the airline, but for which I received a US\$247 bill in the mail a month later. Give me my money back. Give me back my day with Rob.

They wrote back. They were sorry for my loss but there was nothing they could do.

And so, Andrew and I joked at the funeral that Matt would have complained to the manager. He would have posted on social media. One star. Would not recommend. And we were joking. But we weren’t.

This is all I remember of my speech. Just standing next to my biggest brother. Speaking together after a frenzied night at the kitchen table, fuelled by Maltesers, of drafting a speech to deliver to this crowd. People kept coming over to offer advice, to offer to help. *We’ve got this*, we said. It had to be us. It had to be just us.

A rip in my dress. The official mourning period set in motion. The shiva. The seven days of mourning that began immediately after burial. The burial spot must be entirely covered with earth in order for this period of shiva to commence. *For dust you are and to dust you shall return*.

Family members were asked to fill the grave with the dirt. It was tradition. They passed the shovel from person to person. Placed clumps of dried soil onto the grave of the person we loved. And at first we heard the thump of dirt on wood. It hit the casket. Thump. It echoed. Cutting through

the air that was rippling with wails. Thump. Wail. Thump. Wail. But soon the piles of dirt covered the wood. And the thump was softened. Soil on soil. Thwop. And the wails turned to sobs. Thwop. Sob. Thwop. Sob. And the sound of the shovelling and digging became softer and softer, and the cries matched the rhythm of the shovel. It was passed around with less urgency. The grave was almost full. The sobs lost their urgency too. They were resigned. The sound of dirt trickling softly.

The shovel stopped thwacking into earth. And we were left with ripped clothes and dirt under our nails and splinters in our hands and tear-streaked faces. *For dust we are and to dust we shall return.* But the first thump of soil on wood will continue to echo, into the silence, into the future, into our dreams, into our homes. Thump.

I thought I had built up an immunity to trauma. In the same way that they say once you have had chickenpox you can't really get it again. And yet, here I was. Reinfected, burying my dead. Saying goodbye to the people I loved too soon.

When bad things just happen, they can also just keep happening. This was not a chickenpox immunity-type situation.

CHAPTER 35

DEATH QUICHE

THE QUICHES CAME. EVERY time the doorbell rang it was another quiche. A person standing with arms outstretched, a white box in hand.

Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted with quiche.
(Matthew 5:49)

‘You can freeze it, if you want to,’ they said.

I was sitting at Fiona and Matt’s kitchen table, now just Fiona’s, their kids playing upstairs. Six-year-olds playing because that’s what six-year-olds do. We could hear the stomping of feet above. The cousins on all sides going through the dress-up box. Taking out the puzzles. Half finishing one board game before moving to the next, the pieces doomed to be misplaced. Downstairs the adults hovered by a table lined with quiches.

‘We can eat onion again,’ I said to Fiona. ‘Onion in everything.’

Matt was allergic to onion and to garlic. We had to omit it from every family meal. Had to double-check with waiters that there was no onion in whatever he ordered.

Fiona and I laughed until our stomach muscles ached from it. We filled the house with laughter. The noise of it floated upstairs, mixed in with the laughter of the kids playing dress-ups.

‘Silver linings,’ she said, while someone stood awkwardly at the head of the table, holding a slice of potato and onion quiche that Matt wouldn’t have been able to eat.

CHAPTER 36

YES, BUT ...

A LIST, IN NO particular order, of the people I was jealous of:

- A woman in her twenties whose husband was in a coma.
- A man in his thirties whose wife had a stroke and subsequent life-changing brain injuries.
- Patients with a terminal illness.
- A widow who was now a single mother to a one-year-old.
- A widow who found out she was pregnant after her husband died.

I accepted the outcome of their deaths. Of Rob. And of Matt. But with some provisos. Like, I understood that Rob dying was something that happened and I couldn't change that. But wouldn't it be great if he had a terminal illness? Couldn't I have been his wife at the time he died? What if Matt could have been in a coma, just a little one, for a small while, so we could have had a chance to say goodbye? Death turned my mind inside out. I wasn't even negotiating for them to be saved. Just to mix up the narrative a bit. I just wanted a chance for Rob or Matt to live even if the end result was inevitable.

After Rob died I became obsessed with why they hadn't taken him to hospital. I had called the ambulance. I had let them in, they had smashed the doors, they had used the defibrillators, they had started the scene in the movie and then ... nothing.

'Why couldn't they take him to hospital?' I asked every doctor I knew. Rob was a doctor. All his friends were doctors. Both my brothers were doctors. My dad was a doctor. My uncles. There was a seemingly endless list of people who had answers. I went through the list.

'Isn't it protocol?' I'd ask.

‘Shouldn’t they have at least tried?’

‘What if I had called the ambulance faster, would it have made a difference? To get him to all the fancy equipment quickly? Would they have taken him then?’

‘What if it had actually happened *in* hospital. If he was right there, surrounded by professionals, what would have happened?’

No, they told me in a variety of ways. The outcome would have been the same. Stop asking.

As if I needed further proof that tragedy had not made me a better version of myself, my reactions to positive events drove the message home.

On the news, a feel-good story about a nurse who was hailed a hero for performing CPR and using a defibrillator when the ‘Yellow Wiggle’ Greg Page collapsed on stage during a performance. He survived. She made headlines. I was bereft. Imagine being the type of person who gets pissed off that a children’s entertainer was alive and well, recovering in hospital.

Because people said that it was inevitable. And that I needed to stop asking. But when I read the headlines about Hero Nurses and the amazing feats of Good Samaritans and the quick-witted thinking of passers-by, what these headlines were really saying was: this could have been you. There was another option. There were other outcomes.

Worse than being disappointed in survival stories, and jealous of other people’s tragedies, is being thankful for bad outcomes. The passenger who dies mid-flight. The sudden heart attack on the road. They bring ... comfort. See, they say to me, it’s not just you. There are others, too.

A harbinger of death. I will pine for your men in comas. I will breathe a sigh of relief hearing news of your dead. Watch out, no one is safe.

CHAPTER 37

THE CLEAR-OUT

‘FEEL FREE TO SAY no if it’s too much for you, but would you be able to come over and help sort through Matt’s wardrobe?’

Fiona’s offer felt so overwhelmingly kind. I pictured his shirts on hangers. Ties in colour order. Hoodies and tracksuits. Grey and fleecy. I wanted to jump into a pile of them.

‘Of course!’ I said. Too eagerly perhaps. Thrilled to be called upon.

There was a series of photos in their hallway – giant family photos taken on holiday somewhere. His smiling face. I wondered how many times I’d have to walk past the photos and not be taken by surprise. It had been a few weeks and my breath still caught. Maybe months. Maybe years. Maybe never.

Fiona had placed every item of clothing on their bed. A pile of Matt. His smell radiated from his clean laundry. I wondered what molecules make up the smell of a person. The cotton? The polyester? Cleaning products? Aftershave? When odour particles enter our nostrils, they are detected by olfactory receptors at the back of our nose. The receptors then send signals to our brains and the chemical composition of the mix of odours is determined. The smell detection pathway in the brain also connects to the amygdala and hippocampus, areas connected with emotion and memory. I breathed in Matt’s smell and felt joy. The memories of him as a brother more powerful than the memory of him ceasing to exist. My happiness receptors fired.

In order to spend the afternoon with Fiona while Dean was at work, I had asked my friend Anna to come over and watch our two kids, now almost two and almost four. She had offered up her services and had been constantly checking in to see what she could do to help. *Actually, there is*

something, I had said. *Of course!* She said eagerly. Thrilled to be called upon.

Anna had been in an accident a few years earlier. Crossing a road in Melbourne's inner North to catch a tram to work, she'd been struck by a motorist that failed to give way. She flew off his car bonnet and hit her head on the bitumen road. She was rushed to hospital with an intracranial bleed, fractures to her skull and post-traumatic amnesia.

She made a near full recovery. She could walk. And talk. The bruises faded. Her memory returned. But her sense of smell was gone. And with it, taste. She could sometimes decipher vague tastes. Anything vinegary. Or bitter. But the rest all merged together. Food was now identified by texture alone. I imagined it would have been the inability to enjoy food that was the biggest loss. No, she told me a few months after, it was the sense of smell she grieved. She had never realised how much this sense was a part of everything. Of feeling. The way her mother's lavender hand cream brought comfort. The particular smell of her own pillowcase, their soft cottoned corners. The way her siblings radiated with a specific smell just for her. How surreal it felt that first time, being held by them without the element of smell.

She worried about her future. Whether she would know if it was time to change a nappy if she had kids. If there was a gas leak. The way you smell danger. You smell fear. You smell love. It had never occurred to me. And now, as I thought of Anna lying on my living room floor, playing with puzzles and setting out Thomas the Tank Engine tracks and cleaning up crushed pretzels, I felt guilty. That she was there and that I was able to breathe in the smell of my brother. Could soak him up with every sense, as memories flash, flash, flashed, triggered by a bodily reflex.

Fiona and I made a pile for charity. Shirts of different sizes and colours. Pants. Belts. Ties. He wore suits and ties for work as a GP but his preferred dress was tracksuit pants or shorts. We laughed at how he could have lived in decades-old tracksuits with holes and stains. And t-shirts. He never felt the cold. His legs were always scabbed up and scratched. Mosquitoes and bugs seemed drawn to him. He was never without a bite of some kind. We laughed about all the different sizes of pants he owned. How his body changed. He had made a bet with my brother Andrew and a few friends about who could lose the most weight over a three-month period. The

others posted photos, egged each other on with their gym memberships, their egg-white omelettes. Matt was silent the whole time. Quietly focused on his own progress. At the final weigh-in, he had lost the most body weight. Had slimmed down. He'd beaten our older brother, which was really all that mattered. They all put the weight back on anyway.

'The barber,' Fiona said, holding up a suit jacket. 'Do we tell her?'

Matt had been going to the same barber for decades. Out the back of the suburban menswear store where he bought his suits. You'd have to push past the rows of pants and ties, past the section near the back for tailoring suits, over the dropped pins on the ground, to reach her.

She put the jacket in the charity pile.

'I don't know? Matt would want her to know, probably. He wouldn't want her to think he'd just left her to see someone else.'

Would it be kinder to let him exist somewhere in the world, in the mind of the back-of-the-shop barber? We left the question of what to do in the undecided pile. With the worn t-shirts and shirts with fraying edges.

We made another pile for Fiona to keep for her kids. Hoodies they could sleep with. I imagined his smell disappearing from his clothes with time. The thought of having part of him that would leave again. We chose a few things for other family members. My brother Andrew (no longer *our* brother, just mine). My parents. Some ties for Dad. For Dean. For me. I pictured the red jumper I had chosen and the grey tie sitting at the back of my wardrobe. In a neat pile next to Rob's purple t-shirt and lavender tie. Grief laundry.

'When will you tell your kids about Rob?' Fiona asked as we were sorting shoes.

There were no photos of Rob in my hallway. No public way to claim his space, to prompt questions. Only those who knew he existed knew he existed.

'I'm not sure,' I said. I had thought about it. But I hadn't thought about when the time would be right. Or what I would say. I wondered why Fiona was asking now. What she was thinking about telling her own kids one day. The bits they hadn't yet been told. What part of their relationship was theirs alone and what part needed to be explained. There was an unspoken understanding that their memories of their father would need to be reinforced. Memories, like smells, that would fade with the passing of time. Their own memories would need to be recreated, almost. Like folklore.

I came home hours later. Big green rubbish bags in my boot, ready to drop off at charity. I decided I would drop them somewhere far away. In another suburb. Lest I see someone walking the streets in Matt's striped shirts. I thought of the empty closet space. The wire hangers bobbing.

CHAPTER 38

PROPRIOCEPTION

FOR MY THIRTIETH BIRTHDAY, Dean bought me a watch. I wanted to be one of those people who had beautiful but practical things. Investment pieces. It was an automatic watch which also felt very grown up.

After a month, it lost time. At 10 am it was 9.50 am. Then at 1 pm it was only 11 am. I called the company and they took back the watch and gave me a replacement, no questions asked. After four weeks, the same thing happened with the new watch. I called the company.

‘Do you wind the watch like you were told?’

‘Yep.’

‘Do you work with X-ray machines?’

‘Nope.’

‘Do you work with security scanners? At an airport?’

‘Nope and nope.’

‘Look, some people just can’t wear watches.’

‘Wait, what? Like literally all you have to do is put it on and ... wear it.’

‘It’s more difficult than it sounds.’

‘To wear a watch?’

‘To wear a watch.’

‘It’s ... difficult?’

‘You may be electromagnetic.’

‘Me? Personally?’

I returned the watch.

We bought a replacement. Another brand. Battery-operated, not automatic. Within a month, it just stopped. I took it back and they serviced it but they couldn’t find any problems with it. There was no reason it should have just stopped. Parts were replaced, just in case. It was sent to experts in Sydney and then to experts in Paris and then home again, like new. I wore

the watch and a few weeks later it started to lose time and then died. I returned the watch.

A friend who owns a watch business gave me one of his watches to try. It was like a dare, to show that his very affordable watches were far superior to the expensive, European name-brands. His very affordable watch met the same fate as the expensive, European name-brands.

I invested in a Swatch watch. Kids wear them. Surely I could manage one! Within weeks it was five minutes slow, then ten minutes slow, then hours behind. I could not manage one.

With the number of replacements and purchases, the total watch tally was six over a number of years. Six watches of differing price range and quality. A fancy automatic. Battery operated. All brand new.

Could I, in fact, be electromagnetic? Was I somehow travelling on some other parallel space-time continuum? The watches were sent to specialists and all shown to be completely functioning and not faulty. Was I the faulty one?

Two people I loved had hearts that just stopped. Bam. Unexpectedly. If I could cause watches to tick irregularly, eventually stopping them completely, could I also cause arrhythmia of the heart? It doesn't even seem implausible. It seems obvious.

My late partner. My late brother. Even the way they were described now was in relation to time. A euphemism to avoid saying the words that were too hard to say. They were late, as if their arrival was imminent. Or as if they were unable to catch up. They had been left in the past as time had moved on. Maybe I was stuck somewhere in between too. Maybe this was why my watches struggled to keep time. They did not know by which time zone to keep the movement of the second hand.

When Matt had just died, family members rushed to his GP clinic where he had been found unconscious by reception staff. Some got the call, not sure what they would find when they arrived and others knew they would be coming to comfort us because word had spread that he had died. A relative walked in, surveyed the scene and, after a short time, sat in a chair reserved for patients and said (to no one in particular): *What is this family doing to its young men?*

Maybe he was just saying out loud what others were thinking. I had lost my boyfriend and my brother in sudden and unexpected circumstances. Two seemingly healthy, fit, young men. Two doctors. *What is this family*

doing to its young men? Specifically, me. Healthy men, like new watches, don't just stop. And when more than one man, like more than one watch, stops working, surely there is something else at play?

What is this family doing to its young men?

I was recently in a yoga class. The teacher cued us into a standing split. My right leg was firmly on the ground, my left leg pointing up to the roof and my body draped down over my right foot, holding on to the ankle. I was stable.

'Now bend your left leg, the one in the air, towards your butt,' the teacher said, 'and reach your left hand towards your left ankle.'

I bent my leg towards me. I stretched my left arm behind me to grab my ankle. I grabbed at the air. My leg had no idea where my hand was. My hand had no idea where my leg was. Both were being controlled by me, by my thoughts, by my will, but neither was communicating with the other. I reached out again with my hand and stretched out my leg.

'That's it, you're right there, Natasha,' the teacher said. She could see I was perfectly aligned, my fingers just a millimetre from my foot. I felt like there was a giant chasm, a huge gap.

'Proprioception,' the teacher said, 'an awareness of where your body is in space and time.'

I took a breath and grabbed my foot behind me, rewarded with the joy of a beautiful hip stretch. Proprioception. Knowing where I was in space and time.

Post-trauma, my proprioceptors hadn't been functioning. I had lost all sense of where I fit. The world was spinning, people were functioning, and I was flailing, always with that sense of reaching out for something to support me but coming up empty. That feeling of walking down stairs and taking an extra step when the floor is flat. I was dispropriocepted. Unreality. Of not actually feeling.

I make watches stop. People close to me die. These are two facts.

The most common words I heard after both deaths: *Make friends with time.*

Time was not my friend. Time took me further and further away from the people I loved. It was a stupid saying. One that was repeated by people who had never picked up the phone to find out their brother was dead. It just happened. Five days, five months, five years. All just a click of the fingers.

All just a minute ago. It will never not have just happened, somewhere in my body, somewhere in my mind.

Time stopped making sense to me. I couldn't tell you how long it had been since Matt died. I couldn't tell you the year of his death off the top of my head.

It's not relevant. It doesn't change the outcome, the Dutch therapist had said when I despaired about not being able to remember the specifics about Rob's death.

I still don't wear a watch.

CHAPTER 39

GROUCHO MARX

WE SAT AT THE table of Matt's in-laws. Friday night. The Shabbat. Normally we would have been at my parents' house. Lighting candles. Saying prayers. The cousins laughing, asking to leave the table to play. Dad spilling his wine. Inside jokes that only our family understood. But instead, we were at the table of Matt's in-laws. Though Matt was not there. We were not telling inside jokes. Dad still spilled his wine.

We had all lost him, but our titles were different. We'd lost a son-in-law, a brother, a husband, a father, a son. And so we gathered at a table for a family meal. We did not even leave a seat for him.

We crowded the table and ate smoked salmon and chicken soup on white tablecloths and asked for second serves of crisp roast potatoes and brisket. And there were two dessert courses. Two. There was a fruit and gelatin course first and *then* the cake and biscuits were served with tea. The differences in family traditions, of what was the norm.

At the table were two mothers who had lost sons. There was my mum, and Jini. Jini was Fiona's aunt. She lost her son Shimon when he was just a child. It was how I first learned about death. I went to school with Shimon; he was in my year level until he got sick, and he would come and go and come again between the treatments for leukemia. Until he stopped coming. And I remember the moment I found out he would never come to school again. I was wearing a Groucho Marx costume. I was eight or nine. I was in a theatre, backstage, ready for our performance. Our year was dressed as the Marx Brothers. We were divided into groups of four: Chicos, Zeppos, Harpos and Grouchos. Some had curly wigs, others had hats. Our group wore masks made up of black-rimmed glasses, a giant nose and a plastic moustache. We were given fake cigars as props and asked to wear our father's suit jackets and shirts. I was wearing this, my dad's oversized

jacket, as I was told that Shimon had died. That the treatments had no longer worked and that it was time for his small body to give up.

In hindsight it doesn't make sense that teachers in charge of our emotional and educational wellbeing would have broken the news of a classmate's death on the night of a school performance. It seems unlikely that this was how it happened. Yet even now I can't think of Shimon without thinking about Groucho Marx, and this feeling I had backstage, that Shimon had died, in my too-big suit. And I knew then, as I knew at that table, that the show must go on. And we're all just playing adults.

There was a look in Jini's eyes, decades later, that said that she had lost something she would never get back. And though she sat with us at the table, a part of her was not there and never would be. A part of her was with the missing. The boy who never made it to the school performance and was never able to go backstage or dress up as a Marx Brother. Who never got to wear the oversized suit jacket as a costume or ever become a man who would wear a real one that fit.

I looked at my mother, who had that same look in her eyes, who was at the table with us but not really. These mothers in arms.

CHAPTER 40

POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

THE GOOD THING ABOUT something awful happening is that you come out the other end having experienced growth. You become a better person. You become stronger. You become more accomplished. Unless you don't.

The narrative of grief and loss is that surely there has to be an upside. Resilience! Superpowers! Eternal gratefulness! Extreme compassion! An appreciation of what really matters.

But what if there's not? What if something shit just happens and then you keep being the person you always were. Just sadder. Maybe even a less-good version of yourself.

Not only do people want you to experience grief and loss unscathed (move it along now, it's getting old) you must *learn* from it as well.

When Rob died, his friends organised a yearly cricket match to raise money for charity. They banded together, they remembered, year after year. His parents set up a Humanitarian Award at his university, awarded to the medical student judged as having made a significant contribution to an underprivileged community locally or abroad. His memory was honoured. Lives were impacted.

After Matt died, Fiona organised with the primary school their children attended (which was also the school Matt attended as a child) for a friendship seat to be placed in the playground. There was a plaque with Matt's name and an explanation: a child who was feeling lonely during playtime could sit on this bench. It signalled for someone to come and keep them company, to include them.

Fiona also started posting snippets of her days. Moments of beauty amid all the heartache. A cloud formation. A perfect coffee. The limbs of a tree reaching skyward. The response was so immense that she started a Facebook group, amassing thousands upon thousands of followers almost

immediately. *It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.* The group encouraged people to look up. To change their perspective. To take a photo and share it in the hope of inspiring others to experience the beauty of the world.

After Matt died, our brother Andrew took it as a warning to get serious about his health. He started running, swimming and cycling. He trained for marathons and triathlons, raising thousands of dollars along the way. He lost twenty-five kilos. He ran 42.2 kilometres, again and again. He talked about his times and his PBs and I glazed over as he described the benefits of carb-loading two days before a big race versus the night before. He made it to the New York Marathon. He had medals. He had photos crossing each finish line, with Matt's initials in black marker on his hand touching his heart, the other hand pointing towards the sky.

Money to charity. A social movement. Medals. So many people with so much to show. Post-traumatic growth in action. And yet. And yet.

When Rob died I raised zero dollars for charity to fund research for the heart condition he died from. The one I forgot the name of, over and over. I still got road rage. I was both an amazing and shit and average friend. I forgot birthdays. I didn't return phone calls.

When Matt died I raised no money to fund research for the heart condition he died from. The one I forgot the name of, over and over. I was both an amazing and shit and average wife and mother. I sometimes lost my temper. I still got road rage.

I crossed no finish lines. I got no PBs. I helped no small children looking for friends to play with.

In the days and weeks after Matt's death, I was stopped on the street constantly. People told me how amazing my sister-in-law was. They had read a recent post on her Facebook page. Always looking up. Always looking at the positives. The moments of sunshine through the clouds. She was inspiring, they told me, and they were inspired.

'How amazing is your brother?!' people stopped and told me in the months after Matt's death. Andrew's physical transformation was obvious. They saw him training, running laps around the park. They saw his progress photos. They saw his results from his latest marathon. They were inspired because he was an inspiration.

I imagined my brother and my sister-in-law being stopped in the street. 'She's just so ... average! With her crippling panic attacks and the sour look

she always has on her face!’ I was not inspiring, they would whisper. They were not inspired.

I didn’t want to look up. I didn’t want to run 42.2 kilometres and beat my PB. People died and I just wanted to be sad about it. Sometimes. Often. I was too tired, too beaten, too weary to be a better person. I didn’t want to break records or start movements or inspire. If I could be a better version of myself I’d want to be the kind of person who didn’t bite my nails. The kind of person who didn’t pick at my cuticles until they bled. Who could just leave well enough alone. Who could go to a party or watch TV or be stuck in traffic without constantly pick, pick, picking at rough edges and hangnails. That was the sum of my big life goals, and even that was not something I actively strove to achieve.

The trauma didn’t just happen to me. It happened to them. To Matt. And to Rob. And I refused to be a better person because of it. I was not a better person without them. I was the same person. Without them. Maybe a little worse, in fact. And I still bit my nails.

The world wants to see post-traumatic growth. It wants to see happy endings. A crescendo of grief and loss and pain and joy that leads to ... something. Somewhere. But what if it doesn’t? What if awful things just happen because awful things just happen and we bear them? We endure.

‘How is your mum?’ people asked. Although it was more of a statement. There was only one appropriate response and it was: ‘She’s okay, in the circumstances.’ This was the answer people wanted and so I gave it to them. ‘I can’t even imagine,’ they said. Although they could. They were imagining it when they asked the question. Her reality was proof that their worst nightmares could happen. Their children may leave to go to work one day and not come home. They said they couldn’t imagine, but what they meant was: *stop making me imagine*. It was much easier to support the cyclists, the athletes, the social movement founders, the charity fundraisers, the strong ones.

A family member sent me a link to a volunteer-run organisation that helped mothers in need. They were looking for volunteers to help make up packs for newborns from donations. Nappies. Onesies. Breast pumps. ‘For your mum?’ they texted. ‘It might help. Give her something to do. To give back.’ As if her inward focus was pure self-obsession and not survival. There was an expectation that she would turn her despair into productivity.

The act of grieving wasn't an adequate use of her time. I imagined my mum, mourning the loss of her second-born, folding baby booties.

There are no medals for the ones who endure, who get through the sleepless nights, who make it through the day, who are stuck in the mess and muck of grief. Grief itself is an endurance sport. Endless loops around the track, with nothing to show for it.

I wonder if, years later, any children sit on the friendship seat at school. If they read the name on the plaque. If children ever offer to play with the lonely ones. If the world is a kinder place.

We were at my brother's house with the extended family for Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. It had been three years since Matt had died. Our stomachs ached from overeating and yet we continued to pick at the honey cake, collecting the sticky crumbs between two fingers. My cousin asked my brother Andrew if he was still cycling, still training. No, my brother explained. A mate from one of his cycling groups was killed. On his bike. Swiped by a car. Other friends had accidents. Falls. Near misses. Surgeries with screws and broken bones and warnings of what-could-have-been.

I knew that Andrew had stopped cycling, but I had assumed that life had got in the way. That the urgency of outrunning death had passed, or the physical toll and time dedicated to training had caused marathons and triathlons to lose their shine. I had not realised he had been spooked by death again. Wherever you go, there you are.

CHAPTER 41

ANOTHER LIST

MY IPHONE REMINDERS. AN endless list.

- Cheese
- Eggs
- Is pain of another worse than pain for oneself?
- Can only ever experience grief firsthand
- The missing years
- Schadenfreude – look this up. Is there a more general version that applies?
- Ecstatic highs
- Beef mince + diced tomatoes x 2.

My wi-fi password. My car numberplate. Things I might need to access quickly. That I thought I wouldn't remember. I did, though. Remember my numberplate. It was a new memory, so it stuck. I knew there were dates I needed to put in here. And medical conditions. The kinds that killed boyfriends and brothers. But I didn't write them. I let myself keep forgetting.

I let myself take the long way home. No shortcuts to the relearning, the re-remembering, the re-forgetting.

- So undignified

I didn't know what I wrote this about. It could be many things.

- Bread
- Eggs

- Cheese.

The cheese and eggs appeared again. I wondered if I forgot to buy them the first time, or maybe this was a restock.

- How very undignified
- Our greatest human need is to be seen
- Succubus
- Falling in loss
- Pain of another vs pain for oneself.

Like the cheese and the eggs, I repeated myself over and over. Was I writing because I forgot the first time? Or was I writing for emphasis?

The ramblings of a madwoman, I think. And then I add this too.

- The ramblings of a madwoman.

CHAPTER 42

IN LOVE

WITHIN DAYS OF MATT passing, I had turned to Dean and said: *I cannot do this anymore. All this death. I need life.* We had been holding off having a third child. We had two boys, two years apart. We would wait, leave a big gap. Then have a third. This is how I grew up. Andrew and Matt close in age, then a large gap and then me. This was what I wanted to recreate. But the sibling balance had been disturbed. Now there was just a giant eleven-year chasm between me and Andrew.

I was born of need. My mother had lost her father, and then her mother, and then I was created. I knew this was my legacy. She had her two boys. She was content. And then the loss of her parents brought the sudden need for a daughter. I became the life created in a space made by death.

Dean and I knew there was no time to wait. Our boys were only one and three, but who knew what could happen? And so, in the week after death, we decided to create. And then, the business of grief took over. And we forgot. The urgency passed. A forgotten wish. The ravings of a madwoman.

I went to the GP because I was tired. I was tired because my brother had died and I wasn't sleeping or eating. But I needed answers. I needed something tangible other than: the act of living is exhausting. And so my GP humoured me and ordered full bloods: iron levels, vitamin D levels, whatever markers I could look to for signs of health. Or warnings. Iron deficiency in the guise of looming death.

The nurse called while I was walking Ezra and Levi in their double pram, the dog on his leash pulling my arm back while I tried to steady the oversized pram and keep the phone to one ear, my head tilted sideways to keep it in place.

'Look,' she said, 'the levels are only slightly elevated so we recommend you come back for another test. It could be early days.'

‘For what?’ I said, thinking that I probably needed to eat more red meat but not understanding the words she was saying, my neck beginning to hurt from holding the phone between my ear and shoulder.

‘The hCG levels,’ she said. Silence. ‘To tell if you are pregnant or not.’

It hadn’t occurred to me that checking hormone levels would be part of the test. I had just been looking for ways to find out if I was about to die.

‘Oh ... okay,’ I said.

The next test showed higher hCG levels and we arranged an ultrasound to find out just how pregnant I was. To find out if it was real. I booked in at a hospital a few suburbs away, not wanting to bump into anyone I knew, keeping all this separate from my actual life. Dean would meet me in the waiting room there.

As I parked my car on Church Street, opening my door to check I was within the angled lines, a large van pulled up next to me, the kind that delivers flowers or is used for catering. It was my friend Amanda. So much for not bumping into anyone. She hugged me, asked how I was doing and talked about Matt. She used his name deliberately and often. *How are Matt’s twins doing?* she asked. She asked after Fiona. My parents. Not in a perfunctory way but in a way that held on to my words. She wasn’t just ticking boxes on the awkward grief conversation checklist.

I looked into her delivery van and rather than flowers it was filled with car seats. Four of them.

‘Oh my god,’ I said.

‘I know, right?’ she laughed. She had a five-year-old daughter, a three-year-old daughter and one-year-old twin boys. Her husband, Ronnie, had been friends with Rob. Amanda had always made an effort to stay close in the years after Rob died. She would call on milestone days, she was deliriously happy when she found out I was engaged. Her face beamed at me in a way that always made me feel that my two worlds had some sort of bridge between them. It was a feeling that disappeared when I wasn’t in her presence.

‘Anyway,’ she said. ‘Better run into the shops quickly before kinder pick-up!’

She didn’t ask what I was doing in the neighbourhood but I walked slowly past the shops, checking out the Lululemon window display, before diverting to the hospital foyer, just in case.

Dean and I had been joking that it was twins this time. 'It would be because of Matt,' we had teased each other. We didn't mean that it would be a genetic probability because Matt had twins, we meant that Matt would send twins to us somehow. As a sign. Or a practical joke. 'Just to fuck our shit up,' we had said. And laughed.

I spotted him in the waiting room when I arrived, engrossed in his phone. 'I just saw Amanda outside,' I said. 'It's a sign. We're having twins.'

When we were called in for our appointment, the sonographer asked us some preliminary questions. When was my last period? How long was my cycle? When did I ovulate?

'I really have no idea,' I said, three times. My body as other. Out of sync.

She placed the goop on my flat stomach and Dean looked at me and then at the monitor and back at my face. She measured and clicked and clicked and listened. There was nothing that resembled a baby on the screen.

'You are six weeks pregnant,' she said. She gave us a due date of late November. About nine months after Matt's death.

'Is it just one?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'Just one.' She pointed out the tiny blob on the monitor.

'Can you check for twins?' I asked.

'I have, of course.'

'Can you check again? Just to be sure?' She tried to hide a roll of her eyes and pressed the ultrasound probe hard into my stomach.

'Yes,' she said again. 'Just one. Not twins.'

And Dean and I shrugged our shoulders, relieved and disappointed at the same time. No signs from the universe. But new life, new chapter, all the same. We kept the existence of this tiny blur on the screen a secret. Something just for us.

'It's twins,' Dean said the next week. My flat stomach was now permanently rounded as if I had always just eaten a huge serve of pasta.

'It's just because it's a third pregnancy,' I said. 'My body just knows what to do. You heard the sonographer! She said it was just one.'

We arrived at the twelve-week scan, booked in at our regular ultrasound clinic where I had gone for our last two pregnancies. I no longer cared if we bumped into anyone; we'd soon have good news to share and nothing more to hide. This was just perfunctory. I was desperate to call my parents. To tell

them they were going to be grandparents again. To tell them they would have a title they could claim back, other than that of mourner.

The new sonographer was more smiley. She had a lightness to her. Her voice went up at the end of sentences. She pressed into my stomach.

She paused, the screen showing black swirls. She checked the patient notes quickly and then looked back at the screen. 'Did they not tell you at your last scan it was twins?' she said.

The room spun. I remembered being pushed in a swing as a young child. The way you'd beg to be pushed higher and higher. And there would come a point that was just a bit too high but also just right and it was like part of you stayed pinned at a great height while the rest of you sped back down to earth. The balance between being frozen and accelerating. The split second of chain links going slack and then taut. The physics of fear and pleasure. I felt it then.

'Umm ... no?' I said.

We burst into hysterical laughter. Like maniacs. Laughing but crying but snorting but gasping.

'Are you joking?' Dean asked.

'I don't joke about twins,' she said.

We kept laughing, and she joined in.

But then she stopped, the probe pausing in one area, looking at the screen intently.

'Just wait here,' she said, snapping off her gloves. 'I just need to get an opinion on something.'

I was left with an open gown and goop all over me. There was no heartbeat coming through the ultrasound machine but I could hear beating filling up the room, my blood whooshing to my feet with an audible sound, the laughter from moments ago echoing eerily in the space it left behind. The sudden need to go to the toilet, evolutionary functioning of the body seemingly incongruent with survival tactics.

That was when we met Dr Eric Huxley. He walked in with his long hair that swept across his eyes.

He introduced himself, then placed the probe on my stomach. He talked about fluid measurements and my placenta and twin-to-twin transfusion and explained that the blood exchanged between Twin A and Twin B meant that one twin was not receiving enough while the other was receiving too much. The one with too little risked malnourishment and organ failure. The one

with too much risked an overworked heart and cardiac complications. The problem with being too much or too little. It can kill, either way you look at it.

And he said it all in a way that was clear and kind but all I could think was: *I have had my bad thing. I have had my two bad things. I am not owed any more.* I wanted to call my mum and tell her I was pregnant with identical twins. I didn't want to tell her that they might not make it. I didn't want to tell her about my unborn twins' enlarged hearts and too much fluid in one sac. We had had enough talk of hearts.

Dean held me silently. We could not lie, we could not tell each other, 'This will be okay, this will all work out,' because we knew it might not. I wanted to go back to a time when we could have lied to each other. I wanted to be able to take things for granted. People always say that the lesson in death and trauma is to not take anything for granted. That it gives you the gift of perspective. But the opposite is sometimes true. What a gift to be able to take things for granted. To assume that hearts will beat and continue beating. That bodies will breathe reflexively and sleep is just sleep. To assume things will just work out. I wanted to take all of it for granted. To take it all in my hands and grab at life, take giant swoops of it and dance around, grabbing and grabbing and taking it all, taking it all for granted.

And so instead of calling my mum on the way home to tell her good news I called her and said, 'Hi, Mum. Everything is okay, but ...' Because when everything is okay, no one starts a conversation with 'everything is okay'. Because there is always a 'but'. Everything is okay, but I am pregnant with twins and it does not look good. *It-Does-Not-Look-Good.* And we all know how that turns out.

The next few months were a blur of appointments. There were specialists talking about us behind our backs, convening and trying to work out what was going on. We fell in love with Eric Huxley, with desperation and intensity. We fell in love with the way he delivered news. Even bad news. With the way he measured. And clicked. And pointed out blood flow. And fluid. And outcomes. And I couldn't fall in love with these two babies inside me because we could lose them, so easily, any day. And even as my stomach grew, and I continued to cry in my car, week after week, even then, we loved this man, this doctor who my husband stared at with wide-eyed

admiration, whose words we clung to. Because each week he would say, 'I'll see you next week,' and this would give us another week. To hope. To hold on.

My doctors sent me to a different hospital, where they could measure heartbeats with their special machines that wrapped around me and beeped. The nurses there all seemed to have Irish accents. One day with Eric for a scan to check growth and blood flow and a few days later for foetal heart-rate monitoring at Jessie Mac. The scans themselves added a rhythm to our weeks, like the heartbeats we were trying to monitor. In between these appointments, the professionals conferred, then Eric would call me with a summary. It ended in the way it always did, whether the news was good or bad: *But we really don't know.*

Not for the first time, I hated my body. Not the way my stomach popped outwards like an ever-expanding ball, like I was a poster girl for a picture-perfect pregnancy. But the way it was failing the people I loved, again. The way the network of blood vessels that supplied oxygen and nutrients essential for development in the womb were not doing what they were meant to do. This was my responsibility. And I was doing it all wrong. There was an imbalance because *I* was imbalanced.

And so it was, after the seven-month mark, after the amniocentesis, and steroid injections for lung development, I was sitting patiently with the heart-rate monitor wrapped around my now enormous stomach. I looked at the numbers on the screen. Twin A. Twin B. Nameless but for this label, because for now they were just things growing, to be measured like a high school assignment. Something to be observed. The numbers that were usually static were changing frantically. Dropping. Increasing. Dropping. Increasing. Increasing. And I knew. I knew before the nurses rushed at me. Before they grabbed my phone and told me to dial Dean's number. I knew before they started stripping me, peeling layers off me with what felt like 200 hands. I knew before they said: 'These babies need to come out now,' before they said they may have to perform an emergency C-section, perhaps before my usual obstetrician would arrive or before my husband would arrive. *These babies need to come out now*, they said. *Right now.* They were babies in distress. (*Me too!* I wanted to say.) And I knew before they put me on the bed and I started shivering wildly as they placed monitors all over me, with cords going in all directions. Again, my body was doing things without my express permission. Shivering with violence and ferocity. They

swabbed and prepped and injected me. They said, 'We'll need to take this off,' as they came at my polished fingernails with acetone. And the first words to leave my mouth since the word 'distress' was spoken: 'Please don't take off my nail polish, I just got them done.'

And then my shivering became so forceful it looked like I was fitting so they placed foil blankets on me, the shiny silver ones they put on people rescued after weeks alone in the bush after a wrong turn. And here I was, monitors beeping, people rushing into action under my flimsy silver cape. Not a heroic hiker or survivalist or athlete. Just a girl with a failing body.

My obstetrician arrived and said, 'Well, you don't make things easy!' and smiled. Then Dean was in the room and held me as I shivered. He put on blue scrubs and as I was being wheeled into the operating theatre he said, 'I really need to pee.' They told him to hurry. They asked me to take slow breaths so they could put a needle in my spine. 'Don't move,' they said, as my body was spasming on the bed with a violence that was almost comedic, if not for the two babies dying inside me. In between the shivers I was still for just long enough for the epidural to make its way into my lower back. Within moments I was lying face up, eyes to the ceiling, sliced open, feeling the familiar tug, tug, tug of hands deep inside my body. Pulling and wrenching.

And then there was silence. Years, decades, centuries passed until I heard the tiny sounds of newborn cries filling the room. Two mewling boys covered in a white layer of muck. 'Are they okay?' I pleaded, unable to see anything but a blur of action in my periphery and the familiar glare of the giant hospital lights. 'They are,' the doctor said. And I knew he meant it. They were wrapped up and placed next to my face. Dean leaned in close as we smiled for a photo, snapped by a nurse who had grabbed Dean's phone on cue. Not only trained to save lives, she had mastered how to take a perfectly angled photo at just the right second. When I look at this photo now, I see that the emergency that preceded it has not been captured. In the photo I see yellow blankets and swaddled boys who will soon be snatched from me and rushed to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, where monitors will blip and CPAP machines will blow air into teeny tiny lungs so their chests will go up and down, little ribs visible beneath translucent skin.

A full day later, Dean and I were able to stare into their humidicribs as they sunbaked under the phototherapy lights, their skin jaundiced and yellow. It was then that we chose their names. We chose who would carry

the name of my brother, a middle name from a middle child passed down through the generations. Eden Matthew. We chose who would carry the name of Dean's late friend, the one who he told me about that very first night on his brown leather couch. Alon Michael.

The twins were now real, named things, no longer Twin A and Twin B. They were placed on my chest for skin-on-skin time so the heat of my body could regulate their body temperature and heartbeats. I whispered, 'I love you, I love you, I love you,' and we were in sync and breathed as one.

Together, Dean and I looked into the eyes of these strange creatures, these bony babes with round stomachs and bodies too fragile to touch. They had to stay in NICU to be supported by teams of doctors and nurses and machines, to learn to swallow and suck and breathe on their own, in the way that reflexes can be a learned skill.

'Please don't make us leave,' I wanted to say to the nurses on the day they were discharged from the NICU after six weeks of progress. Please don't send me into a world without monitors for hearts and oxygen checks where a medical team will not rush towards me with outstretched arms, will not make the phone calls, will not cut me open when disaster strikes. A world where no one is monitoring distress. A world that takes for granted that hearts will beat and that breathing is a reflex. I cried on the day we were sent home, and the nurses looked at me like I was crying from relief, from acknowledgement of how far we'd come, overwhelmed by joy. But I was already homesick for the life we had created there. A kind of Stockholm syndrome. Please keep watch over us all. Hook us all up, my family, my friends, the people I love. Attach us to the machines that check we are okay. Even the machines that beep, beep, beep and the pulse oximeter with its alarm that goes off constantly because the sensor always comes loose. Hook me up. Feed me by tube. Take my temperature. Check my stats. Please, please, please keep an eye on my heart. It cannot take much more.

Every now and then, Dean and I will look at our twins, playing, eating, squabbling, as if it is the most ordinary thing in the world, and we will ask ourselves: What do you think Dr Eric Huxley is up to right now? Do you think he thinks about us too, sometimes?

CHAPTER 43

YOU ARE AN ANGRY WOMAN

I AM DRIVING DOWN a highway. The speed limit is 70 km/h. I am driving at 68 km/h. I am in the second lane to the left. There is a slip lane and the cars in the first lane need to merge. I am metres in front of them. The cars can slot in neatly behind me, and then neatly behind the car in front of them and so on and so forth. There is an order to things.

I keep travelling at the speed limit. Just under. The car behind me, a black Alfa Romeo, is nearing the end of his lane. He does not merge behind me. He speeds up ahead and cuts me off. I put my foot down on the brake suddenly and drop from 68 to 60, lurch forward against my seatbelt. I beep. Uncontrollably. I beep once and then I hold my hand flat on the horn, for emphasis. I flick my hand up in an exaggerated motion that says: What the *fuck* are you *doing*? I catch him looking in his rear-view mirror. I catch a smirk. I move over one lane to the right, ready to speed ahead. But we are now driving side by side and the approaching red light means we are about to be stationary next to each other.

I ready myself to have the first say. I give him another exaggerated wave of my hand matched with an eye-roll. He motions for me to lower my window and I do. He smiles. 'You need to relax,' he says.

'You merged into me,' I say. 'You cut me off. You need to learn how to drive.'

'You are an angry woman,' he says. And rolls up his window.

Fuck you, I say under my breath, in my midnight-blue minivan. The kind with doors that slide open automatically with the press of a button. With car seats that hold hidden crumbs deep inside their cavities, balled-up tissues, old coffee cups, scraps of paper, pens without lids and a random second-place ribbon from a sports day long gone.

I feel the blood surge through me. The injustice. Of cutting me off, of slowing me down. Of calling me a woman. An angry one. *You* relax. *You*

middle-aged prick.

I take a deep breath and start to let everyone in front of me. I motion politely. I let little old men in hats merge into my lane. I slow to accommodate them. At the lights I let motorbikes speed ahead.

I *am* an angry woman.

I am a Dr Seuss book.

I am angry on the road. I am angry in my house. I am angry in a queue. I am angry whatever I do. I am angry when you chew too loud. I am angry when you walk too slow. I am angry wherever I go.

Like every night before it, I had not slept well. At 2 am my eyes finally closed, heavy and defeated. Less than two hours later I was woken with a start. The sound of a child screaming waking no one in the house but me. I ran in, without time to grab my phone for torchlight. Arms outstretched straight, zombie-like, I opened the bedroom door.

‘Everyone left me!’ Levi said through tears. ‘Everyone left me by myself.’

I held him tight, rocking him rhythmically. *Shhhh, shhhh*. ‘I’m here,’ I said. ‘We’re all here.’

He was confused, the urgency of his screams sounding like they came from someone else. He took a sip of water from the bottle I had left by his bed. He rested his head back on his pillow and within minutes was fast asleep. The house was quiet. I wondered if I’d made the whole thing up.

I crept quietly back into bed, arms outstretched again but less frantically now, feeling my way through doorways, reaching out for walls that were not where they should be, banging into doorframes that had moved in the night. I was overthinking my steps. I closed my eyes so I could see better. It’s easier to embrace the darkness, to let the body adjust, than to try and squint for the hints of light. I banged my shin into the corner of the bed.

For the next few hours I tossed and turned and listened to the sound of Dean breathing, his mouth open, not quite snoring. I dipped in and out of dreamless sleep until my alarm beeped at 5.20 am. The house was silent still, but for the soft beep of my alarm. Dean rolled over. I dressed for yoga with the pile of clothes I left by the door and slipped on my Ugg boots.

On autopilot I drove to the yoga studio, where I was greeted by warm faces with remnants of sleep in the air around them. I hated them. We flowed and breathed and stretched and moved. The teacher talked about

gratitude and ended the class with a chant. *Namaste*. I wondered if you could be grateful and resentful at the same time.

Beads of sweat dripped down my hairline, my singlet sticky. I walked towards my car, detouring for my takeaway long black, before heading home, where children would be waking and lunches would need to be packed and cereal poured and toast buttered and fights broken up.

Outside the coffee shop there was a man, always the first one there when it opens at 7 am.

He had a walker next to him, wisps of greying hair and skin aged from cigarettes. He looked like the kind of guy who would go to the pub on the way home from work to avoid going home to his wife and kids.

‘Smile!’ he said to me, the first time I saw him after a yoga class. ‘It’s a beautiful morning! You can’t walk past me with that face.’

I said nothing. I smiled reflexively. This made him happy. This made me hate myself a little more. I ordered my coffee.

The same routine happened each week. The restless night. The sweat. The rush for coffee.

‘Sm—’

‘I’m smiling! See!’ I said that morning. Grinned. Pointed to my face.

‘Go fuck yourself,’ I said under my breath as I left, long black in hand.

I throw my anger everywhere. I unleash it on strangers and family and friends. I also push my anger down as far as it can go. Late at night on tear-stained pillows. When I least expect it. I am an angry, angry woman.

CHAPTER 44

THE STAGES

I HEAR THE NEWS that there is now a sixth stage of grief and I am pissed off. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler wrote the famous book *On Grief and Grieving* about denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – the iconic five stages. It was published in 2005, the year that Rob died.

I never read the book at the time because my grief was obviously completely unique and I experienced it in a way that had never been and never would be experienced again. I could not be pigeonholed into neat boxes with dot-point summaries.

Fifteen years after my first experience with grief I see a copy of Kübler-Ross and Kessler's book on grieving at my local bookstore. *Selected as BEST GIFT for a grieving friend or relative by Good Housekeeping*, it boasts, a shiny gold star on the cover. My disdain grows.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross died. Kessler released another book and he added a sixth stage. A goddamn sixth stage. No, you do not get to be the poster boy for how-to-grieve and then change your mind. *The New York Times* called the original work a 'definitive account of how we grieve'. It's definitive. You had your chance.

But then I find out that Kessler came to this realisation about stage six after the death of his son. So then I feel bad for being such a bitch about the whole thing. But still. He committed. End of story, grief guy. If the definitive account was not definitive, what hope do any of us have? Proof of fallibility.

I find myself a copy of *On Grief and Grieving*. I flick: 'The stages have evolved since their introduction, and they have been very misunderstood over the past three decades. They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss as there is no typical loss.'

Oh. Okay. Sorry, Dave.

He added the final stage: Meaning. I am still annoyed. How very dare anyone tell me that the people I loved died for a reason? But then I read further. *The meaning is not in the death. The meaning is in what to do now.* Acceptance is not enough.

And I realise how much I have been holding on. Not to Rob or to Matt as people. But to the grief. Because that's what kept them close to me. If I lost that pain, what was left? It was my duty: to wake up with a gasp. To grapple with nightmares in the dark. To be haunted by the question of *what if ...?*

I have accepted their deaths as something that just happened, but I have not accepted the life I am now in. As if it is some provisional existence that can be yanked away at any moment or, worse yet: that my life is an insult to those I loved and lost. The comfort of grief. The familiarity of it.

The grief stages came from Kübler-Ross's research into the dying process; that is, the stages that occur before we leave this earth. These same stages are also experienced by the living when faced with loss. In this way, the grief process is a kind of death, the loss of self.

There is a second death: the loss of the constant pain. When not every second of every day is consumed with thoughts of what happened. It's a comfort, of sorts, when the missing itself becomes so painful that it becomes its own kind of relationship. Keeps you linked to the person you love. The grief itself becomes something to nurture, something spiky and heavy and hot. The paradox that the very thing that feels so intolerable it may kill you is also the very thing that sustains you. When your breath stops catching and slows. When the grief melds and moulds and becomes malleable. No longer requires your constant attention. It's another loss.

No one warned me about the very particular grief of happiness after a loss. Not just the monumental joys like falling in love or having children or celebrating a birthday, but the quiet moments of turning the pages of the best kind of book or the way wind sometimes has a particular smell, or when a sip of tea is just the right temperature. No one tells you how to experience these things without it taking away from the love you feel for someone who no longer exists in this world. Can joy only be felt in a pain-free life? Or, more to the point: can pain only be felt in a joy-free life? The heartbreak of either/or.

Where is the reverse-palliative care for those of us who return to the land of the living? Where are the nurses to tell us how to respond when, in the

muck of grief, we feel an ache of lightness, of enjoyment, of connection to a life we did not agree to live?

What comes after meaning? The denial of joy? The bargaining with the pain (*I will remember, I will remember ...*)? The anger that surfaces when we're feeling safe enough to know we will probably survive whatever comes.

Until, finally, we learn that acceptance has no end point. It is not a finite process. We do not move through it in a linear fashion. Grief Level: Expert. Happiness Level: Pro. There are no medals, no podiums. Just the messiness and madness that awaits us. Without reprieve. The stages of grieving and the stages of joy and the way it all jumbles up and takes us by surprise.

Maybe I am annoyed at the five stages of grief because at its heart, even now, I believe that this should not have happened. There was an error. The fact that the research shows I am having a textbook reaction hints at the fact that yes: this was a possibility all along. The blanketing numbness of denial, the pain beneath the anger, the bargaining to restore chaos, the pointlessness of the day-to-day and the way that healing brings us closer to the ones we love. This is a thing that happens. I was not the first and I will not be the last. The battle between wanting to be seen, to feel understood, while rallying against definition. I need to be an anomaly, not the norm. I need my grief to be special – not because *I* am special, but because I don't want their deaths to be normal. I can accept that it happened without finding it acceptable. These are not the same thing.

The experience of grief and loss can only ever be firsthand. We can define it, we can understand it, we can empathise, but we cannot truly fathom the inexplicable sense of all-encompassing agony without knowing it as our own. Just as we cannot define the sense of joy post-loss unless we have felt it in all its contradictions.

The meaning is not in the death. The meaning is in what to do now.

CHAPTER 45

GRIEF NEMO

I HAVE BREAKTHROUGHS. As if the feeling of grief is some riddle to be solved. I am a detective, forever looking for clues.

Sometimes I stumble upon things accidentally. Sometimes I actively search.

I think I am beginning to understand why grief feels so like suspense. I write these words in the notes section of my iPhone. Jayson Greene, I write. Although the original quote is C.S. Lewis and I'm not sure at what point I connected the quote to Greene. It could have been while he was being interviewed on one of the podcasts I listen to while walking the dog – *Grief Out Loud*, *Grief Cast*, *Everything Happens* or *Terrible, Thanks for Asking*. It could have been two unrelated thoughts that I somehow linked as I typed one-handed, headphones in, dog leash wrapped around my wrist. I read Greene's memoir *Once More We Saw Stars* about the death of his daughter Greta and his experience with grief after a freak accident claimed her young life. I decide to buy Lewis's book, *A Grief Observed*. Following the grief breadcrumbs. I place my order online and it arrives within a few days. I wonder if they have my purchase history on file. I wonder what they think every time I press 'add to cart'. Another book about death.

One evening the following week, I'm lying in bed when Dean comes in. He looks at my bedside table. He looks at me. He looks back at my bedside table. *On Grief and Grieving* on top of *With the End in Mind* on top of *Being Mortal* next to *Grief Works*. He looks back at me. 'Remember when you were fun?' he says, lightly teasing.

'I was never fun,' I say, deadpan. 'I was funny. I was never fun.'

'True,' he says. 'That's why I love you.' I can hear him laughing as he walks down the stairs. Our love language is dark humour. I go back to reading *A Grief Observed*.

I think I am beginning to understand why grief feels like suspense. I realise I have added the word 'so' in my original note-taking. I read the sentence again. I can't help but read it in my head the original way. I think I am beginning to understand why grief feels so like suspense. The frustration of so many impulses, as Lewis describes. Thoughts and actions with no target. These are the moments I feel understood. The feeling that I am always holding my breath. Waiting.

I dog-ear these books when I read them. Fold the top corner, not even with hesitation or gentle care. For some this would be sacrilegious. A sign of disrespect. But I love leaving these marks, the points stopped, eyes weary.

I am dog-eared. I have the marks of where things stopped and started. Put down and picked up. Forever scarred at my corners. I don't believe in bookmarks. I always lose them anyway.

When my kids are sick I want to call Matt. As a GP, he always had the answer. He would come over after work, in his striped shirt and brown belt with his black doctor's bag and stethoscope. He would take temperatures and look in ears and use an icy pole stick to look at tonsils and feel glands with his hands that had fingernails always bitten to the quick. *Sorry my fingers are cold*, he'd always say.

I loved that he didn't feel quite like my brother at this time. Not the brother I grew up with who banged on the bathroom door when I took too long in the shower or ate Weet-Bix with Akta-Vite. He became a man who spoke in a different voice, enunciated his words and held his body differently. He was completely changed when he was helping people.

When he started his own medical practice he learned how to make balloon animals for the kids who came in as patients. And if there is anything in the world to know about Matt it can be summed up by that. Balloon animals.

Now, when my kids are unwell, I have to make an appointment with our local GP.

All these roads that we used to go down that are now culde-sacs.

I have just finished putting the kids to bed and Dean is cleaning dishes when I walk into the kitchen.

‘Oh, I forgot to tell you that I bumped into your brother today,’ he says, his back to me as he squirts Palmolive into the sink. ‘He’d just finished a bike ride so we had a coffee together.’

‘Which brother?’ I say, reflexively.

He pauses, the bubbles lightly popping. He turns to me slowly, unsure of what to say.

‘Oh! Fuck,’ I say, the realisation hitting me not because Matt has been dead for years, but because he didn’t go for bike rides.

The thoughts disappear along with the feelings they bring up. Of connecting the dots. The dots disconnecting on repeat.

I read Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* again. The pages are highlighted and dog-eared and unkempt. *I think I am beginning to understand why grief feels like suspense*. C.S. Lewis’s words are in Didion’s book too. The book I have read and reread on repeat. I flick to the front page, the tiny text. First published in 2005. The same year that Rob died. I try to think who told me about the book, who recommended that I read it. I can’t recall. Is it possible I discovered it on my own? Stumbled upon a book about death and grief and its aftermath that was released into the world in the same year I was stumbling myself?

I read these words as if they are brand new but they were there in 2005 and every year thereafter. I wrote them down, not to be forgotten, only to be forgotten. And remembered again. How am I meant to break this pattern of being enlightened, making progress, only to slide back? To regress. To be unseen once again.

I slide onto the couch with the boys. They are watching *Finding Nemo*. The tiny blue fish, Dory, suffers from anterograde amnesia, or short-term memory loss. The boys find this hilarious. The joke never gets old. Dean has been watching movies with them on Saturday nights and his laugh is so loud as it floats up the stairs that I have a physical reaction to it. He actually says the word ‘Ha’. Shouts it. As if to show what a fun time they are having. So now I am watching because I can be fun, too. Ha.

The boys giggle and spit popcorn and the dog comes to lick the salt off the floor beneath them. He licks their toes and they giggle more. Dory repeats the address they are looking for (P. Sherman, 42 Wallaby Way,

Sydney) over and over again so they can find their way back. She can't commit it to memory so she has no choice but to continue on repeat or risk losing it forever.

I first watched *Finding Nemo* when it was released: 2003, according to the back of the DVD. Before Rob died. Before Matt died. Before the firing synapses that committed things to long-term memory stopped working.

I am a grief Dory. I repeat myself over and over, trying to find my way home. I remember P. Sherman's address, always. I forget about C.S. Lewis over and over again. The moment I stop repeating it, it is gone. And then I make the discovery again, anew. Dory forgets conversations within minutes of having them but she never actually forgets who she is or the fact that she has short-term memory loss. She knows she needs to explain her behaviour to those around her. She knows she needs to work harder to function in the world in order to keep going. Or she will get lost.

I make efforts to explain myself to the world around me and the people in it. I write it all down. Sometimes incorrectly, adding words where they don't belong. So. And it seems significant. Until I forget why.

Months after Rob died I thought I saw him driving his car, so I know this is a thing that can happen; I should have been prepared. But a decade later, I see Matt driving his grey Astra, weeks after his funeral. It is not his car, of course, or his body, or his curly hair, or his hands gripping the steering wheel, but it is the possibility of him. It's that feeling of seeing someone across the street and you go to wave, your arm stuck midway in the air, before you freeze, just in time to get a proper glimpse and see a stranger now standing in their place.

That's the thing about grief, I suppose. I am prepared for it and yet I still forget. Despite having learned the ropes, I am still taken by surprise. Seeing Matt in the butcher, at school pick-up, walking down the street. As a Jewish guy in his late thirties with a slightly receding hairline, there are no shortages of Matts walking around Caulfield for me to bump into. I do a quick double take, I stare into their eyes and see my brother flash back.

My dad shaved his moustache when I was a small child. I remember sitting on my parents' bed. He came out of the bathroom with his new look and I cried. It wasn't just that the familiarity of the moustache was gone, or that his face had suddenly changed shape, or that even his eyes looked different.

It was that the skin above his top lip was suddenly laid bare, exposed after decades of protection. And that's what made me cry.

He never grew his moustache back, yet when I close my eyes, even now, and picture my dad, he has a moustache. Bristly and brown. That is who he is to me. A man with a moustache and breath tinged with milky coffee. Nostalgia. A kind of homesickness for the past. For the people we once were.

When I close my eyes and picture the dead, I don't see them as they were. I see them as if I am looking at a photo. A flash-frozen moment in time, ever-smiling for the camera. When I look at a photo of Rob, he appears exactly on paper as he does in my mind. He is familiar. Captured. It is me I don't recognise. I stare into my face, held in close by Rob's arm. She is the stranger.

The same happens with family photos. I look at Matt, his curly hair captured in my mind's eye, his smile cheeky, even with his mouth closed. But I look at the rest of us, the happy family snap, and I am looking at strangers. It's a kind of face-blindness, an impaired visual processing. I cannot recognise the smiling faces of the past as belonging to me, the strange push and pull of a past that both calls you home and dispels you. When is the imperceptible millisecond in time that the present ceases to be the present and turns into a memory?

When I close my eyes, my dad has a moustache. Decades after shaving. I don't know if this makes my memory more or less reliable. Or if it matters at all.

If the knowledge is forgotten and the memories dissolve and the people disappear, what is left, anyway? Grief dementia.

CHAPTER 46

THE SAID AND THE UNSAID THINGS

‘YOU HAVE NO IDEA what it is like,’ Dean says, ‘to be living with your ghosts.’ We are at the kitchen table when he says this. I don’t even remember what preceded it. What action I took or did not take. A facial expression. Or a comment. The relentless rushing of the past to the present that has exhausted him.

At some point, the fact that I warned him lost its power. How could he have known what he was getting into when I didn’t even know? Not really.

‘I’m sorry I’m not a doctor,’ he says.

And: ‘I cannot believe after all this time you are still obsessed with your ex.’

And I say: ‘He’s not my ex. We never broke up. He died. And that is the reason we are together.’

I assumed time was linear. That I would always be one step ahead of the past. But the opposite is true. My present exists only by reference to what precedes it. The past lies outstretched before us. Always just out of our grasp.

The DVD ended up in my hands by accident, really. Rob’s sister asked if I wanted to see the DVD they’d made of Rob’s life. They’d made it years before, for the nephews he would never meet. Her sons. Cliffs Notes for Rob. When I bumped into her in the street she’d asked if I would like to see it. And I said I would. Which would have been okay, if I hadn’t hidden it from Dean. Hadn’t purposely watched it when he was out. Door closed. Because the truth was, I was waiting to see if it had a different ending.

It does. In a way. The movie of Rob’s life given to me by his sister doesn’t include me. It includes his childhood photos. His school days. His

friends. It includes our overseas trips together and playing *sheshbesh* in Playa del Carmen and dancing the tango in Buenos Aires. I am there, just beneath the surface, on the other side of the camera. But I am not visible on the screen. I have been deleted. An outtake. Our roles are reversed. Here is Rob, alive on film. I am the one doing the haunting.

I go for a walk and return the DVD to her letterbox only to realise I am a block away from her home. The houses look identical. I run back, shove my arm shoulder-deep through the slit. Grab the DVD and wedge myself out, red marks along my bicep. Cobwebs cling to my sleeve.

I don't ask Rob's sister what she tells her kids about me. Or why she offered me this summary of his life now. The one I have been cut out of. The made-for-television version. She never asks me what I tell my kids either, I guess.

Days later I tell Dean. When the hurt of it stings less.

'How could you do this to us?' he says. 'After everything?' His voice has changed. As if the pain has physically restricted his vocal cords.

I can't work out why it impacted him at all. Why he can't see my hurt, the way I have been cut out. I hadn't realised it was Dean who had been cut out. This life I have been living without him. The one that can continue on in my head, unbound by the laws of time or physics or the universe.

'You are dependent on grief,' he says, the air thick and unmoving. The change in his voice disarming me again. As if I'm arguing with a stranger. His body language no longer belonging to him, his shoulders defeated as if my deceit has crushed him whole.

'I don't know who I am without it.'

The words come out hollow. But it is true. Like telling someone not to be so dependent on oxygen or cellular regeneration or their endocrine system. Death is in my marrow.

It's then I realise I have broken us. We may never recover from this. I realise the issue was never how I loved Rob but how I loved Dean, and how you can only push someone so far.

The house becomes spiky, filled with silences but also with effort to make everything seem normal and okay when we both know nothing is normal or okay. It might never be. We have conversations where nothing is said. Just words floating out into the ether. I am too scared to say anything that might tip the very fine balance we've found ourselves on. This liminal space. He

says nothing because we both know the next words out of his mouth may be the ones we can't recover from.

I make an appointment with a new therapist. I can't go back to the Dutch therapist. It's been years since I have seen him and going back now would seem like an admission of failure. I once bumped into him on the street. He'd warned me that this may happen during our first-ever appointment. He said it was his policy to pretend he didn't know me. That if I said hello he would say hello back but for privacy reasons he would never make the first move. And yet, I was still surprised, seeing him at the counter of the local cafe. I said hello. He smiled back and made polite conversation.

At first I thought it was seeing him out of context that made me uncomfortable. He ate blueberry muffins and drank coffee. He didn't exist only in his airless room in a suburban psychology practice. But it wasn't that I had seen *him* out in the world. It was that he had seen *me* out in the wild. I felt caught out, somehow. Because he knew it was all a ruse. I was playing at life. The only person in the world who knew I couldn't be fixed. Maybe it was also that it was clear he didn't belong to me alone.

The new therapist is running late and when she asks me to come to her room she excuses herself to move her car. My appointment is now six minutes late and in those six minutes I have bitten my nails to the quick and picked at my cuticles until they bled.

She returns and takes out her notepad and reads the letter from my GP and then asks me to explain why I am there and I want to say it is clearly in the letter she has just read in front of me but maybe it is also because of people like her who think it is okay to be six fucking minutes late. But instead I say that it is because my boyfriend died and then my brother died and that I think I may have fucked up my marriage.

I begin to see her weekly. She gives me homework I never do and reading that I leave in the passenger seat of the car until the pages turn yellow.

Every time I make a comment about Dean she says, 'Can we try to reframe how you look at things?'

She gives me examples from her own life and her own husband and her own kids and the fact that she has a husband and kids makes me distrust everything she has ever said, ever.

But she also says, one time: ‘You know you can feel two things at the same time. You know you can feel grief and joy. Together. Two contrasting feelings can coexist. It doesn’t seem to make sense, but it does. Life is complex like that.’

I am devastated that I am in my late thirties when I find this out. I wonder why I have never been told this before. This is important information that I definitely should know by now and I want to tell everyone I meet. Everyone on the street. Everyone who has ever lost someone who died. I want to grab them by the shoulders and say: *Did you know this?*

Dean has never asked me to choose. And neither has Rob. But I have been living as if each of them has been waiting for me to make a decision, somehow.

One night the silence in the house becomes so suffocating I think I can’t take it anymore. The air is saturated with silence. Dean is lying in bed reading a book, the lamp on his bedside table turning the room a foggy orange, heat radiating from its centre. I walk into him, into his chest, his arms. I wrap my legs around him. There is a risk that this is goodbye but it’s easier than living in this in between. Words start to flow, from somewhere deep inside, from years of holding on to pain that was never his to carry. I realise there’s no coming back from this. Not for us. There with Dean, the anger and disappointment and guilt and fury burn within us. The light bulb’s heat is nothing compared to the heat from our bodies now, the air rippling with electricity. We are like cracks of thunder, stormy and swirling. A spoken and unspoken reconciliation. Words and sighs and tears and gasps cut through the air. There’s a shift in the atmosphere. The storm rages past us. And we hold on. To each other.

On the fifteen-year anniversary of Rob’s death, Dean stops me on the stairs, kisses the top of my head and says, ‘We love you. You are amazing.’ Then, ‘Do you know who I mean when I say we?’ And I didn’t. But then I did.

The truth is, the only reason Dean and I are together is because Rob died. Not because his sudden death opened up an empty spot to fill, but because I don’t think we would have liked each other all that much otherwise. I don’t think we would have had very much in common; our experience of life would have been too different. We are in sync, the way our bodies flow and our feelings exist on the same plane and the way we let each other breathe

and float and travel through each day. We would otherwise have bristled, bumped against each other, clumsily collided, emotions misfiring, leading nowhere.

And so occasionally, living with my ghosts becomes too much. But without them, we wouldn't have been enough.

CHAPTER 47

THE MIDDLE

MIDDLE CHILDREN GET A bad rap, but it is only after Matt died that I realise the true significance of his position. I have lost my big brother. And Andrew has lost his little brother. Not only did we have a different relationship with our middle brother, but it became apparent very quickly that in knowing and loving Matt, we had known and loved a completely different person.

The age difference between us all (seven years between me and Matt, eleven years between me and Andrew) meant that there was a secret world inhabited only by Matt and me. We were the two ‘younger’ siblings living together at home when Andrew finished school and moved out. He was *my* older brother, a title only I could claim. Andrew and Matt, on the other hand, lived a whole separate life before I was even born. They grew up overseas, living in San Diego when Dad relocated for work. Most of the funny stories I heard growing up occurred when it was just the two of them. They had American accents to go along with the photos from Disneyland. They appeared together in dusty orange photos, the classic 1970s tinge. Photos blowing out birthday candles from years of birthday parties before I existed. ‘Did that happen when I was born or dead?’ I once asked as a toddler, after hearing a story of their childhood. Before I knew what grief was, I grieved a life that never belonged to me.

Being closer in age they had mutual friends, shared experiences. They went to the same university. They both became doctors. They married two girls who were in the same class at school. They went on family holidays together with their wives and children. They, too, had their own secret universe, determined as much by their proximity in age as their shared brotherly bond. Matt straddled these two worlds; he was the bridge between Andrew and me.

Andrew parented me, disapproved of 'bad influence' friends and told Mum off when she let me watch *Beverly Hills 90210* on a school night. He also introduced me to music, took me to my first concert (Green Day) and drove me around in his convertible Mazda MX5 when I was a pre-teen. He basked in the glory of me idolising (and fearing) him.

Matt bought me cigarettes when I was underage, confided in me and kept my secrets. There were things only I knew about Matt. There were things only Matt knew about me. Like a Venn diagram, our Matthew circles overlapped but the majority of our experiences of our sibling remained ours alone.

Andrew lived a life before Matt came to be, while I never knew a life without him. Our loss was heartbreakingly similar and yet also so achingly disparate.

I knew, as well, that much of my experience of Matt was second-hand. It was what he had learned from Andrew. He had been the younger sibling to Andrew and relished the opportunity to take the older sibling role when I arrived. He would pin me down, the carpet scratching at my back, my shoulder blades pressed hard against the floor. He would place his head above mine, leaving a 50-centimetre gap between us. He held me as I squirmed and laughed and screamed and stared into my eyes as he let a long, thin string of saliva dangle from his lips. Then, just as it was getting dangerously close, he'd suck it back up. We'd collapse together on the floor laughing hysterically.

Once, as I screamed, he misjudged his timing. He sucked in too late, gravity working against us. Before I knew it, he'd spat a giant column of saliva directly into my open, screaming, mouth. Andrew would have held Matt's shoulders down and played this game many times before. Andrew never would have made that crucial error. Such is the lot of the flawed middle child; there is always someone who has led the way, and done things better, before you.

There was also the time Matt took a drink of Coke and then laughed and spat it over me, drenching me and staining my white singlet. The time we were forced to share a motel double bed on a road trip with Mum and Dad to Sydney from Melbourne. He got food poisoning and threw up on me in the middle of the night. He blamed the peppercorn sauce from the steak he'd had for dinner at the local pub, and although this was the least likely

source of contamination, I have never been able to eat anything with peppercorns since that night.

My memories of Matt often feature just the two of us. He belongs to me in a way that he doesn't belong to anyone else. I know others claim him in a different way. With different memories and experiences. Our middle child. Our middle. Our centre.

We navigate our new terrain, Andrew and I. There's an unspoken chasm between us. We must find our way back to each other, to exist as a duo, not a trio.

We are at my nephew's bar mitzvah, the family celebrating together. The photographer is running around, ensuring that she captures everyone, captures the essence of the night. She grabs me, grabs Andrew. 'Just the two siblings?' she asks.

'Just us,' we say. We put our arms around each other. Smile. The camera clicks. She moves on.

CHAPTER 48

LOST

WHEN MATT DIED, THEY asked if I wanted to see his body. This was not the first time I had been asked whether I wanted to be alone with the dead. This was not the first time I said yes.

I entered the small room of Matt's GP clinic. This was the room where he lay down on his examination bed. *Just for a moment*, he must have thought, between patients. He was feeling faint, light-headed. That was the general consensus. And then he lay down for a moment, and never got up. He never came out to call for his next patient. That is how the alarm was raised, eventually. That is what set things in motion.

But when I went in, Matt was not on the examination table. He was on the floor. But maybe not. Was Matt still on the examination bed? Had my memory of Matt been mixed up with my memory of Rob? I remembered the 000 operator telling me to put Rob on the floor, demanding I take his heavy body, two times my weight, and transfer it to the ground before continuing with compressions and rescue breaths. I remembered thinking I was wasting time, I had more important things to do, but she demanded it of me and I obliged. Was my memory of Matt on the floor of his room misremembered? Was I confusing the two? I know the paramedics were still there with Matt. They were the ones who asked if I wanted to see him before he was taken away.

What I do remember is this. I looked into his face. His lips. Still plump. His colour was all wrong. Someone who didn't know him may have thought he was just taking a nap. Eyes closed. Looking peaceful. The only giveaways were the scattered packets from electrodes and a rogue paramedic's bag by the wall. Behind the closed door, alone with my brother, I knew. He was lost. He was not there. He was gone. I had lost the sense of him.

The difference between someone who is alive and someone who is not is more than just a heartbeat. More than just vital organs pumping blood through veins and oxygen through lungs. He was not there. Nothing more, or less, than that.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I whispered.

Did I touch his hand? In my memory I was holding his hand. In my memory I was not touching him because I had been told not to disturb his body. I hold these two conflicting memories side by side. I kissed his forehead. In both memories. In the memory where I was allowed to touch him and in the memory where I was not.

There is also the memory I have mixed in of Rob. Being behind our bedroom door alone, him not being there at all even though his body was there with me. We were alone together and yet it was clear that I was just alone. ‘I’m so sorry,’ I whispered.

And now I second-guess my memory with Matt. Who did I say this to? Or was it to both of them? I was conscious of the people in our apartment. Behind the door. I didn’t want to let them in. But I didn’t want to be there anymore either. Alone with a dead body that was no longer the body of my boyfriend. He was on the floor. He was definitely on the floor; I knew this much. They had not moved him. I trust this memory. I was lying on the floor with him.

But the more I think about it, the less I know to be true. As if by playing with the memory, rolling it around in my mind, I have changed the shape of it. How long was the right amount of time to say goodbye? Was I allowed to touch him? I know I kissed him on the lips. I remember them being soft and warm. I remember them being cold. I remember placing my head on his chest. I remember lying there, the room silent, but for muffled noises outside the door. I didn’t want to let the others in. I wanted to get out. I hold these opposing memories side by side as well.

Sorry for your loss, they said. I had lost my brother, like something misplaced. A coin that has fallen behind the couch. A sock that has come out of the dryer without its pair.

Hold your loved ones tight, they proclaimed. A death in their periphery inspiring mass outpouring of reminders. *Hold on* – as if I had not been. As if their Facebook status prompt would prevent other deaths occurring, could have prevented this one.

‘Was Matt on the examination bed or the floor?’ I ask Dean, years after the fact. ‘The bed,’ he says, not even surprised that my question comes without context or warning. He’s in the middle of buttering toast.

‘And the flower,’ he added. ‘Someone had placed a flower on his chest.’

‘What? That didn’t happen,’ I said, defensively now. ‘I would have remembered that.’ It’s an odd thing to say given I know how many things I think I would have remembered but don’t.

I try to picture him and now I see a red rose, something sweet-smelling and vulgar. Like a scene from a movie. I wonder if paramedics have an emergency stash of cut flowers among the EpiPens and gauze. I wonder if someone who loved Matt found a rosebush near the entrance to his medical practice, brought a pair of scissors from reception, cut a stem. Or if they snapped it clean with both hands, let the prick of its thorns pierce their skin. I wonder if Dean has invented this detail altogether or if I have forgotten it.

I am sitting at my local cafe to write. It’s been six years since Matt died. Fifteen since Rob. My laptop is out and I am writing these recollections about paramedics and protocols. As I write, two paramedics walk into the cafe.

‘Are you allowed to touch the body once someone has died?’ I want to ask them. But they are reading the paper, waiting for their coffees. I stare at their uniformed bodies for clues. I receive none. I keep typing. A baby squeals in the back corner, the paramedics say thank you and leave, and I keep typing about dying.

The baby who was squealing knocks a glass off the table and I look up. I see Rob’s dad. He is looking at me. This happens sometimes. We live in the same suburb and our lives intersect occasionally. In cafes. While walking with the kids. In the supermarket. Sometimes it is clear that the surprise reunion is welcome, sometimes I am not sure. I do not know what I remind them of. I do not know who I am to them anymore.

‘Hi,’ he nods.

‘Hi,’ I say back, angling my open laptop away. I wonder if he spotted Rob’s name on my screen before I moved it. I wonder if he would think it strange that I am sitting at a cafe alone, writing about the morning his son died. I wonder if he would think it strange that everything I ever write and say and do goes back to that morning, somehow.

We look for clues in each other's faces. He sits down at the next table and waits for his coffee. He is sharing an escargot pastry with Rob's mum. I glance her way and we give each other a half-smile.

I want to ask if they felt Rob was gone, already, in that room when they said goodbye. I want to ask them what I have been wanting to ask them for fifteen years: 'Do you blame me? Do you think it was my fault?' But I don't.

I let Rob's parents eat their pastry and sip their coffee and look at each other in silence. The feeling of our mutual presence hangs heavy across the tables.

He is lost to us now. And nothing I say or don't say will find him.

'Take her away,' Rob's dad had told my mum moments after Rob's death, while the paramedics were still clearing up.

And they did. But there is still this. There is still the bumping into each other in cafes. There are still the cosmic forces delivering us to each other, the mind-environment connection making things happen. A reverse kismet, fated to be so because we think it.

I have ruined their escargot, I think. Just by existing.

Apophenia is the tendency to mistakenly perceive connections and meaning between unrelated things. It is based on the German *Apophänie*, coined by psychiatrist Klaus Conrad in his 1958 paper about the beginning stages of schizophrenia. He defined it as the unmotivated seeing of connections accompanied by the specific feeling of abnormal meaningfulness.

I think of broken evil eye key rings, of creative writing assignments, of tsunamis, of fated next-door neighbours. Of paramedics who walk into a cafe followed by Rob's parents as I am writing about paramedics and about Rob. I think of hysteria and schizophrenia and the fine line between madness and meaning. I think of words created to give a name to what is happening around us. Events or feelings that until that point had no words to describe them.

I think of another word. Loss. From the Old English *los*, meaning ruin or destruction. An etymological sense of dissolution. In modern times it has transformed to involve a sense of 'failure to hold, keep or preserve what was in one's possession'. And here it is. I have failed. Again. I did not hold on tight enough. I don't need to interrupt the escargot to ask the question because I know it to be true.

I have experienced loss as a reaction to grief. In the Old English sense of facing destruction, I suppose. But I have also lost the people in my care. Loss is everywhere. We are at a loss. We have lost the plot. We cut our losses. We lose heart. We lose our minds.

CHAPTER 49

AT NIGHT

AT NIGHT THE COCKROACHES scurry. Their armoured backs, their wispy antennae flick this way and that. I am pouring a glass of water from the tap in the kitchen. A dark brown cockroach ignores me and darts over the kitchen sink, over the clean cutlery drying in the dish rack. I take the once-clean dishes and put them in the dishwasher.

The things I wouldn't see if I was asleep, if I followed the ebb and flow of the day. On the other side of the world people are getting ready for work, are eating lunch, are kissing their wives. But here in the dark, it doesn't feel that way.

I make appointments with my GP. They're never specifically for insomnia. I tack it on to the end of an appointment. Mention in passing. 'Do you have anything that would help with sleep?' I ask. 'Non-addictive,' I add, as if to prove a point.

The GP brings up my file notes on her computer. I can always see the first few lines, handover notes from one of my first appointments there, probably. *Partner died suddenly. Depressive symptoms.* No one mentions this in future appointments. The notes just hang there, blinking on the screen.

The GP asks a few questions and I leave with something to take over five nights to reset my body clock. I have been resetting my body clock for five nights every few months for fifteen years. It still seems to run on a different time.

The long march to bed. I have tried the basics. Phone off at 9 pm. No social media. No screens. I shower. I brush my teeth. I lay down and feel it: the movement just under my skin. My legs kick and thrash. My eyelids refuse to get heavy. A surge of adrenaline makes my jaw clench and my teeth grind. Next to me Dean is fast asleep, his mouth slightly open. I can hear him breathing, the sound of inhaling and exhaling. He is not yet

snoring but I pre-empt that he is about to. I kick him in the shins, making it look like an accident. He startles, rolls over. 'Sorry,' he says. And falls back asleep, his open mouth sucking in air. I can smell the stench of sleep on him. On our sheets. Emanating from the rooms of our children.

I grab my pillow, my book, my phone. I make a fuss of getting out of bed, as if it is Dean's fault that I am in this situation. I sigh, loudly. I close the door behind me and creep downstairs.

This is when I meet the cockroach in the kitchen. The insects don't care about me at night. This is their time and I am encroaching on it. I hear the creaks and cracks of the house. I think of things that go bump in the night. I am a thing that goes bump in the night. I am not sure if I am looking out for the ghosts, staying awake to welcome them, or avoiding them.

I turn on the television. I grab my phone. I start googling symptoms: *pelvic pain, bloating, nausea*. I grab a one-litre tub of ice-cream from the freezer. I place the tub under my arm while I grab a spoon, still holding the phone in one hand. *Loss of appetite*, I add with my free hand, widening the search parameters.

Warning Signs You Shouldn't Ignore

5 Early Signs of Cancer

Symptom Checker from WebMD

Sitting on the couch, I mindlessly click on links, looking at treatment options and survival rates for all my imagined conditions. The ice-cream is slowly melting and I drip some on my phone screen. I wipe it with the sleeve of my top. Time passes.

I hear a door upstairs open and close. Someone has woken to go to the toilet. I get up and put the empty ice-cream tub in the bin, push it down and cover it with scraps of food and empty packets. I make a mental note to replace the ice-cream tomorrow and I put my spoon in the sink. Then I remember the cockroaches and move it to the dishwasher. I should brush my teeth but I don't. I finally fall asleep, the sound of the television keeping me company.

I wake with a gasp. The television is still on. I flick the channels and leave it on a talk show about Jesus. I close my eyes and listen to the sound of the fridge, on and off, on and off. I think of Gregor Samsa and wonder if, when I wake, I will join the cockroaches.

But it is too late. The metamorphosis began long ago. Take that, Kafka. Scurrying in the night, looking for scraps. This is where I belong.

The alarm on my phone wakes me with a start which means, at some stage, I fell asleep again. Despite myself. This is where I get my revenge. This is my time. It is 5.20 am. Still dark. I have found my loophole.

I splash water on my face, throw on my shoes which I placed by the door before bed. I had pre-planned my escape route from the night.

I get up before I can be woken by the day. Or be taken by surprise. I beat the sun, the signs of morning. I close the front door quietly behind me, unable to get away without a small bang as the snib locks back in place. The cold air hits my face and as I turn I am met by a small fox. We both stand frozen, staring at each other. I try to remember if foxes are dangerous. They seem like they should be. But maybe I am thinking of wolves. My only reference for either is fairy tales. It feels vaguely as if the night before has crept into my morning but then, with a quick start, the fox dashes up the street, past the Toyotas and Hondas. Past the letterboxes.

I turn in the other direction and run, too. My feet hit the pavement. The sound of my breathing keeps the rhythm. The occasional car passes and I wonder if they are returning home or leaving. My legs pound hard against the footpath. I think of sirens. I think of bodies. Adrenaline surges and I use it to run faster. I pretend I am being chased. I pretend I am caught by whoever is chasing me. I am grabbed from behind but I manage to kick and flail like a ballerina-ninja. I foil their plans. I visualise my press conference. They ask questions about how I escaped. I tell them that instinct kicked in. I am modest. There is applause.

I keep running. I reach Carlisle Street. It is almost empty. A few religious Jews are starting to park their cars. They are dressed in black suits with black hats and are carrying prayer books. They all have the same expression, as if they are running late.

They rush towards a small synagogue nestled between two larger buildings. Down the street, the bakery is opening and the smell of bagels starts to fill the air.

I turn around and face home. I take a deep breath, ready to go up the hills I had just gone down and down the hills I had just gone up. I can no longer run. Instead, I walk fast, my arms swinging, my body moving. I have shaken off the night. I have chased away the thoughts.

There is a brick house with a children's bike out the front and a man is at the threshold wearing runners and a shirt. He looks like he is about to go for a run. Or just returning. But as I get closer I realise his shorts are around his

ankles. He is masturbating furiously, the flesh of his penis bulging and pale. Up and down, up and down his hand goes.

‘What the *fuck* are you doing?’ I have not spoken in over ten hours and the sound of my voice comes out strange and mangled. I break into a run. Did my interruption make him pump harder or stop completely?

I think of the fox. I think of the cockroach. I think of Lot’s wife. Don’t turn back, lest you turn to salt. I run on.

CHAPTER 50

OLD DOGS

MY PHONE BEEPS. 'HAPPY Anniversary,' it reads. 'Hugo shat on the kitchen floor.'

I left early for Saturday morning yoga, before the house was up. Dean would have gone downstairs shortly after I left to make himself a coffee. That's when he would have found the dog shit.

It is our eleven-year wedding anniversary. It is also the dog's birthday. Hugo is fourteen. I was going to buy him a steak – the dog, not Dean – a raw piece of prime meat, a yearly tradition on 26 October. But his stomach has been playing up. He has been having accidents at night. Leaving piles of shit for us to find in the morning. Pissing on the rug near his bed. I decide not to get a steak. He won't know the difference. He doesn't know the date. We will make a fuss another day.

'Coffee?' I write back to Dean. I am grabbing a takeaway long black on my way home after yoga.

'No,' he texts.

It has taken me years to get used to this. His abrupt way of responding via text. I ask a question. He answers. And that's it. On some days it is, 'No thanks' or 'No thanks babe' or 'No xox' but today it is just 'No' because the dog shat on the floor and he has just made four different breakfasts for four different kids and just when he was about to meditate, someone had asked for a second serve of peanut butter toast. And that's why he wrote 'No'. Sometimes I have to remind myself of these things.

I wait in line for my coffee and quickly order a massage voucher online, paying with my credit card, the details of which I sometimes remember off by heart. Today is one of those days. No need to get my wallet out. It is a last-minute gift because we are not doing gifts this year. But the dog shit on the floor makes me re-evaluate. And the fact that he has nothing to give to me and that I will surprise him with a thoughtful gift. A point scored in my

favour. I already have a card for him, a picture of a red tomato and a yellow tomato with a heart between them and the words, *I love you from my head tomatoes*. I will print the massage voucher when I get home and slip it in the card. He will say: 'But I thought we weren't doing presents this year?' and I will shrug.

I used to be sentimental about presents. I made handmade photo books and spent months researching the perfect wallet or find things to engrave. Now, the sentimentality makes me uncomfortable. As if the effort proves I have something to prove. So, I have given up on being creative or original in favour of being reliable. The lack of effort proves something else.

When I arrive home the house smells of Pine O Cleen. Dean has disinfected the floor where the dog shat. I gather the kids and we sing happy birthday to Hugo. We leave him outside for the day, scared of a repeat accident on the tiles. He cannot hear us sing, probably. His hearing is gone. His sense of smell, too. He responds when he can see us motion excitedly for him, but he doesn't come when we call out his name. The vet said his eyesight is fading quickly, too. Cataracts. You can see them floating grey over one eye. This means Dean can no longer walk him without a lead. The most he walks now is around our small block. His arthritis is in full swing. The injections helped a bit, but after \$1000 and weekly top-ups, he still walks like an old and achy dog. We rarely take him to the park anymore.

Dean is washing the dishes, moving quickly. He places one of the melamine plates in the dish rack and moves on to the next dish. Soap suds remain, dripping down one of the kids' plates. I open my mouth to say something but stop. The unsaid words collect in my chest. He places a cup in the sink. Rinses it well. Shakes his hands and wipes them on his jeans. His hands are still damp with dishwater.

'If something ever happened to you, I'd never remarry. That would be it,' he says, wet handprints visible on his pants.

'What? Where did that come from?' He meant it as a compliment, but my reaction is to feel shame. Because I have made that kind of statement too. Have felt it in my core. And yet here we are.

'I was just thinking about you. How much I love you.'

'You didn't rinse that plate properly,' I say, my chin angling towards the dish rack, the unsaid words spilling out.

I hand him the card. I can't tell if he actually reads the inside or not. 'Thanks!' he says. 'But I thought we said no presents this year?'

Dean jumps in the shower and I take the kids for a walk before the juggle of basketball games and play dates and parties begins. Levi and Eden hold hands, start skipping like some kind of caricature of childhood delight. Ezra starts riding ahead. Every time he does this, riding ahead, he yells out: *Bye, Mum, love you!* And I yell out: *Love you more! Ride safe! Check for cars in driveways.* And I can't breathe again until he is back in my line of vision. I spend the minutes he is out of sight thinking of all the ways that a child on a bike could be injured or maimed. A car coming out too quickly. Him crossing a road without looking properly. (Is it left, right, left or right, left, right?)

Loni stops to pick flowers. He tells me not to let go of them. I'm instructed to put them in a vase when we get home. I am pretty sure they are weeds. They are placed into my hand half crushed. I wait until we've walked a few steps and I let them go gently, let them fall back to the grass. They leave a sticky residue on my palm. Flower blood, I think. Though there must be a scientific word for it. I'll ask Ezra later; it's something he would know. Loni stops again but this time holds on to what he is picking.

'Dandelions!' he says. And closes his eyes. I wonder how he knows the word dandelions because it is not something I have taught him and I feel sad at the thought of how many people and places he is learning things from that are not me. Soaking up information from all over. Constantly snatching facts from the atmosphere.

'Make a wish!' I say.

'I wish that everybody who ever died was alive again,' he says. Closes his eyes. Blows. White tufts float in the air in slow motion.

CHAPTER 51

THE EMERGENCY

I HAND OUT CHEWABLE Panadol to Loni, the smaller twin. Two white tabs, chalky with artificial strawberry flavouring. He is three. His cheeks are red. I place his sippy cup next to his bed and kiss him on the forehead. He has had a temperature all day. Fluids and rest. This is what the doctor had said. His twin brother, Eden, is tucked up in his bed nearby in their shared room. He seems to have avoided whatever bug is going around.

‘Goodnight,’ I say as I close their door gently. A weak smile from the sick child. A giant grin from the well one.

When I go to bed that night I make sure the twins’ baby monitor is on, though they are no longer babies. I ready myself for a 2 am wake up, when the Panadol will have worn off, when the fever will likely strike again. I prepare myself to be woken by tears and the familiar cry of *Muuuuuum*. I sleep lightly, pre-empting the exhaustion of the night ahead. Like so many fevered nights before it.

Instead, I wake up slowly, confused about what day it is and unsure why my eyes have opened. I touch the home screen on my phone which tells me it is 1 am. I stare at the monitor. The little blue lights that alert me to sound remain unblinking. I hold the monitor pressed against my ear. A light rasping sound. I grab my phone for light and run upstairs to Loni.

As I creak open the door I realise he is fast asleep. I open the door further and see Eden. His eyes are wide with fright. He is sitting upright. Gasping. He points to his chest. No words come out of his open mouth, just a gravelly wheeze. I scoop him up with one hand and dial 000 with the other. The house is silent. ‘You’re okay,’ I whisper in his ear. The frustration of not being able to explain what is happening to him is making him more distressed. ‘I know,’ I say, ‘I know. *Shhh*.’

A woman answers my call and asks to listen to his breathing. I hold the phone to his pale, round face. He is in that in-between age. On some days

he looks like a little boy and on others he still looks like a baby.

He is not sick, I explain. He went to bed healthy, I say. I labour the point, though I am not sure why. I know how fast things change. I know what can happen when you go to bed healthy.

She says words that make me feel simultaneously comforted and tense. *Persistent stridor at rest. Rapid onset hypoxia.* She asks about his behaviour, whether he is hallucinating. Disoriented. She tells me to get in the car and head straight to emergency. She tells me I cannot wait for an ambulance to arrive. She needs me to go now. She asks me if I can do that. I can do that, I tell her. She tells me I am doing a great job.

I am already in movement. Hands and limbs moving gracefully. I am doing a choreographed dance and Eden is following along, my tiny dance partner, his body loose in mine, following in time.

The house is unmoving. In darkness. Still under the spell of sleep. I place the monitor next to Dean to listen out for Loni, for the child that was actually unwell at bedtime. He is blissfully unaware, still breathing softly and gently through his open mouth, smelling of stale air and sickness. I press Dean's shoulder lightly. 'I don't have time to explain,' I say as he wakes slowly. 'Eden can't breathe, I'm going to Emergency. I'll call you soon.' He is wide-eyed, like his son was only a moment ago. As the fog of sleep lifts he hears Eden's gasps. He understands. I am already halfway out the door.

While I was hanging up the phone I was already putting on Eden's jacket and slippers. He is muffled in his hood. I know that the cold air will help open his airway. I don't know how I know this. Scraps of information I have picked up and stored for future use. I use my body to create a barrier between him and the darkness. The cool shock of air hits our faces. He speaks for the first time.

'The moon!' he says, pointing to the sky. His voice is high-pitched and croaky and does not belong to him. 'The moon is following me.' He sucks in cold air, gasping.

It is a full moon. Or fullish. The moonlight makes him look even paler. He has never seen the moon at 1 am, I realise.

'It is,' I say. 'The moon will follow us now.'

I haven't told him where we are going or what is happening to him. He just follows along with my directions. He listens as I tell him that he is doing so well, that I am going to help him.

I clip him into his car seat and the realisation that he is out of my arms, that we are separated, breaks my spell of calm. I become aware of my body. My heart rate. I feel too heavy. Too light. My breathing quickens.

‘You’re okay,’ I say again. To myself, this time.

The roads are empty. The traffic lights are in my favour, urging us on with a string of greens. I look up at him through the rear-view mirror, his face still caught in moonlight.

I look up again at the sky. There is just one moon. I think of Haruki Murakami’s *IQ84*. The female character was a passenger in a taxi in Tokyo. She was in a hurry but stuck in a traffic jam. The driver suggested it would be quicker to walk, to climb down the emergency escape of the highway. He warned her that doing so might change the nature of reality. She paid and jumped out of the car, escaping the traffic. She made it to her meeting on time. She looked to the sky that night and realised there were two moons.

I travel smoothly in the car towards Emergency, checking my rear-view mirror as I go, but also checking the sky. There is one moon. I am here. But I wonder if I am also somewhere else, looking at a second moon. I think of all the parallel universes that look just like this one but with the subtlest of differences. A second moon. Traffic lights that blink yellow rather than orange. Roads that are grey rather than black. Ambulances that have a slightly lower pitch, the difference in sound not immediately noticeable unless you are listening for it. Unless your head is tilted just so. I wonder about the boys riding in the back seats of cars and the men still asleep in their beds. Are they the same?

We pull into the Emergency bay and I take him like a package in my arms, bundled and barely breathing. His lips tinged with blue.

We are ushered through. We are commended. We are seen instantly and within moments Eden has an oxygen mask placed over his mouth. The gurgles of the oxygen match the rasping of his breathing. He is given a tiny hospital gown to match his tiny oxygen mask. He is given a tinier teddy wearing a tinier doctor’s uniform. He cries when he sees the teddy bear. It is the first time he has cried. I hide the doctor bear.

They need to administer steroids and adrenaline. They ask me to hold his tiny body and stand on the scales together and they take note of our combined weight. As I place him gently on the giant hospital bed they ask me to weigh myself. They need to know my weight now so they can

subtract it from the total. So they can get his medication dose exactly right, the subtle mils per kilo ratio.

I hesitate. They ask me to call out my number on the scales as they are moving, preparing nebulisers for adrenaline and getting the oral dexamethasone ready. I flinch. Just a split second. But long enough. It is still there. The horror of my body, of its weight in the world, even among the horror of what is happening to my child.

The medication kicks in quickly. His breathing changes. I realise I have been matching my breathing rhythm to his. I can breathe again too. I send a photo of Eden in his hospital gown, in his giant bed, smiling, to Dean. It is as if the hour prior never happened. This smiling child with colour in his face and sweet pink lips now talking and talking and talking nonstop. The side effect of the steroids which they warned me about.

We are now under observation and I have space to observe. For the delayed panic to set in. For the what-if games to start.

What if the twins' monitor wasn't on? There have been plenty of nights lately when we haven't bothered to put it on. They are no longer newborns; it seems almost redundant. What if I was in a deep sleep? What if Loni wasn't unwell and I wasn't on high alert? There are so many ways and on so many days that the tiny speck of rasping noise would have drifted into our room unnoticed. What if. And I think of Murakami and emergency exits in Tokyo and all the could-have-beens.

It is light now. We will be home before the other children are getting ready for school. We will crawl into my bed together. Eden will fall into a dreamless sleep and I will listen to him breathe. I will hear the clank of cutlery on plates from the next room as toast is spread with peanut butter and lunchboxes are placed in bags and someone shouts about a lost shoe. I will hear Dean tell everyone to be quiet, to let us sleep, and I will hear the sound of teeth being brushed echoing from the bathroom. I will hear the click of cartoons being switched on. The original sick child, the one who went to bed with a fever last night but slept through his twin being taken to hospital, will be placed in front of the television with his sippy cup and a doona. I will think of the Raggedy Ann and Andy blanket from my childhood. And then I will hear the closing of the front door as two healthy children are expertly bundled into the car for school drop-off. A normal day.

I will listen to the white noise of *Play School* from outside the bedroom and the sound of breathing coming from the heated body beside me and I will drift in and out of sleep.

It is light now. But I know tonight there will be one moon. Slightly less round than the night before.

CHAPTER 52

THIRTY-NINE

I AM THIRTY-EIGHT. Which means that next year I will turn thirty-nine. Which sounds obvious but hasn't been until this point. I will soon be turning the age my brother was when he died. When his twins were six. And when I turn thirty-nine, my twins will be six. Another coincidence. It would seem too trite, too neat, if it were not true.

And though I have known somewhere, I suppose, that I will be older than my brother ever was, someday, the reality of it takes me by surprise. That the gap between us will disappear. The reality of his age, just how young he was, hits me all over again. The unfairness of it all. I had known he was young, of course. It was almost always the first thing people said to me; that he was taken too soon. But he was my older brother. He was bigger. And more grown up. And more of an adult than I was. But now he isn't. And I realise, truly, in the flesh, in a visceral way, *just* how young he was when he died. Because I am not ready to die.

And now that the age gap has disappeared entirely I realise that he was not older or more grown up or bigger in any of the ways I had assumed. I had it all wrong.

We need to re-meet it – the grief – at every stage. As life moves, we need to introduce ourselves again to our traumas, to work out how the empty spaces, the losses, fit in. It's like rearranging the furniture whenever you move house. Things that once matched, suddenly look all wrong. A modular couch that once sat in the living room doesn't work in its new configuration.

And I am discovering now all the endless ways to grieve. The long tail of grief. Not just in the missing of the person but in all these new ways for the grief to hit you. The closing of gaps. The outliving of birthdays. Death is not a finite event. It is unending. Unrelenting.

I tell Mum my discovery: the synchronicity of it, the numbers lining up. The patterns. She has not realised. She says time and numbers are strange for her. She can't remember how many years there have been since his death. She knows the date. But she must manually calculate the time it has been since she saw him last. I confess I am the same. I have no idea how many years it has been between anniversaries. I calculate by the years of his children. That they were six when he died has lodged itself in my mind. I do the math based on the age they are now minus six. This is my trick. The number six.

We talk about the strange things we remember and the things we don't. The numbers that stick and the numbers that skirt.

She asks me if I have ever thought about birthdays. I ask what she means. The date of her children's partners. Dean is the twelfth. Matt's wife is the thirteenth. Andrew's wife is the fourteenth. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen. But Rob. She says. Rob is, was, fifteen. It was thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. That was the pattern. And then Rob stopped having birthdays. And then I started dating Dean. And she found out his birthday. And it went from thirteen, fourteen, fifteen to twelve, thirteen, fourteen.

We look for these patterns, the signs and symbols to crack the codes, to interpret the data. She asks if I have ever made the connection. I haven't. She made it instantly but she was too scared to ever bring it up. And it made me think of all the things we've never said to each other. All the things we're scared to bring up. The words and numbers we're too afraid to say.

But we both realise there is nothing anyone can say that can possibly make anything worse.

CHAPTER 53

BARGAINING / TORTURING

DEAN'S GRANDMOTHER TOOK YEARS to die. We were told Buba Leah would not make it to our wedding. Or to the birth of our first son. Or our second. Or our twins. Yet at every milestone her health improved and then declined. *Keyn aynhoreh*, she'd say again and again, protecting her great-grandchildren, the keepers of her legacy.

Like my grandmother before her, she started to shrink. Once large and round she became a smaller version of herself. The disappearing act of death.

The familiar sound of car tyres on gravel. Family members hovering. 'Long life,' we wish each other. Kiss kiss. A wellpractised routine. We received the call that we should come to the hospital and say our goodbyes. This was not the first time we had received this call. Each time we had come, kissed her forehead, wondered if she knew we were there through the fog of morphine and pain. And now we are at the cemetery for a death that seemed years in the making yet somehow still surprises us. Her mortality is the twist.

There are two Jewish cemeteries in Melbourne: Springvale and Lyndhurst. Springvale is the original. Prime death real estate. My grandparents are there. As are Dean's other grandparents, who died decades before Buba Leah. She would have pre-bought her plot. Saved a space next to her husband, whom she married after the war, after being freed from the concentration camps. Because that's what was done. Regardless of the screaming. Of the violence. Of whether there was love or not. It was the duty of the surviving to create. To make babies who would make babies who would make babies. And work seven days a week at Queen Victoria Market in Australia. And make brisket and chicken soup and pierogi like

they were still in Poland. Because it was their duty to be here now, even when the rest of them was somewhere else.

Matt was buried in Lyndhurst Cemetery. While Springvale is crowded with personalised tombstones, row after row, Lyndhurst is a vast open space – a few sprinklings of the dead within its earth. I was sad at Matt's funeral that he would be lonely in his resting place. That he wouldn't be able to make friends. Buba Leah won't be lonely. She is surrounded by her friends and family. The ones who can speak Yiddish with her. The lost language. Those who share memories of the camps. Those who know how to make cabbage rolls just like she used to, before the arthritis took her hands.

We sit as a row of mourners, in that conflicted space of being sad that someone has died but relieved that they are no longer in pain. The odd sadness of mourning the death of the very old and very sick.

And as we sit in this semi-sad, semi-relieved space, listening to the rabbi talk about her life, Dean's aunt, Buba Leah's daughter, begins to weep. She is hunched over, her grey hairs showing, shaking. And we do nothing. We sit. Wanting to be relieved, not sad. And in between the rabbi talking about her early days in Australia, of how she set up a business with her husband after arriving as refugees, the aunt begins to sing.

Through her sobs comes an old Yiddish song, bursting through the now silent room ...

*Oyfn pripetchik brent a fayerl
un in shtub is heys ...
(A fire burns on the hearth
and it is warm in the little house.)*

The rabbi pauses. He is standing in front of the sitting crowd, women to the left and men to the right, separated by a small sheer curtain. Behind him is Buba Leah's coffin, a dark redwood box with no embellishment. Caskets must be constructed with materials that decompose naturally to allow for the returning to the earth. The simplest of caskets to reflect the democracy of death.

I look to Dean's mum for a reaction but then quickly look away when I realise the whole room has just done the same thing. A choreographed intake of air and sharp look to the left in unison, a chorus line in perfect time. Instead, I stare straight ahead. I look to Buba Leah's dark wooden coffin, as if that will give me some indication of what the hell is happening.

The rabbi waits a moment longer, to check if the spontaneous singing is over. He nods at the aunt and begins again, speaking of the life Buba Leah started and the pride she had for her children and grandchildren. And then ...

*Gedenkt'zhe, kinderlekh,
gedenkt'zhe, tayere.
(Remember, children,
remember, dear ones.)*

And louder then, as if encouraged by the awkward shifting in seats. A full crescendo.

*Vos ir lernt do.
Zogt'zhe nokhamol un take nokhamol ...
(What you learn here.
Repeat and repeat yet again ...)*

We wait. The lyrics wash over us. We pretend it is not happening.

‘Sorry, yes ... beautiful ...’ says the rabbi. He picks up where he left off, naming her great-grandchildren. There are eight. But he has to keep stopping and starting, interrupted by the lone singer in the crowd, like some kind of reverse heckler.

*Lernt, kinderlekh, hot nit moyre,
yeder onheyb iz shver ...
(Learn, children, don't be afraid,
every beginning is hard ...)*

And then he just gives up. There is silence. He motions for her to continue.

And she sings and sings; sings through her sobbing. Her voice fills the room while we squirm, embarrassed at the spectacle of it. But also maybe a bit embarrassed for drawing attention to the stark contrast of how she is processing this loss compared to the rest of us. Maybe a bit embarrassed for ourselves, that we are so ready for her to go.

*Az ir vet, kinderlekh, elter vern,
vet ir aleyf farshteyn,
vifil in di oysyes lign trern
un vifil geveyn.
(When, children, you will grow older,
you will understand,*

*how many tears lie in these letters
and how much crying.)*

Even when we're in our sixties we're still someone's child. And maybe death is always unexpected, even when we know it's coming.

*Az ir vet, kinderlekh, dem goles shlepn,
oygemutshet zayn.
(When, children, carry on the exile,
in torture.)*

At the end of her life, Buba Leah had forgotten how to speak English. After sixty-five years living in Australia, she reverted to her childhood language of Yiddish. The language she spoke in prewar Poland. And near the end, when we would visit, we would have to say: 'Buba Leah, we don't understand, you have to speak English ...' and she would wave her hand at us. 'Oy,' she would say, too exhausted to communicate. So the great-grandchildren would play in front of her and she would look on and we thought that was enough. We had done our bit. But maybe not.

*Zolt ir fun di oysyes koyech shepn –
kukt in zey arayn!
(You will gain strength from these letters –
look inside them.)*

After the echoes of a lost language reverberate off the walls, the room is silent. And then it is time to return her to the earth. And nobody knows how to feel about that anymore.

We go through the motions, after the thump, thump, thump of dirt fills up the open grave. We kiss gently on cheeks, even those with deep resentments, with familial disagreements going back days or weeks or years. Death, the great leveller. We walk around and say our goodbyes and wish each other 'long life' as if by reflex. The original Hebrew of this saying is *chayim aruchim* or *richat yamim*: length of days. The Jewish religion places such a high premium on every moment at all times, but especially in the face of a recent bereavement, that we are to wish each other these words, to young and old, to carry out their purpose in this world. *Long life*, we say, as we disperse, leaving the dead behind. The contrast of it grates, though the words leave my lips as if by reflex. The way we wish someone more time without the person they have lost.

‘Are you going to visit Rob?’ Dean asks. He is holding the hand of our oldest son, Ezra, who is eight years old.

I wonder if Ezra has ever heard the name Rob, if he has overheard us talking about him. It is a conversation I have put off. I felt it would be a betrayal, in some way. To Dean? To bring Rob into a world that belonged solely to him. To Rob? Introducing his memory to a person I created without him. In the end I just left it in the too-hard pile with the other conversations not had, topics not broached and actions not taken. Like that drawer that everyone has in their house of objects that don’t have a proper place. A few batteries that may or may not still work, a roll of sticky tape, scraps of paper with scribbled notes, old cords and a USB stick of unknown origin, all crammed in together. Not things to throw out, just not things that can be dealt with at that moment in time.

But then it happens unremarkably.

‘Are you going to visit Rob?’ Dean says and now we are all in this together. ‘I’m going to visit Mike,’ he adds. ‘I’ll take Ezra with me.’

And so Dean takes our son’s hand to visit the grave of his friend, a man who died in his twenties from a previously unknown heart condition in Tokyo, and I go to visit the grave of a man who died in his twenties from a previously unknown heart condition in the middle of the night. Dean had told me about Michael that first night I went to his apartment on his brown leather couch. Had told me that the shock of it was still with him. The way the reality of living without his friend who he loved pushed his life in a different trajectory. And I had told Dean that I would always love Rob and there was no pathway forward that didn’t include him. And now we are here.

Instead of flowers, the graves are marked with stones, seemingly haphazardly placed, creating small walls, tiny villages. A recreation of our world at scale pebbled throughout the graves of the people we love, marking proof of visitation. While flowers are a gift to the living, they mean nothing to the dead. Petals are fated to the same destiny of withering and decomposition as bodies themselves. A solid stone does not blossom, but it does not fade away either. It represents memory, which is supposed to be lasting. But I wonder how much of memory is actually immortal and how much decomposes.

I follow the rows and rows and my body remembers the way there, even after weeks or months or years without visiting; it follows the maze to Rob. There are stones at the end of his grave, placed by his parents, I assume. And his siblings. And his nephews who were born years after he died. The special kind of love that can be shared only between those living and those who have died but have never had the chance to coexist in the same time and place.

My tears fall and I scrounge around for some fresh stones to place at his grave. I feel embarrassed that I did not bring my own. I did not think to. Now there is dirt under my nails from digging up pebbles and maybe we've got it all backwards, I think, as I stare at the cold grey and white stones, the rubble of unrequited love. Perhaps flowers, even fleeting in their beauty, serve a purpose.

I have run out of things to say to Rob. I say, 'I'm sorry,' as I always do. I whisper the words. And I get no response.

And then I am brought back to the land of the living as I see Dean and Ezra walking through the rows and rows of graves towards me. My husband and my son hand-in-hand.

'I want to see your doctor,' says Ezra.

'What did Dad tell you?' I ask.

'That your boyfriend died and it was very sad and you were very sad and he was a doctor,' he says.

And so we visit the grave of my doctor, together. And I cannot be more grateful for the moment given to me by Dean and I just hope it is a moment given to me by Rob, too. A literal meeting of two worlds. And it is ordinary. And beautiful. And it is done.

Three days later, Ezra asks me, apropos of nothing, as is the way with eight-year-old boys: 'Your boyfriend who was a doctor who you loved, were you going to get married?'

'Yes,' I say. 'That was the plan.'

'And would you have had kids together?'

'That was the plan,' I say again.

'So I would have been his son?' he asks.

'No,' I say. 'If he hadn't died, I never would have married your dad, and we never would have made you or your brothers. If Rob and I had kids they would have been different children. Maybe a bit like you, but not you. And

that's the tricky thing. I'll always be sad that Rob died because I loved him so much but I'll always be grateful I had you because I love you so much.'

'That makes sense,' he says.

I have spent so many years asking myself different versions of that question. I asked it in different ways and from different angles and tried to come up with an answer that didn't hurt so much. Would you rather let your boyfriend die again, or kill your family? Grief isn't contained, it leaks on everything.

But then my son asks a question and my answer comes without thinking. He told me that it makes sense. All of a sudden it does. And it is ordinary. And beautiful. And done.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One of the greatest privileges of having a manuscript published is seeing what goes on behind the scenes to bring a book into being.

To my publisher, Alex Craig. I audibly gasped when your name first appeared in my inbox. Thank you for scooping me out of the slush pile and believing in my manuscript. Working with you has felt like a dream. Thank you to editor extraordinaire Brigid Mullane, and to Emily Cook, James Kellow, Robert Watkins, Julia Kumschick, Katherine Rajwar and everyone at Ultimo Press. You live by your tagline of being bold, creative, and different and your commitment to your authors can be felt in everything you do.

Alissa Dinallo, this cover is everything. I may never stop staring at it.

To Elena Gomez for your exceptional edits and comments, and Camha Pham for your expert proofreading.

I am thankful for the space created for me at the Phoenix Park Writer's Group and especially grateful that through it I found Glenys and Tim.

Eleni Hale, I feel so lucky that I walked into Phoenix Park with you as our teacher. It was the start of everything. 'You will be published one day. Keep going,' was a note that you wrote on an early version of what would become Chapter 3. I kept that page in my bedside table drawer and read it (and re-read it!) whenever it all seemed too hard. And now look!

It is because of the *Kill Your Darlings* Mentorship and Rebecca Starford's astute insights (and deadlines!) that the first draft of this manuscript was completed in the early days of the pandemic.

Deepest gratitude to the incomparable Nadine Davidoff, for your exceptional feedback and guidance, and for bringing my attention to the multitude of lives within us all.

To the brilliant Sarah Krasnostein. Thank you for your generosity, kindness and grace. And for always talking to me like I was a writer even when I very much did not feel like one.

Lior, my heartfelt thanks for allowing me to use your beautiful lyrics.

My fierce, warrior (and worrier) mother. Thank you for instilling in me a love of language from as early as I can remember, for asking me what

colour I felt when I was happy and for swapping the boys' names with the girls' names when you read *The Famous Five* aloud. Mum and Dad, your love and support is fierce and limitless, in words and actions and feelings. This book is many things, and one of them is a love letter to you both.

For being there then, now, and always, my brother Andrew. And to Dina, Aidan, Millie, Fiona, Cara, Noah, Betty and Leon, for all the writerly and non-writerly support and love.

Skye, our friendship is another kind of love story. Thank you for everything and for being an exceptional proofreader and typo queen. I am a better person because you are in my life.

Carla, thank you for seeing me through every version of myself and being there from the beginning.

And to Jordy and Ari for reading those first, messy, mortifying drafts.

Supporting someone who is grieving is an often thankless and exhausting task. Thank you to those who saw me through my darkest days. For the invisible work that brought me through to the other side. For those named and unnamed in these pages, thank you for allowing me space to interweave your stories and our friendship into this book.

To Rob and to Matt. If there is ever a way for the words in this book to find their way to you, I hope they make you proud. You are loved. You are missed. It's as simple and as complicated as that.

The four best humans I know: Ezra, Levi, Alon and Eden. I am in awe of you. Thank you for giving me my second heart. It all begins and ends with you.

Dean, you loved me back to life and for that I will always be grateful. Thank you for your gentle (and not so gentle) encouragement, and for telling me the only thing I could ever do to disappoint you was not write. The unexpected byproduct of working on this book was finding new ways to love you and to fall in love with us all over again. We're doing okay, Norm.

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Published in 2022 by Ultimo Press,
an imprint of Hardie Grant Publishing

Ultimo Press
Gadigal Country
7, 45 Jones Street
Ultimo, NSW 2007
ultimopress.com.au

Ultimo Press (London)
5th & 6th Floors
52–54 Southwark Street
London SE1 1UN

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

Found, Wanting
eISBN 978 1 76115 056 2

Cover design Alissa Dinallo
Cover photograph Courtesy of Saba Laliashvili
Author photograph Courtesy of Britt James
Copyeditor Elena Gomez
Proofreader Camha Pham

Ultimo Press acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the country on which we work, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and recognises their continuing connection to the land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.