

End of the Night Girl

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Abstract

End of the Night Girl and ‘Navigating the Kingdom of Night’:

End of the Night Girl

Nothing seems to go right for Molly – she’s stuck in a dead-end waitressing job, she’s sleeping with a man she doesn’t even like, and she’s just been saddled with a swarm of goldfish and a pregnant stepsister. The chance discovery of an old photograph leads her into an act of creation, and brings her into contact with the ghost of a woman who has been dead for more than sixty years.

Sixty years earlier, in Poland, Gienia’s family arranges her marriage to a distant cousin. Not long after her marriage to this stranger, the Nazis invade and she has to face life in the ghetto and the horrors of Auschwitz.

End of the Night Girl is a complex fictional narrative in which the lives of these two women, ‘real’ and imagined, imagined and re-imagined, are inextricably combined.

‘Navigating the Kingdom of Night’

Critics, historians and Holocaust survivors have argued for decades over whether the Holocaust should be accessible to fiction and, if so, who has the right to write those fictions. ‘Navigating the Kingdom of Night’ addresses such concerns and analyses various literary strategies adopted by authors of Holocaust fiction, including the non-realist narrative techniques used by authors such as Yaffa Eliach, Jonathan Safran Foer and John Boyne and the self-reflexivity of Art Spiegelman.

Through the course of the essay I contextualise *End of the Night Girl* by turning my attention to works that raise critical issues of authorial intent and the reader/writer contract; for example Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* and Helen Darville's *The Hand That Signed the Paper*. How did I resolve my own concerns? Which texts helped me and why? Together *End of the Night Girl* and 'Navigating the Kingdom of Night', one creatively and one critically, explore these complex and controversial questions in a contemporary Australian context.

Statement of Originality

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge or belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. In the case of *End of the Night Girl* there will be a one year embargo.

Amy T Matthews

April 2007

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*For my parents,
who have always believed in me*

End of the Night Girl

the taste of pink

I hate weddings. Especially this one. The groom and his mates are three-deep at the bar, knocking back shots and bottles of beer; the bride is disappearing into the bathroom with a gaggle of bridesmaids and a bag of magic white powder, and the DJ is crap. I shuffle back and forth between the floor and the kitchen, removing dessert plates and returning with bitter filter coffee. The only thing that keeps me going is the fact that it's almost over. That and the twenty-three dollars an hour.

The kitchen's closed up, the last of the sludgy chocolate wedding cake packed away in the cold room, to be picked up in the morning. The chefs have retired to the staff room with a couple of six packs of Pale Ale. In half an hour or so they'll trail down, sign their timesheets and hike into town, where they'll run into each other again at the Exeter or the Austral, or later at whatever club will let them in.

Chef's giving the dish pigs their final orders, after which he'll take a beer into the office, write up next week's roster, phone in orders, pack up and head home to the wife and kids. At the moment he's towering over the dishies, rubbing his temples tiredly, not sure whether to laugh at Ping Pong, or belt him. Colin keeps his head down, mop sloshing back and forth.

'Look at this,' Chef grabs a spoon from the clean rack on top of the dishwasher, 'what do you see?'

I can see Ping Pong's narrow face from where I stand scraping half-eaten wedding cake into the bin. His face is rigid, frozen like a rabbit's. He's trying to search for the right words, for the right language to say them in.

'Answer me.' Chef raps Ping Pong on the forehead with the spoon.

'Spoon?' Ping Pong says tentatively. 'For cake?'

'Spoon?' Chef's hand drops to his side, the spoon dangling limply from his fingers.

He looks exhausted. ‘Fucking spoon,’ he says, looking over at me. I force a smile.

‘What colour should spoon be?’ Chef speaks slowly, as though talking to a small child. Poor old Ping Pong’s face scrunches in consternation.

‘I’ll give you a hint you numb cunt: it shouldn’t be brown.’ He shoves the spoon at Ping Pong. ‘Wash the rack again.’

I drop my plates into the sink with a splash.

‘Oi!’ Chef calls after me. I think he’s going to yell at me ‘cause I splashed dishwater on his shoes, but he just wants a beer. ‘None of that local shit. Get me a Stella.’

‘Yes, Chef.’

The bar is an oasis at the back of the restaurant. Outside its bright halogen boundaries, the dining room pulses with pink and blue light from the DJ’s corner. The floor and walls throb with the music. I push past Kevin and open the beer fridge. He wanders over to where I’m squatting. I can see the flicker of his white tea towel out of the corner of my eye. Bloody Kevin.

‘What are you doing?’

The question irritates me. The tone of voice he asks it in irritates me. The razor sharp crease in his beige trousers irritates me.

‘I’m getting Chef a beer.’

His thin lips tighten. ‘They already took some Pale Ale.’

‘He doesn’t drink Pale Ale.’

We have the same exchange every Saturday night. Next he’ll say, *Don’t forget to write it up on the sheet.* And at 11.25 on the dot he’ll say, *I’m heading off at 11.30. I have to be back first thing . . .* and he’ll trail off, studiously ignoring the fact that I’m due back first thing in the morning too.

‘Don’t forget to write it up on the sheet.’

‘Are we out of Stella?’ I stare at the frosted rows of green and brown bottles. There are two empty rows, like missing teeth.

‘Needs to be restocked, can you remember to do that?’

‘Wasn’t Neil meant to do it after lunch?’

He gives me a long-suffering stare, which is supposed to end the discussion.

Fucking Neil. Fucking Kevin. Fucking cunts.

I grab Chef a Crown and kick the fridge door closed. I can’t be bothered going out to the wine store.

‘I said Stella,’ Chef snaps when I slap the Crown down next to him.

‘We’re out,’ I lie.

Chef looks pointedly at the bottle cap and then looks back at me. I pick up the bottle and fumble in my apron for my waiter’s friend. The beer hisses at me as the cap pops free.

‘Cheers.’ I can hear the beer gurgling down his throat.

‘You forgot to write it up,’ Kevin tells me when I get back to the bar. He opens the glasswasher and steam poofs up into his face.

‘When’s Connie back?’ I needle him, as I write ‘CROWN LAGER’ in enormous block letters on the staff drinks sheet. Connie’s his wife; at the moment she’s in Bali with her friend Schyler. Schyler’s a tall Dutch woman who’s more of a man than Kevin could ever hope to be.

At my question Kevin drops the glass he’s polishing. It hits the lino with a satisfying *smash*.

‘Oh, darn,’ Kevin hops from foot to foot. I hear a shriek. It’s Neil.

‘Is there blood?’ He’s clapped a hand over his eyes, fingers splayed so he can peer

through.

'It's just glass,' Kevin announces reassuringly, hands spread. Welcome to the Lucy and Ethel show. I crunch my way over the broken glass.

'Hey!' Kevin protests.

'Don't worry, I'm wearing boots, I'm fine.'

'That's not what I meant.'

What a nob. As if I didn't know what he meant.

The room is a mess. Five hours ago it looked like a full-colour spread in a bridal magazine: white tablecloths pristine, polished cutlery catching the fading daylight, glassware sparkling. In the centre of each table, wreathed in calla lilies, were fat glass bowls; in the bowls swam goggle-eyed goldfish, tails diaphanous in the candlelight. Now there are stains on the tablecloths, napkins litter the floor like dead birds, the lilies are broken and bruised, and the poor old fish... A couple of bowls are cloudy with beer and wine. In others, chunks of lamb and chicken bob on the surface. One lucky fish has a whole piece of wedding cake to suck on. It makes me feel very tired.

I finish clearing my section and start on Neil's. He's still in the bar with Kevin.

'Dear?' An old woman in a beige dress and matching jacket reaches for my arm.

'Yes?' I smile. I always smile at customers. Even if my feet are throbbing. Even if I'm in my eleventh consecutive hour and I haven't had a bite to eat all day. Even if I've just been called a numb cunt by Chef and I feel sick to my stomach. Even then, I smile. It's why I get such good tips.

'Could you call us a taxi?'

You're a taxi. 'What name?'

'Pardon?'

'What name shall I book the taxi under?' I'm holding an armful of dessert plates

and my muscles are beginning to feel the strain.

‘Oh.’ Beige Nanna lifts an uncertain hand to her mouth and looks to her friend, who makes a ‘Hmm’ noise. I grit my teeth behind my smile. If they don’t hurry I’m going to drop the plates.

‘You’d best book it under Windsor,’ she finally decides. Windsor. Like the Queen. I hurry off. I should have told her it would be a wait, this time on a Saturday night, but as it is I only just make the kitchen before my arm gives way. The plates clatter across the stainless steel bench. Ping Pong’s there to steady them before they fall.

‘Thanks.’

‘No worries,’ he says in his heavily accented English.

‘No worries, *mate*,’ I reply with a smile.

As I walk away I slip on the wet lino and slam hard into the door of the cold store.

‘Clumsy old mole,’ Tommy drawls, slapping me on the bum as he passes.

‘Fuck off.’ *Numb cunt*, I add silently, rubbing my sore arm, but I’m not sure whether I mean him, or me.

After work we head to Mars. It’s open, it’s safe, it keeps the gay boys happy and there are always enough straight boys to keep the rest of us happy.

‘I’ve got something for you,’ Tommy shouts into my ear after we’ve got our drinks. It’s a little pink pill, powdery like aspirin. There’s a ‘Hello Kitty’ face stamped on it, all big eyes and ears. Tommy slides his thumbnail along the indent, breaking the tablet in half. Pink dust sprinkles onto the black table. He hands me half and I take it gingerly between my fingertips. He rewraps the other half in its little Alfoil square and slips it into my bag. ‘For later.’ He grins, salutes me with his vodka Cruiser and disappears into the crowd, looking for fresh meat.

I take the pill, washing it down with the sugary vodka. I wish I'd ordered something else but sometimes it's just easier to get what everyone's having. Sometimes it's too hard to be heard over the music and it's too dark for anyone to read your lips.

A couple of lesbians are making out next to me. One of them, blonde, young, with a spike through her ear, has her legs wrapped around the other woman's waist. Their wet tongues catch the light. I watch them for a while, waiting for something to kick in.

Michelle and Des from work are here. I don't know what they've taken but they're flat against the wall, half-smiling, eyes huge and wet and staring. They don't move. They look like Pod People.

Tommy's back, grinning from ear to ear. He's saying something but I can't hear him over the music. He grabs my hand and we're moving, into the throng, onto the dance floor. I watch spinning discs of cellophane cover a light, red to blue to red to blue. Well, Hello Kitty, I think and it seems very funny. *Hello Miss Kitty, will you marry me . . .* no no no no, it's Miss *Mousie*. *Miss Mousie, will you marry me* – there's a world of difference between a cat and a mouse, especially if you're the mouse. *Maus*. Animal People. I'm an animal.

I'm not moving, but that's alright. Everything's alright. I'm red and blue and Miss Kitty is keeping the *Maus* at bay.

I barely sleep. I have paranoid dreams. Dreams of suitcases – cardboard, canvas, leather – covered in stickers – Roma, Paris, Bruxelles, Wilno. *I ♥ New York*. The suitcases won't stay closed. They snap like crocodiles, clasps flashing like gold teeth. When I wake up there are words in my head: *little house, shtetl square*. I grab the pen and paper from my desk and scribble them down before they disappear. They mark the pristine paper, small jags against the perfect white. I don't know what they mean yet.

Beneath them are a pile of similar jagged words on similar expanses of perfect white. I don't know what any of them mean and it gives me a headache. I fumble through my bag. I carefully unfold the Alfoil square, the slightest tear makes me cringe, and remove the broken pill. Miss Kitty's face is cut in half, not neatly, the powder has flaked away, like a landslide; she's eroding. I dry swallow her, she'll be better off with her other half, and lick the pink granules off the Alfoil. No sense in wasting any. This is what pink tastes like, I think, kind of bitter.

After my shower I spend ten minutes gazing around the kitchen, before I decide on toast. I slather it with the butter leftover from my stint on Atkins. By the time I leave for work I'm feeling good again.

'Good morning,' Kevin greets me, checking his watch automatically to see if I'm late. I'm not and that annoys him.

'Good morning,' I sing back, as I pass him. He's sliding the till into the register, eyeing me suspiciously. I'm not usually a morning person. Maybe he thinks I got laid. I trot up the stairs to the staff room. Harry's in there, drinking his Berocca; I can almost smell the alcohol squeezing through his pores. He gives me a shaky wave.

'Rough night,' I commiserate as I fuss through the shelf for a clean apron.

'Fuck, yeah,' he moans. I grab my things and make for the door before he can elaborate. My good mood won't survive a conversation with Harry.

I collide with Chef at the bottom of the stairs. My hands are behind me, tying my apron strings, and I almost go flying but he catches me, his big hands grabbing my arms.

'I'm a married man, Moll,' he says, helping me to straighten up, 'You've got to stop throwing yourself at me.'

'I can't help it, it's your animal magnetism.'

He grins. Sometimes he's not too bad.

'Want a coffee?' I ask, feeling generous.

'Depends who's making it.'

'Me.'

'Double espresso. Boys?' he bellows, striding to the kitchen, 'Molly's making coffee! Orders in!'

They shout orders at me but they don't need to, I know what they have. Strong lattes, the whole lot of them. Except Chef, who alternates between macchiatos, short blacks and green tea.

'Want a coffee?' I call to Kevin as I get the milk out. He's sitting at a table doing the floor plan. I wish he'd leave it to me, I hate his floor plans. He sections them up all unevenly; I always end up with a section of thirty, while Neil gets twelve or fourteen. And I still end up picking up some of his tables, while he's off polishing glasses and gossiping in the bar.

Kevin ostentatiously checks his watch, it's supposed to make me feel guilty for making coffees when I should be working. It doesn't; I don't.

'Flat white? Latte?' I chirp. 'Or tea? Lapsang Souchong? Orange Pekoe?' I twist the steam on and put the jug under the copper pipe. I can't hear Kevin's answer over the hissing. I watch the milk froth and let my thoughts drift. *Little house, shtetl square*. Consonants clinking like cutlery on a plate.

I turn the steam off before the milk can boil, it's automatic, I don't have to think about it. I start the coffees and lay out the saucers, *clink, little house*. Teaspoons go on the saucers, *clink, shtetl square*. I pour the milk into the glasses, holding back the froth with the tip of a tablespoon. The foam muffles my thoughts, absorbing the clinks, softening them, taking away their power.

‘Thanks, Moll,’ Chef says, bolting down his double espresso in one swallow, despite the heat of it.

‘S’okay,’ I reply, spooning sugar into my latte.

‘Hello?’ a voice calls from the front door. It’s the mother of the bride; this morning she’s hiding behind enormous Jackie O sunglasses. I glance at Kevin but he doesn’t stir, so I go to the door, plastering a smile on my face.

‘Good morning,’ I greet her, ‘how are you feeling?’

She gives a brittle laugh. ‘We had too much of a good time, I’m afraid.’

‘It was a lovely wedding,’ I sigh, as though I enjoyed it as much as she did.

The bride’s mother smiles and looks pleased. ‘We’ve come to settle the account. Ron’s just parking the car. We need to get the presents too, and the flowers.’

‘And the cake,’ I remind her, ‘We’ve packed the gifts into boxes for you,’ I point at the pile on the buffet, and on the floor beneath. ‘I’ll get the account while you get started on that lot.’

I fuss through the files by the computer in the office. I find the right folder, with all the function details, but can’t find the account. I paste the smile back on my face and trot back out to Kevin.

‘I can’t find the account,’ I whisper.

‘Did you put it through?’ he retorts.

‘Tommy was supervising last night, not me.’ I rack my brains but can’t remember if he put the account through or not. I scuttle to the till, ahead of Kevin, who scowls as he follows me. I know he’s not going to find an envelope for last night’s takings. I open the register and count the float. Five-fifty, not the usual three hundred. Tommy’s going to catch it.

The computer screen comes on as Kevin starts the system. I hope Tommy

remembered to shut it down properly.

‘You’ll do the account then?’ I say, sticking my head into the office. ‘I’ll help them pack their car.’ I go and get the leftover wedding cake out of the cold store. Harry comes in while I’m bent over the white box.

‘I didn’t know you cared!’ he cries, grabbing me by the hips and trying to dry hump me. I guess the Berocca worked.

‘Fuck off, Harry,’ I step on his foot as I ease past him. There’s no point because he’s wearing steel-caps, but the attempt makes me feel better.

I carry four boxes to the car, as well as the cake. ‘What do you want me to do with the fish?’ I ask, when we’re left with the bowls of goldfish and the bruised lilies. I think she’s going to ask me to get some buckets, or maybe she’s got a load of plastic bags in her purse, or maybe we can empty most of the water out and put them in the car the way they are. I’m completely unprepared for her answer.

‘Oh, flush them,’ she says airily, waving her hand.

‘What?’ I think I’ve misheard. ‘Do what?’

‘You can flush them. The florist wants the bowls back and God knows I don’t want a hundred fish.’

‘Flush them where?’ I feel incredibly dense – her words aren’t registering.

‘The toilet,’ she answers, eyeing me warily. She thinks I’m retarded. I think she’s a maniac.

‘The toilet!’ I squawk. I look back at the poor, surviving fish. Whole bowls of them are dead, belly up on the cloudy surface, and now she wants to flush the ones who made it through the night? ‘I can’t do that!’ I protest.

‘Fine, you can have them. But I need the bowls, they’ve got to go back to the florist.’

‘So you said,’ I sigh. What the hell am I going to do with a hundred fish?

Sure enough, my section’s enormous. I’ve got a table of fifteen fifty-something women; the noise level increases as they put away the riesling. Tommy and Neil have got all the couples, reclining in the sun, wine glasses beading with moisture, limbs long and relaxed: lazy, loved, at leisure. Half their luck.

‘Molly!’ The bellow from the kitchen reaches me at the bar, where I’m watching Kevin trying to fish broken bits of cork out of a decanted shiraz.

‘Chef sounds his usual cheery self,’ I say mildly. Kevin grunts, but doesn’t look up. He looks like a brain surgeon bent over an open skull. Someone daub the sweat off this man’s brow, I think as I drag my feet to the kitchen.

When I get there I see the pass crowded with food: tuna steaks, flathead fillets, duck salad, and one hefty ribeye. Neil’s holding three plates in his white-napkin hands and staring at me with a peeved expression.

‘What?’ I ask.

‘You order all this?’

Gee, Chef, I could’t fit it all in. ‘For my ladies?’ I’m not sure where he’s going with this.

He shoves a crumpled docket at me. I scan it and look back at him with a confused ‘so-what?’ expression. I brace myself for the inevitable explosion.

‘What happened when you took it out?’ he snaps at Neil, who’s playing along.

‘They didn’t want it Chef.’

‘Why didn’t they want it?’

‘It’s not what they ordered, Chef.’

Now I’m well and truly confused. I get my order pad out of my apron pocket and

flip through it.

‘Yes, it is,’ I protest, ‘six tuna, four flathead, four duck, one steak, well done.’

‘At table eight?’

My stomach sinks. *Fucking cunt.*

‘Table nine, Chef,’ I say in a small voice, ‘Sorry, Chef, I must have pressed the wrong button.’

‘What the fuck are you standing around for?’ he growls at both of us, ‘How fucking cold do you want their food to be?’ He hurls his tongs across the kitchen, where they clatter against the tiles above Ping Pong’s head and drop into the sink. I grab three salads and skitter from the kitchen, feeling sick and stupid and mad at Neil. Why didn’t he just talk to me? Why did Chef have to know? *A waiter must be crafty. If he is not, woe be unto him.* Janusz Korczak.

The ladies are too tipsy to notice the temperature of their food. They’re busy talking and don’t even touch it for another five minutes, so they probably think it’s their own fault anyway. The only complaint I get is from the ribeye woman, who thinks her steak is still too rare.

I whisk it back to the kitchen, wishing I didn’t have to face Chef again so soon.

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘Too rare.’

‘Too rare?’ He pushes the meat open where she’s cut into it, his fingers probing. It’s not pink but juices run over his fingers. It’s the juices people have a problem with, the idea of blood, the remnants of life. He wraps the ribeye in a clean tea towel and presses down hard on it, squeezing out the moisture. Then he tosses it under the grill for a minute, just to warm it up, not to cook it. Harry replates it and I take it back. The woman’s satisfied.

'Perfect,' she says as I clear it.

'I'm glad,' I reply, and I am, for my sake, more than hers.

Chef's still pissed off at us three hours later, even after my ladies have had skinny decaf cappuccinos and departed home to their manicured lawns and polo-shirted husbands. From where I stand polishing cutlery I have a good view of the coffee station and the kitchen.

'How many tables we do today, Neil?' Chef asks, sidestepping Ping Pong, who's mopping the floors. Neil doesn't look up from the coffee machine. He's making us one more round before he cleans it.

'Not sure, Chef.'

'Check for me, would you?'

The floor plan is Blu-Tacked to the wall beside Chef, who is standing on our side of the pass, signing off on the chefs' timesheets. Neil sighs and walks over to the wall; they're so close their arms are touching.

'Thirty-two, Chef.'

'How many of those were big tables? More than four, say.'

'Three, Chef.'

'How many?'

'*Three*, Chef.'

'How many tables of more than six did we do?'

I have a feeling I know where this is heading, and I'm glad.

'One, Chef.'

'One?'

'Yes, Chef.'

‘So, when you went to table eight, which was a four?’ He peers at the floorplan, ‘Yes, a four, which was right beside table nine, which was, oh look at that, a *fifteen*, it didn’t occur to you that *that* might be where you should have gone?’

‘The docket said eight, Chef,’ Neil says stubbornly.

‘So while you came back to the kitchen to check, while we got Molly off the floor and cleaned up the confusion, you just thought the food would be fine, did you? Wouldn’t get cold? Would still be *optimal* after ten minutes of dithering? Is that what you thought? Numb cunt.’

Take that, I think. Serves you right for being such a prick. Neil doesn’t look at me when he brings me my latte. He forgot the sugar but it doesn’t matter, it tastes sweet enough to me.

‘You’re a sucker,’ Tommy tells me after work as I lug my buckets of fish in from the alley. It’s Sunday night and we’re closed – it’s the only night we all have off together and I can’t believe I’m stuck with all these fish when I could be going out.

‘Take a couple,’ I beg.

‘I’m a fire sign, we’re not compatible with fish.’

‘Josie?’ I plead, hobbling like Quasimodo through the restaurant, to the table they’ve colonised for knock-off drinks.

‘I don’t like fish, they gross me out, swimming around in their own crap,’ she shudders.

‘Tommy!’ Kevin calls from the till, ‘Come and I’ll show you how to close off again.’

‘I *know* how to close off,’ he mutters under his breath.

‘So what happened last night?’

‘It was two in the morning,’ he moans, ‘*that’s* what happened.’ He drags himself from his chair. ‘Who’s getting the drinks? I’ll have a G&T,’ he makes little sucking noises through his pursed lips.

‘Me too,’ I say, ‘with fresh lime, not lemon.’

‘Wish we could have the Tanqueray,’ he sighs as he slopes up to the till, ‘Or the Bombay Sapphire. Gordon’s is just so . . .’

‘Plebeian?’ I volunteer.

‘Sure,’ he nods, obviously having no idea what it means.

‘You can *buy* Tanqueray,’ Kevin calls down to us.

Tommy hisses like a possum.

‘Who *is* making drinks?’ Josie asks, craning her neck to see who’s still coming.

‘Not me,’ I announce, wriggling in my chair, ‘I’m not getting up.’

‘Tommy!’ Josie whines, ‘Get us a drink on your way back.’

‘Can’t. Busy. Managerial stuff,’ he yells back, with an exaggerated wink.

‘Wish Neil was still here,’ Josie sighs, ‘he always gets the drinks when he’s here.’

Only so he can sneak himself a double, I think sourly. I’m glad he was the first knocked-off, glad he headed straight home and didn’t hang around for drinks.

‘Chef!’ Josie shrieks as he emerges from the office, where he’s been placing orders.

‘Get us drinks?’

‘What do I look like, a waiter?’ He says the word ‘waiter’ like an insult. We watch him go into the bar and grab himself a beer.

‘Don’t forget to write it up,’ we chorus. Chef gives the drinks sheet an evil look and leaves the bar.

‘What will Kevin say?’ I ask in mock-horror as he sits down next to me.

He gives the closed office door the finger and drains half his beer in two gulps. We

watch longingly, but can't be arsed getting up. There's still hope Tommy'll do it for us.

'Right. Where are we going?' Chef says, sucking the beer off his lower lip. We look at him curiously. 'Carla's taking the kids to her parents for dinner,' he says in explanation.

'You're not going?'

'They can't stand me.' He finishes off his beer. 'Get me another, would you?'

'I'm off duty,' I tell him. 'Why don't they like you?'

'No taste,' he grins. 'So where are we going?'

'Home, we're tired.'

'Get off it. You lot are out all the time.'

'Which is why we need our sleep now.'

'Come on, Moll.' His hazel eyes look yellow, like a cat's. 'How often do I come out?'

Not very often, admittedly, but when he does it's a bender.

'I'll drive you,' he says. 'Jose?'

'Yeah, alright,' she agrees, 'I'm meeting some friends at the Exeter anyway.'

'The Exeter? That hole?' He hates it on principle, just because he's not an Adelaide boy. It's the same reason he won't drink Coopers. Dog's piss, he calls it. I don't think he's ever actually tried it.

'You moles got me a drink?' Tommy hollers from the bar.

'I'll have a G&T,' I screech back, 'fresh lime. Thanks, love!'

'I'll have a bubbly: Jansz!' Josie orders.

'Not the Jansz!' we hear Kevin shout from the office.

'The cheap shit then.'

‘Crown, Miss Tommy,’ Chef joins in.

‘You’ve already had one,’ I needle him.

‘No, I didn’t. If I’d already had one it would be on the staff drinks sheet.’

Tommy gets our drinks. He puts a whole lime in my gin, skin and all, just to make a point. I grimace, peel a hole in its large-pored surface and squeeze some juice in.

‘What’s with all the fish?’ Chef asks.

‘Molly’s rescuing them.’

‘They’d be nice tempura,’ Chef says, kicking a bucket with the toe of his shoe.

‘Fuck off,’ I yawn, rattling the ice in my gin. *Clink, little house.*

We put the fish in the back of Chef’s Land Cruiser and head to the Exeter. I’m a bit worried about leaving them in the car, afraid they’ll overheat or suffocate or something, but Chef tells me I’m being stupid, and I let them lead me into the bar. Josie’s friends are out the back – we pile around the table and start drinking. I’m starving and, despite the fact I want to lose a couple of kilos, I eat three packets of chips. By nine o’clock I’m trashed and the last traces of the pink pill’s warm feelings have burned away. I feel tired and grotty.

‘I gotta go home,’ I say suddenly. Chef’s the only one who hears me. He’s sitting next to me, staring morosely at the toilet doors, which are opposite our table.

‘What?’ he says.

‘I gotta go home.’

‘I’ve got your fish.’

‘Yeah.’ I don’t care.

‘I have to eat something before I drive,’ he sighs.

‘Okay.’ I’m having trouble moving my lips, they’re heavy and fat.

‘It’s been swell,’ Chef says loudly to the table but nobody’s listening. Tommy’s gone already, off to meet some systems analyst he’s got the hots for. Josie and her friends are too busy chain smoking and talking about people we don’t know to notice us leaving.

‘Let’s get Indian,’ Chef says, taking my arm and dragging me down the street. We end up in a narrow restaurant with white tablecloths and candles in silver lotus-shaped holders. I’m too drunk for this place, I think, tugging on my wine-stained work shirt. They give us an intimate table in the back corner, under a painting of Kali. I have trouble reading the menu – I keep getting distracted by the candle.

‘I’ll order for us,’ Chef says and I lower my menu gratefully. ‘You like hot food?’

‘Anything.’

‘Can I organise drinks?’ the waiter asks politely, flipping the napkin across my lap.

‘Water,’ I say through my uncooperative lips.

‘Molly?’

Shit, it’s Verne.

‘How are you?’ he coos. ‘I ran into Hero the other day.’

‘Yeah?’ I try and get my brain in gear, try to remember what I should say. ‘How is she?’

‘Oh, you know Hero.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And who’s this?’ Verne asks coyly, eyeing Chef. ‘New boy?’

‘God, no, this is Chef.’ I can’t remember his name all of a sudden. I only ever call him Chef. Luckily he steps in and introduces himself. Then he orders us curry and naan and a bottle of wine.

‘Who’s the fruit?’ he says after Verne leaves.

‘Worked with him at Sea Salt. Verne’s worked everywhere, he’s like ÜberWaiter.’

‘He any good?’

‘Yeah, when he feels like it. Knows everything about wine.’

‘Just a little treat!’ Verne announces, returning with cocktails for us. ‘Cosmos were always your favourite, weren’t they?’ I’m kind of touched he remembers.

Chef takes a sip of the Cosmopolitan and then slides it over to me. ‘Girl’s drink,’ he says, by way of explanation. I shrug, who am I to argue? I drink both the Cosmopolitans and pounce on the naan when it arrives. Chef bitches about Adelaide and work and tells me about the place he’s going to own one day. I listen with half an ear and watch Verne move around the floor. I suck the lime slices that garnished the cocktails and try not to breathe in the curry smells, which are making my stomach turn. Chef pays for dinner, leaving a decent tip.

I peer through the back window of the Land Cruiser, just to make sure the fish are okay. Chef opens the door for me, I struggle to get into the high front seat, wishing I hadn’t worn such a tight skirt; I feel his hand on my arse, lifting me. I can feel the warmth of his palm, even after he’s taken his hand away and closed the door. He starts the car and Echo and the Bunnymen curl from the speakers. He moves to turn it down.

‘Don’t,’ I say, ‘I like it.’

I tell him where I live and we don’t speak again. I let the music flood me, dark water at high tide. *Under blue moon I saw you, so soon you’ll take me, up in your arms* . . . I watch familiar streets slide by, monochromatic under the orange streetlights, distanced by the smooth glass of the window. *Too late to beg you, or cancel it, though I know it must be the killing time, unwillingly mine.*

He pulls in by the curb in front of my block. The music dies abruptly when he turns

the engine off. We sit for a second, listening to the engine ticking. I can hear him swallow.

‘Best get those fish in,’ he says quietly, reaching for his door.

I watch as he opens the back of the Land Cruiser. He passes me a couple of buckets of fish and we climb the flight of concrete stairs to my flat. I fumble with the stiff lock.

‘You need some graphite,’ he says. We leave the fish in the living room and go back down to get the rest.

‘Can I keep some for my kids?’ he asks. I nod, not looking at him, and we make the final trip, upwards, to my tiny flat.

‘Want a coffee?’ I find myself saying.

He follows me to the kitchen and watches while I dig out the decent coffee and the plunger. I fill the kettle, the silence between us stretching out. I listen to the splash of the water, aware of him behind me. I steal a quick glance at our reflections in the window. He looks big in my kitchen, out of place, awkward. He runs his keys through his fingers; they jingle and clink.

I know what’s going to happen, and I don’t stop it. He smells of hot oil and coriander and roast garlic. I wonder if I smell like beer dregs and wine sediment, tannin and yeast. I hear Echo and the Bunnymen as he kisses me – *Fate, up against your will* – and I close my eyes. I expect him to be rough, unforgiving, but he’s not. His lips are hesitant; I steal a peek – he kisses with his eyes closed. His eyelashes are thick, he has freckles on his cheeks, light like cocoa powder on milk froth. There’s a weight in my stomach, and lower; he’s a nice kisser. He opens his eyes, they’re yellow and green. They look into me, serious, bare, and he doesn’t look like Chef.

I let him undress me and I wonder what he’s seeing, wonder if he’s wishing that my hips were thinner, my bum smaller, my breasts perkier. His hands slide over me in

long arcs, his eyes staying serious.

‘I don’t have any condoms,’ I breathe, afraid I’ll break the mood.

‘Don’t worry,’ he whispers, ‘I’ve had the chop.’ As though sperm’s the only worry.

I like the weight of him, the sound of his breath in my ear, the way he says my name softly, with reverence, in gratitude.

Afterwards, beneath the sound of our uneven breathing, I hear the clink of four little words, softly, like glasses toasting, like cutlery touching, like ice cubes colliding in the glass – *little house, shtetl square*.



It was a warm and blowsy summer day, market day, and the *shtetl* square bustled with trade. From where she sat in the dim front room Gienia could hear the geese honking and the goats bleating. She could hear the chatter of the stallholders as they called to milling customers. She heard housewives tightening their purse strings.

‘Last season’s,’ Froy Tuchmacher sneered, perhaps over Moishe’s beets.

‘Fresh from the earth!’ came the wounded reply. So it was Two-Sided Leib and his potatoes. She heard Froy Tuchmacher snort disbelievingly. From across the square came the tinkle of the bookseller’s bell as his cart rattled into town.

Gienia shifted on the hard-backed chair. Her gaze drifted to the shuttered window, to the rind of sunlight edging the old planks. She resisted the urge to swing the shutters wide, to let in the sunlight, the noise, the smell of manure and freshly baked pastries. She shouldn’t *want* to open the shutters. She should be praying; she looked back at the body of her father, laid out on the bed, too primly for her taste. Mathau Zbroik had not been a prim man; in life he would have been

sprawled on his stomach, mouth open, drool crusting the pillow, vigorous snores disturbing the neighbours. This man was a strange twin of her father, his prayer shawl too straight, his locks too fastidiously curled, his fingernails too clean. It was partially her fault, she'd helped lay him out, but how could she have done differently?

'Gienia?'

Gienia startled as her brother Vladek rapped on the glass pane of the kitchen door. She fled the front room, relieved to get away from the dimness, the mustiness, the silence of the cold body. She pulled the door open with more force than she intended and it squealed on its hinges. The cacophony from the platz rushed into the still house and Gienia took a deep, grateful breath.

'That crook Rudzki wanted to barter that cow of his for one of my horses!' Vlad snapped as he brushed past her, sweeping his wide-brimmed hat from his head and slapping it down irritably on the kitchen table. 'Can you believe?' he snorted, 'That cow's ten if she's a day.'

Gienia shook her head sympathetically and moved to the stove to make him tea. She made sure to leave the door open behind her. She could smell the heat rising from the cobblestones, the dumplings simmering in the pots, the bread made from fine white flour baking next door at the Zazulas.

As she reached for the samovar she heard Vlad wander into her father's room. The silvery old floorboards sighed beneath his boots. She tensed unconsciously, feeling the weight of the silence, knowing Vlad would say a respectful but cursory prayer, knowing that for him Mathau Zbroik had already ceased to exist.

'It's your birthday next week,' Vlad said as he re-emerged, his face a little graver. His sidelocks brushed his cheeks as he sat at the table. For the first time Gienia noticed swirls of grey in the black locks.

'Yes,' she acknowledged, pouring his tea.

'How old are you?'

'I'll be nineteen.'

'Yes,' he looked at her through the steam rising from his glass. 'Time for you to be married.'

'I know.'

'I've spoken to Pella the Matchmaker.'

Gienia sat, her stomach in knots.

'I don't want to rush you,' he said, his tone businesslike, 'but you can't live here alone. Ideally you would come and live with me, to give you time . . . but now with Uncle Jerzy's family just come to join the rest . . . and Luba due with our next, that's six . . . it's just too crowded, Gienia.'

'I understand,' she said, relieved.

Vlad took a deep gulp of tea and sat back in his chair. 'The problem is, Pella doesn't think we can make you a match in the *shtetl*.'

'Oh,' Gienia's mind whirled. 'Perhaps I could go to Vitka?'

'It would be better for you to marry.'

'It would?' Gienia tried to swallow her disappointment.

'I've had an idea.'

'Oh?'

'I was speaking to Cousin Yaacov.'

'Oh?'

'His sister lives in Warsaw. She has two sons, both without wives, and she'd like nice *shtetl* girls for them.'

'Oh.'

'She's from here,' he said impatiently, 'originally.'

'Is she?'

'It would be better for you to be with family.' Vlad drained his glass and rose to his feet. He settled his hat over his skullcap as he stepped through the door. 'I asked Cousin Yaacov to write

to his sister. If they want you Yaacov will escort you to Warsaw for the wedding.'

If they want me.

'Luba will be around later with some food for you.' Wład stepped back and cast an appraising eye over the house. 'Have a rest, Gienia, you look worn out,' he said as he closed the door and left, shutting out the fragrant, blowsy day; shutting her in.

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I can't sleep after Chef leaves. I feel sticky and kind of bruised. *Lovers are guilty.*

Tadeusz Różewicz. I stare at the ceiling and regret the fact that I don't smoke anymore. Smoking is the greatest distraction: your hands are busy, your mouth is busy, your lungs are busy; every little nerve tingles, the serotonin surges, the blood races, muscles slacken and relax, pupils dilate. God, I want a fag.

Tomorrow's my day off. I'm glad, I've done my dash for the week – another day would do me in. After an hour or so I can't bear to lie in bed anymore; I have a long hot shower that leaves me pink as a cooked crab. Then I make a pot of tea and go back to bed, taking the yellow pages with me. I look up pet stores in the directory – I'll have to buy a couple of fish tanks in the morning. Can't have the fish living in the old duck fat containers forever.

When I've made a list of pet stores I riffle through the pages on my desk. They make me edgy and nervous. I cram them into a drawer but can't bring myself to close it. I take them out again and fiddle with the pen. I need to sleep, I tell myself, turning the pen between my calloused fingers. I reach under the bed and pull out an old microwave box. It's a box leftover from the last move, full of dog-eared books and photocopied pictures and magazine articles. Martin Gilbert's *Holocaust* has lost its

cover; it's just a naked wedge of papers. The cover is somewhere at the bottom of the box, sandwiched between photocopied pictures of prisoners at the gates of Auschwitz, hollow-faced shades of pixilated grey – from silver to the murky gloom of winter dusk. I drink the whole pot of peppermint tea while I fuss through my box, not looking for anything specifically, just waiting for something to jump out at me. Eventually I find a blessing I've copied onto the back of an old phone bill and read it until I can remember it off by heart. It's a sleep blessing. *Michael on my right, Gabriel on the left, Uriel ahead of me and Raphael behind, and the Shechinah always above my head . . .* I turn off the light and lie back down, watching the dark shadows on the ceiling, feeling the length of the pen against my palm, hard and unyielding.

I'm supposed to have lunch with my mother. I'm running late, as usual. It takes me longer than I thought to get the fish organised. I go to five pet shops to get the tanks and bowls I need. It would be better to get one big tank, but they cost more than I'm willing to pay. I buy some stuff for their bowls: pebbles and castles and old-fashioned deep-sea divers with metal helmets.

I end up with fish in every room, three small tanks and five bowls. I worry that they're too crowded. Still, they look nice with their river pebbles and ornaments. After I get paid I'll have to go pick them up some plants. Maybe some of those miniature floating lily pads, I don't know what they're called but I got some for Bertha, the yabby I stole from Green River. I still miss Bertha. She was only a little bitty thing when I got her. We had yabby on the menu at the restaurant (served with a green mango, shallot and coriander salad and a soy and lime dressing); when they arrived the kitchen boys used to race them across the stainless steel counter. Then the yabbies would go back into the Styrofoam container, snapping and rearing up at each other like monsters

from a Hammer film, and back into the cold room, where they'd be put to sleep by the cold. I felt so awful for them, packed in that box, sinking into semi-consciousness. Then out they came at service time, tossed into the salted pots before they could even regain their senses. So I stole one. Or tried to steal one. Rhys caught me, he was the owner and Head Chef, and he went totally bunta.

'Jesus Christ, Molly!' he kept shouting, 'Grow up!'

I didn't sell one yabby salad all day. Steered my customers to the duck instead.

'It's spectacular,' I said, at least fifteen times, 'kind of a rustic pate, coarsely shredded, served on a hazelnut, orange and beetroot salad – it's what I'd order.'

Then as I was heading out the back door after my shift Peter stopped me. Beautiful Peter, the love of my life.

'Here, Molly,' he said with a smile. I was so riveted by him, dumb as a hot elephant, that I didn't notice what he pulled from his apron pocket until he pressed it into my hand. I squeaked at the touch of her feelers and plated tail. She was still cold and asleep.

'I've been calling her Bertha,' he said, 'it's not very pretty . . . if you want to change it – ' He shrugged. Change it? Change the name Peter chose for our love yabby? I don't think so.

I had her for four years, and she got pretty big. Wish I'd kept the tank.

Mum's on the phone when I finally rock up.

'Well, I don't think there's a secret for choosing good ginger,' she's saying as I wave hello and put the kettle on. She puts her hand over the receiver and whispers, 'It's Lizzie, she's at the supermarket.'

I roll my eyes. Lizzie's my stepsister. For her, everything has to be just so.

‘Molly’s just come in, darling, I’ll hand you to her, after all she’s in the industry.’

‘What industry?’ I ask, as I reluctantly take the phone.

‘You know,’ my mother says, lifting her floral mugs off their hooks, ‘food.’

‘Hi, Liz,’ I sigh, not really wanting to talk to her. Talking to Lizzie depresses me.

‘How do you pick a good ginger?’ she says immediately.

‘Oh, I’m fine, bit overworked, you know how it is this time of year. Weddings, parties, anything. But enough about me, how are you?’

‘I’m in a rush, Molly, I have an extremely brilliant photographer waiting for me at the office.’

‘As opposed to an extremely average photographer? Why do you want to know about ginger? Is it for an article? “Ginger: The New Wonder Diuretic: Lose Kilos Fast!”’

‘It’s not a diuretic, is it?’ she sounds appalled.

‘No. Why? Why do you want to know?’

‘Look,’ she exhales loudly into the phone, ‘I was just asking how to pick a good ginger, what’s the big deal?’

‘There’s no secret,’ I tell her, echoing my mother, ‘but personally I always pick one with fewer knobbls.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Aesthetics?’

‘Right. Thank you.’ There’s a pause. ‘It’s for tea,’ she sighs, ‘I’m making tea, if you have to know.’

‘For the photographer?’

She doesn’t answer. I imagine her fussing through ginger roots.

‘Try peppermint and ginger, it’s more refreshing.’

'Thank you. Bye.' She hangs up.

'You're so touchy,' I tell the beeping phone.

My mother is giving me a reproving look as she hands me a cup of good old-fashioned Lipton's.

'What?' I snap. She shakes her head, but I know what she's thinking. She wants me to be nicer to Lizzie.

'Where's Dennis?' I ask, as I follow her through to the den.

'Playing golf with Dr Glenn.'

'Is he wearing the hat I gave him?' I gave Dennis a checked golf cap for Father's Day. It would be okay except it's purple and orange – I picked it up in a punk shop. Well, Mum said get him something 'golffy'. It was either the hat or the exploding golf balls, and I was a bit worried the golf balls would give him a heart attack.

'I don't know, dear,' she responds vaguely. I have a hunch the cap is buried at the bottom of the wardrobe.

After she's checked her emails we go out to lunch. Nowhere special, just to the local café. She orders a turkey baguette; I order linguine. I'm starving, I haven't eaten breakfast and all I ate last night was the naan and chips. Molly Miller's Liquid Diet. Lizzie ought to publish that in her magazine. Breakfast: Bloody Mary. Morning Tea: a light white wine, riesling, perhaps? Lunch: sauvignon blanc, dahling, what else? Afternoon Tea: how about a Long Island Iced Tea? Aperitif: the good old G&T. Dinner: A nice, full-bodied red. Dessert: Cointreau with fresh orange wedges. Coffee: short black with a Cowboy shot. Don't know how much weight you'd lose, but I'm guessing you'd feel fabulous.

Mum and I don't talk about much. What am I supposed to say? 'I'm hungover, my house is infested with fish and I fucked the Chef last night'?

'I saw Daniel yesterday,' she says, blotting her lips with her napkin, then examining it for signs of cranberry sauce. Daniel. Dan the Man.

'Oh, yeah?' I keep my voice neutral. The last thing I need today is the Dan Discussion. But I can sense it's coming.

'He said he just bought a house.'

'Good for him.' I can hear the bitterness in my voice and I don't like it. I ignore my mother's quick, searching glance. 'Where is it?' I hate the fact I'm curious.

'Unley.'

I choke on my pasta. I scrabble for my Diet Coke and try to dislodge the linguine. Unley. That's right near me. Fuck, I'm going to be running into him at the supermarket, the library, the shops, the pool. Unless his house has a pool . . .

'Return veranda villa. Sandstone, I think he said.'

'What street?'

'I can't remember, dear.'

'It was definitely Unley?'

'Mmm. I remember telling him you were in Parkside. He moves in next week. I asked him if he had Aunt Bea's tablecloth.'

I feel a bit sick. I told Mum he must have taken Aunt Bea's tablecloth when he moved out, but actually Nat set it on fire one night when we had a dinner party. She didn't mean to, she knocked the candle over.

'What did he say?' I can't look her in the eye.

'He said he'd have a look.'

Thank you, Dan.

I'm glad to get away from my mother. I know if we hang out too long she really will launch into the Dan discussion. (*'Such a shame, he was so nice.'* Subtext: what did you DO to mess that one up?)

I stop by the supermarket on the way home. I should have written a list, I feel lost in the aisles. Do I need toilet paper? I get some because it's not something you want to run out of. Ditto tampons. Am I due? Hell, did I take my pill last night? I have a vague peppermint-tasting memory. I must have had it with the tea, after Chef left. Not urgent, he's had the chop, but must remember to check when I get home. What am I going to eat this week? How many split shifts am I doing? I try to remember. Today and tomorrow off. Lunch Wednesday, dinner Thursday, split Friday, split Saturday, Sunday lunch, closed Sunday night. Seven shifts. Dinner at Mum and Dennis' next Sunday night, so I need three dinners. Might go out Wednesday with Nat, so two dinners. I pick up a salmon steak and a jar of pasta sauce. I pause in the pasta aisle. Am I doing carbs? I need to lose weight. Do I cut carbs, fat or calories? Or all three? I put the pasta sauce back and grab some lean beef strips instead. Stirfry. Nothing wrong with stirfry, I'll just skip the hokkien and jasmine rice. I grab a basket of fruit and a six pack of no fat yogurt. I really should get plain yogurt, it has less carbs, but a girl needs a little treat now and then.

I stop at the bottle shop on the way out and get a couple of bottles of sauv blanc and some Grey Goose vodka. I've seen the Weight Watchers ad, there's definitely wine drinking going on, so it can't be too bad. I ignore the fact that vodka's made from potatoes. Vodka's practically water and water's fat free, no joule and really good for you. I'm meant to be drinking two litres of water a day but it makes me pee a lot and there's not a lot of time to pee when you're waiting.

At five o'clock I pour myself a vodka and cranberry juice and sit down in front of the telly. I watch the news. It's pretty depressing, except for the bit about the rescued kitten at the end.

'Though that might depress you guys,' I say to the fish, 'one more predator in the world.'

I get quietly drunk, flip channels and wonder what Dan's new house looks like. It could be a real dump, he fancies himself a bit of a fixer-upper. I bought him a red toolbox last Christmas, I put a hammer and a pair of edible underwear in it. He used the hammer but not the underwear. But, I think morosely, it's probably not a dump. It's probably almost perfect. Almost, but not quite, there would have to be *something* for him to fix or paint or build. I wish Mum had got the address, I could walk past it some day, see what it looks like. No, I think, pouring myself another vodka, probably a bad idea.

After a while I get sick of crap TV and put on a DVD instead. I fall asleep on the couch while Barbra Streisand is singing to her dead father. *Papa, can you hear me . . .* There wasn't any singing in the book. The ending was different too. In the movie good old Yentl heads off to the New World, where supposedly there are no gender roles. Ha, I think, drifting off.

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Gienia's father was laid to rest in the cemetery behind the *schul*. Encased in his simple wooden coffin he was lowered into the cold earth, to rest alone beneath the unassuming tombstone, generously paid for by Vład. Gienia's mother lay across the cemetery, beside her first husband, beneath the ornate *Magen David*, which cast a long shadow over the Jasiński plot.

Gienia didn't weep when she dropped her handful of dark earth on his coffin. She had wept for him already, alone in the little house on the *shtetl*/square, alone in her bed, in the dark.

On the following market day the Zbroik's furniture was arranged in two neat rows on the platz. V'lad sat in the threadbare rocking chair, feet propped on the brocade piano stool that had never belonged to a piano, packing his pipe with tobacco. Gienia stood by his side, resisting the urge to chew her fingernails. She made do with chewing her cheek, a habit her father had hated.

'Like a cow chewing cud,' he would growl at her.

'Should be a busy day,' V'lad remarked amiably, flicking a match against the arm of the rocking chair, 'spectacular weather.'

It was high summer and the air glowed with the promise of heat. Gienia mumbled agreement and watched as the vendors arranged their stalls. Hillel called out a greeting as he drove his geese past them, toward their wicker enclosure.

It didn't take long for the neighbours to emerge. They picked through Gienia's mother's linen, through her father's tools. Froy Zazula took home all the pots and pans, much to the annoyance of Froy Brun.

'She couldn't have left even *one* for the rest of us?' she complained, shooting an evil glare at the Zazula house.

Gienia tried to commiserate as she loaded Froy Brun's basket with her father's books, 'At least she left these.'

'Of course she did,' Froy Brun said, with a smug toss of her head, 'she doesn't have sons.'

Gienia watched the older woman strut past the Zazula's with her overflowing basket of books.

The furniture was all sold by mid-afternoon. The last thing to go was the old iron frame to her parents' bed: Saul the bookseller strapped it to the back of his cart, sniffing all the while about how they'd taken advantage of his generous nature.

'I'll round up Luba and my aunts,' V'lad said, 'and you can get started on the house. Where

are your things? I'll take them home with me.'

Gienia watched as he hefted her trunk into the back of his cart. Everything she had left in the world was in that trunk. It looked small in the wooden tray.

She couldn't face going back inside the empty house, not alone. Instead she wandered across the platz, idly watching the bustle and flow of traffic. She paused briefly at Milla Tepper's fabric stall. They had been friends, before Milla married Abram Tepper. Now at *Schul* on Saturdays Milla sat with the married women and gossiped about children and housework and whose husband had come home late from Mendi's, reeling and reeking of spirits.

Gienia ran her hand over the bolts of cloth and waited for Milla to finish serving Happy Symche's wife.

'I just don't know if Symche will like it,' the woman sighed, fingering the brown cotton. Gienia tried not to snort. Happy Symche didn't like anything. The summer days were too hot. The autumn rains were too late. Winter lasted too long. Spring was too muddy.

'Of course he will,' Milla coaxed.

'He certainly won't like the price.'

Milla pursed her lips. 'You won't find cheaper cotton anywhere.'

'I could have sworn Ana Czerkaski had some just like it' Symche's wife gave Milla a sly upwards glance. Gienia could tell by Milla's sigh that the sale was done. Milla didn't have the patience God gave a goose.

'Old cow,' she muttered to Gienia as Happy Symche's wife left with the brown cotton. She fussed with her wares for a minute, digging out the brighter bolts and placing them on the top of the pile. 'Everything sold?' she asked Gienia.

'Every last bit.'

'When do you leave?'

'Tomorrow.'

'By train? I don't trust them: trains,' she mused, 'must give you an awful stomachache, going that fast. Warsaw, isn't it? You're going to Warsaw?'

Gienia nodded.

'Yes, well, you be careful. Big place, Warsaw. Full of who knows what kind of people.'

'Vlad says it's as beautiful as Paris,' Gienia said.

'Oh ho and he'd know, would he? Prince Vlad's never been out of town in his life.'

'He's read about it.'

'Well, I went to stay at my cousin's once.'

'We were nine.'

'Ten,' Milla corrected.

'Another *shtetl*?'

'Bigger than here,' Milla replied emphatically, '*much* bigger.'

'Dangerous, was it?'

Milla didn't notice the facetious edge to Gienia's voice. 'When a place gets too big of course it's dangerous. People you don't know. I mean they could be any type of person. And in Warsaw you have to deal with Poles.'

'I'll be careful.'

'Yes, well,' Milla said dismissively, 'at least you'll have a husband to look after you.'

Gienia was glad to see Vlad's formidable grandmother sweep into the platz, trailed by Luba and The Aunts.

'Gienia,' Milla called as Gienia said goodbye and made to leave. Gienia turned to find Milla thrusting a folded square of hand-worked lace at her. Gienia looked at her quizzically.

'A wedding present,' Milla told her with an embarrassed shrug, 'for your *chuppah*.'

'Thank you.' Gienia was touched. She took the lace and impulsively kissed Milla on the cheek.

'Yes, well,' Milla grumbled shyly, 'I suppose I thought you'd always be here, in the *shtetl*.'

'Me too,' Gienia dropped her gaze to the lace and stroked it gently. '*Shalom*, Milla.'

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'Look, here's a couple looking for an attractive man 25-35, to share "fun times",' I read aloud from the personals as I sit by the kitchen waiting for dinner. The restaurant is quiet except for the rustle of Ping Pong unpacking boxes and the chatter of talkback on the radio. They're talking about the proposed changes to immigration laws. I raise my voice, hoping Harry won't notice. When you get him started on that stuff he's impossible to shut up.

'Must be discreet. You might be on for a bit there, Harry,' I say.

'I wouldn't do a threesome with another man,' Harry sniffs. I watch his boning knife slide through a salmon carcass. 'Two chicks on the other hand . . .'

'I did two chicks once,' Des says.

I kind of wish I hadn't brought the subject up.

'You never.'

'I did.'

'Were they good looking?'

'So-so.'

'Yeah, good looking chicks only do that kind of stuff in movies. It's the ugly ones who do it, they'll do anything for a bit of action.'

'Otherwise Harry would still be a virgin,' Chef says, sliding staffies up onto the pass. Pasta. At least it's penne, so I won't mess up my shirt.

'Come eat in the office,' Chef says to me, 'these tossers have to eat while they work,

they're way behind.'

I follow him into the office and sit at Kevin's desk to eat. On the desk there's a photo of Kevin and Connie on their wedding day, in a thick silver frame. The frame was probably a wedding present. I stare at it while I eat, not sure what to say to Chef. I've seen him naked, I think nervously. I try to think of something to talk about but my brain is stuck, I keep hearing Harry's voice talking about threesomes. Chef doesn't speak either. After ten minutes his bowl is empty and he leaves. I stare at Kevin in his wedding suit and red bow tie. His hair is parted right down the centre and his ears stick out. He's looking at Connie like he can't quite believe his good fortune. Connie's an Amazon of a woman, slightly taller than Kev, and what I'd call handsome. There's something about her that catches your eye and holds it. I don't know why she married Kevin. I wonder if she knows.

I finish reading the personals. A lot of gay men. Married men looking for a bit of secret fun. Couples looking to spice things up with a third player. It makes me feel sad. The older people are the only thing that gives me hope. 'Trim, fiftyish widow, looking for friendship and romance.' 'Young at heart gentleman, sixty-seven, looking for a lady to share fine dining experiences. Good taste, good company, good tipper.' I find it heartening, especially the bit about being a good tipper. Around here, leading up to Christmas, the tips are hopeless. We get people who don't eat in restaurants and who are horrified at the price of the steak, and people putting the bill on the company card who don't want to explain a tip to the boss (and who won't dip their hands into their own pockets, despite having just enjoyed a free meal). It's dismal.

The best tip I ever got was at Green River – seven hundred dollars. Can you believe it? From Norwegian whalers in town for a summit. They were big blokes who drank a hell of a lot. When the guy signed his Amex slip I thought he'd made a mistake. I took

it back down to him and nervously pointed at his jagged blue scrawl.

‘For you,’ he said, resting a meaty hand against my cheek and gazing at me with boozy affection. ‘You’ve been wonderful.’

Fuck me, I thought, seven hundred dollars! Rhys got a ten percent share and the kitchen boys got a ten percent share, but the rest was mine. (It didn’t last long, I got talked into buying drinks at the pub after work). The next day we had the contingent from the Solomon Islands in for dinner. They looked pretty miserable; I guessed the summit was going the Norwegians’ way. Much as I’m against whaling, it’s a little hard to hate someone who’ll give a tired waitress a lump of cash.

There’s a new guy starting tonight. His name is Adrian – he’s tall and willowy, with fashionably tousled dark hair, lips that look glossed and bright blue come-fuck-me eyes. Everyone wants a crack at him.

‘Nat says he’s straight,’ I warn Tommy as we wait for our drinks to be put up on the bar.

‘He can’t be,’ Tommy snorts. I find it a little hard to believe myself, Adrian’s pushing the boundaries of metrasexuality.

‘Where’s the Paracombe?’ Hanna moans. She’s hunting through the fridges, unaware of the long chain of drink orders hanging from the printer.

‘It’s between the Giesen and the Starve Dog,’ Tommy says absently.

‘There’s nothing between the Giesen and the Starve Dog,’ she snaps.

‘Then it hasn’t been stocked.’ We watch as she stomps from the bar, heading out back to the wine store. I sigh and take over. If I don’t I’ll be waiting half an hour for my order. I rip the dockets from the printer and press them onto the blobs of Blu-Tack on the counter.

‘Well,’ I say, returning to the subject of Adrian, ‘apparently he likes girls.’

‘How does she know?’ Tommy asks me later, as he watches Adrian flirt with a table of thirty-something women.

‘Apparently he told her.’ I try and catch Nat’s eye – she’s walking up to the bar with an empty wine bucket. She comes over.

‘He can’t be straight,’ Tommy says immediately. We don’t need to explain who we’re talking about.

‘He says he is.’

‘But there’s no proof?’

‘His word isn’t enough?’

‘Do you know how many married men I’ve fucked? They all call themselves straight but it doesn’t mean they don’t like a little cock now and then.’

‘Tommy says all men like cock,’ I say to Chef the next day as I kick my heels waiting for another staff dinner. There’s only me, Hanna and the kitchen boys on splits.

‘Get fucked,’ Chef replies, looking mildly appalled. ‘I wouldn’t touch his cock with a ten foot pole.’

‘What about my cock?’ Neil asks as he sails in, shirt hooked over his shoulder.

‘What cock?’ Chef bellows after him. ‘He doesn’t have a cock.’ Harry sniggers.

‘What are you laughing at?’ Chef snaps.

‘Nothing.’ Harry’s in trouble because he forgot to roast the ducks this afternoon.

‘For all we know you don’t have a cock either.’

‘Ask Molly,’ Harry says, winking at me, ‘Just ask Molly if I have a cock.’

‘I’ve seen no evidence of it,’ I tell him seriously.

‘Oh yeah?’ For a minute I think he’s going to drop his pants and get it out right then

and there.

‘Too small to find?’ Chef’s giving me a funny look. I frown at him. He doesn’t honestly think I’ve seen Harry’s cock, does he? *Why not*, a little voice in the back of my mind whispers, *you’ve seen his*. An image of Chef’s penis springs to mind and I blush.

‘For your information, my cock is substantial,’ Neil announces loudly when he returns, fastening the top button on his crisp white shirt.

‘What’s it to us?’ Chef snaps, slinging plates of fish and chips up on the pass. I carry them to the table I’ve cleared off for us. ‘It’s not going anywhere near my asshole.’

‘Nevertheless,’ Neil continues, looking around for Adrian, ‘it’s substantial.’

Chef’s a bastard to me for the rest of the night. He glowers every time I come near him. It makes me nervous and I start to fuck up.

‘What the fuck are you doing, you numb cunt!’ he spits when I lift a plate and send the neatly stacked chicken and prawn salad tumbling. I feel sick and exhausted by the end of service and I volunteer to restock the bar, just so I can hang out in the cool wine store. He comes in while I’m filling a crate with cabernet sauvignon. I hear the door click closed and for a moment I’m worried it’s Harry, but when I look up there he is, arms folded, green-striped tea towel hanging from his fingers. His face is set. He’s just standing there staring at me, looking furious. I swallow nervously; I don’t trust myself to stand, I’m not sure my legs would support me.

‘What was that?’ he says, his voice low. Everything about him radiates menace. I feel the same way I felt when I was six and my dad was drinking.

‘What?’ I hate the small sound of my voice. Why don’t I tell him to go fuck

himself?

‘That service,’ he snaps. ‘Fucking amateur hour.’

I say the first thing that pops into my head, ‘I’ve never seen Harry’s cock.’

He takes a step back. ‘Jesus Christ,’ he sneers. Then he leaves the wine store and by the time I come out with my crate of wine he’s gone home.

My next shift it’s like nothing happened. He asks me to get him a green tea and he sings along to his Neil Diamond tape as he fillets the flathead. Despite myself, I smile when he bellows the lyrics to ‘Play Me’ at Kevin.

‘According to Molly all men like cock,’ I hear him say to Kevin, ‘that true? You like a bit of the old Polish sausage, Kev?’

Kevin doesn’t know what to say, he flushes and mutters under his breath.

We do one hundred and eight pax for dinner and by ten o’clock I’m starting to vague out. I have a table of four who are not in any hurry to leave. They’re all in their fifties; usually people that age don’t want to go, people my age would rather go somewhere else and kick on, but for these guys it’s either drink here or go home to bed. They order another bottle of dessert wine. I try not to yawn as I fetch it from the bar.

The bottle has a lead seal. It cuts my thumb as I run the knife around the rim, spiral cuts, like an apple peeled. It’s only as I pour that I notice the blood pooling in my palm. Surreptitiously, I cover it with a napkin, pouring fast before the blood has a chance to soak through. By the time I get back to the bar there’s a feather-edged red stain. Bloodflowers. *And these flowers will always fade.* The Cure. I lost my virginity after a Cure concert. Not the *Bloodflowers* tour. The *Wish* tour.

I went with my friend Lou and her brother Ben. Ben was six years older than us; he had real stubble, his own car and carried a bag of pot in the back pocket of his jeans.

Lou and I fancied ourselves Goths. We wore a lot of black and dreamed of marrying Robert Smith. Or Morrissey. *You're the one for me, Fatty*. I barely gave Ben a second thought, he was just our ride to the concert. If he'd been more affected I might have found him attractive, but he was an athletic, popular guy, mellow from the pot and genial by nature.

We got ready at Lou's house. My stepfather would have died if he saw what we wore. Well, he would have locked me in my room and then died. Lou had a black lace dress with medieval-style droopy sleeves. You could see her bra and black Bonds knickers underneath. I wore a denim mini that I could barely sit down in and a black velvet tailcoat. We both wore ten-hole Docs. We were prejudiced against any other kind: the eight-holes were for the wannabes.

'Oh, Christ,' Ben said, when we emerged from Lou's room. 'Look at the jailbait.'

'Fuck off,' Lou spat.

'Louise Pierce!' Mrs Pierce gasped. 'Watch your language.' She didn't say anything about the way we were dressed.

'Is George going?' Lou asked her brother as we climbed into his rusty old Datsun. I turned sideways and crossed my legs so he couldn't see up my skirt.

'Is George going?' Ben mimicked in a high-pitched voice.

'You are such a child.'

'Jailbait.'

'Cretin.'

I listened to them fight all the way to the Entertainment Centre. The streets were still damp from the rain. My skin crawled with excitement. Robert, the real Robert, with his round cheeks and smeared lipstick, was breathing the same air as me, air that had been in my body, part of me, carrying my carbon dioxide – taking my poison to

him, returning his poison to me.

Ben's friends were waiting for him outside the front entrance. They were all from the uni, dressed in moth-eaten op-shop clothes, puffing on their pipes right out in the open. Ben left us behind, with a warning not to follow.

The concert's all mixed up with what came after – I can see fragments really clearly: the spinning red and blue lights, Simon Gallup bent double over his bass, Robert jerking around like a marionette. Some things have an ultimate moment, the sublime, and the Cure's happened in 1992. Well, for me. There's a host of people who hit the high in the eighties with *Faith*. But for me it's *Wish* all the way. I was sixteen, a virgin, and life was something that was going to happen to me. Soon.

I walked out buzzing, the bassline from 'A Forest' throbbing in me. Lou and I didn't speak, we didn't want to spoil the mood. She fussed with her sleeves as we approached Ben and his friends and tried to catch George's eye. But he was talking to a razor-thin girl. They all ignored us.

'See her hair?' Lou whispered. 'It's henna. As soon as we graduate I'm going to henna my hair. The Body Shop sells it.' I looked distastefully at the electric red hair. Little did I know that a year later I'd be sitting for five hours, my hair covered with grass-smelling glop, desperate to have the same electric red.

'I'd rather have black,' I told her. Like Mary, Robert's wife.

'We're off to the Ark,' one of the boys said to Ben, 'coming?'

'Can't,' Ben jerked his thumb at us, 'have to get them home.'

'It's only eleven,' Lou complained.

'School night,' Ben said with a mean smile. Lou flushed.

'Mum said we could stay out till twelve.'

'Drop 'em home and meet us,' the boy said, slapping Ben on the shoulder.

'Ben!' Lou whined.

'Look, I don't want to go the Ark. Why don't we go back to mine for a bit, then we can drop them home on the way into town,' George suggested, wrapping his arm around the thin redhead. Lou looked pleadingly at Ben. He rolled his eyes and agreed.

George's flat was sparsely furnished. There was a mattress on the floor in the bedroom and a card table and steamer chair in the living area. He had a bottle of vodka and a bottle of orange juice; we drank and got stoned. I ran my fingers over the nubby yellow carpet and listened to the throb of the bassline, still pulsing in my blood. *Hear her voice. Calling my name. The sound is deep. In the dark . . .* My mouth was dry. I reached for the orange juice but it was empty. I looked around; George and the redhead were gone. Into the bedroom, I guessed. Lou was asleep on the bare carpet – she never could handle her drink. Ben was rolling a fat bud between his thumb and forefinger; feeling my gaze, he looked up. His face was hazy, his eyes big. *Just follow your eyes. Just follow your eyes.* He grinned at me and crawled over.

I don't remember what he said. His fingers rubbed my Docs. Ten-holes, not eight. He was talking into my ear, his breath hot. I wish I remembered what he said. His hand moved up from my Docs, along my bare legs, beneath the denim mini. I liked the way his hand felt. His kiss was sloppy and wet – I remember being disappointed, I thought older men would kiss better than that. He pushed me gently onto my back and I looked straight up at the bare light bulb. *Lost in a forest . . .* He unbuttoned my tailcoat and pulled down my bra. My breasts looked shockingly white beneath the bright light, the nipples slack and pink. He touched one and it puckered; I flushed, embarrassed. He fumbled with my underpants, they caught on my Docs and it took him a minute to pull them free. I wondered if he'd stop if I asked him to. *Into the trees . . . Into the trees . . .* I didn't ask, and he didn't stop.

The Ajzen's narrow house was crammed with family and friends. Food weighed down tables and sideboards. The evening was a whirl of strange faces.

'Gienia, this is Menachem's sister, Falicja.'

'This is Yosl, our butcher. You must thank him for the food!'

'Dear girl, this is my second cousin Wanda and her boys. Her husband Andrzej is around, somewhere . . .'

She drank too much wine. Her skin was damp from the heat of the house. Elja's brother Schlomo drew her eye. He was thin and dark; his eyes followed her wherever she went.

She was dragged into the parlour and pushed onto the chaise beside her new husband. He took up most of the seat and pushed her hard against the headrest. Their sides pressed together; she could feel the damp heat of his body and imagined she could feel the thump of his heart. Flushed and merry, Mamele Halina danced the *Koyletseh tants* for them, the braided bread rising and falling with her steps. Then Yaacov and the butcher faced off for the *Broygez tants*.

'*Kosher tants!*' someone yelled when they staggered, puffing, to a stop. The group took up the cry and soon the entire room was clapping and chanting: *Kosher tants! Kosher tants!* Elja tugged Gienia to her feet. His big hands swallowed hers. With a dramatic flourish he removed his white handkerchief. The crowd applauded. Elja winked at Gienia and she blushed. Her sweaty fingers grasped the cloth.

The dance started slowly. At first Gienia kept her gaze fixed on Elja's chest. There was a spot of red wine, like a drop of blood, over his heart. She dared a glance upwards, but when she found him looking down at her, she looked away. He was a stranger to her: his accent was strange, his silent, even manner was strange, his big hot hands were strange.

By the time the bedroom door closed behind her Gienia was in a state of wine-soaked anxiety. Someone, probably Halina, had laid a new nightgown on the bed for her. She'd also, thoughtfully, turned off the overhead lights in favour of a dim corner lamp. Gienia leaned against the door as she undressed, afraid he would walk in while she was naked. She shrugged the white nightgown over her head and tied the blue satin ribbon in a tight knot. She looked around for a place to put her wedding dress. She opened his wardrobe. It was a mess. Shoes were piled on the floor and the shirts and pants were all askew. It reassured her. She hung her dress. She went to the mirror and gave her cheeks a pinch. Then she unpinned her hair and picked up his brush. There were brown strands in the bristles. She touched them gently before brushing her hair. She heard voices in the hall and, dropping the brush with a clatter, she scrambled to the bed. She was only just under the covers when there was a knock at the door.

'Come in,' she called, her voice cracking. The door opened and he eased through. She heard the chatter of the wedding guests downstairs. He stood uncertainly in the doorway. He was a little drunk; his hair was tousled and his lips were red from the wine. He smiled sheepishly and closed the door.

'Hello,' he said.

'Hello,' she squeaked. He leaned unsteadily against the wall and looked at her.

'Hello,' he said again. Gienia felt her nerves begin to unravel. He looked very young suddenly, leaning there against the wall, his hair ruffled, his cheeks pink. She watched as he fumbled with his tie. He peered helplessly at the stubborn knot.

'Can you help me?'

Gienia crawled across the bed and gestured for him to come closer. She knelt on the edge while he stood before her. She was conscious of his gaze as she reached for the knot. His skin was warm through his white shirt.

'You're so pretty,' he sighed, lifting his hand to touch her face. His thumb stroked her cheek.

She blushed. The knot came undone and his tie slithered through her fingers.

'Sit down,' she said quietly. He slumped onto the bed, leaning on one arm to stay upright.

She climbed off and untied his shoelaces.

'I drank too much.'

'So it seems,' she agreed, sliding his shoes from his feet. She paused, her cheeks flaming, and looked up at him through her eyelashes. 'Do you want me to take your socks off?'

He nodded. She reached under the cuff of his pants and unhooked the sock from its garter. The rough crinkle of his leg hair tickled her hand. She took off the other sock. Then she stood, uncertain where to look. His big hand took hold of her wrist and tugged her down onto the bed. She sat beside him and folded her hands demurely in her lap. He reached out and stroked her face again. His eyes were a warm gold, like sunlight through a glass of tea. She began to tremble. He cupped her jaw and his strong thumb ran over her lips.

'Gienia.'

'Yes?'

He was going to kiss her. She felt his warm breath first. Then the soft press of his lips, as dry and gentle as Indian cotton.



It's out of order. I fret, looking at the spiky black words on the page. It's three am and I'm still in my work shirt, which is splattered with aioli and chili oil at the cuffs. The glass of sauv blanc I poured two hours ago is still full, sitting under my lamp, throwing ripples across the page in front of me.

These things should have an order. Entree, then main course, then dessert. In China

sometimes they start with dessert. Is that true? Did I read it somewhere or make it up? It doesn't matter. I need order. Before she met Elja, she was home in the *shtetl*. Elja wasn't real yet, he was just a name, a name without a face.



By the end of the day Gienia's back ached. She'd spent hours on her hands and knees, scrubbing the skirting and floorboards.

'You missed a spot,' Old Bobbeh Jasiński snapped at her routinely, cracking her cane against the floor. Vladek's grandmother hunched like a crow in the doorway, her black taffeta skirts rustling as she lifted her arm. With every rustle Gienia tensed, anticipating the crack of cane. The old woman's sharp black eyes skipped from Gienia to Luba, to Aunt, to Aunt and when she was displeased she tilted her head back and peered down her narrow nose. Gienia supposed she should be grateful that the cane only came down on the boards and not on her back.

They finished the main room by evening. The old stove was scraped clean, its belly cold and empty. The windows were washed, the doorframes dusted, the walls scrubbed. The tang of lye soap hung in the air. Her home looked smaller, meaner, and Gienia felt lonely at the sight of it.

She massaged her back as they walked home to the *yerishe*. The sun lingered in the west, reluctant to go down, staining the sky a deep buttery gold. Cobblestones gave way to dirt roads and soon they were on the outskirts of the *shtetl*.

The Jasiński *yerishe* was a rambling building, expanded over the decades, and divided into apartments, which shared a central stair. Vladek's apartment was on the ground floor; it was the largest and was presided over not by Luba, but by his grandmother.

Bobbeh Jasiński entered with a snap of her cane against the doorframe, making Vladek's eldest

daughter jump guiltily. Dena was at the stove, baby on her hip, pouring water into an already bubbling stew.

Her great-grandmother's eyes narrowed and she took a slow, accusing sniff. 'You let it boil dry again,' she snapped.

'No, I didn't, Bobbeh,' Dena said meekly.

'You did! I can smell burned meat. Daydreaming again!'

Luba eased past Gienia and shuffled to the stove, taking the water jug from her daughter. The baby struggled in Dena's arms, reaching for Luba. Dena shot her mother a desperate glance and Luba took the baby from her too.

'Lazy, lazy girl!' Bobbeh Jasiński rasped, her cane tapping viciously on the floor as she walked to her chair by the stove. The breath hissed through her teeth as she sat, her arthritic knees clicking. The hiss became a gasp and the old woman rummaged angrily beneath her *toches*. Dena moaned.

'And what is this?' the old crow demanded. A small book, bound in green cloth, dangled from her thin, twisted fingers.

'A book, Bobbeh,' Dena's voice was barely audible.

'A book!'

'The *Tsene-rene*!' Dena pleaded, reaching for her women's bible.

'I don't approve of women reading,' Bobbeh Jasiński replied sharply, her gaze boring into Luba's back. Luba didn't turn from the stove; she neither assisted nor rebelled against the older woman. Bobbeh Jasiński tucked the book into the pocket of her old-fashioned skirts.

'Not even the *Tsene-rene*, Bobbeh?' Dena asked desperately.

The old woman's cane lashed out and caught Dena across the shins. 'Don't talk back. Help your mother, round up the children. Get them bathed before supper.'

'I'll help you,' Gienia sighed, casting an envious eye at the stool beside the stove.

'I hate her,' Dena said tearfully as they carried pails to the pump.

'You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin,' Gienia quoted half-heartedly.

'I don't care, Aunty. I hate her, I *do*. If God knew her he'd understand.'

'It's not forever,' Gienia reminded her as she took the cool pump in her stiff hand.

'I wish it were me going to Warsaw,' Dena complained.

'You'd miss your parents.'

'I'd come back and visit. Tatteh says you'll be rich. You'll be able to come back whenever you want.'

'He may not let me.'

'I still wish it were me. I'm supposed to marry Ignacy Rejch one day. He's four years *younger* than me,' Dena complained.

'He seems a nice boy,' Gienia said.

'He's *short*.'

'He'll grow.' Gienia ignored the disgusted look her niece shot her and carried her pail back inside.

This is the last dawn I will see. She lingered at the pump at first light, watching the horizon pinken above the fields. *This is the last time I will clean these boards.* She lingered over the floorboards in the front room of the little house on the *shtetl* square. She caressed the silvery old wood with the stiff brush, feeling an ache in her gut and in her bones. When she was done she sat back on her heels and gazed hungrily at the room where her parents had slept. Where her parents had died.

'Gienia?' Luba called from the kitchen door. Gienia's stomach lurched. She didn't want to go. She forced herself to her feet, forced herself to leave the room, to shut the door behind her. She crossed the main room haltingly and saw Luba turn her back, to give her a moment's

privacy. Over there she had fallen and chipped her tooth. And there, where the table had stood, was where her mother had shown her how to stretch noodles. And here, by the stove, Vitka had sat the night before her wedding, sobbing into Mamme's skirts. Mamme's rough hands had patiently stroked Vitka's pale hair and her smile was sad and kind and beautiful.

'Tears are bad luck,' Mamme had said gently.

'I don't think Vitka wants to get married,' Gienia whispered to her mother, sidling closer.

'I do,' Vitka protested, looking up from their mother's lap, her round face pink and wet. 'I do.'

'Of course you do,' Mamme agreed. Gienia frowned, not understanding.

It hadn't been the marriage Vitka minded. It was the leaving. And now, alone in the bare house, one hand resting on the cold stove, Gienia found that she minded the leaving too.

'Gienia,' Luba said softly. Gienia took her bucket and brush in hand and left the little house. She couldn't resist looking over her shoulder as they trudged away. The windows were shuttered, the chimney was smokeless, and the panes of glass in the kitchen door reflected the square back at her. *This is the last time I will see my home.* And she ached.

strangers when we meet

I'm woken up by a pounding on my front door. I'm not an easy person to wake. By the time I get out of bed it sounds like someone's jack-hammering my door. Not a patient person, obviously.

When I open the door, there's Lizzie on the landing, looking hot and irritated, strands of hair straggling out of her careful ponytail, flopping into her eyes. There's a suitcase at her feet.

I must look puzzled because she glowers at me and says, 'You *did* know I was coming?'

'Should I?'

'If you'd listen to your messages, you would,' she says through tight lips.

'Oh,' I think of my message bank and the messages I can't bear to listen to. Work, Mum, and obviously Lizzie. '*Those* messages.' I'm concerned by the fact that she brings the suitcase inside. I guess she's staying with me.

'You know it's a one-bedroom?'

'No, I *didn't* know.' She's pissed off.

I watch as she dumps her suitcase by the couch and heads for the kitchen.

'Do you have *anything* to eat besides Roll Ups and chardonnay?' Lizzie's rummaging through my cupboards, having given up on the fridge, which is empty except for jars of chili and mayonnaise. I'm even out of milk.

'Chardonnay!' I squawk in horror. 'No one drinks chardonnay anymore.' I snatch the bottle from her pink-taloned grip. 'This is *Grosset*, it's not for drinking.'

She rolls her eyes at me. "'Nobody drinks chardonnay anymore". Really. I know plenty of people who do. *I* drink chardonnay.'

'Yeah, I bet. I'd heard the eighties were back.'

'I need carbs,' she insists.

'I thought carbs were outré.'

Her thin lips compress further.

'Really,' I continue, 'I remember last Christmas: "no stuffing, no bread, no potato, no pudding."' "

'Don't you have a packet of pasta? Some crackers?'

'Obviously not. Have a Roll Up, they're fat free, I lost five kilos once just eating Roll Ups.'

'They're not real food,' she complains, flipping the box to read the ingredients.

'Oh, of course, they're *pretend* food.' I switch topics when she capitulates and tears the wrapper off one. 'Why aren't you staying with Mum and Dennis?'

Her nose wrinkles. I'm not sure whether it's my mention of The Parents or the taste of the Roll Up. 'Oh, you know,' she says vaguely.

Well, *I* know. I'd die if I had to stay with them. Eating dinner in that long room to the metronome of the grandfather clock, watching endless news and current affairs shows, listening to Dennis' congested snoring rumbling down the hall all night. Oh God, and the coffee. The cheapest, powderiest instant coffee. I'm breaking out in a cold sweat just thinking of it.

'I won't get in your hair,' Lizzie tells me, modestly shielding her mouth with her hand, to hide the sticky fruit gum locking her teeth together. 'And it'll be great, won't it, spending the holidays together?'

'But I only have one bedroom,' I protest.

'I don't mind sleeping on the couch.'

I stare at her like she's grown an extra head. Lizzie sleep on the *couch*? 'Why don't you stay in a hotel?' Mini soaps, room service, a pool – that's more Lizzie's style.

'Trying to save money.' She heads back to the lounge.

'But you earn a packet.'

'Hardly, and Sydney's expensive. We can't all afford to drink Grosset you know.'

'I don't *drink* it, and it's not like I bought it – it was a tip.'

'*This* is a tip, Molly,' she says, looking around the flat. 'What's with all the fish?'

'Tip,' I growl.

'Don't people use money anymore?'

'Do you?'

'I don't tip. This is Australia – we pay our service staff.'

'Praise be,' I drawl, dropping onto my stained couch and resting my feet on the crate that doubles as a bookshelf and a coffee table.

'If you want to be better paid, get a better job.'

'I'm not qualified for anything.'

'And whose fault is that?'

'Oh, Miss! Miss! Pick me! I know the answer! It's *my* fault – I'm reaping what I've sowed, I'm lying in the bed I made, I missed the road less traveled.'

Lizzie rolls her eyes and crams the rest of the Roll Up in her mouth.

Mum married Dennis when I was twelve. He was a widower and Lizzie came with the deal. She was a year older than me but I already had boobs and a period and she didn't. Lizzie was lean and compact, all long muscle. It was the dancing – she did ballet. I wanted to but felt awkward in front of the mirror, awkward in front of all those reflected girls, awkward in front of myself. I only lasted one class. Then I took up sport – swimming in summer and hockey in winter. I liked the loneliness of swimming, the slap of the water against my ears; watching the tiled floor, the pool

edge, the rising arms and splashing feet of other swimmers through the yellow-tint of my goggles. And hockey was great because I got to hit things.

I convinced myself that ballet was useless. ‘What does it do for you?’ I sneered at Lizzie when she returned home, her hair pulled back so tight it stretched her eyebrows towards her ears, ‘Except teach you to walk like a duck.’

I was awful to her, I admit it. But she was older, thinner, smarter, and her mother was neatly contained in a painted ceramic frame, while my father was in Queensland with a bleached blonde named Rhonda. Lizzie’s mother had left her a gold locket, diamond stud earrings and a hand-stitched quilt. If I was lucky my father sent me a fiver at Christmas. She didn’t have to be awful to me – just her existence was awful.

I watch Lizzie set herself up in my lounge room, throwing her pillow on the couch, plugging her radio alarm clock into the socket, hanging her linens from the curtain rod so they won’t crease. She takes over so completely that after a few days I feel like I have to knock to enter my own lounge.



She hid behind the hen house. It was ridiculous, she felt how ridiculous it was, but for a moment she didn’t care. For a moment she considered roosting with the hens, hiding among the feathers and dung, being a useful, brainless chicken. Anything was preferable to the cold horror of climbing into the cart and being taken away. She clung to the rough boards of the hen house and closed her eyes to the dusty yard. *Please God . . .* but the prayer ended there. She didn’t really want to be a chicken.

She heard the children calling for her. She'd miss the train, *her* train. *Please God . . .* she prayed, *make me less afraid*.



'What have you done, you numb cunt?' Chef snarls.

I hate that word. *Cunt*. A glottal, curt, ugly word. Growing up it was a secret word, a swift exhale, a whisper under the breath; a word to make your cheeks burn and your stomach turn.

'Never let a boy say it *to* you, or in front of you!' my high school Sex Ed teacher told us, with an edge of hysteria in her voice. She didn't use the whole word, she called it the 'C-word'. She told us it was as bad as a boy raping us.

At uni I did a bunch of Women's Studies courses, read Marilyn French and Germaine Greer and a lot of graffiti in the toilets – 'My cunt is beautiful', 'My cunt is my own', 'Suck my cunt' – but I still couldn't bring myself to say it. Even in my head it was always the 'C-word'.

Then I started working here and it's as common as the spitting of the coffee machine. *You old cunt*, Tommy says affectionately as he passes me in the bar. *He's such a fucking cunt*, Nat snarls, whenever Harry tries to grope her in the cold store. And the old favourite, straight from Chef's mouth, every time I screw up – *What have you done, you numb cunt?* It's got so I hear it in my head. When I drop a glass (*numb cunt*) when I forget to call away a table (*numb cunt*) when I sit in the dark late at night, drunk and poisoned (*NUMB CUNT*).

'What have you done, you numb cunt?' Chef snarls, and I'm glad he's not talking to me. Ping Pong's just dropped a stack of dinner plates. The crack of them breaking is

heavy, I feel it under my skin, like a vibration. Poor old Ping Pong is already squatting over the bone white fragments, lifting them carefully in his dark fingers, shuffling sideways to drop them into the bin.

‘That’s coming out of your pay,’ Chef growls, kicking a triangle of plate at him. It skids into Ping Pong’s rubber shoe. Ping Pong’s face stays blank, he just keeps lifting the ceramic shards, they clink atonally against the lino. ‘Michelle,’ Chef calls towards the dry store as he unties his apron and gets his keys down from on top of the radio, ‘make sure he’s washed all the herbs by the time I get back. The lazy cunt.’

It’s between shifts. I’m slouched in a chair by the pass, flipping through an *Adelaide Review* I’ve read twice before. My stomach is growling but there’s still an hour until staff meals are up. I wonder if Michelle will let me filch a bread roll when Chef leaves. He’s off to check out a new chorizo supplier, some wog butcher in the eastern suburbs.

‘Can you get ice while you’re out?’ Kevin asks, popping his head through the office door, ‘the ice machine’s packed up again.’

‘Not my department,’ Chef replies, ‘Send Molly.’

‘I don’t have my car,’ I say absently, not looking up. I hear him sigh.

‘Give her the money and I’ll drive her.’

‘Why can’t you just get it yourself?’ Kevin asks tightly.

‘Told you, not my department. Do I send you out to get chorizo?’

So I go with him, try a slice of spicy, fatty chorizo and listen to him chat with the wog butcher, then I climb back into the Land Cruiser and get groped.

‘We can’t,’ I protest, trying to remove Chef’s hands from my arse.

‘Sure, we can, we’ve got –’ he pauses to check his watch, ‘at least an hour and a half. We can go to yours, it’s only a minute away.’

‘It’s not that,’ I reply, thinking it would be half my luck if he *would* take an hour and

a half, 'my stepsister's staying with me.'

'So?'

'So, it's just a one-bedroom.'

'Well, she'll hardly be using the bedroom now, will she? It's four o'clock. She's probably out.'

I wish. Lizzie's been with me for four days and she's spent every day asleep on the couch. She gets up to eat toast, or pasta, or cheese, and to pee, and that's about it. I think she might be depressed – her behaviour reminds me of Hero.

I really don't want to fuck Chef with Lizzie in the next room. But he's chewing on my neck and his hands have drifted and I find I don't mind what they're doing at all.

'Come on,' he whispers, and I give in.

Surprisingly Lizzie isn't there when I get home. I check every room, and breathe a sigh of relief.

'Let's have a shower,' Chef calls from the bathroom, and I hear the water start to flow, 'I'm all sweaty from work. It's a hundred degrees in that kitchen.'

Last time it was late and we were both drunk. I'm a bit nervous, my bathroom catches the afternoon sun, every ripple of cellulite and every pink blemish will be visible. Thank God I shaved this morning, I think, as I head to the bathroom. He's already in the shower, singing and soaping himself up with Lizzie's expensive Chanel body wash.

'You'll smell like a girl,' I say as I unbutton my work shirt. 'What'll everyone say?'

'They'll ask me who I've been fucking,' Chef sticks his head out of the shower to watch me undress. Through the steamed-up glass door I can see his hand sliding rhythmically up and down his already erect cock.

'Don't rush yourself, buddy,' I warn, 'If I don't orgasm this time, I'll chop it off.'

He laughs and yanks me into the shower before I can get my underwear off. It pisses me off: it's my only clean bra.

Afterwards I go through Lizzie's suitcase, hoping against hope that there's a bra I can wear. I tip the whole suitcase out onto the couch. I check the tags on her bras, she's only a damn B-cup. I try and squeeze myself into a white lace Calvin Klein. I hear Chef groan from the doorway and look up.

'Fuck,' he moans, and lunges at me, reaching for my boobs. I don't blame him, I look like a hooker, my breasts are all swollen up and pressed together and my nipples don't fit under the lace.

'Get off,' I try to slap his hands away, 'we've got to get back to work.' But it's impossible, he's twice the size of me.

'Don't take it off,' he orders as he sits on the couch and hauls me on top of him.

'It hurts.'

'Oh, God, baby, does it ever.'

By the time we're finished I feel like I need another shower, but I don't have time. I struggle out of Lizzie's bra and rummage through the discarded clothes on my bedroom floor for one of mine. Before we leave I cram Lizzie's clothes back into the suitcase. There's something hard wrapped in a shirt. A book. I pull it out but my brain barely has time to register the title, Chef's yelling at me to hurry up, we still have to get ice. I zip the suitcase closed and leave, feeling sticky and dirty and wishing I didn't have to go back to work. She *can't* be, I think vaguely, as I slam the door behind me.

The shift feels longer than usual. I'm working with Kevin, Tommy, Trevor and Hanna. Tommy's the only one who's any good. I don't mind Trev and Hanna but they're very inexperienced. Hanna can't tell a GSM from a pinot noir, or gruyere from haloumi;

she's made so many mistakes Chef starts shouting at her the minute he sees her, whether she's fucked up yet or not. By nine o'clock she's a nervous wreck, blinking back tears and jumping like a bee-stung kangaroo every time the food bell rings.

'I'll go,' I volunteer, as Chef hammers the bell so hard I can hear the springs straining.

'Where the fuck were you?' he spits. 'Timbuktu?'

I don't say anything, I just gather up the pannacotta and brulee and head down to table twelve. He's two different people – and both of them are complete cocks, if you ask me.

Kevin has to knock Hanna off before the rest of us; she's in the corner of the bar, crying into a wine-splattered napkin.

'He called me a cunt,' she wails when Kevin asks her what's wrong. 'It's not right.'

'No,' Kevin agrees, looking over at us helplessly.

'It's got to be illegal. Isn't it illegal?' She looks up at us angrily. We shrug. Most chefs are bastards.

'It's like the army,' Tommy volunteers suddenly. He's said something like that to me before. 'You get all these men together –'

'Uneducated men,' I interrupt.

'Uneducated men,' Tommy amends, 'and they all go through apprenticeships where they're yelled at and abused and called stinky little squibs –'

'Cunts,' I interrupt again.

'Yeah, cunts,' Tommy nods, 'and then one day they're in charge and . . . they just do what they know . . .'

'I think it's illegal,' Hanna says with a big sniff. Kevin looks worried.

'Go on home,' he tells her, absently patting her on the shoulder.

‘That’s illegal too,’ I say, trying to lighten the mood and get at Kevin at the same time, ‘sexual harassment.’ He removes his hand so fast he hits a rack of glasses and sends them crashing to the floor. Every patron in the restaurant looks over at us.

Tommy giggles and takes a bow.

‘Get back to work,’ Kevin snaps at me and Tommy.

Hanna calls for a lift home and sits in the bar with a glass of bubbly (Kevin lets her have the Jansz, I notice). We’re astonished when it’s Adrian who comes to get her. He kisses her on the forehead and dashes upstairs to get her stuff. Tommy and I are open-mouthed.

‘You sneaky little mole!’ Tommy gasps. ‘How long has this been going on?’

‘About a week,’ she says, draining her glass.

‘Nat told you so,’ I tell him as we watch them leave, Adrian’s long, muscled arm draped over her shoulders.

‘Doesn’t prove anything except that he goes both ways,’ Tommy sniffs.

‘Who goes both ways?’ Chef asks as he comes into the bar for his nightly beer.

‘Adrian,’ we chorus.

‘Adrian? He’s a raving queen, in’t he?’

‘What’s that smell?’ Tommy’s nose is in the air.

‘He’s doing Hanna,’ I tell Chef quickly.

‘She might as well be a boy,’ he says, his gaze dropping to my chest.

‘Are you wearing perfume?’ Tommy leans close to Chef and inhales.

‘It’s not me,’ Chef snorts, twisting the top off a Stella, ‘must be Molly.’

After he leaves the bar Tommy sniffs me and appears satisfied. ‘Chanel?’ he says, ‘I thought you were a Gucci girl?’

‘Lizzie’s,’ I answer, not looking him in the eye.

Lizzie's still up when I get home. She's got the telly on Letterman and is reading one of my books. The sight of the book makes me think of her suitcase. She's going to go spare at me.

'Sorry,' I blurt, before she can attack. 'It's just I needed... uh, a bra.'

'What?'

'Your suitcase. Mine were all dirty, so I checked, but of course I couldn't . . . you're a B . . . then I knocked it . . . spilled it . . .'

'What are you talking about?'

I glance at the suitcase. Maybe she hasn't opened it yet. 'Nothing.'

'How can you read this stuff?' She holds up the book she's reading, it has a royal blue cover. Olga Lengyel's autobiography. Testimony. Of Auschwitz. 'Doesn't it give you nightmares?'

'Yeah,' I say absently as I head to the kitchen to get something to eat. Chef and I didn't eat anything during our break, though I noticed he made himself a nice steak sandwich at the end of his shift.

Lizzie went shopping. The fridge is packed with cheese and milk and two tubs of butter, but not much else.

'Hey Liz,' I say, popping my head through the doorway, 'what's with all the cheese? Thought you lived on broccoli and sprouts and stuff.'

'I just felt like cheese.'

I get a chill as I watch her hide behind the book. Felt like cheese my arse. My stomach growls. I decide I can't do this conversation on an empty stomach and head back to the fridge. I feel like pizza but it will take forty minutes if I dial one and I'm really hungry *now*. I notice there's a pot on the stove. I take the lid off. Macaroni and cheese. At least it looks homemade. I slop it into a bowl and microwave it. I pour

myself a glass of the sangiovese that's open on the bench and drain it in three swallows. I pour myself another one. I must be wrong, I tell myself. What a leap to make. The book was probably a freebie at the magazine. She's always getting free books; God knows she passes a lot on to me – mostly the diet books. The last one she gave me was *French Women Don't Get Fat*. I really enjoyed it, only I don't think I read it properly because I gained two kilos afterwards. Too much wine and chocolate and not enough leek soup, I guess. The microwave dings and snaps me out of my thoughts.

I take my wine and mac and cheese into the lounge.

'This is just *awful*,' she breathes, looking up from the book. 'Her *son* . . .'

Olga Lengyel. I try to resist the pull of the book but it's as strong as a riptide. She sent him to the left, to save him from work. She didn't know. I see it all through her eyes: the ramp, the lights, the selection, but then it warps into something else, seen through the eyes of someone else, someone less unambiguous; someone who makes me guilty.

○ ○ ○

Gienia stirred from her stupor. Beneath her, the boards shivered. The brakes shrieked. She sat up straighter, head cocked, eyes wide, listening. She could hear dogs barking. And something else . . . low voices, the grit of boots on concrete. She struggled to her feet. Her head swam and she leaned against the wall to steady herself. A crawling caul of sweat covered her skin. She clumsily stepped over the bodies, inching her way to the wire-toothed gap. Others in the car were stirring.

'What's happening?'

'We've stopped.'

'Where's the luggage? Jerzy get the luggage. The luggage!'

The voices were weary and raw-edged with hysteria.

Gienia stood on tiptoe, slipping in the slime. She wasn't tall enough. All she could see was the night sky, fogged white by powerful electric lights. An airfield? There was a scrabble at the door. Gienia hurried back to Friedl.

'Get up.' She tapped the younger woman lightly on the cheek. Friedl opened her eyes.

'This is it,' Gienia snapped nervously. 'Get up.' She yanked Friedl's arm, tugging her to her feet. Wood splintered as the nails were pulled from the door.

'Where are we?' Friedl asked. Her lips were dry and cracking. A triangle of skin flapped as she spoke. The door screeched on its track. Piercing white light flooded the car. Gienia lifted a hand to block it out, squinting. It was painful after so many days in the dim car. For a moment the night hung motionless, silent, suspended. Then, shouts like the retorts of a rifle:

'Raus! Los!'

'Los! Los! Schneller!'

'Alle heraus!'

A dark arm reached through the fog of light and seized Gienia. She tightened her hold on Friedl and together they were yanked from the transport. Gienia stumbled as she hit the ground; only the steadying weight of Friedl kept her upright. They scuttled forward, afraid of being trampled by the descending mass. A heavy club hit Gienia across the shoulders. Her yell was lost in the cacophony of sound. Deep-chested German bellows overpowered the high wails of the crowd and the snapping of the dogs.

Elbowed and shoved, Gienia and Friedl were forced along the platform.

A troupe of men jogged towards the train. They were grey-skinned and emaciated, their heads too big for their bodies. Their brow bones jutted above their deep-set, shadowed eyes;

their heads were badly shaved; tufts of hair still sprouted like hardy steppe grass. They clambered into the open cattle cars and began tossing down the weak and the dead.

Gienia cleared her throat. 'Stand up straight, Friedl.'

Friedl moaned, her gaze fixed on the convicts and the bodies falling to the ground with wet *thuds*.

'Friedl!' Gienia snapped. She grabbed the girl's face and forced it away from the train.

'Oh look!' Friedl choked, the fog clearing from her eyes. 'Ambulances!' Gienia looked. Open trucks rumbled up to the platform. Large red crosses hung on their sides.

'That's good, isn't it Gienia? They have ambulances!'

Gienia wouldn't have gone so far as to call them ambulances . . . but the red crosses were reassuring.

'*Achtung!*' A genial German strode to the head of the platform; his uniform had razor sharp creases and the insignia on his cap flamed under the bright lights. He smiled widely, revealing a gap between his front teeth.

'*Willkommen!*' he bellowed, stretching his arms wide in a gesture of welcome. The crowd shifted restlessly. *He doesn't seem too bad.* The officer gestured and a guard stepped forward. The officer spoke briefly. At the end the smile dropped from his lips and his gaze turned hard.

'Welcome! This is your home now, you are here to work,' the guard translated in perfect Polish.

'*Volksdeutscher!*' Gienia heard someone growl.

'If you work hard, we will treat you well. If you don't, you will be punished.'

Friedl inched closer to Gienia.

'Please divide yourselves into two groups: women and children to my left, men to my right.'

A wave of noise rippled down the platform.

'Shimon!'

'Darling, take the children.'

'I love you!'

'You take the bag, I'll be fine.'

'But your toothbrush, your razor!'

'I'll be fine, dearest, I'll be fine.'

'There must be a women's camp and a men's camp,' Gienia said to Friedl as they maneuvered to the left.

'What about the children?' Friedl asked.

'There'll be something for them. Those people could get work out of a stone.'

'Gienia! Friedl!' It was Wanda, shuffling towards them, her two boys in tow. 'We lost you!' Wanda's old hat was askew. The lines in her face were deeper. Tears dripped from her chin. She didn't seem to notice.

'So horrible,' she said breathlessly. 'So horrible.'

'Oh, Aunty!' Friedl began to cry too.

'Wipe your faces,' Gienia said sharply, glancing towards the guards.

'Achtung!'

Two queues ran the length of the platform. People stared miserably over at their husbands, wives, parents and children.

'You will march before the officers!' the guard ordered. 'They will tell you to go left or right. Please be orderly and do not speak. Women and children first!'

The line of women snaked before the SS. Gienia steeled herself.

'I want to go on the truck,' Friedl moaned, 'I'm tired.'

'Go where you're told,' Gienia said shortly. She kept an eye on the women ahead. The old people and children went to the trucks. Was that the wrong way?

'Please let them send me to the trucks,' Friedl prayed, 'please!'

Gienia's heart lodged in her throat as they trotted before the Germans. The broad-faced, genial man smiled when he looked them over. But it was an arrogant bronze-skinned officer, with eyes like iced-over windowpanes, who gestured them to the right. Gienia hurried Friedl away before she could protest. Behind them she could hear Wanda wail as her boys were gestured left and she was ordered right.

'No! Please, please let me stay with them. They've never been without me. Please, I beg you.'

Gienia glanced behind and saw Wanda sob as she scuttled towards the trucks with her children.



It's all wrong. Bits and pieces lurching out of the darkness. There should be order, structure, but there she is in Auschwitz, before the Germans have even invaded. In my head it's all happening at the same time. I have to get control.

I'm in the lounge, sitting on the carpet; Gienia's shut up in the microwave box, under my bed. She's still in the *shtetl*.

No, she's not, a little voice disagrees, she's in Birkenau. She's always in Birkenau. She's thin and cold and alone and you did it to her.

My head spins. I have trouble orienting myself. I'm in the lounge, sitting on the carpet; Lizzie's on the couch, I'm eating macaroni and drinking sangiovese, nothing has changed, you haven't gone anywhere, you are eating macaroni.

She's dying. You're killing her, the persistent little voice continues.

Lounge. Macaroni. Wine.

I turn the volume up on Letterman, and when it's loud enough I can think again. 'This is good,' I tell Lizzie through a mouthful of macaroni. 'Is there blue cheese in here?'

She nods absently, still with Olga.

There you go. Blue cheese. If she was . . . *you know* . . . she couldn't eat blue cheese, could she? But she can, so she's not.

'Her son,' Lizzie repeats hopelessly, closing the book and swallowing. 'How can you read this stuff?'

I turn Letterman up another notch and take a big mouthful of sangiovese. 'Want some wine?' I ask.

'No.' She reaches for her suitcase. I hear the zipper and tense. There's silence. I look over. Her clothes are in a mess and the book, with its lime green cover, is sitting right on top. *Up the Duff*, the lurid red letters proclaim. She turns to me, her face stiff, like a clay mask. *Don't smile, or you'll crack it.*

'I said sorry,' I say gently, 'I needed a bra.'

'We're not the same size,' her voice is flat.

'So I found out,' I grimace, thinking of Chef's expression when he saw me exploding from her B-cup.

'You went through my suitcase!' It seems to have sunk in. The mask cracks and a stain the colour of pomegranate juice blotches her white skin.

'Sorry,' I repeat miserably, tearing my gaze away from the book. 'But you're not, so it's not that bad, is it? I mean, if you were, and I found out like this it would be awful, wouldn't it?'

'Were what?'

'You know,' I gesture towards the book, 'up the duff.'

The pomegranate stain darkens to beetroot. 'I am.'

'What?'

'Up. The. Duff.' She spits out the words.

'But . . . blue cheese . . .' I falter.

'What about it?'

'You can't have it. Pregnant chicks are always telling us to take it out of the prosciutto, peach and walnut salad.'

'You can have it if it's *cooked*,' she tells me through clenched teeth.

'Oh.' Fuck. FUCK! 'You're pregnant!' I gulp. 'Pregnant?' I look stupidly at her stomach. 'Aren't you on the pill?'

'Sort of.'

'What do you mean, sort of?'

'Sometimes I forget.'

I'm astonished. This is Lizzie. *Lizzie*.

'What?' she snaps, 'I can't miss the road less traveled now and then?'

'There's a difference between missing the road less traveled and getting rear-ended on the highway.'

'That makes no sense,' she huffs as she heads to the bathroom.

'What are you going to do?' I shove aside the congealing macaroni and follow her.

'I don't know.'

'You don't *know!*' *Lizzie!* 'What did Jim say?'

'He doesn't know.'

'What!'

'It's not his. The engagement's off.' She picks up her toothbrush and starts scrubbing. I watch her waist for signs of a bump, a bulge, a *crinkle* of extra flesh. She

doesn't look any different. Typical.

'What?' It didn't sink in.

'The engagement's off,' she mutters through spearmint foam.

'Obviously, if you're knocked up by someone else.'

'Before!' she shouts, speckling me with foam. She looks rabid.

'What?'

'We broke up *before*.'

'Before the bump?' Or lack of bump.

'Don't call it that!'

'What do I call it?'

'Nothing, it's not a person yet.'

'Who's the dad?'

She glares at me.

'Sorry,' I apologise. 'Who's the sperm donor?'

'Fuck off.'

'Hey, little ears are listening.'

She slams the door in my face.

I can't sleep for thinking about Lizzie and the baby. *Baby*. Oh my God, there's a baby.

It's not sinking in. There can't be a baby, her waist is the size of my forearm. Idiot, I think, it'd be the size of a pea. Or smaller. Think of salmon roe, that's miniscule. I wonder how far along she is. I wonder what she's going to tell Dennis. I wonder if she'll still be sleeping on my couch when the kid's in school.

After a while I get up and go put the kettle on. I hover at the threshold of the lounge, wondering if she's asleep.

‘What?’ her voice snaps from the darkness.

‘Want a cup of tea?’

There’s a long sigh. ‘Peppermint.’

‘Okay.’ I pad back to the kitchen. I could give her a teabag, but I’m feeling generous so I give her the real stuff, in my pot for one. When I get back to the lounge she’s switched the lamp on. Hero made it for me, there are a series of angels cut out of Pepsi cans, dangling on silver stalks around three small bare bulbs. Two of the globes are out, so the room’s pretty dark.

‘Thanks.’

‘No problem,’ I turn to leave.

‘You can have your tea in here if you want,’ she says. She doesn’t sound as if she cares one way or the other.

‘Yeah, I know,’ I reply, ‘it’s my flat.’ I make myself a caffeine-free chai, heavy on the milk, and join her. ‘So,’ I say abruptly, ‘can it call me Aunty?’

She rolls her eyes. I roll mine back at her.

‘You’re keeping it?’

She blows on the surface of her tea and doesn’t answer.

‘When are you going to tell the Parents from Hell?’

‘Why do you call them that?’ she sighs.

‘I’m supposed to see Mum tomorrow, do they know you’re here or do I have to lie?’

‘They’re okay.’

‘Well, we’ll see, won’t we.’

‘She’s always been good to me.’

‘I know, I know, she sewed your tutus and baked your birthday cakes, held your head when you hurled . . .’

‘I wanted to hate her when Dad brought her home – I thought she’d make me call her Mum.’

‘So you’ll tell her tomorrow?’ I interrupt.

‘Yeah, I guess.’

‘Then I’d better get my sleep,’ I say, gulping down the last of my chai.

Lying in bed I can still see a line of light under the door. After a while I hear the ruffle of pages. I wonder if she’s reading Olga Lengyel or Kaz Cooke. At the moment I wonder which one would give her more nightmares. Must remember to buy her a *Vogue* in the morning, I think as I drift off.

We’ve both got keys to Mum and Dennis’ but we knock at the front door. Lizzie’s as rigid as a tent pole. I hear Mum’s shoes whisper on the carpet as she comes down the hall.

‘Surprise!’ I shout as the door swings wide. Both Mum and Lizzie jerk and gasp.

‘Molly!’ Mum scolds, holding a hand to her heart. It’s a minute before she registers Lizzie’s presence. ‘Lizzie!’

‘That’s the surprise,’ I say, easing past her. I watch as they hug. They really could be mother and daughter. Mum’s got her tinted hair neatly bobbed; she’s wearing a beige shirt, cream slacks and a gold chain at her neck. Very restrained. Lizzie’s in jeans and a very expensive cotton shirt, with small gold beads sewn around the neckline. Equally restrained. She reminds me of Audrey Hepburn. The kind of woman I can never imagine having an orgasm. But that’s deceptive, surely? Lizzie’s been reading the *Cosmo* sealed sections since she was thirteen, she’s probably had more orgasms than I have.

‘When did you get in?’ Mum asks Lizzie, leading her in. Lizzie and I exchange

glances. 'Where's your luggage?' Mum's looking out at the veranda, puzzled.

'She's staying with me, Mum.'

'But you've only got the one bedroom.'

'Two bedrooms,' I chirp, 'if you count the lounge.'

'Don't be silly,' Mum says. 'You'll stay here.'

Lizzie stays silent as we move through to the back room.

'Dennis!' Mum calls. 'Look who's here!'

Dennis is in his recliner, doing the crossword. The enormous dictionary Lizzie gave him for his birthday is balancing precariously on the arm, if he's not careful it might fall off and squash the cat. Mum said he wants the thesaurus for Christmas – I'll let Lizzie get it, it's expensive.

'Lizzie!' Dennis' face lights up and he struggles out of his chair. The dictionary wobbles. He hugs her and I watch my mother beam at him. They're a sweet old couple really – for Parents from the Black Lagoon, anyway.

'Good thing I bought a big roast! We'll eat in the dining room,' Mum decides, rounding me up. 'Set the table, would you, Molly?'

I hate the formal dining room. It's where we had Family Meetings when I was a kid. The sound of that grandfather clock drives me mental.

I put out the place mats, the good silver, the linen napkins.

'I can't believe you're making me do this on my day off,' I yell in the general direction of the kitchen.

We have gin and tonics before dinner.

'Just a mineral water for me, Dad,' Lizzie demurs when Dennis tries to hand her the gin.

'She's on another diet,' I pipe up, 'I'll have hers.'

'You don't need to diet,' Dennis scoffs.

Lizzie smiles weakly and insists on the mineral water.

'When are you going to tell them?' I hiss at Lizzie when Dennis gets up from the table to carve the roast.

'After dinner.'

Dennis doesn't take it well. But, then, Lizzie doesn't tell him well. She gets all belligerent and snotty.

'You'll come home,' Dennis tells her.

'Dad,' she warns, looking snottier by the second.

'You're keeping it?' my mum asks gently, and somewhat sadly. Lizzie thrusts her chin out; it catches the light. I haven't seen her without makeup since we were at school. She looks older without it, less defined.

'Of course she's keeping it,' Dennis snaps, 'Family is family.'

'Blood is thicker than water,' I add, unable to stop myself. Dennis gives me a black look, his straggly eyebrows drawing together like bison huddling for warmth. *Tatanka*, I think stupidly, picturing Kevin Costner with his fingers framing his head like horns.

'I haven't decided,' Lizzie insists. The bison twitch. Gently, Liz, or they'll stampede. My mother rests a calming hand on Dennis' arm.

'We could paint your old room,' Mum says brightly, 'And we could turn Molly's room into a nursery.' My mother, the domestic goddess. When in crisis, redecorate.

'I'm staying with Molly,' Lizzie insists.

'On the couch?' Dennis asks in astonishment.

'For now.'

'I'd like to speak to my daughter,' Dennis growls, looking at Mum.

‘Coffee?’ Mum chirps, as though Lizzie and I can’t hear him, ‘Molly, come and help me make the coffee.’ She steers me to the kitchen.

I strain to hear what they’re saying through the closed door but Mum snaps the radio on and turns it up. It’s talkback, about the cost of maintaining the Baxter detention centre. I glower at her but she ignores me, fussing over her horrid instant coffee and her floral mugs.

Eventually there’s silence, a sudden, unnatural silence, and Mum and I look at each other cautiously. Mum gathers up the tray of coffee and clears her throat before we walk in, to let them know we’re coming.

‘Coffee’s ready!’ she sings, keeping her voice breezy and bright. She stops abruptly and I cannon into her back. The coffee mugs clink as they topple over and a shower of coffee sprays across Mum’s cream carpet.

‘Ma!’ I shout, before she can turn around and yell at me. But she doesn’t turn around and she doesn’t yell. I look up from the carpet to see Dennis slumped in his captain’s chair. I think he’s crying and I squirm.

‘Where’s Lizzie?’ I ask in a small voice. Mum shushes me and puts the tray down on the table sharply. The floral mugs roll off, dotting the tablecloth with brown spots. She goes to Dennis.

‘I’ll get a sponge,’ I say uncomfortably, leaving the room.

When I get home she’s all ugly tears, shiny and snotty and red.

‘I brought ice cream,’ I say lamely. ‘It’s from Cold Rock. Cinnamon and vanilla with Maltesers bashed in. I know you like strawberry but I’m just not a fan. Milk and strawberries don’t go.’

‘Strawberries and cream,’ she snuffles, never one to back away from an argument.

‘Yeah, well,’ I concede reluctantly, ‘this isn’t Wimbledon.’ I go to the kitchen for spoons. ‘Don’t you think I’m taking this well? I mean, you fuck off with the car and leave me stranded with the Bloodsucking Parents of Death and I come back with ice cream. Mature, don’t you think?’

When I get back to the lounge she’s still crying, face buried in my grandmother’s crushed velvet cushions. Why couldn’t she snot into the red PVC one Tommy gave me? Then I could just hose it off when she was done.

Her shoulders are shaking and she makes these great ‘hee-haw’ noises when she breathes, like a donkey with rhinitis.

‘Alright, enough,’ I sigh, ‘next time I’ll get strawberry.’ I sit down on the floor beside my crate and prise the lid off the ice cream. I tuck in and listen to her cry. After a while the ‘hee-haws’ stop, the shakes subside and she sits up.

‘Tissues?’ she asks through her clogged nose.

‘Toilet paper,’ I answer, not getting up. She kicks the crate with the toe of her ponyskin boot. ‘What?’

She kicks it again; my spoon catches on the rim of the container and sends ice cream skidding across my couch.

‘It’s in the toilet,’ I tell her with a polite smile, even though I’m annoyed about the speckled couch and the wasted ice cream. Delicate condition, my arse. She glowers but gets up to get it herself.

‘Why do they put animals on it?’ she muses as she mops her face. ‘Who wants to wipe their nose on a dolphin or a Labrador?’

‘They don’t wipe their noses, they wipe their bums.’

‘What is that anyway?’ she holds out the roll for me to inspect.

‘A frog.’

‘A frog?’

‘Tree frog, by the looks.’

She examines the toilet paper, baffled.

I feel the need to explain. ‘It’s environmentally friendly.’

‘What, wiping your bum on a frog?’ she sounds dubious.

‘Not all frogs,’ I pass her a spoon, ‘just tree frogs.’

Lizzie doesn’t talk much. She takes the ice cream off me and eats it, even though it isn’t strawberry, and keeps mopping her face with the tree frogs. Her tears are quiet now, but they don’t show any sign of stopping, it’s like she’s sprung a leak. I get her a bottle of water before I go to bed, in case she dehydrates.

In my room, I drag the microwave box out from under my bed. I’ve decided it’s high time I started putting things in order. The chaos of the box is starting to freak me out. You dig your hand in and you have no idea what you might find: a prayer, a poem, a picture of bodies in a pit. I tip the box out onto my bed and start looking for *her*. The page is in a plastic pocket. I ease it out. It’s thin and old and shiny; I wish I had the book it came from – without the book the page seems flimsy, fragile, like a cobweb abandoned by the spider.

This page was the first, the beginning. I had it before I met Dan, before I started at Constanzia’s. I’ve had it since I worked at Sea Salt, since I lived with Hero.

Not long after Peter left, when I was dragging through a depression so deep I thought it would never end, my father called. As always, it was out of the blue.

‘I’m coming down this week,’ he said, his voice as bright as tinsel. I felt the familiar sickening lurch in my stomach. I knew what this meant – a long boozy

reunion in the hotel bar, followed by a hangover and a two-day gloom. I hadn't seen him for a couple of years but it was always the same. I waited to see if there would be a flicker of excitement, the way there was when I was a kid. Nothing but sinking.

Too depressed to fob him off I agreed to meet him and then spent the week dreading it. The fact is that sometimes people go away and don't really ever come back. Sometimes you wish really hard for them to be dead, because if they were dead they'd have a reason for being gone.

At the last minute I chickened out. I couldn't face the morning after his visit – the hangover and the emptiness that would just make me feel worse than if he'd never called. I turned off my phone, pretended my father was as dead as Lizzie's mother and dragged along with Hero while she went to the library to photocopy a grant application. She was an artist, like Peter – except he mostly painted, and she made sculpture out of garbage. She'd turned the sunroom of our share house into a studio and in summer it stank to high heaven.

'If you're going to be miserable, piss off to the self-help aisle,' she complained as I moped about the photocopier. I ignored her and listened to the mechanical hum of the copier.

There was the click of coins being dropped into the slot, the punch of her finger on the button. She was a forceful person, Hero. I sighed.

'I mean it,' she snapped. 'I'm stressed enough about this, I don't need you sighing at me. Go read a book.'

I wandered the aisles, trailing my finger over the spines of the books: plastic-sheathed hardcovers, battered and bent paperbacks – they all reminded me of Peter. *The Great Gatsby*: parties on a blue expanse of lawn that led down to a dark lake, Daisy sitting in a circle of light with her husband, not Gatsby – heartbreak: Peter. *An*

Equal Music: Michael pining for Julia, a second chance, Julia at a party in the garden with her husband, not Michael – heartbreak: Peter.

I headed for the reference section – I didn't think Peter would be there. But he was. In an atlas I traced the curling black line along the southeastern coastline, to the fat red dot of Sydney. I sighed.

'I can still hear you!' Hero snapped from the photocopier.

Scowling, I moved away, towards the children's section. The spines became brighter, the letters larger. I paused in front of a row of tatty blood-red books: *Peoples of the World*. I pulled out the volume on Australia and New Zealand. The pages were thin and shiny, the text brief – the book consisted mostly of black and white photographs, with the occasional uninspired drawing. There was a close up of an Aboriginal man; he was staring straight down the barrel of the camera. His face was broad and black, the camera was so close I could see the open pores in his nose. He had an intense stare, indecipherable and unsettling. I flipped the page, to a series of photos of children on a mission, captioned (imaginatively) 'Native Children on a Mission'. No mention of which mission, or where. Just Generic Mission with Generic Native Children, buttoned up and starched to look respectable. Grimacing, I put the book away and reached randomly for another. Poland. How come Poland got a whole book to itself and we had to share with New Zealand?

There was a pretty series of pages on Warsaw ('The Paris of the North'): a turbulent river, cobblestoned squares, a statue of a two-headed eagle, women snug in fur coats. It looked like a movie set. I turned to the inside page to look for the publishing details. 1933. I flipped through the pages of alien cities with unpronounceable names. Near the back of the book the cities became villages and farms. Near the very end they became Jewish ('People You Will Meet in the Jewish Village'). There was a man in a

mangy-looking fur hat, smoking a long pipe ('A Happy Old Peasant'), three small children in home knits, staring distrustfully at the camera ('Three Little Friends'), a classroom of boys, presided over by a man with a long beard and a broad-brimmed hat ('Bible Study') – bible study? Jews doing bible study? I flipped back to the publishing details, keeping a finger between the pages, so I wouldn't lose my place. Published in London. There's the English for you, I sniffed, turning back to the Jews. In the centre of the page, uncaptioned, was a photo of a girl. She was teenaged, soft, somehow unformed, unfinished. Her cheeks were round, her eyes pale, her hair hidden by a headscarf. Her gaze was directed above the cameraman's head. What was she looking at? Why is she almost smiling? Her lack of caption worried me.

I scanned the text: 'The Jewish villages, called *shtetls* by the Jews, hold themselves apart from the Poles. They can seem unwelcoming to foreigners.'

Nothing about the girl. If she were a teenager in 1933, how old would she be now? I paused. 1933. The Holocaust was looming. Would she even *be* now? Would any of the Happy Little Peasants? The greys in the photographs seemed a little darker, the shadows deep enough to hide stars, wire, trains, death.

For the first time, looking at that smooth black and white face, I felt the horror of it. The cold shiver started below my bellybutton and climbed my spine. She seemed more real than Peter, more real than my father. I felt in that moment that she was the only real person I had ever seen; everyone else was a shadow, shady and ill-defined, unable to be grasped and held. Here in my hand was a fixed and sure thing, a solid horror I could try to understand.

With my thumb I could blot out her face. Nothing remained but the border of the photograph. Not even a patronising caption. I removed my thumb. My greasy fingerprint was visible on the shiny paper, my personal whorls imprinted on her young,

incomplete, unnamed face.

I crept to the end of the aisle to see if anyone was watching. There was no one around: Hero had dropped her grant application and was trying to reorder the pages; there was a lone librarian over by the twirling white wire racks, re-shelving a pile of Mills & Boons. I held the book carefully, lightly, as though it was hot and I might be burned. I didn't realise what I was going to do until I heard the paper tear. I stopped, my heart in my throat. It seemed so loud. The slower I tore, the louder it seemed. I was sure the librarian would turn at any moment. I folded the page, tucked it under my shirt and crammed the blood-red book back on the shelf. I took a deep breath – my heart was racing – and emerged from the stacks like a criminal. No one looked at me. Hero muttered over her pages. The librarian re-shelved her Mills & Boons. The page was slippery on my belly.

I kept the page with me over the next few days – I even took it to work, hidden in my apron pocket; every time I reached for my waiter's friend or my order pad I felt it slide against my fingers. I read through the short text obsessively, during stolen moments in the bar and in the toilet. On payday I went to the bookstore and bought Martin Gilbert's *Holocaust*. I hid it under my bed – I didn't want Hero to see it, it felt private – more than private, intimate.

One night, during dinner break, I sat in the alley, chewing on my thumbnail to stop myself from smoking, dog tired and about to go back on the floor for another four or five hours. Verne and Hero were sitting next to me, on the rickety old steamer chairs, gossiping and chain smoking. Every time a waft of blue smoke drifted over me I tried not to breathe and savaged my nail. Rogue words were drifting through my head. *Achtung*. Attention. *Sheloshim*. The thirty days of mourning. *Vernichtungslager*.

Extermination camp. Extermination. Death is a better word. Death, dearth, earth.

Elja. A name. A name without a face, without a meaning.

Sitting in the alley that night, dog tired and bleeding from the quick, I drifted from the faceless name to the nameless face. She did have a name, the girl with the headscarf. Something exotic and foreign. *Zoffja*. *Fajga*. *Alodia*.

Beata . . . *Gienia*.

And after her name, came her death.



The last day dawned clear. Gienia hadn't mustered the strength to return to the barracks the day before. She'd spent the night slumped on the dirt. Elena the Greek had died. Gienia's head rested on the woman's leg. She wished she had the energy to move. Elena had grown stiff and cold and she was uncomfortable.

Mellow morning light angled down the alley between the barracks, it was the colour of melting butter and made the skin of the corpses look warm. But when it touched her it was thin and cool.

There was a rat – a fat dark rat with eyes like ripe grapes. Its whiskers twitched as it waddled between the bodies, its round stomach dragging through the dust.

There was noise, loud mechanical noise. Engines. She heard male voices cutting through the afternoon. They were loud.

The sun angled in from the other end of the alley. A line of light and shadow ran across the wall of the barracks. Her vision blurred and she closed her eyes.

Something touched her face, something warm and firm, smelling of oil and sausage. Her eyes were gritty. Her ears buzzed with a steady hiss, like wireless static. There was a face

before her. The sunlight ringed him, like the gold-leaf halos around the Polish saints. He looked like Elja, she thought vaguely. Solid as a mountain. A sheen of sweat covered his brow. His round cheeks drooped. His face was desolate. He spoke but she didn't understand. His eyes swam with tears. They overflowed and rolled in fat drops, like a child's.

'Christ,' he said. She knew that word. He shook his head and the tears splattered on her face.

With a grunt he lifted her. She rose like a bird taking flight. Effortless. She had no sense of weight. His arm was like iron against her back. Strong enough to lift the world. He kept crying. His adam's apple bobbed and he made a small gulping noise. *Don't cry, Elja*, she wanted to say, but the words melted away before she could say them. She let her head fall back and watched the world sideways. The weave of his green uniform was rough on her cheek. Behind, in the alley, Elena the Greek lay in shadow. Beyond, at the very end of the long, dim tunnel, Gienia saw a slight figure. *Friedl*. Gienia watched as she was swallowed by distance, then closed her eyes and gave herself up to flight.



She died while I was sitting in the alley, she kept dying as I went back to work, opening bottles, clearing plates, printing bills, polishing cutlery. After my shift I went home and she came with me, bringing her death with her like a hostess gift. *Thanks for letting me stay*. Of course she only stayed because I made her, because I took a sheaf of white, innocent paper and marked it with a black pen – fast, jagged slashes, the pen too slow for the words pouring out of me. Her death has become the constant in my life, something I can depend on when all else falls away.

As I take down my poster of Bowie as Aladdin Sane I hear Lizzie click the lamp off in the lounge and the line of light disappears from under the door. I take the stolen page, with its feathered torn edge and Blu-Tack it to my wall. I slump back on the mess of papers littering my bed and look at her.

You were leaving the *shtetl*, I think. Your father is dead, you're going to be married, you're in the cart, leaving home.



Vlad barely gave her time to say goodbye. He flicked the reins against the horse's withers as soon as she climbed up alongside him. Gienia swiveled on the bench and waved to her nephews and nieces, who jogged along after the cart. Bobbeh Jasiński stood in the doorway of the *yerishe* and Luba stood by the gate, both hands pressing into the small of her back, her stomach enormous; neither of them waved or smiled.

Before too long the children were left behind, swallowed by the dust hanging in the wake of the cart. Vlad didn't speak. Gienia had to grip the bench and brace her feet against the buckboard to keep from rattling off. She watched the horse's flanks quiver as flies crawled across its hide.

After an hour they came across Cousin Yaacov, reclining by the side of the road, his head cushioned by a cardboard suitcase, his face covered by a white handkerchief. He stirred, disturbed by the whicker of the horse and the jangle of the bit. A pudgy hand tugged the kerchief free, revealing a round, damp face.

'Vlad,' he said happily, groaning as he struggled to sit up, his belly straining at the buttons of

his waistcoat.

'Cousin.' VĹad dropped the reins and jumped from the cart. He offered Cousin Yaacov a hand and pulled the older man to his feet. They embraced.

'Good to see you, my boy.' Yaacov peered over VĹad's shoulder at Gienia, shading his eyes with his hand. 'And this can't be little Gienia? Not little bucktoothed Gienia? Not little Gienia the Rabbit?'

Gienia struggled to smile, she hated the old nickname, a nickname Aleje the Mouth had given her, a nickname that, until very recently, had stuck, despite the fact that the buckteeth had fallen out when she was eight. Well, one had fallen out. The other had been yanked out with string. Vitka had tied the loose end to the doorknob, reassuring Gienia with a breezy 'It won't hurt a bit,' and slamming the door with a forcible *bang*.

'My nephew is a lucky man,' Cousin Yaacov grunted as he hefted himself into the back of the cart. His breath whistled alarmingly in his nostrils and he mopped his face again.

'I hope he thinks so,' VĹad remarked, glancing sideways at Gienia.

'I'm sure, I'm sure,' Yaacov assured them, unsnapping his suitcase and removing a bottle. 'Anyone?' he offered halfheartedly, bushy eyebrows lifting. 'No?' he replied for them, before they had a chance to answer. Gienia heard his lips smack as he lifted the bottle.

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And that's all there is. After that she's supposed to get on the train to Warsaw. She's supposed to find a husband: Elja.

I don't know how they meet. The train station at Warsaw? The Ajzen's house after Mamele Halina takes her home? Not until the wedding? It's blank.

Skip it.

Can't skip it, meetings are important.

Surely he's important? But if he's so important why is he absent? Where is he?

Meetings are important, they are, they must be.

We're strangers when we meet . . . Bowie.

I met Dan at a party. I wasn't looking to meet anyone. I was still reeling from Peter. Beautiful Peter, the love of my life.

Dan was the most decent guy I ever went out with. He was so utterly normal – really, just what I should want. He worked for a major advertising company, not in the zippy, zany, fucked up advertising side (where, let's face it, there are just as many drugs as there are in hospitality), but in the accounts department. Dan was a numbers guy, he was big on logic and planning and balancing the books. He was three years younger than me and was saving for a house when I met him.

'You've got to have equity,' he told me seriously the night I met him. I was only at the party because I'd gone with Hero. It was her cousin's birthday.

'He's such a tosser,' she complained, 'but I really should go. His friend, Sean, has an independent label. I thought he might like "Yowl"'.

She had a punk band. It was just her and a guy named Phil, who played a Casio organ. She painted her face white as a mask and taped her eyes closed with silver insulation tape and bellowed into the microphone until her voice gave out. She had one song called 'Pain', which consisted of her screaming 'Pain pain pain pain! Pain pain pain pain!' for sixteen minutes while Phil's organ honked out one of its pre-recorded back beats and he hit a C-note repeatedly. 'Yowl' was her new song. It was a bunch of

screeching cats, set to Phil's Casio beat, with Hero reciting poetry over the top. *Sleek fur, bright eyes, sharp teeth; I walk alone under a watchful moon. I yowl. I yoooooowwwwwwwwl.*

I went along to the party because it was my night off and I didn't have anything better to do. It was in a neat little sandstone bungalow in Prospect. Privet hedge and everything. We rocked up at ten, three hours late, half tanked, carrying a couple of bottles of cheap fizz.

'What's your cousin's name again?' I asked as she knocked on the door.

'Percy.'

'Percy! What is *with* your family and names?'

'They like the classics.'

'I don't remember a Shakespearean Percy.'

She gave me a disgusted look, '*Shelley*,' she said significantly.

'Did you see that movie with Hugh Grant and Judy Davis? Was that about Shelley or am I thinking of someone else?'

'Don't know, don't care.' She rapped on the door, harder. She cupped her hand against the glass and peered in.

'Maybe you got the wrong night?' I said, even though I could hear vague party noises.

'It's the fifth, right? More likely the party's over and they've gone to bed. He's an accountant, you know.'

'No, I didn't know. Good old Perce.'

She led me down the side of the house, along the white gravel driveway. Her heels caught in the shiny stones and she staggered. I was fine, I had my Docs on. We heard the buzz of voices and I felt a wave of relief – I always feel anxious rocking up at

parties, as though there are rules everyone else knows and I don't.

The back yard was crammed with people. There was a floodlight propped on the open screen door, casting a swathe of white light onto the milling crowd. A flock of moths were slamming themselves at the light, colliding with one another, like moshers in the pit. A stereo sitting on a rickety card table was blaring Jamiroquai.

'There's Percy!' Hero screeched in my ear and grabbed my arm, dragging me over to a knot of guys. Percy was dark like Hero, good-looking and obviously aware of it.

'Glad you could come,' he said to us, 'there's ice in the bath, if you want to put your drinks in there.' His gaze took in our cheap wine and dismissed it, even as his instructions dismissed us.

'Oh, look, Nepenthe!' Hero squealed, pulling a bottle of sauvignon blanc from the bottom of the ice. At the time Nepenthe was our favourite – it was a good year, young and crisp and green. We poured it into two plastic beer cups, the wine glasses were too small for our liking, and took the bottle with us as we left the bathroom.

'Wanna tour?' Hero asked, taking a gulp of the Nepenthe.

I shrugged, and let her drag me down the hall.

The house was obviously a work in progress. The back, where we came in, was a mess. An old corrugated iron lean-to with the washer, dryer and a loo, led into the kitchen, which was of the narrow galley variety. The walls were seamed with gaping cracks and the floors were covered with filthy, peeling lino. But the front half of the house was beautiful, with polished jarrah floorboards, freshly painted walls, heritage glass panels around the front doors, and original fireplaces and ceiling rosettes.

'What is he, rich?' I asked.

'He's in *advertising*,' Hero said, as though that explained everything. I finished my wine in one long swallow and held my plastic beer cup out for a refill.

‘Oh, look,’ Hero squealed suddenly, twirling away before she’d finished filling my cup, sending a splatter of Nepenthe across a Persian floor runner, ‘a piano!’ She disappeared into a front room. I followed. There was a couple on the deep leather couch, but they didn’t look up until Hero banged back the lid of the piano. The guy had his hand up the chick’s skirt. I blushed for them.

‘Maybe we ought to get another drink,’ I said to Hero, smiling apologetically at the couple. They watched us, frozen. I could tell he wasn’t going to take his hand away unless he was absolutely sure we were staying.

Hero snorted and waved the bottle of Nepenthe. ‘We’ve still got half a bottle!’ I saw the guy’s hand slide limply down the chick’s leg and she shuffled on the couch, rearranging her underwear. Glaring at us, they got up and left.

‘It’s a pianola!’ Hero shrieked, bending to look underneath the keys, where I could see two big pedals. ‘My Nan’s got one of these. This is so cool! Let’s play something.’

We fussed through the pile of rolls on top of the pianola. Hero pedaled enthusiastically and bellowed along to ‘Home on the Range’, ‘Lady of Spain’ and ‘Broadway Baby’. I finished off the Nepenthe and poked through Percy’s bookshelves.

‘I need to pee,’ I announced as she started on ‘Aba Daba Honeymoon’. She waved blithely, not breaking stride.

The only toilet in the house was the one in the lean-to, and there was a queue. I shifted restlessly. I was really busting. After a minute I decided I wasn’t going to make it and I headed outside to review my options. The backyard was too crowded. I followed the white stone driveway around to the front yard and wriggled my way behind a hibiscus, where I dropped my pants and peed, quick as I could because I was worried about spiders. As I backed out of the hibiscus I hit something. Something that

shouted ‘Fuck,’ and fell into the daisy bush.

Dan. Dan the Man, in the daisy bush.

‘Shit, sorry,’ I apologised, turning aside while he fumbled with his crotch, trying to get himself zippered up and decent. I was glad it was dark because I was blushing.

When he was zippered he climbed out of the daisies.

‘I’m really sorry,’ I blathered on, ‘I was just . . . you know . . .’

‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘I know.’

I started giggling. He had a daisy caught in the teeth of his zip. The white petals gleamed in the darkness.

He looked puzzled and tugged his shirt down, covering the trapped daisy. I didn’t tell him about it and I’ve always wondered what he thought the next time he went to take a piss.

We ambled back to the party and sat on the grass; he offered me a beer but I’d stopped drinking beer, so he got me a glass of wine. He was on the shortish side but pretty good-looking – he had the ubiquitous short hair with the Tin-Tin quiff at the front and expensive-looking glasses that made him seem smarter than he was. We talked through a whole Massive Attack CD and he told me about needing equity (I didn’t tell him that I didn’t know what equity meant, but I looked it up in the dictionary when I got home: *net value of mortgage property after deduction of charges*). We really didn’t have much in common, he was so straight and calm and ordinary, but I liked him. The world felt easier to handle when Dan was around, as if someone had suddenly turned the volume down.

‘Thought you were just going for a piss,’ Hero complained when she found us. I eyed Dan, not sure how he would take her. Her dark hair was crimped and teased into a halo around her head, held back from her face with a strip of furry tigerskin, which

matched her homemade tigerskin miniskirt. Her black t-shirt was too small, exposing a stretch of plump midriff. I always envied Hero her looks, she was dramatic and exotic – burned caramel skin, liquid black eyes, teeth that were white against her fleshy dark lips. Her voice was low, and rough from chain-smoking and singing.

She's too much for most people – she's loud and aggressive and overwhelming. And, sometimes, out of control. When I lived with her she was prone to black moods. Sometimes she'd lie in bed for an entire week, and not bathe and not eat. I always knew when one of those moods was coming because just beforehand she'd get all angry and manic. There'd be new sculpture in the sunroom. Phil would come over and they'd workshop some new songs and she'd go on extended benders. I'd get up in the morning to find her passed out on the bathroom floor, the bath crusted in drying vomit. Do you know how hard it is to get rid of the smell of vomit? I had to hold my breath every time I had a shower. Eventually I took to burning incense. Now the smell of sandalwood makes me think of vomit.

I was worried that she'd freak Dan out, so I got to my feet and said we should leave. Hero shrugged.

'Yeah, okay,' she said, 'let me just go grab a bottle of wine from the tub.' She tottered off on her spike heels and while I waited for her Dan asked for my number. I gave it to him and didn't fret about whether he'd call or not. Dan was the kind of guy you didn't have to worry about. He'd call.

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The train made Gienia feel like she was flying. She took her feet off the floor and closed her eyes. Hens could never feel like this. Hens could only flutter clumsily to the lowest branches.

This was the way a predator would fly: an owl diving at a hare or a mouse.

Yaacov snorted in his sleep and her eyes snapped open. She put her feet back on the juddering floor. The clatter and rattle of the train came back to her. Through the trembling glass pane she saw fields slide by. The towns they skirted grew bigger; the sun glinted off glass and steel.

Part of her wanted the train to pass through Warsaw, to keep steaming along the hard, shining tracks, to keep her in flight, aloft. But another part was ready to land, to take a deep breath of city air and face her future. She hoped she could do it bravely, like an owl, rather than a hen.



The smell of bacon gets me out of bed. Lizzie's in the kitchen, cooking what looks like a mountain of food. There's scrambled eggs, cooked tomatoes and mushrooms, French toast and, of course, the bacon.

'What are you doing?' I ask suspiciously, wondering what happened to her usual cheese on toast.

'You'll have to hurry if you want to eat before work,' Lizzie says, glancing at the clock on the microwave. I sit at my tiny kitchen table and sniff the food warily. Lizzie bends over me and begins heaping food on my plate.

'What are those, chives?' I prod the eggs.

'Uh-huh,' she says as she gingerly pulls a slice of French toast from the pan and chews on it, mouth open to cool it down.

I eat the eggs; they taste great – there must be a tub of butter in them to make them

taste that good. I put my fork down. 'Are you trying to make me fat?'

She rolls her eyes and puts a couple of slices of French toast on my plate. They smell like cinnamon. And more butter.

'If I eat all this they'll have to roll me around the tables,' I complain, pulling off a corner of the toast. I hear Lizzie drop the pan into the sink. It makes an irritable clank. I look up. She sits down across from me and starts on some bacon. I eat more toast, hoping it will smooth the frown off her forehead. 'You fried the bacon?' I ask. 'I usually microwave it, there's only two grams of fat in a rasher of bacon, if you don't fry it in oil or butter.'

Her face looks really black now. 'I thought it would be nice,' she growls, 'I know you won't have a chance to eat lunch.'

I feel a bit guilty but can't stop noticing the puddle of oil surrounding my eggs like a bright yellow halo. 'Thanks,' I say. I eat another bite, then push my plate away. 'I've really got to get ready.'

'What are you going to do today?' I ask as I sling my bag over my shoulder and pull my hair back into a ponytail. Lizzie shrugs. She's kneeling in front of my DVD collection, which is stacked against the wall by my TV.

'There's a video library around the corner, if you've seen all those,' I tell her dryly. She doesn't look up. Through the doorway to the kitchen I can see breakfast congealing on the table and I wonder if she's going to clean it up. Then I feel bad – I'm such a bitch. 'Thanks again for breakfast,' I say on my way out, and I mean it, but I don't know how to *sound* like I mean it.

I'm early for work. There are only twenty-eight booked and I don't think we'll get many walk-ins because it's early in the week and the weather's not great.

It's Chef's day off, so Harry's heading up the kitchen. He's in a good mood, as he always is when he's left in charge. He's got the kitchen's old battered Abba tape on the tape deck and is bopping around the kitchen, singing along. I take my time putting my stuff away. Nat's upstairs tidying the staff room and we chat for a while about her new boy, who's a DJ at Dive. Then I trot downstairs to get the specials off Harry.

'Not much today, sweetcheeks,' he coos, bending over the counter and winking at me. 'Just the lamb from last night's function. Sell it all for me and I'll give you a treat.'

'How many lamb?' I ask, grabbing the eraser and rubbing the blackboard clean.

'Ten. Don't you want to know what your treat is?'

'Something soft that has trouble standing up on its own?' I sigh as I write the numbers one through ten on the board with a little stub of pink chalk.

He snorts. 'It's *tumescant*,' he tells me, leaning further over the pass – to get a look at my arse, no doubt.

'That's a big word, Harry. Been reading the dictionary?'

'What's on the specials today?' Kevin asks, emerging from the office.

'Lamb,' I tell him.

'What's it with?'

'It's the function lamb.'

His brow furrows. 'I thought we'd decided that you'd write the specials on the board,' he says to Harry.

'But it's the function lamb.'

'You write the specials on the board,' Kevin enunciates each word, as though speaking to a deaf person. Or a chef.

Harry sighs and comes out of the kitchen to write the lamb up on the board. He

writes so hard he snaps his stick of green chalk in half.

I waste time folding napkins until the first tables arrive. Above the bench I'm using is a corkboard littered with messages from Kevin and Chef. *'All open wines must be pumped at the end of the evening shift!'* *'Truffles are a delicacy only grown in France and Italy. They are sniffed out by trained dogs and pigs and hand dug by the owner. They are very exclusive, hence the price of \$4000 per kilo. They are rarely seen in Adelaide, please try and upsell these dishes. We have a limited supply and once they are gone, they are gone.'* The truffles have been gone for a while.

Pinned over a pissy little warning about our dress code there's a postcard from Constance. It shows a crescent beach, palm trees, sky and sea, blue and green. I slip my thumbnail under the pins and pull it free.

'Darlings, it says (plural, poor Kev), this is Heaven! xxC'. That's all she's written. I turn the postcard back over and slide my thumb over the shiny white beach. What I wouldn't give to be there.



Mrs Golcz had a postcard. It was battered and had grubby fingerprints smudged over the looping pencil script. On the front it had a reassuring painting of wheat and on the back a message from her son: *We are well. There is much work.* Not much from a son. In other times Mrs Golcz would have suffered over its terse tone.

'You see how he treats me: this boy of mine!' she would have exclaimed, hand clutched over her corseted bosom, eyes rolling over in her head. 'Am I not the one who raised him? Who fed him? Who worried those long winters he was away at school? This is what he gives me?' She

would have waved the card with a snap. 'This! This is not news! It is a telegram!'

But these were not usual times. Late at night, on her bunk at the factory, she turned the card over, feeling the smoothness of the picture and the roughness of the card where her son had touched, had written.

'He is well,' she would murmur, so softly, 'There is work.'

Sometimes one of the women would ask to hold it. Mrs Golcz would consider carefully. Depending on her mood, she would cautiously hold the card out, or jealously shake her head and pull it closer to her chest.

Gienia never asked for the card. It wasn't her way. But she had seen it up close: close enough to see the grain in the silver of the lead. *We are well. There is much work.* It was something.

She thought of the card on the morning of the *Aktion*. They were at work when Herr Streckenbach came in. He was grave and nervous. He clapped his hands. The chairs clattered on the old wooden floor as they stood. The whirr of machinery stopped. Friedl took Gienia's hand. Herr Streckenbach cleared his throat. His eyes slid around the walls, keeping away from the women. Behind him, emerging from the shadow of the door, stood men in uniform.

'Get your things together.'

There was a collective intake of breath. Sour fear floated with the dust motes in the early April sunshine. Then, silent, except for the clomping of feet upon the floor, they went down to their barracks and gathered their bundles. Gienia had one change of dress, an extra cardigan, winter underwear and a hunk of bread covered in spots of black mould. No one had anything more. Anything useful had been sold or eaten or burned for fuel.

'I thought we'd make it,' the woman from the next bunk sighed.

They emerged into the street, blinking like moles.

'Gienia?'

'Yes?' she turned to look at her sister-in-law. Friedl was almost trotting to keep up.

'Do you think . . . do you think we'll see Mamele? And Schlomo?'

No, Gienia wanted to say. Of course not.

'Perhaps,' she said instead, thinking of Mrs Golcz's postcard.

'I hope so,' Friedl sighed. 'I wouldn't even mind digging fields if I could see them again.'

Gienia snorted at the thought of her digging fields. She wasn't a worker. She hadn't been able to keep up with her quota at the factory, and Gienia had pedaled furiously, so she'd have enough to slip into Friedl's basket.

The *Umschlagplatz* was already crowded when they arrived. She was surprised to see the Jewish police confined within the thick walls. They sat with their families in miserable knots on the hard ground, looking like every Jew who had come before. Gienia had a sinking feeling that this was it: the end of the ghetto. The mass exodus at the end of summer had broken its back; this was its death rattle.

The women from the factory stood clumped together by the gate. With helpless glances at one another they shuffled off to find a small space to sit.

'This is where they were,' Friedl said as she followed Gienia through the tangle of people.

'Who?'

'Mamele and Schlomo.'

'I suppose so.'

'Friedl?!' A high female voice shrieked through the thin morning air. Gienia and Friedl frowned and scanned the crowd.

'Friedl! Friedl Ajzen! Gienia!'

Gienia groaned when she saw who was calling. Wanda Hirszman, Mamele Halina's cousin, stood in the far corner, waving furiously. Friedl's face lit up and, dropping her bundle in

excitement, she wriggled through the crowd towards her cousin. With a noisy sigh Gienia picked up Friedl's bundle and followed.

'Darling child!' Wanda exclaimed, pulling Friedl to her enormous bosom. Friedl accepted the embrace happily. 'You poor dear! All alone! And Gienia! Dear girls, how you must have suffered, being so alone.'

'And you,' Gienia said with forced sympathy.

'I'm not alone! Andrzej's here. Somewhere. You know he's a one for wandering off.'

'He certainly is,' Gienia agreed sourly.

'You remember the children? Karol and Liebl? Boys, you remember? You went to Gienia's wedding to cousin Elja.'

The boys didn't look up from their game. They were fighting with soldiers made from twigs.

'Of course they do,' Wanda decided. 'You'll stay with us.'

As though they were houseguests.

'We couldn't possibly,' Gienia demurred at the exact moment Friedl exclaimed: 'We'd love to!'

Gienia clenched her teeth. 'Well, if it's no trouble.'

'Of course not, you're family!'

Gienia sat with her back to the wall and kept her eyes closed, pretending to sleep. It was only when Wanda mentioned lunch that she stretched and opened her eyes. She watched avidly as Wanda fussed though her belongings. Gienia's eyes widened when she saw the thick sausage the woman removed. Peeling back the white paper Wanda began to saw through the meat. Gienia could see white globules of fat in the red flesh. She sat up straighter.

'Just for the children,' Wanda said, looking up into Gienia's ravenous stare. 'They need it so much more than we do.'

Gienia couldn't tear her eyes from the raw, fleshy sausage as it passed from Wanda's hands

to her children's.

'And you Friedl,' Wanda turned to her young cousin, 'you're positively emaciated.' She held out a hunk of sausage. Gienia could smell the garlic in it. Her stomach cramped as Friedl took it. Friedl looked apologetically at her sister-in-law as she lifted the food to her mouth. Gienia watched her small teeth rip into it and then she had to look away. Angrily, she pulled the mouldy bread from her bundle.

'Good news!' A reedy male voice announced. Gienia's stomach clenched. *Andrzej the Eel.*
'We don't leave until morning!'

He slid into view, easing his way around a group of women, eyes taking inventory, fingers twitching. Everything about Andrzej Hirszman was narrow: narrow body, narrow face, narrow mind. An oily moustache bristled above his thin greyish-pink lips. His eyebrows were dark slashes on his high forehead. They rose into his hairline when he saw Gienia and Friedl. Sharp white incisors showed as he smiled.

'Well, hello!'

'Morning, Andrzej?' his wife lifted a gloved hand to clutch at his sleeve. Andrzej looked down at her with an absent frown; then his face cleared and he returned his smile to the girls.

'Yes: morning. We're safe until then. It is so good to see you!' He injected every bit of warmth he could into his tone. 'We thought you had gone last summer.' Leaning down, he kissed Friedl on both cheeks. His eyes slid to Gienia. She braced herself against the brick wall. She could smell garlic on his breath as his face lowered to hers. The moustache prickled her cheeks as his wet lips kissed her, lingering longer than she would have liked.

'Why morning, Andrzej?' Wanda demanded, her voice pitched high.

'No trains, I suppose. Is there food? I'm famished.' He curled his long body down beside Gienia, back braced against the same wall. She felt hot and uncomfortable.

'Have you been well, Cousin?'

'Thank you, yes.'

'Gienia's strong as a horse,' Friedl said, still sucking on her fingers, where a trace of sausage remained. 'Everyone at the factory got sick this winter, but not Gienia.'

'I was sick.'

'You were? I don't remember . . .'

'It was a hard winter,' Andrzej said.

Gienia resisted the impulse to snort. Not so hard, if you were *Ordnungsdienst* and you had fuel for the fire and sausage for your belly. Not so hard when you had new boots and thick woolen coats.

'It was better than the one before,' she said, biting her tongue. And it was true. The winter before had been a killer. What good was a little fire against such cold? Elja's youngest brother had died, his belly bloated and tight as a drum. And his sister Nadzia too, in labour and screaming in that agonising freeze, steam coming from her gaping mouth and gaping thighs. She'd died in the night, a shivering, bleeding wreck. All of a sudden, with a crack, her teeth snapped together and she stopped shivering and was still.

So this winter just past was not so bad. There was a stove in the middle of the factory barracks and, although wild draughts blew through chinks and cracks, it was better. Gienia held onto that: it was better.

Again she pretended to sleep. Andrzej did not leave. She could sense the length of him stretched out beside her. After a while, she no longer had to pretend, she slipped away.

She woke to a growling stomach and a full bladder. Her neck was stiff from resting against the wall. She gingerly sat up straight and moved her head from side to side.

'Sleeping Beauty awakes!'

Andrzej had moved to sit on the trunk, directly opposite. Gienia had the uneasy feeling he'd

been watching her as she slept. His wife was fussing with the children and Friedl was asleep under Andrzej's coat.

'Where is the toilet?' she asked abruptly, not liking his sly eyes. Andrzej laughed.

'Toilet? Haven't you heard? We're not civilised enough to use toilets!' For a moment he sounded unnervingly like Schlomo: cynical, mocking, cruel.

'I need to . . .'

'They have made no provisions.' He watched her discomfort. 'I ordered some of my men to put buckets in the southern corner. There's not much privacy but it's better than going where you are.'

His men. Gienia tried to smile but it twisted into a grimace. She struggled to her feet, still stiff, and walked briskly to the southern corner.

Thick, hazy violet dusk was falling. Odd things were luminescent in the gloaming: the clasp on a trunk, a child's foot flopping from beneath a blanket, her own hands. A tree stood outside the wall by the makeshift latrine. The branches closest to the *Umschlagplatz* had been brutally lopped off. But on the other side, away from her, new leaves sprouted: tender and still impossibly green, even in the gathering twilight. There was a queue for the buckets. She stood behind an older woman and kept her gaze locked on the tree above. The smell from the buckets was revolting. She tried to breathe through her mouth. By the time she made it to the front of the queue the violet dusk had darkened to indigo.

The bucket was almost full. She looked away, afraid she would be sick if she thought about it. She could do this. She had to: she was about to wet herself. Embarrassed, she reached under her skirt and lowered her underwear. Crouched over the bucket, mid-stream, she glanced up; there was Andrzej the Eel, in the queue, watching her every move. Her face burned, she shook. Taking a deep breath, she rose and with slow, forced dignity, readjusted her underwear and began walking back to Friedl.

'Gienia!'

She jerked at the sound of his voice.

'Leave me alone,' she hissed as he drew level with her.

'Hey!' He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to a halt. 'I needed to go,' he said. His words were slippery, greasy, like sausage rinds sliding through melting fat. She wrenched her arm away. 'I'm surprised you mind,' he remarked with a hard smile. And it was all there in his eyes. He *knew*. His fingers reached out to stroke her arm. He inched closer, swaying like a snake. *An eel*. She felt bile rise in her throat.

'Get away from me.'

'Come now, Gienia . . . we both know you don't really mind . . .'

'Get away from me,' she repeated. By sheer force of will she swallowed her bile and tore away, heading for the safety of his wife.

secondhand kisses

She wedged herself between Friedl and Wanda, covered her face and waited for sleep. When it came she dreamed of frost and ice, of bread and fruitless trees.

Gienia and Friedl marched back through the ghetto wall after work; it was dark and blisteringly cold. The streetlights lit the low clouds and an erratic, gusting wind blew ice crystals into their faces.

'I hope Mamele got bread,' Friedl sighed.

The streets were shoveled clear of snow but there were dark humps in the gutters. From the corner of her eye the dark humps could be anything: discarded furniture, bags of refuse; from the corner of her eye they could almost be shadows, their resemblance to people a trick of the light.

Home was a building not far from the wall. It was a flat-faced stone building, only three stories, with a rear garden and ornamental cherry trees by the gate. Gienia and Friedl climbed over the families living in the entry hall, and picked their way around the single men bedding down on the stairway, in order to get to their two rooms on the third floor. They opened the door to the smell of boiled turnip water and Friedl moaned. 'Where's the bread?'

'I couldn't go,' Mamele Halina said shortly, 'I had to stay with your brother.' She was crouched over Yehiel, who had the pallet closest to the stove.

'But we've been working all day!' Friedl complained, 'I can't live on turnip water!'

'Schlomo says he knows someone with bread.'

'He does?' Friedl crossed the room, stepping over her older sister and her nephews to get to the poky second room. 'You're getting bread?'

Gienia felt herself tighten, listening for Schlomo's voice.

'I'll go soon,' he said.

'After curfew?' Friedl looked back at her mother. 'And she's letting you go?'

'Yehiel needs it.' He appeared in the doorway, wrapping a second scarf around his long neck. Gienia felt his eyes on her. 'I'll need someone to come with me, as a lookout.'

'Well, I can't go,' Friedl said, flopping down by Yehiel's feet, close to the stove. 'This doesn't even feel warm, is there any wood?'

'We have to make it last, Little Bit,' Schlomo scolded her.

'Take Gienia,' Mamele Halina ordered.

'Yes, Mamele.' He caught Gienia's eye and gave a swift wink.

'Who is this "someone you know"?' Gienia asked him as they traipsed back down the staircase, buttoning their coats.

'You can't tell Mamele,' he said as he led her to the back of the house, 'I mean it, Gienia, you can't tell her.'

'Why not?'

'It would upset her.'

And we musn't have that, Gienia thought sourly.

'It's Andrzej.'

'Her cousin?' Gienia couldn't keep the disbelief out of her voice.

'He's *Ordnungsdienst*,' Schlomo said with a shrug.

They passed under the fringe of ice blossoms beneath the cherry trees and into the empty street. They heard a cough and the stamp of boots as a patrol passed nearby. Gienia's heart lumbered in fear. She wished she were back in the apartment, bread or no bread. A steaming bowl of turnip water sounded just fine to her.

She kept close to Schlomo as he led her through the twisting streets. By the time they reached the Hirszmans she was shivering, her teeth clicking like the ice in the trees. Schlomo led her down an old night cart lane and through the back fence.

'Wait here,' he hissed, 'whistle if anyone comes.' He crossed the courtyard and rapped

sharply on the back door. A surly boy answered, he was wearing the uniform of the Jewish police, but didn't look old enough to shave.

'Who is it?'

'Schlomo Ajzen for Andrzej Hirszman.'

'Schlomo!' Andrzej pushed the boy out of the way and grinned a pointy-toothed welcome, but he didn't invite them in. From where she stood by the fence Gienia fancied she could smell barley stew. Andrzej grabbed his coat and came outside into the courtyard with Schlomo. Gienia heard the low murmur of their voices, but not their words. Her gaze darted back and forth between the deserted lane and the two men. Eventually she heard the crunch of Schlomo's boots on the snow.

'Give me your coat,' he ordered.

'What!' Gienia blinked in shock.

'Give me your coat. He wants our coats for the bread.'

'But we'll freeze.'

'We need the bread, Gienia.'

Gienia felt a surge of anger. /don't need the bread, she thought, I'll manage on the turnip water. Let Mamele Halina give up her coat. Let Friedl give up *her* coat.

But she didn't argue with Schlomo. His face was hard, set against her. His fingers were at her buttons, roughly pulling them through the holes, tugging the coat from her shoulders. She felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach, every trace of warm breath was sucked from her lungs. She curled into her own chest, muscles clenched, and felt she would be ice by the time he returned. Hard, hateful ice. She watched Schlomo hand the coats over. Andrzej disappeared into the house; Schlomo danced from foot to foot, pounding his arms, white puffs of steam exploding from his open mouth.

Gienia didn't see him take the bread. She heard the click of the door and again the crunch of

his boots on the hard crust of snow. He took her hand and they broke into a run. Near home they heard another patrol and had to hole up behind a deep snowdrift. Schlomo pulled her over the hump of the drift, down into the cave-like hollow of a window casement. Gienia's breath was coming fast and sharp.

'Not long,' Schlomo whispered, pulling her hard against his body, trying to warm her. He tore a hunk of bread off the loaf and pressed it to her lips. It was frozen. She pushed it away.

'Eat it,' he hissed, pushing the icy pellet against her mouth.

'No!' Wildly, she thought of the smell of baking coming from the Zazulas. Hot, porous bread, still damp from the oven; yeasty, as fertile as earth.

'What was that?'

Her heart stopped at the sound of the sharp male voice. They'd heard her. She shrank back against Schlomo. His arms tightened about her. The cold bread was still pressed against her mouth. They heard the boots come closer. *Oh God*, she thought, *let them go away. Please let them go away.* To atone, she opened her lips and took the bread from Schlomo's fingers. It had no taste. It was colder than the air, colder than her fear. She felt the freeze slow her blood. She held the bread in her mouth, waiting to see if she had enough warmth to overcome it.

There was the flare of a match, the rumble of voices. The bread grew soggy on her tongue. Schlomo buried his face in her neck. He shivered; their shivers were out of time; they collided.

When they emerged the world seemed sharper, every corner able to prick and cut and draw blood.

'Hurry,' Schlomo said, and pulled her home. At the gate he paused, looking up at the glinting fringe of ice, the twisting black branches.

The next day he took an axe to the cherry trees; the ice broke like crystal on the path; the damp wood spat and sizzled in the stove and Gienia was glad. Without her coat, she was frozen from the walk home.

I don't want to go home after work. Kevin knocks me off as soon as my section empties.

'I wish he'd knock you off too,' I complain to Nat, 'we could go for a drink.'

We both stare sulkily at the closed office door.

'Hang around,' she says, 'I'll slip you an extra drink after you've finished your knock off.'

'Okay,' I agree, not really wanting to hang around work, but preferring it to going home to watch DVDs with Lizzie. I don't want to hang out in the staff room, so I go out to the alley.

Every restaurant has a back alley. They're not always out the back, sometimes they're around the side, but they all have the same big bin of empty bottles, the same overflowing green wheelie bins, the same tower of grotty milk crates, the same wet sludge on the ground, and the same rancid smell.

I grab a blue milk crate and a flattened cardboard box to lie across it, to sit on, so I don't get sludge on my work pants. I perch on my crate, drink my riesling and stare at the brick wall opposite – someone's drawn a penis on it with green chalk. A *tumescant* penis.

'Well, well, well, what have we here?'

Speak of the devil.

Harry pushes through the fringe of beads that Chef has hung over the open door, to keep the flies out. Undisturbed, the beads form a picture of a topless hula dancer but now they're swinging wildly, flashing flesh tones.

'Thought you'd be out with your *boyfriend*,' he says, taking a pack of Styvies out of his back pocket.

'I don't have a boyfriend. We split up, remember?'

'That's not what I hear. Not what I hear at all.' He looks at me knowingly as he lights his fag. I feel a stirring paranoia and push it away. He doesn't know anything, he's just being Harry. He pulls up his own milk crate and opens the book he brought out with him. It's Stephanie Alexander's *Cook's Companion*, he's taken it from Chef's bookshelf in the office.

'Fucking verjuice,' he complains, brushing a sprinkle of ash from the pristine white pages. 'Her and Maggie Beer, always banging on about fucking verjuice.'

'I like her paté,' I say blandly, 'they've got it at Coles.'

'They've got the verjuice at my Foodland,' he moans. 'Fucking verjuice.' He flips the page and a glossy photograph falls out of the book and onto the sludge. I pick it up and my stomach cramps. It's a photo of Chef's girls. Both of them have glossy dark hair and his wife's wet brown eyes.

Harry takes it off me and whistles, the whistle is visible as a stream of smoke.

'Lookers, aren't they?' he says. 'Look at her, she's starting to get titties.'

'Fuck off!' I gasp, horrified, snatching the photo off him, 'She's got to be about eleven.'

'Tits are tits,' he says with a shrug.

I want to hit him, to kick him, to bite the smile off his face. Instead I get unsteadily to my feet and go back inside. I take the photo into the office and prop it on Chef's desk.

'You still here?' Kevin asks, looking up from the game of solitaire he's playing on the computer.

'I'm waiting for Nat,' I tell him numbly.

His gaze flicks to my drink.

'It's my first,' I say defensively.

'Your only.'

'Yeah, my only,' I tear my gaze from Chef's daughters and leave Kevin to his solitaire.

We go to the BoHo bar, it's just around the corner from my place, and there's a cute barman who always gives us a free drink. I drink two Cosmopolitans while Nat sits on a dry Martini. She keeps checking her phone to see if the DJ has messaged her. I lean back in the squeaky red theater seat and look up at the ballerina hanging from the rafters, swinging in the fairy lights.

'Can we eat?' I ask for the third time, as I suck the last of the juice out of my lime garnish.

Nat checks her phone again and sighs. 'Yeah, I don't think he's going to call.'

'He's probably not even *awake* yet,' I commiserate as we go upstairs, 'they're like vampires, they sleep all day.'

'Yeah,' she sounds despondent.

He comes in when we're halfway through a bottle of semillon. Nat kicks me under the table and I drop a hummus-laden triangle of phoenician bread down my white t-shirt.

'Fuck,' I complain, smearing the hummus over my breasts as I try to wipe it off.

'*Dan!*' Nat hisses.

'What?' I look up and there he is at the top of the stairs, and he's not alone. By his side is a tall brunette. A very tall brunette. She's taller than he is. She's in a denim mini and a skintight black t-shirt. There's no hummus on her breasts, instead there are shining glittered letters, letters that spell *Babe*. And how, I think. Dan's hand is resting

in the small of her back.

‘She’s a *child*,’ Nat says dismissively.

That’s supposed to make me feel *better*, I think, that she’s so much younger than me? I slouch down against the banquette, hoping he won’t see me. He doesn’t. He’s too busy watching the child’s arse as he follows her to their table.

‘Let’s go,’ I mumble.

Thank God for Nat, she organises the bill and gets me out of the building before I fall apart. ‘Let’s go to yours,’ she says, dragging me towards the open bottle shop.

‘We can’t,’ I moan.

‘Why not?’

‘*Lizzie*.’

‘Oh, fuck Lizzie.’

Yeah, I think, fuck Lizzie.

Nat buys us a couple of bottles of cheap sparkling white (‘It makes you feel better than anything else,’ she explains) and gets two vodka Cruisers out of the fridge for us to drink on the walk home.

When we get to my place there’s a note taped to the front door. It has Lizzie’s name written on it but I unfold it and read it anyway. *Call me, Lambchop, we need to talk. Love, Dad.* I feel the old monster snarl and I drain my Cruiser, trying to drown it.

‘Here,’ I snap at Lizzie, thrusting the note at her. She’s on the couch, watching *Shakespeare in Love*. She pauses it on a close-up of Joseph Fiennes, his wet brown eyes make me think of Chef’s kids. It doesn’t make me feel any better. I slide open the door to the balcony and sit on one of the rickety steamer chairs. I can hear Nat getting wine glasses down from the cupboard and opening the fridge.

‘There’s no room for the wine!’ she shouts.

‘Take out some of the fucking cheese!’ I shout back. I can see Mrs Franks down at the letterboxes collecting her mail, she looks up at me disapprovingly. I feel like giving her the finger, but I don’t, she’s not such a bad old bat.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Lizzie asks, coming over to stand in the doorway.

‘She just saw *Dan*,’ Nat whispers as she squeezes past Lizzie and lowers herself into the other chair. She’s holding three glasses.

‘Lizzie won’t have any,’ I say sharply. Nat gives me a stern ‘Don’t be so rude’ look. I catch Lizzie’s eye and she flushes.

‘I’m pregnant,’ she tells Nat softly. The cork pops free from the bottle, a timely exclamation mark. Nat looks back and forth between me and Lizzie, trying to work out if it’s good news or not.

‘Oh,’ she says slowly. ‘Well, one glass won’t hurt. My sister drank all through her pregnancy and Finnigan’s fine. Except for the ADHD.’

I’m amazed when Lizzie accepts the glass from Nat. This is Lizzie the health nut here. Sitting in my doorway, knocked up and drinking cheap wine. The world just doesn’t make sense to me anymore.

‘So you saw Dan?’ she asks, looking up at me as she swallows a mouthful of wine. I look away.

‘Yeah,’ I sound surly.

‘He was with a girl,’ Nat breathes. I’m annoyed by the way she keeps speaking quietly, in asides to Lizzie, as though I can’t hear her. ‘She looked about *twelve*.’

Lizzie looks at me sympathetically.

‘And she had enormous boobs.’

I wish Nat would just shut up.

God must be listening because Nat's phone starts to vibrate in her hand. 'It's him!' she announces happily and takes her wine and her phone back inside, sliding the door closed behind her. Lizzie pulls herself to her feet with a tired sigh and takes Nat's vacated chair. I notice she's still holding Dennis' note.

'I think your dad really wants to talk to you,' I say abruptly.

'Yeah.' There's a rustle of paper as she clenches her fist around the note.

'Were you out when he came over?'

'No.'

'My mum's got a key you know, they'll get in eventually.'

We sit in silence for a minute.

'Why did you and Dan break up?'

I look at her sharply, wondering if she's trying to get at me because I asked her about Dennis.

'You never said,' she says defensively.

'Well . . .' I start, then pause to drain my wine glass. She picks the bottle up from the foot of the chair and offers it to me. I'm feeling a bit drunk; the night has become slick and hard, like it's been shellacked. 'I don't know,' I sigh. 'The usual stuff.'

Oddly enough, Lizzie looks like she understands.

There's no big, dramatic reason why Dan and I broke up. I didn't fuck someone else, he didn't fuck someone else, I didn't run over his dog . . . We lived in our little house in Norwood, tried to save money to buy a house, cooked dinner, watched DVDs, had pretty decent sex. But . . . I didn't like the outdoor loo and always complained about the draughty old house ('Let's live somewhere *new*,' I'd moan, 'somewhere with a twenty-first century toilet.'). he saved a lot more money than I did, I was always on a

diet and refused to eat the creamy pasta sauces he insisted on making, we could never agree on a DVD to rent and always had to compromise and get a movie *neither* of us wanted to see, and ‘pretty decent sex’ is no consolation when you think everyone else in the world is having an earth-shattering fuck three times a day.

Poor old Dan could never get used to the hours I kept. He’d be sacked out in bed when I got home from work; I couldn’t bear to get up and have breakfast with him at six-thirty in the morning; he never wanted to come out for a drink when I knocked-off. He came with me once to Mars but was furious when he saw the pills changing hands.

‘It’s illegal,’ he snapped, stomping up the stairs, pushing Victoria Bitter, the two o’clock drag act, out of the way. She’s never spoken to me again, even though we worked together at Sea Salt, back when she was plain old Greg Butler.

Dan didn’t like my taste in music, my dress sense, my choice of reading material. ‘It’s sick,’ he’d say, picking the books off the quilt as he came to bed and stacking them in a neat tower on the floor.

‘How is it sick? It’s history.’

‘You’re the Queen of Gore.’

‘It’s *history*, Dan.’

‘It’s *voyeurism*, Molly.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Look it up.’

I did. ‘It’s sexual, so I don’t see how it applies to me at all.’

He refused to go see *The Pianist* with me, so I went by myself. It was a morning session and I was the only person in the theater – it was the big cinema at the Piccadilly, which is enormous, so I felt how alone I was. I chose the Piccadilly because that’s where I went with Peter. I was mad at Dan, and going to Peter’s cinema gave me

the pleasantly vengeful feeling of cheating on him.

We just didn't fit. If it hadn't been for Hero we probably would have dated for a couple of months, had pretty decent sex, and then gone our separate ways, quite pleasantly. I'd probably even be *happy* for him: pleased he bought himself the house and the underage, oversize vixen. But because of Hero we stuck too long, we imprinted, we inflicted, we got hurt.

Hero was wild and weird, manic, erratic, uncontrollable. I loved it. Compared to Hero I was stable, steady, *together*. She relied on me. And we had a blast together. We could stay out all night, get wasted, and have a great time, or we could stay in, watch TV and have a great time. We were easy together. I wasn't ever easy with Peter, or Dan. Peter made me edgy – every nerve ending zinged when he was around, and my brain got scrambled. And with Dan . . . everything was a little too orderly: predictable. I knew how every sentence was going to end. Including the one where he said he was moving out.

Hero was my other self, the crazy one.

I'd been seeing Dan about a month when it all went to hell. She was in a manic phase. I don't think she'd slept for a week – there was a bizarre sculpture in the lounge room, made from a green wheelie bin and a bunch of chick pea cans. The chick peas were all in a pile in the sunroom. They reeked. There was hammering and grinding and sawing going on all night. Then one night I woke up to find Hero stoned, next to me in bed, her hands roaming under the covers.

She was strong; I really had to fight to get away from her. She scratched me and cried and told me that she loved me. She wouldn't let go. I got scared when she started biting me, her hands twisting my flesh.

'I love you, cunt!' she hissed.

I got out of there and never went back. Dan went and picked up my stuff for me.

'I guess you could stay here,' he volunteered halfheartedly and, halfheartedly, I agreed.

'It just didn't work,' I say now to Lizzie, shaking my head to clear it of ghosts. 'What about you and Jim?'

'I didn't want to get married and have kids.'

I snort and accidentally inhale some of the wine and start choking. She bangs me on the back, a little harder than she needs to. I look at her through watering eyes.

'What?'

Nat chooses this moment to slide the door open. 'Sorry, babes, I have to go. I'm going to pick him up.'

I walk her to the front door and kiss her goodbye. 'Have fun.'

'Sorry about Dan,' she sings over her shoulder as she leaves, 'you're better off without him.'

I doubt it, I think, but he's certainly better off without me.

The bed tosses on the carpet. I shouldn't have drunk the rest of the bottle of fizz. I feel like I'm on a ship, on a stormy sea. Heave Ho.

I sleep restlessly, dreaming about men. Shadowy men without faces. Green chalk cocks. Erect, flaccid, waving at me like banners.

I wake up, not thinking about Dan, or Chef, or even greasy Harry, he of the original tumescent green chalk cock, but of Peter. Beautiful Peter, the love of my life.

She liked to watch him sleep.

His eyebrows were thick, his nose straight and wide, his lips sharply pointed at the bow. His hair had strands that looked gold in the breaking daylight.

She tried to memorise the planes of Elja's face, because when he was absent she had trouble believing in him.

Sometimes her new life – the sound of the traffic on the street outside, the commotion in the kitchen in the morning, the alien smells – terrified her. Left with his mother during the daytime, while Friedl and Yehiel reeled merrily through their summer holidays, while Elja and his father were at work, she felt she was in a dream. She couldn't control anything. She went where she was told, did as Mamele Halina bid, stayed still and quiet and tried to understand the rules of this queer house, this queer life.

In the evening, after dinner, when everyone moved through to the den to listen to the wireless, she and Friedl stayed at the sink. Or, she stayed at the sink, up to her elbows in greasy dishwater, and Friedl hovered by the doorway, plate and dishcloth in hand, listening to the broadcasts. Now and then Friedl would drift back to put a plate away and complain that they were listening to the news again.

'I can't think of anything more dull,' she pouted, 'when they know my show is on the other station.'

Gienia just shrugged and kept her eyes on the soap bubbles and her own chapped hands.

When the dishes were done they went through to the den too. It was dim, lit only by Mamele Halina's sewing lamp. Elja's father, Menachem, sat close to the wireless; no one was allowed to touch it except him. He kept more and more to the political speeches and newscasts and Gienia quickly drifted into a doze.

Her favourite time of day was when Elja woke her and led her upstairs to their room, to privacy. As soon as the door closed she sighed with relief and began to chatter at him, asking him questions about his day, his mood, his childhood; telling him the minutia of her day, thoughts that had occurred to her, questions she had about the house, the food, the city. He'd laugh and draw her to bed, stopping her mouth with his.

'My chatterbox,' he'd say.

And when he slept she'd watch him. He slept on his stomach, with his mouth open. Sometimes he'd reach for her in his sleep. She would be glad and slide closer, letting him claim her. She stared at the mole on his neck, at the long lobe of his ear, trying to make him less strange, less a stranger.



Peter was already working at Green River when I started there. He was an artist, working as a dishpig to supplement the income he made from grants. He was older than me by almost ten years. He had hair the colour of red dust, his eyes were faded-denim blue and he had a groove in his chin I wanted to rest my finger in. I had a crush on him long before we ever became friends. I'd go along to the Exeter after every shift, just on the off-chance that he might show up. If he was there he'd always come over and we'd have a beer. He rolled his own cigarettes, and I was fascinated by his paint-splattered brown fingers as they laid out a row of curling tobacco, by his pink tongue as it licked the paper.

One Tuesday afternoon I stuck around at the pub long after Hero and the others had left. He wasn't working a split and I knew Rhys would knock him off soon. I sat out

on the street so I could keep an eye out and nursed my warm Pale Ale. Eventually he appeared, walking his bike, his helmet dangling from the handlebars.

‘Hey,’ he said amiably when he saw me, kicking out his kickstand and finishing his fag.

‘Hey,’ I said back, my heart in my mouth.

‘Want another beer?’

‘Yeah.’ I felt like my tongue was four times its usual size. I couldn’t speak. I tried to think of a topic for conversation while he was inside getting the beers. ‘Seen that German movie?’ I asked abruptly as soon as he set the sweating glasses on the table.

‘That one?’ he asked with a smile, gesturing towards a poster for *Run Lola Run*.

‘Yeah.’

‘Nah, not yet. You?’

‘No, I was going to go. I hear it’s good.’

‘Yeah.’

Great conversation numbnut, I thought.

‘Today?’

‘What?’

‘You going today?’

‘Uh, yeah,’ I lied, too rattled to think of anything else to say.

‘Maybe I’ll come.’ He took out his papers and tobacco. ‘Want one?’

‘Huh?’

‘Want one?’ He held up the tobacco.

‘Yeah.’ I watched the brown curls twist. There was an elliptical circle of red paint on one square fingernail. Like a drop of blood.

‘I’m really struggling with my work at the moment,’ he sighed, leaning to lick the

paper. 'Be good for me to get out and think about something else for a while. Mind if I come?' He held the cigarette out and I took it. It took me three goes to get the match lit, my fingers were trembling so much.

'It's on here at the Palace, right?'

'Yeah.' I hope.

'What time?'

'Uh, I don't know,' I admitted, exhaling a cloud of blue smoke. He licked this paper, I thought. This paper between my lips. I lingered over the inhalation, over the paper his lips had touched: a secondhand kiss.

'We'll go look, eh? If it's not on for ages, we'll grab some food first.'

It wasn't on for an hour so we had another drink. The beer worked on my nerves, massaging them, loosening them, and soon I was able to talk like a regular person.

It turned out Peter was a rabid movie fan, he saw two or three a week.

'Sonja's not big on them,' he said as he walked me home. At the time I was living with Hero, in the rundown house off Carrington street. I walked slowly, so we wouldn't get there too soon.

'How come?' I asked, thinking how dumb Sonja was. How could you not like sitting in a dark room next to *Peter*? Having to share an armrest, having your thighs touch, having your fingers meet in the popcorn box?

'She says she doesn't have the attention span.'

'Oh.'

'We live on Childers street, by the Piccadilly, so I usually go there. I call ahead to make sure the movie's in the big cinema, the other two are too small. I like being *overwhelmed*,' he said, 'I'd rather sit in the front row than the back row.'

'Yeah, me too,' I told him, although I'd never really given it much thought.

'You should come.'

'What?'

'To the movies with me, you should come. I don't mind seeing movies by myself but it's more fun with someone else.'

Like sex. 'I'd love to,' I said, 'if I'm not working.'

'How about Sunday? You work Sunday?'

'Yeah,' I couldn't keep the disappointment out of my voice.

'Oh,' he sounded a bit deflated.

'Monday?' I asked hopefully.

'Monday night? I'm working the lunch shift.'

'Yeah.'

'Cool. Meet me at my place at seven.' He scribbled down his address.

'What are we seeing?'

'Whatever's on,' he said with a grin.

It became a weekly thing, movies with Peter; we became friends, and, secretly, he became the great love of my life.



There was an old upright piano in the den. Friedl was made to practice on it for half an hour a day. She didn't enjoy it and would thump about grumpily until her time was done.

'You don't have a musical bone in your body,' Schlomo laughed at her one summer evening, as he rolled a cigarette and lazed in his father's chair. 'Hurry up and finish so I can turn the set on and listen to some real music.'

Gienia was sitting at Mamele Halina's sewing machine, which was by the window, between

the piano and the wireless. The sky beyond the lace curtains was lilac and streaked with pale gold clouds, the air smelled of earth and roses and roasting meat. Gienia wished she were alone in the den, able to peacefully finish sewing Friedl's new school dress.

'I wish Mamele had let me learn the violin,' Friedl grumped.

'Listening to you murder the piano is bad enough.'

'You play then.'

'You've eighteen minutes left,' Schlomo grinned, lighting his cigarette.

'I can't have! I've been playing *forever*. I don't have eighteen minutes left, do I Gienia?'

'I don't know what time you started,' Gienia told her. Then she cleared her throat. 'But it certainly feels like too long.'

Schlomo gave a startled laugh and Gienia felt his eyes on her. 'Well, if our dear sister-in-law says it's too long, who am I to argue. Off you get, Little Bit, and I'll show you how it's meant to sound. Whatever they're paying your instructor, it's too much.' He uncurled his long body and strode to the piano. 'Hold my cigarette would you, Bit?' He passed it to Friedl.

'Can I have a puff?'

'Only if you don't tell Mamele.'

Friedl lifted the cigarette to her mouth and took a wet drag. She blew the smoke out almost instantly, in a thick white cloud.

Schlomo's long fingers lowered to the keys and began playing, gently, mournfully. 'See, Little Bit, it's a lament, not a dirge.'

Friedl didn't answer, she had the cigarette in her mouth.

'Do stop pedaling, Gienia,' Schlomo sighed, 'you're quite ruining the mood.'

Gienia flushed and took her foot from the pedal. The whirr of the sewing machine slowed and faded. The room darkened as the sunset became twilight and the twilight became a purple gloom. The mournful music curled about them. It filled Gienia with a deep and nameless

longing. She watched Schlomo's thin fingers on the white keys; both ivory and flesh glowed.

'Friedl!' Mamele Halina called from the kitchen, 'how you've improved!'

Friedl choked on the cigarette and began to cough; Schlomo caught Gienia's eye and winked.



I find I can't stop thinking about Peter. The fish make me think of Bertha, and thoughts of Bertha lead to Peter. Watching Ping Pong at the sink, or Colin sorting the cutlery into the big white buckets, makes me think of watching Peter do the same thing, years ago at Green River. One night at Supermild I see Hero, slouched by the wall, looking surly and slugging from a longneck of VB, and it's not her cousin Percy and meeting Dan I think of but Green River and Peter. I don't go over and say hello. Some bridges are burned beyond repair. And the trolls living underneath are unrestrained and uncontained.

Small memories trip me up, take the breath out of me all over again: the strands of grey, like silver wire, that ran through his red hair. The way his clothes smelled of paint and turps. The way his skin smelled of soap and tobacco and sometimes, horribly, of Sonja's perfume. Givenchy. A grown up, sophisticated, heartbreaking smell, belonging to a woman I couldn't be.

She'd be home sometimes when we finished a movie. We'd walk from the Piccadilly, down Childers street to their townhouse. Just inside the front gate was a sculpture of a cat made from coat hangers.

'Hey, Honey, I'm home,' Peter would say every time we walked through the gate, bending down to scratch the cat's wire ears. Honey was the cat's name. Sonja was 'Red'.

‘Like Red Sonja,’ he told me with a grin, when I looked puzzled.

‘But she doesn’t have red hair.’

He just shrugged, grinning that private grin that made me burn with envy.

I always knew when Sonja was home because the curtains would be open. Once we were in the gate I could see her sitting on the couch, or working at the dining table. She had expensive hair, streaked with honey and toffee tones, and beautiful, flawless skin. She reminded me of Lizzie and my mother: restrained. She and Peter were nothing alike.

If Sonja was home we had real coffee in the plunger. I’d sit on a stool and watch Peter grind the beans. If she wasn’t we went out to his shed and had instant coffee in tin camping mugs. The shed was a mess of cardboard, tin and canvas. An enormous painting dominated – it was swirly blue, with a black knot in the lower right corner.

‘Wow,’ I said the first time I saw it, worried I’d sound dumb if I said anything more.

‘It’s called *Blue Eyes*,’ he told me, tossing his head to flick hair out of his eyes.

‘What’s all the black?’

‘Rage.’

‘Oh. Cool.’

‘Molly!’ Lizzie snaps. I blink. I’ve been standing at the bathroom sink, toothbrush clamped between my teeth, toothpaste dripping down my chin onto my t-shirt, dreaming of Peter. Beautiful Peter, the love of my life.

‘We’re going to be late!’ Lizzie’s in a complete state and I know I’ve got no time to change my t-shirt. I blot the toothpaste stain with a wet flannel and follow her out of the bathroom. She loads me up with my bag and my keys. For the first time in ages she looks like the Lizzie I know. Her hair is twisted up tight, not a strand out of place,

she's in her terribly expensive tailored work clothes, and her feet are crammed into pointy six hundred dollar heels. I watch her carefully as we walk down the stairs, wondering if you need to take gymnastics to walk in heels like that.

I start the car and the CD player starts blaring 'Life on Mars'. She snaps it off. I snap it back on. She turns it down and I sigh.

'What have you got against Bowie?'

She doesn't bother to answer.

She clicks her fingers against the buckle of her seatbelt as we drive down Anzac Highway, it drives me crazy.

'Dennis called again this morning,' I tell her with a sideways glance. The clicking stops briefly, then starts again, faster, more staccato.

'I heard you talking to him,' she says shortly.

'He left five messages yesterday while I was at work.'

'Oh?'

'Oh?' I mimic. 'Oh, my arse, don't tell me you didn't hear the phone ring.'

'It's your phone,' she says primly.

'He's tried your phone but apparently it's always switched off.'

'There's something wrong with the battery.'

I snort.

'Turn just here, there's a carpark.'

I slow down in the side street, looking for a park.

'There's a carpark,' Lizzie insists, sounding vaguely panicked.

'The street is free.'

'We're late!'

'We're five minutes early.'

‘By the time we park and walk there we’ll be late!’ She raps her knuckles on the dash. Like a judge, like a child. I give in and turn into the carpark.

‘Alright but you’re paying.’

She’s out of the car before I’ve even turned the engine off. She doesn’t bother to wait for me. The sound of her heels on the concrete echoes through the carpark. I trot after her, my mary janes making a humble scuffling sound. I follow her past the prostrate pink roses and the sly thistles, over the zebra crossing and past the main entrance to the hospital.

‘Isn’t it in there?’ I call out to her. I can see her French twist shake from side to side. Guess not. She walks past the cream brick emergency entrance, I look in but it’s disappointingly quiet, and continues towards a square building, a building the colour of wet sharkskin. The windows are big and black. It’s not the cheeriest structure in the world.

I just make the elevator; I don’t think she was planning on holding it for me. Her face is tight, I can see lines in her lipstick from where she’s pursed her mouth. Her fingers are wound around the straps on her leather handbag. We spend the ride up staring at our reflections in the elevator doors.

‘Elizabeth Mountney,’ Lizzie says to the receptionist while I’m still struggling through the heavy glass door. She’s got her polite voice on, and her nice-but-distant smile. ‘I have an appointment for nine o’clock.’

The receptionist gives Lizzie a clipboard with a sheaf of forms to fill out and tells her that they’re running behind, there’ll be a fifteen minute wait.

‘You haven’t been to the toilet?’ the receptionist, Linda her name tag says, calls across the waiting room as Lizzie lowers herself into a chair.

‘No.’

I admire Lizzie's restraint. I'm not sure what I would have said to Linda, but it would certainly have been said louder than Lizzie's simple 'no' was. I watch Lizzie fill out forms for a while and then get up to fossick through the collection of battered magazines. They're mostly *Women's Weeklys* and *Whos*, but there are a few *National Geographics* mixed in. I take a couple of *Whos* back to my chair.

'They don't have yours,' I tell Lizzie, but she doesn't look up from the forms. I see she's left the 'Father's Details' section blank. Maybe he didn't have any details. Maybe he was a very general person.

'Brad and Angelina are still together,' I observe, holding the double-page spread out so Lizzie can see but she still doesn't look up. 'Poor old Jen.'

Lizzie gets up suddenly and returns the clipboard to Linda.

'Not much longer,' Linda says reassuringly, as she begins banging away at the keyboard, getting Lizzie's details into the computer.

'How can there be a wait?' I whisper to Lizzie when she sits back down. 'It's just turned nine o'clock.'

'People come before work,' she says absently, reaching into her bag for a bottle of water.

We wait more than fifteen minutes. After ten Lizzie starts twitching in her chair. She crosses and uncrosses her legs. The waiting room is crowded now, most of the women are accompanied by nervous-looking men in suits. There's a two year-old headfirst in the toy basket. I can't work out who he belongs to. Lizzie has to queue to speak to Linda again.

'How much longer?' I hear her ask.

'Not long?' Linda sounds like she doesn't have a clue, her voice lilts up like she's asking a question.

'I'm busting,' Lizzie hisses at me as she sits back down.

'I'm sure they have a bathroom.'

'I'm not allowed to, they get a better picture if your bladder is full.'

'Maybe that's why the carpet is patterned,' I grin, 'to hide the stains made by women who can't wait.'

She snatches a magazine off my lap and glares at me.

Eventually a compact woman holding an orange plastic clipboard appears and calls, 'Elizabeth?'

'Come on,' Lizzie says and walks stiffly towards the woman. I'm surprised, I didn't think she'd want me to go in with her. I drop the magazines and scamper down the hallway after her.

We're led into a closet of a room, it's dim, with a bed that looks like a reclined dentist's chair and monitors bolted to the ceiling. The sonographer settles herself in front of her complicated-looking equipment. She pats the dentist's chair/bed and Lizzie slips her feet out of her expensive shoes and climbs up. She has to sit back up to unbutton her skirt and tug it down under her belly. I still can't see a bump. The sonographer doesn't talk much. I wish she would. The dim, hushed room and the blue glow of the screens is kind of unnerving. I could do with a bit of light hairdresser-style chatter. I peer at the woman's chest, trying to read the nametag.

'Been busy, Jill?' I ask, deciding to have a bash at chatter myself.

'We're always busy.'

'Oh? I thought I read that the birth rate was declining?'

Both Jill and Lizzie give me odd looks and I decide to cut my losses and shut up. Jill squirts some gel on Lizzie's bare stomach. The bottle is almost empty, she has to shake it a few times and when the gel comes out it makes a flatulent noise. I don't say

anything.

I'm not really prepared to see the baby. I hadn't thought much about it, I wasn't expecting to be in the room. It's kind of hard to see anything on the screens at first. It's all black, with pulsing blue smudges.

'There we are,' Jill says.

'What are we looking at?' I ask, puzzled. I look to Lizzie for an answer but she looks equally puzzled. Then as I'm looking at her she inhales, like someone kicked her, and her eyes go all big. I follow her gaze to the screen.

'Oh wow.' It's unmistakable. A close up of the baby's profile, its neck, its chest and arm. It's transparent and I can see its heart beating, fluttering. 'Oh wow.' I have to sit down. The baby jackknifes suddenly.

'It's kicking me,' Lizzie says wonderingly.

'You won't feel it for a while,' Jill tells her. I think I can hear a smile in her voice. I hope I do. I want to think you couldn't get desensitised to this, to the blue smudges with their tiny little heartbeats. 'You're lucky, they're usually asleep,' Jill continues, moving the instrument over Lizzie's belly, giving us different views. She has to point bits out, because mostly it just looks like blue smudges. Even after she says 'That's a foot,' or 'There's the umbilical cord,' I still can't make them out. I just want to see its face again.

'Is it a boy or a girl?' I ask, unable to help myself. Lizzie glares at me.

'It's too early to tell,' Jill says, 'Ask again at the next one.' Eventually she ushers us out, handing Lizzie a DVD of the ultrasound and pointing her in the direction of the toilets.

I can't help looking at Lizzie's stomach when she comes back to the waiting room and sits next to me.

‘Stop it,’ she sighs. I think she might have been crying again. Her face looks less made up, more pink.

‘Sorry. Just, you know . . . wow.’ I pick up *Who* again and we wait to see the doctor. We wait a long time. ‘I really did read that the birth rate is declining,’ I say suddenly when I finish the last magazine I can be bothered reading. Lizzie is staring vacantly at the fish tank.

‘Why do all doctor’s offices have fish tanks?’ I ask. ‘Is there something about fish and healing? Are they supposed to be restful? I don’t find them restful.’ I tilt my head and watch the tropical fish swim through the bubbles coming from the filter. ‘Cleaning the tanks stresses me out completely.’

Lizzie sighs deeply.

‘God, I’m hungry, are you hungry? Did you have breakfast? I feel like my blood sugar’s bottoming out. You should be careful about that,’ I look at her stomach again, ‘gestational diabetes and all.’

I realise my chatter is annoying her and I fall silent. I notice there’s a box of charity chocolates on the reception desk and fuss through my wallet for some coins. I buy us each a bar of fruit and nut. I pause before I hand it over to Lizzie. ‘Chocolate has caffeine, doesn’t it?’ I turn the chocolate bar over to scan the label, ‘I’m not sure you should be having caffeine.’

She snatches the chocolate off me.

I get bored watching the fish and give in to the lure of the *Women’s Weeklies*. I’m sick of gossip. I look at the ads instead. White kitchens, stainless steel appliances, real pine Christmas trees with colour co-ordinated decorations. 101 recipes for leftover turkey. How to make your own cranberry sauce. Mash cranberries, I imagine.

There's a picture of a long table, set for Christmas lunch. On the lime green, gold-beaded table runner sit mismatched glass jugs filled with flowering herbs and, bang, I'm thinking of Peter again.

After a while my crush on Peter grew painful, like a blister about to pop. I remember the night I thought I should end it, quit my job, walk away before I embarrassed myself. We'd skipped the movie because it was such a beautiful evening – we grabbed noodles instead and sat in his back yard with a bottle of cheap red. We sat on the little patch of lawn and clover, watching the cabbage moths flit through his garden. He grew his own herbs, and vegetables, and, at the back, tall and luscious and deeply green, he grew his own cannabis.

I was disappointed in him. Stupid, because God knew I'd smoked my share of pot and popped the odd pill. But I didn't like it; I didn't want it to be natural to me, didn't want the clubs to be natural to me, or the late nights, or the glibness, or the shell of 'who-gives-a-fuck' I crawled into like a hermit crab. Deep down I thought I wanted to live in an ad for cough medicine, or paper towels. The nice, airy middle class house, the expensive, minimalist beige clothes, the square-jawed husband with the soft wool sweater, the scrubbed kid looking at me lovingly. And a Labrador. The TV kind that didn't mine turds or hump your leg.

Stupid to be disappointed, Peter didn't own a wool sweater, let alone bourgeois sensibilities. But I was, as I watched him roll his home-grown between his long, brown fingers. I sat down on the old wooden sleeper bordering the herb garden and tucked my hands under my armpits, for warmth. It was a spectacular night, still cold but full of the heavy scent of spring – almond and plum blossom, freesia, fresh mint, lemon thyme and chamomile. I took the joint from him and inhaled, sad to give up the clarity of

night. The scents disappeared beneath the heavy perfume of the marijuana. We got stoned and talked about art and work and disappointment.

‘What would you rather do?’ he asked me. He was sitting on the grass, leaning back on his hands and watching me through narrowed eyes. His knee poked through the tear in his jeans. I wanted to reach out and touch it but even stoned I knew it was a bad idea.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Cop out. Think about it and get back to me. I mean it,’ he insisted, ‘tomorrow I’ll ask you for an answer.’

Tomorrow. The weight of it bore down on me. It’s still bearing down on me. Different restaurant, same tomorrow, except now I don’t even have Peter. Just the same routine of specials, orders; food I can’t taste, wine I can’t drink. Same bone-deep exhaustion at the end of a shift. Same desperation for my knock-off drink. Same surrender to the round of pubs and clubs and drinks and pipes and powders and pills. Same empty bed. What would I rather do? Anything.

‘Elizabeth Mountney?’

The doctor’s voice snaps me out of my thoughts. I flip the magazine closed and look at Lizzie. ‘Am I coming?’

She nods.

The doctor leads us through to her consulting room at the end of the corridor. The blue smudge of Lizzie’s baby is up on her computer monitor – it’s casual, like a screen saver. We sit. Lizzie’s knuckles are white as she clutches her bag straps. Doctor Biren flips through Lizzie’s file. I get distracted by the smudge and don’t listen until she mentions the words ‘risk factor’.

‘What?’

‘I just said your partner’s risk factor is one in seventeen hundred.’

‘So it doesn’t have Downs Syndrome?’ Lizzie sounds relieved. I notice she doesn’t say that I’m not her partner.

‘We can’t say that,’ the doctor sounds as firm as a kindergarten teacher. ‘But we don’t recommend further testing.’

‘Right.’ I see Lizzie set her jaw. I think she’s decided to be relieved.

I take her out to lunch to celebrate. We go to Rundle Street, so we can do some Christmas shopping afterwards. For some reason I gravitate towards the Indian restaurant I went to with Chef.

‘You’re okay with this?’ I ask Lizzie, pausing at the front door. She shrugs. ‘Just don’t eat anything hot,’ I warn. ‘I don’t want you going into labour on me.’

‘That’s a myth.’

‘Let’s not test it.’

We sit in the exact same spot I sat with Chef, all those weeks ago, under the picture of Kali. There she is, arms outstretched, creating with one hand, destroying with the other.



She knew before he told her. She was outside, hanging laundry. She’d strung a line across the little patch of garden by the blasted remains of the Reder’s house. The stump of a rose bush, just past the line, in the blackened earth, was bursting with new growth. The sky was harmlessly blue, empty of the screaming silver planes. The sun still had all the warmth of high summer and

it was pleasant on her bare arms and legs.

'Gienia?'

The sheet hid him from view. Her shadow lay across it in striating lines of grey. Her fingers paused on the pegs. He didn't come closer.

'Gienia,' his voice was wary, already defensive. *Oh God*, she thought, her fingernails gouging into the weather-softened wood of the pegs. She heard him sigh, felt his reluctance to speak through the warming soap-scented linen. 'They're assembling a new defense on the other side of the Vistula.'

She didn't speak. Despite the sunshine her skin rippled with goose pimples.

'I have to go.'

'Is Schlomo going?' She hadn't meant to sound so sharp. She wished she could take it back.

'No.' Elja's voice was flat, difficult to read.

'So why do you have to go?' She yanked the sheet and the pegs popped free and skittered over the churned up dirt. He stood by the splintered almond tree, hands in his pockets, his face grave. Her hands clenched around the damp sheet, drawing it closer to her breast.

'Gienia . . .' he sighed. She hated that tone in his voice, that sad, disappointed tone, the one he saved just for her.

'What use is it?' she spat, suddenly furious. 'What will you do, there across the Vistula? Hold them back with shovels?'

'What do you want me to do?' His usual placid face darkened with an equal rage. 'Sit in the cellar and wait? Welcome them with open arms?'

'What about me?'

'I'm doing this for you.' He crossed the garden in two long strides. 'I have to go. I can't just sit here, Gienia, I *can't*.'

'Schlomo's not going,' she said, feeling a twist of envy.

'I'm not Schlomo,' he gave her a gentle shake. 'Let's not argue.' He rested his forehead against hers, 'Please. I'll be leaving in an hour. I don't want to argue with you.'

He led her inside, upstairs. He closed the bedroom door behind them but they could still hear Mamele Halina's muffled sobs through the walls.



I couldn't leave. I was completely addicted to Peter. To the smell of paint and turps. To his brown fingers. To the eclectic series of films he dragged me to. To touching him in the popcorn bucket. To sitting in the corner of his shed with a book while he made up canvases. I was even addicted to the pain of Sonja, seeking her out, talking to her, like prodding a sore tooth, stimulating a wave of pain, just to enjoy the absence of it afterwards. It would have gone on forever, blistering me, scarring me, but in the end Sonja saved me.

'We're going to Sydney,' she said joyfully one night when I turned up to meet Peter for a movie. 'I got the job.'

'The job?' I looked to Peter but he wouldn't meet my gaze. He gathered up his wallet and keys and tucked them into his pockets. He'd never told me about a job, about a move.

I felt sick as we walked along Childers Street, over the bumps raised in the footpath by the roots of the ash trees.

'When?' I asked.

'Next week.'

I couldn't eat the popcorn, I don't remember watching the movie, I sat in the dark and despaired. I was a pocket of deep space: cold, airless, unable to sustain life.

'I'm going to head home,' I said straight after the movie, unable to bear the thought of walking back through the gate ('Hi, Honey, I'm home'), seeing Sonja's joy, smelling the fresh herbs sitting in a vase over the sink. Watching him grind coffee.

That was our last movie.

On the night of Peter's last shift Rhys knocked me off early but I didn't want to leave, I didn't want to go home without having a drink, without saying goodbye. So I sat in the back room with a beer, watching the picture on the old black and white telly flicker and roll.

He walked past and noticed me. 'Hey.' He looked hesitant.

'Hey.'

'What are you doing?'

'Knocked off.'

'Oh.' I thought he looked disappointed. Was he disappointed?

'Thought I might stick around . . .' I said shyly, 'If you're having a goodbye drink . . .'

'Just a quick one,' he looked over his shoulder, then reached for my beer and took a sip. I watched his lips close around the bottle mouth. 'I'm meeting Sonja at the Exeter,' he checked his watch, 'You sure you want to stick around? It's only ten.'

'Nothing else to do,' I said gamely. He popped in a couple more times; I made sure there was still some beer for him to swig, and I ached at the sight of his mouth on my beer bottle: a secondhand kiss. Finally, at eleven thirty, he knocked off and collapsed beside me on the couch. The others came through and collected their stuff.

'We're going to sit on the deck,' Hero said, looking at me through narrowed eyes, 'want me to get you another drink?'

'Uh, yeah,' I glanced sideways at Peter, wishing we were alone.

'Pete?' Hero raised an eyebrow.

'I'll have a beer but I might stay in here for a bit, watch the end of the cricket.' I thought he glanced at me. Did he glance at me?

'I'll bring it in here,' Hero sighed and looked back at me, 'want me to bring yours in here too?'

'Um . . .' I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to look desperate but, on the other hand, he was going to walk out of my life.

'Go on, keep me company,' Peter said, leaning forward to turn up the volume on the TV.

'Okay.' I ignored Hero's snort.

We drank our beers quietly for a while and I pretended to watch the cricket. I hate cricket.

'You looking forward to it?' I asked suddenly.

'What? The move?'

I nodded and took a deep pull of beer so I wouldn't have to speak.

'Yeah, I guess,' he shrugged. 'I don't mind Adelaide. I can paint here as well as anywhere.'

'Guess it's harder for Sonja.'

'Yeah.'

We lapsed into silence again. I fiddled with the label on the beer bottle, tearing it off in little curls. He shifted on the couch and I felt his thigh slide into mine. Eventually he drained his beer and sighed. He scratched his stubble and turned to me.

'Guess that's it, then.'

I blinked, not sure whether he meant the beer, the cricket, or something else entirely. I smiled, not sure how to respond. He stood up, removed his apron, folded it neatly and

put it down on top of the TV. He reached for his bag, then paused and straightened up again.

‘It’s not the beer,’ he said suddenly, sucking on his lower lip. I frowned, not sure what he meant. I could see his adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. ‘I’ve wanted to do this for a long time.’

He leaned over me, bracing both arms on the back of the couch, his elbows brushing my ears. I couldn’t hear anything, my ears were conch shells, roaring with the invisible sea. Up close I could see the pores in his skin, the grooves around his mouth, the feathery lines at the side of his denim-blue eyes. His thick hair brushed my forehead as he lowered his head. I was water, I was lava, I flowed, I burned. His kiss started gently, his lips smooth, and I took it, stunned, unable to grasp my good fortune, unable to respond. But when his mouth opened and I felt his tongue, my eyes closed and I kissed him back. I rested my palms on his chest, I could feel the play of muscles beneath the old t-shirt. He tasted like beer and sugar.

Eventually he pulled away and I opened my eyes.

‘Molly Miller,’ he said softly, his voice fond. *Peter*, I thought, and would have said, if I could have made my voice work. I reached out, the way I’d dreamed of doing a thousand times, and lay my finger in the groove of his chin. It was an act of love, like penetration, intercourse. His thumb rubbed a circle on my cheek. He straightened and, taking my hands, pulled me to my feet. My head barely reached his shoulders. I felt him brush a kiss on my crown and then he hugged me. He was long and lean and hard and I didn’t want to let him go.

Like there was a choice.

‘Bye, Moll.’

After he’d gone I turned off the TV and the lights and stood in the dark for a while,

sucking on my lips, searching for the taste of beer and sugar. The next day I quit Green River and never went back.



'God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the holy Sabbath is nearing an end,' Mamela Halina's voice was a low drone. The candles flickered. 'May the new week bring us health, life, and all that is good. May it bring us sustenance, good tidings, deliverance and consolation. Amen.'

'Amen.' The response was flat, toneless. Nine of them were crowded around the small table by the stove. They were on the third floor of the shared house, living in two rooms. Their rooms overlooked the street and between the buildings Gienia could see the ghetto wall. She felt Elja's absence like a chill. She watched his mother tremble in the candlelight. She heard his father pray in his low voice. She felt his brother, Schlomo, the one who didn't pick up a shovel and go to war, inch closer to her, away from his wife. She felt the heat radiate from Schlomo's body. On the other side, the side where Elja was not, she was cold.

the taste of amber

The Christmas momentum is building. The tables get bigger as the group bookings start pouring in. We get a thousand phone calls a day trying to book Friday lunches and Saturday nights.

‘Sorry, Madam, but we’re booked out.’

‘What about the Friday after?’

‘I’m afraid we don’t have any vacancies except for the Monday and Wednesday.’

‘The *following* week?’

‘We don’t have any vacancies at all. It’s Christmas,’ I tell her, exasperated.

‘I *know*, that’s why I’m trying to book.’

I’m in a foul mood. It’s hot and I’m on my fifth shift in a row. It’s Saturday afternoon, the restaurant is still half full of people lingering over wine and coffee. I’m working the night shift too – we’ve got a wedding, so I’m not likely to get a break.

‘Well, I’m *sorry* Madam, but we’re booked out. I can put you on a waiting list.’

I’m trying not to sound pissy with her but I don’t think I’m succeeding.

‘No,’ she exhales heavily, irritably, down the phone, ‘I can hardly send out invitations to a *possible* lunch, can I?’

‘Sorry, Madam, good luck finding somewhere.’ And next time book earlier, you stupid cow.

‘Molly!’ Chef bellows from the kitchen.

‘What!’ A bead of sweat runs down my back as I glance out at the floor. I’m supervising. I love it when we’re flat out and I can run the floor well, staggering the orders, keeping the momentum, smiling smiling smiling. But today has been hard work. I’ve got Adrian, Trev and Hanna and they’ve all struggled with their sections. They’re just not fast enough. I’ve spent all day careening from one table to the next,

making sure glasses are filled and tables are cleared. My nerves are stretched as tight as piano wire and the last thing I need now is a fight with Chef.

I steel myself as I walk to the kitchen.

‘What’s that?’ Chef snaps. He’s pointing to a big white box sitting on one of their prep benches, near the back door. I look at him quizzically – how the fuck am I supposed to know?

‘Looks like a cake box, Chef,’ I say cautiously as I walk over to the box. I have a look at the white form sticky-taped to the side. For the Hobson-O’Day wedding tonight. There’s a sketch of it, two-tiered, with oriental lilies. Pretty.

‘A cake box?’ I tense. He’s got his bolshie ‘I’m going to fuck with you’ voice on. ‘A cake box!’ He scratches his stubble. ‘Fuck me. Sorry, Moll, did I miss the memo saying we keep the cakes in the fucking kitchen now? Not in the cool room but in the fucking fifty-six degree fucking kitchen!’

‘Well, who left it there?’ I bite back. I’m feeling a bit lightheaded. I need a glass of water. It’s so hot in here, I can feel the heat coming off the oven where Michelle is cooking souffles for table nineteen. I can smell the sharp tang of sweat coming off Chef.

‘Michelle!’ Chef growls. ‘Who left that there?’

‘Delivery guy, Chef.’

‘No shit.’ He looks like he’ll throw something. I hope it’s not at me. ‘Who signed for it?’

Michelle doesn’t look up from her station. ‘Hanna, Chef.’

I wince as Chef’s gaze bores into me. I feel like he’s got me in his grip and is squeezing the breath out of me. I pick up the cake box and prepare to make a quick escape.

‘You tell that fucking bint I want a word with her.’

‘Yes, Chef, after service.’

‘Now!’

Just what I need. Hanna’s going to either cry or walk. Either way my afternoon’s going to get harder. I struggle to open the door to the cool room without dropping the cake box. I moan as I look in at the stacks of wine boxes. There’s not an inch of space to put the box.

‘What’s wrong, lovey?’

Please, God, not now.

Harry peers over my shoulder at the cool store and whistles. ‘Want a hand?’

I do but I wish it wasn’t Harry’s hand. I nod and Harry cheerfully dives into the cool room and starts rearranging boxes. I follow him in and let the door close behind me, to keep the cool air in.

‘Here,’ he helps me ease the box down onto a sturdy pedestal of Moet cartons. ‘This what they’re drinking tonight?’ he asks, kicking a carton with the toe of his boot. I nod. He’s standing between me and the door.

‘Alright for some.’ He grins when he sees me looking at the door. ‘Cooler in here, isn’t it?’ He doesn’t look like he’s going to move. I brace myself and take a step towards the door, towards him. I can smell him. Sweat, fish stock, and a lingering trace of cheap deodorant.

‘Let you out if you give me a kiss.’ He catches me, his fingers cutting into my arms. I imagine my veins pinching off like a kinked garden hose. Maybe I’ll die in here and I won’t have to work tonight. I can lie by the big white cake box, my unblinking eyes staring at the Moet & Chandon labels, stiffening in the cool cool air, while out there Chef bellows, the heat laps at the windows, the bride and groom get drunker and louder

and Hanna sobs herself into a salty puddle.

'Harry,' I warn, but there's no fire in my voice. I sound whipped.

'Come on, Moll, it's just a little kiss.' He keeps grinning. I notice he has a dead tooth. I don't want to kiss him. I try to push past and suddenly his arms are around me, his hands on my boobs. I struggle. I can feel them sliding all over me. There's the smell of fish stock and deodorant. I feel sick. I throw all my weight against the door and it opens. The air is hot again.

'No "thank you, Harry"?' he calls after me as I rush back to the floor.

◦ ○ ◦

She woke to Friedl squealing in her ear. Blearily she tried to focus.

The box car had been abandoned on the tracks for two days.

'Gienia!'

Gienia's heart stopped as she saw a man's thick forearm disappearing up Friedl's skirt. His lips were in Friedl's ear, Gienia couldn't make out his words but the wet susurrus of his voice was unmistakable. With a hiss Gienia reached over and struck him across the cheek. He bellowed and reared back but his hand stayed up Friedl's skirt.

'Get off her!' Gienia shoved away from the wall and grabbed his arm: it was solid and ropey with muscle. She felt it flex under her palm.

'You want some too, love? There's enough to go 'round.'

Gienia spat in his face. He blinked. The hand came out from beneath Friedl's skirt and wiped away the spit.

'You bitch.' With a snarl he seized her by the throat and pushed her to the wall.

'Gienia!' Friedl sobbed.

The man pressed his face close to Gienia's. She felt his hot breath against her cheek.

'I've got what you need, you little bitch.' His hands pulled her dress up. She felt his knuckles dig into her stomach as he fumbled with the waistband of her underwear. Across the car she could see Andrzej the Eel's wet eyes. The fingers around her throat tightened, and her ears began to roar. His hand was down her pants, pulling her underwear down to her knees. She briefly registered a cooler rush of air.

'Help us!' Friedl wailed, staring across the car at her cousin. 'Help us!' But he didn't. Black spots swarmed before Gienia's eyes. Like wasps. She balked at the touch of fingers against her. They pushed her open.

'You like that, don't you?'

She gagged. The man's face was red and shiny, his gaze unfocused. She reached out with her left hand and blindly fumbled for him.

'You want it, don't you, bitch, you want it.' He guided her hand to the front of his pants. She clumsily brushed her fingers over his twitching, swollen penis. He moaned and pressed closer. His fingers left her and went to himself. His pants dropped. His penis sprang free. It was hot and smooth. He braced one arm on the wall and the hand around her throat loosened marginally. Gienia could hear Friedl sobbing. Clenching her teeth Gienia took him in her hand and caressed him gently. His mouth was open, his eyes half closed. She cupped her hand around his balls and the fingers at her throat loosened more. His eyes fluttered closed, his weight shifting onto the hand braced on the wall. She took a deep breath. With a sudden hiss she clenched his balls in her fist. Her nails cut into him. She felt a soft pop as one broke his flesh. He shrieked and Friedl screamed. The hand fell from her throat. She wanted to mutilate him. He was squealing now, weakly reaching for her, his eyes empty of everything except pain. He fell to the floor. She let him go. As he was curling up she stomped her heavy boot into his

groin. With a gurgle the man convulsed and then lay silent, unconscious. Deliberately, hatefully, she ground her heel into him before stepping away.

'Gienia! Gienia! I thought . . . I thought . . . I thought he was going to . . . to . . . ' she hiccuped. 'I was so scared.'

Gienia struggled to pull her pants back up. It hurt to swallow. There was blood on the man, on the floor. Her jaw tingled. Her fingers hurt. With a moan she bent double and vomited. She had eaten nothing for more than a day. She dry-retched, hurting her throat even more. Wiping her mouth, she looked up. The car was quiet. A few people looked at her, their faces blank and vacant. Wanda and Andrzej looked down, into the filth, minding their business. Despair rose from her gut. She fought against it. She pulled Friedl close. Pushing bodies out of the way Gienia crashed through to the other side of the car. She didn't want to be near him.



It's an angry night. I don't know whether it's the heat, or the full moon, or just the frantic sprint towards Christmas, but everyone's tense and irritable. Tommy turns up first, for his four-thirty start.

'It's finished,' he announces miserably as he ties his apron strings and watches me print off the account for table three.

'What's finished?' I ask absently, scanning the bill. 'Fuck,' I mutter. Adrian's put table four's semifreddoes on table three's bill. Worse, table four have already paid and left. Kevin's going to go spare at me. I punch buttons and erase the extra desserts from table three's account.

'Me and Chris.'

'The systems analyst?'

He nods and sighs dramatically.

'Why?' I snap my fingers at Adrian, who's leaning over the bar comforting Hanna. She's still upset about the cake box. He comes over and takes the account off me.

'Hi, Adrian,' Tommy smiles.

'Hey.'

'I'm going to crack him,' Tommy tells me, watching Adrian's bum as he walks away. I notice Hanna glaring and give Tommy a nudge. Tommy giggles and waves.

'Can't blame a girl for looking!' he sings across to her.

'What went wrong?' I ask Tommy.

'The usual,' he grimaces, 'you know.'

I do know, Tommy told me one night when he was full of chemical love. He doesn't like arseholes. He won't go near them and he doesn't want anyone near his. 'I'll do anything else,' he said, 'and I mean *anything*. But not that.' His nose had wrinkled priggishly.

'Want a coffee?' Tommy asks now, dismissing thoughts of arseholes.

I shake my head. 'Too hot.'

'It's never too hot.'

'For what?' Adrian asks, coming back with table three's Amex card.

'Me,' Tommy says, batting his eyelashes. Adrian grins.

'Adrian!' Hanna snaps from the bar.

'Mole,' I hear Tommy mutter under his breath as Adrian leaves him for Hanna. I wish they'd all shut up and get to work.

Neil comes in next, while we're pulling in the room. There's one table left from lunch. I've closed the bar on them but they're still sitting on the last of their wine.

They don't look in any hurry to leave.

Neil's mother is sick ('*Cancer*,' Tommy whispers with a significant rolling of his eyes) and he's spent the day with her. He's twitchy and short-tempered. He and Tommy have a fight over who's supervising the evening shift. I'm just glad it's not me.

'What's going on?' Kevin asks me when he comes in. I'm doing the lunchtime till. Tommy and Neil are still arguing in the bar.

'Who's supervising tonight?' they both snap, rounding on him. Kevin takes a step back.

'It's me, isn't it?' Neil says.

'On the roster the "S" is by my name.' Tommy stalks into the office to get the roster. Kevin and Neil follow. I can hear raised voices.

My till isn't balancing. I know it's because I'm tired.

'Molly!' Chef calls from the kitchen. I ignore him and count the fifty dollar bills again. I hear his footsteps come towards me and I tense. Go away, I think, I can't deal with any more today. Again, I lose track of the fifties.

I jump as his heavy hands descend on my shoulders.

'Christ, you're tense,' I hear him say softly. His hands begin to massage my shoulders. I glance up furtively, wondering if anyone's noticed, but we're alone.

'I can't get the till to balance.' I love the way his hands feel. They're big and strong and loving.

'Here,' he slides me out of the way and starts counting the money. 'You've left the takings in,' he says as he peers at the printout. He removes the cash takings and puts them in the envelope for me.

'Thanks.' I reclaim my position in front of the till.

'Long day?'

'Yeah.'

'You should try working in the kitchen,' his tone suddenly changes, becomes flintier, colder. Trevor's coming up to get more cutlery. 'How many for staffies?' Chef asks, stepping back, away from me.

'Four.'

'Ready in half an hour.'

Typical. How are we supposed to eat then? We've got to get the wedding ready.

He notices my disgruntled expression. 'I'll keep it warm for you.'

Trevor drops his handful of forks in shock.

'You right mate?' Chef scowls at him and retreats to the kitchen.

'What was that all about?' Trev asks me.

'Christmas spirit?' I suggest with a shrug, turning to hide my red cheeks.

Trev, Adrian, Hanna and I get a fifteen minute break. We get ourselves soft drinks and watch the florist fuss around with her table arrangements. Tall vases, like glass spikes, with pink ginger flowers jutting from them: angular, architectural. The vases stand on mirrors, the mirrors are ringed by t-lights. It's all very *designed*. Probably cost a fortune.

We get our staff meals off Harry. Butter chicken. I grimace. I'd rather have a salad. We traipse upstairs to the staff room and sit in a circle around the air conditioner. Ping Pong sits with us. He's reading a book. He gets a half hour dinner break, lucky bastard.

We don't talk as we eat. The others bolt their food and then dash down to the alley for a cigarette. I resist the temptation and stay in front of the air conditioner. I take my

shoes off. My feet are swollen. And they smell. I can see Ping Pong's nose wrinkle, although he's too polite to say anything.

'I bet yours don't smell so great either,' I sigh as I spritz my feet with my green tea body spray. I'm nearly out of it. I loosen my tie and unbutton the top couple of buttons of my limp shirt; I aim the body spray down the neck and give myself a few hearty squirts. Ping Pong gives me a polite, tentative smile but doesn't meet my eye.

'What are you reading?' I ask curiously. He holds the book up. Harry Potter. Bizarre. I don't know what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn't the boy wizard.

'For class,' he says.

'Class?'

'English class.'

'You're doing English?' Again, I'm surprised. 'What do you mean, like at uni?'

'English class,' he says again, confused, 'to speak.'

'Oh, right.' I blush. Of course he means English to speak. English meaning language, not literature. I feel the same creeping embarrassment I always feel around Ping Pong. Guilt.

His name's not really Ping Pong. Obviously. It's Phirun. It was written on his timesheet when he started here, but the kitchen boys called him Ping Pong from the first. Now even his timesheet says Ping Pong.

'Molly!' Tommy shrieks up the stairs; I know my break is over.

Weddings are easy to work. They're so structured. Pre-dinner drinks (in this case Moet – I hope there's some left over for us), guests seated, drinks poured, orders taken, entree and main served, speeches, cake cutting, bridal waltz, dessert and coffee, dancing, close the bar, pack up and go home.

Tommy, who Kevin decided *is* supervising tonight, puts me on drinks and gives me the section closest to the bar. Normally I hate drinks, it's so boring, but tonight I'm tired and grateful for an easy job. My section's full of all the oldies, something else to be grateful for, they'll hardly need anything. Orange juice and light beer refills.

'Just watch out,' Kevin tells me as the guests start pouring in, 'you've got the father of the bride.'

'No, I'm up by the bar,' I correct him, 'the bride's parents are sitting by the bridal table. They're Adrian's.'

'No, that's her stepfather. Her father's here.' He points to a spot right by the door to the toilets. Effectively the worst seat in the restaurant.

'Why's he sitting there?'

'They don't get along,' Kevin whispers. 'Bad divorce.'

'How long ago was the divorce?'

Kevin shrugs. 'I think Yvonne said ten years.' Yvonne's the bride. Yvonne Hobson-O'Day.

'Ten years!'

'Keep your voice down.'

'Why do I need to watch out?'

'Yvonne said to make sure he doesn't drink too much.'

'How the fuck am I supposed to do that?'

'Voice,' Kevin warns again, smiling at a couple of nannas as they walk by, trying to find their seats. 'Just don't over-pour, okay?'

Easier said than done. Mr Hobson is a man on a mission: he plans to drink as much as he can, as fast as he can. And he's a big man. He can drink a lot.

'Love,' he says as he grabs my arm. His fingers are as fat and red as metwurst

sausages. ‘Just leave the bottle.’

‘Sorry, sir, I can’t,’ I protest, making sure I smile so that my dimples show. ‘We’re not allowed to. Table service.’ I waggle the bottle of Wirra Wirra Church Block at him.

‘Do you know who I am?’

‘Your place card says you’re Bob.’

‘Bob *Hobson*.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘The bride’s father.’

‘Congratulations,’ I manage to get my arm away from him and inch my way around the table. I promise an older woman in lavender that I’ll come back with orange juice.

‘He’s a nightmare,’ I hiss at Kevin as we wait at the pass to run entrees.

‘You think *he’s* a nightmare,’ Hanna sighs, ‘you should meet the bridesmaids. The *fat* one?’

‘Oh, I know!’ Neil exclaims. ‘Could she *be* any more feral? She wanted her salmon *well done*.’ Neil makes it sound like she wanted to give the Pope a blow job. And he was raised Catholic, so that’s saying something.

‘Molly!’ Tommy bangs the bell and straightens the order sheets importantly. ‘Bride tart, Groom loin.’

‘Right.’ I step up beside him, like a private about to hit the beach at Normandy.

‘Out back,’ Chef orders.

I scurry to the back of the kitchen where the prep tables are. On one table is a row of gleaming white plates, in the centre of each is a goat’s cheese and caramelised onion tart with a perfectly sculpted dollop of salsa Romesco. On the other table, equally beautiful, shaved veal loin arranged in a delicate fan, with a rocket and feta salad and a

drizzle of tuna mayonnaise. I take one of each and glide down to the bridal table. I check out the group while I'm there.

'She's hardly fat,' I say to Hanna on the way back up.

'Tart, table one, positions two, three and seven,' Tommy bellows at me as I reach the pass.

'Two, three and seven on one,' I repeat, so he knows I heard.

'Loin, table one, positions one, four and five,' I hear him say to Hanna.

'What would you call her?' Hanna asks scornfully as we collect our loins and tarts.

'Normal.'

'Oh, please, she's a heifer.'

'Do you think she's fat?' I point the bridesmaid out to Adrian after we've finished running the food. He shrugs.

'I just think it's wrong to label her *fat* just because she's not a size two,' I complain to Tommy.

'What do you care?' he says.

'I dunno,' I sigh. But it depresses me, the thought of this woman, who's really only about a size twelve, being called fat. 'I think you're being harsh,' I say again to Hanna when I get the chance.

'I wish I hadn't said anything,' she snaps, 'if you're just going to keep going on about it.'

I glare at her retreating back. 'I'll give you fifty bucks if you succeed with Adrian,' I mutter to Tommy.

'Love!' Bob grabs me as I pass. His glass is empty. I wince, noticing his teeth are already stained from the wine and he's flushed and sweaty. He really doesn't need any more. But what am I supposed to do? It's my job.

By the time main courses come Bob's getting a little belligerent. I'm trying to force water on him and I'm hoping his steak (rare – 'Just rip it off a passing cow, ha ha') will soak up some of the wine.

'*Slut!*' he hisses suddenly, venomously.

'What?' I'm so startled I almost drop the water jug on his head. I follow his gaze. He's looking at his wife. Ex-wife. She's in her late fifties but she's still pretty good looking: in shape, dressed in a pale blue sheath and stiletto heels.

'Slut!' he says again, louder. There's a titter from the table. I feel myself grow hot – I'm embarrassed for him. I clear my throat, not sure what I should do. I pour him more water and go run the mains.

Beef, chicken, fish. God, how I wish they'd order something else at weddings. Duck. Pork belly. Anything but beef, chicken, fish.

Bob eats every bite of his bloody meat. No one at his table's talking to him. I feel sorry for him, I feel like he's my responsibility. We're actually getting along quite well. It's the dimples, I think. Older men love them.

'Mr Hobson?' I say as I set dessert cutlery down next to him.

'Bob!' he insists as he drains his wine glass. I'd be dead if I drank what he's had tonight.

'Bob,' I amend, 'do you think she's fat?'

'Who?'

'Her,' I point to the bridesmaid. Normally I'd never dream of having this conversation with a guest, but he's hardly going to remember it, is he?

'Janey?'

'Is that her name?'

'She's my daughter.'

‘Oh.’ I’m mortified. ‘I don’t think she’s fat,’ I blurt.

‘Ah, s’alright, she is a bit. Takes after my mother. The Hobson women were always hefty.’

Now I feel really depressed, even her father thinks she’s fat. Why do I care? I’m not sure where my sudden obsession with the fat bridesmaid comes from. All I know is that it’s got something to do with the smug look on Hanna’s face when she said the word ‘fat’ and the crawling guilt I feel when I talk to Ping Pong.

‘Yvie, now, Yvie takes after her mother.’

‘The slut?’ The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them but Bob doesn’t really notice, my words might as well be in his head. A low growl escapes him.

I make sure all the glasses in my section are full before the speeches.

‘Take a break,’ Tommy says to me. Gratefully, I get a Diet Coke and wander out to the alley. It’s still hot. Suffocatingly, oppressively hot. There’s a ceiling of low cloud and not a breath of wind. I sit on a crate and listen to the rattle of the air conditioning unit. I feel odd. I guess it’s just exhaustion. One more shift before I get a day off. Just one day off and I plan to spend it in bed. I rattle the ice in my glass. Funny how that sound makes me feel eight years old again.

My dad used to drink scotch on the rocks. We always had stacks of plastic ice cube trays in the freezer, all different kinds of ice cube trays so the ice came out different shapes – small round ones, medium rectangular ones, enormous square ones – beautifully glistening in shining amber liquid. The scotch was always gone before the ice could melt. And then it was, ‘Get us another, would you, Moll?’ And I’d get him another. Sometimes I’d steal an ice cube while I was gone – I’d pop it in my mouth and suck hard at the faint tang of scotch. This is how amber tastes, I’d think, not sweet like it looks but sharp like little needles.

When I get up from the crate my feet hurt. Bang, just like that, I'm suddenly aware of my body, the way my back muscles are clenched, as though waiting for a blow, the way my arms ache, the way I feel hollow and dry, desiccated. I need a coffee, but it's too hot, so I drink another couple of Diet Cokes instead.

'You missed a show,' Tommy says dryly as he watches me drain my second Coke. I raise a questioning eyebrow. 'The bride's father.'

I glance at Bob. He's sitting rigid in his chair, watching the mother of the bride circulate. She's getting closer and closer to his table.

'Fucking slut!' he bellows suddenly, spraying spit across the table, speckling the glass spike of the vase.

'Oh, Christ,' I whisper.

'Whore!' Each exclamation gets louder, like gunfire advancing. 'Home wrecker!'

'Home wrecker?' Tommy drawls. 'Hardly a strong follow-up to whore, is it?'

'Someone better stop him before he gets to "cunt",' Neil suggests.

'Oh dear.' Tommy and I spot the bride at the same moment. She's stalking towards Bob, veil flying, eyes glinting brighter than her Swarovski crystals.

'Do you mind,' she hisses.

'Yes, I mind!' Bob shouts, banging his fist on the table. 'Who's paying for this thing? And look where you put me? Right by the shitter!'

Tommy chokes on his water. 'The shitter!'

'You're not *paying* for it, you're paying for *some* of it.' The louder Bob gets, the quieter the bride gets. She's scarier than he is.

'Ten grand!' he shouts. People around them look away, embarrassed. The bride looks furious.

'I don't need your money,' she says through clenched teeth, 'I don't *want* your

money. Get out.'

Bob looks flabbergasted, as though it had never occurred to him that she could refuse his money.

'I mean it,' Yvonne says coldly. And you can see that she does. She looks like she's been carved from dry ice. Touch her and you'll leave skin behind.

'Fine.' Bob gets to his feet, a little unsteadily, and buttons his coat. With the little dignity he has he leaves the restaurant. His daughter collects her husband and a flashing, ribboned cake knife, which she plunges into the two-tiered cake.

'Bob?' I sneak outside, wondering if he could have flagged down a cab that fast. He's sitting on the low brick wall that fences the carpark. Fat, drunken tears roll down his face. I'm not sure what to say. I don't even know the man. 'I brought you a bottle,' I hold out the bottle of red. It's all I've got for him. He takes it in a meaty fist. 'I'll call you a taxi,' I say. *You're a taxi.* 'Go home to bed.'

I look over my shoulder as I go back inside. I see a big old man slumped on a low brick wall. I see my father. I see me.

'Oi!' Chef calls to me as I put the kettle on to boil, so I'll have water to polish the cutlery.

'What?' I sigh. My section is empty, the oldies all left as soon as the coffee was served, clutching their cake bags, and I'm looking forward to sitting down in a quiet corner with the cutlery.

'Get us a beer would you?'

'What do you want?'

'Anything but the local shit.'

I shuffle into the bar and squat before the beer fridge. It's almost empty, only a few

bottles remain at the back, lone survivors.

‘What are you doing?’ Kevin asks.

‘Getting Chef a beer.’

‘They’ve –’

‘He doesn’t drink it,’ I cut him off before he can finish his sentence.

‘Don’t forget to write it up on the sheet!’ he calls after me as I drag my feet towards the cool room.

‘Where are you going?’ Chef shouts as I shuffle past the door of the office.

‘To get you a fucking beer!’ I shout back. I hear Hanna gasp. She’s standing by the laundry bag with an armful of dirty napkins.

‘Oi!’ Chef emerges from the office. He stops when he sees Hanna and glowers.

Her eyes are huge. It’s clear she thinks he’s going to disembowel me for talking to him like that. I roll my eyes and keep shuffling to the cold store.

‘Don’t walk away from me!’ Chef blusters, pushing past Hanna and following me.

I can hear her squeak. ‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’ He stops shouting abruptly as soon as the door to the cold store closes. ‘You alright?’ he asks.

‘Why?’ My knees pop as I squat and reach for a Stella.

‘Hey.’ He sits next to me on a leftover box of Moet. I pass him the beer. He puts it on the floor. The glass clinks against the concrete. ‘Come here.’ He pulls me into his lap and I rest my forehead against his neck. It feels so good to have his solid arms around me. I lick his neck and taste the familiar tang of salt; I feel him shiver. ‘What’s wrong, pet?’ he says. His voice is slow and warm, like liquid caramel. I shake my head, still buried in his neck. His hand circles my back. I feel like crying.

‘You must be a great dad.’ The words just slip out, I didn’t even know I was thinking them. I feel him stiffen and I sigh and sit up. ‘Sorry.’

We sit in silence for a long minute. I wish I could bite my tongue off. I lean down and get his beer. With my waiter's friend I pop the lid, take a swallow and then offer it to him. I haven't had beer in years, not since that night with Peter, watching the cricket on the flickering black and white telly in the back room at Green River. *Peter*, I think desperately, where are you when I need you?

Chef drains his beer in three swallows. 'I have to go home,' he says.

I nod. I know.

Tentatively his hand reaches out to touch my face. 'You sure you're alright?'

'Yes.' No.

I go home. Everyone else is walking into town. It's summer, it's hot, they'll hang out on Rundle Street, drinking, talking, lively, alive. I just can't face it. I go home to my un-air conditioned flat, to my knocked up stepsister, to my torn out encyclopedia pages. I feel like screaming. But I don't. I let myself into the flat quietly. Lizzie's asleep on the double air bed I bought her. I couldn't face seeing her on the couch anymore.

I don't know what to do with myself. I'm not sleepy. Tired, yes. Bone tired. Dog tired. Tired unto death. But I'm still too wound up to sleep. This morning seems like a long time ago. Snippets of the day run through my head. Cake boxes. Fat bridesmaids. Butter chicken. Glass spikes. Chef's hands. Ping Pong and Harry Potter.

On a whim I go get Lizzie's brand new copy of *50 000 Baby Names from Around the World*.

Phirun means rain.

She went willingly. It didn't cross her mind not to go. His hand was cool to the touch, but gripped hers firmly. He led her through the hot night, away from the overcrowded house, away from the smell of sweating bodies, overcooked vegetables, despair.

'What about the curfew?' Gienia whispered. She immediately wished she hadn't spoken. In silence she could cling to the feeling that she was in a dream – the ash-grey moonlight, the sound of people sleeping, like the sussurating sigh of the wind in the poplars, the strange lag between her movements and her thoughts.

'The garden doesn't count,' he replied, looking back at her, his eyes gleaming.

It wasn't much of a garden, just a paved courtyard by the outhouse, with the two poplars pointing like fingers at the moon, and the cherry trees arching over the side gate. Old Janusz, who lived in the woodshed with his sister Ana and a nephew who wouldn't speak, had grown a patch of vegetables for a while. But, in the night, someone had taken everything, even the vines.

'Dogs!' Janusz had shrieked at the sight of his violated garden.

'Our food!' his sister moaned. 'What are we to eat?'

The families in the house stared at them through the open windows, curiously, the way before the war they might have stared at animals in the zoological gardens.

He took her to the poplars. She loved poplars. The leaves, green on one side, silver on the other, snapping in the wind. They sounded the way she felt: wild, yearning, hungry.

She felt no guilt. Not yet, that would come later.

She burned.

He was rough. She liked it. She liked the way he pushed her against the bark, she liked the pain of the tree as it rasped her skin, she liked the way he wasted no time, his mouth wet, warmer than his hands but not hot, she liked the way he lifted her skirt. She wanted it to be fast, to be brutal. He filled her. Angry and grateful, he looked into her eyes. She looked back. She

didn't want him to ever stop, to ever leave. She wanted the pain, the rasp, the feeling of fullness.

'Schlomo,' she said, her words like a bite, drawing blood.

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I pause and a blob of black ink congeals under the nib of the pen. Why did I do that? Why is Gienia feeling my anger? I look at the shiny old photo. *I'm sorry, I think, I'm making you up.* I shiver – someone is walking over my grave. Or I'm walking over someone's.

I put the pen down and the blob becomes a thick and viscous full stop.

'Molly.'

Somehow it's morning again and I really don't want to wake up. I scrunch my eyes up, determined not to let the voice tear away the last wrappings of sleep.

'Molly!' The voice says again. Lizzie. She raps her knuckles against my bedroom door. 'Someone's at the door.'

'You.'

'The *front* door.'

'So open it,' I groan. But I know she won't, she's too afraid it will be Dennis. I listen to the insistent knocking. Three sharp raps, pause, four more. Grumbling, I get up and pad to the door.

'For Heaven's sake! I've been out here for ten minutes.' It's my mother.

'Why didn't you use your key?'

She pushes past me, trailing a cloud of the Burberry fragrance Lizzie gave her for Mother's Day. 'Lizzie!' she snaps. We hear the click of the bathroom door closing. 'Elizabeth!' My mother sounds sharp, angry. She stalks to the bathroom door and tries

the handle. It's locked. She raps on the door. Same pattern. Three, pause, four. I wonder if it's morse code for something.

'Coffee, Mum?' I pad off to the kitchen, yawning.

'Open this door right now!'

I assume that's a 'yes' and get down my big plunger. I boil the kettle and get the coffee out of the freezer. Lizzie has left an orange and poppyseed muffin half-eaten on the table. I finish it off.

'I'm not leaving,' I hear my mother say to the closed bathroom door. 'I don't care how long it takes.'

'I do,' I holler, 'I want to have a shower before work.'

My mother lets out a gusty, irritated sigh and joins me in the kitchen. I pour her a strong coffee. She takes it black and unsweetened. I can't take that much reality, I dilute mine with a generous helping of milk and sugar. She perches on a kitchen chair and watches me fuss through the fridge for breakfast. I wish there were more muffins.

'That's not all you're having,' Mum says disapprovingly as I emerge with an apple.

'And coffee.'

'Make some toast.'

'Too many carbs.' I push away thoughts of the muffin. Knowing Lizzie it was gluten free, fat free, sugar free. Although, lately . . .

'Yogurt, then.'

'Can't be bothered.' I sit opposite her.

'Molly Marie,' she says warningly. I bite into the apple, hoping the crunch will drown her out. Sighing another gusty sigh, the twin of the one she aimed at Lizzie, she gets up and grabs a tub of passionfruit yogurt and a spoon and thrusts them at me.

Obligingly, I eat.

'You're just lazy,' she mutters into her stark black coffee.

'Dennis says it's a kind of cleverness.'

'Sly is his word.'

'Like a fox,' I grin.

We sit quietly for a bit. 'More coffee?' She nods and I pour more coffee. 'She's stubborn, you know,' I say, 'she'll stay in there until she goes into labour. She'll drink the toilet water and eat the avocado oil soap.'

'I'll wait,' Mum insists grimly.

'Hey, come see this.' I lead her to the lounge and put the ultrasound DVD on.

'Look,' I point to the screen gleefully. 'See the little nose. See the hand. Look at that. A real hand! I think it looks like Dennis.'

I hear a strangled noise and look up to see my mother fishing through her bag for her hankie.

'Wow, huh?'

'What are you doing?' Lizzie's standing in the doorway. I didn't hear the bathroom door open. She's white with rage. I make a run for the bathroom before she can retreat. I really want a shower before work.

When I come out they're sitting stiffly next to one another on the couch. 'I was in there for twenty minutes,' I complain as I head into my bedroom to dress. 'How long does it take to say sorry?'

'Who's saying sorry?' Lizzie snaps.

'Did you know she's not coming to Christmas?' Mum says to me as I sit on the floor to put my shoes on.

'You're not coming to Christmas? What are you going to do? Sit here and watch

the midday movie?’ I look wonderingly at Lizzie. *Lizzie!* The good one!

‘She *emailed* me to tell me.’

‘You *emailed* her?’ I’m quite enjoying this. I shake my head and cluck my tongue. Lizzie, who knows exactly what I’m doing, clenches her teeth and glares at me. I ignore her and sprinkle fish food in the tanks. The fish swarm to the surface, mouths gaping, fins surging. I must have forgotten to feed them yesterday.

‘What are you trying to do to your father?’ Mum continues mercilessly. I glance at the clock. As much as I’d like to stay and watch this, I have to get to work.

‘I won’t tell him,’ Mum says sternly. ‘I *refuse*. You can tell him yourself, if you’re so set on breaking his heart.’ Oh, she’s got the big guns out.

‘I gotta go,’ I tell them, ‘I’ll talk to you later, Ma.’

‘If it isn’t my favourite waitress!’ Harry sings when he sees me walking in.

‘And what am I, chopped liver?’ Neil whines, setting the kitchen’s coffees up on the pass.

‘You can be *my* favourite waitress,’ Chef blows him a sarcastic kiss. I ignore them and go up to the staff room. Ping Pong’s copy of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* is lying on the floor like a dead bird. Someone’s drawn a moustache on Harry. I pick the book up, close it and put it neatly on the apron shelf.

I pause after I put my apron on. I’m not sure I can face this. Part of me is still at home, watching Mum and Lizzie. Part of me is curled up in bed. The rest of me is just plain reluctant to work.

‘Are we busy?’ I sigh, slouching into the bar. Neil looks at me like I’ve grown an extra head. Of course we are. It’s Christmas.

‘Molly!’ Kevin calls from the office.

‘What?’

He’s at his computer, his face blue from the glow of the monitor. He looks up at me. Seriously. Gravely. I rack my brains to think of what I might have done. Chef squeezes past me, heading for his desk. I feel his physical presence like heat from a stove. He collapses into his chair and pulls out the roster he’s working on for next week. He peers at the calendar, at the functions bookings for the coming week. I tear my gaze away.

‘Something you want to tell me about yesterday?’ Kevin sounds proud of his patience.

Yesterday? Which one was yesterday? What happened?

Gienia slept with Schlomo. The thought is wayward, unbidden. I push it away.

Yesterday was Saturday.

She liked it. She wanted it. She invited it.

‘Molly?’ Kevin’s serious expression has become stern.

‘About yesterday? The wedding?’ I think about the bottle of wine I gave to Bob.

‘Lunch?’

The cake box. Chef’s hands on my shoulders. My gaze drifts to him. His left hand is spread on the roster, very brown against the white page. There’s a shred of coriander caught under his square thumbnail.

‘The semifreddoes?’ Kevin peers at me. He looks like a newly-blooded school master punishing a student: smug, superior, righteous.

‘Oh, right.’ From the corner of my eye I see Chef look up from the roster.

‘What about semifreddoes?’ he asks abruptly. Kevin gives him an ‘I’ll deal with this’ look.

I look back and forth between them. ‘Adrian put them on the wrong table,’ I

explain, 'I only found out when I printed table three's bill.'

'So you deleted them?' Kevin shakes his head, obviously thinking that I was trying to erase the semifreddoes from existence; that I was trying to hide it from him.

'Deleted them?' Chef's voice is strident. I wince. I feel breakable this morning.

'Table four had already gone,' I protest.

'You know I can recall anything that was deleted,' Kevin taps the computer terminal.

Of course I do, you nob.

'So who paid for the semifreddoes?' Chef snaps.

'Nobody,' I sigh. He slaps his hand against the desk and I jump. 'They'd gone!' I say, looking at him desperately. *Don't do this to me*, I try to send him a telepathic message, my eyes pleading.

'Nobody,' he snarls. I can see the rage coming in like a storm front. Everything goes black and quiet. 'That's my budget you're fucking with,' he says, 'my figures. It'll show up as a loss to the fucking kitchen, won't it? As missing stock?' He glares at me like he hates me.

I can't stop it, I'm going to cry.

'I'll make a note,' Kevin says calmly.

'You'll make a note,' Chef repeats in disbelief. 'What the fuck good will that do?'

I blink but it's too late. The tears are rolling. I'm so tired.

'You're crying now?' Chef says in amazement. 'That'll help, will it?' He's shouting. I know Neil and the kitchen boys are listening to every word. I flee before I really start sobbing.

'Where the fuck are you going?' He comes after me. I make it to the alley before he catches me. We crash through the beaded curtain. The hula girl explodes into a

thousand pieces. I know how she feels.

‘Don’t,’ I plead, trying to pull away.

‘Don’t what?’ He’s still angry. I wish he was the man I sat in the cool room with. The man whose neck I licked. The man who called me ‘pet’ and touched me with warm hands.

I can’t answer him. I shake my head and tears spatter my work shirt.

‘What do you want?’ he snaps, ‘Special treatment?’

The words shatter over me like ice.

‘I mean, I fuck you a couple of times and what? And what, Molly?’

Special treatment.

His eyes are mean, he’s watching me like a vulture, a hyena, a creature that waits for weakness and eats the dead. I can’t think what to say, I’m still cold from the words.

Sonderbehandlung. Is that what I want? Special treatment?

Something stirs deep in me – unease, a kind of creeping horror at my own thoughts.

There is no equivalence, a little voice hisses but, not wanting to listen, I let my thundering heartbeat drown it out.



‘Undress!’

A murmur rose from the women. Gienia heard Friedl whimper.

‘Take off your clothes and underwear! You may keep your shoes. Leave all other belongings here: papers, money, jewelry. Everything!’

‘I won’t!’ a woman behind Gienia gasped.

Around them was an anxious ripple of dissent. No one moved.

'Schnell!!' the officer screamed, his face blooming with colour and rage. *'Blöde Schweine!'*

A soldier grabbed a woman from the crowd. He threw her against the wall and began tearing at her clothes. Hastily, Gienia fumbled with the buttons on her cardigan. Keeping her eyes downcast she pulled off her blouse and skirt. She paused when she was down to her brassiere and underpants. Embarrassed, she unhooked her bra and let it fall to the floor. Her nipples tightened in the chill night air. Her cheeks burned as she slipped off her underpants. From the corner of her eye she caught glimpses of white flesh. The concrete floor was cold on the soles of her feet. She put her boots back on, uncomfortably aware of her nudity as she bent over. She straightened and saw Friedl, still in her slip.

'Friedl?'

Friedl wouldn't look at her. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Gently Geinia reached over and grasped the hem of Friedl's slip. Friedl jumped.

'Shhh,' Gienia soothed. She lifted the petticoat, it caught on Friedl's ears and then tugged free. Gienia turned the girl around and fumbled with the clasp on her bra. Friedl held the bra to her chest. Gienia tugged it away. She saw a momentary glimpse of Friedl's small, pointed breasts before the girl covered them miserably with her hands. Gienia kept her eyes on Friedl's feet as she lowered her underpants.

'Step out.'

She could hear the guards hooting as she helped Friedl back into her shoes. She rose and kept her mind blank, watching the shadowy play of rib bones on the skin of the woman in front.

'Single file! Through this door. Hands open, palms out!'

Gienia didn't know where to look. The room was a sea of jiggling breasts, rounded stomachs and flexing buttocks. She felt hot and sick with the shame of it. As she passed through the doorway she kept her arms out, palms open, to show she carried nothing.

A guard stopped the woman in front of her, pointing at her shoes.

'I don't speak German,' she said tremulously, tears dampening her voice. The guard kicked her.

'He says take off your shoes!' a woman behind called out.

'My shoes?'

'They're too good for a Jew, he says,' the woman shouted. She yelped when a guard struck her. The woman in front of Gienia struggled with her shoes, her fingers nervous and clumsy.

'*Schnell!*' the guard shouted, kicking her. He grunted in disgust and grabbed Gienia, dragging her past. He gestured at the others to follow. As she hurried past Gienia heard the meaty *thump* of his boot sinking into the woman's flesh.

They reached a row of tables. Guards lolled around them, sweaty and giggling. Gienia was pushed down. The table was cold against her back. Her jaw was prised open and a finger probed her mouth, rubbing slickly around her teeth and gums. Her eyes rolled wildly. She felt the panic rising. She shrieked when another hand invaded her vagina. A guard held her down while the strong fingers explored her. She bucked. The guard laughed and reached over to playfully pinch her nipple. Tears flooded her eyes and rolled down into her ears. She was tossed over onto her stomach. The hand entered her rectum, tearing her. She bit her tongue and tasted blood. Bile rose and her stomach heaved. With a slap on her buttocks, the guard hauled her off the table and shoved her towards the next room.

She staggered, collapsing against the wall. Her teeth chattered.

'Gienia!' Friedl careened through the door, hurling herself at Gienia, uncaring of her naked flesh. She was sobbing hysterically. Gienia rubbed her back but had nothing to say to soothe her. She led Friedl further into the room. Convicts stood, shearing the naked women with scissors and clippers.

Her barber had dark, hooded eyes. He didn't look at her. He pushed her roughly to her knees. She heard the rasp of the scissors. Her honey-coloured hair fell to the concrete. She

sucked on her tongue, tasting blood from where she had bitten it. The blunt scissors grazed her scalp. She winced but stayed silent. More slick blood slithered down her neck. He pulled her to her feet, skinning her knees on the rough ground. He squatted before her and she jerked as the scissors went for her pelvis. Roughly, pulling painfully, he cut away her pubic hair, until it was a bristle of stubble. She was beyond shame. He stood and pushed her away, turning to the next woman. The process was silent and had taken no more than a few minutes.

She lost Friedl. The room was a mad tangle of white flesh: slack bellies, pulsating throats, stalk-like arms rising to naked scalps. Gienia couldn't stop trembling. Everyone looked the same. Was that her? It was hard to tell without the shining sheaf of dark hair.

'Gienia?'

The sound of her name made her heart leap to her mouth. But it wasn't Friedl. It was Wincenta from the factory. She smiled thinly, a hand hovering near her head. Her scalp was badly nicked and gleamed with gelatinous blood. 'I thought it was you' The smile tightened further, her lips turning white from the pressure.

'Have you seen Friedl?'

'No.' The smile faltered. 'They sent Dowbora left.' Wincenta looked at the ceiling, her head on an angle, the smile growing odd and fey. 'Why couldn't we be in the same camp?'

'I don't know. Maybe they have quotas to fill.'

'Yes . . . but she was my bunkmate'

'You'll have a new bunkmate.' Gienia swallowed hard. The woman unsettled her. The smile was frightening.

'Einrücken!' a guard ordered, stepping through the door. They shuffled forward. A weak trickle of water fell from spigots in the ceiling. They trotted beneath, not stopping. A spatter of warm water fell on Gienia's head and rolled down her body. The warmth was brief. As she

passed through the doorway rough hands smeared disinfectant on her scalp and pudenda. The rough hands pushed her along when they were done.

◦ ○ ◦

She shouldn't be in Auschwitz. The Warsaw Ghetto Jews went to Treblinka. But I don't know much about Treblinka. It was a death camp, not a work camp. They wove green branches through the fences, to camouflage it. And there was a sadistic German guard, nicknamed The Doll because of his beauty. When he was arrested, decades after the war, they found a photo album, filled with photos of Treblinka; on the cover he'd written '*Those were the days*'. In Treblinka the rumour was that before the war he'd been a waiter, but it wasn't true. Before the war he'd been a chef.

◦ ○ ◦

Gienia shuffled through to the final room. Her boots were damp and they rubbed against her bare heels. There would be blisters tomorrow.

This room had windows and doors to the outside world. They were thrown open. Beyond, day had broken and the air was thin and cool. Clothes were thrust at her. She took them numbly and shuffled along. She headed for the far corner of the room, wedging her back against the walls. She would have burrowed into the plaster if she could.

She had been given a green and blue floral print cotton dress. It had short sleeves and a cloth belt. To wear beneath it she had a pair of the striped pyjama bottoms. On top of the pile lay a pair of well-worn, discoloured underpants. She stuck a finger through a coin-sized hole.

'You have underwear,' the woman beside her said, eyes trained on the grey pants. 'I don't have underwear.'

Gienia drew the pants to her chest and glowered at the woman. She fumbled with the underpants, slipping them on before someone could steal them. The elastic was old and they sagged around her buttocks. She put the canvas pyjama pants on, tightening the drawstring, hoping they would hold the underpants up. The dress was too small for her; it pinched under the arms. She wished it were a little looser. She wished the sleeves were longer. She wished she'd been given stockings or socks. But it could have been worse. Tall women had short dresses that didn't reach their knees. Petite women had enormous sacks that dragged on the ground. There were rags, convict pyjamas, elegant gowns with fishtail trains. Wincenta was squeezed into an old evening dress of pleated yellow chiffon. The décolletage was cut so low that Gienia could see the undersides of her breasts. She plucked miserably at the pleats.

Gienia's head spun at the sight of it. Madness.

'No trading!' a voice shouted in Polish. It came from a slender woman. She stood by the open door, neat as a pin in her uniform. The skirt was narrow and hemmed at the knee, drawing attention to her shapely calves. She had bleached hair and stenciled eyebrows. Her mouth was a slash of red lipstick.

'You will wear what you are given!' The arterial-red lips parted to reveal yellowed teeth. Her smile was vulpine. 'You will move outside and form orderly rows.'

When they didn't move her penciled eyebrows drew together in an angry line.

'Now, you stupid whores!'

They stood outside through the length of the day. Gienia felt her scalp burn. She was exhausted. She thought of the showers. She wished she'd tilted her head back and opened her mouth. What she wouldn't give for a mouthful of water. She wondered where Friedl was. She dozed on her feet.

The sharp clapping of hands jerked her from her haze. The blonde stood before them again, this time flanked by convict women. Their clothes were as irregular and mismatched as Gienia's but their scalps were covered in fuzz and their cheeks were narrower and meaner. At a gesture from the blonde they fell in before the new arrivals.

'You will follow the *blockowas* to your barracks,' the blonde ordered, her brows arched and her smile sharp.

'Listen up!' one of the *blockowas* bawled. 'You will march swiftly and silently. Anyone of you *kurvehs* steps out of line and you'll feel the end of our sticks!'

They passed through another gate, into a world of mud. The ground was treacherous clay slime. The wooden buildings crouched between oozing trenches. Prisoners paused to watch them enter. Gienia took in the hollowed cheeks, the collarbones jutting like coat hangers; the skins thin and leathery as cured hides. The urge to run was overwhelming. She battled it. She heard the gate swing closed behind her and the padlock snap shut.



I get through the shift, but I can't smile and my tips are abysmal. I'm out the door the second I've signed my timesheet. When I get home I go straight to my bedroom and slam the door, without even looking at Lizzie. I pull the blind down and get into bed, shoes and all. I pull the quilt over my head. It doesn't help. If anything the voices in my head are louder.

I fuck you a couple of times and what . . .

Schnell!

I fuck you a couple of times . . .

Schlomo.

Peter.

My father.

Clear as day, like a movie I can't switch off, I see that last time – when she snapped and he broke.

Dad didn't hit her often, only a few times I can remember and he'd only belt her once, he wouldn't keep going. One hit and she'd stagger, sometimes fall, and that would be it. He'd back off and she'd collect herself, keeping the tears quiet. Every time except that last time. That time she was all bent and crazy angles, breathing hard through her narrow nose, enraged. She took his glass and threw it at him – the scotch flew over him in an amber wave, the glass hit his chest, dropped and smashed, the shards clinking against the ice. The scotch worked on Dad like the bucket of water on the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*: he melted. The rage was gone and in its place was something even more terrifying – defeat.

I hated her right then. Hated her for standing up to him, for packing everything she could into the old suitcase with the gleaming metal clasps and the 'I ♥ New York' sticker.

'Come on, Molly,' she said through thin white lips.

I clung to the doorway, unable to look away from my father, whose hair was plastered to his forehead, whose fingers toyed pathetically with the base of the broken glass.

'No.' My voice was a whisper but no one missed it. Dad looked up quickly, so fast it made me blink. Something flickered and replaced the defeat. Something mean but more familiar and oddly comforting. His lips curled and his quick eyes darted to my

mother.

‘She wants to stay with me, Marilyn.’

And, as easy as that, he passed the defeat on to my mother.

I heard her heels clack as she backed up a pace, then she hissed like a cornered cat, picked up the suitcase and left. Left him, and left me.

Two weeks later, as we sat over Chinese take-out at the same kitchen table, he told me he couldn’t keep me. He’d been drinking more since Mum left and even more heavily on the nights she called.

‘Molly,’ her tired voice would say through the plastic receiver, ‘I’ve set up a lovely room for you. It’s got yellow curtains – you wanted yellow curtains, remember?’

‘I like the curtains I’ve got,’ I’d say stubbornly and there’d be wounded silence. When she’d hung up I’d feel mean and kick the wall. There were lots of black marks from my school shoes, little smudges of rage that they could buff away, paint over, erase.

‘It’s not that I don’t want you,’ Dad said, rattling the ice in his glass. He told me it would be best for me to live with Mum; he wasn’t equipped to raise a child, he said as he gestured to the pizza boxes by the sink, the lemon chicken on the table.

All I could think as I listened to him drone on, as I watched the fresh scotch splash over the melting ice, was: *I chose the wrong one.*

ghosts

I hear my bedroom door squeak as Lizzie pushes it open. There's a moment of silence.

'Molly?'

Cunt. Numb cunt. Dumb dumb numb cunt.

I hear her bare feet whisper against the carpet. The bed sinks under her weight.

'Are you okay?'

No, I howl silently. I'm not okay. I'm not okay.

She tugs the quilt away. I blink. My blind is useless, the room is barely dim. The window gets the full afternoon sun and I can see Lizzie's face clearly. 'Are you coming to Christmas?' I ask numbly.

'Your mum gave up,' she says with stubborn pride.

'I doubt it. She must be regrouping.' I turn my head. I don't want her to look at me. I'm naked.

'You've got tomorrow off?' she asks gently. I can feel her gaze scanning my face. I nod. 'I'm sick of this place,' she says abruptly. 'Let's go out.'

I make a 'harrumph' sound. Some of the pages have fallen off my bedroom wall. The Blu-Tack must have melted in the heat.

'Come on,' she cajoles, 'I'll buy you dinner.'

'Thought you were broke.'

'Don't be difficult. Go on, have a shower and we'll go out.'

I let her convince me. I have a long, scalding shower, blow dry my hair, pack my face with a mask of makeup and dress in black.

'Where do you want to go?' she asks as we climb into my old hatchback. I put the Cure on. Not *Wish*, not *Bloodflowers*, not *Faith; Pornography*. Raw, ugly, unpopular. Lizzie switches it off almost immediately and turns it over to the radio. *Hits of the*

Eighties. Synthetic pop. Madonna's burbling 'Holiday'. I shrink back into my black t-shirt and glare at the road.

'Let's go to that place you used to work,' Lizzie suggests.

'Which one?'

'The one with the deck.'

Green River. My heart tightens in my chest.

Ghosts. The deck faces west, into the burning orange sunset.

'They might be booked out,' I say as I kill the engine, gaze locked on the restaurant.

The same old wine barrels litter the deck, planted with citrus trees. Lime, lemon, grapefruit; cumquat, orange, mandarin. In spring they're covered with waxy white flowers. Right now they're heavy with fruit: orange, yellow, green.

I follow Lizzie in. I'm shocked to see Bella standing at the door. I can't believe she's still here.

'Molly!' she exclaims, air-kissing me. 'You in tonight?'

'We don't have a booking.' I still feel naked, peeled, exposed.

Bella clucks and examines her floor plan carefully.

'You're booked,' I say flatly. Of course they are, it's December. Stupid stupid.

'Well,' she muses, 'D-seven are already on desserts. If you're happy to wait and have a couple of drinks in the bar, we can reset for you?'

'Great,' Lizzie beams and leads the way to the bar. It's on a mezzanine level, there are woven grass mats on the floor and a fresco of a winding green river on the wall.

Bella arranges for a free drink.

'What can I get you?' the barman asks. He's in his early twenties, very attractive, and flashing the dimples to get a tip out of us. 'Cocktail? Champagne? Red fizz?'

‘Beer,’ I say, surprising myself again. I don’t seem to have any control over my mouth these days.

‘Sure thing. Coopers, Crown, Corona, Stella, Heineken, Boags . . .?’ He raises an eyebrow, silently asking whether I want him to continue with the list.

‘Pale Ale.’ I watch as he pours the beer into a cold glass. It’s golden. I linger over the first sip, pressing my lips to the glass. It tastes of Peter.

I look over at the open kitchen. There’s Rhys, as always, dark and lean, taller than anyone else in his kingdom. He’s tossing something in a pan (onion, garlic, herbs, pancetta?) and holding a docket in his other hand, calling orders over his shoulder. I almost expect to see Peter behind him, red head bowed over the sink, thin hips wrapped in a dirty blue apron. I ache, momentarily seeing what I want to see. I drink the beer and with every mouthful the sense of Peter becomes stronger.

I’ve had two by the time Bella leads us to our table. D-seven is one of the best tables, right on the lip of the deck, looking down over the sloping suburbs, the parklands, the winding river. It’s almost dark. The sky is deepening to indigo, although a line of palest orange lingers on the horizon. The lights are going on in the houses. There’s a sinuous summer breeze, warm, sensual. I lean back in my chair and breathe deeply. Nothing’s changed. The wooden tables are clothed in starched linen, there are pale green glass lanterns in the centre, dishes of sea salt and crushed pepper, wide-mouthed wine glasses. I slide my fingers along the stem of a glass. The years feel stripped away. I expect Hero to swan by any moment, tray full of cocktails, teeth flashing whitely. I wish she would. I ache for it.

‘I wish I could have the prawns.’

I look over the table, almost surprised to see Lizzie sitting there, as though she should still be in Sydney, climbing ladders, building castles, posting me diet books in

bulky express post packages.

‘Why can’t you have the prawns?’

She gives me a look like I’m being deliberately obtuse. ‘I’m pregnant, remember?’

‘Jeez, you can’t eat anything.’

‘I know,’ she sighs, ‘no prawns, no Moreton Bay bugs,’ she runs her finger down the menu.

‘You can have the haloumi,’ I say, ‘it’s cooked.’

‘What are you going to have?’

‘Chicken liver parfait.’

‘You eat chicken liver?’ she sounds surprised. ‘You wouldn’t eat anything more adventurous than chicken sausages when we were kids.’

‘Well, it’s parfait,’ I say, ‘not whole livers.’

‘I love chicken livers. Jim used to pan fry them with onion and bacon.’

‘Gross.’

‘I guess I’ll have the haloumi. Either that or the soup. And the flathead.’

‘You can’t have the flathead, it’s got a red curry sauce. Remember our chat about curry?’

‘It’s a myth,’ she says again.

It’s a lovely dinner. I have the parfait, the angel hair pasta with blue swimmer crab and we share a black sherry custard with grilled figs for dessert. A huge yellow moon climbs the sky at our backs. I feel comforted.

‘You are coming to Christmas, though,’ I say as I eat the last fig.

‘No.’ She stares down at the twinkling lights.

‘You’ve punished them enough.’

‘I’m not punishing them.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘I’m not, I just don’t want to see them.’

‘What did he say that was so bad?’

She shifts in her chair. ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ She asks for the bill. I don’t want to go.

Lizzie drives home, telling me I’ve had too much to drink. *Hits of the Eighties* has given way to *Love Songs After Dark*. We both listen attentively to Dido singing ‘White Flag’ and I wonder whether she’s thinking of Jim, or the baby’s father. I don’t know who I’m thinking of. Peter. Dan. Chef. They morph into some hydra-headed monster.

I keep drinking when we get home. Lizzie sips tea and eyes me with distaste. I’m rolling, sliding drunk and my tongue is loose.

‘I just don’t get what Dennis did that was so bad.’

‘Drop it.’ Lizzie snaps the TV on and begins flicking through the channels.

‘I mean, what did he *do*?’

She ignores me and settles on the midnight movie, a Danielle Steele romance.

‘Want popcorn?’ I ask, struggling to my feet. The room slides away from me and I find myself clinging to the wall as though it’s a guide-rope. I drop the bag of popcorn twice before I manage to get it into the microwave. I rub my gritty eyes and peer at my reflection in the microwave door. My mascara is smudged.

Something moves over my shoulder and I spin around. The kitchen keeps spinning even after I’ve stopped and my stomach lurches.

She’s in my kitchen. Gienia’s in my kitchen. She looks too thin to stand, her eyelids show faint blood vessels, her teeth are mostly gone and lice cover her scalp and

eyebrows in small white speckles. She has a chemical smell and a bruise, ripple-edged like hand-crocheted lace, on her neck. Terror runs through me like cold water, washing away the alcohol.

‘What do you want?’ My voice is loud, too loud, frightened.

‘What do you think!’ Lizzie shouts from the lounge and I jump. In the instant I look away she vanishes but I can still smell that sharp chemical smell.

‘Christ!’ Lizzie snaps, appearing in the doorway, arms across her chest defensively.

‘He was so goddamn disappointed.’

I’ve never seen Lizzie look so furious. My heart is pounding; I cling to the sight of her, the sound of her fury. *This is real*, I tell myself, *Lizzie is real*. *Everything else is just too much shiraz*.

‘I got full marks for three out of five year twelve subjects!’ she rants, ‘I won the English Prize! I made the Dean’s Merit List every year at university – every year! I never drank underage, or smoked, or did pot, or sneaked out after hours to fuck boys he didn’t like!’

I can see myself as her mirror-image, everything reversed: the bad grades, the drinking, smoking, drugs, boys.

‘Did I say anything when he married your mother? Wasn’t I nice?’

The popcorn snaps behind us. I can smell it burning but I don’t turn it off – it covers up the other smell, the one I don’t want to think about.

‘I’m not some fifteen year-old slapper who got knocked up by a nameless one-night fuck!’

‘Oh Liz,’ I say sadly, feeling very sober, ‘he’s only disappointed because you’re disappointed. It’s not like you turned up all excited and said “Congratulations, Grandpa!” You act like you’re carrying the world on you shoulders. Stoic Lizzie

Bearing an Immense Disappointment with Incredible Fortitude. How else is he going to react? Champagne's a little crass when the mother's in mourning.'

'Mourning?' She looks like I've slapped her.

'Lighten up, Liz, mistakes aren't all bad. And if you ask me, if you've decided to keep it you ought to be happy about it. No kid wants to be a black mark on your permanent record.'

I watch her face close up and harden and then she leaves me alone with the burnt popcorn.

The next day is my day off. I sleep in. I don't remember dreaming. Lizzie's not home, I have no idea where she might have gone, but I notice she's taken my car keys. I drink coffee and re-Blu-Tack the pictures to my wall. The collage is creeping like a fungus, covering the pale yellow wall, soon it will turn the corner and start spreading above my bed.

I don't shower. I draw the curtains and stew.

Faces, voices, ghosts.

Hero: Wanna tour?

I love you, cunt!

Chef: What's wrong, pet?

I fuck you a couple of times . . .

Harry: My favourite waitress! Give us a kiss.

Peter: I want to be overwhelmed.

The sharp tang of scotch, the glint of fluorescent lights in broken glass.

What do you want, special treatment?

Give us a kiss.

I put *Shoah* on. It's not a great copy, it's videotape, grainy and too many copies removed from the original. I sit on Lizzie's air bed and watch the camera pan across the fields near Chelmno. It looks like Smithfield Plains. Like you could drive over the horizon and be on Main North Road, like you could drive to Elizabeth City Centre and order a cappuccino and biscotti.

It's a nine hour documentary. I make it most of the way through the first tape. I begin to feel something when they're interviewing the barber. He can't do it. They cajole. *Leave him alone.* They reason. *Leave him alone.* He cries.

Pain, like a splinter, deep, invasive.

He cries and tries to keep cutting hair. Silver scissors, plastic comb. Agony.

I have to stop the tape.

I feel sick. What am I doing watching other people's agony? Worse are the pages on my desk, growing steadily, like a tumour.

I don't want to think about it. I pour myself a double vodka, with grapefruit and lime juice – sour, tongue-curling, bitter enough to scour away the sickness.

When Lizzie comes back I'm watching static.

'Snow!' I used to exclaim as a kid, fascinated by the swirl, knowing I was starting something . . .

'Ants,' Lizzie would disagree, sticking her long nose in the air.

'Snow.'

'Ants, ants, ants.'

We argued like it mattered.

'Maybe it's both,' my mother would interrupt, in an attempt to diffuse the argument, to restore detente, 'Maybe it's snowing *on* the ants.'

She never understood that it couldn't be both – it was either black or white. If it was

both it wasn't anything – if it was both it was a mess.

'Ants,' Lizzie says now, sitting down beside me.

'Albino ants,' I agree – I've learned new tricks.

◦ ○ ◦

Gienia fled.

'Give it back!' The little Czech was in an unholy fury, howling in broken Polish, her face throbbing and red and shining in the dim barracks. Gienia slid gleefully to the back of the bunk, the blanket catching around her ankles. She crammed the stolen bread into her mouth. She felt its ragged edges tearing at her throat as she swallowed, her neck arched back and straining like a goose's.

'Thief!' The Czech screamed until her voice broke, scrambling into the bunk after Gienia. Her hands came at Gienia, broken nails raking exposed skin, pinching, slapping and twisting. Gienia braced her back against the barracks wall, grabbed the poles for support, and kicked. She felt her foot sink into the Czech's stomach, heard the pained exhalation. She kicked again, catching the woman in the side of the head. The little Czech shrieked and caught hold of her ankle. Gienia twisted desperately. The woman tore Gienia's boot from her foot, shouting in Czech. She threw herself across Gienia's legs to still her kicks and wrestled with the other boot. Gienia growled and bucked.

'Whore!' she spat, letting go of the bunk posts and grabbing at the Czech's arms. But the woman had both her boots now and scuttled from the bunk. Gienia managed to catch her shawl, which tore. The Czech was cackling and waving the boots as she ran from the barracks.

'Shit.' Gienia kicked the bunk post, wincing as a splinter drove into her heel. 'Shit!' She spat

on the dirt below and untied the rags around her foot. She wished she still had fingernails. The pads of her fingers struggled to grasp the splinter head. She tried to bend herself over to grasp it with her teeth, grunting at the discomfort.

'Hungry enough to eat your toenails, eh?' Jozéfa the *blockowa* remarked as she ambled down the aisle, tapping her wooden truncheon against the bunks.

'Splinter.'

'Saw the little Czech get the better of you.'

'You could have stopped it.'

'Why? You took her bread.'

'You could have stopped that too.'

Gienia couldn't bend over far enough to reach her heel. Her hamstrings hurt from the attempt. Irritably she scratched at the splinter.

'Better get that out. Give you gangrene.' Jozéfa leaned against the bunk. Gienia glared at her.

'I could try . . . ' Jozéfa suggested, examining her own fingers. The nails were square, neat and unbroken. Gienia's eyes narrowed.

'And in return?' she asked suspiciously.

'We've known each other a long time,' Jozéfa said.

'And?'

'I wouldn't ask much. Just a little favour.'

'What?'

'Sophia the Greek. I want you to take her to the infirmary.'

'That's it? Get one of the other Greeks to do it.'

Jozéfa snorted. 'They can't speak Yiddish, let alone Polish.'

'Who needs to speak? Just leave her in the queue.'

'Listen Gienia,' Jozéfa bent in, 'don't be dense. I need someone who speaks Polish. I need you to make a trade for me.'

'What's in it for me?'

'Your splinter out.'

'I want new boots.'

'So get some.'

'Then I want to be in on the trade.'

'No. But you can ask the Doctor for antiseptic for that foot.'

'How am I supposed to walk there without shoes?' Gienia grumbled.

'This is my problem?'

'Fine,' Gienia snapped, extending her foot to the *blockowa*. Jozéfa smiled and grasped the splinter; Gienia felt the crescents of Jozéfa's nails pressing into her flesh. The splinter pulled free. A bead of blood formed in its absence. Gienia licked her finger and rubbed spit into the wound.

'Come,' the *blockowa* ordered. Gienia hastily retied her rags and limped after the bigger woman.

The *blockowa* had an individual cot and the luxury of two blankets. Jozéfa already had a tiny package out; Gienia hadn't been quick enough to see where her hiding place was.

'Margarine,' she said, thrusting it at Gienia. Gienia took the cloth-wrapped lump. It burned a hole in her skin. She fought the temptation to scurry for cover and lap it up. All that soft oozing yellow fat melting into her saliva . . . But the *blockowa's* heavy face discouraged her.

'That doesn't get to the Doc and I'll kill you myself,' Jozéfa said. Gienia had a sudden vision of Jozéfa's husband slaughtering the cattle. He'd been a *sokhet*, a ritual slaughterer.

'It'll get there.' Gienia's voice was surly. She wrapped the frozen packet of margarine in the

scrap of material torn from the Czech's shawl, and tucked it inside her dress. 'Where's the Greek?'

'Outside?' Jozéfa shrugged.

'It's freezing out there.'

'In her bunk, then? What do I care?'

Gienia stalked grumpily through the barracks, peering into the bunks. Most of the women were listless, staring at the rough planks above their heads. There hadn't been work for months. Some sat and picked at the lice, cracking them between their fingernails like sesame seeds. Rachel and Ruth were pressed close together, sleeping. Gienia kept walking. At the far end by the shit buckets were the Greeks.

'Sophia?' she called.

'Eh?' Elena the Greek bent down from the top bunk.

'I want Sophia. *Blockowa* wants me to take her to the infirmary.'

Gienia sighed as the woman chattered in Greek.

'No. Can't understand you. Don't care.'

She raised her voice and spoke slowly, as though speaking to a deaf woman.

'I. Take. Sophia. To. Infirmary.'

'Sophia?'

'Yes.'

The woman chattered in Greek again.

'For the love of . . . ' Gienia roughly prodded at the women dozing in the bunks, trying to get a look at their faces. Sophia was on the bottom bunk, right at the end, head level with the buckets. Gienia grabbed her by the hair and lifted her head.

'Come on, we're going to the infirmary.'

The woman was a husk, a *muselmann*. Her face was devoid of flesh, the cheeks sunken into a sharp hourglass. Her eyes had sunken too, the sockets clearly outlined and black with shadows. There was a film over her eyes, like cataracts. She was empty. She was nothing. A bag of bones.

Gienia had to pull her from the bunk. She took the sleeve of Sophia's dress and led her through the barracks. Her toes curled when they reached the door. A frigid draught blew beneath the planks. Hastily she opened the door and pulled Sophia around the corner. She chewed on her cheeks as the pain hit her feet.

'Shit, shit, shit,' she muttered, shivering. The mud had frozen into ridges of ice. It was rough with frost and burned her feet. She slammed Sophia against the outside wall and pushed the door closed. Kneeling, she fumbled with Sophia's clogs. She crammed her own feet into the wooden shoes.

'You won't need them. Come on.'

Even without snow, the world was white. Heavy hoarfrost clung to the camp, forming mosaics on the walls and riming the wires like salt. The clogs were too big for Gienia and their slippery soles slid on the ice. When she jumped one of the trenches, full of frozen mud and effluent, she slipped and fell on her *toches*. The hard ice slammed into her buttocks and she swore.

Sophia stumbled along after her, the rags on her feet had come loose and one grey end trailed behind like a sick snake. Ahead, a knot of people waited outside the infirmary. Gienia gritted her teeth and seized Sophia's bony arm. Lowering her head she charged into the crowd, shoving and pushing until she was at the front. A woman elbowed her. She turned and glared when the woman abused her in rapid Hungarian.

'Listen *Nafkeh*,' Gienia snapped, yanking her sleeve back and shoving her wrist in the woman's face, 'See that? 111379! Watch who you're hitting, you stupid bitch.' She turned her

back on the woman, who muttered resentfully under her breath.

Gienia pushed Sophia before the Doctor.

'What's wrong with her?' Doctor Goldfarb asked. The doctor was a faded woman with a face that looked like well-laundered cotton.

'The usual.'

'There's nothing I can do.'

'Of course not. Jozéfa sent me.' Gienia patted her chest, where the margarine lay.

'Come this way. Marja, take this woman to the back.' The doctor pushed Sophia gently towards the orderly. Gienia hobbled after the doctor. They came to a cramped storeroom where the doctor grabbed a pile of folded clothing.

'That's it?'

'It's enough. Tell her to wear it all herself. She'll need it for the march.'

'The what?'

'The evacuation.'

I need you to look at my foot. What evacuation?'

'What's wrong with your foot?'

'It needs antiseptic. What evacuation?'

'Sit here. Take your shoe off.'

Gienia sat, holding the pile of clothes carefully in her lap. The doctor left the room. Gienia unwound her rags. Her feet were numb from the cold. She massaged her foot and the feeling returned in a hot tingling wave. The doctor came back with a bottle of antiseptic. She put some on a rag and wiped Gienia's foot. It stung. Gienia chewed on her cheeks.

'What evacuation?'

'They started the Main Camp today. We'll go soon.'

'Why?'

'What do you mean why? The Russians.'

'Why not the gas?' Gienia rewrapped her foot.

'No time.' The doctor ushered Gienia from the storeroom and locked it behind them. She held out her hand. Regretfully Gienia handed over the margarine. The doctor strode back to the queue. Gienia followed. Evacuation. Which probably meant marched west and shot. She'd have to find something to stuff her clogs with, in case it was a long march.

o o o

Nat calls me late in the afternoon. 'Let's go out,' she says, 'Tommy can meet us when he knocks off.'

I go because I'm going mad at home. We hang out at her place first, sitting on the dilapidated couch on her front veranda and drinking vodka lime and sodas. She lives in a pretty single fronted cottage in Norwood, right around the corner from where I lived with Dan. She has a flatmate named Sandy, who lives to surf and get stoned. He's reed thin and brown as a nut.

'Where you chicks going tonight?' he asks as he lights his pipe and slouches against the veranda post. I look to Nat for the answer.

'Garage first, then maybe The Vodka Bar and Sweet.'

Sandy wrinkles his nose. 'Sweet?'

'What's wrong with Sweet?'

'Everything's pink.'

'All the good things in life are pink,' Nat tells him with a wink. We look up as a Kombi van coughs its way to a stop in front of the house.

‘That’s my ride,’ Sandy grins, giving the Kombi a wave. ‘Have a good night.’

I watch him bounce down to the van, his step springy, and I wonder if I ever felt that young.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Nat asks as she freshens my drink. I shrug. What am I supposed to say? ‘Dan?’ she guesses, grimacing sympathetically. I blink, startled. ‘Men are bastards,’ she says.

‘What happened to the DJ?’

‘He had his needle on too many records.’

‘Oh.’

Nat shrugs and lights a cigarette.

‘Are you smoking menthol?’ I ask, appalled.

‘Yeah, I figure they taste so gross I’ll quit.’

We head out at about ten. The Garage is packed. I drink two vodkas in quick succession and before I know it I’m feeling calm and drifty, happy. I watch Nat dance with a couple of guys in checked shirts. She looks great tonight, in a backless gold top; her fake tan is perfect, her ribs are visible when she raises her arms.

‘What do you think?’ she asks when she comes back to me momentarily, to finish her drink, ‘should I go with Pink-Check or Green-Check?’

‘All things good in life are pink,’ I say, deadpan.

Pink-Check comes along with us to the next couple of clubs. He and I have both hit the depressed-end of drunk by the time we get to Supermild at four am. He watches morosely as a guy with blond dreads and a tufty beard tries to pick up Nat.

‘Too good to be true,’ he mutters.

‘What?’

‘Her. Too good to be true.’

‘Yeah.’ I feel a bit sick. I wonder where Tommy is. The walls start closing in on me. ‘S’cuse,’ I mutter to Pink-Check and stagger back up to the street. I take a deep breath of the warm night air. Hindley Street is still busy. What am I doing? I start walking towards the mall. I’m not a kid anymore. I’m a Grown Up. Grown up and staggering along Hindley Street at four thirty on a Tuesday morning. I’m supposed to be at work in five and a half hours. I walk past the pub on the corner of the Morphet Street Bridge – it’s dripping with Christmas lights. Wire and pin-light reindeer peer over the balcony, some of them actually move and a fringe dangles down, waving in the breeze. It’s bright as daylight. I walk under the fringe and past the signs saying ‘Pokies! Pokies! Pokies!’ I feel an incredible sense of longing . . . but I don’t know what for.

I get two and a half hours of sleep.

‘You look awful,’ Lizzie says as I stagger off to work. I’m still drunk so I don’t drive, I catch the bus. There’s a headache forming at the base of my neck. I drink a litre bottle of water before I get to work, and have to pee as soon as I get there. Ping Pong’s in the ladies loo, cleaning the mirror. ‘Morning,’ I sigh as I stagger past.

I pause in front of the mirror after I’ve washed my hands. I do look awful. I’m too old for this shit.

‘I didn’t order the risotto,’ the woman tells me for the third time. I take it back from her. Someone ordered the risotto, otherwise why would I have it? But everyone else at the table has a meal in front of them.

‘Sorry, Madam,’ I say, confused, ‘what did you order again?’

‘The duck.’

Damn it. Of all the things. The duck takes forty minutes. ‘You sure you don’t want the risotto?’

‘No, I don’t want the risotto, I want the duck.’

Thank God it’s Chef’s day off. He’d dump the risotto on my head if he were here. Harry’s not nearly so violent.

‘Fuck,’ he says, hopping from foot to foot. ‘Duck!’

‘I know.’

‘Your fuck up, not hers?’

‘Yeah, I think.’

‘You think?’

‘I’m a little fuzzy on the details.’

‘Right. Duck.’ His fingers run across the orders stuck up in front of him. ‘We’ll take the duck from table twenty, they can wait a bit longer, they just finished entrees. It’ll be ten minutes, but.’

I don’t answer. I’ve seen something over his shoulder that freezes me to the spot. A wraith of rag and bone, whose eyes reflect the light. Again a cold river courses through me.

Ping Pong drops a bucket of cutlery and the clatter snaps me to attention.

‘Duck,’ I say, ‘ten minutes.’ I organise a free drink for the woman but she’s still pissed at me. Bye-bye tip.

The floor’s so noisy. All big tables, covered with half-eaten food, torn Christmas crackers, wrapping paper. The voices are sharp, spiraling upwards, beating at the plate glass windows like trapped birds.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Neil watches me closely as I come up to the bar to get an order, as though I’m a grenade with the pin pulled, about to explode and tear his limbs

off.

'I wish people would stop asking me that.'

'You're acting weird.'

'I went out, alright, I didn't sleep.'

'Uh-huh.' He doesn't look convinced.

I don't get a dinner break. The last of the lunch patrons are still leaving when the first of the dinner bookings show up.

'You're bar bitch tonight,' Neil tells me as I drink my third double-strength latte. I know it's because I fucked up so much at lunch. Deep down a small part of me feels guilty. I observe it cringing and think, *How quaint*.

'Where'd you piss off to last night?' Nat asks when she shows up. She checks her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. She bares her teeth to look for lipstick.

'This morning,' I correct.

'Alright, where'd you piss off to this morning?'

'Home to bed.'

'You didn't say goodbye.'

'You were busy.'

'I thought you were doing well with Alex.'

'Who?'

'The guy in the pink shirt.'

'He liked you.'

'So you don't mind if I took him home?'

'Hardly.'

'Are you alright?' She cocks her head and looks at me closely.

I scowl.

Toward the end of the night I'm restocking the bar fridges and when I close the door to the wine fridge she's there. I spin to look over my shoulder, my heart punching my ribs like a fist. Nothing. No one's there. But when I turn back to the glass door, there she is. No more transparent than my own reflection. So thin. Watching me curiously.

'What do you want?' I croak, and the minute I speak she's gone; all I'm looking at are the rows of green bottles and pale wine.

When I get home I sit on my bed, clutching the sleep blessing in unsteady hands. *Left, right, behind me, above me . . .* But it doesn't work, I can't sleep, and I'm not safe.



'I am not well,' Ruth announced as she crawled from her bunk for roll call.

'Who is, these days?' Rachel snorted, unfolding her long limbs like a spider.

'Worse than usual, I mean. Everything hurts.'

'Worry when the hurt stops.'

Gienia fussed with the blanket, trying to tear off a strip to stuff in the toe of her clog. The frayed old wool was crusted with half-thawed ice. The strands twisted like stringy celery, refusing to break.

'Gienia?' Rachel slapped her palm against the bunk post. 'Roll call.'

'I know,' she snapped, growling at the soggy blanket. She got into line between Dorota and the new woman from Płaszów. She could see the Czech bitch up near the front.

'*Ausrücken!*' Jozéfa yelled in mangled German. They shuffled out, hunching down into their collars as the frigid evening air hit them. Darkness seeped up from the mud, transforming the

world into shadows and silhouette. Only the sky retained light: a thin glow in the west where the sun had sunk orange into the ice. The camp was blacked out. They lined up in the dark before their barracks and Gienia tucked her hands under her armpits to keep the blood circulating. A wicked breeze hissed around her ears, raising gooseflesh and making her shiver. Up and down the camp women massed before the barracks. Further away, beyond the twisting wire, on the other side of the camp, the men were doing the same. Gienia let her lids droop as she listened to the yells and the click of boots on ice. These things took hours.

'Has anyone seen Mad Mania today?' Ruth whispered. A few voices mumbled 'no'.

'She wasn't here yesterday either. And what about the bitch Böll?'

'I saw Böll yesterday,' Alina said in her broken Polish.

'But not today?'

'No.'

'Strange. Don't you think that's strange?' she asked Rachel. Rachel shrugged.

SS Gering strode past, examining the ranks, immaculately turned out in his uniform, snug in his heavy coat. His silver buttons and insignia were luminescent, catching the last of the light. A bottle of *slivowitz* dangled from his leather glove. His pale eyes were as flat as glass. Usually the bitch Böll was at his side, gaze trained on the bronze planes of his hard face.

'Doctor said we're being evacuated,' Gienia said as Gering passed through a flurry of ice from the rooftops, away from them. The women in front couldn't help but turn their heads in surprise. Gienia hissed at them and they snapped back to attention.

'When?'

'How do I know? She said they started the Main Camp today.'

'*G'vald!* They're going to kill us!'

'You just now work this out?'

'That means the Russians are coming,' Rachel said.

'Of course the Russians are coming. We're standing here in the dark.'

'I mean coming *now*.'

'I don't believe it.'

'We can hear the guns,' Ruth whispered.

Gienia shrugged. 'We've heard the guns for weeks.'

'*Evacuation . . .*' Ruth sighed, the world curling from her in a plume, elusive in the darkness.

Gienia snorted derisively. *Evacuation*. It meant marching on frozen feet to a dim wood in the Greater Reich. It meant blistering their palms as they dug trenches to lie in. It meant a quick bullet and bad end.

Clouds scudded across the waning moon. The wicked breeze blew harder, its sharp edge smelling of snow. The clogs were colder than Gienia's old boots. She stamped her feet and tucked her chin into the knot of her kerchief. This was her second winter in the camp, her first alone. She wasn't sure her feet would survive it. Her skin was spongy to the touch, keeping the imprints of her fingers, like wet clay. Now she'd lost her boots she was bound to lose some toes.

The temperature fell. Gienia's skin began to burn and split, red cracks showing like lava through rock. She shivered uncontrollably. Soon that would slow. Soon a pleasant drowsiness would come. She pounded her fists against her arms. When she was a child Mamme would settle her and Vitka on the stove on nights like this. She'd pile the bedding around them and the heat of the coals would seep up and warm their bones. Gienia closed her eyes and remembered the smell of warming linen. Across the room her father would smoke his pipe and listen to the singing drift across the square from Mendi's. The windows would be steamed up, the gusting cold locked out.

Dumplings. Her mother used to make great steaming dumplings, swimming in broth. Beads of fat floated on the surface. On the shelf sat hard-boiled eggs in salt water. When she bit into them the yolk was ringed with grey, the texture thick and clinging. Mamme's muscular arms

pulled long doughy noodles that slithered like fat snakes. Gienia opened her eyes. Her stomach could not cope with such memories.

A churning sea of clouds blew in, covering the moon, then the sky. Backlit, they were gilt with silver, their hearts dark as iron. Snow fell, the first for a month. The flakes were fat and wet and made an audible spit as they hit the ice. The night before had been clear as glass and shiny with frost. Standing at roll call had been torture; the snot froze in her nostrils and ice formed on her eyelashes. Her lips split from the dry air. In comparison this was bearable, the low ceiling of clouds a barrier against the stinging empty cold above.

'How long has it been?' Ruth whispered.

'Too long,' Rachel replied.

They said the same thing every night. Too stupid to learn that roll call was endless. You stood, you waited, and time slid away.

She dozed on her feet. She had the sensation of falling, in short skids, as though sliding down a rock face. The warm parts of her body, few though they were, felt even warmer. Her armpits. Her genitals. The back of her throat. She concentrated on those small feelings of warmth and let herself skid jerkily away.

The woman from Płaszów pinched her and she skidded awake. Roll call was over.

The women were quiet as they returned to the barracks. There were soft moans as frigid feet were massaged and ice was rubbed off eyebrows and nostrils. It was far past curfew and they hadn't eaten. Two Hungarians were sent to get the rations. The place was crawling with Hungarians. There was barely a decent Pole left. Being an old hand, Gienia had her own bowl and a spoon fashioned from twisted wire. It had cost her dearly, that spoon. She kept it close and it was warm from her skin. Being an old hand, she was also allowed to be first in the queue. It was the privilege of a low number. She didn't exercise the right. She'd been around long

enough to know that the best soup was at the bottom. A few days ago there'd been a hunk of flesh. Mouse, she thought, because it still had tufts of grey fur. So she hung back, her skin goosepimpling from a wave of hunger. She rocked on her feet as she waited. She could smell the sour tang of the soup. Even though it was barely warm, vapour rose from the pot. She fought the urge to claw her way to the front, thrust her head deep in the liquid and suck it in.

Finally it was her turn. She watched the Hungarian carefully as she filled the bowl. They were shifty, these Hungarians. Gienia snatched her bread from the second woman. It was hard and black, like a rabbit turd. Gienia walked slowly back to her bunk, taking even steps so the liquid wouldn't slosh. She eased back against the wall and gave the food her full attention. She dropped the bread down the front of her dress, for safekeeping, and began slurping the soup from her precious spoon. It was thin, mostly water, and tasted like tin. It had a greenish tinge. Nothing green was growing in the camp. It couldn't even be thistles. Mould, maybe. No potato peelings or cabbage leaves tonight. All she found, in the dregs, was a small black button, with the thread still attached. She tucked it away. It might be worth a trade. Then she licked her bowl clean.

The bread was like granite. She sucked on it to try and soften it. As soon as she broke through the crust she crammed it into her mouth, teeth tearing through the sawdust-thickened grain. It was gone in a moment. She could feel the chunks moving down her throat and she wanted to howl. She wanted more. She looked around, sniffing the air like a feral dog. The barracks were completely silent. Most of the women had to share bowls. Greedy eyes measured the size of mouthfuls before greedy hands snatched the bowl away. Not far away Rachel and Ruth sat with Dorota and Alina. Gienia's gaze was glued to the battered tin bowl as it was passed from hand to hand. When they finished she transferred her attention to Rachel. Tall, thin, bony Rachel had a nightly routine: with great precision she tore her little turd of bread into quarters. She tucked three quarters into the bodice of her dress, where her breasts used to

be. She saved it. She ate a little bit before roll call in the morning, a little bit more during the day, and the last chunk before evening roll call. Gienia saw her pat her bodice before turning her attention to this night's portion of bread. She nipped off the tiniest crumb and began to chew with immense concentration. Twenty-nine chews per crumb. Gienia counted. It was agony to watch. Saliva pooled under her tongue and she had to swallow hard. Sometimes she didn't swallow soon enough and drool rolled down her chin.

Watching Rachel, Gienia always vowed she would do the same. She would portion her bread. She would master her hunger. But the next night, as soon as she slurped up the soup, animal hunger forced the bread into her mouth, crammed in too fast to chew properly, the dry dough soaking up the endless spit. She had no control. Her mind receded beneath red waves and her teeth rent and tore.

Her stomach cramped painfully. She was always hungriest after she'd eaten. She clenched her remaining teeth and slid her bowl back into the lining of her threadbare coat. It had been pure luck, getting the coat. She'd been first back after delousing and there it was, on one of the Greek's bunks. But that wasn't the lucky bit. The lucky bit was that the woman had been selected as they trotted naked past Mengele. So Gienia didn't even have to fight for the coat. She just took it.

Gienia sucked on her spoon before hiding it away next to her skin. She looked contemplatively at the shit buckets but she didn't really need to go. Jozéfa had disappeared into her little cave. It was past curfew but no one seemed to care. A few months ago the *blockowa* would have made sure they were bedded down and quiet. Things were slipping.

Not feeling sociable, Gienia stretched out on the bunk and pulled up the blanket. It was still stiff and half frozen. She could hear whispers. The usual talk: rumours about the war, talk about the executions after the uprising, *poor Róża*, and the inevitable sighs of *evacuation*. She grunted irritably when the woman from Płaszów crawled in beside her and claimed half of the blanket.

She took too much. Gienia's back was bare and cold. She gave the woman from Płaszów a good kick and took the blanket back. They struggled for a moment and then angrily squeezed closer together.

A few months ago one blanket had to be shared between ten. The bunks had been so crowded it was painful to move. If one woman turned, the whole row had to turn. But winter had thinned the ranks and there were no new transports. So she tried to be grateful she only had to share with the woman from Płaszów. The greedy bitch. Gienia curled around the woman's back. Fragile warmth grew between their bodies. Gienia could see lice on the back of the woman's neck. She fussed for a moment, tucking her hands down beneath the blanket. She hated the nights. Sleep never came quickly and when it came it was shadowy and frightening. She tried to make her mind blank, to focus on the red of her eyelids. She heard the rustle and coughs of the women around her as she began to sink below consciousness.

She dreamed she was being chased. She was in the ghetto, in the crowded house. There were people everywhere, cramming the stairs, sprawled through the corridors. She tried to push through them but their limbs tripped her. They were a solid mass of flesh, blocking her escape. She could feel them catching up to her. Her heart hammered in her chest. Panic. She spun and found her way to the top floor. Suddenly the house was empty. She was in the centre of a great whistling emptiness. Clothes were on the floor. Shoes. Pots and pans. Bowls of soup. The world was made of objects.

There was a shout and the hammer of jackboots thundering up the stairs. She was too slow. Despair scuttled in her. A window was open. Beyond she could see the leafless dark thrust of the poplars. Snowflakes danced towards her. She ran faster. She was flying. With a fluid, muscular leap she sailed through the open window and tumbled into the cold world outside. She fell slowly. The snow glittered around her, catching the wind. No, not snow . . . papers. A whirl

of papers: passports, travel passes, documents, money: roubles, zloty, dollars. So much paper in the wind.

She half-woke. The barracks were pitch black. The woman from Płaszów was keening softly in her sleep. Gienia's heart stuttered. The world felt unstable. It kept sliding away from her. She slept. And dreamed.



By four o'clock in the morning I give up on the idea of sleep. I let the useless blessing drop to the floor. I turn my radio alarm clock on – Nick Cave's 'Weeping Song' comes on and I change the station to talkback. Some guy named Patrick is talking about his ex-girlfriend. He sounds loaded but maybe he's just miserable.

I kick the box back under the bed but it's a useless act, there's hardly anything left inside it. Its contents are all over my walls, everywhere I look.

I sit at my desk, staring morosely at a blank page.

'She won't return my calls,' Patrick complains. 'I'm sorry, I've said I'm sorry. How can you love someone for three years and not want to *talk* to them?'

'You have to look to *you* now, Patrick,' smooth-voiced Dr Fiona soothes. What does that *mean*? Sounds to me like Patrick's looking too much, too hard. Patrick needs a holiday from looking. I think suddenly of the awful afternoon when Dan left me. Of holding onto his sleeve, trying to keep him. Of slumping on the veranda, crying, listening to the sound of his Honda as it faded into the general swish of traffic. Don't look, Patrick, that's the key. Just don't look.

Jozéfa banged her truncheon against the bunks.

'Get up, you lazy whores!'

Gienia was slow to climb from her bunk. It was still dark; it didn't feel close to dawn. It felt like night. Something was wrong. Something was different. Her skin crawled. Blankets were supposed to be left in the barracks but she lifted her dress and wrapped the blanket around her. Rachel watched her oddly then whispered to Ruth. They surreptitiously gathered blankets of their own and hid them under their ragged clothes.

Gienia reluctantly stepped out into the freeze. It was still snowing, a thick heavy swirl. The wind had dropped and the camp was muffled. They were silent as they fell into line. The ground trembled from the approaching Russian artillery. The sky was the colour of cold ash. Dawn was still hours away. Gienia was glad of her blanket. The guards lolled by the wire: they were drunk. Gienia's gut clenched. Today. It would be today.

An eerie, dense anticipation rolled through the rows like a fog. The guards hadn't moved. No one walked the ranks. There was no headcount. The women looked at each other anxiously. The guards were slovenly, their weapons holstered or hanging loose from shoulder straps. Empty vodka and *slivowitz* bottles lay in the snow. Eventually the Germans emerged through the white haze. They seemed oblivious to the pounding guns in the distance. Gering was bleary-eyed but freshly shaved. Gienia thought if she got close enough she would smell scent on him, something bracing and alpine.

There was no announcement. The women from the first barracks were abruptly marched away. Gering followed behind. Gienia and her barracks watched anxiously: one by one, lines of women passed, herded by staggering guards. Soon all of the barracks to the right were deserted.

They were left waiting in the falling snow. They were next. But nothing happened.

'Why don't they say anything?' Ruth moaned.

'What's to say?' Rachel replied.

'Are we getting our coffee?' Gienia turned to glare at the *blockowa*. She frowned. Jozéfa wasn't there. Gienia looked back at the barracks. She was nowhere to be seen. Despite the cold Gienia began to sweat.

'Shit.'

'What?'

'She's gone: the *blockowa's* gone.'

The women all turned. Gienia didn't bother to hiss at them.

'Where would she go?'

'Who knows? The infirmary?'

'If they're evacuating us won't they kill the sick?'

'Maybe. Maybe they don't want to waste the bullets.'

'But why would she go?'

There was only one reason. And it didn't bode well for the rest of them.

They shuffled and muttered. Gienia wished she could have her muddy cup of ersatz coffee.

Her stomach could use the warmth and her thirst was painful.

'I don't think they're going to feed us,' she said glumly.

The guards strode forward. The last empty bottles dropped from their fleeced gloves, disappearing into deep drifts.

'March!'

The camp was eerily quiet. The darkness faded, lightening to a dense grey. The wire fences were crusted with white. Snow slid from the barracks rooftops with a mighty *whump*. Gienia's clogs were full of snow and threatened to stay behind every time she lifted her feet. She grew

nervous as they approached the gate. The sweat froze on her skin. For the first time in memory the gate was wide open. The guards did not have to fumble with the enormous padlock, which froze shut and had to be thawed with boiling water. The padlock was gone. The gates were open. Gienia swallowed hard.

Trucks waited on the road beyond. With tired grunts the guards climbed into the truck beds. There was the click of weapons being armed. The column shuffled over the threshold. Gienia trembled. She turned. The shadowy barracks were lost in the shifting snow. The remaining chimneys disappeared into low cloud. She had been here for almost two years. She had been mired in the sucking mud, had fought for breath in the stifling, sweating barracks, had suffered the hunger and constant lust for water-water-water. This was not a place a person could leave behind. She looked ahead at the plains and the snow and the white light growing in the east and felt chilled to her marrow.



‘Carla’s taking the kids to Newcastle today.’

I jump when he speaks. I’m in the office, trying to start up the point of sale system. I’m laboriously following Kevin’s checklist – his handwriting is almost impossible to read, it’s cramped like a child’s.

Chef’s at his desk, seemingly absorbed in his copy of *The Australian*. He doesn’t look at me when he speaks. One would think he was addressing the sports page.

‘What?’

He hasn’t spoken to me since our argument, which was almost a week ago. Not even to yell at me. It’s as though I don’t exist. I don’t look at him when I go up to the

pass, I'm happy to not exist. I wish everyone found me invisible, life would be so much easier.

'Newcastle. My parents. Carla's taking the kids today.' The paper rustles as he turns the page.

'What does my horoscope say?' I ask abruptly. What does he mean? What does he want from me?

'What's your sign?' More rustling as he turns to the horoscopes.

'Taurus.'

'The cow?' I think he's smiling. I look up sharply. I can't tell, his back is to me.

'Bull,' I correct. 'Why, what are you?'

'Scorpio.'

Figures.

'Brace yourself for an eventful week,' he reads. 'Things will go your way, there will be love with a stranger. Or a chef.'

'It doesn't say that.'

'It says stranger.'

'I'll have to go out and find one then, won't I?'

'I'm not strange enough for you?'

Oh, it hurts, the warmth in his voice, the twinkle in his eyes when he turns and hands me the paper. How can I go from invisible to this? How can he be so cruel and so tender? And why am I taking the paper from him? Why am I smiling? Why do I feel like crying? Why do I want to launch myself at him and feel his hands on me? What's wrong with me?

We have two Christmas functions. The lunchtime one is for a rowdy bunch from a

company that makes cardboard and paper products. I notice they make the boxes the broccoli comes in. They're doing well obviously, and they throw a good Christmas show. Ali, the boss' PA, comes in early with a couple of the secretaries, to decorate. They've got wonky Tim Burton-style tin Christmas trees for the centre pieces and on every place setting they put either a glittery red Santa hat or furry reindeer antlers.

'What a bunch of dorks,' Josie laughs when they all put them on.

'Oh, I forgot!' Ali calls, tottering over on her red heels, furry antlers dancing, 'I got these for the waiters.' She holds out green elf hats – they're long and topped with big gold bells that jingle when we walk.

'Very nice,' Chef grins at me when I go up to the pass to collect the bread.

'If it isn't Mrs Claus,' Harry joins in, dropping the hot tray on the pass with a clatter.

'She's supposed to be an elf, idiot.'

'Mrs Claus, elf,' Harry shrugs, 'whatever. She can deck my halls any day.'

'Not today,' Chef winks at me, 'she'll be too busy jingling my bells.'

I glance at him sharply.

'Seeing if you've been good or bad,' Harry guffaws.

'I'll give her a white Christmas.'

'You're disgusting,' I snap, taking the rolls.

'Where's your Christmas spirit, Moll?' he calls after me.

Lunch goes smoothly. The paper people eat their beef, chicken, fish, swap Kris Kringle presents and get cheerily drunk to their Christmas CDs: Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole. But they don't leave a tip. Christmas functions seldom do.

In the evening we have a company of lawyers come in for their Christmas dinner. Very different atmosphere. Eleanor, another PA, with another bunch of secretaries, comes in and decorates. White Christmas lilies, red berries, t-lights: restrained. E Type

Jazz come in and set up in the corner. I'm glad I don't have to listen to Dean Martin again. The lawyers eat their beef, chicken, fish and get pleasantly drunk on their expensive reds. But they don't leave a tip. Christmas functions never do.

Despite myself, I'm disappointed when Chef leaves for the Exeter with the kitchen boys.

'Night, Mrs Claus,' he says on his way out.

I have a knock-off drink with the others and then I go home.

At two a.m. I'm woken up by staccato rapping on the front door.

'Who is it?' I hear Lizzie ask nervously.

'Molly!'

Oh fuck, it's Chef. I jump out of bed and hurry to the door. 'What are you doing here?' I hiss.

'Let me in.'

He's drunk. I glance over at Lizzie, who's settling herself back onto her air bed.

'You can let him in,' she says primly, pulling the covers up to her chin. 'Just keep him quiet.'

I open the door wider and let him in. He stops at the sight of Lizzie. 'I forgot,' he says, but he doesn't sound like he really cares.

'Shh,' I order and lead him through to my bedroom, without introducing them. 'Do you want a coffee?' I ask as he collapses onto my bed.

He shakes his head 'no' and pulls his shoes off.

'Water?'

'We went to The Cathouse,' he sighs, removing his socks. 'Been there?'

'No.' I scowl as I watch him undress and get under my covers.

‘It’s brilliant. Much better than the Crazy Horse, the chicks have real boobs. 100% authentic.’

‘Good for them.’

‘We bought Ping Pong a lap dance. You coming to bed?’

‘You what?’

‘We bought Ping Pong a lap dance, out of the kitchen tips. Thought it would be good for a laugh.’ He grabs my hand and tugs me into bed.

‘And was it?’ I ask as his hands slide up under my pyjama top.

‘Poor little pecker looked terrified. The chick was three times the size of him, woulda squashed him if she’d sat down hard.’ His hands squeeze my breasts. ‘100% authentic,’ I hear him sigh happily.

When I wake up in the morning he’s sitting at the foot of my bed with a cup of coffee, staring at the wall above the headboard. I’ve photocopied her face, in all different sizes, from passport-size, right up to A1, the biggest paper the photocopier at work holds.

‘It’s creepy,’ Chef says. He picks up a book from the foot of my bed. Celan. He flips through the pages. ‘It’s in German.’ He sounds amazed.

‘The English translation is on the opposite page.’

‘Oh. “Death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue”,’ Chef reads. There’s a long silence. I can feel the words surround us, as dense and soupy as an ocean fog.

‘How come?’ The book snaps shut, the words evaporate.

He wants a neat answer, I know he does. ‘My grandmother was Jewish.’ Or, ‘I think I might be Anne Frank, reincarnated.’ Something you can say in one breath. But I don’t have a neat answer. I’m not Jewish, I’m not Anne Frank: I’m nobody. I’ve

seen documentaries on TV – *The World at War*, *Hitler's Henchmen* – and read a bunch of books – *Sophie's Choice*, *If This Is a Man* but it doesn't belong to me.

For me the Holocaust is something that happened in books. Israel and Palestine are places I see on TV. Maybe it's horrible but it's true. I can read about it, watch documentaries and movies and see something stark, something that has an overwhelming simplicity despite its complexity. It's a Big Thing. An Incomprehensibility I can accept.

I don't know why my father drank. Drinks. I don't know why my mother married him, or why she chose the moment she did to leave him. I don't know why I find this life so hard, when it should be so easy.

Standing before the cliff face of the Holocaust the wild fear I feel sometimes makes perfect sense.

I take the book away from Chef and don't answer him.

I'm relieved he's being nice to me again – it makes life easier. He teases me throughout the lunch service and when I screw up an order he doesn't even yell at me. He looks pleased when I'm sent to the kitchen to polish plates.

'Can you believe this shit?' Harry complains, rolling his eyes at the radio. Some guy is talking about David Hicks and Guantanamo Bay. 'The guy's a fucking terrorist.'

'You'd know, hey Harry,' Chef grins.

'Where did they find him, huh? We're not talking about a tourist, you know. The cocksucker's fighting on the wrong side, he deserves everything he gets.'

'You should call in.'

'Damn right I should. Listen to this wet-end. Violation of human rights, my arse. What about those poor bastards in New York? What about Bali, huh? My sister was in

Bali that week. My fucking *sister*.’ Harry’s knife flashes. ‘He gave up his rights when he joined the towelheads.’

‘Fifty bucks,’ Chef says.

‘What?’

‘Fifty bucks if you call in.’

‘Serious?’

Chef holds out his hand. It’s stained with fish blood. Harry takes it and shakes, not caring about the blood.

‘Get me the White Pages, Moll,’ Harry orders.

‘Get them yourself, I’m working.’

He gives me a sour look. ‘Ping Pong, get me the White Pages.’

Ping Pong looks up from the sink, confused.

‘Christ,’ Harry mutters, wiping his hands on his apron and going to get it himself.

He punches the numbers into the kitchen phone and taps his fingers on the bench impatiently when they put him on a queue. We listen to the talkback discussion move from Hicks to Abu Ghraib.

‘I’m on next,’ Harry hisses at us. Next thing we know he’s being announced.

‘Look,’ he says and the radio starts squealing.

‘Could you turn your radio off, Harry?’ the host says. Harry snaps it off and all we can hear is his side of the conversation.

‘I want to respond to that Karen chick,’ he says, his face going red, ‘Yeah, she’s talking out of her bum. They used to execute traitors, you know, he’s lucky he’s not being executed.’ He listens for a moment. ‘And how much is *that* gonna cost? We caught them in Afghanistan for Chrissake – we don’t need a trial to tell us they’re guilty.’

Harry looks pleased with himself when he hangs up. He turns the radio back on and holds his hand out for the fifty bucks.

‘I’m ashamed!’ the next caller exclaims. ‘I’m ashamed to live in a country with a man like that.’

‘Right back atcha,’ Harry says cheerfully.

‘I’ve always been ashamed to live in the same country as Harry,’ Michelle says, leaning past him to slide desserts up on the pass. She dings the bell, even though I’m standing right there.

When I get back they’re still talking about it.

‘We should just nuke the lot of them,’ Harry announces, whacking through a lamb carcass with relish.

‘Including the women and children?’ I ask, unable to stop myself.

‘*Especially* the women and children. See how they like it for a change.’

‘Total annihilation, huh?’ Chef remarks, glancing at me.

‘TOTAL!’ Harry yells, half-jokingly, brandishing his blade like a sword.

I snort and Harry looks at me curiously. ‘You a bleeding-heart, Moll? Think we should send them all Care Bears? Sing fucking “Age of Aquarius” until they stop blowing up innocent fucking people?’

I stay quiet and concentrate on polishing the plates.

‘Careful, Harry,’ Chef laughs.

‘Why?’ Harry looks me up and down. ‘What’s her deal?’

‘She’s got a thing for stuff like this.’

‘Like what? The towelheads?’

‘The Holocaust.’

‘This is nothing like the Holocaust. I’m not talking about killing innocent people.’

Just the towelheads.'

I go to the toilet to get away from them. I listen to the whirr of the fan and look up at the moth carcasses in the light fitting. How do they get in there? I can't see a way into the plastic dome. Somehow they must navigate their way around the plastic, just to flap against the hot bare bulb, just to die. Stupid insects. Numb cunts.

When I come out Des is there, waiting to use the staff loo. 'I went to a camp,' he says abruptly.

'Yeah?' I respond shortly. I don't really want to talk about it with these people. I don't want it to become fodder for just another stupid chat – like dole bludgers and pokie machines – a form of casual, careless entertainment, a way of passing time.

'Outside Munich,' Des tells me.

'Dachau.'

'Yeah, that sounds right. Went in a gas chamber. I could bring you in the photos, if you like?'

'Uh-huh.' I don't really want to see tourist shots of Des inside a gas chamber. What would be the point?

'Ha ha,' I say to Chef later, when I'm dropping dirty dishes in the sink.

'What?'

'You know what.'

He grins. 'Maybe you ought to write a book. We'd read it, wouldn't we Ping Pong?'

'Pardon?'

'Molly write book. You read?'

'He's not deaf,' I snap.

'Just stupid,' Chef says.

'He's not stupid.'

'No? Look at this.' Chef snatches a latte glass off the clean tray and waves it at me. There's brown scum like the ring around a bathtub. I leave before he can yell at Ping Pong. I'm too tired to deal with it.

◦ ○ ◦

Birkenau was soon swallowed by the snow, a phantom on the road behind. The guards led them down back roads, away from the arterial freeways and towns. The sound of the Russian guns grew distant. The ground ceased to rumble. The snow piled in drifts beside the road and melted into a mesh of boot prints beneath their feet; Gienia was in agony. The wooden clogs had scraped her cold, damp feet raw. She dreaded unwinding the rags, afraid the flesh had rubbed off all the way to the bone. She couldn't keep her pace even. She sweated, casting anxious looks at the guards. They slouched in the open trucks, collars pulled up to their chins, scowls on their young faces. The woman from Płaszów was stumbling too. She bumped into Gienia several times, her face grey. Her mouth was open, her eyes glazed. Gienia tried to distance herself, edging slightly closer to Dorota and the side of the road. She let herself be hypnotised by the monotonous shuffle and the scrunching of the dry snow beneath her clogs.

They reached an intersection. Gienia's mind cleared at the sight of the road signs. *Leszczyny. Gleiwitz.* Places beyond the camp. She took a hitching breath and looked around. The heavily swirling snow obscured the world beyond the road. But it was there. Her stomach twisted and a sour taste flooded her mouth. Beyond the snowfall were farmhouses: shuttered against the storm, woodsmoke puffing from their fat chimneys, chickens roasting in the pan, electric lights keeping the darkness at bay . . .

The woman from Płaszów tripped and skidded forward, knocking Alina to her knees. They fell in a tangle of rags. Alina whimpered frantically, trying to regain her feet. Gienia kept walking, keeping a wide berth. A guard leapt down from the truck, his sigh a white frost in the air before him. The crowd split, walking around the fallen pair, leaving a clear patch of road. Matter-of-factly the guard drew his weapon. Gienia heard the two shots but didn't look back. The retorts echoed down the lonely road. Cawing crows scattered from the trees.

The snowfall thinned by late afternoon. Gienia needed to piss. Earlier in the day Ruth had tried to squat by the side of the road. The guard stood up in the truck bed. Ruth wailed and scuttled back into line, struggling to pull her underwear up. Pragmatically, Gienia pissed as she walked. The hot urine splashed down her legs and she shuddered with pleasure. After a moment shudder turned to shiver, the piss turning to ice against her skin.

The fog cleared. Stands of leafless, black trees edged white fields. The sky was pale grey: the clouds higher and wrung dry of snow. Gienia sniffed. Her nose was sore and running. The road dog-legged around a dark copse of firs. Around the corner Gienia caught sight of a village. The truck's engine whirred as it accelerated. The women had to quicken their pace to a trot. Gienia clenched her jaw against the pain from her feet.

'Oh God,' Dorota huffed with every step. 'Oh God, oh God, oh God.'

By the time they jogged into the town a dense twilit gloom had descended. Bright golden light spilled from fogged windowpanes. Gienia could smell bread baking. She stared blearily at the neatly swept streets. It seemed unreal. The shop windows were still lit as the shopkeepers packed up for the day. Gienia was riveted by the butcher's window, her head swiveled as she jogged past; she was unable to tear her eyes from it. Thick sausages lay curled on trays, sides of lamb hung from hooks, geese lolled, plucked, long necks flaccid. So much food. *So much food.*

They stumbled to a halt in the town platz. The guards clambered from the truck bed,

stretching their stiff legs. Several circled the prisoners, rifles held loosely, gazes uninterested. The rest dispersed into the town. Gienia collapsed onto the cobblestones, sniffing and breathless. One by one the other women joined her. She didn't dare remove her clogs: she didn't think she would be able to get them back on again. Civilians emerged from the buildings lining the platz. Their faces were pinched as they observed the women slumped in the town square.

'Oh God,' Dorota moaned again.

Gienia looked up, following Dorota's gaze to the villagers. Their faces were flat and cold. A tall woman in an old hat and a green coat pushed her young son forward. He couldn't have been more than eight years old. His ears stuck out, perpendicular from his head, parting his light brown hair. He trotted forward and yelled '*Stinkjude!*' in a high, excited voice. His small arm rose and he clumsily hurled something into the knot of exhausted women. It hit a Greek square in the face. She gasped and clutched her head.

'It's a potato!' There was a scrabble as everyone scrambled to grab the potato. Gienia heard the guards laugh. The boy darted back to his mother, beaming with pride. She patted his shoulder, still staring flatly at the prisoners. Her face was as motionless as marble in the fading light. Gienia felt a hot lick of hate. The woman took her son by the hand and strode from the platz. Strode home to a crackling fire, hot dinner and feather bed.

Night brought a clear, razor-sharp cold. Vapour gusted from Gienia's mouth when she exhaled. The sweat from the exhausting march dried and left her shivering. Her nose was thick and blocked and her eyes were swelling. She curled into a ball on the salted cobblestones and tucked her hands under her armpits. The chill of the stones rose through her clothes. When she closed her eyes she was conscious of her sore mouth and cracking lips. Her thirst was raging. Her head throbbed.

Some of the guards returned with bottles of schnapps and wine. They relieved their

comrades, who made straight for the restaurant on the corner of the *platz*. The smell of cabbage and corned beef drifted through the door every time it opened.

'They're not going to feed us, are they?' Ruth said bleakly. She and Rachel were curled together beneath their blankets. Rachel didn't speak; she seemed to be asleep.

It doesn't look like it,' Dorota sighed.

Gienia was more concerned about the cold. If it got any colder they would freeze to the cobblestones . . . Abruptly, she sat up. Her cheek was numb from the ground. She rubbed it feverishly. She would stay awake. She would need to rub her hands and face. The feet she would have to trust to luck.



He waits for me after he knocks off. We leave the restaurant separately and I hope no one sees me get into his car. He's got vintage U2 in the CD player. *War*. We get red lights the whole way home. We stop at Hindley Street and sit silently, listening to the music and watching the girls stagger across the pedestrian crossing. They're all young, tottering around on heels that threaten to snap their ankles and send them skidding to the bitumen. A few hours ago they must have looked fresh and fine, glistening with fake tan, hairspray and layers of cheap jewelry. But now, after a few too many Cruisers, they're rumpled and smeared and sweaty, and they look very young to me.

'End of the night girls,' Chef sighs, slouching back into the driver's seat.

'What?' I ask, distracted.

'You know, the ones you take home when it's the end of the night and no one else will have you.'

I shiver and suddenly feel like crying. I have to close my eyes and block out the sight of the bruised young things, the end of the night girls; I take a deep breath and concentrate hard on not crying. I don't want to be you, I think, but I'm not sure it's a choice I can make – I think it's a choice I should have made a long time ago.

We pick up noodles, go home to my place, eat, drink a bottle of shiraz, fuck and curl up, flesh to flesh, in the dark. He sleeps, and snores, and I stare at the orange streetlight staining the ceiling. The sound of him breathing makes me feel lonely.

end of the night, girl

False dawn glowed green in the east when the truck started with a rattle. It chugged from the cold. Gienia woke from a shallow doze with a start. The air was sharp against her throat. It smelled dry. She hoped it wouldn't snow.

'Aufstehen!'

Gienia's muscles protested as she weakly tried to stand. Tears sprang to her eyes when she put her full weight on her feet. Roughly half the women stood. The guards, still holding bottles of wine, couldn't be bothered asking again. They kicked the prone forms. One threw his empty bottle. It smashed against the cobblestones with a flat crack, spraying the women with shards. Dorota gasped as a wedge of glass lodged in her ankle. Slick blood shone black against her hands as she struggled to pull the glass out. It fell to the stones with a *tinkle*. She looked hopelessly at her lacerated fingers. Fat tears spilled down her face. She was exhausted. The blood was the last straw. She sat down heavily, her hand clasped around her ankle. Her gaze was opaque. Gienia looked away.

'Rachel?' Ruth was shaking her long-limbed bunkmate. Rachel didn't wake. Her lips and eyelids were blue. 'Rachel!' Ruth looked desperately at Gienia but Gienia wouldn't meet her gaze.

'She's dead,' she told Ruth calmly.

'She can't be.'

Gienia shrugged.

'She *can't* be.'

'Nevertheless. Take her blanket. She won't need it.' Gienia shuffled into line, not looking back to see if Ruth followed. She found herself next to Elena the Greek.

The iron-grey road stretched into the fog. Gienia faded in and out. For a while Schlomo was beside her. His cap was pushed back and a spill of curls covered his forehead. His wide mouth was pursed, as though to whistle.

'Bad day, this,' he remarked, shoving his hands deeper into his pockets.

'They're all bad,' she replied, her voice a breathless rattle in her throat.

'I meant the weather. Terrible.'

She stumbled, her right clog skittering free. She felt him catch her arm, his touch as wet and insubstantial as the fog. Her toes clawed at the clog. She forced her foot back into it and quickened her pace, listening for the grit of boots landing on the road.

'What happened to the boots Uncle Yaacov made you?'

'Gone.' It hurt to talk. Her lips were split and dry as a desert.

Schlomo clicked his tongue. 'Bad luck to lose a wedding present. What would Elja say?' His glance was sly. He kept pace with her, his feet disappearing into the low-lying vapour. *What would Elja say?*

'Where were you, Gienia?' Schlomo's voice twisted suddenly, the slyness falling away. His long face was taut, the eyes simultaneously wild and vacant. 'I waited for *four* goddamn hours. For all I knew they'd picked you up. For all I knew you were hurt. Or *dead*.' With a flicker he was in front of her, walking backwards, his coat flapping, the fog sliding by him, threatening to consume him. She held his gaze, too tired to look away. The wet black eyes wanted to swallow her whole. Only the meaty agony of her feet kept her anchored to the road.

'Where were you!'

I didn't come. I won't come again.

'Why?' His face flashed with anger. Worse, rage.

You have to ask? Elja. Miriam.

And in the back of her mind, the slither of the eel.

'I love you!' His voice was a thunderclap: violent, powerful, absolute. Schlomo was a man of absolutes. 'Don't you love me?' The voice dropped to a whisper. Pleading. Desperate.

'Gienia? Don't you love me?'

Not enough.

She walked through a solid bank of fog. When she emerged he was gone.

◦ ○ ◦

Miriam. Who the fuck is Miriam?

It's completely out of control. I try to erase the idea of her but I can't. Her name sounds in my head and she exists. Before long, she exists outside of my head, on the page.

She forces me to go back, to change things.

◦ ○ ◦

The cart rattled along a straight dirt road, past bleached fields, along the outskirts of a number of *shtetls*. A dry heat rose from the road, hanging with the dust in the air around them, coating their skins. Around noon Vlad turned off the main track and they clattered into a cobblestoned platz. Vlad stopped the cart under a towering old male pine, to take advantage of the thin shade. Gienia looked around curiously, this *shtetl* was bigger than home. Dominating the square was the *shul*, its steps neatly swept and its doors open, the interior invitingly dark. A solemn young man, not far past his *bar-mitzvah* by the look of him, stood in the doorway of the Rav's house, beside the *schul*. He watched Vlad tether the horse and then disappeared into the house.

'Wake Cousin Yaacov, will you?' Vład asked as he beat his hat against his thigh, to rid it of the dust. Yaacov was braced against the back of the seat, his mouth open, a trail of silver drool shining in his beard. Gienia bent over the seat, gripped his shoulder and gave him a gentle shake. He snorted but didn't wake. Gienia cleared her throat. Loudly. Yaacov's head flopped sideways and she jumped.

'Cousin Yaacov,' she said tentatively. 'Yaacov!' she said, louder. She looked helplessly at Vład but he was greeting the Rav and had his back to her. She shook Yaacov once more before she lost her patience. She took a couple of his beard hairs between her fingers and yanked. Yaacov howled and sat bolt upright. Bewildered, he looked around.

'What's wrong Cousin?' Gienia asked innocently. 'A bad dream?'

'Eh!' he replied, rubbing his cheek.

'It must be the heat,' she said as she climbed down from the cart.

'Must be,' he agreed vaguely, still trying to orient himself, 'Or sleeping on an empty stomach. Never wise to sleep on an empty stomach. Unnatural.'

'Yes,' Gienia said, trying not to look at his bulging belly.

The Rav Cybulski was a small man, thin, with a long pointed face; the point was emphasised by his narrow beard and sidelocks. He greeted them warmly and led them inside, out of the blazing heat. The Rebitsin had prepared food for them and the smell of *kishkeh* filled the house.

'I'm sorry,' Vład apologised, inclining his head, 'but there really is no time if we're to make the train.'

'I told her,' Rav Cybulski said helplessly, 'Of course there is no time. But, a mother . . .'

'A moment,' the Rebitsin pleaded, her eyes moist, 'It will take just a moment to eat.'

'Yes, surely we can spare a moment,' Yaacov agreed, sniffing the *kishkeh* hungrily.

'I'm afraid not,' Vład was firm. The Rebitsin wrung her hands, her gaze flying to her

husband. He shook his head.

'Boys,' the Rav said to his sons, 'get your sister's trunk and load it onto the cart. Dear,' he turned to his wife, his face kind, 'would you get Miriam?'

The Rebitsen struggled to keep her composure and nodded.

'Really,' Cousin Yaacov whispered disapprovingly, his eyes fixed on the stove, 'we should let the poor woman say her goodbyes.'

Gienia could feel Vlad's impatience.

The Rav made polite conversation as they waited for the Rebitsen to return with Miriam. After a while Vlad began to tug his moustache irritably. The Rav cleared his throat.

'I'll see what's keeping them,' he said apologetically.

'We'll wait in the cart,' Vlad told him, donning his wide-brimmed hat and heading for the door. Gienia followed.

'I'll wait here, shall I?' Yaacov called after them, reluctant to leave the cooler shelter, and even more reluctant to leave the *kishkeh*.

Gienia leaned against the pine and watched Vlad water the horse. It seemed like a long time before the Rav led Miriam from the house. She wasn't what Gienia was expecting at all. The Rav and Rebitsen were both small people, narrow-shouldered and unimposing. Miriam couldn't possibly belong to them. She was tall, taller than her father or her brother Hercel, and solid. Her face was round, like a *matzoh* ball, and had a deeply morose cast. The only things that marked her as their kin were her slanted eyes and curling dark hair, inherited from her father, and her skin, the colour of day-old cream, which was like her mother's.

It was clear both Miriam and her mother had been crying. Miriam's slanted eyes were swollen to slits and her face was blotched red. She kept her eyes on the cobblestones as her father led her to the cart. The Rebitsen stood in the doorway, a handkerchief clutched to her mouth, her other hand gripping her youngest son. Gienia felt bad for them both, but especially

Miriam, who looked like a lamb being led to slaughter.

'Poor thing,' she sighed.

'Not so poor,' Vład retorted. 'Looking like that she should be glad to make a marriage at all. And she gets the older brother.' He sounded annoyed.

Gienia climbed into the back of the cart, ignoring Vład's gaze as he tried to gesture her towards the front bench.

'I think Maidel Cybulski would be more comfortable with my sister,' she heard him say to the Rav. She tried not to grin, knowing he wouldn't be happy sitting next to Yaacov either.

She offered Miriam her hand as the ungainly girl struggled into the cart but Miriam didn't take it. She crawled past Gienia and settled herself in the corner, pulling her knees up towards her chin and looking miserably over at her mother.

'Where's Yaacov?' Vład demanded impatiently.

'Here! I'm here, dear boy!' Cousin Yaacov called as he squeezed through the doorway, past the Rebitsen. He was clutching a damp bundle of muslin.

'What's that?' Vład asked, leaning forward to sniff the bundle.

Yaacov flushed. 'Shame to let it go to waste,' he said, 'the Rebitsen was kind enough to slice it for me . . . for us,' he corrected.

The Rav cleared his throat and caught Yaacov by the elbow. 'Reb? My daughter . . . ?'

'Yes?' Yaacov responded, puzzled.

'She is my only daughter,' the Rav said with the same helpless shrug, 'I want my daughter to be happy.'

'Happy!' Yaacov declared boisterously, squeezing his *kishkeh*, 'She will not be able to help being happy! My nephew . . .' Yaacov paused, trying to find a word good enough to describe his nephew.

'If you could just take care of her,' the Rav interrupted.

'Of course, of course. I will deliver her safely.'

The Rav's gaze flickered to his daughter.

'I'm terribly sorry . . .' Vład said, taking Yaacov's other elbow and not sounding sorry in the slightest, 'we really must go.'

'Yes, of course.'

Gienia heard Miriam sniff as they rattled out of the platz, out of the benevolent shade of the pine, into the blazing sunlight.

'Anyone?' Cousin Yaacov asked, holding up the *kishkeh*. 'No?' he answered for them, before they could respond, shoving a greasy slice into his gaping mouth.

The Polish village was twice the size of any *shtetl* Gienia had seen. A few miles out from the town the dirt road disappeared abruptly, replaced by asphalt. The streets were wide, strung with electric wires, draped like bunting from pole to pole. Unlike the wooden buildings at home these houses were rendered, terraced and balconied. The name of the café was painted in gold on its large front window. Outside the butcher shop striped awnings snapped in the breeze. The streets were full of automobiles.

She'd only seen an automobile once before, when she was little. Bolesław Brachter had one. He lived in Siemiatycze and had driven all the way to the *shtetl* to sit *shiva* for his mother. He'd bounced into town, the black car coated in the heavy summer dust, grass hanging from the grille.

'A man who loves his mother,' Mamme had said, with a sideways glance at Vład. Vład had rolled his eyes and pulled a face at Gienia. She had giggled and her mamme had rapped her sharply across the knuckles with a wooden spoon.

'This is what I have? Children who don't understand respect?'

'I understand, Mamme,' Vitka said, with a toss of her blonde braids. As soon as Mamme's back was turned Gienia had given those braids a yank.

But Bolesław Brachter's automobile was nothing compared to the ones in the Polish village. These didn't have grass in the grill, or pebble-chips in the paint.

'A different world, no?' Cousin Yaacov boomed, struggling to swivel so that he could look back at the girls. Fat from the *kishkeh* glistened on his beard. 'For years I've been saying we should get electricity,' he gestured at the wires above, 'and the telephone! Imagine,' he said to Miriam, 'if we had the telephone you could speak to your mother whenever the mood took you. Why you'd hardly feel like you were apart! She could just as well be in the next room!'

Gienia could see the mere mention of her mother was going to set Miriam off again.

'How does it work?' she asked Yaacov, surreptitiously passing her handkerchief to Miriam. Miriam's own was a sodden lump.

'Oh, science,' Yaacov replied, with a vague wave of his hand.

'Who would you want to speak to, Cousin?' Vład inquired dryly.

Yaacov paused to think. 'I could call the Rav Cybulski if I had a question. Our Rav speaks in riddles. He's always pointing me to this text, or that text, when all I want is an answer.'

Miriam gave a shuddering snuffle at the mention of her father.

'Or my sister,' he announced, 'I could call my sister. Would save me writing all those letters and she can't read very well. Although...' he paused, considering, 'she does talk an awful lot. At least now, because she can't write very well, her letters are short. Unless she gets one of the children to write them, then they're enormous. Positive *tomes*. What child got what cough, the price per pound of mutton, and endless gossip about people I've never met and am never likely to meet.' He lapsed into silence, obviously contemplating the negatives of having the telephone.

Vład pulled up in front of the station. It was a long building opposite the post office. The few Poles waiting on the platform watched them curiously as they unloaded their baggage from the cart. Gienia tugged her dusty skirt nervously, straightening the hem.

'Have you ever taken a train?' Yaacov asked, while Vład was buying the tickets. Both Gienia

and Miriam shook their heads.

'A day of firsts!' Yaacov clicked his tongue. 'Shame we won't be in first class. They have a dining car.'

It wasn't until they heard the chugging of the train that Gienia felt the first wave of fear. *I don't want to go*, she thought sickly. Steam hissed from the train as it settled at the platform, causing Gienia to jump. Heat radiated from its metal body, shimmering in the already searing air. She felt her heart stumble and swallowed hard.

Unable to speak, she let Vlad bundle her onto the train. He came aboard to help store the luggage. She wanted to grab him. She kept her white-knuckled hands curled in the folds of her dress, to stop herself.

Vlad observed her rigid posture and wide eyes and sighed. 'This is a good thing,' he said, taking her chin in his fingers and lifting her face. 'He is a good man.'

'How do you know?'

'He's family.' Vlad bent and kissed her on the forehead. His lips were warm. Gienia wanted to hurl herself at his feet and beg him to take her home. But she didn't.

Mazel tov, little sister.'

Where his lips had been, her skin was cold. Through the dirty window she watched him jump from the train and head back to his cart. He climbed back up onto the high seat and flicked the reins. Soon he was swallowed by the traffic and she saw nothing but strangers.

◦ ○ ◦

Then she meets Elja. Still blank. No idea what happens, who says what.

'What?'

‘What?’ I blink at Lizzie and try to reorient myself. I’m in the kitchen, smelling burned toast, not *kishkeh*.

‘You were muttering.’

‘No, I wasn’t.’

‘You were.’

‘Wasn’t.’

‘Whatever.’ She watches as I take the black toast from the toaster. ‘How long is he going to be here?’

‘What?’ It’s the last of the bread. I sigh and slather it with butter. Anything tastes good with butter.

‘The chef,’ Lizzie snaps, ‘how long is he going to be here?’

‘He’s going to Newcastle Christmas Eve.’

‘That’s a week and a half!’

‘You can talk, you’ve been here since 1987.’ I ignore her sour expression and carry the toast into my bedroom, where Chef’s got Paul Celan out again.

‘Nice cooking,’ he says when I drop the plate of burned toast in his lap.

‘I’m too pretty to be a chef.’

‘I like this,’ he muses, still buried in Celan. ‘*Haldengott*.’

‘God of the Slag Heap. How you.’

‘You’re the one obsessed with this junk, if anyone’s God of the Slag Heap it’s you.’

‘Shut up and eat your toast.’

‘Pick a name,’ Neil orders as soon as he sees me.

‘What?’

‘We’re doing Kris Kringle.’ He rattles a shoe box at me. ‘Fifteen dollar limit.’

I reach in and rummage through the scraps of paper. I get Ping Pong. What the hell am I going to get him? 'Who got me?' I ask Neil.

'It's *secret*,' he says with a roll of his eyes, 'that's the point.'

'Who'd you get?' Tommy asks me.

'Ping Pong. You?'

'Michelle.'

'What are you going to get her?'

'Pack of condoms? Did you hear about last night?'

'No.'

'She went home with a couple of footballers.'

'Get her a double adapter,' I joke.

'She's filthy,' he says primly.

'Get her soap.'

'You're in a good mood.'

'It's hysteria.'

'Who'd you get?' Nat asks when she turns up.

'Ping Pong.'

'I got Chef. Can you believe? What am I going to get him?'

'A personality,' Tommy suggests dryly.

'It's supposed to be secret,' Neil scolds us.

By the end of the shift I know who all of the floor staff have got. People swap scraps of paper at will but no one will take Ping Pong from me.

'Get him an English dictionary,' Harry says. He means to be cruel but it's actually not such a bad idea.

It's a good day. Frantic but nothing bad happens. After work Chef joins us for a drink.

'We're going to Sweet,' Nat tells me, lighting one of her hideous menthol cigarettes.

'No smoking in the restaurant,' Tommy scolds jokingly, mimicking Kevin, who went home a couple of hours ago. Nat gives him the finger.

'Is Sweet the pink one?' Chef asks.

'Yes, but no one invited you.'

'As long as it's not the fag one.'

'The *fag* one?' Tommy echoes.

'The fag one,' Chef repeats, 'the one with the bum-fuckers and muff-divers.'

'Don't be so disgusting,' I tell him.

'Your poor wife,' Tommy says with a pitying shake of his head, 'I bet she's hanging out for a little muff action. Maybe we should take *her* to Mars.'

'My wife can't complain.'

'Why not? Have you gaffa-taped her mouth shut?'

'So, you want to come?' Nat asks me again, ignoring Chef and Tommy.

'Uh . . .' I catch myself before I look over at Chef.

'I'll come,' he announces.

'Don't let that put you off,' Nat sighs.

'Get out. Molly loves me, don't you Moll?'

We walk to Sweet. There's a thunderstorm brewing and the air is hot and charged with electricity. I can smell the ozone. For a change I don't feel much like drinking. We settle into the plush pink banquettes and stay there for a few hours. I have two vodkas and that's it. Chef gets completely plastered. I watch him dance with Nat and Josie. He's not a very good dancer.

'Come on,' he urges me when he comes back to the table to drink another beer,

‘come dance.’

‘No, thanks.’

He doesn’t ask why not, or try to convince me. He just shrugs and heads back to the dance floor.

‘Let’s go somewhere else,’ Tommy says after a while, ‘this place is just too pink.’

We go to Chili Pepper, where Chef buys a Glad bag full of little red pills. He hands them out like Santa Claus. I hold mine in my palm, not sure I want to take it. I watch them all wash theirs down. I slip mine into an empty glass. I don’t want it tonight.

Sober, the club is hard to take. Loud, dark, chaotic. After an hour I’m sick of it.

‘I’m going to go home,’ I announce.

‘Don’t go!’

At the moment they love me, they love everyone.

‘Right, Molly’s sick of this place, let’s go somewhere else.’

We pour out of the club and start walking, trying to find somewhere else. I humour them, thinking I’ll slip away as soon as I can. I don’t want to pay the cover charge to get in somewhere else. I hang back. Soon they’re way ahead and I start looking for a taxi. I hear a grunt and look over. In the doorway of a closed CD shop, lit by the harsh orange streetlight, is Chef. And Josie. He’s paralytic, sprawled against the dark window of the music store, fumbling stupidly with the buttons of Josie’s jeans. She’s giggling. I feel sick. *Numb cunt*. I back away. He’s whispering in her ear. What’s he saying? Does it matter? Does it matter what any of them say? *NUMB CUNT*.

I go home, stone cold sober.

Another night out in the open. They'd spent one all too brief night in a barn. It was the only night Gienia had slept. Mostly they slumped by roadsides while the guards took turns tramping to the nearest farmhouse or village. Gienia didn't know whether they were still in Poland or not. She hadn't seen another road sign.

The snow was thin on the field. Damp greying haystacks dotted the frozen ground. Gienia wasn't going to spend another night on the rocky earth. She burrowed into a haystack.

'Gienia . . .' Ruth sighed, 'They'll shoot you.'

Gienia snorted. She didn't care. The hay would be warm. Ruth watched her clogs disappear into the speckled hay. She looked around. Other women were crawling into the stacks, or spreading the hay over the cold ground. There weren't any gunshots. Ruth shrugged and followed Gienia in.

Gienia pushed at the scratchy stalks, hollowing a cave for them. Their breath was already warming it. She slumped back against the springy walls. Her arms flopped heavily by her sides. Her breath rattled in her throat. She wasn't sure she would be able to leave the haystack come morning.

'Where's your blanket?' Ruth asked as she pulled the rough grey blankets from under her dress. Gienia took a moment to speak.

'Fell off,' she rasped with a shrug. 'While ago. Couldn't stop.' She blinked very slowly, her eyelids thin and purple-veined.

'Here,' Ruth offered, nudging Rachel's old blanket towards Gienia. Gienia looked at her blankly. Ruth sighed and covered her with the blanket. It felt heavy. She was so tired. It was hard to breathe, hard to keep her eyes open. Her legs were numb. Sometimes she wondered if they were still there.

As tired as she was Gienia couldn't sleep. Her heartbeat sputtered in her ears, fast and

uneven. Something hard was poking her between her shoulder blades. She tried to ignore it but it kept her awake. Wanting to cry from the effort it took to sit up, she turned and fussed with the hay. Ruth roused.

'What's wrong?'

Gienia didn't have the energy to answer her. Her hand closed on something round and hard. A rock. The haystack had rocks in it. This must be Germany. No decent Polish haystack would have rocks in it. She yanked the rock from the hay.

Ruth gasped.

There, in Gienia's hand, was a fat potato. She looked at it in amazement.

'Are there more?' Ruth struggled to her knees and began digging through the hay. Gienia ignored her, mesmerised by the potato. Its skin was silky and knobby. It smelt deliciously starchy.

'Look!' Ruth exclaimed, uncovering a whole bushel beneath them.

Gienia was barely listening. She took an enormous bite of her potato, the first potato. Milky white juice filled her mouth. The potato flesh was crisp and hard. She swallowed it barely chewed. It pushed uncomfortably against her throat as it went down. She didn't notice the tired tears running down her cheeks. Her walnut-sized stomach, empty and shriveled, cramped as the potato hit it. She didn't care. She finished the first potato and snatched up a second. Before she could finish it starchy bile and potato chunks rushed up her throat. She vomited, her abdominal muscles tearing with every heave. Exhausted, she collapsed on her side in the hay. There were potatoes all around. She lifted her shaking arm and gnawed on the ragged chunk left in her hand.

She had gorged. She had vomited. She was weak and insensible, bruised by her vegetable bed. Gienia floated, not quite asleep, adrift, unanchored. Her stomach gave the odd stubborn

twitch. There was someone in the dark with her. She thought it was Friedl.

'I'm glad I found you,' she tried to say. Her saliva still tasted of the arid potato juice. Friedl didn't answer. *I thought I lost you.* No words came out. Her voice was broken. She couldn't make it work. *It was so dark.* She kept a tight hold on the food, a potato in each hand. They were comforting in their roundness, their smoothness, their heaviness. *It was so dark.* She shivered. But it was alright. Because Friedl was there. There, in front of her. Gienia could hear her breathing . . . But it couldn't be Friedl. She'd lost her: she'd lost Friedl. No . . . Friedl wasn't lost. She was in the camp. She was somewhere in the camp. Gienia would find her.



Make me bitter. Count me among the almonds. Celan.

Paul Celan killed himself. Walked into the Seine and drowned. I guess he walked, I always pictured him walking, but he could just as easily have jumped. I picture him taking off his shoes, rolling the socks neatly, long toes curling over the lip of the river as he edged his way in. I like to think he walked because it's quieter. Just the soft lap of the water against him as he walked deeper, his coat lifting behind him like unfurling wings. It should be quiet. The great silence. The wordlessness of it, beyond language.

I know my vision of it is stupidly romantic. Misleadingly meaningful. The wrong meanings. I may be dumb but even I know I've got no right to rewrite his death. It's *his* death. But it's mine too, I carry it around with me, that image of him walking out, trailing damp wings, feet in the current. *That* Paul Celan is mine, even if he is a monstrosity, even if that does make me Frankenstein.

I sit up until dawn, staring at the pages of 'Death Fugue'. *Make me bitter.*

It's an old library book that I bought at a book sale for a dollar. The pages are yellow and the cover is blue, not cloth but synthetic and shiny, resisting the oil from my fingers.

'Where is he?' Lizzie's in the doorway. She always seems to be in my doorway. I blink. All of a sudden I see her clearly. Her waist has thickened, not just a crinkle of extra flesh but a hard bulge. 'Your chef,' she says, 'where is he?'

'He's not my chef.'

She purses her lips, I can almost see her thoughts: *How far can I push her?* Not far, Liz, I'll fall.

'He had other places to go,' I say shortly.

'Want some breakfast?'

'We're out of bread.'

'We have yogurt.'

I feel an overwhelming desire to get out of the house. 'I'll go get bread,' I announce, getting off the bed and letting Celan fall.

'You don't need to . . .'

'I do. I need to get bread.'

I'm still in yesterday's work shirt but I don't care. I walk to the supermarket and load up a red plastic basket with bread. White bread, wholemeal, soy and linseed, Wonder bread. So much bread I'll never run out.

'Molly?'

It's Dan. He's alone, dressed in the Bowie t-shirt I bought him. The *Reality* tour. He looks shorter than I remember, wide shouldered, top-heavy. He looks like a stranger.

I try to gather my thoughts. 'Hi.'

'Your mum said you lived around here.'

'Yeah.' I pull my basket of bread closer, for comfort.

'How are you?'

'Fine.' How else do you answer that question? The answer is assumed. You say 'fine'. You don't say you're falling apart, nobody wants you, the world doesn't make sense, dead men drown in your dreams. You say 'fine'. Because nobody cares.

'I'm surprised you didn't stay in Norwood, I thought you liked that house.'

It wasn't the *house*, Dan. It was the situation. I liked the situation. I liked it just *fine*. Change the situation and what have you got? An empty house with a scary outdoor loo.

I don't say anything, I just shrug.

'Well, it was good seeing you,' he says awkwardly, backing off.

'I didn't love Dan,' I announce to Lizzie as I dump the loaves of bread on the table.

'What?'

'I didn't love Dan.' I grab a sheet of paper and a black texta and write '*Make me bitter. Count me among the almonds*' in big, firm letters. I take the sheet into my bedroom and Blu-Tack it right in the middle of my Gienia collage. I can feel Lizzie's presence at my back. I can feel her concern. 'He was convenient,' I say softly. 'He had a beige sweater. I found that very attractive.'

'Molly?' Lizzie sounds worried.

'I have to go to work,' I say abruptly.

'Maybe you should call in sick.'

'I can't.' I look at Lizzie desperately. Doesn't she understand that I can't? No. She doesn't understand, I decide, taking in her compact strength, her flexibility, her *bend*. Compared to her I'm a shade. I look back at my collage. Compared to her I'm a shade.

You don't understand, I think hopelessly, I'm not Gienia. Lizzie's Gienia. If I'm anyone I'm Friedl. Clingy, frightened, clueless Friedl. The girl who'd drown, the girl who'd be overrun, the girl who'd give up.



It was a hot day. The earth had been baked dry and had split open. For the second week in a row there was no work. Gienia and Friedl sat with their backs to the barracks wall, barely covered by the sliver of shadow from the roof. Gienia was thirsty and torpid. She was contemplating the walk to the tap. It would be a fight to claw her way through the desperate women and fix her mouth to the rusty spout. And she'd be pushed away before she'd had her fill. She'd be as dry as she was before. It would be a couple more hours before she was thirsty enough to bother.

With a grunt Friedl got to her feet. Gienia was surprised: Friedl usually hung back, watching the tap longingly.

But Friedl didn't go to the tap.

She didn't say anything. She was silhouetted against the blazing white sky. Her shoulder blades jutted through her dress like the nubs of malformed wings. Friedl the Angel, Gienia thought with a snort. Friedl shuffled slowly across the narrow strip of dust. The ground must have burned her feet. Her shoes had been stolen at the beginning of summer; she'd taken them off while she slept and in the morning they were gone. Gienia didn't know how they'd find her more by winter. She'd never make it through without shoes.

Friedl stopped at the fence and stood swaying, gazing through the wires. She was going daft, Gienia thought.

'You'll burn in that sun,' she called to her sister-in-law. Friedl ignored her.

'Don't complain to me tonight.'

With a sudden jerk, like a cheap marionette, Friedl's arms rose and she gripped the fence.

There was a spit and pop and a choked gargle. Friedl slumped.

'Friedl!' Gienia tried to get to her feet. Her head spun. The sun seemed brighter, the strip of dirt between her and Friedl wider.

She heard a shriek and turned to see Mad Mania jogging towards them. Her face was red from the heat. Her enormous bosom heaved with every step.

'Lumpen!' she shrieked, 'Blöde lumpen!'

She staggered to a sweating halt, looking furiously at Friedl's body.

'It's a *sin!*' she cried, turning to stare at the watching women with an expression of rage. 'A mortal sin! This . . . this . . . *anima!* has committed an act against God!' With a sudden bellow Mania kicked the corpse in the stomach. There was a fleshy thud and Friedl's body rolled over. Gienia could now see her face. Her eyes were wide open.

'You try this, any of you,' Mad Mania shrieked, 'and I will beat your fucking brains out! So help me God!'

She kicked Friedl twice more, once in the back and once in the head. The body flopped like a rag doll. Still raging, Mania left, slapping the odd bystander as she passed.

Gienia staggered forward. Her legs were tired. She knelt next to Friedl. The palms of the girl's hands were burned. Gienia tried to breathe. She touched Friedl's cheek. It was hot. Her pale skin was freckled. Old sunburn peeled on her arms, flakes of skin rolling into dunes above the freckles. Gienia ran her finger over them, feeling the skin come away.

'Stirb nicht,' she said softly, her voice thin, 'don't die.'

She couldn't breathe. There was a blanket in her lungs. She looked at the wire. It was a pitiless slender grey. She looked around, helplessly. The mud was splintered and leached of

colour. The barracks were somnolent in the glowering heat. The veil lifted from Gienia's eyes. The women squatting in the shadows were horrors: sacks of bone, blue veins protruding like medical tubes, eyes bleak and predatory. The ridiculous dresses of tulle and soiled silk, the bleached convict stripes . . . Gienia's stomach revolted. She retched. Her precious coffee surged up her throat and spilled onto the scorched earth. The hot dirt sucked it up and left no trace of moisture.

Gienia struggled, squeezing her eyes shut, pushing down the horror. The blanket began to unravel. She gasped, determined, drawing the blazing air into her lungs. She could do it. She opened her eyes and clenched her jaw. She reached out, her hand pausing an inch from Friedl's face. Her fingers trembled. Clenching, until her teeth cracked, Gienia forced herself to close Friedl's eyes. Then she gently unlooped Friedl's jacket from her waist. It was hot now but there would be another winter. The jacket would be useful.

◦ ○ ◦

'Josie and Chef!' Tommy announces to everyone in the bar. He's shaking with the excitement of having such huge gossip.

'What about them?' Kevin asks, looking up from the bookings book.

'Josie. And. Chef.'

'What?' Neil gasps.

Tommy makes an obscene gesture with his hands.

'No!' Hanna claps a hand to her mouth in shock. She looks appalled.

'He's married,' Kevin says dismissively.

'So what?' Tommy replies and I know everyone's thinking of Constance. I

certainly am.

‘Morning!’ Josie sails in the front door and we all fall silent. ‘What?’ She stops dead at the sight of all of us staring at her.

‘How could you?’ Neil asks in dramatic tones. ‘Chef!’ He says ‘Chef’ as though he’s accusing her of necrophilia. Or paedophilia. Or some other disgusting phelia.

‘What about him?’ she says coyly.

‘How big is his dick?’ Tommy calls out.

‘I’m not paying you to stand around and talk!’ Kevin snaps. I leave the bar.

It’s the longest day of my life. I avoid Chef’s eye. He’s hungover and snarls at all of us.

I feel paranoid: pursued, hunted. She’s just at the corner of my eye, a grey shape, hungry. But when I turn there’s only emptiness.

We’re fully booked. Not only with the Christmas crowd but with university graduates and their families, straight from the ceremonies.

‘My granddaughter,’ one old grandpa says proudly, ‘got her Masters today. Me, I didn’t even finish high school and she’s got her Masters.’

‘Congratulations,’ I try to dimple but I think I’m grimacing instead.

‘Are you a student?’ the grandpa asks me.

‘I used to be.’

‘What did you study?’

Which one should I tell him about? The Arts degree I quit? The Nursing degree I quit? The dodgy correspondence course in Naturopathy I quit? ‘Arts,’ I say.

I clear their table and head back to the kitchen.

She’s standing by the bin and this time there’s nothing insubstantial, nothing

evanescent about her. She's flesh and bone. She's dressed in her soiled old dress and pyjama bottoms, one foot is bare and black, frostbitten, even in this searing December heat; she's staring down into the bin at the duck bones, the rocket salad, the gnocchi, the passionfruit tart. I resist the impulse to plunge my hands into the leftover food, to wrap it up in an Alfoil swan and give it to her, an offering: scraps for forgiveness. *You're not here*, I say silently, tearing my gaze away, looking down into the bin as I scrape off the plates, adding to the limp, gnawed, discarded food. Resolutely I turn my back on her and return to the graduation celebrations.

As he's leaving the proud grandpa presses a twenty into my palm and closes my hand, wrapping his hands around mine. 'It's the key,' he says.

'Pardon?' My dimples falter.

'Study. It's the key.'

'Molly!' Chef calls after me as I grab my bag at the end of the night and head for the door. I ignore him and keep going. I don't need it.

I'm glad Lizzie's still up when I get home. 'Want a pizza?' I ask.

'Okay.'

'Anything specific?'

'Whatever you want.'

I get two large pizzas, one with everything, one with just mushrooms. While we're waiting I open my mail – phone bills, junk mail and one cheap and flimsy Christmas card. On the front is a photo of a greyhound wearing reindeer antlers. It's from my father; the message inside is brief – just 'Dear Molly' and 'Love Dad'. The only Christmas greeting is the one provided by the card company. There's no return address and I realise I have no way of contacting him. Should I ever want to.

'I've been wanting to talk to you,' Lizzie says when I collapse on the couch with my Diet Coke. 'It's been hard to catch you without him.'

'Him who?'

She rolls her eyes and reaches for a folded newspaper. 'Look at this.'

It's the real estate section. There are a few houses circled. 'What is it?'

'I've got my place on the market.'

'Your place in Sydney?'

'No, my place on the moon.'

'Good to see motherhood hasn't softened you.'

'I was wondering if you'd want to live with me.'

'What?'

'If I buy a house here, will you rent a room?'

'Can I leave the room?' I ask suspiciously. 'Use the living room? The garden?'

'Don't be stupid, of course you can.'

'Why? Do you need the money?'

'It will help,' she sighs, 'but I won't *need* it. I should be able to get a decent place and have money to spare.'

'What will you do for a job?'

'Freelance, I think. Although I might need something to get me out of the house, so I don't get cabin fever.'

'Why do you want to live with me?' I'm seriously baffled.

'I don't want to live alone.'

'Oh.'

'And you're family. I don't have to be . . . well, *anything* with you.'

'Thanks.'

'You know what I mean. I can be cranky around you. I can lose my temper. And, I think I'm going to need you.'

I glance at her little bulge. It looks like a pot belly. Living with Lizzie and the kid. A baby. Screaming, vomiting, smelling, screaming, more screaming. Is that what I want? What do I want?

'Think about it anyway,' Lizzie says.

'Yeah, okay. But only if you come to Christmas.'

'Don't you start.'

'Come on, Liz, don't you dare leave me alone with them on Christmas Day. Your alco Aunt Mary, Nanna Faye, Mum and Dennis' neighbours,' I groan. 'Please don't put me through that.'

'I can't,' she snaps.

'Sure, you can. You put on your expensive shoes, paint on a smile and eat turkey. It's easy. People even give you presents.'

'You don't understand.'

'Trust me, sister,' I say as the pizza man knocks on the front door, 'if anyone understands, it's me.'

We eat every single slice of pizza. I feel like a balloon. We watch the carols on TV and I regret the fact I haven't got a Christmas tree. Not even a five-inch fake one from Cheap as Chips.

'Hey,' I say, 'let's go see the Brewery lights.'

'They close at midnight,' Lizzie tells me.

'Oh.' It's half past.

'We can go tomorrow night.'

‘Okay.’

After we’ve eaten Lizzie puts on a video. It’s *Dr Phil*.

‘You *taped* it?’ I ask incredulously.

‘It clashed with the midday movie,’ she replies defensively.

‘You have to get a life.’

Dr Phil is talking to the Wives of Husbands Who Cheat. ‘Trust means knowing you can handle whatever happens,’ he tells a woman in a pink suit; she has mascara tracks running all the way to her chin. I snort and look at my flimsy Christmas card. Lizzie shushes me. Later he says, ‘Don’t invest more than you can afford to lose,’ and I look at the card again. The greyhound stares back at me. I lay it face down and decide to brush my teeth, feeling suddenly, heavily, indescribably sad.

‘Can I borrow another book?’ Lizzie calls while I’m in the bathroom. ‘I finished Olga Lengyel.’

‘You shouldn’t read that stuff while you’re pregnant,’ I call back.

‘Why not?’

‘It might mess up your hormones.’

When I go into my bedroom Lizzie’s standing by the side of my bed, looking at the photocopies above the headboard.

‘Who was she?’ Lizzie asks, reaching out to brush her fingertips over the peasant girl’s round and pretty face. She traces the outline of the pouffy headscarf, which I think of as pale green, but which could have been any colour.

‘I don’t know,’ I say, feeling the words stretching my throat – they’re hard to say.

‘Just some girl.’

Not Gienia. I don’t know her name, or what her favourite food was, or even where she came from. She’s a Pole, she’s a Jew, she’s a face without a name. I feel it like a

sickness in my gut, like grief. I don't want to let go of her. She's my Eve, I'm her God. I made her, I made her suffer; I don't want to turn my back on her, to forget her. Somehow that seems even worse than sending her to the camps, than marching her across Germany, than leaving her dying in the dirt. *I'm here*, I say to her silently, as she starves, as she suffers, as she dies. *I'm still here*. I am Kali, creating with one hand, destroying with the other.

But if I walk away from her . . .

I don't know what will happen if I walk away.

◦ ○ ◦

The weight of the potatoes steadied Gienia. She dropped them through the lining of her coat, where they rolled against her bowl and spoon, thudding against each other reassuringly as she walked. They balanced her; they kept her from falling.

At dusk they marched along a violet-shadowed dirt track to a barn. A tired-looking woman, with a thin-faced baby on her hip, stood on the steps of the farmhouse, watching them shuffle into her barn. The well-oiled wooden doors were shut and latched behind them. Gienia stumbled to the far corner, beneath the hayloft. She sat with a weary grunt, like an old woman. She fumbled with her coat, trying to work a potato up towards the hole. It emerged, luminescent and white in the gloom. She curled into a ball against the rough plank wall and gnawed on her secret treasure.

Swallowing the last hunk Gienia felt vaguely better. She watched the rustling women as they sprawled around the barn. Only half who had left Birkenau remained and many were *musselmann*.

Nearby lay the little Czech. She was as good as dead. She lay unblinking in the mud, her dress rucked up around her legs. Her paper-thin skin clung to the bone and sinew of her thighs. Gienia's old brown boots looked enormous on the Czech's feet. Without laces the cracked tongues gaped.

Gienia inched forward, sliding on her buttocks, glancing around furtively. No one was watching. The Czech's face was grey and sunken, her skull clearly defined through the sagging skin. She held her hands up by her collarbone, like a palsied child. The fingers twitched. Gienia looked into her eyes. The whites were stained yellow and were hazy with unnatural dementia. Gienia tore her gaze away and reached for the boots. Her fingers were swollen and stiff. She clumsily eased the boots off the Czech's bony feet. Her feet were covered in suppurating sores; the stench of pus and rot rose. It didn't bother Gienia: hers were too. Clenching her teeth against the pain, Gienia took off her clogs and put them on the Czech. The woman jerked. A strangled moan sounded deep in her throat. Her breath rustled like newspaper. Her gaze wandered from Gienia to the cobwebs drifting lazily from the rafters above. Her palsied hands jerked weakly. Gienia put the boots on. The effort left her exhausted. She sat for a moment to regain her breath. Then she left the little Czech alone.

The next morning there was no sign of the woman or baby. The farmhouse was dark. The dead were hefted into the back of the trucks. The women were marched to a rural train station. The snow was melting; rotting brown grass showed by the roadside. There was a neatly painted hut by the tracks. The stationmaster, an old man with a crutch, shared a smoke with the driver and watched blankly as the women shuffled into view. The guards herded them down the platform and into the waiting transport. Gienia found herself in an open car. It was black with coal dust.

Friedl, stay close. Her tongue was too swollen to form the words but they echoed clearly in her head. She could see Friedl from the corner of her eye, like a wraith, a phantom. Poor Friedl.

So thin, so tired.

Gienia was sandwiched in the middle of the car, poked by bony hipbones and elbows. The sky above seemed very distant, a thin, cold silver-blue, devoid of clouds. A brisk wind snapped at the rim of the car. Gienia ducked her head, in an attempt to avoid the biting wind, and let herself rock and sway with the train.

Gienia? She heard Friedl's voice in her head, rising in its usual whine. *Where are we going, Gienia? West. But Mamele went East . . . East? With Vład? They're home with Vład? Who's Vład? I want Mamele.* I know, Friedl, me too.

Gienia? It was her Mamme. Sick, like she had been in those last days, burning with fever, punctuating each sentence with a hacking cough. Gienia blinked. Her vision was hazy. *Gienia, what happened to Vitka? Where's your sister?* I don't know, Mamme. *I've been calling her . . .*

She's with Valentin. Vład. Vład was here too, a dark shape in the corner of the car.

The Russian? Mamme sounded faint, confused. The rails screeched beneath and she was gone.

He's a good man, Vład called after her, into the wind.

How do you know? Gienia snapped.

Gienia? Schlomo grabbed her arm. Leave me be, she moaned and twisted, pushing at the weight of bodies. *Gienia?* His breath was hot in her ear. It wasn't Schlomo. It was someone else. Someone who smelled sour, whose breath hissed through his teeth. The Eel.

Leave me be!

Gienia? The grip softened and grew warmer; the breath in her ear was less a hiss and more a sigh. Arms were wrapping around her. Her face was drawn to a broad chest. She closed her eyes.

I'm here. It was a nightmare, just a nightmare.

No, Elja, there's something I have to tell you . . .

Shhh, sleep.

When she woke, only Friedl remained, always just out of sight, just out of grasp. Gienia tumbled from the car, pushing off the weight of the woman beside her, who had died with her face pressed to Gienia's shoulder.

A shambling, ragged crew stumbled into the camp, the last camp. It was a disorganised, squalid mess. Dying scarecrows, bones held together by rotting striped clothes, sat in the melting snow and watched the women enter. Gienia reached for Friedl.

Where are we?

The gates shut behind them with a clash and rattle. The guards, the old guards from Birkenau, travel-stained and dark-eyed, lined them up and snapped at them in slurred German. Gienia understood one word. *Delousing*. She clenched her hands around her coat. She would lose her potatoes.

But, as with all things in the camps, the delousing was a slow business. They stood outside in the slush for a day and half, waiting their turn in the barracks. Gienia surreptitiously worried a potato up to the hole in the lining of her coat. She picked off flecks with her fingernail and lifted them cautiously to her mouth. She tried to look like she was wiping her running nose. She watched the scarecrows line up for roll call and slump off to their barracks afterwards. She sniffed the air, trying to catch a hint of their food, but smelled nothing. No sour cabbage, no tinny soup, no dry bread smelling of wood shavings.

Deloused – her head shaved again, her privates itching with the powder, her coat gone – Gienia entered her new barracks. Eyes gleamed in the dim bunks. Wet, like the eyes of the corpse rats at Birkenau. They sized up the knot of new women. Gienia moved carefully down the row,

looking for Friedl. *Friedl's not here.* Gienia closed her ears. She was here. Somewhere.

Friedl's dead. No.



When I wake up she's back – sitting at my desk, reading my jagged black scrawl. The lines of her shoulders are sharp, all bone and no flesh. There is a weeping sore on the back of her head.

'What do you want?' I ask, afraid of the answer.

'Why did you kill my father?'

It's the last thing I expect her to say and I fumble for an answer. Her father isn't real to me, he's unimportant, not part of the story but when she turns to me and I see the grief in the shadows of her eyes I know he's as real to her as she is to me.

'I'm sorry,' I say feebly but it's not enough and she turns away, back to the pages on the desk. I watch as she reads and I feel judged.

'It doesn't have an ending yet,' I say. Her eyebrows lift and the words she doesn't say hang between us: *We all know how it ends.*

When she has turned the last page she sighs and the sound is like a cold wind. Her bones creak as she rises. 'What do you want from me?' she asks, her voice as cold as her sigh.

There are things I have to decide. I look at the Christmas card from Dad, at the collage of Gienia, at the well-thumbed pages. I think of the old granddad who told me study was the key. *What do I want?*

I want to be something other than *this*. I want to be far away from him, far from the

sweat and the sore feet and the abuse. Far from loving a man who calls me a cunt.

As bad as rape, she'd said.

'Lizzie!' I barge into the bathroom, where she's showering. 'I'll live with you!' I bellow over the sound of the water. I leave before she can answer.

It's Christmas Eve. We're only open for lunch but we're full to the rafters so it feels almost like a double shift. Everyone's in a good mood, because we're about to get three and a half days off. Neil puts his Destiny's Child CD on the player while we set up. I hate those chick bands but I find myself bopping along. *It's nearly over.* The words are loud in my head. It's nearly over. And won't that be fine.

'Looking good this morning, Moll,' Harry calls to me from the kitchen. I grin and give him the finger.

'I've got somewhere you could stick that,' he suggests.

'Leave it,' Chef orders shortly, not looking up from his knife.

'Ah, Molly loves it, don'tcha, Moll?'

'Live for it, Harry.'

'Look at her, Chefie,' Harry says, resting his chin on his hand, 'she's begging for it.'

'Get back to work.'

'Thought you'd be a bit happier . . . since, you know,' he nudges Chef as Josie walks past. Chef scowls.

'Merry Christmas!' The voice from the front door stops us dead.

There's a woman, tanned, vigorous, lifting her sunglasses to reveal snapping blue eyes.

'Constance!'

'Alive and kicking!' Her smile is predatory. 'Miss me?'

None of us can speak, we're beyond shock. She's the ghost of Christmases past, present, future; as unexpected as death.

She strides in like an invader, her footsteps loud. She has so much presence I can almost feel the air rippling, like water disturbed. 'Chef,' she says by way of greeting.

'Good to have you back, boss.'

'I'm sure. Where's Kevin?'

'Around. Somewhere.'

'Go get him, would you Molly?' I jump when she addresses me.

'Uh-huh.' I can't tear my eyes from her as I leave. I wonder where Schyler is. I wonder what Kevin will say. I wonder if he'll faint.

'Kevin!' I check the office, the cold stores, the dry stores, the alley, the staff room. I don't see him anywhere. I pause in the staff room, absently looking at the scattered Kris Kringle presents, and wonder where he got to. There's only the staff lock left but the lock says 'vacant'. On a whim I open the door anyway.

'Fuck!' I trip over my feet as I back away, reeling. Kevin's against the wall, hands white knuckled, clutching the sink behind him. On his knees, tousled dark head bobbing up and down, is Adrian. Adrian. Giving Kevin (Kevin!) a blow job.

'Christ!' Kevin jerks like he's been electrocuted and pushes Adrian away. I get a brief glimpse of his curved swollen cock, pink and trembling, before he turns to the wall, gasping. 'Molly! Molly!'

I can't move. I can't look away. 'Constance,' I say weakly.

'Molly!' he keeps gasping. 'Molly! Molly!'

With tremendous poise, Adrian gets to his feet and wipes his mouth. He looks back and forth between me and Kevin. Raising an eyebrow at me he shrugs, straightens his tie and leaves the staff room.

‘Constance,’ I repeat.

‘Molly! Molly!’ I think Kevin’s crying.

‘I know my name!’ I say sharply. I hear his zipper. His face is still pressed close to the white tile. There’s silence except for the whirr of the exhaust fan. ‘Tommy’s going to kill you,’ I breathe. ‘I need to sit down.’ I slide down onto the battered couch. The moments pull out slowly, breathlessly.

‘Molly.’

‘Kevin.’

I watch as he straightens. He wipes his face and turns but he can’t look me in the eye.

‘What did you want?’ he asks, trying to sound calm but his voice is unsteady.

‘Constance.’

‘What about her?’ He clears his throat, obviously thinking I’m still talking about him and Adrian.

‘She’s here.’

‘What?’

‘Constance. She’s here.’

His face turns white. He leaves so fast I can almost see a motion blur; I hear his prissy loafers clattering on the stairs.

‘Nothing makes sense,’ I tell the scattered presents, the quiet air conditioner, the empty chairs. ‘People are crazy.’

By the time I get downstairs Constance and Kevin are closeted in the office.

‘Poor Kevin,’ Hanna sighs, leaning her cheek against Adrian’s arm as we all strain to hear what they’re saying. ‘Imagine being married to her.’

‘I like her,’ I say sharply.

‘Get back to work, you lot,’ Chef calls from the kitchen and we scatter like pigeons.

Lunch is surreal. My tables are all big, full of loud, hungry people who get raucous and drunk and happier by the minute. Constance cruises through the room, keeping up the momentum, smoothing the waters, taking charge. Kevin's bar bitch; he's pale and quiet and he can't tear his eyes from his wife. Near the end of service, when desserts are winding down and everyone's sitting on coffee and the dregs of their wine, Chef puts up an enormous clay platter of cheese and fruit. Great slabs of Jindie brie, Roaring Forties blue, Woodside goats curd and three different kinds of aged cheddar.

'Molly!' he calls me over from where I'm polishing cutlery.

'What?'

'Merry Christmas.'

'I can't eat all that Chef.'

'Ha ha,' he looks awkward, almost embarrassed, 'for everyone.'

'Who's paying for it?' I sneak a glance at Constance.

'Management,' he grins. I grin back.

'That is so sweet,' Josie says, with a sickeningly moony smile, when I deposit the cheese in the bar.

'Shame there's no wine to go with it,' Tommy sighs, glancing sideways at Kevin. Kevin just smears some blue cheese on an apple slice and ignores him.

My table of eight is the last to leave. I've closed the bar and taken away their glasses but they're happy reclining in the sun. We set the restaurant around them and get everything cleaned up. The kitchen boys mill around with their stubbies, waiting to do the Kris Kringle exchange.

Constance knocks everyone off except me. They head out to the alley to drink and wait. Constance and I polish glasses.

'Can't believe you're still here,' Constance says.

'You know me, I'm part of the furniture.'

'You're too smart for this, Moll. For a smart girl it's a temporary thing, waiting.'

Waiting. The word hangs in the air. The end is implied, I think, woven into those seven little letters. That's the whole point of waiting, isn't it? Something happens at the end.

Constance nods towards my table. They're gesturing for me. I trot over. 'We'll have the bill,' they say, 'and can you call us a taxi?'

You're a taxi. 'Sure.'

'Merry Christmas,' I say as they leave. When I collect the bill folder I find they've left me a two hundred dollar tip.

'Keep it,' Constance says when I try to hand it over, so the kitchen boys can get their share. 'Merry Christmas.'

'Thanks, Connie.'

'That's okay, pet.'

'How was Bali?'

'Unbelievable,' she smiles, 'but there's no place like home.'

Neil plays Santa. He wears one of the green elf hats leftover from the paper people's function. Josie plops herself in Chef's lap.

Not to be outdone, Hanna plops herself in Adrian's lap.

'Hussy,' Tommy hisses. Kevin looks away. I wonder if he's going to sit in Connie's lap. It seems to be the fashion.

'I've got somewhere for you to sit,' Harry tells me, patting his crotch.

'Too soft for me,' I say regretfully. Chef laughs.

'Thanks, Tommy!' Michelle calls after she's unwrapped her present. It's a massive

fluorescent yellow dildo.

'It's supposed to be secret!' Neil shrieks.

'Sorry,' Michelle giggles, 'Thanks, Santa!'

'I figured she could please herself for a change,' Tommy tells me as he sips his wine, 'instead of putting out for arseholes.'

'Molly!' The present Neil gives me weighs a ton.

'Who gave me the brick?' I shout.

'Don't tell!' Neil bellows, flapping his hands frantically.

I tear the silver paper . . . and find a giant book. Stephanie Alexander's *Cook's Companion*, the most comprehensive cookbook in the known universe.

'Who gave her that!' Neil complains. 'There was a \$15 limit!'

I know who gave it to me. There's a Post It note on the cover: 'Look up toast,' it says. I look over at Chef. He's watching me. He looks tired. I raise my wine glass to him – I guess it's the best he's got to give me.

'Oh for fuck's sake!' Neil snaps as Ping Pong unwraps his present. It's the box set of all the Harry Potter novels, in hard cover. Cost me over \$200. Ping Pong runs his hands over the spines and then looks around the circle of people wonderingly. Neil pouts at his bottle of massage oil. Whoever gave it to him left the price tag on: \$5.95.

I call Lizzie and ask her to meet me in town so we can do her Christmas shopping. I wait in the car park. Chef wanders out, bag thrown over his shoulder.

'Off to the airport?' I ask.

'Yeah.' He sits down beside me on the low wall. 'Just called a taxi.'

'Josie not driving you?'

'What are you, mental? Did you see how much she drank?'

We watch as Kevin and Constance leave the restaurant, locking the door behind them.

‘Shock, that,’ Chef says.

‘Yeah.’ I haven’t told anyone about this morning. There’s a lot I don’t say, won’t ever say. I’ve got my own flexibility, my own *bend*.

‘What are you getting Carla for Christmas?’ I ask Chef as Kevin and Constance climb into Kevin’s Volvo. Constance is in the driver’s seat.

‘Me,’ he sighs.

‘Good for her.’ I get off the wall as Lizzie pulls up in my hatchback. I bend over and kiss him on the cheek. ‘Merry Christmas.’

◦ ○ ◦

The train hissed as it settled at the station. People stood and fussed with baggage and children.

‘Yaacov?’ Gienia nudged his leg with her foot. He was impossible to wake. Eventually she grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him.

‘Eh?’ He roused, rubbing his face and sitting up straighter.

‘We’re here, Cousin, in Warsaw.’

‘Already?’ Yaacov ran his palms over his clothes. ‘Well, then, best be getting off.’ He grunted as he stood. ‘Old,’ he mumbled under his breath.

‘Gienia?’ Miriam touched her arm lightly, moving closer, ‘I’m nervous.’

‘Me too.’

The platform was crowded. Electric light blazed. The noise of people hissed like the sea in a shell.

'Cousin? Our trunks?' Gienia called as Yaacov wandered off.

'The boys will get them.'

The boys. Her stomach clenched. Unconsciously she reached for Miriam.

'Look at the clothes,' Miriam whispered. There were women in high heels and calf-length skirts. Lipstick, red and pink and bronze, shone on their lips and vivid pink colour dusted their cheeks. Gienia's hand rose to her own flushed cheeks, then moved to the knot of her kerchief. It was her best, but it was still only simple cloth.

'Yaacov!'

Cousin Yaacov's head darted from side to side as he searched for the origin of the cry.

'Yaacov!' A stout woman in a dusky pink dress barreled across the platform towards them.

Miriam's fingers tightened around Gienia's. The woman hurled herself at Yaacov, squashing the enormous cloth rose pinned to her breast.

'Brother, brother!' she said as she rocked in his arms. 'You're so thin,' she scolded.

Thin! Gienia coughed to hide her giggle.

'Doesn't that woman feed you? Don't worry,' she continued, not waiting for his reply, 'I have dinner waiting at home. You'll not starve in my house. Where are the girls?' She turned abruptly and focused on Gienia and Miriam. Gienia forced a smile even though her stomach was churning.

'Ah!' Halina Ajzen exclaimed, trotting towards them with outstretched arms. She embraced both of them at once. 'Which one's which?' She stood back and looked them over.

'Let me, let me,' Yaacov intervened, taking his sister's arm. 'Halina this is Miriam Cybulski.'

'Ah!' Halina embraced Miriam again. 'So wonderful to have you with us! So, so wonderful! Your father!' Halina took Miriam's face in her short, stubby hands, '*Such* a man the Rav Cybulski! Such a man!'

A dank, Miriam stammered.

'And you must be Gienia!' Halina turned, her hand going to her bosom. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkled.

'Yes, Froy Ajzen.'

'Froy! Mamele, darling girl, call me Mamele. I was terribly sorry to hear about your parents.'

'Thank you.'

'Good, good people.'

'Yes.'

Mamele Halina patted her on the cheek. Her eyes strayed briefly to Gienia's kerchief.

'Mamele?'

Gienia almost jumped out of her skin at the sound of the man's voice. Her gaze flew over Halina's shoulder to see him emerging from the crowd. He had a square, solemn face with firm lips and the shadow of a cleft in his chin. Gienia's heart tripped in her chest. He was solidly built, with broad powerful shoulders and a thick neck. She was relieved to see how attractive he was. She exchanged a glance with Miriam.

'Elja, darling!'

Elja! He was hers! The blood roared in Gienia's ears.

'Uncle Yaacov,' Elja reached over and shook his uncle's hand. 'Did you have a good journey?'

'Not so bad, not so bad.'

Elja's eyes shifted to her and she looked away, blushing.

'Darling, this is Gienia Zbroik.' Halina brushed his arm lovingly.

'Gienia?' Gienia thought she detected relief in his voice. He reached out and took her hand. His fingers were large and strong. She hoped her palm wasn't too sweaty.

'It's a pleasure to meet you.'

She couldn't speak.

'And Miriam?' Elja released her hand and turned politely to Miriam. 'I'm sorry my brother isn't here to meet you.'

'He's been detained,' Halina interrupted sharply.

'Oh.' Miriam's face sagged with disappointment.

'He may be able to join us at the house later,' Elja consoled her, 'or you'll meet him tomorrow.'

'He has his own apartment,' Halina said with a dismissive wave of her hand. 'It's in frightful need of a woman's touch.'

'He's very eager to meet you,' Elja told Miriam reassuringly, soft enough so his mother couldn't hear.

Gienia couldn't tear her eyes from Elja as he hefted her trunk. He managed it far more easily than Vład had. The muscles in his back and shoulders bunched beneath his tight brown jacket. She said a quick prayer of thanks and followed him out to the street.



Beginnings are important but no more so than endings, I think as I peel the pictures from my wall. I remove the Blu-Tack carefully and stick it onto the blue ball on my headboard. In five minutes it will be Christmas.

I've put Dad's card on my bedside table. A bruised, little-girl part of me feels sad looking at it and wishes he'd call but another, wiser part is glad that he doesn't. I don't have enough energy left for him. Sometimes you wish people were dead because it would be easier but sometimes you have to grow up and deal with the fact that they don't want you. It can take a while.

My wrapping is done, Lizzie has fallen asleep watching *Meet Me In St Louis*, the fish are fed and drifting happily in their piscine sleep and I've put a beer out for Santa, just on the off-chance . . .

I have a cunning plan to get Lizzie to come to Christmas: I'm going to use force. I'm not facing the rellies alone, that's for sure. Besides, she really does want to come. I know her well enough to know that. And I saw her hide a book-shaped present in the pile – I'll bet anything it's a thesaurus and I'll bet it'll be the best Christmas present Dennis has ever unwrapped, just because she gave it to him.

The pages lie across my bed like snow. I cross to my desk, where there is a new cream-coloured document wallet. Carefully, one by one (flake by flake), I slide the drift of photocopies into the wallet. Right at the front, snug, not forgotten, the thin page: Gienia. I put the wallet next to the pile of pages, where the light falls across them, through the fish tank, casting ripples on their creamy skin.

The dead will not rehabilitate us. Tadeuz Różewicz.

I'm not sure what I'll do with the manuscript. I'm still not sure what it all means – if it means anything at all – but I can't bring myself to throw it away. Not when the feeling of her is so strong and I can still smell traces of that strange chemical smell.



With a grunt he stood, lifting her. She rose like a bird taking flight. Effortless. She had no sense of weight. His arm was like iron against her back. Strong enough to lift the world. He kept crying. His adam's apple bobbed and he made a small gulping noise. *Don't cry, Elja*, she

wanted to say, but the words melted away before she could say them. She let her head fall back and watched the world sideways. The weave of his green uniform was rough on her cheek. Behind, in the alley, Elena the Greek lay in shadow. Beyond, at the very end of the long, dim tunnel, Gienia saw a slight figure. *Friedl*. Gienia watched as she was swallowed by distance, then closed her eyes and gave herself up to flight.

◦ ○ ◦

There doesn't have to be order, it's not life. Her death came first but it doesn't have to come last. There are better ways to end.

◦ ○ ◦

Yom Kippur, 1939: the Day of Atonement. *Blitzkrieg*. The sky swarmed with planes. The city didn't fall, it exploded; the skyline was a jagged range of broken homes.

It was the day before Elja left. They walked side by side – he carried a shovel, she carried a bucket. There was a knot of people at the end of the street; someone had hung a flag from the dead electrical wires above. The Polish Eagle hung limp in the airless heat. Elja and Gienia joined the group: digging trenches, building barricades against the tanks. Gienia carted rubble until her back ached and her hands were raw.

At first she thought she was about to faint. White spots danced before her eyes. No, not spots . . . *snow*. The bucket fell from her hands. From out of a hot September sky snow was falling. Gently at first, dancing and twirling. It made her think, senselessly, madly, of Hanukah. The word 'miracle' twinkled. The word 'saved' soared.

She heard the shovel clatter as Elja dropped it. Faster, faster, whirling out of the blue, flurries, gusts, *sheets* of snow. The planes above pulled higher, wheeled westward, retreated. The sound of the guns died. Gienia held her hands skyward, leaning back into the warmth of Elja.

Thank you, she thought. Thank you.

Author's Note

In researching *End of the Night Girl* I have read numerous works of history, memoir and testimony in order to construct Gienia's fictional experiences. I am greatly indebted to the works of Olga Lengyel, Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel. I also owe a great debt to Martin Gilbert's comprehensive historical work *The Holocaust* and Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum's *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*.

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