

Pippa lay back, letting the sun warm her face. It was afternoon – not long after five – and the sun had softened from its midday peak. Still, she had to close her eyes against the glare. The blackness inside her eyelids shone in red spots. Underneath her back the dried grass crunched between her thin shirt and the hard dirt. Her spindly legs were bent skyward, letting her dusty, torn skirt slide down her thighs. There was no one around to see, though, of that she was sure.

She let her thoughts drift to snakes. She wondered if she would hear a rustle if one was approaching. She thought about the pain of a bite and trying to run back to the house as the poison was spreading through her blood. She imagined heaviness, like walking through water. Would there be much blood? Would she arrive back at the house pale and weak and covered in the red of her own blood? She imagined her mother running from the front door, arms held out, a look of distress on her face. In her mind, Pippa crumpled to the dusty ground, able only to gesture helplessly at the garish tear in her calf from the fangs of the snake before she passed out.

The sun moved behind a ridge of cloud which had settled just above the horizon. Pippa shivered and opened her eyes, distracted from her daydream. Perhaps a storm was coming. A few seconds passed before she realised the sun was not going to reappear for some time. She held herself up on her elbows, her skin digging painfully into the dry earth, and looked down over the valley towards the town. From this distance it was impossible to discern movement, although she always had the feeling that the townspeople could see her if they looked up. She shivered again, the shock of being free from the sun's rays caused momentary goosebumps, despite the remaining warmth of the day. Pippa stood up and started walking for home, letting the dirt and grass slowly fall off her skirt.

The house slowly came into view; a long dark structure with a flat roof, small windows, and two broken cars visible in the front yard. To the left was the workers house, an even smaller, more ramshackle structure. Volunteers would come to the farm and do a half day's work in exchange for food and board. Pippa was used to it by now, having various strangers meandering around the property, turning their heads to smile at her before continuing their work. They rarely approached her to talk. She was too old to be cute, but too young to be interesting she realised, and didn't really blame them for not seeking her company. Besides which, few of them spoke much English, and she struggled to make sense of their broken words. As she got closer to the

house, she noticed a new van to the side of the workers house. It had been a week since the last workers had left, but she had not been told that new ones were arriving today.

The van looked empty and she could hear no noise from the small house, so she went straight into her home rather than attempt to meet the newcomers. It was after five thirty, she noticed, seeing the clock through the kitchen window, almost dinner time. Her mother, Meredith, was holding a wooden spoon, and using it to stir the contents of a large pot. By the smell, Pippa guessed it was bolognaise sauce.

“Grab a lettuce and some tomatoes from the back, would you pet?” Meredith asked, glancing over her shoulder as Pippa came into the kitchen. Pippa half nodded and continued out through the back door to where a large vegetable patch covered over five square metres of earth. She picked a lettuce, brushing the dirt off with her hands and squashing two stubborn worms under her thumb. She flicked off their gooey remains before twisting and pulling three tomatoes off a vine. She bent her head and checked under the vine. Old tomatoes often fell and lay rotting for days underneath the tangled branches. There was only one tomato there, half decomposed into a dark brown mass, already filled with squirming maggots. She wrinkled her nose and left it there.

When she returned to the kitchen her mother had removed the saucepan from the stove and, Pippa guessed, added the pasta. Meredith had a plastic bowl for the salad ready, so she collected the vegetables from Pippa, chopped them roughly and slid them into the bowl. She picked up the pot and moved towards the workers house. “I’m just dropping dinner over, pet, and then we can eat.” Pippa nodded. A couple of years ago she would have been eager to meet the new workers, to help take them their dinner and tell them all about the farm. Now they all seemed the same and she was not so interested. “Oh, damn it.” With a plastic thud the salad bowl slipped out of Meredith’s hand. “Pet, could you help me carry this stuff over?” Pippa suppressed a groan and bent to pick up the salad bowl, slipping a few escaped pieces of lettuce back in without her mother noticing. She trailed after Meredith, noticing how the sway of her mother’s hips hid the crooked hemline at the back of her skirt.

Meredith walked straight through the open door of the workers house. It was dingy inside, and not too clean. “I have some tea here, if you’re hungry,” Meredith called over to a figure on the couch, the back of which faced the door. The head swivelled around. It was a man,

with hair to his shoulders and a wide face. His expression was confused but he stood up quickly and came over. “Oh, dinner.”

“Spaghetti bolognese, and salad,” Meredith placed the pot in the centre of an old wooden table, and took the plastic bowl from Pippa. “Thank you,” the man said, looking at Meredith for a few seconds and then glancing at Pippa. “Oh sorry, this is my daughter Pippa. Pet, this is Pierre, from France.” Pippa looked at Pierre closely while his gaze was occupied by Meredith moving around the kitchen gathering some eating utensils and a plate for him. His hair was definitely too long, and dark. His skin was quite tanned but she was not sure if it was from the sun or just his natural colouring. His eyes were dark, and were looking at her mother’s arm in curiosity. Meredith turned away from the table and flushed a deep red when she realised the large scar on her forearm was being studied. She rubbed it self-consciously. Pierre’s gaze flicked back to Pippa, and she realised that his eyes were more than just dark, they were black. He had a small scar himself, running from one eyebrow back into his hairline just above his ear. It was an old one though, a pale cream compared to the angry pink of the scar on Meredith’s arm. He stared at Pippa and smiled, and the scar jumped at the movement of skin. She suppressed a shiver and turned to leave. “Enjoy your dinner,” Meredith said by way of farewell, and followed Pippa out.

Pippa’s older brother Louis had appeared and was sitting at the kitchen table when they returned. “What’s for dinner?” His voice was gruff for a seventeen year old but he was always gentle with Pippa. The five year age gap allowed them a more peaceable relationship than many siblings. “Spaghetti and salad.”

Dinner was mainly quiet, everyone being eager to eat as much and as quickly as possible. The kitchen was filled with the sound of slurping spaghetti, and the occasional crunch of lettuce. Dribbles of the dark red sauce made their way down everyone’s chins. Meredith finished first, and smacked her lips together loudly, wiping her face with an old napkin. “What a feed.” Louis grunted in reply, a mouthful of spaghetti preventing him from any further comment. Louis and Pippa finished at the same time, taking a few seconds to lean back and feel the food settle before beginning to clear the plates. Meredith disappeared to have her shower.

“You met the new workers yet?” Louis asked, his hands invisible in a sink of hot water and suds.

“Yeah, there’s just one.”

“I thought it was a French couple?”

“No, just a man.”

“Frenchie?”

“Yeah,”

“Great, another natural farmer eh?” Louis chuckled. Pippa understood his sarcasm. While some workers from Europe embraced the dusty, dirty atmosphere, others looked squeamish at the sight of mud or shit smeared on their jeans.

“He was staring at her scar.” Louis didn’t answer. When he finished washing the dishes he left Pippa alone in the kitchen to dry the last few plates.

Pippa could hear a trickle of water from the bathroom; as strong as the shower ever got in summer. Outside the window the sky was still light, but dusk was approaching. Pippa stood at the kitchen window and gazed down towards the workers house. With the gathering darkness the decrepitude became more obvious: the light from inside shone out between the cracks in the walls; and the sagging roof became a dark hollow sinking into the middle of the sagging structure.

A figure moved in the doorway, and Pippa noticed the burning glow of the end of a cigarette. She watched the burning orange spot move slowly up and down as he took puffs. She imagined that he was facing out over the valley, watching the approaching night time as well. He took a step forward, and she realised that he had been staring up at the house, at the window where the light behind her would make her own silhouette visible. The orange glow dropped, and he crushed the butt under his foot. He stood looking up at her for a few seconds, and she was aware of her hands pressing against the edge of the sink. The growing darkness made his expression impossible to see. He turned and moved towards the van, half climbing in the back in an apparent effort to find something. A shadow of one of the dogs moved slowly across the open ground towards the van. It looked like Boulder, the large dark brown mongrel, and he was sniffing the ground to follow a scent. The figure in the van jumped out of the vehicle and Boulder gave a sharp bark at the movement. Pierre froze, staring at the dog. Boulder moved slowly towards Pierre, his nose close to the ground, and started sniffing his feet. Pierre gave a sudden sharp kick towards Boulder’s front legs, and moved quickly to the workers house,

shutting the door before the dog could follow. Boulder barked a few times at the closed door, before turning and continuing to sniff around the van. Pippa exhaled and moved away from the window. Boulder was used to strangers on the property, they all were. But the way his nose had barely left the ground gave Pippa a disconcerted feeling. He must have found an interesting scent.

The hours after dinner always passed slowly. Meredith put on an opera CD, Pippa did not know which one, and the three of them sat around the living room. Meredith was looking through an old notebook in which she kept details about the farm's accounts. Louis was sitting low down on the couch, holding a book with one hand and absent mindedly pulling at the stuffing which was spewing from a split in the couch's material with the other. Pippa pulled an old encyclopaedia off the bookshelf in the corner of the room, and lay down on her stomach on the floor, flicking through the pages. She stopped at the page for the Red Belly Black Snake. There was a large black and white photo of the snake hissing towards the camera, and then a close up photo of a bite mark on someone's arm. Pippa's skin began to hum. She took a deep breath and shut the book. The carpet was scratchy against her elbows, but she did not move. The heat was pressing in, the air felt fat and heavy with it, and the soprano duet on the CD was reaching a crescendo. The track got stuck, skipping back and forwards over a micro second of a high, piercing note which wavered with the stress. Pippa jumped up and switched it off. She exhaled and sat back down on the carpet, her legs crossed and the scratchiness of the old wool itching against her ankles. She sat still for twenty minutes, aware of her pulse beating in her neck. At eight o'clock it was bedtime.

The nights stayed hot and still during summer; the old fan in Pippa's room scarcely disturbed the suffocating heat. She lay awake. The sun had barely set and the birds were only just beginning to give space for the cicadas to call. The top sheet stuck to her legs, and she pushed her feet out the side, searching for the fan's faint breeze. The house was quiet. Her mother and Louis were probably making their way to bed as well. When the last stray light from the sun had disappeared, Pippa's room was completely black. Her eyes strained to adjust but there wasn't even a sliver of a moon coming through the window yet. Pippa sat up and, hands in front to feel

her way, got out of bed and moved towards the window. It was already wide open, with its half a fly screen hanging uselessly. Pippa leant her forehead against the glass and stared into the blackness. Rising slowly up from the valley was a half moon, bright enough to begin creating shadows across the ground. The broken car just outside the window looked eerie with the growing moonlight: a skeleton of a gutted monster sprawled across the ground.

A shadow moved in the window of the workers house, and Pippa's breath caught in her throat; her eyes fixed on the darkness, searching for more movement. There it was again, someone was standing there. It was barely perceptible though, and Pippa wondered if it was just her eyes shivering with the strain of looking through the dark. She took a step back from the window, the curtains shaking half-heartedly at the disturbance. The moon was still rising, it was a metre or two above the skyline now, but it's light did not quite reach through the window. Pippa sat on the bed. She had goosebumps despite the heat. For the first time in years she felt the presence of a stranger on the property, and her body shivered at the thought. Her hands were clammy and she wiped them against her legs. Slowly, without breathing, she lay back down; her eyes wide open against the dark. Slowly, her muscles relaxed, though her eyes remained open and focused on the window. The changing moonlight created shifting shadows, but nothing unusual. A hint of a breeze lifted the curtains slightly, and there, just at the corner something moved. Pippa sat bolt upright, staring hard through the darkness for a second, then jumped up and switched on the light. The room was suddenly bright, all shadows darted back to their places, and the darkness outside looked more complete than ever. There was a faint shuffle outside the window, and one of the dogs let out a single bark, followed by a soft whine. Then it stopped. Pippa did not move. Her arms felt alien hanging slightly out from the sides of her body, her breath was jammed in her throat, and her ears hummed with her own blood. Seconds passed. She exhaled, and felt the release as her lungs relaxed. She sat on the edge of her bed. The light did not seem as bright now, nor the darkness outside so complete. A thin layer of sweat remained on her forehead, and her hands were cold on the burning skin of her thighs. She inhaled, counting to three, and then exhaled. After five repeats she lay back down. She pulled the sheet over the top of her body, and gave an involuntary shiver as the sweat on her face and shoulders caught a breath of the fan's drift. She left the light on.

Pippa woke early, and tired. She could not remember her dreams, but had a sense of stress and exhaustion from them. She could not hear her mother or brother in the kitchen yet, but decided to get up anyway. In the kitchen Pippa automatically reached for the boxes of dog food from under the sink, before realising that the dogs were not barking for their breakfast yet. The dogs were chained up at the side of the house during the night to stop them from making too much noise at the possums. Pippa made her way around the corner of the house, a box of dog food held in her hands. She slowed down as the kennels came into view. Boulder was lying on his side, his eyes open and his mouth surrounded by crusty pink froth. Malta had disappeared along with her chain, the strength of her pulling had left a small fist sized hole in the weatherboard of the house. Pippa walked slowly towards the body of Boulder. His pupils had dilated so that his eyes looked black. His jaw was frozen open, and a faint whine came from his throat, which was swollen to the width of his head. She saw his ribs shudder with the barest of breaths. She crouched down in front of him, resting a hand on his flank. He did not move.

Pippa turned quickly at the sound of a faint noise and saw the man, Pierre, had come up behind her. His eyes were staring at the body of the dog.

“He is dead?” Pippa did not answer. She felt Boulder’s body shudder slightly under her touch. A final froth of pink saliva dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Pippa glanced up at Pierre. He was running a finger along the line of his scar, and looking at where Boulder was lying.

“Where is your mother?”

“I don’t know. Asleep, maybe.” Pippa stared at Boulder’s neck. It was so swollen she could see the pale white skin underneath the dark hair. She couldn’t bring herself to try to find the bite mark.

“He is dead.” It sounded alien in Pierre’s voice, as though it could not possibly be true.

“I’ll get my mother.” Pippa stood and walked back into the house. Meredith was coming down the hallway, patting her hair back from her face.

“I hate sleeping in with new people here, why didn’t you wake me?” Meredith didn’t look at Pippa, but went straight into the kitchen.

“Have you had breakfast?”

“No, I went to feed the dogs.”

“Thanks, pet.”

“Boulder’s dead.”

“What?” Meredith stopped midway through opening a cereal box. “What do you mean?”

Pippa turned and left the kitchen. At the corner of the house Meredith caught up with her, and grabbed her arm to slow her down. The sight of Boulder lying on his side stopped her though. Pierre was squatting near the dog’s head, one hand slowly stroking Boulder’s ears. Pippa stood watching as Meredith joined him. They both knelt in the dirt, stroking Boulder’s fur away from his eyes, clearing the foam from around his mouth. After several minutes Pierre placed one hand over Boulder’s eyes, lowered his head, and began murmuring in French. Meredith closed her eyes, joining in on the prayer she could not understand. When Pierre was finished, they stood up slowly, cradling the heavy, awkward body between them. Meredith’s scarred arm rested on top of Boulder’s body, and both of them stared at it for a few seconds. The ugly red bubbles of skin looked strangely at home next to the swollen, bulging neck of the dog. Together, they carried Boulder’s body around the back of the house.

Pippa watched them moving slowly together, murmuring occasionally to each other when Boulder’s body became too awkward. Pippa turned, and moved back towards the house. She could not shake the uncomfortable feeling which arose from her contact with Pierre. But maybe it was not Pierre at all. Maybe it was the farm itself, and the creatures on the farm, which were creating her uneasiness. Pippa looked towards the ramshackle structure of the workers house and shivered. Maybe she was just getting too old to automatically trust anyone who came to stay on her farm.