

Small Life

a novel

and

Other Nations: Animals and the Anthropocene
in the works of Michelle de Kretser

an exegesis

by

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.

This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

GABRIELA BOURKE

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Small Life

Chapter One

I chose to live in this apartment because it was the least terrible I'd seen. Stefan sent me the listing, accompanied with a single question mark, on a Friday night before a busy day of house-hunting and I'd dutifully added it to my schedule, knowing already it was too bright and clean looking for the likes of me. The next morning was chilly. I jostled through the crowds spilling from each potential apartment, the lines of prospective tenants cowing me because I knew their application would be better than mine, their money more appealing. But this apartment – no-one. Just me and the real estate agent, an eighteen-year-old with acne-cavity cheeks and a wet, pink mouth like a sore. It was dark – the brightness I'd seen in the photos added in post-production – and cold, but the walls were clean and white and the floorboards shone. I couldn't understand why, but my chances seemed good.

When I moved in I woke up to the sound of pigeons cooing and scuttling around on the roof. I felt joyful at the sound. It reminded me of my dad, who kept racing pigeons who never came first, who sometimes didn't make it back at all. The hawks plucked them from the sky and fed them to their young as they flew toward a home they'd never see again. The sound of the pigeons, their connection to my dad, made me feel like this apartment could really be home.

Frankie had a little crease between her eyebrows when I told her how much it cost. 'I can afford it,' I lied, reassuringly. She nodded, but I could tell she didn't believe me, and she was right, I couldn't afford it at all, I couldn't afford to live in this suburb, or even within twenty kilometres of this suburb, but I'm here now and I've sorted it and I've never been late to pay my rent so maybe I can afford it after all.

I like it here because everyone lives on top of each other and that feels safe. There's parks too, and trees, and if you weren't like me you could even go running at night in the dark and get home safely after. My place is the ground floor of an old house, so there's another apartment on top of mine and another right alongside, which has been empty for ages. I looked at the listing for number three, which was almost double the price of mine, and I felt cheated by how much nicer it was, by the new kitchen and the sun streaming through the tall windows in the living room. I wondered if once that light was for the whole space when it was a house and not sectioned-off apartments, but now the walls block out the light to this side. Light costs more, any renter knows that, just like any renter knows that IKEA has cheap lamps and dark can be cosy when you've got someone to share it with. We rug up, me

and Frida, and candles that make crackling noises so you can pretend you have an open fire roaring.

I light the candles and switch on the lamps early in winter. The chill never leaves my feet and hands, and I'm a transcriptionist so that's a problem. One morning I'm sitting at my desk opening my first video of the day when I hear unusual noises outside. The sound of people walking down the stairs to the lower flats, talking, unlocking a door. Then the crackle of keys at the door of number three, the swing and slam, more voices. I creep over to the door and peep through the little window and see a man coming out of the door of the vacant next door unit and going up the stairs again. I wonder if he's moving in. I had hoped for a girl, a non-threatening girl, preferably a slightly fat one with some kind of rural accent who would remind me of home and help me feel safe.

'Oh well,' I say to Frida, who has popped her head out from under the doona and is looking in the direction of the noises, ears pricked, ready for action. She releases a soft growl. 'Nothing to worry about, missus.'

I plug my headphones back in, click play on the video and start typing. It's an interview between a policeman who's mostly bald head is haloed with a ring of grey stubble and a jerky, bearded man whose long hair hangs wetly around his face. I imagine the room would smell bad, like stale milk and body odour.

All right. The cops often start the interview like this. All right, or okay, as though they're steeling themselves for what's to come. *All right, it's 4.32pm on Wednesday the 3rd of July. We're in room number one at Burwood Police Station. This is interview number...*

Even through the speech in my headphones I can hear voices from outside. There are two of them, speaking to each other in the manner of giving instructions, interspersed with scraping and banging sounds and periods of silence. It's possible to type a whole interview without really following much of it at all. Your brain and fingers do the job while the rest of you drifts off somewhere else. Sometimes images flash behind my eyes, stills from the past which have nothing to do with what's happening on the screen. Images of the paddock beside my childhood home, the old horse who stood there drinking from his trough on a winter's morning, his coat frosted and steam billowing from his pink nostrils. Or maybe the back of my sister's head standing in front of me at my mum's funeral. The images are usually different, but those two recur often.

Look, mate, we want to be fair to you, all right, so what we're going to do is, we're going to read out the allegations as they were made to us. So just to reiterate, you do not

have to say or do anything unless you want to, and everything you say and do will be recorded and can be used in court. Do you understand that?

The police are always very keen to be fair to the suspect. Mostly their version of being fair means getting them to do the interview at any cost.

I'm too curious about the next-door neighbour to concentrate properly, so I decide it's time for a coffee. I have my own coffee machine, but I don't like using it because it uses aluminium pods that take between one hundred and fifty and five hundred years to break down in landfill and are difficult to recycle, even if you send them back to the company. I bought a pod machine instead of an espresso machine because the former was half the price one week from Aldi, but now I regret getting it, a purchase which brings only guilt. Mostly I drink tea, loose-leaf, or take a mug over to the coffee shop opposite my place where they don't charge extra for soy milk.

'Come on then,' I say to Frida, who's reluctant to leave bed. 'You can do a wee while we're out there, if you want.' She stands with an air of bored tolerance while I strap her into her too-big harness and clip on her leash, which is yellow and says NERVOUS. She's not nervous, but people understand this one better than the one she had before, which said CAUTION and which most people took to be a joke.

Outside it's fractionally warmer, and there's a man standing with his back to me, holding one end of a sofa that very definitely will not fit through the door of number three.

'Um, excuse me.' I say.

'Oh.'

'Sorry.'

A voice comes obscured from the other end of the couch. 'What?'

'There's a... sorry,' the man turns his head back to me. 'Can you just get around me? We can't really move it back –'

He's wearing a singlet with a big, jagged sweat patch on the back. It would be weird to go back inside now and he'd know I was weird, which would be embarrassing. So I pick up Frida, whose military straight tail indicates an unhealthy interest in the strangers, and shuffle my way up the stairs behind the couch. I can smell underarm sweat and old deodorant and try to keep my nostrils closed, imagining tiny particles of odorous matter twisting their way up my nose and into my lungs. There's a woman waiting at the top of the stairs, giving me space to pass. I recognise her immediately as the type of girl who would have been mean to me in high school. Golden all over with a very long, very blond ponytail and little sunglasses perched on an equally little nose.

‘Hey! Sorry to hold you up.’ she says, waving at the couch and the men and the very narrow stairs.

‘Oh, that’s okay.’

‘Oh!’ she’s spotted Frida. ‘Hello sweetie!’

Frida isn’t happy to be addressed thus. She growls softly and to distract her, because Frida’s obvious distaste for strangers embarrasses me, I say the first thing that pops into my head, which also happens to be a stupid thing.

‘Big couch!’

A beat, in which I berate myself internally.

‘Uh, yeah!’

‘So you’re moving into number three?’

‘Yeah! Just got the keys today. You live here?’

‘Yeah, just –’ I gesture down the stairs. ‘That’s my door there. Number two.’ The two doors are at right angles, so either of us will be able to see the shadow of the other arriving and leaving. I like this idea, like living with someone without having to live with them.

‘What’s it like here? Give me all the local knowledge.’

‘Um, good. I like it here. There’s a cafe just over the road there –’ I wave in the direction I’m going, ‘buses to the city on Booth Street. It’s good. Quiet.’

‘Nice.’

‘Where were you before?’

‘Surry Hills.’

‘Oh, wow.’

She laughs. ‘Yeah, look, it was a tiny apartment. I’m going to have way more space here.’

‘Well, I hope you like it. Let me know if you need a hand, like, with moving boxes or anything.’ As soon as I offer I hope she won’t take me up on it.

‘Thank you! I’ll try not to take you up on that, don’t worry. And what’s your name?’

‘Madison.’

‘Nice, I’m Jamie.’ We smile at each other. Her smile is straight and white. Mine doesn’t involve teeth. There’s the small, awkward silence when you’re both aware the conversation is over, and yet no one knows how to end the conversation.

‘Ok, I’m just going to get coffee.’

‘Right! Enjoy!’

I fumble with the gate and she disappears down the stairs, which are newly vacated as the tail end of the couch moves slowly and effortfully through the doorway. She leaves behind her a smell of something sweet, like fruit, and the grassy, coconut smell of fake tan.

The cafe is full of light and people. It has concrete floors and industrial-style furniture, and it makes me feel cooler than I am to sit in there. They don't have anything I can eat on the menu, just grass-fed everything and soups made out of bones, but the coffee is creamy and unburned, and the bustle soothes me. They have treats for Frida behind the counter and the only waitress she likes, a diminutive woman with a curly ponytail, comes and administers them to her while I take my first, fortifying sips. We sit there for a while listening to a news podcast and watching the girl and her removalists traipse back and forth from the truck. Frida sniffs around the table leg for a bit and looks like she's thinking about defecating, so I scoop her up onto my lap, hoping to dissuade her. The podcast informs me that the government is still shit, people outside Sydney still have no water and a sex worker has been murdered. It doesn't say her name, so I Google the story and read about it until I feel chest feels tight and burned and then order a second coffee and switch to listening to the Serial podcast, which is also about a murdered woman but somehow seems more like a story than like real-life, so it's ok.

Jamie and her removalists are still going. I listen to the piano music that introduces each episode and Sarah Koenig intoning '...it's Serial, one story told week by week. I'm Sarah Koenig.' I like the sound of her accent. She sounds like a lady who could do anything. She says to go back to the first episode if you've not already listened to it. No fear, Sarah, I think, I've listened to it twice. I'm listening because the first two times I couldn't make up my mind if Adnan did it, and this time I'm going to figure it out, conclusively. 'We're telling this story in order,' says Sarah, 'the story of Hae Min Lee, an eighteen year old girl who was killed in Baltimore in 1999, and the story of Adnan Syed, her ex boyfriend who was convicted of the crime. So to pick up where we left off...'

I should go back to my interview, the one I'm supposed to be typing for money, but it's nice sitting in a patch of sunlight listening to Sarah talk with Frida dozing on my lap, and it's interesting watching the items Jamie and the removalists trot out from the van. A tall gold lamp; two bedside tables; a big white bedhead like someone's rich parents might have; a wide TV so thin it might snap; a ten foot high mirror with a carved gilt frame; plants waving from stone-coloured pots; various prints in white frames and a heavy-looking coffee table made out of one large, irregularly shaped piece of wood. I feel a pull of desire when I see that coffee table. When I moved into my place I brought a mattress, two bookshelves and a box of

flotsam. I wonder what she does, if she's going to be living by herself or if a partner, a rich man, might appear. Maybe a rich woman will appear. Maybe she's the rich woman. But she's young, and rent is expensive, and items are expensive, and if she's managed it, why haven't I?

Frankie texts me.

What u doing

I pause Serial so I don't miss any, as though I haven't heard it all before.

Having coffee with Mrs F. Someone moving in next door :(

Damn

Boy or girl

Girl, extremely pretty and blonde

Lol

The worst kind

Haha

Hiding in cornersmith listening to serial

Fuck

Have been at work since 7am

Kill

Have to go to Bondi and don't have the car

How come Bondi?

Client meeting

I'll just be here, drinking my coffee, listening to my podcast, watching the girl next door move in

Watching her?

Yeah can see them from the window, she's got so much nice shit

Like what

Just furniture and stuff, massive TV

By herself or with someone?

Can't see any sign of anyone else
It's not a huge apartment

Well we know that doll, it's in your block

Fuck u

Eventually the guys climb into their van and take off down the road and we trudge back home and I recommence typing while Frida disappears to her nest of blankets under the couch.

I can't tell you anything about that, because it's fucking make believe.

OK. The victim then alleges that whilst in the bed with her, you have placed your hand inside her underpants and began touching her on the vagina and anus. What can you tell me about that?

How am I supposed to have touched her vagina and whatever at the same time?

You can always tell the guilty ones. Their acts of outrage are contrived, and they try to deflect with 'how' questions. How could I have physically done that, they ask of fairly straightforward allegations. I don't know mate, you tell me, reply the policemen. I want to interject and point out that the vagina and the anus aren't very far away from each other. It

would be perfectly possible to touch one within seconds of the other, or even both with one large, outstretched hand.

When I worked in the office I tried to avoid the domestic violence ones, but it was hard because they hid under so many different names. This one is sexual assault, but sometimes even a break and enter might turn out to be a man breaking into his ex-wife's house to make demands or scare her or steal something or all of the above. They're always the most enraged about being questioned, because they think that their previous relationship with the victim grants them a right to privacy and validates their behaviour within the broader context of intimacy. Once, I typed an animal cruelty interview in which a man had taken his ex-girlfriend's cat while she was at work, killed and dismembered the cat and emailed her photos of bits of the body. The man said, 'I had to email them because she blocked me on Snapchat and Facebook.' He said this with an air of expecting some sympathy. A dismembered paw, the white fur drenched on one side with blood, the head, eyes narrowed but open. I had to look at the photos too; they show them in the video as evidence. He said, 'she cared about that cat more than she cared about me.'

When the transcript is finally done I'm stiff and sick with the sound of the man's whining voice, and the clipped questions of the police. He'd admitted to everything after a certain amount of coaxing, and spent the rest of the interview trying to ingratiate himself with the police officer, asking, 'hasn't your missus ever fucked you over, bro?'

My hands and feet are numb with cold, but I put on my tracksuit and head outside for a run. Frida stays home. She's not keen on running. She's more of a 'pottering' type of girl.

It's Friday and I feel light with the knowledge that I don't have to do anything I don't want to do for two full days. I can listen to an entire podcast without moving, if I want to. I can eat nothing but pot noodles. I half walk, half run down the street to the water. There are dogs everywhere, jogging and smiling, and the atmosphere is very weekend.

Frankie calls me.

'What are you doing?'

'Running. Well, walking.'

'Where?'

'Just down at the bay. Why?'

'Oh, I'm still in Bondi. I was hoping you could go borrow the car and pick me up.'

'Can't you just get a bus? Where's Raph?'

'Working late. If you get me, I'll buy you dinner. A whole pizza all to yourself. And garlic bread.'

‘Well, I would, but I’m busy tonight.’

‘Busy? Doing what?’

‘Well, I’m just, I’m seeing Stefan.’

The silence is abrupt and loud.

‘Right. Well I’d better get a bus then.’ And she hangs up.

It’s beautiful down by the bay. So many people sitting on the stone wall at the water’s edge, soaking up the sunlight glow reflected from its surface. But the water is rising, and one day the bricks and stones won’t be enough to stop the tide heaving over the walkway, obliterating the picnic spots and the tracks worn by many paws into the dirt. I gaze into the pale blue horizon and feel the loss of it all, heavy in my body.

Chapter Two

I’m sitting on the couch watching YouTube videos when Stefan arrives. One of the girls I’m subscribed to has uploaded a new ‘productive morning routine’ video. She wakes up and swings out of bed in the morning, wearing silky pyjamas and stretching. Then she plays with her pug and makes a smoothie for breakfast, followed by showering, drying and curling her hair, doing her makeup and sitting down with a cup of coffee to do journaling. She uses coffee pods, which makes me feel fretful.

When Stefan knocks on the door there’s always a moment of pure dread. It’s because I’m shy. It’s because I don’t like entertaining. It’s because I’m not keen on men.

I greet him while Frida growls softly from under the covers on the bed.

‘Hello,’ he kisses me on the cheek and walks into the room. He smells nice, like fresh money. Once I asked him what it was but he wasn’t sure, something his wife gets him. He asks me about my day and I tell him about my transcript, going into more detail than I’m allowed because I have so little else of interest to say. We debate between Thai or sharing a pizza, but he chooses Thai so he can get chickens and eggs in his. He approves of me not eating meat. He thinks it’s sweet, a feminine quirk.

Once we’ve ordered, he bends over his knees, sighing and rubbing his eyes. ‘Jesus, I’ve had a day,’ he says.

‘Oh yeah? Work stuff?’

‘A little bit. And Ruby, you know, she’s been having some issues.’

Issues, I think, she’s stinking rich and ten years old. Yet suddenly an image of myself at ten drifts across my mind’s eye, and I am chastened.

‘What’s going on?’ I put a beer down on the coffee table for him, and take a sip of my own. I like beer because the taste reminds me of when I was very little, standing at the barbecue with my Dad, and he’d let me have a tiny sip of his VB from the can. I start drafting a poem in my head, spurred by the memory of VB from a can, something I like to do when Stefan’s talking.

‘Oh, these girls at school are being nasty to her. Refusing to speak to her all of a sudden. Not letting her sit with them any more. Had to go up to the school this afternoon and speak with the teacher - not that it’ll do any good.’

Beer from a can, beer, bitter, bubbly, I think, simultaneously making a noise that’s supposed to impart sympathy, and maybe even an indication that I’m considering a way forward. I feel suddenly protective of Ruby. I know what she looks like because I’ve seen her in Stefan’s profile pictures on Facebook. She’s got bright red hair and flushed pink skin, and already it’s clear she’s not going to make a beautiful teenager. It’s hard to be a girl, and hard to be a kid. You can’t imagine a time when you’ll have control over your life. When you grow up you can at least pretend you’re in the driver’s seat. You can buy a bamboo toothbrush instead of a plastic one and pretend that says something about who you are.

‘Could she move schools?’

‘Oh, Lucy doesn’t want that. It’s her old school, so she’s a bit nostalgic about it.’ He checks his phone, seeming a little discomfited by mention of his wife, or maybe by the mention of his wealth in the currency of attending a school as a child which was also attended by your parent. According to Stefan, Lucy knows about and accepts his use of sex workers, but whenever her name comes up I wonder if that’s true. ‘Food’s ten minutes away.’

‘Want to watch something?’ This means we can speed things up, get things moving. He’s always reticent about beginning the procedure without a premise. Something on the screen works well.

‘Maybe in a minute. Hey, has someone moved in next door?’

‘Oh, yeah. A girl. Well, a woman. Her name’s Jamie.’

‘Oh, cool. Did she seem friendly?’

‘Um, I guess. I chatted to her when I was getting a coffee, but she was moving her stuff in, so - ’

‘She was busy.’

‘Yeah. She must be rich, to afford that place.’ I know he doesn’t like talking about money, but I carry on. ‘Seven hundred for a one bedroom.’

‘I think it’s got some renovations and stuff, hasn’t it?’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I looked at the listing. I like to keep my eye on things.’

‘Oh. Well, still.’

The food arrives. I feel bad about it, because the delivery company wrings the profits from small businesses and pays their drivers next to nothing to cycle food through the cold so people can add a one dollar tip and feel like they’ve done the right thing.

‘We can tip more than a dollar.’ Stefan counters. ‘We can tip ten dollars, if you want.’

We eat on the couch because I don’t have space for a table and watch *Finding Dory* - my choice, obviously. I wonder if he’ll have to watch it with his kids later. The screen casts a blue glow over the couch and it’s like we’re submerged in the ocean too. Clean, clear ocean with vibrant, fat fish - lots of fish, many different species, happy and safe in the sea. The animated corals are unbleached. The turtles swim through waterways unclogged with plastic detritus.

‘I feel bad about the packaging.’ I say, gesturing at the empty noodle containers.

‘We can put them in the recycling.’

But I know it’s not enough.

After we’ve finished eating he kisses me on the mouth. I can smell meat and hold my breath as best as I can while he touches me. He indicates he wants me to touch him so I do. *Dory*’s still playing in the background and I try not to let on that I’m still watching. At one point, Frida walks past the couch, giving me a long, hard look over Stefan’s shoulder. He finally ejaculates into a tissue and, relieved, I flush it down the toilet and wash my hands. When we go to hotel rooms he often showers after sex, but I don’t think he likes using my bathroom because he doesn’t here. I wonder if he has wipes in his glove box so he can give himself a little wipe off before he returns home. I wonder what there is in this for him.

When he leaves, I brush my teeth hard with my bamboo toothbrush.

Chapter Three

I moved into my place as a reward for getting the transcription job. When I first started I still worked in the office, and decided I needed to be closer to work because the bus from where I used to live only came once an hour and often ran late, and being late makes me feel very sick. Frankie and Raph live in Lilyfield and offered for me to move into their spare room, but they’re trying for a baby and I didn’t want to have to move out the second they needed it for a nursery. Also, moving back in with them felt like going backwards, like the

next move might be back to Parramatta, or even Perthville, and you should never go backwards.

The budget I drew up worked at first. But I started having tooth pain, so bad I couldn't eat. Eventually I had to make a choice between pain and infection or putting thousands of dollars onto a new credit card I'd taken because the bank had offered it to me and I'd thought it might be handy toward the end of a pay cycle. I chose the latter option. And of course, there was always Stefan.

I didn't tell the story to Frankie like that. I knew she'd say, but you said you could manage the dentist, you said you had savings, we could have helped you if we'd known. I told her we'd met at work and he and his wife both saw other people, but she said, that's just exactly what he would tell you.

I'm sitting in the courtyard, drowsy, stroking Frida's warm back and holding a mug of tea when my phone buzzes.

'Hi.'

'Gosh, don't sound too happy to hear from me.'

'Well, I just woke up.'

'It's ten!'

'It's Saturday!'

'Yes, which is why I'm calling you. Do you want to come to the markets?'

I'm forgiven.

'All right, but I can't buy anything. I'm on rations until Wednesday.'

'I'll buy you something if you need. Some potatoes.'

'Well, those'll sure get me through. Thanks Frank.'

'You're welcome, Madison.'

I put Frida's harness on, pop her in my canvas bag and head out. She watches, ears erect, gazing at people's faces intently as they pass. She'll tell me if she wants to walk. We pass the trees they're going to cut down to make way for some kind of freeway. I was arguing with someone in the comments section on Facebook and they asked me why I care so much about those trees, but not about the Djab Warrup birthing trees. I started to say, of course I care about both, but they were right, I care more about the ones down the road from me, and that made me feel uncomfortable enough to stop commenting. It's breezy and the branches rock peacefully. They don't know what's going to happen to them. I envy them that.

Frank's examining some apples when I find her at the market. The stall owner is watching her with a sullen expression and I wonder how long she's been there, touching the produce and blocking the way.

She looks up and sees me.

'Hello, my sweetie,' she says in her Frida-voice, and then to me, 'I don't know if these will give me a stomach ache.'

'Why would they?'

'I could wash them in vinegar.'

'That would surely give you a stomach ache,' I reply, not following.

'It's not the apple, Madison. It's the pesticides. You do wash your fruit and vegetables, don't you?'

'Yeah, yeah.' Not really. Avocados have skins, and blueberries come frozen from plastic ziplock bags I feel bad about.

'No, maybe not.' She puts the apple back and wanders onto the next stall. She wants to buy 'naked' bread, which I take to mean bread that doesn't come in a plastic bag. The loaves are stacked on a huge table, round and hard looking. Frida sniffs at them, she loves bread. She stands up in her bag and shakes off, and I know she wants to wander along herself now, and no longer be carried.

'Mmm, I don't know how hygienic this set-up is,' says Frankie, loud enough for the baker to hear. 'People have probably been coughing on them all day.'

'Frank, shh.'

'It's just a bit gross - ' she starts, but at that moment a diminutive man whose hands are gripped by children on either side walks by and sneezes. I can almost see the particles, explosive and effusive, falling all over the bread like an invisible blanket. Frank and I look at each other and laugh, but a ruined kind of laugh because now we can't buy bread. We wander around a bit more, at Frida's pace, which is slow, and Frankie buys some kind of artisanal soap for herself that I know she won't use because shower gel is so much nicer, and some potatoes for me. I'll eat them with baked beans, which I hate, but are cheap and keep you alive.

'So, how was Stefan?' asks Frankie, pronouncing Stefan's name as though it's in quote marks.

'Yeah, fine.'

'How's his wife?'

'She's good, I think.'

‘And his kids?’

‘I think his daughter’s having some problems at school.’

She’s surprised by this. ‘Do you talk about that? I would have thought he’d try and avoid family talk.’

‘Nope. I told you, they’re non-monogamous.’

‘Hmm.’

‘If you were going to be disapproving, why did you ask?’

But she’s not looking at me anymore. She’s gazing through the glass windows of a cafe where we have coffee sometimes. Inside, sitting on the green booth seat with another girl, is Jamie, my new neighbour.

‘Oh my God,’ breathes Frankie. ‘That’s Jamie George.’

‘Who?’

‘Jamie George! From Instagram!’

‘That girl in there? She’s my new neighbour.’

‘Jamie George is your neighbour?’

‘Well, if that’s Jamie George, Jamie George is my neighbour.’ We’re whispering now and I hope Jamie can’t hear the repetitive muttering of her own name.

‘Oh my God!’ Frankie’s gazing at me now, and I feel an absurd sense of pride.

‘What does she do? Come on, can we move?’

‘Just takes photos and stuff. You know. Can we go in and say hello?’

‘Absolutely not.’ I’m pulling at Frankie’s arm now, to no avail.

‘She’s your neighbour!’

‘No, come on.’

‘Let’s just say hi. I’ve followed her for years.’

‘No Frankie, please. I do not want to go in there and be awkward.’

‘So we can go in there and not be awkward.’

As we stand there, Jamie glances up and at us. My face feels hot. I raise my hand and whisper, ‘hi.’ Her expression remains impassive for a moment, as though she’s taking a moment to recognise me or trying to decide whether I’m waving at her or someone else, and for a heart-stopping moment I think she’s not going to remember me and Frankie will think I just made it all up or worse, recognise me as someone who remembers their neighbours but their neighbours don’t remember them. But then she smiles with her lips and raises her eyebrows and hand simultaneously.

‘Come *on*.’ I hiss, and walk away, tugging Frida behind me, who snorts in annoyance.

‘Don’t you want a coffee?’ Frank asks.

‘Not from there.’

‘Oh all right, stop walking so fast.’ In my mind I see myself, idiotic hand raised, stupid lips muttering, hi.

‘So you really don’t follow her? I swear I’ve tagged you in her giveaways before.’

‘I don’t remember.’ Frankie tags me in giveaways on Instagram all the time. To my knowledge, she’s never been given anything.

‘Oh my God. You should have said it was Jamie George.’

‘I didn’t know who Jamie George was. YOU should have said when I described her.’

Frankie starts laughing. ‘You said she was pretty and blond, that could be anyone.’

‘Cornersmith?’ I ask.

‘All right.’ We sit down on a table outside and Frida flops down on the pavement, displeased and puffed. She’s an old girl now, but the vet says she could live to be twenty, so I don’t need to be worried yet. I pour some water into my hand and she laps it up, the flat of her pink tongue making glistening contact with the flat of my pink hand. .

‘It just seems strange to me she’d move into your old building. No offence, but her last place looked really nice.’

‘I think it’s a nicer apartment than mine. Do you want something to eat?’

‘Can we eat something here?’

‘Um, chips? Toast with jam no butter?’

‘Oh, chips. All right.’

We order coffee and chips. The waiter’s face registers his disapproval at this combination. He asks us if we’d like anything else and we shake our heads, subdued. Frankie hands me her phone. It’s open on an Instagram profile - Jamie’s. She lists her agent, some emojis and her age in her byline. Her first few posts are for a British fashion brand I used to buy from before I read an article about their factories full of migrants working for next to nothing and not allowed toilet breaks. Looking at the photos of her in the clothes makes me feel itchy, like I need to buy things, and also agitated, like the photos depict some great violence. Our coffee arrives and I sip it too quickly, burning a sheet of skin from the roof of my mouth and feeling it hang, tickly on my tongue.

‘Crazy.’ I hand the phone back. I don’t know why I’m unwilling to respond, but something in me hates how impressed Frankie is by this girl and her Instagram profile. I remember my moment of pride by association and entertain a quick spike of self-hatred.

‘So crazy. You should get tips from her and become insta-famous.’

‘I’m pretty sure being hot is a prerequisite for insta-fame.’

Frankie’s face becomes overly sincere, like she’s going to tell me that I’m hot, better than hot, beautiful.

‘Yes, yes,’ I say, tetchy, and she laughs instead. The chips come and we share them, Frida too. They’re bad for her, I know, but they’re bad for us too, so.

When Frankie leaves we wander back home, moving quickly past Jamie’s door. I can hear shrieking laughter from inside, and wonder if she brought the friend from the cafe home to show her the new place.

My house is so cold I feel it before I’m even inside. Frida hurries to her blankets under the bed and I open the doors, hoping the sun’s warmth might drift inside. I haven’t yet lived here in summer, but my hope is that it remains cool. The sharehouse I lived in before was icy in winter but so hot in summer you’d lie in bed and feel like you were roasting. It was cheap, much cheaper than here, and that made up for everything except the mushrooms that crept through the skirting boards and needed to be pulled out by hand. I had rashes on my hands and arms, which the doctor said was a mould allergy. He said, ‘You need to live somewhere light and dry.’

Chapter Four

I look at my bank account at the end of every month and think, where did it go? I think, I’ve been so good this fortnight, maybe there’s a mistake. But the column of careful figures is always right. Coffee, a Thai takeaway on a Friday night, the cheapest bottle of wine from the local bottle shop, my Opal bill, Frida’s pet insurance, the electricity bill, the internet bill, the phone bill, rent. I should cook at home more, give up the wine, walk more. I only really buy the wine so I can offer various types of alcohol to Stefan when he comes over, as though I’m a wealthy courtesan. Sometimes I think about what the columns would look like if it weren’t for the money from Stefan and I shudder. He could end the arrangement at any time. There’s no contract.

The kettle is burbling. I make a cup of tea and think through the options I’ve thought through so many times. Move somewhere cheaper. Get a different job. Like where? Like what? I could move back to a sharehouse, I suppose, find a pet friendly one. Frida’s not human friendly, which is more of a problem. She’s picky, aloof, nippy toward strangers who bend, smiling, hand outstretched into her space.

To distract myself, I lie on the couch and search for Jamie's Instagram account on my phone. She has the blue tick of authenticity that means she makes money from her account. In one photo she stands in front of a white wall. Her head is turned away and her hair is slicked down to her head and gathered into a flamboyant pink scrunchie. She wears a checked blazer, which makes her look whimsical and business-like at the same time. In another photo she wears big sneakers that look heavy at the end of her thin legs. Another is a close up of one of those little designer bags that would cost about a month's rent. I hate those bags, the boastfulness of them, the softness of the stolen skin from which they're made. I wonder where they're made and think about looking it up, to validate my hatred, but the thought of imbibing more heavy knowledge makes me tired.

Jamie turns her face away from the camera a lot, as though shy, or unaware she's being photographed. Her captions are ambiguous and ambivalent, often a single word or an emoji. Black. Sorry. A chocolate brown heart. It's difficult to attribute the wordless facelessness of the girl on the screen to the one I'd met yesterday, carting bits and pieces up and down the stairs and telling me to enjoy my coffee. I screenshot a photo of Jamie in a tiny bikini and send it to Frankie. She replies, I fucking know.

My couch faces the courtyard and we're on a hill so I can see the rooftops of neighbouring houses. Late in the afternoon the tin roofs glow liquid gold as the sun sets and the sky turns pink. I love to watch. The thing about Sydney is, no matter how low your dungeon is, you're always high enough to see someone else's rooftop. I clasp my mug and enjoy the sun on my face, the only time the sun enters my home, bathing in the warmth of it. As the sky fades, the men who live upstairs start to play their music. It vibrates through the whole house, an interminable percussive throb like a headache. I don't ask them to turn it down because they wouldn't listen to me anyway, but I wonder if Jamie will.

I read the news on my phone and try not to listen to the music or the banging of my own heart. A chihuahua named Gizmo has disappeared from his garden in England, presumed taken by a seagull. The general consensus is that this is quite funny. I understand that the humour is to be found in the seagull being an unlikely predator, but overall it seems a sour joke. I think about Gizmo, held in a hostile grip, falling, falling, legs broken, bug eyes bulging, longing for his home. My stomach falls out. The room is cold. I want to hurt myself but I don't do that anymore, so I lie back and breathe in four and out four. I name five things I can see, four I can smell, three I can see, two I can touch. At some point, I fall asleep, and dream that the boys upstairs have turned up their music and I can't shut it out. It bangs and bangs and as I wake I realise there is no music, only the sound of someone knocking on the

door. It's a frantic sound. Frida scuttles out from under the couch, making little rasping barks, her eyes bleary with interrupted sleep. It's five am. Never answer the door after dark, I have cautioned myself while watching crime shows on Netflix. Never answer the door.

But then I realise it's not my door, it's Jamie's door. Shivering, I walk to the door and peep through the glass. In the light of the street lamp I can see a tall figure there. As I watch, the figure raises a fist and knocks again, a loud, commanding knock. I hear whispering and the figure's head turns toward my door. It's so dark I'm sure they can't see me but I drop down on my haunches away from the window just in case, suddenly afraid. I realise Frida has followed me and gives me a questioning look as I drop down towards her. 'Shhh,' I say, but she's making no noise.

I hear Jamie's door open, but no voiced greeting, just the click of the door closing again. I chance another look outside and the corridor to the stairs is empty, devoid of the tall shadow.

It's hard to go back to sleep after that. In bed, I stroke Frida's soft, warm fur and listen to Serial until at some point I'm sitting in a brightly lit room at a table opposite Sarah Koenig. She's talking, looking at a pile of papers in her lap and then up at me. Every time she glances down her brown curls fall over her forehead, and when she looks up she has to flick them out of her face to speak. She's saying, 'and the second thing, which you can't miss about Adnan, is that he has giant brown eyes like a dairy cow. That's what prompts my most idiotic lines of inquiry. Could someone who looks like that really strangle his girlfriend? Idiotic, I know.'

I smile at her. 'Yeah,' I reply, 'but I do know what you mean.'

Weirdest thing

Some man just turned up at Jamie's door and stood there knocking

For ages

She let him in eventually I think

Boyfriend I guess?

Anyway I'm awake now and annoyed

No answer from Frankie. She must be fast asleep.

*

Frankie met Raph during a walking tour in Budapest. She had gone to Budapest on her own, imagining herself cycling around the city and visiting museums and having pleasant, off-the-cuff interactions with locals, and she had been taken aback at the profound loneliness that had descended on her moments after checking into her hotel and finding herself alone in a grubby room, the sound of her own voice almost forgotten.

Hot, thirsty, jet-lagged, she had shuffled around Budapest, the hot cobbles burning through the soles of her Kmart sandals. She tried to make out what the guide was saying, wishing she'd thought to bring a bottle of water. There was a tall man with red hair in her group. He wore a white linen shirt and beige shorts and every so often pulled a bottle slick with condensation from his bag and gulped from it, his Adam's apple bobbing under a thin sheen of sweat. For some reason she thought he was British, so she was surprised when he asked her in an Australian accent if she'd like to get a drink with him. Her mouth dry with thirst and body heavy with travel-fatigue she'd gladly retreated with him to a nearby bar, where they drank tall Pilsners that were cheaper than water and ate pizza, talking about Sydney, places they'd travelled so far and were still to visit, Raph's family and Madison.

In an afternoon, Budapest transformed from a muggy, miserable city into a place brimming with possibility as they roamed it together, cycling over the Szechenyi Bridge to the wide, quiet streets beyond, soaking in the thermal baths and seeking out vegetarian restaurants for Frankie, of which there were surprisingly many. Sometimes Raph said, 'we should go back there,' and Frankie knew the longing in his voice wasn't just for Budapest, but for the time, and the people they had been who were now lost.

She imagines they will go back one day, but this time there will be a baby strapped to Raph's chest or a toddler clutching her hand and asking for ice cream. They will walk together, the three of them, along Váci Street, and they'll turn to each other sometimes when they recognise something from before and point it out, laughing with the joy of the memory they made then becoming part of the memory they're making now. They'll stop at a street vendor and their child's wide eyes - brown eyes, like Raph's - will reflect the whirls of golden dough as they curl into chimney cakes. But she doesn't want to go anywhere before then.

Chapter Five

The next morning I stay in bed for a while, thinking about Jamie. The way the man - or the figure who I assumed was a man - stood there for so long, knocking, a silent,

unanswered guest. The soundless way the door opened, without a greeting from inside, not even a whispered greeting, I was sure, because crouched there in the silence of the night I would have heard.

My hands are numb because I'm scrolling my phone, checking Facebook, playing Tetris, refreshing my Instagram notifications. Frida has burrowed well down under the covers and won't appear until it warms up, or she gets hungry. I pull on two jumpers and go and sit in the patch of sun in the courtyard and think about our old dog, Pippa, a Jack Russell who leapt out of a big cardboard box with holes in the lid on Frankie's seventh birthday and became our best friend. Of course, I don't believe in giving dogs as presents, but I didn't know about puppy farms and pet euthanasia and vet suicide then. Probably no one did.

Frida starts barking, which means someone's knocking at the door. It's Jamie.

'Hi Madison.' Her hair is wet and her face flushed. She smells like shampoo and moisturiser and I feel soiled in comparison, my mouth morning-foul, a leper. She's holding a paper bag and a takeaway coffee and I notice she's been crying. Her mouth has that swollen, pink look and her eyes are very bright white. Her eyes surprise me, because I'd imagined them to be blue, but now I can see they're a nutty yellow brown, like toffee.

'Hiya. How's it going?'

'Good, good. Hey, I just wanted to say sorry for my guest waking you up last night,' she laughs, but it's a hollow sound, and she hands me the bag and drink. My guest. An interesting, ambiguous way to say it, like a glamorous lady in an old film. My lover, paying heed to me in the night. I feel embarrassed now too, at the food gift which I'm sure won't be vegan, at the awkwardness of 'my guest'.

'Oh, wow, you really didn't need to - '

'No really, I'm so sorry - and on my first week. It absolutely is not a common occurrence to have someone banging away at the door like that, don't worry.'

I smile at her, my underarms getting hot.

'I just didn't wake up and... but anyway. Won't happen again.'

Both our smiles are fixed now. It's unbearable.

'Would you like to come in?' I ask. 'I can make you a tea?'

'Oh, no thank you, I'm off out in a minute. Reformer pilates.'

I nod like someone who also attends reformer pilates, like attending reformer pilates is a thing we young people do.

'Well, have fun.'

‘Thanks, Madison.’ She uses my name in that confident, social way good-looking people often have. And I’m left clutching a bag full of food I’m almost certain I won’t eat.

I turn to Frida, who’s sniffing hard at the air, unabashedly interested in the food and coffee. She loves coffee. I can’t leave it unattended anywhere she can jump up or she’ll whip up onto the coffee table and have her tongue in the foam before I’ve noticed a thing.

‘That was weird.’ Her gaze moves from the paper bag to my face, making eye contact. ‘Don’t you think?’

In my kitchen I take the plastic lid off the coffee and smell it. Cow’s milk. Inside the bag is a croissant studded with slivers of almond. The butter has seeped into the paper and left dark, greasy shapes. I can’t waste it. I take it into the courtyard, Frida trotting beside me, expectant for crumbs, and sit on the step again feeling wretched for the cows in their rows and for Jamie, unknowing and trying to do something nice, clutching the bag in her small fake-tanned hands. Frida watches me eat, becoming more disbelieving as time passes and nothing comes her way.

‘It’s not good for you.’ I tell her. ‘I need you to live for a long time.’

She stares, reminding me her life is her business.

‘Oh, all right.’ I rip off a chunk and pass it to her. ‘You barely even tasted that!’

Sunday, empty day. You can pour hours into your phone. I regularly do. Pet Rescue is a good site to lose some time, even if you can’t actually rescue anyone. Instagram, YouTube, Depop for second hand clothes you don’t need and shouldn’t spend money on. I like to imagine Stefan on Sunday mornings, making pancakes for his kids and coffee for his wife in their big marble kitchen. I know his address from some mail I saw in his car, and I looked it up on Domain and saw exactly how it looked when they bought it a few years ago. Then I Googled his suburb, because I like reading about suburbs on Wikipedia. Bellevue Hill is a harbourside eastern suburb of Sydney, it said, and I relished those words, harbourside, eastern, the good stuff. The suburb is located within the Division of Wentworth electorate, which is the wealthiest in Australia. I smiled when I read that, the wealthiest in Australia, the very best one. I imagine being there, not as me, but as a silent, invisible being, absorbing the contented family noises and breakfast smells without needing to speak or contribute anything. I’m almost there, eyes closed, pale parquet beneath my feet, Ruby’s childlike voice taking root in my head when a plane drones overhead and there’s cold bricks beneath my feet instead and I’m alone.

On Instagram, Jamie’s uploaded a new photo of herself and a boy. I imagine it’s her boyfriend, and I wonder if he was last night’s ‘guest’. They’re looking at each other in the

photo, Jamie facing away, the boyfriend angled toward the camera. He has one of those soft faces, clean shaven with long eyelashes, smooth like a child. His shirt is unbuttoned and necklaces sprawl around his neck and drip down his hairless chest. He's light skinned and lean, and the flash deposits red in his laughing eyes. She's posted something to her story too - I can see the coloured circle around her profile picture, but I don't click on it because then she'd be shown my name and she'd know I was stalking her.

Want to come over tonight?

Yep 😊

Want a lift?

Nah I'll just get the bus

Ok

Should I bring anything

A potato we can all share for dinner

Funny

Well what were you offering 🤔

You don't deserve anything

I cut the mouldy bits off some bread and toast it, hoping that the spores will shrivel up and die and not make a home in my stomach. Mould doesn't really phase me. When I lived in the sharehouse with the mushrooms growing from the skirting boards we all had to pick them out of our rooms with our bare hands, spraying vinegar around and hoping that one day we could afford something better. It felt good to get out of there, and bad to pass it on to the new girl who moved in.

I eat the toast. I listen to Serial and wonder why, if Adnan didn't do it, he can't remember where he was the day Hae went missing. Sarah suggests most kids don't know what they were doing on any day from the past, but it wasn't just any day, it was the day Hae went missing. I think about doing laundry. I wonder why, if Adnan didn't do it, his calls to Hae stopped on the day she went missing, when everyone was trying to find her, before anyone knew she was dead. I lie on the couch and breathe and fall asleep and when I wake up it's time to go to Frankie's and Sunday is nearly over for another week.

*

Jamie's watching porn in bed. She can't find her earbuds - she thinks she's lost them - so she plays it out loud. Some of the videos are funny and some make her feel a bit sick. She doesn't like the ones with the humiliation, or the ones with the forcing.

She needs to start an Only Fans account to make more money but she's not sure what to put on there. She doesn't want to make a mediocre account, just another girl putting her tits online and getting two subscribers. She wants to be one of those ones they write click bait articles about, like 'Sydney woman makes 100k in first month using only her iPhone'. She makes notes as she watches the videos, thinking about how to present things differently, how to change the tableau, and have some mystery. She wants it to be classy, not like this, but enough like this that people will pay. She flicks through videos quickly, business expression on, opening extra tabs to look for particular items she'll need to wear and for props. She feels sorry for some of the girls on the website. They're ugly and have bloated faces and poorly applied make up. What will happen to them when they're old and no one wants to film them anymore? Even she has a limited time-frame for proper money making. That's why it's important to capitalise now, while she can.

She's considered upping the escorting, but she's too busy really, she's got events coming out of her ears and one client who never stops contacting her for dates, or to hang out, or just spontaneously as though she has nothing else on in her life except him. It might have been a mistake to move, but she can't think about that now, it's done. And she likes him anyway, he takes her places she'd never be able to go without him, incredible restaurants and hotels, and the whole time she's lapping it up she's on the clock, making bank. He opens up super-rich-Sydney for her, when she's used to inhabiting only rich-Sydney, and the difference is both inspiring and depressing.

Theo loves the OnlyFans idea but he hates the escorting. She'd met him after it had started and explained it to him as a non-negotiable. 'It's part of my work,' she explained,

‘you’ll need to accept that.’ He sulks when he knows she’s due to see a client, he doesn’t respond to her messages but sometimes sends random, childish ones obviously in the hope the client will see and she will be embarrassed. They don’t, and she wouldn’t be, and she thinks she’d probably end things with Theo soon, because he’s already feeling like a responsibility, and she doesn’t need any more of those.

Chapter Six

The bus is slow because there’s so much construction. They’ve already removed many of the trees, leaving behind a field of sludge and exposed roots and concrete slabs. I look away because the barrenness of it and the memory of the now vanished green makes me feel damp with anticipated heat. Frida, snug in her bag, watches through the window, interested but unbothered. The opposite of me.

My GP got me to go to a psychologist once. She found me a bulk-billing one, which was thoughtful, and said if it didn’t help we could try medication. The psychologist said, ‘Can you tell me a bit about why you’ve come here?’ and I said, ‘I just feel bad all the time,’ and she said, ‘well, that’s modern life,’ and I felt like we had a connection. I kept going until the clinic stopped doing free sessions, but I don’t know how much it helped. I felt better in there, contained in a white-walled room with one person to focus on and who was focusing entirely on my worries like they mattered. But it only takes the sight of an uprooted tree to start me off again. The psych gave me a survey at the beginning of each session and it was really tough trying to remember how I’d ranked it the time before so I could gradually improve it over the course of our meetings, so at least when I stopped going I didn’t have to worry about that. Frankie was exasperated with me when I told her about that, but everyone wants to feel like they’ve done a good job.

And I’m not unhappy. I have my own place to live, and when I get paid I buy expensive groceries like ravioli and cashew cheese and pack them into my own fridge. I’m just afraid of what’s happening to everyone and more afraid that they’re not noticing.

Frankie lives a suburb over from me, in a new apartment building that smells like fresh paint and sawdust. It has a lift and swipe cards, like a hotel, and all the apartments are bright and light and have ducted air-conditioning so no-one has to sweat through the summer nights. Of course, the air-conditioning will make everyone hotter in the end, most especially the people who never had it in the first place. But when I sleep on Frank’s couch in the summer, the break from the heat is like wiping my brain clean.

Frankie's partner works in IT. Raph has the look of someone who never has to worry if their card will be declined, and sometimes he says things like, 'Huh? That's cheap!' He has powerful shoulders that make his shirts strain and cropped ginger hair on his head and his face. Frida's not a fan of Raph. I know this because she avoids eye contact and does a little skip of alarm if she finds herself walking towards him on one of her trips to the water bowl of the balcony.

Raph lets me in when I buzz and pecks me on the cheek. He's wearing a tight black shirt and tiny black shorts that make me want to look away.

'Sunday leg day?' I ask, looking at the wall.

'Nah, back and shoulders. Only did a short sesh. I've pulled a muscle or something, fucking kills.'

Fucking kills. It hurts. Fucking kills. Sex is murder. I say it out loud, pleased, 'fucking kills'. Raph looks at me. 'Um, like, my shoulder hurts a lot? Hiya, kiddo.' He's just noticed Frida in her bag. She acts like he isn't there. .

Frankie's standing at the bench, dipping a tea bag in and out of a mug. Her face is slack and her lips are swollen and wet, like pink slugs. My muscles seize up.

'Oh.' I say.

'We've had some bad news.' Raph says. Frankie's pink face collapses and she covers it with her hand. I perch on one of the bar stools, unsure, as always, what's required of me.

'Sorry.' she gasps, and stops dipping. 'My period.'

I think for a second she means she has her period, that it hurts, but then I understand.

'Oh, no. Sorry Frank.'

She picks up her mug and moves to the couch. Raph and I follow, sitting on either side of her like bodyguards. He puts his hand on Frankie's shoulder and rubs it as though trying to restore circulation. It strikes me as a wooden movement, aimed to look like he's doing the right thing.

'It's all right.' Frankie's rubbing her eyes very hard with both knuckles. 'It's just every time I'm sure it will come. I never think it's not going to come. And then when it comes - ' her voice cracks ' - I realise I didn't think it would come after all.' She's choking and pausing as she speaks and Raph increases his rubbing. It sounds as though she's saying this for the first time, as though it's a fresh realisation, but I know all this. She's told me before. I put my hand over her hand and wait. Everything I think of to say is wrong, I know because it says so on a website I found for the families and friends of people who are trying to conceive. I think to say, maybe you should just have sex and stop thinking about the baby

stuff, but I know you can't just stop thinking about anything. I think to say, maybe don't have a baby anyway, because by the time they're ten they'll probably have to live underground and wear an oxygen mask every time they go outside, and that's if they're lucky enough to have escaped the fires and the floods and the plagues.

'It's okay, it's really okay.' The ferocious energy required to express her grief has been exhausted before my arrival, and I'm shamefully, guiltily glad.. 'Just needed a cry. I'm fine now.' Frida was wandering around the apartment, following scents and checking on things, but now she ambles over and leaps nimbly onto Frankie's lap. She makes small, high-pitched noises she keeps for Frank only, and Frank strokes her, fresh tears beginning to spill. 'She knows her aunty is sad, doesn't she? Sweet girl. Sweet, precious girl.'

'I'll get you a tissue.' says Raph, disappearing into the bedroom.

Frankie looks me in the face. Her eyes are naked and blue.

'I just keep thinking, if I had a baby, it would be like there were three of us again. Three of us, in the family.'

She's said this before, with the same sense of airing a confidence, of eliciting some emotion from me. She thinks I'm as soft as her inside, that if she says the right words all the slush will dribble out, but she's wrong. I don't believe in reincarnation, or babies, or a future, or humanity at all. There were three of us once, and now there are two and soon there will be none, and that's all there is to say about that.

'There are three of us.' I gesture at the tightly curled ball of fur on Frank's lap. 'Four, if you count Raph.'

She expected that of me, I know. She says nothing.

When Raph comes back Frankie plucks some tissues from the box and sops up her face. They're normal, white, brand name ones, and I wonder if it would really be such an effort for him to pick up the recycled ones instead, right beside the others on the shelf at the shop, and then I feel fatigued, of the situation and of myself. I say, 'maybe we should order a pizza tonight'. The clench grip mood loosens.

We order online. Raph pretends he wants a meat lovers with double meat and a cheese crust and Frankie makes a face and I know it's all to lighten the mood, but I can't muster much of a smile. He concedes instead to a peri-peri chicken, as though chicken isn't meat. Frank and I order from their new plant-based range and are excited at the prospect of eating a pizza with an approximation of cheese on it again. We cycle through Netflix while we wait and pick a Japanese reality show we've watched before because the subtitles mean me and Frank can talk and Raph can follow what's going on.

Only Frank doesn't say much, and neither do I. I feel sad about her lost babies, but in a removed way that perplexes me. Why can't I rustle up some more emotion for my own sister? Why do veal calves upset me so much, but not lost human babies? I'm sorry, little baby, I think.

The pizza arrives and they've put dairy cheese on Frankie's by accident. Raph calls them and they say they didn't, but he assures them that they have, so they say they'll send another but it'll be an hour so we just take the refund and opt for sharing mine between the two of us. The prospect makes my stomach clench in hunger and disappointment but I don't say anything. Frankie hopes no-one at the pizza place gets in trouble and Raph says, 'well, maybe they'll pay more attention to what they're doing next time,' and I feel conflicted about what the right thing is to think. Raph puts Frankie's pizza away in the fridge for his lunch and says, 'Free pizza,' and I think, but at what cost.

On the screen, Ruka tells Kenny and Shohei that he likes Haruka, which is an uh-oh moment because he's supposed to be into Risako. Later, they eat a thick beef curry and cheese naan and I think about how pointless it is to not eat the dairy pizza, how naive to imagine you can opt out of animals labouring and dying for you when labouring and dying is all they do.

The credits roll and the next episode starts to play. We continue watching without acknowledging that we are doing so. Raph gets some dairy-free ice creams out of the freezer, which I love but feel bad about buying because they're owned by a terrible company with no social conscience and come covered in plastic. Raph hands me an ice cream with the benevolent air of someone dispensing a longed-for treat and I pretend I don't feel bad and say, 'Thanks, Raph.' And I'm glad to have the ice cream. The ice cream is delicious.

On screen, Kenny and Haruka go on a date.

'No chemistry,' says Raph, and Frankie agrees. I look at Raph's face illuminated blue in the light of the TV and feel surprised that he knows about chemistry and that he thinks it's important.

It's late by the time the credits roll again and Raph leaps up for the remote to turn it off before we're all trapped into another episode. Frankie yawns. 'Do you want to stay here tonight? I can make up the sofa for you and the missus.' We call Frida that, sometimes. Mrs F, Frou Frou, Fridster, Fridders, which became Fritters, and then Corn Fritters, Corn Dog, etc, etc. She answers to all of them, but with an air of resignation, like someone going along with a really rather tiresome joke.

I would. I would love to shower in their modern bathroom, to sleep in sheets that always smell like fabric softener, to wake to the buzz of the two of them getting ready for work. The smell of toast and the wet waft of Raph's deodorant and all the light coming in through the windows. But after that would be the bus home, surrounded by commuters all going somewhere, the resounding, chilly silence of my apartment when I finally let myself in, turn on my computer, type my transcripts. The resounding silence punctuated only by the whispered lies and confessions of abusers and murderers and people who haven't paid their taxes. You have to get comfortable in the loneliness. Too much time out of it makes it harder to return.

'Thanks, but we'd better go home.'

Raph gives us a lift in his Range Rover, which I love and disapprove of equally. I shower, check the locks and hop into bed, Frida's small, sleek body burrowing into the crook behind my knee almost immediately. All at once, as though they've been waiting to appear the whole night, my eyes fill with tears.

And the motive the State supplied, the basis for the whole thing, was that after Hae broke up with Adnan, he couldn't accept it. He was so wounded by her, and so furious, that he decided to kill her. Prosecutor Kevin Urick told the jury in his opening statement, "He became enraged. He felt betrayed that his honor had been besmirched, and he became very angry, and he set out to kill Hae Min Lee." Or this is from closing, "It was humiliating, what she did to him. Make no mistake about it, ladies and gentlemen. This was not a crime about love, this was a crime about pride."

*

Frankie lies in bed watching Raph hang shirts.

'Just, where's she going in life, you know?'

Frankie doesn't know, and she sifts through her responses to find the right one. Raph hangs a striped shirt, picks up a plaid one, hangs it. They're ironed by the lady downstairs and look stiff and disapproving. She thinks probably Madison isn't going anywhere, per se, but somehow she doesn't think it matters.

'She's young. She's figuring it out.'

'Frank, she's not that young.'

'She's ^[OBJ] twenty-five!'

I just think you should talk to her. Suggest she drops that job and tries to find something that gets her out of the house a bit. I'm not criticising her. I just worry about her. She relies on you so much. It's like you're her only friend.'

'There's nothing wrong with being friends with your sister.'

'I didn't say there was.' He's tired, becoming irritable, she can tell from the angle of his back, the way his shoulder is turned toward her. They've had this argument, discussion, Frankie supposes, so many times. Tonight's version is tired, a well-rehearsed script practised at the end of a long day. 'And that guy she's seeing - it's not normal.'

Frankie can't see Madison as anything other than the chubby girl sitting forlornly in the passenger seat of the car they drove to Sydney. She loves her very much, but with a kind of love that makes her feel sad, and very aware of the finite amount of time people have on earth to spend with one another. Sometimes she smells smells that remind her of Madison - the smell of chopped celery, carrots and onions frying in oil, of sunscreen, of that natural kind of deodorant with essential oils in it - and she feels like her feet have been replaced with weights.

'She's just figuring it out. Give her time.' As she says it, she hears Madison's little scratchy voice in her head as she often does, solemnly intoning, 'But Frankie, time is something we don't have.'

When Raph turns out the lamp and plugs into his AirPods to listen to a podcast she stares at the ceiling, silent and still, thinking about her baby. Their baby. But Raph doesn't get as excited, or as scared. She wishes he could carry the baby, because maybe her excited, frightened body constitutes a hostile environment for a foetus, maybe that's why they keep slipping back into the world from which they came instead of growing and strengthening and eventually joining their parents in the real world. Earthside, the Instagram mums call it. The Instagram mums have so many children, they're greedy with the children, taking them all. They upload long stories with children hanging from their hands, their arms, their boobs, chatting into the camera about products they've purchased, or rundowns on how their newborn is sleeping. Baby managed five hours last night, they'd say, smiling, pulling pouches of yoghurt from huge fridges to distract their toddlers. Frankie and Raph just wanted one, they'd decided one was okay from an environmental perspective. Well, Frankie had decided, Raph didn't think it was up to them to avoid having children for the environment. Raph has little patience for The Environment, especially when it comes to doing things for it that are inconvenient and, in his mind, useless.

‘Well who is it up to, then?’ she asked him, but he didn’t answer. She supposed he meant the Instagram mums, with their baby bumps and bumper prams and kids in high school and primary school and preschool as well, but she knew there was something classist and possibly even racist about that so he probably did too.

She just wanted one baby. She hadn’t realised she was crying again, but she feels one warm tear slide down her temple and into her hairline. What was wrong with her body, that it wouldn’t perform this basic function, this function that women’s bodies have performed since the beginning of time. She couldn’t help but feel like it was to do with her own childhood and her mother’s boyfriend and what he did to them. Her babies can tell, can run tiny, half-formed hands over their mother’s womb and read the trauma living there. And when they read it, when they know what the world is like, they decide they’re having none of it.

Frankie turns on one side and eventually falls asleep, dreaming of wombs like warm red mazes lined with half-formed pink babies, hearts hanging out, beating.

Chapter Seven

I’ve heard Jamie a few times in her apartment. She sings and vacuums and listens to music and chats to people on the phone. I almost feel bad about how well I can hear her, but I don’t want to tell her because it would sound creepy. She wouldn’t know, because I rarely talk on the phone or listen to music and when I watch videos I usually use headphones, so there would be no sound from my apartment.

I’m typing my first transcript of the week when I hear strange noises, like an animal in pain. There’s a woman’s voice - I assume Jamie’s - and then a man’s voice, and a repetitive gasping sound. I realise with a rush of hot embarrassment that she must be having sex. The last tenant only lived there during the week. He was from somewhere else but worked in the city and told me about his daughter sometimes, who went to private school and did many admirable things like debating and tennis. I think he thought I would be interested by virtue of being a woman also, but seemed nice for a man, unthreatening. On the day we had to vote he slipped a ‘how to vote Liberal’ card under my door and I looked at the bright blue paper and felt betrayed. The realisation that he would have been able to hear me having sex through the thin walls was an unpleasant one. He too was a quiet tenant, silent aside from the fumble of his keys in the lock and the occasional muted noise of 7pm TV.

I turned up the sound on my transcript and pressed the play pedal firmly.

He did, yes. He came inside and I got him a drink, a glass of water, and listened to him, and when he felt better he left on his bicycle. That's it. Nothing else happened.

You didn't give him anything other than water?

No, of course not.

You gave him a glass of water, listened to him for a bit. What did he talk about?

Oh, gosh, I can't remember. No, he was upset, I remember that.

He was upset.

Yes.

But you don't remember what he was upset about?

Oh, you know teenagers, they're always upset about something.

Ok. He was upset. Did you attempt to comfort him in any way?

Well, I listened to him.

Did you give him a hug, put a hand on his shoulder, anything like that?

I might have.

Child abuse this morning. I can envision the man in the video too clearly as the perpetrator, his wide, age-spotted hands incessantly creeping. My muscles are tight and my stomach gargles acid. I pull my headphones off and stretch, breathing out for a long time, surprised by how much air was trapped in my lungs. As I breathe, I become aware of the noise again, the high-pitched, rhythmic gasping. Jesus, are they still at it? And then something worse, words, muttered words. The hairs on the back of my arms stand up and I stay very still, staring at the bright blue-white blank of my computer screen. The moment draws out, long and flat and silent. Then a shout. *Don't. Stop. Stop it!* And silence.

For some time I continue staring at the computer screen and the last words I've typed. It's silent now, and as the quiet envelops me the adrenaline begins to peter out. She's probably watching a movie. The sound wouldn't even need to be up very high for me to be able to hear sex noises and shouting. I should tell her this isn't a normal apartment, with insulation and brick walls and a modicum of privacy. It's just a rickety old house where once upon a time a family lived, and now three separate households are squished in, forced to endure the sounds and visitors and cooking smells of each other. When I looked up how much the other apartments are rented for, it struck me how unfair it is that we all share one tiny water heater that runs out so quickly you can never manage to wash your hair and do the washing up on the same night. I should definitely tell Jamie about the water heater. She seems the type of person to use water indiscriminately, without worrying about where it comes from or if it will run out.

The house is still silent. I don't know if I'm supposed to do something, so I don't. I just push the pedal down and carry on, noticing and ignoring the kernel of discomfort at my own actions, at my decision to literally turn away.

You might have, or you did?

God, man, it was ten odd years ago. How am I supposed to remember if I patted him on the shoulder or not?

Right, okay.

The other cop jumps in.

Mr Boyd, I'll remind you that these allegations are very serious, and it would be wise to try and remember details that you may later rely on in court.

No, I didn't bloody touch his shoulder. I didn't touch any of him.

We'll see about that.

My typing lulls me. There are no more sounds, aside from Mr Boyd's voice, which is aged and somehow vulnerable, despite what he's alleged to have done, and the sombre, reassuring tones of the police. I know the police are bad. But in the interviews they're almost always nice, and almost always on the right side. If I was in trouble I could call the police and they'd be nice to me, because I'm white and don't live in housing commission. But I probably wouldn't call them, all the same.

I always wonder what the 'him' of the interview says and how they said it. I rarely type witness statements, so I've never been able to corroborate the allegations set out by the interrogating officer with the victim's actual story. Sometimes I think about what I might allege, if I were to sit in front of a police officer and allege things. I was sitting on his lap on an unknown date, I would say. I was very young and I didn't know about him yet. I was half-asleep and I felt him lift my hand into his mouth and suck on my fingers. I instinctively knew I must remain very still and pretend I was asleep until he had finished. But why were you sitting on his lap in the first place?

I can hear voices from Jamie's apartment again and I slip my headphones off my head and listen carefully. Voices, and then the sound of the bed head bumping into the wall. I slide my headphones back on and turn up the sound.

*

Mr Boyd is a paedophile, in the end. Once they started getting to him and getting him to admit to things my productivity slowed, my brain and fingers needing constant breaks from his confidences. Scrolling on Etsy to distract myself I started thinking about all the people who need breaks and never get them and the panic started inflating my chest before I

could get a handle on it. Slaughterhouse workers. Sweatshop workers. Everyone who worked in the Rana Plaza building for whom death was the only way to stop. With renewed determination I returned to the transcript but had to stop again almost at once when they put forward a fresh wave of allegations from a different date. My productivity is six pages an hour, but it should be twelve, and I'm paid per page so this is bad news for my bank account. In the morning I'll get a terse email from Graham the HR guy asking how he can help me meet my productivity requirements. I don't know, Graham, maybe lower them.

When I worked at the office I used to run into Graham in the lift every day. He was always holding a coffee in a takeaway container, and I felt a cumulative anxiety about the takeaway container that one day led me to say, 'You know, Keep Cups are so much nicer to drink out of than those things.' He looked at me like I was an insect and said, 'If you say so.' and I felt both annoyed and chastened. He always wore the same clothes, a chambray shirt with a tiny brown Ralph Lauren horse embroidered on the lapel and brown chinos. I wondered if maybe he could only afford one shirt, but then one of the girls in the office said he had seven of the same ones, and three pairs of the same chinos, and I wondered if the self-imposed uniform was his contribution to the environmental movement. I told Stefan about Graham's outfits once, just to make conversation, and he said, Ralph Lauren isn't even good, which made me feel repulsed by him and hurt for Graham, which was a waste because I don't even like Graham. Stefan wears shirts from a Japanese company which only sells in one tiny store in the city which doesn't even have a shop front because the people who shop there already know what it is they're getting. I don't know how much they are because they don't have prices on their website but one thing I've learned is if the prices aren't written down you can't afford them. I thought maybe they weren't made in a sweatshop and that's Stefan's contribution to the environmental movement. Stefan said, if you closed sweatshops, all those people would be out of work. I guess it's good to be able to see the positive side of things.

At some stage the transcript is done. My brain feels gooey and soft like it's been steeped in foul water. I clock out and sit, breathing. I could go for a walk. I could go to the shops. I do nothing, sitting with my elbows on the desk. My body is so still I wonder if I'm a statue. I close my eyes. My mum stands in the corner of the room. She smiles at me, a sad smile showing her crooked front tooth and wrinkles fanning from the corners of both eyes. Hello Mummy, I think. Hello darling, she says. What should I do? I ask. Call your sister, she replies.

Maybe I could. Call Frankie and say, do you want to come over, and she could say, ok, let's go to Kmart. Then we could wander the over-bright, deserted aisles picking out

things we don't need but suddenly long for, like candles in brown jars with wood wicks like a rich person might have in their house. But Frankie and Raph play tennis on Monday nights, and then they go home and eat something wholesome with ingredients they already have in their fridge. They stack the dishwasher and wipe things over right after so there's never a sink full of cold dishes with unidentifiable food dried on, and after that they watch one of their shows, or Raph retreats to the study to play games on his computer while Frankie has a bath or a shower or reads a book or does yoga or any of the other things she gets up to. She doesn't just lie around, like me. She's busy. She's energetic.

I bake a potato and microwave the beans and sit on the couch to eat. The first few mouthfuls remind me that I'm alive and halfway through the meal my spirits start to lift. Sometimes I wonder what the world would be like if everyone had enough to eat all the time. People would be kinder, I think, more positive. People wouldn't do as many bad things, I don't think. Sometimes people say they can't not eat animals because eating is all they have left. I don't know what to do about that.

*

After tennis they go to Broadway and get burritos for dinner. The food court is quiet, the shops closed, only a few people like them sitting silently eating, most gazing at their phones. Raph is scrolling with one hand while he manoeuvres his burrito into his mouth with the other, smiling at something.

'What's funny?'

He holds out his phone and she watches a video where a man with floppy hair impersonates Kiera Knightley. Frankie smiles too, despite herself.

'Do you want to go to Kmart?' Raph asks.

'Nah.'

'Sure?' His face is veering toward concern and she laughs.

'Is it worrying to you if I don't want to visit Kmart?'

'I don't know. A bit.'

'I just don't need anything.'

He nods, unsatisfied. Kmart is a running joke between them. He trails after her while she wanders along, saying things like, 'oo, an iron holder!' Or, 'look at these mugs! So cute', or 'we've actually been needing some of these', while heaping some kind of object neither of them have ever thought about or even known existed into his arms to hold.

She knows she hasn't been herself. She felt good while they played tennis, the simplicity of the bright green ball plummeting toward her, the immediate satisfaction of

thwacking it back over the net, the physicality and grace of crossing left to right, left to right, her feet secure and sure in their white sneakers. She beat Raph 3-2.

When they left they noticed a couple waiting for the nets, the man holding hands with a boy of about six who was trying - not very successfully - to bounce the ball on his tiny racket. Raph caught her eye and smiled a sorrowful smile, and the triumph of her win was lost. Kmart, with its neat rows of neat things so beloved by herself and Madison holds nothing for her today, because Kmart is about aspiration, and yearning, and the part of her that yearns is numb.

Later, she surveys her body in the bathroom mirror, the way the light sluices around the curvature of her stomach. Her body every day looks more like what her mother's body looked like when she was alive, when Frankie was a teenager. Frankie remembers when her body was all hard lines, her breasts and the tops of her thighs the only soft thing. When she had that body she was probably highly fertile. When she had that body and she was taking her little yellow pills, and she was a traveller in Europe and Raph was just a tall, red-headed man in beige shorts, sweat patches under his arms, surveying the map on his phone as they walked. Tall, slender, nonchalant, fertile. Now as her body slides into softness, into the body of a mother, she becomes less of a mother with each passing day. The sun rises, Frankie's body softens, the sun lowers, Frankie's body softens, and there is no baby. .

After her shower she applies a mist to her face, a serum, moisturiser, an oil that smells like oranges.. She brushes her teeth, flosses, swills mouthwash around her mouth, and applies two whitening strips. She must not allow her face to sink further toward motherliness while her body is denied it. When she has a baby, she can stop. She can wash her face with water and chuck on some sorbolene cream, like her own mother did, she'll be too busy for skincare. She removes the whitening strip, swishes water around her mouth, bares her teeth in a straight, sad line.

Chapter Eight

I've been watching videos on YouTube and Instagram for two hours. I've watched an influencer and her boyfriend pick up their French bulldog puppy from the airport and bring him home. I've watched the puppy cavort around on the floor, do a wee on the blue and white wee pad and play with a toy shaped like a banana. I check Instagram and the boyfriend has posted a photo where he holds the puppy up to his face and scrunches his nose like a kid

playing at being cute. *Welcome to the family, Roger.* You can't see likes on Instagram anymore. They introduced it to improve user's mental health.

The dog makes me feel bad in my tummy. There are obvious reasons to feel bad about a French bulldog puppy, not least that his or her existence means there's a mother dog out there somewhere with Caesarean scars because they can't give birth the usual way. But there's something else. Something about seeing violence in an action so outwardly soft. A person holding a puppy, loving a puppy, and seeing only the scalpel slice and now the mother alone, God knows where, licking the scar from where her lost babies came. And then there's the more general, the freezers full of euthanized dogs, the pounds and shelters full to bursting, the ugly dogs and the adult dogs and the disabled dogs licking the hands of the vets tasked with killing them.

Tired of myself, I unfold from the couch, pick up a shopping bag and leave the house. Sarah Koenig speaks into my ear, saying, So, this guy said, my friend Adnan showed me the body of a girl in the back of a car? Yes, answers the girl. Do you think he was telling the truth? Sarah asks, Yes, replies the girl.

It's 6.30pm and the air is fresh, too fresh, a slap. The two hours I've delivered into the social media abyss have left me feeling groggy and hungry. As I hobble towards the supermarket it strikes me how many dogs live in my suburb. Every few paces reveals another one, a labradoodle, a sausage dog, a cavalier, a cavoodle, two pugs, a Frenchie. The oodle dogs dominate, and I wonder when that happened. I wonder where all their mothers are. I don't remember ever seeing an oodle dog in the town where I grew up. There were kelpies in Perthville, and mutts, and the occasional Jack Russell or Labrador. I miss Frida, and wish I could bring her with me to the shop. I miss a time when I could take joy from the presence of dogs without wondering where they came from, how much meat they eat, how many carbon emissions they create. I look at the people as they pass me with their dogs and wonder how much they think about the decisions that they make, and I think about myself and the decisions that I make and I feel very tired and I feel tired of being tired like tiredness is all I've ever known.

The supermarket smells like rotisserie chicken, which reminds me of Friday nights at home when Mum got barbecue chicken and white rolls from Woolies as our special treat dinner. Kel wasn't home on Friday nights until after the accident and it would just be me and Mum and Frankie, ripping drumsticks and wings from the bird's inert body and stripping the skin with our hands. Eventually we'd find the wishbone and crack it between us and when I got it I'd sent up a fervent plea to whoever might be listening that Kel would die on the job

and never walk through the door again. And how close my wish came to coming true. Of course, I didn't see the bird's body as being a body then, or the bird's skin as being skin. Animal bodies were invisible to me then.

I text Frankie.

Remember friday night chicken rolls :(

Haha obviously

Miss it

Could try with jackfruit? tofu? seitan?

But it's not the taste of chicken flesh I'm nostalgic for. It's the feeling of eating a meal without anything but simple pleasure, at sharing food with my family and most of all, at being able not to see bodies on every table. She'll be all keen to try and recreate them now, and we'll do a whole thing of making them gourmet and different and it won't be the same and she'll cry about us as little girls and about Mum and she'll say, I wish I did things differently, and I'll say, none of it's your fault, and Raph will say, I told you jackfruit would be shit.

I stare at the chickens under their bright, hot lights. An old man hovers beside me, looking at each in turn as though making an important decision. He picks them up and looks closely at them, weighing them in one hand. He then chooses what seems to be the smallest one and places it carefully in his trolley. He has a packet of single serve UHT milks, some oven-bake chips and a jar of Moccona. He notices me looking and I smile and he smiles back and says, 'They'll be calling me King Henry the Eighth!'

I leave the man and the chickens and go to the noodle aisle. A good tip is you can get some cup noodles and a packet of peas and get a pretty substantial meal from that for about \$2. I'm weighing up different types of cup noodles when my phone buzzes. It's Stefan. I don't like talking on the phone and I have a moment of believing I could simply not pick up before I recognise that his cash will pay for the noodles. I pick up.

'Hey, I'm in Supabarn so I might drop out.'

'Oh, that's all right. Also, hi, how are you?'

'I'm ok. How are you? What's up?'

‘I’m good.’ He draws out the good. ‘I just wondered if you’d be free for dinner tonight? I know it’s late notice, I’m sorry. I could take you out?’

I want to say no and go home and have my cup noodles but I’d also love a free meal so I say ok, sure. Then I go home feeling disconsolate and wanting a simple evening in with a cup of noodles and Frida and instead have to truss myself up, showering, dressing, putting makeup on, apologising to and feeding Frida. He’s pulled up to the kerb, idling the car when I get to the top of the stairs, and I feel guilty about making him wait for me and irritated I have to go at all.

We make small talk in the car as he drives us to a Japanese restaurant on Glebe Point Road. My stomach is empty and I cheer up at the gentle chat and prospect of food. I feel a rush of affection for Stefan which is unexpected and unprecedented, for his bald head and kindly manner, for the way he is always nice to me. Being with him makes me feel like anything is possible, like the world is a big flat space and you just have to choose where you want to go and go there. Some part of my brain which is open to opportunities boots up when I’m with him, as though even the reflection of his money lights up some kind of future for me.

We sit at the restaurant and the waiter slides some menus and a green glass bottle of water in front of us. Usually Stefan pores over menus, pairing dishes with other dishes, but today he glances cursorily at the menu and orders a beer and a ramen, so I do too, and some baby rolls because why not.

He asks me about my day, my work, what kind of transcripts I typed, but doesn’t seem to be listening even as I do my best to make the stories more interesting than they are. He doesn’t make eye contact much. My hungry stomach tightens. Finally, I say, ‘you okay?’

He looks up.

‘Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.’ He picks up a chopstick and examines it. His gold ring glints. The waiter reappears and sets down our bowls, my tofu and cucumber sushi. I start to eat fast as though it’s the last meal I’ll ever be offered.

‘The thing is,’ he says, taking one delicate mouthful of broth and swallowing, ‘I think we might have to end our arrangement.’

The we and the our confuse me. I think for a moment he’s speaking about something at work, or something to do with his family, but then I realise I’m the we and the our. His words float around me like something I can accept or reject, but there’s no doubt in ‘I think we might’, I know that. I look at my sushi and wonder how much it costs. I pick up a sliver of

pickled ginger and arrange it on the baby roll, dunk the roll in soy sauce and lift it to my mouth. It tastes sweet and fresh and cold.

‘Okay.’

‘Lucy and I, well, we’ve been going through a bit of a rough patch, if truth be told.’ His shoulders and facial muscles are relaxing now the conversation has commenced. It strikes me he felt nervous about telling me. I feel like saying, ‘it’s only me. What did you think I was going to do?’ He takes a sip of beer. There is kanji written on the side and the sight of it makes me feel stuck, because all of a sudden I want to go to Japan and I know Stefan’s ending our relationship and that means no money, and no money means trapped.

‘We need to fix it, clearly,’ he’s saying, ‘and we think it’s best if we just focus on each other right now and the kids.’

I chew, swallow, survey the dark puddle of sauce tinged with wasabi bleeding outward on my small plate. I think about how he’s spoken about Lucy in the past, the businesslike way he refers to their relationship, the veiled references to other girls he’s seeing, always girls, never women, insubstantial girls, light girls, girls who can be flicked away like mosquitos.

‘That’s, yeah. I get that.’

‘I am sorry if that causes you any inconvenience, of course. I have loved getting to know you.’

I wonder if he thinks I’m quiet because I’m upset at the end of the money, or at the end of the relationship. He doesn’t understand that the thing with him means more to me than the money or the relationship, it means opportunities, possibilities, it means I’m brave, that I have a future.

‘Don’t worry about me.’ I say. ‘It has been nice.’

We talk about Ruby’s netball game and the difficulty of balancing Saturday sport and Saturday German. Stefan worries it tires her out too much, but ultimately concludes that it’s important for children to know about their culture and learn teamwork. For something to say, I express an interest in taking adult language classes. He urges me to do so and offers to pay for them as a gift. I decline in a polite but definite way. The concept of taking money from him suddenly seems terrible, unethical, criminal. I eat every last scrap of food on my plate and drink every last drop of beer.

When the bill comes he slaps his card onto the leather receipt holder and waves it away. He seems relieved and gregarious as we exit the restaurant.

‘I’ll drive you home.’

‘Actually, it’s a nice night, I might walk.’

‘I’m happy to drop you.’

‘It’s not on your way, and honestly, I’d like the walk.’

‘It’s cold - ’

‘I have a jacket.’

‘Well, all right.’ He stands awkwardly. ‘Take care, Madison.’ He gives me a brief hug and a kiss on the cheek. As he drives away I imagine the route carrying him east, and the quiet, spacious home awaiting him at the end of his journey. I imagine that the house would smell like fresh laundry, and children’s shampoo, and that the parquetry would gleam palely in the lamplight.

Chapter Nine

I stand in the shower under very hot water. A bottle of shower gel I shouldn’t have bought and will probably never buy again stares at me from the floor so I pour some over myself and luxuriate in the sweet-smelling steam. It smells like cherries, like flowers, like places I will never go and things I will never see. Suddenly, every single person in the world seems to belong to a club of people who have made better decisions than me and people who have more money than me. I stand there so long the heat starts fading from the water, the first time I’ve ever spent long enough under the water to run out of hot. In the fogged mirror I see a shape which is me, and as the fog recedes from the edges of the mirror, my face appears, pink, my eyes washed clean, bald like a ferret’s eyes. I long for my mum.

I can’t text Frankie because she won’t understand. She doesn’t know about the money, so she doesn’t know about what the relationship means to me. She’ll think I’m sad because he ended things, and she’ll think I don’t deserve to be sad about that. I’m sad because my lease is up in two months and now I won’t be able to renew, because I felt comfortable, at times, with my ability to buy things, to ‘treat myself’ as they say, and now that’s gone. I thought the world would open up for me, like it does for other people. I hear my own voice chastising me for these thoughts. You can’t go overseas? Boo hoo. Some people have real problems. Silly, spoilt girl. That one was in a man’s voice. Kel’s. Spoilt brat. Then Raph’s voice. ‘So you want some more money? Get some more money. Get a better job, do something with your life, stop complaining.’

But I am doing something with my life. I’m living, peacefully, with my dog. That’s what I’m doing with my life.

My phone vibrates against the toilet seat where it’s propped. Stefan.

Language courses are about \$400 each at CCE. I've sent you enough for three. Let me know how you get on!

That was nice of him, I think. But of course, I'll need that money for other things, now.

I text Frankie anyway.

Dumped lol

What?? By Stefan?

Well I don't have two boyfriends

That makes one of you

He doesn't have any boyfriends

Good one Madison

What did he say?

I pause. I won't give her the satisfaction of saying the real reason, that he's prioritising his family and relationship.

Idk just that its run its course

I make some toast and put Paddington on the TV. I should end my subscriptions now. The transcription will barely cover the rent. I will have to move. Back into a room, sharing with people who think I'm weird, smelling the reek of cooking meat every evening and breathing mould spores. Or I can sign up to the website again, meet someone else, a couple of them even. Make some proper money out of it. That's how the girls who make real money do it, flit from one expensive date to another in just one evening. I've never been good at doing anything.

But men do very frightening things. What's the likelihood of coming across two good ones in a row?

I'll figure it out. I'll just dump this depressing transcription job and get a better one, which pays more. I could probably earn more working at Coles or something. But I went to uni, I can't work at Coles. It's only acceptable to work at Coles while you're at uni, not after you've graduated and have a HECs debt. I'll move further away. But I'm scared to do that. I'm scared to be far from Frankie. She's my only friend.

I can hear a strange, high-pitched noise. I think it must be the fridge and stare at it for a minute before realising it's coming from Jamie's apartment. Frida's sitting up too, staring in the direction of the noise with sleepy, narrowed eyes. She looks at me and I look at her, and her face says something like, did you hear that, and mine says, yeah.

I turn the TV up a bit. After a while I look up Stefan's address on Domain to have a little geeze. I'm certain the photos are of how the house looks now, because Stefan mentioned once they'd leased it while they were overseas for six months and the photos were listed around the time he'd left. I love the sand-coloured floors and the big copper fruit bowl on the kitchen island. I wonder if Lucy bought it. I love how the staircase sweeps upwards from the living room. I can imagine running down the stairs on Christmas morning, to sit by the big glass doors looking out to the pool and grassy garden and pulling the paper from square presents tied with ribbons like how presents in movies are wrapped. I love the tiles in the bathroom, the surprise of the colours, ruby and navy and green. I love the bath's gilt legs and the way it sits beside a low window so you could watch the trees and the sky while you lay in it, submerged and safe. You can just tell from looking at that bath that nothing bad could ever happen in it.

I lock my phone screen and pull the covers over my head. It's completely black under the covers and it's possible I don't even exist at all. It's possible that I'm Ruby, and I've taken a day off school. I'm sitting on the couch with the white throw over my legs, and I'm watching a movie on the TV that's embedded in the wall and flanked on either side by tall green plants in matching pots. I'm drinking a hot chocolate, and it has normal milk in it, cow's milk, because I'm a kid and I don't know about any of the terrible things. Lulled by the comfort of my imaginings, I fall asleep, and dream that I'm back in the house where I grew up, sitting on the floor with Frankie. We're dressed in our school uniforms and we're playing with something, maybe Lego, or some other tactile game. The house is full of screaming, louder than it really was, screaming tearing through every room and through us as well. We're sticking blocks together to make something. The blocks keep sticking to my fingers

and Frankie says, ‘stop ruining it!’ The bedroom door opens and we both pause and stare into each other’s eyes. Frankie’s eyes are round and flat and blank with fear, because the thing from the bedroom is coming for us now too.

*

In the apartment next door, Jamie is slumped in the bath. The water is too cold now and she’s shivering, but no longer crying. He apologised after, said he’d gotten carried away. Too shaky to say much, she’d let him out of the apartment and gone to the bathroom where she drew a bath and filled it with a sweet smelling bubble bath which enveloped her so securely she’s finally starting to stop shivering.

When she was a baby she’d had to be strapped to her mother’s chest as she cleaned houses. Mum had worried about the chemicals going into Jamie’s tiny nostrils and affecting her little lungs, but she was a hale, hearty baby and had never had any problems. ‘You were such a good baby, such a good little girl,’ her mother tells her sometimes with a note of admiration and affection Jamie never felt like she deserved. All she had to do was sit there, after all.

She needs to take ownership of the problem and lay some ground rules for her client. She’d never really done that before, had thought naively that she could handle things in the moment, but the last few times have proved her wrong. If he ‘got carried away’ again she might end up dead. It sounds dramatic, but the ache of her throat serves to remind her that it’s not.

*

In the morning I email work and ask for extra transcripts. Graham replies wondering if I am capable of typing extra transcripts. I pretend I’ve been having audio issues and reiterate my request. After that, my inbox remains empty, dubious. .

Someone’s dog barks and cries all day. The yowling creeps inside me and batters on the walls of my skull. Frida is distressed. She hides under the couch, eyes open, and I wonder if the sound reminds her of her past, of the sounds of the dogs she once lived with or of the crying of her own lost puppies, of carrying them and birthing them and feeding them and finally of their disappearance, carried off in the arms of strangers.

As I feed her I wonder how I’ll continue to afford to buy her the premium food with the sustainability sticker. The sticker probably means nothing anyway, but somehow it makes me feel better, a reminder that I’m at least trying. I make beans on toast for myself to eat while watching YouTube. My favourite YouTubers live overseas and do weekly vlogs of

them going shopping or on holiday. I watch women with glossy hair and Giorgio Armani luminous silk foundation faces go to Paris, to Zara Home, for a weekend at Cliveden House. I love them. I love their glossy faces and their vibrance and the way they've made empires using the currency of themselves. I could watch them all day, and sometimes I do, I watch them unbox clothing hauls and skincare hauls until my brain becomes numb and fuzzy. They unpack thousands of dollars worth of polyester clothing from a handful of brands in their beautiful homes all around the world and they think everything will be alright, everything will be alright. I can think that too. Everything will be alright. I don't have to think about many hands operating many machines to make the clothing. I don't have to think about empty plastic skincare bottles baking under the hot sun among heaped trash. I don't have to think about the miniscule microplastic fibres released from washing machines travelling fast toward oceans and rivers and swallowed by gobbling fish who will then be gobbled themselves. I'm drifting through video after video and I'm perfectly relaxed because I've let go just for a bit of imagining that I can make any difference in the world and it feels incredible.

I'm asleep again and I'm back in the house where I grew up. I'm alone now and the bedroom door is closed. I realise Frankie has been taken. There's something trapped behind the door, an animal crying. I sit and talk soft and soothing until it stops. I know it's my mum. I say, Mum? Mum? I say it out loud and I wake myself up. It's five am.

Chapter Ten

By morning I'm ready to get a grip. I put on some music and start cleaning, washing up, sweeping, taking the recycling out, singing. It's quiet in Annandale, the dog has stopped crying and there's only the far off sound of traffic filtering through the open doors and my own music, bopping with the pleasure of the early two thousands. Me and Frida will go for a walk and have a shower. I'll go to the shops and buy some cheap groceries, a sack of red lentils, one of rice, frozen greens. Maybe I'll start that pile of novels I got from the library, pure pleasure reading about brave women in World War Two, victory red on their lips and seams drawn in gravy browning on their legs. Making it work. I will make it work. I will stay here, on this little patch of earth we've marked out with our possessions, me and Frida.

Graham hasn't replied about extra work. I open my first interview to the sight of a teenage burglar decked out in an Adidas tracksuit and matching cap. I eat some cereal and type and as I type things happen in my head that are unrelated to what happens in the

interview. A flash of the carpet in the room where I grew up, faded beige with brown swirls that mask the filth of many tenants. The face of a girl called Harriet Hall who went to my school. One day she messaged me on MSN and said, I can give you a makeover for \$50, and I said, I don't have \$50 haha, and she said, you don't even have \$50? Another time she said to another girl, Madison's hair is so stringy, does she know how to wash it? The girl told me in that weird way girls have of using confidences as currency. I went home and washed and washed and washed my hair until it was dry as straw and when I was in the shower Kel came in too and -

Bang bang bang. Almost at the same time Frida starts barking, a croaky sound like she's been shocked out of her slumber. Someone at the door. My adrenaline spikes so hard my stomach feels like it'll fall out of my body. Bang bang bang. I creep toward the door. There's a shape there, and as I watch the shadow of a hand lifts to knock again.

'I'm coming.'

I open the door. It's Jamie. Her face is tight and white and she is dishevelled looking, with black make up smudged around her eyes.

'Can you drive?' she asks.

'No, I'm sorry.' I say automatically. 'Where do you need to go?'

'I need to go to the doctor.'

'I can call an ambulance?'

'No! The doctor, not the -' She mumbles something I can't make out, eyes closed, her hand going up to the wall to steady herself.

'Are you - '

'Can I come in, please?' she asks, eyes still closed, mouth moving infinitesimally.

I stand aside and she falls through the door and onto the couch, where Frida stands, stock still, hackles up, growling softly. I close the door and turn to her.

'Jamie, what is it? What's wrong?' Frida has stopped growling and is sniffing at something on the floor. She licks it. I realise it's blood.

Jamie's sitting on the floor of the living room with her back pressed up against the wall. Her expression is anguished.

'I'm bleeding.' She says. 'I can't stop bleeding. I'm bleeding out from inside.' She's speaking in little high pitched puffs of air, like she's half way toward a panic attack. Her fear is tangible but somehow it doesn't set off my own. I sit down beside her, noticing through the haze of strangeness how cold the wood floor is. Without preamble, Frida scoots herself up in between my knees and sits there, ears cocked, trying to make sense of the situation.

‘What’s happened, Jamie? Why are you bleeding?’

‘I don’t know. I think...’ her voice trails off and I can’t hear what she says next.

‘You think...?’ I prompt.

‘I think he did it. Something went wrong. It felt so bad, it really hurt...’ her voice is breaking, words disappearing somewhere in her throat. The fear begins to creep then. The sense of not wanting to hear that so often presents itself when I’m typing interviews with children. My mouth, shrivelled and dry, forms the words I know are expected.

‘What did he do?’

‘He - ’

She turns, looks me in the eyes. Her eyes are wet and her pupils big and black and blank. .

‘Please just help me. Please just take me to the doctor.’

‘I can call an - ’ I start again but she interrupts me, speaking in little gasps of pain.

‘I can’t go to the hospital, Madison. I have a friend, a doctor friend, I need you to take me to her.’

Chapter Eleven

We stand on Johnston Street, waiting. Jamie’s eyes are closed again and her face is wet, like she’s crying without making any noise. She says nothing and neither do I.

Frankie pulls up in the Range Rover and Jamie lurches forward and hauls herself in. ‘Hi,’ she whispers.

I’ve explained everything to Frank on the phone but she still gives me a long, quizzical look as I slot into the front seat and arrange Frida around my seatbelt.

‘Are you all right, Jamie?’ she asks, in the rounded, authoritative voice she uses with Raph’s nieces and nephews.

‘Yes. I’m sorry. Thank you.’

‘Nothing to be sorry for.’ Frank indicates, joins the traffic. I have the address up on my phone and she glances at it every so often for the next direction. We speak softly but Jamie, eyes still closed, face pale yellow, seems dead in the back seat.

‘I’ve never heard of a hospital phobia before.’

‘Well, she didn’t say that, I’m just extrapolating.’

‘Is this doctor real? Or is she like, a witch doctor or something?’

‘I don’t know. She just said a doctor.’

‘What if it’s not safe?’

‘Well, she’s adamant. We have to take her.’

‘Why did she come to you anyway? You barely even know her!’

‘Close by, I guess.’ I shift in my seat. I don’t know why someone like Jamie would approach someone like me for help. I’ve seen her Instagram, I know she has friends, lots of friends, friends like her, with golden skin and big bright teeth. They would have cars.

We’re heading west, and I notice with discomfort the sound of Frankie’s toll tag beeping.

‘I’ll send you money for the tolls.’ I mutter.

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

The traffic is stop-start but finally we’re driving along a suburban street in Westmead, where the houses are large but somehow squat, and no one has front fences so you could just walk right up to the front door and check if it opened. I check the mirror and see that Jamie’s eyes are open, but her expression as closed as before.

‘It’s here,’ she says suddenly, her voice a croak.

Frankie pulls into the driveway behind a shining black SUV.

‘We’ll come in with you.’

‘You don’t - ’

‘Just to make sure you’re okay.’ Frank insisted.

A woman opens the door. She’s in her fifties or even sixties, her silver and grey hair contrasting against olive skin. She says Jamie’s name as Jamie folds into her, shaking with sobs, and then speaks to her in a language I can’t understand and don’t recognise.

‘Hi girls,’ she says to us, in an Australian accent. ‘Come in.’

Inside, the house is bright, the entire back wall replaced with huge sliding glass doors looking out to a large garden with a pool and a trampoline. Two kids in bucket hats are running around, kicking a soccer ball to and fro. As I watch, one of them slams their foot into the ball and it ricochets into the metal fence with a crash. The other kid stops, hands on hips, yelling something I can’t make out. Jamie is sobbing, streams of words I can’t understand coming out of her mouth. The woman has a deep, forbidding line between her eyebrows.

‘Please sit down,’ she gestures at the sofa to us. ‘Feel free to get yourself a drink - there’s a jug of cold water in the fridge.’

We thank her and sit. They disappear down the hall, Jamie’s sobs getting softer until disappearing completely with the click of a door shutting.

Frankie and I look at each other.

‘This is fucking weird.’ She says.

I shrug, looking around the house. The kitchen looks new, a gigantic island facing the living area. It would be nice to sit here and talk while someone cooked. I glance at the kids again, who have abandoned the ball and seem to be investigating something in the far corner of the yard, both squatting with their backs to us, bucket hat heads bowed. I can picture them sitting at the big wooden table doing their homework, their mother helping them in between chopping and frying.

‘How nice would - ’ I start, but Frank interrupts.

‘I wonder when Jamie told the lady she was coming. I didn’t see her texting or anything in the car.’

‘Before that, I guess.’

‘Before she asked you for a lift?’

‘I guess.’

‘I wonder why her friend didn’t just go to her?’

I don’t reply, too absorbed in my pleasing fantasies of home life.

‘Do you think they’re related?’

‘Oh.’ I hadn’t thought about it. I consider. ‘They do look kind of alike.’

‘And they speak the same language.’

‘What was it, do you think?’

‘Arabic or something.’

‘Do you think?’

One of the kids bursts in the glass door. She stops abruptly when she sees us.

‘Hello!’ says Frankie, brightly.

‘Who are you?’

‘Um, our friend is friends with your mum.’

‘My mum?’

The other kid has arrived.

‘That’s not her mum, it’s my mum!’ He seems highly amused by this mistake.

‘Oh, oops.’

‘Where is she?’ the second child demands.

‘They went down there.’

‘The medicine room.’ He says, with satisfaction, as though a suspicion has been confirmed. ‘We’re having a cordial, would you like one?’

‘Um, no thank you, we’re all right.’

They head to the huge fridge and take out a tall jug of water and a glass bottle of something lemony. The fridge spits ice into their drinks. I suddenly want one.

We watch them guzzle their drinks outside and dispose of their glasses into the grass, then start bouncing aggressively on the trampoline. I envy them everything.

It’s a long time until Jamie and the doctor reappear. Jamie’s face is puffy and red, but she seems steadier. She gives us a small smile.

‘I’m so sorry to keep you waiting,’ she says, at the same time her friend says, ‘did you get a drink?’

‘We were fine, thank you though.’ Frankie answers, smiling.

‘How are you?’ I ask Jamie.

‘Oh, I’m all right. Sorry.’

We stand up as they speak to each other, Jamie giving the doctor a hug and a kiss on the cheek and then saying to us, ‘sorry, yep, we can go.’

‘She won’t stay with us, so I hope you’ll keep an eye on her.’ The lady says to me.

‘Oh, sure.’

‘I don’t need any eye, don’t worry,’ Jamie rolls her eyes at me, but the gesture seems forced.

Back in the car Jamie says, ‘Thank you for waiting for me, guys.’

‘That’s okay.’ We both answer automatically, doing up our seat belts.

‘It’s just that, well, I don’t like hospitals much. Or doctors. That’s my aunt, so I just come over here when I’m sick.’

‘I thought you must be related. You look so similar.’ Frank replies.

‘Yeah, she’s my mum’s sister. They both migrated here from Iran when they were quite young.’

‘Is your mum a doctor, too?’ I ask. Jamie laughs, a small, sad sound.

‘No.’

‘So Jamie,’ Frank starts, speaking in her special commanding tone again, ‘did your aunt figure out what’s wrong and give you treatment?’

‘Yeah. Yep. Thanks.’

There’s a pause. I know Frankie wants Jamie to explain what’s wrong. I know Frankie feels it is the least Jamie can offer us in return for helping her. Jamie says nothing.

‘Okay, well if you need urgent medical attention in the night, you’re going to need to go to emergency, all right?’

‘I won’t call you, I promise.’

‘No it’s not that, it’s just that Westmead isn’t close. If you start bleeding out again you need to see someone.’

‘Thanks Frankie, but it’s sorted now.’

Frank doesn’t say anything. We drive along the highway in a stream of after work traffic.

‘I really appreciate the help. I’ll transfer you for petrol, Frankie, if you can send me your details.’

‘No, it’s okay, don’t worry about that.’

‘I really would prefer to.’

‘You can get me a coffee sometime.’

Jamie hesitates.

‘All right.’ They both smile at each other in the mirror. They’ll be friends now and I’ll tag along. Maybe. Otherwise Jamie will return to greeting me when we pass each other and we’ll never speak of this again. I’m not sure which option I prefer.

Frankie tries to persuade Jamie not to go home by herself, but she’s having none of it.

‘Seriously, Frankie, I just want to go home.’

I don’t push her because I assume she’s done with us now and wants to return to her normal life. Frankie is less easily persuaded, less able to believe that someone might prefer to be alone than with other people.

We drop her off and I look at our shared gate for a minute, wondering if I should just go home too. I’ve spent time with Raph and Frankie recently, so it might be an imposition to go there again, but their apartment will be warm and there will be food and the TV rolling in the background. There’s a car parked in front of our house, and I don’t know anything about cars but it’s sleek and white and reminds me of Stefan’s, which reminds me I only have two friends in the world and they’re both here in the car. I don’t go home.

‘That was so weird.’

‘I mean, yeah.’

‘She’s so weird, honestly.’

‘Is she? I think she’s kind of nice.’

‘She’s just sort of, blank.’

I think about this for a minute. I recognise blank as a descriptor that has been used about me before.

‘Maybe you just expected her to be more like how she is on Instagram.’

‘No, she’s exactly how she is on Instagram. I expected something different.’

I stroke Frida’s back and watch the houses go past, trying to glimpse the comforting scenes of domesticity taking place inside the screen doors and unshuttered windows. Christmas time is the best time for window gazing, when so often you can see the trees at the end of the hallways already wrapped in tinsel and surrounded by presents. There’s not much to see tonight, it’s cold and most people have their doors shut and their blinds down.

‘It’s something about her voice.’ Frankie says, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel as she drives, a habit which annoys Raph but which I find familiar and soothing. ‘She has one of those like, Lebanese accents.’

‘Does she?’

‘I don’t know. I think so. The way she says things reminds me of my boss, you know, Hala.’

‘Hala of the ballet flats.’

‘Yeah.’ Frankie laughs. Hala always wore black ballet flats every day and at every work event. One day there was a special event at the office and she arrived wearing beige ballet flats with white bows on them, which Frankie and I henceforth referred to as the special-occasion ballet flats. It doesn’t sound that funny, but boy did we laugh. Now every time I see a pair of beige ballet flats I smile.

We walk into the apartment to find Raph chopping garlic and warming oil. The aroma makes me realise how hungry I am. Frankie feeds Frida, adding in special bits and pieces for her, chopped carrot, a bit of kefir, while I have a shower and dress in a spare pair of Frankie’s pyjamas. I find myself wrapped up in the smell of my sister, her shampoo and laundry powder and moisturiser. I feel more securely myself than I ever do alone. Frankie tells Raph about our strange afternoon and he is bewildered, both at Jamie and at us, for not simply speaking sense to Jamie and taking her to emergency. ‘Did she get blood in the car?’ ‘Of course not, we sat her on a towel.’ I flick through the channels and settle on one of those shows where good looking people say things and then the producers play recorded laughter in the gaps between sentences. Ha, ha, ha.

‘Are you hungry, Mad?’

‘Yes.’ I wonder if there will be leftovers, and if they will offer for me to take them home.

‘No-one will find her.’ Frankie sits down beside me. ‘I hate this show.’

‘What? It’s so funny.’ Says Raph. .

‘No, it’s not.’ We say together, but we continue watching as we eat our pasta.

A hot girl dressed to look like an ugly girl says something. Ha, ha, goes Raph. Ha, ha, ha, goes the TV. The pasta is fragrant and warm and fills the shrivelled bezoar of my stomach too quickly, but I go on eating. A fat man wearing a little headband and sweating very hard runs on a treadmill. Ha ha ha, goes the TV. I look at Frank to see if it's funny, but she's scrolling her phone and not watching. I wish suddenly I knew if things were funny on my own. I see myself in my mind's eye as Raph must see me, a sombre person taking up space on his couch, a sad-faced leech. I put my bowl down on the coffee table.

'Had enough?' he asks.

'Yes, thanks.' I could cry.

Frida and I stay on the couch, curled into each other and breathing puffs of air into each other's faces. I sleep deeply and dream of nothing. Raph drives us home in the morning on his way to work, even though I know my house is in the opposite direction to his office. I wonder if maybe I'll have a friendship with Jamie, now we've driven her to someone's house in Westmead and waited for her to be examined, and that makes me feel stressed and tired. She will expect me to 'hang out', and to have things to say. I glance at her door as I pass, but it's shut.

Chapter Twelve

Mate, look at me. I'm a big guy. She's, what, five two? If, if, if I'd done that to her, she'd be dead.

Ha! I open up my domestic bingo sheet and jubilantly tick the box that says, POI says 'if I hit her she'd be dead'. Almost a perfect match.

Graham replied. He must say he's surprised I manage to meet my productivity requirements so suddenly, and is willing to offer an extra transcript per day on a trial period. I can afford rent *and* food now, which is good. Today I have domestic violence, domestic violence, and aggravated sexual assault. I have a system where I type as fast as I can for as long as I can until my wrists hurt so much I can't type anymore, and then I set a timer for five minutes where I'm allowed to browse websites, watch YouTube or even add things to shopping carts, but not actually buy them.

This time I open a pet adoption site I like to browse. It lists all the dogs and cats and hamsters and other animals needing to be adopted in Australia. Each animal has a photo, where the photographer has tried to make them look appealing and adoptable, and a write-up about their personality and special needs like, Jackson is a lovely boy but because of a sad

background is wary of men. Aren't we all, Jackson, I think, wishing I could adopt him and bring him to live in my cave, but Frida would not approve of another dog, especially not a man one. Frank and I look through them all sometimes because they want a dog too and Raph says things like, 'the problem with rescue dogs is they have so many problems,' and then I say, 'whose fault is that?' and Raph replies, 'not mine!' and Frankie closes the tab and changes the subject. I know I am annoying to have around.

I like to keep an eye on how many animals are available for adoption at any one time, in the hopes that one day I'll see a downward trend. Today there are one thousand, one hundred and five homeless dogs in New South Wales, some very old, some with disabilities and behavioural problems, some hard to place breeds like pit bulls and dingoes. Mia the staffy has been up for months. *Looking for love*, reads her byline. *Mia has had a hard start to life. She was rescued from a puppy mill where we believe she has lived all her life. Mia was pregnant when she came into care and has since proven herself to be a good and loving mum to seven healthy puppies, which have all since been adopted. Mia is a big softie, but is very frightened of strangers and we don't think she has ever been socialised with other people or animals. Mia needs a home where she is the only dog and where she can learn how to live a normal life.*

I check on Mia regularly. Once she had 'on hold' over her pictures, but a little while later that was gone and she was just 'available' again. She's a beautiful girl, grey and white with a big silvery head and light coloured eyes. I wonder how many puppies she's had over her life, and if they're all happy and safe or if they're in shelters too. I showed Raph and Frankie Mia's puppies when they were up for adoption and Raph said, 'Nah, we don't want a staffy. Maybe a Golden Retriever, or a Labrador or something.' Now every time I see a Golden or a Labrador on the website I send it to them but there's always something wrong - too old, health issues, not house trained. 'But all dogs get old,' I argued, 'all dogs need vet treatment and training.' 'Madison, leave it.' Frank had replied, in her warning voice that meant I was pushing it and should stop right away. I wish they would adopt Mia.

I tick off a few more boxes on the domestic violence bingo sheet and put some pasta on to boil. While I eat my lunch I think about the house in Westmead, the garden with the trampoline and the fridge churning out ice on command. I think some more about what it would be like to be a kid growing up there, and feel annoyed when my phone buzzes, knocking me out of my reverie. With a sense of incredulity, I see that it's Jamie, messaging me through Instagram, and that she's followed me too. She asks me if I'm busy in the

afternoon, if I want to get a coffee or go for a walk. I feel nervous as I say, sure, and later, with an odd sense of being seen for the first time, I walk out of my door and in through hers.

She gives me a hug and she smells nice, that fresh cut grass and perfume scent I noticed when I first met her. She's wearing a matching tracksuit in chocolate brown and her hair smells nice, like it's been freshly washed. Beyond the hallway there's a living room with a big white sofa and a soft white rug. There's something inviolable about someone with so many white things in one space, some sense of being worse than them, more human, or maybe less. I stand awkwardly, not wanting to sit on the couch and dirty it.

'Thirsty? Tea? Coffee? Juice?'

She stands by a set of three designer appliances, coffee maker, toaster and kettle, which cost about the same as two week's rent for me.

'Um, a coffee would be nice.'

'Ok, small thing, I'm actually out of coffee.'

'Oh, tea then. Thanks.'

'One other small thing, I'm not entirely sure how to use my tea maker.'

'Oh, um, what kind is it?'

'It's like a weird, ethical one. See - '

She shows me a tea strainer. I look at it for a second, frowning a little, not sure if she's making a joke.

'It's supposed to be like, a metal bag, I think. But I have no clue how to get the tea inside.'

I take it from her.

'I can do it for you.'

'Really? Oh my god thank you.'

She watches as I click open the lock function at the side of the tea strainer and open it.

'Wow. You'll have to show me how to do that.'

I nod, dying to message Frankie.

We sit on the sofa together, sipping our tea.

'How are you feeling?'

'Much better, thanks.' She grins at me, big white teeth. The crying girl of yesterday is gone.

'That's good!'

'Sorry, that must have been so weird for you, me turning up on your doorstep.' She laughs. 'It just came out of nowhere. My aunt, Mitra, she thinks it's a hormonal thing. Early

period, or ovulation, I dunno. It just gave me a shock.’ She gazes at her phone while she chats, then glances up at me again. ‘Was Frankie mad about having to drive me all the way out there?’

‘Oh, no. Not at all. She didn’t mind.’

‘Oh, I need your bank details so I can give her money. Can you send them?’

‘She doesn’t want money, honestly. It’s fine.’

‘Well, if you’re sure.’ She sips her tea. ‘I broke up with my boyfriend this morning!’ She says it quite brightly, as though she’d been casting around for something to say, and came upon the perfect topic.

‘Oh, no, I’m sorry.’

‘Nah, don’t be.’

‘Was it a - ’ I’m about to say mutual break up, but tail off.

‘It wasn’t like, planned.’ She replies. ‘I was just over it. You know when they start to feel like your child or something?’

I nod. A lie.

‘It was like that.’

‘Ah.’

We sip our tea. I feel aware of all of my inadequacies, of the fact that I have nothing to say, ever, to anyone.

‘Are you seeing anyone?’ she asks. I think about the Bechdel test, where women in movies and TV shows always talk to each other about men.

‘No.’

‘Are you gay?’

‘No!’

‘There’s nothing wrong with being gay.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘What’s your deal then?’ Jamie’s tone is polite, curious, like my life is interesting.

‘Well, I just...’ I tail off. ‘I had a boyfriend once. Just not, you know, for a while.’

‘Is that the guy who comes over to your house?’ She doesn’t meet my eye as she says this. I feel embarrassed; that she’s seen Stefan, tall and bald and pale white, coming into my apartment as though he’s someone I might actually be attracted to.

‘Oh, that’s, my dad.’

She looks at me like she knows this isn’t true.

‘Well, not my real dad, my stepdad.’

‘Ah, ok.’

She sounds highly suspicious. Now I’m scared she thinks I’m having sex with my stepdad. An uncomfortable irony. ‘He just um, came over to help me change a lightbulb.’

She sips her tea.

‘The lights in this place, you know, they’re weird.’

‘Downlights.’ Now it’s her turn to be superior.

‘Yeah well, I didn’t know how to change them, so.’

‘Ok, well, I can show you next time, if you want.’ She’s smiling because this conversation’s dumb. She’s probably thinking about texting someone to laugh about it later. I change the subject,

‘So, what do you do for a job?’

She puts her tea down and picks up her phone again.

‘Well, I’m an influencer, actually.’

‘Wow!’

‘Yeah, it’s like, a weird job, but it’s pretty fun.’ She glances at me, expression wary. ‘It’s hard too, like, you have to be very self-motivated.’

‘Mmm, I can imagine.’

‘And there’s a lot of, like, hatred? People write horrible stuff to me all the time.’ She says this as though, if I was feeling bitter about her seemingly easy job before, the idea that she is regularly abused online will make me feel better.

‘That’s horrible, Jamie.’

‘Ah yeah. Perks of the job. Actually, I’ve started doing Only-Fans now.’

I make a noise which I hope imparts that I’m impressed, and non-judgemental.

‘Yeah. I was doing a bit of escorting anyway, just for someone I’d already met, and I thought, why not do it professionally.’

‘Makes sense.’

‘You know what Only-Fans is, right?’

‘Uh, yes, I know what Only-Fans is.’

‘Are you judging me about it?’

‘No! Of course not. I’m like, a feminist, obviously.’

She slips off the couch and over to the fridge.

‘So where’s Frida?’

‘Just at home. She doesn’t like being out too much in the cold. She’s more of a summer girl.’

‘Oh, me too, Frida,’ She says, inspecting one of her long, pink nails and then chewing it.

‘Are those acrylics? Aren’t they hard to bite?’

‘These are SNS. And yes, they are. You can crush them between your back teeth, like -’ she angles her nail so it rests on one side of her molars and bites down. There’s quiet for a moment, then a crunch. She shows me the nail, a long crack down the centre, the top crumbled. ‘And then you can just, like, flick them off.’ Again, the nail in her mouth, she forces her front teeth underneath the fake nail, pulls upward, and spits it onto the pavement. It’s kind of disgusting.

‘Aren’t they expensive?’

‘Fuck yeah. But you know, it’s stress relief. Some people do therapy, I do nails.’

‘Maybe you should try therapy.’

‘Excuse you.’ But she’s laughing, and I feel chuffed.

‘Do you want something to eat? I’m kind of peckish. I could fix us a snack?’ She rummages around in the fridge, which is double the size of mine, shining silver. ‘I’ve got avocados, cheese, what’s this - tzatziki, I think I only opened that a little while ago - ummm these chia cookie things that are supposed to be healthy but they taste really rank if I’m honest, maybe not those. Oh, I’ve got all these leftover chicken wings actually - we could have a little picnic!’

The moment has come.

‘I’m actually a bit hard to make lunch for.’ I begin.

‘Picky? Me too! We could order something?’

‘Well, actually,’ My nervous heart beats faster. ‘I’m vegan.’

Her eyes widen and she slams the fridge door shut. ‘No way! That’s so cool! I’ve always wanted to go vegan!’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, like, I just love animals, you know, last year, maybe the year before, I watched this documentary on Netflix and was like that’s it, we’re going vegan, bought all the stuff and everything, but my ex, he was just like, so anti, so grumpy, and honestly it was hard! Like, so much respect. Like, I don’t know how to make a meal without cheese. I put that shit on EVERYTHING.’ She grins at me with all her bright white teeth and I chuckle, weakly.

‘Well, I just eat vegan cheese. When I can afford it.’

‘Yeah, but they’re so expensive, right. What do you, like, eat?’

‘Just, you know, lots of things.’

‘But like, no fish?’

‘No.’

‘No seafood at all? What about oysters? They’re barely alive.’

‘Yeah, I just don’t really, like, I don’t think I’ve ever been offered oysters. So it’s, it’s not hard to not eat them.’

‘Right, sorry. I bet you get asked this kind of thing all the time.’ She smiles again. ‘I guess the biggest thing I don’t understand is why they’re always bringing out all these like, vegan meat things. Like, I was in the supermarket last week and I saw these vegan chicken schnitzels? I was like, yeah, like a vegan wants to eat a schnitzel.’ She laughs.

I giggle too. ‘Ah, I like them.’

‘Oh? But, like, ok, why?’

‘Well,’ I say, and I try to sound as though I’ve never said this before, as though it’s something I only just thought about, ‘I didn’t go vegan because I don’t want to eat schnitzels. I went vegan because I don’t want to hurt animals.’

‘Right, right. Of course, and same.’ But at the word ‘animals’, something shifts. She pulls back, afraid of a lecture.

‘Hey, I should cook for you sometime. I make this great vegan dish, it’s like noodles but made out of zucchinis?’

Zucchini noodles are what people eat when they want to lose weight. Wheat and rice noodles are already vegan.

That sounds great!’ If she ever invites me for dinner, I’ll suggest we order Thai.

‘So, a walk?’

‘Okay!’

She goes to change. I take the opportunity to text Frankie swiftly.

I’m at Jamie’s place are u jealous

Hahah maybe I would have been before yesterday

What are you doing there

We’re about to go for a walk

She just offered to ‘fix me a snack’

Your worst nightmare

Yeah had to say the v word. She was very concerned about how I can be alive when I don't eat cheese

Standard

Jamie reappears and I slip my phone back into my pocket. We amble out of the house, talking about Frankie, who Jamie thinks is 'super nice'. I don't want her to see inside my house, which is messy and dark, so I dart in to get Frida while she waits at the door.

Jamie's wearing a seamless activewear set in very pale grey and a Nike cap and sneakers. I am soft and old in my work outfit of faded Kmart leggings and big t-shirt. Frida's wearing her favourite jumper because there's a wind. She declines walking, opting to slide into her bag and watch the world from there. She looks frail and old, with a certain kind of toughened wisdom in the set of her snout, and I feel a curl of fear that one day she will die.

'Where did you get her from?' Jamie asks, watching Frida.

'Well, bit of a weird story -'

'Oo, my favourite kind.'

'- but basically Frankie and I were picking up the couch from a lady from Gumtree, not that one - ' I gesture back towards our apartments - 'a really shitty old sofa bed I used to have which literally caved in when you sat on it... anyway. We went to pick it up and the lady was moving and while we were trying to get it out of the door this little dog appeared out of nowhere and ran out the door, like, as if she was trying to make a break for it. The lady got all mad and ran out and grabbed her and chucked her back into the laundry where turned out she'd escaped from, and was, you know, just complaining about the amount of dogs she had, because she had all these staffies out the back too, they were barking the whole time we were there. So she said she'd gotten Frida before she met her husband, and the husband had the staffies, and all the dogs hated each other, so Frida had to live in the laundry. And she said she was going to be putting her on Gumtree too but just had been putting it off, felt bad about it or whatever.'

Jamie made a noise somewhere between outrage and pity.

'Me and Frankie just looked at each other and Frankie says we'll have her, and I thought she meant for her so went along with it... I mean, I would have anyway, really. But

the lady agrees if we pay her three hundred, so we get money out, pay her and head off with Frida.'

'Wow.'

'Yeah. Well, we're in the car and Frankie was basically like, there, now you've got a dog, and I was like, no no, YOU have a dog, but there was something about Frida, the way she was hunched on my lap...' I remember it so clearly. Frida, smelly and dirty, her spine prominent even through her long hair, sitting stiffly without making eye contact with either of us, a stance which I recognised as fear rather than indifference. We went to the pet shop and got food, a bed and some shampoo. She ate her food so fast we wanted to give her more but the internet said not to, so we put her in a warm bath instead and then dried her with my hair dryer. She was a little snappy and her breath stank and she had matts behind the ears and in the crook between her chest and her legs but later, when Frankie had gone home and it was just me and her hanging out on the couch, she nestled in beside me and surveyed the room with suspicion, like she'd decided whatever was going on here, she was counting on me to help her through it. And I have, since then, and I've counted on her too.

'...I dunno, I just knew she was my dog and I was her person.' I finish.

We walk fast, and conversation is easy. Jamie tells me about her friend who runs an animal shelter and for whom she 'does socials', and about her mum who lives somewhere I recognise as being far away but unsure as to in which direction. Every week she meets her mum at Parramatta Westfield and they have lunch and go for a walk or go for a shop or see a movie. 'It's the one time of the week where I feel like I can remember who I really am,' she says.

I tell her a bit about my mum too, and she seems genuinely sad that my mum is dead. She looks me in the eye and says, 'Madison, I'm sorry,' and my nose itches at the back. She's normal. Nice. A normal, nice person, and she thinks I'm normal and nice too.

When we say goodbye outside her house she says, 'oh, I was wondering - I'm going to the dog rescue on Saturday to take some photos of the dogs. Are you free? Do you want to come?'

'Oh, yeah, that sounds fun!'

'Amazing! They've got a heap of new puppies at the moment so I said I'd go get some cute photos. It'll be more fun if you come too!'

I can't think of anything more fun than going to hang out with puppies, but I'm chuffed she wants me to come too.

‘How about that, Frida,’ I say, as I close the door behind us and hang up Frida’s bag. She shakes off and trots to her water bowl, ready for a long drink. ‘Maybe we just made a friend!’

Chapter Thirteen

Many people accuse Jamie of being controlling. Her mother, her friends, her boyfriend, now ex-boyfriend.

‘You always think you know the best thing for me,’ he said, his cheeks flushed. ‘You don’t. I know the best thing for me, because it’s my life.’ She felt annoyed at him, so annoyed at him. ‘Ruin your life, then, if you want to,’ she replied. Even Stefan sometimes betrays a flicker of irritation when she suggests things to him, things that would improve his life. ‘You know, lots of girls would date you. You don’t have to pay them. You just need to leave your wife.’

It’s annoying, how willing people are to be unhappy. Her neighbour, Madison, is the perfect example. She wanders about so disconsolately, constantly downcast, slumped shoulders and fearful expression like something’s just about to go wrong. She feels instinctively that there’s something off about Madison, something a bit odd, but she doesn’t mind it, in fact it’s refreshing to be around someone who isn’t influencing, who isn’t anything like an influencer. She wants Madison to embrace the weird, to wear only Gorman dresses and chunky socks with sandals, to cut her dull hair into something a bit off beat, maybe one of those bobs with the asymmetric fringe which will fit perfectly with her carrying-a-cranky-old-dog in a bag aesthetic. She should take the dog to the dog park – does she do that already? – maybe even instigate conversations with other people there, people who can become friends or even lovers. She itches to brand manage Madison, to strategise her into a new life.

But Madison, like so many other people in Jamie’s life, seems like she will be resistant to change. As they walked back to their building Madison told her about her transcription job, detailing how depressing it could be, how so many of the crimes were borne of plain old misogyny, how bored she found herself becoming even in the face of other people’s trauma. ‘It sounds like you need a new job,’ Jamie said, pragmatically.

‘Oh, but I like working from home, and it’s easy you know, just typing. I can do it.’

‘I’m sure you can do more than just typing.’

‘I’m good at cleaning up dog poop, too.’

‘Don’t be so dismissive of yourself,’ responded Jamie, feeling irritated. ‘You can do whatever you want. Whatever you want.’

‘Yes, I have a lot of privilege,’ Madison replied, sounding anxious and bothered.

‘No! Don’t turn it into being a big woke thing! I just mean you’re young, you’re pretty, you live here, you have so much time and you can do anything you want.’

‘So much time...’

Jamie changed the subject after that. Her own mum was resistant to improvement too. Jamie had wanted to overhaul her wardrobe, get her to move somewhere nicer, go to a hairdresser instead of doing a home dye job, but Mina hadn’t wanted to. She’d claimed to like where she lived, to like renting - ‘Michael, he comes to help me when I need, I can’t do without Michael’. As Michael had been collecting rent from her mother for fifteen years Jamie considered it his job to help maintain the place when it needed it, but Mina didn’t see things like that, like everything was transactional. ‘He is kind,’ she insisted. So she continued living in the small, dark apartment where Jamie had grown up, on a street with no trees where teenagers congregated to smoke and drink around the building’s garage in the evening. Well, when Jamie had enough to buy a place, her mother would have no choice but to move in with her. She’d build one of those granny flats in the backyard, or get that company to turn a shipping container into a gorgeous, sunny studio, and there’d be no rent to pay so Mina wouldn’t have to work, and maybe Jamie would be married and would have a kid and the three of them - oh, the four she supposed, the baby would need a father - could sit outside together every afternoon taking tea in the sunlight. That’s what she was working for. And she would get it.

*

I’m sitting in front of my computer staring at a frozen image of two cops and one suspect, listening to Serial. It feels more legitimate like this, like I could be working, even though I’m not. I even type bits of it sometimes, and that feels good.

I’m nearly at the end again and I don’t know, still, if Adnan killed Hae. In this episode a kid calls Sarah to tell her that Adnan always picked him for team sports, even though he was chubby and not very good. He says Adnan stood up for him when kids would pick on him for not being athletic. Sarah says that someone told her Adnan is the kind of kid who stood up when you came into the room, as though that’s evidence of him not being someone who killed his girlfriend. She says someone told her that Adnan stole money from the mosque, as though that’s evidence of him being someone who killed his girlfriend. But

neither of those things mean anything, except that Adnan was a human who was horrible and nice at the same time. It doesn't mean he didn't kill Hae.

Jamie texts me, reminding me about going to see the dogs tomorrow. I reply, OK, sounds good.

'Do you want to come?' I ask Frida, who lifts her head from her chew toy and looks at me intently. 'Do you want to make friends?'

She licks her lips, returns to her chew.

I begin to type and as I type I think about dogs, about the friendships you can foster with them, about what you can offer them and what they can offer you. I try to stop thinking, focusing instead on the screen where a tiny girl is crouched by a little table, colouring in. I can hear the whisper of her pencil across the page, can just make out the thick black lines of the cartoon she's colouring. The policeman has one of those singsong voices they use sometimes to talk to kids.

So, Hayley, do you remember what we talked about before we put the camera on?

(NO AUDIBLE REPLY)

*So, do you remember, I introduced myself, I said I'm -
David.*

- a police, yes, that's right, I'm David, good job. And do you remember I asked you if you were happy to talk to me by yourself today?

(NO AUDIBLE REPLY)

Now, Hayley, just for the recording, can we use our big girl voice while we're talking? Can we answer in a big voice today?

Yep.

Thanks Hayley. Now, while we're talking today, I'm going to be writing some things down, OK, I'm writing things down because what you have to say today is very important. But even though I might be writing things down that doesn't mean I'm not listening to you, ok?

(NO AUDIBLE REPLY)

Poor kiddo. You know, if you see a child on the screen, it's going to be worse, harder to write down, sadder that it happened. But why? Why is something sadder when it's happened to a kid, rather than to an adult? Do kids hurt more than adults? Do they suffer more?

So I can see you're nodding your head up and down, does that mean, yes, no, or something else?

Yep.

OK, thank you Hayley. Now can you tell me what you came here to tell me about?

When she speaks, it's in an even smaller voice. A voice a bit cracked, with shame, or embarrassment, or just lack of use.

About the touching.

Frankie wrote Kel a letter when she was overseas. She must have felt braver with an ocean between them, or maybe Raph encouraged her to do it, like how people always encourage you to write things down to help you get over them. Well, I write sad things down all day, but I've never felt like that's made them less terrible. Frankie wrote that he destroyed our childhoods and that she blamed him for Mum dying. She emailed me a copy and I read it with my eyes half shut to give some space between the sighting the words and the feeling of them. I didn't cry or anything. I didn't even feel that bad. I just felt sad for Frank and her pointless, pathetic missive that read as a validation, rather than an accusation. I wanted to write him a note too, on the end, saying, she's wrong, you didn't destroy anything, you mean nothing, I never think about you. She forwarded me his reply too. He said, 'I'm sorry, Frankie, to you and your sister,' only he wrote it 'im sorry frankie to you and your sister', and then he killed himself. I mean, I don't know how long after he killed himself, but it can't have been more than a few months until Frankie saw on Facebook and told me about it and she didn't even seem triumphant, just upset, as though she had killed him, and maybe she did in a way.

About the touching, OK. So what do you mean when you say, the touching?

The touching Uncle Scott does to me.

I always imagine the happenings of my videos taking place in our old house. I can see it in my mind's eye even as the computer glares blue over my face, as my fingers find the keys, black and white, and type them into an unpleasant script. Our house, a bit run down on the outside, but no more so than any of the houses on our street. Behind the front door was the living room, with a couch, a mattress on the floor, a TV on an old cabinet piled with

things and shedding plastic from one side. The cramped kitchen with its brown tiles and dark grout; the bathroom, a bathtub, showerhead, toilet and basin. The bathroom was always dark because there was only one small, fogged window high up above the toilet, and there was always mould growing on the back of the door and on the sides of the toilet. When the little girl talks about her uncle touching her wee-wee in the bath, it's my old bath it happens in.

Frankie was horrified when I got this job, and fair enough really. From an outsider's perspective I suppose it's a bit masochistic. I'd thought I might be typing car chases, drug busts, murders. I'd thought it would be like watching a crime drama all day. Turns out crime isn't like on TV, it's just boring and sad.

Inside your wee-wee, ok. So, Hayley, do you have another name for your wee-wee?
(NO AUDIBLE REPLY)

They want her to say, vagina. They want her to say, penis. They want her to point at the place on the drawing where the vagina or the penis is, where they were touched or invaded. It won't stand up in court unless you know the right words and can put a circle around where the penis went. Knowing the right words is important in getting a conviction. Knowing the right words is important in getting people to believe you. But knowing the right words has nothing to do with the feeling of anything.

I should get another job, like Jamie says. But I'm so tired, so tired. I make some toast.

Someone's shouting in Jamie's apartment, a man, I think. The door slams loudly and I drop my toast on the floor, vegemite side down. I peer out the window just quickly enough to see a tall figure, jeans and a hoodie and sneakers with white soles bolting up the stairs and out of sight. Her boyfriend? Her brother? But she didn't mention a brother.

I scrape the side of the toast that touched the ground and sit down with it, giving in to the memories as they descend like fog. Kel will be home soon, she'd said, and he was, smelling like he always did of cigarettes and sharp, sour sweat. He made coffee and sat next to me on the couch and when he yawned I held my breath. The TV looked at us and we looked at the TV, a gabbling witness in a room of silence, channel seven breakfast still on and Kocie laughing, wiping his eyes behind his glasses. Kel was nervous, his hand shook as he picked up mine and guided it to his thing standing up inside his thin underpants like it was proud of something. The silkiness of it as unnerving as the hardness. Come on, just how I told you to, he said, in the wheedling voice he used when he was trying to be nice to us.

I focus on the floor, my own floor in my own apartment, the wood I've swept and tended to and felt a sense of ownership over since I moved in here. I let myself step sideways. I think about something disgusting, something distracting, the bacteria on people's teeth, the bacteria under my nails which I chew. People say animals' minds don't work like how ours do, that their lack of human language signifies a lack of imagination. They say it like it's a good thing, but it's not. Imagination lets you step away. When the bad things happen you can unlock doors and flee through them and barely feel the hot, solid thing in the place where there should be only you. You can't escape the building, but there's freedom in that movement. I hope animals can close their eyes and escape the cages, the needles, the barrels of scalding water, the white-suited men and women, observant and impartial. I hope at the moment their throats are cut the cows and pigs and lambs and goats and chickens and ducks and horses and geese and turkeys and sheep can leave before the life spills from them, as I would be able to, as I have been able to.

After, I stood in our shabby little bathroom scrubbing my traitorous hand with soap, then lugged Pippa into the room I shared with Frankie which had a door, but not a lock, and sat with my back to it until Frankie got home. She ran inside and said, did he do anything? And because I'd not had to follow through, because the only hole he'd violated was the one made by a reluctant, half-closed fist, I shook my head no and was rewarded by her shoulders dropping, her smile as though we'd won, somehow.

I look around for Frida, wanting a cuddle or even just a glance. But she's busy, trotting about outside, her tail curling up contentedly as she does whatever it is she's doing. As I sit there, I get to wondering if they do kill all those animals with knives or some other way. I Google it.

Chapter Fourteen

It was surely too early to be able to tell. Frankie took her mug of coffee over to her friend's desk and said, 'Can you smell this for me?' Maryam looked at her with suspicion. 'Why?'

'Just tell me what it smells like to you.'

She smelled it.

'It smells like coffee.'

Surely too early to tell. But she texts Raph and her fingers are shaking slightly.

my coffee smells funny
off milk?
no like, it smells FUNNY
maybe don't overthink it too much. Get another coffee. Xx

She didn't get another coffee. She answered some emails at top speed and then did some Googling. Feeling self-conscious, as though she was acting the part of someone who thought she might be pregnant, she placed her damp palm on her shirt and let it sit there for a moment.

*

I meet Jamie outside the building.
'Where's Frida?' she says, looking disappointed.
'She doesn't really like other dogs.'
'Oh.'

We get into the car and greet the driver. I never really know whether I'm supposed to speak to the driver, whether they're replying to me to be polite or whether they think I'm rude if I don't try, but he saves me anxiety by muttering into his phone in a language I don't recognise. (SPEAKS FOREIGN LANGUAGE), I think.

'Why don't you get a dog?' I ask Jamie, suddenly.
'Huh?'

'Why don't you get a dog, now you're living here?'
She looks out the window. 'I've thought about it.'

'You could get one today.' I don't know why I say this. A dog is a big decision, not one to be made lightly, as I know full well. Yet I feel more flippant, with Jamie, more open to spontaneity.

She smiles at me. 'Maybe one day.'

The driver continues chatting, and the sound of his voice - relaxed, affectionate - soothes me.

'So what are we doing today?'

'Oh you know, just taking some photos of the puppies, then they'll do a write-up and I'll put them on the Facebook page.'

'Are they puppies puppies or dogs?'

'I think there's maybe one puppy. Or nearly puppy. But I just mean dogs.'

The driver deposits us outside a big red-brick house in Parramatta.

‘So how do you know these people again?’

‘My aunt - the one you met? It’s her friend.’ Jamie says, flicking her sunglasses up off her nose and walking to the door, me trotting along behind her like an assistant. When she knocks, a cacophony of barking starts behind the door and she smiles at me and says, ‘that’s how you know you’ve come to the right place.’

A tall woman with a pink complexion and greying hair tied into a ponytail answers the door. She’s wearing a fleece furred with dog hair and smells warm and somehow animal. In some dark, dusty recess of myself, I long for my mum.

Jamie greets her and introduces us, while I stand there, being awkward. We walk into the house and the woman, Cathy, offers us tea or coffee.

The kitchen is big and dated, but probably very luxurious in the eighties. There’s a lot of dark brown varnish, cream and brown wallpaper and exposed brown bricks. It makes me want to go outside.

‘Sorry about the mess,’ she says, filling up the kettle. ‘It was clean yesterday, but with these guys around - ’ she waves a hand at the screen door, where a group of dogs stand, spectating like a crowd at a ball game. Every so often they make stilted, coughing barks, as though not convinced we’re allowed to be there. There’s a greyhound wearing a basket on his nose, a number of small white and brown dogs with curly hair and dirty looking faces, German Shepherd who stands back away from the door, seeming aloof, a fat staffy sitting on her bum with an expression as though our being there couldn’t mean anything good and a terrier puppy with the beginnings of wiry whiskers growing from his snout. He alone looks happy to see us, wagging his short tail and splaying his front paws against the screen like he might be able to squeeze through it.

‘Oh, precious baby,’ says Jamie, and I know without even looking at her that she’s speaking about the puppy, the single baby dog, untainted and unafraid.

‘We’ve got some lovely dogs, out there.’ Cathy puts two steaming mugs onto the dark granite bench top and leans against the bench. ‘So, how do you want to do this? John - ’ she turns to me, ‘that’s my hubby - he mowed the lawn and tidied up a bit out there, so it’s acceptable enough but I’m not sure if it’ll be fit for a photoshoot.’

Jamie picks up her cup of tea and says, ‘it’ll be fine, Cathy. We’ll just get them running around and looking playful like last time. Anyone else coming?’

‘Yes - Janine and Anna. Due any minute.’

When Cathy opens the door the puppy sprints inside, his tail whipping back and forth furiously. I squat and put out my hands to him, which are immediately licked and chewed on. The other dogs have started barking again but seem more excited than anything. The shepherd and greyhound retreat, but the nondescript small dogs leap about my feet, sniffing and barking, and the staffy smiles and wags her tail with her tongue hanging out, obviously changing her mind about us being there. The shepherd lets out one strangled sounding bark and the greyhound disappears into a wooden kennel.

‘How come he’s muzzled?’ asks Jamie.

‘Greg? Oh, he can just get a bit stressed out with the little ones.’ Cathy answers, evasively. ‘Greg’s the last of our greys, we had about twenty but they’ve all been adopted out finally. The staffy’s Sadie, her owner died - terrible, actually, she was only in her forties, cancer - and no-one wanted Sadie.’ She reaches out to Sadie and rubs her head. Sadie thumps her tail against the ground, a rhythmic, happy noise.

A tiny black blur whips past us and under a bushy hedge growing against the fence.

‘Oh, and there’s Dante. He’s a bit shy.’

Jamie’s dragging a faded sun lounger onto the grass.

‘Do you think we could arrange them all on this? Get a group photo?’

Cathy laughs.

‘Look, you can try, but I highly doubt it.’

‘Come on Madison, help me. Come on Greg, Greggo, Greg mate. Come and be in my pic.’

None of the dogs are willing to sit on the lounger except Sadie, who, when hefted on by Janine, slumps onto her side and has a doze. Eventually Jamie gives up on the sun lounger idea and starts creeping around on her haunches with her camera, aiming it and snapping a photo before the dogs have noticed her. I stand with Cathy, watching as Jamie tries and fails to get a photo of Dante, who eventually has enough and lifts his lips to reveal sharp, pointed yellow teeth. Cathy laughs, but Jamie is unbothered.

‘Can you pick him up Maddy, and I’ll take a picture of him that way?’

I dither. ‘I don’t think he’ll want - ’ I start, but Cathy has already lunged forward and grabbed Dante and he’s in my arms in seconds. I hold him gently, feeling guilty at the coercion, breathing in the smell of unwashed, unloved dog which I remember so well from first meeting Frida. Jamie takes photos, trying to convince Dante to look at the camera, but he refuses.

‘Where did he come from?’ Jamie asks.

‘Puppy farm. Out in the central west. They were moving house and closing up shop and needed to get rid of all the dogs in a weekend. Ended up calling us. Tons of different breeds - lots of purebreds too, dachshunds, maltese, pomeranians. We’re not sure what he is, but he’s got a chihuahua-ey type face, we think. God knows how many litters call him a dad, poor thing. Jack’s mum - ’ she gestures at the puppy ‘ - was from there too, I ended up with him and two of his siblings, his mum, Dante and a couple of pups. Bit of a nightmare the whole thing, the vet bills were massive.’

Jamie says, ‘How come?’

‘Oh, they were very neglected. Rotting teeth, very underweight, a lot of them, some chronic issues from bad diet, lack of exercise, that kind of thing, and we needed to get them all desexed as soon as we could. We don’t adopt out any dog who hasn’t been desexed - it’s too risky. We have a great vet, hugely discounted, but ten, eleven dogs, some of them older, ruined teeth, heartworm, it was an expensive day for us, I’ll tell you that.’

I stroke Dante’s head and wonder how many Dante Juniors are out there. I hope they have a better life than Dante’s had.

‘People always want puppies, and they always want purebreds. We recouped some costs through them, so that was good. A couple of people have been interested in Dante, but then they meet him, and you know, he’s a bit shy, a bit nippy, and they’re not as keen after that.’

I rub behind Dante’s ear and he tucks his head into the crook of my arm and gazes at Cathy, listening.

‘His person will come along eventually.’

He yawns, a big yawn with a little pop of a yowl at the end of it. I imagine he thinks this is his home now, and Cathy is his person. Or maybe he simply feels comfortable here, and has decided he’ll stay, as though he has that choice. I wonder how it feels to have litter after litter of puppies and then have your testes removed altogether. I wonder about the world, where a dog can’t have testicles without someone trying to make a buck out of them. It seems unfair, that after all that, all those puppies, he can’t even keep his own testicles.

‘It’s not like him to be so relaxed with someone he doesn’t know.’ Remarks Cathy. ‘I don’t suppose you’re looking for a little friend?’

Frida would kill me, I think.

*

Frankie’s sitting at her desk, rubbing her stomach and eating grapes. She’s pretending to be pregnant, because she read that if she manifests it confidently enough, it will happen.

There was the coffee smell thing, and then this morning she felt sick on the light rail, quite sick, and so it seems a very good time to manifest. She wants to kick her shoes off but feels that might be a step too far. She can go home soon, anyway.

Her phone screen lights up with a message from Madison. She picks it up idly, and sees a photo of a small black dog with wet brown eyes and the caption, me and Frida's new housemate.'

Oh dear, Madison, she thinks, pausing chewing for a minute. Has she even got approval for another dog from the landlord? Can she afford more pet insurance? More yearly vaccinations? More dog food? She studies the dog, and warms to his small, defiant face. Well, she supposes they'll just have to make it work, even if it means some financial gifting on her and Raph's part.

oh my GOD

What the FUCK you didn't say?

when can we meet him?

She calls Raph to tell him. He's at the pub for his friend's birthday and sounds distracted, but the distracted note disappears from his voice when she tells him about the dog.

'What? She did not.'

Frankie's own inclination toward eye-rolling Madison's rash dog-getting disappears in reaction to Raph's obvious disapproval.

'She's twenty five, I think she can manage two small dogs.'

'Oh, it's not another chihuahua?'

'I'm not sure actually, he looks kind of like one, but wirier, and kind of bigger-headed.'

'Oh, so a chihuahua but uglier.'

'That's mean.'

'Has she got approval from real estate?'

'I'm sure she has.'

He makes an ominous sound. 'I wouldn't be so sure.'

'We're going to go around and meet him tomorrow anyway, so you'd better be nice about it and excited for her.'

'I know how to behave, Frank, I don't need to be told.'

'Whatever.'

Frankie hangs up. 'Why would I even want a kid with you,' she says out loud, but returns to rubbing her stomach anyway.

Chapter Fifteen

Obviously, it's a bad time for me to get another dog. I can barely afford my rent, for one thing, and I mostly live on baked beans on toast and weetbix. But a longing came over me as I held Dante in my arms and looked into his dark eyes, a longing like how you have when you're a child and there's nothing in the whole world you want as much as the thing you want. I wanted to be Dante's friend, and to get to know him, and to hang out with him, and take him places. I wanted him to meet Frida and for them to be friends, and for us all to have each other, our own little family. I didn't want to leave there without him.

I use some of Stefan's money to pay his adoption fee, and it strikes me that it's not good at all that something as meaningless as four hundred dollars can be exchanged for a small, sentient being. I feel like apologising to Dante as I write out my card details. People act as though you're doing a rescue dog a huge favour by adopting them, but they don't get much say in the matter, do they? It's likely Dante doesn't want to come with me at all. Likely that he'd prefer to stay here, with Cathy and the dogs he's come to know.

Jamie and I bundle him into Jamie's huge tote and conceal him under a jumper as we get into the Uber. Jamie starts up a bright conversation with the Uber driver, a middle-aged woman with frizzy red hair and a penchant for texting while driving, but it's not long before Dante's agonised panting gives us away. The driver says, 'you know, I could get fined for having a dog in the car,' and we both leap into long, involved stories about him being a rescue and us adopting him on a whim, but the driver's heart will not be softened. When we get out of the car Jamie gives her a fifty dollar note, and I say, 'I'll pay you back,' and she says, 'don't be silly.'

Inside, I place Dante on the floorboards, feeling suddenly cold without his warm fur making my hands sweat. Frida followed me from door to living room, sniffing aggressively upwards at the bundle of dog in my arms and growling softly. Dante seems freaked out too, standing stock still as Frida sniffs his penis and anus with vigour. Eventually he turns and sniffs Frida, and she growls again.

'Excuse you,' I say. 'Don't dish it out if you can't take it.'

Dante wanders, a quick, unconsolable trot, around the room, with Frida in hot pursuit. He makes noises so high pitched I can barely hear them, and sniffs at everything, before eventually lifting his leg and squirting a shot of bright urine onto the leg of the coffee table.

I mop it up with toilet paper, flush, wipe it over with disinfectant, flush again. ‘That’s ok,’ I say, although he didn’t say sorry.

He sits with her back to the wall and regards me and Frida, panting slightly. I reach out my hand limply, and he looks at it and turns away. Snubbed, I drop the hand. I turn to Frida. ‘Well, what should we do?’

She clatters over to the fridge, an expectant look around her ears. I glance at my phone and am surprised it’s 6pm, Frida’s dinner time. She’s a punctual lady, a lady who does not like to be kept waiting.

‘Oh, all right.’

Dante eats as though he’s never been fed before. Janine said all his ribs had been visible when he’d first arrived at the shelter, that he’d eaten so fast he threw up right away after. Now only some of his ribs are visible, even through his strange, fluffy yet wiry fur. I remember when Frida was like that too, instead of the sleek, seal-like shape she is now. While they eat, I think about the environmental impact of having two dogs eating meat, instead of just one. Then I Google, ‘can dogs be vegan’. It seems they can be and some are, but the jury is out on whether it’s good for them or not. I feel shaky with indecision. I can imagine the look on Raph’s face if I say they’re going to be vegan. I read some more. I think about why I’m vegan. It’s my species to be held accountable for destroying the world, not theirs. Vegans like to ask, why eat pigs but not dogs? But we do eat dogs, and we do much worse things to them too, like making them breed and breed and breed while the cash kachings into our bank accounts. It seems not right, somehow, to deprive them of anything else when they’ve been deprived of so much already. But do I think not eating animals is a form of deprivation? I guess it depends on the context. I guess also making decisions for another being is a form of deprivation. My head hurts from thinking so I file those thoughts away for some other time. My kitchen reeks of meat and something much worse, something like fear and dirt and urine all mixed together, a smell I recognise from Frida’s early days.

‘Dante, how do you feel about a bath?’

Frida, upon hearing this unpleasant word, abandons the last bits of kibble in her bowl and disappears under the couch. Dante flicks his ears up at his name, but doesn’t meet my eye. He doesn’t understand what I’m saying, but he’s trying to.

I get the plastic laundry tub from the bathroom and fill it with warm water. I lift him in and he stands, still and sorry, submerged up to his knobbly knees, ears flat and accusing.

‘Sorry, mate.’ I take his collar off. It’s wet and slimy. ‘This is going in the bin.’

Once he's soaped up he looks even smaller. He doesn't like the water, but he likes it when I rub shampoo in behind his ears and along his back. He closes his eyes and leans into my hand, one long yellow tooth visible from beneath his lifted lip. He likes getting dry too, thoroughly rubbing his face along the towel I've laid back and making huh, huh sounds as I dry his sides and belly, feeling a bit awkward about his hairy dick growing out his stomach. 'Sorry,' I say, as I wipe around it. 'Is that okay?'

He retreats to his spot by the wall and begins licking his paws and rubbing them over his face and eyes, like a kitten. 'Hey Frida, you do that!'

Frida does not appear, used to my attempts to coax her out from under the couch for nefarious reasons.

There's a knock at the door and Dante stops, sitting stock-still. We look at each other and I see in his expression the question he can see in mine. Frida, curious, with a look around her mouth like she's thinking about barking, trots out and toward the door.

It's just Jamie, holding a bulging plastic bag.

'Hello, little girl!' She croons, dropping down to Frida who backs up into the wall. 'She hates me.' She says, and her voice has changed back to normal.

'She's just scared.'

'Of me! I'm not scary!' but she's speaking in the baby voice again, and manages to reach behind Frida's ears and give her a scratch. Frida hisses.

'I brought over some things.' Jamie gestures to the bag, which has slumped and is spilling tiny tennis balls and which roll along the floorboards, giving Frida a fright. Dante has disappeared completely. 'I popped by the pet shop when I was getting groceries.'

'Oh, that's so nice of you. Thank you, Jamie.'

'Not a worry. I dunno what you already have, so I just got him some little things. A bowl and a bed and some toys. So, what are we calling him?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, are you keeping 'Dante'?'

'Oh.' It hadn't occurred to me to change Dante's name. On one hand I wonder if a fresh name might be akin to a fresh start, but on the other I think it might be a cruelty, to take away the only thing familiar to him, the thing he recognises as himself.

'Yeah. It's his name.'

'Well, okay, but have a think before you decide. Because I've thought of some cute names that would suit him, if you want to hear them.'

'No, Dante it is.'

‘Not Bowser? Or Taco? Or Craig?’ She’s sitting cross-legged on the floor while I sift through the pet things.

‘Craig!’

‘Yeah, it’s funny because you wouldn’t look at him and think he looks like a Craig. Get it?’

‘I guess?’

‘Craig then?’

‘No, definitely not Craig.’

‘Ok, what about,’ she chews her acrylic, staring at Dante, who starts to pant, nervously. ‘I know, Albino?’

‘Huh?’

‘Because he’s black?’

I make a face.

‘Ok, what about Mr Miyagi?’

‘I actually quite like that. But no. He can just stay Dante.’

‘Oh well. I’m still gonna call you Craig, ok?’ Jamie says to Dante, who gazes back, still panting.

‘Why is he, like, doing that?’

‘Panting?’

‘Yeah, has he been exercising or what?’

‘I think he’s just anxious.’

‘Hmm.’

I’m looking up what Dante means. ‘Steadfast, enduring, everlasting.’ I say.

‘What?’

‘That’s what Dante means. Steadfast, enduring, everlasting.’ I like that. I feel pleased.

‘I thought Dante was like, a philosopher, like Aristotle.’

I look that up.

‘Ok, also a philosopher. Do you want a tea or anything?’

‘No thank you, , I actually have to go already because I have this thing on at the QT. I’m getting my makeup done professionally actually, the artist will be over in a minute. You can come and watch if you want!’

‘Oh, that’s ok, thanks.’

‘You could get tips and tricks for free!’

‘I think I’ll just stay here with the kids. Help Dante settle in.’

When she goes I text Frankie a photo of Dante with the caption, our new housemate. He's shivering slightly so I get a blanket, make it into a little nest on the couch and put him into it. He starts doing tight circles within the nest, around and around, another mannerism I recognise from Frida. Frida's cranky, pawing at my calf, requiring attention.

'Sorry lady.' I get her a knitted jumper and we both retire to the couch too.

'Want to watch some TV?'

There's not much on. Racing, and a cooking show where they catch crabs, drive them home and toss them, alive, into a saucepan of boiling water. 'This way,' says the man, red-faced from the hot steam, 'you can make sure they're fresh.'

Frida sleeps, and Dante lies with his chin on his front paws, eyes open and expression watchful. The sun is sinking rapidly. On the TV, the man's family have assembled in his shining kitchen to help themselves to crab-related dishes. A smooth-faced woman sips sparkling wine and laughs. The meal is an unequivocal success, conducted in the warm afternoon sunshine with friends. You can see why anyone would want to attend the lunch, and eat the crab.

The next episode starts to roll. It's on a farm and my hand twitches for the remote. The camera pans over a pen full of tiny pink piglets, milling about their mother, who is huge and fat and hairy. I feel anxious for her, and for her children. They are going to roast a whole suckling pig, they tell me, and the man is going to witness the slaughter in a true farm-to-table experience. I change the channel.

The night wears on. I should eat but I don't feel hungry. Dante and I watch David Attenborough while Frida sleeps. A lion approaches a herd of wildebeest. The lion is a mother. She is so undernourished her entire skeleton is visible through her skin. '...Limited supply of prey animals,' David intones. You know what has to happen. When the lion picks her victim you see the fierceness of the tussle, the hooves flying, and you imagine how it might feel to be kicked in the face with one of those hooves. There's a moment where you think the lion might be killed, instead, but she's not, and she and her cubs eat the wildebeest and live another day.

Another lion. 'Red has ventured out alone,' says David, 'and blunders straight into the middle of a hyena clan.' Red is wet from the stream and the wetness makes him look sweaty, afraid. His mouth is hanging open. 'He's trapped,' says David, calmly. Red growls and the hyena's scream, and the screaming sounds like laughing. 'The pack tries to wear him down. This number of hyenas could kill him.' Red's teeth are bared and his growls sound like cans being ripped open. The hyenas close in, screeching in jubilation. 'His ally, Tartu, has heard

the commotion.’ Tartu stands somewhere nearby, watching, still and wondering what to do. Red paces up and down accompanied by a seething mass of hyenas. ‘Now the odds have changed,’ David says, and you can hear the triumph there, the relief that we’re not about to witness Red’s death. ‘Even for twenty hyenas, a pair of male lions is too much to take on.’ The hyenas disperse and the lions return to their territory, where they rub their necks and faces together and lie down to cuddle. Someone might ask, do lions cuddle? But look, it’s right there on the screen, two lions cuddling. There’s nothing intellectual about cuddling. And someone might say, they’re not cuddling, they’re exchanging body heat in a bonding ritual typical of young lions. And I’d say, but isn’t that cuddling?

*

I’m ten years old. I’m in bed and Frankie’s sick and Mum has to take her to hospital. ‘Be good for Kel,’ whispers Mum, kissing my forehead, clutching her old handbag to her side. Later, Kel sits on the side of the bed. He smells like Victoria Bitter.

I open my eyes and they are the slanting socketed, narrow--pupiled eyes of a predator. Claws grow fast from the stubs of my bitten fingernails and a violent sound vibrates in my chest. I attack, my teeth closing tight around his thick, bristly neck, splitting the skin, blood wet and hot spurting onto my face and into my mouth as Kel screams and gasps and dies.

*

Jamie is very drunk, drunk enough to not be able to type on her phone’s keyboard without making typos. This annoys her, because the typos make her seem weak, vulnerable, when she is neither. He’s pestering her, as usual, for more time, the week’s arranged dates are never enough for him. He’s pathetic. She hates his bald head, and the spiky hairs that grow from it, but she is also intoxicated by his easy wealth.

There’s something else about him, of which she’s aware but unwilling to analyse. Something about the width of his shoulders and the smell of his aftershave which reminds her of the men who used to have sex with her mother while she did her homework in her bedroom. She heard them and smelled them and spied them through the crack in her bedroom door, but her mother pretended they didn’t exist. She didn’t hate the men as a child, she was curious about them, and possibly afraid of them, because her mother bundled her quickly into her bedroom when they were coming and then pretended they’d never been there, like they were ghosts or bogeymen. But they had more money after her mother started seeing them, and for that reason she didn’t want them not to come.

There’s something of the men in Stefan, and she likes the sway she has over him, because she’s young and pretty and he’s old and past it. What’s that word, the word meaning

freedom, self-determination? Empowerment. She felt empowered by having sex with Stefan because her mother had felt ashamed having sex with the men who came to the house. Stefan took her places and gave her things and she eked out the sex, a commodity as precious as the things he had and could buy. She enjoyed it, she'd always liked sex and she made sure she came more often than not, and the money that pinged into her account every week was more powerful than the money she earned anywhere else. She looked forward, one day, to ending the thing they had in a way that showed him how little she thought of him the entire time they'd seen each other.

She gives in.

you can pivk me up feom here if u want

Chapter Sixteen

Frida, Dante and I rise early and go for a walk. He's confused about the relationship between the too-large harness bought for him by Jamie and the leash attached to it, and I realise he's probably never been out for a walk before. When we get to the park, I unclip Frida's leash but keep his on. I don't trust him not to run away, nor would I blame him if he tried to. But he sticks close to Frida, who herds away other dogs, eyeing them with an open hostility that sends most of them in the other direction.

When we get home, we eat breakfast and I tidy up a bit before settling down with a Liane Moriarty paperback and a cup of tea. Frida curls in my lap and Dante snuffles around the room before settling on Frida's round bed, closing his eyes for once and looking like he might believe he can relax here.

Frankie and Raph come over in the evening, carrying fragrant pizza boxes and a bottle of some kind of sparkling that doesn't qualify as champagne. Frida greets them graciously, she likes Frankie and Raph, but Dante hides under the couch and when I get on my knees and look underneath the hair along his upper spine stands up straight and his teeth show, but he makes no sound. I feel a wave of something bad wash through me at the sight of him, hiding but ready to fight. Frankie peeks under beside me and as she comes into view, Dante shuffles backwards, his butt pressed up against the wall. Frankie says, 'Oh, sweetie.'

'Okay.' We stand up together and look at each other. Raph raises his eyebrows.

'Well? What's he doing?'

He doesn't want to come out right now.' I say.

‘Okay.’ says Raph, drawing out the second syllable to communicate that he finds the situation kooky and unusual.

‘Maybe let’s have our dinner, and he can come out when he wants to.’

‘All right. But you know, you’ll have to train him. He can’t be behaving like that.’

‘Why can’t he? What’s the harm?’ Frankie seems annoyed at Raph today. I wonder why.

Raph shrugs, and retrieves plates from the kitchen.

We put on the TV and eat our pizza. It’s barbecue jackfruit with peri peri sauce and tastes good, so much better than the vegetarian, minus the cheese that is our usual order. Frida sits on Raph’s lap and accepts tiny pieces of pizza. Raph wasn’t a fan of Frida when they first met, which wasn’t improved by Frida attacking his leg like a tiny, bug-eyed lion, but now he fusses over her and she preens at him.

‘This pizza is actually good,’ says Raph, surprised as usual that food without meat on it can taste good. A chunk of pineapple falls to the floor and before he can pick it up, Dante has darted out and snapped it up.

‘Oh, hello,’ he says.

‘I don’t know if dogs are supposed to eat pineapple.’ I say, but it’s too late. The pineapple has disappeared down Dante’s very small throat.

Raph starts to laugh. ‘What have you done to yourself, having two demented little dogs in this one tiny apartment?’ Frankie creeps back under the couch and says, ‘Hello sweetie,’ in a voice she usually reserves for young children. I wonder at this, at the subconscious desire to speak to animals as though they are babies, at the desire to speak to babies in this way.

Dante makes no sound.

‘Bye then, Dante.’ Raph sounds like he’s trying not to laugh. ‘Yes, yes, I’m sorry.’ Frida, put out at being ignored, taps at his hand, demanding pizza crust.

I tell them about Cathy’s house, and all the dogs there.

‘Maybe we should think about adopting.’ says Frankie, and I can tell by the way her eyes meet Raph there is some surrender in this phrase that relates to the lost babies.

‘I wouldn’t mind a puppy,’ muses Raph, ‘maybe a Golden Retriever.’

‘You can’t just go and adopt a Golden Retriever puppy.’

‘Well, we could go to a breeder.’

‘Don’t say that in front of Frida. Or Dante.’

Unbidden, Frida and Dante's lost babies float to mind, chihuahua puppies probably ensconced in living rooms across Sydney, wearing designer gear and being carried places in a sling. Or perhaps in a pound or shelter somewhere, just like their mother.

'No offence Mad, but your dogs aren't great examples of rescue dogs.'

'What do you mean, examples?'

'It's just that I want a normal dog, if we're going to have a dog, not one who hides under the couch when people come over.'

'Well, she's been abused, hasn't she?' says Frankie, in a placatory tone, no doubt noting and reading into my silence.

'Exactly. What's wrong with wanting a dog who hasn't been abused?'

'No, you're right,' I say, 'just leave all the abused ones in shelters to be euthanized and take their puppies instead.'

'Madison, come on.'

I pick up another piece of pizza and eat it, the fight draining from me already. You think you can fix things with your anger, that you can tell people a fact and have them react to it in the way you would, but you can't. I could show Raph a graph of how many dogs are killed in pounds and shelters every year and how many of them were born 'normal' dogs the year before, and after looking at it, and feeling sad about it, Raph would get right on with calling the breeder.

'Let's have a look at adopting one, anyway,' says Frankie, into the silence. 'There are plenty of puppies around for adoption. I met a lady last week with a gorgeous little puppy, brown dog, maybe a labrador? He was adopted.'

'Whatever,' replies Raph, returning to his pizza.

There is an abrupt, loud knock. Frida appears from under the couch and barks toward the door. 'Frida, shh,' I say, but the knocking comes again and Frida's answering bark, which seems much too loud for her frame.

'Are you gonna get that?' asks Raph.

'It's not my door, it's my neighbour's.' I can see through the glass a small figure standing outside Jamie's door, a figure too small to be Jamie's. The figure knocks again, an urgent, desperate noise, and shouts something. Then, after a beat, she turns and approaches my door.

'Ah, yes, how is Jamie George?'

This time, the knocking is on my door.

I feel afraid, but there is no reason to feel afraid. I open the door and find a short woman with brown and blond hair and lined olive skin. The honey coloured eyes and something about the distance between her eyebrows and nose reveal her to be a relation of Jamie's. Before I can say anything, she says, 'Hello, I am Jamie's mum, Jamie next door?' She has an accent, but I'm not sure what kind.

'Oh, hello.'

'I cannot reach Jamie. I've called and knocked and called and knocked. She's not answering. Do you have a key?'

'For Jamie's place? Um, I don't sorry. Um - ' I look behind me for support. The woman seems anxious. There is a frantic note to her voice. Raph appears, cleaning his hands on a paper towel.

'Hi there, I'm Madison's brother. Can I help at all?'

He must have meant, brother-in-law, but he didn't finish the phrase and I'm distracted by my new identity as Raph's sister to hear what's said next. Raph goes to Jamie's door and knocks on it hard, as though his own powerful, masculine knock will bring her forth in a way that her own mother's failed to do. There is no response.

I interject. I tell them she's probably out, I haven't seen her all day, but Jamie's mum says no, they see each other every Sunday, and this morning Jamie didn't show. But Jamie would never miss it, and she would never not answer her phone. Next thing I know, Raph squares up his shoulders and slams into Jamie's door, and again, and again, and the door crunches open and I feel a brief panic that my door could be broken open as easily when it's the only thing between me and the outside world at 3am on any given morning, but then Raph goes into Jamie's house with her mother on his heels, but I don't, because Jamie could be back at any moment and she won't be happy to find her door broken and people inside her house without her permission. But then there is a terrible noise, a noise like an animal dying, and Raph appears again, white-faced, and says, 'Call an ambulance, *now!*' Frankie dials and I start stumbling into the house but Frank grabs my t-shirt and holds it tight. I can see Jamie's mum inside the house, through Jamie's bedroom door, she's leaning over Jamie's bed and crying out in a language I don't understand, the same words over and over again in a terrible chant, 'elahi bemiram, elahi bemiram barat dokhtaram,' and I don't know what the words mean but I know they represent something unutterable in my own language. Then there are paramedics, and some do things in a hyper focused way that I know represents something very bad, and some shake their head and move Jamie's mum away, and the police start moving us up the stairs and putting bright tape up and I say, 'but my dog,' and Frida is

standing at the door a bit apart from everyone with her ears flat against her head and her tail between her legs and I scoop her up and allow myself to be moved up the stairs away from my home and the pizza I was eating that I can still taste in the back of my throat. And I've forgotten Dante completely, but Frank has him held inside her jacket, and everything is very bright in the late afternoon light and people walk past us dressed in their suits and activewear until the police cordon off the pavement too, and we're in a car, Frida and Dante as well, and we're all being driven to the station because they need to talk to us because someone killed Jamie and she's dead and that's it.

Chapter Seventeen

I'm lying on Frank and Raph's couch, watching the spaces in between the slats of the blinds light up and go dark again as cars go by on the road below the apartment. I'm surprised their light makes it all the way up here. Frida and Dante have taken up a position I've already started to think of as 'usual', curled up back to back with their noses tucked under their own tails.

When I close my eyes I can see the flat yellow light of the police station. We were there until late, very late, and the horror of everything was blunted by the time we spent there, the black and somehow greasy instant coffee they gave us in too-hot plastic cups, the nothing talk we had to participate in with the officer who dropped us home. Frida and Dante were allowed to stay with us but I had to continually reject offers to put them somewhere else to 'keep them safe' until we were finished. 'Aw, sweet little doggies,' said the officer who interviewed me, and Frida gazed at him ~~un~~unsmilingly until he looked away and cleared his throat.

'The hours immediately after a murder are very important,' the officer told me. I know that because I love true crime shows and podcasts. Everyone knows that from true crime shows and podcasts. Maybe this very policeman only knows that from crime shows and podcasts.

'A murder.' I repeat. 'Could she not have just died?' I asked. 'Like, cardiac arrest, or... something?'

'Do you have reason to believe Jamie was unwell?' he asked.

It was strange, speaking and knowing someone, somewhere, would type up what I said. I wondered if it would be someone from my own workplace, if I should let Graham know I'd been interviewed so he could find someone who didn't know me to type it up.

We're not allowed to type interviews that have been conducted with people we know, it's a conflict of interest.

'What happened? Why did she die?' I close my eyes as though this will protect me.

'We can't be sure of the cause of death until after the autopsy.'

'An autopsy? Like, cutting her up?'

I open my eyes again, preferring the sight of the clean blinds lighting and darkening to the images of Jamie's body installed on some clinical table, awaiting investigation from men with knives. Something bubbled in my throat like laughter, but nothing was funny. She couldn't be dead. That just doesn't happen to people like that.

'An autopsy is a procedure by which we discover the cause, mode and manner of a death.'

I wanted to say, that's what I said, but I didn't. I didn't say much, except I didn't know her very well, and that she came with me to adopt Dante. He said, 'Dante?' and I dropped my chin downward toward the dogs in my lap. 'Ah, Dante.' He started to make a note, then looked up and said, 'and how are we spelling that?'

He didn't ask me all that many questions, really. I could tell he didn't think I was suspicious at all, a thin, white girl with two little dogs, a weakling by all accounts. I wanted to say, anyone can be a murderer, I could have crept in there with a spare key and a kitchen knife. But I didn't. He said I couldn't go back to my apartment, but that I could pick up some essentials with police accompaniment. The apartment was the last place I wanted to go, so when we got back to Frank and Raph's, me and Frank walked down to the all-night servo and got a toothbrush, plastic like our mum used to buy, as though no time had elapsed between our childhood and now.

We watched Jamie's final stories before they expired. In the top left corner it said they'd been posted twenty three hours ago, so they would exist for only one more hour. This seemed unbelievable, incomprehensible. She was at an event. There were balloons and fairy lights and many other beautiful women whose accounts were tagged, their handle pinned to their dancing bodies like Instagram was their primary mode of existence. The final story was a selfie of Jamie and her ex-boyfriend. He smiled his floppy smile and his eyes were almost closed in the glare of the flash.

'Do you think he could have...?' Frankie didn't finish the sentence.

'I don't know,' I said, but I meant yes.

I wonder where her mother is, if she has other family to care for her. The friend or aunt who's a doctor, surely. If I'd wondered about Jamie's family when we first met, I would

have given her a sun-tanned northern beaches family, and at least one long-limbed, blond-haired sibling. But instead she just had a little mum, a dour lady dressed in black with growing out streaks in her hair, and an aunt who might just be a friend. And maybe now the little mum has no-one, because Jamie is gone. My hands shake. Raph says, 'Maybe she had a stalker or something,' and Frankie says, 'statistically, it's more likely to be her boyfriend,' and I say, 'Her and her boyfriend broke up,' and Frankie says, 'even more likely then,' with a dark look at me which I know is supposed to reference our mum and Kel, but from which I turn away because the situation is not the same, at all, and pretending it is won't help Mum or Jamie.

Dante stirs. He's not happy to be here. He sniffed and panted and hid behind the bin when Raph came suddenly into the room. Then he lifted his leg on the side of the kitchen island and weed even though he'd just been outside. Raph's eyebrows puckered in alarm but he didn't say anything, just gave me some paper towel and the bottle of kitchen spray. The sheets Raph put on the couch for us smell like washing powder and sunshine and I wonder if I can just stay here forever, if I can just leave my apartment and all the things in it sitting as they were the moment Jamie died. And I wonder how much of my grief is real, for my new friend Jamie who found Dante with me and paid off the Uber driver and came up with silly names and laughed at her own jokes, how much of it is for the person I might have become if I'd been able to spend more time with her, a female friend, the only female friend I've ever had aside from Frankie. And how much of my grief is fake, just the fascination and horror you feel when someone has died and you think, but I knew them, and you remember how tentative your own grasp is, on life and on this planet, and you remember the other people you have known who have died, like your mum in her pink cotton nightie from K-mart that said 'forever dreaming', still and silent in the hospital bed.

I didn't cry when they found Jamie's body or when they asked us questions or when we watched her final stories, but I do now, just a little bit, just because I'm tired. I watch the blinds lighten and darken and listen to Frida's snores and know that nowhere, out there, is Jamie smiling her white-teethed smile into the camera or having sex in her apartment or going to visit her mum at the same cafe every week. And that it doesn't matter what the autopsy says, because Jamie is gone, and there will be no justice, even if they find who made Jamie die, because once you're dead that's all there is, not even blackness, just nothing at all. I start to feel panicked and try to calm down, fumbling for my earphones and pressing play on a meditation app. I try and breathe and think about the fact that I am simply a being in the universe, and slowly I realise my breath has slowed to the pace of Dante and Frida's

breathing and that we are in fact all three of us beings in the universe, and we will all die, and instead of making me feel panicked it makes me feel comforted. I place my palms on their warm fur.

When the meditation is over I switch to Serial, another meditation, of sorts. Sarah's talking to someone who's talking about Jay, someone who worked with Jay at the video store. She reminds us that it's a porn store Jay worked at, because working at a porn store makes you kind of suss. The man says Jay was afraid of someone coming to get him, the implication being that Jay was afraid the murderer was going to come and get him and thus, that the murderer wasn't Adnan. I think how strange it is of me to listen to a podcast about a woman being murdered to distract myself from thinking about a woman being murdered. I feel repulsed by myself, but I keep listening. The implication is that Jay lied about Adnan being the murderer because he was told to by the real murderer. Nothing is substantiated. There are no answers. We will never know whether Adnan did it. All we will ever know is that Hae was murdered, and her body was dumped in the snow like she didn't mean anything, and her family will never see her again.

At some point I fall asleep with Sarah's voice continuing to drone in my ear. In the dream I'm still awake, still and stiff, afraid of moving in case I disturb the dogs. At some point I realise I've rolled onto Frida and she has suffocated. Her mouth is open but her tongue rolls out and her eyes are little dead slits. I sit up fast and shout, no, no, no, no, no, and then I really am sitting but Frida is right in front of me, alive and staring at me in bleary alarm, Dante is whimpering, and Raph bursts through his bedroom door followed by Frankie and says, 'What? What is it?' and I say, 'Sorry, sorry, sorry,' and Frankie says, 'Are you okay?' and I say, 'Yep, sorry,' and they stumble back into their bedroom and close the door again. It's five o'clock in the morning.

Chapter Eighteen

The next morning Frida wakes me to take her and Dante outside for a wee early, at around 7am, and I feel tired as I make coffee and turn the TV on low. I want to see if there's anything about Jamie, but I also hope and pray that there will be nothing about Jamie.

The news channel plays straight away. There's a banner flashing along the base of the screen and my stomach drops as I read it, as though it's a shock, as though I didn't already know. BREAKING: INSTAGRAM INFLUENCER JAMIE GEORGE FOUND DEAD it reads, just like that, in capital letters as though you might miss it otherwise. '...was found in

her Annandale home late last night after her mother's fears for her safety prompted a search of her daughter's home. Police say George's body was discovered inside the home, and that they are treating the death as suspicious.' While the newsreader spoke, they played a montage of videos of the front of our apartment building and photos of Jamie lifted from her Instagram, but now a policeman in a dark suit appears on the screen. 'If anyone has any information I urge you to contact Crimestoppers immediately.'

The bedroom door opens and Raph appears. His eyes are shadowed and puffy.

'Morning.'

'Hello.'

Frida trots over in a friendly fashion and Raph leans down and rubs her back.

'How's the boyo?'

'He's good.' He's sitting in my lap, staring guardedly at Raph, his claws pressing into my thighs.

Frankie wanders out into the kitchen, brushing her hair and fiddling with the coffee machine.

'Maddy, do you want me to stay home with you today?'

It takes a moment for me to understand what she means. In my mind, I'd imagined us all sitting on the couch, watching the news, talking and drinking coffee all day, recovering from our shared night of trauma. But she means to go to work, and I assume Raph does also, and I suppose that means I should open my emails and get going on the day's transcripts. I do want Frankie to stay home with me, my heart lightens at the thought of a day stolen from work, just the two of us. There's something in her voice that says she thinks I'll say that I want her to, and also that says she doesn't want to, and I feel my skin warm like I've done something embarrassing.

'Oh, no, I'm fine. I've got to work, anyway.'

'I'm happy to if you want. Coffee?'

'I've had one.'

'Well, you don't have your laptop do you? Raph, where's your spare one?'

She continues her frenzied brushing as she slips a slice of toast into the toaster and finds an avocado in the fridge. Broken blond hairs drift toward the floor in the sunlight.

'You're breaking your hair.'

'What?'

I don't say anything, because I glanced at my phone and saw a notification from a news app I don't know how to unsubscribe from which says, 'Australian Influencer Jamie George Murdered in Peaceful Inner City Home'.

After Raph and Frankie leave, a fug of silence descends upon the apartment. It's starting to warm up, and I notice for the first time since summer the high pitched buzz of cicadas in the trees outside. Raph has left his laptop on the dining table for me, plugged in and signed in, ready to go. But I don't move.

Frankie didn't want to stay with me for the day because I am the embodiment of doom. She needs a normal life today. She needs her air conditioned office and her colleagues with their shiny hair and their chicken sandwiches. She needs to believe, today, that she is safe, and life is good. When we were kids, I was the first one to be hurt and I told Frankie because I thought she'd tell me how to stop it from happening again. But then it happened to her too, and it felt like my fault for refusing to be quiet, for making it something that existed outside my head.

Kel drove trucks and Mum worked in a warehouse picking people's shopping off the shelves and packing it into neat parcels. Mum was pleased with herself about that job, because it was nine to five every day so she could be home with us in the evening and before school. Like she'd won some great lottery, being able to care for the kids, cook dinner for the family, clean the house and work forty hours a week too. But in the hours between three thirty when we got home from school and five thirty when Mum got home from work, Kel looked after us. And then Kel had an accident and people died and he didn't go back to work after that and he was around all the time. And he was bored and maybe somewhere deep inside he was traumatised because he was trapped in the cab of his truck, on his side but with a perfect view of the car in front of him in flames and the people screaming and screaming as they burned to death. And it was his fault, because he'd been tired, so tired he'd been falling into tiny sleeps on and off at the wheel, and his grip on the wheel slackened and he veered from his lane and pushed the car with the family off the side of the road with his truck and they'd all rolled down together and then he'd had to watch as they died. I heard him, telling the whole story to Mum, only some of it I couldn't make out because he was speaking as though someone was choking him to death at the same time.

Mum always said, you need to be good for Kel, be quiet for Kel, be nice to Kel. He's hurting. Me and Frankie made furtive eye contact sometimes when she said that, he's hurting, and we knew we could never tell her because he'd been through enough. Maybe if we'd told Mum she would have kicked him out, reported him to the police, gone to court and taken out

an AVO against him. But somehow I can't imagine that happening. All I can imagine is her face, slack-jawed with shock, then her brow knitting, her voice saying 'Girls, you must not say things like that, you could get Kel into serious trouble, and it's not true is it, it's not true?'

I don't know what was wrong with him. I guess he was a paedophile but he didn't lose interest as we got older. We didn't escape from hiding from him until Mum died and we fled. I think he was just someone who liked to exercise power over people who were less powerful than himself.

Frida interrupts my reverie by jumping onto the couch with a grunt and settling herself in the crook of my knees. Dante growls at her and she promptly bites him which makes him squeal and me open my eyes. I see Frankie and Raph's apartment sideways and remember that Jamie's dead and we're all going to die, soon enough, that not a single person on the planet who is alive right now will be in one hundred, one hundred and fifty years. The thought makes me dizzy, so I close my eyes again, and I keep lying there, and eventually I sleep.

Around five I awake, stiff and foul-mouthed. I gather the dogs up and hide them inside my jacket in the lift and the lobby, only setting them down when we're safely outside on the grass. Frida shakes herself off and gives me a look that suggests she could have suffocated in there, and Dante gazes around without moving.

Later while I shower they both sit on the bathmat and watch me and I apologise to them. 'I promise we're not usually this boring, Dante. We usually get up to all kinds of mischief.'

I use Frankie's shower gel and it smells like apples and vanilla. The water is hot and I know it won't run out. The bathroom is bright and light and new, and there are thick towels hanging over the rail. Bizarrely, I experience a moment's happiness, fizzing through my body like caffeine. Back out in the living room, I sit at the table for something different and contemplate the laptop. I think, maybe I'll have a cup of tea, and then I hear Jamie's voice saying she'll make the tea because she's got a special thing to make it in and that special thing is an ordinary tea strainer, and I feel bad, terrible, heavy. I turn my head away as though I can distance myself from my own body and Jamie's sitting there, stroking Frida's ears, and she smiles at me and says, Nice fuckin' place, hey? And I say, 'Oh,' and the door opens and it's Raph holding two plastic bags full of groceries and on the side of the bags it says, *Thank you for not using me!*

Chapter Nineteen

He pauses in the doorway.

‘What’s the matter?’ His voice is higher than usual and I wonder if Jamie’s death has affected him, has reminded him of his mortality and the mortality of everyone he loves. I gesture sideways at the couch but when I look back she’s gone.

‘What?’

‘Nothing, sorry.’

‘Are you okay?’

I nod and look at his hands, white and pink, gripping the bags.

‘You’re back early,’ I say, for something to say.

‘No I’m not, it’s five thirty. Frank not home yet?’

I shake my head.

He dumps the bags on the bench and pulls his phone from his pocket. When he starts talking into it I know Frankie is okay so I go back to looking at the couch. I walk over, reach out my hands, touch Frida’s ears as though I might feel Jamie’s hand there. Frida’s eyes are closed and for a moment I think maybe she is dead, maybe Jamie took her spirit with her to wherever she is, so I shake her shoulders with both hands and she leaps off the couch in alarm and disappears underneath it.

‘Why did you - ’ Raph’s slipping the phone back into his pocket and looking at me with his eyebrows furrowed.

‘I just... I thought she might be dead.’

He nods once, slowly.

‘Okay.’

He pulls his phone out again and types something. I imagine he’s writing, come home quickly, Maddy lost plot.

‘I’m making a curry for dinner,’ he says, when he’s finished. ‘Are you hungry?’

‘Sure. That’s nice. Can I help?’

‘You just sit there. Take it easy.’

He leaves to get changed and I turn my head and Jamie’s there again. I wonder if she was there the whole time, but I just couldn’t see her. She’s wearing a soft pair of grey tracksuit pants and a cropped t-shirt.

I tried to tell you, she says. She’s not looking at me, but gazing through the window to the sky outside. I asked you to come over, remember?

‘Tried to tell me what?’

The door opens again and Frankie comes through it. The second I’ve looked away from Jamie she’s gone. Frankie looks tired and I can see my mum in her expression, my mum walking through the door at five thirty, holding a roast chicken and a tub of tabouli. And I start to cry, all of a sudden.

‘Oh my God, Madison - ’ Frankie dumps her handbag and runs over to me. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘You didn’t want to stay with me.’ I say, and my voice is hoarse, grating, echoing from the cave of my own misery. ‘You hate me.’ Frida licks my hand, over and over, and Frank strokes hair out of my face. Raph stands nearby, looking tired, pulling a t-shirt on.

‘Maddy, what are you talking about?’

‘You think I’m infected with sadness.’

She makes a sound like a laugh but sadder.

‘What are you talking about, Maddy?’

‘I miss my mum.’

I don’t know why I say it like that, my mum, when she was our mum, when she was just, Mum, but Frankie doesn’t comment. She just says, ‘I know.’

My mum, my first friend, from whose flesh I came.

I don’t know if I said that out loud, but Frankie says, ‘I remember when you were born, I was cutting up magazines in the hospital waiting room with Dad because I was so bored.’

I know, she’s told me before, but I’m happy to hear the story again, to imagine my family, two parents and two kids, before everything went wrong.

‘I don’t remember him. Just the funeral.’

Ice cubes hit glass and liquid tinkles. I sit up, and Raph places two tumblers of amber liquid on the coffee table.

‘I thought you might like - ’

He’s nice, Raph. I can’t remember why I didn’t like him. I think it had something to do with Frankie spending less time with me than she does with him.

Raph makes curry and we eat it, watching a Louis Theroux documentary. He made pureed sweet potato and grilled salmon for the dogs because I forgot to buy dog food today, and I’m starting to feel comfortable, dangerously comfortable. What would happen if I never returned to my house again, if I just stayed here forever, eating and napping and drying myself on soft towels?

On the TV, Louis stands with a group of Westboro Baptists outside a church. It's someone's funeral, and they're holding signs. They look like a group of normal protesters until you look closely, listen closely. They sing a pop song I vaguely recognise from the radio but they've changed the lyrics to incongruous biblical ones. It's funny and horrifying. Someone approaches them and even through the distance of the TV screen and camera lens you can see they're shaking with fury. Another person spits on them. They don't seem to mind. They seem cheerful, confident. Louis interviews them in houses with strange, lurid coloured walls. They struggle with his questions because not thinking about their beliefs is integral to maintaining them. They smile a lot while they answer, big smiles with all their teeth. One man says, 'Louis, I'm not making this up, it says it in the bible, word for word.'

'Does it?' Asks Frankie.

'Does it what?'

'Does it say, God hates fags, in the bible?'

'Of course it doesn't," Raph laughs. I Google it.

'Leviticus says gay sex is an abomination.'

'There you go then,' they say, simultaneously.

The girls are the most interesting, girls in their late teens and early twenties. They talk about a man they met at some kind of event they did, a man who isn't a believer but who they have a crush on. They admit he's going to burn in the hottest hell. This seems to depress one of them, but the others are unperturbed.

One man says, 'They tried to cut my dog's head off,' and he looks stunned by it, as though he'd never imagined some of his own hatred might be directed back at him. The dog has a long cut along his neck, only half-healed, and even though I've typed up stories about pets bearing the brunt of men's rage before I'm stunned too.

Later, snuggled on the couch with Frida, I Google them. Two of the girls have escaped. Now they live normal lives where they eat sushi and watch movies and date people. I wonder if they still worry about burning in the hottest hell. Surely a fear like that couldn't just evaporate overnight.

*

That night Frankie lies in her usual, dry-eyed, unsleeping position in the bed, thinking about what Madison said. That she thought Madison was infected with sadness. She'd laughed and said Madison was being silly, but she wasn't, not really. Frankie loves Madison, very much, but it's possible to love someone very much and also know they make you sad. Frankie remembers when she and Raph showed Madison the new apartment for the first time,

and there was a barely concealed beleaguerment about her as she stood on the balcony and gazed, not out at the view of the bridge and the sea and the sky, but up and down, counting air-conditioning units.

‘Air conditioning,’ she’d said.

‘Yep. Great, isn’t it?’ Frankie responded, refusing to take the bait.

Madison smiled a tiny little smile.

‘There are fifty four - ’ said Frankie.

‘Five. Fifty five. We’re fifty four.’ Raph corrected her.

‘They’re energy efficient, Madison. It’s fine.’

Raph cottoned on, his face pooling into blankness as it tended to do when Madison started. Madison, with effort, said nothing.

‘Nice view.’ she said, eventually, not looking at it.

That was the thing, with Madison. Frankie thought Madison didn’t realise how little anything mattered, but the fact was that the knowledge of how little difference her efforts made in the grand scheme of things seemed to press her to ever greater efforts. Like when Frankie had been given a tray of sandwiches and cakes from work after a birthday lunch, which she took home, thinking Raph would eat them. With her cup of tea she ate a little piece of the cake, even though she was sure it was laced with both dairy and eggs, because it existed now, she hadn’t paid for it, what difference did it make to deny herself that small bite of soft, guiltless sweetness with her afternoon cuppa? Madison would see it as a betrayal, to the cows and their calves and the chickens roosting in piles of their own excrement, debeaked and close to featherless, and the betrayal would sour the taste of the cake more efficiently than any statistics about carbon emissions and animal agriculture. Frankie ate the cake, and another piece too, and felt pleasure at the sight of Raph enjoying the tray of delicate little sandwiches and pastries.

Once, Madison and her colleagues had been taken out for lunch by a boss as a thank you for working extra hours over Christmas. They’d gone to an elegant little restaurant on Norton Street which had precisely nothing animal-free on the menu. Madison, faced with a choice of hurting herself or the practice manager had elected for the only vegetarian option on the menu, a risotto gluey with cream and cheese. When Frankie had picked her up after her shift, she was tapping frantically at her phone, calculating the emissions of her meal and whether it was possible to compensate for them in some way, by for example drinking only water for the next twenty four hours, or nothing at all.

Frankie, losing her temper, said, 'Why not just do away with yourself altogether? Surely that would be the most efficient way to go about it?'

'Yes,' replied Madison. 'It would.'

That night, Madison vomited in Raph and Frankie's new bathroom and appeared, sickly and sweating, to crash on the couch right after.

'Well,' said Raph, whom Frankie had filled in, 'that lunch was carbon neutral, I guess.' He was trying to be kind, to make a joke, but Madison, interpreting the comment as a jibe, replied tersely. 'It doesn't matter if someone digests the food, Raph. It's still been made.'

But Madison isn't a joyless person, thinks Frankie, shifting on her pillow. Madison is her favourite person. They converse endlessly, a stream of typing then continued in person, or on the phone, or through direct messaging on Instagram. Madison was the only constant in Frankie's life, the only hand she had to hold in the dark days when they were children, in some ways even darker days when they'd first moved to Sydney, motherless and eking out every inherited dollar. Madison makes Frankie laugh raucously, but when she tries to describe what was funny to Raph, later, he only ever cracks the most bewildered of smiles, or laughs because Frankie's laughing. Madison's long, solemn face brings back her mother's face, her hazel eyes. She remembers Madison as a cheerful little kid, and then a withdrawn, sad kid, and now she knows her as an adult riddled with anxieties about which she can do nothing. When she first met Raph and felt the weight of it all rolling from her shoulders and half as heavy for being shared with him, she wondered if one day Madison might have the same experience with someone, might realise that the world doesn't have to be navigated in isolation. But now she thinks perhaps the opposite would happen, that Madison's weight would double with the concern of another chomping mouth beside her all the time, that the weight would take up residence on the shoulders of another person too, leaving them both twice as heavy.

'She's atoning for the sins of the world,' she'd said to Raph once, after a panicked outburst from Madison about IKEA furniture.

'Yes, but it makes her hard to be around,' he'd replied, and irked, she'd turned away from him.

She doesn't realise that she's crying until she feels the damp pooling on her pillow. She doesn't mind much, she's as used to crying as she is to coughing, or hiccuping, or burping. Just another function her body performs. She wonders what the point of crying is. Madison would Google it, immediately, but she doesn't want to. She'd prefer to just wonder.

Chapter Twenty

‘The detectives want to come and speak to us again this evening,’ Raph says on the phone. ‘More routine questions, they said.’

I feel weird, as though I’m in a podcast or a TV show. I wonder what they could possibly think we might have an insight about. I also feel important, as though I really might have an insight on something, as though something I have might be valuable to someone.

Frida yaps at them as they come through the door and I shush her, embarrassed. Dante’s disappeared, as is his wont.

‘Oh yes, the tiny dogs,’ says the one I remember from the night Jamie died. ‘The little madam.’

I don’t like that, but I don’t say anything.

‘Can I get you anything?’ Asks Frank. ‘Tea, coffee, water?’

‘A glass of water would be fantastic,’ he says, and his sidekick, a woman with pink skin and very blond eyelashes says, ‘Nothing for me, thanks.’

We sit in the living room, with the detectives sitting on dining chairs and us on the couch. Frida growls quietly at them every so often, and we all ignore her to be polite. Frida is clearly of the ‘all cops are bastards’ persuasion, and who am I to argue with her.

‘Were you aware that Jamie was a sex worker?’ the detective asks me.

‘A what?’

‘A sex worker. Jamie had sex with men for money.’

I stare at him. I guess he must mean her Only-Fans.

‘Do you mean her Only-Fans?’

‘We can get to that in a minute, but I’m speaking specifically about the physical sex work Jamie carried out on her property.’

‘Oh.’

He makes a note.

‘Does that surprise you?’

‘I don’t, I don’t know.’ I find this question strange.

‘Could you tell us if you ever saw anyone coming to or from Jamie’s apartment? Or if you heard anyone coming to or from Jamie’s apartment?’

‘Just, just her boyfriend, I think.’

‘Her boyfriend, Theodore Miller?’

‘Uh, yeah.’

‘You saw him go into the house or leave it?’

‘Well, I just heard him.’

He looks at me.

‘I heard him go in and out sometimes.’

‘But you didn’t see him?’

‘No.’

‘How did you know it was him?’

I guess I don’t know if it was him. I guess I just assumed.

‘I guess I just assumed.’

I can feel Raph fiddling beside me. He’s embarrassed at my inability to be a good witness.

‘So you’ve never seen with your eyes Theodore Miller going into or out of Jamie George’s apartment?’

‘I guess.’

‘Just a yes or no, for the recording.’

‘No.’

‘Ok, but you’ve heard people go in and out of the apartment.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Can you remember any details? Anything that was said, any particular noises you heard?’

I feel embarrassed. Sorry Jamie, I think.

‘I think I heard maybe the sounds of someone having sex one time.’

‘So you heard the sound of sexual intercourse from inside Jamie’s apartment?’

‘I think so.’

‘Can you be sure?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And was this at a time when you had assumed Theodore was inside the apartment?’

‘Yeah.’

‘But you didn’t see him go in?’

‘No.’

I can see the transcript taking place on the blank white page of my mind’s eye. Q, A, Q, A, Q, A. It feels strange. I look out of Frank and Raph’s window at the bridge, at the tiny cars busy crossing and crossing and crossing.

‘We have a particular phone number with which Jamie conversed regularly and with whom Jamie set up a meeting on the night she was killed. Unfortunately the phone is now disconnected, but it was most recently traced to Bellevue Hill, in the east. Are you aware of anyone Jamie spoke to or was friends with who may have lived in or near Bellevue Hill?’

Bellevue Hill, where Stefan lives. Bellevue Hill, the wealthiest in Australia. I shake my head.

The man detective asks a few more questions, but the woman just surveys us quietly, occasionally writing something in a small notebook. She has an aura of calm and confidence I long to emulate. I wonder briefly about becoming a policeman, but then smile to myself. I wouldn’t last a day.

They tell me I can go back to my apartment when I want to, they’re finished with the building for now.

‘Why don’t you just stay here?’ asks Frankie, twirling pad thai noodles around her fork, unaware of Frida’s concentrated, pleading gaze. They’re talking about Jamie on the TV again. A man, a relation, says, ‘We’re devastated, absolutely devastated.’ He doesn’t look like Jamie, but he doesn’t look like her mum, either. He’s short and bald but has wide, muscled shoulders and soulful eyelashes. I chew my noodles.

‘Like, for a holiday?’

‘No, for good.’

I glance at Raph. He’s watching the TV but nods as I look and says, ‘Yeah.’

‘I can’t do that. I have to go home.’ I say, but I say it half-heartedly, and we all know it.

‘We’ve got the spare room, we don’t use it at all.’

‘What about when the baby comes?’

Frankie’s presses her lips together and sighs.

‘You mean, if.’

I feel bad then, for reminding her.

‘Don’t take this the wrong way, Maddy, but you have been looking like pure shit.’

‘Is there a right way to take that?’ But I’m not annoyed. I turn my head and look through the glass windows to the sky. Far away a flock of birds wheel above the trees, dark navy in the dusk. The lights of the city twinkle. It’s nice to be up in the sky instead of down on the earth. Nice to live in an eyrie, instead of a dungeon.

‘What about Frida and Dante?’ I ask.

‘They’re invited too, obviously.’ Frankie’s eyes are bright, she thinks she’s winning. I wonder at her, wanting me to move in. I’d always thought I loved her more than she loves me.

‘Raph?’

‘Yeah, they’ll have to stay.’

I watch TV and think about it. If I’d just stayed living with Raph and Frankie all those years ago, I might have savings now. I might have options. I wouldn’t have dormant mould spores in my lungs, discolouration on my hands from the dermatitis I developed in the mould-house, I’d never have slept with Stefan or existed mostly on beans and bread or have met Jamie. The final thought makes my organs feel small inside me.

‘That’s nice of you, both of you. I’m just gonna think about it.’

‘Sure Maddy, take your time.’ Frank’s face has smoothed with relief. ‘However long you need. But maybe let’s pick up some of your things from your place tomorrow. Your laptop and you know, essentials.’

It hits me that I’ve not typed a word in the past two days. Graham must have been doing all kinds of wondering in my inbox.

Later, when Frankie and Raph have gone to bed and Frida, Dante and I are bathing in the glow of the TV I notice Jamie sitting cross-legged beside the sofa. The brightness of the screen reflects in her toffee-coloured eyes.

‘What’s this shit? What else is on?’

‘I don’t know.’ I reply. ‘Have a look if you want.’

She doesn’t, I don’t. We continue watching the show, an American crime show. Someone scrabbles in the ^{OBJ} first and under their fingers, bones begin to appear.

‘Oop, they’ve found her.’ I say, and glance at Jamie. Tears are running down her cheeks.

‘It’s all my fault’ she says.

‘What? What is?’

She turns to me, eyes glossy. I stare at her. She whispers, ‘I just wanted... Just for a minute.’

‘What happened?’

The door opens and Raph walks into the kitchen, fills a glass of water from the tap. Jamie shakes her head and turns away again but remains, solid and real. When Raph returns to his room I say, ‘Jamie, what happened?’ And she replies, ‘you can get twenty percent off

your next Hello Fresh order with my code, Jamie20!’ and I’m waking up the next morning and there’s no sign of her anywhere.

Frank takes a half day so she can drive me back to my place and help me get my things. The police tape is gone but the house looks ruffled, somehow, as though their presence still lingers. As we pass Jamie’s door I almost expect to hear music from inside, or talking, or the TV, but there is only silence.

‘Are you okay?’ Asks Frankie.

‘Yep.’

My apartment - flat, it’s not really an apartment, and maybe I should accept that I am kind of poor - is exactly as we left it. The smell of pizza lingers and the boxes we were eating from are still open. My chest feels strange, looking at them, as though time has folded away and we’re back there on the night we found Jamie. Frankie starts tidying, putting the pizza in the bin, wiping things over. With effort, I don’t tell her to put the leftovers in the compost and the boxes in the recycling. Instead I get my laptop, charger, a couple of changes of clothes and some toiletries. I look at my expensive shampoo and conditioner and feel vicious towards myself, a kind of loathing that feels familiar and good. I put both bottles in the bin, not allowing myself to think about how they should be rinsed out, reused, recycled.

‘There’s not much point to recycling, anyway.’ I mutter to myself, to try on how not caring feels, and Frankie says, ‘Probably.’

I pick up some dog food, the soft bed Jamie brought over. A bad feeling washes through. I wish Frankie wasn’t there, and at the same time, I’m glad she is.

‘That was really nice of her, to give me all this stuff,’ I say, and Frankie says, ‘I know.’

I try not to look too closely at anything, at the floorboards I felt such a sense of accomplishment in sweeping and mopping, my bits of furniture for which I’d scrimped and saved or rescued from junk heaps. My small, doomed attempts at a life. The pigeons are silent and I wonder if they’re listening to us, judging me for my easy withdrawal from standing on my own two feet. Heading back, I survey the world from the height of the Range Rover’s passenger seat and before long, my little effortful home seems very far away.

Later, in the dark, I whisper to Jamie, ‘not everyone can just up and leave for something better. Not everyone can just stop paying rent by moving in with their sibling.’ She replies, ‘but you can, so why shouldn’t you?’

‘Because of solidarity, and allyship. Because we need to seize the means of production.’

‘And you’re going to do that from your dungeon, are you?’ She replies, laughing.

Frida’s happy here, Dante’s settling in. They’re warm, even as other dogs are not. I don’t worry about their bones aching, even as out there, other dogs sit in the cold and the damp and their bones will ache until death takes them. I sleep and when I wake up the sun filters through the windows and the smell of toast and coffee is in the air and I know there are at least three different options for breakfast, more if I could be bothered to make porridge or pancakes or french toast, and as I ladle granola into a bowl and put coconut yoghurt on top - the nice, creamy brand - I try not to let the guilt of it all curdle my pleasure.

Chapter Twenty-One

She believes she is still pregnant. She doesn’t say anything to Raph. She holds her hand over her lower belly when she sits at her desk, as though she can keep the baby there with the warmth of her palm. She worried that the shock of finding Madison’s neighbour, of being questioned in the police station, of the pervasive sense of the world as an unsafe place that lingered afterward might unroot the baby, but so far it has not. She will tell Raph at twelve weeks, and if she doesn’t make it to twelve weeks she will never tell him.

She doesn’t want anyone to notice anything’s amiss so she still joins her work friends on Friday afternoon for a wine at the pub down the road, but she only pretends to sip it and when no-one’s watching she pours tiny amounts of it into a dead pot plant so the level of liquid depletes gradually, unsuspectingly. If no-one knows, the baby will stay. It’s probably shy, like Madison. She wishes she didn’t know, because then the baby would definitely stay. The baby is feeling things out, seeing whether they want to hang around, eyeing her up as a potential mother. She tries to be extra-kind, extra-motherly, hoping for the baby’s approval. She avoids news articles about climate change and about the bushfires that have begun rolling out, too early, in the north. She doesn’t want the baby to know life can be tough out there.

*

The days pass. There’s a rhythm I never quite managed when I lived alone, bookended by Raph and Frankie’s comings and goings. They leave early and I leave with them, clutching a mug of coffee in one hand and leashes in the other. I wonder about leashes, if it’s ethical to leash a dog, if I’d be happy to wear one myself, and then one day we see an unleashed Dalmation get hit by a car and I decide for now, it’s okay.

The three of us eat breakfast together, me trying not to breathe in the meat stench from their bowls and breath, and then I work and they nap or sometimes play. Dante leaps at

Frida and she growls and wags her tail and chases him until he turns around and leaps at her again. I like watching them. We eat lunch sitting in puddles of sunshine and read headlines from my phone. Someone's written an article saying Theodore Miller is unhinged and violent. 'That's not true at all,' remarks Jamie. 'Really?' I say. 'Theo wouldn't hurt a fly.' 'Who did it then?' 'It doesn't really matter, does it? It doesn't change the outcome.'

I've never touched Jamie and she's never touched me. Sometimes I smell her, the grassy, sweet scent of fake tan. I long for her to be alive.

'Look how well I'm doing,' I say, gesturing at my banking app, where my debts have been replaced with savings.

She nods, but her mouth is downturned.

'You know, money isn't everything.'

Rich, coming from her, but I let it go.

One night Frankie and I are watching *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* while Raph sleeps, slumped on the edge of the couch.

'I see Jamie all the time.' I tell her.

'Oh my God, same.'

'What, really? Here?'

'What do you mean, here?'

'What do *you* mean?'

'I mean I see her around all the time. Walking down the street, in ads, on my explore page on Instagram. What did *you* mean?'

'Oh, yeah. Same.'

Jim Carrey's lying on the bed, having his memories removed. That'd be nice, I think.

We sell and give away my furniture, coffee-maker, bed. We move my bookshelf into the spare room, but I still sleep on the couch most of the time, lulled by the blue light of the television screen. Raph somehow dissolves my tenancy agreement. Rent money accumulates so fast in my bank account I feel like a different person. I buy groceries for everyone, expensive groceries. I don't flinch when I pay for them.

Jamie watches me type often, sitting opposite me at the dining table, tugging at her nails with her teeth. She's quiet. One day I turn to her and I say, 'I was molested as a child.' She looks at me blankly. 'I was raped.' She turns her head away. I stare at my hands on the keyboard, small, pale, with ragged cuticles.

*

Frankie's drinking herbal tea and firing off emails when she feels it, the long, deep pull. She stops typing abruptly. She might have imagined it. She waits, but the feeling has dissipated. She breathes in and out and tentatively finishes writing the sentence. As she sends the email, she feels it again. She closes her eyes, the bright white of her computer screen searing through her eyelids. Low in her abdomen there is a dull ache, an ache that stretches backward against her spine and down into her thighs. This cannot be happening, she thinks. She remains in her seat as the draining feeling happens, and then, feeling it dampen her underpants too quickly, she calls to her friend and says, in a calm, low voice, 'Can you give me your cardigan? Sorry, my period's just started.' The friend, unruffled, shimmies out of the black cardigan and wraps it around Frankie, who has worn white and cream and pale grey every day since she found out.

'Have you got a tampon?' asks the friend as Frankie sits on the toilet, her white pants already stained, her forehead nearly resting on her knees as she weeps in silence.

And if she notices when Frankie responds that her voice is higher and hoarser than usual, she leaves without saying anything, and Frankie dabs and wipes until most of the blood is gone and the toilet bowl is heaped high with paper and blood and dark, ugly clots. Before Frank leaves to go back to the quiet office where she will spend the rest of the day crouched in her chair with her friend's cardigan across her knees, she slams her fist into the bathroom wall, which is constructed of a chic exposed stone, again and again and again, until her knuckles swell and split.

After work she goes to the hospital. She wears her stained trousers and a man on the bus turns pink and looks at her in the face too long, as though to communicate she's committing a terrible faux pas, but then he says quietly, 'Please forgive me for saying but...' and she smiles at him and says, 'thank you, I know, accident,' and he goes pinker and feels that he has committed one instead. The nurse has a soft, lined face and brings Frank a styrofoam cup with milky tea, which Frankie cradles and sips gratefully, the taste of the cow's milk unfamiliar on her tongue.

'I'm sorry.' The doctor says, and looks at her with real sympathy glimmering in his dark brown eyes. They make her an appointment for next week. She'll have to have a day off work.

As she waits for the bus to take her home, she scrolls the headlines on her phone.

'Like a hell': Sunshine Coast locals see suburban street become a firestorm. Annastacia Palaszczuk to return from Europe to deal with bushfire crisis. Australian natural disasters minister David Littleproud: 'I don't know if climate change is man-made.'

The baby doesn't want to come here.

Chapter Twenty-Two

After the funeral, the headlines about Jamie fade out, replaced by increasingly frantic ones about the bushfires. There seems no space for any news that isn't red and black and roaring like a tsunami. We keep the doors and windows shut at all times, yet the reek of smoke still creeps inside. The view out the window is shrouded, like the city is being suffocated, but people still go running, panting and sweating, their hair full of ash.

'It's like the end of the world.' Raph says, with something like wonder in his voice. Frank starts crying, big tears like a cartoon rolling down her cheeks silently until Raph says, 'Frankie, what's wrong?' and they both disappear into their room. 'What's wrong is that the world is ending,' I say to the dogs. I thought maybe it would happen slowly, with the coast crumbling into the ocean and people moving to New Zealand and Tasmania and food shortages and that kind of thing, not in the shocking speed of moving flame.

I'm typing an interview with a woman whose children all died in a house fire. Not a bushfire, just an ordinary house fire. Their rental had no fire alarms and went up in flame while she was out at work. She cries, a groaning, breathy crying dragged up from somewhere far beneath the earth's surface, a cry that makes you remember everything bad that's ever happened to you, but when she's not crying she's lucid, answering questions carefully and clearly through a heavy accent as though it's the final thing she can do for her children.

When I lived in my rental, the agent sent a company to check the fire alarms every six months. Maybe they only do that in suburbs where rich people live. The police are cold. They ask if it's a usual thing, for the woman to leave her children unattended at home by themselves, and she looks at them through eyes so swollen as to be barely recognisable as eyes and says, 'Yes, we work, Soleh, our oldest boy, we left him in charge.' The detective sneers, 'Soleh, that's Soleh who is twelve years old?' as though there might be another Soleh, an adult one, not mentioned previously.

Maybe the universe is telling Frankie not to have kids because so many bad things can happen to them. They might be born with a disease and die before they grow up. They might get run over as a toddler on a sunny Sunday afternoon by a drunk driver, or they could be kidnapped, or they could die in a house fire. Or they could grow up and be healthy but the world has heated up so much the streets are empty during the day and everyone lives in caves under the ground because inside the earth is the only place cool enough to live. Kids would

have to do primary school remotely and everyone would eat ground insects as their main source of protein. There would be barely any bees.

‘God Madison, you are relentlessly negative.’ Jamie stands by the fridge, wearing her track pants and t-shirt, her toes painted a pearly pink.

‘Nail polish is bad for the environment.’

She laughs at me. ‘How?’

‘Well, no one ever finishes a bottle of nail polish. They just throw them out when they get gluggy and gross, and then they sit in landfill and leach chemicals into the soil.’

She doesn’t care. She wanders over, yawning. ‘What are you typing?’

‘You shouldn’t really look at it. It’s confidential.’

‘Oh yeah? Well I promise I won’t tell anyone.’ She laughs again.

‘These kids all died in a fire - ’ I start, but she turns away, ‘Jesus, you know what, don’t even worry.’

I return to the typing, feeling glum. She’s right. I’m a negative person, a person awash with negativity. I don’t have any friends except two rescue chihuahuas and my own sister. It just seems that being different, being not negative, would require a kind of amnesia, a forgetting, a skill I don’t have. Not knowing, and not being curious, and not feeling. And even as I have that thought I know I am wrong, because my own sister is knowledgeable and curious and empathetic and yet not like me. So how do I do it?

My throat is tight from the burning air. Perhaps I should end my life. But I know I won’t. I have to know what happens next.

Sometimes when one of us is having a bad day Frankie and I say to the other, ‘Maybe you should just kill yourself.’ It’s funny but I don’t know why.

*

The fires burn. Koalas stumble through the inferno, screaming and gasping. Dead cows lie on their sides, bloated and burned in razed paddocks. Children stand in a black ocean on Christmas Day, their faces tearless and impassive. The animals are dead. One billion of them. Who knew there were so many animals in the first place? People are dead, fifty, sixty, seventy. The swinging grey and green eucalypts are blackened skeletons. Kangaroos return after the fire to emptiness, the ash still warm under their burned feet. A dense smoke, the remains of the animals, the trees, the people who have died, hangs over the cities like fog, and the burning continues.

The Prime Minister, his lungs fatigued from breathing smoke-heavy air, departs for a holiday in Hawaii.

*

We watch a documentary about clothes. Raph crunches absent-mindedly on a bag of pizza flavoured Shapes, his jaw the only thing moving in the darkness. They visit a river in Indonesia which flows thick with toxic waste. Children swim in the river and everyone bathes and washes their clothes in river water. They have rashes and raised disfigurements all over their bodies, itching and oozing. The documentary maker asks a woman with a red, reptilian neck if she has to wash her baby in the water and the woman smiles the smile of the mother who fears she's being over-indulgent and says no, she buys bottled water to wash her baby. The water is full of mercury, cadmium, arsenic. They drink the water, and they grow fields of rice in it too.

They name the companies who dump their waste in the river, and all three of us shift, uncomfortably.

*

'Maybe we're just not meant to have a baby, Frank.' Raph's eyes are clear, but Frankie hears the misery thick in his throat.

'I'm not even thirty years old. I'm so young.'

'Yes, but...'

'After thirty five it's harder for everyone. So after thirty-five it'll be impossible for me.'

'It's just it seems impossible for us as is.'

'For me, not for us.'

'Well, we don't know that.'

'I do.'

'You haven't even let us try a clinic.'

'If the baby doesn't want to come, the baby doesn't want to come.'

He closes his eyes, exhausted.

'That's not how it works.'

'No one knows how it works.'

'Yes, they do. Doctors do.'

'Please don't let's go through this again.'

'Why don't we just think about adopting?'

'You can't just adopt a kid, Raph. You have to go through all kinds of processes.'

'I'm good at processes.'

'Anyway, I don't know if I even believe in adoption. Kids need their own families.'

‘But some kids have no choice.’

‘Let’s just give IVF a go. One go.’

‘You know how I feel.’

‘What about how I feel?’

*

The world is orange, the trees glow black, swaying in the hot wind. The news shows images of helicopters spraying insatiable flames day and night. One koala screams as he wanders through the ashes and a woman wraps her t-shirt around him and bundles him into her car. One koala taken from the fire while the rest die, their dying yelps consumed within the roaring of the flames and the wind.

Outside the apartment there’s a mouse. He’s standing on the pavement as we approach. Frida is disinterested but Dante’s ears are up and a friendly expression on his face, as though recognising a fellow. There’s something wrong with the mouse. He sees us and does not move. His sides, soft and furred, balloon and constrict as though he’s being blown full of air and then drained again. He regards us with flat black eyes, and sways. I drop down to my haunches and say, what’s up buddy, are you ok, and Dante whines. He’s decided he doesn’t like the mouse, after all. Still the mouse doesn’t move, his energy taken up with breathing, with remaining alive. It’s hot, so hot, the air is thick with smoke. I take the lid off my drink bottle and dribble some just in front of him. He doesn’t move, I say, ‘come on mate, have a drink.’ Slowly he shuffles forward and dips his small pink hands into the water, then wipes them swiftly down his face from ear to nose. His tongue appears for a moment. I don’t know if he’s cleaning himself, cooling down, having a drink. I pour a little more water, dribbling it closer so he’s sitting in it. He moves promptly out of it, but he’s not swaying anymore, he’s still, more composed. Dante growls. Someone’s behind me, I glance over my shoulder to see a woman standing there. ‘Oh, yuck.’ she says. ‘Don’t touch it, will you?’

I don’t say anything and she moves on. The mouse continues to wash his face, and all of a sudden he darts off the pavement and dashes into the shade of a hedge. I can still see his tail, his pear shaped behind, but he’s mostly invisible now, safer. I feel happy because the water helped, and sad because the city’s animals are suffering and dying in the stinking, soupy air.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I'm walking home swinging a bag full of limes. There's a van pulled up on the pavement and I'm about to swerve around it when a man comes staggering from the back with half of a pig's body looped over his shoulder. It's exactly half of the body, split in half from what seems like the centre of her snout right through to in between her legs, the half of her rib cage convex, clean and shining in the yellow light. Her tongue is the colour of an uncooked sausage, her throat a curving shadow heading down into that cleaned out space where once her organs were. Her smooth, white leg drapes across the man's lower back as he hurries inside the butcher's shop and I notice that for some reason her foot has already been mostly cut off, but not completely, so it hangs on from a shred of muscle and skin. I wonder where all of her blood has gone, how it can be that she has been cleaved in two and the man's white overall has only faint splotches of pink, when surely rivers of blood have been let from her. I'm standing there as though rooted to the pavement, staring fixed at where the man disappeared into the shop, when he appears again, this time alone, and goes back into the van. Knowing what will happen next, I find my feet and scamper home.

The apartment is cool and smells of air-conditioning. I dump the limes on the shining benchtop and sit on the couch. Frida is sleeping on her back, her legs straight in the air. She makes little yipping sounds as she dreams. Her legs are very fragile. It wouldn't take much to cleave through her legs. My own legs are thick, meaty. There's a lot of flesh on my legs, no matter what Frankie says about me being too thin. It would be hard to cleave through my legs, unless you had the right equipment. I think about the pig, about the thickness of her body, the fat of her flesh, the weight of her bones. The equipment is somewhere.

'What are you doing?' Raph appears, a towel wrapped around his waist, his hair wet. His skin is the same colour as the pig's skin, pinky-white. I realise I'm pressing both hands into the sturdiest parts of myself, testing the heft and resistance of my body.

'I just saw the most terrible thing.'

'Oh yeah? Another mouse?' He's smiling. Once, I might have found this insensitive, dismissive, but now I recognise he's trying to relate to me in the light-hearted way he favours, where I am prone to hysterics and upset and he is comforting and assured that really everything is alright.

I smile a little shaky smile.

'No, worse.' I think about that. Is it worse to be dead, or dying? Is it worse to be crouched and dehydrated, vulnerable to predators, or cleaved in two and on your way to the freezer, to people's plastic shopping bags, to the barbecue? 'Worse.'

‘Ah, thanks for these.’ He picks up a lime and smells it. ‘Great produce at that shop, don’t you think?’

‘I was walking past the butcher, and - ’

‘Oh.’ His smile fades.

‘ - there was a van, and they carried out - ’

‘Yeah. I’ve seen them do that, too. It’s a bit confronting.’

I stroke Frida’s belly. She opens one eye and gazes at me, something baleful in her expression. ‘Sorry.’ I say, removing my hand. She closes her eye again. Dante leaps up onto the couch, nosing into my hand. I pick him up and slip out onto the balcony, taking care to slide the door shut so as to keep the air inside clean. The smoke colours everything, shrouding the rooftops and tree tops in dull yellow brown. The murky sun slides wearily downward. I think about butchering and bushfires, the violent energy of both, the breathless destruction, the hot ripe stench and blooms of foul colour. The axe cleaving into the bone, swinging through flesh like a knife into fruit. I read an article once about people from the Philippines coming to work in slaughterhouses here, promised visas and riches and their families joining them. They were sent to rural towns where no-one would talk to them and they never learned English because they were forbidden from speaking at work and they were always at work, so at the end of it all they were sent home anyway.

I stand there for a while, missing the colour of the sky. Behind me the door slides open and Raph comes and stands beside me and leans as I am on the balustrade. He’s dressed now, and smells faintly of herbs.

‘You all right?’ he says.

‘Yeah, of course.’

We continue standing there. Raph lets out a huge breath.

‘Maybe come inside now. The air out here is barely breathable.’

I follow him back inside. He puts on some music, pours us both wine, and we chop vegetables in a comfortable silence. Soon Frankie walks in the door holding a paper bag from the pet store with new toys for the dogs, and we all watch with unselfconscious smiles as they grab one each and hurry away with them to hide.

*

Without telling anyone, I put in an application to go back to university. It’s not that I’m too afraid that I’ll be rejected, but rather, I’m too afraid I won’t go through with it, and then my wasted life will be all my own fault.

Every day I sit at Frankie and Raph's large kitchen table and type transcripts. There's something meditative about them, some barrier between myself and them which cannot be encroached, which did not exist when I typed from my freezing dungeon and days passed without hearing any voice except for those coming from my Instagram stories and YouTube videos. Frida demands to sit on my lap, and I always let her even though my thighs start to hurt from being clenched together to stop her falling through. At around midday, we all go for a short walk, sticking to the shade, trying not to breathe, so they can sniff at things and wee on them. Then inside, I make a sandwich using the fresh bread and salad ingredients Frankie and Raph always have in abundance. Sometimes I do things like fry tofu or mash chickpeas with olive oil and parsley and pepper for a more gourmet sandwich and actually enjoy the taste and texture of the food. Raph's big on smoothies and leaves me one for breakfast, creamy and fresh and sweet and so far removed from the bits of mouldy toast I ingested so often in my own home. I forget how it feels to be constantly on the verge of hunger.

I despair when I notice the differences between my life now and my life then, because I'm twenty five years old, and why couldn't I have bought smoothie ingredients for myself?

'Well, the blender was six hundred bucks,' Raph said, carefully, when I mentioned this. 'And really, the cheaper ones aren't worth having.'

Can that be true? I wonder. Does one really have to spend six hundred dollars on a blender for it to be worth having?

It's nearly four, I can stop soon, help Frankie make dinner or go for a walk with the dogs or simply settle into the couch and watch all the trash, comfort television that starts playing when everyone gets home from work. I check the news and notice with a thrill of recognition that there's a photo of Stefan at the top of the page. My eyes flick to the caption, expecting him to have won an award or bought a company, but I'm wrong, so wrong that the actual caption, the one saying 55 year old property mogul Stefan Muller in custody over the death of 'influencer' Jamie George, takes a long time to process.

Chapter Twenty Four

'He told me he was forty five too!' Laughs Jamie, her white, straight teeth glinting, her dimple deep in her cheek. 'What a loser!' Then she stops laughing and her face twists. 'I don't want to die. I'm young. I've barely even started.'

'I'm sorry, Jamie.'

‘I wanted to tell you, about him. I wanted to compare notes and like, I don’t know, bond over it. But you’re so buttoned up, so unfriendly, it’s hard to get through to you.’

‘Unfriendly?’ I feel like I’ve been slapped.

‘Oh, I’m sure you don’t mean to be.’ Jamie bites an ~~off~~ acrylic nail and I hear it snap. ‘I made him, Stefan, I made him show me all his ‘sugarbabies’ on Instagram one time and then I moved in and saw you and thought, what the fuck?’

‘That’s such a crazy coincidence.’

‘Madison, are you dumb? It’s not a coincidence, he owns the place. He owns half of Sydney. I bet he told you to move here, didn’t he?’

He did find the place for me. He sent me the listing and I applied imagining I wouldn’t get it because my earnings weren’t enough but somehow I’d been approved anyway. It seemed like a miracle, or an oversight.

‘The guys upstairs are his nephews, they live there for free.’

‘But how do you know all this?’

‘He told me. He knew I wanted to save money on rent so he offered it to me at a discount.’

And just like that, all my pride, my ideas about working hard and staying on top all on my own fell away.

‘It was only supposed to be a one-off thing, him and me. Oh, I don’t even like saying that, him and me, there was no him and me, it was just money. He messaged me on Instagram and offered me money, literally obscene amounts of money, to have dinner with him. He transferred half before I even went. It was wild. More money than I’d earn in a month. He paid for dinner, paid me for dinner, didn’t ask for sex or anything. We did it a couple of times, it was fun, these swanky dinners in places I’d never be able to go by myself, being, like, revered or whatever, it made me feel like, I dunno, like I’d really made it. And the money, I’d never seen so much money, I’ve never been good with it, you know, I’ve always spent too much, lived in places I can’t really afford, you know. But all of a sudden I had more money than I knew what to do with and I thought, ok, I’m going to save up and I’m going to buy a house, and then I’m going to buy my mum a house. She’s still renting, she’s rented all her life, little brown apartment in the west, no air conditioning, that’s where I grew up. But you know I didn’t want just any house, I wanted a proper nice one, a luxury apartment with a pool on the roof and concierge to say hello to when I walked in the building, or one of those Federation renovation ones on the water in like, Balmain or somewhere, you know, something good. And so I asked him, Stefan, I said, how much for sex? He like, honestly his

face, what a pathetic loser, it was like he'd never had sex before, like for God's sake, it's just putting your penis in my vagina, get over it. Anyway, he paid. He paid a lot.'

But I thought I'd just had to. I thought that was just part of the whole deal.

'We'd go to hotels, super expensive ones, the views, like, oh my God. Honestly I started really enjoying the whole thing, it felt like I was in a movie or something. I'd lounge around in this silk robe and order room service and I just felt so cool. I was like, look at me, western suburbs girl, public school girl, no-one ever thought I'd manage anything. He bought me so much stuff, and I thought, great, I'll sell that, jewellery and a watch and designer shit. That was when he started getting weird. He wanted me to like, break up with Theo and treat him like I was his girlfriend or something, and I was like, um, you literally already have a wife? You don't actually need a girlfriend? I knew me and Theo were breaking up anyway so I was like, oh, ok, I'll break up with my boyfriend for you, and he loved that, only then he thought he could see me all the time and I was just like, please, you cannot just drop in here whenever you want. One time he let himself in, like literally let himself in with his landlord's key when I was sleeping and tried to wake me up with sex. I was like - um, this is not part of the deal, buddy. And then he like, he, like, he - '

I remember the soft slap of skin on skin. The sound of breath forced too fast from someone's lungs. I'd thought it was a kink, some kind of kink. The things we're privy to, from which we turn away.

'I'm so sorry, Jamie.'

'I don't even know like, if it was a big deal or not. It wasn't like we hadn't had sex before. I don't know if there was any difference between me doing it or me just lying there. It's just putting a penis in a vagina, anyway.'

'There's a legal difference.'

'Yeah, yeah.' She waves her hand dismissively.

We sit silently. Raph and Frankie will be back at any moment, and Jamie will leave.

'Anyway, I didn't want to see him after that. At first I was embarrassed, and then I was just, I was so angry. He sent me money for it. Like, as though that had been the plan all along. I was just - '

'Did you keep it?'

'Well, why wouldn't I?'

'Fair enough.'

'And something went wrong with me. I don't know what. I felt so depressed.'

‘And then I decided I’d ramp everything up, make a heap of money and start fresh. Maybe even keep an eye out for some more rich old guys too, do everything to get to that dream of moving my mum out of her gross old flat and owning my own house and having a whole fortress of money. I had it all worked out, I was going to transition my Instagram into like a young mum thing soon, get married and have a kid and have a whole like ‘cool mum’ thing going on in my luxe apartment or my federation house or whatever, people love that. It was going to be so much fun.’ She turns to me and I see her face is dissolving in the sunlight, fading into shadow. For a moment I think, but you can still do that, you can fix this, but she’s right, she can’t do anything ever again.

I sit there for a long time, as the apartment grows darker. It occurs to me that Jamie did the sugarbaby thing correctly, and I fucked it up. It occurs to me that I couldn’t even get being a sugarbaby right. It would have been better for me to be dead, because Jamie was doing something with her life, and I’m not. Eventually I hear Frankie and Raph’s voices in the hall and then they come through the door, talking about something in loud voices.

‘Why are you sitting in the dark?’ asks Raph, flicking the lights on.

‘I didn’t notice.’

‘Maddy, did you see, about Jamie?’

‘The guy getting arrested? Yeah.’

‘His name was Stefan. Like - ’

‘Yeah, I know. Weird.’

No-one says anything for a moment.

‘It’s not a common name,’ says Frankie, at the same time Raph says, ‘We thought we might get a takeaway.’

I don’t say anything for a minute, and then I turn toward them and say, ‘I’ll order it, what are we after?’

Chapter Twenty-Five

It’s hot and the air is mostly clear. The mountains are still full of smoke, the south is on fire now, but we’re having a reprieve. I’m lying on the couch with Dante and Frida and although I want to get up and make lunch I don’t want to move because they’re both so comfy and so sweet, Frida’s back against my leg and Dante’s chin resting on her back. He’s growing more loving every day, more confident. He is loyal. I could let him off leash at any time and he’d stay with Frida and I, his friends. He barks more now, at big dogs who run up

to sniff him mostly, telling them to get lost, and people laugh at him for barking, and I smile at them but secretly feel annoyed at them for laughing.

Instead of getting up I open Instagram and scroll. There's an ad from an animal rescue place I follow for volunteers. You move up somewhere near Byron and help on the farm all day, rehabilitating all kinds of animals, and in payment you get to live there for free and eat meals that have been prepared for you. Sounds nice. I keep scrolling, read some depressing news, follow a link to a set of nice underwear I covet but exit out of because what's the point of nice underwear when you're me, check my email.

There's an offer there. From the university. To study a Bachelor of Environmental Science starting next year. I got it. I read the email a few times, swallowing, my hands shaking a little.

*

When Frankie gets home she's surprised to find Madison is missing from her usual spot scrolling her phone on the couch with the dogs. As she dumps her bag, Dante and Frida come scuttling out of Madison's room to greet her, wagging their tails frenetically and leaping up to place their paws against her knees.

'Hello hello,' she says, 'hi to you too!'

Madison stands beside the bed, surveying neat piles of clothing and other possessions. A bright yellow suitcase is open beside her, and already has a couple of things inside it.

Baffled, Frankie asks, 'What are you doing?'

Madison's eyes are bright when she turns to Frankie. Her forehead is smooth, the two lines between her eyebrows softer than usual. She starts giggling, an unusual sound.

'I just handed in my notice.'

Frankie's smiling too, just because Madison is.

'What?'

'I'm going to Bellingen.'

'Madison, what?'

The story comes out in a rush. 'I was on Instagram, I saw this ad for this place where they rehabilitate animals. All sorts, lambs, calves, cows, chickens, they'll take anyone. They need volunteers at the moment because of all the animals who have been dumped with them from the fires. I emailed them, I said I was interested but I need to bring my dogs, and they feed you there so I said I'm vegan, and they called me, they said the dogs are welcome, everyone there is vegan, when can I come. And I said, I dunno, I don't have a car, I don't know how to get there, and they said someone is leaving Sydney and driving up there today,

tonight I mean, and they're going to pick me up on their way." She picks up a pile of folded t-shirts and dumps them into the suitcase.

Frankie gazes at the t-shirts. The top one has a graphic of a deer with guns for antlers and the caption, arm the animals. 'So you're just going? For how long?'

'Sorry Frank, I know it's sudden.' Madison pauses for a second and the lines return. 'I just had to kind of jump to it, I didn't have time to call you or anything.'

Frankie's chest hurts. 'How long?'

'I don't know, really. I don't know how long they'll need me. If I hate it I'll just come back, obviously.'

But she wouldn't hate it. Frankie knew that already.

'What if it's not safe?'

'It's safe, of course it's safe. I've researched it and spoken to the founder for ages on the phone. An hour, at least. She was lovely, amazing.' Madison's eyes shine. She's fallen in love with the woman like she always has done with those types of people, country people, animal people, dog people.

'I don't want you to go.' Frankie's crying. Madison looks appalled, and bends down to reach out for her hands and hold them.

'Frank! Don't be upset. You don't need me here, you've got Raph.'

'I need you here.'

Dante, always receptive to unpleasant emotions, places his paws gently against Frankie's calves and gazes at her from concerned eyes. She picks him up and buries her nose in his fur, feeling her face making his fur wet.

'It's ok, I won't go.'

'Of course you'll go.' Frankie stood up, placing Dante on the bed. 'I'll help you pack, what are you up to?'

Outside, waiting for the car to pick her up, clutching the leashes of two confused dogs with the suitcase beside her, Madison feels suddenly overwhelmed.

'I don't think I can do it, I don't think I can go. What if I do hate it?'

'Then you can get on a train and come back. Or we'll come pick you up.'

They're both crying, but without making much noise. They stand for a moment, arms tightly encircling the other, both dogs whining and gazing upwards, Frida tapping at Madison's foot with her paw, trying to get her attention. A small car pulls up, bags and pillows pressing up against the back windows, and a woman with tightly plaited black hair gets out.

‘Don’t worry,’ she says, seeing their expressions at the sight of the back seat, ‘plenty of space in the boot!’

She greets the dogs who bark at her in a typical-for-them fashion, and Frankie longs to take the leashes and take them back inside, for them to stay with her. She helps Madison put her suitcase in the boot and then arrange her and the dogs in the front seat. The woman’s name is Ira, and she seems nice, no-nonsense, the kind of person Frankie can entrust her sister with for a long drive. They can’t say goodbye properly in front of Ira. Instead Frankie says, ‘ok, get out of my sight,’ and Maddy says, ‘well, if that’s how you feel,’ and as the car heads off down the street and Frida and Dante’s heads appear in the window, quizzical about why Frankie isn’t coming with them, she collapses slowly onto a garden wall beside the pavement, dropping her shoulders and sobbing until the sobs run out.

*

I said goodbye to Jamie privately. Frankie popped out to the shop to get me snacks for the car trip and extra dog food and I sat on the couch and waited. Jamie didn’t appear, but I felt that she was watching me.

‘I’m sorry you’re dead.’ I said. ‘It’s not fair.’

The sunlight streamed in through the windows, the cynical yellow sunlight of Sydney which I loved and was leaving.

‘I wish things were different.’ I said.

‘I’m going to try and live better. Not because you’re dead, but because I’m not.’

As Ira, Dante, Frida and I travel north I feel calm inside. It’s right that I should be going to where the animals are, after all this time of professing to care for them. It’s right to go and look them in the face, to meet them as individuals, to see them as someone other than the faceless masses of the soon-to-be slaughtered. It’s right.

Chapter Twenty Six

Frankie supposes she has depression. It seems a normal reaction to months of trying to conceive and her sister, her friend, leaving her, so she doesn’t worry about it. She doesn’t have energy to worry. Raph notices but doesn’t say anything, performing small acts of love which Frank notices but doesn’t comment on. On Saturday morning they’re lying in bed when Maddy sends a video of the dogs tearing around a paddock, chasing each other and barking wildly. Maddy’s laughter sounds in the background, and the voices of people Frankie

doesn't know. Tears leak from the sides of Frankie's eyes and Raph says, 'Frank, it's a happy video!'

'I know.' She wipes them away. She doesn't feel sad, just suddenly overwhelmed with feeling, for the little dogs running free in the long grass and the sound of her sister's laughter.

'I have a big idea for today,' says Raph, getting out of bed and opening his drawer, fumbling around for some socks.

'Oh yeah?' Frankie doesn't feel like a big idea day. She feels tired, deeply tired. She'd like to go back to sleep.

'Yep. I'm taking you on a special date.'

Her heart sinks. She doesn't want to go on a special date. She also doesn't want to crush the look of earnestness from Raph's face, to ruin his plan.

'Oh? Where to?'

'It's a surprise.'

Frankie hauls herself up and starts to get dressed. Inside she thinks, better not be an *active* surprise, or anything involving energy, because that I do not have.

Raph heads east. She thinks they must be going to the beach, and cheers up at the thought of a wander along the sand, a coffee warm in her hand and the blue expanse of ocean and sky before her. Then he turns away from the beach, inland, and she waits, confused, for him to stop. Eventually he does, in an unremarkable suburban street, outside a bungalow where an elderly man in a hat waters his plants and waves to them. She waves back, thinking how lovely of him to wave at them, when he doesn't even know them, how the art of waving at someone you don't know has been lost and should be recovered, somehow.

'What are we doing?' But Raph shakes his head, takes her hand, and they begin to walk.

They stop outside a small building. On the glass front letters spell out Sydney Dog and Cats Home.

She looks at him. 'Really?'

'Yep.'

'But you've always said - '

'I've changed my mind.' He's gazing at her, longing for her to be pleased, and although she feels tired, and slightly nauseous from being on her phone in the car, she is pleased, but also nervous.

'What if you don't like any of them?'

‘I’ll like them.’

They make faces at each other, expressions riven with the fear of mingled hope and expected failure.

‘Okay?’

‘Let’s go.’

*

Argus’ arrival into her home doesn’t make her feel less tired, less listless, but lying on the couch with him feels better than lying there alone. And he does force her up and about, requesting walks, breakfast, dinner, play, attention, with a confidence belying his newcomer status. She laughs at him as he catches sight of himself in the mirror and skitters away, taken aback by the image of a dog in his home. She smiles when he plays with his toy, throwing it around and catching it, dumping it on the floor and running away and then back again, thoroughly enjoying himself without any help from anyone. She supposes she feels a little better, just having him around.

On the weekend, they drive out of Sydney, trying to find places to walk him where he can walk along unhurried and unhassled by the neighbourhood dogs, who make him hang his head with his tail between his legs. They go to state parks and deserted beaches and grassy, swampy spaces where he wanders along on a five metre leash, stopping to sniff or roll on his back with his teeth showing in a grimace of pleasure. They hold hands, and sip coffee, and one morning, gazing out at the line where the sea meets the sky, Frankie feels a kind of peace.

Madison messages her every day all day, just like usual, and life takes on a new rhythm which becomes the normal rhythm. Raph leaves stacks of printed paperwork out about adoption (Madison would hate this, the waste of paper and printer energy), and watches documentaries about children who have been adopted and who are waiting to be adopted, glancing at Frankie every so often to see if she’s watching too, but she never is.

She does think about it, though. She wonders about it. If it’s even ethical, to take a child born of someone else and call yourself their mother? She looks at Argus and wonders about his mother, from whom Argus slithered just eighteen months before ending up in their apartment. Where is his mother? Is she alive? Is she safe, fed, happy, comfortable? She swings from wanting to start the process, to making a definitive decision not to. The child would always wonder about their real parents, would always long for the real bond of flesh and blood. The child’s real parents can’t look after them, someone needs to, why shouldn’t it be them? She might not love the child, because it wouldn’t be her child. It wouldn’t look like

them. Argus doesn't look like them, and she loves him. Argus isn't a child, he's an adult dog, a friend. It's a completely different situation.

But there are children and the children need homes. And they have a home. And a bedroom, unused. Isn't it wrong not to at least offer?

Probably they wouldn't be accepted, anyway.

*

The sky is bright here. The stars hover closer to the earth. We sleep well, in a single bed, in a room with a woman called Fiona. We're up early, all together, me and Fiona and Frida and Dante, pulling on our clothes and boots and heading out to tend to the animals. The dogs were scared at first, of everything, especially the cows and the noises they make, which don't sound anything like the word 'moo'. Now they're fine, wary, but fine. They have freedom here. They've come to know everyone and everyone treats them kindly.

I miss: fresh, soft clothes warm from the dryer and smelling of Napisan. A hot plastic box of Pad Thai with a separate container of crushed peanuts to sprinkle over the top. TV. I have my laptop, and wifi, but I can't mindlessly watch reality shows now, like The Bachelor, or Married at First Sight, or that show where people get filmed watching tv and talking through all the shows. I won't stay here forever. I'll return to the city and breathe in the dusty air again and fight with mould in the cheapest apartment I can find and I'll find another way of living my life. I'll work in a library, or I'll write for a website, or I'll apply for every job that comes up at the RSPCA until I get one. I won't change the world. But I might be helpful.

Or I won't. I'll live. Or I'll die. I'm just one person, living one small life.

Maybe things will change. I saw on Instagram that we're on track for less warming than was predicted just last year. Things are happening, like electric cars and people having the money to buy them, like solar panels on new buildings which already use less energy than old buildings. Raph talks about carbon sequestration, and although I don't know how that works I can see reflected in his eyes the blue of a sky sucked clean.

I have been an animal. I have been only the function of my body, denied the right of myself. Things might change, but nothing will matter if anyone continues being denied the right of themselves.

I've been thinking a lot about what happens when we die. Death doesn't seem so frightening in the country. Animals die here, kangaroos on the side of the road, lambs spared from farms who we nurse but who die anyway, calves who cry until their cries fade away like the darkness leaching from the sky at dawn. And maybe that's what happens when we die, we are returned the rights to ourselves in the places we were safe. The koalas high in trees that

won't ever burn, cows in shaded fields with calves who will not be taken, dogs playing in parks, intact but unexploited, me and Frankie cuddled up on a bed we will not be molested on, listening to our mum read. We cling so tightly to this world full of the pain inflicted on us and the pain we inflict, when maybe just beyond the darkness there's something else.

Introduction: Human / Animal / Environment

The following exegesis is intended to provide supplementary thematic insight into my novel, *Small Life*. Within it I discuss an emerging sub-genre of literary fiction that is preoccupied with the experience of living through the increasingly tangible effects of anthropogenic climate change, arguing that the growth of this category reflects increasing literary attention to the anxieties and apprehensions of life on a warming planet. I then explore how the period referred to as the Anthropocene is represented in two novels by Michelle de Kretser, an Australian author and academic who has been influential in my own craft. I argue that de Kretser's work sits within the category of Anthropocene fiction; that any work rooted in the concerns of the Anthropocene falls into this category; and that the breadth and scope of the genre is responsive to and representative of the magnitude of issues facing us as a result of anthropogenic climate change. Within this discussion I will explore how anthropogenic concerns have informed and continue to shape socio-cultural attitudes toward domestic animals, both those we eat and those we live with as companions.

Further, I discuss how Anthropocene fictions reflect the complexity of contemporary human-animal relationships, with reference to de Kretser's novels *The Life to Come* (2017) and *The Lost Dog* (2007).¹ By analysing form and genre, I illustrate how Kretser's work extrapolates the complexities of class, race, species and ethics that are embedded in human-animal encounters. Finally, I reflect on a central aspect of *Small Life*, which is the adoption of veganism as an ideology of resistance. Through this reflection I engage with the broader themes of the novel and exegesis, exploring the role of literature in envisioning a more sustainable future.

The following passage from Henry Beston's work of creative nonfiction *The Outermost House* (1928) is one to which I have returned countless times throughout the writing of my novel and this exegesis. Beston writes:

We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image

¹ De Kretser, Michelle. *The Life to Come*. Allen & Unwin, 2018; De Kretser, Michelle, *The Lost Dog*, Allen & Unwin, 2007

in distortion. We patronise them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate for having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein do we err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.²

Beston's work, considered a classic of American nature writing, chronicles a year spent living in Cape Cod on a stretch of solitary coast. This quote underpins the ideology of both my novel and this exegesis, asserting the urgent necessity for a radical shift in human attitudes about and treatment of our nonhuman kin. The final line of this quote, in which Beston positions nonhuman animals alongside humans, 'caught... in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth' is particularly germane in this current moment, defined as it is by the threat of ecological and social breakdown which affects both human and nonhuman animals without distinction, as the supposedly manageable warming limit of 1.5 degrees slips further out of reach.³

We need only remember the disasters of the last few years to see Beston's conceptualisation of human and nonhuman animals 'caught' within the travails of the earth made manifest. Since beginning this doctorate, humans and animals have borne the devastating bushfires of 2019-2020, in which it is estimated that around three billion animals were killed or displaced, followed by the commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic, a virus of zoonotic origin which as of the date of writing has killed more than six million people and affected animals both directly and indirectly through death by infection and death by human culling due to fear of infection.^{4,5} Record breaking fires in the Brazilian Amazon, flash flooding and resultant landslides in India and Nepal, historic flooding in Germany and Belgium, the devastating Haiti earthquake of 2021, torrential floods caused by monsoons and melting glaciers in Pakistan which have thus far affected 33 million people make up a representative but by no means exhaustive list of the climate caused disasters that have

² Beston, Henry. *The Outermost House*. Doubleday, 1928 pp 24-25

³ Singh, Roop K., et al. "International Conference on Climate Risk Management, Inputs for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Sixth Assessment Report." *Climate and Development*, vol. 11, no. 8, Taylor & Francis, 2019, pp. 655–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2018.1521331>.

⁴ van Eeden, Lily M., et al. *Impacts of the Unprecedented 2019-20 Bushfires on Australian Animals*. World Wildlife Fund Australia. November 2020.

⁵ Dadex. "Coronavirus Death Toll." *Worldometer*, www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/coronavirus-death-toll/. Accessed March 18, 2023.

occurred throughout the writing of this thesis, and all paint a grim picture of what is to come for all beings and all nations, and for which humans are responsible.

The concept of the ‘Anthropocene’ provides a framework in which to begin considering these phenomena. The Anthropocene as an idea was popularised in the early 2000s by a group of geologists who argued that the profound impact of human activity on the earth’s ecosystems meant a new geological epoch had arrived.⁶ The Anthropocene has not been officially adopted by scientists to describe the current time, nor is it clear when the Anthropocene is proposed to have begun. Despite this, the term has been accepted into contemporary vocabulary, often used as an umbrella term encompassing the effects of industrialisation, deforestation and the release of greenhouse gases leading to climate change.⁷ The Anthropocene as a concept ‘... captures the extent and profundity of the multiple and interacting changes that human beings have wreaked and are wreaking on Earth...[suggesting] something of the sheer hugeness of the task we now all face in adapting to and healing those impacts’.⁸ Fiction that explores and reflects on these themes has historically been referred to as cli-fi, a genre combining climate and science fiction, but it is important to note that the Anthropocene and climate change are not the same thing – one describes an epoch, one an ongoing event.

Adam Trexler traces how fiction has reconfigured what it means to live in this period, stating that although many genres including science fiction offer rich backdrops for an exploration of the term, the breadth of genre represented by novels dealing with life in the Anthropocene defy easy categorisation.⁹ Trexler asserts that ‘...the best Anthropocene novels... [do not] reduce climate change to a unitary phenomenon, such as the “Great Storm.” Instead, they explore how things like ocean currents, tigers, viruses, floods, vehicles, and capital relentlessly shape human experience.’¹⁰ Early works that grapple with environmental concerns specifically arising as a result of human action are interesting to consider in light of how they demarcate the line between fiction that is primarily concerned with the events of climate change, real or imagined, and fiction that attends to the broader and ongoing effects of the Anthropocene. Some of these include Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*

⁶ Muir, Cameron, et al. *Living with the Anthropocene: Love, Loss and Hope in the Face of Environmental Crisis*. New South, 2020 p 3

⁷ Muir, p 4

⁸ Muir, pp 4-5

⁹ Trexler, Adam. “INTRODUCTION: Contextualizing the Climate Change Novel.” *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, University of Virginia Press, 2015, pp. 1–28. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x1r99.4>. Accessed 28 Sept. 2023 p 13

¹⁰ Trexler, p 26

(1962), which investigated the effect of DDT, a powerful pesticide on humans, animals and the environment, and which was received with ‘a howl of indignation from the chemical industry’.¹¹ *Silent Spring* is not a novel, but is a foundational work in environmental literature and serves as a precursor to the concerns addressed in Anthropocene fiction, and contributes to broader discourse regarding direct harm wrought by human activity on the earth. *The Sheep Look Up* (1972) by John Brunner, published a decade later, engages with similar themes of pollution and corporate greed resulting in severe environmental degradation. The title of the novel refers to a passage from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, where Cassius says, ‘The fault, dear Brutus, is not in the stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings.’¹² This reference is significant in that it highlights a key aspect of Anthropocene fiction as presented in this exegesis, which is that these fictions deal not only with the effects of human action on the planet and all those who live on it, but most incisively with the effects on the most vulnerable, the ‘underlings’.

Social inequality and inequality between species are of fundamental importance in fiction attending to the Anthropocene. Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2003-2013) interrogates the potential for environmental collapse to worsen social inequality and the exploitation of vulnerable populations, as does P.D James’ *The Children of Men* (1992).¹³ As time has passed, so has the proliferation of texts where the repercussions of generations of human greed on both human and animal others is a foundational concern. Ruth Ozeki’s novel, *My Year of Meats* (1998), attends to the human-animal face of environmental ruin, engaging with the impact of growth hormones used to increase profit for livestock farmers on planetary health.¹⁴ It is notable that Ozeki’s novel writes specifically about the devastating impact of diethylstilbestrol (DES), a synthetic form of estrogen, on those exposed to it in kind of bleak mirroring of Carson’s concerns about the consequences of insecticide dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) on those exposed to it. In both instances, those who aim to make a profit show a flagrant disregard for human, animal and environmental health, despite there being four decades between books, plenty of time, one might think, for burgeoning knowledge and attention to have made such practices obsolete. Another notable work elucidating the interconnectedness of all living beings is Richard Powers’ 2018 Pulitzer

¹¹ Carson, Rachel, *Silent Spring*. Penguin, 1999.; Natural Resources Defence Council, ‘The Story of Silent Spring’, August 13 2015, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/story-silent-spring>.

¹² Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2001, Act I, Scene III, L. 140-141.

¹³ Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*. Virago, 2004; Atwood, Margaret. *The Year of the Flood*. Bloomsbury, 2009; Atwood, Margaret, *MaddAddam*. Doubleday, 2018; James, P. D. *The Children of Men*. Faber & Faber, 2018.

¹⁴ Ozeki, Ruth, *My Year of Meats*. The Text Publishing Company, 2013.

Prize-winning novel *The Overstory* (2018), which underscores not only the way animals play essential roles within forest ecosystems, but also how the forests themselves are sentient and worthy of being treated as such.¹⁵

These works indicate a global turn toward writing focusing on the interrelationship between the human and more-than-human worlds in response to anthropogenic climate change. Despite this attention, the literary and cultural entanglements with the Anthropocene are overwhelmingly focused on the human. There are some examples which engage with nonhuman animals and the broader natural world in a way that destabilises the tendency to see humans as the beings of primary importance. Laura Jean McKay's novel *The Animals in that Country* (2020) follows animal attendant Jean as she navigates a post-pandemic world where humans are able to communicate with animals.¹⁶ McKay's novel refuses to provide easy answers about animal perspectives, experiences or futures, depicting animal communications in short, poetic bursts that defy straightforward modes of comprehension. McKay's contribution is confrontational, compelling the reader to reject long-held beliefs about animal agency and value and reconsider how we function alongside animals rather than over them. In his book *Writing Animals, Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, Timothy C. Baker posits that in the Anthropocene '...any species hierarchy or division that places nonhuman animals within a natural world from which humans are separated is no longer possible.'¹⁷ McKay's novel is a valuable example of how fiction can attend to this collapse of species barriers, imagining as it does a world where the hierarchy of human-animal-nature is suddenly void.

Charlotte Wood addresses human-animal relationships in a less direct but equally powerful way in her novel *The Weekend* (2019).¹⁸ Sustained reflection on the broader impacts of human consumption and entitlement on the more-than-human world is anchored by Wendy's specific, apprehensive grief over her elderly dog, whose needs she attends to with patience and love despite her companion's disparaging opinion that the dog should be euthanised. Evie Wyld's *All the Birds, Singing* (2013) also depicts the significance of friendship between women and dogs.¹⁹ Jake has escaped Australia to the isolation of an island in the United Kingdom where she lives with a free-roaming canine named Dog. Jake's

¹⁵ Powers, Richard. *The Overstory: A Novel*. First edition., W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.

¹⁶ McKay, Laura Jean. *The Animals in That Country*. Scribe Publications, 2020.

¹⁷ Baker, Timothy C. *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction*. 1st ed., Springer International Publishing, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03880-9> p 146.

¹⁸ Wood, Charlotte. *The Weekend: A Novel*. 1st ed., Penguin Publishing Group, 2020.

¹⁹ Wyld, Evie. *All the Birds, Singing*. Random House Australia Pty Ltd, 2014.

history and her experiences in the menacing but beautiful environs that serve as the story's backdrop centres the novel in the anthropogenic themes of human brutality on each other, animals and the environment, and a kind of traumatised and isolated form of survival despite poor odds and with the help of an animal other or others.

Amitav Ghosh has contributed both fiction and non-fiction work centring on the relationship between humans and the natural world, specifically through a post-colonialist lens that links imperialist legacies with current global inequalities relating to the distribution of power and resources.²⁰ Ghosh argues that the consequences of climate change are felt most acutely by those who are least responsible for causing it, a theme to which he gives literary attention in his novel *Gun Island* (2019).²¹ This novel again incorporates animals, both real and mythological, to explore the challenges humans face in learning to share ecologies with other animals and the larger natural environment.

Ghosh further exemplifies the connection between non-human animals, human communities and the larger natural world in his book *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021). He writes that 'An essential step toward the silencing of nonhuman voices was to imagine that only humans are capable of telling stories', and suggests that rather than story-telling being uniquely human, '...the narrative faculty is the most animal of human abilities, a product of one of the traits that humans indisputably share with animals and many other beings – attachments to place.'²² He asks us to consider what the planetary crisis might look like if seen from a world where many kinds of beings tell stories.²³

Works written about the Anthropocene, both fictional and theoretical, can be bleak, as they often ask us to consider the crimes of our species and the uncertainty of our future. Questions like these posed by Ghosh, however, prompt optimism and action. Michelle de Kretser writes about the Anthropocene in a satirical way, presenting various absurdities and injustices with a levity that undercuts tension from or resistance to the reader's existing ideas and opinions about the described situation. Jacqueline Kellish comments that in fiction attending to the catastrophe of climate change, '...human beings are not merely its victims – they are also the architects of their own potential downfall. Therefore, in Anthropocene satire, any comic attempt to shore up a victimized self simultaneously functions as a critical parody

²⁰ De, Asis, and Alessandro Vescovi, editors. *Amitav Ghosh's Culture Chromosome : Anthropology, Epistemology, Ethics, Space*. BRILL, 2022.

²¹ Ghosh, Amitav. *Gun Island*. Macmillan, 2020.

²² Ghosh, Amitav. *The Nutmeg's Curse : Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. University of Chicago Press, 2021 p 201; 204

²³ Ghosh, 205

of that very self.’²⁴ The elements of de Kretser’s writing that engage with modes of satire invite a reflection of the victimised self as such; a self with agency, individual capability, and the right to refute the existence of both.

Existing scholarship on de Kretser canvasses a variety of themes of importance in her novels. Cultural displacement, migration, identity, consumer-capitalism and colonisation are all central to de Kretser’s body of work. Mirza Maryam provides an interrogation of *The Lost Dog* from the perspective of inclusion, exclusion and belonging in contemporary Australia, arguing that Tom’s identity crisis stems from and is exacerbated by the workings of global consumer capitalism.²⁵ Marie Herbillon and Alejandra Moreno-Alvarez consider de Kretser’s exploration of trauma and gothic haunting to critique settler culture and decentralise the human subject.²⁶ Marike Denger considers history and identity in *The Lost Dog*, ultimately arguing that the return of the dog at the end of the book signifies Tom’s ‘...cautious reconciliation with the painful aspects of his past.’²⁷

None of this scholarship comprehensively engages with the theme of the animal in de Kretser’s fiction. Although Moreno-Alvarez rightly posits that de Kretser’s depictions of contemporary life destabilise the human, shining the spotlight instead on the more-than-human world, Denger’s argument that Tom’s returned dog is a symbol of something relating to Tom, rather than an animal represented as living his life on his own terms, with determination and agency, is disappointing. This neglect of de Kretser’s treatment of the animal motivates this exegesis.

The Lost Dog and *The Life to Come* offer an intimate, complex perspective on the socio-political setting in which I and the characters in my novel *Small Life* live, that is, a subset of the liberal left characterised by socio-political status and social media performativity which often belies sincere good intentions. *The Life to Come* wrestles with the burden of liability, specifically who has it and who suffers because of it, as the planet

²⁴ Kellish, Jacqueline A. “No Laughable Thing under the Sun”: Satire, Realism and the Crisis of Climate Change in Ian McEwan’s *Solar*”, *Aesthetics of the Anthropocene, Articulating Geo-Logics in the Epoch of the New Human*, Duke University, p 3.

²⁵ Mirza, Maryam. “The Anxiety of Being Australian: Modernity, Consumerism, and Identity Politics in Michelle de Kretser’s *The Lost Dog*.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2020, pp. 190–203, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989418755541>.

²⁶ Herbillon, Marie. “Absent Others: Asian-Australian Discontinuities in Michelle de Kretser’s ‘the Lost Dog.’” *Commonwealth (Rodez, France)*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2018, pp. 43–52; Moreno-Álvarez, Alejandra. “De Kretser’s Retelling of a Ghost Love Story.” *Humanities (Basel)*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2020, 87, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h9030087>.

²⁷ Denger, Marijke. “Michelle de Kretser’s *The Lost Dog*: History and Identity in the Metropolis of Melbourne.” *Re-Inventing the Postcolonial (in the) Metropolis*, vol. 188, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004328761_019 p 306

becomes rapidly inhospitable to life. In *The Lost Dog*, Tom's search for the dog is a catalyst for deeper reflections on how humans perceive of and value animals in domestic, urban and natural settings, as well as the challenges faced by animals in a rapidly changing world marked by species loss, habitat destruction and the broad desire of some to profit from exploiting vulnerable creatures. Through her portrayal of Tom and the dog's bond, de Kretser prompts discussions about the complexities of coexisting with other animals in a time when our shared futures look so uncertain.

These novels present conflicts that are typical of those experienced in the Anthropocene: conflicts between the mundane and momentous, the individual and collective, conflicts which are underpinned by a pervasive sense of passivity and helplessness. Approaching these conflicts from a narrative perspective require a shift away from socially entrenched perspectives of personhood to creatively imagine ourselves toward a new story, one which moves humanity, animality and the planet itself onto spheres of equality, not hierarchy.

The following three chapters will consider first what de Kretser implies about left-wing discourse regarding eating animals, and animals and climate change, then wider implications about human-animal relationships in the Australian context, and finally how attending to individual modes of resistance in writing, such as a consumer's decision to be vegan, can help to mark out the space for larger conversations about how human relationships with other animals and the earth must change. First, I examine de Kretser's portrayal of meat-eating and morality, contending that her satirical take on ethical consumption redirects discussions on animals and the environment toward a socio-political context and sidesteps the stalemates common in food and ethics discourse. I will then argue that de Kretser's portrayal of the eponymous dog in *The Lost Dog* and Hank in *The Life to Come* dismantles socially and culturally constructed boundaries between species, facilitating a reimagining of human-animal-nature relationships built on solicitude and respect. By depicting animals with honesty and empathy, these narratives encourage a shift in perspective that extends beyond the page. In the final chapter I contemplate the idea that narrating and living the stories of 'small lives' can serve as a form of resistance against oppressive structures, fostering connections between humans and the more-than-human world. I conclude by envisioning a future where small acts of resistance become the norm, referencing themes explored in my own novel and positioning these as a creative response to and a form of participation in cultural narratives and attitudes toward global issues.

When smoke fogged the city around Christmas 2019, I found a mouse sitting on the steps outside Fisher Library. Her mouth was open, gasping for air, and her sides expanded and contracted in a way that suggested death was imminent. I crouched beside her, pouring water from my lukewarm bottle near and over her, hoping to cool her down and give her an opportunity to drink but at the same time afraid of drowning, hurting or frightening her. Eventually she dipped her paws into the water and wiped them over her face, licking the remaining water from herself and seeming to breathe more easily. As I knelt there, some people came from the library and saw the mouse. One screamed in fear or disgust, whereas another found the tableau more amusing, taking pictures on her phone, seeing photographic novelty in the mouse's inability to move from the frame to safety. Finally, with a surprising nimbleness, the mouse found her strength and darted away, and I continued my walk home, heavy with the knowledge of my own uselessness in the ravages of the fires.

This affective encounter was made all the more devastating through the knowledge that as the city's animals struggled to survive the heat and smoke, the country's wildlife and those animals kept in paddocks, awaiting slaughter, were dying in their millions, their bodies devoured by the flames and fanned across the country in the form of the charred white ash found in meals eaten outside, in our hair, our lungs, our snot, washed up in lines of spume along the coast. This interaction between myself and the mouse made its way into *Small Life*, and along with the profound and furious sense of urgency to act brought about by witnessing the events of that summer, had a significant impact on the direction of this thesis. These kinds of affective encounters, whether experienced in a fictive or literal sense, have the capacity to profoundly alter human attitudes toward animals, and thus to force a radical rethinking of our natural place on the earth. If we are to reject the idea of animals as 'underlings', as Henry Beston does, we must then reconsider the notion of our own species as 'superiors'. Beston writes that animals are '...gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained'.²⁸ Although it is unknown at present how the next decade will play out in relation to the global climate crisis, it seems clear that one of those lost senses is the ability to live harmoniously, both alongside our own and other species, inhabiting the earth with the temperance and grace of an animal, who lives and dies without the artifice which has come to define our species and will forever define this layer of the earth's crust. The novel permits writers and readers a space in which to reimagine our present and our future.

²⁸ Beston p 24

Chapter 1

Conviviality and Complicity in *The Life to Come*

This chapter examines how Michelle de Kretser's Miles Franklin award winning novel *The Life to Come* comments on the interplay of different forms of power: social and economic, racial and animal, and posits that the novel prompts a reassessment of individual culpability in the Anthropocene. Specifically, I will evaluate how de Kretser lampoons the concept of ethical consumption and in doing so contributes to broader dialogues on the ethics of eating animals, highlighting how personal choices have panoptic consequences. Tony Hughes-D'Aeth surmises that '...the Anthropocene has created a radical problem of scale... The planetary dimensions of the Anthropocene pose challenges to the human imagination, upending the usual historical and geopolitical coordinates that situate us as people in the world.'²⁹ The scenarios depicted may at times be bewildering, echoing the uncertainties of our current era, but de Kretser's adept use of satire allows readers to find humour, poke fun, and see reflections of themselves within these situations. This approach enhances the effectiveness of her writing and also roots it in a literary tradition that excels at spotlighting the discomforts, tensions, and absurdities of life in the Anthropocene. I will briefly refer to how this discourse is thematically related to my own novel, *Small Life*, and reflect on decisions of craft and representation in the writing of that novel.

Eating is a political action.³⁰ Eating or eschewing the flesh and fluids of animals has become a topic at the forefront of contemporary discourse, sometimes in the repudiation of the 'soy-latte sipping inner-city greenies', or as the rise of 'flexitarianism' or the prevalence of warnings in the form of widely-shared articles regarding the impact of diet on an individual's carbon emissions.³¹ Fear and stress about climate change is already having an effect on mental health markers, with the American Psychiatric Association reporting an

²⁹ Hughes-D'Aeth, Tony. "Australian Fiction in the Anthropocene." *The Cambridge Companion to the Australian Novel*, 2023, pp. 289–304, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009083409.022> p 289

³⁰ Rebrovick, Tripp. "The Politics of Diet: 'Eco-Dietetics,' Neoliberalism, and the History of Dietetic Discourses." *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2015, pp. 678–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912915605183>; Lavin, Chad. *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013; Grünhage, Thomas, and Martin Reuter. "What Makes Diets Political? Moral Foundations and the Left-Wing-Vegan Connection." *Social Justice Research*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2021, pp. 18–52, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-020-00361-w> p 18;

³¹ The Nationals, @TheNationals, "Bill Shorten still hasn't said a word about the radical, vegan trespassers storming our farmers' land. That's because he doesn't care about our farmers or the regions. He's too busy focusing on the big unions & soy latte-sipping, inner-city greenies. #ausvotes #FairGoForFarmers", Twitter, 12 April 2019, 5.41pm, https://twitter.com/the_nationals/status/1116607299630448646

increase in mental disorder and coping mechanisms as a result of exposure to media reports about natural disasters and the impact of climate change.³² A 2021 study across North America, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region showed climate change is a prevalent concern among individuals, with eighty percent of respondents answering that they were willing to make changes to how they live and work in the effort to help reduce the effect of global climate change.³³ Despite this, it is not clear whether the kind of changes required of respondents are acceptable (or even possible), and the challenges prevalent in discussing food choices alongside individual environmental impact often results in onerous and unproductive conversations. The discrepancy between the desire for and response to reform for nonhuman animals is the central concern of this chapter, and of the novel more broadly.

The novel follows the stories of several characters, including Pippa, an aspiring writer living in Sydney; Celeste, a French-Australian academic; Ash and Cassie, an academic couple whose romance takes place in Sydney's inner-west; and Christabel, a middle-aged woman who moved to Sydney from Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. Through a tightly-controlled series of vignettes de Kretser builds a narrative undercut by the characters search for meaning in contemporary life. The organisation of the novel into character-based sections which moves characters from primary narrators to secondary or even peripheral elements of different chapters clarifies the contrast between different perspectives and beliefs. This is certainly the case when it comes to novel's extensive consideration of food.

De Kretser derides earnest defences of sanctity of one's personal food choices throughout, yet ironically bases various narrative and character points around the discussion, consumption and origins of food. What, where and with whom characters are eating is integral to story and theme. Pippa photographs it and offers it to other to bolster her performed identity; Cassie proffers it as gesture of romance; for Christabel and Bunty, plentiful, accessible food is a luxury not taken for granted. Celeste is one of the few characters for whom food is a simple matter of nourishment and enjoyment, and in Celeste's section the discourse around food moves unmistakably into parody. After seeing Pippa's online poll regarding people's preferences for toasted or untoasted freekeh, Celeste asks her

³² Morganstein, Joshua C. "Climate Change and Mental Health Connections." *American Psychiatric Association*, Nov. 2019, www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/climate-change-and-mental-health-connections#:~:text=The%20mental%20health%20consequences%20of,anxiety%20and%20post%2Dtraumatic%20stress.

³³ Bell, James, et al. "In Response to Climate Change, Citizens in Advanced Economies Are Willing To Alter How They Live and Work." *Pew Research Centre*, 14 Sept. 2021, www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/09/14/in-response-to-climate-change-citizens-in-advanced-economies-are-willing-to-alter-how-they-live-and-work/.

mother why Australians ‘go on’ about food. Her mother replies, ‘Because they live in a country of no importance.’³⁴

This cultural discrepancy in viewing food is illustrated further through the chapters focusing on Ash and Cassie. Their relationship stems from an interaction over food that explicates the novel’s focus on consumption and ethics, and is maintained through the ritual of Cassie sourcing and producing dishes which she imagines are evocative of Ash’s childhood in Sri Lanka. Ash and Cassie meet at a university event where Ash asks Cassie if the pastry she is eating contains meat. Before Cassie can reply:

A girl came out of nowhere to confide, ‘I often think about going veggo. But I just really love a good steak.’ Smiling, she shook all her curls at the dilemma, extravagant in a rose-coloured dress. She turned her rosy shoulder in such a way that she was addressing only the man and said, ‘And bacon!’

‘Yes, it’s the kind of thing that must once have taken up many a conversational hour in Rome,’ he replied. ‘You know, the injustice of slavery versus the inconvenience of life without slaves.’

The girl’s enthusiastic body went still. Then she went away.³⁵

This scene is positioned satirically to expose discursive flaws regarding eating animals. This tableau identifies the character within a broader politic founded on ignoring rights issues for the sake of convenience and ultimately delivers a brutal critique. Ash’s transgressions are manifold in this interaction as, rather than engaging in the expected script in which two people bond over their shared human foibles, or alternately responding to the unnamed girl’s flirtatious overtures, Ash draws a (deeply unpopular) comparison between human slavery and animal exploitation and thus destroys the intended conviviality of the girl’s comments.³⁶ De Kretser’s presentation of the event makes it clear that Ash is contravening the university’s sanitised liberal script, and serves a commentary on the moral bankruptcy of prioritising one’s personal gratification over broader ethical considerations.

Ash’s response is further a rejection of a gendered script regarding meat and masculinity to which the girl is appealing, positioning herself as a carnivorous woman in the same way someone may position themselves as ‘low-maintenance’, or as ‘not like other

³⁴De Kretser, p 148

³⁵De Kretser, p 26

³⁶Spiegel, Marjorie. *The Dreaded Comparison : Human and Animal Slavery*. Rev. and expanded ed., Mirror Books, 1996.

women.’ According to (tired, but common) notions about meat and masculinity, Ash’s rejection of both meat and woman feminises him, and yet Cassie’s response to witnessing this interaction serves to foreshadow the relationship she eventually enters into, one which casts Ash into the role of saviour; honourable of principle and courageous in conviction.³⁷ The act of not eating meat must be considered within the paradigm of gender, as both the performance and perspectives of gender inform so many of our eating practices. Carol Adams’ work analyses the various ways in which masculinity is expressed through meat and meat-eating, arguing that men who eschew animal flesh repudiate a culturally and historically masculine privilege.³⁸ Inversely, women who embrace meat-eating may aim to disassociate from historically and culturally feminine-coded practices and thus distance themselves from supposedly feminine qualities that are derided by some men, thus appearing equable, relaxed, robust - in other words, qualities permitted only to men. Further, as meat has culturally and historically been marked for men, women may see a reclamation of meat eating as a way of rejecting misogynistic attitudes and taking one’s place at a real and metaphorical table. It is unclear at this point whether Cassie is a vegetarian or not, but a comment made by Pippa later regarding Cassie ‘going vegetarian’ for Ash suggests she is not.³⁹ Thus, Cassie herself takes on a pallor, flexible and passive in the face of Ash’s belief.

From this same angle we might understand de Kretser’s positioning of Ash’s meat-free lifestyle as challenging traditional associations with masculinity and therefore promoting egalitarian gender dynamics. A study of 61 vegan men from Northern Europe argued that the adoption of veganism by men and resulting cultivation of vegan masculinities holds promise for nurturing more ethical and sustainable interactions with nonhuman animals and the environment.⁴⁰ The scenes detailing Ash’s trip to the country to visit a friend’s family farm serve to emphasise the differences between him and other male characters as he realises ‘the magnitude of his mistake’.⁴¹

Ash wondered what word might apply to what they were moving through: certainly not ‘landscape’. It was a presence that spoke of absence; it brought to mind the desolation left by a plundering army – which wasn’t, after all, very far from the mark. Half a cow lay near a

³⁷ Adams, Carol J, *The Sexual Politics of Meat, A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, Bloomsbury, 1990, p 12-17; De Kretser, p 27

³⁸ De Kretser, 17

³⁹ De Kretser, p 47

⁴⁰ Aavik, Kadri. *Contesting Anthropocentric Masculinities through Veganism : Lived Experiences of Vegan Men*. 1st ed. 2023., Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19507-5>.

⁴¹ De Kretser, 36

fence, its head twisted away from the ivory basket of its ribs. It was only a stray splinter from the coffin of pastoral romance – that had perished here long ago.⁴²

Ash observing the remains of the cow ensnares animal-based violence within the broader tableau of post-colonial violence. Ash's discomfort at what he perceives as a ransacked vision of post-colonial violence is not noticed or shared by his companion, Lachlan, who instead directs Ash's attention, in an unperturbed fashion, toward a site where Indigenous people were murdered in the 1800s.⁴³ Hit with 'the fragrance of dead lamb', further encapsulating the current brutality of our treatment of animals within the larger environment of historical and cultural violence toward Aboriginal people, Ash realises he is ill, and spends almost all of his country weekend in bed. The discrepancy between Ash's experience of the country with Lachlan's nostalgic yearning for it underscores how Ash is presented as separate from other men in this section of the novel.

De Kretser sidesteps didacticism while commenting on meat and masculinity by interweaving social and cultural injustices that readers can readily accept as such with those related to species and gender, which may necessitate deeper reflection. She does however take aim at the idea that one's decision to eat meat should not be questioned. Dustin Griffin writes that limitation on dissent encourages the production of satirical texts; 'If open challenge is not permitted, writers will turn to irony, indirection, innuendo, allegory, fable - to the fictions of satire.'⁴⁴ Cassie and Ash are firmly characterised as belonging to the circle of privileged and highly educated academics. However, as Ash was born in Sri Lanka and is only temporarily in Australia from the UK, he is viewed as somewhat separate from the other characters in the novel. This manifests when Ash and Cassie attend a dinner with the rest of their faculty. When someone suggests they all share meals, Ash responds that he is a vegetarian. 'But the rest of you please go ahead,' he says, acknowledging in doing so that his vegetarianism divorces him from the social aspect of sharing.⁴⁵ To counter this, another person suggests everyone can eat vegetarian.

"I can't remember the last time I ate meat anyway."

Her research assistant said helpfully, 'When Baniti took us to that halal restaurant in Auburn last week. We had camel.'

⁴² De Kretser, 36

⁴³ De Kretser 36

⁴⁴ Griffin, Dustin H. *Satire A Critical Reintroduction*. University Press of Kentucky, 1994 p 139

⁴⁵ De Kretser, 27

“Well, obviously I didn't want to be culturally insensitive.” said Leanne.⁴⁶

Leanne's attempt to straddle two ideologies which are in this instance in conflict - one which is to respect animals by not eating them, one which is to respect other cultures by partaking in their culinary culture, which may include animals - is comical. Leanne has tried to extend the hand of conviviality to Ash by suggesting not eating meat is no hardship, but this sentiment is undermined by another member of the group's reference to Leanne eating camel - which, it is worth noting, does not have a euphemistic name like pork or beef and thus immediately conjures an image of the living animal. De Kretser's positioning of the unnamed research assistant does not clarify whether they are truly trying to be helpful, or whether they are unwilling to allow Leanne the virtue associated with vegetarianism. Regardless, the tension of the conversation can be traced back to the spectre of the animal hanging over the dinner table. Further complicating this scene is the implication that Leanne may assume Ash's vegetarianism is connected to his Sri Lankan background, where there can be an intersection between diet and caste.⁴⁷ She may believe her willingness to eschew meat in front of Ash is another demonstration of cultural sensitivity. This scene illustrates the complexity of living according to one's ethics, particularly when ethical choices can, on a surface level at least, appear in opposition to one another, and invites the reader to laugh - even if that laughter is tempered with discomfort. The interaction exposes the superficiality of individual consideration as to their involvement with social norms surrounding food and culture. Through these nuanced yet pointed observations, de Kretser satirises the contradictions inherent in contemporary attitudes toward food.

One's food choices are and have always been intertwined with the political ideology of the eater.⁴⁸ Nick Fiddes writes that 'All over the world food means much more than mere nutrition... we routinely use food to express relationships: amongst ourselves and with our environment. [Food] can be an eloquent statement of shared ideology and as such expresses group affiliation and apparent solidarity'.⁴⁹ Vegetarianism is considered a left-wing

⁴⁶ De Kretser, 27

⁴⁷ Stewart, James. *Vegetarianism and Animal Ethics in Contemporary Buddhism*. Routledge, 2015.

⁴⁸ Rebrovick, Tripp. "The Politics of Diet: 'Eco-Dietetics,' Neoliberalism, and the History of Dietetic Discourses." *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2015, pp. 678–89; Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: a Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. Continuum, 1990. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912915605183>; Lavin, Chad. *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

⁴⁹ Fiddes, Nick. *Meat, A Natural Symbol*. Routledge, 1991 p 38; Grünhage, Thomas, and Martin Reuter. "What Makes Diets Political? Moral Foundations and the Left-Wing-Vegan Connection." *Social Justice Research*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2021, pp. 18–52, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-020-00361-w>. P 18

phenomenon, but at the same time, animal rights activists remain the ‘orphans of the left’⁵⁰ Into this confusing milieu comes Pippa, who is representative of a certain kind of ideological self-delusion best summed up as ‘performative wokeness’, and who routinely broadcasts through Twitter that she is: ‘on the right side... the side of people who drank fair trade coffee and attended vigils for murdered asylum seekers and had rescue pets and shopped at farmers’ markets and said No to plastic bags.’⁵¹ Pippa’s relationship with food is shown to be a vital part of her character, and one which both marks and mars her relationships with other characters. Her presence in George Meshaw’s house at the beginning of the novel has the effect of drawing his attention to food in a way new to him. George ‘...looked on cooking as time stolen from books’ but Pippa cooks avidly, creating complicated meals from various cuisines for them both.⁵² Later in the novel, her decision to make soup for sick friend, Celeste, and then self-aggrandize this action on her blog makes Celeste’s blood ‘...run cold...Now something precious that had belonged to Celeste belonged to the world...’.⁵³ Pippa’s mother-in-law Eva aims to wound Pippa by subtly insulting her interest in food, positioning it as in opposition to ‘...things of the spirit.’⁵⁴

Pippa’s fascination with food as a marker of identity spurs discussions within the novel about food and ethics. Inevitably, as so much of what we eat is either derived from or consists entirely of the flesh of deceased animals, discussions about food are in reality discussions about animals, their suffering and their deaths. A significant instance of this occurs when Pippa declares that she considered and then rejected becoming a vegetarian because personal food restrictions ‘...make eating with other people really difficult. They destroy conviviality.’⁵⁵ As part of her reinvention of self, conviviality is important to Pippa. Martha Radice acknowledges that ‘...places cannot be convivial ... in and of themselves; they only become so by virtue of the interactions that happen and relations that prevail among people in them’, and thus that conviviality connects an abstract sense of belonging with the pragmatic social interactions.⁵⁶ On searching ‘conviviality’ it is validating to note that the first example given of the word in the Cambridge Dictionary online is: ‘Eating should take

⁵⁰ Kymlicka, Will. “Human Supremacism: Why are animal rights activists still the “orphans of the left”?”, *New Statesman*, 30 April 2019 <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2019/04/human-supremacism-why-are-animal-rights-activists-still-the-orphans-of-the-left-2>

⁵¹ De Kretser, 234

⁵² De Kretser, 15

⁵³ De Kretser, 125

⁵⁴ De Kretser, 196

⁵⁵ De Kretser, 11

⁵⁶ Radice, Martha. “Sociality, Spatiality, Conviviality, Community.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2019, pp. 395–401, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1536275>.

place in an atmosphere of conviviality’⁵⁷. These instances suggest that how, where and with whom one chooses to eat is firmly entrenched with one’s perceived sociability, and conversely that the act of not eating animals is to reject sociability. The novel presents these concepts as interchangeable, and in doing so, directs readers to consider the ethical ambiguity of this interchangeability.

George’s acerbic reflection on Pippa’s comment a little later in the chapter, that Pippa’s idea of ethics is ‘a dinner party’ again underlines the intimacy between meat and sociability irrespective of the contradictory nature of the former in relation to the widely adopted progressive politics of the demographic exemplified by Pippa’s character.⁵⁸ In sum, being liberal is social, and eating meat is social, and yet the politics of liberalism in a time of climate change refute eating meat. This contradiction offers an examination of food and social identity. Pippa’s ostentatious displays of ethical consumption seem hollow in comparison to her disavowal of a moral stance that hinders her ability to indulge in the pleasures of gastronomy.

Even without considering the economic factors influencing dietary and lifestyle choices, the cultural, political and gendered context in which individuals operate means an analysis of these choices is not straightforward. Pippa’s preoccupation with virtue-signalling through social media where she can be sure that her love for such things as ‘ethical meat’ can be roundly applauded by her followers is a pithy example of the pitfalls of representing moral virtue online, and another instance in which de Kretser engages in a kind of parodic confrontation with the reader, who will more likely than not recognise Pippa’s demonstration of morality, perhaps as something they themselves have done, perhaps as something they have seen someone else do.⁵⁹ In an article about Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, a novel dealing with the social ramifications of a woman’s desire to remove meat from her diet, Seul Lee writes that ‘Care can itself be a form of violence that masks hierarchical control and violates ethical singularity...structural modes of violence are embedded in pervasive care ethics’.⁶⁰ Due to Pippa’s commentary about meat and sociality being placed toward the beginning of the novel, Pippa’s appearances in the remainder of the text are coloured by her articulated desire to normalise and even celebrate this kind of hierarchical control. De

⁵⁷ “Conviviality.” *Cambridge English Dictionary*, 2023, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/conviviality.

⁵⁸ De Kretser, 14

⁵⁹ De Kretser, 234; 125

⁶⁰ Lee, Seul. “Enforced Conviviality and the Violence of Care in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*.” *Critique - Bolingbroke Society*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2023, pp. 465–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2022.2051420> p 465

Kretser's satiric presentation of Pippa exposes her hypocrisy and arrogance and ultimately holds the subset of liberal white 'foodies' accountable for their part in upholding systemic injustices and inequalities.

In an interview with Roberta Trape, de Kretser acknowledges and names Pippa's brand of political engagement as 'white liberalism'⁶¹.

I have come to believe that many—certainly not all, but many—"progressive" white Australians have no real commitment to equality, although their self-deception on that score is vast. What these white liberals revel in is a scenario in which people of color are in need of assistance of one kind or another, so that they can provide it and confirm their image of themselves as "good people." That kind of goodness is basically patronage, and it's predicated on inequality.⁶²

The word 'patronage' is an excellent one from which to springboard into a closer analysis of what Pippa's character reveals about the interplay of power in de Kretser's novel, and on a broader level. Patronage, so fundamentally tied to ideas of philanthropy and sponsorship, is always bestowed from one party to another, and thus a power dynamic exists within the concept of patronage that is central to the ideas of the novel. Anastasia Piliavsky traces the use of the word 'patronage' to make the case that patronage is not necessarily problematic, rather, relations between 'patrons' and 'clients' can be '...sympathetic and even intimate, based on mutual esteem and affection, like the bonds between kith and kin.'⁶³ This conception of patronage is founded in the mutuality of exchange; that both parties benefit. As de Kretser intimates in the above quote, self-identification with liberalism is intimately connected to class, education and wealth, and therefore problematises the potential for mutual benefit. Pippa believes that financially supporting uncontroversial social ventures is an assurance that one belongs to the category of 'good people', but de Kretser's framing of Pippa's character in relation to other less privileged characters in the book undermines the naivety of this idea.⁶⁴ In this context as in so many others, the idea of 'good people' refers to the subset of people identifying as somewhere around the centre of the political spectrum: not

⁶¹ Trapè, Roberta, and Michelle de Kretser. "Broken Novels, Ruptured Worlds: A Conversation with Michelle de Kretser." *World Literature Today*, vol. 94, no. 3, Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2020, pp. 28–33, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wlt.2020.0206>.

⁶² Trape and de Kretser, p 30

⁶³ Piliavsky, Anastasia. *Patronage as Politics in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107296930> p 8

⁶⁴ Trape and de Kretser, p 30

too left to cause discomfort at a dinner table, not right enough to take umbrage with gentle ideas about recycling, or free-range eggs, or electric vehicles.

At this juncture it is useful to consider the wider political context of *The Life to Come*, especially regarding where Australian policies and politics intersect with animals and the environment, for the purpose of situating these characters within their political context. Although Australia's political parties do fall roughly into the expected spectrum of from least to most consideration of animals and the environment, not one of these parties have adequate policies regarding animal welfare. The Liberal Party of Australia does not have any mention of policies or positions pertaining to animals on their website, while centre group Labor has a somewhat nebulous, somewhat superficial '6 point plan' which takes animal testing and live export into account; on the left The Greens have a more thorough plan involving banning live export, greyhound and horse-racing and establishing laws to 'protect animal welfare' (whatever that might mean).⁶⁵ All three major parties conflate animal and environmental policies, and although an argument can be made that the health and rights of these two entities support one another, there are important distinctions to be made between, say, reforesting desecrated landscapes and protecting the rights of the animals who may dwell within them. Concern for our environmental future is adjacent to concerns for non-human animals, as both are rooted in care for the natural world. Yet it is easy to become disenchanted with the idea that liberalism is a natural space in which ideas about interspecies justice can flourish, or are even welcome. In fact, discourse within the left routinely dismisses the premise of animal rights advocacy as contributing to the marginalisation of vulnerable human groups, as is outlined in Kymlicka and Donaldson's works, in which they suggest that most people who identify as Left '...view human violence against animals with complete indifference.'⁶⁶ Within this real-life context, Pippa's naïve ideas about what makes a person 'good' becomes more sinister.

Cassie's performance of moral goodness plays out in more intimate environs. She begins sourcing ingredients and cooking curries for Ash after he mentioned eating an

⁶⁵ *ALP National Platform*, Australian Labor Party. chrome-extension://bdfcnmeidppjeaggnmidamkiddifkdib/viewer.html?file=https://alp.org.au/media/2594/2021-alp-national-platform-final-endorsed-platform.pdf. Accessed 2023; "Our Plan." *Protecting the Environment and Animals*, greens.org.au/platform/enviro#greenaus. Accessed 14 May 2023.

⁶⁶ Brazaitytė, Monika, "Someone Explained Why Veganism Is Not Cruelty Free, And It Might Make You Think Twice Before Going Vegan", *Bored Panda*, April 2016. https://www.boredpanda.com/vegan-lifestyle-not-cruelty-free-rosasdesal/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic; Kymlicka, Will, and Sue Donaldson. "Animal Rights, Multiculturalism, and the Left." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2014, pp. 116–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12047>; Donaldson, Sue., and Will. Kymlicka. *Zoopolis : A Political Theory of Animal Rights*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

unsatisfying dal. De Kretser ensures that the reader is aware that this confidence was a manipulation on Ash's behalf, who notices that '...women were moved by references to that aspect of his past...this satisfying nonsense simplified everything, clearing factual clutter to reveal the way forward.'⁶⁷

This instance of Ash's casual fraudulence illuminates a shrewdness in guiding others' perceptions of him, and his earlier lack of interest in maintaining conviviality with others, as evidenced by his scornful exchange with the meat-eating girl, could be interpreted as a lack of interest in other people's comfort and wellbeing.⁶⁸ In this way, de Kretser's characters defy categorisation into likeable or unlikeable; into ethical or unethical; into 'good people' or 'bad people'. This has the effect of neutralising the political presentation of characters and thus permitting a more objective analysis than possible with well-loved or conversely much-hated fictional personalities.

Ash and Cassie particularly are presented in ambiguous ways. Ash capitalises on the perception of himself by both the unnamed 'women' and Cassie herself, permitting an imagined version of his past which '...cast him on the grudging benevolence of the West.'⁶⁹ Fairly or unfairly, Cassie thus embodies the 'white saviour', a term describing the construction of an altruistic white self shown to help or uplift non-white people, and one much derided in contemporary culture.⁷⁰ De Kretser casts Cassie in a saviour-esque role, well-meaning but faintly repulsive, imagining that her curries have some kind of distinctly ancestrally grounding effect on a person who has '...only ever spoken English fluently.'⁷¹ Her patronage of Spice Mart, the Indian grocer where she buys the ingredients for her curries, is also undercut with a kind of pious loyalty.

The shopkeeper wasn't a refugee, Cassie told Ash. Two of his children had migrated to Sydney, and he had followed with his wife. 'So it was quite easy for you to come here?' Cassie had asked, pleased. She clung to an idea of Australia as a place where kindness prevailed over expediency. It had rarely been true in her lifetime, but was one more creed that had emerged from the rainbow valley, like the belief that the human race would tire of shopping. The Ashfield Tamil repeated, 'Easy,' in a neutral tone as if hearing the word for the

⁶⁷ De Kretser, 23; 23-24

⁶⁸ De Kretser, 28

⁶⁹ De Kretser 23

⁷⁰ Sondarjee, Maika, et al. "How White Saviorism Harms International Development." The Canadian Press, Canadian Press Enterprises Inc, 2023.

⁷¹ De Kretser p

first time. Cassie remembered something her Viennese grandmother used to say: ‘The worst thing is, we are required to be grateful.’⁷²

The naivety of Cassie’s brand of allyship crystallises when she asks ‘the Ashfield Tamil’ about his ‘ethnic group’ as an excuse to discuss Ash, who is of Sinhalese ancestry.⁷³ Considering the wider political ramifications of Ash’s early childhood movement from Sri Lanka to England in the midst of civil war, and the history of strife between Sinhalese and Tamil communities, this seems an insensitive comment. The fact that Cassie refers to the shopkeeper as ‘the Ashfield Tamil’ is similarly insufferable, flattening the grocer into a cultural signifier, lacking dimension and agency.

In light of these interactions, the incident of the muthu samba rice rings with *schadenfreude*. One of the staple grains of Sri Lanka, muthu samba rice has a distinct and to some unpleasant odour depending on the method of cooking due to the way in which it is processed. The grocer presses the rice on Cassie as a treat for the partner he has heard so much about, but the smell takes both Cassie and Ash by surprise.⁷⁴ Hungry, Cassie ignores the smell, and begins to eat curry by itself.

Ash looked on in wonder. His face said, What is wrong with you Australians? You eat curries without rice, a barbarism. You fear being attacked by people you’ve killed. You stole their land for animals that you slaughter in their millions, when you don’t leave them to die by the side of the road. Your shame-faced paddocks - but Ash couldn’t go on, because another part of him wanted to uncurl in giggles. The candles and flowers, the stink! A dinner party gone wrong: the first-world definition of a tragedy.⁷⁵

This free-thought association between colonialism, genocide and animal death as provoked by the embarrassing scene of a smelly dinner party demonstrates how de Kretser’s parodic style manages to sidestep the discomfort of accusation and showcases a clever use of free indirect discourse. This unfortunate dinner, brought about by Cassie’s somewhat performative desire to connect with her brown partner by cooking him curry, falls into the same kind of reflexive, offhand engagement as the transparent French flag Pippa places over her Facebook profile photo in response to the Paris terror attacks in 2015. Cassie’s choice to

⁷² De Kretser, 52

⁷³ De Kretser, 28

⁷⁴ De Kretser, 69

⁷⁵ De Kretser, 73

remain sitting in the stench of the doomed rice symbolises a broader, more significant passivity. If activism is founded in direction and intervention, the purposeless but well-meaning attempts to be ‘good’ by Cassie, Pippa and their fictional and real-life ilk represent a meandering, collateral, oblivious kind of morality. Ash’s question encapsulates these passive efforts alongside larger, bleaker wrongs, and smaller more humorous ones. The absurdity of the juxtaposition of genocide with eating curry without rice is in its own way provocative, inviting both humour and a recognition of participation in a troubling present tainted by a disturbing past. These satirical interludes occur often in de Kretser’s novels, and form the basis of character interaction in *The Life to Come*. They tease out the base mythologies on which white Australia is based - that we are essentially an egalitarian country where everyone has the opportunity for a ‘fair go’ - and simultaneously destroys them, like the smell of muthu samba rice shatters Cassie’s attempt to conjure a romantic atmosphere.

It is pertinent to reflect at this juncture on how contemporary discourse refutes the notion of maintaining sociability by feigning political neutrality. We know, for example, that instances of casual sexism are inherently linked to systemic and structural discrimination against women.⁷⁶ Correspondingly, evidence shows that challenging racialised language goes some way toward combating racist violence.⁷⁷ Further, a 2013 study showed that failing to challenge sexist or racist remarks was linked to a shift toward prejudicial thinking in the responder.⁷⁸ We are encouraged to challenge instances of casual racism and sexism because not doing so is to sacrifice people of colour and women on the altar of non-confrontation; because doing so is right. When one refuses to eat meat, whether from a desire to avoid complicity in the deaths of billions of nonhuman animals or the choice to reduce one’s individual carbon emissions, or simply from personal preference, an uneasiness descends upon the dinner table. Other people feel they must defend their own choice to eat meat, or as is often the case, deride the person who chooses not to eat meat. References on social media to vegans reflect this broader aggrievement, as shown in Appendix B. To explain frankly why one has chosen not to eat meat is a significant social transgression, again as shown in Appendix B through the implication that people who are vegan constantly announce that they are vegan.

⁷⁶ “Sexism: See It. Name It. Stop It.” *Human Rights Channel*, 2020, human-rights-channel.coe.int/stop-sexism-en.html.

⁷⁷ Sticks and stones — confronting the full spectrum of racism. (2020). *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 383(12), 1103-1105. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2021216>

⁷⁸ Rasinski, H. M., Geers, A. L., & Czopp, A. M. (2013). “I Guess What He Said Wasn’t That Bad”: Dissonance in Nonconfronting Targets of Prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39(7), 856–869. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167213484769>

In my own novel, protagonist Maddy's consternation about having to admit that she is vegan to her new friend, Jamie, is meant to reference this transgression. The first iterations of the novel did not actually use the word 'vegan' or 'veganism' at all in an attempt to avoid tarring the novel with the weight of existing social associations with both. If I am to consider the attempted omission more reflectively, as I have been required to do throughout this exegesis, refusing to use the word 'vegan' was also an attempt not to burden myself with the word. Nuanced, well-rounded vegan characters are uncommon; J.M Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello, the brilliant Janina of Olga Tokarczyk's *Drive Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead*; and the unnamed narrator of Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend* are few who fall into this category. Much more common are peripheral characters like Doris in *Americanah*, '...thin and hollow-eyed, a vegetarian who announced that she was a vegetarian as soon as she possibly could' or Gillespie from *The Weekend* who '...used to be a vegan, he told them, but not anymore. He waited for their approval.'⁷⁹ Throughout the process of writing and revising my novel and in response to queries from early readers, however, the refusal to identify the character seemed more an act of cowardice than one of craft. Ultimately, the intent behind the novel is to underscore the consequences of resisting violent social norms; it seemed only right that the word vegan, with all of its provocations and connotations, should be referenced freely.

The Life to Come too is a provocative novel, and one that responds to many of the themes I have identified as of interest in this exegesis; namely, the consequences and conundrums of ethical consumption in a time of anthropogenic climate change. De Kretser recognises and satirises human apathy and in so doing, dismantles popular discourse about the interplay of power within urban, wealthy communities. When first reflecting upon the quality of conviviality it seems a frippery, a behaviour borne of courtesy toward others or something more fleeting, a superficiality. Yet, in light of the directness of the link between human dietary preferences and the ravages of climate change, between the food on one's plate and the slaughtered animal that must precede it, the concept of conviviality becomes more sinister. Pippa is right. Veganism does destroy conviviality, and a society preoccupied with remaining convivial is not one with the capacity to tackle the systems and structures which hasten us toward global doom. Human sociality in the twenty-first century (and this distinction must be made, because unlike previous generations, we do not confront the animal that must precede the act of eating meat, a confrontation which belies any form of

⁷⁹ Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. Doubleday, 2014 p 403; Wood, 229.

conviviality) is fatal to nonhuman animals and the more-than-human world, and is fast proving fatal to ourselves. Our homes are disappearing into plumes of fire and flooding rain. A potentially awkward dinner party conversation seems a mild discomfort in comparison.

Chapter 2

Lost, missing or dead: Animal hauntings in *The Lost Dog*

Writing pets

The presence of the animal in literary texts has long been used as a mechanism by which to symbolise something about a human character, or to foreshadow what may happen to that character.⁸⁰ Even animals who are given names and distinct characters are often, on closer inspection, ‘humans with fur’.⁸¹ The form of writing itself presents a further, foundational issue. Only humans write, and therefore to depict a nonhuman in writing is to render it in humanity. Timothy Baker argues that although literary representations of animals are human-centric by virtue of form, and cannot be used to demonstrate the capabilities of ‘real’ animals, they may shape human behaviour and attitudes toward animals.⁸²

The imaginative capabilities of reading go some way towards overcoming this problem permitting a construction of ideal worlds and anthropomorphic transformation that encourages a conversation across species.⁸³ Erica Fudge writes: ‘Thinking about pets relies on imaginative thinking and...imaginative thinking (and reading) can help us to contemplate pets.’⁸⁴ Baker asserts that the novel is unique in its ability to use a linguistic medium to overturn assumptions about human-animal relations in a way rarely available through other forms, and Fudge’s claim that animal fictions open space for conversation about and exploration of species and linguistic boundaries.⁸⁵ Fudge writes that we lack a ‘language’ which can truly render animals as animals and yet writers continue to try, writing both about animals and about the impossibility of writing about animals.⁸⁶ Those things we consider distinctly human, like the desire and ability to communicate with and relate to others, to feel both psychological and physical pain, to seek happiness, to live Agamben’s ‘good life’, can in fact be considered distinctly *animal*.

⁸⁰ Baker, p 1

⁸¹ Copeland, Marion, and Kenneth Shapiro. “Toward a Critical Theory of Animal Issues in Fiction.” *Society & Animals*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2005, pp. 343–46, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853005774653636>. p 344

⁸² Baker, p 25; Fudge, Erica. *Pets*. Taylor and Francis, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315710303>. p 11

⁸³ Fudge, 11

⁸⁴ Fudge, p 2

⁸⁵ Baker, p 25; p 53

⁸⁶ Fudge, p 12

Baker posits that violence, suffering and vulnerability are central to human/animal relationships, and that depictions of our relations focusing on these can work to destabilise the ‘othering’ of animals by demonstrating shared traits between humans and animals.⁸⁷ Although I agree with Baker’s premise, there are a couple of points requiring clarification. First, discussions around animals, especially those raised and slaughtered by humans for food, do generally centre on scenes from the slaughterhouse, which are central to many vegans’ motivation to avoid animal products. Instead, one might turn to how animals can and do live and thrive alongside us without experiencing pain or suffering.

The realm of the ‘pet’ can provide fecund ground for this type of consideration. Pet animals appear routinely in contemporary fiction in both meaningful and inconsequential roles, and although many of these examples cannot be classed as animal fictions, those that can often prompt fresh ways of thinking and talking about animals. I have discussed fiction that engages with animals in a more substantive way in the introduction to this exegesis, but some Australian-specific novels that provide formative examples of how animal fictions abound in this country include *The Yield* (2020) by Tara June Winch and *The Octopus and I* (2020) by Erin Hortle.⁸⁸ Winch’s novel depicts the bond between generations and across species through August’s relationship with her grandfather’s dog Poppy, whose presence clarifies the role of animals in conceptions of family. In *The Octopus and I*, the protagonist discovers feelings of affinity and kinship with an octopus while living along a desolate coastline in Tasmania. This novel tackles difficulties of representation and expression to depict animals thoughtfully and without human-centric bias. These difficulties are made even more challenging by Hortle’s choice to feature an octopus as her animal character – a creature unknown to most, and therefore lacking the familiarity and nostalgia available to those of us writing about dogs. In both novels, animals play a central role in re-imagining ourselves and our relationship with other animals and the earth.⁸⁹

There are many linguistic difficulties facing writers when representing nonhuman animals. One of the first of these is representing nonverbal noises made by animals as they strive to communicate with us. The words used to signify animal sounds such as *meow* and *woof* fall very far short of the sounds made by cats and dogs. To speak or to write *meow* or *woof* is to remove the sound made or signified immediately from its natural context, and in so doing remove any element of authenticity from the animal representation. Biologists and

⁸⁷ Baker, p 7; pp 7-8

⁸⁸ Winch, Tara June. *The Yield*. Penguin, 2019; Hortle, Erin. *The Octopus and I*. Allen & Unwin, 2020.

⁸⁹ Fudge, p 4

linguists have undertaken work which has emphasised the linguistic capacities of other animals, but the idea that nonhuman animals have lingual abilities remains controversial.⁹⁰

Similarly, challenges abound when attempting to describe in language the many bodily ways in which animals communicate with us. A dog may wag their tail, a movement generally perceived as being one denoting friendliness despite the fact that dogs may wag their tail when feeling stressed, anxious or aggressive. When we write about a dog and they ‘come toward us, wagging’, what is being communicated from the human author to the human reader is that a friendly dog approaches, and thus in our mind’s eye that’s what we see. The exemplifiers available to us when writing about human behaviours (e.g. a tight smile, smiled stiffly) are not transferable to animal ones. Researchers have shown that studying canine communication with humans is challenging due the necessity of such studies being developed, carried out and driven by humans and thus framed by human social cognition.⁹¹

These foundational challenges in gaining scientific insights into the emotional lives of our animal kin carry over to the depiction of dogs in fiction. Common understandings of dogs are very much informed by the existence of dogs in landscapes around us: eg, at the park, sitting at a cafe, walking down the pavement, defecating on the nature strip or accepting a pat from us as we speak to their human companion. When working in rescue, the disconnect between what people see when they see dogs and what the dog is actually signalling becomes painfully clear. The types of behaviour we consider native to dogs, an extraverted sociality typified by outpourings of friendliness and affection, is perhaps only typical of the minority of dogs, those whose sociality and friendliness means they are often in the public areas where we are used to seeing them. Yet, many of us see and respond to all dogs as old friends, despite the fact that to them, we are complete strangers. Thus, writers need to imagine and depict the behaviours of dogs from the ground up. One can write ‘[character name] smiled’ and expect a reader to be able to interpret with a degree of accuracy what this smile indicates, not only to the other character but also to the reader themselves, yet, as Fudge notes, ‘...a dog that is perceived to smile may actually be showing [his or her] teeth in annoyance, and so a human smiling back at that dog could simply be reinforcing the aggressive potential of such a

⁹⁰ Berthet, Mélissa, et al. “Animal Linguistics: A Primer.” *Biological Reviews of the Cambridge Philosophical Society*, vol. 98, no. 1, 2023, pp. 81–98, <https://doi.org/10.1111/brv.12897>.

⁹¹ Kujala, Miiamaaria V, ‘Canine emotions as seen through human social cognition.’ *Animal Sentience* 14(1) 2017

confrontation.’⁹² The stakes are high when humans assume our modes of communication extend across species.

Baker points out that there is a contradiction inherent in writing animals:

‘...as many thinkers of the posthuman and Anthropocene attempt to move away from or critically respond to a conception of humans as being ‘world-forming’ in Heidegger’s phrase, the arguments are nevertheless made in the very same world-forming form. A claim against the supremacy of human language is inevitably made through language. It may be simple sophistry to consider this for a moment, and yet it remains crucial to consider what it means to privilege language in an argument against that privilege...’⁹³

This contradiction is inherent in this exegesis and in the novel submitted alongside it. Dogs are important characters in *Small Life* as they are in my own life. Careful observation of my own dogs from a writerly perspective contributed somewhat to my attempts to write canine characters, however my dogs communicate with me in ways unique to our relationship that are not necessarily obvious when described to a third party. My dogs communicate primarily through stance, eye contact, facial expression, vocal noises and the movements of their ears and tails. These communications are rooted in context and may mean different things when directed toward different people. My dogs further understand a significant quantity of spoken words, emphasising the idea that when it comes to animal communication within domestic tableaux, animals extend themselves to understand us far more than we do to understand them. The challenge of representing this extension of self from a dog’s perspective was a primary one in my depiction of Frida and Dante. Looking, gazing and responding physically became the mainstays of writing about these two dog characters communicating with their human companion Maddy, yet even now, these verbs seem to me inadequate.

Michelle de Kretser’s novels routinely include dog characters; *The Lost Dog* is named after one. The novel centres on Tom Loxley, a middle-aged academic whose dog goes missing when running off in pursuit of a small animal. Tom and the dog are staying at Tom’s friend Nelly’s rural cottage when the dog goes missing, and much of the plot takes place in this area as Tom and later Nelly search for the dog. When the dog first runs away, de Kretser gives the following description of this interaction between Tom and the dog:

⁹² Fudge, p 51

⁹³ Baker, p 147

Away to his right it went on: a high consistent barking designed to attract the pack's attention. So the dog barked when dancing around a tree where a cat or possum clung among leaves. After a while, it would be borne in on him that he was alone in his venture; that the man would not assist in capturing the prey he had gone to the effort of flushing out.⁹⁴

This paragraph effectively conveys the dog's message to Tom by describing the bark in a way that allows the reader to interpret its meaning through engaging with the narrator's familiarity with the particular timbre of the described bark and situating it within the broader species-specificity of the action of barking. De Kretser does not ascribe any particular motivation or meaning to the bark, rather allowing the narrator's memory of the dog barking when 'dancing around a tree where a cat or possum clung among leaves' for the reader to consider. A reader who lives with dogs may recall a similar situation they have experienced alongside their own companion animal, thus being able to understand with a degree of certainty the meaning of the bark without further description. A reader unfamiliar with dogs may take a guess as to what the dog is trying to communicate with Tom in that instant; whether their guess is accurate or not, the fault does not lie with de Kretser's representation of the dog. I remain unsure as to whether this is the case with my own novel. Regardless, I have tried to represent dogs authentically and that attempt serves as a contribution to the increased interest in writing animals in the Anthropocene.

Another representational issue is in configuring from a literary standpoint the structures of oppression and exploitation under which animals exist as a result of our attitudes toward their non-verbal presences. Descartes declares that animals – which he figures as entirely separate to the non-human animal – are merely 'automata', as they do not 'use words, put together signs, as we do'.⁹⁵ This perception resulted in cruel and unnecessary experiments on animals carried out by him, including public demonstrations in which himself and his assistants would torture and vivisection conscious dogs. These experiments were legitimised by the idea that the keening, screaming, groaning, other non-verbal responses and physical attempts to escape were merely an 'automatic' response, not one denoting any real feeling or response from the mind of the animal. Most societies have come a long way from this conception of animal responses, especially in the case of pet animals such as dogs and cats, in that it would no longer be legal or socially acceptable to conduct vivisection on conscious animals in public in most of the world in 2024. It is however still legal to torture

⁹⁴ De Kretser, Michelle. *The Lost Dog*. Allen & Unwin, 2004 p 27

⁹⁵ Jarvis, Shawn C. "Monkey Tails: D'Aulnoy and Unger Explore Descartes, Rousseau, and the Animal-Human Divide." *Marvels & Tales*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2021, pp. 271–89, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mat.2021.0022>. p 276

and vivisect conscious animals within the confines of the laboratory in 2024. Perhaps this means that, rather than progressing in our attitudes toward animals, we have just organised more efficient ways of shielding ourselves to what happens to them.

Although it is not always useful to compare human treatment of nonhuman animals and the treatment of the First Peoples at the hands of colonisers, Tyson Yunkaporta's assertion that writing about Indigenous thinking in English is challenging because English replaces Aboriginal worldviews with settler ideology is at its core also applicable to writing about nonhuman animals.⁹⁶ It is especially salient that Yunkaporta gives the word 'non-linear' as an example of how English fails to adequately honour First Nations communications, as any use of the word 'non-linear' '...immediately slams a big line right across your synapses.'⁹⁷ The word non-human, which I have and will continue to use throughout this exegesis, also has this issue. Non-human and non-linear place what the thing is not at the centre of the conversation, while the thing that something is remains elusive.

Yunkaporta offers drawings, graphics, and the sounds of his language in the Audible version of his book in an attempt to overcome the limitations of the English language, and those writing about animals must also attempt to use human languages in a way that offers up an interpretation of animality which may be accessible to some humans and which may elide others. The possibility that human readers lack the capacity to overthrow pre-existing notions of the animal and reconceptualise both the animality of others and themselves, and engage in a meaningful way with language that has traditionally been used as a marker of difference and superiority between humans and nonhumans, remains a fundamental challenge to writing about animals. Perhaps it is jarring to perceive language as restrictive or somehow incapable, especially for those of us who have devoted our lives and passion to the written word, and yet acknowledging the inbuilt restriction of linguistic communication is essential to opening oneself to broader forms of communication. In *Dumb Beasts and Dead Philosophers*, Catherine Osborne argues that rather than animals 'lacking' language, humans close themselves to their abilities to communicate without words and by means of forms of communication she implies we have preceding learning to speak.⁹⁸ If we indeed have an inborn capacity to interpret and respond meaningfully to others without words, surely, we are able to hone those abilities once more. Osborne also proposes an alternative way of thinking

⁹⁶ Yunkaporta, Tyson. *Sand Talk : How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*. Text Publishing Company, 2019. p 21

⁹⁷ Yunkaporta, p 21

⁹⁸ Osborne, Catherine. *Dumb Beasts and Dead Philosophers Humanity and the Humane in Ancient Philosophy and Literature*. Clarendon, 2007. p vii

about language, one which encompasses non-linguistic methods of communication and thus includes animal communication within its definition.

The novel is an innovative form, and writers like Michelle de Kretser, as I will demonstrate in the next section, use it to summon the animal in a way that honours both the animality of humans and the personality of animals.

De Kretser's Dogs

Pets are ubiquitous in Michelle de Kretser's novels, specifically pet dogs. The contemplative way in which de Kretser attends to both dogs as individual agents and the relationships between humans and dogs reveals much about the capacity of writing to reflect animal lives in an authentic way. De Kretser's works are particularly interested in animals within a domestic tableau. This chapter will consider how 'companionship' is conceptualised and plays out both in fiction and in reality, and from the perspective of practice, how to depict the animals with whom we live and have meaningful and reciprocal relationships using a form which is alien to them - the written word. In *The Life to Come*, Cassie's supervisor tells her that admiration is a problematic starting point from which to begin an analysis.⁹⁹ I will try to take that on board as I write this section, in which I will argue that de Kretser's representations of the eponymous dog of *The Lost Dog* and Hank of *The Life To Come* muddle the lines demarcating species barriers, and in doing so, succeed in the task of representing animals with honesty and affinity, and therefore encouraging a reimagination of species relations which extends beyond the page. Existing scholarship on de Kretser's works does not consider her representation of canine characters within the broader consideration of our relationship with animals in the Anthropocene, nor does it explore how these relationships are depicted in Anthropocene fictions. This gap in scholarly analysis underscores the importance of examining de Kretser's portrayal of animals in her novels and their significance within the context of contemporary environmental concerns.

De Kretser's approach to canine characters responds to the social conditions in which they live. Dogs in de Kretser's novels are agentic figures, yet reflect the ways in which pet animals are often relegated to a secondary position in relation to human relationships. Both The Dog and Hank actively encourage the people with whom they live to engage with other people, and in doing so, heavily influence the narratives of the stories in which they appear. They are instrumental characters and yet they are also shifted to one side, with The Dog lost

⁹⁹ De Kretser, 59

for the majority of the story and Hank relegated to the backyard after his human companions bring home their baby. The bonds they share with their human kin open spaces for painful and profound conversations about how we value life and whose lives we value. They also show the contradictory features of the Anthropocene, where, as Krithika Srinivasan puts it, ‘...harmful human ways of life intersect with efforts to ethically improve interactions with non-human Others.’¹⁰⁰ Finally, they promote literary space for animals in human stories in a way rarely seen, where dogs are not harbingers of doom or part of the furnishings of domestic life or extensions of their human ‘owners’, but rather just dogs living dog lives in the pages of human-dog stories.

Hank the Tank is one such dog. First introduced halfway through the book and at a point where the reader is very familiar with his adopter, Pippa, he is described as having ‘...the square chest and round head of a dog on a gatepost.’¹⁰¹ From this descriptor and with the knowledge that he has been adopted from a regional pound, the reader can recognise Hank as belonging to that much maligned breed, the ‘staffy’.¹⁰² As staffies are common in Australia, and are often mixed with other breeds, ‘staffy’ as a descriptor is more often than not employed to refer to any dog with a bull-breed look to them, whether mastiff, bulldog or terrier.¹⁰³ This may seem trivial, but is in fact an important point, because in Australia bull breeds are common in pounds and shelters due to indiscriminate and unscrupulous breeding practices which render them almost worthless as non-purebred adult dogs. Further, a factually incorrect association between Staffordshire and pit bull terriers has led to widespread distrust of almost all bull breeds (a distinction must be made between the general and specific here, as some ‘designer’ bull breeds such as English and French bulldogs continue to ascend in popularity and therefore monetary worth, with some breeders able to make as much as \$40,000 per litter). A widely shared article by journalist Clare Harvey entitled ‘Shelters are full of pitbulls for a good reason’ makes this association and accompanying prejudice

¹⁰⁰ Srinivasan, Krithika. “The Welfare Episteme: Street Dog Biopolitics in the Anthropocene.” *Animals in the Anthropocene: Critical Perspectives on Non-Human Futures*, edited by the Human Animal Research, vol. 4, Sydney University Press, 2015, pp. 201–20. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bh4b7h.14>. Accessed 9 Sept. 2023. p 202

¹⁰¹ De Kretser, p 260

¹⁰² De Kretser, p 260

¹⁰³ Hoffman, Christy L., et al. “Is That Dog a Pit Bull? A Cross-Country Comparison of Perceptions of Shelter Workers Regarding Breed Identification.” *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2014, pp. 322–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888705.2014.895904>; Olson, K. R., et al. “Inconsistent Identification of Pit Bull-Type Dogs by Shelter Staff.” *The Veterinary Journal* (1997), vol. 206, no. 2, 2015, pp. 197–202, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tvjl.2015.07.019>.

abundantly clear.¹⁰⁴ Harvey erroneously claims that shelters are packed with ‘...pitbulls of one kind or another.’¹⁰⁵ As pit bull terriers have been a restricted breed in Australia for over a decade, they are in fact very rare, yet this and other fear-mongering has led to bull breeds being one of the most represented in shelters and pounds.¹⁰⁶

This unfair reputation precedes Pippa’s rescue dog Hank, and despite the adoption of an unwanted breed offering an opportune moment for the kind of social media self-aggrandisement the reader has come to expect from Pippa, de Kretser does not detail any such thing. In fact, the relationship between Hank and Pippa is characterised as one of the few genuine relationships Pippa has. Hank communicates in verbal and non-verbal ways with Pippa and she listens to both his sounds and the language of his face and body. She responds easily to Hank when he appears at the door of her study: “‘I hear you,’ said Pippa. “Soon. We’ll go to the park soon.”’.¹⁰⁷ When Hank is relegated inside because a guest at Pippa’s garden party states an aversion to dogs, Pippa returns inside and expresses sympathy to Hank, offering him titbits from the table and acknowledging the unfairness of the situation.¹⁰⁸ These interactions are undocumented and unseen. Pippa’s kindnesses to Hank go beyond the basic care expected of any animal guardian and move instead into the solicitude of reciprocal friendship.

Dinesh Wadiwel offers a perspective on human-animal relationships distinct to the act of pet-keeping.

If we understand human relations with animals as involving large scale systems of violence and domination, across industrialised food production, experimentation, sport and hunting, then perhaps one way to understand petting practices is as a curious evolution in the history of this large scale war against animals, one which has allowed humans and animals to negotiate shared pleasures, a provisional friendship, within the trenches of war.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Harvey, Clare. "Shelters are full of pitbulls for a good reason" The Daily Telegraph, September 10, 2017, <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/shelters-are-full-of-pitbulls-for-a-good-reason/news-story/9f17194fc2abec7014eda4141c700333>. Accessed Thursday 28 September.

¹⁰⁵ Harvey.

¹⁰⁶ Guenther, Katja M. *The Lives and Deaths of Shelter Animals*, Stanford University Press., 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503612860>.

¹⁰⁷ De Kretser, p 185

¹⁰⁸ De Kretser, p 234

¹⁰⁹ Wadiwel, Dinesh Joseph, “Animal Friendship as a Way of Life: Sexuality, Petting and Interspecies Companionship”. *Foucault and Animals*, edited by Chrulew, Matthew and Wadiwel, Dinesh Joseph. Brill, 2017. p 311

The reader already knows Pippa as someone who rejects abstinence from animal flesh in favour of appearing convivial, and who justifies the consumption of chicken eggs as long as there is no *unnecessary* suffering.¹¹⁰ Therefore, the contemporary global context of breeding and slaughter on a colossal scale for human convenience and pleasure is one from which Pippa benefits and explicitly approves, despite her public demonstrations of ethical consumption. Yet this friendship between woman and dog marks out a version of Wadiwel's 'provisional friendship', despite the betrayal which will lead to Hank being relegated to an 'outside dog'.¹¹¹

In my novel, *Small Life*, I have made intentional decisions to reflect this concept of provisional friendship through Maddy's relationship with Frida, her dog. Maddy is clear from the outset that the space in the world she has marked out, her rental apartment, is a shared space belonging to both herself and Frida. The novel commences with Maddy's commentary on the space as being safe, and this safeness is very much underpinned by the presence of animals and nature. Madison notes the sound of pigeons cooing generates feelings of joy; that the location has abundant access to parks and green spaces; that even though the apartment is dark, it is '...cosy when you've got someone to share it with', with that someone being Frida, her canine companion.¹¹² Although Maddy lives alone, Frida's presence is a constant and manifests physically and verbally throughout the text. Their relationship is mutual, with Frida's communication style respected ('She'll tell me if she wants to walk').¹¹³ Both the physical space of the apartment and the emotional space of the relationship between dog and girl are intended to be read as equally shared and mutually affirming.

Tom and the dog also enjoy a mutually agreeable friendship in *The Lost Dog*. Tom's character is shown to be open and inquiring, while the dog is shrewdly social in a way distinct from gregarious Hank and his enduring desire for human company. De Kretser's canine characters are as singular as her human ones; their communications with the world around them carry a characteristic 'voice'. At the beginning of *The Lost Dog*, Tom has retreated to the country with the dog to finish writing a book about Henry James, entitled 'Meddlesome Ghosts: Henry James and the Uncanny'. While walking in the bush, the dog, who remains unnamed throughout the novel, breaks free of Tom's grip and disappears, 'swallowed by leaves' in pursuit of an unknown animal.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ De Kretser, p 15 (emphasis my own)

¹¹¹ Wadiwel, p 311

¹¹² Bourke, p 5

¹¹³ Bourke, p 16

¹¹⁴ De Kretser, p 6

The title of the novel places the dog's unnamed presence at the heart of the narrative, regardless of the fact that the dog is missing and written about only in hindsight and memory right up until he is found at the end of the novel. Tom calls the dog's name yet the reader is never privy to it, and the dog drives the novel, bookending the narrative, hanging spectre-like over the goings on, named (because the dog in itself is a name, a way of referring to a being) and unnamed (because the dog could refer to any dog at all, not necessarily *the* dog) present and absent. Nevertheless, the dog is not anonymous. The dog is described fluently, his actions, likes, dislikes, mannerisms and desires are all accounted for in the manner of any individual. Consider for example the following passages:

Like marriage, their relations had entailed the downward adjustment of expectations. A dog: Tom had pictured a faithful presence at his heel, an obedient head pressed to his knee. And the dog, thought Tom, arms hanging loose, breathing hard on a bush track, what had the dog hoped for from him? Something more than the recurrence of food in a dish, surely; surely some untrammelled dream of loping camaraderie.¹¹⁵

And on the same page:

Over the years, with patient repetition and bribes of raw flesh, he had taught the dog to fetch. But when he picked up the ball and threw it a second time, Tom would feel the dog's gaze on him. He tried to imagine how his actions might appear from the dog's point of view: the man had thrown the ball away, the dog had obligingly sought out this object the man desired and dropped it at his feet; and behold, the man hurled it away again. How long could this stupidity go on?

"Anthropomorphism,' Karen would have said, his wife being the kind of person who mistrusted emotions that had not been assigned a name. But what was apparent to Tom in all their dealings with the otherness of the dog: the expanse each had to cover to arrive at a corridor of common ground.¹¹⁶

To those of us who live with dogs, the dog's confusion over the concept of fetch is familiar, recognisable. Fetch, rather than being an inbuilt, instinctive behaviour, is a learned behaviour at the behest of the dog's caregiver, often taught as a way of providing exercise in small city parks and backyards. Without an understanding of that context, fetch is indeed a

¹¹⁵ De Kretser, p 27

¹¹⁶ De Kretser, p 27

puzzling game. De Kretser satirises the common sight of a person throwing a ball for a dog, and in doing so, destabilises the foundation on which our relationship with dogs sits, where a human throws a ball for the benefit of a dog, and instead shows that a dog may well believe they are bringing the ball for the benefit of a human.

In this interaction De Kretser invites a response to the dog as an individual animal, responding to a specific situation within his own specific context. At the same time the interaction recalls long-argued debates about the cognition and emotional capacity of other animals, through Karen's assertion that affording any recognition of individuality to the dog's specific, unique response is anthropomorphic. Anthropomorphism is premised on the idea that some behaviours are unique to human animals, and that attributing these behaviours to another animal is fallacious. There are many examples of human-animal interactions which may be seen as anthropomorphism which are not immediately harmful to how we see other animals, such as the existence of talking animals in children's fiction. Karen's supposition that the dog is not capable of being puzzled by Tom's behaviour in this scenario however is based on an idea that is deeply harmful and one which can be traced back to Descartes' horrific experiments on dogs; that dogs (and other animals) are mere automata, incapable of subjective thought.¹¹⁷

In comparison, Tom's recognition that both himself and the dog are engaged in a reciprocal and ongoing attempt to understand one another, typified by a requirement they both make concessions for the other and in so doing, travel across an 'expanse' to 'arrive [on] common ground' lays a fresh foundation from where the reader can engage with story and character. This foundational aspect acknowledges a theory of animals defined by anthropomorphic ideology but at the same time underscores the limitations and restrictions present when one refuses to acknowledge similarities across species. A different perspective refutes the validity of limitation when it comes to rendering the more-than-human world in language. David Brooks asks: 'Whose or what purpose does it serve to believe that we cannot know anything of the feelings of non-human animals, and that any attempt at such knowledge is an act of appropriation?'.¹¹⁸ Brooks recognises the distinctly human usage of language while at the same time bringing conversations about the universality of interspecies experiences once more to the fore. This question of whose or what purpose it serves to

¹¹⁷ Thomas, E. 'Descartes on the Animal Within, and the Animals Without.' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 50 (8), 2020, pp 999-1014. doi:10.1017/can.2020.44

¹¹⁸ Brooks, David. *Animal Dreams*. 1st ed., Sydney University Press, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1j55hew>. p 57

exclude nonhuman animals from conversations about language clarifies, as no doubt Brooks intends, that the only purpose the exclusion of animals can serve is to further marginalise and oppress them, rather than affording – or perhaps feigning – respect for differences across species.

This conundrum and Brooks' attitude toward it recalls Baker's assertion that the presence of animals in fiction continually challenges modes of linguistic representation.¹¹⁹ This is in many ways a positive, encouraging readers to confront their own understandings of animals both in real life and in fiction, but in other ways can be problematic for writer and reader. Tom's receptiveness to the dog and vice versa, his ability to acknowledge *both* must traverse the unknown to arrive in a space they can share marks the relationship as one unbounded by limitation, uncontained by the traditions and constraints of 'owner' and 'pet'.

This point, made so early in the novel, provides the reader a place from which to contemplate the story as it unfolds, a way in. The prevalence of art in the text, both written and visual, and the ideas of interpretation and meaning which accompany it offer a complementary mode of seeing. The first time Tom sees Nelly's painting, he reflects, 'Pictures belong to the world of things. They cannot be contained in language.'¹²⁰ Rather than being a marker of human superiority, language ceases to function when confronted with something beyond itself. Seeing is more important than explaining.

Tom moved closer: Goya's ambiguous dog, poised between extinction and deliverance, gazing over the rim of the world.

'That's a painting I can hardly bear look at,' he said.¹²¹

The Dog by Francisco Goya is widely considered to represent the inevitability of death and the futility of struggling against it.¹²² Giovanni Aloï writes that animals haunt the peripherals of art, appearing in paintings, as sculptures and even taxidermied.¹²³ The animal in art poses a challenge:

Unlearning the animal means effectively to suspend one's knowledge of nature in order to reconfigure it, or perhaps to let it reconfigure itself; it means to deconstruct the certainties

¹¹⁹ Baker, p 1

¹²⁰ De Kretser, p 8

¹²¹ De Kretser, p 56

¹²² Charles, Victoria. *Goya*. 1st ed., Parkstone International, 2013.

¹²³ Aloï, Giovanni. *Art and Animals*, I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=903284> p xv

offered by nature, in order to acquire a critical awareness of the relational modes we establish with animals and ecosystems, and simultaneously to find the courage to envision new ones.¹²⁴

De Kretser's positioning of the dog outside the main scope of the narrative encourages a deconstruction of the idea of the dog, and a reconfiguration of this dog, whose absence constitutes a significant presence in the novel. At the same time, ongoing references to containment, to boundaries and the peripherals of knowledge and expression deepen through intertextuality, both in relation to the referenced artworks and the immediate connection with writer Henry James, as discussed by Tom and Nelly in the following excerpt:

There was James' fascination with the supernatural. 'He tried to contain it by writing ghost stories. Sidelining it, trying to keep it out of the major work, out of the novels. But even in *The Portrait of a Lady*, which everyone agrees is a realist masterpiece, the heroine sees her cousin's ghost at a crucial moment.'

Over time the monumental Portrait itself turned spectral, said Tom. Its presence showed and faded and shimmered again in *The Wings of the Dove*, a novel written when James had grown old; and haunted, like its predecessor...¹²⁵

Tom is describing the brief sightings, the crepuscular glimpses that flavour James' fiction with a sense of the ominous, but he could also be describing the mode of seeing which occurs and reoccurs in *The Lost Dog*, as people and animals appear and disappear in the twilight. The action starts one early morning because the dog dashes off in pursuit of an animal unseen; Nelly was supposedly seen near where her husband disappeared but the dim light of 'dissolving night' meant identification was not possible; when the dog is finally found, he appears in silhouette against the sky as the day fades to dusk.¹²⁶ The gloaming serves as a reminder of some of the key thematic elements of this novel and of de Kretser's work as a whole, specifically in relation to animals, the environment and our place alongside and within both. Neither reader nor character can be certain of what has been seen, or, and perhaps more importantly, what is there but cannot be seen. The uncertainty and precarity of the environment into which the dog has disappeared and Tom's increasingly desperate attempts to navigate that environment recall Henry Beston's assertion from the beginning of this exegesis, that 'We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of

¹²⁴ Aloï, p xvi

¹²⁵ De Kretser, p 125

¹²⁶ De Kretser p 132; p 314

animals...in a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear...'¹²⁷

The natural world and its mystery, those voices and the instinctive responses of the animals who hear them are central to this novel. Further, the sense of the supernatural which permeates those scenes set in the bush situate *The Lost Dog* within the genre of the gothic, and de Kretser alludes explicitly to the shame of Australia's genocidal past at various points of the novel, specifically in scenes set in rural Victoria.¹²⁸ One night after a long day of looking for the dog, Tom awakes:

He was certain something had woken him. The previous week, the dog had slept at the foot of the bed. Now, alone at night, Tom was conscious of the unpeopled woods and pastures about him. It was a country in which the old ideal of rural solitude had been bought with violence; and some hint of this lingered in the most tranquil setting, converting calm itself into an indictment. He went outside and saw that the night was fine, the sky glittering with fierce southern constellations. When he came in he was careful to bolt the door.¹²⁹

Spectrality is considered a significant trope of the Anthropocene gothic, meaning novels combining both gothic and Anthropocenic forms.¹³⁰ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock writes that the spectral is that which does not entirely materialise, rather hovering somewhere out of sight, like the 'something' which Tom believes has woken him.¹³¹ The dog himself becomes a spectre for the majority of the novel; we are unsure of whether he is alive or dead, whether he will be found or remain missing. Scepticism and hope combine with something supernatural, something bigger and beyond the characters and ourselves, and at the end we discover that the dog has survived. Emaciated, ragged, he appears as a tentative silhouette before emerging fully into the light, not a ghost but a living, breathing animal. Despite the rope tied around his collar, which Tom believed would serve as a death sentence in the grabbing bush, the dog survives. Despite the lack of sustenance, the predators, the driving rain and cold, the human men with guns, the dog survives. This image, of the animal ravaged

¹²⁷ Beston,

¹²⁸ De Kretser, p 150, p 145, p 133

¹²⁹ De Kretser, p 145

¹³⁰ Edwards, Justin D. *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth : The Gothic Anthropocene*, edited by Justin D. Edwards, et al. University of Minnesota Press, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.sydney.edu.au/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=7041448>. P ix

¹³¹ Edwards, p ix

but whole and at the moment he has successfully located his companion and guardian - and I use guardian in its most reciprocal definition, as the dog has guarded Tom too, albeit from spectral creatures - is a powerful one. He appears at the moment Tom expresses disbelief that he could still be alive, and when later the vet tells Tom and Nelly that they found the dog 'just in time', Tom replies 'he found us'.¹³² With this assertion, Tom affirms the dog's agency, his instinct for survival and his determination to return to his home and friend against all odds. The spectral has become actual, and the materialisation of the dog, his representation throughout the novel, succeeds to conceive of 'a wiser, more mystical concept of animals'.¹³³ The reappearance of the dog on his own terms, not as a result of being rescued by his human caretakers, recalls Baker's assertion that '...whether central or peripheral, the appearance of nonhuman animals in fiction challenges... the implied anthropocentrism of the novel form.'¹³⁴

The spectral figures in my own novel in a variety of ways. The most fundamental of these is through the character of Jamie. In many ways Jamie's presence has a spectral element to it from the outset, when she moves into the apartment beside Madison's. Madison is captivated by Jamie's presence despite only being able to hear her through the walls or observe her online persona. Initially, Jamie embodies the ephemeral nature of social media 'influencers', existing as a distant presence, a digital entity. When Jamie's sudden illness brings her into closer physical proximity with Madison and Frankie, she retains an elusive quality, unwilling to articulate her ailment or attend a public medical facility. Hence, when Jamie reappears after her death, visible only to Maddy, the line between her representation at the beginning of the novel and her current form blurs; she remains a distant presence. Her reappearance also intensifies the element of uncertainty as to who or what is responsible for her death, as she implicates Stefan without naming him explicitly. This ambiguity is intended to reflect broader themes of uncertainty and moral ambiguity, responding to ideas about accountability and truth in the Anthropocene era.

There is a section in *The Life To Come* which echoes these sentiments. Hank has died, officially of kidney failure, but Pippa believes his death was caused by a broken heart, as he is banished to live alone outside after her and Matt's baby is born. This whimsy belies Pippa's feelings of guilt, her sense of responsibility for abandoning her friend, as does her

¹³² De Kretser, p 315

¹³³ Beston, p 24

¹³⁴ Baker pp 7-9

recollection of hearing him pleading to be let inside long after his death.¹³⁵ She is the only character to be haunted by Hank in this way, perhaps because she was the only member of the family to view Hank as an individual, a someone whose personhood is not preceded by the ‘just’ so often placed before the phrase ‘a dog’. She works Hank into stories she tells her son, who remembers Hank only as a ‘threadbare shadow’, where Hank takes on mythological status.¹³⁶

Hank became the hero of her story, a gallant adventurer. He visited kingdoms deep under the sea, and tucked away in the bush, and hidden among the starry lanes of outlandish galaxies. His new friends could be fierce, but Hank kept them from quarrels and steered them into gentle ways.¹³⁷

Hank’s earthly life mirrors those of many of the dogs who live alongside us. A dog of uncertain origin, his fate ends up in the hands of those operating the pound in which he is incarcerated before being transferred to people who, despite being ‘good people’, repay his loyalty, friendship and obvious preference for company with solitary confinement until he dies.¹³⁸ Pippa’s recompense seems to be to reinstate Hank to a position of imaginative prestige; a hero, an adventurer, a diplomat. The few pages on which Pippa seems to experience regret for how she has prioritised social standing over genuine companionship also happen to be the final few written from Pippa’s perspective. We are left with the impression that, as she believes, she has ‘...missed everything important.’¹³⁹ It would be disingenuous to assert that ‘everything’ in this context is meant to have more to do with human-animal relationships than the many other significant themes of this novel, however de Kretser’s timing, her depiction of this heroic and gilded Hank directly prior to Pippa’s ruminations on loss and on failure encourage (a perhaps unconscious) self-reflection on the role of pet animals in fiction and in life.

The Lost Dog and *The Life to Come* contribute to the increasing literary turn toward animals, both human and nonhuman, thriving, suffering, living and dying within this troubled Anthropocene period. De Kretser’s agentic canine characters challenge commonly held understandings of dogs in real life and in fiction, and in doing so encourage a reappraisal of

¹³⁵ De Kretser, p 267

¹³⁶ De Kretser, p 267

¹³⁷ De Kretser, p 267

¹³⁸ De Kretser, p 234

¹³⁹ De Kretser, 268

both human-pet dynamics and of animal representation in fiction. The evocation of the uncanny and the unseen in *The Lost Dog* stimulates a re-examination of what we think we know about nonhuman animals, opening space to approach our understandings of and relationships with animals with the fresh curiosity required to overhaul human-centric attitudes toward the more-than-human world. De Kretser demonstrates that it's possible to write animal characters who are impactful, who make us aware of the crimes we have done to them, and who encourage us to see the urgency in adopting a new attitude towards them. Most importantly, this new attitude encompasses not just the fictional animal in the story, but the stranger animal who you will never see, and never meet, and who in fact will never even exist if global systems of exploitation which result in their torment and slaughter are overthrown, as they must be.

Chapter 3

Living and writing veganism in the Anthropocene

‘In deliberately bearing the vegetarian word, they challenge a world at war.’¹⁴⁰

- Carol J. Adams

Writing this exegesis and the novel that accompanies it is for me the completion of a circle. It was only exposure to the writings of J.M Coetzee in my first year at this university that compelled me to confront the misalignment of my values and my actions in relation to animals, sitting in a tutorial room in the John Woolley building discussing the novel *The Lives of Animals* (1999) with the rest of the class. Literary critics distinguish epiphany as two separate phenomena; first the experience, ‘something lived through’, then the record or account of the experience, ‘something written down’¹⁴¹. My novel and this exegesis constitute these phenomena. *Small Life* is not autobiographical, but certainly reflects my experiences and concerns. The protagonist's preoccupation with animals (how we treat them) and the environment (how we have destroyed it) is echoed in this exegesis, and has formed a substantive part of the decade of my life that has passed since sitting in that tutorial room. *Small Life* is a novel about being powerless and yet using every bit of power available to someone without significant influence, who lives an ordinary, unremarkable life. At the same time it's about lives that are literally small; the lives of pets, the lives of individuals, the lives of ‘girls’, a word I use intentionally and as consistent with its usage on social media, where adolescents and women have reclaimed it after many years of the term representing infantilization and condescension.¹⁴²

This final chapter aims to contemplate the experience of an epiphany about nonhuman animals and the environment in the Anthropocene; the sudden perception of something

¹⁴⁰ Adams, Carol J., et al. *The Edinburgh Companion to Vegan Literary Studies*. Edited by Laura Wright, Edinburgh University Press., 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474493321>. P 42

¹⁴¹ Tucker, Herbert F. “Epiphany and Browning: Character Made Manifest.” *PMLA* : Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, vol. 107, no. 5, 1992, pp. 1208–21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/462875>. p 1208

¹⁴² Maes, Chelly, and Laura Vandenbosch. “Adolescent Girls’ Instagram and TikTok Use: Examining Relations with Body Image-Related Constructs over Time Using Random Intercept Cross-Lagged Panel Models.” *Body Image*, vol. 41, 2022, pp. 453–59, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.04.015>;

Dekic, Elena. “Digital Culture and Value Clash on TikTok: ‘Dancing Girl’ Vs. Radical Feminist.” *Gumanitarnyj Vektor*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2022, pp. 117–27, <https://doi.org/10.21209/1996-7853-2022-17-4-117-127>.

crucial followed by an attempted response which feels simultaneously essential and futile. This project sprang from a belief that living and writing about small lives is a way to articulate resistance to the structures which work to keep us small, stop us from forming collective units of resistance and which encourage us to turn away from recognising sameness between ourselves and the more-than-human world. Veganism as a collective movement has a great capacity to establish a politically-informed and meaningful mode of resistance against the harms inflicted on other animals and the earth. Widespread economic and nutritional inequality may problematise an endorsement of global veganism, but it simultaneously strengthens accountability for consumption, as is represented within the vegan movement.

The following chapter briefly explores barriers to women, specifically young women or ‘girls’, participating in political discourse and action, with reference to how these barriers in turn impact wider understandings of veganism as a political action. Then I will demonstrate how veganism constitutes a foundational movement within a wider political aspiration, concluding with how veganism may be normalised in the future. Throughout I will refer to my novel, *Small Life*, which responds creatively to the questions and themes with which this chapter is preoccupied. Madison’s brand of veganism is intended to represent a thoughtful and non-dogmatic practice that challenges social convention toward both food and animals while remaining inquiring and self-reflective. Further, the friendship between Madison and Frida, as well as her decision to adopt a second dog later in the novel, aims to depict the potential for mutuality in human-animal relationships and prompt reflection on human responsibility toward our non-human kin. Of particular relevance to this chapter’s interrogation of the power of the girl is the novel’s representation of Madison and Frankie’s past, which is marked by their experience of being abused by a male relative. This narrative thread is intended to highlight the pervasiveness of gendered violence amid larger experiences of trauma.

Girls, politics, veganism

As Christine Junker and Hope Jennings note, Anthropocene narratives are often tied to the idea of ‘girlhood’, as ‘...an Anthropocene girl-subject who must process a peculiar kind of ecological grief and, in so doing, (re)negotiate various gendered and spatial modes of being in

the world.’¹⁴³ I read Junker and Jennings’ article almost a year after putting the pen down on my novel, but their observations about other Anthropocene narratives are uncannily relevant to my own. I have experienced being a girl, someone trying to take ‘... clumsy possession of an adult world’, but in hindsight the fictional possibilities of girlhood, which lends itself so well to Anthropocene themes of consumerism, climate grief and animal exploitation no doubt influenced my decision to write from the perspective of a ‘girl’, an ‘unformed thing’ as Eimear McBride’s title goes.¹⁴⁴

In the world outside of fiction, most vegans are “girls” (that is, women under 30), which impacts upon social perceptions of the movement insofar as girls continue to be dispossessed of political agency and representation.¹⁴⁵ Research carried out to explore girls’ and young women’s experiences of and attitudes toward political participation revealed that although 97 percent of respondents considered political participation important, only 11 percent feel properly represented, and one in five respondents stated that they had been personally discouraged from political participation.¹⁴⁶ This data proves something most of us already know, which is that girls are excluded from political spaces, an idea illustrated by the abuse to which female politicians and activists are subjected.¹⁴⁷

Even discourse which seems oriented toward affirming the power held by young women or ‘girls’, like that of the ‘Girl Effect’, which was popularised in the wake of a Nike campaign of the same name, does so only superficially.¹⁴⁸ The ‘Girl Effect’ discourse encouraged Western girls to see themselves as the empowered ‘saviours’ of their downtrodden Southern counterparts, thus promoting the idea that the West has achieved full female emancipation and at the same time that there exists an oppressed female South which lacks the agency to ‘save’ itself.¹⁴⁹ From a more anecdotal perspective, the response from some Conservative factions to the recently released Barbie movie due to its (mainstream,

¹⁴³ Junker, Christine, and Hope Jennings. “Surviving Girlhood: Wild Girls in the Anthropocene.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2022, pp. 680–705, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa127>. p 680

¹⁴⁴ McBride, Eimear. *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. Text Publishing Company, 2013.

¹⁴⁵ Malek, Lenka, and Wendy J. Umberger. “Distinguishing Meat Reducers from Unrestricted Omnivores, Vegetarians and Vegans: A Comprehensive Comparison of Australian Consumers.” *Food Quality and Preference*, vol. 88, 2021, p. 104081–, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2020.104081>; Sundström, Aksel, et al. “Women’s Political Empowerment: A New Global Index, 1900–2012.” *World Development*, vol. 94, 2017, pp. 321–35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.01.016>.

¹⁴⁶ Plan International, ‘Equal Power Now: Girls, Young Women & Political Participation’, Girls Get Equal, 2022, <https://plan-international.org/publications/equal-power-now/>. p 3

¹⁴⁷ Plan International, p 3

¹⁴⁸ Koffman, Ofra, and Rosalind Gill. “‘the Revolution Will Be Led by a 12-Year-Old Girl’: Girl Power and Global Biopolitics.” *Feminist Review*, vol. 105, no. 105, 2013, pp. 83–102, <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2013.16> p 84

¹⁴⁹ Koffman and Gill, p 84

unremarkable) feminist message represents a small proportion of the traditionalist constraints upheld within Western cultures in relation to girls and women.¹⁵⁰

Despite these barriers, girls lead the way in the fight for environmental, social and animal justice. Greta Thunberg has been involved in environmental activism since she was fifteen; Autumn Peltier's water advocacy began when she was eight; eight was also the age at which Nina Gualinga began strategically working towards a cleaner and more just future.¹⁵¹ These young women are figureheads for a broader environmental thrust, which means they are viewed with suspicion and antipathy by some. The response to girls like these who have harnessed their power for the purpose of achieving justice is surely best summed up in a tweet from then President Donald Trump, who, in response to Thunberg receiving the 2019 *Time* Award for Person of the Year, wrote: 'So ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!'.¹⁵² This tweet reveals not just an embedded traditionalist mentality about girls and women, but also symbolises a broader sense of fear and distrust toward a person who challenges the established world order. Michael Knowles comment on a Fox News segment, that Greta Thunberg is 'a mentally ill Swedish child', further reflects the prevalence of a perspective that is no less concerning for being neoconservative.¹⁵³

The protagonist in *Small Life*, Madison, is a young woman living in the inner-west of Sydney, and could therefore be seen as a symbol of the brand of fleeting metropolitan morality so often offered up in contemporary novels as a comedic trope: the undernourished, white, new age vegan, with dyed hair and a trendy postcode.¹⁵⁴ Despite the fact that this trope does not reflect the origins of the vegan movement and in fact contributes to the erasure of the BIPOC activism that has been so instrumental in commencing and sustaining widespread veganism, popular understandings and condemnations of the movement remain rooted in this

¹⁵⁰ Vanden Heuval, Katrina. "Why Does the Barbie Movie Have Republicans in a Tizzy?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 20 July 2023, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jul/20/barbie-movie-republicans-reaction.

¹⁵¹ Unigwe, Chika. "It's not just Greta Thunberg: Why are we ignoring the developing world's inspiring activists?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/05/greta-thunberg-developing-world-activists>

¹⁵² Trump, Donald J [@realDonaldTrump] "So ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!" *Twitter*, December 12, 2019

¹⁵³ Chiu, Allyson. "A Fox News guest called Greta Thunberg 'mentally ill.' The network apologized for the 'disgraceful' comment." *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2019.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/09/24/fox-news-greta-thunberg-mentally-ill-michael-knowles/>

¹⁵⁴ For examples, please see a detailed list on the final page.

falsity.¹⁵⁵ Carol Adams proposes that texts in which women do not eat meat introduce a textual strategy, which she terms ‘interruption’.¹⁵⁶ She writes:

Four themes arise when a vegetarian “interruption” occurs. These themes include rejection of male acts of violence, identification with animals, repudiation of men’s control of women, and the positing of an ideal world composed of vegetarianism, pacifism, and feminism as opposed to a fallen world composed in part of women’s oppression, war, and meat-eating.¹⁵⁷

Adams situates both veganism and writing about veganism as part of a broader politic of resistance in this quote, encouraging an understanding of literary veganism as a collective movement which offers both a space for and a mode of protest.¹⁵⁸ Rather than indicating illegitimacy, social associations between veganism and girls demonstrate an underlying fortitude, evidenced by girls’ continuing participation in political action and discourse despite having to overcome significant barriers to do so. In this way, veganism is a natural outpost around which girls may gather due to the shared vulnerability between girls and nonhuman animals in normative discourse.¹⁵⁹

The representative choices I have made throughout *Small Life* are intended to emphasise this point. Madison initially presents as a person yielding little power; she is financially insecure, lacks the safety net sometimes offered by parents or partners, has a dependent in her companion animal and gives an overall impression of self-doubt and uncertainty as to her place and her future. As the narrative unspools and reveals the traumas Madison and Frankie have experienced in order to build a new life in a capital city like Sydney, with all of its associations of expense and competition, Madison’s steely inner core is slowly revealed. The final part of the novel portrays Madison’s choice to depart from her home sanctuary, the place she has painstakingly carved out in order to achieve safety and security, in order to pursue work that she finds meaningful and valuable. This narrative choice aims to emphasise the notion that power does not have to involve domination over

¹⁵⁵ Davis, Janet M. *The Gospel of Kindness: Animal Welfare and the Making of Modern America*. Oxford University Press, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199733156.001.0001>; Ramsden-Karelse, R. (2022). *Veganism and Race*. In L. Wright & E. Quinn (Eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Vegan Literary Studies* (Edinburgh Companions to Literature and the Humanities, pp. 107-121). Edinburgh University Press.

¹⁵⁶ Adams, p 42

¹⁵⁷ Adams, p 42

¹⁵⁸ Twine, Richard. “Vegan Killjoys at the Table—Contesting Happiness and Negotiating Relationships with Food Practices.” *Societies*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2014, pp. 623–39, <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc4040623>.

¹⁵⁹ Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat : a Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. Polity Press, 1990

others, rather, it resides in an individual's ability to cultivate autonomy and exercise strength in the face of adversity.

The next section will reflect on veganism within the context of its appearance in fiction, exploring its portrayal as part of a broader political sensibility that fosters agency and commitment to pacifism in the face of impending climate catastrophe.

Veganism as a political tool

Reading Coetzee was not the first time I had considered my stance on eating animals, nor the first time I felt uncomfortable about my decision to continue doing so. Reading and discussing Coetzee as part of an open forum, however, required a level of inquisitiveness and curiosity which overcame my conviction that eating meat could exist in harmony with an otherwise non-violent ethic. Some of the arguments presented by the fictional Costello are 'suffused with pathos', such as: 'I, for my part, am astonished that you can put in your mouth the corpse of a dead animal, astonished that you do not find it nasty to chew hacked flesh and swallow the juices of death wounds.'¹⁶⁰ Estey-Burtt suggests Coetzee '...forces his readers to question the contours of their ethical frameworks, including the distinction between human and animal ethical realms and whether animals must necessarily compete for imaginative space with human beings.'¹⁶¹

Coetzee's emotive approach provided the impetus for the 'horror moment', a term I posit represents the moment when one realises that one is implicated in and has benefited from the structural and systemic exploitation of the other. The 'horror' of this moment forces an internal confrontation regarding eating animals and breaks through common rationalisations employed to justify the issue to oneself. In turn, this moment compels turning-toward, rather than turning-away from, the thing that has initiated the distressed reaction. On my part, it was Costello's assertion that 'Animals have only their silence left with which to confront us' that impelled a questioning of my ethical framework and thus the reimagining of my relationship with animals.¹⁶² This questioning began as one primarily borne of emotion and care for animals; it has now cemented into a far-reaching ethic of non-violence which encompasses not just human-animal relations but those between humans and the entire natural world. Our relationship with the more-than-human world is changing.

¹⁶⁰ Coetzee, p 80

¹⁶¹ Estey-Burtt, Brandi. "BIDDING THE ANIMAL ÀDIEU: GRACE IN J.M. COETZEE'S 'THE LIVES OF ANIMALS' AND 'DISGRACE.'" *Literature & Theology*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2017, pp. 232
<https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frv035>.

¹⁶² Gutmann and Coetzee p 25

Humans are attempting to come to grips with and find solutions to the harms we have inflicted upon other humans, other animals and the planet itself. One of these solutions is in the rapidly increasing vegan movement.

Health or personal veganism is often practised as part of a lifestyle shift seeking weight loss or other improved health markers, as it is seen as belonging to a broader culture of dietary abstinence. This adoption of a non-violent lifestyle may be beneficial to nonhumans and the planet, but it does not represent a political choice. Rather, a plant-based rationale for abstinence from meat aligns with Colin Spencer's explication of vegetarianism as a purer mode of consumption, '...healthier, lighter and conducive to spirituality.'¹⁶³ Asceticism problematises the ethics of veganism by introducing an element of self-denial and abstinence which is wholly separate from avoiding the exploitation of humans, non-humans and the more-than-human as set out at the forefront of ethical veganism.

Further, associations between veganism and the ascetic present a hurdle to talking about and writing about veganism.¹⁶⁴ As an example, an early draft of *Small Life* referenced Domino's Pizza's new vegan pizza range, featuring 'pepperoni' rounds and 'ham' pieces. A friend who had volunteered to read a few chapters for me found this bewildering, suggesting the character seemed hypocritical for consuming something reminiscent of animal bodies after expostulating about veganism in an earlier segment. This response reveals a deeply-held social understanding of veganism, where vegans are held to impossibly high standards of puritanism while at the same time being condemned for imagining those standards are achievable (or, perhaps more importantly, attractive) for others.

My supervisor raised another issue which she found personally vexing. As someone who has eschewed meat-eating before, she asked why Madison continually prepares such lacklustre meals, and suggested some simple, nourishing dishes Madison might like to try instead of baked beans, toast and potatoes. Although I had not made an intentional decision for Madison to eat such colourless meals, the reluctance I felt about changing them was reflective of a deeper intention I have for *Small Life*, which is to move the conversation about veganism and animals away from diet and by extension the appeasement of human desires for animal flesh, and toward the animals from whom flesh comes. A literary exploration of veganism which strays away from the usual representation of vegans as vapid, ascetic,

¹⁶³ Spencer, Colin. *Vegetarianism: A History*. Rev. and updated ed., Grub Street, 2000.

¹⁶⁴ Kuz, Maria P., and Valeriia D. Chernoskutova. "Vegetarian Diet: Consumption in the Context of Asceticism." *Inter*, vol. 11, no. 19, 2019, pp. 38–61, <https://doi.org/10.19181/inter.2019.19.3>.

privileged and afraid of particular ‘unhealthy’ foods is important in veering the conversation toward what being vegan might actually mean.

Emelia Quinn writes that embracing the ‘monstrosity’ of the vegan in literature can actually have a reparative effect, allowing for ‘...a condemnation of global institutions of animal exploitation while refusing an association with moral purity.’¹⁶⁵ This concept is similar to certain social groups reclaiming terms of prejudice historically used against them, as girls have reconstituted ‘girl’, as well as ‘slut’, ‘bitch’ and ‘whore’ for the purpose of self-empowerment. Adopting the ‘vegan’ label from a solely animal rights point of view, while refusing to adhere to the types of diet-specific behaviours ascribed to those identifying as vegan is a similarly liberatory tactic.

Yet, there are many instances in which desire or asceticism does not enter the conversation about humans eating animals. Those eating out of necessity are excluded from conversations about taste appeasement. Conversations about eating are complicated by western domination of food but even in high-income countries, rising rates of poverty make questions of responsibility and accountability even more complex. 13.4 percent of Australians live below the poverty line, a figure which is increasing due to the cost-of-living crisis.¹⁶⁶ People in low-income countries who do not have access to plentiful and nutritious plant-based foods eat more animal protein to be adequately nourished. As Vidhi Doshi notes, ‘This means that in high-income countries, where people generally have enough to eat...the shift towards more plant-forward diets and away from carbon- and water-intensive consumption patterns has to happen faster.’¹⁶⁷

By this metric, veganism offers an opportunity to those who benefit most from structural and systemic inequalities to use those benefits for good. Shifting pro-animal discourse away from violence toward animals as resulting from individual, personal ethical failings and toward responses that engage with the structural, institutional machinery of animal violence is an essential component of thinking about human/animal shared futures.¹⁶⁸ Fiction that engages with veganism in substantive ways such as my own novel can be a way of reframing pro-animal discourse to address systemic violence and thus participate in

¹⁶⁵ Quinn, Emelia. *Reading Veganism: The Monstrous Vegan, 1818 to Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Web.

¹⁶⁶ Naidoo, Y; valentine, k; and Adamson, E (2022) ‘Australian experiences of poverty: risk precarity and uncertainty during COVID-19 Australian Council of Social Service’ (ACOSS) and UNSW Sydney p 21;Cortis, N. and Blaxland, M. (2022) *Helping people in need during a cost-of-living crisis: findings from the Australian Community Sector Survey*, Sydney: ACOSS p 8

¹⁶⁷ Doshi, Vidhi, “Fighting climate crisis by avoiding meat ignores poor countries' needs”, *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 17 September, 2019

¹⁶⁸ Calarco, Matthew, in Wadiwel, Dinesh. *The War Against Animals*. BRILL, 2015 p ix

leveraging privilege for positive change. Veganism in this context is a practice that aims to protect both human and nonhuman animals.

Being vegan in a hostile world

Seeking out uncomfortable knowledge marks the first stage of a transition away from old understandings about the lives and deaths of animals. As a society we are discomfited by and averse to contemplating death, for that reason, the mass slaughter which takes place each day in order to accommodate for an increasing desire for animal products must happen in secrecy to improve marketability, especially in a time marked by a concern for ethical consumption. In *The Philosophers and the Animals*, Costello says ‘...I will pay you the honour of skipping a recital of the horrors of [animal] lives and deaths.’¹⁶⁹ I will do the same, but must note that the only reason we have been able to discover what happens behind the security gates of farms and abattoirs both local and global is due to the essential and illegal efforts of animal activists such as those of the Farm Transparency Project, whose peaceful protest I have referred to earlier in this exegesis.¹⁷⁰ This group cites availability of information as a foundational tool in the fight for animal liberation, an argument which is affirmed through my own and many others' journey to accumulate knowledge. As one uncovers evidence of a new and traumatising reality, a kind of re-worlding occurs.

Maddy's frequent consultation of Google in *Small Life* for the purpose of seeking out confronting and emotionally-taxing information serves a dual purpose within the narrative. It first emphasises the availability of information in the current era, highlighting the ease with which individuals can access knowledge about the origin of their food. On the other hand, it illustrates how constant engagement with traumatic content can take a mammoth toll on an individual's psyche. For Madison, seemingly innocuous objects such as Raph's Range Rover become a source of pain as they serve as a signifier for the suffering and exploitation of their origins. This in turn makes it difficult for Madison to create distance between her day-to-day life and the distressing knowledge in which she is so often steeped.

Catherine Oliver's research into vegan world-making provides real-life examples of this consequence. She writes about a young vegan man named Charlie:

¹⁶⁹ Coetzee, 19

¹⁷⁰ 'About Farm Transparency Project'. *Farm Transparency Project*. <https://www.farmtransparency.org/about> Accessed 29 September 2023

Veganism moved Charlie away from objectifying relations with animals, which he recognises felt wrong in hindsight, through a move into shared vegan truth narratives. Animal encounters, both mediated and actual, often precede a vegan transition:

If I saw a bird who has been run over, it would literally make me sad, even though it is dead already and I didn't know the bird. I feel pain when I see animals that are in pain or have suffered. That does break my heart. That is the hardest part of being vegan, that empathy, *because a lot of the time you are sad.*¹⁷¹

Charlie's contemplation strikes a chord, and is reminiscent of the emotional toll experienced by the fictional Madison of my novel. The process of writing *Small Life* in many ways echoed the first years of practising veganism, as I sought out updated evidence of those horrors spared the reader by Costello in the previous paragraph. That evidence came in the form of films taken inside Australian farms and factories and accounts from workers of their experiences working within them. It is important to situate this evidence firmly in an Australian context, as the misconception that Australia has high standards of welfare for animals is common, difficult to shift and ultimately has devastating consequences on the progression of animal welfare in this country.¹⁷² There was a point at which I felt my writing shift away from the curious, open and questioning timbre for which I was aiming and toward something angrier, less productive. This transition was related to the degree in which I was saturated in films and images of indescribable violence done to animals by humans in the name of meat, eggs and dairy. Rage lessened and, like Charlie, I was simply sad.

Charlie's and my experiences represent the first stage of the kind of re-worlding brought about by confronting the discrepancy between how one imagines the world prior to one's moment of epiphany and how one perceives it after. Danielle Celermejer writes in her book *Summertime* (2021) 'of late my anger has been wild and violent' yet maintains '...a measured, inquisitive, self-aware, precise tone' in her contemplation of how Anthropogenic climate change maims and kills animals.¹⁷³ The memes included as part of the introduction imply that some vegans find themselves enlivened with evangelistic fervour at the outset of their practice, resulting in irritation and dismissal from friends and relatives who perceive a

¹⁷¹ Oliver, Catherine. "Vegan World-Making in Meat-Centric Society: The Embodied Geographies of Veganism." *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2023, pp. 831–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2021.1975164> p 837 (emphasis my own)

¹⁷² Futureeye, 'Commodity or Sentient Being: Australia's Shifting Mindset on Farm Animal Welfare'. Futureeye Pty Ltd, 2018.

¹⁷³ Allington, Patrick. 'Review: Patrick Allington on Danielle Celermejer: Other Ways of Living.' *Sydney Review of Books*. September 26, 2022. <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/celermejer-summertime/>

temporary and somewhat soppy sentimentality. In turn, newly minted vegans assuming that, if placed at the same juncture requiring either a turning-toward or a turning-away, friends and loved ones would choose to make similar changes are soon dismayed by the falsity of this assumption, leading to profound feelings of isolation.

When UK chain Greggs brought out a plant-based sausage roll in 2019 British media figure Piers Morgan wasted little time in making his feelings known about the new product. He tweeted, ‘nobody was waiting for a vegan bloody sausage, you PC-ravaged clowns.’¹⁷⁴ He went on to declare the beginning of ‘the vegan resistance’ on his television program, posed beside a tray of raw meat. Kristoff Dhont and Joachim Stoeber write that this example of backlash is just a symptom of a broader hostility against veganism, a phenomenon I have referred to earlier in this exegesis, and one which provides a rallying point for others who feel similarly hostile toward a movement which challenges dietary tradition and engenders discomfort at a place considered sacred for many: the dinner table.

The broader hostility within which Morgan’s outburst takes place and the sense of social isolation that stems from it has been cited as the number one reason people renege on their commitment to veganism and return to more normative ways of eating.¹⁷⁵ At the same time, many vegans feel pressure to represent their lifestyle as something that is both achievable and appealing. Oliver notes, ‘The perceptions of others are important to vegans, who understand that their presence can be a placeholder for veganism itself. Meat-centric socio-cultural spaces demand a presentation of veganism that is determined, but not overly so.’¹⁷⁶ In other words, vegans feel the need to market veganism to others in a way that avoids any accusation of didacticism. Yet, as Richard Twine points out, this is often an impossible task:

Sometimes a vegan will preserve the “happiness” exactly by deciding not to speak out. Like the feminist the vegan might feel that “they are the problem” and do not want to speak, to “ruin the atmosphere”... Like the feminist, the vegan is also assigned to a category of difficulty and sometimes will want to avoid being outed, not to be difficult, or to cause a fuss. The vegan does not even have to purposively engage, by arguing against someone’s animal consumption, to be a killjoy. Often the known presence of a vegan will be enough to trouble the prevailing happiness order and vegans soon become aware of the repetitive scripts that

¹⁷⁴ Morgan, Piers [@piersmorgan]. ‘Nobody was waiting for a vegan sausage, you PC ravaged clowns.’ Twitter. January 3, 2019.

¹⁷⁵ Mangels, Reed. “Why Do Some People Stop Being Vegetarian or Vegan?” *Vegetarian Journal*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2018, pp. 12–12.

¹⁷⁶ Oliver, p 842

omnivores call upon in such situations (“why are you vegan?”, “what do you eat?”, “I could never do it” and so on).¹⁷⁷

In hindsight it has become clear that many narrative decisions I have made in the writing of my novel have been defensive; to counter the anticipated negative responses of potential readers. When discussing my doctorate with others I have been careful to avoid giving any indication that my interest lies in dead animals, animals bred for food and other human interests, as well as living ones, and yet dead animals are the most prevalent nonhuman presences in daily life, appearing as often as three times a day in front of those who eat animals, or symbolised through the liquid offerings of their once-living flesh in the form of eggs, cheese and milk. I recognise this decision as one aimed to avoid tension, and yet at the same time I know that taking the opportunity to have conversations about animals is in itself a form of activism, one available to me but one which I more often than not choose to turn away from. And yet, as Twine’s above quote implies, veganism actively works to destabilise normative and hegemonic social practices through the very presence of existing vegans, who are able to prompt a reconsideration of ‘meat culture’ simply by not engaging in it, which in turn leads to the normalisation of non-violent practices.¹⁷⁸

Identifying as part of a widely derided and disliked group can be exhausting and depressing, particularly when one is reminded that the group’s perceived crime is to care for nonhuman others. The notion of ‘performed virtue’ often attributed to veganism as an attempt to weaken it as a political stance is undermined by the consistent nature of veganism as a lifestyle. Erica Fudge posits that eating animals requires complex decision making from meat-eaters as to what does and does not constitute food:

Vegetarians, after all, have erected an absolute boundary between the edible and the inedible. For them all beings with animate life – snails, fish, humans, cows – are not to be eaten. This is clear and straightforward. It is the meat eaters who live with boundary confusion. They must continually make careful and complex decisions about where the boundary between the edible and the inedible exists. Humans cannot be eaten under any circumstances, the argument goes, but sheep can. Dogs, while not human, cannot be eaten, not because they do not taste nice, but because they are categorised differently from sheep: they are pets. Rabbits, however, can be

¹⁷⁷ Twine, p 626

¹⁷⁸ Twine, p 636

pets and meat (although it is unlikely in most cases that one animal exists in both categories simultaneously).¹⁷⁹

The definition of veganism, as an attempt to avoid the exploitation of animals where possible and practical, has an in-built explanation for inconsistency. According to this definition, one can be vegan and still eat animal products if it is impractical to avoid them. One might assume this kind of practicability is meant for extenuating circumstances, such as being on a lengthy plane journey where the ‘vegan’ option is egg-based, as has happened to me, rather than attending Christmas lunch at Grandma’s which may end up being tiresome and boring due to a lack of vegan options on offer and interminable questioning bordering on interrogation by some hostile, some well-meaning relatives. What about if one has an illness, such as my sister Catherine, who had cystic fibrosis and as such struggled to digest almost all food and thus was fed through a PEG tube for large portions of her life? If, as I have argued, veganism is not a diet, and is not confined only to considering animals who are bred for food, can people who cannot participate in a vegan diet not identify strongly with the ethos of veganism and make their own efforts, in whichever way they can? Should veganism exclude people who cannot adhere to vegan diets? If veganism was opened in this way, made more accessible, providing more opportunities for education, growth and not diet forms of activism, would it not follow that resulting innovation would support further accessibility and ease of veganism and thus encourage better outcomes for the more-than-human world? Catherine, an animal lover, would have much preferred that the liquid siphoned into her PEG tube not be based on animal products, yet at the time a plant-based liquid food that was digestible for those with cystic fibrosis digestive systems did not exist.

Considering how to be inclusive toward people like Catherine is not meant to weaken veganism as an ethical stance, nor ‘water down’ veganism as a political movement. Rather, consideration of the individual within any system is integral to reconfiguring it. Danielle Celermajer remembers her grandfather Isaac, a Jewish refugee who emigrated to Australia from Poland after the Second World War. Celermajer writes that Isaac’s life was oriented toward the lives of those he knew would succeed him, his grandchildren and their grandchildren down through the next seven generations. Celermajer reflects, ‘When I tried to look forward, to feel forward, what seemed most vital was access to fertile land and sources of clean water. And along with that, lifeways and understandings that would have those seven

¹⁷⁹ Fudge, p 18

generations feel at home in, delighted by, grateful for, and responsible to the earth and the other beings who supported and accompanied them.’¹⁸⁰ These themes are not just those of survival, which I feel I have tended towards in my own thinking, but themes of flourishing. People like Catherine must be included in any imagined future. All people, all animals, and all aspects of the environment must be included for any future to be meaningful.

This exegesis offers additional insight into my novel while also investigating the thematic concerns that underpin Anthropocene fiction as exemplified in Michelle de Kretser’s novels *The Life to Come* and *The Lost Dog*. In this exegesis I make the case that writers are increasingly attending to the apprehensions and possibilities brought about by anthropogenic climate change as a way of navigating and re-imagining a rapidly evolving world. De Kretser’s portrayal of characters like Pippa prompt reflection on the intersection of privilege and environmental responsibility and urge individual confrontation of complicity in the face of the climate crisis. Further, de Kretser’s thoughtful and authentic rendering of animal characters invites readers to re-examine their conception of the more-than-human world. Through this exploration, I also demonstrate how my own novel, *Small Life*, engages in a dialogue with the socio-political themes of the Anthropocene and thus, de Kretser’s novels. *Small Life* seeks to further the conversation surrounding individual responsibility and animal agency in the context of climate change. Ultimately, these literary endeavours provide avenues for confronting pressing global challenges and imagining pathways toward a more sustainable and equitable future.

I write these closing paragraphs sitting at Fisher Library during the hottest September on record. The air conditioning is fierce, so I am chilly, and it occurs to me that whatever is or will be thrown at us as a result of climate change will need to be withstood primarily by our bodies, the very part of us we have always considered secondary in our human value. We face a climate-changed present and a climate-changed future not as spiritual or intellectual phenomena, but as physical beings requiring the ability to physically withstand the challenges which we have in our arrogance created. We will need our bodies to withstand higher and lower temperatures, poor air and water quality caused by fires and floods, and less access to nutritious food among many other challenges. Our communities will be pushed further inland as the oceans rise, forced to abandon the places we have considered home. We will have to attempt to make new homes, perhaps underground, and adapt as animals have always done to

¹⁸⁰ Celermajer, Danielle, ‘Learning how to face our feared future,’ Religion and Ethics, ABC Online, 2 February 2021. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/danielle-celermajer-facing-our-feared-future/13113730>

new and different ways of living. As I have written this chapter, floods in Libya have killed at least 11 thousand people, while an entire generation of emperor penguin colonies in Western Antarctica have drowned or frozen to death due to the ice that usually supports them until they mature, having melted into the sea. Many will cringe at these two different terrible events being placed in the same paragraph, as though to mention animal devastation in the same breath as human devastation is tantamount to making human devastation meaningless. Yet the interrelation between human and animal devastations is the point of this thesis. We are caught here, humans and animals, ‘...fellow prisoners of the splendours and travails of the earth.’¹⁸¹ We too are bodies and bodies only when it comes to surviving the Anthropocene, and all we can do is work towards a future in which humans and animals can flourish.

I would expect four years of relentless deliberation about humans, animals and the environment to offer solid answers as to how to proceed. Instead, I am left as unsure of as I was in my first year of university, sitting in the Woolley Building, talking about Elizabeth Costello. Perhaps uncertainty, openness, curiosity, is the only way to proceed.

¹⁸¹ Beston, p 25

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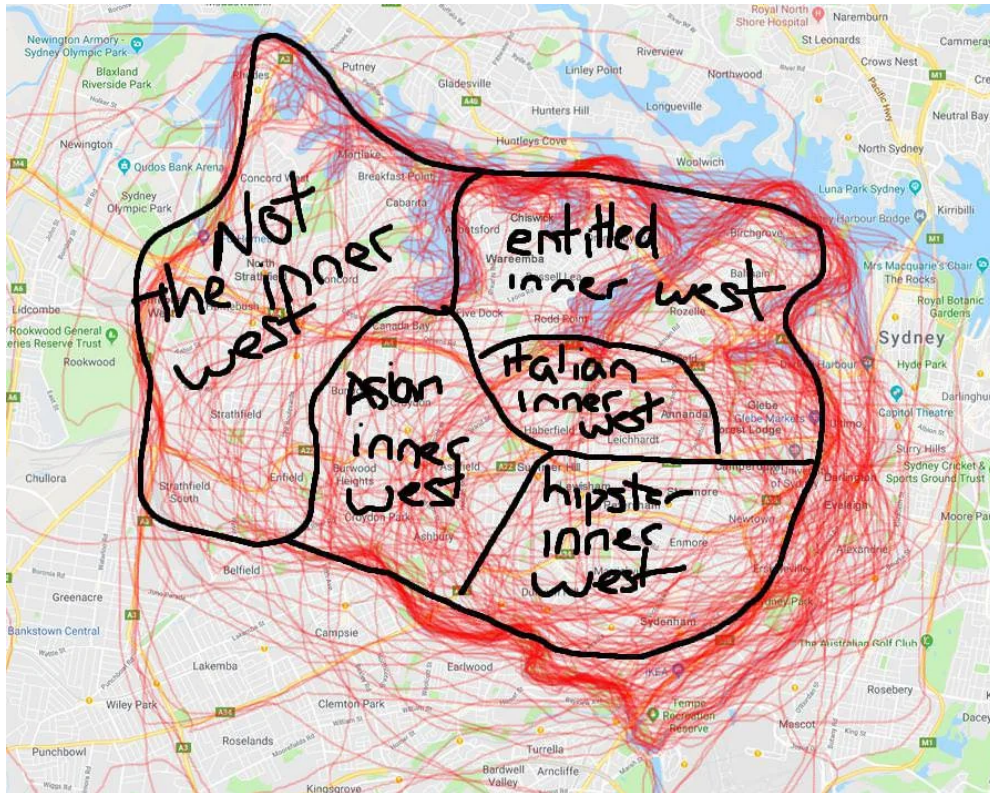
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Appendix

A)



https://www.reddit.com/r/sydney/comments/91fvtf/my_take_on_the_inner_west/

B)





updog
@uptowndogfunk



*someone starts having a heart
attack*

person: is anyone here a doctor

vegan: im a vegan

08/08/2015 06:35

269 RETWEETS 507 FAVORITES



**IF YOU ARE A VEGAN
WHO DOES CROSSFIT**

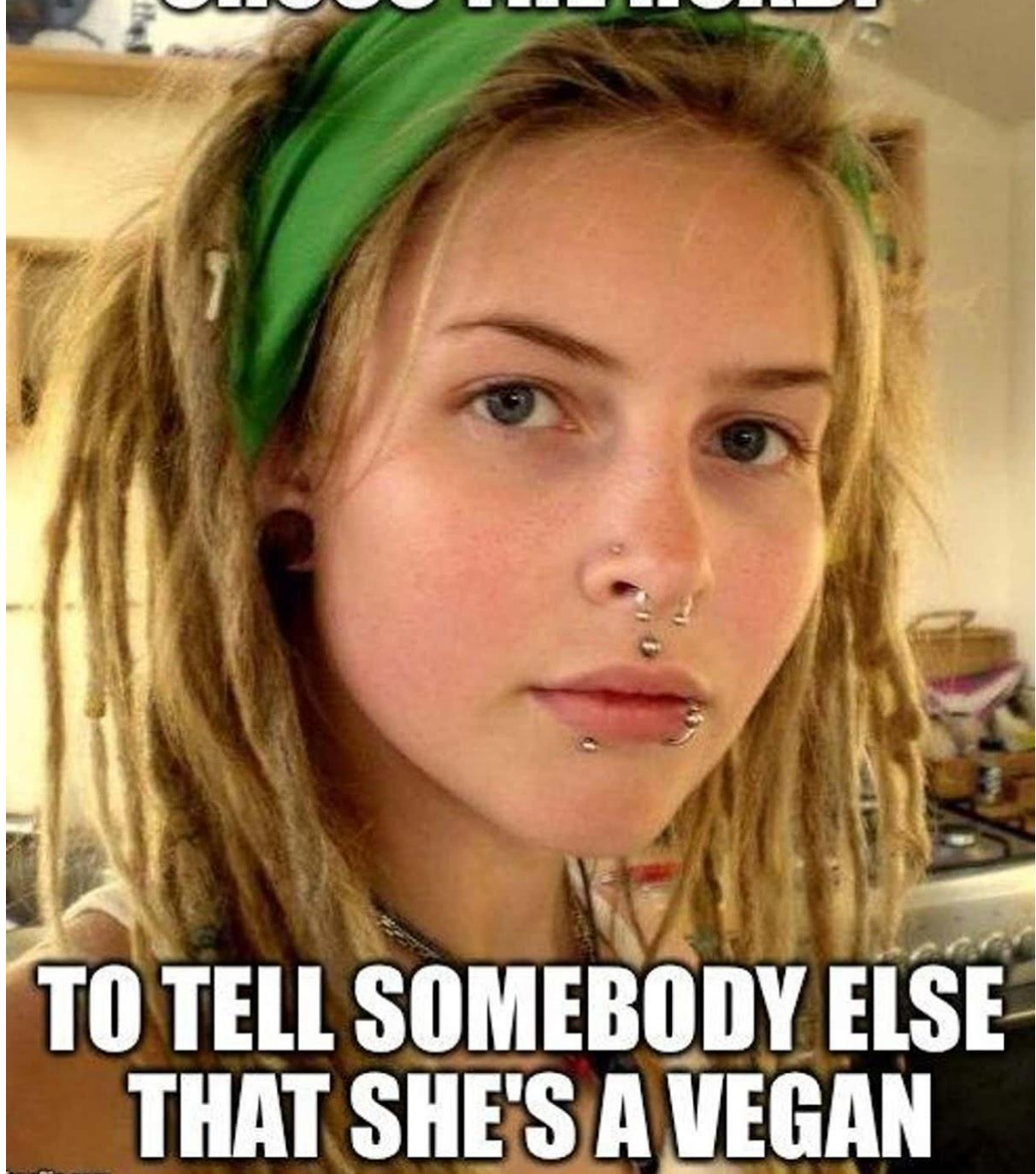


**WHAT DO YOU
TELL PEOPLE FIRST?**

when you're a vegan and haven't
told anyone in 8 minutes



**WHY DID THE VEGAN
CROSS THE ROAD?**



**TO TELL SOMEBODY ELSE
THAT SHE'S A VEGAN**

VEGANS BE LIKE:



**"IT TASTES JUST LIKE
A REAL HAMBURGER"**