

## EARTHQUAKE

He's said that being in an earthquake is a hard thing to forget. He's said other things too. He says that fluoride in tap water will eventually give you cancer. He says that he's been bumping into things too often, that he's forgotten the dimensions of his body. The truth is that my father, even as a young man, has never been in the best of health. Before he retired he was convinced that the ventilation in his office was making him sick. He'd come home in the evening accidentally spilling tissues from his jacket like he was afraid he'd lose his way back to work. He was always squinting and biting at his bottom lip with worry.

Now his problem is that his dog has run off. My sister and I drive him down to the print shop to have some flyers made. She really likes the dog. She told me, when we were driving over to my father's place, that the last time she visited he cleaned her windshield. He did such a poor job of it she was blinded by soap streaks as soon as the car faced into the sun. She insisted on driving us to the printers. I didn't think there was that much need for concern over our father.

Picture both my parents when they were younger. Whenever they walked together my mother was always a few steps in front; my father always followed her, sometimes kicking his shoes by accident, squinting and biting his lip and looking around at everything like he was afraid a bird might swoop him from any direction. This was how they always walked together. I like to think that in his old age he's kind of mellowed out.

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In the car park, standing beside the car, my father says, 'Can you believe how many pockets these shorts have?' and I look down at them. They're grey cargo shorts.

'Are they new?' my sister says.

'I didn't notice when I bought them,' he says. 'I've never owned anything with so many pockets, what am I supposed to do with them all? I don't own enough stuff to fill them.'

My sister and I bought the dog for my father after our mother died. It's a dog from the pound, tan coloured and mostly muscle. It has a sharp little tail that whips against everything and

my father loves it more than any of his friends and certain family members. It's always been pretty energetic but this is the first time in three years that it's run off.

'You can keep gum in there, Dad,' my sister says. 'Or keys.'

The printer's in a shopping centre down the hill from my father's apartment. There's a teenager on the footpath out front drinking water from a large plastic bottle made for orange juice. As we walk past he pours some of it over his head, then shakes his head around.

'Get a load of that,' my father says.

The flyer my father typed out on his computer has a picture of his dog on it, sitting upright on his sofa. He called the dog Michael, which I have never thought as a good name for a dog, and I feel a bit stupid about it while the girl behind the counter prints the flyers out, and all the time she's seeing over and over at least fifty times, *Missing dog, Michael* along with my father's phone number. He's put down a reward of one hundred dollars, but he thinks that once someone turns up and sees how old he is, he can talk them down to at least half of that.

My father is saying to my sister that some cats will jump out of the windows of high-rise apartments because of boredom. He says he had a friend whose dog hung itself while leashed to a bed frame. There was an elephant on a train once, in the early nineteen hundreds, which was put on a carriage as a spectacle, and it managed to break free and jump from the moving train. The elephant had the forethought to do this as the train crossed a river, so it survived. He says that dogs are very perceptive, that they never trust any kind of criminal, that they can tell if earthquakes are coming, or cyclones. We were in another country when the earthquake struck us, but still.

My sister says that he shouldn't be so morbid.

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The last thing we need to do is stick the flyers up around the neighbourhood. I'm taping one to a telegraph pole and my father winds down his window and calls out to me to put it up higher. I'm not getting it at eye level. We've stopped in front of a community centre and I can hear someone playing a piano. When we drive on to the next place, down near a service station, my father asks me to hand him the sticky tape and a flyer.

'I'm not criticising you,' he says, taking them from me. 'I just think I should be the one doing this from now on.'

He gets out of the car. There's still a large stack of flyers on the back seat beside me. I can see now that we printed far too many – there aren't enough poles around – and I wonder if my father will be hurt if we end up dumping them in a bin. Probably he'll keep them, especially if Michael never comes back. It's bright outside and airless. Cars are both pulling in to the service station and driving out, and my father is struggling with the sticky tape in wild gestures, like a person who's walked into a spiderweb. I'm watching him do this and my sister is watching him too and neither of us is saying or doing anything.

The earthquake came in the middle of the night. We were staying in a cabin in a small town in California. It was the off-season, so most of the other cabins were empty. I don't remember much of it, except waking to the sound of plates rattling and my father calling out for us to stay calm. He made each of us – me, my sister, my mother – stand in a doorway. There were enough leading into the living room for each of us and we all stood there, looking at each other across the room with our hands on the doorframes. My mother looked terrified, but my father looked oddly serene. He had his jaw clenched and was breathing steadily, staring at the light bulb hanging from the ceiling while it swung back and forth.

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## AQUARIUM

What had happened was that I had saved a man named George Avery from drowning. He was in his fifties, he had grey hair. We'd sat together on the shoreline afterwards, each of us out of breath, but him more so than me. He wasn't in the best of shape. The waves had been shaping the sand around our bodies. I'd had water running down my face from my hair and occasionally a drop would find the corner of my mouth. Avery had put his hand on my shoulder and I'd just nodded back at him. My sneakers had been a little way up the beach, towards the softer sand, but my socks, which I'd kicked off closer to the water, were long gone. I regretted this. They were one of the few good pairs I owned.

Avery had called an ambulance from the beach and they'd turned up and checked him out. I had been told to wait around. I hadn't really wanted to make a big deal of things. I had a blanket draped over my shoulders, which I'd worried made me look helpless. A news team had turned up to interview us. I hadn't wanted to be interviewed and in the end I'd told the reporter that anyone else would have done the same thing.

Avery hadn't let me leave until he'd gotten my phone number and embraced me in front of everyone.

The day after this had all hit the news I'd received a lot of phone calls from my friends and family. They'd all congratulated me and told me what a good job I'd done. It'd felt like my birthday and that had made me uneasy. I'd really just been waiting for my ex-wife Violet to call me. I'd been restless. I'd had trouble even reading a magazine.

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After a few days of waiting I gave in one morning and called her, while the sun shone big and bright against the white wall of my neighbour's house and reflected into my kitchen. I was thankful that she answered instead of Bill Casey, her lover, because I felt bad for ringing her so frequently.

‘Did you see the news the other day?’ I said.

‘What?’ she said.

‘Did you see the news the other day? I stopped a man from drowning.’

‘Could this maybe wait? I’m trying to get Claudia to eat cereal.’ She said, pronounced ‘Claudia’ in a stiff tone because she’d never wanted to name her after my grandmother. Mostly we called her Claud. ‘You know the mornings are always a hectic time for us.’

‘Put Claud on then. So I can tell her what her daddy did.’

‘No, I don’t want to have to explain to her what drowning is, we’re late.’

‘It’ll only take a minute.’

‘Call back later. I can’t hold the phone and a spoon while also trying to get Claud to eat her cornflakes.’

‘But Violet, come on. I saved somebody’s life.’

‘Good, I’m glad,’ Violet said. ‘It sounds like a very noble thing to do.’

I considered hanging up on her, but I knew this wouldn’t be helpful. Instead I went quiet and looked out of my kitchen window. My neighbour had a vine creeping into his foundations, which I would probably have told him about if I’d known him better. I hadn’t been his neighbour for very long.

‘I was thinking I might come over,’ I said. ‘We can celebrate.’

‘Not tonight,’ my ex-wife said. ‘If you’re still coming to Claud’s birthday we can see you then.’

‘Of course.’

‘Good. Look I have to go,’ Violet said, and hung up before I could say anything else.

I stood with the phone next to my ear, listening to the quiet on the phone line. After I’d left my wife she’d taken up with my friend Bill Casey. I still got on with Bill okay; it seemed us being friends was a hard thing to forget, even if he did things that I’d always found opposite to my own character, like taking wheat supplements instead of paracetamol and using recipes printed on the labels of food cans.

He usually had his eyes half-open when he spoke to you and I had always considered him to be a bit of a moron, but I guess he sure showed me.

I put the phone back in its receiver and went and brushed my teeth, which I do sometimes when I’m agitated. I painted houses for a living. I’d gone to university for about a year and a

half, doing design studies, but that hadn't really offered me much and now I painted houses. I'd even started to paint my own house, the one Violet and I had lived in together, and I'd managed to get a pretty good base coat done before I'd left.

When we were married Violet and I hadn't really fought much and some of our friends, both mine and hers, had told us that this was a problem, as it would lead to a lot of unresolved anger. I wasn't so sure about that. The best way I could ever explain it was that we'd lived together for a while and married and had a daughter and then we'd both moved on to something else. For me I just wasn't too clear what that was.

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George Avery had been calling my house ever since I'd saved him. At first I just let the calls go to my machine, but he rang pretty frequently and I kept picturing him when we were sitting on the shoreline out of breath. He'd had these big wet eyes like a sick dog. My house was big enough, but it was close to an airport and when I finally called him back I was sitting on my veranda drinking beer and watching the white undersides of 747s descending and coming so low to my roof that the windows rattled.

When he answered I said my whole name, formally.

'I was hoping you'd call,' he said. 'I took the week off work and I thought I might have called you too much.'

'It's fine, George,' I said.

'I'm glad you think so.'

'It's good to hear that you're okay.'

'Well I'm not sure if I'm completely okay. I wake up every morning and it's like I'm a newborn. Sometimes it feels like I'm learning how to walk again.'

I sipped my beer. It was getting to the dark half of the afternoon. Mosquitoes were out and I tried to shake them off my legs and arms, which didn't do much. My hands were taken up by the beer bottle and the phone.

'Maybe you should talk to someone about that,' I said.

'I'm talking to you about it right now.'

'I mean someone professional.'

‘My wife’s been saying the same thing. She worries too much. If it’s not this then it’s the environment or the war or our son being in a different city. There’s always something worrying her.’

‘Maybe she’s right on this one,’ I said.

‘Yeah,’ George Avery said, in a way that meant he didn’t agree.

A plane flew overhead and the house shook. The cups rattled in the kitchen. I looked up at its dark shape, the blinking lights on the ends of the wings. Whenever I pictured the total annihilation of my life, I now I thought of an aeroplane flying into my house like a dart and wiping me out. George Avery was speaking to me.

‘I’m sorry, can you say that again?’ I said. ‘I’m under a flight path.’

‘I was talking about when we can get you over here for dinner. My wife is really itching to meet you,’ he said, and then gave me his address, which wasn’t too far from my house.

‘Soon, soon. I’ll have dinner with you soon George,’ I said, though I had no intention of ever seeing him again. ‘You’re definitely in my thoughts.’

‘She wants to make you roast lamb,’ George Avery said. ‘She’s looking to give you the royal treatment, don’t you worry about that.’

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The year Claud was born I would still obsess over some of the men Violet had been with before me. We stayed up in bed one night, listing our previous lovers. I’d been with a few women before her, not many, but one of them had ripped the wipers off my Ford during an argument and Violet and I laughed about that. Then she told me about hers, and we were both about the same number, but then she said that one of them was currently in jail and I didn’t find it that funny anymore.

‘What for?’ I said.

‘Assault. He beat up his boss once, in a car park.’

‘What?’ I said. ‘When is he getting out?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Violet said. ‘I guess it wasn’t really his boss at the time, because he’d been fired. So he beat him up a couple of days after that. He was waiting for the guy after he got off work.’

I was concerned that Violet was saying this like it wasn’t a big deal. She just looked at me and shrugged.

I said, 'How did you even meet him?'

'He was my high-school boyfriend. He was a few years older than me. I don't see why you're worried about it. He was in jail by the time I'd graduated and I haven't seen him since.'

I made a noise, a kind of hum, to try and show Violet that I was okay with it. Then, after she'd fallen asleep, I went into Claud's bedroom and watched her sleeping peacefully in her crib.

Violet had grown up on a farm and I always thought that this had produced a coldness in her, which I occasionally brushed up against. When she was a teenager her daddy would take her out in a helicopter and she killed wild pigs with a shotgun while standing on the landing skids. From all accounts she was a pretty crack shot.

I'd only ever been out to see her folks once.

Still, for a time our life together was a pleasurable one. Most nights in bed we'd go at each other pretty good. Even when things weren't so great, once we hit the bedroom it was like we were both suddenly awake. I'd stroke her body and pull at things and bite them. Violet would be into it too. In these instances I could see how she'd ended up with some of the men she had, as we moved around each other's bodies, like one of us was a planet and the other a sun.

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The morning of Claud's birthday I drove over to Violet's house with a goldfish in a clear plastic ice-cream container. The container was filled with water. I tried to drive carefully. The goldfish was bright orange and swam around in circles and sometimes stayed motionless when I took corners. The water shifted around it instead. The man at the pet store had told me it was a female.

I'd made a birthday card for Claud. On the front of it I'd drawn myself down on one knee, holding out the goldfish in the ice-cream container to Claud. She was smiling. I'd drawn in Violet and Bill too, to show that I was okay with things, though I couldn't bring myself to draw them touching each other. They were standing in the background, looking at us and smiling, and I had maybe slimmed my waistline a bit. Everything else I felt to be accurate.

There were a few cars out in front of the house. I hadn't thought that there'd be other people here. I parked down the street and walked to the house, carrying the goldfish in one hand and the card in the other. Balloons had been tied with ribbon to the letterbox. They weren't helium-filled and they were hanging limply against the letterbox or slid across the ground in the breeze as far as their tethers would allow.

The front door was open. I noticed that the outside of the house had finished being painted and it was a pretty good job, except on the trimmings where, when you came close, you could still make out the brushstrokes. I walked through the TV room to the kitchen, where a couple was standing. I'd never met them before. They were eating olives from a small white bowl on the kitchen counter.

'Hello,' the man said. 'Tony, right?'

'Yes,' I said, stupidly, since my name wasn't Tony.

'There's been a bit of an accident,' the woman said. 'One of the kids knocked the aquarium over in the other room. Violet's in there now cleaning up.'

'Oh. Thank you,' I said.

I headed towards the dining room. Violet was in there, squeezing a mop into its bucket. She was dressed like a cowgirl, with a vest and hat and even a gun holster and pistol. She looked good. There were towels all over the floor, all of them darkened with water.

'Hey,' she said when she saw me. 'You missed all the excitement.'

'Someone knocked over the aquarium?'

'I managed to get all the glass, I think,' she said, looking around the room. 'There's just water everywhere now.'

Around the room were drink glasses and plastic containers and vases with fish in them. Two cognac glasses on the bookcase each held a cherry barb. They were regarding each other through the glass. Claud's lunchbox was on the table and I leaned over to see four zebrafish swimming around inside it.

'I had to put the two catfish in the bath. Claud's upstairs, she's had a bit of a tantrum. Bill's up there with her now. None of the fish died, so that's a plus.'

'I could go and talk to her,' I said.

'Sure, but maybe give them a few minutes,' Violet said. She looked down at the ice-cream container in my hand. 'And also maybe don't give her that yet. Here, I'll go put it in the study until later.'

She took the goldfish from me and walked away. When it had been me and Violet and Claud there hadn't been a study. I went into the kitchen and opened the freezer, took out what I guessed were a couple of frozen hamburgers and threw them up onto the top shelf of the pantry, out of sight. I opened the fridge, took a beer and walked out into the backyard.

There were three women sitting at the outdoor table and a whole bunch of children running around on the lawn. I didn't know anybody there and all the children were wearing costumes. They were dressed mostly as animals, though there was a boy whose costume only extended to a fireman's hat. I sat down at the table with the women and introduced myself as Claud's father. There wasn't any sign of the couple who'd greeted me in the kitchen. After making brief introductions the women went back to their conversation. I drank in small sips. A gazebo had been built in the back corner of the yard. That was new. The pine looked fresh and naked, by which I mean it was un-varnished.

There was a hole in the other corner of the yard. To alert people to its presence, two bright orange witches hats had been placed on either side of it. I thought this gave the hole an official appearance.

'What is that?' I said to the women, nodding at the hole. 'In the corner of the yard?'

'A gazebo,' one of them said without looking.

Before I could explain what I meant, Bill Casey walked out of the house and came over and hit me on the shoulder by way of a greeting. He was quite strong. He was dressed as a cowboy, but it took me a few moments to realise that because he wasn't wearing a hat.

'Hello Bill,' I said.

'I suppose you heard we had a slight incident,' Bill said, 'but I think it's over now.'

'I missed it,' I said.

'It was quite amazing. There was water everywhere. I couldn't believe the tank could actually have that much water inside it. I guess it looks like less when it's in a tank than when it's on a floor.'

I nodded in agreement. Bill had a beard and it suited him. He'd had it ever since we'd met at university and when he smiled he looked just like he always had. I imagined him having had the beard through out his whole life, even as a baby. I got up from the table and went and stood with him. I was pretty sure we'd still have been friends with each other even if he hadn't taken up with my wife, though I had to admit that sometimes I found it hard to picture a different life than the one I was already leading.

'Someone finished painting the house at least,' I said.

'And the gazebo's new. After Vi and I built it, other people on our street started putting them in their yards too.'

‘It looks like a pretty good job.’

‘We were going to call you to help with the painting, but then we didn’t think we should bother you with it.’

‘It looks good.’

‘Maybe we could get some help when we do the inside. The study needs painting.’

Violet came out, with Claud in front of her. Claud’s eyes were still red from crying and she was wearing a giraffe mask that had been pushed up on top of her head, so it stared up at the sky. When she saw me she ran over and hugged me around my legs, which I was thankful for. I looked down at the giraffe’s face staring back up at me and Claud’s blonde hair made it look like it had completely white eyes.

‘Happy birthday,’ I said.

‘Thanks Daddy,’ she said. ‘Lucien knocked over the fish, but none of them died.’

‘I heard,’ I said.

‘Violet mentioned you were on the news,’ Bill said.

‘He stopped someone from drowning,’ Violet said. ‘Claud, do you remember me telling you about Daddy on the news?’

Claud said, ‘Yeah,’ then let go of my legs and ran over to join the other children.

‘She’s been excited all day,’ Violet said.

‘What’s with the hole in the ground?’ I said.

‘We’re putting in a pond,’ Violet said. ‘Or at least that’s the plan.’

‘I need to go out and get a new fish tank,’ Bill Casey said. He turned to me, ‘You want to come along or are you right here?’

I looked at Claud playing with the other kids, and Violet going and joining the other women at the table. She and Bill were the only adults dressed in costume.

‘I think I’ll be fine here,’ I said.

‘Sure, have another drink. I’ll be back in fifteen.’

Deep down I’d always thought that Bill was a better person than me, even if he was a little dumb. When we were in our early twenties we’d come across a dead whale down on the beach. Bill wanted to do something for it. The whale was a dark grey colour and smelled like sea-salt. It wasn’t a huge one, but it was still about as big as a small boat and obviously dead. Its eyes were half-open.

‘Help me push it back into the water,’ Bill said.

‘Leave it, it’s dead,’ I said, but he didn’t, and when he’d tried to push it with the full weight of his body from behind its left flipper, his shoes dug into the ground. The whale didn’t move an inch. People stopped to watch us.

Bill said to me, and maybe to everyone else too, ‘I know it’s dead, all right, okay? Jesus, I just want to see if I can move it.’

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I sat with my ex-wife and listened to the women talk. It didn’t take long before Violet told everyone at the table that I’d recently saved a man from drowning and I closed my eyes and nodded to try to show that it wasn’t a big deal. Thankfully the women didn’t ask me any questions about it and went back to their conversation about the coming school play and what roles their children had been cast in. I felt a bit out of step and stared off into space.

Eventually Violet said to me, ‘You know I helped build that gazebo?’

‘Yeah? And you also seem to have a study now?’ I said.

‘It was your old supply room. We pulled the cabinets out and now the walls look so bare. Did you check out the gazebo?’

‘I was telling Bill that it looks like a good job.’

‘Did you stand on it? It’s sturdy.’

‘Not yet.’

Violet stared at me and didn’t say anything else. I put down my beer, stood up from the table and went and climbed the gazebo’s two stairs. I looked at the roof, which had been made well, with metal joints where the beams met. I bounced up and down on the floor a few times, testing its sturdiness. It was a bright day and the sun was out. I looked over the fence, into both of the neighbours’ backyards. I couldn’t see any other gazebos. The four women at the table were all watching me.

‘Solid, right?’ Violet called out.

‘Yeah,’ I called back.

When I walked back down onto the lawn I decided to take a look at the unfinished pond. It was large and kidney-shaped and I could smell the richness of the soil, like the air before a rainstorm. It was about a metre deep. There was no sign of where the dirt had been ferried off to, there was just the brown dirt of the hole and the green grass of the lawn at its edge.

I wanted to see if I could clear it. I jumped from a standing position – I didn't feel I needed a run-up – and messed up the landing. The toes of my shoes made it to the grass on the other side but my heels landed on nothing and I toppled backwards into the hole. I heard the women at the table go 'Whoa' like they were at a football game. I fit quite snugly into the hole, and I looked straight up at the blue, cloudless sky. For a second down there I found it comforting, I didn't have to think about George Avery or Bill in his cowboy outfit off buying another aquarium.

Eventually Violet came to the edge of the hole, just above my head, and looked down at me. I could see up her cowgirl skirt to her white underwear. Two of the kids were standing beside her. One wearing a wolf mask, the other an elephant.

'What on earth did you do that for?' my ex-wife said.

'I don't know, thought I could make it,' I said.

The dirt at the bottom of the hole was slightly damp, I could feel it on my hands and arms. Violet walked around the other side, down to where my feet were, and leaned over and put her hand out.

'Here,' she said. 'Come get cleaned up.'

In the bathroom I washed my face and arms. I had dirt in my hair. Violet was standing beside me, watching me in the mirror. The front of my shirt was dirty. I looked at the two catfish in the bathtub, swimming up and down, black with white speckles. They looked unhurt and happy to roam lazily back and forth in the clear water.

'I found you a towel,' Violet said, placing it beside the sink. 'Are you hurt?'

'My back hurts a little, but I'll live.'

She reached out and touched my shoulder. I ran cold tap water into the cupped palm of my hand.

'Thanks for coming,' Violet said. 'I know you've been having a hard time lately.'

I didn't exactly know what she meant, but I nodded.

'All that business about drowning too, it sounds horrible.'

'It wasn't so bad.'

'Still.'

I thought of George Avery's face, out of breath, his red-rimmed eyes. When I'd first seen him out in the water I'd thought, What kind of an idiot goes into an ocean like that? It had been a

cold day and the sky above had been dark with clouds. It had taken me a minute to realise he was in trouble.

‘He grabbed onto me when I swam out to him, that man I saved,’ I said. ‘He looked insane. The waves kept hitting us, getting in our mouths and our eyes. The problem was, after he grabbed me, he started pulling me under so I kicked him as hard as I could. I got him in the stomach and he let go. I really was ready to leave him out there. I’ve been thinking about that a lot, how I’d made up my mind to leave him.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Violet said softly. ‘You got him back to shore in the end.’

‘There was no one else around,’ I said. ‘Nobody saw us.’

There was a pause and Violet leaned over and kissed me once on the cheek. She said that she’d better be getting back downstairs. I nodded. Right then I could have said to her that I still loved her, even though I knew it was only true for about a second.

After Violet left I wiped at my face with the towel and walked back downstairs. Instead of joining everyone again in the yard I went into the new study. There was a desk in here now, and instead of the cabinets on the walls there were bookcases filled with books. I thought I could still smell the paint cans I used to store in here, but maybe I was glumly imagining it, the way amputees sometimes feel their missing limbs. Claud’s goldfish was sitting on the desk, next to a lamp, in its ice-cream tub. Compared to the other fish it looked kind of dull. The lid was sitting underneath the container and I put it back on and carried the goldfish out of the house.

Most of the time when I’m at my worst I’ll picture how I want to die. I’ve never shared this with anyone, but when it happens I want it to be like in one of those old paintings, where I’m old and white-haired. I’m sitting up in bed and sunlight is coming through the window, illuminating me. The sunlight is supposed to be God, or maybe even heaven, and there are people in the room standing all around me, my family and close friends, and they’re looking sad and holding their hands to their faces because they can’t bring themselves to stop crying.

## SNOW ON THE MOUNTAIN

Caroline was sitting in the passenger seat while Eliot sat behind the wheel, trying to get the engine to start. She tried not to show it but she was freezing; her hands were pressed between her legs for warmth. She was wearing a scarf and a large coat because she knew the heating in Eliot's car didn't work. The coat had belonged to her ex-boyfriend Tom, but when he moved out he left it behind, sitting in his side of the closet, flanked by empty coat hangers. Caroline liked the way the coat was too big for her. When she stood the sleeves hid her hands.

'It just needs to warm up,' Eliot said. 'Give it a minute.'

Eliot lived with his parents across the street. Caroline had asked to borrow his car because she didn't own one anymore. It was early and there was frost on Eliot's well-kept lawn. She could see their footprints on the frozen blades of grass. Tom had always made a big deal about keeping their own front garden in check and now, in his absence, Caroline had let things go.

'The engine sounds broken,' she said.

'It's fine,' he said. 'It just wants the attention.'

Apart from the sound of the car engine the street was quiet and still. Eliot was eighteen and had bought the car, an old Volvo station wagon, from his uncle. Caroline pressed her hands together tightly, then released them to rub at her nose. The engine coughed and started.

'Okay, my dear,' Eliot said. 'Are you ready to go on our mystical adventure?' He said it in a flat voice and Caroline couldn't tell if he was being serious.

She smiled at him. She was thirty-five and often wondered if Eliot was her closest friend. She'd once mistakenly said this to Tom and he had nodded in a way that had made her feel naive. It had been the same when he'd left her: Tom had presented the information like it was the most simple thing in the world, and that she should have known it was coming all along. Caroline had nodded because she'd felt like she ought to agree, even though she hadn't been completely sure what was happening.

When Tom had left he'd said, casually, 'See you around.'

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Eliot drove through the empty streets of West Hobart. In the past Caroline had ordered firewood from an old man and his grandson, both rake thin and surprisingly strong, who would turn up and throw logs to each other as if they were fruit, but this winter she'd wanted to try and save the money. She'd asked to borrow Eliot's car to collect the wood herself. She'd been trying to cut back on expenses. Last winter she and Tom had burned through at least five tonnes of wood, but she felt she could reduce that, at least for a little while. As soon as the temperature began to drop Tom would start angrily pacing around their living room, rubbing at his arms like he'd been attacked and grimacing. The way she remembered him, he only ever smiled when he was upset. When Eliot had heard Caroline's plan he'd insisted on coming along.

None of the stores they passed were open. Eliot was wearing jeans and a wool jumper and Caroline wondered if he was cold too. He was wearing a bright red woollen hat. Eliot looked at her for a second before turning his attention back to the road.

'My grandmother knitted it for me,' he said.

'It suits you.'

'Did I ever tell you that when I was around four I was with my grandmother in her car. I think we were driving across the bridge and we hit a patch of ice. The car spun around in a complete circle. She never told anyone else in my family about it.'

'Have you told them?' Caroline said.

'No, she swore me to secrecy.'

The tape player in the car was broken and a cassette was stuck inside it. Now and then Eliot pulled at it absent-mindedly when, Caroline liked to imagine, he was deep in thought. It was endearing. She wondered if she would still spend time with Eliot if he didn't live across the street.

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It wasn't long before they'd left the city and were in the national park that headed up the mountain. When they didn't talk Caroline felt comfortable, like they were a married couple. It wasn't like her house where, in Tom's absence, the silence was like someone holding their breath. She wondered if she was in love with Eliot.

'You know,' he said, 'any wood up here is probably going to be damp.'

‘That’s true,’ she said.

‘Maybe we should have tried the beach instead. Driftwood burns pretty well, that’s all we ever use when we’re camping.’

Caroline shrugged, but wasn’t sure if her movements were visible under the coat. The road climbed steadily past small trees and rocks. There was snow, she knew, towards the top of the mountain. She’d seen it from her house.

‘I brought a thermos of tea,’ Eliot said. ‘When we pull over I’ll pour you some.’

They drove past a lookout and for a second Caroline saw the city and, hanging above it, thick grey clouds before they were obscured by the tree line.

‘Am I weird?’ Eliot said.

‘For bringing a thermos?’ she said.

‘Maybe. I don’t know, like more in general.’

‘No,’ Caroline said. ‘I don’t think you are.’

The first time Caroline had met Eliot he’d helped her hang a painting in her living room. Tom had been at work. Eliot had made slight adjustments at the wall while she stood back from it, telling him when it looked straight. After they’d finished with the painting Eliot had looked over the living room and said, ‘Now let’s move the furniture around,’ and once they had, moving the table and chairs and couch, the room had looked larger and better.

Eliot swerved dramatically around a line of four cyclists and into the other lane, even though he didn’t have to. He always drove erratically, over the speed limit, taking corners wildly. Even so, Caroline felt safe with him behind the wheel.

‘We should stop around here,’ he said.

‘Let’s see the snow first,’ she said. ‘We can always come back.’

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They pulled over into first clearing where Caroline spotted snow. They were close to the top of the mountain. The snow wasn’t very thick; rocks and the leaves of small shrubs poked through it. They got out of the car. Outside it was quiet. Eliot opened the car’s rear door, leaned inside and pulled out a thermos and two mugs.

‘I forgot the milk,’ he said.

‘Black tea is fine,’ she said.

‘And I know the lid turns into a cup, but I prefer a mug.’

Caroline was wearing tennis shoes and so was Eliot. When she stood her coat came down to below her knees. Eliot put the two mugs on the bonnet of the car and poured them each a cup of tea. Caroline picked hers up and held it between her hands. Steam curled from it.

‘I used to bike ride up here,’ Eliot said, looking around. ‘When I was younger. I don’t know why I stopped.’

Caroline nodded. They were in a clearing about the size of a swimming pool, with a path leading off at the far end of it. The snow on the ground had settled in patches, and a small stream of water running down beside the road. Eliot put his mug back down on the bonnet and walked into the clearing. He walked carefully.

‘I don’t want to disturb it, you know what I mean?’ he said. ‘Ninjas used to walk across sheafs of rice paper without cracking them, as a test.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ Caroline said. It sometimes worried her to remember how young Eliot was. She leaned against the car. A breeze stirred the trees and it felt cold against her face. She shivered and glanced at the sky. She remembered driving near here with Tom once and anxiously watching clouds coming over the peak of the mountain, thick and grey and carrying snow. They’d had chains in the boot if they needed them. She’d asked Tom to drive more carefully, but he’d told her that they needed to beat the snowstorm and didn’t slow down.

‘Otherwise we’ll be up here all night,’ he’d said. ‘Can you just let me drive?’

‘I just wish you’d take me more seriously,’ Caroline had said.

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Eliot was at the end of the clearing picking up logs and inspecting them, or flipping them over with the toe of his shoe. Caroline walked over.

‘Most of these are too damp to burn,’ he said. ‘We shouldn’t have waited this far into winter to do this.’

‘After here we can try somewhere else,’ Caroline said.

They walked to the edge of the clearing, but the snow was no thicker. She wanted it to be white everywhere, and deep enough to come up to their knees as they trudged through it. Eliot coughed and she noticed for the first time that he was shivering.

‘You’re cold,’ she said. ‘Take my coat.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ he said and crossed his arms. ‘You lose most of your heat from your head anyway. I read about it.’

‘Do you want to go back to the car?’

‘No, but we should walk for a bit.’

They walked out of the clearing and down the path that led away from the road. Caroline followed Eliot’s lead and walked through the thin layer of snow carefully, with her arms outstretched a little for balance.

After they’d walked for about a minute Eliot said, ‘Look,’ and pointed at something with his foot. He had his hands in his pockets.

Just off the path there was a small grey lump. Eliot walked over and Caroline followed, a few steps behind. When she came close enough she saw that it was a dead pigeon, lying facedown in the snow.

‘It probably froze to death,’ Eliot said. ‘They’re not supposed to be up this high this time of year.’

‘Maybe it got lost,’ Caroline said.

‘Maybe.’

Eliot took off his hat and held it between his hands. Caroline leaned forward, with her hands on her knees, to look at the bird more closely. There was no blood in the snow or even any misplaced feathers. The pigeon’s eyes were closed and peaceful. One wing was splayed out as though it was greeting someone.

‘Poor thing,’ Caroline said.

‘I’ve heard freezing to death is like going to sleep,’ Eliot said. ‘Unless I’m thinking of drowning.’

‘Maybe they’re the same.’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I mean how can they tell anyway?’

Caroline wondered if they should bury it, but then thought it would be a stupid thing to suggest. She considered covering the body with something, leaves or a branch, but decided to leave it as it was. It was starting to snow lightly. A breeze moved like a wave through the leaves above them.

‘We should head back in case it really starts to snow,’ she said.

‘I think it’ll be all right,’ Eliot said.

Caroline started to head back towards the car when she stepped awkwardly on a round stone which rolled out from underneath her. She fell silently and put her hands up to guard her face. She crumpled to the ground and felt a sharp burn of pain in her left ankle.

‘I’m fine,’ she said immediately. ‘I’m okay.’

‘Are you sure?’ Eliot said. ‘Is your head all right?’

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Help me up.’

When she pushed herself off the ground her hand was caught in the sharp leaves of a shrub. Eliot helped her stand and propped her up. They were suddenly close and his body was surprisingly smaller than she’d thought. It felt like he could be folded up as easily as paper.

‘Try and walk on it,’ Eliot said.

She carefully put weight on her left foot and again felt a jolt of pain. She couldn’t help but make a noise, a strange kind of gurgle. She felt embarrassed.

‘I think it’s sprained,’ she said quickly.

‘Just stay off it for now,’ Eliot said.

She hadn’t smoked for years but right then, surrounded by falling snow, she wanted a cigarette. She wanted the smoke to cloud out from her mouth and lift into the air. Eliot smelled like damp wool mixed with basil.

They walked back to the car slowly. Caroline leaning heavily on Eliot. Now and then her foot bumped against the ground or Eliot’s leg, and when this happened she tried to stay silent, though she couldn’t help inhaling loudly.

‘Sorry,’ Eliot said, each time.

‘For what?’ she said.

He didn’t say anything else. When they got to the car she leaned against it while Eliot opened the passenger door. She sat down sideways on the seat, so her legs pointed out of the car.

‘Let me check it for a second,’ he said, leaning down and untying her shoe. He placed it on the passenger side floor and cupped her ankle with his hands.

Caroline was wearing tights and felt Eliot press down lightly on her leg, then again and again in different places

‘Does any of this hurt?’ he said.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Maybe a little.’

His hands were soft and he moved them carefully, frowning while he worked. Outside it was snowing more; flakes were landing on the windshield, sticking for a moment, and then melting and running down the glass.

‘I think it’s just a sprain,’ he said. ‘If you want I can drive you to a doctor.’

‘I’ll be all right,’ she said.

‘We should drive down the mountain a bit though. There’ll be wood down there that you can actually burn, not all this damp stuff.’

‘I should probably stay off my foot,’ she said. ‘Let’s just go back.’

‘I’ll get the wood, I don’t mind,’ he said. ‘It won’t take that long to fill up the boot anyway.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘What difference does it make? I’m here now anyway.’

Caroline nodded. She was grateful but she also wanted to go home where, instead of a fire, she’d just cover herself with blankets. She’d wear more clothes. She pictured each empty room of her house as if she was photographing it for a real estate advertisement. Each angle trying to hide how unattractive the place was. It made her unhappy. She thought that maybe she should get a cat.

‘All right let’s go,’ she said.

Eliot was still bent down on one knee, holding her ankle. When Caroline swivelled back into the seat, he held her leg for her as she moved. Eliot reached out and, for a second, Caroline thought he was going to stroke the side of her face. He pulled a twig from her hair. It had a small leaf attached to it.

‘Thanks,’ she said.

Eliot closed her door, grabbed the mugs from the bonnet and got in behind the wheel. He leaned between the seats and put the mugs in the back. The car started on the first go and he turned it around.

When they paused before pulling back on to the road, Caroline reached over and put her hand on Eliot’s. She felt the back of his knuckles. He didn’t move his hand away immediately, which she had worried about, but instead he looked at her and smiled in a pained kind of way.

‘Maybe don’t though,’ he said.

‘Sorry,’ she said.

‘It’s not that I mind, just that I need to concentrate. I almost got hit by a car here once, on my bike. People come down here too fast sometimes.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Stop apologising,’ he said. ‘You do that way too much.’

They were quiet as they drove back down the mountain. The only sound was the windscreen wipers going back and forth.

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Caroline wasn’t really paying attention to the road when Eliot let out an ‘Oh’ in surprise. They were on a straight, flat part of the road and the car felt weightless for a second and then suddenly turned sideways. Caroline reached out and clutched the dashboard with one hand and pushed the other onto the roof above her. She laughed once, one laugh, out of fear. They left the road harder and more suddenly than she expected. She looked down, into her lap. When they’d stopped Caroline looked up and saw that they were wedged into a ditch.

They were quiet for a moment. Eliot looked around himself blankly, as if he’d been woken up and didn’t know where he was. ‘Is your leg okay?’ he said finally.

‘Yeah I think so,’ Caroline said.

‘There’s going to be damage,’ he said, trying to start the car. It took him five turns of the ignition. When he pressed on the accelerator there was the sound of the tyres spinning but the car stayed motionless. They were tilted downwards. Eliot’s door was up against the side of the mountain.

‘Let me get out and check,’ he said.

Before Caroline could ask how, Eliot wound down his window and slid himself out. Caroline listened to the sound of him on the roof. There was silence and then the car started to rock. When she looked in the rear-view mirror Caroline saw Eliot perched on the bumper, bouncing the car up and down. He came back and opened his door.

‘I think we’re stuck,’ he said.

‘Can I help?’ she said.

‘I think I can push us out, can you drive?’

Caroline nodded, even though she didn’t think she’d be able to. Eliot came around and helped her shift over into the driver’s seat. He wasn’t so careful with her leg this time around,

and Caroline had to bite on her bottom lip to keep from wailing out in pain. She'd hoped that Eliot wouldn't notice.

'When you see me nod, put your foot down,' he said. 'Don't stop until you're back up properly on the road. Make sure it's in reverse otherwise you'll flatten me.'

'Okay,' she said.

She started the car then waited. Eliot went around to the front of the car. He looked ridiculous and tiny in front of the hood of the car, like a child at a school crossing. He shouted something and then bent down to lift the car. She wasn't even sure if what he'd said was a word. She put her foot down and the engine kicked in, but the car didn't move an inch. After about twenty seconds she stopped. Eliot was straining against the car, looking like it he was about to have a heart attack. He stopped for a moment and looked down at the car.

'Try again,' Eliot said, after he composed himself.

It was snowing properly now and the flakes surrounded them. Caroline put her foot down on the accelerator and again they stayed in the same spot. Caroline turned her head to check if the road behind them was clear, and so she wouldn't have to watch Eliot as he exhausted himself. She felt like holding Eliot's hand was the wrong thing to have done, that this had caused them to crash, that she was somehow responsible for everything. The car stalled and she tried to get it started again. The engine sounded like it was choking and then it made no sound at all.

Eliot came and got into the passenger seat. 'I'm not as strong as I thought I was,' he said.

'Another go?'

'Will it even start? There's no point at the moment anyway,' he said, closing his door and making the keys chime in the ignition. Caroline wound her window back up. Eliot was breathing heavily. He pulled his hat off. Snow was hitting the windshield, holding there now instead of just melting away instantly.

Caroline bit down on her bottom lip. She wondered what it would be like to kiss Eliot on the mouth, just once; grab him by the front of his jumper and pull him to her, holding him steady like a kite in a violent wind. She coughed.

'So what should we do?' she said.

'I don't know yet. It's not that late. Let me think of something.'

They stayed quiet. Outside there was the sound of the wind that was whipping the snow around them. The snow wasn't falling heavily, but it looked ceaseless. Caroline was at ease with

the idea that they would be stuck on the side of the road and that snow would keep coming and bury the car completely, and that later when people came searching for them, wading through all that powder, she and Eliot would be together and healthy and fine.

Eliot pushed on the hazard lights and they clicked on and off dully.

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In the month after Tom had left her Caroline had killed a mouse in her kitchen. She'd heard it moving about each night for a week and had finally decided that she couldn't take the idea of it living with her anymore. She'd bought a mouse trap from the supermarket the next day.

When the trap had gone off she'd been in bed, and she had gotten up, walked to the kitchen and turned on the light. The mouse had been lying beside the trap in the middle of the kitchen floor. Somehow the trap had broken its neck but not actually trapped it. She'd been surprised at how small it was. She had looked at it closely and seen that it was still breathing quickly, and for the first time she'd felt completely and utterly alone. To stop the mouse running off in the night she'd put an empty wastepaper basket over it and gone back to bed.

She heard Eliot shivering and stopped thinking about the dead mouse. He was tensing his jaw to try to stop it from chattering. He had his arms wrapped around himself.

'You're too cold,' she said.

'I'll be okay.'

'You won't. You'll end up with hypothermia.'

The snow was heavier now, and Caroline could no longer see where the road turned and continued down the hill; after about a hundred metres everything faded into a white-grey mist. Eliot coughed. She reached out and rubbed his back in a slow circle, like she sometimes did to Tom whenever he had a cold. She always felt she was good in emergencies. She always thought she'd have made a good nurse.

'You should take my coat at least.'

'I think we should walk.'

'Really?' Caroline said.

'It'll keep us warm and it's not that far. I can help you walk. It'll be a challenge.'

Caroline looked away from him. His body was shaking slightly and he sounded like he was laughing, tonelessly, under his breath.

'You go ahead without me,' she said. 'I'll be fine. Someone will come along soon.'

'I don't know about that,' he said.

'It'll be too much of a struggle, and we'd go so slowly you'd freeze anyway.'

She could tell he was thinking it over. He always tried, maybe a little too hard, to do the right thing. She took off her coat and handed it to Eliot.

'You should go now,' she said.

He leaned over and kissed her chastely on the mouth. His lips were cold and for a second Caroline hoped that he would push his mouth against hers a little harder, but then he pulled away and the feeling passed.

'I'll bring back some help,' he said, and opened his door.

Caroline watched Eliot stand outside the car, pull on the coat, and then hesitate. He squinted into the wind, looking up the road, towards the top of the mountain, then he hunched his shoulders and started walking in the other direction.

Inside the car there was only the metronome ticking of the hazard lights. She felt like hitting the horn to say goodbye, but then thought that he might think something was wrong and come running back. She held her breath as she watched Eliot continue along the road until he became a dark shape; then, as if he was slowly being erased, he disappeared into the falling snow and was gone.