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how it
feels to
float
helena fox

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Dial Books



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For Anna



I



AT THREE IN THE MORNING WHEN I CAN'T SLEEP, THE ROOM ticks over in the dark and all I have for company is the rush of words coming up fast like those racehorses you see on television, poor things, and when their hearts give out they are laid on the ground and shot dead behind a blue sheet.

At three a.m., I think of hearts. I think of candy hearts and carved-tree hearts and hummingbird hearts. I think of hearts in bodies and the rhythm inside us we don't get to choose.

I lay my hand over mine. There it is.

It beatbeats beatbeatbeats skipsabeatbeatbeat
beatbeatbeats.

A heart is a mystery and not a mystery. It hides under ribs, pumping blood. You can pull it out, hold it in your hand. *Squeeze*. It wants what it wants. It can be made of gold, glass, stone. It can stop anytime.

People scratch hearts into benches, draw them onto fogged windows, tattoo them on their skin. Believe the story they tell themselves: that hearts are somehow bigger than muscle, that

we are something more than an accidental arrangement of molecules, that we are pulled by a force greater than gravity, that love is anything more than a mess of nerve and impulse—

“Biz.”

A whisper.

“Biz.”

In the dark.

“Biz.”

In my room.

I open my eyes, and Dad’s sitting on the edge of the bed.

“You need to stop,” he says.

What? I squint at him. He’s blurry.

“The thinking. I can hear it when you breathe.”

Dad’s wearing a gray sweatshirt. His hands are folded in his lap. He looks tired.

“You should sleep like you did when you were small,” he says. He looks away, smiles. “Your tiny fingers, tucked under your chin. There’s a photo. . .” Dad trails off.

Yeah, Dad. I’ve seen it.

“The one of us in hospital, after you were born—”

Yeah. The one just after Mum got her new blood and you fainted and they gave you orange juice. The one where Mum’s laughing up at the camera as I sleep in her arms. Yeah. I’ve seen it.

Dad smiles again. He reaches across to touch me, but of course he can’t.

That photo has been on every fridge door in every house I’ve ever lived in. It sits under a plumbing company magnet and beside a clip holding year-old receipts Mum can’t seem to throw away.

The photo was taken an hour after I came bulleting out of Mum so fast she had to have a transfusion. In the picture, I look like a slug and Dad looks flattened, like he's seen a car accident. But Mum's face is bright, open, happy.

All the other photos are in albums on our living room bookshelf, next to the non-working fireplace. The albums hold every picture of me Dad ever took until he died, and all the ones of me Mum took until smartphones came along and she stopped printing me onto paper. I'm now partly inside a frozen computer Mum keeps meaning to get fixed, and on an overcrowded iPhone she keeps meaning to download.

And I'm in the photos friends have taken when I've let them and the ones the twins have taken with their eyes since they were babies. I'm in the ocean I walk beside when I skip school and in the clouds where I imagine myself sometimes. And I'm in the look on my friend Grace's face, a second after I kissed her, five seconds before she said she thought of me as a friend.

I blink. Dad's gone again. The room is empty but for me, my bed, my walls, my thoughts, my things.

It's what—four in the morning?

I have a physics test at eight.

My ribs hurt. Behind them, my heart beatbeats beatbeats
beats beatskipsabeat
beatbeat beats.

MY NAME IS ELIZABETH MARTIN GREY, BUT NO ONE I LOVE calls me that.

The Martin is for Dad's dad who died in a farm accident when he was thirty and Dad was ten.

I was seven when Dad died. Which means I had less time with Dad alive than Dad had with his.

There's never enough time. Actually, there's too much and too little, in unequal parts. More than enough of time passing but not enough of the time passed.

Right?

Ratio of the time you want versus the time you get (a rough estimate)—

1:20,000.

Ratio of Dad's time as the son of Martin : as the living father of Biz : as my dead dad, sitting on the edge of my bed telling me stories—

1: 0.7: ∞ .

MONDAY MORNING, SEVEN THIRTY, AND IT'S SO HOT THE house feels like it's melting. Cicadas scream through the windows. The dog pants on the kitchen floor. I had a shower five minutes ago and already I'm sweating through my shirt.

"Ugh," I say, flopping over the kitchen counter, crumpled uniform on, shoes untied.

Mum reads my face and sighs. She's making breakfast for the twins. "Be grateful you get to have an education, Biz." She waggles a spatula. "Not everyone's as lucky."

I peer at her. "You might have read me wrong, Mum. Maybe I meant, 'Ugh. How I wish school lasted all weekend, I have missed it so very much.'"

I'm a month into Year 11, which is ridiculous because I am nano and unformed but I'm still supposed to write essays about Lenin and Richard III and urban sprawl. Year 11 is a big deal. We are only seconds away, the teachers say, from our final exams. The teachers can't stop revving us up about our impending future.

This is a big deal! say the teachers of English, science, art, maths, music, geography, and Other Important Subjects in Which We Are Not Remotely Interested But Are Taking So We Can Get a Good Mark.

You need to take it seriously!

You need to be prepared!

You need to not freak out, then have to go to the counselor because we've freaked you out!

I open the fridge. "I'm going to sit in here, okay? Just for a minute. Let me squat next to the broccoli."

Mum laughs. She's making banana pancakes. Billie and Dart drool over their waiting plates. The twins have the morning off school. They're going to the dentist! They love the dentist—it's where Mum works, so they get extra toothbrushes, and as many little packs of floss and toothpaste as they can carry in their hands.

"Are they ready yet?" says my brother, Dart, six years old.

"Come on, Mum! I'm starving to *death*," says my sister, Billie, nineteen minutes younger than Dart.

"Give me a second," says Mum. "A watched pancake never boils."

She flips one over. It looks scorched. Mum doesn't love cooking.

I can't see how she can be anywhere near a stove in this heat. I grab some coconut yogurt and grapes out of the fridge.

"Did you study for your test?" Mum says.

"Absolutely," I say, and it's true, if you count watching YouTube videos and listening to music while reading the text-book studying. I don't know if I'm ready—there's the lack of sleep thing, and the not-having-spoken-properly-to-Grace-

since-I-kissed-her thing, which makes today impossible and complicated before it even begins.

I hug Mum goodbye and smooch the twins' cheeks as they squirm.

I grab my bike from the shed, ride it for thirty seconds before I realize the front tire is flat.

Ah, that's right.

When did the tire go? Friday? No, Thursday.

Shit, Biz! You had one job.

A magpie laughs from a nearby tree. His magpie friend looks down, then joins in.

I could ask Mum to drive me but I know what she'd say: "Do I look like a taxi, Biz?"

I could skip school, but then I'd miss my test and ruin my impending future.

I shove the bike back in the shed. And start walking.

I LIVE WITH MUM AND THE TWINS IN WOLLONGONG, IN A blue-clad house on a street wallpapered with trees.

We moved here a couple of years ago, after moving to a lot of other places. We're one and a half hours south of Sydney. The city is not too big, not too small; it's just right for now, says Mum. The city sits beside the sea, under an escarpment. The sea pushes at the shore, shoving under rocks and dunes and lovers. Craggy cliffs lean over us, trying to read what we've written. The city is long like a finger. It was a steel town once.

There, that's the tour.

When I was seven, Mum, Dad, and I lived up north, near Queensland—in the Australian jungle, Mum likes to say. She says the mosquitoes were full on, but I don't remember them.

I remember frogs click-clacking at night in the creek at the bottom of the hill. The house was wooden; it had stilts. The backyard was a steep tangle of eucalypts and ferns and figs and shrubs.

You could see hills like women's boobs all around. I'd wake

up and hear kookaburras. Light would come in through my curtainless windows and lift me out of bed. I'd run in to Mum and Dad's room and jump on them to wake them up.

I had a puppy. I called him Bumpy.

Our street is flat now. It goes past a park where I walk the dog and he sniffs the shit left by other dogs. I can walk to school in fifteen minutes or I can walk straight past it and go to the sea. Or, if I want to be a total rebel, I can go the opposite direction and in fifteen minutes end up in a rainforest, under a mountain, gathering leeches for my leech army.

On the walk to school, the cicadas keep me company. They scream from one huge gum tree to another. I pass the community center. I pass the park. I get to the end of the cul-de-sac and wait under the bleaching sun to cross the freeway.

Traffic bawls past. I can feel my skin frying. I can feel cancer pooling in my freckles. I can feel the road tar melting under my feet as I scurry across the road.

Past the freeway there's a vet, a pub, and a train station. Every day I have to cross the train tracks to get to school. Every time I think, *What if the signals are wrong, and a train comes out of the blue and hits me as I cross?*

A woman walked against the signal once. Not here, but close enough it might as well be here. She was in a rush, they said; she ignored the ringing bells, the dropping barrier. She got halfway and thought better of it. She turned back. The train came.

Every time I cross the tracks, I think of her and try not to think of her.

I've traced and retraced her last moments in my head. I have googled her and I know the names of her family, the job she had, the music she listened to, and the last concert she saw before she died. I can feel the tightness of her skin when she saw the train, and how sweat sprang up a moment before the train hit—

step

and how our pupils widened

step

and turned my eyes to black

step

and in that infinite, molecular moment, I can't remember if I meant to cross, or have paused on the tracks and am waiting here—

"Hey, Biz."

I turn my head. Dad's walking beside me, barefoot, in his running shorts and KISS T-shirt.

"Do you remember your first train ride?"

No. I don't remember that, Dad.

"It was a steam train. You were four. We went through a rainforest! We went really high up a mountain, and visited a butterfly sanctuary. And you flapped around like a monarch. You were beautiful."

Is that right, Dad?

"You should flap around. Try it, Biz; it'll shake off the frets."

I look down. I'm over the train tracks and past the station. I'm on the path; it opens in front of me, green grass on both sides, the sun beaming.

I think of butterflies. I think of flying.

Dad laughs.

He's gone by the time I reach the school gate.

I WALK INTO PHYSICS JUST AS MS. HASTINGS IS HANDING out our tests. Ms. Hastings gives me a *young lady, you're late* look. I give her a *tell me about it and have you noticed I'm swimming in a pool of sweat* look. Ms. Hastings raises an eyebrow. I sit at my desk.

Ms. Hastings lays our tests facedown. She does the regular threats: *You must not look at anyone's work, Put away your phones, and Your time starts now.*

We flip our pages over.

Turns out, I am ready for the test. My brain fires up and the neurons make my hand move and the formulas come out like good little ponies at a show.

Most of my tests are fairly easy, which isn't me boasting; it's just a statement of fact. Mum says I might have a photographic memory, which is good for Mum because she often forgets her PIN numbers and passwords.

Mum could be right. All I have to do is look at something and it sticks. Sometimes, the image repeatrepeatrepeatrepeats, like a GIF I can't turn off.

The room fills with the buzz of numbers. Pi scuttles over our papers, theorems talk to themselves. Ms. Hastings looks at her phone—probably at some friend sky-diving or snorkeling in the Bahamas, while she’s trapped in here with us.

The bell rings.

Time’s up! calls Ms. Hastings. We hand in our tests. Next class is English.

I don’t chat or dawdle in the corridors; I slip between the crowds, a fish weaving. In fifty-five minutes I’ll have to speak to Grace. *Just keep swimming, Biz.*

Mr. Birch stands like a flamingo in front of the class, one foot scratching the back of his leg.

“Okay, everyone,” he says, “today we’ll be writing about the ego. That is, your alter ego. Consider your readings over the weekend, and the work of Plath in this context.”

A collective groan from all of us. We’ve done Plath now for three long weeks and no one is a fan. I mean, we all “feel” for her, but at this point we’ve read her and analyzed her and discussed her and it’s like peeling an onion until there’s no onion left.

“I want you to write a description of your alter ego, due at the end of the day,” Mr. Birch says, ignoring our protests. In case we don’t remember what he’s just said, he writes it on the whiteboard, his blue pen squeaking. He then sits at his chipped desk behind his PC, doing paperwork.

We hunker down to do the assignment. That is, some of us do the assignment; some of us daydream. The new boy pulls out a book and reads it behind his laptop screen.

Fans flick-flick above us. A trickle of sweat moves down between my boobs. I stare at my computer.

I don't much like to write about myself. It's not my thing, discussing any part of me. Over the years, Mum has suggested we go see people because Dad is dead, but then we put it off. I did sit with a man once, when I was seven and a half, in a room with yellow-painted walls and framed cat pictures. The man had round glasses like Harry Potter. He laid out paper and blunt coloring pencils and said to draw, so I did. Then he hummed and ha-ed and said, "I'll just speak to your mum now, okay?" and when Mum came back out, her eyes were really red, so I didn't draw for anyone else after that.

The cursor blinks on, off.

I take a breath, and dive in.

My Alter Ego: A meditation/poem, by Elizabeth Grey

Consider the Ego / The ego is defined as a person's sense of self / Which includes but is not limited to self-esteem, self-worth, and self-importance / Don't we all think ourselves important, that we matter? / We are matter, this part is true / But do we? / And / Is it possible to have an alter self / I.e.: an opposite, matterless self?

No / Such a thing cannot exist / The universe is made of matter / And if I am alter or other, then I would be lacking matter or a sense of matter and as such cannot be in the universe / And if I am outside the universe, that makes me a singularity, a concept impossible to imagine / Therefore, my alter ego is beyond my capability for imagining / And thus, cannot be described.

The End

P.S. Some say God is a singularity, but people imagine God all the time / They think he looks like someone's white grandpa, or Santa Claus / God's Alter Ego is sometimes called a Dog / (Sorry) / It should be added that Dogs exist and have the potential to exist throughout the known universe / So it is possible that my earlier hypothesis is wrong.

I close my laptop, look up at Mr. Birch, who'll get to read this masterpiece tonight. What a lucky guy!

The bell rings.

"Please email me your essays by midnight!" calls Mr. Birch over the scrape of chairs, the shoving of laptops into bags, the clatter of our bodies beelining it to the door.

Now it's break.

At break and lunch, I always sit with Grace—and Evie and Stu and Miff and Rob and Sal. The Posse, they call themselves. I should say: We, as a collective, call ourselves The Posse. I am in The Posse. I am an integral member of The Posse, I think.

Grace and I have sat with The Posse since the first day of Year 9. We were both new. Evie saw us hovering uncertainly in the schoolyard, and decided we belonged to her. She brought us over to the bench under the tree by the fence. There, everyone interviewed us. What bands did we like? Did we prefer a day at the beach or inside? Had we read *The Communist Manifesto*? Had we seen *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Did we like it? Did we have a tattoo? If not, what would we get and where?

The group made the questions sound like conversation. But I could feel everyone marking us invisibly. Tick, tick, cross, tick, tick.

I let Grace answer first and watched everyone's faces. I crafted my answers the way their smiles went.

In the end it was okay. We could stay. But of course we could stay! *The Posse is inclusive! The Posse is Love Incarnate!*

We would have more people in The Posse, but most people are stupid, says Miff. We, The Posse, agree.

Before I came to this school, I was never in a group, so being in one—especially one with a name—was quite the novelty. It still is, because, I mean, I belong to six other people and they say they miss me when I'm not there. I've sat on the bench under the tree by the fence for just over two years now, laughing and saying things I think I'm supposed to.

And almost every second of every minute I'm with them, I feel like I'm seeing the scene from somewhere else. In front of a screen maybe, watching someone else's life.

I WALK TO THE LOCKERS. GRACE IS STANDING BY MINE.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey,” she says. She smells like lavender—it’s from the moisturizer she gave me for my birthday, then borrowed two months ago and forgot to give back.

I open my locker. I put in my books.

“Hey,” I say again. My hands are actually shaking, which is stupid, because this is Grace, my best friend, who lives down the street and one left and two rights away from me. Grace Yu-Harrison, who knows all the songs from the Beatles’ *White Album* (like me), loves *The Great Gatsby* (like me), and the art of Alexander Calder, especially his mobiles, which move when you blow on them. (We did this, one Sunday in Sydney, when the guard wasn’t looking. The wires trembled at first, then danced.)

Grace lives with her mum and stepdad, who are workaholics. I’m not exaggerating; they literally can’t seem to stop sitting in their offices, going to meetings and conferences and

dinner with other workaholics, and coming home late. Grace has a lot of time to herself. Her dad lives in Wagga Wagga, which is so far from the sea it may as well be fictional. She has a pool and a hammock that fits two—we often swing in it after a swim.

Grace is also stunning, the kind of gorgeous most people try their whole lives to be. She has kissed five and a half guys. Half because one guy turned and vomited two seconds after their lips touched.

“It was disgusting,” she said. “He nearly threw up in my mouth!”

I haven’t kissed anyone else but her.

In the four-minute walk from the lockers to our bench by the fence, Grace usually talks. She says we should dye our hair, but not blue because everyone’s doing that, so maybe silver? And she tells me about the drawing she did of her dream last night, and about Suryan in Year 12 sending her a photo of his penis, which she calls a dick, and which I say is unfair to all the people called Richard, and Grace laughs.

At least, that’s what she said on Friday, when I saw her last, before I went over for a swim in her pool and she lay on the grass afterwards—her eyes closed, her hair glassy-smooth—and that’s when something lurched inside me and I leaned over and put my mouth on hers.

“Hey,” says Grace again, and I’m back, standing by the locker.

We could do this all day, I think, but then she stands squarely in front of me, so I can’t move. She pins me with her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I begin, which is what I said after I kissed her, and again, when she tried to say how she liked me but not *that* way, but I was so mortified I took off. I’m a thousand feet tall and when I run I look like a giraffe, so imagine me, hoofing it down my street in just my swimmers, school bag in one hand, uniform and shoes in the other, the neighbors gawking at me from their front windows. I must have been quite the sight.

“Biz,” says Grace. She puts her hand on my arm. “Seriously, it’s okay. It was nice, you know? I haven’t been kissed in ages and you’re not a bad kisser. I’m just not—” She pauses. And takes a long breath in.

I fix my eyes on the lockers, the floor, anywhere but Grace’s hand on my arm.

She steps closer, so now we are just two pairs of eyes, floating. “So. Here’s the thing, Biz. What I want—ah—what I’m wondering is”—another big breath in—“Biz, are you bi or all the way gay?”

I blink. “Sorry?”

“Bi? Or gay?” Grace asks the question like she’s standing with a clipboard in a shopping mall, asking strangers for orphan money.

I gawp at her.

“Because,” she says, “I was thinking over the weekend—which *sucked*, by the way—Dad called and I had to fly to Wagga for some great-aunt’s funeral, did you get my text?—and we went to his girlfriend’s *farm* for fuckssake—it’s got no Wi-Fi, no signal, how’s that possible?—and we ate lamb, which is seriously disgusting—and he kept saying how I have to get my shit together this year or I won’t get into uni—God, that man’s a nightmare—But anyway—*back to you*, Biz—I was thinking about who might be good for you instead of me, and whether

guy's are a no for you or still a possibility, because Evie said Lucas Werry might be keen—but if it's girls you're into, we can go in a whole other direction. That's cool. Like, unless—as long as you're not hung up on me, in which case”—she pauses—“that could be a tragedy of Shakespearian proportions.”

Grace finally stops talking. She smiles, sort of, and waits for me to answer.

I can't speak. I can feel the pistons of my heart moving, feel my lungs filling, emptying, my pores clogging. I feel the movement of the stars and I can hear the echo of all the black holes consuming everything—

and then, just like that, my head clears.

It's Grace. Just Grace. (*Look, Biz.*)

Here she is, her hand still on my arm. My best friend.

(*Come down to earth, Biz. Everything is going to be okay.*)

I blink slowly, and feel myself waking.

“No,” I say. “I don't think I'm hung up on you. As mesmerizingly beautiful as you are, Grace, I actually don't think you're my type.” And as I say it, something untangles in my chest. Oh my God. It's true. I think?

I'm not. She isn't.

Right?

Thank God?

Grace looks hugely relieved. Which makes me laugh. And I keep laughing, and suddenly everything is fine.

Right?

Thank God?

“I don't actually know what I am,” I say, and I think that's true. Am I bi? Am I gay? Am I something else? It makes my head fog to think about it.

“I mean, I wasn’t planning to kiss you,” I say.

She smiles. “I *am* pretty irresistible.”

“You’re the only person I’ve ever kissed, Grace. I’m seriously inexperienced. Maybe I should kiss more people to figure it out? Maybe we can line them up. Or lay them out on a tray like a taste test.”

“So we can see if you’re into pepperoni or anchovies,” says Grace.

“Both are animal products, so therefore—” I begin, and then see Grace smirk. “Ah, *gross*, Grace!”

Grace laughs. She starts walking outside. I walk beside her. We head for the tree, the bench under the tree, The Posse sitting beside the fence. And Grace is already pulling her phone out, already texting Lucas-Werry-who-might-be-keen, and asking him over to her house for a swim.

Which will be good.

Right?

DAD SAW MUM FOR THE FIRST TIME ON A JETTY IN PALM Beach. He was swinging his legs off the edge, eating chips. She was fishing.

Technically, she wasn't fishing. She was standing on the jetty watching her boyfriend fish. The boyfriend was all: "Me strong. Me good at fishing. Me have muscles," and Mum was putting together the words she needed to break up with him.

So she broke up with the guy, right there, and as a parting shot she said, "Also. I don't like fishing. It's inhumane."

And the guy said, "They're fine! I chuck them back in!"

And Mum said, "Not before you rip out their insides with that hook."

And the boofhead said, "Ah, fuck off."

So she said, "That's not nice, Barry," and she took his fishing rod and threw it in the water.

Then the guy got all feisty, so she shoved him in too.

Dad watched the whole thing and thought to himself, *Get yourself a girl who can catch and release.*

That's how Dad puts it, anyway, when he tells the story. Most recent retelling: last Thursday night.

I was trying to study and Dad leaned beside the window saying, "And she marched off like Wonder Woman, Biz. And then I saw her at the bus stop waiting for the bus, and I went up to her, and said, 'Excellent technique.'

"She said, 'Thanks, I've had practice.' And then I said. . . Well, I couldn't speak, because boom, there she was, smack dab in my heart. We never looked back."

Dad grinned.

It was a great story. But I was distracted, trying to figure out a polynomial.

"That's great, Dad. Don't suppose you could be of use, and help me with my maths?"

When I looked around, he was gone.

I often think of a bubble when I think of Dad. He's sort of see-through, but when he talks about Mum, or me as a baby, his colors fill out.

It's kind of beautiful to watch. If I don't say anything, he'll totally float there for hours.

LUCAS WERRY IS NOT EVEN SLIGHTLY INTERESTED IN ME. I'M not sure where Evie got her information, but in Grace's pool on Friday afternoon he keeps paddling after Grace like she's catnip.

Afterwards, we can't help but laugh. Lucas heads home after the swim, clearly disappointed when Grace tells him he has to go. She says we're going out to dinner with her parents tonight (a lie), and they're taking us to an expensive restaurant in Sydney (also a lie), and he needs to leave so we can get ready (lie! Lie! So much lie! We are going to eat hummus and carrots for dinner and watch *The Great Gatsby* for the twenty-eighth time, and we might even study. This is what we call a party night).

"He wanted you, Grace," I say. "Did you see?"

"I felt it, Biz," Grace says, making a face. "He pressed it against me!"

I'm showering in Grace's bathroom when I realize nothing would appeal to me less than Lucas pressing any part of his body against mine. So what does that mean?

“Grace,” I say when I go back to her room, toweling my hair dry.

“Yeah?” Grace bounces across her bed and looks up at me.

“I was in the shower and thought of Lucas pressing his penis against me and nearly threw up.”

“Is that right? Lucas’s fine body did not appeal to you in the slightest? Those abs? Those arms? That enormous, throbbing—”

“No,” I cut her off. “But here’s the thing.” I lay the towel over the back of her chair and look at her. “I’m not sure I want anything pressed up against me. Boobs, penises, abs, vaginas. Not sure about any of them.”

“Hmmm.” She beams. “*Interesting!*”

Grace’s project becomes “Solving the Conundrum That Is Biz’s Sexuality.”

The number of girls and boys she points out to me at school becomes a little exhausting. Before I even walk through the school gates, she’s texted me a list of people to check out that day. I draw the line at some girl called Maddie in Year 8.

“I’m not Nabokov, Grace,” I text her in English class.

“Sorry,” she texts back. “I got carried away.”

Her text arrives with a bright PING! just as Mr. Birch is telling us about an assessment we’ve got to hand in next Friday. Everyone looks up from their notes and swivels their heads—twenty-three owls noticing the rustle of a poor mouse who has forgotten to silence her phone.

Mr. Birch says, “Elizabeth, Elizabeth, Elizabeth.” He shakes his head sorrowfully. After the alter-ego assignment, his

ambitions for me must have significantly lowered. Mr. Birch walks over and holds out his hand.

School Policy: Use of smartphones in class is expressly forbidden, even when you're in Year 11 and should be permitted to self-govern.

Shit. I will now be without a phone until Friday. It's Wednesday morning.

I hand my phone over and see the new boy smile. The one who read a book behind his screen last week when we were supposed to be working—a full miscreant move, I might add. I'm not sure he even submitted his essay. I make a face at the new boy and Mr. Birch thinks I'm making it at him.

Turns out Mr. Birch has quite the temper. An anger management class would do that man some good.

Mum is not pleased. She thumps around the kitchen, opening and shutting cupboard doors, picking up saucepans and banging them down.

"Who gets detention in Year 11? Seriously? And your phone confiscated? This is some primary school shit, Biz."

"Mum!"

Mum keeps forgetting the twins are six and easily influenced.

"Shit!" says Dart, doing homework at the kitchen table.

"Mum said shit!" singsongs Billie, sitting opposite him. And the two of them start chanting, "Mum said shit! Mum said shit!" over and over until Mum burns her hand on the side of the kettle because she's distracted, and she swears again ("Mum said fuck! Mum said fuck!") and Mum slams the fridge

door shut because there are no veggies in there besides one limp zucchini and a cauliflower with moldy patches, and her eldest is turning to the dark side, and the twins have mouths like fishwives, and *what did she do to deserve this?*

Poor Mum. I give her a hug. “Let’s go get Thai food,” I say.

She sniffs—a bit weepy—and agrees.

We go to the local Thai and eat until the twins’ bellies swell and we order too much satay, which is wonderful because we love leftovers.

And the ratio evens out.

Shit to Wonderful. 1:1.

MUM FELL IN LOVE WITH A MOVIE WHEN SHE WAS TWENTY. It was about a woman who caught a train and didn't catch a train. When the woman caught the train, she walked in on her boyfriend having sex with another woman. When she missed the train—doors sliding shut a second before she reached them—she didn't catch the guy having sex, and the universe split in two.

"It's the best," says Mum. "You follow Gwyneth in two lives, so it's all, *I wonder what happens if she catches the train; what happens if she doesn't? Will she end up in the same shitty life? Will she ever be happy?*"

"Mm-hmm?" I say.

I'm in the shower, back from a swim at the beach with the twins. Mum's on the toilet, peeing. Mum has told me about this movie before. We actually watched it years ago. Mum doesn't remember.

Mum's in a very good mood. She had the day off work and she's been having drinks with friends. Mum is pretty chatty at

this point. I got home from the beach, stepped into the shower, pulled the curtain, and seconds later Mum opened the bathroom door, hopped on the toilet, and started talking. First I heard about her friend Jamie's haircut, then about the guy who tried to chat them up. Then, it was nonstop Gwyneth. Mum's been on the toilet a while.

I guess she watched the movie again this morning, after we went to school, before she went out for drinks. Mum has the DVD on the bookshelf, wedged next to the photo albums, the twins' art projects, and all the books stacked sideways so we can fit in more books.

"I love parallel universes," sighs Mum.

That she does. And she loves love. And fate.

"If it's meant to be, it will be," she loves to say. "Everything happens for a reason." I've even seen Mum cross herself. She can't run from her faith—it follows her no matter what.

Mum and I watched the movie together when I was thirteen. She sat on one end of the couch and I lay down with my feet in Mum's lap. I listened to Gwyneth's not-so-great British accent, saw her have steamy sex with a guy ("I forgot about this part! Look away, Biz!"), and I watched her die. At least in one universe. And when Gwyneth died, Mum and I cried so hard our eyes swelled almost shut.

I cried just as hard the second time, when I skipped school a few months later and saw it again.

Dad sat on the edge of the couch, watching with me. He popped in to see the part where the Gwyneth of the other universe doesn't die, where she wakes up in hospital and tries her hand at living instead.

He said, "I took your mum to that movie. She had a cold and

said I shouldn't kiss her but of course I did, and of course I got sick too."

I squinted at Dad through puffy eyes.

"I cried so hard when Gwyneth died," said Dad. "Even though she had to. I couldn't stop myself. Your mum too. We were the only ones in that place, thank God, so we could bawl in peace. That's when I really knew," he said, doing his faraway smile.

That you loved her, Dad, right? I wanted to say. That you'd be with her forever. That you would stay till Death wrenched you apart, right, Dad? Isn't that what you promised?

"I'm going to make you so happy," said Dad. "Best line ever said to a dead woman. Heartbreaking."

Dad sat on the edge of the coffee table, in his patterned socks and dressing gown. He said, "Shall we watch it again?"

So we did.

THE NEW GUY'S NAME IS JASPER ALESSIO. HE IS TALL AND narrow. He has a strange gait, a limp, like his right leg is too slow to keep up—a stubborn dog not done with its walk. He has longish hair like everyone else. It goes over his eyes. Jasper fiddles with it when he's thinking hard, usually in maths. He bends over the paper. He frowns over the little *x*'s, the tiny *n*'s. Doesn't he know they can fend for themselves? They are everywhere—the unknown owns us. But Jasper taps with his pencil. He fidgets and scribbles. In English he doesn't seem to care, but in maths, Jasper frets.

Jasper appears to not have friends. No one has claimed him yet. The group at the top won't. They are beautiful and have no physical impediments. Not even pimples. So even if Jasper is funny, even if he can play guitar *and* drums, even if he's had sex with exactly the right number of people, it's the leg.

The next group down might take him, but it all depends on Jasper's personality. Is he clever without being up himself? Is he the right kind of funny? Does he keep the teachers on their toes?

He has only a little time to prove himself. He has to make his move soon.

I don't care, except I mentioned him to The Posse and Evie made a face.

"He's kind of creepy," Evie said.

Miff nodded.

"What makes him creepy?" I said.

"He breathes really weirdly in chemistry," said Stu. "When he's measuring out the hydroxide."

I looked at Grace and she shrugged.

"And what do you think is up with his leg?" said Sal.

"Have you seen it?" Evie asked me.

"I haven't," I said. How would I have seen it? He wears pants every day, even when it's boiling. He doesn't do sport; none of us do. He doesn't look like a surfer. He doesn't look like a gamer, or stoner, or drama head, or nerd, or anything really other than a boy, tall and narrow. He actually looks a bit like a smudge—like, if it wasn't for his leg you might pass right by him, like he's a part of a wall you've needed to repaint for years but can never find the time.

"Well, he seems like a bit of a dick," said Grace.

It's true. He hasn't made the best first impression. He could be a dick and only a dick. But he also seems a bit lonely.

The Posse started speculating on the cause of The Limp. As Jasper would not be getting an interview, they had to figure out his story themselves.

I find myself thinking about Jasper and not telling Grace I'm thinking about Jasper.

What does he do when he's daydreaming in English? Where

does he go? What makes him fret in maths? What happened to his leg? Was it a tractor tragedy? Was he riding a John Deere through the family farm and did he stop for a huddle of mice snuggling in the wheat stalks? Did he step out to save them, and the tractor, mind of its own, ran him down? Thirteen surgeries later, three steel pins, and five hundred staples, Jasper can finally walk again.

Or is he in fact an asshole, and did he run over an old lady with a stolen motorbike? Jasper: buzzed on drugs, tattooed and merciless, just released from juvenile detention. Was he a second away from offending again?

I can't help but wonder.

Mum always says "Answers are your friend." Maybe all Jasper needs is a kind face. I'm sure I can put one on.

I wait for Jasper outside school on Tuesday. He is walking down the steps, tilting a little from side to side, a sailor in a storm.

I go up three steps to meet him and say, "Would you like to go for a walk?"

He stops, startled, and stares at me. "Sorry?"

I say—slowly, because maybe he's a bit thick, maybe this is why he breathes loudly in chemistry, maybe this is why he frets—"I said, would you like to go for a walk?"

"Are you taking the piss?" Jasper frowns.

"Sorry?" I lean forward.

"Are you asking me because you think I can't walk? That's a pretty shitty thing to do, if you are."

I'm so surprised, I step backwards and stumble off the step, banging my leg on a railing. My eyes flash with tears. I bend over to hold my ankle. I've probably broken it.

"That's karma, I reckon," Jasper says, and then he walks off.

◦ ◦ ◦ ◦

Turns out, Jasper *does* ride a motorbike.

He hoons off on it, passing me on the front school steps where I'm sitting, nursing my broken bone. And anyone looking at him would have to agree, empirically, that on his bike, Jasper doesn't look at all like a smudge.

DAD SAYS, "IS IT BROKEN, BIZ?" HE'S ON THE STAIRS, JUST above the stairs. You can see an inch of air between his feet and the concrete.

I don't know, Dad.

"Have you checked? Should you walk? Should you get an ambulance? Maybe you should get an ambulance." Dad is pacing. He looks gray. Like he's been hung on a wall in direct sunlight and has been left to fade.

I don't need an ambulance, Dad.

"Just to be sure. You might make it worse. It could be splintered in there. You could get gangrene, Biz."

I turn my body towards him. He's in his pajamas. The ones he was wearing when he died.

"Dad. I'm just going to go home, okay? Mum will fix it. Relax."
He looks at me for one beat. Two. And then he blips out.

AFTER I LIMP HOME, AFTER I ICE MY ANKLE AND WATCH THE dark bruise rise, Mum comes back from work. I'm in a chair on the veranda, floating in the twilight. A cluster of mosquitoes circles my head but I've smeared myself with repellant, so the mozzies are cranky and whining. The twins are in the living room, watching TV and punching each other.

Mum plonks her keys down on the kitchen counter and sighs. I can hear her; she can't see me.

"Hi, Mum," I say.

Mum jumps. Peers out the window.

"Biz?"

"Outside."

"Why?"

"Because," I say.

Mum never goes out in the garden. She rarely goes onto the back veranda. The garden overwhelms her, she says. All the undergrowth and overgrowth and grass and dog shit.

But I like the mystery of it. Somewhere in this foresty jumble

is a swing set the twins still use, running a narrow path to it through the high grass. There's also a jacaranda tree, limbs twisting—it drops flowers every season and turns the garden purple. The twins have laid out toys at the tree to lure fairies. Also here's the dog, who likes to snuffle for lizards and lilly pilly berries. Right now, Bump is dozing at my feet.

Mum creaks open the screen door. She's already poured her first wine. Another day done for Mum. She works too hard. Mum wanted to be an artist once. Now she's a dental assistant. She looks in a hundred decaying mouths a day. Her boss asks her in for extra shifts all the time because Mum always says yes.

"You okay?" she says.

"Broke my ankle," I say, gesturing to my foot.

"Really?" Mum steps out. Already she's got that note in her voice. The *I don't think so*, Biz tone. You could make a song of that sound, after all the stories I've told her.

"It's the size of a basketball," I say.

Mum stands over my foot, looks at it. "That's a nasty bruise," she says.

"See?"

"Can you move it? Can you wiggle your toes? Can you bear any weight?" She's leaning over it, touching my ankle, and already it's better, just for the touching and looking.

They say observation affects reality, that it can pin an electron into place. Until then, the electron is just possibility, just an idea. Until it's seen, it might as well not exist.

Mum has pinned me all my life. I've tried to dodge her sometimes, but she has me. And I've had her. Two electrons eyeing each other, moving wherever the other moves.

I think Dad was harder to spot. He always went so fast, Mum said. He hardly slept. He'd be up before five, making to-do lists, drinking coffee, pulling on his sneakers, and heading out the door for his morning run.

He had so many plans. They were always traveling—job to job, town to town, house to house.

Mum would say to Dad, "Shall we stay here?"

And Dad would say, "But what about *there*?"

Dad worked as a carpenter, a gardener, a fishing boat mate, a youth worker, an office assistant, and a teacher's assistant, and Mum looked in mouths.

Were they happy?

I've asked Mum more than once.

She says, "Yes, Biz. Lots of times we really, really, really were."

Mum has me tilt my foot, up and down, all around. Turns out, it's probably not broken. I hobble inside and she straps it, her hands moving around my ankle until it's giftwrapped.

We eat flavored tofu on soggy white rice for dinner, with a few stalks of broccoli planted hopefully on the sides of the plate. The twins go and get tomato sauce from the fridge and turn their dinner into lava.

I persuaded Mum to go vegan from vegetarian a few months ago, but I don't think her heart's in it. Nothing much has changed in the nutrition department. Dinner used to be some kind of cheese with some kind of carbohydrate with some kind of vegetable. Our new meals are not so much a step up, as a step sideways.

Sometimes I think about making a better, brighter meal and surprising Mum. I think about it and I go to my room after school, open my laptop, and fall into the Internet. I look up, and three hours have passed and Mum is home, making dinner. We sit and eat: something boiled, something gray, something green.

I move the food around my plate. The twins gobble it down. They talk and talk, and Mum nods and laughs. Sometimes I wonder if she's really listening. She looks like she is, but maybe every time we're having dinner, half her mind is here and half is in Tahiti.

My mind is almost always elsewhere.

How can Jasper's parents let him ride a motorbike? Aren't they worried he'll die? Does he even have parents or is he with caregivers, having just left kid prison? Is he hungry? Is he homeless? Is he holed up in a cardboard box right now, shivering and gnawing on dumpster bones?

After dinner and washing up, I go to my room and look for Jasper online.

He barely exists. There's almost nothing to pin him down, just a shadow-self on Facebook. That's it.

I almost send him a friend request; I have my arrow pointed on the button and my finger ready to click, but wait—what are you doing, Biz? He's a dick, isn't he? And what makes you think he'll even accept? He thinks you're a bitch.

I move the arrow away. I take my hand off the keyboard.

In his profile picture, Jasper is a silhouette against some kind of sunset. His cover photo is a windmill in a field. The photo is beautiful; he could easily have stolen it from someone else (who probably stole it from someone else).

Maybe Jasper steals everything. Maybe his motorbike was pilfered from a front yard, with some biker out looking for it, furious and weeping. Maybe Jasper's bag and books and phone and clothes are all stolen. Maybe his limp is fake. Maybe Jasper is a lie.

I'M AT THE BEACH WITH A BUNCH OF HOOLIGANS. Everyone's drunk. I think I'm also drunk? I had three ciders and then something from a bottle, which burned. It was whiskey; I think it was whiskey. And then we did tequila shots out of medicine cups, which was funny.

Grace is here and Stu and Miff and Evie and Rob and Sal. We are "The Intoxicated Posse" hahaha. Other people are here too. We are all together. The youth are congregating. We are the Church of Youth. Let's pray.

The ocean looks enormous and inky. You can see the white of the waves where they break. You can see our feet where the firelight touches it. You can see our bright, happy faces.

Someone's playing guitar and everyone's singing along. Everyone's shouting all the swears in the song: *Fuck! Fuck!*

Why is shouting the word *fuck* so satisfying?

It just is.

It. Just. Is.

I've got my head in Grace's lap. Grace is kissing the guy who sent the dick pic. I can hear their tongues slapping around in

each other's mouths. Grace twists to mash her face closer to his. Her knee keeps bouncing my head.

I can feel the ciders and whiskey and tequila swirling around in my stomach along with the two hash browns from McDonald's. The food and liquids aren't loving each other.

"I'm gonna throw—" I say. I get up. Grace isn't listening. Whatshisname has his hand on her boob, under her shirt.

I go to the dunes where the bushes and rabbits are. The rabbits must be covering their ears right now because we, the youth, are too loud. I bend over a bush and decorate it. I step two steps to the left and decorate another.

Lucky bushes. They will look like Christmas trees in the morning. Hash brown baubles on the branches and maybe some of Mum's dinner too, noodle tinsel—that's funny but also my head hurts. I step down the dune, away from the bushes and rabbits and back towards the fire, but the fire hurts my eyes and the singing too (why are they singing the same song over and over?) and the sight of Grace with her tongue down whatshisname's throat, and Evie, who is flopped over some guy called Tim, and Stu, who is all heart eyes at Jamal, who's in Year 12 and plays rugby and is super talented, Stu says. Everyone's all tongues-down-throats-and-drinking-and-wanting-and-singing. They're all mouths open, laughing at jokes they won't remember, and no one cares that I've gone.

I go down the beach away from the fire and the noise and them.

I stand at the edge of the water. I look out at the white of the waves and the dark of the ocean. I imagine all the sleepy fish. I imagine how warm they must be.

The water's at my ankles and it is warm; those fish aren't wrong.

Then the waves are at my knees and they're having a chat.
"Sigh," sigh the waves. "We've been waves for so long. We get so bored, rolling and rolling. What's it like to be a girl?"

"Not bad," I say, but that's not true, and I don't want to lie to the ocean. "Actually, it is bad sometimes," I confess. "Sometimes it's been very bad."

The waves nod. "We thought so. We see all sorts of things."

"I can imagine," I tell them. The waves are at my hips now; we're having a lovely time.

"We've seen sharks and drownings and shipwrecks and plastic. Ratio of sharks to drownings to shipwrecks to plastic, 5:2:1:1,000,000," say the waves at my waist.

I shake my head sorrowfully.

"That's so sad," I say.

"It is sad," the waves say from under my boobs. "Why don't you do something about it, Biz?"

"Me?" A wave slaps at my chest.

"Yes, you, Biz, what the fuck are you doing just scrolling the Internet when the sea is suffocating?"

Whoa. The waves are getting stropo. The waves are at my shoulders, whapping. They're yanking at my arms, tugging at my chest and hips, grabbing my knees and ankles and feet.

"No need to be like that," I say, or try to say, but a wave shoves into my mouth and slops around trying to see why I can't be bothered to get the fuck off my chair and save the ocean.

I choke. I try to twist away but the waves have me gripped. They're whooshing into my eyes, my open mouth. My tongue tastes only salt and wet.

I wish I could save the ocean; I want to tell the waves that, but they've pulled my words away. I wish I could save the oceans and the glaciers and the rhinos and I want to save the rainforest

and the Pacific islands and Dad. I want to tell the ocean how useless I've been, but the waves already know. The water sees everything.

You can wish as hard as you want for something to stay,
but it will slip right through you,
drift to the bottom of
you
as you stand, watching,
watery, logged,
bleating bloated blubbering,
doing and holding nothing.
Look at yourself, Biz.
Do you see?
pushandshoveandslap
How useless/stupid/hopeless you are?
Of course the waves should take you.
Yes.
Of course.
They should.

But now here's Jasper.

Here's Jasper, in the waves with me.

He has his arm under my chin and armpit and he's grabbing me back from the sea. He's dragging me back to shore, his face grim, and the waves are saying, "Oi! She's ours!" but Jasper isn't listening.

He pulls me onto the beach and I want to say something but I am full of water.

He leans me on my side and I'm coughing and coughing and the water is seriously pissed off because it was happy inside me.

I heave and choke and the waves are a jumble now, angry words and shouting, but as I lie on the sand, I only hear one line, over and over—the waves saying,

“Fuck you, Biz. Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you.”

I take in a ragged breath.

Cough. Breathe. Cough. Sit up.

My hair is tangled. My shirt is ripped. I've lost a shoe.

Jasper sits back on his heels. He looks exhausted.

Where did he come from?

I suck in another breath.

“Thank you,” I say.

Jasper nods.

None of this could possibly be true.

People only come out of the blue and in the nick of time to save someone's life in stories. Therefore, I am a story.

Jasper is a story. And the blazing youth with their tongues in each other's mouths and their singing and their fire and the clump of them sauntering over and saying “What happened?” is a story.

We try to tell them.

Jasper tries to explain and I try to explain but they take us in—our wetness, my ripped shirt, my lack of shoe—and pin what happened with their eyes. And that is a story.

They think we've been groping each other. They think we went for a swim and made out and maybe had sex or tried to, and I breathed in water instead of breathing in Jasper.

They don't listen to me when I try and tell them about the waves talking.

They don't hear Jasper when he says, "I was just walking and I saw her."

They see us together in a rumple on the sand and the way we are both red and flushed. "Nice work," they say to Jasper. Me, they ogle, because they didn't know I had it in me. And yet, they did, because Evie says it's "just like" me to open my mouth and take in the sea instead of a boy.

It is just like me.

I look at Jasper, who is being pulled up by someone and invited to have a beer. I look at Evie, who's yanked me up too and is walking me back to the fire with her arm around my waist, talking about something something something.

I look at the waves. They're silent now.

I look at Dad, standing by the waves, a gauzy cloud against the water.

He's silent too.

Dad just saw how useless I am. Or maybe he already knew?

I HAVE NEARLY DIED A THOUSAND TIMES.

Okay. Maybe ten.

Okay. Maybe six.

There was the time I fell off the slide when I was five. From the edge of the playground, Dad saw me climb the slide to the top and stand up. Why did I stand? Maybe I was thinking of flying. Maybe I thought I was on a mountain? I don't remember.

I teetered, and Dad started to run, but no one could run that fast, not even Dad.

You could hear the crack of bone when I hit. My hand flipped all the way back and slapped my arm. Then I screamed.

Dad drove me to the hospital. He kept saying, "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

I lurched sideways when the car turned corners. I threw up in my booster seat. I remember Dad saying, "Why'd you stand up, Biz?" and, me crying and saying, "I don't know! I don't know!" and Dad saying, "You could have died, Biz; if you'd landed on your head you would have died."

There was the time I came roaring out of Mum in a wave of goo and blood. I was so slippery the midwife could have dropped me, Dad said. It's a miracle she didn't.

There was the time before Dad died when he couldn't sit still. He kept pacing through rooms, out the back veranda, out the front drive, up and down the stairs. Mum said then he was just restless, that his legs were restless.

She said, "Go for a run, Stephen," and he said, "I can't."

I showed him how to run with Bump. The dog and I went up the long drive so fast we left Dad behind, and when we got to the road, we almost forgot to stop and a yellow car drove past us so fast that it made my body shake. Bump barked and barked. When we came back to the house, Mum said Dad was so tired from watching us run, he'd gone to have a nap.

There was the time I walked into the sea and the sea almost took me, but a boy pulled me out and didn't speak to me afterwards, not once.

There was the time I was seven and saw my father in that room, in that wooden house on stilts, and I took off down the stairs, onto the back veranda and down the steep slope, tumbling almost over, almost splitting my crown like Jack or Jill.

I bolted over the creek and up the other side, scrambling to the little paddock with the brown horse and the big fig tree, and the tree's arms lifted me up and up until I was at the top and I wrapped my legs and arms around the big branch and shut my eyes until night came. Then Grandpa stood at the bottom of the tree and called my name.

I could have fallen from that tree. It was tall. I could have flown and fallen. I could have broken my neck. And the last thing I would have seen was the sky with its blinky stars. Or

the broad leaves of the fig tree. Or Grandpa's wrinkly face. Or Dad, with his eyes widewidewide, so sad to see me go.

So it turns out I have almost died somewhere between six and ∞ times.

I am dead in infinite alternate universes. I am mostly and most likely dead. I am dead, now, here. All doors opening, all doors closed.

JASPER HAS FOUND A GROUP TO SIT WITH. HE SITS WITH A bunch of guys—surfers, stoners, Suryan, who sent Grace the dick pic, and Tim, who Evie likes and is the school cross-country champion. They're all quite hot but also stupid.

Jasper hasn't spoken to me since I died in the waves. Almost died. Died in an alternate universe in the waves.

He hasn't looked at me once all week, even though I've looked at him, pointedly, in class. I've also lingered when leaving English and maths but he's walked right past me like I'm not there. I've counted how many times he hasn't spoken and hasn't looked. It's going into the triple digits.

Well, fuck Hero Jasper, who can't be bothered to say hello to the girl he saved. It's not like I asked him to do it. I could have swum myself to shore. I am no damsel.

When I pass the stupid boys they look at me with new eyes—they move over my face, arms, boobs, legs, the space between my legs, the space they picture under my dress.

I tell Grace by the lockers. "They're stripping me *as I walk*,

Grace. Arseholes. They think I was doing it with Jasper in the ocean. They think I'm about to have sex with them, which is seriously the most revolting—

"I'm sure they're not thinking that, Biz." Grace is digging through her locker, searching for something.

I raise my eyebrows. "Seriously?"

Grace's voice is muffled; she's got her head deep in the locker now. "Biz, they don't think you were having sex with Jasper in the ocean."

"How do you know?"

Grace comes out of the locker, holding up her calculator. "Ha! Found it!"

"How do you know, Grace?"

Grace won't catch my eye. She crouches over her backpack and tries to cram the calculator in.

"Grace?"

"I told Suryan and Suryan told them," she says, finally. She zips up her bag. She straightens and looks at me.

"Suryan. Penis photo guy?"

"Yeah."

"You're talking to him now? So the thing at the beach was an actual Thing?"

"Yeah," Grace says, and shrugs.

Grace heaves her pack onto her back. Our packs weigh a thousand kilos. I've got mine on and I can feel my bones bending. We both have four assignments due next week. We haven't had a break from homework in months, and I don't understand why the teachers don't talk to each other and space all this shit out, or why Grace is talking to Suryan, who sent her a photograph of his wrinkled penis. She's *talking to him* and the

kiss at the beach wasn't just a kiss at the beach, and now that I think of it, she wasn't standing with Evie and the others when I was flopped on the beach, mostly dead.

We walk out of school together. It's Friday. Every Friday we go to Grace's house. We swim, study, eat.

"Grace," I say.

"Mm-hmm?" says Grace, looking around the car park.

"Is there any information you want to share with me?"

Grace smiles, and I think she's smiling at me because she has to be kidding—she must be about to tell me she's joking—but her smile is directed past me, at someone leaving the car park with his arm out the window. It's Suryan, Penis Guy. And Jasper's in the back too, looking the other way, and the boy driving pulls out onto the road with a squeal, which the teacher on car park duty doesn't like at all.

URNS OUT GRACE AND SURYAN ARE THE REAL DEAL:
boyfriend and girlfriend.

Lovers.

Turns out Grace didn't come and see me die on the beach last weekend because she was having sex with Suryan in the dunes.

"Did he use a condom?" I ask her after our swim, over Doritos and dried apricots and guacamole.

"Of course," says Grace, nibbling on a chip.

"Oh my God, Grace," I say. I shove an apricot in my mouth but it tastes wrinkly, which makes me think of penises, and I have to spit it out into the bush next to Grace's pool deck.

"Gross, Biz," says Grace. "And also, a waste of a perfectly good apricot."

I stare at her. "You seem very calm for someone who had sex in a *dune*."

"I was ready," Grace says. "I wanted to see what it was like."

"What was it like?"

“A bit pinchy. He was kind of awkward, and it was fast. Like, it was over in maybe a minute, so there’s room for improvement.” Grace smiles, clearly reminiscing.

“So it hurt?”

“A bit, but Biz, that’s how it is the first time.”

Already Grace sounds a trillion years older than me. Jesus, I must sound like a child. *Did it hurt?* Of course it hurts. You’re ripping something open that will never come back together again. All the king’s horses.

“And now you’re going out with him,” I say, my voice flat.

“Yeah, and it turns out he likes anime, Biz, and he likes the same music and he’s even read *The Great Gatsby*.”

“Did he like it?”

“Well—he preferred the movie.”

“DiCaprio or Redford?”

“DiCaprio.”

We both make a face, and then we both start laughing because, *really?*

Grace shoves at my shoulder and I shove her back and for a second we look like an old photograph of us from a month ago, when we were whole and untouchable and nothing at all had changed between us.

I study at Grace’s for about an hour after our swim and then she gets a text from Penis Guy. She looks up at me, already guilty.

“Biz,” she says.

But I know where she’s going with this, because she’s been surreptitiously texting him all afternoon and she keeps

laughing at the things he's written but not saying them to me and it makes me feel like I'm floating, like I'm one of those balloons people let go, even though that balloon is going to fall in the ocean and kill a turtle.

"Yeah?" I say.

"It's Suryan. He doesn't have to work tonight."

"So?"

"He wants to see me."

"Is he taking you to a movie? To dinner? Ooh, nice," I say, sarcasm dripping because Suryan is too stupid to think of either of these things.

"He's saying we should go down to the beach again. A bunch of people are going. He says he misses me."

It's only been three hours since school finished.

"Aargh," I say.

"You can come. You're invited."

I try to arch a single eyebrow, but end up lifting both.

"Really," says Grace. "They said to come. And Jasper's going to be there," she adds, as if this changes anything.

"So much no to that request, Grace," I say, and I stand up.

Grace makes more noises to convince me to come, but I am not interested. When I go, I can tell she's already thinking about Suryan. Her goodbye sounds like someone calling from a train as it leaves.