

SEVEN DAYS, SEVEN STORIES 2020

Gabriel Bergmoser

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The Substitute

He walks past the empty corner shop that was once a convenience store and waits for a twist of warm recognition, but it doesn't come. He supposes there's no reason it should, with the shop gone. He keeps walking, and there ahead on the footpath are the familiar uniforms, bags over their shoulders, heads down in clumps as they talk and giggle. He smiles. He remembers being one of those kids.

The first recognition comes before he's even set foot on the school grounds. Mr Packer, leading a gaggle of students, waves to him from behind the fence as he heads into the building. Calls out that it's good to see him, that they'll have a class together on Friday. A wave back, a grin, and a sense of being welcomed that carries him through the gates and up towards the building he knew so well once upon a time. But who is he kidding? He still does. It's all the same; the red brick, the old arches, the big clock and stained-glass windows that would create a sense of class or grandiosity if it wasn't for all the kids with mullets yelling and jeering beneath them. The mullets, at least, are new. The rest, not so much.

The office lady, who looked in her eighties when he first came here and looks the same now, doesn't recognise him. He doesn't expect her to, but maybe he thinks she'll glance up with a furrowed brow when he gives his name. She doesn't. She tells him where to sign in and who to see. There's a printed timetable waiting for him. He looks it over; two or three classes every day of the week, the same presentation every time. He checks the room names but he doesn't remember any of them. It's been a decade, after all.

He's met at the office by a new teacher who explains that he'll be working across the oval, in the building that must have been constructed sometime in the last couple of years. The new junior school learning centre or something, she says, but he's not really listening. As they walk across he glances back at the building he knew then checks the timetable again. Every class, it seems, will be over there.

Why does that realisation come with a jab of disappointment? What exactly was he expecting here? He was invited as an ex student, to share his dubious expertise with the younger year levels. A typical act of boasting from a school that loves to show off past students made good and would also really prefer it if you capitalised the 'S' in 'school'.

The new building feels wrong. Too shiny, too covered in bright posters, too much glass and plastic. Wrong as opposed to what, he isn't sure he can quite articulate, at least not yet. But he

knows that there was a version of how this went in his head, vague and uncertain though it was, and this building is not it. Nor are the mullets.

On the way to his first class he keeps an eye out for more of his old teachers. None. New faces, harried and distracted, not giving him more than a cursory glance at the visitor pass around his neck.

The class goes well. He knew it would. He's good at this. He can make teenagers laugh, he can walk the line between serious and cheeky in a way that makes him seem like a rule breaker while not *actually* offending the faculty in any way. He can make what he does seem fun by linking it to the movies and games that even the most disinterested kids like. And yeah, he enjoys it. He likes the attention, the feeling of having that whole room hanging on his every word. He starts to think this week will be fun. But then the class is over and he's back in that new building and damn it's ugly. He doesn't want to hang out here if he doesn't have to.

But, he realises as he checks his phone, he *doesn't* have to. Not really. He doesn't have another session until the afternoon. He walks out of the building and looks across the oval. He stands there for a long time. His heart starts to pick up. He walks.

How many times had they made this walk? How many times had they been yelled at for straying on to the grass, had how many times had they pointed out the utter redundancy of being told to stay off a patch of ground that literally existed to be ran on? Retracing the steps, he waits for something to click into place, a feeling that he moves in synch with the ghost of his younger self, a feeling of the past being right there and at peace with who he is now. But there is no feeling. Just the still school (*School, shit*), the grass and the strange sense that this looks familiar but doesn't feel it.

Then he's in the school proper, stepping into a courtyard he hasn't set foot in in a decade. There's the classroom where he dropped a c-bomb and didn't get in trouble because the teacher largely agreed with that assessment of the person he was talking to. There's the bench where he and Sophie broke up, feeling like such adults as they kept calm and told each other how they'd always love each other. When was the last time he'd seen her? That beer, a few years back. Maybe they'd laughed about that conversation. He doesn't remember. He keeps walking.

Some sights spark memories. Others, he's thought about so much that they don't need to, but still he pauses and smiles and wonders why the smile doesn't feel more real. Why he feels like an actor carrying out some pre-planned role.

Through the courtyard and across to the performing arts centre. He stops there. Can he go down the stairs, to the basement room where they use to have drama classes? He can think of an excuse if he's caught. Or he can tell the truth. *Hey, sorry I'm working here for the week and*

I used to be a student so I thought I'd have a look. But saying that feels somehow like exposing something that is supposed to be private, revealing the way he feels that he has long since tried to squash because it's weird, because adults aren't supposed to think like this, because he is supposed to be living in the present and looking to the future.

He moves over to a nearby bench and sits, watching the door to the building.

There had been nights, nights when his girlfriend was away, where he would do something that he always regretted. Where he would dig up old writings from his school days, stories that at the time he saw as his Kerouac-esque account of the trials and tribulations of he and his friends. He would sit on the bed, listen to music from the time, and drink cheap wine as he read, until the point where the combination of the songs he knew, the pompous retellings of his teenage self and the drunken haze made him feel like he was stepping back in time, like he was moving through those events and that time. He would get emotional. He would feel with such *power* what he had felt then, that sweet and warm and terrible sensation of the familiar.

His hangovers were always especially bad after those nights.

He stands and goes through the door. The smell, that too clean smell like new rubber and cleaning product, makes him stop at the top of the stairs. He closes his eyes and breathes it in. He'd forgotten the smell.

The walls down here are covered in photos from theatre shows. Some, he recognises immediately. Many are new. He stops at a couple of points. Photos of him and Sophie and the rest, faces contorted in such serious expressions because they were *acting* and they were inhabiting the character, whatever the fuck that meant. He keeps on down the stairs.

He pauses at the entrance to the drama classroom, placing his ear against the door. No sound. He opens the door. He looks around. Has it always been so big? A black box theatre space, the old head of drama (long since retired) had called it. Designed to be easily transformed into anything. Right now, it's just the black box and the blank slate and the ceiling is too high. Maybe they've renovated. He shuts the door.

As he walks back across the oval (*stepping on the grass deliberately, try yelling at me now Mrs Harris*) he wonders why he had said yes to this. Pragmatically, anyway, he knows the answer. He doesn't need the money and he's already plenty busy. But when the offer had come he'd agreed straight away. He'd mentioned it offhand to old friends, who'd laughed – *couldn't pay me to go back there, better you than me mate*. But even though they'd shared it, they never felt what he feels towards this place. What he's missed for so long. What he came here to find again.

It hadn't just been a school. Not to him. Moving from the country to board here, his last three years of school spent here before stepping straight into his adult life in the city, this place became a threshold. Representative of the moment his life changed and his path began to unfurl in front of him. The friends he'd made, the things he'd experienced, all of it was tied up in those years he'd loved so much and missed so desperately when they ended too soon. While everyone else had been ready to run as fast as they could, he had looked back, again and again, even when he knew he should be happy with what he had. When he *was* happy but somehow wanted this place and his time here more. He hadn't been happy in that time, ironically. He'd been an angry teenager. But time has turned pain and angst into something comforting, turned rough edges into a gentle haze. Created a feeling that he associates with this time and place but had never once felt back then.

Halfway across the oval he turns and looks back. It's all the same. But at the same time, it's utterly different. The people he'd shared it with are long gone. But beyond that, *he* is gone. The person he had been when this place was his life and his world. He can miss that kid, but that won't bring him back. It's like returning to your house only to find it empty. The walls and the shape are there. But the things that made it yours aren't.

He checks the time. Another class soon. Half an hour. Enough time to check out more of his old haunts. But then, there's a whole week ahead. And he does have some work to try and get done in between his classes.

He turns and walks for the new building.

Amelia

Amelia always wanted a smoke the most during morning prayers. At first she'd figured that would change over the years, but not so. If anything, the keening, demanding urge just got worse, making her fingers twitch and her jaw clench even as she sang out in praise of her lord and saviour.

It always passed, though, something she had to remind herself in the moment. By the time the last drones came from beneath the cross, the last amens echoed from the vaulted ceilings and the sisters dispersed to do God's bidding, she felt more or less herself again. More or less.

Some of the Sisters got to work on the computers, to maintain social media for the church and monastery. Which Amelia figured she'd be pretty good at, given she was younger than just about every other nun here, but no; she was always pointedly given the more medieval tasks, the categorising and cleaning. She wondered if it was punishment for something, if maybe someone here knew or recognised her from before. More likely it was punishment for being both the age she was and stupid enough to lock herself up here with the rest. Amelia liked that theory the most. It made everyone seem a little more human.

Today, she was given more tasks than usual. Long dusty ornaments needed to gleam, apparently, while any stubborn weeds in the garden had to be gone by midday. Because at midday, there would be a visitor, and a message needed to be sent. Amelia was only partly aware of the muttering that had surrounded this impending date, and she'd kept it that way because the whole idea of scrabbling and grovelling to play nice with some local politician who was known for their dislike of traditional religious institutions made her feel like she hadn't felt in a long time, like she was at the mercy of someone with only contempt for her, like she was a pathetic, weaselling coward writhing and begging for kindness. She hadn't come here to be that person anymore. So she did her jobs quietly and didn't involve herself in the bullshit politics.

Midday came and Amelia was still in the garden. She'd been slow at work, partly because it was boring and partly because she wasn't going to let herself get caught up in the hubbub. Also it was a nice day and she might as well enjoy the clear sky and the sun, even if her thick and scratchy habit made it less than pleasant. But she'd enjoy it regardless, and she was doing so until she looked up to see the approaching delegation.

A team of some sort buzzed about the woman, whose pencil skirt, jacket and immaculate arrangement of blonde hair made her look like some kind of high end businessperson. A man in a suit with a clipboard spoke fast to her, a younger woman with a camera scurried along behind and as they neared Amelia hunched her shoulders and tried to find a weed, any fucking weed, that she could occupy herself with until they were gone.

‘Morning Sister!’ the voice of the politician, a bright friendly tone that Amelia knew all too well was fake. She didn’t look up. This non-existent weed’s removal was the Lord’s will and Amelia was not about to be distracted from it. A shadow on the garden, then voices from the front door, shrill and oh-so-pleased, then silence again.

Amelia straightened up and turned. Everyone was gone but her heart pounded hard and heavy. Her breathing had turned shallow and in the habit the warmth was too much, way too much. She put a shaking hand over her face. She was sweating badly. She moved over to the garden wall and sat even though she knew she shouldn’t, even though she knew she had to be away from this damned place as quickly as possible, somewhere quiet and dark where she couldn’t be found.

No. She was being stupid. Cowards ran and she wasn’t a coward anymore. Hadn’t coming here in the first place been about proving that? Still. She didn’t need to face the things she didn’t want to if it could be avoided. There was a Bible verse for that, somewhere. Turn the other cheek? No, it was more specific than that. Maybe.

She made her way around the back of the monastery, to where the shadow of the towering old stone building made the increased warmth of the day a little more bearable. She checked her watch. Five past midday. Shit. She was going to have to stay here for a while. The meeting would be at least half an hour and if they chose to come outside...

She tried to think back to the snippets of conversation that had gotten through her deliberate obstinance. The local member, a progressive who was no fan of these old religious institutions. Newly elected, maybe. Amelia didn’t know. She’d thrown away her vote. She neither wanted to know about the outside world nor influence it. But maybe she should because if...

Her breathing was turning fast and fevered again. She closed her eyes and rocked back and forth on her heels. *In for six seconds, hold for six seconds, out for six seconds.* Repeat. She would not lose control. She was better than that.

Minutes crept, slow and leisurely. She tracked the sun. She maintained her breathing. She shoved away the slither of memories and repeated prayers that had always bored her until she checked her watch again and it was almost one. She stayed where she was.

It was three when she returned inside, tentative and uncertain. It didn't take long to tell that the politician was gone. Some tension, increased over the past few days, had slipped away. The Sisters talked happily and without any indication that they'd all been so on edge before. Amelia didn't ask anyone how the meeting had gone. She didn't want to know. Evidently it had distracted everyone enough to not ask her where she had been all afternoon.

After dinner, after her evening prayers, Amelia dressed down, then slipped a hand under her bed, where a packet of cigarettes was taped to the underside of the mattress. She paused by the door, then slipped down the darkened hall and the stairs. She reached the back door, waited a moment, then stepped out into the cool night air. She looked up at the occasional stars and lit a smoke. She inhaled. God that was good. She had missed this.

'I fucking *knew* it.'

Like searing ice the voice went through her. Amelia didn't turn. *Breathe*. She inhaled smoke. She heard footsteps. Then a flicker of light as Callie lit her own smoke.

Amelia made herself look. The jacket was gone, replaced with a jumper. No high heels anymore, and her hair was down, framing that mischievous grin she'd known so well. Something other than fear, something too hot and dangerous, somewhere at the strange intersection of hate and longing, flared.

Callie's eyes moved up and down. She shook her head. 'Jesus, Melie. Or should I not take the Lord's name in vain?'

'Not if you want to make nice with the Sisters.'

Callie rolled her eyes. 'PR, eh? Big concentration of religious nuts in my electorate and a lot of complaints about my lefty agenda.' She made air quotes. 'Have to banish the perception that I hate the sanctimonious shits. Course, if I'd known...' She trailed off. The smile faltered. 'This is where you've been. This whole time.'

'Not the whole time,' Amelia said. 'I travelled for a bit. Looked at a few options. Settled on this.'

'And coming home wasn't one of those options?'

'I am home.'

Anger flashed in Callie's eyes. 'That so, Melie? How'd you figure? Don't you remember the shit we used to pull at the local churches? Rocks through the window, pissing in—'

A scrape of ugly shame. 'Yeah. I remember. But I'm not like that anymore.'

Callie took a drag of her smoke. 'Using the habit to cover things up, are you?'

Amelia made herself hold Callie's withering gaze. 'What about you? You're a politician, now?'

‘Making a difference,’ Callie said. ‘Not locking myself up in a convent—’

‘Monastery.’

‘—and hoping my imaginary friend will make everything all better.’

‘I’m not hoping anything, Callie. Why are you here?’

Callie shrugged. ‘I guessed you’d still be sneaking out for your nightly smoke. Very devout, that. When I saw you today I... well at first I thought it had to be a mistake. But the more I thought about it the more it made sense. And I had to know for sure.’

‘Now you know,’ Amelia said. ‘So what do you want?’

Silence hung.

‘I want to know why,’ Callie said. ‘Because you sure as fuck haven’t turned to God.’

‘Want to bet?’

‘I don’t need to bet. I know you. This...’ She gestured at her. ‘This is like you playing punk to piss off your parents when you were a kid. It’s a bad costume. So tell me what’s really going on.’

Any aggression or judgement seemed to fall from Callie’s tone. For a moment, she was gentle. For a moment, the question was real and Amelia wanted to answer it properly, wanted to come clean and finally tell the truth she’d never said aloud because then she’d be exposed, then the holes in her own plan could be thrown right back at her and she’d be unable to explain why she had made the choices she had even though she knew on a fundamental level that they were her only chance to break away from the things she needed to break away from and change herself, for good this time. She could tell Callie, then and there, that it wasn’t about God and never had been, that it was about isolation, discipline and reflection, that here she could be safe and looked after and let herself dry out away from the pills and the booze and the nights she couldn’t remember and the friends who wouldn’t look at her the next day. And Callie. Away from Callie, above all else, Callie who of course had survived everything with smiling confidence and not only survived but *thrived*, seizing her ambitions as she always said she would while Amelia had to lock herself away just to manufacture a fledgling chance of survival.

She wanted to say it all. She almost did say it. But she knew opening that door even a crack would give Callie the chance to wedge in her crowbar and burst the whole thing wide open. For all that she presented as mature and changed and different that smile told Amelia how far from true it really was. Accusations of costume wearing and insinuations of knowing the other too well to buy it – the irony.

‘No,’ Amelia said. No lies. Just refusal. The door remained barricaded.

Callie's eyes crossed her face, searching, looking for the crack. She dropped her cigarette and stepped on it. She moved in close. Amelia stayed put. Callie grabbed her by the back of the head and kissed her hard on the mouth.

Vines around her then, pulling tight and hard. The need to kiss back, the hunger, the pain that made her want to throw the door open and let the chips fall where they may, to slip back through into that old world, to be Callie's again, all hers. To be owned.

But she didn't. Callie pulled back. Amelia stayed where she was.

'It won't last,' Callie whispered. 'This. You know you can't keep playing dress-up.'

Amelia could have said the same. She didn't.

A last moment, a last search for her in, then Callie turned and walked away. She stopped, right before the night consumed her. She looked back. 'I'm not a monster, Melie. You know that, right?'

Amelia nodded. 'I know.'

'That's not some churchy bullshit forgiveness thing, is it?'

Amelia laughed. 'No. it's not. Goodnight Callie.'

Callie went to speak again. She didn't. She left.

Amelia watched after her. She looked down. Her own cigarette, burned to the butt between her fingers. Callie's on the ground, discarded without thought. She knelt and picked it up. Her fist closed around the two. She looked back at the door to the monastery. She raised the two butts, one crushed, one round, to her lips.

Night

Night, and the fires were getting higher.

He could see them, distant and dancing from where he waited on the porch with the shotgun he'd held so tightly for so long that it might as well have become another limb. Distant, but not far enough. Closer wasn't the danger. Higher was, and they licked the clear night sky, near to devouring the stars. There was no smoke from these fires. They burned clear and allowed no obscuring. Nobody could mistake them for anything other than what they were.

He checked again. Five cartridges. No point. Nothing would have changed. He had thought he was well stocked before, but everything had changed so fast. Years of farming and he'd rarely had to fire a gun. Two days of the fires and he was practically a marksman. Two days of the whispering across his paddocks, of eyes turning hateful and focused, of voices he knew uttering words he didn't and all the while he was the only one unaffected, the only one who could still think clearly because he'd known this was coming and he'd prepared. More concerned with being ready than being called crazy. None of them could call him anything anymore.

His hand hurt. Blood was starting to seep through the thick bandage that wrapped its way from each finger up to his elbow. He'd made it as tight as possible but that was hard, one handed. And the pain, then, had been worse than he could have anticipated. He'd known it would come, of course, but knowing and feeling were not the same thing. Knowing could not prepare you for skin being torn from muscle, every cell in your body reacting violently to this primal violation, every instinct demanding you stop doing this thing that was so at odds with nature, this thing that human beings were not supposed to do to themselves.

Night, and all the rules were broken.

During the day the fires had looked different, of course. Still there but washed out by blue skies and sun. Without smoke, they were the occasional flicker of red on the horizon. Easy to ignore and everyone else *had* ignored them, had looked away and told him they weren't there all the while he did what he had to do to be ready for the night. And now night was here, hours of dark crawling past, far too many hours to be a single night the way they had known it in the time before, hours that added up to weeks and the fires still rose with the screaming and the panicking and then the turn from horror to acceptance, the worst turn, the turn that made him lift the gun and crying violate yet another law of what it was to be human.

There was no point in hating the fires, but he hated them anyway, hated them in that way that made him want to run screaming into the flames, giving in to the rush of savage fury that rose in him every time he thought about what they had made him do. To empty his gun at the blaze and see it made not worse or better but remain unchanged. His small act of rebellion as pointless as a pebble fighting a river.

He had fought. He was proud of that. But he knew now in the depths of night that pride was worth very little. There was nobody to share it with, nobody to know or remember. He might have thought, back in the daytime, that pride would give him comfort when the fires rose. But it didn't. It was a flimsy twig dangling from a tree the size of a mountain, a twig he hung to even though he knew it would break because maybe those few extra stolen moments of life would lead to a way out, even if they were filled with terror. Even if he knew that the only way out, whether he took his route or the fires', ended in the same place.

Night, and it was almost time.

The fires swayed like whirlwinds now, tall and thin and moving, writhing columns dividing the night. They were so high he could no longer see the stars. They still didn't look any closer but that was their illusion. Humans could always ignore danger as long as it didn't seem too near. It was so easy to view threats as an abstract, to say you understood even though you didn't, even though you were letting yourself stay ignorant because that way you could keep worrying about all the things that weren't important at all.

He could hear the whispers now. It didn't matter how much skin he had sacrificed. It didn't matter that he had put nails through his eardrums. It didn't matter that he had poured his daughter's blood around the edges of the house, stopping every few seconds to convulse in sobs that scoured his insides and made him want to die. He had done everything he could. But in the end that was never going to be enough. It had to be more than him and it hadn't been. Everybody else was too fixated on the false safety of the day. As if night was the shroud, the temporary state, the unnatural. As if day had ever been real to begin with. Now there was no day. Now there only was what there was.

The sky was gone. The fires had met and they no longer danced. They were a wall across the land and the heavens and all there had ever been, and their whispering rose. Voices of fears and private hates and the secret that he had held for so long, that he had fought to keep down, that now repeated itself over and over again without mockery or jeering because it just was and no light could hide the fact. He raised the shotgun and rested his chin on it. The whispering was louder. He could pull the trigger and the fires would be gone. He could stand defiant and

have it mean nothing. The last man on earth shouting a message to the void that he had been here, he had been alive and he had tried.

He dropped the gun. He stood. The fires parted.

Night, and—

The Yew Bow

We were partway through watching *Lord of the Rings* when Dad got up and walked out. I probably wouldn't have noticed but it was the way he did it that told me this wasn't about needing to wee or get another beer. It was abrupt, like something had shocked him or he'd suddenly remembered the oven was on. But I'd turned off the oven myself and besides, he didn't go to the kitchen but out into the hall.

I returned my attention to the screen, where Legolas was shooting some orcs with his bow and arrow. I watched for a moment but I kept wondering what was wrong with Dad so I stood and followed him. I thought he might have gone to his room or something but he was in the hall, leaning his forehead against the wall, shoulders shaking, hugging himself. His eyes were closed tight and his teeth bared. He looked in pain. I thought about saying something, then returned to the couch. I picked up the plate of leftover Christmas ham but didn't eat. Maybe something had happened while I was at university. Maybe Dad was sick, or Mum was. But they had seemed fine the whole time I'd been home. Dad had told bad jokes over Christmas dinner while Mum whispered salacious gossip about the ladies at work and I pretending to be interested. All normal. Bad Dad crying wasn't.

In bed that night I considered how to approach it. I tried to think if I'd ever seen Dad like that before. There was a vague memory rattling around in my head, of him yelling with tears in his eyes, but I must have been very young or else it had been a dream or something because the image was blurry and barely there. Whenever I tried to grab at it it slipped away, which was a bit frustrating because through all of my childhood and beyond it was the only indication I seemed able to find that he'd ever expressed that sort of emotion around me.

The next morning I went for a walk. I hadn't yet decided what to do, whether to ask Dad if something was wrong or let him decide to tell me in his own time. It was possible that none of it was my business and it was something work related or whatever. I didn't think so, but I figured if it did affect me then Dad would say something. He wasn't an oversharer or anything, but he also wasn't so closed off that he couldn't be honest about something that mattered.

Walking down the street, I stopped automatically at an old, red brick house with an overgrown garden. It took me a moment to realise why I'd recognised it. Old Mr and Mrs Tanner used to live there. They had given me lollies when I was playing outside while they worked in the garden, and Mr Tanner would tell me stories about Robin Hood when I said he

was my idol and how I'd seen him in a movie. I liked them, but at some point they'd died. I tried to remember what happened. Mrs Tanner had died first, I think. I remembered the ambulance and how everyone stood out on the street watching with their hands over their mouths. I remembered Mr Tanner, who had always been ruddy and broad, looking like a washed-out ghost as they carried the stretcher away. I remembered the drop of blood that fell from the sheet, how I'd watched it fall, how nobody else had noticed.

I walked up to the garden wall. There was an old bike lying in the long grass and some shoes by the door. Somebody else lived there now. But they didn't care for the place the way the Tanners did. I remembered how Mrs Tanner was always in the garden, often until night, often the only person there. I'd watch her from the oak tree across the road sometimes, wondering how there was always so much to do, how she never just took a break, except for the times when Mr Tanner would take over. That was rare but I liked those times more, because Mr Tanner was always nicer and he knew about Robin Hood. He'd even given me a branch from the yew tree out the back to make my own bow and arrow. He'd told me this was rare, that there weren't many yew trees in the area. He'd told me to be careful with it.

I sat on the garden wall. I'd forgotten about the bow. Thinking back on it now, it seemed a strange thing to give a kid. Dangerous, even. Had I ever told my parents? Probably not. I'd known they would take it off me.

Across the road from the Tanner's old house was the oak tree I used to watch from. It looked the same now as it had back then, although I supposed oak trees never did change very much. I looked at the branches, trying to imagine climbing them now. It had been so easy when I was a kid. Now I would be awkward, worried about my clothes and about falling. I would look down and I would be uncomfortable in the fork in the trunk that used to feel sculpted to me. Now, the idea of spending hours up there seemed laughable. Back then, it just was. Back when my parents had let me run around in the street because it was safe and I'd always come home. Back before Mrs Tanner died. When was the last time I had climbed the tree? I had vague memories of shimmying up, the bow over my shoulder, a homemade quiver of homemade arrows dangling from my waist. But that could have been any time. That memory was ubiquitous. It had happened a lot, perching in the tree pretending to be Robin Hood, ready to shoot. I had practiced on other trees but before long it became clear that I needed a moving target. Otherwise what good would I be?

I remembered the rawness of my fingers when I could come home. I remembered the satisfying snap of the string as I let the arrow go. The thrill when it found home.

Something tugged at me. Some strange sliver of recollection.

But then it was gone.

I shrugged. I'd have to remember to ask Dad at some stage what had happened to the Tanners. Hopefully he was feeling better when I got home. He would tell me in his own time if something was the matter. Dad, after all, was never the type to bury something toxic.

I patted the garden wall, got to my feet, gave the old oak one last glance, and walked home.

The Bus, The Farmhouse and the Road

The bus had broken down in the middle of, as one of the louder passengers called it, buttfuck nowhere. It wasn't dark yet, grey and stormy though the sky was, but the way everyone muttered and looked shiftily around the place could easily give the impression that this was midnight in some uncharted badland where anything could happen.

Maggie doubted anything would happen, or at least anything interesting. Her bag over her shoulder, leaning against the side of the stationary vehicle, as far away from the others as she could get without seeming deliberately isolated, she watched the landscape. The rising and falling hills of mustard yellow grass desperate for the rain teased by the sky, the clumps of drooping gums, the farmhouse on the rise directly across from them, low to the ground and looking like a relic from colonial days, at least from here. Behind it the scrubby paddocks gave way to thick trees coating the unclaimed hills, some crested with thick white mist, others where the trees were interrupted by stark, jutting rocks. Maggie didn't know where they were, really. She knew the name of the town the bus was going to if not the town itself, but the inbetween places had only held any interest to her insofar as making sure she hadn't been through them before. Sometimes she made the mistake of being memorable.

She glanced over to where the driver, grunting and swearing, was still working at the engine. Idly she wondered if she should offer to help, but she was rubbish with engines; she'd learnt that after her last car broke down. She'd decided to take the bus before stealing another; Maggie did her best to only steal from people who deserved it, or at least annoyed her, but she'd had an uncommonly peaceful stretch of weeks and with the car dead or at least in dire enough straits that it might as well be (and, given the stolen license plate, not remotely worth bringing in to a mechanic) Maggie was consigning herself to buses for now.

The bus driver swore loudly, prompting a reprimand from an older woman who squaked something about 'bad influence' and 'kids aboard'. Maggie turned her attention back to the farmhouse. She wondered how to get there from here. There didn't seem to be an obvious road.

Figuring the bus would take a while to fix, she started to walk, past the rear tyres and back the way they had come. The road stretched straight in front of her, overhung by trees and running parallel to a sagging barbed wire fence on either side. She supposed she wouldn't have noticed if there *had* been any kind of turn off, given she hadn't been looking, but she was curious, or at least looking for a distraction from what was going on at the bus. She made a mental note to seek out some sleazy miscreant the moment she got to her destination and steal

his car. Maybe after a couple of blows to the head, depending on how sleazy a miscreant he actually was.

She looked sideways towards the farmhouse again. What was life like, out there? Did the owner ever pay attention to the road over here, or did it disappear into the hilly surrounds, making them feel alone on their one rise in the middle of nowhere? There was no denying the presence of the road, of course, but maybe there was some kind of peace to be found in pretending it wasn't there and with it, the rest of the world.

Maggie stopped. God that thought was sweet. Somewhere to live, somewhere isolated that nobody passing by would ever have occasion to pay attention to unless, like her, they were stuck here and trying to distract themselves. Had whoever owned that house done something as well, something that made such a place the only place for them? Separate from the world but not hiding from it, or maybe just hiding in plain sight, not worth the extra focus that could destroy the solitude.

There was a side road up ahead, a dirt road that Maggie guessed, based on the location, turned off to the farm. She looked back at the still stationary bus. She closed her eyes. Imagined continuing on her way, turning down that road, heading to the farm and seeing what she found there. Maybe somebody who needed some help around the place. Maybe it was abandoned, just an empty shell nobody had bothered to check on.

She could, after all. She had nowhere to be. Worst case scenario she'd be turned away and then it would be a hitchhike; unpleasant but nothing she hadn't managed before. And maybe whatever she found there would be the right thing after all. Maybe it would mean an end, even temporary, to the road, the stealing, the buses and all the rest. She took another step. Looked at the mouth to the road. But she didn't go further.

She had seen many roads like that before. But there was one in particular that appeared in her mind. She didn't even know, with any certainty, how long ago that had been now. Months, maybe. Years, more likely. It all blurred together. But the sight of that road remained crystal clear. She had been with somebody when she went down it, somebody who she was using. For their car, before she started stealing them. She had known, on some level, that whatever waited at the end of that road, if anything, was for her to face and her alone but blinkered she had pulled him into it. Later, she had seen his blood soaked into the dirt and known with a twist of sharp self-loathing that it was her fault. That she had fucked up and because of that somebody innocent was dead now. It hadn't been the first time. It might not even have been the last. But it was the time she remembered now as she looked at that road. The price of her lifestyle, maybe. But not really. Her lifestyle was her choice, preferable to facing the things she didn't

want to face. Risking her life not becoming her own. Selfishness. She knew it still simmered at the core of who she was, and the knowledge was like a cold stone in her gut.

She put her hands in her pockets and walked back towards the bus.

The driver had gathered the other passengers around the door and was going over a clipboard. As Maggie drew closer she heard him speaking.

‘Alright, looks like we’re all here, so...’ He saw Maggie and trailed off. ‘Hang on.’ He looked back at his list. Frowned as he read over it again. Look up at the assembled passengers. ‘We’ve got an extra.’

‘Didn’t anyone get on on the way?’ an irritable looking man snapped.

‘Nobody who wasn’t already on the list,’ the driver said. ‘Which means someone isn’t supposed to be here.’

Maggie’s eyes moved automatically across the other passengers. Mutters and looks of irritation, a rising buzz of something that sounded a lot like ‘who the fuck cares?’ But the driver’s eyes remained narrowed and finally they landed on a pale, wide eyed teenage girl in an oversized black hoodie.

‘You got a ticket?’ he asked brusquely.

She nodded and it might as well have been a confession.

The driver extended a hand. ‘Show me.’

The girl opened and closed her mouth. Looked around. That fear in her eyes, Maggie knew it. Someone with no money, no past, someone doing whatever they could to get as far as they had to from something ugly. She didn’t need to know more. She waited for somebody to offer up money, to pay for the girl’s ticket. None did. They all scowled at her, angry at the hold up.

‘I think I might have...’ The girl’s voice was a miniscule squeak.

‘You dropped it,’ Maggie said, holding up her own ticket. All eyes turned to her as she approached. ‘It was in the dirt over there. Here you are.’ She handed the stricken, shaking girl her own ticket then turned to the driver. ‘I snuck on. Thought I’d try and get away with it.’

The driver bristled. ‘I ticked you off. You—’

‘Ticked *her* off,’ Maggie said. ‘Easy mistake. Anyway, she has a ticket and I don’t. I’m your stowaway.’

The drive looked between them. He knew, of course, but what was he going to say?

‘Well... will you pay for a ticket then?’ He asked.

Maggie hefted her bag over her shoulder. ‘Nope. No money. But these good people look like they want to move, so that might be your best bet. Don’t want any scathing reviews of the bus line, do we?’

The driver was speechless. Even he knew not to leave a woman alone on the side of the road. 'Well, I mean, maybe we can... work something out.'

'Work it out fast,' somebody growled. 'It's getting cold.'

As one, the passengers moved for the door. Maggie and the girl stayed put, the driver watching them, until everyone else was on board.

'You paid,' the driver said finally.

'Kick me off or don't,' Maggie said. 'But I don't have a ticket. She does.'

The driver looked between them. His teeth clenched. 'Get on. Both of you.'

He turned and climbed the stairs. Maggie gestured for the girl to move ahead. Shoulders hunched, eyes down, she did. Maggie followed. She could feel the eyes on them but ignored it. She sat next to the girl, who tried to mutter something, but Maggie shook her head. The bus was moving and people would be paying attention.

Maggie slipped a hand into her backpack and withdrew a bundle of notes. She didn't know how much it was, but she slipped it to the girl.

'Look after yourself,' she said, then stood and moved down the aisle to her seat at the back of the bus. Through the window, she saw the darkening shape of the farm vanish as they pulled away.

Look after yourself until you can look after someone else. Maybe that's what she should have said. But it was up to the girl to decide what to do with that. Maggie, as much as she could, had already decided. She rested her head against the cool glass and closed her eyes.

The Hanged Man

They hanged the man on the outskirts of town, where the gallows had stood for as long as I could remember. I did not watch the hanging itself, although I was curious, but when it was done Father walked me down the road that lead from our house through the town itself and to the spot where the man swayed in the occasional gusts of winter wind.

This, father had said, is what becomes of criminals. I asked what crime the man had committed but father shook his head. The lesson, for him, was over. It was now mine to remember.

The man did not look quite right, dangling there like that. I had been told at school that human bodies went pale when they died, but his face was bloated and almost purple, his tongue hanging out and his eyes bulging and bloodshot. An oversized coat was around his shoulders and he wore fingerless gloves. Dressed like a man without being one anymore.

I thought about him after prayers when I lay in bed that night. I was not disturbed or upset. Beyond anything I was fascinated by who he had been and who he was now. By whether death began the moment he committed his crime and became condemned, or when the noose snapped his neck.

The next afternoon, when Father went to the tavern, I returned to the hanged man. One of his eyes had gone to the crows but there was no blood on his cheeks. He did not sway anymore. He was still and stark against the grey sky and mud. I stood there watching him and after several minutes the peculiar thought of what a dead man might keep in his pockets occurred to me. There was nobody else about so I stretched up as high as I could and reached into his coat pocket. One was empty. In the other, I found a scrunched up piece of paper. Unfolding it, I saw it was covered in jagged, scratchy scrawl. I could not believe my luck. A letter from a dead man.

After making sure Father had not come home yet, I spread it out on my desk in my room and read the words. Some I did not understand. Some were too messy and in places tears had blotted sentences until they were no more than dark smudges. The main word I could make out, every time I read it, was 'sorry'. The other was the name of a woman.

This felt strange somehow. Like I'd done something wrong. If this was an intimate letter between a man and a woman then a child of my age had no business intruding, even if the man was dead. But feelings did little to stop me trying to read it again.

I returned to the dead man three days later. With the letter resisting my interpretation, I wondered if reading it in his presence might somehow make things clearer. Maybe, with him in sight, I could better understand what he might tearfully have been trying to say in his last hours on the planet, and to whom.

By now, his body had a strange smell about it. It was hard to place because I'd never smelt anything like it. I suppose it was unpleasant, but to me it just smelt different. There was some kind of sweetness there, and something not far off the wet, deep parts of the woods after weeks of rain and no sun. It was a strong smell and might have made me cough were I less interested in what it was and trying to place it. The man's face had become mottled now, the red offset by grey, especially around the empty eye sockets. I wondered when they would cut him down or if they would bury him. I wondered if they would leave him up for months and what he might look like then. I imagined myself, dead in this same way, hanging from the gallows and slowly looking less and less human.

I unfolded his letter. This was human, even if it was impossible to fully comprehend. But it was hard to imagine that the strange smelling thing in front of me had ever cried over a woman he needed to apologise for, and gone to his death with the words unshared in his pocket.

I knew better than to ask father anything else about the man. He could grow angry if pushed on things he did not want to talk about and worse if asked a question to which he did not know the answer. Part of me suspected the real reason he hadn't told me the man's crime was that he didn't know. Beyond this, if it got back to Father that I had gone around town asking questions about the dead man, that too might be seen as cause for punishment. No, all I had was the letter and the slowly deteriorating shell of the man himself.

I looked again at the words on the letter. Some snatches of sentences I believed I could not piece together. ...*dearest Annette, I must...you know I am more sorry than...Annette you were my...the day under the willow when the reverend...Annette...sorry...Annette.*

I had always thought a criminal was less than human somehow. I may never have seen one hang, but the thought of it happening had given me no reason for doubt at all. Criminals did things that forfeited what made them human. What I think I started to see in that letter was the idea that maybe a criminal did what they did *because* they were human.

I kept visiting the hanged man over the coming weeks. I watched the incremental changes. The hollowing cheeks. The waxy, tightening skin. The transition of his clothing to rags. And still his words in the letter, the few I could read, remained clear.

Did Annette know what had happened to him? Would she visit him if she did? I couldn't imagine she would like to see him like this, but still. If he had been important to her then surely

she would know. But even so, that didn't explain why he had never sent this letter. Condemned men were allowed to send letters, we had been told that at school. Why would this man not want Annette to know that he was sorry?

Left in his pocket like it was, it had become clear to me that I very likely was the only one who had ever even seen the letter, and therefore the only one who knew the man was sorry. And while whatever he had done clearly meant that no amount of apology would save him from the gallows, it seemed important somehow that that fact was remembered. Because if he was sorry, I felt, he could not have been a monster. No matter what Father and the rest believed. But I knew that there was nothing to be gained by trying to tell them, or by sharing the letter I had stolen from a dead man's pocket.

One day I went to visit him and found the body gone. It was more of a surprise than it should have been. At some stage, of course, the smell would become too much for most and he would have to be buried. I visited the cemetery but there was no sign of where he might have been placed. However, thereafter I considered that the cemetery was consecrated ground and the executed did not go there.

I found the mound of freshly dug dirt in a large, overgrown field behind the cemetery. I could not know for sure that this was where he lay, but it made sense to me. I stood there for a long time, without knowing why. I told the dirt that I knew he was sorry. I couldn't forgive him, but I could know. I walked around the field until I found a large rock. I placed it on the dirt and, after some thought, used another rock to scratch the shape of a cross into it. I don't know why I did that. Maybe I just didn't want the man to be forgotten, even if the rock was not about to change that. I, at least, would always know it was there.

Over time I stopped visiting. The dirt did not provide the same opportunities for thought that the body did, and soon other things took my fancy. As years passed and I became taller while Father shrivelled and shrank and kept drinking, I met women and made new friends. I worked for a living and when war was announced I did my duty and signed up. I see little point in treading over the blood soaked ground of my time holding weapons and killing, but suffice to say that soon the smell I had once considered strange but not so terrible as many thought became something I never wanted to smell again. The hanged man did nothing to prepare me for what it was to see men you knew rotting away before your eyes, staying put on increasingly crowded battlefields day after day because to move them is suicide. Occasionally I did think of the hanged man, but I had other concerns.

He did not truly return to my life until one late afternoon when an officer visited our station. He made a point of asking us all where we had come from and who our parents were. Of course

I gave him my father's name, but when he asked after my mother I had to confess I did not know. This appeared to confuse the officer; many men there did not know their fathers, but to not know their mother was something else, something abnormal. I could not explain more than what I knew; Father had refused to tell me her name or say anything about her, and I had learned fast not to push his refusal. In time, as was the way with such things, thoughts of my mother had faded like thoughts of the hanged man; never truly gone but distant enough to lose significance.

After that day, however, I did start to think about her again. I tried not to. There was no benefit that I could see. And yet, the strangeness of a life I had not thought to consider strange began to grow evident. It had taken an adult's perspective to cast light on what as a child I accepted, and now that the light was cast I could not look away from what it illuminated.

I had not seen my father in many years. This was for no reason other than the lack of much reason to. He had raised me, provided me with a home and food, and when I became a man that responsibility was at its end. I left him to his drink and went out to live a life my own. But when the war ended, I decided to visit him. I returned to the old town, unchanged for the most part except, as I learned stopping in the mud as I neared the first buildings, the gallows were gone. Somehow this difference seemed fundamental.

It occurred to me as I approached my old house that my father might have died. It was not as though anybody would have the means of contacting me if he had. But the smell that greeted me upon crossing the threshold was not that of death. It was of human waste, of cheap liquor, of neglect now unleashed because he had no reason to stave it off.

I found my father in a chair by the ashen fireplace. He did not appear to recognise me at first. His beard was overgrown, his eyes hollow. When I told him my name he grunted and nodded. His eyes moved to the ground, searching doubtless for a bottle.

I knew that there was nothing to be gained by trying to draw this out or soften the blow, so I asked him the name of my mother. He did not reply but his eyes stopped moving. I knelt and asked him again. I told him I was a man now and that there was no point in lying. He still said nothing. I did not reach out to him. Some vestige of my childhood remained, a lingering taste of acrid fear even at the sight of his now diminished form. But still I asked again.

I think I knew what the answer would be. Still, when it came I felt my breath escape me. I stood. I attempted to find the words for the more questions I felt I should ask, but they were not there. In the end there was no reason for them. I left the house.

It did not take me long to find the site of the hanged man's grave. Even after all this time, the location was secured in my memory. The grass had grown and the rock was partly buried, but it was still there, still with the scratch I had made, now barely visible.

There was little for me to say to dirt and buried bones, so I said nothing. There was no wind. There was no sudden emotion to answer whatever question I had come here with. Just the rock that only I knew about. Just the faint and faded apology that I had once thought to accept because nobody else could.

I was not angry at the hanged man. Perhaps I should have been. Perhaps in the moment I even tried to be. But for a long time my understanding of him had grown around the fact that he was sorry, not what he had done. My understanding was as buried and secure as the rock I had placed.

What it meant for me, this truth, I could not say. My father's life and by extension my own had been forever shaped by what he had done and eventually been caught and killed for. He had been like a companion to me throughout the years, the echo of the moment our paths had been set. What I now knew only created more questions I would never find the answers to. Some, perhaps, if I could keep my father sober enough to force him to remember in what were likely his last days. But nothing that, now known, would change a thing.

Without anger all I had was the wish for myself and my parents and the hanged man that things could have been different. But they were not. For that, here I now stood.

A Song

The song came on the radio as he worked at his desk and with the first notes, supposed to sound like the scratching of a record, he was fourteen again, listening to it on repeat as he nodded along while writing an assignment. The clarity of the memory was stunning, blindsiding; consequence, he supposed, of not having heard it in years. He'd always liked the song and listened to it while working on the essay on his Mum's computer but minimising it every few seconds to check MSN, to see if Mel had replied, hoping for that rush of shining excitement that came whenever she did.

Now he leaned back in his seat and grinned, closing his eyes. *What a goddamn tune.* Now the singing, nasally because once that had been the sound of angry sincerity, had started and he was seventeen, playing it ironically to the first girl he ever brought home. She was laughing at him as he mimed singing into his fist, eyes closed, face contorted, so charmingly silly that when he kissed her before the chorus she grabbed him and kissed him twice as hard.

He didn't want to think how those had been the days, but shit they were the days. Then the chorus swept in and he was ten, jumping up and down in Ben's living room, singing at the top of their lungs because they both loved this song so much and they didn't give a crap who knew it. Later, when Ben's perpetually embarrassing Mum brought it up in front of their cool new high school friends they would both deny it ever happened.

He hadn't denied it at Ben's funeral though. The song was too upbeat to play there, but after the eulogy, after he lost it halfway through and couldn't finish, he had gone outside, put in his headphones and let the tears come as the song played. He'd been twenty-four, then, and hadn't played it since, hadn't heard it until now.

The memory made his gut twist. He reached out to switch the channel. Other times he had heard this song come thick and fast. When he was broke at twenty one, refreshing his bank account page on his phone waiting for his meagre wage to go in so he could buy home brand toilet paper. That song had played then. And once when he'd worked at that terrible bar when he was nineteen. It came on at closing time and everyone jeered about how shit it was while he jeered along. He didn't remember the memories unfurling then. He'd genuinely agreed and thought no more of it.

His finger reached the channel button and then, as the song hit its crescendo, it was the last time he'd seen Ben; drunk on the deck of that apartment he'd had so briefly, smoking cigarettes

and watching the night and playing increasingly lame songs the drunker they get until they happened on this one and slurring they'd sung along like they did when they were kids.

His hand curled into a fist. He listened. The memories flared and faded and it was just the song and him, twenty eight, listening to what now counted as a golden oldie, a song that had never even earned the title of a favourite but had been there a lot for a long time, for better or worse.

He let it play out. The final notes came and went and then the host was saying something, probably mocking. He didn't listen. He let the echoes of the memories do their thing. He closed his eyes a beat. Smiled. Then he got back to work.