

the whip hand

stories

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The Returning

MIHAELA NICOLESCU

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Gone, Baby, Gone

They slowed down just outside Watford and pulled into an empty McDonald's parking lot. Erika sat holding the steering wheel, the engine still running, her hands cold, until something tugged at her sleeve.

'What are we doing here?' the kid asked.

'We're resting,' Erika said, grabbing her jacket and bag from the back seat. Erika got out of the car and waited, but the little girl did not budge, just watched Erika with mild cow eyes.

'For fuck's sake ...' Erika walked over to the passenger's seat and pulled open the door. 'Will you get out please,' she said.

'I want to go home,' the little girl said. She sat staring dead ahead, her arms crossed tightly, her little round spectacles fogged up by her own breath. She was still wearing the pink Barbie-themed pyjamas.

'You don't want a Happy Meal, then?' Erika said, and saw the girl's gaze flash towards the restaurant, stopping for a moment on the playground outside.

Erika followed her gaze.

A merry-go-round, a couple of swings and a set of monkey bars. All in bright paints, all looking sad and abandoned, all looking garish and pointless.

'You can play afterwards if you want,' she offered.

The girl gave a great sigh, and made to release her

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seatbelt. She struggled with the buckle, her clumsy hands not able to unfasten it, but when Erika tried to reach over to help, the brat swatted her aside and snapped:

‘I can do it myself!’

Erika took a step back, then another, and turned away.

‘Forget you,’ she said over her shoulder.

‘Wait! Wait! You can’t leave me ...’ the voice rose to a shrill that seemed to cut into the base of Erika’s skull.

She continued towards the entrance, ignoring the screaming, and stepped into the warm, bright McDonald’s embrace. At the counter she ordered two coffees, two cheeseburgers and a Happy Meal.

As she was paying, she heard the door open and close, and little feet scuttle to her side.

‘You can’t do that!’ the girl said, loudly. She looked like she was going to cry.

‘Be quiet please,’ Erika said, without looking down.

‘You can’t just leave kids in cars ... Don’t you know anything? Huh? You can’t just ...’

‘Shut up. And if you start crying, I’m leaving your whiny arse here,’ Erika said, and was immediately sorry. She smiled apologetically to the boy who handed her the paper bags.

‘Here,’ she gave the kid the Happy Meal box, ‘go and sit down.’

Erika took her change and smiled again at the boy.

‘My sister,’ she told him.

He nodded. Erika thought she could see judgement in his eyes, under the brim of his cap.

At a corner table, Erika kicked off her heels. The kid was unpacking her Happy Meal. She lined up the burger, chips and drink, her lips moving, her face animated. She mumbled, ‘So that’s what you have to do ...’ pushed her

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glasses further up and bounced an ugly stuffed dinosaur up and down on the table.

The kid unwrapped her burger and took a nibble. Erika watched. She took tiny, quick bites, then scrunched up her face.

‘I’m a hamster, look,’ she said.

‘Yeah, that’s great,’ Erika tried to smile.

The kid looked up shyly between hamster nibbles.

‘You’re very pretty,’ she told Erika, and Erika felt herself harden to the compliment.

‘Just eat your food and let me think.’

The girl blinked, wounded, and Erika tried to think of something kind to say, but she could not, and so she thought of other things instead.

She was six or seven years old and out shopping with her mother.

Erika had been a beautiful child. Big blue eyes, chestnut ringlets; a gorgeous little thing, a poppet, a doll. Her mother would look at her in disbelief and say to her friends, ‘Look at this child. Where did she come from? Where did all this luck come from?’

And one day Erika was out shopping in Tesco with her mum. It was early in the morning and before either of them knew how it had happened, Erika was throwing a tantrum in the confectionery aisle.

An old lady stopped by the commotion and told Erika, very gently, to be a big girl and to listen to her mummy. No, chocolate wasn’t good for little girls, and wasn’t it a shame to cry when she’d be so pretty if she smiled.

Hearing this broke her mum’s paralysis. She plunged down next to them and took Erika by the arms. Looking straight at Erika, she said, ‘She’s a spoilt, ugly little thing on the inside, a little black lump on the inside.’

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Erika fell silent, her cheeks glazed with tears, snot running into her mouth. Her mother grabbed her hand and dragged her out of the supermarket, leaving their basket on the floor and the old lady staring after them.

Erika now looked out of the walls of glass, and thought for a moment that she saw a flash of blue and white in the distance. She sat up straight. Quickly she shoved her feet back into her shoes.

‘Come on, you can eat that on the way.’

She grabbed the kid by the arm and pulled her outside.

The parking lot was still empty, but for her car, and as she was buckling the kid into the passenger’s seat, she remembered that she had promised her a turn in the playground. This is how it begins, Erika thought. This is the start of the lie that leads to all the hate.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, but the kid wasn’t listening.

Erika got into the car and took out her mobile. She had eighteen missed calls and five messages. She took out a spliff from the bottom of her bag and lit up. God knows how long it had been there. It tasted of dirt and perfume, and Erika coughed between drags.

‘Smoking is bad.’

Erika jumped, banging her head against the window; she had forgotten the kid.

Now she remembered.

She pulled the car back out onto the road, turned on the radio and, while pretending to listen to the news update, tried to think up a plan.

Maybe they could stay with Oli and his flatmates.

Oh yes, there was bound to be a party at Oli’s and she needed a drink so badly right about now. She heard a rustle by her side and turned to see the kid fiddle with the radio.

Oh right. The kid.

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Oh fuck.

'Where we going, Erika?' the girl asked.

'On holiday.'

'Are you crying, Erika?'

'No.'

'Here ...' the kid shoved her half-eaten hamburger in Erika's face, 'Nana says eating makes people happy.'

'Your grandmother doesn't know shit about making people happy.'

Erika had left home at fifteen after getting in early one morning, still buzzing, stinking of cigarettes and booze.

The usual hypotheticals followed: Have you no shame? What are you doing with your life? Where did I go wrong?

Erika had stopped on her way up the stairs and had stood swaying, looking at her mother. She told her, in a slur, how she had never felt this joyless hole to be her home; had never felt anything but a blank where maternal affection should have slotted in.

'You're drunk, it's disgusting. Go to bed,' her mother had said and tried to walk away, but Erika had clung onto her, pulling at her flannel nightgown, screaming, 'I fucking hate you, I fucking hate you.'

She did not speak to her mother for two years.

'Is she ... nice to you?' Erika asked the kid. She realised she was driving too fast and, pulling into the slow lane, asked again, 'Is Grandma nice to you?'

The kid drew a lopsided star in her breath on the window, and said, 'Yeah ...'

'You don't have to lie to me.'

'I know.'

'Does she play with you?'

'Yeah ...'

'Does she tell you you're pretty?'

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The kid frowned. 'I don't know...'

'Does she say that you're a little doll, a little perfect doll? Does she look at you like she can't bear to see you?'

The kid stared blankly, her eyes huge and calm behind the pink wire frames, as if she knew more than she possibly could, as if she trusted in Erika more than she ever should. She wiped the star off the window, breathed and drew a heart instead.

'You know hearts mean *I love you*?'

'Yeah, I know.'

'Erika?'

'Yeah ...'

'Where are we going?'

Erika did not remember much about those two years.

She did remember the day she had crawled back to her mother's house. She had nowhere else to go. She had not planned for this. Erika knew that she could easily solve the problem by a visit to the clinic, a procedure many of her friends said was quick and simple and really no big deal, but she was already fifteen weeks on, and she could cup her belly in her hands and imagine a life.

So Erika went back home and, full of resentment, she named the baby Lilly, the name chosen by her mother. But to Erika it was never Lilly; it was *It* or *The Kid* or *Sweetheart*, but never Lilly.

She held it like a sack of potatoes. Read it stories. Took her for walks, holding her tiny hand.

Erika was always saying goodbye.

She was always going, gone, baby, gone, only to return weeks, sometimes months, later, bringing presents and guilt wrapped up in bright paper and tied up with ribbons.

For six years, Erika did not feel like anyone's mother.

For six years, Erika watched her own mother sprout

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affection in a place that had been barren. Erika watched her mother and her daughter play together in the garden of her childhood home, making memories that should have been hers.

‘It really is too bad this girl will grow up with no father,’ her mother had said once.

‘I grew up without a dad,’ Erika had replied.

‘That’s not true, you had a dad. He died, but you had one.’

‘Well, she had a father and he is dead too.’

‘He is ...’

‘He is fucking dead to me and to her. He’s dead to us, right,’ Erika said, louder than she’d meant to.

For six years, Erika was on her own, and then one day she thought about the way the kid would put up her arms to be picked up and fall into hysterical giggle fits when she was tired. She thought about the little frames around her eyes, and about eyes that were not spectacular but calm and mild.

Erika told a stranger at some party how she had a daughter, and when the stranger did not believe her, she wondered if it was really true, so she left the party and drove to her mother’s house to make sure.

‘What’s wrong?’ her mother had opened the door, bleary-eyed with sleep. ‘Are you drunk? Jesus Christ, Erika, you’re drunk.’

She stepped inside, expecting Erika to follow, but Erika did not move.

‘I want her back,’ Erika said.

Her mother turned to face her, looking brittle, the sleep now vanished from her eyes. She did not seem surprised, but told Erika to be serious. She told Erika to think about the child and be reasonable.

‘I want her back,’ Erika said again.

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Erika stepped inside and rushed up the stairs, her mother following behind, urging her to not be foolish, to not wake the baby in the middle of the night. Outside the kid's bedroom, her anger shattered into desperation.

'Please don't do this ... She needs me, she needs me. Oh God please ... I'm phoning the police,' and she stumbled off to her own bedroom.

Erika crept into the kid's room and gently woke her, smoothing her hair and saying 'sweetheart' again and again. The kid blinked a few times, confused and, on seeing Erika, smiled and touched her face. In moments she was wide awake and reaching for her glasses.

'We're going on a trip,' Erika said and lifted her.

And now she was driving in the slow lane with the kid asleep in the passenger's seat, her mouth open and her glasses askew.

What had she thought?

Had she thought there'd be a place for them? That they'd wake up together in the mornings and Erika would make breakfast? Scrambled eggs and pancakes? That she'd lead the kid by the hand up pleasant hills to school, two little steps in black patent shoes for every one of Erika's.

The kid stirred in her sleep, and Erika remembered her own mother making pancakes and smiling, calling her 'baby'.

'Lilly...' Erika whispered, 'Lilly...'

Lilly opened her eyes and looked at her, and Erika knew that another goodbye was coming, but this time not because she was nobody's mother.

Playing Dead

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Strange Fruit

Three hours from the West Australian border she starts losing it about the fruit in the car.

‘Settle down,’ I say. ‘They’re not gonna run out holding guns to our heads if we’ve got a few oranges in the car.’

‘Well!’ She turns to face me, one hand on the steering wheel. ‘I don’t want to be paying the two thousand dollar *fine!*’ With her free hand she reaches onto the back seat and whisks a bunch of bananas out the driver’s side window.

‘I was gonna eat those,’ I say, but it’s the third or fourth time she has mentioned fruit and she is beyond listening. The windows are down, the Dolly Parton CD is turned up and we are flying along the eastern plain of the Nullarbor.

And what will this desert do with such strange fruit? Animals might die; the entire precarious ecosystem that surrounds us may well turn on its head. She pulls out another cigarette, lights it, and aims the car down the very centre of the Eyre Highway. Without her noticing I lean back to get a glimpse of the speedometer. It is well past the 120 mark. Her head quivers slightly and she moves her jaw like she’s grinding her teeth.

The banana incident is nothing. Only the day before she had threatened to leave me on the shore in Ceduna. I had attempted to go for a swim, not such a stupid idea considering it was February and the car had no air-conditioning. As I walked to the shore, she yelled out:

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‘There’s sharks in that water. *Your* funeral.’ I could see her sitting in the driver’s seat, poking at the car stereo buttons. ‘Oh yeah,’ she yelled out, ‘and don’t expect us to make it back to Perth for Christmas lunch, either.’

Funny, her saying that. Back in Melbourne she said she never wanted to go near Perth again. How any sane person could live there was a mystery to her; just one endless suburb of rednecks, in her opinion. It was time to move on, she said, and with that she went and spent her last three hundred dollars on a lime-green leather jacket and disappeared for two days. I traipsed across Melbourne looking for her, spurred on by a vague sense of duty that came with twenty years of friendship. I looked for her at the houses of various acquaintances and fellow West Australians in exile. When I did find her she was asleep on a couch in Brunswick. It was three p.m. on a Saturday and we were already two days behind schedule.

Adelaide onwards it hadn’t been easy. I did most of the driving and she refused to answer simple questions like: ‘Would you mind passing me the map book?’ Or, when I asked, ‘Did you see what that sign said?’ she snapped, ‘How the *fuck* should I know?’

Every CD I put on was either too mainstream, too happy or it was ‘foreign shit’. We argued about the past, about the Bible, about whose mother was more depressed and whether it was better to have an alive father or one who was dead. But it wasn’t long before I realised it was futile talking to her. I shut up; it was too hot to argue. She looked at me, her mouth turned down in disgust, and I evaded her gaze the way I’d seen people avoid drunken Aboriginals at the shopping centre. I looked everywhere but at her.

Perhaps, I think as we drive across the scrubby plain,

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this is what happens to children whose parents teach them that society is something from which to separate themselves. Perhaps they grow up angry and hate everyone. As if reading my mind she says, 'You know what your problem is? *You're* stuck in the past, you can't get over it. *You're* fuckin' obsessed with it.'

I ponder this for a while, looking out to endless silver saltbush and the mysterious red desert tracks which trail off toward the faded blue sky. Finally I say, 'Well, I think it might have had some, you know, *influence* on our lives.'

'Bullshit! *That* is bullshit. I liked growing up there. In fact, I wish I was back there right now!'

'Great,' I say. 'Good for you.'

She sleeps a lot. It's a kind of tense, knotted-up sleep which she wakes from with a shiver and then squints with revulsion at the road in front. 'I hate driving,' she says, waking up as we leave Yalata. 'My whole childhood was just one long drive after another.' She puffs on another Dunhill Blue. 'Always off with Dad, building some church in the desert, for some boongs who couldn't give two shits about Jesus. Why the fuck you'd want to drive thousands of k's across the country?'

It wasn't like I'd forced her to come. In fact, it was she who had called me from Perth at two a.m. one morning, begging to stay with me in Melbourne. 'I need to get out of here,' she'd said. 'I can no longer remain here.' She used that overly formal way of speaking, which told me she was either high or drunk or both. 'It's just not a conducive environment to my mental and spiritual wellbeing,' she'd said. I hadn't talked to her for months. I explained that I was packing up, heading back home, it wasn't a good time.

We stop at the Nullarbor Roadhouse and it is here that

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I see the familiar red and white of the WA Freightlines truck. It is the very same truck that has been tailgating and intermittently overtaking us since Adelaide. Entering the roadhouse, I pass what can only be the driver: shorts, thongs, an inordinate amount of body hair.

While she is pacing up and down out the front of the roadhouse, this truck driver, in a moment of acute folly, wolf-whistles at her.

‘You fuckin’ prick!’ she screams, throwing a fist in the truck driver’s direction. ‘You can *fuck off!*’ Luckily, at this exact moment, I am walking out of the roadhouse into the hot wind and blinding light with my seven-dollar Cornetto. I manage to grab her arm as she lunges for his faded blue singlet. Her screaming disturbs the dusk silence that lies all around, from the veranda of the roadhouse to the furthest horizon. She lunges at the truck driver again, almost knocking me to the ground.

I realise, there is something wrong. As I try to pull her back I feel her muscles and cartilage pulsating under my hands. It is the shock of touching her cold, clammy skin that gets my attention; it’s a hot day, at least thirty-five degrees. Her anger is not the hot rage of a young, angry woman, but the cold, septic anger of someone sick and desperate. I look at her far too skinny frame, the greyness around her eyes, the glistening cut of her muscles, formed as if they belonged to someone much older than twenty-three.

Back in the car I polish off what may have been the most expensive ice-cream in Australia. She sits in the passenger seat, filling the car with obscenities and cigarette smoke. ‘They should all have their dicks cut off,’ she announces and then, almost abruptly, she falls asleep and stays that way for a good few hours. I keep to the 110 speed limit and

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rummage around the car in search of a CD I haven't heard seventeen times.

The car, even with all the windows down, reeks of cigarettes, a pack a day no less. At every roadhouse I had bought a packet, sometimes two. I calculate: thirteen dollars times three, no four, what's that? Fifty-two dollars, *that's fifty-two dollars* – isn't like I'm going to see that money again. But if she is like this with cigarettes, I don't want to see what she's like without them. Even I have started smoking, which isn't helping the situation. I pick up a CD from under her feet, *The Sounds of Spain*. It is badly scratched but still plays and I try to occupy myself with the sounds of flamenco music. Of course, trying to distract yourself from emotional angst with a musical version of it doesn't work all that well. As I listen to the wailing and the stomping of feet a dark mood swirls over me, as wide and full as a flamenco skirt.

I have crossed the plain several times but I cannot remember, or even imagine, how it ends. It seems it will go on forever and I fantasise, while meditating on the beat of the dotted white line, that Perth must be some kind of special, secret place to be on the other side of this. Only some place that was truly great could be this hard to get to. That I still fill my mind with such ideas of a Promised Land, that I still consider suffering as being worthwhile, is disappointing. I know in reality I will feel let down. I know that Perth, like always, will seem like just another rest stop along the way to a more proper, more well-rounded place.

When we finally make it to the border, the woman at the gate has on more foundation than her face can actually contain. It is all running off down her neck on account of the heat and her eyelashes look like some sort of modern outdoor verandas with black shade cloth over them. My

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travelling companion tells the lady that she looks nice. She calls the lady ‘honey’ in that fake, high-pitched voice she uses when she wants people to think she’s from some place where chai lattes and baked cheesecake are served. When the lady asks us to pop the boot she jokes that there is nothing to see but ‘sixteen ounces of coke’.

‘Oh,’ she says, with such a dramatic flourish that the lady raises her heavily pencilled eyebrows, ‘but I’d never dream of bringing *fruit* into our beloved state.’ I stare on, daunted, after three days in the car, by the exhausting complexities of human interaction.

Miraculously, we are granted entry into our home state. The lady and a thin, leathery man are mainly concerned with fruit, not our emotional wellbeing. They say if we have any fruit we should put it in the tray, and they both point to it. They say it twice. They say, ‘Dried fruit, stone fruit, honey or nuts.’ The lady’s eyes dart between the two of us as her foundation continues its escape down her cheeks and toward the gold chains around her neck. I look out to the desert on either side of us, out on the red infertile earth, the low-lying orange sun, the straight, grey road ahead, and I think how fruit should be the furthest thing from my mind.

‘Well, I thought she did look nice,’ she says when we are back in the car. ‘At least she made an *effort*. I mean, it can’t be *easy* in this dump, waking up every morning making a fucking *effort*!’ She spits out the words like I’m the one that’s holding society back, as if I’m the enemy of anyone in the world who has ever made an effort.

At Eucla, I pull up in front of the giant whale and get out to fill the car. She sits with the door open and her feet on the ground. She has that same faraway look that she had when I found her on the couch in Brunswick, it’s as if

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she's just arrived in a dream, here on the side of the Eyre Highway. She asks if she can borrow some money and I hand her a fifty-dollar note, telling her to pay for the petrol as well.

I stand in front of the ridiculous Eucla whale and I remember a long time ago, at another equally desolate roadhouse. The two of us were heading to a Christian mission near Kununurra. Amos, the pastor's son, was with us. It was the middle of the night and the trip had taken more hours than our teenage minds could comprehend. At this one particular roadhouse, she had wanted to buy a Guns N' Roses tape. We looked at the tape for a long time, trying to interpret some iniquitous meaning on the cover, some subtle, devious message from Satan himself. Soon Amos came and told us to get back in the truck. He was on the lookout for just such worldly distractions.

I remember that night, how she did a half-skip back to the truck and waved to some Aboriginal boys standing in the darkness nearby. She had seemed so excited about even the possibility that one day we would be able to buy that tape, and listen to it, and how great it would be. Even then I remember thinking how bold and happy she had looked. That night it was the other side of midnight, we were sixteen and it was the first time we had been allowed to leave the community without our parents.

Amos had not been impressed. He went on for a while about the path of wrongdoing being wide, how its gates were always open. 'Rock music is one of Satan's favourite lures,' he said. 'It all seems cool and fun until you realise Satan's got hold of your life, oh he's got a good strong hold on it then,' and with his hands still resting on the steering wheel, he curled his fingers around as if he were throttling something. She and I took turns sitting in the window seat

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and, sometime during the night, while I had my arm out, the desert air went from warm to cold so suddenly that I drew back my arm in fear. I wanted to tell her, but when I turned she was looking intently into the blackness, and she whispered, 'I haven't seen any lights so far, not one.'

There are parts of Western Australia where you forget that the world is actually filled with billions of people. You think that the entire world should know you, because your entire world does. They know your mother, your father; they know your kitchen table, the size of your feet and how your voice sounds when you are frightened. You can't imagine a world where people don't. The world that she and I came from was like that, and while the outside was exciting and full of new and compelling things, it was also full of disappointment.

I stand by the Eucla whale for a long time, just me and the whale and that sky. I think about how Eucla always makes me feel small, like I've been shrunk in the wash. I look up from the car park and stars are already appearing in half the sky, the other half is still filled with the sun, about to go down over those snow-white dunes to the south.

Overseas, I once met a man who had never seen a shooting star. He wasn't exactly a young man. I wanted to tell him that Eucla means 'bright star' in the local Aboriginal language. I wanted to tell him that in Eucla the sky is so big it makes you feel you're nothing at all. I wanted to explain to him how the night skies in Eucla are filled with more shooting stars than you can count. But how do you start to tell someone about Eucla, when you're both in some cold, claustrophobic place like Cardiff, or Manchester, or wherever I was.

With the money, she had bought almost everything in the bain-marie: two Chiko rolls, a sausage roll, a pie and

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hot chips. I drive on towards Balladonia while she sits stuffing her face. The sun now a red glow on the horizon, I watch as the grey plain to the right side of the road shifts. The entire plain begins to hop, glide and bound at the side of the car, in front of the car and then all over the road, red and grey, big and small, the landscape teems with them. I slow to sixty and hold down the horn. Even then I have to ride the brake to avoid hitting them, a few still careening into the side of the car as they make their irrational escape to the other side of the road.

At Balladonia the eight official residents of the place sit around a large bonfire. They are full of Christmas cheer and a few cartons of Emu Draft. ‘Geez, you girls must have seen some roos,’ one of them says. We sit a while and eat the lamb chops they offer, drink the beers they hand us. After an hour or so we announce that we should get moving. ‘Perth isn’t getting any closer,’ we say. They say we are crazy. We don’t disagree.

I have developed the same itch as her, scratching at my arms furiously with one hand on the steering wheel. My head churns over and over with its circular, nagging chatter – the few cans of Emu Draft make it churn faster. A feral cat the size of a blue heeler appears on the dark roadside, the bone-white trunks of the ghost gums are illuminated by our lights.

‘So,’ I say, feeling uncomfortable with the unfamiliar sound of my own voice, ‘why’d you have to get out of Perth?’

She sighs and props her arm on the windowsill. Up ahead, small, faded signs, some handwritten, appear in the headlights and point to mines or drilling operations off the road. ‘I don’t know,’ she sighs, ‘I was staying at the Duxton with Ben, we were on a bender, like for three or four days.’ Ben had grown up with us, his parents also raging born-

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again Christians. 'I went to sleep, left a tap on after he'd gone. It flooded the whole penthouse.' She scratches her arm, then tucks her hair behind her ear. 'Ben says I owe eight grand in damages, says it was my fault.'

I doubt this is the real reason. Ben, since growing up, had gone from a quiet, sulky, fat kid to becoming a fully patched member of the Coffin Cheaters. On a big weekend he could spend eight grand on drinks alone. I don't say anything. I take another of her cigarettes and keep driving.

'Perth is not where I wanna be right now,' she says, 'but, I dunno, where is there? I mean, where is there to get to?'

I ash the cigarette out the slit of the open window, mumble that I don't know, how should I know? Nobody knows. What I want to say is that I've also been moving. What I want to say is, I don't see where there is to get to, either. When you spend half your life waiting for Jesus to return, maybe this is just what happens after, maybe this is what you're left with.

At close to one a.m. I stop to get a coffee and use the toilets at Norseman Roadhouse. When I come back to the car she is gone; the cigarettes and her bag are gone, too. There is no movement in the car park, the street in front is quiet, only a gentle breeze moves the leaves on the trees. A streetlight shines on the highway out the front of the roadhouse. It's a harsh, white triangle of light, so bright against the blackness it seems like it could be picked up and moved elsewhere. I imagine her running under the light with her bag over her shoulder, running into the darkness somewhere, anywhere. As if I was the enemy.