

WRITE ON!

CAMPBELLTOWN WRITING COMPETITION



2021

ANTHOLOGY

AWARD WINNERS

Overall Winner

Light Your Way
Chloe Tsang

Open (25+ years)

First **Moonlight Escapade**
Alison Richards

Second **Ablaze**
Bethany Cody

Third **Suburban Awakening**
Karen Chester

Youth (15-24 years)

Light Your Way
Chloe Tsang

Keeper
Surpreet Jaiswara

**An Extinction - Not of
Dinosaurs, Something Else**
Samadhi Chandrasena

Junior (7-14 years)

Illumination
Vinuka Kaluwilla

The Dark Hole
Maheswashi Lakshmanan

Paige Graham
The Light of Transportation

Junior Winners (7-14 years)

Illumination

By Vinuka Kaluwilla

Ryan carefully walked out of the Campbelltown library; his bag filled with books. Each one was important, relating to some aspect of his studies. He shivered at the cold, and pulled his jacket around himself tighter, opting to flee from the chilling night as quickly as possible. He sprinted across the carpark, to his bicycle.

Suddenly, there was a sound behind the bushes. Ryan froze. A chill ran down his spine. Before the comforting idea that it could just be a wild animal, could cross through his mind; somebody, definitely a human, made their way out from behind the bushes. Ryan attempted to ride away in his bicycle, but his attempt only led to him falling off, his books scattering on the floor. In a hasty attempt to pick up his books, he looked up, to see the man that was behind the bushes.

Ryan was immediately frightened to see what was in front of him. In fact, he considered the possibility that it was not a human before him. The person was, as Ryan wildly thought, perhaps over one hundred years old. His face was wrinkled beyond compare, and his white beard reached all the way down to his chest, much like an archetypical wise old man, from fairy tales. He wore a torn shirt, which was covered in muck and soot, and track pants, that seemed unclean and filthy. He was malnourished, and shivering in the cold, taking slow movements, pausing every now and again to look around. It reminded Ryan of a small, defenceless animal scanning their environment for predators. He was somewhat shorter than Ryan, not including the fact that he was hunched down and crippled. The ancient man lay his weight on a long walking stick, which was of very low quality, even decaying in certain areas. His head was bald, except for a couple of wisps of milky-white hair, dangling from his crown. But the most distinguishable feature about the man, was his brilliant blue eyes. They were large, and almond shaped, as if they had not grown old with the man himself. They gave anyone who was looking directly into them, the

feeling that they had some story of themselves to tell. The man had an expression of fear and cold in his face, as if he was biting ice with his front teeth. When he saw Ryan, he immediately paused, and smiled a warm smile, which Ryan was surprised to see coming from a such a ghoulis body.

“Sorry, lad,” he said to Ryan, in a quiet, but magnetic voice. “I’ll be off then,” he sighed. He shrugged and began to nonchalantly turn around, to journey on to wherever wild he would. “Wait!” Ryan exclaimed. Something was different about this old man. Something. He did not appear to be a sketchy beggar or plunderer, who would really be out alone in the dark, but rather a straightforward person, with a place to be. “Are you going home?” Ryan inquired, returning the old man’s smile, looking into his deep, meaningful eyes. “I don’t have a home, Lad,” he replied, but with no tone of melancholy in his voice. “Sit down,” Ryan said, kindly gesturing to a bench by the side. “I want to know your story.”

These words were not something Ryan would usually utter. They just flowed calmly out of his mouth, as if by a supernatural force. “My story, lad?” the old man sighed, pausing, and sitting down on the bench, as fragile as a vase. “If you really want to know, lad, then let me tell you. I can see that you will understand, for you asked.” The man paused, and looked at the sunset for a moment. Brilliant purples, reds, and yellows, all blended into the sky. A gentle breeze found its way through the grounds, blowing the old man’s beard into the air behind him. When the wind settled, and the final hours of dusk had commenced, the world was silent.

The world wanted to hear the man’s story. He began.

“My story, Lad, is one with deep truth and lesson, with only those with wisdom, would understand. I only tell my story to those people – people who want to know my story. People who seek something to learn from what I have to say. We all need illumination on our journey through life and beyond. A light of some sort, to guide us. Something that keeps us going - Through light and darkness. Through both radiant hope and the melancholic despair, which we all encounter at some point during our journey. My identity, my age, is all completely insignificant. My story, on the other hand, is perhaps the most valuable thing that I have to offer. My story is no pseudoscience, conspiracy, or

philosophy. It is the truth – or at least what the truth is for me. Once, I was a person without illumination, and what you are about to hear, is what happened to me, and the mistakes I made, without this illumination.

I grew up poor in a foreign country, making my parents proud. I was the top of my class in school, performing extremely well in every test and assignment I was given. Not only that, but I was also great at physical education, and was reasonably nice, that's true. I had intellect. I had strength. But what I did not have, was wisdom – and thus, I didn't have illumination. I did not have a personal goal in life. A place that I wanted to go. A person that I wanted to be. That is what changed my life – for the greater worse. When I was in grade eleven, all my friends owned fancy bicycles, which they drove to school every day. It became sort of a competition, “who has the best bicycle,” and students were racing each day to buy newer models. During break, all those students would discuss was their new bicycles. Fast, grippy, light bicycles. And how I longed for a bicycle too! Regrettably, though, my parents did not have enough money to buy me a bicycle – and I knew it, so I would never ask them. I thought I would never have a bicycle. Until one day. I remember that day as if it was yesterday. I was in grade eleven and was on my way home from school – walking, of course – and the sun was setting, the sky adorned with magnificent purples, reds and yellows, much like it is today.” The old man paused once more, and looked to where the sunset was, of which now the night sky replaced. Ryan returned his consciousness to his surroundings and let out a slight gasp. He had been so intent in listening to the man's story, he had not realized that the sun had fully hidden its radiant face behind the horizon, and darkness had fallen over the city. He turned back to the old man, who smiled, and continued. “On that day, on my way home, I met a middle-aged man. He was dressed as I am dressed now – in a torn shirt, and pants. He was shivering in the cold, scampering, looking for shelter. He was malnourished, and slightly crippled, but had lively brown eyes. ‘You there,’ he said to me, in a timid, dehydrated voice. ‘I promise you a bicycle if you give me food and water.’

As soon as he said the word ‘bicycle,’ my ears pricked up, but I was also suspicious, for my parents, like all parents, had told me not to trust strangers under any circumstance.

This was where I made my first mistake. I took no notice of what my parents had said to me and answered to the man. 'But sir, I have not food and water,' I replied, though really, this was a lie. My lunchbox contained two pieces of bread, and my water bottle was half full. 'Why should I give my food to a homeless street-dweller,' I foolishly thought.

'Well then, I will give you a bicycle, if you promise to bring me food and water tomorrow, the same time as now.' Now, I wasn't thinking straight. I thought about the matter. 'What could this man do? He doesn't have a place. He doesn't have intellect. He doesn't have strength. I can take the bicycle and forget about him. He's worthless.' That was my first mistake. My greed and longing made me forget who I was. Who I could really be. The kind person I could be, who does the right thing. But my greed took the better of me. 'Sure thing, sir!' I exclaimed, sounding as truthful as possible. The man pulled out from behind some bushes, a bicycle. It was not the newest model, but it was a bicycle. The one thing that I had dreamed of ever since it became a thing. I uttered my thanks and rode away on it as quickly as I could."

The old man paused once more, lamenting, and reflecting on his mistake. Ryan nodded his head gravely. "What happened when you didn't take the food for the man?" asked Ryan, who was curious to know more.

"Well, I cannot remember every detail of it, as I try to forget my mistakes," the old man began, "but I remember crystal clearly, how the mysterious man who gave me the bicycle stared at me, when I rode off on the bicycle, as if he knew I would not return. His profound, brown eyes contemplated me, as if they were reading my mind. As much as I try to forget my mistakes, I will never be able to forget that judicious expression. The next day past quickly, and I forgot completely about the mysterious man. This may sound like a fairy tale to you, lad; where the fairy godmother promises some princess something, and when she fails to return the favour, she is turned into a frog; but this story is not like that – this is true, I tell you.

The day after the next day, The dead body of a man was found, with a piece of paper in his pocket, which said 'find he who stole my bicycle and tie him to my gravestone.'"

Ryan gasped – loudly this time. The old man said this sentence louder than he was previously speaking, which made it sound vile, like a curse. When Ryan had recovered, he gestured curiously for the old man to continue.

“An investigation was launched. I mean, it was not as if they were going to tie anyone to a grave, but a bicycle cost a generous amount of money where I come from and stealing one would result in at least a few months behind bars. Also, the man who died seemed healthy, and question was conspired concerning his death.” “So what did you do?” Asked Ryan, sensing the climax. “I ran.” “Ran from what?” “From my mistake.” “Why?” “Mistakes are a part of life, and many do not realize the fact that people are more trustworthy after they’ve made a mistake, rather than before. When a person makes mistakes, and no-one is willing to accept that they understand their mistake, people are forced to run from their mistakes. To run from their true, newer self. They refuse to accept themselves as imperfect – as a human being. Which, really, is the greatest mistake one can make – fleeing from their mistakes. I could have stayed – owned up and apologized. I could have gone back to being a normal child – a newer self, not forced by greed. If I had some illumination – some guide, a goal to become a better person, I would have stayed, and with just minor scars, I would have healed. But I chose to run.

I ran away from my home one night and ran all the way to the very edge of my country, where an endless sea stretched between me and ‘freedom.’ I joined a fleet of boats, which were traveling to what the people on board claimed a ‘distant country,’ to seek a better life. I joined them, and we floated for months, from my country, all the way to this one, which everyone called Australia. When we arrived, an army surrounded us. No one from our group could speak fluent English, so there was no co-operation between us and the army. They took us to a mass of small, tin houses, which were very uncomfortable, and small. I escaped once more, and ran for miles and miles, until one day, I exceeded my limit. I had nowhere to go. I had no place. I was nobody. I had nothing to eat, and nothing to drink – now I was the homeless street-dweller. I thought I was going to die. My entire life showed up in front of me. My mistakes seemed to be on replay mode. When I thought my final breath was gone, I remembered something my own grandfather told me, when I was merely four years old – you need illumination in life to succeed.

I opened my eyes. This was not the end. I could still change. People deserve a second chance in life. A second go, to change – to make up for their mistakes. That's when I realized. Even when the world turns its back on you, you must keep going. Find your illumination. Your goal, your guide, your light. Something to fuel your power, apart from delusion. That's what I lacked for all those years.

I stood up – reborn. A new dawn began for me. I spent my life, from there onwards; although begging for scraps, and constantly ridiculed and hurt; happily. What I did was my fault, but merely mourning the past is not the solution. It does not matter who you were, but rather, who you are – and that... that is my illumination.

So, lad, I beg you, as I beg others for food and drink, to not make the same mistakes as me. We all need some form of illumination to live a successful life. A goal, a guide, a light, something that we want to be, or someone that we want to be, to get us through life. A better person? There is always room – or rather, time, to accept your mistakes and change. That is my story, if you wish to learn from it, lad.”

Ryan was frozen. Not out of fear, but out of simply an indescribable emotion, impossible to express with merely words on a paper. He stared into thin air and thought about his life. When he looked back up at the man, he had disappeared.

‘Illumination.’

The Dark Hole

By Maheswashi Lakshmanan

I look around me, the Campbelltown City that until minutes ago was bustling with people have a few cars is now in complete shambles. Even the sky is weeping for her misfortunes. My face was always pampered and drenched and dripping with water. My feet which once had never touched a hard floor are now bleeding from walking for who knows how long? The pain I feel in my legs is keeping me from forgetting I'm not dead. But you know what's funny? None of these even hold a candle to this hole in my heart. A million questions in my head:

'Where am I going?'

'What am I going to do from now on?' 'Will I die?'

The only answer I have is: 'I don't know'

I was born as the only daughter of one of the richest men in the small yet greatly established city, Campbelltown. He owned 7 factories in the outskirts of the city which produced an Inks of the finest qualities used by nobility. We were as respected even if we were not one ourselves. I was the object of jealousy for hundreds of young girls. Loving parents, rich friends, a life in a mansion and majestic clothes -- the perfect dream life, even I thought so. Little did I know, wealth and social status could be swallowed up by darkness anytime.

The story rolls back 2 years -- when I was still the a 14 year old girl who had yet to see the terrors of the world veil. The day was as normal as it could be. I was woken up by the sweet yet stern voice of my mother who insisted that she found absolutely no

trouble in walking up and down the stairs everyday to wake me up and that it was too trivial of a job to leave it to the maids. I washed up, clothed myself and ran downstairs to the dining hall. My father yelled, “no running in the staircase, Abigail!”, hearing my stomps from his dining chair. “*Good morning to you too, dad!*”, I replied back paying no mind to what he just said. He rolled his eyes and continued with his breakfast. Mother just silently smiled at the events and asked me if I had a good sleep, to which I answered I did. And then I realized something was odd.

“Dad, don't you usually wait until I come down to have breakfast? Now that I see, you're all dressed up too. What's the occasion?”

“Oh I didn't tell you? I'm leaving on a business trip for 4 days”.

“What? But my birthday's in 5 days! Are you sure you'll be back before that?”

“Of Course dear. “Sir Winston, your luggage has been packed and the car waits outside. Everything's been made ready for your departure. Sir. We can't afford to lose the last train.”, interrupted the butler.

“You heard the man, I'll be leaving now.”, he said as he got up and wore his leather coat the butler brought him. He noticed me crying in the back because of his sudden trip and said, “Don't cry, when you open your eyes in the morning of your birthday, I'll be here and with your birthday present too”, ruffling my golden locks. He hugged mom and me, kissed our foreheads saying goodbye to us. The rest of the day went by as usual ending with my mom begging me to sleep. Four days passed and it was my birthday eve. We had our dinners and headed to my chambers. Mom tried to sing me to sleep but failed since I was way too scared about the next day.

I opened my eyes, looked out the window and saw the sun peeking out just a little and yet decided to go back to dreams until mom herself comes over to wake me up. And she woke me up, indeed. Not with her usual sweet yet stern voice but a horrified screaming broke down. I ran downstairs and saw my mom crouched down, crying uncontrollably while the telephone hung from its wire. The butler and a few of the maids consoled the lady of the house while some cried with her and the rest whispered behind them. Baffled at the miserable situation, I stood there as a silent bystander for some seconds, prior to hearing a few leaking words from the maids' gossip: “*sir*.”

Winston.....

train... crash.... poor madam". As much as I in my heart was hurting, my head started putting all the pieces together without my consent. That was the first time I wished I had been born a bit more dull. December 16th which would normally be the happiest day for my entire family became the most saddest one. The day once known as my birthday is now my father's death day. The time of the year when I was usually dressed in my most elegant dress, that time I was in pitch black. My mother who always wore her brightest smiles then wore the gruesome veil, we who usually stood around a tea table with all kinds of people, stood around an empty grave. Most people who we considered our close relatives didn't even turn up for the funeral and those who did were very eager to get past the door. There were people whose most priorities worry was their investment in the business. Some whispered lies into our ears only to trash us behind our backs.

The trust behind me was failed to see the poisonous lies dripping from their words: "*We are here for you, dear*", "*our doors will always be there for you to walk through*", "*Do not hesitate to ask for help, our arms are always open wide for you*". I completely trusted their sugar coated words. The day ended with us sending off our "friends" and "relatives" with a forced smile.

More than half the maids quitted and men who planned to invest backed off because "a woman" became the head. Taking up on the opportunity, a new ink factory emerged and our factory labourers left one by one and started working there. Even the nobles started purchasing their inks. Those who wished for our downfall started spreading rumours, most of which I feel disgusted to even talk about. "The Winston household is doomed now", they said. Two weeks passed. My mom never knocked on those supposedly open doors. I back then wondered why she didn't. Now I understand there would've been no response even if she did. She started burying herself in work not because she wanted to prove herself but because that was the only way for her to take her mind off things.

Now that I think back, it was probably her attempt to fill the hole in her heart.

I had a hole too, only her's was deeper and darker. I was delusionally believing that my *"family"* and *"friends"* cared about us but she did not. I heard their *"goodbye"* while she heard, "good ". I only saw their sweet speech and hugs while she noticed them searching our pockets. She was robbed off her sweet kind smile and was left with the fixed portrait smile which she only showed to her clients. Mom no longer lulled me to sleep nor did I hear her sweet yet stern wake up call. Work became her world. We both strived towards filling that hole only to make it even deeper knowing we can't. Mom's tears died. She became no better than a walking corpse. There were once days where she did nothing but cry all day and was mocked for being weak minded and idiotic. And when she stopped crying and sank her head in documents.

Months passed. And I little by little started to understand my so-called family and friends once they began to openly display their hostility and felt like the most brainless person for actually trusting them. The worst part was having to still talk and smile with them as if nothing's wrong while their mouths threw honey dipped sweets since we couldn't afford them. My mom, slowly started breaking. She ate a meal per day. All she did was work and became a skeleton but refused to take any kind of therapy and said that it'll only be a waste of money. And as for me I would sometimes help her with work. Our conversations were always related to work and nothing else. We no longer behaved like mom and child, she was the employer while I was the employee. She often fell sick and the interval between her fevers started becoming shorter until one day, there she was, in her deathbed.

After 22 months, I saw her eyes well up. "I'm sorry. I was the worst mother wasn't I? Not being your strength when it mattered the most", her voice was trembling. I could hardly make out her words. "No matter what happens, just know that both me and your father love you so, so much and wish for nothing more than your happiness. Abigail, I know it will be hard, trust me. But don't become like me. It doesn't matter what you do... just... be happy." She placed her hand on my cheek, "listen my love, we wanted to give you everything and we sincerely thought we did. It was already too late when I realized we didn't give you the chance to make true friends. Make it your quest to find your own

people, those you do and can trust. People who make you want to treasure and never let go of them. Find folks who love you for who you are. ”

I can't remember any more than that since I was screaming and crying, letting it all out so hard I didn't pay attention to her. I didn't even bother to change into a black dress, no one told me to either. A funeral service was held with just the butler, a few servants, the priest and myself. Nobody else even bothered to turn up. At least, this time the grave wasn't empty and I didn't have any need to see people off with a forced smile. The next day I received news that folks didn't show up because apparently they were attending the funeral of my aunt's puppy. I laughed at hearing the news. The servants most likely thought I had lost my mind. Even I was able to tell I wasn't in my mind.

The business was at the end of bankruptcy. All the servants quitted. It was the day of my father's death anniversary. I decided to go pay my parents a visit. It was a long way but I still walked, and didn't bother to wear my slippers. I sat down in front of the grave not even having the energy to cry. Just staring at the gravestones with my eyes,

And out of nowhere, I felt the ground tremble a little. Five minutes later it trembled again, except this time it wasn't 'a little'. The earth quaked like a rattle in a child's hand. I survived since there was nothing nearby that could fall on me. I got up and ran all the way to my house and found nothing but crushed chunks of rocks and wood. 'Splat' a drop landed on my feet. In a few minutes the rain started coming down. Until two years back, I was living like a princess. Now I stand deprived of everything I called my own-- parents, rich friends, a life in a mansion and majestic clothes-- the perfect dream life.

I look around me, the city that until minutes ago was bustling with people and a few cars is now in complete shambles. My once always pampered face is drenched and dripping with water. My feet which once had never touched a hard floor are now bleeding from walking. The pain I feel in my legs is keeping me from forgetting I'm not dead. But you know what's funny? A million questions in my head.

'Where am I going?'

The only answer I have is: 'I don't know'.

I am just walking and walking. I suddenly look around me and realize that I've just walked into a forest with half the trees leaning on one another due to the earthquake that just happened. I feel exhaustion and desperation to fill this massive hole in my heart.

Wait! I see something! Is that... fire? Curiosity is invading my mind. I walk towards that blaze, slowly and steadily. I feel warm and hear... songs? Just what kind of deranged human being is singing joyfully right after a catastrophe? I start walking towards it. No. Maybe, I shouldn't. As much as I want to run away, the song is sweet, it makes me want to stay. Well, maybe going a little bit closer won't hurt.

Before I know it, I'm already here. I can see around five people sitting around a bonfire. Some seemed my age while a few younger and one in her twenties. Who are they? Their smiles and laughter are different from my "friends". I feel a familiar tickle inside. Right... just like back then, when I used to laugh around with my parents. Just hearing that song seems to fill this hole a teeny tiny bit. I want to step in and sing along but, can I? What if they don't accept me?

"Ahhhh... a ghost!". It's a girl's voice. They stop singing and look at me.

"Oh... hi!... I'm Abigail Winston..."

"Hello, Abigail! Would you care to join us in our song?", says the a lady who looked to be in her twenties. My body is moving on its own. They continued singing and after quite a while, I joined in. It's been about five minutes and tears started flowing down my cheek. "See! you made her cry by calling her a ghost!".

"What? hah! While this is happening the young lady puts her arms around me, gently patting my back without saying a word which is making me cry even more.

Now I've finally calmed down. I look around and see those five. Those two are still quarrelling while the other two who seemed to be twins watch them entertained and the young lady just smiles at them gently with her hands still on my shoulders.

Watching them brings a smile to my face that is not a business one. It look to me and see a crashed down little cottage. One of the twins told me that it got destroyed in the earthquake. They all start telling me their stories which are just as tragic as mine. Now suddenly, I remember my mom's words, " Find folks who love you for who you are and not for what you have.", and the rest was, "that's the only way to fill this hole in your heart".

Now that folks, is how Abigail found herself a new true family that became just as precious as her old one.

The Light of Transportation

By Paige Graham

The light flickers as I reach it

It is only dimly lit

The lampshade holds monotone

A reason to moan and groan.

In Campbelltown the streets are bare

Everyone's gone home to their lair

But my house is peculiarly bright

From one supernatural light.

I gasp, as I realise

This lamp is full of lies

It is not a lamp, but a portal

To a world where kids are immortal.

Inside the light,

It is not night

It has a golden sun

And a sunny ski run.

The trees are made of peppermint

Waterfalls made of Lindt

The people are all shades

In this world there aren't maids.

I am mesmerised by this place

The bedsheets made of lace,

The pillows are fluffed with cotton candy

And for the adults, the windows of caramelised brandy.

I soon make a friend called Pip

She and I sail a berry ship

But I grow homesick

So I give it one last lick.

I spot the lamp amid the emeralds and pinks

So I grab the lamp and it links

The lamp and I are joined

We whisk away from my friend Pip.

I land in my living room

I hug every object, even the broom

Oh, it's great to be here again

To be with all the women, all the men!.

Youth Winners (15- 24 years)

Light Your Way

By Chloe Tsang

You've always known you would one day return. Birds tweet as you step upon the pavement, taking in the scene of leafy green trees and modest brick houses. You can't say you expected this. Walking the streets of your hometown, you thought that longing or anguish would again fill your heart, but all you feel is the faintest sense of melancholy.

With each step, your destination draws nearer. Fleeting impressions of warmth and comfort surround you, but they disappear just as quickly, lost. If you can only return to the place where everything changed, see it and take it in as the young woman you've become, maybe it'll make sense once more.

The red brick building soon comes into sight. You gasp. It stands beyond grey asphalt, green panels adorning its windows as tall thin trees extend over the rows of parked cars. The library looks exactly the same: it's like you never left. Feeling tears come to your eyes, you lean against a lamppost and allow long-forgotten memories to wash over you.

The afternoon you strolled into the library was a chilly winter day. Grateful for the heating, you took off your gloves and headed to the fiction section in search of a new read. After a while, a book with a worn black spine caught your eye, and so you picked it up.

Immediately, you found yourself drawn into the world of the dissatisfied young protagonist, the bustling cafeteria of the department store. Vaguely aware of footsteps and chatter in the background, you continued reading and might have stood there until the library closed—if it weren't for the soft voice that brought you back to reality.

'Hey.' You looked up and noticed a girl your age, her eyebrows raised as she pointed to the book in your hands. 'You're reading that? It's amazing.'

'Uh, yeah.' Somehow you found yourself tongue-tied as you studied her features, noticing the cascade of wavy blonde hair and the warmth in her blue eyes. 'You've read it?'

The girl beamed and stood taller. 'Definitely, like three or four times. It really shows how love, experiencing love, can change people for the rest of their lives. Maybe you'll like it.'

'Wow. That's...' you nodded. 'I'll borrow it now.'

'Awesome.' The girl followed you towards the counter before you sat down together by the windows. Over the course of that afternoon, you learnt that her name was Alina and that she had had a love of literature since a young age. Talking to her felt so natural and effortless; that day, you headed home smiling with a lightness to your gait.

Over the next few weeks, you and Alina often read at the library, sitting in silence before one of you—usually Alina—nudged the other to exchange light-hearted remarks. Continuing the novel, you found that she was right: through joy and hardship, the lovers had grown stronger not only together but on their own. There was something beautiful in that idea.

You considered Alina a close friend, but one day, you began to wonder. Alina had introduced you to a book—the story of two girls whose friendship blossomed into love. Intrigued, you stayed up late, reading. Sitting under the lamp’s glow in the quiet of your room, you couldn’t help but see yourself in hopeful, sensitive Liza.

Winter turned to spring, and trees began to flower with the slightest of leaves. One afternoon, Alina bounded up to you excitedly, waving a flyer in your face. ‘Heard of the Campbell Soup Festival?’

‘Vaguely?’ you said. She handed you the flyer.

‘It’s an annual event, always on a November night. People dance and drink soup; the park’s lit up with lanterns; it’s amazing,’ Alina said. She took a deep breath. ‘Well, it’s coming up in a few weeks. I was wondering... would you like to go with me?’

Your mouth fell open as you tried to figure out what Alina was saying. Did she mean as friends, or as something more? Stammering, you managed, ‘I’ve never been before. I don’t know.’

Alina smiled. ‘Well, think about it. It’ll be really fun.’

You promised to think about it. Later, as you asked around, you learnt that people also crafted lanterns to celebrate the occasion with friends and family. Alina would love a lantern, you thought, and the festival would be the perfect opportunity to spend more time together. When you told Alina you would very much like to go with her, she beamed and let out a whoop of excitement. As your eyes met, you realised the Campbell Soup Festival couldn’t come soon enough.

On the night of the festival, you arrived at the local park wearing your finest dress, holding a paper bag. The sun had set mere minutes ago, and the lanterns strung in between trees cast a warm glow over the darkening evening. You could see why Alina wanted you to come. Remembering Alina’s gift, you tightened your grasp on

the bag. With the joyous night ahead of you, maybe you would finally tell her how you felt.

‘Hey.’ You started and turned to see Alina come up beside you. She smiled and waved, her eyes shining with warmth.

‘You look really good,’ you blurted out. She did: wearing a blue dress with her hair pinned back, the slightest eyeliner framing her lashes, Alina looked like a princess—even more so when she grinned playfully.

‘So do you,’ she replied. ‘What’s in the bag?’ ‘Uh, you’ll see.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Okay. Let’s get some food!’

You made your way to the tables before heading underneath a tree. As you sipped your chicken vegetable soup, you looked to where friends and couples danced to soft guitar music and lilting vocals. Maybe Alina would want to dance. She met your gaze, and as if reading your mind, took your hand and pulled you onto the lawn.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Dancing, what does it look like?’ Alina placed a hand on your waist, and so you looped your arms around her neck. Together, you swayed to the soulful tune under the twinkling lights. The dance lasted only for a few minutes, but as you stared into Alina’s eyes, it might as well have lasted forever.

Later, during a quiet moment, you took the lantern and presented it to Alina. She gasped, tracing a hand over the wood as the candle glowed with warmth. ‘It’s perfect... thank you.’

She hung it on the tree. It was now or never. 'Alina, I have to tell you something.'
'What is it?'

You drew in a breath. 'I know we haven't known each other for very long, but when we're together, everything just feels so right. You make me so happy.'
Reaching out, you took her hand. 'I really, really like you.'

Alina's eyes widened, her mouth falling open. 'You do? Really?' You nodded.
Before you could look away, Alina lifted a hand to your cheek and smiled gently. 'I feel the same way.'

Your heart leapt with disbelief then happiness, beating faster as Alina leaned in. Closing your eyes, you met her halfway, unable to stop yourself from smiling; Alina's lips were as soft and warm as you'd imagined. As the lantern burned brightly above your heads, you lost yourself in her gentle, loving embrace, the pure joy enveloping you from head to toe.

You couldn't stop beaming afterwards; dating Alina, life seemed almost perfect, whole. You only wished you could tell your parents: when they asked what had you so cheerful, you told them it was a new book you'd discovered. Knowing they would never be able to appreciate what you and Alina shared hurt, but thankfully, Alina's mother was kind and accepting. When Alina introduced you as her girlfriend, Mrs. Hayes had lit up and wrapped you in a hug before heading off to bake the most delicious cookies you had ever had. Her support meant everything to Alina, you knew, and over time, it came to mean everything to you too.

The next months seemed to pass by, filled with joy and contentment as your relationship with Alina only grew deeper. You read together in the library like before, but

you also spent many afternoons in Alina's room, leaning against each other as you chatted or rested after a long day. Often, when you felt your eyes falling shut, you would lay your head in her lap, and she would murmur comfortingly as she ran her fingers through your hair. You always found her caresses calming, and as life got busier, you grew even more grateful for the precious moments together.

With your school years coming to an end, the two of you started to plan for the future. Upon telling Alina which college you wanted to attend, she broke into a brilliant smile, taking your face in her hands. 'That's amazing! We'll get to spend so much time together.' She then leaned in and kissed you. As you returned the embrace, you knew that with Alina by your side, the future could only be bright and filled with promise.

It happened one October evening. Your phone rang as you returned from the library; smiling, you answered, 'Hey, Alina—'

'It's me. It's Alina's mum.' Mrs. Hayes's call came through loud and clear. Your stomach dropped at the slight tremor in her words, the anguish in her voice.

'What happened?'

'It's Alina.' Mrs. Hayes started sobbing. 'There was an accident. She was walking, there was a car... she didn't make it.'

Your entire world collapsed, darkness overwhelming the happiness from past weeks. You didn't remember hanging up, nor did you remember collapsing, the next moments blurring into shock and sorrow as you wept. She couldn't be gone. You never even got to say goodbye. *Alina*. You couldn't imagine never seeing those bright eyes again, or never seeing her smile, her soft, loving expression. But she was gone. You would never hold her in your arms. You would never tell her again 'I love you.'

Your parents thought they knew. Patting your back, they handed you tissues, whispering their condolences: 'We know she was your close friend.' Exhausted and filled with grief, sudden anger overcame you. How dare they? They could never understand. Your house seemed suddenly suffocating. You would not be able to stay for much longer before they found out the truth.

So you ran. You packed up your belongings and the little money you'd saved. You saw Mrs. Hayes once more and told her of your plans: you wouldn't be staying for the funeral. Her face showed only sadness and acceptance. Together, you shared memories of Alina—moments of elation, love, and heartbreak that now seemed so priceless. At last, standing on the doorstep, your tears fell freely as Mrs. Hayes hugged and presented you with one last batch of cookies. With that, you left, running from your hometown and everything you couldn't face.

You fled to a big, bright city, where you found yourself surrounded by packed crowds and honking cars, gigantic billboards and shiny buildings that reached for the sky. No matter where you went, the frenzied atmosphere seemed inescapable—you couldn't have picked a place more different from Campbelltown if you'd tried. The chaos drowned out your thoughts and numbed your senses, but even it wasn't able to lessen the grief consuming you. Soon, you settled into a routine. By day, you worked odd jobs and barely scraped together money to pay the rent; by night, you frequented the city's bars, taking shot after shot, anything to dull the pain for even a while.

Many hours, days, and weeks soon blended into a haze. You didn't know how long it would remain that way, but you couldn't imagine living the life you and Alina had planned—not if you wouldn't be living it together. Everything seemed lost and hopeless.

So many nights you cried remembering bright moments, yearning to just feel her presence. But you never did. Alone, in a world cold and dark, you didn't think you would be able to continue. You didn't know what the future would hold.

Six years later, the day after your return, you stand and watch over the annual soup festival. Your heart aches at the scene: strings of lanterns light up the park, laughter and cheers filling the air as you breathe in the scent of hot soup and bread. If you close your eyes, you can almost imagine that Alina will walk up to you, smiling sweetly like all those years ago.

You wonder where Alina is now. Does she still care for you, miss you? Having relived your story, you only feel her absence more deeply than before. Everything is also distant, numb: you realise how long it's been since you've felt her love. You don't know if you'll be able to go on. If only Alina were here: then everything would be okay.

A voice makes you start and hastily wipe your eyes. 'Why do you look so sad?' It is a boy, staring up at you with wide eyes.

'I miss someone,' you say. The boy's mouth falls open in an 'oh'; he stands still for a moment before running back to the crowd. You watch him, feeling a mix of lightness and sorrow.

Moments later, the boy approaches you again. He holds a bowl of soup. 'Here. I hope this makes you feel better.' He smiles. 'And, hey, the person you miss... they're probably thinking of you too.'

You nod and take the bowl, knowing you would start crying if you tried to speak. As the boy heads back to the festival, you hold up the bowl and inhale its aroma. It is filled with chicken and vegetables. You pick up the spoon.

You gasp. The soup is rich and delicious, warming you to the core. With every sip, you're reminded of what feels like home: you start to truly remember. You remember Alina's touch; you remember her eyes shining under the candlelight; you remember her tender gaze after your first kiss. You realise the boy may be right.

Wherever Alina is, she misses you with all her heart. Even after so long, she's always thinking of you, wondering when you will meet again, wanting to tell you how proud she is: wanting to tell you how much she loves you. Tears flow down your face as you smile, finally understanding.

You're not alone—not with Alina watching over you. As you look over the festival, you realise the lanterns seem brighter than before. They glow with the same light as Alina's gift, burning with hope and promising new beginnings. You feel her devotion envelop you in a blanket of warmth.

You know that things will be all right. Alina may not be here, but her love will forever light your way.

Keeper

By Surpreet Jaiswara

I was the keeper of the moon. She was my friend, and I was hers. I spent my days sitting, feeling her spin and travel and move and shine. I cared for her and I protected her. She gave me everything I needed. She gave me purpose. There was always something to do, a crater to fill, a trail to follow, a stone to shine. When she was safe and I had no work to do, I would climb aboard my boat and fly through the dark and the light. I would fly through the Andromeda, sail through the Kuiper Belt. That is what the beings of the planet earth called them. Some of their names for the universe are wondrous, my favourite being Andromeda.

An - dro - me - da

I would whisper the syllables to myself, my voice echoing and resounding until I could no longer tell what the words were. I would always hope that my voice reached the earth.

I was the keeper of the moon, and this is my story.

I used to ride my boat every time I had no work to do. My boat is a being in itself, almost sentient to the point where it knows where I wish to go, what I wish to see. My white and blue robes would rest against my body as we sailed through the great abyss, nothing and no one stopping us from doing that which we desired. My golden hair would lay flat, unmoving. It is the way of the abyss, for there is no air such as there is on the earth.

However, I soon forgot about my boat. I no longer hungered to ride upon it and explore the universe. Instead, I began to follow the lives of the people on the earth. I watched them grow, laugh, cry and die. They all came and went. Life for them is like a blip, a moment in time. I wished I could be like them. They make the most of their life because they know that they do

not have long. But me? I had what felt like an eternity to live, and nothing to do. As the keeper of the moon, I had things to do, mundane actions that I performed out of habit and duty, but there was no longer any wonder in these things. My only joy came from watching the beings of the earth.

I remember the first humans who came to visit me. One of them, he remembers me. When he came to visit me with his friend, I hid. But he felt me. He turned his head to face me when I called to him silently. He could not see me, but he knew there was something there. It was a welcome surprise. I was real. I did exist. I mattered. Another being knew me. And that was enough for me. When the simple beings returned to their home, I followed him. That is how I became interested in the lives of those beings, the humans.

I watched every one of them.

The boy laughing on the merry-go-round in Coney Island, his screams of joy lighting up the world.

The little girl sitting in the corner of the Campbelltown library, reading silently to herself and escaping to a world where everything is perfect.

The frail old man dancing with his beloved wife with their favourite songs from the 50s playing in the background, peaceful smiles on their faces.

The young girl in her room, crying her heart out as she hides herself under the cover of darkness.

The young man in his bed, his heart in his throat and a bottle in his hands.

the love, and the hate. For every night, there was a human who needed my help. And I was their protector. They called me, and I went.

Some wanted redemption. Some wanted peace. Some wanted love. Some just wanted a listener. No matter what they needed, there I was. Perhaps one night it was a child, staying up past their bedtime to watch the performance of the stars, praying they would grow up soon. Perhaps one night it was a young woman, staring at me, tears in her eyes, unable to sleep because of the heavy burden on her heart. She begged to escape the truth, hide in the shadows and live her life. Perhaps one night it was a young man, holding himself in his arms because no one ever held him when he was broken. He looked to me with pain in his eyes, asking for the hurt to be over, the everlasting distress to end.

I was their protector. I became their keeper, too. I watched, and I asked my moon to shine. She complied every time because she knew how important the humans were to me. Once they poured out their hearts, I asked her to shine. She shone, bathing the humans in an ethereal light. I liked to think that it was as if the light were raining down upon the person, freeing them of the stains of sin and worry that they were so desperately seeking freedom from. Only when they felt like they were drowning in the light could they finally breathe.

I never thought I would find someone like Him. I watched His birth from a comfortable seat on my moon. He was a simple mewling infant, a helpless being, much like the rest of humanity. But, even then, I knew He was different. He was...more. He was the one. He shone just like my moon. From that day, I became His keeper, just as I was the keeper of the moon, and He became mine. He grew, matured, and broke.

His hair was a colour that no other being on the earth had. It was just like mine, shimmering and illuminating the world around Him.

His eyes held the universe in them. The specks of gold in His cool gaze were a trait no other human possessed. He held the meaning of life in His eyes, an explosion of colours much like a nebula forever preserved in them.

I watched Him take His first step, His tender feet light on the cool grass.

I listened in as He cried through the day, and sat on the ground through the night, watching me.

I smiled as I saw Him widen His mouth into an innocent grin as He looked up at me, His head tilted.

I sat as He lay outside in the dead of night, watching me. His eyes did not waver even for a second. He watched me endlessly, almost relentlessly. I asked the moon to shine in His favour, and she obliged. That night was the brightest and most beautiful of nights in the history of my existence.

He held a brush in His hands, the colours of the universe captured within a small wooden palette, and the secrets of my existence in His mind. He was frivolous and furious, yet controlled and calm. He would paint and paint, standing in front of His easel for hours on end. He was never satisfied, though. He would always scrunch His nose, squint His eyes, and, after some more strokes of His brush and some moments of deliberation, sigh in defeat. Then He would begin again. He was trying to make sense of the secrets He had been given to protect, but He could not.

Many nights, He would cry His heart out to me. He always basked in the soft light of my moon, and cried to me, praying for help. I would always feel guilty, because all I could do

was tell Him that I was listening. I could not take any actual action. I was powerless to stop His pain. That beautiful boy, and His pain. He was never meant to be there. He was never meant to reside on the earth. He knew it. They did not. They hurt Him, and my anger blazed against them. Many nights I put up the curtains, hiding my moon's beautiful embrace from the earth. They hurt Him, so I deprived them of their light. Those nights were the worst of my life. I told Him, just a little longer, my love. Soon He would be free. Just a little longer. The abyss carried my words away, but I hoped they would reach His troubled mind and calm His heart. Just a little longer. I begged Him to hold on.

And He did. At times, He came close to giving up, but He always looked up at me and remembered where His true home was. He would hold himself, and I hoped that He could feel my warm embrace and gain some peace. And He did. He always did.

He eventually came to me, when the time was right. We did not speak, for there was nothing to say. I handed Him the oar to my boat, and once I lay in it comfortably, He pushed my boat off my moon and sent me away. He held my oar tightly as He watched me leave, and like a flower, He bloomed with joy. He sat and placed His hands on my moon, the feeling of His new power no doubt unfamiliar but inviting. He took on His role, and began His work.

That was all an eternity ago. Now, as I lay on my boat, floating through infinity, eyes shut and ears blocked, I know He is happy. He has taken my place, an apprentice without a master. He too sails through the infinite possibilities of the universe, treading the fine line of reality as I once did. He too watches the humans, protecting them. He too is a keeper of the moon. She is no longer mine, but I am always hers. My hair still radiates her glory, and my

never feel His pain, for He has none. He now feels like He belongs. He is home. And I am at peace.

I was the keeper of the moon. Now, I am the keeper of the secrets of the galaxy, forever floating through the fabric of reality on my boat.

An Extinction – Not of Dinosaurs, Something Else

By Samadhi Chandrasena

Dormant beneath the clouds, the dinosaurs dreamt serenely of their sovereign past. I watched with raw fascination as they extended themselves infinitely under the solid blue sky, one after the other like the edge of a frilly blanket, the warm sun glimmering on their backs. I longed so much to run my hands over those smooth emerald curves, cushioned snugly under the soft pillows of cloud.

Despite their distance, to me, their vastness and grandeur cast an illusion of proximity, and from my small car window, they seemed so at reach. As though, if I extended myself far enough into the icy morning air, I could grant my fingers the satisfaction of revelling in the tactility of their seemingly velvet skin.

These dinosaurs possessed a simple elegance. Insurmountable in the best way, I chided myself for failing spectacularly to communicate their enchanting aura accurately to those around me. There was an unspoken sense of comfort wafting through the air, as I began to let loose the reins on my imaginative, youthful mind. Everything else around me simply faded into a dull background buzz.

Just like us, the dinosaurs had names and stories and troubles, and each to their own. Though their victories and battles were so different from the ones I witnessed each day in my own life, they drew me in from all sides.

But the dinosaurs' existence was transient. That was the truth. Night always crept up on me and stole them away. The predatory darkness consumed its prey, and I was forced to savour the last waking moments of their presence. Standing in front of the Campbelltown library, a picture book wedged between my arm and fragile torso, I anticipated their daily expiry into the darkness, and ultimate identification with the extinction they were so famously known for. *Their* reality.

At 5pm, the sun's steady descent struck a shift in perception. Slowly, the dinosaurs began to fade away; became the Adelaide Hills again.

A few days ago, I returned to the Campbelltown library – much older now, heaving more than just a picture book under my arm, and scrambling about like a new-born lamb under the brute force of time and stress.

My father was late, and for some reason this frustrated me greatly – though I couldn't tell you why. Perhaps I felt I didn't have the time to wait about in the presence of nature with nothing flashy enough to occupy my short attention-span. Inadvertently, my eyes flitted upwards, eventually settling on the hills before me.

But this indifferent glance managed to kindle something in me, something hidden deep down. Whether it was tears in my eyes or the reflection of light, I couldn't tell, but they shone with

unspoken reminiscence. Curiosity spread like a fever, and for a brief moment, I wondered about the dinosaurs and what they might be up to.

Elsewhere, the flicker of a candle, almost reignited. The dinosaurs held their breath, patiently waiting...

But I was greeted by silence. A litany of possibilities sprung to mind, - sleeping, eating, talking – but none of them were quite as original as before. They lacked a fundamental element: my imagination. My imagination – which had become, over the years, about as dry and shallow as the rest of me. It had withered progressively like a dying flower, unwatered and unloved. For I had deemed a rather dense selection of weeds more important, and to this recognition they had grown deceptively rich and abundant, crowding the insides of my brain with - ironically - nothing.

In that moment, it felt like I was losing oxygen. I scratched the inside of my brain hard, nails bleeding with sheer desperation, scrambling for an answer – anything would do, anything that could elicit some form of freedom from this insipid life I had chosen to pursue. Yet I was unable to recognise the hills as anything more than just that.

I thought about my childhood self and felt a tear trickle down the side of my cheek. She had never wasted her breath. She was never puffing or grasping desperately for air because she had exhausted her supply on pointless gossip. How had I allowed such an original source of gold to

slip through my fingers over the years so easily? I was incapable of accessing my *own* world. It was *me* who had breathed life into them. It was *me* who had created this adventure for them.

I urge you to step outside and look around. Sit in the backseat again, look up at the hills, acknowledge the presence of the dinosaurs, identify the various faces in the trees, the iconography of the clouds. The real world will never repossess that flare that it had from when you were a little girl if you let it slip away, you will never see it as that playground of wonder and illumination you once wallowed in.

Do it. Before it's too late. Before your passport expires and you're stuck in a land washed out of colour and shine with no way out.

At 9pm, a whisper. I almost miss it but catch it just in time. Standing on my windowsill, I peer into a thick of black and, to my surprise, identify the faint outline of a bouncing pattern in the near distance.

I smile to myself in the darkness. It was still there, guided by the dinosaurs' merciful voices.

Perhaps our sense of imagination is hardwired. Creativity is in our veins, the blood that once carried our childhood souls. And, perhaps, if we want it badly enough, it will always be there, waiting to be resurrected by our ever-curious minds.

How does one become so deterred by things like *reality*?

Open Winners
(25 + years)

Moonlight Escapade

By Alison Richards

Brick stood still, his eyes adjusting to the inside of the shed. The full moon was doing its best to help, creeping through the small window and leaking pin pricks of light through rusty gaps.

The space was larger than it had looked from the outside and the far end was too dark to make out. But it was the smell that hit him square in the face. A sickening stench of stale piss and musty air that made his eyes water. It was worse than when he and Thommo made twenty bucks pulling the dead possum out of Mrs. Marsh's rainwater tank. His hands clapped over his mouth and nose to hold back the stink. Swallowing sick from the back of his throat he squinted, scanning the shed. Find the dog and get out. Fast. And quiet, least the bloke hears. That was the plan. He swallowed again, picturing the homemade sign tied with old shoelaces to the chain link front fence. Trespassers will be shot! Servivors will be shot again!

The left side sat lower than the right, a detail that pissed him off more than it should every time he walked past the rundown place on the corner, which was every day to and from school. That, and the spelling mistake. The bloke was obviously as stupid as he was cruel.

'Oi,' Thommo whispered from outside. 'Got it yet?'

'Give us a chance, will ya,' he shot back. 'It's dark as in here.'

Brick cursed the losing hand of rock, paper, scissors that sent him into the shed, leaving Thommo standing guard outside. Lucky bastard. But that was Thommo for you. He had all the luck. He got the girls, the brains, and he'd won the lottery as far as parents went too. Unlike Brick. He tried not to hold it against Thommo, the first friend he'd made at Magill primary, and his best mate every day since.

But it would all be different next year. They hadn't said it out loud, but going to different high schools would change everything. They both knew it.

Eyes finally adjusting, the shed's contents came into focus. It was just more of the junkyard they'd snuck through outside. Broken bits of machinery, barrel drums stacked floor to ceiling, a mess of crates covered with canvas tarps. A wooden workbench filled with tools ran the length of one wall.

Still scanning the room, he jumped as a low whine came from the back corner. He shook out his clenched fists and took a moment to steady his breathing. Heart pounding, he crept towards the sound. The floor was dirt, his footsteps silent.

The stench became unbearable as a small cage appeared out of the shadows. The bars were thick and rusted brown. Brick squinted, sensing movement. And there she was. He let out a low gasp, a mix of shock and sadness as the dog's dark reality was revealed. Bits of dust flitted through the beam of low light as her eyes lifted to meet him.

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It'd been Brick who heard her first, that Friday night down at Fourth Creek. He'd convinced Thommo to hang out late again, made some lame excuse to delay going home. But Thommo knew. And he'd stayed. He was the light to Brick's shade.

They'd just talked, rubbish mostly, and skimmed stones across the creek. The ripples danced across the glassy surface and Brick wished he could just float away on them.

When the dog's sad howl crept over the fence backing onto the creek Brick had held up his hand, signaling for quiet.

'Geez, that poor dog.'

'What do you reckons wrong with it?' Thommo asked.

Brick didn't have to reckon. He knew. It was so much more than just a sound. It had

shape. A feel. One he felt deep in his chest. It was familiar, and he could almost taste it.

‘She’s sad.’

Thommo’d already had his growth spurt (more luck) and gave Brick a boost to look over the fence. The yard’s eerie shadows coupled with the dog’s howls sent a chill down his spine. In the middle of the yard, lit by a creamy white crescent moon, she sat. She was a big dog, but nothing more than a pile of crooked legs and bare rib bones. Her black fur was sparse and matted. A thin tail lay limp in the dirt, showing no signs of life. She lifted a greying snout and stared up at Brick, her eyes dull as she cried into the night.

Then the bloke had appeared, staggering out from the house. His clothes were sloppy and soiled. With an ugly face of chaotic red whiskers and missing teeth he swore drunkenly in the dog’s direction. Brick ducked down under the safety of the fence.

A sharp yelp brought him back up and he watched in horror as the dog was pitched across the yard off the bloke’s boot. She landed awkwardly, legs shaking as her frightened whines made Brick’s heart bleed.

He froze in fear as the bloke screamed over her cowering frame. She limped into the open shed, the door slamming shut narrowly missing her back legs. Thommo dropped him to the ground and they’d run from the scene in terror.

Brick had a dog once, a puppy. But only for a day. When his dad found it he’d gone right off. Said the last thing he needed was another useless mouth to feed. The pup was gone by morning. Brick never asked what happened to it. He figured that’s why the dog’s cries from that night ate away at him so. It was in the middle of maths class, several weeks later that he turned to Thommo and said it. ‘I’m gettin’ the dog out.’

‘What?’

‘You heard,’ Brick said. ‘I’m gettin’ that dog.’ Thommo shook his head.

‘That bloke’ll skin you alive if he catches you.’ ‘I’m doin’ it,’ he said, determined.

‘Tonight.’ Thommo just shook his head again.

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She sat hunched in the small cage, her body shaking. She stared at Brick, her eyes like brown polished marbles. They pierced him, revealing a hidden strength despite her broken body. But there was something else too. Something in the pointed attention of her ears, and her twitching nose. Curiosity maybe, or better still, hope. She circled slowly, wincing as her body rubbed against the bars. No comfort there. A steel bowl sat empty, bone dry and forgotten in the corner of the cage. Brick's anger pulsed in every vein as he took in her dark prison.

'This is where you live?'

His voice broke and sadness brought him to his knees. He held a hand out towards the cage, unable to still his trembling fingers. Anger overshadowed his attempts to calm. She let out another whine, her snout creeping towards him. Assessing. Breathing him in. Her lips quivered and her nose inched further forward.

A frayed rope wound viciously around her neck, tight as anything. The skin underneath was rubbed red and raw. Brick's hand edged through the bars. Crossing the breach his fingers stilled. Her head cocked to the side. Questioning. Time stood still and a familiarity overwhelmed Brick. He didn't know the dog, yet somehow he did.

He allowed her to make the final move, the gap covered with one last curious snuffle. Contact. He drew in a sharp breath as her wet nose and prickly whiskers crept up his outstretched hand. Slowly from palm to fingertip she sniffed, exhaled, sniffed again. The soft white fur of her muzzle exposed her old age. Something indescribable passed between them, like a word in one language with no equivalent in another. Amongst all this darkness, he had found her.

'How long have you been here?'

She stared back in response, eyes unblinking. Her body had stopped shaking,

although he hadn't noticed exactly when. After another moment the dog leaned back. Brick's hand withdrew from the bars and he clutched it to his chest. It felt different. Special somehow, like a small part of her spirit, her hidden light, had been exposed and transferred to it.

'You deserve better than this,' he whispered. 'We all do.'

A padlock sat cruelly at the bottom corner of the cage door. It was old and rusted like the cage, but held fast as he shook it.

'Bugger.'

Standing up he scanned the shed. He pounced on a small pocketknife with a worn leather handle sitting on the workbench. He wouldn't normally have taken it, but something about the way the blade glinted in the moonlight made him feel safer. He shoved it in his back pocket and grabbed a shovel leaning against the far wall. He dragged it to the cage at a jog. After a few reassuring words to the dog, he lined up the lock and brought down the shovel with all his might. She cowered with the crunch of metal on metal, but he struck again, hoping the din would be muffled by distance and luck. The third strike crumbled the lock entirely. He cheered internally and tossed it aside. The cage door opened with a sad creak. His heart raced in double time, the throb filling his ears.

She sat still. Head low, eyes glancing upwards. Brick moved to the side and softly clicked his tongue.

'Come on, girl.'

Her eyes darted side to side. He waited.

'I'm not leaving you here,' he said defiantly, and she inched forward slowly, pausing at the edge of the cage. Her gaze held a question.

'You can trust me,' he answered, his voice tender and true. 'I promise.'

She stepped from the cage, stretching out the stiffness of her cramped limbs. She

seemed bigger then, her body demanding more space. A rush of relief coursed through him. He walked back to the door and peeked through the window. All was quiet in the yard, and a soft light coming from the front room of the house still flickered.

Thommo called again, hurrying him up.

‘You coming?’ Brick asked, looking down at the dog. She sniffed at the door and pawed the ground. ‘I’ll take that as a yes.’

He filled his lungs, working up the courage to open the door. He slowly picked up the short length of rope hanging from her collar. She allowed it, but with wary eyes. With a final, disgusted look back at the cage he pushed open the door.

The cool night rushed in to meet the beads of sweat covering his face. He drank in the fresh air as the door creaked loudly on its hinges. He met Thommo’s wide eyes. They waited. No movement or sound from the house.

‘About bloody time!’

‘I got her,’ Brick beamed, holding the dog’s rope triumphantly as she cautiously followed him through the door. Thommo thumped him on the back.

Crouching low they took off across the open yard, the dog’s large paws thwack thwacking against the dirt. They slammed into the safety of a large Gum’s wide trunk in the middle of the yard, its ancient, gnarled roots stuck out of the ground like twisted speed bumps. Half way.

Thommo mouthed something before taking off again, reaching the fence line in a flash. Brick threw him a thumbs up then looked down at the dog. She stared back at the house, tail firmly between her legs. He tugged gently on the rope, bringing her forward. Their turn.

The loud screech of a door split open the silence in the yard, bringing Brick’s heart and feet to a standstill. Then the slam of a screen door, like a thunderclap.

Flattening his body against the tree, he felt the dog stiffen at the end of her rope.

Heavy footsteps crunched over gravel behind the tree, while Thommo’s figure disappeared into the fence’s shadowy curtain of ivy.

He closed his eyes and steadied his breathing. By some stroke of luck a thick bank of clouds swam across the sky, blocking the full moon’s glow and cloaking the yard

in a welcome veil of darkness.

The bloke coughed loudly. It was a grotty, hacking sound full of phlegm and filth, followed by the unmistakable zip of a fly and a heavy stream of piss falling into dirt. Brick felt the rope tug in his hand. The dog was circling nervously. Her body shook and he tried his best to quiet her frightened whines. But it was no good.

'Brick, run!' Thommo's scream filled his ears. But he didn't need to be told. He was already belting towards the fence, legs pumping like mad. The bloke yelled, launching after them from the verandah. The rope clutched tight in his hand, Brick heard the bloke crash heavily to the ground. He looked back to see the large body face down in the dirt, pants around his ankles, feet tangled in bootlaces and trouser legs.

Brick reached the fence, drawing in large gulps of air as Thommo pushed him to the ground then through a narrow gap under the wire. The dog was there too, right by his side. The bloke's yells were lost to the night sky as they tore down the street.

Brick lost a shoe but kept running. Thommo's laughter was manic and their confidence grew with every step away from the dark house. This was their neighbourhood and they knew the streets backwards. The dog was quick too, despite her poor condition. Brick's eyes briefly met hers as they jumped the creek and hid in the cover of Morialta Park. The bloke wouldn't catch them now.

Thommo's breath was ragged. 'Come back to mine if you want?' 'Nah,' Brick said. 'Reckon I'll just hang out for a bit.'

'Ok, text you tomorrow,' Thommo said, taking off. But Brick wasn't so sure he would. The school year was nearly done and things between them were already changing.

As he reached the top of Deep View Lookout Brick finally relaxed. He slumped forward over the guardrail, catching his breath. The bright lights of Adelaide sprawled out in the distance and the dog yawned at his feet.

'Hey, girl,' he whispered, scratching her soft ear. Her body weight leaned warmly into his leg.

‘No more livin’ in the dark, you hear?’ Her tail thumped. A wag of agreement. ‘Yep. Into the light now.’

Ablaze

By Bethany Cody

January 1st, 2015

The bitumen is oil-slick black and oozes along the curved slopes of Gorge Road. It sticks to Anna's feet as she stumbles down the road, unseeing. Her skin is blackened, feathered in an unfriendly film of ash and dirt. Beneath her chapped bottom lip is a single, miniscule pearl of blood. She walks until she collapses in the middle of the molten road.

Minutes later, she's found.

A white ute appears over the crest of a tall hill and rolls to a stop a metre or so away. She hears the squeal of brakes, the dull thud of boots, the sound of metal and crackling fire. She's lifted into a man's arms, smells pungent sweat and is inelegantly placed in the passenger seat of his ute. She passes out in a dreamless sleep.

When she comes to, she finds herself strapped into the seat of the car. Her neck aches from resting on an awkward angle.

'You're awake.'

Anna looks at the driver, a young man. Ash obscures the writhing tattoos on his forearms.

'Are you okay?'

Anna mumbles, 'I think so.'

The ute crawls past Foxfield Oval into a plume of ruby coloured smoke. Her eyes catch it as they pass, a car hollowed out by long, angry tongues of flame, blackening the bitumen beneath it, firefly-like embers dancing through the twisted branches of the surrounding gum trees. The raging heat warms her face through the window glass.

‘Where are we going?’

‘There’s a bunch of people taking shelter in the church on Paynham Road. We’ll be safe there until they get the fire contained.’

Anna slumps back in her seat.

‘What were you doing out there in the middle of the road?’

Anna makes a noncommittal noise in the back of her throat and coughs as it stirs up a sharp irritation.

‘Where’re your shoes?’

She frowns down at her bloodied, dirty feet in the footwell.

‘I don’t know.’

December 21st, 2014

She steps out onto the dewy morning grass, her feet depressing the loose, damp soil, trapping long, green blades between each of her toes. Her fingers hug the sides of a hot mug of coffee. She draws the acidic, foamy liquid into her mouth in slow sips, savouring the taste. These early summer mornings, where rare raindrops are diamonds on her windowpane and

the unusual cold caresses her lungs with each shaky inhalation, remind her of the quiet beauty of the world.

It's been one year on her own, now.

One year since...

She sighs and her sour breath mists the air.

It appears in the dusky fringes of her periphery, a shapeless blur of motion, and is upon her before she can react. It pummels into the side of her head, knocking her down. The mug is thrown from her grasp. The world tilts and bends around her. The ground is hard when she lands.

She looks down at her body.

At the blood.

Spatters of it drip from her forehead, snaking down her neck and onto her chest as she leans over her knees, catching her breath. Her eyes close against a fine mist of rain.

A few paces away, a blackbird lies still on the grass. She crawls to it on her hands and knees, running tentative fingertips over its soft down. It's still warm. But the eyes are dead. The feathers are brown and mottled, its beak is pale and half-open, as if in an eternal, silent scream.

The house is quiet when she stumbles inside. The TV in the lounge room is on, muted, throwing shifting rays of light on the glass top of her coffee table and kitchen window. She rinses trembling hands in the bathroom sink and presses a towel to the side of her head, wincing. As the blood slows, coagulating and crusting over, she drops several tablets into a glass of water and stares blankly as they fizz and dissolve.

Movement in the backyard catches her eye.

A second blackbird with shining, obsidian plumage, a male, is flitting about on the grass beside the dead bird. His song is loud and strangely musical. He remains in the yard for hours, flying into the nearby pear tree and singing his distraught, little heart out, before swooping down again beside the brown, feathered lump.

She hears him still as she curls in on herself to sleep. A throbbing migraine holds her captive long into the night, robbing her of dreams, of any means of escaping the bird's endless song. She emerges in the morning having slept for half an hour, at the most.

It doesn't stop.

She hears him singing from the shaded branches of the neighbours' plum trees, overburdened with blossoms. The light trilling and warbling, an intricate tune that on the surface sounded so pretty and light-hearted...was really a song of mourning. Every morning, she wakes to the same song, the same grief, the blackbird calling to its dead mate.

She almost catches him once. His feathers are sleek and black where they find the light between the knobbly branches of the pear tree. She shifts on the verandah, stepping out onto the grass to better see him. She makes it all the way to the base of the tree before he senses her movements and flies away.

It carries on for weeks.

At first it was just the one bird. Now there are groups of them lining the branches of the trees in her backyard. In another few days, they spill over and congregate in the neighbouring yards, their pointed yellow beaks and beady, brown eyes trained on her house. Their singing fills the night, a dreaded disharmony, smothering the soft calls of the native birds. She hears

them over the TV speakers playing on full volume in her lounge room. It reverberates off the tiled surfaces of her bathroom, a heady, ringing sound that runs through each bloody contour of her brain, consuming her wholly.

Then they come inside.

A sharp and sudden noise wakes her.

Barely asleep for ten minutes, she limps from her bed, flattening herself to the lint littered walls as she slinks through the house in search of what woke her. A series of scuffling sounds come from the far end of the house, nearest the kitchen, and she carefully closes in.

There she finds them, dark, formless masses dancing about in the dark of her kitchen and dining room, moonlight glinting off of their black feathers. They hop and skip and peck at each other, their yellow beaks gleaming like neon signs in the darkness. Her elbow knocks into the wall and for a horrible moment, the birds go still.

She can't breathe.

They're everywhere, choking the floor of her house, an undulating swarm like cockroaches or rats.

Her lungs ache.

And then they see her.

In one swift movement, the birds flick their heads, taking her in.

One of the birds closest to her takes a tentative step forward.

And then she runs.

Out through the front door of the house, she flees to the safety of her car parked in the driveway. She dodges several birds as she closes herself inside the chilled interior. Dozens of

birds have followed, swooping the car, landing on the bonnet. As she starts the car, they shiver and ruffle their feathers, taking off when she pulls away from the curb and screams down the street. She sees them in the rear-view mirror, following her effortlessly through the early morning air, a huge, black cloud of feathers and beaks and sharp, yellow clawed feet.

Eventually they drive her off the road, throwing themselves into the body of the car, diving into the glass of her windshield, leaving bloodied smears behind, obscuring her view. She staggers out of the car, leaving the door open and engine running in her wake. She jogs down a long gravel drive, taking shelter on the porch of a quaint, brick house. Squatting behind the wooden rail, she watches for them, heart spasming in her chest.

‘Oh dear, can I help you?’

Anna jumps from her crouched position, whirling around.

An elderly woman is half in, half out of the doorway, her face obscured by a dusty flyscreen.

‘Um.’

Red-faced, she stands and adjusts her t-shirt.

The woman’s eyes are a cloudy brown, glistening under the overcast sky.

Anna feels wild, untethered.

‘What’s wrong, dear?’

She draws in a shaky breath. ‘I’m okay, thank you.’

The woman hesitates in the doorway.

‘I...’ Anna laughs at herself. ‘I thought someone was chasing me.’

The woman’s brows furrow. The creased skin of her neck shifts as she swallows.

‘Oh, dear.’

Anna glances at her car, humming at the end of the woman’s driveway.

‘Come inside, have a glass of water.’

She follows the woman in, closing the door behind her. It latches with an audible ‘click’.

When Anna turns to face the interior of the house, she sees the woman is gone.

‘In here, dear...’

She follows the sound of the woman’s voice, leading her down a claustrophobic, carpeted corridor to the kitchen. As she steps across the threshold, her eyes squint against the light pouring in from large, floor-to-ceiling windows.

‘Here you are.’

Anna takes the glass from sun-spotted hands and sips, taking in the bright room.

‘Do you feel better?’

Kindness crinkles the freckled skin around the woman’s eyes.

Anna nods and smiles. ‘Thank you.’

They stand in companionable silence on the tiled floor. Her heart slows, her muscles relaxing against the soft cotton of her pyjama shirt and slack leggings.

But something beyond the windows catches Anna’s eye.

Her fingers tighten around the glass as she searches the backyard.

On the verandah, a dozen blackbirds are gathered on the railing and in the trees, blackening their branches like soot. They shiver and flit about, pecking at each other, their yellow-rimmed eyes peering into the kitchen at the two women.

‘Oh, dear. You’ve gone pale.’

Anna’s neck snaps to the side, she sees the woman leaning against the stove, stirring something dark and odorous in a small saucepan.

The blackbirds’ song starts slow, in disorganised bits and pieces. Anna’s pulse leaps beneath her skin and she backs away, towards the wooden pantry on the far end of the room.

‘Such pretty music.’

The woman sighs, her eyes gazing happily at the birds flanking the trees in her backyard. She stirs the stinking liquid on the stove in dreamy circles.

It’s a whisper where it leaves Anna’s lips. ‘No...’

‘Such lovely singing.’

Anna takes a step towards the doorway when the woman turns on her sharply. Her mouth opens as if to say something, when sharp, musical notes fall from the dark cavern of throat, an eerie imitation of the birds’ song.

Anna drops the glass of water, hears the sharp sound of glass breaking and looks down by her feet.

Feet.

She forgot to put her shoes on.

The glass lies unbroken on the tiles and at first, she doesn’t understand.

The singing intensifies, gaining in volume and acidity. She looks up, sees the floor-to-ceiling windows are shattered and several birds have hopped into the room, picking at the glass with their yellow beaks, their shiny, black heads twitching, watching.

‘Are you alright, dear?’

Anna watches as the woman's cardigan begins to convulse and shift on her lanky frame, the fabric rippling over her concave chest as if something were trapped inside. The expression on her face reveals nothing of the strange nature of the situation and a deep, heavy feeling fills the pit of Anna's stomach.

Suddenly, a large, brown plume of feathers unfurl from beneath the woman's cardigan, coming to rest around her neck. Waves of nausea crash into Anna and as the woman approaches, she panics and pushes the elderly woman into the stove. She doubles over, her head makes an awful sound against the metal. She collapses against the cupboards, eyes closed, chin touching her chest. Her hair is alight with fire. It catches on her cardigan and disintegrates the feathers around her neck, spreading down over her long skirt and slippers.

It leaps from the woman to the wooden cupboards and cheery yellow curtains framing the windows. Soon the smoke is too thick, and Anna flees through the house, flinging the front door open and running down the driveway. She stands at the end of the gravel path by the side of her car. The house is consumed by flames. It jumps from tree to tree, devouring everything in its wake with angry, red fire.

She watches the burning for a long time, surprised she hasn't heard sirens or screams from nearby neighbours. The fire crawls over the front garden, up the sides of the brick fence and over, gaining in speed and heat. Anna feels it on her face. When it reaches the end of the driveway, it teases around the twigs and grass caught under the tires of her car and Anna takes off running.

January 9th, 2015

She wakes.

Tendrils of smoke irritate the inside of her nostrils and she coughs, blowing her nose with a rough tissue. She curls over the side of the mattress and waits.

Nothing.

No sound at all.

The trees have been cleansed.

She falls back onto the sheets and smiles in the darkness of her bedroom.

The fire is contained within the week. A team of local firefighters extinguish the blaze with help from neighbouring fire departments. The damage is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands with many residents returning to piles of smoking rubble and ash where their homes once stood. Maggie, the elderly woman living along Gorge Road, is still considered missing. Flyers are taped to every other street pole in the City of Campbelltown, even spilling over into Magill and as far as Hope Valley. The woman's cloudy brown eyes seem to follow Anna when she passes by on foot, or in her new car.

She watches the news and waits.

They never find her bones.

Suburban Awakening

By Karen Chester

After the busyness of the Campbelltown netball courts, the walk back to the car was welcome respite. Jamie was silent, holding tight to her hand. Lily had played well today and had a flush in her cheeks and lightness to her eyes. Their team had won by six goals so a solid win. She smiled to herself. She'd never played netball as a child, and had initially wondered if she would be able to follow the rules or enjoy watching, but the game had grown on her.

She looked up, Nick was walking about ten paces ahead, Lily trotting to keep up with him. As usual he'd stood away from her at the netball court but she'd looked up a couple of times to see him staring. She'd talked with a couple of the other Dads at netball today and felt a pang of dread. Hopefully Nick wouldn't be annoyed, sometimes he got in a mood and she hoped today wouldn't be one of those days. Nick and Lily piled into the car and she opened the side door. "Up you go" she said to Jamie, hoisting him into his car seat and strapping him in as he squirmed. Nick started the engine. Her heart lurched. She'd told Nick a few times she hated when he did that, starting the car before she got in. She had a brief flashback to many years before of her Dad shouting at her for being too slow to get in the car, the sharp sting of a slap on her thigh as she rushed to strap in. Her heart beat faster, but she shook the memory off and came back to the present. She walked around and sat in her car-seat, looked at Nick.

"Are you done?" Nick asked, his tone was clipped, but his face was calm. I'm being silly she thought, he's my husband, he's not my Dad.

They drove home mostly in silence. Nick and Lily briefly discussed the game, talked strategy. Lily was happy. Jamie was happy, watching Lily. He adored his big sister. At home, Nick made himself lunch and sat silently on the couch with his phone. She rushed around, got together sandwiches for the kids, set up Jamie in the highchair, cleaned up afterwards. Lily tried to sneak on her iPad, but saw Mum's stern eye and quickly put it away. Dad continued on his phone.

She cleared her throat. "Ah, so what are your plans for the rest of the weekend?" Nick didn't look up, didn't answer. She tried again "Honey, do you have to work this weekend? Will you be around?" He said coolly, "I've got a few things to do, I'll be in and out". Her heart sank. It would be another weekend where she looked after the kids while he did his own thing. She knew the drill, it had been this way for the past two years. She knew better than to quiz him for details, she didn't want to control him as her Dad had to her Mum. He deserved his freedom, he worked so hard. And he was a good provider. "Ah, ok" was all she said.

Then she remembered that she needed visit Kmart at Glynde to grab some leggings for Lily. Lily had shot up in the past few weeks and all her school leggings were at least a size too small. "Actually honey, I need to pop out for a bit," Nick looked up sharply from his phone, stared at her coldly. "I....I won't be too long, should be back in 20 minutes or so, I just need to get leggings for Lily..." "You couldn't have done that yesterday? You weren't working...."

He didn't say it then, but had many times before – the weekends were his time, she needed to take care of things so he could focus on his to-do list. "I make the big bucks baby" he would say on occasion and she would shrink into herself. When they first married they'd both had professions, careers, but not anymore. She was such a good Mum he'd said, and when Jamie finally came along (after 4 years of trying), it made sense that she stay home. It seemed silly to pay childcare for two kids, especially in the school holidays. And Nick insisted they could afford for her to do this. "You're so good with the kids" he insisted, "this will be easier for all of us."

So she'd stopped working. And to begin with everything did seem easier. Nick helped out, bathed Jamie in the evenings when he got home from work, chatted to her about her day. But over a few months he started working later, and stopped doing any of his previous chores at home or with the kids. "Well, I can't do everything" he would say.

Nick's latest project was a family budget so they could save for retirement and do all the things they'd dreamed about. Nick asked that she put all her purchases on their joint credit card so it would be easier to monitor expenses and do the budget.

He was so jovial and happy when he talked about the future, and for the first time in months, she saw the Nick she had fallen in love with, the Nick of old. He's trying so hard to make things good for us, she'd thought and had felt contentment.

But Kmart awaited...."I'm sorry" she said hurriedly, "Jamie was unsettled and wasn't napping properly, we didn't get there this week" Nick didn't answer, went back to his phone. She started to rush around, grabbed her keys to go.

He spoke without looking up, "I'm heading out in half an hour" he said. There was no discussion, it was a statement. She felt her stomach tighten. One time she had been out and Nick had gone to Spartans in Campbelltown to buy a new coffee machine for work. Lily said he'd been out for almost an hour. Lily was only 8 and Jamie was 2 ½ and left home alone. They were fine but she had felt sick for hours afterwards, thinking about what could have happened.

She had tried to talk to Nick, to say the kids were too young to be left alone, but he said "Oh they're fine.....I needed to go out, you weren't home" So now it hung over her. If she went out too long, there was the chance he would leave the kids home alone. The thought clawed at her.

Out of nowhere she had a flash of memory. Of hiding in the closet with her 2 younger sisters - probably at similar ages to Lily and Jamie now – while her parents fought in the next room. She could hear their raised voices, the shaky anger in her father's voice. She heard the sickening thud of fist on flesh then a crash as a body hit into a table or perhaps the rocking chair. Then her father's voice swearing and the front door slamming. Hopefully he would sleep it off in the car. She gestured to her younger sisters that it was ok, they crept out and she tucked them into bed. She could hear her Mum moving about in the kitchen as if nothing had happened, so she put herself to bed too.

She shook off the memory...back to now, and a reminder how lucky she was that her husband was nothing like her father. Nick had never hit her, or threatened her and he rarely drank. He was such a good provider. She thanked her lucky stars, and rushed to the car to drive to Kmart. On the way, she turned the radio up loud, enjoyed listening to something other than Lily's CD which usually played on repeat.

She raced in to Kmart, grabbed three pairs of leggings, noticed a cute t-shirt with llama's on it – Lily's favourite. She felt frozen on the spot, wanting to buy it for her daughter, but also remembering that Lily had many other T-shirts. And knowing Nick was trying to keep to the budget. She sighed. Back when she was earning a wage she would have thought nothing of buying it. But it felt different to spend money now.

She walked past the scarves and hats on her way to the front checkouts. She caught sight of herself in a mirror and looked quickly away. She found it hard to look her reflection in the eye, she hardly recognised herself anymore. She used to be – never beautiful – but well put together, a touch of lippie and she always made an effort with her clothes. These days she was busy with the children and felt guilty spending money on things for herself. But she also felt guilty for not being the wife that Nick deserved. He spent a long time in the mornings getting ready, always dressed so smartly.

At the registers, she saw a woman from Lily's baby group from many years before. She smiled and remembered sunny afternoons in Thorndon park, talking about nappies, and motherhood and cute clothing purchases. And singing along to Rhyme Time at Campbelltown library. It seemed an eternity ago now. She looked down quickly, saw her tired old sneakers, worn jeans and felt acutely embarrassed. She looked up, Angie was walking over, hugged her. "It's great to see you" Angie said. "You too" she mumbled back. Then she remembered the kids at home and that Nick was probably fuming that she wasn't back yet, or perhaps had already left the kids home alone. She made a fumbled excuse, grabbed the shopping bag with Lily's leggings and practically ran back to the car. She drove home, berating herself for dawdling at the shops.

At home, Nick eyed her coldly as she walked in but said nothing. He grabbed his keys. She noticed he'd changed clothes. "Oh you're off golfing?" she asked, surprised. He said nothing, walked towards the door. "Are you doing the full 18 holes?" She asked. He didn't answer, but after a few seconds called over his shoulder "I'll be back later" and walked out. She heard his car reverse down the driveway.

Lily was sitting on her ipad, glued to the screen, smiling to herself as she watched some Youtube video clip. Jamie was whingeing, trying to climb up on the chair alongside his sister. She sighed, another long afternoon and evening with the kids. Then she felt guilty. She was so lucky. She didn't have to work; all the other Mums at school pickup looked at her jealously, said how lovely Nick was, how lucky she was.

"I am lucky", she whispered to herself. She looked out the window across the manicured lawns. She picked Jamie up, and after a brief protest at being taken away from the ipad, he snuggled into her. She hugged him, ruffled his hair, then popped him down with a couple of his favourite cars, and he grabbed one and started rolling it. She was so lucky to have this time with her children, she loved them so much. But sometimes it was lonely.

Her sister used to visit a lot when Lily was small. But Nick had said her sister was too pushy, had been coming over too often. He'd said he didn't want her sister spending too much time with the kids as she was a "bad influence, just like your Dad". This rankled as her sister was nothing like her Dad. A bit rough around the edges perhaps but she meant well. But Nick always seemed upset after her sister had visited and the kids were his kids too. His opinion mattered. She had slowly reduced the visits so now her sister barely visited anymore. She missed her sister, the easy camaraderie.

She stared out the window, the sky was starting to pinken. Clouds were silvery and glowing. The old church over the back fence was illuminated in the evening light, the sandstone radiating a pinky hue. She soaked up the scene. She was not religious but there was something beautiful about this building, with the history steeped in the stone walls. She looked across at Jamie who had walked over to pull more toys out of the toy box. She called out to Lily to finish up on the ipad and jump through the shower. Lily grumbled but did as asked, padded to the bathroom. She could soon hear the steady patter of water.

Her phone buzzed and she stood wearily and checked for messages. It was a news bulletin, and as she skimmed through it, one article caught her eye. 'Coercive Control – When Domestic Violence isn't physical'. Her family history flashed

through her mind, but she pushed it away. She skim read the words then stopped suddenly. It was as if a stone had sunk in her stomach.

She looked back out the window, saw the bright orange glow illuminating the sky, illuminating her mind. She felt the last 5 years flash past her.

No physical aggression but increasing control, her life slowly becoming smaller and smaller. Becoming a shell of her former self, losing the essence of who she was, trying to be the perfect wife, mother. The friends slowly drifting away.

The little jibes from Nick – about the baby weight she couldn't shift, the bright sneakers she loved to wear, her frizzy hair. And when she told him his words hurt, he told her she was too sensitive, couldn't take a joke, took herself way too seriously....

The moments at night when she pretended to be asleep so he wouldn't push her for intimacy. Because once he started he was quite rough, even when she asked him to stop. But she understood, he had needs....

The days when she felt anxious, trying not to say the wrong thing in case she upset him and he didn't speak to her for hours or days

The fact he had total freedom over his activities while she had become akin to a prisoner in her home.....

She felt completely overwhelmed, sat with a thump, started crying quietly. All this time, all these years, she thought she'd escaped the past, the childhood of fear and control, but here she was oblivious to what was happening right in front of her. Tears streamed down her face, but tears of relief as well as sadness.

Suddenly she understood. She was not crazy, she was in a bad situation, a bad marriage. She looked down at Jamie's cherubic face, and felt a sense of fierce protectiveness. She had grown up in a dysfunctional home, there was no way her children would do the same. So many emotions rushed through her, anger, relief, sadness, a sense of hope. It wouldn't be easy, it would probably take some months to work out, but in that moment she knew what she had to do.

She picked up the phone and dialled the familiar number. "Hey sis" she said.