

PROLOGUE

I am crying as I affix the tape to the window, the tears collecting on the end of my nose and then falling onto the carpet between my feet. I don't bother to wipe them away; I need both my hands to do this properly.

I work slowly, checking as I go that the seal is good, that not even the smallest space remains between the window and its frame. I am especially careful towards the bottom of the window where the end of the hose can just be seen protruding into the crack. I have closed the window as tightly as possible without compressing the rubber and I press the tape carefully here: several layers of it covering the window's opening and extending around the

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curved edges of the hose to hold it firm. Later, I will pull the curtain closed against the cold press of the outside world, and from within the room it will be impossible to see what I have done.

Tonight, when the children have finished their dinner and cleaned their teeth, when they have come into my bedroom with me and snuggled into bed against me, when the soft glow of the bedside lamp is the room's only illumination, when we have finished reading together, when the small amount of sleeping tablet I will have given them dissolved into warm chocolate has taken effect, then I will finish what I have begun. I will tiptoe to the garage and start the car. Ensuring the hose is still firm at that end, I will return to the bedroom and carefully push the rolled towel against the door; and then I will lie again between my children and wait, sealed inside this final chamber with the two people I love most in this world.

ONE

I watched them as they moved in that day, so long ago it seems, standing on my rear deck, looking over at the back of their house.

I watched as the other woman, my new neighbour, gave instructions to the removalists, sometimes hearing the cadence of her voice carrying for a moment above the cicadas' rhythmical singing. Her words did not carry, the house too far away, the voice modulated at too low a pitch, for that.

I watched her move through the rooms. The warm helmet of hair light in the sunshine, darker in the shadows. Perhaps she saw me and raised a hand at one time, initiating contact. I turned away as the movement was witnessed, so could not be sure.

The people in the house before had been elderly, used to their own company, not needing contact, intimacy. New neighbours would mean readjustments, realignments, the need for efforts which previously had not been expected. I knew that, but it was too early then to decide how I really felt about it. For that moment I had been happy to watch, and assess.

I could see that my new neighbour was used to giving instructions. Had thought about where each piece of furniture was to be placed; pointing and directing so that everything was where it should be in the first instance – nothing would be double-moved. An efficient woman. I had visited my previous neighbours, of course, so knew the layout of the house – not so different from my own: formal rooms to the front, bedrooms and a large rumpus at the back leading out to a deck with steps down to the heavily shaded back garden.

I watched as the removalists struggled up the back steps, taking those objects that were too large to carry through the house: an ornate, wooden queen-size bed, obviously for the master bedroom; a smaller double ensemble bed, probably intended for the spare room; office furniture; and then, a single, white, wrought-

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iron bed, the sort for which my daughter had been begging for months, with matching white bedroom furniture. So they had a daughter.

It was then that I saw the girl run around the side of the house, bounce up the back steps and come to a stop beside her mother. Blonde hair, blinding in the sun. *Her* words – demanding, strident – did carry; the voice of a child used to getting what she wanted. *There's no swing, Mummy. Daddy promised me there'd be a swing, like at our old house.* I could almost see her protruding bottom lip.

I didn't hear the mother's reply, but could imagine it. *Don't worry, Daddy will build you one just like he promised.* The voice low and soothing; the mother's hand lifted to the child's face. Life was easy for this girl, that was obvious, even at that early point. A child used to getting what she wanted; a mother willing to give it to her. An only child – the story was written in my head before I even knew the names of those I observed – loved, spoiled, angry. Perhaps not even a very nice girl at all.

I was in the kitchen at the sink when my daughter came running in shouting. 'Mummmmeeee, there's a girl over there!'

‘There’s no need to yell,’ I said, turning slightly, the merest incline of a shoulder to indicate interest. ‘And yes, I already know that.’

Beccy was dancing around behind me. ‘Can we go over and say hello.’ It wasn’t a question. ‘You know Mummy, there’s a hole in the fence there as well. We can visit her the same way we visit Sammy and Tabby.’

I turned around then. ‘You can, but you may not. Not now anyway. They’re too busy. Her mummy’s organising the house. We’ll go over the day after tomorrow – the proper way – and say hello. We’ll take something, a cake or flowers, and we’ll all welcome them, together, properly. That will be the best way to do it.’

‘Oh pleeeeeease, Mummy, pleeeeeease.’ Beccy grabbed my hand, pulling backwards. ‘She looks so nice. Why can’t we go across and say hello now?’

I leaned down to her, removing some of the pressure of the insistent pull of her body, small yet almost unbearably heavy when she wanted it to be. ‘No, Beccy. I’ve explained why you can’t go and that’s the end of the matter. We’ll go together, tomorrow.’ Already I’d conceded a day and both I and my clever daughter knew it. ‘That’s that. No arguing. Okay?’

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Looking down at the ground, Beccy nodded and I thought that would be the end of it.

I was washing my hands in the bathroom when I happened to look out the window and see them, pushing their way through the rotten palings that made up the back fence. It was the damp that did it. Our former neighbours had told me many years before that there had once been a small creek flowing along the existing fence line, but that it had been drained and piped underground by the council. It always seemed romantic to me, to own land through which a creek had once flowed; I liked to imagine the children playing near that ancient, buried, watercourse.

Seeing my children that day, heading into unknown territory, I hesitated. If I called out to them there was a good chance they would ignore me; possibly the new neighbour would hear me and think I was unable to control my own children. So I let them go. Beccy looked back towards the house as she straightened up on the other side of the fence, and I knew then that she'd timed her sortie with precision, waiting until I was in the bathroom to slip over and taking Marty along with her, so that the potential punishment would at least be shared.

I shook my head; it was hard not to admire my daughter's determination even as I was frustrated by it. But it wasn't Beccy's fault entirely, I knew that. All children are like quicksilver, unable to be stopped, spreading themselves into corners their parents fear are too distant, dark, treacherous.

Later, the three children came out onto the deck, each of them with something in their hands. Watching from that distance it was hard for me to see what they were holding – muffins perhaps? They had been welcomed and fed, it seemed, and now they were making friends. There was already an easy intimacy in the way they moved: Beccy swinging from the rail at the top of the stairs; Marty settling on the middle step, peeling back the paper on his snack a bit at a time as he ate it, looking down to where the other girl stood, on the grass. Beccy began making big hand gestures and Marty nodded; the other girl laughed, her hair rippling. Suddenly, she ran down the stairs and began to hop up and down on one foot and then fell to the ground, playing the clown. Even from where I stood, I could see how irresistible she was: her fake clumsiness, the entertainment of it. Beccy finished her food and rushed down to join her, jumping in rhythm and falling, both of them

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always falling, together and apart, like two spineless jack-in-the-boxes. Once, the two girls fell together and bumped heads, but there was only laughter as they sat on the ground, each rubbing her own head and then that of the other.

And then, Marty had finished eating as well. He stood for a time near the girls at the bottom of the steps but didn't join their game, he sauntered instead deeper into the garden.

I saw the girls follow him, one blonde head and one brown flanking his taller frame, dancing, almost, around him.

The trio moved closer to the back fence, under the huge spreading tree that pressed a large part of the backyard into dappled shade and even threw its morning shadow over our fence. I could hear the children now. The blonde girl's voice rose clear into the morning air.

'Dad's going to build me a swing, Mum promised.' She pointed to the branches high above. 'He'll put it there. It'll be the longest swing ever and I'll swing really high, higher than the fence even. You can have turns on it. You can come over here any time you like. You'll both be my best friends.'

And then the three children were whispering to each other, heads already bowed together under the importance of whatever it is that kids say to each other when they believe their parents are well out of earshot.

When my children came home I questioned them about the new neighbours, not even bothering to reprimand Beccy for deliberately disobeying me.

‘She told me she’s a princess, Mummy, and her daddy is going to build her a swing. She said I can have goes on it. Marty too!’

I could see that my son was holding back, turning something over in his mind. ‘What do you think, Marty?’ I asked him, suddenly eager to uncover his view of this stranger with whom my daughter was already so enamoured.

‘She’s very . . .’ He stopped, looking upwards and to the left as he always did when he was thinking. ‘She’s very . . . pretty.’ And then he looked at me as if daring me to challenge him. It was the first time my son had noticed, or commented on, a girl’s physical appearance. Nearly thirteen, he was tall and already slightly muscled, sometimes slow to use his mind, but never slow to use his body. And somehow it was

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that considered statement from my son that made me more wary about my new neighbours than any of my daughter's enthusiasms could have.

The next day I made my favourite chocolate cake, cooled it, iced it, and, with children in tow, made my way over to my new neighbours' house. Up the street, turning right at the intersection and then right again until the three of us stood in front of number 37, the block that abutted the back of ours. I made the children stand behind me while I knocked on the front door and introduced myself when it was opened. 'My name's Clair,' I said to the woman who opened it. Softly pretty in the late morning light, her hair was fair, but not nearly as blonde as her daughter's.

'I'm Sandy,' the woman responded. 'It's so lovely to meet you. Of course, your kids came over yesterday to see me and Chelsea. This is Chelsea.'

For the first time, I could examine the girl who stood beside her mother. Up close Chelsea was even prettier than I had imagined. Clear skin, blue eyes, clothes that were just right. I guessed that she was probably around eleven and, already, there was an effortless ease about her, a self-belief that had nothing

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to do with maturity. Even with that first glance I knew she was a girl I would find hard to like.

So in the end, I made contact with Sandy the proper way; was welcomed into her house, her lounge room, her life. I sat with her and talked while our children played together under our watchful gaze. This was how I wanted it to be; how I'd *imagined* it would be.

But it was too late, of course. The children had already made contact, they had already established the ground rules upon which the rest of our families' interactions would be based: the rules and the whims of children – informal, ad hoc, uncontrollable.