

I took some oranges and leeks and lemons to the counter. I didn't need anything, the trip was more about the drive than the supplies. The girl dropped her pencil out of her mouth and started to count oranges, but wasn't sure of herself and started again a few times over. There was a smell of alcohol about her, masked by too much perfume. A hangover then. I imagined an argument with her father. I looked up at the greenhouse again, the man in it still with his head in his hands, the wind blowing through.

'Are there nine there?' she asked, and even though I hadn't counted as I put them in the basket I said yes. She tapped things into the till.

'Must be hard to lose the greenhouse,' I said, noticing a small blue bruise at the girl's temple. She didn't look up.

'It's not so bad. We should have had an order over from the mainland, but the ferry's not going today.'

'The ferry's not going?'

'Weather's too bad,' she said, again in that old voice that embarrassed us both.

'I've never known that to happen.'

'It happens,' she said, putting my oranges in one bag and the rest in another. 'They built the new boats too big so they aren't safe in bad weather.'

'Do you know what the forecast is?'

The girl glanced up at me quickly and lowered her eyes again.

'No. Four pounds twenty please.' She slowly counted out my money. It took two goes to get the change right. I wondered what new thing she'd heard about me. It was time to leave, but I didn't move.

'So what's with the free guinea pigs?'

The flush came back to her face. 'They've gone. We gave them to my brother's snake. There were loads.'

'Oh.'

The girl smiled. 'It was years ago.'

'Sure,' I said.

The girl put the pencil back in her mouth and her eyes fluttered back down to her crossword. She was just colouring in the white squares, it turned out.

In the truck, I found I had left the oranges in the shop. I looked out of my rear-view mirror at the smashed greenhouse and saw the man inside standing up with his hands on his hips looking at me. I locked the doors and drove away without the oranges.

It started to rain heavily, and I turned up the heating and put the wipers on full speed. We drove past the spot I usually stopped to walk Dog and he sat in the passenger seat and stared at me hard, and every time I turned to look at him he put his ears up, like we were mid-conversation and I was avoiding his look. 'So what?' I said. 'You're a dog.' And then he turned around and looked out the window.

Midway home it caught up with me and I pulled over into the entrance to an empty field. Dog gazed stoically out the window, still and calm, and I pressed my thumb into the bridge of my nose to try and take away the prickling, clung on to the skin of my chest with the nails of my other hand to melt away that old thudding ache that came with losing a sheep, a bead of blood landing in an open eye. I cried drily, honking and with my mouth open, rocking the truck and feeling something grappling around inside me getting no closer to coming out. *Have a good cry*; it was the kind of thing Mum'd say to a triplet in the hope a visit to the hospital wasn't necessary. Like the time Cleve fell out of a tree and cried it out, and we found out later he had a broken arm. But there was nothing good in my crying – it prevented me from breathing, it hurt. I stopped once my nose began to bleed, cleaned it up with the shammy I used on the days the windows

were iced on the inside and drove home, calmly. On the Military Road near to the turning home, some teenagers fondled about at the bus stop. When they saw me coming one of the boys pretended to put something in his mouth, another mounted him from behind and humped him while he mimed throwing a lasso. The girls laughed and gave me the finger. As I rounded the corner the boy with the lasso dropped his trousers and showed his white arse.

I put a pot of coffee down on the stove harder than I needed to. 'Fucking kids,' I said to Dog, but he had his back to me and wasn't listening.

I slammed the fridge and leant my head against it. Stupid to have become so comfortable. The fridge hummed back in agreement. Stupid to think it wouldn't all fall to shit. That feeling I'd had when I first saw the cottage, squat and white like a chalk pebble at the black foot of the downs, the safety of having no one nearby to peer in at me – that felt like an idiot's lifetime ago. I felt at the side of the fridge for the axe handle.

My sleeve was brown where some of the dead sheep had leaked onto it and I took my jumper off and rubbed the spot with soap in the downstairs bathroom. I smelled like billy goat but the idea of a full wash with the cold deep in my shoulders didn't interest me, so I just splashed under my armpits. My hands clenched and unclenched to warm up, the right one aching and clicking in the way that it did in damp weather where the bones hadn't knitted back together.

I smoothed back the skin of my face in the mirror. The last fringe I'd given myself had been an inch too short and I looked like a mad person. I found a blooded thumbprint below my ear.

I lit a cigarette, holding it with my lips and clasping my hands together in front of me to tense my arms as I inhaled to check the muscle tone and it was still there even if I hadn't sheared in

a couple of months. *Strong lady*. I watched the smoke snake its way out of my mouth and disappear in the cold air. The coffee pot began its death rattle, and I moved to take it off the hob. I still had a fear of the thing exploding.

Out the kitchen window, the flash of a windscreen across the valley. Don in his Land Rover. I spat my cigarette into the sink, ran the water over it, and then bolted out into the yard to get the wheelbarrow, and Dog nipped me on the back of the knee for running. I huffed up to the top of the drive, the barrow squeaking to buggery, and stood, blocking the road. Don pulled up and cut the engine. Midge stayed patiently in the passenger's seat eyeballing Dog with her pink tongue lolling out.

'Christ alive. You're making my balls shrink,' Don said as he swung himself out of the truck. It was sleeting and I only wore my singlet. He passed a glance at me that I rolled off my shoulders. 'You look like shit. Not sleeping?'

'I'm fine.' I nodded to the wheelbarrow. Don looked at it.

'What's that you got there?'

'Another dead ewe. Reckon it's those kids.'

He looked at me. Our breath puffed white between us. He shook his head.

'What's a kid want to go and do that for?'

'Why does anyone do anything? Bored and shitful.'

Dog jumped up at Midge sitting in the truck and barked at her while she looked back coolly.

'No,' said Don, 'can't blame everything on the kids. Even if some of them's vicious little buggers.'

'What's gone on here then?' he asked the dead sheep, bending forward and taking a closer look; his hands were on his hips. It was very cold. I folded my arms over my chest and tried to look comfortable.

'I found her this morning out by the woods.'

‘By the woods?’

I nodded.

He shook his head and walked around the wheelbarrow. ‘She’s dead all right.’

‘Oh really? You a vet?’

Don narrowed his eyes at me.

I cleared my throat. ‘These kids . . .’

Don tipped his cap up off his eyes and looked at me. ‘Good night last night – you shoulda come down the pub last night like I said.’

Here we go, I thought. ‘Not my sort of place, Don.’ I pictured the men who would be there, leaning up against the bar and talking in low voices, their eyes flicking up when a woman walked by. The same sort as the three who had showed up in the first week, whistling farmer-wants-a-wife. Don was different. I’d called on him with my first breech birth and he’d come with me, calmly sewed the prolapsed innards back into the ewe and saved her triplets, poured me a drink and said lightly, *All gotta learn one way or the other.*

Still, he could go on for ever.

‘Three years. You haven’t been out to the pub once.’

This was a lie. I’d been there once, but Don liked to say it so much that he never listened when I told him.

‘You show up, arm in a sling, looking like a lesbian or a hippy or something, and you move in and we don’t have many of either of those round here. You’re not careful, they’re going to use stories about you to scare the nippers.’

I shifted my weight, feeling the cold setting into my jawbone.

‘It’s a lonely enough job sheep farming without putting yourself in isolation.’

I blinked at Don and there was a long pause. Dog whined. He’d heard it all before as well.

‘So what killed my sheep then?’ was all I could say.

Don sighed and squinted at the sheep. He looked about a hundred in the morning light; the age spots on his cheeks were livid. ‘Mink might tear a sheep up, after she’s dead. Or a fox.’ He lifted the ewe’s head to take a look at the eyes. ‘Eyes are gone,’ he said; ‘could be something killed her and then everything else took their pickings.’ He lifted the head higher and looked underneath where her ribs made a cave. He frowned. ‘But I’ve never seen anything round here flense an animal like that.’

I patted the pocket of my trousers, where I kept my cigarettes, then I touched Dog on the top of his greasy head. A crow called out, *Caaa-creee; and caaa-creee*. Midge stood up on her seat and we all looked over the fence at the dark trees there.

‘Just tell those kids if you see them, and anyone else who wants to hear about it, that if I catch anyone near my sheep I’ll shoot them.’

I turned the wheelbarrow around and started walking back down the hill towards home.

‘Yep,’ said Don, ‘happy new year to you too.’

We are a week from the end of the job in Boodarie. I'm in the shower at the side of the tractor shed watching the thumb-sized redback that's always sat at the top of the shower head. She hasn't moved at all except to raise a leg when I turn on the tap, like the water's too cold for her.

The day has been a long and hot one – the tip of March, and under the crust of the galvo roof the air in the shearing shed has been thick like soup, flies bloating about in it. I'm low on shampoo, but I use a good slug of it, and feel the suds run down my dips and crevices, the water cooling off my lower back where the scars get hot and throb with the sweat. Above me, beyond the redback, is a fast blackening sky – the night comes quickly here, not like in the city where you could spend all night at work and not notice its difference to the day, other than the slowing off of customers. The first stars are bright needles, and in the old Moreton Bay fig that hangs over the tractor shed and drops nuts on the roof while I sleep, a currawong and a white galah are having it out; I can hear the blood-thick bleat of them. A flying fox goes overhead and just like that the smell of the place changes and night has settled in the air. Someone moves outside the pallet-board screen of the shower and I still my hands in my hair.

'Greg?' I call, but no answer. I turn the tap off to listen. The redback sets down her leg. 'Greg?' The suds are still thick in my hair and they keep up a crackle in my earholes. I think of being found alone and taken away, back there, tied up and left to rot

in the long dry grasses. There is a smell of fat and eggs frying. Someone steps quietly around the shower. It could be any of the team, could be Alan who is getting deaf these days, looking for electrical tape or kerosene or batteries or rags. But it is not, that much is clear from the change in the air. ‘Greg?’ I am less than 150km from Otto’s, the closest I’ve been since I left, but still, in seven months, I’ve travelled up and down the country and even if he has a nose like a bloodhound, I’ve covered my tracks. *I’ve covered my tracks*, I mouth.

The pallet to my right darkens, and through a punched-out knot in the grain of the wood, an eye appears, and I back away from it, my voice gone.

‘I know about you,’ says the eye. ‘You don’t fool me; I know about you and what you’ve done,’ it says and the voice is thick and sticky and there’s the smell of rotten eggs and lanolin together and whisky and unwashed places.

*I’ve covered my tracks, it’s been seven months and I covered my tracks*, but my heart is beating fast, and I have to put up my hand to the wall to steady myself. The spider reacts, turns in a small circle, settles again. The eye twitches, and I think of driving my thumbnail right into it, but I can’t bring myself to touch it, and there is nothing else sharp to poke with. The eye slides up and down, the iris a milky blue.

‘I know what you’re about,’ says the eye. It disappears and the shadow moves away. My heart drums. I look through the knot in the wood and see Clare staggering off in the direction of the shearing shed. He’s been away the week, and he has found something out.

I bolt from the shower without washing out the suds, round the side of the shed to my sleeping quarters. I pull on pants, shorts and a singlet and then I begin stuffing everything else into my backpack. *If you were so sure he’d never find you*, says my head,