

Shelter

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You're not supposed to like willow trees anymore. They're not native, they choke the river and crowd out the natives. They're best bulldozed out so the creeks can breathe more easily. It's the best thing for the creek ecosystem. They told me all this in the council newsletter. The thing is, though, when I sleep under one, it doesn't feel so terrible. I like that the green is more emerald than the surrounding natives. I like those long fingers that hang like hair, a dreadlocked chandelier traipsing down to the ground. I like the play of dappled light when I'm looking out, encased in my own pocket of cool, airy shade.

My sister's kids have a cubby under a willow tree, the long slender branches shade it completely and fall cheekily through the red-checked curtains my sister made. I had endless cups of tea with the littlest one in there the last time I visited. (*Anuvva cup, Wobbie?* her blue eyes blinking intensely with the concentration of pouring imaginary tea. *Oh, yes please, Lily, mmm ... that's delicious, thank you very much,* all the while trying to keep my balance on the tiny chair). It had gone pretty well, the 'reunification process.' Even though I felt her husband's eyes boring into me and I heard the dull rumble of his complaints from the cubby. I winced at the pity in her voice when I heard her sigh and say, *But he's my little brother.*

We'll be away for three weeks. She writes down the dates on the back of her business card. *The house is alarmed,* she says, avoiding

my eyes, *but the cabana isn't*. She hands me the card and her eyes are pleading with me now and I know she wants promises of responsibility, of appreciation, of something, but she doesn't say. I take the card and meet her eyes for half a second. *Thank you, it will be OK, thank you.*

Cabana. I'd never even heard the word. But I follow her nod to the whitewashed structure adjacent to the long sparkly pool. *It's so they don't have to walk back up to the house for anything when they're down by the pool*, I explain to Jacko over lunch.

Well, we all need one of those! Gawd, imagine the hardship of walking all the way back to the house just to get another beer! His yellow-stained sausage fingers start shaking invisible maracas and his thick gravelly voice is surprisingly tuneful, *At the Copa-co-copacabana, the hottest spot north of Havana.*

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She's left books, magazines, enormous towels, sunscreen, insect repellent, jigsaw puzzles of European villages, board shorts and T-shirts. The mini fridge is packed with milk, juice, margarine, yoghurt, chocolate and sliced peaches in a see-through container like a hundred smiles squashed in a little swimming pool with a lid. There's bread, muesli and English muffins in the cupboard with a note tucked in between them, *Robbie, make yourself at home. Please take your medicine. I love you, Mich xxx. Two crisp fifty-dollar bills are attached with a paperclip.*

The shower is tiled with long rectangles of swirling sandy-grained marble. There's an hourglass bottle of electric-green shampoo promising my hair more life and energy. I swish the thick white goop all over myself and imagine an electrified tingling. I watch the stream of soapy bubbles slip away beneath my cracked feet, bury my head in a thick fluffy towel and breathe in my new self. I smell like apples and honey.

Lying back in the deck chair, a bowl piled high with muesli, yoghurt, and peaches in my lap, I watch water silently lapping at the terracotta tiles in mini-waves, a seamless transition from water to land. A series of fountains spray in gentle arcs from the sidewall, like liquid rainbows. I have a flash to us as kids, Mich at the kitchen table cutting delicate paper patterns and miniature floral cotton prints for Barbie's next outfit. Me, restless and

Shelter

hovering, *Mich, how many more minutes till you'll play with me?* Mum shooing me outside. Feeling a shimmer of heat from the pavers as the flywire door slams behind me.

Today on the tram I saw a bumper sticker saying, *Practise random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty.* Reading it felt like sliding in to a warm bath. I suddenly can't wait for my next form; no longer will I write *undecided* in the religion question, now I will write PRAOKASAOB. I wonder if maybe it's too long but it's two letters shorter than PRESBYTERIAN and lots of old people probably write that.

I still have my lunch at the shelter. The volunteers, mostly older ladies with short silver hair and Homeyeped shoes, always smile when they serve me and today I smile too. One lady whispers a kind secret to me each day to chew over with my food. *You're not like the others here. You'll get well again, I just know it. You have lovely manners. I'm saying some prayers for you.* I wonder if she's practising a random act of kindness or maybe she's Presbyterian.

The fellas ask, *You found a new place, Robbo? Any room for me?* I stare at my hot lunch and stir the peas through the mashed potato. When I think about sharing my Greek Island cabana little prickles of sweat form on my face and multiply down my neck and spine. I chew on my lip, then scoop in big salty mouthfuls and swallow them slowly. Perhaps I should offer, just for a few nights. I shovel a few more loaded forkfuls into my mouth to save myself from a reply. Would that be a random act of kindness? Then I remember Mich's hesitation, her eyes darting with unspoken fears. *Naah,* I shake my head, swallowing, *It's nothin' special.* Afterwards I offer to sweep the floor, hoping everyone will be gone by the time I leave.

Jacko's in hospital, the co-ordinator tells me as I'm leaving. *He went on a bit of bender. But he'll get there.*

I nod but am not sure anymore. Get where exactly? Get sober or get housing or get old or just get dead?

You're looking good, Robbo. Everything OK?

I borrow one of Jacko's favourite replies; it fits nicely. *Never better.*

Good for you! Thanks for sweeping. God bless.

I look over my shoulder all the way to the tram.

Out the rattly window, I see hot and bothered mothers placating their kids. I imagine my sister on the beach, her three kids sticky with sand and sunscreen climbing on her, all wanting her to build sandcastles and take them for ice creams. I picture him, oblivious, his new iPhone clipped to his designer boardshorts below his pasty paunch, pouring over the tiny writing on the financial pages and snorting in disgust at fluctuating share prices. One time when they left Mum's, Mich was in pack-up mode and asked, *Got your blueberry, hon?* and I didn't like the way he scowled at her. *It's a Blackberry and yes – thank you – I have it.*

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I garden in the mornings while the sun is low and gentle. I just pull weeds out and snip the runaway climbers back. Sometimes I press my weight on my hands, pushing them down deep in the earth, willing some healthy life source to seep through my skin and pulse up my veins. When the lady next door collects the mail I give her my friendly I'm-just-the-gardener wave. I'm pretty sure gardening is a senseless act of beauty.

I try to swim three times every day: before my breakfast, when I get back from lunch, and late at night. Sometimes I do laps of freestyle, trying to remember all those things from swimming squad a hundred years ago, *Bend your elbows, reach out, cup your hands, keep your head still, small turn for a breath.* Other times I just swim breaststroke under the water, propelling myself forward in a silent world of bubbles and swirling ripples, smiling at the Kreepy Krauly on my way past. At night, when the summer moon is fat as an orange and close enough to touch, I imagine a great white is hunting me down, endless rows of shearing teeth snapping at my desperate flutter-kick while my skinny arms thrash around like a cartoon character. Finally I scramble out, my heart pounding and my lungs bursting and drape my towel around me like a shipwreck survivor, not daring to put my toes back in.

One night the clouds rumble and I soak in the shallow end, watching milliseconds of white electricity flash across the dark purple sky like giant scissors. When they finally come, the raindrops are fat and heavy, drumming down on my head like a marching band. I am cocooned by water for hours. When I

Shelter

finally emerge my hands look different, my nail beds have soaked themselves new.

I lather myself in the spray-on repellent and sleep in the brightly striped hammock, which the tag says was handmade in Guatemala. I wonder if there are many cabanas in Guatemala. Is that where they invented guacamole? Guacamole in Guatemala. The hammock is suspended between two whitewashed pillars by ropes and carabiners. Carabiners in the cabana. I don't know how anyone ever learns English. When the mozzies are especially fierce I try to drape beach towels over every inch of me without tipping out, which is harder than it sounds.

I buy a tray of pansies from the gardening place on the main road. Some are butter-yellow flecked with deep purple, others are navy velvet, there are a few white ones and some electric-sunrise orange ones. I buy some pea straw too, so I can mulch around them. I read about that in one of the gardening magazines my sister left for me; it helps retain the moisture after watering. The guy at the gardening place tells me I'm on a winner with pansies. *It's nice to be a winner*, I say. He lets me wheel it all 'home' on a trolley. *Just drop it back when you're done, mate*, he says, like I am a regular Saturday morning, muesli-eating, pool-cleaning, pansy-mulching kind of guy. Back home, I upend them carefully, spread out their thread-like roots and plant them gently in the spare spaces of the garden beds and along the cubby-house window boxes. I water them with Lily's tin watering can and then stand back and admire their colour and promise. Maybe they will make my sister smile. Maybe she will say, *He's my little brother* in a slightly different tone next time.

They are due home tomorrow. I fold my towels and wipe the bench down. I tuck Mich's note in my pocket and sit for a while dangling my feet and listening to the rhythmic spray of the side fountains. Circadas throb in unison from nextdoor's towering gum. The sun is sharp and the air smells of fresh eucalyptus. I'm definitely more spring than summer today; new ideas ricochet around inside me as I stride up the road with my new trolley. I feel tall and light, almost willowy.