

## Wrinkles

I like the night. In the darkness of my bedroom anything is possible. I conjure the image of you, here with me in the night. You casually walk into the room and shut the door behind you without a word. You approach the bed, smile, brush the hair from my eyes and take me in your arms. We float down into the bed together...

That's generally the track my thoughts take at nighttime. The familiarity of it feels so good and when I'm with you, time pours gentle like honey. My imagination is kind on the wrinkles; we don't age.

It's nothing like real life, and who would want it to be? Real life drags on, too fast, too slow, always too something. In the unforgiving light of day I can see the ruins of my life, the wrinkles, when all I want is to escape into the night with you. If I had things my way, I wouldn't bother opening the curtains. That way, we could be together in the shadows. But every morning at the same hour the nurse comes bustling in and pulls the curtains wide. Sunlight can only help the healing process, she says.

That scratching sound plays tricks on my ears again, as if Pup's at the door wanting in, so he can push his wet leathery nose to my hand in greeting. But that nose has long since withered. Years have passed since we buried Pup under the fig tree at our first house: remember that one-bedroom cottage with its overgrown backyard and straggly vines creeping up the weatherboard? The place seemed beneath us back then and I couldn't wait to leave it; now I wish we'd stayed. The scratching continues. Perhaps it is Pup, and he's here to collect.

The starched sheets feel heavy against my neck. Feebly I try to push them off with my chin but still they cling to my papery skin. The white coats in this rehabilitation centre have declared me broken but not quite beyond repair. They look at me with detached interest, like a bug they want to stick a pin through and immortalise under glass. *I am more than some doctor's scribbles about low blood pressure and bodily functions!* I want to protest. *I'm a woman!* Perhaps that's the problem: women come with an expiration date, and I'm past it—a little on the sour side. Let's stick a pin in me, shall we?

The doctors have advised me to start preparing for my eventual re-entry into society, so I've imagined returning to my local greengrocer. The friendly old Italian couple who run the shop will give me a blank look. *It's me, Lanie.* I'll say. *I'm disabled now!* Even disabled people need their apples and potatoes.

Disability: a foreign concept. I think the closest I ever came in the past was in my speech before each school assembly: *Disable your mobile notifications, kids. Don't want your*

*pockets pinging every few minutes!* Or perhaps it was gawking at the children they'd wheel out on TV come Telethon time, enforced viewing when Dad was still around: *Would you look at him. Only one leg. You kids 've got it lucky.* Or an over-sized parking space, outlined in blue. Only now it's *me*. My body. I hardly recognize myself, so I try not to look.

Though my superficial wounds may have healed, I'm not able to leave this bed of my own accord, not yet. Sometimes the nurse will wheel me to a park for some sunlight, which is much-needed, she says. I endure her mindless chatter and cooing at passing babies and dogs as I wait for the daylight hours to trickle away.

We used to say how tiresome the older generation could be, with all their sentimentality and reminiscing of days gone by. Now I'm among them, my head turned back, always looking into the past. It helps me to think of the old Lanie.

Let's start with my rowdy childhood. There's little Lanie, the youngest of four. Ours was a house full of mismatched socks, overflowing laundry baskets and the clatter of cutlery in the sink. All the best clothes and toys were tired, faded and darned by the time they were handed down to me, a not-so-subtle reminder I'd arrived late to the party.

Us kids would run barefoot through the backyard, our legs and feet expertly maneuvering around the bindii. Out of breath and exhilarated after an afternoon on the trampoline, I'd forget and jump off into a great big cluster, then be limping for days. An eternity for little Lanie, like Dad's extended absences before he left us for good. I still recall the prickly, burning sensation on the soles of my feet.

I did my best to keep up with my siblings, pitch in like they did. My eldest brother worked all hours at his apprenticeship, the other drove Mum to the shops on his Ls and later on his Ps, and my sister made lunches and dinners in advance. If we were lucky, she'd bake pumpkin scones. I felt very grown up with my own chore, and relished the calm swish, swish and the odd bang of the clothes in the old washing machine, loved the raw smell of the washing liquid before it dried on the clothes in the sunshine. No matter how careful I tried to be, I always ended up with hands smelling of vinegar. *A capful in every wash. Ten times cheaper than fabric softener, and just as effective*, Mum told me. I grew up being able to afford fabric softener but stuck with vinegar, the smell taking me back to afternoons spent in the laundry room, and stoic old Mum.

Before Mum went into care I aimlessly began a career in retail, graduating from the town supermarket to the craft store within a few years. I enjoyed the gentle clinking sound of the loose buttons being shifted in their drawers, the hushed tones people would speak in while

they made their rounds of the store, as if it were possible to experience reverence in the company of pompoms, pipe cleaners and crochet hooks. I never felt it myself, but held a certain respect for the old ladies who would come in on pension day to pore over the gaudy floral fabrics, waiting for the day they'd saved enough money to make a purchase. One woman would call *Helena, dear!* and I'd know she meant me. It was usually to retrieve something from a high shelf, but one day it was just to show me a needlepoint pattern resembling her beloved Scottish terrier, *To a tee, dear!* I need my own Helena now, to help with those things out of my reach.

My thirties were already half over when we met and fell in love. With you, I discovered a purpose that got me out of bed in the morning and into the light. At your side, the sun shone brighter and us along with it. Soon enough our love blossomed and I convinced you we'd outgrown our backward little town and that we could better thrive elsewhere. By then my sister and brothers were contained in their own little family bubbles, each having children of their own. In our bubble there was just you and me, and that was all I needed. So we packed up our old cottage, said goodbye to our sparse fig tree, and moved the three hours north to Perth to make a new life. Together.

I hear the scratch scratch scratch again, like fingernails on a chalkboard, and cringe. Try to bury my head in the pillow but it's no help. In my mind's eye a witch's long and spindly fingers snatch at the air, eking ever closer. I wonder what they'll feel like when they reach me. It's been forever since I was held, and not just injected or dabbed at with a sponge.

The nurse has arrived, bless her cotton socks. Her phrase, not mine; one of her favourites. She heads straight to the window and opens the heavy curtains. I squint at the sudden brightness and mutter a reply to her cheery greeting. Through the window I can see a tree dancing in the wind, its naked branch caressing the glass, beckoning me to join it.

The huge pine tree in our new front garden did its best to overshadow our modest brown brick house in the quiet suburb of Greenwood. Its thick foliage was a deep, majestic green and velvet to the touch, its scent a million times better than those pine tree air fresheners that perpetually hung in your car. The interior of the house channeled the 1970s with its cool slate floors and lime green kitchen benchtop, which only made us love our new home more. The local shops consisted of a deli, pokey video store, dubious Chinese restaurant and The Mighty Cock, a takeaway joint serving roast chicken and chips. They'd never bothered to fix their

sign after someone blacked out the last few letters in 'cockerel' with spray paint. None of the locals seemed to mind. It felt like home, for both of us, I think.

We had barely settled in before we each found jobs, me in the office at West Greenwood Primary, and you as the accountant for Phoenix Holden out in Wangara. Our neighbours popped over to welcome us with a semi-decent bottle of red and after a few glasses we'd already swapped phone numbers and told the story of how you and I met. How I loved telling that story, which so clearly endeared us to all those who heard it. That night I felt giddy and warm, my face flushed from the wine, and when my eyes met yours I remember feeling weightless in your gaze.

Nobody is charmed by our story now. Once it's out, resting in the air between them and me, they don't know what to do with it. In the silence, it slowly suffocates and a little bit more of you disappears from this world.

In the night, your voice hushed despite us being the only ones in the house, you would tell me made-up stories of far-flung lands replete with dragons, princesses and grand castles. Your imaginative tales never failed to amuse and while at times a happy ending seemed impossible, you would craft it just so and I would delight in how the villains came undone.

On one of those nights I said you were my warrior, that you'd slayed the dragon of boredom that had ruled my world for so long. You held me then, until we both fell asleep. On especially difficult days I recall these happy endings; your stories hold me still.

A few years of contentment followed in our new home, peppered with semi-successful DIY projects (remember that ghastly flocked wallpaper?), laughter, and the odd boozy evening with our neighbours. It all passed us by too quickly, I can see that now. As though the universe hit fast-forward and suddenly you were taken from my side and my mobility was taken from me.

I remember looking to you in that moment. Your head was turned away, toward the truck careening down the hill at us. With no driver and no brakes, by the time the truck made impact with our little car, it was moving at considerable speed.

Afterwards, I spent months in a cotton wool fog, gauze abounding, the smell of hospital-grade pine antiseptic heavy in the air. My mind flapped to and fro on its hinges like a screen door in a storm, one moment convinced it was all a bad dream, then having to face the reality that you were gone. Every time I closed my eyes I'd see that damned cardboard tree

swinging crazily from your rearview mirror. How dare it remain untouched? Where the fuck was *my* happy ending?

As my condition has stabilised and even improved, so family members and old friends have felt their duty is done. I saw the relief on their faces when I told them I'd soon be starting more intense physical therapy. *You'll be good as new before you know it*, my brother said. Speechless, all I could do was stare at him until he looked away. Gradually people have filed thoughts of me alongside the dates of in-laws' birthdays and the items that spend months on shopping lists, before they're forgotten altogether.

I have to set my exasperation aside, or else I'm blinded to my memories of you, my love for you. And what exactly do I have, without those?

While it was a truck that eventually brought us undone, it was a truck that had initially brought us together. I was waiting at a stop sign when I felt a car—your car—rear end mine. The delivery driver in the truck behind you braked too late, nudging you forwards, into my life. I remember your sense of calm and caring in a crisis, as we stood lamenting the damage to my bumper when your car had taken a far worse hit. We took our time swapping numbers and insurance details while the truck driver, clearly humiliated by his mistake, looked on impatiently. After he left, we went for coffee, then cancelled work and spent the day together. Not normally one for whimsy, I gave myself over to our chance meeting and grasped its sense of promise, disarmed by your clear green eyes on a cloudy day.

At the moment of the second truck's impact, the weight of the past and the expectation of our shared future crushed us under its burden. The inevitability of it all sickens me still, my rage a black hole I could so easily be dragged into, but I must remember you.

I am for now a prisoner of my body, but I remember you, and our time in the sun.

I am disabled, yet I am still me. I am a fifty-seven year old woman: Lanie June Doyle.

Doyle—your name. Difficult for me to say, but it feels now like a comfort. You are still with me, in your quiet way.

Be patient, Patrick, my love.

As night falls, I am preparing my escape.