

Dust

I am dust. I roll and roil across the endless, brown wheat fields. I am fragments of debris carried by the wind. The guttural purr of Tina's engine guides me over the gentle slopes and round curves of the lonely highway. Confident, reliable Tina wears her dents and scratches like beauty spots, little highlights of depth and character in her paintwork. Now, she is covered in a thick layer of dust, yet she remains dignified, determined.

Intermittent signposts promise that we are drawing nearer to the isolation and nothingness of Lilliana, home to my family since the wind swept two Displaced Persons from the other side of the world to a squalid tent camp on the outskirts of town. When they first arrived, Great-Grandparents' most prized possessions quickly became a little Primus stove and a large tin of International Roast. At night, they would boil water on that little Primus stove and heap large spoons of the instant coffee into tin mugs.

When she could, my Great-Grandmother would collect cubes of sugar, left on saucers in the dining room of the hotel in which she worked. She collected them in her pocket and at night she would add them to the syrupy instant coffee.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

They watched as the sugar dissolved into the dark liquid and then the two Displaced Persons would sit outside their tent, in the middle of nowhere and stare up into the night sky.

In time, my Great-Grandfather began to offer coffee to other D.P.s living in that tent camp on the outskirts of Lilliana. The little village of people from all over war-torn Europe spoke a raft of different languages but sitting there, under that starry sky, their hands wrapped around the big, tin mugs of coffee, language hardly seemed to matter.

Those tin mugs of International Roast were the first coffees my family served to strangers in the dust and nowhere of Lilliana. And we have been serving coffee in the isolated town ever since. Long after most of the D.P.'s moved away in search of more stable work and accommodation, there my Great-Grandparents remained. They opened the Lilliana Café in the middle of town. And there we would remain, four generations of displaced persons, daily serving coffee to the strangers blown into town.

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But ten years ago, late in the summer, a sleek white car appeared out of the afternoon heat. It skimmed serenely down dusty Main Street and came to a stop outside the café. A young man, tall, wearing dark glasses and a sky-blue shirt and grey pants climbed out; a stranger who would change everything.

The car door was shut with a gentle, determined thud. The driver, crisp and fresh and out of place, pushed open the lace covered door of the cafe. The little gold bell above the door announced his arrival.

The stranger strolled over to the counter. Despite the heat, he ordered coffee. Long. Black. When he lifted the dark sunglasses, I saw that he had deep blue eyes, cool and crisp like his spotless shirt.

He took a seat against the window. He sat confidently, one leg extended. He retrieved a mobile phone from his pocket and examined the screen. It was the type of phone I had only seen in advertisements. New to the market. No one in Lilliana yet owned one.

I took the coffee to his table, careful not to spill a drop of the dark, steaming liquid.

‘Long Black,’ I said.

‘Thank you,’ He replied. He placed the phone on the table.

I noticed how he smelled. Cool and airy like the sea breeze.

I returned to the counter. I watched him stare out through the lace covered windows. He drained his coffee and left. I watched through the lace as the sleek, white vehicle pulled away.

The stranger appeared in the cafe again the following day, cool and crisp in a white shirt and black pants. As he approached the counter and ordered a Long Black, I breathed in the fresh sea breeze. He sat at the same table, same leg extended. He opened a black bag and placed a laptop computer on the table. He flipped open the screen.

I placed the coffee in front of him. ‘Long Black,’ I said.

‘Thanks,’ He replied.

I hovered for a moment.

His eyes remained on the screen.

‘You staying in town?’ I asked.

‘Hmm,’ came the reply.

‘Long?’

‘S’pose so.’

‘So, what brings you to Lilliana?’

He closed the laptop.

‘News,’ he replied.

‘News?’ I snorted. ‘In Lilliana?’

‘Journalist with the *Chronicle*.’

The *Chronicle* was the local newspaper, responsible for scattering gossip and local government propaganda across the Wheat Belt.

He looked up at me. His face wore an expression of bemusement.

‘You, er, you have dirt. Here,’ he said, touching his forehead.

‘Oh, that’, I said. ‘Ash Wednesday. Polish Catholics, you know?’ I rolled my eyes.

But he remained puzzled.

‘Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,’ I quoted Father Cook.

‘Okay,’ said the stranger.

‘Ironic really,’ I said, trying to make a joke, ‘being anointed with dust. Out here.’

‘Hmm.’

I went back to the counter. He re-opened the laptop and scrolled through text as he drained his long, black coffee.

The stranger appeared every day. Always late afternoon, always carrying the laptop and the sea breeze. Always Long Black.

One day, he invited me to sit down. He asked me what the Lilliana locals do for entertainment on a Saturday night. I told him entertainment out here didn’t extend much beyond the Pool Competition at the Lilliana Pub.

He asked if I would join him for dinner and the Pool Competition the following Saturday night.

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We ordered the Surf ‘n Turf. We ate. We made small talk. The waiter brought us a round of drinks. And then another. We headed over to the pool tables. It was a typical, crowded Saturday night. He offered me another drink and headed to the bar.

When he returned, we sipped and laughed and watched the Pool Tournament.

As I watched, the coloured balls began to swirl on the table, merging into one other like globs of paint on an artist’s palette.

Tiny specks of dust caught in colourful lights.

I watched as the particles made their slow descent to the floor.

Floating.

Down.

Disoriented.

An arm around me.

On the street outside the pub.

Fresh sea air overpowered by the reek of vomit.

Glittering specks swaying in a milky sky beyond tree foliage.

Damp grass beneath me.

Dank earth.

New car smell.

Darkness.

When I woke, I felt the clean sheets of my bed. My body was a film of dust on the crisp cotton. Fragments of the night before swam in my head. My mother appeared at my doorway. A cup of strong coffee was placed next to my bedside. 'He seemed lovely. So good to make sure you got home okay.'

Her footsteps as she left the room.

The following day, the routine recommenced.

Late afternoon.

Long Black.

Laptop.

Sea breeze.

Small talk.

No mention of Saturday night.

The fragments in my head continued to swirl. At night, I woke, sweating and dirty. Sitting up. Trying to remember. But the debris inside my head just swirled and swirled.

Inside my body, something was knitting together, becoming whole. Almost two months passed before I had any knowledge of it. But there it was. Confirmed by the doctor. Rolling and roiling fragments coming together, forming a new life.

But then, just as suddenly, those tiny fragments dispersed. The new life was gone, slipped away quietly, inconsequentially, in a pool of blood and cramps and sickness as the rain came to Lilliana - a driving deluge, soaking the thirsty fields, rinsing the dust and grit from the town.

I packed my belongings, told my parents it was time I 'got on with it', I was 'going to give uni another shot' and was swept away by the train headed for the city.

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For ten years, the wind placed, displaced and replaced me again. Perth, Albany, across to Adelaide, Melbourne. Part time jobs. Cleaning jobs. Jobs serving coffee in cafes belonging to other people. Rented apartments. Sometimes furnished. Sometimes not. Queen four poster beds and single mattresses on floors. Red wine and prescription medication trying in vain to anchor me, to reunite the scattered debris into a single, whole being.

Eventually, the wind blew me back to Perth and it was there that I met Tina. She was sitting on a wide verge on the side of a main road. Across her windscreen was a large sign: 'For Sale \$3000 ONO'. Her maroon paintwork was filmy with dust. A mobile phone number was painted on the

bottom of the sign. I punched it into my battered mobile phone, a hand-me-down from a girl I couch-surfed with in Melbourne.

I rang the number.

Forty minutes later, I was sitting in Tina's driver's seat. Her owner, an overweight woman of about thirty-five, sat in the stifling cabin next to me. 'Only one owner,' she said, jabbing a chubby finger at her well-endowed chest.

She handed me the keys and I started Tina up. She snapped to a purr and we pulled out onto the road. Tina glided confidently amongst the traffic. That same day, I wrote a cheque for \$2800. I could probably have beaten her owner down further, but I already had respect for Tina and wasn't prepared to compromise her dignity.

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Now, Tina glides to a stop outside the Lilliana Cafe. I pull on her hand break, kill the engine and go inside. Dad is behind the counter, frothing milk at the coffee machine. Mum is clearing dirty plates and milkshake glasses from a table. I notice that they have both aged. They look smaller, greyer.

There are happy but awkward embraces, 'glad-your-homes'. They don't ask. I don't tell. I am quickly swept up, cleaned off and placed into the daily cafe routine like the plates and glasses and coffee cups.

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The afternoon brings the sea breeze into the cafe. A crisp, pale green shirt, unbuttoned at the collar. He strolls over to the counter. Mum is serving. I am frothing milk at the coffee machine.

'Long Black, love.' Mum instructs me.

He strolls over to the table by the window. Sits down. Leg extended. He notices me behind the coffee machine. He gets up, approaches the counter. He mutters something to my mother and then waits, floating, detached in the middle of the café.

'Make that take away.' Mum calls over to me.

I take a paper cup from the stack on top of the coffee machine. I place it under the spout and watch dark, steaming liquid flow into the cup. He has turned his back to the counter, staring out through the lace adorned windows.

As the long, black coffee flows into his cup, I take three white lumps from my pocket.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

I watch as they dissolve into the hot, syrupy liquid. I stir.

'Long Black,' I say as I hand him the coffee.

Our eyes meet briefly and then he turns to leave.

'Just ducking to the Chemist,' I yell to Mum and grabbing my bag I head out through the lace covered door.

Tina is parked just outside the café. I open the door and slide into her driver's seat.

I watch in the rearview mirror as a white car, covered in a thick film of dust, pulls out from across the road. I watch as it careers down Main Street, rolling and roiling erratically and into the path of an on-coming road train.

In the rearview mirror, I notice the ashen smear on my forehead.

I am nowhere.

I am everywhere.

I am dust.

And to dust, I have returned.