

0630 PER-MEL

The thick line of traffic on Airport Drive belies the hour. Taillights snake ahead, a series of illuminated red dots against an inky dawn sky. The air inside the car is frigid, stale, with the sharp tang of dried yoghurt. You lower the back windows to chase out the smell, making a mental note to find the source when you arrive. But the thought slips through your brain like sand through cupped fingers.

You should have gotten an Uber but kissing the girls set you back ten minutes. Pulling doonas up to slack round faces, pressing a kiss inside chubby palms. It had brought you undone. Now it's 5:47am, forty-three minutes to wheels up. But you're going to make it. You must. And you are definitely, one hundred per cent, not going to cry again.

Inside the terminal is buzzing. Friday travellers zig zag across the departure hall like ants in a jar, alert and full of purpose. You feel neither, just repulsion at the jarring fluorescents and the intimidating okay-ness of everyone around you.

You are sinew and skin scrubbed raw, pink and exposed under the glare.

An attendant mistakes your inertia for confusion and bundles you towards self-check-in. She taps the screen with long, manicured fingernails that strike you as being somewhat impractical and asks where you're headed.

'Melbourne.'

'The six thirty? Delayed. Lucky for you.' She gives you the once over as the machine scratches out your boarding pass. 'A little trip before the real adventure begins?' You must look puzzled as the woman gestures to your front, a hint of panic clouding her eyes.

'Oh, yes.' You rub the tight swell of your stomach. 'Sorry. I'm half asleep.' Half here, half breathing. You thank her and waddle away towards security.

At the gate, a knot of passengers stand too close to one another. You sink into an upholstered chair and practically hear your lower back sigh in relief. A man coughs into his elbow, drawing looks of reproach from those around him. Several shuffle back a step, others turn away. A white-haired woman wearing a face mask exits the queue altogether, shaking her head. Fair play, you think. The woman looks fit but might be missing a kidney or something equally perilous. The baby gives you a deft kick to the ribs, as though asserting her own vulnerability, and you fish into your bag for a mask.

You open Facebook for what feels like the thousandth time this week. It's perverse in a way, stalking her page, devouring each new post and comment, watching the grief Olympics in full swing. But it has made you feel less alone in yours.

Liv's teenage face grins at you from a scanned Polaroid. She is rounder in the cheeks and blonder, displaying her stomach in the kind of midriff top she grew to hate, but her essence is there like it is in every photo. Radiating life. You flick through another series published by your friend Annie. New Year's at Henry Street, the girls' trip to Thailand. You have your arm around Liv in every one of these photos and it gives you comfort, as though some part of you knew, instinctively, to hold onto her, to try to pin her to this world.

A lump forms in your throat, burning and urgent, but you swallow the sob it holds. It won't help to fall apart now. To throw yourself on the ground and wail like a wounded animal like you've done a dozen times, as each tsunami of grief ripped through your insides, leaving you shaking on the floor. That will just make an already difficult day harder. And it won't make your best friend any less dead.

The seatbelt sign flicks off, instigating a wave of activity as people clamour to reach bags and devices. You need to pee, badly, but a heavy fatigue has settled in your limbs. Relief, exhaustion, and sadness, pressing down on your body as the realisation dawns that, one way or another, you're finally on your way to her.

How has it only been a week? you wonder. Seven days since you finally reached her mum after a month of unanswered calls. Even then, it wasn't what Trish had said so much as what she hadn't said. Back and neck pain, too tired to talk, to eat. Alarm bells clanging in your head, until you found yourself saying *Tell her I'll be there on Wednesday* before you could even think about what it meant. The desperate scramble to secure flights and accommodation, of untangling Ben from work so he could manage the many drop offs and pickups that punctuated your days, along with playdates, lunchboxes and *where's Mummy?* cries.

None of it mattered once you realised Liv wasn't sick but dying, and soon. It wasn't exactly a shock, for you knew she would die the minute she told you eighteen months ago. A cancerous lump in her breast, maybe Stage 2, but she couldn't remember. It didn't matter because she wasn't doing chemo or radiation. Or having a PET scan to find out how far it had spread. You sat on the sofa, dumbstruck and holding a wriggling baby Wren, as she calmly asked you to trust her.

'You have to say something!' Ben exclaimed when you told him. 'There's a fucking bus coming – she needs to get out of the way!' And you wanted to, countless times. Argued

with her in bed at night, whispering all everything you wished you could say into the dark. Tried in person only to be swatted down from the wall she had built around herself, the one with alternative therapy doctors and truth speakers on the inside, members of the juice-it-away army, peddling a wellness fantasy to swelling ranks of vulnerable dupes.

The real shock came on Tuesday when Trish rang as you were wrestling the kids into the car. At first you heard nothing but Trish's shaky breathing and then a fragile voice, so small you could barely make out the words. Liv had taken a turn for the worse and was in hospital. It wouldn't be long. *I'll leave now*, you pleaded, *I can make it*. But Trish simply sobbed and told you she was sorry; it was too late.

'She knew you were coming, Bec, and it made her smile, I promise. She knew how much you loved her.'

Three hours later, Liv was gone.

A lanky flight attendant picks his way down the aisle and somehow you know he is looking for you.

'Miss Weightman?' You nod. 'Emma Willis told us you would be travelling today, and I wanted to extend my sincere condolences for your loss.' He hands you a muffin and you curse your friend, an attendant for the same airline, for the close attention. 'If there's anything I can do, just say the word.'

Tears sting your eyes as you murmur thanks, and the attendant retreats with a light squeeze of your shoulder. Beside you, the woman in the middle seat bristles, eyeballing the free loot in your lap but, mercifully, remains silent. You check the time on your phone: it's 9:00am in Melbourne. Four hours until you stand in front of a huddled audience and eulogise your best friend's life; sing praise for a life well lived. Only the memories won't come, clouded as they are by false pretence, the unnatural act of celebrating someone who should never have died.

Who chooses death over life? What sort of madness takes place inside a person's head for that to happen? This is not a person you know or understand. This Liv is a stranger. You want to scream at her until your throat is hoarse. Not just for playing a high stakes game of chicken and losing, but for corrupting the memories you made together. Twenty years of fun and adventure, of navigating break ups and jobs and the exigencies of life, of laughter and hell raising and talking until the sun came up on distant shores; all now tarred with the brush Liv swept over them when she suggested her lifestyle had caused the cancer. It made you complicit, liable even, forever tainting the stories you would otherwise have shared today.

Then you remember the podcast. Liv, through her circle of wellness warriors, had met Jayce, a self-proclaimed guru who –in addition to *changing your life in 90 days, guaranteed!* – recognised a golden PR opportunity when he saw one, and invited Liv on his podcast. It had done the rounds amongst your friend group a few months ago, and you had downloaded but never listened to it.

You jam in your ear buds and hit play. The words ‘How I healed my cancer naturally’ appear on your phone screen alongside Liv’s smiling face, captured on her birthday a few years ago. With late afternoon sun painting the sky gold and peach behind her Liv looks ethereal, as though she herself is radiating the light, and sending it out to the far corners of the sky.

Her sweet voice fills your head. She is nervous, and your heart sears with fresh agony as you imagine her sitting there, fidgeting with her gold necklace. ‘This is my truth,’ she says, haltingly. ‘And I hope people can hold their judgement until they hear the whole story.’

Liv rewinds to her diagnosis; talks of ill-feeling doctors speaking words she didn’t understand. Of the assumption she would follow the preordained path, as a voice inside her head told her she never could. She gathers steam as she details ‘healing protocols’ and ‘internal work,’ and a blinding belief that this was a chance to change her life for the better. And then her tone strengthens, as Liv speaks the words that knock the air from your lungs: ‘The crazy thing is, people think I don’t understand what’s at stake. Of course, I do. But I don’t need their fear because / am not afraid. I am at peace.’

This time, when the wave comes, you know it means business. You make it into the toilet cubicle as the first sob escapes and brace your arms against the mirror. Heave after shuddering heave, gasp after sputtering gasp, the waves come. Like an earthquake pulsating from your core, rocketing outwards in rhythmic shivers, filling the tiny, dank room with despair.

The same attendant is outside the door as you exit. He takes one look at your face and ushers you into the galley, draws the curtain closed.

‘Sit,’ he says, gesturing to a seat. ‘Cuppa?’

‘Tea would be lovely. Thank you,’ you manage.

He moves around as you sip, packing and cleaning, pulling roller drawers in and out of tight spaces, before peering between the curtains and sitting down. ‘I’m due a break.’

‘Thanks,’ you repeat, ‘and sorry.’

'Oh, don't apologise. It's understandable.' A shadow passes across his face, darkening a pair of deep-set baby blues. 'I was about to say *under the circumstances*, but then I remembered that phrase drove me crazy when my brother died. It's such a cold thing to say to someone in pain.'

You nod, say you're sorry for his loss. 'The whole *gone to a better place* line gets me. I mean, where? On some all-expenses paid, trip of a lifetime?'

'Oh yes. My family were big on that, which made zero sense. What part of accidental overdose suggests a happy ending?'

You laugh bitterly, draw words in the air with a finger. 'Gone somewhere warm, chat soon.'

'Exactly,' he draws. 'Like they got off lightly and all is well.'

'Aside from being dead.'

A round face appears between the curtains, hovering like a headless ghost. The curtain shakes and the body emerges, a boy roughly the same age as your youngest, Milly. His eyes dart back and forth, searching for somewhere to hide from the frazzled woman behind him.

'Sorry,' she puffs, dragging her offspring towards the toilet door she has propped open with one foot. 'Toby, get in here!'

'What a charming little chap,' your companion says, before nodding at your midsection. 'This your first?'

'No, third. But don't worry. I hate other people's kids too.'

He chuckles. 'Oh, thank God. I'm sure your children are wonderful, but you wouldn't believe the little monsters we get on here.'

'I would, trust me. Toddlers are sociopaths, especially at that age.' Another flight attendant bustles into the galley, grabs a pile of napkins, and disappears again. You stand and place your empty paper cup on the bench. 'I'll let you get back to it.'

'If I must. Good luck.'

You hesitate at the curtain, gripped by a sudden need to ask something deeply personal of this kind stranger. 'Can I ask you something about your brother?'

He stops, turns to give you his full attention. 'Of course.'

'Did you struggle to... remember him... or to see him clearly after he died?' You search his face, silently imploring. 'I'm giving the eulogy for my friend in a few hours and I just... can't. It's like I can't remember her as she was before, only how she went.' You wave your hands; a flush warming your neck. 'Sorry, that makes no sense.'

'It makes perfect sense.' He leans back against the counter. 'My sister and I had the same problem before we spoke at Tim's. Thinking of him as he was before... it felt like pretending after he left so painfully.'

'So, what did you do?'

'Sat in his old room at Mum's with a bottle of whiskey until the good times started to come back.' He laughs, shakes his head at the ceiling. 'And boy did they come. We dredged up stuff that has been buried for decades.'

You pat your stomach. 'Sounds great, only booze isn't an option, and I can't get to her Mum's. I never even saw where she was living when she died.'

He meets your eyes then, points a finger towards your heart. 'She's in there. You just need to find her.'

Trish and her second husband had moved down the coast during Covid, with Liv joining them as the lockdowns dragged on. You hate that you've never been there. Never seen the views she posted from the deck or been inside her room, amongst the things you would recognise as hers in an instant. You close your eyes and try to conjure it in your mind. There would be candles and crystals. Affirmation cards. The woo woo stuff you used to tease her about but ultimately viewed as harmless. Rows of tan shoes in every style and colourful scarves draped on hooks. Printed pictures, many with your face smiling out alongside hers. All of it sitting under the pink and blue hues of the painting she bought on your last day in Rio together.

It was after that warehouse party where you kissed a Brit who licked your ear the whole taxi ride home. You left him standing outside the hostel, calling your name, only to find him on your favela tour the next day— a fact Liv found endlessly hilarious. Here, in your memory of her, she is bronzed and full of life, laughter blooming from her core. Your chest warms with the memory of it.

Hey, you, she says, soft but distinct, I'm still here.

The plane is descending, sinking slowly through the clouds, and the baby is doing backflips inside your stomach. The drop in cabin pressure also ticks your heart rate up a few notches, fuelled by a sense of mortality that often arises when you fly. The gamble of launching 30,000 feet above the earth, hoping to make it back down in one piece. Rich, poor, sick, healthy, happy, all at the mercy of fate.

Liv asked if you were happy when last you spoke, as she was wont to do. You had just dropped the kids off in the usual whirlwind of caffeine and squabbles, when her name flashed up on the dash screen. You almost didn't answer and when you did, you were so wound up you did nothing but vent for the first five minutes. She let you rabbit on, murmuring dutifully in the right places, before cutting through in that gentle but direct way of hers.

'Bec,' she paused to ensure she had your attention, 'you're happy though, aren't you? I know it's hectic, but remember how hard you wished for all this?'

Your fingers tapped the steering wheel. 'Well, yeah...' you draw the words out slowly, wanting to answer truthfully, as you both deserved. 'Of course.'

'But,' she divined.

'But.'

The truth was you had always thought of happiness as a temporary construct. Like the stitching on a favourite piece of clothing. Pull too vigorously and it will unspool, line by line, until all you hold is a tangle of thread.

'Can you love something and hate it a bit at the same time?'

'Yes,' she replies, not missing a beat. 'Definitely. Perfection is not a prerequisite for happiness. I mean, it's hardly realistic.'

'You're right. Then yes, I am happy.'

Liv laughed, a warm, honey sound. 'Glad to hear it.'

'And you, oh wise one? Are you happy?'

'Me? Always.'

The plane touches down with a lurch, but you're no longer picturing worst case scenarios, no fiery slide off the edge of the runway. The only thing you see now is Liv, as you loved her and sometimes hated her, just a bit. As the other passengers ignore the seatbelt sign and start to gather their belongings, you pull out your notebook and begin to write.