

Shall I Tell Him?

Travis crashes through the front door. He never comes in quietly, but today's entry is like a demolition. 'What's for dinner, Meggie? I'm starving. Whose are these keys on the bench, Meggie?' Shall I tell him?

If he asks about my day, shall I tell him? Tell him that, alone, I loaded the kayak onto the trolley and pushed it into the river. The still water reflected the distant boats like a painting as the sun cracked the night into morning. Not another person or boat in sight. No sound but the gentle splosh of my paddle dropping into the water, and a splish as I pulled it through and out, over and over. My arms ached, my shoulders burned, especially the left one, but I pushed on until the pain became blended with the images playing on a loop in my mind. Blurring until they became a messy smudge – a grey-wash evolving to a white-wash. Then peace.

Last time I told him about paddling on the river, he said, 'Meggie, why do you fuckin' bother? Haven't you got something better to do? It's not like you'll be able to keep up with the others, enter the races.' What have races got to do with anything? Once, I tried to explain that the delicate colours of the dawn-break were soothing and wondrous. That the pain coursing through my shoulder and arm with paddling was a positive hurt, even though it's often at least a seven out of ten on the pain scale I use with the physio. I can feel it doing good, that pain. I didn't tell him that it rubs away at, diminishes, the agony that courses through me after talking to him. Sometimes I just think about Travis and – bang! Burning shoots down my arm like a wire on fire.

Mum phoned this morning. I tried to steer the conversation somewhere else, but as soon as I stopped speaking, she was at it again. 'Why didn't you phone me back? Did you forget? Travis says you're having trouble with your memory again. He's a good man, Megan. It's hard to find a man like that. He has a decent income. And isn't free with his fists like your father was.'

Those fists marked my childhood with bruises and tears. Bruises on Mum and tears on my soul. I wanted to tell her that being free with the fists isn't the only thing that matters. I wanted to tell her that the horses and dogs hold too much pull for a man like Travis. What's the use of a good income if it goes to the bookies and pokies? And what about my income? Income, outcome, floating away in a swill of beer at the local. Travis is at the pub more often than he's at home. 'But it's beer, Meggie. It's imperative I try all the craft beers to be acquainted with the competition, Meggie. At least I'm doing something useful with my life, Meggie.' I hate being called Meggie, and he knows it.

‘Why have you got dirty hands, Meggie?’

Shall I tell him I visited Jocasta? I go most days. This morning, I arrived on the kayak, pulling in at the small patch of shingle beach near her house. Worked in the garden. I cast aside the gloves she left for me on the porch and spread my hungry fingers through the moist rich soil. Dug up the demons of his venomous angst beating against my thoughts. Cast handful after handful into the waste pile. Soft breeze, scented with a balm of warm eucalyptus, embraced me like a silken cocoon as I worked. Jocasta laboured by my side and talked of her misspent youth. Our chortles, backed by the kookaburras, rang through the garden like a new-age orchestra. Felt strange to laugh. I shaped shrubs, pulled weeds, and trimmed the shoots of precarious runaway climbers, bringing light into the undergrowth.

‘Will you fuckin’ burn the dinner again tonight, Meggie?’ His fingers curl into a solid fist, knuckles white. Fear unspools across time. My gut clenches. Something shifts.

Last week, I was sure I’d set the hotplate to a gentle simmer. But when I returned to the stove, it was switched to high, the casserole bubbling furiously. A thick pall of acrid smoke snaked through the kitchen. All that food ruined. Travis hates waste. I added a multitude of spices, including bulk chilli. But some things can’t be covered up. Travis sneered at the brown sludge of food spread across his plate, picking the darkest bits out and banging them into a waiting dish. Despite the open windows, the heat pushed against me, squeezing the air out of me. The lumps of meat stuck in my throat. My hand quivered as I reached for a glass of water. Travis glared. ‘You’re so sensitive, Meggie. I’m sure you’ll get better at cooking with experience. It’s obvious which one of us needs the practice; your turn every night this week, Meggie.’

Jocasta is a great cook and loves to entertain. Once, she served up hairy pig’s trotters then hid around the corner listening to the diner’s reactions! She had the proper dinner waiting in the oven, a delicious seafood lasagne, and brought it out later. Travis would kill me if I did that. I mean, maybe really kill me. Although if I told him the story, he’d say, ‘You wouldn’t be able to cook pig’s trotters and pull that one off, Meggie.’

Some of the pig’s trotter dinner guests were there when I cooked a birthday lunch for Jocasta. The vine canopy, heavy with grapes, shaded our dining table from the summer heat. I had helped Jocasta nourish that plant back to productive health. Visible between the bunches of succulent fruit, handsome limbs of a lemon-scented gum stretched out overhead. The guests joked about the risk from the ‘widow-maker’ tree. I wanted to tell them that there are worse things than being a widow. But instead, I answered their questions about how I made the splendid soufflé, the amazing artichokes, the fantastic fennel.

I like to help Jocasta. Her arm doesn't work so well since she had a stroke. We're a bit alike that way. Travis used to call me 'Broken Wing' when I first had the injury. It happened when I slipped in a pool of grease he'd left on the garage floor. He was right – I should have watched where I was stepping. At the beginning, in those first weeks after the fall, he'd touch my arm tenderly, ask me if I needed help. Now he calls me Munted Meggie. Gardening at Jocasta's is making me stronger. The paddling helps too. Shall I tell him I can paddle all the way to the point and back now?

He's slamming cupboards, banging the fridge. 'Why isn't there enough fuckin' milk, Meggie? You were going to buy more yesterday. Where is it?' I did go to the shop. I'm sure I bought more milk. Didn't I?

A few weeks back I'd walked to the shop for apples. Later that afternoon at home - no apples. Travis thumped the bench, slammed the door. I was certain I'd bought apples. Maybe I should have taken a photo. I remember the weight of carrying the shopping home. I'd had to go on foot because I couldn't find the car keys – they were missing for days. When I suggested to Travis that someone might have taken them, he said I was being paranoid.

I stand at the back window, trying to catch a breeze, cool my face, as I think about the missing milk, lost car-keys, disappearing apples. But the wind has the heat of devil's breath. A honeyeater lands on the concrete wasteland. Just like any other creature that ventures into that barren yard, it doesn't stay long – it's probably too hot for its poor little feet. I'd wanted to replace the concrete with a garden, but Travis said there'd be no point, I wouldn't be able to work on it with my munted arm, and it would be up to him like everything else, and he doesn't have time. The only living vegetation out there is a bedraggled serpent vine, creeping along the side fence towards the house. I imagine the shrubs and bushes that I'd have planted – a myriad of greens, flowers, vegetables, herbs. Shady trees. Birds – honeyeaters, magpies, wagtails, coming and going. Even a crow or two would be welcome.

There is a small planter box in the corner – a gift from Jocasta. A few dead stalks are all that remain of the vegetables I carefully nurtured in their special bed - fashioned with smooth vertical walls and beer traps to keep out bugs and slugs. The seedlings disappeared overnight. Travis laughed, said something must have got to them.

'It's getting dark out there. You still afraid of the dark Meggie?'

I went for a night paddle by myself last week. Shall I tell him? I thought we were going out for dinner to celebrate me passing the final exam, but Travis said I had the day wrong, even though it was on the calendar, and went to the pub. At the rowing club I managed

to wriggle and slide a kayak from the rack and wheel it into the river. The air was still, the cool a healing caress as I slipped through the inky water. I paddled in the almost silence – splosh, pull, splish, lift. The full moon lit the ripples like a magical path, a stairway, into a surreal destination of fantasy.

‘What are you daydreaming for, Meggie? Isn’t there something useful you should be doing?’

‘Do you know where my splint is? I haven’t been able to find it for days.’

‘No Meggie, just like last week, I don’t know where you left that fuckin’ thing. You should pay more attention. Always misplacing, forgetting things.’ He stomps away. I find the splint in the linen cupboard. It has turned up in peculiar places over the last few months – in the laundry basket, under the sofa, in the pantry. The physio says ongoing pain can cause brain fog, but this is more than fog - it’s like a software corruption. Or an external hard drive malfunction.

I don’t need the splint when I’m paddling the kayak. Shall I tell him? I grip the paddle with both hands, lift it high and pull the lower side hard through the water. Twist and pull. One stroke after another. Legs pushing, body twisting, propelling the craft like a well-oiled machine. Energy pulsing through me.

Today I glided rhythmically all the way to the bridge without stopping. There was a sting in the sun by then, and the low jetty under the bridge seemed a good place for a rest. I heaved myself onto the platform, straining with my shoulders and arms. As I swivelled to land my butt, the kayak shot away, leaving me hanging, twisted, half in the water. I must have looked a sight! I manoeuvred along the jetty until I could grab the kayak with my foot. I flopped across the middle of it, floundering like I was shipwrecked on flotsam in a storm. That’s when I saw I’d left the paddle on the jetty. I flipped my hands seal style until I got close enough to grab it. I did it! Pain score eight out of ten, joy score ten out of ten!

After a rest on the jetty, I dropped back into the kayak. A pod of pelicans eyed me from the bank, one of them with a crooked wing. As I slipped closer, they sped along the water surface, flapping their ungainly feet, then soared up over me. I couldn’t tell which was crooked wing once they were up. They were flying squadron formation, a team, elegant as anything, masters of the sky.

When I got to Jocasta’s place, she offered me dry clothes before I worked on the garden. Later, we walked the river path. I had trouble keeping up with her, despite her stroke, striding up the rise over the point. I pushed on, one aching leg after another. This time, I didn’t have to stop for a rest on the way. At the top, I grabbed the handrail, bent over, breaths

rasping, sweat pooling on my neck. It felt good. One day I'll be as fit as Jocasta.

After the walk Jocasta showed me where the remainder of the garden tools are kept. We made a list of which plants to prune in the autumn, when to fertilise, where to plant the seeds. I learnt how to control the security system, where the meter box is, how to use the washing machine. I was introduced to the neighbours. Jocasta is going to live with her cousin while he undergoes medical treatment. I put the kayak in her garage.

As I left, a raft of pelicans flew overhead. I wondered whether crooked wing was among them, cheering me on.

I stand at the kitchen bench, vigorously hacking vegetables into small, jagged pieces. Travis watches, his forehead furrowed, jaw thrust forward. 'Where did you get that food from, Meggie?' Shall I tell him? Tell him I'd hidden it in the back of the fridge? I sweep the ingredients into the waiting pot of tripe buried in gravy, stirring, checking the heat. I return to the window and face the dark yard. I can see the reflection of Travis moving quickly to the stove and switching it to high. Shall I tell him?

'Any news about that job, Meggie? I guess you would have told me if you'd got it. I did warn you that there'd be many applicants with more nous and experience than you.'

Shall I tell him I start next week?

The Travis reflection sidles to the bench, sliding the keys, Jocasta's house keys, behind the pot plant.

A stench of burnt tripe invades the kitchen. I stay by the window. The Travis reflection smirks.

'Hey Meggie, you're fuckin' burning the dinner again!' The shafts of cruelty from his hooded eyes snag on the smoke plume. His fists clench and unclench.

The smoke alarm shrieks.

I stride through the haze past Travis and extract the keys from behind the plant. Two packed suitcases are in the boot of the car. I detour to the bedroom. I pick up the splint and toss it back onto the bed, leaving it to its itinerant adventures.

'Hey Meggie, where are you fuckin' going?'

I won't fuckin' tell him.