

**EVERY TIME HE DIES**



# EVERY TIME HE DIES



By Tara East

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*For Ele & April. Miss you.*





# AUTHOR BIO

Tara East is a Doctoral candidate with degrees in Journalism, Editing and Publishing and Creative Writing. Her articles on writing, literature, gender and culture have appeared in Writing from Below, Queensland Writers Centre, The Huffington Post and The Artifice and her fiction has appeared in TEXT journal and October Hill Magazine among others. Home is with her partner, Ashley, and their mini-schnauzer, Sadie. She maintains an active writing blog at [www.taraeast.com](http://www.taraeast.com).



# CHAPTER 1



*Daff*

*Eighteen months ago*

*December 31, 2014*

Daff heard her heart like a gunshot: click, crack, boom. Typical cop's daughter. She wasn't raised on sentimental bush poetry, read out loud while the family picnicked together on warm summer days. She was shown how to kick a guy in the nuts, scream like thunder, call 000 and hide under the bed. When she was a kid, there'd been weeks when her father couldn't kiss her goodnight because some junkie had stabbed him with a needle and the test results weren't back yet. So, when Daff looked at Tom, she didn't

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hear lub-dub, lub-dub; she heard click, crack, boom. Which made sense. He was a cop too.

Sitting in McGee's Irish Pub, Daff swirled the remains of her first and last pint of Guinness. The famous stout had lost its frothy head twenty minutes ago: Happy New Year. Before leaving home, she and Tom tossed a coin for the unprivileged role of designated driver. It had been their tradition for the past three years. Daff lost, again, but she wasn't entirely put out. Tom tended to be a happy drunk, and that goofy smile he'd get after a couple of pints offered its own intoxicating effect. Click, crack, boom. These days, Daff wished she'd paid more attention; that she'd taken the time to memorise the finer details of that broad grin.

McGee's was your typical Celtic affair: dark wood booths, doors and bar, low lighting and burgundy walls. They'd scored a pair of hard wooden stools at the bar, lit from above by a panel of coloured glass that announced the pub's best sellers: Kilkenny and Guinness. Around them was McGee's latest marketing strategy, a retro-themed New Year's Eve bash.

Daff pulled at the cinched waistband of her new olive dress, thinking bitterly of how much it was living up to its name; no wonder women gave up the fit and flare style for pants and blouses. She combed a finger through the back of her dark hair and tried in vain to re-secure the drooping victory roll. Around the room, others had gone with simpler styles: hair parted to the side, pushed back over one ear and neatly secured with a plastic flower. Tom looked good though, despite his initial resistance to Daff's suggestion that they make the special trip to the Sunny Coast and

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attend the party. His pressed khaki slacks, brown plaid shirt and fedora gave his already lengthy six-foot-two frame a streamlined look. Click, crack, boom. The only inauthentic accessory was the black and red adventure watch Daff gave him a week earlier. He'd been lusting for that watch—the new beaut thing—since a constable in his department got one. The smile on his face when he'd unwrapped that present made the last eight months of saving worth it. Though it clashed with the retro outfit, Daff felt a pleasant warmth at seeing him wear it.

“What’s the time?” Her eyes darted towards Tom’s wrist.

“Twenty to twelve.”

The combination of a late night and a sole drink resulted in the usual ultimatum: food or home. Tom gallantly ordered two burgers.

Daff watched as a party of four in a nearby booth fought over the bill. Eventually, a tall man with tartan suspenders snatched the receipt, flipped his mates the bird and dashed towards the counter with his three friends in tow. Her back ached and she was sick of repositioning her legs every few minutes. Seeing her chance, Daff slipped from the stool and into the freshly abandoned booth.

“Nice grab, darlin’.” Tom slid into the open seat opposite her.

Daff glanced towards the swinging double doors of the kitchen, willing them to open and deliver her burger. Instead, she was met with the scowling black looks of several unashamed patrons; apparently, she wasn’t the only one hungry for a decent seat.

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“We should have won best dressed. That Marilyn look-a-like? Pfft! And that gangster guy? He was just over the top and the suit didn’t even fit him.”

“Amateurs. The judges are obviously wankers. Couldn’t they see the brilliant authenticity of our costumes? The standard fifties suburban couple.” Tom waved his hand through the air as if he was cleaning a window. “Who could be more deserving of a two-week gym membership and Woolworths gift card?”

“Very short sighted.” She smiled, despite her grumbling stomach.

A waitress dressed as an American diner hostess appeared and slid their burgers onto the table. “There’s your meals, babe.” She popped her gum, gave Tom a wink and sashayed back into the crowd.

Daff eyed her plate, suddenly wary about the establishment’s hygiene practices, but she was too hungry to be cautious. She plucked a chip and took a swipe at the tomato sauce that oozed from Tom’s burger, another one of their traditions.

Tom dragged his plate back and leaned forward, protecting his midnight dinner. “So, what are your plans for the New Year?”

“Move in with you?” They’d talked about it extensively, so Daff didn’t know why it came out like a question rather than a statement.

“Eh, steady now. Bit late in the game, Daff, seeing as how you’ve already dropped half your library onto my living room floor. The bathroom door won’t even close now, all

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them damn bras you've left on the handle." Tom continued with a wink. "But I'm surprisingly okay with that."

Three years and he could still make her blush. With half a burger lining her stomach, she was ready to gulp down the remains of her Guinness and attempt another swipe at Tom's sauce.

"Don't be greedy." Tom pretended to smack her hand away, while subtly pushing his plate forward. "Come on, I want another goal. What are you going to do this year? Quick, quick," snapping his fingers, "Time is money, baby."

"That doesn't even make sense!"

"And yet you stay."

Daff tried to hide her responding smile, but failed. "Well, I do have other ambitions: finish my degree, keep an orchid alive ..."

"Life on the edge, eh?" Tom dropped his burger and pinched a handful of chips into a bouquet of potato. "You'd look pretty hot in a white lab coat. Get some hipster black frames, some heels, and you'll be sorted."

Daff put on her best American bimbo accent, twirling a free lock of hair in her open hand. "*Oh my god, babe!* Killer uniform was like, *totally* on the top of my pro list. Like, right above my passion for science, criminology and desire to help mankind."

"I've always thought you were a bit shallow."

"Thanks."

Tom picked up a coaster, spun it between his hands and looked out the window into the darkened car park. "How much longer do you have left? Six months?"

She nodded.

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“Might be able to buy our own place soon.”

Daff straightened, burger and rib jabbing forgotten, “Have you heard, already? Did you pass?”

“No, I haven’t heard, but the lecturer said I was amongst the best in class.” He kept his face neutral, but Daff could see the pull at the corner of his wide mouth.

“Tom, this is a big deal. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Nothing’s happened yet and until I get a letter in the mail ... I didn’t want to get your hopes up.”

“Well ... Congratulations!” Daff raised her empty glass, and Tom clinked his own against it.

“Usually, you congratulate someone *after* they’ve passed.”

“Tom, you’re gonna be a great detective.” She leaned across the table, her hand joining his. It was warm and familiar, so like her own.

He gave her a wink. “Thanks, *sweet cheeks*. I got a lot to live up to.”

“Don’t bother comparing yourself to Detective Sergeant Jon Lawrence.” She added mockingly. “You’ll never win.” Though she’d tried to keep the tone light, a shadow crept over the conversation. Thoughts of Lawrence, her father, inevitably led to thoughts of her mother, Ruth. If the cancer hadn’t eaten the life out of Ruth then their divorce may have.

Tom traced the back of her hand with his thumb, his eyes softening. “Sorry.” He hesitated, his mouth nervously shaping the words. “Your old man put himself down as available for on-call again this year. That’s three Christmases in a row.”

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A hand curled around Daff's heart, squeezed. *He's not my old man.* "Stop, please. I don't want to ruin tonight."

"You're really sticking with this, aren't you?"

Designated driver or not; if someone offered her a second Guinness right now, she'd take it.

"Listen, if I pass, maybe I should look into transferring to another station, or we could leave the city all together."

"No," she shook her head. "I like Brisbane, it's my home; yours too. We're not going anywhere. Besides, it would be stupid for you to leave the Valley and start somewhere else; Lawrence only has a few years left." *Two, exactly.*

"Okay." Tom withdrew his hand from hers, pulled his phone out and opened a real estate app. They weren't in the market, not yet, the gesture was pure indulgence, but Daff welcomed the distraction.

She could feel her chest unwind as Tom scrolled through an assortment of renovated Queenslanders, low brick homes and fibro houses. A future bloomed before her: Tom passing his detective certification and sharpening his teeth at the Valley Station, working his way up to senior detective, then sergeant. She'd complete her studies, apply for internships and carve out a career in forensic toxicology. They'd get married, have kids, and buy a house with a big yard so Daff could build her ideal garden. She could plant citrus trees and a vegie patch, a hedge of red robins and mock oranges, and in winter she could fill the beds with petunias, marigolds, pansies and gerberas. She liked that Brisbane had the culture of a city with the feel of a country town. They'd both grown up here, and now they could make it their own. Her younger self would have found the

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idea of marriage, kids and a mortgage strangling, but life with Tom was an exhale. A relief, a salve to the awfulness of the past few years.

Tom's eyes narrowed, losing their focus as he grinned his infectious grin. Daff knew a good opportunity when she saw it. She grabbed the keys to his Mitsubishi Lancer and announced that it was time to leave.

Daff bundled her inebriated constable into the passenger seat and started the engine. His snore drowned out the grind of the four-cylinder tin can; the motor pushed to its limits as Daff headed towards the Sunshine Motorway and settled in for the hour-long drive back to Brisbane. She switched off the radio to welcome the New Year in peace as Tom's breath filled the tiny cabin, a slow rhythmic exhalation of complete relaxation, complete trust. A metronome reliable enough to tap your toe to; she found herself sinking into it. With a full stomach and a pint of drink, her eyes became heavy, looking for a moment of relief. Her hands relaxed out of the mandatory ten-two position as a black SUV came up alongside her and cut into her lane, its brake lights blinding. Daff jolted. Sleepy hands fumbled. The Lancer skimmed the divide between clean asphalt and untamed bush. The front wheels folded. Flip. Tree. Crack. Darkness.

The digital clock blinked steady: 2:13.

Time passed until the sky became light: flashes of white, blue and red. That's what Daff remembered best, how easily those halogen lights had wiped out the constellations. Paramedics tried to resuscitate Tom at the scene. At 3:36,

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life was pronounced extinct. Thomas Luke Pease joined the night sky.

# CHAPTER 2

## *Detective Lawrence*



*Thursday June 30, 2016*

Detective Lawrence examined the older victim first. The blonde woman was in her forties and wearing a denim miniskirt that she should have retired a decade ago.

There was that word again: retired. Lawrence's sixty-fifth birthday was three months away. A fact confirmed by his drooping grey eyes and drawn basset hound face. Once a copper hit pension age, it was all over, you never had to set an alarm or don your blues for a beat shift again. Of course, it had been a long time since Lawrence had worn his blues on duty. He'd been clocking on for forty-odd years; that kind of time deserved respect. Last week though, a

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constable in her thirties made a Hitchcock reference while poking him in the paunch. Lawrence didn't see the resemblance—he still had most of his hair—but the message beneath the comment brought an unexpected blow: he was a fat old man on the cusp of retirement, his ex-wife was dead and his only daughter refused to speak to him. When he walked out of the station for the final time, no one would be waiting for him.

The blonde was propped on a chair in the corner while the second victim, a brunette, was dumped face down on the floor. The Sundowner Motel, or the Sun, as Valley dwellers called it, had managed to hold onto its position on Edward Street despite the suburb's improving reputation. When Lawrence moved here in the eighties, Fortitude Valley was the wallow in which the dregs of city society settled: junkies, dealers, bikers, strippers, working girls. You could still find them, of course, but now the place was filling up with trendy cocktail bars and restaurants, high-end boutique stores and luxury car yards. You were less and less likely to get your teeth knocked in. Lawrence thought you could make an argument about progress, but the two Jane Does before him offered a strong counter point.

Lawrence heard the crime scene photographer cough dryly and he moved aside so the fella could get on with it. The crumpled Moroccan-inspired bedspread matched the dark saffron walls—dated, even by the detective's humble standards. The bedside lamp furthest from the door was on. The padded chair at the breakfast bar was pulled out and there was space beside it for a second seat. The carpet was worn, flattened and spotted with a decade's worth of

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suspicious stains. If anyone ever slept in this dump, Lawrence thought, they probably kept their jeans on.

The photographer sniffed, unwrapped a Butter-Menthol and moved towards the adjacent bathroom, the second victim momentarily forgotten. Lawrence crouched beside the woman sprawled on the floor, knees protesting as he leaned over his stomach. She was tall, small framed and had long dark hair. She could be in her early twenties, but gauging a young woman's age was tricky business; fourteen-year-olds could look twenty-five, some twenty-nine-year-olds looked nineteen. Unlike the first victim, this lass was fully clothed: leather jacket, jeans, boots.

*Boots?* She wasn't staying here, then. Maybe she'd interrupted things, Lawrence thought, that's why he'd killed her. Lawrence didn't know for sure that it was a *he*, but experience and statistics made for a safe bet. There was a large blood stain beneath the victim's head, her throat sliced open. *One victim choked, the second attacked with a knife.* He ignored the cramping in his knees as he leaned forward to get a better look at her face. The mouth was wide, nose narrow and eyes pale blue. *Daphne.* Lawrence shot up with such force that he lost his footing, half falling against the nearby cupboard.

*Daphne.*

"You good, detective?" The camera man asked, emerging from the bathroom.

Lawrence nodded, his throat too thick to talk; he turned and left the way he entered.

Outside it was cold, and for that he was thankful; hopefully it would knock some sense into the old noggin.

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It's not Daff, he thought while sucking in another mouthful of morning air. The nose was too thin and the eyes too big. Really, the poor girl in there didn't look anything like his daughter. He took another breath, slow and steady, and reassured himself again, *it's not Daff*.

Lawrence gripped the loose barrier of the landing and leaned out over the near-empty car park wishing for nothing more than a Wini-Red.

*You stubborn old goat*, Ruth's voice echoed in his head, *how long are you gonna wait before you call her?* Ruth had been gone for near on four years. Cancer. Now that was the real stubborn goat, he thought. Still, he could hear her nagging him now just as clearly as she had when she was alive. He squeezed the railing like he was making orange juice. It hurt how desperately he wished things were different. Days could bumper together, filled with a hundred easily forgotten regrets; the big ones, though, they stay with you.

Ruth had confronted him after she'd received her diagnosis. She said she knew something had been going on and that she wasn't prepared to spend the remaining days of her life living a lie. So Lawrence had told her everything. He knew the affair would cost him a wife, but he hadn't expected to lose a daughter.

A red Toyota Corolla pulled into the car park. Lawrence released his grip. At least McPhee had gotten his voicemail, but the blighter didn't have to come in his own car; he could have stopped at the station first. He'd completed his certificate a month back, gaining the new title of Detective Senior Constable McPhee. Lawrence still thought it strange

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to see him in plain clothes instead of his blues. *It should have been Tom.*

A flicker of rage rose from his gut before he could snuff it out. Tom had passed his certification, but never collected his gold badge. Lawrence shook his head, forcing out all thoughts of his estranged daughter and her deceased partner. He gripped the railing and watched as McPhee crossed the asphalt, his red handlebar moustache making him stand out like a bikie at a CWA meeting. The VLAD laws had been in effect for eighteen months; considering the state's recent crackdown on illegal motorcycle gangs, Lawrence thought the moustache was more odd than ironic. The two had been partners for the past six months; retirement never looked so good.

Now that he was outside, Lawrence noticed a lingering smoky scent. Junkies loved to mask their drug use with incense; Lawrence couldn't walk past a new-age shop without that musky scent conjuring up some memory of a former bust. Between the acrid smoke and the motel's seedy reputation, Lawrence made a mental note to follow up with the forensic physician; make sure that the blood samples were checked for drugs. Meth was big right now.

McPhee had mounted the steps leading to the second-storey landing. "Mornin' Detective."

Lawrence nodded in reply. They were lucky to have arrived first; emergency services had already left and it wasn't often they beat the forensic crew. The crime scene unit usually had first dibs, but Lawrence was in no mood for waiting around until Sergeant Peter Murphy and his team showed up.

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“Let’s get this over with it.” The detective stepped back towards room eight, his partner behind him.

“Jesus, that’s a bit brutal.” McPhee’s hooded eyes ran over the brunette on the floor before drifting up towards the blonde. Snapping on his gloves, he crouched by the body on the floor, careful to keep his shoes out of the tacky pool of blood. From this angle, the victim’s face was concealed beneath a splay of dark tendrils. Lawrence’s breath hitched: how easily that girl could’ve been Daphne. A few moments ago, he’d thought it was.

“She’s young,” McPhee murmured. “I’d say early twenties.” Being in his late twenties, McPhee was in a much better position than Lawrence to perform such crackpot analysis. “She’s got some bruises on her neck too. Must have been strangled before ...”

Lawrence slipped on his gloves and pulled back the duvet. Though the sheets were rumpled, they were clean, at least to the naked eye. He peered over his shoulder towards the half-dressed blonde. Hopefully the guy hadn’t used a rubber and there’d be a few seminal stains on the sheets. He quickly scanned the room again, but could see no evidence of incense having been burned. If they’d taken the time to clean that up, it was unlikely they’d left the murder weapon behind.

McPhee stood up and edged towards the older victim to get a better look. “Maybe it’s a mother-daughter tag team type deal.”

“Maybe,” Lawrence murmured as he slid open the bedside table drawers, but there was nothing in there except a copy of the *Good News*.

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“Weird, isn’t it?” McPhee peered at the purple bruising around the woman’s neck. “If the guy had a knife with him, why did he strangle this one?”

Lawrence glanced at the body in the corner. He’d read enough pathologists’ reports to know what this one would say: thyroid gland haemorrhaged, hyoid bone fractured, small abrasions on both sides of the throat. Death by asphyxiation. “Maybe it was personal. Either he knew her, or she reminded him of someone. If he was high, then there’s probably no logical reason to it at all.”

McPhee stepped over to the cupboard and pulled it open. “No luggage or personal effects. I’m pretty sure the blonde didn’t show up at the hotel door in nothing but a bra and skirt.”

“He probably took her shirt with him, nothing else was left behind. We’ll find out from reception who booked the room, if it was in her name or his.” He didn’t bother adding that at the Sun, most guests booked under fake names and paid in cash.

“I’m guessing the brunette walked in,” McPhee’s eyes traced over her. “Maybe our guy was just finishing up with the blonde and this one arrived too early. If our guy was using meth or on speed, he’d be able to go for hours.”

“We can’t rule out that the women were staying here, not yet. Forensics will run the bloods, check for signs of sexual assault. Dr Cardwell might even lift some DNA skin cell samples off her,” Lawrence indicated the blonde with the swollen throat.

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“You might want to check this out, Detective.” The photographer emerged from the bathroom, sticking his thumb over his shoulder behind him.

Lawrence gingerly stepped around the body on the floor and entered the bathroom. His eyes went straight to the bath, half expecting a third victim, but the shower curtain was pulled back and the tub was empty. No towel hung on the rack and he hadn’t seen one in the room either. If the murderer had been high, he still had enough sense to minimise the chances of trace evidence. Maybe he’d done this before. When Lawrence turned towards the vanity, he hardly registered the bare counter and untouched toiletries.

The room froze. He stopped breathing. His stomach dropped. *Fuck*. He’d thought the club had wised up, that this kind of shit was over. Lawrence took an unsteady step forward. They’d left their symbol on the mirror: a circle drawn in blood, slashed by a diagonal line. The crude design was no bigger than his hand and, though the blood was smeared thinly, the symbol was still clearly identifiable. Given the towel factor, Lawrence knew it would be a match to one of the victims.

“Isn’t that—” McPhee squeezed into the tiny bathroom beside his superior.

Lawrence nodded. “Yup. Road Dogs’ club logo.”

“You interrogated the maids or guests yet?”

“Questioned, not interrogated, and no I haven’t.”

McPhee leaned forward to get a better look. “You reckon Murphy can lift a fingerprint out of that?”

“Maybe, the dragging could have ruined the print though. Still, there’s a chance that some DNA was left behind.”

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Lawrence stepped around McPhee and headed back out onto the landing.

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t want to be here when forensics arrive. Murphy will chew my arse out.” Lawrence headed down the external staircase. The sun was out now, lighting up the bitumen of the car park, and Lawrence was glad. With only a few more months of active duty left, he’d tried to forget about the Road Dogs, to let it go, but here on this sunny Queensland winter day he’d been given another shot.

# CHAPTER 3



*Daff*

*Thursday June 30, 2016*

Daff pulled her orange scarf tighter. The sun had set half an hour ago and Golden Beach would have been in complete darkness if not for the glow of the bonfire. Standing by its flames, she could almost ignore the cool evening air, but when the wind picked up it stung her cheeks. Even in Queensland a mid-year beach visit could be lousy.

She should have stayed at home, she should have told Peta, “No, I’m not coming. Go by yourself.”

Thursday night was laundry night. Daff liked to get the domestic duties out of the way before the weekend; that way she could spend Saturday and Sunday tending her

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garden. The coriander had gone to seed; the basil was covered in its delicate white flowers—they'd need to be removed—and the geranium cuttings were ready to be transplanted. They'd look good in the small garden bed by the front stairs, Daff thought.

Peta was chatting to one of the other meditators and in the firelight, she looked more golden than usual. It was easy to forget how small she was—her personality was a formidable compensation for her lack of height. Phrases of their conversation travelled through the evening air: *transcendental, heart chakra, emotional freedom technique*. Daff fought the urge to roll her eyes. She really should have said no. But Peta was a master at convincing people they wanted to do something they absolutely did not want to do.

Despite the ridiculousness of the evening, and the winter chill, Daff had to admit that it was nice to be outside. She was pleased to have worked her way into a permanent embalming position at Dean & Clayton's Funeral Home, but the mandatory cleaning chemicals were so powerful that the air inside the mortuary was almost devoid of smell. There was no trace of bodily fluids or chemicals but, although there were no windows, the air wasn't stagnant. It smelt more like a Tupperware container that had been sealed for too long: confined emptiness.

It was a hard day. She'd spent most of the morning preparing the body of an elderly woman, Margret Underwood. The funeral had been organised in a rush, scheduled for the next day. Deceased for twelve hours; the rigor mortis had already reached its peak. Margret had been found on the toilet; her body slack against the wall, arms

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and legs curled protectively towards her torso. Lots of people died on the throne, particularly if they had a pre-existing heart condition like Margret did. Bowel movements could drop a person's heart rate and cause cardiac arrest, Daff knew.

She tried to shake out the rigor mortis by massaging the woman's muscles, but Margret remained in the foetal position. If Daff waited seventy-two hours, the muscles would become pliable again; but time was a luxury and the funeral was scheduled. Daff explained to the family that their Aunt Margret had settled into a position that was comfortable for her and she should be allowed to remain in it. Perhaps they would consider buying the coffin three sizes up? The one designed for a six-foot frame. The hardest part of the job was dealing with grieving families; handling corpses was nothing.

More people gathered around the fire; Daff counted fifteen. Some looked perfectly ordinary, wearing jeans, jacket and a scarf like herself. A few had small touches of ironic enlightenment: mala beads or Tibetan-inspired pullovers. Then there was the guy wearing purple slouch crotch pants, his dreads bound into a fat bun on the crown of his head and his ear lobes stretched to the size of a chicken's egg by black plastic plugs. Most were gathered around a woman wearing a teal beanie and white jumper. When the pair beside her began a discussion over their mutual devotion to Kundalini yoga, Daff decided it was time to go. She'd taken three steps, when the woman in the white jumper announced that it was time to begin, inviting everyone to gather around the fire.

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Peta broke away from her conversation and pulled Daff down beside her. “No escaping now.”

This time, Daff openly rolled her eyes. “I’ll be wearing Birkenstocks in no time.”

“Shhhhh.” Peta’s eyes flicked over the foot attire of each attendee.

The group settled into a circle around the fire. The woman in the white jumper sat on a folded towel and thanked everyone for coming.

“Close your eyes,” she began. “Take a deep breath in through your nose and out through your nose. Focus on the expanding movement of your chest and belly as you breathe in and feel how they shrink when you exhale.”

Daff wondered if they had sat too close to the flames as her cheeks prickled and puckered with the heat. The meditation guide invited them to imagine a staircase that lead to a door. Restless, Daff felt a cramp twist around her left knee, and an irresistible itch spring up on her chin. She twitched her leg and scratched her face.

“Resist the urge to move!” The guide cautioned. “Breathe into any areas of discomfort and allow the breath to move the blocked energy.”

The guide’s blatant lack of anatomical knowledge was laughable. *Your breath can only go into or out of lungs*, Daff thought, *it can’t relieve a cramp in your knee*. Just as carrot juice can’t cure cancer. Her chest constricted as an image of her mother arose: she was in the kitchen, healthy and alive, making a pot of tea. Daff swiped the memory away as if it was a picture on her smartphone. A gust of wind swept up

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the beach, making her hot cheeks tingle against the sudden cool. Her nose started to run and she sniffled quietly.

“If you find yourself thinking about the events of the day or what you’ll do when you leave here, your plans for the weekend or your greater life purpose, allow these thoughts to pass through your mind without judgement. This is the voice of your ego. Release the thought and return to your breath.”

Despite the instructions, Daff’s mind began turning over each of these forbidden subjects. *If we aren’t supposed to think about our day, the weekend or our lives at all, why bloody mention it?* Daff thought, suddenly tired. Then she scolded herself. She’d already given up laundry night—that sweet, pleasurable routine—and she may not believe in this woo-woo stuff, but she also refused to spend the next hour in a state of annoyance. Instead, she resolved to find enjoyment in this rare moment of inactivity. This week, it would just have to be Friday night laundry.

The guide continued her spiel about a beautiful garden and meeting your inner-child by a lake, but Daff had already tuned her out, focussing instead on the crackling fire. The sharp snaps of the heat against the night’s dropping temperature were accompanied by the overtones of a rising tide and the clicks of crickets and other small insects. Her world become a small dark globe filled with the unpredictable cadences of nature.

A sliver of light crept beneath her sealed lids like a rising sun. At first, she thought it was the light from the fire, so she shut her eyes harder. But instead of disappearing, the glow grew until Daff could see nothing but its golden blaze.

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A small voice at the back of her head told her to open her eyes ... but the light was so warm, so dazzling; it could take your breath away.

A shadow appeared in the distance like a ball held underwater and then suddenly released. *Open your eyes*, the voice insisted again. Uneasiness swept over Daff, but she kept her eyes shut, couldn't turn her focus away from the figure in her mind's eye. The black shape sharpened and began to take form, morphing into the silhouette of a slim figure; loose dark hair flowing against the brilliant light. The shadow moved forward, growing larger. There was something familiar in its details, the way the shadow moved, the ratio of its parts, but she couldn't identify it. If she could wait just another moment, then maybe she'd remember.

The figure edged closer, its hand outstretched, beckoning. A familiar sense of affection drew around Daff, plucking at the edges of her mind until a thread loosened. Daff struggled to maintain her breath, her ribs pulling towards one another in a way she knew was impossible. Beads of sweat rolled down her temples, cheeks and neck to gather in her scarf.

*Mum?* Daff gasped, illogically stretching out her hand, her heart thumping against her ribs.

“Slowly, start to become aware of your body,” the guide’s low, drawn-out voice broke through, shattering the light and the figure sealed within it. “Gently, wiggle your fingers and toes. Feel your consciousness returning to your body.”

Daff’s eyes flew open and she snatched back her outstretched hand, hoping no one had noticed. Her breath was unsteady, her eyes watery. She rubbed them with the

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back of her hand and sniffed, if anyone asked, she'd brush it off as the symptoms of a winter cold. That wasn't your mother, she scolded herself. Stop being ridiculous.

A hand suddenly came down on her knee. Her body jolted; a small shriek escaped her. She looked up at the owner of the offending hand.

Peta's eyes were wide. "What's wrong?"

Daff managed to brush off Peta's inquiry until after the guide had thanked everyone for coming. The fire was put out and Daff turned, following the group as they slowly headed back up the beach towards the car park.

"I'm not ready to head home yet." Peta stopped and pointed down the beach in the opposite direction. "Come on, let's walk a bit. Then we'll go."

Daff hesitated, but when she failed to come up with a plausible objection, she reluctantly agreed. They walked along to the sound of the incoming waves and the squelch of their winter boots in the soft sand. Eventually, Daff stopped and slipped off her shoes and socks, more willing to put up with the cold sand than the awkwardness of walking in boots. They talked about small things: work, plans for the weekend. When the beach abruptly ended at the side of a small grassy rise, the pair had to choose between continuing up along a walkway and onto the footpath or turning and heading back. Daff was retracing her steps when Peta finally got to the point of their moonlit walk.

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“So, what happened during the meditation? You seemed pretty upset.”

Daff shrugged, but the gesture was lost in the dark. “Nothing happened. In the end, I wasn’t even listening to the guide—just to the sound of the fire and the waves.”

“Why were you crying then?”

Daff didn’t want to describe the strange dream; it felt both too private *and* insignificant. There wasn’t a lot to say anyway. She’d seen a shadow and thought of her mother. Grief was a string of endless mental tricks: memories summoned without reason, seeing your loved one’s face imprinted on a stranger in a crowd or catching an imagined whiff of their perfume. Peta would make the dream significant. She’d turn it into a powerful insight, a mystical breakthrough, a shard of spiritual guidance or a moment of genuine mediumship. It wasn’t that; it was a dream. Daff was tired. She’d had a busy day at work and for a few moments, her mind had been allowed to wander and relax. It was a dream.

“I wasn’t crying. My eyes were watering because I’m getting a cold.”

Peta draped an arm over her friend’s shoulder. “My God, the lengths of your denial. It’s been almost two years since the accident, Daff. You must know why I brought you here?”

The memory of a darkened highway, the car’s headlights arcing across a line of trees and the crack as its bonnet hit home kicked the air out of Daff’s lungs.

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“It’s been eighteen months and I’m fine.” Daff shook off Peta’s embrace. *Why did she have to bring up the accident?* “I’ve dealt with it.”

“How? You’ve never talked about it, not to anyone. Not even me. I’m not even really sure what happened that night. And then you just upped and left the city, you don’t know anyone here on the coast, you still won’t talk to your dad, and I worry about you. You’ve completely isolated yourself, Daff. You gotta talk to someone or this stuff is going to rot away inside of you.”

Leaving Brisbane had never been her idea; it had been Lawrence’s. They’d spoke once since the accident. Lawrence had showed up at her apartment with a cash-filled envelope and told her she needed to leave the city; it was time to start somewhere new. Daff knew that was bullshit—he was just sick of the guilt. But he’d been different that day. The look in his eye was desperate, pleading.

Of course, she hadn’t told any of this to Peta. She strove to keep her voice level. “I really don’t see the point in talking about it. The accident happened and he’s gone. I just want to forget about it. So drop it. It’s none of your damn business anyway.”

Peta stiffened, stunned into silence, and Daff instantly regretted her words. “Look, I’m sorry. I’m tired.” She dragged a hand across her brow, hoping the action would wipe away the image of the shadow’s outstretched hand. “It’s time I headed home.”

The pair continued back along the beach in silence. Daff was staring out at the dark waves, sucking in the sting of the salted air when her bare foot came down on something

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cold, flat and hard. *Broken glass*, she thought instinctively, and she brushed a hand across the sole of her foot, waiting for the sting of an open wound, but there was nothing. She knelt down and gingerly swept at the sand until her hand skimmed a smooth small circle of glass. Daff excavated the object from its shallow grave and draped it across the palm of her hand.

Peta stopped, noticing her friend's sudden alarm. "Shit! It's not a needle, is it?"

"No, no, it's a watch." Daff's eyes strained under the moonlight. A large round face attached to red silicon bands: a man's adventure watch. Her hand convulsed and the watch fell back onto the beach with a soft thud. It looked just like *his*, she thought—but that was impossible. Embarrassed, she picked up the timepiece and slipped it into the pocket of her jacket.

"Taking it, are you?"

Daff nodded. "I'll put a post up on the community Facebook page, see if anyone claims it." The lie came out so quickly Daff almost believed it herself.

Peta held out her hand. "Give it here for a sec."

Daff felt herself become rigid, like a child stubbornly refusing to share a new toy. Her cheeks flushed with the irrational reaction, and she slowly pulled the watch from her pocket and placed it in her friend's waiting hand.

Peta clasped the watch and stood silently for a moment as though she were in prayer. "Okay, all done." She handed the watch back to its new owner.

"What the hell was that?"

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“You should never take a foreign object into your home without cleansing it first. That’s just asking for bad juju.”

Daff ordinarily ignored such baiting, but if it distracted Peta from her original line of questioning, she was willing to be hooked.

“What do you mean *cleans*?”

“Everything contains energy; even you, *Miss Science*, can’t deny that. Our personal objects have energy too—*our* energy. I just removed any energy that may have been left by the watch’s previous owner.”

Daff fought the urge to gag. She wasn’t about to resurrect this old argument. “Whatever makes you happy.”

“You can also do it to people,” Peta continued. “You can cleanse away the negative emotions, feelings or energies that have become trapped in somebody, particularly when trauma has been involved.”

“Still not talking about it.” Daff stepped out onto the car park, relieved to see her powder-blue VW Beetle in sight.

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Daff cursed herself when the security light failed to turn on. She must have forgotten to flick the switch when she’d left earlier that afternoon; her narrow, partially renovated worker’s cottage looked drab in the moonlight. It took three attempts to slide the key home and unlock the door. Daff flicked on the hallway light and walked into the lounge room, dropped her bag on the low coffee table with a thud and sagged into her armchair.

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Of course, she could have sat in any chair; they were all hers now. The silence of the house was stark after the symphony of insects, crashing waves, and chattering hippies at Golden Beach. An hour ago she'd longed for home, but now there was nothing to drown out the ringing in her ears. Tinnitus. Another gift courtesy of the accident; a constant reminder of all she'd lost that night.

Peta's words slipped beneath the insistent hum. *You've completely isolated yourself.* As if Daff had chosen these losses.

On days when Daff finished her work early, if a service was on, she'd slip into the chapel and take a discreet seat at the back. There was such relief when the service broke up and the family stood, clinging to one another to keep themselves together.

A week after her mother's terminal diagnosis, Lawrence had come home from work, pulled up a chair at the kitchen table—the table Daff had eaten breakfast at her entire childhood—and told Ruth he'd been having an affair with an officer from Gaming and Vice. They'd separated immediately, though Ruth had insisted he come over for weekly visits and the pair had maintained a strange, conflicted friendship until her death. When Ruth's funeral had ended, Daff had walked past Lawrence as if he was stranger. Which he was, really. She had cut him out of her life and didn't even notice the absence. You can't miss someone who was never there.

Daff wriggled restlessly in the chair, hoping the action would break her spiralling thoughts. She felt a weight shift inside her jacket. Remembering her discovery on the beach, she pulled the watch out of her pocket, wiped the black face

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with her thumb and brushed away the remains of gritty sand. It was still ticking. She closed her eyes, focussing on the sound, hoping it would override the buzzing in her ears.

“What an exciting life you lead.”

Daff leapt from the chair, banged her knee on the coffee table, and half fell, crouching on the floor. A man, an intruder, loomed above her at the opposite end of the table. She instinctively slipped the watch back into her pocket as a chill rolled through her body.

“Who the hell are you?” She’d expected to sound tough, but the words fell out in a whisper. She stood too quickly, her head spinning as she extended to her full height. Though she was tall for a woman, it made little difference; the intruder was over six foot, lean and broad. If he attacked her, Daff thought, she may not be able to stop him. He was dressed in blue jeans and a plain black t-shirt. Outside, it was easily below ten degrees; why was he wearing short sleeves and no jacket?

She fought to keep her face strong and fierce as her fight or flight responses kicked in. Her heart was in her throat, in her ears. It would do no good to become hysterical, but panic had its advantages. Every sensation was heightened: the creaks of the house, the trace of her own floral perfume, the sweater’s prickly material against the gooseflesh of her arms.

She needed help. She should call for help.

*Jim and Mary are away.* Daff cursed the ill-luck. The Andersons, her only neighbours, had ducked up to Rainbow Beach for the night. Yesterday, Jim had popped his head

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over the fence and ask her if she would feed their dog, Molly, while they were away.

Daff glanced at her handbag that sat on the table between them. She cautiously leaned towards it, hands shaking, hoping to reach her phone before the man attacked her. “If you don’t leave *immediately*, I’m going to call the cops.”

He stood there with his eyes wide and mouth loose, his expression crumbling with relief. “You can see me?”

Daff tried to slow her breathing as her heart beat a double tap. This man was either high or suffering from a mental disorder. His dark brown eyes made it hard to distinguish pupil from iris, yet Daff sensed that he was clean. She liked the second option less; crazy people were harder to predict, harder to manipulate. At least, that’s what Lawrence had told her. She swiftly snatched her bag and stepped aside, putting the couch between herself and the intruder. With her eyes locked on him, she fumbled through the contents of her bag.

“Finally! Someone can see me!” He barked a dry laugh. “You don’t understand I’ve been—”

“Don’t take another step,” Daff held up the phone as if it was a weapon. “I’ll call the police if you don’t leave.”

Daff didn’t wait for a reply. She tried to dial 000, instantly regretting the security screen lock.

The man walked *right through* the couch and stopped in front of Daff. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

Daff took a step back, and the phone slipped from her grasp and clattered onto the floor. No scream escaped her throat, yet her mind unravelled as it sought some

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explanation for how this man just broken the laws of physics. *I'm seeing things. It's not possible.*

"I'm not going to hurt you; I actually can't hurt you." He held up both hands as if he was stopping traffic. "There's nothing to worry about."

"Sorry, but that's not very comforting." Daff lurched for the phone, but the intruder stepped forward, blocking her path. Turning, she sprinted for the kitchen and yanked open the cutlery drawer. She drew out a heavy carving knife and braced the arm that held it against her chest. *You're less likely to be disarmed if you keep your weapon close*, Lawrence had said, years ago, while eating breakfast and recounting the break and enter he'd attended the night before.

The intruder stepped into the kitchen, his hands still raised, and Daff stepped back to keep her distance. "Get out of my house!"

"I can't," he said. "I need your help."

"You need money? Fine. Take my wallet."

"That's not what I need, I don't have much use for money these days."

None of what he said made sense, Daff thought, but he sounded lucid and he seemed to be in control of his movements. She assessed him again: tall, slim, but not skeletal. His skin was fair, but vitamin D deficiencies resulted in low-levels of serotonin, not madness. His floppy dark hair fell across a slightly crooked nose. Someone had broken it. He was a fighter. Daff knew how much strength was required to plunge a knife into a human body—that she could do—but overpowering him was another matter. Her

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best chance of survival was a surprise attack. “How many times do I have to ask you to leave my house?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

“Why?”

“You have my watch.”

*How does he know about the watch?* Daff shuffled back, banging into the refrigerator. The intruder stepped forward.

“Don’t come any closer.” Daff pulled the watch out of her pocket with her free hand. “Take it!”

She threw the timepiece at his chest. He didn’t even try to catch it. It should have slammed into his breastbone and fallen onto the floor, but it didn’t. The watch was a thread passing through the eye of a needle. It sailed through him as though he were no more solid than morning fog. The watch clattered onto the floor behind him.

“What are you?” Daff asked. “Get out of my house, I’m warning you.”

The man’s face turned to steel and he crossed the kitchen in three quick strides. “Or what? You’ll kill me?”

This was it, the moment she’d been waiting for. Daff lunged, throwing the full weight of her body forward as she plunged the knife into his belly. She knew exactly what it would feel like, or what it *should* have felt like. It took strength and conviction to slice through layers of skin, muscle and organs. She waited for the impact, but it never came. Instead, she slammed her shoulder into the lino of the kitchen floor, her head connecting with the corner cardboard. The knife flew from her open hand. Screaming, she clutched her forehead as she looked up at her assailant.

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“You can’t kill me,” he loomed over her. “I’m already dead.”