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And now tell it to me
in other words,
says the stuffed owl
to the fly
which, with a buzz,
is trying with its head
to break through the window-pane.

—*The Best Room*, or *Interpretation of a Poem*,
Miroslav Holub

For Angela Savage

part one

BREATHING IN

When the rain first spills from those egg-white foams of cloud that seem too delicate to have burst forth in such a deluge, I freeze. The heavy drops fizz on the dry grass as they hit; I think this is what a pit of snakes would sound like. And suddenly the rain is falling in sheets, though the sky is still blue, the sun still shining. The Glaswegians on the pebbled shore are yelling and screaming, rushing out of the water, huddling under the trees, running back to their cars. Except for the chubby young man with the St Andrews tattoo on his bicep, criss-crossed white lines on blue; he is standing in the water up to his knees, grinning, his arms outstretched, welcoming the rain, daring it.

And just as suddenly the rain has stopped and they all slink back to the beach. Two young boys race past me and throw themselves into the lake. A teenage girl throws away the magazine she has been sheltering beneath, takes out a compact and starts to powder her cheeks and nose, to reapply colour to her lips till they are the pink of fairy floss. Someone has turned the music

back on and the words *when love takes over* roar through the valley. A pale skinny youth with broken teeth and a mop of greasy black hair dives past me; sheets of crystal-clear water splash all over the wading tattooed guy, who grabs his friend, holds him from behind in a bear hug, and ducks him under. He sits on him, laughing. A woman shouts from the shore, 'Get off him, Colm, get off him!'

The chubby guy stands up, grinning, and the thin boy scrambles to his feet, coughing water.

The girls and the women are all in bikinis, the boys and the men are all in shorts, and bare-chested or in singlets. Except me: I have jeans on and two layers on top, a t-shirt and an old yellowing shirt. The sun feels weak to me; it can't get any stronger than pleasant, it can't build to fire, it can't manage force.

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'Dan, I can't go back there. I can't. Everything is too far away.'

Clyde's words have been going around and around in my head all day. *Too far away.*

In the restaurant the night before, we were eavesdropping on a nearby table: a group of friends—three couples, one Scottish, one English, one German. They were in their late fifties, the men all with beards and bellies, the two British women with newly acquired bobs, the German woman with her grey hair pulled back in a long, untidy ponytail. She had looked up when we first started arguing, when I first raised my voice.

'And I can't live here.'

'Why?'

'Because this, for me, is too far away.'

We glared at each other across the table. One of us had to submit. One of us had to win. The young waiter arrived with our mains and we attacked them in viscous silence.

The group seemed to be old university friends, their lively conversation and loud laughter an invasion. The sauce on my steak was all salt and thick melted butter. I tore into it, was the first to finish. I pushed back the plate and headed off to the loos. Behind me I could hear the argument from their table. It seemed they got together every two years, in a different city. The German woman was pushing for it to be Barcelona next time, the Scottish man thought it should be Copenhagen and the English man wanted it to be in London.

When I returned we were both stiff with one another, miming politeness.

'They took a vote, it's a tie between Barcelona and Copenhagen.'

'Really? Even the English guy voted against London?'

'Aye, even he realised what a fucken stupid idea that was.'

That made us laugh, the lovers' shared complicit laugh, a peace flag. I looked across and the German woman tilted her shoulders, smiling at me and feigning exasperation.

'Barcelona,' I called to them, 'I'd make it Barcelona—the food will be better.'

The Englishman patted his big belly. 'We don't need more good food. We've had enough!'

We were all laughing then.

Clyde leaned in to me. 'We couldn't do that if we went back to Australia.'

I didn't answer. It was true, and my silence confirmed it.

'It's too far away, Dan, I cannot go back.'

It was true. I had lost.

And then the words came from deep within me, were said without my forcing them, they just came like curses. I whispered them: 'And, mate, I can't stay here.'

That night, in bed, he told me he didn't want my skin next to his, that he couldn't bear my touch, and I obediently moved to the edge of the bed. But soon I felt him moving closer, and then his arms wrapped over mine, binding me to him. All night he held me, and all night he couldn't stop his crying.

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The chubby guy's neck and shoulders and face are sunburnt. All the Glaswegians, sunbathing, paddling, strolling, kissing, eating, drinking on the shores of Loch Lomond, all of them have pink shoulders and pink faces and pink necks and arms. There is one Indian family eating Tesco sandwiches on the shore, and one black girl I noticed back in the village, she was with her red-haired boyfriend looking into the windows of the Scots R'Us shop or whatever the fuck it is called. And then there is me. Even with this piss-weak sun, I have gone brown. If I stay here will my colouring eventually fade away from me? Will I go pale, will I too turn pink in the sun?

The chubby guy is still only in water up to his knees. His mates dive in, they put their heads under, they splash and they play and they float. But they don't swim. None of these people swims. No one ventures further than a few metres from the shore. But there is nothing to fear here, no sharks, no stingers, no rips, no dumping waves that can strike you down like a

titan's fist. There is nothing to fear in this water at all. Except the cold. There's always the cold.

I am at the shoreline. The waves can't muster any energy, the waves lap gently across pebble and stone. They push at my sneakers, they kiss the hem of my jeans.

I am taking off my shoes and I am taking off my socks.

Real water punishes you, real water you have to work at to possess, to tame. Real water can kill you.

And I am taking off my shirt, I am taking off my t-shirt.

Men and women *have* died in this loch, men and women *have* frozen in the water, men and women *have* been claimed by this loch. Water can kill you and water can be treacherous. Water can deceive you.

I feel a twitch in my shoulder, I can sense that the muscles there are stirring.

And I unbuckle my belt, I take off my trousers.

The chubby guy is looking at me, puzzled, his expression turning into a grimace. He is thinking, Who is this bawbag, this pervert, stripped to his Y-fronts on the shore? A girl behind me is starting to titter.

I am walking into the water, to my thighs, to my crotch, to my belly. It is cold cold cold and I think my legs will snap with the pain of it. I dive. Breath is stolen from me.

Muscles that haven't moved in years, muscles that have been in abeyance, they are singing now.

And I am swimming.

I can't hear them back on land but I know what they're shouting. *What are ya doin', what are ya doin', ya mad bastard?*

I am in water. It is bending for me, shifting for me. It is welcoming me.

I am swimming.

I belong *here*.

First week of term, February 1994

The first piece of advice the Coach ever gave Danny was not about swimming: not about his strokes, not about his breathing, not about how he could improve his dive or his turns. All of that would come later. He would never forget that first piece of advice.

The squad had just finished training and Danny was standing shivering off to one side. The other guys all knew each other; they had been destined to be friends from the time they were embryos in their mothers' wombs, when their fathers had entered their names on the list to attend Cunts College. Danny kept repeating the words over and over in his head: *Cunts College Cunts College Cunts College*. The nickname he and Demet had invented when he first told her he had to change schools. '*Have to* or *want to*?' He'd had to turn away as he answered, 'It'll make me a better swimmer.' 'They'll all be rich,' she countered. 'You know that, don't you, only the filthy rich go to Cunts College?' But she left it at that. She wasn't going to argue with him, not about the swimming; she knew what the swimming meant to him.

Danny glanced at the other boys. They had hardly said a word to him all morning, just offered grunts, barely nodded to him. It had been like this all week. He felt both invisible and that there was nowhere for him to hide. Only in the water did he feel like himself. Only in the water did he feel that he could escape them.

Taylor, the one they all followed, made towards the change rooms and as he passed Danny, he said in a loud effeminate lisp, 'Dino, I like your bathers, mate, they're real cool.'

The others cracked up, turning around to look at him, to look down at his loose synthetic bathers, cackling like a pack of cartoon hyenas. They were all wearing shiny new Speedos, the brand name marked in yellow across their arses. Danny's swimmers were from Forges—there was no way his mum was going to spend half a day's pay on a piece of lycra. And good on her. Good on her, but he still felt like shit. The boys continued sniggering as they passed by him, all following after that pompous dickhead Taylor. Scooter, who was the oldest, the one with the palest skin but the darkest hair, Scooter bumped him. Just a touch, just enough of a nudge so it could seem like an accident. 'Sorry,' Scooter said abruptly, and then laughed. That set them all off again. The same stupid cackling. Danny knew it was no accident. He stood there, not moving, nothing showing on his face. But inside, inside he was coiled, inside he was boiling.

'Eh, Scooter, you've got nothing to laugh about, mate. You weren't swimming today—that was fucking paddling.'

That silenced them. The Coach was the only one who could get away with swearing at them. Even Principal Canning pretended not to hear when Frank Torma let fly with his curses and insults. The school needed Coach Torma. He was one of the best swim

coaches in the state, had coached Cunts College to first in every school sports meet of the last seven years. That was power. They immediately shut up and continued to the showers. Danny went to follow them.

'Kelly, you stay behind. I want to talk to you.'

The Coach was silent until the other boys had disappeared into the change rooms. He looked Danny in the eyes for the first time. 'Why do you take it?'

'What?'

'Why do you take their shit?'

You could hear his accent in the way he pronounced the word, 'chit'.

Danny shrugged. 'Dunno.'

'Son, always answer back when you receive an insult. Do it straight away. Even if there's a chance there was nothing behind it, take back control, answer them back. An insult is an attack. You must counter it. You understand?'

One side of Danny's mouth started to twitch. He thought the Coach must be joking; he sounded like Demet's mother or Sava's *giagia*, as if an insult were the 'evil eye', as if he needed to wear a *nazar boncuğu* to ward against it. Danny's jaw slackened, his head slumped back. He was not even aware of it, he had just assumed the pose; that was how you reacted to instruction back at his old school, the real school: you just looked bored when an adult was giving you a lecture.

But Frank Torma's expression remained serious and Danny realised this wasn't a joke.

'Listen, you stupid boy, if there is no spite, no hate or jealousy in what they say, then it does not matter. Nothing is lost.' The

Coach patted his enormous stomach, the huge gut hard and round like a basketball straining his t-shirt. He was pointing to something beyond his gut, something inside, but Danny didn't know what that could be. 'Trust your instincts, son, don't let them poison you. You have to protect yourself.' He pointed towards the change rooms. 'They're all jealous of you.'

'That's bullshit.'

For a moment Danny thought the man was going to hit him: the Coach's right hand danced, spun, jerked in the air. Instead his fat finger drilled hard into Danny's chest. 'Listen to me, they're jealous of you—of course they are. You have the potential to be the best in the squad. The others can sense it.' The Coach's finger was now pushing harder. 'They're going to want to get under your skin, and they're right to. You are not friends, you are competitors.'

It hurt where the Coach's finger was stabbing Danny's chest. But he didn't care about the pain at all. He was the best, he was the best in the squad. Better than that dropkick Scooter, that chickenshit Morello, that poofter Fraser, that spineless rabbit Wilkinson, that up-himself spoilt-rich-kid Taylor. He was better than all of them. Stronger, faster, better. Strongest, fastest, best.

The Coach followed him into the showers. Danny was relieved; the boys wouldn't have a go at him with Frank Torma there. The others were still showering, making lame jokes about soap and Wilkinson. The silly faggot was taking it all, giving nothing back to them. The Coach was right, Danny realised. You had to give it back. Hurt them before they hurt you.

Torma sat on the bench as Danny slipped off his swimmers and got under the shower. He turned on the hot tap but the

first blast of water was freezing. Only when the steam began to rise did he loosen the cold tap. He soaped himself all over, scrubbing vigorously, almost violently, using the friction to warm himself up.

'Having a wank, Dino?' It was Taylor, his tone full of pretend disgust. The rest of the morons brayed again.

Danny looked over his shoulder to the Coach, who was silent, sitting on the bench, looking straight at him. *Always answer back*. He understood now what the man meant. *Take control, always take control.*

Danny turned to the boys, his feet planted apart, hands by his sides: let them look at him. The water falling on him, drilling his back and shoulders, made him feel powerful. 'Yeah, Taylor,' he said, tugging at his foreskin. 'Why ya asking? Did ya want me to come in your mouth?'

He could tell he had struck Taylor; the boy's eyes were immediately averted, he was floundering hopelessly for a comeback. Then Morello laughed. And Frank Torma was grinning, his eyes aglint.

'What are you laughing at?'

Morello shut up instantly at Taylor's words. Danny turned his back on them again but he had a grin on his face as big as the pool, the school, the universe. He was better than all of them. He was the best. He was the strongest.

•

What am I doing here?

The Monday of that week had been Valentine's Day, his first day at Cunts College. His mother had taken a day off work and

driven him all the way to the school gates. She'd also arranged to pick him up after practice at the new pool. 'Only today,' she'd warned him. 'From tomorrow you catch the bus and the train.'

They drove for what seemed like hours, down the spine of the city then across to the east, stuck in gridlocked traffic, inching ever closer, everything getting greener as they went, the houses getting bigger and further apart. He was sulking all the way, his face pressed against the car window. He didn't want to go to a new school. *It'll make you a better swimmer.* He didn't want to change to a new pool. *It'll make you a better swimmer.* He didn't want a new coach. *It'll make you a better swimmer.* His mother stopped outside the gate that didn't look like it belonged to a school, that should have belonged to a mansion from the movies, a mansion with a thousand rooms and with butlers and maids and ghosts. The walls were solid bluestone, the ironwork of the gate was black and shiny, the school emblem set on a plaque over the bars and covered in gold leaf: a lion rampant with a crown on its head, its paws resting on a crucifix; there was a burning torch and Latin words. Beyond the gate, the drive wound to a massive grey-stone building with two wings and a huge dome. It looked more like a temple, thought Danny, than a school building. Behind it the grounds stretched out endlessly, with no visible fence, no shops or warehouses or homes to be seen.

And then there were the boys. The boys in single file, the boys in pairs, the boys in threes and fours and fives, in the lavender-and-yellow striped jackets and the charcoal thick long pants that Danny had put on with great discomfort that morning, the striped tie that he didn't know how to knot, that his father had tried to knot for him last night, but hadn't been able to do it, had kept

knotting and unknotting, knotting and unknotting till he was cursing the school for taking his son, cursing the scholarship for making it possible, cursing his wife for wanting Danny to go there, cursing the tie, fucking bloody shit of a tie, and all the time Danny was thinking, He is cursing *me*, he is cursing my swimming. The knot in the tie was now pushing into his Adam's apple, it was the flat of a knife pushing against his throat. The crisp white shirt his mum said he had to wear, that had made his dad curse even more. 'Why new shirts, what was wrong with his old shirts, what the fuck's all this shit costing us?' 'Nothing!' his mother threw back, raising her voice, the danger there, and Danny had seen his father waver. 'It costs us nothing, the boy's on a scholarship,' to which his dad had replied, his own voice now lowered: 'I still don't see why it all has to be new. I don't know why his old school pants and shirts aren't good enough.'

Danny's mother retorted something under her breath, in a tone that indicated the subject was closed. She hadn't wanted Danny to hear it. But he had. 'I don't want him to be embarrassed, I don't want him to think he doesn't belong there.'

The gold leaf of the lion's crown and the crucifix and the burning flame. Cunts College. It's my first day at Cunts College, thought Danny.

His mother pushed him out of the car and he was trying to hide in the folds of the jacket which seemed heavy on his shoulders and the thick fabric of the trousers was chafing the skin between his thighs and behind his knees. He thought he must stink of chlorine, and that he must be walking like a retard, he was walking slowly up the drive that seemed too long and too wide, too grand for a school, all that bluestone and gravel,

all those statues and granite steps, the buildings reeking of the centuries, not looking like a school, no portables, no concrete sheeting, looking more like a cathedral, a cathedral where the Pope would live. Danny walked up one two three four five six seven steps, following the stream of boys through an arch and into an entrance hall as big as a house, taller than a house, lined with stained-glass windows that towered above him, smooth cream walls from which portraits of old men stared down at him, all moustaches and bald pates.

Boys were pushing past him and around him and in front of him and behind him, and they had the clearest skin he had ever seen and the best cut hair and the whitest and most perfect teeth. He felt dirty and ugly and he was conscious of the pimples on his brow, the chain of them on his chin, the ugly red welt of them along his neck. The boys were all shouting to one another, they all knew each other but no one knew him and he was pushed, pummelled, carried through another entrance of granite and bluestone and he was now on a clean cobblestone path that wound through an expanse of immaculately mowed lawn, perfectly level, perfectly green, not a trace of dry yellow in the grass. A gardener was working in a patch of gold and lavender flowers. The boys rushed past, ignoring him, but Danny halted, watching his wrinkled face and sunken cheeks, and Danny smiled. The man didn't return the smile; instead he looked down at the flowers and kept weeding around them. It was then that Danny realised that the flowers were the colours of the school uniform, that even the flowers here had an order. And it *was* beautiful and overwhelming because he had never before seen such turrets nor imagined such opulence and he wondered

again where the squat ugly portables were, the ones that were furnace-hot in summer, wondered where the dry piss-yellow ovals were, where the graffiti was. And then a bell rang, not a siren, not a drill in your ear but a real bell, like a church bell, and the boys all suddenly disappeared and it was just Danny there and the gardener who wouldn't look at him, who only looked down at the ground, at the yellow and purple flowers the colour of the school uniform and the school crest. The flowers that none of the boys noticed. And in that moment, Danny thought of how much the girls at his school—his old school, the real school, with the shitty portables, the ear-ripping electronic bell, the tags and graffiti on the ugly stretcher-brick walls—how much the girls would love to walk past a garden filled with such lovely flowers. But of course there were no girls here, no girls were allowed at this school.

That thought was terrifying. That thought made him want to run away.

It'll make you a better swimmer.

That's when he heard: 'Hey, you, what are you doing here?'

The first words anyone said to him at Cunts College: What are you doing here?

It wasn't a teacher who was asking the question. It was an older boy, flaxen-haired, clear-skinned except for a dark birthmark the size of a thumbprint on his left cheek. He marched across the yard to Danny.

'What house are you in?'

House? Danny stood there, confused, trying to decipher the question. He wasn't going to live here; there was no way he was going to stay in these grounds a minute longer than he needed

to. He knew that boys boarded here, slept here. He wasn't one of them, he would never be one of them.

'You're new, aren't you?'

Danny could answer that. 'Yes.'

'Name!'

'Danny.'

'Surname!'

'Kelly.'

'Right, Kelly, I'm Cosgrave. I'm a prefect.'

Cosgrave seemed to think this should mean something to Danny. He wasn't sure what it could mean. It meant that somehow this older youth was in charge, that somehow this older youth was perfect. Perfect golden hair, perfect clear skin.

Cosgrave sighed impatiently and pointed across the lawn to steps leading to the main building. 'March.'

Danny was conscious of Cosgrave in step behind him. He felt like he was in a war movie, that he was a new recruit. He was Private Daniel Kelly, Blue House.

All that first day it was as if he was slipping away from himself and becoming the uniform. He didn't know how to sit still behind the solid, freshly varnished wooden desks in the classroom, he didn't know what to do, what to say, when to look up, when to speak, when not to speak. He didn't trust himself in the large airy classrooms filled with equipment that all seemed to be new, books that seemed to have been opened for the first time, teachers who assumed they would be listened to and not interrupted. And it all smelled different: full of air, full of light, but also of locker rooms—the nitrous nutty smell of boys, mixed with the fetid whiff of sweat and the acrid stink

of deodorant. There was no scent of perfume, of hand cream, none of the sweetness and floral odours of girls. There was no sign of girls anywhere in this world.

With his tie so tight, the flat of a knife pressed against his throat so he couldn't breathe freely in those large and airy rooms, Danny was vanishing and all that was left behind was a uniform, an outline to be coloured in. He was becoming Kelly.

Kelly, are you following this?

Kelly, are you familiar with this?

Kelly, pay attention!

The day crawled slowly forward, the flat of a knife against his throat, and he feared he was to be trapped in that day forever, that it would be repeated endlessly and there would be no chance of ever finding the real Danny again. He wanted to be back with his old friends, to be with Boz and Shelley and Mia and Yianni and especially Demet; he ached for the chipped desks and mission-brown plastic seats of his old school. He missed the girls gossiping, the boys flicking paper pellets; he missed the noise, the jokes, the insults, the teasing. The day crept. He had disappeared into the day. He had vanished.

'Kelly!'

His name had been called, it had been repeated. He struggled to recognise it. A fat man was at the classroom door, pointing to him, a man in grey trackpants, a white shirt too small for his bulging belly, his brick-like chest. All the boys had turned around and were looking at Danny. The teacher was telling him to go.

'Come on!' The fat man was impatient. He had an accent that made syrup of every word. Danny followed him out to the corridor.

•

'I'm Frank Torma. I'm your swimming coach.'

Now he realised this was the man who had seen him swim at the meet in Bendigo, who had said to his mother, *Your son has talent*. This was the man who had said, *I can make your boy a champion.*

The swim centre perched on a rise from which there was a sweeping view of the whole city. The other boys, all chatting to each other, grabbed their bags and piled out of the van. As Danny walked behind them through the front doors of this new pool, he felt the waft of warm moist air, the sting of chlorine, and the day suddenly heaved off its sluggishness. The day began to move again. In the cold locker room Danny kicked off his shoes, stripped off the heavy jacket, the silken tie, the stiff new shirt, the itchy trousers, peeled off his underpants and socks. Naked, it felt as if his body could suddenly breathe again, and he was so eager to put on his bathers he almost fell over.

Torma was talking, he was pointing at various boys, but all Danny could see was the unreal blue of the pool, and he knew that any moment now he would be immersed in water, held and buoyed and merged with water.

Torma was saying something and Danny followed as the boys formed a line and he could see the pale skin of the boy in front of him, the spray of red freckles across his shoulder blades, and the first boy in line dived in and the next boy in line dived in and then the next and then the next, and the boy with the freckled shoulders was standing on the block and he seemed to be taking forever, Danny wanted to push him in, he couldn't

wait, couldn't wait, and then the boy dived and it was Danny on the block and he looked down at the water being churned by the line of swimmers and then Frank Torma gave the order and Danny dived and broke through the day.

In the water the day splintered and coursed, and he stroked, kicked, breathed to outrun it, to be faster than the day roaring to its conclusion, but the day won. The day always won. He couldn't believe that two hours were up, that he had to get out of the pool, that he had to go back with the others to the cold locker room and put on his clothes.

'How'd I do, Coach?' It was the tall, lean boy, the one whose skin was so white it was almost translucent: you could see the blue of the veins showing through.

'You did well, Taylor.'

The boy grinned and raised his arms into a triumphant boxer's stance.

Then Frank Torma pointed to Danny. 'But Kelly was faster.'

Taylor's arms dropped as if Danny or the Coach had just punched him.

As the boys filed out of the change rooms, showered and dressed, Danny heard his name being called. His mother had been on the benches, watching him. She almost tripped as she ran down the steps, and was out of breath when she got to him. Danny was mortified that she was there. He couldn't bear to look at her. He knew that all the boys were staring, of course they were: at her scalloped jet-black hair in a sixties style; at the beauty spot she accentuated with a black pencil every morning; at her tight low-necked scarlet dress; at the black pumps with the silver buckles. 'My wog Marilyn Monroe,' his dad called her, as he

serenaded her with Hank Williams or Sam Cooke, as he danced with her in their tiny kitchen. It always made Danny and Regan and Theo laugh. But not today. He didn't want her here today, his mother who looked like some vintage movie star. He knew that Taylor's mother would look nothing like her. Scooter's mum wouldn't, nor would Wilkinson. Their mums would look *normal*.

The Coach was the first to speak and he introduced her to the other boys. Danny still couldn't look at her. But he knew the boys would be leering. Why wouldn't they, at her fat tits on display like that? He walked away and she had to almost run to catch up with him. He'd been embarrassed by her before, of course he had, who wanted his mum or his dad around, who wasn't embarrassed by their mother or their old man? But he'd never been ashamed, he'd never wanted her to *fuck off* before.

He barely said a word to her all the way home. But she didn't notice; she kept banging on about how nice the boys seemed, how polite they were. 'They're real gentlemen, Danny,' she said, and he knew she was trying to convince herself as much as reassure him. He couldn't look at her, didn't turn away from the world outside the window. You're so transparent, he wanted to scream at her, You're so transparent and you were trying too hard, they could all see that.

Once he was in his room, he almost tore the uniform from his body. He pulled on a t-shirt and a pair of trackpants and stretched out on his bed. He wanted to stay in his room, to be safe in the room he knew, with the shelf of medals, the glow-in-the-dark poster of the solar system, the pictures of Michael Jordan and Kieren Perkins, the model of the Brontosaurus he had built in primary school, the boxed set of the *Back to the Future* trilogy

that Demet and Boz had given him last year for his thirteenth birthday. He didn't want to leave the room—it belonged to Danny, not to Kelly. But his mother was frying meatballs, and as the smell drifted down the hallway his stomach lurched. He was famished, he could have eaten it all, left nothing for his brother and sister, nothing for his mum and dad.

He ate dinner in silence.

It'll make you a better swimmer.

He spoke to Demet for an hour on the phone. *How was it?* I fucking hate it.

It'll make you a better swimmer.

He was so exhausted that he didn't even bother to brush his teeth. He fell asleep still in his t-shirt and trackpants.

•

Taylor came up to him at the lockers, just as the bell sounded for first period. 'Is your mum on TV?'

Danny slammed the locker door. 'She's a hairdresser.'

Taylor held up his hands in feigned apology. 'That's cool, Dino. She's amazing-looking, we thought maybe she was an actress or something.' He winked at Danny. 'Someone's got to cut hair.' Taylor had his hands in his pockets and he was whistling as he walked away.

That day and the day after that, and all the days following, Danny kept telling himself, *It'll make you a better swimmer.* He was not welcomed, and he was not wanted, but he could already tell that the Coach was indeed making him a better swimmer. Teaching him how to recognise his muscles, explaining exactly how to breathe, how to think ahead of the water. And that most

precious and unlikely piece of advice: Always give it back. The boys didn't want him there, not just Taylor and the swimmers, but all the boys at that fucking school with their perfect smiles and their perfect skin, none of them wanted him there. But the Coach did. The Coach thought he was the best, and that was all that mattered.

That weekend he swam, he swam in the morning and in the evening, and he caught up with Boz and Sava, he spent every spare moment he could hanging out with Demet. On Sunday evening, as he was leaving her house, she asked, 'Will you be alright at that school?'

'Sure,' he answered. 'I'll be fine.' *It will make me a better swimmer.*

•

The next day, back in the heavy uniform, that tie pushing against his throat, he was aware of some of the boys whispering behind him. He ignored them through the morning assembly, but when he walked down the corridor towards his locker, he could sense the smirks and the titters following him. He saw it as soon as he opened his locker door; it was lying on top of his books: the glossiness of the paper, the flash of pink nipple, of pubes and folds. Danny's breath stopped, his body tensed. He pulled out the folded papers and some pages fell to the ground.

All the boys around him are staring, jeering; a voice calls out, 'Dino, that's your mum, isn't it?' The centrefold is lying at his feet, and he can see a full-breasted, dark-skinned model, one hand on her dense black hair, the other at her crotch, a thin strip of dark pubic hair, her fingers spreading the lips of her vagina. He

can't bear the lascivious grin on the woman's face, the way she stares up at him. And then there are the words crudely scrawled in texta: DANNY KELLY'S PORN STAR MOTHER. He notices the words last and he notices the words first, all that matters are those words.

Why did she have to come and pick me up? That was his first thought; his second: I hate her. I fucking hate her.

And the tears come, he is aware of them a second too late, how they sting his eyelids.

Taylor has placed a hand on his shoulder, is saying, 'It's alright, mate, It's alright.' Trying not to break out in laughter.

Danny knows that Taylor has arranged it all.

He knew he should have just turned and decked him. But the boys had formed a half-circle around Taylor, staring and smirking. They were watching Danny Kelly crying.

He wanted to slaughter them all. And he promised himself that if he ever cried in front of them again he would never forgive himself. He would never let himself feel such shame again.

The shame twisted his heart and emptied his lungs. Danny wiped his eyes, picked up the pages, and ripped the paper into pieces.

Give it back, he told himself, give it back to them all.

And he would.

But he didn't say a word. He collected his books and headed off to the first class. One boy teased, 'Your mum in the movies, Dino?' Danny didn't say a word.

All that day, teachers spoke and lectured but Danny didn't hear a word. All that day, boys came up to him, behind him,

around him; they whispered, they jeered, they catcalled. Danny didn't say a word.

That afternoon, when he dived into the pool, that was when he finally spoke. He asked the water to lift him, to carry him, to avenge him. He made his muscles shape his fury, made every kick and stroke declare his hate. And the water obeyed; the water would give him his revenge. No one could beat him, not one of the pricks came close.

Regaining his breath and balance, he shivered at the end of the pool, listening to the Coach harangue the rest of the squad. Torma's face was flushed red, he lashed them with his insults: 'Not one of you is worth shit, the only one worth anything is Danny Kelly, the rest of you are born shit and will die shit, do you understand me?'

Danny made sure to look straight at each of them, at Scooter, at Wilco, at Morello and Fraser. He stared longest and hardest at Taylor. All the boys had to meet his gaze. *I'm the strongest, I'm the fastest, I'm the best.*

The boys skulked towards the change rooms. Danny walked in step with the Coach. He didn't have to say a word.

And he knew that hate was what he would use, what he would remember, what would make him a better swimmer.

After nearly two hours of fruitless searching through the department stores and boutiques off Buchanan Street, I buy my great-aunt Rosemary a scarf. I want to buy her something special as it has been eight months since I arrived in Glasgow and this is the first time I have visited her. But I don't know her at all; all I know of her are my grandad Bill's stories of when she was a little girl. It is only because I am running out of time that I grab the scarf, a royal-blue cashmere scarf. It could be from anywhere, and as I watch the shopgirl wrapping it, I am ashamed of what an ordinary, unimpressive gift it is. But walking out into the square, I tell myself scarves are always handy in Scotland.

Just as I have that thought, the parcel jammed under my arm, the rain pours down. There's no shelter to be had anywhere and I head towards Queen Street station, the rain saturating my jacket and soaking through to my skin, cursing the fact that in this city where it rains two hundred and bloody thirty-nine days of the year—Clyde declaims it proudly, as if the number is

a selling point, something to be proud of—there are no awnings. Not one. The shopkeepers, the councils, no one has thought of putting up shelter. They prefer it, I curse sourly, gives them one more bloody thing to moan about.

I dash into the station, cold and drenched and pissed off.

The man who sells me my ticket to Edinburgh is tight-lipped. He studiously avoids looking at me; the whole time he's talking to the young woman at the terminal next to him. She too doesn't glance my way, I might as well not be there. They are talking over each other, absent-mindedly checking paperwork; a queue is forming behind me and people are beginning to grumble.

I look at the man selling me the ticket and I see a stern, long-chinned Australian face.

I run to catch the train, slip through the turnstile past the elderly man checking the tickets; he too has a ruddy Australian face. I get on board, squeeze into my seat; a young man in a grey sweatshirt scowls at me over the lowered plastic table between us as he pulls in his feet to make room for mine. He turns away to look out the window, deliberately ignoring me. In his round wide eyes and pink snub nose I see the Australian face. Across the aisle from us, a young mother has a toddler on her lap, she is chatting away on her phone. There are four schoolkids in the seats behind me, talking and giggling. The mother, the schoolkids: in them I see the Australian face. Getting off at Waverley station, climbing the ramp to the bridge, passing people looking up at the timetable screens, passing rail workers smoking in groups, crossing with the crowd at Princes Street—all around me, wherever I look, all I seem to see is the Australian face.

I am walking the long high road to Leith, I crest a rise and I can see the Firth of Forth, the water sparkling in the clear winter light. I walk past betting shops and Pakistani grocery stores, past walk-up gymnasiums and pubs, past frowning boys in hoods masking their faces in shadows. And everywhere, the Australian face.

Clyde had said to me the other day, 'Pal, do you think you might be seeing the Australian face everywhere because you want to?' He's right, he caught me out.

Homesickness, I am discovering, is not a matter of climate or landscape; it does not descend on you from unfamiliar architecture. Homesickness hits hardest in the middle of a crowd in a large, alien city. Oh, how I miss the Australian face.

I get to the end of the walk and there is a sad collection of shopfronts with grimy windows, a group of young boys sitting on the dirty concrete rim of a dry fountain, an old woman in a red headscarf resolutely pushing a crammed trolley. I have no idea where to go. *Excuse me*, I say to the old woman, *do you know* . . . but she won't let me finish, she just shakes her head, *I don't know, I don't know*, so I let her pass and look across at the young boys, one of them standing, his jaw jutting out, his eyes fierce, looking as though he will growl, just like a dog, the group of them just like a pack of wild dogs. I keep walking, go through a dank concrete tunnel that stinks of urine and garbage, its walls black from the constant stream of water running down them. I am in a square surrounded on three sides by grey towers.

Heading towards me is a giant insect of a man, so thin that his hooded top and polyester trackpants flap against his spindly arms and legs. Walking next to him, trying to keep to his pace,

is a young woman, short, as thin as he is but with enormous breasts, her long hair falling limply over her shoulders. She's wearing an electric-blue tracksuit and is clutching what looks like a pink toy rabbit to her chest. As if she's trying to hide her tits, as if by holding the toy close to her she can fool the world into thinking she's a girl, not a woman. The couple are arguing, he's calling her names and she keeps saying, 'Just fucken shut up, it's all your fault, just fucken shut up.' As I near them, I ask if they know the address I am trying to find, and the man stops suddenly, as if I have clouted him. His head goes back and he says something in such a thick angry accent I'm not even sure it is English. The woman hasn't stopped walking, and she turns around and looks at me as if I am dog shit she's just stepped in. She doesn't have to speak, the scowl and the disgust in her eyes are enough. I know to keep on walking.

Then I hear, 'Aye, aye, aye,' and I turn around, the man is running back to me, though it is hardly a normal run, he is cradling one hand in the other, as if the effort of it all hurts, as if it is killing him. 'Aye aye aye,' he keeps repeating when he stops in front of me, not able to say another word, bent over, fighting for breath. He has a big smile on his face, he winks and says, You're an Aussie, eh, nah?' and I nod but he's already calling out to the young woman, who hasn't moved, who is standing with her feet apart, the pink rabbit dangling from her left hand, her other hand a fist on her hip, and he's calling out, 'Aye, aye, aye, he's an Aussie.' She's still scowling and doesn't respond, and he turns to me and starts giving directions, asking do I want them to walk me over there, and I say no, but thanks, mate, I make sure to say *mate* over and over, *thanks, mate*, and he winks again

and goes back to the woman. I can hear her berating him as I walk towards the grey towers and this time it is he who keeps interrupting her onslaught, with 'Just shut the fuck up, will ya, just shut the fuck up.'

•

My great-aunt Rosemary lives on the ground floor, in the shadow of the towers. On her door is a heavy brass knocker in the shape of a terrier's head. I bang it, once, twice, and I can hear a shuffle. A voice asks, solidly Glaswegian, 'Is that you, Danny?' and I answer yes and the door swings open. The smells of fried egg and locked-in bodies, confinement and home cooking, burnt toast and eau de cologne, all hit me at once. There, smiling up at me, a solid white-haired woman is holding out her arms, but I can't move; for a moment I think time and space have played a trick on me, I think I am about to be hugged by my granddad Bill. Then she says, 'Let me hold you, love, let me hold you,' and Granddad Bill is gone and this stranger has wrapped her arms around me and I smell chips and cheap scent but the hug she gives me is warm and trusting.

There is no light in the front room, so we sit in the kitchen, out the back. There are two chairs for the small kitchen table; a clump of folded knitting lies next to a small porcelain statuette of the Virgin and next to Her is a framed black and white photograph of Great-Aunt Rosemary on her wedding day. I take a seat and she shuffles painfully to the kettle, and I jump back up to help but she says, 'No bother, no bother,' and makes me tea and brings out a plate of biscuits. She sits across from

me, smiling, her eyes wet. A tea towel printed with images of Melbourne trams is pinned up over the stove; a toy baby koala peers down from a shelf crammed with cups and saucers. Below that are framed photographs of my granddad as a kid, a photo of my mother and father, of Regan and Theo, and then there is the photograph of me; I am skinny and pale with a toothy grin, in my black swimmers, clutching a ribbon, smiling like an idiot, ecstatic at my win. On a white doily next to the kettle is a snow globe on a red plastic base, Flinders Street station in miniature.

'Aye, Danny, aye, Danny,' Great-Aunt Rosemary keeps repeating, 'I can't believe we have finally met. Tell me,' she urges, 'tell me everything. Tell me about Bill and Irene, tell me about Neal and Stephanie.' She's lived in this flat for over forty-five years, came here as a new bride. But her accent still carries the thick chopping call of Glasgow. 'Tell me, Danny,' she says. 'Tell me everything.'

And I do: over another cup of tea, over the biscuits, over the ham and squishy cheese toasts she makes me as the sun moves across the sky and the kitchen begins to darken, I tell her all that I can. She gets up to switch on the light, saying, 'Go on, love, go on, I want to hear it all.'

So I do, I bring Australia forth in words, and it seems that I must be convincingly tracing the outlines and filling in the shades and colours of home because the tiny room seems warmer. I take off my jumper as the sharp smell of burnt toast seems to retreat, as if my stories carry with them the scent of silver-gum forests, of fish and chips on a stinking hot day. All around me are reminders of my home town, the Mother of God and the photographs watching me as I talk. And Great-Aunt Rosemary

smiles sadly and nods, and once, twice, takes hold of my hand, squeezes it, even with her arthritis, squeezes it tight and ignores the pain. And again it could be my granddad Bill who is here with me.

I feel as though I've talked for hours, more than I have since coming to Scotland. Suddenly I have no more words. She nods, and takes out a crumpled tissue from her sleeve, blows her nose and dabs at her eyes.

'I wanted to come to Australia,' she says quietly. 'But then Jimmy got sick. So there you are.' She is smiling again. 'Another cup of tea, love?'

It has started to rain again; the bits of sky visible between the towers appear heavy and sodden with black cloud. We sit in the quiet as the rain splatters against the window.

She pats my hand. 'I'm glad Bill's done so well, I am so glad. He did the right thing, leaving this cold hard place and going to Australia.' She shakes her head, as if the word conjures up enchantment. 'It gave him opportunity. Ach, I know my brother has worked hard, I know it, but he's raised two wonderful sons, he and Irene are happy together and he has a home he loves.' She can't stop nodding, as if in prayer.

And then she surprises me. 'You know he wanted to study?'

'No,' I say, 'I didn't know that.'

'He was a marvel at languages. There was a friend of his, in our tenement, he was Russian—oh, I've forgotten the wee one's name—and he and Bill used to play together all the time. Bill would just go on and on in Russian—he picked it up so quickly. He used to tell us that he was going to learn languages, he wanted to speak five or six, he did.'

'I had no idea. I haven't heard him speak anything but English.'

I say that and her face drops.

'Aye, our dad couldn't bear hearing Bill talk Russian. He'd shout at him, "Who do you think you are? What are you doing dreaming, lad? Our sort can't dream."'

My great-aunt again dabs at her eyes. I am silent. 'Ach, can you imagine that, Danny, can you imagine saying that to a wee child, that you're not allowed to dream? That was our world then.' She looks out the window to the darkness outside. 'No wonder Bill wanted to leave, no wonder he wanted to go as far away from here as he could.'

She surprises me again as her smile returns. 'And I suppose he did—you cannot get further than Australia, can you, lad?' She smiles at me, nodding; I know she wants me to agree. 'Can you, Danny? It must be such a lovely, lovely place.'

In all my time here, she's the first one to say that Australia seems like a lovely place. All of Clyde's friends and family, even those few who have travelled that distance, they say, 'It's alright,' they say, 'Of course, there's beauty there,' but they hold back; you know they have seen or heard of the ugliness and the insularity there. They have experienced the *farawayness* of it. I have learned to keep silent, not to berate them for their disregard of the Brits' role in the colonial tragedy of my country. I bite my tongue and hide my frustration at their tedious obsession with Scottish independence, as if *that* would make a difference to life in Glasgow, let alone to a single soul anywhere else in the world. I have learned how to nod and pretend that I agree. I am a stranger. It is my duty to be polite.

'Yeah,' I answer my great-aunt Rosemary, 'I think I miss it.'

She snorts, loudly. ''Course you do. It's your home.'

•

It is pitch-black when I get home. Clyde is on the phone but he interrupts the conversation—'Just a moment, Dan's home'—and kisses me on the lips and tousles the wet hair plastered flat to my brow. I go through our cluttered living room to the kitchen but he calls out, 'Hang on, Dad wants to talk to you.'

He puts the phone on speaker and Alexander's voice booms, 'Hello, mate, how are you?'

'I'm good, thanks, Alexander.'

'I'm glad, I'm glad.'

The conversation is awkward but not unpleasant: distaste for small talk, along with a general reticence and withdrawal from the world, is something Alexander and I share.

As always when talking to Alexander, I am disconcerted by the careful correctness of his accent. I had mistaken him for English on first meeting him and he had explained diffidently that it was a product of being sent off to an English public school as a young boy. I had expected everyone in the city to sound like my granddad Bill, but in those first few weeks I rarely heard that particular accent. Ruth, Clyde's mother, also has an accent I had never heard before, a soft and musical lilt that she explained came from growing up in the Borders. I have learned now to spot all the variations of the Glasgow accent among Clyde's friends and family and colleagues, but it is still a rare thing to meet anyone who sounds like my granddad Bill.

Except Great-Aunt Rosemary. I walk into the kitchen; a weariness has returned to my step. The landscape of accents has reminded me, once more, that I am a stranger here.

The laptop is on the table; beside it is an envelope from the Home Office, addressed to me, the Royal coat of arms in its top corner. I open the letter. Its language is brusque, officious and unemotional as it details in a few short sentences that my application for an extension to renew my working visa requires yet another interview. There are still concerns regarding my application for residency. I reread the two short paragraphs. The weariness now rises like a tide, I am flooded by it, the taste of it bile in my throat. I shudder at the thought of having to explain myself once again, to convince some suspicious bureaucrat that I am not dangerous, not a risk. I sit and angrily jab buttons on the laptop keyboard to log on to my hotmail. There is just junk and I am about to click off when I notice that one of the messages is from Theo.

It is very Theo, dry and concise. He informs me that Regan is pregnant, that we are going to be uncles but that he doesn't think much of the bloke and doesn't think he's going to be around for the baby. *Hope you are well, Dan, give my best to Clyde*. I hear Clyde saying goodbye to his father, and quickly crumple the Home Office letter into a ball; with the other hand I shut down the computer screen.

Clyde comes up behind me and starts massaging my shoulders, his chin rubbing my hair. I force myself not to move, willing myself not to give away that I don't want his hands near me. I use all the skills I learned from that long-ago otherworld

of swimming to be still and tame my breathing. I don't give anything away.

Clyde kisses the top of my head and leans against the window sill. 'What did the letter say?' His voice is cool, but I know he is desperately keen to hear me say that my visa is approved, that it won't be long before I am a resident.

I shrug. 'Nah, it was nothing, just some guff warning me to advise them if my details change.'

He says nothing, but the slight drop of his chin reveals his disappointment. I breathe, reach for his hand, squeeze it; then I have to let it go.

'Dad wants us to go with him and Wanda to the Greek Islands this summer. I said to him that you weren't into the water—that maybe we should think of somewhere else instead?'

There it is again, I think spitefully, that damn ease with which the Europeans collect the world. 'Yeah. I don't think it would be right for me to see Greece before Mum does.'

Clyde is surprised. I can see a belligerent set to his mouth. But all he says is, 'OK, we'll go when your mum and dad come over.'

I can't control my breathing, I can't settle it. I'm not sure where the fury and meanness are coming from. To bring me back, to stay the anxiety, I repeat silently, again and again, Clyde's too good for me, the man is too good for me.

'Sorry?'

He's said something and I haven't been listening.

'Wanda said that she might have a job for you. It's just for a few months, working with teenagers with acquired brain injuries; she thinks you'll be great.' Clyde is rushing through the words, and now I am conscious of *his* nervousness, *his* unease. 'She

knows the people who run it, she says, she's talked to them about you. They're fine that you've only got a temporary working visa.'

All Clyde's friends and family want to make it normal for him and me. They want to find me work, they want me to lead a *real* life.

'Sounds good.' I nod. 'I'll talk to her.' I know Clyde, I can tell there's something more he needs to say.

'There's just the wee matter of a police check. They'll need to do a check as you'll be working with kids.'

'Then I'm not going for it.'

Clyde tries to hold me. 'You'll be alright. Wanda can talk to them, it won't be a problem.'

'No.' I say it with such force that he steps back. 'I don't want Wanda to fucking know, I told you. I'm not doing it.'

Now it is Clyde who is slowing his breathing, reining in his words. I turn back to the laptop.

'OK, Dan. No bother.' He touches my shoulder again. I let him. 'How was Rosemary?'

I breathe out. 'She's a real nice lady. She wants to meet you.'

Clyde is smiling again. As he saunters out of the kitchen, he says over his shoulder, 'Of course, of course she does, she'll see me so often she'll get tired of me. Linda and Brendan have invited us for dinner, that OK?'

'Sure, that's fine,' I answer weakly.

He has turned on the telly in the living room; I can hear the news. I smooth out the paper bunched in my hand, reread the words and then screw it up even tighter than before. I throw it into the bin, and go into the next room to sit on the sofa next to Clyde.

The wind is howling outside, the rain incessant. I sit next to Clyde, who is happy and at rest in Glasgow, and I disappear into watching the television. And I know, of course I know, that it is time to go home.

Friday, 8 April 1994

The start of the day and the end of the day, they were all that mattered. The last thing Danny did every night was to set his alarm for four-thirty the following morning. He did this without fail, even though his body had no need of the alarm; he always woke up before it went off, but setting it was part of the routine. He always set it on buzz: he didn't want snatches of lyrics or insistent rhythms seeping into his brain and clouding his focus.

His mother was always up, with a small breakfast prepared for him. If his father was away driving, she would take him all the way into the city to the pool. 'I don't mind doing it,' she'd say to him. 'This early in the morning there's no traffic, it's a breeze.' When his father was at home, she would drive Danny to the station.

From six to eight a.m. he was in the water with the squad, Torma marching up and down the side of the pool, bellowing instructions and dishing out insults. And, very occasionally, words of praise. In those two hours, the water and Danny as one, he was flying.

As he would fly again after school, when training resumed. That was what was real, the substance and worth of the day; the rest was the in-between, a thicket of wasted time through which he had to struggle. The in-between was school.

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It was lunchtime and he was enduring the in-between by playing chess with Luke in the cool dark of the library. Danny's knees were pushed against the table as he rocked on the back legs of the tilted chair, one eye on the librarian sitting behind her desk. She kept looking over at him, her expression sour, suspicious. She didn't think he belonged here, he could tell; she thought he should be out on the ovals, or in the gym, not in *her* library, not in *her* space. And it was true: Danny's body jerked and fidgeted, stretched and twisted; his body could not be contained by the hushed space. The library was for kids like Luke, the kids who walked through the day from first bell to last always looking down. Danny never looked down: he made sure that he always looked every single one of them, students and teachers, straight in the eye. The way he was now returning the librarian's glare. The woman knew that he didn't belong there, that his rightful spaces were the ovals and the gym and the change rooms: there with the other boys who never looked down at the ground but who acted as if they owned it. He should have been there with them but they wouldn't allow it; when Danny approached a lunchtime football game or cricket practice, some silent code was always enacted and the other boys stopped their play and walked away. They had to put up with him in the pool, they *needed* him in the pool, but that was the only place they would

tolerate him. Stiff shit if the librarian didn't want him, there was no other place for him to go.

He held his gaze steady, and so did she; the battle was on. He forced a yawn, opening his mouth wide. Now she turned away, disgust on her face. He rocked back further and the chair overbalanced. He grabbed hold of the desk as the chair flew out from beneath him, the force of the jolt upsetting the chess pieces. The crash made everyone look up.

The librarian sprang out of her chair and rushed over, her face tight with anger. 'Kelly, you do that again and I'm going to ban you from here.'

'Sorry, sorry, Mrs Arnaud.' He picked up the chair and sat on it properly, wishing he wasn't blushing, wanting to tell her where to go. She walked back to her desk, shaking her head. *Bitch*, he muttered under his breath, just an expulsion of air, not daring to let the word travel.

Luke had carefully placed the pieces back on the board.

Danny tried to focus on his move. Luke would win—Luke always won—but Danny was trying hard to understand the possibilities of the game. He could see his bishop was in a position to take his opponent's knight, but before he could make that happen his bishop would be taken by one of Luke's pawns. And then? And then? That was what Luke had been trying to teach him over the last fortnight, to think ahead, two, three or even four moves ahead. But if he did and then Luke did something unexpected, his whole game fell apart.

The other boy was sitting patiently; Danny hadn't moved a piece in minutes. Screw it. He slid his bishop across the board

and took the black knight. Not missing a beat, Luke moved his rook across the board and swiped the white queen.

'Fuck!'

The librarian didn't even bother to whisper. She was on her feet and pointing straight at the library doors. 'Get out, Kelly. You are not allowed back for the rest of the day.'

He banged his chair on the carpet, slammed the chess board onto the desk as he put the pieces away, then slung his bag over his shoulder and marched towards the door.

'Excuse me.' She sounded appalled.

'What?'

Her expression darkened further.

'I mean, what have I done, Mrs Arnaud?'

'I am waiting for your apology.'

She wasn't going to let him go without it. He could refuse to acknowledge her—but then there would be detention, then there would be no swimming. There would be no chance of exhaling, of escaping the in-between.

'I'm sorry for swearing, Mrs Arnaud.'

She sat down without looking at him. He wished that the doors were the kind that could bang shut, but of course they were old-fashioned, expensive, with heavy wooden frames, and a spring attached that did not allow for slamming. He pushed through and was out in the open air.

'If you had moved your bishop in front of your king then I would have had both my queen and a rook in danger. I was so sure you were going to do that.'

Danny turned around, dumbfounded. The freaking chess game—he didn't give a toss about the freaking chess game. But

Luke was so serious, so intent on instruction, that Danny had to laugh. He shrugged. 'I'm not as smart as you.'

But I am faster, stronger, I am better.

'It's not necessarily about who is the smartest when it comes to chess, though of course it does require a certain intelligence.' Luke looked across the yard to a group of shouting boys on the football fields. 'Those idiots out there, for example. They'd be hopeless.' He sat down on one of the stone balustrades. 'You're smart but you don't have any patience.'

Danny wanted more than anything to be alone. But he couldn't shake Luke off. The smaller boy had attached himself to Danny; it had happened so quickly that he hadn't had time to think. He wasn't even sure when Luke became visible to him, emerged as a person out of the mass of other boys in his class, in his house. Or maybe it was assumed that they would be friends because they were both half and half. No one had said that to them, they hadn't said it to one another, but Luke's mother was Vietnamese and his father was Greek and that was some kind of relief to Danny—it meant he was not alone. Luke wasn't the only Asian boy in their class and Danny wasn't the only wog. But Ju and Leung avoided Luke and discouraged his attempts at friendship; and Tsitsas and De Bosco, like the older boy Morello on the swim squad, seemed to detest Danny. He'd heard Tsitsas sneer once, as Danny was walking past, 'That fag isn't even a true wog.' Danny had noticed from his first week that Luke was the boy who always sat alone at recess or lunch, who everyone felt free to pick on. It was because he was so small and slight, and because he didn't fit in with anyone. Cunts College made it clear that Luke Kazantsis didn't belong. So one day during his

second week, Danny sat next to Luke at lunch. And he was glad he did: Luke was smart and funny and not cruel. But now, every day, Luke was his shadow, convinced that he and Danny were best friends. It wasn't the case; he couldn't say it to the smaller boy, but it would never be the case. Demet was his best friend. You only had one best friend and his was Demet.

'What time is it?'

Luke glanced at his watch. I bet it's expensive, thought Danny. It was one of those things that no one at school talked about, but it was something everyone knew, who did and didn't have money.

'Twelve-thirty.'

'Let's go down to the river.'

The colour drained from Luke's face. 'We can't.'

'Suit yourself.' Danny turned away. No wonder the others teased Luke. He was so gutless. Danny started walking away, but soon he heard Luke's footsteps behind him. Danny turned around to smile, but he was also a little annoyed. There was no place to hide in the new school. There was no place to be alone.

A tall wire fence separated the school grounds from the bushland that led down to the river, but Danny knew exactly where he was going. He had discovered the path to the river during that first week at Cunts College. There were points all along the fence where it had been damaged and then repaired, but in a few spots the rusting wire had not been touched and part of the fencing had come away from the palings. Danny crouched down and effortlessly slipped under the loose wire netting. When he looked back, Luke was staring at him from the other side of the fence.

'You coming?'

Getting caught meant suspension. There were regular patrols of teachers and prefects. Getting caught was serious, and that was why Luke was hesitating. But then gingerly, fearful of catching his uniform on the rusting wire, Luke crawled under the fence. Danny pounded him playfully on the back and Luke beamed up at him. He'll do anything I say, thought Danny. He thinks I'm a hero.

•

Danny sat on his haunches, looking out at the river. The treacly brown water was flowing gently, and in the blue-grey canopy of the silver gums he could hear the cackling of magpies; on the opposite bank he spotted the rainbow-coloured plumage of two lorikeets in the trees. He could not believe the beauty of the place, how lush and green it was. The parks near his house were not like this; they were dry, parched.

'We should get back.' Luke was twitching behind him. Danny knew he would be looking at his watch, counting down the seconds. Danny didn't want to move, didn't want to leave the peace of the water and trees and birdsong.

'I can't hear anything from the ovals,' Luke fretted. 'The bell will have rung. We have to go, we have to go *now*.'

Stop your whingeing, stop your bloody whingeing. In one swift movement, Danny was on his feet and running through the bushes, through the long grass. He slipped quickly through the loose netting, knowing Luke would be struggling to follow, would be carefully trying to get under the wire fence without damaging his jacket or his trousers, that he would be close to crying because he didn't want to get into trouble, didn't want

to smear his spotless record. He was a wimp, a dick and a wimp. Let them give Danny detention, let them take swimming practice away from him: he'd go to the Coburg pool instead, go back to his old pool, he didn't need them. He didn't need them at all.

He could hear Luke panting behind him. Friendless Luke; a boy who had no one but Danny.

Danny stopped and turned around, relenting. 'It's OK, mate, tell them I was sick and you were looking after me. You're not going to get into trouble.'

Luke nodded, the relief clear on his face.

•

When they cautiously opened the door to their English class, they could immediately tell that something had happened to upset the inflexible rules and rhythm of the day. Mr Gilbert turned to them, barked, 'Why are you late?' but he didn't even wait for their answer. They took their seats and looked around. The boys were obviously agitated. Danny leaned across and whispered to Sullivan, 'What's happened?'

'Kurt Cobain shot himself. He's dead.' Sullivan's tone was hushed, solemn.

Danny's first thought was, It somehow all makes sense, and his next thought was, I need to speak to Demet.

Mr Gilbert had thrown out the lesson for the day, and was asking them about Cobain and Nirvana and what their music meant to them. The boys were throwing themselves into the conversation, some responses measured, some showing care and even passion. It was all so civilised, so articulate, that Danny wanted to scream at them to shut up shut up shut up. He didn't

want to reveal to them how he felt, how deeply gutted he was, how his breath itself felt stolen—he was not going to give them that, he was not going to let them see into him. He had to be with Demet. She would need him, she would be inconsolable.

Shut up shut up shut up. He didn't want to hear those rich kids babble, he didn't give a toss what they thought. The whole time Mr Gilbert was going on about music and art and suicide and death and the importance of talking to someone and not bottling up your feelings and remembering where he was when John Lennon was shot, and all Danny wanted was for the teacher, for the boys, for all of them to shut up shut up shut up, until Mr Gilbert turned to him and asked, 'Danny, how do you feel?'

Mr Gilbert always used their first names, but today he wished Mr Gilbert would call him Kelly—he didn't want to like Mr Gilbert today, he wanted to hate him—and so when he sullenly looked up and saw all the boys waiting, even Luke who didn't know shit about music but looked sad because he knew that Danny loved Nirvana, Danny shrugged and said flatly, 'I don't really care.'

Behind him Taylor was laughing. Danny didn't turn around.

'He's a homie, sir,' he heard Taylor say, and though he couldn't see it he knew Taylor would have thrown a mocking, deliberately clumsy gangsta move. 'You only listen to rap and doof-doof, don't you, Dino? Do you even know who Kurt Cobain was?'

'*Doof doof doof doof doof doof.*' Tsitsas started the chant.

'*Doof doof doof doof doof doof.*' The rest of the boys picked it up.

Until Mr Gilbert snapped, 'Quiet!' And because this was not Danny's real school, because of the kind of school it was, all

the boys fell instantly silent. Mr Gilbert was looking straight at him—Mr Gilbert was kind, he was a good man—and he said, 'Of course you know who Kurt Cobain is, don't you, Danny?'

And Danny answered, 'Yeah, he was a whingeing white cunt.'

He could feel the shock of it, the word had power and velocity, a gust hurtling across the room. The teacher just looked at him, and Danny knew that he had wounded him, knew that the singer had meant something to him, just as he did to Demet, just as he did to Danny himself, but he didn't know how to let the man know and still keep it from the other boys. So he didn't say a thing, he didn't let on, couldn't let on. This was how he was better than them, how he was harder than them, how he was stronger.

'If I ever hear you use that word again, you will never be allowed back in my class.' Mr Gilbert's eyes narrowed, his face pinched. His voice was hoarse from reining in his fury. 'That is a foul and hateful word. That is a word that only foul and hateful people use.'

No one made a sound.

'Do you understand, Kelly?'

'Yeah.'

'Excuse *me*?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You could be suspended for using such a word. Worse!' Mr Gilbert bellowed and it made Danny jump. It made them all jump.

'But these are unusual circumstances.' The man's voice softened. 'Tonight you're back here, after final period. You have detention.'

Taylor couldn't help himself, he let out a gleeful whoop.

'And you, quiet!'

No one made a sound.

'OK, Mr Kelly here thinks Kurt Cobain was a whinger. Does anyone else agree?'

More noise. He would not listen, he would not care, he would not give them anything. Instead he imagined himself back at the river, with the sounds of the birds, the green of the foliage. He thought of water and found the stillness, and their noise dropped away so it was a shock when the bell rang. He slammed back his chair and was the first out the door.

•

During the afternoon recess he had to find Frank Torma and tell him he had detention, that he wouldn't be able to train that afternoon. The Coach was supervising a footy game being played by the Year Sevens.

'What did you do?'

'I swore.'

'To who?'

'Mr Gilbert.'

Torma glared at him. 'You're an idiot.' The man turned away, ignoring him, watching a small but fearless kid steal the ball and run away from the pack, bouncing it once, twice, three times, kicking it off the left foot. The ball climbed, curved, and just hit the goalpost.

'Why are you still standing here?'

'I know I can't train with the others tonight, but I'm going to the pool near home, I'll go straight after—'

'Go away.' The Coach dismissed him with an abrupt gesture.

'With me, you are training, on your own you are just paddling like a puppy.'

And Danny knew the truth of that: without Torma, without his training, he was stuck in the in-between.

•

The class straight after the break was phys ed. And Danny knew that the boys were out to get him, he could sense it. The air was thick, it carried sound and heat, an electric current transmitted from boy to boy, a living, writhing energy. It was there in the smirk on Sullivan's face, in the slow and careful way Taylor undressed next to him, as if preparing for combat: neatly hanging up his shirt, his tie, folding his trousers. Danny didn't dare look at the other boys as he slipped quickly into his sports gear. The challenge was not only in the air: the crowing magpies announced that Danny Kelly was going to get it; the threat was there in the slow measured tread of the boys around him.

Mr Oldfield ordered them to run around the oval three times, and as Danny set off he found that Sullivan and Tsitsas were keeping pace with him, all the while chanting, making it a beat: '*Doof. Doof. Doof. Doof.*'

When the last boy had finished, Mr Oldfield chose Taylor to captain one team, and Sullivan the other. The two captains began to alternately choose from the crowd of boys and Danny knew exactly what was coming. He looked straight ahead, straight at Taylor, who even while calling out names kept his cool grey eyes focused on Danny. The crowd thinned until it was just Danny and Luke left.

It was Taylor's turn to choose. His eyes, unwavering, were still locked on Danny. 'Kelly, get over here.'

Danny walked to the group. His heart was winter. He had been steeling himself, from the change rooms to the run, to the picking of the teams. But he was not prepared for this. Now he knew what the air around him was whispering.

They were going to get Luke.

At a certain moment, as a group of boys were battling in a scrum and all attention was on who would emerge with the ball, Taylor let out a cry and fell to the ground. Mr Oldfield blew his whistle, the boys stopped their game, and the teacher ran over to Taylor. The smiles exchanged between Tsitsas and Sullivan said it had all been prearranged. The teacher massaged Taylor's right calf, asked the boy if he was alright, and Taylor answered, 'I think I've twisted it, sir.'

The teacher got to his feet and called out to the boys, 'I'm going to take Taylor to the sickbay. The rest of you get on with the game.'

'Right,' Tsitsas ordered, 'I'm captain now.' Tsitsas stood a head taller than any other boy, and his frame was muscular and bullish. No one was going to challenge his claim to the captaincy.

Danny didn't care about the game, didn't give a shit about winning. But whatever the play, he wasn't going to move away from Luke.

Sullivan from midfield had the ball, and though it made sense to go forward, to run or kick it to the forward line, he sent the ball straight to the outer, straight to Luke. And the smaller boy, his eyes half closed, ran full pelt towards the ball, afraid of catching it and even more afraid of missing it. Danny followed but the boy

was fast, desperate to claim the mark and prove himself to all of them. The call from Tsitsas sounded like a shriek from one of the magpies circling above them, and just as the ball landed in Luke's open arms, four boys were leaping, slamming into him, dropping on him. Danny ran into the tangle of bodies, trying to get to his friend, but all he could see was the boys crushing Luke; he could see that Tsitsas was lying flat over the smaller boy and was pushing down on the back of Luke's head, forcing his face into the damp earth, one elbow anchoring the nape of Luke's neck. Danny was biting and kicking and shoving and scratching, boys were yelling at him, he thought it was Sullivan screaming, 'You don't bite, you don't bite, that isn't fair', but Danny was kicking and shoving, biting and scratching, until it was just him and Luke and Tsitsas. He threw himself at Tsitsas, wrenched him off the ground in a headlock with the thought that he could snap his neck, and he could hear Luke coughing and retching, and he raised a fist to smash Tsitsas when he felt arms tight around him and then it was him being lifted off the ground and him in a headlock and Tsitsas had got to his feet and his hands had formed fists and he started pummelling Danny, punching him again and again in his stomach, his flank. Danny convulsed with the pain, unable to breathe, but his first thought was, Please don't let him crack a rib, please don't let him do anything that will stop me swimming, and his second thought was that whatever happened, no matter how much it hurt, he would not cry, he would never let himself cry in front of them again, and so every punch took away his breath but he didn't look down, he looked straight at Tsitsas, he would not cry.

Tsitsas's arms dropped to his side. His breathing was ragged.

Whoever was holding him let go of Danny. He staggered but stayed on his feet.

Tsitsas pointed down at Luke, his face caked in dirt, his tears two white rivulets on his cheeks. 'Right, faggot,' he said, 'why don't you look after your boyfriend?'

Danny watched Tsitsas walk away, flexing his muscles, lifting his arms in a champion's pose. And that was when Danny started running, running so hard he didn't think his feet were touching the ground, and Sullivan yelled, 'Tsitsas, watch out!' Tsitsas turned, a bemused sneer on his handsome chubby face, and he put up his hands as if to indicate he was untouchable, and that was when Danny crashed in and headbutted him. There was the sound of bone against bone. And Danny felt no pain, there were no stars or dizziness. So he did it again. Once more the shock of impact, a wet, sharp sound, and Tsitsas stumbled, blood on his shirt, a red mess at his nose. His knees buckled and he fell.

Then Mr Oldfield came running from the other side of the ground, bearing down on Danny. Behind him, Taylor was surveying the field, his gaze coming to rest on Danny too.

'Kelly,' Mr Oldfield called out, 'what happened?'

But it was Sullivan who answered. 'They were contesting a mark, sir, and Kelly accidentally headbutted Tsitsas.'

The frowning teacher squatted and carefully examined Tsitsas's bleeding nose. 'Is that what happened, son?'

The boy's ashamed assent was muffled.

The teacher helped him to his feet and ordered everyone to the change rooms. Danny waited for Luke, who was still distressed, rubbing the dirt off his face and neck and asking anxiously if Danny was OK.

Luke's mouth fell open in shock when his friend started laughing, a rich, crazy cackle as he watched the other boys trudge away, their heads down. Taylor kept turning back to look at him, and Danny wiped his mouth; his fingers were stained with Tsitsas's blood. He couldn't stop laughing, because at his old school he would have been beaten to a pulp by then, he'd have been on the ground, teacher or no teacher, he would have been belted, but this wasn't his old school, this was Cunts College, and he was the strongest and the fastest and the best. The magpies were wheeling above him and he felt as if he was one of them, among the silver gums, gliding over water.

'I'm OK,' he said, slapping Luke on the back, forcing his own breathing to slow, wiping more blood from his chin. 'I'm not hurt at all.'

In the change rooms, no one would look at him. But no one dared to mock him, no one dared say anything to him. He could just hear the murmurings behind him and around him, sensed the whisper first taking shape in Luke's astonished and admiring stare. He could hear the words: 'Jesus, that Danny Kelly,' they whispered, 'that Danny Kelly. He's a psycho.'

The day that Kurt Cobain died, that was the day Danny Kelly became a psycho.

•

'Where are you?'

'I just got home.'

'Come over.'

'I have to go swimming first.'

Demet groaned, then there was fury and pain in her voice. 'Fuck your swimming, I need you now.'

But he had to be in water, he needed to be in water. 'I'll come straight after training, promise.'

Silence. He waited. She would understand, she had to understand.

'Nine-thirty, you arsehole, and don't you dare be late.' She slammed down the phone.

It rang again and he grabbed the receiver. 'Dem?'

It was his mum. She had taken Regan and Theo to the pub for fish and chips; he could hear orders being called out in the background.

'I'm sorry, Danny,' she said over the noise. 'You know, about Kurt Cobain.'

'Yeah, I know.'

'We'll be home in an hour.'

'I have to train at Coburg tonight.'

'Why?'

He should have lied. But she would catch him out in a lie. She always did.

'I got detention.'

She swore in Greek. 'You have to be more careful, Danny. There are rules you have to obey to stay on the scholarship.'

'It was nothing, I forgot about some maths homework I was meant to hand in.'

'What time will you be home? I was going to pick up some Chinese for you.'

'I'm going over to Dem's.'

'That's good, I'm sure Seda will feed you well.'

'OK.'

But his mum wouldn't hang up, his mum wouldn't let him go. 'Danny?'

'What?'

'I'm really sorry,' she said once more.

•

He was unsettled by how strange it felt to climb the concrete steps to the entrance of the Coburg pool. He had swum there for four years, knew all the staff, had won competitions in that pool. But he had not returned since that first day at Cunts College, and it felt like going back to school after the long summer holidays. The guy at the front counter was new and Danny was pathetically glad about that, didn't want to talk to anyone, just wanted to get in the water. The after-school training squads had finished and it was just him and the older, serious swimmers.

The first dive into the water made his heart leap. Stroke, kick, stroke, breathe, kick, stroke, kick, stroke, breathe, kick. He slammed down the pool, the water slipping past him, cradling him, holding him. Stroke, kick, stroke, breathe, kick. He touched the tiles and effortlessly propelled himself back down the lane. There was a man in front of him and Danny had to slow his pace. He needed a lane to himself. Stroke, kick, stroke, breathe, kick. There was a slight pull on his side every time he raised his left arm, a dull tension, and he guessed that one of Tsitsas's punches must have bruised his ribs. It wasn't painful but he couldn't shake his awareness of it; it kept pace with him and the water, and he wished he was at training—the Coach would know exactly what he should do. He lessened the force of his

stroke, maintaining the power of his kick and slowing his breathing, and, minutely, reduced his pace. The man in front was resting against the tiles, allowing Danny to cut in front. Giving the man a nod as he entered his turn, Danny kicked off, but in overcompensating for his injury he rolled to his right side and reeled clumsily, rising for breath off-kilter, all his weight on his left; stroke, kick, he balanced himself, felt the water holding him. Stroke, kick, stroke, breathe, kick. He slowed his pace, for one lap, for two, then turned and belted through the water, thrashing it, and he would not think about the soreness in his side, and then it came, the sense that he was no longer conscious of the individual parts of his body, not his arms or legs or the muscles on his left side, the muscles on his right, and there it was, that moment: it came, the stillness came, and he was the water. His thoughts were suspended, floating free, and then he was thinking of the musician's widow, seeing her face. One day he would be a famous swimmer and he would meet her at a party and he would tell her how much it meant to him, the music she wrote and the music she sang, her music and her husband's, the pain he sang. Stroke, kick, stroke, breathe, kick; the thoughts were no longer separate from the movements of his body. *All denial. All denial. I've made my bed I'll lie in it, I've made my bed, I'll die in it*. She would ask him to sit with her, tell him how she'd watched him win his gold medals at the Sydney Olympics, when all of Australia and all of the world was watching him and cheering him and he won the four hundred metre freestyle and then took the fifteen hundred metre freestyle and the cheering was so loud that it flooded the arena, flooded the country, flooded the world. And there would be a national

holiday and he would ride through Melbourne with the prime minister and everyone would be cheering him, except Taylor and Scooter and Wilco and Morello and Fraser, except Tsitsas and Sullivan—they wouldn't be there, they wouldn't have dared show their faces, because they knew he was better and harder and stronger and braver and faster.

Danny's hand touched tile and he set down his feet, came to, looking over the water. There was no one else in the lane, there was only one other lonely swimmer in the pool, a woman whose dogged strokes hardly unsettled the surface. There was a tightness in Danny's belly, a hole there, a monstrous hunger that he needed to feed. He was red all over, his upper body free of the water; he was shaking uncontrollably, feverishly.

He looked up at the clock. It was eight-forty: he had not stopped for an hour and a half. *Nine-thirty, you arsehole, and don't you dare be late*. He jumped out of the pool, the cold now painful, grabbed his towel and rushed to the showers. He was the only one in there and allowed himself just enough water to rinse off the chlorine, enough soap to try to mask the smell of it. His skin was still damp as he pulled on his clothes and grabbed his bag and ran.

It was nearly nine o'clock. He pounded the hard cold ground, he needed to ride the air as he rode the water, and he braved the steady stream of traffic on Sydney Road, weaving through the cars, ignoring the horns. He was out of breath and in pain, now he could feel the ache where the punches had landed; tomorrow he would have to ask the Coach what to do about it. He tried not to hit the asphalt so hard; he couldn't trip, he couldn't twist or strain a muscle or tendon, but even more importantly he

couldn't be late, he must not be late for Demet. The wind whipped around him and behind him but he was ahead of the wind, he had outrun the wind, and he pounded down Murray Street and he was at the Celikoglus' house and he was pressing the buzzer, and when Mr Celikoglu opened the door Danny couldn't even speak, the sweat was pouring off him, he was wet and in pain. But he was on time. The world was spinning but he was on time.

Mr Celikoglu said, 'Danny, are you alright?' but he couldn't answer, his breathing was rasping and it hurt but that didn't matter because he was there on time, and then Demet came out of her bedroom and she was rushing down the hall and almost knocked her father out of the way as she threw her arms around Danny, holding him so tight that now he really couldn't breathe, but it didn't matter, he was home. Demet's arms were around him, he was home.

She wanted to escape with him straight into her bedroom but her mother wouldn't let her. Mrs Celikoglu insisted that Danny had to eat, and he was grateful for that; he was famished. He sat at the small round table in their kitchen. There were green beans in a yogurt sauce, grilled lamb chops, toasted pita bread and olives and salad, and within minutes he had cleared the plate. He had a milk of grease on his lips as he wolfed down the last of the pita bread, and after swallowing it, he let out a burp.

'Excuse me,' he said, wincing.

'Listen to you,' Demet taunted. '*Excuse me*.' She made it sound so prissy. She folded her arms and leaned back in her seat. 'Do you realise your voice is changing?'

'What are you talking about? Leave the boy alone.'

Demet ignored her father. The look she threw Danny was

contemptuous. 'Your voice is so gay and polite since you started at that new school.'

Mrs Celikoglu spoke sharply in Turkish.

Demet rocked in her chair, looking at Danny. 'Mum, it's true. His voice has changed.'

It was *not* true. His voice was the same, he was the same; Cunts College would never change him.

Demet got up and grabbed his hand. 'Come on, come to my room.'

'Demet.' Mr Celikoglu's voice was quiet, he was tapping a cigarette on the table. 'Please, no more crying.'

'Fuck you!' It horrified Danny how much spite was contained in her words. He saw the flare of anger on the man's craggy thin face, and then it settled into weary disbelief.

'Cry, cry, cry, for some foolish rich rock star. Cry your heart out for the idiot who leaves a widow and a child behind.'

'Shh, Ohman,' counselled his wife. The man slammed his hand on the table, but he said nothing more.

•

Demet did cry. She sat on the floor and began a long steady lamentation. Danny knelt beside her, holding her shaking body, his chin pressed down on her thick matted hair. But he was aware that part of her outburst was aimed at defying her father. He wouldn't dare say it but there was something rehearsed about her bawling. He knew Dem too well. She was crying to punish her father as much as she was crying for Kurt Cobain. She pulled away from him. Her eyes were red, her face blotchy, and a line of snot hung from her nose. Danny wiped it clean, then rubbed

the mucus off his fingers onto his trackpants. That was how they were, he thought, they would never shrink from doing anything for one another.

Demet's crying had eased but she couldn't yet talk. She tried to form words but they stalled, fell back into her throat. The two of them sat there, up close to each other, their backs now against the bed, feet outstretched, Demet playing with a frayed thread on the collar of Danny's t-shirt. He laced his arm through hers.

'You smell of chlorine.'

Danny exhaled, relieved. Her voice sounded normal, or near enough. 'I had a really quick shower, I didn't want to be late.'

'Good,' she sniffed, still pulling the thread, loosening it further.

'Do you want me to put some music on?'

'Nah,' she said, shaking her head vigorously. 'I can't bear any music today.'

Something had changed in her room—she had taken down all her old posters of the Carlton Football Club. Now there was only a small photograph of a sullen Kurt Cobain taped to her bedroom mirror, an advertisement for Hole's *Pretty on the Inside* ripped from a magazine and glued to the wall; pinned next to it was the sleeve for Nirvana's *Bleach*. He could see the dust lines on the wall from where the football posters used to be. He didn't understand it and didn't like it but he wouldn't mention it. He knew what she would say: 'You can't talk to me about change—you've gone off to Cunts College and left me behind.' So he just kept hold of her arm.

Then she wriggled away and sat cross-legged across from him, taking his hand. Her palm was sweaty, it felt soapy and sticky, but he couldn't let go.

'I miss you.' She made it a wail.

'I miss you too.'

Their parents joked about it, teased them both about it, how Demet and Danny would get married one day. Demet and Danny belonged together. Not that they were boyfriend and girlfriend, nothing as frivolous as that; he couldn't imagine kissing Demet, even if they were old enough to do *that*. But he knew that they were *right*, everyone knew that about them. He would look after Demet forever and she would always look after him. There had to be a word beyond marriage, he thought, there had to be a word that would fit.

'Have you got a new best friend?' Eyeing him suspiciously, she pulled her hand away as she asked the question.

'Nah, 'course not.' He wanted to respond: And you? She'd been at Mia's, after all, when he'd spoken to her earlier. He couldn't believe how ugly and mean and awful the thought felt. But she rested her head on his shoulder again and all the awfulness just went.

'When did you find out? About Cobain . . . offing himself?' She meant to sound nonchalant, but she hesitated and stumbled over the word.

'At school, one of the guys told me.' Sullivan: his voice hushed, fearful.

'Like they care.'

'They do. Everyone was really upset.'

Her eyes rolled. She didn't believe him and he knew that for Demet those boys he was at school with would never be flesh, would never be real—would always be alien.

'So they were upset, were they?' Her eyes narrowed. 'You making friends there, are you?'

She was jealous. It was sweet that she was jealous, it warmed him. He would have liked to tell her about Luke, who read books and played chess; he would have liked to tell her about how he had defended him. But he knew not to say anything today.

'Nah,' he said, 'I've got no friends there.'

She was nodding as if to music in her head. He wondered if she was even listening to him.

'I beat the shit out of this arrogant wog today, this total Greek dickhead.'

Demet snorted. 'You? That proves what pussies they must be at that school. Man, *I* can beat you up.' Then she frowned. 'So there are other wogs at Cunts College?'

'Yeah, but you know, Templestowe wogs, with trust funds and beach houses in Lorne.'

'Yuck,' she said dismissively. 'They are the *worst* kind of wog.'

He giggled at her exaggerated disgust. She was still glowering, but his giggling started her off and then they were both laughing so hard that tears were forming, so hard that it aggravated the pain in his ribs. But they couldn't stop laughing and that was when Demet said, her eyes opening wide, 'Can you see it, Danny, can you see it?' She was pointing to the space between them, then drew a line from his stomach to hers. 'See, Danny, can you see it? There's this light there, look, it's connecting us! Oh wow, Danny, can you see it?'

He understood it was the exhaustion and the sadness of the day. He had seen her etch the line in the air. But there was no

light. 'Yes,' he lied. 'I see it.' He wanted to see it. He wanted it to be there.

Demet clapped her hands. 'We are soul twins!' Her voice was full of joy. 'That means we are soul twins forever. That means we'll be best friends in the next life and the life after that.'

•

Mr Celikoglu knocked on the door before coming in. He asked his daughter if she was alright but Demet just snarled and looked away. 'Danny,' the man said, 'it's nearly eleven o'clock. It's time to go home.'

'Let him stay.'

'No.' Her father was firm. 'The boy has practice in the morning.'

Danny was grateful that he understood that swimming came first. Demet shrugged.

'See ya,' he said.

'See ya,' she answered, not lifting her head. But as he was walking out she added, 'I love ya, faggot.'

'I love you, ho,' he responded.

'Call me tomorrow?'

'Straight after training,' he promised.

The man and the boy stood at the front door. Mr Celikoglu was wearing a white singlet and blue pyjama bottoms. 'I'll drive you home, wait till I change.'

Danny shook his head. 'Please, no, it's not far. I'll be fine.'

The man reached out and lightly pinched Danny's nose, gently cradling his cheek, as he had done since Danny was a toddler. 'Say hello to Neal and Stephanie. And thank you for helping Demet.'

•

The night was chilly and Danny wished he had brought a jacket. He had to hold himself in tight to ward off the cold.

There was not a soul about. It was just him and the hum of the streetlight above, the sound of traffic off Murray Road. But a song was running insistently through his head. It wasn't Nirvana and it wasn't hip-hop or techno, not a golden oldie or one of his parents' rock 'n' roller songs. He couldn't quite grab at the music, couldn't quite recognise it, but he knew it was there, just above him. He tried to snatch the song out of the air, to recall a lyric, a rhyme, but it was no use. He couldn't remember the words to the song at all.

At the end of the day, at the other end of the in-between, he hummed that song all the way home.

'Have you applied for the fucken visa yet?'

I have to tell him. This is the moment I have to tell him. 'I haven't had time.'

Clyde looks at me like I am an idiot, as if he is wondering how he could have ever got involved with such a fool. *This is when I have to tell him.*

'Dan, the tickets are booked. We need to get ready. Time's running out, pal.'

'I know.'

'Then fucken make the appointment, man. I'm sick of this.'

He charges off to the bedroom. I can hear his shoes bang against the wall as he kicks them off. This is when I have to tell him. I walk into the room and he is lying on the bed, his eyes closed, his tie unloosened. He senses that I have come in and opens his eyes. They are wary, unwelcoming. I sit down next to him on the bed. He doesn't move.

'How was work?'

He doesn't respond.

I blather on, asking after his colleagues, trying to remember the projects he is working on, what campaign he has just finished, which one he has just begun. I babble and stumble until he groans and says, 'Just shut it, just shut it, I don't want to talk about my work.'

So I shut it, and I don't move and I don't say a thing.

'How was your day?'

Is he relenting? Is he letting me in?

'I had to clean up the cache on Stanley's computer, had to erase what seemed like a million photos of tits. No wonder there was no speed on the bloody thing. I think all he does all day is look at porn and wank.'

'What else is he gonna do? The man will never be well again.'

Is he baiting me? I try not to get angry, try to let it go. There is a cruelty buried deep in Clyde. It isn't hot and spiteful, it is rational and cold. He thinks that men like Stanley, the men I work with, are broken and cannot be fixed, that it would have been better if Stanley had died in the car crash. He doesn't want them in our home, he doesn't want to think about them. 'I couldn't live with brain damage,' is what he claims. 'I couldn't be half a man.' Somewhere deep inside him, he is cold. I am scared that he is too unforgiving.

This is when I have to tell him.

'I'll make that appointment tomorrow.'

'Good.' He still won't concede. He wants me to do the work, he wants me to beg. I can't, because if I start to apologise I won't be able to stop. I am sorry for being lazy, I am sorry for being

deceitful, I am sorry for not being good enough brave enough tough enough.

This is when I have to tell him.

'I'm sorry.'

His hand moves, I feel his weight shift behind me; he is gently rubbing the small of my back. 'I don't think you want to move to Scotland, pal. I think that's why you aren't doing anything about organising the visa.'

This is when I have to tell him.

He stops massaging my back. 'Is that it, Dan?'

I don't have to tell him.

He is sitting upright now, our shoulders are touching. I can smell the stale odour of the office on him and traces of the takeaway he had for lunch.

He sighs, a deep unhappy sound, and it comes from somewhere beyond the callousness and the aloofness. It is where the tenderness is, where I will find the staunchness, where he will do anything for me. He's scared I don't want to go and I am scared that I *can't* go. I am so terrified I can't bring myself to say anything.

'I guess that means you don't want to go,' he says frostily.

This is when I have to tell him. That I do want to go, that I want to be there when his sister Nina has the baby, that I want to meet his half-brother, meet his mother, his father and stepmother, that I want to see the neighbourhoods he grew up in, the schools he went to, the friends he made, walk the grounds of the university he attended, go to the clubs he danced in, the pubs he drank in, that I want to get to know his city, the stink of it and the beauty of it, the poverty of it and the inspiration

of it. And I want to believe that when I am there I will shed my skin, become a new man. I want to go. I have to go.

But I'm scared. I'm scared that I won't be able to.

'Dan?'

I love the whisper of warmth he offers to my name.

This is when I tell him.

It takes an age for the words to come, to take shape, to transform into sound. I am hollowness, my voice is not my own, my body seems drained of everything that makes me human: blood and tissue and muscle and guts. But I don't cry. I can't cry.

'Clyde, there's something I have to tell you.'

He is the one afraid now, he senses the vast distance between us. His whole body has tensed, his eyes are wide and frightened.

'I've been to prison.'

I haven't really thought of his face for years, not really. I have thought of the moments before and all those millions of moments afterwards, but not of the man's face, how it became jelly under my blows, of the blood, the cuts on my fist as I broke his face. How I did this to someone, made him insensible, took him to the edge of life.

'I'm scared they won't let me into the UK, Clyde, and I think they have every right not to let scum like me in.'

I can see the face, for the first time, I can see what I did, how I destroyed something. But there is that calmness inside me, it is flowing through me, sedating me. It is as though I am speaking through the narcosis of a dream.

And it is Clyde who is crying.

'I've been to prison, mate. I nearly killed a man. That's what I did. That's who I am.'

26–27 July 1996

He was standing in the motel bath, his Speedos on, his arms clasped tight across his chest. His mother was shaving his legs. The lather was pasted thick on his thighs, on his calves, and she guided the razor through it slowly, carefully, not wanting to nick him. She said, 'Don't move, Danny, stay still.'

He didn't like looking down at the soapy, filthy water around his feet. His mum flicked the razor into the dirty mess. Spools of black hair floated on the surface of the foam. His legs were covered in coarse black hair. He thought it was ugly, he was pleased the hair was being shaved off, that it would be gone. But now the skin on his legs was dotted with pink blotches. 'Don't move,' she warned him again. He looked up at the bathroom mirror in which he could see his brother and sister sprawled over his bed in the main room. Theo was on his back, his neck and head bent over the end of the mattress, watching the television upside down. Regan was on her belly, her elbows bent, her knuckles pressing against her chin. Her feet were kicking—up

down, up down—banging on the mattress. He couldn't see the television in the mirror but he could hear the voice of the race commentator.

'Hurry up, Mum, the race is going to start.'

His mother ignored him. He looked down to see the razor scraping away what looked like a wad of thick dark fur, as though he was some sort of animal she was shearing. She flicked the razor in the water again and the clump of hair floated on the surface around his left foot.

'OK, that's your left leg done.' His mother smiled up at him.

He was itching all over where she had just shaved him but she poured some lotion into her hand and then rubbed it up and down his calf and the back of his leg. The cool gel instantly soothed the prickliness.

'I'm going to miss the race,' Danny complained. He craned his neck, trying to glimpse a reflection of the television. All he could see was his brother's upside-down head, his sister's legs still kicking the bed.

'Theo,' his mother called out, 'has the race started yet?'

'No.'

'You'll tell us when it does?'

He could see the reflection of his brother nodding. The little boy caught his eye and gave him a smile but because he was the wrong way round it looked like a frown. Theo effortlessly propelled his body over the bed, landed on his feet, and ran over to the bathroom door. He watched as the razor scraped down the back of Danny's thigh.

'You're really hairy.'

Their mother flicked some suds at him and the little boy shrieked, 'Don't!'

'Then get out of here.'

Theo scampered back to the bed.

'Should I close the door?' his mother asked.

Danny shook his head. He thought it would feel strange if the door was shut, with his mother shaving his legs—it would feel a little sick. He didn't want that thought in his head. He shivered.

'Stop moving or I'll nick you.'

If he was nicked, he would bleed. And if he bled, a scab would form, and he would feel it in the water, he would sense it as he was swimming. It would be just a small sensation, just a niggle. But it could be enormous. Like a fly landing on his naked shoulder over summer, when it became all he could think of. All you could think of was that small, trivial thing, but before you knew it, it would be the scab he was thinking of in the water the next day, the feel of it as the water rushed past it, an itch that would want to be scratched, that would make him pause, for a third of a third of a third of a second. But that was all it took, the Coach said it all the time, for that third of a third of a third of a second to make you lose concentration and then you would slip back, fumble a stroke, and then you would find yourself a quarter of a body length then half a body length then a whole body length behind. He couldn't be nicked, he couldn't dare be nicked.

He stood absolutely still.

She had shaved both his legs and still the race hadn't started.

As she changed the water he ducked into the next room to check the TV. There were ads, then interviews with former

Olympians. All they wanted to talk about was Perkins. Would he, wouldn't he? Did he have it in him? Most of the commentators were dubious. He had barely scraped through the heat, one of them warned; another started listing the swimmer's old injuries. The third disagreed, said proudly that just going for an Olympic medal brought something special out of a true athlete: Perkins could do it. The other commentators couldn't answer that; they hadn't been there, didn't know what it felt like. To be in the pool, to be going for an Olympic medal. To have everyone in the world watching you.

Danny wanted to hear about Kowalski. It would be Kowalski's medal. Danny knew exactly what Kowalski would be thinking: that this time he could get there, step out of the other swimmer's shadow, that this time the race would be his. Why wouldn't they talk about Kowalski?

'I think Daniel Kowalski will win this.' The other commentators nodded their heads and one of them was about to answer when Danny's mother called from the bathroom.

He pretended he hadn't heard. He wanted to hear them talk about Kowalski.

'Danny!'

Regan raised her head, looked over at him.

'In here, now!'

There was fresh warm water in the tub. He slipped the towel off his shoulders and stepped into the bath. His mother had fitted a new blade into the razor.

'Lift your arm.'

He raised his right arm and she began to lather his armpit.

'Has it started?' he asked.

'Nah,' Regan called. 'It's boring. Just stupid men talking—can't we change channels?'

'Regan,' his mother cautioned, 'don't you dare change the channel.'

'I won't let her, Danny.'

Danny smiled at his brother's reflection in the bathroom mirror and Theo grinned back. Danny knew what his brother was thinking, he could read him as clearly as if there were actual words going from his brother's brain straight to his, like telekinesis might be. Theo was thinking that it would be his brother there one day, where Perkins and Kowalski were. That would be Danny one day.

'Ouch!'

The razor scraped the inside of his armpit. It was tender there.

His mother slid the razor carefully against the thicker hair. 'Sorry, Danny, this will hurt more.'

'Don't cut me, Mum.'

'I won't, but you have to stand still. I know what I'm doing.'

Did his mother do this for the women whose hair she cut? She had wanted to use wax on him as she did for her clients. But he had been fearful of the wax, thought it might burn, and if it burned it might blister. And blisters were worse than nicks. Blisters niggled worse than anything.

His mother was close to him as she shaved him. He could smell her, the perfume that smelled like fruit but also had the hint of something unpleasant, too sweet. It made his nose twitch. His legs were all pink from being shaved. They didn't look like his legs anymore. He turned away, impressed by what the mirror revealed. They were strong legs. Almost imperceptibly

he tightened his buttocks and glanced back. He could see the muscles of his thighs, stretching, flexing, clearly defined. His calf muscle was like steel.

'Don't move,' his mother scolded. She wiped the black hairs onto a small washcloth. He wanted to scratch; the itchiness stung now. He stood absolutely rigid, looking at his legs again in the mirror. He would not scratch, he would not scratch. He disappeared into the words, spelled them forwards and backwards. I space W-I-L-L space N-O-T space S-C-R-A-T-C-H space H-C-T-A-R-C-S space T-O- . . .

There was an excited cheer from the TV in the next room.

'Is it starting?'

The letters disappeared, but the sting under his armpit was still there. There was a strong odour, like meat mixed with earth, coming from his mother. He had never been close to such a smell before and he knew, as if by instinct, that it only belonged to women.

'Mum,' he whined, 'it's starting.'

'Kids, are they anywhere near the starting blocks?'

'No,' Theo answered. Nevertheless he was excited about something, he could see something that Danny couldn't see, because he was now kneeling on the bed and looking at the screen.

'There,' his mother announced, satisfied.

The flesh under his arm was red, inflamed. She rubbed him with lotion but the sting didn't quite go away. He flinched and she gave him a mocking smile and unexpectedly kissed him on the brow. 'Now you know what we women go through.'

What? He didn't understand. Then he remembered from when

he was a small boy a summer picnic in Whittlesea, his mother lying on the grass smoking, a glass of wine in her other hand. She had been wearing a sleeveless dress, and whenever she raised the hand with the cigarette in it he had caught a glimpse of coarse short black hairs growing back in her armpit. It had disgusted him, like seeing stubble on an old woman's chin.

He raised his other arm for his mother to shave him there.

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Danny was saying the names to himself like a kind of prayer: *Kowalski, Perkins, Brembilla; Kowalski, Perkins, Brembilla*. That was what he was hoping for, Kowalski, Perkins, Brembilla. There was a hush in the motel room, and even the television announcers fell silent. The first youth was called to his block; he raised his arms and the South African flag appeared in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen. Ryk Neethling; Danny didn't think anything of Ryk Neethling, for it wasn't possible that he could win. After Neethling was Hoffmann from Germany—he was a chance. Neethling, then Hoffmann, then Akatyev from Russia. Danny leaned forward as the young man approached the block. He hadn't seen Akatyev before. He turned the name around in his mouth, liking the sound of it: A-KA-ty-EV. It was a much better name than Kelly.

And then it was Kowalski. Who tried to smile, who waved at the cluster of Australian supporters waving their flags in the stalls, but Danny could see that all Kowalski was thinking about was the race ahead, the race that was his, that now belonged to him. It is yours, it is yours, Danny whispered deep into himself, because he knew that everyone else, everyone in the

world wanted Perkins to win, to shrug off the lack of form, the illness, the bad year, nearly missing out on a place in the finals. Everyone—except Danny—wanted Perkins to win. But it was Kowalski's race. Danny hardly registered Graeme Smith, the man from Great Britain, take to his block; he was still seeing the strain on Kowalski's face as he tried to smile. A feeling of unease crept up from Danny's gut. The strain on Kowalski's face seemed a premonition of bad luck.

Emiliano Brembilla was called and moved to his block, looking relaxed. Danny noticed his strong long legs—Danny's would be that strong one day. One day he too would stand on an Olympic block, not anxious, not strained. Brembilla could win it, he thought, he had been the best swimmer in the heats; Brembilla could steal it from Kowalski. He whispered to himself, *Kowalski, Brembilla, Perkins. Kowalski, Brembilla, Perkins.*

His eyes were on the screen but he didn't see Masato Hirano from Japan. (Hirano can't get it, Hirano can't win it.) He could only see Kowalski and Brembilla. It was the cheers that forced him to make sense of the images in front of him. Theo and Regan were cheering, his mother was smiling; Perkins had his arms in the air and the Australians in the crowd were making a din. It sounded like the whole world was cheering. He thought of Kowalski: what must he be thinking? Was he not worthy of such adulation? The bad feeling grew in Danny's gut. He had a smile on his face; he could have even said to Theo, Perkins can still get it, but that would be a lie. That wasn't his prayer. His prayer was Kowalski, Brembilla, Perkins. *Kowalski, Brembilla, Perkins.*

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His prayer wasn't answered. Perkins led at the one hundred, at the five hundred, at the one thousand; and even though by the twentieth lap Danny could see that Perkins had slowed, was showing fatigue, the others were not equal to his swim. It was only to be silver for Kowalski, but then Danny started fearing that the swimmer might have started too strongly. Kowalski had been chasing Perkins from the very beginning. It was Perkins and it was Kowalski and then Perkins and Kowalski and Brembilla and for a moment Danny thought, *He's got it in him, he's gonna push through*, but then it was Perkins and Hoffmann and Kowalski and then it was Smith who began to scare Danny, for it was Smith who didn't tire, unlike Brembilla and—Danny knew it as well as if he was there in the pool, as if he himself had become the struggling swimmer—unlike Kowalski. The race was won long before it was over; Perkins was half a body length, then a body length, then two body lengths in front, and then he pulled away to a place where victory seemed to be propelling him forward, where victory seemed to be swimming alongside him, where every doubt and every injury and every failure had been vanquished. And it was half a body length and a body length and two body lengths before it was five metres and then ten metres and finally he was twenty metres in front, and it was the last one hundred metres and Danny's heart was sinking though he was not showing it at all, he was screaming, just like his brother and sister were screaming, both of them jumping up and down on the bed, 'Go, Kieren! Go, Kieren!' just like the commentators were screaming, like the crowd in the stadium, like the whole world. It was the last one hundred metres and Smith was coming in second and Kowalski was trailing and Brembilla could not win, and then

it was the final fifty metres and Kowalski's turn was beautiful, it put him neck and neck with Smith, and Danny heard an announcer yell, 'Fight for the silver, son!' and he didn't know why but he felt that he had to scream so loud that it would tear his throat, 'Fight for the silver, Daniel, fight for the silver, son!' It was twenty-five metres and Kowalski and Smith were neck and neck and it was ten metres, Perkins had gold and Kowalski and Smith were neck and neck. And it was the finish, and the first hand to touch the tiles was the hand of the swimmer in lane four and just as it did so the swimmer in lane five also slapped the tiles. It was Perkins, Kowalski, Smith. It was gold for Australia, it was silver for Australia. Theo was jumping so high his mother was calling for him to stop, fearful he might hit his head on the ceiling, Regan was crying, the whole world was shouting and screaming and crying. This was what it felt like, thought Danny, this was what it should feel like. But there was an emptiness at the centre of him.

No, there *wasn't*. There *couldn't* be.

It was the best result—Kieren Perkins had made history. But there was a hole in Danny's stomach. No, no, there *wasn't*. This was one of the great moments in sport.

'Yes, yes, yes,' he screamed. 'We've got silver, we've got gold. What a hero. What a hero.' He didn't look at the screen, not yet, not yet, because he didn't want to see Kowalski's face.

'Look,' his mother announced, 'look at Perkins going to shake Daniel's hand. That's the first thing he does, that gives you the measure of the man, doesn't it?'

But Danny couldn't look, couldn't look at Kowalski's face, at Brembilla's face, at the face of the man who had come fourth—who

wouldn't stand on the dais, who wouldn't hear any cheers. Only one man won. He could hear the Coach: *Only one man comes first*. Perkins won. But Kowalski and Smith, Brembilla, Neethling, Hirano, Hoffmann, Akatyev—they all lost. *Only one man comes first*. 'Silver and gold,' he screamed, hugging Theo, hugging Regan, hugging his mother, dancing. But it hadn't been Kowalski, Brembilla, Perkins. He knew then that he had learned something, something about not letting it show. Not showing the strain of it, the anxiety of it nor the terror of it. He wouldn't ever let it show. Only losers let it show.

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Later, when they had seen Perkins and Kowalski and Smith be awarded their medals, after hearing 'Advance Australia Fair', his mother called him back to the bathroom. 'We haven't finished, Danny.'

She had filled the bottom of the bath with lukewarm water and this time she lathered his chest, spreading foam down his firm flat stomach to just above the line of his Speedos. Her hands were warm but he didn't like that her hands were on him, didn't want to think about how close they were to his bits. He could see a thin knot of black pubes escaping from the top of his costume and he wanted to push her away. He wanted her hands off him. He closed his eyes, screwing them shut so tight there were streaks of red and white light dancing in the blackness. But within the twists and the twirls of the light, he could see the face of Daniel Kowalski, he could see the tightness of his forced smile as he approached the block. Danny would not give in to fear and anxiety. He would learn from Kowalski; he would be as

good a swimmer as Kowalski was, but a better competitor. Like Kowalski, he didn't have the perfect skin, the perfect smile, the perfect pedigree. At the school meets, it was Taylor who got the loudest cheers, whose name was called, who got the other boys stomping their feet in the bleachers. It was Taylor they screamed for—*Tazza! Tazza! Tazza!*—not Danny. He would fight the envy, he would take it on and give it back to them. He would not swim for the adulation. He would swim to win.

He could feel the cold blade scraping down his sternum. It was only when he could feel that she had finished that he opened his eyes. He went to step out of the bath.

'Hey, hey, hey,' she chided softly. 'We haven't quite finished. Turn around.'

'Why?'

'There's just some hair on your back—'

'My *back*!' He was furious at her. He hated her and he hated his dad. Who wouldn't pay for the electrolysis. Who wouldn't pay for fucking anything.

He saw that Theo was looking up, alarmed by his shout.

'It's OK.' He knew his mother was stifling a laugh. He wanted to insult her, to call her something that would humiliate her. *Bitch*. You're a *bitch*. 'It's normal, just some hair on the small of your back. It's normal, Danny.'

It wasn't normal for Taylor or for Perkins. It was normal for wogs. Normal for ugly wogs, like her.

'It's OK, we don't have to do it.' His reaction had startled her.

She wasn't ugly, she was beautiful. She was going grey but she still looked younger and more attractive than any of the other mums at school; those women were all hard sharp lines:

the cut of their hair, the jut of their chins and cheeks, the fit of their clothes. His mother was curves and flesh. His mother was beautiful. She would do anything for him. He watched her work the gel into a lather in her hand. He was the one who was ugly.

He turned around, and let her shave him.

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It is your race to win. It was the first thing he told himself that morning when he threw back the blanket and looked down at his new smooth body. *It is your race to win*. He kept whispering it to himself while warming up in the gym. He repeated it to himself as he flexed his muscles in front of the long mirrors, wishing he could strip, wishing it was like the ancient days when athletes competed naked, wishing it were those days so he could stand in front of the mirror loving his new hairless body that allowed him to see every curve and hollow of each muscle. He worked out—nothing too strenuous that could pull a muscle. At one point Danny put down the barbells. He was sweating heavily, it was a shiny casing over his new skin. No one was looking at him, they were all concentrating on their own bodies, their own future. He slowly pulled up the bottom of his singlet to his upper chest. His abdomen glistened, his chest gleamed. He was all muscle and he was clean and smooth. He looked like Kowalski and Perkins and Brembilla.

He would win the two hundred metre freestyle. He would win it because he deserved it, because it was his to win. *It was his race to win*.

He kept telling himself that with every lap he swam in his