

Monday, 4 April

Two days after Head of the River

Cristian

Assembly is like a funeral. There are no overconfident victory speeches from the Captains of Boats or pats on the back for a ‘job well done boys and girls’. Nobody holds aloft the precious Head of the River cup. Instead of a cheesy victory song like ‘Holy Grail’ or ‘We Are the Champions’ playing, there’s a hushed silence.

Eight hundred students sit perfectly still and upright. A quiet sea of green blazers and white shirts. Usually, this would be the time our principal Mr Kentwell would ask us to settle down. ‘Monday morning, people, let’s get it done’. Today, there’s no need. Gripping the lectern emblazoned with our school crest, ‘Harley Grammar – Success Smiles on Effort’, he has our full attention.

‘As I’m sure you are aware the APS Head of the River was held on Saturday at the Barwon River in Geelong,’ Mr Kentwell says. ‘It’s customary to hold a celebratory assembly and to announce the results of our hardworking

rowing team as the culmination of a very successful season, however, this year we felt that wasn't an appropriate course of action. One of our students is seriously ill,' he says.

A girl in front of me starts to sob loudly and I want to lean over and say, 'Stop being such a drama queen. You weren't even friends. This has nothing to do with you.' I wish it had nothing to do with me.

Gossip swirls and Mr Kentwell momentarily loses control of the room.

Around the hall are guys I've rowed with for the past four years. I can pick them out by the slope of their shoulders, crookedness of haircuts or the way their ears stick out. Up close I know what they smell like when they're scared to death.

Nick, our stroke, is two rows in front of me. His head is dipped slightly to the right side as it is in the boat. Leaning into our riggers helps us find the balance. It's hard to shake the habit on dry land. Charley, Mal, Julian ... they're all here. It's tradition for Head of the River crews to sit together during this assembly. Last year I was even on stage. Here at Harley, winners are elevated.

But this year the rowing team is blown like dandelion fluff all over the room.

'We wish a speedy recovery to this very well-liked member of our school community,' says Mr Kentwell. 'Some housekeeping – it's been requested that no flowers are sent to the hospital and no visitors are permitted at this critical stage. However, counselling is available for any students who witnessed this incident, particularly the rowers. Please see your home room teacher to make an appointment.'

That's it. The briefest of reports and onto the day-to-day running of the school – a visiting author, music exams, the upcoming school fete and the Year Ten trip to Papua New Guinea to walk the Kokoda trail.

There's so much more to say than Mr Kentwell's five-minute wrap up. I want to take the microphone and speak up, before everyone clatters out of the room to PE, chem or history classes. Could I put up my hand? Ask for a minute of everyone's precious time?

I could tell the students what colour skin turns when all the oxygen runs out of it. What a body looks like when the heart stops beating. How you can completely forget every single thing you learnt in Outdoor Ed about how to do CPR, how many breaths and what angle to tilt the chin. And all you can do is stand there like a statue while paramedics pound away, hoping for life to return.

I could tell them what it sounds like when a chest compression breaks a rib. Like cracking a stick, if you want to know.

Leni

I try to leave the house without detection, but Mum pounces on me as I'm heading for the front door with my schoolbag.

'Not so fast, Leni. I've made you an appointment with Dr Chang,' she says.

Dr Chang has been my GP since kindy. He's a kind Asian man who's liberal with jellybeans, but I don't want to

see him today. I want to be at school with my crew, trying to make sense of what happened at the Head of the River.

‘But I don’t want to miss assembly,’ I complain as she bundles me into the car.

‘You need a check-up, sweetie,’ Mum says firmly.

I knew I couldn’t get away with letting her know I wasn’t feeling well after the regatta. Mum’s been a paediatric nurse at the Royal Children’s for twelve years. No cough or sniffle has ever gone unnoticed by her.

‘How do you feel?’ she asks as she squeezes into a parking spot outside the clinic, which is already heaving with people and germs.

‘Fine.’

‘And how do you really feel?’ she presses.

‘Tired,’ I admit, although actually I’m beyond exhausted. So knackered and sore I could barely get out of bed. ‘My throat hurts.’ Probably from shouting all day at the regatta.

‘Saturday was quite a shock,’ she says.

‘I’m so worried.’

I hardly slept last night thinking of the accident. Of one of my best friends being stuck in hospital.

‘I know,’ says Mum, patting my knee. ‘We all are. Any news?’

‘Nothing,’ I say, shaking my phone, as if the lost news might fall out.

We sit next to the healthiest looking person in the clinic. Across the room a man wearing a chicken beanie coughs up phlegm into a dirty hanky. I breathe under my hand. I don’t want to get sick before nationals. They’re only a fortnight away. And then there’s the AIS trials. State

crew selections. This is the worst possible time to be at a doctor's surgery.

Mum talks shop with Dr Chang, who's holding a plastic container of my urine. It's bright yellow. He puts it into a plastic bag and labels it.

Funny, I thought today would be the best day of my life. I thought I'd be swimming in relief, accepting accolades and sitting up on stage with my crew. Instead, I'm wrestling in a tangle of anxiety. Waiting for a test result that might ruin all my plans.

'How are things at the Royal, Jodie?' Dr Chang asks.

'Busy,' says Mum tightly.

Mum leans into me. I can smell the garlic she had last night for dinner – sour and close in my ear. 'It'll be okay, Leni,' she says. 'Whatever the result.'

I look down at my hands, which are clenched shut.

'Roll up your sleeve, Leni, and let's take some bloods,' says Dr Chang. 'Which is your writing hand?'

What he should be asking is, which is your turning hand on the oar? I hold out my right arm.

My head is heavy with pain and I have an urge to lie down in Mum's lap and let her stroke my forehead with her cool palm. But I'm seventeen, so that might look weird. I sit up tall as Dr Chang prepares the needles. Staring at a tatty food pyramid poster on the wall. Dr Chang's face is expressionless as he plunges the needle into my skin. He would make an excellent poker player.

'Just a couple more, you're being very brave,' he says, as if I'm a toddler. These are the longest seconds of my life.

Longer than the quiet, panicky silence before the starter's gun. Longer than being six and busting to get out of bed and look at Santa's presents, longer than waiting for a winter tram in the freezing rain without an umbrella. Longer than hearing paramedics say, 'I've got no pulse', when someone you love is lying on the ground, not a single part of their body moving on its own. Longer than any seconds of my life so far.

The wrong result here and everything might fall apart, even more than they have already. They might disintegrate.

October

Six months to Head of the River

Leni

The Yarra Classic is the craziest event on the rowing calendar. Hundreds of eights row in staggered starts down the 8.6-kilometre length of the Yarra River. The course is full of odd bends and kinks and the aim is to get the fastest time and avoid hitting bridges, islands, the rocky banks or each other.

We're coming down the tail end of the race in the blazing heat. We've had a clean run but I'm rushing the slide and everyone's desperate to get to the end. Our hands and bums hurt and I'm not the only one thinking of the sausage sandwich and can of cold soft drink that waits for us on the bank.

'Come on girls, let's finish off!' screams Aiko, our cox. She's cute, peppy and everyone likes her. She gets away with bossing us around in the boat. 'You can still get St Ann's!'

We've managed to hold off the other schoolgirl first eights, but our arch rivals, St Ann's, slipped ahead in the melee.

We won't know for sure until we get handicap times, but as we cross the line and collapse, I have a sinking feeling we are second best today. I don't like being second best.

On the bank our coach, Laura, is weaving through other bikes and spectators, trying to make her voice heard.

'Don't just sit there, Harley, row off the start!' she yells. 'Come on, Leni! Get them going!'

I sit forward and take a jelly stroke. We wobble, completely spent, out of the way. Dozens of eights are clawing for the finish line, blades reaching out like insect legs.

'I'm. So. Freaking. Knackered,' whines Rachel in the seven seat, directly behind me. I can feel her heavy breath on the back of my neck. As usual, she's behind on pre-season training, leaving it to the rest of us to pull her along. The sound of her voice makes me tense. She complains constantly and only seems to do rowing to keep an eye on her boyfriend down at the river. I've actually seen her take her hand off her oar to fix her hair – mid stroke.

'Everyone's stuffed. Let's just get the boat in,' I say.

'Yes, sir,' Rachel says.

I roll my eyes and keep rowing. Rachel will follow me. It's hard not to in rowing.

Laura gathers us in a grassy spot out of the way of the crowds. She has the results of the race, on times.

'Firstly, I'm thrilled with how you raced today. It was strong, consistent rowing,' she says.

‘St Ann’s beat us,’ I prompt, glumly.

‘St Ann’s won the Schoolgirls Division One in 33.04. You guys were second in 33.24.’

‘They were twenty seconds ahead?’ says Rachel. She sighs through her nose. ‘They always beat us.’

‘Let’s not be too disappointed. Second is a very solid result.’

Solid. Something about the word makes me unhappy. I’m the stroke of our crew and when we don’t win, I take it personally. I’m desperate to be elected Captain of Boats in a few weeks’ time, so every race counts.

‘This is a pre-season, fun race. So we have a little competition on our hands. Gives us something to train for,’ Laura says. ‘Get a feed and hit the drinks station. Meet back at the boat to row home in an hour and a half.’

Penny Mission grabs me as I head for the school tent on shaky legs. She’s in Year Ten – the year below me – and seems keen to be mates. She’s sweet, but I’m so busy training I don’t have much time for new friends.

‘Don’t worry about St Ann’s,’ she says. ‘You rowed really well today. We all did.’

Penny was a ballerina before she ditched pliés for oars and she still stands with slightly ducked feet – toes pointing outward. Her long limbs and graceful touch mean she’s risen quickly to the top crew. I should get to know her. She’s quieter and more thoughtful than the other girls. Sometimes I hardly even notice she’s in the boat. That can be a good quality in an eight.

She gives me a hug, which I find awkward and wriggle out of. I don’t like touching, especially in public.

‘We beat thirteen other first crews today,’ she reminds me.

‘But not the crew that counts,’ I add.

Penny droops and looks deflated. I can never see the glass half full. My brother, Cristian, says it’s not a good character trait.

‘Come on,’ I say, forcing a smile. ‘Let’s eat. I’m so hungry I could eat half a cow.’

Instead of standing with the other parents drinking from plastic champagne glasses and eating dainty chicken sandwiches, my parents are tinkering with boats. They’ve been tinkering with boats my whole life. Dad’s adjusting the height of a rigger. Mum’s oiling a squeaky seat wheel. Dad’s the Harley Grammar boat caretaker, so he fixes, tunes and cleans all sixty boats in our fleet.

Mum has a smudge of grease on her cheek and she’s dressed in cargo shorts and an old T-shirt. I feel an itch of embarrassment. The other rowing mothers have white teeth and done-up hair, Broome pearls and designer jeans. The dads wear polo shirts and aviator sunnies. They carry long lens SLR cameras and the *Saturday Age*.

‘Leni!’ calls Mum. ‘Great race.’

Dad puts his screwdriver in his tool belt and sweeps me into an oily, sweaty hug. The kind you can’t wriggle out of. He should be racing with his own masters crew today, but work on the boats comes first.

‘Dad, what did I say about PDAs?’

‘No PDAs ever?’ he says, smiling. ‘I saw the end of your race. Very well done, Elena.’

‘But we came second,’ I say. ‘St Ann’s beat us again.’

‘What’s wrong with second?’ says Dad. It’s a loaded question.

My parents’ rowing medals are framed and adorn every spare wall in our house. There are Olympic medals, too. Dad’s is silver. Mum’s is gold.

‘Lovely wind up at the end, good pacing,’ says Mum. She shakes my hand, her grip still so strong.

Mum puts an arm around Dad and he kisses her nose.

The story goes, my parents first made eyes at each other across the dance floor at the athletes bar at the Olympic Village in Seoul – post racing. It was 1988. Mum had a perm and Dad had a sixpack. Dad was rowing in the Romanian eight and Mum was stroke of the Australian pair.

Dad says he had to carry Mum back to her room after she literally became legless on four champagnes. She’s 6 feet, so he must’ve been keen. Mum says he was the perfect gentleman, sleeping on the floor next to her bed while the rest of the village danced until the sun came up.

‘Wait a minute, Dad slept on the floor? Then why do they need thousands of condoms in the Olympic Village?’ said Cristian when Mum told the story for the millionth time. ‘You two must have been complete dorks.’

‘Ewwww,’ I said. ‘If you ever mention our parents and condoms in the same sentence again I will puke.’

They kept in contact by writing letters and talking by phone for hours. After the fall of communism in Romania in 1989 Dad was finally free to come to Australia, marry

Mum and row for the Aussie team. You can see why Cristian and I pretty much came out of the womb with tiny oars in our hands.

Dad looks at his watch. ‘Ooh. Cristian races now. Jodie, finish for me?’

Dad sprints towards the car park to grab a lift back to the start. He hates to miss our races.

Mum throws me a screwdriver. ‘Come on, Leni, we have work to do.’

After I’ve helped Mum with the boats, I grab a sushi roll and a steak sandwich from the parents’ lavish picnic and head down to the bank with Penny. We sit on the grassy hill as the Harley boys second eight crew cruise over the line looking powerful.

‘Where are the firsts?’ I ask. Cristian’s crew should be in by now.

The seconds are pumped as they pull their boat off the water. They’ve been training well. Buzz surrounds them.

‘Maybe the firsts got beaten by the seconds?’ says Penny. ‘People are talking about Sam Cam being the next big thing.’ On cue, Sam Camero carries his blades up the bank, his zootie pulled down past his hips.

Penny follows my eyes to Sam’s lean torso.

‘Pretty gorgeous, isn’t he?’ she says.

‘I dunno, I guess.’

I pick at a blade of grass and try to act uninterested. Sam mysteriously arrived at our school at the start of Year Eleven and took up rowing right away. Nine months later,

he's already in the seconds. Usually it takes years to learn how to row.

'I heard he was some kind of mountain biking star,' Penny says. 'But he took up rowing instead. Even though he had sponsors.'

'Man of mystery,' I say.

Secretly I've been collecting facts about Sam, like a bowerbird filling its nest with shiny things. So far I've managed to find out that:

Sam used to live in Singapore. His parents bought a yoga retreat in Byron Bay and they moved back to Australia to run it.

Sam went to an American school in Singapore and that's why he has a twang in his accent.

Sam lives alone in his parents' Docklands apartment with a cook and a cleaner, but no supervision.

Sam's Buddhist. That's why he refuses to go to chapel and instead goes to the library and reads.

Sam can stand on his head. I saw him do it one day in the gym on a crash mat. For, like, ages. Then he calmly got up and walked away.

I'm so busy thinking about my nest of Sam facts that I miss the boys' first eight finishing.

Penny grabs my arm.

'Adam's waving at you,' she says.

There he is. My boyfriend, Adam Langley. Cute, in a generic deodorant commercial kind of way, trying to get my attention. I'm happy to see him, but not thrilled. Lately being with Adam is another chore to add to my workload.

'Aren't you going to wave back?' Penny asks.

By the time I raise my hand, Adam is looking away, his hat pulled down over his eyes.

‘Your brother looks like he needs oxygen,’ says Penny.

Cristian does look exhausted. He’s flushed and breathing hard. By the dark expression on his face, they didn’t have a good time out there.

‘Do you fancy Cristian?’ I prod. ‘I think he has a crush on you.’

Cristian’s smitten with Penny’s quiet beauty.

‘Maybe,’ Penny says. ‘I’ve never been out with a boy before. I’m not sure what to do.’

‘Just be you, Pen.’

It was good advice, even if I’d never, ever been myself with Adam.

Cristian

We’re at the start line for the Yarra Classic. I’m nervous because I’m not fit and my hands are shredded from training.

‘Ads, you got tape?’ I ask Adam Langley.

Adam sits in front of me in the boat. I’m five seat. He’s six seat. We’re best mates, but it’s a strange pairing. He’s the third son of Mitch Langley, millionaire property developer. I’m the son of Vasile Popescu, boat caretaker. He lives in a massive Toorak mansion. I live in a falling-down rental in Fitzroy. We are from different sides of the river. Different sides of the planet. The only reason we’re sitting

in the same boat is because of my sports scholarship to Harley. My sister Leni has one too.

‘I don’t have tape, Princess. Suck it up,’ Adam says. He’s joking, but there’s a tense edge to his voice. He’s as jittery as I am. The Yarra Classic is the first proper race of the season.

I clench my fists and feel the skin tighten with the throb of infection. I should’ve taped them this morning. It’s too late now.

Eights are piled up everywhere, coaches riding their bikes in packs. Organised chaos. Dad’s somehow gotten back to see my race. He’s riding a clapped-out women’s ten speed he got from Vinnie’s. I wish he’d get a new one. The pedal keeps falling off and he looks like a goose riding with one leg.

We’ve got a slot a few seconds in front of Glenon Grammar, Westleigh and Stotts College. It’s a handicap regatta, so everyone goes at different times. You could end up rowing along with old masters guys or an elite women’s eight. It only makes sense when all the times are crunched at the end. The aim is not to be passed by anyone in your category and to overtake as many crews as you can.

Of course, everyone’s checking each other out. I suck in my gut and try to look more of a threat than I am.

‘What are those Stotts guys eating with their Weet-Bix? They’re tanks,’ hisses Adam. Stotts are bulging with muscles and they look fit and untouchable in matching mirrored sunnies and red zooties.

‘Girly sunglasses won’t help them win the race,’ I say.

If there's one thing my parents have taught me, it's that flash gear doesn't count on the water. Technique matters. Dad taught me and Leni to row when we were nine and he drilled technique into us from our first wobbly strokes. I can usually out-row anyone my age. Usually. Lately I had the feeling I was getting caught.

The starter gets us into position. It's time for the hurting to begin.

I sit up, breathing in deep. Last chance for air.

'Bring it up a touch Harley Grammar!' shouts the starter.

'Okay, that's a line. Sit forward! Attention! Row!'

We get a decent start and for a few minutes it feels good. It feels like this is our race.

But then it isn't. It's Stotts's race. Stotts and their stupid sunglasses.

Leni

At home, after the regatta, I head straight for the shower and stand under the hot water. After months of wearing tights and shivering in the dark, I finally have rowing suntan marks on my thighs and shoulders. From this angle, it looks like I'm wearing a white skin zoot suit.

Water rushes over the sharp angles of my body. I have no boobs and legs like a horse – all knees and bone. I pinch my stomach and wonder why I don't get a sixpack like the boys do. I want one desperately. My arms are strong and I'm getting defined biceps. I flex one arm in the shower and test its hardness. Not bad.

I resolve to do more sit-ups every day. A hundred at least. Maybe some push-ups, too. But for now, all I have the energy for is to change into tracksuit pants and lie on the couch, watching TV. Our family cat, Banjo, curls up on my feet. I love this tired feeling. My muscles worn out, all my strength left on the river. I put my arms behind my head. From this position, I'm staring at a row of painted trophy oars my parents have won, mounted on our living room wall.

Each oar has a story. European Champs, worlds, nationals, Olympics. All the names of my parents' crews are painted onto the spoon of the blade. When I was a kid Dad would lift me up and let me touch the raised gold lettering and show me the names, Jodie Cummings and Vasile Popescu. Even then I knew I wanted my own painted oar one day. I hope that day is coming.

I don't even realise I've fallen asleep until I wake to my brother tickling my upper lip.

'Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey,' he says. His traditional morning greeting. Which is better than his other favourite, 'wakey, wakey, hands off snakey'.

We always sit in the same spots for dinner. Dad at one end, Mum at the other and Cristian and I facing each other on either side. Mum insists on family mealtimes if we are at home at the same time. Which is getting rarer. She says the dinner table is where families do their best talking. Tonight, though, the mood is murky.

Cristian eats in virtual silence and refuses dessert.

It's *papanasi*, sweet cottage cheese dumplings with sour cream and jam. A family recipe. Mum learnt to cook all

of Dad's favourite Romanian dishes. It was her way of helping ease the homesickness that she says flattened him when he first moved to Australia.

'So yum,' I tell Mum, hoeing in.

'Are you sick?' Mum asks Cristian.

To my knowledge he has never turned down *papanasi* before.

'I'm not sick. I don't want to eat stupid Romanian food all the time. It's making me fat.'

'Don't call your mother's food stupid,' Dad says. 'She work hard. She cook for you. Apologise.'

'Sorry,' Cristian mutters.

'You are a healthy growing boy. You need plenty of energy,' Mum says. 'You're not fat. You're a big boy.'

I caught Cristian looking at himself in the bathroom mirror last week, grabbing a chunk of his tummy. He gets plenty of flack at the river for his size. Always has. Usually it doesn't bother him. But he was flogged badly today.

'Big is the same as fat!' Cristian says.

He pushes his chair roughly away from the table and walks out.

Mum jumps up to follow him.

'Leave him, Jodie,' says Dad, putting his hands on her shoulders. 'He is beaten today. Beaten men do not have celebration.'

Mum nods and we sit down and pick at our dessert in silence. As soon as I can, I leave the table to find out if he's okay. I knock on Cristian's door. Our knock. Three short raps.

‘You in there?’ I call through the wood.

I hate seeing Cristian upset. It makes me jumpy and unsettled. We’ve always been close. Twins usually are.

He opens the door a crack and I see he’s been crying.

‘I’m fine, Leni, go to bed.’

‘It’s months until the Head of the River,’ I say. ‘You’ll come good.’

‘I’ve got to get fit again, like last year.’

‘We’ll go for more runs together. Don’t worry, there’s still heaps of time. You’ve got a good base.’

‘I’m tired, Leni. I might just go to sleep.’ He closes the door and I can’t help feeling down. When one of us loses, we all lose.

I crawl into bed too, even though it’s not even nine. I’m nearly asleep when my phone beeps with a text.

Hey pretty girl, congrats on your race. We sucked tho! Wish we were together tonite. Love u. Adam xxx

He’s attached a topless selfie. I send a text back telling him not to worry about the race. But I don’t attach myself topless because I don’t want to end up on some dodgy website or Adam’s Facebook page. I’m not that dumb.

The photo of Adam is hot. But I’m still not sure. Us. Adam and Me. Me and Adam. Six months ago I started to get the feeling Adam was into me. He’d look my way during training. He even got in trouble for it a few times. *Eyes in the boat, Langley.* I was flattered. Adam’s popular and good-looking in a wiry, freckled way. He has beautiful eyes that are distractingly light blue with dark edges,

a drop-off to deeper water. Word filtered down. *Adam Langley likes Leni Popescu*. I'd never had a boyfriend before so I froze. What next?

Adam texted me one night and I opened it like a present.

Hi. It's Adam. Are you awake?

I was little-girl-on-a-pony excited. We texted until after midnight and I fell asleep, my phone pressed against my cheek.

At school the next day he asked me to sit with his group. I usually sat with my friend Audrey and her knitting circle, but she pushed me to meet Adam instead. Something about it being my *Sixteen Candles* moment. When the popular guy falls for the quiet girl. Perhaps if she'd known a simple seat change would alter our friendship forever, she wouldn't have been so keen.

Adam and I ate lunch together with the whole of Year Eleven watching on. 'See you at rowing?' he said. 'Drink after?' I realised it was probably a date.

After rowing he took me for coffee, bought me a little square of caramel slice and asked me to a party that weekend. I said yes, with the taste of chocolate melting on my tongue. He held my hand across the table and, even though he acted confident and sure of himself, his palm was sweaty and shaking.

At the party we kissed in a dark corner of the garden. Then he held my hand again – this time in front of everyone and when he dropped me home he asked me to be his girlfriend. I said 'yeah, okay'. Even though I didn't know him at all. Because that's what you say when

a good-looking, popular guy asks you to go out. Don't you? Especially if you've been plucked from the wall like a creeping vine. The imprint of your body left behind on the bricks.

It was only later that I thought about the kiss.

First kisses should be lingering and exciting. Ours was rushed and awkward. He smelt and tasted all wrong. He kept poking his tongue into my mouth like he'd lost something in there and was trying to find it. It was like he was a piece of Duplo and I was a piece of Lego. Right from the start, Adam didn't feel like the right fit.

I should break up with him, but I don't even know how. Adam's the only boyfriend I've ever had. How do I tell him he's not the one?

Lying on my side I look at my inspiration board – always the last thing I do before sleep. It's a corkboard full of photos, quotes and inspiring things. It keeps me going when my body and head ache and everything feels too hard. When motivation hides from me.

In the middle is a cut-out of the Head of the River cup, which I've coloured in with gold pen. I want it so badly it hurts. I like to touch the cup with my hand and imagine my bow girl going over the line first, thousands of people screaming on the banks of the Barwon River. Thinking about it gives me goose bumps. There's a quote posted up that I think about during training: 'Pain is just weakness, leaving the body'. To the left of that is an old newspaper story I found online and printed out.