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## WAGER

**B**y morning someone dies, but at that moment I couldn't have known. The only thing I did know then was that I was feeling overwhelmingly out of place in her bathtub. A set of horse hooves brushed against the back of my head before the plastic animal dropped into the lukewarm water. She had her very own bathroom now; I felt a pang of something like pride, seeing how the tiles fitted all the way along the walls. This was my mother's Act II, Scene One, and I had come into possession of unwanted tickets (the reviews had been unforgiving in the past). She'd invited me in the hopes I would rewrite my companion guide to *us*.

I was always going to come and see her, of course; it was so rare, the invitation. Despite the circumstances I still loved her.

'Tommy, just come on up, I'll have your stepdad collect you at the depot, you can stay the weekend, I'll

cook you hot meals, you can meet your little brother. Will you, bub, for him – do it for little Joe.’

I told her I had never met Darryl and he wasn’t my stepdad and she said, ‘Well, technically he is,’ and then I thought it best not to argue her logic since I was paying for the out-of-state phone call.

I arrived a week later in the bus depot; Darryl was there waiting in a button-down that was tucked into jeans. My mother had told me he’d be waiting at the red ute, which he was. He was wringing his hands as I approached him and for a moment I thought he might be readying himself to clip me around the earhole or throw me an uppercut; my best defence was striding toward him with a hand outstretched to shake his. I never knew what to expect with her man of the moment.

There were rock ballads wafting on low volume, almost imperceptibly on the stereo. Besides some unruly sideburns, Darryl was clean-shaven.

‘Your mum talks about you heaps, Tom.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Deadset.’

I leant back into my seat and closed my eyes and listened to the V8.

I remembered the ocean roaring when I was a kid; most nights I’d dreamt of riding my BMX down my street, riding toward the sun being blocked out and a

tidal wave coming toward me, I never turned back in the dream, I just kept riding and then woke up on impact. I remember everything my mother doesn't. I remember when my sister was being born in the hospital and the midwife said to push, push, push, and then she pushed and the midwife cried and my dad ran out of the room and some other woman's baby was born at the same moment, and that woman's baby was crying instead. Mum just looked at the midwife and said, 'Isn't that the most beautiful sound?'

I remembered the taste of coins, house keys, zipper ends – sometimes I could lick a brass key and all of my childhood would return. I remembered I used to pry conch shells off the reef, collect hot wattle flowers and suck out the honey inside; I used to feed the possums that came near my bedroom window at nights. They'd scratch at the fly screen until you pushed a bread crust out, I'd save them from school lunches. In my mind now, I remember coming in from playing late, it's this time of night, then I see my mother standing in the hall, leaning into the wall – she was always like that, she never rushed forward for an embrace, never bent down at the knees.

I remembered my real dad would come back after working seasons in the bush and bring huge gifts; once, I got a massive soft serpent and draped it on the end of my bed, it was taller than me. Our life on the coast

was good, on our land. Then after I was initiated and Dad hadn't come back for three years and I was twelve, Mum had said I was all grown up then, said I was a big man and didn't need her anymore and then she left. That was the cruel summer before my new life at the new school, the one that I got sent to in Sydney, the boarding college. I went to bed at 8.30 pm every night and woke at 6.30 am every morning. I did homework almost every day, I graduated, and now I was halfway through university and the only thing that had ever been more than ordinary was visiting Mum every other summer. Wherever she was.

'You done in there?'

'Getting out now,' I hollered back.

I stepped out of the bath, dried myself with the stiff towel, put the same clothes back on and went into the kitchen.

'Listen, bub, the fuc— the stove is on its last legs, like the showerhead, THANK YOU HOUSING COMMISSION! So Darryl and Joe are going to stay in and have micro stuff. How bouts you and me go to the RSL for a baked dinner?'

'Sounds good to me,' I said.

'Alrighty, gimme five,' Mum said as she nipped into the bathroom.

'So how's university, mate?' Darryl asked.

'It's good, it's different a bit.'

‘Yeah? Lots of parties – I hear they have big parties at university?’

‘Not so much,’ I said, wiping steam out of my ear with the towel end as I leant down and tickled Joe on the tummy.

‘Don’t!’ he screamed at me and ran to the TV.

‘You want a beer?’

‘Alright, thanks,’ I said.

‘So you studying science?’

‘Biochemistry.’

‘What job you get after that, mate?’

‘Hopefully, um, become a doctor.’

‘Waah that’s huge!’

‘Hopefully,’ I said in a little voice so he wouldn’t think I was trying to be a big man under his roof.

‘Let’s go then.’ Mum appeared with dark lipstick on and a nice floral dress.

‘Watch out!’ Darryl yelled, eyeing Mum.

Mum clip-clopped in her high heels to Darryl and put an arm around his waist and said, ‘I bought it for Tommy! You know Tommy here, when he was a little fella he always used to cry when I picked him up from school, he’d say *Mummy why can’t you wear flower dresses like all the other mums* – hahahaha I’d always be in me snooker shark gear, tight black jeans and stuff – he hated it!’

‘Did ya mate? Was she an embarrassment?’

I laughed with them and acted as if my young self was an idiot.

‘Give us a lift, hun,’ Mum said, grabbing her handbag.

‘Alright, alright, but get a cab home, okay.’

‘Course, be good, Joey,’ Mum said, leaning down and putting lipstick on the top of his forehead.

‘He’s staying here?’ I said at the door.

‘Yeah, just be two minutes, mate, he’s watching telly.’

‘Let’s bring him in the car?’

‘Honest, mate, two minutes, he’ll be fine.’ Darryl and Mum were already out the door. I looked back at Joe watching a DVD of Nemo about a metre from the screen.

I pulled the door behind me and heard the deadlock click between my half-brother and me. I climbed into the ute next to Mum and the whole world felt out of place.

We arrived at the RSL quick enough and I went to the bathroom while Mum ordered the roasts. In the bathroom I called the latest house number of my mum’s that I had.

It rang for a long time, too long, and then finally someone was there yelling and out of breath: ‘Yeah?’

‘It’s me, Tommy, Mum just asked me to call and see if you got back to Joe alright.’

‘Everything’s fine, mate.’

‘Okay, bye then,’ I said and quickly hung up.

I joined the line, next to Mum, and she handed me a tray with cutlery.

‘This is like school.’

‘Is it? Whattya gunna have?’

‘I dunno, rissoles and chips?’ I asked it as a question to see if she approved.

‘Good as, Tommy, the rissoles are killer here.’

We took our food and schooners out into the beer garden so Mum could smoke.

‘So, whattya think of Darryl?’

‘I don’t have an opinion yet, he seems nice.’

‘He’s nice, Tommy, I promise you, not like the others, this one. Good as gold.’

‘That’s nice to hear.’

‘So cheers.’ She lifted her beer toward me and we clinked glasses. ‘Cheers to your first visit since high school!’

‘Yep, cheers,’ I said, making eye contact with the beer.

‘You remember everywhere you visited me?’

‘I think so,’ I said, cutting open the hard, dry rissole while Mum lit a cigarette and took a good go at her beer.

‘The first place I went for work was the rig, but you couldn’t visit me there.’

‘Tell me about the places you lived at, I’d like to hear.’ It was true, I liked the past, I liked remembering

it and letting it go; it was like bringing down the walls of a dilapidated house, salvaging the frame.

‘So the first place I went to was the rig, it was board included, had to pass the test first, but passing wasn’t easy – I was up against men; even though my job was just going to be in the kitchen you still had to pass the training if there was ever gonna be an emergency – had to know how to escape from a helicopter, see, since that’s how we went there from land. We were in a simulator one, and the helicopter rolled over as it landed, I had to remove the window, had to unlatch my seatbelt and my body just kind of glided out and everyone followed me through the window. Floating to the surface felt like it took ages, but once I took that breath at the top I knew I’d bagged the job.’

‘Hold on, it was underwater?’

‘Oh yeah, yep, underwater.’

‘That’s impressive, what happened afterward, in the job?’

‘Okay, well, my room, the window was small, could see just the ocean, no land at all. And those things move, they’re not just stuck in the ground, they bob around and you get seasick just like on a boat – I had to cook too, for about a hundred men, day and night, twelve-hour shifts no matter how high the seas were, still had to cook. Our cooking team, we were also the medics on board, so when something went wrong – and it did

all the time, mate – we'd have to stop cooking and run out and help some bloke and then come back in and keep cooking. Even in the green eye.'

'What's green eye?'

'When the ocean is high and the whole rig is moving and you turn green, you just need to vomit – even then we still had to cook and serve dinner – we had rubber on the bottom of the plates, so they wouldn't move, see. On me third week there the alarms sounded, everyone put on their survival suits for emergencies so I threw on mine, bit slow – thinking it was a drill. I get out there, no fucking drill, young bloke with kids at home, he's pinned under some bit of machine from the crane. His face, I won't forget it, just sorrowful, just so sad because he knew. All we could do was comfort, clean him as best we could, give him a painkiller while it took Medivac four fucking hours to arrive. He lost his legs, both of them, that bloke. I left the rig after the next month's contract, I was done after that.'

'Where'd you go then?' I asked, gesturing to the waiter with two fingers and mouthing the word *same*.

'Sydney, found an advert for barmaid with a room upstairs and I didn't have no house so it suited me. Bub, you can't ask the kitchen hand for beers! I'll go.'

'No, I'll go, you eat something.'

I ordered two schooners again and returned to her finished plate. I was glad she'd eaten something.

‘Then what happened?’ I asked, lowering myself onto the picnic bench.

‘Well, the pub in Sydney, I had you out to visit the next summer, you remember?’

I did remember, I remembered being a year in at the boarding school and having no place to go, and my room buddy had a magic 8-ball next to his bed and I shook it most of the year when he wasn’t around. I’d whispered *is my mother crazy?* It read *it is decidedly so.* I shook again and whispered, *will she ever come back for me?* The 8-ball read *don’t count on it.*

She did though.

‘So yeah, next place was the pub, shitty place, you remember – no kitchen and bathroom, just the basin?’

‘Yep.’

‘Just a shared bathroom down the hall. My window saw a colourful row of shops. One was a Chinese restaurant – very good Chinese food! It was a hotel the place I worked in. Not the best hotel in town, just the corner pub with accommodation where all walks of life would hang out, don’t get me wrong, bums mostly. Parties all the fucking time. Someone wins the pokies – party; someone wins the trots – party. Someone dies – party – I mean, they were mourning, but after a few hours it’s just another fucking party. So then one day I hear this noise, young woman crying. I knock on the room door, her man comes to the door,

*No fucking problem here*, yeah right I think. I look at the girl, she's sitting on the filthy carpet, holding her cheeks in her fists, just bashing herself, she was bleeding alright. Un-con-sol-able that girl, so I called the local hospital, they sent out a team and off she went to psych ward – hope she's alright now.'

'Did you find out if she was okay?'

'Nup, kicked him out the next day, not my fucking problem. Got enough.'

'What did you do next?' I asked her as I slid my inedible meal away.

'Got a job at Marble Bar, middle of bloody nowhere. Fifty degrees most days, twenty rooms to clean. Also cooked with the other women breakfast, lunch, dinner, and pumped petrol. Reckon I helped run the whole town, thinking about it! You liked it, that place, there was a swimming pool, you remember?'

I did: I'd stayed at the swimming pool, head underwater to try to get away from my mother's drinking at the time. 'I remember.'

'It was pretty gorgeous there, all that red dirt, but it was more dangerous. Different, like, there were scorpions a size bigger than a big man's boot. There were snakes every fucking where and roos taller than the communal clotheslines! I got used to it though. Then it rained sometimes and the frogs sang for days. I could sit at my room window and watch snakes going for it

with the frogs. Couldn't stop nature. Then a Category 5 came, Cyclone Chris. Jesus fucking Christ, I was alone at my window with only a dingo pup who could see what was coming. Socks I named him. He was a good stray, I'd kicked him out of my way so many times but he always jumped on my legs in time to save me from stepping on baby brown snakes or what not.

'Socks followed me into a room that night, to hide from Cyclone Chris. The wind was strong. The power went. I picked up the phone but no signal. I was feeling really lost and scared. I was crying then and was real scared, truly. Socks jumped from the mattress he was sittin' on and landed on my belly doing triple somersaults until I laughed myself to sleep. He knew. He knew what I was feeling like, shit scared and stuff.'

'What happened with the cyclone?' I asked, genuinely interested.

'Aw, after a couple of hours the sun came up and the phone rang – one of the local roadhouses had been flattened and the eye wasn't even with us yet. Pete, my supervisor, drove me out with him to the stock unit, and the dingo pup Socks ran off in the scrub. When we got to the stock shed the roller door at the dock out back was starting to cave from the rain. *If this door goes the whole building will go and take us with it* – that's what Pete said to me. Whatever we could find we staked against the door for two hours straight while the door

would bend in and rain ran like a waterfall down the sides. The boxes were collapsing, we were exhausted, and then it stopped, the eye was on us then and it was still, no sound, no wind. Like everything that was alive had gone and everything was dead. We couldn't speak, we walked to the door on the corner side of the building and then it started again. We just ran inside and held down the roller door until Chris rode out of town and left us alone.'

'What happened then?' I said.

'I gotta go to the ladies, gimme a sec.' Mum ran into the RSL. Before I could reflect on anything she was back with two more schooners. I knew I couldn't stomach any more beer but I thanked her to be polite.

'So after I left the desert I went to more desert!'

'Where'd you go?'

'Got the East-West mail plane to take me to Tom Price, I thought it was a good-luck job, having your name and all. Anyway, it wasn't glamorous, you never came there, I was a security guard. I was live-in as usual, good for me to save some money, but there it was hell. On country you see, brothers and sisters got money from the government every Thursday and then shit shows for four days. I even went to the local council and said *will you please bloody give them grog money on fucking Monday when the pub's closed!* They didn't listen, they didn't fucking care.'

‘Who?’

‘GUBBA-ment, Tommy! Anyway, I kept working there, I learnt their lingo, they called me sister, so all good, right? Wrong! One night, bloody fight breaks out over fuck knows what and everyone’s throwing pool balls and fucking cues. Deadly weapons if you ask me. People were even smashing chairs. I came in the middle of it, the middle of the bar and screamed *stop now! That’s enough!* – and one bitch come up to my face with a glass, wanted to glass me. I said *you think that’s a good idea?* That’s all I could think to say at the time. Luckily some of the brothers come up then and said, *no she’s a sister* or something. I couldn’t remember, I was so scared. Next thing I knew I’m out in the carpark shaking hands with all those crazy violent bunch and wishing them well on their way home. I don’t even know what came out of my mouth that night, but I wasn’t killed, the staff weren’t killed, I still reckon to this day, a spirit came and spoke for me, stopped me from getting my face slashed apart!’

‘And then?’ I asked, but she was already up getting more drinks for us. My mother, in a floral dress, weaving her way through the patrons, drunk and unstable on her high shoes, I saw her bump into the back of another woman, spilling the white wine in the woman’s hand. ‘Fucking watch it,’ she yelled at Mum, but Mum didn’t notice.

She came back with a schooner of beer for me, and a shot of clear liquid and lemon for herself.

‘What are you drinking?’ I asked.

‘Bub, I never get to go out ever, Darryl and me are always at home, please just don’t bother me having a couple of drinks?’ She eyed the table with the white-wine woman sitting there.

‘I won’t, it’s okay,’ I said, even though I was already drunkish-talking. ‘Where’d you go then?’

‘What fucking ever Tommy! I went to the same old live-ins, same old fucking shit holes.’

‘It’s okay, Mum.’ I tried to reassure her anger, ‘I’m just making conversation, I like when you tell me stories.’

‘There’s only one story true, Tommy, I was a no-good mother to you.’ She swallowed hard then and I let her finish. ‘I was dirt sad, Tommy, that’s sad when not even the free dirt, the free life on earth, don’t make you thankful.’

‘Let’s get a cab,’ I said.

‘Naahh, let’s not.’ She pointed her index finger then and poked me on the tip of my nose. I thought it was odd, and that no-one had ever done that to me before.

‘I love you, boy, but I did you wrong,’ she said and then got up from the bench, walked to the open glass door to the bar, and through it. I finished my beer slowly, fished a cigarette out of her forgotten packet and crushed it

like I used to do when I was a kid. I didn't like all this; I wished I wasn't feeling this way, with everything a tilt. I wished my mum and I could communicate in other ways, but every memory, ever since I could remember, there was always a drink in the foreground.

Mum hadn't returned so I went in the bar and found her at the poker machines. Resting another beer at her chest and tapping at the buttons below the fluorescent-lit screen. I stood behind her, a couple of other older women gathered round. Mum was winning money: 'How much did you put in, Mum?' I asked gently.

'Twenty bucks – now look, Tommy – \$210! – You must be a good luck charm I reckon.'

The ladies whooped with her as the numbers went up to \$230, \$260, \$320, back to \$200, then \$260. 'Mum, stop now, can't you just collect it and then we'll get a cab?' I tried to coerce her, keep-the-money-and-run style; I hoped she would stop. I hoped she'd save it to fix the oven or the showerhead, anything but staying here with the aged sirens gathering around to sing her into the rocks. She tap-tapped again and again.

'Please, Mum.'

'Leave your mum be, she's winning good, lad!' one of the vulture women said then.

'Don't worry, Tommy, I've got plenty of money.' Mum said this, paused momentarily and then threw her arm toward the bar. 'Only problem he's sitting up there

still alive!’ At her punch line, the vulture women chorled, laughing at some inside joke. I didn’t get it, and shot my eye in that direction. I couldn’t miss the side-burns: Darryl was drinking at the bar. I hurried toward him, eyeing the floor, looking for my tiny, crawling brother.

‘Where’s Joe?’

‘Hey mate!’ He gestured toward the barmaid, one arm around my shoulders. ‘Bev, this is Margie’s young boy!’

‘Where the hell is Joe?’ I nudged his arm off my shoulder and said the words clear enough so he knew I was serious.

Darryl lowered his voice, talked as if I were standing behind him. ‘The door locks, mate.’

I turned on my feet and rushed toward the glass doors, and heard him sling ‘Have a beer Tom, mate!’ at my back.

I glanced back through the glass as I passed it. Darryl was making the barmaid laugh, and there was my mum, also laughing, with those nearby predators. I had the sharp apprehension I’d stepped out of a sort of asylum. And then I ran.

‘I ran as fast as I could, and in what direction I could remember.’

‘At what hour approximately did you then ring the emergency services?’ The officer leant his notebook against his thigh then. Light blended the walls behind

Tara June Winch

him, made it all lemon-tinted, shadow-less, and everything appeared one-dimensional, like a pantomime backdrop. Like the theatre sets we'd painted at the boarding college. When we were just boys.

'Too late,' I said.

## THE LAST CLASS

‘Who brought the knife? In fact it wasn’t a good idea to have a knife at school.’

‘I can’t remember if it was Ahmedov’s knife, or he had only taken it. I just remember it was him that flicked the knife back, and the splatter against your long skirt. You brushed your hand against the fabric and I said “it’s not ruined, it won’t stain” but I didn’t quite know how to say *ruined* or *stained* so I said “for the moment it’s bad but after wash it’s good”. Do you remember?’

‘Yes, I do.’ Kamla almost laughed at the thing we both remembered.

‘Listen to us now – we can speak fluently!’

‘Yes, it’s true.’ She looked sad then.

‘How is your family?’ I said.

‘Well,’ she said.

The screen beside us flashed and announced her number and we both looked down at her ticket.

‘It’s me – I hope to see you again someday,’ she said.

‘God willing.’

And we kissed on each cheek and said goodbye. I walked back to the end of the growing line that was snaked around the building. During one of our classes, comparing our employment visas and how they’d read ABLE TO WORK, Amina – my quick and closest friend – had said that the cards should instead read ABLE TO WORK AS A CLEANER. We laughed about it then; I can see her now taking the end of her hijab and covering her mouth as she did when she cackled, covering her teeth, then wiping the laughter-tears that would gather at each eye. We’d become friends on the first day, her and Selma and I, all three of us had known a little English and Arabic so we were drawn to each other for that reason. It was like that at school, we all spent time together and we all spoke our new language, but for lunch and during break we naturally ordered ourselves by the ability to chat freely, to speak as fast and widely as we liked. Our lives outside school – in the street, posting letters, buying groceries, translating clothing sizes, dealing with bills, school notices, our children’s homework, doctors, pharmacies, the labels on medicines, train ticket booths, and, most dreaded of all, *the telephone* – were in translation, confusion, so it was natural, I think, that we all did separate a little. In the same way, there was something very intimate between all of us in the class; we shared something extraordinary,

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so we were joined forever in some way. We all were. We'd remember each other; I want to remember each other.

Before school, way before, we were different. We were nothing, we shared no common tongue with our new country and we'd spoken all different languages and had all manner of ideas on how to live. We'd come by sea, by foot, by flight; some stowaways, some stamped. Some waited seven years, and lived four to a *chambre de bonne*, shared a USB of prepaid internet each night and Skyped their families so far away, babysat babies that weren't their own before having the courage to apply to stay, to bring their children over finally, to go to school. Others had applied for asylum right away. I myself had slept in the park with my children for two nights before being told about, and moving to, the place that the local people called the *fourrière*, which I found out a long time later meant the unwanted dogs home: the pound. I don't want to remember that time, though – it's in the dark past, in that forever-time that we think will never change before it does. I have to carry it, it's filed away in my rib bones, I carry it, but I don't want to remember.

When we got to school we were all barely legal, barely audible, and now I see Kamla and we can talk clearly about the errors of our speech in the past. Not when we were infants, but when we were grown women, mothers. No one knows this experience but us.

I remember every single day of school. Isn't it strange, I think. I don't remember all the days of my children's lives, I don't remember every day of the terrible times, but I remember school. I recall the first appointment, the glossy blue folder I was given by the lady from immigration, how kind she was, how I watched the video on equality and democracy with the plastic translation handle against my ear, and how I took the test for TB and the cold glass pressed against my breasts. I'd wept a lot and used up so many tissues, had drawn the final tissue from the carton, and then the nice radiology assistant had gone to find another box of tissues – which finally made me realise I needed to stop crying. I remember the doctor also, another kind woman, who wrote out seven different sticky yellow notes for me that I've still kept somewhere. One for an optometrist because my eyes were weak, she said, though I still haven't gotten the glasses, maybe at the end of this month. She wrote another note for a pap smear at the polyclinic that Doctors Without Borders ran, and that didn't cost a thing. She'd written another sticky note for the dentist, because my teeth were bad. We also talked about the foods I love and the ones she loved and missed too, and she wrote down a very good, reasonably priced Lebanese restaurant in the city.

The following week was my first day of school, at thirty-one years old. The evening before, I'd laid out

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a long skirt, opaque stockings, a long blouse that tied above my collarbone, a purple scarf. I got up very early, when the sky was still inky blue, and prepared my makeup, pinned my hair. Selma had shown me a photo on her cell a few weeks later of her hair that she'd done in the morning – it was wavy ringlets, beautifully curled and blow-dried. 'I do it like this everyday,' she'd said. 'But then you tie it up in your scarf all day,' I said, noting the obvious. 'But I know how beautiful it is under my scarf' – she giggled then, her fingers flat, pressed just below her nose. Did I cover my mouth when I laughed too, I wondered?

That first day we'd all been together in the Beethoven room; it was cold, I remember. The rooms were named after composers – Chopin, Schumann, Bach, Vivaldi – and all the rooms were cold since, as we were to discover, the temperatures were controlled by the local council. We were from forty-one different countries, the teachers told us; they told us many things in French and even though the first day they had a projector set up with images to match, pictures with red circles and red slashes across the images, the universal sign for *not allowed*, it had still been difficult to understand. They told us there was no spitting in the classroom or the quadrangle outside, that we were obligated to speak French from morning until evening. We could not smoke inside, we could not pick the fruit

and vegetables from the garden in the centre of the courtyard, we should respect the tables and chairs and drink our tea and coffee outside, and we could not have our phones on in class. Most importantly, they said, the classroom was a public space, a neutral place, a place free of religion, and so we could not practise our religious beliefs in the classroom; no one was to wear symbols of religion, the teacher said, no jewellery with a cross or anything like that. Someone put his hand up then, I remember; he'd asked: 'And what about the hijab?'

'It's complicated,' the teacher had said in a way to end the conversation and moved on to the curriculum and sorting us into our classes. I was placed with Amina and Selma; we happened to sit together, by chance. All of us students arranged ourselves into the bracket-shape of assembled chairs and tables. We went through our objectives:

1. understand, read and write French
2. learn the social structure of France
3. understand how police, the postal system etc work
4. learn how to get around the city
5. prepare for the exams
6. obtain a certificate of French comprehension.

'Every time you come, you must sign in to the class,' the teacher said. 'If you do not turn up to class you do not get your papers to stay here. If you have a job, your boss will see the paperwork; if you are not here and not

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at your work then you will not get your visa to stay. In the morning you will learn to speak; in the afternoon you will learn to write.'

Many other days happened after our first: we became close, we laughed a lot with the teachers in class, sometimes we watched films without subtitles, some people graduated without fanfare and we said goodbye, every day we took turns to bring food and sweets to each other from our countries. Sometimes on weekends we'd visit second-hand markets together, and meet at the housing-association apartments for meals too, although never at Amina's apartment since she was embarrassed of her apartment, on account, she said, of the mismatched furniture that the housing association wouldn't let her change.

Amina, Selma and I were having coffee during break when she explained we could never come over.

'I said, madam, please we need to get more furniture, I just want to add a sofa for guests to sit on – it's embarrassing having this outdoor furniture inside!'

'What did she say?'

'She said no, because what if there is a fire, you will make us pay for your sofa if it is destroyed. I said, madam, I promise I won't make you pay for it, I'll sign a contract. No, no no! she said.' Every time Amina was angry outside of school she'd take a selfie, *the angry selfie* we called it. After the argument with

the housing lady she went outside and took her first one, and she showed us. 'Oh please do this every time,' we pleaded with her, laughing. Every week she came in and showed us new ones, scrolling through dozens of selfies, stern eyes, pursed lips, different coloured scarves, and different waiting-room backdrops. Most days we laughed so hard we cried. As we became more fluent in French, the language began to weave into our conversations at break and lunch. One day the three of us were talking about an exam or our children not sleeping through the night or something or other, and we were speaking, by habit, a mix of Arabic, English and French, each of us starting our sentence in one language and finishing in another, finishing each other's sentences in another language and so on for a few quick, distorted few minutes. I threw my arms around my friends' waists and leant into their faces, serious, but half smiling: 'Ahh, girls', I said, 'can we please just choose one language per conversation?' We looked at each other wide-eyed then and began to cackle, cackle until I almost peed, and our laughter bellowed through the quadrangle. 'We sound like witches,' Selma said – which made us laugh even louder, deeper. I looked around the courtyard: there were some men staring at us near the vegetable garden, smoking cigarettes, bemused. I wasn't embarrassed, we laughed even more. 'We are fucking idiots,' Amina said.

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‘Yes, we are fucking idiots,’ Selma agreed, eyes wide, nodding, laughing, I felt so free then, so perfectly free.

There were arguments at school too, sadder days, but we were changed from them, we became better, more whole I think. Once I wanted to come to school and talk to my friends and complain that my husband wouldn’t allow me to buy new shoes this month but Selma was visibly upset, her grandmother’s house had been bombed. Her grandmother was safe but when Selma had Skyped with her younger sister who was ten years old, her sister had laughed about the bombs, how funny it was that they fell right on her grandmother’s house when she was out getting groceries. Selma was smoking cigarettes that day, she’d never smoked before, and she held it like a strange small torch in her fingers, puffed and winced as she told us: ‘It’s like they see the bombing as so normal now, and it scares me, that maybe she doesn’t know how to talk about how she really feels, like she is actually in shock?’ I didn’t complain about my husband and new shoes in the end.

The next day Selma stayed home from school, had gone to the doctor’s and got a certificate for stress. Amina had the day off also; she had to take her children to get some new documents at the council. I had lunch with Sev, another student from our class, at the Turkish cafe nearby school; we both ordered chorba soup. Sev had come with his young family; he was trying to find

a bigger apartment so they didn't have to all sleep in the same bed, the five of them. We sat under the paper curtains and he began telling me about a rumour at school, that someone had won the lottery, but then he stopped mid-sentence and gasped. Something distracted him from behind me. He lowered his voice and spoke in English instead. 'Oh my goodness, that woman behind you, who is she, she's not from school?' I looked back. 'No, she's not,' I said. 'What?' 'Look at the young girl with her – the woman just grabbed her ponytail, her braid, just yanked it like five times, look at the girl's face!' he said. I turned and looked, it was all red, her ears flushed red too, and she held her small hands over her ears, her fingers at her hairline. Beneath her spectacles we could see she was silently crying, the woman's body jutted out on her chair from the restaurant table, scrolling through her telephone as if none of it had happened. 'Oh my goodness, how can someone do that?' Sev said. 'I can't eat anymore.' 'I don't blame you,' I said. We both were so upset that we left the restaurant, our meals unfinished, and walked back to school. 'Do you think it's strange?' I began evenly. 'We've seen war, we've seen dead bodies, people who stop breathing, buildings gone to rubble, and here we cry over a girl's hair being yanked?' 'I don't know if it's strange or not, I feel like we're really close to something here though, always on the edge of being hurt – maybe

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because we can't speak the language yet, because we couldn't just go over to the woman and say in French that that was not a kind thing to do. Maybe because it's all inside us?' 'I don't know,' I said, 'you think if we could speak French we'd say something anyway?' He didn't know the answer and when we returned to school we changed the subject.

The afternoon classes were taught by Martine. At first I wasn't sure I liked her. She'd always start conversations that often turned into arguments among the students. She brought up polygamy, racism, brought up politics and homosexual parenting – I was open-minded, I thought, but many of the other students weren't and often someone's homophobia, rightly perhaps, lost them friends. One girl, Alia, seemed nice enough when I first met her, but after she started to say in class how disgusting homosexuals were, how horrible, I never could look at her again. I've always thought if you haven't got something worthwhile to fight about, don't fight at all. Another student, Sufjan, had got angry one day too; he'd stood up and yelled, 'We don't fucking fit in here, yes we are here, yes there is no war in the street, but it isn't our home, we aren't really welcome. My wife can't find a job, after school I can't find a job. What will we do? Watch television? Our children will hate this country of France because they'll see we never become nothing here. We stay as nobody here.'

‘You wish you were home?’ Martine had asked then.

‘Sometimes, even if I would die there,’ he’d said, striding toward the classroom door to leave, but then he sat back down when Martine told him she understood completely and we all started to talk about the future, about some of our hopes and about the things we missed the most from home: pickled lemons, the feel of familiar seasons, understanding all the people in the streets – them understanding us.

It was maybe a few classes later, in the grip of winter, when Martine had explained a few things. It was the day Sultan admitted he had won the lottery and had brought two large cakes and bottles of juice, along with serviettes and plastic cups, to share with the class. Martine was floored; we all were shocked. ‘How much?’ ‘Five hundred thousand euros.’ ‘Will you buy a house?’ we all screamed; even Martine was saying to buy a house and take the rent as income. But Sultan said he’d keep all the money for his children, his grandchildren, that it wasn’t a big deal. He was very modest about it, or careful perhaps. I wasn’t sure what to think because he told the story so composed: how he always bought one scratch card with a packet of Marlboro Reds, five euros for the scratch card. ‘So you handed over the money?’ someone in the class narrated. ‘You took your cigarettes, you scratched outside?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘And then you just were shocked?’ ‘Yes,’ Sultan said again. I was watching him

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tell his story, so calm. He had a brand-new umbrella resting across the table, I remember looking at it, its green fabric, the gold handle, the spikes dipped in gold enamel. I wondered if anyone else noticed that nice umbrella too.

We were gathered around the table with the cake when Martine told us about the news. She took the whiteboard marker out and drew numbers on the board as she explained. She said, 'Now you are all able to get 350 hours in total, okay.' She drew a big 350 on the board, put a slash through it, that universal code again. After this class, she explained, there was no more funding, no more money for the program, and she said, 'Fifty hours maximum,' and she drew a bigger 50 on the board, circled it with the marker. She explained that after this class, we couldn't come back and ask for more help with French. She was disappointed about it, and explained her disappointment then: 'After this, they'll be students but they will be Americans, Canadians, Australians and British, and others; students will have to pay a lot of money for the classes.' We were feeling deflated after the story of Sultan and the cake and asked questions to which she answered a lot of *impossibles* with. She explained that maybe it was good because after this course, because the course was ending, we could find work faster; we could earn a wage more quickly, have more money. But I think she could tell

that we didn't think there was much outside the school to look forward to, not being too capable in French just yet.

I looked at my friends, at Selma and Amina, and made a sad face with them.

That's when Ahmedov had the knife, he screamed then, a deep 'raaaah' noise from his stomach, it was aggressive and wild, but not frightening, almost like he was speaking up for a feeling we had all been suppressing, some wordless, formless thing. 'No school,' he yelled and held the knife up to his throat, the blade indenting the skin. His eyes were uncertain, as if he hadn't thought beyond this moment. Then he lunged at Sultan for a tiny second, before laughing and flipping the knife's blade back in its case, spraying Chantilly cream down Kamla's dress. No one said anything – just widened their eyes at each other, but Martine didn't like it, 'I don't like that,' she'd said and took the knife from his hand, put her palms on his shoulders and told him to calm down, calm down.

I thought about that strange day while I stood there in the unemployment line. In the whip of cold air, I pulled my coat in tight against my body, and wondered where my friends were right then. I thought about the previous night, and how bad the news had been on the television, how it seemed like the whole world was full of hating, and when my children and husband

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went to bed I had Googled *How to prove love in the world*; I was tired and so I clicked on the video results. I watched this strange black-and-white movie about some monkeys in an experiment. The monkeys were released into a divided cage. One side of the cage had a wire monkey with a bottle of milk; the other held a soft cloth monkey with no food. The monkeys all went to the cloth monkey. Some monkeys leant across, clutching the cloth monkey and drinking from the wire monkey, but still they all went to the cloth monkey and stayed with it for hours and hours.