



Rhiannon Wilde has been telling stories for as long as she can remember – inside her head, as well as through working as a journalist, terrible barista, and high school English teacher in Brisbane’s inner north. Rhiannon’s particular interests are caffeine, characters both real and imaginary, and the power of well-strung words to challenge and change us. Her second-person short story inspired by urban Brisbane, *You Deserve Nothing*, was longlisted for the Queensland Young Writer’s Award in 2014. *Henry Hamlet’s Heart* is her first novel, and won the State Library of Queensland Glendower Award for an Emerging Queensland Writer in 2019.

Henry Hamlet's Heart

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For James

You were always there. There was a time, remember, that we even insisted on combining our names. What's the word for that? Memories that aren't just yours – glittering, gone.

Maybe it started then, soft and secret. Maybe it was later, after lying dormant like the flu.

Or maybe it never started. They say time isn't linear, right? There's not always a clear beginning, especially for the things that end us.

I

Maybe we were always two pieces of the same thing, but cut in half. Or with a bridge across them.

never

Maybe it started because of your face, so much more carefully made than other faces. Obviously fine-boned beautiful. The cheekbones. The Cupid's bow on your lips. Your *lips* – it might have been them.

meant

It could have been my mother, because she said that when you smiled it was like the sun. Or the time you fell and broke a

tooth, and I felt something – watching you cry – and thought,
it's the worst idea in the world, this.

to

The way you speak may have played its part. Up-talking,
confidence that so quickly bleeds to fear, the kick at the end of
your sentences.

want

Maybe it happened because you think nothing scares me, but
when I saw you in that picture I took, stretched out and struck
gold, I knew there was something:

you.

Anyway. You're the writer.

Part I

Ultimately, and precisely in the deepest and most important matters, we are unspeakably alone; and many things must happen, many things must go right, a whole constellation of events must be fulfilled, for one human being to successfully advise or help another.

– Rainer Maria Rilke

1

'Gran, are you a lesbian?' my brother asks at Sunday brunch. Hamish is twelve years younger than me, more Tasmanian devil than boy.

Mum and I exchange glances, but Gran just chucks him under the chin.

We're sitting in the winter sun at the café that's been at the end of our street since forever. I look over Mum's right shoulder and our house stares back at me, bright yellow with mismatched floral leadlight windows.

'Not quite, darling one,' Gran says to Ham in her lilting Irish accent. 'The term is "bisexual". Right, Henry?'

I feel my cheeks redden. I love Gran, and I'm thrilled for her and Marigold, but there are some images you don't want in your head just as the waiter delivers your eggs bene.

'I think so, yeah.'

'What does that mean?' Ham touches her cheek with his fat little palm.

'That I loved your pa, and now I love Marigold.'

'I love Goldie too,' Ham says. His little face lights up; Marigold has put in some serious brain-eating-children's-television time. 'Does that mean I'm a bike?'

Mum laughs softly.

I look at my dad; he's staring intently into space with a latte half-raised to his lips, probably painting in his head.

'Bi,' Gran corrects. She never loses her patience with Ham, which is more than any of the rest of us can say for ourselves.

'You might be,' Gran continues, wiping a bit of cake off his temple, 'but you'll figure all that out later on.'

Ham digests this for a moment, brushing his hair out of his eyes. He's the only one to have inherited Gran's vivid red. 'Will I get to live with you and Goldie if I am?'

Sensing that Gran's about to go off on one of her I'm-not-long-for-this-world tangents (she's sixty-eight, just a realist), Mum interrupts by pushing Ham's hot chocolate towards him. 'Look, Hambam, three marshmallows!'

He beams and picks one up, distracted by the sugar.

'Mollycoddler,' Gran whispers under her breath.

Mum ignores her. 'Henry, tell Gran again about your subject award.'

At the mention of school, I feel a prickle of anxiety about the impending first day back for Term 3, which is only a week away.

'Feels a bit grandiose to brag on myself,' I tell her. 'I'd much rather watch you do it.'

Dad grins suddenly, and says, 'Oh, don't try for humble now. We've got too many years of contradictory evidence!'

Dad is an artist who hated school, so every time I get even a participation award, he's ridiculously excited.

'Fine.' I put my drink down. 'I topped my class for English.'

'Out of *everyone*,' Dad emphasises, tapping the hinge on his glasses as if to demonstrate intelligence.

My school, Northholm Grammar School for Boys, isn't exactly top tier, more upper-mid. It is still an accomplishment, I suppose. There's pressure that comes with topping a subject though. An expectation that I have my shit together; that I know what I'm doing. I guess it does kind of look like that from the outside. Now that it's the last semester of year twelve, the pressure's only going to get worse.

I don't mention any of this at brunch; the fact I have no idea what I want to do with my life is my sweaty secret to carry around.

'That's lovely, darling,' Gran says distractedly, punching out a text (probably to Marigold) on her ancient Nokia.

'Mum!' my own mother admonishes. 'No mobiles at family brunch, you know the rules.'

Dad slowly slides his phone off the table and into his pocket.

'I am sorry, *Sybilla*,' Gran enunciates the dreaded full name with knife-like precision. 'I didn't realise somebody had died and made you the warden.'

'Oh, pl—'

'Let her text,' I placate. 'She's in love.'

Mum glares; Gran continues texting with one hand and eating her bagel with the other.

Ham suddenly drops the marshmallow he's been licking and jumps up. 'Len! Len! Len!'

'Hey, little man,' says a smooth voice.

I turn to see my best friend, Lennon Cane, gold-topped head caught in the sun and film camera looped around his neck.

Ham launches himself at Len, who catches him neatly. Len waves at the rest of the table. 'Everyone.'

'John Lennon!' Dad beams.

‘Christ,’ I say in mock-indignation. ‘They’ll let anyone in here.’

‘Obviously,’ Len returns, gesturing to me.

I wind up my middle finger at him.

Len’s been my best friend so long neither of us can remember why; it just is. He snaps a picture of Ham’s marshmallow massacre.

‘Lovely to see you, Lennon darling,’ Gran says. Evidently, Len is more motivation to break from the Marigold bubble than I am. ‘I hope you’re keeping well. How is your sister?’

‘She’s good.’ Len runs a hand through his hair where it’s longer and slicked back at the top. ‘Freaking out a bit because she’s starting uni mid-year.’

‘I’ll bet,’ says Gran, sipping her cappuccino noisily.

‘Lacey’s too good for a formal education,’ Dad laments. ‘You can’t teach creativity.’

‘She wants to be a *politician*, Dad.’ I huff. ‘Some stuff can be taught.’

‘You look snazzy!’ Mum compliments Len as a distraction.

He’s wearing a green printed shirt that Gran would call ‘zany’ and black suit pants rolled up over paisley socks and Doc Marten Oxfords. Let us simply say that of the two of us, Len is the one you would classify as having ‘style’. Our friend Emilia says he’s like an eighties song – ‘pretty but with dark themes’.

‘Not as snazzy as you, Billie,’ he teases.

‘Suck-up,’ I cough.

Mum swats my arm.

My own ‘style’ roughly translates to sweeping my untidy brown hair across my forehead and throwing on whatever’s clean. Song-wise, I’m straight-up noughties. Know thyself, etc.

'You staying to eat with us?' I ask.

Len shakes his head. 'I'm helping Lacey pack. Just needed a coffee break.'

I look around the table: Mum's glaring at Gran, who's still texting; Dad's lost in the distance again, painting another imaginary scene; and Ham's pulled apart his last marshmallow, which he's now spreading on the tabletop.

'Need any help?' I ask meaningfully.

'N—' Len notices my pleading look, and arranges his face into an expression of exaggerated gratitude. 'Yeah. We actually – desperately – do.'

His coffee order is called.

'Mum,' I ask quickly, 'can I go help Lacey pack up for uni?'

She looks slightly miffed at being left alone with Gran, but she can't say no to Len. No-one can. 'Oh, all right. I'll see you later.'

'How come he's allowed to leave?' Gran demands.

'Oh, you're listening now, are you?' Mum returns. 'I thought you only communicated in smiley faces these days.'

'You know what, dear? Whenever I wonder what purgatory must be like, I think of you screeching "family time!" at me on a loop until I saw off both my ears.'

'Mum! That's a horrible thing to say.'

Len muffles a laugh and we leave them to it, ruffling Ham's hair on the way out until he squeals happily.

We weave the familiar streets between our houses quickly, Brisbane suburbia, blurred blue sky and bald jacaranda trees around us. It's pretty, but there's a sameness to the neat rows of Queenslanders that sometimes feels as close as the constant humidity.

Len's house is an immaculate white colonial that's set back off the main road by a heavy concrete fence. He enters the security code and the gate swings open into the tree-lined yard.

We clatter up the steps to the latticed verandah that hugs the house front, the only original feature besides the gnarled wooden floors.

Len's mum, Sarah, inherited this place. There's a pool and a tennis court, and a beaten brass plaque by the door that reads *Scott's Corner*.

Sarah died, suddenly, two years ago. Cancer. It was quick and aggressive and I didn't understand how it could happen. I didn't get how she could be here, Sarah Scott with her Len-eyes and gold tumble of hair, and then just *end* in an awful unwilling goodbye that took a few weeks and also everything.

'Scotland Yard,' Len says sarcastically now, pushing the door open.

When we step inside, it's white on white, save for a giant black chandelier and a framed photo: Len's dad, John, in his high school football uniform glory days.

The man himself is sitting directly underneath it, drinking coffee from a glass cup and reading the paper. His pale eyes flick up to meet mine briefly.

Visually, John is nothing like Len. He's all sharp cheeks and slicked chocolate-and-grey hair – kind of Byronic hero-ish. Dark and intense. A lot.

I look back to Len, who's already at the top of the giant staircase, his gold brow furrowed. He motions for me to follow.

Lacey pops her head around the door to her room, eyes bright. She's only eighteen months older than us, but she could be thirty with her severe bob and endlessly superior expression.

‘What are you doing here, Henri Antoinette? Don’t you have anything better to do?’

‘It would appear not.’

‘I saved him from family brunch,’ Len explains, handing Lacey her coffee.

‘Oh Lord, the Billie and Iris variety show.’ She takes a sip of her drink and tilts her head back. ‘I’m going to miss this. Apparently all the coffee in Victoria tastes like a burnt shoe.’

Len looks at her sardonically. ‘Where did you hear that?’

‘I read it somewhere.’

‘Isn’t Melbourne meant to be, like, the coffee capital of the country?’ I ask.

Lacey glares at us. ‘Just because I’m moving to another city doesn’t mean I accept its supremacy, okay? I’m in mourning.’

‘You’re only going there to study politics and become PM,’ Len reminds her. ‘Not relocate for good. That I won’t accept.’

She laughs briefly and then flicks her eyes (the same shape and sunstruck steel colour as Len’s) over to me. ‘Right. Henry, you’re useless at heavy lifting, yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘And Lennon, you are similarly afflicted.’

He looks affronted. ‘I can lift.’

She ignores him. ‘I’m thinking, the two of you can pack this stuff –’ she gestures vaguely to the haphazard piles of possessions strewn across the room ‘– into bags, and I’ll start putting the big stuff into boxes.’

‘Whatever you say, sarge,’ Len says under his breath.

It’s past five by the time we finish. Lacey surveys our handiwork and, sufficiently impressed, asks if we fancy attending a party.

‘Whose party?’ I ask.

‘Not whose party. The Party.’

‘The Party as in *The Party*?’

‘The Party’ is the honorary title given to the back-to-school event someone always throws at the start of each term. It’s usually held a full week before the holidays actually end to ensure maximum recovery time. (Last year, the entire football team got suspended for streaking down Queen Street and posting it online.)

Naturally, as school captain, I’m above such things. And, naturally, I wasn’t invited.

‘I don’t know. I wasn’t gonna go,’ Len says.

I turn to him in outrage. ‘You got an invite?’

He tips his head to one side semi-guiltily.

‘Only because Sean Heathcote’s little brother is hosting,’ Lacey puts in.

I guess Henry Hamlet isn’t exactly someone who screams ‘party’. He’s more the type to be seen screaming while running *away* from a party, but still.

(Did I not get an invite because I speak in third person too much? Do people *know*?)

‘We can go, if you want,’ Len offers.

‘Yeah!’ Lacey says. ‘You can be my plus one. As long as you expressly state it’s a pity date to anyone you speak to.’

‘What an offer.’

She laughs. ‘I’m kidding. You’re cute enough, since you stopped being an acne factory. Too uptight for my liking, but defs a solid seven.’ Lacey pats me on the back.

I shake my head. ‘My life’s ambition is complete – I’m a solid seven. I may as well just check out now.’

Len watches our exchange with amusement.

Then Lacey stands up, batting dust off the knees of her jeans. 'I'm leaving in an hour if you guys want a ride.'

I look at Len helplessly.

He shrugs. 'It could be fun.'

He would say that. He who slips in and out of social situations like jumpers, without lying awake half the night afterwards obsessing over everything he said.

'Fun like last time?' I ask.

Len smirks, remembering. 'Touché. Not many people can say they've vomited into a container holding somebody's dogs' ashes.'

'It was the only available vessel!' I cry. 'God, I'm definitely going to hell for that, aren't I?'

'Yep.'

'You're the one who said tequila wouldn't make me sick, and helped clean up Lucky's entire top layer. We're going to hell together.'

He rolls his eyes. 'So are we going to this thing tonight, or what?'

I want to say no, but something stops me. It *is* the last semester of our misspent youth. The last clump of weeks before we leave high school's sweaty bosom behind and Enter The World.

'Fine. Let's go.'

'You sure?'

'Yeah.'

Len eyes me cautiously. 'No tequila.'

We make our way back down the ornate staircase. His dad's gone out.

It's beautiful, don't get me wrong – but there's something about the Cane house that reminds me of Queensland summer. Too-bright light and then showers that flood you in before you notice it was even raining.

The Party is in full swing by the time we pull up outside the sprawling Hamilton house in Lacey's car. Laughter and music twist together on the wind and panic rises in my chest. Len puts his hand on my shoulder, more to force me forwards than anything.

Sam Heathcote greets us in the doorway. 'Lacey Cane!' he cheers. 'Little Cane! And ...'

He looks me up and down. I wait for him to add 'and friend' or something, but he floats away instead. We stare after him.

'Off to a roaring start, then,' I grumble.

'At least he didn't kick you out!' Lacey says, hoisting a sixpack of beers, as well as one of something stronger, inside.

Len looks like he's trying not to laugh. I elbow him in the ribs.

Lacey disappears into a group of squealing St Adele's girls. She's got a silk dress on that I remember Sarah wearing. Len watches her and chews his lip.

We stand in the foyer for a bit, searching for people we know among the dozens of teenagers clustered around clutching bottles. It's an impressive house – all high ceilings and polished concrete. I can see a deck out the back with views across the river to tall tea-light buildings beyond.

'Dude, you're sweating,' Len says. 'Calm your farm.'

'I'm just excited to be here,' I respond, with affected cheer.

'You look high.'

'High on *life*.'

'You are so not drinking tonight, if this is what you're like now.'

'I most certainly will be,' I protest. History of being the biggest lightweight to ever live aside, there is no way I'm going to get through tonight without some assistance. I tell him as much.

Len rolls his eyes. 'You'll be fine, Hamlet. Relax. Try to mingle a bit.'

Most of the guys at North call me by my surname, especially since we studied the play last year. Apparently I'm tragic enough that the moniker suits me better than my actual name.

'Mingle.' I say it like it's a dirty word.

'Yeah. Meet people. It's a party.'

I glance around; several girls are milling nearby, eyeing Len in his tweed jacket and black suit pants and avoiding me in my T-shirt and jeans.

Willa Stacy is hovering with them, staring intently through her curtain of strawberry hair. Len was seeing her a couple of months ago, but they split up before the holidays. He eyes her back.

I purse my lips. 'Is that what *you're* gonna do?'

'Hmm?'

I wave a hand in front of his face. 'Hello? It's me, your sister's invisible plus one.'

'Shut up. I'm gonna go get us a drink, if only so I can monitor what goes into yours. Lacey'll kill you if you get sick in her car before a three-day drive.'

'Fine. I'll just be here, looking for cats to befriend.' I'm only half joking.

‘Mingle,’ he commands, and he disappears into the crowd. Willa follows him in a blur of thigh boots, so I know not to expect his speedy return.

Needing to do something with my hands, I text Emilia. At The Party. Torture. Tell me you’re not busy.

She replies instantly. WHAT? Take mental snapshots, please! Revising, sorry. I’m there with you in spirit.

Ems is the only person I know who could possibly find something to revise during the holidays. We went to primary school together, and I don’t think I’ve seen her without a book in her hand since the day we met, on the playground in year two.

I snap my phone shut. Emilia hates school parties even more than I do, but I feel deflated nonetheless. Why did I agree to this? There aren’t even any cats.

I make my way into the living room towards a high-backed armchair beside the window. I sit down to wait for Len, but then I realise I don’t know if that’s a thing people do at these things. (I also don’t know *anyone*.)

‘Henry?’

I spin around on my heel to see Lily Bassett from debating last year. I grin wide, grateful for the friendly face. ‘Hiya! How are you?’

(*Hiya?!*)

‘I’m well, since we haven’t versed you guys yet this year.’ She smiles too.

I laugh awkwardly. ‘Glad to be of service.’

She looks different out of her uniform. She’s wearing a sparkly top/dress thing, and red red lipstick.

‘What brings you here?’ Lily looks around at the crowd,

who are badly dancing while Fall Out Boy asks through the speakers if this is more than I bargained for (yes).

‘Oh, you know,’ I say airily. ‘Last semester of school, and all that jazz.’

‘I’m so jealous you’re almost finished. I don’t know how I’ll do another year.’

(I don’t know how I’ll *leave*.)

I spread my arms, gesturing around us. ‘Yep. I’ll soon be sitting drinking wine in a courtyard somewhere, far too worldly for things like this. So I thought I’d put in an appearance last minute.’

Lily makes a knowing face. ‘Did you not get invited?’

I drop my arms. ‘That obvious?’

We laugh.

‘I didn’t either,’ she confesses. ‘My sister dragged me along.’ She points to one of the girls in Lacey’s group.

Len comes back with our drinks: one of the clear drinks Lacey brought for him, and half a beer in a cup for me.

He glances at Lily and smiles slowly with recognition. ‘Hey.’

Lily’s cheeks go pink. Great. The Len Effect. I take my drink from him angrily.

‘I’m just gonna ...’ He gestures to where Willa is waiting by the French doors that lead to the deck.

‘I haven’t seen outside,’ Lily says.

‘You guys should come,’ Len responds easily.

‘I’m fine here,’ I say.

‘Okay,’ Lily says, and follows after Len.

I glare at them both. Neither seems to notice.

I flop into the chair and go through the five stages of

the Len Effect – jealousy, rage, irritation, resignation and acceptance – in quick succession. He’s always been good with the laydeez; I’ve always been ... not. It’s been that way for so long that I barely register it anymore, but tonight I feel particularly needed.

A few people look at me, briefly, as they walk past. I think about striking up a conversation, but for some reason I just ... can’t. Crowds always make me feel even more alone than I do by myself.

I brood for a bit about the general state of my life, before I get tired of myself and down my drink in one.

At first I don’t think it’s worked, but then a few songs later the brick wall in my chest starts to lift. I even manage to wave at a few strangers.

I decide to go in search of more.

I walk into the kitchen, where there are intimidating bottles of spirits lined up along the bench. I steer clear of those in favour of the smaller bottles in an esky against the wall. I try to find Lacey’s drinks but give up and grab two at random – blue fizzy vodka something or other. They look sugary enough. I unscrew the cap of one and take an exploratory sip.

Not bad. A bit like cordial, spliced with battery acid. I drink some more. By the time I finish the first bottle, I don’t even notice the aftertaste.

A little later, after making small talk with two guys from my drama class, I’ve drunk three vodka concoctions. I bump into Ged, our friend from school. I’m so relieved Len and I aren’t the only ones from our group here tonight I nearly hug him.

‘Henry Hamlet, as I leave and breathe!’

Ged looks like a pro wrestler, and we have next to nothing in

common, but he's a strangely solid friend. He forced the entire football team to vote for me for school captain.

'Hey, man,' I slur, buzzed enough not to see looping my arm around his neck as the invasion of personal space it one hundred per cent is.

Ged untangles my arm, sniffing my sugar-blue breath. 'Whoa there, my little tiger-peach. Is that alcohol I smell?'

I nod suavely. 'I'm being a bright young thing for one night only. They call me cool hand Henry.'

'Do they really?' He looks at the bottle I'm holding. 'My mum drinks those.'

I try to scowl at him. He's blurry. 'They're fun. I'm being fun.'

'Fun Hamlet – I'm here for that. You do look a bit less stick-up-the-arse.'

'Thanksh.'

'Shall we find some of the real stuff, fun Hamlet?'

Ged grabs a bottle off the table and pours two glasses of sticky amber liquid. 'Bottom's up.'

I knock back what tastes like congealed bleach.

'Shots!' somebody behind us calls.

A group forms and it escalates before I have a chance to think about it. Ged turns it into a game that he calls 'scull'. I throw myself into it and manage to keep up, drinking several tiny glasses, the burn swirling through my chest like smoke. I inwardly congratulate myself – what was I even worried about? I am a champion at this. A hero among men. A—

I suddenly, desperately, need the bathroom. I farewell Ged and make my way upstairs.

When I'm washing my hands afterwards, they don't feel like my hands. I dry them on my jeans and look in the mirror.

My face is different too. It warps and bends. The walls seem to be moving closer to me – I blink my eyes, trying to clear them, which only makes it worse.

I stumble out of the door and down the stairs into the living room. I can just make out Len's familiar shoes dangling off the end of the couch: black vintage Converse he got from a second-hand shop for \$5.99.

'Hamlet!' he calls, then pauses. 'Why do you look weird?'

'Nobody panic, but I think I may be drunk,' I announce, right before I projectile the entire contents of my stomach onto the floor. It splashes onto Willa's thigh boots. Not all the way up, but it's a close call.

'Oh my God!' she screeches. 'What is your *problem*?'

'I'b thorry,' I splutter weakly.

She stalks off.

'Geez, Henry,' Lily says. 'You good?'

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. The girls rush away. I feel so terrible I don't even care that everyone's staring.

Len sits up, eyes narrowing with concern.

'What'd you have? Not tequila again, surely?'

I shake my head weakly. 'Vodka. And something else, I think. They were pretty.'

'Hamlet.' He looks angry.

'They didn't feel like anything at first!'

'Yeah, well, vodka's a cruel mistress. Come on, we'll go.'

'I just ... need to lay down for a second.'

He frowns, but kicks the kissing couple off the couch obediently.

When I'm sure my stomach is settled (for now) I lay down,

shifting uncomfortably on the too-short couch. Why do rich people always buy such impractical furniture? I adjust my pillow, pushing it up against Len's leg.

'Are you right?' He wriggles underneath me. 'You smell like blueberry-flavoured manure. Let me up.'

My vision is starting to fuzz at the edges. I close my eyes against the pounding in my ears.

'God, your head is heavy,' Len says. 'No wonder – it's full of rocks.'

I ignore him. It's warm here, and the room can't spin if I can't see it.

'What am I meant to do, then?

'Watch for opportunistic dick-on-the-face drawers,' I mumble. He huffs in reply.

'I'm sorry I ruined your night.' My words slur together.

'You're a public menace.' Len shifts again.

'Joke's on you, then.' I yawn. 'That I'm your number one friend.'

'More like a compulsory full-time job, at this point.'

I know he's trying to irritate me into moving. I start to think of a snarky reply, but everything goes dark.

We'd never say it, but we look out for one another – especially since Sarah. Except for right now, apparently, because in my half-asleep state I can feel him using Lacey's kohl pencil to draw a meticulously detailed dick and balls down the right side of my face.