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She never used to be this way. She has descended spiralled fallen. Afterwards, when they are washing the blood off her, she tries to tell them this. *I am so sorry. I could not help any of it.* They instruct her to lie quietly.

It is Sunday morning and she is seventeen, pulling off her sweat-doused socks after a run, when she first sees her.

We need to stop, she says before the voice can. But her father is already indicating already pulling over already killing the engine. She throws herself from the car and begins to run back, barefoot. He is running too.

The world flinches past even when the speed limit is sixty kilometres an hour, so she only has three disjointed impressions. A car pulled up on the side of the main road, driver's door open; the woman determinedly stumbling away; and the man, waving his bristling fist over her face. He drops it to his side again, but she sees the memories of him striking the woman: across the jawbone, or over fragile, splitting lips. She feels the voice. It is scalding inside her, as it says, *Go*.

He has torn away in his car by the time they get there. The woman is nowhere to be seen. They peer into driveways, then find her behind trimmed acacia bushes, sitting on the front step of somebody's house with her face in her hands.

Her father stops to watch as she creeps towards her. *Excuse me?* Her voice is soft with uncertainty. She slides down onto the pavement just in front of her. *Are you okay?*

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The woman looks up: with her tears, studies her for a second. She mutters something blunt about his periodic descent from methamphetamine. The blueness seeps like ink down her forearms. It flickers the morning light, into something crimson.

It takes her father away. She blinks and he is gone. There is only the woman and the voice and her. *Embrace her*, the voice instructs. She tries to resist it. Her heart is wild with unease. But the voice insists. It tugs at her.

May I give you a hug? she whispers to this stranger.

The woman nods slightly, so she moves to her she touches her she clutches her. The woman's sobbing tears dampen her singlet. She swallows as she feels it against hers: the swollen, breathing bulge of her stomach. *How old are you?*

The woman says twenty.

She feels sickness curl in her blood. *What is your name?* the voice beseeches through her. *Will you come with us?*

The twenty-year-old shakes her head as she pulls herself away and to her feet. *Carmony*. She touches her stomach. *Thanks*, she adds.

Her father has a stack of his business cards in the car. He returns with one and implores her to call if she ever needs help.

Carmony calls so she hunts him down. She wraps his wrists in tied cotton socks until he is strapped cuffed harmless. The fabric fades in taut severity into his skin. She forces a pill that tastes like rotted lemon carcass down his throat and he coughs and swears then falls asleep as it scrubs his neural pathways and eases the addictions. She buries his collection of knives. She flushes the drugs. When he wakes, she tells him to never touch anybody again, and because of

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the socks he walks around forever with his arms by his sides. Then she takes them: whisks away Carmony and the unborn baby.

Her parents suspect from a young age she is afflicted with a rescuer complex. They do not know she suffers from the voice. She is nineteen when she sees the three of them. Her parents see her see. It is December and Christmas lights glint in the trees as her family wait to cross the road, back to the bus stop and out of the city. She tilts her head at the sudden shouting that erupts from the other side of the road. It comes towards them: a man is running dodging cars being chased pelting away from two pursuers.

Do not, her parents warn.

Do, the voice says.

The clicker changes to green. He is being caught as the road floods in both directions with bodies beginning to cross. He is being tackled and pressed and tackled into the concrete and everyone is looking down in concern even as they step around and move past.

Walk away, her parents say, monitoring her as they head out onto the road.

You cannot, the voice bleats.

Her father's eyes widen as he watches her almost follow as he watches her lose momentum as she stops. *Walk away*, her mother calls again urgently, pointlessly. *Come here*.

But even as she looks at them, she is beginning to turn. Back to the two shouting men grappling the swearing man into a headlock. She swallows herself as she strides over. She is all false assertion, heart feral again, as she inquires loudly, *What exactly are you doing?*

The men pause with their elbows. Their hands still press his face into the ground. They look up at her as if they are surprised at her interruption: the cloud of anger breaks until they are almost meek. *He stole money from a busker ...*

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Can he breathe? she asks. People stop now. A circle of onlookers has gathered safely behind her.

The men look down at him as he wriggles and groans. They tussle and push him harder again, back towards the concrete. *Don't move*, they spit at him. *He stole money*, they appeal again to you.

Come here, her mother hisses from the crowd, but she does not move. The voice tells her to hold them all: in her clenching eyes and her testimony. She waits until somebody else steps forward. She waits as he instructs the others to get off him, then bends down to the thief the victim the lone man. She waits as he helps him to his feet. Then the voice lets her return to her family.

She can smell their anger. It pulses like a grey glow over their skin and in the air around her. The sun takes a long time to die in summer, but by ten o'clock it is gone and the sky is black. Her parents do not talk to her for the entirety of the bus ride home. She shivers and lets them fume. Eventually, when they cannot endure their own silence, they snarl at her, *You could have fucking died. You could have said one word to them and they could have stabbed you.*

The voice is there again. It speaks through her, in sudden quiet fury. *What is walking away worth?*

Your life, they growl. *Your fucking, fucking life.*

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Every two months, she still visits. Initially it is to the local women's refuge after school: the small and quiet and hidden cluster of concrete houses. She takes a handful of wildflowers, or a new book for Carmony to read. They sit with express coffee out on the grass. Often, on these early occasions, Carmony nods briefly with gratitude, then reads in silence. Eventually, though, Carmony allows her to provide a short synopsis of the novel, which later becomes cautious dissection, then vigorous debate. By the time Carmony is renting a small flat and the baby is a toddler, they leave the book at home and take the child for walks along the river. There is a yellow rusted swing set and a small wooden park bench they stop at just before the sun dips. She watches the lines in Carmony's face as Carmony watches her daughter swing. One such visit, she brings along her easel and paints. This is when she begins to paint Carmony's portrait.

The colours squirm inside her: she has always been a painter. As a child, it is in chalk on the concrete pavement outside her house, and then later in notebooks with pencils or water colours. She moves to canvasses in high school, and that is when she first wins prizes. By the time she is offered a place into the country's most prestigious university of art, she is being featured in artistic journals all over the world. Sensitive to commerciality, just like she is sensitive to everything else, she accumulates a following that trails her through various experimental phases and money ripples in. At twenty-one, shortly after graduating from her bachelor's degree, she moves into her first house.

The only prerequisite for it is windows. Large, spreading windows that leak natural light. She is the first and the youngest of the grandchildren to buy property, but by now her work is so acclaimed, nobody is surprised. She adds the mirrors later, to breed more of the light. They

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hoard it all: the bulb and candle and bleeding lantern of morning; the clean white sunshine of afternoon; the orange glow of sun-death. They take up most of the walls, clean plain mirrors opposite the windows; brimming with, and throwing, that outside light.

Her favourite is close to the kitchen, between the reading nook and her painting desk. The mirror is long, like a finger. Her entire body, from feet to hair, fit into it. And onto it, the greenery of the backyard spills through with the sunshine. Standing angled in front of this mirror, she is suffused with the gum trees and the banksias and the bottlebrushes and the lilly pilly. She is trapped inside it, like her paintings. She is lightness.

Beside the investment of the mirrors, and paint, she is loathe to spend money on herself. Her purchases are tight and careful. *Incongruence*, the voice snipes every time she considers something potentially indulgent, *inequitable*. So it is her parents who buy her the expensive cooking knives, as a birthday present. They are elegant and sharp and sit on the kitchen bench like a piece of art. There is a serrated one to cut tomatoes, and a larger one to slice into bread. Her favourite is the middle-size which she uses for everything else: almonds and tofu and cucumber and avocado. The biggest one she does not touch unless the other is in the dishwasher.

She does not use the television, except when the voice forces her to listen to the nightly news. It sits opposite the shoulder of the linen couch and she can see it from the kitchen bench while she makes dinner. The broadcast plays like an articulate scream: over and over. One particular night, she imagines the politician's head as she chops the soy sausages with her favourite knife. She imagines that the soy sausage underneath her fingers is his head. She cuts it in careful rage as the news recites that they will not be released back to their small country

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town: those two asylum seeker people and their small eight-year-old daughter and their smaller five-year-old daughter. They will stay in that centre on that island and nobody knows for how long and it might be for another thousand days. She looks up as the children's faces are thrown onto the screen. The knife jolts under her and she lets it go and it falls. She screams as it severs into her second smallest toe. Blood spurts onto the white tiles with the detached toe, wiggling and dying alone. The dog leaps up from his nest and hurries over to sniff her.

Her childhood dog had been a pound dog. He was less than eighteen months old when they took him in: long-legged and long-eyelashed with the bones of his ribcage sticking out from his flank. He spent the first two years hiding under the dining room table. Every time the front door opened, he tried to escape. The fears followed him, into his old age: whenever anybody raised their voice, he slunk back under that table to hide. The pound dog saw her through her first menstrual blood, all the years of schooling, heartbreaks, international acclaim. But over more than a decade, her family were not able to soothe him out of ducking his beloved head when a hand lifted to pat him. Two weeks before she signed the lease for the house, he died.

This is why she lets the voice win. She is driving the last of the cardboard boxes to the new street and the sky is falling down onto the car, in retches of water. The road drips. She pulls over because she notices him. On the pavement, there is a dog, all bones, barely ten weeks of age, soaked through and trembling.

She carries him with the final boxes into her home. She christens the new bath tub with dog hair. He mewls when she places him into the soapy warm water. She plans to advertise for a found animal, until she raises her hand to cup water over him and he flinches dips his

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head surrenders to her. That is when the voice decides she will steal him, this raggedy, unnamed creature, from his potential life. She rugs him up in a towel and builds him his nest next to the television, against the backyard window. He curls up into it and blinks at her and those eyes say, *Okay*.

When the dog is no longer a puppy he starts to eat her socks. At first, he is conscientious. Teeth marks are clawed through the bottom of both items of cotton. But then it evolves: to only one in a pair. This is bemusing to her. It seems, strangely, like even more of a waste. She tries not to yell. The dog is a nervous, defiant thing. He commits the act, then he cowers. The first couple of times, she asks him gently why. She holds the one dead sock under his nose like a query. He flutters his eyelashes in apology and looks away. She is initially weakened by this. Sometimes she does not even accomplish the entire ten minutes of punitive silence. She cracks early and pets him, knowing he is broken. But as he persists, she becomes more reprimanding, stern. She points at the sock and then points at him and growls, *No*. This does not make him stop. The number of sock casualties continues to climb, and then she can feel the helpless anger rising in her. *Why?* she wants to scream at him. *Tell me why?* It happens so often, this meaningless destruction, she wonders one day if hitting him might help. The thought slinks away faster than she can breathe and she feels so guilty that she does not even tell the dog off. She only throws both socks in the bin then takes him for a walk.

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She likes to stand in front of the mirrors when she forgets what she looks like. This happens often, but she is not always indulged with being able to remind herself. Sometimes

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she takes the opportunity in public toilets, or when passing the glass of shopfronts. But these reflections are not always clear, so whenever she is home, she takes the time to stare at her face and body. Especially before she paints. Or after, to feel real again. Her appearance is mostly invariable. She never changes her hair. She maintains a steady weight. She likes to cling to reasonable things. The world is an ocean around her: an intangible fluctuation. So she holds her external aesthetic and the inside pulse of herself, excluding any accepted growth, as a constant. The dog often joins her. He pulls himself from the patch of yellow sunshine balancing on his nest and wanders over to stand next to her. The reflection expands with him in it; merges into something analytical, self-referential: it is her gazing at herself being gazed at by him.

Five weeks after he has progressed to single-sock consumption, the dog starts to bark at night. It is spontaneous and relentless and she can do nothing to make him hush. At first she assumes a family of sugar gliders might have moved into the trees outside, but when she steps out into the darkness of the garden to check, there is nothing. No possums, no owls, no blossom bats. Still the dog barks. As the nights pass, she tries everything: more blankets on his mat, another serving of warmed kibble, visitation in her own bed. Nothing works. When she puts him outside, he only barks harder. Toys he enjoys during the day he ignores when she offers them as distraction at two am. She tries to cuddle him and the noise, sleepily, away. She tries to growl back. But still the dog intermittently howls on, the noise rough like a cough, strangled.

She does not remember when she gives up, but at some stage she does. She writes letters to each of her neighbours apologising and requesting their patience as she works on solutions for

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her abused dog. She includes a complimentary set of ear plugs. To old Sue, the neighbour who likes to spy into the house from her balcony and evidently lives closest, she gifts a small, custom oil painting of her tattered white cat.

She alters her nightly routine. Before she goes to bed, she closes all the doors and piles pillows onto her head and pushes the foam plugs into her own ears and, when the barking inevitably begins, tries to sleep through it.

She starts to fantasise about knives. The sharpness. The release and power. She is not sure if it is the news or the lack of sleep or the dog itself. But she is consumed with not only the image of knives, but the palpable sensation. She swallows saliva as if one presses down against her throat. She taps the soft pads of her fingers like she can feel something cutting against them, or that they themselves are blades. Each month, she buys new socks, in bulk. She hides them. The dog continues to find them. She commences a shrine: the damaged socks in a drawer of their own. The unharmed ones she leaves strewn on the floorboards, in temptation. They are never touched.

She had hoped that the progression from both socks to only one in a pair suggested he would eventually drop to no sock at all, but the dog remains a targeted sock murderer. No matter where she stores them, somehow he eventually sniffs them out. Often weeks pass with no casualties and she is lulled into complacency. Then she returns home one afternoon from a meeting, or a dinner in the city, to a mutilated couple: one survivor, one fatally injured.

It is on one of those nights the voice points him out. She is twenty-three, on the way home from a football match with a group of mates. Approximately two years before, she had

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conquered the cowardice and begun to meet the eyes of each homeless person she passed. Now, in determined habit, she drops her gaze to meet his. He is sitting, cross-legged, on a dirty rug in dirty clothes with his beard and ragged hair and people are walking past him. She does not recognise him but she smiles, cajoling all the warmth inside her into her mouth and eyelashes. She reads the surprise flickering in him.

You have a good night, the man says suddenly, solemnly, up at her.

You, too, she says as she walks on, as her heart fragments.

Her friends have not faltered. They are dressed like young people with jobs and no rent. Casually warm jackets, clean jeans. *Passive emulator*, the voice mutters. She slows. Her friends stop to look at her.

It is so sad, she says.

It is, they agree, seamlessly. They pat her on the shoulder. *But it's not your fault*.

Then whose is it? the voice says.

She eats it. *I should go back and ask if he needs something from the supermarket*, she says aloud instead.

They look around. *Where?* The city is cold: dotted with oily nightclubs and faded music.

We could give him this? One holds aloft the half-eaten box of jam doughnuts they had bought at the stadium.

Haven't you read that's dehumanising? another says. *Imagine someone expecting you to be grateful for their scraps*.

Somehow she is walking on. There is ravenous, gruesome grief inside her: at the skill of their apathy, and the deficiency in her own compassion. She feels anger like knives. Her friends drop her home and as soon as she closes her front door, she wraps herself up with the barking dog and his chosen sock, and cries.

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The next day, she catches the bus back to the city and she finds the man, curled inside the rug in the same spot. Her breath feels rickety in her chest but the voice has already told her what to do so she invites him to breakfast. He orders egg and sausage omelette on sourdough and she orders zucchini fritters with two glasses of orange juice. His name is Stewart. He eyes his orange juice and explains that he is dependant on alcohol. She listens. By the time they finish the food, the voice is ready to ask him. *Would you want help?*

Stewart looks down at his empty plate for a long moment. *Yes*, he says finally. *I think I would.*

She is pulling a tiny yellow bottle from her pocket. She tells him she has something. *It tastes horrible. But it works for addiction.*

Stewart scrunches his face and requests to see the ingredient list. He says it might sound ironic but he likes to know exactly what goes into his body. He peers carefully at the label on the small bottle. Then he shakes his head as he passes it back. *Are you kidding? This is for dogs.*

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She sits up with him all of the first night. She drifts falls drifts into sleep then wrenches herself awake to make sure he is still breathing. In the morning, the dog is. It seems to be the solution. The barking stops. She writes another letter to the neighbours, thanking them for their patience. Old Sue is so joyous she bakes her a vanilla cake with a ghoulish spectacle of icing in the shape of her cat's face. But the next night, the barking is back. She gets up to offer him another pill, hidden in a spoonful of unsweetened yoghurt. He is dozing within five minutes. She researches canine digestive fluid. From then, she gives him one every night.

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Eventually she increases his dose: one in the morning and one before bed. It cures the sock-stealing.

Stewart relapses. The voice blames her, when she realises recent studies indicate that sixty-six days is more likely to yield habit change than anything less. Her most recent painting has just won the national competition. She reminds herself of this as she offers to again cover the thirty thousand dollar fee for the twelve week program in a private rehabilitation facility, plus necessary extension. Then suddenly it has been two years and it is as if Stewart is freed. He finds work in a local craft shop and rents a small apartment a fifteen minute walk from her house and visits every Wednesday afternoon. Sometimes he brings her paints in the newest range of colours. She insists on paying him, but he never accepts her money, only says his staff discount makes them affordable. Instead, he borrows an easel and canvas and they paint together. Occasionally they talk of her art, but more often it is current affairs. Owning a television for the first time in his life, Stewart has developed an intense interest in the news. His most recent obsession is the mystery of the politician found with his head cut off.

She begins to hang her paintings, in winding entanglement with the mirrors along the walls. The colours of all their faces look down at her. On the day she hangs Carmony's, she crouches down with her quiet, sleepy dog and she thinks how she never actually saw Carmony again, after that Sunday morning when she was seventeen, because Carmony never called. She could have died years ago at the hands of a violent man for all she would ever know. The baby might never have breathed outside its womb. She stands again, stroking this thought, and moves to the kitchen. She starts the dishwasher. Then she steps in front of her favourite mirror in two odd chewed socks: she is glowing red-gold and she knows what the

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light and the voice are saying to her. Behind her, the garden of gums and banksias have died in green and turned red like the sky and everything else and she is red, with blood and feelings, even as she feels nothing. She stabs she stabs she stabs and then she is drifting she drifts until it becomes Wednesday because the dog is asleep on his mat, insensate to the acrid scent of all the blood.

The dog barks for the first time in years. He is barking howling barking barking barking. Next door, old Sue jerks awake from a nap. She creaks herself crankily to her feet, towards the balcony. The cat meows as old Sue peers along that neighbour's backyard, eyes trying to focus — through the big open windows into the mirrored lounge room. Then she begins to scream like the dog.

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When the ambulance arrives, the paramedics swathe her in bandages. *I could not help*, she whispers to them when she remembers to, over and over. She drifts as they take her away. She wakens so the voice can repeat it. *I could not help*. They shake nod toss their heads. *Lie quietly*, they tell her.

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