



CONGLOMERATE

Ben Walter

LOST ROCKS

CONGLOMERATE

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1

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They had been walking away the morning's hours through a stretch of jaded plains that barely bothered to lift up clumps of scrub; indifferent plains that let them wander where they wanted, plains that channelled the broken sky between long rows of heaving mountains. Rose had been striding out the front with her peeling blue jacket warding off the prospect of rain; consulting her old-fashioned map and compass every hundred metres, comforting the paper with magnetic assurances and resting her hands on her hips as she waited for the rest of the group to catch up, her hair damp and speckled with old drips. Behind her walked Aaron with his bright blond hair balding quickly and his new boots, smooth and polished and subject to much mockery by his companions and the landscape's grinding stones. Further back, Sonia, short and sturdy and able to lug boulders in her pack, and Bryony with her cantankerous enthusiasm for difficult weather and terrain, a rock-climber and former Overland Track guide who was delighted by anything out of the ordinary, no matter what obstacle it might thrust at her; both of them workers at the public hospital, nurses and obsessive photographers of beetles and peaks and vibrant shapes and colours wherever they were to be found, lingering figures at the rear of the group, finding space and time to slowly rip their stresses

and anxieties into shreds small enough to hide behind the silent droplets of water; lenses fixed against the fronds of ferns.

And then Marco, a little older; his wife with no apparent interest in getting outside and bashing her head against the fog. While he walked she would care for their two young children, both boys – pack them up in canvas bags and drive them to her sister’s house to play in her wilderness of rudimentary and largely percussive musical instruments, instruments you could shake and hit and blow without regard for melody or rhythm, instruments that sounded like a hailstorm heaving about a flock of failing birds.

And there, comparing lunches and swapping chocolates and nuts, joking about past walks and crucial tent pegs left behind in the garage with the shovels and old gloves, established territory well mapped by friendly mockery on many previous occasions; there, amid all that inconsequential and perfectly happy chatter, Rose tearing a muesli bar from its plastic sheath before moving on to sandwiches of ham and cheese and what seemed by the stains on her shirt to be a kind of tomato chutney; waiting for a lull in the showering fronts of conversation, swallowing the chunk of

wholemeal bread that had been pummeled by her jaws for an unusually long time – Rose kept her eyes averted from her companions when she finally spoke, addressing instead her fingers and her food.

Perhaps it was inspired by the mountain they were felling, a shard in the south-west with many cliffs that trembled at their exposure; the real risk of slipping off the rock. Strange and unfamiliar terrain. None of the safe, shattered steps and cracks of dolerite crystals or the sharp edges of quartzite; this was a rock built from fragments poorly mortared together. Unfocused and lacking clear identity. Handholds that broke apart and crumbled, surfaces that swept you off your feet. Rose had looked up at those cliffs and the blend of weather and “well,” she started uneasily, thoughtfully, “do you ever think about how walking would change for you if one of us died out here?”

There was a pause.

And then a laugh or two sat down beside her and slapped her on the shoulder, refusing to take her question seriously. First Bryony: “Would be a hell of a lot quieter at night.” And Aaron, grinning at Marco: “Guess I’d have to get a lift with some other hoon. Reckon I’d be safer, anyway.”

And while the conversation sped down a gully into the merits of various sleeping bags, and then hospital overspending, and then the particular shade of mud that was staining Marco's knees – was it crap mud or shit mud possibly even just mud – Sonia leaned forward a little, pushed her short, straggly hair out of her face, and “I dunno,” she said. “I really don't know how it would be.”

2

Like any group of walkers who would follow their weekend whims to waterfalls and peaks and rock formations, walkers with the same brands of boots, the same jackets, the copycat packs and over-trousers, the same hopes and desires, reveling in the views and relaxation and simplicity of focus that stamped their pursuit; so many worries of burdensome jobs and mortgages and mothers with liver cancer and looming divorces, all of that left behind with the sunglasses and changes of clothes in the back of the four-wheel drive, its tires edged off the gravel by the side of the road with the sleepy headlights facing downhill. So many headaches and doubts abandoned and completely overwhelmed by a series of simple, square decisions: where to go, when to eat, where to go, what to eat, and where to go next.

But in the dregs of the previous year, when Aaron and Marco had spent a day chasing high places on the Central Plateau, they had wondered at those species that were losing their hold and slipping off the tips of peaks as the flushed air warmed, scraped off and dumped in the sky. The flowers that were blown away by dry mainland winds, trying to sprout vainly in the southern ice. If only the mountains were a few hundred metres higher, if only those threatened shrubs could be sown in

the air and the clouds, feeding off the cold veins of water and busy minerals that circled in the atmosphere's metropolis.

"Marco," said Aaron, shaking his head, "Can't see them hanging on."

But what was to be done about it? Could they build great cairns or poles on the highest peaks, where the thinning vegetation might sit safely in a carefully prepared garden of native dirt like a saint cut off from the concourse of extinctions?

Or perhaps a more down to earth solution.

Marco suggested to Aaron: "You know, I reckon we could at least raise some cash."

Welcome funds to extend the shivering rooms at the botanical gardens, a broad-shouldered donation that would enable the directors to care for an old and lumbering climate that was being lost like so much megafauna, a climate that could not adapt to what had been thrown at it. That was it, they thought, that was it.

And so Aaron and Marco put a proposition to their friends, to Rose and Sonia and Bryony, and they

were excited at the thought of protecting those plants, of barricading the heat from their skin. To raise awareness, to give the cause a profile, the five of them walked the island from north to south, from the town of Penguin at the lip of the strait along the trail to Cradle Mountain, and then all the way down the Overland Track. The heavier work over the King Williams and Denisons, bypassing the Frankland Range via a long bitumen and gravel bash along the Gordon River Road to the Scotts Peak Dam, from where they took the Port Davey and South Coast Tracks to Cockle Creek and plenty of exhaustion and rest.

Only Aaron and Marco had walked the whole span of the island; the others joining them for extended legs as they were able, using the remainder of their time to promote the challenge through busy media and online networks, crowdfunding and sourcing sponsorship. And as the weeks trudged past and donations hurried in to the island, as the local daily covered the story and kept up with their progress with photographs and maps, and as they spoke to the ABC on a satellite phone, there was bred in the community a certain recognition of them as walkers; not fame, but enough prominence for their names to be tuned clearly to their hobby. Names recognised within their own circles like the

author of a guidebook or a prominent peak-bagger. For they were a group blending their highest ideals: getting out and enjoying the bush, while working to protect it for the pleasure of others.

There were many days when their wrinkled feet ached as though their bones were diverging and the arches crumbling, like cities claimed by the years; their backs and hips wired with fiery threads of pain. They had pressed through the early discomfort of their slack suburban muscles into true track hardiness, lean and strong, but had then stepped further into a new phase: vicious cramps, the sweat dissolving their joints. The slow, patient wear and tear needling away and sewing them a suit of weariness and strain that covered their whole bodies. The trial of rising every day and wrapping stiff socks and reeking leather boots around their protesting feet; their stretched shorts and shirts, washed uselessly in rivulets and never really drying. Eating the same meals of oats and rice blended with thin powdery flavours. The bland wheat, the plastic cheese. Bryony, on the nineteenth day: "Where are the hamburgers? You bastards promised me hamburgers." Tearing down the wet tents and hoisting packs on their backs, the endless tracks laughing before them, laughing on and on. The hurtling snow, the rain and the ice, the

mist covering their eyes with so many palms; and yet also, the wondrous rest they found in that way of being, as though they had discovered something essential that everyone else, all around the world, was desperate to know, that they would try to buy and beg for, that they would spend their whole lives trying to find. How to square such sensations? The inner and outer slowly eroding, a curse on their bodies and a blessing for their minds.

All five of them had walked the final leg from Melaleuca through to Cockle Creek in the far south-east, striding across the mud and the beaches, slogging through the ranges and tip-toeing through the rivers, swatting at mosquitos and taping up their gear; and when they finally emerged from the loose forests that swayed by the buttongrass plains and found the road waiting for them with its pale face so knowing and aware, they were certain that their steps through that final day had been lagging for a reason, that it was not truly exhaustion but rather a species of slowly-dawning reluctance. For even as they plodded past the ranger station and saw their support cars and a photographer from the paper and a spread of encouraging faces with their hands waving, even as they felt the relief and triumph that rose up in their spirits as they concluded their journey – at the same time they felt a longing that sang from deep within them

as though all five were being strongly summoned to turn around. To bypass their welcome and the easy wheels back into town with its shops and restaurants and homes upon homes, to plod back down the track past familiar gum leaves and walk the same routes again, this time from south to north, going back and forth like a migrating bird and feeding on what feeble sustenance they could find, on the berries and shoots that were provided for them; and Aaron and Marco, particularly, had held back as the group was embraced by their family and friends.

“Want to get back out there?” Marco was asking, and for a moment Aaron understood that he was perfectly serious, and he knew that he felt exactly the same way. But they were swamped by the small crowd smiling and shaking their hands, “you did it,” everyone was saying, “good one, you know, bloody fantastic” – for the walk had been completed and the money had been raised, tens of thousands of optimistic dollars, and the rooms would be built and the poor, down-trodden plants would live on; but to Rose and Sonia, to Bryony and Aaron and Marco, it felt that even though they had walked for so long, they had in fact done nothing at all.

But that everything, absolutely everything had been done to them.

3

It could only be regarded as a tragic accident.

Certainly, as the reports were later to show, the leader on the vegetation survey had led them down the wrong gully. They all looked much the same – the scrub, the huge monolithic rocks, the sky, the steep slabs of buttongrass on mud – though nothing untoward had actually happened until they were back slipping down the pad itself. Wet weather had got to the rock earlier in the morning, but it remained safe walking, walking that dozens of men and women and children, from five years old to eighty, would gladly enjoy every day on tracks all over the island. Careful with every step, keeping both hands free and ready to catch at a branch, an overhanging prickle of leaves if their feet were suddenly flung sideways. Contouring below the cliff-line through the boulders to the taped route that led back down to the three cars stretching out and dozing. The cloud clearing; a sharp angle of light ruled against the sky.

And then Aaron had stepped on a root.

It was a snow gum with its hooked leaves shivering in the light breeze, and it had sent its brown roots – dark with shades of lighter brown – twisting along the ground and into the air, in search of the

water that was absolutely everywhere. Just garden-variety roots, but Aaron had done a lot of walking – the extended trip for the endangered species and the botanical gardens, but also many shorter day walks and overnights – and the soles of his boots were bare tires with the tread sanded back, and they had slid against the wet root and he had fallen over backwards – not far, not even off the track – and someone behind him had laughed.

So little blood, they said afterwards. One of their party had grazed her knee on a pointed stump and it had bled more than Aaron's wound. But the back of his head had crashed into a fist of conglomerate that was pressing from the dirt and he had slumped down like a pack collapsing against the ground after a hard day's forging forward. Just a few centimetres to either side and it would have missed his head completely or been cushioned by his day pack.

The two walkers further back had waited for him to shuffle up as a fantail landed on a twig that barely acknowledged its arrival. They offered mild concern. "Aaron, are you all right mate?" Was he teasing them, taking a moment to emphasise his clumsiness, the impact of the fall? A glove on his shoulder, and then another one. "Aaron? Mate?" Calls to the party ahead, "Guys, get back here!"

The whole group buzzing around his prone figure, a doctor pushing in to the confusion and “Aaron, can you hear me?” she called firmly while checking his breathing and examining his pulse.

In the evening someone telephoned Rose. She had been cooking a simple meal of pasta, stiff spirals lapping up the boiling water and tinned tomatoes sizzling in the frying pan with the bare minimum of onions and garlic and olive oil, and she was bending over the stove and welcoming its warmth, as though on that cool evening it was she who needed heating; stirring more frequently than the meal really needed, stirring away in that empty house with the television unplugged and boarded up in the cupboard under the stairs. The bare light shining in the kitchen, the thoughtful humming of her fridge and the blunt company of her broad-boned knife.

And then the phone had rung. And Rose had let it ring. Stirring away at that sauce, she had allowed it to ring on and on and eventually the phone had shrugged, giving up trying to attract her attention, and Rose had reached for the colander hanging from a nail and let the pasta fall heavily in a wad, dumping it with force into the strainer like she was trying to throw it away. Turning off the hot

plates and then reaching to tip the pasta into the frying pan – it would save on washing up – when the phone gathered up its courage and tapped at her shoulder once again; it rang and rang and with a sigh Rose let her wooden spoon dangle in her dinner like a slack fishing rod, flicked the heat on the pan to its lowest setting and then jogged into the living room, not bothering to turn on the light, for she could see where the phone was complaining away on the undercoated windowsill.

As she picked up the handset and it began to murmur grievances in her ear, Rose was glad that it was still so dark in that room, for the light that peered from the kitchen seemed to have no sympathy at all for what she was hearing. Her hunger disappeared as though she had been struck with sudden weariness; the food she had been preparing seemed an insult. For who could eat now that Aaron couldn't eat, would never eat again?

More so as the meal she had been slapping together was undeniably camping food, a simple set of ingredients that could be counted on one hand, cooked and dehydrated at home or perhaps heaved into packs and stewed up in the dark on low and unambitious blue flames; ideally in company, sitting together around an uneven stonehenge

of rocks and logs and bunches of grass, swapping snacks and anecdotes and swigs of cheap port. Or if the rain was pouring down and breaking up the party, then boiling water, alone, in the tent's cramped vestibule, the wet scrub nesting the stove, cushioning it and balancing it awkwardly even when it had been screwed into the ground like a lid holding back the elements; all alone, cooking in the dark, wrapped in a sleeping bag and only just poking one's nose out into the weather and the air.

After Rose ushered the phone into silence and replaced it on the charger, she stood there in the dark for a long time, and then she sat on the couch with her face in her hands. When she finally returned to the kitchen and her forgotten meal, the pasta had turned lazy and sick, and even on the low heat the sauce had dried out until it had burnt black against the pan. Rose had stood there in the shrill light and she had thrown her ruined meal into the sink and let both the hot and cold taps rain down.

4

In the morning, Rose met with Sonia and Bryony for an early coffee – before her work and after theirs – for the two younger women had been working late shifts at the hospital, and they explained to Rose that all through the night, as they tended to wounds and injuries and illnesses, working their backs out through the grinding hours, they had been feeling that somehow they had done wrong; that they had abdicated their real duty by not being on hand to help Aaron. There had never been any plans to include them in the party, a group of volunteers that was surveying the spread of a rare orchid – and they had always found it impossible to find those tiny, private flowers when they magnified their lenses and pressed their noses close to the ground, even – especially – when they were pointed out. But still, they gritted their teeth and tore their hearts into tatters at how derelict they had been in their responsibilities; just sleeping through the stupid day and working at the useless hospital, when they could have been on that trip, they could have brought all their medical experience to bear and maybe, just maybe, they could have saved Aaron; at the very least given him a particle of hope.

“There was a doctor there,” said Rose, trying to comfort them. “They told me there was a doctor

there, and there was nothing she could do. It was a freak thing.” And still it didn’t make any difference, and Sonia was very quiet, sipping fiercely at her tea; if only she had stepped away and let the cancer patient dress his own wounds and medicate his own terrible spasms of pain, if he could have just taken care of his own damn self, then she could have been on that walk with Aaron, she could have pushed the doctor aside and ministered to him and bandaged him and washed him and held him and held him and he would have ended up healthy and alive; he would have shaken his head and pulled himself together, grimaced and gotten up and felt the back of his head, checking his fingers for traces of blood, and that would have been that. Certainly he would have been grateful to her – “thanks Doc,” he would have winked, “but fuck that’s sore” – and they would have taken a spell and snacked on a bag of cashews and then walked on and found absolutely thousands of those ridiculous tiny orchids blinking their eyes so innocently in the sun.

Trammeling all through Sonia’s silence like a stampede of boots over fresh snow, Bryony was talking and she couldn’t stop talking. And she was angry, furious at the sheer pointlessness of such an accident, at the members of the survey party who had been so careless as to let Aaron die. “I can’t

believe it,” she said, “I don’t see how something like that could happen. Why didn’t they do something? Why didn’t they *do* something? It can’t be Aaron; it must be someone else. We were going to be walking to PB in the summer; jeez, he was going to be coming over to dinner next week. What are we going to do next week? What were they thinking? That fucking stupid *rock*.”

Rose rested her hand on Bryony’s arm and as she stroked away at her skin, she felt very old and her hair felt grey, and she pulled her fingers away and held that hair tightly, as though to stop it leaking from her scalp and frittering away, and it seemed so brittle and faded to the touch, and she brushed it down like she was smoothing a pile of dirty feathers, and “I just can’t see why they couldn’t save him,” Bryony was still insisting. “Why wasn’t someone there who knew what they were doing?”

And Rose was shaking her head, gulping at her strong coffee, and “Oh Bryony,” she said, “I know,” and then finally Sonia found a voice born deep in the pits of her body which was brought to her breath in the form of a small, hurt query.

“Has anyone told Marco?” she asked.

Rose and Bryony looked at her and tried to grasp her question, as though its meaning was buried miles down. For surely Marco would have been told by someone; surely it was day now and the day brought all these things to light. Horrendous news such as this spread like the morning fog pressing out and covering everything; no-one would be able to see anything clearly, except through the gloomy filter that it forced on their eyes.

Other walkers and conservationists were posting their tributes, their photographs and their grief on social media and the morning news on the radio had choked through its report and there was a sense that certain veins of the city were completely blocked up, lovers of the outdoors shocked and stricken; as they weren't in the same way when a tourist from Japan felt a hypothermic chill slicing through her skin, as they weren't at all when a wealthy pensioner from Sydney found his heart protesting and complaining and then screaming on a steep section of track. For this was directed at them, at one of them who had laughed with them and walked with them and shared his tea and cheese, who had posted images online that others had liked and admired.

Aaron had been dragged away like a warm, sunny day before a vicious storm, and there was no more afternoon left in which to linger. He was gone, just gone, and the walkers in the city and their families and friends were looking up at the bushy hills that once embraced them but now hemmed them in; eyeing their burly companions with a certain suspicion and fear, as they did for a year or two after a big fire gathered its forces and laid siege to the suburbs. Wary of the trees' motivations, empty-handed trees that kept up such blameless faces, that beckoned them all to come and play; but what were they pondering and plotting, those legions of eucalypts? What conspiracies were being hatched below the bark, and how were they uniting with the rivers and stones, the mud and the wind? What malicious revenge were they plotting against the people below?

And all through that pristine morning it felt like something in their world had been tugged and realigned, as though there were bears now wandering in the forests, savage bears with slashing claws and teeth, bears who would creep up behind you and rip your face to pieces. As though the squadrons of mosquitos were armed with dengue and malaria and the snakes were spiteful and fearless and the devils were true devils and they were not threatened by anything; so many demons

and ghouls that plunged a dark, stained curtain down to shroud and defile the happiness that they all felt in the bush. A sense of danger, yes, but also a childlike pleasure cruelly spoiled, an incident which struck at the centre of how they understood their place, their home; an eruption of the perils of elsewhere that were kept at arms length across the strait and the oceans as the fronds of ferns tried to block the view.

But now those fronds were sticking in their eyes, scratching, poking and prodding, and “open,” they were saying. “Open up, and look. Do you see now? Nothing is fine and there is nowhere that you can hide.”

But surely Marco knew? And then Rose and Bryony and Sonia clutched at the handles of their cups and upset the table with their knees, and their eyes were distressed. For Marco had taken his wife Angie and the boys on a walk to the Tyndalls – an accommodation that Angie had finally made, despite her concerns about the cold and discomfort of the outdoors. For she wanted to be there when Marco introduced their children to the other half of the island – that wet and green wildness – whether to maintain her involvement in that earthy side of their maturing or to make sure they

wouldn't be shinning up sheer cliffs. It was just for four days, four bare days, but Angie had worried and fussed and Marco had joked with them all the week before, how she had insisted on blowing their savings on new and unnecessary gear for the boys, gear that none of them would be able to heft up the hills; but he had laughed with a certain sympathy, for he knew it was difficult for her and he was grateful that she was willing to try, for their marriage, for their children and for him.

“But would he even have reception?” Bryony asked, chewing at her nails, and Rose wondered if a call would be the right way to hurl the news against him. But she pulled her phone from her handbag and thumbed to his contact with a certain dread – and there it was, his name and number glowing. She gravely pressed at her screen as though she were pushing a more drastic, irrevocable button. Hoping that her call would be diverted straight to voicemail, hoping that it would crash against the hills and peaks that separated them and be caught and picked up by the wind and blasted out into the Tasman Sea where it would plunge among the deafening waves and sink to the ocean floor, never to be heard from again.

As the connection inched its way across the landscape, persisting through hardships and

gritting its teeth, and as Rose waited for it to clasp its hand on a distant summit, she saw her dark worries reflected in the faces of the two nurses across the table, and for a moment she was heartened. For it felt as though they were *together*, that the three of them would be speaking at the same time, hurrying to Marco from all sides with their arms outstretched and comforting him, holding him together, holding each other together in their small chorus of grief.

But then as she waited for the call to break through the layers of cloud and forest, Rose felt very alone once again, for she was the one who would have to say the awful words, the one to hear Marco's reaction, his response; it was her responsibility, she was all alone and the cafe had emptied out and the table was barren and the cups and saucers had disappeared, the napkins had fluttered away and the salt had been poured down the sink and there were no dishes clinking or cars growling on the street, it was all just her, the phone and the line – and not even a line of any substance that could reach across and link their faces – and so before she could find out for certain if he was waiting on the tip of a mountain where the towers could see him clearly, scrabbling for the waterproof pouch

that sang away in the bottom of his pack, Rose pressed her thumb against the screen and rang off.

“He didn’t pick up,” she said. “It went straight to voicemail, just like we thought.” And she stirred at her coffee with a spoon, even though she hadn’t added any sugar at all.

They bowed their heads in a kind of unspoken prayer, worrying, wondering. And then Sonia raised her eyes and sought a channel to press herself along. “What should we do?” she asked them. “We’re off for the next three days, we’ve both been working nights all week. We’re available, I guess.”

And Rose was unbearably conscious that she was also free from any responsibilities after she had taught her music classes that morning in the primary school on the hill, and that there was nothing to which she had committed in the days following that couldn’t be put off. And she searched inside herself for courageous bones, for the parts of her body that resonated brave and strong when daunting notes rang out beneath her skin, and she had to drag the question out of the very depths of her gut.

“Well,” she asked, “do you think we should go and tell him?”

5

As Sonia packed her gear she tried to understand how she was feeling.

She had left the others toying with rough strategies at the cafe, talking more for the sake of talking than because any plans truly needed to be worked out. Their voices were thrumming in her ears like rain on an iron roof, and it seemed as though they were still walking with her, hand in hand and chattering, all the way back to her house in Mount Stuart; even though when she had been sitting with them back at the table she had felt something of the opposite; that she had been sipping her tea all alone and by herself. The mood of mourning that had swept through her system was like a drug, so powerful and overwhelming that it had confused and perhaps reversed her impressions of what was truly real. What did this mean for her afternoon? Had day become night? She was certain that if she were to lie on her bed she would go straight to sleep, and it wasn't just the series of late shifts that was pressing her down.

What did such confusions and inversions mean for their drive the following morning, for their walk going out after Marco and his family? The bush had blinked and something had shifted, and Sonia did not yet know how she felt about going out and walking among the rocks that had betrayed them so savagely.

She shoved her sleeping bag right down into the depths of her pack, and then her one-person tent, her sleeping mat. What we carry, she thought, is what makes sleep possible. And she rested her hand against the mattress, and she pushed, and she thought to sit down beside her pack, and then lie down on the bed; and then she shook her whole body and turned and hurried out of the room and slipped into a pair of sneakers and went for a walk. Circling a series of blocks in her suburb sloping up the hill, peering into gardens at the arrangements of trees and shrubs, at the different levels of moisture, the shades of colour and varied moods that attended every house and yard, the brick and weatherboard, the magnolias and the silverbeet, the sinking decks and the sandstone barbecues; each of them a world set aside, to and for itself, as though the boarded up fences that defined their perimeters had a real and lasting meaning.

She picked a red flower from one yard and set it down peacefully in the grass of another. On a corner, a lumbering mulberry tree stretched a weary branch across the footpath, green leaves shading out the grey clouds, and she ripped a berry from a stem even though it wasn't anywhere near to ripe, and she popped that berry on her tongue and felt it slice across the juices of her mouth.

Sonia looked up at the sky, and she looked to the darker hills.

When she got home she avoided her bedroom and started packing up and tidying disordered corners of her house, returning spatulas and plates and saucepans in the kitchen to their proper drawers and cupboards, boxing up a jigsaw that she had begun unravelling on the kitchen table. Wandering down the back of the yard, making sure that the few garden tools she kept on active service – spade, fork and secateurs – were safely stowed away out of the rust. Sonia thought about oiling the grudging door; it was important to keep busy, and so she picked up a fading can of WD40, wiped the nozzle clean of dust and sprayed the lubricant into the crevices of each hinge. The smell soaked into the air and sweetened her nostrils, and she swung the door back and forward with pleasure as though she were stroking a cat, the movement more comforting than anything else.

And then Sonia carried the grimy can up to the house and sprayed the hinges on the back door, hinges that hadn't been giving her any trouble or protest at all; but it paid to be careful, to be as prepared as you possibly could be, for any distress that might be thrown at you. She walked into the kitchen and sprayed the hot and cold taps, the

aging coffee machine, the knives and forks of the good cutlery set that she kept in its box above the fridge. The door to the living room, and then her bedroom: she opened it wide to reach the hinges more directly, and there her pack was still waiting there like a crying baby; like something that could not be avoided, no matter how one might try.



While Bryony, after all her protests and indignation, found that she couldn't stop weeping; so much teatree that she couldn't push through and sleet that she couldn't laugh off.

She couldn't bear the bus, but hurried home on sore feet and washed her face, washed her boots and her gaiters and her coat, washed a set of thermals and an extra pair of socks and it all came up so clean. Her tanned reflection in the bathroom mirror fogged over – the cool sense of walking in wet clouds – and she worried that her miserable, grieving mood would usher in the grey weather that was building and setting up its fortifications; that she would be a fifth columnist, responsible for unlocking the gate and letting in the drizzle and the rain, calling it all down on them in a kind of sympathy as they clambered on to the ridges.

Perhaps they would miss Marco in the mist, pass within a few paces and never see the colour of his coat; and she wasn't sure, as she cried, whether this was a good or bad thing.

Brief, consoling messages appeared on her phone, but she couldn't look at them; she didn't want to know. Photographs on Facebook, lengthy, appreciative messages of sadness and regret, images of Aaron striking shy poses on stone seats and walking up buttongrass hills. What was he doing there? She didn't want to see him there. Bryony left her phone in her bedroom and sat down on her couch and began laying out a pack of cards, as though she was already caught inside her tent by foul weather battering against the fly, the wind flapping the corners like a set of small and frustrated sails. She had tried to pull down a novel from her shelf to read in the dim light, but her eyes were unfocused, as though she was reading at the wrong scale, tuned in to pages as a whole and unable to see the detail of blurred words or follow any narrative they might be offering to her.

And so the mindlessness of cards. A game of solitaire, seven columns with their company of faces cast down, a graph lining the table showing an increase in some property, a growth, even as her weeping was easing up. Many times, worn out

and battered after a long day shepherding novice walkers through the national park, she had turned to such cards as a careless consolation, and she had kept up the habit when she graduated to nursing. Every card, as she dealt, was like a footstep; but such tiny steps did not convince her that she was getting very far. A waltz with the spare cards, one-two-three, one-two-three; the filling in of gaps and transfer of whole stacks, modifying the rules as she proceeded when the game began to strangle her attempts and play dirty, the ambiguities of blank columns and what could be shifted there; mixing up the spare cards and filching a jack out of order. Because really, the important thing was to keep the game going for as long as she possibly could, to bring every card under its proper king and queen.

To just make the whole damn thing work out.



The clamour of the news.

Rose had turned down the radio in the car; the hourly bulletins she seemed always to be catching between errands – the same refugee boat overturning in the Mediterranean with the same thirty-five people missing, the same boilover in the tennis overnight with the same gracious platitudes

offered by the young victor – and the same short and utterly inadequate report about a bushwalker who had been killed in the central highlands, the same meagre and useless sixty-three words, summarising it all the way down to nothing.

The first time she had heard it announced, Rose experienced a kind of gratification; the acknowledgement that this event, her event, was significant enough to be broadcast and known and felt by the wider community. But with the second and third and fourth repeats – as she stocked up on dehydrated food and another bottle of metho – it had begun to feel like a kind of routine, a senseless mantra or form of white noise; that there was a well-ordered box into which everyone who was listening would be filing the incident. A somber note peeling in their minds, and then a question: did we know him, or did we know someone who did? No? Still, it was very sad, wasn't it?

Or perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps everyone was feeling just as she was, a horrible, rending shock that this could have happened to a walker like Aaron. The people of the town struck silent, without a glib cliché or superior explanation to offer, not even nodding or shaking their heads. "That's terrible. That's awful. Think of his family

and friends.” Aaron was such a good, strong bushwalker. He had walked the state from north to south, and then the island had found a new direction for him and ushered him all the way down.

As the radio droned on Rose grew impatient – the poverty of words to explain anything at all – and so she muted its assured tones, and when she got home and stuffed the food she had bought into a yellow drybag, leaning it against her pack, she broke her habit of listening to the evening news and went to bed very early with the twilight still huddling in her bedroom.

In the morning, she woke in the dark to eat a quick breakfast of toast and coffee, and as she threw her gear in the back of her hefty four-wheel drive, as she drove to pick up Bryony and Sonia, sitting outside their homes on low brick fences, Rose ignored the headlines blaring from their stands outside the newsagencies as though they were a kind of false prophet, proclaiming messages that were not so much inaccurate as completely oversimplified in every way that mattered, and the only thing that she could do was set her eyes against them.

6

Rose, without thinking, had parked right next to Marco's van.

They stood in the small carpark near the gate, unloading their packs and letting them crash down against the gravel with the wet dust clinging, the three women pursuing their rituals, checking their zips for the gear that they worried about forgetting, confirming maps and torches. Adapting their layered clothes for the conditions, removing synthetic jackets – for though there was drizzle smearing the air, the day was muggy and humid, thick with heat – stepping into their stiff-necked boots and bandaging up their legs with gaiters.

Eating final muesli bars and bananas. Tinkling the keys in the top of the pack like a bell ringing: time to lock the car and make for the track head. So many customs and routines. A protection and a comfort, like every step; the talisman of forward movement. A solemn duty and a pilgrimage, or perhaps a commission for envoys carrying crucial news across dangerous terrain. Rose signed her name in the logbook, checking and confirming the route that Marco and his family were planning to follow.

Each of them was carrying or wearing a piece of gear that they would normally leave in the cupboards at home: a GPS, an extra thermal top, two or three triangular bandages. It didn't feel that they were trespassing into enemy territory so much as entering a kind of no-mans land, emptied of personal imprints and considerations; a fraternity of trees that was both threatening and charming. And even though that landscape, as they strode up the steep, pebbly trail, was not a completely hostile power, beating and torturing them, hanging them and shooting them for daring to impose their bodies on its boulders, all three women kept their heads hooded and bent low, making no eye contact with the sleeping conglomerate slabs and backing away from any altercation, their cameras buried in the bottoms of their packs, only brought out at times because changing their liturgy would have been more troubling – an admission that would concede far too much to their mountainous host.

They wondered when they would meet Marco and his family. It could be any minute; though the ridges ahead of them were empty of red and orange figures, it would only take one or two frames and the clouds would clear and there they would be, walking inexorably towards them. Could it be, the women wondered, that they already knew all

about it? Perhaps the family had climbed up to the tip of Geike, removed their phones and checked the cricket score, uploaded a picture of the whole family laughing and triumphant, the ranges waving behind them, and then noticed on the feeds another photo, and then another; so many photos of Aaron. Or they could have stopped for a friendly chat with another walker.

“Where are you guys headed to?”

“Isn’t it great country?”

“Magnificent. I could live up here, even through the winter.”

Updates on the weather, and then, as they were running out of conversational steam: “Terrible thing. Did you hear the news yesterday?” And Marco would be curious. Had there been another flood on the mainland or a fire devastating the peninsula?

“The news?” he would have asked.

Were they even now rushing along the plateau with stiff, heartbroken faces, the boys growing up into the dark moods of their parents? Angie shaken, with all her fears confirmed. How could she ever go into the wilds again, how could she let the boys,

how could she risk the boys, how could she even let Marco? And yet giving no voice to her concerns, just striding over the top of her small blisters and checking her husband's face for any signs, any indications of how he might need her to behave and respond in such a dark hour. To let him have his space, or to whisper beside his steps: was he okay, was there anything at all that he wanted to talk about?

More likely they would still be ignorant and happy, snoozing in their sleeping bags, Marco frying up some bacon to meet the eggs he had boiled several days before, a cup of strong tea in his hand; but just starting to think that with the gloomy weather it wasn't worthwhile staying much longer. But also still, that there was no reason to rush, it wasn't cold and it was cosy in the tents, and there was still another heavy bag of food to plug through, and after all, the dog was being looked after till Thursday. And then, here was Rose walking out of the cloud, her face tired, and Sonia and Bryony too. What a lovely surprise! Cup of tea? Bit of bacon, there's plenty to go around? No? Is there something wrong?

All of the possibilities cycling through their minds as they climbed past the shelves of rock and over

the lip of the plateau, their shoulders aching and breath forced; the sudden view expanding to other mountains and valleys, the still light wind unimpeded and cooling their sweaty skin as they pedaled their legs onward, quicker now, their faces red and hair damp; the low, brushy vegetation. No lingering or chatting, as though they were out to rescue a lost bushwalker or a climber with a broken leg; and perhaps they were, though the victim didn't yet know it.

“Do you think – ” started Sonia, and then she stopped as her companions turned and waited for her to continue. “Oh, nothing, it's nothing,” she said, but as they gave their full attention she let the implications of her thought spiral out; that there must have been a party like theirs that had readied themselves to go and get Aaron, to save Aaron, and she knew, she had a sense how they must have been feeling as they packed their professionalism and drove as close as they could before striding up through the forests where he had fallen... and Sonia saw that there was no consolation to be had in that thought, and she remembered the helicopter, there had been a helicopter; but the weight of Rose and Bryony's considering faces was a burden that could only be lightened with her speech, and so: “Do you reckon we'll find them today?” she asked. “I hope

we find them today, I don't think I could bear a night out without having told them. I'd prefer to walk all through the night."

Rose studied her. "I think we'll find them today, judging by their walk outline," she replied. And Sonia nodded, very content to let the moment pass, and the tears pooled once more in Bryony's eyes and there was nothing she could do to drain them but keep on moving. Sonia's question had brought the purpose of their walk to the forefront of their minds, a purpose that had been put aside and hidden through the sheer exertion of scrambling up the mountain's slope, and Rose was asking herself again how they could pass on such drastic news, how could they invite Marco to join this transformed world where Aaron was a person no longer, a parallel world that was as colourless as the flat sink of sky above them?

As the morning passed the baton to the early afternoon and the women approached Lake Tyndall across the high native grasslands, they saw two licks of orange paint through a gap in the shifting fog. "God! Fuck!" said Sonia, as if only then the reality had landed in her pack like an extra ten kilos of gear – and they looked across at those tents, and for the first time since entering that new

and strange bush they felt a real kind of fear, a fear that broke the boundaries of the place they were traveling through; and they were strangely tentative as they walked on, as if the ground was exposed on every side and covered by faithless ice. They couldn't take their eyes off the tents for fear that if they weren't attentive, if they let their task get away from them at the final hurdle, a figure might emerge and escape, run down the steep decline to the lakes on the eastern side to dodge their grim news.

As they approached the tents their stride grew faster, as though by consensus to get it all over and done with; they almost jogged past the wizened patches of olive scrub decked in light flowers. There were no sounds or signs of movement, and when they finally stepped into the margins of the tiny village, they were stopped and struck dumb by the absence of anyone at all. The fact that they couldn't discharge their duty, that they were left hanging by the silence, as though they had stepped into space from a massive drop but hadn't yet fallen. "Hello?" said Rose to the tents, tapping the nearest one. A scattering of cooking gear in a half-open vestibule, mugs, a Trangia – but nobody sitting there to welcome them for a hot drink.

“Must have gone for a day walk,” said Rose, swinging a leg back and forth, as though searching for something to kick. “A bloody day walk.” And she dropped her pack and grabbed a pack of matches. Checked the levels of fuel and got Marco’s stove going. “Geike or Tyndall?” She put the water on and waited for her friends to join her. “We should set up camp, anyway.” she suggested.

And so as the water shook itself and started to boil, Rose, Bryony and Sonia pitched their tents, breaking with convention by setting them as close as they could to each other, huddling them together like the rooms of one lone house, all the storm guys linking arms, and then they settled down on patches of uneven rock to wait, ready for the sound of children laughing, for a booming yell – “hello!” as Marco recognised the tents – for the moment when all three of them would have to stand up together and shake out their cramping legs. Perhaps they would walk out into the drizzle and stride up towards Marco and his family, and he would pick up the pace, bounding cheerily down the slope as his sons and wife proceeded sensibly and cautiously, and all too quickly they would close the distance and be mingling greetings, the clash of warm and cool fronts creating a strange disturbance as they hugged and trembled and spoke.

Or perhaps they would wait there as the hum of voices grew closer, hunting and tracking them down, slowly resolving into four separate people. The women would sit there fiddling with their mugs and fingers, saying nothing, just staring at the ground and waiting among the scattered pink and white stones, until Marco appeared in the space between the tents and let the mess of grey clouds in.

COLOPHON

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They had pressed through the early discomfort of their slack suburban muscles into true track hardiness, lean and strong, but had then stepped further into a new phase: vicious cramps, the sweat dissolving their joints. The slow, patient wear and tear needling away and sewing them a suit of weariness and strain that covered their whole bodies.

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