PRAISE FOR *SO MANY BEATS OF THE HEART*

'Warm, fresh, whole-hearted, and very very funny, *So Many Beats of the Heart* sparkles with insight on love, grief, and the ordinary mess of mid-life. It is sensitively told, keenly observed and manages to be both light in its touch and deeply soul-filling. An utterly joyous, charming, nourishing read.' **Brooke Davis**

'With abundant wit, a keen instinct for the perfect detail and a whole lot of heart, Carrie Cox holds a mirror up to the challenging middle years of modern life.' **Nick Earls**

'I adored Evie Shine and this warm, funny novel, filled with nuggets of wisdom about that most fascinating of landscapes: other people's relationships.' **Kerri Sackville**

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So Many Beats of the Heart

CARRIE COX

THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED PROOF

Affirm press

1

It's cauliflower that finally undoes Evie Shine. A bed of rough nubs in aisle eleven. Something about its nothingness. A quick silent kick to the chest.

She can't be winded, Evie thinks, and yet the air has shot right out of her and can't get back in. Her hands twist the trolley bar. Does she even need cauliflower today? *Does anyone?*

There are tears splashing softly onto Evie's hands. How long would cauliflower simply sit in the dark vegetable drawer of her fridge before exhibiting signs of oversight? *Try to swallow. Try to breathe.*

She hadn't known her water table was rising. Maybe cauliflower is exactly what she needs. Just a hardy vegetable and a few fresh ideas. Some better shoes. Swifter changing of blown lightbulbs. Deeper lines in the sand. Simple things. *Come on, breathe.*

It used to be that almost everything Evie needed, everything two children and two adults need over the course of two decades, could be found in a supermarket. There she'd made the weekly

choices, tiny and vital, that dictated the rhythm of their lives. The factory floor of a family. Now it's all passive-aggressive vegetables and decisions of minimal consequence.

Hand on her pounding chest, Evie at last feels a slip of air find its way back in.

'You okay?'

Evie looks up to see a woman at the head of her trolley. She's young and concerned, dressed as though she'll be going directly from here to a half-marathon.

'Do you need anything?' the woman asks her.

Evie puts a hand to her cheek now, feels its wetness and does her best to smile. 'It's the onions,' she says, pointing loosely at the cauliflower. 'Every time.'

'Okay,' the woman says uncertainly. 'Um …'

They both glance at the rows of vegetables for answers, for a way out.

Keep. Breathing.

'Really I'm fine,' Evie says now, one hand waving the entire store away, the other swiping the water from her eyes. She makes a better attempt to smile at the kind woman. Sees that her Lycra top says *Run like no one's watching*.

What?

'All good now,' Evie says, loosening her grip on the trolley. 'Sorry about that.'

And she hears herself say it this time. *Sorry*. A fellow tutor at the university had recently remarked that Evie was forever apologising. She'd thought about this for a day or so and waited to catch herself

doing it. It was one thing to throw around empty apologies in daily life but another to do so within a school of psychology. Among the cloistered halls of smug dot-joiners.

She knows there are many reasons people become excessive apologisers. Social anxiety. Hardwired trauma. Insecurity. Seldom are those who apologise the people who really need to. Rarely is forgiveness the goal. But now that she's doing it, punctuating her sentences with 'sorry' instead of commas apparently, none of those explanations fly. It's reductive behaviour, and she has no idea how long it will continue.

Evie has become, she realises, here by the stupid cauliflower, the sort of client she'd never enjoyed treating. The case study she now hates teaching: blindsided spouse stuck in a loop of self-pity, anger and leaky moments in the supermarket. A patch-up job at best. *Ugh*.

It's not that good therapy can't do much for a trampled heart, at least in terms of holding it like a broken bird in two hands while time maybe, hopefully, does its thing. But if the trampler isn't part of the process, then it's all just guesswork and brushstrokes. History rewritten for an audience of one.

It should make it easier that Evie's read all the textbooks relevant to her situation, every ironic one, but of course it doesn't. Knowledge can be its own punishment. Insight makes for clean cuts that bleed for hours. You don't want reason and clarity when waking up each day feels like a panicked diver's ascent. You want bad advice and platitudes. Cheap wine and hangovers. Plotless movies set in Tuscany. A welcome loss of appetite.

You definitely don't want moments like this in the supermarket. This is awful. Evie's legs are trembling just when she has to push this two-hundred-ish-dollar trolley of vague meal possibilities and forgettable decisions towards the checkouts.

Just get out of here.

She's not one to abandon a task, no matter how uncertain it's become. She always sees things through, often for no good reason. But Evie also feels an uneasy sense of pointlessness about today and what lies beyond it. She steals a deep breath, parks her trolley behind the potatoes and walks out of the store as though struck by the possibility she's left the oven on.

As though everything isn't already burning down.

2

After enough time you stop reading the pithy magnets on your fridge door. You stop seeing them at all. But today the oldest and grimiest of magnets on Evie's fridge pulls her up short: *No matter where you go, there you are*.

She can't remember who first said that – *Confucius? Seinfeld?* – or even how she got the magnet in the first place, but somehow it's survived every house move (four), every fridge upgrade (three) and every marriage implosion (one) since.

And it stops her mid-thought now as she checks with fresh hope whether there's anything dinner-worthy on hand in the wake of her aborted shopping mission. Anything to cover herself and a carnivorous teenager. It strikes her that this prescient magnet might have known all along how the Shine family would go down: broken and adrift on the wrong side of the country. It knew Evie would end up stranded in an alien city of her husband's choosing, unable to decide whether to stay or go, knowing only that any relocation would be like shuffling a steaming pile from one corner of a room to another.

She looks anew at the other magnets, mostly given by friends from a previous life: *We are all broken – that's how the light gets in*, *Turn your wounds into wisdom* and a dozen or so homages to wine and chocolate and soulmates (mostly wine).

God. Evie leans back on her kitchen bench and wonders how many lives have been ruined by taking far too literally the advice on fridge magnets.

'What's for dinner?'

Angus Shine moves into the doorway of the kitchen like a dalmatian through a cat-flap. His ranginess is almost theatrical, though far from deliberate. It often pains Evie to see the quiet shame her son has about his own physicality. No matter what people say about Angus's six-foot-four frame – and it's always remarked upon – he hears only the white noise of undue attention.

'How about takeaway?' Evie says, waving off the fridge like an old debt. 'Pizza?' *Again*.

Angus shrugs in the affirmative. 'Vegetarian with ham,' he says.

Evie's long stopped questioning the peculiarity of this order. 'How was school today?' she says, knowing the question will be longer than the answer.

'Okay,' her son emits, retreating at pace. 'Boring. I'll keep an ear out for the pizza.'

Angus is in his final year of school. There's no plan beyond this, because plans stopped meaning anything a year ago. Now he's marking time, mostly in his bedroom, and fronting up for meals.

Evie believes he's a good kid and by that she figures he has a kind heart. The weight of unrequested existence elicits from him a quiet

acquiescence. He will never be a boat-rocker, unlike his sister. He's never once raised the issue of Hamish's absence with Evie; he's never asked a question or made a protest. Whatever anger and confusion he may feel about his father has no precedent and so cannot be shaped. He seems the least affected out of any of them, seems okay, better than he was, which Evie knows to be a false positive in most cases. Tectonic plates may well be shifting deep within.

She sees a pile of envelopes on the kitchen counter that Angus must have retrieved from the mailbox. A bill from her new skin doctor, a Mater Prize Home lottery brochure addressed to the previous owners, and a Private and Confidential letter for the house two doors down the street. Because Evie doesn't want to open the bill yet, she decides instead to deliver the neighbour's mail.

The street she now lives on, the address hand-picked by her husband via an excitable online search one evening just over two years ago, an evening she now looks back on as one might the feverish booking of a flight for a loved one that ultimately plummets, is typical of Sunshine Coast aspiration. A mixture of young families, blended experiments and seniors not yet going down for the count. In between are people like Evie – caught by circumstance in a place they don't know but can't quite see beyond, perhaps for the glare.

She goes to put the letter in the cream rendered mailbox of number 68 and is intercepted by a girl, maybe sixteen or seventeen, coming up the footpath towards the same house.

'Hi,' she says, lifting the letter out of Evie's hands. 'I can take that. Thanks.'

'It came to the wrong address, sorry,' Evie says. *Again with the sorry.* 'It's the third one.'

'Right,' the girl says.

'But I don't mind dropping them off – it's fine.'

The girl has hair everywhere, wild and pointy like talons, the colour of Pilbara dust. Her face is sunken by furiously smudged brown eyes. 'Thank you,' she says and gestures at the house. 'He doesn't come out to the mailbox much.'

'Probably afraid of all the bills like me,' Evie says and smiles, then frowns, then half smiles. Can't decide the right expression. She heads back in the direction of her house, wondering why she's always felt the need to please ambivalent strangers.

In the fading light Evie looks again at this street they've landed in, a mix of new money and dubious money. High-walled mini compounds alongside porous beach shacks. She knows none of her neighbours and suspects she won't, even though she knew most of the regular faces in her previous habitat. Jill the dog-walker, sad widow Sylvia, Ken the needy conversationalist. And the parents of her children's friends from primary school – those relationships had, apart from one or three, withered from weekly barbecue catch-ups to apologetic summaries in the grocery aisle.

Life hadn't seemed to be winding up in Perth until Hamish announced his golden opportunity: a three-year contract (unheard of in academia these days) as a professorial fellow in politics at Sunshine Coast University. And everything had looked different from that moment, as though viewed from forty thousand feet up –

the depth of their friendships, the value of their home, the trajectory of their careers.

We would be mad – *mad*, Hamish had insisted, to pass this up. And Evie had quickly, so very quickly, come to agree. The money, the timing, the vague reminder of a feeling called thrill.

She looks back now on her agreeability as one might regret falling in with the wrong crowd at high school. There just weren't enough obstacles in the way. She'd trampled over red flags. Moved too quickly.

Of course she'd worried about the kids, but, as Hamish pointed out, Sera was just finishing year twelve and her grades would get her into a university on any side of the country. And Angus would be *fine*, Hamish insisted. Hadn't Evie wanted a change for him? Something to ignite his kindling.

The longer Evie took to find opposing arguments, and she didn't, not really, the more rapidly the moving plan progressed. Her own job, as a relationships counsellor at a reputable not-for-profit centre in Cottesloe, had never felt worthy of throwing up as a counter-argument. As much as she felt she was making progress with most of her clients, she knew – and Hamish often reminded her – that their problems were largely universal and her expertise transferable.

What neither of them raised, for many reasons along the spectrum between doubt and fear, was how their own relationship factored into this decision to uproot their midlife. Somehow the conversation didn't happen, either because it wasn't necessary or because it was so necessary as to be impossible.

It had, for a short time anyway, been nice to see Hamish so enthusiastic about the prospect of change. Of *making something happen*. Evie hadn't been tempted to look too squarely at the possibility that Hamish, like so many men she'd counselled over the years, might be trying to run away from his family by taking them with him.

3

Caron and Glen

There came a point in couples counselling, usually during the third or fourth appointment when the set pieces had all been played and the stakes were now abundantly clear, when Evie could see who was lying. Either to themselves or to their partner. Always to Evie.

Perhaps 'lying' isn't fair. It was more the case that one person's agenda suddenly came into clear focus, no longer hidden behind apparent confusion and hurt. It had been there all along: the trick card secreted at the bottom of the deck. It became evident, at least to Evie, just who was captaining this boat and where it would beach.

Caron was clearly a very capable woman, someone who could quickly size up any environment and insert herself at its core. She didn't just win promotions; she expected them. Knew they were coming. She had surpassed Glen's early notions of her capacity and quietly resented him for underestimating her.

But they'd been an attentive couple, neither one wanting to replicate the errors of their parents, both trying to fill childhood voids. They had produced two children, two boys, now in their final

years of high school, one easy, one difficult. They couldn't agree on who was the easy one.

Minutes into their first session with Evie, Caron had begun to cry. She consistently wept the minute each session began, six in total, before declaring there was no point continuing at all. It was because of all of the things, she said, *all of them*. It was her exhaustion, his ambivalence, her long hours, his long hours, the relentless march of it all, on and on and on into too-familiar territory. It was, Caron said, the meaningless conversations that felt like scraping mould off cheese. It was libidos that no longer signalled themselves. It was old resentment (the sheer engorgement of early motherhood) and new resentments too: his lack of fresh ideas, his acceptance of *this* … whatever this was. This *place* in the supposed middle of their lives that felt very much like the end, at least to Caron.

That Glen couldn't *see* it, that she alone was left to identify the decomposing body of their marriage – this was what had upset Caron the most. This was what had brought her to Evie's small office in Cottesloe one rainy August.

Caron needed to make Glen see how bad things had got, she said, or else they'd never be able to fix any of it. But that, Evie had begun to feel, wasn't the truth.

It wasn't Caron's desire to fix her marriage, not anymore. Caron had done the building inspection some time ago, had deemed the structure unworthy. Her gaze was now elsewhere – quite possibly an exit affair, Evie had suspected – and she wanted out. But it's not easy to call time on a well-established marriage without a bomb, especially if you're a woman.

In the absence of exposed infidelity, abuse, financial ruin, chronic illness or insurmountable grief, first-time marriages in middle age can't easily be detonated. They're like murder trials without a smoking gun, entirely reliant on the weight of circumstantial evidence. One needed to mount a substantial case.

Because really, Evie often thought in spite of herself and in spite of her job, what was any married couple of a certain duration expecting at this point? She had heard it too many times: years and years of listening to couples collapsing in upon themselves, looking for answers, for validation, for a way out. So often the qualities they first saw in each other had become the focus of their respective disappointments. This was both cruel, Evie knew, and partly inevitable. Sometimes fixable if that was the shared goal – if therapy wasn't simply an expensive ruse to please the jury.

She used to be more hopeful, of course. She used to be better at this. Once Evie had been painstakingly methodical about helping couples identify the hurts they were projecting on each other – most often the scars of childhood rearing up like fully grown vipers. She had been proudly successful in helping them at least reach a point of mutual understanding (the highest form of love, she would tell them) and to recalibrate their expectations about sex and romance post kids, career and calamity. Her talent, she knew, or at least assumed, helped insulate her own marriage.

But Evie had begun to see that most people simply come to counselling too late. And that at least one party is telling lies.

She would see Caron again, about six months after their last session. She spotted her at a weekend market throng, her head

thrown back in joy at the taste of a tangerine. She was with a man, not Glen, and Evie had watched them both from behind a rack of clothes. All tanned limbs and sun hats. Side smiles and reinvention.

Evie had wondered what Glen was doing right now. She'd hoped he was okay.

4

There was a window after Hamish left through which Evie could have quietly crawled back, back to what came before, but somehow didn't. There was a clear return route to her former life, the setting of it anyway, so recently abandoned that Evie imagines the fairy lights she'd strung up in branches for their leaving party are still flickering their tiny shards of joy. No one would have questioned it. She'd have returned an object of pity, but that would have been the worst of it. Like the dolt who throws in their job to travel around the world for a year, only to return a month later, sheepish and broke. *It happens. Nothing to see here.*

But Evie hadn't moved – hadn't even teetered like the last bowling pin. She is caught somehow. Drawn to disorientation. Stuck in Bono's moment. Sometimes she recognises the signs of emotional inertia wrought by trauma – the resistance to courting any more unwelcome change. *Stay still. Just wait.*

But it's more than that. More than not knowing what picture Hamish has apparently drawn for them.

In the last three years of her life in Perth, Evie witnessed a steady degradation of the partnerships in her friendship circle. One by one, as though each had somehow infected the next, her friends' marriages ended. There were spectacular combustions and predictable dissolutions. There were third parties, no parties. There were tacky divorce parties. There were exceptions.

An ethnographer might have reported a quiet pandemic of pain in the city's suburbs. A steady fracturing of street-front houses into nondescript little units at the rear of battle-axe blocks. Kids biting skin off thumbs. The packing and unpacking of sports bags. Teachers wanting quiet words. Bottle-shop boom times.

They might have noted the few commonalities – the certain vintage of most partnerships, kids not quite finished high school (but close enough), the absence of the sort of economic or societal pressures that might excite a documentary maker. Problems of privilege.

These were the marriages that had already made it through the early chicanes. Made it out of the dark forest of weariness, the tedium of toddlerhood, the contest for careers, the tandem tilts at joy and temptation. Evie had counselled many couples over the years who'd never made it this far, who'd tripped at much earlier hurdles, but these are not the cases she now looks back on in unbidden moments, the ones landing on her windscreen like bright yellow flyers. Now she remembers the couples who almost made it out of the wild, almost to the clear air.

At each denouement of her friends' marriages, Evie felt worse about her professional place in it all. A firefighter standing in a

charred field, cheeks blackened, eyes white. The front-page picture of valiant failure. But these hadn't been her clients – they were her friends. She never provided professional counsel to any of them, yet their marriage break-ups had left her feeling guilty and exposed, as though her skills were no more valuable than those of a self-help evangelist collecting cash for hopes and dreams.

Within her group Evie had started to play down the intactness of her own marriage. She would echo complaints about estranged husbands with observations of her own: Hamish's blind obsession with his work, with politics, his intolerance of polite conversation, a failure to top up old friendships, and other such middling criticisms that only bore weight when run in quick succession. 'We've just been lucky so far,' she would also sometimes say, and that had been true. They'd not lost their life savings to a charlatan stockbroker, hadn't buried a child, nor even a parent yet. They hadn't watched every last box of possessions turn to ash. Nothing perversely unfair had ever caused them to turn on each other. But while Evie had freely acknowledged this good fortune to her friends, especially when they chided her during wine-addled dinner deconstructions, she'd no longer given any suggestion of the contentedness – and relief – that came with such random blessings.

Evie no longer said out loud that she was still happy to share a life with her husband. She rarely even said it to Hamish.

It was all too easy to leave that behind, that little cluster of dysfunction in Perth, and it's not something she is keen to return to, not yet, not while her own rupture presents such rich conversation fodder. This is cowardly, she knows, and also unfair because her

friends would be compassionate and kind, if a little too salivating in their delivery. She simply isn't ready for them. For any of it. For questions she has no answers for.

And there is more at stake besides. There is Angus.

In their last year in Perth, Angus had begun pulling out his hair. Weeding it out of his scalp with red bony fingers, hiding it beneath his pillow, under his bed, unable to hide the holes in the wake of his pulls and tears.

Angus's turmoil had consumed her. She'd wanted to hold his hands in hers until he promised to stop, to at least explain it to her. But she also knew that the cause of his searing anxiety was school, was the hapless posse of grunting fools he'd somehow landed in, was six or seven circling dogs, and from all that she was powerless to save him. To simply reach in and pull him out.

Evie had pushed Hamish to let their son change schools for his senior years. But Hamish was adamant that the school wasn't the problem, that to move him might even make things worse. Society was the problem, Hamish said. There wasn't enough for kids to be hopeful about anymore. The quicksand of social media.

Hamish liked to make sense, liked to craft it out of reason and evidence like art from stone. He made sense feel like love to Evie. He told their son to take *positive action*, to change his social group, as though that was possible for a giant boy with fresh welts on his head and terror in his marrow. As though a private boys' school playground wasn't the Gaza Strip.

When Hamish found Evie sobbing at the dining room table one evening, he offered to speak to the school principal. Angus roared

in pain at the suggestion.

Evie took him to see one of her colleagues, a specialist in adolescent anxiety and depression. Angus had walked out of the counselling room within fifteen minutes. 'An idiot,' he told her on the drive home. 'Wanted to know if I was cutting myself,' he said. And Evie thought, *Are you?*

It doesn't help, Evie knows, that Angus's sister is so self-assured. So present. Sera navigated her final year of school like a pentathlete. Like she had life's Cliff Notes in her schoolbag: not quite cocky about the future but absolutely *ready*.

Sera is of Hamish, and Angus is of Evie. Some families are painfully obvious.

Now, at least, here in this still unfamiliar neighbourhood, Angus's hands don't fly up to his head at the slightest sound. His scalp is covered, albeit unevenly and with no hint of style, by brown downy fuzz that Evie can't help but touch sometimes with gratitude. She no longer finds clumps of despair in his room or at the bottom of the shower. And while she doesn't know precisely when Angus's self-torture stopped, she knows it was soon after the move east. He'd just needed to be airlifted out of the killing fields. That Hamish was wrong about this is now a moot point.

So it has not happened, the inelegant tiptoe back west. Back to before. 'Not yet,' she sometimes says to Sera, who has regardless taken to college life at Perth's sandstone university and who carefully never mentions her father to Evie.

A little more time please. A little less. More and also less. Just look away for now.

Evie sometimes sits opposite herself, in a chair in one of her old consulting rooms. She looks down upon her body, on time's sneaky victory over effort. *The thickening*, her mother once called a woman's midlife. She looks at the empty chair beside her. She wants to wring her own neck. She wants to slap her face hard.

She passes herself a tissue and lets the silence find its space.

5

Ali and Tom

They were the first couple Evie saw in the Cottesloe rooms, instantly filling the pretty little space with gales and fissures, with words that ripped like hot wax.

An affair. His. A turbulent flight from all he had known, from Ali, from himself. Six months in foreign hotel rooms. So easy. So unlike him. So unthinkable. Brought undone by a receipt for flowers. *Flowers*. This, of all the details, of all the imaginings, drove Ali to the precipice again and again.

'He won't even tell me what type of flowers they were,' Ali wept at Evie. Then to her husband: 'Why won't you fucking tell me? Just *tell me*.'

And Tom would say each time, 'I don't remember,' and 'It doesn't matter,' and 'I'm so sorry.'

And Ali would look at her hands in her lap, rolling over each other, tearing at history. And Evie would gently bring her back from the flowers.

Evie had once watched a snake-catcher in Africa wrestle a large

feisty serpent into a bag. It was an impressive act, humble for its quiet deftness. Like the other frozen onlookers, Evie was instantly relieved by the sight of the full bag, by the containment of the snake and all the danger it had promised just moments earlier. A hostel room full of terror had been stuffed in a bag.

'Isolate, identify,' the catcher had said to the grateful crowd of backpackers. 'It doesn't matter in what order.'

Evie had spent years honing the same approach when counselling affairs: get the snake in the bag. Contain the danger. Calm the room. Identify.

Flowers.

Few people in established relationships set out to have an affair. The exceptions, in Evie's professional experience, are those people who want to make a statement, those with a form of sex addiction, and those who want to leave. She didn't think Tom fitted into any of these categories.

Instead she'd quickly surmised that Tom's affair was of the 'split self' kind, a reductive description for perhaps the most complicated and destructive brand of infidelity. A person who has this sort of affair is often startled, at least initially, by their own response to a situation that clearly threatens their relationship, that winks murderously at everything they've spent years defending and propping up and trimming into photo frames. Suddenly, in a moment that enkindles a dozen more, in a room alight with tiny explosions, they are not what they knew themselves to be. They are *seen*. They are vulnerable. They are the truest version of themselves – a child embraced at last.

These are the people who sit in Evie's room and say, 'I didn't mean for it to happen.' They say – even with every detail, every unknotted scarf, every glistening sternum and fleeting recoil, cast inside their skulls like precious cave paintings – that it's all a blur. It's in the distant past, irretrievable by memory, a giant mistake, an unrepeatable travesty. These are the things they say if they want to reverse the damage.

It's what Tom said to Ali over and over as the weeks passed in Evie's room. *I'm sorry. I can't remember. It doesn't matter. She doesn't matter*. No detail. Detail would crush her like flowers.

Tom knew what Ali needed to hear because he alone knew her. They'd been together since high school, married since their early twenties, co-travellers through parenthood and multiple overseas postings, through ambition and disappointment and the terror of empty weekends. In this sense, they were not unlike Evie and Hamish: together for more than half their lives, two people shaped by the movements of the other.

At the start of every session Tom was complicit in helping Evie put the snake in the bag. Sometimes they were successful. Sometimes Ali stopped crying long enough to hear Tom reason through the maze of his motives and mistakes. (If there was one word that Evie heard most often in her counselling room, it was 'mistake'.) Tom would talk about his mother, about growing up in the narrow tributary of her depression. Ali heard him trying to make sense of his own behaviour, his unforgivable detour. She heard him answering Evie's questions, following her purposeful lead to the past, to the holes dug in the sand before the tide had rushed in.

It was only in these moments that Ali even looked at Tom in this room of smashed secrets. Evie saw flashes of guarded tenderness in Ali's eyes when her husband talked about himself as a boy, before he was a man who formed offshore subsidiaries and hosted corporate boxes and crushed human hearts in his hand. He spoke of being shy, of being short, of being not enough. And it was there, in the past, that Evie had made progress with the couple, gently shifting Ali from the bastion of blame to something resembling hope.

It's no trick of Evie's craft but sometimes it works: this connecting of dots across decades to engineer new ways of understanding a person. Sometimes it even lasts. Sometimes men like Tom don't go ahead and do the very same thing a few years later.

6

There's a coffee place at the end of Evie's new street that is a half-formed thought: a traditional Italian-styled cafe not quite able to overcome the building's origins as a bait-and-tackle shop. Rich bean-coloured panelling barely hides rusted old deep-freeze boxes. Settees of red velvet and wobbly chairs flank Formica tables. Elegant pastries in glass boxes look hopelessly misunderstood. It is always busy, always loud, and Evie has come to appreciate hiding out in its haphazard alchemy.

This is where, soon after Hamish left, Evie took herself each morning to check if she was sound – if she could drive herself to the university, teach Therapeutic Practice to a theatre full of earnest ambition, smile at her colleagues in long hallways, drive home again and not once implode into tiny matter. She would grasp her hands around the warm mug, grateful for its curve, for its limited expectations, and she would wonder again at the best way out of this, about all the things that would have to be done. Now she needed Glen's advice, Ali's advice, the help of every former client

who'd been left to make sense of an altered future.

Evie had drawn comfort from her invisibility in this boisterous cafe setting, yet she had been seen.

Ronni Vella, the sister of cafe owner Rita, flies into Le Cose Semplici most mornings, arms full of muffins and tarts and constellations of flour. She is a human weather front, every facet of her overt Italian-ness instantly charging the room. Ronni's eyes throw to all corners as she kisses the staff and swears above the cacophony. 'Fanculo, it is hot out there!'

Not long after Evie had found her little corner sanctuary in the cafe, Ronni had launched to her side one morning, pushed a warm cannoli on a plate beside Evie's mug and said, 'What has happened to you? Let's make it better now – let's do this.'

And Evie had laughed, at the gentle urgency of her concern, at her apparent desire to ensure no one in that cafe at that moment was nursing despair while drinking the good coffee.

'If it is a man,' Ronni said, 'then we can take him out. Next Thursday. My cousin leaves Thursdays free for quick jobs.'

Evie laughed again, fairly certain Ronni was joking.

'It doesn't have to be the full death. Injuries are quick, easy jobs. A limb. His pene! Troppo facile!'

There were other coffee shops Evie could have switched to – at least eight more between her street and the beach – but if it was truly anonymity that she craved, her resolve was unconvincing even to herself. She continued to return to Le Cose Semplici most mornings, for the often too-hot coffee, for the quick crush of unfamiliarity in a still foreign place. She allowed Ronni to descend upon her life, to

blast away at her edges with utterly mad stories that either couldn't be true or must be.

Even before Evie had shared a single detail about Hamish, about all she'd not seen coming and still didn't understand, Ronni brought her tales of infedelta. She did this with some authority, Ronni insisted, because Italians stray more than any other nationality. 'It's true,' she once said, shrugging. 'The men they cannot help themselves, especially in the summer. The women are worse. There is too much of everything in Italy – too much beauty, too much dreaming, too much of the skinny ankles under lovely skirts. Too much forgiveness from *Him*.' At any mention of God, Ronni would make a sign of the cross over her chest and then appear to toss it on the floor.

Most days Ronni speaks like someone who just moments ago stepped off a plane from Rome and has less than thirty minutes to expel all the latest news to the world.

'Calabria. Just this month!' she'd reported to Evie one morning. 'Good-looking couple. You know, gym types. Bodies are a *temple*. I hate these people. What would they even do with a struffoli? The woman, she has one of those fitty bits, those things you wear on your wrist? I don't really get what they are. Why do you need to know you've walked sixteen hundred steps? Weren't you there? Who's keeping score? I hate these people.

'And then one day she is walking, walking, walking, okay? And her fitty bit tells her that she has just weighed in at fifty-six kilos. And she thinks, *No I haven't*. I'm not on my scales. I haven't weighed myself since this morning. And I was sixty-four point five. Evie! The

scales are connected to the fitty bit thing, *do you see*?'

Evie had nodded, as always amused by Ronni's lively delivery. She was both grateful and ready to flee in equal measure. She thought of Ali and the flowers.

Ronni continued: 'So this woman thinks, who is standing on my bathroom scales right now, at two in the afternoon? It's not me. Because I'm right here. I'm just here walking really fast.

'And so she turns around, Evie. She circles back along the Corso and she goes home, back to her bathroom scales, and what do you think she finds there? *What?* She finds her dick-on-the-head husband with Little Miss Fifty-six Kilos in their bedroom!'

Evie had looked squarely at the table, tried to maintain a smile.

'I mean, who *does* that, Evie?' Ronni demanded of her.

And Evie had thought: *Too many people*.

'Who gets on the scales before sex?'

'Oh,' Evie replied. 'That is weird.'

'And who weighs fifty-six kilos? That's like having sex with a parcel.'

'And does she kill him?' Evie had asked then, because Ronni's face looked like the best part of the story was still to come.

'I don't know!' Ronni exclaimed and then threw her hands to the sky. 'Maybe. Let us hope so! I mean, who are these people? How hard is it to just love someone until one of you dies?'

Ronni's main issue with the world is over-complication. In her reasoning, delivered at a constant frequency like the hum of a fridge, most people simply miss the key points of existence. Love, family, food, repeat.

One morning Evie had watched Ronni all but accost a man in a suit ordering takeaway coffee in the cafe. 'What do you *do*?' she had said to him, as though the size of his lapels naturally demanded an explanation.

'Well, I, I mean I …' he'd started to flub a little before clearing his throat. 'I … there are a number of companies and boards that I consult to on … it's primarily in the area of benefits realisation management and some products-based planning … there's a move towards—'

'Ah!' said Ronni. 'You got one of those jobs. See, I do *hair*. My Vince does *cars*. You got one of those jobs where you don't really know what you do but you get paid a lot of money – I want one of those jobs!'

Somehow Ronni had made this sound like a compliment rather than a stick shoved in a spinning wheel. The businessman had looked a little smitten.

Of course Ronni does not want one of those jobs at all. Evie knows that Ronni views much of corporate culture (apart from its denizens' capacity to pay top dollar for home haircuts and new head gaskets) as an unfathomable waste of human endeavour. There are just too many people in the world actively missing the point of *everything*. Thank God they're still ordering coffee, Ronni often says with a measure of hope.

If Evie was back in Perth now, if she'd given in to the buckling of her legs in those first few weeks and months of uncertainty, she knows that her friends would be clambering over each other to fix her. There would be vouchers for indulgent facials, movie nights,

weekends down south and a never-ending stream of memes to her phone about the restorative power of wine, the vagaries of love and the inherent flaws in all men. All of this would be earnest and kind and Evie would appreciate these things that women do for each other to make disaster look like something else.

But she would also have wanted to silently shut it down, to make it stop, for the price of all this cauterisation would be endless analysis of the wound. Secrets would be expected, pried open like mussels. Long lunches of detective work would be disguised as empathy. And all their marriages, every single relationship, would be turned over and over above the lightbox of Evie's. Her own cataclysm would be everyone's learning opportunity, as theirs should have been for her – their watershed or Waterloo.

It's not selfishness that would stop Evie wanting to provide this receipt for service. It's more that after dedicating hundreds and hundreds of hours to engineering these discussions for *other* couples, to navigating bomb sites and heartache and to finding clues amid the ruins, she is simply tired of looking too closely at anything.

Ronni has never once asked her about Hamish. Of course the topic comes up from time to time but never at Ronni's beckoning. She acts as though the events that landed a broken Evie in a corner of a coffee shop constitute a conversation too obvious to be necessary.

Instead of vouchers and movie nights, Ronni gives Evie irreverence and inappropriateness. She gives her wild theories framed as incontrovertible truths. She gives her frank assessments of Evie's hair – 'There's, like, an old rotting bit at the back – I can probably work around it' – and acne creams for Angus and recipes

for mushroom sauce. Once she had given her, apropos of nothing, a new mop that she simply described as 'a deeply, deeply satisfying clean'.

Once Evie had shared an anecdote about Ronni with her son and found that she faltered when explaining how she knew this eccentric Italian. Was Ronni a friend? How would Ronni describe Evie to others? For a moment she was back in high school, standing on the edges of groups and wondering if this counted as being in them.

Ronni has quickly become such an unexpected and persistent force in Evie's recast life that she's come to think of her as she does certain books that had thrust themselves in her path with unquestionable prescience, as though they were meant to be found. Yet it seemed entirely possible that Ronni had no such description for Evie, that Ronni had never recounted one of their discussions to another person and that Evie was simply one of dozens of people who punctuated the woman's daily hurtle through the atmosphere.

And then one day Ronni arrives at the cafe with a man in tow. 'This is Vince,' she says to Evie. 'He does cars. And sometimes he does me!'

Evie suppresses a laugh, a hopeless rival to Ronni's cackle in this moment.

'And this is my friend Evie,' Ronni says to Vince, 'who I tell you about when you're never listening.'

'Hi, Evie,' Vince says with a self-conscious little shrug. He is handsome and worn and wearing something akin to racing stripes. 'Veronica's told me a lot about you.'

'I *tell* him,' Ronni says then, ostensibly to Evie but equally to the next few tables, 'that you're like that beautiful rose bush he accidentally killed last year because the idiota tipped out engine oil too close to the garden. You're just starting to grow back.'