

A
WALK
IN THE
DARK

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LOTHIAN

One

Fred left without saying goodbye. Jess wasn't awake anyway. He'd had to get up early to catch the bus. Why did his mum make him go to this stupid school with its stupid hikes. He'd imagined it would be slack, a free school with no rules, but it wasn't. His dad had said Bellarine Grammar, and boarding, would sort Fred out, but it hadn't. Now it was his mum's turn for a social experiment. That's what he was. A social experiment.

He got on at Kennett River. The light was grey, it was just before dawn. Warm air inside formed condensation on the windows. The bus wound its way along the looping road that hugged the coast, following its shape. Fred couldn't look at his phone because looking down made him car-sick. Bus-sick. He listened to music instead. Violent Soho. Closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the sun was rising over the ocean. The sea was silver and the sky was pink. Pink Madder Lake. Fred knew the colours because he'd had the Derwents. He forgot most of what he was taught at school, facts and history and science, but lately, the names of those coloured pencils had come back to him. He let himself watch the ocean, the

pink horizon, for a moment. Fred supposed it looked beautiful, he supposed he could understand that this road, the Great Ocean Road, was world famous and tourists came here from everywhere, but it was also just the route to school.

His new school.

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Ash got on at Skenes Creek. A chill washed in each time the bus door opened, hissing on its hinges. Kids in puffer jackets, beanies, eyes glistening in the cold of the morning.

‘Hey, Fred.’ Ash was smiling. He always was.

Fred felt hungry. He hadn’t had breakfast.

‘I wonder where they’ll drop us.’ Ash settled his backpack under the seat in front.

Fred took out an earbud. ‘Have you done this before?’

Ash shook his head. ‘Been camping heaps of times, but not on my own, not a dropping.’

Fred thought it sounded like bird poo. A dropping.

‘So they really drive us somewhere and drop us off?’ he asked.

Ash nodded, putting in his buds.

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As the sky lightened, the bus turned from the coast and headed inland to rolling hills and dairy farms. It had been a wet March, and the hills were emerald green. Black-and-white cows stood in the foreground like a painting. Fred knew Emerald Green, too, from the Derwent pencil. There was a girl at this new school called Emerald, as well. When Fred was a kid he drew

all the time, but not anymore. Music, YouTube and PlayStation were what he did now. In the pack of seventy-two Derwents, there were twelve greens. Fred could picture Emerald Green and Bottle Green. And Olive. Was there a Sea Green? Often the sea was green, but sometimes it was blue, or grey, or silver like it had been earlier that morning. Fred's aunty, Jess, who he lived with now (he didn't think of it as living, more as staying), was an illustrator. She had her own Derwents – Fred had looked at their names, and remembered being small and worried in his room.

He could see the forest ahead of them, beyond the cleared land. The Otways. Old growth, ancient trees. There must be a Forest Green? When he was a kid, Fred had been fascinated by all the different shades of one colour.

The bus stopped and started, lurching and braking more than usual. The regular driver was away and the new person was like an emergency teacher, who didn't know the kids, the ropes, the road.

They pulled over to the gravel edge to pick up more passengers. Kids going to the local high school, and others heading to the edge of the forest, to Otway Community School.

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When they stopped at Lansborough, a little girl got on amongst a group of older kids. Fred didn't notice her, but Ash did. She looked too young for school. 'Do you reckon she's all right on her own?' Ash said to no one in particular, as Fred had his earbuds back in. 'I don't think the driver saw her get on.'

Ash stood up. Took out his buds. The bus swayed. He went over to her. She was sitting by herself, swinging her feet under the seat.

‘Hey, what’s your name?’

‘Tessa.’

He sat down next to her. She was so small that her Bluey backpack fitted neatly beside her on a single seat.

‘How old are you?’

The little girl held up five fingers proudly.

‘Where are you going, Tessa?’

‘To see my nanna.’

‘Is she meeting you at the bus stop?’

‘I’m going to her house.’

‘On your own?’

She nodded confidently. ‘Would you like some popcorn?’

Okay, maybe this was legit? ‘No thanks, you have it.’ The popcorn looked homemade. And fresh. When Tessa opened the bag, Ash could smell burnt butter.

‘Do you go to school?’

‘I’m going to Nanna’s house today.’

‘Right.’

Tessa seemed quite content, she was munching her popcorn from the small Glad bag on her lap. Like she was on an adventure for one. Swinging her little legs and her pink runners back and forward as the bus moved on. Maybe Ash was concerned for no reason.

‘I like your runners,’ he said.

‘They’re my new ones,’ said Tessa, straightening her legs out in front of her. ‘Nanna got them for me. She got them on her holiday.’

Tessa looked out the window.

After a few minutes, Ash went back to his seat beside Fred. ‘We better keep an eye on that kid,’ he said. ‘She’s only five and she’s on her own.’

Fred shrugged. ‘Not our responsibility, mate.’

Why not? Ash didn’t get that thinking. And he wasn’t sure about Fred yet, who seemed a bit angry or sarcastic or something, but they caught the bus together every day, and they’d been surfing a few times with some other guys. Fred was new to the school, and Ash liked to give everyone a go.

When they got off, Ash tossed up whether he should tell the bus driver to watch out for the little girl. But, you’re not in the Kimberley now, he told himself. Not in the community, where everyone watches out for everyone. The driver might think he was weird. You could never tell. You had to be careful, these days, particularly if you were a guy taking interest in a little kid. The driver might have seen him go and sit with Tessa, might have already made a note of it. How sad is that, Ash thought, and he got that sick feeling when stuff in society really worried him, it was so wrong.

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Chrystal woke with tinnitus roaring in her ears.

Elle wasn’t in the sofa-bed against the wall. Chrystal heard the shower, and morning radio in the kitchen. Something about

a weather warning, but she couldn't hear it properly, because the shower sound and the tinnitus sound mingled loudly in her head. What kind of weather warning? She didn't want bad weather when they were going on this camp or hike or whatever it was. They couldn't even take their phones. And she wouldn't like the food, she wouldn't be able to eat it. They wouldn't make her eat it, would they?

Elle came down the passageway to the bedroom, already dressed and putting her hair in a ponytail.

'Hey, Chrystal, we need to leave in twenty, you better get up.'

Elle didn't suggest a shower because Chrystal never seemed to have one. Elle watched her now, sitting up in bed, twirling her hair with one hand and clutching Snoopy, the stuffed toy she was obsessed with, in the other. She hadn't brought half the clothing on the exchange packing list but she'd brought this toy. Her hair fell on her shoulders in twisted strands. It was dirty.

'I have a headache,' she said dully.

'Do you want a Panadol?'

Chrystal acted as if she hadn't heard Elle. She did this all the time. Like she didn't know that if someone asks you a question you're supposed to answer it.

'It's because a storm is coming.'

'What?' said Elle from the doorway.

'I get a headache if a storm is coming,' said Chrystal, slowly getting out of bed.

That's kind of ridiculous, thought Elle, who had been patient for the past three weeks but was now sick of Chrystal.

Elle's dad was cooking pancakes in the kitchen. 'You'll need to fill up on these, girls.' He slipped them onto a plate. 'You have to carry your own food in, so best have a big breakfast.'

He held the plate to Chrystal. 'Pancake?'

Silence. Hands like incy-wincy spider.

'Chrystal?'

Chrystal picked up her phone. 'I guess.'

One thing that really got on Elle's nerves was that Chrystal never said please or thank you. She also never called Elle's parents by their names. And she never helped! She'd only offered one time, when she'd just got off the phone to her mum. 'Do you need help with the meal?' she'd said, too loudly, once dinner was already served. Elle thought that maybe Chrystal's mum had reminded her to say these things, ask these questions. Elle's own mum had said that they needed to be understanding, that maybe Chrystal was finding it stressful living with a family she didn't know. 'But she doesn't even clear her plate after dinner,' said Elle. It sounded petty, but it was so annoying! Couldn't she see the rest of the family picking their plates up and putting them in the dishwasher? It took like six seconds! 'And we've tried so hard!' Elle told her mum. 'You and Dad have, Hughie has, I have too.' Elle's dad had even asked if any of Chrystal's friends were also on the exchange program and if she'd like to see them. She didn't seem bothered.

Hughie, Elle's little brother, was chatting with their dad, but when the weather forecast came on the radio, Dad tilted his head, listening.

'Fine at first, but a severe weather warning with damaging wind, hail and heavy rain.'

‘Do you reckon we’ll still do the dropping, Dad?’ Elle held her fork mid-air.

‘I think so. Sounds like the worst of the weather won’t hit us here until early tomorrow morning.’ Butter spattered in the pan. ‘You’ll be back at school, safe and sound in your sleeping bags by then.’ He slid another pancake onto Hughie’s plate. ‘And it’s going to be a beautiful day today. A beautiful autumn day. Twenty-two degrees and sunny. Perfect!’

Elle went to the bench where her phone was charging, checked the weather app.

‘You know we can’t take our phones on the dropping.’ She stopped. ‘I should take a watch, so we’ll know the time.’

‘I think you get one phone for emergencies.’ Dad sipped his coffee, leaning against the bench. His grey-green eyes matched the earthenware mug. ‘They told us at the information evening. It might be worth taking a watch, though. Easier than digging a phone out of someone’s backpack all the time.’

‘I don’t think I own a watch,’ said Elle. ‘Do you have one, Chrystal?’

‘Hang on.’ Dad put his mug on the bench. ‘I have an old one you can use.’

He left the room.

‘Do you have one?’ Elle asked again. ‘Chrystal? A watch?’

Chrystal didn’t look up from her phone.

Elle rolled her eyes at Hughie.

‘Here you go,’ said Dad, handing Elle a digital watch. ‘This one still works.’

‘Thanks.’ Elle played with the buttons. It was a Casio. A light, a stopwatch and an alarm. ‘Water Resist,’ she read the

words across the watch's black plastic face. She smiled. 'You know these are cool again, Dad? They're vintage, from the eighties.' Elle pushed the button on the left-hand side again, the digits were dimly backlit – 7:43.

'Do you want one too, Chrystal? I reckon I could find another watch somewhere.'

Silence.

'Chrystal?'

She looked up from her phone, stared past Elle's dad vacantly. She hummed; she was always humming. It drove Elle crazy.

'Would you like to borrow a watch?'

'Mmmmmmm I don't wear one.'

'Do you want one for the dropping, though?'

'On account of the ticking.'

'Does the ticking bother you?'

No answer.

'This one's digital. No ticking.'

Chrystal went back to her manic texting. 'I don't wear one,' she repeated. Snoopy was wedged under her arm, her thumbs moving constantly, rapidly across her phone. What was she doing on it all day and night? Elle wondered, and what would she do when she couldn't have it for eight hours on the hike? There was supposed to be a rule at Elle's place – no phones at the table during mealtimes. But not having her phone seemed to make Chrystal so anxious that Elle's parents appeared to have made a silent exception for her.

Who was she messaging? Friends back home in America? She hadn't made any friends in the time she'd been here. Elle

didn't think she'd made much of an effort. Like she didn't think she needed to, or didn't understand how to.

Everyone had said that having an exchange student was such a great experience, and Elle had thought it would be. She'd known people from all over the world, and had been looking forward to sharing these six weeks with a new friend. Someone who she might be friends with for life, even. Show her around where she lived now. The Otways. The Great Ocean Road. The Twelve Apostles, Loch Ard Gorge. People came from everywhere to see these places. And Elle made friends easily. Quickly. But it hadn't worked out that way.

They got their packs and put them in the boot of the car. Elle had had to lend Chrystal a lot of the gear. She was supposed to bring that stuff with her, but all she'd brought were shorts and t-shirts with the sleeves cut off. And Snoopy. Did she think that it's hot all the time in Australia? They have snow in Madison, where she lived, so it wasn't as if she'd never heard of warm clothes.

And she'd brought candy, as Chrystal called it. 'I didn't know if you'd have candy here,' she'd told Elle when Elle had asked why she had bags and bags of lollies in her suitcase. 'The candy I like.'

'Candy's basically sugar and food colouring, the world over,' said Elle. 'It tastes pretty much the same everywhere. Except in Sweden,' she added, 'where they have those rules about artificial colours and sweeteners.'

'What about Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, do you have them?'

'I think you can get them in some supermarkets. Not here, but in Melbourne.'

Elle knew about the properties of candy because she liked to bake. She liked following the steps of a recipe, even complicated recipes. She'd made hot cross buns just last weekend because of Easter, and thought Chrystal might like to help, but Chrystal had sat on her phone while Elle made the dough, the glaze, the gooey flour-and-oil combo for the cross.

Elle's mum had bought Chrystal some warm clothes – socks, a fleecy and a waterproof jacket – when she'd been in Melbourne for work, and Chrystal also had borrowed Elle's clothes. But they were such different shapes. Elle was tall with long legs, strong and muscular. Chrystal was small and fine, but fleshy, with pale skin.

She has such a bad diet, thought Elle, all she eats is lollies, no wonder she's so pale, and has no muscles. Elle was usually easygoing, but she was literally counting the days on her phone calendar until Chrystal would be flying back to America.

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In the car on the way to school, they heard the severe weather warning again. Chrystal looked up from her phone. 'Is that storm where we're going?'

It was so rare for Chrystal to ask a question or contribute to any conversation that it almost gave Elle a fright when she did. 'It's for Cape Otway,' she reassured Chrystal, who was gripping Snoopy tightly so that he looked like he was being strangled. 'It's going the other way.'

It was hard to know how Chrystal was feeling when she spoke because it was always a monotone, all one level for every

word. As if her body, her voice, wasn't really connecting with the meaning of what she was saying.

'The worst you'll get is some rain,' said Elle's dad from the driver's seat. 'A bit of rain never hurt anyone. If we get really bad weather it'll be tomorrow morning, like I said. No need to worry, Chrystal! And who knows, it might just blow away out to sea. That's happened before.' Elle glimpsed her dad's face in the rear-view mirror, his eyes crinkling up as he smiled.

Elle wasn't worried because her dad wasn't worried. He turned right on the dirt road and headed up the hill to school. He parked, got out and helped them with their backpacks and jackets from the boot. 'Take care, look after yourselves,' he said and he gave Elle a hug, kissed the side of her head, his moustache tickling her. He put an arm around Chrystal too, an awkward side-hug, but she stood like a block of wood and looked straight ahead. 'Hughie, I'll pick you up at three. See you tomorrow, girls!'

They set off, but then her dad called Elle back.

'What? Did we forget something?'

'Look after her, won't you.' He nodded towards Chrystal, standing staring in the middle of the driveway.

'What?'

'Don't ignore her, this might be hard for her.'

'Yes, Dad, I'll look after her, okay?' Didn't he care that it was hard for Elle, too, to have this painful girl shadowing her all the time? At least her family got a break from Chrystal during the day. Elle had her all day at school as well. Twenty-four seven.

Otway Community School, or OCS, was a cluster of mud-brick, rounded buildings in a clearing at the end of the dirt road. It looked more like a retreat you'd see on Airbnb than a school. Nearly all the walls were curved, and the windows, too. Curved walls instil calm. Elle's friend Laila always said that. And whenever she said it, Laila put her hands out to touch those walls, as if she was getting energy from the warm bricks themselves; her long, slim, suntanned fingers spread out and still against the rammed earth.

Elle and Chrystal entered the main hall. Older kids were lounging on beanbags or in the conversation pit around the fireplace, while younger kids played outside. Wood was stacked for the fire that night when they'd be sleeping at school, after the dropping. Some kids had hot chocolate or chai they'd made in the kitchen, where you could go anytime you like and get a snack or whatever. The main hall was all timber and glass, with a tall cathedral ceiling.

The school didn't look like a regular school because it wasn't a regular school. But Elle hadn't ever really been to a regular school. She'd been to an international school in Hong Kong, one in Stockholm, and another in The Hague. And now here. Her parents moved around, so Elle and Hughie did too. It was because her mum worked for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. DFAT, they called it. Even Elle didn't know exactly what her mum did there. Something to do with the attorney-general's office. Her parents wanted to move back to Australia before Elle started secondary school, so her mum got a transfer to a department involved in primary industry and exports. That's why they lived near Lavers Hill, because it was

the part of Victoria where there was the dairy industry and the timber industry. Her dad was a music teacher; sometimes he worked and sometimes he didn't.

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Chrystal sighed, sat on her pack, Snoopy on her lap, and kept snapchatting or messaging or whatever she was doing on her phone.

At first Elle had been embarrassed for Chrystal, who didn't seem to notice when people laughed at a fourteen-year-old carrying a soft toy around.

'How's your headache?'

'I have a headache,' Chrystal repeated as if no one had mentioned it before.

'Did you want the Panadol?'

No answer again. Elle handed her the little foil packet. Chrystal took it and put it in her pocket. Chrystal had a child's hands, small and white, but her fingernails were long – not manicured long, but uneven, dirty, not-cut long. Every time Elle saw them, she wanted to get the nail scissors and trim them back, one by one, neatly and evenly.

'Want me to get you some water so you can take them? The tablets?'

Chrystal took out some candy from her backpack.

Whatever, thought Elle. What was wrong with her? Was she homesick? Actually sick? Did she just hate Elle, and everything about Australia? Or was she like this all the time? Chrystal gave nothing away. The only part of her that moved were her thumbs on the phone, frantic. Elle peered over Chrystal's shoulder,

but Chrystal hunched her back – she was an expert at hiding what was on the screen in her hand. She never mentioned any friends, so Elle was genuinely curious as to who she was communicating with non-stop. And she was texting even faster than usual, like it was a series of urgent messages, a warning.

Elle sat down beside her. ‘Who are you messaging?’

Why did she even bother! Chrystal just behaved as if Elle hadn’t spoken.

‘Want a chai? Chrystal?’

Did her tinnitus actually stop her from hearing?

Elle made a chai for herself, and took one back to Chrystal. People drifted in, teachers and kids. None of Elle’s friends had arrived, because the bus wasn’t here yet. She looked out the thick, dappled glass to the sky, which was clear and blue. The air was crisp, but the chill would fade soon, she could feel the sun’s gentle warmth through the glass already. There was no pollution here. Not like in Hong Kong.

There were also no bells at OCS, but at 8:45 they left their packs and wandered into morning group in the adjoining room. Another curved wood and glass space, warm timber floors, linen curtains swaying gently, the soft autumn morning flooding in through big square skylights in the ceiling. Someone was playing acoustic guitar.

Everyone was here now: Laila, the other kids who had exchange students with them, Ash and the new boy Fred. You weren’t supposed to have phones in school, and every morning it was the same routine where one of the teachers quietly told Chrystal that phones were against the rules during school time. If it had been a local kid, they probably would

have confiscated the phone but because these were exchange students who were allowed phones at their school in America, the teachers were more lenient with them.

‘Our country, our rules,’ Fred had said, laughing, but none of the OCS kids ever spoke like that.

After reflections and notices, the head teacher Johan read out the names of each group for the dropping later that day. There was a feeling of excitement in the air. Four groups would go by bus out into the forest. When Johan read out Elle’s name, she hoped that Chrystal’s wouldn’t follow. In a group, the mood of one person could wreck everything. ‘Upset the dynamic energy’ is the way Laila would describe it. Laila’s name was next to be read out, which made Elle happy, because Laila was the best, and also, nothing really bothered her. Which would be good on a night-time hike. Next name – Chrystal Diebert. Oh well, I was expecting that, thought Elle. At least I’ve got Laila. The last two in their group were Ash and Fred. Elle liked Ash, and Fred was new, so it would be a good opportunity to get to know him. At the other schools Elle had been to, kids came and went all the time, so you got used to making friends pretty quickly. An average posting of DFAT families was three years, before moving on again.

Chrystal went up to Johan. She looked tiny standing beside him. ‘When’s the storm coming?’ she asked, too loudly. She clutched Snoopy, squashed under her arm.

Johan looked surprised; it was probably the first time Chrystal had spoken to him. ‘There’s some weather forecast for Cape Otway,’ he said. ‘You might get rain but nothing

too dramatic, Chrystal. Everyone should have a weatherproof jacket. Do you have one?’

Chrystal ignored him and went over to Sammi, the other head teacher. ‘When’s the storm coming?’ she repeated in the same monotonal voice.

Can she shut up about the storm, thought Elle. They’ve already told us that it’ll only be rain. And the whole point of a dropping is that it’s supposed to be a challenge. It’s not meant to be easy.

Chrystal came back to the group. Elle could feel her standing too close. When she stood with you, she was either too far away, an awkward distance, or too near, invading your personal space with the odd humming that she did before she spoke. Elle turned the other way. But Chrystal yanked on her sleeve and addressed the question to Elle’s shoulder.

‘When’s the storm coming?’

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Tessa got off the bus when she saw the red fence. She had been on the bus for a long time, longer than it took to get to Nanna’s when she went with Mum.

She counted the posts of the fence. She knew there were twenty-four before the gate. She could count to one hundred now that she had started school. Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven . . . ouch! Now she had a splinter.

Where was the gate?

Tessa stopped.

Where was the shop with the daisies on the curtains?

Where was the park with the wooden fort?

Tessa couldn't even see the beach.

She turned around and walked the other way. There was a big green sign but Tessa couldn't read everything yet. She was only in prep. Did it say Apollo Bay? Where Nanna lived?

She walked along the gravel beside the road. She pushed at the splinter, but it hurt, and it wouldn't come out.

This wasn't like yesterday, when Mum took her on the bus to Nanna's on her way to work. When she'd had a sniffle and Mum said she could go to Nanna's for the day instead of school.

Now there was only a little bit of popcorn left.

Tessa looked up at the sky, the fluffy clouds.

She wanted her mum, her nanna.

Where was she?



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