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THE
FANCIES

A story about stories. (True or not.)

KIM LOCK

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ABIGAIL

Well, damn. Here she was.

Never, she'd said. *Never* coming back of her own free will. Yet as she sat in the taxi crawling up the darkened esplanade, no one was holding a gun to her head.

The taxi inched along and Abigail knew it wouldn't make the driveway. Wind peeled up from the sea, as if to urge the cab further, but it drew to a halt well short of its mark. Surely the driver mocked her, the way he crept so slowly even though the meter continued to count up in the way dollars only did when you had to pay them. The taxi sat there idling, headlights pushing out cones of light and she felt an impotent fury.

'That's fifty,' said the driver.

It was almost ten pm. She had forgotten how utterly dark night time could be: stars winked, surf flashed at the edge of the headlights' beam and then—nothing. No light anywhere. With effort she craned forward, looking up the hill, but her view was blocked by what she knew was a row of old pines.

'Can't you just—' Abigail gestured towards the driveway, maybe two hundred metres further.

'You got more?'

'No.'

The driver shrugged. 'You said go as far as fifty.'

She sat back. Stuffy hot air blew from the vents in the dash. Salt spray, or drops of rain, or flakes of some crusty coastal crap blew through the headlights. It would be cold out. This enraged her too. Inside the taxi was too hot; outside was too cold. When was the last time she had felt comfortable? Just pleasantly, mildly content?

Abigail considered the man's stomach, the way it lolled towards the steering wheel. She probably couldn't find his dick under there anyway, so she handed him the fifty—she hadn't earned it, but it was the only money she had, and when he took it she experienced a sense of finality so complete she almost laughed—and she got out of the car.

The taxi drove away and Abigail stood on the side of the road. She could hear the suck and froth of the ocean but couldn't see it. She could hear the wind in the pines but couldn't see them, either. But she could feel the familiar cold stinging her cheeks and hands, and she could taste the brine in the air, and smell the rotting mounds of kelp piled along the shore. Same stinking shit, different pile. The smell made her fifteen all over again and in spite of herself she felt nostalgic and homesick. Or maybe what she felt was the relief of a homesickness she didn't know she'd had. Tears pricked her eyes but it was just the wind.

The plastic bag of underwear hanging from her fingers twisted as she walked, first one way then the other, digging the straps in and out of her knuckles. Strands of hair tore around her face, whipping into her mouth. Her cardigan was a loose spring-time thing without any buttons; she'd last worn it in November in Adelaide and now, five months later, late autumn and five hundred kilometres closer to the South Pole, she was freezing her tits off so she hunched her shoulders, trying to pull the cardigan tighter. Her dress fluttered about her bare knees. Gravel crunched beneath her boots. She walked briskly to warm herself and it worked, or at least provided a distraction, as soon enough she was puffing.

Hunger announced itself in her stomach. The last meal she'd eaten was the two Big Macs she'd wolfed down at the bus station, a good seven—eight?—hours ago now. On the bus, someone bought hot chips at a stop halfway and her mouth watered at the memory of how good those chips had smelled, filling the bus with their hot greasy scent.

Headlights lit across the scrubby bush lining the road. An awkward glance over her shoulder and she saw the car. It was in the distance, but coming faster than it should have been along the main street, and something in noticing the car's speed caused an urgency in her that she didn't know how to resolve. No instruction had been given, no command barked with which she must comply, and she was paralysed over how to respond to this simple occurrence: a car, in the middle distance, coming at a clip.

'Shit.'

Should she wave and keep walking? Step onto the road and flag down a lift? Ignore it entirely? *Because it's not just about knowing what to do, is it?* Abigail thought. *It's about knowing the right thing to do.* The acceptable, respectable, *good* thing. And it was these things—*acceptable, right, good*—that needed to remain her focus. In the same way that someone whose clothes are on fire needs to focus on not being on fire.

So what would a *good* person do?

Casting about, she hurried off the road and scrambled into the bushes. Sticks scraped her cheeks, the plastic bag snagged and her left foot was suddenly bare and treading in mushy leaf litter. She swore again, dabbing blindly about with her naked toes, but then the car's headlights lit up the bush and she folded to an awkward crouch, hiding her face.

A ute roared past, bass beat thumping from the stereo, before it slowed and turned into her parents' driveway.

She said, 'That'd be fucking right.' Because if, instead of fleeing, she had stuck out her thumb she might now be at her destination, not crouched in a bush in the dark.

Wind shook the leaves around her, raining fat drops, and it occurred to her that she also needed to pee. Something crawled behind her knee and when she tried to flick it away, it bit her. A needle of pain radiated up the inside of her thigh.

'Motherfucker,' she yelped.

Silent cries of rage built in her throat as she fought her way from the bush. She emerged panting, one foot bare, and slapped her hands all over her body, up and down her legs, over her head and arms.

Lots of girls cried in prison. Almost all of them. But Abigail had not. It could be said that she hadn't wanted to give them the satisfaction but that would be a lie, because no one was satisfied in that place. That whole vile business was miserable and soulless—no one was getting any joy seeing people reduced to snivelling like a toddler. They'd have to *care* in order to do that—even if what they cared about was making people bawl. And no one there cared.

So would it be this, then? This? Standing on the side of the Port Kingo esplanade at night, wearing only one boot, some pissed-off insect munching its way up to her fanny? The feeling of homesickness that wasn't homesickness. The way the wind was *whooping* through those pines exactly as she remembered, as it probably had for a hundred years. The salty stink that was somehow god-awful rotted and also bracing, brand new. Abigail felt the whole lot of it well up inside, inflating and stretching and going transparent-thin.

Then it deflated.

So, no. It would not.

Several minutes spent rooting in the undergrowth did not produce her missing boot and her toes had gone numb anyway, so she limped back to the road without it. One-booted, she stumped along the bitumen and began the long steep walk up her parents' driveway.

And, there it was: the house of her child-self, two storeys of local stone, windows hailing yellow against the night sky. The house had been her grandfather's, now her father's, and could have been one of her brothers', eventually, if any of them still cared about primogeniture or whatever.

Her grandfather liked to say he built this house with his bare hands, which meant he kept a couple of brickie mates in beer and crays for a few months while they built it and in his good graces for the rest. The site, flattened into the hillside, was selected for what could be viewed from the house: town; the harbour; the violent Southern Ocean. But its position was a kind of parlour trick. You could see out, but not in. As a teenager Abigail would see the girls coming—Em and Sal, or Jo and, of course, Honnie—and sneak down the drive to ambush them from the pines. They'd fall about laughing. It never grew old. Once, a year or so ago, she thought she'd seen Em come into the restaurant but it wasn't her. Beyond profile pictures, she hadn't seen them in decades.

Ranged about the house was a crowd of dual-cab utes, gleaming beneath the house lights. *Nose in and suckling*, Abigail thought. The cheesewood bushes—still there—on the edge of the lawn gave off their cloying scent, stewing with the salt and seaweed and catching her in the feels again.

At the front door was a sleek new security screen, one of those expensive, invisible steel mesh things. Overhead the light was out and she stood in the dark, trying to catch her breath. Her bare left foot was numb. From around the back of the house came the sound of laughter and men's voices.

She knocked.

Nothing happened.

After a while she knocked again, harder, rattling the screen. The chorus of voices from around the back continued and through old habit she found herself searching for the potted cactus that used to hide the spare key. But the cactus wasn't there, of course. Her mother had thrown out the cactus and hidden the spare key even before Abigail left. She recalled the sound of the pot dropping into the wheelie bin—*thud*—and the way her mother had turned to her and said, 'I really liked that pot.'

Taking a few steps back, she peered into the upstairs windows. No movement. Returning to the screen, she gave it one last rattle and was steeling herself to creep around the side when the overhead light came on. The front door opened and Nell Fancy stood behind the screen.

Abigail felt Nell's eyes take her in, raking from the top of her head, down the length of her body to her feet. Slinging the plastic bag behind her legs, Abigail popped one hip, lifted her chin, shook the hair from her eyes.

'Hi, Mum.'

Her mother slammed the door shut.