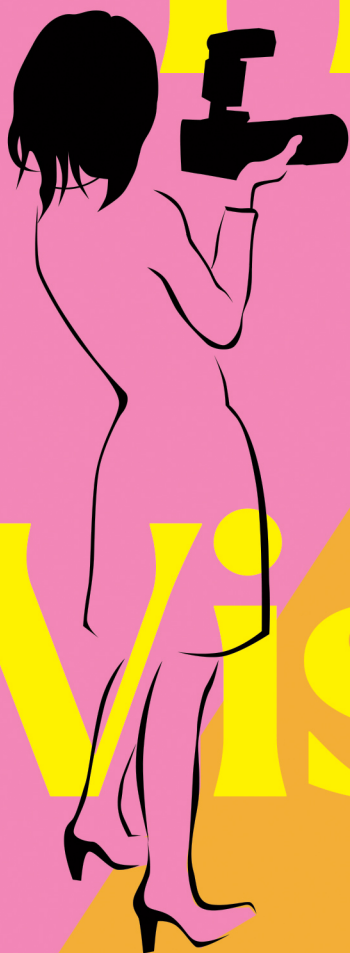


A novel about women,
life and being seen

Tilda



is

'Pitch-perfect.'

KATHY LETTE

*'Fresh, funny,
smart and warm.'*

RACHAEL JOHNS

Visible

JANE TARA

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It started with her finger.

It was not quite 9am when Tilda realised the little finger on her right hand was missing.

She knew it was impossible. How could she lose a finger and not know? But the hand that rested on her computer keyboard now had only four fingers.

She blinked, unable to comprehend what was so preposterous. Waiting to see that it was a trick of the light. But it wasn't. Her finger was gone. Without her knowing, it had ... what? Dropped off?

Tilda searched the room for answers. Or her finger.

Her gaze skimmed over the piles of paperwork she'd been meaning to file, and the prints she was yet to frame, and the camera gear that lay scattered around, and rested on an empty can of kombucha she had drunk earlier.

Had someone spiked the kombucha?

She'd done acid once back in her early twenties and thought she was stuck in a bubble for about six hours. It was a horrendous experience and not only put her off hallucinogens for life but also gave her a deep-seated fear of losing her mind. A surge of adrenaline coursed through her limbs now – pure fear. What if she was drugged and had lost her mind?

At least she could explain that.

Breathe.

She turned her attention to things that were real. Her home office with pitch-perfect timber flooring, earthy colours and natural light from the large windows. Her photo wall, where over a dozen of her favourite photographs hung haphazardly in wood frames. The photos of her twins, Holly and Tabitha. Her girls were born from one shared womb but couldn't have been more different. One photograph showed Holly, in all her auburn-haired beauty, head thrown back laughing, and tiny blonde Tab, a step back from her spotlight-stealing sister, content in the background. Not that Tabitha was unsure of herself – she had a quiet confidence and was, in fact, the more self-assured of the two.

There was the photo of them both at Angkor Wat.

Holly dressed for the lead in a school play.

One of Tabitha as she was awarded the citizenship medal at her high school graduation.

The two girls with their grandmother, Frances, at their twentieth birthday dinner, nearly a year ago now.

And then other images. Tilda's closest friends, Leith and Ali, dancing barefoot in her garden, wine glasses in hand. An average Friday night.

Her dog, Buddy, his large paw across her cat, Pirate, both curled up in front of a winter fire.

Pirate was watching her now, seated on top of the printer. He seemed normal, and she met his gaze. Pirate only had one eye, but it was steady and all-knowing. From the moment Tilda first saw Pirate four years earlier, she knew he was a cat who had seen things and survived them.

'He'll be a lifer,' the woman at the animal shelter had said. 'No one wants a damaged cat.'

But Tilda knew how it felt to be discarded. She knew what it was like to feel damaged and alone, so she'd brought him home. On his papers, it said he was wary of all human interaction, but he'd jumped up onto her lap that very night and their three eyes had locked. Tilda's fears and stresses and worries just melted away, as if he'd drawn them out of her.

'You're special,' she'd whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Pirate had curled up on her lap and fallen asleep, as if relieved that finally someone had seen him.

Even now, he calmed her. She wasn't tripping – the kombucha had been fine. Everything but her hand was normal.

Then what?

She mentally ran through her day so far, trying to remember the last time she'd looked at her hand. She'd used it to hit her alarm, get dressed and then take Buddy for a run on the beach. He'd been the one running, not her. Tilda always joked that the only time she'd ever run was if something was chasing her.

She'd used her hand to pat him, to clip and unclip his leash. It was an unusually cold day, even for late May, so she could remember rubbing her hands together for warmth while she let him bolt up and back down the beach. Then she'd returned home and searched for her keys behind the potted plant and opened her front door, letting Buddy bound past her down the hall. She'd pottered around the kitchen, made a coffee and then sat at her desk, taking a moment to savour the sun through the office window before turning her attention to her emails.

'All that and I'd notice a finger missing, right?' Tilda said to Pirate, an edge of hysteria in her voice.

Pirate couldn't answer that question. Or didn't want to.

Tilda held her fist up in front of her face and one by one unfurled her fingers. No blood. No sign of an injury. No pain. She wiggled her fingers. Her thumb. Check. Her index finger, and then her rude finger, as Holly had called it when she was little. All good. Her ringless finger, as her mother Frances called it. Check. And then ... tentatively ... her little finger. Check.

What?

She could still feel it. It was there. She hadn't *lost* her little finger – she just couldn't see it.

Tilda pushed back her chair and stumbled through the house to the bathroom. She clutched the basin and peered into the mirror and searched her eyes. Wasn't it Susan Sontag who'd said, 'Sanity is a cosy lie'? What if she

was suffering a psychotic episode or mental breakdown but didn't realise it? Was she unhinged? Surely even asking that question ruled it out. Years ago, an old friend of hers from university had been certain the CIA was following him – it was this certainty that led to him spending time in a clinic. From the little Tilda knew about the matter, people who were having a psychotic episode didn't think there was anything wrong with them. But if her mind was fine, why couldn't she see her finger? A brain tumour? She'd read that a tumour could affect your vision.

A sense of tumour, Tilda thought. *Good to see I still have my sense of tumour ...*

Perhaps it was her eyes? Was she going blind? She looked over at the wall above the toilet, at the framed print of a meditating monkey that Leith had given her. Underneath his serene image, it said in small, ornate lettering, 'Let that shit go.'

The fact that she could read the poster gave Tilda some comfort. Her eyes seemed fine. She turned back to the mirror and stared into them. No visible weird shadows or spots. And then, to her absolute horror, Tilda noticed that her right ear was missing too. She raised her hand – the one missing the finger – and drew back a lock of hair to touch the spot where her ear used to be. She could feel her ear. It was still there. Her ear was still on her head. She just couldn't see it.

And with that, Tilda turned to the toilet and threw up.