

1.

MUCH AS I WANTED TO KILL HIM, I didn't have the stomach. I'd thought about the method a lot. Poison, perhaps. I'd heard arsenic was good. Ground glass in a smoothie. Maybe a fall? But I was weak. While unaware of the depth of my weakness, I knew I lacked the fortitude for violence. Perhaps if I hadn't, things would be different today.

The trouble started late one evening at work. Overhead, the red pipe ticked, sending hot water through the veins of the building. A cascade of plans sat idle on the computer. The Anglepoise lamp hummed, halogen light spilling a feeble warmth, while outside, a truck jangled past. Someone whooped, uni kids probably, though the last lecture ended hours ago. Out the window, the green hump of Albert Park rose. The dark city surrounded me, but I remained still, my insides tacky and clotted, the way hard candy lumps together in humid weather. Mind tunnelling, tunnelling, pulled down by the event horizon of the black hole opened by the phone in my hand.

I'd ignored the message at first, thinking it would be from Clary, a continuation of our argument – the usual complaints: I work

too much, she doesn't work enough. Always questioning our commitment to each other, to this place. She'd gone for a drink with Lani, and I'd let her. No energy for another argument about the baby neither of us wanted, and she refused to tell her parents we wouldn't have.

The message, though, was from Lani, not Clary. *Tell me it's not him*, it said. The accompanying photo, framed with the shifty twilight of the harbour's edge, was taken from the pier, where she was meeting Clary for a drink. When I zoomed, the blurred picture – a figure smeared with movement; light hazed and gloaming – pixelated into a flesh-coloured mass, but there was no mistaking Billy's face.

It wasn't him. It couldn't be. He was supposed to be dead.

He promised.

When I pinched the photo out, the familiar hulk of the ferry and variegated greys of sky and sea slotted into place. In the shot, the boat had pulled away from the wharf, the stern rising from a milky churn, while maybe-Billy slunk behind a crew member in a white shirt. The lockbox in my mind, the one I'd kept Billy in for years, opened.

I should have gone after her when I read the message. Foolish to relinquish Clary to Lani at such a moment, when she'd be in a state, needing me to talk her down. That was the pattern since Billy disappeared. God, we'd only just got her off the pills. This would be a setback. Perhaps I was overreacting. No contact, that's what we had said. For the best. For Clary.

Because Clary was easily broken. Something about her reminded me of the delicate layering of hoar frost, complex and fragile. From the first, I longed to be the one to melt her away. There was violence to it, I suppose – the way it can feel with a

vulnerable pet; loving it so much you want to smash its bones. Clary engendered contradiction in me: protection and hidden brutality. Fence her off from the big bad world, then squeeze so tight she explodes.

I had to believe it wasn't him. Couldn't be. Billy wouldn't be so brazen, and anyway, the photo was indistinct; clouded with spray and the movement of the ferry. Could be anyone. Yes, that's what I'd tell them. Mistaken identity. Doppelgänger. Evil twin. Not Billy. I replied to Lani with a single word: *Impossible*.

My phone clinked as I placed it face down on the desk and clicked on the fly-through. The screen swooped with the graceful arc of a bird through the rooms. Sanne had done a good job with the render for the Homes&Communities submission, but something seemed off. Everything had to be perfect – it was our last chance. If we didn't win the project, the practice might go under.

Dusky light dropped into darkness, and the window turned mirrored. I rubbed my eyes. Perhaps the oiled-organ sensation wasn't guilt, but exhaustion. When had I last slept through the night, without waking at three, thrumming with cortisol, to scrawl an incoherent note in my Moleskine?

The fly-through finished and as I stared at the blank wall on my screen – only pixels, simple to tear down – Sanne tapped my shoulder. The black of her clothing made her melt into the dim office, but for the glint of brass discs, like coins, buttoned along the underside of her sleeve. Sanne reminds me of myself. Not physically, her fair colouring and wispy hair is much more like Clary, but in the way she holds herself, as though a hard shell of composure is necessary to contain the lava within. Magma beneath an icy fjord.

I will leave now, Sanne said.

Her syntax was always oddly formal, and I wondered, as I often did, how much more articulate she was in her mother tongue.

Virginia? she said, when I didn't answer.

Sorry, yes, you may go, I replied.

Clarissa has left? Sanne asked, cheekbones not moving. You should go too, it's late.

Yes, Clary had left and inadvertently brushed up against my biggest secret. Another clump stuck to my insides. Impossible to face Clary in this state.

Soon, I replied, clicking on the screen, as though engrossed in the plans.

I'd have to wait until Clary slept – which never took long, she was a cheap drunk – otherwise she'd need me to convince her it wasn't Billy, and there were limits to how long I could pretend.

Once the lift doors closed behind Sanne, I exhaled. What the hell? Outside, streetlights flickered on. Rough sleepers materialised from wherever they spent their days, dragging cardboard and duct-taped bags into the park. I tried to focus, but my thoughts returned to Billy. He charmed most people, but I found him odious. You would too, if you knew what I'd been through.

Not getting anywhere with the render, I closed my computer. A stream of people walked up Kitchener Street. Commuters mostly, a few tourists. Cars streaked up the hill and collected in a queue at the lights. If only Clary had stayed to help with the submission, she and Lani wouldn't have been on the ferry, dredging up memories of Billy. I could have focused, then.

Once, we'd do this together; design late into the night. At university there had been electronic music, and something chemical to spark our creativity, push us through the all-nighters. I didn't do that any longer. People change. When did I change? When did I stop being fun?

Easy. When Billy disappeared. When I let Clary believe he was dead. That's when I came undone.

On my way out of the office, I stopped to give money to Mo, whose patch was outside our building. When he'd appeared there a few months earlier, Clary had complained. Said it wasn't right, he'd intimidate clients. I suspected the real reason was the injury to her aesthetic. Mo wore fingerless gloves on his meaty hands, and a neon-green beanie a few sizes too small, which made his head resemble a tennis ball. He knew about space though – not taking it up, but its inverse. Mo understood how to disappear.

You're out late, I said, dropping coins into the unused coffee cup placed before him.

Needs must, he replied.

I didn't know Mo's story. We mostly talked about the weather when I gave him spare change, or food, or once, a pile of moth-eaten woollen blankets, but I knew enough to understand anyone could end up like him. Billy, say. Me.

Have a good weekend, I said as I left. Coffee Monday?

Sure, Boss, he replied, touching a finger to his temple in salute.

I'd lingered long enough at the office to return to a sleeping Clary and a trail of tide-out glasses scattered around the lounge. I picked around the mess, splashing water on my face and brushing my teeth before collapsing into bed, riding exhaustion straight into a messy sleep. When I woke at the usual witchy time, I waited for the slurry of my subconscious to clear, before reaching for my notebook, ready to scrawl down whatever tedious task had interrupted my dream, such was the habit of these early wakes – but as my consciousness coalesced, it gathered around a single sticky thought.

Billy.

The tackiness from earlier, when I'd opened the photo, returned, as though I were a rodent caught in a glue-trap. Something arrested me: the sense he was watching. I rose, careful not to wake Clary, feet recoiling at the chill of the floorboards. The cliff-edge of Clary's shoulder teetered with each breath, and a chunk of moonlight cut through the gap in the curtains, turning the landslip of her hair iridescent.

When I eased my head between the fabric, the moon illuminated a few metres of empty grass. Beyond, too dark to make anything out in the tangle of trees that lined our property, I imagined Billy watching me with that inscrutable look. The one he often wore. The one that said, I have won. I still believed, then, that one of us could.

Sliding my hand beneath the curtain, I unlatched the window, wincing at the creak of the old wooden frame as the sash rose, wishing for the silence of steel, the articulation of aluminium. Cold air rushed in with the sounds of incipient morning; sighing trees, the flat hum of distant traffic, the call of a nameless bird. I strained for a human sound – a footstep, a snapped twig, the suck of a cigarette, but there was only the rapid pant of my breath. Closing the window, still convinced of a malign presence, I left the bedroom. Too cautious to switch on a light, I traced a map through the house with sense memory.

Behind the door of the study, the dim shrine of my desk rose, bookshelves heavy and dark. My heart was froggish, and the air seemed thin and claggy at once. I drifted my fingers along the spine of the gallery wall, poking my head into the spare room and glancing in the shadowy bathroom, before making my way into the double-height living space, my trailing robe a susurration. The moon came in thick and bright through the clerestory windows, making the house feel too empty, too open, so I ducked into the kitchen for cover, and poured a glass of water.

The cool liquid steadied me as it butterflied a line from my throat down through my ribcage. Braver, I took the glass to the mezzanine, where it was possible to see the patch of lawn that was – as I knew it would be – empty. The fine-tipped moon imprinted cragged shadows on the grass. Darkness collected at the edges like a promise.

No one. I was safe. Clary was safe. Billy was gone. He couldn't hurt us again. Surely?