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Leftovers

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Lucille waited next to an old man wearing a toupée. It blew faintly in the thick summer wind, and she watched as a tear of sweat descended from underneath it and trickled down his forehead. The bus was late again, and the dry heat blistered on the road in front of them. Lucille wondered if the damp patch in her underwear was sweat or if her period had come early. She wished it was her period, because that would mean she wasn't pregnant to Rob, the sheep shearer from Adelaide. Ever since that night, Lucille had been walking around with what felt like a hot rock in her stomach. A hot rock with a fat-bellied brown snake curled up on top of it. And no matter how much she'd tried to shake the snake from its sleeping place inside her, it wouldn't budge. She'd jumped up and down on her trampoline to try and dislodge it; she'd shaken her hips with fury to try and tip it; and she'd even smacked her stomach up against her bedroom door to try and wake it. But the fat bellied brown snake never even quivered, it just lay curled up on the hot rock inside her. So, for the first time in her life, having tried all other options, Lucille decided to pray. To pray to God, and he heard her.

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It had been one of those summer afternoons. The ones Lucille spent sprawled on the grassy mound in front of her house. She watched the men in the distance; tiny stick figures carrying hay bales. She guessed which one was her father, the one with the bent

back. She banged her black and white school feet together. No, he was the one waving his arms about. She let the breeze blow her school dress up around her pale hips. Which stick figure was Rob? She strained her eyes to see. She counted the days until her fifteenth birthday — eight. It was one of those afternoons. Her sister called to her through an open window. She went to fetch the men for dinner.

The grey sky turned its knowing eyes away as Lucille sauntered down the grassy hill towards the tiny stick figures. She found her father and most of the men in the paddock. They threw the last of the hay bales on to a rusty trailer and began to head for the redbrick house. Lucille noticed Rob wasn't with them. She called to her father, who swung around, pointing towards the hay shed. The moon began to peep. The moon has always been a spier. Lucille headed for the corrugated iron doors; she didn't notice the wind trying to hold them shut, and she used all the strength in her bony arms to force them open. Lucille had never been a noticer. The blonde grass hissed in the breeze.

She saw Rob bent over something and ran up behind him quietly. She jumped on his back, letting out a long screech of laughter. He flung around, grabbing her by the waist. He was carrying her on his hip like a baby.

'Hey kid, get down, get off me,' he said, tickling her under her chin so that her head threw itself back with laughter.

'Shut up,' she replied, 'you'll soon see I'm not a kid anymore.'

'Oh yeah?' said Rob laughing, 'I'd like to see that.' He put her down and looked around the shed.

'Is it dinner time or what?'

He rubbed his stubble with the palm of his hand.

'Not until I show you something, something very important.'

Lucille felt her hot little hands by her thighs. They pulsed.

'And what's that?' said Rob, looking mockingly into her sober brown eyes.

Then Lucille dropped her underpants, so that they fell onto her school feet. Faded pink and yellow roses stared up at Rob.

‘We’re gonna be late for dinner.’

‘There’ll be leftovers.’

Rob felt himself transform. His insides tingled; the hair fell off his skin. As they lay there on the ground, the dirt began to speak for them. Rob sighed. The soft song of rain began to fall on the roof. Lucille pushed her palms into the soil, felt its coldness; felt it beneath her, holding her. Panting, she felt the dirt on her neck, her elbows, in her bones. A cloud of dust rose in the thick air between them, like tiny notes of music, resting once again in silence by Lucille’s head and in the back of her throat. There, on the ground, in the hay shed, Rob became a brown snake. And through the small slit in the corrugated iron roof, the moon saw everything.

‘Does the cold not scare you?’ she said, more as a statement about herself and less as a question to him. She thought of her teacher standing in front of a small, square TV, with a snow-capped Mount Everest on its screen.

‘People die on the mountains, you know?’

He shook his head. He was afraid of nothing.

‘You don’t know how cold my thoughts can be.’

‘I do,’ she replied, ‘You’ve know idea how much I do.’

But he didn’t believe her. And he never would. He had a way of believing that his thoughts and feelings were untouchable to the outside world. To him they existed in a realm of their own, a large paddock in which he could roam, that was boxed off from the real world by sky-high fences, impossible to climb. He didn’t see her slip under the fence, he didn’t see her dress get caught on the wire, but he fingered the small tear in the cotton right then as she lay in his lap.

But it wasn’t his thoughts that she was talking about, it was his skin.

‘How typical of him to rearrange my words and their meaning,’ she thought. He could see the sliver of pain on her brow, and he rubbed it with his thumb.

‘No, I won’t be cold,’ he said, ‘Because I’ll have heaps of warm clothes and camping gear and the warm, snuggly thoughts of you.’

She smiled — the simplicity pleased her. They heard her sisters voice echo down the hill, as they dusted themselves off.



He had no idea how cold his body could be.

When the snow came, it came hard and unexpected. Nothing was left untouched. On the mountain, Rob’s tent was ripped to shreds by the wind. The wind picked it up in pieces and hurled it, circled it above Rob’s head. He lifted his arms in the faint hope of catching it, but the wind ripped it back from his reach and threw it upwards and into the stars. His belongings — sleeping bag, camping mat, Trangia, were swept over the ground around him, then buried by the falling snow. Rob didn’t return to the town, and everybody thought he’d gone back to Adelaide. Gone without saying goodbye or thanking them for their hospitality. Marge, who worked in the bakery confirmed it, saying one day, while Lucille pondered over whether to buy a jam filled doughnut or a quiche; that in fact her cousin had seen Rob back in Adelaide, and that he’d dyed his hair blonde.

‘How typical,’ thought Lucille, ‘of me to have such a short-lived love affair, and end up with a fat-bellied brown snake inside of me, how typical of men.’

She chose the jam-filled doughnut because she thought she’d heard somewhere that snakes dislike sugar — perhaps on the radio. Through the greasy bakery window Lucille could see Aylsa in her front garden, bending over her roses with a pair of secateurs.

Roses don't even grow in this climate,' she said out loud. Marge looked over a counter full of pies at her.

'Anything can grow with the right fertilizer,' replied Marge. 'Although, I do wonder sometimes how she can be bothered; a lot a work that, growing roses.' A proud smile slipped across Marge's long brown lips, as if she'd just come to the conclusion, all on her own, that working in a bakery was a much more worthwhile occupation than tending to a rose garden. Lucille studied Aylsa's lean figure as it bent and straightened, stepped back and paused in admiration of her work.

From afar, it looks like a real nice garden, but when you get up close, the roses are all spoiled from the midday sun.'

'Don't tell her that!' laughed Marge in response.

Lucille crossed the street, pausing in front of Aylsa and her silver watering can.

'Beautiful garden,' she said, peering into the centre of a big pink Albertine rose. She reached out and touched its velvet petals, shriveling at the edges, with her fingertips. They fell softly to the ground in front of her. Aylsa looked up from under a straw hat; the shadow of the brim made her eyes look dark. Lucille noticed how big her eyebrows were. Every hair was thick and singular. They didn't look so much like eyebrows as they did a school of fish swimming across her forehead, making their way toward her third eye. Lucille smiled at her, turned back and began to cross the road. As she walked she heard the words, passengers on the summer breeze, 'God bless you, child.' She turned in the middle of the road, but all she could see was the silver watering can on its side in an empty rose garden. A ute beeped her. She ran to the safety of the footpath.



On a dirt road in Bright, Victoria, God's long finger stretched through the broken clouds, down from the baby blue sky and tapped a fat-bellied brown snake between the eyes. It blinked,

Lucille shivered, the old mans toupée rustled. The snake unfurled itself from the hot rock and crept downwards. A line of blood slid between Lucille's thighs and she let out a cry and bent forward. The old man in the toupée came towards her just in time to catch her fall. They stumbled together, locked in the embrace of pain, bending closer to the dusty earth. The bus was late, but it came. Through the bus window, the one with the big red writing that says break glass emergency exit, people craned their long necks to see the girl in the red dirt writhe. The old man, on his knees, lifted one hand to his head in order to catch the toupée sliding off it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something: a fat-bellied brown snake slithered off into the long grass.



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