

# THE BIT



# IN BETWEEN

## CLAIRE VARLEY

WRITING A LOVE STORY

IS A LOT EASIER THAN LIVING ONE

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THE BIT AT THE START

## A WAVE OF NAUSEA

**T**his is how it starts.

A young man sits alone in an airport lounge. The seat beside him is empty. Someone sits down.

This is how it starts and every time it starts like this. In every universe. In every dimension. In every possible version of this story, this is the start. It starts like this because life is nothing but a series of tides and waves, the constant movement of a vast ocean propelled by the sun, the moon and what scientists swear to us isn't magic. Most times they trickle, sometimes they surge, and every so often the earth realigns and the ocean responds in kind. There are no tsunamis in this story – no seismic vibrations or geological cataclysms – but there are waves. Tides come and go, and if you know how to read them you can predict what will happen. And here is the choice: you can either adapt in anticipation – raise yourself on stilts, sandbag

your heart or make your life faraway in the hills – or else you can get on with it, living your days knowing it could strike at any moment, because sometimes even the most effective early warning systems clang their bells and sound their sirens too late. Sometimes it is not the big waves that bring the greatest devastation. It is the slow-moving ones – silent and powerful – that gradually, deceptively, inundate the landscape, then just as quietly retreat, taking everything with them. When they go, the structures on the shore remain but everything inside is gone. The accumulated trappings of a lifetime, all gone. This world is more water than earth – more places to swim than stand – and all things are islands in the greater scheme. This is the story of islands – of one big island and nine hundred small ones. Imagine all those waves.

Like many stories it starts with a wave of nausea. It starts like this because Oliver hates airports. Because he hates waiting. Because on this particular day, at this particular airport, in this particular waiting lounge, he is exhausted and angry and everything in him just doesn't want to be a part of this world. The young woman who sits down beside him smells like patchouli or musk or some other pungent, earthy scent and Oliver hates this very much. Her arm flops over the shared armrest, knocking his own, and he hates this too. She sighs loudly and he can tell she is about to start talking to him, which fills him with a hatred so intense he is surprised he doesn't lean over and stuff his boarding pass into her mouth. He would, he tells himself, but he is too tired, so he crinkles an empty Mars Bar wrapper in his pocket, feeling the tiny crumbs of leftover chocolate melt, leaving a grainy residue on his fingertips.

‘God, I hate waiting at airports,’ she moans, giving him a look that he refuses to return. ‘It’s like, come on! Do we have to check in so early? What’s the rush?’ She shakes her head and looks up at the ceiling. ‘Planes!’

He does not respond, quietly wishing the section of ceiling above the young woman would cave in or else the drug-sniffing beagle would get a taste for blood. The young woman reaches across and offers him an almond from a plastic packet and Oliver instantly feels bad for fantasising about her death. He takes one guiltily.

‘They’re organic,’ she assures him and he suppresses the hate that tries to rise up again.

He concentrates on chewing the almond, and takes another when she offers. Then, because he is, after all, not a bad guy but is just having a bad day/week/month, he feels guilty about his anger and decides to be a decent person and engage in conversation. He turns to say something to her, possibly to comment on how uncomfortable the chairs always seem to be in airports, but before he can say anything, she throws up on him.



There are lots of things that make people throw up: drinking too much, going on carnival rides, going on carnival rides after drinking too much. And, as Alison discovered, eating an entire jar of sun-dried tomatoes in five minutes. In fairness, she hadn’t really wanted to, but she couldn’t stand the customs officer’s smug expression when he had told her she couldn’t take them with her.

‘But they would have broken if I put them in my check-in baggage,’ she had pleaded.

‘That’s not my problem,’ he’d barked.

She'd opened her mouth to argue, but he placed a hand on his security belt and glanced at his colleagues.

'Fine,' she muttered. 'Wait.'

And that was when she had opened the jar and eaten the contents. When there was nothing left but an empty murky oily mess, she felt sick. Her hands and face were streaked with oil and her stomach was starting to roll, but she held her head up jauntily and handed the jar to the customs officer.

'Is that all?' she asked.

In the long snaking line of waiting travellers behind her, someone broke into lone applause. The customs officer just shook his head and waved her on.

'Thank you,' she replied and strode all of three metres before she was stopped by the bomb detection officer.

'Madam, you know why I'm stopping you, don't you?' the officer said.

Alison looked at her with unsteady eyes. 'Yes, I do, and while you will not find anything about my person other than the contents of an entire jar of sun-dried tomatoes, I would have stopped me too.'

The need to throw up intensified as she made her way to the boarding gate. For some reason it had made sense to eat something else to try to soak up the excess oil in her stomach, and she had found a packet of almonds in the newsagents. It cheerfully proclaimed to be organic and had a parade of dancing almonds on it. Alison could never understand why food manufacturers always felt the need to instil life into inanimate objects. As a vegetarian, she ate things like almonds because they *didn't* have arms or legs or big scary manga eyes. Anthropomorphism . . . She hadn't used that word since her arts degree days. There you

go – all that money hadn't been wasted . . . Another wave of nausea surged and she flopped down in the nearest seat. A young man sat beside her staring angrily at the ground. Hoping to ward off the intense desire to vomit, she tried talking to him. It didn't work. In the flurry of activity that followed – the young man jumping up in disgust, an elderly passer-by stopping to see if she was all right, an airport cleaner approaching with his cart before surveying the scene and hurrying in the opposite direction – Alison only really absorbed one thing. The young man was glaring at her, his hands aloft because he didn't want them to touch her vomit, his mouth open in disgusted confused rage. He has beautiful eyes, she thought to herself. Beautiful, big, brown eyes . . . And then another wave of nausea washed over her and she threw up again, this time on herself.

THE BIT IN BETWEEN



## CHAPTER ONE

### A WAVE GOODBYE

**O**liver rammed his backpack into the overhead luggage compartment, shoved his notebook into the seat pocket in front of him and sat down heavily in his seat. He had the middle seat, which was the worst of the seats, because you didn't have anything to lean against and you couldn't spread out into the aisle. And no matter what you did, your head always ended up lolling onto someone else's shoulder as you slept. He crossed his arms then uncrossed them to scratch his neck. He was wearing a horrible bright yellow T-shirt with the words I HEART MALAYSIA splashed across the front, the only thing he could afford to buy in the overpriced airport gift shop after he'd been forced to throw away his old shirt. Oliver was annoyed about this as it was a vintage Alf T-shirt he'd had since childhood, and it had fitted him perfectly because he'd been a tall, fat child and was now an average-sized adult.

He sniffed indignantly, then cringed. He could still smell the vomit.

‘Excuse me, oh . . .’ Alison stared down awkwardly. ‘Going to Melbourne too?’

The young man’s eyes flashed with fear as he nodded and then undid his seatbelt and stood up. Alison stepped back so he could shuffle out into the aisle and then slid past him to the window seat. She sat down quietly and the young man did the same.

‘So you had to buy that horrible T-shirt too?’ She indicated her own bright yellow I HEART MALAYSIA T-shirt.

The young man didn’t respond. Alison glanced at him. Self-consciously he swept his dark hair across his forehead.

‘The yellow goes with your olive skin,’ she joked. ‘Mine doesn’t fit that well because apparently I’m a bit fat in Asia.’

Oliver looked at her. She wasn’t fat. She was what his mother would have called ‘festively plump’ after a few too many scotch and cokes at Christmas. She was that nice kind of plump that girls always got self-conscious about and that made them do silly things like wear gross patterned kaftans at the beach, so that instead of looking like normal healthy people they looked like uprooted circus tents escaping in the wind. Her face, now that it wasn’t contorted with nausea, was open and welcoming and dusted with what looked like a new layer of freckles.

‘The yellow brings out the vomit in your hair,’ he replied.

She smiled and went to tuck her shoulder-length brown hair behind an ear before her hand struck a chunk of vomit and she withdrew it quickly.

‘I thought I got it all,’ she muttered to herself.

There was an awkward silence, interrupted by an elderly man sitting down heavily in the aisle seat just as a chirpy voice informed them that the last of the passengers were boarding and they would soon be preparing for take-off. The elderly man nodded to himself and then fell asleep.

‘So . . . do you?’ she asked.

‘Do I what?’

‘Heart Malaysia?’

Oliver considered this. ‘I was in transit for eight hours, an ATM ate my card, you threw up on me and I had to use the last of my money to buy this T-shirt, which I hate. Does that answer your question?’

She laughed, then her eyes widened and she clutched her stomach. He looked alarmed.

‘Please don’t throw up on me again.’

‘I’ll try.’

And then the flight attendant came out to do her little ‘fasten your seatbelt’ dance and to glare at the passengers who didn’t listen.

Oliver woke up somewhere over the Indian Ocean. She was staring at him but pretending she wasn’t. He glanced over and she looked away.

‘They tried to wake you for dinner, but I told them to leave you alone.’

‘I’m pretty hungry . . .’

‘Oh . . . Almond?’

He stared at her.

‘Right. No. Of course not.’ She shoved the packet into her seat pocket. ‘I’m Alison, by the way.’

‘Hello, Alison By-the-Way, I’m Oliver.’

Oliver cringed. That was a terrible joke. That was a dad joke. In fact, he was pretty sure it was *his* dad’s joke.

‘So . . .’ Alison cleared her throat and drummed her fingers on her thighs. ‘What were you doing in Malaysia?’

‘I was in transit.’

‘Oh, yeah, you said. From where?’

Oliver checked the aisle. He couldn’t see a flight attendant anywhere.

‘Cyprus . . . Do you think they’ve stopped serving food?’

‘Wow! Cyprus! That must have been beautiful. Why would you ever leave? Almond?’

Oliver shook his head. ‘My yiayia – my grandmother – she died. I’m coming back for her funeral.’

Alison’s cheeks went red. ‘Oh. I’m so sorry.’

Oliver shrugged. ‘It’s okay. You didn’t cause her death . . . Did you?’

Alison looked at him uncertainly, torn between the obligation to laugh and the sombreness of the situation.

‘It’s okay,’ Oliver sighed. ‘You don’t need to laugh at that.’

Alison seemed relieved. ‘So what were you doing in Cyprus?’

Oliver gave a tired chuckle. ‘Visiting family. Running away. Pretending to visit family so I could run away.’

‘From what?’

Oliver studied his hands and then shrugged. Why not? It’s not like he would ever see her again. ‘About a year ago my first book was published. For some reason it sold well and got a lot of good reviews from a lot of fancy people in the “literary scene”.’ He made expansive air quotes.

‘So why would you run away from that?’

‘Because they made me change my ending. My publishers. They said it “didn’t work” and that if I changed it, the book would be “spectacular”. They were right.’

‘And?’

‘And I hate the new ending. It’s a cop-out. It cheapens the book. I’m never writing a happy ending ever again. Screw success.’

Alison noticed his hands had clenched into tight fists.

‘What’s the name of your book?’

‘They changed that too. It’s called . . .’ – he looked as if he’d drunk poison – ‘*Happiness*.’

Alison suppressed a smile. ‘How did they change the ending?’

‘They said they only wanted a minor change. Originally everybody died.’

‘What was the minor change?’

‘Nobody died.’

‘I see.’ Alison stared out the window for a moment. ‘What’s wrong with happy endings?’

Oliver gave her a dry smile. ‘You sound like my publisher. Because life isn’t really like that. Humans aren’t really like that. We’re not very good at happy endings. We always go and spoil them. And sometimes you just know how your story needs to go for your characters to learn what they need to learn. In my next book someone will die in the end. There’ll be a plane crash. I won’t budge on that.’

‘Right-o,’ Alison said. She looked around. Everyone else on the plane seemed to be asleep. ‘So no more happy endings?’

‘Nope.’

‘Only plane crashes?’

‘Yep.’

‘Well, I guess I don’t need to buy your next book then.’

Oliver laughed. ‘What about you?’ he asked. ‘Why were you in Malaysia?’

‘Also in transit. From China.’

‘What were you doing in China?’

Alison snorted. ‘What was I doing in China? Following a good-looking moron, that’s what I was doing.’

Oliver didn’t say anything. Alison sighed and shifted in her seat.

‘Okay. So I’m hanging around in Melbourne and out of the blue I meet this guy, Ed. Ed was amazing. It was love at first sight, or so I thought. So then Ed went to the Immigration Museum and used that computer program they have that helps you trace your ancestors and he discovered that he was, apparently, one-eighth Chinese. Ed felt what I thought at the time was a romantic, passionate longing to discover his ‘roots’, so he headed off to China to make a documentary about it and I tagged along. Ed had figured he was most likely Cantonese and he wanted what he kept calling a ‘real experience’, so we stayed in a dirty rest house above a fruit-market-slash-brothel in Nanning. I did some English teaching to support us while Ed worked on his documentary. Soon Ed came to the realisation that he wasn’t really that Chinese and I realised he wasn’t really that great. So now I’m coming home with my tail between my legs to live on my parents’ couch.’

Oliver smiled. ‘What was China like?’

‘Incredible. Beautiful and busy and urban and ancient and full of people and birds in cages and amazing food and mountains that just make you want to cry. At least they made Ed cry. Twice, in fact, because the first time he didn’t manage to catch it on camera.’

‘Ed sounds . . . interesting.’

‘Ed was . . . interesting. And now he will forever be an interesting footnote in my life story. What about Cyprus?’

‘My angst-ridden pilgrimage to the motherland?’

‘Yeah. How was it?’

‘It was kind of like that part in *The Godfather* where Michael goes back to the old country.’

‘Was your lady-friend killed by a car bomb meant for you?’

Suddenly Oliver became very quiet and stared at his hands.

Her eyes widened. ‘Oh my god. I’m so sorry.’

Then he burst out laughing. Alison looked scandalised and punched him in the arm. Oliver pretended it hurt.

‘No. Sorry. No car bombs. But I did . . .’

‘Did what?’

Oliver stared into her eyes and took a deep breath. ‘I can’t believe I’m going to tell you this, but it’s been a long day. A long week. I did, kind of, almost, um, sleep with my cousin.’

Alison’s face revealed nothing. ‘Why?’

‘Well, I didn’t know she was my cousin. Now I realise that basically everyone in the village is my cousin, but at the time I thought she was just a nice girl. So yeah. That was a bit awkward. Nothing like almost sleeping with a close blood relative.’

Alison’s eyes were sparkling. ‘How close?’

Oliver shifted uncomfortably. ‘Close enough for any future babies to have an extra hand coming out of their forehead.’

Alison digested this for a moment, then made a complacent face and shrugged. ‘Well, who hasn’t been in that situation?’

‘Um, most people. Have you?’

‘Nope.’ She gave him a bright smile. ‘Almond?’

The drinks trolley rattled noisily past, bumping the sleeping old man's knee. He jerked awake momentarily, threw his arms in the air and cried out 'Thievery!' before falling back to sleep, his head lolling off the seat and into the aisle. Oliver and Alison looked at each other and then burst into uncontrollable giggles. Alison glanced out the window. 'Where are we?'

Oliver peered over. 'Broome.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'How can you tell?'

'I can see my mate's house.'

Alison pressed her face to the window. 'Really?'

Oliver waited for her to turn back to him. She saw his amused look and punched him in the arm again.

'Your jokes are terrible. Terrible.'

Oliver gave an exaggerated pantomime shrug. She looked away for a moment to hide her grin. 'I missed that humour overseas.'

She watched their shared country pass beneath them and when she turned back she wore an expression of concern.

'I'm sorry about your grandmother.'

Oliver cleared his throat and looked at his hands. 'It's okay.'

'How did she die? If you don't mind me asking . . .'

'No, it's all right.' Oliver picked at one of his nails for a moment and then looked at her.

'So – and I'm only putting this together from scraps of information I've gathered from other family members – but, um, apparently she had been on the phone to family in Cyprus, who had been telling her about the, you know, cousin thing, and then she hung up, took her diabetes



medication, made herself a coffee in the briki, washed up, went to the cupboard for a new packet of sugar to refill the jar and dropped dead from what modern medicine would classify as a heart attack but what the Greek–Cypriot grapevine of the greater northern Melbourne metropolitan region quickly decided was, in fact, crushing familial shame.’

Alison considered this. ‘So what you’re saying is . . .’

‘I killed her, apparently.’

‘Oh.’ Alison cringed. ‘How do you feel knowing that the last piece of information she received before she left this world was that you were on the verge of getting it on with a close blood relative?’

‘It’s not particularly comforting.’

Alison nodded in agreement and thought for a moment. ‘I think I’m going to go against all my standard rules for air travel and buy us some of those expensive beers they have on the menu.’

Four beers and three packets of salted mixed nuts later, Oliver scrutinised his bottle and then turned to Alison.

‘So. Where’s home, Ali? Can I call you Ali?’

‘Yep. Home . . .’ She gave a private little laugh. ‘Home is at the end of a long V/Line train trip from Melbourne.’

‘Go on,’ Oliver said and arched his fingers like a television psychiatrist.

‘Home is a small country town, the heart of Anglo–Australia, where people talk out of the corners of their mouths and almost everyone plays football.’

‘Interesting. What happens to those who don’t?’

Alison gave him a bemused grin. ‘They end up following handsome arseholes to China and return older and, dare I say, wiser.’

‘It certainly sounds like an adventure,’ Oliver pressed.

‘Down the freaking rabbit hole, indeed,’ Alison smiled. ‘But that is a story for another time.’

‘I see, I see,’ Oliver said, maintaining his psychoanalytical manner. ‘Okay then. The nose ring. Tell me about that.’

Alison’s hand went to her nose instinctively. ‘I got it when I finished high school, thinking I was some kind of rebel. Ten other girls did the same thing.’

‘A failed attempt to assert some individuality in a world of uniformity,’ Oliver mused, bridged fingertips springing thoughtfully.

Alison laughed. ‘Okay, my turn.’ Her expression changed and she looked at him seriously. ‘Now, Oliver. Tell me about your mother.’

Oliver snorted with laughter. ‘She’s a pretty good mum. Like any self-respecting Greek mother, she has an active interest in the everyday workings of my life, and she makes an effort to read everything I write – though she does think I’m wasting my law degree.’

‘A lawyer by training. Interesting,’ Alison said, pretending to make a note on a clipboard. ‘And how does that make you feel?’

‘I feel vindicated that I’ve had a book published when she probably thought I wouldn’t. But also a little annoyed that I hate said book. Ah well,’ he shrugged his shoulders complacently, ‘you can’t tell your dreams exactly what to look like.’

Alison’s face softened. ‘Was that your dream? To have a book published?’

‘Yep.’ Oliver looked a little embarrassed.

‘And now? Now that you’ve achieved it? What’s next?’

Oliver picked at the label on his bottle. ‘I’m not sure. Another dream maybe? Another book. One that I’m

actually proud of. What about you, Ali? What's your dream?'

Alison watched him for a moment as if testing the answer in her head. 'Dunno. Don't really have one. Just sort of bumbling through life, seeing where it takes me. But yours is cool.'

Oliver opened his mouth to ask her something else, but the captain's voice came over the intercom and instructed everyone to prepare for landing. The old man in the aisle seat jerked awake again, looking around in mild confusion until he worked out where he was.

'About time,' he muttered to himself, and with a cursory glance pushed Oliver's arm off the armrest and placed his own there. Oliver looked nonplussed and Alison turned away and bit her knuckle as her shoulders shook with laughter.

Twenty minutes later they were walking silently through the terminal together towards the passport control queues.

'New passport?' Oliver asked, pointing to the express line.

Alison gave him a rueful smile and shook her head, indicating the other line.

'It was a pleasure meeting you, Alison,' Oliver smiled.

'You too.'

And they went their separate ways.

Ten minutes later they were standing next to each other at the baggage carousel.

'The big red pack over there,' Alison pointed, and Oliver helped her pull it off the carousel. One of the straps caught on the edge of the conveyer belt and they tugged at it together before it snapped free and they both lurched backwards, catching each other before they fell to the ground.

‘Yours?’ Alison asked.

‘Big black suitcase,’ Oliver replied apologetically.

Alison looked at the carousel. There was a sea of big black suitcases.

‘Anything that sets it apart from the rest?’

‘It has my stuff in it.’

Alison smirked in spite of herself and leant forward.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Trying to read the tags.’

‘That won’t wor –’

‘Is this it?’

Oliver was speechless.

‘It’s this one, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

Alison raised her arms victoriously in the air, like a boxer. ‘Anything else?’

‘That’s it.’

They set off for the customs line.

‘Declaring anything?’ Oliver asked.

‘Nope. You?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What?’

‘This.’ Oliver held up a small bag of vacuum-sealed greenery that looked vaguely medicinal and possibly prohibited.

‘What is it?’

‘I’m not sure. That’s why I’m declaring it. My thea – my aunt – gave it to me, and my Greek and her English aren’t good enough to have established exactly what it is.’

‘Good luck with that.’

‘Yeah. Enjoy not declaring anything. Nice to meet you.’

‘See you around.’

And they went their separate ways again.

Fifteen minutes later Oliver stepped out of the airport’s sliding doors minus one bag of contraband tomato cuttings and made his way towards the quick pick-up point. Because it was Melbourne, it was raining, and he manoeuvred his suitcase around the larger, dirtier puddles. A familiar figure was huddled under a small awning.

‘Hello again,’ he said.

Alison looked up in surprise and smiled. ‘Hey there.’

‘Waiting for someone?’

‘The shuttle bus. I’m going to Southern Cross to catch the train home.’

They stood side by side watching the cars pass. A horn honked and a small sedan pulled up in front of them, spraying a fine mist over their legs. Oliver popped the boot and hauled in his suitcase.

‘Want a lift?’

‘No, no, I’ll be fine.’ Alison smiled and wrapped her arms around herself.

‘Get in,’ Oliver said, looking at the dark storm clouds. ‘We have to pass through the city anyway to pick up my other cousin.’

‘If you’re sure it’s not an inconvenience,’ Alison said.

‘It’s not.’

‘And if you’re sure you’re not a psycho killer who’s going to lure me to some faraway dungeon and cut me into a thousand pieces.’

‘I’m not.’

Alison looked up at the rain and shrugged. ‘Why not?’



The three of them cruised down the highway: Alison, Oliver and someone called Yianni who Oliver described as ‘essentially my cousin’. No one talked much because Yianni’s deck was pumping something that sounded like the love child of AC/DC and Jimi Hendrix.

From the back seat Alison leant forward. ‘Who is this?’

‘Sorry?’ Oliver said and turned so he could hear her better.

‘I said who is this?’ Alison shouted.

Oliver said something, but it was lost beneath a thundering drum solo. Alison shrugged. Oliver shouted something to Yianni, who gave Alison an unimpressed look in the rear-view mirror and then turned the volume down slightly.

‘They’re called Thrash-a-riffic,’ Oliver repeated.

Alison wrinkled her nose. ‘Thrash-a-riffic? Who calls their band Thrash-a-riffic?’

The unimpressed look reappeared in the rear-view mirror. ‘I do,’ Yianni told her.

‘Oh. Sorry. No, what I meant was, it’s just such a good sound and . . .’ Alison trailed off as Yianni glowered at her and Oliver laughed at her obvious dismay. Traffic slowed as they entered the city. There were roadworks at the entrance to Spencer Street and they sat for ten minutes behind a stationary truck, its hazard lights flashing as it was slowly unloaded, before Yianni let out a frustrated yell and mounted the curb. They knocked over three orange witch’s hats and emerged into the tail end of a traffic jam. Yianni cursed in Greek. Alison looked around nervously. ‘What time is it?’

Oliver glanced at the clock on the dashboard. ‘Eleven.’

‘Darn.’

‘What?’

'I'm pretty sure I've missed my train.'

'What time is it meant to leave?'

'Eleven.'

'Yeah, I reckon you've missed it. What time's the next one?'

Alison let out a tired sigh. 'Five o'clock this afternoon.'

'Right.' Oliver thought for a moment. He looked ahead at the unmoving traffic. 'Right.'

And then he opened the car door and got out.

'What are you doing?'

'Coffee?'

Alison considered things. 'Why not? But what about my bag?'

'Yianni can take it. You can pick it up from my place later.'

Alison grabbed her handbag and opened the door.

Yianni gave them an annoyed look. 'What about me?'

'You can come for coffee too,' Oliver said. 'It's not like you're going anywhere in a hurry.'

Yianni scowled. 'Don't be stupid. I'm not leaving my car.'

'Suit yourself.'



They took a tram to Fitzroy and strolled down the street until they passed a corner café.

'Here?' Oliver asked.

'Why not?' Alison replied and held the door open for him.

Although, or maybe because, it was eleven-thirty on a weekday, the café was full of glamorously grungy young things draped over mismatching chairs drinking flat whites

and shooting the proverbial. Dusty Springfield was playing at a ridiculously high volume in the background and thick, rich coffee fumes filled the air.

An androgynous young waiter with a full sleeve of tattoos and a carefully angled fedora gave a noncommittal gesture that indicated they could sit wherever they damn well wanted. Oliver squeezed through the crowded tables until he found some room at a bench looking out on the street. As Alison shoved her way over to him, he motioned at the waiter, then yelled 'Two lattes' over the din.

Oliver sat down and made a face. 'Sorry I didn't ask what you wanted. I just assumed latte.'

'Correct,' Alison replied, then looked around. 'Busy . . . So, are you back in Melbourne for good now?'

Oliver leant closer to hear her properly. 'Nope. Just for the funeral and then I fly out again.'

'Back to Cyprus?'

'Ha ha. No. To the Solomon Islands this time.'

'Oh. Right. Yeah . . . Why?'

Oliver suddenly looked embarrassed. 'For my next book. For ideas.'

'Really? That's so cool.'

Oliver smiled but didn't meet her gaze.

'Yeah. That was kind of the reason I went to Cyprus too. For book ideas.'

'Did you get any?'

Oliver made a face. 'Not that I want to share with the world.'

'Oh, yeah. So tell me more about this next book. What's it going to be about?'

Oliver straightened his shoulders and put on an affected tone. 'Well, it's about the human condition, innit?'



Alison smirked. 'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'Yeah?'

'Actually, I have no idea. I think it might be a war story. Or about colonialism. Either way I reckon a happy ending is unlikely.'

'And it's going to be set in the Solomon Islands?'

'I think so. It's going to have a couple of levels. It'll be a new take on the whole love story set on a tropical island thing.'

'How original!' Alison said.

'And I think it'll be set during World War II.'

'Like *South Pacific*?'

'And someone's going to die at the end.'

'Like *South Pacific*? How are they going to die?'

'I'm thinking there will be a plane crash.'

Alison paused. 'Are you sure you're not just rewriting *South Pacific*?'

Oliver ignored her and leant past to help the waiter with their lattes. Alison grabbed two packets of sugar and tore them open. Oliver watched as more sugar scattered across the bench than into her glass.

'So,' Alison swallowed a small spoonful of froth, 'the Solomon Islands. Why?'

Oliver stirred his coffee and looked broodingly out the window. The truth was that it had been the most exotic-sounding destination that had a flight available on the day he wanted. There was only so much time he could spend with his family, whose standard way to converse was to shout everyone else until you had earned the right to be listened to, so he had booked himself a flight immediately after his yiayia's funeral.

‘Because of the mysticism,’ he replied vaguely, still stirring his coffee.

Beside him there was a minor eruption as Alison snorted with laughter and sprayed coffee all over his chest.

‘Sorry,’ she wheezed, dabbing at the frothy specks with a napkin. ‘It’s just that’s the wankiest thing I’ve heard since Ed.’

Oliver secretly agreed. ‘So tell me more about China. Tell me more about Ed and his quest to find himself.’

Alison laughed darkly. ‘Ed. He was a brilliant mistake. A beautiful, handsome, sexy mistake.’

She didn’t offer any more.

‘And what happened?’ Oliver prodded.

Alison sighed dramatically. ‘What didn’t happen? Okay. Let me tell you about Ed.’

Ed was beautiful. Ed looked like the type of person who would lead the bloodless revolution and then play himself in the movie about his life. Ed came from money – something to do with property – and he was angry about this. He was angry about a lot of things. The state of the world. The never-ending bloodshed in the Middle East. The price of concession movie tickets. Ed was passionate. She had first met Ed at an open mic poetry night in Collingwood, where he had recited a poem called ‘Modern-day Fascist Anthem’. The poem, in its entirety, went ‘Modern-day fascism? You decide!’ and then Ed poured a bucket of red corn syrup over himself while the national anthem played in the background. At the time she thought it was a truly poignant statement about something she couldn’t really grasp. When she offered to buy him a drink and he told her he only drank vegan beer made in local microbreweries, she swooned and self-consciously nudged

her Coopers up the bar with her elbow, so he wouldn't think it hers. It tipped and spilt over a broad flannel-clad man who whipped around furiously and shouted at her until Ed calmed him with the words, 'Poetry is about love, not hate,' so Alison would have said yes to anything when he asked if she wanted to come back to his place.

She had awoken the next morning hung over and desperately hoping to score a brunch date, but Ed wanted to go to the Immigration Museum instead. She'd spent three hours pacing the spacious rooms of Old Customs House pretending to care about Australia's vibrant multicultural history when really all she wanted was a strong espresso, some greasy spring rolls and maybe a kebab. She had almost cried with gratitude and relief when Ed, spurred by his recent discovery of his apparent quasi-Sino heritage, suggested they go get dumplings. As they ate, Alison listened to his unfolding plan: he would go on a pilgrimage to China to uncover his roots, documenting the whole thing for the edification of the greater global population, who would no doubt learn invaluable lessons from his journey that would benefit all mankind. And, because she was absolutely infatuated with him and because she had never slept with someone as truly beautiful as him, Alison had swallowed the dumpling in her mouth and announced loudly that she would accompany him on this most exciting of adventures.

Oliver looked bemusedly into his half-empty latte glass. 'No offence, but Ed sounds like a dick.'

Alison waved her hands in the air. 'Oh, he was. He was a dick. Such a dick.'

'What happened?'

'Well, I tend to get caught up in the honeymoon phase and I create these fantasies in my head about what our life

together will be like, and then, when I realise these aren't going to eventuate, I get scared and run away.'

Oliver nodded.

'And he ate dog.'

'He what?'

'He ate dog. In the market one day. A little puppy. I could tell by the little paws bobbing up and down in the soup.'

'I thought you said he was a vegan.'

'He was. But he said it was an imperative part of getting in touch with his roots.'

Oliver grinned. 'Okay. I can see why you left – even if he was the most beautiful man you'd ever seen.'

Alison thought for a moment, swirling the coffee in her glass. 'Familiarity breeds an alarming sense of distortion. You know how when you say a word aloud enough times it stops having any meaning and just sounds like a weird, primal noise?'

'Yeah . . .'

'Well, if you look at anyone for long enough, they just look like a Picasso.'

Oliver burst into loud laughter. 'That is the most tremendous thing I've heard in a long time.'

Alison looked at him proudly. 'Okay, enough about my love life. What about you? Any girlfriend? Other than your cousin, I mean.'

Oliver made a face at her. 'Nope. No girlfriend. My last girlfriend was a while ago, before my book was published. A long time before my book was published.'

'And what happened?'

'She didn't really want me, and it seems you can't make people love you no matter how much you try.'

His face changed ever so slightly and Alison sensed this topic was closed.

She drained the dregs of her latte, screwed up her face and smacked her lips. 'Do you know what? For a city that boasts it's the home of coffee, that was the worst latte of my life.'

'Agreed. Do you want to go get another cup of coffee somewhere else?'

She did. So they did. Coffee turned into dinner, dinner turned into drinks and drinks turned into hurried, meaningful sex on the floor of Oliver's aunt's guestroom. And then they slept in each other's arms with the exhausted familiarity that comes once in every relationship after that first intimate moment.



Alison awoke suddenly, blinking rapidly as her eyes adjusted to the light. She scanned the room for a moment, her gaze lingering on a framed photo of a racehorse blazing across a finish line with the title 'Brilliant Mistake, 1986' etched across the bottom. For a moment she panicked, wondering where she was, then realised that she was lying in someone's arms. Oliver's arms. A wave of nausea rose from her belly, bringing with it short, sharp memories of the night before. They were, in no particular order, ouzo, baijiu, tequila and something big, pink and sweet with an umbrella sticking out of it. Her stomach lurched and she shuddered with regret as she remembered something about felafels at four in the morning. Her tongue explored her mouth and located the telltale tabouli in her teeth. She burped: onion. That confirmed it. She looked at Oliver. Asleep, his face had a gentle, almost feminine quality. She

felt the urge to lean over and kiss his elegant cheekbones, and another, equally powerful, to swiftly extract herself and escape as fast as possible. Instead, she settled back into the comfortable fold of his arm. Within minutes she had fallen asleep again.

‘OLIVAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA! BREAKFAST! OH MY GAWD!’

Oliver and Alison jerked awake to find a young girl standing in the doorway. She looked about seven and was wearing bright pink pyjamas with Disney princesses on them. Alison self-consciously drew the sheet up. The little girl stuck her hand on her hip and shook her head at them.

‘Morning, Vicky. Can you give us a minute?’ Oliver said, his free hand rubbing his temple.

Vicky stuck her hip out further. ‘What’s that?’

‘That is Alison. My friend. She’s . . . Vicky, can you please go away?’

Vicky pursed her lips. ‘Mum says you should come down for breakfast because we made pancakes and if you don’t come down now we’ll eat them all because we’re voracious. That’s what Mum says.’

The word pancakes made Alison’s stomach heave and she whimpered faintly. Oliver frowned. ‘It’s okay. Eat all the pancakes. We’ll find our own breakfast.’

Vicky exhaled patiently. ‘Mum says –’

‘Tell your mum we’ll come down later.’

Vicky looked at him in despairing disbelief. ‘But there’s ice cream!’

This time Alison actually felt the bile start to rise and she planted her face in Oliver’s armpit. At least if she vomited she could vomit there . . .

‘Vicky!’ Oliver snapped.

‘Fine,’ Vicky said, slamming the door behind her.

Alison groaned again and Oliver leant his head against hers.

‘I know,’ he soothed.

‘Mmffgggh,’ Alison said into his armpit.

‘What?’

‘I said I’m going to vomit,’ Alison repeated.

‘Into my armpit?’

‘Yep.’

‘Okay. When you’re done, do you want to go and find something really greasy for brunch?’

A small tear of happiness formed in the corner of Alison’s eye. It smelt slightly of tequila.

‘I thought you’d never ask.’

After they had dressed, Alison prepared herself for the walk of shame.

‘Where are we again?’

‘Preston.’

‘And who are these people?’

‘My aunt, uncle and cousins. On my dad’s side.’

‘And why aren’t you staying at your parents’?’

‘Because my bedroom was turned into a home gymnasium for my godbrother’s personal training business.’

‘Right. Let’s do this.’

They walked along a photo-lined hallway and down a set of narrow carpeted stairs. Judging by the photos, there would be at least three children waiting at the bottom. The stairway opened up into a large kitchen with a big table in the middle. Five sets of eyes turned to them.

‘Alison, this is my uncle Mick, my aunt Christina and my cousins Vicky, Sophia and Socratis.’

Alison glanced at Socratis, who looked to be about three years old and was trying to eat his pancakes through a straw.

‘It’s a family name,’ Oliver’s aunt offered in a voice that suggested it had not been her idea to name her only son after one of the greatest thinkers in the history of the world.

‘Nice to meet you all,’ Alison said.

Oliver’s uncle gave a short nod and turned back to his pancakes. His aunt stood up.

‘I’ll just go get another chair . . .’

‘No, don’t worry about it,’ Oliver said, waving his aunt away. ‘We’ve got to head to the train station so Alison can get back home.’

‘Oh, of course,’ she said and her face fell. ‘I’ll show you to the door.’

‘Thea, I know where the door is –’ Oliver started, but his aunt ignored him. She pushed her chair back and swept past, motioning for them to follow her. Alison gave the others a small wave, which they all returned except Socratis, who was busy trying to get both ends of the straw up his nostrils. Christina led them out of the room and down a short hall, then busied herself unlocking a small series of deadlocks and bolts on the front door.

‘Okay,’ she said and stepped back.

Oliver squeezed past carrying Alison’s pack and paused to give his aunt a hug and a kiss on the forehead.

‘See you soon, Thea.’

Alison gave her a friendly nod and went to leave, but Christina stopped her. She grabbed her by the shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. Alison held her breath and waited.

‘Listen to your heart and don’t expect a fairytale.’

Alison held her gaze for a moment, surprised by the deep



sadness in her voice. Then there was the pitter patter of little feet and a door slammed shut down the hall. Christina looked over her shoulder. 'I better go. Socratis is on the toilet and he'll need help wiping.'

They got on a city-bound tram. Alison watched out the window as inner-city suburbia flashed past. A sprawling tree encircled by cement. Half a bicycle locked to a rusty wrought-iron fence. A City of Darebin garbage bin with a giant smiley face spray-painted on it. Young mums in matching exercise outfits jogging behind prams the size of chariots. Ancient women clothed in black pacing up and down outside their houses, talking in their home languages to no one in particular. Terrace house next to Californian bungalow next to modern townhouse next to sprawling student squat.

Alison glanced across at Oliver. 'Your aunt . . .'

Oliver gave her a half smile then looked out the window. 'My aunt . . .'

*Christina had married Oliver's uncle because he had asked. For the seven years prior she had secretly loved a young boy who lived across the street and he had secretly loved her back. Unfortunately he was from the wrong part of Cyprus, where they spoke Turkish instead of Greek, and it would have killed both of their parents to see the looks of longing in the eyes of this modern-day Romeo and Juliet. More than three decades and two continents were not enough to ease the tensions of the dispute that divided the island, and while Christina would gladly have drunk poison to be with him, Mehmet had more common sense. He told her their options were to run away together and never see their families again, or else*

*walk away and no longer see each other. He would move back to Northern Cyprus and she would stay in Australia. Despite packing a bag in preparation and bidding her sisters a secret farewell, Christina ultimately couldn't leave her family. Neither could Mehmet, and instead of returning to his parents' homeland, he married a girl from the right side of the island and moved into a house a few doors down from his parents. Christina married Mick because he was the first boy to ask her. He was from the right side of the island too, and this would make her parents happy, but it didn't make Christina happy. Every Sunday-night dinner at her parents' house was a painful reminder of what she had lost, as they celebrated each and every birthday, every Christmas, across the road from Mehmet and his wife. When her kids were old enough to befriend his, Christina would sometimes stand at the kitchen window and watch Vicky and Pinar march down the street arm in arm, and through her tears the two would sometimes merge into one and Christina would see the daughter she and Mehmet never had. Then she would chide herself, telling herself she loved her husband and children, and would sometimes stick her hand over a burner on the stove to remember who she was.*

Alison didn't say much during the tram trip, but Christina's pleading look burned in her mind.

They brunched in Northcote until the caffeine and oil soaked up enough alcohol to make life slightly more bearable. Oliver told stories that made Alison laugh. Alison did impressions that made Oliver chuckle, mostly because he couldn't tell who they were supposed to be, and they gave each other the kind of shy, sideways smiles that are

reserved for only a few living mortals. Then they took the long tram ride into Southern Cross Station. Alison leant against Oliver's shoulder and he laced his fingers through hers. A man sat opposite talking animatedly into a blue-tooth earpiece as if negotiating energetically with himself. Alison giggled, her body pressing into Oliver's, and she felt him tense beside her. With a sudden rush of urgency he turned to her. 'I think I'm falling in love with you.'

Alison glanced at him, startled. She took in his serious gaze and offered a helpless shake of her head. 'But I'm not your cousin . . .'

And Oliver smiled and she smiled and time stopped forever and for only a second.

Soon the tram reached Southern Cross Station, slowing to a halt. Alison turned to Oliver. Oliver looked at Alison. She didn't stand up. He didn't either. They rode the tram to the end of the line and then rode it back again. They would both go to the Solomon Islands.

But first there was Oliver's yiayia. Waiting, embalmed and lonely, for her oldest grandson to return so that she could be laid to rest beside her long-dead husband in a patient patch of earth in Fawkner Memorial Park.

