

STOP

‘The meaning of life is that it stops’

– Franz Kafka

THE END

‘Not like her to lose control,’ they’d said, when they heard.

‘Must’ve missed the stop sign down at the highway. She’s still critical now, they reckon.

Could go either way.’

‘Be a shame to lose ’er. Only doctor we’ve been able to keep. Without ’er, it’ll be back to that five hour drive out west.’

‘I’d better tell Els.’

‘No need, mate. Her and the ladies are already on it. Be enough casseroles in their freezer to see that baby through to two.’

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She’d punctuated the seconds upon the vinyl steering wheel with her thumb, waiting for the little, green man to revert to his red, soldier-like state. Starting. Stopping. Watching. Waiting. Never going. Just following the beat of a metronome, upon which the tedious, unvaried events of her life, never failed to fall.

Her stored impatience pressed down on the accelerator, as the red hue of those lights changed to green in her periphery, before the unrelenting expanse of desiccated, sun-bleached soil had consumed her vision once more.

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She'd been driving home. Well, to the place she used to call *home*. Only, it was just Mum and Dad now. Her brothers had all moved on and, with time, so had she.

She knew what they'd say when she'd pull up at the end of the long, dirt track, a veil of dust suspended in her wake. When she'd watch Dad stride across the dry, furrowed earth, crushing the last, stunted tufts of bronzed grass, neglected by the idle cattle, to greet her. After she'd kill the engine and push herself out with the door to meet his gaze. When she'd notice the concern in his grey, clouded eyes, tired, after years upon years of sowing hope and watching it shrink into a jigsaw of clay. When he'd search her face and then anxiously lower his eyes to her round stomach.

'Where's Jeremy?' he'd ask.

Inside, they'd surround the spotted gum table, polished and streaked with red grain, and Mum would spread out the china which, for as long as she could remember, was only ever brought out in the presence of guests. Then, her mother would lean in, commencing her ritualistic tête-à-tête in that familiar voice, thick like sugary fondant, criticising her father.

She'd look towards Dad then, pushing the door back and forth in search of some silent, squeaking hinge, pretending not to hear; and she knew she'd once more wish for a whirlpool, to drag her into its centre, pull her under. An escape.

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She'd shifted her weight, leaning the aching muscles of her lower back into the base of her car seat, and she'd tugged, irascibly, at the seatbelt cutting along the stretch lines striping her tummy. Then, she'd released her clammy fingers from their grip around the steering wheel, smearing her perspiration onto the forgiving cotton of her yoga pants - the only article of clothing left in her wardrobe still able to cloak her heavy legs.

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'It's dry' was all they'd said. Yet dry could never prepare her for such bleak desolation. They'd had droughts before, but nothing comparable to this - flat, sunburnt country, broken only by a handful of stunted shrubs, poking, like needles, into the clay.

She'd gazed upwards then. Through the windscreen of her car, at those tossing, troubled clouds, as they'd reflected the afternoon rays of the sun, like the polished steel of a sterile, hospital tray. Her features contorting, as she'd felt something burst within her, exorcising every flinch and shudder that she'd had to withhold over the last twelve years. Twelve years of running from the pain, blocking out the screams, pleads, cries...of the pregnant mothers who she had to send home with empty blankets; the farmers who'd left relieved of a limb. Who'd trusted her, when she'd told them there was always a reason to hold on and who had held on, to her every word, when she'd promised that there was still hope.

She'd done well. Very well. Twelve years was a long time and in the end, it wasn't the screams, or the pleads, or the cries that had got to her. It was the silence. The silence that surrounded a dying man whom no one would miss when he took his last breath.

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She'd never forgotten those creases. The ones that had streaked prematurely across his forehead and deepened while she'd watched on, helpless, as his unspoken words had slowly built in those turquoise-blue eddies, wearily circling the black. Circling the dark. Until there was nothing more to say and the current had flexed, like a muscle, dragging unshed tears to the surface.

The cancer had spread to his lymph nodes and the new growths hadn't responded to the chemo. The other patients had needed the few beds on the wards, so they'd wheeled the faulty heart monitor and the bed they'd replaced, because of its broken wheels, into the old staff room. Then, his fiancée had returned his engagement ring, with cursory confession to a fly-in miner who was flying-out with her heart. He'd grown isolated. Alone. Until that day, when he'd surrendered.

She'd reached for his hand, then. Frail and almost elderly. Wasted under those cold, crisp hospital sheets. She'd had to abandon her go-to, distant hand-squeeze. It hadn't felt right anyway. Not in that forgotten room, with those chapped, peeling walls and flickering lights. So, she'd just held it. Running her thumb, gently, over the peaks and valleys of his palm. In time to that steady bleep of the heart monitor. Up and down his veins; blue, like the heart of a flame.

She couldn't say how long they waited, like that. Hand in hand. Just the two of them, before a rise and fall in pressure. One last weak squeeze. His permission.

Then, he'd let go.

She'd silently hooked the syringe to his IV line and forced her shaking hands to steady as they'd squeezed the plunger, watching as that dense fluid had slowly dribbled through the plastic tube and trickled into his arm, smothering those last glowing coals as that jarring, unbroken bleep ripped through her.

She'd stopped fighting then. Sliding down the wall to stoop upon the linoleum floor, as her muscles convulsed, the pain wracking through her chest. Conceding, as the tears pooled and overspilt, flooding the gullies of discontent scratched beneath her eyes.

Tears that only she would devote to his memory.

'You're just at the mercy of your hormones,' they'd said, when they'd come and stripped her of her ID card and pager. 'It's best if you stop work now.'

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She'd told Jeremy by then. She'd guarded her expression as he'd raised his eyes. Up from his plate, to meet hers. She'd just nodded and watched on, from somewhere far away, as a grin, from deep inside, spread across his face.

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She knew when she'd forgotten. They'd been short-staffed. Someone away sick. She'd been triaging in emergency overnight and had had to cover the wards until they could find a replacement doctor from the big hospital out west. She'd been exhausted and by the time she got back to the house, those contraceptive pills, lined up like soldiers marching into battle, had slipped her mind.

Now, that one, lonely, white lump, had sunk to the bottom of her tired leather handbag, where she'd once buried those unbroken, foil sheets, beneath an assortment of random receipts and discount cards.

Afraid of what he'd say if he found out she'd been taking them.

Afraid of what he'd do when he realised, she'd done everything in her power to prevent herself from conceiving.

She loved him. Really, she did; and she wanted him to be happy. But a child would ruin her career. A career she'd prepared for, worked for, lived for, for so many years. She didn't think she could just cast that away.

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She'd jerked her hand down on the steering wheel, veering back onto the left side of the road. Twisting her neck, her eyes darted to the side mirror to stare at the part of the highway her car had occupied, searching for a reason why she'd wandered onto the right side of that thick, unbroken line.

Squaring her shoulders, she'd refocused her attention on the straight road extending before her. The distant asphalt had shifted in her vision. Shimmering from black to blue as the heat wafted upwards, like tendrils of smoke winding into the clouds.

There'd been no point pursuing it. No point climbing the rise to where it had glinted at her, like pyrite beneath the sun. It had no beginning. No end. It was an illusion. Drawing her closer and closer, until it vaporised. From a distance, they only saw a career, a happy marriage, a growing family. Her mirage.

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No. She should have stopped. Should've stopped and turned around. Looked back at how far she'd come.

But she'd failed. She'd failed to stop. She'd just kept driving along that road. Chasing that mirage. She still hadn't stopped when she'd reached that intersection. She'd known it was there. Had driven through it more times than she could count. But she'd felt the graceful caress of feathers within her womb. She'd known then, in that moment, that this was what she'd been waiting for.

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She'd seen the light. Just a dull glow to begin with, white, like an angel's halo. But it had grown. Closer. Brighter. She'd heard the screech of the tyres sliding on the road and she'd felt it... That searing pain, crushing her chest. Her lungs. Her neck. As her heartbeat slowed, she'd felt the blood withdraw from her toes, her fingers, her hands and legs, until she'd been left completely numb. Weightless. Enveloped in the darkness.

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She'd thought she was in the hospital then. The tension felt familiar. Exacerbated, no doubt, by her presence. The road trauma cases were always a mess. It felt strange though, knowing that she now held the conductor's baton. Her every flinch, groan, jolt, leading the orchestra around her. An orchestra that she had, so many times, performed with.

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Then, she sensed the pressure of a hand on her arm. She knew that hand. Knew it so very well. Every contour. Every callous.

Jeremy.

She let that hand move hers upwards. Stopping to rest upon her chest.

Just his hand and hers.

Now, she felt it. Those tiny fingers curling around her pinkie. Small. Feather-soft and sticky, like the herald to the breaking of drought.

And everything else stopped.

THE BEGINNING