

## The Black Ice

The moment Zayneb gushes tears she's cutting inland from wine country and into the Blackwood Forrest. The wipers grate and squelch against the hoarfrost, and the only unimpeded line of sight is a demisted arch in the middle-windscreen that forces her to drive bent over the gearbox. Against the rule-proving blackness, all this vision affords is twenty pithy meters of double lined road. At a quarter of the speed limit, two wheels slush the gravel while the other two navigate the sheen of black ice that killed three of her friends last winter. Destiny whines for the windows to be put up, her gloved hands trying to protect her tiny face from wind-bite. Her crying stops when Zee's starts, gnarled dry sobs that lurch into the hand she's taken off the wheel. It's coming whether she likes it or not; a statement that sums up if not the last few years of her own life, then life for everyone and all time. So while Lana Del Ray tins out the speakers, she holds it together long enough to take the next turn-off, ditch beside bush shrub, re-set the blanket over Destiny, and only then allow nature to take its sometimes violent course and earthquake right through her.

One-way of thinking: absconding mere towns away was bound to end like this. She must have known that. Yet, the mind can be a great obfuscator, especially where need and despair are involved. One winter's day she arrived at a vineyard outside Margaret River, and Tony, the old fella with more dollars than sense, didn't have the heart to say no. But, two conditions, when it was too cold or wet, Destiny wasn't allowed with her pruning the vineyards. His wife would babysit. Two, that whatever she was running from never followed her back here. A promise broken a few hours back when Lucia returned early from live music night at Settlers warning about a man with the word *mongrel* etched on his forehead, and who held a photo of Destiny and Zayneb accompanied with a story about an escape from a mental hospital, and a father's kidnapped daughter.

What Zee feels about Destiny: Consistently shocked by her maturity, the way she questions her mother's temper or moral judgement. A five year old! Some nights, pillow-muffled sobs that she might be losing her innocence. Warm pride that her hair

falls in the same black waves. Nauseating knots that her nose shares the same ski-slope shape as Tyson's. The loss of heartbeat when she realizes that something so beautiful came out of her. The loss of heartbeat that frightens because she brought something so pure into this world. The giggle that begets giggle. Innocent, pure and naïve. It's worth it, right? Surely that makes it worth it?

The new life she's going to start. The old life she's taken away.

She can't believe she's slept. Early morning light shoots between the gums and glistens off the water pooled on plants. She lifts Destiny's beanie and smirks at the contortions on her waking face. Outside, the trickly sounds of wet bush and medicine clean air. Destiny chases birds and rubs leaf against her cheek. Sniggers are shared while she copies Zee's squat behind a Grasstree.

Wiggling Destiny out of her yellow-moon pyjamas, she tells a story. It's about two strong women — a mother and a daughter — that took a wrong turn. They didn't know they were taking a wrong turn. Sometimes that's how life goes. Bad things happened — unfair things — that weren't their fault. They didn't choose those things, nobody does. That might sound obvious now, but life has a way of getting hazy. Sometimes, she thinks, if she could just know one true thing, one thing that doesn't fade, then it would be something to hold onto, something that made everything else stronger.

Mummy. Were you talking about daddy?

It doesn't matter.

What matters is that those two women carry on like they hadn't lost anything. They couldn't look back or curse themselves, because if they did, then they run the risk of damning their lives. The past was for the past. The future for the future. But if they lived for the now, if they embraced the adventure of new people and new places, then life would pay them back in spades.

And take-away food? Destiny's joke telling smile licks the right side of her face.

She hugs her so tight that Destiny asks if she's okay.

Yes, darling. Mummy's all good. Everything she ever does is for you. Know that?

What Zee feels about Tyson. He's a fucking cunt. He's a fucking cunt.

He-is-a-fucking-cunt.

Not now. It will be important to remember later. That's all she can muster for now.

She gets jittery staying put for too long. They sleep in the back of the station wagon in Nannup. The jagged rebound of an unmuffled bike makes her jerk Destiny into a shop front. They shower in a grotty trucker's servo, sneak into a caravan park in Bridgetown, dishpig for a café in Manjimup, and splurge on a tree-walk in Walpole; a whack to the hip-pocket, but minor compensation for the friends she's ripped Destiny from, the vague answers about when school starts. Nasty thoughts run through her head about what she will do for money when it comes down to it. Destiny will go to school, whatever that means. The station wagon shudders and gurgles so ominously that she praises God every time the engine kicks over.

In between these South-Western towns: new growth trees packed so tight and symmetrical and ill-defined they remind her of land packages in the sprawling suburbs, lopped trees stacked horizontally next to giant yellow bulldozers. Further out, mercifully, trees with trunks so wide the car would fit. Closer to the ocean, scrappy bush and white sandy floors. The single lane roads have white faded paint and lack rumble lines, they coil and curve then raise and dip and aren't as reliable as a first world country would like to trumpet. A half-meter depression jolts them senseless, kills the electrics. Under the car, tethered cords scraping road. Outside of the world's most isolated city is a state more sparsely populated than the Sahara Desert. She thinks: People might be capable of destroying the conditions for life on earth, but the conditions for life on earth will not be tamed; will not become the floral version of a glorified fuck-doll. They edge east along the continent and relax in between the straight of farmland and coastal scrub.

In Albany, a few things turn her way. At a hostel, she negotiates free board in exchange for four-hours work per day. Backpackers take to them and beg for goes playing with Destiny. Although scrubbing toilets and putting up with complaints, she finds the work good and honest. Good for school time hours. The school responds positively to her enquiries, don't ask too many questions about missing timelines or an absent father. They'll take her when she's ready. She deletes the social media accounts, a joyous relief. She finally gets around to filling in her east-coast family about the relationship breakdown, and they don't scorn her mistakes or scrub "told you so" in her face, like she dreaded. They're glad she's okay but can't believe she hasn't come home. It's too dangerous; she doesn't know what he's capable of. He'd threatened if she'd ever left he'd have his people at the airports, at their houses. Even as she says this, she's unsure if that's the real reason she hasn't returned. While Destiny motor mouths stories about backpackers from other countries, and her parents are nodding along through the laptop, her eyes begin to water. It's so nice to not feel so alone.

One night, she pays some French backpackers to babysit while she heads for a couple of drinks down the pub. Ears spike in the direction of the goofy grinning Aussie guy playing pool. Poor excuse for a grip, unsteady, barely hitting the white ball, and from what she makes out, not even drunk. John, his name is. A little flirting earns her a game, and when she sinks the black ball there's still five of his on the table. The dropped hint of her car earns an offer to have him service it. She accepts a date as repayment, and that weekend leaves Destiny with the French backpackers. On a clear late September night, they drink wine from plastic cups while whales amble in the bay. There isn't any mystery to this country kid. As earnest as the Adam's apple that nudges his throat, willing to take the piss out of her, unashamedly asking about her accent — it's Wog Melbourne — insistent on paying for dinner at Ship's Pub, plays for the local football team, works at the same mob he apprenticed with out of high school. Could this guy get more Anglo? An opposite. Not her type. She sleeps with him anyway, closed eyes while he massages her scalp. He's going to fix the car. And

he's nice. Maybe because she wanted too. He can't convince her to stay the night, but makes her promise to bring Destiny around for brekkie.

Next morning the two of them lose their shit laughing with hangover humour. He spends twenty minutes alone with Destiny while she luxuriates under a hot shower, and when she gets out, there is an easel set up and he's explaining oils to Destiny. She doesn't say anything about the shitty eggs. What kind of person can't cook eggs? In those early days, Tyson served up perfectly poached eggs and homemade hollandaise.

Can I see you again? Runny yoke on John's stubble.

Bro, it's just —

Stop calling me bro. I'm not your brother.

Sorry. It doesn't mean —

Why not?

Things are...

Complicated?

Despite herself, she grins. There's no recovery from that. Covers her eyes with her hands.

Okay. Sure. What's the harm, huh?

Tyson has sorry eyes, fidgety hands, and black stubble. She can almost smell the booze through the screen — beer and whisky and rotting. While softly spoken with Destiny, their conversation doesn't go past one-word answers. He pleads for her whereabouts. Or to return. But she refuses. He nods. He actually accepts responsibility. Says he can't believe his bad behaviour. Admits he needs to change. Go through a program, like she said. But he says she's wrong about one thing. He can't change before they come back. He needs them to change. They're his only chance. They are his everything.

She believes him, that he means it. But won't be fooled. Not by his eyes dark with sincerity, or the tonal force behind his words — not again. She gives Destiny the phone and puts her headphones on, points for her to sit across the room. She reasserts

everything he did, explains her feelings, and the last chances he was given. Even though he can't touch her, she's waiting for him to blow up. But he stays silent. Without warning, he slaps himself five times and roars from a deep recognizable place. Silence. Rubs the dent on his forehead.

Na... You're right, babe. You've made the right decision.

Silence.

But I... I can't go on like this. Not in this world.

Ty-son. You can't speak like that.

Wif all due respect, babe. If I can't do this wif you, I'm not doing it at all.

It's not her fault, it's not her fault, it's not her fault. She must think of her daughter.

Six times. Six times. Six times. Six. Times. The average amount of times a victim of domestic violence will return to a violent partner.

And she's only on number two.

Here comes what her parents really think.

Why haven't you gone to the police? A woman's shelter? What were you thinking getting involved with a client? A jailbird, nonetheless? Do you really think first time offenders get over a year on a first offence? When are these string of men going to stop? We can't send money. We're not sending money. But we're happy to have you come over. You need to come home. You need to start thinking of your daughter.

What she wants from her family: support, comfort, affirmation. So the accusations thump her like a flung knife into wood.

The next few days it's hard to get out of bed. Her backaches are worse than the week of pruning vineyards. She grumbles at the long-term occupants. Memories of youthhood re-play like a scratched cd on a risky rotation; going into pubs under aged and drinking vodka out of Mt. Franklin bottles, the dangerous play with boys who oozed sex and recklessness, the netballer whose scrounge was felt long after a game, the cafe meetings with her uni study group. The memories aren't nostalgic. They're melancholic; a reminder of a life not lived. She stops answering her family's calls.

All she ever thinks about is her fucking daughter.

The cream-coloured colonial building daunts her. Inside, it's painted bright green and there's a poster of an old man in daggy clothes and a warm smile next to a suited lady who underscores a line in a document. Destiny is crying because she's already used up her allotted screen time for the day, until another icy look from the receptionist is enough to relent.

Zayneb? A young woman in a sleek black dress and a firm handshake. Thin muscly arms and a nose-job. She steers her into a room and asks for the story. The first signs started months into the relationship. He stopped doing the dishes and began expecting meals after work. One night he broke an oil bottle and held the jagged edge to her throat, threatening he'd kill her. The neighbours called the cops and he was put on a short-term diversion order. He was back an hour later. Convinced her to stay.

The lawyer nods her head and taps into the MacBook.

There were little things, but it was pretty good for a while. Up until the pregnancy. Major turning point. Abuse became constant, psychological. Telling her she was useless, that she should kill herself. He wouldn't actually touch her; used his chest to block her path, or bullied her to a corner. One time, he'd read about a domestic violence murder, where the father slaughtered the family. While she was washing the dishes, he called over the tellie: Jesus I feel sorry for these blokes. I can understand how it happens, you know what I mean? You fucking women. You just push, and push, and push.

That's horrible. The lawyer fingers her engagement ring.

Rules kicked in, about what she could and couldn't do, who she could see, when she had to be home. He'd whisper into her belly. Baby, please don't be like your retarded mother.

Zee coughs. In front of their daughter, he'd push her face into a pillow and yell at her not to be like her slut mother.

The lawyer pauses. She uses the back of her hand to swing her shiny hair over her shoulder — Zee did the same when such things like oily hair were important — So, no physical abuse? Like has he hit you?

Not really?

Hasn't hit you? The computer chair squeaks as she leans forward, a shifting of something. What do you mean? You've got photos of bruising, right?

He's shaken me. And threatened —

Photos?

No.

You know there are other options besides the courts?

I'm a social worker. I know what abuse is.

You? Are a social worker?

It's on the form.

Right...Of course. My apologies.

The rest of the conversation plays out like late-stage terminal disease. The lawyer ums and ahs, asks no follow up questions and cuts off explanations. She stands up and shuffles her materials together.

It's important not to get your hopes up. We assess everything case by case. The reality is we're underfunded and understaffed. We knock back many people every single day.

In the back alley, memories snatch the air from her throat. The sky tumbles over and over. Zee's on her haunches and rasping.

Mummy, are you okay?

Everything gets hazy.

Zee has an odd equation that goes something like this. Time spent with John, adds up guilt for Tyson, which equals skyping Tyson.

Tyson has started disputing past events. He didn't "shove" her up against a wall. He wasn't "implying" that she kill herself. He was just "joking" about having her killed. And what about her? What, was this all his fault? Didn't she bear any responsibility? Who was the one pulling sixty-hour weeks slopping mortar and carting bricks so they could have their own place? Who demanded they have their own place? Did she know what it was like to do that kind of work? He broke his fucking back for that family, and how many times would she nag him about changing a nappy and cooking dinner? Whinging about her fucking workload as a parent? She got to rest



any time the baby slept, does she think he got rest at work? Why was she so unkind to him?

It shocks. The truth to it all. It shouldn't. But she can't deny the reality of his perspective. Truth is many sided. Other people's perspectives are always legitimate. Tyson's mother used to beat him. Said the most despicable things to a son. Seriously, Zee wouldn't say them to her worst enemy. Anyone would've had issues. And the only reason why he was in prison was because he was defending a woman who was set upon by a group of men. He admits he went too far, but after they'd hit him and he'd feared for his safety, who can blame someone for losing it? Deep inside there was a good man. She is a fixer. Not a bad thing. Put on this Earth to teethe the good out of people.

He asks her: How are you going to feel when you have to explain to your daughter that you're the reason her father swung from a tree?

It's a cruel question. But not unfair.

Memories slip, crack, seep, disappear, rearrange and return.

She has an odd feeling. Like she's been here before.

John gazes over the ocean.

This is where I come to think. Once upon a time, these toothy cliffs fit into Antarctica. I don't know. It blows my mind.

I used to work in a prison, John.

I beg yours?

Casuarina.

Okay, what, like as a guard or something?

Social worker.

Okay.

That's where Destiny's dad and I got....

I see. Wasn't that against the rules?

Waves explode against cliffs, shooting white puffy shrapnel into the air where they hang for some time before dissolving. She nods. Asks what he thinks.

It is what it is. I mean, I don't judge you, or think less of you, if that's what you're asking.

Destiny grips the steel bars that keeps people from falling off the cliff, presses her face into them.

When you look out...what do you think about?

Life. About how the world works.

And what's the answer?

Depends what's happening, I guess.

What about now?

Right now?

Right now.

I think the world is a nice place to be.

Don't you get bored staying in one place?

It's God's country. And I still get to meet new people. How could I get bored?

I think I would get bored.

He stops. Gazes out again, re-fitting his beanie. You know, sometimes it's hard staying in one place. But I can't say that I've ever felt I've known it all, or there's nothing new to be discovered. I've had mates do the backpacking thing, and they speak about places like they're achievements. Like they're boxes to be ticked on a form. And I'm thinking, you've missed the bloody point.

I see.

Tell me.

You think that about us? That we've missed the point?

I didn't say that.

Bro, I didn't ask for this position.

No, I know. What I meant—

I think you better take us home, huh. Thanks.

Hey, I didn't—

She grabs Destiny's hand and leads her towards the car.

Can't get the waves out of her head. How they just keep smashing into the cliffs. Without end. Exploding into the air. Fading away. Into nothing.

Something emptying about this life. Gone are the virtues of hard work; now are the sore knees from scrubbing toilets. As those first backpackers take off for their next

adventure, there is no excitement about the blow-ins to come. The more this happens the more she recites passages from Buddhist texts about how to stay present and overcome a life of fear and anxiety. But she can't seem to fortify herself for longer than four minutes, the absence of a future weighing as heavily as the memory-ridden past.

Thoughts while pouring another wine: This place is just so dead. No-one wants to make friends. And the cold isn't good for Destiny. Do you want her growing up without a Dad? Tyson's threats about the courts. How are you going to fight that? What if you lose Destiny altogether? You can't let your idea of a perfect family get in the way of having a family. You've always hated middle-class entitlement.

Her phone vibrates some nights — John — but she doesn't pick up. Ouch, the hurt. She's well aware she willed the fight. Jesus, she'd been trying to find a reason to fight for two weeks. That was the closest thing she'd found to an insult.

She's a string tuned so tight. Fated to snap.

In the end, it's an accusation from a regular about Destiny stealing a pot plant or something. The owners aren't having a bar of it, will back her to the hilt. She quits anyway. Pack up the car.

But Mummy...

Now, Destiny.

But Mum—

Now! I said now.

Driving out of town, the flat barren spinifex and the tin coloured clouds clamped across the sky seem to match some kind of flatness within her. She pops chewing gum and snaps at Destiny to stop singing. Doesn't apologise.

There is something unsettling about going the way she came, like she's reneging on some unspoken deal that to flee away meant to missile forward. But like an addict who goes for one more hit — not really wanting to and in full knowledge of the consequences — compulsion overrides feeling, character overrides fate, and for a moment, she imagines the car from above, as a speck amongst the sprawling nothingness that features so romantically in the mind of Australians. Her people. Only now the future is laid out does she feel the immensity of her decision. She glimpses Destiny in the rear-view, and she sees a child who wants friends to play at her house, a space to do homework, and a Mum to join her on an excursions.

All this space gives her decision some take-up time. Is there a certain beauty in the small town/simple man life? Like wildflowers on a desert hill means more than those same flowers in a flourishing gardens. She wonders if the life she's always repudiated — a middle-class fool's life — which she doesn't necessarily want, or even need, but maybe owes herself to take? If only to see what she can build from that. And maybe she ends up with one thing out of this fucked up world that she can turn around and proudly say: I did that.

A bang snaps into the undercarriage. The wheel shakes the car into a dangerous wobble, before she rights it. Destiny snaps awake, disoriented, a lip swelling, then cries that throb her ears. Zee's throat constricts, and as the turnoff appears, the sign back home to Perth emerging, and the sign to head further east — uncharted territory. Even still, the option of pulling a u-ey.

The car is stopped — no longer shaking.

So. Here she is.

Clenching the wheel, whitening knuckles.

The indicator clicking. Then it doesn't. Repeat pattern.

Mummy, where are we going?