

Bright Eyes

Sarah wonders if anyone, anywhere in the world at that precise moment, 8.48am on a Friday, is sucking their thumb in the same exact way, right thumb nestled between left cheek and crowd of molars. Her lips make a smacking sound around the base of her thumb as she ponders and sucks, sucks and ponders. She watches the person who must be Sarah in the mirror, tilts her head just so, raises her shoulders around her ears. For good measure, she balances on one leg. Has anyone in the history of the world ever, like ever ever, sucked their thumb in this precise way?

Sarah knew *she* had not. As a child she'd toyed with the idea of thumb-sucking, for a while.

'Stop that. You'll buck your teeth out and nobody will marry you,' she was told.

Despite heeding her mother's advice in this area, at 28 Sarah is still unmarried. She doesn't like the term *single*; she prefers to think of herself as unattached, untethered. Perhaps a little unhinged, too.

She slumps into an armchair and contemplates the box of her mother's personal effects at her feet. Tossing aside a bunch of doilies, she uncovers a family photo album. She flips through the pages: each photo has 10-year-old Sarah's neat bubble writing beneath, labelling the who's who. She can still feel the hard edge of her mother's frustration as she checked with her who each face belonged to.

'Stop your silly games to get attention,' she was told.

Her immediate family weren't too much of an issue: Mum, Dad and older sister Maria were somewhat familiar shapes. It was the extended family she struggled with. Sarah could make out noses, eyes, lipsticked and bare lips, yet all the faces looked the same to her. The young Sarah in the pictures looked much like everyone else to present-day Sarah; no distinguishable features.

Her phone buzzes: a calendar notification. *Visit Mum*. Sarah sighs. She could go to the care facility, or she could stay home and practise her magic tricks before tomorrow's workshop. She looks to her pet Blue-tongued lizard in his terrarium on the dining table.

'What do you reckon, Houdini? Fancy a field trip?'

Sarah is sure nobody else in Perth—perhaps even in Australia—uses such a reptile in their act. And how many other fluent Esperanto speakers who are magicians are also licenced road train drivers?

Houdini's head turns slowly in Sarah's direction. He flicks his tongue three times. She knows immediately what she should do.

It was Ted who taught Sarah how to drive. Ted, the old bloke who lived in their granny flat. He'd worked with her dad, been laid off, had nowhere else to go. Managed to pay the token rent from his veteran's pension.

'Sacrificed big for our country,' she was told.

On Sunday afternoons Sarah would sit in the driver's seat of Ted's rusted-out old Ford Ranger ute. They started by making rounds of the block, until she was competent enough to drive to the corner shop, eventually to the bottle-o, where Ted would leave her, the engine idling, and come out a few minutes later, his big hands wrapped around a bottle in brown paper.

Sarah drove with the windows down, spring-sweet air flowing in, imagining this was her car, and that she was alone, despite Ted's hand resting on her thigh.

'Hey, Bright Eyes,' says a woman Sarah doesn't recognise from behind the reception desk. Her voice, however, is unmistakable: high-pitched and patronising.

'Hi, Jennifer. I'll just head through to see Mum.'

While walking down the hallway towards her mum's room, Sarah thinks about how to make her entrance. She's still working on her signature move, something she'll be revered for. Like the Bend and Snap from *Legally Blonde*; something people will want to emulate. The same people will flock to her magic show; they'll throw miniature roses on stage for Houdini, with whom she'll travel to far-flung destinations to perform her tricks for royalty. Beyoncé will feel threatened by her celebrity and release a diss track. She'll be known the world over as Sarah. Not Bright Eyes.

At the threshold to her mum's room, Sarah knocks twice before entering and placing Houdini's carrier on the floor. The curtains are closed, the room dimly lit by a couple of lamps. The usual musty smell of oily scalp, disinfectant and something else, and the cool breeze of the air conditioner (on 24-7 as far as Sarah can tell) settle around her shoulders like a familiar cardigan.

The sheet-covered form in the bed starts to rouse. Sarah clicks the fingers of her left hand three times and spins on her right foot, flinging herself to the floor on her knees, arms outstretched. Her skirt floats up and rests above her knees, where the scars begin. She curses herself for not wearing shorts. Plus this entrance doesn't feel right; she'll need to revise at home later.

As Sarah drove, every now and then Ted's meaty hand would give what felt like an encouraging little squeeze, while his face remained expressionless, eyes focused on the road ahead. She wasn't used to much touch; she'd seen Maria hug her friends when they came over, sometimes see them walking arm in arm.

Later, in her room, when she would feel all the pressure building under her skin, the only way to feel better was to cut. Maria had walked in on her one evening, not understanding what she was doing.

'Mum, Dad, Sarah's touching herself!'

Ted's hand was rough and Sarah didn't like how the callouses felt, pressed into her skin. Her face was hot and her tummy sizzled, but she let him rest his hand there. Figured it was just something else she didn't understand. There was so much she didn't understand.

'Something wrong with you, not knowing your own family,' she was told after she'd failed to recognise an aunt who'd put her shopping through Sarah's checkout. The diagnosis of prosopagnosia, face blindness, didn't come until she was an adult. While this certainly explained things, she didn't feel much better, there was nobody left to tell.

The day Ted's rough hand roamed higher, up her shorts and burrowing under the elastic of her underwear, she crashed his Ford Ranger into the neighbour's fence. The Ford Ranger fared better than the fence, a dented fender fitting well with the rusted body. While Ted declined Sarah's parents' offer for her to pay damages, it took her over a year to pay off the fence, with her checkout operator wages.

That spelled the end of Sarah's driving lessons, and Ted's presence became more scarce after that. One day the Ranger was gone, the place empty. No note.

Years later Dad said he'd seen him down at the pub.

'He asked after you. I showed him your graduation pictures.' Sarah froze. 'Told him you've got your licence now, and somehow our fence is still intact!' chuckled Dad.

'Bright Eyes. You came.'

Sarah reaches into the carrier and brings the lizard to her mum's bedside.

'Hi, Mum. I brought Houdini to see you today.'

All the staff think 'Bright Eyes' is a term of endearment, that it's so sweet for her mum to still remember her when she's forgotten almost everything else. What Sarah can't forget is her sister's childhood nickname, when she didn't ever have one of her own.

Maria and her shadow are gone. Even her mum is gone, really. But Sarah reminds herself she's still here, all Sarah-shaped and, hopefully, unique.