

What do you remember about Witchcliffe?

I woke to the sound of him chopping wood. It was just light, and I stretched out under the blanket listening to the axe crack into the wet logs. The bed was warm and his scent mixed with the smell of rain and the unfamiliar house. This was our first holiday together, my first ever with a man, and we were still trying to save money. I wanted to come somewhere green that reminded me of holidays with my aunt. I hadn't thought it was possible, but James had found a place, small, wooden and secluded with a real fireplace and ancient bathtub. The logs cracked and I could picture him, bare hands and coat buttoned to the chin against the cold, as I buried deeper under the covers.

The midwinter rain had made the fields and roadsides thick with grass, clover and mud. I'd thought of walking through fields to a country pub or to the township like I had done with Aunty Netta. We would wear rain boots and walk through lanes sharing polo mints found in a pocket, which made your breath like ice in the cold. She would tell me stories of different fields and their farmers, who was happy, who was struggling.

One morning when the rain had stopped, James and I put on our coats and scarves and set out to walk, thinking we could cut through the field closest to us that didn't have cows in it, but there were no kissing gates, just cattle fences and we had to turn back. We were barely out of the house thirty minutes before our legs were soaked from the wet grass and with no other path but back to the cottage unless we wanted to walk in circles. At some point the farmer's brother drove past and stared. We walked silently, hands pushed deep into our pockets against the cold.

The farmhouse would have been someone's home once. Places like this had been built for workmen when all that was here was a timber mill and a post office. The mill had burnt down in the 70s but the cottages remained. This one had become part of the farm properties, while others were collapsing or left with rusted-out cars and cardboard patching up windows. The whole place tilted and the floorboards sunk to one side, making you walk on an incline around the kitchen table. The well-worn cushions matched the curtains and the farmer's wife had her paintings hung on every wall, watercolours of tractors and chickens with her name finely printed in pencil on each lower right corner.

I was amazed at how quickly we had fallen into roles we thought our generation had outgrown. I would roast the chicken and set the table – removing the yellowing lace tablecloth from it so we wouldn't mark it with gravy. He would chop the wood and methodically rotate pieces to be dried beneath the fireplace before burning, waking in the

night to keep it stoked. He said later that he remembered me so clearly in the kitchen, wearing some apron I had found in the unfamiliar draws. We would spend our evenings watching the sun fade over the field. Rabbits would sneak out of burrows and run between shrubs in the garden. If we were quiet they wouldn't notice us and would creep into the grass just beyond the porch. The cows in the field stood like boulders, their chewing was relentless, mechanical. James said it sounded like a field of dishwashers.

"How do you think they spent their day?" he asked, passing me a smoke.

"Terribly busy, I'm sure," I said, "Washing dishes. Would you rather be a cow or a rabbit?"

"We'd be rabbits," he said.

I got up and walked over to the fence which separated the field from the garden. Hesitantly, the cows lumbered over towards me. The fence was just three wires threaded through a wooden stake. They came close enough that I could hear their breath huffing through their huge nostrils.

"I think they want feeding," I said. "I could try an apple,"

James had stayed in the rocking chair but let out an uncertain groan.

"I don't trust them, they're too big," he said.

"They're just cows."

I pulled a clump of weeds from by my feet and held it out to the nearest one. It moved closer, sniffing but unsure. Its breath was damp and smelt of dirt. I hadn't realised but the entire herd had created a huddle around it, standing skin to skin and the enormity of muscle scared me. A blonde cow surged, shoving the other aside heavily. I threw the clump over the fence towards it and backed away dusting the dirt from my hands onto my skirt.

"They are bloody big," I said.

Much later, on a camping trip I had become terrified in the night hearing some man creeping around outside our tent in the woods. We had heard him earlier, walking through the bushland like a wild boar, drunk or on drugs, approaching campers aggressively. James had put out our fire and zipped us into the tent. When the man returned, he was talking to himself and looking for our firepit. I could barely breathe and tried not to move. James had held my hands and whispered to me,

"We're safe in the tent, we're just like the rabbits from Witchcliffe, remember? Safe in our burrow," until the man left, grunting and swearing that our fire had been put out.

When we arrived, after we had run our bags from the car to the cottage in the rain, we stood on the back porch watching the drops fall from the trees into the mud.

“If the rain gets worse we may not be able to get the car out tomorrow,” he said. The back door was unlocked, and the keys hung on a brass hook shaped like a pig. The notes for the cottage said that the farmer’s brother lived in the next closest property. We would hear him occasionally in the evenings, calling the cows over to be fed and once passed him in his truck when driving out. James flicked a casual wave from the steering wheel, met and reflected by the brother, who didn’t smile or slow his driving. Otherwise, we didn’t see another face unless we drove into the nearest town.

“We should do a gallery tour,” he said.

“A vernissage,” I said.

“The winner will be the painting we find the most unnerving.”

We poured ourselves a glass of wine and started in the back room which held the Hoover and ironing board as well as a single bed.

“Must be the room for the least favourite child,” he said, smiling.

Among the watercolours were framed pictures of kittens in a basket, an amateur painting of a haunted-looking church and a small print of a smiling clown on a kitchen wall. We did our best pompous voices, and I commented facetiously about the line and tone. I had bought my own paints with me, but they had stayed untouched in the bag I’d packed them in.

The farmer’s wife was an accomplished watercolourist. But the paintings hung heavy and oppressive. It felt like another life, an implausible one, where I had learnt to paint and was painted in France. There was a moment one morning when I stood at the kitchen sink watching a honeyeater flit through the tree at the window. The house was quiet and the water was hot on my hands. I thought about the newspaper advertisements they had shown us at school, about dish soap that will keep your hands beautiful, showing dainty fingers with gum-pink nails and a sparkling wedding band. And how those expectations of my mother led her to run off to Australia and make me promise not to get married before I was thirty. I could imagine this life being my whole world, and it made my breath tight in my chest. I washed the cutlery and thought of my paintings as seeds flung upon barren soil. Accomplishing nothing, but hardly knowing what I expected myself to accomplish. I was no Virginia Woolf and no farmer’s wife either.

I remembered being happy before, the sun falling on my skin as I walked back to the home of the family who had hired me. I’d bought raspberries from the market and ate them as I climbed the hill back to the house. No one had corrected my French, and I had been

understood. The rest of the afternoon my tongue had hunted out a raspberry seed trapped in my back tooth, and each time I felt it I smiled. Here, the days melted together and it felt like that. We would wake up with the daylight and spend evenings playing boardgames by the fireplace.

“This one must be designed to push couples over the edge,” he said, holding up a game based on common arguments couples have.

The box was filled with conversation starters on cards - Who does more housework? Who leaves the toilet seat up?

For most of our relationship I had the feeling that we were young children left to play on some beach or bushland. Our days had the ordinary joy of school holidays and inconsequential games. In our regular life we would go on walks and stop to look at some frog or newly sprouted leaves, and here we would venture out only to come back to the cottage cold and hungry unable to decide between eating or falling into bed. Those days were the most I had known of love.

“Are you cold?” he whispered.

We were both wrapped in our blanket and the windows were blank sheets of condensation.

“Too cold to get up and use the loo,” I said.

“Hold on,” he said.

He cupped my hands in his and puffed hot breath onto them. It was the early morning and the fire had died low. In the dark, James found his slippers and moved out into the living room. I heard the metal door of the fireplace scrape as he opened it and gingerly put on more logs, blowing steadily onto the embers. The room was dark but I heard him creep back into the room, groping his way around the bed so as to not walk into it.

“Marco,” I whispered into the dark.

“Polo,” he returned, climbing under the covers.

The last night of our stay I walked over to the fence by the cows. At dusk the moon and stars were already visible and the cows seemed like enormous stones in the field, barely moving but I could hear them chewing. In the corner of the field where the fence met the road, a duck began to cross through the grass with a row ducklings and a drake trailing behind. The ducklings were no more than a flutter that would fit in the palm of my hand. I watched them rocking like tiny boats through the grass and held my breath, trying to print the picture into my memory. The blonde cow began snorting and huffing before letting out a deep tremulous call. I didn't understand it. The others stood tense and huffed out deep growls. I could see

the grass twitch in a line where the ducklings followed, and the drake took flight overhead. The blonde cow shrieked out an awful sound and began leaping and crashing down onto his forelegs, charging at the birds. I pulled up clumps of long grass by the fence and tried to throw it toward the cows, hoping to distract them, but they all began huffing and stamping their hooves hard on the ground until the field shook. The ducklings scattered, the duck trying to gather them on the ground, flapping and barking in circles while the cows charged. Deep sharp screams called out from the herd as they jumped and stamped over the fluttering grass. I couldn't hear my own shouts. The flutters stopped and almost as quickly, the cows returned to their peaceful chewing. The drake kept flying laps, barking searching calls out over the field. I hadn't realised I was crying until I went back inside.

I heard the creak of the floorboards and James propped the bedroom door open with a book to keep it from swinging shut. It was lighter outside now and the smell from the coffee cups he carried flooded the room. He peeled off his jumper and crept into the bed beside me.

“My hands are cold,” he warned, as I pulled him closer under the covers.

I could smell the rain on his skin and cupped his hands to my mouth. We heard the crackle of the fire build, and once again the rain started.