

The Human Mammal

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December 2019: The birds that sing while falling

The birds are falling from the sky mid-flight, and as they fall their feathers crisp into embers, ashes sliding off bone. Charred leaves rain onto pavements and driveways, greyblack and leathery. The earth is burning. The sky is burning.

Everything is burning.

There she is, sixteen and she *knows* this is wrong, and she is afraid in a way that adults should be but aren't. She hasn't learned to pretend this is normal. No, this midday dusk-light is not normal, and the heat beneath her skin isn't normal. And air that chokes you as you inhale is not normal.

Nothing is normal.

There she is, sixteen, they say she's rough, hardened, that she has an attitude and a mouth that's lethal. They say she's slipped glass in her teacher's water and threatened to kill the whole fucking lot of 'em. Yeah, they say a lot about her.

But she's *not* a faker and this isn't normal.

There she is, sixteen, tears rolling down her face. Grief tears, keening tears, fear tears. She sits cross-legged in the school hall as the woman who teaches her about country sits beside her. Though she hates teachers, this woman's alright, yeah she's learned Welcome to Country in her language, and her mum's dead proud of her now.

"All I see is death. My parents, my sisters, my cousins. They're all gonna die," she says when she finally catches her breath.

"Hey, it's ok hon. Listen to the birds, you can hear the birds up there, can't you?" The woman says, pointing at the roof.

"Listen to them singing. Our people have always listened to what the birds are saying. These birds are here and they're singing, and if you can hear them, it means we're safe. Right here and now, we're safe."

She nods and looks to the ceiling.

25 km away the fire front is moving.

100km away the birds are falling from the sky.

And somewhere else, 6000, 7000km away, a virus is crossing the species barrier, from winged mammal to human mammal to human mammal to human mammal...

But here, now, in the dried gums sweeping the Colourbond roof...

the kookaburras and gallahs

magpies and cockatoos-

are singing.

January 2020: Ten thousand Gretas

All the human mammals pressed shoulder to shoulder, frontal lobes pulsing. Among them, ten thousand Gretas stand uncovered in the heat, while the more sagacious Gretas claim shade beneath the Jacarandas.

And those who don't find shade swelter beneath that pink sun ball all the same because the eastern seaboard is still

burning

Ten, thirty, forty thousand stand-

because

fear is this. Fear is a mega fire that swallows entire species of fauna and flora in one gulp, devouring old growth rainforest and yes, yes, fear is this

a fire that burns the unburnable-

Here they stand, ten thousand Gretas, packed shoulder to shoulder in Town Hall square, spilling onto George St and Bathurst Street. Mounted police, their blinkered horses sweating, flank the crowd. To the right, police vans and armed riot police, also sweating in their blue storm trooper armour, wait.

A crowd this large.

And yeah, nah... Something's bound to kick off, you never know with these radical types, bound to be a few ratbags in a crowd this large, their crossed arms say.

Some finger their holsters nervously.

The undutiful daughter surveys the crowd. She is not a Greta, but she would like to be. A human wall blocks her view, she cannot see Myers or Sephorra, and all the other stores that help her forget. And although her skin sears red-raw in the sun, and she cannot move for knocking elbows and shoulders, she thinks she might be almost alive.

Baby Gretas, infant Gretas, student Gretas, parent Gretas, grandparent Gretas begin to march.

The square is so crowded it takes 10 minutes to move 10 metres.

February 2020: Five thousand Gretas

Five thousand Gretas this time because it is easy to forget when there's a bit of rain and the sky loses its haze and adopts its familiar baby blue smile. It's their remit to remember so the five thousand Gretas arrive, despite the news reports of the virus to which there is no immunity.

The five thousand Gretas, they come with their children, they come with their babies, they come with their mates and their mate's mates, they come from the suburbs, the inner city, the satellite cities and they know they have one job only. To remember.

but they don't remember all.

And don't remember why

why would lead them to the secure section of the latest psychiatric facility, with Valium and adult colouring in books and CBT *your thoughts are making you sick* though

and if they were to remember *why*...

why would begin with searing fire wrapped in sweet words

gaiety...a B29 bomber named after a bombardier's mother

motherly strength

Enola Gay on the 6th August 1945 and sweet names for unsweet things

...Little Boy and Fat Man as though the two were grandson and grandfather taking a scenic railroad ride, sharing a packet of boiled lollies-

It would begin with a call that went out, because humanity needed a little saving from itself and there they were, millions of Gretas, who raised their hand and said yes, I will be counted, yes, I will both forget and remember-

And they queued in that Before space where lives are stories to be worn and race is a costume of skin and language is a song to learn and they mingled in a space of pure creation and said yes.

I will be born.

I will gather my costumes, my script and my character and wait for [enter stage left].

It is hard to remember.

The earth is heavy and no don't blame it on gravity. Blame it on fear, not physics. This heaviness is a sickness worse than the virus that keeps jumping from human mammal to human mammal.

to human mammal...

Still, they remember something, that they need to shift the fear and hold the peace and here they stand, five thousand Gretas marching because the world is burning again.

March 2020: The undutiful daughter

There. Choose one, any one of those pieces of printed cardboard will do. A dollar greeting card sporting a pink frangipani. She holds it in her hands, that familiar hesitation as she passes the card from hand to hand. Maybe? The card (no platitude in the insert) is suitably unsentimental. Ugh. Not this one. She replaces the card on the swivel rack. In her mum's culture, frangipanis are funeral flowers. The only other non-committal card is a card with a bouquet of lilies. Aren't lilies funeral flowers here?

Fuck it, the lilies are yellow, and they are her mum's favourite colour. She feels sweat pooling beneath her armpits and beneath her eye lids. It's April already and the temperature has crept into that new normal range of early 30s, humidity 70%. She wants to turn, push past the socially distanced queue of three and burst out of the post office. But she has waited

in the queue outside Australia Post for 20 minutes and donned the surgical mask for 10 minutes. She doesn't mind the surgical mask, it protects her from more than just pathogens.

When she reaches the counter, the clerk gestures to the hand sanitiser. She nods and squeezes the liquid into her palms.

"The card, a stamp to regional NSW...and a money order please."

"There's a 11.95 processing fee. Are you sure you don't want to do an electronic transfer?"

She shakes her head, no.

After payment she retreats to the corner of the post office so she can address the envelope. She never writes her return address, nor does she write the payer's address at the back of the money order.

It has been 10 years since she has spoken to her mother. And this is how she has always survived. By not speaking, by not saying the things that probably should be said.

Despite this, there are numerous forms of gnawing guilt-both Catholic and generic, that plague her. The money that she sends her mother absolves the guilt for a short period. Then that familiar dark voice emerges. You should do more for your mother.

More is never enough.

Until this year she has been able to live in the world of the mind. Until the media pundits began throwing *that* word around.

Unprecedented.

Bushfires that create their own weather. Unprecedented.

When the email was circulated at work: *all staff must work from home for the foreseeable future*: unprecedented. The 24-hour rolling news cycle of makeshift stadium hospitals in China and the mass graves in New York. Unprecedented.

A good daughter would contact her mother, she tells herself. A good daughter should worry about her mother, aging and therefore vulnerable to a virus for which there is no cure.

She does worry though.

You'll be sorry when I'm dead, her mother would say to her time and again when she was a child. This sentence, both punishment and prophecy, remains with her. She is a bad daughter, a horrible daughter, an undutiful daughter.

The presumptuous tell her that she only has one mother, as if she is stupid as well as bad, as if she has no fingers on which to count.

She watches the news, reads the rolling real time death count online. *You'll be sorry when I'm dead*.

It is a phone call, an email, a 90-minute drive. Tasks in which a 38-year old woman should be well versed. Not unprecedented.

Be logical, she thinks.

The sex offender your mother knowingly married when you were 5 is probably dead.

And maybe when her mother heard what the sex offender husband did and said, "Why didn't you tell me during the divorce settlement so we could get more money?" her mother probably didn't mean it.

But she can't return to her mother. It's fear, not vengeance, that keeps her away.

She leaves the post office and slips the envelope in the mailbox.

April 2020: The love ambassador

And not to be confused with his brother, the public relations manager. He had a dignified name, the kind of name one associated with landed gentry circa 1920, or a French existential/artistic dilettante circa 1950.

Regardless.

Everyone knew his name. When he took his daily constitutional with his best friend and companion, people stopped to greet this elderly gentleman.

"Hello Claude!"

"Nice day we're having Claude!"

"Are you off to the park Claude?"

Sometimes (if they remembered), they'd acknowledge his companion human, the best friend who fed him, bathed him and loved him more than she loved herself.

On other days he'd take his daily constitutional with the coterie of female friends he'd collected over the years.

"How's Claude doing today?"

"He's looking good for a man of his age, isn't he?"

The neighbours would say to his female coterie. There was no, "and how are you today, female friend," or "my name is, what's your name?" His coterie was mostly invisible and that was alright with them. They understood.

And people would drop by, unannounced, to his companion's flat. "Hi, is Claude home?" they would ask, looking (not so subtly) for the Love Ambassador himself.

What was his *je ne sais quoi*?

It wasn't just because he was the snappiest dresser (his bandana and dry-z-a-bone always matched his coat). It wasn't just because the moment he cast his eyes on you, his whole body began to smile, beginning with the tilt of his head and the widening of his pupils.

Certainly, he had some unpalatable habits, weaknesses apt to afflict even the strongest of souls. Yes, he had the occasional issue of bad breath, not quite halitosis, and it could be rectified with a drink of cucumber and lemon infused water. And then there was the issue of his culinary tastes, but what mortal can fault such minor indiscretions? Two-week old T-Bone steak crawling with blowflies and maggots (extra protein, don't be so quick to judge, dear reader). Oh, and much to his companion's chagrin, that manna from heaven- cat poop.

Despite all this, Claude the Terrier Cross had a heart large enough to soothe the entire world. "He's the Love Ambassador," the Companion's friend said, stroking his fur as she rode the wave of chemotherapy nausea. And his secondary companion, a woman who had trouble leaving her house, braved the heat and the anxious murmurings of her mind, to step outside and visit Claude each day.

Even when his eyes failed and the muscle that bound his legs shrivelled so his gait was stiff and laboured; even then- his whole body continued to smile when his head and belly were stroked.

They kept a vigil, the week before he died. His companion human and her friend, the undutiful daughter took turns stroking his fur and feeding him chunks of Tasmanian red salmon. Classic FM and hits from the 70s, 80s and 90s played in the background as they rubbed the Love Ambassador's fur. And even while the undutiful daughter sang U2's *Beautiful Day* off-key, the Love Ambassador allowed her hand on his belly. That was the thing about the Love Ambassador, he accepted you in your entirety. There was no judgement at all.

May 2020: The man who calls her sister

"Sister! Hello!"

He always says hello. Even when he's entertaining company in the park- usually with a case of VB -he'll call to her. "Sister, how ya going sister?" The undutiful daughter likes being called sister. He's the first person who sees her, really sees her with that type of seeing that makes you feel human, after her five-day Covid-quarantine.

She's stretching her legs at the edge of the park, the park in which no self-respecting dog will defecate. It's a park named after a Pioneer Woman who achieved Great Things, but the shrubs never flourish, not even the Australian natives that thrive on neglect. It's an ibis and pigeon park, where well-meaning neighbours scatter mouldy bread and deposit salmonella infested special fried rice with bits of ham and egg for protein.

Sometimes when he sees her running in her Wonder Woman t-shirt, he says "Hi, wonder woman, I'm fat cat," and she smiles. He's the kind of man you can smile for. She watches him now, the man who calls her sister, and it has been so long since anyone has called her sister, claimed her as kin, and she lets the word stamp itself into her heart.

Now he's talking with two other men, another Middle Eastern man perhaps or perhaps he's Koori, and a man who could be white but might be Koori; in this suburb it is hard to tell. Another continent away there's been an explosion and they talk about Beirut as though they live there.

"But, mate! Mate! Why? We're all human, why can't we see we're all the same race?" The man who calls her sister says.

The others nod, guzzling their cans of VB. Park bench philosophers are always ok if they shout a case.

She stops stretching and starts running, down towards the river, where the moneyed people exercise on bespoke bikes, where people emerge in Lorna Jayne active wear from three storey with-a-view houses,

Along the river-

where no one sits with a case of VB and muses geo-political relations with the other itinerants,

Along the river-

where no one thinks to call her sister.

June 2020: The womb that went for a walk

5pm 18th June

So, you. You the undutiful daughter, you're in a paper gown and you're shivering. It's been five hours since you were admitted and you're lucky- the doctors deemed the surgery emergency and not elective. It's been five hours since you took your last dose of painkillers. You won't get anything decent until after the operation- oxycontin maybe? Endone?

Fingers crossed.

Across from you there's a woman who's been run over, her hip shattered. On a diagonal, there's the elderly Greek lady who hasn't eaten in three days and hadn't eaten solids in three months because a tumour in the oesophagus will do that to you.

But it's you that's weeping and it's embarrassing really, it's a routine procedure- appendectomy, a childhood operation, but you weep as though everyone you love has died all at once. The room is too cold, and the hospital blanket can't keep you warm. Those clothes you came in-the shawl, and the scarf-can't keep you warm.

7pm, 19th June...

You wake with a gasp into post-op recovery. A nurse brings you a Golden Circle juice box to wet your throat. It is as though someone has inflated your belly with helium and your skin has swollen as a balloon. You imagine your skin snapping and your intestines wrapping around the room in this act of projectile explosion.

The nurse gives you Endone with the juice box. The surgeon appears in a flurry (or maybe, it's your mind that's in a flurry), animated, his waving arms punctuating his speech.

"The appendectomy went well-minor blockage, but we removed it. But!"

He pauses before launching into his speech, which sounds more salacious than diagnostic.

"But! You have endometriosis. It's everywhere, around your ovaries, your bowel, your fallopian tubes. You know what endometriosis is?"

You nod.

"Didn't you feel any pain from the endometriosis?" He asks.

You shrug. When you've been addicted to opiates for 15 years it's difficult to know which pain is real and which is imagined.

"Anyway, we had to get the gynaecological team in. That's why the operation took longer than we expected. You'll have to see the gynaecologist."

You nod. If you give me a post-op script for Endone mate, I don't care, mate. I'll talk to that bloody adman masquerading as PM if it means Endone.

Back in the room, where the woman with the broken hip and the woman with the oesophageal tumour are sleeping, you connect to the internet on your phone. You consult Dr Google- *what is endometriosis?*

Errant endometrial tissue gone AWOL, straying to other parts of the body and taking up residence. *Rare cases of endometrial tissue found in the brain.*

During Stage 4 Endometriosis, fertility can be impacted.

Well then.

That's that, then.

You could start crying. Nobody would fault you if you did. Instead, you laugh (a half chuckle-your insides still hurt). Your womb (good woman!) has decided to go for a walk, colonise your other organs, bleeding monthly from its newfound colonies. You applaud your body's ingenuity.

You chuckle again, wincing through the chuckle. *Ye gods* these drugs are a bit of alright!

You call the nurse for your next dose of Endone.

July 2020: MacFerry the Bear

MacFerry the Bear hailed from County Kerry, South-West of Dublin. He wore a felt St Patrick's Day hat that sported a limp yellowgreen shamrock which hung above his left bear eye. In his later years he had hoped for a peaceful retirement. Perhaps on the top shelf in the eldest girl's bedroom, long moved out, long emigrated back to the Old Country. An occasional dusting would have been nice, an annual airing even.

So, when the eldest girl's father brought him back from retirement, he was somewhat disgruntled. A teddy bear hailing from a Chinese toy factory via Ireland deserved a bit of respite. The father was working from home now, in front of a metal box tray he called a computer. MacFerry the Bear didn't trust the metal box. It didn't hug you like the eldest girl. Hugs were important and even though he wasn't sentient he knew the value of a good cuddle. A bit of warmth, a bit of touch you know? Even if you did end up at the foot of the eldest daughter's bed tangled in sheets.

You couldn't cuddle the metal box, which was odd because the father spent all day talking to it.

According to MacFerry the Bear who had Seen a Few Things, he could trace a great many of the father's troubles to the metal box. And don't get him wrong-the father was superlatively likeable. He was reliable too in the way that most anxious humans were reliable.

Though now he was home with the slim metal box, MacFerry the Bear was concerned. There was the matter of the pills the father took. Medication, they called it. Prescribed by doctors because working at home all day alone, in front of a metal box wasn't healthy, they said.

There was the issue of unsolicited poetry, which, in MacFerry the Bear's opinion, is always a cry for help. The father had begun emailing his poetry to his colleague the Undutiful daughter, his direct supervisor, his line manager and the Dean.

Plus, the father had also recalled the eldest daughter's wooden string puppets back from retirement. Once upon a time they had other names-Jack and Mary, renamed now as Heckles and Applause. MacFerry the Bear watched with fascination, as the father introduced Heckles and Applause to his university students. Always one to give the benefit of the doubt, he

waited. Perhaps the father would deliver a pithy treatise on the nature of class inequality in late capitalist society.

“Hello class” he said in a funny voice as he dangled the puppets in front of the computer camera.

“Today we’re looking at the marking rubric?”

“What’s a rubric Applause?”

MacFerry cringed. Ok, so not a pithy treatise.

He waited for the fall-out, the uncomfortable phone reprimands administered by the father’s boss, the father’s further decline into a James Joycian psychosis.

But nothing.

There were a great many things to which MacFerry was not privy. What occurred on the other side of the metal box, the students listening through their own thin metal boxes, for instance. He wasn’t omniscient.

No, MacFerry was not that sort of bear.

He didn’t see the girl who had stopped eating, and therefore sat silently fatigued, her metal box balanced upon emaciated thighs. He didn’t see the boy who worked three jobs to support his mother and younger siblings, attending class for a two-hour reprieve from Real Life. Or the single mother who let her sister baby sit her toddler on a Wednesday, so she could attend class.

MacFerry the Bear didn’t hear what the students said to other tutors.

“Yeah...that tutor, he’s really kind, but we don’t have any idea what’s going on in class.”

“That guy? Yeah, he’s ok. But he *is* a bit of a tripper.”

There were no student complaints and student attendance did not decline. It *was* 2020 after all. And what MacFerry the Bear did not know was that each time they attended the father’s class, the students felt slightly less alone.

August 2020: The woman who imagines bad things

The woman who imagines bad things hovers in the apartment carpark, seeking conversation. She comes alive at times like these. Behind her bookshelf she keeps a rolodex, and marks off the biblical predictions that are just coming to pass. A bit late, but god has never been a reliable or trustworthy deity. In her opinion anyway.

But now! Now is the time when she can cover her mouth and nose pointedly, glaring at her neighbours through threadbare cotton. And there she is now, in the carpark, moving purposefully between the garbage bins and the laundry. She spies her neighbour.

“Did you hear Them last night?” She asks the undutiful daughter.

And the undutiful daughter shakes her head, smiling the polite Don’t Talk To Me Smile.

“Coughing! Coughing! Can you believe it?”

The undutiful daughter scans the carpark in desperation. Looking for her free-range felines, the postie, a suitable escape in the conversation. Anything? Nothing. She exhales resignation.

“Coughing! Not a smoker’s cough, mind. Oh you smoke do you? Easiest way to catch It, they say.”

With that the woman who imagines bad things moves a step backward, a pointed display of offence.

“I quit.” The woman continues. “After my mum died of lung cancer. I stopped the day we buried her. Funny that.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the undutiful daughter replies, before turning away.

“Wait!”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry for waking you.”

“You didn’t. When?”

“Oh well,” the woman whispering, leaning forward. “Next door, they were up all night. He climbs up through the roof you know. I can hear him, and I can smell the chemicals.”

The undutiful daughter looks at her blankly. “They’re cooking meth up there.” The woman who imagines bad things, growls. “It’s poisoning me. I know it is.”

A commercial meth lab is unlikely in a one-bedroom inner city apartment, the younger woman thinks, but says nothing.

“It’s scary times we’re living in,” the woman calls excitedly, as the undutiful daughter walks away.

September 2020: Moss thief

If you ask the undutiful daughter, she will tell you it’s not theft if you’re ethnic. It is definitely not theft if it is on *this* side of the fence. Others might say she has a history of thieving. She will tell you it’s borrowing. After all, she has returned the married men to their rightful wives- after a time. She always returns what she borrows (uses).

It’s not an act of stealth either, it is something she gathers in daylight, as the elderly Vietnamese and Greek ladies wheel their trolleys to green grocers and the newly gentrified families walk their kids to school. She doesn’t steal all her plants; certainly, she has paid for maidenhair and rabbit foot ferns, ferns being too hard to extract from the crevices between moist retaining walls.

Succulents don’t count in this inventory, however. Just look at them and they germinate.

Her bedroom is filled with worlds growing in glass jars, vases and bottles, each supporting its own unique ecosystem. There is the open mossarium she has transformed into a mini stone henge, the woodlands terrarium complete with country cottage and climbing fig, the tropical tiered garden with miniature bird’s nest ferns, maiden hair ferns and moss on each terraced step.

She likes to think of herself as a traveller in this world, never really owning anything, borrowing and returning (hence the married men), relocating and redistributing (some of the jar worlds will be gifts for friends). The multiple worlds in her bedroom remind her of the places she has visited, Malaysia and the Philippines, Ireland, Wales and Scotland, and Texas (a long story but an educational visit nonetheless). Her whole existence is in miniature this year.

October 2020: The woman who is losing her words (For L.)

But she has not lost her sense of people. Her husband, her eldest daughter, her youngest daughter, her son, her grandson. Though it is difficult to decipher the words on a greeting card, these strange hieroglyphics that somehow create meaning, she can identify her people, the family she has birthed, the friends she has drawn into her circle-

-the woman who glues people to each other

-the woman who sees the whole

-the undutiful daughter

and

Without words she sees the constellation of energy and movement. Yet she cannot define this movement, cannot butterfly pin these words. Besides, her hands are failing, and it is difficult to hold a pen steady to write. The Amish family quilt she began two years ago lies tucked away in the cupboard, unfinished. Half written journals lie at the bottom of a chest. Though she cannot be sure, she believes that she may have been an orderly person, that she was once a woman who finished what she started.

And because the garden brings her comfort, she plants hollyhocks that shoot skywards. Basil and lavender and rosemary grow to her right. Woody, unyielding herbs that hold sturdy in the sky as well as the earth. For now, she can hold a trowel. And the earth beneath her nails smells familiar and her hands are still enough because she wills them to be still.

For now, her fingertips remember for her. These are the things that she still remembers.

The soil, the seedling, the sapling, the blossom, the harvest.

A wordless rhythm.

The Labrador sits at her feet. If it is good day she will remember his name. Clive. He has a collar with his name embossed on brass. C-L-I-V-E. In another life she was able to read and read well. Each Christmas she would buy each of her children a book, fitting for their personalities. And it was her job to read- back when she taught Shakespeare and modernist poetry. Back when her classroom was decorated with bright, motivational posters and laminated grammatical reminders:

There versus their.

Who's versus Whose.

Now she wears a chain-collar not dissimilar to Clive's. From a distance it could be mistaken for a gold chain and medallion, an anniversary gift bordering on ostentatious. There her name is engraved, along with her husband's number, should she wander and find herself lost.

Right now, though, right here though, she is not lost. Clive nuzzles his nose into her calves as she sinks her trowel into the garden bed. It is spring, the earth whispers, it is spring, which means there are marigold punnets and sunflower seeds to sow.

November 2020: The woman who dislikes colour

On a clear night-and there are many clear nights in late spring-she can see the cotton film clouds stretched taut across a watercolour sky. Indigo? Aquamarine? Beautiful, regardless, this child's watercolour palette splattered across the sky. Set amongst this back drop she can also see the palms towering above the complex's pool.

Yes, she can see all this, but she prefers not to. Instead, she faces east-ward, towards the apartment carpark. What she sees upsets her.

No, not the Uber Eats scooters or the Menulog bicycles or the Domino's Pizza motorbikes. Not the building felines (plural yes, plural, the building seems to have oh so many cats) darting in between stationary and not so stationary cars.

And it is not one object that upsets her. She listens for the right moment to have Words with someone who may agree. When her neighbour, an amiable woman still in love with her partner after seven years (perhaps because they live apart) returns home from Woolies laden with recyclable shopping bags, the woman accosts her.

"She's planting more!" She snaps, pointing over the balcony to the carpark. "Look!"

The neighbour glances at the purported monstrosity and shrugs, while the woman shakes her head in fury. A large wooden barrel of yellow and blue daisies in bloom, mocking her! Beside the barrel sits another newly filled terracotta pot with purple petalled petunias and white alyssum, occupying the once empty space against the fence. "Look at what?" The neighbour is confused.

The woman sniffs and shakes her head. "She hasn't gotten permission."

“Oh,” the other neighbour said. “But don’t flowers make the place nice? It makes it pleasant now we’re all working from home.” The neighbour glances at her watch and makes running late motions, despite returning home. “Anyway, have a good day!”

The casual neglect of rules (as though they were polite suggestions rather than legal dictates) irks her. She paces the corners of her sparse, yet stylishly furnished apartment, where her grandparents’ mahogany suite takes centre place. Her dog (purchased with a full background check from a breeder, but suspiciously large for his breed) follows her. It is like an itch, this inability to ignore the flowers. And the flowers are difficult to ignore! It is as though those offensively large sunflowers and flowering tomato plants in used Styrofoam containers are mocking her.

Eventually she stops pacing and turns on the Smart TV, selecting Netflix. Marie Kondo always soothes her. If she could have any job in the world it would be to have Marie Kondo’s personal home organiser job, without the wishy-washy spiritual overtones. But she can’t settle, as laughter drifts up from the carpark and drowns out Marie’s soothing, accented voice.

She increases the speaker volume and walks to the kettle to make a cup of camomile tea. The gardener, the one who had brought the excess of plants and laughter also irks her. She has spoken to the gardener a few times, one of those hippy types who thought the rules could be bent. Besides which, isn’t Marrickville the up-and-coming suburb for the upwardly mobile young professional?

And yes, she has tried to make friends in this 50-year-old apartment complex, built like an angular horseshoe that opens onto a communal courtyard garden with Strata sanctioned terracotta planters. She had invited the undutiful daughter and other neighbours to jazz clubs and art exhibitions and backgammon games. But after each event the embryonic friendship had fizzled into nothing.

Now, alone, except for her dog of suspicious breeding, she begins to seethe.

Rules are rules. What would happen if we all did what we liked? Anarchy! Lawlessness!

The laughter outside fades. No, something must be done. A thought occurs to her and she brightens, moving from her leather lounge to her antique table where her laptop sits in standby mode. She opens her email and begins an official complaint to the Strata Corporation.

December 2020: Runner

The undutiful daughter is always running

Past the

Woman

who

Imagines

Bad

Things....

Past The woman who hates colours, past the gardener, past the Love Ambassador's companion human, past the man who calls her sister,
she runs.

Is it the movement or the cadence or the stride that keeps her safe? You can meditate to your footfall, they tell her. Leave the tunes at home and listen to the sounds you make in the world.
And-

trust is this, it's the thud of her feet on the pavement. She's never been a speed racer, preferring endurance races. Trust is being able to run at a moment's notice; she has always judged women who wear high heeled shoes harshly. Always wear shoes that allow you to run at a moment's notice.

Despite the lactic acid building in her calves, and her aching arches, she will keep running

Away from rather than running to?

Away from the relational goalposts that are always moving (at least the finish line is fixed in a marathon) the steps, the rules one step in front of the other-

The not good enough rules that she can never predict

Eggshells: all those eggshells that she teeters upon-

At least.

At least when she is running, she is fifty percent airborne, it's the closest to flying without being in a metal jet fuelled box, and

unlike all the accusations she cannot predict.

What she didn't do right, what she did too much of, too much, not enough

youdidit yesyoudid

Anger that hovers as fertiliser, the easiest type of bomb to make that's why Bunnings won't let you order online, no they won't, not even during Covid.

You did it on purpose, you're really toxic you're abusive, you're fucked in the head-

Just keep running.

When she runs, she sees anew, she sees the river, and with each footfall, the houses crumble at the foundations, the Moreton Bay figs disentangle their roots and the mangroves rethread themselves, cleansing the river

And she keeps running and she keep seeing,

where Pemulwuy fought those skinless devils, who harnessed fire for evil; where the river fed the people like a mother, serving up feasts of shellfish amongst the old salt flat marshes and swamp oaks.

Just keep running, she tells herself, gravity is a game of flying and falling.

Just run, when you run, you're free

to fall

like a human mammal.