

A person is seen from behind, walking through a field of tall, golden-brown grass. The scene is bathed in the warm, low light of a sunset or sunrise, with the sun's glow visible in the upper left corner. The background shows a line of trees under a clear sky.

The Others

Sometimes, people do the
most terrible things

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The Others

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 hachette
AUSTRALIA



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.



CITY OF MELBOURNE

Supported by the City of Melbourne COVID-19 Arts Grants.



Melbourne City of Literature

This project is supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria and by UNESCO Melbourne City of Literature.



Published in Australia and New Zealand in 2021 by Hachette Australia (an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited) Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000 www.hachette.com.au

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 0 7336 4114 5 (paperback)

Cover design by Christabella Designs
Cover photographs courtesy of Shutterstock
Author photograph courtesy of Julian Dolman
Text design by Bookhouse, Sydney
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. McPherson's Printing Group holds FSC® chain of custody certification SA-COC-005379. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

For my father

I don't think of you much anymore.

No one really knows about you. Only Sam, and she can't tell anyone. I don't have many friends. Don't need them. You taught me that.

Even if I did have friends, I couldn't tell them.

Good thing is, people around here don't ask too many questions. And what they don't know, they make up, which is fine by me. Plus, the rent's cheap.

The reminders are less frequent nowadays, less keenly felt. More often, if I'm honest, I'm searching for the feeling. Just to feel something.

It's as though if I don't feel it anymore, it isn't real. Sometimes I tell myself that's true.

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But then, other times, it comes from nowhere. Like something sticking in my guts. Even after all these years.

It took me a long time to realise what happened, even if I've never really understood. When I was a kid, I thought everything would be okay. That you might come back and make things all right again. That they might help you, and you'd get better too. I didn't realise what I was feeling was grief. Sam's helped with that. Before therapy, I didn't know I was allowed to feel that sorrow. For what I lost, and for what I never had.

Didn't know I was allowed to, because of the things you did. The things I found out.

I also felt guilt. Guilt about what happened. But that's getting better.

Or it was. Until last night. And then today.

Last night I read a news story – it was a similar case, but not the same. They're never exactly the same. And only sometimes do I get a mention. Just for a local angle, I guess.

Has similarities to . . .

Reminiscent of . . .

Like the infamous . . .

I read the article. Read it again. Searched for other reports. I only had a minute before I had to get back on my shift. I do night shifts, mostly. Better money, less talk.

It wasn't the same. None could ever be the same as us.

What you did.

What I did too.

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•

I woke up and had a feeling – a feeling of you being near.

When I shut my eyes, I could almost see you.

Your gold tooth.

Can't remember exactly what you look like anymore. And you'd be different now anyway, if you're still out there.

You're a spectre, drifting into my thoughts without a proper invite, then out again. Less of a trace, less form, with each passing year.

I can't remember everything, but I remember some things pretty clear.

Your anger.

The soft eyes, too.

But the *feeling* is something different. And the feeling is something I'm less able to get hold of. Can't conjure it – just comes unexpectedly.

And it wasn't the news story that did it so much.

Was something else.

And then, I saw it.

•

There's a gum tree in my backyard. A big one. When the wind's up, it creaks and cracks like it might be about to fall. Has done for ages.

My neighbour would love to see it gone. More likely to fall on me, not him. Unfortunately.

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I like to look at it. I like to watch its branches in the breeze, and I look for subtle changes. The loss of bark, the beginning of a wattlebird's nest, a new sprout – all these things, I notice. You taught me to notice. You taught me on our walks.

I was drinking a coffee in the kitchen, looking out. I've always needed those moments, the quiet. More so lately.

I watched the tree, the gentle sway of its branches, the grey sky behind. And I could sense something. Something different, but I wasn't sure what.

I looked it up and down a few times, and something wasn't quite right.

And I felt it.

I felt it before I saw.

It was a broken branch – a small one, stood up between two of the larger roots, leaning against the trunk.

The sort of thing no one else would notice.

But I noticed. I noticed, because I watch that tree. And because I'm careful, like you taught me.

I knew it was a message.

I didn't finish my coffee. I went out there, into the cool of the morning. I picked up the branch, studied it. There was nothing to be read from its leaves, its smooth skin.

I placed it on the ground.

I didn't want anyone else to notice, didn't want them to see what I saw.

But no one else would see, or understand – that's the whole point.

The Others

Only me and you. We're the only ones who'd know.
The only ones who knew.
And I know you might come for me.
Because I had to choose.
Because I'm one of the others.

•

You taught me a lot when I was young, a lot of things that made me who I am. Like keeping a diary – you said that would help. It'd help my writing, you said, and help keep my thoughts in order.

I've still got the old diaries, but I never look at them.

It wouldn't hurt to look now. I know what happened, of course. Most of it, at least. The facts, I mean, not the feelings.

The feelings I've kept out.

Had to.

But I remember some of the things you said.

I remember one thing you said, especially, more than once.

If the others come, everything will change.

You were wrong about a lot of things. Most things, really. But you were right about that.

Sam reckons I should read them. She says to understand ourselves in the present, we need the context of our past. We need to attach meaning.

'It's no good just repressing our feelings.'

That's what she tells me.

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But she doesn't know everything. Everything that happened,
I mean. No one knows that.

Only me and you.

If she knew everything, she might think it's better not to
look back.

Because sometimes, things are better left in the past. Danger-
ous things. Things like you.

The branch against the gum tree is a message. I know it.
I know you're watching. And now the past is here.

So I need to look back and remember what you told me,
what you did.

I have to remember all about you.

I have to remember, so I'm ready.

So I'm ready if you're coming.

I'll get the rifle out too. Just in case.

In case you're coming.

Just in case you're coming for me.

part one

one

This is the first page of my diary. My father gave it to me for my eleventh birthday. I know when it's my birthday, because he tells me.

I asked him what to write in here, and he said I should write about things that happen.

'In the order they happen,' he said. 'And if not much happens, you should write about your thoughts and things like that. Or describe things around the house and farm. Or things you remember.'

But he told me not to write everything. Some things, I'm not allowed to write down.

He reckons he won't read it, but that might not be true.

So I've decided I'll keep it hidden, just in case.

•

My father reckons I need to practise my writing, so I need to write in this diary as much as I can.

That's what he tells me.

diary

daily record of events or thoughts.

I probably should've put that at the start, but it's pretty much what I wrote anyway.

I asked him why I should practise, and he said it's because I mix up my tenses sometimes. The tenses are past, present, and future. He was angry in the lesson, because I got that wrong.

'What the hell's the matter with you?' he said.

I saw more of the whites of his eyes, which is what happens when he's angry. They open up really wide.

So I didn't answer.

But he thinks this diary will help things.

'It'll improve your writing,' he said. 'And help keep your thoughts in order.'

But I don't need to write everything down. He said that again, in case I didn't get the message the first time.

So here's some of my thoughts. I'll start at the beginning, because that's the right order.

We live on the farm. But my father didn't always live on the farm.

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My father says he used to live in the town, but there's no way I'd be able to remember, because it was before I was born. My mother lived there too. But I only know the farm.

The town is hard to imagine, even when he describes it. He says there's people there, and the people have houses, like ours, except right up close to each other. He says it's like people have farms, except they're not much bigger than their houses, and some have fences around their houses to keep each other out. But I've never seen it.

There are roads in front of the houses, and the roads lead to the middle of the town. That's what my father told me. In the middle of the town is the town hall, where the leader lives and makes decisions. The town hall is the biggest building, bigger than all of the houses put together. This is how I imagine it, anyway.

Around the town hall are the shops.

'The shops are where you can get food and things like that,' he said. 'If you don't grow your own.'

But he never really explained how it works. I mean, why the shops give things away to people. When I asked in a lesson once, he said, 'You don't need to worry about that.'

Anyway, the town isn't near our farm.

'It's a long, long way away.'

He says it's miles away, too far for me to walk, out over the hill. He says there's hardly anyone left there anymore.

When I asked him once why he and my mother left, he said, 'We had no choice.'

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That's really all he's said about it.

But there's more to the story. I know there's more, because there's somewhere else my father and mother lived too. Somewhere after the town, but before the farm. He doesn't like talking about it very much.

Anyway, it's better on the farm.

That's what he tells me.

I looked up town in the encyclopedia once, but there wasn't anything. I was hoping it would be there, so I could see a picture.

I looked it up in the dictionary and it did say a bit about it, but not in the same way my father says.

town

densely populated built-up defined area, between a city and a village in size, and having local government.



That's a picture of what I think it looks like. I used both what the dictionary says and what my father says. I use the dictionary for spelling sometimes, but for meanings too.

The other place my father said he lived was the commune, but that's what he doesn't like talking about. Even less than the town.

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commune

*group of people sharing living accommodation, goods, etc.,
esp. as a political act.*

I don't really know what that means, but I can't ask about it. I tried the other day, and he got angry.

'Just leave it!'

That's what he said when I asked, and he said it really loud. I saw the whites of his eyes. When that happens, I know to be quiet.

It's been happening more lately – him getting angry. He says he's sorry after. Most times.

•

I'd like to go to the town one day. Just to see it once, to check it against my picture. I've asked him a few times. He says I've been there before, but was too young to remember.

I don't know if that's true.

I'm more interested in the town than the commune, but I'd like to see that too.

I could maybe even just see the town from the top of the hill, then check if my picture is right. I tried to sneak off once, to look at it from the hill, but he caught me. He caught me going up the trail, and he belted me something terrible.

He belted me with the bendy stick, which is a special branch from a tree that's bendy and thin. He used to keep it in his

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room. He belted me when we were back at the house. He pulled down my pants and my undies and belted me until I promised not to go again.

I promised.

Afterwards, he said he was sorry. He nearly always says he's sorry if he hurts me. Most times.

But he's promised not to use the bendy stick anymore.

'The sins of the father are visited upon the son,' he said.

I'm not sure what he meant by that.

He goes there sometimes, to the town I mean, but not very often. He goes to get things, like the oats, and the bullets for the rifle. But he says it's dangerous. That I can't risk going with him. Because of the others.

'Like a moth to a flame.'

Not sure what he meant by that, either.

He says he won't always be able to get things from the town, which is why the farm is important. It's important the farm is going properly again, with the sheep and the crop and the reservoir. He calls it 'the reservoir', but it's really just a big dam.

That's what I think.

I'm not sure of the exact difference between the two, but it seems like a reservoir should be bigger.

I looked it up in the dictionary, and that decided it for me. But I won't argue with him. It's best not to.

reservoir

large natural or artificial lake as a source of water supply.

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I tried the encyclopedia, but forgot that R is missing. Not sure it would have had it anyway. It doesn't have everything in there, and not as many things as the dictionary. It just describes them for longer. Sometimes it has pictures.

The dictionary would be better if it had pictures.

He said I don't need to write in here every day, but I should do it as much as I can. So I am.

Most times I do what I am told. Most times.