

Absent in Three Parts

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I

THE FIRST TIME you do it, it's not a big deal. You're in high school, that's what teenagers do. Your teacher notices, your mum doesn't. In the morning your mum pulls apart the sagging drapes in your room to reveal the new day. It's the same every day. The magic act, ta-dah, look, a new day—get up, get ready for school. She leaves for work whilst you're in the bathroom. Breakfast is served: Cornflakes, Fruit Loops, Coco Pops, whatever is already out on the table. Your brother's dressed and kicking the footy around, out in the backyard. He's still in primary school.

So you're finally ready, you lock up and hide the key under the third potted geranium. But today when you get to the corner you tell your brother you forgot your library book, your folder, your essay on *Animal Farm*. You have to go back and get it. He keeps bouncing the footy and heads for school, you head back home.

You lock the door. The key stays inside with you. You stay in your uniform and put the TV on. Then you turn the volume down really low. By eleven o'clock you're looking for something else to do. You search your mum's hiding spots. You know all her hiding spots. You've seen her sneak a cigarette. You drag the chair and search in the cupboard above the stove. There's an ancient bottle of Crème de Menthe and vodka for when her special friend visits.

You move to her room. Her drapes remain shut. The doona's straightened, but the Tweety Bird night shirt she wears to bed is left lying on the chair. Under the mattress are four twenty dollar notes; you

think about taking one. Hidden in the empty jewellery box, within her dressing table drawer are the cigarettes and lighter. You light one and smoke it slowly, blowing rings as you watch yourself in her mirror and then you eat the ham sandwich she made you for lunch.

Today you beat your brother home from school. You make him baked beans on toast. You sit at the kitchen table and begin working on your history essay. You've started dinner by the time Mum gets home. *It's nice to stay home just once*, you think.

II

At university it doesn't really matter if you turn up to class or not. You're an adult now. You go to the lectures, you listen to the professors speak. You go to your tutes and listen to everyone speak. You're a good listener.

Your mum tells you that you're old enough to move out now.

You move into a share house. You get a part-time job to pay the rent. And then you find a boyfriend, and do sleepovers. You stop going to class.

"I have to get to class today," the boyfriend tells you.

"Stay in bed . . . please," you say and start to play with your nipple.

The boyfriend gives you a smile. "I'll see you later," he says and leaves. You stay in bed until you hear that the house is empty. You find some cereal—the milk smells okay—and you sit in the armchair, with your feet curled under you and watch television until 4 pm.

He returns.

You cook scrambled eggs for dinner whilst your boyfriend writes an essay on Existentialism and Sartre.

Your boyfriend breaks up with you because he says you lack motivation. You don't leave the house for a week. Your boss calls and tells you to find another job and then adds, "I'm sorry."

You're still at uni but everyone's starting out and you've been there five years now. With the loose change you find around the house, the bits and pieces from the pantry and fridge, you like to have dinner ready for your housemates when they get home. They joke about the imprint you're starting to leave on the velour armchair. When they stop coming home you eat tuna from the can in front of the TV.

Then you get a postcard from your brother. He's moved up north and is getting married. A girl you went to school with. You don't remember.

You miss him.

III

You move out of the share house and rent a one-bedroom bungalow. You get a job, in an office, full time. You'll go back and finish your degree one day. A colleague shouts you a coffee to tell you about her husband, who she's sure is cheating on her. You have a cigarette because she's having one. You see your old boyfriend walk past the café. He is wearing a suit and carrying takeaway sushi. You're brushing powdered sugar and biscuit off your shirt, listening to a woman telling you about her husband who is spending all his spare time at the gym. She asks you if you want to go out for a drink after work. You tell her you have to go to dinner at your mum's. You lie.

Hit the snooze button. You wake up alone and today you don't bother making your bed. The blinds remain shut. There's no time for breakfast. You feed the fish in the bowl. You get dressed and search your pockets, the bottom of your bag and the ashtray on the microwave for loose change. You walk to the bus stop.

You squeeze onto the bus and stand next to a man watching a YouTube clip on his phone. You feel his warm body next to yours and think about your old boyfriend. The bus stops and more people get on. Squeeze, squeeze in. You smell his cologne and shampoo. You think about being in bed with him and smoking a cigarette.

A seat becomes vacant and he looks at you to see if you want the seat. "The next stop is mine," you say. *Please come with me*, you think. He looks back at his phone as you head towards the door.

The lift foyer is empty, the lift door has closed. You press the button, once, twice and wait for the next lift. You look around. No one has seen you. No one will notice. You turn around and head back towards the bus stop.

You ring your boss from home and tell him you have the flu. You lock the door; sit on the couch, with your feet curled under you, and watch daytime television with the sound turned down low. You search the house for a cigarette. You watch yourself in the bathroom mirror and try to straighten out the deep vertical line above your nose. For dinner you make yourself scrambled eggs. Your boyfriend liked the way you made scrambled eggs.