

So Much Potential

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MY BOYFRIEND SAYS I'm too high maintenance; his exact words: *I can't deal with this anymore.*

My shrink says I'm too mad; her exact words: *Cognitive behavioural therapy isn't always successful.*

My best friend says she needs a break from me; her exact words: *Maybe you should have some time away.* She puts an upward inflection on the end of the sentence, but it isn't a question.

My mum says I can stay in Gran's house if I like; her exact words: *Just don't sleep in her bed, Sarah. That's where she died.*

I remember to charge my iPod for the train, but not even Taylor Swift can distract me from the extravagant masticating going on opposite. The woman—teased hair, red fingernails—spends the first twenty minutes of the journey deconstructing a colossal chocolate muffin. She pulls down the edges of the pleated patty case as if undressing a lover. Cake crumbs settle on her sun-damaged cleavage. I am unable to look away. My empty insides squeeze with the familiar satisfaction of denial.

We reach Taranook just after 7PM. I step onto the platform and realise that none of the other alighted passengers have pressed charcoal trousers or patent stilettos. My overnight corporate-traveller case squeaks as I drag it out of the station and into Chester Street. The nature strips all have their late-summer highlights in. Magpies warble at me as I walk briskly towards number forty-three.

The FOR SALE sign out the front of Gran's miner's cottage is dusty and dented. As I push the gate open I notice the way my bingo wings jiggle when I lift my arms.

I unpack immediately. My Fat-E-Razer sachets fit nicely in the top kitchen drawer. I put my ankle weights by the back door. My clothes—one tracksuit, two t-shirts and a week's worth of underwear—go into the wardrobe in the spare room. I head out to the backyard just as the sun dips below the horizon. The natural minimalism of the drought-stricken yard pleases me.

The next morning, I am not woken by an alarm. There is no traffic hum, no boyfriend snoring. I get straight into my exercise routine: one hundred sit-ups, forty-five push-ups, twenty burpees and fifteen jump squats. Then: a litre of water, a shower and one strawberry Fat-E-Razer.

My grandmother's house is cool and dark. I let my damp hair drip onto the floor as I do a self-guided tour. Every room contains peeling floral wallpaper. The windowsills are rotted. The ceilings are cracked and stained. I am looking for a kettle when there is a knock at the door.

It's the muffin lady from the train. She's clutching a large plastic container with both hands, red fingernails in two neat rows down the front.

'I live next door,' she says, gesturing with one bent elbow. 'Just noticed that . . . Well, *a new neighbour*, I thought.' She lifts the container towards me.

'Thanks,' I say, taking my gift.

'Have you . . . bought the house?' She raises her eyebrows and glances over my shoulder.

'I'm just . . .' Escaping. Hiding. 'Housesitting,' I say, stepping backwards.

'Well.' She puts a hand on her hip. 'If you need anything.'

I put the container on the kitchen bench and take off the lid. Inside is a round cake covered in thick white icing. It smells of walnuts and is striped with wiggly fork prong marks. I override the urge to scoop some into my mouth by touching the roll of fat around my middle.

A week later, I am only halfway through my sit-ups when I hear voices outside. I peer out the front window and see two men in the garden. One has a suit on and the other is wearing ripped navy pants and a green singlet.

‘Bit of work to do,’ I hear.

‘But so much potential. And north facing.’

I open the front door and both men look up.

‘Oh,’ says the suited one. ‘Sorry, I didn’t realise—’

‘You can come in,’ I say.

It turns out the green singlet man is Mark: a local shearer, newly divorced, in a hurry to buy. I try to talk Gran’s house up. ‘Low-maintenance yard,’ I say, gesturing at the crunchy lawn. ‘And a good-sized master bedroom.’

‘I’d buy the place just for that apple tree,’ he says to me, on his way out. ‘Golden Delicious are rippers.’

The next day the shearer comes back, on his own.

‘The weatherboards out the front here,’ he says, holding up a crowbar, as if that’s all the explanation required.

‘Hold on a minute,’ I say, pulling the sides of my t-shirt out, away from my love handles.

I ring Mum and tell her that some bloke is fixing the rotting house, and she says he can go right ahead. Her exact words: *Is he good looking?*

When Mark is finished I invite him in for a cup of tea. As the water boils I can see him eyeing off Muffin Lady’s container, still on the bench.

‘Been bakin’?’ he says, arms folded across his chest.

‘It’s not really . . .’

He lifts the lid. ‘Carrot, eh?’

I yank on my t-shirt sleeves in an attempt to cover my flabby arms.

The next morning I have another visitor: Muffin Lady.

‘Hi there!’ she says. She is holding a plate of lamingtons covered in cling wrap. ‘I just thought, well . . . how are you settling in?’

‘Hold on,’ I say. I run and get the empty cake container from the kitchen, then swap it for the lamingtons.

‘When I saw you arrive,’ she says, ‘I said to myself, *now there’s someone who could do with a good feed.*’

We stand on the porch for a moment, smiling at each other silently. Then she leans in and whispers, ‘I did notice a bit of work going on earlier. A handyman?’

‘Yes,’ I whisper back, like it’s a game.

‘I’d keep your eye on that one if I were you.’ Muffin Lady touches one of her dangly earrings. ‘A bit of a scoundrel, you see. Cheated on

his poor wife. *Prostitutes*, I heard.’ She stands up straight again, reaches out and picks a flyaway thread off my windcheater. ‘Well . . . remember, if there’s anything you need!’

I take the plate into the kitchen and stare at the coconut-covered chocolate cubes.

Later there is coconut in my hair, on my pants, the bench, the floor. The plate is empty and I know what I have to do. Fortunately, I am quite the expert: I can expel the contents of my stomach using only my abdominal muscles.

After I have changed my t-shirt, brushed my teeth and put my hair up, I notice a text from my boyfriend. *Sorry I went off, Sars, it says. Miss you. Come home?*

Mark comes back the next day. He bangs on the door, but I keep quiet. I sit cross-legged on the floor underneath the lounge room window and listen to him walk back down the steps. I wonder if he has made an offer yet. I kneel up and peep out. Muffin Lady is at the gate, fiddling with the latch. Mark helps her. She smiles at him.

‘What a gentleman,’ I hear her say.

‘No worries,’ he replies. ‘You a friend of Sarah’s? She’s not in.’

‘Just a neighbour.’

Mark turns to walk past, towards his ute, but Muffin Lady puts a hand on his arm.

‘To be frank,’ she says, touching her hair, ‘she’s not the friendly type.’

I lift my head a little higher, bite my lip.

‘Cheated on her husband in the city, apparently. Bit of a . . . well, *you know*.’ She suddenly turns towards the house, and I duck. A moment later I hear the ute engine start.

Autumn begins quietly in Taranook. I increase my exercise goals: one hundred and fifty sit-ups, sixty push-ups, thirty burpees and thirty jump-squats. I buy a length of rope from the hardware shop in the main street and incorporate skipping into my routine. I ring my best friend and tell her that I might stay longer than originally planned. She says the country air must be doing me good. Her exact words: *Are you eating?*

I run into Mark in the main street one day. He’s coming out of the real estate office. I wish I didn’t have dirty hair and stains on my

trackies. I hold my bag of just-purchased Fat-E-Razer behind my back.

'You're in a hurry,' he says. 'Want a lift home?'

As soon as I climb into the ute I say, 'I don't even have a husband!'

He looks at me and grins.

When we reach number forty-three he walks straight over to the apple tree and picks one. Then he takes a bite and says he never believed Muffin Lady anyway, with her awful fingernails. His exact words: *Your eaves could do with a paint.*

I pick an apple too.