

FUSE COUNTRY

Relief.

—

Romance. They sit in the car looking straight ahead. 'I'd better go,' she says.

They stay.

In the parking lot cars come and go. Some drivers reverse carefully between the lines others fang in careless.

'There's a pattern. If you watch long enough.'

—

'Here's one,' Mother said. '*Central coast, shark bites surfer*. We haven't had a good shark story all summer.'

'It's the storms,' I said.

'Eh?'

'No-one's in the water, the beaches are closed.'

'We used to go there for holidays when you were little, Umina.'

'It was Terrigal.'

She was reading again, mouth full of toast. 'Puncture wounds. What a duffer,' she snorted. 'Everyone knows evening is shark feeding time.'

'Anything else?' I was late.

'Let's see.' She moved her finger down the newspaper. 'Crash, crash, stabbing, crash with alcohol, brawl three arrests, and an eight-year old with an arrow stuck in her skull.' She sucked her breath.

'Try not to think about it,' I kissed the top of her head.

She grabbed my hand, her eyes full at the sadness of it. 'How? How can we not? Some poor kiddy with a shaft sticking out.' She pantomimed.

Summer and the country is ablaze. The seas are a wild fetch of gales foam and suck, the highways a derby of dozing drivers their heads down on the steering wheel, foot heavy on the gas. And the children, the poor lambs, in their pyjamas with a raggedy teddy in a backpack holding hands right on the verge as the headlights come up on them.

In this heat the suburbs are a time-bomb of banging screen doors, broken glass and raised voices.

Simple: the car hit the tree and the steering wheel hit her head and the engine fire-wall pressed in and her torso did the crash-test-dummy limbo: her arms and legs rose up together, her head came forward and then back and everywhere was the spangle of glass — and the breath of life left her.

'Maybe one or two injuries she might have survived but cumulatively...'
The young constable stopped.

'Was it ...?' Mother asked.

'Instant.' He snapped his fingers. 'Like turning off a light.'

Diary of a madman (1)

1. My senses have been purified and now I perceive all living things have an electric glow. You can discern the nature of a thing from the colour of its aura: blue is noble and uplifting, red is passionate or a little unwell, black is...well. I've turned the desk lamp to shine

- directly over my hand and I can see little crystalline points coming out from my finger tips violet and green and, where I slammed my thumb in the dishwasher, a bruised purple.
2. Parrots zoom out of the trees leaving coloured contrails. High above gulls track white and grey lines across the blue. Crows underline their laughter with yellow ribbons of cunning.
 3. Energy is everywhere. My hands crackle with static, my hair is on end under my hat. Walking towards an object—a tree or lamp-post—it hums and whines, rising in frequency as I approach and then falling like an ambulance retreating as I pass. Tree stump...stummmmmmmnnnnpppp, bicycle
bbbbuhhhhhiiiiiiiiseeeekkkulllll, motor kkkkaaaaaiiiiiiaaaaahhhh.
 4. Sub-atomic houseflies pop in and out of existence above my bed and beetles like B52s rattle the windows and the water glass by my bed.

Justine on the swing laughing her hair flying back, her legs bare. Low afternoon sunlight penetrates the fabric of her dress as she hurtles towards me with the sound of a jet engine, deafening.

Mother was at the paper when I came down in the morning.

‘What’s news today?’ I said reaching for the coffee.

‘A woman was pinned in her car for three days. Drove into a gully. Swerved to miss a roo apparently. Trapped all that time by her leg. Stuck until some teenager walking her dog heard her cries.’ She took a mouthful of tea.

‘The paramedics say,’ she continued. ‘That by the time they got to her she was so desperate she would have cut her leg off but didn’t have anything sharp at hand.’

Mother paused and looked up at me. ‘You look terrible.’

All night the melancholy moon's beauty lay across the houses and lawns and the trees where centipedes and roaches run. In my bedroom, beguiled, I waited long on its setting.

'—a sixty-three year old man, crushed when the horse he was riding collapsed and died and fell on top of him. Ribs, broken pelvis, shoulder.' Mother stopped, the tea halfway to her lips. 'How much does a horse weigh?'

Heavy enough.

I thought about being pinned there, the cooling weight on you and nothing to do but wait until...what? Until something happens, some teenager, some helicopter full of paramedics, some shaman in sandals just wanders by.

Misfortune is a lion roaring all around. But it brings out the best in us. This summer communities across Australia have come together in loss, mourning and determination. Neighbours, strangers for the last ten years, sob on each other's shoulders like they were sisters; candles gutter on verge, posies pile up against galvanised fences and cards with crayoned hearts are pushed in between. Here's Stan determined to rebuild after the storm even though we can still see sheets of fibro and roofing iron blowing along the road behind him. He shrugs and pulls the missus to him: 'Where would we go anyway?'

A woman is pushing a broom full of silt out of her living room. She pulls a rectangle from the slop and wipes it clean on her dress: it's a photo of the kids when they were just babes, still running about in nappies. She holds it up to the camera for us. A wan smile.

Diary of a madman (2)

1. Some days the sun rockets across the sky, shadows roll around. Look down and the morning's buttery-ness is already bleached to bone by the midday blaze. Look again and shadows have returned and the evening is closing in. How is anyone supposed to get anything done in such a brief allocation? It's barely enough to tie your tie, to start the car, to leave the shaving mirror's rebuke.
2. Correspondingly, there are days when everything is suspended. See the ant manoeuvring a pebble, look again and it's in the same spot, no progress. Go away, walk down the track and back and there it is again—same position, same pebble. It's another ant surely. No, it's the same the one with the white stain on its thorax and the shortened fifth leg. This is the same ant and the same pebble in front of the big nest, beside the path, in the nature reserve on the same hillside with its granite taproot down in the Indo-Australian plate that is moving us all north-east towards a collision with China a metre a century. And all the while, the wind blows in our faces, always against us always head on.



I had seen the fire-engine coming in my mirror way back, cars were darting out of the way but I was jammed in the outside lane with nowhere to go. Lined in red, blue and white growing larger, to the point where I could clearly read the name of the manufacturer, DENNIS, across the radiator grille. And then it was gone. Vanished. Impossible. I looked around and there it was, accelerating, barely passing to my right an inch away, climbing the curb, and then banging back onto the road in front. But with the water in its belly all sloshed to one side, it became subject to mechanical determinism: to conserve angular momentum its tyres lifted and it tipped over and, wheels spinning, lights flashing, alarm still bleating, it slid sideways down the road.

A guy was banging on my car door.

‘Aren’t you going to help?’

Black water—or oil maybe —was coming from underneath. Mortally wounded, here on the highway the fire engine was bleeding out.

By now the tumbled fire-fighters inside had regained their bearings and were opening doors and clambering up to stand on the stricken truck, pushing back their helmets, nudging each other, looking at the mess and grinning. A few jumped down and unrolled a hose.

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When the police came to our door, we were ready.

There were two of them. The young one sat on the edge of the couch. Mother wanted to offer them tea but I said no.

‘Go on constable,’ the older one said. He was standing.

So he told us.

—

Mother wanted all the details, got him to draw a diagram and pencil in velocities, points of impact, debris fields and where the first responders parked.

—

In my office, a flash and right away a crack of deafening thunder. That was close, real close.

‘Jesus.’ I was hanging onto the desk waiting for the backwash.

‘Sorry?’ Angie looked at me, playing a pencil end in her mouth.

‘Didn’t you...that was...the storm?’

‘I can come back.’

‘No, it’s fine.’ I ran my hands through my hair. I was soaked but at least the noise had stopped.

She pushed her paper across the desk. 'This is so...I worked really hard on this assignment and now you're—'.

I picked up the paper, knuckling sweat from my eyes, focussing. 'University policy is clear on plagiarism.'

'It is so not.'

'There's five paragraphs—'

'It's a different context,' she said. 'It's sampling, you know like hip-hop. Ever hear of the Sugar Hill Gang?'

'It's someone else's work, unattributed.'

She stood. 'Look,' she said closing the door closed and turning to me. 'Can't we...?'

Lunchtimes mostly we would drive out to a mall and park. We'd choose alphabetically as long as it was far enough away from campus:

Belco Westfield

Calwell Centre

Erindale Centre

The G

The Hyperdome

Kippax Fair

The Plaza

and so on.

Most days she had afternoon tutorials —

—and I saw skies full of portents, great turning wheels of blackbirds, locusts rising with the haze and afternoon nimbus penetrating the stratosphere.

Mother was in front of the TV when I got home. She was still in her nightie, a shawl about her shoulders.

‘How about a nice bath before dinner?’ I reached for the remote.

‘They’ve been playing this all day, this and the press conference. The Minster has resigned. He was weeping. A grown man weeping in front of the cameras and everyone.’

The screen showed the sea in an energetic fury of turquoise, the dark of the shore and flotsam, a plank or two, a suitcase, someone’s red coat. Locals had gathered on the rocks and watched helpless as the last of the boat splintered against the shoal.

‘I’ll do my Monday meatloaf.’ Helping her up by the arm. ‘It’s your favourite, remember?’

Half way up the stairs she stopped and dug her hand into my arm: ‘We are...*good* aren’t we?’ There was such intensity in her gaze.

‘No. I don’t think so Mum.’

Diary of a madman (3) — magical exercises

Practice: Do not flinch. Do not turn when you see flashes or booming cracks in the sky.

Align your stationery to the x or y axis of your desk, ignore the magnetic force lines that transect your building and pass through all living things.

Avoid spontaneous laughter particularly in the cinema or theatre or when reading a magazine or novel or stories of any kind; the road of excess leads to the village of disappointment.

Good works and self-control are all that remains.

Up from the underworld

I've gone over this again and again.

I will walk in front of you up that long incline.

I will *not* look back (not this time).

Because I know you are there behind me, close on my heels even though I cannot hear you (you're tread is so light my dear).

Even when I step out onto the burnt land, the fiery fuse country, the blasted plain with the wind blowing cinders in my face, I will not look back.

Knowing you are behind me, I will not turn even though in the glare of the sun I can see nothing — a bright dazzle and there in the corner of my eye reflected, an impression of a dark expanse closing over you, your pale pale hand reaching and receding.

—

Time

has

stopped

—and in this instant I'm there beside your car. I open the door. Today you're wearing the cream linen skirt and the apricot blouse. Your white handbag is on the passenger seat. The engine is redlining and it's too noisy to say anything so you mouth: 'Are you sure?' And then you climb out and I take your place. The seat is still warm from you, the sash of the seatbelt the whole car has your perfume. I take the wheel and close the door. You step back and put your fist to your mouth.

then

time

restarts.

...the car hits the tree and the steering wheel hits my head and the engine fire-wall presses in and my torso does the crash-test-dummy limbo: arms & legs rise up together, head comes forward and then back and everywhere the spangle of glass — and the breath is gone from my lungs. And there's an end at last —

Relief.
