PROLOGUE

IN A BASEMENT bar on a university campus, a boy and a girl hold each other, their limbs loose with alcohol.

The dance floor hums and throbs around them. But the laughter and the phone camera flashes and the hands that reach around to clap his back are elsewhere—far away from their tongue-fumbling embrace. His hands cup her bottom, which feels pert and perfect, and his rising erection bumps her where their hips meet.

For a moment they pull apart. The boy is wearing a cap, which the girl removes. She puts it on her head backwards, because she thinks that this is a flirty, endearing thing to do. Except when she puts it on, the rim licks her forehead—wet with sweat—and she feels for the first time that the music is oppressive, and the air is choked with smoke. She puts the cap back on his head and smiles. She yells—her voice distant and empty—that she wants to go outside.

He can't hear her. He turns his ear towards her mouth and she yells again. She can almost feel the force of it reverberate, brushing back up against her lips. He nods.

They make their way through the dance floor, emerging in the courtyard, where the noise is no longer poured directly into their ears but is somehow louder. The air is clean and liberating. They feel weightless. The girl sways more. She says she wants to leave together.

They walk hand in hand to the boy's room. She takes the stairs with a wild, loping gait, and when she leans on him, he leans against the wall, because he too can barely stand.

In his room they pull at each other's clothes with an urgency they've learned from television. A few drinks ago, either one of them would have been just as happy to make out for a bit, or smoke in the courtyard, or go to 7-Eleven for a sausage roll. But now there is tugging and even sighing.

Abandon floats like debris in their drunken minds, and their world takes on a liquid reckless colour, where actions are impulsive, and tongues are down throats, and clothes are on the floor.

When the drink dissipates, the girl's senses return to her one by one.

The sight of a roof with a slow-revolving ceiling fan.

The ashen, mint-tangy taste of menthol cigarettes. She is not sure whether it's coming from his mouth or hers.

A smell both animal and chemical: the alcohol in heavy breaths sticking to unfamiliar sweat.

The slippery touch of his back, clammy beneath her hands. And pain, not sharp but steady, where he thrusts inside her.

Sound joins much later, when the heaving, sticky vacuum of the room is punctuated by a too-loud voice—her voice—that says, in an almost business-like fashion: 'I think I'm going to vomit.'

In one movement, the boy pulls out and, one knee on the bed and one foot on the floor, reaches under his desk for his metal bin. It smells like a pile of coins, and the vomit makes a clanging splash where it hits the sides.

The boy cloaks her bent and bare body in an academic gown, which hangs on the back of his door underneath a permanently damp towel. She folds into it, and he retreats under the covers, asking if she is okay.

She does not remain in his room for long. She limps out, leaning on another girl, who appears, faceless and timely like a paramedic, in her hour of need. He stays, and makes an unpopular decision to leave his bin in the hall.

The whole evening seems suspended in a giddy, consequenceless haze: a night projected on a screen, and reduced to darkness when they tumble into sleep. The clutch of their bodies, the immediacy of it all—for now—fades to black.

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ALTHOUGH IT HAS been years since Eve and I were friends, I despair that I will ever shake her. This is because she has been selfish enough to take up a place, however minor, in public life. No matter how exhaustively I block her on social media, and distance myself from her friends, and avoid talking about her with mine, she refuses to live malleably in my memory. Instead, she crops up: in bookshop windows; on the Explore function on my Instagram; profiled for the weekend paper.

In photos she looks radiantly intelligent. It's her cheekbones, as I always told her. High, prominent cheekbones that assert themselves like convictions. In these photos, the kinds of photos that also appear on the jackets of her books, her face is engaged and alert, but basically passive. Like the photographer caught her when she was not quite thinking—just letting clever ideas rest in her brain.

Whenever I say I was at university with Eve, people ask me what she was like, sceptical perhaps that she could have always been as whole and self-assured as she now appears. To which I say something like: 'People are infinitely complex.' But I say it in such a way—so pregnant with misanthropy—that it's obvious I hate her.

It's a big claim, I know. To hate a person. What would Eve say? She'd be methodical, as always, starting with the universal and then moving to the particular. She'd ask: *What does it mean to hate?*

I hear her voice in my head, bouncing the idea around. I can't hate someone unless I know them intimately, she tells me. Hate is very personal. It requires care.

A thought experiment: Eve, angular face and pliant hair, crosses a road. I choose a place I know to make it as vivid as possible. The road is King Street, Newtown. Eve crosses where there is no intersection, talking to me over her shoulder as she goes. Looking at me, she doesn't see the oncoming traffic. With a thud so flat it sounds fake, she rolls up onto a car's windscreen. To my surprise, the windscreen doesn't shatter. The car, braking on impact, swerves, and the passenger side hits a streetlamp. Eve rolls, limp, back onto the bitumen. I imagine this taking place in summer, so the bitumen is hot and the smoke from the car feels like it emanates from the earth. There's crunchy glass everywhere, and, as I approach, I see it smattered across her pale chest like breadcrumbs.

How do I feel? When I see her face—that equilateral triangle of nose and chin and cheekbones—blood-specked and ravaged. *How does that make me feel?* Amid the heat and the rubbery smoke and the sirens, I'd be lying if I said that I didn't feel the tiniest flash of glee.

That I still feel so much—that her suffering thrills me, and her success cruels me; that I cannot just *get over it*, but insist instead on resenting her—it all suggests to me that, in spite of everything, I'm still a little bit in love with her.

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EVE AND I lived on campus in our first year at university, in a residential college. Our rooms were adjacent. I was eighteen and

she was twenty, which meant I was a teenager and she was not. At the time, this seemed a significant distinction.

There were several colleges on campus, but Fairfax was the only all-female one, and proudly so. A century ago, it had housed some eminent suffragettes, and it had been resting on those political laurels ever since. Its feminism operated on the level of 'Women in Medicine' and 'Women in Finance' discussion panels, always conducted in a tone of revolutionary awe, as if any combination of *women* and *profession* were still subversive.

Our rooms were on the first floor of the First Year ('Fresher') Wing: a brick octagonal structure from the seventies, which jutted out from the original Victorian building with thrusting, unapologetic ugliness. The rooms were exactly what you would expect from an institution that housed hundreds of young adults: single beds and little desks that looked like they had been stapled to the wall, and carpet brave enough to withstand whatever we might throw at it.

I heard Eve before I saw her.

My room was small, with a window that overlooked a tree and, through its leaves, the car park.

'It's very light,' I said.

My mother looked around. The glossy pamphlet that lay on the bed showed thin white women rowing, and laughing in groups, and seated at high-backed chairs in front of white tablecloths. That was the kind of sumptuous living she'd imagined for me when I'd been awarded a scholarship to Fairfax College. This room with its flimsy carpentry and bare bed—the mattress thin and inauspicious—seemed like a scene from another institution.

'Yes, well, it's typical dorm living, isn't it?' she said.

I wondered where in pop culture this *type* was situated.

She opened the wardrobe to reveal five plastic hangers. On one of them she hung my navy Fairfax College jumper. A straight-haired girl with bulbous pearl earrings had sold it to us on the lawns before we entered the building. It cost eighty dollars.

'Is it mandatory?' my mother had asked.

The girl twirled a strand of platinum hair around her finger, and I noticed she was wearing the same navy jumper draped over her shoulders like a cape. 'It's not like a uniform. But you're expected to wear it when you're representing the college.'

'Like a uniform,' my mother said.

'What?'

When my mother handed over the money, I thanked her loudly, so the girl didn't think I was the kind of adult who still expected her mum to buy her clothes.

'Of course.' She looked at me with that classic maternal half-smile, which was infuriating in how much it professed to understand. 'Of course I'll pay for your jumper.'

Now the jumper swayed on the hanger, and my mother turned back towards me. 'Listen.' She tilted her head towards the wall, her little smile the kind that usually preceded a bitchy comment.

I listened. Someone next door was playing guitar: up and down scratches of chords and a pleasant voice drizzled on top.

'You should go and introduce yourself.'

'Mum, she's playing guitar.'

'It's not the Sydney Symphony.' The smile was back. 'You can interrupt her.'

'I don't want to interrupt her.'

'Why not?'

'Everyone else is unpacking; she's having a jam. It doesn't bode well.'

'You don't know how early she got here. She might have finished her unpacking.'

I didn't know this at the time, but most people would have arrived earlier than me. Most of the college residents, including the guitarist next door, were from Sydney. This surprised me, because I would have thought that they all had places to live already, and probably with much larger bedrooms. But Fairfax wasn't 'typical dorm living': it was a community, as the glossy pamphlet would tell you.

My mother and I, on the other hand, had driven up from Canberra, leaving just after eight that morning. This was effectively a two-day affair, because the previous day had been spent packing and fighting. My mother wanted me to be prepared for any eventuality and to pack accordingly. I wanted to appear nonchalant and easygoing, which meant packing as little as possible so I might appear to be above possessions—like materialism was just something that happened to other people. Everything from thermal socks to a zany patterned shower cap was held up by my mother and dismissed by me as 'patently ridiculous' with a vitriol that shamed me. Then we sat at dinner, just the two of us, both trying to inject the scene with a sense of finality. All I felt was a heavy, schoolgirl depression—the Sunday sense of early-to-bed and waking to responsibilities.

My mother started to unpack the first of my two wheelie bags (the second being her prize in a hard-won negotiation). She pulled out *Middlemarch* (900 pages of concessions to me) and placed it on the desk. I moved it to a different spot, as if to prove she wasn't being helpful.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Nothing.'

'What?'

'I don't want to live next door to the kind of person who plays guitar by themselves.'

'It's not that loud. And you're a deep sleeper.'

'I'm not worried about the sound. I'm worried about what that says about her.'

'God, Michaela, you're so judgemental. You've got to give people a chance.'

I must have looked hurt, because her face softened. 'Are you worried about introducing yourself while your mum is hanging around? Because I'm about to leave.'

'Don't go yet,' I said, in a voice that would have been a whine if it had only been louder. Instead it was a whisper.

My mother stepped over the open wheelie bag and hugged me. 'You'll be fine,' she said, and kissed the top of my head, which made me want to cry. 'You'll make friends. Everybody always loves you.'

'That's not true,' I said. '*You* love me.'

'You'll be fine. People always surprise us.'

The singing from next door was clearer now. The guitar had been abandoned, and 'Mercedes Benz' by Janis Joplin rang unaccompanied through the wall.

My mother laughed, her shoulders shaking under my chin, where I was still enfolded in her hug. 'She does sound fucking lame,' she said.

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THE FIRST TIME I remember actually seeing Eve, she was on stage, and I was in the audience. Of course, I probably saw her before that. I'm sure we would have swapped unremarkable remarks in the corridors.

'So you went out last night?'

'Yeah. You?'

'Yeah. Good night?'

'I think so.'

'How did you pull up?'

'A bit dusty.'

These kinds of conversations were repeated many times a day, the participants interchangeable. So, despite living in adjacent rooms, by the end of that first week I knew Eve as well as anybody else at college—that is, not at all.

Part of the Fairfax offering—the *community* it so proudly fostered—was the opportunity to define ourselves in competition with the other residential colleges. So there were tournaments for sport and amorphous 'culture' prizes, which meant the full gamut of attention-seeking disguised as self-expression: debating, drama, public speaking, singing, dance, art.

Eve signed up to represent Fairfax in drama, with a piece promisingly titled: 'What Women Want'. Self-proclaimed feminist content usually fared well with the judges, who were looking for 'diverse voices' and, being former college residents themselves, usually looked no further than recent Sydney private school graduates.

So, a week after we'd all moved in, we assembled in our navy Fairfax jumpers in the Main Hall to watch a line-up of excessively accented monologues—almost all the male ones seemed to be Cockney (*Oi, you wot?*) and all of the female ones were broadly reminiscent of *Kath and Kim* (*noice, un-youse-you-elle*). At least, until Eve ascended the stage. Like a star rising, or a comet in reverse.

She began by subverting form: a monologue without words.

She stared at the audience, unbroken.

She sighed.

She started to cry. (Real tears, which elicited reluctant respect.)

She wiped her eyes, and wiped her hands on her pants. They left little blue-jean tearstains.

She unbuttoned her jeans.

Surely not?

Her hand descended.

The audience sat in tortured attention. One half of us were boys, mostly private school-educated, who grew up following Victoria's Secret models on Instagram and infecting their parents' family desktop with every virus that has ever washed up on the semen-stiff shores of Pornhub. Several of them had lost their innocence in boarding house dormitories, but they maintained a strict, locker-room secrecy about this. Nonetheless, it didn't take much imagination: beds stacked heads against the wall; penises stacked parallel and upright; synchronous wanking under the blue light of the same shared laptop. (Laptop rather than iPod Touch, because, if there is one thing that is crucial to a contemporary man's sense of his own virility, it is the size of his screen.)

The other half of us were women. Sure, we were all abreast of the politics of female masturbation. As celebrities had reliably informed us, the new boyfriend was the hand. One of my new-found college friends, Portia, even told me that in her last year of school the counsellor had recommended the year twelves practise frequent masturbation to relieve stress. The school Portia had attended was an expensive secular inner-city establishment: the kind where advertising executives or wealthy music managers sent their children. There was a lot of cocaine in the bathrooms at the senior school musical, and on the weekends, families took their labradors to climate protests. So perhaps Portia's story was a high watermark of tolerance, but the point remains: it was all very healthy and throbbing and modern.

But up to a point. A point, which wasn't apparent until it took the crystalline, pointy-faced shape of Eve Herbert Shaw on stage,

one hand white-knuckled against the seat of her chair, the other writhing in her crotch.

A moaning exhale from Eve. An anxious inhale from the audience.

'Oh god,' she shrieked, shaking her head with pleasure.

'Oh god,' the audience tittered behind their hands, which had risen to cover their open mouths.

Then silence.

'I just came,' Eve announced, to more titters.

'Do you think that's funny?' Audience interaction: the experimentation with form continued. She was addressing a boy in the front row. His hair was long and scraggly and he was pitiably afflicted with hormonal acne.

'Do you think female pleasure is funny?' she asked, her eyes wide.

It might have been funny, if she had adopted a confessional, Phoebe Waller-Bridge style: raw, but also self-deprecating. This was raw and proud. I imagine a large part of the discomfort was the stiffening in many male pants in spite of themselves. This was not laughter-as-amusement, but laughter-as-coping.

'I don't care what you think.' Eve knocked over her chair and exited.

The stage was a flimsy wooden platform, not an actual stage, so to properly exit Eve had to climb down wooden stairs and slam the door. A breeze tickled our ankles.

More tittering mingled with cautious applause.

The breeze returned as the door swung open.

Eve launched herself on stage, two stairs at a time, and yelled, eyes scrunched, fists tight: 'I SAID, I DON'T CARE.'

Masterstroke.

The judges thought so too, and she was awarded second place.

The girl who won performed a Shakespeare monologue about a woman who, for reasons that were unclear, was forced to choose between saving her brother's life, and saving her own chastity. The judges congratulated both the winner (she chose chastity) and the runner-up for capturing 'the raw female experience', and said that Eve's use of audience interaction had been 'very Brechtian'.

Eve, of course, thought she should have placed first, and would describe the event later as that time that she was robbed. But the main objective had been achieved: everybody knew her. Even people who weren't there, who'd only seen clips filmed on phones. Eve became a name that was attached to a story. She was both a person and an idea of a person, which—I would come to learn—was very important to her.

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THAT NIGHT I saw Eve in the corridor, coming back from her shower. She was wearing a towel, her wet hair running rivulets down her shoulders. Her collarbones glistened.

'Well done tonight,' I said.

'Thanks.' She smiled, and opened the door to her room. Before it closed behind her, she turned back to me, stopping it with her foot. 'You don't think it was too . . . too much?'

'No, I thought it was cool. It was very, um, experimental.'

She nodded on the word *experimental*, like we were talking about an abstract proposition and she was in complete agreement. 'That's definitely what I was going for.'

I tried to think of an experimental playwright. When the silence stretched to awkwardness, I grasped at: 'It was very Sarah Kane.'

'You think so?' Eve stepped forward, propping the door open with her shoulder and adjusting her towel. Her face was dewy from the shower, and water stroked her sloping shoulders.

I looked away.

'You like Sarah Kane?' she asked.

I looked back. The towel seemed secure.

'I guess so,' I said. 'Is she the kind of person people like, though? Aren't her plays very hard to watch?'

'I love her.' She pronounced *love* with venom. 'This is so weird, standing in the corridor. Do you want to come in?'

Her room was the same as mine, but the desk and bed were on the opposite wall: a mirror image. And hers was a mess. Clothes spilled out of drawers, wire hangers sprung beneath my feet, empty shopping bags lay under textbooks on the floor. A laundry basket at the base of the bed was empty, but for a banana peel and a set of car keys.

She sat on the bed and pulled her wet hair behind her shoulders. She picked a brush up off the floor and raked it through her hair with such decisive strokes that water droplets flew onto the wall. 'I'm so glad you liked the monologue. I don't know why it was so daunting. I usually don't care what people think. I probably should care more, to be honest.'

'I wish I didn't care what people think.'

'I can be incredibly antagonistic,' Eve continued, as if I hadn't said anything. 'My mother always tells me I'm antagonistic. But she's an alcoholic, so as I always tell her, it's just learned behaviour.'

'That must be tough.'

'She's right, though. At school I was always mouthing off at everyone. I thought I was so smart. I, like, really believed I was the cleverest person in the room, including the teachers. But that was only because they were all morons.'

I laughed and leaned back. I was wearing a thin pyjama singlet, and the windowpane was cool against my bare shoulders. She apologised for the mess.

'No worries. Your photos are cool.' Her walls were covered in polaroid photos, each with a date written in black marker at the bottom. From where I stood at the window, I could see how evenly they were spaced across the wall above her bed. They seemed to cast judgement on the messy floor.

'Aren't they great?' Eve looked up at the photos. 'Do you have a film camera?'

'I usually just use my phone. Isn't film expensive?'

'Have you read *On Photography* by Susan Sontag?'

'No.'

'I just don't want to mediate my whole identity through social media.' Eve resumed the vigorous hair brushing. 'I think photos should be a stolen moment in time. Not this thing on your phone: this way of constantly curating your life even while you're experiencing it. Otherwise the likeability of our experiences when photographed—like, travels or social events or whatever—becomes the main metric by which our lives are valued. And that's so arbitrary and depressing, don't you think?'

It wasn't something I'd thought about, except to think that it didn't warrant much analysis. Now I wondered whether that was vapid. 'Is that what Susan Sontag is about?' I said.

'No, not really. It's just my musings.' She tossed the hairbrush into the tangled sheets. 'But I usually scan the polaroids and post them anyway, so take my musings with a grain of salt.'

I laughed, but I wasn't sure at what point she had started joking. Her cultivated self-awareness insisted she did not take herself too seriously. The problem with Eve was that I was never sure how seriously *I* was expected to take her.

She shivered. It was a violent motion, and she clutched the towel to hold it in place. 'God, I'm freezing.'

'Someone's walking over your grave,' I said.

'What?'

'It's something my dad used to say. When you get a random shiver.'

'Are you close to your father?'

This didn't seem relevant. 'I think it's just an expression,' I said.

'I should probably put some clothes on.'

I left her with a final, 'Well done again tonight.'

She didn't respond.

I lay in my bed, listening to her move through her room, humming. She seemed fully formed, like the final draft of herself. I must try to have more opinions, I thought, before I fell asleep to the sound of her soft, illegible songs.