

JENNY

It's a windy day, her hair flits across her face like a brown moth, so neutral in colour it's difficult to describe. The tall eucalypts bend and sway overhead, filling her lungs with the fresh tangy scent of the Australian bush. The shimmering native grass sings softly in the wind. She feels light, outside in the sun and the wind. The countryside is so familiar, so much a part of her, that all her problems slide to the back of her mind, replaced by calm blankness.

Suddenly her old mongrel dog, her constant companion since she was small; stops, ears pricked, leg raised, tail held erect like a banner; his hunting stance. She follows his gaze. A rabbit, a small mass of quivering fur grazes unaware of their presence, of its doom. Her mouth dries up as she tries to call out.

She should have yelled out. Warned her! If only she'd noticed sooner; she might still be here.

She opens her mouth determined not to make the same mistake again. But the dog lunges, moving so silently and fast, that the rabbit doesn't stand a chance. The dog raises its head, proudly beaming at her, the rabbit hanging limply from its mouth.

Her whole body stiffens, the blood continues pumping and her heart continues beating but her brain is numb, so empty it's painful. Her knees buckle and she collapses onto the ground. He scampers back; the rabbit, not dead as she first thought, lies forgotten where he dropped it, waiting for its chance to escape. His nose cold and wet pushes at her arm, his doggy breath makes her laugh and gag simultaneously. Slowly her heart stops racing and her thoughts start creeping back. But now she's not so sure that's a good thing. That other night still seems so shockingly vivid. She buries her hands in

the dog's thick bushy fur and focuses on the rabbit. She and the dog watch it rise shakily to its feet, peering nervously around before making an ungainly bid for freedom.

And they sit, watching the sky fade to the dull glow of sunset.

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At home her mother, an attractive woman, sits waiting. She gazes blankly out into the dark night, the lines on her face tracing the sorrows and worries of the previous weeks. She had had her daughter young, was barely seventeen when she was born. Too young to leave her hometown, trapped. Her parents had kicked her out and her friends just seemed to lose contact. Broke and alone with nowhere to go, she had to stay. Had been forced to endure the small town gossip, the prejudice, of which she was the centre. But all the sideways glances and petty remarks were worth the joy she had felt when she first held her daughter in her arms and felt her tiny heart beating at one with her own. From that moment on her daughter became her focus. She had watched her grow up, protected her, and loved her. But tonight she's exhausted by the suffocating quiet, weighing heavily around her like a net, trapping her in this confined space with her thoughts. Was she right to let her daughter go? Should she be alone right now, after all that had happened?

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The girl stomps onwards. Its pitch black, so she follows the welcoming light of the house, through the long grass, like the path of the moon on dark water.

When she finally arrives home her mother seizes her in a bear hug and holds her, like she did when she was young. Back when the world fitted into her mother's arms and a hug could conquer all obstacles. "You're safe," her mother whispers. She wishes it were true.

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That night she wakes in a cold sweat, her heart beating so loudly, she's sure it will wake her mother. Outside a branch scrapes her window; the screech sends a shiver down her spine. She tries to ignore the surreptitious rustling of the bush outside her room, like the whispers which followed her when she'd braved school after the accident. No one could face her. They tried to smile but they couldn't meet her eyes, and conversation ebbed when she passed. She knew that they blamed her, and couldn't blame them. After all she could barely face herself. It had been her idea...

They were flying along the dirt road, she could smell the alcohol and vomit, hear the pump of the radio. She saw the truck first, tried to yell out, warn them. But they were going too fast! Brakes screeched, someone screamed! After that she remembered nothing, until she woke hours later in a hospital bed. Her mother was curled beside her in the uncomfortable plastic chair. "There was an accident" the white dressed nurse told her. There was something in her eyes, kindness or pity? She sensed there was something they weren't telling her. It wasn't until later that she found out.

Jenny was dead.

And for a second her world stopped, as the truth seeped in.

They hadn't wanted to tell her while she was still recovering.

Jenny, her oldest and best friend was dead. Gone. And there was no way back.

Strange how something so ordinary could end in something so final. They'd been dressing up together, buzzing with anticipation sharing the rush of adrenaline that always came before a party. Who would kiss who? Who would vomit? Would someone need their stomach pumped? Would anyone have sex? Would the cops catch them drinking when underage? Would they be grounded? Would they remember any of it the next day anyway? Parties were like a social culture in small towns, unwritten laws binding them to each other in a shared blurred reality; to not go invited ostracism and ridicule.

With Jenny gone every memory of their entire friendship, whether mundane or exciting, good or bad, had become a treasure. To be relived over and over until each one became etched in her mind forever. The thought of moving on caused her heart to freeze, to go on alone scared her more than anything else. Part of her wanted to forget, to push away the flood of memories that threatened to drown her, they were just too painful; but better the pain than to move forward and risk forgetting. Though she didn't remember the crash, she woke each night with a picture of Jenny, bloody and broken, burnt into her eyelids, terrified yet fearing the day she would no longer see her.

She thought back to the rabbit, her dog had caught. She hoped it could forget, would not be traumatised by fear and the memory of pain. It had lived as she had, but she wondered if that was for the best. Would it have been better for both of them if they'd died? Instead of suffering here alone. She hoped at least that it was not alone, but had a family in its warm burrow, safe from the accidents which waited for it in the real world.

In the next room her mother snored, she heard her tossing, and knew that even in sleep she was worried about her. Her mother had barely left her side since the accident, hovering quietly on the periphery of her life. She wished she could open up to her, bridge the gulf between them. But she couldn't. How could she talk about it? What was there to say?

Jenny was gone.