

AUSTIN CITY LIMIT

A Novella



JUAN ZORRILLA



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by

Juan Zorrilla

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NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

The protagonist of this story is Australian, and I've chosen to preserve his authentic voice throughout the narrative. Australian readers will recognise familiar expressions and spelling, while international readers may encounter some unfamiliar terms, such as:

- **Budgy smugglers:** Speedos
- **Jocks:** underwear
- **Melbs:** Melbourne
- **Oath:** absolutely
- **Out for a six:** passing out

... and of course casual profanity that's far more common in Australian speech than American dialogue.

The narrator's understanding of American culture is filtered through his perspective, sometimes getting details slightly wrong in ways that felt authentic to the character.

Based on real events, or not.

ONE

BACK IN MELBS, my mate was mortified that I'd be catching the Greyhound. He saw no reason why anyone would endure such a humiliation, unless they had no choice. The bus was for parolees and the stranded. People without choice. But again, he was born in Kansas and public transport wasn't his thing.

After three hours of browsing schedules, my credit card bouncing as usual, and two minutes of reflection, I booked the ticket. Seven dollars and thirty-two cents, including tax.

I chose to travel by bus to make a point. Booking the cheapest option from San Antonio to Austin guaranteed that everyone back home would call me cheap, but at least it'd remove one of Kim's objections to me coming to the States for a concert.

In any case, aside from the smell of fake pine cleaner and chicken wings, the bus wasn't bad at all. Through the window, billboards. Jesus is Lord, Dick Case Injury Lawyers (se habla Español), vasectomy reversal services, bail bonds. Behind it all, obviously, were massive balls of straw rolling over endless herds of longhorns.

~

The text came right after we passed a petrol station the size of a small airport, before the off-ramp to a town called Cuero.

Last minute trip down the Guadal river. so sorry! I prob won't be there til Sat, but my friend Flo has the key, and he is terrific. When you get to the station look out for the washateria on West Lynn. He'll take care of everything. Rach

Annoying doesn't begin to cut it. There was zero chance I was going to own up to this one. If she got the slightest whiff that my host, a female, cancelled at the last minute I'd never hear the end of it. She'd been chewing my arse nonstop for leaving her to go to the States to a concert and staying with strangers. Fuming about the whole thing. How I wasn't committed enough and not taking us seriously. How I always ran from responsibility. Standard stuff really.

Looking back, my lack of seriousness was a blessing. It was the one thing that kept us from living together and killing each other.

So that's where I was. Following a flake's instructions to a washateria, whatever that was, to get a key from someone I didn't have a name for.

~

When I got off the bus at the Koenig Lane stop, the heat hit me with everything it had. I looked at the map and got moving, passing rows of houses with bright blue mailboxes perfectly set back from the road. All of them with their red flags up or down depending on whether the postman had been. Pumpkin-pie perfect, just like in the movies.

I turned right, followed a street parallel to a canal. A few blocks later, I reached West Lynn and saw the place. Open 8 AM to 9 PM. Through the glass, machines. I pushed through the door.

~

The washateria was nothing to write home about. Sterile fluoro lighting designed to make you look awful doing laundry, three rows of stainless steel washers and dryers blasting hot air. Coin-operated soap dispensers and plastic baskets stacked on either side of a small reception. An old fashioned till on the table, straight from the '80s. Two kids ran around while a woman folded clothes incessantly. Dr Phil was going at someone on the 14-inch Samsung mounted in the corner.

The place reeked of bleach, which as always, smelled weird to me.

"Can I help you sir?"

In front of me stood a Mexican as flamboyant as a Oaxacan tablecloth. He was in his thirties, five-seven or so, long white socks pulled up to his knees, checkered Vans, arms covered in faded tattoos that no person in their right mind should have to pay for.

"G'day. I'm here to pick up keys from Rachael."

"Ahhh sí, she told me. Rafting downriver again. Not the first time Rach's done this. She is a bit aloof, but means well. She would never leave you stranded though. That's not her." He pronounced it "Estranded," like my mum would. "You must be exhausted, good thing her place is something special. Ah, also important. ¿Te gustan los perros? Do you like dogs?"

He was speaking to me in Spanglish like I was supposed to understand. Fair-skinned, fair-haired, six-foot-tall Australian in a coin laundry here, mate.

"Yeah, I love them."

"That's good. Miss Holloway is a sweetheart. Just make sure you feed her." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a single key. A felt toy giraffe as key chain.

"Vamos, I'll show you the house."

"Sweet, let's go." I shouldn't have said sweet.

What kind of dog name is Miss Holloway?

~

We stepped out into the heat and he strutted like he owned the neighbourhood, claiming the road by the canal as his very own catwalk.

"How do you know Rachael?" I asked.

"I used to help her with the dog, before I opened the laundromat. Now she has more people helping, including you. Perfect *modus operandi*. You get to stay at a palace for free, Rach goes on her adventures, and y'all can help with the feeding."

"Sounds like a solid plan."

"Oh, solid it is. Miss Holloway's a tad peculiar, but she's very low maintenance."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, no, nothing bad, babe. Old dogs have their quirks, that's all." He glanced at me. "But don't we all, right?"

We turned onto streets where ancient low-hanging oaks leaned over the pavement like a living gazebo, and houses sat like they'd been there since before the city had a

name. After a few minutes of infernal Texas summer heat we stopped in front of a two-story Victorian that, if he had told me it'd been painted with a meringue, I would have believed him.

"This is it, you lucky man," he said, stopping at the gate. "Miss Holloway's food is in the kitchen pantry. She eats twice a day, don't worry if she doesn't want it right away."

"Anything else?" I said.

"You'll be fine, papi, enjoy your time in the place. When you're done here, just do the usuals. Throw the linen in the machine, clean all the surfaces, don't forget to unload the dishwasher. You know the drill, right?"

"Sure do."

"Ah, and also, leave the key on the kitchen bench and close the door behind you. If you need anything, you know how to find me. Mwah." He glided away, disappearing around the corner like he'd never been there at all.

~

I stepped inside and marveled at the place. Everything was massive in that over-the-top American way. Ceilings high enough to see the clouds, a kitchen island bigger than my lounge back home, a fridge I'd never fill with vegetables I knew the names of.

Rachael had left a handwritten note on the kitchen bench asking me to make myself at home and use the food in the fridge. Next to the note were instructions about the house. Nothing too involved. How to operate the aircon, wifi password: Ma'mHollowDawg1234*, front gate code: 1234#, that type of thing.

I wandered through spaces built for those whose main role in life was telling others what to do. The kind of place Kim would spend hours decorating to its full potential while I'd wonder how much it'd cost to heat in the winter.

The spare room I was meant to stay in was on the second floor. It was so big that it had a full-size couch and a desk. I threw my backpack on the pharaoh-sized bed. Pure luxury, not just compared to the Greyhound. Premium stuff. I removed half a dozen shiny pillows, kept the two for sleeping, stripped, and lay there, the ceiling fan cooling me all over. I spent a few minutes grinning in my jocks, amazed I'd struck such luck with the house.

I gave serious consideration to a bit of self-care in Egyptian cotton. (Who wouldn't?) But I didn't. My very own chambers didn't have an ensuite, and the prospect of walking a mile to the bathroom for toilet paper killed the mood. Besides, I only had one black t-shirt left, and staining it a day before the concert wasn't a risk I was willing to take. Instead, I got up, shook it off, and stared through the window.

Below, a huge lean-to, at least as big as a basketball court. In the distance, a hint of a creek. I needed some rest.

~

When I woke up from my nap, I went downstairs and made a sandwich with ingredients from the fridge and fresh sourdough from the kitchen island. I found a printer in a home office towards the back and printed the concert ticket. I'd flown halfway round the world for a show. Life was good.

By mid-afternoon, I figured I should check on the dog Florentino had mentioned. I called out "Miss Holloway!" sounding ridiculous. My voice got lost in the immensity of the house. Nothing happened.

I called her again. "Miss Holl-o-wayyy!" lengthening all vowels in my falsetto specially reserved for dogs. Nothing.

Time to change tactics. I walked into the pantry. On the floor, several thirty-pound silver and orange bags of premium dog food. I found a bowl large enough to serve soup to a family of four. I made as much noise with the kibble as possible and set the bowl of food on the marble. Kibble rattling had never failed me as a kid, and this dog wasn't going to be any different. That's when I heard the footsteps.

The sound wasn't the normal click of dog claws on hardwood. More like the stomps of a large person walking barefoot. Someone else must be in here. Seconds later I saw her.

~

The Great Dane was essentially a moose with an identity crisis, pitch black with patches of grey. She fixed her gaze right on me with eyes that didn't match. One teal, the other brown. They were both gleaming with the sunlight coming through the windows. She scrutinized me and made sure I noticed.

I took a step backward. I'd grown up with dogs, but nothing had prepared me for this. She was beautiful... for a moose. Actually, she was beautiful the way the ocean is beautiful. Impressive, terrifying, and beyond human scale.

After a minute or so of taking my measure, she walked into the kitchen like she'd trained herself not to break the china. Her shoulders went up and down with the grace of an old industrial-size sewing machine needle. She inspected the bowl, looked up to judge me. Sniffed a bit more. Judged me again. Then turned and padded away unimpressed.

I stood there for a moment. So that's Miss Holloway. She didn't disembowel me. Good outcome.

~

An hour later, after resting a bit on the chaise lounge, I tried again. This time I was ready for her scale, but not for the way she pierced me with those odd eyes before dismissing both me and the food. She walked toward the side of the house, same as before.

By late afternoon, I'd tried feeding her four times. Each attempt followed the same pattern: a dog embodying a medium-sized sphinx would appear from a side corridor, examine my humble offering, decide it wasn't worth her highness's time, and head toward her chambers.

Half an hour later, during the fourth attempt, just as she was turning away, I lost it.

"Whatever mate. Your loss. Piss off then."

She stopped on a dime when she heard the words. *Shit*. She turned back, eyes locked onto my neck for a solid thirty seconds.

She inched toward me, ready for murder, never breaking contact. I must have looked delicious. She closed the distance, silent, clinical, and fully aware of her stature. I took

the shallowest breath I could, terrified of making a move she might interpret as a threat. She kept coming until she was within striking distance. At the very last moment, she veered toward the French door that led to the backyard. It was closed.

~

She sat by the French door with her eyes fixed on mine for more than fifteen minutes, until she got bored and fell asleep. Admittedly, I might've been overreacting. It turned out the whole scene was because she needed to go out to poo and required me to open the door for her. Still, better not risking it.

Anyway, after a while and against all my survival instincts, I eased forward and pushed the door wide open, staying as far away as possible. She hauled herself up and walked through it. Then, just as before, she turned her head to me. Undoglike, beckoning me to follow.

To be fair, following her seemed like a much better outcome than a Great Dane eating me alive for daring to scold her in her abode.

So I went after her.

TWO

THE FRENCH DOOR opened onto a huge yard. It was well-maintained for its size. A vegetable patch, trees heavy with fruits and all types of nuts I was not sure I could eat, brown squirrels climbing up and down. Insects that somehow sounded a bit different than back home. At the very back of the block lay the Colorado River.

The dog led me farther from the house toward the water. Closer to the edge, the garden gave way to a tangle of scrub and grass that continued into the limestone riverbed. The brown stream meandered around the cottonwoods. The dog stopped and checked that I was still following, then she focused her gaze on a weathered wooden shed no bigger than ten by fifteen feet, hidden by an oak tree. The afternoon light hit its windows, making the old cladding appear orange. I walked toward it.

"She did that to me too when I got here," a young woman said. She was sitting in front of the shed on a makeshift porch.

~

The girl was in her early twenties. She had curves that suggested she wasn't struggling to feed herself and skin so fair that if you paid enough attention and with the right light you could see veins under her collarbones. Her yellow sundress made her look like she'd just left a garden party, bright cotton with a fabric pattern more appropriate for wallpaper. Roses or something. The kind of outfit you'd find in a charity shop.

"Are you trying to get her to eat?" the girl in the sundress, standing in someone else's well-kept backyard, asked.

"So, you know her. Do you live here?"

"Oh no, I've only been here since the winter. If there was such a thing in Texas, so let's say I've been here since whatever they call winter. I was supposed to be at LSU by now, but to be fair, that plan isn't looking too good these days."

"Taking a gap year? Working?"

She trailed off, her eyes on the water.

"Not really working. A hiatus, I guess it's called. I'm from Plainwell. I wanted to see the country before college. Everything here is so different, y'know? The crowds are insane and the trucks are huge. And then there are the bats. There is even a bat colony, billions of them. That's way too many for my fancy, so I've been staying here at Rachael's backyard."

Miss Holloway was still staring across like she was waiting for me to follow her.

"The backyard's big, like an acre I think," she continued. "Back in Michigan we had five acres, which is more, obviously, like five times more but still, I don't mind it so I've stayed."

"Ah. Staying in the shed then. Don't you miss Michigan? I heard it's nice," I said. I had no idea where that was.

"Yeah right, you don't have to be polite. It's way up north and cold as darn it. Full of introverts too."

The girl spoke as if I was the first person she'd seen in a while.

"Anyways, I left for a reason. It's not that I hated the place and wanted to leave but I got a place at LSU, in Louisiana. Everyone back home kept telling me how great it would be, but then I got the paperwork and it had French written all over it, y'know?" she kept going. "So I checked it out and it's in a town called Baton Rouge, which is French for red stick or something. Like a French colony, right? It's also surrounded by bayous which in their language means swamp, so there would be alligators everywhere. I mean with a name like Baton Rouge there would be. I mean, come on."

Oh god.

"I think you may be reading too much into the names," I said. "So you decided to set up shop at the shed instead?"

"For now at least. I says to myself, I would be damned learning French and dealing with crocodiles."

"Anyways, that dog. Just ignore her, she'll eat when she gets hungry." She stood up and smoothed her dress.

~

"Listen, the mosquitos will start eating us alive if we stay here any longer," she said. "Want to see inside? I've made the place pretty comfortable."

The girl had a point, dogs do eat when hungry. I had printed my ticket. So without a plan for the evening I joined her.

Inside, the shed seemed smaller than it looked from the backyard, but she'd made it work. Lived-in but temporary, like she was always ready to leave but never quite getting around to it. She'd created a cramped world around the single bed. Travel photos tacked to the walls, a faded Wolverines poster above the bed, clothes in a pile, a small wooden shelf with lotions and general girl stuff in the usual pinks and creams. Yellow and blue sheets on the single rickety bed made the whole place resemble a rustic Ikea display gone wrong. Everything she owned fit in this one room. Fifty things, maybe less.

I stopped at the CDs that were stacked by a small stereo like a shrine.

"Y'know Nick Cave?" she asked.

"I saw him in Sydney once. I'm showing my age here," I said, expecting her to ask me how old I was.

"Of course you did." She smiled for the first time. "Is he really seven feet tall?"

"I reckon, at least seven feet. And he has huge feet."

"What size are those?" she asked, noting my Cons while she touched her hair.

"Forty-five."

"Really? Those European sizes make no sense," she replied.

"That would be eleven US."

"That's good," she said. "I read somewhere that foot dimensions correlate with things like virility and healthy hormones and stuff, but I never knew if that was true."

"Is that your thing? Feet?" The words just came out.

"Not exactly. More like proportions," she said, studying me. "For example Nick is lanky but has this presence. Like he takes up more space than he should. Like the dog, y'know?"

I sat down on the end of the bed beside her. She leaned in. Our legs were almost touching.

"How tall are you?" she asked.

"Six feet."

"Real six feet or Tinder six feet?"

"Yep. Five eleven and a half," I admitted.

She grinned. "Oh well. I don't blame ya, it's tough for boys on the apps. Round numbers are boring anyways. Fractions are way more interesting." She paused. "Are you interesting in any way?"

The question hung in the air between us. I never thought of myself as interesting.

Outside, Miss Holloway was still waiting by the water, she'd have to be hungry. A limestone scent in the air, drifting from the river. The sun was setting.

"So, you've really been here since winter?" I asked.

"More or less. I told you I was just passing through, y'know?" She paused, facing the door. "The truth is that every time I try to leave, I'm worried that Miss Holloway won't let me."

"What do you mean won't let you?"

"I mean, I tried once. Got as far as the front gate and she looked at me funny. It's hard to explain."

A dog that wouldn't let someone leave? It sounded crazy, but then again the dog had those strange eyes that pinned you in place and was beyond imposing. The girl seemed to be of the worrying type as well.

"No way. I'm off to a concert tomorrow and this dog won't let me go? Bugger that," I said.

"No, no, don't worry about that. I haven't tried that hard to be honest as Rachael doesn't mind me staying here. I think that time she gave me the evil eye was only because she suspected I went in the cave. Now... I didn't go *in* the cave. I get it, that'd mean I can't leave, fair enough. Honestly I think she's overreacting a bit."

~

"Anyway, how long ago did you have sex?" She blurted it before I could ask about the cave.

A bit of a forward move but maybe that's how they rolled here. In any case, after thinking about it, my answer didn't turn out to be so bad. It'd only been two weeks, so it wasn't like I had to own up to having shagged someone last night, or even worse, admitting it'd been six months ago. That would've been embarrassing.

"Two weeks," I said. "How about you?"

"Three months and six days. 97 days in total, only because it is a leap year, otherwise it would've been 96."

"Well, that's quite a long inning."

"Tell me about it. Being stuck in this shed does not lend itself to meeting many people, y'know. You are the first person I talk to, well, apart from Rachael. I mean she is quite the looker, I just don't swing that way."

~

"So you want to stay for a bit?" She placed her hand on my thigh. It was soft.

"Well, I would love to hear more about that cave so, sure."

She moved closer. Warmth came off her skin. She kissed me. Her lips were full, her tongue was small and strong.

"That place, y'know," she said, pulling away slightly but staying close. "I saw inside and I think that's why she won't let me leave. She knows I saw it."

"What did you see exactly?"

"Just the entrance. But it goes deep, and there's this dready vibe... " She touched my face. "Like you're intruding. Disturbing something that wasn't supposed to be found. And then there is this desire to go inside."

She kissed me again, longer this time, and pulled me down onto the space beside her. Yellow underwear as her dress hiked up. Matching in colour, sans the pattern.

"Yesterday I was so determined. I really wanted to go in. I told you, there is this urge. It pulls at you." Her voice dropped. "I've been thinking about it for weeks y'know, that cave probably spans the whole city. I read once about whole underground Roman cities, Pompeii or something."

I didn't know what to say to that. Pompeii, urges, caves that went on forever.

She pressed against me. Her breasts felt smaller than I'd anticipated. The sundress advertised a lot more than was there. How I ended up in this one, I had no idea. But I wasn't dying to go back to the house.

She guided my hands under her dress. Her thigh was soft, warm, slick. Could be just sweat. The shed was boiling and we were both sweating gallons. Bikram foreplay maybe. Hard to tell.

When she got to my cock she paused, unfamiliar. Learning in real time how to solve a riddle she'd never encountered before. My body wasn't entirely in it. The strangeness of the whole day and her unfamiliarity with uncircumcised men meant I could only manage a semi-hard-on. She wasn't fazed though and finished me with her hand despite the technical complications. Grinning all along. After she was done, I went down on her, determined to do my best and even things out. I was pretty sure I delivered.

~

We stayed by the foot of the bed. The concert tomorrow felt a lifetime away.

"What's your name?" I asked. My face smelled of her.

"Now that you mention it," she said, her voice dropping slightly, "I've been here only a few months but I'm starting to forget it myself."

She wasn't keen on giving me her name, and I had no intention of pressuring her to tell me.

Outside, the evening was settling into darkness. Cicadas hidden in the trees ready to drown out everything in a wall of noise. Kim would be awake by now, calling her friends to complain about me being in the States, doing predictable things.

"What do you think is there?" I asked.

She was quiet for a long moment. "I'm sure that's where Austin stops being Austin. Like the city just ends and something else begins."

"What kind of something else?"

We lay on the bed facing each other. "When I first found it, I was convinced that it was a secret facility of some kind. The entrance is too perfect, like someone carved it."

"You mean like government stuff they don't want people to know about?" I said.

"Not quite. It's not man-made but also not fully natural. When you get close, the air coming out doesn't feel quite right. It smells like somewhere else entirely, like those cenotes that go down for miles would smell." She kept going. "The sound is wrong too. You would expect echo, but it just swallows everything. Like darkness and silence that go on forever."

I pictured myself standing at the edge of something that wasn't quite of this world, feeling like I was being drawn in from the other side.

"So why didn't you go in?"

"I was about to. There was nothing I wanted more. But then the damned dog barked. I got scared and ran away."

Outside, the night had settled completely, the sounds of the river louder in the darkness.

"Maybe we can go tomorrow morning," I said. The words surprised me as they came out.

"Really?" She turned, facing me directly. "You'd want to see it?"

"Sure," I replied, half asleep.

~

I woke up before dawn, cramped at the edge of the single bed with her sweaty body pressed against mine. Through the small window, still there, the Colorado.

She was sleeping. The morning light was kind to her. Her skin softer, smoother. Fuller cheeks. Rounded chin. Definitely a more solid build than last night. I slipped out of bed and she didn't wake. Outside, the morning air was already warm. After what she'd told me, I needed to see the place.

I slipped on my trousers and the t-shirt I wore all day yesterday. I could go back into the house, grab the ticket, head to the city, and forget about the girl who didn't even want to share her name. In no time, I'd be at the concert. If I queued early, I might even score a good spot in the crowd. Being drawn into a cave was a bad idea, and at worst, I'd end up on the news being rescued. My type of holiday.

Still, I found myself heading toward the water, following the same path I'd taken the evening before.

Daylight revealed what she'd been talking about. There, cut into the limestone bank where the river curved, was an opening. Nothing dramatic, a dark mouth in the rock. Ancient, formed long before there was a river.

I stood at the entrance, the darkness deepening beyond. Impossible. The air coming out was cool. Mineral. Rot. Something underneath it not quite belonging. When I stepped forward, the sound of the water behind me vanished, the hole swallowing it.

"You found it," the girl said, appearing beside me.

"So you think this is it? This is where you say the city ends?"

She nodded. "I think so. This is a boundary. Well, that's my theory. Once we go in there, we may not come back the same way, or come back at all to this place. That's what I hope, anyway."

"Are you gonna go in?" she asked. The place pulled at us. The strange air gathering at the mouth. "It doesn't matter if you don't feel like going in, really," she said. "I'm going in no matter what. I've been thinking about it for months, y'know. And I'm not a flake."

From somewhere behind us came the sound of heavy paws. Miss Holloway between the trees, her shadow stretched long behind her. She sat down and waited, giving us enough space. She wouldn't interfere.

"She's not going to stop us, y'know?" the girl said quietly.

"Do you think she's trying to protect you from something worse than being stuck here?" I said.

"She's just watching it all, y'know."

Miss Holloway's eyes were fixed on us. In town, people would have started to line up for the festival.

The girl took my hand. We faced the darkness.

THREE

I TOLD MYSELF she wouldn't last five minutes inside. She'd stay near the entrance, get spooked by a bat or the scrape of a rock and come right back out. I'd been in caves before. To be fair, only the attraction type, those with lamps and elevated walkways, but even in those there was always some middle-aged person hyperventilating or freaking out for one reason or another. Without a torch she would have no hope of seeing anything. Even if she didn't get scared, caves are boring. There are only so many times you can pretend you care about mineral deposits and tour guide trivia. After the novelty wears off, it's just rock, everything starts itching, and pretty soon you're dying to leave.

The girl wasn't a flake, but she didn't strike me as the exploration type.

That's what I'd thought three hours ago. Now the rock I sat on had gone numb. My arse too. It was noon and she wasn't coming back out. My shirt was stuck to my back and I was starting to worry. I was also thirsty but didn't want to move in case she came out while I was gone. Miss Holloway sat under a cottonwood the whole time. Black wannabe sphinx with technicolor eyes, watching me.

After a while I realized that either she was coming out or she wasn't. And if she wasn't coming out, then sitting here thirsty wasn't going to change that. I'd been sitting on this bloody rock long enough that going back for water wouldn't make a difference.

~

I stood up and headed back to the house. The dog hauled herself up and followed.

Once inside I filled a bottle from the kitchen, grabbed my daypack, and threw in my phone and a couple of protein bars from the walk-in pantry. Changed the dog's food bowl as well. Dry kibble this time. She still wouldn't touch it, but I had to try. Refilled her water too.

~

Stepping outside through the French doors toward the river, I passed the dog. Her ears went up like she'd been waiting for this moment.

Unless this girl came out in the next half hour, going to the concert wasn't going to happen anymore. I'd been planning this trip for months. Even if she came out right now, I'd need to shower, change, figure out how to get into the city. It would be tight but doable. But she wasn't coming out. Here I was, waiting outside a cave for a woman I knew nothing about. The sun was brutal and I was missing the show I'd come for. Texts kept coming. It was late in Australia now.

~

Once inside the cave, I crouched to avoid hitting my head on the roof, then realised that it was more than high enough to fit a human. The darkness lasted only a few seconds, my eyes adjusted to it and everything was visible. I couldn't work out where light was

coming from yet. No obvious source, but the reflection on the stone itself made the walls glow.

When I was about twenty feet in, my shirt was finally starting to dry. The air was a lot cooler and drier than outside. The floor was solid. No sign of the river. My footsteps made no echo. That was weird, even more than the glowing walls. Here even my breathing sounded muffled, compressed in the space. No signs of animals. No smell. No insects.

Dug through my backpack for comfort, only to find that my phone was completely dead. Not that it would've mattered much inside this place, but not great either.

I turned around and the entrance behind me was gone. Not closed or magically disappeared. It was gone. There were only limestone corridors going back where the entrance should've been. I was sure I'd barely advanced and hadn't taken a wrong turn.

Retracing my steps, I walked back toward where the entrance was a few moments ago. The passage continued into the distance. Same width, same roof height but it kept going back. A ridge ran along the left wall, about shoulder-height. I'd noticed that coming in. Had to be the same passage. Except it wasn't. After maybe fifty steps, the ridge disappeared. The passage narrowed. Not remembering it narrowing, I stopped.

Behind me, wrong. Ahead, also wrong. I was imagining things.

A rock formation appeared that I didn't remember. It was a limestone curtain, wavy and translucent. Beautiful, actually, but completely unfamiliar. Clearly not where I'd started.

Corridors kept branching in multiple directions, sometimes three or four options. Pretty soon I quit trying to orient myself and just kept moving, following the luminescence. Passing under vertical shafts open to the surface but unreachable. I must've been going around in circles. The sunlight meant the outside world still existed. Couldn't reach it, but it was there.

Lost, not temporarily confused. Lost. I was gonna end up on Channel Seven: IRRESPONSIBLE IDIOT DIES IN CAVE (searching for girl he'd almost shagged). Or even worse, rescued by chopper through the shafts and with a life-long medical debt. I was trying not to panic yet and stayed calm. Maybe I was too shocked to panic properly, or maybe some part of me had accepted this was happening and losing the plot wouldn't help.

The sound changed depending on where I was. In narrow passages it felt compressed, close. In wider sections it opened up but didn't echo. Just absorbed. My breathing began to feel different in each space, sometimes muffled, sometimes surprisingly loud in my own ears.

My legs started to hurt, I sat down on a boulder worn smooth and tried to think clearly. Working out if there was a pattern to the passages. But there wasn't. If there was one, I couldn't decipher it. Following the glow meant going where the shafts were, but the shafts didn't lead anywhere in particular. Just holes in the overhang. I gave up trying to understand the place, stood up and kept moving. I wandered for at least a couple of hours. No plan.

I resigned myself to keeping going until I couldn't anymore.

After a while the corridor narrowed, the holes that'd been letting the sun in disappeared and the place gave way to total darkness. For a minute terror took hold. The black ate everything, and no matter what I did, I'd end up touching a wall that wasn't there before. Panic set in.

Another turn, and by some miracle, the corridor in front of me was still there again. All I needed was a place to lie down and sleep, or pass out.

In those moments of despair I kept thinking of the girl. She had no chance. There was no exit. She went in without food or water. She must have done the same. Following the light from the shafts into the void. Her fate the same as mine. Dying in the deep.

She'd stood at the entrance this morning and I'd let her venture in alone. I was furious at myself. I'd done nothing. What a limp dick. She'd been in here for at least five hours and I'd spent three of them sitting on a rock waiting for her to come back out. Now I was underground, just as lost, trying to find her, and I had no idea if that helped or just made things worse.

~

I kept trudging. Hours, maybe. Or minutes. Hard to tell. Then a singular pinpoint appeared. A tiny dot. My legs were done. I was dizzy. My back was scraped by the rock. It didn't get closer or bigger no matter how much ground I covered.

Until it did.

A glimmer hundreds of feet ahead. Actual light, not the glow from before. It pulled at me like the cave entrance had pulled at us earlier. I kept chasing it despite my confusion.

The pinpoint grew into a large opening ahead. The passage walls narrowed further as it brightened, filling the space. It didn't seem to lead to an exit to the surface. The air was still cool and stale, but much better than the pitch black from before.

When I reached the end, the passage opened to a huge rock chamber.

Inside, the dome vaulted up impossibly high. At least as tall as a concert hall. A sunshaft poured down through a single opening overhead, turning the place golden. The beam illuminated the back wall like a spotlight while the edges fell away into gloom.

Stalactites hung like enormous honey-colored icicles, some as thick as tree trunks. A few reached the floor, creating uneven columns. The walls curved into a smooth dome carved over aeons. The floor was dry limestone, flat but scattered with fallen rock and salt deposits that caught the rays and threw them back upward.

The space here was different. Not the dead silence of the passages but something that held sound. My footsteps echoed for the first time since I'd entered the cave. The space bounced sound back.

~

I heard something. Faint at first, barely there under my own footsteps. I stopped moving. There it was again, clearer now. Resonant and pure.

Music.

Not like radio or anything like that but notes on a piano. Someone playing phrases that sounded like they were being worked out in real time. The sound came from deeper in the chamber, somewhere past the bright beam. I made my way toward it.

Near the back wall where the sunshaft reflected strongest, stood a man at an upright piano.

He was wearing a hat.

~

The musician was old, at least in his seventies. He held himself with perfect posture despite his age. A black fedora sat on his head. Grey hair on the sides. His face was weathered and elegant, deep-set eyes that pinned you. Everything about him immaculate. Existing outside the rules of time. Defying it. Age had nothing on him.

His piano was placed only a few meters from the back wall, several passages branched behind it. How he'd gotten it down here, I had no idea. But I wasn't going to ask.

He raised his head from the keys and half-smiled at me.

"Leonard Cohen. It's a pleasure to meet you," his voice deep and gravelly. He paused, considering me with those penetrating eyes, then returned his gaze to the piano keys. Both hands rested on the board.

"Leonard Cohen... Like, the actual Leonard Cohen?" I scraped out. I'd spent hours inching towards death down there. Lost in passages that went nowhere, no echo, sourceless glow. From the depths back to life. And now, this. I had no doubt that it was actually him though. He matched the covers of his vinyls to a tee. The suit, the hat, the face. It was him.

"The actual one, yes." He played a few notes, let them hang in the air. "There's only the one me, as far as I know."

Leonard Cohen talking to me, in a rock chamber. With an upright piano. None of this made any sense, but at least finding someone was progress. Better than dying alone.

"Sorry to interrupt, Mr Cohen. It's a true honour to meet you."

"Oh, call me Leonard... please, and thank you for your kind words. I can see that you mean them. It is an honor for me to meet you too."

So, he was honoured to meet me. What do you say to that?

"Anyway, you are not interrupting much, I was just practicing a few lines, nothing earth shattering." He played a chord progression, it hovered all over the chamber. After a while it decayed naturally. "The resonance in this place is remarkable. That's why I spend so much time down here."

"Really?" I said. "So far I've barely heard anything. Everything's been muffled."

"Ah yes, that is in the passages, you are right, awful resonance back there." He nodded. "Most of the cave swallows sound. No reflection, no response. But here the music finds itself. The notes return but don't overwhelm." He played another chord, then hummed a low note that filled the chamber perfectly.

"How did you end up in this place, Mr Cohen? I still struggle to understand how on earth I find myself here."

"Ah, that's a bit of a long story that I'm happy to get to, if you allow me to indulge in it for a few minutes," he continued before I could offer a reply. "Back in the seventies, I was searching for natural acoustics. Producers had gotten too experimental with electronics, and their textures were all wrong. I was in Budapest, at a Roman bath. That

day I heard how my voice sounded magnificent in those ancient chambers for the first time."

I could picture it: Young Leonard wearing only budgy smugglers, going through his voice warm-up exercises, smoking Camels in an ancient pool.

"So, as it happens, I demanded local cave tours as a non-negotiable artist request wherever I played," he continued. "Others demanded Perrier and Jack Daniels, while I was content with caves. Fame afforded me certain small accommodations."

"So, you do come all the way down to this chamber just to chase the perfect resonance? That is a commitment I don't have in me."

He stood from the bench. "We all struggle with commitment at some point in our lives. You are still a young man. Don't be so hard on yourself, I say. And yes, I come here during the winter months mostly, when Montreal gets too cold. There are some marvelous caves in Quebec, similar formations. But even for a Canadian, it's too cold. This place has the right temperature, perfect acoustics, and direct flights."

I moved closer. He played a different melody. His fingers gliding across the keys. Then he sang a few phrases, his deep voice filling the chamber, bouncing back with just the right amount of reverb. Clean and holy. Every note from the piano came through perfect.

His voice carried in a way that felt ceremonial.

~

"Pardon me asking..." he said, pausing before continuing, "what brings you down here, my friend?"

"You won't believe this, Mr Cohen, I was trying to feed a dog but she didn't eat anything I gave her. Then I met this girl living in a shed, we almost had sex. Twice. This morning she vanished into the cave and I've been searching for her ever since. I'm getting really worried."

He set one foot on the bench, his fingers resting on the keys.

"Oh I see, it makes perfect sense," he said while playing a few notes.

"I may not be qualified, or frankly have the audacity, to give you any advice about the intricacies of consummation, but I may offer a few thoughts on your predicament with the animal."

"Please do, Mr Cohen."

"Of course. When I was a boy in Montreal, we had a dog. What a beautiful beast it was. An Afghan Hound, the color of stepped-on snow. He'd do the same thing. Nose the bowl, eye you like you'd poisoned it, and pad away. Drove my mother to distraction. She'd try everything. Kosher, non-kosher, different bowls, different times of day. Nothing worked."

"That's exactly the case with Miss Holloway," I interrupted.

"Well, one day Mother stopped trying," he continued, despite my bad manners. "Just gave him whatever food was available and walked away. Didn't watch him, didn't wait, didn't care anymore. The dog ate. Every meal after that, he ate. But only when no one was paying attention. Would you believe it? The dog started to put on weight. quite remarkable for a sighthound."

He sighed, his voice measured and philosophical. "That's just how it works with certain beasts. The moment you stop trying to make them do something, they do it themselves. I don't pretend to understand why. But yes, some dogs can be real pricks."

The word 'pricks' sounded different in his courteous, steady voice. Dryer somehow, the way a monk might say it.

~

"Anyway, I'm thoroughly enjoying your company, and I don't want to be rude, but I assume you're trying to get out?"

"Well, I'll need to get out eventually. But first I'm looking for the girl I mentioned earlier. She went in the cave hours ago. I need to find her."

"Ah yes. That lover you mentioned. Young lady, well built, sundress, spoke at length about Louisiana and Michigan and other matters?"

"Oh yes, that's exactly her." I was relieved that my non-consummated lover made it this far.

"She was here earlier. We spoke for quite a while... or rather, she did. I told her about an associate of mine who might be able to help with her quandary."

"Help her with a what?"

"A quandary."

"What sort of quandary?"

"That is between her and myself, my friend." His voice was gentle but firm. "A private confessional might be the only sacred thing left. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I wasn't trying to pry into your conversation. I just need to find her, make sure she's safe."

"She's safe, I'm certain of it," he said, sounding peeved.

~

"You know, people come through here sometimes. Not often, but a few times a year. There was another gentleman a few weeks back. Or perhaps months. Time moves strangely down here, as you may have noticed. He wandered for days before finding his way out."

"Days?" I said.

"Yes. But he made it out eventually. They usually do. The system has many entries and exits. You simply need to know where to look."

"How many exits are there, Mr Cohen?"

"Several that I know of. Five, perhaps six. There may be others. This place extends quite far. I've been exploring it for years. Whenever I'm here for the winter I still find new passages."

"If I may be so bold, I find myself in a predicament. Would you be so kind as to help me find such an exit?" I asked, trying to match how articulate Leonard Cohen was.

"Ah yes, of course." He gestured with one hand toward a passage on the left, the other still on the keys. "That passage there, follow it for about twenty minutes, and you'll reach a drain. Man-made section. From there it's straightforward to the surface. Just so you know, it's steep and there's a bat colony at the exit. Most often people are startled. The bats are harmless. Vegetarian." He turned back to the piano. "The girl. Your

rendezvous. I'm confident she made it out. You should do the same, my friend, before nightfall. That exit will bring you to Clarksville."

He returned to the piano, playing soft phrases and jazzy chords.

I stood there for a moment. Leonard Cohen had been here for years, knew the cave and the exits. He'd seen the girl, sent her to someone who'd help her with all her dramas. He was pointing me to the same exit. I could follow his directions, trust that he had my interests at heart. Or I could keep wandering, trying to find my own way, possibly never getting out.

There wasn't a choice. I was exhausted, confused, hungry. He knew the way. That would have to be enough.

I headed toward the passage. Behind me, the actual Leonard Cohen kept playing actual songs. The music followed me until the corridor curved and the notes of the piano started to get replaced one by one with the sounds of the outside world.

"If one can't trust LC, one can't trust anyone," I muttered to myself, pretending to be as profound as him.

~

The corridor sloped upward. Relentless after about ten minutes. A tough incline, not the flat wandering from before. The air changed and became familiar, less mineral and stale. It smelled more like rain. My footsteps echoed off the walls. After the cave's dead silence, it sounded like heaven.

The texture under my feet changed, the passage narrowed and became a lot flatter. Concrete and bricks instead of rock. The walls had changed too, they had straight edges instead of the cave's organic flow. I'd entered an old boxy drain. The ceiling was lower here, squared off. Man-made. Corroded metal bars exposed where the cement had cracked. Water trickled along the walls, reaching the bottom, running towards sunlight ahead.

Bats hung from the upper joints, dozens of them. Clustered where the structure sections met, packed tight in the gaps and crevices. Dozens of motionless upside-down furry mummies. The smell hit me, sharp and sour, bat dung mixed with damp concrete. The rustling and chittering were deafening.

Bats. The ultimate flying-rat winged-fox special. Plus they drink blood. No bueno. But I guess after hours lost in passages with no echo, a drain full of bats didn't register as a bad idea anymore.

It was late afternoon. Most of them were having a nap before the colony's dress rehearsal of their fifteen minutes of fame under that bridge. They couldn't care less about me as I just passed by.

I crouched beneath them. A few stirred as I went by, flapped around a bit, then returned to mummy mode. I heard some traffic in the distance. The hiss of car tyres on wet pavement.

Ahead, unmistakable daylight. An opening twenty feet away.

I followed the drain, then I was out into an open canal. Rain hit my face immediately. I tasted fresh air after hours of that raw mineral tang. I stretched my neck toward the grey sky. Actual sky. My eyes adjusted slowly, everything brighter even in the dusk of an overcast day. I rested for a few minutes. My throat was dry.

The canal ran parallel to a road. Not that I frequent stormwater canals but overall the scene was familiar. Water kept coming down. I climbed up the embankment and pulled myself over the edge. My sneakers squelched. Rain soaked through my shirt again, dried in a cave, wet outside.

The day pack was still on my back. I'd forgotten I was wearing it but now it was heavy and wet. A red sponge with shoulder straps. I was drenched. I pulled out the water bottle still full and had a sip.

It was warm and magnificent.

FOUR

THREE BLOCKS FROM the canal, the downpour wasn't stopping even for a second. I hadn't found any traces of the girl but she'd have made it out through the same exit. I had to trust Leonard Cohen. She was somewhere out here and I was determined to find her. As for me, good news, I was not going to die today, forgotten in a hole.

The street was the same one I'd walked yesterday. Oaks leaning over the pavement, Victorian houses, picture-perfect husbands jogging with toddlers strapped inside their McLaren three-wheel strollers. The post boxes had a green hue that made them just a bit different from how I remembered them. Yesterday they were proper American blue with proper American red metal flags. A hundred percent like in the movies. House numbers were also a bit too neat now.

Maybe hunger made me second-guess my own memory. Everything else matched the street I'd arrived on. Almost.

After a few minutes I came to a T-intersection. The canal vanished underground beneath the street, right under a large empty paddock with an eight-foot-tall security fence, full US Army spec. She had to have come this way. She had to. I needed to find her, make sure she was alright.

I turned left.

~

Just a few meters past the intersection, someone with a strong Spanish accent yelled at me.

"Here comes trouble! You need a blow-dry buddy. You're soaking, no one wants that."

I stopped. It was Florentino, the guy I'd picked up the keys from. He was wearing exactly the same clothes as yesterday.

"Can I come in for a bit?"

"Sí, of course," he said, grabbing my forearm. "Come inside, I will get you nice and dry. Don't you worry about a thing."

The laundromat was the same as yesterday. Red brick, faded sign, fluoro lights humming. Chemical smell hanging in the air. A woman folding laundry in the corner, three kids running amok among the machines. Dr. Phil on the TV mounted near the ceiling. An LG.

"I don't know about you but if I was staying at Rachael's I would be chilling and drinking rosé on the lounge babe. There is no need to go out in the rain like that," Florentino said.

"Tell me about it, it's been an adventure." A pool was forming around me on the vinyl floor. "By the way, any chance you've seen a girl? Early twenties, blonde, tallish, yellow sundress?"

"Maybe I've seen her... or not. Now, if you play your cards right you might be able to see her too."

"What do you mean if I play my cards right?" I responded, slightly annoyed.

"Don't worry, hon, no need to be uptight, she's safe, just getting a shower at the back. Now, bless your heart but those clothes are all kind of wet. I need to find you some dry clothes. Not sure I have your size but we can't have you here all dripping like that. Bad optics, not good for business." He disappeared through a door at the back.

~

Florentino returned carrying a pre-packaged bunch of neatly folded clothes. Baggy stone-washed cargo jeans, a huge Dickies t-shirt, white socks and a pair of green Crocs, complete with Goku and Yoshi pins. The entire getup looked like it came from a single unfortunate teenager. You couldn't have made it worse if you tried.

"And these?" I asked, hoping he had better clothes stashed somewhere for me to choose a more dignified getup.

"People forget things. Happens all the time." He handed me the stack without offering any other options.

He pulled coins from his pocket. "Dry your clothes. Twenty minutes should do the trick." He dropped eight shiny quarters into my palm.

"I'm sorry, I didn't bring any money."

"You don't have to, papi. Just get dry. I empty the coin box later, you see. I give you the quarters, you put them in the slot. I open the machine at the end of the day, and it gives them right back to me. You are dry, I haven't spent a cent. That's the business model." He pointed to the bathroom in the corner. "You can change in there. I'll be right back, I'm dealing with someone."

Not that I was an economist or anything like that, but moving his own money from pocket to machine and back again didn't strike me as a Fortune 500 CFO move.

I took the clothes to the bathroom to get changed.

~

The room was small and cramped. I sat down and emptied my bladder. I'd been domesticated since early childhood by the females in my life. Splashback is a real problem. I also learned a while back that most Germans pee sitting down, and it doesn't get more manly than the Germans. Period.

The sink sat right over the toilet. Water-saving contraption where water runs through the tap first and you get to wash your hands as the tank refills. The bowl contents went from dehydrated dark yellow to crystal clear in a blink. I thought of Melbourne and all the annoying Labour Party initiatives about water conservation. "If it's brown, flush it down. If it's yellow, let it mellow."

Changed out of my wet clothes and put my jeans, shirt, socks, jocks, all muddy and reeking of bat poo into a plastic bag Florentino had left on the sink. The borrowed clothes were way too big. American medium, not rest-of-the-world medium. The t-shirt hung off my shoulders like on a wire hanger. The pants too loose on my hips and way too abrasive against my crotch. I was not going to wear second-hand underwear, even in the circumstances I was finding myself in. Going commando it was. A man must have some decorum. Granted, the clothes made me look like a die-hard western-suburbs old skater, but they were dry and felt glorious.

~

I went back to the waiting area, dressed like a dickhead to wait for Señor Walkin' Tattoo to come out. A woman was sitting on a plastic seat just as brittle as mine. A low table between us. She was in her late forties. Wore old-fashioned lady slacks and a brown cardigan, too thick for the weather. Her hair was dark brown and dishevelled. Her eyes were a dark shade of copper. On the table lay *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. Dozens of sticky tabs turned the book into a multi-coloured piñata, the whole thing annotated beyond recognition. Follow your dreams type thing.

"First time?" she asked.

One of the kids ran past us, nearly tripping.

"Here yes, it's been a bit of a day for me. I got drenched, needed to come inside and now I'm waiting for my friend. She's at the back. How about you, is this your local?"

She thought for a while, struggling to get something off her chest. She clutched her hands, took a breath, met my eyes.

"No, it's not my local and, not that it would matter to you, but I'm only here because I'm buried up to my neck," she said.

Oh god. "Okay..."

"I don't even know where my clothes are. My house is filled up to the rafters. Cardboard boxes everywhere. I can't even walk through the hall. I can't find anything."

The same lady in the corner kept folding the same towel over and over.

"My nephews used to visit. They don't come anymore. There's no space at home."

"Did you just move houses?" I had moved a few times, it took me months to unpack, it was awful, I felt for her.

"I wish. I just keep buying things," she said. "It all started with coupons. I couldn't resist them. I clipped them at every opportunity. Mornings I'd drive around collecting them at Marshalls, Kroger, H.E.B, Randall's. Afternoons I'd drive out to use them. I soon started filling up the garage, then the laundry and in no time I was buried in things."

She paused for a long moment. Dr. Phil was still playing on the TV. He was scolding a man who'd become obsessed with making sourdough and was in the process of leaving his family. The man was moving to Japan to open a patisserie.

"I've been hooked for years. Every morning I wake up and tell myself today I won't go to Macy's. But by noon I'm in the car. Back shopping, stuffing the trunk. I know it's wrong but it's like something's making me."

She fidgeted with the hem of her cardigan.

"Now my house is a labyrinth. I'm not exaggerating. I can't even find food, basic things. I can barely move among all the stuff. The house is getting dark with all the stacked boxes against the windows, so I've been starting to use a flashlight to navigate. I haven't worn any other shoes for three years because I can't get to the wardrobe. Everything's packed."

She sounded desperate but somewhat relieved, confessing something she couldn't take back.

"So why are you at a laundromat if you don't even have clothes?" I probed.

She didn't answer right away. Weighing whether to trust me to keep going.

"I saw the ad and called the guy. I think his name is Florencio. He explained what they do. I came in to sign some papers he wants me to sign. Apparently some disclaimers. Mainly related to paying the cost for the treatment. He said most people don't mind it."

"You mean Florentino?"

"Yes, him. He's just in there with a customer, hopefully when he comes out we can go through the documents and get it over and done with."

She exhaled like she'd been holding her breath for years. Her shoulders relaxed. Lighter.

"So the friend you're waiting for, what's their deal?" she asked.

"I'm not sure to be honest. I just met her."

"Wherever it is, it's good that she's doing something about it."

"I guess so."

~

I was about to ask her details of the treatment and what the laundry had to do with any of it all, when Florentino appeared. He came through the door at the end of the hallway carrying a folder with documents. He approached the lady.

"Ms. Zorilla," he said. "Please come in."

She stood up, gave me a last glance, said nothing, and walked toward the hallway. She looked even smaller next to Florentino, barely reaching his chest.

"I'll be with you in a bit, hon. I just have a few things going back here. Busy day. You sit tight," he said to me.

The door closed behind them.

The Alchemist sat on the empty table, all those coloured tabs sticking out.

My dryer had three minutes left. The borrowed cargos chafed more the longer I sat in them. My stomach grumbled. Possessed.

The girl remained somewhere in the back.

~

When the girl came out, she was wearing a white bathrobe from the Hilton Garden Inn. Her hair was damp and she was barefoot, moving slowly, half-awake. I didn't recognize her at first. She looked at me like a deer in the headlights. After an instant she smiled.

"I knew you wouldn't chicken out in the end," she said.

I got up from the chair. "I'm glad you made it. Things got hairy in there."

"I mean, it wasn't that bad. The echo thing freaked me out, not gonna lie to you, and when it got soooo dark and narrow it was really scary. The big cenote chamber thingy was super pretty though. The old man was sweet too."

No doubt. The girl was back.

She walked over, sat down next to where hoarder lady had been sitting. The robe was too big on her, sleeves hanging past her hands.

"You look silly in those clothes," she said. "I mean cute, but silly. Like the skinny Beastie Boy, no, actually like Shaggy from Scooby-Doo but streetwise. You're cuter though, shame you aren't good with dogs, and you most likely have a girlfriend, so there you go, I said it. I like the Crocs though."

I was relieved she was here with me. She was right. I looked ridiculous. The cargos, the awful Dickies t-shirt, the stupid Crocs with the Dragon Ball pins. Everything was goofy. I didn't blame her.

"So you like crocs now? I thought you were scared of them," I said, pleased with my wittiness.

She stood for a second as if searching for the exact answer. "Crocs? Yes, they remind me of doctors, y'know. Gotta love a hot surgeon in scrubs. They always wear those. It must be some hospital safety regulation."

"I mean... crocodiles? Alligators? Baton Rouge? LSU? French? Hello..." She didn't get my genius.

"What are you on about?"

"The alligators, you said you were scared of them."

"You are weird. Cute, but weird. Everyone is scared of alligators... Anyway, I better get changed," she collected a bag of neatly folded yellow clothes, just like the one Florentino had prepared for me, turned around and walked to the cramped bathroom.

~

When she emerged she was wearing the sundress, brighter under the fluoro light. It was spotless. A neon yellow Swatch around her wrist I hadn't seen earlier, and men's Havaianas in official Brasil soccer team colours. Basically, Big Bird from Sesame Street. She handed the robe back to Florentino.

"Thank you gorgeous," she said.

"Yes, ma'am." He folded the robe like a butler in an old movie. Fabric draped over his forearm across his midsection. Other hand held behind his back. He turned to me.

"You want to have a go as well? We're pretty busy at the moment but I can fit you in."

"Pardon?"

"A bit of self-care at the back." He gestured with his eyes toward the hallway.

"Nah, I'm good. I'll shower at Rachael's."

Florentino paused. "Oh, I see. You don't have the information yet. That's understandable. These days everyone gets the info online or through our valued partners, mainly community boards. You'd be surprised how many people still respond to those. Not so many walk-ins anymore." He studied me. "So how did you come to know about the place?"

"Walking? Looking for a lost girl? Picking up the keys from you?"

"Sure, but how did you actually get to West Lynn?"

"Walked along the canal." *Bloody hell.*

"Ah!" he smiled. "You came the back way. That's why. Leonard sent you this way, didn't he?"

"Sort of. I did meet him earlier today."

"We've been partnering with Leonard for years. I really should make an effort and talk to him more often. Anyway, let me get you a menu babe, don't you move."

He disappeared through the door behind the counter.

The girl had settled into the brittle plastic chair where Ms. Zorilla had been sitting. She picked up *The Alchemist*, flipping through the sticky-tabbed pages.

~

Moments later he returned carrying a XXL yellowed bathrobe from the Hampton Inn and a massive laminated menu like those at cheap restaurants. He handed both to me.

I read it for quite a while. Him observing patiently. It was in English, but the descriptions of the services made no sense. Generic phrases that described nothing. Prices were listed in percentages, not dollars. All very suss.

I glanced at the girl for support. She wasn't paying attention, still absorbed in Paulo Coelho's invaluable life advice. Florentino waited while I kept staring at the menu, rereading it. It didn't get any clearer.

"So shall we go to the back?" he said, ready to usher me away.

"I think I'm good for now." I handed back the menu. The conversation with the hoarder, the girl acting strange, and now this? Too much to process. Whatever was happening in the back, I wanted no part of it. Not in the mood.

"Well, you know where I am. We all need maintenance at some point." He was still holding the robe, waiting for a change of mind. "Yeah nah, no hope, mate. Trust me."

~

"You hungry?" I asked the girl, changing the subject. "There has to be food around here. We should eat, I'm famished."

"Sure, I'm starving," she said.

Florentino walked to the back. Ms. Zorilla still hadn't come out.

The girl pushed open the front door. The door chime played a monotone version of an old Mexican ballad my mum used to listen to when we were little. Querida by Juan Gabriel. Nice.

We left. The rain had stopped.

~

We ended up at Doña Lesly's a few meters from the washateria. The smell of the place worked a dream and found us before we did. A hole-in-the-wall operation right around the corner. The concrete around it was stained with fat from years of take-out. White formica tables more appropriate for bingo, stacked sacks of flour in the corner. Yellow boxes of Topo Chico. A family sat at a table near the back, their kids busy with colouring books. A woman in glasses commanded the cooks like a four-star admiral. Doña Lesly maybe.

The girl didn't wait for me to sit down before ordering. Executive decision. A 2x12 taco promo for her, three quesadillas for me. She paid with a \$100 note she'd somehow hidden in her pocketless dress, then impossibly tucked away the change."

When the food reached us she tore into it like a starved hyena. I'd never seen anyone eat like this. She was ravenous. Like the food might vanish if she didn't get it down fast enough. Meat from the tacos would fall on the table, she wouldn't care, pick it up and swiftly devour it. One hand squeezed lime, other hand snatched full tacos. Food would reach her mouth exactly when her teeth were ready, like a precisely tuned conveyor. Lime juice ran down her forearm all the way to her armpits. I picked up my quesadilla. I was hungry too, but within human limits. I'd only eaten a sandwich before the dog, the

cave, LC, the hoarder, the goofy clothes, and the weird menu. Long day. I had every reason to eat junk. Besides, Mex isn't junk.

"Where are you from again?" I asked.

"Plainwell. Michigan. I see you weren't paying attention, I don't blame ya, though. Boys."

Talking slowed her eating down a bit.

"Is it very different from here?"

"Nah. A colder version really. My parents have a farm. Brothers live in D-town, they come back twice a year, fix whatever's broken, then leave again. Standard stuff, my parents like it there. Wolverines forever. We've been there since my great-great-great-grandparents came from Holland." She wiped her mouth with a paper towel. "But I'm sure everyone up there says they come from Holland, so who knows, we might've come from Germany."

As I was about to ask her about the menu from the laundromat, she stopped mid-bite, staring toward the window. Her eyes bulged, two giant green marbles bursting from their sockets. "Did you see that?"

I turned. Through the glass, a bat swooped low over a maroon Ford F-150.

"Yeah. Tiny bat. Harmless."

"Yeah, well, that thing was huge. I'm telling ya." She put her taco down, leaning forward to see where the bat went. "Didn't you see it?"

The bat was already gone, but I'd seen it clearly. Same as the ones in the drain.

"Garden variety bat. Vegetarian. Trust me."

"Yeah, no, that thing was massive. Vegan alright, but the size of a bobcat or a bear. At least a cub, for sure."

"It was just close to the window," I said. "Made it look bigger."

She sat back, picked up her food again. Unconvinced. "Maybe." She took a bite, chewed, staring at the window.

"Nevermind, I used to be terrified of bats, y'know?"

"I know, and everything else."

"Oh well. Can you imagine that bridge? Hard pass, for sure. Billions of vampires tangled in your hair. Hell no."

"Right..."

"But I just saw one, a huge one, easily as big as a grizzly, and I'm not scared silly. The thing works." She smiled to herself. "I mean, if I can handle seeing monsters like that and not freak out, I can handle anything in college."

The bat had been small. I was certain.

~

A few minutes later, food nearly gone, I was ready to change topics. "So you told me you'd been at Rachael's since the winter? I bet you are getting sick of the shed by now."

"Yes, a bit to be honest. It's been way too long."

"It seems like you're getting ready to move on, right? Is that what all of that kerfuffle was about back there?"

"Sort of. The last couple of days have helped. I thought it through in the cave mainly. If I don't leave now, my offer will lapse. I managed to get a deferral and I can stretch it

to the spring, but I'd rather start in September. Get it over with. I don't want to be one of those mature students who are like thirty or something, pretending they are young."

"What about the French and all that?"

"Goodness me, you keep going on about that, let it go, will ya?" She kept going, "Alright, let's deal with it once and for all. What about 'em exactly?"

"You sounded terrified of the swamps, the French, alligators at school."

"Why would there be alligators at school?" She wiped her hands on a napkin. "I mean, everyone is scared of alligators, and fair enough but they're in the swamps, not on campus. It's not like they're just wandering around Baton Rouge!" She glared at me. "And what's wrong with the French? Do you have something against French people?"

"Nothing against them." *Spare me.*

"Because that'd be a bit much, don't ya think? They're just animals. Not the French, I mean the alligators. They're not going to chase you down to hurt you unless you bother them." She took a sip of her Jarritos. "I think you're confused."

She was wrapping up her last taco. "Also, LSU's in Louisiana, not in Quebec. They speak English in Louisiana. Last thing I say about the topic."

We stayed silent for a while finishing our food.

"Well, I'm glad you have decided to move on from that shed, have you thought about timing?"

"I haven't decided but soon. It's not that I'm in a hurry or anything, I've got used to the shed, isn't that sad?"

"I don't think it's sad at all but yes, changing is good."

"Just time to go, y'know? Don't you get that feeling?" She had finished her Jarritos and was now drinking mine.

"I get that feeling, yes. All the time."

~

"What about you?" she asked.

"What about me?"

"What are you doing? Are you staying in Austin?"

"I don't think so. It's been a wild ride, to be honest. Besides, this was only meant to be a holiday, I have a life to get back to in a couple of weeks."

"Right. I get it."

I looked down at the cargo pants, ready to be grilled about my life back home, then Goku and Yoshi reminded me of my outfit.

"Great. I left my clothes in the dryer."

"You silly. The laundromat would be closed by now but you could knock on the door. Florentino should still be in there, he'd love to see you." She chuckled.

"Yeah nah, it's fine. I'm tired anyway, I can pick them up tomorrow."

We walked out. The rain had stopped. The street was wet. Above us dozens of bats swooping between buildings and streetlights. Filling the sky like a brown furry blanket.

She plowed ahead of me toward Rachael's, not bothered by any of the creatures across the sky.

Not even a glance.

FIVE

THE SHED LOOKED much bigger now that it was empty. Dust visible on the floorboards in the morning light. Single bed stripped bare. Two nights ago the place was alive. Chocolate wrappers on the floor, her clothes piled around the corners. The mattress still held her shape, a body-worn imprint in the foam. No fancy springs underneath to erase it, just three months of compression.

The shed smelled just like it had when I spent the night here. Pink soap, river earth, salty sweat from before her clean job at the laundromat. A whiff of wet dog. Miss Holloway must have wandered in at some point.

She'd taken everything. The 50-litre backpack, dirty clothes, Wolverines poster, travel photos from above the bed. Lotions and cheap pastel perfume bottles from the wooden shelf. Next to the stereo, square dustless marks where the CD cases had been.

Through the window the brown water moved just as slowly. The cottonwoods, the limestone riverbank where the cave mouth sat patiently for its next visitor. The same view she'd had. Everything still there, nothing changed. Just the girl, gone.

~

Half an hour had passed and I was still in the room that, apart from the lived-in smell, now offered very little evidence she'd existed. I opened a drawer on the tiny bedside table. Empty. I pulled it all the way out, checked the back. Nothing. I kept examining the place. Empty hangers in the closet, power outlets without chargers, and more dustless patches where the cables had been. Without the dust, announcing the positions of her few belongings, I'd doubt yesterday happened. But the marks were there. So it was real. The girl, the cave, the dog, hoarder lady, all of it was real, I hadn't dreamed it. Everything happened.

This was not snooping. I guess it would've been if she was still in the place but I wasn't doing that. I was going through a space after someone had left, hoping to find something they hadn't wanted to take with them. Anything that would explain her actions. A boarding pass, a ticket, a coffee cup to tell me her name. I used to snoop when I was a boy, I hadn't snooped for years and knew the difference. Either way, snooping or not, I learned nothing, what I didn't know yesterday I didn't know now.

I lifted the corner of the mattress before sitting on it. Nothing underneath. Checked under the bed frame itself. Only dust and a cloudy spiderweb with hundreds of tiny spiders that must have just hatched. I sat down on the edge. The mattress was deceptively thin. It creaked under my weight. The girl had spent months sleeping on it, living in a shed, working up the courage to leave for uni, now she was gone. On the way to LSU, free of all her fears.

~

I went back into the house after going through the shed, and set out to make coffee. I hadn't had it in three days. A recent record. I found paper filters in a drawer, a hundred

different types of whisks, one of those bright yellow KitchenAid mixers that back home cost a lot. I even found a proper coffee maker. It was an Italian moka pot, a stovetop straight out of the 1920s, with its pretty straight edges. Those actually make quite a decent brew, if you know how to use them. But for those you actually need real coffee. I wasn't expecting fancy Honduras single-origin beans, just cheap supermarket coffee would've been fine, but for the life of me I couldn't find anything in the cabinets. The kitchen had everything except what I needed. Same as in the shed, I kept looking for something that wasn't there.

After about ten minutes I found instant 3-in-1 Nescafé. Decaf, in little red sachets, already mixed with artificial creamer and tons of sugar. Yep. Nothing like crappy instant coffee to make me feel normal after the last couple of days.

I tore open a sachet and poured it into a mug. I boiled water in a fancy kettle that had a useless electronic screen showing the temperature. It was in Fahrenheit, which made it double useless. As soon as the water hit the bottom of the mug the awful sweet smell took over. I stirred it and took a sip. Terrible, but I polished it in less than a minute standing there in the enormous kitchen. I then moved to have breakfast. Helped myself to three organic eggs and butter from some local dairy with a laughing longhorn cow drawn on the wrapper. I cracked them into a yellow Le Creuset pan that if it had been heavier would have a moon orbiting around it. The gas flame came on with one single turn of the igniter. Masterchef-level equipment that for simple sunny-side-ups was overkill. The eggs cooked presto. I added pink salt from an electric grinder that required two hands to operate. Cut two slices of sourdough from the counter, still fresh, and put them in the toaster, which had settings for brioche, rye, and muffins. I dialed in rye.

Moments later I sat at the dining table, pretending to be a Texaco impresario, having organic eggs on fancy butter made in a French pan, accompanied by tap water, nice and lukewarm. Miss Holloway, stretched out near the back door watched me eat. Her breathing was barely noticeable. The bowl I'd filled before I went to the shed sat untouched on the marble. Outside, the morning was already hot.

~

After eating, and not feeling like a hot shot anymore, I cleaned a bit and played with the Insinkerator. Washed the borrowed goofy clothes that I'd have to return to the laundromat later in the day. I needed to get my actual clothes. I wandered into the living room. The furniture was classy. Old money. Bespoke. Carved from single pieces of wood. Everything oversized, designed for a house this big.

Photos covered the mantle above the fireplace. Some recent ones. Rachael at weddings, traveling, dinners with her mates, some outdoors. A young girl in one of the pictures, maybe eight or nine, playing in the backyard, next to a Great Dane that looked like a younger Miss Holloway. Pitch black with patches of grey and wacky eyes. The dog was large but normal, as tall as the girl. Rachel? That photo was old. The colours were faded and the paper was yellowed. I stood there for a while, looking at a girl and the dog that looked like her majesty but couldn't possibly be her. Had to be the queen's mum. Mrs Holloway maybe.

The air conditioning cycled off, and for a moment everything was completely silent.

~

Moving away from the photos I crashed onto the chaise, found the remote and turned on the seven hundred inch flat screen TV, a single frameless chunk of black glass set into the wall. I zapped through dozens of channels. It took forever to find anything worth watching. It was mainly infomercials, medical ads and Christian sermons. When I was about to give up, there she was, Judge Judy.

I love Judge Judy.

I genuinely love her, not ironically or as background noise to do chores. I do. One week back in Melbourne I caught the flu and stayed home for a whole week watching it in daytime TV. The episodes were from god knows when, edited down and out of order, but so good. Kim used to give me an earful about it. Said it was depressing watching people argue over deposits and car loans and storage units. But I found it relaxing. She had this divine gift for making decisions, cutting through the excuses, handing down judgement. Ten minutes, problem solved. Here in the States the cases were current. Real. It felt different somehow. Watching Judge Judy solving the biggest world problems after an action-packed day. Bliss.

The episode was about a woman suing her ex-boyfriend for half the cost of tattoo removal. \$3,000. They'd gotten matching tattoos two years ago. Tribal motifs with their initials intertwined. His across the chest, hers in the small of her back. S&M. Classic. His idea, she said. Now she wanted it gone and he should pay half.

The ex boyfriend (sorry, the defendant) kept his hands in his pockets and wouldn't lift his head. He was in his mid-twenties, wore a beard manicured to the millimetre, neat oversized chinos, a tucked in polo, and pretend dressy Clarks. Tan leather with white rubber soles. He'd paid for the original tattoos, he said. That should be enough.

Judge Judy leaned back in her chair. "How much did the tattoos cost originally?"

"\$500," the woman said. "Total. For both of us."

"What a deal. And removal is \$3,000?"

"Yes. Just for mine. Laser removal takes multiple sessions. The removal hurts a lot too, much more than getting the tattoo, so I think that I'm also entitled to pain and suffering."

"Dear, I should be entitled to pain and suffering having to listen to you!" shot back Judge Judy, glaring at her from under her glasses.

Judge Judy challenged the man. "And you, sir, you paid \$250 for her to get a hieroglyph. Now removal costs \$3,000 and you think you shouldn't pay for that?"

"I didn't tell her to get it removed," he said.

"But you told her to get it in the first place, sweetheart."

"I suggested it. We both wanted it at the time."

"That's because you were both stupid... At the time." Judge Judy let that sit.

The woman spoke up. "I can't move on with this mark on my body. Every time I'm with someone, they're staring at our initials. I can't stand it anymore. I need it gone."

"Oh, spare me the details, please. You made a permanent decision about your body," she continued. "I get it, people do many things when they are in love, but nobody forced you. You wanted it then. You don't want it now. That is called regret."

The man smirked.

"Don't act so pleased," said Judge Judy. She consulted her notes. "Anyway, you splurged on the original tattoos I guess. That was your gift to the relationship. What a charmer."

"So I don't have to pay?"

"You are lucky, you don't have to pay for her to remove what you both agreed to put there." She turned to the woman. "You wanted this tattoo. You got this tattoo. Now you want it gone. That's on you. Removal costs more than getting it, that's how it works. You live with it or you pay to fix it yourself. Case dismissed."

The gavel fell. The woman close to tears. The man walked out quickly, didn't look back.

The camera cut to an ad for car insurance, I turned off the TV and stood up.

Time to check on the dog.

~

She was still literally being a bitch and not eating anything I put in the bowl. She must have gone more than two days without food.

Back to the huge bowl. I dumped the untouched food, went to the pantry, and did it all over again. The kibble rattled into the bowl, loud in the quiet kitchen. It smelled meaty and artificial. Chicken burger flavour.

A pint of half-and-half this time. Irresistible. I placed the food again on the marble floor. The giant footsteps came a minute later. She stepped in, regal and unhurried. She inspected the bowl, then measured me. Turned around and walked toward the back of the house.

The kibble was only going to get soggy again. Staring at the bowl still untouched, I didn't understand what I was doing wrong. Leonard Cohen was right, some dogs are pricks. I was not scared of her anymore. She wasn't aggressive or anything, just a bitch. I followed her down a hallway that I hadn't explored yet, past a service room and the home office where I printed the ticket. At the end of the hallway there was a dog flap, as tall as a door but only as wide as her hips. She went through it. I did the same, fitting through just fine.

~

The dog room was more like a small hangar. The ceiling was at least fifteen feet high, maybe more. The floor was epoxied concrete, cool and clean. The place reeked of dog. Her bed sat against the far wall. At least a super-king-sized bed, maybe bigger. A sphinx-sized bed made from an old inflatable pool that someone had stuffed with hay and covered in old blankets. She walked over to it, circled and settled down with a heavy sigh.

The room had her things scattered around. A chewed-up personal-trainer rope, a custom-made Kong as big as a basketball, and a giant stuffed giraffe way too realistic for my liking. Aqua-blue guts spilling out of its orange belly, and an old-fashioned computer cable tangled around its neck. In the corner, stacked against the wall, two cornhole boards. Wooden, worn smooth from use, and also chewed-up.

I'd seen people playing cornhole back in a sports bar in San Antonio but didn't want to embarrass myself then, so I thought I'd give it a try in private. Setting the boards

inside her hangar would work. It was certainly big enough but she was watching me from her bed and she wouldn't appreciate me turning her humble abode into a game room, so I picked up the boards to take outside. They were heavier than they looked, solid wood. Awkward to carry, especially both at once. I carried one at a time and headed for a second dog flap that opened to the side of the house.

~

Outside, boiling for a change. I walked past the vegetable patch, looking for a flat spot to set up.

Around the house on the clothesline, single sheets and blankets hung swaying slightly in the breeze. Clean, almost dry in the morning sun. It was the girl's bedding from the shed. The yellow pillowcase and the thin blue sheets and blanket. She'd washed them. Before leaving she'd taken the time to wash the bedding she'd borrowed. Stripped the bed, run the machine, hung everything out to dry.

After lowering the boards I stared at the clothesline. It meant she'd planned it. Packed deliberately, cleaned up after herself, left on purpose. Not fleeing. I was relieved that it wasn't a rushed panic thing where she freaked out and left abruptly. The relief surprised me.

I must've slept so deeply. How could I not have heard the washing machine? It would've filled, spun, and made all sorts of noises. I'd heard none of it. Everything that'd happened took more out of me than I thought. She must've gotten into the house through the burglar-friendly dog flaps while I was dead asleep. Out for a six.

I set up the game in a clear patch of yard. Fifteen steps apart, facing each other. The bean bags were faded, some split at the seams with beans leaking out. No idea what the actual rules were so I decided that I'd get a thousand points if it went in the hole, a hundred for landing on the board.

Ten minutes of throwing produced nothing but short shots, long shots, sideways misses, so I was clever and gave myself ten points for each miss. I kept playing, making up rules as needed. Bags that landed on their side were worth double. It got complicated real quick.

After a while, keeping score became useless.

Resounding victory though.

~

After the cornhole olympics I went back to the guest room. I pulled out my phone from my backpack. Flat but dry. I'd forgotten about it last night when I crashed. Found the charger. Good start. Plugged it into the wall. The battery was so knackered it wouldn't even show the charging icon.

Wearing my clothes this time, I lay down on the bed just for a minute. The ceiling fan spinning steady. The house was quiet except for its hum. I fell asleep for a change.

~

I dreamt about the cave. Not the passages or the darkness, but the sound. Or the lack of sound. That dead silence where even breathing was muffled. In the dream I was walking

through it again, but this time Leonard Cohen was ringing church bells. Faint at first, then louder. Rhythmic. Insistent. The bells kept ringing until they woke me up.

~

On the nightstand, the mobile screen lit up. Message after message kept coming through, dinging and vibrating against the wood.

You're really just going to ignore me like that?

are you actually okay? Starting to worry

Seriously this isn't funny. Just let me know you're alive

Are you okay? I'm actually worried now

This is fucked. You can't just disappear like this

Thirty five more that I didn't read. Then the last one, that had just shown as I was deleting the others:

Fuck you mate. Seriously. Duck you.

She'd worked herself up into a rage. Now she was dishing it all out by text.

I didn't reply. What was I going to say? Making up some story about the concert or getting drunk, then getting reamed about getting drunk. I'd deal with it eventually. The last one would appear as read anyway, so that was enough to keep her from worrying.

~

When we met, I told her about this trip. I'd bought the tickets months before meeting her. Told her about it on our second date. She'd been fine with it then. Into it actually even though she only listened to hardcore electronic music. She asked questions about the festival, the bands, the place. She did her best.

She was trying her best back then, then as the date got closer something shifted in her. She started mentioning it more. Asking if I was sure I wanted to go. Dangling bait for me to bite: "You could skip it, you know," but I didn't bite. Maybe that was what made her furious. That I didn't bite. To her I'd decided to leave her, not just go to a music festival.

By the day before I left, when she watched me pack my bag, folding things I would've just stuffed in if she wasn't watching me, her attitude had shifted towards total disapproval.

That night we had sex. It was good. We lay naked and for a few minutes I held some hope that we'd make it through the goodbye without a fight. Until she brought up what she was always going to. Couldn't help herself.

"It will be a long time between drinks, you know?"

She said it without any ill intention but it hit wrong. Straight away my chest tightened. Fear of the next few hours set in.

"You can always send me smut, you know?" I replied, trying to keep it light. It was always going to land flat.

"What a dick."

"Come on, Kim."

"I know, it's just sad." She turned onto her side, facing away from me. "I'm not trying to start a fight."

But she was. Not because she wanted to, but because she had to know. It was how she was built. The anxiety came out in so many different ways. I understood it. But understanding it didn't stop me from feeling awful. I wasn't planning on doing anything bad.

We lay there in the dark. Her flat was freezing. I had no way to make the situation better. Anything would make it worse. I knew it. She wanted certainty that wasn't there. We were fundamentally different and at some point we'd have to accept it. We fell asleep eventually and made it through the rest of the evening relatively unscathed.

~

She drove me to Tullamarine Airport three hours later, at 4:00 AM. Inside her Honda Accord the tension hovered and the silence between us was complete. For almost an hour we did well and both managed not to mention the night before. As we exited CityLink she finally spoke.

"You know what the problem is?"

I knew what was coming and braced for it. "What?"

"You don't seem to realise what this could do to us."

"I'm going to a festival, Kim."

"Are you though? Really? Fucking off a month to the States for a concert?"

"Yes, Kim, last time I checked it isn't like going to the Sunshine Coast. I'm not going to travel all the way there and not see a bit of the place."

"Well, you have fun at your stupid festival," she said, keeping her eyes on the road.

"I will, you know."

~

After going through the messages, as I was about to put the phone down, another text came in.

Back this afternoon around 3. If you are in the house, great. If you have left, let me know where you left the keys. Hope you're having a blast. Rach. X

Nothing like a normal message from someone other than a mental girlfriend.

I was still feeling like crap from all the messages from Kim and thought of leaving right then. I didn't feel like pleasantries. The last couple of days had been a bit too much, so yes, Rachael, while you were happy rafting I was having a blast.

I'd pack in five minutes, drop by the laundromat to get my clothes and before the end of the day I'd be out of this city. I had money to stay elsewhere, head out to Houston or Dallas. Be gone before she arrived.

Putting the phone back in my pocket, I spent the rest of the morning tidying the place up, ready to leave. I washed the bedsheets, cleaned the otherwise immaculate toilet bowl, and checked all the surfaces where I'd been. I was still annoyed, but I wasn't going to leave a mess.

After cleaning the house, I walked through the back, returned the cornhole boards to Miss Holloway's hangar and took the clothes down from the line. One last time I went back past the vegetable patch, the fruit trees heavy with things I couldn't eat, and followed the path toward the river. Same as yesterday the limestone smell started to become stronger as I got closer. The cave entrance cut into the bank exactly as it had before. Dark mouth in the rock, too perfect to be natural. I paused. Cool air exhaled from the darkness. Metallic. River sounds muffled, still wrong.

Back to the cave was an option. Once inside, follow my instinct, find Leonard Cohen, and ask him questions about quandaries. (First I'd need to find out how he got a piano through that entrance though.) Anyway, he'd been helpful before, was as wise as they come and could help me make sense of all this mess. He could even send me to a different exit. He said there were several if you knew what to look for. Maybe one that led somewhere better. No kidding.

That thought came crashing down real quick. The entrance disappearing behind me. Passages branching infinitely. No echo. Sound just stopping. A glow making everything visible but wrong. Time distorting. Going back there: Shit idea. So I decided to practice some self-preservation for a change. Don't get in that hole again.

Rachael also knew things. She was connected to all of this, the washing, the backyard, Miss Holloway. She'd been flaky and absent but she was in this. Maybe she'd help me, or at least explain things.

SIX

A COUPLE OF HOURS later while I was returning the cornhole boards to the dog's lean-to, Rachael's silver Forester pulled in. Kayak racks on top, gutter rash, and a collage of stickers smeared with every cause from Save the Whales to Love is Love across the back bumper. Full prog mobile.

Of course Miss Holloway wouldn't eat from me. Not socialist enough, I reckon. She'd disappeared again, back to her spot by the river, maybe sleeping somewhere secret, who knows.

Rachael stepped out, looking nothing like someone who drove that monstrosity. Early forties, dark hair pulled back from her face, neat black jeans, grey microfiber Lululemon t-shirt, fancy trainers. Lean shoulders, feminine and strong. Not gym-fit, but the kind of fit that comes from actually doing physical work. She moved like she was aware of every inch of her body. Yoga chic.

She was about to unload groceries and I approached to help. She smiled at me like she'd known me for years.

"How's your week been?" she asked, sounding genuinely interested.

"Busy. The place does have a way of keeping you on your toes, if you ask me."

"It sure does. Austin has so much to offer. Have you gone to see the bat colony yet?"

"Haven't had a chance," I didn't know what to make of her. She must've known about the things that go on in her backyard.

"You should. Congress Avenue Bridge. Quite a sight, it really is worth the wait. They turn the sky brown. I'm not exaggerating." She handed me a bag.

"I saw some flying around yesterday," I said.

"Sure. There are colonies all over town. Sometimes you can see them fly all along the creek. I've seen them all the way up Clarksville. Different thing altogether though."

We walked inside. She moved through the kitchen gracefully putting things away. Milk in the enormous fridge, courgettes on the counter. While she put her groceries away, I couldn't help thinking that she knew way more than she let on.

"There were heaps along the canal on the way to the laundromat," I said, hoping she would catch my drift.

Her eyes sharpened. "Oh, I see you went the back way. Exploring?"

She knew.

"Well, not that I wanted to. But I met your other guest in the backyard who insisted she wanted to get into the cave. She went in, wouldn't come out and I had to go after her. I was worried."

"I figured. Florentino texted me saying you guys came by."

"She's an odd one for sure," I said.

"Is she? We all have our own story."

"I suppose we all do. My story has gotten a bit complicated lately though. Anyway, I think she left this morning in a rush."

"Yeah, it makes sense. She'd been stuck a while. Good that she's moving on." She turned to me. "Coffee?"

~

Rachael opened a cabinet and fetched a bag of Whole Foods ground coffee. *Argh, that's where it was.* She grabbed the moka pot, filled it, and put it on the stove.

"People do that sometimes. Living in flux."

I sat down at the kitchen island. "I guess, flux or not, I really just hope she's okay. The girl. She left all of a sudden. She was saying odd things. Everything's a bit strange."

"Yes, that's how it seems to you, but she'd been here for a while. She just couldn't get herself to leave for whatever reason, then she made a decision. That's good," she continued. "I didn't mind her staying anyway. It isn't like she was occupying my space or anything. She must've really needed to reflect to stay in that shed for so long."

"I mean, it doesn't sit well with me. She kept blaming the dog for not letting her leave, which to me is a cop out. Gets in the cave, gets done whatever it is that they do at your friend's laundry then poof. Gone."

"People usually end up making excuses for not moving on. That's okay. In the end you should head off to where you want to be whenever you're ready. If that means taking an odd route, oh well." She filled two cups, handed me one. "She ended up going to college, right?"

"Yeah. She said she was off to LSU."

"So, she's probably on her way there." She sipped her coffee. "The girl couldn't have stayed in that shed forever. It's not set up for long-term."

I drank the coffee. Amazing. "You know, a couple of days ago the girl was really unsure about Baton Rouge."

"Who wouldn't? Louisiana's heat is as close as you'll ever get to being bain-marie'd. It truly is awful. I don't blame her."

"No, it wasn't that though. She had all these reasons not to go there, then she walks out of the back of the laundromat in a bathrobe, eats like a maniac, all of a sudden she is scared of nothing, sees things that make no sense and the next day she disappears." The coffee tasted better the more I drank it.

"Yeah, well. She got what she wanted. That can't be so bad. Trade-offs."

I pictured the girl's face coming off the back of the laundromat, wearing the bathrobe. Fearless.

~

"Have you ever been to the cave?" I asked.

"I haven't been in there for a while. It just takes forever, you know. It becomes a whole-day thing and it gets old after a while. As you start getting older, it loses its charm a bit." She finished her coffee and washed the cup in the sink. "It really is fantastic the first few times. That's the point. In fact the whole backyard is an experience, so much to discover."

"That's one way to put it. By the way, I met Leonard Cohen." I might as well tell it all.

"Oh yeah, Leonard." She smiled. "He's been around forever. Nice man. Quite old-fashioned in his thinking, but nice."

"He actually helped me get out. I was getting desperate in there, but then I found him. Thank god. He said there were multiple exits."

"He loves that. I sometimes think he gets a bit of a power trip from it, directing people on their last legs to whichever exit he feels like. He must feel omnipotent or something." She dried her hands on a towel. "That cave's big. Goes all over. So many stories about it."

"According to the girl, the cave was where Austin ends. That's a stretch to me. I came out at West Lynn, just a few things didn't add up."

"Yeah, people mention that sometimes. I swear it's the stale air in there. You'd be surprised how your breathing affects everything you do."

I hoped she wouldn't steer the conversation towards me joining her school for deep-breathing and Kegel exercises. *Namaste.*

"Do you think it's just that? The air? There's a lot more to this place than the air."

"Yes, the property has its charm, I don't really understand how it all works though. People come through. Some stay a while, others leave quick. Whether you explore the backyard or not comes down to curiosity. The land of the free, you know. You do you."

~

Miss Holloway appeared in the doorway, David Bowie eyes fixed on Rachael's blue-grey ones. They melted for each other.

"Isn't she a cutie?"

"Yes, so calm. Which is good. You don't want a dog that big to be jumpy. You've trained her well."

She poured the rest of the coffee from the moka. "Oh no, I haven't trained her at all. Can you imagine? So stubborn. She's just an old girl. Not so klutzy anymore, thank goodness."

"Stubborn alright. I've tried to feed her four times today. She won't eat."

"Yeah, she's particular about that." She rinsed her cup. "Maybe refusing food is her key to a long life. Who knows with dogs?"

"I'd never have thought that dogs would fast for longevity," I said, proud of myself.

"I guess. In all honesty, I've been trying to figure out Miss Holloway's quirks since I was a child. She's been odd forever. You should have seen her as a puppy, she was a menace. Some things you just accept, you know?"

So either the dog was forty or Rachael was eighteen and had been in the sun too much.

~

We continued chatting while finishing the coffee. She told me about a trip she did to Melbourne some years back. I told her about my work back home.

"So what are your plans?" Rachael eventually asked.

"I should head out soon. Get out of your hair."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'm not kicking you out, just asking." She smiled. "You can't leave Austin without seeing the bat colony, I mean you'd regret it. You just can't. And of course the Capitol. These Texans would wax lyrical about it, how they were an independent country for about five minutes and all, but in all fairness it's gorgeous and

very impressive. You can stay in the guest room a couple of more days. No pressure though."

"I appreciate that."

"Anyway, I'm thinking of getting some food. Can't be bothered cooking. Do you need anything? I'm heading out soon if you want to come."

"Actually, I left my clothes at the laundromat. The ones I came in."

"Of course you did. I'll drive you."

Minutes later we jumped in the prog mobile and headed into town.

~

"Gotta love the trim on the Subaru," I said, settling into the flannel-covered passenger seat.

She laughed. "God, no. I'd never buy this car. It's my friend's. She's out of town, lets me use it when mine's in the shop."

"What's yours?" I asked.

"Mazda CX-30. Turbo. Fiesta Red. A lot nicer than this thing." She pulled out onto the street. "I've been single for a while, fair enough, but not quite at Subaru-and-sticker manifesto level yet. Give me a few years."

"Good info," I said. *There is a god.*

"Smooth. Anyway, my friend's a bit full-on about her beliefs. I respect it." She turned onto West Lynn. "I draw the line at bumper stickers."

"Oath," I replied, relieved.

She glanced at me strangely. Smoothness gone.

She double-parked outside the washateria and put her stop-anywhere hazards on. "I'll wait here. Reverse parking this thing is a nightmare."

Inside, Florentino manned the counter, he was organising piles of quarters. He raised his head, smiled.

"Look at you, leaving your clothes behind. Naughty. Lucky we're among friends here." He pulled a plastic bag from behind the counter. "I hope you don't mind, I washed them for you."

"Thanks, mate." I took the bag, set the borrowed clothes on the counter. One pair of cargo jeans, one Dickies shirt, one pair of green Crocs complete with Goku and Yoshi pins. "Appreciate it."

"No problem, those are for emergencies. You looked like my cousin in them, actually quite handsome. Dreamy." He kept sorting quarters. "You settling in okay at Rachael's hacienda?"

"Oh yeah, she's lovely."

"My favorite reformed Californian. Southern hospitality is contagious, I'm telling ya." He continued. "You need anything else while you're here?"

The back hallway was visible behind him. There was the door where the hoarder lady had gone in. Where the girl had come out from in the bathrobe.

"I don't think so."

"Okay. You know where I am if you need anything, yeah?"

"Yeah. Cheers." I walked out quickly with my clothes in hand.

Rachael was still in the car, windows down. I got in. "That was fast," she said, pulling back into traffic.

"Yes, didn't want to linger."

She glanced at me. "Florentino's harmless, you know."

"Yes, I know."

But I wasn't sure I did.

~

On the way back, we stopped at Republic Pizza Traders. Est 2017. ATX. The shopfront was all reclaimed wood. Gulf oil barrels as tables.

"Neo-Austinite Gourmet Pizza? Really?"

"It's pretentious as hell but actually good," she said, getting out of the car.

Inside smelled like smoke and cilantro and something sweet I couldn't place. The menu was chalked on a massive board behind the counter: Coffee Tejano, Aloha ATX, The Alamo. Each had a full paragraph of description underneath.

"What even is Neo-Austinite pizza?" I asked.

"Try-hard ingredients, Clarksville price tag." She was already at the counter. "We'll take the Coffee Tejano."

I read the description. Coffee-crust steak, pickled habaneros, artichokes, Oaxaca cheese, caramelized onion, truffled arugula.

"That cannot possibly work."

"But it does. You'll love it." She paid before I pulled my wallet out. "My treat."

We sat by the shop window. The pizza was the best I've ever had. Bar none. I hadn't realised how much I needed a nice meal until that moment.

She grabbed napkins and handed me half a dozen. "Ready? I need to unpack."

~

Back in the house, I settled for a while in the guest room while she pottered around. I kicked off my shoes and lay down on the bed. Just for a moment. You'd think that a caffeine-crust steak pizza would've kept me awake but I was out in a blink.

Woke to twilight through the massive windows, ready to start a new day but the phone only read 7:16 PM. I'd been asleep for a few hours. This was no good. I'd never been able to recover from a late nap. This could only mean 3:00 AM, eyes open, staring at the fan.

The house was quiet. Rachael must've retired to her room. Downstairs the fridge was humming, the structure of the house settling for the evening. Creaking. Everyone but me getting ready to have a good night. I sat up. My mouth still burned from the habaneros.

Picked up my phone with dread. More texts as expected and opening them was the last thing on my mind. I knew what was coming. I'd soon get to all of them but not now. I'd just had a lovely afternoon and didn't want to go back ten steps. What the hell was I supposed to say to the drama?

The Neo-Austinite pizza carb crash and angry Kim combo hit especially hard. The whole thing killed me.

~

Maybe walk to the washateria? Twenty minutes, tops. Florentino would still be there. He'd offered to help me and would be glad to have me over, I'm sure. Get rid of all this drama and guilt. With a bit of luck, the payment wouldn't involve me having to get into a gimp suit. I wanted whatever the girl got, that lightness and freedom. The girl acting all weird and forgetting all her fears was a bit of a worry, though. The image of me in a red latex onesie wasn't that appealing either. I dwelled on it for a long time. An hour at least.

Not understanding half the things that were happening, double-guessing the colour of post boxes, bats the size of grizzlies, none of that was the problem. I didn't mind all the odd stuff. I really didn't. In the end, I was in a new place. Praise be not all places are as boring as Maddox Road, Newport, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia 3015.

In truth, Kim going ballistic over text was the real shitshow. Over-philosophising the bejesus out of it all was only an excuse not to deal with the texts. I was here already and I was not going to risk leaving Austin without seeing the hundreds of millions of flying foxes under the bridge.

Fuck that.

I picked up my phone. I had to.

K Sorry I haven't replied, I just haven't had the energy to deal with the emotions Im in austin. Still. At the couch surfing host I told you about, she is lovely, we haven't had sex if that helps. I know your furious and you should be. I havent been in contact without explaining what I've been up to and thats ducked. Im sorry. You were sort of right about what you said on the way to the airport. I didnt realise what this would do to us and im sorry for how you feel now. Im not coming back yet. I need to stay here a but longer. I dont know how long. Im trying to figure something out and I cant explain it properly over text. Its not about us but more about the place and how I want to explore it more. I also dont want us to force things past the point where we hurt each other. I think thats true. I could make this easier and come back and try to change but I dont want to. And really I just can't. So i prefer to do the right thing instead and I want to be honest with you and us and me. I dont know if this makes sense. Prob doesn't. I dont know if youll understand this. I think you do actually. But im think we need to move on and that starts with telling you the truth even if its bad timing and a shot explanation over text like we promised we would never do. I thnk we are running in circles Kim. We shouldn't. Is no good.i dont want that for you. Im staying here for a few more days. Ill let you know when im coming back. If your still there we can talk and close things off. If your not ill understand. D

Turned off the phone and left it on the nightstand. I'd just sent a breakup text like a fifteen-year old. That's not good, but it needed to be done.

~

The bathroom didn't seem as far as the first night, maybe only half a mile. I accepted the quest and grabbed at least three metres of super fluffy toilet paper. Back on the bed I masturbated with surgical precision, keen to avoid making a mess on the Egyptian cotton. No thoughts of anybody or anything. It was refreshing. Five minutes later, back

to the bathroom again to wash off a bit and brush my teeth far less meticulously. Drank about a litre of water straight from the tap. I was completely dehydrated.

Through the window, down into the lean-to, she came out of the burglar-friendly dog flap. She looked straight up. The light from the house caught her eyes, reflecting back like two lasers, one teal, one brown. Summoning me to join her.

~

I sat on the porch steps with zero hope of an early evening. The street was quiet. The evening was warm and the cicadas started to sing. It couldn't get more American than this. Well, maybe by adding a fair-skinned girl in a sundress. By now she'd be arriving in Baton Rouge, sans fears, having traded something to get rid of them.

Miss Holloway had already come out from the side of the house. She found a spot beside my feet, switched off the high beams and for the first time gazed at me with adorable kaleidoscopic puppy eyes. Like a proper dog. She was still enormous, beyond any scale, but tonight despite her size and the laser eyes she was not a mythical creature. That's progress.

The mosquitoes kept their distance. They wouldn't want to mess with either of us. Maybe there was something about me that made me invisible to them. Hard to say. Most likely it was the lizards keeping them at bay. I was glad that in this Austin reptiles were not the length of a semi-trailer.

Beside the door, a large tub full of organic faux-chocs for dogs. Gourmet Liver.

I pulled out one of the treats. It was hard as the steps I was sitting on and shaped like a bowtie. I placed it on the step, next to her snout. She blinked.

The air was thick like foam. The sun was gone, and the pavement was still giving off waves of its heat. Summer nights were no different here than back home. The air sat still, not a single leaf on the trees moving.

~

The treat vanished.

She'd settled next to my feet, haunches down, the inside of her lip hanging off the edge of the step. Gorgeous eyes fixed on the treat tub, back on me, back on the treat tub.

I took out the next faux-choc, lay it slowly on the step. This time, I placed it a little closer to her nose. All the while looking at her intently.

"Wait."

Rachael still moved around upstairs. She hadn't retired for the night either.

"Wait."

Telepathy.

"Good girl."

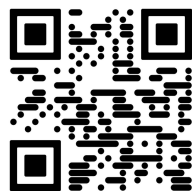
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Juan Zorrilla is an Australian writer whose work explores liminality. *Austin City Limit* is his debut novella. He currently lives in Houston, where he continues to write fiction that treats the impossible as mundane.

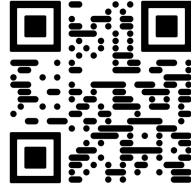
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BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening & Setting

1. How does the protagonist's Australian perspective shape his experience of Austin? What details reveal his outsider status?
2. The story treats extraordinary events as everyday occurrences. How does this storytelling approach affect your reading experience?

Characters & Relationships

3. What role does Miss Holloway play beyond being just a dog? How does Leonard Cohen's advice about feeding her relate to the story's broader themes?
4. The Girl refuses to give her name and claims to be "forgetting it." What does this suggest about her situation and state of mind?
5. Discuss the Leonard Cohen encounter. Why do you think the author chose this particular figure to appear in the cave?

Themes & Symbolism

6. The cave system serves as both literal location and metaphor. What might it represent in the context of the story?
7. What is the significance of the protagonist missing his concert for these encounters?
8. How does the contrast between mundane concerns (feeding a dog, missing a concert) and extraordinary experiences shape the story?

Craft & Style

9. How does the author balance Australian and American speech patterns? What effect does this create?
10. The story leaves many questions unanswered. How do you feel about ambiguity in fiction?

Personal Reflection

11. Have you ever experienced a moment where familiar surroundings suddenly felt foreign or strange?
12. What do you think drives people to seek transformation, even when it involves risk or uncertainty?

For Further Discussion

13. How does the author use humor to balance the story's more mysterious elements?
14. What questions would you ask the author about the story's inspiration and creative process?
15. If you were to recommend this book to a friend, how would you describe it without spoiling the surprises?