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Without proof, people can disappear like vapour. *That's why photos are important*, Mrs Blackler had said. *So things don't get forgotten*. And Dustin doesn't want to forget. She'll be permanent now. She'll stay real — her nose and eyes, her lips.

That's why he does things properly, setting bottles onto the bench the way he'd watched Jasmine do it: developer, stop bath, fixer. He remembers how coolly she'd unscrewed the caps and poured out liquids, as though this was the most natural thing in the world. Her eyes flitted from the counter to him, giving her attention to both. She made it look easy.

Beneath the soft pulse of the red globe, Dustin threads film onto the reel then slides it into the developing tank, tapping it to dislodge any bubbles. He uses both hands to tip

it upside-down, then right way up, and hears fluid trickling though the reel, coursing over film. His long fingers hold the tank carefully.

He changes the developer for stop bath, then fixer. He mixes, waits, mixes, visualising every one of the thirty-six negatives wrapped around the spool. Each image is fresh in his mind. He knows exactly what's developing in there.

He trembles when he holds the tank under the tap. Water bubbles in and up, washing over his nervous fingers. He hopes he's done this right and wonders if Jasmine would be pleased. He remembers how her eyes and teeth gleamed in the red light when she smiled at him. She's all air, Jasmine.

When he opens the tank, it's like a release. The film unfurls with the weight of itself. He hangs the strip, runs a sponge smoothly down each side and waits, thinking about which images he'll choose to enlarge. That will be the best bit — watching faces rise up from a blank page.

Lunchtime noises filter through the gap beneath the door and Dustin's glad he's not out there. In here, the room is small and warm; the air smells musty and sweet. Each breath is a reminder of her.

He leans in to peer at the filmstrip. He sees her in silhouette and his heart thuds.

REWIND

VIEWPOINT

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The machine grinds to a stop. The lab fills with an angry silence and Dustin swears. 'Fuck.'

'Language.'

'It's done it again!'

'Fix it,' his father tells him.

'I have. I had! It's rooted.'

'Mind your language Dustin.'

'Well *you* do it.'

'I'm stocktaking.'

'Fuck!'

It's already dark outside at 6:30 and rain is blowing against the shop window. He'd prefer to be out there in the storm, cycling home, but instead he's stuck here with a

backlog of orders and a photo processor that keeps breaking down. Somewhere between frames seventeen and nineteen, the film's become twisted and stretched, lodged in the machine's hull of metal and plastic. He hits the cover with the palm of his hand.

From inside the stock cupboard, his father's pen taps against packs of papers, films and canisters of fluid. It gets to Dustin, even more than the reek of chemicals and the embarrassing out-of-date enlargements dangling from the ceiling. Occasionally the tapping stops as the ballpoint pen is dragged across a notebook, but then it continues, and it's almost enough to push Dustin over the edge.

'Fuck!'

'Language.'

He wishes his father would step out of there and fix this crappy machine himself, but a rainy Sunday night isn't a good time for confrontation. Instead, Dustin swallows and lifts open the cover. He hates machines that are old and useless. Some things are too far gone to be fixed.

Outside, streetlights glow through the storm. Kids run past carrying soggy parcels of fish and chips. He wishes again he were out there, blending into the background on a wet night. He's wasted his afternoon processing images of smiling faces, sleeping babies and pampered pets. The photo

backgrounds might alternate from suburban streets to sandy beaches to city skylines, but it doesn't matter. They're all the same to him.

The flashing light tells him there's a jam in Compartment F. He inhales and lifts the cover, sliding the paper feeder across. He reaches his right hand into the machine, between the paper tray and fluid tray. He twists his wrist to slide his fingers vertically to the reel spool, where film should be resting between smooth cogs.

That's when he feels it — a piece of glossy paper jammed up against the spool, folded in on itself like an oriental fan. It shouldn't be there. This old machine is incapable of the most basic functions, he thinks. It should be chucked from a bridge.

He pinches the paper between two fingers and draws it toward himself through the maze of catches and trays. The photo comes free and falls to the ground. When he restarts the machine it grunts twice, then locks itself into its own clunky rhythm.

Picking up his backpack from behind the counter, Dustin says, 'I'm going.'

He's already thinking about the wet ride home as the processor finishes the film. Photos are spat out at his end in a tedious blur. He remembers his rear-light battery is almost

flat. He puts on his jacket as the last of the photos drops into the catch and the machine quietens.

A photograph crackles under his boot.

He doesn't know why he bends to pick it up. He doesn't know what makes him stretch the photo between his fingers, or why it breathes open like a flower. The picture exhales in his hands.

The bike in the photo is decent, for once, not a crappy scooter ridden by a pommy backpacker. It's a Ducati Monster 620, cherry red.

He's about to throw the photo in the bin when his attention snags on her. Standing beside the bike, with her hands in jean pockets, is a girl. A woman. The photo's kind of off-balance, as though she'd placed the camera on top of something and used the timer switch. And unlike the thousands of other photos he's processed this afternoon, the person in this one isn't smiling. Not really. Her mouth's turned up in one corner like she's holding something back. She looks at the camera, her dark eyes boring straight into it. She's looking right at him.

Dustin knows he's not the irrational type. He never bursts into song. He doesn't believe in ghosts. He won't avoid walking under ladders. He thinks horoscopes are stupid. He doesn't have compulsive habits, but tonight,

without good reason, he pushes the crumpled photo into his jacket pocket. By the time he steps outside into the rain and unlocks his wet mountain bike, she's already out of his mind, along with the frustration of a wasted Sunday. The slippery streets are waiting.

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He cycles High Street north, turning left into East Street, then jumps the bike onto the footpath, riding the pavement until he reaches Queen Victoria Bridge. He weaves west behind North Fremantle, hugging curbs, then hits the bike lane by Port Beach. Here, finally, he can settle into an easy rhythm and follow the West Coast Highway home.

The chain grinds in fourth gear. The ride is uphill a lot of the way, dropping into smooth descents before pitching back to steady climbs. On this squally night, his is the only bike on the path and that's exactly the way he wants it.

The wind is a bitch though. It pushes against him from the left, from out beyond the dark vastness that's the Indian Ocean. Sudden gusts send him sideways closer to the road and the headlights periodically beside him. He grips the handlebars hard, trying to keep the Avanti under control.

A motorbike wouldn't be bullied so easily. He spits and it gets lost in the wind. A motorbike would be swayed by nothing. The wind moves around motorbikes, splits for them. Traffic dissolves for them. A Ducati 900SS would turn all this into a blur — the rain, wind, red brakelights and orange streetlights. It would all be nothing but his blur.

He pushes on, forcing the bike into fifth gear. With this wind, he has to work hard just to keep an average of 20k an hour. A Honda 550 roars behind him then speeds off, its red tail-light arcing and waning in the distance.

His slow progress is lit methodically by orange lamps suspended from high poles, each one casting an unnatural glow over him. He likes this stretch of road, where the skin on his hands turns orange and unfamiliar for three-second intervals, then back to darkness. Even his goosebumps become visible in each web of light. The strangeness of it reminds Dustin of foreign films watched in small cinemas, with sharp editing and grainy lighting, where life is weird and reassuringly surreal. Eating choc-tops beside Jasmine is easy.

Out there to his left, nothing is visible. There's a void; an endless dark ocean, swilling and moving. He can sense the size of it and it's too big to comprehend. He wonders what it might be like to be swallowed by the sea on a night such as this.

Heading inland, he rides on the left shoulder of the West

Coast Highway, home to Swanbourne. With the wind behind him, he speeds over the shiny bitumen. The road is slippery-quick under the tyres. Cornering fast is risky and worth it. He grins as he imagines how the wet road will feel from the seat of a motorbike. His tail light will sweep around corners like a comet. Nights like this were made for Ducatis.

Halfway along Boronia Street, he brakes and steers into the driveway. It's been over an hour since he left the lab and he knows his dad will have beaten him home. He nudges the side gate and walks his bike around to the back of the house. He takes off the helmet; the foam inserts are soggy and soft, smelling of sweat and fresh rain.

For a minute he stands in the backyard, prolonging the silence. He's not in a rush to go inside, where his father will be sitting in the lounge room. The familiar fist tightens in Dustin's chest. This is a house where two men share a space but not much else.

When he slides open the glass door, the smell of tomato paste meets him. His stomach rumbles out loud. Pot steam has fogged the kitchen. A bowl waits on the kitchen bench, while a matching one is soaking in the sink. Except for these things, nothing is out of place. Surfaces and walls are bare and clean. In the lounge room, a single painting of a desert landscape hangs squarely above the television, and that is all.

Dustin eats spaghetti bolognese and watches television with his father. The investigation into a missing girl closes in on her parents. Burmese monks are shot in the streets. An ex-football star overdoses in his home.

In the lounge room the two men listen to the ABC news, sport, finance, and weather. Dustin's full stomach groans. There is nothing to say.

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It's the nightmare again. He wakes himself out of it and lies in the darkness. He wishes it didn't get to him so much.

It started a couple of weeks back. At first there'd just been the car with a woman inside. Her face was hidden by hair as the car turned. As he stood and watched, the car revolved as though in slow motion, her face somehow staying out of sight.

But each time he dreams it, there's another piece. And tonight there've been sounds too — the drawn-out screeching of tyres, then a tinkle of glass. Tinkling on the road like solid rain. He hates it.

Quietly, he walks through the dark hallway to the kitchen and fills a glass with water. When he looks up, he

sees his own image reflected in the kitchen window. With the light from the moon, skin shimmers silver, like the sea. He turns off the tap and sees the way his shoulder pivots in its socket; tendons rippling beneath the surface.

Skin stretches tight across Dustin's hard, bare chest. He is all bones and knots, knuckles and angles. He watches himself drink then refills the glass and drinks again. He wants to wash away the memory of the dream.

The house is still as he steals back to his bedroom and closes the door behind him. He moves to the bed, stepping over the wet clothes he'd dropped earlier that night. Something crackles underfoot. He remembers — it's that bloody photo that messed with the machine. Why did he put it in his jacket pocket?

After flicking on the lamp switch, his eyes adjust to the image of the Ducati Monster 620 in his hands. It's the standard model with S4 racing set-up and chassis. He exhales. It's awesome. The woman impresses him too. She's leaning against the bike like she's been dared. He grins and lets the photo fall back to the floor.