

SKIMMING STONES

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FREMANTLE PRESS

CONTENTS

Code Blue	7
When I think of my childhood	45
Descent	101
Harriet	113
The only ordinary you see	141
The boy at the lake	153
Return	177

CODE BLUE

1

After my sister's illness, the colours of summer became brighter, and the sunsets grew deep. The city we moved to was as glassy and as shiny as my mother had promised. Grass came in much thicker patches than we were ever used to, houses were more uniform than they had been back home by the lake, and rooftops and bitumen roads reflected light in a way that made even black seem white. Our new suburban lives quickly warmed us in the same way sunshine warms sand at the beach, and after a while, even I seemed to forget where we had come from or what we had known. I stopped counting new summers, stopped noticing the passing of seasons. Years passed, and the day at the lake faded not into my memory but perhaps into a deeper part of me. Dad had long left. Harriet and Samuel were gone too. Mum took up study at university, and as for my sister—Emma was something else altogether. Time made me comfortable with forgetting. I looked forward without really knowing that I inevitably also looked back. Perhaps this was why I ended up becoming a nurse, why I stopped believing in karma and magic salts, and why I turned to science and the grounded nature of research instead. Perhaps this was also why I let what happened with Nate happen.

What was it that he said?

'I know you.' And, 'Do you remember me?' and I looked up from my seat at the bus stop where I was waiting to go to work all those months ago, and he looked at me, and he smelt like the sea, as if there was salt

in his hair even after washing, and in that moment, I knew that yes, I remembered him.

‘I do,’ I said. ‘Of course, I do.’

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked. And, ‘What have you been up to?’

He told me right from the start that he was married. He didn’t hide it. We weren’t in a nightclub. He wasn’t taking me to bed. There was sweetness to him. I used to know him, and I was once drawn to him, and then suddenly he was there, right there, and my heart was thumping like it had thumped at the lake on the day he first held my hand, and yet we only had minutes, seconds even, before the bus came, and then what?

I asked if he still surfed and if he played the guitar, and he said, yes, he did. He said he was a music tutor now and a father. He was teaching and performing. He had a band, a regular covers-thing down at the local pub on a Friday night, which he did for a bit of fun and to be social, but every now and then he also did a show on his own. He sat on stools in small clubs, and it wasn’t big or fancy, and he didn’t have lofty dreams of fame, but somehow, he always seemed to fill a room.

At the bus stop, he was light and lightness and all about his child and guitars and what the ocean floor looked like, and I smiled at him and said I was a nurse. In all the time since we last saw one another, I had followed a more conventional path; I had gone to university and become a nurse.

‘I can see that,’ he said, winking at my uniform.

Then he told me that he was finally studying too now, that fatherhood made him want something more solid. He said he had managed to get into a science degree. ‘Genetics,’ he said. ‘Because, you know.’

And I said, ‘I do.’

‘I still paint,’ I said.

‘What do you paint?’ he asked.

There was a pause, if you could call it a pause. Then the bus pulled in. Its doors opened. Nate grabbed my hand and pulled me back as I stood to go. ‘You happy?’

Another pause.

‘Grace?’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘Come hear me play sometime.’

Sky-high boots; that's what I wore. A black tulle mini. A grey singlet with beads hanging off the straps. I was taller than normal, and far more made-up. I had my hair loosened when usually I wore a ponytail. Smoky eyes. Lipstick even.

Cole, my neighbour from across the road, happened to be arriving home from what seemed like a late-night walk to the deli, and as I unlocked my car door, she stopped by, a tub of ice-cream in hand. She was the first to say it, but not the last: 'Grace, you're beautiful.' She asked, 'Where are you off to?' in that gentle way of hers, and when I told her about the boy I sort-of once knew, about his band and his family, she looked at me, caution written all over her face, and she said, 'Oh Grace, do be careful.'

He was an acoustic storyteller; that's the only way to describe him. He sat on a stool in the spotlight just like he said he would; his tempo was slow, the harmonies did not jump abruptly from one to the next, and his timbre was both soulful and sorrowful. In the breaks between songs he spoke to the crowd as if the crowd was sitting in a lounge room, and when he began again, strumming his guitar to indicate a new song, I clapped. We all did. Somebody wolf-whistled. People cheered. Then the spotlight darkened. I sat at that bar and sipped at my drink. Nate's vocals caught the riffs. His pitch deepened. For a little while, there was nothing other than his voice and his music, but then as the lights above the stage flashed red and blue, I was suddenly reminded of another set of lights—sirens, all the way back from the lake—and it had been such a long time since I had allowed myself to think about those sirens that they caught me by surprise and pulled me not just to that afternoon, but also to the day Nate and I sat in the sprinkling rain while he hummed with his pretend guitar, and the two of us—children that we were—wished not for our imagined futures, but for the lives we led before.

'You haven't changed at all,' he said after the crowd thinned out, and for a long time, almost until the bar closed, we sat together, talked and filled in the blanks of our lives. One type of music flowed easily onto the next—rock and blues and flamenco even—and then he took out his phone and showed me an old clip of himself playing a fat guitar with three pairs of strings. He said he lived in Cuba for the same four years

I studied at university, and maybe it was what he needed to do back then, or maybe it had been a mistake, but instead of a degree, he learned the *tres cubano*, although *tres*, he clarified, was not what I heard that night.

I said, ‘*Tres cubano* sounds so specific. Why?’

He told me that he was drawn to the movement and the deeper story in the musical score, that it was to do with wanting to know more about his family, his history, and I said, ‘I understand,’ because I remembered my mother and the way she used to speak of the bouzouki and the dances she learned when she was a child, and I remembered also wishing I knew exactly what those dances were, or which ones belonged to her village, or whether they were the dances of poor people or butchers or those in exile.

Ten minutes passed, fifteen, but not much longer than that, and then right in the middle of all our catch-up chatter, he brushed one hand over mine, and at the same time as I felt the calluses beneath his fingers, I also saw that his wedding ring was full of scratches. ‘Nate ...’ I said, ‘your hands.’ He looked towards his thickened skin, and then towards his ring, and because it all seemed to silence him, I said, ‘Your wife, is she here?’

He shook his head and said, no, she was home with their boy. These things tired her. It had been three years since she last saw him play.

I said, ‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘It’s okay,’ he said, ‘It’s not your fault.’ Then he grabbed his phone again and showed me photographs of a fair little toddler with blue and green jelly on his face.

We didn’t flirt. We didn’t try to turn nothing into something. It was innocuous. He was a married man and he had a child, and I knew all too well what it was to see my parents fall apart. Somewhere in the bottom of a stuffed drawer I had pictures of my family too, which I read differently now that I had grown. It wasn’t, for example, an image of my sister dripping ice-cream by her tricycle in as much as it was my father driving off outside the frame of the photograph. I had no intention of being the woman he left my mother for, nor the one who came after. But then I said, ‘They don’t bother you?’

‘What?’ he asked.

‘Your fingers. The calluses.’

He shook his head and smiled, and then he told me they came from playing so much. He said, ‘Do you remember that old Bob Marley tune?’

I didn't know the one he was talking about, so he sang the lyrics of 'Trenchtown Rock' in a funny not-very-good reggae voice, and when he reached the part about music hitting you and you not feeling any pain, he actually screeched his words, and I joked, 'Stick to your normal sound maybe?'

He told me then that it had been like this a long time: since I had known him. Since his brother actually. Since way back then. Music made him forget. If it wasn't for music. This was why he liked to play.

Something passed between us in that moment. I sensed it, and I suspect he did too, but it wasn't yet attraction. More like a bond. 'What do you mean?' I asked, and he confided that there were other things he was ambivalent about. Sadness, for example. Sadness washed over him.

It seemed so incongruent. I thought of the boy I used to know. I remembered him distressed over his brother and over loggers lopping down a tree.

He started it: texting at first, a message here, a message there, just as I was sitting down to dinner, or late, eleven or twelve at night, right at the end of everything. 'Hello,' he would say, and 'How was your day?' Innocent questions that were not so innocent after all. We'd text for hours sometimes—to two or three in the morning. I told myself a whole set of stories: the marriage was bad, or he was leaving it, or in it only for the child. I told myself that this was what people did, that it was just friendship, and that I was the one reading too much into things.

That was how it was in the beginning: as if I wasn't cool or worldly enough. We would share a drink after my shift finished, or lunch, or even a chat at the bar in the breaks of a show. He would phone me unexpectedly. Or else he'd come by with his boy on the back of a pushbike, and it always felt as though the child was so well cared for, so loved, but at the same time there was also something utterly motherless about him, an absence that reminded me of that time back when Emma was sick and I stood in front of my school performances knowing neither of my parents would be in the crowd.

Was I filling the gaps, finding the loopholes that justified what I wanted to do? The boy played on the floor, and while Nate and I shared a simple pot of tea—me with my hands wrapped around the old china cup that I had long ago taken from Harriet, and him drinking out of

an ordinary mug—he told me about his first job as a trolley boy and the time he was fired because his best friend’s brother stole a packet of cigarettes and blamed him, and then he mentioned his own brother: how this was something David never would have done.

It’s hard now to think about how much Nate spoke, how willing he was to share his story, how little he actually said. He smiled whenever he talked about his brother, but it was the same kind of smile I wore when I told him about my family’s Easters, cracking painted eggs and eating Red Rooster instead of lamb roast, and so I sat beside him, not yet noticing what these conversations did to my body—the rise in my throat, the bite of my teeth against my lower lip—reacting without knowing.

He said, ‘Grace, it all changes when you have kids. Everything you thought you knew, everything you wanted, and then the little shit smiles at you and it’s all worthwhile, but it’s different. Everything is different.’

I wanted to say, ‘Do you love your wife?’ and ‘Do you still sleep with her? Do you long for her?’ but those were not words I allowed out of my mouth.

For a long time, we were *just* friends. That’s what we were. But then one thing happened, and then another, and then before I knew it, he was at my door, ringing the bell while slipping his wedding ring into the bottom of the grey satchel he always carried. It would stop me in my tracks, the action of him pulling at his finger and then fumbling with the bag—me on one side of the door, and him on the other, both clear as day and obscured through the frosted glass—and yet I would let him in, the bag rattling with keys and coins and that one piece of gold, and as we made our way through my house, I would simply take the bag, put it in the hallway closet, and pretend it didn’t exist.

Nate knew cancer like I knew cancer. We were both from cancer. We shared it like a password between travellers in a foreign country. Or that moment in a crowd when someone says something or another and they carry just the right inflection, an accent you recognise, the sound of home. That’s what it was like between him and me. He knew where I had come from. He remembered having first spoken to me, not at the lake like I had thought, but caught in the harsh light of a hospital waiting room all those years ago. In other circumstances, he might have been in my class at school—just as easily the boy who won all the cross-country

paces as the one who hid cigarettes beneath the railing of the drinks' trough. He could have been anyone with any skill whatsoever—a maths whiz, a budding scientist, a bookworm—but at the lake where I first came to know him and at hospital where he insisted he met me, we were made the same, without distinction. Mine, Nate said, was a hollow face that would scan and forget him just as quickly as I took him in; it was a cloudy face, reminiscent of the face he also once wore.

Nate knew the patterns on the linoleum floor in the hospital as if they were landmarks in his hometown. He memorised the dinner menu, the nurses' names, the medicines which were fed through clear plastic tubes, the channels on the televisions above. We were extras, he and I, but also fixtures. We stood on the other side of closed green doors, in corners of busy rooms and at the edges of small porcelain basins where we diligently scrubbed antibacterial gel onto our palms and over our fingers until the skin on our knuckles began to crack. All the while, we watched our siblings—what they were going through, where they were hurting, and how their throats seemed made of the same tiny rips and tears and broken lines that had appeared on our skin. We poured more of the gel on, kept quiet, and washed and washed and washed, both of us, him with David, and me with Emma, washing our hands, occupying those old halls like the peeling plaster that often fell in flakes to the floor, scrubbing back, scrubbing until it stung. Nate stopped touching the bin, the elevator buttons, toilet doors, toilet seats. We were the siblings, the sidelines, farmed out and left behind, old enough to fend for ourselves, too young to understand.

I was thirteen then, and Emma was four. Nate was my age, but his brother was older, sixteen, and supposedly stronger. We were 'we'. After I found him again, when I was with him, when we lay together in bed, when we whispered and listened to each other speak and not speak, we were 'we'. We understood. We heard. We knew.

And then, when he inevitably returned to his wife, I became 'I' once more. On Friday evening—after everything that happened that day at work, after little Zoe and the sirens, after the seagull at the beach and Nate's wife dressed in draping blue, after all of that—I stood in my front courtyard with my hands wrapped around Harriet's old china cup. Neighbours that had been out had since gone back inside, facades

glowed, and streetlights that had long shielded and given me hope, lit the darkness in the same way as they always did, but this time they also dimmed the sky above, making it hard to see the stars. Along Lake Clifton, where I had come from, the Southern Cross, the Pointers and Orion's Belt would have likely been bright pinholes of torchlight behind a worn blanket. Years had passed since my sister fell ill, since my mother left for their long hospital stay and since Harriet took me in. Seasons had cycled. It was November again. The leaves were shadowy on the trees again, and the peppermints and bottlebrushes were in bloom. Pollen was heavy in the air.