

**HOPE  
FARM**

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**PEGGY  
FREW**



SCRIBE  
*Melbourne • London*

It was always the same. We had to leave because the energy had changed — something had faded, failed, gone wrong. There was probably a specific reason, probably to do with a man, but I never needed to look that far. I just saw it coming in Ishtar, in the flattening of her voice and movements, the dulling of her colours.

She went quiet, she stopped smiling, she didn't touch me or, often, even respond if I spoke directly to her. She still went to work and upheld her domestic obligations; she never faltered in these things. In fact, as the shutting-down phase went on, she almost seemed to vanish into the endless rhythms of chores, of labour — they took on a new quality, a busy screen beyond which she was even less reachable. Slicing onions in the drab kitchen of a group house. Sweeping the hallway of an ashram. Buttoning one of the various uniforms she wore — for mopping the floors of a hospital, or changing sheets and scrubbing bathrooms in a motel — slipping my lunch box into my school bag and handing it to me without a glance as she strode to the door.

Then one day she'd come back to whichever room we had, in whichever house, and the switch would have flicked; she was alive once more — the veil lifted, her skin lit — and I'd know even before she spoke that we were packing and leaving. We were going somewhere else, to start again. And the old criss-cross of feelings would tug at me: the relief and the mistrust, the hope and the anger. And each time it happened, the mistrust and anger were stronger, the relief and hope weaker.

During these transitions something would change in the way I saw the world. Everything — an unlined curtain leaking light, a dash of spilled turmeric on a bench top, the chalky line of scalp that showed at the parting in the hair of a girl at school — seemed to become at once very clear and slightly removed,

as if I was peering through a viewfinder. It was a glassy, sliding feeling, and it continued until the ending had been completed, and we were on our way to the new place, when suddenly all the details would be lost, and the girl's hair and the turmeric and the curtain blurred and swam into the uncertainty of the past.

Men were usually involved, in both the endings and the beginnings. Boyfriends, lovers, partners — whatever they were to her in the varied and loose lexicon of the circles in which we moved. I can glimpse them still, a collage of faces, mostly bearded, mostly framed with quantities of hair. I can dredge up the sounds of their voices, some of them, or a small physical detail — a bracelet of plaited flat strands of copper on a sun-damaged, ginger-haired wrist; a combination of a long nose and bushy eyebrows that called to mind the letter 'T'. But I have no memory of any actual break-ups, of men begging or raging at having been left. I recall no messy scenes. Ishtar was so good at it, I suppose, so practised. She simply withdrew and allowed things to collapse.

This time it would be different. And I imagine now — when that pocket opens in the haze and Miller first appears, first spreads and cups his hands, first unfolds the smooth carpet of his voice — that I could tell from the beginning.

Before Miller, before Hope, she had decided we would go overseas. At night she sat cross-legged beside me as I lay on the mattress we shared, and talked about countries. She brought an atlas up from the communal bookshelf in the yoga room and turned the pages, running her hand over maps, sounding out place names. *Istanbul. Prague. Varanasi.*

For a while I held back, like I always did. It was so hard to resist though, the heat in her, the energy that hummed and leapt. When she read aloud she sounded like another person, uncertain, effortful, with her pointer finger creeping across the page. She seemed nearer to me, nearer even than all the times we'd slept in the same bed, back to back.

She got stuck on a word, frowned, peered, muttered. Then she threw me a grin. Her face was pink. 'Gibraltar,' she said, straightening her spine. 'Gibraltar.'

I pulled the covers up to my nose, my own mouth splitting in an unstoppable, answering smile.

We went to get passport photos at the chemist's. Mine had to be taken twice because I blinked the first time, and Ishtar laughed. 'Be cool,' she said, and then I watched as she faced the camera, still and strong and lovely, and my throat filled with helpless, fluttering pride.

Afterwards she bought me jellybeans to eat while we walked back to the ashram. Their chemical sweetness made me feel like a little kid again. It was a Brisbane winter, clear and bright, and somewhere somebody was burning leaves.

'I love that smell.' Ishtar's arm went round me. 'Remember the picture, in the atlas, of the chestnut seller in Italy?'

I remembered him, olive-skinned and stern, standing with his stall and his fire in a metal burner, the street behind him shining and slick and cold-looking.

'We'll go there,' said Ishtar. 'We'll eat chestnuts. And spaghetti.' Then she let go and started walking faster and I had to run to catch up.

She kept the passports in her suitcase, inside a yellowy-orange envelope that closed by winding a string around a little paper button.

Then Miller came and the plans were changed. We weren't going overseas any more — we were going to the country instead, down south, to live.

'It's a farm,' said Ishtar. 'There'll be goats. And potatoes.'

The atlas was gone. I stood in its spot on the threadbare rug.

She folded a jumper. 'Goats are good for milking. And wool, some of them. Angoras.' The word had a soft, fleecy sound, and in the way she said it, drawing it out, I heard another voice, and knew it must be his — Miller's. 'Cold down there.' She pushed the jumper into her bag. 'We'll need to rug up.'

On the maps I'd copied at school, Victoria had always looked cold, squashed down the bottom in a jagged wedge, shaded green or blue.

'Oh, it's far,' said Ishtar, although I hadn't asked. She folded and stuffed, knelt and stood, her movements fluid, unhesitating. 'It's a long way. Further than we've ever been.' She paused, touched her hot palm to my cheek, leaned closer and kissed me, three quick kisses that pushed me almost off balance. 'It's going to be a whole new life.' Reaching past, she began to fold her Indian quilt, with the pink and orange pattern. Her hair brushed near my lips and I breathed her smell, sweet and smoky.

I got up and went to the window, which showed part of a brick wall and a yard with a Hills hoist sprouting from concrete. I put my face close to the glass and looked up into the sky. Flat,

angry phrases slid rhythmically through my head. *Of course, of course. You should have known.*

‘Angora goats,’ came Ishtar’s new, Miller-tinged voice. ‘And potatoes, all kinds. Sebago. Coliban.’

*Of course.* I stared up at the sky and opened myself to disappointment, pinching, cold, lonely. How could I have been so stupid, to have believed in the overseas trip, in us — just the two of us — getting on a plane and taking off into some whole new life? I was as bad as she was.

‘Well, that’s about it.’

I turned from the window. The mattress lay stripped, showing its stains and hollows. Our two duffel bags and her old brown case stood by the door.

‘I’m off to work now, to give this back.’ She was holding her uniform, folded into a small pink slab. ‘To let them know I’m finished. I’ve scrubbed my last toilet.’ She gave a little pretend stamp with one foot, put her free hand on her hip, and shook back her hair.

I was supposed to join in, to say something or return her smile. And, unbelievably, the urge was still there — to concede, to go to her and feel those arms round me. But I stared down at the rug, at the webbing of its exposed fibres.

She didn’t notice anyway — the door swung and she was gone.

Another ending, another new start. But with a difference, and not just because of Miller. When he steps out of the murk of memory, solid and bold, his gestures sweeping with the promise of change, another figure materialises, sharp edged, beside him. It is me, as I was then: thirteen, scrawny and suddenly tall, angry

and sad and full of shame and reluctance — but changing,  
coming into something, waking up to a power of my own.