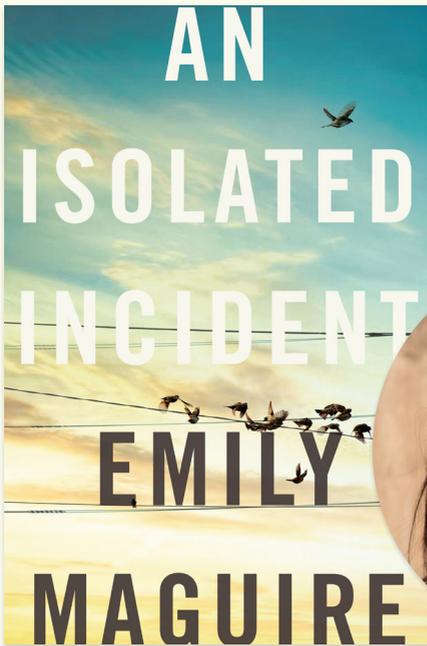




2017 STELLA PRIZE SHORTLIST

Sampler



Emily Maguire
AN ISOLATED INCIDENT

It was the new cop who came to the door, the young fella who'd only been on the job a couple of months. I thought that was a bit rough, sending a boy like him to do a job like that. Later, I found out that he was sent because he'd gone to pieces at the scene. That's what we all call it now: the scene.

'Miss Rogers?' he said, as though he was about to confess to reversing into my fence.

I nodded, waiting for the blow I knew was coming. I knew it was coming because Bella had been gone days and because no cop ever came to anyone's door to bring them cake or wine.

He rocked on his heels and cleared his throat.

'You found Bella?' I said, to give him a way to start. To show him it was okay.

'Yeah.' He blinked and I thought, *Jesus, he knows her*. 'I mean, there's been a body found. Matches her description. We need an official ID. Um, need you to come to . . . to do that. To confirm.'

Someone who's been hit as much as me should've known that seeing a blow coming, asking for it even, doesn't make it hurt any less. Probably hurts more, I reckon, because you're thinking *yeah, yeah get it over with* and you think you already know. So I stood there nodding, thinking how the poor kid knows my sister and what a rough job to give a new fella and then I was shaking so hard it was like a demon had got inside.

The whole way to the hospital I wanted to ask him what had happened. I was hoping she'd been hit by a car or had a brain embolism or something. I wanted to ask those questions I'd asked when Mum died: 'Was it quick? Did she suffer?' But I couldn't speak. Never happened to me before, no matter what drama I've been chucked into. But there in that car it was like . . . It was like when you're so sick with some damn stomach thing that you don't even want to say 'no' to the offer of ice chips to suck, don't even want to nod, because the tiniest movement will bring the spewing on again. Like that, but I didn't feel like spewing. I just felt like any sound or movement would start something that would hurt and be impossible to stop.

The cop, Matt was his name, told me that he knew her from school. 'She was two years ahead of me, but it's a small school, ya know?'

I knew. I went there myself. Bella was twelve years younger than me, which made this boy twenty-three – so not a boy at all, technically, but his clenched jaw was dotted with pimples and his hands on the wheel were smooth and unscarred. I asked him if he'd seen her since school and he nodded, smiled like a love-struck dork and said he'd seen her a few times at the nursing home where she worked. 'We get called there a bit,' he said and it was clear he never minded being called to that stinking place by my sister who, even in that blue polyester uniform and those clunky white nursing clogs, was the prettiest thing anyone in this hole of a town was ever likely to see.

At school we had an expression: Strathdee-good. It meant that something was tops by Strathdee standards but not much chop compared to anything you'd get outside of here. So if you had a particularly good pie or whatever, you'd say, *Man, this is good. Strathdee-good, obviously, but yeah.* We did the same thing for people. None of the blokes at our school could compete with boys from Sydney or Melbourne, obviously, but there were a few who were definitely Strathdee-hot and so they were the ones we'd go for.

Bella was, if I'm being honest, Strathdee-pretty. I was always telling her she could be a model if she wanted, and I still think that was true, but it'd be modelling in the Kmart catalogue not *Vogue* or anything. I'm not putting her down. Like I said, she was the most beautiful thing anyone around here had ever seen in the flesh, but she was five foot nothing in high heels and had a size 10 arse on a size 6 body. Her skin was like fresh milk, and her light blue eyes so goddamn lovely it made me jealous as hell when we were younger. She could've done cosmetic ads, for sure, except they'd have had to do something about her hair, which was thick and frizzy and grew out and up instead of down. I used to tease her, saying that she was actually an albino African and that Mum had just adopted her because she felt sorry for this poor kid who all the other Africans thought was a freak. When she was twelve or so she

started getting up really early to go through the rigmarole of oiling and flat-ironing her hair before school and then I felt bad for tormenting her. I told her that her hair looked hot, that it was way nicer than my bog-standard mousy-brown mop, but she never believed me.

One good thing about getting older is you make peace with the things you can't change about yourself. Not that Bella ever got old, but she was always mature for her age. By nineteen or twenty she'd stopped straightening her hair every day and just let it frizz out over her shoulders. She had to tie it back for work, of course, and I loved it like that most of all; the front all smooth and sleek and out the back a giant blonde fuzball.

I never had to make peace with my hair – it was never my problem. My problem was my tits. I was too young when they sprouted and then they grew so fast. Eleven, twelve, thirteen and becoming used to feeling naked, feeling rude because of the way that boys and men – old men, teacher men, family men, strange men, friendly men – looked at me and found reasons to touch me and press against me and every now and then go for a sneaky grope. It set me apart from the other girls and made their mothers narrow their eyes and suggest I put on a jumper when it wasn't cold and made the boys my age laugh and call out *slut* and *showusvertits* as I walked past. These giant tits that told everybody I was a *scrubber* and *easy* and *trash*.

For the first few years I tried to ignore them. I mean, ignore the effect they had on people. The things themselves I packed into bras which my mum bought grudgingly (I kept outgrowing them and then wearing through the nylon). Once she said, 'Try and slow down, Chris. I'm not made of money,' as she tossed a Target bag on the bed, and although I knew she was joking I still felt hurt and shamed like there might be some truth in the suggestion that I was growing these things on purpose.

At around fourteen I picked up the idea that I could diet them away, but a smaller arse only made them look more super-sized. I tried to keep them covered, but, you know, a mountain range covered in snow

is still a mountain range. Then I gave in. Not to the men who tried to corner me, but to the name-callers and whispers. I pretended to be the thing they all thought I was.

And now, well, now, I wear low-cut tops and bend forward more than I need to if it's been a slow night for tips and I barely notice when men speak to my chest, women shoot death-stares at it and people of both sexes treat me like I have brain damage. Now, I've learnt to live with the fact that most blokes who come home with me will be breast-men and that once in bed they'll spend more time nuzzling and squeezing than getting busy down below. I spend a lot of money on good bras and keep my thigh muscles strong so I can bounce up and down forever. Give 'em what they want.

I didn't choose to have an enormous rack, but you have to accept the things you cannot change, don't you? So I do. I accept that having big boobs makes me a popular barmaid and an excellent root. Not excellent-excellent probably, but Strathdee-excellent for sure.

I've gone off the track. I do that. I have to, you know? This track is not an easy one to trudge down.

It was a quick drive. I mean, there's no such thing as a long drive in this town – you can go from highway exit to highway on-ramp in the time it takes to drink a large takeaway coffee – but the drive from my place to Bella's body seemed supernaturally fast. As we pulled out from my driveway I noticed that there was yet another stripped-down car on Carrie's lawn, making it four in total. Then suddenly we were at the three-churches intersection downtown and a second later we were swinging into the staff car park behind the hospital.

Matt led me through a door I'd never noticed and into an elevator which seemed to take about as long as the drive had. When the doors opened there was another cop looking right at us. Senior Constable Tomas Riley, I knew, because he spent almost as much time at the pub where I worked as I did. He told me he was sorry to see me under these circumstances. He walked me and Matt through to a reception area where he said something I didn't follow to a woman behind a desk. The

woman asked me for ID and I was confused for a minute, started to say I hadn't done it yet, the ID-ing.

'No, no,' Riley said. 'Do you have some identification? A driver's licence?'

'I don't drive,' I told him, rifling in my bag for my wallet. 'I've got Medicare. Bank cards. Responsible Service of Alcohol.' I piled all the plastic onto the counter. The woman smiled and grabbed up a couple, scanned them through a machine, handed them back. She printed a form and passed it to Riley, who signed it and then touched my arm and led me down another hallway.

My skin tingled as the air-con dried my sweat. I hadn't known I was sweaty until then. I don't think it was even hot that day. It was grey out, I remember that much, but we do get those grey days so humid you can hardly bear to wear a stitch, don't we? It might have been like that. I don't know. I just know that walking down those empty blue hallways with a cop on either side, my skin started to cool and dry. I did a fake stretch and had a quick sniff under the arm. No BO that I could detect, so that was something.

'Rogers your married name?' Riley asked me, but in a making-conversation way, not jotting it down in his notepad or anything like that.

'No.'

'Oh. Your sister —'

'Bella has a different dad.'

Bella's father was a real classy bloke, which is how come she had such a pretty name. Me, I was named by our mother who was not of the soundest mind at the time given how she was eighteen years old and newly delivered of a giant baby whose dad she'd not seen since he fled to Tassie on hearing he'd knocked up the checkout chick he'd been rooting behind his wife's back. Mum was pissed off she couldn't give me his surname so she gave me his first — Chris. When I was younger I pretended it was short for Christina, but now I don't bother. Just Chris, that's all.

We stopped outside a set of dull silver doors. 'Chris, have you ever viewed a body before?'

I shook my head. He said some stuff I don't remember. I couldn't listen. I was suddenly sure that the dead girl through those doors wasn't Bella. I was sure. I started practising in my head how to sound sad and sorry for who-ever she was even though I was lit up with joy because she wasn't mine.

'Are you ready?'

I nodded. It'd all be over soon and I'd be back on my way home, trying her mobile again, leaving her another annoyed message about driving us all nuts with worry.

Funny thing is that even when they pulled the sheet back I thought for a minute it wasn't her. I thought, *Jesus, what has happened to this poor kid, this poor girl, someone's darling girl, how do you do that to someone, someone's precious beautiful girl, this poor little thing with hair just like Bella's.*

And I didn't think of this right away, but later I realised how lucky it'd been I couldn't speak on the car trip. Can you imagine if I'd asked that poor young cop whether Bella had suffered? I mean, Jesus. Can you imagine?

Matt drove me from the hospital to the police station back in the centre of town. He didn't try to make conversation, just told me there were tissues in the glove compartment and asked a few times if I wanted to stop and get a cup of tea or something.

I didn't cry or feel anger or anything, but I shook and shook so much that it made me giggle, which made Matt look at me like I'd screamed. Honestly, it was like I was on one of those vibrating chairs in the shopping centre. Like I *was* a vibrating chair.

At the station they offered me tea again. I said no and let them lead me to a room with a white formica table and a couple of sweaty vinyl seats. Riley was there, along with two men in suits; detectives from Wagga, they said. They wanted to know when I'd last seen Bella. I had to think a minute and then it took me another minute before I could say it.

'Wednesday night. She dropped into the pub —'

'The pub where you work?'

'Yeah, the Royal. She dropped by as we were closing. She'd worked late to cover for a sick colleague and since she knew I was due to finish soon she thought she'd swing by and offer to drive me home, maybe have a hot choccy and a catch-up before bed.'

'And how late did she stay at your house?'

'She didn't . . . I told her I had to stay back and do some admin stuff. Said we'd catch up on the weekend.'

'Alright, Chris. Take some deep breaths. I'm sorry but we need to get a bit more information from you before we take you home. Deep breaths, that's the girl.'

They asked me a bunch of stuff they could've found out from the phone book and then some stuff about my family, Bella's family. They wanted to know about the men in Bella's life, but there weren't any. I mean, there were the men who worked at the nursing home with her and there was her seventy-eight-year-old neighbour whose dog she walked and there was her dad, who she'd not seen since she was twenty, but who she exchanged emails with every so often. But no boyfriend, not for a while now.

'Girlfriend, then?' one of the men in suits asked.

'She's not a lezzo if that's what you're asking. She's got women friends, of course. The girls at work for a start. There's a group of them who go out together when their off-shifts match up. And she still keeps in touch with a few mates from school.'

'All women?'

'I suppose.'

'She didn't like men?'

'Bella liked everyone. It's just that she didn't trust men very much. They had to prove themselves first, you know.'

'Why d'you reckon she didn't trust them?'

'Because she knew what they were capable of,' I said, and then one of the suits said I needed a break.

You know, I've often been told I'm too trusting, too generous, too open. I used to think these were compliments, but recently I've come to realise that they are not. They say 'trusting' and mean 'stupid', 'generous' and mean 'easy', 'open' and mean 'shameless'. All of those things are true and not true. It depends who you ask, doesn't it? Ask old Bert at the pub if I'm easy or generous or any of that and he'll say no. He'll say, 'The little bitch slaps me hand if it so much as brushes against her.' Ask my ex, Nate. He'll tell you a different side.

Look, what I'm saying is, sometimes I am trusting and generous and open and stupid and easy and shameless. What I'm saying is, who isn't?

Bella. Bella wasn't. She was older than me from the time she turned thirteen. I don't know what happened to her then, maybe nothing important, but I remember she changed. She stopped being a kid and started being a proper adult. She'd come around to my place after school, find me still in bed, usually hungover as hell. She'd haul me up, make me coffee and eggs, give me an ear-bashing. At sixteen she moved in with me on account of a personality clash with Mum's new boyfriend. I used to complain about what an anal, nagging little cow she was, but when she turned eighteen and took off on her own I missed her like you wouldn't believe.