



The 2018 Stella Prize Shortlist

Extract

Krissy Kneen

An Uncertain Grace



'With each new book, I find myself hoping that readers will finally discover her quirky, sexy and incredibly beautiful writing.' *Books+Publishing*



AN UNCERTAIN GRACE

KRISSY KNEEN



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‘FIRST PERSON IS a very narrow and limiting point of view.’ Jane looks up, half-smiles. Her fingers scuttle over her keyboard. It looks like she is listening, typing down every breath of the wisdom I am imparting. Only minutes ago I held a copy of *The Year of Magical Thinking* in my hand, tilting the crisp pale jacket towards the class to display the marketing department’s monochrome vision, and they all glanced, all nodded. But when I took a slow walk up the aisle and looked down at Jane’s computer, there was the familiar blue Facebook F in the corner of the screen and a chat-box open in the bottom right. I couldn’t see the words but the sentiment was clear. Caspar Greenwald does not hold my attention.

‘If an author uses first person, a reader is trapped in her or his perspective. You can only learn new information when your character learns it. And most limiting of all? First person, present tense.’ I pause, as if deciding whom to call on; as if I didn’t already

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know. ‘Jane? Can you tell us why?’

Jane’s smile is open, unaffected, the smile of a multitasker. She pauses in her Facebook conversation, moving her hands to surreptitiously angle the screen of her laptop down.

‘Because you only know things your character knows as he finds them out himself?’

‘Thank you, Jane.’

She grins and adjusts her laptop so that she can see the full screen again. Her fingers return to the keyboard; I imagine the words flashing up on the screen. Sorry. Dr Greenwald is so boring. Her own narrative, first person, present tense.

I often have trouble remembering the names of the students on the first day. I draw a map of the classroom and write names next to the corresponding chairs. This rarely works. The students shift around to participate in group work, evading their identities for the duration of the exercise, and then by the next class they have forged alliances with other students and swapped chairs to sit, like with like. Jane’s was the first name I remembered. It was easy. Plain Jane, I thought when she first raised her hand as I read down the class list. She used the raised hand to flick her long dark hair away from her face. She was wearing bright red lipstick and a dress that plunged down towards a thick gold belt, revealing just a hint of lacy red bra easing out towards the perfect V of her neckline. Plain Jane she is not.

Yet the nickname has stuck as surely as my attention, which constantly tracks her movements around the room. If I could tell this story in third person, past tense, I would foreshadow

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the delicious transgression of our sexual relationship. But no matter how impatient my nature, I am stuck fast in my glacial journey, pinned to my own point of view.

‘First person, present tense, or past tense,’ I say, trying not to address my words solely towards Jane, ‘are the preferred voices for memoir, but—and I stress *but*—they are not the only voices available to you for this genre. Does anyone have any examples of memoirs that stray from the norm in this regard?’

A young Indian student in a paisley shirt raises his hand. Patel? Maybe that was the Indian student in last semester’s class. ‘Yes,’ I nod, leaving him nameless.

‘*Boyhood*. J. M. Coetzee.’

‘You, sir, have been reading your course dossier.’ Everyone utters the required laugh. ‘Turn to page nineteen of the dossier.’ I allow myself the indulgence of watching Jane lean to her side, reaching into her satchel, the spill of her flesh, the waterfall of her hair. I try to imagine the ineluctable future in which I have grown tired of watching her. When her flesh holds no mystery for me and her perfume is nothing but a background odour, like opening the door to the tedium of your own home after an exciting overseas trip.

It is impossible to think that far ahead while she is still leaning, still rummaging, still swelling out of her perennially low-cut top. Not only can I imagine sleeping with her, it seems inevitable. At this point I am still boring her; still unattractively middle aged. But we haven’t got to Rabelais yet. The bacchanal is still to come.

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The envelope has been slipped through the slot in my door, the memory stick so thin I can barely feel it through the textured card. Liv still uses good quality stationery. It is one of the first things that attracted me to her. Her assignment printed on heavy cream paper with a faint watermark on each page.

Compared with Jane, Liv was less memorable in the flesh, more subtle. She didn't stand out from the rest of the class; I might have missed her among the blonde curls and ginger ponytails. She handed me her assignment and I weighed it between my fingers, the paper thick and buttery. I looked a second time at the girl standing in front of me and noticed she was pretty. Pixie-faced, with a short dark helmet of hair that made her eyes seem bigger than they were. By exam time I was regularly helping her zip up her linen tunic, her perfume still appealing then; not quite yet the scent of a familiar but uninteresting room.

It was her exploration of form that kept me entranced till just after her graduation. A double major, arts and technology. She brought a different world with her to the page, a curious experimentation. Tricks, I called them, but she would not be dissuaded from her experiments in narrative. And even before she won the award for the interactive narrative, I had to admit that some of them were quite good.

I hold the memory stick up to my nose as if I might smell her fingers on it. Nothing. Plastic, a petrochemical base note. There is a piece of characteristically heavy paper in the envelope—*Thanks for this*—and on the flipside—*I value your feedback*.

There is a suit to go with it. A skin. That's what they call them. I hold the thing up, weighing it, turning it. It is just like a skin that someone might have shed, a whole person degloved, rubbery,

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flesh coloured, damply cold.

I pour a glass and sit by the laptop. Liv's email has instructions. This is a memoir. Ten years in the making. *First Person Present Tense*. I'd like to thank you for the lessons you taught me. Voice is everything—you were right.

I sip and tap the memory stick on the kitchen counter. 'Bach,' I say and the computer anticipates my track choice: cello suites. I lean back and shut my eyes and Plain Jane hovers in my memory, pushing back her luxurious tresses. Liv was interesting, smart, a handful, but Jane, now Jane...

I tap my finger on the side of the glass. Even with Bach to calm me I can't settle. How could this be the future of memoir? How could a memory stick and a synthetic suit replace Nin and Levi and Thoreau? I push the glass aside, barely touched. Suiting up is quite a process. At this time in the evening I would rather be putting on my tracksuit pants. It feels too intimate, the fabric, a little like neoprene but sheerer, softer against naked skin, the little tube-shaped pouch for the penis. It feels almost pornographic to slip myself inside it. I suppose there is a different model for the ladies but I can't imagine how the crotch would be configured. I think of Plain Jane easing her suit on, rolling the tight fabric up her smooth leg, and I appreciate how the material adjusts for all the slight changes that might occur in the course of a viewing session.

They use these suits for porn. Of course. Pornography is the driver for most innovation. If it weren't for the needs of men we would never have shot off into space.

I press the sliver of plastic into the slot in the machine. I slip the headpiece into place and my eyes adjust to the optical limits. A grey line begins to turn blue, the words pairing suit above it.

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First Person Present Tense.

Prologue.

Perhaps the title is a little obvious. I'll tell her this. Why is it impossible to make notes when you are in this skin? *Title*, I squeeze my eyes shut to commit the note to memory. *Tell her to change the title*. Then it begins.

I am momentarily confused. I am watching myself. I recognise the university, a lecture theatre, probably in L Block although I have never seen it from this angle. I am sitting in an audience of students. I can feel the press of the seat back, the shift of the swivelling lap table across my knees. I never realised how hard these seats are. I never knew how constricted you can feel when the tabletop is swung into place. I look down at the table and there is my laptop. No. Not my laptop. This is a more modern laptop. Mine has travelled with me for ten years—upgrades, additions—heavy and silver and uncomfortable. This one is lighter and sleeker. I remember it. This is Liv's laptop that she replaced with a more powerful model when she graduated. These are Liv's tight black jeans constricting my hips. Liv's high heels slipped onto my feet. The left one tapping against the seat in front of me, her. On Liv's laptop screen there is a flashing red word. Remembering. Remembering. I am pacing back and forth in front of myself, no, in front of Liv.

'Voice.'

Oh god, the shirt. Do I really look that chubby in it? Do I even own that shirt anymore? Purple check, the warping across the protrusion of my stomach. I try to suck my gut in but I can't and needn't. I am slim as a girl. I am a girl. I am Liv.

I can't breathe. I fumble for the headpiece, the mask, whatever it is called in this mess of silicon and circuitry. I snap it off

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and take deep breaths. Parallel lines sit in the middle of my laptop screen, my heavy old silver computer. The universal symbol for a paused feed. It is strange to be back here in my own body. I catch a glimpse of my face reflected in the dull blue of the screen. I am six years older now. That plump version of myself must have been one of the first times we met. I didn't even remember her name back then. She was one of the many faceless students. I have a whole new batch of them now and each new crop is exactly the same as the last. I take a big swallow of wine. I feel myself returning, occupying my body once more. A draft licks at my cheek. I have left a window open somewhere.

Was I really that old even then? I am tempted to get up, go to a mirror, find myself again. Of course it is just a trick of perspective or technology: a bad lens, a dodgy angle. I know what I look like. Below the pause symbol there is a line and the word Contents. I click on the word and there are chapter numbers, Prologue, Chapter 1, Chapter 2 all the way to Chapter 34 and then an epilogue. I hover the arrow over the first chapter and click. The cursor flashes, waiting for me to put the headpiece back on. I take deep breaths as if I were about to plunge into icy water. Then, when my head is spinning from hyperventilation, I slip the mask back onto my head.

Again, a moment of disorientation. It is as if I have been swallowed whole by a creature barely larger than myself, a croc or a shark. My muscles tense to cut my way out, emerge like Jonah, triumphant and covered in ambergris. But the panic settles. The new skin eases snug against my own, becomes my own, its eyes my eyes, the mechanical iris making its adjustments. Pairing suit. The new world becoming clear, clearer than the old, real world. Everything leaps crisply into focus. A room, the smell of it, at once

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familiar and yet unfamiliar. I sniff. That scent, cloves, cut grass and dust. An old-book scent and the reek of unwashed sheets. It smells like...my own bedroom, and yet different. Heightened. I blink and take an unbalanced step into the room. A moment of dizziness, then I reach out and touch the wall. My own bedroom wall. It is solid. I am home. But I'm not, I'm not in my bedroom. I struggle against this new overlap of reality. I know I am sitting in the kitchen, plugged in to Liv's program, clad in a suit, a second skin. I try to turn, to walk back to where I know I am sitting, but nothing happens. I have no agency in this story. I run my fingers without volition—my fingers are run—over the flock wallpaper. I look down at the piles of books lining the wall. The titles leap into focus as I stare: Knausgaard, Atwood, Orwell, Yuknavitch... Nin, although I know the Nin is no longer there. I lent that book to a student, the one who superseded Liv. Slimmer waist, longer hair, bigger tits. But here is the book, returned to its rightful place in the pile at my feet. I pick up the Yuknavitch, *The Chronology of Water*, and turn it in my hands. I am wearing nail polish. Green on the right hand and on the left a darker green, almost brown, a shimmering like the carapace of a beetle. I vaguely remember knowing a girl who did this, two different colours at once, who was it?

'You can borrow that. You'd like it.' It is my voice, close to my ear. Someone behind me. I am behind me. 'You've read

C. A. Elphick?' I can feel myself nodding. It is unsettling to nod without willing myself to nod, to be a passive participant in my own actions. I struggle to shake my head, but no. I have to sit in this body and be moved like a puppet. Nod, nod, nod.

'Well, she owes a lot to Yuknavitch. *Writing the Silence* is like a little cousin to that book.'

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I am putting the book back on the pile when a hand reaches out to still mine. Fingers touch, interlink. The book becomes an excuse for hand-holding, a finger gently stroking mine, and I am suddenly aroused. I turn my head and there is a tall man behind me. Just like with my bedroom, he is familiar, someone I have known. He reminds me of my father, same barrel chest, same grey and thinning hair. He leans closer. A twitch deep inside me like the slow rise of a penis, only one that is buried in the pit of my belly. The penis thickens and throbs as the man leans close and presses his mouth against mine and forces my lips rudely open with his tongue and stabs at my upper palate, snailing over the back of my teeth. The pulse in my belly might be lust or fear and it is too big, it is tearing a hole inside me. I am paused at the beginning of a sprint; my heart is too fast. I can't breathe.

When the man pulls away there is blood on his lip, and I realise that it must be my blood, my lip split in the violence of that kiss.

But no. Not blood. Lipstick. It is my lipstick smeared onto his mouth. I can see a pulse beating at the base of his neck. I can see his trousers pulling tight at his crotch. I press the Yuknavitch to my chest. My chest. The breasts soft and warm under my fingers. A confusion of desire. I try to cup them, my breasts, but my hands will not let go of the cool chaste cover of the book.

He cups them for me. He reaches out and shapes his hands around my breasts and pushes the hard lump in his crotch against me and tilts his head down, smiling. And I know him. I recognise him from the other world, the real world. It is me of course, this man. In the other world I see him smiling at me in the mirror, catch glimpses of him as I walk past shop windows, see him in photographs.

Me. Of course it is me.

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And I am her. I am Liv. And this is my room and it is his room and he, I, put my hand up her, my, skirt. I push the cotton aside with his finger and it catches on the pubic hair, which stings sharply and his finger wriggling inside me is like sandpaper and I am trying not to wince as he finally gets the finger—sharp ragged nail—into the complication of folds and touches the very edge of her void. The horror and the beauty of it. The feeling of a slick damp finger, less pain, more pleasure in it now as he fingers me. I finger her. I remember fingering her that first time, standing in my bedroom, I am the subject of this probing, not quite enjoying it, not really sure if I should push his hand away.

I push his hand away and my lips are slick with my anxious desire and I smell him, musky, strong, predatory, and he raises his finger to his face and sniffs it, touches it to his lips, wetting them, and there is a rush of saliva—not saliva, not come, but a wet warm spurt nonetheless and it dampens my underwear.

I did that. I am doing it. It is me. I slip my finger into my mouth and I hold her hips, not her, my hips with the sharp, bruising fingers of his other hand. He holds me so hard that any pleasure dissipates as he pushes that spit-wet finger inside me and rams it all the way up. One, two, three times in quick succession. And it hurts. This little pistoning finger that I know to be the Auslan gesture for *fucking*. A furious triple *fuck you*.

And I remember what is to come and I am struggling to forget just as I am struggling against his rough clamp of a fist. And I hear her in memory, an echo, as I say, 'No.'

And I say, 'Stop,' or is it my memory of her?

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No. And Stop.

And it stops.

I am sitting on a chair in my kitchen and I am breathing hard in the suffocation of the mask. The parallel pause lines glow in the middle distance. The story has stopped. I must have spoken aloud. The narrative responded to my words.

I snap the headpiece off and the world comes back to me. My thick thighs, my masculine waist, my cock standing hard, stiff against the fabric. I unzip the suit and peel it off. The rancid smell of anxious sweat wafts from my sticky skin. I make my way to the bedroom. My bedroom. Here. In my house. My piles of books. The Yuknavitch there where it has always been in a pile of memoirs and biography.

I touch the wall. My fingers stroke the flock wallpaper. I have never really thought about the wallpaper before. I press the palm of my hand onto it and feel a finger sandpapering its way inside me. The smell of my sweat, her cunt. The taste of her, first taste that time right here where I am standing. I take hold of my cock, slipping my fist down over it. Sandpaper-dry fist. But I pump it anyway, remembering the day as it happened. Remembering the next thing. The sharp surprise of her hymen. How excited I was by the discovery of her virginity.

I spit on my hand and take my cock again, remembering. Not quite remembering. All I can grab hold of is the memory of pushing, hard, trying to break it. Knowing I was the first and swelling up with that knowledge. A conquistador, an astronaut planting his flag. Splitting the cunt of her wide open and seeding her virgin field. All the old clichés.

I rub myself hard. I am older now. I was so hard pushing myself against her. She was collecting it all. I'm not sure how, was there

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some device, some secret camera? How do the kids do that stuff anyway? First-person video games or whatever they call it now.

But this isn't a game, this is something else. Not a camera. She was naked. I remember or almost remember that first time with her. Was she naked? Did I let her leave some part of her clothing on? I rub, but my cock is deflating. I am squeezing the air out of that particular balloon. Did I let her keep her clothes on?

It is the doubt that bothers me. The gaps in memory. And now with the limp curl of my penis soft against the palm of my hand I feel my anger flushing my skin.

She recorded me without permission. I will sue her. This is my reputation here. If this thing got out, this file, this game, the first-person shooter or whatever high-tech thing. This skewed version of things. If this got out? If my students saw this...

My cock leaps at the injustice of it. A little angry stab and I squeeze it again, once, twice, three times, remembering that first finger-fuck. That sweet fresh sap filling my nose. That tight first-fingered cunt hole. I remember she was a virgin, but I didn't know that then. Popping the cherry they call it, because of the blood. No blood marring the first taste of her. My mouth waters, my cock swells anew but I rub without coming. Rubbing and rubbing, my cheek pressed against the flock wallpaper, my cock aimed towards Lidia Yuknavitch. Liv is a bitch, a bitch with a camera hidden somewhere.

Bitch. Rub. Bitch. Rub.

I let go of my penis, panting, sweating. I stomp back towards the kitchen. The suit is difficult to drag on. My hair catches; pulls. I remember the tug of my pubic hair, his (my) finger in my pants. I grunt into the suit and zip it up, gentling the fabric up to cover my penis, now fully erect.

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There is that momentary dislocation as I put the mask on. A moment of suffocation. The beat of her heart is faster than mine. I can feel the disconnect, a syncopation, that rise of the ocean and the sudden plummet but then my heart makes pace with hers and we are one. I am up against the flock wallpaper. I can feel it softly scratching against the cheeks of my arse.

He is too heavy against my chest. The thud of his belt on my pubis is sharp and unpleasant. I struggle away but it is persistent like a dentist's drill. This dull metal tapping against bone. His hands grab at my arse, push up, settle me onto his body. My knees spread wide, the lips of my vulva swollen and sensitive. I can feel them chafing. This is what it feels like? I shake my head, but of course I am not shaking my head in this moment within moments. I feel fear. Is it my fear? My real and present fear? Or is it her fear, has this program somehow plugged me into a recorded memory of fear? How do you do that, I wonder as he lurches across to the unmade bed with me, held too high and clutched too tight. How do you record a sensation of fear? Is it the heart rate communicated through the tiny receptors in the rubber? Is it a change of temperature, a tightening of the second skin?

How is this story 'written'? And what part of it is authored? What percentage comes from the reader? Am I afraid now because I have never experienced 'the lips of my vulva' before? Am I scared of the possibility of a vagina, of my body embracing this magician's trick without missing a single beat? Or was she, Liv, frightened six years ago when I picked her up and threw her down onto the plump of my bed?

I am shaking my head now, or she is, as he climbs between my spread knees and pins me with his sheer bulk. And I am shivering a little, clamping all those unfamiliar girl parts shut.

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This must be my fear, my masculine self responding to the idea of penetration. I struggle for distance from the feel of his hands on my knickers as he struggles them down. Part of me remembers how it really was. She was warm and welcoming beneath me. She was wet and ready for me, urging me on. Wasn't she?

I shake my head but I remain silent as he wrenches the tangle of underwear off one of my trembling feet. He lifts his hips off me for a moment and I hear the sound of a zipper. His face is on my face, his closed eyes, the wrinkles beside his nose, a close-up of open pores. His tongue missing my mouth entirely, a wet line across my cheek until he finds his target and the tongue darts hard between my lips.

Hard between my lips.

Is this how it feels, the slip of cock missing its mark? He shifts and my knee is pushed wider from the weight of him and the buckle of his belt cuts at the flesh of my thigh. He thrusts again and there is no way that thing is going in me. It couldn't. I try to wriggle my hips away, I twist but his hand is down there, I can feel his fingers hooking into the meat of me. Yes. I am wet. He slips on juices and fumbles. Can a woman be wet when she is afraid? I would never have expected this physical contradiction. There is lubrication all around the area and it is only this that allows his finger to slip past my tight clenched lips. He pauses. I wriggle, but he presses down to hold me still. His finger pokes away down there. He is feeling the surface of my hymen, exploring it, plucking it like a string on a guitar, playing a hiss of air out of me, a grunt escaping around the slug tongue.

His fingers retreat and he is breathing heavily onto my cheek, into my hair. I have excited him, or the barriers of my body have. My mouth is free and I speak for the first time since hitting the

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bed.

‘I...I’m not sure...’

But the words are interrupted by a punch. It feels like a punch although I’m not sure if you can call a cock barrelling towards a cunt a punch exactly. A pounding is the right expression as the thwack of it speeds up, bruising the sticky lips, numbing them with thump after thump and then a sharp pain, a cutting, and I cry out. And he stops. He is lodged a little in me. Part of him finally settled inside my flesh.

He pauses. We pant. The pain is less sharp. I can bear it. I suppose I am losing, have lost my virginity. I wasn’t ready, but it is done.

Hang on, are these my thoughts? Her thoughts? I try to surface, slide back down to the place where I am shaking but I let relief flood through me because it is over and I have survived.

Then he lifts his hips and I feel the cock sliding out of me and just before it loses contact with the sting of my flesh it slams down once more and I have never felt pain like this. I whimper uncontrollably and maybe the sob of pain is like a sob of pleasure because he is encouraged by it. He lifts and drops and there is more of it inside me. A big fist of gristle lodged in my skin. Lift and drop, lift and drop further. I grit my teeth at each new humiliation. Then he picks his weight off my chest and props himself up and looks down at what must be the bloodied pulp of my sex and he puts his hand down there. I can feel him measuring his own girth.

Then the fucking starts, fast pumping thrusts as I lie spread and bleeding and growing mercifully numb beneath him. He fucks and there are words on his lips and some of them slip out in counterpoint to his pumping.

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‘...right...up...up...fu...tight...first fuck...first...’

And then his eyes become wide and white, the irises disappear completely and he stretches his lips into a grin before grunting the words ‘There you go’, and rocking, jerking, stopping, jerking and falling with a grunt onto my face, chest hair in my mouth. Another sharp twitch into me and a stinging like alcohol poured on an open wound.

The only sound from me is a sharp, pained hiss.

‘That was fucking wonderful,’ he says, slipping his hand down again and checking that he is still lodged there. He bounces his soft cock in and out a few times, paddling in the shallows. Then he pushes a kiss into my cheek and looks down at my pale face and says it:

‘You’re a woman now.’ He really does. Another pressing of the lips. ‘Did you come?’

I close my eyes and in the darkness words, my voice, her voice in my head. They are clear and certain. This is what you would call a voiceover. My voiceover. But no. I shake her off with difficulty. I struggle to remember myself within her.

The voice says: And in this way it begins.

There is come in the suit. I don’t know how it happened, even now, thinking back on the scene I am becoming aroused again. It is horrifying. How could so much pain and fear make me come? Make the sticky relief of my penis start to get hard again?

The scene lacked all the things I usually need to push me to orgasm. The sight of a girl, particularly the tits. Where were her tits in all of this? He, I, didn’t suck one tit into my mouth in the whole experience. That can’t be possible. I don’t remember it like that at all, but to be honest I don’t remember much about it except that

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first realisation that she was a virgin and how my knees trembled when I knew I was about to help her be rid of that childlike state. I do remember needing to wash the sheets twice, soaking them in a bucket of bleach between washes. I almost remember it as a sweet, tender moment between us. I almost remember it.

I lie now, naked on the bed and my cock standing and I lather it with lube from the bedside table and although it is hard I can barely feel it in my fist. Instead I feel the push of a cock. I feel cunt. I feel sharp pain. I feel ill. Bile rising from my gut. Come rising from my balls. I spasm, shooting a second time. I turn my head and vomit. It sprays, yellow as jaundice across the sheets. I roll onto my knees and my body is racked with the purging spasms as my cock still pumps the last of its bitter seed onto the sheets.

I stand up, dizzy. Seasick. She has poisoned me. Bitch, I think, but without heat. If that was really how it was, that first time with Liv...

I rip the sheets from the bed and throw them in the bathtub. I turn the shower on above them and fall back to sit on the toilet.

If that was real, then I am implicated in it.

It felt real. I felt what Liv might have felt. Or was it some trick? Surely what I have just experienced was like falling into someone's unreliable memoir. A lie. A very cleverly drawn one, but a lie nonetheless.

I wash the come out of the suit. There is a special protective coating on the inside, thicker around the crotch area. Pornography drives innovation. I suppose it must be so.

I fall pale and shaking onto the fresh sheets. I will have to re-write the dossier. This more than anything bothers me. The fact that my course outline for Memoir 104 will have to be updated.

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Not now, but sometime soon. If this is a future for narrative, I will have to be at the forefront of teaching it. I cross my arms over my breasts, only I have no breasts. I try to remember the skin that I am in. I have ‘read’ three chapters. If it wasn’t for the 8 a.m. lecture I would have finished the whole thing, staying up to experience my own life retold to me, by her but in my skin—or no, in her skin. I have never felt so unsettled. Tomorrow’s lecture will cover the rise of the sexual memoir, from the pseudonymous memoirs of female prostitutes (written by men) to modern accounts of web affairs, second-life sex, and last year’s bestseller, *Recollections of a Proxy Sexxer*. All of it superseded now. Soon the page will not be the place for it. I will have to look more closely at the lecture on ethics in light of this new thing, this unrecognisable version of myself.

I close my eyes and roll over onto the fat of the pillow and remember the softness of the skin I have been inhabiting. I could sue. Surely defamation laws cover this. I wonder if she could mask my identity somehow, some CGI technique, another body over my skin. Even then I would not be protected. Some people knew about us, our affair. Sometimes she would step out of my car wearing one of my shirts, her own shirt lying in my washing basket stained by my jism. Sometimes she sat in my class, her eyes averted but with all eyes on her. They knew. They would know. I could sue. But then I would have to admit it was me who held her down and forced myself upon her, who humiliated her.

I have lived through a chapter where I critique her essay in front of the class, sneering at the lack of analysis, at the gush of subjectivity. Then at home, making up for it with sex

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that I assumed was mutually pleasurable. I have struggled to contain my tears while lying powerless beneath the bulk of my own body, faking an orgasm just to get my weight off my own chest. How could I stand up in court and say, *Yes, that was me. That was all me, but despite what you have seen, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, it wasn't like that at all.* Not at all. Honestly. If you could see inside my head you would have a different story. As the officers of the court approach: *No. Please. I am innocent.* And they take me by the arm, one on each side. *No honestly, it isn't like that. She has remembered it all wrong.* And they half-drag, half-carry me down the aisle and I catch my shin on a pew and I wake up.

I have slept. I groan and ease my legs out of bed, dropping them over and onto the floor. My head throbs. I stumble into the bathroom. The dirty sheets are still bundled in the bottom of the bath. I let the cold water run through them, rinsing away the smell of vomit and the memory of a bad night. When they are clean enough I bundle them into the washing machine and watch the slow sudsy spin begin. I step under the shower. I will be similarly cleansed. I can feel the water outlining my body for me. I am me. I am in this body. I am surrounded by water. I am the person I always thought I was, not her vision of me.

As I rub myself dry with the bath sheet I become myself.

They are watching me. I am aware of them now. All eyes on me and I see myself here, my threadbare cardigan over a T-shirt with a comic panel on the front. Zombies approaching a car. The hero standing on top of the car with a cricket bat. I am probably too old now for a novelty T-shirt. I pull the cardigan close around my chest and fumble the buttons closed. Maybe I should start working out. It would be good for my health to start some physical ac-

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tivity. I am fatter in the stomach than I would like to be.

Jane is looking at me. Plain Jane, who is so far from plain. I smile in her direction. I feel a sudden need to accelerate my habitual leisurely seduction. I need her to think of me in a different way. I need her eyes, glancing approvingly at my belly, my solid hips, my chest. I need her to give me back my cock, which used always to be so present. It has become difficult to imagine myself without a vulva, and I need to address this as soon as possible. I need Plain Jane to smile back at me, to see me as a man.

She smiles. I feel my feet planted more firmly on the floor. I open my laptop. A flutter of panic. I track my cursor to the finder, search for the file in case it has embedded itself there, but I ejected the slim memory stick before I left. It is carefully tucked away in the envelope it came in. Her address on the back. Evidence.

‘Today,’ I say to the class, but I am really speaking to one person. I keep coming back to her, locking my gaze to hers. ‘Today we will discuss how a writer can seduce a reader.’ The predicted swell of laughter from the group. They are still young. This doesn’t change. In all my years of teaching, every first-year group will laugh in embarrassment when the subject of sex is even vaguely referenced. ‘As a writer,’ I say, ‘you are in complete control of the story. You have the reader in your hands. And as with any seduction, it is up to you to...land the fish, shall we say. Tickle it out of the water. Like a trout. Have you heard of trout tickling?’ Lots of heads shaking. ‘Well, look that up some time. The reader is like the fish and you just need to get your hands under there. A little tickle to reassure them. Then you follow up quick smart and land them. Seduction. Look that one up, too, while you are at it. It is an art, a craft. You have to craft your story so that it seduces the reader.’

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She doesn't take her eyes off me. It won't be hard to get her. She has read my novel, or she should have. It was required reading for last semester's fiction subject. She has read it and therefore half my work has been done for me. She has been tickled. My hands are already hovering under her. All that I need do now is to lift her and flip her onto the shore.

Jane seems nervous. She holds her satchel in front of her, shielding her crotch. I step aside, holding the door open. She has to push past me to get inside and her skin presses against my shirt. I smell her perfume, sweet and unapologetically feminine.

My own house feels unfamiliar. I dump my briefcase on the table where I always put it. I shrug my jumper off onto the back of the lounge. I open the fridge, my fridge, and pull out the wine, my wine, but I am seeing all of it through a distorted lens. Each action familiar and yet equally unfamiliar.

'You have so many books.' She says this as if she is surprised that a lecturer in literature might read books. She touches a row of them with her delicate fingers, each one tipped with a pale shell pink. I imagine her fingers spreading those similarly coloured lips. Her nails seem to promise me the pink of her sex. I take her hand and wrap those cuntish fingers around a glass of sauvignon blanc. This is a perfect beginning.

She is here to borrow *Speak Memory* by Nabokov but of course we both know that isn't the reason we are here. She wouldn't like the book anyway. I glance down at her tanned and hairless legs, the elegant red high heels that she slips off one by one, easing her feet into the long pile of the carpet as if it were unmowed lawn. She is like an old-fashioned girl from seventies soft porn. She is all warm limbs and Vaseline lens.

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She plumps herself down on the couch and crosses her legs and her skirt kicks up. She manages to seem shy and flirty all at once. This would be the signal to pounce as she arranges herself in front of me. She glances up at me, stretching her neck as if to offer her throat. I ease myself onto the couch beside her and I could so easily lean forward, press my lips onto her skin. This would restore me to myself. I take a long sip of my wine. I lean forward, looming over her.

Looming.

I see this with a strange sense of *deja vu*: I have been here before, only I was the one being loomed at. I lean towards her and she stretches her chin up and out and I see myself leaning down to breathe on my neck. I am displaced. I am at once both the hunter and hunted. Too late to waver now, my lips are so close to that pale throat, the pearly fingertips reaching up to cup the stubble on my cheek. I bury my face in skin. I breathe in flowers, flesh petals it seems, with my eyes closed and the gentle brush of her against my mouth. She is floral. Her face is a bouquet. I am lurching between one perspective and the next, her face, mine.

I pull back, dizzy. I take deep breaths. I try to be still within myself but I can't seem to find my equilibrium.

I close my eyes. My skin feels too naked on my body. I am vulnerable. It takes me a moment to realise that what I am missing is that other skin, that rubber-like material that heightens as it curates my bodily relationship with the world. My skin on her skin is just too intimate and yet even my leg pressed against hers feels like it is a long way away from her body. And something else, as she shifts, puts her hands up to the front of her summer frock, undoes one button after another, even with the lace of a bra poking up above the pastel-coloured cotton, all this feels like an

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interruption. These are not the people in the story of my life. This man I am inhabiting, this woman I am about to find my way into, these are mere distractions. Even the possibility of sex with this girl feels like an irritation.

The suit is where I left it, drying on a rack in the bath- room. It is the thought of it that stirs me now. I feel myself beginning to become firm. I kiss her, imagining the tight grasp of the fabric on my calves. The suit is mine to wear, the story is mine to inhabit. Hard now, I push myself onto this girl. I knew her name but now I have forced it out of the way. She is just some warm thing under me as I fumble with her knickers, unzip, unbuckle. I feel the shape of my penis and it feels like the first time in a long while. The warm wet clutch of her cunt gives me length and breadth again. I measure the whole length of myself in a single thrust. Male again. I with- draw and lose my sense of it as I lose connection with her body. I thrust in again and my cock is returned to me, three- dimensional, whole. I punch it into her, swelling a little each time, floating up into my sense of self, but at what seems to be maximum altitude I begin to plummet. I fall into—no, become—a chasm. I open to a cold, hard disappointment. I am my cock and yet I am also the disappointment of flesh, losing all hope of pleasure, thrust by agonising thrust.

I feel the infusion of loneliness that will be numbing her thighs. Each awkward forward motion pushing her further away from me. I know her eagerness to please and also the glimmer of an understanding swelling deep in her belly. This old man will be no different from any of the young men. This old man, expert in narrative structure, is inexpert in the busi- ness of sex. This man, me, I am slightly unclean, unskilled, good for nothing when I step out of a lecture theatre and ease into a willing young girl.

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I am deflating. My cock bends painfully at the next thrust. I lift it out of her, letting the lips of her cunt suck at the sudden cold rush of air. I open my eyes. The nausea rises up to meet me and I pull away, flinging myself to the far side of the couch. Her dress is pulled high, her knees parted. I can see the red pucker of her vulva pursed at the edge of her knickers. The cotton slips back, almost hides her slit from my gaze. Her cheeks are flushed. Her eyes are locked onto the shrivelled worm of my penis, glistening wet and hanging sadly from my open fly.

I hold my hand to my mouth, my stomach clamps down on itself. I feel a hot rush in my throat and swallow it down quickly, and when I am safe from the attacks of my own body I look back at her. Jane. I remember now. Plain Jane with the porcelain inner thighs and the perfectly bald shell-pink lip still poking out the side of her damp underwear and her pink lipstick kissing the rim of her wine glass, abandoned hurriedly on the side table.

‘Get up,’ I tell her. I can see that she is confused. ‘Get up,’ I say again, and, ‘Go away.’

She blinks, and very slowly moves her pinked fingers to her crotch. She plucks the elastic from its lodging and smooths the skirt of the dress over her knees.

‘Done with me?’ she asks. And then, with her lip curled up a little, ‘Doctor Greenwald?’

I am thirsty. I reach for my glass and sip but wine is not what I am hoping for. I need some water.

‘It would seem so,’ I tell her.

She finds her shoes and her bag and then she opens the fridge door and plucks the bottle of wine off the shelf and carries it with her to the door.

‘Thanks for the drink.’ She holds the bottle up to make sure

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I have seen it. I shrug. She hates me. If I had continued on with it, met her tomorrow and the next day and the next, then she would have hated me more. As much as Liv hated me. Hates me. Hates me, in the present tense. I put my cock away and zip up. The memory stick is where I left it last night.

Memory stick. That is exactly what it is. I pick her memory up and turn it between my fingers. Each scene plays out in real time but there are breaks, cracks in her recollection. The recreation of her history skips over the boring bits or the bits she has forgotten. Last night I immersed myself in three weeks of trysts and emerged from it before the next day arrived. I wonder how long it will take to trudge through the three long years of our time together.

Will she include the time we borrowed a car from her mother? The quick duck to the hills? Would a reader have to suffer through each of the three Christmases, with their respective aggressions and humiliations?

I walk quickly to the bathroom. I am out of my clothes and pulling the suit on before I have time to rethink. Just to check, I tell myself, just to know what she has included and what she has left out. I step inside the skin and zip it up and I might as well have shrugged her body around my own shoulders. I can even smell her on me, an earthy musk. I breathe it in, knowing that it is an illusion. I sit at the same table. My laptop. Her memory stick.

I pull the mask over my head.

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The phone is ringing. I try to reach into my handbag for it but I can't and so it must be a phone in that other place. I am sitting at a cafe. There is a damp tissue in my hand. I am eating a slice of cheesecake to wash the taste of the woman off my lips. I don't hate her. She is just another of his students, but she is prettier than I am. Her breasts are bigger. She is more skilled at taking him in her mouth. I dutifully let him push my head down between her legs and pretended to like it. I pretended to like what he wanted. I press the tissue to my eyes but they are dry now. He didn't kiss me once. Her face was slick with his spit and yet he didn't kiss me once. I touch the tissue to my lips. The phone rings. I try to purse my lips angrily but I can't feel any anger. There is just the terrible wrenching sadness, and the slack frown.

But the phone.

My fingers are numb. It is almost impossible to fumble the mask off my head. The parallel pause lines leap into view. They are like a slap in my face. I am falling backward, but no, not me, the world is slipping away and I am still upright. I flex my fingers till the circulation returns to them. I have been clutching the edge of the table so hard my fingers feel bruised.

My phone is ringing. It is in the pocket of my jacket, which is still lying crumpled on the lounge chair. I look at it lying there and it is as if the jacket is a person, someone I abandoned, mewling like a kitten, lost, lonely. Jane. I am equating my jacket with Jane and remembering her feels terrible. I am filled with a rush of self-loathing and, worse, I am filled with a sense of my physicality. I was the man who pushed Liv's head down on Lee's crotch. I was the man who pulled myself and aimed it at her mouth, spilling across Lee's clitoris as she licked it. I was that man. It makes me want to crawl back into the suit just to escape the fact of my

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history. I glance to the window. The sun is just beginning to set.

I have only been in the suit for a few hours but it feels like weeks.

I push up to standing, sway. I have lost my balance and I sit down again. The phone stops ringing. I hear a last isolated beep telling me I have a message.

I stand again, with more success this time, using the table to support my weight. I am ravenously hungry, and so thirsty I could drink a gallon of water. I stumble into the kitchen and stand at the tap pouring glass after glass. The phone rings again but now I need to urinate. My bladder feels swollen, ready to burst. I unzip the suit and it is too late to run to the toilet. I grab a plastic mixing bowl and sink into the relief of pissing.

I notice that the suit is sticky at the crotch. I have come again. Several times, by the look of it. It must have been in that scene, I remember it now as I shake off the last drops and tip the bowl into the sink. A stink of urine fugs up into my face. That scene where I crept out of his bed—my bed— and locked myself in the bathroom and put one finger into myself and brushed the index finger of my other hand up and down across my clitoris until the lips of my vulva began to pulse, sucking at my finger. My first orgasm as a woman. Or her first orgasm with me, but not with me.

I trot over to my jacket and fumble for my phone. ‘Caspar?’

It takes me a minute to recognise the voice of Arthur, acting head of school.

‘Yes?’

‘Thank goodness. You’re alive.’ ‘I am.’

‘Where were you? Why didn’t you call in?’

‘Call?’ I move over to the window, lift one of the venetians. The sun is just beginning to set. It can’t be later than six o’clock.

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‘Lucy covered your class but we were worried.’

‘Oh,’ I say and check the face of my phone. Thursday. Thursday night, 5:16 p.m. What happened to the rest of Wednesday? What happened to a whole new morning and a day? Could I have been sitting in that chair the whole time? My back aches and I stretch it out, leaning forward and resting my forehead on the sill.

‘I think I’ve come down with something nasty.’ ‘We thought so.’

‘I seem to have...slept all day.’

‘No problem. Take your time. Just checking you’re okay.’ I pause. I am not really sure if I am okay.

‘I might take tomorrow off.’

‘Good idea. We’ll see you Monday. Go to the doctor.’

I nod but I’m not sure if a doctor can cure what I have. I look at my phone. Scroll through the contact list. I find her name. Liv. Phone number, email and address. I wonder if she is okay now. It has been years, but is she okay? I never once thought to wonder what her life has been like. She was in it, and then she was gone. I sent her away. She rang, kept ringing, but I just let it go to message. I thought it would be easier for her, for the breakup. Or did I? Did I think that? Or did I just not want to think at all?

There was that girl with the really long hair. Hair to her thighs. Took her hours to caress it all with a straightener. She was already in the picture before I kicked Liv out. It was that strand of hair, that single fine thread, so long when I picked it out of the drain. Liv had to go before there were more hairs, in the sheets, swept under the kitchen bench, wrapped loosely around my balls. That’s why I kicked her out. It was to save her from knowing or to save me from the aftermath of her knowing.

I lie back on the couch, exhausted. I am still hungry. I flick

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through my phone and call the number for the pizza place down the road. I order extra garlic bread, a packet of M&M's. I could eat two pizzas but I just order the one.

I lie with the phone to my chest. Liv. I wonder what happened to Liv. I should get out of the suit but it is so comfortable now, warm and supple. I zip it up and hug my arms around the rubber shell. I slip the mask back over my face and click into the chapter menu. I am halfway through. Almost exactly. This is the midpoint in our story. I am tempted to play this out, just to the end of the scene, but I know I will become lost in it. My stomach groans. I haven't eaten in almost twenty-four hours. I need a coffee.

I peel the suit off and head back to the kitchen. I pour bleach into the sink and run the tap. The acid tang of urine is replaced by the alkaline slap of bleach. I throw the bowl straight into the recycling bin.

While the coffee is brewing I snack on bocconcini from the plastic container. I eat a handful of olives and the oil runs down to my elbow. I wash my hands in dishwashing liquid. I am exhausted, and feverish, as if I really do have the flu. I slip my bathrobe on and sip coffee till the pizza arrives. The young man glances down at the rubber leggings poking out from beneath my robe but says nothing. He takes the tip I offer him and leaves quietly. Maybe he thought he'd interrupted me in the middle of some fetish game.

Did he? I am certainly aroused when I lie back on the couch and pull the mask back onto my face. I am about to press play but then I roll over and wake up and although I am still in the suit I have not experienced anything but the cold dark emptiness of the universe and me plummeting through it.

I would shower but that would take effort. I would have to get out of the suit. Taking the suit off at this point feels like it might

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hurt. Even when I unzip to take a piss it feels as if I am cutting myself open with a blade. I hold my stomach with one hand in case my bowels fall out through the gap in the suit. I zip up with no mishaps. And re-skinned I set the table with a picnic lunch, grazing on bread and cheese as I do it. I must eat. I must stop and eat and drink and defecate. I have a body and no matter how odd it feels to be inside my own body, it will need some sustenance or it will not be strong enough to finish what I have begun here.

I am still swallowing a mouthful of coffee and a slice of ham when I press play. My teeth are chewing and I am swallowing and it is a nice segue because I am eating a toasted sandwich in the narrative, sucking up thick mucus along with tears each time I sniff loudly. I have been crying. This is real. This sucking in of air, the salt on the back of my palate. This is real. I have a vague distasteful memory of ordering pizza. It feels like that might have been a long time ago, or perhaps it is just a story someone told me, like when your mother tells you about that time you fell off the swing and needed stitches. The brief, distasteful tussle with Plain Jane is just a terrible story I have been told, a cautionary tale.

The waiter brings me a box of tissues with a little flower on top of it. A paper daisy. Small kindnesses. It makes me weep out loud. I turn to thank him but he is gone. I pull six tissues from the box and blow my nose into each of them till I am surrounded by soggy wads. When I can breathe more easily I put the daisy behind my ear. I am sure my eyes are puffy and my face is beetroot red but this small thing, a flower, makes me feel a little bit human again. Perhaps even attractive. Not attractive like that other girl, not all long legs and pillowy breasts and glossy hair, but someone a waiter might notice. Someone who might deserve a small floral tribute.

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I think I have lost weight. I look at myself in the fogged mirror. My body, my now unfamiliar hips, legs, shoulders. Showers are certainly quicker in this body. I don't need to blow-dry then style my hair. I don't need to paint my face with base then powder then eyeliner then, then, then, then. I towel myself dry and I slip a robe over my shoulders. I should wash the suit properly, there are instructions on the lid of the box. There is a special disinfectant that the manufacturer provides. I am almost at the end of it now. The breakup is inevitable. Maybe there will be one more twist, a happily-ever-after ending plucked from a hope rather than a memory. In the narrative Liv has been finishing her assignments.

In particular, an interactive narrative for her computer subject. *Liv Walks Home*. It won some award, the university did a big song and dance around it. Six years ago the gridiron helmet that you had to wear to view the thing was really cutting edge. I remember being curious, putting the helmet on, playing the experience. I am sure it is archived somewhere but you wouldn't find one of those helmets anywhere anymore.

It was nothing. Well it was something, obviously, but it wasn't anything that you would expect. It was a representation of a spring day. You walked in the shoes of a young girl. You felt the weight of her textbooks in the backpack on her shoulder. You walked past low-set houses along a footpath and arrived at a metal gate. That is the whole of the story. The thing about it was the wall of jasmine. It was the one moment of pause in the walk. You stopped and looked at the

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wall of jasmine and it was just bursting into new flower and you took in breath and you smelled it and there was a flood of emotion, the same emotion every time. A sad beauty, a bouquet of ennui. There is still a jasmine bush climbing the wall along Thompson Street. It is on my way home from uni. Of course it is, because that fence is my fence. The Home in the story is my home. She made the narrative for me. She made it so that I would stop and look at the jasmine and smell it and feel something.

I have never been able to walk past that fence in spring without feeling that same bittersweet sense of loss and new beginnings. We were breaking up. I was about to kick her out of my house. Home would no longer be home to Liv. She would never again open that metal gate with the same feeling of arrival.

Liv Walks Home was not even a proper story, but there was a story. Everyone who experienced it felt the echoes of a story even if they didn't know exactly what it was they were feeling.

There is still a glimpse of hope. There is sun on your shoulders. Flowers are emerging from the bud. Things might get better. When you put the helmet on and relaxed into the experience of *Liv Walks Home* you would have the distinct impression that there was no need, perhaps, to hold on to your pervasive feeling of despair. She wasn't the first person to use that technology. Gamers had been using it for months. Now there are people who film their adventures like this. For a price you can climb Mount Everest, paddle around the world in a kayak, trek up a river in Bolivia, go caving into the very depths of the world.

After I have eaten I put the mask back on and check my progress on the bar at the bottom of the screen. I have missed three days of work. I have told them I am ill, and I am. I am sick with this. Or Liv is sick. One of us. I am not even sure how to tell which

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part of the feeling is me and which is her. There is only one more chapter. I know how this one ends. I could just skip it altogether. I don't even need to press play, but of course I do.

I am walking home from uni. Sun on my shoulders, dappled under the jacaranda trees. First blooms so purple underfoot. The jasmine wall is in full bloom and some patches of flower have yellowed. Dried blossoms make a pile of dirty snow in the grass below. There is still the smell, still that feeling of nostalgia, but then I reach the gate and my feelings are more complicated now. The weeping sound the hinge makes as it opens is more banshee than siren song. It is only a matter of time—hours—but I am not aware of it as I lift the clasp and settle the gate behind me once more. Our story is almost done. I don't know the details. I don't know about the girl who has been visiting in my absence, but I know. I look down to the cobbled path. I want to remember each irregular stone. I want to stay in this moment but everything is already moving on. He has moved on. I have. I have moved on. I have moved on and my heart is broken for the first time. I have never felt anything like this before.

*

'I'm sorry.'

I stand before the class. Jane is in her usual place, the rest are still a nameless whole. I look out at each and every one of them and I know how it feels to look down at me from their position. I know how I seem, bigger than I really am, taking up more of their attention than I should. They feign indifference but they all really care so much about what I might think of them. I can change a day with one nod, with a tick in a margin. I could change a life just by taking one of them aside and telling them, keep going. It will all work out for you. Keep going. I could make the next genera-

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tion of writers, creators, with an easy sentence or two. What have I been doing all this time? I stare out at all the opportunities I have wasted, all the women I have overlooked because they are too fat or too short or too full of fight, all the young men I have seen as competition. I have marked them down for their youth or their false bravado. I stand here and for the first time I feel the weight of them, too much for me to hold and yet I must hold them. I have been entrusted with them.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say and I suppose they think I am apolo- gising for three lectures wasted. It will be difficult for them to pick up all the content before the exam now. That is all on me.

‘We’re going to skip ahead,’ I say. ‘This bit isn’t really going to help you with anything. Read pages twenty to forty- five in the dossier in your own time, and we can skip over to page sixty- five...

‘I’m sorry,’ I say again, and I am looking at Jane. She stares back, frowning, but the frown softens a little and she nods. ‘Okay. Character. In the classic hero’s journey, the char-

acter goes on a quest and is transformed by it. But this is memoir. Do we really think a person learns from their actions? Do they change?’

‘No. Sir.’ It is a young woman in the second row. She puts up her hand belatedly and I wave it away.

‘No?’

‘No, sir,’ she says.

‘Can you think of an example in memoir, in all the books we have read so far, where the character changes?’

Hands are raised. I point to them one by one and they give me their examples and I nod. I force myself to say *good*. I say *good, good, good*. It feels good. It does. I say it some more until all the raised hands are exhausted.

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‘So if people don’t change in real life? Why do they change in a memoir?’

More hands raised. More good students trying to please me. Nothing has changed. They are the same students, I am the same lecturer in the same threadbare jumper, but I am pleased. They have pleased me with their enthusiasm.

I still have her skin on me. I still feel her hurt, her disappointment, her terrible bittersweet scent of ennui.

I wonder if the weeks will scour her body from my skin. I will become myself. I will return to myself unchanged because we don’t change, not ever. Or at least, I have not ever before.

*

After the lecture I nod to each and every one of the students as they leave. It might be too late to begin to learn their names but I have picked up a few during the lecture and maybe tomorrow I will remember a few more. How long will it be till I sink back into forgetting? I hope it isn’t too soon. I want to try living in her skin for just a while longer.

I walk up to Z Block to the post. I have packaged up the suit, and the little memory stick, a little slice of her memory now shared by me, is nestled in its box on top of it all. I tear a slip of paper from my notebook. I wish I had had the fore-thought to pick a nice card.

Thank you. I write the words carefully. My handwriting is notoriously hard to read. The students tell me this each semester but in all these years I haven’t bothered to change it, to make it any easier to read. I put the note in with the memory stick and close the box. I am about to seal it when I change my mind, open the box. Take out the paper. I pick up the pen and let it hover over the paper. *This is really good work.* I underline good, then cross it out.

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Above it I write the word *extraordinary*.

It doesn't seem like enough, this one sentence to explain what I have lived through this past week. But there are no words to encapsulate it. You would have to live it. The ordinary wonder of it. The extraordinary wonder.

For what it is worth, I am truly sorry.

Not enough. Not nearly enough.

She will publish it and I will not complain. I won't sue her. I won't comment in interviews. If anybody asks me what I think I will tell them that it is an extraordinary work.

I press the padded bag to seal it. I hesitate at the automated payment machine. Real mail is so expensive. It is a luxury for birthdays and Christmas. Big department stores use mail for shopping but they always cover the costs and they send the packages by private courier. It is so rare, even now, to send an original artefact and not a 3D printout that you download and print at home.

Maybe I should have written that she had changed me. That I was a better person now. That I would never be that kind of man again. But it probably isn't true. I will probably be returned to myself in time.

I walk home down Thompson Street. It is still winter and the jasmine bush has a million buds, pink pushing to white but none of them quite ready to burst. I pick a bud and crush it between my fingers. It smells of bitter sap and I am a little disappointed, but I stand and stare at the vine anyway and remember what it is like when it is full of flowers. I remember what it is like to be flooded with a sense of hope for the coming months. I almost feel it. Not quite.

I keep walking. I'll make sure I come back in a week, maybe

The 2018 Stella Prize Shortlist

Extract from *An Uncertain Grace*

two. It will be easy to remember the feeling more clearly, but will I be remembering? Or experiencing it anew? The flowers will be out by then, the sun will be a little warmer. The wind will be less chill. I will be at a little remove from the last few days. It will be spring, come around once more.

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