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BELLA ELLWOOD: Scarecrow

WEEK ONE. MELBOURNE, NEW YEAR'S EVE

Lillian and I spend the evening at the university on our dissertations. There were better places to be, but we don't care. At 10:30 I pop champagne in the office kitchen and play Auld Lang Syne on my mobile. Soon after, we decide the fireworks would be nice after all. We catch a humid tram full of bosomy Greek girls and tipsy teenagers and step off into expectant thousands.

Midnight, the skies dance electric; noise barrels out like rivalry; and, Lillian and I are in the crowd, together among the hopefuls and the disappointed.

"Will you be all right?" Lillian asks when we reach her tram stop. "I don't like the idea of you walking home alone."

"I'll be fine, my love," I reply.

But it's not all right. There are people everywhere, and I'm alone. My best friend Riana is on holidays in Byron Bay. I walk quickly through the streets; pass Lonsdale and its hidden clubs, cut through Victoria market until I reach the main street of my neighbourhood. Music plays out from the local. I want to go in and get a drink, but I'm not sure if I'm brave enough to do it alone.

I enter the bar. New Bartender. Cute. I walk to him. He walks to me. I lean to him, request a pot of Carlton, which he pours for me. He stands close while I fumble for change. It's on, between us, already. Just like that.

A few minutes later, he pulls up a stool close to my own and begins rolling a cigarette. As I lean towards him I say, "I miss so many people."

"I know," he replies, all blue-eyed, blond and lanky and cool, "I arrived from New Zealand three weeks ago and I really miss my friends."

We introduce ourselves. It feels like there's nobody else in the room but this tall Dylan, eyes listen to each of my syllables. His shirt is blue and I feel as though I am drifting like a cloud into the sky. It turns out we live on the same block, only three streets away. I tell him that there's a great swimming pool nearby.

"We'll have to go on a pool date, then, yeah?"

"That would be good," I respond, eyeing his thick leather bracelet.

We learn a lot about each other in pieces during this short time, as though we are filling in spaces of a crossword. He makes me laugh.

"I get off in an hour," he tells me. "You wanna go find a party?"

"Could do." I reply. "Here's my number. Call me when you get off. I'll go home first."

An hour passes. Dylan texts: "Hi Kyla. I'm finishing soon. Guess ur probably asleep ... Think I'm gonna go home & chill"

"nope, up writng, come chil here 4 a bit, 46 Queens st" I reply.

Dylan arrives with a six-pack of beer. We stay up talking in the living room until the sun comes up.

I eventually say, “Don’t get the wrong idea, but maybe we should go into my room ...”

He takes off his shoes and leaves them outside.

I’ve never done this before—met a stranger, invited him into my home, brought him into my bed to continue talking.

I slide off my jeans, get under the covers, watch while he strips off to boxers, spy his beautiful body. He folds in beside me, tucks his face to mine. His arms feel like they are ten feet long, doubled and doubled around me. We sleep like this, his hand, warm, cupping my belly. When I awake in the middle of the night, he kisses my shoulder and whispers, “beautiful girl” over and over again.

The absence of awkwardness strikes me in the morning. It is easy to wake beside him. He kisses my mouth as though ritual. Making him coffee is natural. Our bodies coo together, like sun-warmed fruit.

“Shall we go swimming,” one of us asks, and the other agrees.

We gather our things and walk to the pool. When we find it isn’t open, we retire to the closest park, kneel on the grass, our bodies lazy, heavy onto each other. He strokes my back and kisses my neck. I wonder where I am. We share a joint and talk about his devotion to taking pictures, and then cross the street to find children in bathing suits and parents with bags, impatient for the cool water.

We toss our stuff on a grassy knoll and play in the pool. Then we lie together on the hill, wet skin, little kisses, for easy nap-like hours as we share prohibited cigarettes, and I muse about the extraordinary length of his fingers.

“This is the most relaxing day I can remember having,” one of us says, and the other agrees. “Yes, the most perfect day.”

We become hungry, walk towards the main street. He reaches out and holds my hand.

At the café I ask him to tell me exactly where he was a year ago today and exactly what has happened since that time. He talks about an ex-girlfriend he nursed for three months, about how she almost died. I tell him about my year. We talk of life and love, friend’s suicides, and my father’s recent death—a death more of regret than loss.

“I need a rest,” I say, as we walk back towards my house. As I fall onto the grass, my head on his lap, his hands in my hair, until he beckons me to rise.

Once inside, he covers me. But, I push away from our kisses, from his zealous hands.

“I don’t think I can do this,” I say. “I’ve never done this before. To just meet someone, and then, to feel so comfortable ...”

“It’s never happened to me before either,” he says.

“Never?” I sit up.

“Never.”

I try to control the wind, the howling. His hands roam the map of my body, link cities together, touch rivers and sky, until I am almost undone.

“I can’t do this,” I say, escaping to the kitchen.

“I’m starving,” he says, following me.

“I’ll cook,” I reply.

I get a pot. Walk to the sink. Run cool water down into it. Stare out my huge window at the neighbours’ windows that face my own like magnified eyes of the possums, which play nightly in the giant trees between us. Dylan comes from behind.

His enormous hands lift my hips, his hot mouth on my neck, the sunny window hiding nothing. My face in the sun. He takes my top. My breasts in the sun. The possums' eyes. His hands dig down my shorts, find me wet. He lifts me onto the counter, skin against plastic.

"Fine, you win!" I exclaim! I grab his hand, run to my bed, clothes off so fast, skin-to-skin, condom, legs in the air. Hard fast fucking.

We rest, him inside me still, bodies sticky with honey and lemons.

I go to my balcony railing, put my cheek against the cool iron.

"God, you look sexy," he says. He points across the street, "See the brick building over there? It used to be a fire station. The third window on the left is my bedroom."

"That's insane—we can flag each other and make up codes!"

I cook him the worst meal I've ever made. He's kind enough to eat it. He tells me what he'll cook for me next time, explains the way he likes to grill vegetables.

"Do you wanna go play billiards or watch a video," I ask.

"I want to do whatever you want to do," he replies.

"A movie then."

When the main characters declare their love ("I love you," he says, "I love you too," she replies) Dylan jolts up, burying me in the kiss of river.

I fall asleep before he does. It's a hot night, and we don't hold each other. Tomorrow, I must return to my thesis.

I rise Dylan with bird-feet kisses. He walks me to the bus stop and kisses me goodbye.

That night he calls and asks if I'd like to join him and his friend for a drink at the Local.

"Which friend?" I ask.

Ah, the New Zealander he'd spent Christmas with. I remember Dylan describing her as a "bundle of sunshine."

"Sure, meet you in about twenty," I reply.

Slip on red pants and dark eyeliner. Walk to him. Dylan introduces us and kisses my mouth hello. Every third word out of Sunshine's mouth is cunt. She keeps punching his arms and slagging him off, "loser," "faggot", while explaining that they're like siblings. After getting drunk we decide to go to Sunshine's.

She leads us through Chinatown, down heroin alleys lined with signs like, "There is no mirror-stand, no mirror to polish, and no place where dust can cling." I follow Sunshine into a cagey building pigeon-grey; ride the elevator up only to find myself in an immaculate room the size of a gym, its walls covered in graffiti. Sunshine rolls a joint while we fall onto the couch and her roommate puts on an X-Men DVD.

Dylan's passed out beside me. I can barely see the screen, Hugh Jackman's face becomes two.

"Where's the loo?" I ask.

But I can't make it to the toilet. At the sink, I turn the faucet on so that they won't hear. Gag into my hands. Watch puke—red as though berries—fill the sink. I try to jab the chunks down the sinkhole, and scoop the remaining dregs into the wastebasket, so they won't know. I Line my finger with toothpaste and run it along my tongue.

When I return to the couch, Dylan pats my leg and resumes sleeping.

Sometime later, the doorbell rings, two high ravers come up looking to score.

"Let's go," Dylan says.

We jam ourselves into the back of a cab.

“Your place or mine,” I ask.

“Mine,” he replies.

Dylan forgot his house keys and instead climbs through his living room window. He sets the alarm early for work. I borrow a shirt and hide behind his back, my face tucked between his shoulder blades.

Next morning, I dress quietly, whisper my plans to my sleeping boy, and kiss the back of his neck before I leave.

Returned from her holiday, Riana and I spend the day at the beach with my friend Ryan. He drives us where we want to go and sings love songs to the sea. I collect small pink shells for my night table and think of my father and the gaps between our knowing.

Later that evening I text Dylan: “Working hard?”

“Hell yeah. Quieting down tho. Com vis me!” he replies.

I walk to my local, a sketchpad and pencil crayons at my side. I sit near the edge of the bar and make friends with band. I ask them to pick the colours I should sketch with. I sip drinks Dylan pours me until it’s time to leave.

Back at my place, we fall into each other on my grey couch. I curl onto his body and shut my eyes, expect we’ll sleep. But his hands reach between my legs, stretch my pink g-string to the side. He slips his long fingers like dark octopuses into me, salty. I ride his lanky body, kiss his tobacco mouth.

“We need a condom,” he breaths.

“My room,” I reply.

He picks me up, my legs wrapped around his waist, and carries me quickly to the lemon bed of ashes and sweat, fucks me from behind, the bright lights on.

I wake early and tidy the kitchen while he lies sleeping. He catches me unaware in the living room. “You gave me a fright,” I say.

The comfort that’s been our bedrock, our spell, does not settle us this morning. We are grass without dew. He reads a bit of yesterdays newspaper and then says, “I gotta go, sleep some more at home, I’m working in a couple hours.” He gathers his things, kisses me goodbye, walks out the door.

Shortly after, I head up the street towards the market. And then I see Dylan. Walking towards me.

“This is so fucked,” I say with a grin, as our paths intersect.

“What’s fucked?” he asks.

“Bumping into you, like this. It’s crazy.” I reply.

“We live in the same neighbourhood. It’s normal. I’m going to the grocery store. I’m starving.”

I look to his sun-glassed face, wait for something meaningful.

“Well...see you later,” he says.

I charge through the streets. Through his shift of warmth to stone, a sense of gravity is displaced.

WEEK TWO. MONDAY, TUESDAY, AND WEDNESDAY I HEAR NOTHING FROM DYLAN.

He does not return the messages I leave for him on his mobile. I spend the days at my desk and the early evenings flat on my back at the closest park. My cigarette smoke rises up to the clouds; the sun burns the trees.

My roommate returns from the country. She tells me that she wants to move out. That she’s had a breakdown and needs to be alone. “Sorry, I know I’ve been a bitch to live with...”

The next day I call Dylan's mobile from a pay phone. If my name doesn't appear on the screen he might answer it.

"Hello," he picks up.

"Hi. Hey, there's all this stuff going on with my roommate. Could you see me tonight? I could use an ear."

"Yeah. I'm in Fitzroy now. I'll call you when I get back."

But he does not.

The following evening Riana calls and invites me to join her and her admirer, the optometrist, for a drink at the local.

"My God, is he working?" I ask her. "Go look in the front bar. Like a blond Colin Farrell. Call you back in five—be subtle, huh."

A few minutes later Riana confirms that Dylan is there now, behind the bar.

Shit! I make a quick decision, "Fine. I'll meet you in the beer garden out back. Dylan never works that section."

I walk with bristles in my socks, hot cheeks and swarms of bees in my lungs to find Riana and the optometrist sitting in the enclave out back.

The optometrist asks me what I'd like.

"To do something violent, and a double rum and coke."

We get drunk and have clever conversations. Shadows hover in the corners as though plants. I tell a story about a novel I read, where a wife discovers her husband murdered a girl ten years before they met. I spy Dylan walking towards our table. God, he must have been sent out back to collect empty glasses. I don't miss a beat and continue with the story

"... so, he looked down and realized there was blood everywhere, on the sheets, on his shirt. Seeing this, he jumped up, climbed out the window and ran down the field to the scarecrow."

Dylan approaches our table. He reaches out for a glass. He looks up. Spots me. And drops the glass onto concrete. "You gave me a fright," he says.

"Hey," I reply. I turn my back to my friends. "When he gets to the scarecrow he takes off his bloody clothes and replaces them with clothes of the scarecrow. Then he burns the ..."

Dylan walks away but returns to collect the shards of glass.

We stay until the bar closes and leave messy into the streets.

Home. Like a junkie, I dial Dylan's number. He doesn't answer, so I leave a message on his voice mail. "Hi...I feel shitty about not talking to you at the bar... It's not a nice way to treat anybody, for whatever reason. Will you call me?"

His silence flicks my skin and bites my ears, like bees in my bloodstream.

WEEK THREE. THE NEXT DAY WHILE RIANA AND I ARE HAVING COFFEE, I see Dylan in front of the grocery store, his head turned as soon as he spotted me.

"Dante's definition of hell?" I ask, without waiting for Riana's reply.

"Proximity without intimacy. I read that somewhere."

"Hmph." She gives me a wry smile. "This reminds me of what one of the characters said in Kundera's *Last Waltz*. He said all women are easy to seduce. It's how a bloke breaks off with a woman that shows the degree of his maturity."

"It's such a cliché though. The man swoops in, acts nice, they have sex and then he never calls again."

"Happens all the time," Riana scoffs.

“What I don’t get is that, if these men told us, I’m gonna sleep with you for one week and then never speak to you again, I don’t think most of us would do it. And if we did, it would be an informed choice.”

Rather than a rockslide. I decide I must confront Dylan.

It seems obvious now that he has no plans to seek me out again. I do not require any explanation or kindness. I hate that whenever I go to buy bread or cigarettes, the possibility of our crossing is imminent. That each time I walk home I pass his house. I am becoming dizzy from the dialectics of our nearness, and our distance.

The next night Riana and I pass Dylan’s apartment. His bedroom light is on, like a lighthouse to my mania.

“Come with me, Riana.” I say.

Dylan answers the door, looking stoned and un-kept.

“I need to talk to you.”

He lets us in. In the living room we introduce ourselves to one of Dylan’s roommates, Raj, a chubby, young Indian man. Riana sits down. I tell her I’ll be back soon. Dylan leads me to the roof. We can see the city and the sky is dark blue.

“We live in the same neighbourhood, Dylan. We’re gonna bump into each other, I don’t want things to be awkward ...”

“It’s not awkward.”

“The last time I saw you I was in your bed, and the next time I see you we don’t say hello—you don’t think that’s awkward?”

“It was fine.”

Who is this man? I don’t know him. There are fields between us and scarecrows where there should be men.

He explains that he got sidetracked the night we were supposed to meet. That sometimes he feels like he gets lost for days at time.

“So, you just want to be friends, huh?” I ask.

“Yeah, mates would be good.... I don’t want to be in a relationship. I came out here to get space, you know. I just broke up with someone I really loved.”

“I feel misled...”

“Sorry. When I saw you I thought, cute girl to spend New Years Eve with.”

“What?”

“Shit, that sounds terrible. I mean...I didn’t come over that night to sleep with you. But... it’s just what I do... I sleep with lots of women.”

“But you told me this has never happened to you before.”

“It hasn’t. It was a beautiful connection right away, but... it was just an experience.” He sits down. I know that he wants me to leave.

“I’m gonna say goodbye, because,” I sit down on his lap and put my arms around him, our heads fall together, like small birds, “because I’m mad at you.”

“I’m sorry,” he voices, the sweet Dylan almost back, soft wings sprouting from his shoulder blades.

“I know you are,” I reply.

But he jolts up, spilling me from him, mutters something intangible and passes under the door leading to the staircase. I follow behind, gather Riana, and leave the building that once was a fire station.

WEEK FOUR. DAYS PASS. SUNLIGHT IS GIVEN TO THESIS WRITING. I am haunted by the drying laundry that dances on Dylan’s roof. I stop at his house, his work, leave messages. But there is no substance only wind.

I spend Friday evening drinking with my friend Kia and her mates. By midnight I've had enough and tell them all I have somewhere else to go.

Dylan is not home, but his other roommate, a Frenchman, opens the door and invites me in. We sit in the kitchen and drink wine. I think it may be a good idea to slip into Dylan's bed and sleep. For him to find me curled underneath his sheets. But reason strikes. I excuse myself from the table and request in French not to let Dylan know that I had come.

I begin down the street only to hear my name being called out by the Frenchman.

"*Oui?*" I ask.

He comes toward me, lands his lips on mine for strange moments, until I push away.

"Don't leave," he says.

"What do you mean, don't leave? I'm here to see Dylan."

"Please. I have to talk to you." He insists.

He ushers me into Dylan's living room and refills my glass. We talk a little until Raj, Dylan's Indian roommate, arrives, eyeing me like a cat who knows too much.

What am I doing, I wonder.

Raj goes to bed. The Frenchman is trying to kiss me. I leave, return home, answer the ringing telephone—a friend of Kia's from the bar asks if he can come over and spend the night with me.

A thousand no's. A thousand mistakes. A thousand reasons why I shouldn't pursue this one.

My admirer Ryan comes over in the morning with a bouquet of orange gerberas. As he makes me breakfast, I spy Dylan passing under my street, dressed in white for cricket practice. Good God. What madness! How like a Shakespeare play! Characters devise and divine love from the uninterested. The uninterested, in turn chase others who do not return their affections.

WEEK FIVE. A WEEK HAS PASSED SINCE I SAT IN DYLAN'S kitchen table drinking wine. I am still haunted by the drying laundry. I spend hours on my balcony. I wonder if the dancing bodies are men or whether they are scarecrow. My essence has become sweet, like overripe mango, and my lips chatter whether cold or warm.

Saturday. Seven, a.m. The phone rings. The last time I received a call at this hour, it came with news of death.

Dylan.

He is mid-sentence, in the flow of words already. "I'm sorry Kyla... I'm coming out of a dark place... I'm really sorry."

I congratulate his resurrection. *Good for you. I knew you had it in you.*

"I just got home," he says. "Would you... come over?"

"Just pop by in my pyjamas then?"

"I'll leave the door open."

I smirk at myself through the bright white street. Birds dive in the air.

He is lays on his bed, a Michael Moore book before him. I dump my stuff on the night table, kick off my shoes, lie down beside him.

"I wrote a short story about the past few weeks," I say.

"Am I the villain?" he asks, "Do I get killed in the end?"

"It's just an account of events."

Few words follow. Instead kisses override them, speak more. I pout between his teeth, my tongue heats so my suffering will burn him. My body turns purple like the iris while his river hands tease my skin plying for forgiveness.

"You were like a stone. You were like a stranger. Don't ever become stone with me again."

"I won't," he replies, lifting me. He strips me of my lips, my eyes. Warm waters rip my hair, strike my throat. We submerge, are given to the flooding. But I am not here to comply to his needs, not here to be fucked, as on call. I will not become naked, penetrable. Will not let him touch my centre.

I see that he is weak, unseeing, craving only. Oblivion. That each touch now, that I place on his skin, excruciates. I like him under me.

"I want it just as much as you do, Dylan. But it's not going to happen."

He takes my hand and places it in between my legs, covering it with his own while dictating the rhythm of my masturbation.

"Please, touch me," he says, his breath like sand.

"No. Another time." I am small and rabid. "If we were gonna fuck, which position would you want me in?" I taunt.

"From behind."

"With me lying down or on my hands and knees?"

"On your hands and knees.... Please."

I wrap my lips around him and like a snake charmer, coax white sea salt into my mouth, watch impassively as it shoots out, like a comet across his golden stomach.

Dylan falls asleep soon after, while I smile at the turn of events. When I fill up on his soft skin, on the smell of lemons and everyday treachery, I gather my things, lean over his body and kiss the back of his neck.

WEEK SIX. DAYS PASS WITHOUT WORD. I pass Dylan's house nightly as though by vigil. The rains come.

On Tuesday night I call Dylan. We speak sweet and he tells me he'll call tomorrow.

But does not.

The plumbing in our apartment fails. There is no hot water. My hair becomes dirty. Surely, I can use Dylan's bathroom. If I can suck his dick I have a right to use his shower.

I call. He answers. After I explain the situation, he acquiesces to my request.

I go directly there. Dylan answers the door, dressed in black for work. I sashay past him, smile like a cheerleader and thank him for his generosity. While walking up the stairs, I am aware of his eyes on my ass. He laughs a little, and then says goodbye, that he's off to work.

I leave my pink razor on the bath ledge, and have a glass of wine with the Frenchman before returning home.

Nights pass.

Riana and I go to the local, the wind flirts with our skirts and hair. The optometrist arrives. And, we shout drinks in turn, until all is jovial and strangers become friends.

I call Dylan and ask if he'd like to join us.

"I've got cricket training tomorrow, so... I'll pass.... but thanks," he adds.

Riana points out that by trailing love, I will be perceived as a stalker, that romantic pursuit is still a man's domain.

The bar shuts. Riana and I teeter down the street towards mine. The moon is wide.

Light shines out from Dylan's bedroom window.

"I have a plan," I exclaim.

I lift Dylan's living room window. Hike my leg over the ledge. Crawl through it.

"I can't believe I'm doing this!" Riana kisses my cheeks through the open window. We cover our mouths to stifle the rising of hysterical laughter.

Pearls before swine," she whispers.

I slip up the dark stairs leading to Dylan's room. Open his door. He's asleep, like a child. The light and radio was left on. He murmurs a little and changes position, his back to my imprudence. I shift from foot to foot, wondering what to do. Walk to the bed. Draw my fingers across his bare ribs.

He shutters. Lets out a terrified gagging sound. His eyes tweak. "What are you doing here?" he demands.

I sit down beside him, laughing. "I thought it'd be fun."

He rolls onto his side, away from me. Minutes pass.

"How did you get in here?"

"Through the window. Like you do ..."

"It's so weird, you just come into my bedroom, Jesus—"

A song I like by Radiohead starts playing. I get up and turn its volume, sway a little, singing along with the lyrics: *I'm a creep, I'm a weirdo...*

"This is wrong," he says, his back still to me. "You should leave."

"Why is it wrong?"

"You should leave."

"Ok, I'll go, but can we talk first?"

"No."

I gather my purse. Close his bedroom door behind me. Light a cigarette and walk down the stairs, slowing stripping off my skirt, shirt, bra and knickers with each step. I throw my clothes in a hump on the living room floor, re-lift the glass and stretch myself through the window. My cigarette drops, landing on the pile of fabric, on the snakeskin of my love. The ember sparks as though firefly. The air outside chills my body and paints me silver, it lifts me above his burning roof, above this city, above the body of my father continents away.