

Heron White

The ceiling is shedding its leaden skin. White flakes drift slowly, snow born of summer heat, propelled by the fan's rhythmic churn. All that secures the fan is a frayed cord, nude to its wiry entrails. It gyrates, groans, a monotone fuck. Me, motionless, on the bed beneath. Stale sweat stains the sheet beneath my body. I contemplate jacking off. It's too hot.

The front door slams. It's Lydia. It's always Lydia. And she always slams the front door. In my mind, I trace her path. She treads lightly across the kitchen. Steps into the hallway light. Traces fingers along the grimy walls. Steps slowly. Holds her head high. Walks as in a dream. Her breasts rise and fall in her bleached white school blouse, buoyant as clouds. She loosens her tie, casts it away. There is something of a smile or a frown on her face; I never can tell.

Lydia reaches the second last room off the hall. Stands there. Contemplates the closed door. It's patched with newspaper. Repainted, right over the mould, the colour of Colgate fresh-mint toothpaste.

Fingers drum.

But Dan's not there. It's only a matter of time. I watch the fan. I watch the paint. Footsteps in the hall.

"Where's Dan". My door swings, slams into the wall. Flakes tremble from the ceiling.

"Where's Dan?" she repeats.

"Football." I say to the ceiling.

She flops down on the opposite side of the bed. Our crowns meet in the middle. Her hair mingles with my hair and I can breathe in her scent, sharp with an inexplicable acidity, obscured in a girlish gentility. She smells of band-aids and lavender, cigarettes and musk lifesavers, washing powder and stray cats. We lay there, for a long time, in silence.

She speaks first.

"Something up with Dan? He's been avoiding me."

I don't answer. There is a fleck of paint on the end of my nose, and I can see it.

I hear the soft zip, zip, zip sound that I know is Lydia playing with her necklace, running the broken heart up and down the chain. Tara had the same habit.

I think of the photo Dan's mum had, nestled on the sideboard between the framed baby shots of him and Tara: the two girls standing together in their shapeless school uniforms, grinning as they hold their matching necklaces at tension. I don't know what she did with that photo. One day, it was simply gone.

Lydia sighs. There's a shiver of chains, a light thud as the necklace drops to her chest. Nestles in the cleft of her breasts.

"He got a new girl or something?"

I work out that if I close one eye, I can see the paint fleck more clearly. When I open the other, it divides and blurs.

"Nah," I say.

I move. The paint fleck slides down my nose. Like tears on your best mate's face.

"No"

I feel Lydia tense. Her head presses into mine. The rise and fall of breath stops.

"No", I repeat, "The thought of getting blood all over him freaks him out. Said he's scared that if he fucks you he'll tear open the cuts."

She inhales sharply. A muffled, throaty sound. Back arches. Arms stretch out. The bed groans.

Then, she's yawning. I want to tell her she shouldn't open her mouth here, because paint might get in it, and I'm pretty sure its lead based.

"Figures." She sighs.

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Figures in the newspaper: One in four.

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"Want some acid?" she passes a tab over her head. She never waits for a reply. I stick it under my tongue. Close my eyes. Feel the paper melt in my mouth. Imagine it travelling my veins.

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And it's just like the burn when Dan finally did cry.

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A few days after the verdict.

Dan in the backyard at their mum's place. Motionless. Semi-deflated football pinned beneath his bare foot.

I stood on the deck. Watched his outline crumble, fragment.

I flung my shopping bag on the outdoor table. Made a fuss of taking out the beers and the meat pies and the little packets of tomato sauce. Arranged them, just so. Tara's bottles of glittery nail polish still on the table, mingling with the salt and pepper. It occurred to me that maybe Dan didn't drink anymore.

I glanced into the yard again, Dan suddenly reanimated. A run up. A dropkick. An impotent thwack. A lopsided trajectory.

He turned. Waved.

"Mate!", he yelled.

We patted each other on the back. Cracked open the beers. Froth on hot pavement. The foam swept towards my pluggers.

We didn't talk about Tara, or about Lydia, or the scars that now criss-crossed Dan's face. But after the pies were gone and we were both on our third beer, and our sides hurt from laughing for such an unnecessarily long time over the story of Ryan shitting his pants, the story neither of us find particularly funny, then, finally, I said what I'd come there to say.

"So", I began "When you going to move back in?"

"You know I can't. Need the 'rents to get me to work and all". He said. Hunched his shoulders. Gazed intently at the red x on his beer can.

I nodded. I'd rehearsed the next part.

But at that moment, my voice caught. I thought about how, the year before, he'd come to me with the classified section of the paper: *Holden Commodore. 2000 model. Heron white.*

And now, the other newspaper clipping, creased in my pocket. White Ford and Commodore entangled, lovers mid-fuck, cannibals consuming each other. All around, everywhere, shards of white.

I cleared my throat. Tore shreds from the sauce-smearred pie packet.

“I could, you know, drive you around. Get where you need to go, and all.”

Dan sat. Held the bottle of nail polish in his palm.

I played with the paper shreds. Made a mound. Watched the sauce seep slowly through.

“Really?” Dan said, eventually.

“Yea, man”.

I swept the shreds from the table. Glanced up at Dan.

Tears slithered down his cheek.

“Yea”, he said, “yea, that’d be good”.

I nodded. I reached over, tore the other pie packet in half. We both took big swigs from our cans, shredded our halves into little pieces, said nothing more.

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“He tell you that?” Lydia asks.

“Huh?” I pull myself back from memory. Residual pain or just-dropped acid trickles through me. It’s bloody difficult, sometimes, trying to figure where one thing ends and another begins. Tara said that to me once. I didn’t it understand then.

“Did Dan tell you that, about fucking me?”

“Yea.”

“Figures.”

“It freaks him out.”

“Yea. You said.”

I look for the paint fleck again. It has slipped from vision.

“So why do you do it?”

“What?”

“Keep unpicking the stitches.”

For a moment, Lydia is silent. I imagine her buried alive in an avalanche of paint flecks.

Then, she answers.

“It’s like masturbation. I enjoy it.”

“Really?”

“No.” A barking laugh. “It’s too hot. Let’s go to the creek.”

I should be leaving to pick Dan up soon, but I'm not sure I can stand to see him on a day as hot as this one.

"Okay"

We both sit. Face our opposite walls.

I haven't seen her face yet and I wait for her to leave before I turn around.

The doorway frames her receding silhouette.

I watch. She blurs. Slides from vision. Vanishes into light.