

# HEARTSEASE



# 1.

I SAW MY mother for a long time after she died. I would see her out of windows, or the corner of my eye. Always in the periphery, always a dim blur, but unmistakably my mother, the *herness* skating through every line and flicker. There was the thumbprint of her head on its long neck and the two bright streaks of her eyes. The shape, or the suggestion of the shape: slim and sharp. The tilt of the head. The hair wild, as I had never seen it, so polished, so put together had she been in life. The tapering limbs pulling against the darkness. For years and years she would be there, until she stopped pulling, and was finally drawn away. But maybe that's not how it was. Maybe I just stopped looking.

I thought of my mother's ghost like a phantom limb, or a spasm of muscle memory. I was so used to seeing her when she was alive that my synapses had continued to channel that image through my brain structure, my eyes interpreting certain splinters of dissatisfied light into her form. I could smell the blood, but she never looked red. My brain told me she was bloody, or had been.

I had never understood how it works: that you look at a person, and their image is sucked in through the layers and devices within

your eyeballs, and then even after they're gone their image remains,  
folded up inside you until your brain takes it out and dusts it off  
and hangs it up to show you again. Other people get it, though.  
That's why they say, 'See you,' when they leave.

## 2.

THE NEW DAY peels back golden and mild, but Charlotte is taking it on from the wrong side and is propping her eyes open with matchsticks. Someone used to say that. Not her mother. Maybe her stepfather. She hates the expression, but it's greased across her brain now.

The Salamanca plane trees have lit up in red and orange, and a toddler is staggering around in the fallen leaves below them. Vapid little brown birds hop and dart. Beyond, mariners bundle onto boats bobbing on the oil-dark harbour. A seal pierces the thick water from below, head swaying, sending a gull flapping to perch angrily on a bench. The old sandstone warehouses bustle with tourists ready to be charmed, whisked by the winds that skate up from around their ankles. The mountain casts shadows over itself, and the distant eucalypts ranked up its sides shiver green and grey. There is brine, coffee, red wine, whiskey, bread, soup, the yellow of old books, and an earthy array of sensible jumpers. Only the merest traces of attempted genocide in the air, the soil.

Matchsticks are too long to prop eyelids, that's what used to trouble her. You'd have to break them in half, and then they'd be splintered and get into the raw red skin behind your eyelashes.

Bleary-eyed is a better expression to use, like the rest of the world is just beyond a smear of fingerprints on glass.

She gets as far as the cauldron set beneath the plane trees in a ring of bricks. There are two youngish men perched on the low wall. One looks up at her. 'Charlotte!' he says. He went to school with her younger sister Nelly. She says hello. He looks more closely at her and asks if she's OK.

His friend is watching the toddler and laughs when she laughs. 'Kids,' he says, smiling. 'Look at that baby.'

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Charlotte is having terrible visions of another little girl, soft and fluff-haired, dimples for knuckles, contentedly beheading flowers in a garden somewhere. She feels starved of oxygen, although she's breathing quite normally. Her lungs are grieving, like sadness is a physical malady.

### 3.

#### *Fourteen hours to go*

IT WAS AUTUMN on that last day and the leaves skittered across the gravel like crabs. The trees beyond skewed slightly fascist, straight, stark and thick. It was still afternoon, but my headlights edged the trees in thick shadow. I followed the drive around a sharp corner and the carpark, a large circle ringed by a low hedge, pooled before me. The hotel beyond was mostly unlit. Through one warm window I could see a woman with her head bent.

There were two other cars there, both small and white like mine, huddled together by the hotel wall. Lot's wasn't there yet. I parked across from the others and shut everything off: lights, engine, music last of all, some old man with a smoker's voice cut mid-syllable.

The flat, cold afternoon began poking its fingers into my clothing and tickling the tender inside of my throat as soon as I opened the car door. My boots crackled the leaves. A raindrop came upwards at me from the ground and got me on the cheek, and another one came at me sideways. The wind shifted and the leaves, which had been scurrying around the ground in a lonely way, pivoted all at once and began a steady march toward me.

I hunkered back into the warm car, closed the door firmly, and got it all out of my system by screaming as loudly as I could manage. I held on to the steering wheel and let out one long howl from the depths of my throat and then a series of shrieks that dwindled to a sheepish cough. I peered back up through my windscreen and the hotel window; the woman hadn't moved, hadn't heard me. I sighed and said, 'Righto, that's done,' and got out to lift my suitcase from the boot, and to take the grey silk dress from the back seat and loop it carefully over my arm. One of the wheels of my case had locked and it bounced lopsidedly behind me as I took the path through a gap in the hedge. I was still coughing pathetically.

Someone's small backbone lay beside the bottom step, the vertebrae grey. I cast around and found a small mess of matted fur toward the hedge: a wallaby, probably, its remains sorted through by a devil. I went back to look at the vertebrae again, trying to work myself up to touching them, to tossing them away from the path. I looked for half a second and then lost my nerve.

The hotel had been a house a couple of centuries ago. Its front doors were of thick dark wood, firmly closed at the top of stairs worn into bowls by many feet. The suitcase thumped and bumped up behind me. I thought of the bottle of whiskey shaking up in there, imagining it frothing like beer. There was a sign taped to the door. It said:

## SILENCE

The dim afternoon closed behind me as I shouldered my way in, and the lobby creaked hot and orange. It was empty of people.

The desk, the sofas, the paintings and the weird carpets were all like artefacts locked behind a cordon in a well-preserved home-stead museum, the kind that skates over the various atrocities of the local area in favour of bone-white dummies posed stiffly in replica period clothing and ranks of staring dolls in the old nursery.

There was a sign on a spindly stand saying:

*We extend you a Warm Welcome!*

*Peaceful Invigoration Awaits!*

Please sanitise and refrain from speaking.

Turn off your phone and leave

it in your designated safe

(INDICATED IN WELCOME PACK).

Check your name!

After you have found your bedroom (INDICATED

IN WELCOME PACK) kindly

Wait in the Waiting Room.

Please retain your item of personal significance

and beauty.

I was yet to be invigorated by this experience.

Hooking the dress – personally significant and beautiful, if you're into that sort of thing – further up my arm, I half-heartedly sanitised my hands. Lot should have been there with me. We'd originally planned to carpool, but for complicated logistical reasons she explained to me very quickly in a barrage of five essay-like texts (plus one thin-lipped eyeroll emoji) we'd had to go separately. We'd coordinated in the hope of arriving at the same



time, and I'd quietly adjusted my own arrival time to allow for Lot's special quality (always late), but clearly I had underestimated her logistical complexities because it was forty-five minutes after we'd agreed to arrive and there I was, sanitising solo.

I followed the directions, searching my emails for the welcome pack which did indeed include the safe number, but then when I found the safes, which were actually drawers behind the desk, mine had also been neatly labelled with my name: LLEWELLYN, ELLEN.

The carpet was in russet and cream, looping and scrolling, repeating in fastidious perfection along the hallway from the lobby. If that sounds disgusting, well, correct. I thunked the case up the middle of a wide flight of stairs, trying to punish the carpet with its wheels. My room was small, mercifully uncarpeted, with dark floorboards and one of those agonising wrought-iron outdoor settings for a corner table and chairs. High ceiling and a light fitting suitable for suicide, although the ceiling rose it dangled from didn't look capable of holding much weight. No mirrors at all, which I took as a personal slight. A painting of an unamused woman. The bed, though, was large and spotlessly white, and seemed to flower seductively in my direction, pollinating me with longing. Sorry, I told it telepathically. We'll talk later.

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The woman with the bowed head was perched on the edge of a chaise longue. She glanced up as I came in; I nodded at her, but she had the face of a sealed bank vault and gave nothing back. She was wearing a green velvet blazer that perfectly matched a green velvet upholstered chair on the other side of

the room. Somehow, she made the rich fabric look serious, like something expected. There was a drawing beside her on a piece of pink paper, the scribbled work of a very young child. She bent her head once more, studying her clipboard, and took her pen and began to write furiously. She glanced up at me again and then glared pointedly at another of the laminated signs, this one propped in the middle of the carved mantelpiece, where an antique clock might otherwise be. It said:

Kindly Reminder! IT HAS ALREADY BEGUN!

No Vocalisations Please!

Red ribbons of sinking sun sneaked past the windowsill and unrolled across the busy carpet. Tasteful antique-style furniture was troubled by tissue boxes, by laminated signs giving kindly reminders, and by the proliferation of pump packs of fancy hand sanitiser. These last were everywhere, named after every flower you'd ever heard of but couldn't visualise.

One of the signs said:

We Have Certified Counsellors Available,

Just Indicate Your Need!

Clipboards were arranged in a fan on an old sideboard, each with a form attached and a biro under the clip. The sign next to them said:

Take & Complete! ☺