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At first Sam thought the scratching was an animal. The sound tugged at her through sleep; it took some time for her to surface. No possums any more. Still, there was a *thunk* of feet landing, too big to be a rat. She was reaching for her phone on the floor when the animal cleared its throat, and she lunged instead for the wheel brace she kept under the bed.

The noise was coming from the other bedroom. Sam rose slowly, keeping her movements quiet. The cool metal warmed in her hand. She stepped over the creak in the floor, slid her fingers along the wall past the light switch without pressing it. There was a grunt, familiar now, then a heavy crack, the crunch of splintering wood, and the breath of a swear word.

Sam crept along the hallway, one hand trailing the wall to gauge her distance in the dark. The door was slightly ajar and she opened it further with the pads of her fingers. The intruder had her back to Sam and was trying to close the sash with one hand. Sam watched her for a moment, her outline fragile in the moonlight, then clicked the light on. The woman turned, but did not let go of the stubborn window. In the other hand she held a leg of the old chair she'd broken on her way in.

'Leave it,' Sam said. 'I'll do it.' She tossed the wheel brace onto the empty bed.

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Ivy smiled, crook-toothed. 'Hello, love. The door was locked. I didn't want to wake you.'

They sat over tea at the kitchen table. Ivy's face wasn't much softened by the low lamplight. She'd be forty-five, but looked older. Sun, anxieties. Her hair was bleached or greyed to a paler blonde and it made the dark moons under her eyes more prominent. The eyes themselves wouldn't settle: they darted from Sam, alighting on the hanging saucepans and stacked plates like the honeyeaters that used to fly in and out of the bottlebrush when she was small. Lost birds on tins and tea towels now. Sam slid the sugar across the table and watched as Ivy deposited two heaped teaspoons into her mug.

'So you're back.'

Ivy squinted at the teaspoon as if she was trying to read its meaning. Photophobia was one of the side effects of her old medication. The slips in the boxes hadn't mentioned break and enter.

'Just for a visit,' Ivy said.

'Staying how long?'

Ivy smiled at her with lips pressed shut. 'You look well,' she said. Her voice was cracked like old glaze. The wind made its birdless chatter in the dry trees, and her face seemed to let go its hold for a moment.

'You right?'

'I'm sorry,' Ivy said, already recovered from the lapse. 'Just tired from getting here.' She yawned expressively into the back of her hand. Her arms were whittled sticks.

'How did you get here?' Sam asked.

DYSCHRONIA

‘Still got that van,’ Ivy said. ‘Oh yeah, sorry about the chair,’ she added, folding the arms across her chest.

Sam shrugged. ‘It’s a chair.’ It was the least of broken things. Three years since she’d seen Ivy, maybe four. Twice that long since she had left, saying she needed time, as if time wasn’t everywhere, seeping into every crevice. The house might not have changed much on the inside, but outside the garden was a sprawl of dry weeds. Like the rest of the houses in town it was slowly being dismantled by gravity. Clapstone was a shell crumbling at the edge of a dry plain. It hadn’t taken long.

Ivy cleared her throat. ‘I suppose you’ve been busy with everything,’ she started. ‘The park and everything. Visitors. Your friends.’

Sam stirred her tea. ‘I guess.’

Ivy watched her for a long moment. ‘You been well?’

‘Yep,’ Sam said, and then, ‘You’ve lost weight.’

Ivy’s eyes narrowed. ‘I’ll go up to the pub for the night, if I’m imposing. It was cold in the van, is all.’ She didn’t put down her tea. Through the kitchen window, the outline of the vehicle was just visible. Its arrival should have woken her, but lately Sam slept so long and deep it was hard to return.

‘Don’t be stupid. You gave me a fright, that’s all.’ There was no point telling Ivy the Commie was never open any more; the vacancy sign was just for show. ‘I’ll make up the spare bed. The rest of it will keep until the morning.’

Ivy waited in the kitchen while Sam rummaged in the wardrobe, spread sheets and blankets on her old childhood bed. She took a pillow from her own bed, which used to be her mother’s, and smoothed the made bed with her palms. The single bed was narrow and cold. Some weak sense of longing

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surfaced for a time, a future or a past, when she and Ivy might have become close. She moved through the motions of hospitality. She printed the dust with her feet.

Ivy appeared in the doorway.

'Bed's made,' Sam said. She went to the window, kicked the rest of the broken chair under the bed, and pulled the sash down with the right degree of force and the slight sideways jerk it needed, a two-handed shove that had become a habit. It closed easily. 'Mind the splinters,' she said.

'It's good to see you,' Ivy said. The hands fidgeted against her jeans.

Sam felt the air thicken. 'Don't go overboard,' she said.

'Sam.'

She was already in the hall.

Sam had coffee and toast on the table and was looking for milk when Ivy came into the kitchen. In the daylight her mother didn't look so old, just skinny and hunted, like one of those last-animal videos: the last thylacine, the last scrawny lemur or tree kangaroo, the last black rhino or scabby devil staring out from its final days in captivity. Ivy had long red scratches down one arm, some fresh. She was shaking slightly, but there might have been a chill in the air.

'Sleep all right?'

'Yeah,' Sam lied. 'You?'

'Great.' Ivy returned her look.

'I only have artificial,' Sam said, waving the carton.

'That's all I'm used to,' Ivy said. 'I suppose I should learn to drink it black.'

They sat and ate in silence. The bread tasted flat in Sam's