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Mornings were when they were most forgiving of each other. When they fucked now it was first thing, when they were still kind.

Before Clive got sick, he was always up early. He worked at the power plant in Hazelwood. Even when he'd been on night shift, he'd get up and make the coffee.

5 These days he might not get out of bed at all. Mostly Franca woke when Billy wormed his way between their bodies, smelling of sleepy toddler. She'd lie there feeling his hot belly pressed against her back, his fingers in her hair. She'd go to the kitchen and do the kids' lunches, make the coffee. Clive'd be where she left him. Sometimes the blanket was too much for him to lift. He'd stopped saying *sorry* a long time ago.

10 He was having a good week. Franca heard him moving around the kitchen. The front door slapped shut. She sat up and looked through the blinds. There was frost on the lawn. Clive was barefoot, shirtless, carrying two plates of toast across the yard to the caravan, propped up on its bricks, where the older two slept. He banged on the metal with his fist. He shouted *Gendarmes*¹! It was a joke the kids wouldn't understand. The door swung open. Emily stood with a half-smile, wiping sleep from her face. Her mouth moved. Franca couldn't hear what she said, but it might have been *I knew it wasn't Mum*. Franca never brought them toast with jam in the mornings.

"There was a spider the size of a five-cent coin in the caravan," Clive reported. He sat on the end of the bed. "Kurt was carrying on the worst²."

"Thanks for getting them breakfast."

20 Her shoulders were wet from the shower. The house was so cold she could see her breath.

"Listen, I'm getting Cate to pick up the kids from school today," she said. "There's a meeting about the bargaining agreement³ after work."

"I can get them."

25 She bunched her stockings at the ankles. "It's okay. It's probably best to ask Cate. So we know for sure. You know. If you start to fade⁴ by then."

He was gracious. He said nothing.

"I'll pick them up after five," Franca said, "then come and get you and Billy."

"We still going to your parents' for tea?"

"Only if you're up to it. Otherwise I can just go with the kids."

30 "I'll be right." Clive scratched his ear. "What'd you say it was at work?"

"The meeting for the bargaining agreement. I haven't been able to get to the others."

"What's the go⁵?"

"It's all still a bit over my head. I know they're talking about changing our pay from fortnightly⁶ to monthly."

35 "Well, that wouldn't be the end of the world," Clive said. "We always work something out."

Franca felt that sudden rage rolling in. "Who does?"

"What?"

"Who works it out, I said."

¹ Politiet (fransk)

² *was carrying on the worst*: tog mest på vej

³ *bargaining agreement*: overenskomstaftale

⁴ (her) falde hen

⁵ (her) Hvad er der på spil?

⁶ hver fjortende dag

Clive looked at her steadily. Franca dropped her head. [...]

40 She made the lunches. She wiped the crumbs from the bench. The house needed restumping⁷ so badly that when she'd dropped the frozen peas last night, they'd rolled and collected in the corner of the kitchen by the door. The kids had crouched, pinching them between their fingers. Kurt said *See, Mum, woulda⁸ been worse if the house wasn't falling down. At least they're all in the one spot.* He and Emily slept in the caravan because it was warmer than their bedroom with its rotted
45 weatherboards⁹, the hole under the window spewing damp Insulwool¹⁰. They were good at making adventures of things. [...]

When she went back to the bedroom, the baby was in bed with Clive, in the curl of his arm. They had the same face.

"It's a real sickness," Clive said. "I'm really crook¹¹."

50 Franca was helpless. She stood holding her coat. "I never said you weren't."

In the drawer beside his bed were a bible, a broken watch, his prescriptions and some foreign coins he kept to prove to himself he'd left the country. There were photos, too – mostly of the kids, but there was one picture of Franca from before they were married. She was naked, standing in front of a curtain. [...] Franca didn't like the photo, or didn't recognise herself in it. She looked too much of
55 a child.

After the second baby she'd gone away, left him with the kids. When she came back Emily was eleven months old and didn't recognise her. Clive knew nothing about where she'd been or what she'd done that year. She didn't know if he'd ever trust her again.

60 Franca worked four days a week at the Latrobe Valley Magistrates'¹², all pale blue glass and clean angles. It had been built ten years ago, but she still thought of it as new. She was a stenographer. She liked the solemnity of the courts. She liked the drive to and from work. [...]

Clive hadn't worked in two years, but before, they could coordinate their lunch breaks some days. It was about ten minutes from the court to the power station. She'd meet him in the car park and they'd eat their sandwiches in the station wagon beneath the brutal concrete building, like
65 something from the pages on the Eastern Bloc¹³ in her high school atlases. It had eight towers, set in pairs, and red capital letters spelling out HAZELWOOD. When she'd been on maternity leave, she'd sometimes taken the kids to the lake next door. Its water was used to cool the station.

It seemed like all the men in the valley worked there, or at the Yallourn plant, or else in the coalmine. [...] Now when she saw it, it meant other people's husbands. [...]

70 She drove past Stephen's on an impulse. His car was in the driveway. She tapped on the door and watched his figure approach through the bubble glass. He asked if she wanted coffee. She said *I have to get the kids.* They fucked in a hurry. He held her wrists and pinned her down. His face hovered over her. His features blurred when he came. She thought, dimly, that there was something pathetic about the two of them, her thighs clenched around his hips. [...]

75 When she left the sky was paper-coloured. All the cows had started their journey home, their tender ears flattened. She parked out the front of Cate and Sonja's. No one answered when she knocked. [...]

⁷ (her) nyt fundament

⁸ would have

⁹ træbeklædning

¹⁰ isoleringsmateriale

¹¹ syg

¹² lokal domstolsinstans

¹³ *the Eastern Bloc*: Østblokken

The two women were sitting on the deck, rugged up¹⁴ against the thin sun. [...]

80 “Hullo!” said Cate. She spread her arms. She had a quilt around her shoulders. She was holding a glass. “Do you want some? It’s Tasmanian whisky.”

“I’d better not,” said Franca. “I don’t like drinking when I’ve got to drive with the kids.” [...]

“How’s Clive?” Cate asked.

“Oh – not good today.”

“Have you heard of anyone else from Hazelwood with it?”

85 “No. He’s lost touch with a lot of the blokes from work.”

“I imagine,” said Sonja, “that’d be the sort of illness that men don’t understand.”

“I was thinking. Remember all that talk about asbestos a couple of years back?” said Cate.

“You don’t get Chronic Fatigue¹⁵ from asbestos,” said Franca.

“I know that. You just can’t help wondering if somehow – if there’s something –” said Cate. [...]

90 The wind had picked up by the time they were heading home. On the radio there was talk of storms and flash flooding¹⁶. [...]

The house was unlit. The kids dropped their schoolbags at the front door. Franca heard the thud of their bodies against the beanbags, the fight for the television remote.

Clive and Billy were as she’d left them. There was a box of Duplo upended at the foot of the bed.

95 “Have you two been there all day?”

“We had some lunch,” Clive said. “We played Lego. We watched some footy¹⁷ on YouTube,” he said, “didn’t we, mate?”

Billy smiled at Franca, then burrowed his blonde head into the pillow. He looked dopey, stunted.

“He needs sunlight, Clive.”

100 “I’m sorry. I had a bad day.”

“So he could have gone to childcare.”

“We don’t have money for that more than once a week,” Clive said. “You’re the one keeps saying it.”

Franca knelt to gather the coloured blocks. They made a hollow clatter.

105 Clive’s face appeared above her. “Sorry, babe,” he said.

“I’m going to mum and dad’s for tea¹⁸,” she said, “remember?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“I said you didn’t have to come if you’re not up to it.”

110 He touched her hair. “What if I stay here with Kurt and Em. I’ll make us dinner. You just go with Billy.”

Her parents managed a motel in Omeo. This time of year it was filled with people on their way to and from Hotham, rich people who stopped overnight before they fitted their snow chains and drove up the mountain to ski.

115 Used to be that Clive always drove up from Bairnsdale. Franca hated driving the Great Alpine Road at night. She still hated it – the 70 kilometres of high-beam light, the sudden twists, the narrow places – but she had no say in it anymore. Clive hadn’t been up that way in months. She wished he could see it now. It looked healthier since the drought had ended.

¹⁴ klædt varmt på

¹⁵ *Chronic Fatigue*: kronisk træthedssyndrom

¹⁶ *flash flooding*: pludselige voldsomme oversvømmelser

¹⁷ (her) rugby

¹⁸ aftensmad

Her mother cooked a roast. Franca was embarrassed, turning up with only Billy in her arms. There was far too much food. [...]

120 The rain fell in sheets¹⁹.

“I should move the car. I parked under the big tree,” Franca said.

“Do that. Then sleep here tonight,” her father said. “No good going home now. It’s bloody cyclonic out there.”

125 She stayed in one of the motel rooms. It smelled of eucalyptus cleaning product and old carpet. She undressed Billy and tucked him in. She turned on the television. The football was just finishing. At home, the kids would be watching the same match. Maybe Clive would have made it to the couch, too. The muscles in her thighs had begun to ache.

She sat at her parents’ table. Her mother scrambled eggs in the microwave. On television they were reporting the storm damage.

130 “Lucky you stayed here,” her father said. “They’ve had trees down all along the highway. Flooding from Traralgon to Paynesville.”

“They just had a bloke in Bairnsdale,” her mother said, “reckons almost the whole town’s without power. You spoken to Clive?”

135 Franca shook her head. “His phone might be dead. If there’s no power, he won’t be able to charge it.”

There was a tree across the road at Doctors Flat. She stood in her parka, hopping from foot to foot, while the SES²⁰ crew finished clearing it.

She stopped for petrol in Bruthen. She tried calling Clive again.

“Was your power out?” she asked the guy at the servo²¹.

140 “Nah, we were fine, but they were rooted²² in Sale,” he said. “You been listening to the radio?”

The roads were slick with water that hadn’t drained; flooded in parts. Franca pictured the footy oval²³ in town. It’d be marshy. Maybe Kurt’s match would be called off. She hoped their spouting²⁴ at home had withstood all the bark and leaf shit, but she was sure she’d be up there all afternoon with a pair of gloves and a garbage bag, clearing out the muck.

145 She saw it as soon as she pulled into the driveway. The great dead red gum²⁵ had come down. It lay across the yard, [...] like a spear. The front room of the house was caved in; roof beams exposed, weatherboards splintered to matchwood²⁶.

The caravan, the kids’ room, was cleaved in two. It looked absurd, the metal folded into itself.

150 Franca yanked the handbrake to and heaved open the car door. She saw a striped doona cover²⁷ beneath a sheet of corrugated detritus²⁸. She saw her daughter’s gumboot. She started to run. Suddenly she was on her knees in the mud, calling for Clive. He was in front of her. His mouth was moving. He helped her up.

“They’re okay,” he said. He was shivering. Franca clutched at his arms. “The kids are inside,” he said. “They’re okay.”

(2016)

¹⁹ regnen stod ned i tove

²⁰ State Emergency Service

²¹ (her) tankstation

²² (her) sad fast

²³ *footy oval*: rugbystadion

²⁴ nedløbsrør

²⁵ (her) gummitræ

²⁶ pindebrænde

²⁷ *doona cover*: dynebetræk

²⁸ *sheet of corrugated detritus*: (her) bølgeformede rester af tagplade