

My life is mapped out by sign posts. When I was five, I put a t-shirt on inside out and grandma told me to leave it that way for good luck. That day I met a girl who is still my best friend. When I was seven a black cat walked across in front of me and I fell off my bike. Well, that could have been coincidence swerving out of the way, but just a year ago a feather floated down into my hand and the next day I won five hundred dollars. You can't get more conclusive than that.

Last week I came down to the old family bach. The house is one of those dying breeds of peeling weatherboards cladding ancient bones that have long since settled into the earth. An island in its own sea of springy kikuyu lapping back at the beach. I forgot about the veggie garden until today, which shows how keen I am on salad. When I went up the back I found one purple lettuce intruding on the cluster of green.

I harrumped back inside. It was a sign.

I had been thinking about my sister, Sarah, and that lettuce made me think if Sarah and I were colours, I would be purple to her green. She is tall and thin with long blonde hair, and model-perfect friends as tidy and predictable as those rows of green lettuce. I am the tag-on to green fields and trees, the odd purple flower, short and dark with untidy hair and worn jeans.

I stared out the window at the ocean and sighed, squinting as surly wavelets poked flashes of light in my eyes. Another bright day. Hot and humid, with sweat making my skin itch. Even my name's against me. Pin. Ridiculous. Sounds like short for pinafore. Once upon a time it was Penny, as sensible and normal a name as Sarah. But I was Pin to Sarah before she could get her tongue around Penny and that was that. I went through a patch of insisting everyone call me by my proper name, but I forgot to answer, so Pin it remains. I wouldn't mind if it was an accurate description, 'thin as a pin', but that describes Sarah, not me.

Just then Raoul walked past on the beach, and I followed him with my eyes. His hands were stuffed in pockets and his half open cotton shirt blew in the wind against the hair on his chest. I met him last time I came here and it was all pancakes and maple syrup, but I was still with Pete then.

Pete is my ex-boyfriend.

"Ex-boyfriend," I try out loud, but my tongue dances tango with my teeth. Two years of temporary insanity, and of missing the signposts. Pete's birthday was a month before mine, and that first year I brought the Taj Mahal itself into our flat to surprise him. He went surfing with his mates on my day.

"Oh yeah, happy birthday hon," came with a sloppy kiss when I reminded him on his way out. "Want a quickie?" he asked, torn between a lascivious leer and a surreptitious glance at the surfboard waiting by the door.

Well, hell no, actually, I grimaced, remembering. Though I had let him take me to bed at the time.

Just after I arrived the other day, I jumped down from the grass to the sand with my head swamped in an oversize sun hat, and almost knocked Raoul into the high tide. We sometimes walk together now, with the wash of the waves a descant to jokes about my dangerous headgear and his writers block. As I watched him from the window my heart did a flip. I wondered if there was something wrong with me – shouldn't I be getting over Pete first? That's why I'm really here, though I'm saying I came to work on mosaics for the exhibition. One thing's sure - Raoul is ice on a burn. I sighed again and turned away.

Curse that purple lettuce. Just when summer is kissing everything better.

I shook my head, banishing all men from my mind, and marched myself out to the bench under the covered patio at the back, shaded and cool. I yanked on a dust mask and safety goggles, pinging the back of my head with the elastic, and picked up the nippers. Hard jaws squeezed down on fractured tile, bruised reds, burnt browns, deep greens, until groups of colour hemmed in a weatherproof board in the centre of the work bench. Then, piece by piece, the shards whispering to me, I bedded them down with glue. A dusting of sand on the concrete caressed my bare soles and my shoulders breathed out. The sun ambled overhead till it could reach in under the awning to stroke my feet. I stretched, my back unkinking as arms reached up, and drank in salt air. A spell held the space I inhabited under the awning - stillness, and a silence keeping the muted pulse of the ocean company.

The sound of a car engine and crunching gravel on the driveway out front came over the soft shush-shush of the waves. I dropped my arms, frowning as the ignition turned off. I stirred up from the chair and drifted around the corner. Sarah pulled a bag out of her car. She nudged the door shut with a hip and came up the path towards me. Green and purple. I knew it. I crossed my arms and glared at her.

"Hi Pin," Sarah said, coming right up to me and dropping her bag almost on my feet before throwing her arms around me.

"What are you doing here?" my traitor arms making a movement that could be interpreted as a hug back.

"Came down for some R & R," she gushed in my ear.

"Didn't Mum tell you I was here?"

"She said something about it, but that's all right, I don't mind."

"What if I mind?"

Sarah searched my face, puzzled.

"What if I mind you being here?" I spelled out.

For a split second her brows knit together, and then she laughed. With a wave of a manicured hand, she said, "You won't even know I'm here," and picked up her bag and sauntered into the bach.

I stood on the spot and stared after her. A breeze twisted around the bach and prickled up goosebumps along my arms. I punched my hands into the pockets of my shorts and stormed down to the sand. It usually takes me twenty minutes to walk up to the other end of the beach and back again. This time it took me ten. Furious footsteps brought me back to plant my feet in the sand outside the bach. With hands on my hips I frowned up at the windows for a long time before going in.

That night Sarah declined my offer of spaghetti bolognese, pulling out a weight watchers frozen dinner to microwave, and sitting down to nibble at it while I boiled the spaghetti over and slopped sauce on the stovetop. The next morning she wandered out to the covered patio still in her PJs, eating an apple to fill the mandatory flat strip of sun-bed tummy peeking out from between jama top and bottoms. Sarah and her friends use art exhibition openings as fashion statements, but she has yet to come to one of mine. Apparently mosaics are pseudo art. Now she flicked her eyes down at the work bench.

“Oh. You brought your hobby with you.”

I stared at her through the goggles. “And you brought yours,” flicking a glance at her apple, my voice muffled through the mask.

“Oh you, always with the jokes.”

“It wasn’t a joke.”

“Oh, a ‘be mean to Sarah day’ is it?”

I dragged the mask down. “Well what kind of a good morning was yours? I make more out of my *hobby* than you do PA’ing.”

“Some of us have to work at real jobs, Pin, you know.”

I glared at her before shoving the mask up and wrenching my eyes back to the bench. I strangled a tile in heavy cloth, crashed the hammer down on it and jerked it open. Dust and fragments, now too tiny to use, painted grimy streaks down my legs.

“It’s so messy, I don’t know how you can stand it,” Sarah grimaced, crunching on her apple.

“Yeah, I can see that’d be hard for you to understand.”

“But your hands and nails, don’t you ever worry about them getting damaged?”

My eyebrows pinched together as I glowered at her. She was serious. I sighed, arguing with myself about green bimbos, real life and little sisters before mumbling, “Sometimes.”

Sarah shuddered, and spread her free hand to gaze at perfect bright pink nails.

I wrapped another tile and then paused, resting my elbows on the bench and looked at her. I shouldn’t ask, but couldn’t help myself. “What about you? Don’t you ever get tired of keeping up with it all? The make-up and everything?”

“Of course not.” Sarah threw the apple core way up the back to land amongst the green lettuce. “I like looking good,” flicking a head to toe glance at me. “I’m off for a walk,” and she turned away into the bach.

I stared after her, but saw Pete.

The week before I left Pete, we arrived home from a party and he began his usual burning at the stake. He stalked around me, tying me up with words, and stabbing me into the heat of the fire.

“No-one wants to hear your jokes, even if they do laugh,” he bellowed. “And you look like a fool flirting with those idiots. Can’t you see they’re just humouring you. And don’t you know how lucky you are I keep you around. No-one else’d want you. And couldn’t you simply not eat at these things – you look like a hippo next to all my mates’ girlfriends.”

Protests as insubstantial as smoke seeped out my mouth.

Pete clenched his fist in front of my face and loomed over me, face red and saliva at the corners of his mouth.

“You’re an idiot. I can see these things, and you need me to set you straight. Just keep your mouth shut.”

I did.

The door on the beach side of the bach slammed, and I started. I looked at my watch. Quarter of an hour. Shorter than usual for Sarah’s make-up routine. I shook my head, bending back to the bench. I lost more useful tile before I had what I needed. I rolled my shoulders and stretched my fingers, and began fixing fragments into place. Soon nothing else in the world existed but each morsel of tile and its precise placement. At last I sat back and smiled, this stage finished. A tree wound up from the centre of a broken heart. The charred shadows along the bottom shifted by subtle degrees up the board to a luminosity searching through the tips of new growth at the top. I put it aside to let the glue set and cleaned up the bench, wondering what colour grout to use to tie it all together. Washing up in the bathroom I could hear Sarah’s giggles and a deeper tone. Still wiping my hands, I wandered out to the window overlooking the beach and glanced out.

Raoul laughed down into Sarah’s face.

I jerked myself away from the glass. My jaw clamped shut, eyes tearing. What did I expect? Sarah was a ten out of ten, and always had been. It looked like Raoul knew quality when he saw it. I couldn’t believe I had let myself think he might be interested. I threw myself across to the kitchen bench, knocking into the table on the way. Water slopped over the electric jug as I tried to fill it. A hot wet line ran down my face as I plonked the jug down. I managed to plug the thing in, though I couldn’t see what I was doing.

A minute later Sarah sprang up the steps.

“I’m back,” she sang, as if I couldn’t see for myself.

I ignored her. The jug boiled and I made coffee in the plunger, enough for one.

“I just met Raoul, he’s gorgeous. He said you’ve met.” Sarah’s mobile rang, and she stopped mid gush to check the caller ID. As she answered it, her voice rose into a girlish register I knew well. It had to be one of her green lettuces. “Hi Jen. Yeah, got here yesterday, weather to die for, and some stunning scenery just now on the beach too,” she giggled, before pausing to listen. “Yeah, you should come, it’s just me and Pin here, it’d be great. More the merrier.”

“No,” I shouted, the rinsed plunger clattering into the sink as I whipped around.

Sarah raised her eyebrows at me and then turned away, wandering outside to finish her call.

I followed her. "What do you think you're doing?"

Clicking her phone shut she turned to face me. "Inviting a friend to stay."

"I came up here for some time out and to work. I don't need you and your picture-perfect friends strutting their stuff around. Just for once, why can't you consider what I might want?"

"What do you mean, you've never minded us before."

"Actually, I have. But you never ask, Sarah. You just take it all for granted."

"Jeez Pin, when did you get to be such a party-pooper. You should go get your hair done or something. Then you'd feel like being around people."

"That's your answer to everything, isn't it? Oh and I suppose I should go to the gym while I'm at it. Well, why don't you get together with Pete and compare notes on how embarrassing I am – Oh that Pin, too fat, no class, and isn't she odd?"

Sarah's mouth dropped open. "What?"

After all that exercise my jaw decided to wire itself shut, and I pulled my head around to stare at the waves.

"What's he been saying to you?"

I couldn't answer.

"Pin?"

"It doesn't matter, it's over."

"You've broken up?"

I remained mute.

"Why didn't you say something, Pin? No wonder you don't want anyone around."

"We're sisters, not girlfriends. Besides, how many different ways have you found of telling me how weird I am compared to you and your groupies?"

Sarah stared at me, opening her mouth and closing it again. She looked down at her feet, then out to the beach, the silence all sharp barnacles on the soles of our feet.

I brushed past Sarah to retrieve my solo coffee. Stalking down the steps and over the kikuyu, I sat on the line between green grass and scorched sand. When my coffee was half gone, Sarah came and perched beside me. I was down to the bitter dregs before she spoke.

"I'm sorry about Pete," Sarah said.

I shrugged. "Better off without him."

"I lied this morning." She hesitated. "It does take work always trying to fit in, and I do it because I haven't figured out what I'm meant to be. Then I look at you, and you seem to have it all sorted. And I'm jealous." She stopped, fiddling with her watch. "So yeah, I snipe, and don't make room for you. I'm sorry."

I turned to gape at her.

"What?" she demanded, trying not to smile.

"Thank you," I growled. Then I chuckled, leaning over to drag her into a hug.

We sat watching the waves soothe the sand, arms just touching.

Sarah giggled. "You know Pin, there's a much cuter guy than Pete just down the beach," nodding her head in the direction of the house Raoul rented. "I think he's got a serious thing going for you."

“What do you mean?” I asked, throat strangling. Then, unable to keep the huff out, added, “He looked pretty into you a moment ago.”

“Yeah, the way he was all over asking about you really shows he’s into me,” she sniggered.

The next afternoon Sarah came out of her bedroom with a packed bag.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I asked.

Shrugging a shoulder, she said, “Time to go.”

“Don’t. I’d like you to stay,” I said, meaning it.

She shook her head. “Nah, you’ll do better without me. Three’s a crowd,” nodding towards the beach and smiling. She picked up an exhibition flyer, pausing to study it. Looking up to see me staring at her, she blushed, waving it in my face. “Maybe,” she laughed, “but no promises.”

We held each other a long moment before she got in her car to drive home, the little sister smell and feel of her lingering after she left. On my way back to the work bench I detoured to the veggie garden to contemplate that one lettuce. As I inspected it, I saw it was not just purple, but a rainbow of purples, burgundys and greens, catching gold light and tapering down into creamy white stalks. A magician’s work of art, bold and different, yet flourishing.

Signs are one thing. Interpreting them is another.

Back at my bench I worked soft purple grout across the board to draw all the pieces together, and wondered when I had let Pete take over the way I felt about myself. It was early evening when I finished, and after washing up I wandered out to see Raoul walk past on the beach. He would be turning at the end and coming back soon.

I laughed. Running into the bedroom, I threw on a summer dress and some lippie. I dashed to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of wine and two glasses, and sauntered down the steps to sit on the beach and wait.