

*She recalled quite liking Plath, in Stage One English. She didn't remember quotes – never had that sort of brain – but she remembered lots of incineration imagery; and rebirths... phoenixes rising, that sort of thing. All very ghoulish, actually, and a bit macabre: bones and metal tooth fillings left behind in the ash. There was lots of revenge enacted, and feminist undertones that'd resonated with her at the time and dominated her essays. (She'd never been truly bitter, but she'd liked to think she could at least **taste** the bitterness, churn it up, flesh it out a little, perhaps have it spread – gratuitously, like an oil slick – through her writing).*

She'd been living in the place in Arch Hill, dating Todd, and had a thing for silk scarves and second-hand bookshops. They'd drunk cask wine a lot. And made chilli con carne. She remembered that... Todd's Alison Holst ways-with-mince cookbook, the chilli con carne page crinkled and illegible beneath translucent brown splatter.

They'd driven to Piha on weekends, smoked cannabis on a blanket atop Todd's car; all seepy viscous haze above and warm bonnet below. They'd had a lovely gay male flatmate who was part-Maori and slightly unkempt and dizzily beautiful. Concrete steps, and planter boxes; a shabby verandah, a patchy pottery collection, and scalloped brown carpet.

Plath, she remembered, had died with her head in the oven. Something fitting about that. Had she planned it to echo her literary themes, marvelling at the symmetry and allegory and selecting a suitable death outfit? Or did she just get fed up, one night, frizzy-haired and losing it, whilst making chilli con carne?

She and Todd had talked about things like that. Drivel, really, she thought today. Semantics.

She sliced lemons, now, enjoying the geometry; and aligned champagne flutes on a tray, and opened a packet of interleaved smoked-salmon slices, slender and gleaming on their silver cardboard. Stephen appeared from the bathroom, pink-raw and prickly from his razor and smelling of aftershave.

“Seven thirty, yes? And do get Bartlett's wife right...it's *Amanda*, remember. Don't repeat last time. Honestly, for a smart woman...” He grinned, then, touched her playfully on the small of her back; headed back to the bedroom.

She smiled wanly. Yes, she thought, for a smart woman... She unwrapped a stack of napkins, put plates in the warmer drawer. Stephen would want jazz, tonight. Arranged tonic water in the fridge, frowned over a vacuum line in the carpet, wiped down the bench in smooth, square strokes. She liked that.

Ah, the 'smart woman'. Indeed. A BA, with the obligatory pink hood and drizzly Albert Street procession; and then three-quarters of a Master's thesis... Postmodern African-American female poets had been her thing, although – she realised now – she'd really just romanticised the whole thing terribly, with that typical overly-simplistic fervour unique to one's early twenties. She'd revelled in the sheer emancipation of it all, slept dreaming of words like 'steatopygous', spotted

subverted slave imagery from a paragraph away. She'd loved the easy swing and speak of their language, the rhythms, the breast-swigging, the oozy effortless... it had always been disappointing, somehow, to emerge from a piece to her own spotted, milky skin, her narrow hips and twiggy arms.

Rookie eagerness, in hindsight. She opened crackers, spread them in a careful arc around the cheeseboard periphery. Patronising and cringeworthy; yes, nil more than your typical misguided and enthusiastic blinkered-blundering in tertiary education. She searched for a suitable knife.

*Suddenly – unexpectedly, in the middle of it all – had come Stephen. An engineer, and seven years her senior, and not her type at all. He was square-jawed, terribly boring on paper: Jeep Cherokee, played golf, father a Rotarian, **partnership aspirations**, even (his words, obviously). Ah, suggested her university friends, inevitably more than a little boring OFF paper too... He was, after all, exactly the type they poked fun at on the weekends, at their shadowy wine bars and little ethnic restaurants and indie rock gigs. A bit like something off the telly, really. Jessa had jibed her about when she was going to take up lacrosse, and they'd dined out for months on the fact that he'd turned up once to pick her up in penny loafers and a polo shirt. A polo shirt! they'd shrieked. **Hilarious.***

She laid the table now, with a quick flush of pleasure when the ironed creases matched perfectly with the right angles at the table edges. Adjusted the dimmer-switch. Cleaned the bathrooms, refilled the liquid soaps, arranged white lilies in a vase.

It went okay, the evening. The guests liked their new painting, and she did a lamb rack with pitted prunes and red wine and cumin-spiced mash. Served it in the middle of big, white plates, with starchy napkins. They laughed, and the wine flowed, and Stephen curried up to Bartlett sufficiently. There were tiny panna cottas for dessert, which she'd bought from a French gourmet grocery place at a price that made her feel slightly sick, but at least *Amanda* (Amanda, Amanda..) commented on them. They talked about private schools, gluten intolerances, property investment; and she'd several comments on her French manicure and new sandals. No-one mentioned bulimic daughters or politics. Amanda flaunted her new breasts, and the Curries were lithe and tanned from a sojourn in Portugal (Portugal. *Portugal*). In bed, Stephen kissed her head and stroked between her thighs and thanked her. So, yes... it went okay, the evening.

Exams. She hadn't minded those too much, actually. Stressful – but there were colourful post-it notes and condensed essay-plans pallisading through her texts, and she'd had her own special exam-specific rituals (medium-tipped soft-wicked Staedtler pens, SuperWine biscuits with Edam, favourite trackpants, new maxi-blocks of refill). There was the empathetic exam-hush of the library, and the intricate concertina-folding of one's knowledge – best, sometimes, when you just

*went in and **wrote** and then emerged afterward a little blinking and unsteady, stiff-handed, time-warped somehow. Cathartic. There was the student bar, afterward; a cheap curry. The post-exams session was always big. She'd vomited, sometimes... cathartic, too, in its own way. Providing her sneakers were spared.*

Stephen went to Seattle, in June, for a big company conference (there had been talk of oil-drilling projects, and pipelines, and networking... She'd paid embarrassingly little attention). The hours expanded, somehow. Days gaped in front of her, grey and featureless. She became ritualised – ate pieces of carefully buttered toast, on the hour, at the same time each day. She was careful to get the chutney into each corner, like putty with a set square when tiling. Watched snippets of daytime television, painted her nails, drank cup after cup of instant coffee. (She didn't wash the cup in between, quite liking the way the little brown contour lines criss-crossed up the side).

She looked at recipes, researched holidays for the summer, had a bracelet repaired, cleaned kitchen cupboards. She might have read, once.

*They went to Cromwell, one summer. Central Otago. What was she: twenty-two? She remembered the stitzy hump-and swoop of the power lines they'd skimmed beneath in the car. And so **flat** – she liked flat. Cleared the brain. Auckland's topography was only good for semester-time, she'd thought at the time, all cones and peaks and complications.*

Todd had worked in an orchard packhouse, and she in the tearooms there, with the archetypal voile curtains and custard squares and veneer tables. It wasn't romantic, or lyrical. Languid, perhaps... Plenty of nectarines, and good sex. She remembered lying stretched out across their chenille motel bedspread, cheeks flushed from pie-warmers, patrons, pastry-cutting. Todd's lips salty against her skin, his hands rough, the long oval moles on his back.

A greyish morning, now, a Friday, mid-winter; entirely insipid and unremarkable. She was tired, hadn't slept well, but put on a cream top she quite liked. Complemented the slightly sleepy-eyed look. She called the lawn-mowing man, went to her Pilates class. Stephen had another two weeks in the States.

She needed cottage cheese, tomatoes and picture hooks. She drove, slowly and carefully, to Ponsonby, lulled by the viscous rhythms of turning and indicating. It surprised her, slightly, that she remembered to breathe and blink and do all those similar maintenance-things.

Her thoughts came carefully-sized and ordered, waiting their turns, triaged for importance, sensible and clad in ironed uniforms. No nail polish, or obviously-tied hair, or frayed hems. She parked, careful of the paintwork as always.

Mark and Jessa's invitation came the next day, entirely unexpected. Jessa was a little nervous and giggly on the phone, too-fast in patches; apologising, over-explaining... "of course it's totally – entirely - out of the blue, a last minute thing really, and I'm sure... well, of course, you've undoubtedly got something on..." Jessa's voice was different to how she'd remembered it, a little distracted, girlier and more coy. There was a warm hubble-clink of kitchen dishes in the background.

She rebuffed the offer reflexively, clerically; surprised at (unsettled by?) the initial hop-swoop in her chest and catch in her throat. No, she *didn't* see these people any longer, she had coffee-table books to size and stack, and she needed to get things ready for Stephen... yes - and there was a class at the gym that night, and what would she *wear* to fit in anyway? They'd probably talk about art, and drink sangria and be really voraciously left-wing; and there was no-one to drive her home if she had a drink or two. Out of the question, she thought, *entirely* out of the question.

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And so it was ridiculous (*preposterous*, even, she'd stretch that far) that she was here, now, walking past the letterbox (linen dress, bottle of merlot in hand, sunglasses on forehead). The next door neighbours' kids squealed over a swingset, a nectarine tree in the corner dripping with fruit in a sort-of fat, greedy late-summer display of botanical virility. It was hot, and she could feel damp little spirals of hair clinging to the back of her neck. She hated those. Gripped the wine bottle neck harder, stepped over a crack in the driveway, wondered yet again what she was doing – going, indeed, against all her best sensibilities, and notions, and other rational-bits. Preposterous, she thought.

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There were plywood trestle tables set up in the backyard, plastic cups nestled alongside a thicket of wine bottles and cartons of pulpy orange juice. She poured herself a generous glass of wine, deceived a little by the tumbler size, the plastic dimpling slightly under her fingers as she lifted it to her lips. It was warm, still; and Dusty Springfield was on the stereo. Twenty or thirty people, perhaps, on deckchairs or standing. Herb garden, woodpile, citronella candles and fairy lights for later, an already-healthy collection of empty bottles accruing at the corner of the house.

Jessa was barefoot and wearing a silk top; plumper and more brunette than the last time she'd seen her, but more luminous somehow, holding court at the end of a long table, cigarette in hand. The man sitting next to her couldn't take his eyes off her breasts: she wondered, prudishly, if he realised his own lack of subtlety. She fanned her fingers on a concrete planter box, tipped her head back and breathed in slowly, feeling the first tiny hints of wine-haze. She wondered if her Pilates instructor would miss her.

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It was later, then, that Jessa's brother came to sit by her. She remembered him – vaguely - from previous parties of Jessa's, years ago. Slim-hipped, now, smelled a little of aniseed: his cologne, perhaps. She wasn't attracted to him per se, but there was something foppish and (she supposed) a little *dapper* about him (if she chose to sound quaint). Long fingers, hair falling into his face, an interesting tattoo on his bicep. A boring t-shirt, though, too tight, a square-edged gridiron-team number on the front. She hated those.

Hated those, but it was turning to dusk, now; and there were barbecue smells, and the edges of her mind were softening slightly. He told her about a press photography exhibition on in town, and the kayaking at Abel Tasman, and she actually *listened* to him, genuinely interested, her forearms still a little warm in the memory of the afternoon sun.

They danced, later. Danced, on the bricky outdoor-area, her toenails painted red. She took off her sandals, her soles feeling a little visceral bare against the terracotta. She was slightly chilly, but pleasantly so, the wine warm inside her veins. Jessa grew funnier as the night went on, spilling out of her top a little, her lips and tongue stained with red wine, her male admiration club growing as the belts and barriers of sobriety loosened a little.

He left, then, to talk to his sister, and she didn't miss his company. Sat, for a while, near a rosemary bush; watched a lesbian couple kiss, and Mark re-light the extinguished candles.

She wondered – briefly – what Stephen was doing: breakfast, perhaps, or laps in the hotel pool, or listening to a speaker? (Her mental images, she realised, reeked of “*American Hotel Imagery*”, as if her brain had - unable to afford its own material - just resorted to dialling up what was on file. The result was a horrible collection of plasticky bagels and complimentary newspapers, of plush lobbies, conference lanyards, leather seating, martinis with olives and toothpicks.)

Did she miss him, when he was away? Did she miss **him**? It was too deep a question, and not one she could answer. Not one she was really *asking*, anyway, and contemplation was not her thing. She went back to the table, sat next to Jessa, ate two pieces of bruschetta, wondered if her ankles were getting bitten. She needed to go to the bathroom, vaguely, but sat for a little longer, the conversation ebbing and flowing around her, citronella stinging her eyes.

There had been plenty of nights like this one: long, and hazy, soporific and wine-soaked. They were all just faces and fairy lights now, in memory. In summer, they'd shift to the baches: Ruakaka, Cooks Beach, Hicks Bay; all rotary clotheslines and gravel driveways and those little prickles in the grass (the ones with diamond-shaped heads; the ones that pulled out quite neatly, with a little glimmer of satisfaction). Drying towels draped over verandah railings, and gin and tonics in the afternoon, and short showers to conserve tank water.

They talked about politics, sometimes; might play charades. Jessa and Mark, even slightly inebriated, had always been laughably inept at disguising their attempts to escape for a quickie. She used to wear red lipstick (was a trademark thing, she'd been going through a phase) so she always knew which glass was hers. Jessa's father had still been alive then. She'd sit on Todd's lap, and there were cicadas long into the night, and the sea-salt would dry on your skin, little crystals forming columns up your arm-hairs.

It moved, slowly, toward 3am; with trips indoors for insect repellent and more bruschetta, and the moon full, and Jessa increasingly hilarious. She felt soothed and smiley and languorous and entirely unlike herself. Bundled into a taxi, later, the leather was cool and sticky on her thighs, and she felt suddenly, inhumanly, exhausted.

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She was dehydrated and thick-headed the next morning, her thoughts back to their babushka-doll-like order and rigidity. She washed her hair twice, and sloughed off the makeup grime. Moisturised, dressed in her gym gear, and wiped down the bathroom benches with orange-scented Spray and Wipe. Stephen would be back in two days. She thought of his square carry-on luggage, his carefully-typed address labels, his suit bag; of taxis and metal detectors and wing-tip lights; of the trip to the airport to collect him on Tuesday. She wondered what he'd want for dinner.

She caught another taxi back to Jessa's to collect her car, chiding herself for the unnecessary expenditure: a little merlot-induced whimsy and she'd wasted enough money for a half-decent pair of shoes... a coaster set, perhaps, or a new frame for one of their prints. It was folly, she decided, and preposterous indeed. She retrieved the car, and drove home skittish and irritable, a to-do list forming in her head... a *typed* list, and centred, on clean white paper; a little starkness and order to atone for yesterday evening.

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It wasn't until later that she noticed it, ducking into the garage to replenish the drinks-fridge. She was beginning to feel a little better, eased by a day of vacuuming and supermarket trips, a Pilates class, plenty of straight lines and cleaning products and smooth white surfaces.

It was along the whole side of the Passat, and considerable: a gash probably two centimetres wide and at least a metre long, the door panels scallop-edged and puckering in at the centre. She must have missed it, collecting the car: had approached from the driver's side, driven straight home. She was shellshocked and numb, at first, clamouring for what she'd say to Stephen: "yes, well, left on the kerbside, overnight, yes... in Sandringham..."

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She went back inside, then, and poured herself a large glass of chardonnay. Went back into the garage, sunk down beside the car door, rested her cheek against the cold panelling, sipped long and slow. She ran her fingers up and down the gash, and thought – just a little – of last night. Of the blurred edges, and the jacaranda tree, and bricks beneath her feet, of her deliciously-illicit drags on Jessa's ciggies, of Jessa's brother's smooth brown fingers. *Honestly*, she thought, for a smart woman...