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**The ESU Roly Sussex Short Story Competition
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Second Prize in the Open Division

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Watersong

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I unclip my case, pull out the Fender, stroke its lovely flank, and see that my hands are shaking.

“Let’s test levels.” Lamar at the desk, doing something with faders.

“Yeah, okay.” I check my tuning and plug into the amp.

Lamar takes his seat behind the kit and we run the first few bars of *Blue*.

“How is it?” I ask, not trusting my own ears.

“It’s good. What do you think, Grace?”

What do I think? I think I might throw up.

The hardest gig I ever played was a biker meet outside Pine Creek. I went on between the strippers and nobody was happy to see me. The crowd was male and pissed. I played my set inside a cage so the bottles didn’t hit me.

This is worse.

The room is long and narrow. There’s no stage, just a stretch of carpet with sound gear at one end. At the other, a long, laminated table with five chairs in a row, all facing me. There are no windows. The ceiling is low and tiled, the lighting bright as a hospital. It’s a conference room. I’m going to have to rock out in a conference room.

Before we left Darwin, Lamar leaned against my kitchen table and lectured me. “If you’re lucky enough to be in a room full of music execs, make sure you pull out all the stops. Stadium lighting, smoke machines, dancers. Leave them so dazzled, there’s no way they’re not going to sign you.”

I thought he was being ridiculous. I thought he was being American. I didn’t need smoke machines. The songs were good. That was what mattered. The songs and the thing that happened when I stood in front of an audience.

Except there isn’t going to be an audience.

The A&R rep appears at the door in a grey suit and blond streaks. A shell necklace above the collar of his T-shirt. His name is Sean and he calls everybody man.

“Hey man,” he says to Lamar. “Guys’ll be here in about 15.”

“Cool,” says Lamar.

“Cool,” I say, a little echo.

The door closes.

Lamar sees my face. “What?”

“Did you know it would be like this?”

He shrugs. It’s not his problem. Lamar is a hired gun. A freelance producer, here to help until the money runs out. And now the money has run out. But if the label signs me today, that won’t matter.

Lamar moves to the desk to cue the backing track. We’ll start with *Jane*. It’s my best song but it’s also the one I froze on in the studio. The song that had me foetal on the carpet, not sure how I ended up there.

I’d been halfway through a take when my throat closed. Lamar in my headphones saying, “I can’t hear you. Can you go again?” Then, “Grace? Hello? Can you hear me?”

He’d been inside the control room, but he came out in time to see me fold, knees and hips, neat as a hinged ruler.

The studio floor smelled of cigarettes and beer. Pot too. A whiff of piss. I landed sideways, my left cheek on carpet tiles chosen for their price, durability and ash-coloured talent for hiding stains.

Lamar was standing over me holding a polystyrene cup. “Are you alright?”

I was not alright.

“Um.” His heavy-metal ringlets fell around his face. “You wanna take a break?” He was embarrassed and it was my fault and I needed to fix it. It had not been easy to get this far. A studio. A US producer. I’d fought for these small miracles. I needed to get up. I needed to get up, now.

I couldn’t move. I lay with my knees tucked, neat as a newborn. Or younger. A creature curled inside her mother’s body. It seems strange to me, now, that I reached that far back to find comfort. The wordless place. Wordless but not without its own watery music.

She sang to me. That’s what I understood in that moment on the floor. My mother gave me music before I could breathe.

Lamar coughed a fake cough. “Um,” he said and then he bit the cup. Later I would see the neat line of teeth marks in the polystyrene and remember his mortification.

But it wasn’t Lamar who pulled me up from the carpet. It was the endless unfolding of her absence. It was the songs she wouldn’t sing.

I got it then. Loud as if somebody had spoken. Nobody is going to save you. Nobody is going to do this for you.

“Just give me a minute.” I didn’t look at Lamar but, as he headed back to the control room, I said, “Turn the lights off.”

He flicked a switch at the wall and, in the black air, I unfurled. Testing my limbs like they were new to movement. Lamar shut the door to the control room. I put the headphones on and stood in front of the microphone listening to the dark pulse around me. Music flowed into my ears. I closed my eyes and drew my mother in close. I sang. I did it in one take, the take that ended up on the demo tape. All the labels loved that song. It was the song that got me into this room.

The A&R rep is back. “Two minutes.”

I look down the length of carpet at the empty chairs. A tremble starts in my right foot and travels up my leg.

The door closes.

“What is it?” Lamar watching me over the snare.

“I just need to … You okay if …”

“Yeah, yeah. Do whatever you need to.”

I move to the corner behind the bass amp and lay on the carpet. A chill of air-conditioning falls across my body. I try to remember things I love – the big sky of home and the feeling of seawater around my body. My mother’s voice singing me to sleep. My mother.

A needle of grief pins me to the floor. I don’t think I can do this.

Lamar, at the kit, clicks his sticks against one another. “Ready?”

“Almost.” I close my eyes and move through the muscles of my neck and shoulders and belly, softening them one by one. Smoothing the serrations from my breath.

Lamar hits the kick drum. Once.

“Just give me a sec.”

I keep my eyes closed. Pulling my feet in until the heels touch my buttocks, I place my palms flat on the carpet on either side of my head and push up into a backbend. Breathing into the spaces between each rib, I straighten my arms so my chest can rise a little higher. My throat can open.

It's hard not to remember her throat, filling like a jug.

My arms shake but I stay up for ten slow breaths before lowering back down. A rush like uncut cocaine behind my eyes. I put my hands on my body. My belly, my sternum. Trying to feel the earth beneath the carpet.

The door opens.

I stand.

Later, because I felt I owed him an explanation, I told Lamar.

“I didn’t, um, really speak much, for a couple of years, when I was a kid.”

“What years?” We were in the studio, working on the song that would become *Blue*.

“Five to seven.”

“Wow, how’d you do school?”

“I didn’t.” I strummed a G chord, then A minor. “Dad kind of home-schooled me. For those years anyway.”

“Oh yeah, I had a bit of that ‘kind of’ home-schooling. My folks were stoners.” He turned back to the keyboard, ran a one-handed melody.

“That’s nice. I like that.” I nodded at the keys. I could hear a counter melody.

“Did you sing? In the years you didn’t talk?”

“No. Nothing. It was like I forgot how to make sound.”

“Wow, for two years. Nothing at all?”

I shook my head, then pointed at the keyboard, because lyrics were coming. “Can you play that again?”

He played it again. I started to sing.

There are five of them, all in suits of blue or grey. They sit at the far end of the room and talk to each other. The man on the end clicks a biro on and off, repeatedly. The door opens again and they flutter like chickens disturbed. A man, larger than the rest, steps into the room. His suit is expensive, his hairline receding.

He walks across the flat grey acreage of carpet and bends his head to mine. For a moment I think he's going to kiss me, but then he says, "I've heard great things. Hope you sound as good as you look."

A dryness in my throat.

He laughs and I see the gold of his fillings at the very back of his mouth.

He doesn't introduce himself. He doesn't have to. This is Denis Hanlon.

The men at the other end of the room grow still and I feel their terror like my own. Denis takes his seat in the centre of the long table. The man on the end begins to click his pen until Denis glances at him and he stops, mid-click.

Sean stands. "Ready when you are."

The night my mother left, I woke to the sound of the piano. The piano did not live in the house, but at the bottom of the hill, inside the boatshed, where everybody said it should not be.

A single finger pressing on a single key. It pulled me from my bed and then outside in my Minnie Mouse pyjamas and bare feet. Music was how my mother loved me. It was the comfort she pulled around us like a quilt.

I ran down the steps and under the fencing wire, along the scrubby edge of the water, pulled by her melody. I could hear her notes and my breath and the crashing of my feet through the bush. The branch of a she-oak smacked my face and in the morning there would be a small line of scab.

The boatshed door was closed. The handle, cool and smooth as a stone in my hand.

A squabble of fruit bats in the trees behind me.

The handle turned. The door opened without noise.

A smell of lifejackets, seaweed, fish. Moonlight flooded around my shadow into the empty room.

I make the shape of a G chord. My face is hot.

Sean sits back down.

The guitar is warm despite the aircon. I can smell metal and my own sweat.

Lamar counts us in, tapping sticks together above his head.
The men like a row of newsreaders at the other end of the room.
My hands won't stop shaking and when I strum the first chord, the sound wobbles through the front-of-house speakers.

Denis says something to the guy next to him, who laughs.

I turn to face Lamar, who is hunkered down inside the kit, getting more compact, as if to balance the weightlessness coming over me. Watching him pounding around the kit, I feel his rhythms move across the floor and into my spine. I remember we're good together. That I love these songs. That music is the place I shine. By the time I turn back to the mic, I'm ready.

It might have gone either way until the last song. The first two are good, but something happens in the last song.

When we get to the bridge, Lamar pulls right back. I take the mic in both hands, singing, low, quiet, dirty, like I'm whispering into the ear of somebody I badly wanted to fuck. From the foldback, the sound of my breath comes back to me amplified and full of sex.

At the other end of the room, the men go still, listening with their bodies, tilting, despite themselves, across the laminated tabletop, towards me.

I let their attention swirl around my hips, move into my bones, and then I hold it, one long beat until the air around me quivers.

Lamar once told me that PJ Harvey had an orgasm on stage. "Or maybe it was Patti Smith. One of them." I didn't know whether to believe him, but I loved the story. A woman making herself come with nothing but her own music.

When we get to the chorus, I step back from the mic, my body rocking like a metronome. Lamar waits, watching me, counting with his own body. Two, three ...

I lift my guitar.

Four.

I stomp on the distortion pedal.

We smash back in together, bang on the first beat of the next bar, huge and full of fury. I throw a banshee scream at the ceiling and then, sliding up and down the neck through distorted chords in the key of E, I keep that wild intensity rolling all the way to the end, where we crash, surf in a cyclone, straight into our bogan rock ending. A roll around the

toms. A cacophony of rising guitar. A smash of cymbals and one last furious chord ringing out into the almost empty room.

I thought, if she saw me, I'd be in trouble.

The water was silver. The night a sepia photo. Her red coat black in the moonlight. I stood in the shadows and watched her fill the pockets with stones until she could barely walk for the weight. She was humming. The same melody she'd been playing at the piano.

She slipped into the sea, a selkie going home, singing inside her heavy coat. There was no wind. The water was the slowest gloss of ripples. The moon, low in a purple sky, lay commas of light across the black water, all the way to my wet feet, where I waited for her to come out.

“Our very own Virginia Woolf,” one of the neighbours said later, when the police came. And then the newspapers.

“Did you see anything?” they asked me. Over and over again. “What did you see?”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t say anything.

You know. You always know. It’s about the quality of the silence that rolls in after the last note.

The man with the clicky pen writes something on his notepad and then they’re on their feet, jostling around the table, talking over each other, rushing us like groupies.

They slap Lamar on the back. They touch my shoulder, my arm, my guitar. Hands like meaty butterflies.

“She’s like Iggy Pop, man,” Sean tells Lamar, then me. “You’re like Iggy Pop, man, except you’re a woman.”

Denis shakes my hand and I see how the others go quiet to see what he will say. His fingers are large and soft. “That last song,” he says, and the hand moves to the small of my back. I can feel the shape and heat of his palm as he steers me across the room. “That’s the one,” he says. “That’s the single.”