

Rosie and the Wolf

‘Spoke to Del last night,’ says Mum. ‘They said goodbye to Rosie yesterday.’

After her phone call I sit in the dusk’s half dark and listen to the rain. The roar of it, pouring over gutters. No let up for days. Tiny meteorites announcing their arrival with a splash of sparks on the deck. I wonder if there’ll be slips again. Anxious faces monitoring riverbanks. I feel a flash of guilt, even as a part of me longs for the pelting to continue, to be swept away in its white noise static, snatching at rainy days of childhood, snatching at Rosie, a girl I haven’t seen for twenty years.

I picture smiling eyes, a broad grin. The tinkle of a laugh? Pigtailed? But I’m unsure if these are true memories, or something I’ve conjured over time, a black and white photograph coloured in.

I breathe in the rain’s scent through the open window – the gods’ iced tea, a brew of fenugreek and rocks, the sky a strainer, the earth its cup – while I sip my chamomile.

In the morning, the rain has turned to gentle mist. I make my way beside the river, banks burst and belching, to lend a hand. I see a baby’s shoe balanced on an island of flotsam, flaxes wrapped around tree trunks, old blue jeans jiving downstream. A stench of sodden sofa as I turn the corner into a low-lying cul-de-sac, carpet turned to sludge, the wet fur of bedraggled cats.

We sweep and mop and pick out precious things, like egrets stabbing prey through the marshes, neighbours and strangers blurring and blending, as if it’s always been like this, as if we’ve known each other forever, *culvert* and *blockage*, *ditches* and *drains*, *climate* and *change* a dark new poetry on our lips.

I pull a photograph album from the wreckage, faces all but disappeared, darkroom emulsions dissolved in a watery reversal spell. ‘Oh,’ says the mother reaching for it, ‘thank you,’ as if I’m a bringer of gifts, even as I watch her turn the pages, roaming her eyes over stolen memories. She

traces rogue patterns, like newly bloomed disease cells, with her fingertip, as though she might will a Photoshop brush into her caress.

It pours again on my return home, the rain's acupressure fingers describing points on my scalp. I take shelter in a bus stop, seeking the sound of its iron roof, and all at once I'm seven years old and there she is: Rosie in sudden technicolour, like I've clicked the lever on the 3D Viewfinder I got for Christmas that same year, and swung the memory into focus. I feel the shape of her beside me, and all around us a Peter Pan green, the wet and grassy hillside, a periphery of trees. We dash through the rain to a half-built hut, roof an iron corrugation, the glorious din of raindrops on metal. We are inside a waterfall, smelling it, tasting it, the rain a fizz of sherbet on our tongues. 'We're frogs!' says Rosie, snapping raindrop flies. I close my eyes to slits, seeing colours in the water, like the plastic ribbon flyscreen at the old beach house we stayed at in the summertime, running through the streamers, their swaying and clacking in the breeze.

The flyscreen might have been at Paige and Belle's now that I think about it. I went there with Rosie sometimes, our mothers' get-togethers for coffee and cake and More cigarettes before you shouldn't and all that. The four of us combing dolls and threading beads and racing to the dress-up box, claiming Cinderella or Pocahontas, Cowgirl or Genie. I like to think I was generous, that I let Rosie choose first, even as memories surface of diving headlong into tulle, grabbing at sequins, a tug-of-war between the sisters, while Rosie quietly pulled out a wand. I wonder what became of them, Paige and Belle. I wonder if they remember Rosie.

A wolf took Rosie. It snuck in, in the dead of night, disguised as a butterfly when Rosie was nineteen, leaving its bite on her face, lepidopterous wings unfolding across her cheeks in an angry red. I'd heard she was sick. Had updates here and there via Mum. But I didn't know Rosie in those years. We'd long moved away. She was just a memory, a childhood friend. And while I was flatting, and becoming vegan while sneaking burgers at midnight, and walking under the moon, and falling in love, and breaking up, and laughing into gin and tonics, and driving to the lake in an old Kombi, and

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leaving Auckland for London, and waiting tables, and clubbing til dawn, and dashing for trains in the rain ... Rosie? Rosie was pulling her red cloak more tightly around her shoulders, drawing her hood up over her ears.

But the wolf just grinned. It grinned in the forest of hospital beds, and needles, and excess fluid. Smacked its chops at her kidneys. Sniggered at daily dialysis, at transfusions, at diverted blood.

It kept coming back for more, that wolf, licking her skin, chewing her joints, sizing up organs, all before Rosie was twenty-two. It grinned and snapped up her legs. Howled with laughter when they brought out the wheelchair. As if that would stop it, a greedy wolf. A wolf with the initials S. L. E. A wolf named Systemic Lupus Erythematosus. Say it fast. Run it together:

Systemiclupuserythematosus

A storybook word. A magic spell. *Say it three times and your wish will come true.* Something Mary Poppins might have said, like supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

Magic never arrived for Rosie. No Ms Poppins to whip her up and carry her off under her umbrella. She would have kept her cosy, Mary, if she'd known. 'Cosy Rosie,' she might have said, as they flew beneath rainclouds, floated their way through silver ribbons.

The rain is heavier now, each drop a tymbal beat, echoing in their thousands like the cacophony of cicadas when you walk through Batton's Bush in the summer. I try to untangle a time sequence in the downpour, but memories are slippery things, jostling this way and that, and I can't be certain which was the last time I saw Rosie. It might have been at Paige and Belle's, sipping cordial and plaiting hair to the waft of percolated coffee and tobacco. It might have been at Rosie's house, telling stories in felt cut-outs, patting two-dimensional puffy white clouds into place to the music of our mothers' chit-chat. Or perhaps it was the time we all stayed at the beach house together, building

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sandcastles and racing flies through coloured streamers. Though I like to think it was the day we were caught in a rainstorm.

And, as I nudge this final memory into place, ink it as the last dot in my join-the-dots Rosie tracing, it's as though the nursery stories are true, as though the Sky Giant has simply turned off his tap, and the rain ceases. I see a hint of sunbeams on the edge of a cloud, a peek of blue. I feel the collective sigh of relief, the letting up of the town's bracing for the worst. Still, a familiar pang with the rain's departure, something slipping out of reach.

Speaking of slips, five more, I hear on the news. Earth sliding off hillsides like the cascades of flour we watched tumble from the mountain in our childhood party games, faces diving into powder when the chocolate finally fell. There's a holiday home teetering on a clifftop across town. I see the man on the TV later, his face red with frustration, an angry blush spreading across his cheeks. Something about the Council.

Rosie had slipped from consciousness, Mum said, before the wolf could gobble up her arms. I'm glad of that, at least, that she had her wings when she went. The wings she held out to the rain, that day. The hand that took mine as we ran down the slope together, the raindrops bleeding our clothes into deeper blues and richer yellows, like two butterflies in the rain.