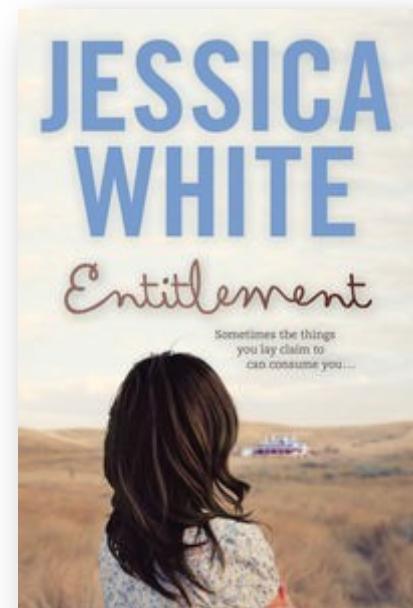


Entitlement

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Extract

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It was a small train station with a single line of tracks, a stuccoed building painted white, and two wooden benches, the sign 'TUMBIN' nailed to the wall between them. The heat of the January day hung in the air, trapping the smell of asphalt, while the lowering sun glared.

Blake had come home early and sponged dust and sweat from his skin in the shower. He'd pulled on his moleskins and a red checked shirt Leonora had ironed. She wore her navy-blue linen dress, belted at the waist, and red sandals. Next to the handful of others at the station in dusty jeans and T-shirts, they looked out of place.

Blake shifted his weight and clasped his hands behind his back, as though he were meeting the Tumbin mayor. He nodded to the man next to them in khaki shorts and shirt, a trucker's cap shading his face.

'Rellies coming to stay?' the man asked.

'Cate's coming back for a bit.'

'Haven't seen her for a while.'

'No.'

'You never had any word?'

'No.' Blake directed his gaze back to the tracks.

The man folded his arms.

Leonora stepped close to Blake. 'Who was that?'

'MacPherson. Grain trader.' Blake began to limp stiffly down the platform.

Leonora wrapped the thin straps of her handbag around her fingers and swallowed. A fly persisted at her face, trying to get at the moisture in her

eyes. She waved it away, ran her hand through her dark-brown bob and fiddled with her pearl earrings.

Blake returned and placed an arm around her shoulders.

'Train's coming,' he said.

Their daughter, when she stepped onto the platform, looked to Leonora as hard and weary as a soldier. There were blue circles beneath her eyes and she was scrawny, her hair dull. Leonora embraced her. The girl's body was like steel, but her mother didn't care. It was Cate, and she was home.

Blake bent and awkwardly kissed his daughter's cheek, then took her bag to the car. He made an effort to walk naturally.

'Did you have a good trip?' Leonora asked, as they pulled away from the station.

'Not really. I took a sleeping pill and woke up past Kynidia.'

'I still don't understand why you couldn't have flown.'

'I didn't want to get here in a hurry.'

'Oh. Did —'

'I don't want to talk, Mum. I've got a headache.'

'I've got Panadol in my bag.'

'I've had some.'

'Well, it's not too long —'

'Nora, leave it,' Blake said.

Cate sank into her seat, unable to stop herself looking out the window. They passed the red-brick primary school, its grounds dry from the summer, jacarandas dripping purple flowers onto the concrete paths, the steps to the classroom swept clean. When they'd been children, they had lined up in front of those steps, she in one row, her brother in another, each trying to make the other laugh by crossing their eyes or curling their tongues. To Cate's admiration, Eliot could twist his into the shape of a three-leaved clover.

The car crawled by the pub with its wide verandah. Men and women sat on white plastic chairs in thongs, shorts and T-shirts, their bottles of beer glowing in the last of the light.

Blake sped up once they reached the outskirts of the town, where most of Tumbin's Aboriginal population lived in fibro shacks built in the fifties and newer brick houses. Kids were playing handball on the hard, compacted earth of a driveway, and dogs barked at the car as it passed.

The light faded as they left the town behind and reached the irrigated paddocks of cotton. Wild turnip weed sprawled across the roadside. Cate hated its oily-smelling yellow flowers, which made her eyes itch and her nose run. Bigger, deeper dams had been built to service the cotton since she'd been here last. She closed her eyes and leaned her cheek against the seatbelt.

She was woken by the slowing of the car. Darkness had fallen, but the light on the verandah shone the way it always had. For a moment Cate was a little girl again, arriving home late after Blake and Leonora had been at a party. She almost glanced to her right to see if Eliot was still asleep.

Her parents had new dogs; they jumped up and left dusty paw prints on her jeans as she climbed out of the car.

Silently, Blake carried her bag indoors.

Her bedroom was just as she'd left it eight years before. The toys and dolls were arranged according to height, starting with an enormous, under-stuffed pink bear Eliot had won at the clay-pigeon shooting stall at the Tumbin Show, and ending with a lilac My Little Pony. In the bookcase was her complete set of *Anne of Green Gables* and innumerable volumes of *Sweet Valley High*. Her jewellery box with the red satin cover still sat on the dressing table. She lifted the lid, and the tiny ballerina inside twirled to 'Over the Rainbow'.

The adjoining door to Eliot's room was open.

Leonora hovered.

'I need to be alone, Mum.'

'Okay, love.' Her mother looked disappointed, but she closed the door.

Cate took off her shoes. She padded into Eliot's room. His glow-in-the-dark stars were still on the ceiling, his soft-toy troll lay against the pillows. The house shifted in the wind, its rafters clicking.

'Cate?' An hour later, Leonora rapped lightly on the door. There was no answer, and the light was out. She twisted the brass knob and her heartbeat vaulted. The room was empty. Then she stepped forward and saw, through

the doorway, Cate curled up asleep on Eliot's bed, her arm wrapped around the troll.

Something settled inside her.