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SKIN DEEP

GARY
KEMBLE



echo



echo

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for Amelia, Eamon and Aurora



Cold dirt pressed against his cheek. Plastic rustled, like a sail shifting, and shades of grey replaced pitch black. A shadow fell over him.

‘Yep. He’s dead.’

He tried to turn his head. Couldn’t. Tried to push himself up off the ground. Couldn’t. The shadow moved across the bleak brown landscape. In the distance an ant wandered in lazy circles. Beyond that, only darkness.

‘Do you want to cut, or dig?’

He recognised the voice but couldn’t place it. A man with an impressive handlebar moustache and an even more impressive beer gut.

The snick of a lighter, followed by the rank odour of cheap tobacco. Feet scuffed. The smoker exhaled.

‘Dunno. You sure he’s dead?’ Another familiar voice. Blond hair. Goatee. Celtic bands tattooed across his shoulders and neck.

‘You used a shottie. Half his fucking chest is gone, ya tool.’

Beergut snorted out a rough laugh. Blondie joined in, sucking in breath between high-pitched squeals. The laughter died away. A foot prodded his back. They rolled him over. Silhouettes, backlit by the harsh fluorescent light. Above the men, floorboards.

‘Come on, shithead. Cut or dig?’

‘Ah, this is bullshit. Cut.’

‘Typical. Lazy cunt.’

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Beergut reached for his belt. Light gleamed off the hunting knife he slid from its sheath. He handed it to Blondie. The man on the ground felt no fear. He was beyond fear.

Half his fucking chest is gone.

Blondie dropped to his haunches. From behind him came the heavy thunk of a shovel breaking earth. Blondie looked up and light fell across his face, revealing heavy bruising. *I did that*, the man thought, but couldn't remember how.

Blondie sighed, then ripped open the man's shredded, bloody shirt. The man tried to reach out and grab his face. Nothing. Blondie looked down, eyes wide. Close enough that the man could see the sweat on his forehead and the tear tattooed under his swollen right eye. Close enough that he could smell the heady tang of petrol on his clothes.

'Jesus. Lotta ink.'

'Do you want me to dig this hole big enough for two?'

'Keep your head on.'

Blondie pushed the knife into the flesh. There was no pain, just a dull tugging sensation. Blondie sawed away, greasy hair falling around his face. He pulled away a bloody flap of skin.

'What are we going to do with these?' Blondie said.

'What do you think we're gonna do – stick them in your fuckin' family album? Burn them. Idiot. Now get on with it.'

'I wonder how the Chief getting on with Kyla,' Blondie said. That laugh again: *hyuck, hyuck, hyuck*.

'You know him. Loves to mix his business and pleasure. I'm sure she'll go out with a bang.'

Anger flared. He tried to sit up. Blondie stared down, frowning. With his spare hand he reached down and pressed two blood-tacky fingers against the man's throat.

'What's wrong now?' Beergut said.

'Nothin'.'

'Fucking pussy. Hurry up. I wanna have a few of the old man's VBs when we're done.'

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'Yeah, and do you want to explain to the Chief why you're drinking his dad's beer?'

'Well, we *are* concreting his fucking driveway tomorrow.'

They laughed. Blondie brought the knife to bear once more, cutting away a slab of flesh from the man's arm. The rage faded. As the bikie peeled the tattoos from the man's body, the memories went with them. Terrified faces swallowed by a raging sea. Lungs full of water off the coast of Fiji. Blondie rolled the man over and started on his back. The vision of a blood-smeared death room in Helmand province flared, then faded to black.

'I guess I should do the teeth too, right?' Blondie said.

'Yep. Dealin' with a real pro here.'

Blondie disappeared. The man could hear him rummaging around on the tool bench. Then he returned, rolled him over, and hefted the hammer.

Smack. Smack. Smack. Impact, but no pain.

When he was done he reached in, scooped the teeth out. Under the tang of fresh blood, Blondie's hands tasted of unleaded and weed.

Cicadas droned in the trees. In the distance, music played. The White Stripes' 'There's No Home for You Here'. The steady thunk, thunk, thunk of Beergut's spadework lulled the man into a trance.

Beergut grunted, then shuffled over. 'He doesn't look so tough now, does he?' he said.

The plastic flexed around him as the two of them lifted him off the ground, then lowered him into the hole.

Beergut knelt over him, grabbed him by the hair and lifted his head, turning it this way and that.

'You missed one.'

'What?'

'A tattoo. On the back of his neck.'

'Fuck it. No-one's ever going to find this guy.'

'The Chief wanted the tattoos cut off and burned. All of them.'

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From the darkness came the sound of a car engine.

'Fuck! Someone's coming!'

The light went out. Pitch black. The White Stripes' song finished. The babble of drunken conversation filled the void. The car edged closer.

'Ah, shit. Quick. Cover him up.'

They pushed the plastic into the hole, then Beergut grabbed the shovel.

'Hurry!'

The dirt fell on his head, and into the wounds on his back. Into his eyes, nose, mouth and ears. He felt its firm weight on his body, like a winter blanket.

The distant stereo cranked up. Powderfinger's 'I Don't Remember'. If he could have closed his eyes he would have. It was time to sleep.

CHAPTER 1



Harry sat in the corner of the lounge room, staring at the packing crates as the hangover squeezed his head and stomach. In one of the boxes he'd find Panadol and Nurofen and Berocca, the staples that would allow him to progress from abject misery to garden-variety misery. He just didn't know which box.

He closed his eyes, but that was worse. The world spun. He cursed the lack of curtains, he cursed the humidity resting on his head and shoulders like a warm, wet blanket, he cursed Dave for the buck's night, he cursed Bec for kicking him out. But most of all he cursed himself for his ability to hoard and his inability to pack in a rational, meaningful way.

Books, he'd found. Stephen King's *Dark Tower* and a healthy collection of Peter Straub were absolutely no help in his current condition. He found bedding, which would have been handy at four that morning, when he stumbled in shivering. He'd been caught in a summer storm while staggering home from... he couldn't quite remember. He vaguely recalled strippers.

VHS tapes, he'd found. *War Games*. *Beverly Hills Cop 2*. *Evil Dead*. Videos he'd doggedly held on to all these years, despite Bec's infuriatingly logical argument that they didn't own a VHS player any more, so there was no point keeping the tapes.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck, which stung for some reason. It felt bruised, sunburned. Rubbing made it worse, which in turn made the headache and nausea worse. He dropped his head

between his knees and concentrated on the shapes in the god-awful red carpet. *Who the hell has red carpet these days?*

He tried to remember what happened the night before. Remembering seemed important. He froze, hand resting on the back of his neck, snatching at the memory. A nightmare. Must've been a nightmare. Cold, hard light from a fluorescent bulb. When he thought about it, he recalled his Dad's disastrous Friday-night barbecues after his Mum left. Harry didn't get the sense the nightmare was about the barbecues, per se, but thinking of those nights made him recall damp grass, powdery soil, the stench of tobacco and beer.

Had he been bitten by something? An ant? He remembered an ant walking in confused arcs across a patch of dark earth. The memory faded even as his mind clawed for purchase. No, not an ant. It wouldn't still hurt so much. A spider? No, that didn't feel right either.

Harry leant forward and pulled his shirt off, sniffed it, and threw it across the room, where it landed on a box marked 'PHOTOS'. Of course, it didn't have photos in it. It was one of Bec's boxes, from when they moved in together. She'd turned the middle 'O' into a heart. She'd kept the box because she figured it would come in handy one day. And it had. Harry closed his eyes, squeezed the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger, willing the memory away. The one bright spark of sick joy he took from this was that it wasn't part of Bec's life plan, either. She'd be suffering as much as he was.

'Fuck,' he said. He dragged himself to his feet and into the bedroom. He picked his iPhone off the floor, thumbed the button. Dead. Typical. He rummaged through the boxes in his room until he found the charger. He plugged in the phone, waited until it had enough juice, then knelt down so he could hold it behind his head. He snapped a photo. He stared at the screen, not believing what he was seeing. That must've been from the night before. A drunken photo of someone else. But that was his bedroom. His neck. And on it, a tattoo.

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'Holy shit,' he said.

You missed one. On the back of his neck.

A bloody knife. An ant crawling in his mouth. He lurched for the front door, bile rising. In the blisteringly hot sunroom his legs gave way. He stumbled onto his hands and knees, crawling, squinting against the sunlight lancing through the craquelure louvres.

He made it. Just. Body flat on the linoleum floor, chin just over the threshold, Harry threw up; water and bile erupted onto the front steps. He dry-heaved a couple of times, then wiped the threads of spit from his mouth. As he looked up, an old man with a ruddy face pushed a green flyer into his letterbox, saw Harry lying there, then hurried up the street.

'Yep,' Harry croaked, pushing himself up onto his hands and knees. 'You've sealed the deal. Welcome to your new home.'

When he had the strength, he crawled back inside and called Dave.

The kitchen's green cabinets and red Laminex benchtops were almost too much to handle in his current state. At least the colours were faded. The original kitchen. Well, original from the '60s. He thought this place, given its VJ walls and the way it creaked at the slightest breeze, dated back to the '30s at least. Back then it was most likely a lonely shack on a dirt track, leading up to more houses on Given Terrace. But unlike most of the houses on the street, in this area for that matter, this place seemed to have escaped the gentrification that was spreading across the city.

The rickety formica table where he and Dave sat was about the same vintage: pockmarked with chips and cigarette burns, the once anodised edging rusting and loose at the back. Harry had fond memories of sitting at a very similar table at his granddad's place at Caloundra, reading old war comics, sea breeze carrying the sounds of gulls and surf. In better condition, it would have sold for a mint at one of the antiques places up the road.

He stared at the photo. The tattoo was a grid – five by five. Each square contained a different symbol. Squiggles. Dots. Circles. Lines. The skin around it was an angry red. He'd never seen a tattoo like it. Although, to be fair, he hadn't seen a great many tattoos.

'It's not that bad, really,' Dave said, taking a sip of coffee to hide the smirk. 'Wearing a collared shirt, no-one will even notice it. With the collar up.'

Harry reached up again and touched the skin. 'Shit! Just... *shit!*'

'Hey, hey! Not so loud,' Dave said.

To Dave's credit, when Harry called he got himself to Harry's place in about ten minutes. He even brought some mysterious pills in a silver packet, but refused to tell Harry what they were. The benefits of being friends with a nurse.

And to his further credit, he'd managed to keep the grin off his face, mostly, other than the initial burst of hysterical laughter.

'Could have been worse,' Dave said. He pulled up his sleeve. Bart Simpson as Poe's Raven perched on his meaty bicep, clutching a parchment that read 'Nevermore'.

'Yeah, but you asked for that. You weren't drunk.' Harry pushed the phone away, pulled his cup closer. He'd downed another couple of painkillers, topped it off with some coffee, and so far was keeping it all down. In an hour or so he might try some Vegemite on toast. If he could find the Vegemite, and the bread, and the toaster.

'Fuck. This is fucked!' He laid his head down on the table. The surface was cool against his forehead.

'It's okay mate, we'll figure it out,' Dave said. 'What do you remember from last night?'

Harry thought again of flat fluorescent light. An ant crawling in lazy circles. He closed his eyes. Thought harder. Red tablecloths.

'The Indian place. I remember the Indian place,' Harry said.

'Yep. Me too. Shit. How much did we drink there?'

It was BYO. Harry remembered several cartons of beer sitting around the table. He couldn't remember how many they left with,

but he knew they wouldn't have been allowed to take drinks on the...

'CityCat! We caught the CityCat!' Harry said.

Dave winced. 'Tone it down, mate.'

'Sorry.'

'But yeah, you're right. We caught the ferry down to the city. Do you remember Simmo trying to chat up that woman on the Party Barge?'

Now that Dave mentioned it, he remembered the Party Barge drifting past, speakers blaring Rick Astley. Simmo, the best man, was trying to take the woman's photo. He called out to her, asking for her phone number.

'Okay,' Dave said, staring down at the table. He sipped his coffee. 'I know we were heading for the casino, but I don't for the life of me remember what happened there. Hang on.'

He picked up his phone, flicked through the photos. Harry leant over so he could see them. The facade of the Treasury Building, brightly lit by multicoloured spotlights. Inside, people milling around gaming tables. Simmo, at the head of a craps table, beautiful brunette in a low-cut dress beside him. Simmo looked wasted. The woman looked unimpressed.

'What's he doing?' Harry said.

'That's right. He was trying to get her to blow on his dice... so to speak.'

'He's married, right?'

Simmo had gone to school with them both, but Harry hadn't really kept in contact with anyone from those days. He didn't understand why Dave had, although Dave's time at school had been easier. He was one of those people who could cruise through exams and assignments but, crucially, was good at sport, too. He'd led the school's football team to a win at the state finals.

Dave shrugged. 'He doesn't mean any harm. You know how it is.'

But Harry didn't. Not at the moment. He wouldn't have risked his relationship with Bec for a one-night stand.

Dave laughed, flicking through the photos. 'She got really aggro. Security headed over...'

Harry had a vague flash of two beefy Islanders who looked pissed off at having to wear suits on a sweltering Brisbane night.

'... but then he lost anyway. Is any of this ringing any bells?'

'The bouncers. But only because you mentioned them.'

'That's okay, we'll get there. You were still with us when we left the casino, so there was no chance of you sneaking off for a quick tatt then. You had a little hissy fit on the way to Showgirls.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah, you didn't want to go. You said you were sick of the boys asking you about the break-up.'

'What did you say?'

'I told you to pull your fucking head in. It was my buck's night, after all.'

Harry nodded, sipped his coffee. 'Fair enough.'

'So you were definitely there at Showgirls, although you spent the whole time propping up the bar. Tequila shots, I think.'

'Shit. No wonder I'm so fucked today.'

'Uh-huh. Do you remember anything from Showgirls?'

'No. Wait. Yeah.'

'Girls on Film' on the sound system, a woman in a pink g-string and matching bra cavorting on the circular stage with its shiny brass poles.

'Simmo wanted me to "get it out of my system" with a lap dance,' Harry said.

'Sounds like Simmo.'

Dave consulted his iPhone again. 'Aha. You might have been shitty but I guilted you into sticking around. Look.'

The photo was blurry. The inside of a MaxiCab. Harry in the back seat, resting his head on his hand, staring out the window.

'Not a happy camper,' Dave said.

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‘Where were we going?’

‘Jamie’s place. Do you remember him?’

‘From school, yeah. From last night, not so much. He’s an accountant, something like that?’

‘Stockbroker, mate.’

Harry remembered a towering white apartment building. Remembered thinking that whatever Jamie did, it pulled in a lot more than reporting for a local paper. He closed his eyes.

‘Jamie had porn going on his laptop. Kept joking that it was Simmo’s mum.’

‘Yep, that’s right. And check this out.’

Another photo of Harry. In this one he looked much happier, standing on the balcony of Jamie’s penthouse apartment, clutching a bottle of Oban. The lid was off, but there was no glass in sight.

‘Shit. What a waste of single malt.’

‘Yep.’

‘And then?’

Dave consulted his phone. ‘Dunno. Last photo. I woke up at Jamie’s. We’d just had brekky when you called.’

Harry rubbed his face. ‘So, somewhere between West End and here, I stumbled into a tattoo parlour and got inked.’

‘Probably West End Tattoo. That’s where I got mine done.’

‘Would they even have been open that late?’

Dave shrugged. ‘Got mine during the day. One way to find out.’

‘What, now?’

‘Yeah, we can get a decent cup of coffee while we’re over there.’

Harry dragged himself up from the table.

‘Oh, I’ve got a wedding thing on later, so I’ll probably head over straight from West End,’ Dave said. ‘Are you right to drive yourself?’

Harry gave him a sour look. Dave replied with a wink.

‘Legend,’ Dave said.

CHAPTER 2



West End was buzzing, people coming alive as the temperature dropped ahead of the incoming storm. Harry climbed out of his car and negotiated a path down the pavement, past an eclectic collection of cafes, bars and grocery stores, to where Dave had parked. Suits sipped wine and imported beer, jostling for space with Gen Y hipsters slurping coffee and jabbing at their iPhones, and world-weary locals who'd seen it all.

West End Tattoo had a low-key shopfront. No gaudy artwork on the window, venetian blinds to discourage gawkers. Harry had walked past the place dozens of times without realising it was a tattoo parlour.

'Now, when we get in there, let me do the talking,' Dave said. 'You don't want to piss them off, okay?'

Harry was angry, but the anger was offset by a sickening feeling in his stomach. He was sweating, his heart racing. It wasn't all the hangover, and he wasn't scared of a looming confrontation. He had to ask plenty of hard questions in his job. Questions people would rather not answer. In his personal life he found confrontation harder to deal with, but he could still flip the 'journalist' switch if he had to.

The place looked just as foreign as every other time he'd passed it. So much so that as Dave pushed the door open, he knew what the result was going to be. *No. No, we did not do that tattoo. Sorry, pal.* A shrug. A see ya later. Which would leave Harry facing the

prospect that he had been so bombed he actually went out of his way to get the tattoo. What else had he done, and couldn't remember?

'You okay?'

Harry jumped. Dave was staring at him.

'Not really. None of this is familiar,' he said, shaking his head.

The walls were covered in framed tattoo designs. On the far side of the small room a woman sat behind a counter. People were crammed in shoulder to shoulder on bench seating around the other three sides of the room. A young guy with bleached blond hair clutched an art folder. A woman with a pram flicked through a magazine. From the doorway behind the counter, tattoo machines buzzed. Stairs led up to the second storey, and Harry could hear more tattooing going on up there.

The woman behind the counter looked up. 'Hey, Dave!'

The ring through the middle of her lip glistened when she smiled. She wore a vintage dress: red flowers on a cream background. Her hair was pinned up, revealing the art that cascaded from her neck down over her shoulders and under the fabric of her dress, before continuing out from under the sleeves and down her arms. Flowers, faces and intricate scrollwork.

'Hey, Sian.'

She nodded at Harry. 'Brought in a convert?'

'Kinda. Um...'

'I've already got a tattoo,' Harry said. 'I just don't know how.'

Dave seemed happy to let Harry do the talking, once he realised he wasn't going to explode. When he finished the story, she shook her head.

'Not ours.'

'You haven't even looked at it!' Harry said, a little louder than he intended.

Sian's lips set in a firm line. Dave touched her arm. 'He's a little... things have been a bit fucked up lately.'

Her eyes flicked to Dave and her face softened a little.

‘Well, for a start, we’re not some 1950s dockside operation. We don’t open at night unless someone’s got an appointment. Even if we were open, we wouldn’t be doing walk-ins. There’s a two-month waiting list for most of the artists here. And even when we do walk-ins, we don’t tattoo people if they’re wasted. Too much grief for all involved.’

Harry blinked. The rising anger dissipated. Now he could feel a lump in his throat. Sian rolled her eyes.

‘Let’s have a look at it then,’ she said.

She came out from behind the counter, pushed Harry’s head forward a little more roughly than was necessary.

‘Hmm. I was gonna say you might’ve got it done at Stones Corner. But this doesn’t even look like it’s been done with a tattoo machine. The edges aren’t defined enough. Looks more like *krob kru*.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Buddhist monks in Thailand have a ceremony where they tattoo people using shafts of bamboo. Mix the ink with snake venom. It’s pretty full on.’

‘I think I’d remember that.’

‘Yeah. You’d think so, right?’

She let go of his shirt, and he turned to face her.

‘It’s weird though,’ she said, frowning.

Harry rubbed his neck. ‘Oh yeah? It gets weirder?’

‘Yeah. They’re not *krob kru* tattoos. I mean, it’s not a *krob kru* design. In fact, it looks kinda Persian.’

‘Persian?’

‘Yep.’

‘Don’t suppose you happen to know what it means?’

‘Um. Offhand, no. Sorry.’

Harry stared into his coffee. ‘Worst. Day. Ever.’

Dave shuffled his feet under the table, watched the waitress as she delivered another couple of drinks. Tight black t-shirt, tight

black shorts. Cars and buses droned past. Up and down Hardgrave Road steel shutters clattered down. The storm was edging nearer, flashes of lightning illuminating clouds in the west.

‘Well, she could be wrong,’ Dave said.

Harry stared at him. ‘Er, she looks like she might know a thing or two about tats, Dave.’ He slurped his coffee.

‘Just sayin’.’

Harry searched for a subject that wasn’t going to lead back to tattoos or Bec. ‘So, you ready to get hitched?’

‘Yeah, pretty much. There are some last-minute dramas about the seating arrangements for the reception, but that’s about it. Ellie isn’t too impressed that I’m on night shifts every night leading up to the wedding but, ah, she’ll get over it.’

‘No, I mean, are you ready? Emotionally?’

Dave laughed. ‘Ha! You know me. I wasn’t fussed. It was mainly Ellie’s family. I mean, I love her. A ring on the finger is neither here nor there. You live with someone long enough, you just know, right?’

Harry looked into the street; an old guy in a tattered blue jumper was pawing through an overflowing bin. Harry thought about the last conversation he and Bec had. If you could call it a conversation. He provoked her, but then she really let him have it. About how he was still at the *Chronicle*. About how all he ever did when he was at home was watch TV. She even had a go about the middle-age paunch he was growing.

‘Sorry,’ Dave said. ‘I just mean...’

Harry waved it away. ‘I better get going. I’ve got a big day at work tomorrow.’

‘Oh yeah. Toastmasters’ convention? Over-60s Blue Light Disco?’

‘Har-dee-fucking-har-har. You should be a fucking comedian.’

‘That’s what the director of nursing keeps telling me. Maybe I should.’

‘Our local MP wants to talk election coverage.’

Dave tipped his head back, offered a fake snore, jolted awake. 'Sorry. Did you say something?'

'He's not that bad.'

'Ron Vessel. Man of Action,' Dave said, delivered deadpan.

'Laugh all you want, but Andrew Cardinal is Opposition Leader, and Ron is his right-hand man. If Cardinal gets up, Vessel's going with him.'

'Uh-huh. Like that's going to happen. Cardinal would have to stop running marathons to have a successful run at the Lodge. And that's not going to happen.' Dave leant in close, offering a conspiratorial whisper. 'He's addicted... to the endorphins.'

'Well, I think he'll get plenty of excitement on the campaign trail.'

Harry stood, started loading his possessions into his pockets.

'Hey, do you want to catch up for a coffee during the week? Last coffee of freedom?' Dave said, picking his wallet, car keys and phone off the table.

'Yeah, maybe.'

'Cool. If not, I'll see you Saturday.'

'I wouldn't miss it for the world.'

Harry turned to leave.

'Hey, Harry.'

'Yeah?'

'Thanks for coming last night. I mean, I know you haven't really had much to do with the guys since high school. It really means a lot to me. And I do feel bad about the tattoo.'

'Not your fault. I'll talk to you during the week, okay?'

Harry was still a hundred metres from his car when thunder boomed through the sky and the heavens opened. He sprinted through the rain, gasping as he fumbled for his keys. He slid into the front seat and sat there for a moment, catching his breath, listening to the rain smashing against the roof.

He opened the glovebox and pulled out a well-worn cassette

tape: Counting Crows' *A&EA*. Dave thought it was hilarious that Harry still had the Corolla – his second-ever car – and even funnier that he had never bothered to buy a car stereo with an iPod dock or CD player. Harry wasn't averse to technology. He just figured there was no point putting a new stereo into a car that could die any day now.

He'd been saying the same thing since he bought it, shortly after joining the *Chronicle*. Back then, he didn't have a choice. He needed a cheap and relatively reliable vehicle. These days, he could afford the repayments on something better, but he'd grown fond of the old girl. The Corolla rolled off the assembly line the same year he did.

He keyed the engine, watching the steam rising from the road. As he pulled out into the street the first guitar strains of 'Round Here' came crackling through the speakers. The music, like the car, pre-dated Bec. Dave had introduced him to Counting Crows, back when they were delivering pizzas and Harry was in the process of running his first car into the ground. The music anchored him in a time before Bec, when he was alone, when he was still full of twentysomething angst and thought he'd never find anyone.

Yeah, it was depressing. But right now he needed that. He drove out of West End, eyes tearing up in sympathy with the sky. Across the Grey Street Bridge, the chocolate-coloured waters of the Brisbane River churned below him. City lights refracted off the raindrops on the car's windows.

He made it through Rosalie Village before the tears got so bad he had to pull over. He switched off the engine. The music fell silent but the song played on in his mind. He leant his head on the steering wheel and gave in to it. Tears cascaded down his face and to the floor below, as the storm raged around him.