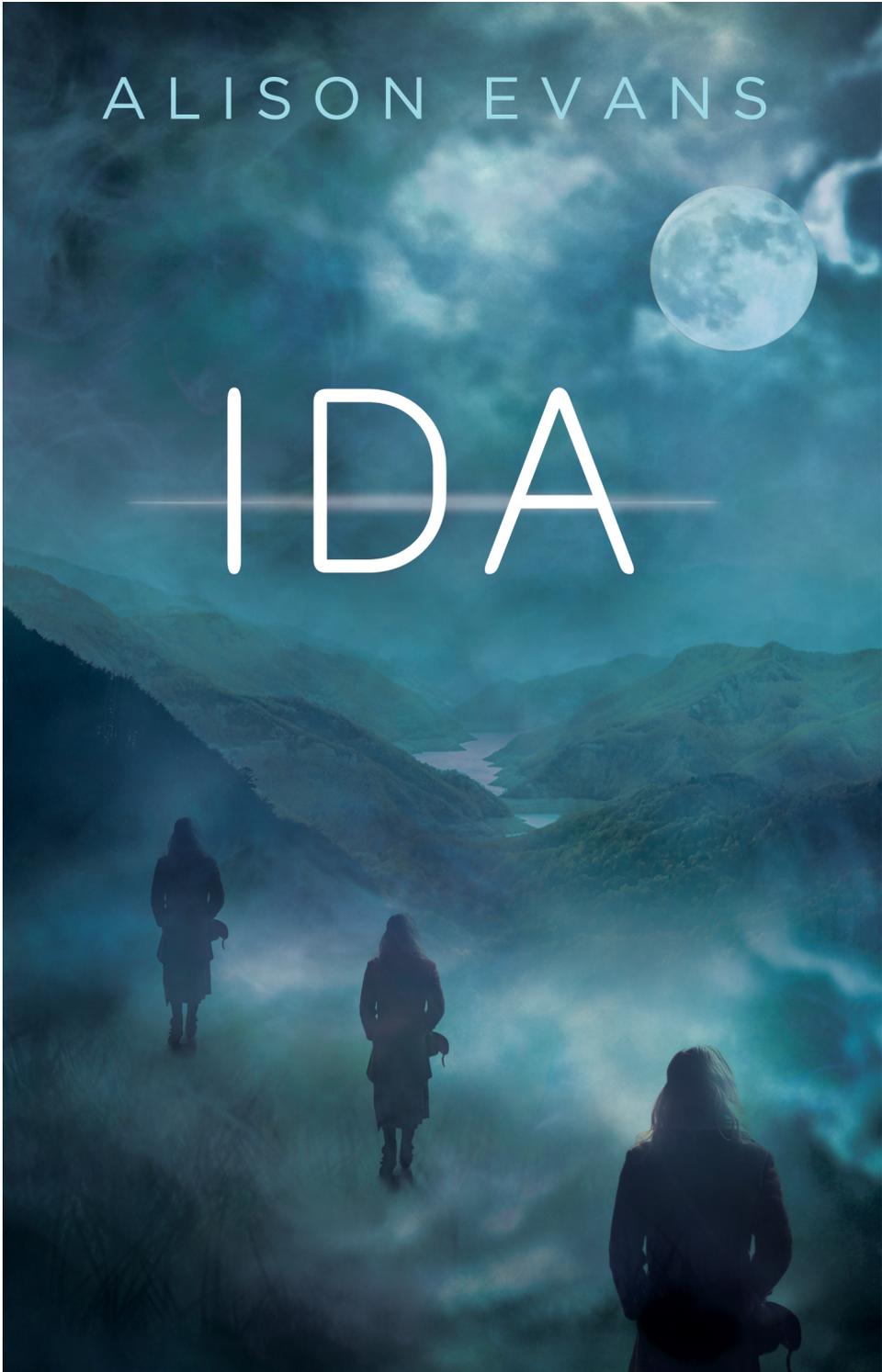


ALISON EVANS

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Alison Evans writes about people who don't know what they want, relationships and Melbourne. They are co-editor of Concrete Queers, a maker of zines and a lover of bad movies. Their work has been published in various Australian and international magazines, lit journals and zines. You can find them on twitter @_budgie or their website, alisonwritesthings.com.





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For Brigit







THE CRASH AT THE START



MY SHIFT is finally over and I want to scream. The thing about hospitality is that you always have to be switched on, always nice, welcoming, smiling. Even when someone's yelling at you because their three-quarter soy latte is too cold. I'd tell them that soy milk is supposed to be slightly cooler than cow, but then that would look like I actually cared.



I throw my bag onto the car seat beside me and run my hands around the steering wheel, feeling the bumpy grooves on the underside. The sky's full of dark, plump clouds and it's going to rain soon.

Juddering on, I pull my car out of the car park. The road out of the tourist park I work in is narrow, windy and the tourists can't drive on these almost-country roads. Today, though, there's no one in front of me,

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so I zoom around the bends because my body knows the way they work.

The pay's good considering I don't do a lot. It's an all right job for the moment, half a year out of high school, or at least that's what I'm telling myself. I don't really know what I want to do with my life, anyway, as if there would only be one thing.

On the main road now, and little smacks of rain appear. The slow beat begins as I turn on the windscreen wipers.

The little glowing clock on my dashboard says 5:06, but my watch says 8:38. People always ask why I don't set it right or get a new one. I never tell them.

At the end of the road I turn right. The drive home isn't too long and Daisy is coming over tonight after being in Queensland for six weeks. I can't wait. It's been so long. Tree ferns and gum trees tower over the road as I send the car forwards, winding down the curves, almost too fast but not quite.

Even through the cover of the trees, the rain beats down hard. Combine that with the clouds and the light starts to suffocate; I flick on my headlights.

When I get home I should have plenty of time to shower, shovel down some food and maybe read a bit before I have to pick Daisy up from the train. The plane should have just touched down in Melbourne if my car clock is right, and I know it is.

All around, the rain brings a constant sound and I



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can smell the freshness and the dirt through the vents. I lean into the curves of the road; I could do this with my eyes closed.

As I slow for a familiar bend, all of a sudden right in my face there's a huge Landcruiser crossed over into my lane, speeding towards me like I'm a magnet or something. Cold needles spike through my blood and I'm gonna be crushed by this arsehole who can't drive. I can't see the driver's face, the bullbar is too close, but I can see the numberplate. That jumble of letters and numbers is going to be the last thing I see, something that doesn't mean anything to me.

I close my eyes and try not to imagine what the impact will be like... bones crunching, blood, pain, pain, pain.



Everything is white dark. I know this place, its coldwarm comfort. It's like I'm floating but there's no way to tell because I can't open my eyes, I can't move.

Peaceful calm.

The space is everywhere and although I am not bound, I know if I try to move my arms the space won't let me. Nothing but the lightdark embrace.

Then there is a warmth that spreads through my whole body, pooling through my veins, and I know I'm going the right way.

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Once again, I find myself in the work car park. Time travel is super handy for avoiding near-death experiences. I've already put my bag on the seat beside me and the engine is still off. I mean, I would really appreciate one fucking week without almost dying. A bit of adrenaline now and then is healthy enough, but this melodrama is tiring.

It barely takes any time for my hands to stop shaking. Used to be a lot worse, especially car crashes, but turns out you can get used to almost anything. The time on my watch is 8:46.

I sink into the seat as I close my eyes, let my breathing slow, let my heart return to its usual rhythm. Ready, the car engine groans as I turn the key. I put the windscreen wipers on and before I can leave the car park, the rain begins.

At the end of the road, I turn left instead of right. It'll take longer, but at least this way I won't be squished into nothing. No crash to worry about; it didn't happen.

This time, with the heater turned on and the rain sounding everywhere, it's safe. Soon enough, the Landcruiser comes up behind me. So they managed to right their car before crashing. Prick.

As the car gets closer I can't help but grip the steering wheel tighter, fingers turning white. The car takes up my whole back window, headlights directly



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in my rear-view mirror. Swearing under my breath, I eventually pull over when there's room and let the car pass. They honk their horn as they zoom away and I roll my eyes.



Dad is sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper when I get home. A coffee that is most likely cold sits on the paper, surrounded by rings on the printed pages. I look closer and Dad's got the careers section open and there's something in my chest that clenches.

He looks at jobs for me when he thinks I'm not looking. He used to pass them along, but once I hadn't got any interviews for any of them I yelled at him to stop. I know he looks because he cares, but I wish he wouldn't.

'Ida,' he says, turning so I can see his face. 'Bit late, everything okay?'

He worries when I drive. I guess I understand his reasons, but that doesn't make it any less suffocating. It's only ten minutes.

'Thought I'd take the scenic route.'

He stands and we hug. His scratchy woollen jumper smells like smoke from the fire. He's just shaved, but the hair on his head is just as unkempt as ever, greying, balding. He smiles. 'How was work?'

'Riveting. Making coffee all day is gripping stuff.' I grin, because if I look happy despite the sarcasm then



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maybe he won't bring up the jobs in the paper. 'What'd you get up to?'

I can't look at him any longer so I pick up an apple from the fruit bowl sitting on the bench beside me. The fruit's got a few dimples, the dents in the waxy skin illuminated as I turn it over in my hands. Red to yellow to spotted pink.

'Maybe you should look at something that isn't in hospitality, if you hate it,' he says. I know he's looking at me and the words drift between us, dry, and then he cracks the silence: 'I had a lazy day. Might get some things done later on.'

And I stare at the apple in my hands. 'Well, I'll be in my room if you need anything.'

'I made you a tea,' he says, gesturing. 'Might be a bit cold.'

I pick up the cup from beside the kettle. It's lukewarm, but I smile as I take a sip. 'Thanks, Dad.'

He grins back and his white face crinkles up. He means well, I know, but still.

My room is the only room on the second level and the stairs lead directly to my door. I push it open with an elbow and then the rest of the world is gone. Closing the door behind me, I put the cup down on the bedside table and it clinks against its saucer. Out the window, the rain has passed on. There's a bit of blue peeping out and the rain clouds are wisping into smaller, whiter strokes.



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Underneath, the trees are greener in this light. The window looks over a valley and I can't see the neighbours even from this storey. Sometimes, their lights wink out in the night, but mostly it's empty except for the trees sprawled over the ground.

I let the apple fall from my hand onto the carpet, I'll get it later, and I sit to relieve my feet. Once my socks and shoes are off, my feet breathe again. My toes find the familiar carpet and wriggle into it, the dusty blue that's always been there.

Outside, two birds fly across the garden and disappear into a bush on the other side.

Pilgrim darts out, ginger fur puffed, and he can't catch them even though he tries. He's a terrible hunter even without the bell collar I gave to him.

The clock on my bookcase says I've got plenty of time before Daisy gets here, so I flop down on my bed. My face smushes down into the pillow and I breathe in the smells of comfort. There's not a lot in my room but it's easier this way—harder to lose things. I keep a calendar pinned to the wall with everything on it: my work shifts and plans with friends, people's birthdays. Sometimes I go a few days back in time too far by accident, so I write everything down. The calendar is the only thing pinned up and I like the emptiness of the rest of the wall. The cream-grey paint is home, my space.

Groaning, I roll onto my back and drag myself up





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till I'm leaning against the wall with my feet pointing towards the window. The white paint of the window frame is cracked from years of sun. All the dark clouds are blown away and the world is peaceful.

I remember my tea and by now it's stone cold. I still motion to blow away the steam out of habit, and then I stop after the first sip.

There's this weird pressure in my head, maybe I've got a headache coming on. I shake my head, but the feeling doesn't go away. And, I don't know why, maybe it's recklessness—it is... but it isn't, something feels different, off—I get hold of the book sitting beside the bed and open it up to the middle, take the teacup and spill the contents on the book. Mindless destruction, also a good thing occasionally... though I don't know why I want to do this.

The pages of the book wrinkle into waves and cling together in their storm. The tea soaks through, spills over the sides and onto my legs, the doona cover.

It's like it isn't real... I can barely feel the weight of it in my hands, my hands become blurry and it's almost as though there are too many fingers. The little black shapes on the pages, how do they even mean anything at all?

I put down the cup and swing my legs around so my feet touch the carpet.

The pages sludge out as I rip them away from their binding. I get a handful of type and scrunch it into a

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ball; tea runs down my arm. I weigh the gluggy nothing in my hand and then throw it onto the wall opposite, beside the door.

The tea splats into whacked-out star shapes. The ball sticks to the wall for half a second till it slips down and falls into the carpet, squelching quietly.

Two more balls follow. I didn't realise the stains would be so big, or so dark. My head flicks through a moment of blunt pain, and then the pressure is lifted.

The now-empty book sits on my lap and I stare at it for a moment before I close my eyes.



*The lightdark surrounds, skin-tight and consuming.
Warmth starts at the top of my head, it's quick this time,
and I know in my bones, my skin, I'm going in the right
direction.*



Back on my bed, still in my work clothes. Socks and shoes off, tea full, book intact. The apple is lying in the middle of my floor, stark red against the blue. The pressure in my head is gone.

I drink the tea in one gulp, grimacing. Cold coffee I can do—work has taught me—but cold tea will always taste like shit so I don't know why I'm still drinking it.

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The book I'd ruined before is *Slaughterhouse-Five* and I've never finished it completely. My copy is worn, almost falling apart, but still intact. Sometimes I'll lose it for months, but I always find it and start again. Billy Pilgrim is someone I would like to know. He has his aliens; I have my time travel. It's almost the same.

I don't know how the time travel works. I almost died a lot as a kid: got tangled in a swimming tyre, fell down a mine in the bush, ran out onto the road in front of a motorcycle.

At first I didn't notice, thought the lightdark was me fainting or something, the time-confusion from stress, adrenaline. And then I realised I didn't have to wait to almost die to go back in time, I could go back to any decision. It got easier the more I did it.

There are always those little things that I can change: A different meal at a restaurant, to bring an umbrella or not. But there are always things that stay the same, no matter how much I try. I make different decisions but they lead to the same outcomes, inevitably.

I used to only use it for important things, but now it's habit. And why would I stop? I'm not hurting anyone. No one except me even knows I do it. Who would I tell?

The bookshelf clock says I've got time for a shower, though my watch says I have five hours, so I bundle up some fresh clothes and almost trip over the apple as I make my way downstairs to the bathroom. Need to scrub the workfeel off my skin.



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The lock on the door slides into place and I let my shoulders drop. After being on show—people want their barista to be happy all day no matter what—it's a relief to know I'm finally alone. It's almost the same in the car, except for all the windows, and in my room, but there's no lock on my door.

I unbutton the black shirt, let it fall from my shoulders. I undo my belt, pull my black pants off; my underwear and bra end up on the floor too. I kick the pile of clothes to the corner, and turn to the shower.

I put a hand in the stream, wincing as I feel how freezing it is. As the water slowly heats up, my feet are getting colder standing on the tiles. But soon the temperature's right and I'm under the water and it massages my shoulders. Eyes closed, my hair streams down my back and turns to silk, my legs start to feel like legs again. My feet still ache; I need to give them time. I rub my hands up my soft, wide arms, feeling the knots in my shoulders ease and fade away. There are hard muscles under the fat somewhere from lugging around supplies at work. I open my mouth, let the warmth in, and breathe through my nose all the way to the bottom of my lungs. My chest expands and I feel like I shouldn't be able to hold this much air, but I can, and I do.

My grappling hand finds the shampoo bottle. As soon as I open the cap with a pop, that fucking watermelon smell is everywhere and it triggers the

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memory. Shampoo always does, no matter what kind we buy.

I've never really liked watermelon, and I don't know if Dad has realised what he'd done when he bought this.

I wash my hair quickly, find the soap and concentrate on scrubbing myself clean. I stand in the water, and with the constant stream it's easy to let my mind empty as my thoughts are chased down the drain. When I can breathe again, when that calm comes back, I turn off the shower.

The bathroom air is cold, even with all the steam, so I scamper for my towel. I use it to fluff up my hair and I look at myself in the mirror, giggling. I used to hate my body; I was taught to hate it and I learnt so well. In school I was the *fat Asian*, words whispered through the hallways like they were poison, shouted like weapons, but then once I realised neither of those things were insults, it was better. Every body has these soft folds, the pimples in weird places, because no one's that shiny in real life. It took a long time. It still takes work, a lot of the time.

I dry off the rest of my body and pull on some clothes.

There's still time enough, so I go back upstairs and boot up my old computer. It's a slug and it takes twenty minutes to get to my emails. When I finally get in, I see there's an email from myself there. An

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eyebrow draws up; I don't remember sending myself anything. When I open it, there's nothing but a strings of numbers. Must've been a keyboard smash at the wrong time, and my computer doesn't always comply with what I want it to do.

There's another email from a job I applied for, an auto-reply saying my application was unsuccessful. This was for one of the twenty retail jobs I went for last week, and the only one I've got any kind of response to. I hate that I'm grateful for this.

I jump when I hear a meow, then I see Pilgrim pawing at the window. There's a tree right on the edge of the window that has a branch just at the right height for him to come inside. I open the window and he runs in, belly wobbling. The first time he did this, I thought he was going to fall and hurt himself, but now I know he never will.

He's hungry, judging by the time and the desperate mews he's giving me, so I pick him up and we go downstairs.

Dad's not around, he must be in his room or outside, and there's a knock on the door.

Pilgrim squirms out of my arms so I abandon him and head for the door. It must be my cousin, Frank, and he keeps knocking. I've told him a billion times that he doesn't have to knock if he's staying here; hell, he doesn't even have to knock otherwise. His parents are on holiday in Germany visiting our grandparents.

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Grandma might not have that long, and my dad wants to go over soon. Maybe if he could afford it.

'Frank,' I call out. 'You can just come in.'

He doesn't reply and I roll my eyes. He's got his headphones in, sound turned up too loud. Bracing myself for a rant about some band he's discovered during the day, I open the door. The way he talks about music is like it's real-life magic.

Usually I just end up nodding as his words wash over me. He's got good taste, anyway, which really just means I like what he likes. Since he's been staying here, he's made me some mix CDs from all different genres. I keep them in the car, and they're good company for the road.

The person who was knocking isn't Frank, though.

It's Daisy and we're hugging till I can't breathe and we've lost where we end. The wind outside is cold, but Daisy smells like beaches and warmth, I put my hands on either side of their face and hold them like I can't believe they're really here. They've shaved the sides of their head, and the short hairs aren't spiky like I thought they would be, but soft. They lean in to kiss me and their smooth lips are strong, familiar.

'So, didn't miss me then?' they say. They step back and I take them in: their gangly limbs; they're wearing tight, ripped jeans that show their brown skin through the fabric, a loose, patterned wool jumper, black boots.

'Not really.' I take their bag and wheel it further

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into the kitchen as they close the door. 'Did I get the time wrong?'

Daisy taps the face of my watch, two clicks with their fingernail. 'It's always wrong,' they grin. 'And no, I got the time wrong.'

'You could've called me,' I say, watching them play with the necklace they always wear. It's got a silver tree pendant on it. They let it fall back onto their brown chest and it disappears under their jumper.

'I don't mind walking, the station's not that far.' They rest against the counter. 'How was work?'

'Boring. How was your flight? Your grandparents? Did you have fun? How was meeting your cousins for the first time? Do you want a cup of tea?' Daisy being here makes it difficult to remember to breathe between words.

They turn and flick the kettle on.

'Yes, tea. It's fucking freezing outside.'

'Blanket?' I offer, there's one draped over a chair.

'Thanks.' They pull it over their shoulders. 'Flight was fine, grandparents are good. My cousins are pretty rad. I think they were a bit confused by me, the whole gender thing, but they didn't say anything. Which I think kind of made it more awkward, and I kind of explained what genderqueer meant. But they still only used she pronouns and stuff... I dunno. Some of them were into painting and that, mostly music, but we made some pretty cool things. I'll show you later.'

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'I'm sorry, that's shit.'

They shrug. 'What else is new, eh?'

'Frank's staying with us at the moment; you could do something together.'

Daisy considers for a moment, the stud in their eyebrow winking in the light. 'He's into music, right? What kind?'

'All kinds.'

They nod and the kettle boils. I get the cups, they get the tea bags, and the leaves brew. Daisy adds milk to the cups and the browns swirl around as they tug at the strings.

'I missed you,' I say.

'Missed you too,' they reply as the tea continues to steep. 'Next time you should come with me.'

'I'll save my pennies.' I pull them close, feel their heart through their chest, their arms, their neck. 'What do you want to do?' We break apart.

'I've got a few ideas,' they say.

There's a slam and the kitchen door is flung open by Frank, headphones in ears, sure enough. He's not looking where he's going and walks straight into me. I catch his bony elbow and we grip each other, somehow managing to not fall.

'Oh hey.' He pulls off his headphones. 'Sorry. I know I should look where I'm going, please don't tell me again. This time I didn't break anything. Should be taken as progress.'

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'All right,' I say, making sure both feet are firmly on the ground. 'Have you met Daisy?'

'Couple times, yeah.' They shake hands anyway. 'You play guitar,' Frank says.

Daisy looks at him for a moment, then laughter startles out. They like being surprised by people. 'I do.'

'Callouses,' he says to me. And then he's right back to Daisy. 'What do you play?'

And then the magic music thing happens. And it's good they get along, because Frank is really my brother even though he's my cousin. He doesn't like new people, usually, but Daisy's laugh has done something good. If he had just got home a minute later though... and my bedroom is so close, and Daisy's been gone for so long... ugh.

Eternally grateful my bedroom is pretty much soundproof though; and away from everyone else's.

Frank sees me pouting eventually and stops mid-sentence. 'Well, much homework to do. Love to stay and chat, Daisy my dear,' he kisses their hand, 'but I'm sure you both have a lot of catching up to do!'

He gives me the biggest wink and scampers off down the hall to the tiny spare bedroom he's staying in, and Daisy grins.

'Upstairs?'

I nod. 'Upstairs.'

We forget about the tea.