

quirky and pixie-like, which is why Kurt couldn't take his eyes off her.

There was Lars, with his shock of white-blond hair, tanned skin, chiselled cheeks, and blue eyes that gazed with the kind of disquieting intensity that makes jelly out of knees. He had a knack for making me laugh by poking me in the ribs and saying 'Boop!' He loved me; I knew it. The only trouble was: Lars loved every girl on the bus. My Plan B love interest was a grade A player.

And then there was me: twig-skinny, giraffe-tall, naively trusting, and offbeat by accident. While all the girls had turned into hourglasses, pears, apple bottoms, and other soft, exquisite shapes of femininity, I was still angled and pointy. Any day, I expected my curves to pop too. It was like waiting for Christmas to come.

Three weeks. I was to have three glorious weeks with these people, during which time anything at all could happen. The bus passed another mangled roo on the roadside, his body a crimson smear on black tarmac wobbling with heat. 'Ewwwwww!' we chimed.

This was looking like it was going to be the best time of my life.

---

Seventy percent of the Australian mainland is classified as semi-arid, arid, or desert, and so you'd think I would've known what most of my country looked like. I didn't. The sight of the desert surprised me. I'd always pictured Sahara-like rolling dunes of golden, shifting sand, but this was all red dirt and spiky spinifex from horizon to horizon, for days and days. The flatness was astounding. I'd never seen so far into the distance before.

Sometimes we slept on the bus while it sped northwest in a dead straight line. Sometimes we stopped and camped in the desert. The nights dipped to freezing and the mornings were fresh for a few hours before the heat of the day arrived. One morning, we emerged from our tents groggy and puffy-faced to find our teachers gathered around looking stressed and angry. They called a meeting. We gathered in a semi-circle, all forty of us.

One of the teachers held up a square foil packet, torn at its perforation. My first thought was that it was some kind of snack that I'd never seen before. Ooh, is that chocolate? I wondered. Chocolate for breakfast!

'Whose condom packet is this?' the teacher said.

A condom? People my age were having sex?

Nobody said a word.

The dirt at our feet became very interesting to us all, and it was then that I noticed Dr Marten boots paired with my twiggy legs made me look like a newborn giraffe who had joined the military. Idiot.

'Well?' the teachers prompted.

More silence.

In the beats of that silence, I grew overwhelmingly sad. My idea of fun at fifteen was watching Warner Bros. cartoons on Saturday mornings with my little sister sleepy-eyed beside me, my mum in the kitchen cooking waffles. I worried that sex might change this, that I would outgrow my little sister. I worried that it would end the waffles. But more than anything, I worried that everyone else was speeding along a fast, straight road towards adulthood while I was still a twig with a washboard chest and Disney songs resounding joyously in my head.

'Is anyone going to own up to this?' the teacher prompted.

No doubt our eyes became impossibly wide and glassy as we shape-shifted into the most puppyish version of ourselves – a superpower that only teens have – until the teachers hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. They gathered heads and whispered among themselves, likely discussing whether it was more important to punish teenagers for hooking up on a school camp or to celebrate the fact they did so safely.

The issue was dropped.

I still hoped there'd somehow be chocolate.

---

Uluru first came into sight in the Pitjantjatjara tribal lands, looking like a pimple that had budged from the horizon. As we neared, we dug