

Affirm_{press}



Credit: Tim Grey

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the
strays

emily
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‘To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame,
to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life’

– *Walter Pater*

Prologue

I ONCE READ THAT the heart's magnetic field radiates up to five metres from the body, so that whenever we are within this range of another person our hearts are interacting. The body's silent communications with other bodies are unmapped and mysterious, a linguistics of scent, colour, flushes of heat, the dilating of a pupil. Who knows, what we call instant attraction may be as random as the momentary synchrony of two hearts' magnetic pulses.

Eva's mother believed in past life connections, that two souls can be twinned over and over, playing out different roles so that in one life they may be mother and daughter, in another husband and wife, in a third dear friends. I only know that throughout my life I have felt an instinctive attraction to particular people, male and female, romantic and platonic; attraction inexplicable at the time but for a certain mutual recognition. It was this way with Eva, although we were only eight years old.

I remember that day, after it all fell apart, when Eva came to me through the misty garden so that her red coat bled into view from white to pale rose to scarlet, the pride I felt. That

I was the one she turned to. That I could give her what her own family could not. All those years as part of the Trenthams' lives. Feeling loved, but never needed, never family. I am an only child; it is my lot to be envious, even grasping, to long for the bonds that tie sisters together, the fearless, unthinking acceptance that we are social creatures, pack animals, that there is never, truly, the threat of being alone.

I am sitting outside at the wooden table marking student essays when I hear the tidy creak and clap as the letter slot opens and shuts its mouth. I shuffle the papers into a pile, set them on a chair and walk through the open French doors, across the lounge room and down the hallway, lit cobalt by the panels of glass that flank the front door. The envelope is narrow and rust-coloured, shot through with metallic strands. Inside is an invitation that I recognise immediately, to the opening of Evan Trentham's retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria. Tucked behind it is a sheet of notepaper folded into three. I open it and see Eva's loose sloping handwriting, unchanged, so that some part of my mind slips, unsure if I am a middle-aged woman standing in her hallway in blue light, or if I am a girl again.

Beyond the front door I hear a man and a child walk past the gate, the man's head swimming, rippled, across the panel of glass, the child's voice falling indistinct from a high note like the carol of a magpie. I turn and walk back through the blue tunnel of the past towards the clear kitchen, reading as I go.

Dear Lily,

It has been so long. Far too long. I know it's difficult to keep people in our lives, and I know that what happened in the past has made it hard for us to be in contact, although I've thought about you often over the years and have started letters to you several times. I've thought of you more since Heloise's death, and now that the grief has eased a little bit, I'm determined not to let it go any longer. Being back in the country for Dad's retrospective seems a good opportunity to reconnect, although I'll understand if you don't want to after all this time. Mum and Dad would of course love to have you at the opening, and for me it would be wonderful to see you again, dear friend of my childhood.

I know you are in contact with Bea, and she has my dates and details.

Please do come.

Love always,

Eva

I brace my body against the edge of the sink and pull my eyes up from the page. It is so many years since the last time I saw her. Three full decades at least. And now, Eva has come back to me like a good deed returned. Already I am imagining how it would be to see her again, and I become aware of that old compulsive pain I have pressed like a bruise again and again throughout the years.

Who else will be there, which members of the circle willing to be brought together once more, alongside art historians and critics who are aware of how it all went and who will no doubt be nudging one another and staring blatantly as greetings are exchanged and the past flashes between Evan and Helena

Trentham and the artists, now old, whom they once took into their home?

And Eva.

I stop myself, tuck my grey hair behind my ears. I gaze out at the garden. The silver birches at the fence ease my mind along their straight, kind trunks. I notice that the mulberry needs pruning. I take the letter and invitation to my study and sit down, lining up the invitation along the edge of the desk, running my thumb along the card as though absorbing it gently through the skin. I have already received a copy of the invitation from a colleague in the art history department who works in Australian modernism and who has some involvement in the exhibition. As far as I know she is not aware of my past connection with the Trenthams. But I had no intention of going until now.

I examine the invitation again, reading the text on the back. *You are invited to the opening of the retrospective exhibition of Evan Trentham's work at the National Gallery of Victoria. 6 to 8 pm, Friday the 10th of May, 1985.* I turn it over and look closely at the image for the first time. I had thought it was simply an early self-portrait, Evan's face aligned with the narrow card, his shaggy red beard and blue-pale skin. But now I see that there is a thin green line protruding from the corner of his mouth and curving over the paler green background behind his head. Above his right ear I notice a small house, a replica of the Trentham home with its gabled roofs and the portico over the door. Smoke is swelling out of a downstairs window and the green line has become a hose in the pink dot hands of a tiny man who must be Ugo.

I feel a tenderness in my chest, and the past rushes in as a

deluge I can no longer hold back: the house and garden, the smell of smoke that will always be the scent of things gone wrong. Those twilight days in the hotel room with my dear, sad Eva.

I flip the invitation over again and search for the title. It is there, in small letters along one edge: *Self-portrait with Miniature Disaster 4*.

After a time, I haul myself back to the present, to the daylight and the fact that I am cold. I search for the cordless phone and find it stashed behind the empty bowl from the muesli I ate at my desk this morning, the residue in the bottom like a fortune waiting to be read.

It is a reflex, by now, to go to Bea when the old scars begin to itch.

‘Bea, it’s Lily.’

‘Hi, Lily.’ Her voice is an instant salve. ‘How are you?’

‘I’m okay. You?’

‘I’m well. How’s Tim?’

‘He’s good. Busy, as usual. Can you chat for a minute?’

‘Sure. I’ve just got my little Mardi here. You know I’m minding her one day a week now.’

I picture Bea with her adored grandchild, the way she explains everything so patiently. ‘I’ll call back later,’ I say.

‘No, no. We’re just sitting here with some playdough, aren’t we, Mardi? As long as you don’t mind my divided attention.’

‘Not at all.’

‘What are we making, Mardi?’

‘Snakes!’ Mardi says in the background.

‘I’m so glad you rang actually,’ says Bea. ‘I’ve been meaning to call and ask you and Tim over for dinner this week. Is it too late?’

‘Lucinda’s moved back home for a bit, so I feel like I should probably be around for her. She and Eli are having problems.’

‘Again? That’s difficult, isn’t it.’

I laugh. ‘That’s what I said when she told me – *Again?* – and she got angry with me.’

‘You must just want to smack that boy.’

‘I do. But Luce is very good at telling me when to back off.’

I hear Mardi’s voice again.

‘Yes it’s very slithery-snaky,’ Bea responds. ‘Maybe now you could make a basket for them to live in ... Sorry,’ she says as she returns to me. ‘Well, let me know when you’re free and we’ll organise something.’

There is a banging of playdough.

‘Bea ...’ I begin and then hesitate.

‘Hmm?’

‘I just got a letter from Eva.’

‘Oh, you did. She said she was thinking of making contact while she’s back.’

‘Why didn’t you warn me?’

Bea pauses for a moment.

‘I’m sorry, Lily. I didn’t think. I forget it’s been so long since you two have seen each other.’

‘I feel like I’m slightly in shock,’ I say, thinking how much of an understatement this is.

‘Careful, bubby,’ says Bea.

There is a crash, and Mardi begins to wail.

‘Oh no, upsadaisy. Lily, I’m so sorry. I’ll have to go. We’ve had an accident.’

‘No, no, of course, go.’

‘I’ll call you back later, but you know you don’t have to see

her just because she's decided to make contact now. Although I think it'd be great for both of you if you did. But I know she's left it far too long.'

Mardi's shrieks grow louder as Bea bends close to her.

'I know, I know. You go, Bea. We'll talk later.'

I hang up and walk back to the garden, but the table has fallen into shade and the essays have blown onto the pavers. I gather them up and come back inside, shutting the French doors behind me. I set the essays on a shelf in my study, watch a pigeon curtsying to its mate outside the window, allow myself to fret about my daughter and her heartbreak, to take my mind off Eva's letter. Eventually I give in. I open the deep bottom drawer of my desk and pull out a pile of journals. I place them on the desk in front of me and rest my hands on top of the solid stack. I let my mind turn back once more, to recreate again that distant, still wracked past.