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After the Fire, A Still Small Voice

Written by Evie Wyld

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Evie Wyld

After the Fire, a Still Small Voice



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

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The sun turned the narrow dirt track to dust. It rose like an orange tide from the wheels of the truck and blew in through the window to settle in Frank Collard's arm hair. He remembered the place feeling more tropical, the soil thicker and wetter. The sugar cane on either side of the track was thin and reedy, wild with a brown husk and sick-looking green tops. The same old cane that hadn't been harvested in twenty years swayed like a green sea. Blue gums and box trees hepped out of it, not bothered with the dieback. Once it would all have been hardwood. In the time his grandparents had lived out here, just the two of them, before the new highway, maybe then this place was a shack in the woods.

The clearing was smaller than he remembered, like the cane had slunk closer to the pale wooden box hut. The banana tree stooped low over a corrugated roof. He turned off the engine and sagged in his seat for a moment taking it in. There was a tweak at the back of his neck and when he slapped it his palm came away bloody.

'Home again home again diggidy dig.'

He could have driven here without thinking. He could have turned the radio up loud and listened to the memorial service at Australia Zoo. They were calling them revenge killings, the stingrays found mutilated up and down Queensland beaches. He could have let his hands steer him to Mulaburry, those same roads he'd hitched along as a kid, sun-scarred and spotty, scrawny as a feral dog without the bulky calves and wide hands he had now. But never

mind that, he'd still pulled over on to the slip road and smoothed out the map and read aloud the places, and he still sent his eyes over and over the landmarks, searching for the turn-offs he knew were not written down. The tension in his arms had got so strong he wanted to bust a fist through the windscreen but instead, as a road train roared by and rocked the Ute in its wake, he'd clutched the wheel, crumpling the map as he did it, feeling small tears made by his fingertips. He had gripped the wheel hard so that it burnt, and he pushed like it might relieve the feeling in his arms. But it didn't help and then he was outside, banging his fists on the bonnet for all that he was worth, his nose prickling, his throat closed up, the bloody feel of some bastard terrible thing swimming inside him. And when he was done and spent, he had climbed back into the truck and refolded the buggered map, and when he couldn't make it fit together he'd laughed softly and started the engine.

The air outside was thick with insect noise, heavy with heat, and the old gums groaned. The padlock on the door was gone and the idea that some other bastard might have claimed the place as his own nearly made him turn round and shoo all the way back to Canberra. The whole thing was suddenly hare-brained. Tearing through drawers at home trying to find some sort of clue as to what he was supposed to be doing, he'd found an envelope with a picture of his mum in, taken on one summer holiday at the shack. There she was, hanging up a sheet in the sun, the same wide teeth as him, the same sort of boneless nose. Different hair, though – hers a blonde animal that moved in the wind. He was like his father, wiry, black, not from these parts. By her shoulder was the window and inside you could just make out a jam jar with a flower in it. It was like being smacked on the arse by God. Couldn't have been more than a month after she was hanging up that sheet that they'd been driving in his dad's old brown Holden

when a truck hadn't stopped at the intersection. When he woke up there was no more mum and no more old brown Holden.

It wasn't difficult getting out of the rental agreement. He'd been late and short in the last three months since Lucy left. A week from then and he was on the road, two suitcases of clothes, the rest of everything in boxes for the op-shop and the padlock keys burning his thigh through his pocket. He'd taken the first part of the journey that evening, ended up in a motel close to midnight, with a sun-faded poster of a lion eating a zebra above his bed. He hadn't slept, he'd drunk from a three-quarters empty bottle of Old and he'd let himself think about Lucy then. The sick feeling of trying to make it all right. The endless meetings they'd had across the table, to see if there was a way round it. The months afterwards when he'd sweated if he dropped a plate, the look on her face. Careful, or I'm going. Or when the coat hangers tangled themselves and made a jangling as he shook them, her pointed silence. There were other things he thought of in that wide-awake night. Being alone, fixing himself up. Getting done with the drink, sorting through the things in his head as she'd wanted him to.

He stopped the Ute and opened the door. Holding his hat on to his head, he stepped into the sound of cicadas that shrilled like pushbike bells from the cane. He slammed the door louder than he'd meant to and walked towards the shack. The smell of sweet ozone and the clump of his boots in the dust was alien. It was darker and smaller than he remembered. It tilted inwards a little like a sagging tent. He cleared his throat.

'Hey!' he called before reaching for the door. Inside it hadn't changed, and it made his chest tight to see. There should have been broken windows, mess left by kids, dust and leaks, mould on the walls. But there was not. The shack had a feeling about it like it'd been waiting. There were no wildflowers in jars, it wasn't

swept, there wasn't the sparkle of sand in the cracks of the floorboards, but the placement of *things* was just the same. It was like the last person there could have been his grommet self fifteen years ago and it made a warmth at the back of his throat. No one was there. There were no other belongings, just the old things that had lived there for ever. On a high shelf a grey elephant, a kewpie doll and a mother-of-pearl shell. The wedding-cake figurines of his parents and grandparents that had always stood on the telephone table, dustless inside their glass bell jar. There was no telephone – he'd forgotten that. Sat on the stack of plastic chairs in the corner, a Father Christmas with a felt body and a rubber face. The wood-burning stove that had been put together a little wrong and now and again used to chug black smoke into the room, which would have his mother up and in the doorway coughing and flapping with a tea towel. He took a step inside and heard the familiar creak of the floor. The place wouldn't recognise him this heavy or hairy. The sink was dry, with a sprinkling of dead flies upside-down in it. The beds were there too, a double and a rickety single all close together so that as a kid he'd lain awake, wide-eyed at the sound of his parents at night, wondering what is that and why are they doing it? A thin blue and white striped blanket covered his old bed, tucked at the feet in the way he hated, where you'd have to kick your way free, so your feet didn't pin you down.

He dragged out the mattresses and afterwards he slung the bed frames in the back of the Ute. The idea of sleeping on either of them filled him with dread. The smell might be there, his mother's hand cream, or the witch hazel his father used for aftershave, in the days before he stopped bothering. Later it was more of a faying than grooming. There might be particles of their skin there, he might find a long blond hair and know it was not his. They were things that needed to be forgotten about, for starters.

He'd bought some kerosene with him, and he found a place out of reach of the fingers of the cane and poured it on to the mattresses, knowing he was pouring too much. He threw on a lit match and felt his eyelashes singe, turned away and didn't watch the beds burning. He moved his suitcases into the shack and tried the taps. Nothing came out, the dead flies skittered around the basin, blown by the breeze of his hand. So he'd need to see to a water tank. There was no fridge, but there'd never been one – they'd kept beer and milk and Cokes cool in a deep rock pool where the water moved gently. They'd caught fish as they needed it, and there were always abalone, oysters and octopus to be had. But things changed. He'd get a cold box in town when he went looking for a camp bed. Chances were the stove was bugged after such a long time, but he gave it a look-over anyway. Something dreadful had happened inside, and nothing he could think of made any sense. A big rat or a bandicoot, something with hair and long yellow teeth, claws and a thick backbone, had been cooked whole and left. The thing looked like it had exploded and then been cooked again, the stuff was black and hard and old. It was long past smelling, which was good. He found a stick and gave it a poke but it was welded on. He straightened up and looked at the stove with his hands on his hips. He rubbed the grit of hair on his face. He wasn't sure how much he'd want to use it anyway even if he could get the stuff off. Like a man slow-dancing with an orang-utan, he walked the stove and cylinder, corner by corner, out of the shack and well away from the burning mattresses. He left it, squat and angry-looking, at the entrance to the clearing.

The week after his mum had drifted in burnt flakes to the seabed a chill Sydney morning woke him, so that his face was wet and his shoulders were stiff. That was when he'd seen the first one. Padding out of his bedroom, a blanket round his shoulders,

thoughts of morning hot chocolate and warm bread, his stomach had sunk and growled as he saw her slip from his parents' room. The old woman from the flower shop, but for half a second he would have sworn it was his mother, and in that moment he'd wondered if the past weeks had been imagined. There was no explanation for a woman coming out of his parents' room apart from it being his mother, and he stood with his mouth open, his knees weak and his heart high in his chest. But only the vague shape was hers, only the long hair, the small hands. This woman was old and nearly dead. She met his stare with a look like she'd been caught stealing butter from the fridge, but she was old and so wouldn't have any trouble about that. Her eyelids were shaded blue, her fingernails were red and her yellow dress was something a lady in a picture might wear, but not her. She hesitated and then smiled at him, and he could see that her teeth were not her own, but belonged to a much younger person with much bigger teeth. She made for the stairs, holding her high heels in one hand, her handbag in the crook of her arm. As she passed him she touched him on the head. 'Okay, kiddo,' she had said and tackled the stairs in her stockinged feet, mindful of their slipperiness.

Those women, the ones with the clothes that smelt of piss and smoke, the ham thighs showing through the slits in their skirts, the skin and bone of their chests and the unlikeliness of their make-up, the rouge that seemed to float above the skin of their cheeks, the lipsticked teeth either false or yellow. The smell of his mum was gone from the house a month after she was in the sea, and it was replaced with something wide open and stinking. After his father stopped baking bread there was nothing to mask it apart from the smell of old beer and damp rot, like the house was growing soft and sinking into the ground.

* * *

The wood of the dunny shed had turned silver and it snagged the tips of Frank's fingers when he opened the door. Inside, the porcelain bowl was almost hidden beneath fireweed that geysered out of it, some of the plants five feet tall. Through the green he could see a crack running the whole way down the throat of the toilet, something black, like good soil, pushing behind it. It had been a joke his dad had loved – the porcelain drop dunny. The smell was like a garden shed, no shit, but a gentle manure, potato-y, cool. Spiderwebs coddled the corners, white and flossy, and a skink ran across the cistern. The whole thing looked more like a fancy bird bath than a loo, and he closed the door and let it alone. The burning mattresses gave off a smell of rubber. He watched the fingers that peaked on the fire and snatched at the moths gamely flying over the top, disintegrating them in snaps and pops.

He thought of the morning Lucy left. How he'd sat at the kitchen table, listened to the sound of the schoolkids on their way to soccer practice, the shouts and magpie noises of girls laughing. A line of sunlight cast on to the checked tablecloth, and he had counted the squares. He'd walked his finger on to a red square and thought of her marching towards him, sticks that she found interesting under her long arm, her hat throwing a shadow down to her shoulders. White square; pale hot hair that flew in her face, white clay, dust, and thrash caught in it like a gill net. Red square; the first time they'd had sex, all knuckles and knees. White square – the mole under her breast – red square – the clasp of her eyelashes – white square – the smell of her neck – red square – the sound of her sleeping – white square – the sound of her crying when she thought he was asleep – red square – the silhouette of her hand over her mouth in the dark – white square white square white square.

The sun had moved across the table and on to the floor where it disappeared up the wall. He'd listened to the kids returning from

soccer practice, had heard the bell sound in the school up the road and the day ending for them in kicked cans and squabbles. He listened for keys in the front door. He drew his fingernail around a red square so that it stood out from the others.

She did not come back that night, and it was dawn before he'd moved to the toilet where he let out a jet of strong greenish piss. He didn't flush but went into the bedroom where he'd checked the wardrobe. Plenty of her things were still there, but her pack was gone, along with her good jeans and her work jeans. They were not in the dirty clothes. He avoided the photographs around the house – the ones that he knew off by heart anyway. Three on the mantelpiece, two on the chest of drawers in their bedroom. One by the window trying to catch his eye with its reflection. Taken soon after they met, she wore some terrible yellow dungarees and her hair had blown into Frank's face. His teeth showed, smiling, through the hair, wide and laughing. You couldn't see the kink in his nose where it had broken. You could see the crows' feet, which made him look older than he was, and happy, and the dark line of his eyebrows tilted upwards like he couldn't believe his luck, not yet thirty and suddenly there was all he'd ever wanted. He looked half a head shorter than her. The picture showed how she couldn't ever leave him because they held hands.

Opening the desk drawer he saw that her passport, usually bulldog-clipped to his own, had gone too. He tried her mobile for the fifth time, and it went straight to answerphone and he hung up. He spent the rest of the morning with the phone in his hand sitting on the edge of the bed, but nobody called him.

She'd come in the night before, a secret look about her, and Frank had thought for a while that she was pregnant. It had taken him so by surprise, but it all added up – she'd told him she was going to see a friend who was upset and she might end up staying over – she was worried about it, that was all. She wanted time to

get used to the idea, had booked into a hotel for the night, or maybe she'd stayed with a friend, talking it through. She was scared, worried about how he might react. He felt his palms tingle and realised he was excited. He wanted to pull her down into a chair and make her tell him. He had it ready what he would say, and how happy the next days would be. This all happened within ten minutes of her getting in the door. He poured her a glass of wine to test her, but she drank it. A glass of red now and again was good, he'd read that, that was fine. But she'd have to stop the cigarettes.

She looked at the red and white tablecloth, rubbed a spot of grease away with her index finger and started. 'Look, I've been to Sydney.'

Were the doctors better there? She caught his eye, smiled and looked down again. She was nervous.

He took her hand. 'How come?' He could feel that his eyes were wide open, he didn't want to miss the moment. She looked at him again. He inhaled.

'I've been to see your father.' His hold on her hand grew slack but other than that nothing changed. He kept his gaze steady and she must have taken that as encouragement, because she started talking at ninety miles an hour.

'I had to ask around a bit, but the shop's still there, and once I found it and I went in, I could tell he was the right one, he looked just exactly like you, it was weird, a bit smaller, tired, but it was like you were there. And I talked to him, I actually bought a pie first, just to be sure, and then we got talking and he really was a nice-seeming guy. Charming. Friendly.' She paused, thinking Frank might say something but he didn't, just let his hand hang open on the table. How could she have done that to him? She didn't seem to notice he'd let go of her hand. His old man, who when he looked at you looked up and to the centre of your forehead like he was

reading something printed there, whose body was old, mouth slack and full of dark teeth from drink and banana paddle-pops, the wrappers wet in his pocket. Who still somehow managed to bring home, every so often, a young pretty thing, in between the old and the fish-smelling, the fat and moustached women that he found by the bucketload. The daytime drinkers and their terrible loud voices, their piss, dark and strong in the toilet. That was ten years ago. It was a surprise he was still alive, let alone that he still managed a day's work.

'And anyway,' she went on over his thoughts, 'I didn't tell him who I was or anything like that, but I asked for directions back to the train station and he drew me a map.' She scabbled around in her handbag and brought out a paper napkin, carefully folded, and laid it on the table like it was a child's drawing. 'He knew it just like that.' She took a long gulp of her drink and pushed the map closer to Frank. 'He did look tired, though. Really tired. And alone. I really think now's the time, love. We could just go and say hello, take it from there.'

Where did all this 'we' come from? She looked at Frank like he was a puzzle she'd just fitted the last piece into. He sat back in his chair and drained his glass, and when he'd finished he threw the glass on the floor and it smashed. The colour had gone from her face. He held her gaze a moment and hoped that she understood what he thought about what she had done and the anger that was barely kept inside him. He was going to leave the house then, but it wasn't enough, the smashed glass seemed pathetic, like a tantrum, and she had to know it was not. He found that his hand was holding her face and squeezing it, and he'd been sure he was going to say something, but he just squashed her face with his hand, feeling the teeth through her cheek, feeling her breath hot on his palm and already there were tears, but what did she have to cry about? Then he didn't want to touch her any

more and pushed her away, and there came a noise from her and her hands went up to her face. Still there was something he wanted to say, he heard it rumbling inside him but it wouldn't come. He left the house leaving the door open, spent the night in the park and knew that she would not be there when he got back and that that had been it, his chance to prove himself, to show that his old overreacting self had gone for good. But she'd seen his father. Christ, she'd talked to him and he had not.

He took shallow breaths. He picked up a back board from an unframed picture and snapped it in two.

There, he thought. At least that's that taken care of.

He strode into the kitchen, whistling tunelessly, because no songs would come to him. He thought he would take a bath and dragged his clothes off standing at the kitchen sink. He put on some toast and went to the bathroom, but there was a large spider in the bath.

'Get the fuck out of my bath, you shit!' he shouted, turning on the hot tap and leaving the room. He picked his clothes off the kitchen floor and put his shirt back on, but he didn't manage the pants.

The toast pinged up and, crying, he buttered it and daubed it with jam, inhaling deeply and letting out long shaky breaths. He ate it breathlessly between hiccups. His mouth, which at that moment had nothing to do with him, would not stop making the sound 'Aaaaaaaa' like a stiff door opening. He lay on the floor, a smear of jam on his cheek, and mashed the last of the bread into a wet pap with an open bawling mouth. The crusts sat on the floor. He swallowed and breathed in sharply, then cooled his crying to a whimper, then to sniffing and then just to staring. The sun moved across the kitchen floor, regardless.

On his last night in the flat he sprayed air freshener until the insides of his nose were raw, to get rid of the smell of her. But still

she flooded in, got behind his eyes, up his nose, at the back of his tongue. Those white days in the city when he would wake to condensation fogging up the bedroom window, and from where he lay it looked like the world had left while he was asleep. She smelt faintly of beeswax polish. On those cold mornings when they lay in bed, and he missed Sydney and the things that were there, she pressed her feet into the backs of his calves and even their coldness was comforting. It was enough to leave the blank window of Canberra outside a little longer.

At the roundabout before Mulaburry Town, on the grass verge, a boy sat cross-legged reading a book that could only have been the Bible. Frank watched him in his rear-view mirror. The kid wore boardies and a big yellow T-shirt, his hair was almost white from sun and sea and his arms, long and brown and smooth. Frank shook his head. Cutting school to read the Bible by the road. Things had changed.

Behind the camping shop was a recycling yard and he moved the old bed frames as quietly as he could, gritting his teeth when they clanked together, hoping no one would come and tell him to dick off. He left them leant up against the bottle bank and hurried round to the front of the shop, trying to look like he'd just arrived.

The old lady in the shop said, 'The council come on a Tuesday and take away the larger refuse.' But she said it with a wide smile, as though he'd asked.

'Right,' he said, smiling back but not knowing what to say, waiting for the feeling of delinquency to run out of him.

'Need any help, darl?'

'I'm after a camp bed.' Move it along, he thought, move it along, make it seem like you don't think you've done anything wrong. It was only dumping a couple of bed frames. Is that bad? How bad is that?