

Fracture

The poster was Tony's grandson's idea. The family had gathered for their weekly Sunday meal. As usual, Carla had cooked up a storm. Roast pork, roast chicken, three salads and two cakes. They were all nursing their bellies, the adults drinking moscato and licking the last of the cheesecake from their plates, the kids lounging on beanbags as they watched a movie in the second living room.

Carla had been to mass in the morning but Tony hadn't joined her. Tony hadn't seen the inside of a church since his wedding, forty years ago. He had given up on God when his father dropped dead from a heart attack the day he and Carla got back from their honeymoon. For Tony, it was the Sunday dinner that was the highlight of his week. To

be flanked by family, and to have the old house resonating with noise, made Tony feel if not invincible then at least less vulnerable. Everybody listened as he told the story of the surgeon at the hospital. The family was outraged—Mario, his eldest son, the most so.

‘You tell me his name. I’ll make sure he gets what’s coming to him.’ Mario banged his fist on the table. The family knew it was an empty threat. In spite of his size—which, in recent years, was more fat than muscle—Mario was soft at heart. It was his late wife, Trudy, who had worn the pants in their little family, from the moment she gave birth to Luca in the back seat of a taxi to the moment she’d hit the ground in a tragic skydiving accident. The Ferraris missed her terribly. Now when they needed strength they looked to her ferocious son, Luca.

Luca said nothing as he listened to his nonno’s story. When Tony had finished and the others had taken turns to voice their disbelief, Luca slunk away. About an hour later, when Carla had just started clearing everyone’s plates, he returned, wielding a piece of paper.

‘Is this the guy?’ he said, holding up the poster proudly, like a five-year-old. The family stopped talking. They looked at the grainy head shot and read the caption in huge capitals below it.

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Below his face was one word: FUCKWIT. It was Anzac Day and Deepak wondered if the timing was deliberate—the naming and shaming of an antihero, or something along those lines—but he didn't think the perpetrator was capable of such sophistication. The poster was amateurish. The photo had been downloaded from the hospital website and then blown up to ten times its size. Fortunately he was at the hospital early that day—the registrar had called at seven am about a girl who had fractured her arm. When Deepak saw the poster near the main entrance, he immediately tore it down, but he felt dirty—as if he had something to hide—when he buried it in an infectious waste bin.

Public holidays were always busy and Anzac Day was no different. A fractured femur, a supracondylar, two dislocated shoulders, in addition to the usual rubbish from the ward. By ten o'clock that night, as Deepak collapsed into Simone's bed, the poster was a million miles from his mind. He only thought of it the next morning when he woke up, naked and sticky from sex.

'Do you know who it was?' Simone asked when he told her the story.

He shook his head.

'But do you have your suspicions?'

Deepak thought of the hundreds of patients he'd operated on over the years. Some were disgruntled, of course—you could never please everyone—but nobody stood out to him.

'Fuck,' Simone said, twisting her blond hair into a knot on top of her head. 'I'd have a short list of twenty.' She stood up and walked to the bathroom. Through the hiss of the shower, she shouted an inventory of all the patients who'd made complaints about her over the years. But it was little comfort to Deepak. Simone was one of the top orthopaedic surgeons in Australia. Last year she'd won a prestigious women's leadership award. Simone could easily rebuff such an attack. Deepak, on the other hand, was a junior consultant. He had failed his oral exams three times—when he was stressed he had a stutter.

Deepak picked a strand of Simone's hair off the pillow and draped it over his palm. He'd never been with a blond before. Growing up, he'd joked about it with his friends at high school—other brown-skinned boys who confused screwing a blond with screwing white imperialism—but they were fourteen at the time and none of them had done anything with a girl other than pashing. He wound the hair around his finger, watched his fingertip swell with blood. Here was the *hair spun of gold* he had read about, as a child, in fairytales. If he said this to Simone, she would balk at his sentimentality, tell him it was all ammonia-based chemicals. Even so, Deepak couldn't quite believe he shared his bed with this woman. She had grown up in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, spending holidays surfing at Anglesea or snowboarding at Mount Hotham. Deepak had

spent summers with his best friend, Prakash, stealing porn magazines from the local milk bar.

Simone emerged from the shower, pink and smooth and sleek. She towelled off in front of him. 'Don't worry about the poster,' she said.

'I'm not.'

'Just some nut case.' Her perfect breasts jiggled and bounced. 'It'll blow over.'

Once she left, Deepak got dressed. He'd promised his parents he would visit them. The air outside was crisp, and he put on the beanie and the scarf he kept in his car. He left Simone's warehouse apartment in Fitzroy and drove to his parents' house in Sunshine. Deepak's mother loved telling her family in London she lived in a place called Sunshine. Never mind that it was an old industrial district, or that the nearest beach was fifteen kilometres away. In twenty years her English relatives had never paid a visit.

Deepak's father was out the front of the house, pruning the rosebushes. He covered his ears with his hands as his son parked in the driveway. 'I could hear your car all the way from the freeway,' he said when Deepak got out of the Porsche.

'That's what I paid a year's salary for.'

His father shook his head and turned back to his rosebushes.

'Where's Mum?'

‘Cooking.’

Deepak went inside. He let the smell of roasting spices and the ‘meadows and rain’ air freshener his mother had been buying for years waft over him. His mum was standing at the kitchen bench reading *New Idea* before a backdrop of bubbling pots and pans.

‘Smells good.’

‘Did you know that Norah Jones is half-Indian?’ his mother said, putting down the magazine and turning her attention back to the stove. ‘She was born Geetali Norah Shankar.’

Deepak laughed. ‘I’d change my name too if I was called Shankar.’ He lifted the lid of one of the pans. His mum slapped his hand.

‘Shankar is a very common Indian name.’

‘Yeah, I know. But it sounds the same as *chancre*, which is a genital sore caused by syphilis.’

His mother shook her head. ‘When did you get so dirty?’

Deepak opened the fridge. He took out the orange juice and drank it straight from the carton.

‘They divorced, of course.’

‘Who?’

‘Norah Jones’ parents.’

Deepak threw the empty juice carton into the box his mother used for recycling. ‘Who the hell is Norah Jones?’

‘A singer.’ She turned away from her cauldrons and

looked at Deepak. ‘Mixed marriages never work. Too many cultural barriers.’

His parents didn’t know about Simone. Once, his mother had asked him about the pretty blond on his Facebook page, but she seemed satisfied when Deepak said she was a work colleague.

Secrecy was convenient for Simone, too. *People will talk*, she said if Deepak grabbed her bottom when no one was looking. *I’m your boss*. But Deepak wondered if it wasn’t more than that. Simone’s father was a member of the Melbourne Club and the owner of a racehorse called Pink Diamond. When Simone showed Deepak pictures of her family and friends at the Melbourne Cup, he couldn’t spot a brown face among them.

For years Deepak’s parents had been setting him up on blind dates with successful Indian women. Deepak played along, because sometimes it was quite fun and deep down he really did want to please them. Lately, though—presumably because of the advancing age of the women he was being set up with—the meetings felt less like bonding sessions about crazy Indian parents and more like interrogation. Nowadays the women had sharp nails and pursed lips. They knew what they wanted in a man, and they were determined to find out, over a three-hour degustation, if Deepak had it.

Simone was fascinated by these introductions and spent hours grilling him about the details. While Deepak knew he

should be grateful to have such an open-minded girlfriend, in truth, he was disappointed. Just once, as he described an encounter with one of these prospective partners, he wished he would see a hint of jealousy in Simone's eyes. But he never did. They were always cold, blue, bemused.

Tony had tried to do the right thing. He'd contacted the hospital complaints officer, who advised him to send an email. He got Luca to help him set up an email account. He chose the name TonyBulldogs after his favourite footy team. He wanted TonyFerrari, but it was taken. As was TonyFerrari1, TonyFerrari2, TonyFerrari3 and so on. There were, as his grandson had pointed out, a million Tony Ferraris in the world.

The next night Tony got Carla to help him compose a letter. She wrote his words in her elegant cursive hand and their son Mario typed it into the computer. Tony was happy with the final result. It was polite without being pathetic, firm without being rude. When Tony pressed the send button, he felt a satisfying swell of accomplishment. That's how you have to deal with these people, he told himself. You have to play them at their own game. He knew from his years of working at a big organisation that management couldn't ignore a written document. There were certain *procedures* that had to be observed.

But weeks had passed and Tony's email inbox remained

empty. ‘These things take time,’ Carla said when he complained, which just infuriated him even more. It suddenly struck Tony that his partner of thirty-five years was an observer of life rather than a participant in it. Lately, the calm and patient temperament he had once so admired in his wife only served to exasperate him. For the first time in thirty years, Tony fantasised about how his life might have turned out if he’d married feisty Gabriella from high school.

He thought of Luca’s poster. He remembered the way the family had shut Luca down, how Mario had scolded his son for being antisocial and aggressive. At the time, Tony had agreed with them, but now he saw that his grandson was the voice of reason. Ever since he was three years old, Luca had been calling injustice as he saw it. *That’s not fair!* he would scream when he didn’t get his turn on the swings at the playground, and Tony would promise him an ice-cream if he would just let the obnoxious kid with braces have one more go. But his grandson was right. They could all learn something from the boy’s fearlessness. Tony recalled the expert way Luca had gutted a garfish on their last fishing trip to Queenscliff. He hadn’t stopped until the dirty job was finished—hadn’t even flinched.

A couple of weeks after the poster incident, Simone called Deepak into her office. He wasn’t worried—the last time she’d summoned him like this, she’d kissed him violently

against the filing cabinet. But this time when he walked through the door, Simone had a serious face.

‘There’s been a complaint,’ she said as he pulled the door closed behind him. She sat down and pointed to a document on her desk.

It was an email addressed to the hospital complaints officer. As Deepak read it, words bounded off the page: *Rude. Abrupt. Uncaring.* He looked at the name at the bottom. Tony Ferrari. It took Deepak a while to recall the patient. Mid-fifties, maybe. A drinker’s nose. A rugged, fleshy face.

‘It’s dated the eighth of March,’ he said, flicking the paper back across the desk. ‘Why am I only seeing this now?’

‘You know what HR’s like,’ Simone said and shook her head. ‘There was Easter, and then Anzac Day. They’ve been sitting on this thing for weeks.’

Deepak sat down in the chair opposite her.

‘I pulled the file,’ she said. ‘All you’ve written is: *Query nerve damage. Trial Lyrica. Discharge from clinic.*’

Now he remembered. The guy had sustained a tibial fracture after falling off a broken ladder. The X-rays looked great, but he’d developed chronic pain from a nerve injury. Simone’s face was poker-like, professional.

‘Do you think it’s him?’ Deepak asked.

She raised her eyebrows. She had forgotten. Already.

‘The poster.’

‘Oh. That.’ She rubbed her forehead. ‘God, I don’t know.’

Probably.’ For once she looked tired. Older. ‘You’ll have to write a response. Acknowledging without apologising.’

Deepak groaned.

Simone sat up tall and taut again. ‘We spoke to some of the nurses who were at clinic the day you saw him.’

Now it was Deepak’s turn to raise his eyebrows.

‘It’s protocol,’ she said.

‘And?’ Deepak felt confident of his relationship with the nurses. He was always respectful and courteous to them.

‘The unit manager said you were patronising.’

The blood drained from Deepak’s face.

‘But she acknowledged it could be cultural.’

That night Deepak sat down at the dining table in his St Kilda Road apartment to compose his letter. He swirled the scotch in his glass, savoured the crisp tinkle of ice cubes. He put the glass down and stared at the computer screen. After five minutes he leant back in his chair and poured himself another shot. Through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows, the Shrine of Remembrance glowed gold.

Deepak had bought the apartment from the parents of a doctor friend. It had been a private sale, without agents, conducted over a meal of salmon and champagne. After dessert, his friend’s father, a jeweller, had shown Deepak his briefcase of diamonds. There was still an industrial-grade safe bolted to the floor of the walk-in wardrobe, empty now

except for Deepak's watch and passport.

Deepak looked around the room. With the help of his sister, he had made the place inviting. A Natuzzi couch, an impractical coffee table, a couple of tastefully mismatched cushions. Friends who'd bought their own places had assured Deepak that when he found his future home he would *just know*. It was like love, they said, all heart and no head. Deepak had convinced himself he loved the apartment, the opulence of it: the soft-closing drawers, the black timber joinery, the luxurious Italian carpet. But the more time he spent at Simone's place, with its hand-picked art and fresh flowers, the more he thought his flat looked like an apartment for rent on Airbnb.

He glared at the blinking cursor. What was it Simone had said? Acknowledge without apologising? *Dear Tony*, he wrote and immediately felt a sharp pang of resentment. It wasn't his fault the old man had climbed up a broken ladder, or that he'd developed chronic nerve pain as a result of his injury. If Deepak had been rude that day in outpatients, it was probably because he'd been working straight through since the night before without a break, or because his registrar had called in sick, or because he'd had to plough through the thirty-plus patients the nurses had squeezed into an overbooked clinic.

Mr Ferrari, he typed. *Life sucks. Shit happens. This time it happened to you.*

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Once, a while ago now, Tony had held his head high like the doctor. He'd been proud of his success. Everything he owned, from their four-bedroom bungalow to the antique jewellery in Carla's dresser, was a direct result of his sweat and hard work. God knows how many hours he had spent chatting footy with people he hated as he made his way from factory worker to line manager and finally to operations director. But it was worth it. The day he got that promotion was still one of the best days of his life. He would never forget the delighted looks on the faces of Carla and the boys when he brought home four air tickets to the Gold Coast.

But it hadn't lasted. And though Tony took credit for every step forward he'd taken, he didn't feel like he'd played any part in his own downfall. After the global financial crisis, the board sold the company to a multinational. Tony and all of middle management were made redundant in the restructure. Tony's position had literally vanished before his eyes—one day his name was in a little yellow box on the company's organisational flow chart, and the next day his name and the little yellow box were gone. He was three days shy of his sixtieth birthday when he filled a cardboard box with pens and photo frames from his desk. Sixty was a terrible age to be looking for a job. Especially for Tony, who had made his way up through the ranks at a time when experience and street smarts trumped a university degree.

People in the company had looked up to him, even admired him, but that meant nothing now.

Tony lasted ten minutes in the queue at Centrelink. He had expected junkies, people with tiny pupils and needle marks on their arms, but in reality there were a lot of middle-aged men who looked just like him. Depressed. Despondent. Defeated. He felt sick. He walked through the sliding glass doors and never went back.

Instead, he started doing odd jobs for his neighbours. Old women, mainly. He mowed Miss Howard's lawn. He installed Ikea cabinets in Mrs Ferragamo's laundry. Tony was good with his hands and the work was satisfying—and the undeclared, tax-free cash didn't hurt either. He and Carla even managed to get away to Daylesford for a long weekend, which was something they'd never done while Tony was working. By the time the redundancy money ran out, they'd almost paid off the mortgage.

Tony was feeling positive about the future the day Mrs Jackman asked him to clean her gutters. It was a cloudless day in February, the sun bright overhead. He'd completed three jobs in the morning and his wallet was fat with cash. Mrs Jackman was ninety-two. Everything in her house was old and broken. Tony should have known better than to use her ladder to climb up onto the roof, but she had caught him on his way home, and he was in a hurry—Carla had asked if they could have lunch together at the shopping centre that afternoon.

Mrs Jackman's tabby hissed ominously as Tony propped the ladder against the wall. He only made it to the second rung before the whole thing collapsed beneath him. When Tony heard the snap he couldn't be sure if it was the sound of the ladder breaking or his leg. He soon found out that it was both. Mrs Jackman called 000, and the ambulance arrived in less than ten minutes.

The doctors said it was a straightforward fracture. A crack at the top of his shinbone, just inside the knee joint. If he were younger they might consider operating, but at Tony's age a cast would do. Six weeks, they said, and he'd be right as rain. Worst-case scenario, he might need a few weeks of physio.

The first month went according to plan, but during the fifth week the foot sticking out the bottom of the cast had swelled to the size of a small watermelon. The pain was unbearable. When the emergency doctor sawed off the plaster, Tony winced at the sight of his leg—a foul-smelling log of maroon flesh.

The doctors couldn't explain it. At first they suspected a blood clot, but the ultrasound of Tony's blood vessels was normal. Unable to walk or drive, Tony had no option but to lie in bed and watch the telly. Over the next few months, in spite of multiple X-rays and CT scans that proved the fracture was healing, Tony's condition deteriorated. When he looked at his leg—fat and useless and propped up on a

mound of pillows—it looked like it belonged to someone else. Someone fat, ruddy, unhealthy. The unhealthiness was like a cancer, spreading from his one sick appendage to his entire body, until one day Tony didn't recognise the sad, bloated face in the mirror.

'You're depressed,' his GP declared, as if she had cracked a puzzle. Tony nodded. The GP gave him options, but Tony wasn't in the mood for making decisions. In his melancholic state, every road seemed like a dead end. Eventually, after many awkward consultations, he had agreed to a plan. He would start a low-dose antidepressant and try a few sessions of counselling.

The counsellor was like the GP, kind and well meaning. Sometimes Tony said he felt better just to spare himself the disappointment in her lovely eyes. But nothing helped. The medication made him feel weird, empty. He took ten tablets before chucking the entire box in the bin. He continued with the counselling because it felt good to speak to a pretty girl for half an hour once a month, but it was like a massage for the soul and, like any massage, its effects were not long-lasting. As soon as he walked out the door, his leg burned and throbbed just as badly as it had before.

When summer rolled around again, the heat made the pain worse, and when Tony wore shorts to the supermarket people gaped at his pink hairless leg. Rather than go out, he spent days drifting in and out of sleep on the couch. In

January the occupational therapist recommended that Tony use a walking stick to help with his balance. Carla picked up extra cleaning shifts at the nursing home to pay off the last of the mortgage. And then, on the anniversary of the accident, something in Tony snapped.

‘Did you know it’s been exactly one year since I fractured my knee?’ he said, chucking the newspaper across the table.

Carla, sensing a storm on the horizon, continued washing pots in the sink. In a way she was relieved. She’d been waiting months for this to happen.

‘A year today since I agreed to pull leaves from Mrs Jackman’s gutters.’ Tony got up and limped around the kitchen. ‘She never even paid me. Never even sent a card.’

Carla said nothing. She certainly wasn’t going to point out that Mrs Jackman couldn’t write after her stroke, or that Tony had never actually started the job, let alone finished it. She kept on with the washing-up.

‘Twelve months since that doctor in emergency said I’d be right as rain in six weeks. Right as rain? Right as rain? What does that even mean?’

Carla wiped her hands on her apron. She pulled two mugs down from the cupboard. ‘Cup of tea?’

‘You know what I reckon?’

Carla turned on the kettle, and the water began to bubble and hiss.

‘I reckon somebody fucked up.’

The kettle grew louder.

‘Who?’ Carla asked.

‘One of those teenage doctors at the hospital. They should have operated on me. They put the cast on too tight.’

Carla poured boiling water onto tea bags, watched the colourless liquid stain a dirty brown. Tony sat back down at the table and propped his leg up on a chair. There were three seats at the kitchen table nowadays. One for Tony, one for Carla and one for Tony’s leg.

‘This,’ he said pointing to his limb, red and shiny and smooth. ‘This is somebody’s fault.’

Tony got an appointment with his GP that afternoon. Carla drove him to the clinic. The doctor smiled sweetly at the couple, totally unprepared for trouble as they walked through her door.

‘I want you to refer me back to the hospital,’ Tony said, his voice belligerent, before he had even sat down.

‘Okay,’ the doctor said, surprised at his ferocity and not wanting to provoke him further. She started typing.

Tony was itching for a fight. ‘Don’t you want to know why?’

She stopped what she was doing and swivelled her chair to face him. ‘Tell me.’

‘Today’s the one-year anniversary of my accident.’

The GP nodded.

‘And I’m no better.’

The doctor wheeled her chair closer to Tony. She leaned in with a concerned face.

‘If anything, I’m worse,’ he said.

‘I know you have a lot of pain.’

‘Nothing you’ve ever done has helped me.’

The doctor winced, and Tony felt bad. She had only ever been gentle with him.

‘I’m on your side, Tony,’ the doctor said.

‘I know.’

‘So let’s write this letter.’

As the doctor typed, Tony studied Carla, sitting on a chair in the corner. She smiled encouragingly.

Weeks had passed while they waited for the hospital to make contact. Tony’s anger waxed and waned. Once or twice, pottering around in the shed, he had looked at his dad’s hunting rifle and thought about killing himself. He mentioned it to the counsellor, who told him that if he ever had those sort of thoughts again, he should call Lifeline immediately. She wrote the number in red pen on the back of one of her business cards.

Finally a letter arrived notifying Tony of his appointment date. Amazingly—maybe because his adrenaline levels were sky-high—the pain wasn’t bad the morning of his appointment. Tony considered cancelling, but then he saw

Carla, wearing a pretty dress and a hopeful face, and he knew he had to go through with it.

As expected, he and Carla spent two hours in outpatients, waiting to see the doctor, flicking through three-year-old copies of the *Women's Weekly*, looking at the people around them and guessing who would be called next. Every so often a doctor would walk briskly past the waiting area, and the patients—growing ever more wan and listless under the fluorescent lights—would follow them with earnest eyes. But the doctors were like workhorses with blinkers, brutally focused on the task ahead. They poked their heads through doors, called names in curt voices and panned unseeingly across the sea of faces. To be fair, the doctors looked tired too. Their hair was oily and limp and their shirts were soft and crumpled. Only one doctor, a lady, looked immaculate—her navy suit shiny and pressed, her blond hair pulled into a bun.

Tony didn't hear the doctor call his name. It was Carla who dug her nails into his thigh and told him to get up. By the time Tony had hobbled into the room, the surgeon—a tall, brown-skinned man with pointy shoes—was already at his desk, glowering at the computer.

'I'm not sure why you're here,' he said when Tony and Carla sat down.

'The GP should've written a letter,' Carla said and smiled.

The doctor pulled a piece of paper from a manila folder, presumably Tony's medical file. He read the letter and

leant back in the swivel chair, stretching its plastic spine to breaking point.

‘It should all be there. In the letter,’ Tony said.

‘This is a fracture clinic,’ the doctor replied, turning back to face his computer. ‘We deal with fractures.’

Tony could feel a cold burn, like ice on a wound, around his knee. ‘I *have* a fracture.’

‘You *had* a fracture,’ the doctor replied and pointed a long finger at the computer screen in front of him. ‘Your X-rays look great.’

Tony looked at the long white shadows on the black screen. They did look great—smooth and straight. He felt stupid. Like he used to feel at school when he answered a question only to have the teacher explain in front of the entire class why he was wrong.

‘But my husband has a lot of pain,’ Carla said.

Tony glared at her.

‘Then you should be at the pain clinic,’ the doctor said.

This struck Tony as the sort of simplistic explanation you might offer a small child. If you have pain, you go to the pain clinic. If you have problems with your poo, you go to the poo clinic.

‘Somebody fucked up,’ Tony said, glad to see Carla and the surgeon flinch. ‘You say you fixed me, but instead of feeling better, I feel worse. Terrible. *Suicidal*.’

The surgeon changed his tone then. He looked nervous,

and started using words like *unforeseeable* and *regrettable*. But it was too late. Tony's eyes found the lanyard around his neck.

'Deepak,' he said. 'What is that? Indian?'

But that was one step too far for the surgeon. He stopped grovelling. His momentarily pleading eyes became cold again.

'I'll write a letter to your GP. Explaining everything.'

Tony stood up. Carla handed him his stick. Tony slapped it away.

'I'll write a letter too,' he said under his breath as he limped from the room.

At the end of May, Deepak flew to the Sunshine Coast to meet Priya. Priya was twenty-eight and worked part-time as an ultrasonographer in Caloundra. She was born in Brisbane, but her father, like Deepak's parents, came from New Delhi. Deepak's mother had arranged a lunch by the beach so that they might *get to know each other better*.

There was nobody in the taxi queue at the airport in Maroochydore. Deepak threw his bag into the boot of the first cab.

'Where you headed?' the driver asked with a strong Australian accent.

'Noosa.'

They sped off. On the radio, a woman was interviewing

Bindi Irwin. Even though the DJ had just wished the daughter of the Crocodile Hunter a happy eighteenth birthday, Deepak couldn't help but picture a young blond girl in pigtails and khaki clothes. As they drove, he imagined what it must have been like growing up at Australia Zoo. He tried to picture his ten-year-old self riding the corrugated backs of crocodiles and play fighting with kangaroos.

Priya had reserved a table on the deck with a clear view of the ocean. When Deepak arrived she was already there, sipping a drink, waiting for him. She had her back turned, but the little of her that Deepak could see looked promising. Glossy hair. Pink toenails. A long, loose summer dress. He touched her lightly on the shoulder. Her skin was warm and soft.

'You found me,' she said, turning around. Apart from a large pimple on her chin that she had tried, unsuccessfully, to cover with make-up, she was stunning. 'But then again, I am the only brown-skinned woman in the restaurant.'

Deepak laughed. He sat down in the chair beside her. They stared at the people on the beach, kids playing in the water.

'What are you drinking?' he asked.

'A lychee martini,' Priya replied. She picked up the thin-stemmed glass, inspected the liquid in it. 'But what I really want is a beer.'

Deepak laughed again. The ice had been broken. They spoke of travel and books and movies. They bonded over their disappointment with Prague and their love of Leonardo DiCaprio's movie *Inception*. Deepak did an impression of his mother. Priya imitated her dad. They argued about who did the best Indian accent. They criticised the food. Deepak's burger was too small, Priya's barramundi overcooked. They drank. They laughed. They relaxed. The conversation turned to work, and to Priya's experiences with doctors while she was being trained at the hospital. That was when she mentioned Simone.

'Actually, you might know her,' Priya said. 'I'm not sure what hospital she's at now, but apparently she's some big shot in Melbourne.'

Deepak drank from his pint. 'I may have heard of her.'

'She was a junior consultant at Royal Brisbane while I was doing my placement.'

Deepak tried to picture Simone as a junior consultant—pandering to heads of department, ingratiating herself in the presence of scrub nurses—but he couldn't.

'She's a real piece of work, that woman.'

Deepak watched a seagull attack a chip beneath the table.

'This one time, I was doing an X-ray for her in theatre—a reduction of a hip that had gone terribly wrong—and she told me my breathing was too noisy.'

Deepak feigned a look of shock. He knew from personal

experience that when Simone was stressed, which was fortunately not often, she was vicious.

‘I had a cold.’

Deepak shook his head, trying to appear incredulous.

‘She’s a doctor. She’s supposed to be compassionate.’

Deepak wanted to explain to Priya that Simone was not a doctor in the traditional sense of the word. She was not a smiling GP, plump from the chocolates her patients had given her for Christmas. She was an orthopaedic surgeon—one of only a few women in a club full of men with God complexes—and her steely demeanour was not a choice but a matter of necessity. But he didn’t have the energy.

The waiter arrived with dessert menus. Priya looked at Deepak expectantly. Deepak pointed to his watch and said that he really should get going. He asked for the bill before tossing another chip to the hungry seagull between his feet.

When Deepak turned on his phone in Melbourne, he was pleased to see a message from Simone: *Come over*.

He went straight from the airport to her apartment, in a taxi. He found her in a silk robe, curled like a cat on her leather lounge. He hung his jacket on the hatstand and sat down beside her.

‘How was it?’

She always said this after his meetings, always said *it* instead

of *she*. Deepak hoped this spoke to some unacknowledged, deep-seated jealousy.

‘Don’t be like that,’ he said and slipped his hand into the open neck of her robe.

Simone pulled away and sat up straight. ‘There have been more. Posters, I mean. Everybody’s talking about them.’

Deepak felt his heart skip a beat.

‘I thought your apology would help, but it’s only made things worse.’

He thought of the letter, its final wording edited by Simone and the complaints officer. *I’m sorry this has happened to you. It was an unfortunate series of regrettable but unforeseeable events.* It was the language of government agencies and eviction notices and redundancy letters. Deepak could see how it might inflame someone.

‘Is that why you asked me to come over?’

‘Yes.’ Simone wrapped her robe tight around her chest. ‘I’ve spoken to others in the department, and we all agree that it would be best for you to take some time off. Until this thing blows over.’

Deepak stood up. He put on his jacket. It didn’t matter that he was in a suit and Simone was in a robe—he knew who held the power.

‘Well, if you all agree.’

Even now he wished that she would grab his arm, implore him to stay—something. He would forgive her everything.

But Simone didn't even get up off the couch. She remained seated, statuesque.

Deepak had a cousin, Jignesh, who was a lawyer. They met for a coffee in the Royal Arcade building.

'Can you prove this Tony guy put up the posters?' Jignesh asked. 'Are there CCTV cameras in the car park?'

Deepak scooped the foam off his cappuccino. 'I don't know. I don't think so.'

'So all you've got is a hunch?'

'Pretty much.'

Deepak looked at the sheen on his cousin's tailor-made suit. He felt self-conscious and underdressed. He'd only been off work for two days but had already resorted to ripped jeans and a footy jumper.

'My best advice is to ignore it. These things blow over.'

'That's what my boss said.'

'Well, your boss is a smart man.' Jignesh looked at his watch, jiggling his leg beneath the table.

'I'll pay for the coffees,' Deepak said. 'You should go.'

'Thanks, man.' Jignesh looked relieved as he stood up. He slapped Deepak's shoulder. 'Remember when we were kids and we sculled shots of Sambuca in your garage?'

'Yeah.'

'I miss those days.'

'Me too.'

Deepak watched his cousin's black head disappear into the lunchtime throng. He paid the waitress—who had flirted outrageously with Jignesh but refused to make eye contact with Deepak—and wandered through Bourke Street Mall. On the tram, he scoured the unnervingly familiar faces of the passengers. An old woman in a pink scarf who might have had a hip replacement. A pretty redhead Deepak might have admitted, once, for septic arthritis. A tradie with a tribal tattoo whose leg Deepak might have plastered. Everybody was a suspect.

Weeks passed with no word from Simone. Deepak watched his annual leave dwindle on his pay slip. He was nothing without work. He was not sporty. He was not creative. He had few friends—most of whom were doctors and worked just as hard as he did. At first Deepak devoted entire days to Facebook, but after a while the photos of other people's holidays made him sick. He moved on to watching back-to-back episodes of *Making a Murderer* and searching the internet for the porn star who most resembled Simone.

For once he was pleased when his sister, Monisha, phoned. It was ten pm and he was in bed with his laptop.

'What's up?' he asked.

He waited for her to launch into some tirade about their parents—the only reason, these days, that Monisha seemed to call him. He wondered what it would be this time—their

mother criticising her cooking, their father pressuring her to have another son. But it was neither.

‘It’s Mum,’ Monisha said, her voice faltering. ‘She’s in hospital.’

When Deepak arrived, around midnight, his mother was sitting in bed, smiling. ‘Such a terrible, terrible pain, Deepak.’

Deepak picked up the observation chart. She was afebrile. Her ECG was okay. Her blood pressure and heart rate were within normal limits. She certainly looked well, with bright eyes and waves of glossy hair. If anything, it was Deepak’s father who seemed under the weather, slumped in the corner, his skin tinted grey by the fluorescent lights.

‘What happened?’

‘Your mother was doing too much. As usual.’

‘I wouldn’t have to do so much, if your father would just help out a little.’ Much to Deepak’s surprise, his mother looked delighted with her situation.

‘Vacuuming? At nine o’clock at night?’ his father persisted.

‘Monisha was going to bring the children in the morning.’

‘The children would only mess it up again.’

‘I can’t sleep in a dirty house.’

‘I told you to hire someone.’

‘I don’t want some stranger rifling through my underwear. I just want my lazy husband to get off his bottom.’

‘I’m too old.’

‘And what do you think I am?’ Deepak’s mother said, pointing down at her gowned belly and stockinged feet. ‘A spring chicken?’

Deepak couldn’t take it anymore and held up his hands.

‘Please. Mum. Dad. Just tell me what happened.’

His mother launched into a needlessly detailed account of her day. She had first noticed the chest pain while preparing his father’s dinner. The pain had grown worse when her sister from London called to brag about her renovations. ‘But the final straw,’ she said, waving her finger in the air, ‘was when Mr Peterson told me he had seen a poster of you at the hospital.’

Deepak felt his cheeks burn. Luckily his parents’ elderly neighbour, Mr Peterson, was not a reliable witness.

‘Imagine! A poster saying my son is a bad doctor. My son! A bad doctor!’ She clutched her chest.

Deepak’s father jumped in. ‘That man has always been jealous of us. He only has one daughter and she never visits him.’

‘I think he might be getting dementia,’ his mother said.

Deepak sighed.

‘Anyway, I blame Mr Peterson for this chest pain.’ Deepak’s mother massaged her breastbone. ‘If I die, you can sue him.’

‘You’re not dying, Mum.’

‘I certainly hope not. I told the doctor I’m not ready.’ She

stared at Deepak with defiant eyes. 'I told him I had to stay alive to see my only son have children.'

It was three am by the time Deepak left the hospital. The blood results had come back: his mother had *not* had a heart attack. The doctors said her chest pains were probably the result of acid reflux, or muscle strain, or stress. Exhausted, he sat in the front seat of his Porsche, revving the engine and staring at the bright red emergency sign.

Deepak didn't see the boy at first. It was only when his eyes adjusted to the dark that he noticed the teenager, hoodie pulled low over his eyes, hiding behind a pillar while a heavily pregnant woman and her partner made their way to their car. When the coast was clear, the boy sprinted towards the hospital's emergency entrance and rummaged in his pockets, pulling out a piece of paper and sticking it to the sliding glass door. Deepak gripped the steering wheel. He watched the boy run back to the pillar again and then scamper towards a Holden Commodore. Deepak was only metres away—he could see the shadow of another person in the driver's seat.

He started the Porsche and rolled forwards, straight towards the Holden, blocking the way so it couldn't pull out, and then killed the engine. The driver hadn't even had time to put the key in the ignition. Deepak stepped out of the car, his rubber shoes squelching on the wet concrete. He was determined to resolve this matter once and for all. He felt the

flare of the Holden's high beams on his face and waited for something to happen.

Tony didn't recognise the man in the beanie who emerged from the sleek black car. At first he thought it might be an undercover policeman, but Tony had never heard of a policeman driving a Porsche. Luca was fidgeting on the seat beside him. Tony felt an ache in his chest and took a few sprays from his Anginine pump.

'Fuck!' said Luca.

'Relax.'

'It's him.'

'Who?' Tony peered through the windscreen at the man, who was shielding his face with his hand.

'The doctor.'

Tony examined the man again. Luca was right. He looked different in normal clothes—Tony had only seen him in a suit—but there was no mistaking the expensive watch and the cocky way he stood, as if the world owed him something.

Luca laughed. He was enjoying this. Tony didn't like to admit it, but there was something not quite right about his grandson. Every chance he got, Tony warned the boy off drugs. He suspected a hit of ice would be just the thing to unhinge him.

'Look at his car,' Luca said, and again Tony did as he was

told. Anything was better than looking at Luca, smiling and salivating like a predator on the seat beside him.

‘Probably bought it with the money he made fucking you over.’

Tony nodded, but as he watched the doctor blinking in the headlights—reduced to a human being by the beanie and the tracksuit pants—he felt the rage he had maintained for so long desert him. Tony reached for the handle of the car door. He was ready to make peace with the guy. But he was too slow. Luca jumped out first. Tony saw his grandson’s hooded face through the windshield. He felt his heart pound against his ribs. He watched the doctor stab the air with his finger and Luca’s soft lips curl into a snarl. He heard himself gasp and a voice, very much like his own but different somehow, mutter *No, no, no, no, no!*

Tony had given Luca the knife as a gift one weekend at Lake Eildon. He had shown Luca how to use it on the sequined skin of a rainbow trout—shown him how to slash the fish’s belly in one quick move before scooping its guts out with his bare hands. There was no mistaking it—the bright green handle, the curved blade flashing white in the glare of the Holden’s headlights. The surgeon—a man familiar with knives and scalpels—saw it too. He backed away.

It was fast and it was gruesome—a couple of quick thrusts. Tony watched the body writhing on the ground as blood hosed, like black oil, across the concrete.

Within seconds Luca was back in the car, hot and breathless.

'You idiot,' Tony said, with a calm that surprised him. 'Give it to me.'

Luca handed over the knife, red and wet and sticky.

'Go,' Tony said.

But Luca didn't move. He was like a child, waiting for his nonno to punish him.

'Go!'

Luca ran away from the car, hesitantly at first, and then at great speed, his hair flapping wildly.

Tony got out of the Holden. He looked down at the doctor, heaving in a pool of blood at his feet. He looked straight ahead at the flickering red emergency sign. He looked up at the dome of sky, at the stars glinting overhead. He crossed himself. *In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost...*