

## *He cannot dream a river*

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Finch is transfixed by the black rivers of the veins of Molly Finch. He rubs gently her cold, paper dry wrists. Finch frets that he might over-press, rip an artery and have to watch the black rivers of Molly spill across the white of her hands and the nurse-bullied sheets.

Dread is his companion. The inevitable squats inside him and shares watch over Molly. Finch needs an ally, a vigilante perhaps, who might chase away his fears and caution the nurse who should cheer him. The nurse is abrupt and has convinced Finch that the hands of old men are dangerous. He is intimidated by the hands of the nurse, which are blue-veined and driven by a confidence that has abandoned him.

But he will not surrender. Finch leans forward in his chair and slides the palm of his right hand under Molly's left hand. The sheet against the back of his hand is too taut for a real bed and he wonders if he is crafting another of his dreams. Perhaps he invented the nurse, or extended a real nurse to his purpose, because so many stories require a villain. He fits his left hand around Molly's claw. He wonders how birds die and whether their mates endure this reaching, arthritic love. And whether they close their eyes while they suffer, because life is warmer behind the orange curtain of closed lids.

Finch creates a sky, pink and orange-stained. Beneath the sky he hallucinates a town, one of those worn towns of the Wimmera, with houses and shops dressed in a ruse of washed-out weatherboards and imagination, a backdrop for a gunslinger.

Finch populates his setting with a man who walks into the camera from the far end of the street. Finch turns up the sound, vigilante music, with a beat vengeful and certain, certain enough to make a nurse pause, if she heard it. The gunman is dressed in black, his hands hover over silver pistols snug in the black holsters slung on his hips. Low, even-spaced footsteps are his trademark, for energy must be rationed, even in dreams, and low, even-spaced footsteps allow time for contemplation and might send a nurse, even an abrupt one, into a flurry of remorse and apology.

Finch knows she hasn't got time for remorse. But conjuring an avenger soothes him, and provides a distraction to the frustration he knows will consume him if he thinks too long about the nurse. He makes the gunslinger retreat, watches him step backwards, each footstep low and even. Slim-hipped, his shoulders forward-jutting in disappointment, hands poised

and fingers agape, thrilling for cold metal, Finch's gunman is a mirage flickering at the far end of the street.

The old man wonders how long he can hold him.

Finch turns his head, swivels it slowly right and left on a neck free from the restraint of clarity. The gunslinger has served Finch's purpose. There is no sign of the nurse.

Finch is free to sculpt a glass casserole dish and exhibit it behind the window of a shop that a moment before reflected his vigilante. He charms the beating heart of Molly Finch and places it inside the casserole dish. He secures the lid with a soft clash of glass. Blowflies are sprawled on their backs on the dusty, once-white surface of the display area. The bellies of the flies are light-faded and yellow-soft, their legs upthrust in the still air. He leaves the flies. He will not be diverted.

In the shadows of the shop sits Molly, the fingers of her right hand taloned over the cave in her chest. Roused by the shrilling whir of a siren, she struggles out of her armchair. She locks the front door of her shop, pushes against it to make sure the catch has caught, pockets her key in the folds of her yellowed apron and picks her way to the Federation Hotel. As she walks, the siren fades to a purr, then disappears.

Finch's street shimmers in the leftover-from-yesterday warmth of a Wimmera morning. Finch summons shops with display windows and open doors. Through one door is a butcher, grinning through the stink of meat. For verisimilitude, Finch adds a concrete floor and sawdust. Next door is a paper shop, where his love might buy a newspaper from a boy whose perfect fingers thrill the paper skin of Molly Finch when he picks the coins from her palm.

In recent editions of his dream, Finch has emptied the bar of the hotel of everyone but himself. He stands with his back to the counter, fiddling with dials and switches exposed in an open cupboard. He turns as Molly enters the bar. Finch takes a small glass from a rack above his head and holds it against the light. He nods and expertly pulls the silver head of the only tap. The liquid in the glass glows amber, with a foaming white head.

Molly fills her mouth, and swallows. With a finger she wipes the froth from her mustard and black moustache.

'Any takers, Molly?' he says.

'No,' she says. And then says, because Finch has tuned every dream so that she finds a way of seeing him through the snarled strings of herself, 'Finch. Yes. You again. No. No-one wants that old thing.'

She shakes her head and Finch imagines that something untangles. The smudge behind her eyes clears and she smiles at him, remembering. Finch nods, eager. Yes, she remembers. Finch, her husband, the man she should love, but can't anymore, not even in the scripted possibility of his dream. Molly shakes her head again and the tangled ribbons resettlement themselves. Her eyes fade.

Desperate, Finch flicks his eyes away from her face. He stares into the black hole in her chest. He takes a small step to the side, his head angling for a better view. In the last version of his dream he thought he had seen something moving in there.

Molly takes another mouthful of beer and lets him look. Even in her confusion, she knows this is all he has. She moves slightly, opening herself to him. She has nothing to hide. She drains the glass and places it on the towel that Finch has positioned on the bar. Through the shallow threads of the towel Finch notes the scars of old cigarette burns, black and many in the polished oak. Practice has taught him that detail can prop a dream.

'See you tomorrow,' Finch calls after her. He turns back to the cupboard within which are the switches and dials that control his dream. He resets the siren and adjusts a close-numbered dial, the one that controls recognition. String and ribbons are pathetic metaphors, Finch knows he must endure his way to the end. Hope has consumed too many of his stories. Nothing can untangle Molly Finch.

Finch catches himself, mid-snort and hawking for breath, bent forward in his chair, his hands moist and hot around Molly's tiny, talon-cursed hand. He flicks his eyes right then left. No nurses.

Finch releases Molly's hand.

'Platypus, that'll be me, a wrinkled old platypus.' That's what she'd told him.

He'd go first, they'd agreed. And she would hang on, because she was capable of bliss, and solitude.

'And when I go, I'll die on my own, in clear water. In a river,' Molly had said. 'Bright it'll be. Despite the water I'll feel the sun on my back. I'll know the light is there and I'll be grubbing at something in the mud. My platypus hands will fumble, then grasp the miracle. I'll die happy.'

Finch touches her hand. 'Is it warm in there? Is there light enough?'

In the corridor, a nurse clatters past, pushing something that is metal and clack. Finch doesn't turn around. He thinks of the light filtering through the water to the platypus. He lifts Molly Finch upwards, into the sun.

Finch has finessed his art to the point where tedium is removed. He pushes the sun to the west of town, to the end of the street from where, when needed, the gunslinger will manifest. Finch steps out of his hotel and looks left and right along the empty street. He locks the door behind him. His day nest is secure.

Finch wanders the street. He studies the blank-windowed houses and the empty shops. His polished black shoes leave indentations in the grey dust of his dream. There is no wind, again. Finch takes a deep breath and pulls the dry air of his hallucination inside him. He holds it prisoner until the air frets in his chest. He releases his breath in a slow, even exhalation. Ahead, the street runs straight to Flannery's Swamp. The swamp is fixed in place by a fence and a gate that he installed many dreams ago to keep the children out of the water. But there are no children in his dreams. There is no water. A swamp needs a river, one that spills. He has tried, but rivers are a genre beyond him. In another dream he has imagined a sign:  
*Platypus in bliss. Do not disturb.*

Finch can just make out the silhouette of the one tree in his swamp, a ghost gum. He walks on, positioning his shoes so that his footsteps replicate exactly the route he has walked so many times, the path past Molly's shop.

Under the white fluorescent light of the window display, Molly's heart beats slow and deep. Finch wonders if the colour of her heart has altered. Perhaps it is the changing light, his waning dream struggling against the flickering persistence of the fluorescent tube. The glass of the window is warm against his forehead. Yes. The heart has faded. The rhythm is still there, but the colour has changed. The surface of the heart most exposed to the fluorescent tube appears to be white. Molly's heart is grey along the sides and a soft pink nearer the bottom, as though the one-fierce blood of Molly Finch has settled for the night.

Finch arrives at his swamp and pushes the gate open. It creaks. He draws a small notepad from a pocket of his trousers and a pen from the pocket of his shirt. In the fading light he writes the word *oil* in blue ink on white paper. He climbs the solitary tree and settles in for the night. Asleep in the lowest fork he dreams within a dream of the bedroom window of Molly Finch. The drawn blind of her window beats white, then grey, then pink. He presses his lips to the pale flesh of the ghost gum.

Finch hears a pandemonium of galahs and sees the sky pink and grey and white thrilling.

He shakes himself awake. A trolley, that's all, the complaint of a nurse-worried trolley in the corridor. Finch has suffered a long apprenticeship. His dreams have improved with practice, and on his good days, when the nurses don't distract him from his mission, he convinces himself that everything is a rehearsal, that everything has a purpose and should be recorded in blue ink on white paper, ready for his final dream. A trolley clacking along a linoleum passage is a mayhem of galahs.

For everything is a prop. Everything Finch has ever touched, heard, seen, smelled or tasted has the potential to load a dream. Molly's frail and twisted hands, for instance. Her platypus hands have featured in so much of his labour. He has failed. He must abandon the platypus. He cannot dream a river.

Finch ponders Molly, and the whip-quick certainty of what she was.

Molly arrives five minutes after he has quietened the siren. Each rendition, the journey from her shop to the hotel takes a little longer. Her once black hair has faded to a matted grey. Her face is white, a bloodless white the colour of paper. While Molly drinks the beer he has poured, Finch's blunt fingers caress the pen in the pocket of his shirt. He imagines himself, stout, red-faced and leaning across the bar and writing the words *I love you* in vivid blue on the wrinkled parchment of the forehead of Molly Finch. But he holds himself back, because that scene is not in the script.

There is something inside the hole in Molly's chest. He tilts his head to one side and she sways, opening herself to his gaze. Dark and too thick for a vein, something is stretched across the cavity. Behind it, there might be another. He crouches and searches for the torch he keeps under the counter. He flips open and slams shut in frustration the cupboards that line the inside of the bar. This is his dream, his hotel, where is his torch?

When he stands, thumb cocked on the switch of the torch, the glass is empty on the counter and she is leaving, her arm shaking as she struggles with the handle that opens the door. He lifts the flap on the bar, hurries over and pulls the door open. Molly shuffles through. She is not wearing any shoes. Her almost transparent feet slide over the floor in stuttering steps. Her toenails have faded to a dull grey. Finch falls to his knees and stares at Molly's black-veined feet. He reaches for her, wanting to rub the thick strands in her swollen ankles and feet back to the fine-veined beauty he remembers. But she keeps walking. As she passes he inhales the smell of wet, warm grass, mud and bark, melaleuca. Finch remains on his knees, confounded. Molly carries the smell of swamp.

Exhausted, he nods, sleep grips him. A nurse, the abrupt one, steps into the room. She notes the droop in his shoulders and retreats, back stepping, low and even.

As Finch prays in front of the display in the window of Molly's shop, he notes that the colour of her heart has changed again. There is no trace of the washed-out pink from his last dream. The white patch on top of her heart seems to have spread, and the grey has darkened to flecks of black with rich and varied browns interspersed with sudden sheens of blue and green. He kneels, mesmerised by the shifting colours of Molly's heart.

When he reaches the swamp, Finch oils the gate and swings it open and shut. He curses when he realises he has destroyed a sound, one of the things that anchors him to his dream. He climbs his tree.

He is jolted from his sleep by the jubilation of a kookaburra promising sweet murder to the lizards, snakes and frogs of the fecund, warm-scented swamp he has dreamt.

There is no kookaburra, just the sound of a mobile phone, unattended and raucous in a room across the corridor. Finch is still half in his dream and watches himself climb down from the ghost gum and wander to the gate that guards his swamp. He wonders what grade of loneliness would make a man long for the scraping of the hinge of a gate.

This time he has the torch ready. When Molly raises the glass to her lips he shines the beam into the black hole that once contained her heart. There are wires, or strings, or perhaps ribbons, stretched and tangled in the hollow of her chest. By the torch's gleam he thinks he sees two pairs of eyes watching him. They blink and then there is nothing, just the confused insides of Molly Finch. He switches off the torch.

Her hand holding the glass is almost transparent. He sees new veins, dark and briar-tangled through the tissue-thin fabric of her hands and the thin wrists that extend from her blouse. Finch reaches across the bar and takes the empty glass from her hand. Molly's fingernails are the silver of moonlight on the plains.

Molly turns towards the door. Finch studies her feet. Her veins are even more prominent than in his last dream. The nails of her toes have turned silver. Against the light from the only window in the bar, Molly Finch is translucent. Inside, she is a maze of veins and knots, odd-curved ribs, and backbone.

Finch stares after what is left of his love as Molly meanders down the street. She passes her shop and keeps walking. He follows her, standing for long pauses and then scurrying forward a few steps at a time. When he reaches her shop he looks through the window into the display. Molly Finch's heart is deflated, the colours washed back to match the upturned corpses of the blowflies inside the window.

In the distance he can see Molly, floating through the heat shimmer to the swamp.

A nurse, the abrupt one, enters the room and clasps Finch by the shoulder. She pushes, gently rocking him. Surprised, she feels him push into her hand. His back straightens, his shoulders open, an exultant sigh puffs his lips. Finch knew his accomplice would come, unsummoned, all the guns and black of him. Finch issues his final instructions. The gunslinger closes the gate behind Finch and stands in the pose the old man has choreographed, facing outwards, hands poised, fingers splayed and willing. The inevitable squats inside him. He is doomed, but Finch's vigilante will stare down all comers until he too is ensnared in the tangled ribbons.

In the pink and orange-stained dawn there is no swamp. There is no ghost gum, just a silver gum, newly dreamed and furnished with two zebra finches, urgent in the green and silver foliage.