

The Bathers

I wait for her out the front of the corner store. It's forty degrees and I can feel the heat from the pavement burning my feet even though I'm wearing my new sandals. Tiny, scarlet ants crawl up and over the leather ridges, and every now and then I pour a splash of water from my plastic bottle – watch them float red-belly-up on a tide of crusty leaves and cigarette butts. But the puddle dries up fast and they come crawling back.

She's late, like always, and when she comes I know she won't be sorry. Alli doesn't keep track of time like the rest of us, doesn't even own a watch, she says. Through the half-open screen door I can hear the radio and the sound of Peggy singing. No one goes to this corner store anymore, not since Mack died and Peggy took over the register. Mum says it's nothing personal – just that she knows Mrs. Mason from the church and, really, if you cut through the schoolyard, it's just as close. But even on the days Mrs. Mason's store is closed she still doesn't go to Peggy's.

I feel around in my pockets for some coins: a smooth dollar and two twenty cents. I push open the screen door and head inside. It's cooler there, even though Peggy doesn't have aircon – just an old fan in the corner, carving the thick, yellow air like peel from an orange.

'You good girl?' Peggy says.

'Yeah, alright.'

'Got some more of those clouds you like.'

She means those red, lumpy lollies – as kids we always called them 'flesh'. I fill up a paper bag with a few, along with some coke bottles, strawberry delights. I don't really have a sweet tooth anymore, but Alli does.

'Your friend coming today?' says Peggy.

'Should be.'

'You say hello to her from me.'

Peggy used to live out in the camps with Alli, but when she married Mack she moved in town. Now the mob doesn't go here either, too far out for them. That's why we meet here, Alli and I.

When I get back out the front she's halfway down the street, her feet bare on the hot bitumen. I asked her once how she does it. We were sitting near the creek and she lifted up her foot to show me: black on top, white on the bottom.

'Wanna touch it?' she said.

'No way.'

She'd shrugged and lowered her foot to the ground. Sometimes, I still wonder what it would have felt like.

She's wearing soccer shorts and a grey Bonds singlet today. Her hair is out for once, longer than I thought. I run my hands through my cropped, blonde hair – mum lost it when I cut it all off, but Alli said it looked neat.

'Did you bring a towel?' I say.

'Nah, forgot.'

'Good one.'

I follow Alli down the side of the store and over the fence. She reckons these paddocks used to belong to her great grandpa, back when the town was just beginning, but the McKendricks have been here ever since I moved on. The fence is new though, they put it up last summer, got a guard dog and everything – a flat-faced terrier named Benny. We move quietly through the long, grey grass, the dry blades tickling our bare legs. When I'm alone I worry about snakes, but not with Alli. She can spot them a mile off. I remember once she grabbed me right before I stepped on the belly of a fat brown snake. Later I told the girls at school, spread my arms out to show the size of it, but they just shrugged, said 'Why do you hang out with her?'

'I don't really,' I said.

'Yeah right.'

Since the summer break all the girls at school seemed to talk about were boys or clothes or some party on the weekend. They'd sit in the schoolyard with their legs stretched out in the sun, making plans for buying cars, getting jobs, moving to the city. Sometimes Alli talked about getting out too – about the old Ute she'll nick from her dad, the money in the jam jar under the sink, but the difference is, I believe her. Some days I can even picture myself in the passenger seat beside her, the music turned up loud. Dust flying.

We find the track down to the creek – a small opening in the bush marked off with an old sneaker. People say it belonged to the kid who drowned here last summer. This small, white thing. Laces still tied up.

Before I met Alli I used to go to the local pool – that’s where the other girls went when it got hot like this. They’d gather in the locker rooms, giggling as they swapped one-pieces for bikinis, hoping to catch the eye of a lifesaver or one of the older boys from school. But Alli can’t go there. Danny at the counter’s got a knack for picking out kids like her, even the light-skinned ones. Says he can sense them with his eyes closed. The girls laugh when he tells them this, a captive audience, counting out coins for gum and ice-blocks from the kiosk. Apparently last year they built another pool out in the camps, but Alli and the others still come into town. That’s how we first met. I was waiting outside for the girls from school when I saw her leaning against the pool fence with a few of the other kids from out of town. She was mouthing off, talking loud, saying she didn’t want to go to the bloody pool anyway, she’d go to the creek. Her black hair was pulled tight off her face and her skin shone like gold. ‘What creek?’ I said, stepping out from under the shade. She looked me up and down real hard, then shrugged. ‘Come if you want.’

The first time we went it was cloudy and she was so late I thought she wasn’t going to show. Peggy watched me from the window as I waited, my legs tingling with nerves and itchy bites. It had been hot and wet that summer and the mozzies were everywhere – my legs spotty and scratched up. Mum always said they liked my blood.

Those first weekends it was easy coming up with excuses to get away – I’d say I was going to Debbie’s or over to the local library – but after the protests mum got funny about that kind of stuff. She started going to weekly meetings at the town hall, having tea with other wives and mothers: good women with good values, she

said. The last couple of months they'd been making a big deal about cleaning up the town – putting up signs in the yard and everything. Alli told me how the big white jeeps rolled in. The way the women's heels sunk into the earth. It was in the paper and everything, though, when I showed mum she said she didn't know anything about it.

As we walk along the path, we scan the bush for twigs. 'Flicka-sticka' she calls it, the kids play it out in the camps. I find a good one and dip the tip of my stick beneath its arched back, launch it high into the air. It hits the leaves of an overhanging gum and falls flat to the ground.

'Shit one,' she says.

'Shut it.'

She walks ahead of me, her feet leaving perfect prints in the dirt. For a moment I want to unstrap my sandals, send them sailing into the quiet bush. But then I think about the ants and my mother and the sharp rocks and stones underfoot and I keep walking.

She stops a little ahead of me, looks back to make sure I'm watching, then flicks a stick up so high that birds go flying.

As we get closer to the creek the path narrows. Trees hang low overhead – the dry fingers of gum trees trailing across our skin as we pass. I remember one time Alli got a tick from walking through the scrub – felt her skin go hot, legs heavy. She knew right away. Lying on a rock, she made me search her body, lay still as I peered beneath the thin canopy of hair on her arms, scanned the dark, flat plains of her stomach. I found it, tucked away in the shade of her neck. She lifted her hair and I picked it out with my fingernails, careful not to leave the head. She let me walk her

home that day, out past the station and down the highway for what seemed like forever. By the time we arrived the sun was getting low. A group of boys kicked a soccer ball in the dust. Three women sat on mats, their voices growing quiet as I went by. We hung around for a while, Alli pointing out the other kids as they rode by on rusty bikes, showing me the school hall, the small, concrete pool. Fat, brown leaves sailed across its murky surface – a white chain tied around the gate. When it got dark, we went back to Alli's and her dad drove me home. We squeezed in to the front of his old Ute, the leather seats still warm from the heat of the day. As we searched for our seatbelts between the creases of the seat, our fingers found one another, twined themselves together among the gum wrappers and stale chip crumbs. We stayed like that, all the way back, our fingers circling and the Ute winding its way into the centre of town.

When I got home all the lights were on and mum was waiting in the kitchen. She didn't thank Alli's dad at the door. I was grounded for two weeks and the next day at school Alli called my mum a snobby bitch and after that I didn't see her for a while.

When we get to the wattle bush we turn off. I always remember that part. *Wilyurwur* she'd called them, as she picked one off the branch and handed it to me. I've still got it somewhere, the leaves dried up but the flowers still yellow and bright. I mouth the word to myself now, feel it warm and sweet on my tongue. All around the cicadas are singing and Alli whistles a song I haven't heard before.

We make it through the clearing and the creek lies before us, brown-blue and beautiful. It's dry banks slope like shoulders, surface marked with the shadowy handprints of trees. Light and dark. We take out our towels and spread ourselves

across the smooth backs of rocks. I take the paper bag from my pocket and pass it to Alli. She peers inside.

‘Clouds,’ she says. ‘My favourite.’

Sitting on the rock, I watch her: knees tucked up, chewing slowly. Small sugar crystals stick to her fingers and for a moment I want to take each finger and lick them clean off, but she beats me to it – her quick, pink tongue flicking in and out like a goanna. She finishes the last of the sweets and tosses the bag to the ground. Across the riverbank, little red ants begin make their way towards the sugary cave and I wonder if they’ve followed us here.

‘I gotta pee,’ Alli says, getting up, half-lifting her shirt.

‘Not in the creek,’ I say.

‘Why not?’

‘It’s gross.’

She rolls her eyes. ‘Ya bloody princess.’

She heads back into the bush leaving me alone by the creek. Water brushes over stones and somewhere in the distance a magpie calls. Looking up at the sky I think about the difference between clouds and flesh, sky and skin – the sweet, salty taste of her breath, her lips.

‘Can I swim now?’ she says, coming back through the clearing, though she’s already rolling down her soccer shorts, peeling the sweaty singlet over her head. She leaves them in a little heap in the sun. The first time we came here I expected her to jump right in, but the creek makes her slow, cautious. She walks to the water’s edge, arms out for balance, her skin smooth as the stones beneath her feet. I wonder if she even feels them. Stepping into the water, she lets the creek’s cool hands run across her feet, her thighs, then up and up, over her hips and up again until its chest-high, just

covering her dark nipples. She lowers herself into its arms, disappearing for a moment, then coming up for air.

‘Well don’t just sit there,’ she says, eyes like fire.

I take a breath, pull my cotton dress over my head, and step into the light.