

All there is

If grief can be said to have a corner, then he thought they'd turned it. Thought the days filled with Linda's keening or, worse, silence and inertia, had passed. (Days during which, at times, he wanted to shake her and shout, You're not the only one hurting, you know!) Thought the nights he woke to find her in Kyle's bed were over. And he has good reason to believe this; she's begun to eat more, talk more and, although he can't be sure, he's almost certain that yesterday he heard her laughing on the phone. So, when he comes home to find her sitting on the back step in the crepuscular light, his instinct is to tiptoe away. It would be easy enough. Send her a text from the car to say he's working late, then drive to the pub around the corner. But he doesn't.

He sinks down on the step beside her. The back yard needs attention; the grass is ragged, the path needs spraying, and there is Kyle's basketball ring, which he makes a mental note to take down.

'What is it?' he asks.

'I didn't know what it was,' she says without preamble, 'so I opened it. Started reading it.'

'Reading what?'

'It's in the desk drawer.'

The desk drawer is where they keep important documents, along with other things, like photos they've never got around to putting in albums, reading glasses he's been meaning to fix, artwork Kyle did in primary school that Linda can't or won't throw out.

The letter is lying on top, in a registered envelope. He reads it twice, then plants his hands on either side of the desk to steady himself, takes five deliberate breaths before putting it back.

When he goes outside again, she says, 'Don't tell me. I'm not ready', as if he were armed with the letter. As if it were a grenade.

The morning he first lays eyes on Mia is blustery; branches heave, empty bins blow over, pedestrians totter against the wind. His heart heaves as well when he sees her step from her house onto the footpath, a young woman in jeans and a puffer jacket, wrapping a woollen scarf around her neck.

He climbs out of the car and follows her, surprised by how quickly she walks, her scarf flapping in her wake. The wind is icy, erratic, the type that used to give Kyle earache when he was young. He'd forgotten all about Kyle's earaches, the way he'd burrow down between them, whimpering, Make it go away. How powerless they'd felt then - and later, of course.

She makes two turns before reaching the train station. While she waits, she paces along the platform, her phone pressed to her ear. When she swings onto the train, still on her phone, he gets into the same carriage and goes to sit at the opposite end. She doesn't interrupt her conversation. As she talks, she stares out the window, although whether she's looking at the scenery or her own reflection, he can't tell. She isn't a pretty girl. She has short fox-coloured hair that might or might not be natural, and a rather brutal fringe, yet he can't take his eyes off her.

He continues to shadow her right up until she enters the university gates, the same gates that Kyle passed through only two years earlier, a coincidence that so discombobulates him he stops dead in everyone's way, until he hears someone say, Excuse me, mate.

In all the times he follows her, she never once looks back over her shoulder. Nonetheless, he's careful; he wears nondescript clothes and keeps a reasonable distance between them, even if it means losing sight of her (which he does more than once). He discovers that she's studying psychology, likes foreign films, and that on Tuesdays she frequents a bar in Faraday Street, where she meets up with a group of friends and orders espresso martinis. On one such evening, she drinks enough of them for him to feel so disgusted he leaves the bar, his own glass still half-full. As he drives home, he asks himself what the hell he's been thinking, trailing after her when he could have been at work or at home. *Should* have been. And no answer comes to him. Not one that makes any sense, anyway.

In the semester break she begins working at Tully's, a café/winebar in Lygon Street, a noisy, two-storey establishment beside a laneway, all retro fitted – distressed wooden walls, mismatching furniture and crockery, framed vintage posters. He only has to poke his head in the door to realise how conspicuous he'd seem in that setting, where almost everyone is either female and/or under thirty. He scans the room and spies Mia, her back turned, sorting cutlery at a nearby table. She looks thinner in her black skirt and top. There are tattoos on the back of her pale legs that he can't decipher. He catches sight of himself as well, in the café's opaque mirror, as he hurries back out, and is struck by how anxious he looks, like someone who's lost something – their keys or wallet.

A few shops further down, there's an antique store with an odd assortment of wares in its front window – a mannequin wearing a batman suit, an old boules set and sewing machine. But what stops him in his tracks is a stethoscope coiled around a pair of binoculars. When Kyle was eight or so, he decided he no longer wanted to be a train driver, but a doctor like his friend Blake's dad (who, it turned out, wasn't a doctor after all, but a paramedic). So, for Kyle's birthday, Linda bought him a kids' doctor's kit – a case containing fake pill bottles, a mini-prescription pad and pencil, a plastic thermometer and an imitation stethoscope. It was the stethoscope Kyle was most excited about. He wore it around for days, tested everyone's heartbeat, including the cat's.

He writes letters to her that he never finishes, has imaginary conversations with her at random times of the day and night. When Linda says it's time to scatter Kyle's ashes, he's pleased to have something else to focus on. He suggests they hire a boat from the Mornington harbour, near where they spent so many summer holidays, he and Kyle swimming while Linda sat reading book after book on the shore. Linda agrees. They drive down there on a sunny afternoon in late spring. Linda wears a cream dress with blue flowers that he can't remember having seen before. He wonders if she bought it especially. Despite the reason for their journey, she looks almost girlish. He reaches out and takes her hand like he used to in the old days, squeezes it, as much to comfort himself as her.

The boat, which smells of fish and diesel, rocks when they climb into it but steadies as he guides it - its engine putt-putting - past the other boats, the paddleboards and trio of snorkelers. Linda sits opposite the tiller, clutching the brick-sized box that has for so many months sat on Kyle's chest-of-drawers. When the harbour and the shoreline seem suitably distant, he cuts the engine and, as the boat sways gently in the sun-spangled water, they regard each other.

'Could you do it?' she asks, holding the box out to him as if it were a baby.

He takes it, struggles momentarily to get the latch open, then shakes the ashes out over the side of the boat. Shakes and shakes until the box is empty. And, as they watch it merge with the water, Linda, an atheist, recites The Lord's Prayer.

He imagines telling Mia what they've done with Kyle's ashes, how afterwards they ate calamari at the restaurant above the jetty and talked about him, really talked, for the first time since they'd agreed to turn off his life support. And how surprised he was when Linda reached for him in bed that night. Surprised and delighted. But even if he and Mia were friends and not strangers, he can see from his vantage point in the bistro opposite that she'd be too busy to stop and listen. Now that school holidays have started, Tully's is busier than ever and she's working longer hours. He can't help worrying about her. Sometimes she doesn't leave until late, and he knows she leaves via the laneway where he's seen people shooting up. He tells himself it's not his business, but he keeps watch, if and when he can.

One evening at around the time Mia usually finishes, there's a bloke in the laneway, staggering about, ranting, so he crosses the road. Just as he's wondering how best to convince the bloke to rant elsewhere, Mia appears. She stops when she sees them, eyes wide like a spooked horse.

'What do you want?' she shouts, holding her phone up like it's a crucifix.

It takes him a second to realise it's him she's addressing and not the drunk, who stands staring, open-mouthed.

‘Well?’ she shouts. She takes a few steps towards him. ‘What? You want to fuck me? Is that what you want?’

‘No,’ he says, recoiling from the accusation. ‘No.’

‘What then? Why the stalking?’

‘I’m not . . . I wasn’t . . .’

‘Think I haven’t seen you? Think you’re invisible? I’ve called the police, you know.’

‘But . . . I’m Kyle’s dad.’

She drops her arms. ‘Kyle’s dad? Kyle Silverson? Oh my god!’

He’s not sure what to do. He wonders how long it will be before the police arrive.

‘Come,’ she says, with a flick of her head, and, when he doesn’t move, she walks over to the café’s side door and holds it open for him.

‘Victor?’ she calls out. ‘I’ll be upstairs. Don’t lock up, okay?’

Upstairs has the feel of an old theatrette, with its thick scarlet carpeting, but it’s clearly used to store furniture. He assumes she’ll turn on a light, but she doesn’t. There’s a row of interconnected padded seats facing the window overlooking the street. She sits down on one of them. He follows suit, feeling like a passenger on a cruise ship.

‘Mum wrote to you,’ she says.

‘I know,’ he admits. ‘I read the letter.’

‘But we never heard anything.’

‘My wife wasn’t ready.’ In saying that, he feels guilty; after all, he could have written back himself.

She nods slowly, her face almost featureless in the dark.

‘Tell me about him,’ she says.

‘He was always good at school, went on to study Science at - ’

‘No,’ she says. ‘What was he like?’

An avalanche of adjectives present themselves to him, but he settles on one, Full of life.

Traffic noise travels up from the street below, along with a gust of music.

‘What do you want from me?’ she asks at last.

He hesitates. ‘Could you wait while I get something out of the car?’

She nods again, uncertainly this time, so that when he dashes back down the stairs, he’s not convinced she’ll be there when he gets back. Fears he might find the side door locked and her gone. But she stays.

‘Thank you for waiting,’ he says, sitting down again, waiting for his breath to settle.

‘You got something to show me?’

‘Not exactly,’ he says, taking the stethoscope from his neck, feeling foolish. ‘I just wondered if, just for a moment, I could . . .?’

‘You want to hear it?’

‘Please.’

‘No,’ she says, pushing the instrument away. ‘There’s no need for that.’

She unbuttons the top of her blouse, unashamed, it seems, of the scarring.

‘Here,’ she whispers and, because he appears confused, she takes his face in her hands, turns it gently and presses it ear-down to her chest, so that he hears it, loud and clear - Kyle’s beating heart.

And for a while that is all there is.