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WES SAID, 'KRISTA'S MISSING.'

'What do you mean, missing?'

'She hasn't come home. She left Sara at her mother's house and no one knows where she is.'

Wes was in the middle of taking out the garbage, a rare event in our flat where a huge plastic garden bin passed for a kitchen tidy. It was often full to the brim, stinking after several weeks without being emptied, maggots wriggling from the light when the lid was removed.

Wes was tall and skinny like me, but paler and unhealthy-looking. His frizzy black hair resembled an afro wig. His family had emigrated from Johannesburg before Wes finished school so he could avoid compulsory military service. He remained a pacifist and his attitude to me, despite his being only three years my senior, was almost motherly. He fretted about me. When a mutual friend first introduced us, I considered but soon abandoned the possibility he might be gay. Wes was peace-loving, sexually frustrated, but decidedly

heterosexual. He made a point of informing those close to him that he was still, reluctantly, a virgin.

'She's probably just taken off somewhere,' I said, standing back while he struggled to squeeze our decaying leftovers into the bin liner. 'She'll be back.'

Wes could worry a crisis out of almost anything. If he had been gay, he would have been what I had recently learned was called a drama queen.

'I hope so,' he said. 'I hope she's alright.'

I'd only been living with Wes and this other guy Tony for about two months. Our flat was half of an old house on Dornoch Terrace. To get from the front door to the kitchen or bathroom, we had to walk through each of the other rooms. There was one bedroom, a living room and an enclosed verandah. We divided the space up with wardrobes to create what privacy we could. It was a dump but as poor students, cheap was cheerful. Between the three of us, the rent was eighty-nine dollars a week.

When I was growing up, Highgate Hill figured as a dangerous place. Stories in the *Courier-Mail* detailed the crimes taking place here and I came to associate the suburb with itinerant lodging houses, bashings and drunken violence. But now I was a resident, it seemed totally different: a neighbourhood of artists and politically aware students and academics; a place that promised adventure and the excitement of ideas and new experiences. For a boy who had spent his life in the suburbs, living on the very edge of the city — even one that was disparaged as 'just a big country town' — meant possibilities I could not imagine.

It was my first move out of home. At the age of nineteen and in the second year of my architecture degree I decided I needed to be independent from my parents. But the move coincided with my failing a major subject that I would have to wait six months to repeat. By default, I was out in the Real World. I had budgeted my student allowance carefully to ensure I could afford my freedom, but dropping back to part time at uni meant the end of Austudy. I took a job unloading trucks in the bowels of the Myer Centre until I could find a firm of architects willing to take me on.

Wes had told me about Krista the week I moved in.

'You have to meet our neighbour,' he said. 'She's very *new-age*.' So one afternoon we knocked on her door.

'Hello boys,' said Krista. 'We have to be quiet, my daughter Sara is sleeping.'

Krista appeared to be in her late twenties with fair skin and dark, almost rust-coloured hair. I would discover it changed shade on a weekly basis. She wore a loose, flowing dress in subdued greens and browns with scarves and metal bangles on her arms. When she spoke, her voice was slow and measured, and she emphasised words with her hands as though she was conducting a quiet ensemble. As she listened to us answering her questions, she would tilt her head sideways and toy with her hair, winding it one way around her fingers then back the other. In her other hand, she held a cigarette that she drew on occasionally.

We were talking in hushed voices on the threshold of her lounge room. Inside, the furniture was broad and low: couches covered with throws in colours similar to the clothes

she was wearing, an upright piano against a wall, a standard lamp spilling dull light. I could see through to the kitchen where open windows revealed a spectacular view of the city, the night sky lit up with strobes from Expo.

'So, Adam, are you straight or gay?'

I looked at Wes.

'I'm not going to speak for you.'

'Umm, gay?' I offered.

'That's nice,' she said. 'I like gay boys. My younger brother's gay, you know, and I'm so proud of him.' She took a drag of her cigarette. 'Have you got a boyfriend?'

'No, not at the moment.'

'Oh you should. You might like my brother. Or what about my friend Marlon? You'll meet him. He's lovely but he hasn't been well recently. He has HIV — well he actually has AIDS but anyway — Marlon says that we should all have three lovers: one older, one younger and one the same age.'

'Really?'

'Yes. You know you might really like Marlon. I think he should have a younger lover.'

Wes, who had been listening to all this, said, 'I'm not sure he is Adam's type.'

Krista apologised for not inviting us in. She didn't want to wake Sara otherwise she would have made us tea. She excused herself but promised she would come around soon for a drink and a joint.

Every morning I got up early and discovered what it was like to have to work for a living. I walked to the city to save the bus fare and by the time I was over the Victoria Bridge my clothes were damp with sweat. Myer demanded we wear collared shirts and long pants — no T-shirts or shorts — in case we had to walk out onto the shop floor. We were busy and the days went quickly. The job didn't require much mental effort so I thought a lot about the men I worked beside. I wondered about their lives and who they went home to at night.

In the evenings I'd come home and we would cook, or listen to music or, if we could afford it, go out. We would hear Krista through the walls playing her piano or listening to something wild on the stereo. Sometimes we heard the long, one-way conversations she had with Sara.

'She's into modern child psychology,' said Wes. 'She reasons with the kid.' I imagined Sara sitting there, staring, wide-eyed as the ways of the world were explained. I had no opinions on child rearing. I wasn't sure I had opinions on much at all. Wes told me Krista had been to the conservatorium and taught piano. Now she was a full-time mother. She had a husband who didn't live with her. He was in a band that played at community festivals. Then there was Sara's father, who sometimes came around. It had started to sound confusing to me. My own mother and father had been married and living together for thirty years and now I had left them and was wondering what I was going to do with my life.

Wes and Tony had an interesting relationship. They were virtually a married couple themselves. I think Wes was

jealous of Tony's sexual experience even though Wes had no interest in guys. I had heard him say a few times to Tony, 'Oh you'd fuck anything,' like a jilted girlfriend. They did almost everything together. Wes was responsible for paying bills, Tony for making sure they had beer. I was not a big drinker and preferred wine, which was generally out of a cask rather than a bottle. I often drank something called Passion Pop that was popular with architecture students and could be purchased for less than three dollars. The boys wanted to know whether I would contribute to the beer kitty, but I declined.

Usually on weekends there would be a party, mostly Wes's friends, but occasionally some of Tony's. Because sitting around drinking wasn't really my thing, on those nights I tended to go out to dance clubs with a group of my own. When I came home the stereo would still be playing and anyone who had not left would be passed out in various positions around the flat. I'd turn off the music then step over the bodies to get to my own bed. When I woke in the morning the others would still be asleep, but sometimes I'd encounter Krista cleaning up around them, filling up plastic bags with empty cans and bottles, little Sara trotting around copying her. I never knew whether to show gratitude or embarrassment or both.

Tony, like Wes, was a couple of years older than me. He was tall and cycling had given him muscular legs which he liked to show off in lycra cycling knicks. His chest, however, was sunken and nobody but Wes ever saw him with his shirt off. Tony didn't talk much and in this way he projected a

kind of surly masculinity: blond and athletic, but reticent and rarely without a sullen expression on his face. We had met at the Terminus, a gay bar in the Valley, the previous year. He was friends with the DJ and used to spend most of the night in the DJ booth. At that time he was also living with his parents in a suburb past where I lived. A couple of weeks after I met him, he offered me a lift home. As we sped down Gympie Road, his car stereo pumped out dance tracks from a mix tape.

'This is great music,' I said when we reached my house. We were both sitting there with the engine turned off.

'Take it,' he said, punching out the cassette. 'I've got heaps more.'

The car was silent. Tony put a hand on my leg. I wasn't sure what I wanted to happen. I wasn't sure whether I even liked him. He was older and had great music, so I kissed him then told him I'd better get inside. 'Okay,' he said.

Wes was so friendly and concerned to make my first move out of home a success that we got on really well. But I hardly ever spoke to Tony now that we were flatmates. I thought perhaps my rebuff had soured things between us. So I was surprised when he invited me to take a day trip to the coast with him.

'Don't you have to go to work?' I asked. It was my day off but I was supposed to attend a lecture at uni.

'Taking a sickie,' he replied.

I should have said no but the lure of a day at the beach was too strong. It was perfect spring weather and I thought it was about time Tony and I did something together. I offered

to take my car, an ancient Renault 12 with no two panels the same colour. We were heading down the South-East Freeway when the whole car began to shake. I looked at the speedo. It read 90.

'Going a bit too fast,' I apologised.

'You haven't done much of this, have you?'

'What do you mean?'

'Highway driving.'

He was right. The reality was that my life had taken on an autonomy I had never known living with my parents. I was making decisions that had previously required consultation. The world was opening up for me and it seemed a bigger place than I had ever imagined. I put some music on to try to cover up the noise. It was the same mix tape Tony had given me the previous year when he dropped me home from the Terminus.

After a couple of minutes he said, 'Are you still listening to this?'

'Yeah. It's great, I love it.'

'Turn it off. It's shit and we can't hear it properly anyway.'

When we came home that night, Wes was still at uni but Krista had someone with her.

'Look out,' Tony said, 'it's Marlon.'

Krista and the guy were talking on the landing outside her front door. Krista smiled at us as we came down the concrete path.

'Hello, boys.'

'Ooh, big tongue kiss!' cried Marlon.

'Get off,' said Tony, pushing him aside and retreating into our flat.

'What's got into her?' countered Marlon, then turning to me, 'And who is this?' He was wearing a white T-shirt and shorts made from cut-off denim jeans. He had bleached curly hair and was kind of sporty-looking. I guessed he was around the same age as Krista although his face seemed older. He had big eyes that rolled around suggestively as he spoke.

'This is the lovely Adam who is living with Wes and Tony,' Krista explained.

'Tony has a boyfriend!' Marlon called into our flat. There was no response. He turned to me.

'Adam,' he said, lowering his voice. 'First Man.' He pursed his lips expecting me to kiss him and when I didn't, extended a flaccid hand that I took and tried to shake.

'Ooh, very butch this one.' He rolled his eyes and fluttered his eyelashes in a pantomime of coyness. I excused myself and followed Tony into our flat.

A little later, Tony and I were sitting on the sofa, watching television. There was a knock on the door and Marlon walked in.

'Don't you love me anymore?' He slipped in beside Tony and put an arm around him.

'Want a beer?' Tony asked, his eyes not veering from the screen.

'Oh yoofla, I've probably had far too much to drink today but I suppose in that case I may as well not stop now.'

'In the kitchen.'

I went to get it for him. Marlon stood up and took the can from me and turned off the television.

'Hey,' complained Tony, 'I was watching that.'

'Social lubricant,' Marlon replied, raising his can. 'So let's be social! First some muzak.'

He selected a disco compilation and started up the turntable. It was far too loud but neither of us could be bothered trying to get him to turn it down. Marlon started dancing.

'*I'm in Boogie Wonderland!* I've just walked up Boundary Street. The Dyky Bridge is covered in graffiti again. The council needs to realise if they keep paintin' it, the dykes will just keep sprayin' it.'

'I guess they are trying to keep it looking nice,' I offered.

Marlon stepped back and put a hand on his hip.

'Oh yeah,' he started in an American accent, 'let's make the entire neighbourhood *nice*. We'll just get rid of all the hookers and the faggots and the smack fiends and redecorate!'

'What I meant was…'

'*I* am an AIDS-infected poofter. I've been a junky and I've been a whore and you…' he flicked his wrist at me, '*you*, just have to deal with it.' He rolled his eyes around then fell into a wide-eyed stare and leering smile.

Marlon became a regular visitor in our flat. I'd never known anyone with AIDS let alone someone as outspoken about his personal life as he was. My knowledge was limited to what I read in magazines and the posters and drink coasters at gay bars. One day he came over carrying a large paper bag filled with condoms and brochures.

'I went to a safe-sex workshop and the facilitator told me to shut up. He said I was being too loud for the group.' He let out a cackle. 'Well, I took offence! I only asked whether they had any larger dildoes. Anyway we had a lucky dip and I won this.' From the bag he produced a large black phallus which wobbled as he waved it around. 'And what about you, yoofla, are you practising safe sex?' He gave me a poster, the back view of a man's bare torso. In the man's hand was a box of condoms but my eye was drawn to the top of his jeans, lowered just under the start of his buttock cleft.

Marlon told me about Stonewall and the gay liberation movement of the seventies. He lent me his copy of Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story,* which I took to Musgrave Park pool and read on the grassy embankment, looking up every few pages to check out who had joined the swimmers doing laps of the chilly water.

I found myself falling in love with boys I could not have and, seeing my longing, Marlon would offer me his wisdom.

'Oh don't bother with *her,* yoofla, she's obviously all pent up and tortured. There's plenty more about at your age.'

'You're beautiful, Adam,' Krista would add. 'You just remember that. Don't let anyone ever tell you you're not, because you are beautiful.' She was often stoned and I wondered how seriously I should take her. 'I think you and Marlon should be lovers.'

'What do you think, Adam?' Marlon would say, moving in close and running his hand down my chest. 'Could we be lovers?'

Krista smiled and twirled her hair. I did my best to wriggle away from Marlon, who just rolled his eyes, released his usual hysterical laugh and continued to ogle me.

At the time of Krista's disappearance, I had left Myer and was working four days a week for a firm of architects in the Valley. One of the senior partners would berate me for using too much washing-up detergent or have me clean out the drawing archive, a dusty basement enclosure with a crumbling ceiling I later discovered was asbestos. It seemed I was too unskilled for anything important. The company did a lot of work for the Catholic Diocese and I once spent days drawing up options for placement of the Stations of the Cross in a new church. All were rejected until after almost two weeks they chose one of the schemes I had proposed early on the first day.

Every night the sky lit up with fireworks from Expo. I had refused to go, and joined a boycott campaign to show solidarity with evicted residents. But as the weeks passed, I increasingly found myself the outsider, until finally I knew no one else who hadn't been. Across the city the jacaranda trees were in full bloom. Krista had been missing for three weeks and the flats had become much quieter. It was strange to be aware of the absence of sounds that had previously gone unnoticed. In the evenings I heard car doors closing as people returned from work. I listened to the grinding gears of the 177 as it climbed the hill and waited for the inevitable booming that signified the end of another day of solitary protest.

At home by myself one day I was disturbed by a knock. I opened the door to a tall unshaven man with a gold earring.

'Do you know where Krista is?'

'No,' I said. 'No one does.'

'Has anyone else been around looking for her?'

'I don't think so.'

'Well if you see her tell her Paul was around. She owes me money. Do you know when she'll be back?'

'No.'

'Just let her know, okay?'

I agreed, keen for him to leave. His persistence was unsettling and there was something about him that made me uneasy.

In the week the jacaranda blossoms began to fall, I came home to find Wes, Tony and a girl I'd never met before sitting in the lounge room drinking gin in front of the television.

'They've found a body,' announced Wes. 'It's probably Krista.'

'What, don't they know?'

'The body's been lying there for nearly three weeks so it's decomposed beyond recognition.'

For a moment I thought he must be wrong. It couldn't be Krista. She couldn't be dead.

'But…how?'

'She was strangled with the strap of that bag she always carried.'

'Oh Wes,' said the girl.

'What bag?' I asked.

'You know, that one she always had, the canvas one.'

'I can't remember it.'

'You know, you do,' he said, waving a plastic cup around. 'You know the bag. You know.'

Wes had clearly had a few. Tony said nothing but stared at the TV. They didn't offer me a drink.

'Who did it?'

'They don't know yet. She was found dumped near the Gateway Bridge. She'd been bashed on the head with a rock several times then strangled with the strap of her bag.'

'Wes! Enough details,' said the girl.

'It will be on the news soon.'

On the TV, a soap was just finishing up. A blonde woman was looking wistfully into the eyes of a chisel-jawed man as credits rolled up the screen.

'I just can't believe she's gone,' said Wes.

When the news came on, Krista's name was not mentioned but a photograph was shown and it clearly was her. The newsreader said police were investigating a murder.

I think I was in shock. I'd had no personal experience with death, let alone murder. I started driving to work. I hated waiting for the bus and my car felt safer. I told myself it suited my professional image not to be stuck on public transport. The architect's office was on the bus route and driving definitely had its drawbacks. Now I was worried my old car wouldn't start and I would be late. And time-limited parking meant I had to move every two hours or else get a ticket.

A couple of days after the news broadcast I was leaving for work when I heard someone call out. I turned to see two guys in suits walking towards me. One was tall and solid looking, the other shorter and dumpy. They both wore sunglasses and announced they were detectives.

'Did you know this woman, Kristine Sloane?' the taller one said. He pulled out a photo of her, the same one from the news.

'Yes, she lived next door.'

'You know she's dead.'

'I know. I saw it on TV.'

'What was your relationship to her? How well did you know her?'

'Not that well. She sometimes came in and cleaned up after parties.'

Then the other cop spoke. 'You were pantsing her.'

'What?'

'You were pantsing her. Givin' her the big finger.' He made a crude gesture with his hands.

'No I wasn't.'

'You knew she was a whore.'

'No she wasn't,' I said. 'She was a pianist. She trained at the conservatorium.'

They both laughed.

'A pianist, that's a good one. She was a whore, mate, and you were pantsing her.'

'I was not.' They repulsed me. I started to walk to the car. 'I have to get to work.'

'Is this your vehicle?'

I stopped and waited. If they started on the car they would find unlimited defects.

'Do you want us to give it the once-over?'

The tall detective said, 'We're watching you, mate. We'll be back.'

I did not like cops. Once, when I was still living with my parents, two guys in plain clothes claiming to be police had stopped and searched me right outside my house. It was just after I left school and I had multicoloured hair and was carrying around a pamphlet about socialism. They asked me lots of questions and called me 'poofter'. When they finished I went inside and told Mum and Dad but after several calls we were unable to find out who they were or where they were from. It was as if they didn't exist. I was under no illusion about the existence of police corruption. In Queensland in the eighties homosexual activity was still illegal and punishable with a prison sentence. I walked around feeling as though my identity made me a criminal, which was both exciting and frightening.

The next day I was in the kitchen with Wes who was cooking up sausages for the third time that week.

'They're cheap and they fill you up,' said Wes. 'Do you want some?'

'No thanks. Don't you have any vegies with them?' 'Well I would, but a certain person refuses to eat anything that's green.'

I told Wes what had happened with the police.

'They must have thought you were Tony,' he said.

'What do you mean?'

'Well they slept together a few times. Didn't you know?'

I had no idea about it. I was under the impression Tony was only interested in men.

'They will probably have us all in for an interview. It's pretty standard. They always investigate the people who knew the victim. In most cases it's someone known to them.'

The prospect that Krista knew her killer scared me. And then I started wondering what Tony had been doing on the night Krista was murdered.

Tony had been morose since Krista's body was discovered. This was not out of character but he appeared to be crankier than usual. I had asked him if he knew where one of my books was, a travel guide that had gone missing a few weeks earlier.

'How the hell should I know?' he said. 'What would I want with your shit?'

'Don't worry about him,' said Wes. 'He goes through these moods.'

I came down with the flu and had to stay home from work. Saturday night arrived and I was too sick to go out. I had lost my voice, my joints ached and I felt too weak to do anything. I lay in bed, reading, until thirst forced me to the kitchen. I shuffled past the lounge room where a group of Tony's mates sat about drinking. The place looked like it had been trashed. One of the chairs was broken and discarded beer cans lay everywhere. Thick guitar music oozed from the speakers. I noticed my set of watercolour pencils scattered across the floor, lying in a puddle of spilt beer.

'What do you want?' called out Tony. He was wearing sunglasses and was obviously drunk.

'Nothing,' I rasped. 'A glass of water.'

'Have a beer,' he called.

'No, thanks.'

'Trouble with you, Adam, is you never join in the fun. You think you're better than us.'

'I don't,' I said, then added, 'you've spilt beer all over my pencils.'

'So what?'

'They're water soluble.'

'C'mon, let's have it out. Have a go outside, huh?' He got up and pushed me in the chest.

'Just leave me alone,' I said.

'No, let's sort this out now.'

Wes, who had been in the kitchen, came in.

'Shouldn't you be in bed?'

'Tony wants a fight.'

'What's wrong,' said Tony, 'aren't you man enough?'

'He's sick, Tony, just leave him be.'

'Oh poor little boy.' He started to stroke my head and I reeled back thinking he was going to hit me.

'So where were you the night she was murdered?' I spat it out so suddenly I surprised myself. Tony's mates looked at him then away quickly.

'What? You think I did that?'

'Well, you were fucking her.'

'Hey,' interjected Wes, 'that's enough. Go back to bed, Adam.'

Tony clenched his fists. 'I should fucking deck you.'

'Tony, stop it,' said Wes stepping between us. 'I've made chips for you guys.'

'I need a drink,' I said.

'I'll get it,' replied Wes. 'Go back to bed.' He gave me a pleading glance and I realised he would have a job settling the drunken Tony. So I went back behind my wardrobe and tried to sleep. Through the wall I heard Tony open another can of beer.

'I should have decked him.'

The day of the funeral was steamy and uncomfortable. I drove alone out to Mt Gravatt. Wes and Tony went in Tony's car. I had switched my headlights on out of respect but had to be reminded to turn them off by someone as I walked across the lawn. I had never been to a funeral before and chose not to wear black but a brown stetson and colourful clothes I thought Krista would like to see me in. I was not alone. It was easy to tell who the cops were. Wes of course had fronted up in black jeans, with a collared shirt the only concession to his usual grungy singlet.

I found myself standing next to Krista's family. Her mother wore a broad hat and dark sunglasses and waved away flies while she held Sara's little hand. Krista's two brothers seemed only physically present, the younger gay one, dressed all in black and wearing white stage make-up, appeared as if he might suddenly pass out. As the casket was lowered, a skinny little man who I later found out was Krista's husband, began

playing a sitar. When Sara started to dance, her grandmother cuddled her close to keep her still.

Marlon, Wes and Tony stood on the other side of the grave. Tony, who had not spoken to me since the night of the argument, was crying. Wes looked across at me and nodded. I thought how sunburnt he would get standing there without a hat.

After the service, Wes came up to me.

'You know he was having dinner at his parents' place the night it happened. Way across the other side of town.'

We put on a kind of wake that night. Krista's family were having a private gathering so Marlon came over to our flat and we ate pizza and listened to music until late. Tony seemed to be avoiding me, but later in the night, without saying anything, he handed me a cold beer and I realised this was his gesture of reconciliation. We all got very drunk.

I woke in the night to noises on the other side of the VJs: voices talking quietly, giggling, and the squeaking of bedsprings. A Cult song, 'She Sells Sanctuary', was playing.

'Just relax, let me do everything.'

'Should I move around this way?'

'Sh! Wes, relax.'

'It's different to what I thought it would be like.'

I wish there was some tight resolution to this story but there isn't. I found a better job and decided I could afford to live in a room with a door. I moved into a place in Hill End with a friend from school.

Since the night of my disturbed sleep, Wes was a changed man. His worried attitude seemed to lift overnight and after graduation he became a dot-com millionaire.

Tony got himself a girlfriend and disappeared into the life he craved: beer and sport and everything 'normal'.

Marlon became a local activist, speaking out about discrimination against HIV-positive people at conferences and staging demonstrations outside health department offices. I remember reading an interview with him talking about surviving ten years with the virus then I lost track of him.

Krista's killer was never found. Looking back now, I can see it was a random event, some crazed stranger unknown to her, someone she trusted enough to accept a lift from.

Recently I went back to my old street. The house hasn't changed and sometimes I wonder what it would be like to live there again. Whenever I'm in Brisbane in the spring and the trees spread their lilac carpet, I am reminded of when I was nineteen. Those Dornoch Terrace days, when my eyes were opened to the best and the worst in people, and nothing would ever be the same again.