



birdvillemagazine
issue ii

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LA NOVIA
valerie valdes

The man in white stood on the front porch of Mara's uncle's house in a neatly pressed suit, pale as a ghost in the darkness right down to his shoes. When he removed his white hat to come inside, even his hair was without color. He saw her staring and winked at her, baring his uneven yellow teeth in a grin that made the skin prickle at the back of her neck. The smell of night-blooming jasmine followed him, sweet and heavy.

Mara and her brothers were shoed off to their room while the man was escorted to the kitchen, but they stayed in the hallway, watching and listening. Her father shook the man's hand and sat with him at the table. Her mother bustled about preparing food and offered him a glass of milk, which he accepted. When he spoke, his voice was like the thunder that rumbled in from the ocean and beat against the mountains beyond the city.

"Doctor," he said. "They come for you tomorrow. You must take your family and leave."

Mara's mother paused, her knife raised over the onions she had been dicing.

"You know we cannot," Mara's father replied. "They've

out in front of her. She spent a while flicking through the scattered pencils for the right one, then started filling in a white space in the top corner.

"*Ay bee cee dee ee ef gee,*" she sang.

"They're just movie posters, Marty. Right?"

"Full Metal Jacket? I don't think, I mean, they're not really just movie posters. The Exorcist? Did you see that? It's not right, Cath."

"Well we can't just take it off her. What do you want me to do about it? She doesn't understand."

"It's the colours, though. Those colours. They're spot on. I don't know if I could even get them right like that. I'm sure I couldn't."

"She's probably just seen them on the telly. Or on the computer. Stop stressing about it. Kids pick up things."

"I know. Still..."

Under the bedsheets, Catherine pressed her knee up between Marty's thighs. He rolled away, onto his back.

"Fine. I'm going to sleep," said Cath. "Turn the light off when you're done reading. Or whatever."

Marty's book lay flat against his chest for a long time. When he finally got up, he closed the bedroom door before switching off the light.

"Mummy," said Em, climbing up a stool to the bench, where Catherine was cleaning away breakfast. "Can I have a purple pencil?"

"We've got lots of pencils, sweetie. Isn't there a purple one?"

"They aren't right."

"What do you mean?"

"They're not the right purple."

"Well they'll have to do."

"They won't do," said Emily, and let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Can you wait until we go shopping tomorrow night?"

"No," said Emily.

"Well, they'll have to do."

"Hey kiddo, I'm home" said Marty, leaning into his daughter's doorway. She was on her knees and hunched amidst a mess of crayons, pencils and markers. "What ya up to?"

"-cee dee ee eff gee. Nothing. *Haitch eye jay kay el em en oh pee.*"

"Is that your colouring-in book? Can I have a look?"

"Okay." She stood up with the book, careful not to disturb the piles around her.

"Who gave you this one?" Marty took the book and rifled through the pages. They were movie posters.

"Uncle Jeddy. What's wrong with it?"

"No, nothing. That's... it's really good, Em. You're staying inside the lines and everything. Can I show it to mum?"

"It's not finished yet."

"Well I guess you better finish it."

Emily sat back down on the floor and spread the book

stopped giving papers to doctors. The rest of my family have their papers in order, and we have our passports. But I would be turned away at the airport. If they didn't arrest me there."

"I promise you, Obatala will provide." The man took another sip of milk.

"He will, or you will?"

"I am only the messenger, and I have given you the message. What you do with it is your business."

Her father's hand curled into a fist. "Thank you for the warning, then. Will you stay for food?"

The man shook his head. "There are other *gusanos* destined for the plow. I must see them all before the moon begins to fall." He stood, gave Mara's mother a small bow, and walked to the front door followed by her father. They shook hands and the man in white replaced his hat, then returned to the night.

Mara watched her mother finish chopping the onion while her father sat again at the table and lit a cigarette. His black hair was slicked back, his dark eyes squinting at nothing. He unbuttoned his *guayabera* to just above his growing gut, exposing his white undershirt.

Her mother spoke first. "We should pack before—"

"No. We're not going anywhere."

"But he said you—"

He slammed his hand on the table. "*Olvídalo, coño!* He's been throwing coconuts. Or maybe he had a bad dream. He doesn't know anyone in the army, or in the committees."

"We've been trying to leave anyway," she said. "Our house has been sealed for weeks; everything has already been confiscated. Why not go tonight? We could

maybe bribe someone at the airport. Get on a plane, fly to Miami. Start over."

"No. It's ridiculous."

"Josue is almost old enough for the army. If we don't get him out soon—"

"Yes, soon!" He jabbed the cigarette at her. "Soon, but not tonight." His expression softened when he saw her eyes fill with tears. "We'll go back downtown tomorrow and try to get my release papers again. *No llores, por favor.*" He noticed Mara and her brothers finally. "You three, get to bed. *Andalé. Salpica.*"

Mara curled up under her light linen sheets and watched the stars through the open window. She and her brothers were crammed together in their uncle's spare room, as they had been since the first time they'd tried to leave the country. Victoria was tucked under her arm, brown eyes staring up at her through thick eyelashes. She had been Mara's most special present on her seventh birthday, with clothes made by Mara's mother on the big Singer sewing machine in the spare bedroom. She was *la novia*, the bride; her dress was fitted at the top and flared at the bottom with frilly underskirts, all white like the clothes of the strange man who had made her father angry.

Before she had begun to dream, Mara awoke to the sound of rustling in the closet. Her mother pulled shirts and skirts and dresses out and folded them neatly, placing them in the small red suitcase Mara carried on trips to Tia Celia's house on the beach.

"Mami?"

"Shh." Her mother helped her out of her nightclothes and into a dark blue dress. "Tio Pepe is taking us on a trip, but you have to be very quiet."

not start on religion now, hey? Or else we might be up all night."

"Why don't you go and make us some coffees," said Catherine.

"That's a terrible idea," said Marty finishing off the last sip of beer before pulling out from the table. "Alright, alright. Coffee? Tea? Everyone?"

"Em got spoiled," said Marty.

"Mmm," said Catherine.

"Did you see that colouring book?"

"No? Why?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Why?"

"It just seemed like an adult book. Like. An ironic colouring book."

"Like... porno?" asked Catherine, rolling over to face him. "Who gave it to her?"

"No, God no. Not that kind of adult. I think it was from Jed and Kate. Ah. Forget it. We can talk about it later." He reached over to click off the bedside lamp. "I can never get to sleep on this bed. What's with the pillows? I hate these pillows."

When Emily got home she spread all of her presents across her pink-dressed bed and started to organize them. She pulled the Barbie dolls out of their boxes and set the chocolates to one side and arranged the stiff plastic horses on the big toy chest in the corner. She took the colouring-in book and slipped it into the bookshelf, where she forgot about it for a little while.

the laughter of all the children.

"What did you get, Ems?" Marty said, poking through his daughter's cotton sack, which was filled with chocolates and plastic-wrapped toys. "Looks like you got the best stuff out of anyone."

"I got two Barbies."

"I can see," he said. "Anything else good?"

"Yes, some horses and a colouring-in book! What did you get?"

"Socks and undies," said Marty. "Same as always."

"Oh, poor dad," said Catherine, coming up behind Emily and lifting her on her hip. "What a complainer."

"I like socks and undies," said Marty.

"Come on, you two," said Catherine. "It's nearly dinner time."

The kids were upstairs, and Emily was already asleep in her makeshift bed on the nearby couch. Everyone else was lethargically sitting around the dinner table. Catherine had her hand cupped around a full glass of red wine and was looking at it intently.

"I just don't see why we should have to support that. Why should I have to support that? That's their decision."

"Listen, John. It's not... It's not a fucking decision," said Catherine. "It's not a fucking lifestyle choice. Don't start to say it's a lifestyle choice."

"Well it is. Really. It is."

"It's not," said Catherine. There was a long pause. She fingered the rim of her glass. "It's not like, I don't know. Like some religions refusing treatment. Or, or... I don't know, but it's not like that. It's not a fucking choice."

"Honey," said Marty, rubbing his wife's back. "Let's

"Why?"

"Because I said so. Don't argue. *Vámonos*."

Mara wanted to cry but she didn't dare. She wasn't even allowed to wear her shoes until she was seated in the back of her uncle's old Dodge. Her mother had never let her outside barefoot before. Clutching her suitcase, she sat between her silent older brothers as the car roared to life and took off down the dark street. The headlights cast everything around them into shadow, leaving only the path ahead illuminated. Homes she'd often ridden past on her bicycle were indistinguishable, featureless shapes like toys piled in a corner in the dark. Toys...

"Mami!" she cried. "I left Victoria!"

Her mother turned to look back at her, smiling sadly. "I'm sorry, *hija*," she said. "We'll get you another doll as soon as we can."

Now Mara was sobbing, her face red and scrunched up. "I don't want another one! I want her!" Her mother said nothing. She cried until the car's movement lulled her to sleep.

Later, when she opened her bleary eyes, they were parking in an unfamiliar place. Tio Pepe carried her and her suitcase through rooms that she could hardly remember from one moment to the next. She wondered if this was what ghosts felt like, the world changing around them as they stood still. There were people everywhere, pressed close together, moving in packs, sweating even in the relative cool of the early morning.

Finally they were outside on gray asphalt, in a crowd of people in front of an airplane that read "American Bread" on the side. Most wore their nicest clothes, as if on their way to church. Some were chatting amiably,

others eating or reading or playing dominoes as best they could on the rough ground. Tio Pepe gently put her down. Her brother Miguel dropped his big duffel bag and stretched out on it, to get some sleep. Josue stayed next to their mother and Tio Pepe, who spoke in hushed voices.

"Look at that poor man," someone murmured, pointing at her dozing brother. Mara giggled. In his best suit, Miguel almost did look like a man, even if he wasn't old enough to shave. He looked a lot like their father.

"Mami," Mara said, her skin suddenly cold. "Mami, where's Papi?"

Her mother and uncle exchanged a look. "He'll be here soon, *hija*," her mother said with a smile.

But he didn't come. The sun rose and the summer heat shimmered on the tarmac like a promise of rain waiting to be broken. People in uniforms started checking papers at the front of the line and the crowd surged forward, families and couples and lonely single travelers all vying for seats on the flight. Everyone was on their feet, hugging and crying, some peeling away from the group and walking back toward the terminal wiping their eyes. A man took her passport and stamped "VOID" on the inside and before she knew it, Mara was climbing the stairs up to the airplane clutching her little red suitcase and trembling. She'd never flown before.

"Tio Pepe is waving at you, Marita," her mother said.

Mara turned and waved back at him, smiling. Maybe he could watch Victoria for her while they were gone. They stepped through the mouth of the plane and walked down into its belly.

There were three seats on one side of the aisle and two on the other. It felt much smaller inside than Mara

THE COLOURING-IN BOOK editorial

Marty went to the fridge and pulled out the last cold beer from the bottom tray. He replaced it with a six-pack that was warm with the summer heat and a day of bustling kitchen activity. Before he had a chance to close the door Phoebe stuck her slender arm in to pull out the apple juice.

"Isn't it time for presents, Phoebes?"

"Dad's not dressed up as Santa yet. He can't find the beard."

"Get him to hurry up, then!"

Everyone was sitting around the tree and talking, the kids sprawled out like cats on the carpet, as close as they could get to the heaped, brightly wrapped gifts. The television was talking, too, though nobody was listening to it. Seats on the couches were snapped up as soon as they were evacuated; Marty lingered in the doorway, sipping at his drink.

"Hey," he called out. "Quiet everyone! Here comes the big man!"

"It's Santa!" squealed Emily as her uncle bustled in, bellowing "Ho, ho, ho," and adjusting his felt beard, to

#4

Sounds take on a different texture. They seem richer and more varied. The wail of a police siren was deafening when it cut across a conversation; now it interrupts my thoughts pleasantly, as a logical punctuation to my train of thought. I listen to the siren pass, then carefully step back into my thoughts. The bark of a dog, the rustle of the trees, the squick of my wet trainers on the pavement: all these things are the soundtrack to the world, which human conversation does nothing but drown out. Words do not add anything useful.

#5

And then my voice comes back one morning, suddenly, when my girlfriend asks me whether I'd like toast for breakfast and I say "Yes, please," just like that, without even thinking. My girlfriend puts the bread under the grill before she realises what happened, and then her only response is to mutter "Oh, good."

had expected, cooler than outside but still humid, and so full of people that the air felt thick and stale. Her mother pulled her past row after already filled row until they found room just behind the wings.

"I wanted the window seat," Miguel said.

"You can have it on the way back," Josue replied, already fastening his seat belt.

Mara sat with her mother while an old man took the empty spot next to Miguel. More people filed past them until the plane was full. It smelled of tobacco and sweat and Mara thought of her father again. He was always washing his hands with the bar of white soap on the ceramic dish in the bathroom. She could almost smell it, that soap mixed with sweet cigar smoke, the grease he combed through his straight black hair, the cologne slapped on his face and neck after he shaved.

"Mami," Josue said, pale as if he'd seen a ghost, "Papi is outside."

Their mother fumbled to unlatch her seat belt and look, over the protesting old man beside Miguel. Mara couldn't see past her or figure out how to undo her own restraint. Frowning, she looked out her own window and there, where the grass met the asphalt of the runway, was the man in white.

"Mami," she whispered, but her mother was shouting, and there was a commotion at the front of the plane. Police had come on board and were fighting with a young man who screamed at them to let him go.

"I don't want to join the army!" he shrieked. "My family is already in Miami, please!" The officers beat him with their batons until he stopped fighting back, then cuffed him and dragged him away while the stewardesses averted their eyes.

The man in white tipped his hat at Mara and walked forward until his figure was obscured by the broad metal wing. She realized she had been holding her breath and when she inhaled, her mouth was filled with the scent of jasmine. He did not emerge on the other side.

And then her father was there, crying and kissing Mara's face as if he hadn't seen it in years. Cradled in his arms like a child was Victoria.

He handed the doll to Mara, who hugged it tightly as her parents embraced. Other passengers grumbled and the crew began preparations for takeoff. Mara would always remember that moment – not the sweet painted face of her doll, its pristine dress that now smelled like soap and smoke, but the sight of her mother slowly releasing her father's hand as he walked to the last empty seat at the front of the plane with nothing but the clothes he wore.

#2

Phones are a problem. Should I answer, knowing that all I can offer the receiver is silence? If the person on the other end does not know that I cannot speak, then what will they think? Even if they do know, and just want to leave a message for someone else, I can't acknowledge the message. This opens up a whole new vein of worry: what if I have to call an ambulance? Technology must exist for people who can't speak – I've seen 'textphone' mentioned on TV show call-ins – but I do not have these technologies. I picture myself standing over a body twisting in the throes of a seizure, the telephone gripped in my hand as I mouth soundlessly at the emergency operator. Or standing outside a burning house, sleeping people trapped inside, the world deaf to my useless screams.

#3

To avoid damaging my vocal chords further, I ration myself to three sentences a day. This soon proves to be more than enough, and some days I do not even use those sentences. I consider saving them up, so that at the end of the week I can say 21 sentences all together, one after another. I think about all the sublime, shocking, erotic things I could say in 21 sentences. But by the end of the week, nothing I think seems important enough to risk damaging my vocal chords. Even if the damage was not a factor, nothing I can think of is worth saving up. And who would I say those precious words to, anyway? Who would listen closely enough that it was worth saving words so jealously, so carefully?

ON LOSING MY VOICE FOR A FORTNIGHT
kirsty logan

#1

For the first few days, every time I get on the bus or walk to the library or go to the café round the corner for a cup of tea, I point at my throat and mouth *sorry, I can't speak*. Sometimes I don't try for words at all. I just point to my throat and open my mouth to show that no sound comes out. Waiters hand me menus to point at what I want; bus drivers print my ticket based on the money I've deposited. But I soon tire of this. I stop telling people I can't talk, and I just don't talk. I still point at things on the menu and put my money in the bus ticket machine without speaking. Nothing changes. People might find me rude for not saying 'please' and 'thank you', but they do not mention it. I am beginning to enjoy muteness. I go for days without checking whether my voice has returned.

PICTURE WINDOW
len kuntz

Sarah left earlier. I heard her heavy footfalls on the floor above me. In my mind I traced her movements – precisely, I believed – from the coffee machine to the kitchen to the refrigerator to the sink to the bathroom to the shower. I lost her for a while until she left the house for work. After she'd gone I tiptoed up from the basement. I don't know why I tiptoed because I was alone in the house. I skulked into the bedroom that I used to share with Sarah and I knelt down on the shag and pressed my cheek to the sheets on her side. They were no longer warm but nevertheless I picked up a hint of lanolin and almond scent, which became the ingredients of my morning's dismantling. I cried tantrum-hard. I twisted the sheet ends in my fists until the cloth ripped. Now I get a boiling cup of coffee and let it burn my lips and gums. It feels like delicious torture. My teeth start to smolder from the heat and just as I find a piece of paper to write Sarah a note someone throws a hard object at the picture window and I jerk and steaming java splashes over my hand, scalding me.

I expect the glass to be cracked but it only wobbles.

I go outside and see the culprit: this hairball cluster of what used to be a robin, one wing torqued stiff like a bent toilet brush, its tiny bird feet gone or sucked so far into its gut as to be invisible. I think about picking it up and wrapping it in newsprint and burying it back where we keep the garbage and recycle cans but I don't do any of that. Instead I go inside and pour more coffee and then the next bird crashes into the window, only I'm watching clear-eyed as this one kisses it hard. That's the problem with having windows that are too clean: it's as if nothing's there, no barrier or separation, while in the end it's the very thing which does you in.

Now a smudged streak the color of strawberry jam mars the glass, left of center. I don't bother getting up. It hit so fierce the bird had to be dead. Besides, I don't feel like moving. I sit there staring at the smear of blood when the next bird bangs into the window. It's a wet, soupy blur of brown, so I can't tell the type, but what I do know is that this one's dead, too.

Almost rhythmically, every twenty minutes or so, a bird slams into the picture window. Once two birds Kamikaze together and I think how cute and interesting that is. I wonder if it was some sort of lover's pact they'd made. People are known to do anything for love. I have to remind myself that these aren't humans. By this point I've been adding bourbon to my coffee and I'm on cup number whatever, yet I'm not hallucinating. This death is the real thing.

By the time Sarah comes home I imagine there will be a small heap of dead birds, maybe enough carnage that it will reach the bottom window sill. I could jump on top; pretend it's only a mound of fallen maple leaves. I did that when I was a kid. I could add my body to the others

I went back to watch from the kitchen window but she was already gone.

It was Monday, and I was hungry.
And thirstier still.

Why did it have to be black? If it was red, at least it would be biblical.

grandchildren."

"That's a terrible reason to have a kid."

"It's a reason, at least."

I went back to the kitchen and sat alone, nursing the ache in my belly. I was hungry, but not hungry enough to eat the raw bacon. Not yet.

She woke at noon on Sunday and vomited, twice. I cleaned up after her, and when I went to rinse the cloth beneath the black water running from the bathroom tap I heard her stand and go to the door.

"Liri. Get back in bed."

"I need more Panadol."

"Then I'll go get it," I said, and lit a match. In the dance of the flame her eyes were sunken deep into her skull, bruised so blue she looked like a corpse. Her hands trembled pale by her side. "I'll get it," I said. "I'll go see how Bobby's doing."

"You won't," she said. "You stay here. Do the bills and wank to Brando."

"Liri," I said, and before I could move she snatched up the umbrella and stepped out the door.

I ran after her, but only as far as the front steps, beneath the safety of the awning. She was already out in the rain, and I could see it bending the umbrella down, creaking, threatening to break those slim fingers. I shouted her name.

I could see her feet, and they surely walked on something, but it wasn't grass or mud or pavement or anything in between. It was a black carpet, and when the rain hit it there was no sound. Only the rattle on our tin roof, and me calling, and the doom-drumming of my heartbeat in my ears.

and let Sarah sort it out for herself but I don't because they say suicide is an act of conceit, one of the most selfish there is, and I should know. My father's brains got washed off the den wall and then painted over with two coats of ocher flat, but I still see the wall as freshly blood-splattered even though I haven't been in that house for more than a decade. Sarah says that right there is my problem – that I can't let go and yet I won't talk about it. She says it has leeches into our life no different than asbestos or invisible toxins from contaminated canisters. She might be right. My judgment's been off for a while now. Any guy who can sit on the sofa watching birds crash into his picture window has got issues.

Finally, though, I feel a twinge of ambition. I get up and rinse my cup. I find my coat and cram the bourbon bottle into the breast pocket, straining the satin lining until a seam rips. I take the top blanket off Sarah's bed, hold it to my face and nose, and inhale one last time. On the way out, I place the quilt over the murdered mass and I walk down the long drive. I don't hear anything. I don't listen and I don't look back.

BLACK RAIN
christopher hayes-kossmann

The rain woke us at one-fifteen in the morning, and I pressed against Liri until she murmured *yes*. We made awkward, spring-squeaking love for the first time in four months. The sky through the bedroom window was black, the black of caverns and blind children.

She purred into my shoulder and said, "Hello lover", and I said, "You just wait. I'll even make you breakfast."

I woke again at three thirty, suddenly sure that I was drowning, that the waters were rising up around the bed and lapping against my cheeks. The room was dark and the rain was a hundred hands drumming on the roof. It echoed in my ribcage.

Then, finally, Liri stirred and stretched and jolted me out of sleep. She nuzzled into my shoulder. "Is it morning yet?" There was still no light in the window. I squinted at the glowing hands of my watch.

It was eleven AM. It was Saturday.

She was a good Jewish girl, once. Probably before I met her. I taught her to skip her prayers, and how to ride pillion. She taught me to bite my tongue.

The rain echoed in the bedroom, and in the toilet

But I couldn't tell her those things. It'd break her down the middle.

"Maybe," she said, "Maybe Bobby has Panadol."

"I don't know about that."

"Of course he would! He's a queen, he'll have a whole cabinet!"

"I'm not going out in the rain," I said.

"Then I'll go."

"Fever *and* pneumonia? No."

"They can drive me to the doctor, she said. They have a landrover."

"Just wait a while. See if it stops."

But she was already asleep. She drifted and mumbled. In the living room, the last of the candles burned out.

I went to watch the rain for a while. When I came back she was sweating, and I wiped it away with a tissue. Her sweat left black streaks across her forehead, like ink worked into the lines of her frown.

For the first time in many years, I said my Shacharit. The milk smelled sour. We'd eaten the apples and the remains of the yoghurt and the heel of the bread loaf. No way to boil rice. The cupboards were empty but for sugar and flour and teabags.

I chopped the last carrot and pushed slices of carrot between her lips and watched her chew. She was whispering and I leaned over until my ear brushed her lips.

She said, "Why don't you want a baby?"

I went to the window and stared at the empty space where Bobby and Foot's house had been. "It's not the time."

"My mother keeps asking... when we'll give her

irons against my ear.

"I think I'm sick."

"You're fine. Have a Panadol."

"I'm scared, Thomas."

"It's just rain."

"It's been raining too long."

"I know."

We tried to boil the black water over a candle before we drank it. It didn't help.

My watch said it was eight in the morning but I didn't remember sleeping. The walls shook with the rain. It was a freighter falling on our roof, an army marching in circles through the garden, a shower of tank shells. It ached in my teeth.

"Is it tomorrow?" she asked.

"Just drink."

"It tastes awful."

I pressed a hand against her forehead. The heat beneath her skin made me shudder. "I'm going to get you to the doctor."

"You can't drive in this rain."

I hadn't the heart to tell her I couldn't drive at all. I'd looked out the kitchen window ten minutes earlier. The car was gone. I knew if I tried to explain it she'd say it had washed away, swept down the street and into a tree. Then she'd talk about the insurance, the repairs, we can't afford this, no, no, why didn't you get the handbrake fixed, why didn't you, why why why.

No, I'd say. The car is gone and the road too. The garden isn't there. There is nothing but black beyond the window. Darkness and rain and darkness again.

where Marlon Brando as Captain Kurtz stared unblinking from a poster on the back of the door, and in the living room, ringing, tinny against the glass. The sky was grey and hungry all the way to the coast, where lightning curled between the clouds.

To the west was the gentle sweep of the suburbs of Moonee Ponds. If I strained I could make out the prick of lights on the furthest rise, as distant as constellations. Then, to the south, the spires of the city, blunt-topped skyscrapers that didn't loom so much as swarm. There was venom in those stingers. Even through the hammer of rain the city was Carnivale, a mash of menorahs and Christmas trees and chandeliers.

She tried the TV. The signal came in fits. Sarkozy was to be buried without a headstone; a train derailed in Portugal. Then static heaped upon static.

I asked, "Bacon with your breakfast?"

"What would your mother say?"

It was good she never met my mother, who hadn't missed Shabbat in all her sixty-eight years. I doubt my father would have cared.

"You get bacon or you make it yourself," I said. The glow had already faded from her eyes. Four months since she had last let me inside her, and already she was rebuilding the broken walls.

The lights of the city fluttered, then went out, and all those streets and spires and twinkling eyes were lost behind the rain.

There was a poster of Brando as Kowalski beside the bookshelf. Tattered along the edges, faded nearly yellow, but there was still something about the set of his lips that made me shiver. I sat where he could watch me, and

tried to organise my tax receipts.

"I've been thinking," she said.

"About?"

"The baby."

"There is no baby. Save the thinking until a baby comes along."

"I told you. I told you years ago," she said. Her hair fell in dark ringlets over her shoulders. "I just want to talk. Like adults?"

"We have to do this today? On my day off?"

"There is no other day."

I set my papers down. "On Tuesday," I said, "I'm meeting Alex. Maybe I'll get a raise. Maybe not. After that, we'll talk. Alright?"

"Alright. Jesus."

I tried to do a sum but the numbers all blurred together. I went to the window to watch the storm. In the distance, out on Moonee Hill, the houses shone one two three, like Orion's belt laid across the horizon.

Then the lights went out, and I could swear that as they died the houses vanished too, that the darkness swept across with the wind and swallowed them whole. There were no winding suburban streets. There were no hills. There was only the rain.

"It's been heavier," she said.

"When?"

"In winter. Once."

"Not this heavy," I said. Out in the street the drains had filled and were vomiting filthy water up and over the gutters. The front yard was nothing but mud and leaves.

"Last time it was this bad it flooded the river," she said. "I saw a tram floating in the street."

"Take it off."

"Then I *know* I'll feel cold."

"If it makes you feel better, take it off," I said.

She peeled off her jacket. Sweat stood out in bold droplets up her forearms. "More water," she said.

I'd filled the glass halfway when I noticed the sediment swirling in the bottom. I carried the glass to a candle, frowned, took it back to the tap, emptied it. I poured it again. This time the water was grey.

"Something in the line," I said, and ran the tap at full blast. The pipes rattled in their sockets. The water sputtered, came clear, then ran grey again.

And then darker.

And darker again.

And then black, the sick black of ichor, of broken beetles and drowning sailors. It ran black until it stuck in the pipes and the sink began to fill, and there were lapping waves of black against the steel.

It was supposed to be stainless, but it stained.

Brando as Corleone, framed, hanging beside the bed where we made love eight hours previously. It was night but there was no way to tell the difference between night and noon.

"I'm thirsty," she said again.

"There's nothing. No milk, no juice, no soda. You drank it all."

"There's always something."

"You want to drink that shit? I don't know what's in it."

"I have to have a drink. I'm sweating so much."

She hugged me close and I could feel the heat through her undershirt. She was burning inside. Her lips were

"So? Weathermen are wrong all the time."

She pointed to the date in the corner of the screen.

"This is from yesterday."

"Then show me today."

"There is no today. That's all they have."

My mobile bloomed. The battery indicator flashed. It beeped twice, and faded.

"That's it," Liri said. "Just candles, now."

So we waited.

It was four in the afternoon. I ate the last ginger biscuit, and began to wonder how long the meat in the freezer would hold out. The last time there was an outage it was three days before lines were repaired. But that was almost a hurricane. This was just rain.

I pressed up against the window and squinted though the black. No sign of Bobby and Foot's house, not even a flicker of brickwork, or the long white slide of guttering.

Maybe it was an illusion caused by the sheets of rain, but I was suddenly sure that their house wasn't there at all. There was the space where it once was, and rain fell there, and beyond, all the way to the horizon, but there was no house next door. Only the gloom, the suffocating shadow of stormclouds.

I wanted to tell Liri, but I didn't. I don't know why.

"I'm thirsty," she said.

"Juice or water?"

"Water, thanks."

I poured her a glass and she drank greedily. "I don't know," she said. "Something about... it's cold, but I feel hot. I feel like I'm wearing too much."

"I wasn't there," I said.

Rain ran down the glass, leaving dirty black trails. It was growing heavier. It was one forty-three, and there was no sign of the sun.

I made tea and we sipped in silence. She read her book, a first-world-war history as large as our coffee table. I doodled bored-looking faces on the back of the gas bill.

"We should go on holiday," I said. "Somewhere with a beach."

"Melbourne has a beach," she said.

"A beach where it doesn't rain."

"It rains everywhere eventually."

"Somewhere with a lot of sun," I insisted. "Phuket. Maybe Spain. Somewhere where they serve white wine with breakfast."

"There's no such place," she said, a note of irritation creeping into her voice. "And we don't have the money. Not right now."

"We have money to have a baby, apparently."

The lights went out. The hum of the fridge choked off. The buzz of the TV on standby vanished with a pop.

There was the beat of the rain on the tin roof, and the panic of her breath, and the curve of her cheek catching the thin green light that came from the luminous hands of her wristwatch.

Out the window all was black. The streetlights were gone. The orange glow of the houses across the street were gone. The rain pounded the asphalt flat, beating on the bonnet of the car with great stone fists.

We lit candles and left them in little bowls around the living room. They made Liri's eyes seem very deep, and

very old. Outside, the storm grew louder.

I tried to call my father but he didn't pick up. My phone showed one bar of battery. Liri's was already dead. Our wallphone was a handful of cold plastic. No dialtone – not even a spit of static.

On one side of the house was the empty unit where the Scullys had lived until Mr Scully's liver went rogue. On the other side were Bobby and Foot. I never learned Bobby's last name; I never even learned Foot's real first name. They had a ginger cat the size of a Volkswagen, they planted snapdragons, and they were outrageously gay.

Their lights were out. Not even the glimmer of a candle flickered in their windows. That was as far as I could see; the next house down was hidden behind sheets of rain.

I told Liri I was going to check on them, and she pressed an umbrella into my hands. "Ask if they have gas cooking? I don't want a cold dinner."

"I'll ask."

"Or a torch?"

"I'll ask," I said, and pushed my way into the rain.

Twenty paces to Bobby and Foot's front door. The rain forced me back with every step. The fingers of the umbrella bent down around my head. Black water ran over my ankles.

There were no cars on the street. I couldn't even see as far as the other side of the road. The rain punched me in the ribs, soaking me from the neck down. I staggered and sputtered.

Then shouts from ahead; Bobby at the door, waving me inside. I obeyed. I felt carpet underfoot. I couldn't see through the water dripping from my hair and into my

eyes. Bobby said "Hello, hello, let me get you a towel," but my teeth were chattering too hard to reply.

They dried me, dragged me blind into their living room, guided me to a beanbag.

"It's like this all over," Foot said. "I was talking with Monica. It's all the way to New South Wales."

"But not in Sydney," Bobby assured. "They have sun."

"They always have sun." Foot took Bobby's hand. "Bobby wanted to move," Foot said, "but I told him no. They have no culture."

I could barely make them out in the darkness. The living room was glass on three sides and all around was the rain, digging trenches from the garden, tearing the flowers up by their roots. It thundered on the windows.

I said, "Do you have a gas stove?"

"Not for years."

"What about a phone?"

"I do", Bobby said, "but there's no signal. You'll just have to wait until the rain stops."

"When's that gonna be?"

Bobby and Foot looked at each other. "How much rain can there be?"

We shook hands. Bobby told me to pass a hello on to Liri. We shook hands again.

Then back out into the thunder, into the torrent, and the rain ran in black streams over my lips.

She'd plugged her laptop into my mobile phone. "Go dry off in the bathroom. You're dripping all over the place."

The phone sat on the coffee table, blinking. I towelled off and watched over her shoulder. On the screen was a satellite weather report and she panned across the globe to Melbourne.

"Clear skies," she said. "Look. No rain near."