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de Silva**

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**'Gorgeous,
transporting,
powerful: this will
be one of the big
novels of the year'**
The Spinoff

Annie

2018, London

Annie Ano Fernando doesn't care much for men.

Her grandfather died before she was born. She says her father is dead, though this is a lie. Sometimes she is attracted to men, but it usually fades when she hears them speak. Only one man has ever really mattered. In three stops she will arrive at his doorstep.

The streets here are swollen with people. She has overheard Arabic, Spanish and French since stepping off the plane. There are more South Asians than she has ever seen in her life. She has already imprinted on every grandmother that looks a little like hers.

Annie has to check herself to stop gaping. It is painful, so pathetically Christchurch of her to be in awe of London. She just can't grasp the scale. As soon as she disembarked she

was funnelled into the underground, the space between her armpit and shirt growing warmer and wetter the closer she got to the city.

Then she had heaved herself onto the platform of a windowless train station. The escalator marched its passengers to the top, shedding one after another, and she wondered if she should give herself up to something so relentless. At last she was shot out into the middle of a city where no one knew her or cared. Outside the station she runs into a dairy for a bottle of water and stares at the wall of alcohol. Rows of beers and RTDs. People push past her to buy their chewing gum and energy drinks. Everyone is in the middle of something. She tries to imagine what it would take to be somebody here.

At five foot four, Annie is by far the tallest woman in her family. Her ears stick straight out from the sides of her head, poking through the hair she uses to cover them. Her gaze is so direct it makes people uneasy. As a child, unnerving people made her feel like a freak. As an adult, she enjoys it. Her face has none of the poetry of her gran's, nor the startling drama of her mum's. But on a good day Annie knows she is cute.

Today is not a good day. Her eyes are puffy from crying. Leaving Gran this time felt like leaving her whole life.

Eleven hours in the air sucked every drop of moisture from Annie's skin. Her hair is slick, like someone ran a wide-toothed comb smeared with gel through the top and pasted her roots to her scalp.

Annie has just spent two weeks in Melbourne with Gran, Maude Aunty, Vida Aunty and Nathan Uncle. Technically they are her second cousins. Vida Aunty is her grandfather's sister Maude's daughter and Nathan Uncle is her husband. Gran lives in a small cottage in their garden, same as she did in Hamilton with Annie and her mother, but happier. Maude and Gran laugh like witches late into the night.

On the aeroplane she had wished she was eight again, sitting in a bath with Gran singing 'Istanbul (not Constan-ti-nople)' and pouring perfectly warm water down Annie's back. It was probably the last time she felt safe. Gran knew Annie was going to London, but she did not ask who she would be visiting. Nervous, Annie offered up a lie anyway, and said her first weeks here would be spent on the couch of a friend from uni.

There is no real viewing of the place, no skyline to stare at. The houses she passes on the bus switch from mansion to crumbling apartment block and back again in the space of a few hundred metres. Someone her age sits opposite her. They're East Asian, platinum-blond hair. The tattoos across their arms look like faded runes. Annie presses the bell for her stop and makes

eye contact. Someone looking this gay and this hot on a bus at this time in the morning doesn't seem fair. She watches them take in her muscled shoulders and brand-new suitcase. They smile and toy with a beaded necklace.

Annie wobbles out a smile in return. She hopes her teeth don't look as furry as they feel. She thinks about starting a conversation. Perhaps she could say that England is just as cloudy as she heard it was. Roll her eyes and shrug. Would that make them laugh? She wraps her fingers around the handles of her suitcase, wets her lips and then stops herself. Her first words to this Londoner can't be about the *weather*. Annie gets off without saying anything, lifting her belongings like they are weightless and swinging them behind her. The suitcase wheels thrum on the pavement like a heartbeat.

Annie finds his street following the instructions she copied into a notebook, knowing her phone battery would not last. It's nice, maybe nicer than she expected. Wide, with cute brick houses and plenty of greenery.

De Beauvoir Town. Annie could live here. She could get a house big enough for her and Gran. They would buy food from different stores like rich people – meat from the butcher, bread from the bakery, cheese from the cheesemonger. The only thing standing between her and a life here is a shit ton of money.

This address is one she stole, found etched in jerky pencil on the back of a prayer card in Gran's cottage, hidden under a pile of old magazines. It could have been rubbish waiting to be chucked, but Annie saw Gran wipe the magazines clean of dust and tuck the card between the same two issues. She darted back as soon as Gran was asleep and studied it. His name, Suri Fernando, a phone number and an address. She had to squint to make out the postcode around the words of the Hail Mary.

Number 49. It's big, two storey. A pretty wrought-iron gate. Annie's free hand trembles. She typed his number into her phone many times but never had the balls to follow through with a call or even a message. It's likely he's not home. He could be working, out of town, out of the country even.

'Alright then,' she says aloud. She has come so far.

She walks up the steps and knocks on the door, then skitters back down where she feels safer. Istanbul. Constantinople. Annie hears footsteps growing closer and waits, holding her breath. In her dreams she has stood in front of this door many times.

A man who is skinny and dark like her mum opens it, blinking across at her. He is wearing shorts and a blue t-shirt that says 'Ran London Marathon'. His hairy calves taper into ankles so delicate and familiar that Annie's eyes fill with tears.

He doesn't look angry, which is a good start. He wears glasses with thick brown two-tone frames. He's so stylish, with his nicely manicured beard, that it throws Annie. He takes in her

cheap luggage, her trackpants, her old, sweat-stained tank. Annie squirms, mentally punishing herself for not being cool enough for London, but she doesn't look away.

He opens his mouth to talk but stops, gaze darting past her as if to check whether she is alone. When he sees that she is, he winces. Annie's tears trickle down over her lip.

I'm your niece, she says.

Suri nods a yes and massages his beard.

Hi, Suri Uncle, she says, testing it out.

To Annie's relief he smiles. It's a good smile, the sort that polishes a face.

Annie has to stifle a laugh. Somehow Suri, her mum's closest living relative, is bald.