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For P. Pomare

Both of you

I would forget it fain,
But oh, it presses to my memory,
Like damnèd guilty deeds to sinners' minds.

– Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, act 3, scene 2

Doubting what you see is a very odd experience. And doubting what you remember is also a pretty odd experience, because some memories come with a very compelling sense of truth about them, and that happens to be the case even for memories that are not true.

– Daniel Kahneman

PART ONE

SHADOW AND HEAT

In the past month, how much time have you spent thinking
you will not live a long life?

0 – none; 1 – a little; 2 – some; 3 – much; 4 – most

> after

ONE

THE GREEN FIRST-AID kit is open, with rolls of bandages, eye drops, butterfly stitches spilling out over the vanity like entrails. In my hand are the tiny pointed scissors. Before my eyes, they open and close and open and close. I can hear him coming up the hall. The door creaks.

‘Jesus,’ he says. He palms his forehead.

I stop breathing.

‘Put those down, Kate.’

I toss them beside the sink and sit back on the stool with my arms folded.

His eyes roam over the floor tiles, the clumps of dark hair. ‘It’s a real mess.’ He stands for a moment, before reaching in under the sink and pulling out the hair clippers. He plugs them in at the wall, and they purr to life in his hand. ‘Be still.’

Blood throbs in my chest. The clippers sing closer. When the steel thrums against my forehead, I scramble up from the stool. My feet slip on the hair, and I steady myself against the door.

‘Kate,’ he says. The clippers die in his hand.

I turn and run. The bathroom door whips closed behind me. I sprint up the hall and through the kitchen, sidestepping the bench.

It's only when he shouts that I realise how close he is. 'Stop right now!' *Never run*, but it's too late.

I lunge for the front door, opening it inwards. I twist through the gap and try to pull it closed but his fingers grip the edge, whitening.

I haven't thought this through. I haven't thought at all. Goosebumps rise all over my body. The towel slips from around my torso and pools on the concrete. Pulling with all my strength, I turn my head back and look about me. I could scream. *Would anyone hear? The door is opening. If I ran would I make the road? What then?*

'Let go of this door,' he says, a sort of stillness on the surface of his voice. 'You are only making it worse.'

Squeezing every cell in my body I wrench, imagining his fingers crushed against the frame, clipping off at the tips.

'Please,' I say. My voice sounds so pathetic and high I hardly recognise it. 'Just let me go.'

The handle slips from between my fingers. My body thumps against the concrete.

'Shit, watch your head,' he says, rushing forwards, cradling my skull in his hands. 'What the fuck were you thinking? Look at you.' His face hovers over mine. The concrete saps the heat from my skin. 'Come on. Inside now.'

'No,' I say. 'I want to go home.'

He looks up towards the road, then back at me. The big wire-framed glasses have slipped down his nose and his cheeks glow red. His teeth are yellow; his voice is low and mean. 'If you want to act like a child, I'll treat you like one.' He snatches my head back by the remaining hair. The sound is cotton ripping in my skull. An electric shock shoots down my spine, poking between every vertebra to my hips and down the bones of each leg. I scrabble for purchase as he drags me with one hand knotted in my hair, the other under my shoulder. The concrete turns the skin over on one knee. Even though I know I shouldn't, I let out a scream.

I hear the sound first. A gunshot suddenness and my cheek is hot and numb. I look up and he's staring at his hand.

'I . . .' he begins. His face is still red but the anger is draining. He exhales. 'Just stop.'

Size is important; the smaller I become, the less he can hurt me. 'I'm sorry.' My voice is a wind chime. 'I was scared.'

A tear of blood rolls down my shin, carving a path among the goosebumps. He crouches. Hauling me up, he folds me over his shoulder. Like that he carries my weak and trembling body back inside to the bathroom.

'That was a stupid thing to do, alright? Where were you planning on running off to like that in the middle of the day? They could be anywhere. They could be watching us right now.'

I'm back on the stool and now when the clippers start, he positions his lean muscled body between the door and me. I can feel the naked patch in my hair like a burn. The clippers are whirring again; he brings them up my neck. *Vrrthonk*. The steel teeth gnaw, catching a thatch of hair and jerking my head. Hair brushes my neck. It falls over my scarred thighs to the floor. He thumps the clippers against his palm, blows on them.

'It's too thick,' he says.

I stare at the towel veiling the mirror. If I could reach it, pull it away, I would see that it's not real. I would know it's not happening. He runs the clippers through again, this time peeling the hair away from my scalp. A ribbon of it falls apart and strands stick to the dampness of my cheek. He flicks his wrist to whip the cord away. The molars at the back of my mouth are numb. I try to relax my jaw but I can't.

'Be still.'

Arms first, then legs, then stomach, but my chest will not become still. It rattles, and within it my heart is the quivering pulse of a bird held in the hand. *Can a heart give up? Slow down, seize its valves, and close like a fist?*

‘It’s almost finished, darling. Please.’

Vrrrthonk. The clippers tangle, clutch my hair like curled fingers, and pull. The skin of my thighs goes white beneath the grip of my fingers. This bathroom is smaller than the one at home. It’s tacky and dated. This entire house is claustrophobic. *Where the fuck are we?* I could scream it and yet the headache looms, sharpening its teeth. And one thought rises through it all: *He hit me.*

Stepping back with one hand on his hip, he examines me.

‘It will be fine.’ My voice is desperate.

‘No, it’s patchy, it’s a mess. You look like a starved dog.’

I squeeze my eyes closed and see a teenage girl. She’s sitting on the edge of a bed. Then she slips to the floor, where she comes to rest. Her legs are tucked beneath her. Over her nose is a saddle of freckles. She rises with the boneless grace of a dandelion, tilts her head, smiles. It’s the video of me. I’m reminded of why I ended up here.

I try to stand but his hand is heavy on my shoulder. It squeezes. I sit back down, tip my head forwards and close my eyes.

He takes most of what’s left of my hair in his fist and picks up the scissors. ‘Almost finished. Just don’t move for one more minute.’ As my hair falls around me, I imagine the scissors puncturing his trachea, lodging between a pair of vertebrae in his neck. These thoughts come and go as quickly as a sneeze. I remind myself of a time when I loved this man and feel sick with it.

‘Oh,’ he says, letting the word uncoil like smoke from his mouth. ‘What have we done?’

In the shower, I’m still trembling with adrenaline as I watch the water chase the blood and nicks of hair down the drain. Up in the corners long-legged spiders dance webs across the avocado-green panels. The water pressure is weak and sprays with a panicked hum. Soon the water is cool, and when I shut it off I can hear the pipes shudder in the walls. I dry myself and pull the towel away from

the mirror, standing before it. An invisible fist thumps my chest as, for the first time, I see myself.

You can never know the shape of your skull, not until you have peeled the hair away. Even then the skin, the shadows and light, marks and spots, can obscure the bone that lies beneath. Seeing it isn't enough because, as with anything, what you see is not necessarily all there is. I almost don't trust my eyes. It's possible the cord stretching to my brain is knotted, or my brain may have a short-circuited connection or snapped synapse. I see only my skull. Closing my eyes, I squeeze a single tear out. I try to forget but the skin remembers, the fingertips remember. When I touch my shorn head I gasp. The thin layer of skin wrapping the bone cage of my brain is so soft and smooth, like the pink foot of a newborn. I can feel the shape, the planes and the curvature. But of course it's what lies within that is most important of all.

I think: *What I know about the human skull, I learnt because of him.*

before <

TWO

THIS IS MY first memory. I am in the bath at the old house, the house down in Portsea. Mum was sick and we had a nanny who would drift about the house, laying out my clothes for the day, ferrying me to childcare, spreading raspberry jam over my toast and deftly cutting away the crusts. Her name was Eloise. She was the first woman I wanted to be like.

I recall snippets of her time in the house and her abrupt dismissal. I recall Dad passing her in the kitchen, his hand grazing her spine. I remember all the time I spent nestled against her chest as she read to me on the couch while Mum was sick. And, of course, I remember that bath.

Dad would eventually organise to have the hot water cylinder replaced, but back then the bath would only reach ankle-depth before the hot water ran out. Extreme emotions – rage, bliss, grief, ecstasy, agony – are amber; they preserve memories whole. I remember every detail of that time. I remember the gold locket that dangled from Eloise's neck as she bent to shut off the tap. I remember the cloying scent of the lemon bubbles.

'In you get,' Eloise said, her voice sweet and light.

'It's still cold and empty.'

She frowned and flattened the front of her blouse. 'You don't need to stay in for long, Kate.'

'I don't want to get in. It's too cold.'

'Come on,' she said. 'Arms up.' She pulled off my top, but when she went to pull off my shorts I held on to them and dropped to my knees.

'No.'

'Kate, please. It'll only be for five minutes.'

I let her undress me. She picked me up, deposited me in the water, then I screamed.

'Kate,' she said with an owlish lean of the head. 'That's enough.'

I splashed water over the edge of the bath onto the floor as she left the room, then to stop my shivering I wrapped my arms around myself. When she returned, Eloise slipped and had to grab at the sink to keep from falling. She clicked her tongue. 'You've got water everywhere.'

'It's cold.'

'Do you want to get out?'

'No,' I said. 'Just make it warmer.'

'There's no more hot water, Kate. We can't make it warmer.'

'Dad makes it warmer.'

'Well, I don't see how,' she said. She was on her knees now, dragging a towel over the floor tiles.

'Dad heats the water up in a pot.'

From her position on the floor she looked up at me. I splashed water at her. 'Make it warmer!' I said. 'Make it warmer!' My voice had become a shrieking demand.

She winced. 'Okay, okay,' she said.

She left the room again.

It seemed a very long time before Eloise returned, carrying a large steel pot. Steam drifted in her wake as she strode across the room and set it down on the wooden seat beside the bath.

‘Okay, Kate, move your legs away so I can pour a little in.’ I drew my legs up to my chest and Eloise poured. A gust of steam rose as the hot water rushed beneath me. It was too hot but it quickly cooled. Eloise set the pot back on the seat. ‘Better now?’

‘I’m still cold.’

She tested the water with her hand. ‘You’ll be fine. That’s warm enough.’ She tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. ‘Can you just sit for a few minutes? I have to get your dinner on.’

Leaving the door open she walked away up the hall.

The water was still too cold.

‘Eloise!’ I called.

No response.

‘Eloise!’

Still nothing.

Gripping the edge of the bath, I stood and reached for the handles of the pot. It was heavy, almost too heavy for me to lift. Stepping backwards, I dragged it over the lip of the bath. The water rocked within. The edge came to rest against my stomach. It seared. I fell back and a scream ripped from my throat as the pot tipped over my legs. I screamed and screamed as, beneath the surface of the water, blisters bubbled on my thighs.

Then Eloise was there, her hand covering her mouth, her eyes wide. She pulled me from the bath but the pain didn’t stop. The screaming didn’t stop. I thought it never would. A howl escaped that may have lasted seconds or minutes or hours. Hands holding me under flowing water. I couldn’t distinguish hot from cold. A long throat-scorching vowel of pain. This is my first memory.