

Petrichor

by Madeline Stuchbery, 2023

The gates to the property were open, just like they always had been. Slack, like a gaping jaw at the entrance to the driveway, which ran the length of the property like a spine. Lucy nosed the car up the steep slant of the drive, gravel crunching beneath the tyres. She put it in park and idled at the cattle grid. Looking out through the windshield, hands loose on the wheel, Lucy saw storm clouds on the horizon, blooming like ink in water. She smelled rain travelling in the air, heavy in the atmosphere. In a fit of movement, Lucy pushed the door open and got out of the car, both hands holding the edge of the window.

Everything looked the same to her. The scene before her was denuded and grey under the overcast sky, sinister in its skeletal neglect. The paddocks falling either side of the driveway like lungs were vacant and had been for some time. She often wondered what her father did with all his time since he'd de-stocked the place completely, the year after she'd moved away for university. That remained a mystery to her. It wasn't a wound she was willing to prod. There were plenty of decisions the old man had made over the years that extended beyond her comprehension. But, like many things to do with her father, she opted to let it be. To the left were the old cattle yards, the crush, and the small tin shed. Lucy thought of bones bleached white under the sun: a carcass left to rot in the paddocks. Lichen grew in dark spots across the cracked concrete floor, dotting the surface like cavities. The paint had flaked and rusted away from the metal jaws of the cattle crush. She remembered playing on the fence when she was little: how she would sit astride the metal bars with her sister, riding and racing pretend horses while her father and uncles pushed calves through for vaccination or tagging, the grown-ups whooping and hollering at the stock, cigarettes dangling from their soft, loose lips. She remembered how they used matches to light cigarette after cigarette, the embers glowing like tail lights. Tall feathery rushes grew by the cattle grate and made excellent toy swords when she was younger. She remembered the filaments of fibre that shook free and clouded the air as they slapped the feathers against each other, up her nose and in her eyes, making her skin itch. They would waste hours simply playing, wrestling in the grass, jumping off the hay bales and tumbling over one another, for what felt like an eternity, in that vast expanse of childish innocence. The same bush of reeds — now taller and wilder — shivered in the wind, the stalks whispering in the breeze, making a sound like a chorus of small voices, muttering things she couldn't quite make out. That's what she was thinking about as she stood by the side of the car,

one hand holding the door and the other loose by her side and the rich smell of rain yet to fall, fat and ripe in her nostrils. She stood, rooted to the spot, the wind cutting at her face like a blade. You wouldn't know he was unwell to look at him, Lucy would think. There was no sinister cough, no rash or growth that marked him out as different to the other dads at school. But she knew he was sick, and she didn't have the words for it, not enough breadth to her vocabulary. What had affected their father throughout her life she'd once rationalised as something similar to lightning; indiscriminate in who it struck, and when. Like a summer storm, as certain as the flux of the seasons, the weaning of calves and the baling of hay before the bushfires came. It was simply her father's turn. That's all. *That's all*, she repeated to herself. But it wasn't that simple. Not at all.

There was a summer — she was younger, before adolescence — when Dad took them down to the creek at the southern end of the property to go fishing and to trap yabbies. They all sat on the eskies under the tea trees and paperbark trees, the light dappled on the hard earth, dancing spots across their faces. Cicadas sang in a cacophonous chorus, so loud it smothered them all like a blanket. Her father's face was dark and obscured beneath his broad-brimmed hat, and she watched his hands stick a hook through a fat pink worm, observing the dirt under his broad fingernails. In her mind, that's how she always saw him, his features dark and obscured, obstructed by something she couldn't quite articulate. When his anger rose swiftly like a rising tide, when he turned to Alice after she cried with joy at her luck of catching a small slim carp and shoved the little girl off her perch, when he snatched the fish from her hands and struck her in the face so suddenly and without cause, Lucy didn't have the capacity to process what was happening. She just watched as her sister howled, saw the fish she had caught gasping on the earth, fins twitching and she saw something of herself in its saucer-like eyes, shiny and vacant. The illness they'd all lived with for most of their lives was something that plagued people like her father. A boy she went to primary school with lost his Dad the winter cattle prices plunged to 10-year lows. It was a bad year for everyone, and she remember how her father was terse and tense with her and Alice all winter. They avoided him as much as possible, walking the thirty minutes to the bus stop instead of waiting for a ride. But for the boy, it was worse. The rumours on the playground said it was he who'd found his father, when it happened. Lucy saw him after that as a forlorn spectre of the school yard, his sandy face a vacant landscape of grief and surprise like he'd taken a misstep in the dark and was perpetually falling, falling, falling. It frightened her to go near him, and she and many of the other kids avoided him like a hole in the road, something to skirt around.

The memory of the fish gawping and gasping by the hard banks of the river came to her mind, and something roiled up in her like reflux, hot and acidic. Her hand gripped the car door with a renewed vigour, and a hardness passed over her like a storm cloud. She thought of the homestead awaiting her up the drive, of the dark bedroom and its shuttered windows, the fridge barren of food. The smell of rain grew stronger, and somewhere far beyond, a low rumble of thunder heralded the beginnings of a storm. The wind picked up with a sudden fervour, and Lucy dove for the door handle, yanking it open, and shoving the car into gear, reversing so fast the wheels threw gravel. The first fat drops slapped the glass of the windshield loudly just as she pointed the car back towards the city, just as she started to cry.

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