

PINA FASTENED ALAN'S seatbelt. He was whistling softly and staring ahead through the windscreen. She'd brought him out to see the release of the black cockatoos in Murrungowar National Park; she'd thought he might get something out of it given all the hours they'd spent together watching the birds that flitted in and out of the trees beyond the back fence. Not that either of them had been *birdwatchers*; not in the way that other people were – those who sought out rarely sighted breeds or purchased all the right equipment – but, she had to admit, that moment when the tent doors had been unzipped and the black cockatoos had rushed forward into the open bush had been special. That first instant of flight in the wild, where they were supposed to be. She wondered how the biologists knew when it was time to release the birds into to the bush. She supposed they had formulas to tell them when to let them go. Having a set of rules to follow would make things like that easier.

A couple of people had tried to speak to them as they'd left, and Alan hadn't recalled who they were. Looked right through

them as though they hadn't all been living in the same area for almost thirty years. She'd given up apologising for him long ago.

'Do they know me?' Alan had asked as she'd steered him back towards their ute.

'Yep.'

'Well, I don't know them.'

Even Earl. She thought back to how, after she'd been working at Toongabbie for a couple of years, she and Lil started to meet up with Alan and Earl at the Boney Point Hotel on Friday afternoons; remembered how the two men had just clicked immediately upon meeting.

'We're cut from the same cloth,' Alan had told her. 'I could have grown up with that bloke; it's like we already did.'

Just before, as they were leaving the birds' release site, she'd seen the sting of hurt travel across Earl's features. She wasn't the only one losing Alan.

The road twisted back along the service road to the Pearl Point Track T-intersection. Then she had to drive down the main street before she could get back out the other side of Boney Point. Along Wallangamba Road, pale-trunked mountain gums and full tick bushes lined the sides of the road. She knew the tick bush flowers would arrive in December; it was one of her favourite times of year.

At their meeting with the community on Saturday morning, the newsreader was saying on the radio, Sol Petroleum promised six local Indigenous jobs. Members of the public voiced their concerns about the project at the meeting, some even clashing with supporters of the dig in the Orbost Community Centre car park. Coming up after the news, Roger Jones talks to conservation biologists trying to save a threatened local species in Murrungowar National Park.

She turned the volume down until the voices were a hiss beneath the car's engine.

'Look,' Alan said as they neared home. He was pointing towards a big stringy bark at the end of the driveway to Bruce Holloway's dairy, a couple of kays down the road from their house. From the heavy, splayed branches hung about fifteen corpses. *Dog tree*. It was something of a local custom, she knew, for the farmers in the area to string up the wild dogs they shot on their properties. The beasts decimated livestock and attacked native wildlife like echidnas and bandicoots. The dogs were all hung up by their hind legs. Some were the size of large calves. She always tried to pretend she couldn't hear the ricochet cracks of gunfire that came across the paddocks, but she wasn't completely naïve. She understood what it meant to live in the country; that sometimes things had to be put down.

She changed gears and heard the crunch that signalled she hadn't made a smooth transition. 'Sorry,' she said, but Alan didn't even look away from the window.

She was confident behind the wheel, but he'd always been the driver if they went out together. That's just the way they'd done things. He'd enjoyed driving, and she'd enjoyed the feeling that she was in her husband's hands. The day they'd decided that Alan was no longer safe driving a car was one of the hardest for them both. It had marked the end in a strange way. He'd been a bit unsteady for a while, putting his foot on the brake rather than the accelerator, that kind of thing. But then one afternoon he'd driven straight through the only roundabout in Boney Point. Right over the top of it.

'What the hell is wrong with you?' she'd yelled, horns blaring around them.

‘What?’ he’d asked.

‘You go *around* roundabouts.’

He stared at her, and she could tell he didn’t understand what she was talking about.

‘What?’ he said again.

‘You go *around* – she moved her arm in a half-circle through the air – ‘not straight. You ran right over the top of it.’

By then they were stopped on the shoulder of the road, just outside of Boney Point Fuel Supplies. She could see Maureen peering out the window at them. Alan was gripping the wheel with both hands, staring ahead, his knuckles paling beneath his taut skin.

‘Alan, what’s going on?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What do you mean you don’t know?’

He let go of the steering wheel. Stretching out his fingers and hovering his palms just above the vinyl. ‘I think you need to drive.’

She had felt a pulsating mixture of frustration and fear. She’d worked a long day – why couldn’t he *just drive*? But there was something about the way he looked that kept her from snapping. She opened her door, got out, and they passed each other as they changed sides.

Maureen came out of the service station. ‘Youse right?’ she called.

‘Fine,’ she shouted back.

Alan was already sitting in the passenger seat, hands under his armpits for warmth. She started the ute and steered back out onto the road. Dusk had set in: the tree trunks appeared white

and were lined against the edge of the road like teeth. Alan said nothing, just stared out into the growing darkness. When they reached home, she turned off the ignition and they sat in the dark until their eyes adjusted.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked.

The only sound in the space where his answer should have been was the wind.

Now, as she pulled into their driveway, she noticed that the weatherboards on their house were flaking, the boards of the verandah were sagging in places. The wire fence down along the side of the shed was rusty and slack. Fixing things like that used to be Alan’s job.

After the roundabout incident, things had moved quickly. Their local GP had referred Alan to the Cognitive Dementia and Memory Service clinic in Bairnsdale, a two-hour drive away. The neuropsychologist there, Doctor Ellen Nash, was a slim woman, who was wearing a gold brooch shaped like a sparrow’s skull when they first met her.

‘I know, it’s a bit cliché,’ she’d said when Pina had commented on it, ‘but I really like birds and brains.’

She’d sent Alan for an MRI, and then had conducted a series of tests.

‘Some of the things I ask you may seem a little strange,’ she had warned Alan at the start. ‘What’s the date today?’ she asked first.

‘The fifteenth.’

‘Of what month?’

‘July.’

She wrote something on the pad in front of her. ‘Do you know who the prime minister was before Tony Abbott?’

'I can see his face,' Alan said, 'but I can't think of his name.'

'It's Kev ...' she said. 'Kevin Rrr ...'

You know this one, Pina thought, urging Alan on. The guy had been a real disappointment, as Alan had told her often enough.

'Can you take this piece of paper,' Doctor Nash asked, 'and draw me a clock face with the hands pointing to a quarter past eight?'

Alan picked up the pen and drew a circle. His hand hovered above it for a beat, then he wrote down all the numbers along the right side of the clock. The left side remained blank.

'Now the hands. A quarter past eight.'

He had drawn two lines. Both pointed into the jumble of numbers with no logic.

'I'm going to read you a list of words,' the doctor said next. 'When I'm finished, I want you to repeat as many of those words as you can. Cloud, fish, paint, dentist, ladder, chicken, banana, telephone, truck.'

'Truck,' Alan said. 'That was the last one. Chicken.'

'Any others?'

'Banana ... cloud, fish, pa ...'

It was as if there was nothing left in his mind except dust and vapours.

'Alan,' Doctor Nash said, 'how are you coping at home?'

'Fine,' he whispered.

The doctor had given them her diagnosis at the end of the session. *Early on-set*.

The words had resounded in Pina's head. There was a distance to them, a mutedness.

'*Alzheimer's?*' she kept saying.

Alan's jaw was set and he wouldn't meet her eyes.

'But he's not old,' she'd said to Doctor Nash. 'He's sixty. This is an old person's disease, isn't it?'

Sitting there together in the ute, as the engine cooled and darkness fell, she thought about how that was the difference now: he did seem old these days.

Alan was still staring out the window blankly. His fingers splayed across his thighs. The car door seemed unusually heavy as she pushed it open. Her legs were stiff from the long drive, and she stumbled a little as she got out, and thought back to how the black cockatoos had seemed cumbersome initially, as though they'd needed a few moments to get used to the heft of their own wings.

'Come on,' she said after she'd walked around to Alan's side. 'Let's get you inside.'