

BEFORE

YOU

KNEW

MY

NAME

JACQUELINE BUBLITZ

'Unusual, beautiful, feminist, gripping, deserves to win prizes.

I loved it so much' MARIAN KEYES

BEFORE YOU
KNEW MY NAME

Jacqueline 'Rock' Bublitz is a writer, feminist, and arachnophobe who lives between Melbourne, Australia and her hometown on the west coast of New Zealand's North Island. She wrote her debut novel *Before You Knew My Name* after spending a summer in New York, where she hung around morgues and the dark corners of city parks (and the human psyche) far too often. She is now working on her second novel, where she continues to explore the grand themes of love, loss and connection.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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FOR MY DAD, ON THE OTHER SIDE

The desire to go home that is a desire to be whole, to know where you are, to be the point of intersection of all the lines drawn through all the stars, to be the constellation-maker and the center of the world, that center called love. To awaken from sleep, to rest from awakening, to tame the animal, to let the soul go wild, to shelter in darkness and blaze with light, to cease to speak and be perfectly understood.

REBECCA SOLNIT

If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere.

THEME FROM *NEW YORK, NEW YORK*

YOU WILL ALREADY HAVE AN IDEA OF ME.

There are enough of us dead girls out there. From a distance, so many of our stories look the same. That's bound to happen when someone on the outside tells the story, speaks as if they knew us. They pick over our remains, craft characters from our ashes, and this is what the living get left with. Someone else's impression of who we used to be.

If I tell you my story. If I let you know what happened to me. Maybe you'll see who I was. Who I am. Maybe you'll like the truth of me better, and maybe you'll wish this for every dead girl from now on. The chance to speak for herself, to be known for more than her ending.

Wouldn't that be something. After everything we've lost.

ONE

THE FIRST THING I UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE CITY I WILL DIE IN: it beats like a heart. My feet have barely hit the pavement, the bus that delivered me here has only just hissed away from the curb, when I feel the pulse of New York, the hammering. There are people everywhere, rushing to its rhythm, and I stand open-mouthed in the middle of the widest street I've ever seen, smelling, tasting the real world for the very first time. Though I am named for a girl who fell down a rabbit hole, I feel in this moment as if I have climbed up out of the darkness and left the distortion of my old life behind me. If you were to look back, you'd see all the four-way stop signs and the star-spangled flags of small-town America waving us goodbye. You'd catch a glimpse of untended roads littered with potholes, and windowless convenience stores set down on otherwise empty lots. You'd see rusted ice freezers next to sliding glass doors, and nine-dollar bottles of liquor on dusty shelves. If you looked hard enough, you might even find

my name traced in that filmy coating, there between the expired packets of potato chips and the fading jars of salsa.

Alice Lee.

I am here. She was there. And then she ran away to New York City, leaving all that dust behind her.

The second thing I understand: I cannot fall back down that rabbit hole. Not even if Mr Jackson shows up at the bottom, his delicate fingers beckoning. I need to prove I can make it on my own, that I can survive just fine without him. I will not be like my mother, who forgave any man who said sorry. I have learned her own failed lesson, see. That when a man discovers where to hurt you, the way he touches you changes. He won't be able to stop himself from pressing hard against that spot, no matter how many times it makes you cry.

I will never let a man make me cry. Not ever again.

Reaching inside my travel bag, I swing it to the front of my hip bone. I run my fingers over the black vulcanite of the old Leica buried at the bottom of the canvas, feel for the grooves of the detachable lens as I walk. I don't know why I need this proof, when I have been feeling the weight of the camera, the bump and knock against my thigh, the whole journey here. It is not as if it could have suddenly disappeared from deep inside my bag, cocooned by my sweaters and socks and underwear. But I need to reassure myself the Leica is safe and intact, all the same. Because this is what I have left. This is what I brought with me, and it is a small triumph to know that Mr Jackson will soon realise what I have taken from him. If he does not miss me, he will at least miss how he used to look at me through that lens.

Everyone's lost something, Alice.

Isn't that what he told me, just the other day?

For three glorious weeks in the late summer of 1995, my mother appeared on a billboard in Times Square. In the months before I was born, if you were to stand out front of the old Roy Rogers restaurant, you could look across the street and see her beautiful face decorating the side of a tall, wide building, right there between ads for the *Donahue* talk show and a movie called *Showgirls*, coming soon. I know these details from my mother's stories of that summer. How she ran away to New York after one too many beatings from her father, as if there was a magical number for the endurance of such things, and he finally exceeded it in her eighteenth year. And how, her lip still bleeding, she stole money from my grandfather's wallet to buy a bus ticket from Bayfield County, Wisconsin, to New York City, the most faraway place she could think of. Her first night in the city, trying not to fall asleep in a back booth of some dingy 8th Avenue diner, she met a semi-famous photographer. Before the night was over, he had shifted her into his apartment, cleaned her up, and when she looked nice and pretty, he said he was in love with her. He wasn't, of course, or he was for a time, but he loved his rich wife in the Hamptons more than he loved my mother, so he eventually left her. She was already pregnant when he snapped the picture of her smiling face that would end up reigning over Times Square those three sultry weeks.

'You were there with me, Alice Lee,' she would remind me. 'Everyone looking up at us, as if we belonged there.'

I never knew if my mother told my father what he was really seeing when he took that picture. If he ever knew his unborn child was also there in the frame. The finer details of how I came to be were smudged, blurred out, by the time the story made its way to me.

These are the things I think of. The two of us on a billboard, high above Times Square. My presence unnoticed back then, just as it is tonight, as I wander past streets lined with busy restaurants and glittering signs, a crossword puzzle of names running down the sides of the fanciest buildings I've ever seen. Who do you have to be, what do you have to do, to get your name up there?

Just a few weeks from now, when people can't stop talking about me, this city will give me a whole new name. My real name will be a question no one can answer, so they will call me Jane Doe. A dead girl who—

But we are only at the beginning of things tonight. My name is Alice Lee, and I have just stepped off an overheated cross-country bus, only just started to make my way up an avenue called 7th in the city of New York. I am alert, alive, present, as I breathe in the peculiar smell of cardboard and piss and metal that is my first hour in this city. There is an order to how things happen, a trail of breadcrumbs I need you to follow. Right now, I want you to get lost with me, as I turn the map on my second-hand phone this way and that, following the blue dot that is me, right here, pulsing. In this moment, the lines and circles make no sense to me at all.

Here we are, on an island. Surrounded by water, and somehow this makes it easier to breathe. Delivered to a busy bus terminal

with two bags and six hundred dollars in cash, and an unfamiliar address stored in my phone. I am eighteen, just turned, and there are a million things I cannot do, but I can do this. You can't exactly call it running away. Though to be sure, like my mother, I waited to collect that extra year. Years are funny like that. The way a certain accumulation gives you permission for all kinds of things. Eighteen years old, and you are suddenly able to consent. Does that happen at midnight, or one minute past the hour, or is there some other calculation that makes you ready? Able to consent. Does that mean I did not consent before? It certainly seems that way to Mr Jackson.

Fingers travelling all over metal and lens. I cannot think of him without touching what used to belong to him.

I used to belong to him.

Now I belong only to myself. I am no longer a minor, a ward of the state. With the addition of just one day, there is no more threat over my head, no more list of strangers with the power to control my life. I'm eighteen years old and suddenly nobody can touch me. I'm so light with this realisation that, were it not for the weight of my bags, I might actually skip. Manhattan's wide, heaving streets seem made for skipping this first, beautiful night, as horns honk and engines hiss, and passers-by talk too loud on their cell phones.

I shimmy around these noises, careful to avoid all the concrete cracks, and the large, metal-framed holes that seem to puncture the sidewalk at increasing intervals. Cellar doors, I realise, but only after I see some of those rusty traps open up, men in aprons climbing onto the street from hidden staircases, crates of flowers,

bags of fruit in their arms. I have no idea where they bring these gifts from. What gardens have they been tending to underneath my feet? Perhaps there is a whole other city living, thriving, beneath me. The thought makes me speed up, shift my body closer to the curb, away from those holes and these men. I have only just hoisted myself up into this new world; I do not want anything or anyone to pull me back down.

As I travel further north, I move my head left to right, up and down, acknowledging every unfamiliar thing, greeting each green and white street sign, each gift store Lady Liberty statue, some as big as a child. Halal and kosher signs blink their welcome, and the cross-signal man clicks at me. It's my heartbeat that's as loud as the city now, taking it all in, and I have the sudden impulse to click my own fingers, hail a cab like they do in the movies. But the traffic is moving south on this street, cars weaving left and right as they pass me, claiming and conceding inches from one another at best, and no one looks to be getting anywhere faster than me.

Feet aching, muscles stiff from the long bus ride, I consider calling Noah, asking him for the shortest route to his apartment. But we haven't spoken to each other yet. Not really. Text messages hastily sent and quickly answered don't count, and I don't even know his last name. Thinking about it, I should probably be a little wary. A man opening up his home to a stranger like this. *Room available*, the advert said. *Own bed, shared bathroom*. As if it might be normal to share the bed, too. *\$300 P/W—all included*. I don't know what all included means. I hope it means breakfasts, or a cup of coffee at least. I've booked the room for one week

to start, and that'll be half of the money in my pocket gone. I don't let myself think about what might happen after those seven days are up, except to remind myself that a week is long enough to find another way. If something is wrong with this Noah surname-unknown guy, I'll simply find that other way, and fast.

It's not like I haven't had to do this kind of thing before. Only this time, if I have to start over, I'll be starting over in New York City.

Despite my sore feet, I feel a slow fizz of excitement, as if this city is carbonating my blood. I have come back to the place I was conceived. All those years of moving around the Midwest, of not knowing the kids in my class, or the name of my mother's latest boyfriend, or where she was when she didn't come home at night—they were merely lessons, preparation. For this. For standing on my own two feet, unnoticed, in the best possible way. Within twenty-four hours of arriving here all those years ago, my mother had come to rely on the sympathies of strangers. I won't do that with this Noah whoever, even if he turns out to be the nicest person in New York. I won't do that with anyone here. I have earned my independence, and I won't squander my future on something so hard won. I have 79.1 years promised to me, that's the life expectancy they gave to girls born in 1996, like me. 79.1 years—I learned that in second or third grade, in some school, in some town I can't quite remember, but I've never forgotten the number, or how it felt to count out the years I had already used up, subtract them from the life span of a girl, and see what I had left. Here, tonight, on my eighteenth birthday,

I have more than sixty years ahead of me. I'm going to make a whole world of those years, starting now.

Later, when we get to that next part, it won't take long for a man with fingers at my neck to prove me wrong. He will mock my sincerity, laugh at the idea of a girl like me making her own world. He will be so sure of his own right to my body, he will leave nothing but the memory of that girl behind.

We will keep coming back to this part. No matter how hard I try, the streets and sounds of Manhattan will fade, the men with their fruits and their flowers will disappear, and we will end up down there on the rocks. It's inevitable, no matter how much I try to distract you. Because this hopeful, heaving night is just one part of my story. The other story is this: there is the body of a dead girl waiting, down on the banks of the Hudson River.

The man who did this has left her there, gone home. And soon there will be a lonely woman who looks down, across, at the dead girl. I can see this lonely woman coming, or see her already there, and she's sadder than I have ever been, because her sorrow is still simmering. It hasn't boiled over and scalded her life, which makes her feel that nothing important, nothing meaningful, has ever happened to her.

I am about to happen to her.