

ALEX NELSON

*A Worm and a Girl*

In the middle of the road are a worm and a girl. The worm is translucent. Old flesh with a grey stripe. Perhaps this marks the head, she thinks, staring with a zooming concentration which makes her face feel heavy and dumb. Last night a month's worth of rain flung itself at the earth, and now the sun is seedy and slow. It squints obliquely, sweating the night off.

Bree stands in her nightie, a dim yellow t-shirt made for someone much fatter than she is. It sags against her thighs and shoulders. Across the front are the letters of some place she's never been. Her teenage nipples dot the 'T's in the early morning air. She is barefoot on the road. Her hair is limp beside her neck. In the distance a truck's engine grumbles down the gears.

The worm leeches across the asphalt, which is glossy and black after the rain. As she watches it closely, Bree notices other worms stretched across the road. Coming into focus now, they are everywhere, pale dashes on the bitumen.

Quiet houses line both sides of the road beyond the nature strip, in a town where there's no shortage of space. The telephone wires trace straight lines in either direction, and perched on these, magpies gossip back and forth as the people sleep. Black asphalt smears across to the gravelly edges, like thick vegemite pushed to the crusts. There are no white lines.

A car comes along the road. It is forced to slow to a stop where Bree is standing. It idles for a few seconds then putts around her and speeds up again. She doesn't take her eyes off the worm.

It's a butter morning. And the ants come crumbling in. A crack at the base of a brick wall sets its teeth on edge and braces for the ant march. Yesterday they filed out, quickstepping over the brick dust, preparing for rain. The bricks are old. An outer shell of white paint offers some strength to the crack, but mostly it stays together out of habit.



“I told you she's a dirty skank.”

Voices boomed into the toilets, spanking the disinfected walls. Bree sat in her cubicle on the closed toilet lid, scratching a mozzie bite. Mr Corbett had let her out of Maths again.

“What did you say to her?”

“That she's a bitch. And if she ever threatens me again she's totally fucked.”

“Hold on. I've gotta piss.”

Bree sat still and listened to the revenge plot on the unknown girl, and then to more episodic toilet intimacies as girls came and went. Someone hovered in the cubicle next to her. Bree could hear sobs under the jangle of the toilet roll holder. She waited for the bell and for more people to come in.

After school Bree went to the mental asylum, which stood, long closed and crumbling, up on the town's only hill. Like the rest of the town, it had been mostly forgotten. Bree did a school project on it a few years ago, cutting and pasting statistics about patients freezing to death and needing eight signatures to get them out and only two to get them in. She wandered the grounds, taking photos for her poster with a complicated camera borrowed from the library. The buildings were tall and straight and white, with walls of blinking windows. There were corners everywhere and old signs with names. One building had the words Toy Store painted neatly above the door. Gardens of giant trees skirted the buildings.

Then after the project, Bree kept going back to the asylum grounds. She climbed the few trees with low branches and rolled over the grass until her skin tingled with itches. She went up there one night by herself, but it freaked her out. The moon made the buildings and some of the trees

glow, and shadows seemed to bounce off all the darkness. The place had a glorious emptiness to it, like the dark patches between the stars. A broken happiness which made Bree dizzy. But the rushing threatened to beat her until she ran all the way home, stubbing her toe on something hard at the back door. She slithered under her doona, face and all.



The worm is gleaming in the damp. Sloshed puddles settle on the road. Bree folds at the knees and curls her feet under her bottom. Whatever purpose was driving the worm across the road has ended and now it is still. And so is Bree. The smug air weighs down around them.

Another car approaches from the same direction as the last. It pulls up alongside her. A woman winds down the window. She has grey hair and a vibrant green brooch pinned to her blouse. Her face is all concern.

“What are you doing? Are you all right, my dear? Is everything okay? Can I do something, call someone for you?” She runs out of questions. Bree looks up from the worm and acknowledges the concern with a brief smile.

The door opens and the woman swooshes out of her seat and on to the street.

“Are you hurt? Dear? Are you feeling ill?” The woman pats Bree on the shoulder.

“Do you live nearby? Can I call someone for you? Can you answer me? Are you okay?”

Bree scrunches her eyes up at the face which is round and flabby and dusted, finding that the harder she listens the less she understands the words. It’s like scanning through the radio signal in the car.

“I’ll get help, my dear. I’ve just got to... I’ll be back. Just stay where you are.”

In a flurry of silk the woman gets back in her car. She bunny hops around the worm, waving and gesturing her hand out the window, right to the end of the street.



Between the asylum and Bree’s home, a few blocks away, sits the face of a century-old hospital, stone archways and windows rising like a theatre set. Behind it there is nothing left, just a grassy clearing where some kids practise bike jumps, and beyond this the earth drops away into a

ravine. Trees cling to the soil as it falls. The hospital burnt down decades ago, and by then the town had shaken off so much of its gold-digging, early-settler population that there was no money left to rebuild behind the façade.

Cutting across the face of the slope behind the old hospital site, where the wallabies have worn paths through all the tangles of periwinkle, Bree spent a decade of empty afternoons tracing the maze of trails. Where the trees open out, she could stand on granite to look to the other side of the ravine, unable to hear if there was water at the bottom, but also silenced from cars and voices. A big old pine tree grew there, dropping arms of brittle tinsel in a circle. It's a Bunya pine, she thought. There were a couple up around the Asylum with name plaques and at certain times of year, security tape roping off the circle underneath. The signs read 'Danger: Falling Bunya cones from this tree can cause severe injury'. This one had no security tape or warnings. Bree liked to stand at the base of the trunk, eyes closed, long enough to trick the rabbits, who were back out nibbling when she flicked her eyes open again. She could hear their tiny crunches.

A few months ago, she returned to the place to find it was different. Someone had been hanging out there, had dragged an old sofa bed right down under the pine's canopy, with the bed folded out so that the mesh and springs were exposed. A tarp was strung above the bed. There were stones in a circle with blackened chunks of wood and a crumpled can.

When she first spotted the bed she hesitated on the wallaby track, waiting in silence. But nothing happened. No one appeared. Eventually the rabbits came out. They never seemed to care what changes.



“Mum used to want a dishwasher,” Brendan said.

She looked at her brother's blotchy chin.

“Yeah?”

“Used to whinge about it all the time. Don't you remember?”

He filled the gaps for Bree sometimes, like it was his duty.

They do the dinner dishes together now. Dad always at the sink, in pink plastic gloves and stubby shorts. Bree and her brother dry. The curled whip of a tea towel against a bare thigh. Bree and Brendan fling their hips forward and sideways to miss the nugget in the tip which leaves a

welt. They grin wide. Youse kids, Dad says. But he accepts a gentle whip to the bum with a bovine snuffle. No one ever complains about doing the dishes. Even when it's take-away, they find something to wash.

Bree tried the tea towel trick once, out of place. Other than tea time, the three of them are rarely all together, but about the time Dad lost his job they ended up hanging around the front yard one morning. Dad tinkered with an old mower, swearing at every piece he removed. Brendan kicked a stone against the steps. Bree stood with her back against the fence twisting a coil of hair around one finger. Sensing an opportunity, she raced to the kitchen for a tea towel. She studied her father and brother closely, as she wound the weary fabric into a snake. Brendan was tall but good at being invisible. He was staring hard at stone, shoulders hunched and stiff. Dad was an easy target. He was bending right over so his bum was perfectly aimed and she caught him a good one, full whip. A choking squawk fell out of him as he toppled over the mower, scattering handfuls of washers and nuts into the grass. Bree waited for her grin. But she could see bristle rise from his uncurling spine as he bellowed and span round to see where his pain had come from. His eyes clocked hers a second after his clumsy hand whacked her cheek. He cut a few words, but most fell into mumbles. He bulldozed into the house. The screen door screeched and banged shut. Brendan gave his stone a final angry kick and shoved Bree's shoulder hard with his hand. Good one, fuckwit.

Dad managed to sit through two meetings with the social worker at school last year. He jiggled on the seat with his hand fingering the keys in his pocket.

“Support network,” Mrs Embry kept saying. “Reengagement strategies.”

“Support network,” Dad nodded. The words sounded weird in his mouth.

At the end when they stood up Mrs Embry shook his hand. All the way out to the car Bree watched it hang limp by his side like he didn't know what to do with it anymore. At the second meeting Mrs Embry started talking about doctors. In the car they looked at each other with pressed lips. Bree smiled, her dad nodded and she poked her tongue out at him gently. There were no doctors.



Sitting cross-legged on the asphalt Bree's hands are flat beside her hips, her thumbs working the nobbles of the road. A third vehicle approaches. It's a ute this time, going fast. It barely slows down, just enough to swing around her, and a vaguely familiar face tosses a few words at the windscreen as it slews past. Maybe he flings her the bird. But the worm is all she sees.



Last Saturday morning, Bree sat on the concrete post beside the front gate. A couple of kids from next door wobbled their bikes past her on the nature strip. Two men in suits approached and stopped on her driveway. They each had neat brown hair and very white teeth. One carried a black folder against his hip.

“Beautiful morning, isn't it.”

Bree smiled.

“Enjoying the sunshine? How are you today?”

“Umm,” Bree said.

“Tell me, young lady, how do you feel about happiness?” said the man with the folder, holding it in front of his crotch.

Bree tilted her head to one side.

“Huh?”

“I mean, do you feel hopeful about the future?” He traced the zip around the edge of the folder and looked at some notes written inside.

The second man cleared his throat and stretched a smile across his teeth.

“We have some wonderful news to share with you.”

They talked and talked. The second man looked good enough to be in a movie and Bree wanted to ask them inside. Maybe they'd have a cup of tea at the kitchen table and she could open a packet of biscuits. But every time she tried to offer, they started talking again.

“Well we'd better keep moving. It's been real lovely talking to you.” The folder man handed her a waxy brochure, nodded his head and tucked the folder back under his arm. The paper had old fashioned sketches of animals and sunsets. There was a family with a mother and father and two children: a boy and a girl. The parents rested their arms on the children's shoulders. All four

faces had smiles drawn on. Bree tries to read the words and when she looked up the men were gone.



Bree shared the asylum with a few people from school. She'd known Michelle since they were kids, and Michelle brought the boys. They used to hang outside the back of the supermarket or on the swings at the Lion's playground. But these places got boring and they started talking about going for a drive. There was only Toby who had a car and a licence. Four spare seats and five of them. Bree knew she'd be the one left behind, so she asked if any of them had been up to the asylum before.

“What, the psycho place? Up the hill?”

She felt the warmth of their interest, like sunlight on her skin.

“Mum reckons that place is haunted,” Michelle said. “She said people used to hang themselves up there, like, all the time.”

Bree wondered how to reassure them, but apparently this threat was enticing. They set off at once, and four blokey bodies surrounded her. Michelle had to skip to keep up.

They wandered around the gardens, finding places to sit and drink. They tested a few doors, but they were always locked. By the time New Year's came around the place wasn't really hers anymore, and nobody remembered that she'd been the one to find it. Heaps of older kids came along and there was music and eskies. It felt like a real party. Bree had spent the morning straightening her hair. Brendan told her she looked like a slut, but she assumed this meant pretty in his terms.

By the time she got up the guts to talk to anyone, Bree had already downed enough vodka to feel wonky and bold. She joked with the people who knew her name and giggled at the ones who didn't. Her head zoomed in and out of it all, sometimes flying off away from the awkwardness and sometimes swooping back to the present with all its hard angles of light and words. At one stage she found herself far, far away stroking her arm with the sharp tips of pine needles and humming to music. She heard shouts counting down to midnight through the darkness and felt drawn towards it by a chest full of breath, but some guy's fingers were inside her, twisted round skirt and undies. Who was this lump dragging her down on to the needles? Where had he come

from and why was she attached? As she tried to stand up, his fish mouth flopped against her thighs. He twitched his fingers sharply. Bree extracted herself and stumbled towards the singing.

Ancient lollipop streetlights lined the road that circled the gardens and the party goers were sprawled beneath them. Bree stopped beyond the reach of the light and blinked herself back into clarity. Everyone was paired up or involved in something intimate. Suddenly sober, she retreated from the light. She found a tree to lean against and swallow down her hiccups. She was just releasing a long drawling burp when a cigarette lighter flared a few metres away. There was a face, bearded and grizzly, entranced in the flame. She walked toward the face and sat cross-legged before it. It was a man she didn't know, dank hair lapping at his forehead. The skin of his cheeks and nose reminded Bree of the kitchen table, imprinted with a thousand scribbles. She stared at him hard, over the shifting flame, half expecting to see a phone number or a game of naughts and crosses in his skin. The man didn't smile or meet her eyes or say anything. When the lighter blew out he relit it. They sat together in silence, and all around them felt the sad shadows grieve the newness of the year.



Lying face down and flat against the asphalt, now, Bree can feel the warmth from before the rain still trembling beneath the surface. She hugs the bitumen, pressing her fingertips against its gradations, the peaks and valleys of rock against the contours of her skin. The crazy wet worm is just beyond her nose now, concertinaing its body towards her in millimetres. It will never reach her. It clutches and stretches in slippery repetition.

From high up somewhere she can look down and see another vehicle approaching, an old flatbed farm truck. Perhaps there is a dog on the tray tied to the railing. He is tied tight enough, hopefully, that if he swings off round a corner he won't be able to hang himself or be run over by his own master. Bree watches the truck inching towards her flat body. Dream-like, it moves quickly but takes forever to reach her. When it does reach her it doesn't slow down. It simply drives over the top, bumping over the lumps of Bree and the worm. It crunches all the craziness, rubber against flesh. The truck drives over and over and over the two of them, not reversing but simply never moving beyond. Though she is above, Bree can feel its weight crushing her limbs with the completeness of water and darkness.

Eventually, the truck changes gear and rumbles away, leaving the two pale torsos demented on the bitumen.

Behind the hospital façade, beneath a Bunya pine a fly buzzes around a grizzled face and alights the criss-crossed nose of a man sleeping there. He is lying on the sofa bed, beneath a bulging tarp, with his hands tucked between his thighs. The fly disturbs him and he swats it away.

Up on the asylum hill in the buttery air, the trees shudder in unison, shaking free the leaves they do not need. A crack in some brickwork a few feet off the ground, which has been clinging to itself for years, itched incessantly by the ants that track their daily course, lets go of itself and the gap grows.

