

RAELEE CHAPMAN

The Undercurrent

Whenever I dream about my sister, I'm collecting teeth—her teeth—from the blue canvas floor of a boxing ring. Padded headgear is clamped around Karina's face, but her orange mouthguard is missing. In the dream, my fingers are pressed into her warm, gooey mouth trying to plug each tooth back into its socket. Karina's eyes are wide, her nostrils flare slightly like a wild animal that's in pain. Her breath hot on my hands smells metallic, and she tells me her ears are ringing. Lying in bed in the dark, pinching an imaginary tooth with my thumb and forefinger, I'm a kid again, waiting in the kitchen one Friday afternoon for Karina to get home from school. I haven't learned what it means yet to be abandoned, to resent my dad or to rage like my sister.

I was going to my neighbour Simon's after dinner to play Nintendo 64, but I would have ditched Simon in a second if Karina let me hang out with her and her friends. Dad didn't have the heart or the energy to mind where we went, what we did, so long as we were asleep in our beds by morning. Mum had been gone six months and had missed my twelfth birthday. She skipped town with her tennis coach, Mr Jarvey, who was from California and had teeth too white and skin too tanned for it to be real. When she left, I found the bike I had wanted on the deck, a red Malvern Star Freestyle 500. She'd taped a piece of paper to the handlebars and scrawled *Adam* inside a love heart. Dad never saw it coming, but Karina said it was premeditated. She also said our mother was a whore.

When Karina got in from school that Friday, I was at the kitchen sink, lapping water straight from the tap. She threw off her schoolbag and kicked her shoes against the wall. Everything with Karina was physical. At school, she swaggered and elbowed people as she pummelled down the corridors on her way to class. After Mum moved out, she hacked off her hair with the nail scissors. It was shorn off in patchy black tufts and spikes. Ever since the haircut, my friends had been ribbing me, calling my sister a lez.

“Adz, what's for dinner?”

“Dad said it's a makeshift dinner tonight.”

Karina scowled, “Yeah, it's makeshift with a silent *f*.”

I laughed, and she grinned before racing me to the fridge to get first dibs on whatever was edible in there. Dad rarely cooked for us. Around the time Mum left, he did his back in at work and was on compo. Mostly, he just sat in his La-Z-Boy all day watching telly. Karina and I did all the housework. She taught me to iron and use the washing machine, otherwise our clothes lay in a rank pile in the laundry basket untouched. Dad wouldn't let us open the front door without first buckling him into his back brace, in case it's bloody *A Current Affair*, he said.

The sun was setting, and hot air blew through the flyscreen above the sink. The bug catcher hanging outside the window crackled and thrummed as insects flew into its blue-lit cage. Karina handed me a can of tuna, so I popped open the jaffle maker and plugged it in, while she grated the last rectangle of cheese we found onto a plate.

"Where you going tonight?" I tried to sound casual, keeping my eyes on the bread I was buttering.

I was sick of going to Simon's. His parents, mainly his mother, had started to bug me. She kept inviting me to church, and always sat me down in their dining room to ask how I was coping. One time she asked if they could pray for me, and I felt like saying pray for Dad whose arse is glued to the La-Z-Boy, for Karina with her bad haircut, pray that Mr Jarvey snaps his wrists and most of all that my mother ditches him.

"Don't even think about it Adz."

"I was just asking ... there's no crime in asking."

"Forget about it. Not after last time."

Back in the middle of winter, a few weeks after Mum moved out, Karina took me ten-pin bowling with her friends. I felt like this could be the one good thing to come from Mum leaving. The bowling alley was huge with ten lanes and lots of spill-out areas with sticky couches, tables and chairs, other arcade games, and a jukebox. The kiosk counter had a string of twinkling fairy lights around it and free soft drink refills. Kids guzzled post-mix all night, topped up with Southern Comfort from stolen hipflasks, and made out in the darkest corners. The place was loud and chaotic; the lanes were well lit but everywhere else was dark, hot and stuffy. I recognised a bunch of kids from Karina's year at school and even some from the rival high school across town. Most of the crowd were wearing In Utero t-shirts or looked like they had slashed their jeans the night before. Their home-bleached hair hung long and greasy about their faces in memory of Kurt Cobain.

Now that we were motherless, we had taken on some kind of mysterious aura, and Karina was absorbed into a rougher but more popular crowd at school and that night by extension I was invited. Karina's group was made up of three guys with long ponytails. There were also two girls. I could never remember the guys' names, but I made an effort with the girls: Kym and Melanie. They dressed alike and wore headbands and sparkly lip-gloss. Karina had no lip gloss but chapped lips and crazy hair.

We had the table closest to the jukebox which seemed to be culturally enshrined in the 60s; I knew then why Karina loved this place so much. She was never into grunge. She loved Dad's record collection and they would bliss out some Saturdays in the lounge room, eyes rolled back into their heads, listening to the full fifteen minutes of Hendrix's "Voodoo Chile" like they were on some transcendental trip. Mum always hated Dad's music. She liked songs like "Sugar, Sugar" and "Be My Baby."

Karina sent me back and forth to the post-mix machine with a tray of cups, and I refilled them with Coke and Fanta for her friends. She let me sip her Southern Comfort, and it seared down my throat, till it hit my chest, fanning out and heating up my blood. My head felt light, and I started laughing a lot. Karina kept ruffling my hair. The guy closest to her rested his palm inside the back of her baggy jeans. She didn't seem to mind.

When the music rang out, Karina gave me some dollar coins.

"Adz, go choose a song."

I grinned, holding up the gold coins. I knew all the old bands Karina liked: The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin ... but the tracks were listed by song titles. I recognised track 43. Karina loved it and used to play it a lot before Mum moved out: "Stairway to Heaven." She told me it elevated her, whatever that meant. I pushed the coins through the slot and selected it. I turned around and gave the boys the thumbs up. I hadn't reached the table when the song flicked on, I stopped for confirmation before moving, my runners glued to the floor. Karina's friends were staring at me when I felt all the other noises in the room being sucked away. People bowling paused mid-swing, skittles stood still, a hush fell over the foosball, and air hockey discs slid to a stop. I could no longer hear the arcade games—all anyone could hear was the awful, goblin voice of Rolf Harris, his didgeridoo and the *whoop, whoop* of his wobble board.

Some kids from the rival high school got up and flung a basket of fries swimming in tomato sauce at Karina's table. Within seconds the guys with the ponytails got up and started smashing things. Kym and Melanie moved out of the way. Karina marched forward and hauled me by the jumper outside the bowling alley. Under the streetlight, I could see frost on my bike chain; it was about three

degrees. Before I could say anything, she kicked me hard in the shin and shouted, “For fuck’s sake Adz! For fuck’s sake...”

We ate our tuna jaffles standing in the kitchen. Ravenous, we then made seconds, levering the crusted cheese from our first batch off the jaffle plates with a butter knife. We made extra for Dad before we tidied up and carried it to the lounge room, resting it beside his elbow in the La-Z-Boy.

“Jeez, you two are good kids.”

His eyes watered, and his voice wavered. He told us it was the medication for this back that made his eyes do that.

“Pa-thet-ic,” Karina mouthed to me as we left the room.

“Dad’s just a sad sack now, he’ll get better when Mum...” I stopped, but it was already too late. I’d never spoken about what I wanted to happen, hoped might happen. I was afraid Karina would start calling me pathetic.

“If you’re that delusional I’m going to disown you as my brother right now.” She walked into her bedroom, not even bothering to slam the door.

A few weeks ago, on the first hot weekend, Karina asked me to go float in the river, just the two of us. It was the first time since the bowling alley that she’d asked me to do anything. We even invited Dad: he loved the river and had been swimming in it all his life. His eyes lit up as he thought about it and he shifted forward a bit in his recliner before he said, “Nah, Nah.” Someone might see him up and about. Karina and I rode our bikes to the river, each with a tyre inner-tube looped over our neck.

It reminded me of all the other summers when Dad used to take us for a float. He’d tie his tube to Karina’s and link hers to mine with ocky straps. Sometimes he carried an oar to push us free from tree roots and branches if we got snagged. He always wore a terry towelling hat and put white zinc on our noses. He’d bring a beer and a couple of spare cans in a plastic bag attaching it to his tyre tube to let the river chill them.

It was Karina who noticed my tyre deflating one day, air whistling out and wrinkling like a hippo’s skin. I was about seven and didn’t know how to swim. She panicked, shouting, “Adam! Adam!” She reached out and gripped my hand, dragging me out of the water onto her lap. She’d looked scared, like I could have sunk and slipped away. Dad said a lot of people don’t know there is an undercurrent, flowing beneath the surface in a different direction. It is up to fifteen degrees cooler a metre below, and if you panic, a churning brown eddy will just pull you down and suck you away.

Dad had patted his chest and motioned for me to climb over Karina. My pointy knees and elbows dug into her until I reached the wide expanse of Dad's hairy chest and belly, which was strong and hard back then. I lay there with my feet hooked up over the edge of the tyre. Nothing was sweeter than floating with him and my sister.

Mum never floated with us. She sat on the bank under a tree in a sarong and shoed flies off her homemade French Onion dip which she placed in a hollowed-out cob loaf from HOT BAKE. We used the bits of torn off bread to eat the dip with. Mum said the river was dirty, cold, and unpredictable with hidden things submerged there like barbed wire and sheep carcasses. Dad would laugh and say, it's not the Ganges, darl. She grew up in Manly and only swam at the beach. She made her life in Manly sound really posh; her school had blazers embroidered with a crest and a Latin motto. Our school had a rainbow lorikeet as its mascot stitched on the right shirt pocket, and the slogan *Live for Life*. After Mum shot through, Dad started saying she had always been out of his league.

As kids, our floats with Dad were long and adventurous, and we'd be gone for hours. Afterwards, when our toes sank into the riverbed as we climbed out, our legs felt cold and unsteady. It was then a long walk back to Mum and our picnic spot. Sometimes we'd get a lift from another family driving by. Mum never offered to drive and pick us up. She had no interest in where the river carried us.

On the drive home on those afternoons the car always smelt like sunscreen, Mum's coconut tanning oil and French Onion dip. Despite what Mum said about the water, our skin smelt ripe like willows, gum leaves and mud. My fingertips and the soles of my feet were soft and crinkled. The white zinc on our noses flaked away like plaster. Dad said moving water is never dirty.

I couldn't convince Karina to take me out with her that night, and I tried everything. I got down on my knees and pretended to be Simon's mum, with my hands clasped before me muttering about the restoration of the nuclear family. I pleaded with her. *Take me with you. It's on you if I become a Seventh-day Adventist! I'll just be like invisible or something...* I knew she and her friends were going to the river because they were underage, it was summertime, and really, there was nowhere else to go.

I followed her, riding slowly, always several blocks behind, to a picnic spot just off the highway. It was dark, but the moon cast a decent glow amongst the thick trees and on the water. Further downstream I could hear voices, talking, laughter, clusters of teenagers sitting somewhere on the riverbank, hidden amongst the willows. In the picnic area, some kids from the year above me at school were huddled around a gas barbeque, trying to melt Mars bars, pushing them about with twigs. Karina

ignored them and wheeled her bike to where the same three boys from the bowling alley were waiting. They sat by a rope swing tied to a tree branch. She dropped her bike in a messy pile with theirs. Behind me, semi-trailers rattled by on the highway.

One of Karina's friends was messing about, putting six heavy D-size batteries into a tape deck and another was holding a packet of balloons. Kym and Melanie were missing. Karina sat down and pulled paper cups from her backpack and began mixing drinks. I knew one of the kids by the barbeque, and he called out to me to come over, the smell of burnt caramel hung in the air. I walked towards my sister instead, ready to be turned away.

Karina didn't look happy but said nothing and passed me a cup quarter full of orange juice and vodka. The guy with the long blond ponytail turned on a mixed tape with songs recorded from Triple J. The distorted guitar and languid vocals of Eddie Vedder were overlaid with static, household sounds, people walking in and out, a door slamming. I rested my back against a stringybark, knees up, and sipped from my paper cup. The blond guy said he could hear Callum—the one who had made the mixed tape—masturbating in the background. Karina refilled my cup mostly with juice: they were outdrinking me three to one. The guys talked mostly about music. They wanted to form a band called *Into Oblivion*, they all wanted to die at twenty-seven. Go out like Kurt, a bullet to the brain.

After some time, the guy who was not the blond and not Callum pulled a box of whipped cream chargers from a shopping bag,

“Time for the whippets.”

Karina handed out the balloons. “Not for you Adz,” she said.

They cracked their canisters and filled a balloon each, sitting back to inhale. Afterwards, they flopped back on the grass, grinning a lot, sighing, saying yeah, oh yeah. I watched Karina go through ten balloons. She told me it was like a kaleidoscope going off in her brain.

“Stairway to heaven,” she said.

In most things in life, Karina went harder than anyone else. The guys stopped with the balloons after three or four and watched Karina, shaking their heads. I jogged down to the concrete toilet block, my bladder about to burst after so much juice.

When I got back, Callum was sitting alone under the rope swing.

“Where are the others?”

He tilted his head over his shoulder meaning somewhere in the direction of some trees a hundred metres away. I thought maybe they were doing some hardcore drug even Callum wasn't up

for. A tell-tale squealing emitted from the tape deck as the cassette began to chew up. I hit eject and pulled out the blue magnetic ribbon gently.

“Is it ripped?”

“No, I can fix it,” I picked up a small twig to wind the spools with after I detangled the ribbon.

“You know, your sister is all right.”

I nodded. Callum had ginger hair, and his ponytail glinted in the moonlight.

“We thought she was a lezo, but she’s not.”

I nodded again, focussing on the tape.

“I think my mum’s one you know?”

“A what? A lesbian?”

“I caught her in the pantry kissing my aunty Judy,” Callum said, running his hands over his face like he was trying to wipe the memory away.

“Your actual aunt? That’s sick.”

“Not a real aunt. It’s her best friend, we just call her Aunty Judy.”

I pushed the twig through one of the cassette holes and began to rewind the ribbon. I didn’t want to hear about other mothers’ secret desires. I asked where Kym and Melanie were. I told him I thought Melanie was hot. He laughed,

“They were not so ‘easy’ to get along with,” he held up his fingers in inverted commas when he said the word easy.

Without the music, I could hear dead tree branches dropping further downstream with a loud plop and the occasional splash of a river rat swimming. The groups of kids I’d heard earlier had dissipated and I wonder where they had moved off too and what they were doing. Semitrailers roared by on the highway roughly every few minutes, blocking out all the other sounds. I couldn’t hear Karina, but in the gaps between the trucks going past I thought I heard grunting, private throaty noises carried on the wind. After some time, the blond guy walked towards us, stopping halfway, and called his friend over.

“It’s your turn,” he said.

Callum popped up over-eager like a wind-up toy.

“Turn for what?” I asked.

He just gave me an awkward shrug before he trotted over to his friend. I heard the blond say, “She loves it mate, can’t get enough.”

I dropped the tape and stood up. The rope swing beside me swayed in the breeze, I wanted nothing more than to get out of there. I threw the twig I was holding into the river and watched the direction of the current. The rope was old and frayed, but I pulled it with me up the bank for a run-up. I swung out to the widest part of the river and dropped into the centre feetfirst in case I hit a sandbank. The water was deep, cold on the surface and icy below. I flailed and thrashed about kicking my legs, spinning, and churning in the black water as I screamed Karina's name.

She ran down the bank pulling up her underwear. She was wearing an oversized Pink Floyd t-shirt. She ignored the rope swing and waded in safely from the bank swimming towards me. I splashed and hollered.

“Adam! Adam! Stop freaking out okay?” She sounded breathless, worried.

Her face was clouded, and she looked older, like our mother only with short hair. When she reached me, I stopped pretending and trod water with precision, my eggbeater kick barely making a ripple. The three ponytails had run after Karina. Callum was doing up his belt buckle. They stopped and stood by the rope swing rooted to the spot, their faces in shadow, hands in their pockets like they were on the cover of an album.

Karina looked at me, I think she shook her head and shrugged like she couldn't believe it, but as we were treading water, it was hard to tell. She bobbed next to me for a moment before slipping beneath the surface to wet her face, wake up a bit. She stayed down a moment too long, her body giving in to the cold. I grabbed her hand, feeling the tug of the undercurrent, the dip and swirl of water turning back on itself and pulled her to the surface.

About the Author

Raelee Chapman is a short story writer from regional New South Wales. Her stories have been published in *The Best Australian Stories 2017*, *Westerly*, *Southerly*, *Mascara Literary Review* and *Singapore Love Stories*. She currently lives in Singapore with her family.