

INDIGO PERRY

The Party

The sky is dark out of the town: no sign of the moon, stars obscured under the clouds. She soon loses track of the direction the car's moving in as they leave the streetlights behind and the boy who's driving starts screeching around corners, the car drifting, headlights shining over the trees instead of the road. The bitumen ends and the car churns up dirt. All turns to black and the girl beside her screams. The one on her other side laughs, saying, *Come on, it's fun*. They speed up. She feels rather than sees the trees rushing by as they throttle along the road with the headlights off. He brakes. She lunges against the seatbelt. Jolts back hard. A roaring noise rises and it's like it surrounds her. When the headlights flick back on for a minute, she sees a motorbike hurtling alongside them on the wrong side of the road. It pulls ahead and waits for the car to draw level. The rider turns off his lights and so does the driver. All is black again. The car accelerates, the motorbike thundering away right next to her. She sees nothing, but the noise jangles her ears and she's forced back against the seat. There's no headrest and her neck is flung back. She can't hold her head upright. The girl beside her starts crying and grabs at her arm. The other girl yells to the driver to go faster. The roar recedes and the car speeds faster, faster, after it, and then a light appears and they swerve to the right, headlights back on. She sees a dirt clearing, and in the middle, a house, a weatherboard with a tin roof, rusted brown, and out the front, a water tank on a stand. Around the tank-stand a few rubbery shrubs have been planted. Other than that, only bare dirt circles the house. The motorbike has pulled up ahead of them, but there's still a roar in the air. Someone is on a four-wheeler bike, belting it along the dirt. Every time the rider comes to the end of the stretch and spins the bike around, he leans it over and rides on two wheels. She gets out of the car and slumps back against it, head spinning, falling against the open door and nearly squashing the girl getting out behind her, who yells at her and shoves her away. She wants to vomit, body and head seeming to be still moving inside the speeding car. The driver points at her, laughing. *Check out how white her face is*. She sees men gathered around the tank stand, slabs of beer under their arms. She wants to go home, but she's not getting in the car again, even if the driver would agree to take her back. She has no idea where she is or who lives here—only that they drove a long way to get to this farm.

She follows the others over to the tank-stand. Only a few of the men look familiar, and only from a distance. She hears a murmur with a sharp edge to it as she approaches, and knows this feel, knows to keep walking, eyes down, to follow the girls through a doorway into the house. More people are inside, some of them from school. But still no other girls or women. She passes a huddle of boys on the floor near a small TV screen. One of them lurches up and shrieks at her, his face close so that even in the dim light she sees the yellowness of his clenched teeth. *Get down and do what she's doing, dog.* He flings his arm towards the TV. She sees the woman on the screen, naked, three men holding her down. The other boys on the floor twist around and look at her. The girls have disappeared and for a moment she's alone in the room, all of them turned from the woman on the screen to stare with slitted eyes at her. She moves towards a lit-up doorway, to a kitchen, with a spindly-legged laminex table. In here, there are girls, some from school, a couple of older ones who have moved away to other places. She sits down on a kitchen chair. Someone says hello, and she asks this girl how she's getting home, arranging to leave with her when her parents come to pick her up. She breathes more slowly, in here where the lights are on, a bright fluorescent tube hanging overhead, and now that she has a way to get home. One of the older girls leans back and takes a long swig from a narrow bottle. This girl lives in the city now and is telling stories about her life there, about her job, the clubs she goes to, and the barman who gives her free cocktails. She names long lists of ingredients for cocktails while she drinks from the neck of the bottle. Her eyes grow sleepy. Her words start to slur. The back door swings open. The motorcyclist swaggers in, still wearing his leathers, the helmet hanging from one finger. Hearing the girl who's moved to the city talking about her cocktails, he calls her gorgeous. Everyone hears the tone, and she tells him to just leave her alone please. He tells her again how gorgeous she is, and all of them can hear how he means the opposite, but they keep quiet. Nobody wants him to start on them instead. She stays quiet too. It's not often that she isn't the first target of someone like him. She clasps her knees under the table and tries not to stand out. The man sets himself to making a drink. He pours some of the city girl's liquor into a big plastic cup and adds slugs of other liquors that he takes from cupboards around the kitchen. Pours in a can of beer. Adds a squirt of tomato sauce. Then, he reaches behind himself to prop open the back door. She doesn't know why, but quickly finds out. He skols the drink, bolts out through the doorway into the dark, and vomits loudly. They hear his swearing and the smashing of plant pots that he stumbles over. Then he's gone. More people arrive, people she knows, and she walks around a bit, talks, still staying close to the other girls. She's outside by the tank-stand when all of a sudden most of the party seems to have shifted to somewhere else. There's a shout, from inside. A silhouette of a boy fills the doorway of the house. He beckons. *Come and have a look at this,* he says. *You don't want to miss it.*

It almost feels fun, to go along. It's like she forgets. She forgets that the boy beckoning is the same one that twisted away from the naked woman on the television to snarl at her when she got there. His yellow teeth aren't clenched now. He's smiling, as though he's inviting the girls to join in with something pleasant. And so, from some place inside, she watches herself following the others. It's a place where she stands alone in a clearing where blue-white lightning splits everything apart, trees exploding and crashing down, her face lashed with rain. She watches herself forgetting. At the house with dirt all around it, raked up thinly to the edges of the timber slats nailed around the foundations, she, and, it seems, the other girls, forget. They don't think about the woman held down by men on the small screen of a box TV with rabbit-ears antenna, the shuddering light of it picked out in the murkiness of the room; the teeth; the snarl. They forget the man in the leathers and his vomiting outside the back door; forget the car ride, the speed, the darkness; the trees, heavy-bodied but invisible without the headlights. The her that's on the inside opens her mouth to speak, but her voice is drowned in the rain. This version of herself forgets nothing. In the weatherboard house, all the girls forget so surely that they laugh, giggle, even, as they are led into another room by the smiling, beckoning boy.

A wall of bodies parts. Someone shoves her shoulder, hard, so that she falls forward onto her hands and knees on a linoleum floor. As she hits the floor, she notices its unevenness, sees bumps and lines under the pattern of the lino, miniature hills and valleys under the gaudy print. Then, she sees what she's been brought to see. The older girl, the one who had moved away to the city, who went to clubs and had barmen gift her cocktails, the *gorgeous* one, lies motionless, on her front on the floor. Her legs are pulled wide apart and one of her boots is missing. Her underpants are bunched around the ankle of the foot with the missing boot. Her skirt is hiked up over her hips. Her head is turned to one side and her eyes are closed. In and out, she breathes deeply, audibly. Scattered around her are pieces of plastic ornamental fruit, a bowl lying upside down a little way away. Two boys from school sit on top of her legs. One of them is thrusting the plastic banana into the girl's vagina.

She gets up off her knees, and shoves her way through the wall of boys and men that has closed again between her and the door. They try to stop her getting out, punch her, yell in her face, but she pummels and yells back until she breaks through and gets outside. The other girls follow her. The men and boys stay. Some of the girls cry. All are angry. But when she says they need to find the phone in the house and call the police, they shift away from her. And then they start. They say

the things that make her go away inside, to where voices outside grow distant and where the rain thrashes down. It's her fault, they say. She's the one that got drunk and passed out. From the inside, she makes herself louder. She says she is going to call the police. And she's grabbed around the neck from behind and wrenched back into the doorway, into the room, and he, the yellow-toothed boy, growls into her ear: *If you even think about calling the cops, you'll be next. You'll be in there, after her.* She knows then that she won't call the police. She never will stop what's happening. She wrestles herself away and goes out to lean against the side of the house by the tank-stand, alone.

At school on Monday, they tell the story of how the unconscious girl had been dragged out of the house and over the dirt and put into the back of a car. Hours later, at dawn, she was left naked and still unconscious on the front doorstep of her parents' house.

She wakes in the nights, clutching her eiderdown to her throat, there again, pushed to her knees on the hard floor with its mountain ranges and valleys of linoleum, the girl spread out in front of her, the boys sitting on her legs. Sometimes, she finds the phone. She pushes through all in her way and calls the police. Sometimes, the girl wakes up and she helps her to get off the floor. She thinks of going, still, to the police. Thinks of asking her parents for help. But she remembers the cold gaze of the town's lone policeman. She recalls the time her dog was shot on the front lawn and how she wanted to call the police then and had been told to let it be. She remembers a woman on the ground in the gravel in front of the old train across the road, being battered at midnight, everybody hearing her cries and nobody going to help. She never sees the girl again in the town. She only ever sees her in the nights.

Indigo Perry is a Melbourne writer. Her book *Midnight Water: A Memoir* was shortlisted for the National Biography Award. Recent work has appeared in *Meanjin*, *Australian Poetry Anthology* and *Verity La*.