

# Driftwood

## Romy Ash

It was cold outside, but in there it was hot and stinky, smelt like something dead. She smelt. She didn't have to wear a uniform, so she stood, slouchy in dirty jeans and a hooded jumper. So this was death, she thought, as she stacked cans of tomatoes onto the shelf. Crushed, with herbs, whole, roma. It was death, and she was 21.

She could hear a woman wheeling a trolley, she could tell it was a woman because she could hear the heels, tap, tap, stop, consideration of purchase, tap, tap, tap. 'Do these come in blue?' she asked. Heather looked up, such a pretty name, such a pale face. Heather looked up, 'crushed, with herbs, whole, roma,' she said. Deadpan.

The woman, holding a pink baby's jump suit just held it there for a moment in front of her like a shield. Then something clicked and she walked back to her trolley thinking she would complain at the service desk. She didn't know why they hired these retards. With the high unemployment rate in this town, she didn't know why they had to hire these retards who couldn't even answer a simple question.

Heather remembered her from school; Jennifer was her name, stupid bitch.

Her face dark under her hood, she walked home in a starless night.

Her key was heavy in the lock, hard to turn in the cold. Her hands were heavy like the key, out of her pockets they froze quietly as she turned the key.

He worked nights, and all she saw of him was cigarette ash in the ashtray and little notes left on the fridge: 'I saw the old tom today.' She wrote one for when he got up in the morning. 'Boys baby suits are blue.' She put his note in the bin. To her he was a dead arm flung over her body; she had to peel herself from beneath his heavy limb in the morning. He would groan, she would yawn, she got up while he slept. Cold feet on the floorboards.

The shower was hot and her body tingled from head to toe. Her hands were burning. She brushed her wet hair down over her face and blow-dried it so it wouldn't wet her pillow. She could hear her grandmother's voice in her head, 'never go to sleep with wet hair, you'll catch your death, a cold.' She turned on the telly. The reception was bad, and the characters were shadowed by themselves. They were always one step behind, but they had no power to change their actions, they followed suit.

She made a rarebit, the melted cheese warm and sticky, and she watched those twins make their tea, and shoot their lovers. She watched the blood on the floor and on their faces, and she watched the serious investigators and their serious faces. They liked the blood, they didn't turn away and neither did she.

The bed was cold, cold, cold, and she wore socks, track pants, and a jumper. In the morning she would wake up sweating and have to strip. Two people are hotter than one.

She woke with his arm there, on her chest, across her throat and she pushed it up, (so heavy) and away. She kissed the shoulder muscle to let the sleeping form know that she still loved it; she still loved that arm even though she woke like death every morning with the weight of it on her chest.

As she pissed, she looked out of the small window in the bathroom. It was smoky with salt. She could see the ocean, small breakers crashing with their small force on the shore. The white sand looked grey, the sky overcast. A light mist was still playing over the dark sand. She thought she would go for a run.

The sand was cold under her bare feet. There were footprints down the beach, but no people. She followed the line of their steps running slow and drowsy. She felt asleep still in the grey world, the mist parting for her footfalls.

As she ran she could see the black stick of a fisherman ahead. She would run to him, then she would walk home.

He had a fish in his hand. She coughed and heaved her way to him, her breath was like the waves, it crashed against her mouth, she was suffocating. It was silver and as long as his forearm. He had it held firmly but its tail swung violently about. 'Give us a hand love?' He pointed to the bag up on the dry sand. She put her hand into its dark depths and pulled out a knife. The shiny knife and the shiny fish met at the neck and blood dripped to the sand. The tail was limp. Her breath came easier. He cut its belly

open and pulled out the guts, flinging them to the sand. A seagull floated down silently, as if from thin air and it ate without getting its white feathers bloody.

He scaled it then on a little plastic board and the scales flew off like a thousand shining fingernails. They joined the shells on the shore and looked at home there.

‘Fry this one up, nice with a bit of lemon and butter, beautiful,’ he said, and he handed the fish to her, clean and silver beautiful. It didn’t look so much like a fish anymore, apart from its eye, which looked at her all wet and alive. She hooked her finger from under its neck into its mouth and hung it from her hand, the tips of her fingers touching its sharp little teeth.

‘Thanks Gov, see you.’ He remembered her from when she had piggy tails, from when she held onto her dad’s hand. He remembered her sitting up on the dry sand all rugged up in jumpers and a scarf. She would come running when they caught a fish.

She walked back in her footsteps, the dead fish hanging from her hand.

She walked up the path, her legs brushing against spinifex grass, crabs running from the fall of her feet. Opened her creaky wooden door. The fish went into the fridge on a white plate. She took down the note on the fridge (it said: ‘I think my hands are blue’) and wrote another for when he woke up. ‘Dead fish in fridge, nice with lemon and butter.’ She washed her hands in icy cold water and brewed a coffee on the stove.

She sat on the front steps, coffee misting, breath misting, ocean misting. Gina walked up the path and sat beside her.

‘You going to work today?’

‘Yep.’

‘What time?’

‘Three.’

‘I’ll see you there then. You coming out tonight?’

‘It’s Friday isn’t it?’

‘Yeah. Wear your blue dress.’

‘It’s too cold.’

‘Wear that big jacket.’

‘Ok.’

She was lucky to have it, she knew. The job not the jacket.

‘Can’t wait to get the fuck off,’ said Gina, she was starting her shift. Heather signed in and Gina said with a smile, ‘I’m check out chick today. See you after.’ She was wearing make up, that orange lipstick they had bought last time they went to the city. She always looked pretty when she did checkouts, all neat in her black and red uniform. Heather put her hood up, and walked with a big trolley of returns up and down the isles. She put melted ice cream back in the freezer. If had been outside it wouldn’t have melted, but in here in the hot it was liquid. Her insides felt all squishy in the warmth; she might melt to the floor a mess.

In her big black jacket she felt like a bear but her legs were like popsicle sticks, her boots were too tight and uncomfortable. She stepped into the pub in her too tight boots and her bear jacket. Someone whistled when she took off her jacket to hang it on the back of her chair. Gina was there sipping her beer. 'See, you look sexy.' She said this with a frothy beer moustache and Heather thought she looked her up and down like a seasoned old man.

Heather shook her head and got down to business. Drink beer as quick as possible so that the pub would be bearable. She couldn't play pool, her dress was too short, so she sat and watched the footy, it *was* Friday.

She was waiting, she knew it. She was waiting for him to come in, they finished at the factory around one, and he would be here all awake and real. She would look in his eyes, she thought they were brown, she was so used to the spidery veins on his eyelids.

When he came in she smiled, she couldn't help it. They all came in together and she could see old Joe wringing his hands behind the bar. They shed their jackets like a snake sheds a skin, but beneath them they were still in old, dirty overalls and his hands would be big and cold and calloused. He leant down and kissed her on her neck, on her pulse, and she felt it quicken at the touch of his lips. He touched his lips to her neck and he felt like an exhalation. It was quiet in the pub for that moment. Then he laughed loud as his mates brought him a frothy glass and words that meant nothing. They shot these words at each other; you'd think they'd be too tired of each other's faces to bother throwing words like darts.

The drink was heavy upon her, so she sat. Gina sat beside her snuggling into her arm.

‘I’m tired, they’re going back to Jake’s place, you wanna come?’

‘No, I think we’ll walk home.’

She took his hand and climbed back into the bear jacket. They stepped out of the noise, the heat and into the cold silent night. Their boots crunching on frosted up grass as they walked across the reserve. It was a dream world, cold and silvery blue, he held her in close. The swings were hanging over dirt. They wandered down the rocks and onto the beach. Their feet sank into the sand. They could see the trawlers, their lights twinkling on the horizon.

She could hear the waves, but she couldn’t see them, it was a dark moon, not even a sliver to light their way. She pulled away from him, she could hear the waves, but they were inky black, even the froth.

She took off her jacket, dress, stockings, boots and stood naked every bit of her body acutely aware of the cold, of the slight breeze on her nipples. It was with sadness that she walked into the water and dived under those black breakers. She wanted to feel alive for one second; she wanted to feel close to death, to appreciate the feeling of life. It was like being burnt, it was so cold, she couldn’t breath.

‘Are you scared?’

‘Yes,’ two voices in a hollow night.

She walked out dripping and cold, and blue like a deep-sea monster, her skin like a corpse, her hair like seaweed. She looked dead except for her eyes, which were wet and shiny and alive. Her laughter rung out across the beach, into the sky and across the ocean so that they heard it on the boats above hum of the motor and they looked for mermaids in the waves to tempt them into drowning. They imagined love sliding their hands along the tail of a fish.

He kissed her blue lips full like the lips of an oyster. He expected to find a pearl in her mouth with his tongue. She sucked his warmth. She was hard with the cold, frozen, and before she had felt alive, now she felt numb, so numb, she couldn't move to put her jacket on, to wipe the salt from her face. All she could do was let him kiss her chattering teeth.

He put her in her jacket and they left the dress and stockings, like so many discarded skins on the beach for the fishermen to find in the morning, swept up like driftwood with the high tide along with all the other dead things.

Maybe it would be in the paper, *Dress Found, mysterious girl lost*, in the lost and found column, along side the missing tabby cats. She would have to ring up and claim herself. I'm here, I'm alive.

He made her a bath and she screamed, it was too hot, he was burning her, her body tingled as the numbness left, it was painful, this being alive. She howled and whimpered, too much drink in her belly, she was full of liquid, in liquid, she could

hear the ocean. She was too wet inside and out. She couldn't tell if the salt on her face was tears or ocean.

She got out of the bath; her skin was pink like a cooked prawn. She could smell frying butter. He was frying that fish, she saw him put it in the hot pan, and it crinkled up at the edges and curled. The pink flesh turned white, a splash of lemon. She could see the filleted carcass on the bench, all bones with just a head and a star spangled tail.

She sat on the old brown couch and ate that fish on a bed of new potatoes and filled her belly with something solid, something that wouldn't slip through her fingers like sand or water.