

The Charm

The first time you have a gun pointed at you, you're five. You're with your grandfather in a pub just across from the greyhounds. You're staying with him in his small flat in Glebe while your father's at work and your mother's in hospital getting you a baby brother. You're wearing grey school shorts that have sat in many classes before you and you're crouched against a tiled wall playing marbles on paisley-patterned carpet that's stiff from years of spilt beer and urine. Your grandfather stands near an upright piano that a woman in an over-stuffed orange stripy halter-top has just been singing along to. He has a hand on her bare shoulder. He calls out to the big-haired barmaid and shouts the bar another round of drinks, then laughs loudly to men with red faces, while his thin cotton pocket boasts his good luck.

Later, as he piggybacks you down the road towards another night of crumbed sausages, you hear fast footsteps coming from behind and a sudden pressure like a coin is being pressed into your head. You move and it moves with you. You imagine this coin, big and silver and shiny like the one the tooth fairy left under your pillow. You hear tobacco-smelling words you don't understand. Then the coin goes away. You smell metal and see smoke and your grandfather suddenly deflates.

The second time a gun is pointed at you, you're eleven. Your family's on the verandah, all together like it's a special occasion. It's mid-morning and there's a cool breeze, but sweat lacquers your father's forehead as if he has a fever.

'It's holding on,' your mother says, stroking your pet rabbit's ears. You wonder if she means holding on the way that newborns hold on to grown-ups' fingers. Or holding on like your brother does each night in a half-dream on his punishing plastic sheets. Or holding on as you are now to the lucky pebble in the corner of your corduroy pocket.

‘Can’t you do something?’ You look at your father.

‘Sorry son,’ he says, lifting up his singlet to wipe the sweat from his face.

‘Please Popstar?’

Popstar – you always called your father that. It made him sound bigger – like your very own superhero. When you were little you’d yell it out loud and pretend that you had to be rescued from climbing too high up a tree. Your Popstar was in the papers once – before he got in the papers a lot. But your family doesn’t ever talk about those times. Like they don’t talk about his long trips away. Or the baby your mother gave away one summer so she could still dance at night. Or about having to hide under the beds whenever the cops came knocking at the front door.

That first time your mother was proud, calling people up, buying extra copies of the afternoon edition, cutting them slowly with small measured snips. For a moment Popstar had become someone else’s hero and you had to share him with a freckly boy he’d rescued from the sea. ‘Saved by the Kiss of Life!’ the headline said – but you’d never seen your father kiss a thing. Two days later, after all the back-slapping and teacakes and late-night sherries, a newspaper man came calling by to say that the boy had died that morning from lungs so filled with salt that he’d take weeks to decompose.

Your mother puts the rabbit in your lap and goes to make tea. Making tea is what she does when there’s nothing else she can think of to do. The screen door slaps behind her.

‘Please Popstar,’ you say again softly.

Your father looks down at the rabbit as it lies limp in your lap. You want him to give it his miracle kiss. He puts one hand on your shoulder in a father-calming-son kind of way and looks straight at you, his eyes clamping your eyes so you can’t look away. Then his

other hand snaps the rabbit's thin neck. He says it's the kind thing to do. Says you can get another. Says your mother's right, it was holding on and needed help to let go. But you know it was Popstar who couldn't hold on. Couldn't stand the rabbit's bubbling breath.

You carry your rabbit to the vacant lot at the back of the house and dig a small rectangle in the earth. You don't want to bury it while it's still soft and alive-feeling, so you decide to keep it in your lap and wait until it's deader. The butcher's son from next door has been watching and comes down to the vacant lot when he knows there are no grown-ups around. He sneaks up and points a shotgun at you – the one his dad uses for shooting beer bottles and kangaroos. He points the gun and makes shoot-em-up sound effects. You close your eyes. You put your fingers in your ears. You want to disappear. He laughs and says 'Gimme'. Then snatches the rabbit from your lap and runs away.

He finds you later that day still sitting by the empty grave. He squats beside you and tells you that he skinned your rabbit and fed it to the cats. His fat fingers – red from bad circulation and the bunny's blood – press a small alfoil parcel into the pit of your palm.

'You killed it,' you want to say to the boy, but you know it's not true. You watch as he mimics rabbit ears with his fingers on top of his head and hops all the way back to his house. You open the alfoil and see a stumpy severed foot. You hold it for a while and take your lucky pebble from your pocket and put them both into the too-big grave and fill it with dirt.

The next time a gun is pointed at you, you're sixteen. Your father has taken the family up north to chase work and you've moved to the inner city. You go to a technical college during the day and have a job at a pizzeria in a seedy part of town at night. Across the road is a long sandstone wall and boys your age stand against it while cars drive slowly by. Late one shift, when you're working alone, a boy with cropped bleached hair and wearing

frayed denim shorts comes in and orders garlic bread. ‘It puts them off kissing,’ he says, then smiles. His front teeth have a gap between them that’s wide enough to fit a five-cent coin.

You smear extra garlic butter into the sliced bread stick and wrap it in foil. He waits while it cooks. He sits on a stool close to you and leans all over your counter as he flicks through a year-old weekly. When you give him the hot parcel, he opens it and offers you a piece. You say you’re not hungry. He looks at you, scanning as much of you that he can see. You feel a sudden heat rise up through your body and look away. As he eats, he watches as you wipe down the bench and fill the straw canister tin and push paper napkins into the bulging metal dispenser. When he’s finished, he rolls the foil into a tight silver ball and hands it to you. ‘Just like a mini mirror ball, eh?’ Then goes back to his spot on the wall until a car takes him away.

Next evening, you watch him slowly cross the road to you. You could start on his order, but you don’t. You like the wait. You like watching him eat the pillowy pieces. You don’t know how to ask him about his work, but he asks about yours. He shows up again the next night, and the night after, always at the same time on every shift for three weeks. Then one night his spot at the wall stays empty. A couple of nights later he comes to the pizzeria just as you’re cashing up and closing.

You feel nervous seeing him, ‘I’ll turn the oven back on,’ you say.

‘Don’t bother,’ he closes the door behind him. He walks up to you at the counter and you see a pink scar on his cheek.

‘What happened?’ you reach to touch his face. He stops your hand and leans down to kiss you. His mouth is big and wet and tastes of mints. You pull away from him and stare at the scar.

‘It’s nothing. Anyway, I just came to say bye.’

‘How come?’ You want him to kiss you again.

‘I’ve gotta go away for a bit.’ He steps back and looks around the shop. ‘Yeah, anyway, I thought maybe you could help me out with some cash?’ He gestures to the neat stack of notes laid out in little plastic coffins in the open register. You close the till drawer. You say you can’t.

He leans in and whispers, ‘Just say someone held you up.’ He makes a gun shape with his thumb and forefinger and presses it through your Tasty Pizza T-shirt into your heart.

‘I can’t do that,’ you say.

He drags his finger down to your nipple and flicks it. ‘You lend me some then.’

You want to please him. You open the till and lift the tray. You take out a little yellow envelope with your name on it. ‘You can have this till the weekend.’

‘Thanks a mill,’ he says. He grabs your pay packet, kisses you on the forehead, then turns around and walks out of the pizzeria and across the road to a waiting car.

Three years later, you’re living with your new lover in a disused railway yard close to the city. He has the name of an archangel and silver polish on his nails. Each night your bodies smell of salt and sweat and semen. When you press your chest against his and kiss his mouth hard, your tongues mad and mercurial, you taste metal from his daily dose of lithium.

One night you come home later than usual. When you open the roller-door to your warehouse, you see it’s landlord-inspection tidy. It’s deadly quiet, so you go to put on a record. He’s stacked them in alphabetical order. The videos too. And the books, spines straight like soldiers, start marching from Artaud and finish with Zola. You need a cup of tea. You go to the kitchen and he’s sitting at the linoleum-topped table with a gun to his head.

You know that he’s capable. You’ve heard of his earlier attempts. Before you that is. You’re convinced you can save him, give him pluses, pros, positive reasons.

You’ve distracted him. He looks at you calmly, as if he’s just been meditating. He

turns the gun slowly from his own head and points the gun at you, at your face. He pulls the trigger and with a sudden reflex the gun shoots out a little white flag that says 'Bang'. Then he smiles his wonderful bad-teeth smile.

One night, not long after, you come home from work late again and your lover isn't there. You stay awake for him. You plan to run him a bath when he finally comes in. You'll undress him and while he's soaking you'll make him a cup of chamomile tea, and when you both finally go to bed you'll stroke his curls until he falls asleep.

Just before dawn there's a loud knock at the roller-door. You think he must have lost his keys. You open it and a policeman and a policewoman are standing in front of you. They take off their caps. They show you his wallet. They ask for his dental records. They tell you that late last night your archangel flew in front of a train.

A few months later, after all the attention has stopped and the flowers are long dead and the smell of him on his clothes has faded, you decide to point a gun at yourself. You find a firearms shop near Chinatown. The squat salesman asks what you're looking for. You know you can't tell him, so you say something about marksmanship.

He points to a cabinet of silvery pistols and says, 'Beretta is best, hands down.'

'Don't you mean hands up?' you say.

The salesman ignores you. He unlocks the cabinet and takes out a shiny handgun. Stroking it, he says, 'It's the loveliest model you'll ever lay eyes on.'

You like the way he talks about guns as if they were lovers, admiring their looks, their prowess. You choose a pistol with a black textured rubber wrap-around grip and a long barrel in a chrome finish. He checks you have no record; you haven't, so he takes none. You buy this gun and you walk out onto the street.

It's been drizzling and the smell of diesel and roast duck chokes the air. You feel

the gun in your pocket, heavy against your thigh, aware of the irony. You feel self-conscious, like you're reading porn in public, and wish you were already home. You pass giggling schoolgirls wearing long socks and short skirts queuing to see a Hong Kong movie. The walls are plastered with posters of a gun-toting lip-pouting girl in a catsuit. You get a cab.

Your place is clean. You've rehearsed this moment. You go to the bedroom and place the gun on the bedside table. You undress, shower, shave. You go back to your room and open the bedside drawer where you keep all your toys and get out some lube. You take your gun and tenderly smear gel all over its shaft. You lie on your back and place it at the opening of your arse. You push the mouth of the gun into you and you open to it. You slide the barrel in little by little and lie very still. And when you start to move with it and against it, and your breath shortens, you remember the smile your lover gave you when his toy gun went 'Bang'.