

Canberra

My brother called me a murderer, and I knew it was the truth. Eric wasn't the type to lie. If he said there was blood on my hands or slaughter in my heart, then it must be so. He was five years older than me and next year he would take the bus to high school. He knew everything. He even knew that I had killed Lightning.

The death turned the winter flint-grey. A sea of snow hid the weary goldenrod, the stout juniper, the dead starbursts of aster that once flowered down by the pond. I used to like the muffled silence, but now the farm choked on its own breath. Mr. Kennedy said he would put a man on the moon this year, but he didn't need to look so far: he could find the moon right here in Nelson County, empty of anything other than broken fences and a wind that hissed *Murderer, murderer.*

"I want to give him a funeral," I told Mom. "A proper one."

"He was just a stupid fish," Eric argued.

Eric didn't care about Lightning. He only cared about his baseball cards, the ones he fanned out on the table every Sunday. Lou Brock, Al Karine, Hank Aaron, Mickey Mantle, other sturdy men who looked nothing like my reedy brother. Eric said he was going to play for the Yankees someday and I believed him, because he was never wrong.

"We can give him a funeral," Mom said. "Go grab him."

I tried not to look at the empty fishbowl as I retrieved Lightning's temporary coffin—a stained cookie tin—from underneath my bed. Guilt was a poison-tipped arrow in my heart. I had moved Lightning's bowl during my chores, and that's what killed him yesterday, even if he normally didn't mind being moved from the windowsill.

I didn't cry. This far from town, we were used to death as a hovering cloud: the horse, the dog, the sheep. Lightning, a present from my mother, had been the last animal on the farm. I'd named him after the storms that simmered across the fields. Mom never answered when I asked her why she drove all the way to the pet store in town to buy him. She just looked at the bowl, the window, and the garden with its strangled dahlias.

"What do you think heaven looks like for a fish?" I whispered to Mom. She stood beside the front door, already prepared for the funeral rites with her threadbare jacket and homemade mittens. She took the tin as I shoved my feet into toe-pinching boots. Eric hovered by the kitchen table, pretending not to listen. Dad was asleep by the fireplace, his feet a little too close to the flames.

Mom took a few seconds to chew on her answer. "I think it would look like Australia," she said quietly.

My mother was born in town, and when she was younger, she was famous for her eyes: movie-star eyes, people said, the type of eyes that could drown a man like a siren calling from the rocks. Mom even went to a few auditions but nothing turned out. Sometimes I caught her looking in the mirror, moving her dishwater curls out of the way, peering into her own irises. She would tell me they reminded her of Australia, the way the water curled in and out of sandy beaches. I once asked her to tell me more about that far-away country. She shook her head and told me to read about it in her well-worn encyclopedia.

"I think Lightning would like Australia," I said.

I opened the front door. The sharp wind was a scalpel to my face. Mom talked as we stomped down the porch steps, telling me about Lightning's future adventures as he flitted among the coral with his tropical friends, the red rainbows and barramundi and pufferfish.

We trekked through the snow drifts to the back of the farmhouse, near the empty rabbit hutches. Dad had built a ramshackle lean-to ages ago. Skeletal tools—a rusty rake, a pitchfork that once impaled hay, an old shovel—hunched against the wall. I liked the idea of Lightning being buried right beside the house, near my bedroom window.

“What about here?” I asked, pointing.

“The ground will be too frozen,” Eric said. I hadn’t noticed him trailing after us. His coat nearly swallowed him.

“It’ll be fine,” Mom said. She grabbed the shovel from the lean-to and made quick work of the snow. Then she rammed the shovel into the dirt.

It didn’t even sink an inch.

“I told you,” Eric said.

“We’ll get it done,” Mom said. To me, she added, “Wake up your father.”

I shook my head. If Eric was always right, then Dad was somehow *more* right. If Dad said this was a bad idea, I’d have to believe him.

The metal handle of the shovel bit into my hands as I started to dig. The soil was frozen through. The tips of my ears throbbed. The iciness turned into a burning heat, one that seared any exposed skin: the gap between my mitts and my sleeves, my nose, the hole in my pants, the back of my neck.

I continued to dig. The dirt came up in tiny, walnut-brown specks. To my right, snow undulated in waves across the fields. I wondered if shipwrecked sailors felt like I did.

“Give it to me,” a voice said, and the shovel was jerked out of my hands.

Dad.

I looked over at Mom, but she tipped her head towards Eric. He'd gone inside to fetch Dad. I hadn't noticed.

My father's eyes were dark, evidence from his disturbed nap. He hadn't put on a jacket. Not a surprising decision—he was one of the hardy *garçons* from Quebec. If you asked him about his childhood, he'd tell you about trapping wolves in the Laurentians and hunkering overnight on the desolate, wind-whipped shores of Anticosti Island. A year ago, Mom confessed that he was from Montreal and had never been further north than Laval.

With Dad's weight leaning into it, the shovel managed to unearth large, compact chunks of soil. Dad grunted once the hole was deep enough. I took Lightning's remains out of the tin and carefully placed them in the small grave. As soon as I was done, Eric grabbed the shovel and scraped the soil back over the broken earth.

"I'm glad he's in Australia now," I said, and regretted it the moment I saw the glee in Eric's eyes.

"You don't believe that, do you?" he asked.

"Never mind," I said quickly.

But Mom, with the beach in her eyes and the sand in her skin, placed a hand on Eric's shoulder and explained again how it worked: when fish died, they went to heaven, and that was Australia. She gave Eric a pointed look, one I pretended not to see.

"That's not true," Eric said. "Fish don't go to heaven."

"Yes they do," I argued. "He's in Canberra."

"Can-berra?" The word was choppy on Eric's lips.

"The capital," I said. I'd read it in the first volume of the encyclopedia set that Mom had inherited. The books took up two shelves of the only bookcase in the house.

“Sydney is the capital,” Eric said.

“It’s not.” I’d imagined the country before, sun-stained, walking along the coastline instead of our endless fallow fields.

“Well?” Eric asked, turning to Dad, and I hated that word, wanted to shove it back down Eric’s throat.

Dad shifted his weight onto the shovel, wiggled the handle. Huffed out a foggy burst of air. “I recall that it’s Sydney.”

He was wrong. They both were and the truth flared in my arms and legs and feet and before I knew what I was doing, I was dashing towards the front door, the wind scalding my cheeks. My boots skidded against the floor as I crashed inside. I didn’t bother taking them off. The encyclopedias beckoned, iron-hot with knowledge.

Gritting my teeth, I flipped through the delicate pages of the first volume with my throbbing fingers. My eyes were raw with snow blindness and there were too many entries for other words.

Eric burst through the door so quickly that the inner doorknob banged into the wall. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I said, and it was a lie, and even I knew it. Eric stomped towards me, and I snapped the heavy book shut, kept it next to my chest. Near my heart.

He grabbed the book and wrenched it out of my grasp. In one breathless moment, he looked at me.

I blinked, and he started to rip out pages.

I yelled and charged him and wrapped my arms around his legs, trying to take him down, but no luck, he just staggered around and crumpled the pages and threw them into the fireplace.

The flames ate agoraphobia, airplanes, antelopes, Aristotle, asteroids, and the worst, the absolute worst, was when those hungry tongues of flame consumed Australia and Canberra and the sandy beaches. Sydney survived just fine.

Eric destroyed chunks of the book by the time Mom and Dad lurched into the house. I barely heard the shouting. Something horrendous, something even worse, had interrupted my panic. My vision faltered. I stepped forward.

There, on the hearth in front of the fireplace. A dustless circle, one with a diameter the same size as Lightning's fishbowl. I thought about yesterday, how I moved Lightning to the table so I could clean the windowsill. I hadn't put the bowl back immediately; Dad had asked me to shovel the front porch.

I remembered Lou Brock and the other baseball men who posed on those colourful cards. Eric would never have tolerated Lightning's bowl so close to his beloved collection.

An after-image flitted through the room, as if I'd stared at the sun too long. It was a shadow version of my brother, formless and indistinct. This yesterday-Eric picked up the bowl and was too lazy to walk to the window. Instead he placed it in front of the fireplace.

Where it *boiled*.

The nausea came so quickly that it turned me upside down and inside out and I sprinted past my parents, out of the smoky room, and into the bathroom. By the time it was over my throat burned, my head burned, everything burned. I wished the house would burn down. I'd take matches and light the drapes and watch as the flames jumped to the carpet and the dish towels and the blankets and the baseball cards and even the encyclopedias, because they were already worthless, anything could be destroyed. I hoped God watched the burial. I wanted his attention and his hatred and I wanted him to smite us all, leaving a crater and some smoldering cinders.

I swallowed the fire and let it catch somewhere in my stomach. Rushing into my room, I dove under my bed to drag out a ratty bag. Mr. Kennedy's space shuttle wouldn't be my new home. No, I had something else in mind, and I would start my new life with everything that fit into the bag: four shirts, three books, a toothbrush, a comb, one pair of pants, sandals, a stuffed bear. The fire urged me back to the living room. Mom screamed about the mutilated encyclopedia. Dad howled over the mess in the fireplace. Eric defended himself. Only the blast of air from the open door made them notice me and the bag hanging from my arm. Dad asked where I was going, but I didn't reply.

Just as I stepped outside, Eric said, "She'll come back."

Maybe Eric was right. Maybe I would get tired during the long trek down our unplowed laneway, or maybe my parents would come after me in the truck. It didn't matter. He might be wrong.

I looked south and walked toward the beach.