

# 1

Mim runs hot water in the sink, plunges her hands beneath the suds and gasps at the scald of it. Ben is particular about knives. She has to handwash them, even with the restrictions. She runs the blue cloth up and down each blade, feeling the smooth heat of the steel.

*Missing*

*He is missing*

*Your husband is missing*

‘Mum!’

She turns to her daughter leaning over the kitchen bench, scowling. Still in her soccer gear, she is long-legged and ponytailed. It is untenable how much longer she gets each day.

Essie holds out her screen. ‘The Friendship Project – you haven’t signed the form.’

There is always something else. ‘You sure I didn’t sign it already?’

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Essie sighs. 'No, you didn't. Everyone else got to start uploading today and I didn't. 'Cos *you* haven't signed the form.'

Mim takes the screen. Apologises. Swipes her finger in a squiggle across the flashing rectangle.

'*Thank you,*' Essie says, taking the screen back and muttering, 'Wasn't that hard, was it?'

'Careful,' Mim says, trying to keep her tone light. 'Tell Sammy bath time, can you?'

Since when did eleven-year-olds have so much attitude? Ben will laugh when she tells him.

Mim puts one hand on her sternum, thinks she will vomit.

*Keep it together.*

She washes each knife. Pulls out a clean tea towel and dries each blade, sliding them one by one into the wooden knife block in the corner.



'What do you mean – *missing?*' she had said when the phone call had come that afternoon. She had been distracted by the kids tumbling their bags in the door ahead of her, trying to get her earplugs in to hear the call properly.

'It appears Mr Elliot has disappeared from the mine site at the Golden Arc. GeoTech have confirmed this with us.'

'But he's due back in a few days. Couldn't he just be on his way home?'

'We don't believe so.'

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Essie called from in front of the open fridge. 'What is there to eat?'

Mim had frowned, pointed to her earbuds, turned away.

'Why am I hearing this from you?' She had tried not to raise her voice. There are ways to speak to the Department.

'We're working closely with GeoTech. Protocol, Mrs Elliot, on foreign investment sites, you understand.'

'But how can he be missing? He's chipped. Can't you just geo-locate him?'

They had ignored her question. Asked if they could send someone around. She had asked again, but there was nothing they could tell her.

She had pictured the grey SUV parked in the driveway, the white concentric rings of the Department logo, the faces behind the curtains in the street.

'No, thank you,' she had said, 'we'll be fine.'

'You'll let us know if he makes contact?'

As if they wouldn't already know. 'Of course,' she had replied.



When the kids are in bed, she pours wine. Tries to think. She should call her mother. That's what you do when you have stressful news. But what can her mother do from up there at the farm? She'd only worry, call Mim back endlessly until there was an answer. And she's still so tender. Michael, then Dad.

'Call Ben,' she tells OMNI, even though she knows what the result will be. OMNI has a woman's voice, a soft, slightly clipped

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accent. The feedback from previous operating systems all pointed to people having a higher compliance with female voices. It was traumatic for the kids when they updated. Sam had only ever known SARA. OMNI took some getting used to.

‘Unable to make contact.’

It’s not unusual. She hasn’t been able to call him onsite the entire time he’s been gone. He could make scheduled calls with the rest of the crew from the IT room, hardwired in, so at least they get to see his face. They laughed before he left about what they should and shouldn’t say. It’s a well-known secret what the flagged words under the Department are. They can only imagine how many flagged words there are under China’s security services.

She thinks of the last time they spoke, and realises she can’t remember the specifics.

‘OMNI, call GeoTech.’ It’s the kind of company they would have laughed at together in the past. Big money.

‘Calling GeoTech now.’

It’s after hours so she’s not really expecting anyone to pick up, but what else can she do? She drums her fingers against the stone benchtop.

She leaves a message and rings off. They’ll call. It will all make sense.

She gulps the wine.

*What the fuck, Ben? Where are you?*

She puts the glass down, and it clinks violently against the hard surface. Maybe he’s just been delayed on the island. Her theories

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begin reasonably, but as the glass empties, she imagines him with a drink in his hand, then drunk, sitting with his back against a wall in a dark lane. Then in a hotel room, where there is skin, pulled sheets, the heavy groan of illicit sex. A mangled taxi, suitcase thrown against the traffic. A foreign emergency ward.

The glass is empty. Another glass means another bottle. Maybe it will help her sleep.

She scrolls the feeds for news from Indonesia. But there is nothing about a missing Australian engineer. Nothing but apocalypse stories, or that's how it reads. The equatorial region is beginning to really sweat it, the patterns of climate refugees marking trails like new currents on the maps as they swarm to higher, cooler, ground. Ben was mad to go there, but the money! The fortunes to be made there before the whole region swallows itself. Plus the danger money. Thanks to the ever-increasing frequency of seismic activity. Quakes. Aftershocks. The suck and spill of tidal waves. For people like Ben, like her to a lesser extent, there was a thrill in that. The added frisson of knowing how the earth worked, or thinking they knew, anyway. There was a need for people like Ben to extract the wealth from the fault lines before tectonic movement, the spluttering, violent earth, made it impossible. He had promised it'd only be another couple of years, then they'd be set. He could work less, she could take the helm, if she wanted, and they'd be secure, financially at least.

She missed work. The brain stretch of geology. That's why she was so keen to take Heidi up on her recent offer. Being out in the

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field, even being back in the front of a lecture theatre, would be thrilling. She was pretty sure that she was the one who suggested she give over her tenured position. The groundwater project needed someone who could work fulltime and she couldn't go back with Essie so young, but she wishes she hadn't. Wishes they had made it easier for her to stay. It's not just the brain drain heading back to their countries of origin after graduation – it's the ones who are wiping bums and pureeing organic fucking vegetables, too.

She keeps scrolling. She no longer reacts to the images. They are all the same and she has no feeling left. The stories are the same too. And who knows if what they say is true.

The world shifted slowly, then so fast, while they watched but didn't see. They weren't stupid. Or even oppressed in the beginning. Let the record show that. There were no assassinations. No riots. The people invited the new government to take charge at the ballot box. The two parties had consumed themselves. Left the system wide open for a third option. Reasonable, populated by diverse public figures, backed by both big money and big ideology. On a platform of innovative and economically viable responses to the climate emergency, a rehaul of the health, housing and disability schemes that would see the most vulnerable members of the community cared for, and a foreign policy that miraculously spoke to fear of the other *and* fluid borders ideal for capital in and capital out, the new party was humbly triumphant on election night. Simple, elegant. No need for finite portfolios and the bullshit of bureaucracy (their words, appealing to the everyday Australian). Centralised power was

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the answer: One Department for One Nation. The Department of Everything. A party who promised a different way, a better way, and a populace who needed to believe them. Like geology, history repeats itself. Sometimes it's just hard to see.

And then, within their first one hundred days in office, their greatest test. Mim didn't personally know anyone at the MCG on the day of the attacks, although, by degrees of separation, there were a few. Someone shoots that many footy fans in a city like Melbourne during a preliminary final and everyone's going to know someone. Likewise, the bank hack didn't affect them directly. She didn't go through the months of hell of getting the administration of their life back on track. But, like everyone else, they did bear the pain of soaring interest rates.

And then the bio-threat. The government tried to keep everyone level-headed, at the start at least. There were protocols in place for the media by then, supposedly to counteract scaremongering and division. So for a while they only knew that security at the MediSec facility outside of Geelong had been compromised. Eventually it got out. Two security officers and a virologist were dead. The terrorists had known what they were doing. They only took one frozen vial. Only needed one. Enough terror in that particular strain to last a generation.

So that's what they lived with. The knowledge that nothing was sacred, and nothing was safe. Not their money, not their health and not their football games.

After that, the government changed the terror laws again. People could be detained without charge for six months while

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investigations were pending. A new Treason Code. The punishment for violations? Loss of citizenship. The offender *and* their family. Loss of all assets. Stateless. *You bring terror to our nation, you don't deserve a nation.* No one could argue with that kind of rhetoric.

The ensuing authority creep hardly caused a ripple. In this, the lucky country, the land of the lackadaisical larrikin, no one demanded you jumped on board the new system. No one legislated. No, it was much more powerful than that.

You got a chip to protect a mate.

You got a chip 'cos you had nothing to hide.

Because we are all in this together.

The publicity campaign was a triumph. Rumour has it that they paid 5 million to one influencer alone to livestream her own chipping through her social media feed. Football clubs got chipped together. There were cross-cultural chip days in the inner suburbs – even the most strident of small L liberals on board.

And all in all, it seemed a rather small price to pay. It seemed increasingly likely that there might be a moment when you would like to know that your loved ones could be located in the blink of an eye. Less.

They were all doing it anyway, more or less. Geolocating their every move in exchange for Points! Rewards! (conditions apply).

You want to know where your people are when the world becomes a shifting, wild, hungry thing. When there are mass evacuations at least three times each summer on the outskirts of every city, tidal floods up the mouth of the river, a wave of eco-terrorism – bombings



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at a proposed radioactive waste repository site, and that storm – they couldn't call it a hurricane on an atmospheric technicality but anyone within fifty kilometres would say it was.

When they brought in the legislation she was heavily pregnant and had to wait until she'd given birth before she could get herself chipped. And Essie. *Easier to do it now for her*, the smiling nurse had said, *she won't even remember the nick*. Mim – leaking, weeping, feeling like she had been torn asunder – said, *Yes, of course*.

They did Mim first, a click, pearl of blood, nothing compared to the blind vortex of pain she'd just endured.

And then her tiny daughter, Essie, another click, a scream, eyes squeezed shut then open – the treachery of it! Of what she'd let them do to her. The nurse soothed, *Now you'll always know where she is. Doesn't that feel wonderful?*

She had grown this child, had been attached. How would she ever not know?

*I will always know where you are*, she had whispered.



By the time Essie arrived, the Department had started rolling out the estates. She remembers watching it on her feeds while she nursed Essie late at night, and feeling hopeful that there was finally a solution to some of the problems that had plagued the city. The residents of those first estates were homeless women, crushed by poverty, violence, and the market crash that ensured their already minuscule super accounts crumbled to dust. Their children went too, of course. The

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overworked and underpaid former Human Services workers collectively breathed a sigh of relief. The Department had this in hand. Children in safe and secure housing with equitable access to education, adults in work and re-training programs, their healthcare and finances all overseen by the high-tech, omniscient eyes of the benevolent state. BestLife, they called it. No pun intended.

There was some unease, of course, there always is. But, how could anyone argue?

It wasn't until later that the gates to those estates became one way. And by then it was too late.



Her head spins slightly when she stands.

‘Lights out, OMNI.’

‘You are still in the kitchen zone.’

‘Lights out.’

‘As directed.’

The lights fade to dark around her, punctuated by the green and white glow of her networked kitchen. She stands at the bench, wondering where her husband is, trying to remember to breathe.



In the morning the school traffic is heavy and Mim is on edge as she waits to find a gap. She has two days before the kids expect Ben home. She suggests casually that there might be a delay.

‘But can we call him?’ Sam asks from the back.

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She hedges. ‘We’ll try after school, huh?’ Essie catches her eye in the rear-vision mirror, but Mim looks away. Tries to remember the last conversation she had with Ben but still can’t make out any specifics. They all feel the same when Ben is away, the space behind him, even when it’s a cramped comms room, seems to expand infinitely. After they sign off she can’t help but imagine him, standing, stretching, walking away, back to work, his brain, the pulse of it all, to quiet perhaps, to solitude even. She accelerates, pulling out to get into a tight space. She cranes her neck to see what the hold-up is, but there is only the line of cars ahead, the smooth contours of all the hybrids. Keeping up with the Joneses is a competitive sport in this neighbourhood.

‘Maybe there’s an accident?’ Sam says.

The familiar flash of lights in the mirror.

They all stare out the window as the grey SUV rushes past on the kerb, siren wailing, followed by the white van emblazoned with the block green font of the BestLife logo.

‘What do you reckon it is?’ Essie says, her voice low, even though Mim and Ben have been so careful not to scare them. Children always know.

‘Must just be someone who needs some help,’ Mim says.

Essie grunts, unconvinced, and slides back in her seat.

The BestLife squad don’t even try to block the view as the traffic slows past the scene and the commuters rubberneck. High visibility is part of their effectiveness these days. So effective in its messaging and consequent public compliance, in fact, that they hardly even bother with the farce of the judicial system anymore.

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A man is on the ground, his hands already cuffed behind him. He does not look especially dishevelled, although it's been a long time since she saw anyone looking that way. And even though they are already painting over it, the graffiti is still easy to read. Wide and pink across the concrete wall: *RESIST!*

Sam sounds the word out. 'What do you reckon it means, Mum? Resist what?'

'He's probably not well, darling,' she says, the words bitter, traitorous, in her mouth. She is glad they cannot see what she sees when she looks back in the rear-vision – the medic moving in, the flop of the man's body as they drag it into the van.

It is better this way. She and Ben had decided together that the kids did not need to know the details of the society they were growing up in. Not yet. Did not need the specifics of what BestLife had become or how it operated or how their uncle had come to die under their watch. Essie could not even remember him. But fear has its own signature, and even with their careful sidestepping, the kids know, joke in the playground – *You'll be sent to BestLife* – understand that something is being hidden from them, and they want to dig it up but keep their eyes closed at the same time.

The graffiti will be gone by the time she drives home.

All the same, she'll know it is there. Underneath.

*Resist.*

That's what her brother Michael had once said, too.



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Arriving at the school, she swipes to get through to the drop zone, watches the kids tousele in the line to hold their palms to the security pad as they enter the grounds. They run from there and they don't look back. She sees Essie point towards some of Sam's friends, the way she touches her little brother's shoulder before he runs off to join them.

Michael used to do that for her. Her eldest brother Steve never did. But Michael, just two years older than Mim, and gentle, so gentle (*Soft as the inside of a strawberry Freddo*, she once heard her dad say, not kindly) that his own eyes might glisten if she ran to him, crying at recess, with scrapes and tales and squashed sandwiches. The way the protective shadow of his arm enclosed her closest friend Heidi too. Until later, when they'd had to turn around and protect him.

She shakes her head, trying to loosen these images of her brother. There is no time for this now. For pain and guilt and what-ifs. For the treacherous voice whispering that she is a coward, that she has let his death go unremarked, that she has not stood up, that she has been found wanting.

The screen on the dash lights up. Incoming call. Unidentified. She answers quickly, hope high in her chest.

'Miriam Elliot?' A woman's voice.

She slumps back in the seat. 'Yes?'

'My name is Raquel Yu, I'm a journalist with *The Advocate*.'

'Sorry, I can't –' Mim goes to end the call.

'I'm an Australian based in Canada,' the woman continues, undaunted. '*The Advocate* is an independent news organisation

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peopled by correspondents from around the globe and funded by citizens who want the truth.'

'Sorry, I'm in the middle of something. If you're looking for donations —'

'No, no.' She laughs. 'It's not that, although if you're offering . . .'

Mim grits her teeth, annoyed at her inability to just hang up. 'Sorry, I really have to go.'

'I'm actually after your husband, Ben? Are you able to give me his contact details?'

She startles at Ben's name. 'What's this about?'

'I'm currently looking at the Golden Arc project and the unprecedented Chinese–Australian collaboration on the mine. I'm keen to speak to Ben about his work there with GeoTech?'

Mim doesn't speak.

'Are you there, Miriam? Have I got that right, GeoTech is his employer?'

'Mim,' she says, 'and yes, GeoTech, but he's not . . .'

She thinks that perhaps if she doesn't say the words they can continue to exist somewhere else, a place of parallel possibilities. She wants to refuse the reality of them.

'He's not working there anymore?'

'He's missing.'

'Sorry?'

'They called me yesterday. He's gone missing from the mine site.'

'Oh, god, sorry, is that . . .?'

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Mim's voice is tight. 'Probably nothing to worry about, I'll get him to call you when he gets in touch. Ben's not one to give up a chance to get his face in the news.' She attempts to laugh but the sound does not work.

The woman says she'll send all the contact details, apologises for calling at this time. She had no idea, she says.

'It's fine,' says Mim, but her stomach flips over as she hangs up. Why is a journalist poking around the Golden Arc project? The international controversy was all over years ago once China acquired the island. And the domestic row was over before it began. 'Unprecedented investment opportunity for Australia.' Everything was unprecedented by then anyway. *Keen to speak about Ben's work there* – but what was so special about Ben's work? Mim rakes back through the messages, the conversations, that last video call in her mind. Had he seemed more stressed? Secretive? The calls were always monitored so it's not like he could have told her if anything was wrong. She shakes her head, separates the two events in her mind. She is conflating them for nothing. Coincidence that the woman called today, that's all. Strange and unsettling, but nothing more.

Ben will be home. Ben will be home and everything will go back to normal.