

Up above the Weird

It started with a potato, an overcooked Desiree potato, an overcooked Desiree potato flung from a rooftop into a busy St Kilda street, on the first hot night in December, seconds past sundown, by the kind of girl who could have swallowed the world.

The girl was Nancy Koslov. She was nineteen and sharp as knives. I was fifteen and not much. She'd started off as my and Gully's babysitter, but we were pretty much hanging out now and if Dad sometimes forgot to pay her she didn't push it. She had other jobs anyway - dog-walking, bartending, supermarket promotions – it was all to fund her Great Escape. Nancy's itinerary was straight out of National Geographic: the Czech church made from human bones, the grave of Hollywood starlet Virginia Rappe (plugged to death by Fatty Arbuckle), the lost village of St Ishmael, swept into sea in the 16th century. "I don't want to see the world," she'd say. "I want to see the *weird*. Ten grand or my twentieth, whichever comes first. You should come too little sister."

Little sister. That was what she called me. Also: kid, girlfriend, dollbaby and monkeyface. Sometimes she even used my real name, Skylark, Sky, and all with that drawl that felt like fingernails on my back, lightly scratching in all the desperately itchy but impossible to get places.

The roof was my favourite place in the world. It was on top of the flat on top of Dad's record shop, down the beachy end of Barkly St. It wasn't a roof garden or anything grand like that, more like a perch for stargazers or suicides. We had everything we needed up there: parlour palms and cushions, a record player, the 45s my Mum left behind: psycho-sweet ballads by guys with cleft-chins; domestic pop by ladies in lounging pajamas. *Got a pocketful of rainbows and a star up my sleeve ...*

Nancy and I had eaten al fresco (Muthas Microwave Roast) but it was too hot, and I'd found one of Dad's bottles of rainy day home-brew in the gutter. It tasted like Old Dunlops and made me stupid after two sips. We drank it, wincing, holding our noses as if that would make it taste any better. When we couldn't stomach any more, we hung our heads over the rail to watch the maze of bps (beautiful people) and crazies on the street below.

"I'm going to find your white knight." Nancy said, as she peered through her

vintage opera glasses. She sang along to Peggy Lee's *Manana*, wiggling appropriately until: "Found him!"

She passed me the glasses, angled my head just so until I was looking at The Fugg, resplendent and sweaty in his brown fur coat.

"Ha ha." I passed the glasses back.

The Fugg was one of Dad's regular customers. He liked folk music and progressive rock. His real name was Ernst Vella but he was always roiling and swearing - 'Fugg this', 'Fugg that'. He was all beer and balladry. He claimed to have slept with June Tabor, who is folk music royalty and has a voice like a cut diamond. She looks both fierce and beautiful on her record covers. I couldn't imagine The Fugg and June Tabor sharing the same air, let alone the backseat of her touring car.

"Why do I need a white knight?"

"Dollbaby, don't you want to be s-a-v-e-d?"

"From what?"

"I don't know. We all need saving."

Down on the street sets of tourists were bounding around like unleashed dogs. Their laughter floated up and Nancy flicked her hand as if she could smack the laughter straight back down.

"Save me from suburbia," she drawled.

"St Kilda's not suburbia."

"Not yet."

A note on the location:

Once upon a time in St Kilda, Victorian ladies would promenade Fitzroy Street and no one made disparaging remarks about their arses from the open window of an unregistered Ford Falcon. Then came wars and tramlines and the riff-raff bleeding in. Working class families, immigrants, refugees, spivs, tourists, artists, crims, prostitutes and junkies. By the sixties St Kilda was a red light district to rival King's Cross. In the eighties the yuppies moved in with their filthy lucre, but they could never completely clean her up.

"St Kilda is a dirty girl." Dad said. "Doesn't matter how much paint they slap

on her, she'll always be a dirty girl.”

These days the red light still glowed, but faintly. I could live without the tourists but there were things I loved - like the palm trees and poppy seed kooglehoupf; like the monster goldfish at the botanical gardens and the sad song of the marina boats. The wind played their masts like a bow on strings and the sound was eerie and lovely and more lonesome than anything I could imagine.

By the time the sun was down and the streetlights were up I was flaking. The palm trees looked like showgirls after a long night, standing around waiting for their pay. Nancy picked a chop end off her plate and flung it over the rail. She laughed and flicked her hair. It was the colour of orange blossom honey and it fell perfectly around her shoulders. My hair was short and dark and nothing. When Mum was last over she called me an urchin. She lamented my waistless-ness, my aversion to girl props. When I wasn't in school uniform I wore old jeans and a t-shirt. I didn't have to wear a bra and for this I was grateful - the less stuff sticking out and drawing attention to me the better.

Nancy moved onto my plate. She threw chops and broccoli and baby carrots. Finally she picked up the potato. She weighed it in her hand and made the prediction. “This will land on your white knight.”

“Him again?”

“I'm serious.”

“Go ahead.”

Nancy lobbed the potato behind her back. It bounced off the meat shop awning and landed on some guy's shoulder. He turned, rubbing the spot. I got a flash of his face, his mouth twisted, eyes squinting. Nancy pulled me back, laughing. “Shit! It's Lucas Bell.”

“Who's he?”

“He's got bad luck blood. Dead mum, dodgy Dad. His sister was Canal Girl. They were twins.”

She was looking at me like I was supposed to know something.

I didn't know anything.

“How can you not know about Canal Girl?” Nancy ranted. “Last year? She went out Christmas Eve and ended up swimming with the fishes? A guy walking his dog on Boxing Day found her floating in the weeds. Where were you – under a rock?”

Last Christmas, Dad was on a bender. Gully and I had to stay in the country with our Aunt who made mosaics that looked like monster vaginas, but I didn’t want to get into all that. I started picking my teeth.

“What was her name?”

“Mia.”

“How did it happen?”

“No one knows. She’d been drinking.” Nancy’s eyes were bright. “Afterwards there were rumours ...”

“Like what?”

“Like she was on drugs. Like she was a prostitute. Her brother nearly killed a guy for spreading shit about her. He got sent to Blake St, you know the detention centre for bad boys with hearts of gold? Looks like he’s out now.”

She peered over the edge again. I could see a smile forming. “He’s going in. Maybe he’s going to rob your Dad!”

“For what? Five bucks and a Kamahl lp?”

Below us the bent sign for *Bill’s Wishing Well* hung forlorn. The only people who crossed the threshold were vinyl tragics, weirdos, misguided fools, Gully and me. And now - Lucas Bell.

Nancy stared at the space he’d left behind. “He’s pretty. He looks like that movie star from the fifties who used to be hot but then got all fat.”

“Oh right, *that* guy.”

Her phone rang then; blaring so loud it made me jump. Nancy moved away murmuring and came back humming. “I’ve gotta lam.”

“So go, lam, am-scray.” My smile was unshakeable even when I was being ditched. Nancy leaned in and kissed me lightly on the lips. She smelled like tea roses and tasted like Muthas Gravy. A weird combination but it worked. When we looked down again, Lucas was leaving Dad’s shop. He had a poetic kind of lope. He held his

shoulders dead straight. He had his hands stuffed in his pockets and a brooding look on his face. I saw all of this in seconds under streetlight.

“Bye, bye, Bruiser,” Nancy flung her hand across her brow. “Farewell, you violent, suspect, beautiful lug.”

She said it like it was the end of something, but actually it was the beginning.

(wordcount 1400)

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