

Begin

‘Begin,’ the therapist said. Her therapist was the sort of person who was always presentable. No makeup or expensive clothes, just naturally attractive, calm and collected. With this observation as a guide, Mel was determined to be rational but then she couldn’t think of anything interesting to say. The therapist lived in a lovely renovated colonial. Her consulting room was at the rear, with a view onto a lush garden. The room had an old-world intimacy about it. The best thing for Mel though, were the two chairs—one facing the other and separated by a small table upon which sat a jug of water and two glasses. The first day she entered the room, she was disappointed by the ugly 1970’s appearance of the chairs, but when she sat down on hers, it was a study in comfort.

‘Even now, when you say *begin* I have this compulsion to laugh but then—well its offensive really, to laugh at one’s therapist—don’t you think?’

‘Okay, but I’m not offended,’ the therapist said, making a note. It had been a year and she was still taking fucking notes. Mel thinks she may have enough evidence to have her locked up for life.

‘I sound like a complete fuckwit. Do you think there’s a chance I will be cured any time soon?’

‘Firstly, you should be careful about the words you use Mel—it’s important not to catastrophize. You’re not suffering from an illness. You are sad and hurt.’

‘Shit! That’s pretty important. Why didn’t you tell me this before?’ she attempted an ironic smile but the therapist’s demeanour was, as always, inscrutable.

‘Why don’t you tell me what’s been happening this week.’

‘But surely I am a little bit of an idiot?’

‘No.’

‘Okay, so Juro left again for another shoot. Melbourne this time, and he’ll be away for at least a week. Trouble is, I suspect I’ll actually feel abandoned when he comes back.

‘Really,’ the therapist said.

Mel noted a tone of disbelief. ‘I worked that out since I saw you last, like homework.’ It was at least partially true, just popping into her head. She imagined the therapist calling the remark *disingenuous*, a word Mel had never heard her use. She had a habit of creating scenarios for her therapist, who never complied with any of them. She didn’t respond at all and Mel blushed, looking down at her white-knuckled hands gripping her thighs. ‘Good grief.’

‘Just relax Mel, take some deep breaths.’ There was a pause while Mel followed her instructions. ‘Why do you think that?’

‘It’s because of Hana, because I want her to walk in the door, not Juro—or at least for three of us to be together. Even now the twins seem interchangeable. Clearly a terrible thing to say about one’s boyfriend, but it’s true. I mean, I do love Juro—it’s just that I miss Hana so much. I know she was horrible sometimes but I still want her to walk in and say hi, drop her bag and kiss me. I can feel her lips and then I’m like—dissolving.’ Mel continues to look down, her head feeling leaden. She rubs her hands along her jeans, as if to remove something unpleasant. ‘For Christ’s sake, this isn’t going well is it?’

‘There’s no rules Mel.’ She glanced at her notes, ‘dissolving—an interesting choice of words.’

Mel first met the twins, Hana and Juro at her family Christmas lunch nine years before—she was sixteen. Her older brother Stephen had invited them because the twin’s mother was *crazy* and of course, there was the matter of Stephen dating Hana. It wasn’t a secret about their mum. They were all told over lunch by Hana herself.

‘Yeah, bat-shit crazy. She’s in short-term psychiatric care at Ceritas House for setting her hair on fire and running around the neighbourhood in the nude.’

‘Goodness me, the poor woman,’ Mel’s Mum said.

‘Our dad left us to it when we were 8—had a gutful, I guess.’

‘Hana, can we not talk about this?’ Juro was clearly embarrassed by his sister’s lack of discretion in front of virtual strangers. Mel was mesmerised by Hana and prayed she’d continue.

‘It was just after our birthdays. He bought us each a hand-made doll from a charity stall at the market. He even made sure they were similar, because he knew we’d fight over them—no hint of their gender.’

‘Hana!’ Juro said.

‘One night he tucks us in, says goodnight and that was that,’ she said. ‘Haven’t laid eyes on him since, a cheque comes in the post now and then.’

She said all this with an air of breezy nonchalance, simultaneously discomfiting her brother and impressing Mel immensely. She had a macabre sense of humour. Hana treated the family’s problems as if they were a series of amusing anecdotes.

‘Mum lost the plot straight away. When we asked where Dad was, she said he’d just gone upstairs for a nap,’ Hana said. ‘At the time, it would’ve been kinder, if he’d done us three in and strung himself up in the garage.’

Dot, Mel’s Mum claimed the siblings were terribly traumatised but had trouble showing it. That was Dot, when it came to emotions—she was all over it.

Mel and Dot fell in love with the twins and became regular visitors with Dot paying particular attention to their diet and general well-being. Stephen was also fascinated by them in his own reticent way, so fascinated he thought for a long time he was actually in love with Hana. To be honest he was kind of scared of her as well; you could tell he never knew what was coming next. Sometimes he seemed exhausted after being with her and found excuses to escape her company, before returning to her with renewed enthusiasm. Mel got how he loved Hana and was confused by her at the same time, because it was how she felt too. She was infectious.

‘We need to get some meat on their bones,’ Dot said.

‘They’re not domesticated. Essentially they’re feral,’ Stephen said. He was majoring in anthropology.

‘Hardly surprising, the poor dears are practically orphans,’ Dot replied.

The twins still lived in their mother’s house in the inner west. The house was a rental in desperate need of repair and the twins had no discernible domestic skills.

Dot was a rescuer, having saved various dysfunctional members of her extended family and friends from a variety of perilous and ill-conceived adventures. This largess

even extended to Frank, Mel and Stephen's dad. Two years before, he had gone on a bender and absconded with a barmaid named Twig. She shot through after a week, with a lorry driver from Broome. Now their father, when he wasn't at work, spent a lot of time in the shed brooding and drinking beer.

Dot accompanied the twins to Ceritas on several occasions to visit their *crazy* mother, Junko. Juro had to drive home after, because Dot was too upset.

'It's a scary place, a locked ward for lunatics, with high walls and low expectations,' Dot said over dinner after her first visit. 'The twin's mother is an attractive woman in a bad wig—completely failed to recognize her children.'

'Mum, they don't use the word *lunatics* any more,' Stephen said. He was having, what he described as a *well-earned break* from Hana.

'I'm getting Junko out of that place,' Dot said.

'How?' Mel said, alarmed by the prospect of yet another search and rescue mission.

'Don't know yet.'

'What did she say? Did she talk to you Mum?' Mel said. She hadn't been allowed to go, even after her customary whinging and pleading.

'Yes she did, it was odd—well, I guess you'd expect that.' Dot sat thinking for a while. They'd finished eating but the whole family stayed seated at the table waiting.

'Mum! What'd she say?' Mel implored.

It was a locked ward on the top floor of the hospital. They had to ring a buzzer several times before a face appeared briefly at a small, reinforced window, then a tinny voice

crackled through the intercom. They could hear a muffled screeching sound in the background. They had arrived in the visiting hour but security was tight. 'Please wait, someone will escort you in,' the voice said. Two large men in security uniforms arrived and were buzzed in, leaving them to continue loitering outside.

As it turned out there was a long delay. A commotion was in progress, a patient had become 'difficult', as the nurse who eventually let them in, described it. It occurred to Dot "difficulties" might be a rather mild way of describing daily life at Ceritas. An obese man sat at a coffee table playing checkers. Opposite him was a woman so emaciated, Dot felt sure that movement of any limb could cause multiple compound fractures. The man looked up at them as they passed and offered them a maniacal booming laugh.

'Jonanthon—no!' the nurse said.

The two burly security men they'd seen earlier were crowding a ferocious looking young woman with wild black hair. She looked intensely alert, hunkered down and ready to leap at them like some sort of savage predator.

A large patio, off the patient's common area, housed several trestle-like tables and bench seats fixed to the concrete. A series of festive looking umbrellas, also firmly fixed in place, was providing shade from the midday sun. One of the other tables was already occupied by a sad-looking middle aged couple and a surly young man in a hoody.

Dot, Juro and Hana, sat down with Junko. They'd brought food from one of the takeaway places near the hospital. Nobody seemed particularly hungry, least of all Junko, who stared at the others as if they were a new and interesting species.

'Hello Junko, I'm Dot.'

She responded by looking closely at Dot. She was very pale, as if she had not been exposed to any sunlight for years. Dot noted how pretty she was, even with the dreadful wig, and the hand-me-down clothes they'd given her. She was annoyed at the staff for this. The genetic inheritance of the twin's delicate features and slim build was obvious.

'Mum, Dot's speaking to you,' Juro said. Hana groaned—she hadn't wanted to come.

'I know,' she said. She had a surprisingly clear, soft voice. 'Who are you again?'

'Dot, I'm a friend of your children Junko. It's lovely to meet you. I've heard so much about you.' Dot said. She gestured to Juro and Hana, wondering if that had come out right.

'I'm not myself, you know. Thank you for coming,' Junko said this as if their visit was at an end.

'I know and I'm so sorry about that Junko. I'm sure they're looking after you here,' she said, although she wasn't sure at all. 'Your children are doing fine and you'll come home soon,' Dot silently berated herself for being a complete idiot. She had no experience at this and felt useless.

'You don't understand,' Junko said, as if Dot had not spoken.

'Jesus H Christ,' Hana groaned again and got up.

'Hana, don't' Juro said. Hana walked over to a large, plexiglass porthole overlooking the park and nearby technical college. Resting her head against the window, she looked resentfully down at the park.

'I'm not this person anymore.' Junko paused. 'It's somebody else—it's a way to be better,' she pushed her white hand flat against her chest. 'You can see that, can't you?'

Junko looked intensely at Dot, as if willing her to recognise some truth, to precisely understand her assertion.

‘Well—I,’ Dot, a person who thought she’d had the world’s measure, was lost for words.

‘Dot wait, none of this is our purpose here,’ she gestured with a sweeping arm. ‘I know this now.’ She held Dot’s gaze. Her voice was quiet, her diction precise. Outwardly, there seemed nothing the least bit threatening or even mad about Junko. Juro gently stroked his mother’s shoulder.

‘Mum, do you have everything you need. I could bring you some...’

Ignoring him, she reached over to Dot and placed a small, cool hand on hers. ‘Will you come again? I can see you, you are so bright it almost hurts, I want you to come anyway,’ her shy, frightened smile entered Dot like smoke.

‘They have no glue,’ Dot told Mel a few days later. Mel thought the twins were the embodiment of perfection, hardly in need of repair. One night she got up to use the toilet and they were on the couch watching TV, either side of her mother. Dot had an arm around each one and that’s when Mel understood the glue analogy.

Mel believed the twins—fraternal not identical—to be the most beautiful creatures she’d ever laid eyes on. They were, according to Mel’s romantic appraisal, the very ideal of humanity, with faces and bodies as smooth and unblemished as small children. They had perfect elegant hands and feet, each tooth a pearl set in their utterly kissable mouths. They stared out of dark and mysterious eyes and often elicited a Zen-like stillness. Their *feralness* was evidence of a certain variety of purity—a grace beyond normal human

experience, Mel thought without certainty. Even Hana's acerbic observations rippled through the universe like pebbles dropped into a garden pond. Mel had a thing about eastern spiritualism at the time and a propensity for exaggeration, an issue her therapist had alluded to on more than one occasion.

The twins were more parochially Australian than Mel, who was separated from England by only one generation. Their ancestors, Juro said, came from Japan in the mid eighteenth hundreds—a source of much fascination for Mel, who probed the twins for details. It was Stephen who pedantically filled them all in on the facts. Japanese pearl divers were forced into slavery the minute they set foot on Australian soil. The twin's great grandparents would have been conned into diving on Thursday Island with a promise of riches. This utopian assurance quickly turned septic, as they were thrown into squalid housing and paid a pittance. Heroically mirroring to a degree the present circumstances of the family, Mel concluded.

Eventually Mel and Juro became an item, whereas Stephen's relationship with Hana fizzled out after 12 months. She was a 'handful', he said enigmatically and left it at that. Mel and her mother expressed a desire for a more thorough explanation. Stephen was the quiet type, unless his abundant academic knowledge was called upon. He never did seem to be able to maintain relationships. It remained unclear who of the pair, was the most likely handful. He started spending time in the shed with their Dad.

When Mel enrolled in a Law degree at UTS, Juro was in his last year of Media Arts there. He was busily completing a film, with a view to entering it in Tropfest. Hana was finishing a Philosophy of Art degree at Sydney Uni up the road, so all three were

often together. They hit it off, to the exclusion of practically any other friendships. Hana inexplicably thought Mel and Juro's relationship hilarious, even to the point of derision.

After Stephen, Hana had lots of boyfriends, most of them married. One was an academic in his forties. 'He's an arrogant and entitled shit but he has a circumcised cock which I prefer— they're a bit thin on the ground these days.' She seemed incapable of taking anything seriously, even sleeping with another woman's husband. 'I don't really like men much, but I love fucking,' she said. "Why get married and make one man miserable, when I can stay single and potentially make thousands miserable?" She was always quoting Carrie Snow, whom she'd never met but considered a mentor in absentia. Once, Hana and Mel were having a drink at the student bar. 'I think I might have killed a man,' Hana said. 'When he got home after visiting me and in time for dinner with his wife and kids, he died from choking on a chicken bone.' She explained her reasoning thus. 'His throat had become fatally constricted from my cunnilingus demands. It's a thing,' she said. Mel nearly choked on her drink.

The trouble began when Mel realised she was *in love* with the wrong twin, Hana and not Juro. The three of them were living in cramped student digs in Surry Hills. One evening Juro rolled a joint and they smoked it lying on the floor. Hana flipped over and proceeded to climb the wall with her feet until she was standing on her head. She swore blind it was a good thing to do before dinner at which Mel giggled.

'That's ludicrous, I'm going to get Kebab's and beer,' Juro said. When he left the flat, Mel leaned over and kissed Hana on her upside down mouth. Hana, unsurprised,

asked her to do it again. Late that night Mel snuck out of the bedroom she shared with Juro and into Hana's.

'Do you think it's possible for children to redeem their parents?' Hana said. It was later, before Mel had gone back to her own bed. Hana had this odd way of thinking. It was a complicated question, but Mel thought she knew what she was talking about.

'I don't know for sure, but I don't think so. In any case,' Mel said, 'it's not a child's job.' She knew the twins had a shitty childhood but was still astonished to feel Hana's tears drop onto her chest. Hana was not the crying type.

It took a couple of weeks before Juro realised what was happening. He was working on his graduation film and carried a lot of responsibility with his crew—there was even a famous actor who volunteered to be involved. He came home late one night to find Mel and Hana sleeping naked in each other's arms. The twins had a terrible fight about it while Mel looked on, frightened by their fury.

'Well, what the fuck, let's make it a fucking threesome,' Hana said.

That's when it came to blows, with Juro slapping her.

'That's disgusting! You'd fuck anything that moves,' he said.

Hana punched him hard in the face—there was a lot of blood from Juro's nose. Though Mel wasn't exactly overjoyed by Juro's remark, she did try to drag them off each other. To add to the calamity, a neighbour from across the corridor started banging on the door.

Mel felt as if some catastrophic force had thrown her from the world, her unable to get back in. Things settled down and they came to an arrangement, whereby Hana moved back to their *crazy* mum's house. Mel was in despair over her part in all of it.

By then and thanks to Dot, Junko had been released from hospital and was receiving assisted home help, but she was so heavily medicated she could barely stand. Mel and Dot appeared at least once a week to make sure Hana and Junko were alright, or as much as they could be. The regime of pills made Junko both nauseous and terrified but kept her from doing anything physically alarming.

‘Mel, you used the word *dissolving* last week. What did you mean?’ The therapist’s eyes seemed to be lit with a milky shine Mel hadn’t seen before. It was like Mel made everybody sad and she would have to explain it all more carefully...her guilt. The therapist had heard it all before, but appeared to never tire of hearing it, as if there was some crucial element missing from the previous telling.

‘That’s how it felt, like I was disappearing out of the world, drifting somehow, just watching them tear each other apart, it was like I was irrelevant after that. At least until I received a scheduled SMS from Hana. As I’ve already told you, the message said simply *I’m doing you all a favour and going upstairs for a nap, sayonara kiddo*. Juro got one too and I didn’t know if his message was different. I didn’t ask and he never mentioned it—which is fine. I couldn’t have dealt with any more than I already had. I’d started grieving anyway when she left but it didn’t diminish my horror. I really thought she loved us enough to stick around and help Juro and I work through it.’

‘Have you considered that she did love you, but couldn’t figure out how to express it appropriately? It wasn’t all down to you Mel, you can’t take it all on,’ the therapist said.

The room fell silent. The therapist didn’t seem to mind nor did Mel, who looked out the window. A wren had alighted on a spindly agapanthus, its tiny head wildly

twitching, alert only to the needs of survival, she wondered at its life of perpetual restlessness.

‘I couldn't bear the thought of the twins being separated and as it turned out neither could Hana. She really prepared for it, as if she had it all worked out for ages. I mean, right down to making sure Junko's day-carer found the note pinned to the front door— DONT GO INTO THE GARAGE. RING 000 NOW!! That was considerate wasn't it, she'd thought it through.’ Mel looked squarely at her therapist, expecting affirmation. ‘You see, it wasn't Junko we had to worry so much about. None of us got that bit.’

‘Mel, you can forgive yourself. You're allowed to do that,’ the therapist said.

All of the following week, Mel felt lighter, less crazy. Juro came home from Melbourne and they had a great few days together. A friend of his owned a ketch and they spent a night drifting in the sea. They talked and cried until the sun came up. A tentative plan had been made for Juro to try his luck in California the following summer.

They went to visit their parents. Junko had been living with Dot and Frank for a year by then and even Frank was getting on alright with her—he was kind. She was on different meds, calmer and she recognised Juro. It was tricky when she asked after Hana, and Dot gently explained what had happened. Stephen seemed happier than he'd been in a long time. He was awarded a research fellowship, somewhere in Puerto Rico living with an indigenous tribe. There was no end-date and everybody thought that was entirely appropriate.

Mel had something to say now as she settled herself into the wonderful chair. Somehow, she sensed a lifting of the confining gloom that had invaded her life. She reasoned that perhaps she was beginning to embrace a wider view. While she had ebbed along this narrow and constricted line of culpability, she had forgotten how to breathe. She was starting to feel again, to find *a way to be better*.

‘Begin,’ the therapist said.