

Background

Everything is close despite the space, even the sky. All of it is over-lit.

How could I have forgotten this about Willoughby, Amy thinks, how vast but airless it is?

She winds down the car window. There's the taste of sawn timber, strong enough to sting her eyes. Amy takes in the church: the spire and pointed arches over the windows, the slate roof with its fleece of lichen. Around the tiny building the grass is patterned brown from persistent frosts. Twenty or so sheep stand huddled under a lone tree. Along with the misty haze, the loneliness of the landscape would transfer beautifully into a photograph. She eyes her camera, forces herself not to pick it up. As she'd told herself on the way here, she wants to keep this as simple as possible. I've come to pay my respects, she repeats, and that's what I have to concentrate on.

Rachel Featherstone and her man, Russell, pull up across the road. Amy had heard they'd split, and she delays getting out of the car so she can watch them. They walk through the gate and up the narrow path. Other people arrive: girls in frayed denim, bikie-couples in leathers, a young bloke with Rex's dog, Roman. The large Rhodesian ridgeback must be eight. Five years, she thinks, gone in a sigh.

'Amy?'

On the road, her hair streaked with slashes of luminous pink and purple, Janine is frowning quizzically at her.

Gathering her bag, Amy opens the door. She's only met Janine once before, three years ago at an exhibition-opening in Menence where, along with other artists, she'd had some photographs showing. Those pictures – people lurking in hallways doused in red syrupy light – were the first she'd taken after moving to the city; after Rex. Janine had been so attentive that night that Amy had wondered what Rex had told her about their relationship, about what had happened before she and Rex broke up.

'So good you came,' Janine says now. 'Rex would have been rapt. Was the drive okay?'

Amy nods. 'What about you? Are you all right?'

'Can't stop crying.' Janine chews her lower lip, her forehead crimping. 'People say it's better than starving the grief. It's just... that I can't stop.'

'You've had a fright,' Amy says, although from her tone anyone'd think she'd said: *You should thank your lucky-stars*. In fact, something's not right: Janine, the church, the vast

dome of ill-defined sky, something's playing tricks on her. Amy knows why. She's surprised she doesn't feel worse. After all, when it comes to Rex – perhaps even in death – nothing's straightforward. Never-ever.

A couple of galahs scythe by, screeching audibly. Amy follows their path. The air is as cold as a block of ice against her forehead. A poke of laughter from the gathering pulls at her attention. She and Janine walk across the road together. When Janine stops to hug someone, Amy continues inside. Sitting neatly on an empty pew, she waits in the muted silence staving off as many thoughts as she can.

Rex's parents arrive. His mother – large-hipped and lopsided – leans into a thin straggly-haired man, Rex's father. Rex's sister is behind them, her colourless face appearing in hard-relief as her eyes switch about blindly. Amy watches Janine wander up the aisle behind them. There is a little coughing, some clearing of throats. Hush descends and the organ draws breath before sliding into a discordant note. The congregation stands and people rummage through the first bars of a hymn.

The singing should offer some relief, certainly distraction, but Amy is suddenly with her memories: with Rex, the wise-cracker. Rachel Featherstone had introduced them at one of her heady parties, but it wasn't that, she couldn't blame Rachel or the party for allowing herself to be drawn in.

'Beauty as rare as a blue moon,' Rex had said to her. 'Can I kiss you?' And she'd said yes, of course, the sounds of Joey Farrell playing his guitar at the bonfire, rising.

'Hey, Farrell,' Rex had said at some point, certainly after the kiss. 'What's with the folk music? Where's ya didge?'

'Rex!' she'd admonished. But what sticks in her mind, what she remembers, is Joey Farrell laughing, and she'd thought at first, that he was laughing at Rex, at his joke. It was only later that she'd realised Joey had been laughing at her, at her attempt to pull Rex into line. But that was the nature of things with Rex, nothing was as it seemed.

When everyone is seated again, a small child with a booming voice reads a prayer. The minister – his eyebrows thin and dark – makes the short trip to the pulpit.

'Rex had a tremendous spirit,' he says, his shoulders joggling. 'A way of bringing colour to every occasion.' Now there's an understatement, Amy thinks, as another image of Rex batters against her. They'd been at The Willoughby Inn, the local packed – people and booze and music – so that it was hard to get a drink. Joey's younger brother, Solomon, had been there, squeezing in, leaning across the bar, calling to be served.

'That's the kind of rude and uncouth behaviour you get from letting this lot in here, Frank?' Rex had yelled over the racket to the publican. Like everything he said, it was a joke, and one year in, she was used to this sort of comment. Not that she'd laughed, no one had laughed, but it no longer surprised her. And she remembers that it had been the publican who'd responded.

'Don't take any notice of him, Sol,' he'd said. 'Rex was unloved as a child.'

'Fuck off, Frank,' Rex had fired back. 'Solomon can stick up for himself.'

Amy's ear tunes. Prayers are being read. Someone recites a poem which brings tears to her eyes, but they're not tears for Rex, they're for some strange amalgam of what had never been sorted out. Her gaze trails to a small stained-glass window. Light is streaming through it onto Rex's coffin, onto the crimson roses and the flurry of confetti flowers on its lid. She huffs quietly, shakes her head. Trust there to be some semblance of splendour, she thinks. Charm and tastelessness, he had had both, the two traits so intertwined it was impossible to pull them apart.

The woman at the organ strikes the keys, her torso stiffening with the effort. Eight men take the handles of the coffin, and everyone watches them proceed awkwardly down the aisle, the casket swaying.

The atmosphere eases. The formalities are over, and there's just the goodbyes to get through, the quiet slipping away to execute. Amy isn't going to put herself through anything like a wake.

Outside, Janine grips her forearm.

'You're not planning to go, are you? I need to talk to you.'

'I've got a big drive ahead of me.'

'Just one drink. At the Willoughby Inn.'

Amy's blood races. She wants to tell Janine it's done, that nothing will be gained by going over things. Bloody Rex, she thinks, you couldn't shut him up except when someone needed something explained, and then you had Buckley's of getting anything out of him. She hesitates. Rachel Featherstone is approaching, and she doesn't want Janine to bring it up in front of her.

'All right,' she says. 'Just one drink.'

Janine loosens her grip. Amy watches her walk away, the pale almost seaweed-green expanse of sky growing. And then her hand is lifting in acknowledgement to Rex's relatives, and Rachel is embracing her, asking her to come to dinner at her new house which

is, she says, perched on a cliff-top at Pearl Beach. Amy explains that she's travelling back to the city. 'But I'll ring,' she promises, 'the very next time I'm down.'

Leaving, Amy feels as if she's swallowed gravel, as if it's swilling around in her gut, scratching her insides.

The pub hasn't changed. It's bland. The tables and chairs are the sort found in a school cafeteria. She looks across the room for Frank, but there's someone behind the bar she doesn't recognise.

'What'll you have?' Janine asks.

'House-red.' Amy holds out cash and Janine grabs it, strides off purposefully.

Amy's eyes travel to a row of photos. Local footballers. Stalwart young men trussed up with their arms crossed and their chests puffed out. Rex always stood out in here. Shit, the two of them had: she in tartan skirts, black tights and Doc Martin boots, he with his tats that bent down his arms, his chains and studs punctuating his look. Amy can see him. A laugh kicks in her. Damn it, she can hear him: he was always mouthy, goading.

She focuses on Janine coming back from the bar.

'Asked them to turn the bloody heaters up,' she's saying, beer spilling over the rim of her glass as she walks. Amy's dense wine looks like sump oil. 'They're tight arses in this pub. Rex used to say it. "Scabby pricks" he'd shout out.' Janine laughs, her cheek quivering as she hands Amy her drink. 'Most people didn't know how to appreciate Rex. We did though. We knew.'

Amy raises her glass. 'To Rex,' she says keeping her tone even.

'To Rex.'

The wine, which Amy manages to swallow, is a lousy drop. She keeps her face deadpan though as she watches Janine gulp down a couple of hungry mouthfuls of beer. They sit at one of the tables.

'This town needs people like Rex,' Janine says, her eyes darting about. 'They're too straight. The walking dead.'

Amy offers an affirming smile, another nod.

Janine wipes a tear away. 'I wouldn't ask, Amy, if he was here. I wouldn't need to. But now, given how he died, I have to hear it, hear what happened.'

Amy's heart shunts. Why hadn't she prepared herself for this, prepared for Janine to ask her questions?

'You were asleep weren't you?' Janine continues. 'Wasn't it late when Joey turned up?'

Amy switches her eyes up to Janine's. 'No, but we were in bed.'

'So Rex got up?' Janine asks.

And Amy can see him crossing the floor in his boxer shorts, his legs all sinewy and stringy-muscled.

'I'm glad you've heard what happened,' Amy says. 'I don't know if I can add anything.'

'Bullshit,' Janine is frowning. 'I'm in agony here. All I'm asking is that you tell me your version of it.'

But Amy doesn't want to. Her version isn't what Janine wants to hear. Besides, Amy's not willing to say it, to tell her how Rex had picked up a broom and swivelled it to thump the handle against the floorboards, and then called out, 'Learn some manners, Farrell. Come back at a civilized time.'

'Come on, Rex,' Joey had yelled. 'I'm just after a deal. It'll only take a second. It's freezing out here.'

'What did I just say? Feel like I'm fucking Captain Cook here. Go home you dirty savage.'

'He didn't want to let him in,' Amy says to Janine in a wooden voice. 'And he should have just said that. But he had a go at him.'

'A go?'

'You know what he was like.'

'But what did he say exactly?'

'He called him a black bastard and stuff.'

'That's it. That's all he said?'

'No, not really.'

'I want to hear the *whole story!*'

'*I know!*' The accusation rings. They sit for a minute, stunned.

Then Janine is crying, rails of tears tracking down her cheeks. 'You think it was his fault. After what they did, you want to blame him.'

'No!'

'Then why don't you stick up for him?' Janine stands with such force that her chair kicks back, almost falling over.

'They were punished, Janine.' Amy looks at her. 'They did three years in prison.'

'Rex is dead!' Janine leans over the table, her voice shaking with anger. 'It might have taken until now but they killed him.' She pauses, presses her lips together. Her chin is quivering. 'A massive brain haemorrhage. Directly attributable to his injuries.'

Amy is nodding, trying to think of something to say. 'I know,' she murmurs.

'You fucking bitch. Why did you come here?'

Amy's eyes shift across the room. She shakes her head. 'Maybe because he forgave me.'

'You're kidding,' Janine says, her words charged. 'For *what*?'

'For leaving him?' Amy says quietly.

Janine lets out a laugh but her face contorts into a sneer. 'You think he cared about you?' Her voice is full of spleen. 'He didn't give a *shit* about you.' Then, she switches around, and walks out through the swinging doors.

Amy sits for a while, her skin stretching like parched paper over her cheekbones. Then, suddenly needing to leave, she stands and walks hollow-legged in Janine's wake.

Digging in her bag for sunglasses, Amy goes to where her car is parked. Joey Farrell had gone home that night and told his brother, Solomon, what Rex had said. The two of them had come back to the house, busting through the door, one holding Rex down, the other dragging and locking her and the dog, Roman, outside. They'd turned on Rex after that, nearly killing him. Doctors had stapled Rex's head together, one hundred and seventy-four steel stitches around his skull. The scars were circular like the markings on a baseball. He was unconscious for days.

Amy had stood at the end of his bed listening to his breathing and watching for any movement under his eyelids. She'd practised being as still as he was. She could do it too, be frozen; feel nothing but a distant muted flutter of anxiety. It was then that she realised she didn't love him. More than that, that he horrified her.

That's when she'd written him a letter explaining that it was over between them. Putting it on his bedside table, she'd simply left. They didn't see one another until the trial started a year later. In keeping with his self-assurance he hadn't mentioned her desertion. In fact, he'd been friendly and forgiving. It didn't mean she wanted to resume things, far from it, but she did appreciate his lack of animosity.

Now, Amy pulls out from the kerb and sees Janine crouched by the side of the road near the pub. When she gets closer, Janine looks as if she might be throwing up. Amy slows her car, wondering if she should stop. But as she reaches her, Janine rises up from her

haunches and starts shouting angrily. Amy can't hear the words, but, afraid of running her over or, conversely, having to argue the point with Janine, she makes a wide berth around her, the little car ferrying her safely past the woman.

It's not far down the highway to the house where she and Rex had lived. She'd passed it on the way up but tried not to look at it. Now, she parks outside it, if only to get her head straight, to calm down before she hits the busier roads.

Amy's surprised at the poor state of the place, and stares dumbly at the demolition signs nailed each side of the front door. The windows are boarded up and the whole house leans precariously to one side, gravity tugging at it.

Eyeing the neighbouring homes – six in a row along this little stretch – she gets out of the car. Amy had knocked on the doors of those houses that night, waking people up. But what could anyone do except telephone for help, help that had taken an hour to arrive?

A breeze has come up and the grass bends, flutters against the fence. She'd only returned once after it'd happened, a painful force rising in her as she'd gathered what she could of their things. Even then, she'd been unable to make sense of her feelings or the incident.

And standing here now, the wind jostling her, she cradles the same sense of confusion. She wonders if there's something she'd missed, some small thought or explanation that had always escaped her, and that would excuse her, excuse Rex. But everything is as uncertain – nebulous really – as it's always been.

She had loved Rex for three years. And, while, at the time, everything had rung with a heartiness, a certain planned prosperity, the thought of him now ripped through her with foreboding. She'd been younger, yes, more whimsical, but looking onto the scene of their domesticity, she hardly understands it: that she was there, that he'd been the person he was. She guesses that's why she'd come to his funeral, to face it.

When she starts to shiver and the foul taste from the wine rises in her, she gets back into the driver's seat.

As Amy leaves, as she pulls away, her eyes are drawn to the rear-view mirror as if there's a chance, a very last chance that something will occur to her. She's hopeful she'll finally know what to make of what happened. But behind her there's nothing but a dull paleness, a day indiscernible and remote, and she pulls her eyes back to the road, back to the white lines that rise along the undulations.

And looking ahead, a potent pull of blood is a little like giddiness. She comes to the top of a crest, her body lifting against gravity as she passes over it, as she leaves Willoughby. And she feels it, feels as if she's being released from shackles, as if she could fly straight up into that muted but unfettered air, and never return, never have to face up to standing-by.

She pulls on the gear stick and sighs. The road straightens, and her gaze clock a patch of blue sky that has appeared between some separating clouds.