

ON THE EDGE

2970 words

Each afternoon, when Tamara walks down it from the station, Dillon Street is a little steeper than the day before. By this Friday in the first week of December it's nearly a precipice.

She has to hold herself in as she starts down. If she were to let herself go even for a moment she would topple forward and fall. She would not be able to stop at Number 45 halfway down; she would go tumbling through the thick air right to the bottom, would bounce across the park and land – *Plop!* – in the fat brown river.

And then what? Be borne along with it perhaps like a body in a sack, swept around all its busy curves past the city and the wharves and out into Moreton Bay.

But she does not let herself go. She holds herself tight and teeters down Dillon Street as if on the highest of heels instead of sensible flat teacher's shoes. As if she were an old, old woman instead of just turned twenty-three. She turns in at the gate of Number 45 which is there waiting for her as ever clinging to the precipice, perched like its neighbours on high piles like a creature turned sideways to the street and staring over the park and river. A creature crouched to spring – short hind legs and long, long front ones.

The stairs lead, perversely, to the high side of the house. The original stairs and landing have been lost long ago when the verandah was enclosed, and she has to balance on the narrow top step, precarious as a high-wire artist, while she digs for her key.

She can't find it. And she needs to get inside quickly. There's a storm brewing – clouds packing themselves into an over-stuffed sky till you'd think it must burst, a tense electric feeling in her skin and eyes and teeth. Edge of the week near the edge of the year and she's clinging to the outside of a house which is hanging off a hillside above a river which is crawling away to empty itself off the edge of a continent... and at last there's her key at the bottom of her bag and she is fitting it into the hole and letting herself in.

She remembers to turn and undo the deadlock behind her, to walk through the hollow echoing rooms to unlock the back door as well. Damien gets so concerned if she forgets that. "You don't want to find yourself locked inside the house," he tells her, and she agrees meekly and never tells him how impossible that seems to her nor how she yearns for it.

To be locked inside – safe and quiet and private with the whole of Brisbane on the outside – that is what she needs at this moment more than anything in the world – except, maybe, to go home. But there is no getting properly inside this house. Perched among its fellows like a seabird in a cliff-side rookery, it is washed always by a spray of noise.

Thud! Thud! Thud! go the running feet of a child in the house above. "Col, you ready for your cuppa?" calls the voice of old Mrs Forrest from the house below. In the house behind, a radio wails and thuds. Boys are yelling to each other in the park. A speed boat revs on the river. Over and

under and through it all throbs the traffic.

Into the bathroom to wash her hands and she is staring at the Forrests' roof and remembering the time she stepped out of the shower and found herself looking into the startled eyes of Mr Forrest – Col – standing pliers in hand by his TV aerial. Into the bedroom to drop her bag and kick off her shoes and there above her as always are the net-clad windows of the uphill neighbours, blank as sunglasses, staring down at her. There is nowhere in this house to get away from them all.

“But you grew up in a Queenslander,” was Damien’s reaction the one time she said something – just one small, cautious, sideways mention – of how she feels. He himself grew up in a brick box, in the northern suburb where his mother still lives. He’s a late convert to the old “Queenslander” style, and fervent like all converts. “You’ve lived in a Queenslander all your life,” he pointed out.

“That was different.”

“How, different?” But she didn’t explain. How could she, when he chose this place himself, thinks it’s so great?

“You don’t think it’s just being away from home for the first time?” That was Debbie, the visiting counsellor at the school. She’s not really there for the teachers; she’s already overloaded with problems from the pupils. In any case Tamara didn’t exactly consult her, merely threw out another of those quick sideways mentions – those little fluttering distress flags.

“But it’s not my first time. I had three years in Rockhampton doing my teacher training.”

“Oh, but that’s different,” said Debbie, echoing Tamara herself, and of course she was right. It was not only that Rockhampton was smaller and flatter. Living in student accommodation, with all its pleasures and problems, never felt anything but temporary. She always knew she was going home at the end – not just the end of each term but the end of her course, because the Department was never going to knock back someone who actually *wanted* to go and teach way out west. It was a stroke of luck that sent her back to her own district but she’d never doubted she would be escaping from this cramped green edge of the continent, back to some broad brown expanse. She’d imagined her whole future out there. Instead, one year later along came Damien, the new senior master from Brisbane, and suddenly her future was turned on its edge.

He comes in while she’s washing salad for dinner. His school is closer than hers, only a few stations in on the line while she has the long journey to the outer rim of the city, but the duties of a deputy head keep him there longer.

“Are we having just the salad?” he asks. Not complaining, but with a certain plaintive note.

“Sorry. I’ll do you something else if you like. I couldn’t face anything cooked, it’s so sticky. And there’s a storm coming. I thought the power might go off.”

“It’s going to miss us,” says Damien, with the calm assurance of the local. “It’s okay, I’ll grill myself a steak to go with it. Sure you don’t want one?”

He gets a steak from the freezer and cooks it without fuss. “He’s a treasure,” Tamara’s mother

has told her more than once. A good cook, likes shopping, does his share of the housework – what mother-in-law could fail to be impressed? Tamara agrees with her, if not for all the same reasons. Of course he's a treasure; isn't that why she's here? "And finding your nice house," says her mother, who's seen floor plans and photographs though not yet the real thing. "How many men could you trust to do that?"

But that's exactly the problem. After he was promoted back to Brisbane, in the six months while she was still out west, he house-hunted tirelessly. He was so pleased with himself when he found this place. "Couldn't be better," he told her, "on the train line, not too far out, great view. It's been messed around with but we can restore it later." It never occurred to her to disagree. She was in love, she was deep in plans for the wedding, she knew so little of Brisbane. All she thought she needed was a place – any place – where she could be alone with Damien and spread her wedding presents around her and make a nest.

Their dining room is the enclosed verandah. It has the view Damien prizes so much, down the steep fall of Dillon Street to the park and the river and the high bank on the far side. It's dark now; all that can be seen are lights in the houses across the river and pallid flickers of lightning behind the hills to the north. Tamara sits with her back to the glass but she knows it's all out there. Her stomach clenches with the knowledge; it's an effort to force down every mouthful.

"You tired?" asks Damien and she nods.

"Ah well. We can sleep in tomorrow. And only another week to go before the holidays."

"Yes," she says and tries to look – tries to *feel* – like someone with the Christmas holidays in front of her. But all she can think is, *Christmas here*. Here in this room – on this ledge – with Damien's mother and Damien's sister and brother-in-law and Damien's cousin and his wife. What is she going to feed them and how is she going to talk to them – they are such arty people – and will they be watching all the time to see if she's done things right? And how can she prevent their noticing that from her kitchen window you look straight down on the Forrests' back landing and the Forrests' toilet opening off it and as like as not at Col Forrest's back as he stands there peeing with the door wide open?

She checks her emails while Damien clears the dishes. There's one from her sister: "Wots this about bodies throne in the river out yr way, are u still alive or has Damien taken to u with an ax? time sumbody did, tell him congrats from me, luv Jorja."

She'll be expecting a reply in the same vein but Tamara isn't up to it. The report of the woman dismembered, stuffed into a sack and thrown into the river, is one more of all the things that are becoming too much for her. She types a hasty message telling Georgia the body was found a long way downstream, why should she think it has anything to do with them? She reads it through before she sends it and is shocked at how angry she sounds. She knows why – nothing to do with bodies in sacks, it's because Georgia will be home for Christmas and she won't.

“We understand,” her mother has written. “We had the wedding here so it’s only fair if you spend your first Christmas with Damien’s family. I’m afraid there’s no chance of us coming to you. You know what your father’s like.”

Her father hates the city. Would hate this house. She’d be ashamed to have him here.

Later, lying beside Damien with the ceiling fan dragging the heavy air over her skin, the sound of traffic mingling with far-off thunder, she thinks of home. Of the house on the plain which is wide and welcoming, set low on its short stumps; not since she was six has she been able to walk upright underneath it. Its rooms are dim, sheltered by verandahs, its doors always open because there is no-one who needs to be shut out.

On the main road above them a siren is howling. Damien stirs in his sleep and puts an arm over her.

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She wakes early from a dream of terror. She’s on the front stairs of the house; they have become impossibly narrow and steep and they end in swirling brown water. Something is tossing in the water, bumping against the underside of a step. Even though she dreads it she has to know; she crouches down and peers between the steps – and it’s a torso. The bloody torso of a butchered woman.

“But you don’t need to worry about the river,” says Damien when she starts to tell him about it; she has roused him with her waking scream. “Even the ’74 flood only came to the bottom corner of our block. It was one of the things I checked.”

“I know.” She curls against the comfort of his body and doesn’t tell him any more.

After breakfast he goes to the room they call the study to write reports. “I’ll probably be all day. All our parents expect a whole essay on their own little dears.”

Tamara has already finished her reports. They didn’t take her long – a few lines on each child and she doubts if many parents will read even those. They have more pressing concerns, out there on the city’s desolate rim.

She ought to be baking things for Christmas but she can’t face that. Storm clouds are still hovering and the air is thick and hot. If she took a handful and squeezed, drops would ooze from it. She starts to clean the kitchen instead. She mops and scrubs, trying to keep her whole attention focussed on the patch of wall or floor in front of her and to shut out everything else.

But it’s no good. Outside the house, engines are revving, car doors bang, people shout to each other. When, finally, she gives up and goes to the veranda, the road is lined by parked cars. Groups of people are straggling down to the park with baskets and eskies, folding chairs and tables, small children in pushers.

She puts her head round the study door. “I’m going to the park for a bit to cool off,” she tells Damien. “It’s so hot. It’ll be cooler by the river.”

He nods without looking up.

Even before she reaches the park she's assailed by the greasy smell of barbecues. There are clusters of people everywhere having pre-Christmas parties. Some have even wound tinsel into the trees. Most of them seem to be family groups – children and parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts.

Tamara steers away from them, following the avenue of bunya pines to her usual spot in the far corner. There is a rise before it, a levee, and when she comes over that she finds the place empty as usual. It's a strip of rough grass bordering the river, not a good place for a picnic. You could lose a child over the edge, which is only roughly screened by paperbarks.

She pushes between the paperbarks and stands on the brink above the brown water. It is moving fast, the tide going out. She stares down at the repeating patterns of ripple and swirl and racing debris. Almost imperceptibly, her body leans forward. In one hand she has hold of a thin branch of the paperbark beside her. Suppose it broke? Suppose she were to let go – accidentally, of course. It could happen. The water is deep, the current strong; she's not a good swimmer; no-one is near enough to hear her cry for help.

“This should be far enough.”

It's a man's voice, behind and to her left. She peers sideways through the leaves.

Two men have come over the levee bank. One is carrying a sack. There is something furtive, secretive in their movements. They keep looking behind them over their shoulders but they don't glance in her direction.

“We're out of sight here.”

They stop, just short of the river's edge.

Tamara stays absolutely still. The paperbark leaves are prickling her face but she doesn't dare turn it away. Her eyes are held in fixed, horrible fascination on the sack.

The man who is carrying it rests it on the grass. He opens it, reaches in, and pulls out something red.

A Santa suit.

He strips to his underpants, putting his clothes in the sack, and climbs into the costume. While his mate is helping to adjust his beard there is a tinkle of bells and a soft thudding, and over the bank trots a white pony pulling a little carriage. Santa climbs aboard and off it goes, tinkling gaily. The mate follows on foot.

Tamara waits until they've gone before she comes out from her screen of paperbarks. She is shaking with laughter. As she climbs the levee bank there is a flash and, almost instantaneously, a huge tearing crack overhead. Another moment and water is pouring out of the sky.

“I hope that pony's bomb-proof.” She says it aloud though she can't hear her own voice above the storm.

When she tops the rise she sees the pony standing steady with two people at its head, while someone is holding a huge umbrella over Santa Claus. The park is busy as an ants' nest. People are

gathering up food and babies and blankets, putting up umbrellas, rushing for the shelter sheds, racing for trees and then, after another flash and bang, dashing away from trees and into the open.

Tamara strolls back along the bunya pines. They are the tallest trees of all but they've stood a long time; why should they be struck today? Rain sluices over her, straight through her clothes, cool and welcome on her skin. But it's easing already and the storm is rolling away. A few people are heading for their cars, heads bowed over dripping bundles, but most are staying put.

By the time she reaches Dillon Street she has come out from under the storm. Water is still sheeting down the tarmac but it is glittering in the sun and a faint steam is rising. She splashes upstream towards the house. In her mind she is composing the email she will send to Georgia about the men and the sack, the letter to her parents. And then the version, a little more elaborate, that she will recount to her in-laws on Christmas Day.

But first she will tell Damien, over lunch as he takes his break from report writing. And later, she thinks, when he's finished the reports – tonight, or tomorrow, or next week when term is over – she will maybe find a way to tell him how she feels about the house.

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