

*Love's T(ri)(str)angle*

3000 words

In the middle of the track. A bloody cow, calf bunting its udder, bellowing indignation at Sarah's sharp toot-toot.

Sarah winds her window down. Calls, "D'you mind? My child is hungry. My husband... God knows, because I know nothing... too much... nothing except I need to get home."

The cow turns liquid, long-lashed eyes upon her – eyes of the righteous, demanding, "Do *you* mind? Can't you see I'm breast-feeding?"

When Sarah wrenches the hand-brake on, the groan it emits could be her own.

She swings her legs out into a squelch of dung that splatters her skirt and sinks her to her ankles.

Arms windmilling, she yells, "Move. Do something."

The cow lowers its head, great horns pointed at her. Sarah stumbles backwards. In the back-seat, Geordie wails.

But when the cow juts its chin upwards, the flash of defiance fades. Point made, it trots to the fence, calf scampering after.

By the time Sarah has pulled off boots, wriggled out of tights, tipped groceries and stuffed mud-smothered mess into the plastic bag, Geordie's screams have morphed into sobs.

Oh, to stop. To unbuckle the harness of this baby who went from her into childcare before daybreak, to take him into her arms, tell him how she'll fight to make his Daddy whole again – how their love triangle will hold, no matter the storms buffeting it.

No, don't stop. That her heart might prevail, her head must rule.

The car coughs into life and judders forward. Hunched over the steering wheel, Sarah weaves around potholes and, where the track is less treacherous, peels with one hand the banana wedged between her knees. When a stubborn little fist unfurls to grasp it, she accelerates.

The shock of a cold splat on her neck sends her skidding. Spin corrected, tentative fingers locate a gooey mass.

She'll have to wash this slime-coated hair, now beyond twirling into the bun that would have hidden the greasy bits and cribbed another day. Before the world's toughest audience – a class of teenage girls – nothing will escape their eagle eyes nor spare their acid tongues. Certainly not banana-reeking hair on the Bohemian-looking teacher with the glazed-eyed husband.

Yes, they stand out – she and Tom.

Amongst robust farmers with feet planted so firmly on the earth they might have been seeded where they bloom, she and Tom are strangers, without even the protection of city anonymity. But while she is tolerated as some exotic plant evolved from rural roots, Tom is definitely a weed to be expunged.

It's true they stand out less in the big town where they shop on Saturdays. For that town has succumbed to the disease of loneliness and loss that afflicts so many where people numb their despair. And like every other species, Tom's can smell one of their own.

Strange though. Even in town, Tom draws stares. Not because his teeth bear the yellowed rot of his kind. But because his eyes dart with the terror of a hunted man.

Months ago, when she still hoped the throbbing metropolis could be their haven, they'd gone to eat pho, their new-born strapped in a papoose to Tom's chest. She'd loved them like that: she producing milk, he carrying Geordie where he could feel his heartbeat. It was then she first thought of their love as a triangle – without the usual angst. She'd flattered herself they were like any other couple – if there were such a thing.

But the skinny teenager with the pocked face knew they were not like any other couple. Pupils shrunk to crystal points, he clung like a blow-fly to dung, whispering his urgent, "Chasing? Chasing?" When he stalked them to the car he compelled Sarah, blinkers of love lowered, to see the man who had fathered her baby as the boy at their heels saw him. And that clear lens exposed soot-ringed eyes and hollowed cheeks that matched the boys' own.

It shattered any delusions about Tom recovering in the city; it did not crush her resolve.

When a cousin told her the farmhouse was vacant, she'd seized the refuge it promised. Remote from temptation, Tom would heal. She was sure of it.

But at what cost to Geordie?

Sarah counts the seconds between sobs, the tally higher and still higher until silence reigns.

Edge sheared off his tiredness, he'll wake and rage until midnight, she thinks bitterly. Opportunity to challenge Tom, gifted by her principal's early dismissal to beat the storm, squandered.

They call Tom's a post-modern problem. Yet trace the trees on each side of her family and it's there—drink or gambling, long before pokies and drugs. Misery wove such tangled threads into their lives, you could not unravel them without destroying the fabric of their beings.

Occasionally it skips a generation – or a generation, scarred by ravages wrought by a parent's addiction, skips it. But it stalks you, waiting to swoop. To tear at what you've stitched, reinforcing the seams with pledges (from him) and pleadings (from you.)

If it doesn't catch you, your family seeks it out – driven by some compulsion to cure it; flirt with it; procreate with it.

At ornate iron gates hunched over with age, Sarah turns.

Such a grand entrance to such a humble cottage, this avenue of pine trees, planted soon after her grandmother arrived as a bride.

The trees are breaking down now, branches weighted beneath decades of wind gusts and family – cousins, uncles, great-aunts upright in sturdy brogues who once were long-limbed girls with the agility of possums, as she was herself – scrambling along branches, tossing down knobbly pine-cones.

They're becoming dangerous. She'll have to lop them.

The roof flashes through a gap between trees. No smoke wisps up from the chimney.

He promised he'd have things organised. He promised. It was little enough to ask.

Dread entwines itself around her heart, squeezing until the well of mercy drawn upon too often is wrung out, and it solidifies into a tight ball hard-coated against pleas for one last chance.

She pulls up. Waits.

Why the hell doesn't he come out?

Sarah wades barefoot through chilly mud to lift Geordie from his seat. His head drooped on her shoulder, she carries him through the garden, and propping the screen-door open with one foot,

swipes muck off the other. Through the gloomy cottage she plods, to lay the tear-streaked face in the cot.

Injustices, the fermenting of toxins born of righteous anger, churn. She knows how, when she finds him, they will ignite into violent accusations, and she digs her nails into her palms.

In her bedroom, she sweeps shoes from cupboards, upturns drawers, flings clothes. Searching, searching.

At the futility of the havoc she has wrought, Sarah slumps onto her bed, wraps her arms across her chest and rocks herself as if she were rocking Geordie.

The chill surging through her has nothing to do with the iciness in the house. What is it he said as she left? "I'm changing, Sare-Bear. I'm setting us up for something big." Arms full of lap-top and nappy bag, she'd muttered, "It needn't be anything big and showy" – just wood, fire and dinner so she could spend time with Geordie and correct those essays her students are pestering her for.

*Something big.* To try to negotiate with the Mr Bigs, that's what he'll be doing.

Oh, foolish man.

For she knows the people he's mortgaged their future to.

Knows the way they come for you.

How he has sold them into bondage.

And hadn't they agreed? To lie low in their refuge long enough for his pursuers to get locked up, run out of spleen... or worse. She didn't care.

Is this what her grandmother felt when her grandfather forged her signature on mortgages, leaving her to fend off thugs demanding repayments with interest?

From the window, Sarah watches bedraggled sheep leave the shelter of a willow tree to scamper through rain after their leader. Her grandfather and Tom – sheep. Never foxes.

Fast-forwarding twenty years, she pictures herself tiredly insisting, "Geordie, your father was never a dealer. He never profited from others' misery."

For Sarah, it is all she has. It is everything.

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Ear against the keyhole of the unlined room where Geordie sleeps returning only silence, she tiptoes to the veranda, pulls on boots and jeans and huddles into her jacket.

Where would Tom go, without a car, with so little cash?

She'd vacillated about denying him money. He'd submitted, agreed it was for the best. But...

But nothing got done.

She'd declared herself guilty of the soft bigotry of low expectations, restored his cash-flow and left him the freedom to find his focus.

She'd found him curled under the doona, shivering.

What do you do? You make lists to steer his days. Delete anything that sounds patronising.

Still, nothing got done.

About him hung a torpor that threatened to suck her in. She might strangle in that fetid air of his stagnant questioning ...always questioning 'what is the point of the struggle anyway?'

Driven by the urgency to feed her family, she'd side-stepped his pit of despair.

Ice wind smacks her face as she steps from the veranda. Her pulse thrums through her eardrums.

Where the fence slumps defeated, and the hedge shoots sprigs of chaos, that's where she'll find him. Perhaps he's collapsed. How appalling that she hopes he might've – better than have him desert them; better than gangsters bashing him.

The compactness of a nest of chopped sprigs is testimony to his giving up. As he always gives up.

If she had left Geordie with him, might he have rallied? "Mea culpa, mea culpa," she mutters.

Or she might have found Geordie drowned in his bath-water, his father collapsed beside him.

Where would he go? A six kilometre hike to the nearest one-store town. Less if you cut across neighbours' paddocks. Sarah manages to smile at her vision of Tom squeezing between barbed wires, running the gauntlet of livestock, stung by insects and whipped by sword grass. And the day so bleak!

No. If he's gone, he's been taken.

Before they came here, she'd dyed their hair, reverted to her own name – a name the brutes who hold the deeds to their future could not know. But she'd balked at dyeing their child's hair, and Geordie's blonde curls blaze the lie of his parents' black tresses. The give-away.

At images flitting unbidden across her mind's eye, Sarah shudders. She pictures ritualistic killings. Brandings. Remembers how they threatened they'd never let up.

"Oh, Grandma," she murmurs, "what would you do? You poured your spurned love into your children and this home. And I have let Tom defile your triumph. Forgive me.

You are here in your garden, where old-fashioned flowers still peep through. Tell me where he is, Grandma.

You are here in the beds you edged with paddock stones, neat blocks for vegetables and potatoes, like the lazybeds of your Irish parents. A perfect grid of order amid madness. Tell me what to do, Grandma."

She could never change this sacred site. But when Tom bubbled with plans for a Japanese garden, she knew she would commit sacrilege. My God, she would let him pull the place down, rebuild it with some concrete atrocity, if only he were gainfully employed.

She needn't have feared for sanctity of garden or house.

And now she's lost him altogether. Because of last night and the desperation she'd heaped upon him to "just do something, Tom. Don't let this win." Her frenzy exhausted, she'd sobbed, "Sorry, sorry for doubting you," and they'd made love, slow, kind love, each afraid of their power to break and their vulnerability to being broken.

Onto a dry patch beneath a ghost gum, Sarah sinks to her knees, her mouth open in a prayer that sounds like a scream.

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But what about this morning? How, when she'd woken, she'd found Tom already dressed, powered by some new determination.

She swipes the leaves from her jeans and steps out the gate. He's left the axe jutting into a log, splitting sinews.

"Tom, Tom!" she calls.

A rustle startles.

Only a lizard, black and sleek, scurrying into the woodpile.

She'd thought there could be nothing worse than him leaving. Now she knows – there are worse things. To find him tomorrow, fallen into the gully, frost-bitten in below-zero temperatures or...she dare not think.

Fog is creeping like a thief down the mountainside, stealing options, leaving but one.

Back at the house, she jabs in numbers on her mobile. She names the names she knows and those she suspects.

Only when the sergeant recognises her as his daughter's teacher does she hear a flip to interest. Yes, he'll send a couple of officers out to have a look around.

"Oh Tom, I've betrayed you. Will you ever understand?" Tears prick behind her eyelids.

But Geordie is crying. He'll need feeding, cocooning. She is glad of the distraction.

Beanie pulled over his ears, Geordie snuggles in as she arms herself with a torch and heads out.

Her light fractures, illuminating corners which by day are friends, by night filled with skittering, wailing things. She stumbles over a log; wills herself to slow. The hand not clutching the torch shields Geordie's head.

"The police know every low-life. They'll find who's taken Daddy," she whispers. "We'll send him to re-hab. He'll come back to us... really back to us."

She is heading for the stables, once wafted in hay and warm creatures, home now to dung beetles and snakes.

Through the pine trees, the wind howls; somewhere, a bull moans as if in agony.

When she shines her light into a bloodwood tree, honey-eaters break into a twitter of protest. The crumbling bark of their tree is the hard shell of determination cracking around her heart. What will she do if she finds Tom bashed, bloodied? Common sense says "Ring an ambulance." Love tells her if his head has been pummelled to jelly, she will die.

Her light picks out a rag, cowering beneath a rusted tank. Balancing Geordie against her chest, she bends to seize it.

She cries out. It is her own t-shirt, stiff with blood.

They lurch on. Questions bombard certainties. Why would they take only her t-shirt? Why no signs of rampage in the house? Why is the blood dry?

The old sheep-dip is a trash pit of spray-cans, plastic containers, rubber tube off-cuts. What new form of torture have they contrived to torment her Tom?

Geordie sneezes and whimpers. One mittened hand swipes at his streaming eyes. The pungent stench of fertiliser assaults her nostrils. Weird. So weird. Her cousin said she wouldn't top these paddocks this year. And this no ordinary fertiliser. More the rancid ammonia of wild cat urine? Rotten eggs? Vinegar? All of these.

She sniffs the t-shirt she clutches. It is the same smell.

Not blood, but the reek of love in its death-throes.

Caught in torchlight, the windows of the old stables glint malevolently. Of course, of course. Curtains of tin foil.

She swallows the retch rising in her throat.

Show me a woman with a baby and I'll show you a coward. She had read that somewhere. As she creeps to the peep-holes she and her cousins drilled long ago to spy on the horses, she already knows the truth of it.

Tom is alone. One sweeping glance confirms it. Around him is a paraphernalia of her things – big cooking pot, nail polishes open on the bench, cold and flu tablet boxes, fish-tank she'd spent hours hunting for. Every jagged segment – chopped bits of hosing, glass jars of red liquid – falls into exactly the right place in an image already formed and now completed with the final piece: the hollow-cheeked, self-taught chemist she had thought she loved more than she loved herself.

She grips the railing of a water trough and slides slump by slump into the mud, the still frame of the stables scene playing over and over behind her sealed eyes.

The rumble of motors and the slam of car doors compels Sarah into the moment. Floodlights blind her. Geordie cries out. Police encircle.

Words strangling in her throat so they must lean in to hear, over the top of the baby she and Tom created, she pleads for their futures. "It's just a row. I shouldn't have called. Please go. I'm sorry. I've wasted your time."

But with her words out, something shifts. Familiar elements – a pinch of exasperation, a measure of stubbornness, a beaker of loyalty, a daub of shame – still jostle for domination. But into the vacuum left by the expelled plea, new elements – disgust and fury and yes, despair – enter. And the concoction gurgles inside her, swelling into a force more potent than the chemical cocktail within the stable walls.

Sarah holds the disbelieving eyes of the policewoman and her words explode like ordinance. "Yes, I'm lying. Tom's in there. He's cooking. And he's all yours."

When she hears the scuffle, hears Tom call her name, she hitches Geordie higher and says, "I need to feed the baby."

Her voice breaking beneath what the policewoman mistakes for anguish, but which Sarah knows is the new weight of aloneness, she adds, "If he's offered bail, don't contact me."

Through the wide-eyed stillness of the evening, she strides to the cottage. Police cars cringe across the gravel, clatter over the cattle-grill and are gone.

Only when she enters the yard does she look about. The grid of her grandmother's garden, laid in steely resolve, will be the blue-print for her life now. The cottage, standing against generations of storms, will be her refuge.

Into a strand of hair, Geordie has entwined little fingers. Sarah winces at the pull. She sees it then, her future. Sees that no matter how hard she works at untangling Tom from their lives, he will always be here. He is here now, in this fatherless boy she loves more than herself.