

Nostalgia Filter

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Bec's already wrestled with the Camira once tonight. Dad had ordered a congratulatory pizza feast to celebrate Em's Year 12 graduation and sent Bec to pick it up. Still not used to switching gears, she'd stalled in the carpark. Some dickhead in a Range Rover had honked her, and the reverb ricocheted so loudly off the red-brick façade into the car's open windows that it'd rattled her — far more than it should've.

Dad had been completely unsympathetic, of course, and Em hadn't cared — she had already left for Party Planet: Population Her. She'd shovelled down half of her pizza before Bec had even finished her first slice. She'd also stolen more than her fair share of the communal garlic bread before commandeering the bathroom without a single thanks. Even when Dad had relocated to the lounge room and Bec had retreated to the safety of her bedroom, Em's abrasive pop playlist travelled through the walls while she prepped for *the party of the year, c'mon, please, I gotta go*. By the time Dad had trundled Em into the car to go get blind drunk with her classmates, Bec never wanted to move again — she would comfortably decompose where she sat, parked in front of an old CRT TV she'd saved from hard refuse.

She's working her way through the backlog of Dad's original PlayStation games that got buried in time, pushed to the back of the living room cabinet. Her summer plans are sorted until uni starts again; she could work her way through these archives forever. But instead, she's being pulled from her plans with a knock at her door. It couldn't have been that long, had it? The world outside her window was dark.

'Why can't you pick her up?' she asks Dad, who's standing in her doorway with a stubby in hand. The pause screen from her game flickers, lighting up the dust bunnies cuddled alongside her chair.

Dad takes a conspicuously long swig from the stubby before exhaling his pleasure with a shit-eating smile. 'Can't. I've already had a *beeeeeer*.'

Can she hold her ground long enough? He must've planned to jump her during an ad break. Sure enough, within the minute, Dad's good humour drops. 'You're not gonna get any better at

driving by not trying. Go on,' he calls down the hall, already half-way back to the living room and to his fifth rerun of Terminator 3 on free-to-air. 'It's 20 mins there and back, chook.'

She doesn't bother getting changed out of her house clothes for the drive. She goes to splash her face in the bathroom, but the basin, taps and towels are covered in Em's glitter. The sharp plastic residue smears sparkles into the corners of her vision and just makes her feel worse. She grabs the keys from the hook, grabs a water bottle to go, and slams the front door behind her.

The second she climbs into the car, she changes the radio preset. The Friday Throwback playlist is a marginal comfort within the rest of the car's discomfort. It's a shitty old car, even by their family's standards. The brake indents too slowly, and the clutch springs the car forward too quickly when she eases off.

The engine hums as it warms up. It lurches up the driveway, but reaches a steady, familiar pace to take her down the street.

The evening haze of early summer hangs thick on the bitumen. It smells like the lead-up to Christmas. The passenger window was left wound down from earlier, so Bec winds her own window down with the manual crank to breathe the festive night air in.

She normally doesn't mind a night drive, but it's busy enough on North East Road that she gets stuck behind two cars each going 50 km in their respective lanes. United in their unpredictability, they drop speed and brake suddenly with no obstructions ahead. Bec joins their concertina — the brake shudders under her foot, and, for a split second, she's terrified she'll crash. The moment the car on the right slides into a slip lane, Bec accelerates hard to reclaim the road. The Camira hollers under the pressure, but she soon arrives in one piece at the side street address that Dad texted to her.

Tucked at the end of the street, the community hall and accompanying footy field is left in an ugly aftermath. Straggler zombie teens sit in piles along the exterior façade of the hall. The worst of them sit with their heads between their knees, while the better off lean on each other's shoulders and rub each other's backs. A few revenants are left with just enough life in them to lurch around and garble incoherently at each other, standing so close they must be able to taste each other. To the side of the hall, a cluster of boys have found the basketball hoop. They're

tossing a balled-up jumper and mostly-empty cans of UDL into the netless ring. As the cans fly, stray droplets of premix sparkle and just as quickly disappear under the hall's stark floodlights.

Keeping her distance, Bec parks further down the street next to a silent, dark house, and dials Em. 'C'mon, c'mon,' she mutters, scanning the tableau for her sister. She doesn't notice a group of teens walking past until one of them *bang bang bangs* on the car bonnet. She yelps, but no one's there to hear it. The teens disappear as quickly as they arrived, guffawing into the night. Her heart rate refuses to settle, even when the other side of the line connects. It's garbled — wherever Em is, she sounds underwater.

She finally spots Em, sitting alone on the curb just out the front of the hall. She's leaning on her knees with her bodycon dress bunched up around her thighs, phone against her ear. The glitter on her face has fallen, now smeared under her eyes. Even while she stares vacantly into the dark street in front of her, the glitter catches the light.

'I'm not getting out the car,' Bec says into the garbled line. Her voice comes out huffier than expected — her heart is still racing. She flashes the high-beams so Em can spot her. 'Hurry up.'

Through the windscreen, she watches Em blink into reality. She stands up from the curb, bottom half of her face still soft like the child she is. When her gaze lands on the car's flickering lights, she squints into the brightness, and something in her gaze shutters.

'Yeah, okay, okay,' Em crackles from the end of the line. 'Hang on, *Jesus*.'

She stumbles over to the car in her heels, and drops heavily into the passenger seat. 'You better not vom in here,' Bec says, but she's already feeling calmer with both of them in familiar confines. Em leans back in the seat, head lolling off to the side to rest against the cool plastic shell of the car, face turned towards the breeze.

'I'm not that bad, Bec,' she sighs. She sounds tired. 'You'd know if I was.'

'Look. I'm just saying,' Bec says as she puts the car in gear. Easing off the clutch, she falls silent as she listens to the engine's rumbling. The car begins to roll. This time she eases off the clutch, agonisingly slow, and it responds just a bit more smoothly than before. She's almost proud, until she jerks the car to a stop before turning back onto the main road. The seatbelt jams up tight and the water bottle she brought from home sloshes from the movement. Em doesn't respond to any of it.

‘How was it, then?’ Bec asks once they’ve hit the main road, turning down the radio to hear. ‘Tell me all about it.’

Em rolls her head to rest on her other shoulder and cracks open an eye. She leans over and grabs Bec’s water bottle from the cup holder, and takes a long swig. She wipes her mouth, and crinkles the bottle in her two-handed, klutz-proof grip.

‘Yeah. It was fine. Good.’

‘Was it? Wasn’t this one going to make your entire life? It looked like a horror show, not gonna lie.’ She realises what she’s saying, and tries to backpedal. ‘But I just don’t get it, you know I don’t, so... it’s fine, it’s whatever,’ Bec says. ‘If it makes you happy.’ She steals a glance at her little sister — she’s shut her eyes, frowning but not responding. Her mouth opens again despite itself. ‘I mean, I guess it’s the best thing to do now that you’re done with school, after all — have a final hoorah with people you’ll probably never see again.’

The wind blows northerly tonight. Its warmth beckons them home. At a red light, Bec takes another look. One of Em’s fake eyelashes has become unglued and hangs crooked. ‘Just as long as you had fun,’ Bec finishes, to no response. As the car takes off, the eyelash begins fluttering in the breeze. She laughs despite herself, and chooses not to share what made her laugh. When she steals another glance, Em’s eyes are still shut, but her brow is a bit softer than before.

When they hit their home street, Em cracks her wonky eyelid open. Even in shadows and under passing streetlights, Bec can recognise where they’re the same. They have the same mouth and the same shape to their eyes, even when Em’s is caked in powder.

They pull into the driveway. Bec kills the ignition and the car fades into silence. Before she can take off her seatbelt, Em turns to face her — her eyes are open and clear. ‘I’m not going to be like this forever,’ she announces, loud in the dark. Before Bec can think of anything to say in response, Em’s already turning away as quickly as she turned to face her. She unbuckles and climbs out of the car with her heels and the bottle of water in hand, leaving Bec to follow in her wake.

The house inside is dark and quiet, with just the faint hum of tv prickling in the background. Em dumps her bag onto the table: lipstick, mascara, her own set of keys, and a half-empty bottle of vodka come tumbling out. Still clutching the water bottle, she makes a beeline

for the fridge, and tears the leftover garlic bread in half. She stumbles to her bedroom, clutching her bounty, and shuts the door behind her without a second glance.

Faint light flickers in the lounge room. Dad is asleep in front of the tv — a late-night talk show about nothing garbles on. He looks deep enough in sleep that Bec doesn't try to rouse him. She turns the tv off, winking into blackness, and leaves him where he lays.

In the static, radiant silence of the house, Bec retreats to her bedroom, picks up the controller, and picks up exactly where she left off.

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