

Still

Anna Pax

The poinciana tree swayed outside her window, moonlight slipping between the shadows of its warping branches and scattering patterns on the rumpled sheets. This was Imogen's night-time view when the moon was full. She thought that this would be the third full moon since Ava had been born. Nights had been strange since then, miserable and distorted and too long (never long enough). It's not as though she was unprepared, she knew it was always like that with a new baby... but, still. The night times shook her. She was all alone, Matt so heavily asleep next to her that he might as well have been dead. The house felt hollow and unreal — the ghost of a house — and always this damn tree scratching at her window. The poinciana tree was shady and beautiful during the day, but at night-time it clattered and feathered against the window like fingernails or rain. It gave Imogen the shivers. Sometimes she imagined cutting it down.

They'd been so excited to move into their own place together after living with Matt's parents for two years to save for the deposit. Saving had felt pointless at the time, what with prices always going up — it had been hard to justify so much as an Indian takeaway dinner. Scratching and doing without and putting up with Stan and Debbie too. The relief of this pretty, airy house after Deb's eyes following her around the kitchen, her sweet voice just *mentioning*, love, that the light was left on in the bathroom the other night. Two years of holding her tongue. Matt didn't need to hear about how much of a bitch his mum could be — it's not like he didn't *know*. So, as much as the house sometimes creeped her out, it was better than that any day. And it was only at night, anyway.

Was that Ava crying? Imogen reached out over the edge of the bed to where the bassinet should have been, groping for the wooden frame and spidery mesh that contained her little daughter. Her hands waved uselessly through the air, not hitting the edge, and she felt that familiar rise of panic — where is she?

Oh, that's right, they'd moved it into the other room.

Four years of life in this house, and it was still almost like they had just moved in. There was a feeling to the first nights in a new house that always made Imogen feel a little shaky. Unmoored. She remembered it from when she was a little kid. The first night in a new place,

lying in the dark in her bed, not knowing where the door was. It was like that here, sometimes. It had been worse since Ava was born. It was probably baby brain. Had the crying stopped? She couldn't hear it anymore, just the scrape of leaves against the window. Maybe Ava went back to sleep. Maybe I could just...

'I'm off to work, Gen.' Matt's voice came through to her as though through some great distance, and Imogen felt herself float up from a dream. He was gazing down at her, his brown hair flopping down and twisting into loose curls.

'Okay,' she murmured. 'Have a good day.'

How could he just leave?

He did it every morning. Her white sheets were pulled up to her chin, her hair dishevelled, her face creased with sleep, and he was as neat as her mother-in-law's kitchen counter.

'Did you check on Ava?'

Matt shook his head blankly. 'You just look after you, got it? This family needs you.' Needs you, she thought. He's going to work while you're useless in bed, but he needs you.

Matt was packing things into his messenger bag, glancing in the mirror, and then he was gone.

Imogen dozed a little longer before getting up to pour a cup of black coffee and sit at the window. In a way, Matt was right. She hadn't been herself since the birth.

Well. Who would be?

She sipped her coffee quietly. It was still only eight thirty. She needed to get dressed. She felt like a mess. Usually she slept in pretty pyjamas, but these days she slept in large men's t-shirts with nursing bras padded with breast pads underneath because she leaked everywhere, all the time, especially at night. Anything could set her off, an ambulance siren or a dog barking or anything, even dreams. At least little Ava wasn't desperate for milk! But ugh, her breasts were aching and damp, the whole thing was disgusting. Wet stains were spreading like paper towel soaking up a spill on her chest. She drained her cup of coffee and went to dress.

On the way she thought she heard the little burbling sounds that signalled Ava was awake. 'Coming, love,' she whispered to herself. First, a clean t-shirt.

Maybe I'll go out today, she thought. She imagined putting on her old, pre-pregnancy clothes and shoes that had a heel and only carrying a small bag with only a lip gloss and her phone in it. She remembered being chic, or at least well-dressed. It was like looking at a feeling through a telescope; remote, and with the proportions all wrong. I love you, Ava, she thought. You little menace, I love you.

Twenty minutes later Imogen was dressed, Ava was quiet and the sunshine in the window had faded as more clouds swept over the house. More fucking rain, she thought. This much rain is like a disease. The plants were happy, at least. A few monster vines were climbing the drainpipe at the front of the house, their snaking tendrils winding into the gutters and sending out new green shoots along their length. Another one was climbing the handrail on the stairs, the veiny ropes pulling it down in front of their eyes slowly, so slowly. Imogen was glad they'd bought when they did. They couldn't afford it if they bought it today. It had been a pristine, freshly painted house. Three years of this fucking rain and the walls were growing mould that Imogen's mother scrubbed down every time she came to visit — every time because it didn't matter how often she tried, it inevitably grew back. They hadn't realised one of the windows didn't seal when they bought, so it was cold in winter and wet in summer, and a patch of flooring near the porch was rotting.

Right. I was going to go out.

Before she could make it out, her mother rang. 'Hello, darling,' she said tenderly. 'How are you?'

'Fine,' said Imogen.

'Been sleeping?'

'I suppose so. Waking at nights, obviously.'

'My poor love, I'm so sorry. It must be such an adjustment.'

'What about you?'

'I haven't slept well in twenty-five years I'm afraid, darling. But not to worry. What are you up to today?'

'I was going to go out,' she said. 'Maybe take Ava to the library or something.'

There was a little pause.

'Sweetheart, are you sure that's a good idea?'

'Why not?'

Her mother hesitated. ‘So many people... are you sure you want to face all that?’

Imogen sighed. ‘Mum, it’s just the library. Or maybe I can go to a park.’

‘A park is a better idea. Oh, my poor Imogen. Would you like a visit at the weekend?’
Again?

‘Why don’t we visit you?’

‘Oh well, I suppose. Ask Matt.’

Imogen’s mother thought Matt was God.

‘Okay, I will.’

‘You look after yourself, okay?’

‘Yes, Mum. Okay, love you.’

‘Bye, darling.’

Finally.

Imogen loaded up the pram, draped the little muslin cloth over the front of the pram so that Ava wouldn’t be disturbed, and left the house. The rain was holding off, but she would have gone out even if it was pissing down. She hadn’t realised how stir crazy she felt, and there was a rain jacket bundled up under the pram, and a plastic zipper thing, like a pram raincoat, for Ava.

Imogen felt clearer out of the house. The constant hum in her head, the dull electrical throb that was always there was beginning to fade. She hadn’t realised till she left; everything was quieter. There was air out here. The poinciana trees waved in the wind, but cheerfully, like friends. She pushed the pram up and down the streets of Wynnum, and every second white or chipped pastel-pink Queenslander had a boat in the driveway.

They didn’t have a boat. Matt got seasick.

Ava was still calm, and Imogen wanted an ice cream even though she was trying to lose the baby weight, so she stood in line at a café, paid for her cookies and cream waffle cone and walked along the foreshore. There were other mothers here pushing their prams, sometimes with a little dog trotting alongside, usually a little cavoodle or sometimes a kelpie cross. These mothers had neat hair done up in high ponytails and were wearing good quality athleisure with bright white sneakers. In the prams little boys and girls were nibbling snacks, smiling and pink-cheeked. When she had grown up around here it was utterly bogan and she had only cared about how she looked if she was going out with her mates to the pub. Somewhere in the last ten years Wynnum had become upper middle — Imogen still hadn’t adjusted.

She was nearing Wynnum Creek and didn't feel like turning around yet, so she took Fox street and wound around to the other side of the creek. Her spirits lifted. She was getting further and further from home, and Ava was still quiet in the pram, and there were no fancy mums this side of the creek. Down around the boat ramp and on to the esplanade — she was going to work off her ice cream cone if she kept going! — and the waft of mangroves blew towards her, stirring an unexpected euphoria. Maybe this was the exercise endorphin high? She was sure Matt would be proud of her. She wanted that, badly. There was a distance between them now — because of Ava? — that hadn't existed before and that made her yearn to be in his good graces. Just to get close, to be right up close to him and have him thinking she'd done a good job — the very thought of it was delicious. He was always telling her to exercise, that it would help her to get outside, that it was a beautiful day. The idea of winning his approval stole through her veins, and she picked up her pace.

Let Ava wake up if she needed to.

But she didn't. Imogen got all the way to the mangrove boardwalk before she ran out of energy and had to find a place to sit down. When she couldn't find a bench she sat on the grass, knowing she would get a damp bum but not willing to care. The weather had turned hot, and Imogen felt underboob sweat blooming on her t-shirt. God, she was tired after that effort. Her fitness had gone to shit since pregnancy. She glugged some water from her water bottle and lay down on her back. Her muscles relaxed as she sank heavily into the slightly damp grass. Her breathing began to slow, her heart thundered in her chest, her eyes fluttered closed, and peace finally descended. She was finally still.

Freed from seeing with her eyes, Imogen's other senses sharpened. She could almost feel the heartbeat of the earth beneath her. Or was it just the sea, that steady gentle lapping of salt water on mud and tree trunks? The air was loaded with the full-bodied stench of mangroves, saline and miasmatic. In the pram right by her, Ava remained silent. Imogen sensed the birds flying above her as they cast shadows over her face, wheeling off with their ghostly cries. She felt the hot sweat of the mangroves right near her, thrumming and pulsing like a huge living beast. This was the calmest she had felt in weeks, no, months.

I wish it was always like this, she thought.

An ibis landed nearby, and Imogen opened her eyes to study it as it stepped delicately, sneakily, toward the bag that she'd dropped on the grass. Good luck finding anything in there,

she thought distantly. She was sure she would normally shoo it away, but she couldn't remember why. It had black, scaly legs and beady little eyes and sad, yellowing feathers.

Imogen felt so sleepy after the walk, so worn down right in her very spirit, that when the ibis shook out its wings and landed heavily on the edge of the pram she didn't get up. She just watched it, and she thought she could see it watching Ava. Damn bin chickens, she thought — but she was really thinking about how wise and terrible it looked, with that curved beak like a scythe and its sharp, crackling clawed feet curled around the clean black cloth of the pram, desecrating Ava's safe harbour with its foulness. It was *looking* at Ava, cocking its head, studying her. God, it's going to peck her eyes out, she thought. But it only rumbled its call and looked at Imogen dumbly before opening its wings and flying heavily away.

Time stood still then, and she began to drift quietly away. The moment stretched forever, golden and precious. Grass prickled lightly against her back. I feel so soft here, she thought. I don't want to go home. What if I don't want to go home? Well, anyway, I don't have to yet. But why don't I want to? But then the sound of cars and people got louder, and she thought she heard wriggling in the pram. Soon Ava would start to cry, and there was still the whole way back to walk.

Maybe I'll just walk down through the mangroves.

The boardwalk was an aisle in a cathedral of mangroves. Imogen knew they were beautiful but couldn't help finding them absolutely, biologically repulsive. A haven to baby fish, she thought, imagining tiny silver flashes slipping amongst the distorted roots. But there was no denying they could be peaceful. Foul smelling, yes, but very quiet. The further she drew away from the road the quieter it was. They were tall, blocking out all but a few jagged puzzle pieces of blue sky.

Hush... she could only hear her breathing. And the clack clack clack of the pram wheels on the boardwalk and the lapping of the water against the roots.

It was strange how small her view of the mangroves was when she knew that they stretched further than she could know. The boardwalk showed just a small slice. The whole forest of them stretched out over this coastline like a fungus. Like lungs, she thought. Like my lungs, panting. And then her breath was all she could hear again. It filled her ears, it hurt.

No. No, she could hear breathing, but it wasn't just hers. Was it Ava's? But she was too small and this sound was too large. Now that she had noticed it the sound was deafening, it

rasped at her ears. Was she being followed? But the further on she walked the more she thought it was the mangroves breathing, the sound of them all breathing out together like a sigh that echoed out over the water...

The walk home took forever. She was tired out and Ava was finally fed up and sobbing, the sound of her shuddering cries sharp to Imogen's ears after the mangrove walk. But in a way, Matt was right. She *did* feel better for getting outside, and it *was* a beautiful day. Not so beautiful that she wasn't ready for a cuppa and a sit down, but there was definitely an improvement in her mood. She felt a spring in her step that she hadn't before. The pram felt heavier to push home than it had been before, but even that weight was comforting. There was a satisfying feeling in her arms as she pushed Ava up the hill, and when she made it home (sweaty, stinking, and nothing in the fridge for dinner) she felt, for the first time in a long time, like every nerve in her body was firing.

She fed Ava while sitting on the big grey sectional in the lounge room, cradling the little nut of her head in her arms against a pile of pillows. The milk let down in a gush so strong that Imogen was surprised Ava didn't choke as she had in the early days, but she must have grown — she greedily sucked down every drop. Or maybe Imogen was better at breastfeeding now? It was a long feed, which made her neck and shoulders sore but that made sense after so many naps, and Imogen didn't mind. It felt good to hold her baby, to feed her, to feel skin against skin. Ava's solid weight comforted her. She sat quietly, watching the breath rise and fall in Ava's little body, lips locked around her nipple, throat rippling as she swallowed. It was so good to sit down. So what if she hadn't made dinner? This was what mothering was all about.

After the feed Imogen laid Ava down on the rug and watched her squirm and burble on the carpet. She lasted about three minutes before she started to get angry and Imogen had to pick her up. The sound was miserable, a foul tempered squalling that Imogen couldn't remember from before. Was it a developmental thing? She patted her on the bum and shh-shh'd, but Ava only cried louder, emptying her lungs of every scrap of air from her diaphragm before inhaling and bellowing again.

Imogen sighed to quiet her internal irritation. 'You're grumpy today, aren't you?'

Ava screamed in reply, her face flushing bright red.

She managed to get dinner done by putting Ava in the Baby Bjorn and bouncing around like an idiot while boiling pasta and heating sauce from a jar. There wouldn't be a vegetable in the dinner, but it would be food. Matt wouldn't be able to complain about that, and who cared when she had to look after Ava? So she bounced and bounced while Ava wailed desolately at her chest, and luckily it didn't take too long to cook because in no time Ava was hungry *again*. She smashed her head against Imogen's chest, smearing tears and saliva over Imogen's t-shirt, butting at her upper breast with demonic fury.

'Calm down, little baby,' she singsonged. 'Mama's here. Mama's gonna feed you.'

She unclicked the sling and eased herself back down on the couch. God, it was just so good to sit. Her nipples ached as the milk let down and Ava began to suckle in earnest. A wet patch of breastmilk spread across the front of her other breast where there was no mouth to catch it, and not for the first time Imogen imagined another baby at the other breast suckling her way to life, growing and thriving on the milk that Imogen couldn't manage not to waste.

A key clattered in the lock. Matt was home. She heard him dumping his laptop bag and keys on the kitchen table and leafing through some papers before calling softly 'Hello?'

'Hi baby, we're in here,' called Imogen. Ava was still awake but docile, scrunching her hands together and worrying at the collar of Imogen's shirt. She was finally relaxed and calm, but there was little chance of sleep. She was quiet but steely-eyed.

'Gen?' Matt called again.

'In here!' she called back.

He poked his head around the corner and for a second he smiled like he was really happy to see her. 'Hey babe! Did you —'

Matt's face froze. Silently he fell to his knees. Then he was gasping for breath, for sanity, his hands clutched at his chest, his face twisted. He looks like he's drowning, she thought, suffocating right here on the carpet. What is that sound he's making? Dread caught at her.

'Matt?' She stood up and laid Ava on the floor, a good way away from Matt in case he was having a seizure, and put her hands to his shoulders, trying to look into his eyes. 'Matty? Are you ok? Should I call an ambulance? What's wrong?'

He wasn't looking at her. His eyes had followed Ava, who was now docilely lying on her back, inspecting her thumb very carefully and blowing soft bubbles of spit.

‘Ava?’

‘Matt, what the fuck? What’s wrong?’ He was keening, moaning, it was terrible to hear. Imogen tried to hold him, but he shook her off.

‘Ava’s here!’ he screamed, his voice alien-pitched, the sound sending her belly roiling. Tears rippled down his face, coating his cheeks and dribbling into his lips. ‘Gen, what happened? What the fuck?’ He was sobbing and shaking as he clawed his way across the carpet to Ava. She turned her head to look at him, produced an adorable, gummy half-smile and blew bubbles a little harder. Matt scrambled into a sitting position next to her, crossed his legs, and reached gently to stroke her cheek.

‘Shit,’ he breathed.

Imogen watched him pick Ava up so, so gently and set her into the crook of his arm. She lay there peacefully, staring up at him with her beautiful, strange eyes. Tears were rolling off his chin onto her, spreading out in a damp patch over her little pink top with the unicorn on it.

‘My god,’ he croaked. He bent down to kiss her. He swiped at his eyes, but the tears kept falling.

‘But it’s just Ava, Matty,’ Imogen said, confused.

He wasn’t listening.

They wheeled the bassinet back into the bedroom together with Ava lying in it, her wise baby eyes studying the faces of her parents.

‘Mum wants to know if we can visit on the weekend,’ Imogen said.

‘Your mum? Christ, she’s going to fucking lose it,’ said Matt absently.

‘What?’

‘I mean, sure, yeah.’

Imogen changed into her nursing bra and stuffed it with fresh breast pads. Behind her Matt stripped down to his boxers and rolled into bed.

‘Where did you go today?’ he asked.

For fuck’s sake. ‘Just down to Wynnum, round to the mangrove walk.’ She pulled on a clean nursing top and slipped in next to him.

‘No, really, where did you go?’ he asked, his voice stubborn and urgent.

‘Matt, I have no idea what happened this afternoon, but I promise I did nothing out of the ordinary. I have no idea what you’re on about.’

‘I want to hold her again.’

Wordlessly, Imogen leaned over the bassinet and lifted Ava out, the weight dragging a little on her arms. Had she grown in just one afternoon?

He settled her between them on the bed and Ava waved her pudgy fist in his face. Imogen rolled to face them, putting a light hand on Ava’s belly.

Matt smiled, his first real smile since the last full moon, a smile that filled the room. Something about it twanged sharply at Imogen’s chest.

‘Why, anyway? What?’

He shook his head, the smile wavering, and leaned over to kiss her.

‘Let’s just forget about it.’

Anna Pax is an emerging writer living on Kaurna land. She loves stories about magic, terror and the beauty of our country.