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opening extract from

Everything Beautiful

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published by

Bloomsbury

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Outlaws

I am the maniac behind the wheel of a stolen dune buggy. Dylan Luck is at my side. We are tearing up the desert, searching for proof of God. My driving experience amounts to a few stuttering laps of the Safeway car park. *That* was supervised – Dad blanching and clutching his seatbelt. *This* is something else; something beginning with Freedom.

While the rest of the campers were singing their thirty-fifth Bottle of Beer down the highway, Dylan and I made our escape. We had petrol siphoned from the counsellors' cars. We had supplies – snacks and Band-Aids and bottled water – all hauled to Fraser's garage where Delilah was waiting under a dirty tarp. Delilah started life as a 1967 VW Beetle – but she's had 'work' – her chassis shortened, her body stripped back to a shell. She has bucket seats and sand tyres and a 'demi' windshield that sits like reading glasses on her pert bonnet. We didn't build her, but we did christen her – after some dispute.

'It has to be a girl's name,' Dylan said. 'Cars and ships always have girl's names. It's a macho-sexist-transport thing.'

'What do you call your wheelchair?'

He thought about this, then smiled. 'My Bitch.'

Delilah's speedometer is cactus. It feels like we're flying down the corrugated track. Dust swirls behind us like a cowgirl's wedding train. There's nothing like going so fast you have to squint; so fast your cheeks wobble, and the wind ploughs your hair and judders in your ears like a tattooist's drill. Delilah has no floor, just pedals sticking up. My feet stay on them waiting to stomp. Clutch in – gas out. I do the dune buggy two-step, wild and gleeful. Shrieks fly out of my mouth like bats.

Dylan roars too, mocking Neville, our twee camp counsellor – 'I feel so ALIVE!'

He rattles his chair, which is folded and fixed to a bar in front of his knees. In the corner of my eye I can see the chair's Playboy mudflaps. They're homemade and have a wonky charm – like their maker. Five days ago, when I first saw Dylan, I felt sorry for him. I never thought he'd make me laugh so hard or act so crazy. First impressions are arse.

As we zoom along the fire road I think about topography. Twenty thousand years ago the Little Desert was under sea. I close my eyes for the briefest of seconds and see ridges and reefs and whirlpools. Then: CRACK! The world tilts and Delilah starts to skid. She's lost a wheel, and I'm losing my footing. There is swerving and swearing and shuddering and then there is the tree – one of those fat red mallee bastards that a week ago I wouldn't have known the name of. We hit the trunk on my side. I lurch into the steering wheel. Time stops. When I fall back against the vinyl, my face feels

stiff; my arm hurts something ferocious. Dylan has hardly moved. He had the chair as his buffer – plus he has superior upper body strength. Not that you'd know it to look at him – his chest is more crushed tinnie than buff six-pack.

Our first reaction is to look at each other and balk. Then we laugh.

I say, 'Are we dead?'

Dylan checks his legs. He lifts each one and lets it drop down with a thunk. 'If this is Heaven I want a refund.' For Dylan, Heaven is where his legs work. I don't know what Heaven is for me – unless it's us, here, this.

I hear something. It sounds like the first cart climbing a roller coaster, or a parrot pecking at a bush apple. But the noise is just my teeth chattering.

'Are you okay?' Dylan asks me. 'Your head – '

I touch my forehead. When I bring my hand back, my fingers are wet with blood. 'Oh.' I check myself in the side mirror. I have a cut, dead centre – a perfect, red spot.

'You look like one of the Manson girls,' Dylan jokes.

I'm too fuzzy to summon a comeback.

'I always thought you'd look cute with a third eye,' Dylan muses and when I try to laugh I feel myself slip a little in the seat.

Dylan brushes his thumb across my brow. I press my head into his hand.

'It's okay,' he says stroking my hair. I stay down. I feel woozy, flooded. I have an insane urge to tell him that I love him. I want to say that if we really are dead it would be sad in a way, but in another way it would be the perfect outlaw

end. I picture the sand turning into sea again, rising and rising, folding over us and preserving us forever. But talking takes too much effort. So I close my eyes. The sky stays blue behind them and there are no clouds for the longest time.

In the Beginning

The Palace of Suckdom

The first sign we were entering the Palace of Suckdom came as we passed under the wooden arches. They had a shipwrecked look and were etched with this: *He Hath Made Everything Beautiful In His Time.*

'There's a challenge,' Dad said. He winked at me in the rear-view mirror. 'Someone's got their work cut out for them.'

'Ha, ha.' I made a face. It was high noon. Outside the window was a wilderness of dust.

'Ron!' Norma cried. She turned to me, 'Don't listen to him, pet. You're gorgeous.' Then she trilled, 'And we're *here*! Are you excited?'

'I'm so excited I need the toilet.'

'Riley,' Dad's voice was like a jab in the ribs.

'What?'

'You know.' He mouthed 'Be Nice'. Be Nice to Norma – that old refrain. Well I didn't want to be nice. He couldn't banish me and still expect sunshine smiles. 'Here' was Spirit Ranch Holiday Camp. The website boasted '*an oasis of fun*

and learning on the edge of the Little Desert: From Pomponderoo Hill to the southern crater – nowhere is God's work more in evidence.' From where I was sitting it looked like a horror movie set: closed up and quiet – too quiet. I wasn't excited. I was banished. The closest town was called Nhill – and that's exactly where I set my expectation levels.

It had been a long drive, made longer by Norma's New Age soundtrack – fern gullies, waterfalls, the tranquil sounds of whale sex. I couldn't stop staring at Norma's hand planted on Dad's thigh. Traveller's hand. Mum used to do that. But Mum's hand was a salve; Norma's was like a falconer's mitt.

My mother, Lilith Maree Rose, died two years ago, when I was fourteen. Of all of the facts of my life this was the one that wouldn't change. If I ever chanced to forget about the Mum-shaped hole in my life, the grief would come back like a Chinese burn on my heart. It was Cancer – fast and ugly – and it left Dad and me gasping for air. *Pain ends* – if you believe the grief guides. Apparently visualisation helps – *close your eyes, imagine you see your loved one laughing, open your eyes. Breathe.* Cue me: sweet sixteen and still gasping. I felt incomplete, cut up and I couldn't talk about it. Insert life change here.

Six months after Mum died, Dad moved us back to the town where he grew up. He had all his old friends and I made precisely one: Chloe Benson. Dad started going to church again and not just on Sundays – he got *involved.* It was months of church-activity craziness. He even auditioned for *Moses – The Musical.* Dad is a terrible singer. His breathing is all over

the place. He sings like someone's chasing him – and it turns out someone was. Norma. Her name is onomatopoeic which means she looks like she sounds – she's all soft and droopy-drawly, and she's kind. I didn't want her to be kind.

When term ended Dad sat me down to tell me that he and Norma were 'pretty serious'. And even though the rest of me was numb I still managed a smart mouth because that's my best defence. I said, '*Pretty* serious? *Pretty*? A qualifier is like a seed of doubt.' Dad squeezed my hand and that squeeze cut the qualifier out.

My smart mouth is one defence; my weight is another. I am Chubby Con Carne, eighty-two kilos and rising. The whole Norma Trauma kit came with free counselling. 'Do you think, Riley, that your weight is the moat around the real you?' Or, 'Would you say, Riley, that you only feel good when you're being bad?'

All year I'd been hurtling towards catastrophe. There was the thing with the bucket bong, my almost failing mid-terms, my schizo MO – hugging Dad one day, railing at him the next – but the tipping point was when a group of us broke into the local pool for a spot of night-swimming. Your honour, I admit it. We were drunk on vodka jellies. My mascara had run in Vampira streaks down my face, which was delirious-happy because *I was just about to kiss Ben Sebatini!* He of the inky hair and that smile that made me steady myself against stair-rails. I still can't believe that for nine hot minutes – until the cops busted in and ripped us asunder – the boy was mine.

Dad picked me up at the station and we drove home in

silence. In the driveway, he killed the lights, hung his head and said, 'Riley, Riley, Riley.'

I went, 'What's up, Mr Potato-head?' but he didn't laugh like usual.

'You don't take anything seriously.' His voice was so quiet I had to hunch to hear it. 'You don't seem to understand that there are consequences in life. You're messing up. And I don't know what to do with you.'

'I'm sure Norma has a few ideas,' I said under my breath.

That night I bent my ear to the ducted heating vent and listened to Dad and Norma plot my course. They had their first holiday coming up. A winsome week of B&Bs and cellar doors. I was supposed to stay at Chloe's but there was no way Dad was going to let that fly now. Norma suggested Spirit Ranch. A friend of a friend from the parish had sent her daughter there and she'd come back Saved. She'd gone from shaving her eyebrows to reading *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants*. Camp was booked solid but Norma was connected. All it would take was a phone call.

Dad wavered. 'I guess it would get her away from Chloe . . .'

'But?' Norma prodded.

'I don't want her to feel like I'm dumping her.'

'Ron. You're too sensitive.'

'I don't know . . .'

'Honey, you have to take something for yourself here. It's like teaching a baby to swim. You have to just throw them in. Once they get over the shock, they love it.'

Norma's never had a baby. I know this for a fact.

*

The next day I debriefed Chloe.

'Talk about pussy-whipped!' she crowed.

'Norma doesn't have a "pussy",' I popped the 'p'. 'More like an old box with creaky hinges.'

Chloe and I creaked at each other and then fell apart laughing.

Chloe's like an ancient Vegas pole-dancer trapped in the body of a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl. She has lax parents, a disposable income and a serious guy habit. My first sleepover at her house featured her boyfriend Matt, his friend Andy, and a bottle of Jägermeister. The morning after she said, 'You know, when you're wanking a guy, sometimes it helps if you spit on your hand.' Everyone at school was scared of Chloe, but I, as her protégé, was safe. I liked her bent wisdom, but I couldn't picture us after high school – sharing a flat, or going to college or having any adventures that didn't include body-shots and bohunks.

We took turns punching her faux-fur pillow.

'Wahh,' she cried. 'You're going to miss Ben Sebatini's party.'

'I know – it's like every time I get close, the cruel hand of fate rips up the set.' I hung my head. 'And I'm left on the stage . . . alone and forsaken.'

'The cruel hand of fate is a bitch.'

After that I showed her the Spirit Ranch brochure.

Chloe's eyes glittered. 'Will there be nuns? Make sure you take photos. I want to see wimples and control pants. Just think of all that dag couture . . .'

'I'm not allowed to bring my phone.'

'What?'

'No phones, no gadgets.' I sighed. 'It's totally Mormonic.'

Chloe laughed.

'Don't,' I said. 'This is Terminal.'

'My friend, my friend . . .' She pressed the pillow to my face and then flung it on the floor. 'I think you're fucked.' She uncurled her long, brown legs and stood up. She did one of her power yoga poses – the tree – closing her eyes and breathing out through her nostrils, short, fast and furious. Then she opened her eyes and declared, 'I'm going to get you out of this.'

'How?'

'Leave it with me.'

The day before I left for camp, I cut my hair. This was Hair-chitecture. One side fell in ascending steps down my face, the other was straight, shoulder-length, civilian. Then I dyed it Ultra Violet. I looked like an old New Waver. Shocking but compelling.

I decided I would only pack frivolous things: eyelash curlers and costume jewellery and little jars of antipasto. If I had to go to Christian camp then I would go as a plague. I would be more like Chloe: outrageous and obnoxious – call me a plus-size glass of sin! It wasn't until Melbourne was wavering behind us like a bad watercolour that reality hit. As the kilometres ticked I sank in my seat and practised holding my breath. On a silo just past Horsham someone had painted an escape button. ESC – ten feet high against a concrete sky. I almost asked Dad to stop the car so I could press it.