

# Becoming Human

A novelette and memoir



Zonky Zoe

Part I. Sheida

“Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend.”

– Albert Camus

The room was not what I was expecting a counsellor's room to look like. We sat in matching, cushioned chairs which faced each other but at a slight angle so that it felt less intimidating. The wall beside us was made entirely of glass, letting plenty of sunlight in, and as we were on the fourth floor, we had a bird's eye view of the courtyard below. In the space between our seats was a table which contained a few objects: a stuffed monkey, a small book on Buddhist spirituality, and a "folding wire meditation mandala", a series of metal loops that were linked in a way that allowed the small structure to completely change shape. I picked up the little cage and started fiddling with it to distract me from the terror within me and the stranger in front of me who was about to realise how messed up I was. Like her room, she was not who I was expecting to see when I made the appointment. She wore hip, fitted clothes which hugged her tiny figure, and she barely looked much older than I was. She lounged casually in the chair with her legs curled beneath her as though she was at home.

"What brings you here today?" she asked, after giving me what I presumed was the normal spiel that everything I said in this room stayed in the room unless I was going to hurt myself or someone else.

"I met this guy at uni," I shyly began.

I then proceeded to tell her all about Pete. At first it didn't feel natural to spill the contents of my mind and heart to a complete stranger, but as I started talking I realised how gratifying it was. I was like a withered tree soaking up any rain that fell. Somewhere it came up that I had been bullied at high

school and she invited me back to talk about that. I had always longed to talk to somebody about it, somebody who cared enough to listen. It was that moment something strange started happening outside the window. I stopped and stared as more and more trees were emerging from the ground below and growing to full maturity in seconds. The room started to darken as the trees reached our window and concealed the sunlight. I then heard a gushing of water from the clinic's kitchenette. I waited for someone to turn the tap off but no one did and before I knew it the corridor outside was morphing into a river. A flower sprouted from the "folding wire meditation mandala", and the monkey started to move. He smashed a fist through the glass and took off into the trees. The little book on the table started to resemble a bird. It opened up by itself, as though spreading its wings to fly, and then flew out the window after the monkey. I turned to my counsellor, equally horrified as I was in awe. She sat there as though she'd seen it all before. It was then that I noticed something different about her. I started to see a beautiful aura of white light around her. The table between us was now gone and I was alone with her in a dark, misty forest. The forest seemed familiar to me, it was where I spent most of my time. I usually went there by myself but now I had company and we were walking through the trees together. She moved as silently as a flame catching the draft, almost gliding. I would usually be terrified to run into someone while walking, but she was not like any human being I had met. There was an angelic grace about her. We got to the end of the track where it separated into two. I said good bye and thanked her for listening, and I made another time to meet. I was finally going to talk about

when I was bullied. But for her to understand everything I had to tell her what happened when I was five. That is where I start my story.

## Part 2. My story



I had just moved back to “the mainland” from Tasmania where my sister was born. In fact by this point I had lived in more houses than I was year’s old. My new, but old, house sat between two ginormous gum trees which made the pale orange weatherboard lodge look like a dolls-house. I had my own bedroom which my parents painted pale yellow, my favourite colour. My mother also sewed me matching floral blinds and bedspreads. No matter what the weather was, whenever I entered my room, I felt the warm kiss of sunshine on my back.

My favourite place was the yard, which my father, a building surveyor by trade, turned into a personal playground, attaching a swing from one of the gum’s branches, a platform to one of the backyard trees and even building me my own flying fox. But as grand as his skills were, a flying fox between my new Catholic school and house was beyond his parameters. We owned only one car which my father took to work, so my

mother would walk me to school each morning up a nasty slope with my baby sister in the pram. I would often be late for school, much to my teacher Mrs Bloom's disliking. I am not sure whether it was my lateness she didn't like, or just me. I was a ragged, gap-toothed five-year-old, a kink to my blond hair, one sock up the other down. I preferred brown boots over polished black t-bars, and I would take loose pants I could move in to skirts and stockings any day. I was a child who pushed the boundaries, who ventured up trees and embankments where we weren't meant to play. No one could pin me down, though on my very first day at this school I tripped and was left with a stubborn wound on my right knee which turned purple whenever I swam in the pool.

I quickly made new friends and I found a kindred spirit in girls who were fascinated with secrecy, mystery and adventure, girls who weren't into boring games like "family" or "barbie".

Emily was a peculiar girl who was seeing a psychologist. She seemed to have no identity of her own, exclaiming her mother had the same name as mine and that her plans after school were exactly the same. It got under my skin at first, but I eventually befriended Emily and I enjoyed trading toys with her. I cherished the rubber, pre-loved glow worm she gave me, on which she had written "Emily" in blue ink.

Rebecca lived across the road from me and shared my love for climbing. She had built a platform amongst the top of the enormous hedges which formed a barrier between the road and her yard. On the platform was a chair and other various pieces of furniture she and her father had collected from the

hard rubbish. There she would sit, in limbo between the outside world and her peculiar and sheltered home full of hard rubbish, a faint connection to this outside world. Rebecca's family were the subject of much neighbourhood gossip. They had no electricity as they'd disconnected themselves from the grid. Her mother kept to herself and forbade her children from giving out their contact details in public. When in public herself, she wore stylish, carefully planned clothing which sat in stark contrast to her home surroundings. Rebecca's father did not work and was apparently claiming disability allowance for a bad back, yet was frequently seen around the streets collecting hard rubbish and heaving it back to his house. The rubbish he collected was then dumped in the yard, providing an obstacle course to their front door. While the neighbours found it feral, I always enjoyed visiting Rebecca's house as I never knew what kind of treasure I'd find.

My best friend, however, was Tamsyn, a plump girl who I went to school with and who also lived down the street. My mother brought me to her house for tea and that is when I met her. While our mothers chatted at the table, we started a giddy game of peak-a-boo under the table which was our way of bonding.

Hiding and exposing became a common theme in our relationship and morphed into the domain of bodies and toilets. The school toilet became so much more than a place to pee. In the end cubical there was a ledge, a prime climbing opportunity. One day when I left class to go to the toilet with Tamsyn, we clambered up there, but then she couldn't get down. I had to shamefully fetch Mrs Bloom, who was already

starting to form ideas about me, and confess what we'd been up to. I was always left feeling it was all my fault. On other days, we played a similar game to the one we played under Tamsyn's dining table except under the toilet cubical. One day I found myself in the cubical with Tamsyn looking where I knew I wasn't meant to look. I had done this with another friend in Tasmania, but Tamsyn's looked different. I later blurted out to my mother that Tamsyn had "white stuff" down there. I don't think I was as good at keeping secrets as I thought I was.

Seeing each other's naked bodies became less about mutual play and more about power. Pulling one's pants down was the ultimate revenge, I learnt. Tamsyn was one-up if she was clothed and I wasn't, especially in front of others, and vice-versa. That is why Tamsyn must have been thrilled that hot summer's day when I came running onto the road in full nudity before her entire family. My mother had found a flat piece of lawn in the front yard to set up the clamshell for my sister and me. Protesting the unfairness that my baby sister got to be naked while I didn't, my mother finally gave in and let me strip off my clothes so that the cool water could caress my bare body also. It was then that I caught sight of my friend coming down the road. I bounced out of the clamshell and ran onto the road to see her, forgetting I was naked. Tamsyn couldn't stop laughing. Her mother, however, was horrified, as though she'd just seen the devil. Scooping up Tamsyn and her siblings, she took off down the road with her nose in the air.

The last time Tamsyn spoke to me was the time I ran into her in the local supermarket while shopping with my

mother. We were by the dally, the place people buy their pre-slaughtered meat instead of doing the dirty themselves. Tamsyn approached me, combative, while our mothers had a serious conversation in the background.

“Why did you do it?” she accused.

I couldn’t deal with such an awful accusation.

“I didn’t,” was all I could say in defence. And in that brief moment my memory went poof like the world when anaesthetised. To this day I still don’t know what “it” was. I was never told exactly what “it” was, and come to think of it I’m not sure whether anyone really knows what “it” was, if “it” even exists.

While I had always been a bit of an outsider, over the course of my short time at this school I had it ingrained in me that I was even more than this. I wasn’t just an outsider. I was as good as a criminal. I knew something was going on when Mrs Bloom kept pulling people in my class outside into the corridor to speak with them privately. Everyone except for me. I felt the heavy atmosphere all around me, the heaviness of secrets, the heaviness of secrets coming undone. It was a dark room, never receiving much sunlight, air full of shadows rather than clear outlines. Tamsyn stopped playing with me, and it was like I meant nothing to her now. The year came to a close and then she was in a different class to me. Sometimes I saw her sitting where we used to eat lunch together, where she tried one of my cashew nuts one time and it made her so sick she had to go to hospital. We no longer walked home together, and whenever her family neared our house they would move

onto the other side of the road as far away as they could get without trespassing on our opposing neighbour's property. I kept having dreams that Tamsyn and I were still friends and then waking up to this sad reality again.

It wasn't only the friendship with Tamsyn I lost. I was no longer allowed to play with Emily either. When I tried to see her in the yard a teacher would come up to me and tell me I had to play somewhere else. It stung to the core and I told my mother what was happening. She went to the school and found out Tamsyn's mother had been to see them about me. Unsure what to believe, Mrs Bloom was commissioned to ask every person in my class what I was like. On the basis of one boy saying I asked him to venture up a tree with me, they decided I was a bad influence and believed the story Tamsyn's mother wove like a venomous spider. Tamsyn's mother had also spoken with Emily's mother, her devastating story spreading like cancer. Needless to say my mother pulled me out of this toxic place. I had stopped wanting to go a long time back.



Playing ball with Tamsyn (left)

A new start, a new uniform, I was as good as a new person, the only trace of my history the shrivelled wound on my right knee which continued to turn purple whenever I went swimming. I now wore the Christmas colours red and green, and despite starting late, it didn't take me long to make a new circle of friends. I was that kid who everyone liked. I don't know who my best friend was, it changed every week and I'd write their name on the back of my wooden ruler. I think it's fair to say there were several people I felt close to and who felt close to me. When it was my birthday I loved to have a party- sometimes at my house, sometimes at the pool, but always with rainbow ice-cream cake. I loved having friends stay at my house, especially Monique, a pretty girl who also had a mysterious edge to her, a badass edge which I liked. She kept secrets like me, and we made secrets together. **Monique** was my new Tamsyn, and when she had to go home, her absence was like one thousand daggers to the heart.

Monique lived with her twin sister, her little brother, her mum and her mum's boyfriend. I stayed the night at her big, double storey house as well. Her house had a cold vibe to it which made me uneasy. We slept in her room together, and did things children weren't meant to do. She licked my vagina.

"My mum said I should sleep with my legs apart to get air," she also told me.

When we were in the yard one time she pulled down her little brother's pants to show me his penis. She seemed far more enthralled than I was.

I didn't eat their food at breakfast time; I only liked my familiar food.

We collected "smelly bellies", toys which came in a plastic egg. Monique gave me a pink and yellow mango smelly belly, which was one of my favourites.

One day Monique had a sleep over party in the basement of her house. Monique was my only friend there. I got overwhelmed by all the people and didn't stay the entire night. I preferred it when it was just Monique and I.

At night, I started to have nightmares about a sadistic dwarf, like Rumpelstiltskin, who would pop up out of the ground wherever I was. I'd be on the playground and he'd emerge through the tire rings. I'd be in the swimming pool and he'd come through the plugs. He'd then drag me into an underground chamber where he would test and torture me. He continued to taint my otherwise happy life, like passing a homeless person in the street, a reminder that, perhaps, all is not well. But soon the sun would rise again and I would be returned to my family and friends, the stone walls of the chamber replaced with the walls of my mother's bedroom.

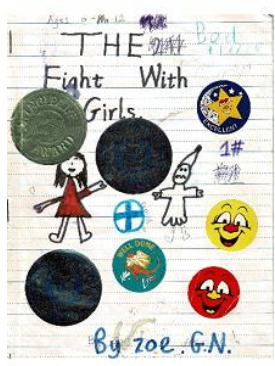
Everyone at my new school was warmed by my wacky sense of humour. I discovered I could work magic with the pencil, and I managed to rebuild my confidence and voice through writing. Each recess I would create stories with friends. Horror stories. Stories about ghosts and witches, stories about conflict, stories about good versus evil, truth versus deception. I liked to blur fiction and non-fiction, inserting real people into made-up scenarios. I would give my

stories an age rating, for instance “For ages 8+”, and do the rounds with different classes, captivating my young audiences and collecting stickers. My favourite stickers were the ones that had a fragrance when scratched. My stories had quite a following, especially “The Fight With Girls”. Everyone wanted to know who would win the fight: the boys or girls. Kids started making fun of one of the boys who I made a central character, my male friend who would dare me to go inside the boy’s toilet. I wrote some crazy things about him, such as killing him off and then bringing him back to life. His mother had to ask me to stop writing about him. One lunchtime I rallied my classmates together to turn one of my stories into a play. I quickly found out I wasn’t cut out for being a play director. It turned chaotic and my friend Meridith had to console me as I hid in the bushes and cried. I much preferred writing. But a writer is never really content with a flat, uneventful story, a story with no climax. After three years at this school I suppose I grew restless. I am not quite sure what it was really; I had friends and it was all smooth sailing except that I didn’t like my new teacher as much. My mother was also unimpressed with the academic standard of the school at this point and thought I’d be better somewhere else. I didn’t fight it. I welcomed it. It was an adventure going somewhere new. She asked me what I’d miss, and I said the class guineapigs. She said I could have a guineapig of my own if I moved, which turned into a blue budgerigar I named Sky, my new best friend. I had a trial at another school. My mum told me not to tell anyone I was going to move schools, but I told my friend Kelsey, a girl with hair even blonder than my own which the bees thought was a flower. I wasn’t always a great

friend to Kelsey; I stole her elephant hair tie and pretended it was mine. She also watched people flip off the money bars and have their friends pull them so that they landed on their feet. She asked me to do it, but I failed miserably and Kelsey fell on the ground, injuring herself. Yet she remained loyal to me and didn't tell people I was having a trail at a new school.

Monique wrote me a letter after I left but I never replied. I had developed an incredible ability to detach from friendships, to let people drift in and out of my life like clouds without a care in the world.

ZOE is funny.  
ZOE is smart



ZOE is really COOL!

I really like you ZOE

ZOE you are SO! funny

Zoe, I love your "wacky" sense of humour!  
you are funny and nice

ZOE IS COOL! She is wicked

Zoe is the best person  
I know!!  
of every body  
w/ Zoe they  
would like and  
love her.

ZOE is my Best friend.



I LIKE ZOE!

Next on the horizon was a school up the hill from where I lived, the last town before the road stretched into the open paddocks. I already had a friend here, Tamara, which helped as I was becoming a shy child, my social disadvantage quite pronounced and difficult to overcome now as the other students had a good four years head start at making friends. My friend, a freckle-faced girl with midnight black ringlets and a child-like innocence was an outsider herself, so she was excited at the prospect of me joining her.

I started a trial at the school where I met my soon-to-be classmates, teacher and schoolyard. I was given a tour of the other classes, which is when my past came back to haunt me and I saw Tamsyn, who had also left our old school. My mother was aware she had moved here, but we had no intention to strike up a relationship again; we simply wanted to live and let live. Tamsyn and I locked eyes briefly before I carried on with my tour.

My trial came to an end and I met my mother at reception where we signed a few forms and were given the green light to start by the principal. The air oozed with tension, however, as in the background sat a hostile old acquaintance. Tamsyn's mother refused to make eye contact with us. The silence spoke all there was to speak.

My mother shortly received a phone call from the principal who said the school was no longer taking new enrolments from students beyond the immediate area, so I would have to look elsewhere. Smelling a rat, my mother called him back after they hung up and asked whether this had anything to do with the woman sitting in reception when we

left. Looking like an almighty fool, he admitted it did. She had now infected this school with her story. She had also threatened to take them to court if they accepted my enrolment, to which the principal resigned. Like a spark catching hold then smothered and left to smoulder, that was the end of my brief time here. I suppose my mother didn't know what to say to Tamara and her family. Poor Tamara, she seemed over-the-moon about me coming to her school. But I worried if she were to discover my deep dark secret, she may very well be the next friend I'd lose. I had to go into hiding.

My final primary school was nestled away amongst the forest, a short drive down a winding road hugged by gums, ferns and golden wattles, the colour of my new uniform. We passed under a trestle bridge which a historic steam train crossed over, legs dangling over open windows. I wondered whether anyone rode the stream train to school.

Spring was in the air, the promise of new life. The principal of my new school was a kindly old man and it meant so much to me that he accepted me. It was starting to feel like a privilege if I was included, rather than something I deserved and should expect. I wondered how my life would have turned out if I had of started here from the beginning.

I was a polite, reserved and petite student and I looked even smaller beside Samantha who the teacher introduced me to. Samantha was a nice girl and I couldn't understand why she hung out with Raine and Christy. Christy had many siblings, all of whom were as rough as her. Her limp, unkempt hair the colour of mud was ridden with head lice and after many calls from the school to do something, her mother decided to pour kerosene over her daughter's head. Christy seemed excited by my arrival at the school at first, deciding I was her best friend until she realised it was Samantha I was closer to. From that point onwards I became a rival and the two girls set out in make me feel as rejected as they felt in their troubled lives. The four of us sat together in class with Raine and Christy at one end of the table, me at the other, and Samantha in between. After finishing their bag of popcorn, Raine and Christy passed the packet which contained a dribble of kernals at the bottom down the table to me. On hindsight it deserved to be

scrunched up and thrown at their heads, but instead I meekly picked out the last remains of their generous sharing, the salty savour teasing my senses. I was grateful they had left me something as opposed to nothing at all, as they often did when they threw their rubbish at me, telling me it was mine. Just before the bell went for lunch, Raine and Christy would pack up their desk, grab their food, and then take off out the door, rallying Samantha to run with them. I would chase them, chase Raine's blazing red hair tailing the corner of the brick building, until Samantha, torn between me and them, gave up. Often I would approach Raine and Christy, only to find they were complaining about me. Raine, Christy and her siblings called me a pig and told me I had rabbit teeth. During our Friday afternoon game of bombardment, Raine and Christy would target me with the ball, taking great delight in getting me out. And in class I would look up to find Raine giving me "the evil eye" from across the room, a glare reserved for the most despicable. I couldn't believe how much hatred and repulse could be conveyed without laying a single hand or speaking a single word. This was my world as I walked through the school gate each week and we sung the chorus of the school anthem, "Selby, oh Selby, little school upon the hilltops. Happy and friendly, it's the place where we belong".

With my faded confidence, it took me a while to branch away and make new friends. By the time I did start to find my place, we were all about to graduate and go our separate ways. My mother enrolled me in the local private girls' college thinking they would have more power to expel any more bullies that came my way, while my new friends went to a public school.

My college was like a city compared to primary school. It had two stories and was a blend of historic, brick buildings and modern concrete boxes, like the way my birthday parties were a blend of friends from my last school and new. I was a tiny year seven blanketed in an oversized uniform. I felt out of place, like a wild animal in suburbia. I felt eyes on me wherever I went.

While I was only thirteen, I could have started an arts degree at university as I already had a keen interest in social justice and the environment. I had a worldliness, perhaps from all my moves, which set me apart from my peers and their seemingly shallow and insulated lives. News to them was Paris Hilton's love life, not the legislation our politicians passed. They spoke a different language and mocked my use of full grammar which was just not "kool". I was old, but I was also young. I still liked to climb and I still liked to play.

Year Seven was like building a raft, one of the activities on school camp that year. Like the pieces of the boat- the pipes, ropes and planks of wood- we were all, more or less, scattered, trying to form bonds, coherent groups and a coherent sense of self. It wasn't until the following year that my group of friends came together. We were a small circle of four and we were like a peanut butter and chocolate smoothy, a seemingly unusual blend that worked.

Fran, who floated around during year seven, was an outspoken girl with short, curly hair. I am not quite sure what drew us together other than the fact we were both misfits. There was something about her which reminded me of Spongebob Squarepants; perhaps her childishness, the way she

bounced into social situations with no fear of annoying or offending other people, or the pride with which she wore her school badges on her jumper. She was a bright student who excelled at maths, science and languages, though when she stole one of my ideas in art class and claimed it as her own, I took it her creative abilities lagged behind. She came from a German family, her father a gruff, disciplinary man who scolded Fran's sister. Our families went to the beach together one weekend, and I spent a night at Fran's house. Her bedroom was on the second storey of her house and we platonically shared her double bed. Under the moonlit sky which seeped through her bedroom window, we talked about what made us scared. Fran called me her adorable little munchican, and when other girls at school had a go at me, she had a smartass come back to swing at them.

Jess was a tall girl with long blond hair and eyes the colour of milk chocolate. She was pleasant but reserved, a cat lover, and the most girly of us all. She lived in a comfortable house on the edge of a steep hill, a house I only visited briefly once. I never really knew much about Jess's world and I didn't understand why she didn't give people presents for their birthdays, but the group was not complete without her.

Grace was an attractive, fit, olive-skinned chick with a teasing demeanour. When I first met her, she kept asking me why I said "oh yeah" all the time. "Oh yeah" was my attempt to succeed at the socialising game. I learnt that if I could acknowledge what a person had said and keep them talking, they might stop paying attention to me and the fact I had no idea what I was doing. It looked like I could never win, but

instead of reacting to Grace picking apart my mannerisms, I asked her in return why she kept asking me this question. Grace and Jess were already friends when Fran and I met them. This, perhaps, is why Fran became my best friend. Yet it is Grace who I remember the fondest, a joyous friendship developing out of our mockery. A friendship as unpredictable as Grace's favourite colour: brown. We played badminton together, and that summer we went to Adventure Park, a theme park an hour's drive out of town, with our families.

## *Norbury Green*

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Norbury Green was a flat patch of grass at the bottom of the schoolyard. It was down past the French rooms which were situated on a pretty, Polynesian-style wooden boardwalk hugged with gardens. Norbury Green was only used during sport class and it was out of bounds all other times. One lunchtime, Fran, Grace and I dared each other to go to Norbury Green without getting caught. Fran kept watch up top, while Grace and I scrambled down, adrenalin pumping through our veins. While on Norbury Green, one of our teachers emerged through the gardens above. As she made her way down the garden path, Grace and I dived down behind the retaining wall like combat troops. We slithered along the wall while Fran awkwardly and suspiciously hovered above with the teacher. None of us were very good at hiding and our teacher knew exactly what we were up to.

“Get off Norbury Green, girls” she called from above.  
“Don’t let me catch you here again!”

For my birthday that year, my friends / partners in crime made me a banner for my locker with a photo of my favourite animal, the penguin. How I loved penguins. I loved the way they were oddities of the bird kingdom as they could not fly, but they made up for this deficit in the water, a rich inner world no other bird knew like the penguin did. I loved their awkwardness, and I loved their strength to withstand the harsh, Antarctic conditions. Year Eight was a good year, and was the year I created my first blog, which my English teacher introduced us to. As the year came to a close, I logged in and started typing:

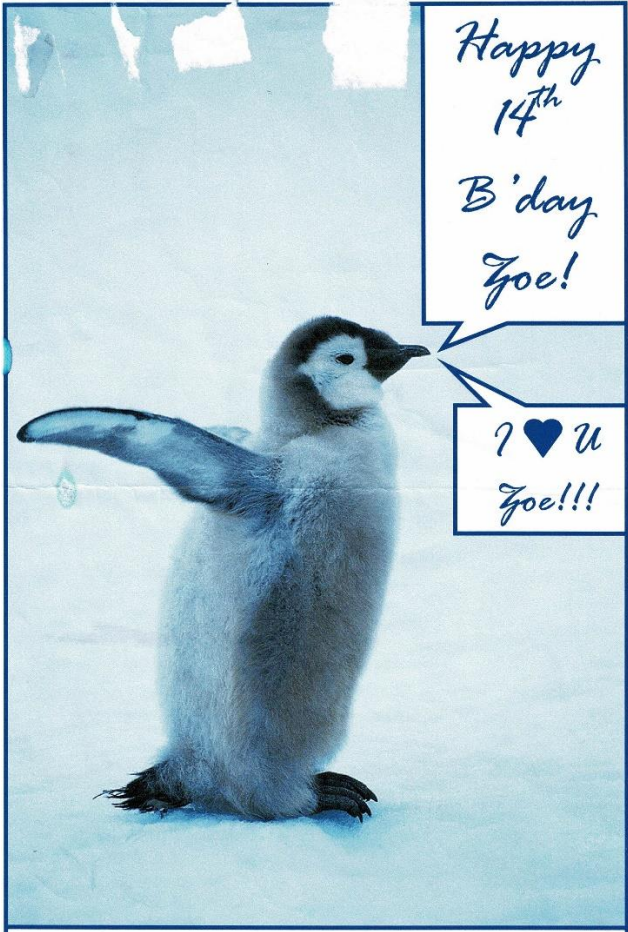
### [The end of Year 8 is approaching..](#)

Posted on [December 3, 2006](#)

Every year and everything I go through changes me as a person. This year I have been through so much, from making friends I will keep with me for the rest of my school life, to completing yet another year of school. Everything that has happened to me this year has changed me, and made me what I am today. In one week, Year 8 will be over, and it will be the holidays that I know we are all looking forward to. Sometimes it scares me to think that I am nearly in Year 9, the middle of high school. It feels like just yesterday that I stepped into the school building for the first time.

Everything was so big, and so new. I was a tiny year sevens, dressed in my brand new uniform that was way too big for me. I can tell you one thing for sure; I didn't like this new school. All my friends from my primary school weren't with me, my teacher wasn't here, and I was lost. Standing in the middle of the courtyard, I looked around me and felt as if everyone else were staring at me. All alone in this huge school with very little people I knew, I felt cold. I was a shy year sevens who never said a word unless I was asked to.

Everything has changed now. I have now formed a good group of friends who I feel comfortable around, and I am now used to this place which I used to describe as "cold" and "not nice". I have grown, not only in size, but in education and confidence. I have experienced many different things that I never knew existed in primary school such as blogging, and I no longer feel that everyone is staring at me.



Happy  
14<sup>th</sup>  
B'day  
Zoe!

? ♥ U  
Zoe!!!

Little did I know everything would turn to dust the following year. I am not sure how it began exactly, but Jess, Grace and Fran weren't the same. Or maybe it was me who wasn't the same. I could not sit my ABAB piano exams or get into the school badminton team as I could not perform in front of people, and suddenly I felt on the outside of my own group of friends. We fought, especially after I pulled out of the school's debating team with Fran, an extracurricular activity we signed up to together. I didn't have Fran's wit, nor her confidence, and I dreaded the night when I would have to stand in front of our parents and our opposition's parents and come up with a quick response to their arguments. I wasn't coping. The dread started to consume me, my stomach filled with sinking butterflies. It was killing me from the inside out.

My mother spoke to the teacher in charge of the debating for me and said I needed to pull out. While my teacher understood, Fran wasn't so sympathetic, and it was then I experienced first-hand how awful she could be when people crossed her.

I came into class and sat next to Grace. On the other side of Grace was Fran, who sat in a huff, like a scorching blaze whose heat could be felt miles off.

"Sooooo, I heard you quit the debating team and you've made Fran angry," Grace said in the same mocking voice she used when I first met her. This time though I had nothing left in me to play along. It was like being kicked while already on the ground, attacked and blamed when all I needed was understanding.

Fran refused to talk to me unless it was to insult me. She wrote nasty notes about me in class. And during class dodgeball, she erupted in ecstasy when she got me out.

“I got Zoe out! Grace I got Zoe!” she cried, leaping around like she’d just won the lottery. My life felt like a broken record repeating over and over.

Over time, the fire of Fran’s anger started to settle down. But the devastation left in its wake was unrepairable. While Fran came around to forgiving me, I could not forgive her, and I abandoned my friends for abandoning me. Fran caught me on MSN and asked me to come back to the group, that they were the best friends I would ever have. But I would not. We never talked about what happened and never was my side of the story heard. The only conversation I’d had with Grace during our fight was in the busy corridor one time between class.

“It’s not just the debating team,” Grace told me, “You haven’t been the same all year, annoyed at us all the time.”



I fell from having a group of friends I believed I would keep with me for the rest of my school life, to having no one, now easy prey for the school bullies. There was one girl I sat with in my drawing class, Ruby, who I tried to pursue a friendship with, despite her being way out of my league. Ruby was a ballerina and model and one of the first things she noticed about me was how skinny I was. During one excursion, I hung out with her and another friend of her's called Alannah. The next day I got an email from Sophia:

"Why did you follow me and Ruby around all day yesterday? It was so annoying. No one likes you, Ruby only pretends to like you."

In the end, Ruby made her apologise for sending the email. I discounted what Alannah said and continued to remain loyal to Ruby, who was pretty much my only friend now.

Ruby invited me to sit with her group at lunchtime and I took her up on her offer. They sat on the concrete steps down to the new gymnasium. It was a large group. I knew some of them from my classes. There was someone else there I recognised too. I flashed back to when we locked eyes while on that tour when I went to move primary schools, shortly before I was told I couldn't attend the school.

It was the most peculiar group, made up of both the meanest and kindest students in our year level. I figured the size of the group would dilute the contact between Tamsyn and myself; she could stick with her subgroup and I stick with mine. She hung back with the rough members, while I joined

the girls I knew from my classes who were pleasant enough. Yet I couldn't ignore the hostility present, the same hostility I felt in the foyer with Tamsyn's mother as I enrolled in my fourth primary school. The rougher girls stood together and whispering intently, while I sat with the others who were busy chatting and seemed oblivious to the fog closing in on us.

It wasn't long until Ruby pulled me aside and told me I shouldn't sit with her group anymore.

"My group doesn't like you," she informed me, "I haven't been liked by groups before, you're not the only one." She preceded to tell me about the time she wanted to sit with some girls who didn't like her, as if this was normal and something to be accepted.

But I knew this wasn't like anything Ruby may have experienced. Only one member of this group didn't like me, and this had a long history.

I continued to sit with the group until I was approached by an alpha girl who, in my sitting position, seemed to tower over me even more. She asked me to leave. I tried to tease out what the issue was, which was when the girl came out that it wasn't her who had the problem with me, but her friend. She was simply the assassin.

"If your friend has an issue with me, she should speak with me herself," I told her.

"My friend feels too uncomfortable around you," the girl said.

But not if she wants something from me, I felt like saying. It was just that year Tamsyn had approached me in sculpture class. She was friendly, and for a minute I thought we might be able to resume our old friendship. She only wanted the jar of beads I was using.

Eventually the girl succeeded in reducing me to tears, before another member, Rebecca, intervened and pulled her into line. The bell rang and I walked back to class with Rebecca. I took note of the name of the girl who had confronted me in the group when Rebecca mentioned it, however Rebecca was reluctant to give me her full name.

Perhaps I was stubborn, but I went back to be beaten again the next lunchtime. I wasn't prepared to be bullied into submission. I saw Tamsyn and her ring of assassins standing apart from the group like last time, but then, to my relief, they left, and I was able to sit with the others without an ever-present smog of hostility. Towards the end of lunchtime, however, they returned. Beth, a girl I remembered from Year Seven, approached me. Beth had left her first high school and moved to this school when I first met her. I heard she got expelled from her last school, but I never thought much of this; I just had compassion for her as I knew what it was like to be the new girl. I befriended her and for a while we hung out together with another girl, Freya, a clumsy, large girl with a large laugh who couldn't find her place either. I barely recognised the girl before me who taunted me with such malice. I could hardly believe we used to be friends.

She casted a vote. "Who here hates Zoe?"

The unsuspecting group of girls who had previously been chatting fell silent. One girl, who I had seen around but never met, raised her hand. My eyes filled with tears. I was too distraught to see who else put up their hand, but what I did see was my childhood friend in the background, now smug and enjoying the show.

“Go sit with Freya,” Beth howled, categorising me at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

## *Sara*

\* \* \*

It was during Year 9, against the backdrop of my bullying, that I got to know Sara. We started to sit together in science class. She saw something in me, a kindness she had not known enough. A friend.

She was a peculiar girl, a sad girl, a girl who stabbed pens into the palm of her hand. I tried to take the pen off her.

She dressed in black and hung around girls who dressed in black. I didn't dress in black, but my year was certainly black and my life was black.

When I came into class that day I was in tears. Some girls in my class swarmed around me like vultures, like journalists, girls who'd never taken an interest in me before now acting warm and caring. Sara warned me to stay away from those girls. She could read people like she read the periodic table, pointing out the dangerous ones.

Sara never faked kindness. What she did fake was coldness. Behind her "stay away" vibe she loved passionately and she hurt passionately. Her heart went out to me, probably because she knew the territory all too well. She took me outside and we hugged and it was exactly what I needed in that moment.

There was a spark of hope in the darkness trying to catch alight. Sara invited me to come join her friends who liked me. I even heard Grace ask someone if I was okay, despite everything that had happened between us. There were people who cared about me, but I couldn't see past all the hatred. I received an email from a girl in Tamsyn's group who I was on good terms titled "URGENT!!!" She warned me to stay away from their group, and told me if Tamsyn's chief assassin was to get expelled, Beth and the rest of her assassins, who were big girls, would hurt me physically and mentally. She also revealed she heard I did something really "grave" to Tamsyn, but asked me not to tell anyone she said anything because then her group, who were determined keep Tamsyn hidden, would turn on her. Once again I was never told what it was I did to Tamsyn.

I couldn't fight so I fled. I stopped going to school and my mother started looking for a new school once again. Sara caught me on MSN when I left and accused me of being a coward. We lost contact and she never really forgave me for leaving. I often wonder where I'd be if I had of stayed, and sat where I belonged: with the girls who dressed in black.

“The sense of separation is the greatest cause of human  
suffering”

*From 'The Schizoid Wound', Nick Athanassakis, YouTube*

I was no longer just a shy girl, but I was becoming a crazy girl, the wounds of being rejected continuing to be opened until they could no longer heal and I bled to death. My mother took me to look around another Catholic school where students wore the colour green of holly, but all I could focus on was the group of girls I passed on my way out. I could feel them looking at me and hear them sniggering and criticising what I wore. When I got home, I shoved my head into the living room couch to hide the tears that were now escaping my rein.

“I can’t stand to be excluded again!” I wailed.

My mother found another school. When I graduated from primary school, she had been tossing between sending me to this school and the local girls college. Here, the girls wore grey skirts which looked like potato sacks. The school let me have a trial here before I enrolled and purchased my own grey uniform. I chose a few classes to attend. In art class I sat at the back table closest to the door with a boy; I felt more comfortable around boys than girls. He kindly fetched me some paper from the front to draw on while I stayed seated, keeping a safe distance from the girls like a timid cat. I managed to survive class, but it was at recess and lunchtime that things began to unravel. The campus was fairly new and the student areas were still being renovated, so everyone was clumped together for the time being. I was introduced to two girls who took me to their group the size of Tamsyn’s. Because it was so large, it split into subgroups. As I sat with three other girls I couldn’t understand why I wanted to cry. I couldn’t follow the conversation at all and spent the entire time trying to hold back the tears so I didn’t draw attention to myself. I

was preoccupied with the other subgroup, fearing they were plotting to get rid of me. I managed to hold it all in until I got home and finally crumbled. My mother had to tell the school I wasn't able to go there.

"She's extremely shy," my mother said to the woman in charge of enrolments as they whispered about me. "She needs to go to a smaller school."

That is when we started looking abroad to a small Christian college on the other side of the mountain. I already knew someone there, Kayla, who used to live a few doors down the road from us when I was little. Kayla was keen to take me under her wing. The school was spacious, with a lake and open green planes stretching into the horizon; plenty of room to get away from people.

"You will shine here," my father told me.

Before I knew it, I was cloaked in a straight, no-nonsense navy blazer over the top of Kayla's old checkered dress which she gave me. I smelt of somebody else's perfume, but as much as I wished I was a new person, my past continued to haunt me. It haunted how I felt around other people. I was losing grip of my mind.

Kayla introduced me to her best friend Jessica, a tall, thin girl who I could barely make eye contact with, not only because of her height but because of how overwhelming it felt. I tried to act normal but I couldn't look any higher than her breasts.

“You look like you’re perving on my boobs”, Jessie pointed out one day. I wished I could crawl into a hole and never come out.

Kayla introduced me to two other friends of her’s, a short girl called Kim and a dark-haired girl called Renata. I thought the two girls hated me and would start whispering about me as soon as we turned our backs. We walked back up to the classroom and passed a group of other students on the lawn. They were laughing, and I was sure it must be me they were laughing at. A lot of people have stage fright or hate public speaking, but the anxiety ends when they get off the stage. This did not. In fact it was easier to be on stage than off it because at least on stage I could be someone else. I could hide behind my character.

It was such a struggle to get to school on time. My mother drove me to the bus stop which took twenty minutes, and then the bus took me around the mountain. I often didn’t make it in time. We’d then chase it along the road, get ahead when it stopped, and then I’d jump out at the next stop just in time for it to arrive. One day when I arrived at my classroom I found all the girls had been taken outside, where they were lined up like identical dolls and the length of their hems were being measured with a ruler. I figured I was meant to join them. There was never a “good to see you Zoe, we know how difficult it is for you to get here”. I was only told my dress was a couple of millimetres too short and I needed to make another trip to the uniform shop as my white socks shouldn’t have ribbings.

The more I realised how different I was from my peers, the more repulsed I felt being made to look like them. My differences couldn't be more clear than when we played sport down in the two-story gymnasium every Friday. The girls liked to watch the boys play basketball from the second story window, pointing out and lusting over boys they'd never even met. I didn't feel like a girl, but neither did I feel like a boy. I felt like an alien. I didn't know where I belonged, but I certainly knew it wasn't here.

In my loneliest hour I turned to music. "How Soon Is Now" by The Smiths became my personal anthem, as well as Matchbox 20's "Unwell". It gave me tremendous relief that somebody out there understood what I was going through, because my friends certainly didn't. It was Jessica's birthday and like normal teenagers do, she held a party. I didn't want to go but I felt I should since she was my friend, so I dragged myself to her front door. She led me into her living room, the torture chamber. Here, lively music boomed from her speakers. She rallied us all to dance with her. I remained stiff and lifeless on the couch while she spun and swirled before me. I was the party pooper.

"Come dance," insisted Kayla, trying to pull me up from the couch. I refused.

Jessica turned the music up and it felt like a tsunami crashing over me. I could barely cope with all the people in the small room let alone the noise on top of it. That managed to get me up, but only to turn the volume down before I returned to the couch. The music was shortly turned up again and the whole room began to swirl. My heart was racing and I felt the

tears coming on. I couldn't control myself. I wanted to disappear, dissolve into the shadows. I didn't want people to see me like this, but the more I tried to push it down, the worse it got. Suddenly I found myself getting up, as though controlled by invisible strings, and charging for the nearest exit. I wrenched the sliding door open and stepped into the patio, gasping for solitude like an asthmatic gasps for air. There was a basketball there and I began kicking it against the wall... anything to distract me.

It was what happened at Jessica's party which prompted me to start researching my mental health on the internet. I needed to know what was wrong with me. That is when I came across the term "social phobia". I had a name for this horrific experience. I found so much comfort in being able to pin it down to a name. But I couldn't see a therapist due to the very nature of the disorder; I was afraid of people. I couldn't talk about it with anyone because I was afraid of being judged. There wasn't even a professional trained in mental health at my school, only pastoral care. So I immersed myself in an online forum for social anxiety. I started to lead a double life, keeping my secret online community separate from my lonely offline reality.

The day came when I got another dreaded invite to somebody's party, a friend of Kayla's who was a year above us. Either way was bad: getting an invite and not knowing what to say, or being excluded. I accepted the invite because I had such a hard time saying no, but then pulled out last minute. I told her I lived a long way from her and my parents weren't up to driving me. The next day at school I was interrogated by Jessica, while Kayla watched on.

“Any parent would take their daughter to a party if their daughter really wanted to go,” she said. “If you didn’t want to go, you could have just said from the start. She was looking forward to seeing you, and I saw the disappointment in her face when you told her you weren’t coming anymore.”

After giving me the guilt trip, she dredged up her own party from our memory banks.

“You practically walked out of my party,” she accused. That was all it was to her; someone not getting their way and throwing a hissy fit. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

We were in the girls change room, tears streaming from my eyes.

“You don’t understand,” was all I could say.

“Then help us understand,” she said. I didn’t know where to begin. I had never come out to anyone that I had a mental illness. I didn’t know what to say to her, and the pressure she was putting on me wasn’t exactly helping me to open up to her. Just three words would have made all the difference: *are you ok.*

It was Year Ten and camp was on the horizon. I wasn't looking forward to it, and neither was Kayla for her own reasons.

"Ever since I lost Nan I've been so sad going away from home," she told me.

Yet her mother and the school were making her go on the camp. Together we came up with a list of arguments she could use to persuade her mother to let her stay at home. We wrote them on a piece of paper which she took home with her.

A few days later, I got called into Mr Anderson's office, the Head of our year level. He was an old man and devoutly religious like all the staff at this school. I was expecting him to pull me up on something to do with my uniform, but instead he pulled out the notes I'd given Kayla.

"What's this?" he grilled.

I may as well have been scheming to blow up the school from the way he was reacting. He never asked why Kayla and I didn't want to go to camp; he just assumed we were bucking authority for the sake of it. I was shaking, and of course wondering how he'd come to get the notes.

I frequently left Mr Anderson's office in tears. The worst time was when he told me my white "Make Poverty History" rubber wristband had to go. The wristband was as much a part of me as my arm, and I felt naked without it. It was at lunchtime whilst everyone else was outside. I walked down the empty corridor in tears until my kindly maths teacher, Mrs P.,

saw me and asked if I was alright. She was the only one there who looked out for me, and often made a point of stopping and saying hello in the corridor.

“I hate this school!” I blurted out.

She put her arm around me and walked me to the girls’ bathroom. I had maths next so she said I could take my time and come in late. Her kindness was like a candle in a blackout. I was developing a severe mental disorder before the school’s eyes, and all they cared about was making sure people looked fine on the outside. In time, Mrs P. would pass into a distant part of my memory. I would not be able to remember her smile, her face, or even her name, but I will never forget her heart. She was the person who came to me with a torch in the dark.

Once I’d regathered myself, I didn’t know how to act around Mrs P. At the end of maths class, I thanked her for helping me and said I was just a bit fragile because my grandfather had died. I wasn’t particularly close with him but it was a good excuse. It was *normal* to be upset over losing your grandfather. I didn’t want her to know how messed up I was and how deep the scars ran. But there was also a part of me deep down who did want her to know, who longed to share this story with somebody. I didn’t know that part of me was there until it grew bigger and bigger and I could no longer deny my burning need to be seen and heard and maybe even loved.

“If there is any need that is perpetually unmet on this planet, it is the need to feel seen. To feel seen in our humanity, in our vulnerability, in our beautiful imperfections. When we are held safe in that, a key turns inside of our hearts, freeing us from our isolation, transforming our inner world. If there is anything we can offer each other, it is the gift of sight. “I see you” - perhaps the most important words we can utter to another.”

- Geoff Brown

We were taken in a bus to a campsite with four rows of cabins, a swimming pool, a trampoline and a large dining space with a kitchen. I was to share a dorm with Kayla, Jessica and another friend of their's. I took the top bunk of two bunk beds in our one-room cabin. At the back of the cabin was a door opening into the cabin behind us.

Kayla settled in better than we thought. It was me who was of most concern. I managed to hold it together the first night, but the next morning at breakfast I started to lose it. I got a slice of toast and sat down at one of the tables with my friends. The table was circular so everyone could see each other. The room filled with chatter and it was like listening to one hundred radio stations at once. The noise swirled around me until it all became a blur. It happened so quickly I can barely recall the details, but one minute my friends were chatting, oblivious to what was happening to me, and the next the table had fallen silent and all eyes were on me. I had blacked out. The big, black clouds which had just swallowed me whole finally released their rain and I began to sob. Kayla took me outside and hugged me.

“Do you want me to get a teacher?” she asked.

“Yes,” I managed to say.

The teacher assumed I hadn't got enough sleep and was home sick. She didn't know this kind of thing happened when I wasn't on camp as well. She let me go lie down in the dorms while the others did the next activity. I returned to my cabin and lay on my bed, the stillness and quiet medicine to my mind. I started to pick up, until the others returned. Students

were chasing each other with pillows through our door and out the door connecting our cabin to the one behind. I lay with my face buried in my pillow. It felt like the time I was at Jessica's party. I felt it building in me as the students hit and squealed. I was going crazy. I didn't want to draw attention to myself but neither could I stand it any longer.

"STOP!!!" I finally screamed out in despair.

My friends wrenched the curtains and doors shut. Jessica took on the role of counsellor, clambering onto the top of the other bunk to see eye with her crazy friend and figure out what was wrong. But I had no words to explain what was happening to me.

That evening, I left the activities early to get some alone time in the cabin again. The quiet darkness was comforting, re-energising. I got my toothbrush and brushed my teeth in the girls' bathroom. Suddenly Mrs P. appeared at the entrance. I froze and stared at her like a deer in the headlight, sheer terror across my face.

"It's alright, I'm just checking you're ok," Mrs P. reassured.

I said nothing and she left. It was hard for me to get my head around the idea that there might actually be people who cared about me.

My mental health was deteriorating and so, too, was my eyesight; it was becoming increasingly difficult for me to read the boards at school. I had gone to the optometrist and got a pair of glasses made up, but I couldn't bring myself to wear them. My level of self-consciousness was pathological; I was terrified of anything that might give people another reason to laugh at me. Many people with disabilities say that when one sense fails, another sense steps up and becomes heightened; that is how I made it through my studies in the end. I listened to every word that came out of the teacher's mouth and rejoiced when she read her notes out loud while she wrote them on the board. Sometimes I'd sneak a glance at what the person next to me was writing. I'd often make stuff up just so my pen was moving as though I was taking notes. Mostly I relied on the material in the textbook to get me through, although in maths class Mrs P. started giving me copies of her notes each class. This was only because I told my mum I was having trouble getting all the notes down in time before Mrs P. erased the board, something my mum then brought up during parent-teacher interviews.

In health class I sat with a girl called Crystal who reminded me of Sara in many ways. She had black hair and a gothic edge. She also wore glasses, but still this made it no easier for me to wear mine. She took a shine to the ring I wore as I desperately tried to hang onto some sense of individuality at this Nazi camp. The ring was silver and diamond-shaped with a splatter of blood red in the centre. It used to belong to my mum, who purchased it at a hippie market when she was my age. I visited Crystal's house once and she gave me a book on how to make dream catchers.

I sensed Crystal wanted to sit up the back with our other friends, but I kept sitting at the front because of my poor eyesight. She continued to sit with me, instead of sitting with our other friends. This, perhaps, is why she stopped talking with me when she found out I was going to leave the school, yet another secret I kept from everyone. I had decided to complete my final two years elsewhere. Crystal didn't even hear it from me, but through Mr Whittle, Head of Senior Students, who approached us while we were walking together to ask me how I felt about leaving. He was one of the few nice teachers at this school who also had a great sense of humour. Realising I hadn't told anyone, he pulled me to one side.

“Why haven't you told anyone you're leaving?” he asked me.

“I don't know,” I said.

I began to realise I left a trail of destruction wherever I went. I forgot that normal people form attachments. I was a child of the ever-changing ocean, both hypnotic and dangerous; if people got close to me, I would break their heart and swallow them whole.

During my last maths class, Mrs P. went round the room and got us all to say one word which described us. When she got to me, I didn't know.

“Eccentric!” another girl chipped in.

“No, let Zoe answer,” Mrs P. said.

“Yes, eccentric,” I agreed.

My final memory of that last day is sitting in front of the lockers with some other girls I’d only just begun to get to know.

“Do you really want to move?” one of them asked me.

I can’t remember my answer.

It was during my final day at this school that I was able to enjoy my time with other students the most, like the way chips in snack packs always seem to taste better, or the way a terminal diagnosis makes us live life like we’ve never lived it before. Mrs P. knew I was leaving, though I didn’t properly say goodbye. Even if I stayed I figured I wouldn’t see much more of her anyway as she only taught Year Ten. I was glad I could return her kindness, such as the day I saw her crying and asked her what was wrong. She told me her friend was in hospital dying. I then made her a condolence card which she kept on her desk.

While I can’t quite say I was happy at this school, during my brief time here I had regained enough strength that I could go to a larger school again. I enrolled in the school I was going to move to had I of not had a nervous breakdown. I purchased my grey uniform which matched the metal lockers and concrete campus, a campus deficient in trees. The campus was set apart from the town. It sat on a hill, slowly expanding into empty, barren grassland. At the bottom of the schoolyard on the other side of the unclimbable wire fence was a traintrack. I was yet to become accustomed to the din of the routine

passing of trains, white noise to the students who had been here for years.

I picked my new subjects: Maths, English, Biology, Psychology, Geography and Health. My psychology teacher, Mrs Evans, was a motherly figure who took it upon herself to introduce me to Katie, a girl she thought I'd get on with.

Katie was the bookish, nerdy sort. Her text messages to me were written in full grammar, with commers always in their proper place. She texted me after my first day asking me how my day was. She soon started sharing more and more of her soap opera life with me and my circadian rhythm began to shift from all the nights we'd sit up together on MSN. I heard all about her abusive father, her boyfriend saga, her medical crises (Katie was a Type I diabetic who had to prick her finger multiple times a day), and her fights with Laura. Her neuroticism was the only thing she seemed to have in common with Laura, who, outside of school, liked to wear mascara and low cut tops revealing bulging boobs. I always found it odd Katie's choice of best friend. I was coming to see the truth in the saying that opposites attract. The more Laura and Katie fought, the more Katie would turn to me, but when they made up, I didn't see much of her anymore. In fact I sensed a familiar hostility from Laura, a hostility I had become so attuned to that I could smell it a mile off. It is said there is a difference between envy and jealousy. We are envious when someone has something we don't have. But we are jealous when we perceive someone as having taken something that is our's. Jealousy is by far the hotter and more dangerous emotion.

It was no surprise when Katie told me Laura didn't want me around. In fact it felt rather like déjà vu. We would sit together in a classroom left unlocked at recess and lunchtime, but sometimes she would take off with Katie before I'd finished at my locker and sit somewhere else, leaving me with nobody. When we were together, she liked to speak in code, a secret language only she and Katie understood. They shared their complex, inner worlds with each other, worlds which, if places, would contain boom gates and signs saying "authorised vehicles only". Everyone needs that special someone, afterall. Somebody that will see us. Understand us. Love us.

I always hung back after psychology class and helped stack the chairs. Mrs Evans complimented me on how thoughtful I was, but really I just had no one and no where else to go. I wished I could just join the teachers in the staff room at recess and lunchtime. It felt like Mrs Evans was the only person who took an interest in me. She asked how I was settling in, and I told her about Laura. She listened kindly and made some suggestions. I often longed to tell her more- about my past and how broken and crazy I was- but I held back.

I was entertainment for the other students. In Geography they picked up how strongly I felt against the government dredging the local bay to bring larger cargo into the port. The other students liked to provoke me. One day in maths class they passed around a petition for people to sign in support of the dredging, as if I didn't feel alone enough. Finally it reached me in the front row, while the students in the back row who made it sat in suspense as they anticipated my reaction. Laura, who sat next to me, took the petition and signed it.

“You can't stop people expressing their views,” she said.

After class one of the girls in the back row approached me. She was a loud girl, a popular girl and the one who made the petition.

“Do you care about animal rights?” she asked me.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Then why are you wearing leather shoes?” she scathed, pointing to my black t-bars. It hadn't occurred to me what

they were made of. The girl didn't care about animal rights herself but enjoyed pointing out where I was not perfect.

Another train passed... I was fifteen minutes closer to going home.

I made it my mission to make up for all my sins- wearing leather shoes, playing naughty games children weren't meant to play, apparently doing something really grave to Tamsyn-through my study. I studied at recess and lunchtime, on school excursions, on the bus, and the minute I got home. I became a straight A student, rising above my peers through my grades. But grades, while it bought me flattery from the teachers, couldn't buy me friends, and it couldn't buy me happiness. I was becoming sadder and lonelier than ever. I stopped eating as I wasn't allowed to eat in the library and, buoing around outside the library on my own eating, I was hyper-aware of my every move: the way I stood like a moron, stropopy, uptight and aimless. The motion of my mouth as I bit and chew my food. The space I took up.

I had given up trying to make friends. It was clear I didn't belong with Laura and Katie, and I couldn't bring myself to ask anyone else if I could sit with them, if they would take in this basket case. On our psychology excursion Mrs Evans noticed I wasn't mixing with anyone. She came up to me and asked me if I was ok. As much as I wanted to talk to her, I couldn't get the words out of my mouth.

"I'm fine," I always said. "I like being on my own."

We met with a woman of Asian origin who led us to a psychology exhibition. We then wandered around the displays. I was glad to have something else to focus on other than my own awkwardness.

“What’s introversion?” asked another student, prompted by one of the displays.

As a self-proclaimed introvert, I told her what it was.

We then had lunch. I grabbed a table for myself and pulled out my books to study. I liked to look busy, but I felt so miserable I could barely concentrate. I could tell the teachers were whispering about me over at their table.

A few weeks after this excursion, I passed a woman at my school I’d never seen there before.

“Hello Zoe,” she said.

“Hi, how are you?” I replied as I continued on past. I gathered I was meant to know her, but I didn’t recognise her. It was only later I remembered the woman we had met at the psychology exhibition, who looked a lot like her. I wondered what she was doing at my school. I then wondered if I being studied... watched. The teachers were concerned about me and must have organised for a psychologist to come to the school and assess me. I started to worry Mrs Evans knew too much about me now. I was caught between wanting to tell her everything and wanting to keep it all a secret. I couldn’t look at her and I ended up avoiding her. Fortunately the year was

coming to a close and I would be getting a new psychology teacher in Year 12, so I would get some space from her.

It was my final year of school and I continued to spend each recess and lunch in the library with my textbooks. When I got sick of studying, I went for a walk. I wandered the boundary of the school, as far away as I could get from the other students, but I still couldn't get away from them. Some boys from the primary school division stalked me from behind and, when they thought I wasn't looking, grabbed my long platted hair and yanked it. Sometimes they would kick me. I wondered how I could report them and still show my face to the world.

Some lunchtimes I would sit down on the grassy hill behind the oval and watch the trains go by. I fantasised about jumping the fence and getting onto the tracks. There were days where the only thing I said all day was "here" when the teacher called the roll in class, letting them know I was still alive and I still carried on.



“We are laid low by grief, taken below the surface of the world, where shadows and strange images appear. We are no longer moving in our brightly lit, daytime existence. Grief punctures the solidity of our world, shatters the certainty of fixed stars, familiar landscapes, and known destinations. In a breath, all of this can be shaken, will be shaken, by unexpected loss.”

– Francis Weller, ‘The Wild Edge of Sorrow’

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It was during Year 12, in the middle of my most critical year, that my parents decided to move house, a sudden decision prompted by a bushfire in the hills that summer. They started looking at houses in the suburbs while I was absorbed in study. I never thought much of it until the day they went off to an auction, and won. It all happened while I was still in bed, and by the time I got up, my parents were back and it had been signed and sealed. That was the day the ground caved in beneath my feet. Soon I would have to pack up and leave behind the one place I had found some sense of stability and refuge in my world of bullies and ever-changing schools. We had moved here during my first year of school, and now we would leave in my last. We would move to a house far more exposed to the world. The road our new house was on had two streams of traffic separated by a white line painted down the centre which made our little street seem like a laneway in comparison. It was also on the edge of a roundabout. I had

told my parents I thought it was too noisy, but they still went ahead and bought it.

We had to vacate our house while the real estate agent led strangers through. Eventually they would get to my sunny room and gawk at my floral blinds, warm, gentle yellow walls, and matching yellow bedspreads. It made me cringe; they did not belong in there. I tried to come up with a story that would put them off buying our place: that it was haunted, that we found out it was built on top of an old landfill that was leaking gas. Unfortunately our little orange weatherboard lodge was snapped up in no time and there was nothing I could do about it.

The day came when we had to move. It was meant to be exciting, which made being sad even more difficult. I stood on the gravel driveway with our neighbours, a nice young couple who had recently had a child. Fed up with people acting happy, I blurted out that I never wanted to move. They didn't really know what to say to me.

My dad took down my long swing from the gum tree, and some of the other things he'd built me. I took one last look at my tree house, the platform in the tree from which I'd spy on the girl over the back fence. I took one last look at Rebecca's place, or what I could see of it through the bars of the gigantic security gate her family had since erected. They, too, wanted to keep the world out, I figured. Or maybe they just wanted to keep me out, like everyone else wanted to. Since building the gate, my friendship with Rebecca had started to fray. Rebecca was now grown up and I barely saw her anymore. I said goodbye to my memories growing up in this curious

corner of the world. At least I wouldn't have to see Tamsyn and her house anymore.

My parents realised we couldn't move everything by ourselves and needed to ask the neighbours for help. We were not short of kind neighbours and they happily helped us out. I got in the car with one neighbour from across the road, tears gushing from my eyes like a burst water main the entire trip down the hill.

Our new house was a tiny, worn shack which we needed to renovate to make it liveable. It used to belong to an old woman who passed away. My parents set up my bed in a bright room with windows facing the road. The next morning I woke up not to kookaburras, the whisper of the wind between the trees, and the gentle lul of the bush, but to engines accelerating and the woosh of cars outside. It felt as though I was standing on a highway. It didn't feel like a home at all. I wailed hysterically like some cultures do at grief ceremonies. My parents ended up moving my bed elsewhere. They also decided to book in at a nearby motel while we renovated. Meanwhile I had to push on with my study, despite all the changes and my grief. For a while I studied in one of the bedrooms of the motel. Then when we moved back to our house, I set up in the laundry which was the quietest room of the house.

I never got used to the new house. I was a painfully sensitive girl, and in my family I was the least able to deal with noise. I missed having a yard I could enjoy and a boundary to the world. My senses were sharpened to all the different ways the world intruded through my walls and into my space: the

noise from the road, our next door neighbour's stereo, the neighbour over the road's motor bike, another neighbour's lawnmower and whippersnapper, the neighbours' WiFi, the manmade chemicals added to our food. On top of the sense of hopelessness, fear and alienation I felt, I developed a severe case of misanthropy, a general hatred, distrust and contempt of the human species and human nature. I couldn't relate to my own species, from the way they drove around in enclosures completely cut off from the damage they were causing the planet, to the way they interacted. I hated being at school and I hated being at home; I got no relief anywhere. I retreated further and further into the laundry, escaping into my study and my head. I put enormous pressure on myself to achieve academically and sometimes I broke under that pressure, tears streaming down my face in the middle of tests. My heart raced and I couldn't remember how to answer the questions despite studying so hard. In one maths test I got up part way in and, trembling, handed my blank paper to the teacher before walking out. But study was as much my redemption as it was my crucifix. It gave me something else to focus on, and staying on top of the material made me feel more on top of life. Despite everything, I managed to keep my grades up. Deep down, I believed perfection would liberate me and make me safe, good and lovable.

Shortly after we moved house, my new psychology teacher mentioned in class that Mrs Evans wasn't very well and was leaving the school. I felt like I'd been hit by train. By multiple trains. I had been worrying this would happen. I felt like it was all my fault, that I spread bad vibes wherever I went. She was the only one who took an interest in me, and while I avoided her, I really wanted to talk with her; I just had a funny

way of showing it. Now, I may never be able to see her again. As soon as I got home that day I went straight to bed and didn't get up. I kept the curtains drawn and buried my face into my pillow. The tears were no longer flowing properly so the searing pain remained trapped within. My family didn't know what was wrong with me. I didn't even know what was wrong with me, I just wanted to die.

Finally I emerged from my dark room and was able to show my face to the world. I had been talking with Katie online and we were going to give Mrs Evans a card and buy her a salt lamp as a farewell present. We went to the staff room at lunchtime and asked for Mrs Evans. She came out, and we gave her the salt lamp. She was touched by our kind gesture and she ended up giving us her personal email address so we could keep in touch. That day I walked away feeling like I was the one who had been given a gift... a gift which cost nothing but meant everything. Her email address was my lifeline, a faint connection to the world's goodness.

Despite all the adversity I had, I made it to the end of my final exams, but of course I remembered the questions I did not answer perfectly and forgot the ones I did. On the day results were released, I switched off my phone and ran off to the city to make banners with an activist group I had involved myself with. Meanwhile the principal tried to contact me. I switched on my phone later that day and got her message asking me to contact her. At first I assumed I must have done terribly and the school, knowing how driven (and crazy) I was, were just checking up on me to make sure I wasn't going to kill myself. But it was quite the opposite: I had miraculously come out on top. I was school dux, and she wanted me to come to school for a photograph. My result was the best revenge, a polite way of sticking the finger up at everything and everyone who had tried to drag me down.

I got a scholarship to university and I enrolled in psychology, a replacement for going to therapy. I needed answers. I needed to figure people out and I needed to figure myself out. Only then I wouldn't feel so confused and be in so much pain. At university I joined clubs searching for people I could relate with. But even though I found people interested in the same kind of things, I still felt so cut off from the human race, from human affection and even the desire for it now.

One of the clubs I got involved with was the 'Greens Club'. That is where I met Pete, a tall bloke with dirty blonde hair who happened to live near me. He started driving me back from meetings and we would talk about politics and the environment, but soon we began to leave the safe confines of the intellectual, and I would find him wanting to hug me, or catch up with me outside of the club. I agreed to go on a

picnic with Pete, and it was then I began a journey with him I just didn't have a map for. We set up on a large rock at the top of the mountain, and before I knew it, Pete was kissing me. I couldn't even imagine what it was he felt that drove him to do this as it was something I had never experienced. This was my first kiss, and what was meant to be a beautiful, memorable experience was instead, for me, a disgusting, carnivorous act which I couldn't wait to finish. It felt like he was trying to eat my face. He may as well be kissing a robot, I thought.

"I don't feel anything," I ended up saying.

"How about this?" he asked, and he kissed me again.

We walked back to the car together holding hands, which meant nothing to me. I had been so naïve that I didn't even realise this was a date. I hated what I'd got myself into.

I began to avoid Pete. Meanwhile, I desperately searched for answers online as to what was wrong with me. I was eighteen and not once during my teenage years had I ever "liked" someone. When I managed to look Pete in the eyes I saw an intensity there, a wanting. I didn't know what it was like to want somebody like that. I didn't feel part of this human race and the strange ways they related. Then, while searching Google one day, I came across the term 'asexual' to describe a person who does not experience sexual attraction to anyone. I must be asexual, I realised. I found a group for asexual people in my city and I went to one of their events. But even though I was now surrounded by my own tribe, I did not feel a connection to anyone there and I couldn't wait to go home. I was drowning under the weight of the world and

wherever I went, I did not seem to belong. I started to believe I really was an alien who had come here from another planet or realm.

My relationship with Pete was becoming a rollercoaster ride. I managed to tell him I just wanted to be friends and anything beyond holding hands was a no-go zone. I thought we had sorted things out but then he would try and turn the relationship into something more again. He didn't like seeing me with my other friends, and he wanted to see me far more than I wanted to see him. I decided to stop travelling home with him from our meetings and, as callous as it may sound, I didn't care if the relationship came to an end altogether.

As I left the meeting and headed towards the train, Pete came after me.

"It's depressing to care for someone who doesn't care for you!" he yelled.

"Friends are like stars," I quoted, "You may not always see them, but you know they're always there."

"Wake up, Zoe!" he bellowed.

One day after a meeting, Pete decided to get on the train with me. Thankfully another member was with us for most of the trip home. She lived in the same suburb as Pete, but when she got off at their stop, Pete stayed on the train so he could catch me alone. After five long minutes, we arrived at my stop, where, to Pete's disappointment, my mother happened to be waiting for me.

“Can we have just a few minutes?” Pete begged.

My mother stood back and watched him tower over me as he gave me a lecture.

“Do you think he could get violent?” my mother asked me afterwards. But as much as it looked like Pete was the one with all the power, Pete was really just a little man behind a big machine. He was in love and I wasn't: that gave me all the power in this relationship. I had somebody's heart in my hands.

I no longer went to any more Greens meetings and the group broke up. The last contact I had with Pete was a heated email he wrote me telling me I was messed up and should see a psychologist. Deep down, I believed him. There was something seriously fucked up with me, and even though I had people who wanted to be around me now, I felt more alone than ever. I couldn't shake this relentless feeling of being an outsider. I felt like a person who was transsexual, only it wasn't my sex that was wrong. It was being human, and it was the planet I was born on.

### Part 3. Becoming Human

Her warm glow illuminated the darkness which otherwise blanked the forest. We had been walking together for two years now, meeting each week at the same spot and spending an hour together before we parted ways. I started to live for that hour we saw each other each week. There was an incredible build up to that hour. Like a girl on a date, I put a lot of thought into what I wore, sometimes spending an hour pulling clothes in and out of the wardrobe as I mixed and matched. I never told my family who I was seeing as it was a secret. They must have thought they had a living Juliet under their roof given the effort I put into my dress whenever I went to see her. Most other days I just stayed in my pyjamas as I rarely went out. I don't know whether I'd caught the love bug, but all I wanted to do was see her. The closer I got to Sheida, the more my world would shrink; I lost interest in everything else as nothing compared to the thrill of seeing her. In all my other relationships I withheld so much of myself I felt like an imposter, but with her I could talk about everything, from Tamsyn to how scared I was of people. She never judged me or got bored. What a perfect world she weaved for me; a safe, beautiful place where I was the victim, not the bully, like Tamsyn had made me out to be. Where I was good, where I was loved unconditionally, where I could crumble and not have to feel the crushing weight of shame bearing down on me. After our time together finished, my mood would plummet. It was as though I was developing an addiction.

I started to wonder why we always had to meet in the forest. I wished we could go somewhere else together. There was such a strange formality to our relationship which was starting to really irritate me. I wanted to break the rules. I wanted her to show me where she lived. I wanted to meet her

family and friends. I wanted to swim in the ocean with her. I wanted to hug her. And most of all, I wanted to know about *her* inner life and secrets. But deep down a part of me knew that this enigmatic woman was not an equal to me... that her world was not mine... that she couldn't stay with me forever. The little voice grew louder and louder until I could no longer shut it out. The trees around me were shrinking and the river was drying up. The ground beneath my feet levelled out to a perfectly flat terrain, on which sat a table and a few cushioned chairs. The monkey and the bird then tumbled through the window and settled on the table. The "folding wire meditation mandala" was no longer a real flower but a series of metal loops which sat next to the little book on Buddhism. Walls were emerging around me and shards of glass were melding together to form a glass window which covered one entire wall. I sat in a room with my counsellor and an older woman who was going to be my new counsellor.

"So we won't see each other again?" I asked my counsellor, "reality" still not sinking in yet.

"No," she said, as kindly as she could.

"I can't stand to hear this," I erupted. At some point in my life I had decided that I was better off away from others. I packed up most of my emotions and left to a faraway place deep inside myself where nobody could reach me. Where I could no longer feel pain, but neither could I feel the joys and comfort of human contact. It is the place Ernie from Sesame Street sings about in 'I Don't Want to Live on the Moon'. A desolate place, enticing at first but, without a return ticket, it will become a nightmare even worse, in many ways, than the

one you're trying to flee. My counsellor rescued me from that lonely place, but she also reminded me why, perhaps, I went there in the first place. I had been cracked open and I now knew what it was like to be Pete. To feel. To need someone as though my life depended on it. To experience the full spectrum of human emotions... to love so madly it is like an ecstasy-powered rocketship to the stars, and to break so badly it is like falling straight to the bottom of the deepest ocean trench. In that moment I did the only thing I knew: I got up, opened the door and left. I ran through the clinic and towards the stairs, footsteps chasing after me. To my disappointment, they belonged not to Sheida, but to my new counsellor. I dived down the stairs, skipping multiple steps without caring if I fell.

"I'm coming after you," my new counsellor called.

It was like a scene out of an action film where the cops chase the villain. Finally, I gave up, and I let myself collapse onto the cold, hard floor between two flights of stairs. I could hear a third person's voice behind us.

"Someone should get a counsellor," said the voice.

"I am a counsellor," replied my new counsellor.

"I want to die," I announced as I lay flat on the floor like a dead fish, no dignity left in me.

It was December, the month of my birthday and also the month of Christmas. I spent my birthday in bed, occasionally emerging to look up ways to kill myself on the internet. My family felt a little rejected because I wasn't interested in their

presents. By Christmas time I was not much better. I was on holiday with my family but was violently ill from grief. I wandered over to the beach and fantasised about disappearing into the surf, never to be seen again. In Year 10 my maths teacher had asked me for one word which described me. If I had my time again, I think I would change my answer; I am not nearly as eccentric as I am strong.

“It is the accumulated losses of a lifetime that slowly weigh us down- the times of rejection, the moments of isolation when we felt cut off from the sustaining touch of comfort and love. It is an ache the resides in the heart, the faint echo calling us back to the times of loss. We are called back, not so much to make things right, but to acknowledge what happened to us.”

– Francis Weller, ‘The Wild Edge of Sorrow’

Nov 2016

When I was twenty-three, amidst the empty desert my life had become, a distant figure came to me. I received a “friend request” on Facebook from Emily. Suddenly my life was rewound seventeen years again to when we were little girls. To school sports day when I raced Tamsyn and Emily and won, as neither could run properly. To the pre-loved glow worm she gave me. To the day Tamsyn confronted me in the supermarket, her accusation piercing me like arrow poison. I examined the profile picture of Emily, now a grown adult. I don’t know whether it was her hair the complexion of black magic, her forbidding lipstick, her eyes or her cheekbones, but her face morphed into Tamsyn’s mother. My heart thumped in my chest, like one final crashing note. I was unsure whether it was fear or excitement that she had come back to me. She told me she had been searching for me and just wanted to make peace.

“Do you have a recent photo of you?” she asked me, “I just want to see what you look like now.”

I did not post pictures of myself to Facebook, but in the end I unmasked myself to her.

“The big change of You is you have brown hair, you used to have blonde” she commented when she saw what I looked like now.

“I’ve turned darker by the ages,” I told her, both jokingly and honestly.

We proceeded to talk about what happened at our old primary school. To my surprise Emily had no idea what happened with Tamsyn.

“I don’t think my mum told me that,” Emily said, “But she told me when we were little you did something bad to me like sticking a stick up my private parts, as I recall her telling me.”

While I could not remember what exactly happened with Tamsyn, I knew I never did such a thing to Emily. Emily couldn’t remember anything like that happening either. That day I realised that if this wasn’t true, then maybe Tamsyn’s accusations weren’t either. The truth had been distorted somewhere along the way like a game of Chinese whispers. Emily went on to say that there was another girl in her class who did do these things. She also said that Tamsyn would make up things she didn’t do either to get her into trouble.

It was such a special gift to be able to resume our fractured friendship, and we went out for pizza together. Our roads crossed in many ways, it turned out: we both had a deep sense of spirituality and loved wildlife. We were both, also, hopeless insomniacs. While we had both felt the temptation to cancel our dinner plans, we were glad we pushed through as our reunion was deeply healing.

“I’ve never had that sort of connection with a female like myself before,” Emily wrote to me in a text afterwards, “Oh thank you!”

We were going to see each other again.

“The next time you’ll see me I’ll have very short hair,” Emily exclaimed, “You won’t even recognise me. I’m going full blonde on Friday, maybe with a touch of blue.”

That day, however, never came. Our communication went silent. During the middle of the following year I texted Emily again.

“Hey Emily how have you been?”

“Who is this?” I got back.

“It’s Zoe.”

“I don’t know a Zoe sorry! I think you have the wrong number, whoever had this number before obviously changed it.”

“Oh. Is this Emily?”

“Who’s Emily?”

“Are you Emily?”

“No. If Emily wanted to keep in contact with you, she would’ve. Please don’t message me again.”

We were no longer connected on Facebook either. It felt like I had been split in two, a bridge across the river set alight, the first flower of spring trodden. Panic grew in me like a tsunami

approaching the shoreline. A dirty feeling that someone had got to Emily and turned her against me again swept over me. I wondered whether this was how I felt when I was a young child.

Meanwhile, the Royal Commission were wrapping up their four-year inquiry into institutional child sexual abuse. From 2013-2017, thousands of people had come forth to tell their untold stories. It was found that just over half were abused by religious institutions, most of which were Catholic. I never paid much attention to the inquiry until mid 2018, when suddenly it was all I could think about, leading to many sleepless nights as I searched for answers online. I discovered that the parish priest of my old Catholic primary school resigned the same year I left, crumbling from the weight of having to carry the heavy secrets of his colleagues. As the morning sun peaked through the tips of the mountains, the tragedy of the whole thing dawned on me: while everyone was busy treating me as the criminal, their church was full of paedophiles who got off scot-free. It was then that I felt a kind of anger that was like nothing I had ever felt before, the trick mirror shattering to pieces before me. I had been Jesus on the cross, bearing the weight of other people's sins. The next evening, something kept me in the lounge room when my father turned on the television to watch the seven o'clock ABC news. The very first report was about the royal commission. I watched the prime minister apologise to the survivors of child sexual abuse at the hands of institutions, and announce the government were implementing many changes to prevent it from happening again.

While I do not remember being abused in such a way myself, I was left wondering whether the children around me had. Wondering whether it was easier for Tamsyn to blame me than her real perpetrator. Wondering why Emily was seeing a psychologist at the age of five. I may never hear the stories of Tamsyn, of Emily, and of other classmates, and I may never get an apology. Yet the prime minister's apology meant something to me, relinquished tears from my eyes, and brought me an unexpected sense of perspective and closure. I was humane.