

## There's a big black cloud over Cassetown

Iris flicks the car's headlights on, even though it's not long past midday. There's no rain yet, but you can feel it in the air, smell it coming. When they'd left the city that morning, they'd driven three hours south in midwinter sunshine, under skies of unbroken blue. Then just out of Cassetown they drove in under a thick dark cloud that filled the whole of the sky to the south, and turned the day dusk-dark.

Kurt's in the front passenger seat, next to her. In the rearview mirror, Iris sees Luce in profile, headphones framing her face, eyes closed. She's slumped against a pile of bags and bedding, her hand twitching at her phone as it has been all the way south from the city.

Iris looks back from the mirror to the road, sees the sign for the bridge ahead. She feels the lift in the road take them over the bridge, and she flicks the indicator stick with her hand – flicks it without thinking, starts to turn the wheel, the arc of the turn so familiar, though so long untaken – the flick flick flick to turn right, past the FOR SALE sign overlaid with a diagonal red SOLD sticker, into the driveway of their old house.

— — —

The big black cloud holds onto its rain while the three of them pile out of the car, and Iris unlocks the front door of the house. They all stand for a moment in the doorway, then they split apart to wander the house. They claim rooms and beds, open and close cupboards, draw curtains. They breathe in its smell.

The rain holds off as Iris watches Luce and Kurt surge out the side gate and down the path to the bay, like the little kids

they were the last time they were all here together. Iris unloads their gear from the car, brings in bags of food they've brought from the city for the weekend, stacks flattened cardboard boxes and packing tape in the hallway. Rain holds off, still. Luce and Kurt reappear, arms loaded with driftwood, pockets tinkling with shells. They bring in wood from the shed at the back, get the stove in the kitchen fired up. Iris makes tea. They all settle in. The kids – her grown-up son, her teenage niece – slink off to their rooms, leave Iris in the kitchen. She stands up, moves to the sink to wash the mugs. Out the window, out the back, above the tin roofs of the shed and the old washhouse, the sky's solid, dark, but still dry.

— — —

It's not until two hours later, when Paul and Kristin's car pulls into the driveway, that the first fat drops of rain start to fall. Iris meets them at the door, kisses Kristin on the cheek, inhales the baby's smell, waves to Paul. She bustles Kristin and the baby inside, out of the rain, into the kitchen, to make more tea, to get the baby settled. By the time Paul has hauled their gear inside – the travel cot, the clip-on high chair, the stroller, all the bags and toys and things a baby needs, all of them stacked down the hallway, next to the empty packing boxes – it's a full-on, pelting deluge.

## All inside the house, now

They're all inside the house, now, and have been since the rain. They're in rooms that lead off from the central hall that stretches from the front door, down past the pile of baby things and packing boxes, down and down and down past bedroom doors and cupboard doors, open doors, closed doors, past paintings and photographs and drawings and posters hung and pinned and sticky-taped and blu-tacked to its walls. The hallway ends at a dogleg to the bathroom, then it crooks past the bend and leads on to the kitchen. You can barely see, in the darkness. If you opened the front door, even if you opened all of the doors of all of the rooms that lead onto that hallway, and even if you opened the curtains and blinds and windows of every single one of those rooms, still the hallway would be dark. There's a single light – just a bare bulb on a cord – halfway down, high up, hanging just below the pressed-tin ceiling. It stays on all day and all night. The hall – the whole place – has the beautiful smell of old house, and the sea: of books and papers; faintly of mice, somewhere within a wall; of musty linen, of mothballs, of old face powder (though none is ever used); of wax crayons and pencil sharpenings; and the salt-metal tang of towels from the beach, flung over doorknobs and chair backs and left to dry.

— — —

They're all inside their rooms, now, listening to rain on the roof. It's pissing down, guttering and gushing, sinking into the earth, wetting, muddening, all damp and glorious. Kurt's lying along the sofa in the little room, drawing, his arm curled around – out of habit – to hide the page, though there's no one there to look.

His feet are up on the sofa's arm. A sketchbook rests on his thigh, and one knee is bent to prop the surface to a good angle for drawing. He's pencilled the six-panel page he thought of in the car on the way here. He thinks about getting up, knocking on Luce's door, showing her how he's translated what he imagined into a series of images, a composed page, a piece of story: a scene. But he doesn't get up. He chews his pencil. He listens to the rain. He flicks back through the pages of the sketchbook, past rough ideas, sketches for story lines, glued-in pieces of paper. Some pages are bright and beautiful, inked and fully coloured. Some pages have just a line or two, a shape, a phrase. Some have a wash of watery grey. He flicks forward to a blank page, puts pencil to paper, and starts to draw the rain.

— — —

Three doors down and across the hall, his cousin Luce is on the floor, wedged in the gap between her bed and the window, pillows and sheets and quilt all pulled off the bed and tucked around and under her. Her elbows are pulled in tight against her sides. Her knees are up in a V, and the laptop rests on them. She doesn't think about her fingers on the keyboard, the trackpad, doesn't think about how they move, what they do. She's scrolling through stuff she cached before they left home in case the wireless was shit here. And it's shit here. Of course it is. Her phone beeps, and she grabs it from where it lies on the centre of the bed, thumbs the screen alive, reads the text – *Hey Lulu, busy here so not driving down til tmrw, txt me if u forgot anything, and I can bring. Mum x* – and replies – *K* – then blanks the screen and throws the phone back onto the bed. As the phone hits the mattress – a soft thud, a muffled beep – Luce hears a sharp strange sound from a few rooms away. It's like a parrot trapped in a cupboard, but it's probably the baby, so not her problem. She listens for a moment, her head on its side, but all she can hear is the rain.

---

One door along, and back across the hall, Kristin grabs the pillow and pushes it to her own face to muffle her shriek, her squawk. Paul pushes into her, kisses her, shushes her, 'Shhh, shhh, love,' both of them laughing with keeping quiet, with the unfamiliar bed, with the proximity of the others. Kristin shifts her hips, tensions her body against his. His hand brushes her breast, and her body and mind fill – in a biochemical wave – with their baby, asleep in the room next door, just a thin wall away. She reaches her arm out over her head and places her hand flat against the wall, feels the old wallpaper corrugate against her palm. Then Paul moves faster against her, in her, and her hand raises up until only the fingertips touch the wall, then one finger, then she lifts away completely, and her cry gives up to the high ceiling, to the shush of the rain.

---

The last time Paul'd been in this bed was with Iris. They were still married, then, but already falling apart. Then, he'd driven down from the city, leaving late – leaving Kristin, and the delicious cheating tangle of her sweaty sheets – arriving in Cassetown long after Iris and Kurt had eaten. He remembers Iris reading a bedtime story to Kurt, remembers trying to walk in quietly, but treading on Kurt's Lego, strewn everywhere up and down the hallway. He'd stumbled, sworn, kicked Lego into the darkness. Was it really ten years ago? More? Kristin shifts under him. He moves his leg, and knocks the book from the end of the bed to the floor. Kristin had been sitting on the end of the bed, reading the book – a map on the front cover, reaching around its spine to the book's back – when Paul came to her, after he put the baby down to sleep in the room next door. Their beautiful baby, their nameless girl, lulled to sleep in the rain.

---